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The Movement Toward Pathways

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Over the past several years, the concept of guided pathways has spread rapidly through community colleges and four-year institutions in many states and districts. The guided pathways model is based on coherent and easy-to-follow college-level programs of study that are aligned with requirements for success in employment and at the next stage of education. Programs, support services, and instructional approaches are redesigned and re-aligned to help students clarify their goals, choose and enter pathways that will achieve those goals, stay on those pathways, and master knowledge and skills that will enable them to advance in the labor market and successfully pursue further education.

The guided pathways model is built upon three important design principles. First, *colleges' program redesigns must pay attention to the entire student experience, rather than to just one segment of it (such as developmental education or the intake process)*. Second, *a guided pathways redesign is not the next in a long line of discrete reforms, but rather a framework or general model that helps unify a variety of reform elements around the central goal of helping students choose, enter, and complete a program of study aligned with students' goals for employment and further education*. Third, *the redesign process starts with student end goals for careers and further education in mind and "backward maps" programs and supports to ensure that students are prepared to thrive in employment and education at the next level*.

Although the elements on which it is based are rooted in research, the overall guided pathways model is still relatively new and has not been fully tested. Very encouraging preliminary evidence has emerged from institutions that have implemented guided pathways practices at scale, including Florida State University and Georgia State University, among four-year institutions, and the City Colleges of Chicago and CUNY's Guttman College, among community colleges. Large-scale efforts are now ongoing to implement guided pathways at two- and four-year institutions in Tennessee, Indiana, and Georgia, and at community colleges in Arkansas, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, Texas, and Washington State. This work will, in a number of locations, be strongly connected to the AACCC Pathways Project.

Origins of Guided Pathways Reforms in Community Colleges

The Community College Research Center (CCRC) dates the beginning of organized reform designed to improve community college outcomes to the beginning of this century, when policymakers and educators began to question community colleges' low completion rates. The first major initiative in this movement was Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count (ATD), which started in 2004. ATD was initially funded by Lumina Foundation for Education but subsequently received support from many other foundations. ATD established its focus on improving student completion, equity, and overall community college performance and was the first initiative to emphasize longitudinal tracking of individual students. From the beginning, there were five principles underlying ATD:

- (1) Secure leadership commitment.
- (2) Use data to prioritize actions.
- (3) Engage stakeholders.
- (4) Implement, evaluate, and improve intervention strategies.
- (5) Establish a culture of continuous improvement.

[Note: these principles recently have been updated and are reflected in ATD's 2016 Institutional Capacity Framework.]

In 2010, ATD became an independent non-profit organization, but the field learned several important lessons from the first six years of the initiative, when ATD had functioned as a grant-funded activity. First, despite the emphasis on comprehensive organizational change, most of the reforms initiated by ATD colleges were relatively focused efforts involving relatively few students, and they were usually directed at only a single segment of the student experience, primarily the intake system and developmental education in particular. Second, while some of these focused reforms improved outcomes for the participating students, the efforts in general were not large enough or sustained enough to influence the overall performance of the institutions. Thus, while focused programs were sometimes successful, they did not typically lead to improved outcomes for large numbers of students (Rutschow et al., 2011).

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation became involved with ATD in 2009 through the Developmental Education Initiative (DEI), in which 15 ATD colleges participated. DEI was explicitly designed to identify specific developmental education pilot reforms at ATD colleges that were improving student outcomes, and to scale those reforms throughout the developmental education population. In general, colleges were unable to achieve wide-scale implementation of their chosen programs within the three-year timeframe, suggesting that the pilot-to-scale strategy is not an effective approach to reform (Quint et al., 2013*). The DEI programs also tended to be implemented in isolation from college-level programs and the broader set of support services within colleges.

During the latter half of the 2000s, a growing volume of research by CCRC and others established additional knowledge and insights that formed the foundation for further advances in policy and practice. These advances occurred in three broad areas. First, the field began to draw insights from behavioral economics to argue that the community college environment was too complex and confusing for students, suggesting that college-level programs needed to be simplified and made more coherent. The implications of behavioral economics research for community college practice

was formally articulated in a BMGF-funded CCRC paper, *The Shapeless River* (Scott-Clayton, 2011*). Second, CCRC and others produced research showing that students who gained early momentum (by passing the gateway courses in a program of study in their first year of college) were much more likely to graduate than those who took more time to enter a program (Attewell, Heil, & Reisel, 2011; Jenkins & Cho, 2012*).

Third, research by CCRC and others on developmental education concluded that developmental assessments did not accurately identify students' needs, and traditional developmental coursework did not help underprepared students succeed at higher rates, while accelerated and contextualized coursework held more promise (e. g., Bailey, 2009; Edgecombe, 2011*; Jenkins et al., 2010; Perin, 2011*; Scott-Clayton, 2012*; Zeidenberg, Cho, & Jenkins, 2010*). These findings provided the impetus for the development and wide-scale adoption of "co-requisite" models, which place many more students into college-level courses while providing them with the support they need to succeed in those courses. *The broader implications of the ATD and DEI experience and related research was that developmental education should not be conceptualized as a separate activity, but rather should be designed into a broader model as part of an on-ramp to college level programs of study.* This became a fundamental element of more comprehensive models.

The ATD and DEI experiences, together with the insights beginning to emerge from the research discussed above, contributed to the conceptual foundation of the Bill & Melinda Gates-funded Completion by Design (CBD) initiative, which began in 2011. CBD was based on the following principles:

- (1) Accelerate entry into coherent programs of study.
- (2) Minimize the time required to get college-ready.
- (3) Ensure that students know the requirements to succeed.
- (4) Customize and contextualize instruction.
- (5) Integrate student supports with instruction.
- (6) Continually monitor student progress and proactively provide feedback.
- (7) Reward behaviors that contribute to completion.
- (8) Leverage technology to improve learning and program delivery.

Most of the components of the guided pathways model as understood today were incorporated into these eight principles. At the time, these elements represented a new and ambitious agenda, unfamiliar to participating colleges and even to some extent to the program organizers and technical assistance providers. As a result, participating colleges were allowed to exercise a great deal of flexibility in the implementation of these principles. In practice, each college chose to implement the subset of principles that most appealed to that institution, resulting in wide variation in the implementation of the CBD "model."

While not ideal in terms of evaluating a well-defined model, CBD's variety in implementation did provide CCRC with the opportunity to observe the implications of different combinations of these elements. *Their resulting report to BMGF (Jenkins & Ran, 2015*) suggested that the most successful colleges used the college-level program of study as a central organizing point for college reforms.* At the same time, the experience with CBD and associated insights led to the solidification and elaboration of the guided pathways model that is articulated in CCRC's book, *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015*).

In addition, CBD created the conditions that allowed participating colleges such as Miami Dade College, Davidson County Community College (NC), Lorain County Community College (OH), and Sinclair Community College (OH) to become leaders or emerging leaders in the guided pathways movement. The initiative also trained a cadre of administrators and change management experts who are now engaged in the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's recent pathways-focused investment—the Pathways Project organized by AACC. Other institutions emerging as leaders in the guided pathways movement, such as the 2- and 4-year institutions under the Tennessee Board of Regents and the City Colleges of Chicago, were directly inspired and influenced by the CBD experience.

The guided pathways model is based on research suggesting that community colleges and broad-access four-year institutions are currently operating under a "cafeteria" model that was appropriate to their primary mission in the 1960s, 70s, 80s, and 90s, which was to dramatically expand access to higher education—a mission they fulfilled beyond expectation. However, cafeteria colleges are not well designed to address the need of today's students, who want to enter and complete programs that confer economically valuable certificates and degrees as quickly and efficiently as possible. At cafeteria colleges, the best pathways that students can take into and through programs of study and to their career or further-education end goals are not clear. There are too many choices, programs lack educational coherence, and students' progress is not monitored.

Research on organizational effectiveness from within and outside education strongly indicates that to substantially improve student completion and learning, discrete innovations—even when they are implemented at scale—are not sufficient; rather, colleges need to *redesign* programs and support services comprehensively and at scale to support student progression and learning. A small but growing number of community colleges and four-year institutions across the country are beginning to see substantial gains in student outcomes by redesigning programs and services to improve the student experience along four dimensions: (1) create clear curricular pathways to employment and further education, (2) help students get on a path, (3) keep students on a path, and (4) ensure that students are learning along their path.

In summary, this series of important initiatives and accompanying research has yielded crucial insights that have helped form the foundation of the pathways movement. Now comes the next generation of guided pathways reforms, which will help to deepen knowledge about the efficacy of the model, build the capacity of the community college field for designing and implementing large-scale change, and identify effective strategies for maximizing colleges' impacts on student learning and success.

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What is the Pathways Model?

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The Pathways Model 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 her/his point of entry through to attainment of high-quality postsecondary credentials and careers with value in the labor market.

Central to the pathways model are clear, educationally coherent program maps—which include specific course sequences, progress milestones, and program learning outcomes—that are aligned to what will be expected of students upon program completion in the workforce and in education at the next level in a given field. Students are helped from the start to explore academic and career options, choose a program of study, and develop a plan based on the program maps. These plans simplify student decision-making, and they enable colleges to provide predictable schedules, frequent feedback, and targeted support as needed to help students stay on track and complete their programs more efficiently. They also facilitate efforts by faculty to ensure that students are building the skills across their programs that they will need to succeed in employment and further education.

Guided Pathways Essential Practices

The four dimensions of the Pathways Model, together with essential practices under each, are the following:

1. *Clarify paths to student end goals*
 - Simplify students' choices with default **program maps** developed by faculty and advisors that show students a clear pathway to completion, further education and employment in fields of importance to the region.
 - Establish **transfer pathways** through alignment of pathway courses and expected learning outcomes with transfer institutions, to optimize applicability of community college credits to university majors.
2. *Help students choose and enter a pathway*
 - Bridge **K12 to higher education** by assuring early remediation in the final year of high school through the application of courseware technology in strong K12/higher ed partnerships, such as the TN SAILS model.
 - Redesign traditional remediation as an "**on-ramp**" to a **program of study**, which helps students explore academic and career options from the beginning of their college experience, aligns math and other foundation skills coursework with a student's program of study, and integrates and contextualizes instruction to build academic and non-academic foundation skills throughout the college-level curriculum, particularly in program "gateway" courses.
 - Provide **accelerated remediation** to help *very poorly prepared* students succeed in college-level courses as soon as possible.
3. *Help students stay on path*
 - Support students through a strong **advising** process, embedded and ongoing in the pathway experience and supported by appropriate technology, to help students make informed choices, strengthen clarity about transfer and career opportunities at the end of their chosen college path, ensure they develop an academic plan with predictable schedules, monitor their progress, and intervene when they go off track.

- Embed **academic and non-academic supports** throughout students' programs to promote student learning and persistence.
4. Ensure that students are learning
- Establish program-level **learning outcomes** aligned with the requirements for success in employment and further education in a given field and apply the results of learning outcomes assessment to improve the effectiveness of instruction across programs.
 - Integrate **group projects, internships, and other applied learning experiences** to enhance instruction and student success in courses across programs of study.
 - Ensure incorporation of **effective teaching practice** throughout the pathways.

Essential Capacities for Guided Pathways Reforms

Research and experience in the field indicate that the following capacities are essential for motivating and supporting higher education institutions and systems to undertake the broad-scale institutional reforms involved in implementing guided pathways effectively and at scale.

- **Leadership** demonstrating skills for managing and sustaining large-scale transformational change.
- Broad and authentic **engagement** of college faculty and staff—particularly advisors—in the design, implementation, evaluation, and ongoing improvement of pathways for students.
- **Institutional will and capacity to use data and evidence** to design academic and career pathways, monitor student progress, and implement needed improvements over time.
- **Technological tools and infrastructure** appropriate to support student progress through guided pathways.
- Commitment to the level of **strategically targeted professional development** that will be required to design and implement pathways at scale.
- **Policy conditions** established at the state, governing board, system, and institutional level that provide incentives, structures and supports for pathway design and implementation at scale while removing barriers.

A **continuing action research agenda** that examines the efficacy of guided pathways and develops practical knowledge and tools to support effective implementation at scale.

Pathways Project Description

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Building Capacity For Reform at Scale In The Community College Field

A decade of intensive focus on improving student success in community colleges has produced notable effects: a dramatic increase in awareness of the challenges and in commitment to college completion as a critical goal; a sea change in the use of data to assess and monitor student success and institutional performance; a growing body of evidence regarding effective educational practice in community colleges; and increasing numbers of institutions that are putting that knowledge into practice and demonstrating encouraging results. These promising developments can be attributed to the unprecedented efforts of a collection of philanthropies, national organizations, state systems, and institutions that have worked both collectively and individually to investigate practice, implement change, and produce results.

Now, there is a striking convergence of research and lessons of experience, as these people and their organizations have come to the shared understanding that progress, while evident in some places, is too slow; that the favored solutions of the past decade, while often necessary components of change, do not adequately address the magnitude of the challenges community colleges and their students face; and that typically, the changes thus far achieved have not been fundamental enough—and certainly not scaled enough—to achieve the improvements in completion of college credentials with strong labor market value, especially among low-income students and students of color, that are necessary to *reclaim the American Dream*.

Recognizing these realities—and affirming the critical role of America's community colleges, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) has undertaken, with generous funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, a national project focused on building capacity for community colleges to design and implement *structured academic and career pathways* for all of their students.

Building on emerging research and experience in the field, the project reflects AACC's commitment to follow through strategically on recommendations set forth in the 2012 report of the 21st-Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, *Reclaiming the American Dream*, and the 2014 implementation guide, *Empowering Community Colleges to Build the Nation's Future*.

National Partners

Key national partners in the project are **Achieving the Dream, Inc.**, **Aspen Institute**, the **Center for Community College Student Engagement**, the **Community College Research Center**, **Jobs for the Future**, the **National Center for Inquiry and Improvement**, and **Public Agenda**.

The Pathways Institute Series

The project will build a model series of six institutes, each 2.5 days in length and each engaging five-person teams of varying composition from a selected group of 30 colleges. All will support committed community colleges in work to design and implement clear, structured student pathways to high-quality credentials that are aligned both to university transfer and to jobs with value in the labor market. Designated college teams will attend the six institutes in 2016-2018, and each event will focus on a critical aspect of institutional change and pathway design/implementation; each will require advance work by the colleges, and each will result in products developed by the participating college teams, including action plans and assessment of needs for technical assistance. The institute format will combine discussions with experts, technical assistance, and facilitated discussion/planning sessions for college teams.

College Participation

The institute series will involve, through a competitive application process, AACC member *colleges that demonstrate serious commitment to transformational work at scale* to improve college completion and equity in student outcomes. In the selection process, priority will be given to colleges located in focus states for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation: CA, FL, GA, KY, NC, NY, OH, TN, TX, and WA. Ideally, a number of colleges from other states also will be selected to participate. Colleges will receive no direct funding; but most on-site costs of institute participation (i.e., materials, coaching, hotel rooms, refreshment breaks, and most meals) will be covered by the project budget. The college will be responsible for travel expenses for a 5-person team, including airfare, ground transportation, parking, and non-institute meals.

Knowledge Development

In addition to providing direct support to college teams, the project aims to build knowledge in the field that will lead to broader and better adoption of the pathways reforms. Accordingly, participating colleges will (1) collect, monitor and report data on selected metrics depicting student connection, progress and completion; and (2) participate in evaluation of the institute series. In addition, the project will support student focus groups at several of the colleges, providing authentic voices and video documentation that enrich understanding of quantitative data. Systematic interviews conducted with individuals at project colleges will contribute to the existing knowledge base about institutional change, particularly through the process of implementing guided pathways at scale. Finally, the project partners will develop open-source resource materials for broad use by community colleges.

Achieving Scale

The project focus is design and testing of an approach that can be replicated with additional groups of institutions. A further outcome will be expansion of the available pool of experts qualified to provide technical assistance to colleges as they undertake pathway design and implementation. The institute series will be implemented during 2016-2018 with 30 colleges; then, with the benefit of thorough evaluation and related improvements, the institute models and related tools and resources will be made available to Achieving the Dream, state-based student success centers, and perhaps other organizations that can replicate the series, supporting pathway design and implementation at much greater scale across the community college field.

Pathways Colleges

Thirty diverse institutions from seventeen states have been selected to participate in intensive Pathways Project work over the next three years. The selection criteria were intentionally rigorous, as the project is designed to help colleges already progressing on a student success agenda to advance that work to the next level.

The Pathways Project Colleges are:

[Alamo Colleges](#) (TX)
[Bakersfield College](#) (CA)
[Broward College](#) (FL)
[Cleveland State Community College](#) (TN)
[Columbus State Community College](#) (OH)
[Community College of Philadelphia](#) (PA)
[Cuyahoga Community College](#) (OH)
[El Paso Community College](#) (TX)
[Front Range Community College](#) (CO)
[Indian River State College](#) (FL)
[Irvine Valley College](#) (CA)
[Jackson College](#) (MI)
[Lansing Community College](#) (MI)
[Linn-Benton Community College](#) (OR)
[Monroe Community College](#) (NY)
[Mt. San Antonio College](#) (CA)
[Northeast Wisconsin Technical College](#) (WI)
[Paris Junior College](#) (TX)
[Pierce College District](#) (WA)
[Prince George's Community College](#) (MD)
[St. Petersburg College](#) (FL)
[San Jacinto College](#) (TX)
[Skagit Valley College](#) (WA)
[Stanly Community College](#) (NC)
[South Seattle Community College](#) (WA)
[Tallahassee Community College](#) (FL)
[Tulsa Community College](#) (OK)
[Wallace State College](#) (AL)
[Western Wyoming Community College](#) (WY)
[Zane State College](#) (OH)