

NCII Guided Pathways Resource Series #4:

Key Decisions for Colleges Transforming the Student Experience Through Guided Pathways

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* With Input From AACC, CCCSE, and CCRC

OVERVIEW

In this discussion guide from NCII & Friends, we have identified a list of key decisions we see as truly vital to transforming the student experience under a guided pathways framework. We offer these decisions not as an exhaustive checklist but to serve as a guide and a point of departure to help colleges with their planning and implementation of a transformed student experience.



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Introduction

Over the past few years, NCII and its guided pathways partners have served hundreds of institutions that are at various stages of exploring, designing, and implementing guided pathways. In many of the conversations that we have observed and facilitated with diverse college teams over these years, we have noticed similar threads of conversation and common decisions that colleges need to make in advance of rolling out their initial version of guided pathways at scale. While the array of potential decisions that could be made under a guided pathways framework is vast, we have provided a brief list of decisions that need to be made to truly transform the student experience at scale.

We also note that colleges' approaches to these key questions should evolve over time, from the initial rollout of guided pathways to version 2.0 and beyond. This evolution should be driven by ongoing assessment and evaluation of the effects of the rollout on the student experience, key momentum metrics and the institution itself (e.g. culture, engagement, professional development)—all serving the superordinate goal of ensuring equitable achievement of students' educational and career goals.

Note that we aren't providing answers to these decisions—we think there is a range of potential approaches that could address these questions and the college is best suited to design approaches that fit the college culture. As an organizing aid, we are using the four stages of the Loss/Momentum Framework¹ from *Completion by Design*, which helps to make key college guided pathways decisions across the full span of the student journey. Note that we are using a more recently updated version of the four stages from the Community College Research Center (CCRC) that combines the Progress and Completion stages and adds Advancement as the new fourth stage.

Decisions to be Made at Stage 1: Connection

- How do we deepen the college's relationship with our K-12 partners to ensure early exploration of careers and college programs? How will we inform our K-12 partners about guided pathways-related changes at the college such as metamajors and first-semester / first-year experiences?
- How does recruiting change when we are intentionally recruiting into metamajors and/or program of study vs. into the college in general? How do we ensure that recruiting and initial advising efforts promote equitable access to programs that lead to jobs and transfer in high-opportunity fields?
- How does the application process change when we roll out pathways?
- Under a guided pathways approach, how does the college respond intentionally to a student who has applied? Which key steps should be added / eliminated / revised?
- How does the college immediately begin to build the new student's sense of connection and belonging to the college?
- How do we ensure that students have the information they need to make to make an initial decision among metamajors? How do we ensure students understand the impact and consequences of their decision, as well as the ability to make changes?

¹ Completion by Design's Loss/Momentum Framework: <https://www.completionbydesign.org/s/cbd-lmf>

- How do we translate the decision a student makes about an initial metamajors into a first-semester—or, even a first-year—schedule?
- How will we identify if a student has unmet basic needs (e.g. housing, nutrition, transportation, childcare, healthcare)? How will we support their ability to access related supports?

Decisions to be Made at Stage 2: Entry

- How do we expand students’ decisions about their metamajor into meaningful participation in a “community of learners” designed to build engagement and community while supporting their ability to make more focused and informed decisions about a specific program of study?
- How do we ensure that students take a well-taught, college-level course relevant to their interests in the first term?
- In order to help students make an informed decision about a program of study by the end of the first academic term, how can we assist students in exploring their interests and careers?
- Will we use a first-term course to assist students in making an informed decision about a program of study? If so...
 - Will this course be required? If so, for whom?
 - Will the course be 1, 2, or 3 units?
 - Can the course be offered in a 4-week or 8-week term?
 - Will the course be credit or non-credit?
 - Who will teach the course / what will the minimum qualifications be?
 - Will we offer field-specific sections of the course?
 - What will be the proportional breakdown between a focus on career and academic exploration and planning vs. overall college skills?
 - What will be the role of the course in helping all students develop an academic plan charting out their full program?
 - How do we support those teaching this course through relevant and adequate professional development that grounds them in the key outcomes of these efforts?
 - What role will departments or metamajors have in designing and delivering such courses?
- How do we accelerate students’ attempting and completing college-level math and English in their first year?
- How do we ensure that students are taking the "right math course" for their metamajor or program?
- How do we transition the first semester experience into a full, customized program plan that includes a completion date and job and transfer objectives for every student—including part-time students and students starting below college-level?
- Who is exempted from identifying a metamajor and/or developing an academic plan and how does the exemption process work?

Decisions to be Made at Stage 3: Progress / Completion

- Who will advise students once they have decided on a program and developed a full-program plan? What will be the primary domains this progress / completion focused advising will cover?
- How will we deal with students who are still undecided or who change their plans after their first term?
- Will students be required to meet with an advisor at “checkpoints” during their journey at the college (e.g. every semester to register, once a year, at completion of 15/30/45 units)?

- How will the college check to see if students have “fallen off” their plan (e.g. advisors, technology, both)? How often will this happen?
- If a student has “fallen off their path,” who from the college will intervene? How will they get the relevant information? What resources will be available to help students get “back on path?” How will the student / staff know that the issue has been resolved?
- How will faculty and student services professionals work to embed discipline-appropriate academic supports (e.g., supplemental instruction, tutoring, lab time, required study groups) into students’ pathways?
- How will the college evolve its approach to student-centered, equity-minded teaching and learning under a guided pathways framework?
- How will program and metamajor faculty ensure that courses within a pathway feature active and experiential learning?
- At what intervals do program and metamajor faculty come together to review results of student learning assessments within the program pathways?
- How often will the college check in with students about their career and transfer goals?
- How will the college help connect students with industry and workforce opportunities through job shadowing, internships, co-operative experiences, service learning, and/or mentoring?
- How will the college ensure that it is supporting students’ ongoing financial stability needs (e.g., housing, nutrition, transportation, childcare, healthcare) that will facilitate student attendance, progress, and completion?

Decisions to be Made at Stage 4: Advancement

- How will the college support students applying to transfer programs and jobs?
- How will the college measure and ensure equitable achievement of post-graduation success outcomes such as bachelor’s degree attainment rate after transfer, job placement rate, and living wage attainment?
- How will the college build stronger bridges from the community college to its transfer partners to ensure a smooth transition (including financial aid & other supports)?
- How will the college build stronger relationships with employers to ensure an authentic feedback loop informs curriculum and program decisions?

If you have any comments or questions, please contact Dr. Rob Johnstone at rob@ncii-improve.com. We would particularly welcome other suggestions or examples of decisions that you have faced or are facing that have been important for you as you engage in your guided pathways design work.

About NCII and A2I2

NCII focuses its work with colleges on guided pathways and student financial stability reforms. We work directly with colleges who are interested in working toward implementing guided pathways and student financial stability reforms at scale through our two-year Agency, Attitude, and Intensive Implementation (A2I2) cohort model. If you are interested in more information on A2I2, see <http://ncii-improve.com/a2i2-cohort/> or contact Dr. Rob Johnstone at rob@ncii-improve.com.