



Elevating Student Affairs Practice in
**COMMUNITY COLLEGE
REDESIGN**

MICHAEL A. BASTON, JD, EdD



Elevating Student Affairs Practice in Community College Redesign

Michael A. Baston

Rockland Community College, Suffern, NY, USA

ABSTRACT

The current national community college redesign effort, Guided Pathways, focuses on the need for “clearer, more educationally coherent programs of study that simplify students’ choices without limiting their options.” In *Redesigning America’s Community Colleges*, the authors Thomas Bailey, Shanna Jaggars, and Davis Jenkins offered general insights into student services redesign in support of constructing guided pathways. This article provides answers to some basic questions about the role of Student Affairs in the community college redesign effort commonly referred to as Guided Pathways. Specifically addressed is the focus on how and where Student Affairs executive teams start in the desire to advance the institutional change mandate.

The current national community college redesign effort, Guided Pathways, focuses on the need for “clearer, more educationally coherent programs of study that simplify students’ choices without limiting their options” (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). Guided Pathways redesign efforts enable students to complete credentials and advance to further education and the labor market more quickly and at less cost. In an excellent primer on the subject, *Redesigning America’s Community Colleges*, the authors Thomas Bailey, Shanna Jaggars, and Davis Jenkins (Bailey et al., 2015) noted that “community colleges were originally designed to expand college enrollments at low cost, not to maximize completion of high-quality programs of study” (Bailey et al., 2015). As a result, students picked courses from a “bewildering array of choices with little guidance” (Bailey et al., 2015) or self-reflection. The lack of structured guidance led to students changing majors multiple times, increasing the time and finances needed to complete a community college degree.

Community colleges engaged in redesign efforts are examining the way they offer programs and services, and restructuring these programs and services to put students in the best possible position to select and finish their course of study and transition to advance degrees or employment opportunities that provide a family-supporting wage. This article provides answers to some basic questions about the role of Student Affairs in the community college redesign effort commonly referred to as Guided Pathways. Specially, what is Guided Pathways? In what ways can Student Affairs contribute to this effort? How can Student Affairs collaborate with faculty in this initiative? How does it change our current work? What staffing and training is necessary?

What is guided pathways?

As noted, all too often, students begin their educational careers at community colleges with little to no knowledge of how to navigate the complexities of the college environment. They may have no sense of what their options or opportunities are at the college. Some make choices about their major with minimal information and perhaps solely influenced by current popular culture or the direction

of a parent who has decided for the student what he or she should become in life. The lack of structure and strategy results in students taking 6 years to earn a 2-year credential. Many earn excess credits, change majors multiple times, and run out of financial aid because of these choices, which then makes building student loan debt a matter of necessity rather than choice (Rosenbaum, Redline, & Stephan, 2007). According to data by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE), this is especially true for many first-generation college students, ones who are the first in their family to go to college—some from a low socioeconomic background (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012). Guided Pathways, simply stated, is an institutional effort to create coherent academic and career pathways for students that leads to the student's intended goal of pursuing an advanced degree or transitioning into employment.

When community colleges choose to begin college redesign efforts, there are basic areas that are important for review. First, what are the regional talent needs in terms of future employment? This is important because academic programs should lead to positive labor market outcomes. Because some schools have many different majors, mapping academic programs, there is a course-taking sequence that helps students identify a recommended plan to finish. This includes guiding students to take the classes most appropriate to their goals, including gateway math, English, and other essential prerequisites. It also means that students who have to complete basic skill courses would do so in their first year of study. The ultimate objective is to get students on a path to the goals they have for themselves with the support to persist because time ultimately becomes the enemy of completion (Complete College America, 2011).

The literature on Student Affairs in the Guided Pathways approach is at a nascent stage. The role of Student Affairs in the Guided Pathways initiative largely focuses on the new student on-boarding process and the need for intrusive advising with imbedded general discussions of career and transfer options. By limiting the role of Student Affairs in the Guided Pathways approach in this way, campus-based institutional approaches may miss critical opportunities to make college completion possible for community college students.

Student Affairs professionals are experienced design specialists. Focusing the profession on student learning, Student Affairs reframed the engagement paradigm (Calhoun, 1996). The most effective Student Affairs divisions perpetually design, realign, and recalibrate services to meet changing student needs throughout the entire student experience from recruitment to completion. While some senior Student Affairs officers may not have a full background in the emerging Guided Pathways movement in community colleges, many have implemented clear enrollment processes (Bontrager, 2004). They have also guided the design of effective approaches to career and academic advisement. Additionally, Student Affairs leaders know how to identify targeted student outcomes to include graduation, transfer, and the ability to obtain a career opportunity that leads to a family-supporting wage (Bailey et al., 2015). In learning from Student Affairs professionals, higher education is learning how to address social justice, equity, and inclusion (Bukowski, 2015). This contribution of this extensive body of work is essential in designing a successful and impactful Guided Pathways approach. Student Affairs executive teams must assert their professional expertise in all areas of the Guided Pathways initiative, or be limited to taking a reactionary posture following redesign. It is far more advantageous for community colleges when the division of Student Affairs is included in all efforts to inform and lead critical elements of change.

Where do we begin? The student experience as a pathway

A good place to ground the work of Student Affairs in the Guided Pathways redesign is by looking at the entire student experience as a series of intentional exchanges. In *Understanding the Student Experience through the Loss/Momentum Framework: Clearing the Path to Completion*, the authors Elisa Rassen, Priyadarshini Chaplot, Davis Jenkins, and Rob Johnstone (Rassen, Chaplot, Jenkins, & Johnstone, 2013) defined the concept of the student experience as a “series of interactions between the student and the college” (Rassen et al. (2013). For purposes of mapping a path to completion, the

four key phases in the student's journey represent the Preventing Loss/Creating Momentum Framework. Those phases are:

- connection (i.e., initial interest through submission of the application),
- entry (i.e., enrollment through completion of gatekeeper courses),
- progress (i.e., entry into course of study through completion of 75% of requirements), and
- completion (i.e., complete course of study through earning credential with labor market value).

Under the framework, students will either gain or lose momentum toward completion in part based on the interactions they have with the institution at any of the four identified critical phases. Policies, practices, programs, and processes, both within and external to the control of the institution, affect the phases (Rassen et al., 2013).

The work of Student Affairs connects to each aspect of the identified phases. For example, in the connection phase, the process of recruiting, training, and employing student ambassadors to guide potential students creates a valuable circular cycle of connection between both groups of students. The potential students gain college connections with their peers, while the student ambassadors gain skills for future success. Both the potential students and the ambassadors build momentum to matriculation through these connections and progress to degree is often increased. In the second phase, students at entry level, through new student orientation, comprehensive advising, first year experience courses, and/or learning communities, are empowered to become members of the academic community. The academic learning center, with peer tutors and mentors, assists in the progress phase through knowledge acquisition and academic skill building. Likewise, effective Student Life programs increase student engagement and learning while targeted student service programs serving TRiO, Veteran's, student parents, women, men of color, and students with disabilities increase the persistence and completion of historically underserved and marginalized populations. In the completion phase, assistance with transfer or entering the workforce supports students so they can complete their intended outcomes. In all of these phases, in more ways than articulated in this set of examples, Student Affairs provides comprehensive experiences and non-academic supports that enable students to finish what they start and reach the goals they have for their future.

These critical phases, identified in the Loss/Momentum Framework, are also key points of influence in the Guided Pathways model. Student Affairs professionals hold a unique expertise in designing effective approaches to influencing student success at each stage of the student experience in college. Therefore, the role of Student Affairs in the institutional redesign toward a Guided Pathways model is essential.

Not just a faculty driven initiative

Some community colleges have characterized Guided Pathways as a faculty-driven initiative. However, focusing redesign solely on course map sequencing is only a partial solution. An important aspect of creating coherence in the academic program is strategic recruitment into academic programs that align with transfer and labor market outcomes. The on-boarding process redesign, often led by Student Affairs, should take into account, as part of that process, career exploration at the beginning of the student's matriculation. A newly designed Guided Pathways student advising and registration process must help students make informed program and course selections by utilizing innovative career services at the start of their journey at the college.

Proactive advising models also play a critical role in the Guided Pathways redesign. In order to best support students, the college must create intentional interactions with students to support their progress. This means monitoring student progress and identifying student behaviors that hinder their academic momentum and their ability to accumulate credits toward academic program completion. It is critical to address these concerns in real time.

This has not always been the community college approach to student support. The emphasis has often been on addressing the issues that students identify when they come to an office on their own or in response to a faculty referral as part of an early alert strategy. The connection with an advisor or counselor at this point is usually too late to salvage the student's semester because of its retrospective nature. Some community colleges are using segmentation strategies for students. They are dividing students into subsets and determining the interventions most appropriate for the subset. For example, some schools segment the students based on their credit accumulation. Supports could differ based on student status (0–15 credits, 16–30 credits, 31–45 credits, and 46+ credits). Others may have a different set of supports for full-time students than they do for part-time students. Some use grade point average as a basis for segmentation.

The goal of a segmentation strategy is to provide tailored guidance and support to students who need the specific interventions. The college or community partner can offer this guidance and support. In a time of limited resources and increasing needs, having the students connected to the appropriate resources and tracking the outcomes of that connection can reduce the number of students who, particularly for nonacademic reasons, stop or drop out. Student Affairs professionals know the student body that the campus serves. This knowledge can help in a segmentation process. Which students would benefit from high-tech, low-touch interventions? Those interventions would occur through text-messaging reminders or other nudging activities. Which kinds of students would benefit from much more high-touch, low-tech strategies because of the nature of the student's academic progress? Which students would benefit from peer interventions? Which students would benefit much more from a faculty or professional advisor connection? All of these realities make the expertise of Student Affairs professionals essential.

Helping students fund their college experience must be a part of Guided Pathways design. Knowing at the beginning how much money a student will need to achieve completion will enable the student to know, at what point in the experience, they will need additional funds. For example, students who have transferred to the community college from a prior institution, having already used financial aid, present the current institution with information that can help inform the student's educational finance plan. The financial aid advisors' expertise is central to the work of helping students complete the course of study.

Consider the student who works part-time. A financial aid advisor can help that student develop a budget based on their income. The financial aid advisor can then help the student strategize how to save part of their paycheck for the semesters where they will no longer be receiving financial aid. The financial aid advisor can also suggest that the college set up a savings account to receive the student's prepayments. The result is that the prepaid savings account can be applied to the bill in the semester where the student does not have financial aid.

Decisions about full-time and part-time attendance can be made intentionally with the help of financial aid advisors who can provide critical information. Assistance with questions such as what scholarships can assist to address gap semesters? and what about on-campus employment? are all questions that should inform the feasibility of staying on a path. Financial aid offices within Student Affairs can develop the capacity to provide models to students to answer these questions and to assist students in building financial literacy to make informed decisions about funding their education.

A path also should lead to somewhere. Student Affairs professionals' work in career and transfer services in redesign is key. The work of student engagement and involvement that provides students a variety of out-of-the-classroom experiences contextualizing in-class learning is also important. Employers want a skilled workforce. Applied learning opportunities offered by Student Affairs, through leadership development programs, service learning, and student government, help students develop the 21st-century skills necessary to gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace. What is clear is that the Guided Pathways redesign must be both a faculty- and staff-driven initiative. The contribution of Student Affairs throughout the entire student journey is vital.

Professional and organizational development in redesign

The work of Guided Pathways will require professional development for Student Affairs professionals in different ways. The role of the Student Affairs professional will become more generalist in nature, and will be more cohort driven in terms of integrating supports and monitoring success outcome measures based on where the individual student is on their path. This means that technology will be integral in terms of communicating with students, monitoring their behaviors, and engaging them as they traverse their experience at the college. Informing Guided Pathways redesign, Student Affairs professionals must be knowledgeable and conversant about the language, role, and potential of technology. Understanding the college's enterprise resource planning platform, the student information system platform, the constituent relationship management platform, the learning management system platform, or any other technologic platform used to address enrollment management, student success, and/or instruction is essential. These platforms capture the data that enable the institution to understand how the student is responding to the college as a system, based on the way the student experiences the college. There are companies, often considered by community colleges in redesign, dedicated to taking the data from these various platforms to make predictions about students' success. Artificial intelligence is not a substitute for the expertise of Student Affairs; however, we must be skilled in our understanding and use of large amount of data and predictive analytics to avoid students being steered into academic programs that restrict their opportunity for future mobility based on an algorithm. Student affairs involvement in the redesign effort must lead to discussions of the campus implications of technology on diversity, equity, and inclusion outcomes and initiatives.

The questions that we ask students will change. We will need to know more about the student's life outside of the college to assess factors that could lead them to stop or drop out. We will need to know if the student is employed, seeking employment, or employable because they will need resources to stay in school and experiences that will prepare them to enter into the next phase of their journey with the skills to succeed. We will need to ask more questions about the student's financing strategies for completion. We will also need to make sure students are on track to complete their chosen academic program of study. While these seem like simple questions, they require skill and training to elicit the information and to know the appropriate steps to help students succeed.

Redesign may require organizational structure changes. The approach to these changes will be greatly influenced by whether the college is in a union environment and working through the collective bargaining process or in a nonunion environment. The culture and organizational change resulting from a Guided Pathways redesign often requires revising job titles, creating new job descriptions, and establishing goal measures as part of the evaluation process. The clarity and spirit of collaboration and transparency within which the transition takes place will influence the likelihood of its success. In this regard, effective transformational leadership is imperative.

Conclusion

A successful Guided Pathways redesign requires a collective effort, college-wide buy-in, and the skills of transformational leaders. Senior Student Affairs officers have the capacity to play a critical role in this organizational change because of their expertise as experienced design specialists. Critical steps in the Guided Pathways model require intentional student engagement processes involving the work of Student Affairs areas. Therefore, any redesign effort must include leadership and participation from the Student Affairs division.

Likewise, Guided Pathways will require Student Affairs professionals to redefine roles, responsibilities, and approaches to their work. Student Affairs areas are constantly evolving and adapting to new trends and ideas. Early adopters of innovative technology or rapid response to new legislative policy directives demonstrate the structural agility of Student Affairs professionals to respond to barriers that impede student progress and address the immediacy of student issues and concerns.

This agility enables Student Affairs practitioners to test interventions more nimbly and to design approaches for scale in ways that are more responsive to student needs.

Community colleges across the nation have adopted the Guided Pathways approach. Often, these redesign efforts are led by the Provost, or other institutional entities, while Student Affairs divisions are on the margins of the organizational change. Yet, the critical steps in the Guided Pathways approach center on the areas in which Student Affairs hold the greatest expertise. Promoting students' academic success requires that professionals working in Student Affairs have a clear understanding of how they will be involved in leveraging their expertise in student experience design and how they will be included in helping develop the plan for execution.

It is the responsibility of senior Student Affairs executives to make the case regarding the expertise Student Affairs brings to the Guided Pathways approach and in so doing, to open opportunities for both resource acquisition and broader institutional influence. Any redesign of the student experience without centering Student Affairs in this effort will prove unsuccessful. Now is the time to elevate the Student Affairs practice in community college redesign.

References

- America, C. C. (2011). *Time is the enemy*. Indianapolis, IN: Complete College America.
- Bailey, T. R., Jaggars, S. S., & Jenkins, D. (2015). *Redesigning America's community colleges*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bontrager, B. (2004). Strategic enrollment management: Core strategies and best practices. *College and University*, 79(4), 9–15.
- Bukowski, J. (2015). Learning from student affairs professionals: Applying lessons of social justice, equity and inclusion in higher education administration. *The Vermont Connection*, 36. Article 13, 91–95.
- Calhoun, J. C. (1996). The student learning imperative: Implications for student affairs. *Journal of College Student Development*, 37(2), 122–188.
- Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2012). *A matter of degrees: Promising practices for community college student success (a first look)*. Austin, TX: Community College Leadership Program, The University of Texas at Austin.
- Rassen, E., Chaplot, P., Jenkins, P. D., & Johnstone, R. (2013). Understanding the student experience through the loss/momentum framework: Clearing the path to completion.
- Rosenbaum, J. E., Redline, J., & Stephan, J. L. (2007). Community college the unfinished revolution. *Issues in Science and Technology*, 23(4), 49–56.



STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

145 College Road, Suffern, NY 10901
845-574-4000
www.sunyrockland.edu