

**College Spark Washington/
State Board for Community and Technical Colleges
Guided Pathways Initiative**

**Evaluation
Baseline Year Summary Report**

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Introduction

Five Washington community colleges are participating as a first cohort in the College Spark Washington/State Board for Community and Technical Colleges Guided Pathways Initiative. This first cohort was selected through a competitive RFA process in 2016 and includes:

- Everett Community College
- Peninsula College
- Pierce College
- South Puget Sound Community College
- South Seattle College

A second cohort of five colleges was added in early 2018 and includes:

- Clover Park Technical College
- Lower Columbia College
- Renton Technical College
- Spokane Falls Community College
- Tacoma Community College

“The idea behind guided pathways,” as noted by the Community College Research Center, “is straightforward. College students are more likely to complete a degree in a timely fashion if they choose a program and develop an academic plan early on, have a clear roadmap of the courses they need to take to complete a credential, and receive guidance and support to help them stay on plan.” Guided pathways is a comprehensive approach to reform that entails “a systemic redesign of the student experience from initial connection to college through to completion, with changes to program structure, new student intake, instruction, and support services.”¹

In addition to increasing student completion, the College Spark Washington/State Board for Community and Technical Colleges Guided Pathways Initiative has two other goals: to close equity gaps and develop change leaders.

¹ Community College Research Center, *What We Know About Guided Pathways* at <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/What-We-Know-Guided-Pathways.pdf>.

As part of the Initiative, cohort colleges are provided grants from College Spark, training and technical support from the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC), and coaching. Over the course of five years, cohort colleges will plan, develop, and implement Guided Pathways essential practices, including:

- Mapping pathways to student end goals (metamajors, program/degree maps, and exploratory sequences)
- Helping students enter a pathway (intake, advising, precollege math and English, gatekeeper courses, and math pathways)
- Keeping students on the path (scheduling, progress monitoring, and intervention and/or redirecting students as needed)
- Ensuring students are learning (e.g., program learning outcomes)

This independent third party evaluation, also funded by College Spark, is being conducted to document and evaluate the implementation of Guided Pathways and the results, provide timely feedback to the colleges to help inform their efforts moving forward, and document lessons learned and their implications for policy, practice, and systems.

Key questions guiding the evaluation are:

- Does Guided Pathways increase student success—as measured by completion, four year transfer, employment and earnings, and milestones such as earning college level math in the first year and 15, 30, and 45 college credits—and close equity gaps for low income students and students of color?
- What does full implementation of Guided Pathways at scale require in terms of organizational change and adaptation?
- What kinds of supports are most critical in helping to move this work forward at the college level?
- What are the implications for policy, practice, and systems?

This baseline year summary report highlights some of the key cross cutting issues and themes that emerged during 2016-17, as the five Cohort I colleges organized around Guided Pathways and began work on Guided Pathways essential practices. It also identifies the early progress measures and longer term student outcome measures that will be used to examine progress over the course of the College Spark/SBCTC Guided Pathways Initiative.

Data and information sources include colleges' College Spark Guided Pathways grant applications, five year implementation work plans, and data reflections reports; colleges' scale of adoption self-assessments, based on a tool developed by the Community College Research Center; college site visits and structured interviews, conducted at the start of the baseline year and again at the end; attendance at SBCTC Student Success Center Guided Pathways retreats and institutes; SBCTC Guided Pathways dashboards, which provide detailed student outcomes data; and participation on the Guided Pathways leadership team.

Key Cross Cutting Issues and Themes

Institutional change. Most of the five Cohort I colleges are approaching Guided Pathways as part of broader institutional change, using at least some of the strategies for effective institutional change identified in College Spark’s post-Achieving the Dream (AtD) study issue brief on the topic. These include:

- Institutional change requires visionary, active, engaged, and ongoing leadership.
- Shared or distributed leadership is essential to institutional change, and this requires engaging leaders at all levels of the college.
- Transformational change requires meaningful engagement.
- Sensemaking—making the case for why change needs to occur and tying this to mission, vision, values, and beliefs—is the fundamental underpinning of real institutional change.
- External partners make a difference in moving institutional change forward, providing learning networks, and supporting public, mutual accountability.
- Institutional change is a complex, nonlinear process.²

Leadership is actively engaged in Guided Pathways at most colleges. For example, Peninsula’s president uses the college’s monthly all-college meetings as an opportunity to provide consistent messaging about Guided Pathways and its value and meaning. Pierce’s district chancellor, college presidents and deans are all actively engaged in the Guided Pathways work. This includes the chancellor or one of the presidents being at every Guided Pathways meeting. In general, the visible involvement of leaders is a strength at the Cohort I colleges.

Faculty and staff are also engaged in Guided Pathways work. Everett’s Guided Pathways efforts are faculty-led, with faculty co-chairing the Guided Pathways steering committee and providing critical strategic thinking. Pierce’s subgroups on helping students enter a pathway and keeping students on the path have actively involved faculty and staff in mapping the student experience, identifying barriers, examining current practice at the college and best practices in the field, and conducting student focus groups and surveys. South Puget Sound deliberately began its planning process with a large, cross-campus team for this purpose.

At the same time, the Cohort I colleges continue to wonder if there are additional ways they can broaden and deepen faculty and staff engagement and buy-in. One recognized way of doing this is to engage more people in the work itself. As the colleges continue their work in the coming year on program mapping and advising redesign, these tasks present opportunities for spreading engagement more broadly if the colleges are strategic about this and explicitly plan for it.

Some colleges are also connecting Guided Pathways to mission, vision, values, and beliefs. For example, Pierce ties all of its Guided Pathways work back to mission and mission fulfillment, and does this on an ongoing basis. Everett is paying attention to not only the “what” of Guided

² See Deena Heg and Bob Watrus, *Lessons Learned from Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count. An Issue Brief on Institutional Change* at <http://collegespark.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/AtD-Issue-Brief-Institutional-Change.pdf>

Pathways, but the “how.” This includes articulating mission, vision, and values. Experts in the field suggest this kind of work plays a critical role in moving transformative change forward.

The underlying processes of institutional change are not explicitly addressed in the Guided Pathways model, which emphasizes structural transformations, yet the cohort colleges have eagerly responded to presentations that focus on change processes. Presentations at Guided Pathways retreats that bring together the five Cohort I colleges, student success institutes, and the Community and Technical College Leadership Development Association’s meetings in the last year have all included sessions on key institutional change issues such as decision-making, adaptive change, and equity. These sessions have sparked important, sometimes difficult and exciting conversations, and follow-up work for the cohort colleges. During evaluation site visits, we often heard colleges refer to these as critical components of their Guided Pathways work.

The College Spark/SBCTC Guided Pathways Initiative can help colleges move forward on the institutional change aspect of Guided Pathways by making this a continuing part of technical support, coaching, and cohort retreats. Recognizing that effective change processes must underlie the structural reforms of Guided Pathways in order for real, enduring transformation to take place, the Initiative could continue to provide some opportunities at retreats and institutes to support this. For example, a session or presentation could be included at every retreat or institute that starts the kinds of conversations about critical change issues described above. The colleges can then take those conversations back to their colleges to be continued there.

The Initiative can also continue to document what Guided Pathways requires in terms of organizational change and adaptation, as part of the evaluation; and make this part of leadership team conversations.

Equity. Most Cohort I colleges are working to apply an equity lens to their Guided Pathways work. For example, Everett has developed an equity framework—which explicates five dimensions of equity: aspiration, access, achievement, economic progress, and engagement—to guide all of its Guided Pathway work. This commitment to equity led Everett to include an exploratory pathway as one of its metamajors or pathways, reflecting the belief that there is social justice value in ensuring students have choices and are well prepared to make those choices.

Another example is Pierce, which is using an equity lens in its mapping of programs and the student journey, along with analysis of barriers, current practices, and best practice, as part of helping students stay on the path. All of this is being done for specific student groups, including students of color. Pierce sees Guided Pathways as a way to help the college achieve its goal of closing equity gaps by 2020.

This view of Guided Pathways as a way to close equity gaps is shared by the other Cohort I colleges. They are eager to act concretely to do this, but are not always sure how to do so.

The College Spark/SBCTC Guided Pathways Initiative has helped inject equity into the work of Guided Pathways in a number of ways. First, it made closing equity gaps one of the explicit goals of the Initiative. Second, the SBCTC Guided Pathways data dashboard—which provides college, cohort, and system level data on student outcomes such as employment and earnings, transfer rates, completion, and student progress milestones broken down by race/ethnicity, gender, first generation student, and other demographics—helped to highlight equity gaps and inform colleges’ first year planning and development efforts. And third, Everett shared its equity framework at the Summer 2017 Guided Pathways cohort retreat.

Ways in which the Initiative can continue to support this focus on equity as part of Guided Pathways include conducting additional equity analyses of Guided Pathways dashboard data and sharing the results with the colleges; having equity related sessions, both conceptual and pragmatic, at some of the cohort retreats; documenting the ways in which colleges are applying an equity lens to their Guided Pathways planning, development, and implementation efforts; and assessing the impact of Guided Pathways on closing equity gaps.

Metamajors and program/degree mapping. By the end of the baseline year, all five of the Cohort I colleges had identified metamajors or pathways, although not all had finalized them formally. The colleges had six to eight pathways, with the most common areas being arts and humanities; business; education and social sciences; health care; industry technologies, manufacturing, and the skilled trades; and STEM – although there is some variation within these broad areas.

Also by the end of the baseline year, all of the Cohort I colleges had identified their processes for program/degree mapping. Most were planning to engage faculty at the departmental level and incorporate program learning outcomes as part of the process. Both of these steps are critical to program/degree mapping and were strongly encouraged through Initiative coaching and retreats. It might be helpful to emphasize the importance of these steps with the Cohort II colleges as well.

Career exploration. At the start of the baseline year, most Cohort I colleges incorporated some form of exploration of career and college options as part of entry advising and college success courses. The depth of such exploration varied, as did the breadth of student coverage. At least a couple of colleges had career counseling available, if students chose to pursue it. The colleges reported that career and college exploration needs to be further developed at all stages, especially at the front end.

This is critical, given that Guided Pathways essential practices call for students to choose a metamajor upon enrollment and enter a program of study within no more than two quarters. And it is an issue with major equity implications. These implications were raised in Everett's equity model, in its explicit focus on aspiration and engagement as part of student decision-making about pathways and programs of study, and also in discussions with faculty and staff of color, who want to be sure that Guided Pathways does not inadvertently or prematurely limit student aspiration and achievement.

This is an area that needs greater focus in the coming year. Opportunities to help colleges with career exploration and its implications include future Guided Pathways cohort retreats, student success institutes, coaching, or other professional development events that bring in expertise and promote rich discussion about how to help students make well-informed choices.

A related area that also needs greater focus in the coming year is the exploratory sequence designed to help students who have chosen a metamajor but not a program of study upon enrollment get a good sense of the field.

Advising. At the start of the baseline year, all of the Cohort I colleges had mandatory entry advising, ranging from brief to more comprehensive efforts. Some, but not all, had mandatory ongoing advising provided by professional advisors and/or instructional faculty, with periodic student check-ins required. Some had a mix of success, completion, and retention coaches and/or navigators to provide more intensive services and supports to target populations or programs, often with grant funding. And all had some technology tools to support student

progress monitoring such as degree audit and early alert, but most of these were seen as having real limitations (e.g., ease of access, use, and accuracy of information).

Guided Pathways essential practices with respect to advising call for mandatory and intrusive advising for all credential-seeking students; student progress monitoring and supports through completion; close cooperation between professional advisors and instructional faculty; and the possibility of metamajor or program specific advising, with students assigned advisors based on their metamajor or program of study. Cohort I colleges saw this as an area needing further work. For example, in their Guided Pathways essential practices scale of adoption self-assessments, colleges tended to rate themselves low in the “Keeping Students on the Path” area, with most essential practices in the area falling in the not systematic range.

During the baseline year, several Cohort I colleges embarked on thorough planning and development efforts focused on helping students enter a pathway and keep on the path, with advising being one key element of this work. Faculty and staff work groups began mapping the student experience, analyzing colleges’ current practices, conducting student focus groups and surveys, and researching best practices in the field.

All of this work helps position these colleges to meet the Initiative’s requirement that they have an advising plan completed by the end of the second year (Spring 2018) and fully implemented by the end of the third year, as spelled out in the College Spark/SBCTC Guided Pathways 5-Year Implementation Work Plan template.

A couple of the Cohort I colleges had advising models in mind, consistent with the Guided Pathways essential practices in this area, but had yet to do much planning and development around them.

In terms of technology to support student progress monitoring (and other Guided Pathways essential practices such as scheduling), all of the Cohort I colleges now recognize they cannot wait for CTCLink. By the end of the baseline year, several of the colleges had purchased or were planning to purchase either Hobsons or EAB products to support Guided Pathways. A couple of colleges were still grappling with the issue. Some colleges were also looking to use their existing systems (e.g., Canvas and Tableau) to support Guided Pathways, in addition to Hobsons or EAB.

The Initiative can help colleges move their advising work forward by making this area a focus of technical support, coaching, and cohort retreats. This includes exploring advising models that show promise and all that they require. A couple of promising in-state models are Bellingham Technical College’s enhanced advising and Renton Technical College’s high touch advising, developed during participation in AtD. As detailed in College Spark’s post-AtD study issue brief on efforts to transform advising, the strengths of these models are:

- Students connect with their advisors as part of the onboarding process and those advisors stay with them throughout their time at the college. As a result, students have a single point of contact.
- Advisors specialize in pathways or program areas. They develop knowledge of those pathways and build relationships with program faculty. Advisors have assigned caseloads of students in those pathways that they actively reach out to on a regular, ongoing basis (this includes classroom-based advising). Because of this, they build relationships with students and can provide more in-depth advising.

- Faculty focus their advising efforts on their field of study and related careers, employment, and further education; and serve as mentors.
- Teams of advisors, coaches, and faculty collaborate in working with students to help identify issues and address them.³

Supporting the models are policies such as making advising mandatory and enforcing this through blocks on registration, investments in technology, the leveraging of grants and funding streams to expand advising capacity, and providing related training and professional development opportunities.

The models would likely need to be adapted to community colleges with larger student populations and academic transfer as well as professional-technical programs. This might include providing more upfront career exploration, assigning a number of advisors to specific pathways, targeting gateway courses for classroom-based advising, and creation of other cohort based opportunities such as affinity groups, with a focus on specific groups such as students of color (as one way to help close equity gaps).

A couple of broader lessons learned from the experiences of AtD colleges in Washington and their efforts to transform advising and their implications are:

- Think systems, not services. This includes designing a whole, coherent system, and assigning resources (people, technologies) once the touchpoints, needs, and expected outcomes are all laid out.
- Reflect the advising system's underlying philosophy and values in policies and practices. This means considering how each component, from onboarding and entry advising through proactive, intrusive advising, puts into practice relationship-building, equity, integration of advising and instruction, and other foundational elements of systems advising.
- Design and implement an assessment system from the outset that provides ongoing feedback within the advising system on its effectiveness and makes possible course corrections along the way to achieve its goals for students.

College level math. At the start of the baseline year, all of the Cohort I colleges had in place a wide range of reforms designed to increase the percent of students earning college level math credit, including shortened precollege math sequences, changes in placement policies and practices, instructional models such as Statway and Emporium, supports such as supplemental instruction and tutoring; and STEM and non-STEM math pathways. However, not all of these reforms were at scale. Also, some were optional, which tend to be less effective.

Gains have been made in the percent of students earning college level math credit within one year of enrollment in recent years; however, the percentage falls short of the Guided Pathways essential practice in this area. As spelled out in the College Spark/SBCTC Guided Pathways 5-Year Implementation Work Plan template, the expectation is that the majority of students earn

³ See Deena Heg and Bob Watrus, *Post Achieving the Dream Study Issue Brief on Efforts to Transform Advising* at <http://collegespark.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/AtD-Issue-Brief-Advising-Final.pdf>

college level math with one year of enrollment. Some colleges are closer to this figure than others, and all have equity gaps that need more work.

College level math was not a focus of Cohort I colleges' Guided Pathways work in 2016-17.

Positive steps taken or planned as part of the Initiative to move this issue forward include: making clear expectations regarding this Guided Pathways essential practice (that the majority of students earn college level math credit within one year of enrollment); possibly making college level math an early outcome measure that colleges will track and report on; highlighting models such as co-requisite at cohort retreats; and offering additional support for math reform efforts through College Spark's Community Grants Program.

Guided Pathways Data

The State Board for Community and Technical Colleges has created an extensive database and dashboards for Guided Pathways that provide data on student outcomes, including employment and earnings, transfer rates, completion, and student progress milestones such as college level math and total college credits earned in both first and second years.⁴ The data can be broken down by a wide range of variables, including:

- Student demographics (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, and first generation)
- Individual colleges, the Guided Pathways cohort colleges grouped together, and the community and technical system as a whole
- Credential earned
- Career field
- Transfer status

As part of the evaluation, these tools will be used to examine progress on key student outcomes over the course of the College Spark/SBCTC Guided Pathways Initiative.

Note that Guided Pathways planning is the key focus of the first few years of this Initiative—thus, changes in milestones connected to actual Guided Pathways implementation may start to appear only after three or four years, and changes in employment and further education outcomes after seven or eight years. It is also important to keep in mind that the impact of GP cannot be readily disentangled from the other reform efforts that have been and will continue to take place at the colleges.

Colleges can also use the data dashboards to not only track student progress and outcomes, but to guide and shape their Guided Pathways planning, development, and implementation efforts. To help promote the latter, Cohort I colleges were asked during the baseline year to examine their own data dashboard findings on post-college outcomes—employment, earnings, and further education—and to reflect on the following questions: What are the major takeaways

⁴ Completions data are based on student credential status four years after entry; employment/earnings and transfer status, one year after leaving the initial college.

for your college in thinking about what you want to achieve with respect to student success and equity? And what are some of the implications for your Guided Pathways planning efforts?

Each year, colleges will be asked to submit a data reflections report, with the topic timed to coincide with work the colleges will be doing that year.

Some key observations about the current system-level data for colleges to consider as they plan, develop, and implement Guided Pathways, from State Board researcher David Prince, include:

- For professional-technical students, employment and earnings outcomes vary by race/ethnicity, gender, career field, and credential level.
 - African American students had notably lower full-time employment rates and median earnings than other racial/ethnic subgroups.
 - Female students had overall lower employment rates and median earnings than males. This was especially the case for certain career fields, including education/training and human services, and in general, for short term certificates.
 - For all students, award level affected outcomes. Degrees had better outcomes than certificates, and long terms certificates had better outcomes than short term certificates (with some exceptions)—and this latter effect was more pronounced for females.
- For students who plan to transfer, certain milestones are associated with much higher levels of success.
 - Students who completed college math in their first year had much higher rates of degree completion.
 - Completing a degree made it far more likely that the student actually transferred to a four year institution.
- Most students do not complete a credential after four years.
 - Almost two thirds of students left with no award. At the system level, this rate was similar for Asian and white students grouped together and for historically underrepresented students, but there was more variation between these two groups at the individual college level.
 - About 10 percent of students were still enrolled at their starting college. Ten percent had completed transfer degrees and five percent workforce degrees, and seven percent had earned certificates. Both transfer and workforce degree attainment rates for underrepresented students were consistently a couple of percentage points lower; again, this difference was more variable at the individual college level.

Questions colleges might want to explore, based on these findings, include:

- How are students being advised as they enter? Do entry advisors, orientation leaders, and college success instructors have the kind of information that is highlighted above, so

that they can discuss the implications of these findings with students early on as they are making pathway and program decisions?

- What kinds of career exploration and personal reflection supports are needed for students to have a range of meaningful options to consider and to make informed choices about what program of study and what credential level to pursue?
- What kinds of bridges might a college want to create to ease the way for a student to move to a higher credential level if they want to? What kind of “ladder” might work for a professional-technical student to be able to pursue a four year degree?
- If nursing and other high-interest program slots are limited, are there other programs with similar employment and earnings to consider—for example, health technology? Are there career exploration tools that can help pre-nursing students find other directions that will work for them, since slots are so limited?

As part of the evaluation, we will want to track college progress on early progress measures and longer term student outcome measures.

The early progress measures aim to get at two key questions: Are Guided Pathways essential practices being implemented and at scale? What early impact are they having? They are intended to complement the longer term in the SBCTC’s Guided Pathways dashboards (e.g., 15, 30, and 45 credits earned; employment and earnings; and transfer). With data disaggregated by student demographics, the early progress measures can also provide information on equity gaps.

Examples of early progress measures include:

- Metamajor selection upon enrollment
- Enrollment in a program of study within 1 to 2 quarters
- College level math earned within 1 year of enrollment
- College credits earned in first year tied to program of study

The selection of early progress measures will be based on Initiative requirements; the preceding work on early progress indicators by the Community College Research Center⁵, Completion by Design, the AACC Pathways Project, and others; and discussions throughout the first year with the five Cohort I colleges, the Guided Pathways leadership team, and institutional researchers.

⁵ See, for example, Davis Jenkins and Thomas Bailey, *Early Momentum Metrics: Why They Matter for College Improvement* at <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/early-momentum-metrics-college-improvement.pdf>