USC Rossier
Pullias Center for Higher Education

Change Leadership Toolkit

Case Studies:
Amarillo College

An Addendum to the

Change Leadership Toolkit:
A Guide for Advancing Systemic Change in Higher Education

By Elizabeth Holcombe and Ángel de Jesus González
Collaborator: Russell Lowery-Hart, Amarillo College

CHANGE LEADERSHIP TOOLKIT
CASE STUDY OVERVIEW

These Case Studies accompany the Change Leadership Toolkit and demonstrate what it looks like in action to use Leader Moves to promote systemic institutional change. Each case highlights a few key Leader Moves and includes an overview of each institution, the leader at the forefront of the change process, and a description of the Leadership Context and Levers used to achieve the change goal. Collectively, these Case Studies showcase the combinations of Leader Moves and Levers that leaders can use to drive change across different types of institutions. It is important to note that given the lengthy time period for changes and keeping the document brief, these are just examples of Moves, Levers and context elements and are not fully inclusive of the leaders' change processes.

In any systemic change project, there are a variety of conditions that may influence the Moves leaders choose to make, the Levers they may use, and the ultimate change that is made. As a result, for these Case Studies, we chose to represent leaders in different roles, institutions with varying characteristics, and various types of change projects in order to reflect this diversity and showcase how the Toolkit is useful in a variety of situations. Visit our Change Leadership Toolkit Case Studies web page to see other examples, **https://pullias.usc.edu/clt-case-studies/**.

Building a Culture of Care to Improve College Completion

About the Institution

Amarillo College (AC) is a public community college in Amarillo, Texas. It enrolls over 10,000 students and was established in 1929 as Amarillo Junior College. With nearly 45% of its students identifying as Latinx/a/o or Hispanic, AC is classified as a Minority-Serving Institution (MSI). In addition, 71% of all AC students are first-generation college students and 55% are part-time. AC has seen much change in the last decade that has required their leadership to better understand their students in order to move toward serving, supporting and caring for them to success.

CASE STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

- **Leader Role(s) and Agency:** Russell Lowery-Hart, President of Amarillo College
- **Goals of Change:** Improve completion rates at Amarillo College

- **Level/Scope of Change:** University-wide

- **Institutional Type:** Community College, MSI

- **Moves Highlighted:**
   - Sensemake and Learn (SL)
   - Create Vision, Expectations and Pacing (V)
   - Lead People and Teams (T)
   - Develop Strategy and Resources (S)
   - Engage in Advocacy and Navigate Politics (P)

- **Levers:**

   - **Lever Category 4:** Affiliations with national associations and organizations
   - **Lever Category 7:** Funding streams and sources

Setting the Stage: About the Project

This case study documents the transformation of Amarillo College (AC) from an institution with low retention and completion rates to a community college that has been recognized nationally for its innovative approach to improving student success. In the midst of a budget crisis, President Russell Lowery-Hart worked to both cut costs and streamline bureaucratic processes, while at the same time transforming systems and structures to improve outcomes for students and tackle the challenges of poverty that were holding students back. Facing declining enrollments, a nearly $4 million budget cut from the state, and told by the Board that tuition could not increase, Russell had to figure out a way to cut costs and simultaneously improve the College's low completion and transfer rates. At the same time, the state of Texas was shifting to an outcomes-based funding model where campuses would be funded based on student outcomes such as persistence and completion.

Through an extensive process of data-gathering and talking to students, Russell and his team determined that the challenges to the College's low success rates were two-fold: first, students were facing incredible challenges in their personal lives — largely driven by poverty — that prevented them from succeeding at AC; and second, the overly complicated and bureaucratic processes and policies at AC were further stymying students from succeeding rather than helping them. As Russell noted, *"We were an institution designed for a student that no longer existed. We were set up for the students that we served 30 years ago, but not for the student that was actually walking on our campuses, needing us the most."*

In order to redesign the campus to better support students, Russell and his team worked to create a culture of love and caring (known as #ACcultureofcaring) that drove significant transformations of campus structures and practices. The specific changes AC made were numerous and included: reorganizing work in teams to bridge silos, eliminating developmental education, accelerating learning through the creation of eight-week terms, requiring tutoring, creating a social services center and a food pantry, offering childcare and transportation assistance, building a new mentoring program, expanding career services and leveraging technological platforms such as Early Alerts and predictive analytics to proactively identify students who were facing challenges. Underlying all these interventions was the new culture of caring and love, epitomized by the humanizing of students and their challenges through the creation of a "composite" AC student named Maria. Maria has all the characteristics of a "typical" AC student as identified by campus data: a 27-year-old first-generation Latina, student mother, from a low socioeconomic background who is working two part time jobs. By referring specifically to "Maria" rather than to students more broadly, Russell helped campus stakeholders develop a personal connection to the sometimes abstract challenges that students face and focus on "loving Maria to success." This Case Study describes the ways that Russell worked to transform the culture at AC and ultimately improve completion rates by nearly 40% in just five years.

Change Leader Moves

Overview of Leader Moves

While Russell and his team made a variety of different Moves to advance their systemic change project, this Case Study focuses on Moves in five key categories. First, he made Moves in the Sensemake and Learn (SL) category to help better understand the barriers hindering student success at Amarillo College. These Moves included examining disaggregated demographic data to get a clearer picture of students' backgrounds, creating a "secret shopper" experience to learn about the processes students go through to register for classes, holding focus groups with students to learn directly about their experiences and hosting a campus wide data summit to share the results of this learning with the broader campus community (SL2, SL6, SL7). This sensemaking process helped Russell and his team clarify their vision and make Moves in the Create Visions, Expectations and Pacing (V) category. They created a vision around loving and caring for students, eliminating bureaucratic barriers to success on campus and supporting students in overcoming barriers they faced outside of school related to poverty and other life challenges. This vision was crystallized in a new

set of institutional values which were then embedded in job descriptions and programs throughout campus (V1, V2). The vision and values guided the creation of a new strategy through Moves in the Develop Resources and Strategy (S) category, which developed concrete programs and policies to remove the school and life barriers students were facing while working with limited financial resources (S1, S2, S3, S8, S9). Russell also worked on Leading People and Teams (L) Moves. Specifically, he aimed to build faculty and staff morale and empowerment through a series of innovation challenges that allowed teams of employees across campus to develop and compete for funding to pilot new ideas aligned with AC's vision and strategy (T5, T6, T7). Finally, Russell focused on Moves in the Navigating Politics (P) category. He built strong relationships with the Board and leveraged partnerships with external organizations to gain support for his systemic change project, and he took intentional steps to build trust and support among faculty and staff as he moved the project forward (P1, P2, P3, P5, P6).

Sensemake and Learn — Focus on SL2, SL6, SL7

Russell first made Moves in the Sensemake and Learn category to better understand why AC was struggling to retain and graduate students. These Moves involved several specific steps. First, Russell and his team examined student demographic data to get a better understanding of who their students were and the challenges that were preventing them from completing their degrees (SL2). They found that the majority of students at AC were older or non-traditionally-aged college students, from low socioeconomic backgrounds, first-generation, Latinx and often parents. Most students worked and many worked more than one job. As he and his team began to digest this data, Russell said:

> *"What became clear to me is that we were an institution designed for a student that no longer existed. We were set up for the students that we served 30 years ago, or the students that we were 20 years ago, but not for the student that was actually walking on our campuses, needing us the most."*

To further learn about the experience of AC's student body, Russell used two innovative information-gathering techniques: student focus groups, which he conducted himself and a "secret shopper" program, where the College paid students to go through specific intake, advising or financial aid processes to document the "typical" student experience (SL2). Among other insights, he learned that at one point in the secret shopper process there were 12 things that a student had to do before they could talk to an actual person. Processes felt overly bureaucratic and discouraging for students, as they shared with him in the focus groups. Students shared that they really wanted to feel cared for and loved on campus, rather than like just a cog in a bureaucratic machine.

In order to share these insights broadly across campus stakeholder groups, Russell decided to hold "data summits," where the entire campus shut down for a day and all the employees came together to learn about AC's students and their experiences. Russell presented all the data he and his team had gathered, both qualitative and quantitative (SL6). At the summit he also introduced the concept of "Maria," the composite AC student, to help stakeholders understand students' needs and humanize them, helping to build toward the culture of love and caring he was beginning to create (SL7).

Create Vision, Expectations and Pacing — V1, V2

As noted earlier in this Case Study, as Russell continued to share information around AC's student profile, he and his team clarified the vision of their systemic change around two related statements: "loving Maria to success" and creating a culture of caring ("#ACcultureofcaring"). Both of these vision statements captured the idea that AC would need to humanize their processes by eliminating bureaucratic barriers and focusing on relationships (V1, V2). In order to build on this vision, Russell established a set of collaborative processes to work with faculty, staff and students and create AC values that would guide their transformation.
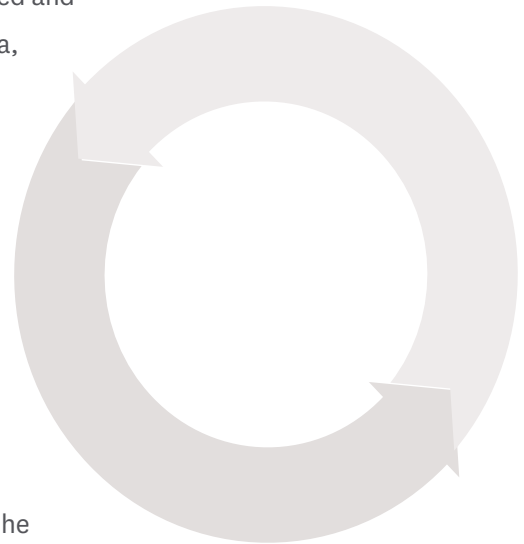
Over the course of several months, Russell met regularly with these key stakeholders to brainstorm about how they could create the "perfect college," using insights from students themselves as well as stories from other colleges and even corporations that embodied the caring culture that they wanted to create at AC. Russell felt it was important that the values were expressed in ways that would resonate with students and not through abstract, hard-to-understand buzzwords or jargon. Ultimately, the leadership team coalesced around five key words to express AC's values: Wow, Fun, Innovation, Family and Yes (V1). Russell explained the meaning behind these values:

> *"Students shared that at the end of any interaction with an AC employee they wanted to go, Wow! they really do care…. The perfect college for them would just be fun, coming to campus would be fun, not fearful. The interactions would be fun and light-hearted and supportive. It's innovation. They want to know we see them and we're trying to change things for who they are, not who we wish they were. [AC] would be familiar. The fourth value is family, but not in the sense that we need to be a part of the AC family. They wanted the perfect college to embrace their family in the process. So, instead of saying, well, FERPA says you can't have family members in your advising conversation, we went and looked at what FERPA actually allows and if the student wants to bring a family, however they define it into a conversation they bring them in… [the] family is a part of the experience. And then the last one is Yes, the last value is yes, [students] just wanted us to get to a yes [rather than putting obstacles in their path]."*

These values were communicated across campus through emails and meetings and embedded into every job description and throughout the hiring process for new employees (V2).

Lead People and Teams (T) — Focus on T5, T6, T7

The values were also integrated into staff performance evaluations and rewards systems. Specifically, AC established merit pay for employees who were doing an exemplary job embodying the College's new values, and they supported their ability to do that with extensive professional development and training sessions (T7). Building on the value of "innovation," and continuing the collaborative approach that had helped inform the creation of the values, Russell developed a team innovation challenge. They formed 77 teams of 8-10 faculty and staff members and tasked them with the charge of identifying and solving problems across campus — specifically pinpointing barriers to student success and coming up with creative ways to dismantle those barriers (T5, T6). Russell was able to work with the Amarillo College Foundation and private donors to obtain funding for the team innovation challenges (T7). After several rounds of brainstorming and development, teams would vote on the best idea and the winning team would get $10,000 to split among themselves, and the top five ideas would be piloted across campus. These pilots eventually expanded to become cross-campus programs that serve students at scale. Russell continues to hold the team innovation challenges to continue to generate new ideas, as they "help employees feel empowered to identify a problem and a solution and to make it fun and to reward them on some level for doing so" (T5).

Develop Strategy and Resources — Focus on S1, S2, S3, S8, S9

Guided by their vision and values, Russell and his team worked to develop a strategy that would transform AC into a place where love and care were foregrounded, barriers to success were removed and students could succeed (S1). While much of the strategy focused on removing academic or bureaucratic barriers, such as creating accelerated eight-week terms or mandating corequisite remediation, a key part of the strategy involved targeting "life barriers," especially those caused by poverty. As Russell noted, student data showed that the top 10 barriers to student success at AC were not academic (S3). In order to help students overcome the barriers that poverty was putting in their path, the team created the Advocacy and Resource Center (ARC), which provides social services including support for transportation, housing, childcare and food. Russell and his team were able to leverage partnerships with nonprofits and local government agencies, as well as funding from the AC Foundation, to support the ARC (S2). Additionally, they partnered with a local university to have undergraduate- and graduate-level social work students complete internship hours at the ARC, significantly expanding the number of students served at no additional cost to the College. The funding and in-kind support from these partnerships was critical for the success of the project, as Russell was simultaneously navigating the urgent need to significantly cut costs due to the College's budget crisis. Creative funding approaches like the ones described here were a key part of Russell's strategy for navigating the campus's budget challenges (S8, S9).

Engage in Advocacy and Navigate Politics (P) — Focus on P1, P2, P3, P5, P6

Russell made Moves in the Navigating Politics category in order to effectively manage political dynamics that arose over the course of this systemic change process. One of the most politically contentious issues he faced was the need to significantly cut costs due to the College's budget crisis — meaning he had to cut dozens of jobs across campus. These cuts came as he was simultaneously working to establish AC's new vision and strategy centered around love and care. Russell was transparent with the Board of Regents about his approach — both the need to cut jobs and the new strategy — and explicitly asked for their support (P1, P2). At a Board meeting, Russell declared "I'm not doing it unless we have each other's back," and he asked each trustee to verbalize their support for him in the meeting. The support of the Board helped legitimize Russell's efforts and navigate the tricky political dynamics that arose as he worked to implement the changes he proposed (P2, P5). Russell also leveraged connections with external organizations including Achieving the Dream (ATD) to legitimize the change approach (P6). Many of the new strategies Russell proposed aligned with recommendations from Achieving the Dream, and Russell was able to use evidence from other ATD campuses to advocate for change.

Despite the support from the Board and external partners, Russell still struggled to maintain buy-in among faculty and staff throughout the job cut process. As he noted, he tried to be transparent throughout the process and shared a lot of information with the campus community, but he "avoided the personal" even as he was arguing that AC's approach to student success should be personalized and humanized. After a courageous staff member informed him that the layoffs had alienated many staff and faculty across campus, Russell needed to rebuild trust and support. As he noted, "for the next year I went to every department twice, I took cookies, I said, I'm sorry" in order to rebuild relationships and trust (P3). In this way, Russell was

eventually able to win back the remaining faculty and staff and gain buy-in for the new vision and change (P5).

Focus On: Leadership Context

Leadership Context involves the set of internal and external influences that shape a leader's change landscape, influence the Moves made, and provide opportunities or challenges to consider when developing a change strategy. Two significant aspects of Leadership Context in Russell's case were *politics* and *culture*. Russell noted that while Amarillo College is an MSI and that many of the challenges to student success were related to racial equity, the College is located in the most politically conservative Congressional district in the country. Any change strategy related to race, equity or DEI could be a political lightning rod in such an environment. As Russell made Moves in the Vision (V) and Strategy (S) categories, he was intentional about centering poverty rather than race as the key challenge to tackle at AC, believing that this approach meant he "could access [DEI issues] without politicizing it." The focus on poverty as AC's key challenge also came through as Russell made Moves in the Communicate Effectively (C) category. Additionally, the institution's culture was another contextual factor that drove Russell's decision-making. The organizational culture was extremely siloed and bureaucratic, and faculty and staff felt disempowered to identify and advocate for solutions to problems they observed. Russell made Moves in the Lead People and Teams (L) categories with these aspects of culture in mind. For example, he developed the team innovation challenge as a way to empower faculty and staff to advocate for change, adopting ideas from the challenge to pilot on campus and rewarding the winning team. Further, by structuring the innovation challenge as a team challenge rather than an individual exercise, he facilitated relationship-building and collaboration that helped to break down silos.

Leadership Context

- Institutional Type
- Leadership & Governance
- Culture
- Politics
- Human Capital & Capacity
- Physical & Financial Resources
- Externalities

Focus On: Levers

When leaders engage in systemic change efforts, they are faced with many opportunities to amplify change. In the Toolkit, these opportunities are referred to as Levers. A Change Lever is an opportunity that can be leveraged or that can be *"pulled upon"* or manipulated to advance or accelerate the desired change. In this section, we describe the most prominent examples of Change Levers from Russell's project.
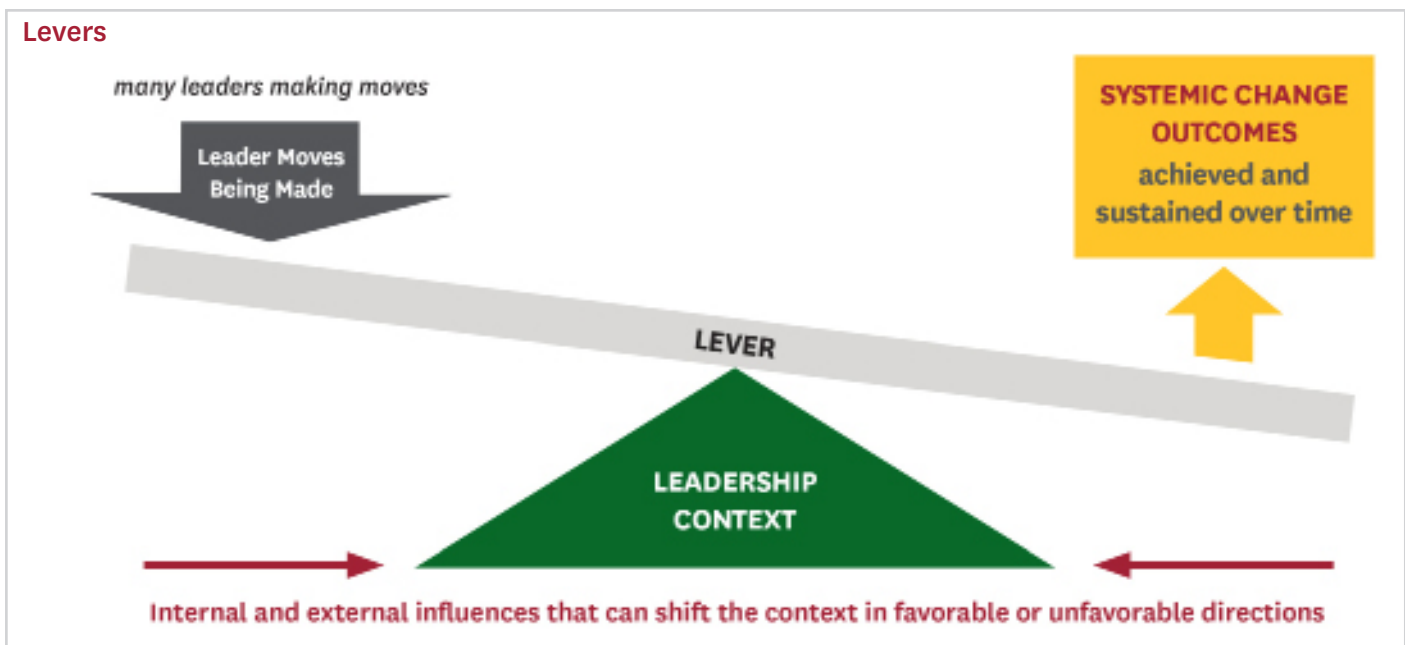
- **Lever Category 4: Affiliations with national association & organizations:** Russell leveraged connections with national organizations to affirm his vision and strategy and squelch some of the pushback he got from campus stakeholders. For example, many of the strategies that Russell proposed aligned with recommendations from Achieving the Dream. Russell was able to leverage evidence from other ATD campuses to advocate for these changes and gain buy-in. Additionally, an award from the American Association for Community Colleges for their work several years into the project helped affirm the strategy; Russell leveraged this award to maintain momentum and garner further support.

- **Lever Category 7: Funding streams and sources:** Russell leveraged changes to rewards and funding structures to accelerate the change process. As noted earlier in this case study, the state of Texas was shifted to an outcomes-based funding model at the same time that AC was going through its budget crisis and Russell was working to improve completion rates. Russell stated that this shift in the state's funding approach meant that AC had to shift their work and prioritize completion, because future funding for the College would be dependent on outcomes like completion. These state-level changes gave Russell additional evidence for why the changes to student support structures were necessary.

Key Takeaways

In this Case Study, Russell was able to transform the culture and improve completion at Amarillo College through a focus on holistic care and love for students. He was able to leverage changes to the state funding landscape to promote new approaches to completion on campus by using an extensive learning and fact-finding process to inform his approach. By connecting directly with students to learn about their experiences, as well as diving deeply into student data, Russell developed a more complete picture of the challenges students were facing and used that picture to convince faculty, staff and the Board of the need for change. A collaborative and inclusive process led to development of a new vision and values for the campus, which guided the development of specific strategies and programs to support students in their academic work and in their lives off campus. As we noted at the beginning of this Case Study, the new approach has led to dramatically higher completion rates and a culture of innovation, collaboration and care at Amarillo College.

Reflections to Help You Ignite Change

This case study provides an example of how Russell used the Moves outlined in the Change Leadership Toolkit to enact systemic change at his institution. We offer the following questions to get you thinking more deeply about Leadership Context, Leader Moves, and Levers:

✔ How did Leadership Context shape Leader Moves in this case?

✔ How did this case study help you to better understand Levers and how they can help motivate or amplify change?

✔ What stands out for you in terms of significant Leader Moves that were made?

✔ What influence did the leader role and/or agency have on the project?

✔ What did you learn that you can apply to your campus change initiative? How you might use the Toolkit to advance change leadership on your campus?