California Community Colleges

Students Shaping Change

Engaging Students as Essential Partners in Guided Pathways Development

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Engaging Students as Essential Partners in Guided Pathways Development

Guided Pathways requires California community colleges to take a student-centered approach to redesigning structures, programs, and practices so that significantly more students reach their educational and career goals in a timely way. So, how do we know what students experience? How can we directly respond to their aspirations, strengths and needs through Guided Pathways design and implementation? How can we ensure that the changes we make lead to improved outcomes for all student groups?

Engaging students as partners in Guided Pathways redesign efforts fosters a campus culture that puts the student experience at the heart of decision-making and day-to-day practices. When students have structured opportunities to share their perspectives and contribute their ideas, choices related to college policy, processes, programs and practices will be more practical in supporting students and helping them reach their goals. Involving students in a sustained way can also help maintain the momentum for change, keeping people motivated to continue the hard work of redesign during difficult decisions or challenging times.

STUDENTS AS PARTNERS: A FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE

Engaging students as partners in Guided Pathways development requires an important shift in thinking. It means that in addition to gathering student perspectives to identify key success issues through activities like surveys, focus groups, or town halls, colleges also actively involve students in all aspects of design and decision-making.

> " *Typically, we bring students in after we decide what to change to get their reaction. We had the idea to bring students in while we were designing so they could help [shape the change]."*
>
> Jenna Gausman,
> Santa Monica College Student
> Advisory Squad faculty liaison

This approach engages students in an ongoing way throughout the redesign process, as opposed to seeking students' feedback on potential changes already determined by college faculty, staff and administrators. As Santa Monica College career counselor and Student Advisory Squad faculty liaison Jenna Gausman shares, "Typically, we bring students in after we decide what to change to get their reaction. We had the idea to bring students in while we were designing Guided Pathways so they could help [shape the change]." What is the value of engaging students in this way? Colleges can identify priorities and construct changes

IN THIS RESOURCE...

Student engagement in institutional redesign can happen on a continuum. All efforts to involve students are valuable—from collecting student voices to identify key success issues, to asking for student input and feedback on proposed changes, to deep collaboration with students throughout your design work.

This resource focuses on how to involve students as partners in institutional redesign, including:

- Six "design principles" for structuring and supporting students' involvement.

- Examples from Santa Monica College's Student Advisory Squad to demonstrate what these design principles look like in action.

- A group exercise to help advance a student engagement approach.

Colleges can use the design principles and Santa Monica College insights to inform their own approach to engaging students as partners, based on local needs, strengths and goals.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR ENGAGING STUDENTS AS PARTNERS

Despite the best intentions, attempts to involve students in shared governance committees, task forces or design teams often fail. An existing committee may select one or two student leaders to join its work without much preparation or thought about how they can contribute. Students frequently enter into existing structures that are not designed to optimize and support their participation. As a result, students might lack the confidence the speak up, participate irregularly, or share their perspectives in a limited way.

Six design principles—grounded in theory and practice—can offer direction for meaningful student engagement.[1] Together, these principles can help your colleges foster purposeful and effective student engagement—avoiding some pitfalls that may arise from more ad hoc approaches.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN GUIDED PATHWAYS DEVELOPMENT

1. Treat student engagement as an ongoing and iterative process
2. Ensure equitable student representation
3. Create conditions for full student access
4. Prepare students for the opportunity
5. Level the playing field in the presence of power dynamics
6. Honor student involvement

We explore these design principles below in the context of engaging students as partners. Examples from Santa Monica College's Student Advisory Squad also are shared to show what these principles can look like in action—offering one model for how student engagement is different when the systems are built to prioritize learning from students' experiences and using students' inputs in design.

1. PARTNER WITH STUDENTS IN AN ONGOING WAY

Engaging students as partners requires a dynamic, multifaceted and continuous effort. It is not an event or activity. Rather, it is about developing relationships with a corps of students through a scaffolded, structured and intentional approach to ensure students can effectively contribute to institutional redesign. Colleges and students get maximum benefit from this participation.

Student involvement in shared governance committees, student success task forces and Guided Pathways design teams in a sustained and ongoing way or embedding student engagement as part of course curriculum or special program participation is likely to lead to real student-centered change more than an ad hoc approach. Colleges might even work with students themselves to design where to root your student engagement strategy. Whatever the approach, engaging students as partners demands strategic investment—including dedicated staffing and support—and takes cultivation throughout each stage of Guided Pathways adoption.

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[1]   See Student Engagement in Guided Pathways Development: Design Principles for a high-level overview, found in the California Community Colleges Vision Resource Center at https://visionresourcecenter.cccco.edu/.

SANTA MONICA COLLEGE'S APPROACH

Santa Monica College launched its Student Advisory Squad in January 2018 at the same time it initiated an institution-wide effort to adopt Guided Pathways. For the 2018-19 school year, 22 students—including a mix of new and returning Squad members—were embedded across the college's nine Guided Pathways/Redesign teams (e.g., Guided Career Exploration for All New Students, Student Care Success Teams). Students committed 12 to 20 hours a month to attend regular Student Advisory Squad meetings, Guided Pathways/Redesign team meetings and campus-wide Guided Pathways events (e.g., meta-major sorting days, program mapping days, Guided Pathways retreats).

Santa Monica College currently uses money from its Award for Innovation grant from the California Department of Finance to fund this approach. Students must be enrolled in at least 12 units to receive payment for participation. Faculty liaison Gausman receives four hours of release time each week to coordinate and support Squad members.

2. ENGAGE STUDENTS WHOSE SUCCESS YOU MOST WANT TO IMPROVE

Engaging students as partners in your redesign work requires deliberate recruitment that starts with a deep knowledge of your student body. Without a specific recruitment strategy, colleges are likely to reach students who are already succeeding. For example, while student leaders can have unique perspectives and critical input, engaging those who can share a wide range of other experiences is important and informative. Specifically reaching out to those who are not as involved on the campus, part-timers, older or returning students, and/or students experiencing disproportionate impact ensures that you include those who may be most marginalized by existing college structures.

Assessing your college's student characteristics and disaggregating specific metrics can help pinpoint which groups to engage. By making it a priority to involve students on Guided Pathways teams who will be affected directly by redesign efforts, you can keep decision-making focused on how changes will practically improve their success and avoid unintended consequences. Enlist college faculty, staff and administrators who have trusting relationships with these students to support their recruitment, increasing the likelihood the most representative set of student partners participate.

SANTA MONICA COLLEGE'S APPROACH

Santa Monica College developed a recruitment strategy for its Student Advisory Squad based on data that showed which student groups were struggling to progress and complete their programs to specifically target those whose outcomes could most benefit from Guided Pathways. The Guided Pathways/Redesign team knew up front that it did not want to tap Associated Student leaders. As Gausman notes, "We wanted students who were wandering our campus, who weren't necessarily involved in anything." The college identified specific student characteristics and experiences it wanted in Student Advisory Squad members and found through initial recruitment that individual students often represented multiple facets of these priority groups (see sidebar, Santa Monica College Student Advisory Squad 2018-19).

SANTA MONICA COLLEGE STUDENT ADVISORY SQUAD 2018-19

22 members, including those who represent:

- Undecided students
- Career Technical Education students
- First-year experience participants
- Disabled students
- STEM majors
- Black collegians participants
- Adelante participants
- Scholars students
- EOPS students
- Guardian students
- Probationary students
- LGBTQ students
- Veterans

Gausman underscores that "the best recruitment happens with individuals on your campus who really know your students, what their background is, where they're from." As faculty liaison, she reached out to faculty leaders of various student groups on campus and asked them to refer prospective Squad members. As a career counselor, she also looked to her own department for recommendations, saying that "some of the best sources for finding students are our counseling departments; counselors have ongoing discussions with students not only about their interests and goals but their life experiences and background."

Squad member Anthony Arevalo-Hernandez notes that personal outreach from faculty and counselors is a compelling strategy, sharing, "It's really nice to be approached [to participate], to be recognized" as a potential leader. Student Advisory Squad members underscore that the college's approach to building this advisory group makes participating feel more accessible and less exclusive than other campus leadership opportunities. Further, they appreciate the way in which the college recruits participants to ensure the Squad reflects a broader student experience. Squad member Ishmael Jasmin notes:

> *The majority of the [students are] not [Associated Students leaders]; I like that for the Student Advisory Squad, all you need is your story… When you tell a teacher your story, they can say, 'Oh, I never really thought about it from that perspective.'*

3. CREATE CONDITIONS FOR ROBUST STUDENT PARTICIPATION

Students have multiple demands on their time and attention (e.g., employment, family obligations, educational commitments and commutes). Without realistic, grounded expectations for their involvement, it is likely that students will struggle to consistently or meaningfully take part in our redesign work. When possible, put in place strategies to meet students where they are to increase participation. Consider the venues and places on campus to best connect with various student groups and ensure ease of involvement. Flexibility so that student partners have multiple opportunities to plug in to Guided Pathways design work is also important. Consider holding meetings, committee work and task force forums at times and in locations that are conducive to regular student involvement. Alternatively, participation can be embedded into course or special program activities. Whatever the approach, take students' unique interests and experiences into consideration when making assignments or structuring their involvement in workgroups or teams.

SANTA MONICA COLLEGE'S APPROACH

Logistically, Santa Monica College puts Squad members' commitments, loads and availability front and center when scheduling meetings. Gausman notes that at the beginning of the year, she pulled every member's class schedule to determine a Squad meeting schedule that worked for the majority of students. To respond to students' own time demands and varied interests, Squad members are invited to attend any and all Guided Pathways/Redesign team meetings. Gausman notes, "Students' schedules are crazy. At Santa Monica College, students commute from all over the greater Los Angeles area. Having 22 students helps us ensure at least two or three Squad members are at every Guided Pathways work team meeting." In the case

of some work teams, Gausman asks Squad members to make a sustained commitment so they are up to speed and can make informed contributions.

Squad members report that they appreciate they can attend any redesign team meeting. They share that this approach helps meet their scheduling needs and allows them to take part in the groups in which they feel as if they have a genuine interest in the issue and valuable ideas to contribute.

4. PREPARE STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE AND PROVIDE ONGOING SUPPORT

Students need structured, well-planned support in their role as partners in institutional redesign. Students on a Guided Pathways design team, shared governance committee or student success task force require clear and consistent communication, thoughtful training and robust backing. Without this preparation, students may struggle to understand what is taking place or share their ideas. Letting student partners know up front what the commitment includes, how they can contribute and what will happen to the perspectives, experiences and ideas they share empowers them to join in the work with confidence.

Onboarding and ongoing training can include an explanation of community college jargon and processes, a rundown of the issues they will be addressing, and an overview of "Guided Pathways 101." This preparation helps students enter decision-making groups with similar knowledge to the faculty, staff and administrators with whom they will be working.

Assigning a liaison who is responsible for preparing and guiding student partners can reassure students they have a go-to person in accepting and flourishing in this role. Additionally, establishing venues for student partners to regularly connect with this liaison and their peers can help with problem-solving and skill-building. Embedding students' engagement into a course or special program also can provide a built-in support structure through classroom faculty and program staff and peer participants.

SANTA MONICA COLLEGE'S APPROACH

Santa Monica College ensures Squad members have upfront training and a sustained support system in the form of regular Squad meetings and a staff member dedicated to fostering their engagement and successful participation. To orient students to the role, Squad members are trained on Guided Pathways basics, the college's rationale for pursuing this redesign framework and the goals the college hopes to achieve through this reform effort. They also receive access to and are trained on all the same documentation and resources that faculty, staff and administrators can access as part of their Guided Pathways design work.

> "*Debriefing with [our faculty lead] can be like therapy! We talk about what went well and what didn't. Having her tell me, 'It's going to be OK; we're going to start over [with the next meeting], let's talk about what to do different,' is really helpful.*"
>
> Leyla Messian,
> Santa Monica College Student
> Advisory Squad member

The first cohort of Squad members went through this orientation together; Gausman oriented new members of the second cohort one on one. While she recognizes that both approaches work, Gausman acknowledges the value in collectively orienting each cohort of Squad members, given the sense of community fostered by a group approach. To provide ongoing assistance, Squad members meet together with Gausman a couple of times a semester. Gausman serves as a regular touchpoint for the students. As Squad member Leyla Messian describes:

> *Checking in with students is really important. Debriefing with Jenna [Gausman] can be like therapy! We talk about what went well and what didn't. Having her tell me, 'It's going to be OK; we're going to start over [with the next meeting], let's talk about what to do different,' is really helpful.*

5. LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD FOR STUDENTS

> *When we meet [as a Squad], it's a safe space to talk about what's coming up and how to respond. We bring up issues and solve problems there; our [Squad] helps us."*
>
> Anthony Arevalo-Hernandez,
> Santa Monica College Student
> Advisory Squad member

In addition to ensuring students are prepared to participate, building trust with students and helping them feel as if their contributions are valuable and count in the decision-making process is essential. Attempts to bring students to the design table can fail because they do not feel confident or empowered to fully participate in the presence of power dynamics. Entering a room of faculty, staff and administrators can be intimidating, as students may have had experiences at the college and elsewhere that have left them skeptical or fearful of those in charge.

To reduce "tokenism" and balance power, include more than one student in meetings, committees and/or design teams. Train educators to be aware of the power and influence they bring to the table and how they might affect students' comfort and engagement. Prepare educators with the skills required for deep listening. Empower students with leadership and communication strategies so they feel equipped to share their perspectives and ideas, even when challenged by others in the room. To facilitate peer-to-peer support, offer opportunities for students involved in decision-making groups to meet together and with a trusted staff member to address concerns and develop strategies for addressing power imbalances.

SANTA MONICA COLLEGE'S APPROACH

Individual check-ins with Gausman and regular Squad meetings provide an important space for addressing power issues that arise when working with Santa Monica College educators. During Squad meetings, food helps bring members together and eases conversation. Squad member Anthony Arevalo-Hernandez says, "We eat together, have donuts or pizza, and it opens up a forum for us to share." Meetings include skill-building exercises such as how to communicate with faculty, team-building activities and problem-solving. Arevalo-Hernandez notes, "It's a safe space to talk about what's coming up and how to respond. We bring up issues and solve problems there; our [Squad] helps us."

> *We're not perfect. If I could have a 'do-over,' I'd go to each mapping day, introduce myself and the students, and educate the faculty and staff. We need to help [faculty and staff] recognize the role of students, that they're our equals during this redesign process."*
>
> Jenna Gausman,
> Santa Monica College Student
> Advisory Squad faculty liaison

These Squad meetings also allow students to share with Gausman issues that are not on the Guided Pathways/Redesign team agendas. Gausman can then serve as a conduit for raising awareness of these students' concerns and perspectives with the appropriate work team leaders.

Santa Monica College is also learning about ways to improve its approach so educators understand, respect and embrace the role of Student Advisory Squad members. For example, while students were invited to work with teams of faculty and staff at the college's first program mapping day, Gausman was unable to attend due to other work commitments. Some Santa Monica College employees were unaware of why students were participating or what role they were expected to take in the mapping process, and some confusion and difficulty ensued for Squad members. Gausman notes:

> *We're not perfect. If I could have a 'do-over,' I'd go to each mapping day, introduce myself and the students, and educate the participants as to the reason why students are at 'the table.' We need to help [faculty and staff] recognize the role of students, that they're our equals during this redesign process.*

> *[That first mapping experience] was intimidating. I was at a table with a group that had already done some of [its] mapping.... I felt like everything was already set in stone. I asked questions but felt belittled. I felt like my voice didn't matter."*
>
> Leyla Messian,
> Santa Monica College Student
> Advisory Squad member

Squad member Messian recounts her own struggle during that first mapping experience:

> *[It] was intimidating. I was at a table with a group that had already done some of [its] mapping… I felt like everything was already set in stone. I asked questions but felt belittled. I felt like my voice didn't matter.*

At the same time, given the strong support system in place, Messian was also able to grow from the challenge. She continues:

> *I brought back [the experience] to Jenna and asked if it was supposed to be that way. She helped me think about how to approach it, and also reminded me that not every group will be like that. The next mapping day, I worked with a different group who asked my opinion after everything. I learned that I have to speak up, interrupt, speak my mind.*

6. HONOR STUDENTS' INVOLVEMENT

Acknowledging student input, advocacy and leadership is vital to recognizing their unique contributions to college transformation efforts. College leaders have a central role in setting a tone and providing active support for and investment in student engagement in all aspects of institutional improvement. Recognition can include broad public acknowledgement of students' partnership and the role their ideas have played in redesign.

Awarding stipends (e.g., through the college foundation), providing incentives (e.g., significant bookstore vouchers) or paying students for their time spent participating in decision-making groups can help motivate students and remove financial barriers to them making the time commitment.

Even without financial rewards, students will be able to highlight their contributions to campus redesign work groups, committees and task forces on their college transfer applications, resumes and social media profiles as well as during internship/job interviews.

Ultimately, acting on the input and recommendations students provide can serve as the most powerful form of recognition. Honoring students' involvement in this way creates a culture that shows students' experience is valuable, their contributions essential and their success paramount.

SANTA MONICA COLLEGE'S APPROACH

Santa Monica College recognizes the involvement of Student Advisory Squad members in a variety of ways. As some members of the first cohort of Squad members prepare to graduate, they articulated the value of listing their involvement on their university applications and resumes and reflected on the valuable personal skills they have built through their participation. Messian notes, "The Squad looks good on college applications. It makes students stand out differently from Associated Students. You practice public speaking and get confidence in dealing with people who are older or different from you. And, you can help others."

> *I came [to Santa Monica College] with a bunch of friends. A lot have dropped out. It's not that they're not smart enough, it's that they're weren't getting the help they needed. So, it's a good feeling that I'm helping students out who really need it."*
>
> Ishmael Jasmin,
> Santa Monica College Student
> Advisory Squad faculty liaison

Squad member Ishmael Jasmin agrees, sharing:

Once I realized that I was helping students, that's what really kept me on [the Student Advisory Squad], working on Guided Pathways. I came [to Santa Monica College] with a bunch of friends. A lot have dropped out. It's not that they're not smart enough, it's that they weren't getting the help they needed. So, it's a good feeling that I'm helping students out who really need it.

Student Advisory Squad members who are enrolled in 12 or more units are paid $13.25 an hour for their participation—a difference-maker to many students. Anthony Arevalo-Hernandez explains, "I always wanted to be involved [at Santa Monica College], but life got to me. I needed a job to support my family. So, the money really helps." At the same time, some Squad members participate without payment (given their unit load). Arevalo-Hernandez underscores that the potential for contributing to the success of other students is as compelling as the money, saying:

I hope the work I do [with the Student Advisory Squad] goes to students like me. I hate to generalize, but Latinx students aren't always pushed toward finishing. A lot of us leave early… There's no one there to hold your hand. I had to do it all on my own… The conversations I'm having with department chairs and administrators, well, I hope that they keep an open mind to the student experience and think about how to design things in more equitable ways.

Indeed, Santa Monica College's Student Advisory Squad is transforming the college's culture, in which faculty, staff and administrators are now demanding students' involvement across all redesign efforts. Gausman shares:

We didn't know how powerful this process would be. There can be some cynicism about Guided Pathways. [People] think, 'Here we go with another initiative.' By bringing students in, we are able to train faculty and staff about what students are really experiencing at our institution. We put a real person, a face to why we're doing Guided Pathways. There's real buy-in that comes out of the Student Advisory Squad.

Gausman notes that feedback indicates students' engagement has become one of the most positive aspects of the college's redesign work.

LET'S GET TO WORK ...

How can you use the six design principles and draw on Santa Monica College's experience to inform your approach to intentional, structured and sustained engagement of students as partners in your college redesign?

Consider using the following group exercise (p.11) to initiate a discussion about how to jumpstart or expand meaningful involvement of students in your Guided Pathways design. Note: this exercise can help launch a discussion about student engagement; however, it is possible your college will need multiple planning sessions to fully conceive and act on your approach. To increase the likelihood of participants' investment in and action toward this discussion, enlist individuals with a reputation for student advocacy who have direct and indirect contact with students, as well as those who have the ability to influence funding and staffing decisions supportive of student engagement efforts. Consider rooting this discussion in an existing Guided Pathways steering committee or design team.

TELL US YOUR STORY!

Does your college have an effective approach for engaging students as partners in your Guided Pathways redesign?

Share your experience by contacting research@rpgroup.org.

JUMPSTART STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN YOUR GUIDED PATHWAYS DEVELOPMENT

GROUP EXERCISE

2-2.5 hours, adjusted according to the group size, available time and approach to Step 1 below

Step 1. Review the design principles and Santa Monica College examples provided above. (30 minutes)

Provide participants time to individually read and reflect on the above content to ground your discussion OR ask participants to do this review and reflection before your group discussion in preparation of sharing their thoughts at the meeting. During this time, have participants consider what stood out to them about the design principles and/or examples.

Step 2. Form small groups (3-4 people); ask members to discuss their reflections on what stood out while reading the design principles and/or examples. (15 minutes)

Ask groups to identify their top 3-5 key takeaways from the reading. Encourage participants to refrain from discussing how the design principles or examples may apply to your campus at this point.

Step 3. Remain in small groups and respond to each question below. (100 minutes)

Take roughly 25 minutes to tackle each question: 15 minutes to discuss the prompts as a small group and 10 minutes to share thinking with the whole group.

1. **What is the purpose of engaging students taking into account where our campus is with Guided Pathways development? For example …**

   a. Do we need help identifying some of the barriers various student groups face in reaching their goals?

   b. Do we need to make the case for change to a wider group of campus stakeholders?

   c. Do we need student partners to help us design a specific aspect of the student experience (e.g., onboarding, meta-major design, proactive advising practices, transfer planning and support)?

2. **What structures, processes and funds do we need in place to support an ongoing student engagement strategy?**

   a. What existing decision-making structures can we tap to serve as models for engaging students on an ongoing basis? Or what courses and programs might be a natural fit?

   b. Who will lead and manage this student engagement strategy (e.g., recruit students, serve as their liaison, prepare them for the opportunities, and train faculty, staff and administrators on meaningfully engaging students)?

   c. How will we encourage and recognize student participation?

   d. What possible funding sources exist to support this work?

   e. How will we gather ongoing feedback from student partners about their ability to fully contribute to decisions?

3. **How can we design an intentional recruitment strategy to engage students whose success we most want to improve?**

    a. Which student groups are most affected by our current structures and processes? How do we know that?

    b. How can we design a recruitment strategy that reaches students who may not have the confidence or know-how to step forward?

4. **What other questions do we need to answer? Whose input should we gather on these questions? What next steps will we take?**

Step 4. As the whole group, confirm assignments and timeline for action. (5 minutes)

Clearly state who will take what concrete actions and set deadlines.