

THURSDAY MARCH 25, 2021

PROGRAM PLANNING AND DESIGN

Why the Work of Guided Pathways Is Valuable for Students

LINDA GARCÍA

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT,
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

COURTNEY ADKINS

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF PUBLICATIONS FOR THE CENTER FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT,
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Guided pathways are part of a reform movement that aims to improve community college students' rates of completion, transfer to four-year institutions, and attainment of jobs with value in the labor market by reframing the entire student journey. This new journey includes intensive and continual academic advising, early career exploration, structured academic and career-focused communities, and active and applied learning experiences, among other things. Before the COVID-19 pandemic became our new reality, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (the Center) surveyed nearly 50,000 entering students in 2018 and more than 75,000 returning students in 2019 about how they were experiencing key elements of guided pathways.

Although the implementation of pathways is new at many colleges, and there is still much work to be done, the survey findings revealed the impact of the work, especially at colleges further along in the process. For instance, 48% of all entering student respondents said that someone had talked with them about how long it would take them to achieve their goals, but at a college that adopted the pathways model early, 70% said this had happened.

The value of guided pathways: a focus on planning

For students, the value of pathways is receiving guidance and structured supports from their point of entry at the college to the attainment of their goal. In a Center-conducted focus group, one student described guided pathways as such: "Guided pathway

is a direction that you take in order to enroll in the right classes and not get confused, jumbled or unsure of what to do next semester, and then be stuck. It really gives you that direction so you're not lost. I feel like it was a lifesaver, really, because honestly, I did not otherwise know what to do."

Because guided pathways are focused on getting students on a track and helping them stay on it, institutions have become more intentional in guiding students.

A staff member said in a focus group: "Recognize that no longer can students afford to just wander through college and not have a clue of what it's all about. We owe it to the students. We owe it to their pocketbooks because of how expensive it can be, but we owe it to our students to help them plan and know where it is they're going, why they're going there, and that there are resources to help them."

The survey data reflect this shift in intentionality. About 68% of all entering students reported being required to meet with an advisor before registering for classes, yet at a college further along in the pathways work, this was the case for 91% of respondents. When asked whether a staff

member had talked with them about the total cost to complete their credential, only 29% of all entering student respondents said yes. However, 63% of students at an early adopter college answered yes to this question.

For students, the value of pathways is receiving guidance and structured supports from their point of entry at the college to the attainment of their goal.

Another staff member shared that guided pathways encourages them to understand students' goals and expectations beyond college: "One thing that we've incorporated is asking the students why they are here? We want them to really start thinking about their purpose beyond the degree."

The data show that this further exploration of students' goals and expectations is taking hold at colleges across the country. When students, at least in their second term of enrollment, were asked if

a staff member had talked with them about the types of jobs their program, major, or pathway of study might lead to, 55% said yes.

The value of guided pathways: a focus on equity

An essential condition of the guided pathways model is a commitment to equity in student outcomes. And in order for there to be equity in student outcomes, equity-minded practices must be in place. In 2018 and 2019, the Center conducted interviews with faculty members across the country about innovative teaching practices they employ in their classrooms. In one interview, an instructor described using sociological imagination—a process through which students learn that seemingly personal matters are often connected to larger social and historical conditions. This teaching practice involves creatively based activities around songs, poetry, and short stories that take place over three weeks. This lesson is used at the point in the semester focused on race, class, and gender inequality to help students explore critical social justice issues throughout history.

To further help institutions with their work in this fundamental sphere, the

Center partnered with the Office of Community College Research and Leadership to develop equity tools that cover topics such as creating an equity-minded syllabus and the role of midlevel leaders in advancing equity.

The importance of engaging faculty in guided pathways

A key pillar of guided pathways implementation is ensuring students are learning, which asks that faculty (full-time and part-time) be fully engaged in the pathways mission—and, in turn, use their classrooms to engage students in the process.

Yet, according to data collected from the Center's 2019 survey of over 7,000 community college faculty, 32% of full-time faculty and 61% of part-time faculty reported not knowing whether their college was implementing pathways. When faculty are aware that their college is implementing guided pathways, however, their perceptions of their students and their own behaviors reflect higher levels of engagement. For instance, when asked how often their students talk about career plans with them, 46% of faculty who reported that their college was implementing pathways

said this happened often or very often, compared to 37% of faculty who didn't know whether their college was implementing pathways.

A key pillar of guided pathways implementation is ensuring students are learning, which asks that faculty (full-time and part-time) be fully engaged in the pathways mission—and, in turn, use their classrooms to engage students in the process.

The value of guided pathways in a COVID-19 world

What has become evident is that the components that make guided pathways valuable for students are just as—if not more—important now than they were before the pandemic. Due to COVID-19, some students have had to alter their educational plans; therefore, timely and intrusive academic advising and career counseling will be vital resources for them. The

pandemic has also amplified inequities that already existed for many students; hence, an ongoing commitment to equity will be fundamental in helping all students succeed. And since the majority of students are primarily interacting with their college campuses through online platforms, exchanges with their instructors may be their only regular link to their college community.

One student described the support that guided pathways provides as a safety net: "There are a lot of safety nets. Your teachers. The counseling. Your advisors. Everyone has a hand. If you've fallen down, everyone helps pick you back up." Many students need that support now more than ever before.