



Understanding the Guided Pathways Program in the California Community College System



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Background

The Guided Pathways program is a nationwide initiative created to completely restructure the community college experience by improving student outcomes and streamlining the path to degree completion. It focuses on creating clear, structured pathways for students from entry to employment or further education, reducing confusion and enhancing student success rates through academic and career advising, clear and concise program maps, early momentum goal posts, and integrated support services to help students navigate their educational journey in an efficient manner. In the California Community College System, this framework was implemented to address the diverse needs of its large and varied student population. California's approach involves creating meta-majors, which group related academic programs to facilitate clearer pathways for students. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of comprehensive support services to address barriers to student success and ensure equitable outcomes. By implementing Guided Pathways principles, California community colleges work to enhance student engagement, retention, and achievement, ultimately leading to a more educated and skilled workforce both in California, and across the country.



Results / Conclusions

Despite its many successes and notable goals for student success, the implementation of Guided Pathways has yielded significant challenges. It was understood that although strides have been made, staff members of the community colleges feel frustrated due to the lack of adequate funding and incentives provided by higher-up faculty members, thus impeding the program's ability to operate at its fullest potential. Additionally, students have voiced their grievances over inconsistent availability of updated technology across community colleges within the system and their own educational experiences, making it more difficult to transfer credits, review classes, and understand their educational pathways.

Though much is being done to transform the California Community College System through Guided Pathways, significant changes are still needed. With funding ending in 2026, colleges must decide if they wish to enhance student experiences by either expanding the Guided Pathways Program through their own funding and restructuring or returning to forging a new path, which may present its own unique challenges. Addressing these issues will be vital in ensuring this program's continued effectiveness and in supporting the needs of students and staff alike.

Methods

This project was conducted in a qualitative research fashion to assess faculty members' experiences with the Guided Pathways program within the California Community College System. Data collection was conducted in three main stages:

- ➔ Research: Extensive literature review to gain a comprehensive understanding of Guided Pathways and its documented implementation within the California Community College System. Helped in created and identifying key topics to be explored within the interview questions.
- ➔ Interviews: Conducted by Research Mentor Dr. Robyn Tornay with a diverse group faculty members from several colleges within the California Community College System. Faculty members were anonymous and asked to elaborate on their experiences throughout implementation. Provided first-hand accounts of their perceptions, experiences, and challenges within Guided Pathways, with regards to both faculty and students.
- ➔ Data Processing: Interviews were recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed in their entirety. Using Nvivo, these transcripts were imported for systematic coding and analysis. Provisional codes were thereafter established and used to understand key concepts and themes within the data.



References



Future Research

Understanding the lasting impacts of this program is still necessary. How are students performing after undergoing Guided Pathways and how did Guided Pathways influence that development as they advanced into traditional 4-year universities and/or entered their careers? Additionally, how have colleges taken what they've learned from Guided Pathways to continue to enhance student experiences after funding ends?

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