

Implementing Guided Pathways: Early Insights From the AACC Pathways Colleges

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This summary is a digest of key findings from *Implementing Guided Pathways: Early Insights From the AACC Pathways Colleges*, a report based on CCRC's research on the 30 colleges involved in the American Association of Community Colleges' (AACC) Pathways Project. For the full report, visit CCRC's website at <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/implementing-guided-pathways-aacc.html>

The research presented in this report focused on how the AACC Pathways colleges were designing, planning, and beginning to implement guided pathways reforms during their first year of work on the project, which started in late 2015. AACC chose these colleges to participate in the project because they had laid the groundwork for guided pathways reforms by building organizational cultures open to change. Only a handful had begun implementing guided pathways before joining the project. The expectation is that participating colleges will redesign their programs and support services for all incoming students by fall 2018 according to the guided pathways model adopted by AACC based on CCRC's research. To help accomplish this, the colleges are sending planning teams to a series of six institutes run by AACC and other national organizations, each on a different aspect of the guided pathways approach. Participating colleges are also receiving coaching from college practitioners who have experience with guided pathways reforms in their own institutions.

We conducted telephone interviews with project leaders from all 30 colleges, and we carried out in-depth two-day site visits at six of the colleges. The resulting report examines how colleges are approaching guided pathways, and it provides insight into how to go about planning and implementing such reforms. The report may be particularly useful for those at the growing number of colleges nationally that are seeking to put into practice ideas that CCRC advanced in *Redesigning America's Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success* (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, Harvard University Press, 2015).

The full report is organized into three main sections focused on:

1. How the AACC Pathways colleges are designing and implementing key features of the guided pathways model.
2. How colleges are managing the substantial changes involved in implementing guided pathways.
3. A key next frontier for implementing guided pathways reforms—further rethinking how to help more students succeed in gateway courses for college-level programs.

This executive summary highlights key insights on how the AACC Pathways colleges are approaching guided pathways reforms, how they are managing the substantial changes involved, and what they are learning in the process.

Insights on Implementing Guided Pathways

Overall Progress

The AACC Pathways colleges are “going all in” and implementing the full pathways model.

By the end of the first year of the project, all of the AACC colleges had made significant progress across all four of the guided pathways practice areas:

1. ***Mapping pathways to student end goals.*** During the first year of the project, the AACC Pathways colleges made substantial progress in mapping programs of study. Almost all of the colleges began to map programs, or planned to do so. Most were using broad career-focused fields, or meta-majors, as a framework for their efforts. About a third were in the process of sequencing program courses and identifying critical courses and milestones for every program, but most were still planning to do so. Several were redesigning their websites around their program maps and meta-majors to show how each program connects to opportunities for employment and further education. The other colleges were planning to do this, pending completion of the initial mapping process.
2. ***Helping students choose and enter a program pathway.*** The AACC Pathways colleges made significant progress in building support for new students to explore career and college options and to develop academic plans. Most had implemented or were in the process of finalizing procedures for using meta-majors to help entering students choose a field of study. As part of the onboarding experience, colleges were moving toward requiring students to develop at least a preliminary full-program academic plan by the end of their first term.
3. ***Keeping students on path.*** All of the AACC Pathways colleges are strengthening advising to help students make timely progress on their program plans and to enable appropriate interventions when students are floundering. By the end of the first project year, many of the colleges were implementing procedures and systems to monitor every student’s progress on his or her program plan and to enable students to see what they have accomplished and how far they have to go.

4. ***Ensuring that students are learning.*** Most of the AACC Pathways colleges have established learning outcomes for career programs and for general education, but they are recognizing that they need to revisit these learning outcomes based on the program maps they have created. A handful of colleges are customizing general education learning outcomes for particular meta-majors.

The speed with which the AACC Pathways colleges are moving toward implementing pathways is impressive. Equally impressive is that the colleges are “going all in,” planning to make changes in all four practice areas of the guided pathways model rather than approaching the reforms piecemeal. This approach is consistent with the theory, advanced in *Redesigning America’s Community Colleges* (Bailey et al., 2015), that colleges will not see substantial improvements in student outcomes unless they redesign programs and support services across the institution so that they work in concert to help students explore, enter, and complete programs of study that will prepare them for further education and career advancement.

Below, we summarize key findings on how the AACC Pathways colleges are approaching each of the four guided pathways practice areas. The full report provides more details and examples for each finding, as well as a discussion of the challenges colleges face as they implement guided pathways.

Practice Area 1: Mapping Pathways to Student End Goals

The AACC Pathways colleges are using career-focused meta-majors as the framework for program mapping.

Most of the colleges are using meta-majors organized by career field as the framework for their program mapping efforts. While we use the term *meta-majors* to describe the groupings colleges are using to organize their programs and associated program maps, in practice, colleges are using terms that are more intelligible to their students and other key audiences. The terms they use tend to convey a connection to careers and a sense of academic community.

The colleges are redesigning their websites to show how program maps connect to career and transfer opportunities.

AACC Pathways colleges are taking steps to demonstrate how their programs connect to opportunities for employment and further education, and they are redesigning their websites accordingly. To ensure that their programs prepare students to advance in the labor market and pursue further education, many colleges are involving employers and university partners in the program mapping process.

The colleges are moving to indicate the math courses appropriate for a student’s meta-major or program on their program maps.

At several colleges, we heard that meta-majors and program maps potentially take the guesswork out of which math courses are appropriate for a given field of study. At least six of the colleges had fully developed and scaled sequences of math courses aligned with particular fields of study. Most others were developing such “math pathway” options, which they plan to recommend students take based on their initial field of interest.

The colleges are trying to find a balance between providing too much and too little choice.

Most of the colleges are seeking to limit the number of general education electives they offer to simplify students' decisions and create more curricular coherence. At the same time, pathways leaders are learning to communicate to faculty, advisors, and students that program maps represent recommended paths. Students' academic plans will reflect the program maps but will be customized based on where students start (including what previous postsecondary education students bring with them) and on their interests and goals. In many cases, students can choose electives not on the maps if the default options do not suit their interests.

The colleges are continuing to revise their maps after they have drafted them.

Most of the AACC Pathways colleges recognize that program maps are dynamic. Program curricula and requirements will change—and in some fields, such as technology, these changes will be frequent—so colleges are defining processes for updating maps. Furthermore, colleges are finding that maps are a powerful heuristic that can be used as the basis for ongoing discussions between stakeholder groups inside and outside of the institution, including between faculty in career-technical education, general education, and academic support; between faculty and professional advisors; and between stakeholders from the college, employers, universities, and K-12 partners.

Practice Area 2: Helping Students Choose and Enter a Program Pathway

The AACC Pathways colleges are finding that organizing their programs by meta-major can help students and others make sense of their many programs.

Interviewees at some colleges told us that organizing programs around a relatively small number of fields can help students understand and begin to explore the many programs their college offers.

The colleges are helping students explore careers and programs from the time they enter college, choose at least a meta-major, and develop a full-program plan in the first term.

One of the most dramatic changes in practice we saw among the AACC Pathways colleges is that most are moving to a model in which students are helped to explore college and career options, choose a program, and develop at least a preliminary full-program plan by the end of the first term. Several colleges are redesigning their new student orientations and student success courses in support of this goal. Most colleges intend to use students' program plans to schedule classes and to enable students and advisors to monitor students' progress throughout their experience at the college so that students stay on plan and complete their programs in the intended time frame.

The colleges are ensuring that students get a taste of a field of interest in their first semester.

Interviewees at several institutions emphasized how important it is for students to get exposure to a field of interest from the start of their college experience. As a dean from one college said, "If a student gets a taste of something that interests them, it is going to help them choose a direction and motivate them to persist." In some cases, colleges are customizing student success courses to students' meta-majors. Several other colleges have also created first-semester maps that include at least one course in an initial meta-major.

All of the colleges are experimenting with promising approaches to developmental education, but most have not yet connected these efforts to their guided pathways reforms.

Virtually all of the AACC Pathways colleges, like many others across the country, are experimenting with new approaches to developmental education and assessment, such as

corequisite courses, modularized or accelerated courses, math pathways tailored to meta-majors, and the use of multiple measures for placement. Most report achieving very positive results in pilots of these strategies, yet very few of the AACC Pathways colleges (and few community colleges across the country) have implemented developmental education reforms at scale. For colleges to enable most of their students to enter a college-level program within the first year, they will need to rethink how they approach placement testing and provide academic support, and to better connect efforts in those areas to their pathways reforms.

Some of the colleges are strengthening academic support in critical program courses other than math and English, but these efforts need to be expanded.

At most community colleges, developmental education and academic support are largely focused on math and English. As the AACC Pathways colleges work to identify critical courses for program areas as part of the mapping process, they are seeing the need to strengthen academic support for students in other program “gateway” courses as well.

Some of the colleges are beginning to build pathways down into high schools, often starting with dual enrollment students.

A handful of the colleges that are further along with pathways reforms are beginning to extend pathways down into high schools, with the aim of helping students to begin exploring career and college options and to prepare to enter a program of study when they enroll in college. Some colleges are doing this by taking a more strategic approach to the courses they offer high school students through dual enrollment arrangements.

Practice Area 3: Keeping Students on Path

The AACC Pathways colleges are redefining advising roles—and in some cases hiring new advisors—to support a more proactive model of advising, with check-ins at key decision points along students’ paths.

All of the AACC Pathways colleges are taking steps to redesign advising to better support progression by students into and through programs, and beyond to jobs and further education. Colleges are finding this to be one of the most challenging aspects of guided pathways. This may be because it requires a fundamental redesign of advising—one that entails new roles not only for staff and faculty with formal advising roles, but also for everyone else, since under pathways, everyone at the college is responsible for helping to advise students along their paths.

The colleges are enhancing their information systems so that students and advisors can easily monitor students’ progress toward program completion.

The AACC Pathways colleges’ efforts to improve systems for monitoring students’ progress represent another major departure from conventional practice in community colleges, where neither students nor colleges generally have a clear sense of how far along students are in their programs and what more they need to do to complete them. Most of the AACC Pathways colleges are upgrading and enhancing their information systems to help advisors and students with progress monitoring. Some of the colleges are also developing “scripts” and checklists for advisors to use when meeting with students at the key decision points along their paths.

Some of the colleges are developing policies to help students “redirect” when their interests change or when they are not likely to be admitted to selective programs.

In nursing and other selective admissions programs, there are usually more applicants than available spaces. Some of the AACC Pathways colleges are taking steps to help students who are unlikely to gain admission into limited-access programs choose a more viable path—for instance, by exposing pre-nursing students to career options in allied health.

Most of the colleges are trying to create more predictable schedules and taking other steps to enable students to complete their programs more quickly.

Most of the AACC Pathways colleges are taking steps to create more predictable schedules for students. Several colleges are developing two-year schedules and offering “course guarantees” to ensure that the courses students need will be offered when students need them. Several have purchased software to help optimize the scheduling process. Colleges will be best able to use these tools when every student has an up-to-date full-program plan. A handful of the colleges are beginning to schedule classes based on students’ plans so that students can take the courses they need to complete their program on schedule. A couple of these colleges are considering ways to preregister students each semester for the next term based on their program plans.

Practice Area 4: Ensuring That Students Are Learning

A handful of the AACC Pathways colleges are considering how to customize general education learning outcomes for meta-majors.

All of the AACC Pathways colleges have established general education learning outcomes, but as colleges organize their programs into meta-majors, some are considering how to define learning outcomes for programs in these broad fields.

Insights on Managing the Change Process

In addition to examining how the AACC Pathways colleges are approaching various aspects of the guided pathways model, we examined strategies that the colleges are using to manage the change process. We discuss these strategies under the three main dimensions of Kotter’s (kotterinternational.com) eight-step change leadership process: creating a climate for change, engaging and enabling the whole organization, and implementing and sustaining change.

Creating a Climate for Change

All of the AACC Pathways colleges had previously taken steps to cultivate cultures of openness to change and innovation.

The colleges selected to participate in the AACC Pathways Project had all been at the work of change for several years, and in some cases even longer.

Most of the colleges had a strategic plan with clear, measurable goals for improving student outcomes.

Nearly all of the colleges had gone through at least one strategic planning process in which they developed goals and metrics for improving student retention, completion, and other outcomes.

The colleges had laid the groundwork for change by building their capacity to analyze, report, and use data.

Most of the colleges had spent several years developing their capacity not only to collect and analyze data on students, but also to use data to inform decision making and improvement efforts.

Engaging and Enabling the Whole Organization

The AACC Pathways colleges are using data to create a sense of urgency.

Leaders at all of the AACC Pathways colleges have sought to raise awareness and urgency about the need for more clearly defined program pathways and integrated supports. Data on the student experience have been particularly effective for this purpose, as have exercises to help faculty and staff see the college experience from the student perspective.

The colleges are taking steps to address the fear and anxiety that inevitably come with big changes generally, and with pathways specifically.

According to leaders at several colleges, because pathways reforms involve major changes to practice, and because these ideas are relatively new in higher education, a concern among faculty and staff is, “What does this mean for me and my job?” Leaders at these colleges have taken steps to address fears raised by the pathways reforms—for instance, by enhancing their communications efforts around pathways and by ensuring that faculty will be able to maintain full course loads.

The colleges are engaging all parts of the college in the pathways work—not just academic and student services staff, but also registrar, information technology, finance, financial aid, human resources, and other functions.

Colleges are finding that pathways reforms work best when the planning and implementation processes are highly inclusive, involving stakeholders from all functional areas of the college.

Implementing and Sustaining Change

The AACC Pathways colleges are finding it helpful to establish clear parameters for pathways work groups.

College leaders are finding that pathways work groups perform much better when they are required to produce implementation plans with clear objectives, activities, roles, and timelines and when their progress is regularly reviewed.

The colleges are investing in professional development that directly supports pathways implementation.

Even in colleges with cultures conducive to innovation, change is hard, and pathways reforms involve big changes. Faculty and staff sometimes feel threatened by pathways reforms, and even if they agree with the concept of pathways in theory, the work of mapping programs and redesigning student supports is novel to many. It is critical, therefore, that college leaders support faculty and staff involved in this work with training and professional development to help them do it effectively. Pathways colleges are providing opportunities for cross-divisional collaboration on pathways between faculty, student services staff, and others; blocking off time for planning and professional development; and providing training to support pathways reforms.

The colleges are taking steps to ensure that initial communication and engagement efforts are sustained.

At more than one college we visited, college leaders communicated broadly within their institutions about the need for change, the larger vision for pathways, and how pathways would build on and help to integrate reforms their college was already undertaking. However, over time, communication sometimes lagged. It is difficult to do once the initial fervor for reform subsides, but communication and engagement around pathways must be ongoing.

The colleges are reallocating existing resources and budgeting for new costs that will be incurred in implementing pathways.

Leaders at the AACC Pathways colleges said that many of the changes brought about through pathways can be covered to some extent by reallocating existing resources. However, our discussions with these leaders indicate that other changes may require additional resources. The two biggest new costs are hiring additional advisors and upgrading websites and student information systems.

Key Next Frontier for Pathways: Increasing Student Success in Program Gateway Courses

A critical next frontier for the AACC Pathways colleges will be to connect their developmental education reforms to their pathways efforts. This will enable more students who arrive at college underprepared to get on a program path and pass critical program gateway courses, ideally in their first year.

The AACC Pathways colleges are already rethinking conventional community college practice in some fundamental ways. Yet for the colleges to implement promising practices in assessment and developmental education at scale (for all degree-seeking students) and to connect those efforts with their pathways reforms will be challenging. It will require even further change in thinking about how colleges help students succeed in college-level courses.

More specifically, colleges will need to move away from the traditional practice of separating college-ready and not-college-ready students and toward the idea that virtually all entering students need help developing skills and habits to thrive in college. Colleges will profit by relying less on standardized tests to “place” students and by involving faculty teaching introductory college courses in using classroom assessments to diagnose the support needs of their students. And colleges will need to move away from offering remediation primarily as a prerequisite to college coursework and instead offer more corequisite, contextualized academic support to students while they are enrolled in college-level courses. Finally, colleges will need to shift from providing support primarily in math and English courses and instead integrate academic support into all courses that are critical gateways to college programs of study. By making these changes, we believe that colleges will enable many more students to get on the college-level program paths that they are working to strengthen through guided pathways reforms.