COLLEGE
EXCELLENCE
P R O G R A M
aspen institute

FRONTIER**SET**

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

SPRING 2022

Lorain County Community College

Lcc Lorain County Community College

How did Lorain implement guided pathways?

Lorain began work on guided pathways implementation in 2012 as part of its participation in the national Completion by Design (CBD) initiative, which shared many student success and equity goals and strategies with the Frontier Set.

At the outset, several factors pushed the institution to critically review its data and take action: external pressure from the community, a challenge from a journalist, and a shift to performance-based funding (PBF) in Ohio in 2013, which tied institutional budgets to student success metrics.

Just as faculty, staff, and administrators at the institution were reviewing student data as part of the CBD effort, they received a query from a journalist pushing them to not just take a hard look at their overall enrollment and graduation numbers, but to also review their disaggregated graduation rates. What leaders realized was that the combination of low graduation rates and high credit-accumulation totals among graduates was most pronounced among students of color at the institution. And, in fact, those rates were poor for all students: Lorain ranked near the bottom of institutions in the state on both metrics.

Lorain's guided pathways work began with a developmental education and gateway redesign. Their initial data showed developmental math was a significant barrier for most students. A student services administrator described the challenge this way: "Such a small number of students who started off in the first level of dev ed who actually ever even made it to college math, let alone passed college math and then moved on to get a degree."

Activities linked to this redesign eventually evolved into work creating meta-majors, to identify courses students needed to be successful in key areas of study. Their meta-major work led to the program mapping that would define their pathways, and later an advising redesign centered on the meta-major design.

As Lorain's work progressed, relationships with key organizations such as the Community College Research Center (CCRC) and Achieving the Dream (ATD) served as catalysts to their guided pathways work. In addition, Lorain's transformational student success work was boosted when it was selected as part of a cohort of Ohio community colleges chosen to replicate the City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (CUNY ASAP) program. This helped accelerate Lorain's transformational student success work.

What made Lorain's implementation unique?

Lorain developed nine meta-major pathways, grouped by discipline. These "within-institution" pathways also serve as the foundation for My University and the Students Accelerating in Learning (SAIL) model. My University is a set of pathways that connect high school students with Lorain pathways, as well as pathways through baccalaureate degrees with select partner universities. As described on their website,

"The My University program, a unique partnership between Lorain and area high schools, provides a pathway for high school students to the full college experience—for less! Students taking advantage of the program have the opportunity to graduate high school with both an associate degree and a high school diploma, free of charge. College courses may be offered at your high school, but other courses will have to be taken at Lorain, online, or at one of our Learning Centers."

With My University, students can complete their associate degree while enrolled in high school—and complete their baccalaureate on campus with Lorain and its university partners.

Faculty and administrators indicated that their model for implementing guided pathways is unique in its focus on holistic student support and a culture of care, undergirded by mandatory advising. Specifically, the college established two reforms:

- The Advocacy and Resource Center (ARC), which serves as a one-stop intake point and provides a welcoming review of students' needs across food access, emergency aid, legal help, safety, mental health and physical well-being, public assistance eligibility, and childcare programs.
- The Students Accelerating in Learning (SAIL) model (their version of the CUNY ASAP model), which connects students to scholarships, textbook vouchers, and incentives such as gift cards to grocery stores, to remove financial barriers and promote using supports such as tutoring and advising. The program uses high-touch advising, workshops, and boot camps, along with personalized career advising, to accelerate students through to credential completion.

The pathways, and the connected Advocacy and Resource Center and Students Accelerating in Learning models are supported by mandatory advising. All students in the college are assigned an advisor who helps them determine their program pathway, as well as connecting them with necessary supports to help them complete their degree. Advisors monitor students' likelihood of persistence using analytics that help them target outreach to the students who need it most. According to a senior administrator,

"Advisor relationships with students also encourage more frequent contact than required, and grouping advisors by career and academic pathway creates a strong working relationship between student support services and the academic disciplines and divisions they support. This highly relational advising approach … ensures all students have at least one single point of navigation as they attend Lorain."

Lorain has carefully designed pathways to include very specific course sequences and intentionally built stackable credentials into their pathways, aiming to not just improve completion rates but also to ensure what is completed is aligned to higher degrees. This isn't limited to 2+2 and 3+1 pathways to university— Lorain also has engaged in "degree mining," including reverse transfer options, to support students who have stopped out or transferred out without a degree.

What capacities were key to implementation?

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

CROSS-FUNCTIONAL TEAMS

Lorain's Student Completion Council was the primary implementation structure for developing guided pathways and other transformation initiatives. While it started as a temporary committee, over time the council became so critical that it evolved into a standing committee. Faculty and staff described the Student Completion Council as the place where all their student success initiatives and related oversight were housed, including student success and completion reports and plans that were required by the State of Ohio.

The Student Completion Council, described by many as a large cross-functional group cutting across almost every area of the institution, was composed of different sub-teams, including an academic sub-team (with activities such as streamlining curriculum and meta-major planning) and a student support sub-team (with activities such as advising redesign and first-year-experience design). Other sub-teams focused on key areas of student success such as career services and holistic support.

As the work moved into sub-teams, faculty and staff champions were essential to success. Respondents repeatedly alluded to the immense value of a faculty champion in the accounting discipline, as well as a math faculty member (who has since become a provost) who served as a key liaison tasked with engaging other faculty in the work. Student advisors co-led the effort to redesign the new student experience by serving as co-chairs for some of the sub-teams.

The involvement of the senior team, beginning with the president but also including the entire leadership team, also contributed to the success of guided pathways implementation at Lorain.

The president clearly and regularly voiced her belief in the efficacy of and support for the guided pathways model.

That theme was echoed by each member of the senior team, dissuading anyone from believing that guided pathways reforms at Lorain were, in the words of a senior administrator, a "trend in higher education that would come and go away." Respondents noted that the communication was not one-way, and that open lines of communication with leadership allowed everyone to be "blunt" with the senior team on what was needed. Finally, the senior team didn't just talk the talk; they also got support and approval from the board for the needed finances and the institution's completion plans, which were later submitted to the state.

COMMUNICATION

A critical component of developing and implementing guided pathways at Lorain was using multiple communication avenues to ensure broad-based understanding of the need for, and progress in, the reform effort. Three primary venues were used: college-wide convocations, division meetings, and smaller role-based meetings.

College-wide convocations and meetings were especially important during the launch. These larger events allowed the college community to understand the institutional focus and urgency of the work. As described by a senior administrator, "There's a sense that this is important enough for it to take center stage at those … campus-wide engagements."

Sharing data in college-wide meetings was a key step in ensuring institutional buy-in, especially from the faculty. One senior administrator described it this way:

"[Faculty] just didn't want to believe that the data was correct; they couldn't believe it was correct. [It was in] those early large sessions where we showed people how long it was taking students to complete, how many credits people were taking but not having selected a major."

Often, especially in the early stages of guided pathways development, external speakers were brought into convocations to emphasize the overall message and the relationship between the work at Lorain and work being done nationwide. All these communication methods contributed to promoting college-wide understanding of the need for guided pathways—understanding this would then "trickle down" through the divisions and sub-team structures of the Student Completion Council.

Using data in these large-scale conversations was key to setting a tone of urgency and building a common language to understand both challenges and progress.

The Student Success Council served as a vehicle for data-driven communication across the college, informed by institutional research (IR) staff as well as the council's sub-teams; they conducted the on-the-ground work and reported to the council. The council then reviewed the data and ensured it was communicated through convocations and other college-wide meetings.

Reports from the Student Success Council were then used to set the agenda at more focused division meetings and administrative leadership meetings. These meetings were facilitated by dedicated leads assigned to each division, to ensure consistent communication. A senior academic leader described the interaction between advisors and faculty: "From a division perspective we have a lead advisor that the faculty know and can build a relationship with. Then they come to our division meetings and we communicate with that lead advisor."

Smaller, more tailored meetings with employees in similar roles were important to ensure continued implementation participation and monitoring. One example is faculty brown-bag meetings, held three times a year, focused on processing recent data on student success.

Now that the guided pathways work is fully underway, these same communication venues continue to play a critical role in ensuring all campus stakeholders understand the ongoing progress—and their impact on student success. A senior administrator described how these groups continue to play a central role:

"The Student Completion Council and Institutional Planning Council (IPC) spend time talking through the areas for improvement and identifying institutional redesign. The Student Completion Council reviews and recommends changes to catalog policies like withdrawal, incomplete grades, and academic dismissal to better support students through loss/momentum points identified in the metrics. IPC develops, tracks, and monitors the metrics for the strategic plan, many of which are from the 'What Matters Most' metrics."

The president hosts a series of President's Forums to ensure the institution hears directly from her about priorities, and the institution's CFO launched the "CFO Series" to update the college community on the budget and how their efforts relate to state allocations based on key performance metrics. One senior administrator underscored the importance of these sessions to help stakeholders understand how increasing student success can drive the financial health of the institution: "A part of his message is that an increasingly larger share of our revenue stream is the state share of instruction, and that is dependent on how well we're doing with student success."

Finally, the president and provost have ensured that communication efforts include student voices. The president hosts coffee chats with students, and the provost meets once a semester with the student senate. These conversations help ensure the student voice is central to the decision-making process, and that the guided pathways are indeed serving the needs of Lorain's students.

HUMAN CAPITAL

Because advisors and faculty play such a critical role in helping students access and stay on a pathway, most of Lorain's professional development opportunities focus on these two groups of individuals. Investing in professional development for these employees supported a successful guided pathways implementation.

Advisor training was intensive, consisting of nearly 20 sessions in one year, with topics including becoming poverty-informed, career counseling, customer service, new student processes, holistic advising, and using degree maps. A large portion of training focused on how to use the institution's predictive analytics technology to manage caseloads,

and how to use data drawn from the system to better support students.

For faculty, the professional development's focus was on the classroom. The institution has consistently invested in both internal and external professional development to help faculty improve the teaching and learning process. Coordinated out of the Lorain Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), faculty development topics included best practices in online teaching, corequisite remediation, and inclusive teaching. The Center for Teaching and Learning monitors faculty needs and emerging trends in the field, to update professional development curricula and assist faculty in meeting students' needs.

STRATEGIC FINANCE

Developing and implementing guided pathways required a multi-pronged financial strategy. Among the key sources of revenue to support Lorain's guided pathways implementation are non-recurring grant dollars, reallocated institutional resources, performance-based funding (PBF), a new student fee structure, and fundraising through donors and philanthropic groups.

Staff noted that early on, grant support was an important catalyst for developing guided pathways. They pointed specifically to support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (through Completion by Design and later the Frontier Set), as well as a key Title III grant focused on adult learner success.

Sustaining the pathways required reallocating resources to support emerging priorities.

This included shuffling staff positions to support the newly established pathways, as well as creative cost-saving moves such as refinancing bonds and renegotiating contracts. The State of Ohio allowed Lorain to enact a career advantage fee for students that directly funds initiatives supporting career exploration and overall student success. And now that Lorain has achieved measurable gains in student success, the state share of instructional dollars has increased and PBF has become a much more substantial source of financial support.

Lastly, the institution has been able to augment its fundraising efforts. Lorain's continued improvement in student success metrics has allowed the college to successfully cultivate individual donors to support the Advocacy and Resource Center with emergency funds for students in need.

DATA CAPACITY

Lorain has developed a strong data culture undergirded by a limited set of clearly defined metrics that are consistently communicated with all stakeholders.

In particular, the institution developed a report, "What Matters Most," that includes 31 regularly monitored metrics used to ensure progress in student success. These metrics are regularly discussed during committee meetings, are included in campus-wide reports such as the Campus Completion Plan and Equity Progress Update, and are used to set biannual goals. They align with the State of Ohio's PBF model, but also draw on national research to ensure the institution is tracking "what matters most" in student success. To signal their importance, The Board of Trustees formally adopted these metrics to signal their importance. A senior administrator described how ubiquitous these metrics are on campus: "We use them everywhere; we put them into a dashboard very intentionally so they can be accessed at any point."

When asked to reflect on the student outcomes that made them most proud, respondents spoke of increased completion and decreased excess credits. To reduce excess credits, Lorain revised the approach to developmental education and improved gateway mathematics and English completion; the college also ensured students met early and regularly with their advisors. A senior administrator expressed his pride:

"One of the great data points is the fact that every year since 2012 … we have reduced the number of credits to degree for our students, and I think that is attributable to the work that we did early on with academic advising and the new … requirements that … students … meet with an advisor … I think the advising is huge."

Tailored advising helped increase completion rates, as did Lorain's focus on stackable credentials. A senior administrator noted: "There was real emphasis on how we can help students by creating certificates that stack to the associate degree, but that also have labor-market value because they're aligned with industry certifications and street credentials."

Because ensuring equitable student outcomes is a core focus of the Lorain guided pathways model, the college created the "Equity Progress Update" (EPU), which applies an equity lens to the What Matters Most report. The Equity Progress Update is used to develop the institution's strategic vision, and is broadly distributed through brown-bag sessions and staff update meetings. One senior administrator described how they use the report:

"The EPU, released annually, serves as the central point for data and information related to equity in access and outcomes at Lorain. The EPU is shared across campus through both committees and constituent meetings. Individuals are empowered to share the call to action and drive change and response. One example is the focus of the recently transformed Teaching and Learning Center (TLC). In response to data shared within the EPU, the TLC will be providing more professional development to support practical application of equity-informed pedagogy within the classroom."

The original Student Completion Council that helped develop and implement the Lorain guided pathways model has evolved into the institution's Equity by Design team. Within that team, smaller groups are developed to address specific findings in the EPU report. Those groups have dedicated time and resources to make changes, which supports a culture of innovation and redesign. Broadly, the Equity by Design team establishes monitoring and accountability to equity metrics as a campus-wide priority.

Takeaways

Lorain has built a robust communication and professional development platform to support long-term implementation for their guided pathways model, which is fiscally supported through a combination of grant support, resource allocation, and state funding through the PBF model.

When asked to reflect on what's next for the Lorain guided pathways work, a senior administrator pointed to a renewed emphasis on the fourth pillar of guided pathways: teaching and learning.

"I think there's much more attention now to what happens in the classroom and how we can do more to support student learning through assessment of [that] learning—through a focus on learning outcomes and making sure that they're clear not only to ourselves but to our students."

REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL LEADERS

- Has your college decided on a limited set of specific data points that it aims to improve to increase student success and equitable outcomes? Are those data woven through all major evaluation and reform efforts, including the strategic plan, guided pathways plans, and accreditation review and reports?
- What implementation structures—such as college-wide meetings, standing committees, workgroups, and leadership meetings—can you use to support broad participation, communication, and regular data and progress check-ins? Have you developed a communications plan that reflects messages sent and data presented in each of those contexts?
- What role can your president and senior leadership team play in communicating priorities and progress to key stakeholders within the college? Has your college leadership team developed a communications plan to reflect its priority messages?
- How can your institution leverage external forces, such as state funding and federal or foundation grants, to support priorities in student success reforms? How might resources be reallocated?
- How can you build a more intentional equity focus into your institutional transformation initiatives? How can you use data reports, convenings, and other processes to ensure equity gaps are consistently identified and discussed, and solutions crafted?