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At College, a Guided Path on Which to Find Oneself

Tina Rosenberg MARCH 28, 2017

This is nail-biting week for high school seniors awaiting acceptance from their dream colleges.

But the classic experience — a four-year residential college sheltered from the real world — is not what happens for 80 percent of college students.

Two weeks ago I reported on [colleges that provide several hundred dollars](#) to students near graduation to keep them from dropping out. In fact, most college students live at home. Nearly half attend two-year community colleges. They are very much in the real world; 70 percent work, some of them full time. A third are supporting children. And the median age of a community college student is 24.

Schools understand. If you can go to school only at night, or can take only a single class at a time, schools make it possible. “Colleges feel students have complicated lives and they have ways to work around all that,” said Tom Sugar, the president of the Indianapolis-based organization [Complete College America](#). “Colleges think they’re doing their students a favor by adding all this flexibility.”

He doesn’t agree it’s a favor. “Part-time students just don’t graduate,” said Sugar. “The longer it takes, the more life gets in the way and the less likely you are to graduate.”

The three-year graduation rate from community college is just 22 percent. If you count those who transfer and graduate from *any* school in six years, it’s 40 percent. At many nonselective four-year colleges, graduation rates are similar.

Flexibility isn’t working. But in the last few years, colleges across the United States have been succeeding with its opposite: providing as much structure as possible.

Colleges use different parts of the strategy and give it different names, although it often goes by “guided pathways.” The underlying idea is to give students firm guidance in choosing the right courses, along with structured, clear course sequences that lead to graduation. Colleges also monitor students’ progress closely and intervene when they go off track.

One college has used guided pathways from the start: the City University of New York’s Guttman Community College, which opened in 2012. Although Guttman draws from among CUNY’s less-prepared students, its three-year graduation rate is 44 percent — nearly triple the rate of similar colleges nationwide.

Guttman had an advantage: By starting from scratch, it didn’t have to persuade faculty and staff to change how they did things, which is the single biggest obstacle to reform. “They didn’t have

to deal with existing political issues and faculty relationships,” said Thomas Bailey, director of the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University, whose 2015 [book](#), “Redesigning America’s Community Colleges,” lays out the guided pathways strategy.

The strategy has helped other schools as well. Georgia State, Florida State, the entire Tennessee system and many other schools have dramatically increased retention and graduation rates. And the reforms help the least-prepared students the most, which is exactly what you want.

Here’s what the schools are doing:

Full-time enrollment. This is one of Complete College America’s most urgent recommendations. Many schools call 12 credit-hours per semester “full time” enrollment. But it’s not; it doesn’t get you to graduation in four years. The University of Hawaii started a campaign, now in use all over, called “15 to Finish.” It offers 15 credits for the price of 12 and [reminds students often](#) that taking 15 leads to better grades, earlier graduation and increased earnings.

Meta majors. Tennessee colleges, like all colleges, ask incoming students what they plan to study. “About a third say, ‘Oh, I don’t know,’ ” said Tristan Denley, vice chancellor for academic affairs at the Tennessee Board of Regents, which oversees higher education. “We found that more than half of those students dropped out of higher education entirely before they even chose anything at all. Choosing to choose later is really an impediment to their success.”

For the last three years, however, each incoming Tennessee student meets with an adviser to choose a field of focus, or meta major, such as social sciences, business, science or education. Denley said that most students are prepared to make that choice.

Everyone in the focus area gets the same freshman classes, including three in their area. When they take those three, the graduation rate doubles in community colleges, said Denley. “People are simply more committed to something when they feel the purpose of what they’re doing.”

The structure is especially helpful to first-generation college students, who are more likely to be undecided and have less help navigating chaos. “Georgia State offers 3,000 different courses every semester,” said Tim Renick, vice provost and vice president for enrollment management and student success at Georgia State, which uses meta majors for freshmen. “Students get confused, make bad choices, waste time and make fatal errors that result in drop out. It’s confusing for everyone, but for students who don’t have a support system at home, it’s overwhelming.”

Whole program choice. At Tennessee’s Colleges of Applied Technology, which offer one- or two-year certificates in skills such as machining, practical nursing or computer information technology, the graduation rate is 82 percent.

How is this possible, when in the state’s community colleges, only [26 percent of those who started in 2009](#) graduated from *any* college six years later? (Tennessee’s reforms are too recent to affect this rate.)

Technical college students enter knowing what they want to study. But here's something else that is critical: that's the only choice they have to make.

A student who chooses aircraft mechanics knows she will be in school from 7:30 to 2:30 every day. Her program is set. Regular colleges can't dictate a student's courses for their whole time, of course, but many of the reformers do it for a student's first year, and offer default or recommended schedules for subsequent years.

Block scheduling. Guttman is not CUNY's only success. CUNY's [Accelerated Study in Associate Programs](#) (ASAP), which has covered 20,000 students across CUNY's colleges and is expanding, employs a host of new strategies. Graduation rates have [almost doubled](#) for the worst-off students. ASAP is [also off to a good start](#) in a very different setting: three Ohio community colleges.

ASAP buys student books and Metrocards. Its block schedules allow students take a full course load and still be able to work or take care of kids. "It's actually predictability, not flexibility, that students need," said Bailey.

Cohorts. Meta majors naturally create student groups. At Georgia State, 25 students in the same meta major take their entire block schedule together freshman year. The students get study partners, a built-in crew, and friendships built around academic pursuits, all of which foster happier students, and better [grades and retention](#).

Milestone courses. Lawrence Abele, who as provost of Florida State led the effort to raise graduation rates, said the single most important factor was requiring core foundational courses to be taken at specific times, laying the groundwork for progress.

"You have to take that course in that term to be able to graduate in your major," he said. And you must do well in it; research showed that a C or below in a milestone course made it very difficult to do well in subsequent courses.

Elimination of remedial classes. What? When students are less prepared than ever?

Traditionally, students who aren't ready for college take remedial courses to get them ready. It doesn't work very well; in community colleges, fewer than 10 percent of remedial students graduate in three years.

One reason has been that students pay for classes but don't get college credit. "It felt like treading water," said Denley. "Before we knew it, they dropped out."

In 2015, Tennessee abolished prerequisite remediation. Now remedial students take the normal college math or writing course, but alongside it, get extra workshops and tutoring.

Co-requisite remediation makes a [huge difference](#). In the old system, only 12 percent of students who began in remedial math completed a college-level math class in their first year. Now 55 percent do. Writing success doubled.

Intrusive advising. All these strategies depend on collecting real-time data about what and how students are doing — and an army of advisers to use that data to help students the moment they need it. Advisers contact them immediately if they do poorly on a midterm, or sign up for a course that won't bring them closer to graduation.

When Georgia State started the program in 2012, it hired 50 advisers. That's expensive. But last year, the advisers held 52,000 meetings with students. "It helped to raise retention rates by four or five percentage points," said Renick. And retained students pay tuition. "It cost a little over two million a year, and produces between 10 and 15 million in additional revenues," Renick said.

Renick said that last year, students signed up for a wrong class 2,000 times. After being notified of the mistake, a few students decided to take the course anyway, but more than 95 percent switched courses.

The idea that a class is "wrong" is uncomfortable. It signals that the exploration we think of as part of college works only for people with the resources to overcome mistakes. That's unfair — but probably true. "In higher education for a very long time people have thought to themselves that we should allow people space to find themselves, lots of choices — and when they figure it out, enable their dream," said Denley.

"That's a beautiful picture. It just turns out that students don't behave that way. You have to find a way to not box them in. But on the other hand, if you allow people to wander about, you enable them to wander right out the door and never come back."