Change Leadership Toolkit

Case Studies:
Forsyth Technical Community College

An Addendum to the

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

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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/**.

Redesigning the Onboarding Experience to Promote Student Success and Close Racial Equity Gaps
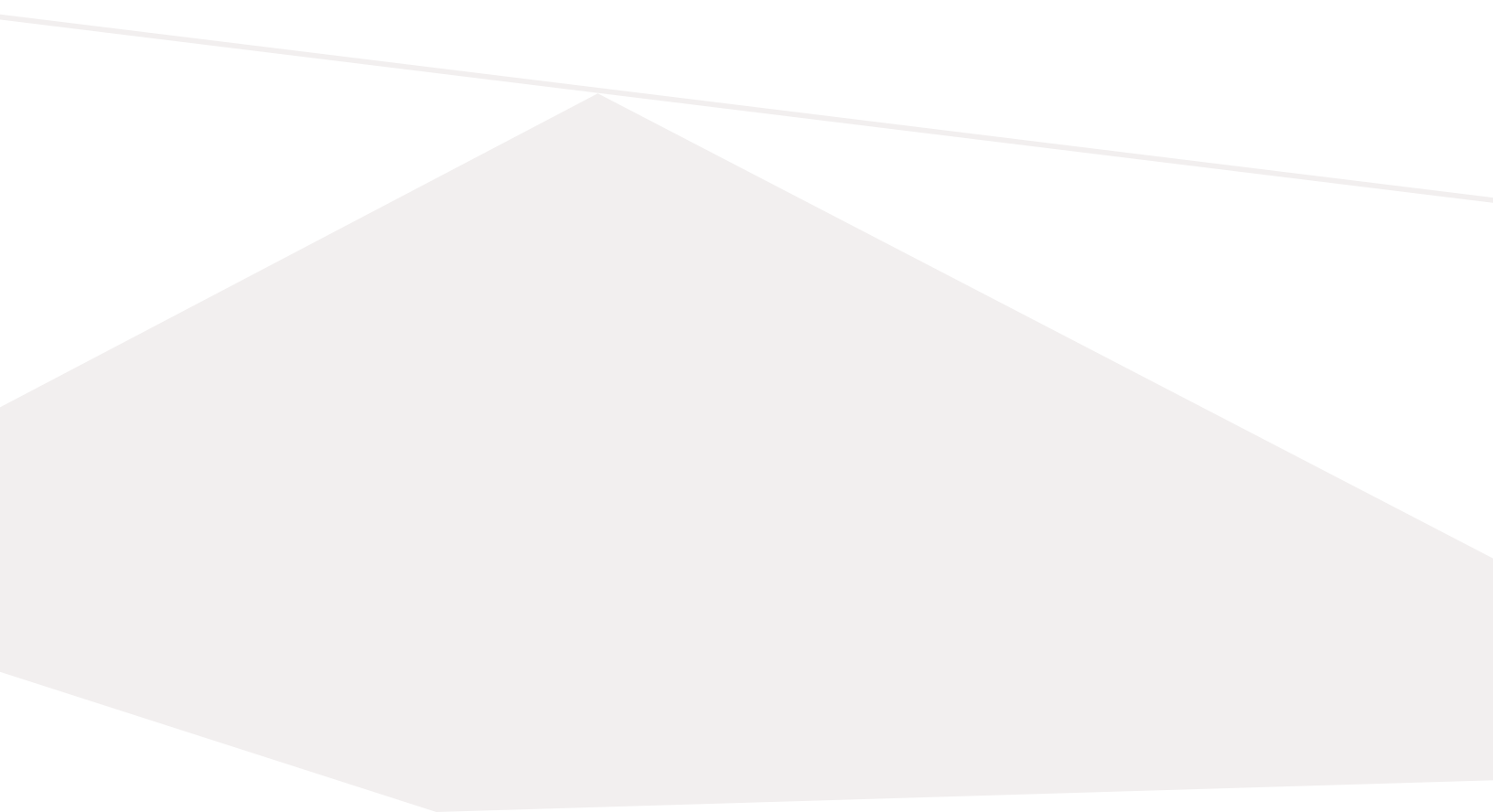
About the Institution

Forsyth Technical Community College (Forsyth Tech) is a community college located in and around Winston-Salem, North Carolina that offers more than 175 programs through both online and in-person programs. Founded in 1960 as the Winston-Salem/Forsyth Country Industrial Education Center, today Forsyth Tech serves over 13,000 students in the local area. As of Fall 2023, 44% of students identified as White, 19% as Hispanic, 22% as Black, 2% as Asian, and 3% as multriacial, while the remaining 10% of students had no data recorded on their racial or ethnic background. In early 2024, Forsyth Tech was recognized as a Leader College by Achieving the Dream (ATD) for its work to close achievement gaps between White students and students of color.

CASE STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

- **Leader Role(s) and Agency:** Janet Spriggs, president of Forsyth Technical Community College
- **Goals of Change:** Improve retention and transfer rates and close racial equity gaps through the Student Experience of Onboarding Project
- **Level/Scope of Change:** Institution-wide
- **Institutional Type:** Community College
- **Moves Highlighted:**
  - Create Vision, Expectations and Pacing
  - Sensemake and Learn
  - Develop Strategy and Resources
  - Lead People and Teams
  - Foster DEI
  - Communicate Effectively
  - Engage in Advocacy and Navigate Politics
- **Context:**
  - Institution type
  - Culture
- **Levers:**
  - Campus (system, state) strategic plan(s), including mission, master plan, diversity plan, and other plans
  - Affiliations with national associations and organizations

Setting the Stage: About the Project

Janet Spriggs became president at Forsyth Tech Community College (Forsyth Tech) in January 2019. Janet immediately began to work with stakeholders around campus to better understand the low success rates of Forsyth Tech students. Three year completion rates were well below the national average at 19%, and racial equity gaps were significant, with only 12% of Hispanic/Latino students and 6% of Black students completing in the same time frame. Working with the Board, external partners such as Aspen Institute and Achieving the Dream, and faculty and staff leaders from across campus, Janet determined that significant changes to the student onboarding, enrollment and advising processes were critical for improving student success. This Case Study describes how Janet and her team leveraged the strategic planning process to redesign student advising and support services at Forsyth Tech through the 'Student Experience of Onboarding' Project. Ultimately, overall completion rates improved to 31%, with gaps for Black students decreasing by 15 percentage points and Hispanic/Latino students now completing at higher rates than White students.

Change Leader Moves

Overview of Leader Moves

Janet used a variety of Leader Moves to help implement the Student Experience of Onboarding Project. First, she worked to develop a shared vision around why it was important to change the onboarding process (*Create Vision, Expectations, and Pacing*). She shared data on current student success rates with faculty and staff across campus and compared those numbers with national trends. She also shared examples of best practices from community colleges where success rateswere much higher and racial equity gaps were minimal or nonexistent (*Sensemake and Learn*). Next, Janet worked with faculty and staff across campus to create a new strategic plan for Forsyth Tech that included key changes to student support services, including onboarding (*Develop Strategy and Resources*). Once the strategy was developed, Janet noted that she was the "Chief Storyteller" and shared this new vision and strategy with every department and division on campus (*Communicate Effectively*). Finally, Janet intentionally partnered with long-time, well-respected colleagues at Forsyth Tech on the project and leveraged the support she had from the Board to forestall resistance and promote buy-in (*Engage in Advocacy and Navigate Politics*).

Create Visions, Expectations, and Pacing

When Janet began her work to improve student success and close racial equity gaps, she knew that the campus needed a shared understanding of what the current challenges were, as well as where they wanted to go in the future. Previously, most campus stakeholders did not have an understanding that racial equity gaps existed at Forsyth Tech, and therefore the closing of such gaps was not a campus goal. Janet worked with

groups of faculty and staff across campus to define a vision for the college that was grounded in equity and student success. She connected this new vision to the college's mission. As a community college, Forsyth Tech has a mission to meet students where they are and take all applicants; however, the way that student support services were structured did not align with that notion of meeting students where they are. There were only two full-time and three part-time advisors who did not operate on a case management model and did not have a practice or policy of reaching out proactively to students to help them with challenges to enrollment and registration. As a result, very few students were persisting and completing, and a narrative had developed on campuses that students just were not "college-ready." Janet worked with campus stakeholders to flip this narrative so that instead faculty and staff could focus on being a "student-ready college." She used Sensemake and Learn Moves, described in detail in the next section, to help clarify this vision.

Sensemake and Learn

Janet realized that Forsyth Tech did not have a culture of using data to make decisions, nor did they have capacity to collect, analyze, interpret and use data effectively. She took a number of steps to simultaneously share important student outcome data with faculty and staff and build data capacity on campus. First, she held workshops for all faculty and staff to share data on student persistence and completion rates and racial equity gaps to help "build the 'why'" behind their shared vision. By having a clear sense of how low current completion rates were — and how they stacked up against peers across the country — she was able to instill a sense of commitment and urgency to make change.

At the same time, Janet worked to build capacity for data collection and tracking efforts. She built out the Institutional Research and Institutional Effectiveness teams, hired a new data analyst, and combined IT functions with Institutional Effectiveness. Additionally, Janet and her leadership team worked with a data coach from Achieving the Dream to learn how to use data and hold regular data summits to keep information flowing. Janet then conducted surveys and held focus groups that included faculty, staff, students, alumni, community members, K-12 system leaders and board members to generate ideas for how to tackle these challenges. The results of these surveys and focus groups helped develop the strategy for the Student Experience of Onboarding Project. We discuss these Strategy Moves in the next section.

Develop Strategy and Resources; Lead People and Teams

As Janet helped the Forsyth Tech team clarify their vision and develop their data capacity, they also began to develop a strategy for redesigning the student onboarding experience. The campus was also undergoing a strategic planning process during this time. Janet was able to leverage that strategic plan and embed changes to the onboarding and advising experience into the plan. A key part of the strategy was breaking down silos between departments and divisions. Janet leveraged her connections with Achieving the Dream and the Aspen Institute to provide examples of how to break down silos and create a more holistic student support system. Part of this strategy involved creating a team to support it. Janet hired a new Vice President for Student Success Services (VPSSS) to lead the project and build an Action Team of faculty and staff to develop the strategy. The VPSSS

was an internal hire, someone who had worked at Forsyth Tech for a long time and had also been a student there. Over the next eight months, the Action Team developed a new holistic support services model, which included hiring more advisors and developing a case-based model where advisors stayed with the same students and proactively reached out to support them.

Foster DEI

This project centered on changing campus systems and structures to close equity gaps for Black and Latino students at Forsyth Tech. Janet noted that she applied equity-minded principles to her leadership of the change process, always questioning how the institution could be changed to better serve students rather than looking for ways to change students. She noted in particular how she and her team examined specific policies and procedures on campus with an equity-minded lens and that many had "structural racism built in." For example, while the college itself was open access, several of the programs had selective admissions policies. These programs tended to be those with the highest labor market outcomes, such as nursing, and they also had disproportionately low numbers of racially-minoritized and low-income students. The team revamped these policies, and Janet also hired the college's first senior-level diversity officer to ensure that equity-related issues would continue to receive attention at the senior level.

Communicate Effectively

Janet used Communication Moves to ensure that all stakeholders across campus had accurate information about the new approach to onboarding and advising. She shared regular email messages from the president with the entire college; regularly updated the college's intranet page with information on the project; sent out a weekly newsletter called 'Connections' that also contained information about the project; spoke about the project at all-campus events such as convocation; and made in-person visits and presentations to department meetings, and Faculty and Staff Senate meetings. She also held one more round of focus groups across campus to get feedback on the plan. Specifically, she framed her messaging in a way that was not negative or blaming faculty and staff for poor completion rates. Instead, she spoke about "seasons of change" at Forsyth Tech over its 60-year history and how this project represented a "new season" of taking responsibility for student success and preparing students for "family-sustaining careers not just minimum wage jobs."

Engage in Advocacy and Navigate Politics

Janet also used Moves in the Navigate Politics category to build buy-in for the project. She had the Board's support as a new president and two-time Aspen Fellow, which helped give her legitimacy and enabled her to move the project forward quickly. She also intentionally built relationships across campus and engaged faculty and staff all throughout the process so that they felt included and that their voices were heard.

Additionally, she partnered with the newly appointed Vice President of Student Success Services and empowered her to take a strong lead on the project. As we described above, the person who was hired in this new VPSSS role had been at Forsyth Tech for many years and had strong institutional knowledge and deep relationships across the college, yet also was a major champion and supporter of the new project. Janet noted that she helped "temper my sense of urgency a little" and would help "pull me down when I get too up in the clouds and I'm moving too fast and make sure I'm not moving faster than the organization can go." This partnership helped Janet navigate campus politics and "prevent revolt" as the project took off.
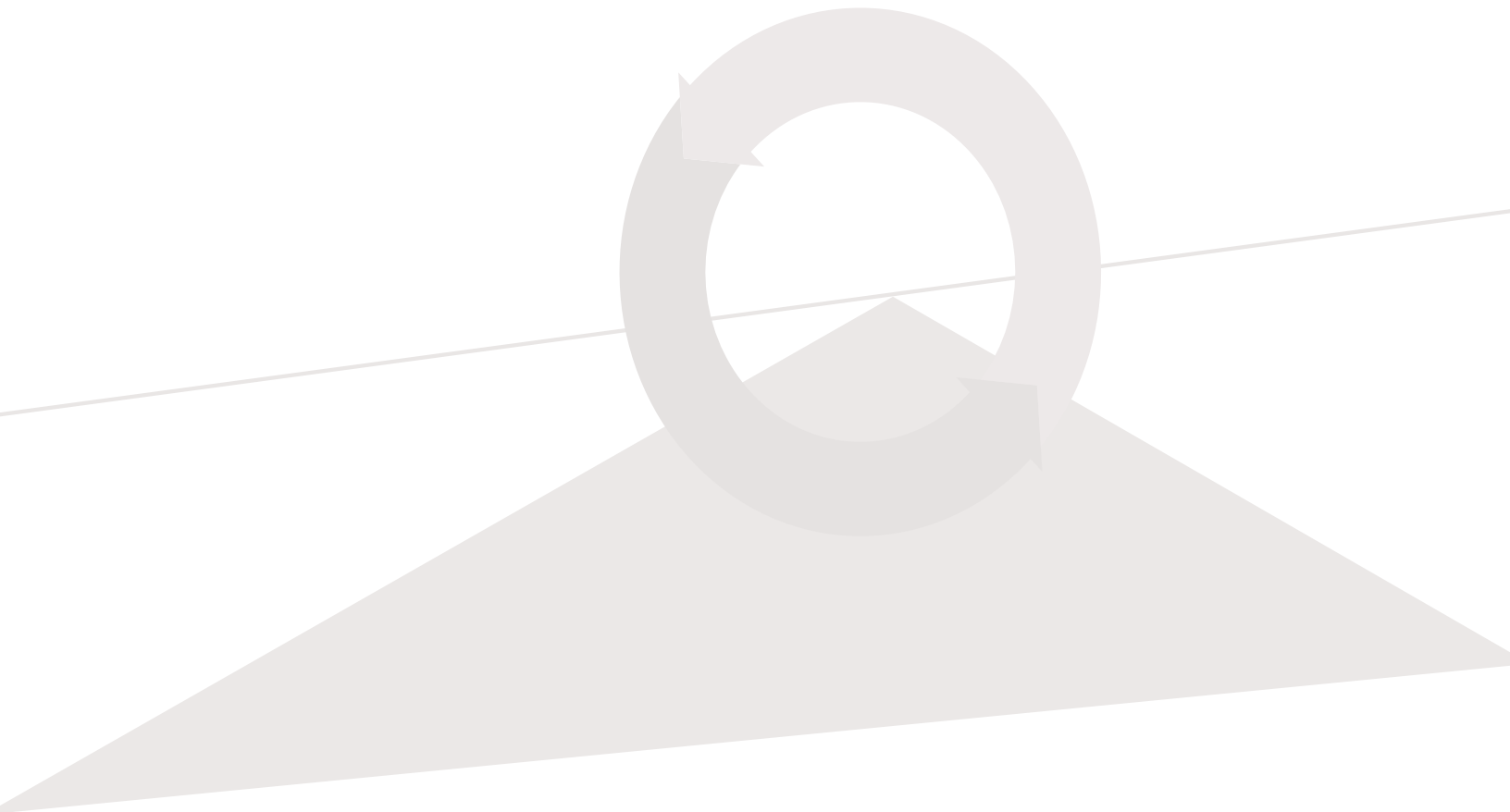
Focus On: Leadership Context

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. At Forsyth Tech, important elements of Leadership Context included *institutional type* and *culture*. In terms of *institutional type*, Janet described how she used Forsyth Tech's mission as a community college to build the project's "why," or rationale. Because their mission involved serving all students and ensuring students from any background could succeed — and because most of the faculty and staff felt a deep personal connection to that mission — Janet intentionally tied the project's vision and strategy to this community college mission (Vision and Strategy Moves).

Another aspect of context that Janet had to consider was the campus culture. Because the campus *culture* was very status-quo-oriented and siloed, Janet used Sensemake and Learn Moves to help faculty and staff understand the need for change and the importance of building bridges across silos to improve student success. She was careful to build new cultural norms around using data to learn and grow rather than as a "gotcha thing" or a punitive approach.

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 leveraged or "pulled upon" or manipulated to advance or accelerate the desired change. In this section, we describe the most prominent examples of Change Levers from Janet's project.

Leadership Context

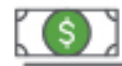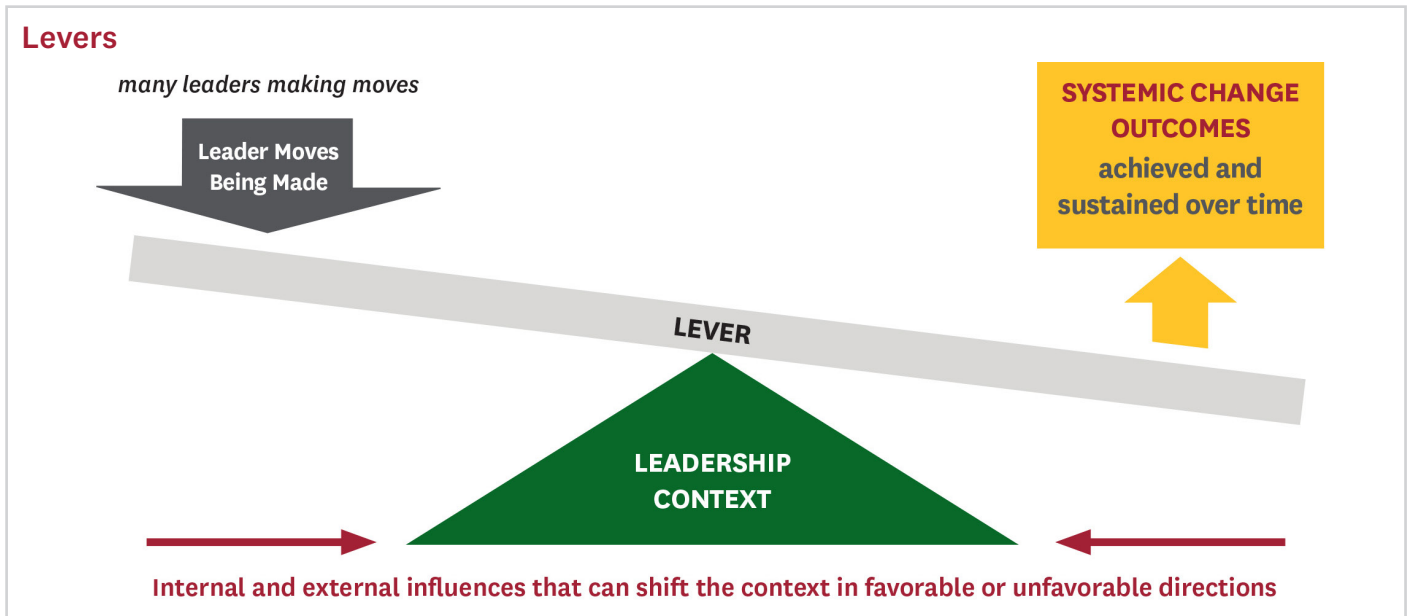- INSTITUTIONAL TYPE
- LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE
- CULTURE
- POLITICS
- HUMAN CAPITAL AND CAPACITY
- PHYSICAL, FINANCIAL AND TECHNICAL RESOURCES
- EXTERNALITIES

Levers

many leaders making moves

Leader Moves Being Made

SYSTEMIC CHANGE OUTCOMES achieved and sustained over time

LEVER

LEADERSHIP CONTEXT

Internal and external influences that can shift the context in favorable or unfavorable directions

1. **Campus (system, state) strategic plan(s), including mission, master plan, diversity plan, and other plans:** Janet leveraged the strategic planning process to drive home the importance of overhauling the onboarding, registration and advising processes. In tying the project to the strategic plan, Janet and the team were able to demonstrate clearly how the project could drive improvements to student retention and completion and close equity gaps. This connection to the strategic plan also signaled the project's importance to stakeholders across campus and helped promote buy-in.

2. **Affiliations or partnerships with national associations & organizations, including regional, community, state, national or international:** Janet also leveraged Forsyth Tech's partnerships with external organizations like the Aspen Institute, Achieving the Dream, and the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) to help confer legitimacy on the project and introduce research-backed ideas to campus stakeholders as they developed their strategy. We noted above how some of the principles behind the new onboarding and advising model were drawn from Achieving the Dream, and their data coaches also helped the team learn how to collect, interpret and use data to make change. Additionally, Janet brought in speakers from Aspen Institute for a Board retreat to gain Board support and engagement. Finally, she leveraged NACADA resources to train the new advisors and advocate for higher levels of pay for these new positions.

Key Takeaways

In this Case Study, Janet and her team transformed the student onboarding experience and made significant inroads into closing racial equity gaps at Forsyth Tech. Janet leveraged the strategic planning process to tie changes to the onboarding experience to broader institutional goals around retention and completion. She also leveraged partnerships with external organizations like NACADA, the Aspen Institute, and Achieving the Dream to provide legitimacy for the new onboarding and advising approaches. She used data to demonstrate the need for change and built a more robust capacity for data collection and tracking on campus to help stakeholders remain aware of student performance as well as equity gaps. She also worked to change the campus culture to one that was open to change and driven by data rather than by adherence to the status quo. Her collaboration with the Vice President for Student Success Services, who was newly appointed to her role but a longtime Forsyth Tech employee, and inclusion of key stakeholders across campus, promoted buy-in and ultimately led to significant changes and improved student outcomes.

Reflections to Help You Ignite Change

This Case Study provides an example of how Janet used the Moves outlined in the Change Leadership Toolkit to enact systemic change at her 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 might you use the Toolkit to advance change leadership on your campus?