

Advancing the Completion Agenda: A Snapshot of Guided Pathways Efforts

By Krystal Andrews

Obtaining a college credential is viewed as a means of accomplishment and a vehicle for economic and social mobility. However, the road to obtaining this coveted prize varies, while the demand for college degrees for entry-level positions continues to increase.

As for community colleges, this institutional type continues to be the premier and most affordable access point for students of all preparation levels to gain credentials that allow them to move onto baccalaureate-granting institutions and into the workforce. In 2009, President Barack Obama introduced his administration's American Graduation Initiative (AGI) to meet the economy's demands by producing a more skilled labor force by 2020, along with a way to stimulate the economy amid the 2009 economic recession. This initiative used community colleges as the featured sites for carrying out the program by committing \$12 billion over ten years to improve the funding and physical infrastructures of campuses, in order to meet the goal of having five million community college graduates by 2020 (United States Office of the Press Secretary, 2009).

While this initiative found traction with the growth in the conversation surrounding free community college nationwide, it did not include any concrete parameters or guidelines for states to follow to achieve this goal; as a result, there is an absence of policy to guide the broad adoption of policies to improve degree completion.

AGI has diminished due to partisan politics and federal budget cuts since its introduction. However, the initiative sparked a movement to improve the community college experience and completion rates through frameworks such as guided pathways. As it stands today, there still is no federal policy to address the issue of degree completion. Hence, states have decided to institutionalize their own policies while leveraging the guided pathways framework as their model.

The purpose of this brief is to examine how the guided pathways framework has influenced states to reimagine how their policies and practices influence student outcomes and the steps to institutionalize these reforms at the state level. This brief includes a historical review of guided pathways, states' efforts, and recommendations for improving policy and practices nationally to increase credential completion at community colleges.



What is Guided Pathways?

Guided pathways as a framework is an “integrated, institution-wide approach to student success based on intentionally designed, clear, coherent and structured educational experiences, informed by available evidence, that guide each student effectively and efficiently from their point of entry through to the attainment of high-quality postsecondary credentials and careers with value in the labor market” (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018, p.1). This framework is supported by the need to provide a more structured academic experience. Hence, the goal of guided pathways is to shorten the time to degree completion while providing students with the opportunity to explore career interests through course maps that include embedded skill-development experiences and institutional support through completion. The intended guided pathways experience “allows colleges to provide predictable schedules and frequent feedback so students can complete programs more efficiently” (Community College Research Center, 2015, p.2).

The framework includes four key pillars that guide curricular transformation: (1) creating clear academic paths; (2) helping students get on a path; (3) helping students stay on a path; and (4) ensuring that students are learning. Further, the framework includes a theoretical map that includes planning, implementation, evaluation, and early-outcome measures that should be considered when embedding this approach (American Association of Community Colleges, 2019).

The origins of guided pathways can be traced back to 2011 with the establishment of the Completion by Design (CBD) project funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. This galvanizing initiative sought to address the barriers and obstacles impeding positive student outcomes and completion rates at community colleges.

At the outset, nine colleges across three states joined the project, undertaking the challenge of revamping their respective campuses’ academic culture and policies to improve student success (Completion by Design, 2017). Additionally, organizations such as the Community College Research Center (CCRC), Achieving the Dream (ATD), Jobs for the Future (JFF), and others worked collaboratively on CBD.

As the project progressed, more funding and collaborations with the Association of American Community Colleges (AACC), the Aspen Institute, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE), the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement (NCII), and Public Agenda were put in place to continue to develop the guided pathways framework. As of this writing, organizations such as the Office

of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL), Complete College America (CCA), the United Negro College Fund (UNCF), The Charles A. Dana Center, the Association of American State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU), and Carnegie Math Pathways have contributed to the pathways movement (Completion by Design, 2017; American Association of Community Colleges, 2019). More than 200 institutions are utilizing the framework and seeing results from their investment in transforming their institutional approach to student success and completion (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2020).

Guided Pathways Efforts in California and Virginia

As states implement a guided pathways framework, they and their institutions are in various stages of adoption and commitment. For states such as California and Virginia, instituting the framework shows that the level of implementation is unique and makes a statement for each state’s investment in education. This section reviews each state’s implementation of the pathways framework to provide a snapshot of how an absence of federal policy or oversight of college completion stratifies the approach to student success.

California Snapshot

As the largest community college system in the country, California is one of the first states, along with Missouri and North Carolina, to pass legislation to institute policies that address college completion or practices such as guided pathways (Fulton, 2017). In 2017, the California legislature implemented the California Community College Guided Pathways Grant Program. This bill included a one-time investment of 150 million dollars to aid in implementing the program across its 114 community college campuses, along with clear language and practices that should guide the development of the grant program (California Community College Guided Pathways Grant Program, 2017).

Further, the bill included guidelines for state-level administrators regarding fiscal allocation procedures, data points, and evaluation tools for completion metrics statewide. Based on the most recent guided pathways legislative report, an overwhelming majority of the participating community colleges are still in the planning-to-scale stage of implementation of their guided pathways efforts; however, three campuses that were early adopters of the framework are showing promising change. For example, Skyline College has completed a comprehensive redesign that includes a new promise scholars’ program offering financial support and a realignment of academic programs into meta majors to provide clear program maps for each academic program and respective career field.



The redesign also includes a transformation of teaching and learning into high-impact practices to garner more connection between students' classroom learning and their career goals (California Community Colleges, 2019, p.24).

Virginia Snapshot

Virginia does not have legislation that specifies the implementation of guided pathways as a framework for its community colleges. The closest pieces of legislation related to leveraging the power of community colleges in the completion agenda are the policy guidelines that address the development of transfer agreements (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2020) and the state policy on transfer (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2016). However, they have leveraged a partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and Jobs for the Future to establish a grant-funded student success center that provides state community colleges with resources to implement the guided pathways framework (Virginia Community Colleges System, 2020).

Further, the success center also highlights its use of Achieving the Dream's (ATD) Integrated Planning and Advising for Student Success (IPASS) strategy, which leverages integrated technology, advising, and progress-tracking to garner student success. As such, IPASS is complementary and integral to embedding the guided pathways framework across the Virginia community college system.

Highlighting these two states reveals that states are left to create and implement policies and practices that best fit their needs or priorities due to a lack of federal guidelines. These highlighted states also shed light on the vast differences in funding guided pathways work, as both states feature non-renewable funding.

Recommendations for Improving Credential Completion Using Guided Pathways

The Guided Pathways framework was presented in this brief as a practice enacted nationwide to address the absence of federal policy and the college completion agenda. Additionally, the history and guiding pillars of the framework were presented, as were snapshots of states that have varied approaches to funding models and legislative measures to address their respective usage of the framework. While one state has a more detailed approach, it is important to note that to increase student completion, a centralized and robust approach must be enacted to meet the goal of increased credential completion.

Below are recommendations on how to utilize the guided pathways framework as institutions strive toward the completion agenda for community colleges:

1. **Formalize policy that features best practices from guided pathways at the federal level to guide states to streamline the implementation of such a model based on their needs.**

While the guided pathways model includes the four pillars of clarifying the path, helping students get on track, helping students stay on track, and ensuring students are learning, a consortium or task force at the federal level is needed to provide centralized oversight to ensure that states are not left behind in the college completion movement. Best practices should include suggestions for assessing campus capacity for a guided pathways overhaul, standard policies that can be adopted in compliance with individual state policy, a centralized model for creating academic program maps, standardized student metrics, culturally responsive advising and teaching practices, and culturally responsive assessment of student outcomes. Additionally, creating a national clearinghouse for guided pathways to serve as a repository for these best practices would provide both access and transparency in the further development of institutionalizing the framework.

2. **Providing financial incentives to community colleges for implementing guided pathway best practices.**

This recommendation consists of the earmarking of funds for community colleges through the proposed national clearinghouse for guided pathways to reward or incentivize campuses to implement best practices of guided pathways. As the funding model for community colleges does not match their missions, providing funding for institutionalized best practices, with the possibility of renewal, is a way to elicit more participation in the streamlining of the framework.

Such a funding model can mimic performance-based funding in terms of metrics, yet the guidelines of those metrics must be culturally responsive. Additionally, funding should be incremental based on the campuses' rate of implementation of best practices.

3. Leveraging these models to create more equitable experiences for racially minoritized students.

Guided pathways as a framework is heralded as a model showing an increase in overall completion rates. However, until recently, equitable experiences for racially minoritized students were not considered in the model. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2020), students of color make up more than half of all community college enrollees. However, when looking at the guided pathways framework, equity was not accounted for before the 2019 update of the model. Hence, the framework can be viewed as color-evasive and lacking any semblance of culturally responsive practice in any pillar of the framework. Thus, to increase the

degree completion of all students, the experiences of racially minoritized students must be included and given the same level of attention as their white classmates.

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