

Guided Pathways: Lessons Learned

Dr. Guy Generals 20 February 2018

Adopting the guided pathways model means accepting the challenges associated with transforming an institution into one that is student centered. This seems simple enough -- and undoubtedly most community colleges describe themselves as student-centered. But the reality is much more complicated. The sweeping changes that accompany a transformational effort can stir uncertainty and no small amount of trepidation. At the macro level, departments are merged, reporting lines are changed, and policies created many years ago are challenged for their continued relevance. Those policies may be administrative with only an indirect impact on student learning, or they may be educational policies directly affecting student outcomes. Both can have an impact even before the student steps into their first class. Advisement policies, financial aid policies, payment plans, and the myriad of registration policies -- and procedures -- are among those that demand close examination for their continued relevance. Similarly, educational policies like testing, placement, and first-year advisement are among the minefield of practices that can increase the risks associated with student failure.

A concern that continues to challenge the onboarding

process is testing and subsequent placements. Recent research suggests that the production model of mass testing and placement is not particularly student-centered nor is it necessarily accurate. *In Redesigning America's Community College*, the authors -- Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins -- cite J. Scott-Clayton's work challenging the traditional model of relying on single indicators, or discreet scores, to place students into their initial classes. Beyond the cut scores' lack of predictability, the overreliance on a single score places too much of an emphasis on minimums and fails to assess motivation, critical thinking, or grit. This is a formula that assesses students' weaknesses and not their strengths. Sadly, this approach does not take into account the scope of a student's prior experiences. Those experiences are marked by their tenacity and their ability to balance family responsibilities, work, and far too many obstacles for most to understand. Too many high school students have fallen victim to learning environments that failed to push them to their full potential. They were among the best in their high school class yet, when they arrive at the doors of the community college, they are placed into remediation. According to their high school grades, these were good students, motivated students, and students ready to achieve and pursue their dreams. But the traditional approach to mass testing often fails to calculate those strengths into an accurate final placement. The onboarding process needs to be redesigned to leverage students' enthusiasm as well as recognizing their

academic strengths.

However, when it is clear that remediation is needed, it is best to place the student into a learning environment consistent with their goals and aspirations and not stifle motivation by placing them into disconnected reading, writing, and math courses. Every effort should be made to apply engaged learning with career-focused and contextualized materials. If course content is unrelated to student aspirations, they are much more likely to lose interest. Creating career clusters that vertically align with the pre-college experience is an essential component of the pathways design. And along the way, proactive wrap-around services will help students with academic and/or, personal challenges. The implementation of a caseload model for advisement services removes the randomness of an open advisement system; and, integrated technologies such as Starfish help to facilitate student engagement between courses and beyond the classroom.

At the micro level, the conversations about courses and learning outcomes are equally challenging. The debates about which skills and knowledge are most important are as old as our institutions of higher education. Throughout our history, the nation has wrestled with the fundamental question of how institutions of higher education can best be organized to further the interests of the growing democratic society and the evolving economic and social challenges. In many ways, the origins of the guided

pathways strategies stem from the desire to confront those social and economic needs. At its core, the guided pathways approach challenges traditional thinking about higher education's role in preparing the learned and productive citizen solely through the liberal arts and related values and truths. For many, multiple options within the liberal arts curriculum foster intellectual curiosity and a lifelong commitment to the love of learning. While we all share in the importance of a solid liberal arts education as foundational to a college education, an outstanding question continues to center around the degree to which we are able to blend career and technical education with a reasonable complement of courses in the liberal arts. Can this be done without creating a course for every specialized interest growing out of the broad subject areas of the liberal arts?

Implementation of a guided pathways strategy encourages the reduction of options that are not consistent with career goals or program clusters. This should not be interpreted as a narrowing of the curriculum. In fact, the tradition of intellectual exploration is preserved when the guided pathways strategy is implemented and the student's goals are reinforced and within sight. A student's career passion sparks their curiosities while fostering a deeper desire to understand the subject matter related to their interests. They explore nuances and are able to think critically about a body of knowledge aligned with their aspirations. Rather than

course selections based on curiosities in unrelated areas of study, students are connected to rich learning experiences with coherence and relevance to their chosen fields. Their college experience becomes one continuous pathway with a clear end-goal in sight. Flexibility within course selection is important but a laissez-faire environment -- or what is commonly referred to as the cafeteria model -- slows progress. Further, research has shown that too many choices creates a level of paralysis that distracts and often diverts attention away from the goal. Plus, it's costly.

The fundamental goal is to have students persist, graduate, and join their communities as contributing members. This does not detract from the goal of lifelong learning. In fact, career success internalizes the importance and value of education. The pathways model addresses the nation's reality of far too many students attending college with no defined purpose or outcome. While many community college students are clear about the importance of a college education or a career goal, most are in need of guidance and specific strategies to help them succeed. They are determined to provide a better life for themselves and their families and, in large urban cities, that determination includes a certain level of urgency. The guided pathways model helps to facilitate their success.

Works Cited

Baily, Thomas; Jaggars, Shanna; Jenkins, Davis.

Redesigning America's Community Colleges: *A Clearer Path to Student Success*, Presidents & Fellows of Harvard, 2015

Author bio

Dr. Donald Generals, a strong advocate for community colleges, is the sixth president of Community College of Philadelphia. With a focus on student success, he has emerged as a leader in the national reform initiative Guided Pathways, which involves a college reorganization to ensure curricular alignment between academic programs and related support services. The resulting impact has shown positive trends in graduation rates and retention. An educator and seasoned researcher, Dr. Generals is an expert on the roots of the progressive education movement. This concept is advanced by leading scholars who believe schools must be effective agencies of a democratic society. In 2013, Dr. Generals authored a book titled, *Booker T. Washington: The Architect of Progressive Education*.