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Davidson-Davie Community College



How did Davidson-Davie implement guided pathways?

Guided pathways at Davidson-Davie evolved over several years, beginning when the institution participated in Completion by Design and refined through participation in the Frontier Set.

When their guided pathways reforms began, Davidson-Davie had already been engaged in several student success reform efforts and was in the process of redesigning developmental education. That redesign included implementing multiple measures for placement and reviewing course sequence and course requirements, particularly in mathematics and English. Much of this work was also aligned with Davidson-Davie's involvement in the state's Student Success Center (supported by Jobs for the Future) and their work as a member of Achieving the Dream.

Against this backdrop, the work leading up to guided pathways reforms began by analyzing the course catalog and realizing the college had multiple superfluous or overlapping courses. After reviewing their student data and seeing significant room for improvement, the faculty, staff, and administrators came to a broader conclusion: course-level and advising reforms would not be enough. They reached consensus that the next phase of their work needed to focus on academic programming. This realization led Davidson-Davie to consider the guided pathways model. A senior academic administrator explained:

"We considered all of our different student success initiatives, and one of the things that we came to realize was that we were at the point where we had done advising, we had done orientation. We had looked at all these things and we really needed to turn our attention to academics... [one of the key issues] was making sure that we had a clear understanding for our programs and what the right pathway was for the student to be the most successful."

Davidson-Davie saw implementing guided pathways as a full-institution effort meant to change the way the college conducted its work to benefit the students.

This, combined with an intentional approach to engaging faculty and staff in the design process, led to success. One faculty leader at the institution described it as follows:

"It's not just creating a new initiative—it's making sure that what we are doing is all working together and it's all benefiting the student."

What made Davidson-Davie's implementation unique?

One important part of the process: Davidson-Davie's efforts to engage faculty in developing pathways. Faculty input was key to developing course sequences and adapting the guided pathways model to suit the college's unique context and students. For example, one faculty leader described attending a national guided pathways institute and learning very specific guidance about putting math and reading in the first semester—and immediately afterward being approached by a colleague with concerns about that approach in their program. That faculty leader noted:

"We chose to look at it in our institution, and we decided what programs this would work for. Will it work for these pathways or not? We understood that change isn't always something that has to take place. It only needs to take place if it's going to benefit us."

By addressing how to uniquely tailor guided pathways to each academic department, Davidson-Davie overcame some early instances of faculty and staff pushback. A senior academic leader explained the initial concerns around the removal of course prerequisites that had proliferated prior to guided pathways implementation:

"We had swung to the overkill side of requisites. As people started to look at those requisites, at the same time there were some conflicts there that people had to work through. And some people struggled with that a little bit, but we did wind up getting rid of, I would say, probably 90 percent of the local requisites through that process."

In eliminating courses, Davidson-Davie was able to make a greater number of general education courses applicable across programs. It also allowed them to create cohorts of students within the same program and schedule courses more effectively for programs with relatively fewer students. Davidson-Davie was able to find a compromise between the traditional "cafeteria" approach and a fully structured pathway.

As a senior academic leader recalled:

“We discussed what the ideal order of courses was for each program. Advisors know what the order needs to be, and students can be advised based on where they are. Courses that keep the student on track are approved by the advisor based on the ideal order, and those courses are the ones the student can register for. This is aided by requisites that are in place for some courses. By reducing the number of options where there are choices to make, we have reduced the instances where mistakes can be made along the way.”

What capacities were key to implementation?

The primary institutional capacities that allowed for successful guided pathways implementation at Davidson-Davie included cross-functional teams, communication, and human capital. Data capacity also helped.

CROSS-FUNCTIONAL TEAMS

Cross-functional teams were critical in implementing guided pathways at Davidson-Davie. One senior academic administrator stated: “The biggest thing ... that I think makes the difference is that ... pathways are developed with a team of people around them; they’re not developed in isolation by one person.”

To ensure progress, Davidson-Davie created a steering committee to oversee several implementation teams. Academic-focused teams required greater faculty engagement, while advising-focused teams required greater student services staff engagement. But all teams included individuals from across the institution’s divisions as well as faculty, staff and administrators. A senior academic leader described the structure:

“Even though you had the student support services team there were still people from academics on that team, and there were still people from student services on the academic team, there were people from both on the larger steering committee. There were faculty who were knowledgeable about the programs in terms of industry needs, and others who probably had more experience and a better grasp of student success from a bigger-picture perspective.”

The teams had a flexible structure, allowing addition of new members to respond to needs. According to a faculty member, “It was very fluid. It was not a set group. We met throughout the year to make sure the right people were in place, and each year we would reassess and bring different people in.”

Teams building pathways were necessarily focused on including front-line faculty, who understood learning goals, but they also made sure to involve

advisors. As described by a faculty leader, “A lot of our student services staff were there—specifically the folks in advising who were helping students choose [their courses for] the next couple of years.”

Faculty, administrators, and staff also underscored the importance of the institution’s senior team providing the overall vision and direction for the implementation teams during college-wide meetings. One faculty member reflected on how they appreciated academic leaders being champions for this work, in part because they saw leaders as typically focusing on barriers to student success—but in this work they were looking for solutions, which was a nice contrast.

Faculty also appreciated the senior team’s availability and receptivity during guided pathways implementation: “Leadership is the biggest thing. And you have to be blunt with your leadership, and they have to be 100 percent bought in.”

The faculty noted leadership’s importance in tying the guided pathways work to the institution’s strategic plan, as well as the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) required for accreditation. One administrator explained, “There’s no reason for us to be meeting and making changes or coming up with initiatives separate from that strategic plan. The idea is that [guided pathways] would be a part of our strategic plan and our QEP.”

Recently, maintaining strong cross-functional collaboration has been more difficult. One student services administrator reflected that when student and academic affairs were combined into the same team, collaborative conversations about a collective vision and plan were a given. Recently, under new administration, teams were separated back into academic and student affairs divisions, making it more challenging to engage student affairs in guided pathways work.

COMMUNICATION

Constant, effective communications through various vehicles was another defining characteristic of implementing guided pathways at Davidson-Davie. College-wide communications began during “opening sessions” led by the president at the start of each semester, immediately followed by division meetings, which were followed by smaller targeted meetings and discussions throughout the semester. As described by a senior academic leader:

“At a certain point it was the responsibility of the administrator for each academic area to also keep moving that process forward with their programs, and making sure that they were helping their faculty and programs get where they needed to be.”

The most striking aspect of the Davidson-Davie communication process was the faculty's central role in its coordination.

Faculty engagement in communications began when administrators identified a faculty lead to champion the process. This faculty member took ownership of regularly communicating with the rest of the faculty. He provided information, conducted surveys, and convened meetings to gather faculty input. He would ensure staff and administrators understood faculty viewpoints and, conversely, he kept faculty abreast of administrative decisions and how the process was progressing. The primary faculty lead described his role as follows:

"I really focused on making sure everybody knew what was going on and what we were working on—how everything was interconnected ... I used surveys as one means for them to understand the different things that might be taking place or might change. It was a benefit both to those individuals and to those of us making changes."

HUMAN CAPITAL

Professional development, especially within division and department settings, was key to implementing guided pathways at Davidson-Davie. One faculty leader reflected on their process for connecting new professional development opportunities directly to changes (or "solutions") the college was considering, and dispersing the learning across a department:

"For instance, for course sequences, we started [training] within each school with the deans, and then we broke that down for the associate deans. They then took it to each department and then talked about how their courses fit into each program and what appropriate order would work best for them and what changes they want to make. And then that worked its way back up."

Leaders also made sure to provide time for individuals to participate in professional development. A faculty leader said, "As a general rule this college is very supportive, including giving somebody some release time—which means, of course, you have to get your classes covered and that increases your item cost."

As the guided pathways rollout progressed at Davidson-Davie, administrators saw the need for additional, sustained faculty development. So the institution invested in creating a Center for Teaching and Learning. A faculty leader noted how creating the center was one of the most meaningful changes

related to the fourth guided pathways pillar (ensure learning)—both because of the data capacity it added to help measure learning, and the fact that it gave faculty "a specific entity that was creating professional development that ... felt relevant to them and meaningful to them."

Other venues that were important for faculty and staff development included webinars, national meetings, and meetings through the North Carolina Student Success Center.

DATA CAPACITY

Davidson-Davie makes student progression and persistence the primary measures regularly reviewed to track the success of guided pathways implementation. Leaders disaggregate that student data to understand equity gaps. One faculty leader noted that Davidson-Davie built on the definition of achievement gap as the North Carolina Student Success Center defined it (the difference between minority success rate and the success rate of students who self-identify as white non-Hispanic) and defined the college's achievement gap as the difference in first-year progression rates of those same groups. This distinction allowed Davidson-Davie to identify barriers to success early in the student's academic path.

Takeaways

The Davidson-Davie work provides some key considerations for sustained pathways implementation, especially regarding cross-functional teams and communication across the institution. One senior administrator described the importance of a cross-functional group:

“It’s not just about faculty and academic affairs. I think if you lose sight of that on the front end, from admissions and enrollment through the advising process and into the classroom—if you don’t have all of that present at the table—then you’re probably missing pieces of what can make your student successful.”

Regarding communication, a faculty leader described it as a process of education:

“Educate yourself and make sure people around you know that you are there for your institution ... I would definitely recommend to anybody (even non-faculty) [thinking about] leading this at another institution to have a very thick skin [and] constantly communicate to others that you’re there as the facilitator ... and not just directing [the] group or ... the initiatives that are taking place. Make sure that everybody’s voice is heard, and that they understand that everybody’s voices can be heard.”

REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL LEADERS

- As you’ve built program pathways, how have you engaged both faculty and student services staff, including advisors?
- Thinking across your college-wide reform work groups and committees, how many have the right mix of people to ensure strong implementation? If not, do they feel empowered to bring in needed expertise?
- What other implementation structures can you develop to support broad participation and communication, especially in the early stages of institutional transformation?
- Who is engaged in communications efforts? Are messengers from key groups—including faculty and advisors—centrally involved in messaging college-wide guided pathways priorities? Do they help administrators understand the faculty and staff perspective on how reforms should proceed?
- How can you more strongly reflect institutional transformation efforts in your strategic planning process? In your accreditation review? Do those processes and documents reflect the same priorities and approaches to student success and equity?