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ISSUE 2

ENABLING STUDENTS AND ADVISORS TO NAVIGATE THROUGH BETTER PATHWAYS

AUSTIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

A Call to Build Better Pathways



Dr. Virginia Fraire, Vice President, Student Services
Austin Community College

“Many of our students come in unsure about how long it might take them to earn a degree because life happens. We are ambitious in our work to build pathways that will best guide them toward success.”

– Dr. Virginia Fraire
Vice President, Student Services

According to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, only one in five of the 2004 year 8th grade cohort went on to earn a college certificate or degree within six years of graduating high school. For low-income students the numbers are worse—only one in 10—and only one in 14 low-income males go to college. As the second largest higher education institution in Central Texas, Austin Community College (ACC) enrolls and admits many of the students who beat these staggering odds, though other challenges may await them as they pursue a postsecondary degree.

ACC’s student body of ~70,000 students includes significant numbers of underprepared students needing developmental education and scaffolding, first generation students who often have trouble navigating choices and working adults unsure of which programs to enter and how to balance life and school. At the same time, ACC has committed to raising three-year IPEDS graduation rates from 8 to 13 percent, lifting successful transfer rates from 33 to 38 percent, and eliminating the number of excess credits students acquire on their path to completion.

In 2016 ACC began restructuring programs and services to support Guided Pathways. They are one of 12 Texas community colleges participating in the Texas Pathways Project, an initiative to help more institutions transition to guided pathways with highly-structured, educationally coherent program maps, and personalized guidance to support student completion and future educational or professional goals.



CHANGING PROCESSES

Redesigning for Better Pathways

“We started our pathways work by rebuilding the doorway into our institution,” said Melissa Curtis, Associate Vice President of Enrollment Management. **“We focused on onboarding students and rolled out a complete redesign of our enrollment process—from application to registration.”**

This work involved consolidating the 12 steps required for new students into just four steps, including: completing an online first step video, submitting an application, attending an Area of Study information session and registering. “Today, students receive a welcome email within 24 hours of starting their admission process with information on these four steps. This has never been done before,” said Bradfute. “Part of the new process also involves a required information session for anyone with less than 12 credits to get an overview of programs in their chosen area of study. This session is a collaborative effort including Area of Study faculty and Area of Study advisors. It is optional for students with more than 12 credits who can instead choose to visit directly with an area of study advisor.”

In August 2015, ACC also started the redesign of nearly 300 degree programs to help more students finish college on time and be better prepared for employment, career advancement or university transfer. A team of 24 faculty, students and staff are working together to restructure degree programs by grouping similar degrees into broad “paths” or “areas of study” that have a common starting point so that students may enter a field rather than a degree, and explore the options within it without wasting credits during the early phase of their education.



Giving Students Clarity and Control of Their Degree Plans



Early on ACC prioritized making it easier for students to see where they were along their academic journey and additionally, helping them plan beyond just one semester. For nearly 40 years, ACC students waited in long lines to talk to an advisor for tasks such as selecting courses or tracking grade point average. In Fall 2014, as part of their Integrated Planning and Advising for Student Success (iPASS) grant, ACC rolled out the Civitas Learning Degree Map™ application to advisors, counselors and a limited number of students, with adoption being optional. The app would enable students to use their computer or mobile device to plan to select courses aligned with their degree plan and track progress, allowing advisors more time to assist with other challenges.



Antonia Ceballos, Integrated Planning and Advising Services Coordinator, Austin Community College

Within 60 days of making Degree Map available, ACC saw 90 percent adoption with advisors and more than 15,000 degree plans submitted. “We believed that providing all relevant data to advisors and students directly in one view could open up the time needed for a meaningful discussion about course selection, degree planning or changing majors,” said Dr. Wade Bradfute, Executive Dean of Student Services. “Students and advisors could have more genuine, relevant and valuable conversations.”

An early analysis used prediction-based propensity score matching (PPSM) showed a 2.4 percentage point (%pp) increase in persistence for students who used Degree Map over the course of three terms. PPSM matches pairs of like students who are similar based on both their persistence likelihoods and their propensity to participate in an initiative (in this case, use of Degree Map). An additional lift up to 7.3%pp was observed for students who used the app five or more times. “Those results validated our decision to focus our institution’s student success work on transforming our advising process, and reinforced the importance of implementing engaging tools to help students map their journeys, drive the quality of advising conversations, and get students to graduation,” said Fraire.

Ensuring Consistency in the Delivery of Student Services

ACC’s larger work around pathways also involves engaging professionals from across 75 student services departments and 11 campuses to ensure the consistent delivery of student services.

In Fall 2016, ACC established the Committee on Student Progress that brings together student services and academic affairs to work collaboratively on initiatives such as the selection of early alert technology, implementation of the early alert system, and intervention guidelines for students not meeting academic standards of progress.

ACC is also offering professional development to advisors and counselors with a new 6-week advising training module. ACC has also published an online advising manual to enable advisors to be effective in each of the different approaches practices at the institution including group advising sessions, proactive advising and faculty advising. The manual is being regularly updated to promote continuous learning. The institution is also, in collaboration with Inside Track, developing a Master Advisor certification program around pathways.

In August 2016 ACC created key leadership positions to oversee teams that are collaborating around critical pathways areas. New Associate Vice Presidents and Executive Deans are responsible for providing leadership, organization, supervision and evaluation of departments and programs including assessment, college-readiness, academic advising, counseling and career counseling. “Broad and authentic engagement in the design, implementation, evaluation and ongoing improvement of pathways for students is critical to this work” said Bradfute.



Improving Student Outcomes and Operational Capacity

In Fall of 2016, Austin Community College transitioned to the next generation of Degree Map. Use of the Civitas Learning's Illume Impact application to apply PPSM to measure impact on persistence from Fall 2016 to Spring 2017 showed an 11%pp lift in persistence for students who used Degree Map compared to similar students who did not. This persistence lift equates to 1,492 additional persisting students and an estimated \$1.36 million in retained revenue in just one semester for ACC. The lift was even greater for students in the bottom quartile, with lowest probability to persist (18.5%pp) and for online students (17.4%pp). An additional lift up to 12.3%pp was observed for students overall when using the app four or more times. This lift is a result of many new features and integrations that make Degree Map a one-stop-shop for students and advisors to see degree progress, and enable more collaboration across the institution to support each student.

For example, the inclusion of student financial aid information into Degree Map has sparked a collaboration with the Office of Student Money Management around training for advisors to incorporate financial literacy into advising sessions.

As ACC continues to optimize pathways and gain more clarity about what is working, it is also seeing improved efficiencies around operational outcomes. "The number of advisor errors have decreased overall with more students and advisors using Degree Map to plan and track degree progress." Bradfute says the work is increasing ACC's advisor capacity as students can 'self-serve' on much of this now with Degree Map as opposed to coming to campus to speak advisors with each question. "This gives our enrollment advisors more space to follow up with students and get them to follow through with their applications. We are seeing more students register after positive and productive advising sessions."



Helping Students Balance Life and Logistics

ACC is bringing process, people and technology together in unprecedented ways to achieve its holistic vision for better pathways, where all students are given support to develop an academic plan based on program maps created by faculty and advisors. Students choose a program of study that matches their aspirations within Degree Map and explore career options based on growth and earning potential. ACC has made strides in this direction, by giving students the ability to better plan and track their degree progress with Degree Map and more productive advising conversations, inviting students to participate in important conversations and work to restructure degree programs.

And now ACC is implementing the Schedule Planner application to help students address the challenges in balancing course scheduling with life and logistics that can sometimes get in the way of their education. These types of challenges can be as simple as finding a course that fits the major requirements for more traditional 18-21 year-old students. For the growing non-traditional student population, this can get more complicated as work, family, transportation, daycare and finances often conspire to severely limit options and availability. By bringing student-centric design to scheduling and registration, Schedule Planner simplifies one of the most critical points on students' journeys toward degree completion by enabling students to easily select preferred classes, block off breaks or life conflicts and surface the best possible schedules for immediate registration at optimal course loads.

"It's all coming together," said Fraire. "We are leaning in—with clear direction and strategy—and we are delivering on our promise of helping students achieve their dreams."



About Civitas Learning®

Civitas Learning is the Student Success Platform for higher education. Our Student Insights Engine™ powers initiatives that dramatically improve student success. Our predictive analytics and connected applications provide administrators, faculty and advisors with a 360-degree view of student behavior and engagement and the ability to identify and deploy interventions in real-time. Our growing community includes more than 285 partner institutions reaching more than 6.5 million students.

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partnerships@civitaslearning.com
civitaslearning.com
civitaslearningspace.com

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