



# CREATING

# Nimble Teams

## How Institutions Enable Transformational Change

**Supporting student success and meeting college completion and equity goals requires institutions to do more than just work at the margins. Overcoming deep-seated challenges means that campuses need to transform. Successful transformation requires identifying, understanding, and navigating campus culture so initiatives can both implement new strategy and build improved systems.**

To improve completion rates and close institutional performance gaps, particularly for students from groups that have been historically excluded, Complete College America (CCA) works at the national, state, and institutional levels to shift policy, perspective, and practice and drive systemic change. Through the PEP initiative, CCA provided resources and support to numerous institutions in three states over three years to enact transformational change aligned to the [CCA Pillars of Transformation](#). (For more on PEP, see sidebar on page 2.)

While each participating institution implemented strategies to meet its own goals and needs, the PEP work revealed five common behavioral patterns, or archetypes, that initially limited the institutions' capacity to change. To overcome these archetypes, each PEP team had to grapple with the limiting behaviors that were present on their campus to become more agile and then implement and sustain reform. By honestly interrogating their campus culture and having the courage and tenacity to address these behaviors, the institutions demonstrated their commitment to institutional transformation and the sometimes difficult process that accompanies such growth.

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Although the set of practices that emerged from this action research, which CCA is calling Nimble Teams, came from specific PEP sites, they can help all higher education institutions more effectively and efficiently implement change. To operate as a Nimble Team, those leading the change work must understand their institution, its typical behaviors, and how the new initiative intersects both with institutional culture and daily operations. Nimble Teams identify why the change is needed and how it will help the institution meet its goals, and they communicate this message regularly and consistently across all campus stakeholders. With a nimble mindset, teams can help connect the change to the roles and duties of all members of the campus community. Leaders who create and support Nimble Teams empower their staff — and any faculty who may be involved in the initiative — to solve other challenges and implement other changes to support student success and increase completion rates.

## About PEP

The PEP initiative, funded by Ascendium Education Group, focused on scaling change that centers equity in college completion policy and practice. CCA worked across the postsecondary landscape in Arkansas, Montana, and Oklahoma over three years to address shortcomings in higher education.

At the state level, CCA is working with higher education systems to create a policy environment that will enable long-term sustainability for this work and to track key metrics to monitor progress and inform continuous improvement.

CCA also is working directly with numerous colleges and universities across the three states to implement equity-focused, evidence-based strategies supported by targeted policies chosen from the CCA [Pillars of Transformation](#).



## Archetypes That Hinder Transformational Change

Higher education is facing numerous internal and external pressures, including the lingering effects of the coronavirus pandemic and public skepticism about the value of postsecondary education. These factors, combined with a policy environment that can lead to institutions facing competing priorities and demands, financial constraints, and moves toward consolidation, are leading to high staff turnover and low employee morale.

At the same time, the imperative to close institutional performance gaps and improve completion rates highlights both the need for transformational change and the challenges of implementing these changes. Staff face work overload and project fatigue, and daily operational responsibilities can swamp capacity for change. Therefore, when a new initiative is introduced, institutions often default into behaviors that conform to one or more of the following archetypes.



**That is not how we do it here.** The entrenched culture is resistant to change, particularly if the person leading the initiative is new to the institution and lacks relationships with those who are affected by the change. In these cases, the institution defaults to historical practices rather than asking critical questions about the effectiveness of those practices and why change is needed.



**Nobody knows.** Staff grow frustrated when their work meets all benchmarks and exceeds expectations yet they receive no feedback or recognition. And sometimes, the larger campus is not even aware that a change has happened.



**What forest? Those are trees.** The institution assigns activities to staff without connecting the work to the bigger picture. As a result, the initiative ultimately does not move the needle on campus goals or support improved student success.



**Tied up in knots.** The institution has so many competing and conflicting policies and structures that identifying how to implement change while adhering to policy paralyzes the team.



**Get this done.** The team focuses on completion and speed, rather than assessing whether team members have broad enough expertise and sufficient time to achieve the desired change.

Institutions may experience more than one of these archetypes, or they may have additional patterns that limit how they engage with change.



## Overcoming the Archetypes With Nimble Teams

**“Do the best you can until you know better.  
Then, when you know better, do better.”**

— MAYA ANGELOU

Knowing campus behavior patterns and managing campus culture are essential to overcome archetypes and transform. When those leading the change work connect the institutional need to the desired change, recognize and manage behavioral patterns that limit the ability to implement change, and communicate frequently across critical structures, they operate as a Nimble Team. Nimble practices enable institutions to enact fundamental institutional transformation across a range of initiatives or challenges that they currently face or ones they will encounter in the future.

A Nimble Team:

- Moves beyond the “what” of the new work to the “why,” focusing on purpose, processes, and people. It understands why the change matters to the institution, how the change affects ongoing operations, and who needs to be included in the change work.
- Has the flexibility and expertise to take stock of the campus context, connect the new work and individual roles to the campus mission, and adapt.
- Appreciates and values the contributions of staff at all levels.
- Focuses on continuous improvement with flexible, iterative assessments. The team repeatedly revisits questions that are central to its work, such as:
  - » What are we doing, and how does it connect to the student-centered vision for success at our institution?
  - » How well are we doing it?
  - » How do we know? What qualitative and quantitative evidence do we have?
  - » What are our next steps to improve based on this knowledge?

In PEP, when teams were able to connect their initiative to their institutional purpose, self-efficacy, responsiveness, and situational leadership improved. The following section includes examples of how PEP institutions overcame common archetypes.





**That is not how we do it here.** An institution assigned the PEP work to an administrator who had just arrived on campus. Because she was new, she did not have connections across campus to help her know how to approach implementing the changes. Rather, she quickly discovered resistance to her work and was told, “That is not how we do it here.” Once her supervisor aligned the initiative with campus needs and she began linking PEP goals to institutional gaps, she was able to communicate in ways that long-serving staff could embrace and overcome the bumpy early days of the initiative.



**Nobody knows.** At one institution, the PEP team had developed robust programming, support, and measures that were aligned to institutional, system, and state objectives for student outcomes. The lead for the project shared enrollment, success, and completion data that demonstrated the program’s impact and showed that it was exceeding expectations. But when that lead, who had been an acting vice president when the PEP initiative began, stepped back because a new vice president was hired, the PEP team grew frustrated that “nobody knows what we are doing.” To alleviate this concern, the new lead worked to ensure that messaging about the initiative and its success was shared in key institutional committees and documents to inform stakeholders about the purpose of PEP and raise awareness about the impact of the work.



**What forest? Those are trees.** A PEP institution had developed a dual enrollment program that included embedded, college-funded advisers who supported high school students as they took courses for college credit along with their K-12 graduation requirements. While these relationships resulted in high rates of student participation in dual enrollment, almost none of those students enrolled in the college after they finished high school. Despite its success, the program was not improving college enrollment or completion rates. To move the needle on these goals, the advisers had to understand and embrace the role of advising students not only about the importance and value of participating in dual enrollment courses in high school but also about how those credits could help them meet their goals if they enrolled in the college after high school.





**Tied up in knots.** The PEP team at one institution sought to implement a first-year experience (FYE) by adding a new course but encountered barriers, including that many of the students who would be affected by the change were career and technical education (CTE) students. The FYE course had been designed for transfer students, so the content did not map easily to CTE courses. Another barrier was that course was approved for three credits but was not included in any transfer pathways, which meant that it did not fit in the associate degree plans for transfer programs. In addition, because the additional three credits added time to degree and cost for completion, financial aid did not apply.

The team became stuck in how to address the multiple, competing obstacles. The team had to shift its focus to the purpose of the FYE by identifying the goals for the institution and then determining whether or not a course was the right approach. When the team aligned its goals for students to the constraints, it was able to create an experience that met student needs.



**Get this done.** At another institution, the three-member PEP team, all from admissions/student affairs, set the goal of designing and implementing changes to the student onboarding process within about three months after launch. They anticipated gathering information, developing the changes, and rolling them out just a few weeks later. The team soon realized that the changes they sought to make touched on many different areas of their campus. They also realized that without the input, insight, and expertise of stakeholders from those different areas, the PEP initiative would fail. By the time the team gave its interim progress report, the campus had assigned 33 members to the PEP task force. When the team understood the broad reach and impact of changes to the onboarding process, it determined that broad role representation would improve the quality of its PEP redesign. Even though the team grew 11 times larger, it became more nimble because it included the expertise to develop a robust plan.



## Creating Nimble Teams

**“The more they know, the more they’ll understand. The more they understand, the more they’ll care. Once they care, there’s no stopping them.”**

— SAM WALTON

Developing Nimble Teams requires institutional leaders and leaders of the change initiative to know how their institution engages with change and if those local archetypes inhibit transformation. As a quote often attributed to management consultant Peter Drucker emphasizes, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” Managing institutional culture alongside the process of change increases the potential for the initiative to be transformational.

To foster Nimble Teams, leaders must:

- Lead with the “why” from the start, communicating the reasons for and goals of a project, including data that supports the need for action.
- Align the initiative to institutional mission, goals, and key performance indicators. A unifying vision with clear metrics for success helps staff understand how this work fits in with other campus priorities. It also helps build commitment to the project, so staff are more likely to embrace the work rather than just the check the box for compliance.
- Engage team members in the development of the initiative to build trust and ensure that they feel ownership so they will invest the time and energy to do the work.
- Ensure that team members represent a broad range of perspectives and roles, including both leaders and practitioners, to identify issues and solutions from both the top and the bottom. Leaders need to intentionally foster cross-department collaboration and get team members out of their siloes. Creating a team approach empowers staff and fosters leadership at all levels of positions. It also guards against the initiative falling apart due to staffing changes.
- Continue to communicate the progress of the work with team members and, when appropriate, broader campus audiences, reinforcing why the project is being implemented and the value of and urgent need for change in campus operations. Repeated communication helps staff internalize the messages and remain committed to the work.
- Regularly gather feedback from the team and other stakeholders about what is and is not working well and then in turn share how that feedback is being implemented.
- Share stories and celebrate wins as the work progresses. Recognizing the work repeatedly and at each level helps teams maintain momentum.





## Conclusion

Transformation in higher education is challenging but urgently needed to ensure that all students, especially those from historically excluded populations, earn degrees and credentials of value in a timely fashion. Improving completion rates and closing institutional performance gaps benefits students, institutions, states, and the nation. Through Nimble Teams, CCA is helping higher education leaders, faculty, and staff overcome archetypes and implement successful policies and practices to meet these goals at their institutions. It is also building on this work to develop a replicable model that can be scaled to advocate and foster change at other institutions and at the state level. The Nimble Teams approach paves the way for a system in which more students can graduate and prepare to thrive in an ever-evolving world.



Complete College America (CCA) builds movements for scaled change and transforms institutions. Specifically, CCA drives systemic change that leads to better college completion rates; more equitable outcomes; and greater economic and social mobility, especially for historically excluded students. CCA operates at the federal, state, and institutional levels and works with its national network of forward-thinking state and higher education leaders. Since its founding in 2009, CCA and its network have introduced bold initiatives that help states and institutions implement data-driven policies, student-centered perspectives, and equity-driven practices.

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