Implementing Guided Pathways at Miami Dade College: A Case Study

Systemic Change at Miami Dade

In 2011, working groups from across the eight campuses of Miami Dade College (MDC) conducted a wide-ranging examination of why many students were not completing their programs. These groups identified a number of reasons for student attrition. Students were unclear about how to progress through programs—they had too many course and program choices, did not understand program requirements, and needed help in developing academic and career goals. Also, advising information given to students was unclear and inconsistent, and academic support was disconnected from academic programs.

These realizations provided the impetus for a comprehensive college-wide effort to redesign programs and supports so that students could more easily navigate college and achieve their goals. While implementation is not yet complete, and student completion data are not yet available to gauge the impact of the changes undertaken, more than half of the college's faculty and staff are now involved in various aspects of the endeavor. This case study describes the strategy MDC used to engage faculty and staff in this wide-ranging reform effort.[1]

This case study is part two of CCRC's guided pathways practitioner packet. It is adapted from the article "Strengthening Program Pathways Through Transformative Change," by Lenore Rodicio, Susan Mayer, and Davis Jenkins, published in *New Directions for Community Colleges*, no. 167, fall 2014. For an overview of research supporting the guided pathways model, see *What We Know About Guided Pathways* (part one). For practical guidance on implementing guided pathways at your college, see *Implementing Guided Pathways: Tips and Tools* (part three).

The Planning Year

In 2011, the college launched a major new initiative to strengthen pathways to degree completion, facilitate transfer to baccalaureate programs, and support students' advancement in the labor market. Because previous small-scale, incremental innovations had not substantially improved student outcomes at MDC, the goal from the onset was systemic change. College leaders understood that broad, institution-wide change could only be achieved if faculty and staff led the process of identifying problems, developing solutions, and carrying out results-oriented action.

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The college kicked off the initiative in August 2011, embarking on a yearlong planning process with three objectives:

- Cultivate a collective understanding of the problems students encounter as they navigate through college.
- Create a comprehensive plan to address the problems.
- Build support for the initiative, particularly among faculty, staff, and administrators who did not participate directly in the planning.

More than 120 faculty, staff, and administrators were tasked with analyzing data on student progression patterns to identify barriers and their causes. Initially, planning teams were organized for each of the eight campuses, but after the teams shared early findings at a college-wide retreat, they realized that the barriers students encountered were common to all campuses, and the planning teams were reorganized into college-wide teams. After analysis and deliberation, the planning teams came up with five major recommendations (see box below).

Early findings showed that barriers students encountered were common to all campuses, so college-wide planning teams were formed.

The college-wide teams were reconstituted as integrated implementation teams to develop detailed execution plans for the five recommendations. The first three recommendations were prioritized, since mapping programs, redesigning intake, and integrating support services had to be in place before it would be possible to accelerate students' transition to college-level programs and build communities of interest.

Recommendations of the MDC Planning Teams

- **Develop structured program pathways that clearly lead to transfer and career outcomes.** Courses and course sequences should be aligned with the college's 10 learning outcome goals, Florida's statewide undergraduate general education requirements, and the requirements for junior standing in baccalaureate programs at MDC (which offers bachelor's degrees) and its partner universities.

- **Create a comprehensive intake process.** The intake process should be designed to increase students' early engagement with the college and to help them choose and enter a program of study as soon as possible. It should include mandatory orientation, assigned advisors, and holistic assessments of student motivation and metacognitive skills.

- **Integrate academic programs and student support services.** A new, intrusive coaching and mentoring model should be implemented to help students make steady progress on their program pathways. Students should receive advising, coaching, and mentoring from the time they are admitted to the college until they graduate, through a partnership between student services and academic departments, and facilitated by student information and academic planning technologies that can be used to monitor student progress.

- **Strengthen students' transition into college-level programs.** The transition from developmental education and English language learner programs into college-level programs of study should be strengthened by redesigning and expanding contextualized, accelerated, and modularized course offerings and linking them to diagnostic information about individual student skill gaps and needs. The English as a Second Language for Academic Purposes program should also be revamped, introducing college-level coursework earlier in the sequence, and contextualizing instruction in the content and skills foundational to the student's field of interest.

- **Increase student engagement through communities of interest.** Entering students should choose a broad program area—or "community of interest"—based on their educational and career goals. Each community of interest should provide additional opportunities for students to benefit from academic, extracurricular, and career activities related to their field of interest, and to engage with a community of other students and faculty with common interests.

Mapping Program Pathways

In fall 2012, MDC formed the Undergraduate Pathways Planning Group (UPP), made up of 27 faculty members representing each of the schools and major disciplines at the college. The team was tasked with using the 2012–2013 year to map out pathways for their most popular programs: business, psychology, biology, and criminal justice. Together with allied health and nursing programs (which were already clearly mapped out), these programs enrolled 80 percent of MDC students.

Getting Faculty Buy-In at the Front End

Some faculty members of the task force were skeptical about the necessity for more prescriptive recommended program maps for students. However, the planning group participated in a series of exercises that changed their perspective. In the most powerful exercise, the members were given the transcript of a currently enrolled MDC student seeking to transfer to a local university for a degree in biology and were asked to determine which courses the student should complete in her second year in order to transfer with junior status in the biology major. The task force members had difficulty figuring out what prerequisites were required by the transfer institution and which courses would transfer. The assignment was made even more complex by the need to identify which courses fulfilled state prerequisite requirements. This experience helped galvanize support among the planning group for more clearly structured program pathways.

Creating the Pathways

The UPP teams started with the end in mind: preparing students for direct entry into jobs or achieving junior standing in bachelor's programs with minimum loss of credits. With this goal informing their course choices, the teams created pathways that incorporated both Florida's general education prerequisites and the courses required for related bachelor's degree programs offered by the college and Florida International University (FIU), the destination for over half of MDC transfer students. For each program area, faculty mapped out a pathway for full-time students (enrolled in 12 or more credits) and one for part-time students (enrolled in at least six credits).

Each pathway provided opportunities for students to master the 10 learning goals that MDC faculty in 2007 had set for all students and indicated specific general education courses relevant to the given major field. For example, the pathway map indicated which social science course was recommended for criminal justice majors. In other areas, students were given flexibility in choosing electives. For instance, the biology pathway had a prescribed sequence of math and science courses, but it allowed students to choose from a variety of arts and humanities courses.

The Role of Institutional Researchers

Institutional research (IR) staff were critical to the mapping process because they provided analyses that informed the group's decision making. For instance, the business faculty surmised that students needed to take introductory college math (intermediate algebra, the highest level remedial math course) in order to perform well in business statistics. When the IR staff analyzed the data, however, it was evident that students who enrolled directly in the business statistics course did as well as students who first took intermediate algebra.

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The Role of Institutional Partnerships

The pathways planning benefited from the strong working relationship between MDC and FIU. Each year, administrators from the two colleges meet to discuss priorities. In the 2012 meeting,

MDC leaders indicated that their priority was to map out more structured and aligned associate degree pathways that would enable transfer students to start their junior year on equal footing with native FIU students, and FIU leaders encouraged their faculty and support services staff to provide the necessary cooperation to help MDC achieve this goal.

The Pathways Vetting Process

Each UPP member was responsible for reviewing drafts of pathway maps with their respective departments and for communicating departmental feedback back to the team. Substantial efforts were made to ensure that everyone participated in these discussions, including skeptics. These deliberations produced a rich diversity of ideas and feedback, which facilitated the process and strengthened the pathway maps.

The psychology pathway was the most difficult to map because requirements at both the associate and bachelor's level are not well defined. To overcome concerns, the psychology department participated in a retreat, during which they talked through which courses to include in the map. The conversations were difficult but worthwhile, and in the end, the faculty reached a consensus and created a pathway they supported.

Overall, more than 200 faculty members were engaged in the pathway mapping process. The UPP submitted pathways drafts to the student services directors, the Implementation Council (the initiative's steering committee), and the academic deans, who all provided feedback. The pathways were presented to the College Academic and Student Support Council—which reviews and helps to disseminate new and revised curricula across the college—and were implemented in fall 2013 term.

Creating a Comprehensive Intake Process

While the UPP was beginning its work mapping out program pathways, MDC launched a restructuring of its new student intake experience. Creating the new intake system was critical from an operational standpoint. A new infrastructure—through which entering students would create an educational plan and choose a program pathway and community of interest—was necessary to serve as the foundation for the other pathways reforms.

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Transforming Intake to Increase Engagement

The initial implementation of the redesigned intake process targeted the cohort of approximately 9,000 students entering MDC directly from high school in fall 2012. The changes the college made included eliminating late registration; augmenting the number and scope of "mini-term" courses for students who missed registration deadlines; establishing uniform, mandatory orientations for new students that incorporated nonacademic diagnostic assessments and course registration; assigning advisors to incoming students; and offering summer "boot camps" for students requiring remediation.

Advisors reached out to approximately 9,000 new students to help them develop individual academic plans. Throughout the semester, advisors connected with students with high-risk profiles, publicized activities designed to help students become more engaged in the college, and made themselves available for follow-up questions.

Early Outcomes

The initial results of these efforts were promising. Half of the students who attended a boot camp placed at least one level higher in developmental education. More than twice as many academic plans were completed than in the prior year (about 70 percent of the 9,000 new students met with an advisor and completed an academic plan during the fall 2012 launch of the new system). Retention for students who met with an advisor and developed a plan was 8 percentage points higher than retention for incoming students who did not meet with an advisor.

The Role of Early Success in Guided Pathways Reforms

Launching the redesigned intake process was an important early win for the college, helping to demonstrate that large-scale change was possible and that students would benefit from it. The success of the endeavor was actively communicated across the college, and the news motivated faculty to persist in developing more structured program pathways and to volunteer as coaches and mentors for students in their programs.

Strengthening Supports Along the Pathway

Advising for Guided Pathways

Because of the initial positive results from the restructured intake process and the added revenue generated by the improved retention, the college's leadership approved the hiring of 25 new full-time advisors. These advisors enabled the college to expand and enhance support services for new and returning students. Because the new advisor positions were to be an ongoing annual expense, the additional $1 million investment required was paid for with the college's operating funds, as opposed to grant funds.

In keeping with the new advising model focused on supporting students through to graduation, the college transitioned approximately 3,200 students from the 2012–2013 cohorts to academic coaches in students' particular program areas to provide more targeted career, transfer, and employment guidance. More than 150 faculty, department chairs, and departmental advisors volunteered to coach and mentor students from the time they complete 25 percent of their program requirements until they graduate. Each academic coach and mentor is supported by a peer in student services.

Strengthening Pre-College Advising

The college also implemented pre-college advising, which begins in high school and continues until the mandatory orientation, when newly matriculated students are assigned an advisor. While the new system is designed to serve all incoming students, including nontraditional students who have been out of school for some time, the college focused early implementation on incoming high school students.

Starting in spring 2013, the college began outreach to high school students with the objective of building student engagement with the college. College administrators believe that this effort contributed to a 13 percent increase in the rate at which recent high school graduates enrolled directly at MDC in the 2013 fall term compared to the previous year.

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Professional Development

The student services staff and faculty supporting students received extensive training, including classroom instruction and hands-on practice. For example, the advising staff trained the student coaches to access and use students' academic plans and communicate effectively with students. Faculty coaches were required to do four hours of "job shadowing" with a professional advisor. In addition, a college-wide learning day was held in the spring of 2013, during which participants learned strategies and tools they could use to support students both in and out of the classroom.

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Feedback and Improvement

MDC is carefully monitoring student outcomes and evaluating each major aspect of the reform in order to understand what is working, what is not working, and how to make it better. Institutional researchers are tracking several near-to-mid-term measures, including course pass rates, retention rates, student satisfaction, and particularly the time it takes students to complete 25 percent of their program requirements—a measure that is strongly correlated with program completion.

The college's director of institutional research and planning leads an internal evaluation team, with research staff members who are "embedded" in the redesign implementation teams. These researchers document the work in each area for use in formative evaluation. In spring 2013, the college provided training to members of the implementation teams and the internal evaluators on developing and executing a robust evaluation plan.

This evaluation process is intended to stimulate ongoing learning and improvement. Evaluation of MDC's initial experience with the redesigned intake system in the summer and fall of 2012 informed extensive improvements that were implemented in spring 2013. The college also evaluated the process by which the pathways were mapped, surveying faculty who participated in the process. UPP members recommended the creation of a "tool kit" and training in curriculum development for future mapping teams.

Conclusion: What Drives Systemic Change?

Critical to the transformative changes at MDC was the leadership of the college's president, Dr. Eduardo Padrón. Dr. Padrón set the vision for the initiative and provided dedicated resources to support it—including assigning full-time staff to coordinate planning and implementation. At the same time, he let the design, planning, and implementation processes happen from the bottom up. Systemic change would have been difficult to achieve had he dictated solutions. Instead, he gave faculty, staff, and administrators a full year for planning, so they had time to deliberate about needed changes and develop ideas for strategies that they could drive forward with enthusiasm.

Effective communication was another key element to successful implementation. The college appointed a full-time member of the communications staff to increase awareness across the institution about the initiative and to help teams get the word out about research findings and lessons learned. This steady flow of information facilitated problem solving, informed decision making, increased innovation and risk taking, and supported effective execution. Open communication was also essential to effective collaboration with the faculty union, which was concerned that prescribed pathways would result in many discontinued courses. The college invited union leaders to be members of the planning and implementation teams, allowing them to participate in designing collaborative solutions.

Overall, the largest threat to institutional redesign at MDC was organizational inertia. Communicating frequently about progress, building consensus, and creating a sense of urgency were vital to creating a sense of shared ownership and to generating momentum for change across the college. Three years after the launch of the overall initiative, more than half of all faculty, staff, and administrators are directly involved in one or more implementation activities, and many report that the change they are driving has become ingrained in the culture of the institution.

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Endnote

1. This case study is largely adapted from Rodicio, Mayer, and Jenkins (2014).

Source

Rodicio, L., Mayer, S., & Jenkins, D. (2014). Strengthening program pathways through transformative change. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2014(167), 63–72. doi: 10.1002/cc.20111.