

Response to “Adoption and Adaptation: A Framework for Instructional Reform”

By: Jeanne Costello, Professor of English, Fullerton College – April 2012

The [Adoption and Adaptation Framework](#) is an exciting model for planning and refining innovative practices. Informed by an astute assessment of why many reforms fail to achieve greater results for students, the model’s most promising suggestions are also those most challenging to implement.

The idea that colleges should implement innovations aligned with identified student needs might seem obvious, but the in-depth process of diagnosis spelled out in the adoption phase of the model would yield a much more detailed analysis than the simple consideration of gross measures like course success or progression rates that currently drives the discussion of student success at my community college. Attention to course outcomes performance or survey data on student and faculty perspectives would produce more nuanced discussions than are currently possible. The approach of Pellissippi State’s developmental mathematics program provides a very helpful model of how to use such information to guide reform.

I also agree that we need diagnostic tools for discovering why students drop courses, fail to complete work, or otherwise disengage academically. Rebecca Cox’s research helps,¹ but Susan Bickerstaff and her colleagues correctly note a “shortage of useful mechanisms or tools for identifying student needs” in these areas. As a result of an often simplistic understanding of student failure, our interventions may stay broadly programmatic rather than targeted to improving particular, course-specific skills. Indeed, “innovations that explicitly try to change pedagogy are the rarest and most challenging to implement.”

¹ Cox, R. (2009). *The college fear factor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Long-term pedagogical reform requires a deep level of faculty commitment, and the Scaling Innovation team correctly identifies faculty autonomy and heavy workloads as potential barriers to the kind of intensive collaboration needed to develop and refine innovative teaching practices. Refinement is especially challenging because it requires making classroom practice transparent through observations and discussions of class materials.

Developing innovative classroom practices collaboratively from day one might help alleviate faculty performance anxiety. If small groups jointly create and implement a similar version of an innovation, perhaps they will approach the results with a spirit of inquiry, receptive to mutual feedback and willing to discuss and evaluate classroom artifacts. Also, collaboration can help refinements be made more responsively and quickly.

For example, among my team of four implementing a pilot accelerated developmental English course, we can make immediate adjustments to lesson plans with feedback from colleagues who have tested them the previous day. Our weekly group discussions offer the opportunity to evaluate and change lessons and assignments as we go instead of waiting until next semester to try again. Our participation in the California Acceleration Project's Community of Practice ([CAP](#)) has also enabled us to make more timely refinements. We have adapted our planning and implementation based on insights from CAP members.

In my view, mechanisms for better planning would automatically provide structure for continued refinement of innovations. Small teams that have fostered the trust necessary for transparency will enable the ongoing "potentially difficult conversations" needed to make lasting change happen. Many departments have core groups of innovators willing to devote their time and effort to change. The larger challenge is determining how to bring those innovations to the larger department!