**A Simpler Path, Authors Say, Is Key to Community-College Completion**

By Katherine Mangan April 07, 2015



Columbia U.

“Nobody does that well if they’re faced with a confusing array of options,” says Thomas R. Bailey. The director of the Community College Research Center at Columbia U.’s Teachers College, Mr. Bailey is one of the authors of “Redesigning America’s Community Colleges,” released this week by Harvard U. Press.

Community colleges need to fundamentally overhaul the way they offer courses by giving students fewer choices, a more structured curriculum, and better guidance from registration through graduation, according to the authors of a book being released this week. Creating a simpler, streamlined pathway will be far more effective than the piecemeal approaches two-year colleges have used in trying to bolster sagging graduation rates, the book, [*Redesigning America’s Community Colleges*](http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674368286) (Harvard University Press), argues.

The authors are three senior staff members at the Community College Research Center at Columbia University’s Teachers College: the center’s director, Thomas R. Bailey; the assistant director, Shanna Smith Jaggars; and a senior research associate, Davis Jenkins.

Mr. Bailey talks about the book here in an exchange that has been edited for length and clarity.

**Q. Why is the guided-pathway approach preferable to the cafeteria-style structure currently in place at most community colleges?
A.** Community-college students have a plethora of courses, majors, degrees, and certificate options to choose from. Many are first-generation, low-income students from families that don’t have a lot of experience with higher education. Colleges, meanwhile, don’t have the resources to provide them much guidance. All of that leads to confusion, discouragement, and wasted resources. There are services available to students, but they are pretty much on their own figuring out which to use and how to access them.

The basic idea for guided pathways is that we’d like to have simpler, more coherent programs of study. We need to do a better job of helping students decide which path they want to be on. There’s a huge difference between a student who knows what he wants and one who doesn’t.

One of the fundamental insights of social science in the last 20 years has been that nobody does that well if they’re faced with a confusing array of options. When I have my 401(k) and someone says, "Here are 10,000 stocks and bonds — go to it," I don’t know what to do. If someone says, "Here’s a low-risk, medium-risk, or high-risk portfolio," I’m much more likely to choose something that makes sense for me than if I’m simply let loose in the wild.

**Q. What are the biggest barriers to implementing a guided-pathways model in a sector where more than half of the students attend part-time?
A.** There’s no question part-time students pose a challenge for this model. There are practical issues about how you schedule courses. If everyone were full-time and moving together in a cohort, you could schedule classes in blocks. Making this work requires a tremendous amount of collaboration and interaction among groups of faculty and counselors and advisers who traditionally haven’t had to interact much.

Even though the models that are out there encourage students to attend full-time, this kind of structure could also be helpful to part-time students. They are really lost, because they aren’t there that much and they have fewer contacts with the college. If they see that this is a pathway I can stay on and I know what I need to do to get through expeditiously, then they may be more likely to make the financial sacrifices needed to attend full-time.

**Q. Isn’t all of the extra advising and support prohibitively expensive, given declining public support and the pressure on colleges to cut costs?
A.** We recognize this is going to cost more. The City University of New York’s highly-successful [ASAP program](http://chronicle.com/article/Programs-Extra-Support-for/190415/) costs about 30 to 35 percent more per student. I don’t think it’s realistic to think we can make major improvements in community colleges without some increase in spending. But while the overall cost may go up, the cost per completion may actually go down as more students graduate. And with all of the attention lately on the need to improve graduation rates, this should be seen as a worthwhile investment.

**Q. What makes you think this approach would work when a flurry of reform efforts have failed to make a significant dent in the dropout problem?
A.** A typical reform involves a couple of sections of something, or counselors working with a small group of students. It allows reform to take place without getting into the basic operation of the college. It’s grant funded, and even if you can get some activist faculty to participate, when the funding runs out, they move on to something else.

As a result, there’s a lot of appearance of reform, but not a lot of fundamental change taking place. This, on the other hand, is an approach to reform that takes account of the entire student experience from registration to graduation. It isn’t a narrow, highly-prescribed rail that students get on and can’t get off. We’ll have a default sequence of courses in a particular "metamajor" like health or social sciences, but there will be some flexibility built in.

*Katherine Mangan writes about community colleges, completion efforts, and job training, as well as other topics in daily news. Follow her on Twitter* [*@KatherineMangan,*](https://twitter.com/KatherineMangan) *or email her at* *katherine.mangan@chronicle.com.*