Community colleges trying to increase pathways for students

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Building Clear Paths

More community colleges are considering building clear pathways to help students reach a career or further their education goals without wasting time or money.

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By

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CHICAGO -- Community college leaders across the country are looking through the hundreds of courses in their catalogs and trying to find a way to streamline their offerings in order to get students to completion.

That's because the days of students taking courses without direction is no longer acceptable if colleges hope to get them to complete within a reasonable time, with a degree and minimal student debt.

These community college leaders have been meeting here this week at the American Association of Community College's national conference, discussing how to create guided pathways and help their students find the careers and programs that match.

AACC, with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, has partnered with Achieving the Dream, the Aspen Institute, the Center for Community College Student Engagement, the Community College Research Center at Teachers College Columbia University, Jobs for the Future, the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement and Public Agenda to create The Pathways Project. The project is expanding the use of guided course and career pathways at 30 community colleges in 17 states.

"No more boutiques, no more pilots, no more innovation around the margins of the institution," said Kay McClenney, a senior adviser at AACC. "By fall 2018, all entering students at all 30 of these colleges -- all students -- will be coming into well-designed, fully implemented pathways."

The Pathways Project is asking the colleges to achieve four objectives. First, colleges should clarify students' choices with program maps developed by faculty members and advisers that connect to careers and employment.

Second, the colleges should help students enter a pathway by redesigning their traditional remediation courses. Third, the colleges should offer strong advising to help students stay on a pathway. And finally, colleges should make sure students are learning by having high-quality pedagogy and establishing learning outcomes tied to employment or further education.

"There's a myth that students enjoy wandering," said Rob Johnstone, president and founder of the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement. But the No. 1 thing colleges hear from students is that they need help finding the right direction to take, he said.

There is a fear -- particularly among faculty members in the liberal arts -- that guided pathways is a way of eliminating their fields of study, Johnstone said.

"At the end of the day, when you go down a guided pathways path … you're not going to have fewer humanities courses. It helps you think, 'How do these general education courses go together?'" he said.

The Gates Foundation is funding the pathways project with a $5.2 million grant, with the hopes that the work being done at the 30 colleges will spread to other institutions across the country.

"We hope this creates a framework by which we can engage local communities and the experts in their communities and provide them with the latest learning so they can really embed this," said Patrick Methvin, deputy director of postsecondary student success at Gates.

But it's not easy for any college to do a re-evaluation of its course offerings and create pathways.

"The thing that has to be done is to find the time and give faculty, advisers and deans the time," said Davis Jenkins, senior research associate with CCRC, adding that it requires good leadership because most community colleges are already busy with hundreds or thousands of students.

But McClenney points out that in Texas, students have a lot of choices, but they're not being used effectively. Research in that state found the average number of credits earned by an associate degree student in a community college is 91, she said, adding that 60 credits should be the maximum.

"There's no level in which 91 credits for an associate degree is OK," she said.

While creating pathways may seem daunting for some colleges, Bruce Leslie, the chancellor of Alamo Community Colleges in Texas, which is one of the 30 institutions in the project, said many two-year institutions across the country already have a few guided pathways. They just call them by another name.

"It's called workforce programs. All of this is about fixing general education. But nursing faculty, they get it … our automotive and welding programs are all pathways," he said.

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