Topic: Ask-Connect-Inspire-Plan

This video provides a short overview of Ask, Connect, Inspire, and Plan, or ACIP; how it fits into the broader guided pathways framework; and how colleges can use ACIP to reimagine an equitable program onboarding experience for all students.

One of the main features of the guided pathways model is the four areas of practice, or the four pillars. Pillar 1 is mapping pathways to student end goals; Pillar 2 is helping students choose and enter a path; Pillar 3 is keeping students on a path; and Pillar 4 is ensuring that students are learning. These pillars provide a framework for thinking about how colleges can change practices to better support students as they enter and move through the college and on to their next steps, whether it's transfer or entry into the workforce.

Over the last seven years, our team at CCRC has been researching how community colleges are approaching guided pathways reforms within this framework. We have learned a lot, and our thinking about how colleges can approach institution-wide reform has evolved.

One of the challenges with the guided pathways framework is that it is a huge undertaking, and the amount of reform work required can leave colleges feeling pulled in many different directions. The Ask-Connect-Inspire-Plan framework builds on the four pillars, with a particular emphasis on Pillar 2. We have come to believe that getting students on a path is particularly important to their longer term success; it also provides a necessary foundation for work in Pillars 3 and 4. You can't keep students on a path if they don't have a path or ensure that they're learning in a program if they aren't in a program.

But besides setting up Pillars 3 and 4, why else is program onboarding important? Program onboarding starts when students apply or even earlier. From national data, we know that between 10 and 40% of students who apply to community colleges never actually enroll. As we've seen in colleges across the country, enrollments in community colleges are declining, making it even more necessary to think about how to engage students from the start.

Let's think about the student onboarding process as a funnel. Colleges lose students at every stage of the process, and we think that to help more students stay enrolled, colleges need to help students feel like valued members of the college community

and to see that they have a clear path to meet their goals and that it begins at your college.

Right now, we know that we lose between 10 and 40 of students between application and enrollment. While some students probably applied never intending to enroll, what about the rest? Then, how many students leave before census day and before term 2? Nationally, about 45% of students who start at a community college leave higher education by the start of year 2, and almost 60% of Black students who start at a community college leave higher education during their first year. So almost half or more of students who start at a community college leave higher education within their first year.

We think that one reason that students leave is because they don't see a clear path to their goals. But by rethinking the program onboarding experience, we can engage students early, help them get on a path that is inspiring and motivating and aligned with their goals, and provide them with a strong support network.

If we look longer term, nationally about 40% of community college students complete any credential in six years. In interviews CCRC has conducted with students, we learned a lot about what they want when they are entering college. Our colleagues found that students want assistance exploring academic and career interests; opportunities to interact with other new and current students, faculty, and others who share similar academic and career interests; the chance to take a course on topics of interest in term 1; and assistance developing a full program educational plan.

Now we want to introduce the Ask-Connect-Inspire-Plan framework. But first, put yourself in your student's shoes for a minute by thinking back to when you went to college. How did you decide on your major or your program of study? Was it an influential professor, a great class, a lifelong interest? Who or what helped you make this decision?

Now think about the students who enrolled for the first time at your college this past fall. Through your college's onboarding process, how much did you learn about students' interests and goals? Do you think it's clear to students what they need to do to meet their educational goals and how long it will take?

These questions are important because everyone comes to college with different interests, goals, and ideas about their future, and for many people, there isn't a direct line between major and career. But we want to emphasize that regardless of where students are when they walk in the front door, it's important to provide opportunities for them to explore, learn, and try out fields that they're interested in. Finding your passion usually won't happen by chance or luck, but it's an important part of ensuring that students are successful and that they are inspired by what they are studying.

So how can we provide every student with the opportunities and support to find their path? Your college can reimagine program onboarding and help students explore and enter a program of study that is aligned with their interests and aspirations through the Ask-Connect-Inspire-Plan framework, or ACIP. The process of onboarding with ACIP can take up to a year, and a student is onboarded when they have chosen a program, not general education or general studies; taken and passed introductory program courses in their field of Interest; have started to build a community with students and faculty in that field; and have a full program educational plan.

Ask-Connect-Inspire-Plan represents a shift in mindset to one in which all college staff are involved in actively helping students explore and find a program path. I want to emphasize that point about all college staff–is not only admissions staff and counselors and advisors that are having ACIP-informed interactions with students. How can faculty, deans, the registrar, financial aid, librarians, classified staff, and others be more involved in this process?

A major theme of ACIP is that it's about providing proactive support: It's about reaching out early and often to students and adapting supports to particular student groups, including students of color, first-generation students, returning adult students, and other underserved students in degree credit programs, but also students the colleges sometimes do not see as candidates for credit programs, including dual enrollment students, students in ELL programs, adult basic education, and non-credit workforce training programs. Colleges implementing guided pathways have recognized that they need to provide more support to students with different life experiences and goals.

We define "asking" as every student is engaged in an ongoing conversation about their interests, strengths, aspirations, and life circumstances, with the aim of

helping them explore programs of study and career paths aligned with their goals. One thing to note is that this is an ongoing process–things are going to change and evolve, not just about students' programs and interests but also about their lives. Asking things like how many hours a week are they working, are they caring for family members, how far are they traveling for school, and do they have stable housing or childcare opens up a dialogue about their ability to complete and connect with their programs, people, and the school. These things change on an ongoing basis as well; as their lives and interests evolve, their needs for support will evolve, too.

There's also a role for everyone in Ask. This isn't just about admissions counselors and advisors but also about faculty and other people who can learn more about their own students. A national survey of entering community college students by CCCSE found that fewer than half of students ever met with an advisor. But Ask should start even before students meet with an advisor.

When one college we worked with started asking, it totally changed how their initial interactions with students went. Before, the first question that they asked new students was, "Are you a credit or a non-credit student?" If they said they were a credit student, the follow-up was, "Are you a transfer or workforce student?" They are putting students in these tiny boxes without ever learning anything about them. Now the first question they ask students is, "What brought you to college?" And they're able to start a meaningful conversation.

We define "Connect" as from the start, colleges facilitate opportunities for every student to meet with faculty, students, alumni, and employers in fields of interest to them and to access college and community resources that can help support their needs. Connect builds on Ask: It's about intentionally helping students find and build a community within the college. The literature on student development and engagement emphasizes the benefits students gain from engaging with faculty, peers, and alumni in a field of interest early on, and in larger colleges, it can be helpful to find a smaller community within the larger college.

But in addition to helping to facilitate a sense of belonging and community within the college, connecting can provide an opportunity for students to start building an academic and professional network, and it can give students real-world insight into program and careers and help them make an informed decision about their path.

Finally, this can be about connecting students with resources in the college and in the community that can help them outside of school as well.

"Inspire" is when every student takes at least one course in term 1 on a topic of interest that "lights their fire" for learning. Often students take courses in their first term that are reminiscent of their high school experiences, like math and English courses, and don't necessarily see how college is different or more impactful, so it's important to ensure they are given opportunities to engage in exciting learning experiences early on. The courses students take during their initial terms are important for engagement in a program because they can define the college experience, facilitate exploration of interests, help them build confidence as learners, inform their choice of major or program, and support connections with faculty and peers.

Finally, we have "Plan," which is about ensuring that every student is helped to develop a full program educational plan by the end of their first term. This plan will be based on the program maps developed by faculty and advisors, but it is tailored to each student. It will show a student what courses they need to take to complete their program. It will be tailored to their timeline and will include electives that they choose and may also include certain courses that are required by their transfer destination. Ideally, the plan will be updated as needed and tied to scheduling and registration processes.

In our interviews with students, they often talk about how much they value having a plan. One of students' biggest worries is taking a course that won't count, but a plan provides reassurance that they have a path to meet their goals. Plans can also help colleges because they give programs and departments a better sense of how many students need what courses and when so they can develop schedules that work for students.

As we mentioned earlier, students are going to come to college with different life experiences, varying levels of clarity about their goals and interests and the range of fields and careers that they can explore, and different levels of support outside of college. So part of rethinking onboarding through ACIP is thinking about how you can tailor practices to students based on what support, guidance, and types of conversations will be helpful to them.

More often, privileged students are the ones that get access to people who take an interest in them. But, if we start thinking about orienting practices to the most marginalized students at your college, you'll be laying a strong foundation to better serve your whole college community. The reason we sometimes talk about all students is because even powerful programs like TRIO do not serve all students of historically marginalized backgrounds. If we want to improve outcomes for Black, Hispanic, Native, and low-income students, for example, we need to ensure that we're implementing practices that are going to benefit students regardless of whether they are in a targeted program or not.

If you're interested in learning more about guided pathways and ACIP, please explore the resources on the CCRC website.