A GUIDED PATHWAYS CASE STUDY: SOUTH PUGET SOUND COMMUNITY 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.

"The adage of 'the student has to be ready for the college' needs to be rewritten. Colleges must come alongside students and listen, creating a pathway to graduation. At South Puget Sound, we're removing barriers and doing things differently. How can we ask our students to be learners if we're not willing to do that ourselves?" — Dave Pelkey, Vice President of Student Services

Dave Pelkey
Vice President of Student Services

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

South Puget Sound
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

college spark
washington

EMBRACING CULTURE CHANGE

"You have to meaningfully acknowledge through action and strategic planning that this is not extra work, it is the work," says Pelkey. "From the president down the line, everyone was willing to ask what we need to do for equity and student success, and we just keep doing it. It's not complicated; it's just a commitment."

After doing their best thinking on essential practices and implementing them at scale, they schedule review and revision. "We've created a culture that is comfortable with iteration," says Andreas. "People understand that they have a voice in the process and more opportunities for change."

KEY CONCEPT

A critical component is trust. "The data is there for anyone in our college to look at," says Director of Institutional Research Jennifer Tuia. "That's a strength."

Jennifer Tuia
Director of
Institutional
Research

"We do not use data to discipline," says Andreas. "We only use it to increase conversation."

Michelle Andreas
Vice President of
Instruction

INTEGRATING STUDENT SERVICES WITH INSTRUCTION

"Our strategic plan is Guided Pathways, and Guided Pathways is our strategic plan. Instruction and Student Services have gone arm in arm together. It takes time, commitment, difficult conversations, and recognition that it's not personal, and then you go have lunch together." — Andreas
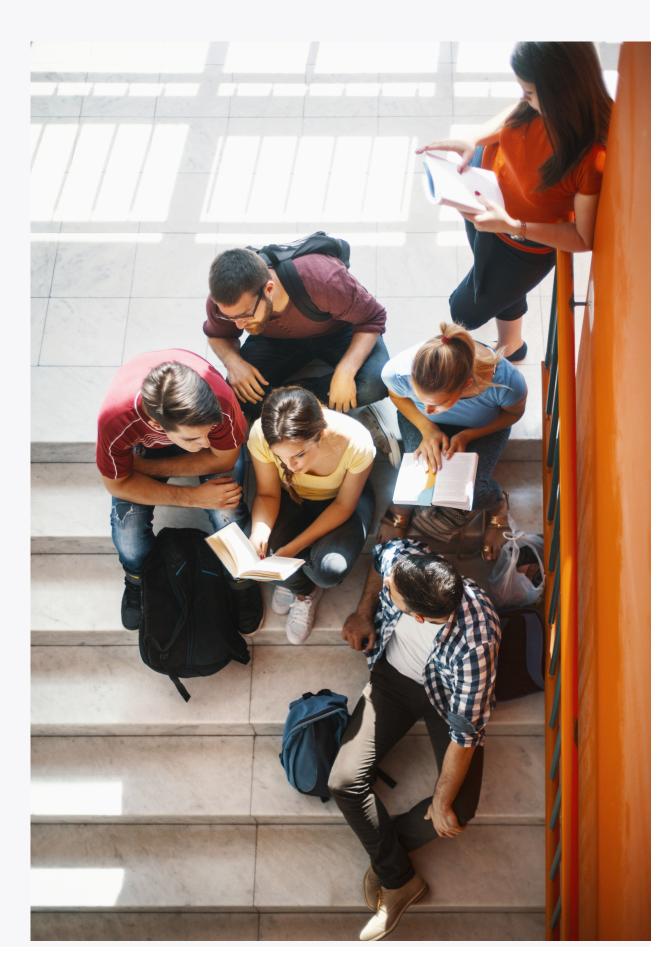
Example: Increasing Capacity

Using a case management model, South Puget Sound built their advising capacity, getting all the necessary people in the room from Student Services and Instruction, with heavy involvement from IT. They looked at the research and the data, figured out the best model for them, implemented it, and then set a schedule for reviewing and improving.

Example: Removing Barriers

In addition to providing educational planning, financial aid support, and pathways from high school, a support center ensures that students quickly surmount obstacles, from laptops to car tires to housing or food, with very little paperwork.

"We stood the support center up during COVID and never took it down." — Pelkey

FACULTY AS CHANGEMAKERS

"After being involved in a lot of research, faculty voted not unanimously but overwhelmingly to do this Guided Pathways work. Transition Studies faculty were the ones who sold this to the college. They were our leaders." — Andreas

Example: Working Holistically

Students have limited time and money and need clarity on a direct pathway. It was essential to create a process that involved everyone. After the first round of coming up with maps, they have a regular review and continue improving.

"It's exceptional work. Faculty do a deep dive into the data, student success rates in classes and department learning outcomes. Then there's a rubric to build the map, it must go through a committee process, and then get voted on and approved." — Robertson

Example: Prioritizing Learning

Faculty wanted to rethink the post-tenure review process because it didn't seem meaningful, so they restructured it through a committee process to center on student learning and success. Data now frames in-service days, best practices, universal design, inclusive pedagogy and more. Ongoing reviews inform course corrections.

"Now review of data is part of our world and everything we do, and that informs teaching and learning in ways that used to be all guesswork." — Andreas

LEADING WITH DATA

"Before we had silos and boutique initiatives launched for a limited number of students. It's hard to expand an initiative without all departments on the same page. It takes a while to turn a ship, but now the collaboration between Instruction and Student Services is bringing research-based initiatives up to full scale." — Tuia

Sample Practices

1. Everyone looks at the data and decisions are only made with supporting evidence.
2. Removing Running Start, often a privileged group, can offer more clarity in underlying data trends.
3. The college's two-person institutional research team provides training, so people better understand what results mean.

"Seeing positive change is exciting. However, it's important to curtail our use of statistical claims such as 'significant' and 'predictive' unless we have the supporting research. Another area of training is how to talk about change within small populations; it's important to include small populations in our analysis, just not through percentages." — Tuia

MATH AND ENGLISH

"Some colleges continue to say that students won't be successful if we let them choose. That's not been our experience. Students have a good handle on what they can do. Faculty said, 'We want them to be successful. Let's see if guided self-placement works.'" — Pelkey

Sample Practices
1. Remove or change classes that create barriers. They had 20, and now have two they are actively working on improving.
2. Provide targeted support with concepts that challenge a lot of students, like dividing fractions, to move them forward as quickly as possible.
3. Provide the right class for the pathway. For example, offer Math in Society for social sciences degrees and don't require algebra and calculus for automotive students.

"A math expert from the State Board spoke to faculty in meaningful ways. The captivating part is that it works, and they see it working. Now faculty talk about math being a gateway rather than a gatekeeper, and it's been phenomenal to watch them make that change." — Andreas

Quick Fact:
In 2022-2023,

47%

of first-time college students at South Puget Sound completed college-level math compared to 32% for CTCs overall.

ALWAYS IMPROVING, NEVER FINISHED

"It's been difficult and fun, exciting, exhausting, and extremely rewarding to see our completion rates and fall-to-fall continuous enrollment increase as we've completely overhauled our institution and the way we view our responsibility to students." — Andreas

"We found something last week that was a barrier, and the dean said, 'Just go change it, it's in the way.' Leadership matters, and it's about fixing things without looking for who's at fault because that doesn't matter." — Pelkey

A champion putting students first for decades, Robertson incorporates lessons from efforts like TRIO and Achieving the Dream. She underscores that Guided Pathways continues to advance the same priorities of helping students stay on track and persist to success. "I know how to do this work. It's what I love. It's why I'm here," she says.

Example: Persist!

From technology implementation challenges to COVID-19, supporting students through completion has been complicated. Meeting these setbacks with determination, collaboration, and creativity, South Puget Sound continues to progress steadily.

"In Institutional Research, we provide targeted student communication lists, such as 'kudos' notification lists for Student Services to celebrate student academic milestones that the CRM system can't generate. We built these partnerships and saw our graduation rate on a solid upward trend pre-COVID. Now, post-COVID, practices just launching during the pandemic have an opportunity to take root more thoroughly." – Tuai

> "Schools with enrollment and budget problems may not want to focus on much more than recovery. It's hard to take on the new when you are focused on what needs to be fixed, but Guided Pathways is a way to help you get there."

Valerie Robertson
Dean of Enrollment Services

> "Students gave us time and money, and we failed to get them where they needed to go. We have a social justice mission and were compelled to do better. Now we have a roadmap to do that." — Michelle Andreas, Vice President of Instruction

PUTTING STUDENTS FIRST

Describing the launch of a new degree planner as part of Guided Pathways, Pelkey says, "The tool went live on Thursday with the plan to market it on Monday. Between Thursday and Monday, 360 students found it and turned their degree plans in for review. We never used the marketing plan." His point? Students couldn't be more ready for these kinds of changes.

A Story About Ditching Orientation

Staff had labored over seven orientation videos and then put a hold on students' enrollment process if they hadn't watched them. Later, while assessing their enrollment process, they learned that students either weren't watching the videos or didn't remember them when they did.

"We got rid of that process," says Robertson. "Now, it's five simple steps (What's your major? Are you full-time or part-time? Are you going to transfer? Here's a video on how to use the ERP system, and here's a website with additional information if needed). As soon as we turned the switch, students were zooming through it."