

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Community College Journal

Premise and
Promise



Designing New
**ACADEMIC
PATHWAYS**

► *This three-part series first appeared as separate articles in successive issues of Community College Journal. Together, the articles describe a new model for academic pathways, key design principles, examples from colleges leading the way, and implementation challenges. The series is reprinted with permission from the American Association of Community Colleges.*

A photograph of a man from behind, wearing a light blue short-sleeved shirt and dark pants, with his arms outstretched horizontally. He is standing on a paved path that curves through a green landscape under a clear blue sky.

REIMAGINING
THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Premise and Promise

BY KAY McCLENNEY, DONNA DARE,
AND SUSAN THOMASON



DEVELOPING NEW PATHWAYS FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

“I don’t know,” Jenny said. “I just seem to be wandering around and not getting anywhere.” Thus a student described her community college experience, just before she dropped out.

Across the country, another student, Mason, was asked what his community college could have done better to prevent him from leaving school. His answer: “Please, just get out of my way.” Mason came to the college with ambitions of becoming a chef but found his class schedule packed with developmental courses that had no apparent bearing on his career goals.

Could Jenny’s college have helped her find her way instead of enabling her to wander aimlessly? Could Mason have developed needed academic skills through learning experiences more closely aligned to his culinary aspirations?

Ensuring that community colleges can better support students in pursuit and completion of college credentials is a central focus of the American Association of Community Colleges’ 21st-Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges. (Read more about the progress of that initiative in our cover story on page 30.) Whether community colleges are able to help the Jennys and Masons of the world will depend largely on their ability to design clearer student pathways to completion. Recently, many institutions have worked to improve the college entry experience, but too often, student

experiences in colleges’ academic programs have been left untouched—or at least underemphasized. Thus, this article calls for the design of new academic pathways.

From Practices to Pathways

Community college reform efforts have long focused on relatively discrete (though often innovative) educational practices—learning communities, student success courses, technology-supported advising, supplemental instruction, and project-based learning, for example. Typically, the work involves a cycle of study, followed by

small-scale piloting, sometimes followed by slightly larger-scale piloting. But the practices are seldom implemented at scale for all students in a target population. Because the scale often remains small, the innovations do not substantially alter the mainstream functions of the institution. Further, discrete practices are seldom integrated into pathways—intentionally designed educational experiences guided by a plan for progression from point of entry to goal completion.

Students’ college transcripts far too often look as though they stood with

their backs to course-schedule dartboards and chose their classes with a blind toss, getting essentially random results. Thus, students wander into the college, wander around the curriculum, and then, all too soon, wander out the door. The many choices and options students face as they attempt to navigate college systems may inadvertently create not the opportunity intended but real limits on student success. Now a remarkable and growing array of evidence from diverse sources indicates the premises of an academic model that promises to serve students more effectively.

More (but Different) Structure

In a paper for the Community College Research Center, researcher Judith Scott-Clayton argues that insufficient structure in many community colleges can lead to poor decisionmaking. Says Scott-Clayton, “Community college students will be more likely to persist and succeed in programs that are tightly and consciously structured, with relatively little room for individuals to unintentionally deviate from paths toward completion, and with limited bureaucratic obstacles for students to circumnavigate.”

The structures currently in place in

community colleges—for example, arts and sciences versus career and technical programs, or instruction versus student support services, or curricular versus co-curricular activities—tend to support isolated functions. These silos reinforce the traditional notion that college is about “what institutions provide,” rather than “what students experience.” Such disconnects often frustrate, confuse, and overwhelm students.

Instead of an integrated and coherent experience, students encounter each aspect of the college in isolation. They are “sent to” advisers or “referred to” tutors for support, rather than experi-

RALF HIEMISCH/GETTY IMAGES

encing those resources as integral to their classes and chosen programs of study. The transition from one level of academic work to another (even within a given discipline) is often costly, the result of poor alignment of academic standards and curriculum from one level to the next. Far too often, students report being unable to enroll in the classes they need to stay on track and graduate. Making matters worse is an ironclad separation at many institutions between credit and noncredit courses.

Fewer Options

In a *Newsweek* article titled “I Can’t Think: The Science of Decision Making,” writer Sharon Begley describes the near literal brain freeze that results from the cognitive and information overload increasingly experienced in our society. As people reach overload status, she says, “they start making stupid mistakes and bad choices because

the brain region responsible for smart decision making has essentially left the premises.” Frustration and anxiety escalate, and ultimately, the individual may experience a “total failure to decide.”

With that in mind, consider the amount of information a first-time community college student faces with 140 potential college majors and hundreds—in some cases, thousands—of course options. At most community colleges, only 20 to 25 courses account for about 80 percent of enrollments. What if community colleges diverted the energy spent on the proliferation of options toward building a strategic number of high-quality, coherent, and relevant academic pathways for students?

The axiom of “fewer options” applies not just to streamlining student progress through the curriculum. It also means that when evidence indicates that certain experiences are likely to

enhance student success, those experiences should be mandatory elements of educational pathways.

Academic Pathways: A New Model

As proposed in this model, an academic pathway is not restricted to a single major or program of study. Rather, it encompasses a cluster of related programs, so a college might offer six pathways, or 10, or 15, depending on its size, transfer arrangements, and regional labor market needs. Examples could include a STEM pathway; an arts, humanities, and design pathway; or a health careers and life sciences pathway, to name a few. As noted by researcher David Jenkins, students can’t complete a program of study when they never enter one—as too often happens—so this model brings students into a chosen pathway at the beginning of their college experience, whatever their entry level of academic

preparation. Each pathway is its own large-scale learning community, incorporating student cohorts; intentional connections among students, faculty, and subject matter; collaborative curriculum design; and active learning.

What follows is a description that intentionally distinguishes the new pathway model from traditional community college structures and practices. (For more, see the chart below.)

Aligning Levels of Learning

This academic pathway model clearly aligns exit standards and entry expectations to support student progression to each subsequent level of learning—from adult basic education, to developmental education, to credit-based certificates and associate degrees, and on to university transfer and employment. The design explicitly provides for stackable credentials. Anchoring an academic pathway within the larger context of transfer options and viable employment opportunities enables students to make informed decisions about their educational goals and plans for achieving them.

Coalescing Arts and Sciences with Career and Technical Education

With students preparing for careers like biomedical engineering, music business, or green construction, traditional divisions no longer apply. The academic pathway model eschews an either/or approach to learning so that knowledge and skills developed through the arts and sciences are taught alongside and in the context of professional and technical education, each strengthening the other.

Integrating Student Learning And Support

The pathway model calls for one or more advisers to be embedded in each pathway, guiding students from the level at which they enter to completion of a postsecondary credential and

preparation for next steps, whether transfer or employment. Students receive assistance through small group advising sessions that help them set goals and balance school with family and work obligations. They learn about academic and career options, including information about post-credential opportunities in the labor market or through continuing education at colleges and universities. Discussions focus on course sequences, prerequi-

sites, expected learning outcomes, and realistic timelines for completion. During their first semester, students complete a plan for navigating the pathway to completion. Thereafter, they and their advisers regularly monitor their progress.

Another feature of the model is a pathway-specific student success course. Also, academic support is integrated into regular coursework, limiting the number of students who

Critical to Success: Strengthened Advising

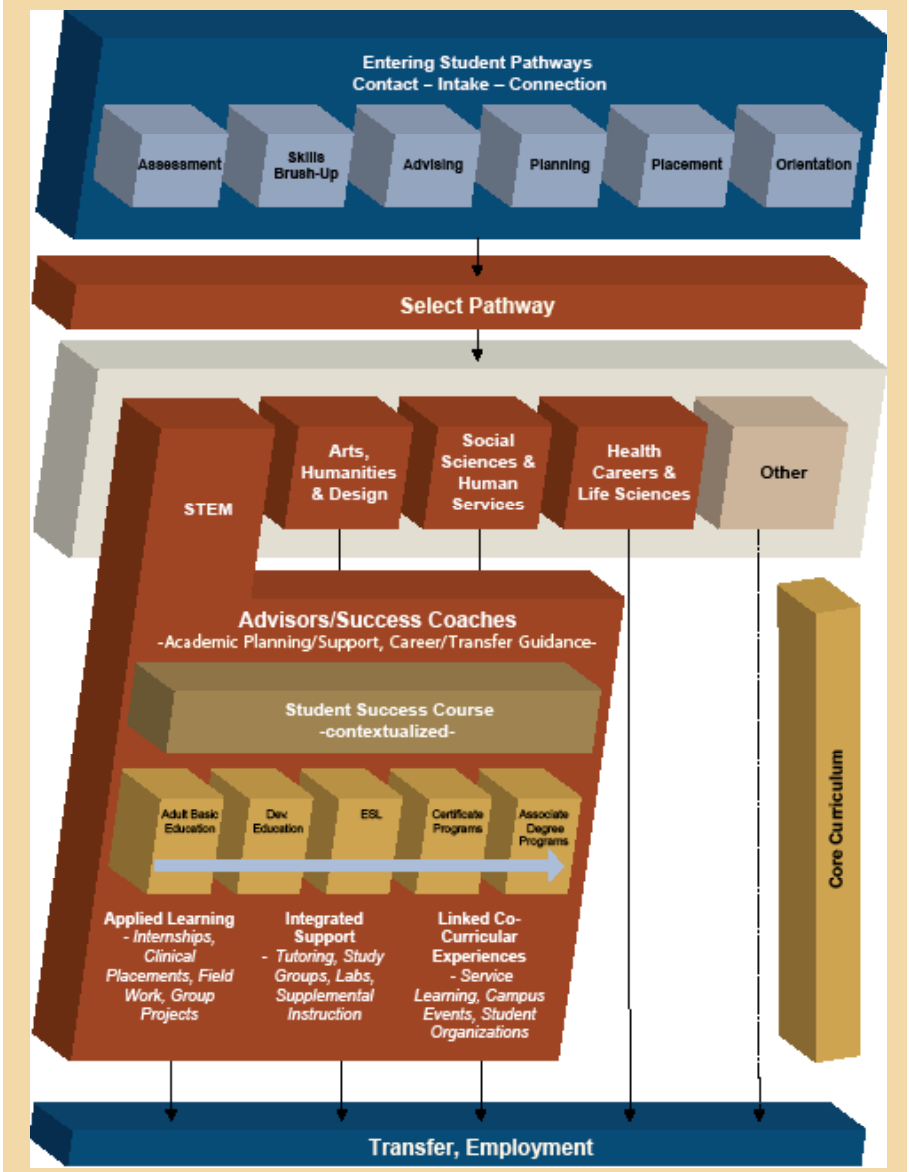
Survey data from the Center for Community College Student Engagement have consistently shown that students view academic planning and advising as the most important service offered by their college. Yet, students commonly point to missing elements in the process.

Among entering students, only 38 percent agree or strongly agree that an adviser helped them set academic goals and develop a plan to achieve them. Moreover, just 26 percent of survey respondents say that someone at the college talked with them about commitments beyond schoolwork and helped them establish an appropriate course load. And 45 percent say they never saw an adviser by the end of the third week of class. Could the need for strengthened advising be any clearer?



ERIK ISAKSON/GLOW IMAGES

A MODEL FOR ACADEMIC AND CAREER PATHWAYS



MODEL DESIGN GRAPHIC BY SUSAN THOMASON

don't get help when they most need it. Syllabi and daily practice incorporate supplemental instruction, required study groups, lab work, and tutoring in ways appropriate to the subject matter, ensuring that academic support is an inescapable part of every student's experience.

Connecting Classroom Learning To Applied Learning

The notion of what constitutes a "classroom" is changing. But whether face to face, online, or a combination of the two, most college experiences are structured around a traditional lecture format. This remains true despite research and student feedback affirming the value of "hands-on" or applied learning. A combination of problem- and project-based learning, out-of-class group projects, internships, clinical placements, fieldwork, and other discipline-appropriate activities enables educators to structure learning so that students can apply and practice newly acquired skills and knowledge.

Merging Curricular and Co-Curricular Learning

In a world where 81 percent of community college students do not participate in college-sponsored extracurricular activities, valuable engagement opportunities are lost. The pathway model pulls in selected co-curricular activities, connects them to programs of study, and integrates them into students' educational experiences.

In an arts and design pathway, for example, students might attend campus cultural events as structured assignments that involve advance reading, observation rubrics, and post-event reflection. Students in a social sciences and human services pathway might systematically identify the emergency assistance needs of their fellow students and work with the student government to address those needs. Students in a STEM pathway might

work through Phi Theta Kappa to create social media campaigns for promoting college completion.

Bridging the For-Credit Versus Non-Credit Gap

How colleges organize and certify learning must shift in recognition of the rapid expansion of learning opportunities available to students. Whether through workplace experiences, military service, massive open online

The Developmental Diversion

It is now well known that more than 60 percent of entering community college students need some developmental education to be successful. Far too often, placement in developmental courses diverts students from their hoped-for college path—and even permanently stymies their progress, according to the Community College Research Center. Community colleges focus a massive amount of institutional energy on college readiness, including strategies for reducing remediation needs; accelerating student progress through precollegiate work; and thoroughly redesigning curriculum, teaching, and student support to meet the needs of the least-prepared students.

The objective is to get students into college-level study as quickly as possible, but institutional and instructional designs have erected virtually insurmountable barriers. Rather than embed remedial work within an academic pathway, most colleges isolate developmental education—as well as adult basic education and English language learning—from academic content where students' interests and motivation are invested. It's now time for that to change.

courses, or continuing education programs offered by colleges themselves, students acquire more education and relevant experience than they often get credit for.

It makes no sense that a military veteran should be required to take a credit course in a subject that he or she taught to soldiers in Afghanistan or that someone who mastered Mandarin Chinese outside an educational institution should have to begin again at a community college. The pathway model includes assessment of prior learning and appropriate assignment of credit.

For non-credit courses, particularly those involving industry certifications, clear crosswalks should show how knowledge and skills attained in such courses could translate into college credit. Quite possibly, the traditional "credit hour" will soon be replaced by more meaningful learning certification.

The Student Experience Reimagined

Even with this bare beginning, it is possible to glimpse the magnitude of change and challenges that lie ahead. The starting point for campus discussions is the understanding that every course, every program, every service, and every college is perfectly designed to produce precisely the results it is currently getting. It follows that if we aspire to better results, we must first imagine and then implement better educational designs.

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Designing New ACADEMIC PATHWAYS

BY KAY McCLENNEY AND DONNA DARE

Reimagining the
community college
experience with
students' needs and
best interests at heart

Community colleges are beginning to embrace the task of reimagining students' educational experiences. In the first article of this series, we described a new academic and career pathways model for use as a resource in that challenging work.

The pathways model aims to support increased certificate and degree completion by moving beyond exposing students to isolated (even if promising) practices, seeking instead the full-scale implementation of high-impact, evidence-based practices woven into clear, coherent, and structured student pathways. The model purposely challenges community colleges' cultural norms and traditional structures and asks educators to put the student experience at the heart of their redesign efforts.

Design Principles

In creating new academic pathways for students, colleges should consider that *whatever the particular practices or programs they integrate into the design*, those experiences are likely to be most effective when they incorporate design principles emerging from research and practice. When intentionally implemented, these principles enhance the quality of design and implementation and should improve prospects for student learning, academic progress, and college completion.

The design principles described here reflect ongoing work from many sources, including the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE); the Community College Research Center and the National Center for Postsecondary Research at Teachers College, Columbia University; WestEd; and the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education.

Few if any institutions have implemented at scale all of the key elements of the new academic pathways model.

But several encouraging examples illustrate the effectiveness of certain features and principles.

We profile a few of these examples—from individual institutions, consortia, and state systems—here. Many of these initiatives are still in the early stages of implementation. As such, their impact on college completion remains a story largely untold, but eagerly awaited.

A Strong Start

Focusing attention on ensuring that students' earliest experiences set the stage for success is a critical first step. The average community college loses untold numbers of students between the first contact and first class day; colleges enroll (however briefly) double-digit percentages of first-time students who do not complete a single credit in their first term. About a quarter of entering students don't return for the second academic term. Colleges must make intentional efforts to establish personal connections with students, to create cohorts at every opportunity, and to ensure feedback on performance early and often.

That's the goal of the Start Right program at Florida's Valencia College. The program encompasses thoughtfully redesigned college-entry experiences, including the elimination of late registration (and the addition of so-called flex-start classes), early advising and mandatory orientation, and a required student success course for underprepared students. LifeMap, an online tool, helps students develop career, educational, and financial plans. Results show improved completion of developmental sequences and progression to college graduation.

Integrated Support

Incorporating academic and student support into coursework is a more effective strategy than standalone referral-based student services. Educators can, in discipline-appropriate ways, make completing an academic plan, supplemental instruction, time in the tutoring lab or writing center,

or required study groups an integral part of class requirements and assignments.

The challenge is illustrated in student engagement survey results. Though students consistently identify academic planning and advising as the most important service offered at their college, only 41 percent of entering student respondents to the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) report that an adviser helped them set academic goals and develop a plan to achieve them. Some 48 percent of entering students participate in an on-campus orientation prior to the beginning of classes, while 16 percent say they are unaware that orientation services exist. While 73 percent of students who responded to the 2012 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) cohort indicate that tutoring is somewhat or very important, just 29 percent report ever participating in tutoring.

So, what can colleges do?

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has partnered with MetLife Foundation and 22 community colleges to integrate academic and student services. Through The Roadmap Project, institutions focus on learning outcomes assessment, implementation of high-impact practices, and creation of navigable roadmaps for student progress. Many principles of the academic pathways model are evident in this approach. At Hostos Community College in the Bronx, N.Y., students entered a redesigned first-semester experience beginning in spring 2013. Addressing the learning needs of new students (more than 85 percent of whom require some developmental education), the Hostos Semester of Success includes a required college seminar that integrates developmental reading and writing with college success strategies. Students' experiences include high-impact practices, such as learning communities and a first-year seminar, interdisciplinary approaches, and peer mentoring.

“If community colleges are to design and implement new academic pathways for students, they also must invest in the people who will do the work.”



High Expectations and High Support

Students entering community colleges typically enroll with high aspirations. Nearly 80 percent of entering students responding to the 2012 SENSE survey indicate their intention to seek an associate degree. Too, often, though, community colleges have emphasized college access for a highly diverse student population without designing systems to support their success. Higher education scholar Vincent Tinto famously asserts that “no one rises to low expectations”; but he simultaneously affirms that high expectations without support constitute a hollow promise.

Following a thorough and thoughtful planning period, the Stella and Charles Guttman Community College (formerly New Community College) in New York City opened its doors in fall 2012 to its first 300 students, a group demographically similar to students at other City University of New York community colleges. Projected future enrollment is 5,000. Planners set a goal of increasing three-year graduation rates to 35 percent, with the expectation that all completers will be well prepared for both transfer and careers.

The educational model features pre-admission information sessions and a mandatory Summer Bridge Program that establish high expectations for incoming students. During their first year, all students must attend full time. All students belong to cohort groups supported by instructional teams, including faculty, student support

professionals, and librarians. Integrating college-level and developmental work, the first year includes a required two-semester city seminar—an interdisciplinary experience focused on critical issues in New York City—and a two-semester course in ethnographies of work. Though the paint on the walls is barely dry, early results (e.g., a 92 percent fall-to-spring persistence rate) suggest that high expectations, high levels of in- and out-of-class support, and integration of a variety of high-impact practices are paving the way to positive outcomes for learners traditionally underserved in higher education.

Intensive Student Engagement

Decades of research indicate that a key principle for design of effective educational practices and pathways is intentional and intensive student engagement. Results of independent studies conclude that benchmarks derived from the CCSSE survey—active and collaborative learning, student effort, academic challenge, student-faculty interaction, and support for learners—exhibit positive relationships with a variety of student outcome measures. Simply put, the more students are actively involved with one another, faculty and staff, and academic subject matter, the more likely they are to learn at higher levels, persist, and succeed in college.

The 2012 CCCSE cohort represents close to 5.4 million students from 710 community and technical colleges in 48

states and the District of Columbia. The colleges are located in rural, suburban, and urban settings, with enrollments ranging from small to very large. Among the relatively high-performing institutions across all benchmarks and within their respective size categories are colleges as diverse as Isothermal Community College in North Carolina, Saint Paul College in Minnesota, Malcolm X College in Illinois, and Miami Dade College in Florida. In company with growing numbers of their peers, these are institutions where intentional and inescapable student engagement is highly evident.

Pathways, Not Mere Course Sequences

The typical community college experience provides many opportunities for students to slip through the cracks, even when there is a clear sequence of courses. Particularly (though not exclusively) within developmental education, each separately structured course presents the obvious options of enrolling or not, completing or not, and enrolling in the next course in the sequence or not. Far too often, students see the developmental climb as insurmountable.

Analysis by the National Center for Postsecondary Research indicates that only 10 percent of students initially placed at least three levels below college-level math complete a college-level math course within three years. Surprisingly, more students (48 percent) fail to complete the developmental math sequence and the related college

algebra course because they *don't enroll in courses* than because they enroll in the courses and do not successfully complete them (42 percent). The course sequence design simply multiplies the chances that students will not progress.

To address this significant barrier to degree completion, Philip Uri Treisman, director of the Charles A. Dana Center at The University of Texas at Austin, has recruited partners into what he calls "a joyful conspiracy." The New Mathways Project continues pioneering work aimed at enabling students who enter at precollegiate math performance levels to earn college credit through three different pathways. Depending on the kind of mathematics appropriate to a chosen program of study, students may enter a math pathway focused on statistics, quantitative literacy, or STEM-related math. Each of these accelerated pathways is supported by a one-semester co-requisite student success course. The Texas Association of Community Colleges and the Dana Center are collaborating to scale up the program statewide.

Learning in Context

Research and practice have long indicated that people learn best when information is presented in a context that is relevant to them. Optimally, learning involves a variety of authentic applications related to students' lives, work, and chosen educational pathways.

With grants from the U.S. Department of Labor's Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training program, a consortium of Missouri community colleges seeks to develop integrated academic pathways. The program, MoHealth-WINS, aims to prepare 3,200 Missourians for health-care occupations. At St. Louis Community College in Missouri, the approach features a portal for all entering students; credit for prior learning; an adult learning academy; stackable credentials that include credit and noncredit components and industry certifications; integrated student services, including intrusive

73%
While
of students say
tutoring is somewhat
or very important, just
29%
of students participate
in tutoring at their college.

Source: Community College Survey of Student Engagement 2012 cohort

career coaching and a map for completion; and online and hybrid learning experiences.

Acceleration of Student Progress

The more time students spend in college, the less likely they are to complete a credential. Complete College America (CCA) documents the challenge in "Time is the Enemy," an aptly named report that asserts that the longer students linger in college, "the more life gets in the way of success." Data show that no more than a quarter of part-time students in higher education ever graduate. CCA also asserts that progress toward college completion is slowed by excessive course taking.

The California Acceleration Project, an initiative of the California Community Colleges' Success Network, supports colleges in redesigning English and math curricula to increase college completion. At Chabot College in California, for example, students whose placement test scores are below college level—even those at the lowest levels—are invited to self-select into one of two options: a one-semester

accelerated course leading directly to college-level English or a two-semester nonaccelerated sequence. Over the past decade, students in accelerated English classes have completed college-level English courses at significantly higher rates (for some cohorts, nearly double the rate), compared to students who participate in nonaccelerated developmental courses.

Design for Scale

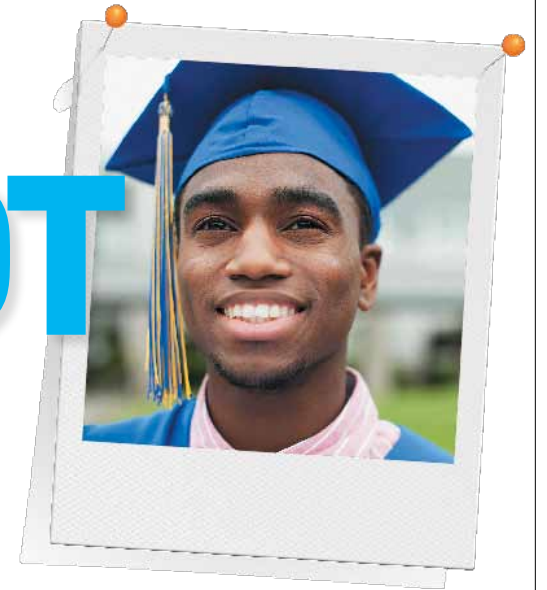
Bringing effective educational practices to scale requires a long-term commitment of time and resources; thus, it also requires significant political, financial, and human capital. The process necessarily involves appropriate engagement of faculty, staff, administrators, students, and governing boards in planning and design, including collaborative examination of available evidence of effective practice; anticipation of design implications for staffing, space, technology, and other resources; and inescapably tough decisions about resource reallocation from less effective or lower-priority functions to those promising better results for students.

Completion by Design (CbD),

Survey SNAPSHOT

of students represented: **5.4 million**
community colleges represented: **710**
of states represented: **48 states and Washington, D.C.**

Source: Community College Survey of Student Engagement 2012 cohort



supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, addresses critical junctures in the pathway from a student's first college contact to completion of a post-secondary credential with value in the labor market. CbD state cadres include: Florida—Miami Dade College; North Carolina—Guilford Technical Community College (managing partner), Central Piedmont Community College, Davidson County Community College, Martin Community College, Wake Technical Community College; and Ohio—Sinclair Community College (managing partner), Lorain County Community College, and Stark State College. Based on intensive data analysis and planning, the cadres are tasked with developing new student pathways that accelerate remediation and entry into coherent programs of study while incorporating many of the design principles described above.

Professional Development

If community colleges are to design and implement new academic pathways for students, they also must invest in the people who will do the work. Improving student success and attaining college completion goals requires individu-

als and groups both to reconceptualize their roles and to work differently. Thus, strategically focused professional development is critical for everyone who has an opportunity to impact student success.

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching established the ambitious goal of increasing the percentage of developmental math students who achieve college math credit in a single year from 5 percent to 50 percent. Through the Community College Pathways Program, Carnegie has brought together a network of community colleges, researchers, and professional organizations to change the structure of mathematics education. The first two pathways—Statway and Quantway—were implemented in fall 2011 (22 colleges) and spring 2012 (8 colleges), respectively, and have shown promising results.

Critical to success is a component for instructors aimed at building the knowledge, skills, and habits necessary to develop efficacy and expertise. Sophisticated analytics support continuous improvement of materials and teaching.

When Done Well ...

As colleges create new academic pathways for students, incorporation of evidence-based design principles matters. Quality of implementation matters. And making these pathways the typical student experience rather than an exceptional one matters. Higher education scholar Vasti Torres, among others, makes the point that *when done well*, certain educational practices make a significant difference in student learning and success. So the goal then is to reimagine students' experiences, redesign them with consideration of key principles, implement them at scale, and do it all exceedingly well.

KAY McCLENNY is director of the Center for Community College Student Engagement, part of the Community College Leadership Program at The University of Texas at Austin. She co-chaired the 21st-Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges. DONNA DARE is vice chancellor for academic and student affairs at St. Louis Community College in Missouri.

**THE CHALLENGE OF
TRANSFORMATIONAL
CHANGE**

BY KAY McCLENNEY AND DONNA DARE



MIKKEL WILLIAM NIELSEN/GETTY IMAGES

REIMAGINING

THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Community colleges are confronted by both the promise and the difficulty inherent in fundamentally redesigning students' educational experiences. The call for transformational change comes to community colleges via "Reclaiming the American Dream—Community Colleges and the Nation's Future," the landmark report from the American Association of Community Colleges' 21st-Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges. >>

Institutional change is never an easy process. But community colleges now must address interlocking goals: to significantly improve outcomes, including degree completion, for an increasingly diverse student population; to achieve equity in those outcomes across student groups; and to do so at a lower cost per successful outcome. No one said that this work would be easy. And it's no surprise that it's not.

New Academic Pathways

A strong case can and should be made—and subject to campus discussion—that community colleges should care deeply about increasing college completion; why doing so requires a fundamental redesign of students' educational experiences; and the reasons why the conceptual notion of academic and career pathways is gaining support from researchers and practitioners as a means of increasing student success.

The American middle class is shrinking, average income has been declining, and the nation's level of educational attainment is losing ground relative to other developed countries, while inequities in attainment across racial, ethnic, and income groups remain an urgent concern. As stated in the commission report:

The American Dream is at risk. Because a highly educated population is fundamental to economic growth and a vibrant democracy, community colleges can help reclaim that dream. But stepping up to this challenge will require dramatic redesign of these institutions, their mission, and, most critically, their students' educational experiences.

A key strategy for improving college completion, according to the commission, is to “construct coherent, structured pathways to certificate and degree completion.” These pathways should incorporate high-impact educational practices, integrate student support with instruction, and allow for implementation at scale.

To accomplish meaningful change, every college needs to engage constituent groups in thoughtful discussion about the condition of the nation and

the local community, the college's data about student outcomes and persistent inequities, the evidence pointing to the importance of clear pathways for students, and the challenges of transformational change. A number of these challenges are discussed below.

Cultural Shifts

Changing institutional culture is the most essential and the most difficult task in our broader work to reimagine students' educational experiences. Culture is the foundation for everything else. What elements of cultural affirmation and cultural change are most salient to this work?

#1

Establishing Values

Community colleges live by a set of tightly connected values: open access, excellence, and equity. With the growing emphasis on college completion and performance accountability, it is important that institutions revisit core values and align resources to ensure that these elements are enacted rather than simply espoused.

The question of values in community colleges is at the heart of our historic missions: Do we value the open door or believe that college is not for everyone? Do we believe that all students can learn (even if currently functioning at the fifth-grade level)? Do we insist that students have a right to fail or that they have a right to succeed? Do we equally value all elements of the traditional multifaceted community college mission, or do we believe that fiscal constraints call for difficult choices? Do we believe that achieving equity in student outcomes is a moral imperative or an impossible dream?

#2

Using Data

In the past decade, many colleges have learned—through student engagement surveys, the Achieving the Dream network, state system initiatives, and local efforts—that data provide a powerful

prompt for campus engagement, courageous conversation, and constructive change.

Despite significant progress, data capacity and use vary widely at community colleges. The push toward a new culture of evidence and inquiry raises important questions: Where are the barriers to student success? Where are the achievement gaps? What evidence-based strategies can be deployed to address these barriers and other gaps? What is the plan for evaluating strategies and their impacts on student success? The cycle of change is dependent on an institution's willingness and capacity to not just *collect* these data, but to *use* them.

#3

Dismantling Silos

Structurally, community colleges and their various functions reflect a century's worth of development. Academic affairs have always been at the core. But as the need to support broad access to college grew, student affairs took on a life of its own, providing needed services for increasingly diverse student populations. Along the way, extracurricular activities, by definition, were separated from traditional academic programs. As colleges sought to meet workforce development demands, other silos grew—separating not just general education from technical education, but also for-credit courses from noncredit courses, and so on. As more students arrived on our campuses underprepared for college-level work, developmental education became a burgeoning enterprise, often misaligned with related college-level academic programs.

As these silos have grown, so have their formal and informal power structures. Staffing patterns reinforce divisions; collaboration is difficult and sometimes notably heroic. The results are all too often disjointed and confusing—or entirely missed—student experiences. The new academic pathways model calls for dismantling silos that readily impede student progress.

#4

Breaking (or Changing) Established Rules

Community colleges, like all public institutions, conduct their work in accord with a plethora of written and unwritten rules. Some enhance students' learning experiences and attainment. Others create more barriers.

Among the many formal, written policies and procedures, some are issued through accrediting bodies and federal and state statutes; others reflect local choices. Carnegie units drive the organization of instruction, teaching loads, and financial aid in terms of time rather than learning. Collective bargaining contracts often reflect relatively traditional approaches to education.

Serious review of these rules inevitably produces cognitive dissonance. When, for example, did we decide that it was a good idea to direct newly arrived students almost immediately—and often without warning or preparation—to complete academic skills assessments that could well determine the course of their academic lives? Where is the evidence that all human beings learn best in 50-minute blocks over a 16-week semester, most often with lecture as the predominant teaching method?

The unwritten rules of higher education limit change more dramatically than the written ones. Norms of belief and practice are a part of every culture and should be examined for their impact on student success.

Discussions, for example, about creating clear, structured pathways for students might well evoke powerful convictions that a college should promote individual choice. Some members of the college community might insist that mandatory experiences inconvenience students, coddle them, or violate their “right to fail.” In some cases, the predominant culture might cast faculty as essentially independent operators, allowed in the name of academic freedom to act at will in their classrooms, sometimes with little accountability for curriculum alignment, collaboration

across disciplines and divisions, effective student engagement, or learning outcomes.

Designing new academic and career pathways for students requires recognition and review of the rules of the game. The will to change most often comes through discussion laser focused on student learning, progress, and attainment.

#5

Redefining Traditional Roles

The academic pathways model requires reexamination of traditional community college roles. Ideal and important cultural shifts include a move from fragmentation to integration and a move from isolation to collaboration. People must learn to work in different ways.

Designing a seamless and effective entering student experience requires careful integration of services and repurposing of staff. If arts and sciences and career and technical education are on the same pathway (e.g., health careers and biosciences), then faculty must work across academic disciplines and credit and noncredit instruction must be aligned. Effective pathways demand continuous fine-tuning of curriculum alignment in collaboration with K-12 systems, transfer institutions, and employers.

Embedding advisers in academic pathways requires organizational shifts and creates opportunities to build long-term relationships with students. Increasing the role of pathway faculty in student advising strengthens students' sense of commitment and direction toward completion, careers, and/or transfer. Effectively marrying cocurricular activities with instruction requires new levels of collaboration between faculty and student support professionals.

#6

The Leadership Imperative

Borrowing the words of T.S. Eliot, Terry O'Banion, president

emeritus of the League for Innovation in the Community College, recently said that community college leaders need to “disturb the universe.”

Further, the many leadership coaches who have worked for Achieving the Dream over the last decade affirm this conviction: While many factors contribute to transformational change for student success, it is leadership that matters most.

Pathway design and implementation leadership requires high levels of courage, commitment, focus, communication, engagement, collaboration, and ingenuity. Those qualities are needed in presidents and chancellors; the work also requires champions and leaders of similar strength throughout the organization.

#7

Vision and Planning

A clearly articulated and widely shared vision is the essential reference point for work as encompassing as the design and implementation of new academic pathways. The vision—here's what educational experiences will be like for students at this college—enables the institution to plan more effectively and helps individuals in the college see how their efforts contribute to transformational change.

Once the vision is clear and a plan is in place, it is equally important to identify a small number of clear implementation priorities, each of them explicitly tied to the allocation or reallocation of resources.

#8

Sustaining Focus

The most common reaction to community college change—initiative fatigue—is also among the most toxic. Though the majority of faculty members view teaching and learning as their central responsibility, they frequently are tasked with flavor-of-the-month projects. Thus, instead of being energized by opportunities for change, faculty often hold tight to their own nuggets of innovation, hold onto

their silos of effort, or just hold their breath, weary of the next big thing and often resistant to integration of disparate initiatives to create more coherent student experiences at a larger scale.

In “The 4 Disciplines of Execution,” authors McChesney, Covey, and Huling argue for fierce focus on a single wildly important goal, or WIG. They contend that execution of significant change requires a disciplined approach characterized by focus, definition of leading indicators for monitoring progress, and accountability for results. Creating new academic and career pathways is a daunting task. But with the WIG of college completion and the pathways model as a framework for integrating effective practices and expediting student progress, members of the college community can contribute in ways that more clearly lead to strengthened coherence and quality in students’ educational experiences.

#9

Engaging the Campus Community

Design of new academic pathways, fidelity of implementation, and continuous attention to the quality of students’ experiences require the effort of the entire college community. From the admissions office to financial aid staff to bookstore employees to advisers, administrators, and faculty (full- and part-time), engagement is essential. Engagement does not happen by itself or through mere good intentions. Engagement of faculty and staff, similar to engagement of students, must be intentionally designed.

#10

Bending the Bureaucracy

How many times have innovators heard, “But the course management system won’t let us do it.” Or, “The registrar says it’s too difficult.” Or, “IT (or IR) control the data.” Or, “Obviously, we can’t ask [faculty, counselors, whomever] to do that.” Or, “But the administrators prevent us from doing

what we know students need.” Or, “The department chair says we can offer only five sections of that redesigned math course, despite the 80 percent student success rate.” Or, “The governance process is so cumbersome that it will take us three years to implement a substantial change.”

Bureaucracies exist for substantial reasons—to create stability, foster consistency and fairness, and keep bad things from happening, whether financial, legal, ethical, or operational. Efficiency is an intended feature of the academic pathway model, which seeks to expedite students’ progress through high-quality, structured educational experiences. To accomplish this, leaders at all levels must take explicit action to remove unnecessary barriers. The phrase “Because we’ve always done it that way” might be reason enough to question your college processes.

#11

Bringing Practices and Pathways to Scale

The challenges of implementing innovation at scale have been the topic of numerous discussions and proliferating articles and have caused a fair amount of hand-wringing. Such challenges include the well-recognized power of stasis in organizations; the traditional structures, rules, and roles of higher education; a still-nascent commitment to evaluation of effectiveness; and sometimes, a lack of institutional will—the absence of the apparently simple but often elusive decision to change these things. Once the decision to change is made, colleges will need ingenuity in the face of constrained budgets, a willingness to reallocate resources, effective communication, and commitment to professional development that will prepare people to work differently and more effectively on behalf of students.

This is hard work. But colleges take it on in the face of a sobering truth: Thus far, the scale of our solutions does not match the magnitude of the problems that community colleges face.

#12

Working Within Financial Constraints

It is impossible to deny the severe financial constraints under which community colleges are attempting to do perhaps the most challenging work in higher education. Still, as student success leader Byron McClenney often says, “There is always enough money to do the most important things.” Adopting the academic pathways model will require colleges to stop doing some things that are lower priority, off-mission, or ineffective—and reallocate resources to do the things necessary to improve student success.

Stepping Up

Innovation is underway, and progress is evident. Still, creating clear, coherent, evidence-based academic pathways for all students requires a comprehensive vision and fundamental change in the ways community colleges do their critical work. The challenges of leading, designing, and implementing change of that magnitude are daunting—but not insurmountable. Bringing new academic pathways to scale will not be easy. But it is entirely necessary if community colleges are to reach critical goals of increasing college completion and achieving equity in student outcomes.

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