# Advancing Equity Through Guided Pathways Series Discussion Guide #1:

## *Supporting Students from Application to the First Day of Classes*

Julianna Barnes, Cuyamaca College &
Rob Johnstone, National Center for Inquiry
& Improvement

California Guided Pathways

National Center for Inquiry & Improvement

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*By Julianna Barnes, Cuyamaca College & Rob Johnstone, NCII*

## Introduction

One of the primary purposes of the Guided Pathways movement is to remove unnecessary barriers that serve as obstacles to student success and equity. Given that higher education continues to employ structures, practices, and policies that have historically and disproportionately impacted students of color, Guided Pathways redesign is particularly important for this population of students. Notably, the early phase of the community college student experience happens well before students ever enter a college classroom. It is front loaded with many steps and processes that students must attempt to understand and navigate, including application, placement testing, orientation, financial aid, advising, and registration.

Commonly referred to as "intake," "onboarding," or "matriculation," these features of the student experience are intended to facilitate student enrollment into courses and lay the foundation for early success. However, given that the institutionally designed intake process is often confusing, complex, and inaccessible, many students are not able to successfully navigate it and do not end up enrolling in classes. For those who do enroll, uninformed choices often lead them into courses that do not allow them to meet their educational and career goals. These early negative experiences and results are often exacerbated for students of color and other vulnerable student populations, including first-generation and low-income students, as evidenced by the equity gaps that continue to persist.

## Issues Impacting Successful Student Intake

While college leaders and practitioners often describe the student intake process as a linear, step by step experience, students may characterize it as more of a complex maze with many twists and turns that could lead one to get lost at any

## How to Use this Guide…

The *Advancing Equity through Guided Pathways* series aims to foster critical campus conversations about increasing student equity under a Guided Pathways umbrella. Institutional redesign teams can…

- Read the introductory framing on issues impacting student connection to the college throughout the intake process

- Use the discussion questions to facilitate conversations related planning and action

- Conduct the research tasks to help better understand their students' experience of this topic

Some guides, including this resource, address issues in the student experience aligned to the stages of the [Completion by Design Loss/Momentum Framework](), while others address issues of culture and leadership. Across all guides, authors bring their own unique perspectives on and approach to the issue. No guide is intended as the definitive word on its topic.

For related content, discussion questions, and research tasks, review *Creating Student Connection and Belonging upon Entry (Guide 2) and Taking an Asset-Based Approach to Student Onboarding (Guide 3)*.

For all guides and additional information on the series, visit [http://www.ncii-improve.com/]().

point along the way. Indeed, the sheer volume of students who never make it through the process, particularly those who have been historically excluded from higher education, beckons our attention.

For example, many students start the college application or financial aid processes but do not complete them. There could be many factors contributing to this issue, such as overuse of college terminology or jargon not easily understood by students, especially those who may be first in their families to attend college. Students whose first language is other than English may find it particularly challenging to navigate these processes without instructions that are translated into their native languages. Additionally, many community college students who are low- to middle-income count on financial aid as the deciding factor as to whether or not to proceed with college enrollment. Despite a proliferation of free college programs (e.g., College Promise programs), covering costs beyond fees or basic tuition continues to be a key factor in student enrollment and success. When students experience confusion with the financial aid process or delays in receiving aid—commonly cited issues—it is no surprise that many students grow weary and opt not to enroll.

Students may experience fatigue and confusion at other points between application and entry, such as when confronted with issues of placement testing, course selection, and registration into courses. Often students are left to seek out related information on their own, unaware of the resources available to assist them such as orientation, counseling, and advising services, which are typically not mandatory for students. Thus, students find themselves mining for information through college websites not commonly designed with the student in mind or sifting through hundreds of pages in course catalogs that are difficult to understand. Students may grow weary and frustrated and choose to not proceed with the process, abandoning their hope for a brighter future. For those who do stick around, they may find themselves making uninformed decisions like taking high stakes placement tests and/or selecting courses which may not count toward their desired educational or career outcome. Students of color are especially disproportionately impacted by these challenges, as evidenced by the large proportion of them who wind up in remedial courses or programs of study which lead to low-wage careers.

The intake process is perhaps one of the most underestimated aspects of the student experience, and ultimately, student success and equity. However, it warrants special attention given its multi-faceted and complex nature, coupled with the fact that colleges lose students at several points between application and the first day of classes. Moreover, the racial, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity of community college students means there can be no one intake experience. In turn, redesigning the intake process and thus improving the early experiences of its diverse student bodies is an imperative for colleges seeking to advance their success and equity agenda.

## How to Get Started…

Campuses can use the following Discussion Questions and Research Tasks to advance planning and action to improve intake for all student groups through Guided Pathways implementation.

### Discussion Questions

1. What do we know about the current intake process for different student groups? How does this current process foster or impede early connection to the college?

2. What tangible changes could your college make to its intake process that would make it clearer for students of color and those who have been historically underrepresented and/or underserved in higher education?

3.  How could your college ensure that all students, especially those who are disproportionately impacted, gain awareness of and have access to student support services that facilitate successful enrollment into programs of study that lead to earning a living wage (e.g. financial aid, orientation, counseling/advisement)?

4.  What hiring and professional development practices can be employed at your college to help improve the intake processes for disproportionately impacted students?

## Research Tasks

1.  Map the current student intake process. What are all the steps a student might need to take to get from application to the first day of classes?

2.  Determine at what points along the intake process your college loses students. What do the data reveal when disaggregated?

3.  Identify the percentage of students who begin the intake process but do not enroll (e.g. applied but did not enroll, started/completed the financial aid process but did not enroll). What do the disaggregated data reveal?

4.  Gather student perceptions about the onboarding process. What do the data reveal when disaggregated that may have implications for improvement?

5.  Examine what percentage of students who make it to enrollment at your college are directed to remedial education. What percentage enter a program of study that leads to earning a living wage? What do the data reveal when disaggregated?