

Reprinted
by
Permission

Community College Week.

THE INDEPENDENT VOICE COVERING COMMUNITY, TECHNICAL AND JUNIOR COLLEGES



point of view

By TERRY O'BANION, PRESIDENT EMERITUS, LEAGUE FOR INNOVATION AND CHAIR OF THE GRADUATE FACULTY, NATIONAL AMERICAN UNIVERSITY /

2017 November 29 - 07:55 am

Guided Pathways for Undecided Students

Narrowing Choices Can Lead to Better Outcomes



TERRY U. O'BANION

Chair of the Graduate Faculty,
National American University
President Emeritus, League for Innovation
in the Community College

The idea of the Guided Pathway has been around for decades but has only recently been studied, refined, and implemented to the point that it is beginning to be embedded as standard practice in community college culture. Gretchen Schmidt, executive director of the AACC Pathways Project involving 30 community colleges that are creating models of Guided Pathways, titled her update on the project on December 8, 2016 “Pathways Project Becomes a Movement.”

The Guided Pathway has indeed become a “movement” supported by research, by community college leaders, and by generous support from foundations. The literature on the Guided Pathway is blossoming fed by the seminal work of Tom Bailey, Shanna Smith Jaggars, and Davis Jenkins in their book *Redesigning America's Community Colleges*. Bailey and his colleagues indicated that the current *cafeteria model* of education is unstructured and forces students to choose, with little or no guidance, from among an array of disconnected courses and programs. Based on their research at the Community College Research Center, they recommend community colleges adopt the *guided studies model* that provides “coherent, relevant, and easily understood programs of study that ideally stretch back into the high school, as well as forward into bachelor’s institutions and the labor market.”

Community college leaders and faculty have responded quite positively to the idea of guided pathways and are busy creating specific pathways reflective of earlier work in career pathways, articulation agreements with high schools and colleges, and cohesive programs of general education. Soon, most community colleges will create pathways for all key career areas, advisors will help students make clearer choices, and students will follow these “roadmaps” to a more successful completion of their goals.

A key component of guided pathways includes “meta majors” which a number of colleges are creating to restructure their program offerings. Meta majors are broad areas of study comprised of collections of related programs of study, or majors, that provide a framework for students to explore a field they think they might be interested in—without being locked into a major in the field right away. The State of Florida has established eight meta majors for community colleges: (a) Arts, Humanities, Communication and Design, (b) Business, (c) Education, (d) Health Sciences, (e) Industry/Manufacturing and Construction, (f) Public Safety, (g) Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics, and (h) Social and Behavioral Sciences and Human Services. Guttman Community College in New York has identified five meta majors: (a) Business Administration, (b) Human Services, (c) Information Technology, (d) Liberal Arts and Sciences, and (e) Urban Studies. The number of meta majors in the 30 colleges in AACCC’s Pathways Project range from four to 11. The purpose of the meta major is to reduce the number of choices a student must make. Instead of choosing from among 60 different specialized pathways, a student chooses from among a more limited number of meta majors or programs of study. These programs provide a general introduction to areas such as business administration or information technology without requiring a specific commitment to a more specific career. Students proceed through the general program of study with the goal of eventually selecting a more specific area of study framed as a guided pathway or switching to another meta major if they do not find a good fit with their first choice.

The goal of these reform efforts is to narrow the choice for students to an array of Guided Pathways or to a smaller number of meta majors. These efforts will help in organizing the curriculum; and they will help focus the faculty, the advisors, and the students. For students who know what they want to do, the Guided Pathway is a great benefit. For students who are not quite sure about what they want to do, the meta major is a good starting point. For students who have no idea what they want to do, other options are required.

Bailey and colleagues noted “In a nationwide survey of beginning college students, nearly 40 percent were undecided about their major—and the real number may be much higher, as students must declare a program of study to qualify for financial aid.” With this many undecided students attending community colleges, how are these structured programs of pathways and meta majors designed to help them without forcing a choice students are not ready to make? One way to answer this question and maintain the framework of the Guided Pathway is to create the **Guided Pathway for Undecided Students**.

Students need guidance, and most students want guidance—especially students new to the college experience. And students need to believe and feel they are in “real college” along with the other students. They do not need to be “placed” in remedial programs that do not grant any college credit, and they should never be allowed to roam unattended in the wilderness of the current college curriculum gathering credits they do not need and which financial aid may not cover. Community

colleges require 60 hours of credit for an associate degree, but many are discovering that their graduates have earned 80 credits on the average; in Texas the average is 93 credits.

Neither do students need to be forced to choose a program or major until they are ready. To meet the needs of these undecided students, colleges should create pathways or meta majors specifically designed for their needs. The idea of the Guided Pathway or meta major for the undecided student should become part of the standard curriculum for all community colleges. Such pathways and meta majors do not have to be pejoratively labeled “undecided;” they could be offered as The College Experience, Navigating Oak Creek Community College, or Exploring Your Future. Many colleges already offer such options as The First-Year Experience or the Student Success Course for undecided students, but these options need to be more fully integrated into the structured programs offered decided students and be viewed as a legitimate option by the college and the student.

Following are some suggestions of options that could help undecided students make better choices of majors and careers:

- 1. Individualized Student Success Course**—Instead of a one-credit student success course with a dozen or so topics of the college’s choice taught to a class of students, colleges could create a variable-credit student success course ranging from three to 12 credits in which the student works with special faculty or counselors to create an individualized plan to explore interests and goals. Make “individualized” mean what it suggests. Students enrolled in the same exploratory experience could collaborate to review the plans of other students and make suggestions for revision and implementation. Ready-made modules on key issues such as decision-making, problem-solving, exploring self, connecting to others, etc. could be options for the students to build into their design. The idea is to create a series of learning experiences (an individualized curriculum) in which the student is immersed in exploring such questions as Who Am I? Where Am I Going? How Do I Get There? What Difference Does It Make?—an intentional personal pathway that leads a student to make a thoughtful and rational choice of a major.
- 2. Career Exploration**—A one-term immersion in exploring various careers with the goal of making a program decision at the end. The exploration could include a series of one-week interviews/internships in a variety of careers using the community as the laboratory. It could include assessments of career interests and other relevant assessments. It could include sitting in some of the classes in programs that might be of interest to the student. The college’s Service Learning program could help coordinate some aspects of such an experience.
- 3. Internships**—A one-term immersion in hands-on experience in three or four career areas of the student’s choice. Students would spend a month deeply engaged in working in and learning about a specific career area following a structured design of goal-setting, evaluating pros and cons, being evaluated by a supervisor, and evaluating outcomes—in written reports and in discussions with key players including other students enrolled in internships. Jackson Community College (MI) requires all CTE students to complete an internship in an area of their choice.
- 4. A Learning Community for Success**—Students would enroll in a three-course program of study including a student success course, basic communications, and a personal psychology course. The focus would be on personal and social development and career and college exploration with cross-cutting themes embedded in the three courses. Faculty and students would operate as a “community” of colleagues. Many colleges already offer similar learning communities that could be quite effective in helping students make better choices of majors and careers if these goals were more explicit as part of the purpose of the learning community.

Many community colleges already offer some of the experiences suggested above. Many community colleges are redesigning their student success course to focus on career exploration and transfer institution mapping. At Guttman Community College, all first-time students are required to attend a summer bridge program, to enroll full-time, and to follow a common first-year curriculum designed to help them explore careers and choose a major. Few community colleges will embrace the Guttman model, but creative faculty will come up with practical designs to help students make career choices if colleges will make undecided students a priority. And creative administrators will assist in finding resources to support these efforts including helping to create partnerships with community groups such as the Chamber of Commerce and with individual companies in the college's service area. If we are ever to meet the needs of undecided students (possibly 40 to 50 percent of our student population according to Tom Bailey and his colleagues at CCRC) we must not marginalize them by placing them in categories outside the mainstream of our curriculum and programs. And we must not ignore their special needs by forcing them into a limited array of current pathway and major choices created for students who are decided. Using the current structures of the Guided Pathway and the Meta Major we must work with faculty and administrators to expand the curriculum by creating Guided Pathways and Meta Majors for Undecided Students. In this way we will begin to treat undecided students as a legitimate group of students worthy of our attention, and we may make the pathways for decided students easier to navigate by decreasing the traffic of undecided students.

Terry O'Banion is the president emeritus of the League for Innovation in the Community College and Chair of the Graduate Faculty, National American University. He serves as Chair of NAU's National Community College Advisory Board.

This article is a continuation of a series authored by principals involved in the Roueche Graduate Center, National American University, and other national experts identified by the center. John E. Roueche and Margaretta B. Mathis serve as editors of the monthly column, a partnership between the Roueche Graduate Center and Community College Week. For additional information send emails to mbmathis@national.edu or, call 512-813-2300.