So I started at Front Range Community College about 25 years ago as a faculty member with not a lot of guidance about what to do when I got into the classroom. So early on I was teaching microeconomics and I thought it’s a 200-level course, I ought to assign a paper. So I assigned a seven-page paper. That seemed reasonable. Results came back, pretty much terrible. I thought well, this is a bad group of students; I’ll do it again next semester. I assigned it again next semester. Results come back, definitely not what I expected.

So I went home, and I’m talking to my wife and I said, “You know, these students, they’re just not ready for college. They don’t know how to write a simple paper.” And she turned and looked at me, and she said, “Well, did you teach them how to write a paper?” I said, “That’s not my job; that’s the English faculty’s job or high school or somebody like that. I’m not supposed to teach them how to write a paper.”

But then I thought about it and I thought, you know, obviously what I’m doing is not working so I either have to give up the paper or do something different. So I started teaching them how to write a paper. And lo and behold, they started writing good papers, and they actually became proud of their papers.

So fast-forward a couple decades, and a team from Front Range and I are sitting in the very first institute for Pathways 1.0. And one of the very first speakers comes up and says, you know, “Pathways isn’t about a particular initiative. It’s not about a program; it’s about a mindset, and it’s about the questions you ask.”

And I still remember she said, “You can ask, ‘Are my students ready for college,’ or you can ask, ‘Is my college ready for the students that we have?’ Are you ready for students who might not be completely academically prepared? Are you ready for students who had a tough high school experience? Are you ready for students who are scared to death when they walk in your door? Are you ready for students who are brave but really don’t know how to navigate college? Are you ready for students who have a dream but maybe not a clear sense of purpose or any idea of a plan of how to get there?”

And after that session we had team time, and our team was getting together. And we thought about it, and we thought, you know, “There are a lot of good things we’re doing, but as a college we’re really not student ready.” So coming out of that institute we did many of the normal pathways things. We mapped our curriculum so students could make a plan, instituted mandatory orientation so students could get ready for college. Probably most importantly we looked at advising because again and again we heard from students that advising was broken.

We started with career and academic communities, our version of meta-majors. The faculty developed them. We developed six of them. We assigned our advisors to the meta-majors, and then doubled the number of advisors we had. When we doubled the number of advisors, we could actually implement case management advising, and we could say to students, “You’ve now got a name and a face at the college.” Maybe just as importantly, we could now have connections between faculty and advisors because advisors had a focus, and they didn’t have to know the whole curriculum.

But one of the things we thought about in being student ready and just like my experience, many of our other faculty members came in with a lot of assumptions about how to teach, and we hadn’t necessarily helped them think differently. We needed to address the instructional side. With a group of faculty we designed some interventions. One of them was making the first day count. That starts with not allowing late registration, but the most important part of that is saying to faculty, “On that first day, please don’t read the syllabus. Please don’t scare your students with all the rules you might break, but please engage them. Help them make connections to other people in the classroom. Help them make connections to the material, get excited about being in college.”

We implemented mandatory midterm grades,, but not so much with the idea that it was about getting the grades out. It was about getting the conversation going about if you’re having trouble in class, I can help you.

We knew that math was probably the biggest stumbling block for most of our students, and we had already compressed our developmental sequence, but we thought we’ve got to attend to college-level math. We had a good pilot program called Supplemental Instruction with peer tutors. We’ve expanded that to about 95 percent of college-level math courses right now.

We also had started a program called the President’s Innovation Grants a few years before, and out of that had bubbled up a lot of initiatives by faculty to really rethink how they were teaching. And one of the most important ones was an engaged learning academy that two faculty had piloted. It was a semester‑long academy where 12 full-time faculty completely redeveloped the course from the ground up and basically eliminated all lecture. The whole idea was that students were engaging with the material every single day with their peers and with the faculty members without being talked to but thinking about what they were doing, what they were learning.

We’ve expanded that program now. A quarter of our full-time faculty have gone through that. We’ve got about probably 30 more faculty who are signed up for the next year. We’ve also added instructional coaches to help mentor our part-time faculty. We’ll have our first part-time faculty engaged learning academy this summer. And we’ve continued our teaching with a purpose for part-time faculty, which is a semester‑long program for those faculty to become better teachers.

When I think back to how Front Range Community College was 25 years ago, we’re not completely student ready, but we’ve come a long way and we’re on the right journey.

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