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The New Learning Compact:

A Systemic Approach to a Systemic Problem

By Bret Eynon, Randall Bass, Jonathan Iuzzini, and Laura M. Gambino



Bret Eynon recently retired from LaGuardia Community College (City University of New York), where he served as Associate Provost and taught history to an extraordinarily diverse body of students. Leading college-wide change initiatives related to learning, technology, advisement, assessment, and strategic planning, Eynon helped LaGuardia double its graduation rate in five years. Honored as a Distinguished Humanities Educator by the Community College Humanities Association, Eynon now serves as a Senior Fellow at Georgetown University and as Strategic Teaching and Learning Coach at Achieving the Dream.



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Laura M. Gambino is a Vice President for the New England Commission of Higher Education, where her work focuses on helping institutions and the commission use data and conduct assessment for institutional learning and improvement. Prior to 2018, Gambino was Associate Dean for Assessment and Technology and Professor of Information Technology at Guttman Community College (City University of New York) and a Visiting Scholar at the Community College Research Center, Teacher's College, Columbia University.

In Short

- To meet looming challenges, higher education must focus more strategically on learning— student learning, faculty and staff learning (professional learning), and institutional development as adaptive learning organizations.
- Research has demonstrated the value of evidence-based pedagogies and professional learning “done well” in advancing learning-centered adaptive change. Yet higher education has not focused the systemic attention needed to scale these approaches.
- The New Learning Compact (NLC) Framework identifies evidence-based strategies to address this problem, offering design principles for professional learning that is systemic, coconstructed, equity-focused, and personally empowering for students and educators.
- The NLC authors and Achieving the Dream (ATD) guided community colleges and historically Black colleges and universities in field testing the NLC Framework and related resources. Using NLC and ATD tools, campus teams developed and implemented strategic professional learning action keyed to institution-wide priority needs.
- Preliminary results are encouraging, demonstrating changes in professional learning strategies and the institutional adoption of more systemic approaches to learning, equity and change.

Most of us are unprepared to teach. We were never taught how. . . . Even worse, most of us know, deep down, that many of the teaching practices we have inherited contribute to inequality. . . . (Davidson & Eversley, 2021, para. 2)

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND STRATEGIC CHANGE

Higher education is on the cusp of a crisis. Still recovering from COVID-19, colleges and universities face steep new challenges. Declining enrollments, disruptive delivery options, and new populations of students underscore an urgent need for agile, adaptive colleges, focused on student engagement, learning, and retention (Grawe, 2021). In this context, scaling evidence-based pedagogy and practice is vital.

Professional development, or professional learning, can effectively engage faculty with essential pedagogies and help higher education meet its challenges. Yet centers for teaching and learning and broader professional learning work remains undervalued, underutilized, and

underfunded. And campus professional development programming is still too often haphazard, one-off workshops.

Sidebar 1: Professional Learning

Professional Learning: We use “professional learning” to reframe what is traditionally labeled faculty development or professional development. Our approach broadly includes all educators: faculty (full-time and contingent), advisors, and other student support staff needed to address the whole student and effectively scale transformative change.

While research has generated abundant insight into effective professional learning methods, the field continues to suffer from a lack of systemic approaches. In response, a group of national professional learning leaders recently developed a framework that links proven professional learning methods to the strategic priorities of higher education institutions. This article describes the New Learning Compact Framework and an initial set of field tests, concluding with ways that higher education can leverage the power of professional learning.

A SYSTEMIC PROBLEM

Before outlining our framework for high-impact professional learning, it is worth briefly stepping back to consider the systemic nature of the problem. Despite the best efforts of some educators and researchers, higher education as a field has for many decades paid too little attention to learning: not only student learning, but also faculty and staff learning and systemic approaches to organizational learning. Historically, higher education has neither recognized nor leveraged the connections among learning at all these levels. This oversight has consequences, significantly inhibiting higher education's capacity for effective adaptation and ongoing change.

This pattern of neglect is deeply rooted and spans all sectors of the enterprise. Trained in graduate programs focused on scholarship, most faculty receive little preparation around effective pedagogies. Educational reform initiatives, both national and campus-driven, have until recently paid insufficient attention to teaching and learning, and have failed to engage frontline educators. Professional learning remains underdeveloped, disconnected from meaningful outcomes assessment and strategic institutional priorities.

"An odd feature of the public policy discussion of higher education is the near absence of attention to the quality of teaching," wrote Sandy Baum and Michael McPherson, who led the Commission on Undergraduate Education for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

In higher education, questions about what and how much students are learning and how their learning is related to the quality of instruction they receive tend to take a back seat. Instead, questions about college admissions, pricing and cost, debt, and financial returns dominate the news and policy discussion. (Baum & McPherson, 2019, p. 5)

Research shows that quality teaching, guided by evidence-based pedagogies, can address equity and improve retention and student learning outcomes (Brown & Kurzweil, 2018). And we now have good evidence that well-designed professional learning makes a critical difference in teaching and learning improvement (Condon et. al, 2016). Yet higher education as a field has

not responded strategically to the insights generated by this research.

The failure to systemically prioritize learning hobbles higher education's ability to meet the emergent needs of students and educators, and to adapt to the shifting demographic, economic, and technological landscape. If higher education does not deploy professional learning to advance change and engage all students, it will increasingly lose ground.

Sidebar 2: The Power of Professional Learning "Done Well"

New research has revealed the ways that professional learning, done well, advances teaching practice and deepens student learning. *Faculty Development and Student Learning: Assessing the Connections* examined professional learning programs that engaged faculty with evidence-based practices such as writing across the curriculum (Condon et al., 2016). The authors asked whether these programs helped faculty learn targeted methods and change their practice. Moreover, they examined whether related changes in faculty practice advanced student learning.

Extensive examination of the evidence produced a clear conclusion: "Well designed faculty development definitely yields great value," prompting "changes in teaching practices that generate corresponding changes in student learning, as demonstrated in actual student work products" (Condon et al., 2016, pp. 111-112).

Studies at Purdue, Creighton, LaGuardia Community College and elsewhere have affirmed this finding, concluding that professional learning, done well, supports educators as they deepen teaching quality and foster improvements in equity and student success (Eynon & Iuzzini, 2020). A Bronx Community College study concludes: "*The critical implication is that intensive professional development is worth the investment of money and time, as it helps an institution attain the goals of not only improving retention and graduation, but also deepening students' learning and improving their long-term professional and personal success*" (Getman-Eraso & Culkin, 2018, p. 44).

THE NEW LEARNING COMPACT: PROFESSIONAL LEARNING “DONE WELL”

Research has revealed the power of professional learning “done well” to advance educational change. The phrase “done well” is critical. High-impact practices, such as undergraduate research, build student learning *only* when “done well” (Kuh et al., 2017, pp. 8–16). The same holds true for professional learning. It benefits educators and students when “done well.” But what does “done well” look like?

In 2019, a group came together to identify research-based design principles for professional learning “done well.” The New Learning Compact (NLC) group included Isis Artze-Vega (Valencia College), Mary Deane Sorcinelli (University of Massachusetts), Peter Felten (Elon University), Adrianna Kezar (University of Southern California), José Moreno (California State University, Long Beach), and this article’s authors. Drawing on the literature and decades of experience, NLC developed a framework for high-impact professional learning.

Reviewing the research on proven professional learning methods, the NLC group found a common thread: the central importance of co-construction, of engaging faculty as partners in an inquiry-driven change process. Co-construction enhances motivation and effectiveness by empowering faculty voice and valuing faculty expertise as teachers and learners. Linking professional learning to classroom practice and building faculty skills as reflective practitioners can engage the experiential capital of an increasingly diverse professoriate. And these practices model the co-constructive processes at the heart of student-facing, culturally responsive teaching. “As faculty co-construct their own learning processes,” Moreno (2021) explained, “intentional opportunities can be created for sharing of instructional practices that engage student contexts.” Improving the quality of teaching, and sustaining that change, entails new orientations to power, respect, inclusion, and community.

The NLC group found it equally critical to approach professional learning from a systems perspective, one that aims to put professional learning at the core of institutional policy and practice. Such an approach includes attention to

faculty hiring and promotion, generating a rewards system that values teaching and professional learning as well as scholarship. It speaks to the importance of co-curricular learning and recognizes the responsibilities of systems actors, such as disciplinary organizations and education funders. It centers the integration of assessment with professional learning to effectively “close the loop,” informing the intentional deployment of professional learning as a central element of strategic change initiatives. Embedding co-constructed professional learning methods within an agile, systems-based approach to institutional change creates the continuous improvement model needed to ensure that higher education can advance equity-focused change and meet its pressing challenges.

Weaving these insights into an accessible framework, the NLC group published a guide to professional learning “done well.” *The New Learning Compact: A Framework for Professional Learning and Educational Change* (Bass et al., 2019) identifies evidence-based design principles that are systemic, co-constructed, equity-focused, and personally empowering for educators and students. These principles fall into four dimensions:

- *Individual*: How do effective professional learning programs engage educators as individual practitioners? What kinds of approaches help educators advance student learning as they consider their individual practice as one component of a cohesive student learning experience?
- *Community*: How can professional learning bring educators into community, co-constructing student learning opportunities? What are the principles for designing such professional communities?
- *Institutional*: Professional learning cannot succeed if it is not rooted in systematic institutional support. What institutional policies and practices are needed to sustain high-impact professional learning?
- *Ecosystem*: Colleges are linked to other higher education actors: state systems, accreditors, national success movements, and so on. How can campuses best engage these groups to advance high-impact professional learning? In turn, how can funders, disciplinary associations, and other stakeholders work more effectively to advance learning, teaching, and change?

The Individual and Community dimensions of the framework speak to co-construction and effective professional learning methodology. Illuminating systemic approaches, the Institutional and Ecosystem dimensions address the structural context needed for transformative professional and organizational learning.

Each dimension spotlights core principles to guide professional learning design and strategy (Figure 1). Building on concise definitions of its principles, the NLC framework offers inquiry questions, which are prompts for campus self-assessment and planning. For the “leverage reward systems” principle, for example, inquiry questions include: “How is meaningful participation in professional learning recognized, encouraged, and supported on your campus? What internal and external resources do you apply to this goal? Do your hiring, promotion, and tenure structures recognize diverse participants’ meaningful engagement? What campus stakeholders (faculty governance, unions, chairs) could be engaged to systematically advance such policies?”

The NLC group designed the framework to inform campus efforts to strengthen professional learning. The publication of the framework opened the way for elaboration and field-testing.

EXTENDING AND TESTING THE FRAMEWORK

In 2020, Eynon and Iuzzini integrated the NLC framework into a new resource that was designed to anchor teaching and learning-focused supports for Achieving the Dream (ATD)’s national network of three hundred institutions—community colleges, technical colleges, and Tribal Colleges. The ATD *Teaching & Learning Toolkit* (Eynon & Iuzzini, 2020) expanded on the NLC framework in key ways.

First, the toolkit explicitly links professional learning to student-facing educational practices that build equity, learning, and success. It spotlights evidence-based pedagogies (e.g., active learning and culturally responsive teaching) and holistic student supports. It connects these practices with the high-impact professional learning needed to effectively engage educators in integrating them at scale. The connection helps institutions envision the systemic effort needed to advance transformative change, investing and planning for scale and sustainability.

Second, where the NLC framework is primarily conceptual, the toolkit offers practical resources. It offers annotated links to research and web-based resources, an assemblage of campus case studies,

FIGURE 1. DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR HIGH-IMPACT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PRACTICE

<p>Individual</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Respect Educators’ Knowledge ▪ Connect with Practice ▪ Engage Inquiry and Reflection ▪ Protect Participant Time 	<p>Community</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Create Supportive Professional Communities ▪ Learn from and with Students ▪ Involve All Sectors of the Professoriate ▪ Bridge Boundaries
<p>Institutional</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Integrate Changes in Pedagogy, Curriculum, and Assessment ▪ Connect Professional Development with Strategic Priorities ▪ Leverage Reward Systems ▪ Build a Learning Culture 	<p>Ecosystem</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Build Partnerships & Exchange ▪ Capitalize on Strategic Messaging ▪ Leverage External Funding ▪ Engage Internal and External Stakeholders

and worksheets to help campus teams strengthen professional learning and build institutional capacity for equity-focused change.

The toolkit introduced the NLC strategies for high-impact professional learning to a broader audience—more than 8,000 visitors hit the ATD toolkit’s download page in its first 15 months—and energized a proof-of-concept process. In fall 2020, NLC and ATD began field-testing the framework and toolkit in sustained virtual seminars with 14 community colleges and historically Black colleges and universities. Each campus convened a cross-functional team of four to six educators: faculty, administrators, and professional learning leaders. In monthly seminars, teams examined the resources of the framework and toolkit. Through the following structured activities, teams applied systems thinking to campus goals and challenges:

- *Self-assessment*: Building on the toolkit’s worksheets to examine data and engage in guided self-assessment, teams considered equity and student learning data, current institutional initiatives, and the quality of campus professional learning practice.
- *Evidence-based planning*: Identifying promising pedagogies and student support processes, teams developed plans for effectively engaging educators in adapting and testing these approaches with students.
- *Designing professional learning*: Using the principles of the NLC framework, teams considered ways that these targeted efforts could strengthen professional learning design and advance transformative institutional practices.

Working collaboratively, teams drew on the toolkit and their own expertise to discuss shared issues, identify possible solutions, and shape ideas into team-based strategic action plans.

“CHANGE IS POSSIBLE”

What impact have we observed? Centering professional learning in institutional culture and structure is a long-term process. While it is too early for dramatic campus change, we have begun gathering preliminary quantitative and qualitative evidence related to the impact of active, team-based

engagement with these conceptual and practical resources.

Anonymous feedback gathered from participants in our 2020–2021 programs suggests they found their engagement highly productive. In a spring 2021 survey ($N=32$), more than 90 percent rated the following features as valuable or highly valuable:

- the NLC framework and its best practice principles for high-impact professional learning;
- research on evidence-based pedagogies and the role of professional learning in advancing learning, teaching, and student success;
- the campus self-assessment process;
- the scaffolded process of developing a campus professional learning action plan; and
- the synchronous exchange with participants from other campuses.

Participants specified the impact on practice: 93 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the seminar helped them (a) focus on deepening professional learning design and (b) develop strategies for strengthening institutional support for professional learning. As one anonymous participant wrote:

We learned how vital it is to include the entire campus ecosystem in the planning and implementation process. Even as we were going through the program, we were able to see our efforts to engage faculty, administrators, students, and student services re-shape our vision for professional learning on our campus. Also, having so much research on the value of professional learning and the importance of high impact practices gathered in one place made the conversations with campus decision-makers much more productive!

The spring 2021 survey also confirmed teams’ intent to pursue actions, such as (a) making the case for institutional investment in professional learning, (b) redesigning structures and processes of professional learning programs, and (c) sharing proposals with institutional leadership.

“My most important takeaway,” wrote one anonymous participant, “is that professional learning needs to be part of the university’s

strategic plan.” Another participant wrote, “I learned from this program—from the national coaches, from the toolkit, and from working with other colleagues—that change is possible. That you can make a difference for your institution.”

“NOT JUST ANOTHER INITIATIVE”

Recent evidence adds new insight. Fall 2021 interviews with teams from five colleges—Miami Dade College (MDC), Jackson State University (JSU), Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC), Santa Fe College (SFC), and Westchester Community College (WCC)—uncovered ways they have begun to enact their plans to advance systemic and co-constructed professional learning.

All five campuses spotlighted ways their seminar engagement was shaping significant work. Whereas earlier feedback was anonymous, these interviews with professional learning leaders reflect their diverse campus realities and their ways of adapting the framework to meet local needs.

Across campuses, all teams drew on seminar-based learning to convince stakeholders to connect professional learning with institutional priorities. Some campus teams needed to start by laying institutional groundwork. The SFC team employed research and new language offered by the toolkit as they successfully lobbied their college president and faculty stakeholders to put professional learning at the core of their 5-year, campus-wide Quality Enhancement Plan. JSU prioritized creation of a Center for Teaching and Learning in the university’s strategic plan. “That’s really big,” explains JSU’s Candis Pizzetta. “It says this is not something we’re doing off to the side.”

At NWTC, which had recently launched a center, the team collaborated with faculty and administrators to pilot a high-impact professional learning process designed to strengthen college-wide assessment and respond to accreditors while addressing a priority “strategic direction” goal to better prepare students for rewarding and family-sustaining careers. “What we learned from the seminar gave us a framework for aligning and effectively addressing these opportunities,” explains NWTC’s Trista Loritz.

Teams made the case on their campuses for strategic and sustained institutional investment, including dedicated space and staff. MDC and SFC teams are considering ways to leverage faculty and staff reward systems to incentivize broad engagement. The WCC team connected their work with COVID adaptation and the college’s Guided Pathways funding. NWTC built substantial resources for professional learning into a successful federal Title III funding proposal; JSU and SFC are developing similar proposals.

Systemic approaches helped teams articulate a compelling professional learning vision. “Our work got broader and deeper,” notes MDC’s Margaret Shippey. Michele Campagna says, while the WCC faculty development advisory committee previously had difficulty figuring out its goals, in recent months they have developed a stronger sense of purpose and direction: “Now things are more crystallized, and the faculty on the committee are more invested.”

Teams also rethought their professional learning design with co-construction-related core principles in mind. The WCC team sought to deepen the effectiveness of its existing center by building an inclusive community and engaging participants in leadership and design; they fanned out to meet with departments and groups of full-time and part-time faculty. “We’re saying to the adjuncts, ‘What do you need?’” says WCC’s Kamil Hamoui. At SFC, when faculty saw professional learning that valued them and their work with students, the conversation changed. “We found much more support for professional development than we anticipated,” notes SFC’s Dave Tegeder.

Faculty in NWTC’s pilot program were similarly enthusiastic. “I was amazed at the strong positive feedback,” says NWTC’s Myke Schmitt, citing collaborative planning as key. Their program helped faculty connect change in their own classroom practice with the needs of students and NWTC’s larger strategic efforts, explains Anne Kamps. “You could see the light bulbs going on.”

The team at WCC created an action research program where faculty generate and test an intervention, engaging students in its evaluation. Reflecting the framework’s emphasis on sustained, multilayered inquiry, Hamoui describes how this

process represents progress toward adaptive organizational learning.

With everything we're putting into play, it's just the very beginning. How will it work out? Will it work as we've envisioned it? We won't know until we do it. We'll try things, gather the data, and build from there. This is a long-term process.

While there is still more work to be done, all teams reported the process had deepened and energized their work. "This isn't just another initiative," explains SFC's Stefanie Waschull. "It's more of a new direction or a new day."

ADVANCING LEARNING AND ADAPTIVE CHANGE

Our cumulative experience working with campuses validates an approach that braids three strands of emphasis: (a) attention to expanding evidence-based pedagogies (quality teaching), (b) design of high-impact professional development, and (c) a focus on systems change. In a community learning context, where expertise and inquiry are valued, these emphases become crucially reinforcing and can serve as a context for integrating "new practices" in service of evergreen goals of institutional success (graduation rates, retention rates, improved student learning, etc.).

Based on our observations, we highlight, by way of conclusion, three underappreciated principles of practice that can help campus leaders make professional learning a force for adaptive change:

- *Focus on Co-construction:* We found that a co-constructed approach is crucial to honor the expertise of all educators, build collaboration based on common goals, and help balance faculty autonomy with community responsibility. Valuing co-construction can also ensure that attention to evidence-based pedagogies aligns with inclusive teaching practices, empowering educators to experiment and center quality and equity in their work. With this approach, professional learning communities become expressions of "epistemic justice," honoring knowledge from all sources and modeling, experientially

and institutionally, the inclusive approaches that transform the classroom.

- *Think Systemically and Plan Strategically:* We observed that placing the work of professional learning leaders in a systems context helps them connect to institutional priorities. When institutional leaders understand the strategic potential of professional learning, they are more likely to invest resources and make the policy changes needed to deepen its impact. Scaffolding change—starting with low-hanging fruit while aiming for transformation—builds momentum and refocuses institutional culture.
- *Operationalize a More Nuanced View of Educators' Motivation:* When professional learning aligns with strategic priorities and reflects co-constructed design, educators show compelling energy and personal engagement. At least three kinds of motivation are evident: (a) *extrinsic educator motivation*, or what we typically think of as faculty rewards, pay equity, and release time; (b) *intrinsic educator motivation*, such as setting an ethical imperative for student success and wedding the culture of peer learning to a common goal; and (c) *motivation to be part of larger institutional "rethinking."* We saw that the opportunity to shape institutional transformation is a powerful motivator for many educators, and we encourage new designs that integrate this insight. Further, a critical effect of putting professional learning in a systems frame is the reconnection of educators—to each other and to their institutions.

The need for dynamic, inclusive, and effective higher education has never been greater. To become more adaptive and meet its challenges, higher education must make systemic investments in professional learning for all educators and, in so doing, put student, faculty, and institutional learning at its core. ☐

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