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Touchpoints: How Faculty and Advising Understand and Collaborate on Guided Pathways Reforms to influence and Support Major Choice in a Community College

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ABSTRACT

TOUCHPOINTS: HOW FACULTY AND ADVISING UNDERSTAND AND COLLABORATE ON GUIDED PATHWAYS REFORMS TO INFLUENCE AND SUPPORT MAJOR CHOICE IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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Northern Illinois University, 2023
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Guided Pathways is a nationwide whole-college reform that aims to improve college completion rates and times for students, especially in the community-college sector. This multisite case study sought to explore how pathways institutions supported students to better align with the right academic and career programs. Through individual semi-structured interviews, faculty members and advisors reflected on if and how they collaborated to better serve students in this capacity. Three themes emerged during data analysis and were reported in narrative form: a.) divergent faculty and advising attitudes about pathways reforms, b.) inconsistent perceptions on levels of collaboration, and c.) criticisms and suggested improvements from the participants. These findings indicate that a blended approach of cultural and structural changes could strengthen communication and collaboration between academic and student affairs. When institutions deliberately and comprehensively implement these reforms, students are likely to be better engaged as they make the important decision of selecting a good-fitting academic or career pathway.
TOUCHPOINTS: HOW FACULTY AND ADVISING UNDERSTAND AND COLLABORATE ON GUIDED PATHWAYS REFORMS TO INFLUENCE AND SUPPORT MAJOR CHOICE IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

BY
BRYANT B. MANNING
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Doctoral Director:
Kathryn Jaekel
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CHAPTER ONE
RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Introduction

Community college students often make uninformed decisions on their choice of major that misalign their skills and interests to the appropriate field of study, and this undermines their progress in the long term (Bailey et al., 2015a; Baker et al., 2018). One explanation for this is that students are not receiving enough targeted support that could help communicate to them the perceived difficulty of the required courses, the requisite personality traits, and the expected labor outcomes, for instance (Bailey et al., 2015a; Baker et al., 2018; Baker & Orona, 2020). Community college students also face an especially expansive menu of class options from which to choose (Scott-Clayton, 2015). All the while, community college students have traditionally persisted and graduated at low rates, and the high probability of not completing a bachelor’s degree necessitates a different decision-making environment for this population—one that often means prematurely leaving school to enter a low-skill, low-paying job (Baker et al., 2018).

Community colleges are attempting to remedy this trend via the development of meta-majors in their guided pathways reforms (Baker & Orona, 2020). Guided pathways reforms redesign academic programs and services to help students make better choices, avoid accruing expensive excess credits, and complete their programs (Bailey et al., 2015a). Meta-majors are when career-technical and transfer-oriented programs are organized together in broad academic and career communities that help students build networks that offer peer support, mentoring, and job advice (Jenkins et al., 2021). By exposing students to all majors in a given field and
providing them an understanding and experience within these other majors, institutions are, respectively, increasing awareness and affecting consideration.

Many institutions like Laramie County Community College (LCCC), for instance, are redesigning their first-year experience (FYE) courses to center on career exploration and educational planning. As LCCC contextualizes its FYE courses around each meta-major, specialized faculty and local employers actively help facilitate the content. Moreover, when these students reach 30 credit hours, they transition from their assigned academic advisor to a faculty mentor (CCRC, 2020). Prince George’s Community College in Maryland offers a similar service to its students. At Pierce College District in Washington State, admissions coaches call students as soon as they receive their application. At Chattanooga State, students take a field-related success course their first semester that includes a comprehensive career assessment (Jenkins, Lahr, et al., 2020). Finally, Central Carolina Community College requires students to take an engaging 5-to-10-minute career interest inventory survey that links them to several program pathways (Central Carolina Community College [CCCC], n.d.). By rethinking the onboarding process, community colleges can help students complete more suitable programs of study in a timelier and more cost-effective fashion.

When it comes to providing the structural support that is needed for student decision making, these institutions are unfortunately an exception. Guided pathways’ emphasis on completion is still a major goal of the initiative, but with this lack of support many underserved students are not completing high-opportunity programs (Jenkins et al., 2021). A misalignment between students’ skills and major choice is an important reason why. A more holistic and targeted approach is required so that students are better suited to their area of study.
**Purpose Statement**

The aim of this qualitative intrinsic case study will be to explore how an urban midwestern community college, through its newly implemented guided pathways policies, is helping students decide on and support their choice of major at community college. As Baker and Orona (2020) noted, “No research has examined if such programs and policies are differentially effective at shaping major choice” (p. 3). The study is designed to understand: 1.) how guided pathways interventions, especially during the first two phases of implementation (choosing and clarifying), promote or support various areas of study, 2.) what resources Career and Transfer Center (CTC) staff, advisors, and faculty leverage to better inform students, 3.) what barriers are in place for institutions, and 4.) how community college practitioners can support students’ major choice at their institutions.

For the purposes of this study, guided pathways is defined by Bailey et al. (2015a) as a college-wide strategy that engage[s] faculty and student services professionals in creating more clearly structured, educationally coherent program pathways that lead to students’ end goals, and in rethinking instructions and student support services in ways that facilitate students’ learning and success as they progress along these paths. In short, to maximize both access and success, a fundamental redesign is necessary. We refer to the resulting strategy as the *guided pathways model* (p. 3, emphasis in original).

**Research Questions**

This single-site case study will examine the culture, protocols, and methods at a community college that has 1.) implemented guided pathways reforms and 2.) produced a robust number of course offerings, degree plans, and transfer students. Using semi-structured interviews, data will be collected at an urban community college in the Midwest in order to
better understand the experiences of faculty, staff, and students who are involved at a pathways institution. This study is guided by the following research question and subquestions:

1. How do guided pathways interventions influence students’ choice of major at a community college?
   a. What are the perceived benefits that guided pathways interventions provide to effectively support students’ choice of major?
   b. What are the perceived barriers in guided pathways design and implementation to effectively support students’ choice of major?
   c. What improvements in guided pathways design and implementation would best support student choice of major?

**Literature Review**

This section presents the literature relevant to the study of community colleges in the era of a career-centered completion reform called guided pathways. Community colleges are continuously searching for ways to increase student completion rates and guided pathways has become its most advocated reform (Community College Research Center [CCRC], 2021). First, I review the community college’s evolution over time, whereby the dual roles of liberal arts and vocational training are considered. Fields in the humanities have been unexpectedly popular majors in community colleges but less so in four-year institutions (American Academy of Arts and Sciences [AAAS], 2018; Nussbaum, 2016). In addition, I explore the sector’s increasing diversity and enrollment numbers and the challenges these have for equity. Secondly, I present guided pathways’ conception, structure, challenges, and early impact to understand the educational milieu in which students navigate today. Finally, the concluding section presents the
literature on how students arrive at their choice of major, including the successful strategies and interventions that are being leveraged by various guided pathways institutions.

**Equitable Access and Demographic Diversity**

As a response to societal and economic demands, community colleges were developed in the early 20th century to expand the number of liberal arts students who could inexpensively transfer to four-year research institutions (Bastedo et al., 2016; Hendrickson et al., 2013; Trainor, 2015). With their distinctly democratic missions, community colleges have since evolved into comprehensive community colleges that now provide training for vocational programs, continuing education, academic transfer, and other services (Baime & Baum, 2016; Hanson, 2013; Hendrickson et al., 2013). Between 1970 and 2010, fall enrollment at two-year colleges tripled from 2.2 million to 7.2 million (Bailey et al., 2015a); 8.2 million undergraduates were enrolled in community colleges during the 2018-19 year, roughly 44% of the country’s net undergraduate enrollment (Community College Research Center [CCRC], n.d.).

Students of color and those who come from households that make less than $30,000 are overrepresented at community colleges, and 55% of Hispanic undergraduates attend these institutions (CCRC, n.d.). Even though the Latinx population is the fastest and largest growing demographic in the country, it possesses the least amount of educational credentials of all ethnic and racial groups (Abrahamson, 2019). Access to college has become more equitable, but completion rates remain low for underrepresented groups (Abrahamson, 2019; Bailey et al., 2015a; Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCCSE] 2020; Kezar & Posselt, 2020). Still, the open admissions policy at community colleges provides higher education to students at an affordable price who might not otherwise have such an opportunity. In addition to
the sector’s racial and socio-economic diversity, 30% of all two-year college students are 30 years and older (Baime & Baum, 2016).

Because nearly half of all undergraduate students enter or continue their postsecondary education through the community college, the performance of the two-year sector has rarely been more critical to the nation’s educational and economic health than it is right now—two decades into the 21st century (Amelink et al., 2015; Rose et al., 2019). Community colleges, which were once frequently called “people’s colleges,” have long been vital hubs of problem solving and innovation, and they have been at the forefront of every major development in higher education since their inception in 1901 (Trainor, 2015). With significant demographic change posing challenges to equity since the Immigration Act of 1965, community colleges have actively embraced diversity. For instance, two-year colleges desegregated faster than their four-year counterparts; They also welcomed nontraditional adult students and combat veterans into their classrooms, and finally, they introduced new course formats and campus social services that accommodated a wide range of learners (Trainor, 2015). Now, community colleges’ enrollment of African American, Latinx, and other racial and ethnic groups roughly parallels their group representation in American society (Amelink et al., 2015; Bailey et al., 2015a; Trainor, 2015). It is no wonder that George Boggs, former president of the American Association of Community Colleges, has called community colleges “potential saviors of the economy” (Bers, 2013, p. 81).

**Humanities and the Early Mission**

Community colleges were originally designed as liberal arts colleges, where students with disparate backgrounds could attend their first two years of college affordably before transferring to a baccalaureate-granting university (Bastedo et al., 2016; Hanson, 2013). Indeed, the medieval usage of liberal arts, or *artes liberalis*, designated the various arts—such as music,
rhetoric, geometry—a necessity for all free (i.e., the Latin *liber*) men (Roche, 2013). Just as community colleges originally accommodated a great influx of early 20th-century immigrants, so too has the community-college sector adjusted for the recent demographic shifts (Bastedo et al., 2016). Contemporary “open access” community colleges, of which many are designated as comprehensive, now provide education in the following areas: academic, community, remedial, and occupational (Bastedo et al., 2016). The “community” aspect, or what is colloquially referred to as continuing education or lifelong learning, tends to emphasize an education in the humanities (Fanelli, 2013).

Today, about one fifth of all community college courses are taken in the liberal arts and humanities fields (Pippins & Belfield, 2019). Nussbaum (2016) said the focus should be less on the number of humanities majors and more about the liberal arts courses available to and taken by students of other majors. The definition of humanities is elastic, but Bickerstaff et al. (2020) have defined it as the “study of arts; American, culture, gender, and ethnic studies; English language and literature, and foreign languages; philosophy; history; religion; and interdisciplinary coursework in the humanities” (p. 2). Associate degrees conferred in the humanities grew from 25.7% to 41.8% from 1987 to 2018, or about 4.3% annually (AAAS, 2018; Jaschik, 2017; Nussbaum, 2016). In one large-sample study, nearly 80% of arts, humanities, and English majors stuck with their choice relative to lower percentages in the behavioral and social sciences, allied health, and communication (Liu et al., 2021). On the other hand, in 2018 the number of bachelor’s degrees awarded in the humanities (10.2%) was less than a third the size of the 36.7% share for the sciences (AAAS, 2018). Still, community colleges are a growing and vitally important source of humanities students (Nussbaum, 2016). One possible explanation is that given the rise of global social movements like Occupy Wall Street and Black
Lives Matter, or even Nikole Hannah-Jones’s 1619 Project, more students have become interested in emerging fields that address such social disparities—fields like gender and race studies, which are often classified under the liberal arts and humanities umbrella (Schneider, 2005]). Whether the liberally educated populace inspired the social movements or vice versa is worthy of further study.

**Calls to Increase Student Success**

During President Obama’s tenure, concerns about community college completion became an agenda item not only central to the Department of Education but for public intellectuals, major foundations, and other visible policymakers as well (Bailey et al., 2015a). In the fall of 2014, the six-year completion rate for Asian students who started at a community college was 51%; for White students it was 49%; for Latinx students it was 36% and 28% for Black students. Moreover, just 17% of all community college students obtained a bachelor’s degree within six years (CCRC, n.d.). The national average for three-year completion rates at community colleges is usually around 20% (Bailey et al., 2015a). This is not unusual, as community college students have traditionally persisted and graduated at low rates and where prematurely leaving school often means entering low-opportunity fields (Baker et al., 2018).

**Students’ Choice of Majors in Community Colleges**

Students are faced with many complex options when choosing an area of study—sometimes upward of 150 choices—and as a result often make poor decisions that undermine their best interests in the long term (Bailey et al., 2015a; Baker et al., 2018). Switching majors might increase certificate completion rates but will decrease the probability of bachelor’s degree completion (Liu et al., 2021). The existing research on students’ knowledge of labor market outcomes relative to college major has been limited to selective four-year colleges, and very little
is known on the beliefs and behaviors of community college students (Baker et al., 2018). In a survey of 367 students, less than 40% of California community college students accurately ranked broad categories of majors in terms of labor market outcomes (Baker et al., 2018). Moreover, while the majority of incoming students have some idea of what they want to study, 17% have “no idea” what they will major in (Bailey et al., 2015a, p. 37). Consequently, student choice often involves tradeoffs by way of selecting a short occupational certificate program that will compensate well in the short term but less so in the long term (Bailey et al., 2015a).

Oftentimes undecided community college students are advised to take introductory liberal arts and science courses in a “general studies” program, but destination transfer universities can be overly selective when accepting credits within a particular major (Bailey et al., 2015a; Pippins & Belfield, 2019; Reed, 2013). Unclear articulation agreements between community colleges and four-year institutions are still common within many states, especially in humanities disciplines (Bickerstaff et al., 2020; Pippins & Belfield, 2019). Foraker (2012) found that changing a major choice within the first two years has no negative effect on student performance, but after that usually results in lower grades, reduced retention rates, and longer completion time.

Expected course enjoyment is the most important predictor of major choice, followed by expected grades. Other important factors include predicted salary, probability of employment, stability of employment, family and friends with the same major, and parental approval (Baker et al., 2018; Baston, 2018). To the latter, O’Brien (as cited in Nussbaum, 2016) noted that while literature and philosophy have changed the world, parents “are more likely to fret if their children are financially illiterate than if their training in the humanities is deficient” (p. ix). Still, if students are sold the communal value of their college major, they feel positively towards their area of study and develop a stronger sense of self-connection (Klussman et al., 2021). In
particular, humanities majors at an elite university embraced the stigma they perceived from STEM peers by self-identifying as empowered social groups in pursuit of “fulfillment, meaning, and self-affirmation” (Lewis, 2017, p. 391). With voluntary stigma, they defined themselves in opposition to those who majored in traditionally market-rich fields like business, health, and science (Lewis, 2017).

Community colleges are also uniquely positioned to help push students from diverse backgrounds into STEM fields at four-year universities (Amelink et al., 2015; Bottia et al., 2020). One explanation is that a significant portion of high school students likely uses community colleges as a bridge to the STEM major, since introductory classes are less expensive than universities, learning contexts are smaller and more intimate, and the opportunities to acquire social capital with and recommendations from STEM faculty are plentiful (Bottia et al., 2020). Vu et al. (2019) defined talented learners as those who scored perfect ACT or SAT scores, and of their sample of 109 students, 71% chose to major in STEM fields. Since a key internal motivator for students is self-efficacy, or the belief that they can persist in the face of adversity through a difficult major, some capable students might not view STEM as a realistic option (Baker & Orona, 2020; Snyder & Slauson, 2016). Furthermore, those without strong familial support in STEM might choose another major (Vu et al., 2019). In addition, mentoring, vicarious experience, and social persuasion were all essential factors for students whose self-efficacy in STEM was high (Amelink et al., 2015). Students on a pathway to a STEM field have shown to improve their self-efficacy in the supportive environments of community colleges (Amelink et al., 2015).
Effective Interventions to Support Students’ Major Choice

Students grow their satisfaction with major choice when they have regular opportunities to interact with others on campus to fit their projected image as working professionals (Milsom & Coughlin, 2015). Strong student-faculty mentorships, in particular, have a positive significant effect on retention and graduation, and the most effective mentoring goes beyond the academic to address study skills and social needs as well (Sneyers & DeWitte, 2018). Faculty mentors should take a more active role in advising, for many students are unaware of course requirements or whether their course is developmental or college level (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Mentors can even be recruited by administrative offices based on academic specialty or ethnicity (Sneyers & DeWitte, 2018). Liu et al. (2021) have even called for more positive messaging about the benefits of major exploration because it tends to result in higher quality student-major matches and outcomes.

Students are overwhelmingly satisfied with their choice of major when they have been exposed to a variety of career options prior to beginning college (Milsom & Coughlin, 2015). Bailey et al. (2015a) have argued that faculty members are especially qualified to design meaningful courses of study and career pathways for students. In the classroom, faculty can start assigning more problem-centered take-home assignments that are critical predictors of students’ success: academic confidence, belongingness, and mastery of skills that employers value (Winkelmes et al., 2016). Lofty rhetoric and anecdotal evidence that have long advanced the liberal arts as the best means of education are no longer sufficient. Rather, Seifert et al. (2008) asserted that powerful practices and conditions, such as extracurricular involvement and faculty interest in student development, best support and motivate students. They added that regardless
of institution type—private liberal arts school or community college, for instance—any institution can implement effective practices that foster persistence in any given major.

**The Guided Pathways Initiatives**

Guided pathways became the widely advocated response to low completion rates, and it is now the most popular completion reform, formally adopted by nearly 400 institutions (CCCSE, 2020). One of the biggest barriers for community college students is the need for developmental education (Bailey et al., 2015a). Forty two percent of all first-year community college students take developmental courses, a learning process that demands time and resources from students and taxpayers yet statistically offers almost no long-term benefits to either party (Abrahamson, 2019; Bailey et al., 2015a). With pathways, more schools are offering accelerated developmental courses, such as integrated reading and writing, and more co-requisite courses that allow students to take college-level courses during their first semester on campus (Baime & Baum, 2016). The sooner students are college ready, the sooner they can declare a meta-major, or a career cluster, where they will be streamlined towards transfer or completion. Since guided pathways is not an intervention but rather a total framework, students are actively assisted in all phases of their college education (CCRC, 2021).

Guided pathways rests on four pillars that policymakers need to carefully erect (Bailey et al., 2015a). The first is to clarify the path for students by providing them clear program maps (i.e., meta-majors) that allow for seamless transition to a baccalaureate program or a professional credential. The second pillar is choosing the path, where students receive academic advising and career exploration guidance. The third pillar is staying on the path, and here the whole college must come together and maximize resources to ensure that students complete their programs. The fourth and final pillar is to guarantee that students are learning. Indeed, a common criticism
of pathways is that it is a neoliberal approach to completion that emphasizes efficiency at the expense of deep learning and real intellectual growth (Schnarr, 2018). The fourth pillar addresses this justified concern and links learning outcomes with curricular and instructional practices. Additional strategies include an emphasis on more high-impact practices, such as learning communities, internships, and large-scale research projects (Bailey et al., 2015a). In all of these areas, students are encouraged to think about their chosen field of study in terms of career.

**Inherent Challenges**

Bailey et al. (2015a) have stated that while comprehensive implementation of guided pathways is cost effective to all stakeholders in the long term, it is expensive in the near term. Belfield (2020) found that of the 12 community colleges they examined that had successfully implemented pathways, they had all set aside about 3% of their annual budgets and spent approximately $7.14 million in the first four years. They also found that schools need to plan on a laundry list of budget commitments in student advising, program mapping, information technology investments, governance and management, ongoing professional development, teaching and learning, success courses, and other direct costs (Belfield, 2020). Thus, arguably the greatest challenge facing institutions is not necessarily the financing of pathways, but its comprehensive, slow, and painstaking implementation (Bailey et al., 2015a; Belfield, 2020; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2020). Well-meaning schools make one or two changes and mistakenly call it guided pathways (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2020). Bailey et al. (2015b) called this the challenge of “comprehensive reform” (p. 6), where institution-wide changes require committed leaders who can engage faculty and staff across the college.
Early Impact of the Guided Pathways Initiative

There are a number of metrics on which to evaluate the success of pathways: completion rates, tuition savings, institutional finances, student retention, employee and stakeholder satisfaction, job placement rates, and more. Through the lens of equity, the results here will focus on completion rates and retention. Both Florida State University and Queensborough Community College were inspirations for pathways leaders because of those schools’ increased completion rates in less time—the former because of its early introduction of easy-to-read program maps and the latter’s focus on meta-majors, both of which are now staples of guided pathways reforms (Bailey et al., 2015b). Sinclair Community College experienced a 75% increase in earned degrees while Miami-Dade College, the largest higher education institution in the U.S., saw fewer developmental education placements as a result of their boot camps, and they also saw increased retention rates as a result of their pathways-related approach to advising (College of DuPage, n.d.). The City Colleges of Chicago (CCC) saw its three-year graduation rate increase from 7% in 2009 to 17% in 2015 (Fink, 2017). When CCC administrators aimed for a goal of 20% by 2018, they witnessed a record 22.9% graduation rate, which they attributed to their pathways efforts (City Colleges of Chicago, 2018). This increase in completion rates across the country signifies that guided pathways will continue to be a popular option for community colleges.

Guided Pathways’ Effect on Student Choice

Twenty-eight percent of associate degree-seeking students end up switching their major at least once during their college experience (US Department of Education, 2017). Liu et al. (2021) recommended that major switching not be discouraged in community colleges, but rather integrated into program planning via common course sequencing, cross-discipline introductory
courses, and flexible application of credits. By doing so, students will be able to revise their
goals and interests without losing valuable tuition and time (Liu et al., 2021). This has long been
the objective of guided pathways’ meta-majors, where programs of study are grouped in broad
fields that allow students more mobility within academic and career communities (CCRC, 2021).
The third pillar of guided pathways—staying on the path—emphasizes improved advising and
holistic student services, where students can make more informed decisions about the college
majors they choose (Bragg et al., 2019).

Students desire clearly structured pathways to a degree or transfer (Bailey et al., 2015a),
and a significant majority of students approved of the meta-major or career cluster selection
process at their guided pathways institutions (Fink, 2017). The guided pathways initiative is a
comprehensive reform, so student affairs professionals will play an especially important role in
the student experience, and that will include choice of major (Baston, 2018; CCRC, 2021; Kezar,
2003). Moreover, we know that a close relationship with an actual person is one of the most
powerful predictors of success, especially for first-generation students and students of color
(Kinzie & Kuh, 2004). Perhaps the most critical change in the pathways reform is that highly
qualified faculty members design student-friendly course sequences of study (Bailey et al.,
2015a). With increased contact between students and campus personnel, guided pathways
institutions should continue to actively support students in their choice of career and academic
path.

Summary

The relevant literature shows that community colleges are rethinking their support
systems and prescribed curricula. Yet little if any research reveals how these fields are
communicated to students in pathways colleges, especially during the intake process. Moreover,
community colleges need to be actively supporting undecided students so that they are not
misaligned with a particular pathway. A whole-college effort to help inform students on various
academic and career choices will contribute to increased completion rates. A specific case study
on how that could be accomplished would begin to fill this research gap.

**Conceptual Framework**

This study is framed by the dual concepts that 1.) guided pathways interventions require
the intentional collaboration between academic and student affairs and that 2.) guided pathways
is a major program that needs to be optimally structured in order to best benefit students in their
choice of major. After all, the guided pathways model was designed to prevent students from
picking courses and majors with limited guidance—in essence, to prevent them from making
important decisions on their own (Bailey et al., 2015a). Thus, in order for community colleges to
commit to the “whole-college” reform that is required for better assisting students in major
choice, then a stronger collaboration between academic and student affairs is essential.

Kezar’s (2003) theory of collaboration between academic and student affairs provides
this study’s first framework, which is to understand the cultural and structural factors that inhibit
or promote such reforms. Indeed, for student affairs professionals, student success is grounded in
the belief that holistic and *collaborative* practices best support and develop college students
(NASPA, n.d.). Kezar (2003) argued that the research literature suggests the most common
barriers to collaboration are:

- organizational fragmentation and division of labor, specialization among faculty, lack of
  common purpose or language, few shared values, cultural differences between academic
  and student affairs in terms of personality styles, and competing assumptions about what
  constitutes effective learning. (p. 3)
This framework will in part guide the present study by helping identify those areas in which institutions have cultural and structural control over their interventions.

Moreover, Van Noy et al. (2016) defined their own framework along four dimensions of program structure that includes program prescription, program alignment, access to information, and active advising and support. They argued that the better college programs are structured along these four dimensions, the better the student outcomes will be. In their original study, the authors applied their framework specifically to career-technical programs and found that a careful examination will reveal the dimensions of structure that could be strengthened. Students benefit from highly structured programs, which is now the hallmark of guided pathways reforms, but it is community college students in particular who need most help navigating institutions and programs (Bailey et al., 2015a; Van Noy et al., 2016). Consequently, this establishes a second framework for this study’s examination of guided pathways and points to which college-level practices can be implemented at the case study site, Woodland Plains College (WPC, a pseudonym).

As I will be analyzing data from professionals, students, and institutional documents, the frameworks will help serve as organizing principles for the creation of themes. As faculty and staff discuss how they influence major choice of students, understanding the nature of their collaboration (i.e., between student affairs and academics) will establish recommendations for improvement. Collected documents, such as website pages and promotional materials, will be interpreted along the aforementioned four dimensions of structure (Von Noy et al., 2016). Finally, students will discuss through their interviews the process by which the institution did or did not help them choose a field of study. Their responses will similarly be interpreted through the four dimensions since, for instance, easy access to information and active advising and
support are especially relevant keys to student success. By framing the study’s research questions and collected data through these conceptual lenses, I will understand if or how guided pathways institutions are influencing student choice of major.

**Research Design**

This qualitative case study will take a social constructivist perspective. A paradigm is a basic set of beliefs that will guide the researcher’s action throughout the course of the study (Guba, 1990). One guiding belief is that a social constructivist perspective allows for people to actively construct their own views through their personal experiences and the meanings attributed to such experiences (Cohen et al., 2018). This qualitative intrinsic case study will include interviews with the research site’s staff, advisors, faculty, and students who contributed to or experienced the formation of major choice at a guided pathways institution. While a social constructivist perspective is not critical in nature, it does highlight through analysis the voices, experiences, and meaning making of those who have participated (Jones et al., 2014). The primary research question of this study asks how guided pathways interventions influence students’ choice of major. The subquestions ask 1.) what the perceived benefits that guided pathways interventions provide are in order to support students’ choice of major, 2.) what the perceived barriers in guided pathways design and implementation are identified in students’ choice of major, and 3.) what improvements in design and implementation would best support student choice by guided pathways. Given the nature of these questions, the study will likely interpret the data through a conceptual framework, rather than a theoretical one, as the research takes shape.

A qualitative case study has two overarching purposes: to help understand in depth the richness of life experiences and to provide new understanding for emancipating practices (Jones
et al., 2014). Merriam (2009) described a case study as an in-depth description of a system bounded by space and time. Hancock and Algozzine (2017) explained that case study research typically focuses on either an individual representative of a group, an organization or organizations, or a phenomenon, such as a particular event, situation, program, or activity. This qualitative intrinsic case study is then bounded by the institution’s staff, academic advisors, faculty members, and students who all were involved at the research site during the 2021/22 academic year and beyond. The research site implemented guided pathways reforms in 2016 as part of their Achieving the Dream (ATD) initiative, so the phenomenon under investigation is WPC’s leveraging of these reforms as they pertain to helping support students’ choice of major.

Through case studies, the researcher hopes the insights gleaned can directly influence policy, procedures, and future research (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). In order to understand how guided pathways institutions help match students to their career interests, an “intensive analyses and description of a bounded system by space and time” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017, p. 9) is required. The system is a two-year community college in the suburban Midwest, the unit of analysis is the institution, and the unit of observation is the participants of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A report of the study’s outcomes of the process is often narrative in nature, consisting of a series of illustrative descriptions of key aspects of the case (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). The following research questions will guide this study:

1. How do guided pathways interventions influence students’ choice of major at a community college?
   a. What are the perceived benefits that guided pathways interventions provide to effectively support students’ choice of major?
b. What are the perceived barriers in guided pathways design and implementation to effectively support students’ choice of major?

c. What improvements in guided pathways design and implementation would best support student choice by guided pathways design and implementation?

Research Site

Data within qualitative research are collected at the site where participants experience the problem or issue being studied, and the qualitative researcher is the sole collector of such data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The setting for this study will be a large, urban community college located in a northern suburb of Chicago, Illinois. The single research site will be the main campus of a 147-acre suburban midwestern community college (identified by pseudonym as Woodland Plains College, or WPC) that has implemented guided pathways reforms. According to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions, WPC is a medium-sized public urban-serving campus. WPC offers associate degrees in 80 areas of study and prepares students to transfer to four-year institutions or enter the job market. According to the college’s 2018-2023 strategic plan, the institution wants to better match students with distinct educational programs and academic pathways based on their interests and aspirational goals. The research site was also chosen for its diverse representation of students, its active student life, and its large body of 700 full-and part-time faculty members. The student body is 47% White, 20% Asian, 18% Hispanic/Latinx, and 7% Black or African American. In sum, the college enrolls students from 55 different countries.

The Lumina Foundation’s Achieving the Dream (ATD) project began in 2004 and was designed to increase the academic success of community colleges by employing a “culture of
evidence” driven by data (Bailey et al., 2015a). In 2015, WPC implemented a nationally recognized program that addressed low rates of persistence and retention. As part of ATD, the initiative required each faculty and staff member to reach out to one student five times a semester. Out of ATD’s call for broad institutional change within the community college, guided pathways was born. WPC adapted its own version of pathways called the WPC Experience that will be a holistic design intended to support students in intentional ways. Still, a “primary” goal of the institution is to connect new students to major and career exploration programs through the First-Year Experience and guided pathways programs.

**Participants**

The participants of this study will be WPC’s current Career and Transfer (CTC) staff, advisors, faculty, and students. Criteria for inclusion, or sampling criteria, refers to those characteristics, qualities, experiences, and demographics most closely aligned to the purpose of the study (Jones et al., 2014). WPC has redesigned their program to include 80 fields of study and 2,500 course offerings. The following criteria are required for participants: for CTC staff, their department is described as being embedded in each of guided pathways’ four pillars, which WPC has renamed to fit their institutional needs, i.e., enter, navigate, grow, and transition. CTC is front and center to the college experience as it guides exploration for students. As a result, staff will be experienced in fulfilling the department’s mission. For advisors, they will be current employees whose interactions with students have been informed since guided pathways’ implementation. Ideally, advisors will have participated in guided pathways professional development trainings. Faculty members too will have been involved in some aspect of guided pathways implementation, either as a committee member or faculty liaison. Finally, students will
be undecided entering the 2021/22 academic year. Those students who entered in fall 2020 will not be considered given the anomalous nature of the ongoing pandemic.

While Cohen et al. (2018) contended that there are no clear rules on sample size for qualitative research, the number of participants should be informed by fitness for purpose. For this purpose, one of the study’s aims is to necessitate the institutional change and research that will more accurately place students on the appropriate career and academic paths in a guided pathways institution. Using face-to-face interviews and focus groups in the natural setting when possible, a minimum of 10 participants should yield thick descriptions of the problem under investigation. Collecting data where the participants experience the issue or problem under study is a major characteristic of qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). On the other hand, alternatives to face-to-face interviewing are acceptable (Jones et al., 2014). For instance, interviews over Zoom can help participants overcome geographic constraints, scheduling inconveniences, and body image vulnerabilities. Nonverbal cues can still be observed.

The participants will be identified from snowball sampling. Cohen et al. (2018) noted that in snowball sampling the researchers identify through personal contacts and social networks a small number of individuals who have the characteristics in which they are interested, and then these people put the researcher in touch with others who meet inclusion criteria. Since I will be approaching an outside institution, I will depend on these “chain referrals” in order to find the most pertinent human subjects such as CTC staff, advisors, faculty, and students. Guided also by the belief that not all people interested in participating will make excellent participants, I will initially purposely sample strong candidates who can help answer my research questions. If participants recommended fit neither the previous four categories of CTC staff member, advisor, faculty member, or student, they will still be considered for additional inclusion (e.g., other staff
member). Prospective students will receive an emailed letter and/or flyer that will be distributed both on the physical campus and through social networks. Each individual who participates will provide the researcher a pseudonym in order to assure confidentiality.

**Data Collection**

Data collection will take the form of three methods: interviews, focus groups, and document collection. I will begin the data collection process by conducting semi-structured and open-ended interviews with CTC staff, advisors, faculty, and students in order to understand the ways in which guided pathways strategies are helping students meet their career and educational interests and aspirations. While the specific wording and sequencing of the questions will be predetermined, follow-up questions will be asked in order to accommodate potentially information-rich variations. Leading or yes/no questions that make assumptions about outcomes will be avoided. Rather, concise open-ended questions will allow for a more productive exchange. Hancock and Algozzine (2017) underscored this belief by noting that valuable research time is better used *listening* to the interviewee rather than *talking* to the interviewee. Consequently, interviews will be the most efficient means of addressing the research questions. The list of interview questions is presented in Appendix C.

Focus groups of six to eight interviewees will also be conducted so that I can bring together specifically chosen segments of the population (i.e., students) who were previously unknown to each other (Fowler, 2009; Hyden & Bulow, 2003). While faculty and staff will receive individual interviews, only the students will assemble in focus groups in case some do not turn up on the day of the interview. The assumption is that students are busy, less reliable, and possibly less analytical than their professional counterparts. As a result, overrecruiting
students by 20% will help ensure participation (Morgan, 1988). Moreover, focus groups encourage participation which will be ideal for students who are still maturing socially.

There will only be a few open-ended questions so that free-flowing views and opinions can be expressed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Focus groups are particularly useful for developing themes, gathering qualitative data, empowering participants to speak out in their own words, and encouraging individuals to build on the comments and ideas of their peers (Cohen et al., 2018). This study will seek students for semi-structured focus groups so that they might yield insights that might not otherwise be gained from interviews. In particular, focus-group comments might help trigger memories about the various interventions their institutions provided when they began to choose a college major. The list of guiding focus group questions is presented in Appendix C.

Document analysis will be the final method for acquiring data. Artifacts like flyers, brochures, apps, intercollege emails, and especially WPC web pages will be useful in understanding how the various disciplines are communicated to students. Hancock and Algozzine (2017) stated that before researchers begin collecting documents, the following questions need to be asked: “Who has the information? What part of it is needed? Where is it? When was it prepared? How will it be collected?” (p. 57). Preliminary discussions with key WPC personnel will help steer the research towards these documents. For example, an emailed professional development itinerary for advisors would prove valuable towards answering the research questions, especially as they pertain to possible barriers. When collected, these documents should richly augment the data acquired from interviews and focus groups.

**Data Analysis**
Since data analysis in qualitative research requires segmenting, taking apart the data, and putting it back together, Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommended an interactive five-step process for data analysis and interpretation. First, I will organize and prepare data for analysis by transcribing interviews and focus groups from a digital recorder. During this process I will type up field notes to preliminarily organize the data. All the visual data, such as flyers and emails, will be catalogued. The second step will include reading or looking at all of the data. Here I will start to reflect on the data’s overall meaning, and general impressions of the data’s credibility will begin to form. For the third step, I will use open and axial coding in order to generate themes for the study. Open coding first breaks down all the raw data into manageable pieces and allows the researcher to explore the ideas without any preconceived notions. With axial coding, which is similar to focused coding, the researcher relates the concepts to each other through constant comparison (Jones et al., 2014). In the fourth step, subsequent themes will be carefully scrutinized so that I can better understand the interconnectedness of the themes. Here I will begin to write out a description of the people and setting. NVivo will be the software used for the coding process. In the final and fifth step, I will represent the description and themes through a narrative passage to convey finding of the analysis. Creswell and Creswell’s (2018) three code categories are all a possibility for a study of this nature: expected, surprising, and codes of unusual or conceptual interest.

**Criteria for Quality**

Capturing an objective reality eludes qualitative research, so in order to increase trustworthiness in a study, the researcher needs credibility (internal validity), confirmability (objectivity), dependability (reliability), and transferability (external validity) (Jones et al., 2014; Merriam, 2009). Trustworthiness is confidence in the research findings (Jones et al., 2014).
Thus, the criteria for quality include methods of triangulation, member checking, rich and thick descriptions, reflexivity journaling, the presentation of contrary information, and a researcher positionality and bias statement.

With triangulation, the researcher applies and combines several methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). In this study, I will be using different data sources (e.g., interviews, focus groups, document collection) in order to build a coherent justification for themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Citing Creswell (2011), Jones et al. (2014) even stated that triangulating the data is an obligation of worthiness and one of high importance in case studies.

Follow-up with the participants will add to the triangulation of the study through member checking. This is achieved through prolonged engagement with the study’s participants. My transcriptions will be provided to the participants through email to verify their accuracy. Once the recorded data is confirmed as reliable, then I will provide rich, thick descriptions so that themes will be thoroughly considered and explained to the reader. During the process, a reflexivity journal will be kept in order to ensure the confirmability (objectivity) of the study. Here, field notes will be reflected upon throughout the entire data collection and analysis process. Then, by presenting contrary material in the study, the researcher increases the validity of the study. For example, any material that disagrees with the themes established in the coding process will provide for a more genuine reality of the study, its participants, and researcher (Merriam, 2009). A narrative section dedicated to such disconnected themes will be shared.

**Researcher Positionality and Bias**

Since the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009), it is necessary for readers of the study to understand relevant background information of
the researcher. I have over 10 years of experience in various community colleges in vastly different geographical regions—rural west Texas and greater Chicago—with heterogeneous populations and needs. In that time I have been a full-time English faculty member who has held administrative leadership roles in developmental education, dual-credit English, tutoring, and testing. I will take over as chair of Communications (i.e., English, speech, Spanish) in the summer of 2022. This has broadened and shaped my understanding of the community college student experience given that I did not attend a community college when I was a student. In addition, I have over two years of experience leading my institution’s guided pathways initiative. I am one of my own institution’s main faculty liaisons as I organized several college-wide pathways events for my colleagues. As a longtime teacher and former director of developmental English, I have witnessed firsthand a significant number of students who languish without direction in low-level noncredit-bearing courses such as ENG 082 and ENG 084, in particular. As such, my professional experiences have influenced my particular views of this completion reform and will help shape the study (Merriam, 2009).

On a more personal note, I am a former business major (finance) turned humanities major (English) with a graduate degree in English literature. Given my then-indifference to business classes, I still do not know what had motivated me to initially choose a major in a field for which I knew and cared little or what career and academic guidance I had received after I graduated high school. I would no doubt have benefitted from targeted interventions during my own onboarding process for college. Instead I graduated in five years as a result of unclear direction, and that has in part inspired me to study this subject.
Significance

Early findings suggest that the implementation of guided pathways is expensive, often such that institutions incur costs above and beyond budgetary expectations (Jenkins, Brown, et al., 2020). Belfield (2020) examined 12 community colleges that successfully implemented pathways and found that schools, on average, needed to set aside 3% of their annual budgets to cover all recommended costs (p. 13). For a community college with about 4,000 full-time students, an estimated $7.14 million is required over four years, or roughly $1.8 million per year (Belfield, 2020). With a strong political will, a dynamic advocacy for student success, and effective state leadership, schools are actively seeking additional state monies for the financing of pathways. Such sizable commitments are essential, so it is significant to know whether or not the reform works and which interventions, in particular, are effective.

Even as more community colleges adopt the comprehensive, large-scale reforms of guided pathways, outcomes disparities persist across racial groups (Bragg et al., 2019; Jenkins et al., 2021). Consequently, the original architects of pathways have now modified their original recommendations so as to help institutions achieve more equitable outcomes. One such proposal is that community colleges need to redesign the entire onboarding experience and not just provide better career and transfer information to students (Jenkins et al., 2021). A set of essential practices that focuses on improved advising aligned with holistic student services will help students successfully choose a program and complete their end goals (Bragg et al., 2019). On the other hand, students who are ill-suited to a program are likely to struggle on their pathway and leave school for a low-paying, low-skills job (Baker et al., 2018). Davis Jenkins, one of guided pathways’ most visible spokesmen, has noted, “If students aren’t taking an interesting course in
their first year, they are likely to leave. You have to help every student explore their options and develop a plan. It’s unethical not to when you’re charging that much money” (St. Amour, 2020).

This study will be significant in that it will explore if and how guided pathways reforms at WPC have influenced and supported students’ choice of major. Moreover, because of the Biden Administration’s renewed commitment to investing in student success at community colleges, it is important to maximize increased funding opportunities and to better understand what practices are most effective in this context (CCRC, 2021). WPC is a large, racially diverse urban community college in the Midwest, so this study can serve as a representative sample of this dynamic sector. By exploring the insights of CTC staff, academic advisors, faculty members, and students, this study will assist other community colleges that are at any stage during or after their guided pathways implementation process. As Bailey et al. (2015a) described it, the more that community colleges can provide “coherent, integrated, intensive, and sustained supports for students,” the more they can expect to see increased completion rates (p. 67). I hope that “creative” will figure in just as prominently once this study’s findings will be published.

Yet another qualitative study could collect the experiences of other support staff like librarians, tutoring directors, and TRiO personnel. These key hubs are latent areas for career resources and need to be actively integrated into any institution’s guided pathways whole-college reform. Finally, a mixed-methods study could gather a high volume of respondents via surveys, polls, questionnaires, and existing data. This will help future researchers determine whether the quantitative data either contradicts, supports, refines, or qualifies the previous qualitative data (Cohen et al., 2018). As more themes are coded and more best practices are developed, a statistical analysis will help community college practitioners integrate the most effective interventions into their own strategic plans.
Dissertation Organization

This chapter has served as the project’s proposal. Chapter 2 will serve as a publishable paper that expounds on this proposal through findings and a discussion of and recommendations based on those findings. Chapter 3 will present a scholarly reflection on the dissertation process, notably the project’s origins, obstacles, and applications to professional practice and research.
CHAPTER TWO

TOUCHPOINTS: HOW FACULTY AND ADVISING UNDERSTAND AND COLLABORATE ON GUIDED PATHWAYS REFORMS TO INFLUENCE AND SUPPORT MAJOR CHOICE IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Abstract

Guided Pathways is a nationwide whole-college reform that aims to improve college completion rates and times for students, especially in the community-college sector. This multisite case study sought to explore how pathways institutions supported students to better align with the right academic and career programs. Through individual semi-structured interviews, faculty members and advisors reflected on if and how they collaborated to better serve students in this capacity. Three themes emerged during data analysis and are reported in narrative form: a.) divergent faculty and advising attitudes about pathways reforms, b.) inconsistent perceptions on levels of collaboration, and c.) criticisms and suggested improvements from the participants. These findings indicate that a blended approach of cultural and structural changes could strengthen communication and collaboration between academic and student affairs. When institutions deliberately and comprehensively implement these reforms, students are likely to be better engaged as they make the important decision of selecting a good-fitting academic or career pathway.

Introduction

Community college students often make uninformed decisions on their choice of major that misalign their skills and interests to the appropriate field of study, and this undermines their
progress in the long term (Bailey et al., 2015a; Baker et al., 2018). One explanation for this is that students are not receiving enough targeted support that could help communicate to them the perceived difficulty of the required courses, the requisite personality traits, and the expected labor outcomes, for instance (Bailey et al., 2015a; Baker et al., 2018; Baker & Orona, 2020). Community college students also face an especially expansive menu of class options from which to choose (Scott-Clayton, 2015). All the while, community college students have traditionally persisted and graduated at low rates, and the high probability of not completing a bachelor’s degree necessitates a different decision-making environment for this population—one that often means prematurely leaving school to enter a low-skill, low-paying job (Baker et al., 2018).

Community colleges are attempting to remedy this trend via the development of meta-majors in their guided pathways reforms (Baker & Orona, 2020). Guided pathways reforms redesign academic programs and services to help students make better choices, avoid accruing expensive excess credits, and complete their programs (Bailey et al., 2015a). Meta-majors are when career-technical and transfer-oriented programs are organized together in broad academic and career communities that help students build networks that offer peer support, mentoring, and job advice (Jenkins et al., 2021). By exposing students to all majors in each field and providing them an understanding and experience within these other majors, institutions are, respectively, increasing awareness and affecting consideration.

This qualitative intrinsic case study aimed to explore how an urban Midwestern community college, through its newly implemented guided pathways policies, can help students decide on and support their choice of major at community colleges. More specifically, the study sought to understand how faculty and advising personnel collaborated to help support students’ choice of major. Accordingly, the following research questions guided this study:
1. How do guided pathways interventions influence and support students’ choice of major at a community college?

   a. How are campuses engaging the process of developing academic and student affairs collaborations in order to influence student choice of major?

      i. What are the perceived structural barriers to collaboration in a guided pathways institution?

      ii. What are the perceived cultural barriers to collaboration in a guided pathways institution?

   Findings from this study suggest that leaders of reform efforts will need to consider that faculty and advising have different roles in the college, so they will often have divergent attitudes about pathways. In addition, they will find that inconsistent perceptions on collaboration levels could impede their pathways goals. Finally, they should listen to the voluntary criticisms and suggested improvements from the participants. These findings indicate that a blended approach of cultural and structural changes could strengthen communication and collaboration between academic and student affairs.

   **Literature Review**

   For guided pathways institutions to effectively serve students as they begin to form their academic and professional identities, college leaders, advising personnel and faculty members need to understand how students rationalize their choices. The following research review will focus on this decision-making process and then more broadly on the guided pathways initiatives, its challenges and flaws, and the interventions that have been tried by various community colleges.
**Students’ Choice of Majors in Community Colleges**

Students are faced with many complex options when choosing an area of study—sometimes upward of 150 choices—and as a result often make poor decisions that undermine their best interests in the long term (Bailey et al., 2015a; Baker et al., 2018). Switching majors might increase certificate completion rates but will decrease the probability of bachelor’s degree completion (Liu et al., 2021). The existing research on students’ knowledge of labor market outcomes relative to college major has been limited to selective four-year colleges, and very little is known on the beliefs and behaviors of community college students (Baker et al., 2018). In a survey of 367 students, less than 40% of California community college students accurately ranked broad categories of majors in terms of labor market outcomes (Baker et al., 2018). Moreover, while the majority of incoming students have some idea of what they want to study, 17% have “no idea” what they will major in (Bailey et al., 2015a, p. 37). Consequently, student choice often involves trade-offs by way of selecting a short occupational certificate program that will compensate well in the short term but less so in the long term (Bailey et al., 2015a).

Oftentimes undecided community college students are advised to take introductory liberal arts and science courses in a “general studies” program, but destination transfer universities can be overly selective when accepting credits within a particular major (Bailey et al., 2015a; Pippins & Belfield, 2019; Reed, 2013). Unclear articulation agreements between community colleges and four-year institutions are still common within many states, especially in humanities disciplines (Bickerstaff et al., 2020; Pippins & Belfield, 2019). Foraker (2012) found that changing a major choice within the first two years has no negative effect on student performance, but after that usually results in lower grades, reduced retention rates, and longer completion time.
Expected course enjoyment is the most important predictor of major choice, followed by expected grades. Other important factors include predicted salary, probability of employment, stability of employment, family and friends with the same major, and parental approval (Baker et al., 2018; Baston, 2018). To the latter, O’Brien (as cited in Nussbaum, 2016) noted that while literature and philosophy have changed the world, parents “are more likely to fret if their children are financially illiterate than if their training in the humanities is deficient” (p. ix). Still, if students are sold the communal value of their college major, they feel positively towards their area of study and develop a stronger sense of self-connection (Klussman et al., 2021). In particular, humanities majors at an elite university embraced the stigma they perceived from STEM peers by self-identifying as empowered social groups in pursuit of “fulfillment, meaning, and self-affirmation” (Lewis, 2017, p. 391). With voluntary stigma, they defined themselves in opposition to those who majored in traditionally market-rich fields like business, health, and science (Lewis, 2017). On the other hand, 48% of adults who were humanities majors—the largest of any discipline—would have majored in something else (Federal Reserve Board, 2022).

Community colleges are also uniquely positioned to help push students from diverse backgrounds into STEM fields at four-year universities (Amelink et al., 2015; Bottia et al., 2020). One explanation is that a significant portion of high school students likely uses community colleges as a bridge to the STEM major, since introductory classes are less expensive than universities, learning contexts are smaller and more intimate, and the opportunities to acquire social capital with and recommendations from STEM faculty are plentiful (Bottia et al., 2020). Vu et al. (2019) defined talented learners as those who scored perfect ACT or SAT scores, and of their sample of 109 students, 71% chose to major in STEM fields. Since a key internal motivator for students is self-efficacy, or the belief that they can persist in the face of
adversity through a difficult major, some capable students might not view STEM as a realistic option (Baker & Orona, 2020; Snyder & Slauson, 2016). Furthermore, those without strong familial support in STEM might choose another major (Vu et al., 2019). In addition, mentoring, vicarious experience, and social persuasion were all essential factors for students whose self-efficacy in STEM was high (Amelink et al., 2015). Students on a pathway to a STEM field have shown to improve their self-efficacy in the supportive environments of community colleges (Amelink et al., 2015).

**Effective Interventions to Support Students’ Major Choice**

Students grow their satisfaction with major choice when they have regular opportunities to interact with others on campus to fit their projected image as working professionals (Milsom & Coughlin, 2015). Strong student-faculty mentorships, in particular, have a positive significant effect on retention and graduation, and the most effective mentoring goes beyond the academic to address study skills and social needs as well (Sneyers & DeWitte, 2018). Faculty mentors should take a more active role in advising since many students are unaware of course requirements or whether their course is even developmental or college level (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Mentors can be recruited by administrative offices based on academic specialty or ethnicity (Sneyers & DeWitte, 2018). Liu et al. (2021) have even called for more positive messaging about the benefits of major exploration because it tends to result in higher quality student-major matches and outcomes.

Students are overwhelmingly satisfied with their choice of major when they have been exposed to a variety of career options prior to beginning college (Milsom & Coughlin, 2015). Bailey et al. (2015a) have argued that faculty members are especially qualified to design meaningful courses of study and career pathways for students. In the classroom, faculty can start
assigning more problem-centered take-home assignments that are critical predictors of students’ success: academic confidence, belongingness, and mastery of skills that employers value (Winkelmes et al., 2016). Lofty rhetoric and anecdotal evidence that have long advanced the liberal arts as the best means of education are no longer sufficient. Rather, Seifert et al. (2008) asserted that powerful practices and conditions, such as extracurricular involvement and faculty interest in student development, best support and motivate students. They added that regardless of institution type—private liberal arts school or community college, for instance—any institution can implement effective practices that foster persistence in any given major.

**The Guided Pathways Initiatives**

Guided pathways became the widely advocated response to low completion rates, and it is now the most popular completion reform, formally adopted by nearly 400 institutions (CCCSE, 2020). One of the biggest barriers for community college students is the need for developmental education (Bailey et al., 2015a). Forty-two percent of all first-year community college students take developmental courses, a learning process that demands time and resources from students and taxpayers yet statistically offers almost no long-term benefits to either party (Abrahamson, 2019; Bailey et al., 2015a). With pathways, more schools are offering accelerated developmental courses, such as integrated reading and writing, and more co-requisite courses that allow students to take college-level courses during their first semester on campus (Baime & Baum, 2016). The sooner students are college ready, the sooner they can declare a meta-major, or a career cluster, where they will be streamlined towards transfer or completion. Since guided pathways is not an intervention but rather a total framework, students are actively assisted in all phases of their college education (CCRC, 2021).
Guided pathways rests on four pillars that policymakers need to carefully erect (Bailey et al., 2015a). The first is to clarify the path for students by providing them clear program maps that allow for seamless transition to a baccalaureate program or a professional credential. The second pillar is choosing the path, where students receive academic advising and career exploration guidance. The third pillar is staying on the path, and here the whole college must come together and maximize resources to ensure that students complete their programs. The fourth and final pillar is to guarantee that students are learning. Indeed, a common criticism of pathways is that it is a neoliberal approach to completion that emphasizes efficiency at the expense of deep learning and real intellectual growth (Schnarr, 2018). The fourth pillar addresses this justified concern and links learning outcomes with curricular and instructional practices. Additional strategies include an emphasis on more high-impact practices, such as learning communities, internships, and large-scale research projects (Bailey et al., 2015a). In all of these areas, students are encouraged to think about their chosen field of study in terms of career.

**Inherent Challenges**

Bailey et al. (2015a) have stated that while comprehensive implementation of guided pathways is cost-effective to all stakeholders in the long term, it is expensive in the near term. Belfield (2020) found that of the 12 community colleges they examined that had successfully implemented pathways, they had all set aside about 3% of their annual budgets and spent approximately $7.14 million in the first four years. They also found that schools need to plan on a laundry list of budget commitments in student advising, program mapping, information technology investments, governance and management, ongoing professional development, teaching and learning, success courses, and other direct costs (Belfield, 2020). Thus, arguably the greatest challenge facing institutions is not necessarily the financing of pathways, but its
comprehensive, slow, and painstaking implementation (Bailey et al., 2015a; Belfield, 2020; CCCSE, 2020). Well-meaning schools make one or two changes and mistakenly call it guided pathways (CCCSE, 2020). Bailey et al. (2015b) called this the challenge of “comprehensive reform” (p. 6) such that institution-wide changes require committed leaders who can engage faculty and staff across the college.

*Early Impact of the Guided Pathways Initiative*

There are a number of metrics on which to evaluate the success of pathways: completion rates, tuition savings, institutional finances, student retention, employee and stakeholder satisfaction, job placement rates, and more. Through the lens of equity, the results here will focus on completion rates and retention. Both Florida State University and Queensborough Community College were inspirations for pathways leaders because of those schools’ increased completion rates in less time: the former because of its early introduction of easy-to-read program maps and the latter’s focus on meta-majors, both of which are now staples of guided pathways reforms (Bailey et al., 2015b). Sinclair Community College experienced a 75% increase in earned degrees while Miami-Dade College, the largest higher education institution in the U.S., saw fewer developmental education placements as a result of their boot camps, and they also saw increased retention rates as a result of their pathways-related approach to advising (College of DuPage, n.d.). The City Colleges of Chicago (CCC) saw its three-year graduation rate increase from 7% in 2009 to 17% in 2015 (Fink, 2017). When CCC administrators aimed for a goal of 20% by 2018, they witnessed a record 22.9% graduation rate that they in part attributed to their pathways efforts (City Colleges of Chicago, 2018). This increase in completion rates across the country signifies that guided pathways will continue to be a popular option for community colleges.
**Criticisms of Guided Pathways**

With such popularity, however, skeptics wonder whether blanket fast-track completion policies ignore the lived realities and responsibilities—i.e., family obligations and work-life balance—of most community college students (Isserles, 2021; Kuneyl, 2022). In the fall of 2020, for instance, nearly 4.8 million students were enrolled in community college, of which 65% were part time. In the fall of 2018, a year that was not affected by a global pandemic, that number was still 58% (CCRC, n.d.). Part-time community college students are not traditional full-time university students, but it is argued they are being treated as such under guided pathways. In fact, the Community College Research Center, which drives much of the policy and analysis around guided pathways, is staffed by members with very little direct community college experience (Isserles, 2021). These students are told to adapt to the rigors of being a full-time student rather than the institution adapting to better support part-time college work (Isserles, 2021). In many of these cases, the support mechanisms required of guided pathways, including the call for a culture of care, can exploit the free emotional labor of staff and faculty, especially those on contingent contracts (Isserles, 2021).

Moreover, there is concern that community college practitioners are viewing guided pathways as the “miracle cure” that might move lower income people into “middle class consumers” (Schnarr, 2018, p. 147). As a neoliberal completion model, guided pathways is turning the community college over to demands of the marketplace where colleges become businesses and students become customers. The disruptions promoted by guided pathways—e.g., the creation of co-requisite classes or the subscription to online tools—are primarily driven by degree attainment that flattens the complexities of an undergraduate education (Isserles, 2021; Schnarr, 2018). It is also not clear what harm is caused to racialized minorities under the
completion model, of which guided pathways is a prominent example (Kuneyl, 2022; Sublett & Orenstein, 2021). Huerta et al. (2022) stressed that guided pathways needs to center equity in its framework and better examine students’ multidimensional identities (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, student-parent, etc.). Finally, since many incoming community college students have an underdeveloped understanding of higher education, there is concern that students end up being misplaced in a meta-major or program for the sake of completion expediency (Isserles, 2021).

**Guided Pathways’ Effect on Student Choice**

Twenty-eight percent of associate degree-seeking students end up switching their major at least once during their college experience (US Department of Education, 2017). Liu et al. (2021) recommended that major switching not be discouraged in community colleges, but rather integrated into program planning via common course sequencing, cross-discipline introductory courses, and flexible application of credits. By doing so, students will be able to revise their goals and interests without losing valuable tuition and time (Liu et al., 2021). This has long been the objective of guided pathways’ meta-majors, where programs of study are grouped in broad fields that allow students more mobility within academic and career communities (CCRC, 2021). The third pillar of guided pathways—staying on the path—emphasizes improved advising and holistic student services, where students can make more informed decisions about the college majors they choose (Bragg et al., 2019).

Students desire clearly structured pathways to a degree or transfer (Bailey et al., 2015a), and a significant majority of students approved of the meta-major or career cluster selection process at their guided pathways institution (Fink, 2017). The guided pathways initiative is a comprehensive reform, so student affairs professionals will play an especially important role in
the student experience, and that will include choice of major (Baston, 2018; CCRC, 2021; Kezar, 2003). Moreover, we know that a close relationship with an actual person is one of the most powerful predictors of success, especially for first-generation students and students of color (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004). Perhaps the most critical change in the pathways reform is that highly qualified faculty members design student-friendly course sequences of study (Bailey et al., 2015a). With increased contact between students and campus personnel, guided pathways institutions should continue to actively support students in their choice of career and academic path.

Many institutions that have implemented guided pathways, like Laramie County Community College (LCCC), are redesigning their first-year experience (FYE) courses to center on career exploration and educational planning. As LCCC contextualizes its FYE courses around each meta-major, specialized faculty and local employers actively help facilitate the content. Moreover, when these students reach 30 credit hours, they transition from their assigned academic advisor to a faculty mentor (CCRC, 2020). Prince George’s Community College in Maryland offers a similar service to its students. At Pierce College District in Washington State, admissions coaches call students as soon as they receive their application. At Chattanooga State, students take a field-related success course their first semester that includes a comprehensive career assessment (Jenkins, Lahr, et al., 2020). Finally, Central Carolina Community College requires students to take an engaging career interest inventory survey that links them to several program pathways (Central Carolina Community College [CCCC], n.d.). By rethinking the onboarding process, community colleges can help students complete more suitable programs of study in a timelier and more cost-effective fashion.
When it comes to providing the structural support that is needed for student decision making, these institutions might be the exception. Guided pathways’ emphasis on completion is still a major goal of the initiative, but with this lack of support, many underserved students are not completing high-opportunity programs (Jenkins et al., 2021). A misalignment between students’ skills and major choice is an important reason why. A more holistic and targeted approach, such as increased collaboration between faculty and advising, can help ensure that students are participating in a guided exploration of major choice. Increased completion of college credentials does not necessarily advance equity. Instead, by embedding advisors into meta-majors and connecting students early with faculty and related networks, institutions can more accurately align students with their passions and skills (Jenkins et al., 2021).

Community colleges are rethinking their support systems and prescribed curricula. Yet little if any research reveals how these fields are communicated to students in pathways colleges, especially during the intake process. Moreover, community colleges need to be actively supporting undecided students so that they are not misaligned with a particular pathway. A whole-college effort to help inform students on various academic and career choices will contribute to increased completion rates. A specific case study on how that can be accomplished will begin to fill this research gap.

**Conceptual Framework**

This study is framed by the concept that guided pathways interventions require the intentional collaboration between academic and student affairs. After all, the guided pathways model was designed to prevent students from picking courses and majors with limited guidance—in essence, to prevent them from making important decisions on their own (Bailey et al., 2015a). Thus, for community colleges to commit to the “whole-college” reform that is
required for better assisting students in major choice, then a stronger collaboration between academic and student affairs is essential.

Kezar’s (2003) theory of collaboration between academic and student affairs provided this study’s framework, which is to understand the cultural and structural factors that inhibit or promote such reforms. See Table 1 for a complete list. Kezar drew on a national survey that included input from 32 community and technical colleges, or about 25% of the total respondents. The questions allowed survey respondents to provide open-ended responses about how their institutional culture affected collaboration. Their data was relevant to this study since cultural and structural reforms in the guided pathways model can help students enter high-opportunity programs (Jenkins et al., 2021). For student affairs professionals, student success is grounded in the belief that holistic and collaborative practices best support and develop college students (NASPA, n.d.). Kezar (2003) argued that the research literature suggests the most common barriers to collaboration are, but not limited to:

- organizational fragmentation and division of labor, specialization among faculty, lack of common purpose or language, few shared values, history of separation, different priorities and expectations, cultural differences between academic and student affairs in terms of personality styles, and competing assumptions about what constitutes effective learning. (p. 3)

Large higher education institutions usually have a greater need for structural strategies and may experience more obstacles in this regard (Kezar, 2003). For the purposes of this study, references to student affairs are synonymous with advisors and references to academic affairs with faculty members. This framework will guide the present study by helping to identify those areas in which institutions have cultural and structural control over their interventions (Table 1).
Table 1. Structural and Cultural Strategies (Kezar, 2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cross-institutional dialogue</td>
<td>Combine fiscal resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff development</td>
<td>Promotion and tenure requirement changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common vision development</td>
<td>Reassignment of duties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common language development</td>
<td>Restructuring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication strategies</td>
<td>Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation</td>
<td>Setting expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty attitudes</td>
<td>Accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalities</td>
<td>Reward system modified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redefining mission</td>
<td>Systemic change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student affairs attitudes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generating enthusiasm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Methodology**

To investigate how the pathways model was interpreted and implemented by the pseudonymous Woodland Plains College (WPC) advisors and faculty, I employed a qualitative case study approach. A case study is distinguished from other qualitative approaches because of its intensive focus on a bounded system, which in this case is WPC and its two campuses, faculty, and staff during the summer of 2022 (Jones et al., 2014). In particular, this study used the qualitative methodology of intrinsic case study to learn more about this particular institution’s experiences with guided pathways. While the goal is not to generalize to all or even
broader populations, this study’s descriptive approach might yield useful findings for similar community colleges (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017).

A descriptive case study emphasizes an outcome where rich descriptions of a particular phenomenon are usually described in narrative form (Merriam, 2009). Even though a social constructivist perspective is not critical in nature, it does highlight through analysis the voices, experiences, and meaning making of those who have participated. Like most descriptive case studies, I examined the complexities of WPC employees’ interpretations, attitudes, and language choices depending on their roles as either faculty or advisors. This study relied primarily on individual semi-structured interviews since the complexities of analysis require rich, personalized information that can only be attained from such focused discussions (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). A report of the study’s outcomes of the process is often narrative in nature, consisting of a series of illustrative descriptions of key aspects of the case (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). For contextual purposes, document collection augmented the study’s data.

**Research Site**

The setting for this case study was a large community college located in a northern suburb of a major American city in the Midwest. This 53-year-old community college employs 147 full-time faculty members and enrolls 46,000 credit and noncredit students across two campuses and a distance learning program. The main campus A is nearly seven times the physical size of its smaller companion campus B, but both campuses offer a full complement of services for students. Associates degrees are offered in 80 areas of study. The research site implemented guided pathways reforms in 2016 as part of its Achieving the Dream (ATD) initiative, so the phenomenon under investigation is WPC’s leveraging of these reforms as they pertain to helping support students’ choice of major. WPC renamed guided pathways’ four
pillars with simple one-word action verbs: Enter, Navigate, Grow, and Transition. Finally, its nationally recognized Persistence Project encourages faculty to sit down with students each semester outside of class, and this initiative was mentioned numerous times throughout the interviews.

Participants

Upon approval of the Institutional Review Boards of both my doctoral-granting university and Woodland Plains College, I enlisted the help of my primary liaison at WPC to connect me with head advisors through snowball sampling. Career and Transfer Center (CTC) advisors were initially to be included in the recruitment process, but the department was undergoing a leadership transition and employed no active CTC advisors at the time of this research. General academic and specialist advisors were recruited primarily through chain referrals. After two weeks without receiving responses from advisors, a modest incentive was formally amended to my study by the IRB. After this amendment, a total of five advisors agreed to participate in interviews.

Meanwhile, I individually emailed over 36 faculty members requesting interviews, out of which five agreed to participate. Both advisors and faculty members had good reasons for not returning recruitment pitches by email in the month of July. For the former, it was peak advising season and all caseloads are high in preparation for the fall semester. For faculty members, many could have been off contract and not teaching during the summer. Despite these challenges, the entire recruitment and interview period only lasted about five weeks from early July to mid-August of 2022. A total of 10 faculty and advising staff agreed to participate in this study (Table 2).
Table 2. Participant Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Professional Role</th>
<th>Campus</th>
<th>Years at WPC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>Faculty (Business)</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward</td>
<td>Faculty (Art)</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajeev</td>
<td>Faculty (Accounting)</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amir</td>
<td>Faculty (Biology)</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Faculty (Computers)</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>Advisor (General)</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daphne</td>
<td>Advisor (General)</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerard</td>
<td>Advisor (General)</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda</td>
<td>Advisor (Health Careers)</td>
<td>A/B</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>Advisor (General)</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection and Analysis

I analyzed the interview data to find themes and also examined documents to help contextualize and clarify the participants’ answers. According to Hancock and Algozzine (2017), thematic analysis is often preferred by novice researchers. Answers to the interview questions were examined in light of the research questions. In this case, the research questions are centered on Kezar’s (2003) theory of collaboration between academic and student affairs. All interviews lasted from 30-60 minutes and were recorded simultaneously on an iPhone 12 and an iPad Air for backup. The recordings were then manually transcribed into a Microsoft Word file. Once
each participant’s interview was fully transcribed into Word, it was then pasted into Taguette.com, a free open-source text tagging tool for qualitative research.

Open and initial coding breaks down large groups of data into manageable segments by allowing the researcher to explore various concepts and ideas (Jones et al., 2014). By using a constant comparative model I first grouped similar answers into open codes (axial coding) to see how they related to one another. The software Taguette was especially useful in cataloguing numerous participants together under similar tags. The tags were then winnowed down to three explanatory themes best described in relation to the study’s research questions.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is confidence in the research findings (Jones et al., 2014). Thus, my criteria for quality include methods of triangulation, member checking, reflexivity journaling, and a researcher positionality and bias statement. With *triangulation*, the researcher applies and combines several methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). In this study, I used different data sources (i.e., interviews and document collection) in order to build a coherent justification for themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). When interview transcripts yielded unclear answers, I followed up with the participants through *member checking*. This was achieved through prolonged engagement with the study’s participants. During the process I kept an informal *reflexivity journal*, where I reflected on field notes throughout the entire data collection and analysis process, to ensure confirmability (objectivity) of the study.

**Researcher’s Position and Background**

Since the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009), it is necessary for readers of the study to understand relevant background information of
the researcher. I have over 11 years of working in various community colleges in culturally different geographical regions—rural west Texas and greater Chicago—with heterogeneous populations and needs. In that time I have been a full-time English faculty member who has held administrative leadership roles in developmental education, dual-credit English, tutoring, and testing. I am now chair of Communications (i.e., English, speech, Spanish) where I supervise 11 full-time faculty members and 12 part-time faculty members. This has broadened and shaped my understanding of the community college student experience given that I did not attend a community college when I was a student. In addition, I have over two years of helping lead my institution’s guided pathways initiative. As a faculty liaison, I have organized several college-wide pathways events for my colleagues. As a long-time teacher and former director of developmental English, I had witnessed first-hand a significant number of students who languished without direction in low-level noncredit-bearing courses, such as ENG 082 and ENG 084, in particular. As such, my professional experiences have influenced my particular views of this completion reform and helped shape the study (Merriam, 2009).

On a more personal note, I am a former finance major turned humanities major (English) with a graduate degree in English literature. Given my then-indifference to a business curriculum, I still do not know what had motivated me to choose a major in a field for which I knew and cared little, or what career and academic guidance I had received after I graduated high school. I would no doubt have benefitted from targeted interventions during my own onboarding process for college. Instead, I attended three institutions and graduated in five years as a result of unclear direction, and that has in part inspired me to study this subject.
**Limitations**

I acknowledge that there are limitations to this study that should be considered when interpreting the findings. Data collection was carried out during the summer when many faculty members were not checking email, so of the 36 faculty members targeted for participation only five responded and agreed to interviews. Since this research focused on one community college, the results of this study cannot be generalized to all community college campuses. Finally, interviews with WPC’s CTC advisors would have richly supplemented the study’s findings.

**Findings**

From the individual interviews conducted with faculty and advisors it is evident that this study’s participants actively assist students in major choice. In a recent survey distributed by the WPC advising team, however, there needs to be more work done in earlier stages for incoming students. Over a period between November 1, 2021, and January 31, 2022, an area of interest survey asked new students if WPC had impacted their current choice of program and 49 of 76 respondents (64.5%) said it had not, and 43 respondents (56%) said that it was possible to very likely they were going to change their current area of interest. Moreover, students in a smaller sample (n=13) expressed an interest in having “clearer explanations” in the application and orientation process and especially more career exploration in the application and during advising meetings.

WPC calls its version of the pathways model the Woodland Experience, and after the completion, transcription, and analysis of the faculty and staff interviews, all participants acknowledged that they were aware of the reform, but to varying degrees. When asked if their work had changed since the implementation of pathways, the participants’ responses covered the spectrum.
Three broad themes emerged from the data analysis and help address the study’s research questions: attitudes towards guided pathways reforms, perceptions on collaboration, and their own criticisms and suggested improvements. The following subsections attempt to capture the essence of each group’s overall perception, but of course there were complex and divergent opinions to be found in each.

“I’m not that familiar with it”: Faculty Attitudes on Pathways

While faculty had attitudes that were uniformly positive about assisting students in career choice, they were less inclined to perceive that guided pathways reforms influenced their work in this area. On whether pathways had helped WPC faculty get more involved in students’ choice of program, Edward, an art instructor, said that he only knows what he’s always done for over three decades, which is to engage each of his students on a personal level. “I’m not that familiar with guided pathways, and to be honest maybe I’m a little critical of it,” he said. As he allowed me to sit in on his painting class during our interview, he grew emotional when he spoke about helping his students explore themselves. “We’re in the experience business,” he told me. “We need parameters to allow people to knock around and grow. We’re not a channel,” he said. Some of his students have taken classes at WPC for 60 semesters, and many have taken his painting class numerous times for pleasure. When he’s aware a student has exceptional artistic talent, he recommends they go to art school. He might encourage artistically inclined students to pursue one of three practical pathways, such as art education, medical illustration, or art therapy.

Rajeev, an accounting instructor, said that he does not see any difference with guided pathways. “There are two kinds of professors: those who care, and those who don’t,” he said. “Those of us who care have been assisting students on major choice long before guided
pathways.” Where career choice is concerned he encourages all of his students to become accounting majors and tells them that they will always be employed despite the economy.

Deborah, a business professor who finds career exploration to be “a very important part” of her job, expressed a different interpretation of pathways. She thinks that the reform “forces” students to take a liberal arts education where more certificate options might help them in the real world. She then compared it with the Netherlands system where students do not have to take “extraneous courses, like women and gender studies.” This concern was shared by biology professor Amir, who would rather incoming students not have to take “so many overwhelming” gen ed courses. “Didn’t they just have four years of high school? Why does a student who’s interested in medicine have to take art or music classes?” I examined both the Biology AA and AS pre-major program maps and indeed the recommended courses in the first semester pathway sequence are English, speech, mathematics, and chemistry. He did not feel guided pathways had changed his role much where career assistance was concerned.

Samantha, on the other hand, felt that pathways was an important and necessary initiative for WPC. She coordinates and teaches computer information systems courses, and she advises students on career choice as much as she is able to. “Guided pathways nicely blended the particular way I work with students,” she said. Throughout the implementation process, Samantha created program maps for both full- and part-time students, and this “heavy-duty” work with the curriculum has made her a more conscientious advocate for students, especially where her relationships with advisors were concerned. “I sensed something was missing [prior to pathways] that needed to be tied together. Sometimes instructors can get set in their ways where they might have a traditional notion of what a student needs.” For her, pathways has cultivated more “out-of-the-box” thinking when it came to assisting students.
“A lot of appeal for students”: Advisor Attitudes on Pathways

Two general academic advisors communicated similarly positive attitudes about guided pathways’ role, especially where the first pillar (“Enter”) is concerned. “I think we’re now more up front and assertive with career and major choice,” said Kathy. “Prior to pathways I was not seeing many students walk through our door and tell us, “I want to be this major.” Even when students are undecided, they now have at least indicated something. I think our multiple touchpoints prior to their first appointment with us has really helped.” She credited the school’s brand-new website as a major complement to the pathways reforms, and the survey’s respondents agreed, as 40% of incoming students credited the website as significantly impacting their current choice of major. “Programs are a whole lot easier to find,” she said while showing me “Areas of Interest” on the new webpage where pathways maps are housed and easily accessible. “This website is not just an advising tool,” she said, “but a huge marketing tool. I think pathways has a lot of appeal for students.”

Daphne, another general academic advisor, also thought this made a difference. “I certainly see some students find pre-major information on their own prior to meeting with me in the onboarding process.” Yet she is quick to clarify that the program maps (what WPC advisors call “pre-majors”) can be misleading for students who intend to transfer. “I don’t use the maps as much as I should. To transfer in our state is not a seamless process like California or Florida. Many students can’t do 15 credits at a time, or they have dev ed requirements, so if they follow a pre-major, it’s confusing.” Kathy agreed: “The maps are a good starting place, but they aren’t going to fit all the time.” Victoria, an advisor who participated on the guided pathways committee, credited pathways with improving the college application. “When students fill out the application now, they are more likely to have accurately declared their intended area of interest.
This is a positive. Before it was so wrong that we’d just tell students to not even worry about it. With pathways, advisors are now more focused on what is declared is accurate,” she said.

Gerard is a new advisor on the secondary B campus who prefers talking to his students in person and thinks it essential when influencing student choice. He believes pathways helps start these conversations a little earlier. “I’d guess about half of students who come to me think they know what they’ll study, but once we start talking, I realize they don’t really know. I encourage self-exploration and give them resources, but when I hand off the baton I’m not always sure where the baton is going.” He reiterated throughout the interview that faculty members are going to give students the best career advice. “College is when kids are changing, and we’re very vulnerable when we’re 18 or 19. I hated biology yet I have a degree in biology.” He added that he wished more people had talked to him.

Miranda is a specialist advisor so works with a different group of students: “When they come to me they’re already pretty much decided,” she said. “Pathways isn’t something I have worked directly with all that much. When this was all starting I thought this might be the dumbest thing ever. I’m not sure my mind has changed all that much,” she laughed. “But I do like how a pre-accounting major can take an art history class because that might be what they really love.” She concluded by saying that one colleague felt pathways was implemented simply because it looked attractive to administrators.

“The other side is not responding”: Perceptions on Collaboration

All faculty and advising personnel perceived that cross-institutional dialogues for better collaboration were vital to student success. Samantha framed this in relational terms: “When WPC employees collaborate, regardless of job title, they build relationships that ultimately help students make better choices.” She qualified that this was highly dependent on personality type,
however. Deborah expressed frustration and said that communication rarely happens:

“[Advisors] come to our department meetings, but no matter how much we talk about how we need to communicate and collaborate, we don’t do it. We beg and plead to get on their calendar and bring them to meetings in order to promote our classes, but they’ll tell students not to take it because it doesn’t transfer.” Victoria, an advisor, said that communication could be better but thinks that faculty members misinterpret what they do: “The biggest barrier is that every semester we get faculty trying to sell us their courses. We’re not in course sales,” she said with a laugh. “My goal is to help students reach their goal, and filling classes for a faculty member never crosses my mind.”

Amir, whose many students are assisted directly by specialist advisor Miranda, was happy with collaboration: “We communicate well and haven’t encountered any real challenges. It helps that Miranda’s office is so close to mine.” Kathy also noted that the physical distance of two campuses, where each houses different programs, did not give her many opportunities for physical hand off. “It’s difficult to walk a student to a faculty’s office when you don’t know their office hours,” she said, but she was emphatic about connecting students to faculty “experts” anyway, even if it was through an email introduction. When students are deciding on major choice, she said rigorous collaborations need to happen, even when they’re not all that visible. “Our chairs and faculty are so student focused that very few if any of them are nonresponsive, and if they aren’t responding there’s probably a good reason.” While reflecting back on his own college experiences, Gerard reiterated the idea of connecting students to department chairs and professors. “They really need that voice. I needed that voice,” he said. “Professors they can trust.”
Daphne, who’s advised at WPC for 25 years, viewed the recent developments of pathways as having a positive effect on collaboration but made the distinction between communicating with full-and part-time faculty:

I think an overall bonus of the work over the past several years on pathways and pre-majors is that academic department chairs have gained a greater respect for what we do as advisors, and vice versa. We understand we need each other. One hundred percent of faculty, as you know, are the subject experts. We’re the curriculum and requirements experts. Now, some faculty are extremely responsive but there are a whole lot that are unresponsive. I feel terribly for our adjuncts teaching at five or six different colleges, and then trying to learn about all the different [resources on campus]. It’s an extra extra extra burden for them to respond to an advising question.

Edward thought collaboration had become increasingly difficult over the years. “They’ve created all kinds of new departments that I don’t even know who works where anymore,” he said. “And it’s not because I’ve gotten older. There’s too much stuff. Who is this person? Everyone’s a dean now. They come up with new committees and all this stuff.” Rajeev wondered if some of the advisors on campus were fully invested and understood the importance of their work: “I’ll be honest, I don’t even know these advisors. I don’t know what these students are saying to advisors, or what the advisors are saying to students. I don’t know. There’s obviously a big disconnect. If I need to take the initiative that’s fine. But the other side is not responding.”

“Times have changed. Tools change”: Criticisms and Improvements

While the participants were asked to be critical, they all volunteered thoughtful solutions. Kathy thinks it’s difficult to be “everything” for a student, so the need for more transfer and career counselors is critical. “It’s obvious what a career coach can do,” she said, “and maybe it’s less obvious what a transfer coach can do to help students figure out their career goals.” At the time of this interview the college faced staff reductions in their Career and Transfer Center and
currently employed no career counselors. Kathy said, “If we don’t hire more staff, then that responsibility falls on my team and we need more training in this area.” She thought that among her advising colleagues she might be one of the few who took a full career counselling class in her master’s program, but that was already 10 years ago. “Times have changed. Tools change,” she said.

Rajeev and Deborah thought students needed a specialist advisor within their majors and that faculty and advisors should meet once or twice a semester. Daphne said that while this idea is under discussion, she thought embedded advisors in meta-majors could present problems. “Community college students are always starting and stopping and I worry with these specializations students are going to be handed around a whole lot more,” she said. “They still need to have an undecided general advisor as well.”

Kathy recalled the challenge where important guided pathways info was shared at several live events but her office team was unable to attend: “So many of these types of events are held at peak times. Everyone was talking about pathways and I think the assumption was that all of us could be there and that the info would trickle to others. I don’t know if it fully did.” She added that these key events need to be accessible to everyone.

Miranda also thought more trainings and resources were needed. Her team had once hired a third party to run an audit to suggest how to better run the advising department and to help focus their mission statement, but administration didn’t like the criticisms. “It ended up being a waste of money,” she felt. Both she and Victoria believed that WPC could be “too hierarchical” and that has contributed in some cases to low morale. When Victoria was asked if training sessions with both faculty and advisors could help clarify each of their roles in pathways, she thought “it sounded like a great idea but could see it could going downhill quickly.” Miranda
saw the hierarchical divide as primarily between administration and the rest of the staff, and she felt that a little more humility could go a long way towards “doing some real good” for everyone. One structural improvement she wants is having student service areas—like financial aid and scholarships—to become centralized as a result of the pathways reforms.

Amir previously noted that students have been “bombarded” with gen eds in high school, and if guided pathways is going to really help students with career options, then it needs to offer more electives. Samantha agreed that finding the right balance is essential for students. “In a given semester let’s get them three gen eds and maybe two classes in their field,” she said. As noted earlier, a recurring theme in Edward’s responses was having the freedom to explore:

I’ve had students tell me that if pathways is just another form of structuring, then they would’ve gone into a trade. Since I don’t think guided pathways is a good thing, I put my efforts into the Persistence Project. When a student of mine disappears, I try to find them like a detective would. If I don’t they’re going to get dropped and still pay tuition. Sure, I’ll get paid, but my life is meaningless without them—without being able to teach them.

Victoria thought purchasing pathways-specific software designed for academic planning would be a “really important” improvement, adding that software that can alert her when students are taking the wrong classes would be helpful. On the other hand, Gerard thought simplifying the administrative tasks would free up more time for meaningful interactions:

There’s too much documentation. We need less paperwork and red tape. Of course I’m going to fill out paperwork and document that I did x, y, and z, but it shouldn’t be as time dense as it is. I would rather talk to a student for a long time because they get a lot of the content I’m giving them. But then for me to document it and recall everything? I can’t record them, according to FERPA. I need to have casual conversations.

While he noted that specific career advice is suitable to individualized conversations, Gerard said that more group presentations to anywhere from 20 to 400 students could help him communicate a lot of important information without the added paperwork.


**Discussion and Recommendations**

The findings show that while guided pathways offer a sweeping vision of how community colleges can transform themselves to better serve students, practitioners need guided paths of their own. The following discussion of my findings is targeted to those policymakers, leaders, and others involved who are in a position to help facilitate such transformations.

This study was framed in part by Kezar’s (2003) conceptual model for creating partnerships between student and academic affairs. When institutions leveraged a blend of structural and cultural strategies they secured more robust collaborations across campus. In an overview of student and academic affairs collaboration, O’Halloran (2019) found that such partnerships can increase student learning and success. Bailey et al. (2015a) even devoted a chapter to the importance of this engagement and found that cross-functional teams of advisors and faculty members can produce innovative solutions for students. Since cross-functional teams—especially as they pertain to the implementation of pathways—are by their nature diverse and bring disparate peoples together to maximize expertise, they similarly bestow agency and power to those who do not normally wield it (Bailey et al., 2015a; Chase et al., 2020). In the case of my own institution, we have brought together people in all roles to serve on four such teams: Data and Equity, Communications/Marketing, The Student Experience, and Program Mapping. As Samantha pointed out, such collaborations will assist students in making better choices.

The interviews in this study suggest that collaboration might even be undercut by a mutual suspicion and misunderstanding between faculty and staff. Kennett (1996) has noted that since colleges strive to be democratic and decentralized institutions, faculty tend to distrust anyone who seems eager to govern them. In the case of WPC, faculty seemed critical of those outside of their own silos as teachers. From the perspective of staff, it appeared that faculty did
not understand or always appreciate their support roles at the college. Coen (2021) argued that relational distrust can be repaired through three concrete steps: offer incentives for faculty-staff partnerships, rethink hierarchical norms, and create more shared experiences. For WPC, one such shared experience might include the designated time to research and write together on guided pathways. This could be supported through an internal grant program. Faculty were called “experts” by two advisors in this study, and staff need an opportunity to show faculty that they are experts as well. Along those lines, more campus events need to showcase the shared expertise of faculty-staff partnerships. Finally, Young et al. (2015) recommended microaggression training in the workplace to address any feelings of rankism that might exist between these two units. By doing so, senior leaders can begin to address the divide among perceptions between staff and faculty members.

In fact, Kezar (2003) noted that in one survey 80% of respondents said that senior administrative support played the most important role in facilitating partnerships and cross-institutional dialogues between student and academic affairs (Kezar, 2003). In addition to senior leaders calling for increased collaboration between the two sides, they needed to model the philosophy themselves (Banta & Kuh, 1998). O’Halloran (2019) found that leaders can promote collaboration by evaluating its various levels. This can be achieved, for example, in the redesigning of job descriptions and even the tenure and promotion process (Bailey et al., 2015a). Leaders can also incentivize staff and faculty by restructuring their rewards systems, either through added compensation or increased recognition. Moreover, if pathways committees want to stay effective, they need clout and top administrators should “lead by listening” (Bailey et al, 2015a, p. 215). Participants in this study did not always feel heard, understood, and even respected, especially from the perspective of advisors. In an effort to boost “low morale,” as
Miranda said, the explicit support from provosts, deans, executive directors, and vice presidents could solidify partnerships and build relational trust.

Another structural change could come in the form of setting concrete expectations. This strategy could rein in motley personalities and different areas of expertise and ultimately clarify collective purpose. Milligan and Morris (2012) showed that faculty attitudes can vary greatly by department. English faculty, for example, believed their workload was greater than that of other faculty, and as a result they could often be exhausted and even depressed by the end of the semester (Milligan & Morris, 2012). As one instructor in the current study said, “It was the department chairs who were actually responsible for putting together the pathways, but we didn’t do a very good job. They didn’t consult with me and I’m not even sure if [pathways] is still under development.” The practitioners participating in a college-wide reform would benefit from explicit instructions about their role in helping students and working with advisors, how to carry out those changes so that they can put reform into practice, and then receive clear descriptions of what the end result will be (Chase et al., 2020). As theorized in their garbage can model, Cohen et al. (1972) argued that institutions are organized anarchies without clear guidelines. When its own processes are not even fully understood by its own members, then participation will always vary greatly in both time and effort.

Kezar (2003) found that while a blended approach is best, it is cultural strategies that are most often successfully used. Chase et al. (2020) even argued that structural solutions by themselves will not address inequities in student outcomes. What’s needed is a deep overhaul of practices within the student support services and academic domains (Bensimon, 2012). In this case study, the interviews revealed a lack of common purpose or language. Some interviewees oversimplified guided pathways in what Chase et al. (2020) categorized as a surface-level
interpretation. Many participants thought pathways was simply streamlining a student’s curriculum through sequenced program maps, but pathways is a full suite of elements. More specifically, the pathways model was defined in its early stages as a highly structured and coherent education experience (Chase et al., 2020). Change is facilitated through social interaction and a collective understanding of the change being sought. When a common language is developed around the change initiative, leaders can generate enthusiasm for pathways (Kezar, 2003). WPC’s renaming of guided pathways’ four pillars to memorable action verbs—Enter, Grow, Navigate, and Transition—is one strategic change, but it needs to be reinforced in the messaging throughout campus.

The importance of faculty’s role in assisting students on major choice cannot be overstated (Rose et al., 2019). Chase et al. (2020) found that one department chair’s interpretation of pathways was to center the role of faculty to improve student success, but the majority of chairs viewed pathways itself abstractly, as the agent of student success. What this means is that many faculty members at WPC are unsure of a broader role where major choice is concerned. An overarching expectation of community college faculty is that of the generous educator who invests in developing their teaching by supporting students (Aguilar-Smith & Gonzalez, 2019). After Gerard had put his advisees in touch with faculty, students regularly came back to him with clearer expectations about the various directions they could go in.

Finally, leaders would benefit from a clear developmental evaluation plan during the creation and implementation of the guided pathways program (Chase et al., 2020). Since pathways is a relatively new reform, leaders need to be regularly observing the actual doing from the inside, and that includes ongoing evaluations of academic leaders taking this abstract and structural concept into “new practices, new cognitive schema, and new roles” (Chase et al., 2020,
p. 2). Bailey et al. (2015a) added to this suggestion by encouraging leaders to create a staff and faculty development model that will be organized around collaborative activities designed to strengthen understanding and sense making. Finally, Hendrickson et al. (2013) reinforced the importance of leaders “continuously assessing what is going on and adjusting plans accordingly” (p.375) so that the institution and its programs can advance to the best of their potential.

Implications for Future Research

This study shows that the implementation of a whole-college reform is nebulous and fraught with competing interpretations, doubt, and in some cases, outright disregard. For one, a more explicit critique of pathways would continue to examine the ways in which guided pathways might be negatively affecting students and contingent faculty, for instance. To what degree are actual learning and intellectual development forsaken in the interests of quick credential attainment? If community college students have complex lives and overwhelmingly attend college part time (CCRC, n.d.), is a streamlined reform like pathways equipped to ignore or respect those realities? More dissenting voices are needed when understanding the full picture of guided pathways. The work of Isserles (2021) could serve as a foundational text here.

Research on the complex dynamic of major choice within guided pathways institutions is essentially nonexistent. A similar study of community colleges outside of (sub)urban areas could yield interesting results. For instance, how do faculty and advisors, who work in a small, rural community college, collaborate? Are students better served when the physical proximity of campus is reduced? How might institutions with a one-stop student services center compare with sprawling multicampus sites like WPC?

Finally, more research is needed on the social and cultural aspects of pathways implementation. This study did not disaggregate participants by race, gender, or age, for
instance. I have taught at small, mid-size, and large community colleges, a regional state university, and a private Catholic liberal arts college. Each environment had its own prevailing culture that sharply affected policy and priorities. Ray (2019) suggested that organizational theorists need to understand that institutional formations, hierarchies, and processes are never race neutral. While early data showed that guided pathways was not closing racial equity gaps for students (Bragg et al., 2019), more research might even focus on how pathways also affects its practitioners with multidimensional identities. O’Halloran’s (2019) overview of the student and academic affairs collaboration literature could provide a relevant conceptual framework.

**Conclusion**

It is my hope that this case study will provide community college practitioners and leaders with the perspective and practical steps to maximize guided pathways’ influence on students’ choice of program. Major switching might increase certificate completion rates, but it decreases the likelihood of bachelor’s degree attainment (Liu et al., 2021). Like any completion-minded reform, guided pathways is not a silver bullet, but it does signal an opportunity for changemakers to rethink how their institutional culture and structures are influencing student choice. They can begin by energizing their campus’s social networks by promoting the intentional collaboration between faculty members and advisors. The participants in this study have shown that beyond their own innate desires to help students, clearer expectations about the broader reform are expressly desired. The tendency towards superficial implementation is strong, and only a deliberate and comprehensive effort will transcend what could easily be dismissed as another passing educational fad.
CHAPTER THREE
SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

Genesis of the Project

The focus of this dissertation crystallized during my last semester of doctoral coursework in the fall of 2021. I knew that Guided Pathways was going to be the subject of this study because of its increasing presence in my professional life beginning in 2019. To be clear, its presence was more like a will-o’-the-wisp—coming and going with unpredictable frequency.

When the frenzied rhythms of a given semester had abated, and staff and faculty had settled in, discussions of pathways would intensify. When a new semester began and personnel departed for other institutions, it was as if we were starting from square one. This was especially true when summer gave way to fall. In one instance, a team leader’s temporary departure, in conjunction with the COVID shutdown several months later, halted implementation efforts for a full calendar year. This unpredictability has been more or less the case for the past three years and, as I write this in September of 2022, remains so in the present day. Oftentimes it seemed as if guided pathways had come to symbolize a specter at a haunted house attraction: you know it is around the corner and needs to be reckoned with, but you dreaded seeing it.

There was a good reason for this: pathways is not an easily communicated reform with a single remedy. Everyone on campus needs to participate, but roles are not clearly defined. How does this affect me, we all thought to ourselves. As an English instructor, I had initially wanted to examine the role of humanities in this ever-expanding and popular completion reform. I was concerned: what might happen to the few aspiring English majors in a model that emphasized
quick completion and “high-opportunity” programs? Would neoliberalism’s latest darling in higher education be the coup de grâce for liberal arts? After some preliminary research for my proposal’s literature review, I was pleased to see that community colleges were actually vibrant homes for humanities exploration—even under pathways.

Then two principal factors simultaneously shaped the project’s aims in September 2021, one professional and the other academic. With the former, I had noticed that an unusually high number of students were visiting my faculty office hours, often to talk about career options. In no uncertain terms these were students who seemed almost fearful of college, unsure of themselves and overwhelmed by the choices available to them. My own students had declared an area of interest, but after talking to them it was evident they were feeling half-hearted about their decisions. I had remembered hearing my former college president, Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart of Amarillo College, say that pathways work meant getting to students as early as possible, even when they’re high school freshmen, so college representatives can get them aligned to a university degree plan. “So that no credit hour is wasted,” he said. This sounded a bit much to me, but there seemed to be a critical mass that more and more of these touchpoints were going to benefit students.

After all, I had had nearly identical experiences 22 years earlier. I had been a restless, ill-equipped, and often disillusioned finance major only to have my own sophomore English professor, Dr. Laura Hapke, set my sights on another path. Through all my comma splices and purple prose, she had identified some of my better tendencies and urged me to consider a switch to literary studies. She was candid, too: I would not make much money, but I might be happier. With my own students, I realized that while they were not necessarily budding philosophy majors, they were undoubtedly misaligned with their current fields of choice. I wondered what I
could do. Who else could I connect them with on my campus? Who were their main contacts during the onboarding process? Moreover, could I leverage any creativity to serve them beyond simply connecting them to an advisor or career counselor? All the while I kept wondering what exactly guided pathways was supposed to be.

At the same time in my doctoral program at NIU, I was enrolled in Dr. Hu’s Applied Research Design course where the first drafts of dissertation proposals were due. After I toyed with the humanities angle all semester, she gave me the critical insight that both broadened and ultimately gave final form to my project. “Are guided pathways’ institutions actually helping support students with their choices—regardless of major?” she had asked me one afternoon on an impromptu Zoom call. I knew that this would vary greatly by institution, but her question resonated with me. A nearby community college’s pathways expert had recently conducted a workshop at our institution as we implemented our own changes. With her community college’s robust size, strong reputation, and relative proximity to my residence, I knew I had found an intriguing spot for my own case study.

Just as fortuitously during the fall in 2021, the CCRC had re-evaluated their pathways work since 2015 and suggested numerous modifications, especially aligning students with high-opportunity programs (Jenkins et al., 2021). Suddenly my case study had the purpose and timing I had been seeking. Still, arriving at a topic for my dissertation was, without question, the most difficult part of the process. The focus of my doctorate will surely be a discussion starter for the rest of my professional life, and it took many restless nights wondering whether I should hitch my name to something that so regularly provoked groans and dismissals from many of my colleagues.
Temporary Obstacles

Yet once the decision was made, I was excited to conduct my research at WPC. The problem, however, was a pronounced communications disadvantage. While the aforementioned pathways expert had answered a couple of my initial emails, she had eventually gone silent on me. I knew I would have to find a new liaison at this institution, and through the IRB process an upper-level administrator in institutional effectiveness and strategic planning proved to be the gatekeeper I needed. Had she not been so open to my inquiries and willing to assist me, I would have been stuck sending out email blasts. During the summer of 2022 when she agreed to meet with me on campus to discuss the finer details of my project, everything after that moment seemed to fall into place.

All the while, family, friends, and colleagues all repeated to me the chestnut about a “completed dissertation,” so for my data collection I decided to remove focus groups and students. That was no longer realistic with my time frame in mind, and I knew that sticking to individual faculty and advisors interviews might even strengthen my study through its reframed focus. In late spring, after several key meetings with my advisor, Dr. Jaekel, I was more motivated than ever to conduct my study within these reasonable parameters. In line with what one of my participants would later tell me, having more “stuff” isn’t necessarily better. Once I was able to hurdle this psychological obstacle, the process of finding participants became a joy.

Indeed, even the growing list of unanswered recruitment emails did not deter me much. My first round of individualized email recruitment pitches quickly yielded two faculty commitments, and it was simply impossible after that not to be encouraged during dry spells. Even as I waited, I was able to transcribe those first couple of interviews and process the data. My project was taking shape. I knew I wanted to have an equal number of faculty and advisor
participants, so when I got to five faculty interviews with just one advisor interview, I decided to contact IRB and add an incentive to my recruitment. To further hedge my bets, I drove out to Campus B and physically distributed my contact information to the head of advising. Not only was I warmly greeted, instead of treated like a suspicious outsider, I was immediately put in touch with other participants. Within 10 days the rest of my interviews were scheduled.

**Applications to Professional Practice**

The genesis and ensuing completion of this doctoral dissertation has necessitated three new outlooks and roles for me as a faculty member and department chair. The first one is to become a more deliberate and meaningful collaborator at my institution. For too long I viewed my role as an English professor as siloed and removed from a larger network of actors. Put simply, I taught, held office hours, attended required meetings, and went home. Wherever collaboration was concerned it was departmental and usually out of obligation. Where I saw my value as a then tenure-track instructor was principally in the classroom, but this dissertation showed me that full-time instructors are in a privileged position to do even more. First and foremost, I have begun cultivating active relationships with my advisors. This morning I am helping coordinate a scholarship essay workshop for undocumented students, and I’ve already reached out to numerous departments.

Secondly, through this research I have become a de facto pathways liaison at my institution. My dean views me as a constant in the pathways continuum at our college, mostly by virtue of being an original member and now a last man standing. She has suggested I host a reading roundtable on the book *Redesigning America’s Community Colleges* (Bailey et al., 2015a). In that vein I hope to lead more cross-institutional dialogues and maybe demystify pathways in the process.
Finally, my research has already transformed my day-to-day professional habits with students. This week I walked an aspiring chemistry major to our new STEM center so he could meet the director and ask her about classes, resources, and opportunities. He had been on campus for a full year and was not even aware such a hub existed. While such a maneuver may seem intuitive to readers, it was not to me for most of my career. The simple act of physically connecting a student to an environment where they might flourish felt like making a difference.

**Applications to Research**

In one of my early classes in the program, our professor asked us what goals we had for the program. One of my colleagues said that they would prefer to be a better informed consumer of research as a result of this doctoral training. They clarified that they didn’t necessarily want to produce research, but apply it. I found that perspective refreshing. It wasn’t until then that I realized my training at NIU was also one of a more informed interpreter of research.

James Joyce said that his *Ulysses* had so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors occupied for centuries. With his popular novel turning 101 years old this year, Joyce’s prophecy is more accurate than ever. Guided pathways, enigmatic in its own way, has a way of proliferating research projects as well, and that’s a positive development given its prominence in higher education. I would like to imagine that this dissertation raises even more questions for readers, and should I wish to answer them through scholarly publishing, I have acquired the tools and confidence to do so.

**What’s Next?**

A family friend once told me that cynicism is much easier to deploy than sincerity, and worst of all, cynical attitudes quickly grow tiresome. He was responding with tough love to my first published movie review, and it took me years to accept his comments in good faith.
Whatever doubts and criticisms I have of guided pathways, I also recognize its strengths and wish to maximize them in my own workplace. For that reason I want to present my findings to my institution’s Teaching and Learning Center. This is our in-house professional development series that has been expertly curated by a colleague in the English department. Current fall sessions include presentations on first-generation college students, pedagogical lessons from a recent exchange in Finland, and social media as a way to enhance and promote learning. The sessions are always well attended and I believe that my findings will be of relevance to faculty and staff alike.

For three and a half years, this doctoral curriculum and dissertation were all completed during tenure-track full-time employment. There were many nights when I physically could not look at my computer screen after grading all morning, teaching three classes, commuting for two hours, and eating way too many energy-sapping foods in my school cafeteria or local drive-thru. When I look ahead, I am grateful that this program helped teach me to manage my time, say no when it wasn’t easy to do so, live healthier, and get the work done.

**Closing Thoughts**

Maybe what this dissertation did best was enlarge my perspective on the numerous realities of working professionals and grow my capacity for understanding. My personal maxim comes from the novelist Harry Crews: “Doubt makes a man decent.” Indeed, the people I tend to instinctively trust most are those who reveal to me some uncertainty about the world and its bottomless complexity. I brushed up against people in my interviews who shared opinions that irked me, but in my role as a researcher I was not there to counter their claims. I could only hear them out and try to understand their rationale. Thankfully I had been conditioned to do this throughout my curriculum, where I engaged in many spirited discussions with fellow doctoral
students and professors. When I first embarked on this graduate degree, my intention was to serve myself by becoming more versatile in higher education—or in less euphemistic terms, upwardly mobile. I wanted the terminal degree and attendant pay raise. I also wanted to be on a rigorous reading and writing schedule again. Still, after just a couple class sessions in the program, I came to value the immense power of listening to other perspectives. Of course I participated, but I looked forward most to being in a place where I could get out of my own head and into those of others. This cohort model helped me see that doctoral work is about serving a collective, and just maybe contributing something of value to a greater good. While this dissertation is ostensibly about guided pathways, student major choice, and collaboration between faculty and advising, it will always symbolize to me rewards more far-reaching than job mobility or mere personal fulfillment.
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APPENDIX A

IRB EXEMPTION LETTER AND AMENDMENT
Exempt Determination

22-Jun-2022
Bryant Manning (Z1875858)

Counseling, Adult and Higher Education

RE: Protocol # HS22-0464 "How Guided Pathways' Reforms Influence and Support Community College Students' Choice of Major"

Dear Bryant Manning,

Your application for institutional review of research involving human subjects was reviewed by the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety on 22-Jun-2022 and it was determined that it meets the criteria for exemption 2.

Although this research is exempt, you have responsibilities for the ethical conduct of the research and must comply with the following:

Amendments: You are responsible for reporting any amendments or changes to your research protocol that may affect the determination of exemption and/or the specific category. This may result in your research no longer being eligible for the exemption that has been granted.

Record Keeping: You are responsible for maintaining a copy of all research related records in a secure location, in the event future verification is necessary. At a minimum these documents include: the research protocol, all questionnaires, survey instruments, interview questions and/or data collection instruments associated with this research protocol, recruiting or advertising materials, any consent forms or information sheets given to participants, all correspondence to or from the IRB, and any other pertinent documents.

Please include the protocol number (HS22-0464) on any documents or correspondence sent to the IRB about this study.
If you have questions or need additional information, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at 815-753-8588.

Please see the RIPS website for guidance on the impact of COVID-19 on research (including face-to-face data collection) https://www.niu.edu/divresearch/covid/index.shtml
19-Jul-2022
Bryant Manning
Counseling, Adult and Higher Education

RE: Protocol # HS22-0464 "How Guided Pathways' Reforms Influence and Support Community College Students' Choice of Major"

Dear Bryant Manning,

This is to inform you that your request for approval of modifications to the above named project was reviewed on 19-Jul-2022 and it was determined that the modifications you propose do not change the exempt categorization of the project.

Proposed changes:

Adding incentive to study

Although this research is exempt, you have responsibilities for the ethical conduct of the research and must comply with the following:

Amendments: You are responsible for reporting any amendments or changes to your research protocol that may affect the determination of exemption and/or the specific category. This may result in your research no longer being eligible for the exemption that has been granted. Record Keeping: You are responsible for maintaining a copy of all research related records in a secure location, in the event future verification is necessary. At a minimum these documents include: the research protocol, all questionnaires, survey instruments, interview questions and/or data collection instruments associated with this research protocol, recruiting or advertising materials, any consent forms or information sheets given to participants, all correspondence to or from the IRB, and any other pertinent documents.

Please include the protocol number (HS22-0464) on any documents or correspondence sent to the IRB about this study.

If you have questions or need additional information, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at 815-753-8588.
APPENDIX B

DRAFT OF EMAIL FOR PARTICIPANTS
Dear _______________.

My name is Bryant B. Manning, and I am currently a doctoral candidate at Northern Illinois University in the higher education program with an emphasis on administration. My dissertation research focuses on how guided pathways institutions are influencing and supporting students’ choice of major.

The purpose of my study is to explore the perceptions and experiences of community college staff and faculty who may have helped students in this process. In particular, the study will examine how academic affairs and student affairs collaborate in order to better serve students as they formulate a program choice. Because your institution implemented guided pathways reforms in 2016, ____________ College is the setting for this study. For this study, I will meet with faculty and staff (i.e. advisors) who have ideally been with ____________ College for at least five years.

My doctoral institution and ____________ College have given me permission to conduct my study, and you have been identified by the Assistant Vice President of Institutional Effectiveness and Strategic Planning as a relevant participant. I am requesting your assistance in participating in this study.

Most of the data collection process for the study will be through interviews with faculty and staff. Completion of the interview should take about 30-60 minutes. Interviews will be conducted either in person, by phone, or through a videoconference platform. Participation in this study is voluntary and you can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

If you would be willing to participate in this study, please respond to this email identifying your willingness to participate. For more information about this research study, please contact me at z1875858@students.niu.edu or by telephone at (###-###-####). (Text messages or phone calls are welcome.)

For questions about your rights as a subject, contact the Northern Illinois University Research Compliance Coordinator, Patty Wallace, at pwallace@niu.edu or ###-###-####. The IRB Chair is MJ Blaschak and can be reached at mblaschak@niu.edu or ###-###-####.

I sincerely appreciate your time and consideration in participating in this study. Your participation will provide insight into how guided pathways reforms are supporting students in a community college. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Bryant B. Manning
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS
Thank you for meeting with me today. I appreciate your willingness to participate in the study. The purpose of this study is to explore how a guided pathways institution is helping students decide on and support their choice of major at community colleges, namely ______ Community College. In particular, I want to know how guided pathways is influencing your work as a faculty member, and what interdepartmental dialogues are taking place between student affairs and academic affairs personnel. I will also be interviewing other faculty members, along with Career and Transfer (CTC) staff and advisors. Your identity will be protected throughout the process, as I will not use your real names throughout any of my reporting.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

1. What specifically do you teach and how long have you worked for _____ Community College?

2. In your role as a faculty member, what do you feel are your responsibilities with respect to career guidance? Please explain.

3. How familiar are you with your school’s guided pathways reforms?

4. How would you describe the nature of collaboration between faculty and student affairs in assisting students on major choice?
5. Can you briefly describe what assistance you provide to students who are making their initial major decisions?

6. Do any of your pedagogies/assignments focus on students’ majors and career options?

7. Has your work changed as a faculty member since the implementation of guided pathways? If so, how?

8. Can you describe any barriers and challenges between faculty and advisors in terms of communication and collaboration?

9. Do you think with the implementation of guided pathways that faculty are more involved in students’ personal academic and career goals?

10. What improvements from GP do you see as faculty members leveraging to help support student choice of major?

11. Is there anything else that you would like to share on this topic that we haven’t discussed?
Time of meeting:
Date:
Place:

Facilitator: Bryant B. Manning

Participants: Advising Staff (Academic and Career and Transfer Center (CTC))

Thank you all for meeting with me today. I appreciate your willingness to participate in the study. The purpose of this study is to explore how a guided pathways institution is helping students decide on and support their choice of major at community colleges, namely ______ Community College. In particular, I want to know how guided pathways is influencing your work as an academic advisor, and what interdepartmental dialogues are taking place between academic affairs and student affairs personnel. I will also be interviewing faculty. Your identity will be protected throughout the process, as I will not use your real names throughout any of my reporting.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

1. What areas specifically do you advise and how long have you worked for ______ Community College?

2. What are your responsibilities with respect to advising?

3. How long have you been in this role?

4. Can you briefly describe what assistance you provide to students who are making their initial major decisions?

5. When does a major deciding student first interact with their advisor?
6. What percentage of students would you guess are completely undecided versus those who are somewhat sure of their major?
   a. Does your advising approach differ between these two groups, and how?

7. Has your work changed since the implementation of guided pathways? If so, how?

8. How would you describe the nature of collaboration between faculty and student affairs in assisting students on major choice?

9. Can you describe any barriers and challenges between faculty and advisors in terms of communication and collaboration?

10. Do you think the implementation of guided pathways has helped students align their interests and skills with the right major choice? Please explain.

11. What additional resources would help you do your job better?

12. Do you have any relevant documents that might help me with my research?

13. Is there anything else that you would like to share on this topic that we haven’t discussed?
APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM
Study Title: How Guided Pathways Reforms Influence and Support Community College Students’ Choice of Major

Investigators

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Dept</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bryant Manning</td>
<td>Higher Ed (Ed.D Program)</td>
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Key Information

- This is a voluntary research study on how guided pathways institutions help students choose their major.
- This dissertation study involves one 30-60 minute interview per interviewee. Interviews will be given to both faculty and staff.
- The benefits for faculty members will be that they clarify their role as not only educators, but also as participants in a college-wide reform that seeks to better align student skills/passions with major choice. Staff members will be able to reflect on their roles as not only advisors to students, but also as collaborators with academic affairs personnel. It is my hope that all participants will benefit from the knowledge of clarifying what they do and learning what they might do better.
- This study will also benefit the case site, and community colleges more broadly, by helping them understand how they are influencing and supporting students’ choice of major. Ideally, students should not be selecting a major on their own, and guided pathways reforms recommend that schools do more to help students explore and connect to academic and career communities. If guided pathways reforms are to help clarify paths for students, then institutions should know what is working and what needs improved.
- There are no anticipated foreseeable risks with this study.

Description of the Study

The purpose of the study is to understand how guided pathways interventions influence and support students’ choice of major at a community college. In particular, how campuses are engaging the process of developing academic and student affairs collaborations in order to influence student choice of major. Finally, the researcher will seek to find the perceived structural and cultural barriers to collaboration in a guided pathways institution.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: You will participate in one 30-60 minute interview on the campus of _______ Community College. If an on-campus meeting cannot take place, alternative modes of communication will be available such as telephone or videoconference platforms like Zoom or Blackboard Collaborate.
Risks
There are no reasonably foreseeable (or expected) risks. (Benefits listed above under “Key Information”)

Confidentiality [or ANONYMITY]

- This study is confidential. We are collecting information; however, we will mask all identifying factors.
- The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. All recordings and transcripts will be destroyed after three years. Files will be deleted permanently off the password protected laptop. Any notes will be properly shredded and destroyed. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.
- With your permission, your identity will be made known in written materials resulting from the study. However, you will be given the opportunity to review and approve any material that is published about you.

Your Rights

The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right to skip any question or research activity, as well as to withdraw completely from participation at any point during the process.

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered before, during, or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact the researcher, Bryant B. Manning at z1875858@students.niu.edu or by telephone at ###-###-####. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigators or if you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at (815)753-8588.

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.
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<th>Participant’s Signature</th>
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I give my consent to be audio recorded (or video recorded, as appropriate) during the interview.

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