

Converging Initiatives Lead to Guided Pathways

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Guided Pathways are clear, highly-structured degree maps that are designed to help students complete their college degrees on time. With completion rates of 48% for bachelor's degrees and 16% for associate degrees (2012 Montana CCA Data Snapshot), Montana's higher education community is exploring Guided Pathways as one way to help more students complete degrees and enter rewarding careers. Recently incentivized by a performance funding model adopted by the Montana University System, campuses have pursued a variety of initiatives to address completion over the years.

One such initiative—tightening admissions requirements—may have been a response to the standards movement in the K-12 systems of the 1980's. Or perhaps a focus on admissions was designed to counteract the long-held belief that the purpose of the freshman year was to weed out unprepared college students. Whatever the reason, in 1995 the Montana Board of Regents approved a directive requiring that a “uniform assessment” be used to provide students “a reasonable chance of success in postsecondary education.” The Montana BOR adopted Proficiency Admissions Standards in Mathematics (2003) and Writing (2004), and supported a uniform writing assessment administered to high school juniors from 2001 through 2012. Remediation rates dropped from 36.7% to 28.4% over a seven-year period (dropping by 5% in math and by 6% in writing).

Granted new Perkins Reserve Funds in 2013, Montana's two-year colleges hired Big Sky Pathways Coordinators who worked to help high school students transition seamlessly to their colleges' Career and Technical programs. In 2014, Montana GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) began funding the ACT for all of Montana's juniors to help achieve its goal of “increasing students' college and career readiness.” However, efforts to increase the college readiness of high school students must be matched by college strategies to improve students' chances of completing college degrees. With the current focus on college completion, those initiatives that focused on high school students' pathways naturally progress to the use of guided pathways for college students.

In October 2017, Helena College joined a small group of colleges and universities within the Montana University System to partner with Complete College America (CCA), committed to helping students complete their credentials in a timely fashion. Based on the principles that 1) time is the enemy of college completion; 2) structure benefits students; and 3) student success requires mutual commitment, the CCA proposed five “Game Changer Strategies”:

- 1) Adopting Math Pathways that align with the skills needed for success in a program of study;
- 2) Using co-requisites in math and English to provide just-in-time academic support;
- 3) Advising all students to enroll in a minimum of 15 credits each semester (15 to Finish);
- 4) Directing students into Guided Pathways or highly-structured degree maps; and
- 5) Providing students with predictable and consistent class schedules.

In 2016 Helena College initiated mathematics pathways and experimented with developmental co-requisites for math courses, with the intention of reducing the barrier of remediation to gateway math courses. In addition, one-credit writing labs now serve as co-requisites for College Writing (WRIT101) for students who would otherwise need to take a developmental writing course before entering the



college-level course. With the co-requisite model, underprepared students are not automatically relegated to an extra semester of course work.

During the 2017-18 school term, Helena College faculty and staff have engaged in collaboratively reading and discussing Redesigning America’s Community Colleges (2015). This book supports the Complete College America agenda, including the recommendation that students make informed choices about their “meta majors” as soon as possible, ideally during their first 15 credits. To select a meta-major wisely, students should begin narrowing the field based on their interests and skills in high school.

Helena College has employed a Big Sky Pathways Coordinator for the past five years, helping high school students find and enter pathways to successfully transition from high school, to college, and to careers. Big Sky Pathways developed “Programs of Study,” outlining specific high school and college courses that lead to the completion of a specific college degree--essentially guided pathways from high school through completion of a two-year degree. This model has transitioned to Montana Career Pathways, which encourage students to select meta-majors (or career clusters), a feature of the CCA and Redesigning America’s Community College. If more students begin their pathways in high school, more will complete. As a bonus, they may earn some relevant college credits while still in high school.

In Redesigning, guided pathways are contrasted with “the cafeteria college,” where students “are left to navigate often complex and ill-defined pathways mostly on their own” (Bailey, p. 13). Montana Career Pathways guide students in high school, a level that the Redesigning authors call the “connection” phase, when students transition from “interest to enrollment.” The following chart contrasts the experiences of two students in this phase:

**Benefits of the Guided Pathways Model
Connection Phase**

Student Without a Pathway	Student With a Pathway
Attends high school that is poorly informed about the local college’s program offerings and readiness standards	Attends high school that aligns senior-year curriculum to the local college’s readiness standards in its main program areas
Not helped to explore career and college options while in high school	Participates in pre-career assessment and exploration offered in collaboration with the college
Takes random dual-enrollment courses that may or may not apply to college program	Takes dual-enrollment courses in field of career interest (such as business)
Graduates high school, gets a low-wage job, delays enrollment in college, enrolls later part-time	Graduates high school, gets a low-wage job, but enrolls full-time in college in the fall with credits toward degree (in business, for example)
 No clear direction Enrolled part-time	 On a program path Enrolled full-time

- Adapted from Baily, Thomas; Jaggars, Shanna; & Jenkins, Davis (2015). p 201. Redesigning America’s Community Colleges. Harvard University Press. Cambridge Massachusetts.

Montana Career Pathways can play a critical role in achieving the Complete College America agenda by beginning guided pathways in high school. A focus on college readiness, capitalizing on Montana GEAR UP and the statewide administration of the ACT, contribute to this redesign. Using these resources, the steps outlined in this chart can be fleshed out with the following specifics:

1. College and high schools work together to ensure alignment of senior-level curriculum and college readiness standards, ensuring that counselors, students, and parents know the benchmark ACT scores required for entry into college-level courses and know which courses they should take to be prepared for the college program.
2. Colleges provide high school students with opportunities to take placement tests and interest inventories; to tour college campuses; and to experience hands-on events at their local colleges.
3. High schools offer and students are advised to take dual enrollment courses in their fields of career interest. When high schools are unable to offer relevant concurrent enrollment courses, colleges offer pathway courses for high school students to experience on campus or online.
4. Colleges and high schools work with local business and industry to develop apprenticeships and work-based experiences that will introduce students to the job market. Colleges schedule courses so that students can enroll full-time and work part-time.

In the next three phases of the *Guided Pathways* model described in Redesigning, the student 1) enters college and enrolls in a program of study with a prescribed first-year sequence; 2) progresses with the assistance of intrusive advising, and 3) completes a degree ready to enter the workforce or transfer to a four-year university. Instead of experiencing the unrelated courses dished up in the cafeteria model, with *Guided Pathways* students see how the skills they learn are applied to their destination: “the guided pathways approach conceptualizes each course as a step along a coherent path. Instruction should therefore focus on building skills, concepts, and habits of mind necessary for success in subsequent courses” (p 97). Such holistic approaches have the capacity to help K-12 students prepare for their next level of learning and to help college students prepare for successful careers.

Helena College has made a commitment to Complete College America and to understanding the principles and strategies described in Redesigning America’s Community Colleges. Using these resources and working with K-12 partners through Montana Career Pathways and ACT initiatives, Helena College hopes to take advantage of the synergy created by these converging initiatives to achieve higher completion rates and help students fulfill the aspirations that brought them to this campus.

Sources:

Baily, Thomas; Jaggars, Shanna; & Jenkins, Davis (2015). p 201. Redesigning America’s Community Colleges. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Complete College America (Oct 25, 2017) CCA Data Snapshot, Complete College America Summit, University of Montana Missoula, Montana.

Montana Board of Regents (2017) Policy and Procedures Manual. www.mus.edu/borpol/