

# Guided Pathways: Two Professors' Perspective on Why We Need the College GPS

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*(Note: The following article is part of an ongoing dialogue about the guided pathways framework. For reference, previous Rostrum articles on this issue may be accessed on our website under publications.)*

We appreciate the attention the ASCCC gave the Guided Pathways framework in the February 2017 *Rostrum*. We agree with one author's view that the ideas behind Guided Pathways need to be understood, discussed openly, and debated critically. For that reason, we offer the following report from our perspective as lead faculty on the Guided Pathways System (GPS) implementation team at Bakersfield College (BC).

Bakersfield College's embrace of the college GPS comes after a sobering look at our student success rates and several professional development workshops that enabled us to better understand the students who now make up our student body today. About 80% of our students are first-generation college students, and the same percentage arrive on our campus unprepared for college coursework. Less than a third of our students were getting their degrees or certificates or transferring after six years, and only one percent of students who placed into the lowest level of remediation ever reached transfer level coursework. Higher education attainment rates in our county are half the statewide average, and Bakersfield College faculty came to realize that we needed change. We are also a Hispanic serving institution and recognize that poor educational attainment is a fundamental equity issue.

The traditional "cafeteria model" we used at BC makes the false promise of access to a better life. The cafeteria model in community colleges that was created in the '60s and '70s was set up to be the cheapest way to educate the masses, not because it was a pedagogically sound way to educate. The promise is false because the cafeteria model fails to provide the proper guidance that today's first-generation and basic skills students need. These students do not know how to navigate the bewildering collection of choices regarding courses, majors, degrees, and careers. If anything, the cafeteria model has become a Darwinian system—if you can make it through the cafeteria model and go on to get a bachelor's, you are the exceptional one.

We mapped out the number of students who start out below college level and do not make it to the next level of remediation. These students were not just taking a long time to get to college level coursework and get their degree; they were giving up entirely. We lost even "A" students between semesters. The flood of students entering our doors for the first time was reduced to a mere trickle by the end of the remediation sequence. The over-arching goal of BC is transforming lives for the better, but that transformation cannot happen for the two-thirds of students who are lost in the higher education maze. Bakersfield College joined the American Association of Community College's national Guided Pathway Project not because we were doing well but because we had a hunger and widespread commitment to do better. The main goals of the college GPS are making the pathways clearer, giving students the tools to make the right choices that fit their interests, and being intentionally intrusive in our guidance.

We believe that the college GPS solves the fundamental problem of clarity. Our students want to know how college fits their life plan: how to prepare for college in high school, how to choose a path and how to stay on the path. These three problem areas should be considered from a student's perspective.

Because they do not have any family history to draw from, new students are uncertain about what is involved with those college-required careers their high school teachers and counselors have told them about. While in high school, no family member has firsthand experience to guide them in selecting high school classes that will prepare them for college. Anything their family can tell them about college and college-required careers is based on third-hand information that high school students would consider less reliable or not relevant to their particular background. If the high school student is blazing the trail to college for his or her family, the student is going to rely on a peer network for information. Unfortunately, many of these students' peers are also blazing the trail to college for their own families, if they are interested in college at all.

Because they do not have any family history to draw from, students do not know how to choose a major that will lead to a higher-paying career. At Bakersfield College, new students must choose from a menu of 72 degrees. Many students will just pick a major at random to fill a mandatory box required in the registration process with no real commitment to that major. Without that commitment to a clear path, students wander about trying to find majors that fit their interests and abilities. They take classes they do not need. At Bakersfield College, the number of units

accumulated by students to get an associate's degree in programs that award ten or more degrees per year is a mean of 85.0. That is 25.0 excess units they should not have had to take. At \$46/unit, the student wastes \$1150 in tuition, not to mention the cost of textbooks, living expenses while attending school, and lost time. Financial aid will mitigate some of these losses, but the restrictions placed by financial aid on the total number of units towards a bachelor's degree covered mean students risk running out of financial aid while taking upper division courses after transfer.

Even if they are clear and committed to a major, 85% of our students do not have family members who know what it takes to complete a four-year bachelor's program. Making the transition from high school ways of studying to college ways of studying is extremely difficult without guidance. One must learn to handle college-level courses that, according to Title 5, require two hours of study time outside of class for every hour in the classroom. Students did not have to do that in high school, and they must learn to succeed in courses that move at twice the pace of a high school class. Students must also deal with being told that a two-year program may actually require three or four due to remediation, and they must learn to succeed while also juggling their family responsibilities, such as caring for younger siblings, their own children, or other relatives, especially if the primary breadwinner becomes disabled at a job that does not have the generous benefits found in jobs where a bachelor's is the minimum entrance requirement. If the student starts out at a community college, he or she may also have to face the added problem of having to change institutions half-way through that bachelor's pathway. If the transfer institution requires additional lower division courses, the student is understandably frustrated because the Institution appears not to have communicated with each other and worked the transfer system out.

The data collected and presented in *Redesigning America's Community Colleges*[1] shows that our school is not unique. Community colleges across the country are struggling to fulfill the promise of higher education. We believe that changing our system from the traditional cafeteria model to the college GPS will empower a wider range of students to explore higher education because it makes the journey less intimidating. The college GPS will also enable those students to actually complete their educational goals and to do so in a much timely and, for the student, more cost-effective manner. As educators we strive to make things clearer, more understandable, and less intimidating. We want our students to succeed. For this reason, we are working to create the college GPS with other faculty at Bakersfield College, and we encourage other faculty to engage in the deliberate process of institutional self-reflection.

The creation of the college GPS at BC is an iterative process driven by faculty discussion. One of us—Strobel—co-wrote a paper on the college GPS that uses the geographic GPS app device as an analog for describing the philosophy behind the college GPS. You can find it on our [President's College Projects website](#) [2]. The college GPS paper also shows how the college GPS integrates all of the statewide student success initiatives we all have been working on for the past several years into a coherent framework, including multiple measures assessment, accelerated remediation, SSSP, Equity, and others. Bakersfield College faculty are working on the meta-majors—“areas of study” or “areas of interest”—with student input. We are carving out the role of faculty in the completion coaching teams that will provide the intrusive guidance our students need. Both of us wish the process could be faster, but we welcome those intense discussions because we know that careful deliberation and action will generate better outcomes for our students. For more information about our process, please contact Nick Strobel at [nstrobel@bakersfieldcollege.edu](mailto:nstrobel@bakersfieldcollege.edu) or Jessica Wojtysiak [jessica.wojtysiak@bakersfieldcollege.edu](mailto:jessica.wojtysiak@bakersfieldcollege.edu).

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[1] Authors: Thomas Bailey, Shanna Smith Jaggar, and Davis Jenkins. ISBN 9780674368286

[2] *What is the Guided Pathways Model? Using the College GPS to Describe the Philosophy of Guided Pathways* at <https://www.bakersfieldcollege.edu/download/18362>.

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