Building Pathways to Community College Success

Our Latest Research to Help More Students Enroll, Persist, and Succeed
Welcome to a special edition of EAB’s *Expert Perspectives* for community college leaders. Throughout the year, our team is privileged to speak with hundreds of community college presidents and senior leaders about the most pressing, persistent, and difficult challenges facing their institutions. This year, leaders highlighted “staying true to mission” as a top concern: broadening access to higher education, ensuring an affordable college experience, and meeting completion standards. The task is difficult, considering constrained budgets across higher education, and also daunting, as more public figures and private citizens turn their attention to the sector.

Looking ahead, the challenges facing two-year colleges are growing and becoming more complex. In response, members have sought our support to implement Guided Pathways at their institutions and help students enroll, persist, and succeed. In this publication, EAB experts share best practices to reduce jargon during onboarding, engage students in financial literacy training, and reimagine the traditional academic calendar to encourage reenrollment—to name just a few.

My hope is that you read these insights with an eye toward adoption and adaptation—identifying best practices that address a challenge at your institution, tailoring them to fit your campus culture, and connecting with our experts to maximize their impact on student success. Together with the nation’s leading community colleges, our team looks forward to bringing the promise of Guided Pathways to life.

Scott Schirmeier
Executive Vice President, EAB
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**PATHWAYS MOVEMENT | 17**

Community college leaders are embracing the Guided Pathways model, but what does it take to actually implement this model successfully? Learn more about how institutions can move towards the Pathways “Holy Grail.”

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While community colleges spend millions of dollars each year on support services, less than half of their students take advantage of these resources. Learn how one institution boosted completion rates by matching students with existing campus resources.
Proactive Recruitment Strategies

Recapturing the lost market share

JOHN TANNOUS

Community college enrollment declines are not merely cyclical

In the aftermath of the Great Recession, from 2009 to 2013, community colleges faced five consecutive years of enrollment declines. Across the sector, fall headcount has declined by 16% since 2010. The resulting loss of tuition revenue—coupled with volatility in state funding—has left many college leaders struggling to balance their budgets.

Community college leaders are familiar with the cyclical nature of enrollments: every time the job market recovers, students leave college to return to work. Yet the current enrollment decline is not merely cyclical—it’s exacerbated by growing competition across higher education. As demographic growth stagnates in many parts of the country, four-year universities are enhancing their marketing practices and going head-to-head with community colleges for prospective students.

Market share slipping as enrollment competition escalates

To understand the impact of heightened enrollment competition, community college leaders need to look no further than their market share. The graph below illustrates the percentage of undergraduates enrolled in the community college sector over time. Until 2002, this figure hovered between 40% and 44%, peaking during recessions and declining modestly in between. Since 2002, however, community college market share has declined almost every year regardless of economic trends. Even when the sector was serving a large influx of dislocated workers during the Great Recession, its market share was barely growing. By 2013, it had fallen to 38%—the lowest it’s been in over three decades.

Initially, community colleges lost market share to for-profit institutions. Over a decade ago, these institutions introduced multi-million dollar advertising budgets and private sector recruitment practices into higher education. Although many of these for-profits faced intense governmental regulation under President Obama, they’ve made an irreversible impact on college marketing. In recent years, more and more not-for-profit universities have similarly enhanced their marketing strategies, and these market-driven universities represent a new source of competition for community colleges today.

Seeking scalable strategies to compete for prospective students

Broadly speaking, community college leaders have two options to reverse enrollment declines.

1. They can continue to grow the market for higher education by expanding college access.

2. They can recapture lost market share by competing with universities for prospective students.

This second approach requires that community colleges replace their traditionally hands-off approach to recruitment with a systematic prospect management strategy. In particular, college staff must identify prospective students early in their decision process and engage them through their preferred—and largely digital—communication channels.

See the gray box on the right for a best practice from Lake-Sumter State College to increase enrollments through proactive applicant engagement.

Nudging Applicants via Email

Lake-Sumter State College

1. Select Topic
   Each prompt focuses on one step such as FAFSA, orientation, registration, or course payment

2. Draft Email
   Admissions staff draft brief email template with instructions to complete selected step

3. Identify Recipients
   Admissions staff download list of applicants missing selected step from SIS

4. Conduct Mail Merge
   Staff send out emails personalized with applicants’ names

   Over half of applicants receive at least one email prompt and may respond for further clarification

Short Email Goes Long Way

Applicant conversion rate in 2015, compared to 59% in 2013

$191K
Estimated additional tuition revenue per year

Time to complete: 25 min

Share of Total Enrollments in Decline Since 2002
Percentage of U.S. Undergraduates Enrolled in Two-Year Sector, 1980-2013

Note: Gray bars indicate recessions
Avoiding ‘Fight or Flight’

Examining behaviors in student onboarding

MELINDA SALAMAN

Evolutional biology in our hallways

In periods of intense stress, humans and animals exhibit a “fight or flight” response, which evolutionary scientists explain is a primitive, automatic, and inborn response preparing the body to either fight or flee from a perceived threat. The credibility of the threat is entirely in the eyes of the beholder; a crash in the next room can trigger this response whether caused by an intruder or merely a gust of wind.

Our research teams have interviewed hundreds of community college students over the past few years and found that every student who submits a college application, regardless of his or her background, has the same basic goal: take a class at your institution. But when students encounter a barrier or threat to that enrollment goal, they often react by fighting or taking flight. Anything from unexplained delays, seemingly unnecessary tasks, and complex decision-points wrapped up in strange language can trigger this response. The “fight” response is likely familiar: students who become increasingly frustrated with the process and try to bully their way through the enrollment process with yells and screams. This is rare but damaging for staff morale.

Recommended Redesigns Based on Behavioral Economics

**Fight**

 **STRESSOR**

A new applicant receives conflicting information about college onboarding steps from the institutional website, available printed materials, and staff instructions.

 **REACTION**

The student becomes agitated due to the clear lack of coordination across different divisions of the institution. Doubting the staff’s ability to help her enroll at the institution, the student becomes increasingly argumentative.

 **RECOMMENDED REDESIGN**

Present students with unified onboarding messages. Ensure your website and printed materials align with staff instructions. This will build trust among new applicants and reduce confusion about next steps for enrollment.

**Flight**

 **STRESSOR**

A student must choose a program of study during a short, 20-minute advising appointment.

 **REACTION**

The context in which the student is asked to choose a program of study seems casual, so she doesn’t give much thought to the decision. She chooses a forensic science major based on the episode of CSI she watched that day.

 **RECOMMENDED REDESIGN**

Set the right environment for informed decision making. Signal to students that their selection of an academic program is important by encouraging them to complete personality diagnostics, network with industry experts, and research career projections for top program choices.

Cognitive depletion:

Attention is depleted with heavy use. When attention capacity is exhausted people are likely to act impatiently.

Choice architecture:

A person’s decision is influenced by the characteristics of the environment or context in which the decision is made. This can include the number of choices presented or simply the manner in which the choices are described.
College leaders can **guide** students toward optimal decisions during onboarding and the rest of their academic careers by **investing** in the language and frame in which **choices** are presented.

The “flight” response is more nuanced, as it manifests in one of two ways. The first is that applicants simply drop out of the enrollment process. When students exhibit the second manifestation of the “flight” response, they retreat from a task by skipping it or investing the least amount of energy to complete it. One student told us that her goal of taking classes at her local community college felt like it was slipping away throughout the onboarding process—just as she started to make progress, she was hit with another step that would take time to complete, like filling out a financial aid application, or a decision she didn’t feel confident about, like choosing a major. Her stress levels were through the roof.

This student, like so many others, retreated (or “took flight”) from these decisions: she opted out of applying for financial aid and remained an undecided student for the first year of her enrollment at the college. While she was able to make it to the first day of class and realize her short-term goal, these decisions set her up for a long and troublesome time at the college.

**Eliminating the threat?**
The City University of New York’s (CUNY) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) model is well known in the two-year college sector. CUNY has managed to show remarkable gains in semester-to-semester retention, credit accumulation, and graduation among participants. It’s an ambitious program with many components that are arguably difficult to scale because of resources and costs. It’s no secret that the program also costs CUNY more than a million additional dollars per year. One of my favorite moments at the 2015 AACC convention in San Antonio, Texas was hearing CUNY LaGuardia Community College’s president Dr. Gail Mellow admit that the program has been both impressive and expensive. The crowd (myself included) appreciated her honesty throughout the conference, which in some way allowed expectations for student success outcomes to fall back to a reasonable level. That’s necessary for change. Realistically, most colleges can’t secure the money needed to fund their own ASAP program and match CUNY’s three-year results.

**Behavioral economics in action**
*Avoiding fight and flight with empathy and language*

College leaders can guide students towards optimal decisions during onboarding and the rest of their academic careers by investing in the language and frame in which choices are presented. This is guided by the behavioral economic theory of choice architecture, which says that the decisions humans make are influenced by a set of contextual constraints, like language, design, or other available options.

There are a number of difficult situations students encounter during onboarding, and even more strategies to reduce the associated stress. Using these strategies, college leaders can begin to anticipate students’ needs earlier and help them feel secure at the institution, avoiding a fight-or-flight response altogether.
**Plain Language**

The art of effective student communication

MELINDA SALAMAN

What does a bursar do? Are developmental courses considered college courses? What does ‘MWF’ mean? The list of questions students ask during onboarding is lengthy and at times, frustrating. For those of us who “speak” the language of higher education, it is easy to overlook confusing terms or phrases. However, over one-third of community college students (36%) identify as first-generation college attendees, leaving them without the cultural capital needed to navigate the ins and outs of the college admissions process on their own.

REBECCA GHOULSON, Executive Director of the Center for Plain Language, has spent the past few years at the non-profit organization educating government officials and private business leaders about the value of plain writing. I sat down with her for an interview to hear why plain language is important and how higher education leaders should optimize their communication with students.

> Experts find it really hard to be simple and straightforward when writing about their expertise.”

—Rebecca Gholson, Executive Director of the Center for Plain Language

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**How do you define plain language?**

REBECCA: Plain writing includes writing, designing, and testing—you’re correcting for clarity, and most importantly, there is always a consumer research element. You cannot achieve plain writing in a vacuum—you always have to bring in the people who are going to do something with the document you’ve created. For instance, if you write something for Veterans Affairs, a real veteran might look at the document as a test case. You as the writer should observe what they read (or don’t read) and ask questions to gauge how well they understand the message you’re trying to communicate.

**What is difficult about plain language?**

REBECCA: In the information age, there is a misperception that more information is better. When experts in our field consider the act of sharing information, there are a series of higher-order concerns that must be prioritized before considering a piece of writing “plain” enough for the public. First, examine the audience. Next, determine your purpose for the message—that’s a great way of eliminating unnecessary content—and remove any language that doesn’t further that stated message.

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**What kinds of organizations are interested in the Center for Plain Language’s work, and why?**

REBECCA: Primarily, government agencies. In 1998, Vice President Al Gore created the “No Gobbledygook” award to recognize federal employees who use plain language in innovative ways after President Clinton issued a memorandum directing agencies to write all forms, documents, and letters in plain language. Since then, President Obama signed the Plain Writing Act of 2010, which requires federal agencies to use clear communication that the general public can understand. The Center played an active role in pushing this legislation through, and continues to work closely with the government to assess language clarity across individual governmental agencies.

Less often, we’ll see interest from state or local government offices and institutions of higher education.
Example of Student Communication

The following exercise may be used with staff members to conduct a jargon reduction audit, so that students and other audiences may more effectively navigate the college website, newsletters, handouts, and other written materials.

**DIRECTIONS**

1. Ask IT Department staff to identify top 10 college webpages with highest volume of traffic
2. Brainstorm all student- and parent-facing material that generates a high volume of in-person traffic
3. Provide staff with print copies of webpages identified by IT staff and additional self-identified webpages
4. Ask staff to complete the following tasks:
   - Reduce multisyllabic words: Underline all words with more than two syllables, identify and replace them with shorter words (even if this requires using multiple words in the place of one multisyllabic word)
   - Remove passive voice: Ask staff to highlight all language in passive voice, rephrase sentences to be in active voice
   - Group related information: Condense all text that pertains to the same topic in a specific area and use white space to separate it from information pertaining to another topic
   - Translate jargon: Replace jargon specific to higher education with translations for a non-expert audience (this step is especially effective when completed with new employees unfamiliar with higher education jargon)
   - Consider using the Gunning-Fog index (available free online) to determine the number of years of formal education your audience needs to read the revised text. EAB recommends striving for a Gunning-Fog index score of 9 or lower to be comprehensible to a new incoming student.

**EXAMPLE**

**Key:**

Passive Voice | Jargon | Multisyllabic

**Original text:**

**Take the College Placement Test**

After you have been admitted to the college, you must take the college placement test. Schedule your test by going to www.eabcc.edu or by calling. If you have successfully completed a college-level English or math course from another college or have taken EABCC placement testing at an earlier date, you may qualify for an exemption from all or part of the test. In order to be eligible to participate in a specific academic program and/or enroll in credit classes, students must achieve a minimum score of 33 out of 120 on the reading section.

You'll need an appointment to take the test. You should schedule it by going to www.eabcc.edu or by calling (xxx-xxx-xxxx).

There are two reasons you may not need to take the test. If you are an admitted student, you must take a test that measures what classes you are ready to take, called “Placement Tests.” It’s important to prepare for this text because it could impact how fast you can graduate if you place into classes that do not count towards your degree. To enroll in classes that do count towards your degree, you need score at least 33 or of 120 on the reading section.

1. If you completed and passed an English or math course for college credit at another school
2. If you took the placement test at EABCC in the past

**Revised Text:**

**Take the College Placement Test**

After you have been admitted to the college, you must take the college placement test. Schedule your test by going to www.eabcc.edu or by calling. If you have successfully completed a college-level English or math course from another college or have taken EABCC placement testing at an earlier date, you may qualify for an exemption from all or part of the test. In order to be eligible to participate in a specific academic program and/or enroll in credit classes, students must achieve a minimum score of 33 out of 120 on the reading section.

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1. If you completed and passed an English or math course for college credit at another school
2. If you took the placement test at EABCC in the past

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<th>Gunning Fog Index Score</th>
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See the gray box on the right to simplify language by reducing jargon. This tool was originally featured in the implementation toolkit for EAB’s best practice research study Eliminating Enrollment Pain Points.
Debt After Graduation

Why do fiscally conscientious students default on their loans?

MELINDA SALAMAN

Poor financial management is not the problem

In 2015, the student loan company Sallie Mae released a study concluding that American college students have a “careful approach” to managing money and “cautious attitude” towards debt. The survey of about 800 college students included community college enrollees.

Internet commentators put the question the most clearly, if bluntly: If college students are so conscientious, then how do they end up with thousands of dollars in debt that they cannot repay?

It’s true that among all students entering into the repayment phase in 2012 (typically 6 months after leaving the institution), 11.8% defaulted on their loans within three years. For public two-year institutions, that figure is 19.1%, the highest 3-year cohort default rate of any institution type.

Student default is important for college leaders to track, understand, and manage. As part of the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, legislators are tracking institutional cohort default rates (CDRs) more closely. Colleges with CDRs above 30% for three consecutive years may face discontinuation of federal financial aid for their students and a decline in public opinion.

But high CDRs don’t conflict with or disprove the results of the Sallie Mae study. They do, however, point to a great failing of federally mandated student loan counseling and how we prepare (or don’t prepare) students for loan repayment.

Community college defaulters don’t stick around long enough for exit counseling

The Department of Education requires colleges and universities to provide loan counseling to federal borrowers twice: at the point of entering the institution and again around graduation.

The Association of Community College Trustees’ 2015 study of student borrowing and repayment trends found that most defaulters (nearly 90%) left the college before earning a certificate or degree. When a student leaves unexpectedly he misses out on exit loan counseling, but is still responsible for repaying loans. This means community colleges effectively have one shot to teach students about the responsibility of accepting and repaying loans: during entrance loan counseling at onboarding.

Loan counseling modules feel too generic, technical, and long

Despite students’ interest in learning more about loan management and ensuring their own financial stability, observations and interviews with student borrowers reveal a standard loan counseling process that is confusing and unsurprisingly leads to widespread student disengagement.

In the spectrum of “fight or flight” student onboarding reactions, the most common reaction to student loan counseling is ‘flight.’ Students may literally leave the institution and drop out from the enrollment process, but more likely they withdraw by passively clicking through modules without absorbing any information.

Shortly after leaving the institution, students must deal with the consequences of this early disengagement as they confront their first loan payment deadline.

Build a loan counseling program around students

Even the most boring tasks—like learning about loan repayments—can become engaging with personalization.

In the private sector, new consumer technologies have turned chores like balancing budgets and booking travel into fun, easy, and informative activities.

In developing Navigate, we’ve seen just how effectively technology can transform a generic onboarding process into a personalized experience for students to complete enrollment tasks and receive customized guidance about academic programs, courses, and scheduling.

Face-to-face loan counseling can also be effective with a facilitator who draws a clear connection between loans, repayment, and students’ futures.

The key to success? At Broward College, facilitators lead financial literacy workshops highlight anecdotes and personal stories to explain to students the potential impact debt can have on their present and future lives. Few things inspire more student attention and engagement than a discussion of their future careers, dreams of home ownership, and romantic relationships.

The chart above outlining the impact Broward’s financial literacy workshops have had on student loan debt since their inception in 2010.
I propose a game for your next community college conference: every time you hear the word “pathways” mentioned in a keynote, concurrent session, or even in the hallway, take a sip of your preferred beverage. I guarantee by the end of the first day, you’ll be sick of the word (and your beverage choice).

The Pathways movement—an institution-wide approach to student success based on clear, coherent, and structured educational experiences that guide each student from the point of entry through to graduation, transfer, and career—is here to stay. The movement takes a refreshingly holistic approach to student success. Faculty may be tempted to roll their eyes at yet another initiative, but board members, state legislators, and funders will undoubtedly raise the question, “Are we doing Pathways?”

The answer to that question depends on the reach of your efforts. However well-intentioned, well-designed, and well-implemented, college leaders are no longer satisfied with small, boutique programs. A high-touch program may dramatically improve 10 students’ odds of success, but on a campus of several hundred, thousand, or tens of thousands, that reach is miniscule.

The most progressive leaders are pursuing transformational institutional changes that touch every member of campus.

So...is your college actually doing Pathways?
Success depends on strong, dedicated leadership from the president and team.

Consensus: More structure is a good idea
Applicants face a dizzying array of steps, jumps, and hoops just to reach the first day of class. Nationally, community colleges lose over half of their applicants to this game of Chutes and Ladders, and those who remain through enrollment spend this time making poor decisions about their program of study, classes, and schedule before the term even begins.

If your college is serious about maintaining enrollments and fulfilling your mission by raising completion rates, then this open-door, hands-off approach to onboarding must be a thing of the past.

Organizations like the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), the Community College Research Center, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have rightly championed the Guided Pathways model as a way to improve the student experience. The model includes clear curriculum maps to transfer and careers, guidance to help students pick the right academic program, and a coordinated support network to keep students on path to completion. Administrators, staff, and faculty all play a more active role in informing students’ decisions and supporting their progress to graduation.

Consensus across the sector isn’t easy, particularly when we’re forced to look in the mirror and identify some ugly truths about our own institutional shortcomings.

Officially, 30 institutions have been selected for the three-year AACC Pathways Project, but based on the comments and conversations at League for Innovation and AACC conferences, I estimate the number of colleges interested in bringing Pathways to their institutions is three times that.

Truly ‘doing’ Pathways
Few institutions have achieved clear pathways to transfer and career, guided pathway selection, and relevant, effective supports to completion for 100% of students: the Pathways Holy Grail.

While no college has achieved “the Grail” yet, many are well on their way. Our team has helped Navigate members across the country with dedicated change management and technology, improving the student experience and connecting students to the support they need to succeed.

Streamlining onboarding
One Navigate member in the mid-Atlantic measured a 42% applicant attrition rate before the first day of classes. Using design thinking principles to uncover process challenges, EAB found a prolonged delay between acceptance and receipt of a student ID number, which is required to move forward in the enrollment process.

Three weeks after our team offered a solution, the college issued immediate ID numbers to accepted students in their admissions email. Contacts at the college reported that after implementing this practice with a fraction of their total applicants for the term, they saw an initial (1.3%) increase in new student enrollments and cost savings from ceasing to print and mail ID numbers through the postal service.

Connecting students to financial support
At one West Coast community college we work with, students complained that the financial aid office was too busy to give quality advice. Consequently, students skipped financial aid without understanding the consequences of doing so. EAB introduced a group of students to the part of the Navigate platform that explains financial aid in plain language and offers easy directions to apply online. About 25% of the students found Navigate so inspiring they started to apply for financial aid on the spot.
Implementing Guided Pathways

MELINDA SALAMAN

A Conversation with Northern Virginia Community College

Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) is located just outside of Washington, D.C., near EAB headquarters. Despite close proximity to the country’s political elite, NOVA's student population more closely mirrors the diversity of an average community college campus: over half of students enroll part-time, one-quarter of the population is enrolled in at least one online course, and the college is home to students of varying racial, national (they represent more than 180 countries), and socioeconomic backgrounds.

NOVA is also a long-time member of our Community College Executive Forum, and more recently of Navigate. We sat down with CYNTHIA PASCAL, acting Director of Student Services, to chat about some of the most vexing questions in her role:

- How to advise a declared math major who registered himself in a schedule full of child development courses
- What Redesigning America's Community Colleges left unanswered
- Advice for college leadership hoping to engage advisors in institutional change

Dispel the myth that institutions like NOVA have all the answers—what challenges does your college face?

CYNTHIA: In my role, I’m constantly figuring out what’s working and what’s not working for our students—we’re not perfect. There are a lot of unintended barriers to student success at NOVA that hinder student momentum, and my team is responsible for helping students navigate them. Like most other colleges, we’ve traditionally had a cafeteria-style approach to onboarding. As a student, you can really sign up for anything and do anything, and there’s nothing in place to stop you from doing so. I remember this one student I advised many years ago who wanted to be a math major. But when I looked at his schedule, he was taking a whole bunch of child development psychology classes because he thought it was interesting! That’s his prerogative, of course, but it was my job to tell him that these courses didn’t contribute to his major requirements and would not be covered by financial aid.

The team at the Community College Resource Center (CCRC) found that it’s fairly common for community college students to choose a random selection of courses that don’t count towards their majors. Why do you think that is?

CYNTHIA: The problem with traditional forms of self-advising, when you just leave students up to their own devices, is that they think all of their random choices will work out in the end. Unfortunately, not only will it not work out in terms of their time to degree, but there are also implications for financial aid and transfer.

This presents a big opportunity for us as an open-access institution to introduce Guided Pathways: we can help students find the path they should be going on, but that takes strategic use of academic and faculty advising, an environment that is hospitable to those decisions, and the right use of technology.

What’s missing from traditional conversations about Guided Pathways?

CYNTHIA: The book has absolutely influenced conversations on campus. We’re redesigning how we operate. There are things that work really well, and we should continue to do them; but for those that don’t, we need to redesign our approach to academic and student services.

At this point, I understand the “why” and the “what,” but I don’t understand the “how”—How will this impact student services? How do these changes impact our current advising practices? How does the faculty fit in the equation?

What advice would you offer to college leaders moving forward with Guided Pathways?

CYNTHIA: First, plant the seed early. If you communicate news too late, the staff’s reaction is going to be fear and panic. But if you plant the seed over a year, there’s an opportunity over time to educate people. Secondly, be transparent about your intentions. If the institutional change means everyone’s jobs are going to change, then just tell the staff that their jobs are going to change. Our senior leaders at NOVA haven’t minced words, or tried to sugar-coat any of the changes coming to the college, and I truly respect that.

Also, share your resources with the staff. Show staff Redesigning America’s

What do you consider a major success at NOVA, and how do you hope to build on that success in the future?

CYNTHIA: Our Student Development Course (SDV) has made a huge impact on our campus. It was part of a whole new campaign about two years ago introducing six policy changes focused on improving student success. In the course, we help students shape their own college experience. The final project is to create a course map—identify their goals and create pathways to get there. We’re teaching them to explore career paths, and apply that to their lives.

The course has [improved student outcomes], but is only required in the first 15 credit hours for students who are first-time college entrants aged 24 and younger; our non-traditional students must take the course, but the timing of enrollment isn’t enforced.

I see Navigate as a way to highlight the importance of taking this course early to students who are older than 24 years old, or have transfer credits. These students want to be self-guided and want access to guidance 24/7, often at all hours of the night—flexible access to technology like Navigate is exactly what they need to get structure that fits with academic, professional, and personal schedules.

Community Colleges, share job market data, and explain why major changes are coming to the college. That way, the staff knows the rationale for changes, rather than feel blind-sided.

Lastly, bring in key stakeholders at all levels. Even if it’s not clear how a change will immediately impact someone’s job, bring them in anyway—there are always unintended consequences. An example of this is in the financial aid office, or your Quality Enhancement Plan director, who needs to be looped into changes for accreditation.
Why it’s important to teach stress management skills

Community colleges serve low-income, high-ability students on a daily basis. Our hallways are filled with individuals of all backgrounds and experiences who have enormous potential to reach and surpass their goals. Unfortunately, we can’t always translate this potential into success; to date, community colleges only graduate about one-fifth of students within three years. Attrition, particularly among students facing multiple barriers to success, is often rooted in stress. When our research team shadowed and interviewed new community college students, early stopouts shared similar stories of high anxiety, stress, self-doubt, and disappointment. The quality of the academic experience is critically important, but fragile. Even with all the academic ability and training in the world, an incredibly bright, promising student can see his academic progress stripped away by life circumstances.

The struggle is real

Students bring with them all the difficulties of their lives outside of school, including doubt about their ability to succeed, stress about making ends meet, and anxiety about beginning a new educational experience. It’s a lot to manage. Karen Costa wrote a great essay in Inside Higher Ed reviewing some of the science of how stress inhibits learning.

She writes, “There is a tipping point where normal stress, an inevitable part of the human condition, transforms from ally to enemy.”

When students face an onslaught of information, choices, and deadlines, their ability to take in information diminishes. Behavioral economists call this cognitive overload, and it results in the “fight-or-flight” behaviors we see in our hallways during peak registration period.

“No my job”

Adjunct professors like Costa and other front-line staff members who interact with students frequently tend to understand the stresses that plague students’ lives. For many administrators, however, it’s been years since they’ve worked as closely with students, and they struggle to abandon their old, “cafeteria-style” approach to student success:

› I’m a college administrator, not a counselor; this is college, not a daycare.
› Isn’t this hand-holding?
› Why should I have to track down students when they’re not doing well? Isn’t that their responsibility?

The resistance comes from a good place. College leaders want to ensure that they support their long-term success. Administrators fear that too much doers. Administrators fear that too much support, particularly for something as personal as stress or anxiety, may stifle true learning, and make students reliant on outside support when troubles arise.

No-nonsense nurturing

However, the risks of doing nothing outweigh the risks of doing too much. If college leaders choose not to teach stress management, it is unlikely students will learn on their own. Instead, they flounder in self-doubt, which could drive them to leave the institution for good. College leaders have to create opportunities for stress management and coaching—starting during onboarding. We created the Navigate platform to guide students through early enrollment steps and ease the chaos of the typical community college onboarding experience. Student feedback has been overwhelmingly positive; they relish the opportunity to take their academic experience in their own hands, engage with the college in a high-tech way, and feel empowered. Here’s a sample of the comments we’ve received from students:

› The [academic plan] is beautiful! You have everything in one view and I can see exactly what courses I have to take.

Our aim isn’t just to make things simpler for students—we also teach them how to approach big and complex tasks like choosing a major or creating a schedule. We dispel the misconception that students should just pick a major and move on; instead we guide students through a series of questions about their academic skills, future goals, and personal interests; create a customized set of program recommendations; and help them narrow their options by comparing relevant information, such as job demand and salary. It’s a combination of hard facts and guided support: no-nonsense nurturing for people of all ages and backgrounds. No doubt, students will face much more difficult decisions down the road. And when they do, those who learned to manage stressful decisions during their college years will be at a distinct advantage. To prepare for that moment, we encourage you to ask how your institution can better equip low-income, high-ability students with the stress management skills they need to succeed.
Engaging Students

3 ways to interest them in the perfect program

MELINDA SALAMAN

Sally declares a forensic science major...despite a deep-seated fear of blood. John dreams of becoming an early childhood educator...but wants a six-figure paycheck. I too, fell victim to program mismatch; I briefly considered a career in international development before finally admitting distaste for flying and a need for the creature comforts of home.

In reality, most academic advisors can rattler off a list of students enrolled in poor-fit programs who could have benefited from career counseling—but never got there.

Students don’t know that career counseling is an option—or where to find it

Without explicit directions or a centrally located office, students rarely seek career exploration on their own. Consequently, they choose academic programs and career goals that are misaligned with their skills, interests, and long-term goals.

College leaders should resolve this “program mismatch” by redesigning career counseling altogether so that it becomes more of an exploratory screening process. On the next page are three interactive, skills-based career exploration activities that help students screen for the right programs—and help higher education leaders screen for the right students.

1. Spark students’ interest with jargon-free program explanations

By far students’ favorite part of our Navigate onboarding platform is the major exploration feature, which uses a short series of questions (e.g., What are your favorite activities? What were your favorite subjects in school?) to identify the best meta-majors and academic programs to suit their interests.

For students, online major exploration is a chance to learn about a particular discipline or career field, and eliminate those that don’t meet their interests.

Descriptions must be written in a way students can understand—using plain-English descriptions of the academic requirements as well as the job skills and daily responsibilities of careers in that field. Radiologic technology on its own might be a mystery (and a mouthful), but knowing that technologists are responsible for operating x-ray equipment and administering radiation therapy makes it a lot easier for students to understand and make an informed decision about enrolling in that program.

2. Engage students with a hands-on career open house

Jobs in the abstract are very different from jobs in reality. Students may want to study a discipline out of academic or personal interest, but find their skills and priorities at odds with the day-to-day demands of the job.

College leaders can avoid this program mismatch by giving students a chance to see common workplace tools and even step into real workplace settings during a career open house.

College leaders can use a career open house as a chance for early skills assessment—are there students with a knack for the skills required to weld metals, take blood, or saw wood? If so, these might be early indicators of their long-term success in the relevant career programs and a chance for early, targeted recruitment.

3. Provide a program sneak peek with “try-before-you-buy” options

A try-before-you-buy model can take many forms, from one-day workshops to weeks-long intensives, depending on institutional resources and the type of student recruited. Current high school students typically have more time to invest than working adults, for instance.

All previews should engage students in meaningful activities that mimic what the academic program and career training is really like. Instructors can lead participants through a project from beginning to end, with lessons infused throughout that reflect the wide range of skills and tasks required for success in the featured career field.
Accelerating Completion with Mini-semesters

AUDREY WILSON

In the traditional community college academic calendar, students face barriers that can slow or even stop their progress toward completion. Minor issues like a malfunctioning car or severe problems like losing a job can cause a student to withdraw from the semester.

In 2015, Trident Technical College decided to restructure the academic calendar into mini-semesters to accelerate student progress toward completion. In the new Mini-sems model, full-time students take two compressed courses per each seven-week mini-semester instead of the traditional four or five courses simultaneously during one semester.

Three benefits to the Mini-semester model:

1. **Lower the stakes of dropout**
   Students that face a non-academic hurdle (e.g., illness, eviction) receive no credit for any of the work they completed before dropping out.

   If students drop out in the second mini-semester, they can still receive credit for the courses completed in the first mini-semester. Alternatively, if they must drop out in the first mini-semester, they have the opportunity to return in the second mini-semester to gain credit for their planned courses.

2. **Eliminate late registration**
   Students who enroll a day or two before the term, or even after the first class session, are significantly less likely to persist from term to term.

   To prevent any late registration, Trident Tech also adopted a strict policy about late registration: students who attempt to enroll in courses in the week before the start of the semester are denied and told they can enroll in the second mini-semester. In this scenario, the policy reduces the wait period before starting courses from up to 18 weeks to just seven.

3. **Leverage developmental courses**
   Students who are not college ready face semesters of developmental courses, which delay their enrollment in college-level courses.

   The compressed Mini-semester model at Trident Tech allows students to take two compressed sections of developmental math within the first 14 weeks of their time at the college. Students who successfully complete two levels of developmental math in the first two mini-semesters can enroll in college-level courses that require math by January instead of waiting a full year.

   While the transformation of Trident Tech’s academic calendar was no simple task, the student success outcomes speak volumes. Trident Tech saw increases in student success across courses throughout the college as well as increases in retention rates.

“A roadblock that only causes minor tremors in a traditional student’s academic performance is more likely to be insurmountable for a nontraditional student.”

—William Watson, Director of SparkPoint, Skyline College
Using **Existing Campus Resources** to Boost Completion Rates

STUART DAVIS

While many community colleges invest millions of dollars in on-campus support programs and services as a way to improve completion rates, only a small percentage of students take advantage of available resources.

A study from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) in 2011 shows that while the vast majority of two-year colleges have built academic tutoring centers, student success courses, and first-year experience programs, less than half of students take advantage of these services.

**Campus Services Fail to Recruit Participants**

*Results from 2011 CCSSE Survey*

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<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Colleges Offering Services</th>
<th>Students Participating in Services</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Academic Tutoring Centers</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Success Courses</td>
<td>84%</td>
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<td>60%</td>
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Often what prevents students from completion are non-academic life factors—a realm in which community colleges have historically had little control. Mount Wachusett’s proactive service matching program represents one of many best practices from our larger study, Preventing Early Attrition, aimed at minimizing first-semester dropout. These practices ultimately empower students to manage life circumstances that could otherwise derail them from their completion goals.

Steps to implement a new-student intake survey

Students who indicate a specific area of need on their intake survey (e.g., support caring for young children) receive personalized text nudges that proactively connect them to resources that would suit those specific needs (e.g., on-campus child care).

From the inception of the invention in 2013 to 2015, Mount Wachusett’s fall-to-fall persistence rate of first-time, full-time students has increased by 20%. By utilizing a new student intake survey, this institution was able to understand the needs of individual students earlier and connect them with related resources on campus.

1. New students complete the survey during orientation at placement test centers. The answers to the 30-question survey form part of the student profile stored within their student information system (SIS).
2. Next, the assistant dean of student services leads a team to create a campus services referral matrix. This tool helps categorize student responses, so they can match students to applicable campus services and resources. Admissions staff notify students of the applicable services via SMS.
3. Rather than receive a list of 30 to 40 resources available to them, students receive customized invitations to participate in right-fit clubs, programs, and services.

Intake survey can identify and push relevant resources

Mount Wachusett Community College encourages students to utilize on-campus services by understanding their needs and connecting with them early. Admissions staff created a new student intake survey that captures information about potential non-cognitive risk factors like family support, transportation, and financial literacy.

Make a greater impact on completion

Often what prevents students from completion are non-academic life factors—a realm in which community colleges historically have had little control.

This discrepancy in utilization is a missed opportunity for community colleges to directly impact the completion rates of their students. After speaking with students, staff, and administrators, we surfaced three common barriers that prevent students from connecting with on-campus support services:

1. Options may feel overwhelming
The average community college offers more than 200 student services, offices, special programs, and clubs.

2. Services can be easily dismissed
Students may self-identify as not needing additional support, especially to avoid social stigma of academic or financial assistance in front of peers.

3. Extracurriculars vary in popularity
Students may intentionally select extracurricular activities that appear easy or require minimal time investment, while seemingly time-intensive groups are often neglected.

Mount Wachusett Community College encourages students to utilize on-campus services by understanding their needs and connecting with them early. Admissions staff created a new student intake survey that captures information about potential non-cognitive risk factors like family support, transportation, and financial literacy.
**Navigate** is a student-facing platform for two-year community colleges that delivers personalized guidance at scale. Designed for both mobile and web-based use, this comprehensive student success platform was built in partnership with the nation’s leading community colleges to support students starting from onboarding through to graduation.

For more information on the topics presented in this issue of *Expert Perspectives* or to learn how Navigate can help you achieve your student success goals, visit [eab.com/blogs/navigating-student-success](http://eab.com/blogs/navigating-student-success).
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