

**EXCERPT FROM:**

**DESIGNING FOR TRANSFORMATION:**

# **Insights from Frontier Set Institutions**

Understanding the work of 12 high-performing,  
high-potential community colleges, supported  
and studied by the Aspen Institute

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## William Rainey Harper College



### How did Harper College implement guided pathways?

Harper College began its five-year guided pathways implementation process in 2016. There were two key catalysts that led to launching this work. The first was a data review as part of a strategic planning process, which revealed a need to improve student completion rates. The second was the institution's interaction with external entities, including the Community College Research Center (CCRC), with whom they collaborated to identify and implement best practices from other institutions.

Driven by these factors, the institution developed a five-year implementation plan. As described by a student services administrator:

*"It was within that five-year cycle that 'areas of interest' were developed and implemented. It took about three years before we had them in a student-facing place ... and then in the last two years of the strategic plan we were refining them and continuing to socialize areas of interest throughout the student experience."*

The institution used external national experts and research to understand where to make changes. A student services administrator described the desire to move away from being a "cafeteria college" and instead get students on the most direct paths possible to completing their credentials. They were impressed by the research showing the benefits of implementing guided pathways, and noted: "We wanted to ensure that students were taking the classes that they need ... We wanted to better organize and present options to students in a way that's not overwhelming."

Harper College's strategic planning process included six phases: campus dialogues, data summits, data synthesis, a conference to discuss emerging themes, plan review and approval, and plan launch. The data summits used a combination of student data, community data, and workforce data to inform the process. Goals from the most recent cycle included implementing innovative teaching and learning practices, removing barriers to student success, and building institutional capacity to support equity, diversity, and inclusion.

### What made Harper College's implementation unique?

Administrators identified three unique elements that allowed Harper College to successfully adapt the national guided pathways model.

The first was the decision to create flexibility in their model. The faculty and staff at Harper College adopted the term "areas of interest"—rather than "guided pathways"—to describe their model, and they use those areas of interest to help students align the courses in their associate degrees to four-year institutions' transfer requirements. (The "areas of interest" are essentially the equivalent of meta-majors at other institutions.) A senior academic leader described the reason behind this approach:

*"I think it really was because we had a lot of concern, particularly from faculty, around being too prescriptive with curriculum paths for students and eliminating courses ... So rather than forcing students into a track, we came up with these nine or 10 areas of interest that were a little broader, that we could align with a first-year seminar and advising roles."*

Adopting the term "areas of interest" reflects another priority: It allows Harper College to better customize pathways and provide more flexible options for transfer-seeking students. Because Harper students pursuing bachelor's degrees in the same subject transfer to multiple different four-year colleges, flexibility in the program maps enables students to choose slightly different courses within each area of interest, to ensure all coursework will be applied to their major at their chosen four-year destination.

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*This flexibility took strong and sustained interaction between advisors and students as they worked through the course options within each area of interest.*

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A student services leader at Harper College noted that as they were developing their model, they were looking to other colleges in the region for examples. They noticed that some of the "cleanest" guided pathways models were at colleges offering more career and technical programs, where students complete credentials at the college and directly enter the workforce. With Harper College's transfer-oriented model, they needed more flexibility to customize

students' curriculum maps to align to their transfer goals. The student services leader noted: "I think that leaving [it] open a little bit and flexible so that students are working with their academic advisors to refine those plans—that's our guided pathways."

The second unique way Harper implemented guided pathways was developing tools advisors could use to ensure students are on track and completing their degrees. Harper implemented an electronic degree-planning platform as they rolled out guided pathways reforms. This platform provides tools for advisors to not only monitor student degree progress, but also to work with students on "what if" scenarios when considering changes in majors and/or courses. Academic and student leaders noted that the electronic degree plans helped show students how close they were to finishing certain credentials and allowed advisors to "... provide a little bit more intentional and strategic outreach to students who were close to completing a credential." The platform also made it possible to reach out to students who had left Harper when close to completing a credential, to check in and see if they'd transferred or if they wanted to return and graduate. One academic leader noted that the "intentionality behind that outreach ... did impact the overall graduation rates."

Third, the institution designed its "areas of interest" approach with the goal of ensuring strong collaboration between academics and student affairs. A senior student services administrator described the impact this more open collaboration and communication has had on the student-advisor relationship:

*"We bridged communication between the academic side and the student services side ... I think opening that communication channel has given advisors the tools to provide cleaner educational plans for students, and I think that has had an impact on keeping students on track so they're completing their credentials in the shortest amount of time possible."*

Highly effective cross-functional teams were a central mechanism for this communication, as described below.

## What capacities were key to implementation?

The primary institutional capacities that allowed for successful guided pathways implementation at Harper College included cross-functional teams, communication, human capital, strategic finance, data capacity, and technology.

## CROSS-FUNCTIONAL TEAMS

While academic divisions carried the greatest responsibility for implementing guided pathways—including aligning courses and program outcomes—strong collaboration between the academic and student affairs divisions was a hallmark of Harper College's efforts.

For each identified area of interest, the college created a team consisting of a lead chair, faculty, advisors, and a librarian. Senior academic leaders and student services leaders attested to the importance of these cross-functional teams. One explained the model, noting that it operates similarly to a shared governance structure:

*"Fairly early on we implemented areas of interest teams that met regularly. They had representatives from faculty from each area of interest, a dean and academic advisors, and some library support staff... Those teams are designed so that the faculty take what they've discussed within the areas of interest team and bring it back to the rest of the faculty from that area, and ... the same thing with advisors."*

Another leader added that these teams "had representation across the college, which I think was really important so that each area felt like they had a seat at the table to influence the direction of the areas of interest."

Senior leadership involvement was an important component of these cross-functional teams. For example, an associate provost was tasked with monitoring the work emerging from the teams and ensuring it was translated into technology tools, marketing tools, etc., and providing regular guidance and feedback to the teams via a faculty chair from each area of interest. In turn, those faculty chairs were charged with translating the provost's guidance back to their teams or departments to ensure the area of interest's structure was maintained.

## COMMUNICATION

Senior administrators communicated the importance of guided pathways by tying it closely to the college's strategic plan. For example, the team that was charged with designing and monitoring goals for the strategic plan was assigned responsibility for overseeing guided pathways implementation.

The college accomplished strategic communication several ways, including college-wide meetings, forums, and individual departmental meetings. Given the link to the strategic planning process, the institution also included conversations about guided pathways implementation progress at strategic planning meetings and a strategic plan summit. A senior student services administrator discussed how the administration used

college-wide meetings to set the stage for smaller, more focused meetings at the departmental level:

*“[On] a retreat that we did a few years ago, where we brought faculty and advisors together for a substantial period of time to really ask them what was working and where we still had some gaps or opportunities ... We also did road shows and campaigning around areas of interest to help everyone grasp what it is, why we’re doing it, and where they fit into areas of interest.”*

As guided pathways implementation has continued, the college has been challenged to maintain the commitment to strategic communications that it made in the early stages. Senior academic leaders at the institution are concerned about an emerging lack of communication to ensure fidelity in implementation. One leader explained: “One area where I think we could have really been more effective is to bring faculty and advisors together to participate in shared learning experiences, to be in the same room talking about the same thing.” As a result, the college discovered that some students in some divisions have not been assigned advisors, which is troubling given the reliance on advisors to help students navigate flexible pathways.

Another challenge to maintaining strategic communications has been leadership turnover at Harper College. A lesson for others engaged in guided pathways work: Clearly document the strategic communications plan, and ensure new administrators are briefed on their responsibilities as part of the onboarding process.

## HUMAN CAPITAL

Employee onboarding and professional development were important factors in successfully implementing guided pathways. Administrators at the institution noted that Frontier Set grant dollars were particularly important to support much of the pathways-related professional development. In addition to hosting college-wide meetings and inviting guest speakers, the funds allowed faculty and staff retreats focused on sharing information and best practices.

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*Additionally, Harper College implemented an employee onboarding program that spotlights the pathways model, so new personnel are aware how central this strategy is to student success.*

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The onboarding process covers the areas of interest approach and explains how new employees fit into and support the model.

Harper underwent some human capital challenges as well. One lesson learned relates to the role personnel, particularly advisors, play in pathways development. An academic administrator cautioned against overwhelming staff with significant and rapid shifts in how workload is managed:

*“Shifting from a model where we had counselors working with students on courses to one where we had advisors managing very large caseloads, that at times felt transactional and perhaps didn’t allow for their relationships to develop ... So I think advising is a challenge—just the cultural shift away from how we did it before to now, the caseload, and certainly too the assigned advisor model.”*

Fundamentally shifting the advising model is often a hallmark of guided pathways reforms, so other colleges should take note of this challenge, and consider how to ensure there is enough time for the transition, adequate training to support adopting new responsibilities, and manageable caseloads for advisors.

## STRATEGIC FINANCE

One of the strengths of Harper College’s guided pathways approach was integrating the model into the institution’s operations. Rather than using grant funds to support the reform, operational aspects of the pathways model were funded through the institution’s operating budget—supplemented by grant dollars to support professional development. Administrators could fund the work through core operating dollars because of the tie to the strategic plan, which was already funded in that way.

One big area required reallocating dollars: new advising positions. A senior academic leader noted that, to reallocate funding and make way for these new positions, they had to eliminate positions including adjunct faculty counselors, while spreading advising capacity across areas. This reallocation was made easier because Harper College works regularly to ensure funds are available to resource what matters most.

## DATA CAPACITY

Harper College frequently reports student retention, persistence, and completion metrics to all campus stakeholders as well as the Board of Trustees. The college’s key performance indicators (KPIs) are identified by reviewing peer institution metrics and examining recent research and publications on key indicators in higher education, then aligning with the college’s mission and vision.

The college sets targets to measure progress based on the KPIs. The Strategic Planning and Accountability Shared Governance Committee leads this target-setting process, and it includes input and feedback from key campus stakeholders, including trustees. For this target-setting, Harper College developed a framework with three categories: 1) expected targets if the institution maintains the status quo; 2) improvement targets that are challenging, but attainable; and 3) stretch targets that can only be achieved if they are prioritized and resources are marshalled.

Harper College also built data capacity at the advisor level to support student success. Another primary KPI the institution monitors: the relationship between advisement and completion. One senior academic leader noted that in addition to tracking when students choose an area of interest, the college also tracks which students meet with their advisors (and which don't) and examines the success rates of both. The college frequently reviews this data and shares findings with the board to demonstrate the value of advisement and the investments made in new advisors.

## TECHNOLOGY

Harper College invested in technology to support degree planning and early alerts—and to help advisors manage their respective caseloads. Although it is an ongoing and continually evolving process, much of the college's technology effort has gone into integrating their platforms. One senior leader explained that “student data, registration, degree planning, and scheduling tools, all those things just work together seamlessly.”

Another technology investment has been in the Harper College website, which the institution considers a primary vehicle for communicating with students. The college made significant efforts to reflect the areas of interest and supporting information on the website, to help students understand their guided pathways.

## Takeaways

Overall, Harper College credits its cross-functional teams and flexible pathways models for their implementation success. A senior student services leader summarized the foundation of their sustained implementation:

*“There isn’t a one-size-fits-all pathways model. You have to give space for the full change management process to happen so that you are asking for input from a wide range of both faculty and staff on [the questions]: Where you do want to be more structured within your guided pathways model? Where do you ... want to provide flexibility for students?”*

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL LEADERS

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- Are your guided pathways design and implementation closely connected to your strategic plan? If not, is there confusion as to how these plans fit together? Would your college benefit from tying them more closely—and, if so, what steps would you take to accomplish that goal?
- What significant investments will implementing guided pathways require? Redesigning advising? Adopting technology? How will your college resource those functions in ways that are sustainable after early implementation stages?
- What systems can you develop to ensure that people at every level—from senior leaders to team leaders to managers within divisions—monitor whether reforms are being implemented as intended? How can your college set the expectation that mid-course corrections are expected when challenges arise?
- What are ways you can leverage strategic internal communication to get everyone on the same page about the transformation process you’re embarking on? How can you build communications plans that make clear what everyone’s role is in communicating the importance of the reform? How can you ensure those plans continue even when leaders depart?