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Finding The Path To Student Success

It's the Next Level of Community College Work



These findings — some of them recent, many of them maddeningly persistent — beg for our attention:

Stand-alone remediation, typically structured as a sequence of largely disconnected courses, has been shown to produce dismal results in terms of the percentage of students who begin in remediation and ever attain a college credential.

In disproportionately high numbers, Black and Hispanic students in American higher education are enrolled in programs that lead to relatively low-paying jobs and careers.

Eighty percent of entering community college students want to transfer in pursuit of baccalaureate degrees; yet across the nation, only 14 percent of students who enter a community college have transferred to a baccalaureate institution and earned a bachelor's degree within six years.

In the very large community college state of Texas, the average associate degree graduate has earned 92 college credits.

Community college students have reported for years that the most important support service offered by their college is academic planning and advising; yet almost half of entering students say they had not seen an advisor by the end of their third week of class. More broadly, a disconcerting gap exists between the array of important academic and student support programs and services community colleges typically provide and what their students typically experience.

Worst of all, gaps in educational attainment across diverse subgroups of students stubbornly persist.

Among community colleges that have been deeply engaged for a decade or more in work to improve student success, many are finding through their own experience and through accumulating research the limits of interventions that apply only to small numbers of students and of strategies which — even when scaled — are not by themselves powerful enough to produce sustained momentum toward college completion.

Taken together, these realities point to the need for larger solutions — solutions that bring more structure, coherence, and integrated support to students' educational experiences. The next level of work, now gaining significant traction across the community college field, is the design and implementation of guided academic and career pathways at scale — for all students.

A call for fundamental redesign of students' educational experiences was central to the recommendations of AACC's 21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges in the 2012 report, *Reclaiming the American Dream: Community Colleges and the Nation's Future*. A major priority identified in the report and the companion Implementation Guide is a commitment to provide support for colleges in constructing new pathways for students. The intent is to ensure increased clarity, structure and coherence, incorporate evidence-based educational practices and accelerate progress toward meaningful credentials, efficient transfer and family-supporting jobs and careers.

The case for this work has been made through a remarkable convergence of evidence from the field, from community college research, and from other disciplines, including behavioral economics, decision theory, and cognitive science. That case is most comprehensively and pointedly argued by Thomas Bailey, Shanna Smith Jaggers and Davis Jenkins in their 2015 book, *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* — an illuminating resource now in its eighth printing.

Following through on the 21st Century Commission's recommendations, AACC in late 2015 launched the Pathways Project, a collaborative initiative supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and seven national partners: Achieving the Dream, the Aspen Institute, the Center for Community College Research, the Center for Community College Student Engagement, Jobs for the Future, the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement, and Public Agenda. Thirty competitively selected community colleges have committed themselves to the challenging work of large-scale institutional change in accord with the pathways model. Well beyond the work with those colleges, the project aims to build the capacity of the community college field to support the transformational work of many other institutions that see the promise of pathways.

One might think that with all the effort of the past decade or more, with all of the colleges doing so much work, that by now we would pretty much have the hard stuff behind us. Unfortunately, not so much.

Even as we affirm the lessons and the gains from the efforts of Achieving the Dream, Completion by Design, and many individual colleges and systems, we recognize that the work ahead must reach for that next level of transformational change. For leaders and institutions passionately committed to student success and equity, there can be no more marginal solutions, no more boutique programs, not even more pilots that somehow don't get to scale. Rather, pathways reforms require that fundamental redesign of students' educational experiences, which in turn requires substantial change in institutional culture, structures, policies and practices, impacting the way virtually everyone on campus does their work.

As defined for the Pathways Project by the Community College Research Center and AACC, the pathways model is an institution-wide approach to student success based on intentionally designed and structured educational experiences, informed by evidence, that guide each student

effectively and efficiently from the point of college entry through to attainment of high-quality postsecondary credentials and careers with value in the labor market
(www.aacc.nche.edu/Resources/aaccprograms/pathways/Pages/ProjectInformation.aspx).

Foundational to pathway design are clear and coherent program maps that define course sequences, key milestones and thoughtfully scaffolded learning outcomes. Those outcomes are intentionally aligned with both transfer pathways and labor market opportunities in a given field. Further, program faculty make intentional design decisions in response to questions such as these:

What is the appropriate math requirement for this pathway?

What general education and elective courses will pathway faculty recommend as particularly relevant for a given program of study?

What is the default course sequence for full-time and part-time students?

What approaches to experiential learning (group projects, field work, service learning, apprenticeships, clinical placements) will we incorporate in course work within the pathway?

How can developmental education be redesigned, leaving behind the stand alone sequence of courses in favor of an accelerated and contextualized onramp to the student's chosen area of study?

Student services professionals work in close collaboration with faculty to build out and strengthen the pathway experience. Redesigned advising, embedded in each pathway, ensures that from their earliest connections with the college, students get assistance in exploring academic and career options, making informed choices among an array of potential pathways, developing a plan based on the program maps, and staying on that path. Discipline-appropriate student and academic supports are integrated into courses within pathways, becoming an inescapable feature of students' experiences. Students, along with their advisors and faculty, monitor progress and celebrate milestones.

Very importantly, the institutional infrastructure needed to support this work — professional development, technological tools, policy change, and resource allocation, for example — is intentionally aligned with the redesigned student experience.

A central assertion in the 21st Century Commission report is this:

The American Dream is at risk.

Community colleges can help reclaim it. But stepping up to the challenge will require dramatic redesign of these institutions, their missions, and most critically, students' educational experiences.

Clearly the magnitude of change required is substantial. The challenges are real. The risk in taking them on is not for the faint of heart. But the alternative is to continue to get the results

we're getting. The longer we wait, the more students are lost. Now is a very good time to reach for the next level in our work.

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