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# Guided Pathways at Community Colleges: From Theory to Practice

By: Thomas R. Bailey

Imagine that you are a student at your institution. If you sit down and explore your college's website, are you able to pick a program and create a plan of study that will carry you through to graduation? If you are at a community college—where many students hope to transfer—are you able to plan a course sequence that would allow you to transfer into your desired major and finish your degree at a four-year college without taking excess credits?

If you are having trouble carrying out this exercise, as many faculty and administrators do, just imagine the barriers confronted by community college students. Students lack much of the knowledge about higher education possessed by college staff, and even counselors who understand their colleges well cannot possibly help students develop complete academic plans in the fifteen or twenty minutes that they typically spend with each student. So, what can be done to remedy this situation?

## Redesigning College

At the Community College Research Center (CCRC), we say that the typical community college is structured like a cafeteria. Although community colleges provide many services, programs, and activities, it is often up to each student to navigate the complexities of the college experience. Students get lost and confused amid hundreds of options, which is one reason that graduation rates at community colleges are low. Even students who finish college often graduate with many more credits than they need. These problems are particularly serious for students of color and low-income students, who tend to arrive at college with the least knowledge and social and financial resources, and are thus particularly harmed by the confusing environment and its inefficiencies (Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins 2015).

Over the past two decades, better data have led to a better understanding of how students are faring in college. With this information, educators and policymakers have been pushing for reform under the banner of the completion agenda. Colleges and systems have implemented initiatives on college readiness, developmental education, advising, the use of data, and a host of other improvements. But research by CCRC and others has led to a key insight: individual reforms that involve relatively few students or that touch only a piece of the student experience are not enough to measurably improve graduation rates or other key indicators of institutional success (Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins 2015). The effects of even significant reforms within one segment of a student's college career—for example, developmental education—fade over time if nothing changes in the rest of the college.

In our recent book, *Redesigning America's Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success* (2015), Shanna Smith Jaggars, Davis Jenkins, and I argue that what is needed is a comprehensive reform model that transforms the entire college to focus on student success. We propose a guided pathways model that involves redesigning each part of the student experience, from the stage where students choose programs and start remedial or college-level work to the time of graduation, when they move on to further education or careers.

### Areas of Practice

As of 2017, guided pathways reforms are being designed by more than 250 colleges, including at least ten in each of the following states: Arkansas, California, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Washington. Thirty colleges are participating in the Pathways Project coordinated by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). The project aims to implement guided pathways at scale over several years. CCRC has worked with AACC to break down guided pathways into four main practice areas:

- 1. Mapping pathways to student end goals.** In the guided pathways model, colleges create clear maps for every program they offer. They make these maps easily accessible on their websites so students will understand what courses are necessary to complete a program or qualify for transfer, how long completion will take, and what opportunities for employment or further education they will have at the end of the program.
- 2. Helping students choose and enter a program pathway.** Currently, many students choose programs and courses largely on their own. In the guided pathways model, colleges help new students explore programs, consider possible careers, and develop complete academic plans. Undecided students narrow their options by choosing from clusters of majors—such as business, social sciences, or health—that align with their interests. Developmental education reforms enable students to enroll more quickly in college-level courses, including courses in their field that will keep them engaged in college.
- 3. Keeping students on a path.** Both students and advisors can see students' plans mapped out through graduation and keep track of students' progress. If students get off track or have trouble in a course, alert systems bring these issues to advisors' attention so they can steer students toward academic or other supports. Colleges also try to remove institutional barriers such as inconvenient schedules or cancelled classes.
- 4. Ensuring that students are learning.** Programs are designed around a coherent set of learning outcomes, rather than as a collection of courses. Program learning outcomes align with requirements for success in further education and employment in a related field. Colleges track student learning outcomes and work to improve teaching.

Guided pathways reforms involve every part of the college, requiring the redesign of major departments and of functions such as developmental education and advising. For this reason, they take several years to implement in full, and they require coordination among administrators, faculty, advisors, financial aid personnel, schedulers, technology specialists, and many

others. Because these reforms involve changing the way things have always been done, they often are met with skepticism and resistance. Some faculty and staff, for example, may be concerned that their courses will be canceled or that students on more structured plans will lose the opportunity to explore as they find their majors. But these educators may be pleasantly surprised: greater retention can increase the need for higher-level courses, something that many faculty favor.

To ensure buy-in, reform efforts should involve faculty and advisors from the very beginning. Reform leaders should also underscore for faculty and staff that guided pathways reforms do not necessarily limit choice, but rather provide a systematic process through which students can make more informed choices.

### **Guided Pathways Examples**

The colleges in the AACC Pathways Project, which have committed to implementing redesigned programs by fall 2018, were chosen because they had built organizational cultures open to change. In CCRC's report on the first year of guided pathways implementation (Jenkins, Lahr, and Fink 2017), we found that participating colleges, despite significant challenges, are finding innovative ways of adapting guided pathways principles to their schools and to the circumstances of their students.

In Texas, San Jacinto College has organized its 144 degree and certificate programs into eight meta-majors, including arts and humanities; business; construction, industry, and manufacturing; and public safety. For each of the college's career/technical programs, a program mapping team consisting of staff and faculty from each meta-major has documented jobs in the college's service area, verified demand for certificates and degrees, and recorded wage information. Career/technical programs that did not lead to family-supporting wages have been eliminated. Teams working on transfer-oriented programs have created maps leading to the five most common transfer destinations, with the aim of moving students away from general studies degrees that often leave them with credits that don't transfer.

Cleveland State Community College in Tennessee has organized "career communities" in business; advanced technologies; fine arts and humanities; education; social sciences; science, technology, engineering, and math; and health care. The college is using these career communities to reorganize orientation as a one-day event during which each student will attend a presentation on the programs of study, career options, and types of degrees (transfer and career/technical) available in the career community the student has selected. All students will enroll in required first-year seminars corresponding to their career communities; in these seminars, they will create individualized educational plans leading to graduation. The college is also redesigning its website to help students explore programs and careers.

Redesigning advising is one of the most challenging parts of colleges' guided pathways work. Prior to its advising redesign, Jackson College in Michigan had four advisors—one attached to each of its four main program areas—for more than five thousand students. Due to long lines and wait times, most students registered for courses without seeing an advisor. Over

the past two years, the college has hired several new “student success navigators” (for a total of eighteen) and is aiming to reach a 200:1 advising ratio. Every student receives a call from a navigator before orientation; during these calls, navigators help students begin setting goals and developing program plans. Students are required to see their navigators in person at least three times during their first term, and navigators advise students throughout their time in college.

### **Improving Student Success**

The reforms described above are just a few examples of the significant work that colleges are undertaking to improve student success. CCRC plans to follow these colleges’ progress as they complete the planning and implementation phases of their work and begin to see an impact on their students. These vanguard colleges will offer lessons for the hundreds of colleges asking how guided pathways can be done well.

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