Building Strategic Learning Through Shared Measurements

Measurement is a tool to build strategic learning in a community tackling the complex challenge of helping more students access and succeed in college and their career. Yet, too often data can be misused, damaging trust among partners. To avoid turning meetings into a round of finger pointing, consider these data do's and don'ts:

DO love your data, but love your partners more.

Good data is critical for making informed decisions to improve student outcomes, but not at the expense of your partnership.

Smart moves:
- Invest in relationships with partners to better understand sensitivities around the numbers.
- Before making data decisions, agree on a process for doing so to reinforce the common agenda of the LCAN.

DO remember context matters.

Numbers don't lie, but they don't tell the whole story either. It's tempting to compare one school to another for instance, but the context within which schools operate – levels of low-income students, staff/administrator turnover – can impact results.

Smart moves:
- Use data to start a curious conversation – what do we know/not know that might be impacting the results?
- What can we learn from schools that are seeing gains that we might be able to take to other schools?

DO use a data working group.

Involve partners representing different organizations in a data working group responsible for identifying the best sources of data to meet the LCAN's needs, spotting trends and acting as a knowledgeable resource for the broader leadership team.

Smart move:
- By leveraging partner data expertise you can create buy-in on what the right metrics are to use, and provide the context to make the numbers meaningful. That way no one feels blind-sided, and participants can share the strengths and limitations of each data source.

Do define common definitions.

Common terminology and definitions will ensure data discussions result in fewer mis-communications. For example, a community should define what the network means by the word "college". For some, it represents all postsecondary education. For others, it represents only public options included in the Florida State College System. Is another word like postsecondary education more inclusive of all options (2-year, 4-year, and career/technical), better representing the network's intent?

Smart move:
- Have your data team keep a running list of how terms are used in the network, and share the updated version at meetings where data is presented.

Do utilize a data scan.

A data scan can provide the baseline data needed to select the metrics and indicators needed to set your group's agenda.

Smart move:
- Good data scans include district, school and institutional specific data.

Smarter move:
- Better scans also include historical performance and disaggregated data by student subgroups like racial/ethnic groups, gender, adult students and income-status.

Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good (data).

No data set is perfect. Each data source administrator must decide what to include and not include in the parameters of what the data set measures. Education data takes time to collect and verify, which means in nearly all cases, even the most recently available data may be from previous years.

Smart move:
- Proceed with the data you have and inform all network partners about how to read the data, understanding its limitations.
- Make requests for the data you need where available from reputable sources. Let the person handling the data request know why you need the data and how it will be used. They can let you know what is and is not available, and may suggest better options or sources. This also builds trust, which can come in handy the next time you have a data request.

DON'T use your data as an accountability metric.

Too often, an accountability framework is used to identify "winners" and "losers". With job performance, funding, or public reputation on the line for some partners, it's important to remember that an LCAN is built as a partnership of shared responsibility.

Smart move:
- Use data to inform decision-making and learning, and to find areas of opportunity the LCAN can mobilize to address.

Don't fall prey to analysis paralysis.

Data analysis can provide leaders with an insightful look at where opportunities exist to better serve students. But too much data analysis can keep a community stuck, afraid to make a decision or try an approach, wanting more and more data in the hopes the decision will become clear. This is complex work. If the solution were easy it would have been solved long ago!

Smart move:
- Strong LCANs develop a culture of learning, willing to try ideas in a small pilot to determine which ones are scalable.

Florida College Access Network is here to help!

Our research and analysis team can share resources, data and examples from other Florida LCANs to help you build strategic learning capacity in your network. Our team can identify the best sources of data for what you want to learn, and can lead discussions around the data in your community, lending a neutral perspective to facilitate constructive community discussions. You can find data dashboards and other resources at: FloridaCollegeAccess.org/research-and-data.

To discuss your data and research needs, contact:

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