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Preparing for guided pathways

A readiness assessment for colleges and universities

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Guided pathways:
A student-centric transformation
Building roadmaps to student success

Across higher education, institutions are searching for ways to help their students succeed.

Definitions of success can vary—from on-time graduation to certificate completion to improved transfer rates—yet regardless of type or size, every institution wants its students to achieve the goals they enrolled with, accrue as little debt as possible, and gain the skills and knowledge they need to help them succeed in the workplace. Heightened scrutiny from policymakers, an increase in performance-based funding, the rising cost of education, and growing challenges in the job market add urgency to this essential responsibility.

While some hurdles to student success are more easily cleared than others, most institutions have room for improvement in their program design, advising services, degree tracking, and student support resources.

Enter the guided pathways model.

Born as part of a large-scale initiative to redesign community college education, guided pathways reforms were created to address critical student needs—including stronger advising, help navigating cafeteria-style course offerings, timely completion, workforce development, and financial aid concerns.

With funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the American Association of Community Colleges partnered with Achieving the Dream, the Aspen Institute, the Center for Community College Student Engagement, the Community College Research Center at Teachers College Columbia University, Jobs for the Future, the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement, and Public Agenda to create the Pathways Project, implementing guided course and career pathways at 30 community colleges in 17 states.

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The guided pathways model is designed to deliver a number of benefits to students and institutions:

Increased retention: Clearly defined programs, combined with continuous progress tracking, help keep students on track.

Improved student engagement: By guiding students toward majors that reflect their strengths and interests, institutions can help students stay motivated.

Increased on-time graduation: Students who follow a structured path complete their degrees or certificates more quickly.

Reduced debt: Students who take fewer courses unrelated to their goals spend less time in school, reducing their need for financial aid.

Improved career prospects: Aligning critical, in-demand skills with program development means graduates have an edge in today's challenging job market.

A model for success: A successful curriculum restructuring can point the way toward other institutional reforms that can improve retention and completion.

While these benefits make a guided pathways model attractive to many institutions, it's important to take a methodical approach when preparing for implementation. This guide offers a roadmap of the necessary pre-work for a successful guided pathways adoption.

Guided pathways reform is a student-centric approach that clarifies and simplifies students' academic choices through grouped courses that form clear roadmaps through programs and toward careers. From enrollment through completion, students get continuous, targeted advising that helps them choose a path, stay on it, and graduate with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in the workplace or next educational pursuit.

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Are you ready for guided pathways?
A readiness assessment questionnaire

As interest in structured pathways continues to grow, many institutions have begun the challenging work of mapping their programs of study, helping students select and stay on their chosen pathways, and tracking outcomes. If your institution is considering a guided pathways approach, this questionnaire can help you determine your readiness.

1 How does your graduation rate compare to the national average?

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, national six-year graduation rates for four-year degree-granting institutions are approximately 59%, while three-year completion rates at two-year degree-granting postsecondary institutions are approximately 29%. How do your institution's rates compare?

- ◯ **A. More than 10 points higher than national average.**
- ◯ **B. Within 10 points lower or higher of national average.**
- ◯ **C. Between 10–20 points lower.**
- ◯ **D. Lower, by more than 20 points.**

2 Is your data reliable?

Institutional consistency and understanding of data are fundamental to initiatives, including pathways. As your institution explores opportunities related to guided pathways, consider the question: Do you trust your data?

- ◯ **A. Yes, we have strong data governance that enables consistent understanding and uniformity in reporting.**
- ◯ **B. Somewhat. We have the foundation for consistency in reporting, but not all departments or units are on the same page.**
- ◯ **C. Not really. Institutional data governance and consistency of data within the organization are not reliable since different departments report different data.**
- ◯ **D. No. I'm not sure if our data is reliable, and not all stakeholders have access to data.**

3   Is your student information system data valid, accurate, and up-to-date?

Preparations for pathways are more efficient when the data in your SIS is current and consistent. Does your SIS reflect current offerings on campus? Does your SIS data reflect the current courses in your catalog?

- A. **Yes. Our courses are cleanly mapped to the current academic catalog.**
- B. **Somewhat. Most courses in our SIS are current.**
- C. **Not really. Inactive courses for some programs remain.**
- D. **No, our SIS is cluttered with years' worth of inactive courses.**

4   Do your systems allow you to collect and analyze data to identify and advise struggling students?

Too many students get derailed by inadequate preparation, unmanageable course loads, or "killer" courses. Does your institution have a documented early alert process to notify advisers of red flags? Are structured programs in place that focus on improving outcomes?

- A. **Yes. We clearly map all major and degree requirements, track student engagement and attendance, and offer comprehensive advising and academic support.**
- B. **Somewhat. We've begun implementing some key best practices like mapping and remedial education in some majors.**
- C. **Not really—we're still in early planning stages.**
- D. **No—our DFWI rates are high. We haven't effectively addressed the problem and aren't sure where to begin.**

5. Are you effectively using your SIS to help refine your course-planning approach?

Some student information systems include powerful analytics and reporting tools that can help make course planning more efficient and data-driven. Do you use data to inform your decision making?

- A. **Yes. We use a data-centered and data-informed approach to design our course offerings.**
- B. **Somewhat. Some stakeholders in some departments use our SIS to improve and inform our planning.**
- C. **Not really. Only a few stakeholders know how to use our SIS for planning improvements, and even fewer actually do so.**
- D. **No, we are not fully utilizing our SIS to enhance our planning process and most stakeholders don't know how.**

6. Does your approach to program planning take student needs into account?

A key element in a pathways approach is the consistent availability of courses that students need to fulfill their degree requirements. Does your institution prioritize students' scheduling needs in its course planning?

- A. **Yes, a student-first approach guides our course offerings.**
- B. **Somewhat. We're shifting toward more student-centric course planning and are gradually offering more high-demand courses.**
- C. **Not really. In some departments, students often can't enroll in the courses they need in a time frame optimal for timely degree completion.**
- D. **No. We have not yet adopted a student-first approach to course planning, and across campus our students struggle to choose, register for, and complete their required coursework in a timely manner.**

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7 **In your current environment, can students electronically access and manage their degree programs and requirements?**

On today's campuses, technology plays a key role in helping students understand and manage their degree requirements—a key element of a pathways approach. Do your institutional systems enable students to manage their affairs when and where they need to?

○ **A.** **Yes, students can access their degree programs and requirements via mobile, and we offer self-service options.**

○ **B.** **Somewhat. Requirements are readily available online and we are starting to increase our self-service capabilities.**

○ **C.** **Not really. Requirements are online, but they aren't as clear or accessible as they could be, and we offer very few self-service capabilities at this time.**

○ **D.** **No. Students must meet with an advisor to review their progress toward degree completion.**

8 **Has your institution considered the financial implications that a pathways approach can have on students?**

Too many students pay dearly for common mistakes. If they take the wrong courses, overload themselves, or perform poorly, they can accrue debt, squander savings, and waste or lose financial aid. Successful pathways programs directly address those pitfalls with careful program evaluation, thoughtful course structuring, and continuous academic advising. Does your institution currently consider financial issues during academic planning?

○ **A.** **Yes, when evaluating programs, we consider the financial implications of students' pace of progress.**

○ **B.** **Somewhat. We occasionally take students' completion rates and their corresponding financial implications into account during program evaluations.**

○ **C.** **Not really. We rarely consider financial implications during our decision-making about academic programs.**

○ **D.** **No, we never consider financial implications during program evaluations.**

9 **Do you have the right people at the table with the right expertise?**

Every institution's "dream team" will vary somewhat, but key participants should include representatives from across technical, administrative, and academic areas—and should include partnership with other secondary and postsecondary institutions in the area. Does your team include stakeholders representing different viewpoints and focus areas?

○ A. **Yes. We've included a wide range of stakeholders, ranging from the CIO, academic administration, and faculty members to representatives from institutional research, IT, curriculum, registrar, financial aid, advising, and the transfer office. We've also worked with area secondary and postsecondary institutions to coordinate curricular needs.**

○ B. **Somewhat. We're in the process of soliciting a wide range of viewpoints.**

○ C. **Not really. We could do more to include a variety of perspectives and areas of expertise.**

○ D. **No, we have not yet assembled a team, and we're unsure who to include and what issues to consider.**

What it takes to pave the way

Evaluate your answers and learn more about next steps

Graduation rates

While its origins lie in community college reform, the guided pathways model holds promising applications for four-year institutions as well. With its focus on student-centric practices, clearly defined programs, enhanced advising, and early alert systems, the guided pathways approach offers something for everyone—even institutions with average to above-average completion rates.

That said, if you answered C or D to **question 1**, or if you weren't sure because your institution lacks sufficient or accurate data, the following steps will be particularly beneficial in helping you identify critical areas of improvement.

Data governance

If you didn't answer A to **questions 2 and 3**, your institution will benefit from a sound data governance plan to help access and effectively apply the information needed to lead your institution toward guided pathways.

Data governance—the practice of ensuring that data meets precise standards and business rules as it is entered into a system—includes four key elements:

ownership, access, quality, and security. But at most institutions, data lives in many places and is owned by many people and departments—each with different goals and procedures. Breaking down those silos and getting data governance under control are critical, requiring effective management of processes, policies, and people.

Reforming your data governance program is no overnight task, and is usually best rolled out with a phased approach, but there are some essential elements.

1. **How does your graduation rate compare to the national average?**
2. **Is your data reliable?**
3. **Is your student information system data valid, accurate, and up-to-date?**

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Create a consistent, shared view of information to ensure everyone is working off the same page. Here, a higher-ed specific data model and data dictionary can be key assets in standardizing information, sources, and definitions.

Clean up your student information system. The detritus that can accumulate over the years in any institution's SIS can throw mapping efforts into chaos. Conduct a comprehensive audit of your SIS, ensuring that all courses are active and Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) coding is consistent. Streamline wherever possible, eliminating duplications and redundancies.

Establish clear data ownership guidelines to ensure that the data stewards at your institution—from department heads to the registrar to institutional effectiveness staff—stay informed of all curriculum changes.

Educate and train your end users to avoid conflicting processes, making sure to communicate first what data governance involves and why it's important. Clearly explain the new rules and policies and how users should comply, then provide ongoing education that reflects changes to data rules, types, definitions, and security.

Use your constituent relationship management system to connect data silos. It's easier to achieve process consistency when consistent, accurate information follows each student through the life cycle and can be properly accessed by different end users—whether they're in student information, financial aid, or learning management.

Data analysis

After you've cleaned up your data, it's time to dig in, find the patterns, and put that intelligence into practice. If you answered B, C, or D to **questions 3 and 4**, look at your registration rates, drop rates, and completion rates among your courses. Who's struggling, and why? Who's losing financial aid, and why?

But don't just focus on the negative—be sure to use your SIS to calculate completion rates for your *highest* achieving students, too. Map them to find the common patterns underlying their success. What courses did they take, and when did they take them? In what format did they take them, and in what order? What other traits did they share?

Another key metric that's ripe for analysis when preparing for pathways reforms: students' SAP, or Satisfactory Academic Progress. Identifying why students lose their aid is paramount to helping them reach completion. What red flags went up before those students lost their aid eligibility, and what steps could have prevented it?

Indeed, an early alert system is integral to guided pathways reforms. Equipped with the right tools, faculty members and advisors can detect problems promptly and intervene appropriately before students fall behind.

3   **Is your student information system data valid, accurate, and up-to-date?**

4   **Do your systems allow you to collect and analyze data to identify and advise struggling students?**

Curriculum assessment

To effectively implement guided pathways, institutions need to know which courses and programs students are in, how they're progressing toward their degrees, and if, when, and where they're falling off track. If you answered A to **questions 5 and 6**, you've already performed this critical work. If you answered B, C, or D, it's time to examine the clarity of your existing pathways and compile the number of and progress of the students enrolled in them.

At its core, the guided pathways approach is about removing roadblocks to student success. And that means designing a curriculum with the course availability, rotation, timing, and modality students need. Again, look to your data: which courses, on which times and days, get the best student enrollment and the best outcomes for students? How is that course delivered? These factors all have profound effects on enrollment, course cancellations, and degree completion time.

Once again, your SIS should play an integral role in this effort—and your CIO and IT staff can help ensure that you're making the most of your technology. An informal audit of how you're using your enterprise resource planning (ERP) system, conducted by your vendor, might be useful as well. They can help you answer questions like:

» Are you planning from scratch every semester? Or are you making sure the information in your system is repeatable by taking advantage of templates and schedule builders?

» Are you putting analytics to their best use?

» Are you effectively using your SIS to refine your course planning approach by determining completion rates and patterns of success and failure—then using that information in your decision making?

» Are you delivering the kind of student-centric programming that guided pathways requires, or is course planning still largely driven by faculty priorities?

» Do the offerings on your website align with your course catalog?

A modernized, student-centered approach

When preparing for a guided pathways approach, it's time to take a long look at how your students are currently being served by existing offerings—academically, technologically, and financially. If you answered B, C, or D to **questions 6, 7, and 8**, a wide range of systems and practices exist to help you address shortcomings in curriculum design, progress monitoring, student self-service, and financial aid.

Putting students first is central to guided pathways initiatives, from designing course offerings around their needs to empowering them with easily accessible information. Institutions preparing for pathways should, at a minimum, ensure that students have easy electronic access to their

5 Are you effectively using your SIS to help refine your course-planning approach?

6 Does your approach to program planning take student needs into account?

7 In your current environment, can students electronically access and manage their degree programs and requirements?

8 Has your institution considered the financial implications that a pathways approach can have on students?

course requirements, course catalog, and degree progress to date. The ability to self-monitor is essential to helping students understand where they are on their paths to completion, and what they need to do to stay on track and stay eligible for aid.

Institutions, too, need to pay increased attention to their students' financial situations, especially when financial aid is involved. When analyzing data, ask the questions: How many students are losing financial aid by taking too many electives or courses in the wrong buckets? How many students are we losing as a result of us not tracking what courses our students are taking? Are we sufficiently monitoring their choices?

Collaboration, communication, and buy-in

Collaboration is essential to preparing for guided pathways—and many departments and individuals have a role to play. If you answered B, C, or D to **question 9**, you'll want to plan on including a range of viewpoints and areas of expertise.

The dean, provost, and vice president of academic affairs will be deeply involved in curricular reform, and together with faculty and advisers will map out program pathways and define course sequences. Curriculum reform also includes working with partnering secondary and postsecondary institutions to understand college readiness needs and transfer articulation requirements to optimize academic progression and student success.

Representatives from institutional research can explain trends in graduation and retention, while members of your most (and least) successful programs can share what works (and what doesn't). The financial aid office can advise on the restrictions and progress requirements that can trigger a loss of aid, while advisers can highlight common pitfalls and identify student needs. The registrar can detail the processes and procedures necessary to maintain current and accurate data, and the CIO can help identify and explain the most effective tools for progress tracking, advising, analytics, and course management.

Putting it all together

Implementing a guided pathways model is an ambitious undertaking that requires the right preparation, the right tools, and the right people on board. But with a thorough self-assessment, comprehensive analysis, inclusive planning, and multi-level preparation, your institution can achieve the first key goals on the road to guided pathways.

9   **Do you have the right people at the table with the right expertise?**

Learn more

For more information to help you plan a move to guided pathways, visit **www.ellucian.com**.

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