Advancing Equity Through Guided Pathways Series Discussion Guide #7:

Taking an Asset-Based Approach to Student Onboarding

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Introduction

As students get ready to begin college, the messages they often hear from the college emphasize their doubts and feelings of inadequacy rather than capitalize upon their strengths and experiences.

Colleges implementing Guided Pathways at scale are quickly realizing the value of recognizing and reinforcing the strengths, resilience, academic abilities, and grit that students bring to bear on their higher education journey. Many colleges are moving from a deficit mindset, wondering, "Are our students ready for college?" to a more asset-based frame, "Is our college ready for our students—and the experiences and preparation they bring?"[i] In fact, Dr. Victor Rios suggests shifting the nomenclature from "at-risk" students to "at-promise" students.[ii]

Empowering college personnel to engage early with students, and to develop and support a positive mindset through high expectations and high support (1) demonstrates that every student is valuable and has strengths and potential, and (2) has resulted in positive impacts on students' beliefs about their own success, and therefore, positive outcomes.[iii] This is especially critical in supporting students from historically marginalized communities, including students of color, first-generation students, and students with low socioeconomic status.

As a reference, here are two central frameworks that can inform an asset-based approach throughout a student's journey:

1. **Dr. Laura Rendón's Validation Theory**, consisting of six elements, argues that validation precedes academic success, as students are affirmed and supported in viewing themselves as capable and whole, both inside and outside the classroom.[iv]

How to Use this Guide…

The *Advancing Equity though 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 capitalizing student strengths and experiences throughout their college onboarding

- Use the discussion questions to facilitate conversations related to 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 6) and *Integrating Non-Academic Supports into the Student Journey* (Guide 11).

For all guides and additional information on the series, visit www.ncii-improve.com.

2. **Dr. Carol Dweck's Growth Mindset** centers on implicit theories of intelligence, particularly that intelligence can be developed as a result of deliberate effort and practice.[v]

Strategies for an Asset-Based Approach to Student Onboarding

Given the critical role of a strong start in college, taking an asset-based approach specifically to onboarding (re)design (i.e., student entry into college and the experience in the first year) has a significant potential to positively impact students' trajectory. Below are a few examples of how such an approach can inform institutional processes and student experiences, especially in the early and pivotal stages of a student's journey at the college.

Dual Enrollment. Adapting an asset-based approach can begin as high school students enroll in dual enrollment college courses. When thoughtfully planned and communicated, with an eye towards equitable access, these courses can foster an important sense of confidence in completing college-level work and can result in degree-applicable credits that can be transferred to their college or university of choice. In addition to general education and gateway career education courses, counseling courses (student success or career success courses) can help high school students plan for college and career choices that support their life goals. These opportunities are critical in expanding and supporting a college-going culture.

Orientation. When orientation sessions focus on validating students' identities, preparation, and experience in a culturally-responsive context; promote excitement and anticipation; and develop social capital in the college setting, students pick up on the signals that we believe in their ability to learn. These orientation sessions can include opportunities to select programs of study within metamajors, career pathways, or academic clusters.

Developmental Education. Students from historically marginalized communities have been disproportionately placed into developmental coursework based upon traditional assessment tests and have frequently been taught by our less experienced faculty. Few would ever make their way to the transfer courses, let alone stay enrolled in the college. Important reforms in developmental education now expect that students can be ready for and successful in college-level math and English courses when provided appropriate supports (e.g., embedded tutoring, supplemental instruction, and co-requisite courses)—grounding their design in what students *can* do rather than what they cannot do.

First Year Experience. Highly-structured First Year Experiences (FYE) are invaluable in reinforcing students' capacity for college, validating their strengths, and connecting them to relevant academic, emotional, and personal supports. Success teams, a common component of FYE, tend to include success coaches or peer mentors who serve as role models, not only because they successfully navigated their own way through the crucial first year, but also because they may have come from similar communities as students. Such a connection can enable students, particularly from historically marginalized communities, to envision their own success. Plus, intentionally hiring equity-minded FYE faculty and staff can empower students to center their backgrounds and lived experiences as assets.[vi]

First Semester Coursework. In their first semester in the classroom, it is imperative that students feel validated by experiencing exciting and engaging pedagogies (e.g., service learning, project-based learning, interaction with community members in their field of study). They should take at least one course that connects to their passions and encourages them to apply their identities, skills, and

experiences in ways that matter to them and to their community. Students who experience a powerful gateway course in a field of interest with active learning strategies are more likely to complete their program of study. In turn, professional development focused on active learning, cultural humility, and growth mindset are critical for supporting faculty, staff, and administrators in embracing the asset-based strategies.

Normalizing Support. Normalizing the fact that all students will need support at different points of their educational journey is critical. It signals that the college understands and expects students to both possess significant strengths and abilities and, from time to time, need academic, emotional, financial, or other supports. For example, many students could benefit from basic needs supports (e.g., food, housing, healthcare), but there are historical and cultural stigmas associated with accessing this assistance. Making related supports opt-out versus opt-in, including them in student-facing spaces (e.g., course syllabus, student portal, college website), and locating them in central, high-traffic campus locations can go a long way in destigmatizing services.

How to Get Started…

Use the following Discussion Questions and Research Tasks to advance planning and action related to taking an asset-based approach to student onboarding through Guided Pathways implementation.

Discussion Questions

1. What messages are we currently sending students (intentionally or unintentionally) that indicate that they belong and are valued at the college? Specifically, when, how, and by whom?

2. What specific strategies might we employ in the early interactions with a student that would validate the experiences and strengths that they bring with them to college?

3. How might we strengthen engagement with or resources for students that would further reinforce a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset during their first year at the college?

Research Tasks

1. Assess formal or informal communications students get from the college during the onboarding phase, specifically paying attention to messages about their capabilities or how they are to make choices.

2. Collect student perspectives on how they feel their strengths, experiences, backgrounds, and capabilities are validated upon entry. What do students say about their onboarding experiences?

3. Determine how many of our students complete an application but do not enroll at the college. Disaggregate these data for specific populations within your community (e.g., race, gender, age, veteran status, foster youth, uniquely abled).

4. Disaggregate and review the data on students entering each metamajor or career cluster. Do the students in each metamajor reflect the general student population? If not, why?

Endnotes

[i] McNair, T., Albertine, S., Cooper, M. A., McDonald, N., & Major, T. (2016). *Becoming a student-ready college: A new culture of leadership for student success.* Indianapolis, IN: Jossey-Bass.

[ii] Rios, V. & Mireles-Rios, R. (2019). *My teacher believes in me! The educator's guide to at-promise students*. Five Rivers Press.

[iii] Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2019). *A mind at work: Maximizing the relationship between mindset and student success.* Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin, College of Education, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy, Program in Higher Education Leadership.

[iv] Rendon, L. (1994). Validating culturally diverse students: Toward a new model of learning and student development. *Innovative Higher Education*, *19*(1), 33-51. https://www.csuchico.edu/ourdemocracy/_assets/documents/pedagogy/rendon,-l.-1994---validation-theory.pdf

[v] Dweck, C. (2008). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

[vi] Hurtado, S. (2001). Linking diversity and educational purpose: How diversity affects the classroom environment and student development. In Orfield, G. (2001), *Diversity challenged: Evidence on the impact of affirmative action* (pp. 187-203). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Publishing Group.