Engaging the College Community in Guided Pathways Reforms

Advice From Project Leaders at AACC Pathways Colleges

By Hana Lahr

Implementing guided pathways to improve the college experience for all students, not just selected groups, requires new ways of thinking about leading large-scale reform efforts at community colleges. Colleges that have fully embraced the guided pathways model approach the associated reforms not as a set of discrete interventions targeted at particular groups of students or one aspect of the student experience, but as a framework and a set of principles for redesigning practices across the college that enrich the entire student experience—from onboarding to completion—in and beyond the classroom.

This attention to the change management process and to the need for faculty, staff, and administrators to shift their mindsets to embrace whole-college reforms is as important as the specific implementation practices that are undertaken. But how do college leaders help people within the institution make these mindset shifts? What follows in this brief is advice from project leaders—including college presidents, senior administrators, faculty, and staff—who were involved in planning, overseeing, or coordinating guided pathways reforms at the 30 colleges that participated in the AACC Pathways Project. The colleges joined this national initiative in 2016 and have since sought to transform their institutions using the guided pathways model. We interviewed the project leaders at all 30 colleges in spring and summer of 2022—more than six years after the colleges launched their guided pathways efforts—to learn what has worked best for them in building a college-wide commitment to adopting whole-college student success reforms at scale.

Their advice fell into two categories: (1) how to facilitate commitment to and engagement in implementing whole-college reforms at the start of the work and (2) how to sustain momentum in the work over several years. Much of this advice reaffirms what CCRC learned through interviews with eight of the colleges in fall 2018—two years into the AACC Pathways Project—about how leaders were managing the guided pathways reforms at their colleges (Jenkins et al., 2019). Four years later, college leaders involved in guided pathways, including some

Guided Pathways Change Management Advice From College Reform Leaders

1. Initiate a sense of urgency around how the college has fallen short of helping students achieve their goals.
2. Keep the focus on students, especially those from underserved populations.
3. Listen to students' perspectives and get their input on proposed reforms.
4. Give faculty an integral role in the planning and implementation work.
5. Develop a communications strategy and share out often about reform plans and progress.
6. Be ready for difficult conversations with faculty and staff.
7. Aim for stable presidential and project leadership.
8. Develop and support guided pathways leaders across the institution.
9. Establish cross-functional teams that include academic and student affairs staff.
10. Be patient and accept that progress is often nonlinear.

What Is the AACC Pathways Project?

In 2015, with initial funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) announced the AACC Pathways Project, a national initiative designed to support a cohort of community colleges in implementing and scaling whole-college guided pathways reforms. When the project launched, guided pathways was still a new idea. Yet, momentum was building around a set of research-based design principles organized under four areas of practice intended to help colleges reimagine how students enter and complete programs of study aligned with advancement in the workforce and transfer in a major. Recommendations by the 21st-Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges in *Reclaiming the American Dream* (AACC, 2012) and by CCRC in *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* (Bailey et al., 2015) had made an urgent case for developing a new community college model, and the AACC Pathways Project embraced this challenge.
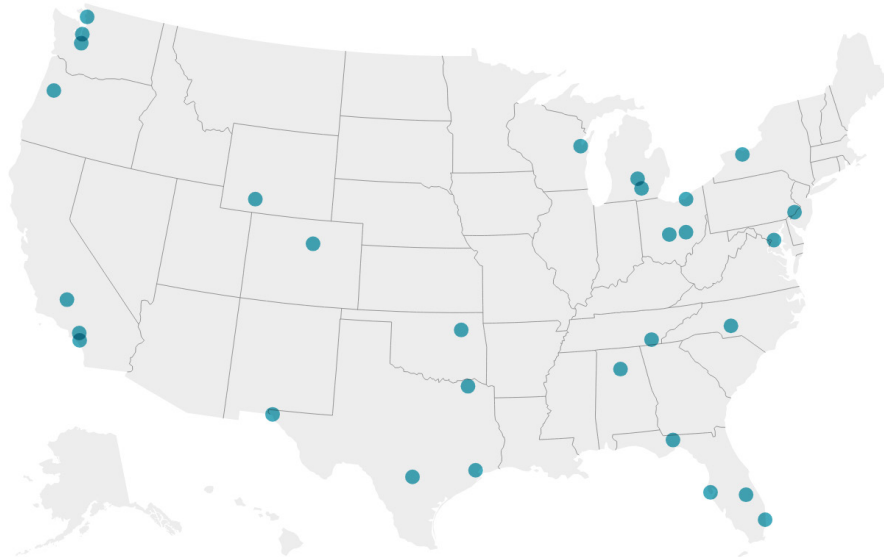
Through a competitive application process, 30 community colleges from 17 states were selected for the project; they committed to redesigning the student experience at scale—for all students in all programs of study at their institutions. AACC chose these colleges to participate in the project because they had laid the groundwork for guided pathways reforms by building organizational cultures open to change. Throughout 2016 and 2017, cross-functional teams of faculty, administrators, staff, and advisors from these colleges participated in a series of six three-day institutes during which they learned about the guided pathways model from national experts and fellow higher education practitioners, analyzed institutional data, and worked through questions and activities aimed at helping them examine the student experience at their institution and design for a new student experience that would lead to an increase in the completion of credentials of value and reduce time and credits to credentials.

Over the course of the project, the colleges focused on implementing and scaling practices within the four areas of the guided pathways framework: (1) mapping pathways to students' end goals, (2) helping students choose and enter a program, (3) keeping students on a path, and (4) ensuring that students are learning. CCRC has partnered with the 30 colleges as sites for research on varied topics, including what practices the colleges have been implementing as part of their guided pathways reforms (Jenkins et al., 2017), how they have been managing the large-scale change process that is required (Jenkins et al., 2019), and what the costs are and how the colleges have been funding their reforms (Jenkins et al., 2020).

who were not interviewed for the earlier study, reiterated many of the same strategies for building commitment to guided pathways and for sustaining progress in adopting reforms. In particular, fostering a sense of urgency, creating cross-functional planning and implementation teams, and developing and supporting reform leaders across all levels of the college emerged as critical aspects of the change management process during both the fall 2018 and spring/summer 2022 interview sessions.

Starting the Work: How to Facilitate Commitment to Guided Pathways Whole-College Reforms

Guided pathways involves changes to how colleges are organized, the programs colleges offer, the roles of faculty and staff, and the experiences of students as they enter and move through the college. So, cultivating broad commitment to and engagement in the reforms and sustaining that momentum over multiple years is essential. College leaders offered six main pieces of advice for building this commitment.

1. Initiate a sense of urgency around how the college has fallen short of helping students achieve their goals. An effective method of encouraging urgency for reform is sharing data on student outcomes. One interviewee explained that college leaders used data—particularly on equity gaps in student outcomes—to appeal to faculty because they knew the data would "catch their attention." Another stressed that "you have to appeal to people's heads and their hearts." To appeal to people's hearts, this college used student data to start conversations about troubling aspects of the current student experience. One key data point was total credit accumulation among students who earned degrees:

> Look at what the data is telling you about what you're doing to your students. Students are graduating with 81–83 credits for programs that [require] 60–65 credits. We're taking their money, their time, and their future opportunities to use financial aid.

2. Keep the focus on students, especially those from underserved populations. As one college leader explained, throughout the process of introducing guided pathways, a crucial part of the messaging is to "always keep in the forefront doing what's best for the student." In the words of another leader, it's important to "remember why you're doing what you're doing. It's basic, but that's why we're here." The guided pathways leadership team at South Seattle College, which has a strong equity focus to its guided pathways reforms, explained that if the goal of guided pathways is to create structures to help more students succeed, then the college also needs to closely examine in what ways the current structures are not helping students of color to succeed. By prioritizing students of color in the college's data analysis, student feedback, and student engagement, South Seattle aimed to better center equity in the college's consideration of course design, programming, and the student experience. Doing this ensures that equity becomes central to the guided pathways work. Tulsa Community College also centered students in their college-wide discussions of the reasons for implementing guided pathways. As their guided

pathways leadership shared, it must be clear to people that pathways is about "doing things differently for students." Finally, at Tallahassee Community College, the focus on the student experience helped unite several different reforms under a student-experience-focused framework called the CARE (connections, academics, resources, engagement) model. This framework has helped faculty and staff across the college consider how their roles contribute to student success.

3. Listen to students' perspectives and get their input on proposed reforms.

Leaders from a number of colleges—the Alamo Colleges, Broward College, El Paso Community College, Irvine Valley College, and South Seattle College—highlighted the benefits of involving students in the guided pathways design teams and in the planning process. At Irvine Valley College, students participated in all guided pathways working groups, contributed to the redesign of the college's website, and were invited to share their experiences with faculty and staff. A few years into the redesign work at South Seattle College, the guided pathways leaders began including students and quickly realized that if they had to do it over, they would find ways to involve students from the start. Through surveys, focus groups, events, and student mentors, a Student Voice working group at South Seattle uses qualitative student data to inform the assessment and refinement of guided pathways essential practices.

4. Give faculty an integral role in the planning and implementation work.

One of the largest groups of employees within a college, faculty have organizational power through senates, committees, and, in some cases, unions and collective bargaining agreements. Many guided pathways reforms directly impact faculty's roles as instructors, advisors, and those responsible for designing and improving programs. Leaders at two colleges reflected on the progress they could have made earlier had they included more faculty in the planning and implementation process from the start. The team at South Seattle College, for example, developed cross-sectional working groups, many of which were led by faculty. This structure proved vital in ensuring that there were faculty champions for the work, helping other faculty to see how guided pathways efforts could align with their goals as faculty members. And leaders at Broward College, recognizing that faculty and advisors spend more time with students than any other group, convened them to look at data and discuss (for the first time at the college) how to best work together to support students.

5. Develop a communications strategy and share out often about reform

plans and progress. At the beginning of any major reform effort, communicating a guiding vision is critical (Jenkins et al., 2019). To help kick off their guided pathways work, many AACC Pathways colleges organized professional development days focused on learning about guided pathways, the ideas behind the reforms, and how they would take shape. Bakersfield College, for example, held campus-wide meetings from 2016 through 2018 to engage faculty and staff from across the college (Jenkins et al., 2020). But as we heard from college leaders, regular communication throughout the adoption of reforms is also essential to ensure that people are aware of progress, that accomplishments are widely known and celebrated, and, just as importantly, that people feel that they are being adequately informed about the progress of the work and what changes are being made. One guided pathways leader emphasized the importance of "reporting out a lot" about the reform work being undertaken.

San Jacinto College has prioritized communication since the college launched its guided pathways efforts in 2016. The college held weekly "Framework Friday" meetings, where stakeholders from across the college could go to learn about and plan guided pathways reforms. The meetings rotated among the college's campuses, and staff reported that they were able to develop strong working relationships with people in other departments as a result (Jenkins & Pellegrino, 2019). San Jacinto College leaders underscored the value of an intentional communication plan "that is consistent, focuses on priorities, and makes clear what the work is and why it's important."

As part of its communication strategy, South Seattle College emphasized that hearing directly from the college president was critical to demonstrating the importance of guided pathways reforms and ensuring transparency. This transparency energized the college's guided pathways work; people wanted to be a part of it because it came across as authentic. One of the topics that college leaders spoke openly about was the barriers facing students that resulted from the college's own practices. This openness enabled others to voice what they saw as barriers to student success.

The focus on communication during guided pathways planning and implementation also led several colleges to take a fresh look at how they communicate with students. San Jacinto College hired an individual responsible for student communications to ensure that the students were receiving cohesive, consistent, and accurate messages from the college. Meanwhile, Wallace State Community College considered communication with students early on in their guided pathways work and carefully looked at who was communicating with which students, when, how often, and what messages were being shared. The college quickly realized that departments were sending out their own distinct messages and that students were receiving emails from many different people and departments. The college has since streamlined its communication with students.

6. Be ready for difficult conversations with faculty and staff. This piece of advice was shared by reform leaders at many of the colleges, and it reflects the challenges inherent in implementing college-wide reforms that may disrupt long-standing practices. As leaders at one college explained, it is important to give people the time and space to process what these reforms may mean for their roles before college leadership begins planning and scaling new practices in earnest. At one college, a key focus was on helping people make "big mindset shifts"; for advisors, this meant recognizing that they would be having more personal interactions with students and avoiding transactional sessions in which advisors "just wait for the next person in line."

Project leadership at another college explained that part of the shift was helping people understand that what benefits students might not always benefit the college's bottom line or individual members of the college. This often played out in difficult conversations with faculty members about the courses to be included on program maps. As one college leader stated, some of the most challenging but critical conversations involved looking at what courses were being offered and which courses counted toward students' programs of study. This leader explained that "leadership has to be ready to have difficult conversations. If we are offering courses that aren't in a program, we aren't serving the student." Moreover, one guided pathways leader shared

that their college has had to clarify for people that certain changes "might not be what's best for us financially, but they are what is best for students, and that's why we're here. That has made it easier to continue to make tweaks."

Another leader recommended grounding these difficult conversations in data to "depersonalize" the conversations so that people do not get defensive. As they explained, "You have to start with data to tell the story of the needs of your students with numbers." They also noted,

> *In these difficult conversations, you should assume everyone is going to resist a little bit. So, how do you make it easier for them to be comfortable with change and appeal to them in an empathetic way? [By using student data.]*

Finally, this leader underscored the importance of approaching the work "in a human way, not just shoving evidence on faculty or saying, 'This is the law.'"

Sustaining the Work: How to Keep Guided Pathways Reforms Moving Forward

The second category of advice from those leading reform efforts at the AACC Pathways colleges centers on how to keep the reform work moving forward over time. Because this work can take many years (Jenkins et al., 2019; Jenkins et al., 2018), institutions are bound to face staff turnover, leadership transitions, financial challenges, and the kind of initiative fatigue that can set in when engaging in challenging work. Remarkably, these colleges have also persisted and adapted throughout the pandemic. The advice from college leaders on how to sustain the work over time focuses on people. In the words of one college president, "It is humans who do all these things to keep an institution operating."

7. Aim for stable presidential and project leadership. Interviewees' emphasis on the value of stable leadership echoes CCRC's research on how colleges have been managing the whole-college redesign process involved in implementing guided pathways (Jenkins et al., 2019). One project leader explained that to foster cross-divisional collaboration and engagement, the president must be talking continually about pathways, while one college president stated that successful pathways adoption requires leadership who "keep pushing and don't let it die." We note that the AACC Pathways colleges have experienced relatively stable leadership over the course of this project, which has likely contributed to the progress many colleges have made. From 2015, when the colleges were selected, through summer 2022, 18 had the same president, while three had the same president from 2015 until summer 2021. At another three colleges, a senior vice president or campus president became the college (or district) president/chancellor and remains in this position. And despite presidential turnover at the remaining six colleges, four have had the same person (most commonly a vice president) serve as the guided pathways leader from 2015 through summer 2022. Finally, at nine of the colleges, the same president and guided pathways leader have held their roles from 2015 through 2022.

8. Develop and support guided pathways leaders across the institution.
While strong presidential leadership is essential to any large-scale reform effort, including guided pathways, we also heard that project leadership must be distributed across key actors throughout the institution, including deans, directors, advisors, and faculty (see also Klempin & Karp, 2018; Spillane, 2012). CCRC researchers had learned about similar strategies while conducting earlier guided pathways change management research. In particular, deans, registrars, financial aid staff, institutional researchers, and information technology specialists had been identified as being vital contributors to the planning process (Jenkins et al., 2019). At San Jacinto College, deans were mentioned frequently as critical change agents. A guided pathways leader noted that the college "sets high expectations for deans and others and provides a lot of professional development for them." At another college, the guided pathways leader explained that the college leadership "let people be experts in their field" and emphasized the benefits of supporting people within the college: "If you have people on the team and you empower them, you will build trust and teamwork."

One project leader stated that executive leadership needs to empower other staff to take the lead: "It should not be top-down, but you need executive leadership who are willing to provide a platform that allows you to make change." One college integrated more people into its guided pathways work by including them on teams for AACC Pathways Institutes as well as state-based guided pathways institutes. This college's president shared that taking someone to the institutes meant there would be "one more person on the campus pushing guided pathways" and that "the more people you can get involved, the easier it is to make it happen."

South Seattle College created an internal coaching model to develop "shared leadership" across the college. Key members of the guided pathways leadership work as coaches to support staff and faculty in implementing reforms. The coaches act as project managers for stages of the pathways work that align with their institutional affiliation; for example, one individual who works with first-year students serves as the coach for the intake and onboarding group. The coaches aim to work collaboratively with other faculty and staff to increase involvement every year and to incorporate redesign efforts into regular college operations.

9. Establish cross-functional teams that include academic and student affairs staff. This piece of advice reinforces findings from CCRC's study on managing change (Jenkins et al., 2019). Having representative teams plan and lead the work is critical to both the planning stages and ongoing pathways adoption. At St. Petersburg College, we heard that the "secret sauce" to pathways planning and implementation was appointing diverse cross-functional teams to lead the reforms. To this end, the college developed a triad model for leading each meta-major (or Career and Academic Community); the triad team includes a member of the library staff, a faculty member, and an advisor. The benefits of this model are that each person adds their perspective on what it takes for students to be successful. The triads train other members in the meta-major, which has helped break down silos between academic and student affairs. One of the benefits of uniting people from multiple departments and programs to plan and implement guided pathways reforms at St. Petersburg College is that now "every single department has changed the way it does its work based on guided pathways," and all their work is organized "under the umbrella of guided pathways."

Everything from the college's communication with students to registration, advising, career counseling, calculation of grade point averages, and progress monitoring has been revisited with the aim of supporting students along their program paths within one of the college's ten Career and Academic Communities.

The guided pathways leads at Bakersfield College also emphasized the need to work together across divisions and departments to better serve students. The college established cross-functional pathways leadership teams for each meta-major that comprise a lead faculty member, an educational administrator, counselors, educational advisors, a job developer, a financial aid expert, and a data coach who works with the team to collect and interpret their student data. The teams originally reported to the guided pathways steering committee but now report to the deans who oversee their respective meta-majors (which they call Pathways). In the words of one guided pathways leader,

> *Pathways work has to be led at the highest level of leadership if you really want cross-divisional collaboration and engagement. Just leading from one division can be polarizing. The board of trustees and president have to be pushing and continuously talking about it.*

10. Be patient and accept that progress is often nonlinear. College leaders recommended taking risks, being patient, and letting things go if they are not working. At one large AACC Pathways college, the provost and guided pathways leader touched on several of these points:

> *You need to be prepared for a lot of work that takes time. You have to be patient. I'm terribly impatient. But I've learned to be patient. One of the things that's frustrating is, with so much work, there is an expected steady upward trajectory. But there are bumps.*

Leaders from two colleges also shared examples of the need to change direction when a strategy is not working or to modify long-standing practices. The first college decided to shift focus away from developing a new first-year experience course and toward a project that had more momentum. The second college shifted from having faculty advisors to having student success coaches, which caused friction because, as the guided pathways leader noted, "People have a vested interest in the way things are." However, the faculty embraced this shift after recognizing the new model's benefits.

Patience was a piece of advice noted by numerous interviewees. As one guided pathways leader encouraged, "Just stick with it. This will take a while. The pace is sometimes frustrating to people, but don't give up—plug away." The guided pathways leaders at another college described how the college persisted through some initial challenges: The first year that the college hired new success coaches, "there were some screwups," but they stuck with their strategy. Another key part of being patient is setting realistic timelines for the work. CCRC has suggested that transforming an institution can take between four to six years, but leaders at several AACC Pathways colleges said that a 10-year timeline is more realistic. An interviewee at St. Petersburg College noted,

> *Transforming a college on the guided pathways model is a 10-year process; it can't be done in a year or two. It is tempting to want to see results right away, but slow and steady will win the race.*

Conclusion

The advice presented in this brief by reform leaders at the 30 AACC Pathways colleges focuses on how to begin guided pathways work and how to sustain momentum. The leaders we spoke with discussed strategies for encouraging buy-in and urgency around equity and outcomes, for listening to the ideas of students, for determining whom to involve in the planning and implementation processes and what data to share, for promoting candid conversations and shifts in mindset, and for keeping everyone up to date and enthusiastic about the college's plans and progress. The leaders also described how college personnel can best maintain their reform efforts over the long term. This includes the importance of stable and distributed leadership, of cross-department collaboration, and of patience for the development of comprehensive, interconnected reform practices. Based on their own experiences, the advice these leaders offer provides a useful way to think about critical elements of the change management process for implementing guided pathways reforms. In our accompanying report, *Innovating at Scale: Guided Pathways Adoption and Early Student Momentum Among the AACC Pathways Colleges* (Lahr et al., 2023), we found that nearly all of the 30 colleges that signed up for the AACC Pathways Project in 2016 remain committed to this work seven years later. Despite the challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting setbacks, college administrators, staff, and faculty are still moving forward with this student-focused, whole-college reform work.

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