The Impact of Student Enrollment on Guided Pathways

Guided pathways are designed to help colleges improve rates of student completion, transfer, and attainment of jobs with value in the labor market. Instituting the whole-scale transformation required to implement pathways means rethinking fundamental aspects of the college structure, including onboarding, advising, curriculum, instruction, scheduling, and technology.

The Center for Community College Student Engagement's (the Center's) national report Building Momentum: Using Guided Pathways to Redesign the Student Experience presents the first national baseline data on student and faculty perceptions of pathways practices. While students across the country are experiencing individual practices and support that mirrors many components of guided pathways, part-time students are often not experiencing these practices at the same level as their full-time peers.

The Center's surveys evaluate distinct practices as a window into understanding the full picture of the student experience. The student experience and the Center's survey data are most clearly aligned with Pillars two, three, and four. Thus, the findings in this article focus on those parts of the pathways model.

Pillar Two: Help Students Get on a Path

The second guided pathways pillar of implementation focuses on the support needed to ensure students get the best start in college. While starting with the end in mind—choosing a job or career at the beginning of college—is a pathways goal, some students make career decisions based on incomplete or inaccurate information. They may not be aware of potential career options that align with their interests. Therefore, academic advising and career exploration guided by the institution play a critical role in helping students select their desired job or career. Advisors can also help students form realistic ideas about the time and cost necessary to complete their degrees or reach their goals.

In a focus group interview, when describing the importance of students making informed decisions about getting on a pathway, one staff member said: *"One thing that we've incorporated is asking students, 'Why are you here?' We want them to really think about their purpose beyond the degree. We talk about taking a look at a living wage, a sustainable wage that you're comfortable with. What type of lifestyle do you want to have once you've graduated from either an associate's degree program or a baccalaureate program? How much does it cost for a mortgage, an electric bill, a water bill? Shopping, daycare, we have students take a look at all of these things from the first time they walk on campus and encounter new student orientation."*

One student focus group participant at a college immersed in the work of guided pathways said this of early meetings with advisors: *"What I did when I met with my advisors was talk about my career goals. What were the jobs that I would like to see myself in? What were jobs that maybe I didn't know about going into?"*

The importance of advising and career exploration of this sort cannot be understated. Yet, not all students are having these critical conversations. Although part-time students make up the majority of the student population at most colleges, they are less likely to be required to see an advisor. When asked, "Were you required to meet in person or online with an academic advisor before registering for classes this academic term at this college?" 51 percent of part-time students said they were required to do so, compared to 61 percent of full-time students.

Full-time students are also more likely to talk with someone about the types of jobs their pathway of study might lead to. Sixty-two percent of full-time students said they had these conversations, compared to 52 percent of part-time students.

Seventy-five percent of full-time students said that a staff member had talked with them about how long it would take to complete their certificate or degree, compared to 64 percent of part-time students.

Similarly, 42 percent of full-time students said a staff member had talked with them about the total cost to complete their certificate or degree, compared to 30 percent of part-time students.

Pillar Three: Help Students Stay on Their Path

The initial advising that helps students start down a path is crucial for their success, and advising continues to be important throughout a student's academic experience. Advisors can support students throughout their academic journeys by tracking their progress and helping them adapt if their goals change. Regular student-advisor meetings also present opportunities to build relationships and check in on a range of academic and life issues.

One student in a focus group said this of the advising experience: *"She's amazing. She goes over my guided pathway with me. If there's a class that I need to take for my degree and the college doesn't offer it or we don't have it that semester, she offers me an alternative. She pushes me to take classes and do better than what I thought I could ever do."*

Other students in focus groups described their colleges' monitoring systems in this way: *"If we enroll in a class that's not on our plan, or that's really off, we actually get an automated response from our advisor saying, 'You're off track. What's going on?' He or she gets in contact with you immediately. That way, if you made a mistake, if you got your classes and you registered online and didn't go through them, or there was just something that disagreed with the track you'd already set up, your advisor makes sure you're alright."*

"My counselor, or navigator, and I basically go off the computer. There's a site on the school's website that shows your progress, how many credits you've completed, how many credits you have or are taking right now, what the next couple of semesters look like, and what you still need to take to get your associate's degree. I think it's really, really helpful."

As with other aspects of advising, full-time students are more likely to experience regular student-advisor meetings than are part-time students. Fifty-one percent of full-time students reported meeting with an advisor online or in person two or more times in the academic term in which they took the CCSSE survey, but only 41 percent of part-time students reported doing so.

Likewise, 64 percent of full-time students said that they reviewed progress on their academic plan each time they met with an advisor, compared to 54 percent of part-time students.

Pillar Four: Ensure Students Are Learning

Since its inception, the Center has surveyed students about practices that are now part of the Ensure Students Are Learning pillar. While active and collaborative learning, service learning, and regular interactions with faculty members are proven to increase student engagement, too few students have these experiences. However, on some items related to the Ensure Students Are Learning pillar, the difference between the full-time student experience and the part-time student experience is not great—which is encouraging.

For instance, on an item that asks students how often their instructors have required them to participate in study groups, 58 percent of full-time students said this had happened, compared to 56 percent of part-time students. Similarly, 37 percent of full-time students reported that their instructors had required them to participate in tutoring, compared to 35 percent of part-time students.

Students in focus groups speak to the power of study groups and tutoring: *"My first semester I took an introductory statistics course that for the first couple weeks really handed it to me, but every time that the class met, both the instructor and the SI (supplemental instructor) were there to let everybody know that there were additional meetings. Basically, an hour before each lecture, you could go in and the SI would be there to help you through the last classes' materials. It really improved my overall class grade and testing scores. I failed miserably on the first exam. I started going to the SI meetings. From that point, I think my exam score increased by 35 percentage points."*

"In my first semester at the college, I was taking an English course that had assigned study groups. [It] started pulling leadership skills out of me that I didn't know I had. I was getting the numbers of the students, and I was like, 'Okay, we're going to set up a time at the library, and we're going to go to this room.' I could get them all together. We started working on the project. Some of them were just like, 'Oh, I don't want to do this.' I'm like, 'No. This is going to be exciting.' We ended up pulling this whole thing together, and it started this snowball effect of, wow, I really like interacting with students. I really like getting involved in creating these groups because I start learning a lot better when I can bounce ideas off of other people."

Conclusion

Colleges that were early adopters of guided pathways are receiving promising feedback from students, faculty, and staff participating in focus groups. The Center is encouraged by this feedback and by the commitment to pathways that is evident across the country. As colleges move forward with this work, it will be important to continue disaggregating student data in order to explore whether all students are experiencing pathways implementation equally.

The Center for Community College Student Engagement

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