Student Engagement in Guided Pathways Development

INTRODUCTION

Guided Pathways asks our colleges to take a student-centered approach, redesigning around how students enter and move through the institution to reach their goals. How do we know what students experience? How can we directly respond to their aspirations, strengths, and needs throughout Guided Pathways development? How can we ensure these efforts will practically improve their chances of completion?

Student engagement in Guided Pathways development is essential to fostering a campus culture that puts the student experience at the heart of decision-making and day-to-day practice.
When students have the opportunity to regularly share their perspectives and inform institutional action, everyone on campus can stay grounded in how choices related to college policy, processes, programs, and practices will support students in reaching their goals.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY STUDENT ENGAGEMENT?

Student engagement can happen on a continuum that ranges in both the depth and breadth of connection. Guided Pathways development calls for moving beyond the "one-and-done" approach to gathering student perspectives.

Student engagement includes...

Systematic student listening practices —ongoing, iterative collection of student perspectives to make the case for change and inform redesign efforts so we address the factors that impact the success of different student groups.

Active student involvement in decision-making —supported student participation on design teams, shared governance committees, work groups, and task forces to ensure we make student-centered decisions across different levels and functions of the college.

Meaningful student engagement takes intention and cultivation over time, and requires strategic attention at each stage of Guided Pathways development (inquiry, design, and implementation).

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT DESIGN PRINCIPLES

What considerations should colleges keep in mind as we engage students in our Guided Pathways redesign? The following six design principles—grounded in both theory and practice—offer high-level direction for meaningful student engagement.

Colleges can use these design principles as a reference point when formulating and refining plans for collecting student perspectives and involving students as decision-makers in Guided Pathways work.

1. **Treat student engagement as an ongoing and iterative process**

   In short, developing a practice of meaningful student engagement requires a dynamic, multifaceted, and continuous effort. When we offer students the opportunity to share their perspectives, we inevitably generate fresh questions about the student experience that require additional attention. To create a full understanding of a particular student success issue, we may need to collect input from different populations in a variety of ways. Similarly, involving students in a sustained and ongoing way on your shared governance committees, task force, design team, or workgroups can demonstrate the value of their involvement, as well as underscore ways this engagement needs improvement over time. It can also reveal other decision-making bodies where students can and should contribute.

2. **Ensure equitable student representation**

   Intimate knowledge of your college's student body is essential to all aspects of effective student engagement. Student leaders can have a unique perspective and critical input, and are often the first group colleges target for student input. At the same time, engaging the full range of students who attend your college in sharing their experience is important and informative—including those who may be marginalized or disengaged from the campus, part-timers, students at different points in their journey, and those experiencing disproportionate impact. For example, assessing your college's student characteristics and disaggregating specific metrics can help pinpoint which groups to engage in sharing their perspectives and when. Ensuring the representation of student populations that will be directly impacted by your redesign efforts on your Guided Pathways teams can keep decision-making focused on how changes will practically improve their success or lead to unintended consequences.

3. **Create conditions for full student access**

   Students have multiple demands on their time and attention (e.g., employment, family obligations, educational commitments, etc.). Engage students where they are to increase participation. Consider the venues and places on campus where you can best connect with different student groups and ensure ease of participation—whether it be attending listening activities or taking part on design teams and decision-making groups. Tap technology to support certain kinds of listening activities (e.g., online surveys, text polls, web-based forums). Hold meetings, committee work, or taskforce convenings at times and in locations that are conducive to regular student involvement.

4. **Prepare students for the opportunity**

   Whether it be short-term participation in a focus group, interview, town hall, or classroom activity or longer-term participation on a design team, shared governance committee, or task force, prepare students for meaningful participation. Preparation will inevitably need to vary by the depth and breadth of involvement. For example, when engaging students in listening activities, let them know up front what the commitment includes, how they can contribute, and what will happen to the perspectives, experiences, and ideas they share. For decision-making involvement, consider assigning a liaison that is responsible for preparing students for and supporting them in their role. This individual can explain community college jargon and processes, provide onboarding and training, educate students on the issues they will be addressing, and offer sustained mentorship.

5. **Intentionally level the playing field in the presence of power dynamics**

   Building trust with students and helping them feel like they have the space, knowledge, and support to make an authentic contribution is essential. Recognize that students may have had experiences both inside and external to the college that have left them skeptical or fearful of those in charge. Train educators to be aware of the power dynamics they bring to the table and how they might impact students' comfort and engagement. Prepare educators with the skills required for deep listening. Consider who leads your student listening activities, particularly who is best positioned to put students at ease and get their honest, candid feedback and input. To reduce "tokenism" and balance power, include more than one student in meetings, committees, and/or design teams. To facilitate peer-to-peer support, offer opportunities for students involved in decision-making groups to meet together.

6. **Honor student involvement**

   Acknowledging student input, advocacy, and leadership is vital to recognizing their unique contributions to college transformation efforts. College leaders have a central role in setting a tone and providing active support for student engagement in all aspects of institutional improvement. Recognition can include broad public acknowledgement of student contributions and public articulation of their input and ideas. Consider providing students incentives for short-term participation in listening activities and awarding stipends or remuneration for ongoing involvement in decision-making groups. Ultimately, acting on the information and recommendations students provide can serve as the most powerful form of recognition.