Institutional transformation at scale under a guided pathways work is hard work. But more importantly it’s different work than most colleges are used to doing. My colleagues and I have had the amazing opportunity of working with hundreds of colleges around the country in the last few years since the inception of the guided pathways movement, and we’ve come to a couple of conclusions. One of them is that the historical structures that most colleges have in place are actually not designed to produce institutional transformation at scale. They’re designed to preserve the status quo and the dominant historical paradigm of an 800-year-old model. By the way, it’s a model that works very well if you have unlimited time and unlimited resources as a student. It’s not a model that works very well in other situations. And so we have to change that paradigm of how we do work at colleges if we’re actually going to transform things at scale.

And one of the things that I would note about this is all colleges that I’ve worked with and been to have amazing pockets of innovation, right. I would term most of the innovation that colleges had historically as old-school innovation. So it did one of two things. I would call it change with a capital C and 30-point font for really small numbers of students. We tend to call those things boutique programs sometimes, right. So we have large amounts of change for small numbers of students or we have change with a very lowercase C in one-point font for a large number of students, which largely leaves the dominant paradigm in place for most students.

So if we’re going to try to transform outcomes at scale, we of course can’t have large C change for small numbers of students or small C change for a large number of students. We need large C change for large numbers of students. By the way, this doesn’t mean we can’t have targeted programs that maybe we used to call boutique programs that serve a small number of students in a targeted focused way, right. Many of the programs we’ve had on an equity front to serve certain underserved populations have been termed boutique programs under the old model. What we actually get to tell the leaders of those programs and colleges is not only do you get to target small numbers of students, you get an overall system that works with you for once rather than against you. When you make the transformations at scale that guided pathways helps you make in the student experience, we can add to that with targeted programs, right. So the targeted programs can not only stay but they can evolve in a new-world order.

I would also observe from the work of the last five years, look, we’re all in academia, right. What do we know how to do in academia? We know how to talk. We are brilliant at talking about things, right. So when a new idea comes up, we will talk about it, right. We’ll talk about it and maybe we’ll even make the case for why we need that new idea. But what we’re not very good at is taking the next couple of steps from talking about it and making the case to actually having structures to getting the design and planning work done.

And this is what we’ve really learned over the last two years in my work on the ground with colleges in the A2I2 Cohort is that what you actually need are two things. One, you need a series of design principles to help guide the work, right, taking a lot from the software design world and the technology world. You have to know what your desired future state is, and you have to have a series of design principles, things that help workgroups know what is my sandbox, what are my degrees of freedom in the design process, what are the non-negotiables, right. Those design principles are very important for colleges to get work done.

And the other thing you need is a functional workgroup structure, right. Actual workgroups, not committees. Committees are very rarely designed to actually be working groups. When I say a functional workgroup, what I mean is a group that knows what problem it’s trying to solve. That sounds really trivial, but in most cases a lot of times workgroups don’t know what problem they’re trying to solve. What does the ideal future state look like? How would you know when you’re done? Right. How would you know when this task you’ve been working on is done? And so working with colleges who are engaging in this work, it’s very important to have a functional workgroup structure in place.

One other thing I would note about the work from the last couple of years about doing work differently is that there’s a lot of guided pathways activity going on at colleges around the country. Sometimes that doesn’t necessarily translate into actual changes in the student experience, right. So we’ve got colleges saying they’re doing guided pathways, and in some sense they are thinking about the big ideas of guided pathways. But the question you have to ask yourself as leaders and practitioners at colleges is: Are we making the changes in the student experience at scale that we know need to be made so more of our students can complete?

And the final story of working with these hundreds of colleges the last couple of years is a story of hope. It’s with this hard work, with this transparency and clarity about what we’re trying to produce in the student process, we have numerous colleges who have produce amazing improvements. And we talk about them sometimes as data improvements, but you always got to bring this back to the fact this is about student lives and lives of their families. When you improve an outcome by 10 points, it looks really good on a chart, but every single one of those points represents hundreds, if not thousands of student lives. And that’s why we’re doing this work, and that’s why it’s worth doing this work differently at colleges. So thank you very much.

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