



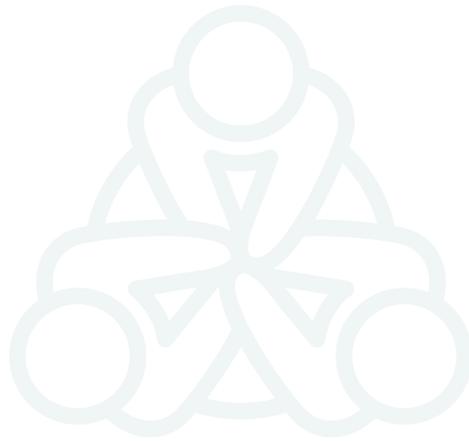
# Cultivating Regional Professional Learning Communities

A FACILITATOR'S GUIDE TO SUPPORTING STUDENT-FOCUSED PARTNERSHIPS

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## PART 1

# Framing the Work

ACHIEVING THE DREAM has created this Facilitator's Guide to support our colleges in convening community partners to create effective educational pathways that lead to family-sustaining wages. These partners may include educators from high schools, community colleges, and four-year colleges and universities, and representatives from local workforce development agencies and employers. Community colleges have a special role to play as hubs of community vitality in which their students successfully complete a credential on their path to increased economic and social mobility. One way colleges can fulfill this role is to convene these groups at a regional level to address local and national needs while working together to remove systemic barriers to positive life outcomes.

**Effective regional collaboration requires deep engagement and trust between multiple constituents who share a stake in student success and community vitality.**

This resource summarizes what we have learned in partnership with ATD colleges that have convened regional professional learning communities to foster deeper collaboration across K–12, higher education, and workforce partners. We share

helpful strategies and tools to support your work in these cross-sector collaborations, and we present four case studies of how these efforts have unfolded in four diverse communities across the country.<sup>1</sup>

As we release this guide, we are excited to support similar regional collaborations led by ATD colleges that serve as hubs for this essential work in their communities. While the primary audience for this guide is community colleges, the strategies and tools we provide can be utilized by any entity interested

<sup>1</sup> During 2020–22, our staff and coaches worked closely with four colleges in the Achieving the Dream network — Cuyahoga Community College (OH), Mott Community College (MI), Tallahassee Community College (FL), and Tyler Junior College (TX) — to design and facilitate regional professional learning communities (PLCs). Each of these colleges collaborated with key community partners to align and strengthen locally relevant academic/career pathways from K–12 through the workforce.



in convening these groups to work toward a common goal.

Effective regional collaboration requires deep engagement and trust between multiple constituents who share a stake in student success and community vitality. To do this work well takes patience, a common language and goals, and sustained effort and commitment from all involved to effect sustainable change. This guide is designed to help you build and facilitate an effective team in examining the student experience from high school through college and into employment. We call that team a **professional learning community (PLC)**.

In typical professional development, we tend to believe that experts are necessary. We spend significant time and money inviting experts to our campuses to provide one-off presentations

or workshops, or we travel to hear conference speakers. While experts can certainly share innovative ideas, inspire, and reinvigorate, their one-time talks rarely make a long-term impact on teaching, programs, policies, or students. We

also tend to expect professional development experiences to yield at least one concrete new strategy to implement immediately; we look for a silver bullet solution that addresses institutional needs and goals without contextualizing the solution across the full life cycle of the student experience. We take these strategies and use them individually. When they do not solve the issues that we identified, we rarely discuss it with colleagues, because that might

show that we are fallible. Embedded in these expectations is an assumption that there are simple discrete solutions to the complex issues educators face.

**We recognize that complex issues cannot be solved simply and that this work will take time and commitment.**



Instead, let us aspire to *professional learning experiences*. We recognize that complex issues cannot be solved simply or in silos, and that this work will take time, commitment, and exchange with other collaborators who have a mutual interest in designing and supporting K–12 to workforce pathways. We need to create PLCs in which participants gain more together than they would have alone. We can commit to supporting both individual and group growth by developing participants' collaborative skills and critical thinking. Because the issue of student success from K–12 education through employment involves so many stakeholders, institutions, and organizations, this work cannot be done in a vacuum. Similarly, as regional collaboratives convene and build their work together, their initial goals may evolve as they share new perspectives and achieve outcomes. The case studies we present in this Facilitator's Guide provide helpful examples of the value derived from this approach. It takes time and energy to build a regional PLC and take an inclusive

approach as we bring partners to the table. But this investment pays off when we see our students and communities benefitting as our community colleges take the lead in these efforts.

Many community college faculty development centers host faculty inquiry groups, collaborative inquiry groups, communities of practice, teaching circles, learning circles, and PLCs. These cohort-based experiences share some common characteristics, often aiming for professional learning. But they also often focus more narrowly on the classroom or campus experience (e.g., collaborative learning strategies, equity-minded pedagogy, assessment practices in STEM). They tend to draw people together to explore an identified topic for their own professional development using research. The audiences for these cohort-based programs typically come from a single institution, if not a single department. If you have experience in these types of groups, you will notice some similarities, as well as key differences.

**Strive for  
a balance  
between being  
task-oriented  
and process-  
oriented.**



In other situations, PLCs are intended to provide space and time for faculty to critically reflect on their teaching practice in collaboration with colleagues. These are often called reflective practice groups and can be very powerful. Members spend time reflecting on the group’s process and how they are working together. These are quite different from task-oriented committees, which focus on completing a concrete product, such as designing the master schedule to maximize the use of a newly outfitted lab space.

In creating a regional PLC, we encourage you to strive for a balance between being task-oriented

and process-oriented. Your PLC members will complete a task together, and you will want to invest time in building relationships and eliciting different perspectives to identify new ways of doing things with an understanding of each member’s unique contribution to the final outcome. Goals developed at the start of your work will inform how you conceive of and facilitate your PLC.

Most of us are familiar with committee work, so let us also be clear how a PLC is different from a typical committee.

|                       | Committees   | Professional learning communities <sup>2</sup>  |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| <b>Leadership</b>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Chair plans agenda</li> <li>Chair leads group through agenda items</li> <li>Chair is responsible for keeping participants on track</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitator plans agenda</li> <li>Facilitator leads group through agenda using protocols to guide discussion</li> <li>Facilitator and participants are responsible for keeping other members on track</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Focus</b>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Task-oriented</li> <li>Hierarchical</li> <li>Problem-solving</li> <li>Individuals take responsibility for completing tasks</li> <li>Can be unfocused if there isn’t consensus about the goal</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mix of task-oriented and process-oriented</li> <li>Collaborative</li> <li>Problem-solving</li> <li>Raises questions and challenges assumptions</li> <li>Balanced between focus on goals and focus on people</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Accountability</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To those outside of the group</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To individuals in the group as well as those outside of the group</li> <li>Reflective about what the group has accomplished</li> </ul>   |
|                       | <p><b>Example work</b></p> <p>Each department or program is responsible for reviewing its course objectives and identifying which courses meet a new statewide core requirement.</p>   | <p><b>Example work</b></p> <p>While aligning their department’s or program’s courses to the state core requirements, participants examine how students are meeting the identified objectives. They consider what types of evidence count and how that choice impacts which students have been successful.</p> |

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from David Allen and Tina Blythe, *Facilitating for Learning: Tools for Teacher Groups of All Kinds* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2015).

# Building Blocks of Effective Professional Learning Communities

## Design Principles for High-Impact Professional Learning

Effective PLCs share some common elements that foster environments for successful collaboration via high-impact professional learning. The Good Practice Principles from ATD's [Teaching & Learning Toolkit](#) will be especially helpful as you design your PLC.<sup>3</sup> Grounded in the latest research in the field, they function as design principles for high-impact professional learning. We encourage you to review these Good Practice Principles and consider how they apply in your context. In Part 2 of this guide, we will walk through specific questions to steer your planning.

## Highly Engaged Facilitators and Participants

Let us now consider the roles of the facilitator and participants. Having a clear sense of these roles will be useful as you start to recruit participants. It will also help you think about building opportunities (for yourself and your group members) to

Imagine an effective facilitator you know. What were the attitudes, skills, and knowledge that made them particularly successful and memorable? What made you a valuable participant in that situation?

reflect on the roles and improve over time. Imagine an effective facilitator you know. What were the attitudes, skills, and knowledge that made them particularly successful and memorable? What made you a valuable participant in that situation?

### FACILITATORS

**Attitudes:** Effective facilitators are confident, reflective, and flexible. They are equity-minded, meaning that they pay attention to who is in the group, who speaks, and for how long. They notice who remains on the margins, and they create space for them to feel included. They ensure the team has adequate representation and can authentically speak for marginalized and minoritized student populations. They know that it is normal to make mistakes and they are transparent about their own learning in the process. They believe in shared decision-making rather than keeping all of the power.

**Skills:** Effective facilitators listen actively and ask thoughtful and probing questions. They process what is happening within the group while it is happening. They are assertive and direct when necessary, ensuring that no one member is monopolizing the conversation or decisions. They provide a safer space that ensures all members are respected and contributing in meaningful and productive ways.

**Knowledge:** Effective facilitators are deeply familiar with the group's goals, the participants' names and contexts, how to design meeting agendas to promote adult learning, and how to structure and lead constructive conversations. They are professionally connected to the work and have sufficient authority to bring the PLC's efforts forward to relevant stakeholders for implementation.



<sup>3</sup> The Good Practice Principles are adapted from Randy Bass, Bret Eynon, and Laura M. Gambino, *The New Learning Compact: A Framework for Professional Learning and Educational Change* (Every Learner Everywhere, 2019), <https://www.everylearnereverywhere.org/resources/the-new-learning-compact/>.





**Example:** If the facilitator notices that certain voices are missing from the conversation, they might say, “We’ve heard from several members of the group so far. Would anyone who hasn’t had a chance to speak like to go next?”

## PARTICIPANTS

As the facilitator, your leadership can guide the team toward productive participation. In the green box (below) are things that participants can do to be effective team members. These



behaviors may not be within the PLC members’ skill sets when the group begins its journey—but your goal is to help them develop as productive participants through your work together. By setting up community agreements, you and the group can name behaviors that are important for active participation. Because you are working with professionals, they likely have many opinions about what productive collaboration looks and feels like. Be sure to include that in your expectations for active engagement in your PLC. Inviting the group members to reflect on their participation in light of the community agreements and current work can help them become more self-aware and effective.

**Example:** If one participant says something that discounts another’s perspective, the facilitator needs to recognize this and address it, ensuring all voices are given space. It is not the facilitator’s job to solve the problem, but to point out what is happening to the group, invite feedback, and propose possible directions for the group to choose. They might say, “It looks like we are shutting down the high school perspective. Have others noticed that?” They then pause for responses before continuing. “We could try a couple of things next. We could break up into partners to clarify our ideas, or we could continue as a whole group but pause between speakers so we really take time to understand what was said. What do you think?”

**Example:** If the facilitator notices that the group is highly engaged in a productive discussion but the agenda says to move on, they need to make a quick decision to either stick to the agenda or adjust the plan. They might say, “Excuse me, I don’t want to cut off this discussion because it is very productive, but I’m aware of the time. How about we go another 15 minutes and save the next item on our agenda for the next meeting?” Or they might say, “Excuse me, I hate to cut off this productive conversation, but \_\_\_\_ brought work for our feedback today, and I want to make sure that we get to that. Could everyone take a couple of minutes to write down their thoughts about this discussion? I’ll collect those and summarize them so we can come back to it at our next meeting.”

**Stay engaged**  
**Listen to understand**  
**Take risks**  
**Speak their truth**  
**Take responsibility**  
**Trust the facilitator**  
**Commit to the team**  
**Challenge the status quo**

## Getting Started

Now that we have introduced some of the key distinctions of PLCs and identified building blocks for success, it's time to examine opportunities for local partnerships. To do this well, we encourage

you to work closely with a small group of key stakeholders at your college who will ultimately support the success of a regional PLC.



### TOOL

## Partnerships Analysis Exercise<sup>4</sup>

1. Begin by articulating the difference between college partnerships and relationships. It's important that you and your colleagues define these in ways that are relevant in your local context.
2. Next, take some time to identify existing partnerships in these areas:
  - a. Educational partners (local school districts, K–12 institutions, other community colleges, transfer-receiving institutions, college consortia)
  - b. Employers
  - c. Industry associations, labor unions, professional associations
  - d. Workforce-related organizations (workforce development agencies, economic development, chambers of commerce)
  - e. Government (cities, counties, state, and federal agencies)
  - f. Community-based organizations
  - g. Human service and social service agencies
  - h. Philanthropy groups (foundations and other local donors, funders, and investors with whom the college has an existing or potential relationship)
3. Select at least two partnerships to analyze (at least one from among your educational partners and at least one from among your employer/workforce-related partners).
  - a. Which partnership are you analyzing?
  - b. What is the objective or goal of the partnership?
  - c. Do you agree on a vision for student success?
  - d. Who at the college is the owner of this partnership?
  - e. Classify the partnership by level of interaction intensity with the college: low, moderate, or strategic.
  - f. Could the intensity of the partnership be expanded to the strategic level? Does the partnership support the college's strategic student success goals?
  - g. Are there written expectations (e.g., an MOU)?
  - h. How do you assess the quality of the partnership? How do you know it is an effective collaboration for both partners?
  - i. Do you meet periodically to discuss changes that would impact how you partner?
4. Follow-up questions:
  - a. What sector gaps do you see?
  - b. Did this exercise reveal there are multiple relationship owners for different partnerships?
  - c. Could any of these partnerships be expanded to help students prepare for their future success?
  - d. Do you have a manageable yet sufficient number of strategic partners?
  - e. Did you identify partnerships that are not of value and do not need to be maintained any longer?
5. What are next steps as you work toward convening a regional PLC that leverages these partnerships?

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Meredith A. Hatch, Donna M. Kragt, Mary E. Ostrye, Cindy Lopez, "Partnerships Analysis Exercise" (Achieving the Dream, 2022). This tool was designed to support cross-functional teams in thinking deeply about the wide range of partnerships they might initiate and sustain. These partnerships — and your team's analysis of them — will help you form a meaningful foundation for your professional learning community.





TOOL

# Building Your Regional Professional Learning Community

Completing the partnership analysis exercise should clarify which partners — especially those from the education and employer sectors — should be invited to join your regional PLC.

We encourage you to begin by gathering a small core team of stakeholders from your college to engage in the first stage of the planning process. This group should identify a primary objective for your regional PLC.

This objective will then inform your next stage of work, which is to invite colleagues from each partner organization to engage with you in this collaborative. Part 2 (Setting the Stage) provides helpful information on recruiting these PLC members. This worksheet provides a space for thinking about the ideal composition of your PLC and a broader group of stakeholders you may need to engage as the process unfolds.

**PLC name:**

**Our PLC's primary objective (what we hope to accomplish as a team):**

### Team Members and Contributions

(Add rows as needed)

| Name | Organization and role | Key skills/ perspective this person brings to the team | Contribution to the pathway | Individual goal(s) for being part of the PLC |
|------|-----------------------|--|-----------------------------|--|
|      |                       |  |                             |  |
|      |                       |  |                             |  |
|      |                       |  |                             |  |
|      |                       |  |                             |  |
|      |                       |  |                             |  |
|      |                       |  |                             |  |
|      |                       |  |                             |  |
|      |                       |  |                             |  |

**Aside from members of the working team, please identify key stakeholders you should engage in this work. These are individuals who may inform the work, advocate for the PLC and its goals, provide financial assistance, or mobilize the work in other ways.**

| Name | Organization and role | How might they support the work? | How will we engage this stakeholder? |
|------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
|      |                       |                                  |                                      |
|      |                       |                                  |                                      |
|      |                       |                                  |                                      |
|      |                       |                                  |                                      |
|      |                       |                                  |                                      |
|      |                       |                                  |                                      |
|      |                       |                                  |                                      |
|      |                       |                                  |                                      |

## PLC Example

### CARRYING THE WORK FORWARD IN CLEVELAND, OH

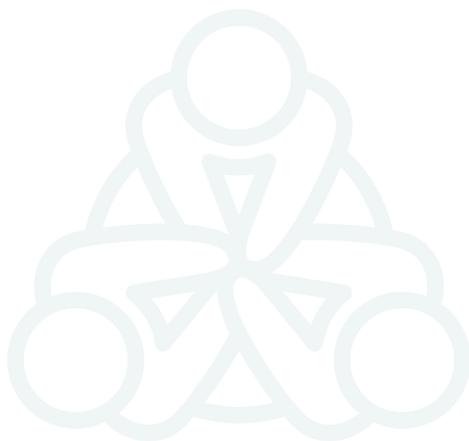
Convening a PLC allowed Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C) to bring together a diverse group representing K–12, workforce, and community college partners with the goal of helping more students finish high school with a plan to go into healthcare, a high-demand field regionally. Tri-C had a long history of collaborating with community partners and is in charge of a county-wide sector partnership in healthcare. In addition, Cleveland Public Schools had recently launched the PACE (Planning and Career Exploration) initiative, focused on helping sixth through twelfth graders explore careers in healthcare. Building on this strong foundation, the regional PLC created a new opportunity for partners to have deeper conversations about the students they serve, exploring gaps in healthcare pathways and challenges to student success. The PLC complemented existing work and became increasingly relevant as local healthcare employers began to loosen credentialing requirements for certain positions in the face of mounting regional and national staffing shortages.

As convener of the PLC, Tri-C's team was initially concerned that the group did not have all the right people around the table because students and faculty were not well-represented.

This might have been due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the necessity of online meetings, something that potentially discouraged their involvement. The PLC members worked together to navigate these pandemic-related obstacles and found that the PLC framework enabled partners to discuss a variety of barriers to students experiencing clear pathways from K–12 to and through postsecondary programs in healthcare fields. Dr. JaNice Marshall, the Cleveland PLC facilitator and Tri-C's Vice President of Access and Community Connections, shared that she learned to ask questions differently, drilling down into the “what might be” and encouraging others to look at the sticky issues and come together collectively to address barriers to student success. For instance, partners identified that students often complete a high school program with a credential, only to discover they are not awarded adequate credit upon enrollment in a postsecondary program. In response, Tri-C is working with its nursing curriculum to maximize credits students can keep from prior education.

In the coming year, Tri-C plans to use this model and lessons learned to convene two additional PLCs organized around IT and advanced manufacturing.





## PART 2

# Setting the Stage

AS THE FACILITATOR, you have a unique opportunity to consider your community's needs as you shape the goals of your regional PLC. In this section, we will offer several reflection questions to guide your thinking and planning as you take on this role. We encourage you to allow yourself

the time and space you need to pause and reflect before moving to the next section.

To begin, let's consider some possible outcomes of your regional PLC. Community colleges are well-positioned to strengthen and clarify pathways from high school through regional employment by leading PLCs with members from local high schools, other community colleges, four-year institutions, regional associations and affiliates, and regional employers and workforce development organizations. These PLCs can collaboratively identify career pathways that are relevant to local communities and articulate what students need to be successful in those fields. Structuring regional collaboration in this way enables participants from various contexts to better understand each sector's needs, responsibilities, and realities, and work toward alignment so that students can realize their academic and non-academic goals.

PLCs can identify a shared problem to work on, in this case fragmented career pathways, and collaboratively produce a relevant product to amplify and communicate the problem and begin to solve it.





## TOOL

## Pathways from Education to Career: Reflecting on Community and Institutional Context

Please take some time to reflect on your community and institutional context, using the guiding questions here. Your responses to these questions should be informed by (and build on) your responses to the partnerships analysis exercise in Part 1. You may need to gather information to answer some of these questions. Once you have considered the big picture, develop some concrete goals based on your initial reflections.

1. Thinking about your partners and key stakeholders in the education and employment sectors, what are the strengths of your local community?
2. What are your community's areas of need with respect to workforce and talent development? Where is there space for innovation?
3. What career or transfer pathways does your college already have? How developed and effective are they? What inputs from K–12, university, and employer partners did you consider in these pathways? What redundancies or barriers have you identified in these existing pathways?
4. What is your college's role in engaging students from your local K–12 districts and facilitating their success in college? To what extent are your K–12 programs equity-oriented? Similarly, how is the college preparing students to transfer to four-year institutions? For employment? What are your strengths? Where is there a need for growth?
5. What do you know about the diversity of successful graduates? Are there equity gaps that need attention? Where along the pathway (e.g., K–12, transfer outcomes, bachelor degree completion, wage equity gaps) do you encounter these obstacles and barriers and how might you address them?

Once you have clarified your goals for the PLC, it is time to think about who to recruit. Usually, having eight to twelve members who have both front-line and decision-making responsibilities allows for significant diversity in perspectives while still allowing everyone to actively participate. Having diverse perspectives can increase impact and make the professional learning experience more effective, while also ensuring the needs of all students are represented.

In what ways does your college already connect with high schools? Perhaps you have dual enrollment courses or an education department that supports field experiences. When identifying community college colleagues to invite to join the PLC, consider both experienced faculty and your

newer faculty who might be looking for ways to engage at your college. Consider your adjunct faculty as well; they tend to be more immediately connected to industry trends and current themes in the workplace. As you identify potential employer partners, analyze them by industry cluster to determine which employers are most likely to hire your college's graduates. In addition, consider leveraging your own network, existing advisory boards, or career placement office to identify possible PLC members.

Focus on ensuring diverse community representation (racial, ethnic, ability, gender), working specifically to identify and eliminate inclusion gaps. We tend to create networks of people who look and act like ourselves, and who





have similar backgrounds. This is natural, but it limits the opinions and perspectives with which we engage. If your college has affinity groups, or supportive groups for people who share a common identity, you may want to reach out to their leaders to share information about the PLC. Also, be aware of the subject areas represented. Although many employment opportunities are in STEM and career and technical education, faculty from the arts, humanities, social sciences, and other general education disciplines will bring an important perspective to the project goals.

Try to balance the roles that your participants hold. Include some in management positions, but not all, as front-line personnel will bring a unique perspective that represents the day-to-day experiences of students. Consider engaging a representative from the local philanthropic community; funders might appreciate the opportunity to collaborate as thought partners and their presence could help you identify additional resources for your work.

**Having diverse perspectives can increase impact and make the professional learning experience more effective.**

Finally, we urge you to invite one to two students to join this PLC. Although a student may not be available for an ongoing commitment, remember that student voices are hugely important to ensuring the feasibility of the recommended course of action and its relevancy to their own experience. Student leaders are often best

primed to actively participate in a long-term PLC. However, it may be more practical to bring students to a few specially chosen and designed meetings once the PLC has already formed. In this case, including the voices of students who have faced significant barriers to success would provide critical information to your group about your most marginalized students' experiences and needs.

Next, you will need to decide whether your PLC will be held in person, virtually, or in a hybrid format. There are many benefits to meeting in person, especially because PLC members will be coming from a variety of locations. As a facilitator, it is easier to



read body language when you are in the same room as your participants. In addition, if you vary the meeting site so each participant has the chance to host, everyone will better understand the different contexts, while also distributing power across the team.

Many people say they feel more connected when they can meet in the same room. However, we learned during the COVID-19 pandemic that there are numerous ways to build community virtually. Intentionally holding the PLC meetings virtually may make active engagement feasible for busy participants because they will not need to travel to meetings. You can also record the meetings for someone who is absent.

Pursuing a hybrid strategy can allow for even greater flexibility in your planning, providing opportunities to maximize relationship-building at in-person meetings while also accommodating a wider range of PLC members' schedules. In addition to video, there are virtual tools to record the group's process in writing, which can create a useful record of your work while also keeping the team accountable; these are discussed explicitly in Part 3.

If you choose a hybrid or fully virtual format, we suggest an in-person kick-off, if possible.

Whichever format you choose will involve tradeoffs, so it is worth being intentional about this choice as you consider your goals and your participants. A word of caution for holding effective virtual meetings: while this modality offers flexibility and can contribute to greater participation, the tendency to miss meetings, multi-task, or simply "hide" with video turned off is also that much greater. Ensuring all participants are attending and contributing productively with full attention will

mean designing an engaging meeting that requires the input and participation of all members. Being upfront about participation expectations, time commitment, and the desired outcome is crucial to ensuring the right combination of team members.

Recruiting participants can be tricky because many people are constantly bombarded by impersonal emails and invitations to join committees, projects, and events. To make

this PLC stand out, we encourage you to be intentional about your outreach strategy, which should involve multiple marketing tools

**Intentionally holding the PLC meetings virtually may make active engagement feasible for busy participants because they will not need to travel to meetings.**



(e.g., personal phone calls, flyers, and emails) that align with your goals around building relationships with key partners. Whenever possible, individualize. For example, if you decide to make a flyer, write a handwritten note to connect to your recruits: "It would be great to work with you on this project because you would bring \_\_\_\_\_," or "\_\_\_\_\_ recommended you to join this project because you

would bring a perspective about \_\_\_\_\_." Use the following prompts to guide your communication. Be strategic about who will send these messages; they will have a higher likelihood of successfully engaging their target audience if they come from someone who is well-known to your community partners.

**WHY:** Briefly state the goals of the project.

**WHAT:** Briefly explain the product and the PLC.

**WHO:** Indicate which roles should be represented in your PLC.

**WHERE:** In-person or virtual

**WHEN:** Days, times, and duration of commitment

Dear Colleague (it's best to personalize this with individual names),

Our region is known for high-quality healthcare, yet we know that many young people do not have access to secure, high-paying jobs in that field. I'd like to invite you to join a group of committed individuals from local high schools, community colleges, four-year institutions, and healthcare employers to collaborate on a project.

By learning about our collective work, strengths, and challenges, we can better align to support our students and incoming employees.

Together, we will build our capacity to lead change by identifying a community need and exploring challenges. We will learn from each other and research to inform our actions. By the end of the year, we will share our learning to amplify the challenges our students face and propose potential solutions.

Who: Faculty/staff/administrators from high schools, community colleges, four-year colleges and universities, and local employers.

Where: Our Community College

When: Mondays, 3:00–5:00 pm monthly

Ready to join us? Please contact me with questions and concerns, and to sign up. Or if you know someone who would be a great fit for this excellent work, please share this information with them.

I look forward to working with you!

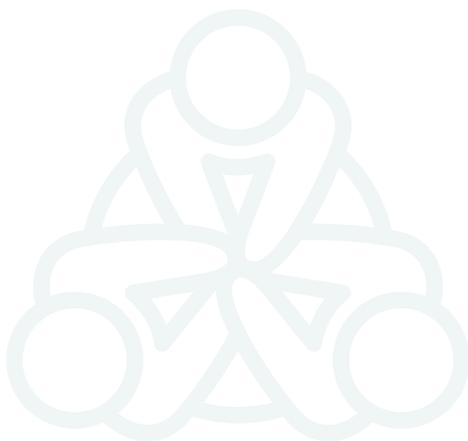
Logistically, the facilitator sets the meeting time and place, organizes and distributes materials, communicates with participants, plans the agenda, and leads the group through the agenda. Once you have decided whether you are meeting in person or in a hybrid or virtual format, you may need to reserve rooms and arrange parking passes. Regardless of how you are meeting, you will need to organize materials, so consider whether participants will read a shared text, use a shared virtual folder (e.g., Google Drive), or receive a physical folder or binder for the PLC materials. Many in-person PLC members have said that a must-have at meetings is food. You may choose to provide a snack for the first meeting and then bring a sign-up sheet so that the members share this responsibility with you going forward.

**As the facilitator, you will need time to plan and reflect, communicate with participants, and lead the meetings.**

year. Although you will not be in a formal position to limit participants' other commitments, helping them communicate the goals and value of the group to their supervisors can proactively ensure they have the time to commit to the group. Your own administrators may help you with this task by speaking to their counterparts at high schools, peer institutions, and places of employment. Consider what funds are available to support this work. Be sensitive to the workloads of your busy colleagues from each partner organization, and do not forget to advocate for yourself. As the facilitator, you will need time to plan and reflect, communicate with participants, and lead the meetings. Ideally, taking on this responsibility will allow you to step away from other commitments.

Protecting participants' time is an important element to a successful PLC. We recommend meeting for 90–120 minutes four to six times per





## PART 3

# Designing the Meetings

A KEY GUIDING PRINCIPLE to consider when designing the meetings is that you must make the most of everyone's limited time. The Good Practice Principles featured in *The New Learning Compact* and ATD's *Teaching & Learning Toolkit* suggest that professional learning should respect participants' knowledge, concretely connect to practice, engage inquiry and reflection, and protect participants' time. As you consider a roadmap for your PLC's meetings, we encourage you to identify ways to intentionally build in elements that are

informed by these Good Practice Principles. Each meeting agenda should connect to your regional PLC's high-level goals, pick up the thread from previous meetings, allow time to learn together, and consider what learning and growth has taken place and how this will impact future work. When participants enter the meeting, the space needs to be prepared for them. Whether the group meets in person or online, the facilitator can create a physical atmosphere that reflects the group's meaningful work.



### TOOL

## PLC Facilitator Goals

1. What high-level goals does your college have for convening this regional PLC?
2. Within the scope of these goals and your reflection about your context (see worksheets in Part 1 and Part 2), what do you hope your PLC will accomplish in its first six months? In one year? In three years?
3. How will you know that you were successful?



## Planning the Agenda

### Connecting to Goals

Many educators are goal-oriented and motivated to engage in activities that have clear purposes that are relevant and timely. Sharing the PLC's initial overarching goals with your potential participants is an important step during recruitment, but it is worth reconnecting to those goals when planning every session. Co-constructing these goals is equally important. While you identified high-level goals at the initiation of the PLC, you will want all participants to finalize these larger, organizing goals to ensure they have mutual interest in the outcome. This co-construction process is fundamental to success, as it will help you and the group stay on track. Likewise, we encourage you to leverage available data during each stage of your work; you will likely find opportunities to iterate on your goals based on the data.

Early in your time together, work with your group to establish short-term goals to move you toward the big-picture goal. There are a few reasons to do this with the group. First, it ensures that the group meetings are relevant to participants. They are more likely to commit to the group if they have choice and voice in its direction. Second, if you give up some control of the planning, the group's work becomes shared rather than owned by the facilitator and the host organization. Ideally, all members of the group will actively participate because they are individually committed to it, rather than passively attending and waiting for the facilitator to tell them what to do.

**Sharing the PLC's overarching goals with your potential participants is an important step during recruitment, but it is worth reconnecting to those goals when planning every session. This will help you and the group stay on track.**

### WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE:

1. Writing the big-picture goals on a poster that is displayed at every meeting (or re-sharing in the chat during virtual meetings).
2. Writing the short-term goals at the top of every agenda.

### Building Connections

Given what you know about the workload of educators and partners in our communities, you should assume that everyone involved in this group will have had a significant number of other meetings and professional responsibilities

since your last session together. It is useful to build time into the agenda to recognize this and reconnect as a group. This segment in the agenda can focus on building personal connections between members, building connections between meetings, or creating space for individuals to intentionally leave behind other commitments to turn full attention to this group.

This brief section of the meeting is process-oriented rather than task-oriented, but it is not wasted time. Instead, spending a few minutes building connections helps the group develop trust so it can complete tasks more efficiently.



## WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE:

1. In pairs or triads, participants take a few moments to share what they have been working on since the last meeting.
2. Participants respond in a round to the question, “What is something that stands out to you from our last meeting?” This helps the group remember what happened as well as highlights a variety of perspectives; what stood out as being memorable, useful, or impactful will be different for each person. Another benefit of this process is that it spreads the responsibility of synthesizing what happened across the full group, instead of leaving this solely in the hands of the facilitator.
3. Formal Connections:<sup>5</sup> This is a structured protocol in which group members have a chance to state something that is on their mind to clear space and fully focus on this group’s time together. Participants do not respond to one another, so they are not connecting with each other per se. Instead, they are purposefully connecting to the group, creating a bridge from what they were thinking about before the meeting so they can put it aside during the meeting.
4. The facilitator reads anonymous written reflections from the previous meeting. These could highlight significant learning, anticipated action, or constructive feedback.

**Spending a few minutes building connections helps the group develop trust so that it can complete tasks more efficiently.**

and well-spent, and that they have benefited by committing their time to this purpose. So although process-oriented elements are critical pieces to group development, it is important to spend significant time on task-oriented activities as well. These specific activities can come directly from

the group’s short-term goals. As the facilitator, designing the “getting to the work” section of the agenda means finding work that is accessible and relevant to the diverse group members.

One way to approach this is to find a common text to explore. In this context, we use the term “text” loosely to refer to any concrete communication that the group can examine together, and this can include writing, video, audio, and data.

A well-chosen text can help build a shared language and understanding. It can also surface assumptions and create opportunities for learning. For example, if the group has identified a goal of increasing the number of under-represented students in a particular career path, it may be useful to use a text showing the demographics of employees in that career and in the college major or program. Then, to increase the group’s language for discussing the issues surrounding this goal, a text on microaggressions in the classroom and workplace may raise awareness, prompt fruitful discussion, and lead to action. Initially, these choices should be made by the facilitator, but as the group matures, members can choose texts to bring.

Once the group has established some trust, there is an opportunity to build a collective understanding of what happens in high school and college classrooms and what is expected of employees in particular fields. To do this, members from each sector can showcase their best work. However, the group will learn much more if members are willing to bring work that did not go perfectly, was a little confusing, or is incomplete. By bringing real work and asking for feedback

## Getting to the Work

To make professional learning worth doing, participants need to know that their time is valued

<sup>5</sup> Gene Thompson-Grove, “Connections,” School Reform Initiative, updated March 30, 2017, <https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/download/connections/>.



from the group, members will continue to build trust and accountability with each other while also deepening their understanding of the different members' contexts. For teachers at any level, this can feel very uncomfortable. Educators spend a lot of time as the lone professional in the room, and it is unusual to publicly admit our imperfections. Sharing work with employers may bring up feelings of vulnerability. But if the group can get to the level where they are willing to bring their own work for feedback, they will find the time spent together more valuable. PLC members will not only gain a deep understanding of what happens in the high school, college, and work sectors but also receive actionable feedback to improve their own practice. The facilitator can play an important role in normalizing feelings and the process.

### WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE:

1. Early in the group's formation, each person reflects on their perspective of the big-picture goal: "In your role as a high school educator/college educator/ employer/community partner, how do you prepare individuals to be successful in employment?" Then, similar to speed dating, individuals pair up and share their reflections in five- to ten-minute sessions. After changing partners several times, the whole group discusses what they heard. These interviews become the "text" that the group uses to find similarities and differences. They can identify gaps and use them to create short-term goals for the group.
2. The facilitator brings the course requirements for a program of study that

leads to a relevant career goal. High school teachers discuss how their students are prepared to take those courses, identifying where there is strong alignment and where there are gaps. Employers share how the program of study will prepare students to work in their field and where there are gaps. College faculty listen first and then share what actions they could take to improve the alignment.

3. An employer brings a dilemma to the group for feedback. The group asks clarifying questions to make sure they fully understand the scope of the issue and what the employer is hoping to learn. Then they ask probing questions to help the employer think through their own assumptions about the dilemma. Next, the group offers a few suggestions about how the employer might manage the dilemma. Finally, the employer shares what insights they had while listening to the feedback and what actions they plan to take. The facilitator then leads the group in a debrief of that experience so they can get better at effectively giving feedback to each other.

**By bringing real work and asking for feedback from the group, members will continue to build trust and accountability with each other while also deepening their understanding of the different members' contexts.**

### Taking it Forward

It is important for the facilitator to protect a few minutes at the end of a meeting to intentionally close it so there are clear next steps to advance the conversation, while also recognizing not all items will be addressed or resolved. Because PLC members are focused on learning from

each other, while also balancing process and tasks to move the work forward and effect change, the facilitator must account for the possibility of non-closure while ensuring positive and productive communication. Emphasizing the process means giving participants time to share how the facilitator



can improve future meetings and the group can work more effectively together. This can be done orally or in writing.

Adult learners remember best when given the opportunity to name their learning. The facilitator can focus on tasks from the meeting, asking participants to identify what they learned and what they will do as a result. Of course, both will be useful in building trust, improving the group's development, and integrating learning into practice. Unfortunately, time is a limiting factor, and it is necessary to intentionally design an effective agenda that accounts for the time and space needed to address systemic barriers. Note a time to begin closing the meeting on the agenda so everyone knows there is a hard stop in the task-oriented work. This way, all PLC members will have a chance to take a breath, process, and reflect, as well as synthesize what they learned before rushing out to their next commitment.

**Adult learners remember best when given the opportunity to name their learning.**

## WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE:

1. Participants respond to two questions on a note card, which they fill out quietly before leaving. In a virtual format, the facilitator can ask participants to send them a private chat or complete a poll with their responses. The facilitator collects these and uses them to inform planning for the next meeting. These can also be used at the beginning of the next meeting to build connections.
2. Every member has an opportunity to share one concrete thing aloud that they want to think more about before the next meeting. The facilitator takes notes and shares the list in a follow-up email.



## PLC Example

### LEARNING FROM PLC CONVERSATIONS IN GENESEE COUNTY, MI

When Mott Community College first decided to convene a regional PLC, they had broad goals to develop pathway maps from middle school through community college. But as they ventured into the world of Career and Technical Education (CTE), PLC members identified a big opportunity gap. Essentially, area high school students interested in technical fields had two options if they wished to remain at their school: either complete high school and pursue a traditional degree or certificate after graduating or take the technical path within their school, earning no credit toward a post-secondary credential. To obtain college credit for CTE courses while in high school, students had to move to a different school, leaving their friend groups and often traveling great distances from home.

Through early PLC conversations, the college realized there was an opportunity to fill this gap locally by offering CTE college credit programming to high school students. In collaboration with PLC partners, Mott developed Connect to Career, a pilot combining dual enrollment transfer courses or general education courses with gateway CTE courses. The goal was to offer students a taste of career options and some college credit while still in their home high school. This approach was the first step toward achieving a broader vision of supporting all high school students, regardless of their intended track (CTE or college-transfer), in starting dual enrollment programs leading to employment and a livable wage.

Discussing students' need to explore careers and obtain college credit for appropriate CTE courses led to a broader conversation about the stigma often attached to CTE and certificate program tracks for students. PLC partners lamented the fact that many high school students were being discouraged from pursuing CTE programming, often because teachers and administrators felt all students should be encouraged to pursue a four-year degree. Mott discussed with its regional PLC partners that many students would benefit from a CTE and certificate program option if they

were better informed about it, and participation in these programs would not deter students from also pursuing four-year postsecondary options.

What's more, local institutions and organizations were not coordinating efforts, resulting in challenges and incongruencies that learners encountered as they transitioned from high school to college or from college to career. MCC set a goal to offer career-oriented and high-paying CTE pathways to all students, whether they were enrolled in CTE programs or on track to transfer to college.

As a result of the PLC's work, the Connect to Career framework has found success thanks to broad cross-district participation, with all but one high school in Flint, Michigan, engaging in the initiative. Connect to Career includes MCC's early college program and offers pathways into CTE fields, with options available for families. By focusing on the whole community, MCC established a model that wasn't just an academic transfer program but instead offered flexible options that students could work into their busy lives.

The Connect to Career model required the support, collaboration, and engagement of a variety of community stakeholders, including high school districts and industry partners. The continued efficacy of the program relies on parallel efforts with these partners to promote CTE education in a non-competitive and equitable way. MCC is now moving to establish a consortium of CTE leaders in the area and create a communication plan to map the pathways for K-12 students and families. MCC established itself as a hub for the region, bringing everyone together for conversations and to share experiences.



## Preparing the Space

In Part 2 of this guide, you had the opportunity to consider where and how the group will meet. Regardless of what you choose, you will want to prepare the space to communicate that this group is a high priority for you. It is likely that you will have many other responsibilities while you are facilitating this group, but as its leader, you need to model being present and prepared for your time together.

### Meeting in Person

Preparing for this type of group is more complicated than emailing your colleagues with a room number and expecting everyone to show up. For those coming from off campus, you will need to give clear directions about where to park and how to find your meeting. Some colleges require guests to have a parking permit. Depending on where you are meeting, it might be useful to have posted signs directing off-campus members or even a greeter to welcome and walk these guests to the meeting.

In the room, consider how the group will work together — think about how much time the whole group will be together versus working in smaller groups. Move furniture to facilitate the agenda you planned. You may choose to put desks in a circle, organize clusters of two to three chairs, or move all furniture away from one board. If you are going to post the big-picture goals each meeting, decide where and how to hang them. Have copies of any readings available and an agenda printed or clearly visible in the room. To record the group's thinking, it may be useful to have some posters and markers available, unless you prefer to use a computer and projector. Some facilitators put together baskets with highlighters, sticky notes, and name tags so participants can access them as needed. Others like to have music on in the background while participants enter. Although it is wonderful when

the host institution provides food, it can also build community to bring snacks during the first meeting and offer a sign-up sheet so others in the group can join in the responsibility.

### Meeting Virtually

For virtual meetings, let go of any assumptions that you have about people's technology savvy. When setting up the virtual meetings, include all troubleshooting information (e.g., meeting ID, dial-in number) rather than just the direct link. It is better to offer a "tech check-in" at the beginning

of each meeting where you demonstrate basic tools than it is to have a frustrated member struggling to engage in the meeting. Some facilitators open the virtual room early for this purpose, and you can mention this in a welcome email to the participants. If you have the capacity, invite a co-facilitator who can monitor the chat and any technology questions.

To keep the spirit of active participation within the virtual setting, we encourage you to

make use of tools that support engagement. Some common ones are Google Drive and its applications, Zoom features, Jamboard, and Padlet. While some of these tools offer more sophisticated paid versions, they all have a free option; each platform has online tutorials as well.

To share materials, agendas, and presentations, you may want to create a shared folder on **Google Drive**. By sharing documents through Google Drive, you can limit the size of emails that you send to your participants. Participants can also upload their own materials. If you would like everyone to comment on a text at the same time, you can use a Google Doc and share a link to it in the chat during the meeting. For example, while setting your community agreements, participants can be typing into a shared Google Doc simultaneously.

**In order to keep the spirit of active participation within the virtual setting, we encourage you to make use of tools that support engagement.**



Once everyone has had a chance to contribute quietly, you can have a conversation about what the participants wrote.

**Zoom** has several useful tools for active virtual engagement. You can create random or assigned breakout rooms for small group conversations. While working as a whole group may be necessary at times, it can also feel tedious to some members. Participants tend to enjoy talking in small groups without the challenge of jumping into a larger conversation. In the whole group, the simplest way to involve participants is through the chat. This can involve asking participants to type in one thing that they intend to apply in their practice because of the meeting. Using the chat, everyone will likely have a chance to participate. Because Zoom allows you to save the chat, you can send your participants the whole group's intentions or revisit them at a future meeting. When you are ready for a more complicated tool, Zoom allows participants to annotate a document. The annotation tool works best using simple symbols. For example, you could create a slide asking participants their comfort level with using technology as a learning tool. Then participants can place their stamp somewhere on the line showing their comfort level.

**Jamboard** and **Padlet** allow participants to write short responses that the whole group can view. These can be useful ways to gather information from multiple people at once. After everyone has had a chance to write their thoughts, they can read each other's contributions. Jamboard allows participants to write or draw on colorful sticky notes, add images, or draw lines to connect ideas. It offers space for creativity. Small groups could use Jamboard to develop a vision board because it has the option to move elements around and reorganize them. We recommend planning a few minutes for participants to try out the platform



so they feel comfortable using it before being asked to engage with it substantively. Padlet is more linear in that the facilitator sets up discrete columns and participants add responses in rows.

As a text-based platform, Padlet can be very effective at gathering responses to a series of questions.

Using a variety of these tools may feel cumbersome, so take it slow if they are new to you and your participants. If you can, practice with other users before you bring a new tool to the group. Although this variety does add interest and engagement, be clear about why you are using the tool. Remember that the tool is there to help you create the learning experiences you

planned. If you keep this in mind, when a tool fails for some unanticipated reason, you will be able to pivot to another approach.

**Remember that the tool is there to help you create the learning experiences you planned. If you keep this in mind, when a tool fails for some unanticipated reason, you will be able to pivot to another approach.**



## An example PLC meeting agenda compared to a committee meeting agenda:

### COMMITTEE MEETING

1. Announcements
2. Reports
  - a. High school faculty: update on student test scores
  - b. Community college faculty: update on graduates in selected fields
  - c. Employer: update on new recruitment strategy
3. Discussion about community college's new program proposal
4. Adjourn

### PLC MEETING

- Today's goal: understand the current career trajectory for automotive students and identify gaps
1. At last meeting we... *8 minutes*
  2. Review agenda and goals *2 minutes*
  3. Examine demographic data (students in automotive program and employees in automotive field) using ATLAS protocol *30 minutes*
  4. Identify next steps *10 minutes*
  5. Written reflections *10 minutes*
    - a. What I thought I knew...
    - b. What I know now...

Consider including your big-picture goals as well. Some facilitators base final reflections on how well the group met the goal.

This is the "building connections" part of the agenda, which you can modify in the moment if you feel the group needs something else (see Part 3).

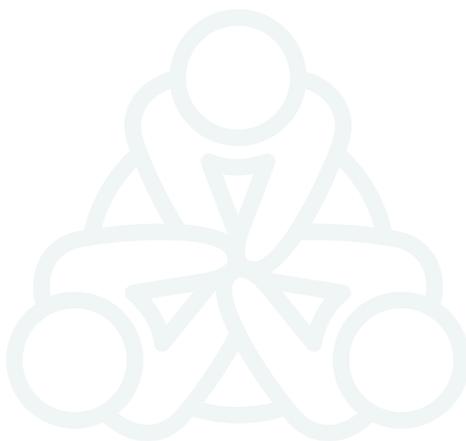
Reviewing the times on the agenda can help participants stay focused.

Using a protocol to structure the conversation can keep the group on task and moving toward the goal.

This is an opportunity for the PLC members to share control of the group by helping to plan its direction (see Part 5).

Collecting written reflections gives you a record of the group's progress, but it can be done orally as well.





## PART 4

# Facilitating the Meetings

ONCE THE MEETING AGENDA has been planned, imagine how it will flow. Practice what you will say. Effective facilitation requires being in the moment and attending to the individuals in the room. The more prepared you are to lead the group through the agenda, the easier it will be to focus on the people in the room and respond to them. Without preparation, facilitators can be too focused on moving through the agenda and miss important cues from the participants. It can feel overwhelming to both manage the agenda and respond to participants. The more fluent you feel with the planned activities, the more cognitive space you will have for the facilitation.

At the same time, try to take some pressure off yourself. If something goes wrong during your facilitation, it is appropriate to admit that to your group. Being fallible allows everyone to be vulnerable and take risks. In addition, remember you are not the only one responsible for the

success of the meeting. All PLC members should be active and contributing members. Consider rotating responsibilities at each meeting to ensure

all are actively engaged and feel mutual ownership of the process. Establishing these parameters up front is important to ensuring full transparency of participation expectations and soliciting the right level of contribution.

**The more prepared you are to lead the group through the agenda, the easier it will be to focus on the people in the room and respond to them.**

### Before the Meeting

So much of how the group functions depends on how prepared participants are to attend and engage. Are they

rushing from a long day at work? Are they supposed to bring materials? Will there be food? Prior to the first meeting, the facilitator can alleviate a lot of anxiety and build anticipation by predicting and addressing participant questions in a welcome email. This email should have a friendly and professional tone that gives a sense of



your style as a group facilitator. Before the group meets for the first time, this email will be where you share all the logistical details including where to park and how to find the meeting space. Since this group will purposefully connect professionals from various locations, consider sharing your cell phone number so they can contact you if they run into traffic or get lost should your first meeting be in person. Although it is important to respect everyone's time by starting the meetings promptly,

offering a contingency plan can set a supportive tone from the beginning. As the group matures, these emails may become shorter and less frequent. However, providing the agenda ahead of time (even a skeletal version of the agenda) can help members arrive prepared.

### WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE FOR A VIRTUAL MEETING:

Hi!

Thank you for joining me as we work toward more effective alignment between our institutions to better prepare students for employment in our community. What a great opportunity we have! I am excited to work with you all in this professional learning community. We will have our first meeting on \_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_. Please use this link to join the meeting: \_\_\_\_\_. Meeting ID: \_\_\_\_\_. Dial-in: \_\_\_\_\_.

#### Pre-work

Before our first meeting, please spend some time reflecting on our big-picture goal: \_\_\_\_\_. Consider why it feels important to you. What do you hope this group will accomplish together? What assets are you bringing to the group? What concerns do you have?

Before our meeting, think through how you will take notes. Either a physical notebook or electronic document will work.

#### Agenda

At our first meeting, we will discuss our collective vision for our work as well as some community agreements. Here is the link to a Google Drive folder where you will find the agenda. You may want to print it out or keep it open during our meeting.

#### Virtual Norms

Whenever possible, please plan to be on video during our time together — meeting online can be impersonal, so seeing each other will make it easier to establish a learning community. That said, please feel free to dress comfortably! Coworkers and guest stars are welcome.

#### Important Note

To establish a trusting community, it is important to attend all the meetings. We will be active in our sessions together — sometimes working in pairs or small groups. Since we know that emergencies arise, please reach out to me as early as possible if you cannot join so I can plan our agendas accordingly. I understand that sometimes last-minute changes may take place; however, if possible, please inform me of your absence no later than one day prior to the meeting day.

*If you have any questions at all, please reach out! My cell is xxx-xxx-xxxx. Save it in your contacts in case you need to reach me at any point via text or a call.*



## Opening Moves

Starting the meeting sets the tone for the work and gives participants space to transition from what they were doing before to what they are doing now. The importance of this time spent connecting with each other and building community cannot be overstated. However, let's clarify the difference between opening moves and icebreakers.

Icebreakers are opening activities that are used to encourage individuals to talk together. Unlike opening moves, they are often disconnected from the rest of the work the group will take on. It is worth choosing opening moves that both engage participants *and* scaffold the rest of the meeting. Before the group has developed much trust with each other, these opening moves should be low risk. As participants gain trust, you can begin to invite and then encourage risk. Scaffolding risk can help participants bring personal and imperfect work to the group for feedback.

An important aspect of a group's development is establishing community agreements. These can include criteria such as "start and end meetings on time," "watch your airtime," and "stay engaged." Setting community agreements early in the group's formation can provide a framework to return to if and when the group drifts. For example, if a participant keeps interrupting other speakers, the facilitator might say, "I'm noticing, Chris, that you have a lot of ideas to contribute, let's remember our agreement to share our airtime," or instead, "We are starting to talk over each other. Let's remember that we agreed to pause between speakers." The facilitator can also provide an area for team members to capture their ideas in a "parking lot" for later consideration.

As time goes on, the facilitator should ask the group to consider how it is acting on these agreements and where they can improve. The group might decide that some agreements are

not useful and others are needed. This list of agreements should be fluid but allow for the needs of the quietest voices to be attended to.

Other opening moves can involve connecting back to previous meetings by asking members to be accountable for remembering what happened and taking action. Reviewing the action items alongside the big-picture and short-term goals can ensure the group makes progress and participants

recognize that progress. You may choose to begin some meetings by reading anonymous reflections from the previous meeting to connect back to key ideas and plans. Highlighting what participants learned and what they wanted to remember and accomplish emphasizes the task-oriented parts of the meeting. Facilitators can also raise up reflections about the group's process. Although it can feel uncomfortable to read any critical feedback on your facilitation, doing so models

risk-taking and shows the group that you are open to improving. After reading previous reflections, you can review the agenda and point to reasons that you decided to include particular segments.

As the facilitator, you can take the pulse of the members as they join the meeting. Educators will likely be rushed or overwhelmed during certain times of the academic year. Likewise, your colleagues from local employers and workforce partners may have seasonal or other cyclical pressures. If you notice this, you may want to open the meeting with a minute of silence. This can set a calming and more focused tone. Conversely, participants may arrive exhausted. Taking three minutes to do something that makes everyone laugh might raise the energy level. Consider asking your team members how to best open the space and prepare it for engagement. Recognizing cultural and personal preferences in these types of activities is important to ensuring inclusion.

**The importance of this time spent connecting with each other and building community cannot be overstated.**



**WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE:**

1. Participants have five minutes to reflect on a time when they had a positive collaboration. Then they walk with a partner for 10 minutes while they share their personal experiences and discuss the common elements. With the whole group, agree to a set of common elements that will make for a positive collaborative experience. Record these agreements someplace visible so you can refer to them during each meeting.
2. Give each participant a small sticker and ask them to place it next to the community agreement they need the group to pay particular attention to during that meeting.
3. In a virtual meeting, everyone can rename themselves with an action they took since

the last meeting. The facilitator randomly assigns pairs, then the pairs have a private chat with each other about their recent accomplishment in a breakout room.

## Protocols as Building Blocks of Successful Meetings

Facilitators must balance keeping time and focusing on the agenda (task-oriented activities) with flexibly responding and adapting to the people in the room (process-oriented activities). Using tools to structure conversations can take some of the complexity out of the role. These tools, or *protocols*, can serve as a co-facilitator by helping you foster trust while keeping the group focused.

A protocol is a set of steps each conversation should follow. They give each participant a turn to speak. Introverted participants often remark that

### Example (low risk): Three Levels of Text Protocol<sup>6</sup>

Let's imagine that early in the life of your PLC, you would like your group to come to consensus on the skills that students need to be successful in particular fields. Perhaps you find an article or video about 21st century skills in the workplace. The Three Levels of Text Protocol would structure the discussion such that each participant has a chance to relate the article or video to their own work and context. You might expect employers to confirm, contradict, or expand on the article's statements, and educators to consider how they are or are not preparing students with those skills. The structure of this protocol designates time for each participant to share their perspective. Using a text to root the conversation allows participants to respond to an article or video rather than a person, which makes this a low-risk protocol.

1. One participant goes first and has up to five minutes to speak while others listen and take notes.
  - a. Level 1: Read a passage that seems significant.
  - b. Level 2: Interpret that passage. What does it mean to you?
  - c. Level 3: Consider application. What does this mean for your practice?
2. The next participant has a turn.
3. After everyone has a chance to speak, the group may choose to have an open discussion about what they heard.
4. Debrief the process. The facilitator may ask, "What was it like to talk in this way?"

<sup>6</sup> "Three Levels of Text Protocol," School Reform Initiative, updated March 30, 2017, <https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/download/three-levels-of-text-protocol/>.



this is their favorite aspect of the protocol because they do not have to try to break into the conversation. The protocols tend to follow a similar arc in which participants seek clarification and literal understanding at the beginning before moving toward interpretation, suggestions, and critique. Choosing the right protocol depends on what type of discussion you are hoping to have; there are many different examples

**Reflection *in action* refers to attending to what is happening during the meeting. Who is speaking? Who is not speaking? Who is engaged and who is not?**

of protocols available at [www.schoolreforminitiative.org](http://www.schoolreforminitiative.org) and [www.nsrffharmony.org](http://www.nsrffharmony.org). Remember that the protocol is a tool to guide a discussion, but the content and goal of the discussion are the priorities. Facilitators who leverage these protocols in especially thoughtful ways will find that they foster equitable participation.

An important skill for facilitators is paying attention, as well as

## Example (higher risk): Tuning Protocol<sup>7</sup>

Once the group has established some trust, members can bring their own professional work to the group for feedback. Because a participant would be presenting their own work, this protocol is higher risk for them. Similar to the low-risk protocol example, having a piece of work to ground the conversation provides needed direction. Suppose that your group compared demographic data between the college's automotive programs and the local automotive field, as mentioned in the sample agenda in Part 3. Imagine that your group noticed that although BIPOC women enrolled in automotive programs, few graduated and gained employment. Perhaps your PLC has decided to focus on that issue. As the facilitator, you might encourage an automotive employer to bring a draft of a new recruitment plan. Using the Tuning Protocol to guide the discussion would allow the employer to get specific feedback around a question that they bring. In addition, the protocol would give other participants an opportunity to consider how the employer's plan matches their own expectations and assumptions of how their students secure employment.

1. A presenter shares work with the group for feedback, stating their intended goals. (10 minutes)
2. Participants ask clarifying questions. (5 minutes)
3. Participants examine the work silently, noticing where it is "in tune" with the presenter's goals and where there are gaps. (5–10 minutes depending on the complexity of the work)
4. Participants share feedback that is warm (where the work aligns with the goals) and cool (where there are gaps and how it could be aligned better) while the presenter listens silently and takes notes. (15 minutes)
5. The presenter reflects back to the group, choosing two to three key takeaways from the feedback. (5 minutes)
6. Debrief the process. The facilitator asks the presenter how the process went for them before opening the debrief to the other participants. (5 minutes)

<sup>7</sup> Joseph McDonald, "Tuning Protocol," School Reform Initiative, updated March 22, 2021, <https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/download/tuning-protocol/>.



practicing active listening; these are skills that you will continue to hone over time. Practicing *mindful inquiry* will also help solicit feedback and foster communication across the community. For instance, reflecting on what was said will ensure that participants have a clear understanding of what was communicated. Asking guiding questions such as “Can you tell me more?” provides the space needed for full explanation and understanding. In addition, practicing what you are going to say will give you more cognitive space to attend to the group. Protocols can also serve this purpose by taking some of the decision-making out of facilitating a conversation. Donald Schön names two types of reflection, reflection *in action* and reflection *on action*, and facilitators need to do both.<sup>8</sup>

Reflection *in action* refers to attending to what is happening during the meeting. Who is speaking? Who is not speaking? Who is engaged and who is not? What happened right before Amy started checking her phone? How did everyone react when Michael said that? Novice facilitators may get caught up in the content of the meeting and lose track of reflecting in action. Good facilitators pay more attention to reflecting in action than to participating in the discussions in order to guide the group toward its goals. With more practice and fluency with protocols and professional learning agendas, excellent facilitators are able to attend to the group while also participating in the content. If you are not already an excellent facilitator, don't give up, but rather continue to practice and ask for your group's feedback. Facilitation is a skill we can all develop.

After the meeting is over, the facilitator is responsible for reflection *on action*. This means thinking back to what happened and making judgments. Do you believe the group achieved

its goals? Did you achieve your own facilitation goals? If you have collected written reflections from the group, these can guide your reflection on action. Consider what the reflections say about the group's learning and progress. This information is a gift to you because it provides a window into the participants' minds.

When possible, use the reflections to plan the next meeting. Even if you already have a plan for the meeting, see if it is possible to use your participants' learning; this will help build a feeling of shared responsibility. Consider including a brief anonymous survey at the conclusion of each meeting, asking team members about learning and progress. This avenue provides opportunity for team members to share thoughts and ideas they may not feel comfortable sharing with the group. You can use this data to reinforce or challenge your own reflections around progress.

**After the meeting is over, the facilitator is responsible for reflection *on action*. This means thinking back to what happened and making judgments. Do you believe that the group achieved its goals? Did you achieve your own facilitation goals?**

## Closing the Meeting

Even though you may have planned a brilliant agenda, things happen and you have to adapt. Certain conversations can take longer than you expected. Whenever possible, do not skip the closing. Use your agenda as your co-facilitator and remind the group that you need to wrap up the last activity five to ten minutes before the end of the meeting so you can honor the closing.

These brief minutes are your chance to get the group's feedback on both the process and the product of the session. Offering a few questions for participants to consider can help them synthesize their learning rather than rush out and forget. Depending on your time, you can close the meeting orally or in writing. A benefit of recorded reflections is that you can use these while reflecting on

<sup>8</sup> Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (Ashgate Publishing, 1983).



action and to begin the next meeting. Perhaps you have a printed sheet with questions for in-person meetings or an online survey for virtual ones. Or you could have the group share something they will remember in a “whip” — a quick go-around where everyone contributes a sentence. These closings can be adapted on the fly but should not be forgotten.

### WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE:

1. Pre-printed reflective questions: What happened in today's meeting that will be useful for you in your work? What is something that surprised you during the meeting? What is something you need from the group so our next meeting is worthwhile for you?
2. To be turned in on a blank notecard: Take a few moments to name your learning from today.
3. “Let's give everyone a chance to say one word about how they are feeling right now.” Give everyone a moment to think of their word. Invite someone to start and choose the direction to continue for the round.
4. Write today's tweet for @ourprofessionallearninggroup.

**These brief minutes are your chance to get the group's feedback on both the process and the product of the session. Offering a few questions for participants to consider can help them synthesize their learning.**

## Following Up

Consider breaking up the time between meetings to keep the group connected and focused on your shared work. Some follow-up communication can serve that purpose. For your regional PLC, follow-up communication can strengthen cross-institution partnerships. Facilitators can ask for input on an agenda, suggestions for a shared text, or feedback on facilitation. You can reach out to see why a PLC member seemed especially quiet or disengaged. Or perhaps you can leverage the end-of-meeting survey suggested previously. Since you do not want to bombard busy participants with emails or phone calls, check in with the group about what type of follow-up works best for them.

### WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE:

1. During a meeting, a participant mentions a dilemma they are having collaborating with colleagues about career pathways. Email that participant to ask if they would be willing to present that dilemma to the group for feedback at the next meeting. Meet with that participant to help frame a focus question to guide feedback and prepare to lead the Consultancy Protocol.<sup>9</sup>
2. Share your agenda plan with a participant who gave you critical feedback about the direction of the meetings. Ask if they think that the agenda will address their needs, and if not, ask them to suggest alternatives.

<sup>9</sup> Faith Dunne, Paula Evans, and Gene Thompson-Grove, “Consultancy Protocol,” School Reform Initiative, updated March 22, 2021, <https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/download/consultancy/>.



## PLC Example

### LEVERAGING INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERS TO ALIGN HIGH SCHOOL AND INDUSTRY-BASED CREDENTIALS IN TYLER, TX

Tyler Junior College (TJC) understood that its regional PLC could spur transformational change for its community and region holistically. By developing robust pathway opportunities for high school students, TJC's team believed that it could address the needs of students and industry.

They began their work by engaging multiple stakeholders from across Tyler's service region. With help from LaToya Young, Executive Director of the Tyler Area Business Education Council, input from a number of local business representatives, and the support of several faculty members, Tyler began creating a pathway that would enable students to go beyond earning individual college credits to full credentials while still in high school.

As the PLC's conversations deepened and evolved, the team recognized that multiple credentialing opportunities already existed for students in high school. Students could participate in several different CTE tracks and earn credentials, and they could earn workforce-recognized and industry-based credentials through work-based learning opportunities such as internships and apprentice programs.

Open and honest lines of communication were at the heart of the Tyler PLC conversations. This enabled the team to surface a critical alignment issue: several stakeholder partners, including Tyler Independent School District (ISD), were doing very similar, and thus redundant, work. But these parallel efforts did not necessarily guide students toward the same outcome of earning college course credit and/or college credentials. As Jeanie Oxler, TJC's Director of School District Partnerships and Tyler PLC facilitator, explained, "Students were doing the work, with the same or similar learning outcomes, but not getting college recognized curricular credit. We needed to do something so that students are not being forced to repeat content they have already completed."

Tyler ISD had developed a detailed guide, based on the state of Texas's CTE programs of study,

for students to follow and earn credit toward certifications in multiple CTE tracks at the high school level. Unfortunately, almost none of those plans were aligned with the college's programs of study. Students were completing coursework, but they were not earning college credit. As Oxler noted, even those students who had earned an industry-recognized credential while in high school still needed to repeat that content to earn college credit.

The PLC's open and non-judgmental conversations created opportunities for collaborative problem-solving that benefited students. Tyler's PLC team included multiple institutional stakeholders, including the Dean of Professional and Technical Programs (PTP). Tyler's PTP department had already created an internal articulation process in which the college could award curricular course credit to students who had completed an industry-recognized credential. This led to further conversations about how the college can develop additional internal articulations so students enrolled in non-credit courses (i.e., continuing education/studies) might also earn curriculum credit. While this will require additional coordination among key stakeholders across the college, these efforts will result in awarding credit to students for their learning in a range of environments. The PLC team is also exploring how they can create multiple entry and exit points for adult students who earn credentials in the workplace and want to return to college to earn a degree. Doing this work will ensure that the college will not need to invest more time and resources into seeking approval for additional programs of study.

Going forward, the PLC will continue to align approaches to how students are granted credits. Their goal is to develop a regional pathway planning guidebook for students, parents, and workforce partners that will outline exactly which courses, classes, and industry-based credentials align with TJC's programs of study.



## Opportunities and Challenges

Part of the facilitator's role is to reflect on the group's development and direction over time. This gives you an opportunity to compare the group's goals to its process and accomplishments. Regardless of your experience as a facilitator or your group's experience together, there is always room for growth and improvement. Just as you took time to reflect on your personal goals for the PLC prior to recruiting members, it is worth your time to periodically reflect on the questions below. You will notice that all of them ask you to pinpoint evidence for your responses to make it more likely that your conclusions will be based on observations and not assumptions.

### Anticipating Challenges

Purposefully designing meetings can play a tremendous role in establishing a trusting community of learners willing to take risks together. But a well-designed meeting is not foolproof. Even using protocols to structure conversations does not prevent normal human challenges. Next, we will consider a few common facilitation challenges and options for working through them. This is by no means an exhaustive list of challenges or solutions, and you will undoubtedly have more to add to this list as you facilitate your PLC.

### THE OVER-TALKER

There are a lot of reasons that a participant may take up more than their share of airtime. They may feel anxious or prefer to process ideas orally. They may be used to having a position of authority or are unfamiliar with productive collaboration. Often, they are unaware that they are talking too much. In this PLC, you will ideally have participants who hold a variety of positions. Consider, for example, that you have several faculty members from different institutions (some from a high school and some from a college) who may or may not have tenure. You might also have an upper-level college administrator or high-powered employer from the community. If the over-talker holds a position of power, it can pose an especially challenging dilemma. The over-talker might be another participant's supervisor or have control over hiring your students.

#### Why it matters:

Typically, when one participant talks too much, others talk less, lose interest, or feel annoyed. Since a goal of this group is to bring together diverse perspectives, an over-talker shuts down the opportunity to hear from everyone. If you do not purposefully create space for the quieter members from the beginning, they may feel their voices are not valued and engage less and less.



#### TOOL

### Reflecting on Opportunities and Challenges

1. Do we have the right people at the table? Whose voices are missing? Is there diversity in our conversation or do we have an echo chamber? What is the evidence?
2. How would I assess the group's cohesiveness? How would I assess the group's tangible progress? To what extent do each of these need more attention? What is the evidence?
3. What is our level of jargon? Do all members feel included? What is the evidence?
4. What are our PLC's assets? What is our growing edge? How willing are we to take risks? What is the evidence?
5. What are my strengths as a facilitator? What is *my* growing edge? How willing am I to take risks as a facilitator? What is the evidence?



**What you could do about it:**

1. One facilitation move is to pause the whole group conversation and give participants time to talk to a neighbor. This naturally allows space for more voices. Then you could give partners time to share one significant idea that they discussed. Similarly, you could give participants time to reflect individually before opening the conversation to the group. When you begin with an open discussion, you privilege the quick processors who come up with a response immediately. Intentionally giving participants time to reflect before speaking will allow those who take time to process to come up with a response, and it may also deepen the level of responses.
2. Setting up the conversation in a round can also help. You can ask each person to speak once, taking turns until everyone has had a chance to speak or pass. After one round, you can open the conversation up or continue speaking in turns. At the end, ask the group if they thought the rounds were a productive constraint on the conversation. Although some participants might say that it was frustrating or unnatural, others might say that it took pressure off them to break into the conversation.
3. Pay attention to who is impacted by the over-talker. Are they participants who hold historically marginalized identities, such as people from racially minoritized groups, women, or people with disabilities? Are they new or adjunct faculty? If so, this challenge is particularly important to address. Consider asking a pointed question for your closing reflection, such as, "What is something you wished you said today? What prevented you from saying it?" Read the responses, anonymously, at the beginning of the next meeting.
4. Or you could address the issue directly: "Thank you, \_\_\_\_\_. I want to make sure that we get to hear from everyone during our limited time together. Would anyone who hasn't had a chance to speak in a while like to contribute?"





## THE ARGUMENT

Disagreements can be highly productive moments that move the group to higher levels of learning and action. There is no need to avoid them. However, it is worth reflecting on your own comfort with conflict. If conflict makes you feel uncomfortable, you may benefit from imagining disagreements and practicing responding in writing or aloud. Know that responding effectively to conflict is a skill that you can develop with practice.

### Why it matters:

Although disagreements can lead to productive growth, if not addressed, participants may feel frustrated, vulnerable, and disengaged. For example, members of your PLC will likely come to the group with preconceived notions about what students' experiences are like at the various educational levels. We know that there is a common narrative in our country about the failure of schools to prepare students, particularly poverty-affected students and racially minoritized students, for higher education. An argument could arise between high school and community college faculty about who is at fault for students' lack of

success. In this situation, some group members may inadvertently use language that disparages teachers or students. There may be hurt feelings, defensiveness, and self-protection. Although facilitating through a rift like this can feel stressful, doing so can surface harmful assumptions that some members hold so you can collectively examine them.

### What you could do about it:

1. One especially helpful approach suggests that facilitators "listen-describe-invite-propose."<sup>10</sup> This means that you would objectively describe what happened, then invite members to confirm or expand on your summary. You would then propose a few next steps. It might look like this: "May I pause the conversation here? I've heard a few terms we should unpack. What does it mean to say students are unmotivated and families are unsupportive? What evidence do we have for that?" Then, after members have an opportunity to contribute, the facilitator could follow with, "I see a few next steps; we can make some changes to our community

<sup>10</sup> Allen and Blythe, *Facilitating for Learning*.



agreements right now, or we can continue with our conversation, paying attention to our assumptions and agreeing to call each other out when they surface again. How does that sound?"

2. The facilitator can often interject a needed pause. This is a great move, even if you do not know what comes after the pause. Offer time to the participants to record what they think just happened while you consider your next steps.
3. Pay attention to if some opinions seem to be valued more than others. This is particularly critical if historically marginalized voices appear less valued. In this case, a facilitator can choose to raise up one voice in a disagreement. For example, "I don't think you are representing what \_\_\_\_ said as she intended. \_\_\_\_, would you agree? Would you like to explain your point again?"
4. Following the meeting, you may want to follow up with participants who were involved in the disagreement to see how they are doing. This could take the form of a brief email acknowledging what happened and then opening the door for a follow-up conversation. If you feel that the disagreement was productive, consider ending with a thank you for the participant's contributions to the group's growth even though they may have felt negative in the moment.

## THE SHARED PRODUCT

Let us pivot from challenges that require skilled facilitation moves to one that calls for deliberate design. In your regional PLC, you will likely expect that your group will produce a shared product

based on a problem or issue that you identify together. However, every PLC member will arrive with their own assumptions and agendas. If members have different goals, it may be impossible to complete this project in a reasonable amount of time. And, even if you anticipate this and

design your early meetings to build a shared vision, you may still encounter challenges moving together toward the shared product. By consistently reflecting on the group's development and direction, you will be able to recognize any disconnects and intentionally design meetings to bring the group together.

**Every PLC member will arrive with their own assumptions and agendas.**

### Why it matters:

Your PLC has the unique opportunity to build meaningful bridges between organizations and create lasting change to help students succeed. If the group is unsuccessful, participants may feel powerless or ineffective. Having a product that the group feels proud of is an important mark of its success.

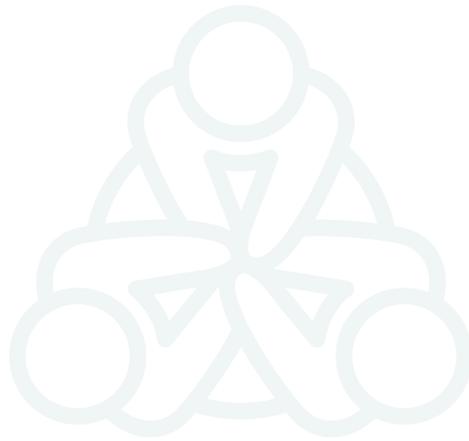
### What you could do about it:

While designing early meetings, give participants an opportunity to express their "why" — why they do the work they do and why they joined this PLC. Then spend time setting priorities for the group's work, pulling in something from everyone's personal goals. The Back to the Future Protocol can provide useful structure for this extended discussion.<sup>11</sup>

Include process and product questions in your meeting reflections such as, "What is our biggest accomplishment so far as a group? Please comment on how we work together as well as what we do together." Collect and share these responses to document your progress.

<sup>11</sup> Scott Murphy, "Future Protocol a.k.a Back to the Future," School Reform Initiative, updated March 26, 2021, <https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/download/future-protocol-a-k-a-back-to-the-future/>.





## PART 5

# Sharing Responsibility for the PLC's Success

IF YOU BEGIN TO FEEL that your group members collaborate well, trust each other, and take risks, it may be time to give up some control. To be more democratic, the facilitator can step back as the group's content leader, putting that responsibility on the group. The facilitator may continue to organize the logistical minutiae of the PLC's work, but the group holds and shares the power to decide the direction of the meetings. The facilitator can give the group control in a variety of ways, including planning the agenda or facilitating structured conversations.

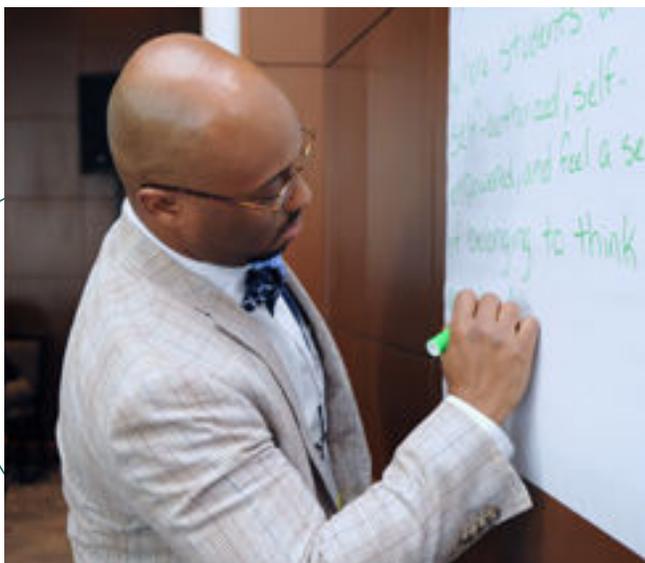
There are several reasons to move toward a more democratic approach to PLC facilitation. First, when people have control and choice, they are more likely to be motivated and engaged. Also, this move will build facilitative leadership capacity among your PLC members. Facilitative leadership focuses on individual and group development in which leaders guide collaboration rather than impose a top-down agenda. Much like the work that you will do with your PLC, facilitative leaders create conditions that support effective

collaboration and build a learning culture. Building facilitative leadership capacity among your PLC members increases the likelihood that this work will have a lasting impact as they bring their learning back to their organizations.

How do you know when your group is ready to take greater responsibility for its outcomes? Consider how often members look to you for guidance. This is to be expected at the start of the PLC, as you introduce many of your members to a new way of interacting and working together. If you find that they still rely on you for all problem-solving and decision-making, even after members have committed to community agreements and are familiar with using protocols, it is probably time to give them more control.

One way to start this democratization is by encouraging group management of the community agreements. A truly collaborative group takes responsibility for each other rather than looking to the facilitator to be the manager. This may be as simple as letting the group know that they are





encouraged to do that. Or, if your group seems reluctant to “call out” a colleague, you may debrief a meeting with, “How did we do on our community agreements today?” Once someone takes the courageous step of reminding the group of your agreements, you can publicly name the action, appreciate it, and mention how important it is for your group’s development. This might sound like, “Thank you, \_\_\_\_\_, for bringing us back to our shared agreements! That is very important, and I invite everyone to help us stay on track.”

Another way to encourage shared leadership is to spend a few minutes at the end of meetings collecting input on the next meeting’s agenda.

Perhaps someone may want to prepare and lead a section of it. This may feel risky at first and there are some ways to scaffold this transition for yourself. First, you could start by collecting the group’s ideas and then integrating them into an agenda on your own. Next time, you could share a draft of your agenda with them and ask for feedback prior to the meeting. When you feel comfortable with both of those steps, then you might be ready to let members prepare and lead parts of the agenda. However, keep in mind that your participants may be reluctant to take on time-consuming tasks. To balance giving the group control and keeping their time commitment reasonable, experiment with democratizing during the meeting first, before

you offer the opportunity to take control of the preparation between meetings. Remember to keep asking them for their feedback and adjust your facilitation in response to it.

Consider bringing a piece of your own work for feedback. You could ask someone to facilitate a protocol for you. This would allow you to choose the protocol and the work but give someone the opportunity to try facilitating. Protocols are a wonderful entry to shared leadership because they provide structure and guidance for new facilitators and will feel familiar to the group if you have been using them. Before doing this, think through what type of feedback would be undesirable — while you are in the presenter’s role, there might not be anyone attuned to the community agreements. Then, meet with your facilitator to help them prepare by reviewing the protocol and your own limits. This will help draw their attention to what you need from the feedback session so that you can fully concentrate on presenting your work and

let them manage the rest of the group. After they facilitate, be sure to give the group the opportunity to provide feedback for the facilitator so they can improve.

These moves toward democracy emphasize that facilitation is not about perfection but about growth — for the group and for its individual members. You will know that it is going well when the group is looking to each other for problem-solving

and decision making. When you support your PLC members in developing their capacity as leaders, you ensure they can have greater impact within their own organizations. Keep in mind that this is aspirational. Some PLCs will never move toward democratization because it will take time for the facilitator and the group to become comfortable and familiar with collaboration and risk-taking. If you believe that your group is ready to democratize, go for it! But if you think that is too big of a leap for your PLC, listen to your intuition and continue to move them forward at a pace that makes sense based on your self-reflection and their feedback.

**Facilitation  
is not about  
perfection but  
about the group’s  
and individuals’  
growth.**



## PLC Example

### FROM ONE PATHWAY TO A CHARTER SCHOOL OF PATHWAYS IN TALLAHASSEE, FL

Tallahassee Community College (TCC) approached its role as convener of a regional PLC with the goal of making college accessible to more students in its region. Their approach focused on developing and implementing pathways that would increase access for traditionally underserved populations of students.

TCC has strong K–12 and workforce/industry partnerships within its service region and has successfully created opportunities for students to engage in college courses while still in high school. These courses are designed to enhance students' college preparation, providing a running start and helping them earn credentials that lead to employment opportunities.

The Tallahassee PLC collected and analyzed dual enrollment data, stakeholder information, and local workforce needs and found that almost all of the high school students participating in dual enrollment identified as being on a college-going path. These students were likely to pursue a college education regardless of whether they took college classes while in high school. The PLC also discovered that most of these students were taking college transfer-related courses not associated with workforce development needs in fields like healthcare, education, and manufacturing. As a result, the TCC team reached out to department chairs and faculty members to identify a program of study that would partner to develop a pilot pathway.

The pathway implementation was a success, but its reach was limited to a small number of students. The PLC members found they were still not reaching the region's high school students in the ways they had hoped for. The pathway did not increase opportunities or success for traditionally underserved students. Consistent with the pattern they identified in the dual enrollment data, students enrolled in the pathway were likely to enroll in college regardless of their participation in the pilot.

Rethinking the role of the regional PLC, the TCC team re-engaged their partners and refocused their work on broadening institutional and student

engagement while continuing to meet the region's workforce needs. TCC brought everyone back to the table without a narrowly focused agenda so they could talk more expansively and collaboratively about increasing college access for greater numbers of underserved students. How could they enroll more of these students in programs that would lead to employment? Those conversations sparked an idea: the college could leverage its work to develop and implement a dual enrollment program focused on several CTE pathways and populations of students who had historically not been able to access the courses.

The PLC shifted away from a traditional committee-style meeting and generated broader conversations about holistic student supports; they included multiple departments and programs with an agenda of supporting college access for as many students as possible, aligned to the workforce needs of their community and region. Dr. Tricia Rizza, Tallahassee's PLC facilitator, explains, "We need to make sure students know what is available for them, how they can access those opportunities, and support them every step of the way." The PLC can help ensure that all students can access college programs of study that will lead to credentials associated with high wages and high-need job opportunities.

The Tallahassee regional PLC became a mechanism to share and develop ideas and to create broad-based solutions. As their discussions deepened, they found that the college was well-positioned to apply to host one of Florida's five pilot CTE charter high schools. The state of Florida recognized that the alignment of TCC's regional PLC efforts made their transition to the charter school model an ideal fit. They had done the work, bringing all relevant stakeholder groups to the table; the PLC framework allowed them to engage all partners in meaningful solution-oriented conversations. TCC will soon launch its charter with an anticipated enrollment of more than 500 students — students who may not ordinarily have seen college as an option.



## Sustaining the Work and Building Momentum

There are several characteristics of successful reforms.<sup>12</sup> These include meeting the needs of the intended audience, as well as making available the tools, resources, guidance, or other relevant materials needed to put the reform into practice. Ultimately, a successful reform will align with the intended mission and vision of the institution(s) in question, as well as the goal of the PLC to devise effective K–12 to workforce pathways that contribute to family-sustaining wages and vibrant communities. Once these pathways have been tested and shown to be successful, the community might consider scaling these successes. To that end, it is especially important to establish *depth* to truly reflect transformative change in beliefs and practices.<sup>13</sup>

Sustaining this work requires continued support from leadership, stakeholders, and the institutions involved as these new practices are internalized within the institution, ensuring the work spreads and leads to other potential pathways. Furthermore, PLC members should consider disseminating their findings and successes broadly, celebrating small and big wins, as well



as extending the reach of the PLC to the broader educational community. In sharing the work, the PLC is spreading their knowledge to other communities and institutions, contributing to best practices and modeling effective strategies for replication.

## Moving Forward

As you reflect on this project and your role in it, you may feel a range of emotions, from excitement to anxiety. Though the work is complex and has many moving parts, this project has the potential to make a real and lasting impact on your community. By strengthening students' pathways from high school through college and employment, you can improve their access to jobs with family-sustaining wages.

Rather than implementing a prescribed program developed elsewhere, you and members of your community will collaboratively identify what matters in your context — to your workforce and your students. We encourage you to recognize the complexity of the goal and lay the foundation for a long-term collaborative partnership. This will provide a unique opportunity for people who hold vastly different positions and perspectives to build a shared understanding of each sector's needs, strengths, responsibilities, and obstacles. When your PLC is successful, you will have built a structure for organizational learning that aligns those strengths and needs to support students on their path to becoming successful members of their community. It is time to get to work!

<sup>12</sup> David Cohen and Jal Mehta, "Why Reform Sometimes Succeeds: Understanding the Conditions That Produce Reforms That Last," *American Educational Research Journal* 54, no. 4 (2017): 644–690.

<sup>13</sup> Cynthia E. Coburn, "Rethinking Scale: Moving Beyond Numbers to Deep and Lasting Change," *Educational Researcher* 32, no. 6 (2003): 3–12.



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Cultivating Regional Professional Learning Communities: A Facilitator's Guide to Supporting Student-Focused Partnerships

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