NAPA VALLEY COLLEGE

Research, Planning and Institutional Effectiveness

Guided pathways

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Background

The guided pathways model is a comprehensive, whole-college redesign approach aimed at significantly improving student success, persistence, and completion rates in higher education, particularly at community colleges. It seeks to structure the student experience from initial connection and entry through progress and eventual completion of certificates or degrees with labor market value, or transfer to four-year institutions with junior standing in a major.

The model is designed to address systemic issues within traditional higher education, where students often face an “oft-opaque, barrier-laden pathway” toward graduation. This traditional system is characterized by too many course and program choices, unclear requirements, and insufficient guidance, leading to uninformed decisions, wasted credits, tuition money, and time (Altstadt et al. 2014).

This lack of structure is particularly detrimental to academically underprepared students, as three out of five community college students are referred to at least one developmental course, and graduation rates for this group are disconcertingly low (Building College Readiness 2016). This unstructured complexity disproportionately disadvantages first-generation college students, minority, and low-income learners who may lack the "social know-how" or familial experience to navigate the system effectively (Altstadt et al. 2014).

Key takeaways from the literature

Initial evidence from colleges implementing guided pathways, or components thereof, demonstrates promising results. These include:

1) **Improved Completion and Persistence:** Early adopters have shown positive impacts on student progress and completion (Johnstone 2015). For instance, CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), which includes elements of guided pathways, saw a 3-year graduation rate of 52% versus 22% for comparison groups (Johnstone 2015). Kingsborough Community College's learning communities program increased degree attainment by 4.6 percentage points and increased total credits earned by 4.0 after six years (Sommo et al. 2012)

2) **Cost-Effectiveness:** Studies suggest that well-implemented guided pathways interventions can be cost-effective. For example, Kingsborough's learning communities

program resulted in a lower cost per degree earned for program participants compared to control group members (Sommo et al. 2012). While colleges may lose some credits from students having a tighter roadmap, these reductions are likely offset by increased persistence and completion (Johnstone 2015).

3) **Long-Term Gains:** Research indicates that even modest short-term impacts can grow into significant long-term gains, highlighting the importance of long-term follow-up in evaluating such reforms (Sommo et al. 2012)

Evidence also suggest that implementing guided pathways is a **long-term, institution-wide effort** that demands broad engagement and collaboration from all organizational levels—from presidents to faculty, advisors, and staff (Jenkins et al. 2019). Colleges must first build awareness that the institution itself creates barriers to student success and that only large-scale, cross-college reforms can remove them. This requires a significant cultural shift focused on student success. Colleges need to reorganize decision-making structures to facilitate broad engagement, make student success "everyone's business," and strengthen leadership roles like department chairs (Jenkins et al. 2019).

Possible associated interventions/activities

The guided pathways model usually involves several interlocking pillars to support students effectively:

1) **Structured Program Pathways and Meta-Majors** The model emphasizes creating clear, efficient "roadmaps" to students' end goals (Johnstone). This involves organizing all programs into broad, career- and academic-field-focused **meta-majors** or "communities of interest" (Jenkins et al. 2019). Faculty and staff collaborate to map out optimal course sequences for all programs, aligning them with employment requirements and bachelor's degrees (Jenkins et al. 2019).
2) **Comprehensive Intake and Early Planning** Guided pathways redesigns onboarding processes to help new students explore career and academic options and develop a full-program educational plan during their first term (Johnstone 2015). This often includes mandatory orientation, assigned advisors, and holistic assessments of student motivation and skills (Rodicio et al. 2014).
3) **Redesigned and Embedded Advising and Support** The model integrates advising, progress tracking, feedback, and support throughout a student's educational journey (Johnstone 2015). Colleges institute new advising models, often assigning advisors to meta-majors to provide dedicated support and strengthen connections with program faculty (Jenkins et al. 2019).
4) **Streamlined "On-Ramps" for Underprepared Students** Developmental education is treated as a coherent, deliberate part of the transfer pathway, accelerating the

acquisition of basic skills while guiding students into transfer programs of study (Johnstone 2015).

5) **Enhanced Career and Transfer Information** Colleges improve the accessibility and clarity of information on their websites, helping students and prospective students explore program options, understand requirements, and see connections to career and transfer opportunities (Jenkins et al. 2019).

Related metrics and indicators:

The literature on guided pathways identifies a range of metrics used to measure their success, focusing primarily on improving student progression, completion, and efficiency within the higher education system. These metrics serve to highlight systemic barriers and track the effectiveness of comprehensive institutional redesigns. Here are the most important metrics to measure the success of guided pathways:

1) **Student Completion Rates**
    a. **Degree and Certificate Attainment:** A core measure of success is the proportion of students who earn a degree or certificate (Sommo et al. 2012).
    b. **Bachelor's Degree Attainment Post-Transfer:** Success also extends to the rate at which community college students ultimately earn a bachelor's degree after transferring (Altstadt et al. 2014)
2) **Student Progression and Efficiency**
    a. **Credit Accumulation and Excess Credits:** A key problem addressed by guided pathways is students accumulating excessive credits that do not count towards their degree, leading to wasted time and money. Colleges track the average number of credits students earn for a degree (Jenkins et al. 2019; Sommo et al. 2012)
    b. **Time to Completion/Progress on Pathways:** Metrics include the time it takes students to complete early milestones, such as 25% of their program requirements, as this is strongly correlated with overall program completion (Bailey et al. 2015). The number of students who are "off-path" (not following their intended program sequence) can also be tracked.
    c. **Course Pass Rates:** Monitoring pass rates for individual courses within a pathway can indicate student success and program efficacy (Bailey et al. 2015).
    d. **Developmental Education Progression:** Tracking student placement and successful advancement through developmental courses is crucial, especially for underprepared students (Bailey et al. 2015).
3) **Student Persistence and Engagement**
    a. **Retention Rates:** This includes semester-to-semester and fall-to-fall retention rates (Jenkins et al. 2019)

   b. **Student Satisfaction and Sense of Belonging:** Guided pathways aim to improve the overall student experience, fostering a sense of integration and belonging (Sommo et al. 2012)
   c. **Completion of Academic/Educational Plans:** The number of students who complete an academic plan early in their college career is a metric for early engagement and planning effectiveness (Bailey et al. 2015).
   d. **Enrollment Rates:** While not a direct measure of pathways success, changes in overall enrollment, particularly for incoming students, can be a relevant outcome (Bailey et al. 2015).

4) **Equity of Outcomes:** Guided pathways emphasize addressing disproportionate outcomes for specific student groups, such as low-income students and students of color. Colleges ca examine data to identify and address achievement gaps across various demographic groups (Altstadt et al. 2014; Jenkins et al. 2019)
5) **Cost-Effectiveness**
6) **Cost per Degree Earned:** This metric assesses whether the investment in guided pathways leads to more efficient production of degrees (Altstadt et al. 2014; Jenkins et al 2019).
7) **Operational and Cultural Shifts (Formative Evaluation)** Colleges may also track progress in areas like improved progress monitoring systems, redesigned advising models, and the integration of career and transfer information on college websites (Bailey et al. 2015). They also assess the cultural shift within the institution, observing changes in faculty and staff attitudes towards student success, their collaborative practices, and their sense of shared ownership for reforms (Rodicio et al. 2014)

Supporting literature

[NOTE: Many of these sources are on file at RPIE as PDFs and can be shared on request]

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