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Research • Planning • Professional Development  
for California Community Colleges

# What Do We Mean When We Talk about Middle Leadership?

Insights from an Evaluation of the  
Leading from the Middle Academy 2016

Executive Summary

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# Introduction

A growing number of community college educators are in positions with formal or informal leadership responsibilities. Colleges have always had titled middle leader positions such as “dean” and “department chair.” Recently, however, with a proliferation of state initiatives and local innovations, an increasing number of faculty, counselors, and staff are moving into leadership roles with titles such as “Basic Skills Initiative Coordinator,” “Student Equity Coordinator,” or “First-Year Experience Coordinator.” In those roles, educators may find themselves with new leadership responsibilities and the opportunity to make significant improvements in student success and institutional effectiveness, and yet with little formal training specifically designed to ready them for this undertaking.

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) launched Leading from the Middle (LFM) Academy in 2013 to support the professional development of middle leaders. Since then, more than 350 California Community College educators have participated in LFM activities, including the yearlong academy and customized programs designed for City College of San Francisco and the San Mateo County Adult Education Consortium.

What can we learn from the experiences of LFM participants? How can those experiences contribute to an emerging description of middle leadership and an understanding of the process of developing middle leaders?

## LFM Purpose, Design, and Outcomes

### Purpose and Design

Based on their own experiences and needs, a group of experienced middle leaders created the LFM Academy to show what middle leadership entails, to point out some of the predictable pitfalls, and to make clear the reasons for participants to take on the challenges involved in institutional transformation.

LFM’s purpose is to support the development of middle leaders across California Community Colleges. This charge entails providing ongoing professional learning opportunities for deans and department chairs as well as for practitioners who serve as coordinators or directors for campus programs and who may not yet consider themselves as leaders. Because middle leadership is inherently collaborative, the LFM Academy invites colleges to send teams that draw from various functions of the institution and include current and emerging leaders, and supports development of both individual and collaborative leadership. As more colleges engage in transformational change—rethinking structures such as the sequence of basic skills courses, the process for how students choose a major field of study, and the design of pathways to completion—the role of middle leaders becomes even more important.

The LFM Academy design reflects current literature on effective professional development and is experiential, related to practice, and undertaken collaboratively with colleagues.<sup>1</sup>

The LFM Academy has three components:

- Face-to-face convenings across a calendar year (February, June, and October)
- Online activities between convenings
- Coaching by a member of the LFM leadership group to maintain ongoing connection and support to college teams.

Rooted in a project-based pedagogy, participating college teams of four to six community college educators come with a designated campus change project to conduct throughout the LFM Academy experience. Collaboratively planning and leading the project gives participants the opportunity to apply their LFM learning and to experience leadership in practice. The professional learning experience also connects participants with peers from other colleges across the state.

## Outcomes

Middle leadership has particular characteristics and challenges. Rather than relying on authority and position, middle leaders work through collaboration, coalition building, and communication. Their work is rooted in an understanding of the local cultural context and enacted through a network of professional relationships. LFM aims for participants to grow in areas that will support their long-term development and efforts as middle leaders. The six LFM 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

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of the principles for effective professional development, visit [National Council of Teachers of English](#), [Project Learning](#), and the [National Staff Development Council](#).

# LFM Academy 2016

## 2016 Participants

The LFM 2016 Academy cohort had 70 participants, the largest group to date. This cohort included 11 college teams, including two continuing college teams from LFM 2015, and a team from San Bernardino Community College District office with two colleges.

The cohort of LFM participants reflected a wide swath of college personnel. Altogether, the LFM cohort touched many corners of the colleges. The group included roughly 13 vice presidents, deans, directors, and division chairs representing academic, student services, and administrative functions, along with nearly 20 faculty from a wide range of basic skills, general education (GE) and career and technical education (CTE) disciplines. Several of these faculty members also reported serving in leadership roles (e.g., SLOs Coordinator, Student Success Coordinator, Faculty Equity Coordinator, and Academic Senate positions).

Program leaders and administrators included individuals in positions such as EOPS Directors; Student Equity and Success Center Director; Director of Admissions and Records; and Director of Student Life. Classified staff members included personnel from offices of academic affairs, student services, and the library. Moreover, six deans of research, planning and institutional effectiveness participated along with four senior researchers; most college teams included a participating researcher.

## 2016 Evaluation Activities

LFM conducts internal evaluation activities designed to assess program outcomes in qualitative terms. This internal evaluation focuses on gathering data to improve program delivery and inform the field about middle leadership. The findings in this report come from a range of evidence including observation of the large group discussions during convenings, reflection cards that were collected at regular intervals during each of the 2016 face-to-face sessions, products developed by participants, and occasional online surveys.

# Leadership Development

## Developing Leadership Identity

Participants come with widely varied backgrounds and experience as leaders. Leadership development supports educators new to leadership as well as those who have been in leadership positions. Participant feedback indicates that through their LFM experience, participants' **identity as a leader deepens and develops as it is enacted in practice.**

One participant illustrated this point, stating:

I would describe [LFM] as a journey of self-discovery and development. Calling it "training" is almost misleading, insofar as there was little direct instruction and more reflection and guided activities. The bottom line is that one develops their leadership skills by **DOING** rather than by listening to others lecture or read about it.

In October 2016, participants further reflected on what they had learned about themselves as leaders; they **report being more confident and more strategic in their decisions and actions**. As one participant noted:

I have gained confidence and learned to speak up for equity in venues where that might not be the popular thing to do. I have learned a lot about resistance and am willing to accept criticism without taking it personally.

## Sustaining as a Leader

In shaping the program outcomes, LFM leaders recognized that developing as a leader is an ongoing process that can at times be stressful and exhausting. Leaders need strategies to avoid burnout. These LFM participants, who attend professional development on their weekends on top of their busy schedules, demonstrate that they **want to translate their passions into action**. LFM offers a venue to reflect on this dedication to their students' success and provides an opportunity to pursue college projects driven by their deep desire to improve outcomes for their students. One participant's reflection shows awareness that building mutual support with colleagues is a way to sustain energy and effort over time.

I think that our team has learned that we are stronger when we pull together on behalf of our students AND that we need student input to help inform our leadership directives.

## Team Collaboration and Leadership

Another critical component of the LFM experience focuses on developing participants' sense of middle leadership as a collective and team-oriented effort. For middle leaders, relationships are particularly salient. Collaboration and coalition are inherently part of middle leadership, as the issues that middle leaders address are bigger than their own division, department, office, or classroom. As one participant summed up the experience, "Shared leadership produces stronger results." Another added:

Team dynamics account for [a] slower yet more thoughtful process; [they] also account for longer lasting rewards and higher impact; collaborative leadership moves us as a pack, and strengthens our common force.

However, they also acknowledge that **collaboration is not always easy or smooth**. One participant observed:

I think the most difficult thing to learn was trust and placing that trust in many others on campus as well as in my group.

Part of the challenge of collaboration is to go beyond only finding colleagues who share the same opinions. Leaders **need to be able understand and engage opposition and resistance**. Collaboration can structure different perspectives and conflicting views in ways that strengthen the effort. LFM particularly focuses on building this awareness among participants, which is reflected in the following quote:

Good ideas come from supporters and resisters. And you need to be able to incorporate these ideas into your plan.

## Leadership in the Context of a College Initiative

The LFM outcomes of “engaging with the literature” and “applying research and evidence to make informed decisions” contribute to the overall skill of “strengthening capacity to prioritize and lead departmental, institutional and other changes through the process of evidence-based inquiry.” College projects conducted by LFM teams offer the context to deploy and experiment with these skills.

### Engaging Existing Literature

LFM participants confirm that they have few opportunities in their regular work schedules to read or discuss professional literature with colleagues. LFM provides a space for engagement with theory, research, and practice literature. Each year, Academy readings have been chosen to be responsive to the college team projects. For example, Academy leaders included articles on equity (Dowd & Bensimon, 2014) and integration of academic and student services (Kuh & Hinkle, 2002). Participants report finding the readings relevant to their work:

The Fullan framework from the beginning continues to make sense.... "Engaging resistance" was a great topic.... And (for tomorrow) "On Risk" carries a good message worth remembering.

### Applying Data and Evidence

The application of relevant data and evidence, presented in meaningful ways, is an ongoing component of organizational change. In constructing their initial elevator speeches, for example, LFM participants include both quantitative and qualitative evidence to make the case for change. Participants shared that they particularly found **utility in learning to tell a story**

**with data**; as one participant stated, “[I] can create a compelling message based on use of data.” Another added:

I have been able to think more critically about institutional change and the role of data in creating this change and the impact on different departments, faculty, staff, students, and admin[istrators] in the process. For example, when trying to implement a project, one of the first steps I take is looking for the evidence and data to frame the project. I never did this in the past.

Feedback indicates participants **develop facility with logic models**, as one participant described: “[I can] use the logic model to develop a plan, implementation approaches, and evaluation metrics.”

## Leading a College Initiative

### Developing College Projects

In the initial application to LFM, college teams identify a college change initiative they will work on. Given the influence and requirements of current statewide initiatives such as the Basic Skills Initiative (BSI), Student Support and Success Program (SSSP), and Student Equity Plans (SEP) there were similarities across projects pursued by college teams as part of their LFM experience, with equity and student support central to several team efforts.

Riverside and Butte both focused on developing their equity plans. Riverside and El Camino also looked for ways to integrate campus initiatives such as SEP and SSSP. Diablo Valley, worked on defining inclusive excellence as a core concept for strategic planning, along with continuing their work from 2015 to increase the number of under-represented students in STEM.

Other college teams sought ways to support students on campus. The Mt San Antonio team established an LGBTQ center on their campus. Merced focused on visually representing the student journey through the college and the resources available along the way.

San Joaquin Delta redesigned the placement process in order to increase the number of students placed in college level English and math. Yuba worked on dual enrollment. Both Norco and the returning Cabrillo team focused on developing pathways, Norco looked at developing meta-majors, and the Cabrillo team worked to develop support and lay the foundation for creating guided pathways.

The Cañada team developed a campus-wide professional development plan. The San Bernardino district team, including district and technical personnel as well as participants from Crafton Hills and San Bernardino Valley, launched work on the system-wide Education Planning Initiative; however, their project was slowed by delays in the statewide effort.

## Implementing a College Initiative

LFM participants expressed their **growing understanding of the change process, including advancing their strategic thinking, gaining more ability to read their environments, and acting more intentionally**. As two participants describe their actions:

I need to take time to be more intentional to think through this framework.

I lead more effectively if I keep an eye on the big idea. The more I communicate and network, the more successful the project seems to go.

As teams described the progress they made on their projects over the year, they **noted the value it will bring to their colleges**. Although few of the projects were of a scale that could be completed in one year, they could **see the ongoing progress, recognize opportunities for improvement, and articulate their next steps**. One team said that the value of their work was recognized on campus:

Our project is seen as a model and touted by senior management as a project that is helping our college think about pathways, faculty development, student support and program outreach to K-12.

## Receiving Coaching and Team Support

Each college team had a coach, who was a member of the LFM leadership group. Coaching has been part of the LFM design since the Academy's inception. Over the years, the coaching roles and relationships have been refined. During the Academy's first iterations, the coaching experience was uneven, depending to a great extent, on the ability to schedule time to connect. When coaching worked, the teams appreciated the external support and accountability. From the **participants' perspective, they appreciated the coaches' outside observations on development of the college projects**. Participants described the value of this support:

It is easy for us to get tangled up in our own spiral of thoughts. The coach is a good mediator to help keep us on track at times, and make us feel that we were accountable to something, or someone, other than just ourselves.

## Conclusion

Given four years of Academy implementation and evaluation, the LFM initiative has ample experience to address key questions that serve as the foundation for this effort: What can we learn from the experiences of LFM participants? How can those experiences contribute to an emerging description of middle leadership and an understanding of the process of developing middle leaders? Below we summarize the implications from the LFM Academy 2016 and reflect on learning over the past several iterations of program implementation. We conclude with how considerations will factor into the future of the LFM Academy.

## Evaluation Implications

California Community Colleges face major challenges and opportunities; in pursuit of stronger and more equitable student outcomes, colleges are implementing numerous programs and initiatives. More than half of the colleges in the system have created accelerated basic skills sequences. A growing number of colleges are actively planning to establish guided pathways. As community colleges look towards major structural and cultural changes, middle leaders have central roles in transforming their institutions.

In order to be key organizers, implementers, and sustainers of institutional change at their colleges, middle leaders

- are rooted in the moral purpose of their work; the mission of the institutions and the passions of the individual educators are motivation for developing as leaders
- need to see and understand the bigger picture—bigger than their own classroom, program, division, or campus—and have a long timeframe for transformational change.
- need to understand how complex and messy the change process can be and anticipate pitfalls and resistance.

The LFM Academy 2016 participants described the many and varied ways they are learning to be more strategic and intentional about planning, communicating, and including different perspectives in implementation of their projects. They acknowledged that leadership includes rough and rocky parts as well as progress and satisfaction.

## Future Directions for LFM

In 2016 LFM received support from the Institutional Effectiveness Division of the California Community College Chancellor's Office. These financial resources give LFM the opportunity to expand in multiple ways. The funds will subsidize college participation in the 2017 LFM Academy, lowering the cost per individual participant. The resources will also allow LFM to bring more former participants into the leadership group as coaches and facilitators and support the embedded coaching model. The expansion of LFM will also mean active collaboration with the California Community College Success Network (3CSN) on regional workshops and presentations about practitioner leadership.

The theme of the 2017 Academy will be coherence. Cognizant of the many initiatives that community colleges are undertaking, and having observed the development of campus initiatives as part of LFM, Fullan's framework points to coherence as a missing perspective in institutional transformation. And middle leaders are central to the process of transforming their institutions in ways that support stronger, more equitable student success.

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## LFM Academy 2016 Colleges

Butte College

Cabrillo College

Cañada College

Diablo Valley College

El Camino College

Merced College

Mt. San Antonio College

Norco College

Riverside College

San Bernardino Community College District, with Crafton Hills and San Bernardino Valley College

San Joaquin Delta College

Yuba College

# Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

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