

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

# VOICES OF PATHWAYS

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## A Series About Community Colleges and Transformational Change

*Voices of Pathways* is a five-part documentary film series about colleges in the process of implementing guided pathways. Filmed at five community colleges in different regions of the country, the series shows transformational change from the perspectives of faculty and staff members undertaking the day-to-day work as well as the students these efforts aim to serve.

Practitioners at community colleges are benefiting from a growing body of research and resources related to pathways. By telling the stories of faculty, staff, and students, the *Voices* films offer a different way to look at pathways — and to introduce conversations about how to engage in this critical work.

The *Voices of Pathways* films do not aim to show the “right” or “best” way to implement pathways. They show five colleges’ approaches to this complex work. They aim to show what is possible, provide insights, and encourage the courageous conversations that lead to improvement. This guide provides a starting point for discussions about the films and how pathways can address specific needs at your college or in your community.

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**We welcome stories about how your college is using the films.**

If you’d like to share yours, send it to:

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## GUIDED PATHWAYS

Guided pathways is an institution-wide approach to student success that is based on giving students clear, coherent, and structured educational experiences that build in a variety of academic and nonacademic supports. Pathways involves whole-college redesign that focuses on equity, prepares students for good jobs and further education, and advances students' social and economic mobility.

With pathways, students explore career options and interests, develop an academic plan early on, have a clear road map of the courses they need to earn a credential, and receive ongoing guidance and support. Through pathways, colleges help students complete their programs efficiently so they can attain credentials and advance to further education and/or careers with high economic value.



For more information about guided pathways, visit [pathwaysresources.org](https://pathwaysresources.org)

## CONSIDER WHAT EQUITY MEANS FOR YOUR COLLEGE



Guided pathways focuses on how community colleges serve populations that have been historically underrepresented and/or underserved in higher education, particularly students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students. The discussion questions in this guide mention those students explicitly.

As you prepare for your campus conversations about the films, bear in mind that the equity challenge is not to treat all students equally, but to ensure that each student has the experiences and supports they need to succeed. Toward that end, consider which other student populations should be included in your college's equity conversations as well as what types of data can be collected to better understand their experiences and outcomes. Examples include LGBTQ+ students, older students, veterans, students with disabilities, international students, and so on.

## USE DATA TO GROUND DISCUSSIONS IN REALITY

Individuals' perceptions about the student experience are not always accurate. Thus, it's impossible to know whether conversations based on perceptions or opinions — regardless of whether participants agree or disagree — are identifying the issues that most need solutions.

Conversations based on facts, by contrast, are grounded in reality. Data provides these facts, making conversations more honest so they can be more productive.

This does not mean that every conversation should begin with an avalanche of data. A few carefully chosen data points can shed light on key issues and remind participants that their own perceptions may not reflect the typical student experience. This core understanding — that data, rather than opinion, should drive decisions — also is central to guided pathways work.

Page 4 has suggestions for brief data tasks that are relevant to the key themes in the Voices of Pathways film series and the discussion questions in this guide. For ease of use, each task is associated with one film, but many of the data points are relevant to multiple films.

## DATA TASKS

### DATA TASK #1: EQUITY

#### Are We Student Ready?

Milwaukee Area Technical College

Identify the five programs at your college that lead to the highest paying jobs and the five programs that lead to the lowest paying jobs. Aggregate the enrollments for the five programs at each end of the spectrum and then disaggregate each of those totals by race/ethnicity and gender. Note which students are more likely to be enrolled in the five programs that lead to the lowest paying jobs.

### DATA TASK #2: ACADEMIC SUCCESS

#### Getting Along with Math

Austin Community College

What percentage of students at your college are identified as underprepared? What are the demographics of the students so identified?

### DATA TASK #3: ACADEMIC SUCCESS

#### Getting Along with Math

Austin Community College

What percentage of entering students at your college complete college-level English and math in their first year? (Completing college-level English and math in the first year is a predictor of subsequent success and completion.)

### DATA TASK #4: COMPLETION RATES

#### Changing the Data Culture

Linn-Benton Community College

What are your college's two-, three-, and six-year graduation rates? Look at these data points for all students and disaggregate them by race/ethnicity.

### DATA TASK #5: CREDIT HOURS EARNED

#### Many Minds Working Together

Prince George's Community College

Identify the average number of college-level credit hours your students have earned when they graduate with a degree. How does it compare with the number of credit hours needed for that degree?

### DATA TASK #6: EFFECTIVE TEACHING

#### Continuous Improvement

Volunteer State Community College

Assessing the effectiveness of teaching is challenging. If your college has data from the Center for Community College Student Engagement, examine items related to the Active and Collaborative Learning benchmark for CCSSE. These benchmark items provide strong assessments of teaching practice that are linked with higher grades, course completion rates, and degree completion rates.

*Please note that these data tasks provide a starting point for identifying data that will be relevant to discussions about the films. Consider what else participants will need to know (or want to know) for these and other conversations.*

*Finally, remember to bring students' voices into your conversations. The data tasks outlined above are designed to help participants understand the typical student experience. Another way to gather this information is to ask students — and listen carefully to their answers.*

*The Center for Community College Student Engagement offers a [focus group toolkit](#) colleges can use to host focus groups with their students. It includes an overall guide as well as discussion guides for focus groups with entering students, returning students, and other audiences.*

## GUIDELINES FOR FACILITATED CONVERSATIONS



This guide is intended to help colleges begin addressing challenging questions raised by the Voices of Pathways films. In discussing the films (and by extension, in discussing guided pathways), participants will be evaluating your college's choices — those made consciously as well as those made by default, such as continuing practices because “that’s the way we’ve always done it.”



Effective conversations allow room for reflection and differing opinions. They encourage new ideas rather than prescribing what participants should think or do. Toward that end, it is useful to set some ground rules at the beginning of your conversations. For example:

- We are here to listen and learn, so please don't be shy. Say what you really think.
- Share your views even if they are different from what everyone else is saying.
- Please speak one at a time. We want to hear everyone, but we can't hear everyone at the same time.
- It's fine to disagree, but not to be disagreeable.

## ARE WE STUDENT READY?

Milwaukee Area Technical College



### FILM SYNOPSIS

Faculty and staff at Milwaukee Area Technical College (Milwaukee, WI) have a strong commitment to social justice and a belief that guided pathways can help create more equitable outcomes for their students. In launching pathways at MATC, faculty and staff are working to help students better navigate college as well as their broader community, which is facing the toughest consequences of deep economic inequality, deindustrialization, and structural racism.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 Several people at MATC — particularly Rodney McLain and Amanda Brooks — describe their experiences advising and supporting students. What are your thoughts about the approach to student support shown in this film?
- 2 How are MATC students' needs similar to — or different from — our students' needs? How do we know?
- 3 How is our approach to being student ready similar to — or different from — MATC's approach?
- 4 Do we have access to data or focus group information that can tell us how the student experience at our college — including onboarding, advising, and instruction — is different for different student populations, particularly students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students?
- 5 What are our most significant outcomes gaps for students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students? What is required to take action to address these inequities?
- 6 What have we done to support small numbers of students (e.g., TRIO, Puente, and special mentoring programs)? How can we provide that type of support for all students?
- 7 Rodney discusses how guided pathways has allowed him to build relationships with students and learn about their interests. What are some ways that we can learn about our incoming students' program interests? How can we ensure that every student can explore career opportunities and complete a full education plan by the end of their first term?
- 8 If we want to change our approach to advising students, including helping them explore career interests, set goals, and develop plans in their first term, what steps should we take immediately? What steps should we prepare to take in the long term?
- 9 Who else should be involved in this conversation? How can we involve them?

# GETTING ALONG WITH MATH

Austin Community College



## FILM SYNOPSIS

Austin Community College (Austin, TX) is situated in a thriving art and tech economy. With the right degree or certificate, students can attain well-paying jobs in a dynamic sector. But for many students deemed underprepared by the placement process, developmental math was an uncrossable divide that kept them from attaining their academic and career goals. Using guided pathways, ACC redesigned math learning and transformed its academic model so more students can succeed.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 Do students at our college have experiences like Madison's — taking one or multiple levels of developmental education before getting to college-level work?
- 2 What percentage of students at our college are identified as underprepared? What is our means of assessing preparedness, and does our placement process have a disproportionate impact on students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students? If so, what changes should we make?
- 3 Do we have access to data or focus group information that can tell us how the academic experience at our college is different for students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students? How could we obtain this information?
- 4 To what extent does our math curriculum align with the knowledge and skills that students need for their programs of study and career goals (i.e., math pathways)? How can we better align our program offerings with programs at four-year institutions and with employers' needs? What resources and supports would our math department need?
- 5 In the film, we saw ACC change its approach to teaching in classrooms and through the ACCelerator. Students starting at ACC now are unlikely to have the experience Madison had just a few years ago. How does our college serve students identified as underprepared? Is their experience more like Madison's or like the experience of students who start at ACC now?
- 6 Are you comfortable with our approach to teaching and the results it produces? If not, how do you think it should be changed? What does our ideal look like? How does available evidence inform your thinking?
- 7 If we want to change our approach to teaching, what steps should we take immediately? What steps should we prepare to take in the long term?
- 8 Who else should be involved in this conversation? How can we involve them?

# CHANGING THE DATA CULTURE

Linn-Benton Community College



## FILM SYNOPSIS

Linn-Benton Community College (Albany, OR) has moved from using data for compliance to using it for improvement. The college's data team found creative approaches to overcome fears of data and help faculty and staff become more comfortable using it in their day-to-day work. LBCC faculty and staff now embrace data and rely on it to evaluate their guided pathways efforts and make evidence-based decisions. Most important, they consider data a powerful tool for helping more students succeed.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 In the film, Justin Smith and Justene Malosh (LBCC's data team) talk about moving from using data for compliance to using it for improvement. How and when does our college use data for compliance? How and when do we use it for decision making and continuous improvement?
- 2 In the film, Ann Buchele says, "Data is data. It isn't good or bad. It just is." Do you think administrators, faculty, and staff at our college think about data that way? If not, how do they think about data?
- 3 In the film, Leslie Hammond says that the college had a lot to learn about using data. Is that true of faculty and staff at our college? How can our college help faculty and staff use data — in particular, data about student progress and success — more effectively?
- 4 Guided pathways is about integrating a range of effective practices across the student experience. The more effective guided pathways is, the harder it becomes to assess the impact of any individual element. That said, the film shows how LBCC uses data to evaluate specific practices, such as its Destination Graduation course. How does our college evaluate our interventions and practices?
- 5 What are our college's two-, three-, and six-year graduation rates? How are we using leading indicators of students' progress (e.g., completion of math and English in the first year, credit accumulation milestones, and course completion rates)? How are we using longer term indicators such as graduation and transfer rates and employment data? Who is using these data points to inform discussions and decisions?
- 6 What data would you like to have access to? In other words, what's on your data wish list? How might you obtain it?
- 7 Who else should be involved in this conversation? How can we involve them?



# MANY MINDS WORKING TOGETHER

Prince George's Community College



## FILM SYNOPSIS

As part of its guided pathways work, Prince George's Community College (Largo, MD) built cross-functional teams that streamlined 217 credit programs down to 82, created clear programs of study, and updated advising. Through ongoing collaboration among faculty and staff members, PGCC mapped all programs of study to jobs in the greater Washington, DC, area. The college also expanded its relationships with employers, including federal contractors that offer jobs with competitive salaries, benefits, and opportunities for advancement.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 PGCC developed an effective team structure for designing and implementing pathways. Each team includes a cross-section of faculty and staff members who work on particular parts of the pathways model (e.g., onboarding and advising). Are there takeaways from PGCC's collaborative approach that would resonate on our campus?
- 2 What makes it challenging to collaborate across traditional college silos (e.g., instruction/student services; developmental/college level; arts and sciences/career and technical education; and credit/noncredit)? What steps can we take to overcome those challenges?
- 3 As part of its pathways work, PGCC developed 10 academic and career pathways (or meta-majors) that organize all programs by career field. These pathways include credit and noncredit offerings. Has our college considered developing meta-majors? If so, how could we use them to help students explore and choose a program of study aligned with their interests and goals?
- 4 PGCC faculty developed a rubric to examine the college's programs of study and to decide whether each program should continue, be merged with another program, or be discontinued. Has our college looked at whether our programs are still viable — specifically whether they lead to either jobs that pay a family-sustaining wage or to transfer with junior standing in a major?
- 5 PGCC has built strong relationships with employers in its region. Those relationships informed the college's program mapping work as well as its efforts to connect students with jobs. What is our college's approach to working with regional employers?
- 6 Where do we excel in working with regional employers? Where could we improve? What does our ideal look like?
- 7 Who else should be involved in these conversations? How can we involve them?

# CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Volunteer State Community College



## FILM SYNOPSIS

For the past 20 years, Volunteer State Community College (Gallatin, TN) has implemented many practices proven to advance student success. In 2014, the faculty and staff committed to focusing their efforts around guided pathways and embracing continuous improvement. Today, Vol State students experience many features of pathways, including educational planning, proactive advising, clear first-year requirements, scheduling based on students' academic plans, and instruction that uses a growth mindset approach.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 This film highlights a range of practices, from planning and advising to innovative scheduling and instruction. What elements of Vol State's approach stand out the most to you?
- 2 Each of Vol State's changes required significant planning and is part of large-scale change throughout the college. What conditions have to be in place to allow for this level of transformation?
- 3 What are some of the challenges in implementing the college-wide transformation evident at Vol State? What steps can we take to overcome those challenges?
- 4 What are your impressions of Vol State's growth mindset approach to instruction?
- 5 Vol State committed to ongoing improvement and learning from one another. Faculty and staff are comfortable being in a state of change. What is our college's approach to change? How does it differ from Vol State's?
- 6 Are there takeaways from Vol State's commitment to continuous improvement that would resonate on our campus? What does our ideal look like?
- 7 If we want to change our approach to ongoing improvement, what steps should we take immediately? What steps should we prepare to take in the long term?
- 8 Who else should be involved in this conversation? How can we involve them?