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Essay on challenges facing the guided-pathways model for restructuring two-year colleges

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A much-discussed, comprehensive reform plan for improving community colleges and their low rates of student persistence and completion is the "guided pathways" model put forth by Thomas Bailey, Shanna Smith Jaggars and Davis Jenkins in their book [1], *Redesigning America's Community Colleges*. Published last year, the book condenses and focuses years of research -- a fair amount of which comes out of the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College, which Bailey directs.

I support the reforms laid out in the book. But I also have some concerns -- maybe "cautions" is a better word -- about the social and political dynamics of establishing the guided-pathways model, and about the complex nature of the typical community college student population.

In the book, Bailey and his co-authors locate the fundamental problem with the community college in the structure of its curriculum and the institutional assumptions that undergird that structure. In its attempt to serve all members of an area, the typical community college has allowed to proliferate a wide range of academic, occupational, general interest and service courses and programs. Though some type of orientation, counseling and advising is typically available, quality and effectiveness vary, and counselors' caseloads -- 1,000 students per counselor is not uncommon -- work against any substantial contact. Many students don't use these services at all.

The authors label this arrangement the cafeteria-style, self-service model. Students, many of whom are the first in their families to go to college, might enroll without a clear goal, get inadequate or incomplete advising, and take courses that don't lead to a specified outcome, are out of sequence or that they've already taken.

As a remedy, the authors suggest a basic redesign, arguing that community colleges "need to engage faculty and student services professionals in creating more clearly structured, educationally coherent program pathways that lead to students' end goals, and in rethinking instruction and student support services in ways that facilitate students' learning and success as they progress along these paths."

The authors acknowledge the laudable reforms attempted recently, such as improving the curriculum for remedial courses and streamlining them or creating programs at the front end of college to better orient and guide new students. But these reforms have had limited impact

on completion, the authors claim, because the large macrostructure of the cafeteria model remained in place.

To realize the guided-pathways model, faculty and staff would create sequences of courses that lead to clearly defined outcomes. And this major restructuring of the curriculum would provide direction for other significant institutional reforms that will aid in retention and completion. Faculty members who work within a particular pathway will together define the skills, concepts and habits of mind they want students to develop through the pathway "and map out how students will build those learning outcomes across courses." At the front end, increased effort will go to helping students clarify goals and choose a major or "metamajor," which would reflect broad areas of interest. Orientation to college will be beefed up, and students will be enrolled in courses that provide ongoing information and guidance about college life. Through the increased integration of technology into advising, students will receive timely feedback on their progress, and instructors and counselors will be alerted when something goes awry -- when a student drops a course, for example.

In addition, the authors adopt various promising reforms to remedial education, such as sequences featuring fewer, more intensive courses, and the use of additional instruction and tutoring. Their assumption is that improved remedial courses will function more effectively as part of a pathways model, resulting in greater numbers of students moving into a college-level course of study.

Enacting the Model

The pathways idea is a good one. I have known so many students who would have benefited tremendously from it -- who would have taken fewer courses that were extraneous to their goals, used up less financial aid money, moved more quickly toward completion of a certificate or degree or toward transfer to a four-year school. And the suggested reforms that follow, especially related to orientation and advising, are long overdue. I raise similar suggestions in my 2012 book, *Back to School*. As for rethinking remediation, I've been on that boat for more than 35 years.

To achieve this restructuring will require collaborative engagement on the part of faculty and staff, both within departments and across them. The authors realize the challenges of effecting such engagement and devote a chapter to the topic. They wisely begin the chapter by noting some of the difficulties, including the possible lack of trust among administrators and faculty and staff members, the divide between faculty and student services, and the disruptive role played by dissenters.

The book then suggests strategies to work through these problems. For example, its authors suggest including dissenters in program planning, creating planning teams that combine faculty with student services personnel, the use of data to question current practices and so on. Though this is a legitimate way to structure such a chapter, the structure implies that the barriers to change listed at the beginning of the chapter can be overcome with the management and group facilitation techniques presented in the remainder of the chapter -- an impression reinforced by the lack of any examples or discussion of what to do when the techniques fail.

The authors have a wealth of experience studying two- and four-year colleges, so they surely know how messy and unpredictable the process of reform can be. Perhaps they (or their editor) decided that it was best to present their model and a process to achieve it, and not to

overly complicate things with extended discussion of potential pitfalls and blunders. Fair enough. And perhaps the authors' disciplinary backgrounds in economics, public policy and quantitative methodologies limit their treatment of politics, ideology and the tangled day-to-day dynamics of status, power and turf -- which, depending on the institution, can include everything from budgets to racial tensions to contentious personal histories.

To limit treatment of all this is a legitimate choice, but should be stated and underscored, for my worry is that individual colleges attempting the reforms suggested by Bailey, Jaggars and Jenkins will encounter more of a mess than anticipated and possibly scrap or significantly weaken the implementation of ideas that have real merit.

The organizational compartmentalizing and the administrative hierarchies that exist in the community college are not only structural features; they are electric with power and status. The various methods suggested by the authors to bring people together to work through these dynamics toward the common goal of creating guided pathways are good ones, tried and true in the tool kit of management consultants. But they also can be foiled by genuine ideological differences about the purpose of a particular area of study or of education in general. They can also be foiled by turf protection, administrative power struggles and pure and simple personal animosity.

To be sure, change happens. I've witnessed several successful programs take shape over the past few years as a core of energetic and creative faculty are given the resources to run with their ideas. But during that same time I've also seen such groups -- inspired, seemingly tireless people -- be stonewalled or shut down by larger groups of faculty within their subject area, by their department heads or by middle managers.

Bailey and his co-authors suggest arriving at shared values as a starting place for examining current practices and changing them. For example, the authors write, "In our experience, faculty and staff choose to work at community colleges because they believe in the open-access mission and are passionate about improving students' lives." This is generally true in my experience as well, but with two qualifications -- which illustrate how arriving at shared values can be more complicated than it seems.

First, regarding the embrace of the open-access mission of the community college, a percentage of faculty at most institutions believe some of the students they teach should not be in college, and certainly not in their classrooms. These faculty align themselves with the universities that educated them, want to teach students who have some affinity with their discipline and are not at all trained to work with students who are academically underprepared. In some cases, they are younger and work at the community college because that was the only position available in a tight job market. In other cases, these are older faculty who have been at the college for decades and lived through a significant shift in student demographics. They look back at a golden age -- one that most likely did not exist as they remember it.

Furthermore, faculty can have quite different beliefs about concepts like "improving students' lives." And some of these differing beliefs can present resilient barriers to change. One faculty member believes that to change methods of instruction will compromise standards and lead to subpar education. Another believes that students -- particularly those with poor academic backgrounds -- need to have positive experiences in school, so avoids challenging them intellectually. And yet another operates with racial, class or gender biases that limit what he or she thinks is realistic for some students in school or career.

Another assumption in the book is that when faced with data about student, instructor or program performance, faculty and staff with guidance will engage in reflection and behavioral change. Some people will respond thus -- and thank goodness for them. But other responses are also possible. People don't believe the data -- especially in institutions where there is a high level of distrust between faculty and administrators. People question the way the data were obtained. People blame the students. This last response is a big one where test data or pass/fail rates are concerned. When faced with data demonstrating the low pass rates in remedial English or math, some faculty respond by stating that those students don't belong here. As one community college staff member said to me, "It's hard to admit we've been doing something wrong."

For all its merits, the book's implementation plan is sometimes thin on the political and social dynamics of institutional change. To work amid a complex human landscape, the plan might well need to be combined with savvy, perhaps even Machiavellian leadership, with horse trading, with both symbolic and financial incentives, with the strategic use of personal relationships, and, unfortunately, at times, with reassignment or marginalization of obstructionist personnel.

Pathways and Students' Lives

The structural fix Bailey and his co-authors offer makes sense given the evidence that the status quo creates a host of barriers to student success. Still, like all structural remedies, this one runs the risk of reducing nuanced and layered human dilemmas to a technical problem, and thus being unresponsive to or missing entirely the particular life circumstances of students. So, yes, make the college curriculum more coherent, but realize that other human and material resources also will be needed to meet the needs of many students, and, as well, build into your structural changes the flexibility needed to honor the range of life circumstances your students bring to college. Otherwise, the fix may create unintended negative consequences.

A significant number of people who go to community college are adults with family and other responsibilities. They can only go part time. They can't go every semester. They sometimes quit in midsemester because of family emergencies or changes in employment. They go to two or three different institutions. A guided-pathways model could help them in some ways -- at the least lend coherence to their course selection -- but not necessarily speed up their progress through college. For them, evening or weekend classes, good online courses, legitimate competency-based options, and counseling and advising in off hours, weekends or online also would be necessary.

A different kind of problem lies at the other end of the college age continuum. We don't have in our country many avenues to help young people develop after high school. We don't, for example, have a robust system of occupational apprenticeships or of national service. Young people who are not on the academic fast track and do not have a clear college goal have few options: entry-level, low-skilled, low-paying work or the military. Or they can enroll in the local community college hoping some career path will reveal itself. Many such students don't stay long, but those who do typically change their areas of study several times, shift between full-time and part-time attendance, start classes they don't complete, stop out, and return to school. Eventually some find their way. A guided-pathways model could help these students by more clearly delineating curricular and career options at a critical stage of early-adult development.

But there are some powerful developmental dynamics going on here that lie beyond a structural fix in the curriculum. In interviewing such students, I'm taken by the simple but powerful fact that this process of discovery takes time. A lot of growing up happens: cutting back on partying and frivolous entertainments, changing one's understanding of the purpose of school, bringing one's fantasies in line with one's abilities, learning how to manage time and to study. In some cases, students arrive at the big questions: Who am I? What kind of work do I want to do? What is meaningful work for me? Why am I on this Earth? It certainly could be argued that the community college is not the place to work all this out, but if our society provides limited transitional institutions or spaces, young people are left with few other options.

Then there is the issue of the burdens students carry. I am continually struck by the hardship experienced by so many community college students. To be sure, middle-class students from stable and secure backgrounds attend community college, but, depending on the location of the college, many students come from low-income to destitute families; have to work 30 or more hours a week; live in cramped housing, some of which is substandard; are food insecure; and have health problems that are inadequately treated. For some, there are worries about immigration. Some must contend with prior involvement in the criminal justice system while others struggle with addiction.

In the book *After Admission*, sociologist James Rosenbaum and his colleagues make the critical point that a structural analysis of the problem with community college student success takes us "beyond individual blame" and focuses our attention on institutional factors that create barriers to academic progress. Bailey and his co-authors offer a corrective to these problematic structural features. I do not intend to refocus blame on students, but I think it would be a mistake to not attend to the details of their lives while conducting this structural analysis. Otherwise the structural remedy might promise more than it can deliver -- thus threatening its longevity -- and also inadvertently contribute to the barriers students face by diverting attention from other remedies they need.

I do not want the issues raised here to be used as an excuse for maintaining the status quo. But even with the most coherent and streamlined curricular pathways, there will still be a number of students who enroll in one course at a time, who stop out, who take years to find their academic or occupational path, whose past blunders and transgressions continue to exact a material and psychological price, whose personal history of neglect and even trauma can cripple their performance. All this and more require institutional responses beyond guided pathways (though the model could enhance these responses) as well as extra-institutional social services. The needs of the community college population require a range of programs and accommodations to make "the people's college" more fully the uniquely American institution it, at its best, can be.

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