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## Extending “Guided Pathways” Beyond the Community College: Lessons for University Transfer Orientation

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### ABSTRACT

Many states have enacted policies to increase accountability for 2- to 4-year institutions in an effort to increase degree completion (Sponsler, Pingel, & Anderson, 2015). Reform initiatives, including Guided Pathways (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015), have developed mechanisms for 2-year students to have structured, sequential course maps that promote degree completion. Additionally, while 81.4% of community college students intend to complete a baccalaureate degree or higher, only 5.9% of those students received a baccalaureate degree and 13.1% received an associate's degree within 5 years (NCES, 2011). In transitioning to the receiving institution, negative institutional perception, time with advisors, self-confidence, and first-semester grade point average (GPA) all impact a transfer student's ability to successfully adjust to the campus (Laanan, 2007). This article describes how Guided Pathways can extend beyond the borders of community colleges by informing transfer orientation practices at 4-year institutions.

### KEYWORDS

Guided Pathways;  
Orientation; Student Affairs;  
Student Transition; Transfer

Of the more than 20 million students enrolled in higher education institutions in the United States, nearly 7 million (33%) of these students enrolled in 2-year colleges (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2014). For students who started at 2-year institutions in the fall of 2010, 39.3% received a degree or certificate in 6 years, with 9.3% doing so at a 4-year institution (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2016). As a result of these enrollment and degree completion statistics, states have enacted policies to increase accountability for both 2- and 4-year institutions, including articulation and transfer policies, performance-based funding models, and financial aid support (Sponsler, Pingel, & Anderson, 2015).

Several initiatives have sought to reform 2-year institutions, including Achieving the Dream (2017), the Developmental Education Initiative (Manpower Development Corp., n.d.), Completion by Design (Pennington & Milliron, 2010), and Complete College America (2014). Most recently, the Guided Pathways model (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015) reframed the degree pursuits of community college students, shifting the focus from a cafeteria-style format where students have unstructured, open selections of courses to structured, sequential course maps with mandatory support systems (Jenkins, Lahr, & Fink, 2017). Guided Pathways are intended to narrow the scope of decision-making students experience in order to provide structured career paths and accelerate degree progress. Bailey et al. (2015) proposed that within the Guided Pathways model, students can initially select a general field of study, or meta-major, and later choose a specialized program after completing some coursework. Beginning with a meta-major and narrowing focus, students work closely with an academic advisor to choose a field of study and stay on track for credential completion.

Guided Pathways implementation requires systematic reform in four areas: “(a) mapping pathways to student end goals, (b) helping students choose and enter a program pathway, (c) keeping students on path, and (d) ensuring students are learning” (Jenkins et al., 2017, pp. 1–2). Following a review of pilot sites, many institutions were in the process of redesigning their websites to reflect specific program maps, implementing program of study selection guidance for all new students, developing intervention strategies for pathway deviation, and creating clearly defined learning outcomes for each program (Jenkins et al., 2017).

While research is underway on student outcomes for those participating in Guided Pathways programs, community colleges are only part of the higher education equation. In a longitudinal study of over 13,000 students, Monaghan and Attewell (2015) found that only 58% of students transferring from 2- to 4-year institutions were able to transfer 90% or more completed credit hours, creating substantial barriers for degree attainment. Considering the importance of community college-to-university transfer, the question can be raised: How might the Guided Pathways model extend beyond the 2-year sector and be used to shape the orientation of students transferring from 2- to 4-year institutions?

### **Understanding transfer student transitions**

Research on students transferring from 2- to 4-year institutions illustrates the disparity between intention and completion. The National Center for Education Statistics (2011) reported that while 81.4% of community college students intend to complete a baccalaureate degree or higher, only 5.9% of those students received a baccalaureate degree and 13.1% received an associate’s degree within 5 years. Doyle (2009) found that students who enrolled in 12 or more credit hours in their first year at a 2-year institution were more likely to transfer to a 4-year institution. As Guided Pathways seeks to increase credit and credential completion at 2-year institutions, it can be argued that a subsequent outcome may increase transfer rates to 4-year institutions.

### **Transfer adjustment**

The research provides perspective on factors that contribute to a transfer student’s adjustment process at a 4-year institution. In a study of students transferring from a community college to 4-year institution in California, Laanan (2007) found that students with negative perceptions of their institution and students who spent a lot of time with academic advisors were likely to experience challenges adjusting to the 4-year environment, indicating that students may be seeking help from advisors as they experience challenges with their transition. Additionally, students who had a lower grade point average (GPA) and lower self-confidence in their academic abilities experienced greater challenges adjusting than their peers with higher levels of self-reported self-confidence (Laanan, 2007). Townsend and Wilson (2008-2009) found that upper-division students transferring to 4-year institutions have different needs than native, traditionally aged first-year peers, and indicated that they felt not connected academically and experienced challenges developing social connections in their first semester at the university.

### **Transfer orientation**

While orientation can be seen as a transactional interaction between a transfer student and the institution, orientation programs strive to provide students with support, advice, and resources that will facilitate a seamless transition between their previous and current institution. Orientation programs offer opportunities for students to become involved in social and academic programs that facilitate the adjustment process to campus (Kuh, Schuh, & Whitt, 1991). Townsend (2008) recognized two phases of transfer student adjustment, the first being the transfer process itself and the second as adjustment to the new institution. As orientation plays a role in helping transfer

students to understand those adjustment phases and the resources available to assist them in that transition, orientation professionals must consider specific transfer student needs in developing programming.

### **Using Guided Pathways to inform transfer orientation**

While Guided Pathways programs target community colleges, 4-year institutions can use the Guided Pathways Essential Practices (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017) model and knowledge of transfer student transitions and adjustment to frame and inform transfer orientation practices.

#### ***Clarify paths to student end goals***

Transfer students should understand their value at their receiving institution to promote self-confidence and fit. Wyner, Dean, Jenkins, and Fink (2016) advocated for 4-year institutions to share that transfer students are central in serving the mission, and that they dedicate specific resources to support transfer students' transitions. To combat negative academic self-confidence and lower GPA in adjustment (Laanan, 2007), orientation programs should specifically address transfer student performance data and strategies for persistence with internal and external stakeholders, as well as transfer students themselves.

#### ***Help students choose and enter a pathway***

The use of broad career fields, or meta-majors, provides a map for students entering community college and can be intentionally linked to programs of study at 4-year institutions and postgraduation opportunities (Jenkins et al., 2017). Additionally, electronic portfolios in advising can provide collaborative information between 2- and 4-year institutional advisors, as they provide context about a student's decision-making and a more holistic picture about a student's path to their major (Allen, Smith, & Muehleck, 2014). By adopting collaborative e-portfolios with key feeder institutions, academic advisors can be better prepared to provide intentional, individualized advising at orientation. Additionally, orientation programs should encourage incoming students to declare a major prior to arrival (Wyner et al., 2016), or offer opportunities for transfer students to declare a major on-site, so that students can be advised and register for major classes while attending orientation to make progress toward their degree in their first semester.

#### ***Help students stay on path***

Providing direct opportunities for engagement with students in one's program of study will allow for socioacademic integrative moments (Deil-Amen, 2011) that are inclusive of one's community college experience. Additionally, transfer students find information from their transfer peers as helpful (Townsend & Wilson, 2006), so transfer programs should include transfer peer leaders as successful role models in the transition process. Peer leaders can speak to the level of academic rigor, discuss anticipated and unanticipated transition issues and ways in which they successfully navigated those, and speak to the culture of the institution, facilitating the socioacademic integration and allowing students to stay on path toward degree completion.

#### ***Ensure that students are learning***

According to Schwartz and Wiese (2010), "the effective reporting of assessment that results from the orientation process helps to ensure that orientation programs are meeting the needs of the students they serve as well as the interests of the institution" (p. 224). In addition to quantitative program

evaluations, Wyner et al. (2016) suggested listening sessions as a means to understand the transfer student experience and transition at a 4-year institution. Conducting program assessment and sharing information with key university constituents will allow the institution to improve the transfer transition process.

## Conclusion

While the Guided Pathways model is continuing to be developed and assessed, it is among the most influential reforms for 2-year institutions. As students complete credentials through Guided Pathways programs at 2-year colleges and seek admission to 4-year institutions, this model can also be used to inform orientation programs for transfer students. Further study is warranted to understand how Guided Pathways can assist in student matriculation, persistence, and completion of credentials across higher education sectors to ease the transition for community college transfer students.

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