



Building Adaptive Capacity for  
Resiliency and Agility: A Guide

June 2020

## INTRODUCTION

As we move into a “new normal” where digital and virtual models are playing a larger role in the delivery of instruction and student supports, it’s increasingly important for us to deliver holistic, resilient, equitable, and student-centric systems. This requires transitioning to an adaptive culture that focuses on long-term sustainability through the generation of alternate paths, ideas, modes of operating, and behavioral norms.

Colleges are asking questions such as “How robust and equitable are our programs and supports? Can they adapt to ongoing change, uncertainty and volatility?” ATD recognized many years ago that answers to questions like these are fundamental to improving student outcomes and reducing equity gaps at scale and for the long-term.

ATD also recognized that outcomes improvement cannot be realized or sustained without changing institutional culture. As a result, ATD created the Institutional Capacity Framework based on over ten years of field experience. This experience reinforced the importance of student-centered institutional transformation that improves student success outcomes with equitable results. The Institutional Capacity Framework identifies seven fundamental capacities that are required for sustainable cultural change.

The seven fundamental capacity areas are rooted in larger principles of change management:

- Leadership committing to change
- Embracing the power of data to inform decision making
- Communicating why change is needed
- Restructuring core operations, policies and procedures to effect change
- Bringing people together to plan and execute change
- Fostering a culture of continuous learning and improvement
- Centering equity in all organizational decisions



Figure 1. Institutional Capacity Framework

In times of rapid change, like now, the ability to be flexible and to adapt is critical. Research shows that many organizations are not well equipped to handle the uncertainty, unpredictability, volatility, and complexity that characterizes disruptive times. Colleges that have worked on strengthening their ICAT fundamentals are prepared, however, and we're seeing this as we watch ATD colleges position themselves to be responsive to the challenges of the pandemic and systemic racism.



They are leveraging their organizational strengths to respond to emerging needs and new financial constraints, to move from strategic planning to scenario planning, to allocate resources more strategically, to adapt and respond to change, and to prepare for multiple possible futures.

These organizational strengths create Adaptive Capacity. Adaptive Capacity is defined as the ability to generate or initiate changes in the way we do business that drives improved performance, relevance and impact.

*Figure 2. Adaptive Capacities*



Research also indicates there are several models for building adaptiveness, resiliency, and agility. Generally, adaptive organizations are strong in seven areas. A summary of the research is included in Appendix B to this Guide.

The seven Adaptive Capacities are:

- Innovative: committed to change
- Strategic: clear direction and priorities
- Unified: empowered and committed employees
- Fluid: aligned communications, operations, and structures
- Customer-oriented: student-centered and equity-focused
- Inquisitive: data-informed and learning-centric
- Resourceful: strategic partnerships and resources

## ADAPTIVE CAPACITY FRAMEWORK

This chart explains in more detail what each of the adaptive capacities comprises, how they align with the fundamental ICAT capacities, and how to think about adaptive capacity at your institution.

Innovative	Strategic	Unified	Fluid	Customer Oriented	Inquisitive	Resourceful
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visionary, entrepreneurial, creativity (e.g., launch funds)</li> <li>• Commitment to transformational change</li> <li>• Risk taking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic direction and priorities/goals as a framework for acting</li> <li>• Strong organizational identity and purpose is upheld in difficult times</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaged employees</li> <li>• Empowering organizations</li> <li>• Collaborative organizations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fluid communications</li> <li>• Structural &amp; Operational Fluidity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding, embracing, responding to unique customer needs</li> <li>• Rapid change in services to meet needs in times of crisis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Voracious Learning Organizations</li> <li>• Data informed (capacity to monitor and inspect events, markets, etc.)</li> <li>• Uses metrics and tools to assess changing environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leverages external funds</li> <li>• Leverages external partnerships and alliances</li> <li>• Agile resource deployment &amp; redeployment in turbulent times</li> </ul>

Figure 3. Adaptive Capacity Framework

- **Innovative:** Leadership committed to change is an obvious and necessary capacity. The literature suggests that leaders who take risks are visionary, innovative, creative, and entrepreneurial. They are more adaptable to unpredictable, unplanned, and unexpected change. Leaders/organizations with experience making sense of ambiguous or uncertain situations are more agile in times of crisis. *The ICAT contains questions that relate to risk taking, funding for innovation, transformational change, and celebrating success.*
- **Strategic:** The existence of strong organizational direction and priorities that provide a framework or set of criteria for people to consider when they're making decisions and taking actions. Out of necessity, agile decisions sometimes happen quickly in times of disruption. The literature highlights that organizations with clear strategic direction are also more likely to uphold the organizational identity and purpose in turbulent times. *The ICAT includes questions about the existence of student success vision, student success goals - especially those that advance equity. Alignment of the core work of the institution with vision and goals is also included.*



## Achieving the Dream™

- **Unified:** The literature says that engaged employees are committed employees. Adaptive organizations bring people together and set a constructive tone for conversations. They empower teams by expanding the number of people that are involved in decision making, and delegating authority to people at various levels in the organization. When employees from different functions or programs interact frequently and collaboratively, they understand the linkages between their own work and the organization's strategic goals. *The ICAT contains questions about engaging faculty, staff, and students in the design of student success initiatives and conversations about equity to inform action, fostering a culture of shared leadership and responsibility, effectively organizing to support collaboration and bridge institutional silos, and integrating academic and non-academic supports.*
- **Fluid:** The literature suggests that the ability to communicate top down, horizontally, and bottom up strengthens consensus-building during times of disruption. In addition to flexible communications, flexible structures and processes adapt more quickly to change. Organizations that are experienced with continuous review and modification of policies and practices that create barriers to change are more likely to adapt in times of crisis. *The ICAT contains questions about communication, policies and practices, and a culture of continuous improvement.*
- **Customer-oriented:** The literature states that adaptive organizations understand, embrace, and respond to the unique needs of customers, facilitating rapid change in services or products required to meet unique needs in time of crisis. For community colleges, this means putting students at the forefront of the work and designing/delivering equitable supports to help them survive and thrive. *The ICAT probes whether the college has a clear and compelling definition of equity, cultural needs, and clear understanding of the differences between diversity, equity and inclusion.*
- **Inquisitive:** Adaptive organizations are voracious learners. They seek out data and information, use it to learn and then apply and share their new knowledges. They have a strong culture of inquiry and evidence to monitor events, rapidly assess the changing environment and evaluate progress, impact, and outcomes. These organizations also have a culture of learning and professional development that makes them more open to change. *ICAT questions include the use of data for decision making and ongoing improvement, the level of evidence-based decision making and innovation, and professional development across all levels of the institution.*
- **Resourceful:** The literature tells us organizations with strong external alliances are better equipped to leverage partnerships in times of crisis. The ability to deploy/redeploy resources in support of new strategies is another area of resourcefulness necessary for adaptation to change. *ICAT questions include the extent to which community partnerships are integral to strategy deployment and processes for resource allocation decisions.*

Appendix A crosswalks the ICAT 1.0 and ICAT 1.5 questions to the seven Adaptive Capacities.

We extrapolated data from more than 200 colleges that completed the Institutional Capacity Assessment Tool (ICAT) 1.0 or ICAT 1.5 to get a snapshot of the overall adaptive capacity present today within the ATD network. Not surprisingly, ATD colleges already have a high degree of adaptive capacity.



These results mirror overall capacity strengths for the network across all capacity areas measured by the ICAT. While the ICAT uses words different from customer-oriented, inquisitive, resourceful, or innovative, ATD colleges focus on building strengths in each of those areas. ATD colleges benefit from strong leadership and vision, evidence-based decision making, broad cross-functional engagement, and a culture of continuous learning and improvement.

*Figure 4. Adaptive Capacity within ATD Network*

*Score on 1-4 Scale where 1 = minimal capacity and 4 = exemplary capacity*



## HOW TO USE THE ADAPTIVE CAPACITY FRAMEWORK

The Adaptive Capacity Framework is a conversation starter. It provides information that colleges can use to identify current strengths and to prioritize opportunities to build additional capacity for resiliency, agility, and adaptiveness.

- If you completed either ICAT 1.0 or ICAT 1.5 within the past 2 years, ask us for an Adaptive Capacity Report. This Tableau-based report highlights your scores in each of the 7 Adaptive Capacity Areas, overall, by functional area and area of responsibility.
- If you haven't completed the ICAT 1.0 or ICAT 1.5 or completed it more than 2 years ago, ask us for the Adaptive Capacity ICAT that you can administer at your college.

Please contact Yu Sun ([ysun@achievingthedream.org](mailto:ysun@achievingthedream.org)) for further information.

When you have your results, schedule a reflective discussion, such as a capacity (world) café to provide various stakeholders opportunities to discuss the findings and identify what you can do to strengthen the capacities that colleges will need to overcome the unpredictability, volatility, and relentless change that will characterize the near future. ATD coaches have been trained to facilitate these reflective discussions, including small and large-scale conversations with virtual break-out groups.

## APPENDIX A - CROSSWALKING THE ICAT AND ADAPTIVE CAPACITIES

**Capacity Areas:**

L&V: Leadership & Vision  
S&P: Strategy & Planning

D&T: Data & Technology  
P&P: Policies & Practices

E&C: Engagement & Communication  
T&L: Teaching & Learning

EQ: Equity

### Innovative

**Adaptivity Factors Contributing to Effective & Efficient Response to Change**

**Comparable ICAT 1.0 Questions**

**Comparable ICAT 1.5 Questions**

While leaders do not necessarily have to create a sense of urgency in times of extreme disruption, leadership commitment to change is an obvious and necessary capacity for responding to change in times of crisis. Literature suggests leaders who take risks and are visionary, innovative, entrepreneurial, and creative are more adaptable to unpredictable, unplanned, and unexpected environmental change. Additionally, leaders/organizations with experience making sense of ambiguous or uncertain situations tend to be more agile in times of crisis (tolerance for ambiguity). The literature also suggests that leaders who reward and motivate employees are more adaptable to change.

L&V Q6: Do college leaders seek transformational change to improve the student experience?

L&V Q7: Do college leaders encourage open dialog and risk-taking?

L&V Q6: Are leaders willing to take risks to improve student outcomes and narrow equity gaps?

S&P Q6: Does the institution set aside funds to encourage development of innovative, new student success initiatives (e.g. launch fund)?

L&V Q8: Do leaders celebrate early wins to motivate faculty and staff to act in support of student success?

## Strategic

### Adaptivity Factors Contributing to Effective & Efficient Response to Change

**Strategic Direction:** Existence of strong organizational direction and priorities provides a framework or set of criteria for people to consider when making decisions and taking actions in times of crisis. The literature suggests that colleges with clear strategic direction are also more likely to uphold organizational identity and purpose in turbulent times.

### Comparable ICAT 1.0 Questions

L&V Q2: Is the student success vision used to set priorities and direct action?

S&P Q6: Does the college focus on a set of high-priority student success goals?

EQ Q3: Does the strategic plan include goals to advance equity?

### Comparable ICAT 1.5 Questions

L&V Q1: Does the institution have a clear and compelling vision for student success?

S&P Q1: Does the institution's strategic plan focus on a clearly defined set of student success goals?

L&V Q2: Do leaders ensure the core work of the institution aligns with student success vision and goals?

EQ: Q1: Does the institution's strategic plan include measurable goals and strategies to advance equity?

## Unified

### Adaptivity Factors Contributing to Effective & Efficient Response to Change

### Comparable ICAT 1.0 Questions

### Comparable ICAT 1.5 Questions

**Engaging:** The literature says that engaged employees are committed employees. The degree to which employees connect to their work and feel committed to organizational goals can impact their response to change. Active and continuous involvement helps employees understand the link between their own work and strategic goals/direction of the organization.

E&C Q1: Does the college engage multiple internal stakeholders in student success work?

P&P Q7: Does the college effectively involve internal stakeholders in implementing and improving student success policies and practices?

EQ Q6: Is the college community broadly engaged in conversations about equity?

E&C Q3: Is broad-based input from faculty, staff, and students solicited to inform student success efforts?

E&C Q4: Are faculty, staff, and students engaged in the design of student success initiatives?

EQ Q6: Are all members of the institution broadly engaged in conversations about equity to inform action?

P&P Q3: Are internal and external stakeholders engaged in development and improvement of policies and practices that help more students succeed?

**Empowering:** According to the literature, expanding the number of people involved in important decision making creates a more agile organization in times of crisis. Involving more people in decision making helps develop leadership and management skills of many

L&V Q9: Does a culture of shared leadership for student success exist across all levels of the college?

S&P Q7: Is a climate of shared responsibility for student success established across all levels of the institution?



## Unified

### Adaptivity Factors Contributing to Effective & Efficient Response to Change

### Comparable ICAT 1.0 Questions

### Comparable ICAT 1.5 Questions

employees. When employees are empowered, authority is delegated at various levels for people to act in times of crisis. According to the literature, decentralized and flat organizational structures respond better to change.

E&C Q4: Does the college empower those engaged in student success work to take action?

S&P Q9: Do faculty and staff prioritize student success among competing objectives?

T&L Q1: Are faculty engaged as change agents in improving student success?

L&V Q8: Do faculty initiate and lead efforts to improve student success?

**Collaborative:** The literature shows that when employees from different functions or programs interact frequently, there is a shared view of power and collaborative/coordinated approaches to unexpected change are more likely. This minimizes silos or divisive social, cultural, and behavioral barriers that create disjointed, disconnected ways of working in times of crisis.

S&P Q7: Is responsibility for student success goals clearly defined and broadly shared?

S&P Q8: Are initiative teams effectively organized and mobilized to bridge institutional silos and foster collaboration/coordination?

T&L Q10: Is the institution working towards integration of academic and non-academic support for students?

## Fluid

### Adaptivity Factors Contributing to Effective & Efficient Response to Change

### Comparable ICAT 1.0 Questions

### Comparable ICAT 1.5 Questions

**Fluid Communications:** While there is less of a need to communicate why change is needed in times of disruption, the literature suggests that strong ability to communicate top down, horizontal, and bottom up strengthens communication capacity in times of crisis.

E&C Q3: Is the value of student success regularly communicated to the college community?

E&C Q1: Are student success vision and goals communicated regularly and broadly across the institution?

E&C Q2: Is communication planning an integral part of the institution's student success work?

**Structural & Operational Fluidity:** Flexible structures and processes adapt more quickly to change. Organizations that are experienced with continuous review and modification of policies and practices that create barriers to change are more likely to amend business processes and practices in times of crisis.

P&P Q9: Does the college evaluate the effectiveness of policies and practices and revise as appropriate?

L&V Q5: Are leaders willing to change structures, processes, and policies in support of student success?

D&T Q12: Does the college evaluate student success initiatives to inform decision-making?

T&L Q8: Has the institution redesigned processes so they are easier to navigate, and student supports are more personalized?

S&P Q11: Is there an established culture of continuous improvement?

P&P Q1: Does the institution proactively review, identify, and remove policies and practices that create barriers for students?

## Customer-Oriented

### Adaptivity Factors Contributing to Effective & Efficient Response to Change

Ability to understand, embrace, and respond to the unique needs of customers is important for instigating and responding to change. Adaptive organizations seek keen understanding of their customers which facilitates rapid change in services or products needed to meet their unique needs in times of crisis. Having as many employees as possible that are near to or have direct contact with customers facilitates adaptation.

### Comparable ICAT 1.0 Questions

EQ Q15: Is disaggregated data used to address achievement gaps?

EQ Q1: Does the college have a clear and compelling definition of equity?

EQ Q10: When teaching, do faculty take into consideration the various ways that students learn due to different cultural values?

### Comparable ICAT 1.5 Questions

D&T Q5: Are data disaggregated by sub-groups of students to identify equity gaps and inform improvements?

EQ Q2: Does the institution have a clear and compelling definition of equity?

EQ Q3: Does the institution engage in targeted outreach to underrepresented populations?

EQ Q4: Is the institution working towards a clear understanding of the differences between equity, diversity, and inclusion among institutional stakeholders?

## Inquisitive

“Organizations demonstrating adaptive capacity, are voracious learners. They are inquisitive in that they seek out data and information. They use it to learn, and then they apply and share their new-found knowledge”

### Adaptivity Factors Contributing to Effective & Efficient Response to Change

**Data Informed:** Institutions with a strong culture of evidence and inquiry (to identify, collect, access, and use data) are better positioned to adapt in times of crisis given their emphasis on real time data/information to inform decision making. The literature says that critical information about issues and opportunities must flow into decision making preventing people from becoming “ossified” in their roles. Three types of information are considered important in disruptive times:

- **Situation Monitoring:** Capacity to inspect and monitor events
- **Market Analysis:** Effective use of tools and metrics to assess rapidly changing environment
- **Progress Tracking:** Assessment of progress, impact, and outcomes in times of crisis

### Comparable ICAT 1.0 Questions

L&V Q11: Do college leaders share and use data to inform decision-making?

L&V Q12: Is there a climate of accountability and expectation of the use of data for decision-making?

D&T Q6: Are student success data translated into meaningful information?

T&L Q11: Are data regularly used to improve educational practice in the classroom?

D&T Q11: Does the college use data to examine and improve student outcomes?

### Comparable ICAT 1.5 Questions

L&V Q9: Do leaders set expectations and hold people accountable for data-informed decision making?

D&T Q12: Are student success data broadly shared and translated into meaningful information?

D&T Q9: Does the institution track labor market data?

T&L Q16: Are data regularly used to improve instructional practices?

D&T Q8: Does the institution track progress of student success initiatives/interventions and revise as appropriate based on data?



## Inquisitive

“Organizations demonstrating adaptive capacity, are voracious learners. They are inquisitive in that they seek out data and information. They use it to learn, and then they apply and share their new-found knowledge”

### Adaptivity Factors Contributing to Effective & Efficient Response to Change

### Comparable ICAT 1.0 Questions

### Comparable ICAT 1.5 Questions

#### Learning Organization & Knowledge

**Management:** Organizations with a culture of learning/professional development are more open to change and more agile in times of crisis.

T&L Q8: Does the college have an effective professional development program for instruction?

T&L Q10: Do faculty update their institutional practice based on acquired professional development?

S&P Q5: Is professional development appropriately aligned to advance student success?

T&L Q5: Does professional development meet the needs of faculty (full-time and adjunct) at various stages of their career?

T&L Q6: Do faculty demonstrate evidence-based, innovative and reflective teaching practices as a result of professional development?

D&T Q15: Does the institution provide professional development for faculty and staff to maximize use of student success technologies?

EQ Q11: Does the institution offer professional development for faculty and staff to strengthen their work with diverse student populations and address equitable practices?

## Resourceful

### Adaptivity Factors Contributing to Effective & Efficient Response to Change

### Comparable ICAT 1.0 Questions

### Comparable ICAT 1.5 Questions

<p><b>Leveraging External Funds:</b></p>	<p>S&amp;P Q4: Does the college pursue external grant funding to support student success?</p>	<p>S&amp;P Q5: Does the institution generate revenue from external sources to align with student success vision and goals?</p>
<p><b>Deliberate External Partnerships/Alliances:</b> Organizations with strong external alliances are better equipped to leverage external partnerships in times of crisis.</p>	<p>E&amp;C Q5: Does the college include external stakeholders in student success efforts?</p> <p>P&amp;P Q8: Does the college effectively involve external stakeholders in implementing and improving student success policies and practices?</p>	<p>E&amp;C Q6: Does the institution work with employers to assess and align programs and services with market demand?</p> <p>E&amp;C Q8: Does the institution partner with community-based organizations to foster an institution-going culture and deliver student supports?</p>
<p><b>Resource Deployment/Mobilization:</b> Organizational ability to quickly deploy and redeploy resources to support new strategies is yet another adaptive capacity inherent within the literature.</p>	<p>S&amp;P Q3: Do revenue and resource allocation decisions support student success?</p>	<p>S&amp;P Q3: Are revenue and resource allocation decisions driven from the institution's student success vision and goals?</p>

## APPENDIX B – RESEARCH LITERATURE

1. Harraf, A., Wanasika, I., Tate, K., & Talbott, K. (2015). Organizational Agility. *Journal of Applied Business Research (JABR)*, 31(2), 675-686. <https://doi.org/10.19030/jabr.v31i2.9160>
2. Worley, C. G., & Lawler, E. E. (2010). Agility and organization design: A diagnostic framework. *Organizational Dynamics*, 39(2), 194-204.
3. Nafei, W. A. (2016). Organizational agility: The key to organizational success. *International Journal of Business and Management*, 11(5), 296-309. <https://doi:10.5539/ijbm.v11n5p296>
4. McCann, J., Selsky, J., & Lee, J. (2009). Building agility, resilience and performance in turbulent environments. *People & Strategy*, 32(3), 44-51. Retrieved from <http://agilityconsulting.com/resources/Strategic%20Agility%20Institute/HRPS-BuildingAgility.pdf>
5. Gupta, J., Termeer, C., Klostermann, J., Meijerink, S., van den Brink, M., Jong, P., ... & Bergsma, E. (2010). The adaptive capacity wheel: a method to assess the inherent characteristics of institutions to enable the adaptive capacity of society. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 13(6), 459-471. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2010.05.006>