PLANNING TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE FOR STUDENT SUCCESS WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABOUT

Rio Salado College (RSC) has been transforming the learning experience for students and setting the standard for innovation in higher education since 1978. The college is committed to continuous improvement and adapts to meet the needs of its community. The college uses analysis of data and empirical examination of student outcomes to make tactical decisions regarding education and learning.

Rio Salado College fosters an entrepreneurial spirit which inspires change and embraces innovation. The college challenges the limits of tradition to significantly impact public higher education, business, and governmental entities. Whether it is finding new student markets, forging community partnerships, or tapping into new technologies, the college’s progressive approach accepts each challenge with remarkable enthusiasm and steadfastly pursues leading-edge solutions.

Rio Salado Colleges developed this white paper as an outcome from a grant which planned for transformational change. This work was supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation [OPP1136162].

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I. INTRODUCTION

Rio Salado College (RSC) received a grant to plan transformational change for student success from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. As RSC began this project, it became clear there were few resources that looked at transformational change within as a large of a scope as RSC was undertaking, especially related to higher education. Therefore, RSC turned to a targeted strategic planning effort and sought expertise from higher education leaders to determine how change could be implemented within our institution. In the process, we developed a roadmap to plan change that is replicable and executable.

As RSC began this project, three main questions were considered: How and where does an institution begin? Who should be involved? What steps should be considered throughout the planning? The purpose for this white paper is to address these questions by sharing the knowledge we acquired through the completion of an integrated planning process. This should be seen as one approach to planning change as it relates to student success.

It is important to note that what might start out as process improvement can lead to transformational change, especially if the institution is willing to think beyond distinct areas and consider the big picture. Likewise, an institution may find that what they originally intended as transformational change may be better suited to process improvement. Regardless of the scale of change, the steps outlined lend themselves to both transformational change and process improvement.
II. THE RSC APPROACH

At some point, your institution will find itself at a crossroads; different members of administration, faculty, and staff might see the need to implement changes to better serve today’s students and increase student success with little direction on where to go next. Improvements might be needed anywhere from the entry to exit point. Where does an institution begin?

The process that RSC has developed is divided into two main phases: Preliminary Planning and Project Planning. Each phase has several steps to guide your institution through transformational change.

A. PRELIMINARY PLANNING PHASE

The steps for Preliminary Planning will lay the groundwork for your institution to plan for transformational change related to student success. The purpose of Preliminary Planning is to consider your main charge and begin with high-level, big-picture visioning (100,000 foot level). This should not include the identification of specific solutions. Embedded in the narrative are questions that should be considered throughout the project.

![Diagram showing 1. Preparation, 2. Brainstorming, 3. Workshop]

The Preliminary Planning Phase may take an average of two weeks.
1 PREPARATION

PURPOSE: READY THE INSTITUTION FOR PRELIMINARY PLANNING

The project begins with an idea. It may arise from any level of the institution but typically it starts with the institution’s president. For the purpose of this white paper, the project visionary is considered the institution’s president. Keep in mind however, that whoever the idea originates from will be considered the project visionary. Institutional leadership should give final approval and a documented main charge to move forward.

Once the institution has documented the charge, a team of representatives from all key departments across the institution should be established, heretofore referenced as the “core team.” It is essential to have these departments represented in the core team in order to provide unique perspectives, challenges, feasibility of change, and to ensure buy-in. Within the core team, a subject-matter expert should be identified for specific topic areas. This topic expert will be responsible for developing/gathering data for their respective topic area, for example, financial aid, student services, technology, etc.

RSC’s Experience: We included the Vice Presidents of Information Services, Academic Affairs, Administrative Services, and Student Affairs; Dean of Academic Affairs and Instruction; Dean of Student Services; Director of Marketing; Coordinator of Grants; Project Manager; and two Faculty representatives.

Next, a project lead will need to be identified by the institution’s leadership or the core team. The lead should be someone who is familiar with the core team and the key players at the institution as well as someone who collaborates effectively with others. The lead must be a champion for the project; they will be charged with motivating the team throughout the Preliminary Planning and Project Planning Phases and will be charged to keep up project momentum. Since this individual will be a working lead managing a large amount of behind-the-scenes work, the position may require a full-time assignment. Depending on the lead’s other duties and responsibilities, it may be beneficial to assign a co-lead, project manager, or an external consultant to help guide the project. Hiring a consultant to assist with the project can be beneficial for several reasons: a consultant with experience leading institutions through change can quickly launch a project and be an impartial voice in the room, encouraging contributors to comfortably share their assessments.

RSC’S Experience: We hired an external consulting firm to collaborate and provide assistance throughout our planning. Our core team determined this due to an aggressive timeline to conduct the project and the number of other initiatives at the college. In our case, this required a formal request for proposals (RFP).
Once the core team and lead have been identified, it is important to note factors that could impact your institution’s success. First, the core team and project visionary will meet to review the project. The team needs to have full buy-in and it is important for leadership to reiterate an open attitude and willingness to respond to feedback. Second, the entire core team must understand the main charge (including expectation(s)). The team should bring questions or concerns to the table so they can move forward in understanding and consensus. The importance of asking questions and seeking clarification cannot be overstated; having clear direction is essential to your project’s success.

Documents Developed:
- Main charge
- List of core team members for specific topic areas

**BRAINSTORMING**

**PURPOSE: ESTABLISH A PROJECT VISION**

A majority of the Preliminary Planning will focus on brainstorming the project vision. Depending on the extent of the change envisioned and time constraints of the core team, brainstorming can either be done during regular planning meetings tackling each student service area at a time, or consider organizing a planning retreat within the same week. Although it is a bigger time commitment up front, the advantage of a retreat is that the core team will not lose momentum and ensure full participation by team members. Regardless of the timeframe chosen, the following processes remain the same.

RSC’s Experience: We brainstormed during regular planning meetings held over several weeks to accommodate the large core team’s meeting schedules. Instead, consider scheduling a one-day retreat to brainstorm the project and vision in order to maintain momentum of the project.

While brainstorming, the team’s goal is to articulate the desired “to-be” state for your institution. That is, what does the team envision as the institution’s ideal state? To define the “to-be” state, the core team should consider the institution’s need as well as challenges currently hindering the institution. The team should also ask: What do you want to achieve in the “to-be” state? How do you best serve your students? What parameters (e.g. your project will serve a specific population) are non-negotiable? As you begin to answer these questions a vision for your project will unfold. For now, the team should not focus on specific solutions to implement (these will come later). The key at this point is to dream big; do
not to let apparent internal constraints hamper big-picture visioning as these will be addressed during the next phase. You will also want to take time to define your measures of success; how will you know that your project was a success? Finally, the team should document the project vision and share it the project visionary to confirm it is aligned to the main charge.

Once the need and desired “to-be” state have been established, consider briefly the institution’s readiness for change. Depending on the size of the vision and possible transformation, you may opt to host a change management workshop at the beginning of your project for the core team as well as any other key stakeholders. Then later in the implementation stage, the core team can host a change management workshop for the whole institution.

Next, the team will develop a one- to two-page project overview that formalizes the desired “to-be” state. The project overview should clearly outline your project vision, the challenges you are addressing, and explain why you need to implement change(s). In addition, include how you plan to measure the success of your project and a timeline needed in order to reach the vision. It is good practice to have the core team and visionary review the project overview and provide feedback; this provides another opportunity to clarify details and address questions or concerns. Remember, at this point, the overview is an internal document shared with the core team and visionary only.

Lastly, the core team should remember to use the project overview as a roadmap throughout Project Planning, as subsequent conversations can unintentionally derail the team the project overview can keep planning focused.

Documents Developed:
• Project vision
• Project overview

3 WORKSHOP
PURPOSE: DETERMINE STUDENT NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

The next step in Preliminary Planning is to conduct a student experience workshop to visualize and describe the desired student experience from the entry to exit point. The purpose of the workshop is to develop the future definition of the student experience at your institution. To do this, use the following question to guide the workshop discussion: What should the student experience be at your institution from start to end? As participants brainstorm, encourage everyone envision the experience from the student perspective and to not focus on constraints. Remember, the workshop will seek input on what participants imagine as the ideal
institution regardless of existing roadblocks or challenges. It is important to still not focus on the solution, rather, stay at a high-level (i.e. 100,000 foot).

In addition to the core team, include individuals who interact with students on a daily basis and at all levels (e.g. faculty, peer mentors, financial aid staff). It will also be key to involve both current and former students in this workshop, since as a customer they will share what works, what does not, and lend perspective on their ideal outcome. If student participation is not feasible because of time constraints, the team could send a survey to current and former students prior to the workshop to solicit their feedback, and then have the core team review the results and bring them to the workshop to share with the rest of the participants. Depending on the type of student-related change, you may want to include external community members. Since attendance at the student experience workshop will be much larger than the core team, it is a good idea to break into small groups and have a core team member, student, and someone new to the project on each team. Although many participants in the workshop will be new to the project, it is not necessary to share the project overview. If shared, participants may begin to add constraints to their ideas.

After the workshop is completed, the lead will write a summary definition of what the new student experience looks like and review it with all participants to finalize the definition (this can also be done post-workshop by survey if there are time restraints).

At this point, the core team will need to come back together to review results from the student experience workshop. The core team needs to assess if the new student experience is aligned with the project overview. Use the following questions to reassess:

• Can the integrity of the project overview be maintained with the newly defined student experience?
• What makes your new student experience compelling?
• Are there certain components of the new student experience that are out of scope and should be tabled for a separate project?
• Does the new student experience include ideas that seem far-fetched? If so, the core team should drill down to the intent of the idea to determine if it can be realized in a fashion that the institution is willing/able to adopt.
• Are there additional changes to consider that need to be reflected in the overview?
• Is it necessary to scale back the project vision?

Based upon this review, determine if there is misalignment and if so, the core team will need to decide if and how the student experience definition or project overview may need to change. Include the new student experience definition into the project overview.

Now that the project vision, project overview, and student experience are aligned, think about how you will communicate the project overview to internal stakeholders. A concise summary (or abstract) of the project overview can be shared with the rest of the
institution in an effort to be transparent. Depending on the culture of your institution, you may want to clarify that the proposed idea(s) are still at the planning stage in order to mitigate concerns that naturally arise with change. Another approach is to hold short information sessions for college staff to attend and have the opportunity to ask questions.

RSC’s Experience: Our student experience workshop actually happened during the second step of the Project Planning Phase (Kickoff). In retrospect, it would have been better to do this during the Preliminary Planning which is where we have placed it in this paper.

As a reminder, it will be important to routinely circle back to the finalized overview to remind the institution this is the driver for transformational change. You will also want to keep the visionary involved at all stages of planning to ensure the project overview is maintained. The visionary should continually revisit the project overview and ensure the core team’s planning is aligned. Keep in mind during the next phase (Project Planning) the team may discover the vision must change. If this is the case, be sure the core team is the one leading this change and the lead and project visionary are central to the conversation. The lead and visionary can help determine if the vision really needs to change or if the team needs to focus back on the original vision. The lead can help determine if the vision really needs to change (which they may need to discuss with the project visionary) or if the team needs to focus back on the original vision.

RSC’s Recommendation: It is important to continue the momentum from Preliminary Planning into Project Planning; this phase is lengthy and will require the core team’s focus and dedication. Since the Project Planning phase will be an intensive, up to a year-long project, the core team should assess if they need a short break in order to organize their other projects/responsibilities. After the decision is made on whether to take the break or not, the core team can begin developing a plan for transformational change.

Documents Developed:

- Student experience definition
- Project overview revision (if needed)
B. PROJECT PLANNING PHASE

The following steps will lead your institution to a plan for transformational change and are described in full detail. The purpose of this phase is to plan the transformational change and determine what changes (solutions) are needed at a mid-level (think at the 50,000 foot level). Embedded in the narrative are questions for consideration throughout the project.

Timelines will look different depending on the extent of your project vision; as you develop your timeline consider how much time your institution will require for each step. Also keep in mind this phase, *Project Planning*, will require a significant amount of effort from across the institution. Examine the amount of time and resources your institution can dedicate to complete the project on your timeline. This may amount to a total of six, nine, or 12 months for the entire project.

*RSC’s Experience:* We completed this phase on an aggressive six-month timeline.

*RSC’s Recommendation:* It is imperative for the institution to have a clear timeline in order to keep the project on track and not lose momentum, therefore try to achieve this phase on a six-month timeline.
1 PREPARATION
PURPOSE: READY THE INSTITUTION FOR PROJECT PLANNING

In order to plan the desired vision and determine how the institution needs to change or grow, the core team will need to first assess the institution’s “as-is” state. To do this, the lead will need to coordinate with the core team by topic area the collection of college data; keep in mind the information to be gathered will depend on the areas where the institution is considering implementing change. When thinking of the data to collect, challenge the norm and look beyond student outcome figures. Make sure to look at the whole picture by including data from marketing, operational budgets, who your partners are, student financial data, etc. The lead should then create a data summary to provide a high-level review to the entire team. Examples of information might include:

- Student data (e.g.: data on general persistence, retention, and completion figures; student demographics; and student satisfaction surveys)
- Financial Aid information (e.g.: overall aid dispersal and Title IV aid dispersed)
- Marketing information (e.g.: website, social media, and outreach center analytics and advertising costs)
- Operations (e.g.: operating budgets, organizational charts, and technology systems)
- Academic Affairs (e.g.: current accreditation reports, programs, instructional design processes, partners, and articulation agreements)

The core team will review this data summary in the Kickoff related to the “as-is” state. While this is high-level data, the team will be able to identify data gaps and what data points need further research. This will be useful in the Research step of planning as part of a deeper dive in order to best plan for the implementation of the change. It is also a good reminder of the importance of making data-driven decisions throughout planning.

*RSC’s Experience: We collected the college data for our consultant to better understand our institution. It was also essential for the core team because it served as a reminder of the importance of making data-driven decisions.*

While data is being collected, this is also a good opportunity for the lead to begin organizing for the remainder of planning. This includes developing a planning timeline and scheduling meetings with the core team. Review these items during the Kickoff with the core team and seek input on any other preparation that should be completed.

*Documents Developed:*
- Summary of college data
- Planning timeline
2 KICKOFF
PURPOSE: OFFICIALLY BEGIN PROJECT PLANNING

To launch the Project Planning Phase, you will host a kickoff/planning meeting. Plan on allocating at least a half-day for the kickoff meeting; if there are many new participants, consider a short meeting beforehand to provide the background on the project and bring everyone up to speed. The core team will review documents (college data and project timeline) developed during the previous step (Preparation) and discuss the remaining steps of the planning project. They will also review the summary of college data; this will help the team determine the institution’s “as-is” state and can be incredibly valuable for the team to collectively understand the “as-is” state.

During the Kickoff, the core team should also identify any other stakeholders who will be crucial to the planning process and may need to serve as ad-hoc team members. Ad-hoc teams may be necessary to help divide the work across the institution, especially since the core team will also be juggling other projects. The ad-hoc teams can vary depending on the expertise needed within each planning step. The ad-hoc team may even be divided into subgroups (reporting back to the core team) and can provide subject-matter expertise on specific areas of the institution (such as financial aid or technology) at certain points of Project Planning. It will be the role of the lead to provide the ad-hoc team or subgroups an onramp to the project.

Documents Developed:
• List of potential ad-hoc team members

3 RESEARCH
PURPOSE: ENABLE CORE TEAM TO UNDERSTAND THE INSTITUTION AND ITS ENVIRONMENT

While strategic planning may be very familiar to institutional planning, it may not be intuitive to do it while planning a large project. However, since this is a project where you are focusing on transformational change, strategic planning lends itself nicely. This step will enable your core team to better understand the institution’s strengths and weaknesses, students, and competitors. Two strategies the core team can utilize that are common in strategic planning and assessment processes are an environmental scan and a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis. Each of these strategies allow you to look at external and internal factors that impact your success and should drive your project overview. With this information, you will be able to strategize the best ways your institution can fully serve the student and realize the desired student experience.

For this step, assign an ad-hoc team to lead the environmental scan and SWOT analysis and report back to the core team. While the ad-hoc team is leading these strategies,
depending on the extent of change, additional expertise may be needed from other stakeholders. The core team will later assess the results of these strategies while developing the concept paper.

Encourage participants in the environmental scan and SWOT analysis (either those leading it or providing feedback) to have an open mind of the ‘as-is’ state. It is also ideal to have those involved with these strategies to be external to the department as they will bring an outside perspective.

The environmental scan will help deepen the understanding of your external environment by looking at data that helps to define the environment in which your institution operates (assessing the industries and competitors) and the type of students you are looking to serve. The environmental scan will also examine the institution itself. Part of the ad-hoc team’s role will be to do a deeper dive of the college’s data, using the college data summary. The following are examples of questions the ad-hoc team can consider:

- What are the characteristics that describe your student population? (What are their education patterns? What does the student population look like?)
- What is the best way to reach your students?
- What are the workforce needs?
- Who are your competitors?
- What are the needs/challenges of your students/industries?
- What are best practices, emerging trends (locally, regionally, and nationally)?

The SWOT analysis should focus on taking the information gained during the environmental scan and determine actions the institution can take or potential changes to make. During this discussion, the ad-hoc team should ask itself:

- What is unique about our institution?
- What are our strengths? Are these strengths compelling for our students?
- Can we make these strengths more appealing to students? If so, at what cost?
- What is preventing us from implementing our desired student experience?
- What factors threaten our success? What are our competitors doing?
- What are emerging trends? What should we pay special attention to?

Ultimately, results from the environmental scan and SWOT analysis will help your core team with: 1.) identifying the changes the institution needs to make to implement the project overview, 2.) determining your institution’s best position to serve students, and 3.) defining your institution’s direction.

Next, the team should conduct research to identify solutions that support the changes needed. To do so, the core team should research solutions identified as a best practice, keeping in mind the solutions must support the new student experience. Assign a subgroup of the core team to lead this research rather than an ad-hoc team, as the
core team subgroup will have intimate knowledge of the project. The research can be focused on other higher education institutions or even external industries, depending on the changes required. If the team kept a list of solutions from the Preliminary Planning Phase, revisit this list now. At this point, the subgroup should focus on identifying as many best practices as possible, as the whole core team will later determine (in Concept and Development) which solutions to implement. The subgroup should then develop a list with their research results to provide to the rest of the core team for review in the Concept step.

Once completed, the subgroup will want to further enhance their research by conducting a more detailed literature review of the best practices identified. The results of the literature review will later help the core team determine if these solutions will be feasible for your institution to implement. Finally, your institution may also consider scheduling site visits or conference calls as a follow-up to the literature review results. The advantage of conducting site visits is that it allows your subgroup to gain an inside perspective of how an institution operates related to their best practice. Likewise, the conference calls are a cost-effective approach to site visits that still allow you to ask poignant questions regarding the best practices you have identified. For either of these enhancements, the project lead should be highly involved and facilitate any conference calls.

**RSC’s Experience:** We went on several site visits and found them to be extremely beneficial because they provided us a first-hand look at the best practices ‘in action’. Our team had a standard agenda for each visit to be able to compare them.

**Documents Developed:**
- Environmental scan
- SWOT analysis
- List of identified best practices/solutions
- Literature review of best practices/solutions

### 4. CAPACITY

**PURPOSE: DETERMINE THE INSTITUTION’S CAPACITY AND READINESS FOR CHANGE**

Learning sessions are another useful tool in providing an honest analysis of the “as-is” state of your institution. The difference between assessing the “as-is” state at this step is that your goal will be to think specifically on your institution’s capacity to implement the desired change based on its current operations. Previously, examining the “as-is” state focused on establishing the existing state of the institution; now the focus shifts to how to reach the “to-be” state.
Coordinate a series of learning sessions with targeted departments. An ad-hoc team will lead the learning sessions, but the core team will want to carefully consider who facilitates and participates. The team facilitating must be trustworthy and well-regarded among the institution’s staff. The participants should be those who do the work daily and you may or may not want supervisors to be involved at the same time; it depends on the current culture of your institution. You may not want managers to participate in these learning sessions since it may hinder honest and open communication. Depending on the scope of your project, begin by focusing on departments from student service areas. Examples include:

- Student Enrollment
- Financial Aid
- Marketing
- Instruction
- Technology

The learning sessions will help the core team measure the institution’s preparedness to accomplish the desired vision. The learning sessions will take between two and three hours and should be organized with the departments directly impacted by the project vision (those serving students and those that provide the operational functions for the student serving departments). The findings of the learning sessions should be documented by the ad-hoc team and will support the overall development of the institution’s organizational assessment.

During the learning sessions, encourage participants to focus on what your institution does really well and what it is known for, and then look at what the institution needs to do differently in order to deliver the ideal student experience. As the learning sessions are conducted they should focus on the services or functions the institution currently offers and identify what will be needed in the future to support the new vision. This may include analyzing internal staffing and resources to determine whether the institution needs to allocate additional resources in order to achieve the project vision. Inquire into the areas that are holding the college back from delivering the new student experience.

The ad-hoc team should then prepare the organizational assessment; this will serve as the documented outcome of the learning sessions. The organizational assessment will highlight the institution’s strengths and weaknesses or gaps and will help the core team understand the institution’s current capacity to respond to change. The assessment should also indicate whether or not the institution’s current infrastructure allows for modification (and whether or not there is a budget to support this). The core team will need to review the assessment to make any final recommendations/decisions related to change.

💡 For some, the BPR may be a very new process, so you might consider conducting a half-day BPR training.

💡 Instead of an ad-hoc team you may consider working with an external consultant.
Next, conduct a business process review (BPR), an essential strategy when planning for change. While the organizational assessment highlights the gaps at an institution, the BPR allows the organization to drill down and examine its “as-is” processes. The BPR can help accomplish several things. First, it provides the information needed to support new initiatives by revealing challenges with existing processes and presents opportunities to be more efficient or innovative. Second, the BPR helps the institution determine if the current organizational processes support the project vision. Third, the BPR can help to frame the recommendations from the organizational assessment against institutional constraints (these constraints can be financial, technological, political, etc.). Keep in mind that a BPR will likely involve individuals who are not familiar with the project so make the purpose of the BPR transparent. As was done in the kickoff meeting during the Project Planning Phase with new participants, take time to provide context.

While a BPR for all areas of the organization can be helpful, you should first and foremost start with the student services areas within the scope of the project. Consider the different steps along a student’s entry and exit point, and the departments they come in contact with (directly or indirectly). After the current processes are documented, determine if they will need to be changed in order to meet the project vision.

At the end of this step, your core team should have a much clearer picture of how the institution operates and what change is needed to make transformational change. The results will become a foundation for developing your institution’s new business practices and will drive the change toward your “to-be” state.

*RSC’s Experience:* We conducted the organizational assessment in tandem with the BPR.

*RSC’s Recommendation:* If time is limited, have teams complete their own list of processes and steps to bring to the BPR.

*Documents Developed:*
- Organizational assessment and recommendations for change
- Business processes and recommendations for change

5 CONCEPT
PURPOSE: DEVELOP PRELIMINARY IMPLEMENTATION PLANS

Now the institution has a well-developed sense of where it currently stands and where it needs to go in order to implement the project overview. The institution also better understands the areas where it needs to grow and the processes it needs to improve, although, it still may not be clear the exact solutions you want to or can implement.
However, with substantial data from the previous planning steps, the core team should be able to move forward with data-driven decisions. First, the core team will need to determine if the solutions/recommendations are aligned to the project overview. As with the student experience workshop, you may find that some of the recommendations are not aligned to this project and should be tabled for the future. Or, you may find a best practice you had not known about before that now changes some of the anticipated solutions. Look at the list of solutions (best practices) identified in Research as well as the results from the literature review. Then, compare these against the organizational assessment and BPR and determine if they are aligned with the project overview. Next, identify which solutions the institution can implement in order to deliver the new student experience. Take into account the resources needed to implement the change (such as staffing or technology), any new training for staff, marketing changes, etc.

At this point, the team should develop a value proposition. While the project overview shares your institution’s vision for transformational change, the value proposition will share how that change benefits students and what makes the transformed institution more valuable to students. Think back to the results from the Research and Capacity steps; now that you know your students’ needs and challenges and have solutions that will address them, what can your new student experience offer to students? Encourage the core team to revisit the discussion of your strengths and ask, is your value proposition supported by these strengths?

With this information, the team can write a concept paper between 5-10 pages that describes the transformational change, and in further detail describe the project overview (including the vision, desired student experience, and solutions). Compared to the project overview in the Preliminary Planning Phase which stayed at a high level (100,000 foot), this concept paper will begin to drill down to determine specifics (think around the 50,000 foot level). Keep in mind the measures of success you defined in the Preliminary Planning Phase, Brainstorming step. The concept paper can also provide a preliminary plan for implementing the project vision, based on the research findings and the organizational assessment. Remember, the core team should meet to review the concept paper with the visionary of the project to ensure consistency and alignment to the institution’s larger mission and vision.

Documents Developed:
- Concept paper

FEEDBACK
PURPOSE: SOLICIT FEEDBACK ON YOUR CONCEPT

As the planning draws to a close, your institution should seek input on your project vision
and plans. You will want to bring together individuals who have experience leading innovative change/practice at the institution or assisting institutions in implementing new strategies/technologies. This may include external leaders in higher education (from other institutions). Remember, the purpose of this step is to provide your institution with honest and direct feedback on the direction of the project and to allow the experts to share key information/challenges to consider based on their own experiences. Furthermore, you will want to encourage the participants to share ideas on how to move the vision forward, share potential concerns/pitfalls, and provide insight on the vision. This session can be conducted in-person or by phone/web conference. However, having all the experts together in a session at the same time is ideal because it allows participants to have a more organic conversation and build off of each other’s ideas.

The external feedback session can take up to half of a day, depending on the number of participants (experts) and the extent of your vision and plan. In order to prepare participants for this session, plan on sharing your concept paper in advance of the meeting. Have the core team or a subset of the core team participate in this session. Assign someone to take notes on all the feedback/advice provided and prepare a summary and overview.

Documents Developed:
- Summary of the external feedback

DEVELOPMENT
PURPOSE: FINALIZE THE INSTITUTION’S APPROACH

The core team has now completed internal and external research, identified possible solutions to implement the project overview, has a preliminary concept paper outlining what the project would look like and the team has received feedback on the project. Your team is now ready to begin looking at the details from the 10,000 foot level including staffing levels, specific roles of departments and employees, and budgets. Do not think about ground-level details just yet, this will be done during project implementation.

The core team now moves into developing a business plan to determine the changes the institution needs to make to implement the transformational change. You will want to revisit the documents developed in the Research and Capacity steps. Keep in mind it is important to be intentional about involving the visionary of the project along with other key administration personnel (if not already involved).

There are many different strategies to developing business plans; regardless of the method, it needs to be an actionable plan. In addition, it is of the utmost importance to outline the specific actions/activities to be taken, whose responsibility it will be to carry out those actions/activities, and the key measures of success for each action/activity. These measures will be essential for the
institution to determine at what point you have achieved a proof of concept and show whether the project is (or is not) successful. Alongside the plan, the core team will need to identify a timeline for the actions/activities to take place during implementation. Other components to consider developing include updated organizational charts, high-level descriptions for changes to departments, a risk assessment, and mitigation strategies.

Next is to analyze the financials associated with the business plan to develop the institution's financial plan. It is helpful to create a subgroup of the core team for this step and then come back to the larger core team with a draft plan for consideration. Assign someone from administrative or business services area to oversee this development, and make sure to include the lead. While developing the financial plan, think about the budget requirements of the changes that will be implemented. Are you purchasing new technology? Are you outsourcing any services or providing new services? Are you hiring more staff? Whatever the costs, consider a template/model or tool that allows you to measure the financial impact of changes and validates the return on investment of those changes. This will be especially helpful for anyone new to the project to see how planned changes will benefit the institution over a set period of time.

Finally, communicate the final plans with the key stakeholders, internally and externally – in similar methods you used at the end of the Preliminary Planning Phase. This can be achieved through an email, a college-wide meeting, or short informational sessions.

This process, from the Preliminary Planning Phase through Project Planning Phase, takes the core team from looking at the project vision at a very high level to narrowing the focus to the details.

Documents Developed:
  • Business and financial plans
  • Timeline for implementation

III. SUMMARY OF OVERALL APPROACH

The approach outlined in this white paper is an intense, data-driven process that relies on the institution regularly assessing their planning against the project vision (and project overview). The core team will be required to meet several times over the course of the project and will need to be comfortable with change.
The process focuses on two key phases: Preliminary Planning and Project Planning. These steps ultimately lead to designing actionable business and financial plans for implementing the project vision.

A. Preliminary Planning:
1. Preparation – Purpose: ready the institution for Preliminary Planning. Key activities: a main charge is given from the visionary of the institution, a core team is assigned, and a lead is identified; these individuals meet to review the main charge. Identify core team members for specific topic areas. The lead will be the main contact for the project.

2. Brainstorming – Purpose: establish a project vision. Key activities: schedule brainstorming meetings. The core team brainstorms a project vision and articulates the vision in a one- to two-page project overview.

3. Workshop – Purpose: determine student needs and challenges. Key activities: schedule a student experience workshop. The workshop participants and core team define the new desired student experience. The core team finalizes the project overview and communicates with internal stakeholders.

B. Project Planning:
1. Preparation – Purpose: ready the institution for Project Planning. Key activities: the core team collects college data and the lead prepares for the next steps in planning, including setting a timeline, scheduling meetings, and developing a data summary.

2. Kickoff – Purpose: officially begin Project Planning. Key activities: review documents developed in the previous step and establish the institution’s “as-is” state. Identify potential ad-hoc team members.


6. Feedback – Purpose: solicit feedback on your concept. Key activities: schedule up to a half-day feedback session and invite those external to the project to provide candid feedback. Document a summary of the external feedback.

7. Development – Purpose: finalize the institution’s approach. Key activities: determine changes to make, develop a business and financial plan, and create an implementation timeline. Communicate with internal/external stakeholders.
IV. CONCLUSION

Rio Salado College began this project to determine ways the institution could improve the student experience, specifically for underserved populations. As the project unfolded, it became clear that some of the improvements would require our institution to embark on transformational change. With support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, RSC not only learned about ways to better serve students but also outlined a plan to implement the transformational change required.

It is important to remember that what might be considered a small change can have a larger ripple effect across an institution. Sometimes, what an institution sees as process improvement based off of this small change will actually lead the college to transformational change; it depends on the willingness of the institution to be open to larger ideas and taking some risk. One key for transformational change to be successful is having the core team, along with multiple stakeholders, analyze the change from the areas that will be impacted to ensure that plans and the vision are aligned.

This white paper is a result of RSC’s knowledge acquired and is intended to assist higher education institutions interested in embarking on transformational change at their institution. RSC’s experience is embedded throughout the white paper. The intent is that by sharing our college’s experience, along with tips that we learned by completing this planning, other institutions will have a reliable method to begin their own planning. While some steps were completed at different stages of the project (described in our experiences and recommendations), the process represents what RSC recommends as best practices for transformational change. We hope the process and strategies detailed in this white paper can help others plan intelligently to circumvent errors and risks that can set an institution back or waste valuable resources.

Finally, the process outlined should be seen as one approach to transformational change. Each step is designed to help prepare an institution to examine their own capacity and readiness for change. The level of detail and time needed for each step may vary depending on the institution’s need for change; however, the process can be replicated to the degree that best serves your need. Appendix A includes an overview of the planning process and is intended as a checklist/quick guide for the project lead/team to use while undergoing the project.
V. APPENDIX A

PLANNING TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE FOR STUDENT SUCCESS WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION
A. PRELIMINARY PLANNING

Purpose: The purpose of this phase is to consider your main charge and begin with high-level, big-picture visioning (100,000 foot level). This should not include the identification of specific solutions.

Timeframe: The preliminary planning detailed in this phase can take an average of two weeks.

Steps:
1. Preparation
   - Identify main charge
   - Identify core team
   - Identify core team members for specific topic areas
   - Identify lead
   - Initiate meeting to discuss
   - Main charge, list of core team members for specific topic areas

2. Brainstorming
   - Brainstorm project vision
   - Determine ideal state, needs, challenges, goals, etc.
   - Develop project overview
   - Project vision, project overview

3. Workshop
   - Conduct student experience workshop
   - Develop definition of student experience
   - Meet to review alignment of project overview and student experience definition
   - Student experience definition, project overview revision (if needed)

B. PROJECT PLANNING

Purpose: The purpose of this phase is to plan the transformational change and determine what changes (solutions) are needed at a mid-level (think at the 50,000 foot level).

Timeframe: The project planning detailed in this phase can take up to a year.

Steps:
1. Preparation
2. Kickoff
3. Research
4. Capacity
5. Concept
6. Feedback
7. Development

Implementation
B. PROJECT PLANNING

1. Preparation
   - Collect college data
   - Create data summary
   - Develop planning timeline
   - Schedule meetings
   - Summary of college data, planning timeline

2. Kickoff
   - Conduct project kickoff/planning meeting
   - Identify additional stakeholders to serve as ad-hoc team members
   - List of potential ad-hoc team members

3. Research
   - Conduct an environmental scan
   - Conduct a SWOT analysis
   - Develop an action plan
   - Identify successful strategies/solutions
   - Complete site visits or literature review
   - Environmental scan, SWOT analysis, list of identified best practices/solutions, literature review of best practices/solutions

4. Capacity
   - Conduct learning sessions
   - Make recommendations/decisions related to change
   - Conduct a business process review
   - Document current processes
   - Determine new processes
   - Organizational assessment and recommendations for change, business processes and recommendations for change

5. Concept
   - Review Research and Capacity findings
   - Determine what solutions to implement
   - Develop concept paper
   - Concept paper

6. Feedback
   - Schedule experts for feedback session
   - Solicit feedback from experts at feedback session
   - Develop a summary of the feedback
   - Summary of the external feedback

7. Development
   - Determine what changes to make
   - Develop a business plan which may include organizational charts and/or risk assessment/mitigation strategies
   - Develop a timeline
   - Develop a financial plan
   - Communicate with internal/external stakeholders
   - Business and financial plans, timeline for implementation

Lead
Core team

Lead
Core team

Lead
Core team Ad-hoc team

Lead
Core team Ad-hoc team Impacted departments

Lead
Core team

Lead
Core team Experts

Lead
Core team