

Pathways are worth the cost

BY ELLIE ASHFORD NOVEMBER 4, 2020



Implementing guided pathways at community colleges is a costly proposition. Still, it can be worthwhile, leading to improved student outcomes, concludes a report by the [Community College Research Center](#) (CCRC) at Columbia University's Teachers College.

Even during the coronavirus pandemic – a time when enrollment is declining at many colleges and funds are diverted to health measures and support for students struggling financially – colleges are still moving forward with pathway reforms. In fact, interest is growing among colleges not yet part of the pathways movement, according to a [blog post](#) by Davis Jenkins, a senior research scholar at CCRC, and Clive Belfield, a professor of economics at Queens College and a CCRC research fellow.

A [CCRC practitioner guide](#) on funding pathway reforms uses case studies from six colleges that implemented major reforms based on the guided pathways model over the past six years: [Alamo Colleges District](#) (Texas), [Bakersfield College](#) (California), [Cleveland State Community College](#) (Tennessee), [Cuyahoga Community College](#) (Ohio), [Jackson College](#) (Michigan) and [Pierce College District](#) (Washington).

Shifting resources

The cost of implementing guided pathways is about 3% of the operating budget at an average community college, according to Jenkins and Belfield.

The CCRC report identifies an average college as having a full-time-equivalent enrollment of 4,000 and an annual operating budget of \$60 million. For that college, the report estimates that implementing guided pathways reforms costs \$7.15 million over four years, which is typically the time it takes for colleges to implement core guided pathways practices at scale.

This works out to about \$450 in added costs per full-time equivalent student per year, the report says.

The largest start-up cost (\$3.7 million) is hiring additional advisors to allow individualized case management of students by field or meta-major. Other substantial start-up costs include:

- providing faculty and staff release time to engage in program mapping: \$856,000
- information technology investments: \$681,000
- governance and management: \$588,000
- professional development: \$474,000

- success courses: \$361,000

The estimated cost of sustaining guided pathways reforms after the initial implementation phase is somewhat lower: about \$350 per full-time equivalent student per year. Student advising would still be the biggest ongoing cost, estimated at \$895,000 per year.

Finding funding

All six institutions secured at least some grant funds to launch pathways reforms. But they also relied on reorganization, reassignment and reallocation of staff and resources to support the reforms.

In one example, Cuyahoga Community College President Alex Johnson discontinued dozens of small-scale student success initiatives. He shifted funds and staff from those programs to a case-management advising approach that was organized around meta-majors and program maps. That resulted in reallocating \$6.4 million in fiscal year 2021 for pathways and related student-success efforts.

Better outcomes

According to CCRC, college leaders who have institutionalized guided pathways practices despite the added costs say the reforms have led to improved outcomes and benefited the colleges as businesses. These reforms include redesigning the new student experience so all students can explore career and college options and assigning an advisor to each student based on their field of interest.

Advisors help students develop a full-program plan during the first term based on program maps created by faculty, monitor their progress and ensure they complete their programs on schedule.

“All six institutions shared evidence of improved student outcomes that they attribute to their pathways reforms,” according to CCRC.

All six also saw increases in early credit momentum for first-year students. Four colleges reported increased retention and graduation rates. And four colleges in states with funding formulas based on student outcomes achieved substantial gains in funding.

The effect of COVID

CCRC also interviewed leaders of the six colleges during the summer.

“Leaders at every college indicated that they were better positioned to respond to the COVID-19 crisis because of changes they made as part of their pathways reforms,” Jenkins and Belfield said.

Adelina Silva, vice chancellor for student success at Alamo Colleges, told CCRC, “The fact that every student had a plan and now we had to pivot to move online, that didn’t change their plan or their commitment to their plan.”

And because every Alamo student already had an advisor focusing on his or her field of study, it was easy for advisors to reach out to students during the pandemic.

Students already had plans laying out what courses they needed to take next, according to Silva and leaders from the other colleges. As a result, Jenkins and Belfield noted, “registering students for summer and fall courses was no more difficult than usual despite the challenges posed by COVID.”

A new business model

CCRC’s recommendations on funding guided pathways call for colleges to organize programs and student supports “to systematically help all students choose, plan and complete programs in a timely and affordable fashion.”

This should be done now, the guide urges. Colleges need not wait until they have raised new money to start pathways design work. Instead, they can reallocate existing resources.

The first step is to estimate how much revenue colleges can generate by retaining a larger share of students they currently lose because of college practices. This includes students without an educational plan, particularly part-time students; students in “low-opportunity programs,” such as general education transfer tracks that don’t prepare them to transfer efficiently to a bachelor’s program; and dual-enrollment students.

Next, CCRC advises colleges to redesign onboarding, advising and program planning and estimate the additional resources to provide case-management advising. In addition, colleges should assess their IT systems to determine how to customize them to support a pathways model rather than buy new systems.

Colleges should seek funding from local philanthropic sources, federal grants or other sources to fund strategic visioning, campus and community engagement, reform planning, and other start-up costs, the report recommends.

“At all six institutions, guided pathways reforms were tied to broader efforts to engage internal and sometimes external stakeholders in examining data on student outcomes, identifying barriers the college creates to student success, and building commitment for large-scale reform,” CCRC found.

“In sustaining support for guided pathways reforms, the leaders of these institutions are, in effect, adopting a new community college business model,” Jenkins and Belfield said. “In the conventional model, colleges generate enrollment and revenue by offering a diversified set of courses and programs at a low cost.”

Under the new model exemplified by the six case studies, colleges attract and retain students (and thereby increase tuition and state subsidies, including performance funding) by offering affordable programs and student supports that have clear value for employment and further education, the report said.

In an increasingly challenging and competitive higher education environment, “investing in whole-college reforms is increasingly necessary for community colleges to continue to achieve their educational missions and survive as businesses,” Jenkins and Belfield said.