



Student Success Center Self-Assessment Planning Tool

FACILITATION GUIDE



MAY 2019



WHAT ARE THE SSC CORE CAPACITIES?

The Self-Assessment Planning Tool is organized around seven core capacities that are central to the effective operation of Student Success Centers (SSCs). This section explores the background for these core capacities in more detail. Each subsection includes the rationale behind each of the core capacities and an overview of the topics covered in the self-assessment, along with some additional probing questions to consider.

CORE CAPACITY #1—STRATEGIC VISION AND DIRECTION

Rationale Behind the Core Capacity

As is true for all organizations, it is important for SSCs to have an overarching strategy and vision guiding their work. The rationale behind this section of the tool is to encourage the SSC staff to take the time to articulate this vision and engage in conversations that will help to implement it. The SSC's core capacity around their strategic vision and direction is arguably the most important outlined in this document. The absence of a clear strategic direction will likely result in a poor understanding of the work of the Center by key constituencies, misalignment of the SSC resources and supports available to the colleges, and questionable long-term value and sustainability of the SSCs.

Topics Covered in This Section of the Tool

1. Relationship to the SSC Host Organization

- Clarifying relationship and roles
- Integrating SSC operations with the host organization
- Establishing areas of appropriate autonomy from the host organization
- Additional questions to consider:
 - Does the host organization have a clearly stated goal of improving student success and increasing educational attainment that connects to the role of the SSC?
 - Is the contribution of the SSC to the host organization's broader mission well defined?
 - Is there a process in place to regularly evaluate and enhance the relationship between the SSC and the host organization?

2. SSC Strategic Plan

- Establishing a strategic plan
- Aligning the plan with the host organization’s strategic direction
- Creating a process to monitor to the plan’s implementation
- Incorporating key aspects of other SSC core capacities in the plan
- Additional questions to consider:
 - Is the strategic plan informed by a mapping/scan of existing programs and initiatives by the state and individual colleges?
 - Has the SSC strategic plan been vetted with the SSC advisory committee to reflect the input/needs of the colleges?
 - Is there a process in place for revising the strategic plan that includes opportunities for colleges to provide input and feedback?

3. SSC Role in Supporting State Policy

- Facilitating conversations about the state policies to promote/support reform
- Advocating for student success-oriented policies
- Supporting implementation of adopted policies
- Additional questions to consider:
 - Does the SSC staff lead workgroups, task forces, or committees that are focused on state policy changes to support student success?
 - What role does the SSC staff play in the larger advocacy efforts of the host organization? Are there opportunities to add value by providing “expert” legislative testimony?

CORE CAPACITY #2—COMMUNICATIONS

Rationale Behind the Core Capacity

The SSCs have a variety of stakeholders that they need to communicate with regularly. These range from the host organization staff to college leadership. SSCs also interact with frontline

college practitioners as well as external partners from other education sectors. Not all these groups need the same information, nor do they need it at the same time or at the same frequency. This complexity makes communications one of the biggest challenges SSC staff encounter. This section of the tool is designed to help SSC staff think through the dimensions of their communications to help them develop a plan that identifies key audiences, messages, and communications channels.

Topics Covered in This Section of the Tool

4. SSC Audiences

- Identifying core audiences closest to the SSC work
- Defining broader campus audiences
- Determining external stakeholders (beyond the colleges)
- Additional questions to consider:
 - Are key policymakers (gubernatorial staff, state agency staff, legislators and staff) identified and familiar/connected with the SSC?
 - Are education and workforce pipeline partners (K-12, universities, workforce development, etc.) identified and familiar/connected with the SSC?
 - Are other key audiences (major employers, regional and community organizations, etc.) identified and familiar with the SSC?

5. SSC Messaging and Communications Channels

- Creating clear messaging about the role/function of the SSC
- Establishing regular modes of communication
- Additional questions to consider:
 - How frequently does the SSC share updates with core audiences about the activities, upcoming events, and emerging opportunities for colleges?
 - Does the SSC document and disseminate the progress colleges are making in implementing reforms and the impact these efforts are having on student outcomes?
 - Does the SSC articulate the value proposition of reform efforts broadly and highlight the return on investment for specific reforms?

- Does the SSC deliver a regular “newsletter” to stakeholder groups that provides updates on SSC activities, but also highlights promising practices by colleges in state and emerging national resources?
- Does the SSC have a robust website that serves as a portal to all the resources, materials, and information the SSC offers to colleges?
- Has the SSC established a social media presence as an additional vehicle to communicate with the key audiences and convey the promising reform work of the colleges?

6. SSC Knowledge Development and Management

- Defining processes for gathering/disseminating emerging research
- Producing substantive publications alone and in partnership with other organizations on key SSC priorities
- Additional questions to consider:
 - Should the SSC explore the creation of a repository for colleges to share and access best practices?
 - Is the dissemination of new publications and emerging research with college practitioners a key component of the SSC’s overall communications plan?

CORE CAPACITY #3—COLLEGE AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Rationale Behind the Core Capacity

The impact of the SSCs is tightly tied to the level of commitment from the colleges in their states to embrace the mission of the Center and engage in the activities that are designed to help them individually improve the outcomes of their students. This section of the tool is designed to help SSC staff think through the aspects of their interaction with colleges and to evaluate how they can expand the breadth and depth of the engagement from their colleges.

Topics Covered in This Section of the Tool

7. College Engagement with the SSC

- Securing college commitment to creating/sustaining the SSC
- Growing the “coalition” of participating colleges

- Establishing a dashboard to track (and share) college engagement
- Additional questions to consider:
 - Is there a growing number of colleges that are actively engaged in the activities and opportunities offered by the SSC?
 - Is there periodic communication with college leadership about the value and extent of the services and support they are receiving from through SSC?

8. SSC Advisory Board and/or Steering Committee

- Establishing an advisory board/committee
- Defining membership, meeting cadence, and overall role
- Delineating the role this group in creating and updating the SSC strategic plan
- Additional questions to consider:
 - Is the role of the advisory board/committee clearly understood among the members?
 - Is the role of this group more obligatory, or does it have a more substantive role in the direction of the SSC?
 - Does the SSC staff need an informal group of advisors that serve as a timely sounding board for key decisions, messaging and communication, and myth busting?

9. SSC Approach to Convening Colleges

- Establishing an annual signature convening
- Creating a multiyear convening strategy (e.g., pathways institutes)
- Presenting to standing convenings of college affinity groups
- Additional questions to consider:
 - Does the SSC regularly sponsor regional convenings of colleges to help facilitate local dialogues?
 - Does the SSC have an approach to using webinars, podcasts, and other virtual tactics to help extend in-person convenings?

10. Broader Stakeholder Engagement and Partnerships of the SSC

- Serving on relevant statewide and regional workgroups/task forces
- Pursuing joint funding opportunities with partners
- Additional questions to consider:
 - Has the SSC staff presented at convenings of other organizations in the education and workforce space?
 - Does the SSC advisory committee include representation from external partners and other sectors?

CORE CAPACITY #4—DELIVERING CONTENT AND ASSISTANCE TO COLLEGES

Rationale behind the core capacity

The core of what SSCs do is to provide content-specific technical assistance and professional development to their colleges. SSCs are also increasingly providing individualized coaching support to their institutions to extend beyond the cross-college convenings. This section of the tool is designed to help SSC staff think through the dimension of the collective and individual support they provide colleges and to evaluate how they can adapt the assistance they provide over time as the colleges' needs evolve. It is worth noting that the primary focus of this entire tool (and guide) is about the capacity of the SSCs. This section is purposely shorter because most SSCs spend the majority of their time focused on their content strategy, which is wholly appropriate, but there is no need to replicate those dialogues here.

Topics Covered in This Section of the Tool

11. Programmatic Emphasis of the SSC

- Developing a shared framework for implementing promising models/practices
- Determining an approach to delivering/diffusing innovative practices statewide
- Establishing a method to differentiating the capacity/readiness of individual colleges
- Aligning technical assistance and support based on capacity/readiness
- Additional questions to consider:
 - Does the programmatic focus of the SSC adequately address equity issues?

- Does the framework guiding the content focus of the SSC capture the breadth of the challenges to student success that colleges are working to remedy?

12. SSC Coaching/Mentoring Strategy

- Establishing a strategy for providing individualized coaching to the colleges
- Creating an initiative to identify/develop coaching capacity from in-state college practitioners
- Aligning in-state coaching capacity with national expertise and technical assistance
- Additional questions to consider:
 - Does the SSC have a process in place to assess college readiness for coaching?
 - Does the coaching strategy of the SSC incorporate an equity mindset?
 - Does the SSC coaching strategy differentiate between subject matter experts and coaching that supports organizational change?
 - Does the SSC have a process in place to orient and train coaches?
 - Does the SSC have an approach for evaluating the impact of coaching in supporting college reforms?

CORE CAPACITY #5—EVALUATION AND IMPACT

Rationale Behind the Core Capacity

Given that SSCs are multiple steps removed from students at colleges, it is difficult to draw a direct link to the role of SSCs in effecting student success. However, it is possible to evaluate the efficacy of the supports SSCs provide to the colleges. This section of the tool is designed to help SSC staff think through how they should evaluate how well they are serving their colleges and how best to learn from their experience to improve what they do.

Topics Covered in This Section of the Tool

13. Formative Evaluation of the SSC

- Establishing a theory of change/action to guide activities and programming
- Implementing a process to regularly gather formal input and feedback from colleges
- Initiating a partnership with a third-party evaluator for the formative assessment

- Additional questions to consider:
 - Have mechanisms/processes been created to garner informal feedback to inform future activities from trusted advisors?
 - Is the SSC theory of change/action used as rubric to communicate with core audiences about accomplishments and challenges encountered?

14. Summative Evaluation of the SSC

- Launching a formal summative assessment of the SSC
- Initiating a partnership with a third-party evaluator for the summative assessment
- Integrating assessment findings in revisions to the SSC strategic direction
- Additional questions to consider:
 - Has a plan been created to regularly communicate the results of summative assessments and lessons to core audiences?
 - Has a plan been created to communicate the results of the summative assessment and lessons to core audiences?

15. College Progress, Assessment, and Documentation

- Devising plans for assessing overall college progress in improving student outcomes
- Developing a plan for generally assessing colleges' progress in implementing reforms
- Defining a process for collecting data to document colleges' implementation of pathways
- Utilizing institutional data to inform strategic priorities
- Additional questions to consider:
 - Has the SSC considered how tools from JFF, Research for Action, and others might help with the development of a process for monitoring college progress?
 - Has the SSC considered the role of institutional assessments (e.g., the Guided Pathways Scale of Adoption Assessment) in supporting efforts to demonstrate change?

CORE CAPACITY #6—FUND DEVELOPMENT

Rationale Behind the Core Capacity

It goes without saying that the impact of the SSCs is directly connected to the resources available to create professional development and technical assistance opportunities for their colleges. This section of the tool is designed to help SSC staff think through the aspects of their interaction with potential funders, and to evaluate how they can deepen relationships with existing funding partners as well as diversify the sources of the financial support.

Topics Covered in This Section of the Tool

16. Defining SSC Funding Needs

- Setting a process for regularly reviewing funding needs
- Delineating the resources needed to operate the Center over the near and long terms
- Outlining the resources needed to support the programmatic work
- Additional questions to consider:
 - Does the SSC staff periodically interact with the core constituents about the resource needs and gaps between current activities and what the colleges may need in the future?

17. Targeting SSC Funding Options

- Conducting research into potential national, state, or regional philanthropic partners
- Exploring the potential for colleges to provide financial support
- Investigating potential state funding opportunities that align with the Center strategy
- Probing potential federal funding opportunities that align with the Center strategy
- Additional questions to consider:
 - Has the SSC considered exploring joint fundraising efforts with other entities? Examples may include other state organizations, national intermediaries, or other SSCs.
 - Does the SSC staff periodically review the recent grants to other organizations with similar missions as the SSC (through foundations public listings)?

18. Developing SSC-Funder Relationships

- Arranging periodic meetings with existing funders to update them on the work
- Engaging program staff with possible new funders to establish a connection and educate them about the work of the SSC
- Additional questions to consider:
 - Is the SSC leadership connecting with funders at times when they are not seeking new funds to simply deepen relationships?
 - What kind of updates do funders receive beyond regular grant reports?
 - Are existing or new funders invited to prominent convenings to see the SSC in action?
 - Drawing on materials from grant reports, could the SSC create an annual report of the activities of the SSC?

CORE CAPACITY #7—OPERATIONS

Rationale Behind the Core Capacity

While the main focus of the SSC staff is rightly on the supports they provide to the colleges, the effectiveness of the SSCs is quite often determined by how well the SSC and its staff operate organizationally. This section of the tool is designed to help SSC staff think through the dimension of the Center's operations and how, as a small team, they might function more efficiently and effectively to help maximize the quality of support they provide to their colleges.

Topics Covered in this Section of the Tool

19. SSC Staff Capacity

- Determining adequate staffing to manage the workload and implement the strategic plan
- Creating contingency plans to keep the work moving in the event of key staff transition
- Exploring opportunities to increase efficiency through various technology or partnerships
- Additional questions to consider:
 - Does the SSC have an annual process in place to review staff capacity and skill sets needed to meet the demands of the work?

- Can the SSC use consultants to augment the full-time staff capacity in targeted areas?
- Does the SSC leadership have the sufficient standing necessary with the host organization leadership and senior college leadership to move the work?

20. SSC Finances

- Establishing a transparent budget
- Establishing a transparent audit process
- Additional questions to consider:
 - Does the SSC staff have a regular cadence for reviewing Center expenditures with the host organization leadership?
 - Does the SSC have a clear process in place for timely submission of funder reports?
 - Does the administrative support from the host organization have a process to manage and report on SSC finances?