



## At the heart of that work was an effort to help the partners use cycles of inquiry to analyze, study, and act on data.

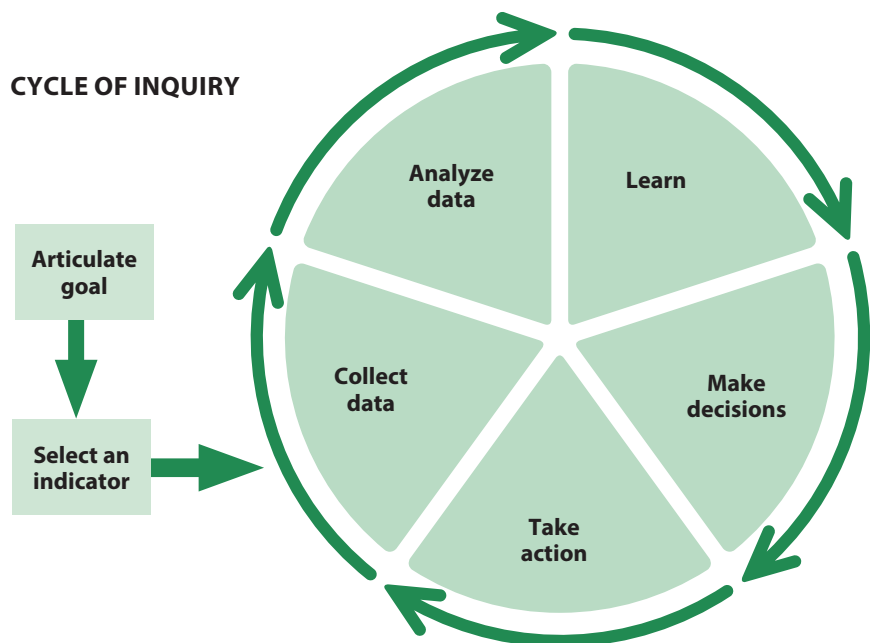
together to address the potential to improve college readiness and completion among the county's students. A diverse group of education leaders spanning K-12 through college formed the collaborative, with leadership from the Humboldt County Office of Education, a regional entity that supports local districts, offers countywide services, and maintains connections with local higher education institutions.

Enter the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at the Stanford Graduate School of Education. The Gardner Center partners with communities, researchers, and practitioners to produce evidence-based research to improve and strengthen the well-being of youth, inform policy and practice in the fields of education and youth development, and emphasize the importance of equity and capacity-building in youth-serving organizations.

The Gardner Center partnered with the county office to build the collaborative's capacity, including designing and leading a professional learning process for educators from participating schools and institutions. At the heart of that work was an effort to help the partners use cycles of inquiry to analyze, study, and act on data.

### PROFESSIONAL LEARNING GOALS AND STRUCTURE

Recognizing the need for a data-driven approach, the collaborative set



two main professional learning goals for its participants:

- To become familiar with college readiness and completion indicators at three interrelated levels: individual, setting, and system; and
- To strengthen education leaders' capacity to conduct cycles of inquiry framed by the indicators.

Cycles of inquiry link actionable indicators of student success to supports for students. Further, they help illuminate the issues and conditions for improvements. By embracing and centering the cycle of inquiry approach, participants engaged in comprehensive and deep learning about the problem

and its sources, identification and definition of goals and attainable objectives, informed decision making and strategy formation, progress monitoring and continuous improvements based on targets and measures. See figure above.

During the first two years, teams from a small, core group of institutions (districts and colleges) engaged in professional learning and opportunities to practice cycles of inquiry. Early in the process, the Gardner Center provided presentations and facilitated discussions that built from the College Readiness Indicator Systems resource suite, which provides tools to support the data to action approach in schools and districts. (For more information,

visit <https://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/publications/college-readiness-indicator-system-cris-resource-series>.)

Rooted in the College Readiness Indicator Systems principles, we shared a systematic approach to college readiness and completion that combines the following elements encompassed within the cycle of inquiry:

- A trilevel lens, recognizing the setting (school) and system (district) contexts for youth development;
- Domains of learning, reflecting the concept that college readiness and completion require academic preparedness, academic tenacity, and college knowledge;
- Indicators of college readiness and college completion, driven by the understanding that that indicators should be research-informed, measurable, meaningful, malleable, and impactful; and
- Supports, emphasizing that while indicators are applicable for all students, supports are tailored interventions.

Sessions in the first two years empowered partners with the necessary tools and supports to advance cycles of inquiry aimed at increasing students' readiness for, and completion of, college. We planned discussions and exercises that focused on indicators relevant to the region, such as student participation in college prep curriculum, access and uptake of student supports, and completion of financial aid applications.

Participating districts and institutions of higher education selected one or more of these indicators on which to focus their own data-to-action efforts. Partners carried out this work at their sites between convenings and shared their progress and challenges with one another at subsequent sessions.

## LEARNING AMONG PARTNERS

In the early phase, building trust among partners was essential. We placed a high value on learning and improvement supported by inquiry, rather than placing blame or declaring success.

With this foundation of trust, an important part of the sessions was partners' presentations of their progress on their cycles of inquiry. We helped partners use a protocol for sharing that included structured opportunities to present aspects of a team's inquiry to other teams and for other teams to ask questions and provide feedback.

Partners shared information about their inquiry process, data analyses, changes to policy and practice, and implementation of supports. A critical aspect of these presentations and discussions was sharing challenges faced and lessons learned. Sometimes this meant that institutional teams shared what they saw as their own shortcomings. This was valuable both to the content of the learning and the ongoing trust building that underlies all the work.

For example, one district developed spreadsheets that visually represented their analysis of college track course completion. The analysis contained some surprises — including some that disappointed the district. The district shared its analysis and tools at a convening.

The district also shared some of the actions it took based on the data analysis, such as policy changes. Subsequently, some partners adapted the tools to suit their institutions' needs and analyzed their data with the benefit of insights shared by other partners.

This group sharing process enhanced knowledge for everyone and also provided growth opportunities. After two years, the original group of core partners grew to include eight local districts in addition to a second team

from the county office, and those who had been part of the core group were able to take on leadership roles.

As new members learned basic concepts, existing members presented their own work and received targeted feedback to support their ongoing inquiry. This built a sense of regional efficacy and provided new districts with a better understanding of inquiry's potential. It laid the groundwork for sustaining the work into the future by strengthening regional capacity.

By developing leadership among members and embedding and institutionalizing attitudes and practices of inquiry, we expect that the individual and collective culture of inquiry will continue into the future.

## IMPACT ON PARTNERS AND STUDENTS

We already see evidence of the collaborative's impacts on Humboldt County's students and educational institutions. Members took unique approaches to inquiry, based on available data, staff capacity, goals and strategies, or other local factors.

For example, one high school redesigned credit recovery opportunities to support students to meet college eligibility requirements. This was a result of the team's inquiry into student participation in college prep curriculum (an individual level indicator of college readiness), illuminating that retake options for some core classes did not meet college eligibility requirements.

As another example, through a cycle of inquiry focused on helping more high school students complete college-track courses, members from one high school district identified that many freshmen from rural communities were failing courses required for continuation in the college prep sequence.

The district's collaborative team hypothesized that it is difficult for some students to transition from

| <b>LISTENING TO MEMBERS</b>  |                           |
|--|---------------------------|
| To gain insights into members' experience of the collaborative and inform the development of its next iteration, we conducted an anonymous survey of participants. Twenty-seven participants responded, shedding light on the value of the professional learning related to the use of inquiry to inform strategy and action; capacity and norms of continuous learning and improvement; and the benefits of cross-system, regional collaboration. |                           |
| Select survey items  | % agree or strongly agree |
| <b>PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT</b>  |                           |
| Participation in the collaborative has influenced my mindset/attitude toward data and/or data-informed decision-making.  | 96                        |
| <b>CONTINUOUS LEARNING AND IMPROVEMENT</b>   |                           |
| My institution has built its capacity for continuous learning and improvement.   | 88                        |
| Informed by our work related to the collaborative, my district/institution has taken steps (or will probably take steps in the near future) that will likely result in more students being ready for college / completing college.   | 85                        |
| As a result of our participation in the collaborative, my district/institution has created new norms around the use of data and inquiry in decision-making and/or strategy formation and execution.  | 65                        |
| My district/institution has increased (or has the potential to increase) stakeholders' buy-in for data use, inquiry, and strategy development.   | 92                        |
| <b>THE VALUE OF COLLABORATION</b>  |                           |
| Bringing together local partners with different levels of experience in data and inquiry outweighed the associated challenges.   | 100                       |
| The Post-Secondary Strengthening Collaborative serves a valuable cause by promoting cross dialogue between districts and higher education institutions.  | 100                       |

small, rural middle schools into the district's comprehensive high school, often a long bus ride away. The team considered creative ways to address this issue, including establishing a Freshman Academy for students identified as those who would benefit from a focused transition program.

Moving forward, the district will analyze the results of its academy pilot through a new cycle of inquiry. This will inform the student selection criteria and shed light on the need for program modifications. It will also help gain the school board's support for expansion if it finds the program is effective.

**FEEDBACK FROM PARTNERS**

In a survey of collaborative partners, after most members had been

participating for one or two years, 88% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that, through the adoption of the cycle of inquiry approach, their district or institution had broadly built its capacity for continuous learning and improvement. And 100% agreed or strongly agreed that, as individuals, they will likely take what they have learned through participation in the collaborative to their future positions. (See table above.)

Collaborative members said they appreciated the process and the opportunities that the structure provided, as illustrated in survey responses like these:

- "I'd like to continue learning ways to engage staff, analyze data, and support each other.

I've gotten so many good ideas and such good feedback throughout the process."

- "We need to continue this collaborative opportunity, as rich and deep discussions occur that lead to systemic change."
- "This is one of the most valuable educational endeavors I have been part of."

**LOOKING AHEAD**

The collaborative has accomplished a lot, but much is still left to do. The Humboldt County Office of Education, the collaborative's main convener, hopes to harness the energy and power of its successes to date to design the collaborative's next phase, which may include:

# IDEAS

- Ways to better engage small districts, perhaps creating a cohort that works on a joint cycle of inquiry;
- Hiring personnel to support those districts that do not have an in-house capacity to analyze data; and
- Opportunities to expand inquiry to areas that involve both K-12 and postsecondary members, including outreach and enrollment designed to engage students.

## LEARNING FROM CHALLENGES

Like our partners in the collaborative, we are committed to sharing challenges, learning from them, and finding strategies to address them. Among the challenges:

**Seed funding ended:** The county office of education launched the

collaborative with support from College Futures Foundation. When that funding ended, the county office of education found new resources and called on existing and new members to contribute funds.

Paying to take part in the collaborative increased members' commitment and ownership. In this way, the end of funding did not cause the collaborative to contract. Instead, the collaborative expanded its ranks. This broadened the range of perspectives and the reach of the professional learning. As such, the collaborative reached more educators and students.

**Disconnections between existing and new members:** Building trust among new and existing members presented a challenge. To address this, we encouraged veteran members to share not only their successes but also their

struggles and disproven hypotheses. This allowed all members to engage in dialogue and collective work that was inclusive, supportive, and inspiring.

As articulated by one local leader, collaborative members moved away from an "us-versus-them" paradigm. Using data in a collaborative, intentional, and mutually supportive environment helped strengthen a regional approach to addressing the needs of all students.

**Limited capacity threatened engagement:** Many of the members came from small teams, so prioritizing limited resources and staff time was often difficult. To ensure that members remained engaged, the county office of education reinforced that the collaborative's work aligned with other accountability requirements, local commitments, and districts' interests. Also, by emphasizing local context,

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we addressed members' unique needs. Members saw benefits in the collective work and dialogue that took place at each meeting.

Finally, members understood the long-term value in learning to embed inquiry into their institutions. They realized that, by making their work more efficient and targeted, they would better their chances to direct scarce resources wisely. Keeping focused on creating value for all participants resulted in strong participation, even when resources were tight.

### TAKE-AWAYS

Professional learning in a collaborative environment, focused on building a sustainable culture of inquiry and improvement, holds powerful potential. Through the work in Humboldt County, we offer the following three lessons, which are particularly applicable to rural communities:

#### **A culture of inquiry and data-informed decision-making is an important asset.**

Armed with competencies that support processes of inquiry, educators are better equipped to ensure that local programs and policies are effectively meeting the needs of their students.

Starting with training, tools, and the opportunity to focus on partners' specific areas of concern, collaborative participants could build their own competencies while simultaneously impacting their institutions.

#### **Rural communities face unique challenges to collaborative learning because of their geographic isolation, so coming together was central to achieving the collaborative's professional learning goals.**

At convenings, members from diverse organizations could engage and learn across geographical and institutional boundaries. Coming together also strengthened informal

professional relationships and helped participants expand their professional network.

#### **Building community-based knowledge and embedding data-informed processes into local institutions can be a powerful tool for collectively supporting a community or region.**

By designing learning in ways that lead to institutionalization of such processes, we can help extend the impacts beyond the tenure of individual participants and build sustainability so the work can continue without external trainers.

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