

Research Brief

Implementing Guided Pathways—Findings from Colleges and Students

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Purpose: Summary of Key Issues in Guided Pathways Implementation

Methodology: Review of Published Literature

Introduction

As the pathways movement evolves among community colleges in California and across the United States, researchers have investigated the factors most commonly associated with successful implementation of pathways programs. This Research Brief provides an overview of trends and findings, from the perspectives of colleges that have recently implemented pathways programs and of students enrolled in a specific pathways institution (City Colleges of Chicago).

I. Pathways Colleges Nationwide: Progress Report after Year 1 of Implementation

(Source: Jenkins, Lahr & Fink, Implementing Guided Pathways: Early Insights, April 2017, <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/implementing-guided-pathways-aacc.html>)

In this study, the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Columbia University examined 30 community colleges across the U.S. that are participating in the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Pathways Project. Focus of the study is to determine the ways that various colleges are implementing guided pathways reforms, the challenges that they are encountering, and the promising practices for successful implementation.

Components of Pathways Implementation

(1) Mapping pathways to student end goals

- * Programs are clearly mapped for students
- * College website provides key information on employment pathways and further education opportunities per program

(2) Helping students choose and enter a program pathway

- * Every new student is helped to explore career, college, and program options as soon as possible
- * Special supports are provided to help academically underprepared students to succeed
- * Intensive support is provided to help poorly-prepared students to succeed at college-level courses as soon as possible

(3) Keeping students on path

- * The college carefully monitors every student in every program to determine the student's academic progress
- * Colleges are able to determine which students are at risk of falling off their program plans, and provide appropriate interventions
- * The college schedules courses to ensure that students can take the courses they need *when they need them*

(4) Ensuring that students are learning

- * Rigorous learning outcomes measurements are conducted for every program at the college
- * Faculty use the results of learning outcomes assessments to improve program instructional effectiveness
- * The college tracks learning outcomes by individual students
- * The college uses CCSSE to assess effectiveness of educational practices

Key Challenges in Implementation of Pathways

(1) Mapping pathways

- * Colleges are trying to find a balance between providing too much and too little choice for students
- * Colleges have difficulty finding data on the value of a specific degree/certificate in the local labor market

(2) Helping students choose and enter a program pathway

- * Colleges need to organize programs by meta-major in order to help students make sense of college offerings
- * Colleges are striving to help every student develop a program plan and a clear career pathway in the first term

(3) Keeping students on the path

- * Colleges need to redesign advising practices to better support student progression into and through programs
- * College information systems need to make it easier to monitor student progress

(4) Ensuring that students are learning

- * Colleges need to learn how to track individual student learning outcomes
- * Colleges need to take steps to help students complete their programs more quickly

Managing the Change Process at the College: Best Practices

(1) Creating a climate for change

- * Pathways colleges need to take steps to cultivate cultures of openness to change and innovation
- * Pathways colleges must have a strategic plan with clear, measurable goals for improving student outcomes

- * Pathways colleges can lay the groundwork for change by building and strengthening their capacity to analyze, report and use data

(2) Engaging and enabling the whole organization

- * Pathways colleges use data to create a sense of urgency
- * Pathways colleges take steps to address the fear and anxiety that inevitably comes with changes
- * Pathways colleges engage all parts of the college in pathways work (academic, student services, business operations, human resources, etc.)

(3) Implementing and sustaining change

- * Pathways colleges establish clear parameters for pathways work groups to implement plans, objectives, activities, roles and timelines
- * Pathways colleges invest in professional development that directly supports pathways implementation
- * Pathways colleges take steps to ensure that initial communication and engagement efforts are sustained
- * Pathways colleges reallocate existing resources for new costs associated with pathways implementations

II. Student Perspectives on Guided Pathways

(Source: Fink, What do Students think of Guided Pathways? June 2017, <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/what-do-students-think-guided-pathways.pdf>)

In this study conducted among students attending City Colleges of Chicago (CCC), 149 first-year students were interviewed regarding their educational and career goals and how they evolved during a period that CCC was embarked on Guided Pathways implementation. A subgroup of 48 students who emphasized pathways issues in their comments was assessed for their opinions regarding benefits and frustrations of the Guided Pathways emphasis at CCC.

Overall Findings

- * Of the 48 “opinionated on guided pathways” students participating in these interviews, 37 (77%) had overall positive feelings regarding CCC’s guided pathways reforms.
- * Most student opinions focused on program maps, educational planning and advising, and tracking progress toward completion.
- * About half of the opinionated students reported concerns or frustrations about problems encountered during implementation.

Student-Reported Benefits

- * Planning their term-by-term path toward completion with help of an advisor was positively motivating

- * Online educational planning with an advisor was beneficial and easy
- * Knowing which courses counted toward completion and transfer to specific 4-year institutions was helpful
- * The college provides a rich body of knowledge about specific career pathways for all programs
- * Very strong emphasis was placed on the role of the advisors for explaining pathways progress reports

Student-Reported Frustrations

- * Some students were troubled that program maps could limit their choices of classes
- * For some students, the process of educational planning felt “discouraging”
- * Course availability was not always adequate in the newly revamped programs
- * Changing program requirements sometimes created confusion for students
- * Students especially wanted more guidance as they moved into and through pathways

Implications for Practitioners

- * Most opinionated first-year students were enthusiastic about program maps and educational planning.
- * Students generally seemed to profit from more clearly defined and educationally coherent pathways.
- * Advisors overall play an essential role in helping students make meaning of the educational planning process and to fully utilize the maps and other available resources
- * Most students indicated that they *wanted* advisors to work with them to clarify their end goals and identify the best pathways toward those goals
- * Technical “hiccups” in implementation of new computerized information systems are common and often have direct impact on student progress

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