

# THE NISOD PAPERS



An occasional publication dedicated to topics of interest to community and technical college educators.

## The Simple Question That Became a Movement

Are you or your colleagues looking for a high-impact topic that can increase the success and wellbeing of faculty, staff, and students at the same time?

A few years ago, faculty at Scottsdale Community College (SCC) felt like they had stumbled upon a magic seed. It was presented in a simple package: The opportunity to be a part of a learning grant team looking at student success and purpose. A group of SCC faculty members from diverse disciplines came together to discuss how to incorporate “purpose-based” activities into their classes. The group met once a month to talk about how to embed purpose into their classes, help one another create purpose-based assignments or interventions, and debrief about the experience.

What these faculty members witnessed as a part of that learning grant team was the magic that can happen when colleagues collaborate on a common topic. The faculty members taught very different subjects and used different teaching methods, but the ideas that came out of the monthly meetings were so much better than any of the ideas they would have created on their own. The group members would walk in tired and sometimes feeling a bit stressed about “yet another obligation,” but within minutes of talking about purpose, their energy and optimism were ignited. In addition to the ideas they generated for their classrooms, they also organically engaged in conversations about their own purpose. They each couldn’t help but re-connect with their own “why” as they thought about innovative ways to incorporate it into their classrooms.

After participating in another learning grant that hosted a student focus group, SCC created the Purpose Learning Community Committee. The committee met monthly to host dialogues about bringing purpose to students and colleagues with a focus on professional and personal development. While the Purpose Learning Community Committee was developing at SCC, Professor Andrea Scherrer started sharing this work at national conferences. At a conference 1,000 miles away from Arizona, another individual from the Maricopa Community College District attended her session, and the seeds of a district-wide coalition were planted.

Paradise Valley Community College (PVCC), another

college in the Maricopa Community College District, was independently beginning its own journey toward infusing purpose into work. Dr. Doug Berry, the vice president of academic affairs at PVCC, attended Professor Scherrer’s session. After returning to Arizona, Dr. Berry began a partnership with Professor Scherrer and Dr. Anne Suzuki, the dean of student affairs at Chandler-Gilbert Community College, to establish an inter-college Purpose Coalition. Dr. Berry, Dr. Suzuki, and Professor Scherrer presented their seminal work at a local conference, which resulted in more colleges in the Maricopa Community College District demonstrating an interest in developing course work that engaged students and employees in identifying their purpose. This led to the development of a hub for resources, a district-wide workshop, and college leads. A website now houses contact information for each campus; purpose-related professional growth opportunities; purpose-related articles, books, and resources; and will eventually serve as a repository for purpose-based lesson plans and activities that can be shared between colleges in the district.

### Integrating Guided Pathways

The Purpose Coalition was formed to meet the needs of an ever-expanding group, but not without the consideration of how this work would fit into the larger mission of the Maricopa Community College District. A key concern when choosing to expand the group was initiative fatigue. It was critical that the work of the Purpose Coalition matched the Guided Pathways undertaking that had been happening district-wide since 2017.

One of the pillars of Guided Pathways is helping students identify a path, also called a meta-major (Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins, 2015). Within Maricopa Community College District, these are referred to as Fields of Interest (FOI). Many students are unsure about their end goal at the time of enrollment, and in the past have simply indicated that they wanted to transfer. Even now, when students are required to select a Field of Interest, many are unsure of their choice. An emphasis on the student First-Year Experience (FYE) is also a key part of Guided Pathways, as is creating a common experience and building a sense of community for students.

---

In an effort to assist students in identifying an FOI, some colleges in the Purpose Coalition are considering purpose classes within the Pathways. These classes will be identified to specifically help students who are not certain about their career or academic goals. Unlike a traditional career exploration class, these classes will infuse purpose work into the curriculum to increase retention and assist students choose the correct FOI early in their academic career to avoid excessive credit accumulation. The strategy will be to survey and track students to see if the classes with an intentional focus on purpose influence student retention and success rates at the college. Collecting data will inform the next step of potentially expanding these courses in each FOI. Eventually this practice will be adopted at other colleges in the Maricopa Community College District.

### Collaboration Among Divisions

The Purpose Coalition also allowed an opportunity for collaboration between the academic affairs and student affairs divisions at PVCC. Previously, implementing Guided Pathways provided an opportunity to take down silos that had previously existed in the district. Now, as the divisions expanded their collaborative work to enhance the student experience, it felt timely and appropriate to discuss purpose with a cross-functional group of employees. At the request of the college president, Deans Suzuki (student affairs) and Berry (academic affairs) hosted an executive leadership retreat. Dr. Berry and Dr. Suzuki used a purpose-focused activity to bring the team together. Administrators at the retreat read and discussed a book about purpose and created a video exploring why their work at the college was important. The video was presented to faculty and staff at convocation. The video has helped other departments consider personal and departmental purpose work. Looking forward, the work will be continued between academic affairs and student affairs in an effort bring purpose-based learning to new student orientation.

### Conclusion

From work in the classroom to employee development to student onboarding, the idea of identifying one's purpose has ignited a passion among faculty and staff in the Maricopa Community Colleges District. As colleagues learn more about each other's individual work with purpose, the collaborations and monthly purpose meetings become all the more rewarding. While COVID-19 created many challenges over the past year, the introduction of virtual meetings has increased participation and made it more convenient for participants across Maricopa County to collaborate. As the work continues to grow, the virtual connection between colleagues makes it possible to expand beyond the physical location of Maricopa. We hope this platform continues to promote new ideas, successes, and creative methods that impact student

success. The strength of this coalition comes from the contributing members, and we invite you to join us. Please contact us at [purpose@memo.maricopa.edu](mailto:purpose@memo.maricopa.edu) and tell us about your purpose and the meaningful work you are doing or aspire to do.

Doug Berry, *Vice President, Academic Affairs*,  
Phoenix College

Anne Suzuki, *Dean, Student Development*,  
Chandler-Gilbert Community College

Andrea Scherrer, *Professor, Counseling*,  
Scottsdale Community College

For more information, contact the authors at [purpose@memo.maricopa.edu](mailto:purpose@memo.maricopa.edu).

### Reference

Bailey, T. R., Jaggars, S. S., & Jenkins, D. (2015). *Redesigning America's community colleges: A clearer path to student success*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.