



the Research & Planning Group  
for California Community Colleges

# Leading from the Middle

Year 3 (2015) Executive Summary

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# Introduction

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) launched Leading from the Middle (LFM) Academy in 2013 as a professional development experience for community college educators—faculty, administrators, and staff—who have formal or informal leadership responsibilities. Over the first three years, close to 150 California community college educators have participated.

Based on a commitment to learning from experience, the LFM leadership team conducts an annual internal evaluation of the academy experience. This report summarizes findings from the evaluation of the Year 3 (2015) LFM Academy and builds on the formative evaluation of the first two years. We offer this report to share evaluation findings, promote understanding about the development of middle leaders, and highlight the roles these individuals can take in advancing institutional change. This report is written for community college educators including campus executive leaders and other administrators who are in positions to support and encourage leadership development at their colleges. In addition, current and potential middle leaders can read about the experiences of colleagues with common aspirations and challenges.

## LFM Purpose and Design

LFM has an inclusive definition of middle leadership, spanning positions such as deans and department chairs, that have formal leadership responsibilities, as well as faculty who have become coordinators of the Basic Skills Initiative or Student Learning Outcomes, and staff positions, such as institutional researchers, that have the opportunity to take on leadership responsibilities in their work.

Middle leadership has particular characteristics and particular challenges. Rather than relying on authority and position, middle leaders work through collaboration, communication, and coalition building. Their work is rooted in an understanding of the local cultural context and enacted through a network of professional and personal relationships. LFM is designed to address a central question: How can more educators gain strategic skills and increase their willingness to take on leadership responsibilities?

The LFM Academy design reflects what is known about effective professional development. It focuses on practice and in contrast to one-time professional development events, the Academy takes place across a calendar year through three face-to-face meetings. Educators attend in college teams, facilitating collaboration with local colleagues. In turn, participating in LFM supports development of both group and individual leadership skills. Moreover, the setting provides the opportunity to connect with colleagues from colleges across the state.

LFM takes an experiential approach to learning, as demonstrated in its design, curriculum, and instructional delivery. For example, the program pedagogy is problem-based; participants develop middle leadership skills in the context of collaboratively planning and leading a campus-based change initiative with their college colleagues. Initially this campus project was included as laboratory experience, a setting for participants to practice new leadership skills. However,

over the three years that the LFM Academy has been in existence there has been a change; teams now frequently come with projects that are connected to college priorities and view LFM as a chance to support the development of these initiatives.

The curricular content follows the process and challenges of implementing a campus change project. The first session introduces tools of making the case and mapping out project design. The second session addresses coalition building and communication, including the popular topic of engaging resistance. The final session looks cumulatively at the willingness to take risks and failing successfully as essential characteristics of leadership.

## **Leading from the Middle Outcomes**

LFM aims for participants to grow in areas that will support their long-term development and efforts as middle leaders. These six outcomes are clustered in three major categories and include the following:

Leadership development:

1. Develop leadership identity
2. Develop strategies to sustain and support leadership development

Team collaboration and leadership:

3. Create and sustain professional relationships in which peers share ideas and strategize together

Leadership in the context of a college initiative:

4. Engage with existing literature
5. Apply research and evidence to make informed decisions that advance institutional change efforts
6. Strengthen capacity to prioritize and lead departmental, institutional and other changes through the process of evidence-based inquiry

# LFM Year 3 Evaluation Findings

## **LFM Year 3 Participants and Projects**

In 2015, LFM organized a “LFM 1.0” experience for new teams and a “LFM 2.0” for continuing teams. The 2015 LFM 1.0 cohort had 46 participants from 10 colleges: College of Alameda, Alan Hancock College, Cabrillo College, Crafton Hills College, Diablo Valley College, Fresno City College, Irvine Valley College, Modesto Junior College, Palomar College, and Sierra

College. LFM 2.0 had a small group of 10 participants from three colleges: Crafton Hills College, Fresno City College, and City College of San Francisco.<sup>1</sup> This report focuses predominantly on the outcomes of the LFM 1.0 participants.

The LFM 1.0 participants included a wide range of middle leaders across the colleges. Nine deans attended, including deans of sciences, math, and computer science; social and behavioral sciences; literature and language arts; English, math and instructional support; curriculum and instruction; enrollment services; counseling and educational support services; and student equity and student learning. Three department chairs participated, including two counseling chairs. Four teams included institutional researchers. The majority of participants (more than half) were faculty and counselors, many with the growing list of middle leadership titles including Student Learning Outcomes Coordinator, Basics Skills Coordinator, Coordinator of Academic Support, Faculty Student Success Coordinator, Professional Development Coordinator, First Year Experience Coordinator, and Academic Senate President. In addition to their formal titles, many participants mentioned that they had also played active roles in union negotiations.

Several teams worked on similar college change projects, reflecting current community college initiatives and priorities, and giving college teams a chance to learn how similar projects develop in another setting. Two colleges, Cabrillo College and Modesto Junior College, both designed campus professional development institutes focused on equity. Two other colleges, Irvine Valley College and Crafton Hills College, constructed early alert systems.

All of the college teams were attentive to issues of equity in their projects; College of Alameda looked at supporting men of color, particularly in mathematics. Alan Hancock College looked at equity and online education. Fresno City College continued the work from the 2014 LFM team, developing *ME First*, looking at the implications for students and the college if students take their math and English requirements in their first semesters on campus.

## Findings on Leadership Development

The LFM outcomes serve as an organizing framework to describe growth and development of participants' middle leadership skills.

### Develop Leadership Identity

LFM is designed to provide the space, resources, and structure for a range of middle leaders to thoughtfully and realistically consider how they see themselves as leaders.

One participant noted her evolution from reluctance to acceptance in viewing herself as a leader.

- “I have learned to think of myself as a leader to a certain degree. When I first came I

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<sup>1</sup> Crafton Hills College and Fresno City College have sent teams every year since the first LFM cohort in 2013.

thought of myself as just a ‘doer.’ I have some clear leadership strategies to use now.”

Two others described their own increased willingness and confidence to see themselves as leaders in light of the support they received from colleagues.

- “I am more capable than I tend to think, and people seem to appreciate what I bring to the proverbial table.”
- “I think I am a better leader than I give myself credit for. People respond well to my ideas and I could probably be more vocal in the future.”

## **Develop Strategies to Sustain and Support Leadership Development**

If middle leaders understand that change is a complex process and they are in for the long haul, they need to thoughtfully consider how to maintain commitment, energy, and the will to keep going when things get difficult. During a discussion at the last face-to-face academy in October 2015, participants talked about individual things that they do to keep balance in their lives.

Some participants indicated that a connection to other people was part of their long-term support plan. One participant described the value of collegial relationships, “Find a way to keep the joy in the heaviness of this work. The joy comes from relationships and working alongside others.” Participants additionally spoke about the need for self-care as a strategy for sustaining their leadership. People talked about personal ways of nurturing themselves, including receiving bodywork regularly or gardening; some participants talked about the personal value of spirituality, prayer, and meditation.

## **Findings on Team Collaboration and Leadership**

### **Create and Sustain Professional Relationships in Which Peers Share Ideas and Strategize Together**

Collaboration and coalition building are central to middle leadership; in LFM professional relationships take multiple forms. The college team is a home base for collaboration and provides the foundation for expanded coalition building on campus. The team offered a setting where different perspectives could be appreciated. As one participant expressed this, “Everyone sees and thinks differently. Some are big thinkers; some in the weeds; [we] need them both.”

In describing relationships among the team, participants had a clear sense that taking the time to build familiarity and trust was essential to the strength of their groups. Some of the teams had worked together on campus before coming and knew each other well, while in other cases, the participants met at LFM for the first time.

Participants were conscious of the challenge of keeping the core team engaged in their overtaxed work environment. In the words of one participant:

- ...take time, to play together, and invest in each other. Then we're more willing to do the slog and hard work...the things we do, the rituals. We know we have each others' back, and that makes the work possible and pleasurable.

Through their LFM experience, participants reported extending their network of colleagues to include educators across the state. One person summed up the experience of hearing colleagues from across the state engaging in similar conversations, stating, "It makes us feel less alone." Another participant articulated finding her own courage and similarly encouraged others, saying, "Never be afraid to challenge the status quo. You have allies all across the state of California."

## Findings on Leadership in the Context of a College Initiative

### Engage with Existing Literature

Many educators admit that they would like to read the literature and be up on current research, however, they often feel caught between heavy work demands on their time and the overwhelming amounts of existing and new literature. The LFM readings included two chapters from the *Jossey-Bass Reader on Educational Leadership*, one by Michael Fullan on change, and one by Roland Barth on risk taking, as well as Davis Jenkins' *Guided Pathways Overview* and a chapter by Aaron Anderson from *Engaging Resistance*. In addition, the group read poems by Marge Piercy and Claudia Schmidt and quotes from Sandy Shugart's book, *Leadership in the Crucible of Work*, to invite perspectives on the personal and internal process of developing leadership.

A few participants reported sharing the LFM readings with colleagues at their colleges. One participant said, "The Fullan and Anderson articles were well received by a few colleagues and faculty peers. A few found the Aspen Report to be eye-opening and inspirational (more initiatives, anyone?)"

### Apply Research and Evidence to Make Informed Decisions that Advance Institutional Change Efforts

Community college educators are increasingly attentive to utilizing data and fostering a culture of evidence. Recent legislation, statewide initiatives, and accreditation standards all now require educators to engage in inquiry-based data-driven improvement efforts.

LFM participants indicated a strong appreciation for the notion that data is the backbone of equity. They articulated an understanding that data make inequities visible and serve as a powerful resource to advocate for change. In the words of one participant, "The hard facts around equity—we say we're about success; we pride ourselves on transfer, but for African American and Latino students, we're not doing well." Another participant added, "Data tells a certain story, and there are other stories to weave together.... We want to be able to merge data patterns and stories, which we listen to, and remember."

## Strengthen Capacity to Prioritize and Lead Departmental, Institutional, and Other Changes through the Process of Evidence-Based Inquiry

LFM participants learn and practice a range of tools for the change process. Teams articulated their theory of change through a concept map and then further developed details in a logic model. Creating a logic model provided participants the opportunity to think through desired outcomes, identify landmarks, and plan for evaluation. During the year, however, almost all of the participants reported experiencing a reality check that reminded them that change is not a linear process and rarely follows a well-organized plan.

At the end of the first convening, teams crafted and delivered a short elevator pitch, summing up the need for the project. They identified the audiences on campus that would benefit from receiving their pitch. In ongoing discussions, participants considered how others might hear their message, particularly those who might not initially respond positively, in other words, resisters. Many participants took the lesson of anticipating responses to heart; as participants noted,

- “When you deliver a message, stand in the shoes of each stakeholder.”
- “Resisters may see themselves as champions, and vice versa.”
- “People may feel left out of the loop. People want to feel they know and understand what’s going on, that they have a voice and are part of the decision-making. If they don’t participate, then [it’s easy to] criticize later.”

## Conclusion

Leading from the Middle was created by a group of experienced middle leaders to provide the big picture of what leadership entails, to point out some of the predictable pitfalls, and also to make clear the reasons for taking on the challenges. One dean’s comment exactly echoes the original motivation for LFM’s creation, stating, “We’re hungry for leadership. When I moved from faculty to dean, I never had support.”

A growing number of community college educators are now in positions where leadership is an explicit or implicit responsibility. As represented in some of the LFM participant titles, an increasing number of faculty and counselors are becoming directors and coordinators of campus-wide programs. However, without support and guidance, individuals may first learn about what it means to be a leader through encountering pitfalls or obstacles.

LFM is designed to give individuals and teams a space to gain and practice skills in a supportive environment with like-minded colleagues. The input and feedback collected through the LFM evaluation indicates that participants appreciated the time, structure, and support of the academy experience. LFM participants articulated this appreciation:

- “LFM created the space and offered support for our team to have deep and meaningful conversations that helped shape up our project work and strategically plan its delivery.”

- “We need to have intensive periods of time to be able to think together creatively...the collaboration is essential. There are no lone rangers in transformation.”

When participants finished the LFM Academy, they said that they could be more strategic about planning and more intentional about communication. When they propose changes, particularly significant ones, participants indicated they could sympathetically recognize that “people put work into the old model and are afraid of change...[afraid of] losing what they’ve done.”

Along with a sense of the challenges and complexity of change, participants reported that they took away a quiet determination and even optimism. In response to a question about what they had learned about the process of change, one person responded, “that change is possible, despite the odds!”

Most importantly, participants indicated they could see and value the roles they can play in the change process. In the words of one participant, “Middle leadership is critical to establishing and maintaining a coherent vision.”

At the completion of the third year, more than 150 community college educators have participated in the Leading from the Middle Academy. LFM has raised the visibility and value of supporting development of middle leadership. Participants reported that they gained skills and strategies to lead campus efforts; they have refined skills for communicating and collaborating in the local setting of their college culture. Still, the evaluation findings indicate that participants’ views of change are not simplistic, nor unrealistic.

At a time when an increasing number of community colleges are looking toward major structural and cultural shifts, middle leaders across the system have active roles to play in transforming institutions and supporting equity and student success. These evaluation findings indicate that LFM continues to contribute to the development of this critical group of educators.



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