

PART IV. INTEGRATED APPROACHES AND SYSTEMS

This part includes chapters that describe how institutions can combine various student success efforts with their gateway-course improvement strategies to increase the likelihood that the strategies are more successful and serve larger numbers of students.

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Offered as a case study, this chapter shows how Lansing Community College intentionally combined efforts to redesign eight high-risk courses with efforts to create clearer guided curricular pathways for the college's students.

Intentionally Linking Gateway-Course Transformation Efforts with Guided Pathways

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In an effort to improve student outcomes, postsecondary institutions across the United States often find themselves involved in an array of student retention and success efforts. These programs frequently occur in disjointed ways that can, if not addressed, result in duplication of effort, missed opportunities for shared resources, and initiative fatigue. In an effort to avoid these common issues, faculty and staff from Lansing Community College (LCC) in Michigan worked to combine two student success-related efforts: a gateway-course redesign project and a separate process to design “guided pathways,” in order to limit and focus the curriculum. We engaged in these efforts because we believed that doing so would make the ultimate outcomes better for all involved parties—particularly the LCC students.

According to the Community College Research Center at Columbia University, the term *pathways* has come to be used to describe “a clear road map of the courses” that students “need to take to complete a credential” and the intentional provision of “guidance and support to help (students) stay on plan” (Community College Research Center, 2015). Pathways, or Guided Pathways, are employed by many 2-year institutions, but they are also becoming a part of broader student success efforts at 4-year colleges and universities in the United States (Hopkins, 2017).

The work to transform five gateway courses at LCC began in fall 2013 when the college joined the Gateways to Completion (G2C) process directed by the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education (Gardner Institute). Our efforts to transform both teaching and learning in gateway courses helped us to identify larger issues affecting the performance of students. It became apparent to faculty and staff engaged

in the G2C self-study process that gateway courses existed within one or more curricular pathways that were not clearly understood by students or even faculty and staff. Jenkins (2014) succinctly describes the problem that underlies the work on pathways: “In most community colleges . . . many students do not see a clear path to their end goals, become frustrated, and drop out” (p. 1; see also Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015b).

In December 2014, LCC made a decision to join other Michigan community colleges to establish Guided Pathways for its students. Through interacting and learning from other Michigan colleges in a 2015 Michigan Guided Pathways Institute and making use of a Guided Pathways Resource Repository maintained since 2014 by the Michigan Community College Association (MCCA) (2017), LCC established a process to create clearer pathways that ultimately yielded higher levels of completion and more appropriate credentials for students. The kinds of questions LCC faculty and staff were being asked to consider by the Gardner Institute in the G2C course-transformation process meshed very well with the questions being addressed by the pathways projects administered by the MCCA and also the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) (For more information on AACC Pathways, see <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Resources/aaccprograms/pathways/Pages/default.aspx>). It became apparent that sound pathways through higher education do not exist if students are not successfully completing gateway courses that are part of the pathways. Further, LCC faculty noted that gateway-course outcomes could be enhanced if the courses were contextualized within broader, intentionally supportive pathways. In other words, better outcomes could be achieved by linking the work on gateway courses to the Guided Pathways efforts.

Gateways to Completion (G2C)

The G2C process is “designed to create and implement an evidence-based plan for improving teaching, learning, and success in historically high-failure rate courses” (Gateways to Completion, 2017). In LCC’s first 3-year cycle of this process (2013–2016), we focused on five courses: Principles of Accounting I; Foundations for Physiology; U.S. History, 1877 to Present; Intermediate Algebra; and Composition I. College faculty and staff enthusiastically engaged in the college-wide and course-level self-study using the embedded key performance indicators (KPIs), questions that help faculty and staff consider and apply evidence to answer teaching- and learning-related questions about the courses they teach. The answers to these questions formulated the basis for action plans that LCC faculty, working in a broad task force and individual course committees, then implemented.

One of LCC’s college-level actions was to develop a method for faster delivery of student evaluations of instructors at the end of the semester. We

were able to implement this change within 2 years by moving from paper to a completely online student–teacher evaluation system. A second college-level action focused on requiring all faculty to provide feedback “early and often” (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This action was realized through the implementation of a new policy that requires faculty to use a centralized digital grading tool available to students on a 24/7 basis.

Course-level action plans for the first 3-year cycle of the process included the following:

- Principles of Accounting I:
 - Increasing access to tutoring and supplemental instruction
 - Providing more timely teacher feedback earlier in the semester
- Foundations for Physiology
 - Collaborating with Allied Health faculty to align learning outcomes across sections
 - Recruiting and retaining underrepresented student populations in biology
- U.S. History, 1877 to Present
 - Creating a course-wide syllabus review committee to ensure consistency across sections
 - Analyzing course assessment data to improve teaching and learning
- Intermediate Algebra
 - Designing and implementing a mentoring system for new instructors
 - Updating and disseminating the Math Library Guide
- Composition I
 - Revising learning outcomes
 - Identifying means of assessing learning outcomes

All of these recommendations were generated with extensive faculty involvement, which helps explain why they were adopted; because faculty generated the ideas, they were interested in seeing them implemented effectively.

We saw numerous positive results from our first G2C venture, including not only a new energy among faculty who were empowered to drive change, but also a drop in the online rates of Ds, Fs, withdrawals, and incompletes (DFWI rate) for these courses. We narrowed the achievement gap between students of color and White students in several classes as well, and during the project the DFWI rate overall dropped in biology, history, and writing. While there still is more work to do, our combining G2C with the Guided Pathways initiative has helped us greatly in sustaining the energy and desire among faculty to improve these courses.

Guided Pathways

Work in the 2017 Michigan Guided Pathways Institute pointed LCC toward the concepts of “meta-majors” (Waugh, 2016) and “maps.” Maps are lists of classes in exact order that students must complete each semester in order to finish a program of study (major). A meta-major is a large category of careers relating to a central theme. For example, the communication meta-major includes careers like professional writer, journalist, social media designer, and web designer. Using meta-majors to help students design a broad degree plan and subsequently a specific map is antithetical to the traditional use of cafeteria-style models of course selection. Cafeteria models are pick-and-choose buffets of individual courses from which students create course schedules based on course availability, their schedules, and level of course difficulty (see Bailey, Jaggars & Jenkins, 2015a; Waugh, 2016) rather than on predetermined curricula linked to programs of study.

LCC established five meta-majors that were named by the students, “Career Communities.” The State of Michigan’s Career Clusters and Occupational Information Network (O*NET, 2017; see <https://www.onetonline.org/>) helped inform the creation of the Career Communities and allowed LCC to mesh data on occupations with its programs of study. The Career Communities are:

- Arts and Communications
- Business, Economics, and Management
- Computer, Engineering/Manufacturing, and Industrial Technology
- Health and Public Services
- Liberal Arts

Next, staff assigned each program of study to a Career Community and gave faculty time to respond to how their courses were placed and timed within their designated Career Community. The structure and alignment of the programs of study within these Career Communities were well received by LCC faculty at large; only a handful of revisions were suggested.

With the structure in place, faculty in programs of study began work on creating the program maps for their degrees. This task required getting the word out, specifically to faculty, as to what the phrase *guided pathways* actually meant and why LCC was involved in constructing them. Program maps were created for the ideal student—one who is full-time and requires no remediation. While full-time students are only a small fraction of our student body, this process helped LCC establish two things: the ideal sequencing of the courses for the program of study, and where general education courses best fit in support of the ideal program of study.

The most important part of the map creation tends to be the least discussed: ensuring that the courses in the map are worthwhile for students and supported by both the transfer-receiving institutions and eventual employers. This is hard work for many faculty members because it may

require sacrificing a course they love to teach for a course needed for successful transfer or career opportunities. However, this concept was incorporated into the aforementioned conversations and workshops to achieve a consistent product for each program of study. Through using state online transfer resources, faculty became aware of the 4-year institutions that accepted their general education courses and those that did not.

While these activities were underway, LCC was advancing other important components of the Guided Pathways project. Predictable schedules—the product of using meta-majors and programs of study to organize a student's entire schedule at the start of the student's course work—were another component of the Guided Pathways work that LCC deemed important. Implementing predictable schedules at LCC meant that students working on an associate's degree would have a 2-year course schedule mapped out prior to the start of their first class. The guarantee that students could hold their seat in all their courses over a 2-year period was both a revolutionary and an evolutionary concept that resulted in the creation of a full pilot project in which we will be offering 1 year of scheduling for the 2018–2019 academic year, with appropriate testing and reconfiguring occurring during spring and summer 2018. This approach will allow the college to work out bugs before expanding to a full 2-year pilot.

Blending G2C and Guided Pathways

Starting in summer 2015, in response to the recognition of the possible benefits that could come from connecting gateway-course transformation and Guided Pathways efforts, LCC intentionally began blending its Guided Pathways and G2C efforts. This blending was accomplished in part because Rife and Conner, the authors of this chapter, each worked with one of the programs. We began meeting together regularly and collaborating on all aspects of the respective projects we were leading. Each of us became a member of the steering committee for the other's project, and we regularly shared drafts of documents, new ideas, and feedback with each other. It turned out, not surprisingly, that the faculty leaders who stepped forward to work on gateway courses were often the same faculty leaders who stepped forward to work on Guided Pathways. We were also able to identify a new cadre of early-adopting and innovative faculty to be involved in each of the projects. For the college, this was a significant benefit because it widened the pool of faculty leaders and brought new perspectives to each project. The benefits derived from the “cross-pollination” of the two projects cannot be understated. Many opportunities for faculty development and the generation of other student success initiatives have emanated from this blending.

Another way the two initiatives were blended occurred through increasing participant awareness of the potential connections through numerous workshops, presentations, and discussions. This active communication strategy helped address some of the ongoing concern faculty

vocalized regarding “initiative overload,” because efforts were made to show how the two projects were mutually reinforcing, as opposed to duplicative.

Guided Pathways and G2C advance two unique but compatible perspectives. First, it is just as important for G2C participants to understand the context of the program map as it is for the Guided Pathways participants to understand the impact of the “killer” (or gateway) course. Understanding exactly, for example, where Introduction to Sociology, a huge, multisection class at LCC, fits in various programs of study brings some dimension to the G2C course-transformation process that couldn’t otherwise be realized. Second, understanding that high-risk gateway courses can undermine the best pathways, no matter how clear, effective, and efficient a program map might be, brings perspective to the Guided Pathways effort that would not have been realized had it not been for G2C. Having meetings and discussions with both groups together and systematic collaboration with the project leaders were crucial to assure that implemented institutional changes were complementary across projects. Working together intentionally created a more efficient and holistic approach to increasing student retention, completion, and transfer.

These efforts did not go unnoticed outside of the college. In summer 2015, 19 Michigan 2- and 4-year colleges and universities met and, as part of a broader statewide project planning meeting, learned how LCC accomplished connecting its Guided Pathways efforts with gateway-course redesign work. LCC’s successes shared at this meeting helped the Gardner Institute partner with the Michigan Center for Student Success, and eight colleges and universities in the state received funding from the Kresge Foundation to launch the Michigan Gateways to Completion (Michigan G2C) project. Michigan G2C is bringing together three community colleges, including LCC, that were involved in the Michigan Guided Pathways Institute with the expressed goal of creating a more formalized method for connecting their Guided Pathways and gateway-course redesign work.

In this, LCC’s second round of G2C, lessons from the Guided Pathways efforts are being used to identify three additional courses on which to focus. All of these courses are critical to specific pathways. The first, Pre-Calculus I, has been selected because it is a choice class for science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) majors, many of whom wish to transfer to Michigan State University. LCC also selected Introduction to Sociology because of its high enrollment and high DFWI rate, in addition to a large achievement gap in this course between students of color and White students. Further, the class serves as a “global perspectives” requirement class for students obtaining an associate’s degree from LCC. A third course had yet to be identified at the time of publication, but LCC will examine it similarly to ensure the broadest impact of redesign efforts.

By 2019, LCC will have spent 6 years working with laser-like focus on eight key gateway courses through G2C. Simultaneously, and complementarily, the college will also be in the sixth year of Guided

Pathways. Retrospectively, G2C was a great way to get LCC to focus on critical courses acting as barriers to students' success in various pathways. We have learned a great deal from our efforts—lessons that we believe have implications for others interested in doing similar work.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Future Work

A major change that came out of LCC's work to connect its course redesign and Guided Pathways efforts was the emphasis on and emergence of faculty leadership. We learned about the importance of strong encouragement from the provost for faculty and staff to become involved in campus-wide improvement efforts. LCC's provost continues to discuss the return on investment for providing faculty reassigned (or release) time to work on key projects at the college. In addition to making faculty feel valued and empowered, this emphasis also drew from the expertise and skill possessed by LCC faculty. Many faculty members were leaders in both projects, and as a result received reassigned time or, in the case of adjunct faculty, equivalent compensation.

The importance of one key lesson learned from these initiatives cannot be overemphasized: Institutions must plan for faculty support and reward. Additionally, it is better to overestimate the time such initiatives will take. Drawing as many faculty members as possible into leadership roles in projects of this nature, from across an array of disciplinary areas, and giving them time and rewards to undertake the work, create optimal conditions for success.

Another recommendation for future work involves intentionally overlapping and integrating student success initiatives in the manner described in this chapter. As many of us know from our own experiences, when various student success initiatives appear to be disconnected efforts, college employees will cry "Initiative overload!" However, through working to intentionally overlap the G2C and Guided Pathways efforts, LCC is experiencing success. The college has used its G2C work as a starting point for work with the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). Through the grant-funded AAC&U Equity and Inclusive Excellence initiative, efforts are now focused specifically on two courses first examined in 2013 as high-DFWI gateway courses: U.S. History and Principles of Accounting I. The goal in the AAC&U initiative, pursuant to AAC&U guidelines, is to close the equity gap between African American/Black/Latino/a students and White students by 5% via the implementation of a summer institute conducted by LCC's chief diversity officer.

In the same trajectory, the hiring of 20 academic success coaches clearly is not an isolated student success initiative. It ties back to work connected to the Guided Pathways initiative, and the design asks that "students' progress based on academic plan is tracked, and frequent feedback is provided to them" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 5).

Another lesson learned that applies to future work at LCC and other colleges is that, regardless of the course or pathway, faculty and students have many of the same struggles and concerns. LCC's provost has held dozens of conversations with students and staff over the past several years. Time and time again, students have clearly articulated that they do not want to take even one course they do not need for their degree. This has led LCC to develop predictable 2-year scheduling, which again is a design suggested by Guided Pathways. Further, each class in the schedule should achieve excellence in learning and teaching, which is a G2C focus.

An additional lesson that will be applied to future work has to do with creating scalable methods and strategies for communication that help foster the desired change. Administrators know that, at a certain level, connections that are clear and understood in some corners of the institution are not clearly understood in other areas. There are still many at LCC who are unaware of the Guided Pathways and G2C projects, their connections, and what role they as individuals might play in these initiatives. To address this, LCC staff started working on creating the foundation for several project-integration summits that would be held for staff, faculty, and administrators to learn about the projects and how they work together to support each other toward students' ability to attain their completion or transfer goals. These summits will require the leads from several of the college's key student success projects—G2C, Guided Pathways, the recently started AAC&U Equity and Inclusive Excellence initiative, as well as an additional student portal project—to work together to inform the campus community with routine updates and breakout sessions. The summits will draw on a format that has been successful in the past: working lunches to foster connection with all stakeholder groups.

Finally, we recommend that everyone involved in efforts to integrate these (and other) student success initiatives appreciate the importance of patience and perspective. One likely outcome of overlapping initiatives is that the achievement of positive change will come a bit faster than if initiatives are siloed, or left to be administered without regard for other efforts on campus. We learned that when groups of faculty and others collaborate and band together, and ask for change via one or more cross-college groups, our asks are taken seriously and worked on/implemented. All of this, however, requires faculty and administrators to be willing to lead the way and do the necessary work. If these conditions are met, then most efforts are likely to succeed, just as they have at LCC.

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