

Organizing, Supporting, and Continuing Guided Pathways in Michigan



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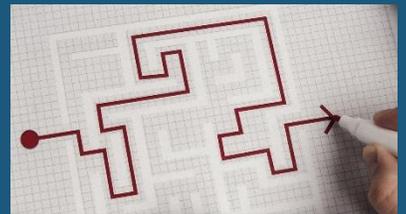
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Introduction



During the interviews and focus groups that form the foundation for this report, participants from five different institutions described Michigan's higher education landscape as "the wild, wild West," usually with a sense of frustration, but sometimes with a hint of pride. Michigan's community colleges have an unprecedented degree of autonomy, and this decentralization comes with both benefits and challenges. One challenge is how to effectively and efficiently coordinate state-wide reform efforts. The Michigan Center for Student Success (MCSS) was created in 2011 to help with this challenge.

MCSS provides unifying support to the state's 28 community colleges by connecting them with each other, with national experts, and with other resources to help them meet the needs of their students. By the end of 2014, the center had already coordinated involvement in over 20 different initiatives.¹ These included, but were not limited to, the Accelerated Learning Program, Benefits Access for College Completion, Career and College Readiness Partnership, Committee on the Transferability of Core College Courses, Consortium for Michigan Veteran Educators, Credentials that Work, Credit When It's Due, Degree Qualifications Profile, Faculty Leadership Initiative, Gateways to Completion, Michigan Student Success Network, Project Win-Win, and the Voluntary Framework of Accountability.

In Fall 2014, another initiative was added to this list when MCSS received a grant from the Kresge Foundation to fund the Guided Pathways Institute (GPI). Following an orientation, colleges were invited to apply to participate in one of two

cohorts; 12 colleges were chosen for Cohort I, and 11 colleges were chosen for Cohort II. Colleges were provided with technical assistance from the Community College Research Center (CCRC), the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement (NCII), and Public Agenda. Colleges teams participated in a series of in-person Guided Pathways institutes, virtual webinars, conference calls, and regional faculty convenings. Guided Pathways related topics were also a focus of the annual Student Success Summit and the Michigan Student Success Network.

By the summer of 2017, these 23 colleges had already made substantial progress towards implementing Guided Pathways essential practices. This phase of MCSS's work culminated in a qualitative study of the Cohort I colleges.² The goal of this study was to learn from their experiences, exploring the institutional characteristics that supported and hindered the implementation of Guided Pathways, and learning more about how MCSS could better support the colleges in their work. The study found that the facilitators of Guided Pathways implementation included: alignment of Guided Pathways with other reform efforts at the college; having a culture of evidence and innovation; collaboration across academics and student services; and supportive and engaged leadership. The primary challenges faced by these early implementers included building campus-wide support and developing program maps and pathways. The study also found that MCSS provided valuable support by serving as a change agent, providing technical assistance, and facilitating cross-college collaboration.

¹ Smith, C.A., Baldwin, C. & Schmidt, G. (2015) Student success centers: Leading the charge for change at community colleges. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 47(2), 30-39

² Coleman, D. (2017). *Supporting Guided Pathways: Lessons learned from Cohort I*. Lansing, Michigan: Michigan Center for Student Success.

In the fall of 2017, MCSS continued its work supporting Guided Pathways by launching GPI 2.0; the 23 colleges who participated in the first two cohorts were joined by three more colleges. Colleges chose to participate in the initiative as either Mentor Circle or Study Circle colleges. The 13 Mentor Circle colleges received more intensive support and provided ongoing data to MCSS through CCRC's Guided Pathways Scale of Adoption Assessment (SOAA) and the Voluntary Framework for Accountability. Supports included participation in six Guided Pathways institutes, three Mentor Circle Leads Retreats, Michigan Student Success Network meetings focusing on Guided Pathways components, and faculty summits focused on building stronger associate-to bachelor's transfer pathways.

This report is based primarily on findings from a qualitative study of the 13 Mentor Circle colleges. The primary goal of the study was to learn more about how these colleges organized the work of implementing Guided Pathways and how they plan to sustain and build upon their progress. As part of a virtual Guided Pathways Institute meeting in June 2020, representatives from 12 of the 13 Mentor Circle colleges participated in one of two 45-minute-long focus groups. Each college was then invited to participate in a follow-up interview. These semi-structured interviews were conducted from mid-July to mid-August, 2020. A total of 25 Guided Pathways team members from the 13 Mentor Circle colleges agreed to participate. At five of the colleges, a single college representative was interviewed; at the remaining eight colleges, two to four representatives participated in a small focus group. Interviewees were almost evenly balanced across the academic and student services sides

of the house and represented varying lengths of participation in the Guided Pathways initiatives at their institutions.

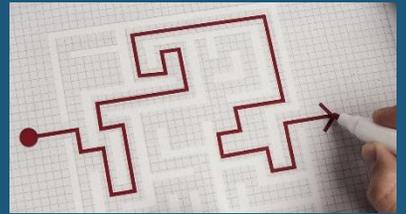
Interviews ranged in length from 25 to 85 minutes. Most were an hour long. All of the quotes in this report, unless otherwise indicated, are the verbatim words of the interviewees. Every effort has been made to protect the confidentiality of study participants and their colleges, including the deliberate use of singular they so as not to identify participants by gender.

For the past six years, Guided Pathways has provided a framework for the various initiatives of MCSS. The three-year GPI 2.0 initiative is now coming to a close, but Guided Pathways work in Michigan will continue in more focused efforts, including MiTransfer Pathways, MiBEST, MiStart2Finish, and Right Math at the Right Time. According to one community college practitioner interviewed for this study, "Michigan is not an easy state to coordinate," but the MCSS has done impressive work in providing support and cohesion to the work of its community colleges. In the words of another community college representative:

"The work of the Michigan Center for Student Success is itself a guided pathway for community colleges. We're in such siloes and the presidents meet, but it doesn't always trickle down. But the work that is being done through the Michigan Center for Student Success provides a structure and pathway for what we, as community colleges in Michigan, need to focus on. So the pathway that the Michigan Center for Student Success has provided has been awesome!"

Organizing

the work of Guided Pathways



The focus of this study was less on *what* the colleges implemented as part of their Guided Pathways work and more on *how* that work was organized and structured. One similarity in experiences across the colleges was that they had a shared leadership structure with co-leads from the academic and student services areas of campus. However, they had quite different methods of organizing committees and subcommittees. They also differed in the extent to which they created new positions or adjusted roles and responsibilities of current faculty and staff.

COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

As part of their participation in GPI, colleges were asked to identify co-leads, who were the primary points of contact and typically attended the GPI events and activities. While most colleges had two co-leads, representing academics and student services, several institutions had, officially or unofficially, added a third or fourth co-lead. Almost all of the colleges specifically mentioned the value of this shared leadership structure in helping create buy-in across campus and having different perspectives represented. One college also emphasized the importance not only of having the two areas of campus represented, but also of having co-leads who personally work well together, saying “We have different strengths so we really complemented each other; I’m more the operations person and she brings all the ideas.” Their co-lead agreed, saying “yes, co-leads don’t always work because sometimes there’s competition between people, but we don’t have that.”

While most of the colleges aligned their co-lead assignments with specific positions at the college

(for example, the VP of academics and the VP of student services might serve as co-leads), one college rotated the co-lead positions every two years. They maintained representation from both sides of the house, and overlapped terms so that one person could mentor the other; however, leadership wasn’t specifically associated with a particular position, allowing staff at different levels of the college to serve. Those colleges that did associate co-lead roles with specific positions at the college were often challenged by staff turnover in those designated positions. This sometimes resulted in a loss of historical knowledge and a loss of momentum when new staff were not already familiar with Guided Pathways.

COMMITTEES AND WORKING GROUPS

Most of the Mentor Circle colleges organized their work by creating a Guided Pathways steering committee led by co-leads along with a series of sub-committees or working groups; several colleges had multiple levels of working groups. Several colleges had co-leads from academics and student services not only on the steering committee but also on each subcommittee to ensure that leadership was shared at all levels. In general, smaller colleges had fewer and smaller steering committees and working groups, while larger colleges had more committees and working groups. The size of the steering committees across the colleges ranged from just 3 members to more than 30 members (and growing). Some of the colleges started with steering committees that largely involved faculty and student services staff and then found that they needed to expand to add representation from other campus areas, such as IT and communications; other colleges started with

much broader representation and then found it was more efficient to streamline the steering committee, shifting some members to more focused working groups. According to one interviewee, “we kind of started with everybody, and now we’ve whittled that down.”

One college felt that eight to ten members was ideal for working groups, because it allowed for a diversity of perspectives, but any larger and “you’re not as nimble as you could be.” Other colleges didn’t see an ideal upper limit, with one saying “the committee has grown in size exponentially, because as you do the work, you realize that certain voices were missing from the table, so we added them in.” However, one college with a large steering committee pointed out that it was important that committee members were active members and not members in name only, saying

“We just kept inviting these outside members into being part of the steering committee and I don’t know that that was the way, because they can attend the meeting, but if they can’t make connections to how what we’re saying related to how they would change operations in their own office, then they fall into that group of people who are on the committee but aren’t actively engaged in what the committee is doing.”

Several of the colleges spoke in depth about the importance of choosing who serves on the various committees and working groups and “making sure you have the right people in the right seats on the right bus.” According to one college, it was more important to “have people involved who have an interest and desire to work on this” rather than choosing membership based solely on job title.

While almost all of the colleges specifically spoke about the importance of representation from various areas of campus, one college emphasized the value of not only involving both academics and student services on the committees and working groups but also to

ensure they were working together as opposed to parallel to each other. Initially each co-lead at this particular college worked with their own areas of the institution on mapping and advising reform to “differentiate that expertise,” but they found that “just faculty having the discussion isn’t going to be enough, and just student services having that discussion isn’t going to be enough”; they needed to be having the discussion together.

Another college also emphasized the value of this cross-unit collaboration, saying

“New friendships developed along with a better relationship with advising, and I think faculty got a better understanding of the issues that advisors were facing, because in many ways the advisors are the front line people, and I think it really created a lot of good will and better communication between positions that previously had been in silos.”

Another college agreed, saying, “I think it has altered how we do business, because everyone is working towards the same goal of helping the student.”

The extent to which the decision-making process was centralized or diffused also varied widely across the colleges and didn’t necessarily align with the committee structures. At one college, work was largely centralized in a small steering committee that collaboratively made decisions about Guided Pathways components and implementation strategies before soliciting feedback from relevant areas of campus and then adjusting their plan as needed. According to one co-lead at this college, “at every step, we’d stop and throw it out to the whole campus, so we got input all the way through.” This college felt that with larger committees and working groups, “there’s too many people, too many ideas, too many things to fight through...instead of just throwing the whole thing out there, we get together, we come up with a plan or a skeleton of a plan, and we say how does this look?”

However, they acknowledged that this method may not work for all colleges and pointed to the vital importance of trust, saying

“If you don’t have the relationships, if you don’t have the trust, what you throw out there is going to be looked at as out to get them, but I think having built that trust over the years, they understood we were doing what’s best for the students.”

Other colleges prioritized broader participation. According to one college, “everyone had an opportunity to share their ideas and there was a lot of open sharing, a lot of creativity, and we had a lot of flexibility to implement ideas that were bounced around.” Another college agreed, saying

“It’s been a college-wide effort and we have equal representation from academic services and student affairs and other support departments and the administration of the college. We do our very best to be inclusive and that’s why those committees were so large. We want to hear all voices.”

Several colleges noted that committee and working group membership and purpose “morphed” or “evolved” either in response to the changing focus of their Guided Pathways work (for example, shifting from building program maps to redesigning advising) or in response to moving onto a more advanced stage of implementation where maintenance and quality improvement became more important. This shift to “maintenance mode” will be discussed later in this report. While most of these changes appeared to happen organically and on an ongoing basis, a couple of the colleges spoke of deliberately pausing to review their goals and progress and rethink who should be involved in each committee, or whether some committees could be phased out.

Interestingly, only one college chose not to create separate Guided Pathways committees and working groups; instead the implementation of

Guided Pathways was incorporated into already existing committees. For example, the initial focus of Guided Pathways at this college was on creating program plans, so that process was embedded into the standing curriculum review and instruction committees, with additional representation from student services. According to this college, a separate Guided Pathways committee would have needed eventual approval from the curriculum review and instruction committees anyway, so it made more sense to just embed the work within those committees from the beginning.

The disadvantages of not following this approach was evident at another college whose co-lead talked about how decisions about program maps and curricular changes would be made in the Guided Pathways working groups, and then hit a barrier, saying

“We would take it to the curriculum committee and the committee would go through their processes, but the curriculum committee was never pathways, it was always reacting to pathways. Their job hadn’t changed, so they weren’t getting things like the role of pre-requisites or the importance of developmental education reform... each committee tried to just keep doing their work the same way.”

Several other colleges spoke of similar experiences and the frustration of creating plans that were then rejected or radically changed by standing committees.

CHANGING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

During the interviews and focus groups, colleges were asked whether they had created any new staffing positions as a result of Guided Pathways, or radically adjusted the roles and responsibilities of any current positions. Although most of the colleges indicated that they had not created any new positions, one college did create a position designed to work more closely with transfer institutions, one created a position to oversee the

early alert system, and another created two new success coaching positions. One college noted that, rather than adding new staffing, “it’s changing responsibilities and processes to serve students in a different way.”

Most of these changes in roles and responsibilities in response to the implementation of Guided Pathways have occurred in advising as colleges shift to a case management or cohort advising model, structured around meta-majors. One college took a team to NACADA’s summer planning institute to help them create a vision for advising centered around learning. According to one co-lead,

“The function of advising is learning, and on the instructional side the focus is learning so there’s a common connection there, and we knew that the function of advising was also happening in multiple job titles. The long-term vision was getting as many of our advisors and counselors and faculty talking to students about what’s your end goal, what do you want to do, so that everybody is integrating that conversation.”

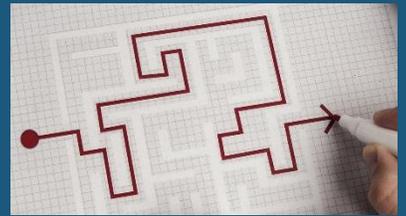
Multiple college representatives spoke of the advantages of a case management model of advising that aligned with meta-majors. For students, this model provides more continuity of support. Advisors are able to build relationships not only with students but also their assigned departments “which strengthens their ability to advise their students, because they have the up to date information that they can on the spot tell

the student, or they have built relationships with the faculty so they can directly refer the student to a specific faculty member to get more information.” Finally, faculty “know who their go-to person is” and can refer students to advising for additional support. Interestingly, one college has aligned its case management advising not with meta-majors but with service areas so that students stay with the same team from as early as recruitment and admissions.

One college truly embraced the idea that, under a Guided Pathways approach, everyone is responsible for student success. This college provided training to all levels of staff, from the maintenance staff to the administration, on how everyone at the college is an advisor. According to the college,

“We quickly found through some student interviewing early on that students have no idea that their supervisor on the maintenance team isn’t an advisor. So that lightbulb moment happened, and we made sure everyone knows how to do the basics and also knows when to hand off...Now they have some tools in the toolbox to point people to the right place or put in an early alert that says my student employee on night shifts says that they’re really struggling with their math assignment this week. Everybody is an advisor, and everybody is a support specialist now, and they have the toolkit to do that, and I’ve never seen that happen before anywhere I’ve worked.”

Supporting the work of Guided Pathways



Although the focus of the interviews was primarily on how the colleges are organizing and sustaining the work of implementing Guided Pathways, several colleges pointed out that this work would not have been possible, or certainly would not have been as smooth without institutional support in the form of engaged college leadership and financial support. Colleges also spoke of the importance of support from other Michigan colleges, facilitated by MCSS, and the Scale of Adoption Assessment as a guiding tool, also facilitated by MCSS.

SUPPORT FROM COLLEGE LEADERSHIP

The importance of supportive and engaged leadership was one of the key findings of the study of Cohort 1 colleges, and colleges continue to identify this as a facilitator of implementation in these later stages. According to one college where the president made Guided Pathways an institutional focus, “it’s good if it’s an institutional initiative and if you have leadership from the top.” This was especially true when there were high levels of staff turnover in the Guided Pathways committees and working groups. According to one college,

“If you know that you have the institutional support, that this is important, we need to keep this ball rolling, we need to keep it moving forward, the players may change but the focus is still there, and that’s what keeps the momentum going.”

Conversely, some colleges struggled with effectively organizing the implementation of Guided Pathways because of a lack of clear support from college leadership. One college in particular felt that implementation would have

been smoother if it had been directed more from the top, “so that when we ran into hiccups, we could have solved the problem, instead of just reverting back to the old way.” Another college concurred, suggesting that the Guided Pathways co-leads often lacked the institutional power to push change when challenges arose, leading some efforts to stall. According to another college,

“They want us to do all of these things, but there isn’t really the support to get it done, so we’re kind of sent out into the woods to gather the wood and build the huts but without college commitment.”

Turnover in key leadership positions was also a challenge because it often led to inconsistent support for the initiative. According to one college, “because of changes in leadership, we often found ourselves having to start back at square one” when the new leader had a different vision or new ideas that conflicted with the work that was already underway or awaiting approval. Gaps in leadership due to delays in filling positions was also a challenge, as it made getting that approval for changes more difficult.

At several of the colleges, however, changes in key leadership positions led to a renewed sense of energy around Guided Pathways when the new hire was more enthusiastic about the initiative. This included one college that was able to take advantage of the change and revisit ideas that had been vetoed by previous leadership but were embraced by the new leadership.

While most of the colleges were speaking of their presidents and provosts when they spoke of the importance of college leadership, one college

pointed to the importance of ensuring the board of trustees was also supportive. According to one college,

“As we started down this trail, our board of trustees had to be educated on what Guided Pathways was and they had to take a vote that we were now a Guided Pathways institution and that was more than just ceremonial. It was saying there are going to be other things asked of you. There’s going to be funding, there’s going to be ways of restructuring the college, and it was important that they know what it meant.”

Several of the colleges mentioned struggling with implementation due to a lack of financial support. Although a couple of the colleges have received Title III and utilized some of those resources to support aspects of Guided Pathways, most of the colleges did not have additional resources to apply to the implementation effort. This included a lack of reassigned time. Those colleges that did have reassigned time often felt that it was critical to their success, especially in the early stages of implementation. According to one college, “if we don’t have the resources and the ability to really move it forward, then it really becomes a struggle, and it becomes something that sucks some of the joy out of it.” Several of the co-leads specifically mentioned their personal passion for the work, but acknowledged that it was sometimes difficult to maintain that passion when it was work on top of their regular roles at the college.

SUPPORT FROM OTHER MICHIGAN COLLEGES

Because most of the colleges did not have any additional financial support to implement Guided Pathways, the support provided by MCSS was especially valuable. While multiple colleges talked about how helpful MCSS’s work on transfer in the state had been and others talked about how MCSS provided a motivating level of accountability, the most talked about support provided by MCSS was its role in bringing the colleges together to learn from each other.

During the study of Cohort 1 colleges, this role of MCSS as a facilitator of collaboration was identified as a key support, and it continued to be important during GPI 2.0. According to one college, “they brought us together strategically, often in creative ways, and engaged us in meaningful conversations.” Another college talked about how important the in-person meetings were as an opportunity to “get a critical mass talking about a particular subject, which you can’t always get on our campus.”

While the colleges appreciated the opportunity to learn from national experts in Guided Pathways, they generally felt that the opportunity to learn from each other was more valuable. Several colleges specifically mentioned that they struggled with relating to the examples used by national speakers, because those examples often came from highly centralized states with a more structured and consistent transfer system. Despite all of the difference among the Michigan colleges, they shared the common experience of functioning within a highly decentralized system. According to one interviewee, “just having that shared experience is incredibly valuable.” Another college found this shared experience to also be helpful in motivating change on their own campus, saying

“It’s helpful for those of us trying to get our faculty to do crazy things, to say ‘hey this is going on all over the place,’ and having that network and camaraderie really helps them see they’re not in it alone, but that there’s a lot of support and resources that we can tap into through the Center.”

Several of the colleges spoke about how implementing Guided Pathways was not a lockstep or linear process; while one college may be further along in one area of Guided Pathways, another college might be further along in a different area. This allowed reciprocal learning to take place, as colleges could learn from each other while also being proud of the areas where they were stronger. Several colleges specifically

mentioned reaching out to their counterparts or visiting other colleges. According to one college,

“I think it’s been really powerful in a decentralized state to have that network, knowing we can call the Michigan Center for Student Success and say we’re looking for a sister community college that’s done some good work in X.”

Most of the colleges indicated that they would like to continue meeting in some format, with one college jokingly saying they needed to form a Guided Pathways support group.

SUPPORT FROM THE SOAA

For some of the colleges, the completion of the Scale of Adoption Assessment was the most helpful support provided by MCSS. One college called it “the glue that kept us together.” According to another college,

“I really love the SOAA, and I’m trying to have us adopt something similar for our strategic plan, because I think it’s a good accountability document and it helped me to stay on track, on target.”

Most of the colleges indicated that completing the SOAA was a collaborative process, which helped further break down silos on their campus. According to one college, “we wouldn’t have sat down together and taken a look at some of the areas collectively if we had not had the SOAA.” According to another,

“Everyone is doing good things and good work, but because we’re all separated, it’s easy to lose track of who is doing what and what are the efforts being made, so it forces us to collect all of that information and put it in one document, so we can reflect on it as an institution.”

Several colleges also spoke of how they appreciated the opportunity to “think about what we’re doing, what we’re not doing, and what we

should be doing.” Guided Pathways is an approach with many moving pieces, and the SOAA “made us look more closely at some things we might have otherwise swept under the rug.” According to another college,

“I think the piece that I truly enjoyed the most was the dialogue and working through and assessing where things were at and where you wanted them to be and where those gaps were.”

One side effect of involving more people in the completion of the SOAA was finding more of those gaps. One college thought they were answering the first SOAA they completed correctly, but when they completed the second SOAA 18 months later and involved more perspectives, they had to rate themselves lower in some areas because they were able to be more accurate.

Completing the SOAA was also an opportunity to see where they had made progress. According to one college,

“We are making progress, from our first one to the one we did most recently, wow look at the progress we have made, and we should pat ourselves on the back a little bit. So, I thought the tool was good in that way, to focus us, to share information, and then see the realizations of what we had done.”

While several of the interviewees unreservedly loved the SOAA and others also greatly appreciated its usefulness, a few of the colleges had “mixed feelings about it because it feels like a checklist, like a chore, because it’s so long and tedious.” According to one college, “I think it’s a good tool, I just think it needs to be refined.” According to another, “I’m not sure that any of us are jumping up and down when we have another SOAA to fill out” while also admitting “it actually is a really great instrument and tool to bring people together and say ‘oh we really do do this’ so it’s affirming.”

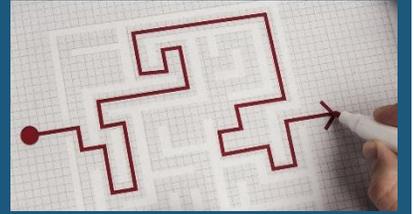
The biggest frustration with the SOAA, across several of the colleges, was that they felt that some of the SOAA components were not really applicable to Guided Pathways at their institution or were only applicable in certain programs. Colleges are making Guided Pathways their own and having items on the SOAA that “we do not see as part of our Guided Pathways” was demotivating, because they knew they were never going to be fully implemented according to the SOAA. A couple of the colleges did note that they felt the new equity considerations were more helpful, because they “led to deeper conversations and are less like a checklist.”

Those who liked the SOAA and those who did not both suggested that it might be helpful to

customize the SOAA early on in the process, so it could be treated more like an action plan than a checklist. Several colleges also felt that it would have been helpful to have more guidance on how to use the tool for strategic planning; colleges often felt that they were completing the tool for MCSS but wanted to know “how to better utilize it for us.” According to one college,

“I’m thinking could we do something differently with how we share outside the small committee, because I think it could be invaluable to the larger college community because it really opens your eyes, so that’s something that perhaps MCSS could help us with, how we might use the SOAA throughout the journey.”

Continuing the work of Guided Pathways



Although the GPI 2.0 project is ending, Guided Pathways work is not done, though the nature of that work is changing at many of the institutions with a shift to maintenance and quality improvement. However, some of the colleges have concerns about sustaining the progress they have made, and initiative fatigue is a challenge. To some extent, that fatigue appears to be due to a failure to see Guided Pathways as a framework for improving the student experience, rather than a narrowly focused initiative.

MAINTENANCE AND QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

Several of the colleges reported that they have already reached a point where “we’ve integrated so much of this stuff, that it’s not going to go away, it’s just part of the culture now.” According to another college, “we’re not calling it Guided Pathways, it’s just embedded in the work that we’re now required to do.” However, even at the colleges that now consider themselves to be Guided Pathways colleges, there is still ongoing work to be done. According to one college, “I think the message is that we’re never going to finish.” According to another,

“We could call the project ‘done’ [with air quotes] because we’re not meeting regularly in committees and subcommittees, but the work still happens every day and we’re still implementing, tweaking, changing things as we find new ways to do things or we find new tools to use. But the heavy work was done early on and now it funnels down into the normal work.”

Many of the colleges are learning that this normal work is different under Guided Pathways. Multiple colleges talked about how changes to meta-majors, programs, or transfer agreements

“set off a cascade” of other adjustments that must be made. According to one college “the amount of work is compounded quickly” in a way that did not occur prior to Guided Pathways.

One college is trying to identify where maintenance can be automated and where it must be done manually. Another is using a software program that has an automated search to find affected programs if a change is made to an individual course. Several colleges talked about how they have or intend to set up checklists and maintenance plans to help keep track of this new, ongoing work. According to one college,

“We have a process to update the website every year at the end of the curriculum cycle, that triggers all the updates to the communications, to the website, to the application. All of these things have to be maintained. You can’t just put it out there and then say ‘oh well it’s good.’”

Most of the colleges felt that the additional work wasn’t necessarily onerous, just that it was important to be aware of “if someone changes a program, what’s the trickle-down effect and who is maintaining it, and how often should things be reviewed?” One college estimated that now that all of the meta-majors and program maps were established, making a curriculum change would require perhaps 15 extra minutes of work onto their already existing yearly curriculum review process. While this is a small amount of time to invest in maintenance, failing to do so could derail much of the progress that had been made.

One college likened Guided Pathways to a new routine, saying “once the change is in place, that’s your new reality, like if you create a new

Saturday routine, eventually you get it down and it's just your Saturday routine." At several of the colleges, a Guided Pathways approach has been incorporated into the strategic plan, so that "it's become part of what we do now." According to another college, "I believe that the work will continue, and I think it will actually become more robust because of our strategic planning."

One important aspect of maintenance now being encountered by the colleges is ensuring new hires understand the Guided Pathways approach and how it might affect their own work, "so that there is a continuity of philosophy and culture." One college spoke about high rates of turnover among its advising staff and how important it was to "talk to new counselors and advisors about what Guided Pathways is and where it came from and how we use it to frame our work."

CONCERNS ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY

Several colleges expressed concerns that "in five years, some of the colleges will have abandoned all of this work." Another college asked, "is this really going to stay with us for a long time, or is this just a flavor of the month again?" Colleges were specifically concerned about the impact of the end of GPI 2.0 on sustainability, with one college saying, "I worry about not having the pressure from outside." According to another college, "I am afraid that it's not going to continue to be at the forefront of change, and I just don't want this to be something we did and then it went away." One college was particularly concerned about how the end of GPI 2.0 might shift the priorities of their Institutional Research department, saying "having the outside saying 'we need your data,' versus internally saying 'we need to evaluate how we're doing,' there's definitely a different level of prioritization."

A couple of the colleges expressed concerns about shifting the work of their various Guided Pathways committees and working groups from implementation to maintenance mode. According to one college,

"When there's a task to do, everyone is there and focused and engaged. Then when it's done it's like 'OK I guess we're through with that, what more do you want from us?' So that feels like the next hurdle we need to tackle...what do you do with a committee when there's not something to do?"

A few colleges were concerned the maintenance work was concentrated in the steering committee or just one or two staff members. According to one co-lead, "I really worry about that, because I do a lot of the maintenance, and there is a lot of maintenance to be done, and I'm going to retire soon." Others were concerned that the work of the various committees had not been adequately integrated into the ongoing processes of the institution, and many departments still did not see how a Guided Pathways approach impacted them. According to one college,

"We really need to sit down with individual groups and help them see what they do from a Guided Pathways lens, and that requires some really clear, really focused explanations and diagrams of what that means for different parts of the college."

Some colleges were concerned about the financial resources needed to continue their work. They felt that much of the work to date had required staff time but that moving forward effectively would require funding for technology and more staff. In the words of one interviewee, "as I look at the SOAA, I think we need some money to make all this happen." This was particularly true when it came to the need for more effective tracking of student progress and automating processes for identifying when students were off their path.

GUIDED PATHWAYS AS A FRAMEWORK

One specific concern that many of the colleges had related to the sustainability of Guided Pathways was initiative fatigue. In general, the Mentor Circle colleges have a culture of

innovation, which includes involvement in multiple MCSS initiatives. According to one college, “we kind of suffer from this phenomenon of ‘oh what’s this next shiny thing we’re going to go after?’” However, it became clear that much of the initiative fatigue was caused, or at least exacerbated, by viewing these different reform efforts as distinct initiatives, rather than part of the Guided Pathways work that they were already doing.

At some colleges this was due to having different faculty and staff from each college involved in the various MCSS initiatives without having a process in place to talk to each other and unify the work. According to one college, “different people on the campus are involved, so there’s no connection...It feels like a lot of different little things, and I didn’t really know what our other people were doing with the transfer work.”

During the data collection process for this study, when it became clear that some of the colleges were not seeing all of the different MCSS reform efforts as being connected, a question was added to the end of the study protocol to directly ask the colleges about the extent to which they saw the various MCSS initiatives as being part of a broader Guided Pathways approach. At colleges where the same core group of people were involved in the various MCSS initiatives, it did appear that there was a greater awareness of how the various projects connected to each other under a Guided Pathways framework. According to one college,

“We have been intentional to create this picture of a large umbrella and underneath that umbrella, as we serve student holistically through a Guided Pathways model, there’s all these things that go under it. But it’s sometimes a tough picture to paint, and I think we’ve been able to do it because we’ve been the ones who have consistently been part of all these initiatives. But I could see in other institutions, if you have different people leading different things, creating that umbrella picture could be

really difficult, depending on the culture of the institution.”

A couple of the colleges spoke about how easy it was to see the connections, because all of those involved in implementing Guided Pathways on their campus had read the same Guided Pathways book.³ According to one college, “the whole philosophy of Guided Pathways is there, it’s right there, and when we go to the meetings, it’s obvious that MCSS is also coming from that same textbook.” According to another college where the book was also widely read and referenced, “there are a lot of moving parts, but if you understand the overall structure and philosophy of it, it makes a lot of sense.” However, they noted that it seemed that some of the other colleges did not have that same foundation.

Even with developmental and gateway course reform, financial stability, and equity explicitly being part of the Guided Pathways SOAA, many of the colleges continue to view each MCSS as a new project. According to one college, “I’ve never really seen those things as being connected, I’ve seen them as separate initiatives.” It should be noted that a couple of the colleges continue to conflate the term Guided Pathways with meta-majors and program maps. In this context, it makes sense that there is confusion over what is viewed as “a lot of different pathway initiatives,” including guided pathways, math pathways, and transfer pathways. However, as one another college pointed out,

“It’s not just about course maps, it’s about trying to revamp and change and improve the overall student experience from the moment they walk in the door.”

One co-lead had not previously been thinking of the various reform efforts as being connected but noted,

³ Bailey, T. R., Jaggars, S. S., & Jenkins, D. (2015). *Redesigning America’s community colleges: A clearer path to student success*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

“They have different components but you’re right, they do all connect back to Guided Pathways. And I think that’s an important message to share. Because when you’re overwhelmed, you’re not at your best, that’s just the reality. But if we know that this is another component, it’s not really new work on its own.”

A couple of the colleges also realized that, while they themselves understood how all of the pieces connected together, perhaps others on their campuses did not. According to one college,

“I’m not sure that it has been clear that it was all connected. Maybe because of my position I got it, but I’m not sure that the advisors and faculty really know that. So, I don’t think it’s easily recognizable to the mass if you’re not in the inner circle”

Another college agreed, saying “I’m not sure that the faculty involved in MiTransfer necessarily knew that it was connected to Guided Pathways, so maybe we just take it for granted that it’s obvious.”

One college recognized and addressed this issue by creating a visual of Guided Pathways as a building with four pillars associated with the SOAA. College reform efforts, both those that align with MCSS initiatives and those that are specific to this particular college, are all incorporated into the visual to show how they are connected, and this visual is shared widely at campus meetings.

While one college indicated that “it’s hard to remember which initiatives on campus are attached to Guided Pathways,” other colleges, consider most if not all of their reform efforts to be part of their new Guided Pathways approach. One college likened Guided Pathways to the pace car in race, saying

“We use Guided Pathways to guide the smaller initiatives through. From Day 1, when we joined

GPI 1.0, everyone knew the term Guided Pathways, so when we talked about doing early alerts or implementing co-advising or mapping degrees, it’s understood that it’s all part of Guided Pathways, so everyone could say this is where this new thing fits into the model.”

Interesting, and this was also evident in the earlier study of Cohort I colleges, the extent to which colleges do and do not embrace the nomenclature of Guided Pathways varies. One college was concerned that Guided Pathways was no longer being directly referenced at college events and worried that “there might be the perception that we’ve left the pathways era and now we’re moving in another direction.” Another college felt that they had erred in not having a campus-wide launch, saying “we didn’t launch it, we just talked a lot about it, but we didn’t launch it formally” so their next step is to “remarket Guided Pathways to the campus.” However, a couple of the colleges have moved away from using the name Guided Pathways. According to one co-lead, the name had acquired a negative connotation on their campus and “we really worked to peel back using the term Guided Pathways and just start talking about how do we want to serve students, how will we be serving students in the future, so it’s a lot more positive now.” Another college agreed, saying

“I think it’s been helpful that we’ve stopped highlighting it as Guided Pathways, because it was seen as just another thing that we’re going to do and we’re going to do it for a little while and then it’s going to go away. So, we’ve just stopped rolling it out at every event, because it felt like something new every time and it really wasn’t, it was just a continuation of the work.”

THE WORK IS NEVER DONE

This study was conducted and this report was written during an ongoing pandemic which has led to disruptions to normal college operations, and several of the colleges were specifically concerned about how current events were

already affecting their forward momentum; they pointed particularly to challenges with scheduling Guided Pathways committee meetings and a shift in focus away from implementing or scaling Guided Pathways components and towards adjusting to a new normal. One college asked

“How do we weave what we’ve done into where we’re going? Because higher ed is a very different place now from where it was just in February. How do we do Guided Pathways sitting in our basement?”

According to another, “somewhere in this virtual world, we need to find where those pathways principles can apply newly and freshly to what it is we’re going towards.”

Interestingly, one college felt that the structures they had developed as part of Guided Pathways was helping them better support students during chaotic times; this included having technology in place to stay connected with students and more

quickly identify when students may need additional support. Another college talked about how the more holistic Guided Pathways approach to student success meant they already had started the work of developing supports, including a family life center with a food pantry, to address non-academic barriers to success.

Although GPI 2.0 is ending, MCSS will continue to support colleges in their Guided Pathways work, through more focused initiatives, including Right Math at the Right Time, MiStart2Finish, MiBEST, and MCSS’s increased emphasis on equity. The challenge will be to not lose sight of the forest for the trees, and how these are all parts of a larger effort to support student success. In the words of one college,

“This is not ending, there will be ongoing work, because this is a journey.”