

Communities of Practice in Higher Education

A Playbook for Centering Equity, Digital Learning, and Continuous Improvement



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This work is a collaboration of Achieving the Dream (ATD), the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), and the Online Learning Consortium (OLC) in partnership with Every Learner Everywhere.

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About Our Organizations



[Achieving the Dream \(ATD\)](http://achievingthedream.org) is a partner and champion of more than 300 community colleges across the country. Drawing on our expert coaches, groundbreaking programs, and national peer network, we provide institutions with integrated, tailored support for every aspect of their work — from foundational capacities such as leadership, data, and equity to intentional strategies for supporting students holistically, building K–12 partnerships, and more. We call this Whole College Transformation. Our vision is for every college to be a catalyst for equitable, antiracist, and economically vibrant communities. We know that with the right partner and the right approach, colleges can drive access, completion rates, and employment outcomes — so that all students can access life-changing learning that propels them into community-changing careers. [Visit us at achievingthedream.org.](http://achievingthedream.org)



The [Association of Public and Land-grant Universities \(APLU\)](#) is a research, policy, and advocacy organization dedicated to strengthening and advancing the work of public universities in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. The association's membership consists of 244 public research universities, land-grant institutions, state university systems, and affiliated organizations. APLU works with members to expand access and improve student success to deliver the innovative workforce of tomorrow; advance and promote research and discovery to improve society, foster economic growth, and address global challenges; and build healthy, prosperous, equitable, and vibrant communities locally and globally. The association's work is furthered by an active and effective advocacy arm that works with Congress and the administration as well as the media to advance federal policies that strengthen public universities and benefit the students they serve.



The [Online Learning Consortium \(OLC\)](#) is a collaborative community of education leaders and innovators dedicated to advancing quality digital teaching and learning experiences designed to reach and engage the modern learner—anyone, anywhere, anytime. OLC inspires innovation and quality through an extensive set of resources, including best-practice publications, quality benchmarking, leading-edge instruction, community-driven conferences, practitioner-based and empirical research, and expert guidance. The growing OLC community includes faculty members, administrators, trainers, instructional designers, and other learning professionals, as well as educational institutions, professional societies, and corporate enterprises. Learn more at onlinelearningconsortium.org.



[Every Learner Everywhere](#) is a network of twelve partner organizations with expertise in evaluating, implementing, scaling, and measuring the efficacy of education technologies, curriculum and course design strategies, teaching practices, and support services that personalize instruction for students in blended and online learning environments. Our mission is to help institutions use new technology to innovate teaching and learning, with the ultimate goal of improving learning outcomes for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students, poverty-affected students, and first-generation students. Our collaborative work aims to advance equity in higher education centers on the transformation of postsecondary teaching and learning. We build capacity in colleges and universities to improve student outcomes with digital learning through direct technical assistance, timely resources and toolkits, and ongoing analysis of institution practices and market trends. For more information about Every Learner Everywhere and its collaborative approach to equitize higher education through digital learning, visit everylearnereverywhere.org.

The ATD-APLU-OLC Partnership

ATD, APLU, and OLC have extensive experience creating and convening a diverse array of communities of practice within higher education, for a variety of groups, institutions, and community stakeholders. As a part of an ongoing partnership in the Every Learner Everywhere network, these three partner organizations collaboratively developed and facilitated a range of learning communities of faculty, faculty support staff, academic administrators, and leaders, all in service of promoting equitable student success through the adoption of high-quality digital learning and improved teaching and learning practices.



Purpose of this Playbook

A playbook provides foundational guidance for practitioners and shares strategies they can use to learn more about a topic or refine their work in a particular area. They often emphasize optimization and highlight best practices. Playbooks also provide context, resources, and actionable strategies for challenges to be explored and solutions generated.

This playbook provides the higher education community with guidance on how to envision, design, facilitate, evaluate, and sustain communities of practice. Communities of practice offer higher education faculty, students, and leaders a range of benefits, such as facilitating resource sharing, individual and collective goal achievement, group problem solving, evaluation of practices, and emergent learning. The playbook particularly emphasizes three under-explored elements of the communities of practice experience: equity, digital technologies, and continuous improvement. Approaching these elements with intentionality can ensure a reflexive, accessible process that supports all community members. This playbook provides actionable strategies for all who want to learn more about structuring and facilitating communities of practice. It also explicates ways to engage our three-pronged approach through the lifecycle of a community experience.

Intended Audiences

This playbook is designed to support colleges, universities, and other higher education organizations as they develop and facilitate communities of practice to improve teaching and learning. The intended audience includes Higher Education leaders, administrators, Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTL), faculty, and staff.



Introduction

Although the term “community of practice” was first coined in 1991 by Lave and Wenger, the concept it illuminates is ancient. For instance, ancient Greek craftsmen shared a focus on learning new techniques and mentoring apprentices (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). In more contemporary times, healthcare experts convene to generate solutions to shared problems, such as providing effective virtual care and treating patients with mental health concerns (see, for instance, The University of Toronto Family & Community Medicine, n.d.). In both cases, the human impulse to learn from knowledgeable peers, evaluate practices, and generate new ideas is made manifest.

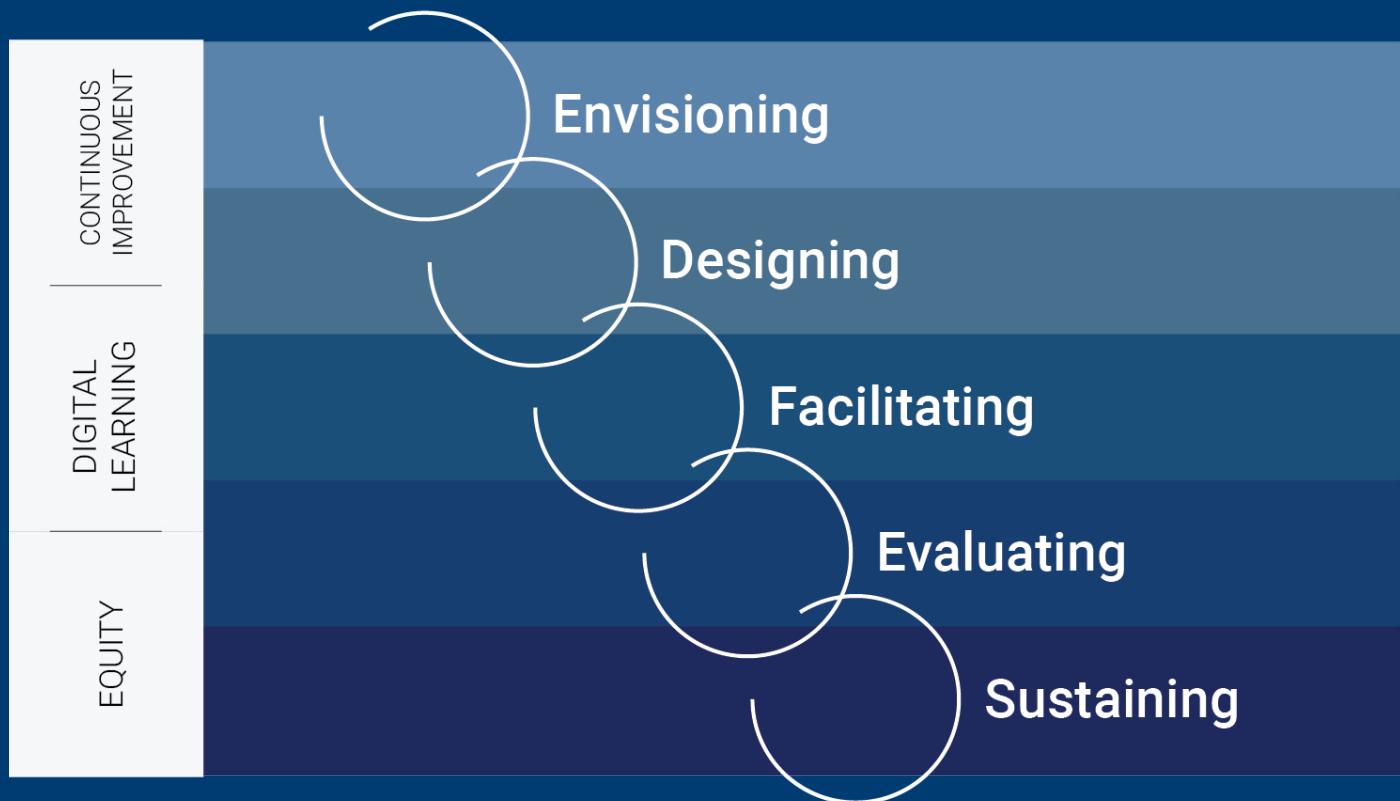
Communities of practice are groups of people who share information, experiences, and practices through collaboration and dialogue in a common area of interest (Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice provide a shared context for people to communicate and circulate information, stories, and personal experiences in a way that builds new understanding and insights. They enable dialogue between people who come together to learn, solve shared problems, and create new, mutually beneficial opportunities. They also support group problem-solving by introducing collaborative processes to encourage the free flow of ideas and exchange of information. Ideally, communities of practice help practitioners generate new knowledge that will transform their practice and accommodate needed change.

Within a teaching and learning context, communities of practice members seek to explore everyday problems, emerging trends, new practices, and complex challenges with a focus on improving teaching practices and equitable learning experiences for students. With intentionality, we can center student experiences and ensure a reflexive and accessible process that supports all community members. Communities of practice provide educators with an opportunity to identify solutions to shared problems that promotes self-reflection and offers a process to evaluate best practices. Because communities of practice are by necessity formed based on the needs of their members, it can be challenging to specify how they should operate. However, each community of practice shares some common features, and intentional design can facilitate better communication, inclusion of diverse perspectives, and goal setting and evaluation for facilitators and members alike.



This playbook presents five stages of communities of practice work and dedicates a section to each: envisioning, designing, facilitating, evaluating, and sustaining. Each section highlights actionable strategies for managing each stage of the process and embeds considerations related to equity, digital learning, and a focus on continuous improvement. Far from being additive, these aspects of communities of practice work are foundational to the entire lifecycle and warrant consideration at all stages. Finally, we provide an appendix that references examples of communities of practice that might serve as models for others interested in this work.

The Communities of Practice Lifecycle.



Envisioning

Envisioning involves identifying your audience, vision, purpose, goals for the community experience, and intended outcomes. When identifying who your audience is in the context of higher education, it is helpful to ask who the community of practice is for and what participants and stakeholders need in order to feel like they are included and they belong.

It also involves identifying the key issues the community is responsive to and the nature of the learning, knowledge, and tasks that the community will steward. Once these are identified, the purpose, goals, and outcomes can be articulated. This can involve consideration of the benefits to stakeholders beyond the community and understanding the needs the group intends to meet.

Consider the following steps to guide the start of your envisioning process:

1. Conduct a needs assessment of community members, including higher education practitioners, students, and decision makers. Consider an assessment plan that includes informal discussions, formal interviews, surveys, and/or focus groups.
2. Work with a core planning team to define the benefits of the community for all stakeholders, including individual community members, defined subgroups, the community as a whole, and any sponsoring organization (centers for teaching and learning, departments, colleges, higher ed supporting organizations and non-profits, companies engaged in continuous learning) that might be supporting this endeavor.
3. Craft a vision statement that will lead to the development of the purpose, goals, and outcomes, tying these to the sponsoring organization's mission and vision if appropriate. In some cases, a vision statement can be created with participants as part of the initial activities of the practice. In order to ensure that the vision statement and the purpose, goals, and outcomes resonate for the community members, it is important to have reflective dialogue across and among the community and its stakeholders. This can occur with select community members and should continue as the community is officially launched to ensure that the facilitators and community members are in alignment about the vision and purpose. Such actions instill an equitable design approach to the foundation and culture of the community.
4. Identify an artifact, resource, or presentation that participants will develop as either a representation of their learning, an action plan for implementing a strategy, or an asset that operationalizes a goal, such as equitizing a department-wide syllabus template. This helps participants stay engaged and work together over time to build, iterate, and consider scaling.
5. Before launching, it is helpful to identify the major topic areas for community content and exploration, but it's important to allow topics to shift, change, and emerge over time, which requires facilitators to be nimble, adaptive, and responsive.
6. Consider what digital spaces will be created to support the work (i.e. a learning management system course page, a set of shared documents, digital white boards, etc.). There are a myriad of digital design options to choose from that can support collaborative work, including shared and editable digital spaces for collective note taking, brainstorming activities, co-creating activity banks, and action plans.

Envisioning: Guiding Questions

- Equity: How has the community defined benefits for all participants? How has the community solicited reflective feedback from all members when composing the vision statement?
- Digital learning: Which digital platforms/tools will be created to support the work? How do these tools support collaboration, brainstorming, resource sharing, and other needs as determined by your community? How has the community considered accessibility and access concerns when choosing these platforms/tools?
- Continuous improvement: What will success look like for the community? What is the community's intended purpose, goals, and outcomes?

Envisioning



Designing

The design process focuses our attention on the logistics, management, and design decisions needed to bring the vision to life. The design should intentionally cultivate a dynamic of peer-to-peer learning that fosters collaboration, creates new knowledge, generates solutions, and sustains growth in the teaching and learning practices of faculty, staff, and institutions as a whole.

An effective community of practice functions as a mutual learning environment where practitioners are committed to improving their practice and building new knowledge and resources. This means that the community structure and platform should not be rigid and restrictive; instead, it should be designed to enable thoughtful and strong facilitation that creates an environment that supports emergent learning.

The design of a community of practice can include synchronous experiences such as a monthly meeting that can be conducted live online or face to face and be supported by designing a digital space such as a course site in a learning management system often available to educators. The digital space can house resources, engage participants between meetings, and capture new and emergent ideas.

Synchronous Meeting Design

When designing each synchronous meeting or session, it is best to plan for a lower ratio of content to discussion time. For example, developing a 20- to 30-minute presentation as part of a two-hour synchronous session sets the stage for creating robust peer-to-peer exchange of ideas and developing new knowledge and solutions. The key is to develop a meaningful question that invites participants to contextualize issues, content, and ideas to their institutions and professional practice.

Examples of a meaningful opening questions include:

- How could this work in your context?
- What issues would this solve?
- How do you see this playing out in your classroom or department?

It is also helpful to facilitate activities such as applying a new framework to their context, asking to identify what might be missing, or asking what digital tools might support solutions.

When designing a synchronous session and its activities, keep in mind that the purpose of a community of practice is not just to share existing information, but also to create new knowledge, resources, and solutions, making it important to encourage contributions from everyone. This means making sure there is space for different levels of faculty and administrators to participate.

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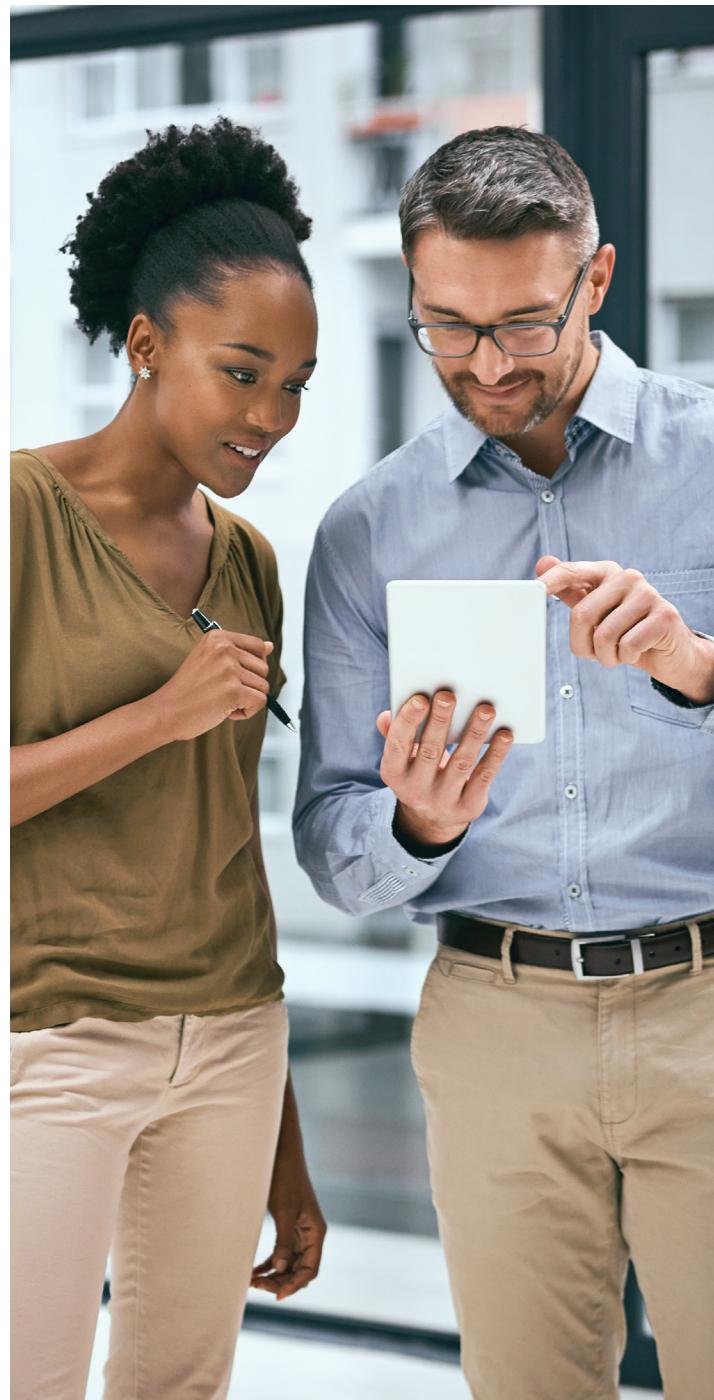
For example, find ways to vary perspectives, bring in minoritized voices, and welcome student voices to share feedback on topic selection or offer insight into issues they face. This can be done by identifying expertise in the room to lead aspects of the synchronous sessions. This could involve asking members to present on their research, a teaching strategy, course module, or another topic of interest to the community as a whole. Asking community members to take on support or leadership roles helps cultivate a sense of ownership, solidifies a sense of accountability for continued engagement, and sustains capacity in the facilitation of the community over time.

Establish Continuity and Build Action into Community Structure and Discussion

It is easy to fall into the pattern of scheduling a series of meetings and then making very little progress between meetings. A mature community of practice will include concrete measures for creating continuity and ensuring that practitioners know what they should be working on between meetings.

In order to make meetings feel less disjointed, it can be helpful to design meetings that build on one another by assigning individual or group projects and discussing their progress over time. For example, if there is a meeting one month about sharing strategies for creating a more equitable syllabus, ask participants to return to the next month's session with an example of a revised syllabus. They can be asked to discuss its impact on their students and offer feedback as a group.

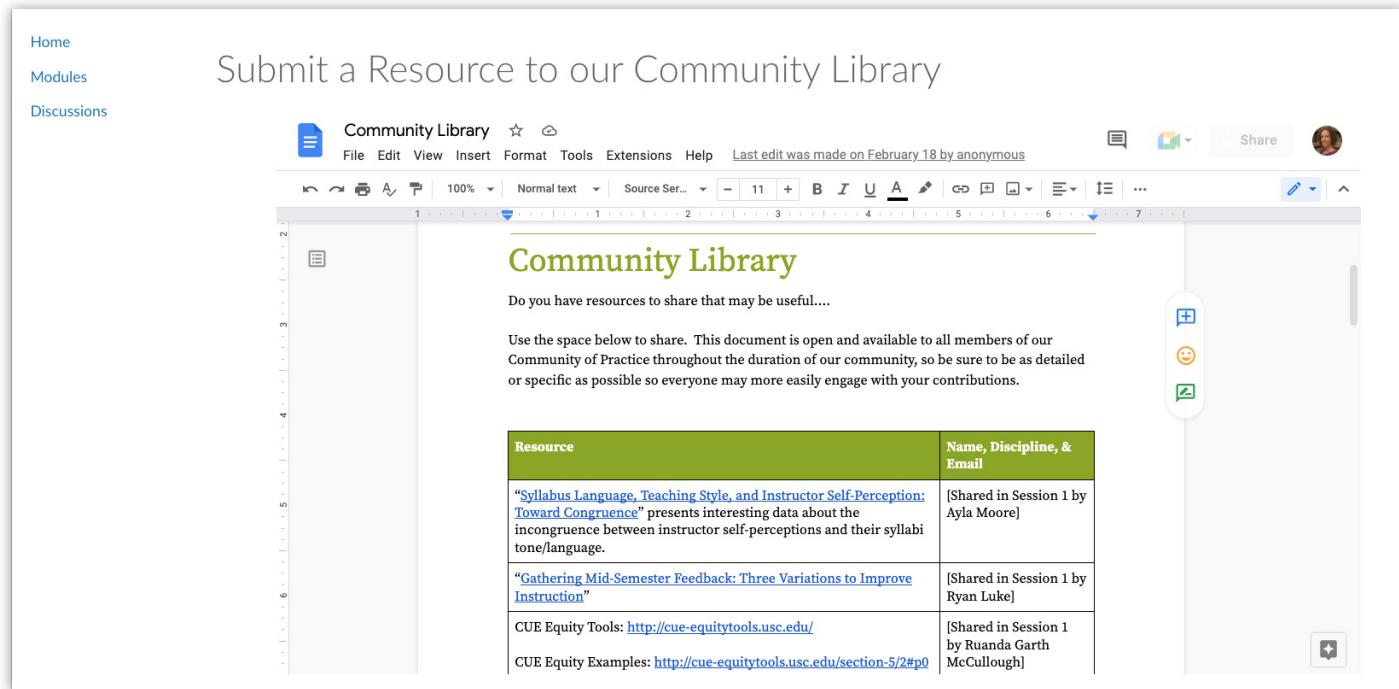
Although communities of practice should be designed to allow for flexibility, many groups will nonetheless have a clearly defined final product or deliverable. It is worth reflecting on what the end product or goal of your community of practice will be and regularly ensuring that the group is collectively working towards it. In other words, there should be a mechanism for turning mere discussion into action, problem-solving, and knowledge-sharing. For example, developing an action plan can help a group identify specific and measurable goals, leverage existing expertise, and make plans for overcoming obstacles.



Digital Space Design for Collaboration

Creating a seamless digital space for participants to engage in both during and after live meetings or sessions enables the community of practice to create a living and breathing artifact that represents both learning and the co-creation of new knowledge and solutions. For example, creating a course site inside of an LMS (Learning Management System) that is dedicated to the community of practice gives participants a “home” for the experience. Modules can be created for each live session with areas for resources shared during the live session and collaborative documents for activities conducted. The LMS can also house digital spaces in the form of a shared document such as a Google doc designed to capture new ideas. The example below shows a designed Google doc with a table that helps participants contribute ideas and indicate their discipline. The shared document’s “Community Library” serves as an artifact for the work.

Compiling Artifacts in a Community Library.



The screenshot shows a Google Doc titled "Community Library". The left sidebar has links for "Home", "Modules", and "Discussions". The main content area has a title "Community Library" and a sub-instruction "Do you have resources to share that may be useful....". Below this is a text block: "Use the space below to share. This document is open and available to all members of our Community of Practice throughout the duration of our community, so be sure to be as detailed or specific as possible so everyone may more easily engage with your contributions." A table is present with the following data:

Resource	Name, Discipline, & Email
"Syllabus Language, Teaching Style, and Instructor Self-Perception: Toward Congruence" presents interesting data about the incongruence between instructor self-perceptions and their syllabi tone/language.	[Shared in Session 1 by Ayla Moore]
"Gathering Mid-Semester Feedback: Three Variations to Improve Instruction"	[Shared in Session 1 by Ryan Luke]
CUE Equity Tools: http://cue-equitytools.usc.edu/ CUE Equity Examples: http://cue-equitytools.usc.edu/section-5/2#p0	[Shared in Session 1 by Ruanda Garth McCullough]

During a live session, one facilitator can be designated to capture new ideas in the chat and place them inside of a shared document, such as the above community library document, which creates a living and breathing space for new ideas.

Digital spaces are most useful when they provide a relevant and well-organized resource that is set up for a two-way discussion or provides a place to ask questions outside of live session time. Planning teams can be thoughtful about the best use of a digital space for idea generation or to simply capture existing resources to reference later. It is also helpful to house a shared document in one place but provide a link to it multiple times during live sessions and in follow-up emails.

Creating an activity where participants visit a digital space such as a shared document can go a long way in focusing attention around a question prompt and generating new ideas based on what other members wrote. The beauty of using a shared document space is that all participants can contribute, edit, comment, and ask questions.

Below is an example of a virtual, collaborative whiteboard activity used during a discipline-specific community of practice. In support of a discussion on authentic assessment design, participants were asked to answer two questions using sticky notes on a Miro digital white board.

Miro Board Collaborative Activity.

Directions

To answer a question on the right, create or grab a blank sticky note. Be sure to include only one thought on each sticky note. You can add as many thoughts/sticky notes as you want!

If you see an answer that you share, be sure to react to the sticky note!

To create a new sticky note:

1. Click on the box with a folded corner in the left menu.
2. Click and drag the sticky note you want to this main area.
3. You can type in the note and drag it where you want or you can place it then type!

--OR--

Copy (CTRL+C) and Paste (CTRL+V) one of the blank notes below!

A Continuous Improvement Approach: Starting with the Purpose in Mind

As you work with your team to envision your purpose, goals, and outcomes, and design the structure and management of your community of practice, you'll also want to consider how to evaluate the community experience as it is implemented and refined over time. We propose approaching all stages—from envisioning to sustaining—with a continuous improvement approach to evaluation and refinement. This means ensuring that the community is regularly evaluating its progress toward the goals, purposes, and outcomes the community identified in the envisioning stage. This approach provides a few important benefits. First, it provides community members with multiple opportunities to share feedback, which facilitates the timely sharing of important ideas and concerns. This can also prevent participants from getting lost in a process that does not work for them and/or focusing on topics that do not benefit the group. Regular checkpoints create opportunities for all members to express their ideas, reflect on progress or changing needs, and refocus on the community's stated goals.

To effectively evaluate the health, quality, and efficacy of communities of practice over time, we look to the criteria outlined by Barab et al. (2012), which expanded upon the foundational work of Lave and Wenger (1991). Barab et al. (2012) highlight six characteristics of equitable research design, which we encourage communities to adopt as a framework for their evaluation process. These six characteristics are outlined below alongside a set of questions for your design team to consider as they move through the development process:

- 1. A common practice and shared enterprise** – What binds the community together as something larger than the individual? Is there a shared understanding of goals and desired outcomes that reflects the diverse needs and interests of the community itself and those it seeks to serve? Who is centered as an expert and how can that be shared?
- 2. Opportunities for interaction and participation** – How does the community provide its members with a diverse array of opportunities to engage and interact with each other? Do all community members have equitable access to engage and participate in the community? Does the structure and modality of the community reflect the diverse learning needs and styles of community members? Are members' emotional and physical well-being valued?
- 3. Mutual interdependence** – How does the community work together around common areas of interest that are situated within an understanding of how the community will address broader cultural and systemic inequities? How does that work serve to bond the community and elevate the unique backgrounds, skills, and expertise of its community members? Does the community work together to solve problems and find ways to share ideas that extend beyond the community itself? Are members' identities, cultural experiences, and prior experiences invited?
- 4. Overlapping histories, practices, and understanding among members** – Does the community have a sense of who its members are, their backgrounds and positionalities, their expertise, and their intentions for participating in the community? Do they have a sense of how everyone has, is, and will contribute to the broader goals and mission of community members? Is there an established understanding of how community members will engage with each other that is developed in an inclusive, collaborative way? Is an understanding of who has the power and the privilege discussed and identified?
- 5. Mechanisms for reproduction** – Is the community designed in a way that will welcome and integrate newcomers into the practices and decision making around how the community is designed, what it seeks to achieve, and how it is facilitated? Are all community members, new and old, empowered to participate and contribute? Does the design and structure of the community lend itself to growing or changing over time—as is needed through the community's evolution?
- 6. Respect for diverse perspectives and viewpoints** – Does the community environment provide an open, accessible, and welcome space for all its members, and does it do so in a way that prioritizes and addresses the systemic barriers and inequities faced by those from historically marginalized groups? Does the structure and content of the community reflect on and critique cultural, systemic, and historical inequities and how it might reproduce those through its own practices—striving to address and eliminate such barriers?

Designing: Guiding Questions

- Equity: How has the community welcomed all members to engage in its design process? How will the community address systematic inequities and barriers for minoritized populations in its process (facilitation and evaluation) and strive to eliminate these barriers in practice?
- Digital learning: How will community members engage within the digital platforms and tools you've chosen to use? How will the group archive artifacts, resources, and meeting notes so they are easily accessible to all members? What training might community members need to effectively use the selected tools? How can the community ensure that digital platforms remain a brave space for all members?
- Continuous improvement: What regular checkpoints has the community agreed upon? How will the community evaluate progress, continued benefit to all members, and sustained focus on mission (surveys, open discussion, focus groups, etc.)? How frequently will the group check in, formally or informally?

Designing



Facilitating

An equity-minded approach to facilitation starts with creating opportunities for all members to engage in discovery, contribution, and ownership. Facilitators will be most successful when they plan in advance, employ a thoughtful and collaborative tone, and prioritize the emotional and physical well-being of the group. This means paying attention to the power dynamics in the room, acknowledging privilege, inviting diverse perspectives, and celebrating existing assets. It also means being flexible, embracing unpredictability, and identifying and addressing barriers to create an inclusive and safe environment for collaboration.

Brave Spaces

Facilitators can cultivate a brave space by modeling honesty and self-awareness, which can help participants find comfort in being vulnerable about subjects they struggle with professionally or pedagogically. The community culture can reinforce a commitment to meeting faculty members where they are and find ways to support their emerging needs. By inviting transparency to what is arising in real-time, facilitators can direct conversation and inquiry that acknowledges intention vs. impact while also making decisions regarding when to move on. Some questions to ask ourselves as facilitators include: How do I acknowledge my privilege and affirm participants' lived experiences and cultural identities? How can I identify and mitigate barriers to help make an inclusive learning environment for folks who have not historically been centered in these spaces?

Community Building

It is important to set the stage for your community to allow for all levels of participation, and to empower all participants to contribute regardless of their role. We can ask ourselves: Am I recognizing members' emotional and physical well-being? Is everyone able to access and participate in meaningful learning and community building opportunities? Am I engaging their identities, cultural experiences, and prior experiences? One foundational way to build community and create an open environment is to have facilitators make time to check in and chat with colleagues. Although it can be tempting to begin a meeting by launching right into the agenda, it's also critical to make sure everyone has been introduced and make time to get to know colleagues on a more personal level. This can be done by creating opportunities for participants to share what's on their mind, what they're working on currently, and what recent successes and challenges they've experienced. This builds connection and a sense of belonging that can invite more engagement and contributions from all members.

Another action that supports equitable facilitation and safe space creation is listening for understanding. Seeking to understand and empathize with others' experiences and reactions, particularly those with different identities, sets the stage for authentic engagement, sharing, and active listening.

Inclusive Facilitation

Facilitators can structure conversations to support multiple perspectives and ways of processing information. Often, simply giving some time for participants to process individually or with a partner before a whole group conversation helps bring new voices into the discussion. Facilitators can additionally scan the group to pay attention to and react to trends in conversations and think about who is speaking up. Some questions to consider include who is staying silent, and why? It is also true that silence is not always a concern, as everyone processes differently and some need more time, so providing multiple ways to share is important. Facilitators might also ask the group how they can support new voices joining the conversation.

Co-creating Shared Norms

Agreeing on shared norms can help set the conditions for a safe learning environment where all voices are welcomed and heard. This allows groups to explore learning moments thoughtfully and with authentic curiosity. Facilitators should regularly draw on the insights of others. This means developing a network of colleagues with different identities and perspectives to help facilitators and planning teams notice and compensate for any blind spots in planning, facilitating, and reflecting on discussions.

Allowing for Emergent Learning

It is helpful to recognize that learning happens in every element and phase of a community of practice experience. The learning may be in the activity planned, but it may also be in a critical moment that arises during a conversation and is worth unpacking as a group. Facilitators and participants collectively can balance and discover over time when to follow an agenda and when to take pause. This can mean being mindful to acknowledge resistance to racial equity and address them directly. When possible, acknowledge the detours, myths, or misconceptions to expect and name and debunk them upfront. One way to disrupt any harmful behaviors that may arise is using the DUB method (Describe, Understand and Bridge). The DUB method is an invitation to slow down our thinking and make better-informed decisions about what we believe and how to respond (Nam & Condon, 2010).

- Describe: Be objective. Leverage your senses and describe what you notice, without judgment.
- Understand: Seek to understand what's going on. Research and get curious.
- Bridge: After getting a clarity of the behaviors and actions observed you can make a decision on how to react to the situation.

Facilitating: Guiding Questions

- Equity: How do facilitator(s) and community members acknowledge their privilege and listen for understanding? In what ways does the group center the voices of historically marginalized persons and foster inclusive group learning? How do all members name and strive to remove barriers for members of marginalized groups?
- Digital learning: How are community members engaging with the selected digital platforms and tools? As new needs arise, are expectations for digital engagement changing? If so, has the group reflected on this? How is the labor of digital archivism and resource tracking being distributed across the community?
- Continuous improvement: How do facilitators allow for flexibility while preventing mission drift? How does the facilitation process currently serve members? Who is speaking, and who is not speaking? Are there better ways to engage all members who would like to participate and ensure that several voices are not dominating the discussion?

Facilitating



Evaluating

Evaluating the community of practice experience provides an opportunity to honor the growth of its members and advance any resources that have been generated. While evaluation is not always required for communities of practice, it can benefit members by guiding goal setting early in the process, ensuring group accountability, and measuring the value of the experience for participants. It can also facilitate the community's storytelling about their process and results within and outside of the experience (Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium, 2016).

It is important to note that the purpose and goals of a community of practice will directly influence its evaluation process. Most communities will choose to evaluate member engagement, relevance of discussions, and usefulness to members in order to ensure that all members are benefiting from the experience. In other cases, communities will want to evaluate the impact of their work beyond the experience. In still other cases, evaluation will encompass both of these focus areas. We pay particular attention to the former in this playbook; all communities of practice should engage in a continuous improvement process to evaluate and refine the experience, but they will not always have external goals.

Although we isolate evaluation as a separate stage to highlight its importance and provide actionable strategies, a community of practice should ideally facilitate evaluation throughout its lifecycle. Communities should establish a process for evaluation during the early stages of the experience. During the envisioning and design phases, in particular, the articulated purpose, goals, and outcomes of the community will lead to defining what success will look like. As you outline the intended outcomes, you can create a plan for how to track and measure the community's progress towards those outcomes. The group should determine a regular schedule for evaluation to facilitate continuous improvement of practices, which allows for real-time adjustment when a community has drifted from its original purpose and goals.

Criteria for Effectively Evaluating your Community of Practice

Community members can identify measures of success early in the process to determine whether or not they are meeting their stated goals. During regular checkpoints, members can consider their progress as individuals and groups over time.

Questions to consider include:

- In what ways has the group made progress towards its stated goals?
- How has the group spurred individual growth and development?
- How has the community of practice facilitated collaboration?
- How does the group resolve conflicts and disputes that arise?
- Does the cadence and pace of the community of practice meet the group's needs?
- How are member contributions recognized?
- Do the original goals continue to reflect the needs of members?
- (How) do the technological platforms facilitate discussion and collaboration?

An especially foundational question to regularly ask is: How does the group invite and recognize multiple perspectives and viewpoints? This question serves two purposes. First, it reminds members that they should be actively seeking viewpoints that will differ from their own. It also reminds members that such perspectives should be honored and respectfully engaged with when they are shared. This is especially true of minoritized perspectives that should be sought and welcomed in community of practice discussions. An equity-minded approach to evaluating communities requires sustained mindfulness to whose voices are missing from conversations and grappling with privilege that may be amplifying certain perspectives over others. Group dynamics within the community of practice must be routinely interrogated to ensure that privileged voices are not speaking for minoritized voices.

Communities will want to pose these questions, or others as determined by the community, by inviting feedback directly from members. For instance, facilitators can conduct brief surveys, interviews, or focus groups with community members to gauge their satisfaction and acquire their input on the direction of the community. You might also facilitate conversations with the community during live sessions, encouraging members to provide direct feedback about the quality of the community.

Using Evaluation to Improve your Community of Practice

Once you have established the criteria for evaluating your community of practice and gathered insights from your community, you will want to engage in an inclusive continuous improvement process that makes feedback transparent to members and empowers them to act on it.

One important concern is ensuring that the community's insights are transparent to all members for reflection and analysis. It is crucial that members hear from one another about their experiences, evolving interests, and shifting goals for the community. To ensure transparency, facilitators might choose to collect all reflections electronically and share them with the group for asynchronous reflection. In other cases, members might evaluate the community during a synchronous discussion, though in such cases it can be helpful to record the session or ask someone to take notes so the group can track discussion points, concerns, and insights over time.

Equally important is ensuring that community members are empowered to make decisions about how to act on what the group learns during the evaluation process. Communities should collaboratively consider which practices and attributes are helpful and should be carried forward based on the group's insights. Groups should additionally identify which practices require further examination, modification, or removal from the structure and practice of the community. Members can also be prepared to address shifting priorities of members, which may lead to conversations about sustaining or ending a community of practice.

Evaluating: Guiding Questions

- Equity: How has the community invited and engaged with feedback from all members, particularly those from marginalized groups? Are the feedback forums/tools accessible to all members? How is the labor of ensuring that DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) measures are met distributed throughout the community?
- Digital learning: (How) have digital platforms and tools served the community's needs and fostered collaboration? Are process adjustments or new platforms needed?
- Continuous improvement: How does your continuous improvement process make feedback transparent to all participants? How has the community empowered members to act upon collected feedback? How well has the evaluation schedule served all members' needs? Does the pace of the community's work benefit all members?

Evaluating



Sustaining

There are several considerations that must be made in determining the long-term sustainability of a community of practice. These factors depend on the natural progression of the community itself. Through the continuous improvement evaluation process, the community will eventually need to consider one of three options:

- The community of practice should continue with a similar purpose, goal(s), and structure;
- The community should evolve to focus on a new purpose and new goals and/or its structure should change;
- The community should disperse.

In determining which option best meets member needs, communities should draw on evaluation feedback to decide whether the community has served its purpose. It is also important to consider whether the original roles laid out by the planning committee should remain, or whether facilitators should step back and leave the communities of practice in the hands of the community members. Ultimately, the future of a community of practice depends on whether it continues to serve that community and provide ongoing benefits to participants.

As you think about the future of your community, it's also important to be flexible and recognize that the needs and interests of the community may shift over time. It is necessary to revisit and reflect upon your earlier definitions and measures of success. Does success look different to your community now compared to when you started? How have goals shifted and/or been met over time such that the community wants to pursue new directions?

If the group decides to sustain a community of practice, they should collaboratively chart the future of the community. Wilson-Mah and Walinga (2017) identify several key practical issues that communities of practice should consider when discussing the sustainability of their community, including orienting new members, process, leadership, focus/purpose, communications, sustaining interest and commitment, and membership (p. 30-32). Below, we draw on these issues to provide guidance for communities looking to effectively sustain an ongoing community of practice. We also build upon this framework by adding a focus on continuous improvement and equitable design.

It is important to note that these issues are vital to consider at all stages of the community lifecycle, especially when envisioning and evaluating the community. However, we would encourage community members to negotiate these issues in particular when considering whether to sustain, alter, or dissolve a community of practice.

Membership – Consider how new members are being oriented and which roles and responsibilities old and new members should be responsible for going forward. There should be established roles, but with opportunity for flexibility. Are new members integrated into the community such that they feel a sense of belonging? Are opportunities created for both older and newer members to take on new roles where the multiple voices, experience, and expertise is leveraged? Are voices missing from discussions that should be included?

Process – Communities should reflect on the efficacy of their continuous improvement process and consider how to evaluate, reflect on, and make modifications to the community's purpose, goals, and structure over time. This should be done collaboratively and equitably with the community members, ensuring that the evolution of the community of practice is aligned with the community members it is meant to serve.

Leadership – Traditional leadership roles or hierarchies are not necessarily applicable in a community where organic, emergent, self-sustaining interests are centered. The communities of practice should consider discussing the various roles and responsibilities of a communities of practice leader, further reflecting on the inherent privileges that leadership affords and considering in what ways community members themselves might be empowered to participate in the design, facilitation, and sustained engagements of the communities of practice.

While group facilitators should be mindful of the limitations of their role, communities function much more smoothly when there is a specific person or persons responsible for guiding and maintaining their activities. This is true both for the facilitation of live meetings and the management of asynchronous spaces, such as a LMS course site or message board.

Focus/Purpose – Identifying, aligning, and revisiting the community's focus and purpose is critical to sustainability. The goals and objectives of your community should be clearly established and communicated across the community. Further, community members' input should be collected and integrated into the decision-making about the community's evolving focus over time. If the community no longer has an agreed-upon focus and purpose, then the community of practice is no longer serving the community.

Communications – Communities should consider what channels and content will be shared or sustained, the process for accessing information, and the tools or platforms that will be used for logistics and documentation. This can be done by capturing and sharing the knowledge that is generated from the community. Facilitators can find ways to transparently share this within the community but also identify ways to showcase the community's activities and lessons with a broader audience (e.g, publications, blog postings, presentations, white papers). This will serve to not only celebrate the contributions of the community and its members, but also to promote the community and recruit new members.

We recommend that communities develop a resource inventory for historical and community-generated materials. Create a space for those in planning and facilitation roles to document, share, and collaborate on community design, evaluation, and facilitation materials. This will help continuity and ensure that new members may easily move into leadership roles and that the community will not lose momentum with the departure of a key member.

Maintaining interest and commitment – Focusing on the topics central to the community's interests and needs is critical for the group to continue to evolve. Managing the dialogue of the community, both at the onset and intermittently as activities continue, can support the community in meeting its stated goals and purpose and establishing new or emergent goals. An equitable design approach will ensure that the community takes steps to ensure that all of its members - particularly those from historically marginalized communities - are empowered to engage fully as their authentic selves. This focus on engagement should ensure that their interests are accurately understood and integrated into the community in meaningful ways and that the community engagement platform or facilitation tools are accessible.

Funding and sustaining resources – It is important for the health of the community of practice to secure funding and sustained resource allocation. This can be most easily supported when the purpose of the community of practice directly ties to organizational strategic plans and vision. The goal here is to build ongoing leadership, awareness, and buy-in for the work.

A Note on Reaching the Desired Conclusion of a Community of Practice

Paradoxically, sustaining a community can also mean anticipating and working towards the dissolution of the community. The end goal of a community of practice is often to help participants develop the skills and knowledge needed to achieve their goals and progress to new areas of focus.

It is a very common occurrence for communities to stagnate and lose momentum over time. To work against this effect, it is essential to dedicate at least an equal amount of effort and outreach to keeping the community going as you did for planning and launching the initiative at its onset. Ongoing reflection is required to assess how the community is evolving, sustain interest and excitement among participants, and determine potential ways to help the group move forward.

One strategy is to be intentional about making regular community meetings feel lively and new. Switching up the format of meetings and the voices represented – whether they are “outside” guest speakers or new presenters from within the community – can make a huge difference in terms of holding participants’ interest.

The logical result of striving to engage participants to become community leaders is that the initial facilitators can eventually hand off facilitation duties to the leads from the community. For this to be successful, however, prospective leaders will need the initial exposure to a well-facilitated community of practice in order to experience it first-hand, learn from it, and take on a leadership role themselves.

Give time and space to make sure accomplishments have been captured so they can be shared more broadly to educate others. Also, be sure to document and archive any artifacts, presentations, or project elements in case others want to resume the community and re-engage in conversations at a later time.

Sustaining: Guiding Questions

- Equity: How should facilitator roles be allocated moving forward? Should the current facilitators continue to lead, or should new facilitators take on this work? What has worked well and what should be adjusted in terms of facilitation thus far? What role have facilitators played in the community, and does this role need to change? Which voices and perspectives are missing from the current community, and how does the community plan to address this?
- Digital learning: How can the community share the archived materials and assets with their broader community through presentations, publication, research, etc.? What is the recruitment plan for new members? How will the community maintain records in the event of facilitator/member turnover and platform changes?
- Continuous improvement: How have goals shifted and/or been met over time? Does the community have additional goals they would like to pursue? How should the structure, leadership, and process the group has implemented be adjusted moving forward? How can the community evolve to maintain engagement? If the group plans to dissolve, how does the community plan to honor achievements and discuss next steps?



Sustaining

Conclusion

This playbook provides practitioners, facilitators, and educators with actionable strategies for successfully envisioning, designing, facilitating, evaluating, and sustaining a community of practice. We also provide a framework for communities of practice that embeds three fundamental elements: equity-minded design, thoughtful digital technology usage, and continuous improvement. Our intent is to inspire individuals to develop and facilitate thriving communities of practice that identify relevant issues facing educators today, offer solutions to shared challenges, generate new knowledge, and support all members in forwarding their goals.

We welcome readers who are interested in learning more about communities of practice to review the attached appendix (see page 27), which highlights active communities and provides generative examples for practitioners with a range of interests. We further encourage readers to reference [Every Learner Everywhere's "Communities of Practice in the Higher Education Landscape: A Literature Review" by Tina Rettler-Pagel \(2023\)](#) for an excellent overview of the last thirty years of scholarship in this area. Her review captures emerging trends in communities of practice research that will be helpful for those interested in the future of this work.

While our playbook's focus is on providing actionable strategies that guide participants through the lifecycle of a community of practice, we acknowledge that it is impossible to prescribe what a community experience should look like in all cases. Indeed, communities of practice facilitate nuance, creativity, collaboration, and emergent learning, which are elements that limit our abilities to be overly prescriptive. Additionally, success for the community experience should ultimately be defined by the community itself. Nonetheless, we hope this playbook will serve as a guide for those undertaking this work and provide a roadmap for opportunities and challenges to consider along the way. We also hope that this work will inspire other practitioners to further develop and interrogate current approaches to communities of practice work. In particular, there is a need for focused attention on how to create communities that center marginalized voices that have been historically excluded in higher education. We encourage those pursuing this important work to begin with intentionality and a commitment to listening.

Appendix

Examples of Communities of Practice

Several examples of existing and past higher education communities of practice are found in scholarly works, organizational websites, blog posts, and other resources. The following list of communities of practice includes some examples that represent a variety of communities of practice in higher education, as found on institutional websites:

- University of Colorado Boulder hosts an Online Pedagogy Community of Practice to amplify existing exemplary work, but more importantly the mission of the community is to “create a space for dialogue that builds trusted relationships among collaborators by sharing effective strategies and practices, encountering challenges with empathy, and facing change with community. This is not “just another meeting” – this is a network of trusted collaborators invested in doing what we do, better.” Source: [Online Pedagogy Communities of Practice | UC Boulder](#)
- Librarians at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas developed and implemented an inclusive teaching community of practice with members of their instruction department to foster a culture of discussing inequity in higher education, to develop and implement inclusive teaching practices, and to cultivate a shared responsibility to be equitable instructors and colleagues. The article highlights the importance of library workers from majority groups, especially white library workers, to engage meaningfully in educational equity work to lessen the burdens faced by those with marginalized identities, particularly BIPOC library workers, and to ultimately foster educational equity for all by creating inclusive workspaces, libraries, and learning experiences (Marineo et al., 2022).
- Oregon State University’s faculty are invited to organize communities of practice through a proposal process through the Office of Faculty Affairs. Approved communities are required to submit a summary report. Current and past communities of practice include Inclusive Excellence in Marine Programs, Research for Undergraduates Network, and the Community for the Advancement of Antiracist Instruction. Source: [Communities of Practice | Oregon State University](#)
- The University of Washington invites colleagues with similar information technology interests to join communities to “share common skills, technologies, or methodologies” to identify practices that promote the participation and success of people with disabilities in education and careers. The communities do not meet but instead communicate via email. Some communities include AccessCyberLearning, Accessible Distance Learning, Broadening Participation, Universal Design in Higher Education, and Veterans. Source: [Communities of Practice | DO-IT Center | University of Washington](#)

- The University of California-Santa Barbara has a Student Affairs Assessment Initiative Community of Practice to support the professional development of Student Affairs staff. The topics are centered around student services and student affairs activities, such as the upcoming community topic, "Transfer Students' Experiences Navigating Financial Aid." Source: [Community of Practice | University of California, Santa Barbara](#)
- As a response to mitigating COVID-19 effects and in the spirit of "leading with racial equity", The Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges offered technology-mediated communities of practice that encouraged social connection, skill-building, information aggregation, problem-solving, and the sharing of resources. They currently have STEM Faculty communities of practice and Workforce communities of practice. Source: [Communities of Practice | SBCTC](#)
- College of DuPage uses inquiry groups and affinity spaces within the communities of practice umbrella. CoD defines inquiry groups as communities of practice centered on and built around examining topics of special interest. They define affinity spaces as providing participants with common interests a collective voice, a sense of community, and professional and personal support. Source: [Communities of Practice | Faculty | College of DuPage \(cod.edu\)](#)
- Orange Coast College has communities of practice specifically targeted to and hosted for part-time faculty. The experiences include celebratory experiences and teaching and learning-centered experiences, such as outcome-centered teaching, enhancing the lecture experience, and engaging with instructional resources. The Source: [Communities of Practice for Part-Time Faculty | Orange Coast College](#)
- California State University San Marcos' Office of Success Coaching offers "Wisdom Exchange" opportunities, which are meant to serve as a communities of practice to support shared participation for all. Source: [Wisdom Exchanges | Office of Success Coaching | CSUSM](#)
- The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) in partnership with Every Learner Everywhere (ELE) created a [Guide to Building a Faculty Learning Community](#). The resource describes how to build and maintain a faculty learning community, details some logistics, and provides a case study from Colorado State University along with testimonials from instructors.
- Through their [ShapingEDU initiative](#), Arizona State University hosts several communities of practice that expand the boundaries of their institution and invite practitioners from around the globe. Some examples/case studies of communities include Community of Practice in Open Education Resources and Pedagogy, Educational Technology and Media MOOC, Faculty Engagement Academies, and FLEXspace - the Flexible Learning Environments Exchange.

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