MISSOURI HIGHER EDUCATION EQUITY
BRIDGES TO SUCCESS

WHITE PAPER:

PREVENTING COVID-19 STOP-OUTS: HOW THE GUIDED PATHWAYS MODEL CAN BE A SAFETY NET FOR STUDENTS

DEPARTMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

When institutions of higher education began to respond to the arrival of COVID-19 in March 2020, it was unclear what the immediate or even long-term effects of the pandemic might be. Institutions demonstrated great flexibility as campuses closed and instruction moved primarily online, and many campus leaders and administrators began contingency planning for fall 2020, all while anticipating decreases in enrollments and budget shortfalls.[1] As other entries in the Bridges to Success Equity White Paper Series have demonstrated, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are very likely to continue or even increase longstanding inequities in postsecondary education.

While it will still take some time to fully understand the impact of COVID-19 on enrollment and retention rates, early research indicates that the impacts of COVID-19 have not hit all populations equally, and low-income communities and communities of color have been hit particularly hard. Some researchers estimate that in spring 2020 around 17 percent of students at community colleges withdrew, and predict that as much as 20 percent of students may not return at all.[2] Other researchers, utilizing survey data, demonstrate that Hispanic and low-income populations were much more likely to indicate that COVID-19 affected postsecondary re-enrollment plans than White and higher income populations.[3] Student retention has been a long-standing issue both at the state and national levels and has been exacerbated by COVD-19.

Data on retention rates, including historical trends, illustrate inequities that the COVID-19 pandemic may very well exacerbate. Historical trends in Missouri demonstrate that retention disparities are largest for students of color and low-income students.[4] Nationwide, institutions retain Hispanic and Black students at lower rates than White students, by a difference of 8.8 percentage points and 14.3 percentage points respectively.[5] Research from the Community College Research Center (CCRC) suggests the pandemic has hit community colleges, which have a higher proportion of low-income students and students of color, harder than four-year institutions. Additionally, due to the pandemic, 40 percent of households indicated that prospective students were cancelling plans to attend a community college (twice the rate of four-year college students), and an additional 15 percent reported taking fewer credit hours or changing programs.[6]

In order to help students continue their education and complete their program of study, especially vulnerable student populations, institutions should focus on proven retention strategies. Researchers have indicated that in responding to disruptions such as COVID-19, and in other crisis situations, institutions need to "[e]stablish a command center to manage yield actively, particularly regarding students at higher risk of not enrolling," including low-income students;[7] consider programs to retain students and offer them supports; and plan in the long-term to have more students enrolled than in the past, as students impacted by COVID-19 may need more time to complete their programs.[8] One such solution that incorporates these strategies is Guided Pathways.

---

[1] "After Action Report: Spring 2020 Institutional Response to COVID-19." Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development, December 2020. https://dhewd.mo.gov/documents/AAR3.pdf

[2] "A strategy to ensure equity, retention amid COVID." Lisa Jones Copprue. November 17, 2020. https://www.ccdaily.com/2020/11/a-strategy-to-ensure-equity-retention-amid-covid/

[3] Polikoff, Morgan, Dan Silver, and Shira Korn. "What's the Likely Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Ed?" Inside Higher Ed, August 4, 2020. https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/08/04/analysis-data-national-survey-impact-pandemic-higher-ed-opinion

[4] "2019 Equity in Missouri Higher Education Report." Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development, October 2019.

[5] "Snapshot Report: First-year Persistence and Retention 2018 Cohort." National Student Clearinghouse, August 13, 2020. https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/PersistenceRetention2020.pdf

[6] Belfield, C., & Brock, T. "Behind the Enrollment Numbers: How COVID Has Changed Students' Plans for Community College." Community College Research Center, 2020. https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/easyblog/covid-enrollment-community-college-plans.html

[7] Bevins, Franki, Jake Bryant, Charag Krishnan, and Jonathan Law. "Coronavirus: How should US higher education plan for an uncertain future?" April 2020. https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/coronavirus-how-should-us-higher-education-plan-for-an-uncertain-future https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/McKinsey/Industries/Public%20and%20Social%20Sector/Our%20Insights/Coronavirus%20How%20should%20US%20higher%20education%20plan%20for%20an%20uncertain%20future/Coronavirus-How-should-US-higher-education-plan-for-an-uncertain-future-final.pdf

[8] Polikoff, Morgan, Dan Silver, and Shira Korn. "What's the Likely Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Ed?" Inside Higher Ed, August 4, 2020. https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/08/04/analysis-data-national-survey-impact-pandemic-higher-ed-opinion

What are Guided Pathways?

The Guided Pathways framework aims to be a robust system of support that allows students to feel confident in their decision making as they wrestle through circumstances such as changing majors or adjusting their credit-hour load in order to maintain a healthy school-work-life balance.

At its core, an effective Guided Pathways framework involves all parts of the institution, including remedial education and advising, and focuses on the following four practices:
1. Mapping pathways to student end goals
2. Helping students choose and enter a program pathway
3. Keeping students on a path
4. Ensuring students are learning[9]

As more research is produced on student behavior as they progress through their institutions, the flexibility and support of initiatives like Guided Pathways exhibit remarkable success in improving student outcomes, and over 250 postsecondary institutions have adopted elements of Guided Pathways.[10]

The Community College Research Center (CCRC) has conducted a variety of research on the efficacy of Guided Pathways initiatives at various stages of the student experience. One of the main goals of these initiatives is to get students on the correct track for their program of study as early as possible, an approach that has resulted in positive student outcomes. According to a 2015 report, roughly half of students who enrolled in at least three courses in their program of study during their first year earned a credential or transferred within five years. For students who did not enter a program until their third year, the completion rate was around 20 percent.[11] Similar positive outcomes have been observed through research conducted by other outlets. Community college students who enter a specific program earlier in their postsecondary experience are more likely to transfer to a four-year college or complete a degree.[12] Likewise, Florida State University's use of academic program maps increased retention and decreased the number of excess credits students took.[13]

Many institutions nationwide have observed positive impacts from implementing Guided Pathways, including an increased focus on advising, remedial education supports, and the integration of academic programs and support services. Miami-Dade College has demonstrated a positive impact on student retention rates. Students who met with an advisor to develop a plan had an 8 percent higher retention rate than those who did not.[14] Guided Pathways implementation at Jackson College showed that the share of students who earned at least six college-level credits in their first term jumped to 58 percent in the fall of 2016, from 35 percent in the fall of 2015. Moreover, the percentage of incoming students who completed college-level math in their first year rose from 19 percent to 43 percent over the same time period.[15] Wallace State Community College found that the share of its students that were able to complete a credential within three years increased from 23 percent in 2013 to 38 percent in 2017.[16]

9   Bailey, T. R. "Guided Pathways at Community Colleges: From Theory to Practice." 2017. https://www.aacu.org/diversitydemocracy/2017/fall/bailey

10 Jenkins, D., Lahr, H., Fink, J., & Ganga , E. "What We Are Learning About Guided Pathways." Community College Research Center. https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/what-we-are-learning-guided-pathways.html#:~:text=As%20of%20spring%202018%2C%20more,doing%20so%20on%20their%20own.

11 "What We Know About Guided Pathways." Community College Research Center, 2015.

12 St. Amour, M. "Report: Guided Pathways Show Progress." Inside Higher Ed, 2020. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/09/15/progress-guided-pathways-promising-still-much-do-report-says

13 Ibid

14 "Implementing Guided Pathways at Miami Dade College: A Case Study." Community College Research Center, 2015. https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/Implementing-Guided-Pathways-Miami-Dade.pdf

15 Jenkins, D., Lahr, H., & Fink, J. "Implementing Guided Pathways - Early Insights From the AACC Pathways Colleges." Community College Research Center, 2017. https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/implementing-guided-pathways-aacc.html

16 Schwartz, N. "Community colleges embracing 'guided pathways' see payoff." Higher Ed Dive, 2019. https://www.highereddive.com/news/community-colleges-embracing-guided-pathways-see-payoff/552684/

These efforts have also been successful in lowering the overall credit load that students take on in order to achieve their degree. According to research conducted by Complete College America (CCA), institutions that implemented degree maps saw the number of students who graduated with excess credits was reduced by half. Similar successes were seen at Georgia State University, where research showed degree maps and proactive advising have increased graduation rates by more than 20 percent over a 10-year period.[17] These changes also appear to be effective at producing equitable outcomes for disadvantaged student populations. Utilizing highly structured, block-scheduled programs, the Tennessee Technology Centers have consistently graduated their students at three times or higher than the rate of their peers, even though their student population is made up of slightly more lower-income and older students.[18]

Guided Pathways and COVID-19

"The work of guided pathways has continuously influenced our conversations and actions to address student equity gaps," says Linda García, executive director of the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE). "COVID-19 has exposed inequities among students at a deep level, and there is now added urgency for colleges to act quickly to help students move forward toward their academic goals. Guided pathways can help colleges with this crucial task."[19]

According to a recent report from the Community College Research Center, many institutions have indicated that because of the changes from implementing Guided Pathways, they were in a better position to respond to COVID-19. Students had clear degree plans, and knew what classes to take, minimizing the disruptions as students pivoted to online education. Because of these academic plans, which are generally made during the first year and align to students' program of study and academic goals, students could quickly and easily register for summer and fall classes with minimal interruption to their plans.[20] Further, as a result of proactive advising, which helped students develop a full-program plan during their first term, students already knew their assigned advisor, making it much easier for institutions to reach out in times of crises.[21]

Given the observed successes of Guided Pathways initiatives at a variety of campuses serving a variety of student populations, there is reason to believe that the implementation of Guided Pathways would yield similar successes in Missouri. By strongly advocating for degree maps, student supports, and proactive advising practices across Missouri's public institutions of higher education, students are more likely to earn a credential and ultimately join the workforce. These reforms can also help undo the damage done by COVID-19 to student plans, and can lead to Missouri's higher education landscape being better prepared to weather the next unforeseeable setback.

[17] Complete College America. (n.d.). Guided Pathways to Success Summary. https://www.collegechangeseverything.org/events/scalingup-media/Guided_Pathways_to_Success_Summary-Complete_College_America.pdf

[18] ibid

[19] Ezarik, Melissa. "Guided Pathways in the COVID era." September 15, 2020. https://universitybusiness.com/guided-pathways-in-the-covid-era/

[20] Jenkins, Davis and Clive Belfield. "Why Are Community Colleges Investing in Guided Pathways Reforms in the Face of Frightening Fiscal Uncertainty?" Community College Research Center, October 2020. https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/easyblog/guided-pathways-cost-effectiveness-pandemic.html

[21] Ezarik, Melissa. "Guided Pathways in the COVID era." September 15, 2020. https://universitybusiness.com/guided-pathways-in-the-covid-era/