Washington State Community College

Improving Student Retention and Success Through Organizational Efficiencies and Alignment

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Overview of Guided Pathways Reforms at the College

Large-Scale Changes to Practices

When Vicky Wood came to Washington State Community College as president in 2017, the college was investing limited resources in efforts to improve student success. "As an institution, we were operationally focused," she said. In the five years since then, Dr. Wood has brought on a new leadership team, which has engaged faculty and staff throughout the college in making substantial changes to organizational practice and culture with the goal of improving student recruitment, retention, learning, and success in employment and further education. These changes, which reflect guided pathways design principles and goals (they are summarized in the table on the next page and described in more detail in the Appendix) were implemented in three phases.

FAST FACTS

Location: Marietta, Ohio

Fall 2020 headcount enrollment: 1,809

Number of students by race/ethnicity:
Asian – 7
Black – 25
Hispanic – 27
White – 1,561

FY 2020 operating budget: $11.6 million

Year started guided pathways reforms: 2018

Overview: Guided Pathways at Washington State Community College

Key Practices Implemented at Scale

1. Clarifying paths to student end goals

- Strengthened information on website and in catalog about program requirements, course sequences, and job and transfer outcomes.
- Improved sequencing of career-technical programs so that students can earn certificates and industry certifications while completing their associate degrees.

2. Helping students get on a program path

- Consolidated all services for incoming and dual enrollment students under the Student OneStop and created new college pathways advisors who work with other front-door staff as a team to answer questions and assist incoming students.
- Moved to relying on conversation with success coaches rather than on standardized tests for placement, integrated academic support into college math courses (rather than offering it separately as a not-for-credit course), and worked with success coaches to ensure that students are guided to take math aligned with their field of interest.
- Require all first-time students, including high school dual enrollment students, to meet with a success coach and develop at least a preliminary full-program plan, which is entered into the college's student planning system and which the college and students use to monitor progress, schedule classes, and revise students' plans as they change.
- Promote to K-12 leaders, students, and parents the idea of dual enrollment as an on-ramp to

a college program of study (rather than an opportunity just to take college courses) and work with schools to expand access to dual enrollment for underserved students.

3. Keeping students on path

- Consolidated all services for enrolled students in the newly renovated Center for Student Success strategically located in the library.
- Replaced existing specialized student services staff roles with success coaches who work as a team to provide ongoing support in partnership with faculty advisors.
- Assigned librarians to success center team and expanded role to include tutoring, Food Bank, etc.
- Developed in-house system to facilitate consistent communication and information sharing about early alerts and other efforts to help students stay on path; purchased texting software to facilitate communication with students.
- Cross-trained success coaches and other staff on career counseling and purchased a mock interview platform for students.
- Converted most programs to be taken in eight-week terms.

4. Ensuring that students are learning

- Improved efficiency and efficacy of tutoring by setting goals for response times to student requests, developing a tutoring ticketing system to ensure students get the tutoring they need, and moving tutoring online.

Promising Trends in Student Success

- Increased rate at which entering students earned at least 24 college credits in their first year from 27% for the fall 2015 cohort to 44% for the fall 2020 cohort.
- Increased fall-to-spring persistence of entering students from 68% for the fall 2015 cohort to 77% for the fall 2020 cohort.
- Substantially increased number of students earning certificates and industry certifications as part of career-technical degree programs.

In the first phase, college leaders sought to strengthen advising and support for enrolled students. To do so, they consolidated support services for enrolled students under the Center for Student Success, which was relocated to the newly renovated library to be more accessible to students. They replaced positions that were previously focused on specific student services functions—including tutoring, dual enrollment student advising, and disability services—with success coaches who were cross-trained to work as a team in partnership with field-specific faculty advisors to respond to a wide range of student questions. College leaders assigned library staff to the success center team and broadened their responsibilities to include tutoring and student support. And the college's IT staff developed a system to facilitate consistent communication and information sharing among success center staff and faculty on providing early alerts, just-in-time tutoring, and other supports. As part of this phase, the college also redesigned the website to provide clearer and more consistent information on program requirements, course sequences, and related career and further education opportunities.

In phase two, the college sought to improve recruitment and onboarding of new students. College leaders redesigned and consolidated the admissions, high school outreach, financial aid, business, and records offices into the Student OneStop, which is located in a newly renovated space on campus. The college merged the admissions and dual enrollment advising departments and replaced positions in those offices with college pathways advisors who work as a team to recruit and advise dual enrollment students and other high school students who might be interested in enrolling in the college after graduation. Frontline staff from financial aid and records were also brought into the Student OneStop team and, together with the pathway advisors, have been cross-trained and empowered to answer most of the questions raised by students seeking to enroll at the college. The college also moved to optional placement testing, integrated academic support directly into college math courses (as opposed to offering it as a separate corequisite support course), and worked with the pathways advisors to ensure that students were recommended to take math courses aligned with their field of interest. Finally, it took steps to improve the responsiveness and efficacy of tutors.

In the current phase, the college is converting nearly all of its programs to be scheduled in eight-week terms to allow students to focus on a smaller number of courses at a time and give students with work and family obligations more flexibility to adapt their schedules. As part of this effort, the college has sought to more intentionally sequence courses in career-technical programs so that students can earn certificates and industry certifications along the way toward completing applied associate degrees.

Effects on Student Performance

College leaders point to a number of improvements in student success that they believe have resulted from the reforms they have implemented so far.

- **College math completion.** Between 2015 and 2020, the rate at which first-time-ever-in-college (FTEIC) students completed college-level math in their first year increased from 25% to 44%. The rate at which FTEIC students completed both college math and English in their first year increased from 15% to 31%.

- **Credit momentum.** The rate at which entering students earned at least 24 college credits in their first year increased from 27% for the fall 2015 cohort to 44% for the fall 2020 cohort.

- **Persistence.** The fall-to-spring persistence of entering students increased from 68% for the fall 2015 cohort to 77% for the fall 2020 cohort.

- **Awarding of certificates and certifications.** In the past, the college awarded relatively few certificates, and most students did not earn industry certifications. Now that the college has sought to more intentionally sequence career-technical programs, many more students are earning certificates and certifications.

Strategies for Funding Guided Pathways Reforms

Through its foundation, the college raised $180,000 from local philanthropy to help cover the salaries of the new success coaches. The college also shifted operating funds to hire a dean of student success and a success coach. The college has also implemented the impressive changes to college practices and systems described here without raising additional new resources. According to the college's president, as a small college in a rural area, "raising new resources is not how we solve problems; instead, we do it by creating efficiencies and alignment—making sure the right people are in the right roles and everyone is on the same page with the goals."

To do this, the college eliminated clerical positions, consolidated and redefined roles in related functions, and cross-trained staff previously assigned to particular functions to instead work in teams to provide a wide range of supports to students. For example, to staff the Student OneStop for students seeking to enroll in the college, the college eliminated clerical roles in frontline offices, merged admissions and dual enrollment advising offices, and replaced specialist roles in those areas with college pathways advisors who were cross-trained along with financial aid, business, and records staff to work as a team in responding to questions from incoming students. The former director of admissions and financial aid positions were combined in a new director of enrollment services position, which reduced overall administrative costs even as it improved coordination across these front-door functions. The college took a similar approach in staffing the new Center for Student Success.

In a bold move for a small college, the college discontinued its contract with an IT services firm and hired its own IT staff. Under the leadership of the vice president for organizational effectiveness (see below), the IT staff works closely with the faculty and Student OneStop and success center staff to understand what information faculty, staff, and students need and to develop and deploy systems that provide it. Involving student-facing staff and students themselves in the design of these tools ensures that they will be useful and used. Thus, the college has been able to develop in-house systems that other colleges pay lots of money to purchase from vendors, having too often found that the vendor-supplied tools do not meet their needs and are underutilized.

To manage the systemic changes the college has implemented in a very short time, the president brought on a new leadership team. The vice president for organizational effectiveness led an effort to train all staff in an execution model similar to the Franklin Covey Four Disciplines of Execution (4DX) system, through which every department and staff person establishes goals aligned with the college's overarching goals and metrics for

improving student success. As part of this execution strategy, the college now collects and uses more data than in the past, including both hard measures like student persistence and academic performance and softer measures such as student satisfaction with their experience at the college.

The college has done most of the training for execution strategy and other changes in-house. But it has benefited greatly from the professional development, networking opportunities, and coaching provided at no cost through the Success Center at the Ohio Association of Community Colleges (OACC).

Appendix: Details on Guided Pathways Innovations and Funding Strategies

In the following, we provide more detail on the innovations Washington State Community College has implemented under the four guided pathways practices as well as how the college covered the costs of these reforms.

1. Clarifying Paths to Student End Goals

Innovations the college implemented at scale

- **Website program information.** Washington State has sought to clarify and ensure greater consistency of information on its website and catalog about program requirements and outcomes, such as program-related jobs and earnings for career-technical programs, including through its transfer assurance guides (TAGs), which show students both the general education and major-specific courses they need to transfer in specific fields, such as business, education, sciences, and social services.

- **Embedded certificates and certifications.** In the past, the college offered few career-technical certificates and opportunities to earn industry certifications. The college has worked to improve the sequencing of courses in its career-technical programs so that almost all courses align with a certificate or certification and students can earn certificates and prepare for certifications as they are working to complete their degrees. The move to eight-week semesters (see below) provided an opportunity to further clarify for students how they can earn certificates and certifications as they pursue degrees.

How the college funded these innovations

The college's efforts to improve program mapping and information on the college's website have required a great deal of effort from administrators, IT staff, and faculty, but these tasks were carried out as part of their regular duties at the college and did not require extra funding.

2. Helping Students Get on a Program Path

Innovations the college implemented at scale

- **Student OneStop.** The college redesigned and consolidated its admissions, high school outreach, financial aid, business, and records offices into the Student OneStop,

which is located in a newly renovated space on campus. The goal was to provide a place where students seeking to enter the college can have a personalized experience with one staff member to get their questions answered without getting shuffled around. In the past, these front-end services were siloed, and students complained about not easily getting the information they needed. College leaders said they wanted frontline staff to be able to answer 80% of students' questions, with only 20% needing to be handled by "experts beyond the counter." They thus needed to empower frontline staff so that their interactions with students would be perceived by students as "a conversation, not a transaction." To that end, they engaged all frontline workers in these areas—and students themselves—in redesigning processes and roles for the new center based on a set of design principles articulated by the leadership team. And they cross-trained OneStop staff to better answer students' questions on a variety of topics or refer them to others who could address these questions. The college conducted a survey in fall 2021 and found high levels of student satisfaction with the front-end services. College leaders say that frontline staff now feel more comfortable with their newly empowered roles. According to a member of the leadership team, "[Staff] are better able to help students get the information they need, in some cases answering questions students didn't even know they had."

- **College pathways advisors.** As part of the OneStop, the college merged College Credit Plus (CCP) advisors for dual enrollment students and the admissions team and reassigned the staff's duties to create three college pathways advisors, who are responsible for advising CCP students and other prospective students. These advisors work closely with high school students and their counselors to encourage CCP students to take courses that will put them on a path to a credential in a field of interest and to encourage students to pursue that path at Washington State after they graduate from high school.

- **Optional placement testing.** Because it was difficult for high school students to take college placement tests remotely during COVID, the Ohio Department of Higher Education waived the requirement that students pass placement tests to qualify for CCP. This accelerated the movement already underway at Washington State to make placement testing optional for all students. According to college leaders, students' placement is now determined through conversation between students and their success coach (see below). In the past, conversations about placement between entering students and their advisors tended to focus on test outcomes and were therefore often negative in tone. The success coaches have been encouraged to refocus conversations with entering students on their interests, strengths, and aspirations to help these students develop individualized plans aligned with goals that they can get excited about. Success coaches talk with the student about academic supports they might need to succeed with their plans, not, as in the past, about what they need to do to become "college-ready." As a result, only a small number of students (around 50 out of 900 first-year students) agree with their advisor that they need lots of support in math and consequently take prerequisite developmental math. (The college has gotten rid of prerequisite developmental reading and writing courses.)

- **Integrated academic support for college math.** The college's math faculty created a 3-credit corequisite academic success course that many students once took alongside college math. They found, however, that students succeeded regardless of

whether they took the corequisite class and thus questioned the necessity of requiring students to take three additional credits that do not count toward graduation—and that prevent them from taking another course that would likely be of greater interest to them. The college has moved away from recommending most students take a corequisite and has focused instead on integrating academic support in college-level courses through embedded tutoring.

- **Math pathways.** In the past, most entering students were placed into a college algebra track regardless of their program. Now students are guided to take math aligned with their field of interest—statistics for social and behavioral sciences, business, and health care; technical math for trade and technical programs; and algebra for STEM. The college has also developed a quantitative reasoning math course for arts and humanities students, although success coaches are careful to ensure that the universities to which students intend to transfer will accept this course toward their intended major. Between 2015 and 2020, the rate at which first-time-ever-in-college students completed college-level math in the first year increased from 25% to 41%, an improvement that college leaders attribute to the combined effects of optional placement testing, integrated academic support in college math courses, and math pathways aligned with each student's field of interest.

- **Academic planning.** All first-time students, both full- and part-time and high school dual enrollment students, are required to meet with a success coach and develop at least a preliminary educational plan. Students and success coaches enter the plans into the student planning module of Colleague, the college's enterprise resource planning (ERP) system. Once students' plans are in this module, students, success coaches, and other college staff can consult them to see how far along the students are and what they need to do to complete. The plans can be easily changed if students' goals or circumstances change. Also, students can use the tool to put together draft schedules for an upcoming term, which they can send to their faculty advisor (to which students are assigned once they choose a program) to approve without a face-to-face meeting. In the past, the student planning tool was underutilized by students. However, the college has made a big push to cultivate a self-service orientation among students. So, for example, the OneStop team shows entering students how they can use the student planning tool from home.

- **Dual enrollment pathways.** In their conversations with K-12 district and school leaders, students, and parents, college administrators and staff have emphasized the value of seeing dual enrollment as an opportunity for students to explore and enter a postsecondary pathway to college credentials and good jobs in their field of interest. Under the traditional system, according to one college leader, "students are getting college credits, but they are not always getting a head start on a college program." In the past, high schools tended to offer CCP (dual enrollment) classes based on the subjects their teachers were qualified to teach. College leaders have sought to change this mindset by identifying opportunities for the college and schools to collaborate on building pathways in fields where there are strong career opportunities for students and where the high schools lack capacity. Several districts have agreed to establish CCP pathways, and the college believes that others will follow their lead. The college is also looking for ways to expand access to dual enrollment by students from low-income families and is raising grant funds to pay for transportation and food. College leaders

believe that by providing opportunities for high school students to begin a college program and by extending these opportunities in particular to economically and geographically marginalized students, they are changing students' and families' perceptions of the value of college and motivating more students to pursue college after high school in an area without a strong college-going culture.

How the college funded these innovations

The college staffed the Student OneStop without increasing personnel costs. To do this, college leaders eliminated reception and secretarial roles in the frontline offices. They merged admissions and CCP functions and combined the directors of admissions and financial aid into a single director of enrollment services and financial aid, which somewhat reduced overall administrator costs even as it improved coordination across these functions. They reassigned all staff roles to align them with the goal of providing more proactive, personalized service to incoming students; examples of this include the creation of the director of enrollment services and financial aid position and the three newly defined college pathway advisors. And they cross-trained all frontline staff to answer questions across Student OneStop functions, such as course scheduling, billing, and financial aid, which has increased staff efficiency. The college did spend $126,000 of its own funds to renovate the building that now houses the Student OneStop. However, college leaders say that the increase in student satisfaction and in enrollment and retention has paid dividends that exceed this one-time investment. College leaders are considering hiring a recruiter using general operating funds, with the assumption that this person will help offset the costs through tuition revenue generated from increased recruitment of adult students, which has declined markedly at the college in the past decade. By training students to use online tools such as the student planning tool themselves, the college removes some of the burden from staff.

The college implemented the reforms to placement testing, math academic support, and math pathways without additional funding, although the college's faculty benefited from participation in professional development and opportunities to share information with other colleges on reforming developmental math that were organized for all colleges in the state by the Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE) and the Success Center at the OACC.

3. Keeping Students on Path

Innovations the college implemented at scale

- **Center for Student Success.** As they had done with services for incoming students through the Student OneStop, college leaders reorganized supports for enrolled students through the new Center for Student Success. They reassigned three student services staff who previously focused on disability services, tutoring, and counseling to serve as success coaches, added a fourth success coach, and cross-trained the four to work as a team to provide retention supports for continuing students in collaboration with discipline-focused faculty advisors and others. They located the success center in the library so that it would be easily accessible to students. And, in an innovative twist, they added librarians to the success center teams, expanding their roles to include assistance with tutoring, career counseling, and running the newly created Food Bank. The college eliminated an assistant dean position so that it could bring on a new dean of student success to oversee this work.

- **Early alert and learning support communication system.** The college's IT staff developed a homegrown system to facilitate consistent communication and information sharing among the Center for Student Success staff and faculty on efforts to help individual students stay on path. The system includes functions such as class attendance reporting, early alert for faculty to communicate with success coaches when a student is struggling in a class, and a completion-plan tracker to help monitor the progress of students on academic probation. The IT staff incorporated a predictive analytics function into this system that adds to conventional risk measures 10 additional factors specific to students from rural Appalachia. Information on the risk factors for particular students is built into the early alert system so that faculty advisors and success coaches can respond appropriately. IT also developed a tutoring ticketing system to better respond to student requests for academic support (more details below) and a queue system that asks students seeking service at the Student OneStop or success center what questions or issues they have, which helps staff ensure that students get what they need as soon as possible. The IT staff are also working on a system to monitor disability services records.

- **Career services.** All success coaches and librarians have been trained to provide career counseling and planning support to students. To help students prepare for job interviews, the college purchased Interviewstream, a mock interview platform.

- **Eight-week terms.** Through its Focus to Finish initiative (https://www.wscc. edu/academics/course-schedule/8-week-classes/), starting in fall 2020, the college converted most of its programs (except some health programs) to be scheduled in eight-week terms. This enables students to take the same number of classes they would in a traditional 16-week semester but to split them up into two eight-week terms. The purpose is to allow students to focus on a smaller number of courses at a time and give students with work and family obligations more flexibility to adapt their schedules. The college has also added an eight-week summer term that students can take advantage of to finish their programs faster. And starting in fall 2022, the college plans to roll out programs based on the eight-week model that are designed to be completed by students as a cohort on schedules suited to working adults: two-year associate degree programs with embedded industry certifications in accounting, business, and engineering technology—fields for which there is strong demand among local employers who are willing to pay good wages for qualified workers. The aim of this is to increase enrollment among older working adults, which, as at many colleges in Ohio and elsewhere, has fallen precipitously over the past decade.

How the college funded these innovations

The college's foundation raised $180,000 from three local foundations to cover the salaries of the success coaches. Now that the grant funding is ending, the college is moving the staff costs to its general operating budget. The college eliminated several clerical positions in student services to free up funds for the new Center for Student Success team, and it is using a portion of Perkins funding to cover one of the success coaches. As with the Student OneStop, even though the new center has increased costs, the college has cross-trained staff to work together in a more coordinated and aligned way to support students. The college believes that this improved support for students will lead to increased retention, which will generate sufficient tuition and state subsidy to cover the added staff costs.

A few years ago, the college discontinued its contract with an IT services firm and hired its own IT staff. When the former CIO left, the college chose not to backfill the position because high-level IT staff members already possessed the necessary background in managing IT services. These proved to be wise moves because the college's IT staff has been able to develop in-house systems that other colleges pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to purchase from vendors. Moreover, whereas other colleges find that off-the-shelf systems often do not live up to their promise or are underutilized, the college's IT staff works closely with the faculty and staff from the Student OneStop and Center for Student Success to understand what information staff and students need, thereby ensuring that the systems they develop are useful and will be used.

The IT department also serves as the college's institutional research office. College leaders say that IT is extremely responsive to their requests for data: IT staff address requests quickly, and they ensure that the data they provide answer the questions asked. This represents a remarkable change for the college, which in 2018 was cited by the Higher Learning Commission visiting review team for gaps in data on students and learning outcomes assessment. The college does purchase special purpose software tools that are not easily developed in-house, such as the texting system to better communicate with students and the Interviewstream mock interview platform, but the costs for these are reasonable, especially if they can improve productivity and responsiveness to student needs.

4. Ensuring That Students Are Learning

Innovations the college implemented at scale

- **Tutoring.** The college has taken several steps to improve the responsiveness and efficacy of tutoring. First, it set a goal to connect students with a tutor within 24 hours. Fast response to students' needs has become particularly important in the move to shorter eight-week terms as students have less time to catch up. To do this, the IT staff developed a tutoring ticketing system that helps identify what tutoring students need and matches them with the appropriate tutors. The college also purchased a texting platform that has improved communication with students in general and about their tutoring requests. Second, librarians have taken on tutoring responsibilities. As mentioned, the librarians interact with students from across programs (for example, students often come to them for help finding free textbooks) and are on a first-name basis with many. During COVID, the college moved tutoring online, which has helped improve responsiveness to students. Finally, the college created a hybrid nursing success coach-faculty position that is 50% success coach devoted to tutoring and supporting nursing students and 50% faculty member teaching nursing courses. College leaders say the introduction of this hybrid position has helped to improve student retention.

How the college funded these innovations

As indicated, the college's IT staff developed the tutoring ticketing system in-house. The college did purchase the texting platform with its own funds, but because it is used to communicate with students for many purposes, not just tutoring, the cost was considered justifiable.

Management and Infrastructure for Guided Pathways Reforms

Innovations the college implemented at scale

- **Strategic change management.** To help achieve its extraordinary coordination and alignment of effort across staff and departments, the college implemented a new execution strategy similar to Franklin Covey's 4DX management system. Under this execution strategy, every department has established goals and metrics that are aligned with the college's overarching goals and metrics for improving student success and institutional performance. The metrics for each department include indicators that the departmental team can use to assess the effects of their effort on students—for example, on reducing "summer melt" for success coaches or for decreasing turnaround time for data requests for the IT department. The college is now implementing StrengthsFinder, a system that enables individual staff members to recognize their strengths and use them more effectively in the work with their teams. The use of this system is related to the cultural or mindset aspect of change that college leaders say is a needed complement to the technical management capabilities they have built using the execution model based on 4DX.

- **Assessment of student satisfaction.** As part of the execution strategy, the college has dramatically stepped up the collection of data on student utilization of services and how students are performing in and out of class. College leaders have also led a push across departments to measure the quality of services. This includes collecting harder metrics, such as the number of tickets processed for IT tasks or tutoring sessions, as well as softer metrics, including measures of student satisfaction. The college has established kiosks around campus that students can use to enter questions or concerns. Just as important, college leaders have encouraged all departments to ask students how they are doing, how their studies are going, and whether they feel welcomed at the college, among other questions. This helps cultivate a sense among students that the college cares about them and also helps identify student concerns or suggestions for improvement that the college can respond to quickly.

How the college funded these innovations

The college's vice president for organizational effectiveness, who trained staff in the new execution strategy, has led implementation at the college without the need to pay for outside training of staff or consultants. Other staff who are trained in StrengthsFinder are leading that initiative. The college has limited dedicated resources for professional development. The college's president indicated that as a small college, they have benefited greatly from the free professional development, coaching, and cross-college sharing activities organized by the Student Success Center at the OACC. The OACC institutes and webinars have given them exposure to expertise and sharing opportunities that they could not afford on their own.