

Collaborating to Break Down Barriers to Student Success

Guided Pathways Reforms at San Jacinto College

By Davis Jenkins and Lauren Pellegrino

SERIES ON CHANGE MANAGEMENT AT AACC PATHWAYS COLLEGES: CASE STUDY 3 OF 5



In fall 2018, CCRC researchers conducted site visits at eight community colleges implementing guided pathways to learn how they are managing the whole-college change process involved. These colleges are among the 30 nationally that were in the first cohort of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Pathways Project, a national demonstration initiative that was launched in late 2015 to show how community colleges could create clearer pathways to program completion, employment, and further education for all students.

Our full report on this study, *Redesigning Your College Through Guided Pathways: Lessons From Community Colleges in the AACC Pathways Project*, synthesizes lessons from all eight colleges we visited and shares new findings on how long it takes to implement guided pathways at scale. Here, we provide a case study of San Jacinto College (San Jac) in Texas. During a two-day site visit to the college, CCRC researchers conducted one-hour interviews with 44 faculty members, administrators, advisors and counselors, and other staff. We also held hour-long focus groups with 24 additional faculty members, advisors and counselors, and students at the college. Based on the data we collected, in this report we describe the organizational change work that has enabled San Jac's exceptional progress in redesigning academic programs, student services, and related support systems using the guided pathways model.

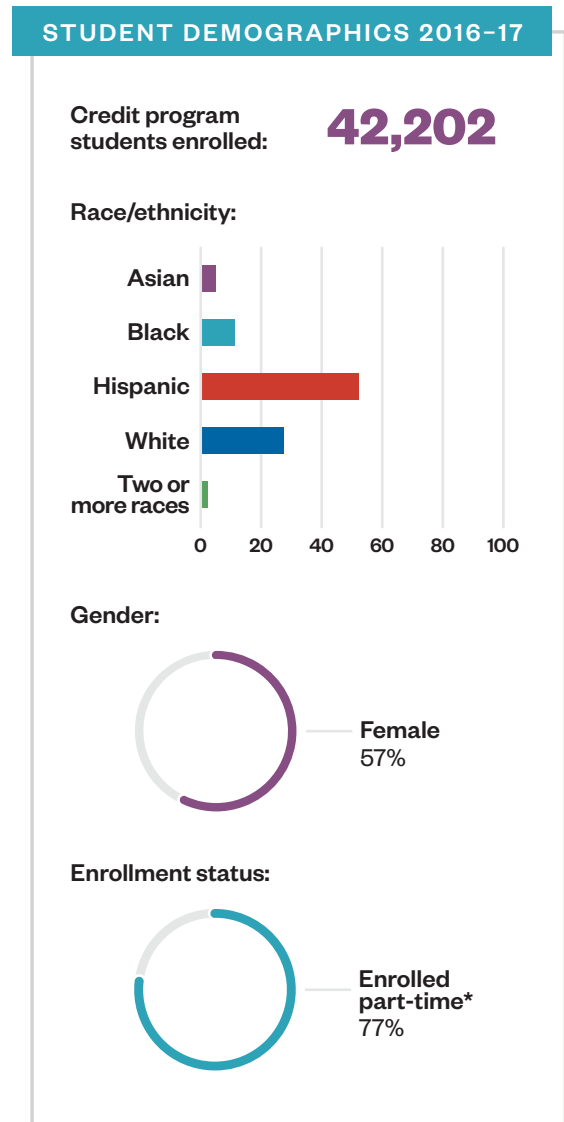
About San Jac

Located in the Houston metropolitan area, San Jac is one of the largest community colleges in Texas, serving over 40,000 students across three main campuses and a maritime training center. San Jac offers 185 degrees and certificates in 46 technical programs, with a number of flexible online and hybrid course options. San Jac has partnerships with hundreds of local companies and articulation agreements with dozens of universities in Texas, including Baylor University, Texas A&M University, the University of Houston, and the University of Texas. In 2017, the college won the “rising star” award from the Aspen Institute, and in 2019, it was a top-10 finalist for the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence.

Overview

San Jac began laying the groundwork to systematically improve student success in 2009, when its leaders made several organizational and staffing changes to support institutional reform work and engage faculty and staff members from across the institution. The college implemented a more centralized leadership structure to facilitate the alignment of policies and practices across campuses. It also redesigned department chair roles to focus on instructional improvement and implemented a performance management system for all employees to align individual roles and efforts with the college’s goals and values. College leaders began to foster a culture of innovation, encouraging faculty and staff to experiment with new approaches to serving students without fear of being penalized for failure. They created time for broad engagement in innovation by instituting “Framework Fridays”—weekly forums for faculty, staff, and administrators to plan reforms and participate in professional development focused on student success.

A guiding vision for San Jac’s guided pathways work emerged from initial college-wide meetings and deliberations with other college leaders at the AACCC Pathways Institutes, which the college’s deputy chancellor and president articulated as follows: “A student should never fail because of a barrier we overlooked or unintentionally created.” To this end, faculty, staff, and administrators from across the college mapped San Jac’s academic programs and process-mapped the entire student experience to identify barriers to student success. They then remapped programs and redesigned student support services to eliminate those barriers. Using this collaborative, creative approach to improvement, San Jac has now implemented several essential guided pathways practices at scale, as described below.



*Fall 2017 only

Guided Pathways Practices San Jac Has Implemented at Scale

Meta-majors

San Jac organized its programs into eight meta-majors, which it refers to as “areas of study.” The college worked closely with local school districts to align its meta-majors with the Texas high school “endorsements”—career fields that students select in eighth grade and that carry over into high school—so that high school students and counselors can see the connection between the endorsements and San Jac’s program offerings.

Program Maps

Faculty and advisors mapped pathways through all programs to ensure that each clearly leads to transfer with junior standing or employment in an in-demand job in the college’s service region south of Houston. Courses whose credits would not transfer were not included on program maps. Career-technical departments were required to demonstrate that all of their programs meet regional employment demands. Nursing and allied health faculty collaborated to create a common first-term curriculum to enable students to explore both nursing and other health care pathways.

Career and Academic Exploration for All New Students

All incoming students are required to take a career readiness assessment gauging how certain they are about their meta-major or major before they meet with an admissions advisor and register for classes. The college has had all of its advising staff trained as NACADA-certified career counselors.

Personalized Educational Plans

The college’s information technology (IT) department worked to configure the college’s DegreeWorks academic planning software so that every student, with an advisor’s help, can create an individualized educational plan based on the program maps created by faculty and advisors. Students and advisors can track students’ progress and use a “what-if” feature to explore alternative program paths.

Program-Relevant Math Pathways With Corequisite Support

San Jac’s math department sent a survey to all department chairs asking what math competencies students need to succeed in their programs. Math faculty also looked at the bachelor’s degree math requirements for different majors at common transfer destinations. Based on their findings, they created four math pathways aligned with students’ meta-majors: algebra/calculus, statistics, contemporary math, and finite math. They also developed corequisite courses, jointly taught by college-level and developmental math instructors, for the first college-level course in each pathway. This approach to developmental support has been effective at improving math

progression at San Jac, although it is costly because classes are taught by two teachers. For this reason, San Jac is continuing to redesign its developmental supports for students in gateway math and English courses. The college recently began offering math and English courses that are three credit hours but involve four contact hours; the fourth contact hour focuses on student success skills.

Support for Near-Completers

The college requires students to visit an educational planner (academic advisor) when they accumulate 45–50 credit hours. This meeting provides students with additional support as they select their final courses for their programs of study, as well as timely guidance on upcoming transfer or workforce transitions.

Laying the Groundwork for Whole-College Redesign

San Jac’s path toward implementing guided pathways began with its efforts to build a collective understanding that college-wide reforms were needed to increase student success—and that everyone at San Jac would need to participate in these reforms for the college to achieve its goals. To realize this “one college” vision, college leaders redefined campus leadership and department chair roles, provided support for faculty and staff members’ engagement in data-informed innovation, and dedicated time for collaborative planning and professional development. These changes had a profound impact on the collective mindset of the institution. According to San Jac’s chancellor, Dr. Brenda Hellyer, “We have 1,300 employees. In the past, we had 1,300 agendas; now we have one.”

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A Wake-Up Call to Improve Student Outcomes

Shortly before Dr. Hellyer became chancellor in 2009, the college’s board of trustees reviewed data on the poor success rates of its students in gateway English and math courses and in completing credentials during a retreat run by Dr. Byron McClenney of the University of Texas at Austin in conjunction with Achieving the Dream. In early 2010, Dr. Hellyer and other college leaders presented similar data to faculty and staff. Shocked by the unsatisfactory student success rates, the board set goals for improving student outcomes, and faculty and staff formed intercampus planning groups to devise strategies for achieving those goals. The strategies formulated by the planning groups became the basis for a three-year strategic plan.

“One College” Focused on Student Success

In the past, San Jac’s three main campuses operated in relative isolation from—and sometimes in competition with—one another. This dynamic presented challenges for students, as inconsistencies in policy and practice proved frustrating for those who attended multiple campuses. Dr. Hellyer concluded that the college could not improve

students' experiences and outcomes unless all three campuses—and indeed, all parts of the college—worked together.

To facilitate alignment across campuses and become “one college,” Dr. Hellyer restructured San Jac’s campus leadership roles during the 2012–13 academic year. Campus president positions were changed to provost positions, with provosts reporting to Dr. Laurel Williamson, the deputy chancellor and college president, who in turn reports to Dr. Hellyer. By restructuring its leadership roles in this way, San Jac’s leadership team could more effectively implement institution-wide reforms and work together to achieve the college’s strategic priorities.

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Historically, academic affairs and student services also operated independently from each other, often to the detriment of students. To foster better collaboration between these divisions, Dr. Hellyer brought both under the direction of Dr. Williamson. Representatives from student services at each campus became part of their provost’s communication council, which meets once a month with staff from all departments. Each campus holds its own meeting, but provosts coordinate their agendas. By facilitating coordinated, ongoing, and cross-disciplinary meetings at each campus, provosts foster collaboration among diverse stakeholders while providing consistent messaging across the college.

Faculty Department Chairs as Instructional Leaders

In 2013, San Jac revised the role of department chairs to focus on instructional and program improvement. Previously, department chairs were faculty members appointed for a short time while maintaining a full teaching load. Under the new model, department chairs are competitively hired as full-time, permanent faculty. They teach only one course a year (in the summer) and devote the bulk of their time to instructional improvement, observing classes, coaching faculty, overseeing program reviews, and organizing professional development for full- and part-time faculty. The department chairs later proved instrumental in engaging faculty in program mapping as part of the college’s guided pathways reforms.

After establishing department chairs as instructional leaders, the college’s leadership team wanted to facilitate opportunities for collaboration between the chairs and other college leaders. To do this, they expanded the annual meeting of department chairs to include deans and members of the executive administration, with the idea that leaders at all levels of the organization should work together to identify issues with instruction or programs more broadly and propose solutions. At first presentation-centric, the event transformed into a dynamic workshop in which leaders review data on program effectiveness, set operational goals, and outline plans to achieve those goals.

Individual Accountability for Achieving Collective Goals

Every year all employees, including faculty, set personal key performance indicators (KPIs) directly related to the college’s values and its goals for student progress and success. Employees meet twice a year with their supervisors to assess their performance against their KPIs. Interviewees noted that having KPIs helps employees focus their

work on the college's most important goals. As one college leader stated, "In this system, it is very transparent ... how goals are set from the board on down. [Employees] see how the overriding goals are connected throughout the institution." Pay increases and recognition are tied to KPIs, although the system is designed to be formative and developmental, not punitive. The college has invested heavily in training and professional development to ensure that employees have the support they need to reach their goals and grow professionally and personally. Together with the "one college" leadership structure described above, this performance management system laid an important foundation for guided pathways because it ensured that college stakeholders were focused on similar goals, understood the accountability structure, and were speaking the same language about student success.

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Strong Institutional Research Capacity

Historically, San Jac struggled to identify the causes of poor student outcomes because it lacked strong institutional research (IR) capacity. In 2008, the college appointed a new director of institutional research and effectiveness who worked closely with Dr. Williamson to write new job descriptions that reflect the skills and tasks associated with robust data management and analysis and to establish protocols for using data across the institution to facilitate continuous improvement. Since then, the college has hired other IR staff whose skills align with these descriptions. The IR office has taken many steps to increase access to information on student outcomes among those who work directly with students, such as creating a dashboard for all faculty and staff displaying student outcomes by program (not just for the college as a whole).

Support for Creative Thinking and Experimentation

Again and again, campus representatives we interviewed stated that they felt supported by college leaders to try new ideas, even if they did not work out. A member of the registrar's office said:

When somebody comes to you and says, "Everything is on the table; there are no barriers to anything," at first it's very uncomfortable. After a while, you begin to have ideas that [are] ... I don't want to say "outside of the box" because that's used so frequently, but you do begin to think about things in a different way when you are not inhibited.

Another staff member said:

The college's leaders don't start with a mandate. They start with a team of people who have open minds and are enthusiastic about student success and say, "Think outside the box. Don't worry about cost. I want your best idea of what will work. We'll get you what you need to make it happen."

A student services dean expressed a similar sentiment:

We have a sense from our administration that they trust us to figure out how to do what we need to do to help students. ... We also are given the message that not every idea will pan out, so we're not afraid to fail.

Having a climate where stakeholders feel safe to examine disappointing data on student outcomes, experiment with new approaches, and change course if the initial efforts are not working has been crucial as the college has implemented guided pathways.

Time and Support for Collaborative Innovation and Professional Development

Dr. Hellyer recognized that although organizational restructurings improved communication across the college, cross-functional stakeholders needed to meet regularly face-to-face to ensure they were on the same page. In 2015, San Jac thus implemented a Monday through Thursday class schedule so that faculty and staff—including frontline student services staff—could participate in required “Framework Friday” meetings and collaborate on planning, evaluation, and professional development related to the college’s ongoing student success efforts.

This structure paid off greatly for San Jac when the college later adopted guided pathways. Nearly all of our interviewees stated that Framework Friday meetings, which rotate between the campuses, were among the most powerful means of promoting ongoing communication, learning, and planning about guided pathways. They fostered discussion of the book *Redesigning America’s Community Colleges* (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015), resulted in forums for program mapping, and catalyzed “mini-conferences” where attendees broke into groups to brainstorm ideas. Faculty and advisors have been able to form closer working relationships through Framework Fridays because they now have the time and space to collaborate across roles. Results from student focus groups conducted after Framework Fridays were implemented indicated that advisors and faculty seemed to know one another and were better aligned in their support and advice than before.

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Introducing Guided Pathways to the College Community

San Jac launched its guided pathways reforms with a full-day meeting in spring 2016, during which faculty who had recently attended the first AACC Pathways Institute spoke to stakeholders from across the college. Attendees were put into groups and shown data on student outcomes that had prompted San Jac to join the AACC Pathways Project, which helped to crystallize their understanding of how guided pathways could benefit the college and its students.

Data Highlighting the Need for Guided Pathways

One of the key pieces of data presented at the guided pathways kickoff meeting was the average number of credit hours taken by associate degree graduates. Faculty learned that students often completed 90 credit hours before they transferred because they took courses that did not count toward their degree or end goals. College leaders stressed that taking excess credits can be particularly harmful for students from low-income families

because it increases time to completion and therefore increases costs. College leaders presented guided pathways as a strategy for streamlining programs so that students could finish them more efficiently.

Presenters also shared data from the college's IR department showing the demographics of students enrolling in particular programs. These data demonstrated that Black and Hispanic students were more likely to enroll in technical programs, whereas White and Asian students tended to enroll in transfer-oriented programs. College personnel were challenged to ask themselves whether the institution contributes to racial/ethnic minority students being tracked into programs with lower returns.

A Guiding Vision for Student Success

After the kickoff meeting, college leaders formed a pathways steering group with two staff coordinators. Several people we interviewed reported that breaking down barriers to success—an idea that emerged from this group's early meetings—became a touchstone for all pathways work at the college. A page on San Jac's website describing the guided pathways initiative (<https://www.sanjac.edu/pathways>) puts this commitment front and center:

- *Every part of the College will be engaged in analyzing and redesigning more efficient and effective pathways for students.*
- *All areas of the College will remove student barriers in and out of the classroom!*
 - *Includes instructional delivery, curriculum, general education within programs, website, advising, business office, financial aid, facilities, marketing, professional development, human resources, IT, budgets, operational systems and processes.*

Supporting Collaborative Planning and Implementation

Although college leaders articulated a clear vision for guided pathways through well-orchestrated rollout and communications plans, they carefully avoided suggesting that improvement strategies were somehow predetermined. In fact, according to an administrator, the message from the leadership team to faculty and staff was: “Here’s what we need to get to; you need to figure out how to get there.”

The college structured its initial guided pathways planning work to broadly engage faculty, staff, and administrators in developing improvement strategies. San Jac's leaders sought to have employees from all parts of the college contribute ideas for removing college-created barriers to student success. Leaders used two related activities to engage members of the college in this work: mapping programs and process-mapping the entire student experience. The results of these activities guided the redesign of existing programs and practices and the creation of new ones—all with the aim of removing barriers for students and facilitating their program completion.

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Program Mapping

In spring and summer 2016, a committee convened by the pathways steering group worked to organize the college's 144 programs into meta-majors in order to make it easier for students to understand and explore program options. The committee devised eight meta-majors:

- arts, humanities, communications, and design;
- business;
- construction, industry, manufacturing, and transport;
- education;
- health sciences;
- public safety and human/consumer services;
- science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; and
- social and behavioral science.

These meta-majors are aligned with Texas's high school endorsements, which are career fields that students select in eighth grade that carry over into high school.

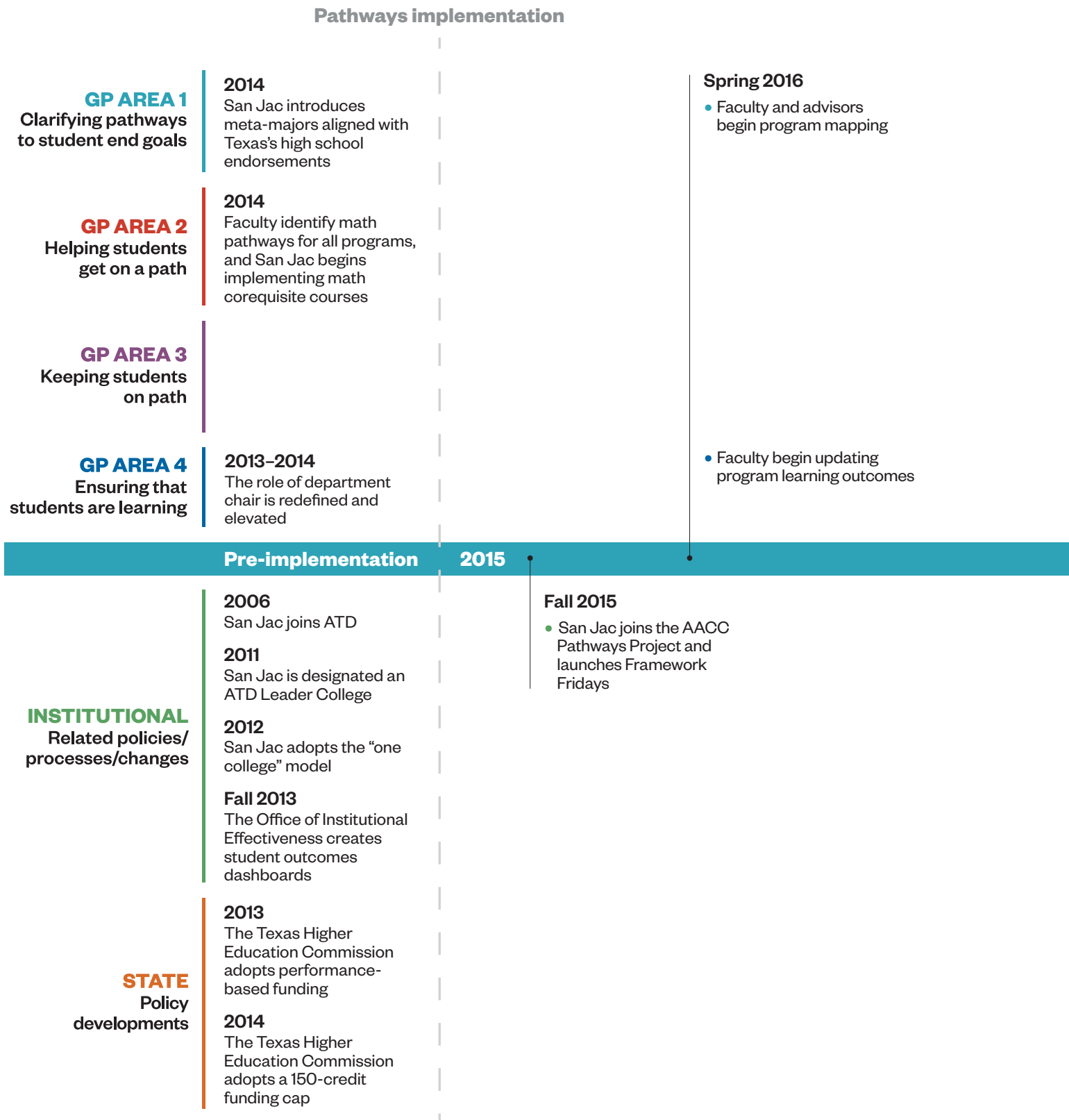
After the committee defined the college's meta-majors, curriculum experts mapped the programs within each meta-major. The teams of faculty and advisors tasked with mapping programs were asked to do so in a way that reduced students' accrual of excess credits and dropout rates. Participants started with an exercise in which they were asked to put themselves in students' shoes and attempt to develop educational plans for particular programs by navigating the course catalog and website. Faculty in particular reported that this exercise was eye-opening, as much of their day-to-day work is focused on individual courses. In this instance, they more directly experienced the same barriers their students face, including confusing prerequisite requirements and uncertainties about whether credits from particular courses would count toward majors at common transfer destinations. The initial drafts of program maps they created after this experience began to clarify students' course choices. Department chairs then helped the teams revise the maps to take other factors, including transfer articulation, into greater account.

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The program mapping process was a learning opportunity for faculty and staff about how to best integrate students into their program area and provide them with viable alternatives within those programs as needed. Program mapping teams were asked to keep the curricula for the first few terms of their programs general and inclusive, so students had the chance to explore career and academic pathways within broad fields without foreclosing their options. For example, the first-term curriculum for nursing was designed to include courses that apply to both nursing (a more selective program) and medical assisting (a relevant and valuable alternative).

San Jac's program maps have been improved on an ongoing basis since these initial efforts. On the college's website, students can now see careers connected with particular programs and related salary data. Program maps are also aligned with the top five transfer destinations for San Jac students.

Timeline of Guided Pathways Implementation



Spring 2017

- Program mapping to major transfer destinations is completed

Fall 2017

- Smart Start, an orientation program, is piloted
- San Jac's advising structures are redesigned
- San Jac modifies its DegreeWorks configuration to facilitate educational planning and implements a 45-credit advising hold

Fall 2018

- Smart Start is implemented at scale as a full-semester course
- San Jac hires six educational planners, bringing its full-time advisor total to 20

Spring 2019

- Faculty and advisors continue to refine program maps

- Faculty continue to refine program learning outcomes

Fall 2019

- Reading and writing corequisite courses are scaled (*math corequisite courses will be scaled in fall 2020*)

2020

- The Texas legislature passes HB 2223, requiring that colleges offer corequisite courses

Process-Mapping the Student Experience

Mapping programs illuminated unnecessary prerequisites, nontransferable courses, and other curricular barriers to student success. To expose noncurricular barriers to success, the college's human resources department led efforts to process-map the entire student experience with a team of nearly 40 individuals. Team members included faculty, department chairs, and deans, as well as staff from admissions, financial aid, orientation, counseling, the registrar's office, and the library.

The team used flowcharts to map students' path through the institution from the first point of contact to graduation. In doing so, they uncovered previously unrecognized barriers to student success. For example, team members learned that some students who applied to the college could not afford the \$100 meningitis vaccine required by the state for college registration. They also discovered an easy solution: applying financial aid to pay for the vaccine.

In another instance, the team learned that advisors had to complete large amounts of paperwork during students' initial advising sessions, giving them little time to discuss students' needs and plans. The team found that much of this paperwork could be completed by the registrar's office, freeing advisors to have deeper conversations with students about their goals and how to reach them. One staff member remarked that although the college markets itself as offering a high-quality education at an affordable cost, process-mapping the student experience revealed that too many students are meandering, spending money and earning credits on general education courses but not graduating. Enabling advisors to spend more time talking to students about their goals and plans would help students complete programs and transfer more efficiently.

Members of the process-mapping team indicated that their findings highlighted the ripple effects of poorly designed or inconsistently applied policies, processes, and systems. The three campuses often approached the same functions differently, so when students moved from one campus to another, they were often confused and frustrated by inconsistent practices. The director of institutional research and effectiveness said, "When we took a more collaborative, holistic perspective on student success, we recognized that we create barriers because we work in silos."

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Career Exploration and Educational Planning for New Students

In addition to process-mapping the student experience and San Jac's existing processes for serving students, the same team laid out how college services should ideally be designed to enhance students' connection with their programs and the college. Their proposed plans became the blueprints for San Jac's efforts to redesign policies, practices, and systems at each stage of the student experience to better support students' progress toward program completion, employment, and transfer.

The college had redesigned its advising services the year before it joined the AACC Pathways Project, creating a one-stop center that allowed students to go

through admissions, financial aid, and advising in the same building. Advising was restructured with three different types of support:

1. admissions advisors, who work with students right when they start on campus;
2. educational planners (academic advisors), who work with students after they meet with admissions advisors; and
3. counselors, who work with students who are high-risk either academically or nonacademically.

After faculty and staff process-mapped the student experience, though, it became clear that the college needed to strengthen its approach to career exploration and counseling for new students.

The intake system was redesigned so that students take a career assessment before they meet with an admissions advisor to register for classes. Students bring the results of the assessment to their initial meeting with an admissions advisor. Educational planners provide extra support for students who are at risk academically or very unsure about their major. After the first AACCC Pathways Institute in 2016, the college had all of its advising staff trained as NACADA-certified career advisors so that they would be equipped to help students with career exploration and planning.

The college also redesigned its new student orientation programming to emphasize career and college exploration and planning rather than focusing exclusively on campus resources. In spring 2017, San Jac launched a mandatory, two-week program called Smart Start, which focused heavily on helping new students explore career and college options and interests; after the two weeks, students transitioned into a 14-week term. Some students liked the intensive focus on careers, but others found it overwhelming, and advisors found that many students had forgotten about their Smart Start experience when it came time to plan their second semester. Because of this feedback, and in line with the college's emphasis on innovating without fear of failure, San Jac has revised the program and implemented Smart Start 2.0 and 2.5. The more recent iterations of the program integrate career exploration and educational planning into the regular 16-week first semester or through two eight-week terms that infuse student success skills into gateway courses.

To sustain support for students' academic and career planning beyond the first semester, San Jac reconfigured DegreeWorks to support the creation of individualized educational plans. Recently, the college added the functionality to enable administrators to load program map templates into the system, making the process of creating individualized plans quicker and easier. Students we interviewed indicated that they frequently use their educational plans to make sure they are on track and conduct "what-if" simulations to examine the implications of changing their majors. Advisors indicated that having students' plans readily available in DegreeWorks has helped them communicate with students about their progress and with faculty on how to improve program paths.

Sustaining and Institutionalizing Student Success Reforms

A College Culture Centered on Student Success

It was clear from our interviews that breaking down silos and collaborating across the college to identify and address barriers to student success was an empowering experience for many faculty and staff and fundamentally changed their understanding of how to help students reach their goals. A dean noted that in the past, faculty were focused on their courses, but now they have a greater awareness of what it takes for students to enter and navigate programs. According to a senior leader for student success, “We have become much more intentional and directive. . . . We have stopped letting students take a smorgasbord of courses and wander.” A liberal arts dean said that conversations with university partners about major requirements have become more frequent and have had a big impact on the courses liberal arts departments offer and how they are taught. The IR director said that though the college had been engaged in efforts to improve student outcomes for some years, citing its involvement with Achieving the Dream, reform efforts prior to guided pathways were generally course- and service-level interventions. Adopting guided pathways, he said, substantially shifted the college’s approach to reform:

Guided pathways demonstrates that . . . to move the needle [on student success], it isn’t sufficient to improve course performance. . . . The college has had a lot of experience with isolated interventions, but they did not produce the results we were expecting. . . . When you look at [student success] holistically, what matters are the pipeline metrics.

In the past, faculty were focused on their courses, but now they have a greater awareness of what it takes for students to enter and navigate programs.

Thinking Differently, Behaving Differently

Changes in faculty and advisors’ understanding of student success have led to changes in their attitudes and how they approach their roles. An honors program faculty member affirmed that participating in program mapping and the associated training helped her “see the big picture” and become a much better advisor to her students. A chemistry faculty member said that he has become more aware of how students are supposed to progress through their programs. A career-technical education instructor said that she had been at the college for nine years but did not know how to advise her students until recently; being able to access students’ personalized educational plans through DegreeWorks has helped her better support them. She told us, “Now that I can ‘GPS’ my students, I can much better advise students.” This instructor also indicated that the career-centric nature of San Jac’s guided pathways efforts has changed her work habits. She and her colleagues now conduct mock interviews with students and otherwise integrate soft skills into their classes because employers consulted in the program mapping process emphasized their importance.

Advisors explained that they spend a lot more time now helping students think about their goals. One advisor told us:

Students come in and say, “I just want to take my basics.” But we say, “That’s okay, but the reason I’m asking these questions is that what you want to do in the long run dictates what math and other general courses you should take.”

Another advisor said that under guided pathways everyone at the college, including disciplinary faculty, acts as career advisors.

Faculty and advisors said their involvement in cross-college working groups and regular meetings at different campuses have increased partnership, trust, and understanding across San Jac’s campuses. One faculty member said that the college has begun to involve students in improving practice because the program mapping, process-mapping, and other working groups included students. She wondered, “Why haven’t we been doing this all along?” Another staff member said, “Pathways has helped us see how interconnected we are.” For example, the financial aid office convinced faculty of the need to take attendance to keep better track of students who have taken out loans and identify those who may be at risk for default. This newly shared understanding has enabled the college to lower student default rates.

Attitudinal and behavioral changes among faculty and staff seem to have affected students, too. Advisors noted that students have become more aware of the importance of planning, are putting more thought into choosing programs and courses, and are beginning to take more initiative and personal responsibility. One advisor said:

After pathways, they come to me and ask, “Will this class transfer for my degree?”... They have become more aware of the implications for money and time of choosing the right courses.... Slowly but surely, some of them are realizing that “I can’t be here for four-and-a-half years [before earning an associate degree].”

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A faculty member confirmed, “Students now see that there is a reason for taking my class: ‘I need this class to move through my pathway.’”

Strategies to Maintain the Momentum for Improvement

San Jac has seen a substantial increase in degree completions even as new student enrollment has declined. Retention and completion rates have also increased steadily. Those we interviewed expressed a strong sense that these improvements are the result of reforms the college has implemented in recent years, although college leaders and IR staff acknowledge that the full effects of pathways reforms may not be clear for a couple of years. College leaders highlighted several strategies they are using to maintain the college’s focus on student success and momentum for reform.

Distributing Leadership for Student Success

The pathways steering group has evolved into the student pathways success council, and college leaders have invited more midlevel administrators to participate in the group along with faculty and staff. The council includes significant student representation from each campus, formalizing the importance of the student voice.

Students are asked to review and provide input regarding proposed changes before they are implemented. The college continues to invest heavily in professional development and in 2018 launched major initiatives to prepare high-potential employees for leadership roles and to establish plans for leadership succession.

Maintaining Structures and Supports for Student Success Efforts

College leaders are acutely aware that with all the changes at the college, along with inevitable state and federal policy changes, communication and engagement will remain high priorities. San Jac continues to hold Framework Fridays for planning and professional development, offering structure and support for faculty and staff members' ongoing engagement in student success work. Because programs and transfer requirements change regularly, department chairs and others within meta-majors are responsible for keeping program maps up-to-date, and process-mapping is always part of any effort to improve existing processes and systems or implement new ones. College leaders also pointed out that the college's performance management system has helped employees focus on ensuring that their efforts improve the student experience.

With all the changes at the college, along with inevitable state and federal policy changes, communication and engagement will remain high priorities.

Emphasizing the Importance of Student Success in Hiring and Onboarding

The college has revamped its hiring process to make commitment to supporting students' program completion and success a key criterion. New faculty now go through a weeklong orientation and then meet once a week for a year, with student success the primary focus of all new faculty professional development.

Monitoring the College's Progress in Improving Student Outcomes

San Jac's IR department maintains a dashboard with information on the college's overall performance as well as trends over time on metrics including enrollment, retention, persistence, graduation, and transfer. IR staff also generate targeted reports at the program and career pathway levels.

Prioritizing Investments in Student Success

The reforms San Jac has made under guided pathways have required substantial investments in hiring new educational planners, upgrading the college's DegreeWorks educational planning software, training faculty and instructors as part of Framework Fridays, and paying part-time instructors to participate in professional development activities. To cover these expenses, college leaders have reallocated funds from activities determined to be less critical to student success. Two years ago, for example, the college's board disbanded four of its six sports teams, resulting in substantial savings that were reallocated to better support the entire student population.

Plans for Building on Improvements to Date

San Jac plans to build on the infrastructure for improving student success it has created through its guided pathways reforms. Planned next steps include the following.

Using Data Analytics to Identify Critical Courses

San Jac intends to use data analytics to identify courses that are critical to students' success in each program of study, as well as those that are most challenging for students overall. Program maps and students' individualized educational plans will then highlight these courses. The IR department will work with program chairs and faculty to identify instructors who have exceptionally strong outcomes in these courses and help them identify and share their effective practices.

Clarifying Transfer Pathways

To address the complexities of transfer coordination, San Jac's IR team is developing a database of transfer requirements by major for the college's main transfer destinations. This database, which will reflect degree requirements set by the state, will be linked to the college's educational planning and degree-audit systems so that students and advisors can quickly assess courses' applicability to particular majors at a given university or university campus. When faculty and advisors update program maps or create new ones, they will be able to use the database to verify that students will be able to apply the credits they earn in courses on the map to related majors at common transfer destinations. To facilitate that process, San Jac implemented a new catalog and curriculum system that will provide integration so that updates automatically occur in all places where the information exists. The college also has a task force that is considering ways to revise San Jac's associate degree requirements so that students who complete an associate degree before transferring do not earn many credits that do not apply toward their intended major at the four-year institution.

Strengthening Pathways to Employment

San Jac's leaders plan to intensify connections with employers to ensure that programs prepare students for career-path jobs. In recent years, the college has worked closely with partners in the petrochemical industry, asking employers to dissect their programs and suggest improvements. Faculty have also worked with industry experts to create chemistry and other science courses tailored to the petrochemical industry. San Jac will continue to partner in this way with petrochemical employers and develop similar partnerships with employers in healthcare and other industries.

Leveraging Pathways to Improve Equity

The college is beginning to move equity issues from the background to the forefront of its guided pathways reforms by analyzing and presenting for widespread discussion disaggregated data on access and success of different student groups. College leaders acknowledge San Jac did not previously do as much as it might have to guide underrepresented students, but improving equity in college access and success is now becoming a major focus.

Improving equity in college access and success is now becoming a major focus.

San Jac is trying to better integrate, coordinate, and align equity efforts throughout the college. In the process, it is forming working groups to address several equity-centric questions: How can the college offer higher remuneration programs such as nursing on the North campus, where its poorest students are? How can San Jac increase dual enrollment opportunities for students in high schools with low participation rates? And how can the college encourage more students from communities devastated by Hurricane Harvey to enroll (or reenroll) in college?

References

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