A GUIDED PATHWAYS CASE STUDY: PIERCE COLLEGE

WHY WE'RE HERE: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR TRANSFORMATION

Guided Pathways exists for the same reason community and technical colleges exist: to get students where they need to go. While every community college and technical school will approach this data-rich, student-centered, continuous improvement framework differently, there's still much to learn from each other, especially in times of challenges. Read on to be inspired.

"From looking at the data and talking to students, we learned that they weren't wondering; they were wandering. They didn't know what to take or why it mattered. With Guided Pathways, we responded to that in a very intentional way." — Matt Campbell, President of Pierce College Fort Steilacoom

Matt Campbell
President of Pierce College
Fort Steilacoom

BACKGROUND

In 2016, College Spark Washington and the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges launched an eight-year, $7 million Guided Pathways pilot aimed at increasing student completion, closing equity gaps, and developing change leaders. Ten institutions led the way so others could learn from their challenges and successes.

In addition to an independent third-party evaluation that provides comprehensive insights about the implementation, with implications for policy, practice and systems [Read the report here], we offer these case studies to demonstrate the potential when institutions fully commit to this mission-central change effort.

GRATITUDE

Alongside Clover Park Technical College, Pierce College, South Puget Sound Community College and Spokane Falls Community College, we're so grateful to Everett Community College, Lower Columbia College, Peninsula College, Renton Technical College, South Seattle College and Tacoma Community College. Every institution advanced this work, and we could have focused on any of these early adopters for inspiration and lessons learned.

COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGES
Washington State Board

CLOVER PARK TECHNICAL COLLEGE

college spark washington

EMBRACING CULTURE CHANGE

Sample Practices

1. Pierce College welcomed skeptics, recognizing that skeptics ask good questions and bring up issues and fears best addressed early on.
2. They enlisted ambassadors to help colleagues understand the effort.
3. They didn't hide from data that looked bad but instead led with accountability.

Key Concept

Pierce drove transformation by supporting faculty with professional development and involving everyone in the budget process, including the faculty union and classified union, and tying every line item to their mission of supporting students to thrive in their careers and personal lives.

"I've never been so proud of where I work than when I watched our administrative leaders represent us at a nationwide conference, speaking about our problems. They were so vulnerable and transparent." - Murray

Lisa Murray
Health and Technology Department Chair and Physical Therapy Assistant Program Advisor

90%

OF STUDENTS ARE HERE TO GET A BETTER JOB. WORK IS NOT A DIRTY WORD, AND WE NEED TO MAKE SURE WE'RE HELPING THEM GET THERE." - MICHELE JOHNSON, EMERITA CHANCELLOR

INTEGRATING STUDENT SERVICES WITH INSTRUCTION

Example: Close Connections

For several years, Campbell served as the VP of Instruction and Student Services, creating alignment between the two functions. "Here, there's synergy between units," he says. "While differences in opinions or approaches across stakeholders still exist, there's leadership around bringing everyone together."

Key Concepts

- Having their strategic plan together with their institutional effectiveness processes created what one person called "the secret sauce for success."
- They also understood the importance of leadership in instruction; student services; institutional research; and equity, diversity and inclusion; along with tapping people to lead small groups who were not those vice presidents to create a more inclusive infrastructure.

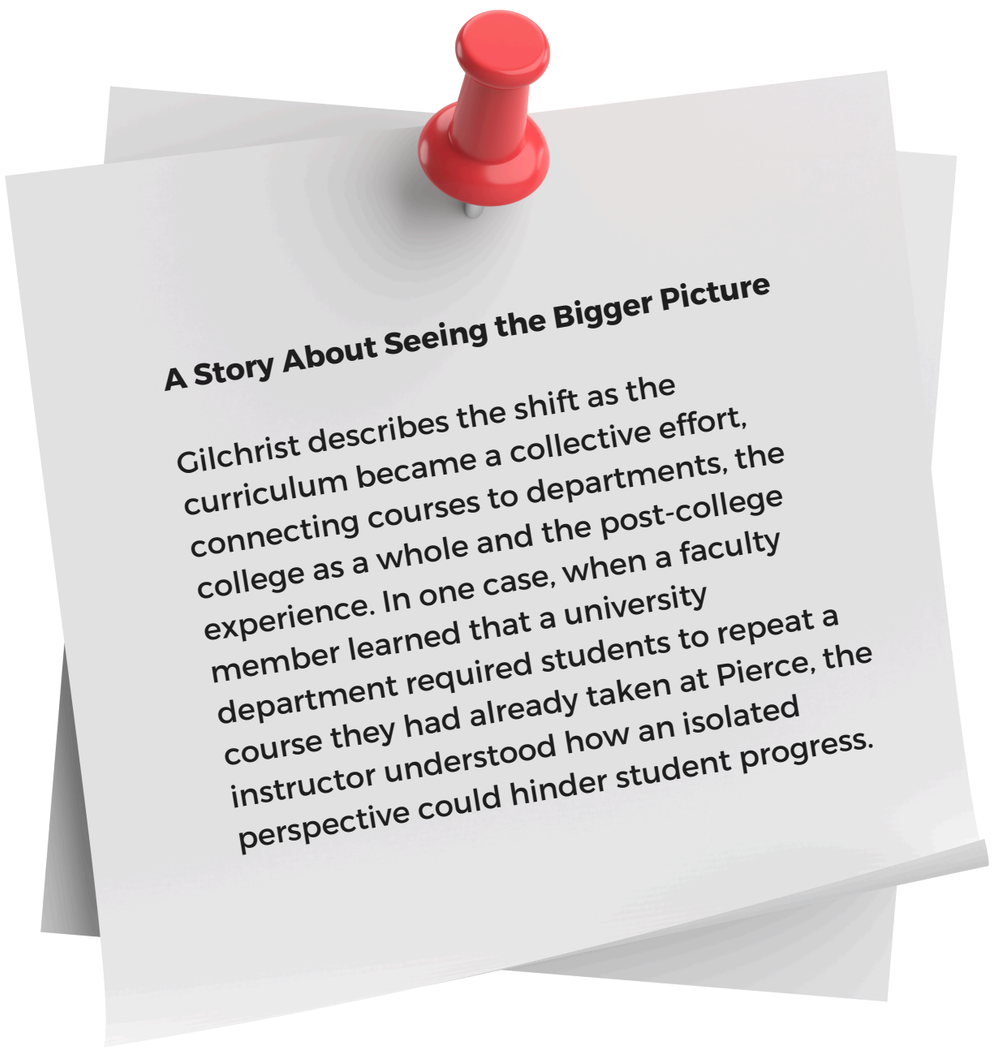
FACULTY AS CHANGEMAKERS

"The math department was the reason we democratized the data. That was a major moment in Pierce history." — Campbell

Example: Addressing Fears

With open data, the math faculty could see that the issues impacting student success were not isolated but longitudinal and could be broken down by faculty and course. "The math department was never satisfied," says Campbell. "Every time they got data, they said, 'We need to do better.'"

Still, many people were afraid. "I don't know how many times I had to say to people that low data does not indicate failure. It's a place to start to dig, and you have to put the systems in place to support the transformational change." — Gilchrist



"To build our maps, we had to let go of things, which was hard for me too," says Murray. "But I started crunching the numbers for the average employment rate for a high school diploma in Pierce County, the likelihood of living above the poverty level, and these are my students. Time is money. While students endure tuition bills, they aren't working."

Sample Practices

1. While they didn't convince all faculty, an initial group of 30 came to understand the importance of continuous improvement work based on data.
2. When hiring new faculty, they began centering equity and continuous improvement, ensuring that people came in with an aligned mindset.
3. Paying faculty for new work, providing training to set standards, and offering stipends for completed work helped integrate and normalize the effort.

> "While we're debating, students are dropping out. There were times when we had to go slow to go fast. But when we belabor it, we're doing a disservice to students. We can't do that."
>
> **Michele Johnson**
> Former Vice President for Learning and Student Success

LEADING WITH DATA

"After key people were hired to help with dashboards and make Tableau completely visible to everyone, the data became personal on behalf of our students. In our annual review process within departments, based on data, we asked for things like resources to increase student access to tutors, equipment, or childcare for single parents." — Murray

Key Concept

Seeing glaring percent differentials broken out by race alongside student surveys changed faculty and staff perspectives. Instead of making excuses for each person who failed, they assumed responsibility and asked, "What's my role in this?"

Sample Practices

1.Data only tells part of the story. It's an invitation to dig deeper to understand how identity-related barriers come into play.
2.Collect and share data in ethical and unbiased ways and understand the value of quantitative and qualitative information.
3.It's critical to take action, learning along the way, knowing that you'll never have all the information you need, and that students are waiting.

"You can get stuck in a rabbit hole of inaction. We're trained for perfection, but data can become a weapon if it postpones action." — Campbell

Example: Change What You Can

While Pierce College recognized that they couldn't control how financial aid works or Title IV, there were other things they could change. "What barriers are impacting success? If it's something we created, we must dismantle it," says Campbell. "If we can't take it down, we must make it work better."

PUTTING STUDENTS FIRST

KEY CONCEPT

If 100 percent of students succeed because of sound pedagogy and because faculty care about their students, that's a very different narrative and goal than saying that 100 percent success means a class is too easy or an instructor is giving away grades.

"The things people think of as rigor generally exclude or keep people from success, and that's not our goal." — Campbell

"When you read the book, you get the idea that this work focuses on making maps and changing the student experience, but first and foremost, it's about changing the culture to be student-centered." — Deb Gilchrist

Deb Gilchrist
Former Vice President for Learning and Student Success

Example: Keeping it Real

For their maps, Pierce College started with careers and worked backward to the knowledge, skills and abilities students would need. This approach acknowledged the realities of the employment sector and the limited time and financial aid available to today's students. It also sidestepped some of the advocacy of faculty for particular classes.

MATH AND ENGLISH

“Both the math and English departments were masterful, developing onboarding with guided self-placement and corequisite courses because they had access to data at the institutional level.” — Murray

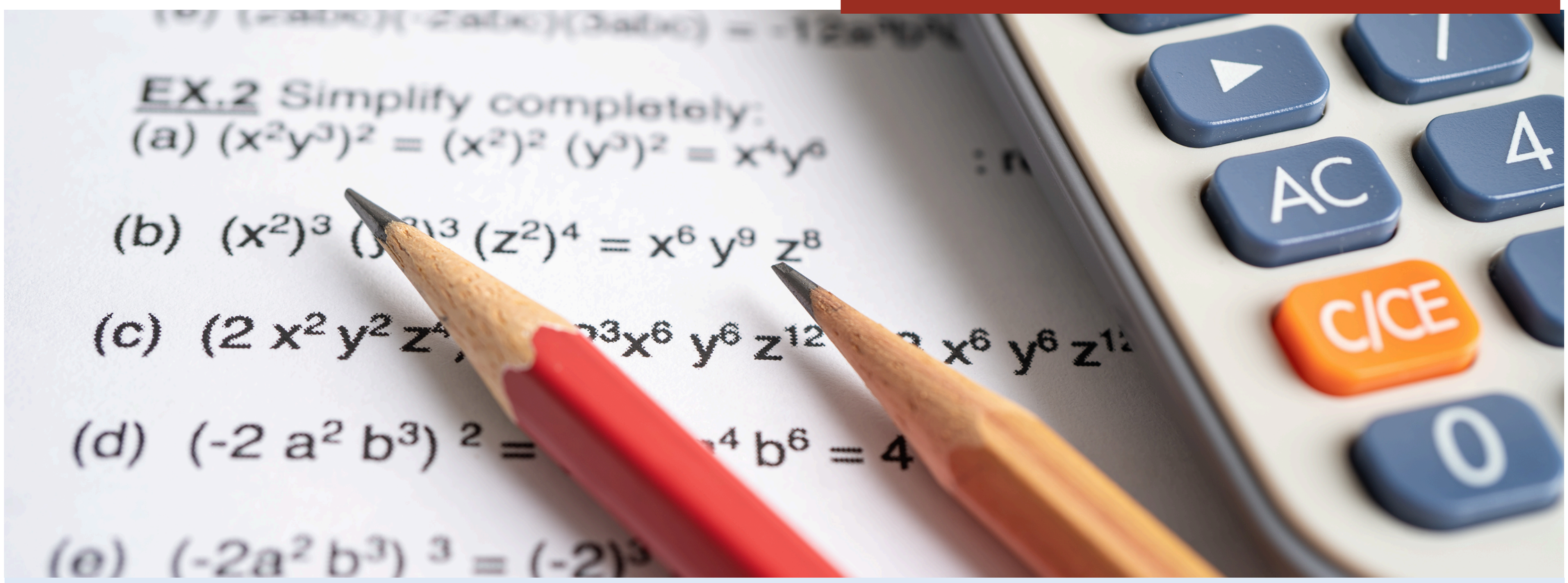
Key Concept
After recognizing that the math pathway was a barrier to student success, Pierce ended up with almost no pre-college math or English courses.

“We kept going back to the drawing board to ask what we could do to improve the outcomes, eliminating high stakes testing, adding corequisites, keeping students from stumbling through three or four classes before getting to the college level.” — Campbell

Quick Fact
First year math completion at Pierce College went from 25% to 38% between 2011 and 2020.

Example: The Naked Truth

“Having full access to the data was like taking your shirt off in front of everyone — scary,” says Murray. “It helped to see administrators and the math department openly modeling.” It wasn’t about shame and punishment but about open dialogue, shared learning and how to change.



ALWAYS IMPROVING, NEVER FINISHED

“The work to me is faculty work. If you ask faculty to do more work, you must support them with resources, space and time to meet and build relationships across disciplines. Also, doing this work is easy when you see your leaders in the trenches with you. That’s critical. We’re getting stretched in higher education, but students are still struggling. We have to stay true to the work we are doing and not let it fizzle away.” — Murray

“With shared governance, we’re not just talking to the union. Everyone has a voice. I taught criminal justice, and I believe in restorative justice. There’s an element of accountability. You change the system and hold the individual accountable as well. It’s individual and system skill development, both all the time. — Johnson