Structured College Pathways

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Two-year public colleges have taken on a central role for postsecondary innovation. As Bailey, (2016) from the Community College Research Center states, this makes for an exciting time to be working in the community college field. The interest in community colleges graduation rates has grown dramatically. Most community college students, many of whom are working and attending classes part-time; are leaving college without completing programs. One intervention strategy that has been growing in popularity over the past few years is to increase the structure of student pathways. The outcomes are impressive. So much so that the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) is facilitating a nation-wide project with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. AACC is the lead entity and fiscal agent for AACC Pathways. AACC Pathways has brought together 30 diverse colleges from 17 states for an intensive pathways project which will run for three years. The 30 institutions were selected based on rigorous criteria developed to assist colleges that were already implementing a student success agenda and were ready to work on advancing to the next transformative level. In California the three institutions participating in the AACC project are Bakersfield College, Irvine College and Mt. San Antonio College. Primary goals will mirror the majority of pathway programs: assist students to choose and enter a pathway earlier; clarify paths; assist students to stay on the pathway; and ensure that students are learning on their pathways (AACC Pathways: The Pathways Project, 2015).

Review of the Literature

Definitions.

DM's – Degree Maps.
Guided Pathways – Educationally coherent programs of study that simplify students' choices without limiting their options. Informed deliberate choices, and structured intrusive advising to minimize off-track errors and highlight milestones. Academic roadmaps to completion.
GPM – Guided Pathway Model.
GPS – Guided Pathways to Success or Guide to Personal Success.
MP's – Mapped Pathways.

Justifying the need for more structure along educational pathways.
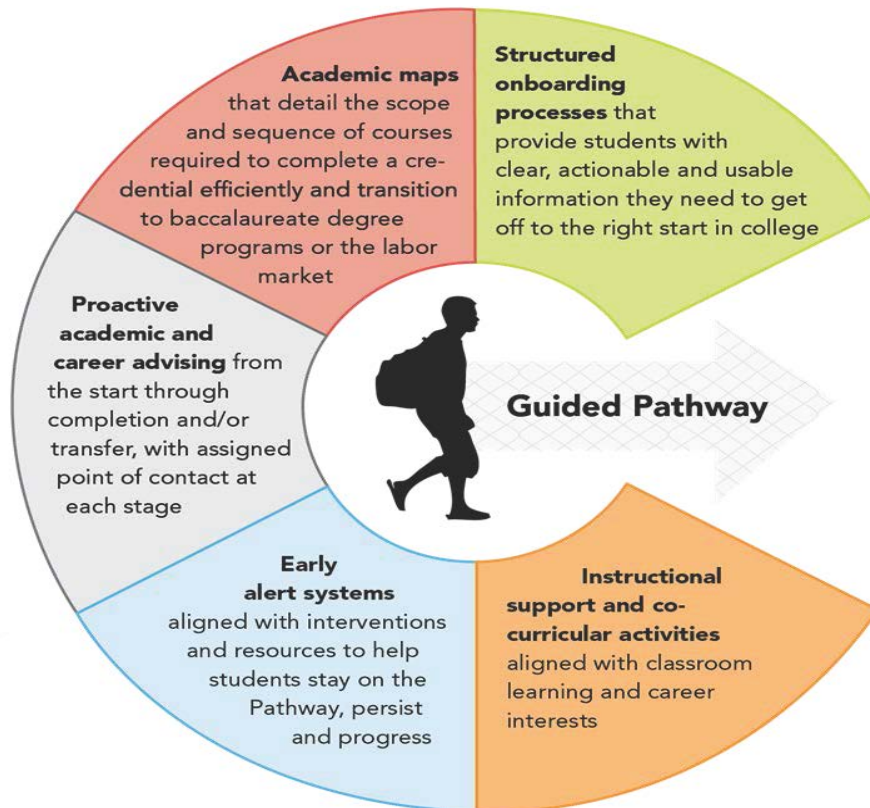
Many colleges today offer a cafeteria model which allows students to choose from a numerous group of disconnected courses and support services. Consequently, too few students graduate from college and even fewer graduate on time. Of those who do eventually graduate, many earn unnecessary credits. The average associate degree holder earned approximately 80 credits instead of the routinely required 60 credits. Evidenced-based research has shown that students are at the highest risk of dropping out before they complete those first 60 units. The unnecessary credits earned are even higher for certificate completers. Students pursuing a certificate earned more than double the number of credits expected. While some high education institutions have made progress over the past several years, many college programs still require too many credits, wasting time and money. Excess credits and no-credit repeats are very costly. Excess credits are estimated to cost more than $19 billion each year. Of the $19 billion, approximately $8 billion is paid by the students, while $11 billion is the burden to taxpayers who subsidize public higher education. Community College students are more likely to complete a degree or transfer if they select a program of study early in their educational pathway. However, students have a difficult time navigating the many choices which leads to poor decisions without seeking help. Advising, progress tracking, feedback and other support strategies should be embedded throughout a student's entire educational journey (Bailey, Jaggars & Jenkins, 2015; David, 2015; Guided Pathways to Success: Boosting College Completion, 2012; What we know about Guided Pathways, 2015).

Examples.

- Miami Dade College (MDC).
  In 2011 MDC launched a major new initiative across their eight campuses because previous small-scale innovations had not substantially improved student completion outcomes. Approximately 120 faculty, staff and administrators task force spent a year strategically planning transformative change. Collaboration was key. One powerful exercise for task force members involved attempts to determine which courses a student should complete in their second year in order to transfer to a local university with junior status in their biology major. The task force members had difficulty figuring out prerequisite requirements and which courses would transfer. The exercise galvanized support for the need of a more clearly structured pathway program. MDC is carefully monitoring student outcomes. Early results include an eight point surge in retention

rates for students with assigned advisors, providing significantly positive revenue implications for subsequent terms (Implementing Guided Pathways at Miami Dade College: A Case Study, 2015)

- Completion by Design, Pathway Design Principles.

Academic maps that detail the scope and sequence of courses required to complete a credential efficiently and transition to baccalaureate degree programs or the labor market

Structured onboarding processes that provide students with clear, actionable and usable information they need to get off to the right start in college

Proactive academic and career advising from the start through completion and/or transfer, with assigned point of contact at each stage

Guided Pathway

Early alert systems aligned with interventions and resources to help students stay on the Pathway, persist and progress

Instructional support and co-curricular activities aligned with classroom learning and career interests

- Pasadena City College (PCC).
  PCC launched their guided pathways program in 2011 with embedded high impact practices. During their first year, PCC Pathway students are required to: attend summer orientation called Jam; enroll in math, English and a first-year seminar; carry a minimum of 12 units and maintain a GPA of 2.5 or better; meet regularly with their academic coach, tutor and counselor; develop an ePortfolio; and participate in various workshops and activities. PCC Pathway students earn significantly more credits and persist at significantly higher rates than non-Pathway students. The PCC Pathway program has considerably impacted completion. A significantly higher percentage of PCC Pathway students achieved longer-term milestones. A higher percentage of Pathway students in the 2012-2013 cohort reached transfer-directed, transfer-prepared, and/or transfer-ready status at the end of three years, compared to non-Pathway students. For example, 9% of non-Pathway students reached transfer-ready status (successfully complete transfer-level math and English courses and earned 60 or more transferable units with a GPA of 2.0 or better) compared to Pathway students at 19%. A higher percentage of Pathway students at 12% received a degree at the end of three years compared to 5% of non-Pathways students (PCC Pathways: Student Success Study, (2015).

Methodology

The structured pathway data reviewed for this Research Brief, is for first-time entry full-time students and does not include non-first-time or part-time students. The researcher for this literature review found a total of 11 publications which focused on researching or discussing research results for structured pathway program development and/or implementation. The researcher examined peer reviewed publications, studies released by research entities such as the Community College Research Center (CCRC); publications released by National organizations such as Complete College America and Completion by Design; relevant state and federal websites, and articles discussing the applicable research of structured pathways. Findings and conclusions for this research brief are drawn from the conclusions of the literature reviewed.

Findings and Conclusions

The intervention strategy of connecting and engaging students with varying levels of structure is not new. Students themselves through years of surveys have voiced their concern about being unclear on how to progress through community college programs because there are too many courses and too many choices. The extant of literature demonstrates that student engagement in structured pathways which includes purposeful educational experiences both in and out of the classroom, has a significant positive impact on persistence and learning. When implementing a guided pathway program for long-term transformation, collaboration is a critical component. Important institutional questions to consider include: how does the college most effectively help new students select a program of study, especially critical for the many students who do not have clear educational and career goals; how does the college ensure that the students enter a program of study as quickly as possible; how does the college keep students on path to completion through monitoring and highlighting milestones; and are learning outcomes well defined as well as aligned with student needs, for optimal student learning. Quality should never be sacrificed. The implementation of a guided pathway model does not require removing choice; instead, it should encourage the building of choice architecture that is strategically planned and not just random. Structured guided pathways should be designed to shift the focus of student choices of picking courses, to selecting programs. Research supports the argument that adding increased levels of structure back into the educational pathway of students is notably beneficial to all community college stakeholders. (Bailey, Jaggars & Jenkins, 2015; David, 2015; Implementing Guided Pathways Tips and Tools, 2015; Johnston, 2015).

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