The Educational Experiences of Students at Pasadena City College: A Selective Analysis

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I'm awake, I'm alive, and I can move my feet and I can get to places and be able to find the help that I need.

-Marcus, PCC Student

Summary

This report presents an analysis of the educational experiences of 22 PCC students who have either graduated, are about to graduate, or are currently matriculating in good standing. The analysis of these 22 successful students reveals the importance of contact with faculty or staff and the value of programs that provide both individual assistance and a sense of community. Our analysis also revealed the degree of hardship in many of our interviewees' lives, in their past and in some cases their present circumstances. (Such hardship partly explains the value of the aforementioned institutional relationships.) We were also struck by the irregular trajectory many students took en route to their current major and educational/career goals: It took time, experimentation with different fields, blunders, stopping out and returning to school, and pure and simple maturation for people to find their way at PCC. Current reform efforts aimed at increasing retention and completion will help shorten and smooth out that irregular trajectory for

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some students, but other institutional interventions and social services will also be necessary as will a comprehensive effort to create and sustain networks of human contact.

Introduction

To better understand the educational experiences of students at Pasadena City College – what barriers they face and what keeps them in school and motivates them – we interviewed 22 students about their educational histories, from elementary school through post-secondary. The interviews took place during the last six months of 2015 and were each about 40 to 60 minutes in length. They were semi-structured, allowing a more conversational exchange that focused on education but also allowed for discussion of (sometimes quite powerful) life events that affected school.

Twenty-two students is not a large number, especially given PCC's sizable population, but we did try to selectively sample in order to get a variety of student profiles and trajectories. There are 13 males and 9 females in our sample, early 20s to 36 years of age. Four of the students are military veterans. In terms of race/ethnicity our sample broke out as follows: 6 African American or Black, 13 Hispanic/Latino/a, 2 Asian American/Pacific Islander, and 1 White. The students come from a range of majors – CTE, STEM, business, and arts and humanities – and most participated in one of PCC's special programs: Pathways (including some Pathways' tutors), Ujima, MESA.

Several characteristics make this a somewhat *un*representative sample. About one-half of the students we interviewed are in STEM. We wanted to explore this group, given the current urgency to bring more low-income students and students of color into these fields. (We will have more to say about STEM students in our conclusion.) The second

atypical characteristic of our sample – given the low levels of completion for community college students in general – is that they are a successful lot; almost all are on a path (or have completed it) to an occupational credential, Associate's degree, and/or transfer to a four-year college. We figured we could learn a lot about persistence by studying such students. It is worth pointing out, however, that many of our sample encountered a number of hardships along the way (at times leading to stopping-out), so we thought we could also learn something about the low points, and the factors that lead students back to achievement. Still, there would be merit in a separate study that would locate and interview students who are in severe academic trouble and/or have dropped out. Finally, let us note that our findings are in line with work we have done with other community college students and, more generally, with trends in the community college research literature.

The data produced from the 22 interviews and nearly 600 pages of transcription tell a multifaceted story of persistence, struggle, hope, and a cognitive and emotional awakening. Specifically, our analysis found that students collectively addressed the following topics: the degree to which the college environment either supported or constrained students' progress in their eyes, important teachers or programs, students' goals for transferring, and personal obstacles to degree completion. In presenting these findings we use pseudonyms to protect students' identities.

During the time we were at PCC, there was a good deal of discussion nationally of the book, Redesigning America's Community Colleges by Thomas Bailey, Shanna Smith Jaggars, and Davis Jenkins – and members of the PCC faculty and staff were engaging in this conversation as well. Therefore, at points in our report, we will refer to this book, and we will include in an appendix an assessment of the book by Mike Rose that will soon appear in Inside Higher Ed. In a nutshell, we believe that Bailey, et al offer specific

reforms that could have a positive effect on students' trajectories, and they offer tools to increase persistence; however, they do not adequately appreciate the complexity of students' lives and journeys.

What We Found

College Structures

Multiple entries in community college. Bailey, et al report that a fifth of all entering community college students exit school before they manage to earn even ten credits. What we have learned through our interviews is that students often dabble in college work at one community college and commit to another, enroll in three different colleges for the ideal schedule that accommodates two jobs, or enroll in one college for specialized courses and another for general education requirements. So in these cases, it seems that students exit after ten credits, but the reality for a number of our interviewees indicates that they experiment, relocate, or select colleges based on time constraints. What we have learned is that there are multiple entry points in community college and PCC specifically. For example, Sylvia enrolled in one French course at Long Beach City College to, "just try something fun," because a former PCC graduate encouraged her to give college a try. Shortly thereafter she transferred to PCC where she is a successful student. For others like Eric, who began his studies at Los Angeles City College, PCC had a "better connection" to his ideal transfer institution. While attendance at multiple colleges can lead to a student's increased knowledge about higher education, it can also add to that student's confusion, and, as well, deplete his or her financial aid resources.

Declaring a major. Colleges use in-person advising services and student success courses to help students make an initial decision about enrolling in a major or to clarify their

goals, yet many students have a difficult time selecting a major. Bailey, et al suggest "meta-majors" and improved counseling as a remedy, and those reforms would certainly help. But the data from our student sample indicate that students followed a non-linear path as they explored one area and then another before settling on a major – and while Bailey, et al's reforms would have helped some of them, we doubt the reforms would have made a significant difference for all. Listen to Michael's circuitous route to his major, "My intended major was business management and human resources 'cause I like working with people. But as I took the first semester, it was – the business part was boring. I don't know, I felt like I could just learn this by working myself and have hands-on experience. I really wanted to challenge myself. I said, 'If I'm gonna spend four years learning something, I want to learn something that's hard to learn by myself independently. I like viruses. I was curious about 'em. So that's when I got into microbiology sciences.'" Rachel switched from psychology to engineering and eventually committed to an English transfer degree based on an English professor's pedagogy and the content of his curriculum. Eric's major evolved from electrical engineering to political science as his duties in the Marine Corps shifted from the technical aviation field to the "critical thinking" intelligence field. Colleges can build clear, streamlined pathways to majors and career clusters, but the reality is that some students will continue to explore, change their minds, and select a major based on a meeting with a staff member, a recommendation from a friend, inspiration from an influential professor, or a dramatic life event occurring outside the campus.

The faculty effect. Every student we interviewed described at least one, and often up to three, teachers and PCC faculty/staff who have influenced their lives. There were nearly 200 references in the interviews to influential faculty or staff who helped students to learn, grow, and explore new academic areas.

The significance of these relationships moves beyond the classroom and into the personal lives of each student. Students mentioned professors by name who offered individual invitations to visit during office hours, reached out with a phone call, and provided thoughtful feedback on assignments. They also marveled over the morsels of humor in lectures and written feedback and valued an instructor's passion for the content. Students describe individual faculty and staff as mentors and people they wanted to emulate.

"Relatable," "animated," "engaging," "intelligent," "experienced" and "passionate" are words used to describe faculty or staff who stand out in our sample's minds. What may seem like an innocuous utterance from faculty or staff, such as a personal life experience or statements about one's alma mater, can be a memorable and influential statement to the students we interviewed. Students described professors as passionate teachers who love their content areas and staff who understand the challenges students face in college. Pathway students know they can, "go talk to Tito," and veteran students seek out veteran or "vet friendly" instructors identified through word-of-mouth networks. Whether instructors share pieces of themselves or are sympathetic to particular groups of students, they all hold something in common, succinctly summed up by Ernie as, "…a personal connection."

Another common theme emerged in our data: recognition of one's efforts, abilities, or struggles. Nine students described the importance of being noticed by a professor or staff member, being truly "seen" by someone they value. Rhonda, a timid tradeswoman with a strong work ethic, described an instructor who saw her full potential, "when she looks at you, she sees you, and it's like you're already there. You've already attained - it's like she sees the finished product, and I'm already that person." Some students mentioned the value of an honest acknowledgement of struggle in an area followed by

advice or a supportive statement. Ashton summarized a statement made by his professor, “Even though this is probably the weakest points that you're not your strongest in, you're gonna make it, and you'll be okay." Students value instructors who are honest and often “blunt” in their assessment of student performance and follow-up with statements of acceptance, even of one’s “blunder,” and comments that suggest they “see something in me that I don’t even see.”

As PCC scales up their boutique programs, administrators should not underestimate the impact of a single individual on a student’s decision to remain in school, return to school, and select a major.

College Climate and Community. Students who received encouragement from friends or family to attend college often did so without the how-to knowledge of college enrollment. Students like Sam admitted that “going online and looking for this, this, and this” was “Greek to [me].” Students used terms like “family” and “community” to describe the support they felt in the programs at PCC, and often added that they would not have made it as far as they have without the individuals and support services associated with these programs. For our sample, transitioning to college was a difficult process, but one mitigated by enrollment or participation in a program like Pathways, Ujima, MathJam, Tutoring, Design Tech, MathPath, MESA, the Puente Project, Veterans Resource Center, Boots to Books, Media Pathway, etc.

The four veteran students felt “lost” as they transitioned from a structured environment where students, like Marsha “still have the mentality of, ‘Tell me what I have to do.’” John revealed that he lost his wife, son, home, and hope as he transitioned from the military to civilian life and college. Though he privately shared his combat and readjustment issues with a few select individuals, it was Brock and Tito (from Pathways) who recognized that

John was “lost…completely lost,” and reached out to him. John, like others, described the transformative power of being welcome into an established community with a strong ethic of care. Marsha, a veteran, also found a community in the Veterans Resource Center and the Boots to Books cohort. The transition to college was difficult because, “We’re not a team anymore; we’re an individual.” She described the power of being a part of a veteran cohort that replaced her familiar military team, “they're all in the same boat as you, transitioning, going through the same problems.” Marsha indicates that she, and many from her cohort, would have “gone in another direction” without the support and cohort model.

The three Ujima students used the word, “family” fifteen times to describe their program. When asked what makes the program feel like a family, Olivia replied:

> Just the way they interact with you, like either my sisters, my mother, or my auntie. They come to you and they're like, "Hi, how are you doing?" Friendly. It's like you don't have to ask, "I have a problem." They'll look at you and they're like, "Are you okay?"

Olivia described a protective atmosphere, one where the coaches, counselors, and staff are on the lookout and can sense when a student is in trouble. The Ujima students detailed the ease of receiving help at the center and the availability of staff, “You walk in, you ask. They get it done.” Moreover, Ujima students, like Timothy, argue that when one is in a learning environment with a transfer culture and the backing and support of the staff, “[education] becomes what you want to do.” In addition, Ujima provides a safe, supportive space for its students to explore identity as a black student. Allie admitted that, prior to enrolling in the program, “I didn’t know what it meant to be African-American.” It is as if the environment itself is transformative.

Student Pathways tutors noted that the tutoring experience not only provided a tight-knit student community, but it also provided opportunities to improve one's own skills, share personal and academic experiences, advise, and push students out of their comfort zones. Rhonda compares Pathways tutoring to the larger tutoring program accessible to the whole campus, "I like that I can see familiar faces…I already know where they're at. [In] the larger tutoring program, that's less common. It's just students from this entire campus going in and out." Sarah shared that people in the center were proud of her efforts, and the tutoring center's community, "gave me a reason to come for the fall."

A Media Pathway student said that, "everything they do is really helpful" from the study sessions and IT support to the email reminders to ensure that students meet. Over in Design Tech, students understand the relevance of science, math, and English through the integrated curriculum. Susan did not understand why she needed "math and stuff like that" until professors in the program created cross-curricular "projects to explain why."

In a few cases, we were able to gain some insight into the lives of students who enrolled in PCC without membership in a program or struggled after leaving the program. Alan "had no idea what I was trying to do. I was part of the group that was just taking random courses, just trying to get registration and be part of a school." Students who accumulated nontransferable credits by enrolling in "random courses" felt financial pressures as they watched their aid dwindle and experienced frustration over their choices. Four students in our sample offered critiques of the system and two were particularly outspoken.

Alana and Samantha had negative counseling experiences that directly affected their transfer timeline; they both have been enrolled since 2011. Alana explained that her counselor "mashed" the requirements for two different transfer institutions and

encouraged her to enroll in psychology and other GE's to "get them out of the way." As a result, Alana has not met the requirements for upper division courses and reported that she needs to finish her physics, chemistry, biology, and math series.

Samantha claimed that the financial aid and counseling offices did not work together to prevent her from obtaining "useless" credits that are not transferrable and affect her future financial aid package. Samantha has accumulated 90 credits thus far and, like Alana, needs to complete all of her math, chemistry, physics, and GEs prior to transferring as a competitive student in engineering. When Samantha sought help as an independent student, she fought with "the office" who directed her to look online for the answer. Samantha preferred to speak to someone in person. Due to the long lines and her initial negative experience, Samantha did not seek academic counseling for three years and relied on advice from her more advanced classmates. (Her response was arguably counterproductive, and it demonstrates what can happen when students who are not savvy institutional navigators are left to their own devices.) When Samantha finally visited an academic counselor, she described the rote process, "Print out *assist.org*; show me the paper, cross out what I needed…There's your transfer and here's your *assist.org* to transfer." Samantha felt frustrated and angry when the financial aid counselor didn't understand that she couldn't enroll in the courses on the *Assist.org* list without taking the prerequisites, "they don't understand that so they count what I need but they don't count how to get there." She said resolutely, "…to transfer and… not waste time you have to be in a program at PCC."

For the majority of our sample, the tailored programs provided the resources for students to be successful as well as a space to interact with a community of learners and like-minded students. The programs and their staff provide both support and high expectations. Allie sums it up nicely, "I wasn't forced to be in a community, but I was

provided with it, and I just took advantage." PCC's challenge as they scale up is to retain the sense of community, the program's identity, and the staff's personal touch as the numbers increase.

The Student Experience

The destabilizing effect of trauma. Nearly every student in our sample shared emotional stories of doubt, struggle, hardship, and trauma. We were struck by the students' resilience and self-reflection and marveled at the fact that they, with so much hardship, persisted and remained focused on their transfer goals. Our interviewees manage to successfully, and sometimes unsuccessfully, navigate the challenges of college while coping with life-changing events. For example, John, a veteran who would deploy, return to school and deploy again, describes the emotional effects of war, "Being in combat absolutely and fundamentally changed everything about me…It changed what I believed. It made me question my morals, who I was, what I was doing here, who am I fighting for – those kind of things. I had a really difficult time readjusting back when I came back." Ben, a welding major with a traumatic brain injury, returned to PCC after three years of rehabilitation: "I was still shaking… so I would [lean against the wall and] prop my arm on my hip. Just slowly I would get a little bit less shaky. And now I'm certified." While one student wedges himself into a welding booth to control the shaking, another student lives in his car, another moves home to protect the women in his family from his abusive father, and another spends time in a rehabilitation facility after confessing to a crime. Trauma can derail a student from a well-intentioned path, and that trauma is often beyond the control of the institution. But the institution cannot ignore the fact of trauma as it creates its protocols and programs for student success.

Stopping-out or slowing-down. Those who wish to redesign college programs often focus on student intake and support services to get and keep students on track. It is clear that student success courses and the human touch in academic advising are valuable; however, this input-output model neglects what appears to be a fundamental reality of the community college student – slowing down by enrolling in one or two courses at a time or stopping out entirely. Missing from some discussions of retention is a description of the supports that students may need when returning to college after stopping out the first, second, or third time or supports that slow-track students may require. Students who leave for a semester, or longer, due to military deployment, family crises, lack of financial aid, or mental health issues may require unique emotional or academic counseling to streamline their return to college.

Our findings suggest that stopping-out or slowing-down is a reality for many students, as indicated by their program start dates: eleven percent of interviewees initially enrolled in 2008 or earlier, 61 percent enrolled between 2009-2011, 17 percent in 2012, and 11 percent in 2013. Almost all of the students in our sample will not complete a transfer degree in a "traditional" timeframe due to forced breaks caused by life events or schedule and financial challenges that dictate a reduced course load. For example, Ernie served in the military and has attended PCC on-and-off since 2009, "I was only in ____ for six months. I left February 2009 and was back here September 2009. So that's what I did. I came right back to school, for a short stint, then I heard about another deployment and I hopped on that." For others, stopping out was the result of financial aid problems related to immigration status or limited family resources that were spread too thin after a divorce. Even students who had the resources to attend regularly were forced to slow down their progress as the result of chemistry course availability or failing a math course two or three times.

Habits of mind and other lessons learned. The students in our sample who have enrolled for four, five, or six years may not look like success stories on traditional outcome measures like time-to-degree or GPA; however, these students have learned a great deal about themselves and what it means to be successful. Students describe how they develop habits of mind outside the classroom and often, as a result of mistakes made, suggest that developing habits of mind occurs throughout the college *experience* rather than solely within the classroom.

Students learn to persist, think flexibly, think about thinking, and remain open to continuous learning through making mistakes, tutoring, participating in extracurricular activities, and failure. For example, students who fail to meet a financial aid deadline, like Martin, will have to drop courses for a term or enroll without purchasing textbooks. A hard lesson in planning resulted in financial challenges that led Martin to adhere to firm FAFSA deadlines in the future. He admits, "Now I'm more prepared. I'm saving up for spring semester. I don't know if financial aid's gonna kick in, but if not, I still have my job." Ethan failed chemistry, reenrolled, and ultimately learned to "follow a systematic order of learning in order to succeed" and now values the study habits he developed at PCC over the past six years. Others see their time in community college as more than just obtaining a degree. Rhonda states, "I didn't think it would be the case, but I've found so many things to broaden my knowledge of what I can do with the stuff I'm learning, not just have a degree."

These students who are taking 4 to 6 years to transfer are using up their financial aid and taxing institutional resources, but they likewise seem to be learning valuable life lessons as they slowly accumulate transfer credits. One could argue that the students we interviewed should have learned these lessons at home, and that college is a time for more focused study; however, many of our sample did not have the opportunity for

growth prior to enrolling at PCC. The students were fighting wars, taking care of parents or siblings, surviving in dangerous neighborhoods, spending time in rehabilitation centers, learning the English language at a late age, and transferring from school to school in various states around the country. Time for self-reflection and emotional maturation was in short supply. As a result, for many, the community college is the first place to take the time to breathe, learn, reflect, and grow. Success, to the interviewees, is more than course completion and transferring in two years; success and growth are internal and not easily measured by a quantitative metric or captured in a neat table on a single PowerPoint slide. It is messier than that. Success is finding your way with the help of others and sidestepping most, but not all, of the landmines associated with tackling a new and unfamiliar goal. It is learning a new concept through repeated practice and support. Often it requires moving backward and then forward again before the lesson is internalized. Success is not linear to our sample; it looks more like a positive sloping sine wave with repeated peaks and valleys.

Growth mind-set at work. Most of the students in our sample take responsibility for their actions and view their interaction with the environment as something they can control and change. Occasionally, students like Samantha, blame the counselors or financial aid office for missed financial aid deadlines or for credits that do not count towards a degree. However, the majority of students described deliberate behaviors and conscious choices that resulted in mostly positive outcomes. The students made it very clear that, despite events that sometimes derail their efforts, the choice to succeed or fail is ultimately up to them. Alan illustrates that community college provides a space for emotional as well as academic growth, "I need to make these decisions for myself; I need to learn on my own whether it be good or bad. Whatever it leads me to, I need to know that I'm making these choices and I am doing what I can."

To be sure, some of this “growth mind set” orientation and language comes from the training and teaching students receive through class materials by Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck and others. Students, in our sample, have learned that they can influence their outcomes by directly controlling their actions. For example, Adrienne struggled in her math courses, but she learned in her tutor training that, “It’s just a fixed mindset and that’s really what’s getting me stuck, the fact that I don’t think I can do better. But I know I can do better.” Tyler and others “didn’t have that [growth] mindset” when they enrolled in community college. However, as Tyler discovered, “If I just put the time in, I can be successful beyond measure." The key question, of course, is whether the students just use the “mindset” language or actually enact it. Our sense based on the actions students describe is that in some cases, anyway, students experience a budding self-determination and a shift toward empowerment, feeling less like a victim and more like an active participant in their own lives.

Often more striking than the students’ words was the manner in which they spoke. Young men and women who have overcome significant challenges sat up a little taller, looked directly into the interviewer’s eyes, and spoke passionately about their metamorphosis at PCC. A second-language learner from an impoverished area struggled with the correct syntax, but he, too, used the language of empowerment as he shared his personal revelations.

It is clear that the students in our sample are a resilient group who believe that hard work and effort will help them achieve their academic and personal goals. Could this be one factor that separates our sample of students who have clear sights on their transfer institutions from those who do not?

Final Thoughts

As we noted, the students we interviewed are for the most part PCC success stories, and still their experience reflects the complexity of the community college journey that is partially missed in current reform discussions. The community college population, and PCC's is no exception, is comprised of a high number of low-income and first-generation students. And while a number of students come to community college with clear goals in mind and a previous education adequate to the task, many others are uncertain, poorly prepared, searching. The kinds of structural remedies advocated by current reformers – like Bailey and his colleagues – can help guide and direct such students. Absolutely. But many students will still need other college interventions and social services. We were struck by just how hard some students' lives have been.

We were also struck by the profound role PCC has played and continues to play in some of our interviewees' development. Let us step back for a moment and consider a broader picture of young people's lives in the United States. 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 word or the military. Or they can enroll in the local community college – as some in our sample did – hoping that a 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.

In interviewing these students, we are 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.

One more thing to note in summary: we cannot emphasize enough the role simple, old-fashioned human relations played in the stories we heard. PCC faculty and staff and fellow students working in a support role figured continually in accounts of success, reflection, overcoming hardship, and growth. If we had only one recommendation we could make, it would be this: As the college moves to scale up existing programs or start new ones, do not diminish the amount and quality of human contact you have with your students.

In closing, we would like to focus on a particularly interesting subgroup: STEM majors. Many have done poorly in key courses and even failed them. At times they have experienced doubt related to their abilities, and hit the proverbial wall. These students have successfully overcome their challenges at the college, but one can predict that many will experience similar roadblocks at their transfer institutions. We wonder, therefore, if the college could apply to local philanthropies for a grant to follow these dedicated STEM students for one year after transfer, and provide a counseling/mentoring intervention if one is needed. The intervention could be geared toward supporting students in their STEM field, helping them move into related fields, or guiding them to different fields (such as teaching) that would still draw on their STEM interests and knowledge but in a new occupation. Given the need for under-represented groups in STEM, the passion yet challenges faced by the STEM students we interviewed, and the

multiple avenues open to people with STEM interests, it seems that PCC has a wonderful opportunity to do something pathbreaking that is fundable.

Thank you for the opportunity to meet and work with your students.

Appendix A: Reassessing a Redesign of Community Colleges appearing in *Inside Higher Ed*_ by Mike Rose

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: *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 of the reforms laid out in book. But I also have some concerns -- maybe cautions in 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 coauthors 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 its 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 and counseling and advising are 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 utilize 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 macro-structure 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 "meta-major," 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.

The Pathways idea is a good one. I have known so many students who would have benefitted tremendously from it -- 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 thirty-five 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

administration and faculty and staff; the divide between faculty and student services; 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 toolkit 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 coauthors 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 sub-par 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.

The structural fix Bailey and his coauthors 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 mid-semester 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 would also 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 that 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 coauthors 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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