



Making the Case for Guided Pathways

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Business case:

- *Students spending more, want ROI.* State funding cuts have led to tuition increases in many states. At the same time, per student financial aid is declining. The more students pay out-of-pocket, the more they will want programs that lead quickly and affordably to degrees that prepare for labor market advancement and further education.
- *Financial aid tied to making progress in a program.* Federal financial aid requirements are putting increasing pressure on colleges to ensure that students take courses in their program of study and make satisfactory academic progress.
- *Growing competition.* Colleges are facing growing competition from public 4-years, privates, and on-line providers due to declining high school graduating classes in many regions and the economic recovery, which has led many prospective students to choose work over school. Colleges can continue to compete primarily on cost or focus on program cost-effectiveness and ROI.
- *Growing accountability for program outcomes.* State policy makers are increasingly holding colleges accountable for outcomes with performance funding and other policies, forcing colleges to shift focus from course enrollments to program completion.

Academic case:

- *Developmental diversion.* Developmental education tends to divert and discourage students rather than build their skills and motivation to succeed in college-level coursework. Academic support for program gatekeeper courses other than College Algebra and English Composition—such as Anatomy and Physiology, Biology 101, Economics 101, Psychology Research Methods, etc.—is often limited.
- *Misaligned math.* Students are often required to take algebra even though many undergraduate majors require statistics or other mathematics.
- *Lack of curricular coherence.* Giving students flexibility to design their programs can lead to curricular incoherence—particularly in general education—which in turn can limit learning across a program.

- *2 + 2 ≠ 4.* Community college associate of arts curricula are often not well aligned with lower division requirements for university majors in many fields. Rather than keeping their options open, encouraging students seeking to transfer to “get their general education courses out of the way” before choosing a field of interest can lock students out of many university majors or force them to take additional pre-major courses.
- *Lacking evidence of learning.* Colleges generally do not assess program learning outcomes and therefore can’t document whether students are building essential skills across their programs. One result is that faculty lack good data with which to assess and improve instruction in programs.

Student services case:

- *Little support for college/career planning.* Although many students arrive without clear goals for college and careers, college/career exploration and planning supports are often limited and offered on a self-serve basis. Many students do not visit career or transfer centers until they are ready to graduate. Information on college websites on career options and the connection between college programs and job and transfer opportunities is often hard to access and difficult to interpret.
- *Limited intake advising.* Intake advising is often focused on scheduling first-term classes. Many colleges do not require first-time college students to take a college success course.
- *Unpredictable schedules.* Class scheduling is often not done with a view to offering the courses students need when they need them. As a result sections are cancelled and students have difficulty taking the courses they need to complete their programs. The lack of predictability from one term to the next makes it difficult for students to plan and readily organize their work and family obligations around school and complete their programs in a timely manner.
- *Student’s progress not monitored.* Many colleges don’t require students to develop and follow an academic plan. Students’ progress is not monitored, nor are they required to meet with advisor to register for classes. As a result many students take courses “off plan,” adding time, cost and frustration.
- *Transfer pathway morass.* Students are especially confused about transfer paths and requirements—information is hard to access and often inaccurate. As a result, an estimated 40% of students can’t transfer most of their credits. Most students who transfer do so without earning an associate degree.
- *Students want a clear path.* When asked, many students say they would benefit from clearer program pathways.