

Guided Pathways to Student Success

Perspectives from Indiana College Students & Advisors

Executive Summary

Indiana's higher education attainment rate lags behind the national average at a time when postsecondary credentials are nothing short of necessary for success in our 21st-century economy. To support the Indiana Commission for Higher Education's (ICHE) efforts to address this problem, Public Agenda held 11 focus groups with current students, non-completing students, professional advisors and faculty advisors and also reviewed literature on pathways.

The study had three goals: (1) understand perceptions of the obstacles to smooth degree pathways and timely college completion; (2) probe responses to a set of policy proposals being explored by ICHE; and, (3) review promising practices based on national literature.

Obstacles to smooth pathways and timely completion

Poor initial selection of degree programs	Many students initially select programs for which they are not suited. As a result, they frequently take courses that will not count towards their eventual degree, fail or drop courses they do take, and sometimes stop-out of education altogether. Advisors complain that their caseloads are too large to be able to help students make better initial program choices.
Poor student selection of courses once in a degree program	Once they are in their programs, students often select courses that will not count toward completion, or fail to select courses that must be taken as prerequisites, further slowing their progress. Sometimes students are unable to take the courses they need because of conflicts with the demands of work and family; often they make poor selections because they self-advise, based on inadequate information.
Advisors who lack adequate information	Advisors report that they lack adequate information, citing frequent and rapid curriculum changes (which are often not communicated in a timely fashion) and poor communication between professional advisors and academic departments.
Problems with transfer courses	Transfer students have particularly daunting challenges. Communication between two and four year institutions is fragmented. Students (and advisors) complain that it is difficult to determine which courses will successfully transfer. Courses that do transfer are often counted only as electives, further slowing progress.

Executive Summary *(continued)*

Summary of Promising Practices for Guided Pathways

State- and institution-level practices for guided pathways fall into two broad categories:

1) strategies for accelerating completion and 2) strategies for preventing wasted credits.

Strategies for accelerating completion

- Encourage students to take more credits, especially in their first year of college.
- Make the long-term consequences of course withdrawal apparent to students and alert them to courses that are high risk for failure or withdrawal.
- Alert students to relevant transfer and articulation information.

Strategies for preventing wasted credits

- Supplement advising capacity with structured degree maps.
- Use degree milestone systems to ensure completion of courses that all students must take to progress in a major or program of study.
- Build the infrastructure for students to change course without having to backtrack or get off track entirely.

Summary of Reactions from Indiana Students & Advisors

Proactive Advising and Informed Choice

Shows promise if the technology is carefully implemented. Advising resources should supplement rather than replace in-person advising and ideally should also provide information about transfer articulation.

Degree Maps and Guaranteed Courses

Draws support from those who recognize the need for students to complete degrees efficiently and cost-effectively but met with hesitation by those who prioritize open exploration through the college experience. Guaranteeing courses may be a challenge for smaller programs. Two-year programs may not be long enough to permit a process of exploration.

Block Schedules and Structured Cohorts

Controversial. While advisors express concerns that students with complex lives need more flexibility, students and non-completers express enthusiastic support because predictability of schedules are viewed as helpful to managing complex life obligations. Implementation concerns center around the feasibility of offering required courses for multiple cohorts.

The Importance of Authentic Stakeholder Engagement

Successfully implementing guided pathways requires engaging Indiana colleges as true partners:

- Communicate consistently and clearly about the goals and the relationship between structured pathways efforts and other initiatives or state priorities.
- Create meaningful opportunities for institutional stakeholders to discuss concerns about policy proposals and implementation obstacles, and respond to those deliberations.
- Treat institutional stakeholders as vital partners in the work by including them early, often and authentically in the planning, design and implementation process.