

# How Do Guided Pathways Work?

## How are guided pathways typically defined?

Guided pathways are, in a way, a simple idea – that students in two-year or four-year institutions should know very early in their college experience the career they are aiming for, the degree needed, and exactly which and how many course credits are required to transfer or graduate within two or four years. The goal is to increase student success, retention, and graduation rates.

## Is this revolutionary?

Yes, guided pathways could prove to be a game-changer, especially at community colleges. Too often, when educators examine why students drop out or fail out, their focus is on what is wrong with the students. The idea behind guided pathways is to look at how institutions — which for the most part are not set up to serve first-generation, nontraditional students — need to change. And unlike other reforms aimed at student

success — which often address only one problem, such as developmental education — guided pathways can provide comprehensive reform that touches on almost all aspects of the student experience.

## Is it just for community colleges?

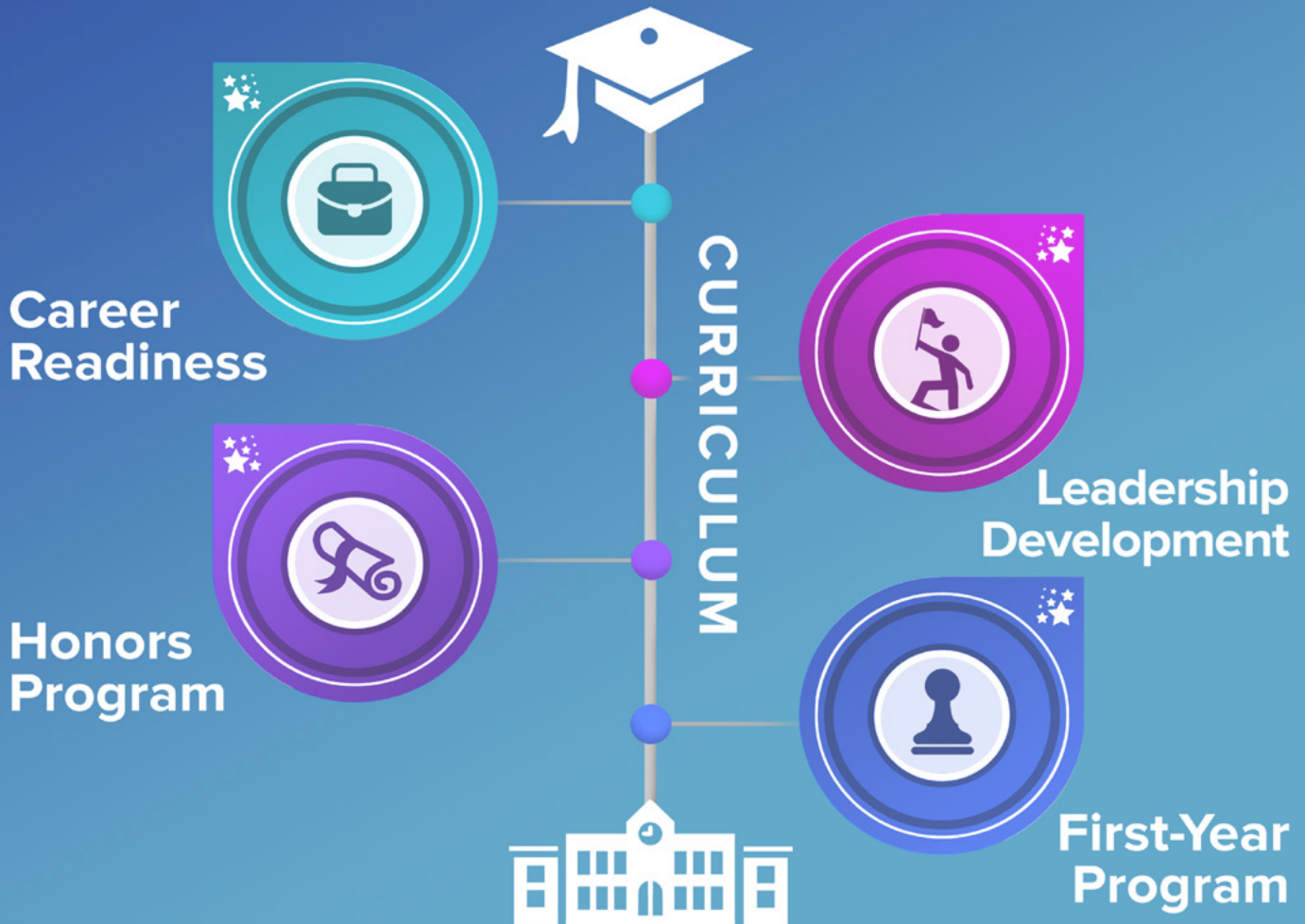
Community colleges are the primary institutions using the model — more than 300 of them have implemented guided pathways reforms, according to the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College. And the American Association of Community Colleges has spearheaded a major initiative, the [AACC Pathways Project](#), to support the adoption of guided pathways at 30 colleges across the country.

But the model was pioneered at Florida State University and the University of Florida and others have adopted it, including the University System of Georgia, which includes 26 colleges and universities. Georgia, which fully implemented the initiative this academic year, calls it “[the momentum year](#).”



# Map Your Programs to Guided Pathways

CONNECT STUDENT LEARNING WITH OPPORTUNITY



“Portfolium's integrated network will support our goal of advancing a holistic model of student success through guided pathways of signature curricular and co-curricular polytechnic experiences for our diverse students.

**Larisa Preiser-Houy**, *Associate Dean*  
Cal Poly Pomona's College of Business Administration

#### PARTNER INSTITUTIONS



## Why is this needed?

Simply put, it's because too many students who start college don't finish. Although graduation rates, especially at two-year colleges, don't tell the whole story, since many students are part-time, or transfer among different colleges, [national education statistics](#) show that just under one-third — 32 percent — of first-time, full-time undergraduates seeking a two-year certificate or an associate degree finish within three years. That number is about 60 percent for first-time, full-time undergraduates at four-year universities. There are many reasons students drop out or take a long time to finish, but a major culprit is spending money and time on classes that don't count toward a degree or can't be used when transferring.

## How do the pathways work?

Although there are numerous versions of guided pathways, one common characteristic is that most move away from what is typically called a “cafeteria style” approach to majors and classes — one in which students are largely left on their own to figure out which majors and courses they should take from a wide array of options, and often with little help navigating the system.

With guided pathways, the idea, essentially, is to start at the end; advisers help students think about what career they might want to pursue and how to best get there, then provide students with clear maps from Day 1 that show what they need to take to graduate or transfer. Faculty, administrators, and advisers work together to support student success, and community colleges coordinate much more closely with four-year universities to ensure credit for degree courses align.

One of the major goals of guided pathways is to close achievement gaps by eliminating information gaps.

Often such programs include offering [meta-majors](#), which group individual programs that have common or related subjects together under one academic umbrella. There are different terms for the concept of meta-majors, such as career clusters, academic focus areas, or in the case of the [Alamo Colleges District, in Texas, institutes](#).

Alamo Colleges District, which encompasses five independent community

colleges with 100,000 students all together, started looking at the idea of guided pathways about five years ago, when administrators became concerned that too few students were graduating or transferring, and it was taking too long for those who were.

One of the major reforms the institution undertook was to establish six Alamo Institutes; every student must enroll in one of those institutes upon entering college. The institutes include: Creative and Communication Arts; Business and Entrepreneurship; Health and Biosciences; Advanced Manufacturing and Logistics; Public Service; and Science and Technology.

Within each institute are multiple pre-majors; the goal is that students will always know exactly what courses and how many credits they need either for graduation in their field of choice in two years or to transfer to a four-year university.

The transfer part of the equation was particularly difficult, as students statewide were losing on average 24 credit hours when they moved from a two-year to a four-year university. So, the Alamo Colleges District established individual compacts with 20 public and private universities and, one by one, determined which courses taken at the community colleges would be applicable toward a specific degree program.

## What are the challenges facing guided pathways?

One of the biggest criticisms is that it limits student choice and is paternalistic toward typically underrepresented students, such as first-generation students. The concern is that the message being sent is that they don't have the social or cultural capital to navigate college on their own and to explore without guardrails in the way students have in a more traditional liberal-arts curriculum. This is a particular worry if guided pathways stay largely in the community-college sector.

The model is still evolving, and some institutions have adjusted their pathways to ensure that students don't feel constrained. Others argue, however, that choice is oversold — research has shown that the more options people have, the more bewildered they are likely to become, especially if they are trying to choose among options they're not familiar

with. Proponents say students still have a choice, but a choice with a purpose.

Also, implementing guided pathways is a very heavy lift. If done correctly, it doesn't involve just making a few tweaks, but requires a major and ongoing structural and psychological overhaul — and buy-in — from all the stakeholders.

Ideally, institutions also look closely at what is working and not working with the pathways model and use evidence-based data to make modifications.

And the pathways model can prove costly to implement. Usually colleges need to hire more advisers and upgrade student information services and websites to improve information, tracking, and analytics. On the other hand, such reforms can help attract and retain full-time students, bringing in more tuition money. More research is needed — and in the [works](#) — to study the cost question.

## What do students think?

Students reflect the same pros and cons that others express about guided pathways. From in-depth interviews with 149 students at the City Colleges of Chicago — which adopted guided pathways in 2010 — [researchers](#) at the Community College Research Center at Columbia University focused on 48 who expressed clear opinions about some aspect of the colleges' guided pathways.

The great majority said the program maps, individual plans, and tracking information were very helpful and increased their confidence and motivation to progress toward their degree. Many found it especially encouraging to see their exact progress through an online tool the colleges use. And they appreciated that the tool didn't "assign"

them courses, but gave them a few different options in order to stay on the right track.

On the other hand, some felt restricted from picking the classes they wanted, or that the structured environment of guided pathways was less helpful for those who were undecided early on about what career they wanted to pursue. And, while most found it motivating to see their degree plan mapped out and how many steps were involved, others expressed discouragement.

## Are guided pathways showing success?

Preliminary [research](#) found that colleges who have had the pathways model in place for a number of years are finding positive outcomes in what are called early momentum indicators. That means more students are completing more classes and getting more credits — in particular the all-important college-level math and English classes — in their first year than before guided pathways was introduced, although more rigorous research is needed.

In the Georgia system, for example, there is significant evidence that when students take classes recommended to them by an automated advising system, they are much more successful than when they don't. And those who complete foundational math and writing courses in their first academic year are 10 times more likely to graduate than those who take them later or didn't take them at all.

Alamo Colleges numbers show that in 2014, it took students an average of 92 credit hours to get a 60-hour degree and 4.6 years to complete a two-year degree. In 2018, that dropped to 82 hours and 3.88 years. And students who start and finish within the same system — that is who didn't transfer in — typically take 67.5 hours to get that 60-hour degree.

**For questions or comments about the report, please email [CI@chronicle.com](mailto:CI@chronicle.com)**