

Introduction

Strengthening Guided Pathways and Career Success by Ensuring Students Are Learning

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In 2018, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) launched a multiyear project, Strengthening Guided Pathways and Career Success by Ensuring Students Are Learning, in collaboration with the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) to build institutional capacity and to develop resources that will help institutions strengthen their student learning efforts as part of the guided pathways framework for student success. As articulated in the 2015 publication *Redesigning America's Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success*, guided pathways is a framework that supports institutional transformation with student success at the center based upon a structured experience:

1. Mapping pathways to student end goals
2. Helping students choose and enter a program pathway
3. Keeping students on path
4. Ensuring that students are learning

Early evaluation findings from institutions that are implementing guided pathways indicated that campus efforts were progressing around the first three pillars of the framework, but additional work was needed to support capacity-building around the fourth pillar, ensuring students are learning. Thus, this project emerged in partnership with CCCSE.

Through a competitive selection process and in consultation with the project's national advisory group, AAC&U selected twenty community colleges that were implementing guided pathways but desired to deepen their work on student learning structured around three primary objectives:

- To contribute to the existing research for the ensuring students are learning component of the guided pathways framework and a set of professional development tools for institutions to measure success
- To develop an evidence-based process for examining teaching and learning outcomes within the guided pathways framework at the institutional level
- To work collaboratively with faculty to improve learning and quality in pathways programs to help students understand defined credential competencies and the alignment with employability skills.

As part of this effort, CCCSE led a refresh of the core components for the ensuring students are learning pillar:

- Scaled, high-quality, program-relevant, applied learning experiences
- Intentional and sustained student engagement
- Evidence-based, high-impact teaching practices across modalities
- Institution-wide commitment to equity-minded, asset-based teaching improvement
- Quality assessment of program learning outcomes that lead to credentials, further education, and/or gainful employment

The campus narratives included in this publication provide an overview of the institutional activities to implement these refreshed components and to achieve the project objectives.

As part of the selection process, all of the campuses completed baseline assessments on high-impact practices, equity in student outcomes, direct assessment of student learning, student engagement efforts, and institutional efforts that demonstrate commitment to equity. Campus teams participated in AAC&U's 2019 Institute on High-Impact Practices and Student Success to develop action plans to guide their project work, including identifying selected pathways and learning outcomes as the focus for their institutional work. Over the course of the project, campus teams participated in meetings, webinars, and trainings, where resources were shared and discussed, as well as professional development opportunities focused on direct assessment of student work products as part of AAC&U's Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) initiative.

During this project, the nation faced multiple crises, including COVID-19 and mounting racial and social injustices. As the campuses shifted to virtual learning, the project activities had to be suspended, but the dedication and commitment of the participating campuses prevailed and the implementation of curricular enhancements continued in fall 2020. In the midst of everything, the campus teams participated in structured interviews with leaders from CCCSE, completed evaluation surveys, and provided valuable insights for the resources that will be released from this project, including a project evaluation research report and web-based teaching, learning, and assessment framework.

Thank you to the participating campuses, the project team at CCCSE, the national advisory group, and our funders for joining us on this journey.

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