Supporting Guided Pathways in Michigan:
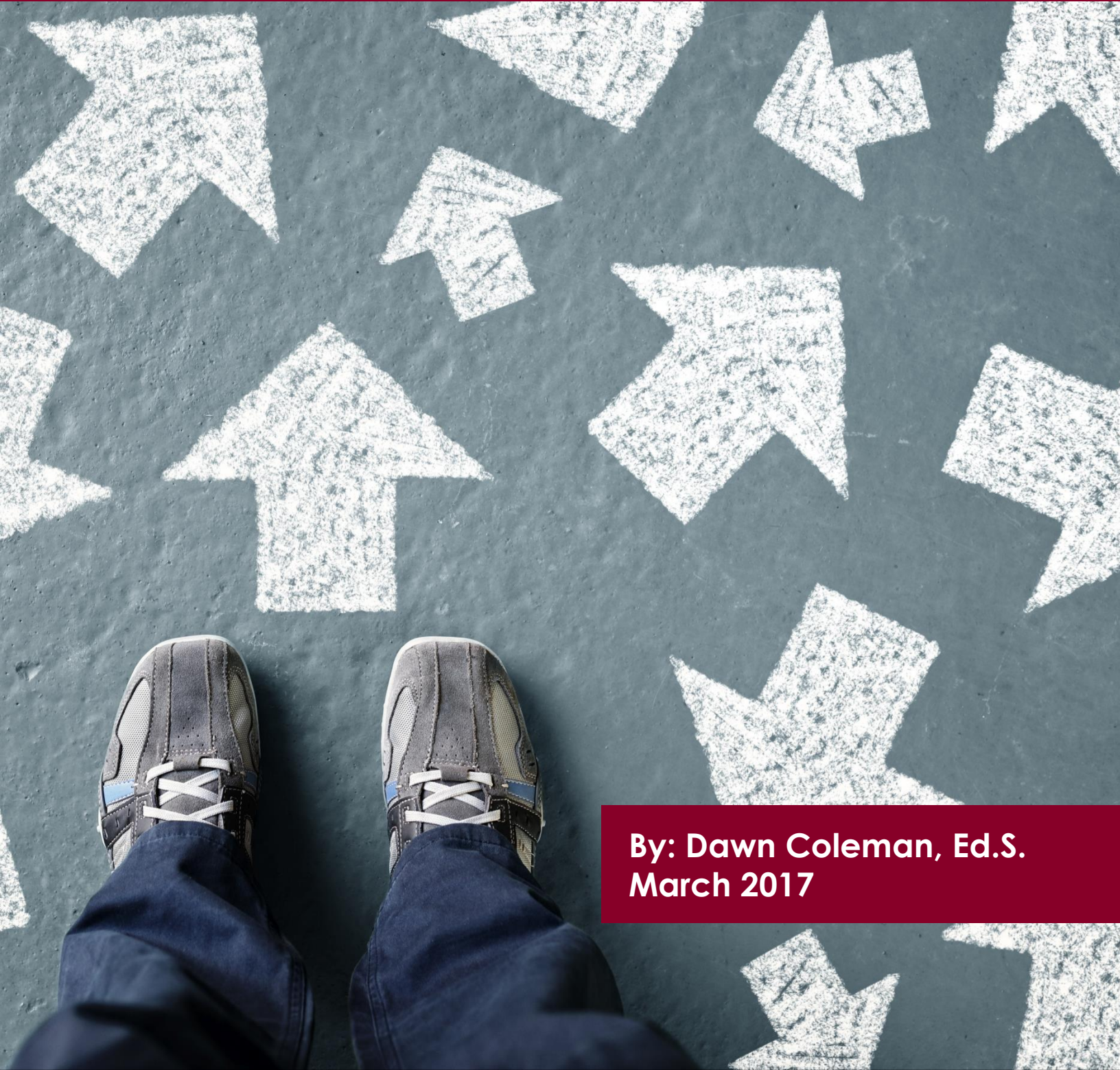## Lessons Learned from Cohort 1

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March 2017

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Introduction

Pressure to improve student success outcomes at community colleges has become ubiquitous and colleges across the country have adopted myriad reforms in an attempt to improve retention and completion rates. However, research suggests that these efforts have produced effects that are limited both in scope and in long-term impact (Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins, 2015; Rutschow et al., 2011). It is not enough to support new students with a more robust orientation or a dedicated first year experience course, or to reform developmental education, or to implement an early alert system, or to offer more instructional supports. A piecemeal approach will have only limited success, particularly if reforms target new students only to remove support in subsequent years (Bailey et al., 2015). Instead, a more holistic approach to student success that supports students along the entirety of their college career trajectory is needed.

One such approach is the guided pathways model (Bailey et al., 2015). While this model also includes many of the reforms mentioned above, rather than being disconnected efforts, they are coordinated approaches that align with well-defined academic programs. Rather than a series of initiatives or boutique programs aimed at small groups of at-risk students, the guided pathways model aims to make structural changes that can have a far reaching impact on student success. Rather than being faced with limitless choices, in what has been referred to as the "cafeteria" model, students are instead shepherded along clear pathways from intake to completion. This requires colleges to establish a more robust onboarding process into college and, if needed, into a streamlined developmental education program that is aligned with their chosen pathway. These pathways represent broader areas of interest, sometimes referred to as meta-majors, within which clearly defined and mapped academic programs reside. Upon entrance to the college, students choose either a program or, if undecided, a meta-major and are then provided with

embedded advising and other supports to ensure they choose a program of study and then do not stray from their path. The aim is to support students in identifying their goals and achieving them in a direct and timely manner. While some have raised concerns about the model limiting student choice, proponents make clear that it's not about removing choice but rather "organizing it into a 'choice architecture' that is planned rather than haphazard" (Johnstone, 2015, p. 7).

Many of the colleges that have been highlighted as exemplars of the guided pathways approach (Bailey et al., 2015), are four year institutions where pathways can be built from intake to completion within the same institution. However, community colleges attempting to build pathways for transfer students are faced with the challenge of building paths that must viably cross from the two year institution to the chosen four year transfer institution. This may be facilitated by centralized state systems of higher education where community colleges have strong articulation agreements with a system of four year institutions, which is the case for many of the community colleges that have adopted the guided pathways approach. In Michigan, however, neither the two-year nor the four-year institutions are part of a state system; this can complicate not only the building of guided pathways but also, more broadly, other community college reform efforts.

Operating in a decentralized system, the community colleges in Michigan have a level of autonomy not seen in most states. While there are certainly benefits to this autonomy, it can also pose challenges for colleges attempting to implement large scale reforms with no guidance or support from a coordinating organization. In order to fill this coordinating function, the Michigan Center for Student Success (MCSS) was established in 2011. The guiding framework for the MCSS is based on aligning initiatives across the state, offering

professional development and other learning opportunities, building data capacity, supporting reform through research, and encouraging policy changes that impact large scale change. According to it vision statement, "The Michigan Center for Student Success provides state-level support to Michigan's 28 community colleges by serving as a hub connecting leadership, administrators, faculty, and staff in their emerging and ongoing efforts to improve student outcomes, emphasizing linkages between practice, research, and policy" (Hilliard, 2012).

The effort to implement guided pathways at community colleges in Michigan is being coordinated by the MCSS with funding from the Kresge Foundation and began in December 2014 with the Guided Pathways Orientation Institute. All 28 of the state's community colleges were invited and 26 chose to attend, far exceeding the anticipated level of interest. Following the orientation, colleges were invited to apply to be in either Cohort I or Cohort II. Being in Cohort I required them to commit to a target date of having pathways in place for students by Fall 2016 and to commit the resources needed to support faculty and staff in completing this work as individual colleges do not receive funding from the MCSS for this initiative. Ultimately, 12 colleges were chosen for Cohort I; an additional 11 institutions were chosen for Cohort II and asked to continue building the foundations for guided pathways. The Community College Research Center, the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement, and Public Agenda are providing technical assistance to the colleges. Technical assistance is in the form of Guided Pathways Institutes, attended by college teams consisting of representatives from across college departments, webinars and conferences calls, and other events that address student success more broadly but that include discussions of guided pathways. These events include the annual Student Success Summit, meetings of the Michigan Student Success Network, and regional faculty convenings.

After 18 months of coordinated support from the MCSS, Cohort I colleges were asked to complete a self-assessment of progress towards implementing the critical features of guided pathways. Results showed that, while the level varied, the colleges have all made progress towards implementing at scale. The MCSS was interested in learning more about the factors that may contribute to that progress and asked the following three research questions: 1) What environmental factors, leadership attributes, and implementation strategies supported institutional transformation at scale; 2) What aspects of the technical assistance support from the MCSS supported institutional transformation at scale; and 3) What aspects of cross-college collaboration supported institutional transformation at scale.

To answer these research questions, a qualitative study of Cohort I colleges was conducted. Using qualitative methods allowed for a deeper understanding of the experiences of key faculty, staff, and administrators including the challenges they faced and the lessons they learned in their first two years of implementing guided pathways.

Data were collected from semi-structured interviews and document review. A sample of seven Cohort I colleges were invited to participate in the study. Key informants were identified at each college who could speak to various components of the guided pathways initiatives at their respective institutions. A total of 12 guided pathways team members agreed to participate in interviews which were conducted between December 2016 and February 2017. They included representatives in a variety of roles from both academic and student affairs, including faculty members, advisors, counselors, an associate dean, a program chair, a records specialist, and several vice-presidents of academic affairs and student services. This diversity of roles helped paint a picture of guided pathways from various perspectives and experiences. Most of the participants were involved in the project from the beginning, though a few became involved once it was already underway at their institutions.

The interviews were designed to be semi-structured, with guiding questions but the flexibility

to delve deeper when merited. Interview questions were developed based on the research questions and focused on eliciting information about institutional characteristics that were facilitators or barriers to implementation, experiences with the support provided by the MCSS, and lessons learned that could be beneficial either for Cohort II colleges or for other colleges considering implementing guided pathways. Interviews were recorded and ranged in length from 30 minutes to 80 minutes; most were between 45 minutes and an hour. As part of this study, documents relevant to the Guided Pathways Institute were reviewed, including agendas, presentations, self-assessments, program maps, and other reports. These documents included publically available documents that are available on the MCSS website along with documents that MCSS and the participating colleges shared with the researcher.

All of the quotes in this report, unless otherwise indicated, are the verbatim words of the interviewees. Every effort has been made to protect the confidentiality of study participants when discussing the findings in this report, including the deliberate use of singular they so as not to identify participants by gender.

Guided pathways work in Michigan is still underway and the findings from this study could provide valuable insight into how colleges are supported in their work, what challenges and barriers they face in implementing guided pathways, and how the MCSS can better support Michigan colleges not only in implementing guided pathways but also in other reform efforts.

Institutional Supports and Facilitators

As part of the interview process, guided pathways team members were asked to identify and discuss the various ways in which they were supported by their institutions and which characteristics of their institutions contributed to the successful implementation of guided pathways. The most common response was that the strongest facilitator of implementation was that guided pathways built upon and expanded work that was already being done or provided an umbrella under which to coordinate already occurring work. Colleges also discussed the importance of having a culture of evidence and innovation, collaboration between the academic and student services sides of the house, and having a supportive and engaged leadership.

ALIGNMENT WITH OTHER REFORM EFFORTS

All of the colleges in the study indicated that guided pathways aligned well with other reform efforts at the college. Some colleges had already begun work improving intake processes and establishing procedures to deal with undecided students. Due to accreditation issues, some had already begun a process of reviewing their degree and certificate programs. This alignment with already existing efforts helped facilitate the implementation of guided pathways.

> "In a lot of ways there were many things that we had already been doing that could be tweaked and modified to give us a little boost and there were other things that we weren't doing but by God we sure should have been."

> "Pretty much every single one of the main tenets of guided pathways we were starting to or almost fully working on implementing at the college already."

> "My initial thought was 'Oh no, not another initiative'…but now I've evolved to thinking

this is not a whole different thing. This is all the things that we have adopted as high impact practices which have improved our onboarding and our student placement and assessment. This is just another way to approach that."

> "I would not underestimate the fact that that's where we were heading anyway. We're like a lot of institutions, there's a lot of initiative fatigue here…if all of a sudden this had been a thing out of the blue, that would have been a problem."

At one college, guided pathways was seen as an extension of an already existing equity and inclusion project so the discussion at that college focused on whether program maps are inclusive "or are they preventing certain students from achieving their dreams and aspirations of achieving a degree?" Another college pointed to their robust early college program, which accounted for approximately 20% of enrollment as "the epitome of a guided pathways model" with set schedules and a case management system. This program provided the college with a framework for understanding guided pathways that could be transferred to other programs. In creating buy-in among various sectors of the college community, guided pathways teams tried "to paint it as an evolution as opposed to something new."

In some cases, reform activities that were already underway were due to external pressures such as accreditation or the new Michigan Transfer Agreement (MTA). Several of the colleges had participated in their accreditation process soon before the guided pathways initiative began which had led to a program review process. This review was then enhanced with the Michigan Transfer Agreement. The MTA offers a 30 credit package of core classes that are guaranteed transfer. It was "a major step to have universities agree to accept a block of credits." So prior to guided pathways,

many of the colleges in the study had already begun narrowing the choice of courses, with a few going so far as to adopt the MTA as the core requirements for the AA/AS degrees. Faculty resistance to this idea of narrowing choice will be discussed in greater detail, but a couple of the colleges in Cohort I indicated that "by the time we got to guided pathways…a lot of that heartache had already occurred" so there was less faculty resistance to narrowing course choices when building the program maps.

As part of the process to become part of Cohort I, colleges were required to do an internal assessment. According to one college,

> "We found that many of the things that we were being asked about, we were already doing to a larger or less degree but they were somewhat discrete in their efforts. There wasn't a unifying theme or organization that pulled it altogether. This unit was going this work and this group of faculty was doing that work and there wasn't a way to bring it together. What guided pathways provided us was a theoretical umbrella for a great deal of work that was already occurring."

This idea of guided pathways as "a nice umbrella for a lot of those activities," was a common theme among the colleges. It wasn't just that guided pathways built upon already existing efforts, it also provided a lens through which to view reforms as one consolidated effort to support student success. According to one college, "What really struck me was the notion of aligning all of our systems. I knew that we really had a lot of great things going on in various individual offices and classrooms but they weren't aligned." According to another college, "Most of it is aligning work that is already going on or should be going on at your college so it's finding those gaps and aligning all that work." However, although guided pathways functions as a useful umbrella at some institutions, colleges indicated that there was still work to be done in coordinating various reform efforts. One college is planning a

summit covering all of the initiatives at that college "so everyone can come and learn about how these things fit together and how they affect you and what your role is."

A CULTURE OF EVIDENCE & INNOVATION

A culture of innovation and data-based decision making also appeared to contribute to the successful implementation of guided pathways. According to one college, "One of the things that I think helped us a lot in the beginning is we are a college that embraces and seeks out best practices." At one college, new innovations, including guided pathways, are approached with an "all hands on deck" attitude producing "a wonderful synergy of people's efforts." Another interviewee spoke of their college's history of trying one or two high impact practices each year and "folding them in" with already existing initiatives. Said another:

> "The more I'm able to learn about what other institutions do versus what we do, I would say that we are a very innovative institution. It is important to our leadership that we are on the cutting edge of what is up and coming and what is new. Cultures like that, attitudes like that, just that mentality of 'alright let's jump in and do it and we're going to figure it out as we go,' that bravery…is characteristic, trademark, of this institution."

This culture of innovation is generally supported by strong data capacity. A couple of the colleges spoke specifically of having strong Institutional Research departments that facilitated data use. According to another college, "we have a lot of people who really like data…it's important to us that we make decisions based on data, that we not just do things arbitrarily. If you don't like data and you don't have a good resource for pulling it, I think that can be a hindrance." Some colleges used their data to build support for the initiative, and suggested that national data did not speak to their faculty and staff the way that their own college data did; being able to look at the patterns of course taking of their own

students was critical to bringing people on board. One college spent a large amount of time in the beginning using data to raise awareness of the low completion rates among faculty, saying "they didn't even know, they think they graduate a lot more than they do" and it's difficult for faculty to "get used to the idea and try an wrap their heads around the idea that something they love so much and think is so important and they're investing all this time in, and then very few students are really completing." Finally, one college emphasized the power of data in facilitating conversation around change: "The conversations have to be around the data…if some of those conversations are going to be difficult, and some of them are, focusing on the data helps minimize some of the finger pointing because you're talking about data, not people." As will be discussed later, there is often faculty resistance to limiting course options for students and rooting those discussions in data around course taking patters can help ease that process.

COLLABORATION BETWEEN ACADEMIC SERVICES & STUDENT SERVICES

Guided pathways must be a college-wide effort, so a strong foundation of support from and collaboration between academic services and student services can be of crucial important to the success of the initiative. For one college, it was important that "the effort has a lot of champions both in the faculty and in student services." Many of the colleges already had a "good culture of student services and faculty working together" including, at one college, having representatives on each other's committees. Several institutions built this collaboration into the guided pathways initiative by having co-leads from academics and student services, while other colleges encouraged this collaboration through steering committees that included members from both groups "so that both sides of the house were represented." While in some cases, this was done primarily to encourage buy-in to the process, in others, there was a recognition that the two groups had different areas of expertise and perceptions of the student

experience so it was important to "try to cover that breadth of knowledge."

Because so much of the focus of guided pathways is on building program maps, the need to have faculty involved is clear as they bring knowledge of their own programs and the coursework students need to be successful in particular programs of study. However, according to one college that also had experience with the national guided pathways movement, student services often does not have a voice at the table. This voice is incredibly important because "we see every student and know the needs of every student whereas maybe an accounting faculty member is going to know very well their 40 people…so to be able to speak to the needs of all of the students in your institution and not just the specific pockets, I think that's a benefit." In particular, several colleges spoke of how student services staff had a much better understanding of the benefits of more structured pathways, saying "when you work on the student services side, you know what is confusing to them."

SUPPORTIVE & ENGAGED LEADERSHIP

When asked about institutional characteristics that facilitated their work four of the colleges pointed to the role of "good leadership." One college referred to "the right level of engagement at the leadership level" which, while leaving most of the day-to-day work up to the guided pathways teams, provided encouragement and support in the form of consistent messaging and commitment to the initiative. This included a provost who is "a charismatic speaker" who helped garner support, a leadership team of "student success champions," and a vice-president who is "more than just a cheerleader but who holds us accountable and never wavers in his support." Another college had a provost who is "very forward thinking, very concerned about the students, very motivated to make sure that we're operating within a social justice circle, that we're not creating more harm for our students" and who maintained a consistent message about the importance of guided pathways.

Support from the MCSS

As a state without a governing board for higher education, the Michigan Center for Student Success fills a gap in coordinating reform efforts among the community colleges in the state. According to one college,

> "In general, and this goes beyond guided pathways, I think they serve a very valuable role for the state because since we are all autonomous, these major initiatives around student success wouldn't be occurring. We're in the midst of a big effort around transfer and they're really leading that for the state…so I think that's an important point of the value of the center, to be able to focus on things that are not legislatively based or necessarily financially based but to really focus more on the student success mission that we're all trying to accomplish."

Another college agreed, saying "This has been hard work but it's been exciting work and I think people feel really good about the change that has happened. I don't know if we could have pulled this off without that external support." The colleges praised the MCSS for being responsive to their needs, saying "any time you needed any kind of assistance, they were there." According to the Cohort I colleges, the support provided by the MCSS falls into three broad categories: MCSS as an accelerator of change, MCSS as a technical assistance provider, and MCSS as a facilitator of cross-college collaboration.

MCSS AS A CHANGE ACCELERATOR

As mentioned previously, the Cohort I colleges indicated that they were already "going down this path not knowing it was something called guided pathways." However, these efforts were often fragmented and limited in scope. By creating a coordinated effort around guided pathways, the MCSS helped push those efforts to the next level. Most of the colleges indicated that their progress

would have been much slower without the MCSS, saying "we certainly wouldn't have been as far as we are now without that support." In particular, participating in a statewide movement "ensured we prioritized it and got it done." While some struggled with the "aggressive timeline" set by the MCSS, others indicated that the deadlines made them accountable "so we're not losing sight of what we're supposed to do." Colleges were able to leverage this external pressure to facilitate internal work by working backwards from the MCSS deadlines. According to one college, "We would probably still be grappling with more things if it was at our own pace…It always helps when you have a deadline." Another college said that the regular meetings with the MCSS "spurred us to keep moving."

One interesting point raised by several of the colleges was that the work of the MCSS provided legitimacy to their own work, particularly among college leadership. According to one college, "it gives gravitas to what we were doing already…we can point to national literature and national research to say this is what's happening nationally and that reinforces or validates the work we were already doing. The Center for Student Success has been very valuable in providing that." According to another, "This coordination is really helpful for the administration to be supportive of this type of work…it gives us a coordinated effort that can be shown to administration." One college indicated that rallying college leadership around the components of guided pathways was the most helpful support provided by the MCSS because it allowed them to develop a more coordinated plan for implementing work that was already underway but had lacked a sense of urgency.

MCSS AS A TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDER

In addition to providing a sense of urgency for change around guided pathways, the MCSS also

provided technical assistance to support that change process. This technical assistance began in 2014, before Cohort I was chosen, with the Guided Pathways Orientation Institute which introduced interested colleges to the initiative and included presentations from national experts on using data and facilitating broad-based engagement. Colleges were also provided with a readiness assessment and a planning template. Several colleges indicated that these early tools were among the most helpful aspects of technical assistance, partly because they provided a guide to future work but, more importantly, because they showed how the colleges were already well underway with guided pathways which made the work seem less daunting.

Once the Cohort I colleges were chosen, they were able to participate in statewide Guided Pathways Institutes supported throughout the rest of the year by monthly webinars and conference calls. The Cohort I colleges found the webinars to be most beneficial when they were focused on a particular topic or involved another Cohort I college "lending their expertise to the rest of us" on a particular aspect of guided pathways. Monthly virtual meetings that were more of an open question and answer format were viewed as less helpful. In general, the colleges indicated that they preferred in-person events and the opportunity to meet with peers at other colleges. Colleges also indicated that, while they found other MCSS events, such as the annual Student Success Summit, to be helpful, the events focused specifically on guided pathways were more useful. According to one college, "I loved going to the events…we got so much valuable information from them." Another college indicated that the institutes and webinars helped direct their efforts "because that's where we were going anyway and the technical assistance helped to move us along a little bit more succinctly."

Most of the colleges specifically mentioned that having access to national leaders in the field was one of the most helpful aspects of the support provided by MCSS. One college referenced an event where they were able to sit down with Rob Johnstone and Davis Jenkins to learn more about

how other college nationally have built their program maps; this "helped jump start the process" of building their own maps. Others pointed to how these experts provided them with key talking points for heading off opposition to guided pathways and for engaging broad stakeholder support. According to one college, this support from national experts combined with state-wide institutes which were then supported by monthly webinars and phone conferences to provide additional technical assistance "all helped to provide the richness of professional development that was important to support us."

MCSS AS A FACILITATOR OF COLLABORATION

In addition to learning from national experts on guided pathways, being able to collaborate and learn from each other was also seen as a critical component of the support provided by MCSS. Rather than "trying to do it all on our own," the colleges now have a network of support facilitated by the MCSS. According to one college, "It's a lot easier to talk through with others who are also struggling to try and come up with a solution rather than doing it all on our own and recreating the wheel." Another college said, "we have our own support groups…we found that was necessary." While some of this collaboration occurs virtually via the monthly webinars and what one college referred to as "long email chains" of questions, typically when the colleges spoke of the benefits of collaborating with other colleges, they spoke specifically of meeting in person at the institutes. According to one college, "The biggest benefit [of MCSS support] was bringing us all together and having the conversation…having those set times that we could actually come together and brainstorm and learn from each other was really helpful." Said another, "For an initiative this size, having the opportunity to actually be in the room with other schools doing the same type of work and having that time where we were out of our element and at a different location so that we could focus on that task, that was huge. It really was." Because the Cohort I colleges were generally at the same

point in the implementation process, the institutes "provided a great opportunity to hear from one another so when groups were grappling with how do you approach this, we always had other colleges that were grappling with similar things." However, colleges also indicated that it was helpful to meet with Cohort II colleges saying "we need to be willing to do that as part of our collegial responsibility" to help the colleges that were earlier along in the process, and they also appreciated the opportunity to see how far they had come and how much wisdom they had to share.

It should be noted that the extent to which colleges collaborated with each other varied. Some colleges only collaborated as part of the institutes or webinars while others established more ongoing relationships including visiting each other's campuses and moving the conversation to statewide registrars meetings and student affairs groups. However, one college did not see the collaborative aspect of MCSS's work as being beneficial, feeling that the colleges were all too different to learn from each other, though another college pointed out that even though the colleges are often very different, "at the end of the day, it's about student success, so if something's working, maybe we can tweak it to make it work for us."

COMPLEMENTARY SUPPORT FROM THE MCSS & AACC

Two of the colleges in Cohort I are involved in both the MCSS guided pathways efforts and the national movement supported by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). During the interviews, team members from these two colleges spoke of how the two efforts complemented each other. It was generally agreed that the national initiative was more structured and required more intensive work, with one college saying the national institutes were "just fantastic…you have to do a whole bunch of homework and it's really intense" in comparison to the MCSS institutes where "they gave us the information and the room to grow with it…and moved more at the pace that our faculty would prefer." One college said that the national initiative has "taken everything that we've already started at the statewide sessions and finished the recipe." In contrast, "because we're sort of building it as we go, the Michigan one feels a little more informal. It's not so laid out and prescriptive…It's more like an informal conversation or a work group. And then the national institutes are really well laid out, it's a whole curriculum." According to one college, "I think the two of them together are ideal."

Implementation Barriers and Challenges

While the focus of this study is on the positive supports for implementation provided by institutions and the MCSS, it is difficult to discuss facilitators without also discussing the barriers and challenges that colleges face when implementing guided pathways. The most common challenges were building campus wide support for guided pathways, particularly among the faculty, and developing viable program maps and pathways.

BUILDING CAMPUS-WIDE SUPPORT & ENGAGEMENT

When asked about challenges involved in implementing guided pathways, the most common response was positively engaging faculty and other staff. Several study participants joked that their primary role in the guided pathways initiative was to attend meeting after meeting, all in an effort to create support from various campus groups. However, they recognized that this was important work, particularly when it came to engaging faculty, saying "We knew it was absolutely critical that faculty felt that this was not an initiative that was being imposed on them, but they understood the rationale for it…and we need to do this sooner than later because the system we have now isn't serving the majority of our students very well." Luckily, even those colleges that struggled with faculty engagement reported that "generally people are getting more on board," though at some colleges this process was slower than at others.

Resistance to change and innovation fatigue: Faculty resistance was sometimes rooted in a general resistance to change, with an attitude of "this is the way we've always done it and we're not going to change" or "the normal hesitance that people sometimes have, that they want to do things the way they always have." At two colleges, some of this resistance appeared to be rooted in concerns that reforms wouldn't be effective because the colleges would not be willing to commit the needed resources. One guided pathways team member

questioned "when someone has been at the college for forty years and has seen the money not be there for forty years, what do I say to that person?" Another college said that the sense among faculty was that "we've been through this before and we're going to come up with a lot of recommendations and then there's not going to be any money." There was also resistance to the idea that guided pathways could have a significant impact on student outcomes when there are so many factors involved in student success. According to one college:

> "A lot of the resistance was 'this isn't going to solve everything, our students are still going to have financial problems, they're still going to have childcare problems, they're still going to have work issues, they're still going to struggle with money and a place to stay and all these other things,' the so-called non-cognitive issues, so it led to some really frustrating meetings. Everybody knows that those things matter and we know that our students face a lot of obstacles…we just want to stop being one of them."

Interestingly, while having a culture of innovation was a clear facilitator of the implementation process, one byproduct of being a college with a culture of change is that innovation fatigue can easily set in, which was the case at several of the colleges in this study. According to one college, "we pretty much pegged it that there would be faculty who were excited about the opportunities and doors this would open up for students and then there would be those that said 'no I'm not doing one more thing that you ask me to do'." Efforts to communicate the message that guided pathways is not a new initiative but rather a means of unifying already existing initiatives appeared to alleviate some of this fatigue.

Concerns about limiting student choice: One common source of resistance to guided pathways

was the perception that college is a time for exploration and limiting student choice runs counter to the foundational philosophy of higher education. According to one guided pathways team member, "I'm not one of those people that you occasionally hear in faculty meetings that talk about how students come to college to find themselves. That's a really old fashioned attitude from back when we were kids and when college was affordable." However, many of the colleges in the study reported that this attitude was common among faculty, particularly those in the liberal arts. At one college "we had long conversations about the meaning of a truly educated person versus a person who is work ready" and the question of "are we here to educate people to be good citizens and be educated or are we here to make people ready for work? And I think the answer that most of us have come to is that it's both." But coming to that consensus was not always an easy or comfortable process at the Cohort I colleges.

There was also resistance to the idea that students are not equipped to "determine what they want to do when they're 17 or 18 years old and the feeling that guided pathways forces you into a decision before you've had a chance to explore." However, the traditional paradigm of college students spending a year or two exploring courses without declaring a path does not reflect the reality of federal financial aid policies which already require that students choose a program of study and avoid taking courses outside of that program to receive aid. Several of the colleges reported that communicating this clearly to faculty helped ease some resistance. Other colleges worked to emphasize that what they themselves had valued so much in their own educational journeys, namely exploration, was not generally valued by their students. This was where the perspective of student services was especially important, because they had more experience advising students who were overwhelmed by having to choose from hundreds of general education courses.

Concerns from faculty that their courses wouldn't be included on the program maps: There were

naturally some concerns from faculty about "what's going to happen to my course if they don't put it on a pathway?" However, some colleges were very straightforward in making clear that "let's face it, if a class is credit bearing, we should ask ourselves very seriously why we are teaching it if it doesn't fit on any student program. And there could be a very clear answer that perhaps it should not be offered." Instructors weren't just concerned about their own courses but also their peers' courses. Said one guided pathways team member, "they are friends and they are family and they are looking out for one another." However, another college noted that it was important that the faculty "worry about the student first" and that well designed pathways could lead to higher enrollment which helped make everyone's job more secure.

DEVELOPING PROGRAM MAPS & PATHWAYS

The foundation of the guided pathways model is the system of program maps that help students more efficiently choose appropriate coursework without overwhelming them with a list of hundreds of general education options. These maps are designed to allow students to plan out their entire college career, whether they're full-time, part-time, college-ready, or require developmental coursework. These maps also allow colleges to better plan course offerings so students can be guaranteed that courses will be offered when they need them. Program maps are clustered within what many of the colleges referred to as areas of interest. These areas of interest are designed to allow students to begin taking coursework within a particular area even if they haven't chosen a program yet, confident in the knowledge that courses can be applied to various programs within a particular area of interest. However, whether or not they had full faculty support, colleges struggled to develop these maps and pathways.

Challenges deciding how much to narrow course choice: The extent to which colleges struggled with creating their program maps appears to be directly related to how much they were attempting to

narrow the choice of courses within each program. A couple of colleges indicated that they were not challenged in this area and did not face faculty resistance, but these were colleges that ultimately did not limit choice beyond what had already been encouraged by the Michigan Transfer Agreement. At another college, college leadership made the decision not to push for much narrowing of choice in the face of faculty resistance. However, other colleges were very much focused on streamlining the program maps, saying "our students don't enjoy such a wide choice…they are sort of paralyzed by that breadth of choice." At one college, choice has been narrowed to a point where students have approximately five courses to choose from within each general education category. Another college allowed more choice but noted that "there's a big difference between pick one of fifteen versus pick one of two-hundred."

It should be noted that none of the colleges indicated that their program maps were prescriptive, but instead represented "preferred courses." At one college this meant that the catalogue still showed all of the possible courses a student can take but indicated which ones were recommended. At another college, "from a visual standpoint, the preferred options go to the top of the list and they're listed in bold to kind of draw your eye." However, "If a student wants to push harder for a particular area through their conversations with the counselor or advisor, which I think is positive…they can look at those courses and hopefully that will help give the student some guidance."

Challenges deciding how to narrow course options: At a couple of the colleges, a single person or a small team was responsible for narrowing down the choice of courses for each of the program maps and eliciting faculty feedback along the way because faculty were not interested in participating. At these two colleges, the guided pathways team relied on the Michigan Transfer Agreement and experience working with students to identify the courses, often narrowing options down to "the usual suspects" like American History and

Introduction to Sociology. However, most of the colleges felt it was important that faculty be responsible for creating their own program maps saying "we firmly believed that faculty needed to be the ones creating the program maps and by having them create those maps, they were in control." However, faculty often struggled with how to choose the appropriate courses for each program. According to one college, "the way that we described it was that we wanted faculty to think about it as an advising session and if a student came to you and said 'I'm in this program and I've got all these choices, which class should I take?'" One college held a "speed dating" even where tables were set up by general education outcome and faculty could present their courses to program leads to explain how their courses would fit into a particular program of study. Another college emphasized to faculty their role as content experts who know what skills and knowledge their students should need and can direct them to courses appropriately. Faculty concerns over how to choose the best courses for a particular program of study really begs the question of how, if faculty who are experts in their content areas, cannot determine the best courses to take, how can we expect students to make wise choices?

While most of the colleges relied on faculty knowledge to choose the courses for each program map, two colleges relied more heavily on data, looking at common course taking patters. One college referenced their efficiency model for enrollment which led them to choose to include courses that "students have shown themselves to be more interested in." Another college used enrollment data to analyze course taking patterns within each program and built default maps based on those data.

Challenges with building meta-majors or areas of interest: Almost all of the colleges spoke of how much easier it was to build program maps for the applied programs which were already limited in choice and often already had highly structured semester by semester sequences. However, several colleges raised the very valid point that, while it

may be easier to build program maps for applied programs it was more difficult to cluster these programs into meta-majors because there was so little flexibility in their sequences. While ideally students would be able to explore a meta-major for one or two semesters, with highly structured applied programs, foundational courses were often specific to each program and could not be used for other programs in the pathway. The challenge was to identify a common first semester of coursework that could be applied to all of the degrees within a meta-major.

According to one college, "we are still very program based and not as pathways based as we maybe should be" and this was reflected in the lack of alignment of coursework within each of this college's six areas of interest. The guided pathways team member at this college pointed to how faculty did not communicate with other faculty within the same pathways when they were developing their program maps which resulted in maps that did not align and limited the ability of students to shift from one program to another within the same pathway. For example, within one particular pathway, there were three different math tracks that students would take depending on their chosen program.

Challenges building program maps that reflect the student population: Almost all of the colleges only have program maps designed for full-time students taking 15 credits each semester who do not need to take any developmental coursework. While this may be the recommended level of coursework to complete a degree on time, it does not reflect the reality of the colleges' student populations. In the words of one college, "we're trying to make it simpler for students but when it's a full time sequence, it doesn't make much sense for part-time students." Only two of the colleges in the study had developed part-time maps and none had maps specifically for developmental students. At one college, 80% of the student population needs developmental education, "so right off the bat, our maps don't work as they are laid out for a great number of our students." According to one college, however, creating maps for developmental students

is a relatively simple process of taking their templates and shifting them one semester to allow space to build in remedial coursework. In general, colleges indicated that they were relying on advisors to be able to take the full-time program maps and adjust them for students based on their individualized needs.

ADDITIONAL BARRIERS & CHALLENGES

While most of the discussion around barriers and challenges focused on building engagement and the logistical challenges of how to build pathways and program maps, colleges also discussed several other general challenges, including the complexity of guided pathways and the pressure to meet strict timelines. According to one college, "There so much to coordinate, so many pieces of this…every time we do something we realize it touches two other things so there's so much that needs to be coordinated." According to another, it is difficult to focus on guided pathways work when they all already have full-time jobs so it's "hard to find time to go offline to have the conversations when you have to help the students that are in front of you each and every day…We still have to be here for our students today even as we're trying to make things better for our students of tomorrow." Almost every college spoke of how many "moving pieces" there are to guided pathways and how "it's a lot of juggling." One college was dealing with a high level of burnout because "it was just so much work so fast so the challenge was keeping people's spirits up…We had to adopt the idea that this is important and this isn't going to be easy."

Some of the colleges were also beginning to anticipate challenges they might encounter in the next stages of their guided pathways work. This included concerns about the lack of sufficient advising staff to support students and a means of identifying when students are off their path. Several of the colleges have plans for technology-based solutions but others were planning to rely on required student check-ins with advisors. Two of the colleges have greatly expanded their advising staff but others were continuing to depend on

already existing advising and counseling support which was limited. Many of the colleges also did not yet have plans for training their academic advisors and faculty advisors on the new pathways and program maps. Finally, there were concerns regarding how to identify and support undecided students when, due to federal financial aid guidelines, students must declare a program in order to receive aid.

Looking Back and Moving Forward

When the interviews for this study were completed, the Cohort I colleges had almost two years of experience implementing guided pathways and, looking back, had a wealth of knowledge to share about their experiences with guided pathways in general and with the MCSS in particular. However, most also recognized that there was still much work to be done and that they would continue to need support from the MCSS moving forward.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENTS

While the colleges generally spoke very positively of the support provided by the MCSS, they did have some suggestions for improvement that could inform how support is provided to Cohort II or to other initiatives. The most common suggestion was that the conference calls "needed structure with an agenda and key take-aways…rather than a free for all." One college noted that without a focused topic, certain people often dominated the conversation and there was a lot of "rehashing" of issues that had already been addressed. One college suggested that the phone calls could have been aligned with the implementation plans so that key topics were proactively addressed.

Several colleges suggested that having a listserv would be helpful. This came up in conversation at one college in the context of having questions about certain tools and software that were too narrow a discussion to have at the institutes, but they found it frustrating to rely on long email chains. One college mentioned that there had been an online system set up for communication but that "it just didn't catch on" and "even if it's not sophisticated, sometimes just an email listserv is the best way to do it." Other colleges seemed unaware that any such system existed and also recommended a listserv, noting that they were active participants on state level listservs for their particular job functions and thought that system would have worked well for guided pathways.

In terms of technical assistance content, several colleges indicated that they felt that they heard from the same speakers every time and "there was a lot of duplication of information and not a lot of practical suggestions and models." Another college agreed, saying that "more clear, concrete examples of what this looks like" would be helpful because "if you're dealing with it in the abstract, and haven't seen it in real life, it's very hard to create it." A couple of the interviews included discussion of how difficult it was for colleges to find examples of what a program map actually looks like. One college indicated that, while the national speakers were very effective, "it's like you're preaching to the choir" and they would have appreciated a way to share those presentations with their college so they could "hear from the experts in the field about the value and the benefits of this work and what's going on nationally that supports this work." Another college felt that sometimes the timing of the support could be improved; in the case of this college, the team that attended the Guided Pathways Orientation Institute did not include the people who eventually were chosen as leads for the project. So when the leads attended their first meeting several months later, "we came away from that first meeting with a ton of good ideas but we had already tried to engage our faculty in a way that was not the right direction. Every time I've gone to one of these meetings I've said 'Oh that was a really good idea. We should have done that three months ago'."

However, the colleges recognized that the MCSS seemed to learn and adjust how it offered support. One college noted that several times "things that were frustrating were corrected at the next meeting." According to another college, "the meetings became more useful as we went on" and another pointed out that just as the colleges had a learning curve when it came to implementing guided pathways, the MCSS also had a learning curve when it came to providing support.

NEXT STEPS & NEEDED SUPPORT

Many of the colleges were struggling with the next steps of rolling out their program maps and monitoring student progress. Two of the colleges suggested that additional support in this area would be helpful. However, another college was very clear that they did not see it as the MCSS's role to "develop or pitch" a technology system to them, preferring to explore options on their own to determine which would be the best fit for their college. Another college pointed out that, based on the responses to the Scale of Adoption Self-Assessment completed by the Cohort I colleges after the first 18 months, most of the colleges were struggling with similar issues and support should be built around these shared challenges.

Several of the colleges indicated that, "Now that everyone is farther along, it would be interesting to see how it's going for folks" and spotlight those that had been particularly successful. Said one college, "I would really like to hear what the other colleges are doing, just to have the Cohort I leads sit around and talk." Another offered to host a visit so the other colleges could come see their program in action, particularly a revised first year seminar, redesigned to align with the new pathways.

The colleges also noted that, moving forward, continued support from the MCSS on transfer issues would be critical. According to one college, "Transfer maps have to be done discipline by disciple and school by school and it's an absolute nightmare" so anything the MCSS can do to facilitate the process between the two and four year institutions would be very valuable. According to another, "they need to be the ones helping to coordinate that conversation because otherwise it won't occur."

ADVICE FOR OTHERS CONSIDERING GUIDED PATHWAYS

The colleges that participated in the study were also asked if they had any advice for others considering

embarking on this work, and most of the responses focused on "engaging the right folks" and ensuring you "have broad based support for what you're doing." However, one especially interesting piece of advice that emerged from several of the colleges was that they would recommend not using the term "guided pathways."

"My biggest recommendation for any school that hasn't started this work…is don't call it anything. Don't call it guided pathways, just say 'we're going to take a look at our institutional practices' or call it retention. We still are kind of battling some misunderstanding of what this is. People think that all it is, is just sequencing or just the pathway itself. They don't take in that it's getting students to be more successful."

"I would not give it a name. I wouldn't call it guided pathways. I would talk about it in terms of aligning student success strategies. Everybody already has people at their college who are working on student success and so you want to just talk about it as an alignment of those things"

"If we could go back in time we just wouldn't call it guided pathways. We'd just say we have a team that's working on the alignment of student success strategies and if you want to be a part of it come on. And I think we would have had greater buy in faster."

At several of the colleges, it was challenging to build support because there was so much confusion about what guided pathways meant. According to one college, "I can't tell you how many times we've had people say 'I'm not a fan of guided pathways' and then they tell us what they are a fan of and they lay it all out and it's guided pathways." According to another, "We had other people who were opposed to it and didn't want to support it and would stand up at meetings and speak out against it…one time we spoke at a faculty wide meeting and somebody stood and said 'We

shouldn't do this, this is what we should be doing' and then he went on to describe guided pathways. Something like that happened more than once." While this could be an indication that colleges need an improved communication strategy to better explain what guided pathways is and isn't, it was clear that at several of the colleges, the issue was the name itself. According to one college "Some people just don't like initiatives that have a name."

FINAL THOUGHTS

The experiences of the colleges in Cohort I make clear the role of institutional capacity in supporting innovative work. In particular, it is important that institutions have a culture of evidence and innovation, collaboration across various college departments, and supportive and engaged leadership. It is also important that new innovations align with work that is already occurring in a college. The MCSS also provides a critical avenue for external support for innovative work by being an impetus for change, providing technical assistance, and facilitating cross-college collaboration. However, questions remain regarding how best to support colleges in their guided pathways work when the initiative represents a truly new way of doing business and when institutional capacity is not as strong. The Cohort I colleges likely represent colleges with a certain level of institutional capacity, yet these colleges still struggled in implementing guided pathways. Colleges that do not already have many of these institutional capacities may struggle even more and the challenge will be discovering how best to support them in their guided pathways work.

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