

Factors Enabling and Constraining Implementation of Guided Pathways

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Across the country community colleges are engaging in guided pathways transformative efforts. In an attempt to learn more about how guided pathways are being implemented outside of California, ten phone interviews with national and state leadership (working primarily in Ohio, Texas, North Carolina, and Florida) were conducted in February 2018. (A list of the interviewees is appended to this report).

This report is intended to help inform California community college leadership about the implementation experiences of guided pathways in other states. The first two sections of this paper provide some background on the American Association of Community College's (AACC) National Pathways project and a description of the state systems cohort training programs that evolved from the original National Pathways project. The paper then details the factors identified through the research that enable and or constrain the development and implementation of guided pathways.

Finally, the paper concludes with some reflections on reform efforts implemented by California Community Colleges over the last four decades and some recommendations as California embarks on its guided pathways efforts.

The AACC National Pathways Program

The AACC National Pathways Program is based upon a strategy of demonstrating what a few colleges can do with guided pathways with the hope that the lessons will trickle down to other colleges across the U.S. Thirty colleges participated and completed the six-part program last fall 2017, and a new cohort of 20 colleges are now enrolled for 2018. Most of the original AACC thirty community colleges had experience working on Achieving the Dream and/or Completion by Design, and therefore brought an organizational culture open to reform and innovation, along with the creative application of data and evidence to the AACC program. These colleges also had experienced institutional leaders, so the expectation is that many of the colleges will move from pilots to scaling guided pathway reforms in the next period of time.

While the AACC program is limited to only a few colleges, the AACC curriculum is not; it is now being used by state systems to build professional learning institutes for all colleges. I found this to be true in Ohio, North Carolina and Texas, and I was told that other states are planning to use the AACC curriculum for system-wide institutes.

State Professional Development Institutes

The community college systems in Ohio, Texas and North Carolina have inclusive year-long guided pathway institutes for all colleges in the state. For example, the Texas program includes 50 colleges divided into four cadres (or cohorts) based upon the level of progress implementing guided pathways. Other states utilize a mixed cohort strategy of colleges with little to no experience to those with multiple years of experience.

In Texas, the most advanced group is comprised of 9 colleges; the next most advanced has 16 colleges; and the other 25 colleges are distributed in cadres 3 and 4. The cadres meet twice a year for 2 ½ days in a retreat format, and each team is assigned a coach who facilitates discussions at the tables. The coaches are chosen for their knowledge of guided pathways and/or their knowledge of the Texas community college system (they use in- and out-of-state coaches). The teams are divided between administrators and faculty with limited participation from classified staff. Unlike faculty who receive release time, staff are assigned, in many instances, to guided pathways teams in addition to their regular workload, consequently the staff dropout rate is high.

The convenings combine presentations with group and team activities with team time. After each institute, teams leave with assigned homework for the college to discuss and ultimately, implement.

The Institute curriculum is derived from the AACC six-part program, and Texas offers two institutes a year, taking three years for a cohort to go through the entire AACC curriculum. Institute teachers include well-known national figures like Davis Jenkins and Rob Johnstone, and also leaders from the Texas community colleges. To review the Texas curriculum for their professional development program go to the following link:

<http://www.tacc.org/pages/texas-success-center/resources>

The Texas guided pathways program is built on the idea of meeting the colleges where they are, and supporting implementation at the college's rate of adoption rather than a pre-formed plan. The objectives include:

- Ensure clarity about Texas Pathways goals, expectations of colleges, and supports for participants.
- Establish a common definition for guided pathways and essential elements, as defined for the Texas Pathways, and initiate use of aligned tools that Pathways colleges will use for planning and monitoring progress.
- Reinforce change leadership strategies for implementing pathways at scale.
- Delineate how guided pathways reforms can build on and help to integrate student success strategies already in place in the institution.
- Build a “case statement” for pathways, tailored to individual institution context and current status, that will help build broad understanding, urgency and momentum for transformational change.
- Produce draft action plans that delineate next steps in pathways reform, specifically incorporating strategies for broad campus engagement and needs for professional development and technical assistance.
- Begin to build an engaged learning network among Texas Pathways Colleges.

The program enables faculty, staff and administrators to remain focused on specific work without feeling pressured to complete implementation within a five-year timeframe. The people I spoke to recognize that setting goals for implementation is important to keep the focus, but they also recognize many colleges will take far longer than five years to fully implement guided pathways. One state system leader noted that *“it took us four years just to make the case in many of our colleges.”*

All institutes spend a great deal of time on learning how to make cases with data to promote a sense of urgency especially around inequalities and equity and how guided pathways can address those issues.

One aspect of implementation informants note has been lagging is the development of new pedagogies for courses in the pathways system. While many faculty support reorganization of advising and the establishment of pathways, classroom faculty are more reluctant to change their teaching practices. Most interviewees indicated that this aspect of implementation will take the longest.

Viewed from the state system perspective, leaders noted a number of key enabling factors for implementation including:

- System-level institutes providing long-term professional learning for the colleges;

- Supportive state legislation like reforms in the pre-collegiate sequence and funding for professional learning;
- System level capacity to draw upon expertise both inside and outside the state;
- System level leadership with experience and understanding how change works at community colleges;
- Professional development of local trustees on guided pathways, change strategies and implementation planning.

Enabling Factors and Barriers

Twenty-one enabling factors and barriers, emerged from the 10 interviews. These have been organized into the following five categories:

- Organizational Culture
- Leadership
- Budgets
- Understanding Change
- External Stakeholders

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is a key factor enabling implementation of guided pathways. Colleges exhibiting a collaborative culture with high levels of trust, a shared vision and a transparent decision-making process demonstrate significant implementation progress. Where college faculty exhibit trust among departments, and between instruction and student services, work teams were able to move forward much more easily. Where trust is low, work teams' progress more slowly.

One factor common to all colleges is the ebb and flow of work team members and the difficulty of maintaining continuity and consensus with so many team members leaving after one or two years. Many teams are now assigning **middle leaders (administrators or faculty) to be full time coordinators and anchors for implementation**, ensuring that all work teams stay focused and on a timeline. Where necessary, the coordinators orient new members and make sure they are well-integrated into the work teams.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE FACTORS

ENABLERS	BARRIERS
Open to change	Closed and Insular
High levels of trust	Low levels of trust
Shared vision	Multiple visions
Transparent decision making	Unclear how decisions are made

Leadership

Experienced and committed executive and middle leadership are critical factors where implementation has been succeeding. My informants stressed the importance of a commitment to collaborative distributed leadership. Where colleges face high turnover of executive staff especially the president and chief instructional officer, implementation processes frequently stall for up to 1 to 2 years. Due to the complexity of guided pathways transformation, middle leadership is increasingly recognized as critical players in both the development of ideas as well as implementation, but none of the states I contacted have specific leadership programs for middle leaders, yet.

Trustee leadership has played a positive role in the implementation of guided pathways: when trustees are open and informed advocates for guided pathways, college presidents and other college leaders are able to use trustee advocacy to advance an implementation agenda.

LEADERSHIP FACTORS AND GUIDED PATHWAYS

ENABLERS	BARRIERS
Experienced executive leaders	New and/or inexperienced executive leaders
Stable long-term executive leaders	High turnover of executive level leaders
Strong experienced middle leadership	Weak inexperienced middle leadership
Distributed leadership	Hierarchical leadership
Supportive and informed trustees	Trustees unengaged or skeptical of guided pathways

Understanding Change

One of the key success factors is the degree to which leaders, as well as rank and file faculty and staff, understand what transformative change

means, inasmuch as most community college educators have rarely encountered major structural changes during their careers. Furthermore, since the guided pathways framework does not provide answers to what the actual transformative reform will look like, leaders and champions must develop a ‘long haul’ mindset with a high tolerance for ambiguity, and the capacity to take risks—to try and fail, and try again.

The guided pathways implementation processes in most colleges used ad hoc committees composed mostly of faculty and administrators, rather than the traditional governance system. While the traditional governance bodies ultimately had to approve proposed implementation changes, it was the ad hoc system that generated the ideas and the timelines.

Everyone emphasized the important role data and evidence building an understanding of the urgency of the tasks, and grounding everyone in the reality of increasing student outcomes. Data was one of the main ways to start discussions about unequal outcomes and the urgency of addressing equity at the college.

FACTORS RELATED TO UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTING COLLEGE REFORMS

ENABLERS	BARRIERS
Open to new ideas and innovation	Insular and traditional
Experience with change strategies and reforms	Unfamiliar with change strategies and reforms
Ad hoc work teams and committees	Traditional academic governance only
Institutional resources for reassigned time	Limited to no resources for planning and implementation of reforms
Frequent and effective use of qualitative and quantitative data to make case for equity and structural change	Little use of data to discuss reforms and change strategies
High tolerance for ambiguity and willingness to take risks	Lack of willingness for risk-taking

Budgets

Many colleges throughout the country are facing declining enrollments and consequently, declining revenues, which in turn affect the willingness of colleges to embark on a major change which may risk even more enrollment losses. While no one was willing to predict what the resource issue will

mean for implementation, some of my informants estimated no more than one-third of the colleges in their states will scale up guided pathways in the near future, and in all likelihood, those colleges will be the ones with more experienced leaders and a faculty with a history of engagement in change and reform. While most colleges facing declining revenues hunker down and don't try to address major transformations, there are a few colleges using the decline in revenues as the basis for a full structural reform to address spending efficiencies and the delivery of education to students.

Another budget factor is the willingness of college leaders to allocate the resources needed by faculty and staff to work on implementation, a multi-year commitment if implementation is to succeed. Finally, there is the issue of how guided pathway funding is treated in the budget: is the funding treated as a one-time categorical or is the new funding treated as an investment to permanently change the delivery of education?

The actions of college leadership on budget can facilitate or constrain guided pathway reforms, and they are indicators of the depth of the commitment of CEO and the Board.

FACTORS RELATED TO BUDGET AND FINANCE AND GUIDED PATHWAYS IMPLEMENTATION

ENABLERS	BARRIERS
Declining enrollments seen as an opportunity to restructuring the delivery of educational services	Declining enrollments as a distraction to implementation of guided pathways and ultimately to suspending implementation
Guided pathways funding treated as transformative investments to permanently reform the delivery of educational services	Guided pathways funding treated as a special categorical as a supplement to regular operations
Funding for time for faculty/staff to plan and implement reforms	Limited to no resources for time for faculty/staff to plan and implement reforms

External Stakeholders

One significant barrier noted many informants was the lack of alignment with colleges' external stakeholders—schools; universities; and employers. The most frequent first response to planning and implementing pathways is to define the stakeholders as only internal to the college—faculty, staff, administrators, and trustees.

But once colleges begin to implement guided pathways they encounter the problem of alignment of the new curriculum and new advisement structure with other colleges in their district, feeder high schools and transfer institutions, and in many cases, the colleges must make multiple revisions to their plans before alignment and agreement are reached. Building pathways is described as an iterative process because there are so many variables affecting pathways. For example, in multi-college districts where students are swirling, colleges must establish pathways that can fit this factor.

To ensure a smooth and orderly transition to guided pathways, interviewees advised that an external stakeholder panel be organized early in the process to maintain a communication system and build collaboration.

EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS AND IMPLEMENTATION OF GUIDED PATHWAYS

ENABLERS	BARRIERS
Guided pathways used as an iterative framework with external stakeholders	Guided pathways treated as a one-time discussion/negotiation with external stakeholders
Collaboration local K-12 school districts	Limited to no communication or coordination with K-12 school districts
Collaboration with local transfer institutions	Limited to no communication or coordination with local transfer institutions
Collaboration with local employers	Limited to no communication or coordination with employers

Reflections

Major reforms are not new to the California community colleges. They date back to 1975 beginning with the Education Employment Relations Act, followed by the Community College Reform Act of 1988, and the Partnership for Excellence in 1999, and from 2008 to 2015, the Basic Skills Initiative, the Equity and Student Success initiatives. Now the colleges are embarking on the most ambitious effort to date—Guided Pathways.

Over the last four decades, the colleges learned how change can work and when it does not, and now the California community college system will have to use its collective knowledge to promote a transformative change.

What has been accomplished to date? Here are a few examples:

The CCCCO, in collaboration with practitioner organizations and the colleges, built a data system which is widely used by faculty and staff in the

planning and development of innovations and programmatic reforms at the college level.

Reforms in CTE programs and the establishment of the ADT transfer degree are making it easier for students to navigate and complete.

We have system-level leadership with extensive experience working in the colleges, and the system has many statewide community college organizations with leaders committed to increasing the levels of success among our students. A new generation of faculty and staff are now rising to college leadership positions with a demonstrated openness to addressing institutional barriers to student progress and completion. Middle level leaders are also demonstrating the capacity to lead major changes at the college, division, and department levels.

Unlike many other states, the state legislature and the governor have demonstrated a strong commitment by appropriating funding for the Guided Pathways initiative, and passing AB705 which mandates a transformational reform in the delivery of pre-collegiate skills.

The State Chancellor's Office has produced a vision statement for the college community system addressing the major issues facing the colleges and proposing guided pathways as the framework to address those issues.

Obstacles

While California has many assets to enable a major reform, it also has some potential major barriers:

- **Equity indicators for student performance and outcomes remain problematic.** Transformative change cannot really happen without addressing and resolving the issue of equity in the California community colleges;
- **Community college governance system** comprised of both academic senates and unions where leaders as well as rank and file are wary of new initiatives and reforms;
- **Complex relations with high schools, transfer institutions, employers and other community college districts.** Building pathways with effective advisement systems for all community colleges and all institutions linked to the colleges from high schools to universities and employers throughout the state will require a great deal of time and attention to the needs of external stakeholders. Further, a significant number of community college

students swirl from one district to another and guided pathway reforms will have to take notice of their needs.

- **Executive level leadership.** College presidents, CIOs and CSSOs have historically focused on funding, and nuts and bolts issues. Rarely has the executive leadership been willing to stick their collective necks out on major reform initiatives, and consequently, they could be a major obstacle to pathways reforms;
- **New performance funding formula** could become a major distraction for many colleges especially those that are projected to lose funding in two years;
- **Reform exhaustion** among early adopter faculty who have been leading much of the past efforts at programmatic reform.

Lessons from Other States

Some of the practices in other states may be useful in addressing California's concerns:

- **Utilize data and evidence to link the case for equity with the case for guided pathways.** Building capacity to creatively use data has enabled guided pathways leaders to build the case for equity to faculty and staff who were unsure of guided pathways and its relevance to their students.
- **Inclusion of union leaders as well as senate leaders in all Pathway planning.** Where colleges have promoted inclusion and patience with governance leadership, they note a gradual opening to guided pathways reform. The more governance leaders become familiar with the issues and the ideas, the more capacity to resolve differences and move ahead. In some colleges, union leaders are active members of the leadership for the guided pathways initiative.
- **Address external stakeholder concerns** throughout the guided pathways implementation process. Where external stakeholders are part of the conversations, colleges can make faster headway with articulation agreements with high schools and transfer universities.
- **Develop a cohort-based multi-year guided pathway professional development program for all colleges.**

California should consider adopting the cohort guided pathway training program now used in many states.

- **Recruit more early-adopter faculty and staff** into the ranks of leadership to spread the responsibilities and avoid reform exhaustion. This should be an on-going effort to address the multiple demands on faculty, staff and administrators at the colleges.
- **Develop a trustee and executive level professional development programs on guided pathways.** Where trustees are active and outspoken about the importance of guided pathways, college presidents and executive staff are able to leverage trustee concerns to help implement plans. Consideration should also be given to establishing a training program for executive staff as part of or in parallel with the trustee training program.

Last but Not Least

Special attention must be allocated to pedagogical reform since it is the most difficult to change.

One idea is to establish a limited amount of earned FTES revenue from classes where faculty can experiment with new ideas without having to follow all the Title V regulations. Such 'experiment zones' could both promote important innovations and demonstrate where Title V regulations need be permanently changed.

APPENDIX

LIST OF STATE AND NATIONAL LEADERS INTERVIEWED FOR THIS REPORT

NAME	TITLE	ORGANIZATION
Kathy Booth	Senior Research Associate, WestEd, California	Guided Pathways Project
Ed Bowling	Executive Director, Completion and Performance, Guilford Technical CC, North Carolina	
Marty Carpenter	Strategic Advisement and Facilitation Support for CCCCCO, Jobs for the Future	
Cynthia Ferrell	Vice President, Texas Success Center, Texas	Association of Community Colleges
Mary Gutierrez	Dean, Language Arts, Skyline College	
Rob Johnstone	President, National Center for Inquiry and Improvement	
Susan Mayer	Senior Partner, Student Achievement Initiatives, Miami Dade College	
Kay McClenney	Senior Advisor, AACC	
Laura Rittner	Ex. Director, Student Success Center, Ohio	Association of Community Colleges
Gretchen Schmidt	Ex. Director, Pathways Project, AACC	