

INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP ABSTRACTS

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The 4 Connections: Moving from Intuitive to Intentional Relationship-Building to Improve Success and Reduce Equity Gaps

Introduction and Background

Equitable student success can be achieved through connections and a sense of belonging created among faculty members and students. Lake Washington Institute of Technology, one of the 34 community and technical colleges in Washington State, implemented the 4 Connections framework based on best practices identified and systematically implemented at Odessa College. Through quantitative and qualitative research, Dr. Don Wood (now Odessa's VP of Institutional Effectiveness), discovered that all faculty with high in-class retention rates shared "a common thread of connectivity with their students" (Kistner & Henderson, 2014). From this common thread emerged four key practices:

1. Learn and use students' names
2. Check in regularly
3. Schedule required one-on-one meetings
4. Practice Paradox

Once these practices were identified, all faculty at Odessa were asked to implement them. In the first term (fall 2011), Odessa's in-class retention rate went from 83% to 95%, and that 95% was regardless of age, race, gender, and Pell eligibility. In other words, applying the four practices not only improved success, it did so equitably.

Over six years, Odessa maintained a 10% increase in courses success (Kistner & Henderson, 2014).

Lake Washington Institute of Technology (LWTech) Deans of Instruction, Sally Heilstedt and Doug Emory, learned of Odessa's research and model in summer of 2016 at an Achieving the Dream event. Back on campus, instructional leaders quickly embraced the model, renamed it the 4 Connections, and introduced it to faculty at the fall 2016 convocation. The concept for the 4 Connections was reinforced at convocation by input from over 100 LWTech TRiO participants. The students expressed their two primary needs for success in college as good information and meaningful relationships. The 4 Connections provided a practicable response to the second need. Faculty members volunteered to practice the 4 Connections during the fall 2016 term. Those who volunteered would receive their before and after data, like Odessa faculty, following the end of the quarter. Of note, this was the first time at LWTech that faculty would receive student success data disaggregated by individual faculty member.

Faculty Participation and Support

Twenty-eight faculty members

signed the pledge to practice the 4 Connections. Of those, 20 faculty members also volunteered to participate in a faculty learning committee (FLC) focused on implementation of the 4 Connections.

A typical meeting included faculty members sharing what worked well for them and what issues they were still working through as they more intentionally practiced the 4 Connections. The FLC members also received more directed professional development, including training on the Transparency Framework, Reading Apprenticeship, and building empathy for students (utilizing Achieving the Dream's The Finish Line Game).

The pilot cohort of 4 Connections faculty members included the following representation of faculty populations:

- Adjunct: 50%; Full-Time: 50%
- Female: 67%; Male: 33%
- Faculty of Color: 25%;
- White Faculty: 75%
- Basic Education for Adults: 17%;
- Professional-Technical: 66%;
- General Education: 17%
- Years of Teaching Experience: Variable, from 0 to 30

Results

LWTech focused its data analysis on course pass rates. Would the 4 Connections not only provide a sense of belonging that encouraged students to stay, but could it also improve learning (as measured indirectly by pass rates)?

Individual faculty members received their before and after course success data, comparing the two years prior to the 4 Connections with fall quarter 2016. One faculty member went from 79% course completion to 100% in that first quarter! After reviewing the initial data, faculty members persisted in practicing the 4 Connections, and instructional leaders partnered with Institutional Research to create a data dashboard for longer term comparison.

Overall, the 24-member cohort (4 faculty members were not included because they did not have before data at LWTech) saw an increase in course pass rates from 89% to 92.5%, comparing two years prior to two years after implementing the 4 Connections. This increase represents approximately 250 more students who successfully passed their classes.

While this change is somewhat modest, it is important to note that most of the faculty members who volunteered to practice the 4 Connections were already proficient, if not exceptional, teachers. Many of them were practicing at least two of the 4 Connections prior to hearing about the framework. The following data makes their more intentional practice of the 4 Connections even more compelling, for intentionality appears to correlate with equitable course success.

Continued on page 3...

The 4 Connections

Pass Rates by Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	2014-2016 (Before)	n (duplicated)	2016-2018 (After)	n (duplicated)
African American	71.17%	319	88%	329
Alaska Native, American Indian, Pacific Islander	79.00%	117	94.67%	148
Asian	92.17%	941	94.33%	1168
Latinx	86.33%	388	91.67%	411
White	90.67%	3764	93.34%	3817

Data in this table includes all students enrolled in courses taught by 24 faculty participants in the 4 Connections pilot. Fall, winter, and spring quarters are included.

LWTech is currently in the process of analyzing retention and completion data of the students enrolled in the 24 faculty members' courses in fall 2016 compared with students not enrolled in those courses. The initial results are as follows:

Fall-to-Fall Retention

- Students not enrolled in classes with the 24 pilot faculty members: 48%
- Students enrolled in classes with the 24 pilot faculty members: 54%
- Students of color not enrolled in classes with 24 pilot faculty members: 40%
- Students of color enrolled in classes with the 24 pilot faculty members: 54%
- White students not enrolled in classes with 24 pilot faculty members: 49%
- White students enrolled in classes with 24 pilot faculty members: 55%

Completion

- Students not enrolled in classes with the 24 pilot faculty members: 26%
- Students enrolled in classes with the 24 pilot faculty members: 43%
- Students of color not enrolled in classes with 24 pilot faculty members: 23%
- Students of color enrolled in classes with the 24 pilot faculty members: 40%
- White students not enrolled in classes with 24 pilot faculty members: 31%
- White students enrolled in classes with the 24 pilot faculty members: 47%

Next Steps

Spurred on by the positive results in student success and feedback from faculty, LWTech continues to promote and support implementation of

the 4 Connections. The Vice President of Instruction is committed to hiring full-time faculty who agree to try the 4 Connections. A team of faculty led a training for all faculty at the 2019 convocation. Next steps include creating two FLCs: one for faculty members practicing the 4 Connections for the first time and one for those who have been practicing them for a year or more. The latter FLC will focus on implicit bias and the impacts of bias on systems and practices, as well as collaboratively developing effective practices for engaging young male students (ages 16-20). Young males did not see the same increases in course success with the 4 Connections, and LWTech faculty members hope to find a way to change that.

LWTech will continue to utilize the 4 Connections as a framework that not only increases students' sense of belonging and in-class retention, but also one that enables students to learn and to achieve their long term goals.

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