

THE CHRONICLE
of Higher Education

CURRICULUM

Can 'Guided Pathways' Keep Students From Being Overwhelmed by Choice?

By Katherine Mangan | APRIL 25, 2017

✓ PREMIUM

NEW ORLEANS



Pat Garin

Timothy Renick (at microphone), vice president for enrollment management and student success at Georgia State U., says studies show that students who decide on a major during their first year at college are more successful than those who come in with their minds already set.

When the Community College of Baltimore County helped spearhead what would become a national movement to streamline community-college graduation requirements into pathways with prescribed course sequences, many faculty members were dubious.

Whose courses would make the cut? What would happen to liberal-arts classes that don't fit neatly into a career pathway? How would the sequences accommodate part-time students, those needing remedial help, or students seeking transfer to a four-year college?

It was hard to take issue with the argument underlying the trend: that students who are overwhelmed with confusing choices are more likely to drop out.

"We had 151 different majors and a variety of certificates and a dizzying array of developmental education placements," Mark McColloch, vice president for instruction at Baltimore County, told fellow attendees here on Monday at the annual meeting of the American Association of Community Colleges.

"If you're an academic adviser, you might have thousands of combinations of student circumstances presented to you, and it's very difficult to determine what courses students should take."

Once persuaded, teams of faculty and staff members streamlined those selections to six academic tracks.

They were struck by the data that showed the "horrendous mistakes" students were making in the first term, Mr. McColloch said. Of the 100 transcripts they looked at during one exercise, nearly a third of the students had taken so many wrong courses in their first year that they had already delayed their completion by a semester.

Mr. McColloch's report, which concluded that the benefits of structured pathways made the hard work of designing them worth it, was one of many at the annual meeting focused on guided pathways. Critics have dismissed the concept as the latest buzzword in a sector besieged by trendy initiatives, but it is quickly gaining a foothold at campuses nationwide. It is supported by a variety of influential nonprofits and foundations focused on improving college completion.

The community-colleges association's project has created spinoffs in Texas, where higher-education officials hope a statewide focus on structured pathways will lift completion numbers and close the achievement gap between minority and white students. In California, 20 community colleges were selected this month to participate in the California Guided Pathways Project.

A report released last week by the Community College Research Center at Columbia University described the successes and challenges of the 30 colleges from 17 states that are participating in the inaugural phase of the pathways project, begun in 2015.

Most of the participants expect to finish mapping their academic pathways by the end of next month and to have redesigned academic programs and services available to all of their students by the fall of 2018.

"The speed with which the AACC Pathways colleges are moving toward implementing pathways is impressive," the study concluded. "Equally impressive is that the colleges are 'going all in,' planning to make changes in all four practice areas of the guided pathways model rather than approaching the reforms piecemeal." Those areas include mapping programs of study, helping students choose pathways and stay on them, and making sure that students are meeting learning objectives.

It's too early to determine what effects these efforts will have on graduation rates, but several college leaders who adopted the approach early on reported promising results in retention and developmental-course completions.

Required Reading

The guided-pathways approach is largely based on the recommendations of a book written by leaders of the Community College Research Center and released in 2015. At some colleges the book, *Redesigning America's Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success*, is required reading for everyone connected to the pathway effort.

During the first year of the nationwide guided-pathways project, most of the colleges designed course sequences grouped around career-focused clusters they termed meta-majors. Colleges beefed up advising, sometimes by supplementing their advising crews with faculty members, to help students stay on course.

By the end of their first terms, most students are expected to decide on an academic plan.

The paths are recommended but, depending on the college, not always required. Students can sometimes substitute courses for the ones listed.

"It's a pathway, not a prison," said Kay M. McClenney, a senior adviser to the president of the community-college association, who has helped lead the pathway push.

"Most people think this is all about mapping the curriculum, but it's much more than this," she said. It also means choosing the right math course depending on a student's major and, even more importantly, getting people from the academic and student-advising sides working together.

Colleges are sending planning teams to six instructional institutes coordinated by the community-colleges' association and fielding visits from pathway "coaches" — college administrators whose own campuses are relatively far along in the pathway process.

The problems start long before students enroll, said Tonjua Williams, senior vice president of student services at St. Petersburg College, who is one of 12 pathway coaches.

"Imagine going through a maze just trying to enroll. That's what happens to our students at the front door," she said during a session at the conference. "After a while, they say, Forget it; I'm going to one of the for-profits that makes it much easier. All they want is my name and driver's license."

San Jacinto College, outside Houston, is one of the colleges she is coaching. It was also one of the first to embrace the pathways approach. The college's success, Ms. Williams said, is largely due to the fact that the streamlining was driven by faculty members.

Three faculty members first presented the guided-pathways idea to their colleagues. When it came down to deciding whose courses would stay and whose would go, some faculty members resisted. One of the three faculty members, Ms. Williams said, "got beat up pretty bad after the presentation. They felt he'd turned his back on them and gone to the dark side."

One of the hardest parts of starting the process is facing the depressing data about retention and completion, Ms. Williams said.

"You can't know where you're going if you don't know where you are," she said. "You have to look at the ugly parts of your institution and make changes."

The coaching process "gets people out of their corners" to work together to solve problems, said another pathways coach, Michael A. Baston, vice president for student affairs at LaGuardia Community College, part of the City University of New York.

Connecting students to solid jobs is key, he said. A central question should be: "Are we setting them on paths that lead to family-sustaining wages, or are we setting up poor people to stay poor?"

New Approach at Ga. State

Georgia State University, a leader in the use of data analytics to improve graduation rates, used to focus on having as many students as possible come in knowing what they wanted to major in.

Studies have shown, though, that students who make that decision during their first year are more successful than those who come in with their minds already set, said Timothy Renick, vice president for enrollment management and student success at Georgia State, which offers both two- and four-year degrees.

Although it isn't one of the 30 colleges participating in the inaugural project, Arapahoe Community College is creating pathways based largely on the principles the community-colleges association is promoting.

Some faculty members have reacted with alarm to the possibility that their own courses would be cut and that the pathways might give short shrift to the liberal arts.

Lisa Matye Edwards, vice president for student affairs, described a typical reaction: "You're blowing the liberal arts, Lisa — you're not letting them wander and choose the way I could when I was in college back in the day."

Advocates of pathways at Arapahoe changed minds by assembling faculty members around a table with a stack of anonymized transcripts from students who had dropped out. The professors were asked to find a path to graduation for those students. "They were shocked at the courses they had taken," Ms. Edwards said, and understood the need to help students make better choices.

Technology companies that focus on student success have also been pitching their products to colleges that are trying to channel students into pathways. For instance, Danville Community College is working with EAB's Navigate system to help students zero in on career goals so that when they declare a pathway and a major, it's more likely to be one that will stick.

Katherine Mangan writes about community colleges, completion efforts, and job training, as well as other topics in daily news. Follow her on Twitter @KatherineMangan, or email her at katherine.mangan@chronicle.com.

Copyright © 2017 The Chronicle of Higher Education