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Students' Major Pathway Selection Process from the

California Community College Counselor Perspective

in Light of the Guided Pathways Movement

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Kassidy Laine Camilleri

2023

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Students' Major Pathway Selection Process from the California Community College

Counselor Perspective in Light of the Guided Pathways Movement

by

Kassidy Camilleri

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2023

Professor Kevin Eagan, Co-Chair

Professor Mark Hansen, Co-Chair

This dissertation investigates the major pathway selection process of students at a California community college from the perspective of counselors in light of the Guided Pathways movement. This study seeks to understand counselors' perspectives on how Guided Pathways shapes students' choices in selecting their majors. A qualitative research approach was employed, utilizing semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interviews with 11 community college counselors. Counselors emphasized the importance of career-specific information, real-world exposure, early interventions, and the need for an undecided option. Successes identified include Career and Academic Pathways (CAPs) and Program Maps, although improvements were suggested for accommodating part-time students. Shortcomings of the implementation included the slow implementation of Guided

Pathways and the necessity for enhanced personalized advising, especially for first-generation students. This study emphasizes the importance of tailored counseling to optimize academic and career decision-making within the Guided Pathways framework.

The dissertation of Kassidy Laine Camilleri is approved.

Inmaculada García Sánchez

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2023

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VITA

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The California Community College (CCC) system is the largest higher education system in the United States, with more than 2.1 million students on 116 campuses (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2022). The CCC's primary mission is to offer academic and vocational instruction at the lower division level for both younger and older students, including those persons returning to school. An additional focus of the CCC system is to advance California's economic growth and global competitiveness through education, training, and services that contribute to continuous workforce improvement (California Education Code Section 66010.4 (a), 1999). The CCC has been largely successful in providing access to students; however, completion has been a different story.

Despite the democratization of higher education community colleges provide, many students who enroll in community colleges do not complete a certificate or degree. In fact, less than 40 percent of community college students earn a certificate or degree within six years (Bailey et al., 2015). Those who do not complete a certificate or degree after high school face dramatically reduced earnings (Belfield & Bailey, 2017). Research also finds that community college students who do not declare a major within the first year are less likely to earn any credentials (Jenkins & Cho, 2012). Therefore, low completion rates are a serious issue for those looking for a path into the middle class and for employers seeking a skilled and educated workforce. This low college completion (Educational Advisory Board, 2012) affects the employment rate, the economy, and ultimately, the infrastructure of the United States.

One factor that may contribute to this completion problem is poor alignment between students' personalities, skills, and major selection. Multiple studies have employed Holland's (1997) theory of person-environment fit and found that higher interest in a major or better major-fit increases motivation and self-efficacy, thereby leading to higher major persistence and overall academic achievement (Porter & Umbach, 2006; Wiswall & Zafar, 2015). The literature on major selection is predominantly based on four-year institutions, and unlike many four-year colleges, there is no uniform expectation in the timing of declaring a major at community colleges (Liu et al., 2021). Often, community college students are not taking the courses they need, do not understand their goal requirements, or do not have an idea of what they would like to do with their degree (Bailey et al., 2015).

As a means to address students' confusion and the complicated process of reaching educational goals, Guided Pathways, a reform approach to redesigning community colleges, was introduced in 2017 by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office and is currently being rolled out among California Community Colleges. College Futures Foundation partnered with the National Center for Inquiry & Improvement (NCII) to select 20 colleges for California Guided Pathways 1.0 (NCII, n.d.). Additional support for cohort 1.0 came from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Teagle Foundation, and James Irvine Foundation (NCII, n.d.). In 2020, College Futures and NCII launched California Guided Pathways 2.0 with 37 colleges, including 19 from the initial group and 19 new colleges (NCII, n.d.).

The Guided Pathways approach to redesign starts with students' end goals in mind and then rethinks and redesigns programs and support services to enable students to

achieve their goals of completing their credentials, furthering their education, and advancing in the labor market (Bailey et al., 2015). In Guided Pathways, colleges' intake processes are supposed to focus on helping students develop and clarify their goals for college and their careers, integrate advising supports, and provide explicit career counseling to help students explore their options and choose a college-level program of study as quickly as possible (Bailey et al., 2015).

Despite the consolidation of choices into meta-majors through Guided Pathways, students frequently grapple with making a selection at the outset of their college journey. Meanwhile, the counselors, who are primarily responsible for guiding students through the college's procedures and helping them identify their academic and career aspirations, face an average ratio of 611 students per counselor in California, as reported by Los Angeles Community College District. (2019). Given the integral role of academic counseling in promoting student retention and its utilization by institutions for advancing student success (Smith & Allen, 2014), counselors confront significant challenges when aiding students in their major selection journey. In certain instances, students are now determining their majors even before college enrollment. What remains ambiguous is the extent to which the Guided Pathways initiative has incorporated the insights of counselors. This study seeks to capture the perspectives of counselors concerning the students' major selection process amidst the rollout of the Guided Pathways reform.

New Structure Provided by Guided Pathways

In light of the Guided Pathways movement currently sweeping across the California Community College system, colleges are moving to offer more structure for students during their major selection process. The Guided Pathways reform model is the result of decades

of research by a myriad of scholars and organizations. That research is summarized in the book *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* by Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins, which catalyzed a national community college reform movement (Bailey et al., 2015). Traditionally students have experienced delays in declaring a major, do not have an academic plan or roadmap early on, and may not receive enough guidance or support to stay on that plan. Students have been routed into prerequisite courses that do not transfer or count toward their degrees, which can slow progress and hinder degree completion.

To combat these underlying issues, the reform movement of Guided Pathways was introduced to ensure that college students are more likely to complete a degree in a timely fashion if they choose a program and develop an academic plan early on, have a clear road map of the courses they need to take to complete a credential, and receive guidance and support to help them stay on plan (Bailey et al., 2015). Most community colleges allow students to select from a wide array of unstructured course options, programs, and support services, rather than moving through a structured pathway to obtain their degree (Bailey et al., 2015). Because of the difficult nature of navigating these major life decisions, many students make poor decisions about which programs to enter and which courses to take, and thus many simply drop out (Bailey et al., 2015). In the past, college and career planning services have been optional, and undecided students have been left to explore on their own, making navigating the realm of higher education confusing for many community college students. With the Guided Pathways approach, students are now steered into career clusters, which provide a narrower pathway within to make a major decision.

The Role of Community College Counselors

Counselors are the most essential resource to help new college students identify their goals and choose the classes aligned with them (Bailey et al., 2015; McClenney et al., 2013; Novak, 2017). Counselors help students create comprehensive educational plans, assist students in selecting courses aligned with transfer and career goals, and aid students in exploring majors, and vocational and career choices (Karp, 2013; Novak, 2017). Counselors provide students with resources for internship opportunities (Khalil & Williamson, 2014). Additionally, counselors relay job market data, align goals with employment options, provide a level of mental health support, and connect students with campus resources (McClenney et al., 2013; Karp, 2013). Counselors assist students in adapting to college life and provide guidance for readjustments when necessary (Educational Advisory Board, 2012). They also offer crisis intervention (Acree, 1998; Bailey et al., 2015) and foster social and emotional growth (Bailey et al., 2015). Furthermore, counselors can directly impact a student's college success (Gordon et al., 2008) and indirectly affect student retention (Montag et al., 2012).

Today's students confront a wide range of intricate academic and personal issues. Expert counseling by trained faculty is essential for guiding students towards their educational and career aspirations. Counseling faculty are professionally trained to diagnose students' issues and prescribe appropriate solutions. An academic counselor and a student work together to create a student educational plan. Counselors assist students in planning through multiple layers of their goals, and recommend course sequencing based on the student's strengths, scheduling patterns, and course requirements (Smith et al., 2012). Counselors provide students with referrals to on and off-campus services and

provide information about requirements to meet educational goals, such as AP scores, GPA requirements, and deadlines. For students interested in transferring, counselors plan sets of requirements for multiple transfer institutions and advise students on how to be competitive candidates for admission. Counselors' working knowledge of catalog rights helps students complete requirements available to them based on the year they began their studies (Smith et al., 2012). Counselors bring professional knowledge to their counseling sessions regarding differences in programs of study and differences in institutional requirements for transfer colleges (e.g., University of California, California State University, and private colleges). Furthermore, counselors evaluate transcripts from other institutions to help students understand how their completed coursework fits into their current goals. Regardless of a student's educational goal, most community college students greatly benefit from professional academic counseling throughout their educational experience. Research on retention and success indicates that students perform better when guided by a counselor on their academic planning, career discovery process, and decision-making with personal concerns that could interfere with their education (Smith et al., 2012).

The pivotal role of community college counselors cannot be overstated. From facilitating academic planning to aiding in personal and emotional development, counselors act as the cornerstone of a student's holistic educational journey. Their expertise bridges the gap between academic goals and the challenges that students face, ensuring that learners navigate their college years with informed choices and steadfast support.

Statement of the Problem

California Community College students often struggle to make an informed decision regarding their major. A consequence of not selecting an appropriate major may lead to a

reduced likelihood of persisting. Counselors, Guided Pathways, and potentially other interventions can help improve this process over time. While broad access institutions such as California Community Colleges are expected to serve nearly anyone who wants to attend college, most students who enter community college do not finish, as only about two out of every five community college students complete any degree or certificate within six years (Bailey et al., 2015). Colleges designed to maximize access are not necessarily well designed to maximize completion and often offer disconnected courses, programs, and support services that students are expected to navigate on their own (Bailey et al., 2015). Although the Guided Pathways reform aims to provide a clearer structure to address these challenges, the transition from an access model to a student success model requires further refinement and effort. Although community colleges primarily aim to offer vocational education, certificates, and lifelong learning, a significant 80 percent of students entering these institutions express their intention to transfer and attain a bachelor's degree or higher. Regrettably, a mere 15 percent achieve this ambition within six years of enrollment (Bailey et al., 2015). This shortfall in completion not only curtails individual opportunities in the job market but also hinders their potential for higher earnings.

While many factors contribute to low college completion rates, one such factor is the number of major choices (or areas of study) a student has upon matriculating to a community college (Jenkins & Cho, 2013; McClenney et al., 2013). The core aim of the Guided Pathways movement is not to restrict student options but to streamline their decisions. By reconfiguring the college framework to be more structured and consistent, it ensures that students' actions align seamlessly with their intended goals (Johnstone, 2015). Within the current Guided Pathways framework, "meta-majors"—also known as career

clusters, communities of interest, or Career and Academic Pathways (CAPs)—group similar academic disciplines together. These meta-majors act as overarching categories, enveloping individual majors that share thematic links. For instance, a healthcare meta-major might encompass diverse career tracks, from nursing and respiratory therapy to kinesiology. While many students now choose a meta-major at the time of their college application, some institutions offer "bridge majors." These bridge majors act as an intermediate step, offering students a broader focus within a meta-major before narrowing down to a specialized discipline as they advance in their studies. In the Los Angeles Community College District, for example, all students must select a major when completing the application process to the college through CCCApply. CAPs are designed to minimize overlap and ensure students maintain progress even if they switch majors within a CAP. They also play a pivotal role in enhancing the exploration process through deliberate initiatives like career panels and online Canvas communities, where students can engage with peers and faculty. However, the depth and scope of such engagements can differ across CAPs, with certain ones being more dynamic than others.

The California Community College Chancellor's Office announced a plan to implement Guided Pathways in the community college system to provide more structured support in assisting students in pursuing their academic goals and addressing the issue of college completion (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2017). In 2017, the state of California committed a $150 million one-time investment to a Guided Pathways Award Program that gave all 114 California community colleges the opportunity to begin implementing the Guided Pathways framework (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2017). The four pillars of Guided Pathways are: to clarify pathways to end goals,

help students choose and enter pathways, help students stay on the path, and ensure students are learning (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2017). Another way to describe this would be creating roadmaps to student goals, providing on-ramps to programs of study, embedding advising, progress tracking, feedback, and support; all in an effort to help students make better choices so they have an increased chance to reach their goals (Jenkins & Cho, 2013).

Counselors, pivotal in assisting incoming students to craft educational plans tailored to their interests and objectives, have a unique vantage point to discern students' experiences while navigating the major selection process under the current phase of Guided Pathways implementation. Engaging daily with students, counselors offer valuable insights regarding the efficacy of various components of the Guided Pathways, identifying both its strengths and areas needing improvement. They can pinpoint challenges students face in choosing a major and highlight unmet needs or supports that could enhance students' decision-making process.

This study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What do community college counselors believe students need when choosing a major?

2. What do community college counselors view as the successful innovations of GP? What, in their view, does GP get right?

3. What do community college counselors view as the shortcomings or limitations of GP? What, in their view, does GP neglect? What recommendations do they have?

Existing Gaps in the Research

At present, there is a discernible void in research concerning the firsthand experiences and insights of community college counselors as they navigate the student major and career selection process, particularly in light of the Guided Pathways initiative. While numerous hypotheses exist regarding the best practices for Guided Pathways, limited data is accessible regarding how counselors perceive the rollout and execution of this framework. The significance of counseling in bolstering student engagement and triumph is well-documented (Pongracz, 2016; Shaffer et al., 2010). In fact, counselors and advisors emerge as foundational pillars within the Guided Pathways model (Bailey et al., 2015; Fleming, 2016; Jenkins & Cho, 2013; Dadgar et al., 2017). Given their extensive interactions with a diverse student body, counselors represent a largely untapped reservoir of insight. As the Guided Pathways model gains traction, understanding how counselors perceive and adapt to these transformative shifts — including their views on meta-majors and the major selection process — becomes imperative. This gap in our knowledge is precisely what this study endeavors to bridge.

Study Overview

The landscape of community college education has undergone significant transformation, with initiatives such as Guided Pathways leading the way. In this context, the present study sought to dive deep into the perspectives of those at the heart of student guidance: the counselors. At the inception, this study aimed to uncover the beliefs of community college counselors about the essential factors students require when they are at the crossroads of selecting a major. With a multitude of options and directions available to students, determining what they need the most during this phase is paramount. As

Guided Pathways continues to influence the structure and approach of community colleges, understanding its strengths from the counselors' viewpoint is essential. The study delved into the successful innovations of Guided Pathways and aimed to recognize what, in the counselors' collective perspective, this initiative is doing right. No system is without its limitations. Thus, the investigation also focused on the potential shortcomings or limitations of Guided Pathways as perceived by the counselors.

Overview of the Research Design

With more than 2.1 million students at 116 colleges, the California Community College System is the country's largest system of higher education (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2021). One in four community college students in the nation attends a California Community College, so college completion within this population impacts a large swath of students (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2021). The study used a phenomenological qualitative research design to explore counselors' perceptions regarding students' major and career pathway decision-making process at the community college level. Eleven counselors were interviewed virtually using Zoom to gain deeper insights and perspectives until saturation was met. Based on prior literature samples and counselors' experiences, the sample selected had the experience and knowledge to answer the research questions and produce similar themes across experiences related to Guided Pathways. By interviewing 11 counselors the study was able to capture a variation of perspectives and experiences related to the implementation of Guided Pathways on campus.

The study utilized a purposeful, criterion-based sample. This approach to selection was used in order to ensure that the sample had certain characteristics, such as counseling

experience in a California community college, direct student contact counseling students, those who work with credit students, and those who are working for a campus that is currently implementing Guided Pathways. I applied thematic analysis to analyze the data collected from one-on-one interview transcripts to understand better how participants construct the meaning of their experiences.

Study Significance - Community College Counselor Perspectives

Counseling offers a critical component to student engagement and student success (Pongracz, 2016; Shaffer et al., 2010). Counselors are one of the most important elements in Guided Pathways (Bailey et al., 2015; Fleming, 2016; Jenkins & Cho, 2013; Dadgar, 2017). It would be valuable to learn from community college counselors the elements of selecting a major and career pathway that are effective and which roadblocks they see students struggle with. Gaining insights from these findings can equip other community colleges with targeted strategies to better support their students towards successful completion. Furthermore, they can benefit from the tailored recommendations made by counselors to help students make well-informed decisions. In the context of the Guided Pathways reform, such knowledge is invaluable for colleges aiming to embrace a more student-centric model of implementation.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

First-year community college students often do not know which major to select, lack exploration opportunities to make informed decisions, and do not understand how their major maps onto future career pathways (Complete College America, 2019). This literature review covers the importance of choosing a well-matched major, covers recent efforts to address barriers to completion, and highlights the conceptual frameworks used to undergird this specific research project.

Academic and career decisions require students to reflect on their values, aspirations, and the economic realities they will face on the other side of graduation. Beginning college with a clear sense of purpose is a crucial step to ensuring investment in higher education pays personal and financial dividends for students' futures. With so many options to choose from, many students select an option without full comprehension of how that major choice aligns with their personal interests and future career implications (Complete College America, 2019). Uninformed decision-making about majors can lead students to accumulate excess units and extend their time to a degree (Complete College America, 2019). Time to degree is an important consideration with longer timeframes leading students in some cases to drop out without a completed degree (Complete College America, 2019). For students who do reach completion, the additional time causes increased costs which makes it harder for them to set up a strong financial foundation (Complete College America, 2019).

The Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment (CAPSEE), a research center funded by the Institute of Education Sciences of the U.S. Department of

Education, conducted extensive analyses of education and earnings. Their analysis found that completing an associate's degree yields strongly positive, persistent, and consistent earning gains of approximately $4,640–$7,160 annually in additional earnings compared to those who entered college without reaching completion (Belfield & Bailey, 2017). They found that the evidence shows modest positive returns for completing a certificate, but the returns on certificates fade within a few years after its completion (Belfield & Bailey, 2017). Those who do not complete college but accumulate some credits show evidence that more credits completed are associated with higher earnings (Belfield & Bailey, 2017). While there are clear benefits to students who complete a certificate, and even more so an associate's degree, there is also a cost to accumulating excess credits and taking longer to complete a degree which results in the cost of college increasing for students (Belfield & Bailey, 2017). While community college returns are high, completion rates are low, hindering students from completing and securing higher-paid jobs (Belfield & Bailey, 2017).

Counselors are on the front lines, assisting students with their academic classes and majors, providing transfer information, making connections to campus resources, explaining degree and certificate options, providing internships opportunities (Khalil & Williamson, 2014), relaying job market data, aligning goals with employment options (Karp, 2013), as well as offering a layer of mental health support to students. Counselors working directly with students see their struggles and triumphs first-hand and are poised to give high-level insight into the patterns they see in students navigating community college.

The Importance of Choosing a Well-Matched Major

While many new community college students enroll in courses without a clear understanding of their goals for college and their future careers, many do not even have a clear understanding of the opportunities available (Gardenhire-Crooks et al., 2006). While career services are available to students seeking them out, studies suggest that students who need these services the most are least likely to use them (Karp et al., 2008). Frequently students who are unsure about which path to take forward are advised to begin their general education courses (Grubb, 2006). This is because starting with general education allows students to try out different classes and explore options while completing coursework that would be needed to meet general education requirements anyway. Although the general education classes are typically accepted towards a student's goal of an associate's degree or transfer, there is no guarantee that those courses count towards a particular major since major requirements are set by individual departments and transfer colleges (Gross & Goldhaber, 2009).

With students having so many choices, ambiguous pathways, and a lack of advising support due to the ratio of counselors to students, community college students report that they feel confused and discontented trying to map their way through their education (Venezia et al., 2010). Research suggests that congruence between person and environment is critical to the success of college students (Feldman et al., 1999; Smart et al., 2000). Feldman et al. (1999) contend that a match between an individual's personality and their environment is linked to greater stability in education, as well as higher levels of satisfaction and achievement. Academic preparation, family influence, and academic self-efficacy do not seem to matter after considering personality (Porter & Umbach, 2006).

Porter and Umbach (2006) say that personality is highly predictive of student major choice. Due to this, colleges should seek to understand students' personalities, values, and beliefs as they advise them on the major selection process. Allen and Robbins (2008) found that students' interests affect both choice of entering a major and the likelihood of persisting in a major. An important factor for graduating on time for students includes the match between their personality and their major. It is unclear to the extent that students are aware of this information. Although research regarding selecting a major has been generally dated, a prominent study from the field using national data showed that students with undecided majors have low academic performance and persistence rates (Leppel, 2001).

Students may be overwhelmed with their choices, want to fully explore the options before committing, or question whether their college offers the best experience for them to reach their goals (Cuseo, 2005). However, after that first-year benchmark, students' indecision regarding their major can lead to graduation delays. While students may be satisfactorily passing their classes, that does not necessarily mean they are making progress toward an academic degree (Strommer, 1993). Major congruence is a vital part of graduating in a timely fashion. In a study of 3,072 students in 15 four-year colleges and 788 students in 13 two-year community colleges, Allen and Robbins (2010), found that students' interests affect both choice of entering a major and the likelihood of persisting in a major.

As stated, many students are not completing a degree or program that would prepare them for a future career. According to researchers Porter and Umbach (2006) "the choice of a college major can be one of the most important decisions a student can make"

(p. 429). Declaring a major can have long-term impacts on people. College counselors are cognizant that students range in their familiarity, experience with options, and level of knowledge surrounding the initial major selection, career exploration, and their ultimate major and career choice. Undergraduate major is significantly correlated with job stability and satisfaction (Horn & Zahn, 2001). Major selection also significantly impacts career opportunities and salaries (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). While students may fall along a continuum, they are certainly influenced by social class disparities and gender, leading to differential earnings among underrepresented groups, making major selection even more critical for workforce outcomes (Leslie & Oaxaca, 1998). The process of selecting a pathway for community college students is complex and interconnected and compels students to consider many factors such as fit, payoff, transferability, flexibility, and mobility (Wickersham, 2020). Community college students may find the process difficult since there are so many choices for enrollment, courses, and programs which can be unclear how to meet requirements, which is why it is so essential that colleges provide clarity to support students in making informed decisions to reach their goals (Bailey, 2016). Research from the field of behavioral psychology suggests that too many complex choices can lead to the behaviors commonly found in students, from indecision to procrastination to self-doubt and paralysis (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008).

During the major selection process, counselors assist students in the creation of comprehensive educational plans, help them select courses aligned with transfer and career goals, and aid their exploration of major, vocational, and career choices (Karp, 2013; Novak, 2017). They provide resources for internship opportunities (Khalil & Williamson, 2014), relay job market data (McClenney et al., 2013), and help students align their goals

with employment options (Karp, 2013). Counselors assist students during their adjustment to college life and offer crisis counseling when needed (Bailey et al., 2015). Upon entering college counselors provide the support needed for students to successfully transition and adjust to the college environment. Counselors help students to locate and utilize the campus support services and help with increased student retention (Bennett, 2016). Counselors help students build confidence, affirm them as individuals, and provide opportunities for academic and personal development (Xiong et al., 2016). As institutional agents, counselors can influence how students socialize at the college and to what degree they are exposed to resources supporting their success (Tovar, 2015). Counselors serve as conduits to college-related information of various forms such as academic, career, and social information. Attending to students' psychosocial and academic needs facilitates their transition to the college experience and students' perception that they are valued by others at the institution (Tovar, 2015). Relationships with counselors enhance students' sense of belonging to the institution; facilitate social interactions and relationships with others, including faculty; and ultimately impacts degree progression (Barnett, 2011; Rendón, 1994; Tovar, 2013; Tovar et al., 2009).

Holland's (1958) Vocational Development Theory has had a significant impact on the fields of career counseling and education. The theory emphasizes that one's vocational preferences are an expression of underlying personality traits. Holland identified six core personality types—Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional (RIASEC)—and asserted that individuals thrive when they find work environments that align with these inherent traits. This conceptual framework has been integrated into various career guidance tools, including the U.S. Department of Labor's O*NET, and is

foundational in many counseling master's programs, which prepare counselors to guide community college students in their academic and career decisions.

However, it is critical to recognize the limitations of Holland's model. While it offers a structured approach to career selection based on personality alignment, it has been critiqued for its potential reductionism. The theory might not adequately capture the complexities of real-world job markets, economic conditions, or societal expectations. Additionally, it could risk reinforcing stereotypes or oversimplifying the fluid nature of human personality and its development over a lifetime.

Furthermore, Holland's theory, although useful, does not fully encapsulate the myriad factors that influence career or academic major choice. For instance, the theory does not directly address how external influences, like socio-economic conditions or educational opportunities, affect these choices. Nor does it consider the role of life circumstances, which often play an unanticipated but significant role in career trajectories.

Given the Guided Pathways model's emphasis on structured academic and career paths, Holland's work offers valuable insights but should not be applied in isolation. The theory underscores the importance of aligning academic paths with intrinsic personalities for greater satisfaction and success, but this is just one facet of a more complex decision-making process. Career counselors, particularly those working within the community college system, can benefit from incorporating Holland's theory into a more multifaceted, nuanced approach that takes into account both internal personality traits and external life conditions. This balanced perspective allows counselors to offer holistic guidance that spans academic, professional, and personal domains for students.

Recent Efforts to Address Some of the Barriers to Completion

Students face a plethora of barriers to completion including but not limited to understanding degree requirements and processes, navigating the college environment, college tuition costs, health issues, financial problems, mental health struggles, childcare challenges, transportation difficulties, disconnection from the college community, and understanding how their coursework connects to their lives. Researchers claim that the traditional structure of community colleges hampers students' progress toward completion, which is why they argue that the structure of community colleges should be rethought (Bailey et al., 2015; Holzer & Baum, 2017).

In the traditional cafeteria-style model, students are inundated with vast amounts of information. They are tasked with deciphering complex major choices, determining which courses fulfill their program requirements, navigating both job training and transfer programs, and ultimately deciding on a post-graduation career path (Scott-Clayton, 2011; Bailey et al., 2015). It is challenging for students to identify clear pathways while selecting courses to enroll in, earning a two-year degree, or transferring to a four-year college. Program requirements are usually not clear, and students do not have sufficient guidance and support to make informed choices (Bailey et al., 2015). Bailey et al. (2015) describes that "the typical student is overwhelmed by the many choices available, resulting in poor program or course selection decisions, which in turn cost time and money, and likely lead many students to drop out in frustration" (p. 22).

Guided Pathways reform is a student-centered approach that aims to increase the number of students earning community college credentials and close equity gaps. Guided Pathways provides a framework for integrating California-based initiatives such as The

Student Success and Support Act of 2012, Equity, Basic Skills Transformation, the Strong Workforce Program, and California College Promise. The California Guided Pathways project was modeled from the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Pathways Project and adapted for implementation in California to support colleges as they guide students in clarifying their paths to end goals, select and stay on that path, and ensure quality learning.

In research examining the educational pathways and outcomes for community college students, it was found that those who enter a program of study in their first year are much more likely to complete a credential or transfer successfully than those who do not get into a program until their second year or beyond (Jenkins & Cho, 2012). Due to the lack of attention that has historically surrounded this issue, Guided Pathways was introduced to help students get into and through their programs of study instead of letting students languish to navigate complex and confusing programs on their own. Guided Pathways aims to streamline the student experience through college by providing structured choices such as meta-majors, alternately known as Career and Academic Pathways (CAPs), which provide additional major-specific supports and clear learning outcomes to assist students in achieving their goals of college completion. While most community colleges offer an assortment of majors and programs, they commonly do little to guide students in choosing a program or providing a plan for completing their goals (Venezia et al., 2010). Research studying course-taking patterns has shown that a great deal of community college students are going down subpar tracks (Crosta, 2013). According to Public Agenda (2012), students reported that being in a well-defined pathway would improve their ability to persist, complete, and transfer. Community college

counselors play a role in building these learning communities and assisting students in creating their educational plans based on the pathway they select.

As far as early implementation of Guided Pathways goes, some colleges have used CAPs to create a more personalized onboarding experience for students based on their field of interest (Klempin & Lahr, 2021). Many are also using Program Maps to help students develop individualized educational plans (Jenkins et al., 2021). Bailey et al. (2017) suggested that community colleges provide new students with better information on programs, such as career and transfer outcomes, and urged colleges to require students to choose a meta-major early on (Jenkins et al., 2021). Bailey et al. (2017) also emphasized the importance of helping students explore their career interests in student success courses. Many community colleges are now building career and academic exploration and planning into their first-year experience courses (Jenkins et al., 2021). Most colleges implementing Guided Pathways that have been studied have redesigned their websites to provide better information on their programs and have taken steps to help students without clear goals explore their interests using career and personality assessments and planning tools (Jenkins et al., 2021). Community colleges' efforts to provide better career and transfer information to students initially and to help entering students develop career and academic plans is a shift from past practices, and these changes appear to be improving the college experience for many new students (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2020). However, giving students this information and career/transfer advising is not enough to help them clarify their pathways. Students' exploration process for choosing an academic and career field is developmental and often ensues over multiple terms (Bailey et al., 2016). With the best practices in mind, there is still much work to do and community

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colleges need to redesign their entire student onboarding experiences around meta-majors to assist all students in exploring their interests and options, helping them to choose at least an initial direction, and develop an academic plan with a counselor (Jenkins et al., 2020).

According to the Regional Coordinator of the Foundation for California Community Colleges, Antonio Ramirez, Guided Pathways implementation varies across colleges, with each handling it differently (Ramirez, personal communication, February 15, 2023). The initiative has undergone two phases, with the first phase involving a significant allocation of funds to kickstart the process. Guided Pathways 2.0, however, is primarily focused on increased funding without significant changes. Ramirez noted a perceived threat to counselors' occupation due to the principles of Guided Pathways, particularly with the shift of technical processes to classified personnel.

Ramirez shared that the pilot phase involved selected colleges, including Bakersfield, adopting a model where counselors focused on high-skilled aspects while classified personnel took on technical processes. This led to concerns among counselors from other colleges about hiring practices and the future of their profession. The differing ideologies between administrators, who favor classified hires for budgetary reasons, and counselors, who emphasize the importance of counseling faculty, further complicate the matter. Ramirez mentioned the Chancellor's office releasing a work plan to gauge colleges' progress in the Guided Pathways integration and the need for colleges to submit assurances and work plans to receive funding. However, there is currently no current way to compare colleges' implementation progress, and effectiveness remains uncertain. The pandemic has affected the implementation, with some colleges prioritizing pandemic

response over their Guided Pathways efforts. The challenges in combating historical racism and policies were acknowledged, and the new chancellor's appointment, Dr. Sonya Christian, was imminent at the time our conversation in February of 2023 which meant that the future of Guided Pathways implementation process remains to be seen (Ramirez, personal communication, February 15, 2023).

The Guided Pathways Model

The Guided Pathways model forms the crux of the theoretical framework for this study. Born out of a need to improve community college systems, Guided Pathways moves away from the conventional "cafeteria-style" education system. It aims to create a structured, goal-oriented framework for students to not just complete their education but also to excel in their careers. The birth of Guided Pathways was influenced by a series of academic and socio-political trends, including rising concerns about college dropout rates, increasing student loan debts, and the evolving demands of the job market. These historical markers provide an understanding of the urgency that led to this reform.

The model's theoretical underpinning is not limited to educational theory; it draws from interdisciplinary domains including organizational theory, educational psychology, and theories of change management. These theories contribute to a nuanced understanding of how community colleges are navigating the complexities involved in implementing Guided Pathways. Before the advent of Guided Pathways, other models aimed to improve college completion and student satisfaction, such as the Student Engagement Model (e.g., Pike & Kuh, 2005) and the Tinto Model for Student Retention (Tinto, 1975). What sets Guided Pathways apart is its holistic approach, not only emphasizing academic structure but also integrating essential student supports like counseling and advising.

Despite its growing adoption, the Guided Pathways model is not without its critics. Scholarly discourse debates its efficacy, scalability, and the potential for it to overlook individual student needs in favor of streamlined processes. This study aims to address some of these gaps by focusing on counselor perspectives.

By using the Guided Pathways model to contextualize the study, this research provides insight into how counselors at one community college make sense of this new policy and approach their support of students' process in selecting academic majors. Moreover, the study focuses on understanding what aspects of the framework are working well, what could be improved, and how counselors' expertise can be leveraged to create a more effective system.

CHAPTER THREE

STUDY DESIGN

This study explored California community college counselors' unique insights regarding students' majors and career decision processes. This study completed interviews with eleven counselors from a Southern California community college campus to capture qualitative data until saturation was met. This chapter describes the research methods and procedures that best addressed the research questions to achieve this goal. This includes the purpose of the study, the research questions, the rationale for the research design, the population and sample, and the instrumentation. This chapter describes the data collection, analysis, and limitations of the study and provides an overview of the data. The research design aimed to elicit unique perspectives and identify special cases that could enrich our understanding of the challenges and opportunities within this evolving educational model. This approach was chosen intentionally to present the complexity and nuance of the issue, allowing for insights that could be instrumental in both highlighting what is working and identifying areas for improvement.

First-year community college students often do not know which major to select and lack exploration opportunities to make informed decisions. They do not understand how their major connects with future career opportunities (Complete College America, 2019). Counseling is critical to student engagement and success (Pongracz, 2016; Shaffer et al., 2010). Counselors are one of the most essential elements in Guided Pathways (Bailey et al., 2015; Fleming, 2016; Jenkins & Cho, 2013; Dadgar et al., 2017). Counselors offer consistency, structure, and the ability to build rapport with students and help them make these major life decisions related to their major and career pathways. Counselors are

crucial to student success (Kuh, 2015; Novak, 2017; Bailey et al., 2015) and are the most important resource to help new students identify their goals and choose the classes aligned with those goals (Bailey et al., 2015; McClenney et al., 2013; Novak, 2017). Therefore, I was interested in learning about community college counselors' unique perspectives on students' decision-making regarding their major and career pathways.

In order to address this topic, this study looked specifically at the following questions:

1. What do community college counselors believe students need when choosing a major?

2. What do community college counselors view as the successful innovations of Guided Pathways? What, in their view, does Guided Pathways get right?

3. What do community college counselors view as the shortcomings or limitations of Guided Pathways? What, in their view, does Guided Pathways neglect? What recommendations do they have?

Design Overview

The study used a phenomenological qualitative research design to explore counselors' perceptions regarding students' major and career pathway decision-making process at the community college level in light of Guided Pathways implementation. A qualitative design was suitable to uncover the rich data needed to discover the ways counselors perceive how their students navigate these major life decisions. According to Merriam (2017), a qualitative research design is appropriate when the researcher is interested in discovering how meaning is constructed and how people make sense of their lives. Qualitative studies focus on how the participants make sense of their experiences,

and my aim was to learn about counselors' experiences from their numerous interactions with students.

Instead of analyzing data from an extensive group of counselors to infer causal relationships, a hallmark of quantitative studies, my research honed in on one specific campus actively adopting the Guided Pathways model and CAPs. Here, I conducted detailed qualitative interviews to delve deep into the individual perspectives, experiences, sentiments, and insights of community college counselors directly engaged with students. Since my study didn't aim to quantify the outcomes of counselor-student interactions or evaluate distinct interventions, a quantitative approach wasn't deemed appropriate.

The study was approved by the UCLA IRB and the college district's Office of Institutional Effectiveness.

Study Site

I refer to the study site by a pseudonym, Southern California Community College (SCCC). SCCC is part of a large urban Southern California community college district that has begun the implementation of Guided Pathways. I decided to conduct the study at a campus that is a few years into implementing the Guided Pathways policy. An additional factor is that this site has established meta-majors known as Career and Academic Pathways (CAPs). Since community colleges are at different levels of their Guided Pathways implementation, I preferred to conduct research at a site that had already made substantial headway into building out the reform model at their campus. This campus decided to eliminate the option for an "Undecided" major and students must select a major upon application to the college, which then allows them to belong to a CAP. A key consideration for this site was that there are many experienced counselors that fit my criteria and were

able to share their experiences working with students within the Guided Pathways framework. At this particular site, all counselors have the same policy tools, so I was able to collect information about how the counselors are navigating the advising space differently or the same as each other in regard to helping students make major selection decisions, which may contribute to the broader understanding of how counselors are applying the policy.

Study Participants

The study utilized a purposeful, criterion-based sample. Purposeful sampling allows for the identification of individuals from the population directly tied to the research objective to gather the rich information needed to learn about a specific issue (Patton, 1990). For the purposes of this study, I recruited eleven community college counseling professionals from SCCC. Counselors were eligible to participate if they had direct academic counseling contact with students. Those in coordination positions or chair roles that do not allow for as much weekly direct student contact were excluded. I also ensured that participants were counselors working with credit students (those who are taking courses that are designed for students who are interested in earning college units towards a degree or certificate). The justification for these criteria is that counselors who work directly with students on a weekly basis are more likely have a better understanding of how the Guided Pathways implementation is working in regard to the student major selection process. Counselors who work with credit students work with those who are interested in receiving certificates, associate degrees, and plan to transfer to four-year colleges.

I emailed a questionnaire to the counseling listserv which included all eligible counselors at the site. Through this process, 37 counselors were contacted, 16 responded

to the questionnaire, 11 indicated a willingness to be interviewed, and those 11 were subsequently interviewed. Out of those who completed the questionnaire, I was able to confirm that participants who were invited to complete the subsequent interview were counselors who work directly advising credit students, and captured some preliminary thoughts on the student major selection within the Guided Pathways framework before moving forward with the interviewing process. Since I had eleven community college counselors volunteer, I did not have to create a prioritization process as I was able to complete an in-depth interview with all eleven interested participants. Counselors who completed the initial questionnaire were asked to participate in the subsequent interview, and were given a $25 gift card to Amazon.com as a thank-you for their time.

Data Collection

I initiated the data collection process with a concise demographic survey (see Appendix A), which participants typically completed in under 10 minutes. This survey sought insights into the participants' area of counseling emphasis, employment status (full-time or part-time), tenure in community college education, years at the specific site, duration in their current role, weekly hours spent directly engaging with community college students, and a set of questions centered around their familiarity with the Guided Pathways framework.

To ensure a consistent and detailed exploration of participants' experiences, I employed a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix B). This approach focused on extracting counselors' firsthand experiences and insights gathered from assisting students during their major and career decision-making phases. Participants chose pseudonyms to maintain anonymity throughout the study.

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The interview commenced with questions designed to build rapport, delving into the participants' counseling backgrounds. One objective was to discern counselors' observations regarding facilitators and barriers students encounter when selecting a major and career trajectory. These discussions ventured into their approaches for assisting students in choosing specific majors or meta-major pathways, especially within the newly adopted framework. Throughout, I employed probing and supplementary questions, enhancing the depth of the conversation and ensuring engagement.

The interviews were conducted between February 21st and March 3rd, 2023. Each interview spanned approximately 45 to 60 minutes and utilized the secure platform, Zoom, enabling efficient recording and transcription. I then used Rev premium software for precise, word-for-word transcription. The resulting transcripts were securely stored in a cloud-based system and subsequently integrated into Dedoose software for analysis and coding.

Data Analysis

I employed thematic analysis on the data derived from individual interview transcripts to delve deeper into how participants interpret their experiences. This analytical journey spanned data collection, transcription, and intensive analysis.

Once transcripts from Zoom were finalized, I refined them using Rev software and subsequently integrated them into Dedoose software for further processing. A preliminary code tree was devised, rooted in my interview questions and the anticipated emergent themes and responses.

During the iterative examination of these transcripts, I refined my coding structure, categorizing data into parent and child code groups. During the initial coding phase, I

highlighted recurring patterns and themes, cultivating a list of probable codes influenced by my evolving comprehension of the data. Some codes were eventually merged upon repeated reviews.

Executing a meticulous, line-by-line coding cycle within Dedoose, I distilled the data into 22 distinct codes. This comprehensive exercise yielded overarching themes and related sub-themes that illuminate community college counselors' insights into the multifaceted processes students navigate while determining and committing to their academic and career trajectories.

The identified codes encompassed diverse facets like career planning, early exploration, real-world career exposure, college success design, and perspectives on Guided Pathways. They also highlighted specific challenges and aids in major selection, the importance and timing of choosing a major, as well as nuances of counselor and faculty involvement in this pivotal decision-making process.

Positionality

Given my role as a community college counselor, I perceive that fellow counselors were more inclined to openly share their views and experiences with me. They could trust that my professional background equipped me with a heightened sensitivity towards others' well-being, a trait I carried into my research process. My research design was mindful, neither overly intrusive nor burdensome for participants.

Furthermore, my affiliation as a researcher from UCLA, backed by the support of the ELP program, my co-chairs, committee, and IRB approval, reassured participants of the ethical standards underpinning my data collection process. Adhering to these protocols, I ensured participants were approached with utmost care and respect. My counseling

background naturally equipped me to foster rapport and genuinely engage in understanding the lived experiences of my participants.

As I engaged in the research process, creating analytic memos became an invaluable tool for introspection and reflection. These memos helped me navigate the dual roles I found myself in: as a counselor and as a researcher interviewing my professional peers. Tensions arose as I started to see stark differences between how counselors and administrators view the effectiveness and challenges of the Guided Pathways model. Counselors, including myself, often felt that their expertise was not sufficiently leveraged in decision-making processes, whereas administrators were more focused on larger systemic factors, including budgets and institutional structures.

These tensions were the focus of several analytic memos. In one memo, I noted my internal conflict over the apparent disconnect between counselors and administrators regarding the importance of low counselor-to-student ratios. Administrators, pressed by budget constraints and strategic objectives, seemed to have a different set of priorities. My position as a counselor naturally biased me towards siding with my peers. However, the analytic memos allowed me to step back and understand that administrators are juggling multiple high-stakes responsibilities that extend beyond student counseling services. They are focused on a broader canvas, encompassing faculty concerns, state regulations, and the viability of the college itself.

Learning to see the perspective of administrators did not mean compromising my stance as a counselor, but it did provide a more nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in implementing something as ambitious as Guided Pathways. This enriched perspective informed not only the data interpretation but also allowed me to approach

interviews and interactions with a balanced view, contributing to a more comprehensive and robust analysis for the study. Overall, the practice of writing analytic memos offered me a structured space to confront and reflect on these tensions.

Minimizing Validity Threats

Counselors might have harbored concerns about being identifiable from their responses. To address this and ensure confidentiality, I invited participants to adopt pseudonyms in the research, rather than using their actual names. I made it clear that my goal was not to evaluate their answers—there was no 'right' or 'wrong'—but to gain genuine feedback, be it positive or negative. My intention was to foster an open environment where participants felt comfortable sharing any aspect of their experiences.

Being in the same professional role posed a challenge of personal bias. To combat this, I maintained a keen focus on the participants' responses, relying on my pre-set interview questions to guide the conversation. I actively engaged in critical reflexivity regarding my position as an "insider." To further identify and bracket out my biases, I invited a colleague to pose the interview questions to me. This exercise allowed me to introspectively gauge my reactions to the questions, heightening my self-awareness. I also crafted analytical memos that concentrated on my responses to participants' comments, enabling a deep dive into potential biases.

For added rigor and to bolster internal validity, I undertook member checks, ensuring that counselors felt their views were accurately captured in the initial data analysis. Furthermore, I gave members the option to receive a finalized copy of the dissertation, providing a comprehensive overview of the results.

Ethical Considerations

I emphasized to potential participants that their involvement was entirely voluntary. Based on recommendations from the UCLA IRB and the site, I made necessary modifications to my consent forms and procedures. I made it clear to participants that their employment was not contingent upon their participation in my research. Before collecting data, I comprehensively briefed participants about the research objectives, expectations, procedures, and the steps taken to ensure their confidentiality. I clarified how their responses would be transcribed verbatim and the intended use of the data. To further protect their identity, I allowed participants to choose pseudonyms, and I safeguarded all data on password-protected devices. After concluding my dissertation, I shared the study's findings with participants for their reference and also offered the site a copy of the dissertation for their insight and use.

Limitations

While this study offers a detailed window into the perspectives and experiences of counselors at a single community college, it's important to approach any broader generalizations with caution. Generalizability is not the primary objective of qualitative research; rather, the aim is to deeply understand the processes by which something is unfolding. In this case, the focus is on how counselors perceive and interact with the Guided Pathways framework at a particular stage in its implementation. This qualitative approach allows for a nuanced understanding that can facilitate targeted improvements in the framework.

One limitation of the study lies in its confinement to a single institution, which, while allowing for an in-depth examination of that specific college's nuances, raises

questions about the broader applicability of the findings. However, the very limitations that

caution against broad generalizations also contribute to the study's strength in offering a

deep, context-rich exploration of counselor perspectives. Institutions are inherently unique

in their culture, practices, and challenges, making each a distinct case that may not be

broadly applicable. This specificity is also an opportunity, as the Guided Pathways

framework is still in a transitional phase. Therefore, capturing the complexities and

nuances at this juncture can offer valuable insights for ongoing adjustments.

Another limitation stems from the sample size, consisting of only 11 counselors.

While this may not fully capture the entire spectrum of perspectives across various

counseling areas and stages of the major selection process, it does offer a focused look at

counselor viewpoints within a specific institution and timeframe. Additionally, the study

was conducted during a phase where the full expectations related to career communities

within the Guided Pathways framework were yet to be realized. While this limits the scope

of the findings, it also represents an opportunity: it is not too late to solicit and consider

feedback from counselors for future iterations of the framework.

Further, while the study offers insights from the vantage point of the researcher as

an insider, this could be considered both a limitation and an asset. Being an insider

provides unique perspectives and access to information that might not be easily accessible

to an outsider, although it might also introduce biases. Given the fluid nature of the Guided

Pathways initiative, with elements such as a pending tracking system and influential roles

like that of Dr. Sonya Christian, findings are inherently tied to a specific stage in the

framework's evolution. Yet this also means that the findings could serve as a critical

foundation for ongoing adjustments and future research, which could include a broader

range of institutions, utilize both qualitative and quantitative data, and capture the evolving nature of the Guided Pathways initiative.

Therefore, while the study's limitations do shed light on its constraints, they also illuminate opportunities for deeper, more targeted future research. The limitations not only spotlight inherent constraints but also pave the way for subsequent studies that could delve deeper, capture a broader range of perspectives, and adapt to the continually evolving nature of the Guided Pathways initiative.

Conclusion

Understanding counselors' perspectives and experiences is pivotal to enhancing the major and career decision-making process for students. By delving into these insights, we can discern effective strategies and identify potential areas for improvement in a journey that can often be daunting for students. Engaging with counselors offers valuable insights into recurring themes they encounter in their frequent interactions with community college students. Through a qualitative research design, this exploration sheds light on the potential improvements in the major selection process, essential supports for students, gaps in the current system, and strategies to ensure students make the most informed decisions about their career pathways.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This chapter reports on the findings of a qualitative research study that focuses on

11 community college counselors at a regional Southern California community college. The

chapter begins with a brief overview of the development and implementation of Guided

Pathways within the state, based on a conversation with a Regional Coordinator for the

policy. It examines the perspectives of community college counselors regarding student

needs when selecting a major, the accomplishments of Guided Pathways, and its

limitations. The chapter begins with a description of the study participants, followed by

findings related to counselors' beliefs about student needs. It then examines the

counselors' views on the successes of Guided Pathways (what it gets right). Finally, the

chapter presents the counselors' views of the limitations of Guided Pathways and their

recommendations for improvement. These insights provide a valuable understanding of

counselor perspectives and can contribute to effective practices in community college

settings.

Additional Context on the Development and Implementation of Guided Pathways

In a conversation with a Regional Coordinator of the Foundation for California

Community Colleges, several critical concerns emerged regarding the implementation of

Guided Pathways in the state's community colleges. The process has been marked by

inconsistent implementation across different institutions, making it difficult to assess

overall effectiveness. This variability also casts a spotlight on underlying tensions between

administrators and counselors; while the former lean towards hiring classified personnel

for budgetary reasons, the latter emphasize the need for specialized counseling faculty to

guide students effectively. These diverging perspectives have led to concerns about job security among counselors, particularly with the shift of certain responsibilities to classified staff.

Furthermore, despite the release of a work plan by the Chancellor's office to gauge progress, there remains a lack of standardized metrics to assess and compare the effectiveness of Guided Pathways across colleges. The situation is further complicated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has diverted resources and attention away from Guided Pathways implementation in some institutions. Moreover, lingering challenges related to equity and historical racism still need to be addressed comprehensively. Lastly, the imminent appointment of a new chancellor, Dr. Sonya Christian, adds a layer of uncertainty to the initiative's future, especially as the transition to Guided Pathways 2.0 appears to focus more on increased funding rather than significant policy changes.

Even though the Guided Pathways model is understood as a whole-college reform, the spotlight often falls unevenly on different roles within the college ecosystem. For instance, college presidents and vice presidents frequently exert a highly visible influence over the reform's messaging and direction. In contrast, available research does not indicate that counselors—who play a crucial role in student career guidance and academic planning—were consulted in the framework's creation process. This omission raises questions about the reform's comprehensive efficacy. Counselors' on-the-ground experience with students offers invaluable insights in tailoring Guided Pathways to be more aligned with the practical needs and challenges faced by students.

Characteristics of the Study Participants

A total of 37 counselors at one community college site were invited to participate in a questionnaire and a following interview. Of those, 16 counselors (43%) completed the initial questionnaire. Eleven counselors (30%) agreed to be interviewed, and all 11 subsequently completed the 45- to 60-minute in-depth interview. Table 1 presents some information about these 11 counselors. Four work in General Counseling only, five work with special populations, and two work between both General Counseling and special populations. There were five full-time counselors and six part-time counselors.

Table 1
Characteristics of the Study Participants (n=11)

| Counselor | Area | Status | Years of Experience | | | Avg. Hrs. of Weekly Student Contact |
			In CCs	In This CC	In Current Role	
1	Special Population	PT	0-5	0-5	0-5	26+
2	General	PT	6-10	0-5	0-5	26+
3	Special Population	FT	11-15	6-10	6-10	21-25
4	Special Population	FT	6-10	0-5	0-5	26+
5	General & Special	FT	11-15	0-5	0-5	26+
6	General	PT	26+	26+	26+	6-10
7	General	PT	0-5	0-5	0-5	16-20
8	General & Special	PT	6-10	0-5	0-5	6-10
9	General	FT	16-20	6-10	6-10	26+
10	Special Population	PT	0-5	0-5	0-5	6-10
11	Special Population	FT	26-30	26-30	21-25	21-25

Note. PT = Part-time. FT = Full-time.

Counselors were asked how confident they would be explaining the Guided Pathways framework to a colleague. The response scale allowed participants to rate their confidence on a scale from 0 (least confident) to 10 (most confident). Confidence ratings

ranged from 6 to 10, with a mean of 8.0 and a standard deviation of 1.3. Table 2 shows that a majority of counselors reported being very/extremely knowledgeable about topics related to Guided Pathways.

Table 2

Study Participants' Knowledge of Topics Related to Guided Pathways (n=11)

	Not at All (1)		Slightly (2)		Moderately (3)		Very (4)		Extremely (5)		M	SD
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Meta-majors/CAPS (Career Academic Pathways)	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	36.4	6	54.5	1	9.1	3.7	0.6
The student major selection process	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	18.2	6	54.5	3	27.3	4.1	0.7
The college's onboarding process for students	0	0.0	0	0.0	5	45.5	5	45.5	1	9.1	3.6	0.7

Table 3 shows that six out of 11 counselors (54.5%) indicated that Guided Pathways has made the process somewhat/substantially easier for students. Only two of 11 counselors thought that the new Guided Pathways framework was harder for students and for counselors. Three counselors believed it was neither harder nor easier for students, and five thought it was neither harder nor easier for counselors. Five thought it was somewhat easier for students, and four thought it was somewhat easier for counselors. Interestingly, less than half view it as being easier for counselors. It is noteworthy that very few view this situation as harder for counselors or students.

Table 3

Study Participants' Perceptions of the Impact of Guided Pathways (n=11)

	Substantially Harder (1)		Somewhat Harder (2)		Neither Harder Nor Easier (3)		Somewhat Easier (4)		Substantially Easier (5)		M	SD
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
For Students	0	0.0	2	18.2	3	27.3	5	45.5	1	9.1	3.5	0.9
For Counselors	0	0.0	2	18.2	5	45.5	4	36.4	0	0.0	3.2	0.8

Findings Related to Research Question #1

Counselors were asked what they thought students needed when choosing a major. They described four specific needs: (1.1) Career-Specific Information, (1.2) Real-World Career Exposure, (1.3) Early Intervention, and (1.4) an Undecided Option. These four needs are presented in the sections below.

Finding 1.1: Career-Specific Information

Six counselors highlighted the prevalent issue of students' limited knowledge about various career options and the misconceptions surrounding the connection between majors and careers. Notably, several counselors described the significant misinformation that students have when starting college regarding the connections between majors and careers. As Counselor #9 described,

I think a lot of students just don't know what careers exist or what's required to go into a particular career. There's a lot of misinformation and myths about careers that I think it's our obligation, our professional obligation, and our responsibility to provide, because they're making this decision with our institution, we should at the very least provide more information about the careers that these majors lead to. - Counselor #9

This counselor felt that, given students' decision to enroll at this institution, counselors at the site have a professional responsibility to address any myths or misunderstandings students have regarding the academic pathways leading to certain careers. Students receive a list of majors without necessarily being provided with career choices or comprehensive career counseling to help them understand how that fits into

their big-picture goals. This can result in students feeling undecided, or exploring paths that may not align with their interests or goals.

While course descriptions and introductory information on the website may briefly mention potential career outcomes, these are often inadequate and merely presented as short blurbs lacking in-depth details. This observation underscores the need for more extensive and detailed resources that can help community college students make well-informed decisions about their majors and future careers. By addressing this information gap, counselors can empower students to navigate their educational journeys with a clearer understanding of the practical applications and employment opportunities related to their chosen fields of study.

Several counselors also noted that limited career exposure can significantly impact students' decision-making process, often leading them to prioritize the perceived financial stability of a career over their personal interests and happiness. Without the necessary exposure to different career paths, students may solely focus on the financial aspects and the ability to sustain a living:

A lot of times, students will see, without having any career experience, they'll see how difficult it is to have a living to contribute to your state of wellbeing and your income and all that stuff. So they focus more on what is going to be lucrative and what's going to be good to sustain a living, which is important. But it seems like they put most of the emphasis on that and not so much on their interests and whether or not they're going to be happy in those careers. - Counselor #9

Participants in this study perceived that students tend to emphasize lucrative pathways without considering their own passions and whether they will find fulfillment in

those careers. The absence of career exploration and real-world experiences leaves students with a limited understanding of the diverse range of options available to them. The excessive emphasis on financial considerations rather than personal fulfillment can result in students pursuing careers solely for monetary reasons, potentially leading to dissatisfaction. It highlights the critical need for comprehensive career exposure to help students make informed decisions.

Finding 1.2: Real-World Career Exposure

In addition to suggesting that students need specific information about careers to make informed decisions about their major, most counselors also emphasized the value of gaining real-world exposure to various careers. Eight of the 11 participants described the value in the practicality of out-of-class experiences. These types of experiences provide practical insights into different professions, help identify personal strengths and passions, and offer valuable knowledge about current job market trends. By gaining firsthand experience and connecting their academic pursuits to meaningful career opportunities, students can make informed decisions that lead to a fulfilling and successful future:

> *The parts that are missing or that are rare, but I feel everyone needs to some*
>
> *extent, is that real-world experience. So an internship, volunteer work, shadowing*
>
> *somebody. I think that whole arena we need to really work on. - Counselor #6*

By actively participating in these activities, students can acquire firsthand knowledge of various professions and gain insight into the day-to-day realities of different careers. This emphasis on real-world experiences aims to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and practical application, empowering students to make more well-rounded and informed career choices.

Out-of-class or real-world career exposure also provides students with more opportunities to become familiar with the various skills, competencies, and characteristics necessary for success in a variety of career tracks. Counselor 3 described these types of experiences as helping students to become more aware of their own interests and abilities:

I feel like students are less aware of themselves in general and what they like and what they don't. And they don't have the opportunity to get out there and experience a little bit more about what they want to do or what they think they want to do. And therefore, if they haven't been exposed to just real life, world, and work, how are they going to know what they like? - Counselor #3

By venturing beyond theoretical knowledge and embracing practical encounters, students can acquire a deeper understanding of their aptitudes, strengths, and inclinations. Furthermore, the counselor's language suggests that limited exposure can hinder students' ability to make confident decisions about their future careers. Without tangible experiences in different industries or professions, students may rely solely on assumptions or misconceptions about certain fields, potentially leading to misguided choices. Real-world exposure becomes an essential factor in dispelling uncertainties and illuminating the most fitting career paths.

In order to remedy the problem of limited career exposure, counselors stressed the importance of comprehensive career development initiatives that incorporate both classroom learning and experiential opportunities. By combining counseling sessions, and hands-on experiences, students can build a stronger foundation of self-awareness, explore diverse career options, and make choices that align with their interests, strengths, and aspirations:

But at least starting with that informational interview. Hey, I want to be a teacher. Oh,

I want to be this, I want to be that. Let me interview someone that already went

through that. So start that career exploration way sooner instead of waiting for them

to choose. Because I think that when you get exposed in that sense besides just using

O*net [career exploration website] or using whatever resources are there to explore or

to learn a little bit about a career, I think the best way is when you actually get to

experience - personal experience. - Counselor #5

According to counselors in this study, when students take part in internships,
informational interviews, or other real-world experiences, something magical happens –
they grow and discover a whole new level of awareness about their careers.

I think often it's looking at videos or informational interviewing, having an experience

where they are observing someone doing the kind of work they might want to do, or

just talking about it even in a video as opposed to so much of what we want and expect

students to do is go and read about stuff. When they can start to connect and see

themselves in that role, that helps them tremendously. So looking at videos at a

minimum, but encouraging those informational interviews, something that's beyond

reading about something. - Counselor #6

Students can put the textbook knowledge into action and see how it plays out in a
real work environment. The experience of learning from a professional may boost their
confidence and also help them develop crucial skills that cannot be taught in a classroom.
The feedback and mentorship they receive during these experiences become invaluable in
shaping their personal and professional growth. Ultimately, these encounters open their

eyes to a world of possibilities or help them understand what they do not enjoy in a job, ultimately refining their career goals.

The significance of real-world career exposure cannot be overstated. The inclusion of internships, volunteer work, informational interviewing, shadowing, and other experiential opportunities provide students with invaluable insights into different professions, allowing them to develop a deeper understanding of their own interests and preferences, and connecting the dots between academic knowledge and real-world application.

Finding 1.3: Early Intervention

Building on the topic of what students need when choosing a major, nine counselors discussed the necessity to incorporate earlier and more comprehensive career-oriented information into the college's current design. Counselors talked about the importance of intervening early in a student's educational journey, preferably in middle school or early high school, to provide career education and exploration opportunities. Counselor 9 explained how early intervention might look:

I think that targeting students while they're in high school with these career assessment tools or career exploration tools, either through workshops, career assessments that we help fund or pay for, that's kind of missing cause we do that now, but we do it and it might be a little too late. Not that it's too late, but it should be done before they enter college just because at least we'll have the formula on how to select the major without any sort of outside influence. And once they get to college, they get overwhelmed with all the other stuff that they need to do that engaging in career exploration on their own time is usually something that doesn't cross their mind. So I

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think having them do it as part of the outreach recruitment process, maybe designate

some counselors. I know we've experimented with that in the past, but to really

designate some counselors to do that and to do career exploration, career

development advisement or workshops or whatever through the high schools. -

Counselor #9

Such early interventions or outreach efforts could include providing counseling,

career information, and resources to help students make informed decisions about their

educational and career pathways. This information should include not only the pathways

or majors available but also potential career opportunities. It is worth mentioning that

these counseling insights are geared specifically toward traditional-aged students coming

from high school into community college. Additional approaches may need to be

considered for non-traditional students.

Some participants emphasized the importance of early outreach due to the fact that

the campus decided to eliminate the undecided option for students. As one counselor

explained:

I think we need to do a better job if the expectation is that students are going to choose

a pathway that they feel is best for them when they first apply, and they're new

students. We need to do a lot better job educating students before they get to us.-

Counselor #6

For both students and the institution to achieve efficiency in this new approach, it is

essential for students to gain more information, exposure, and awareness about career

possibilities and the specific pathways leading to those opportunities earlier in their

educational journey. Without such insights, students might make arbitrary choices under

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pressure and end up switching paths shortly after, undermining the purpose of Guided

Pathways, which aims to provide a clearer and more streamlined educational journey.

Forcing students into a meta-major can only be effective when they possess a realistic, even

if general, understanding of potential careers and occupations that align with their

interests and abilities.

Finding 1.4: Undecided Option

As noted in Chapter Three, this site decided to eliminate the option for students to

remain undecided in their majors. This decision means that upon entering the institution,

students need to choose a major, thereby allowing them to become a part of a CAP. Eight of

the 11 counselors brought up the topic of undecided students. When reflecting on this

change, counselors felt this may lead to students feeling like they are forced into making a

premature selection of their major. Counselor 9 lamented:

> *But at the same time if someone's undecided, I don't feel like it's right to rush them just*
>
> *because our model says that they should, or financial aid says they should, or whatever*
>
> *entity says they should. It's an important decision. And I've seen a lot of students go*
>
> *towards nursing or something like that and then decide at the last minute that it's not*
>
> *for them because they didn't spend the time doing the exploration and really dissecting*
>
> *the major and the career and see if that's something that they really truly want to do*
>
> *or if it's something that they just decided to because they were rushed.*

Counselor 9 raises the issue of students making ill-informed choices early in their

college careers due to limited information and exposure to other possibilities, limited or no

guidance from counselors, and without any time for counselors to try to intervene.

Counselor 9 went on to share the idea that instead of presenting a multitude of pathways,

which can be overwhelming or confusing, a clear and distinct process specifically designed for undecided students would be beneficial by allowing them to select "Undecided" as their major. This would allow the college to identify those students and provide additional support. Most participants in this study felt strongly that undecided students should not be rushed into making a hasty decision about their major or career path. They believed such a process unfairly pressured students solely based on institutional requirements. Such a significant decision requires careful exploration and analysis. There are potential consequences of students choosing a major without thoroughly evaluating their compatibility with the field. Rushed decisions can lead to later realizations that the chosen path is not the right fit.

> *Just because I feel if they continue beyond the second semester without not really knowing, I think that that can really delay the time for which they will either earn their AA or transfer or they might just begin to take classes that might not necessarily apply to whatever major they end up pursuing. - Counselor #1*

The lack of an undecided option goes beyond simply switching majors to also include lost time, unusable credits, and frustration navigating different requirements which students may experience by being forced to make an ill-informed choice. Counselors felt that there is a need for an "Undecided" major option which would allow for more institutional support. Another counselor added:

> *Definitely it would be okay to say that you're undecided and have a path for them so that we can help them decide. So then we can point the students into what they need to help them select a major and do career exploration if that's necessary for them at this point. - Counselor #11*

There is a need for a structured approach from the beginning of a student's academic journey to help them navigate their decision-making process. Since "Undecided" is no longer a major choice offered by the college, and a major decision is required at the time of application, there is no longer a way to identify undecided students through the college application.

One counselor shared that they did not view the lack of an undecided option as a forced choice, given that students have the ability to continue to change their major throughout their time at the institution.

They changed three or four times. So that's the part that it's not exactly forced choice, but my concern is for those students who don't really come see a counselor, don't really get guidance that they may have this idea that, oh, this is where I'm stuck here now. - Counselor #6

As evidenced in this perspective, because students retain the ability to switch majors, some counselors did not view the lack of an undecided option as prematurely forcing students into a limited pathway; however, these counselors tended to worry about the lack of guardrails on the policy given that not all students make time to meet with counselors about their major and career plans. Counselors play a crucial role in that, without an undecided choice available to students and without intervention from counselors who can identify those students, they may feel quite stuck.

In conclusion, counselors shared their views on providing comprehensive support and guidance to undecided students in their academic and career decision-making process. The current approach of eliminating the option to remain undecided in majors was discussed as pressuring students into premature decisions.

To sum up the findings from this section, counselors emphasized four key needs for students when choosing a major: Career-Specific Information, Real-World Career Exposure, Early Intervention, and an Undecided Option. The counselors recognized the importance of providing students with accurate and comprehensive information about various career options, dispelling misconceptions, and highlighting the practical connections between majors and careers. Additionally, they stressed the significance of real-world experiences, such as internships and volunteer work, to help students identify their interests and strengths and make informed decisions about their future paths. Early intervention in middle school or early high school was deemed essential to offer career education and exploration opportunities that enable students to navigate their academic journey with a clearer sense of direction. Lastly, counselors expressed concerns about eliminating the undecided option for students, emphasizing the need for a structured approach to support undecided students in making well-informed decisions without undue pressure. Overall, addressing these needs is crucial in guiding students toward fulfilling and successful career paths.

Findings Related to Research Question #2

When queried about Guided Pathways' successful innovations counselors provided responses that revealed two main innovations: (2.1) Career and Academic Pathways (CAPs, also known as meta-majors) and (2.2) Course Program Maps. These accomplishments are presented in the sections below.

Finding 2.1: CAPs (Meta-Majors)

The majority of counselors interviewed generally recognized CAPs as an effective approach to the major selection process, and most counselors agreed that the

implementation of Guided Pathways has made students' lives easier (see Table 3). By grouping related majors into clusters, (e.g., Science, Tech, Engineering, and Math [STEM]), students can explore and ultimately select a major within their desired field of study. By grouping related majors and providing clear academic roadmaps, CAPs can offer students a more streamlined experience since students more commonly know which area they are interested in but are not always aware of a particular major that they would like to commit to. Counselor 9 described CAPs as a worthwhile approach:

> *Overall, I think it's a good idea to try, from our perspective, to take some of the pressure off having to know precisely what they want in the door. I think it provides students with a way to really refocus on career fields as opposed to majors. I think there's a lot of good starts to this, and I think that helps students find their place in the CAPs.*

There are potential benefits of reducing the pressure on students to make specific decisions allowing students to explore within disciplinary and career fields of interest. This approach acknowledges that many students enter college without a clear understanding of their specific long-term career goals and may need time to clarify their interests and passions within more general fields or disciplines. Many of these same counselors were critical of the lack of an undecided option but gave favorable reviews regarding meta-majors since meta-majors offer a more structured approach to exploration. By grouping related majors together, meta-majors provide students with a clearer and more streamlined path to follow, reducing the likelihood of wasted credits and facilitating a smoother transition between majors within a CAP if needed. Allowing students to explore major and career fields beyond specific majors encourages them to consider alternative

pathways and fosters a more holistic approach to their educational journey. Students in a

CAP are also more likely to take courses that overlap with other major requirements within

their CAP, should they decide to switch majors within the CAP.

> *I like [the CAP] approach because I think that for a student who might not be so*
>
> *certain about one specific major, at least they're put in this CAP where you're with*
>
> *other majors that might be of a similar interest. And I think that that can be very*
>
> *helpful if the student decides to maybe switch from one to another, even if it hopefully*
>
> *might be within the same CAP. - Counselor #1*

Guided Pathways introduced meta-majors as a way to simplify and clarify the

process of choosing a major for college students. The idea is to group similar majors

together under broader categories (meta-majors). This approach was implemented to

make it easier for students to navigate through the many available academic programs,

especially in community colleges, which often offer a wide range of options. By organizing

related majors into meta-majors, students are presented with more coherent and well-

defined pathways to follow.

> *I think that for the majority of them, I want to say that it's been helpful for them to*
>
> *have been put in a CAP because the course selection is more clear. The support is there.*
>
> *They feel like they have some sort of notion of what other related majors they have as*
>
> *options. - Counselor #3*

As described by Counselor 3, CAPs provide students with more than more

streamlined guidance about pursuing courses and reducing redundancies; they also

provide students with a community of other faculty and students with similar interests.

Additionally, they allow students to explore connected career paths. For example, career

panels allow students to learn from professionals and develop a deeper understanding of how their majors parlay into workforce opportunities. As Counselor 8 explained:

So it's pretty good. I mean, because the thing is certain CAPs have career panels. And within [those] career panels, they have ...panelists from different subject[s]. So it's good to have that because if you are a social into arts in that CAP, then you can see and explore what [other] career options you have within that CAP. - Counselor #8

Presently, the programming within CAPs is mainly organized by the faculty associated with the specific CAP. While CAPs are still being established more fully, they are seen by counselors as a positive innovation that with time and effort will provide more clarity and support for students during their time within the community college system.

In conclusion, counselors generally recognize CAPs as a valuable approach to the major selection process. By grouping related majors into clusters, CAPs offer students a more streamlined experience, allowing them to explore and select a major within their desired field of study. The intentional programming initiatives, such as career panels and online communities while still in progress, will eventually facilitate the exploration process and foster a sense of community among students.

Finding 2.2: Course Program Maps

Another significant aspect of Guided Pathways that aids students in their academic journey and helps them stay on track is the implementation of Course Program Maps. Five counselors discussed the innovation of program maps. Program maps showcase the timeline and list of courses a student needs to complete their degree requirements, including their major prep coursework and general education. These maps are typically broken down into routes for the California State University system or for the University of

California System. Counselors mostly felt these program maps were helpful for clarifying students' course-taking patterns, and that the design is a good start even though they could still use some work to accommodate plans for part-time students since they currently showcase a full-time option only. As Counselor 1 described:

> *I think going back to the program mapper, I think that's very helpful for a student that's a full-time student because I really do see that's kind of how it's designed. The program mapper gives you the different majors, and this is what you should follow the two years, and it will help you. - Counselor #1*

Program maps give students an idea of which classes they need each semester. Program maps are available to the public on the college website, so students can access these maps on their own. Taking the right courses for students' majors early on is important, as it lays the foundation for meeting academic requirements. Many majors have specific course requirements and sequencing, and starting early allows students to make steady progress and avoid potential delays toward graduation. By taking the correct courses from the beginning, students can align their course selections with their degree requirements, minimizing the need for course retakes or last-minute changes that could prolong their time in college. Although program maps cannot fully replace the personalized guidance provided through one-to-one counseling by a counselor, students can effectively utilize the program mapper tool to gain insights into the specific coursework required for their chosen area of interest. While students are still expected to meet with a counselor to receive a Student Educational Plan (SEP) as they were prior to program maps, these maps now provide an additional exploration option that students can examine on their own and in conjunction with a counselor.

I think that the program maps could be a little bit better, but they're a good start. It's a

good idea. [It] has good intent to show students what would be expected of them

academically to fulfill the requirements for the major. I just think it needs some

tweaking. Mainly the way that information is presented now as seven CAPs or

pathways and then showing them what kind of majors and jobs correspond to that

instead of just giving them this long list of majors and have them take a career

assessment to narrow it down on their own. - Counselor #9

One counselor discussed a helpful change of Guided Pathways:

I think the most specific thing that I've noticed with Guided Pathways and the CAPs

that we're using is the visualization of once we click the program map. - Counselor #10

Being able to visualize a two-year path of coursework semester by semester can let

students compare their options for transfer to the CSU or UC system by major and see what

is a good fit for their interests and timeline. While students still often need a counselor to

help them create an individualized plan based on their goals, the program mapper provides

clarity about what different options look like for students to compare. This can help

students feel less overwhelmed by being able to see what the requirements and timelines

are semester-by-semester for different majors.

Findings Related to Research Question #3

Despite the various successes of GP implementation to date, counselors identified at

least two critical shortcomings of the policy and its implementation: (3.1) the slower-than-

anticipated roll-out and (3.2) Guided Pathways fails to provide personalized advising and

support, especially for disadvantaged and first-generation students. Analysis of these

concerns provides valuable insights into the challenges and areas that necessitate further attention within the Guided Pathways framework.

Finding 3.1: The Roll-Out of Guided Pathways Has Been Slower Than Expected

Counselors viewed the slower-than-expected rollout of Guided Pathways as a limitation that can be attributed to various factors. Seven counselors discussed how even three years after its initial introduction, Guided Pathways is still not yet fully implemented, making it difficult to know what the results will be. Implementing a comprehensive system-wide reform is complex. The adoption of Guided Pathways requires substantial coordination, collaboration, and adjustments across multiple departments and administrative levels. Counselors reported needing to become accustomed to the specific components of the new initiative and framework and then the need to transition their thinking and behavior to be more fully aligned with the new policy. Counselor 6 elaborated on these points:

> *We need to, as a campus, create more of a comprehensive structure. I don't know if that's the right word, but comprehensive package or structure for how all the different ways that students can interface with career information and guidance. We have great, wonderful resources, great people; we need a different way to put it together and to get students involved. I think the barrier is how we do things as an institution, and we're working on changing that, but change is really slow. - Counselor #6*

This counselor acknowledged that the campus already possesses valuable resources and personnel, but it lacks an efficient and cohesive system for students to access and engage with these resources effectively. Such a significant redesign demands coordination and collaboration among various stakeholders, making the implementation process slower.

Creating campus-wide structures that cater to all aspects of career support has been a time-consuming process. As mentioned elsewhere in this study, the site was still early in its implementation of Guided Pathways when counselors participated in interviews. Participants recognized this point and urged the need for patience and a strong commitment to continue supporting its rollout. While the goal of Guided Pathways is to create a more seamless experience for students, instituting this change is a process as the college works to reshape its institutional practices while actively engaging students.

> *Even the counseling redesign for the CAPs was daunting. Just to do it on paper in the abstract, but it's not so easy because, in some ways, we're still in the old framework, but also in the new. We haven't completely made that transition. And because it's so huge, it's going to take a while. And so I hope that everyone, including the administration, will continue to support it, but also have some patience about how it's all working because it's a lot. - Counselor #6*

Another counselor noted that the implementation is not there yet with Guided Pathways:

> *I really don't feel that it's fully implemented yet. And we can create the system for the students, we can create the framework for it, but it's like it's a culture that has to be created and massaged into our current set of our students, our cohorts of students as they come in. It's not something that's going to happen, Fall 2023 - meta-majors, here it is. It's something that has to be built into the way of thinking, even maybe at the middle school level or the high school level. It's the very latest of this is how college works now. - Counselor #4*

Guided Pathways is a larger framework to implement than what some may have initially imagined, and sometimes the distribution of tasks has not been equal among faculty, which can contribute to a slower implementation process. While these dynamics may have always been present, Guided Pathways has not paid enough attention to how to delegate the breakdown of work needed for the implementation, which is contributing to the length of time in reaching the goals of the four pillars. It has not been extremely clear who is responsible for each part of the implementation. CAP teams were formed with discipline faculty, an assigned counselor or two, and a counseling assistant. However, counselors initially felt that they took on more responsibility to build out the online Canvas communities and offer programming to students and mentioned that more faculty involvement would be beneficial.

> *I see some of the CAP faculty teams doing things some more than others in different CAPs, but the connection between the counseling CAP team and the rest of the team, the integration, I'm not real clear myself. It looks like we have the beginning of that, but it's a lot that we envisioned that has not occurred yet. And so maybe this takes a lot longer than we envisioned to do all this revamping. - Counselor #6*

The quote provided by Counselor 6 highlights the challenges faced in integrating counseling with the rest of the faculty CAP teams. This suggests that the implementation of CAP communities and programming is not uniform across the institution, leading to variations in how each team operates. It was also noted that there has been a lack of clarity on who is responsible for leading these teams. This lack of clarity implies that there might be communication gaps or insufficient collaboration at this point in the rollout.

Additionally, there was a plan to assign General Counselors, who see all majors, to specific CAPs and have them gradually transition their focus from serving the general population to becoming specialists in their assigned CAP over a period of five years with the CAP population increasing over that time. This means that counselors would be responsible for providing guidance and support to students within a particular academic pathway, which is a cluster of related majors or programs. The intended approach was to have the assigned counselors gradually shift their focus away from serving the general population and develop their expertise in one CAP. By working closely with students pursuing similar academic paths, the counselors could develop in-depth knowledge about the specific challenges, opportunities, and career prospects associated with that particular pathway. There have been some initial efforts toward achieving the goal of counselors becoming specialists in their respective CAPs, but this transition is still in progress since counselors are still balancing the general population with their CAP-specific population.

> *And the part where the CAP counselors are going to become sort of experts, if you will, or specialists in the field or in that CAP. I see the beginnings of that, but we're not there yet. So I think it just needs more work. - Counselor #6*

Furthermore, what I found in my interview process was that the CAP communities that this campus decided to develop are not fully functional yet. Online Canvas shells were supposed to have been functional for each of the CAPs where students could connect, find information about CAP-related events, and become a part of a community. While these shells have been built, managing and promoting them is still in progress. As a result, there was not enough awareness among the counselors for them to be able to share thoughts or feedback about the online CAP communities at this moment in the implementation process.

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As the implementation of Guided Pathways continues, it is evident that achieving the desired outcomes requires time and patience. The college is grappling with the complexities of reshaping institutional practices and engaging students effectively. The comprehensive structure and cultural shift necessary for successful implementation are ongoing challenges. While progress has been made, there is still work to be done.

Finding 3.2: Students Need More Personalized Advising/Support

All counselors viewed the lack of personalized guidance being offered to students with the current implementation as a limitation of Guided Pathways. Their recommendations included a call for more human interactions, counseling sessions, and discussions with faculty to better understand and address student needs. Counselors felt that a shortcoming of Guided Pathways is that it has made things less personal and expressed feelings that students are not supposed to be cogs in a one-size-fits-all machine. While Guided Pathways did not create this issue, counselors believed that more could be done to address the need for more flexibility, nuance, and human connection, especially for disadvantaged and first-generation students. Counselor 11 explained the consequences of a policy that emphasizes efficiency at the expense of direct interactions between students and counselors:

> *Students just pick a major, and there's not necessarily any guidance there, and there's also no option for the ones who haven't decided on a major, then I think students can get really lost there or forced into selecting something. And then they get to us, and it's like, oh yeah, I started taking the classes because, according to the program map, I'm supposed to be taking these classes, but this is not really what I want. And so now*

they've taken courses that they didn't even need because there wasn't that initial

guidance at the beginning.

Guided Pathways aims to simplify the process of major selection and reduce counselors' student loads by providing clear program maps for students to follow. However, the execution may have been misguided, as it overlooks the complexity and individuality of choosing a major. The reality is that sites generally believe that they need to reduce costs, so increasing the number of counselors is unlikely, but there might be alternative ways to develop and implement these new policies so that the interaction with counselors is not eliminated for so many students. By oversimplifying the decision-making process, students may make uninformed choices and miss out on opportunities for exploration and self-discovery, or even take the wrong courses for their goal. While many counselors seemed to favor the aim of reducing counselors' student loads by introducing online information such as program maps, several counselors worried that it may be limiting the personalized support students need during this critical phase of their academic journey.

Yeah, because a lot of the students aren't going to know, they don't even know how to

check their email, or they don't know how to access their student portal, but yet they

have to make a decision that's going to be determining the rest of their career right off

the bat, I think isn't the best approach. - Counselor #2

Many students may lack essential skills for navigating the college environment. Several participants believed that expecting students to make life-altering decisions without adequate support or the necessary tools represented an ineffective design. Counselor 11 elaborated on this point:

And I know that everywhere they have to click and they're saying follow the maps. But I think for the majority of our students, it's too much to expect from them to figure that out on their own, even though they're, our students are not on their own but to just think, oh, we put it in these nice little maps, everybody's going to be able to always take the classes the way that we have 'em in that order, and it's just going to be seamless. It doesn't work that way. And especially not with our students. They need a lot of guidance.

The expectation for students to choose a major, navigate program maps, and submit education plan requests solely online, without direct interaction with a counselor, diminishes the accuracy and effectiveness that personal guidance and advisement can provide. It is crucial to consider the limitations of a technology-driven approach and acknowledge the value of face-to-face interactions with counselors in the decision-making process.

The way this site has chosen to implement Guided Pathways seems to take more of a one-size-fits-all approach or an impersonal approach to working with students. Several counselors highlighted the issue of students feeling lost or forced into selecting majors without proper guidance. The absence of personalized counseling sessions can result in students making uninformed decisions or taking unnecessary courses, which can be detrimental to their educational journey. Counselor 7 raised several questions related to this point:

Let's say if they were into the STEM community, they're like, does that mean that it's just a math major? Or I wanted to be a doctor. It's like, no, I have to break it down. Yeah, what are possible things? And it's like if they don't have someone that is doing

that with them, sometimes they just choose. Let's just choose a random one because I

have to finish the application.

Many four-year institutions, for example, require students to apply to a major or identify with a major upon enrolling whereas others have policies preventing students from selecting majors until the end of their first year. Often those policies are developed based on the kinds of students the institution attracts and enrolls. This site in particular enrolls a large share of first-generation and low-income students. Therefore, it can be problematic to require students to select a major when applying to college without providing them with the opportunity to consult with a counselor or other knowledgeable college personnel. In such cases, students may end up choosing a major arbitrarily or without a clear understanding of how it aligns with their future career aspirations or the program requirements. This approach neglects the significance of informed decision-making, potentially causing students to feel disconnected or uncertain about their chosen major. Consequently, they might enroll in the wrong courses due to misunderstandings, given that the information provided may seem like mere words on a page with unclear abbreviations that hold little or no meaning to students:

And they're choosing it again on the computer, which is just letters, right? And this is a

very important life decision, and they're just going based off a screen that says letters

and abbreviations. - Counselor #2

As evidenced by the previous quote, students selecting STEM may not even have full awareness of what STEM stands for when making that decision. Since students are asked to select their major at the time of completing a college application before speaking with a counselor, they may not have an understanding of what they are self-selecting.

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And I know that everywhere they have to click, and they're saying "follow the maps."

But I think for the majority of our students, it's too much to expect from them to figure

that out on their own. - Counselor #11

In the context of this institution, several themes and findings shared for research question #1 suggest potential reasons why students face difficulties in choosing a major independently. The lack of exploration and exposure to various academic fields, particularly for first-generation students, can be a significant obstacle. Many community college students might not have had the opportunity to explore different disciplines adequately before enrolling, leaving them unsure about their interests and strengths. The guidance provided by counselors can help them better understand the available options and align their interests with suitable majors. Furthermore, the decision-making process may be further complicated by external factors, such as financial constraints and family expectations. These factors can add additional pressure on students. While it is essential to acknowledge that some students may face challenges in selecting a major independently, counselors can play a crucial role in providing tailored guidance and support. Their expertise can empower students to explore their interests, build confidence in their choices, and ultimately contribute to their overall academic success and personal growth.

Counselors expressed a desire to have more opportunities to interact with students, ask specific questions, and provide guidance in creative ways. There may not be enough counseling faculty to handle the needs of the student population effectively. This leads to an approach to counseling where counselors are overwhelmed and cannot provide in-depth counseling appointments or guidance to all students.

So the barrier would be more that we need, in a weird way, this is weird to say this, but we need to not rely solely on technology and written information. We need to have more human encounters. So more counseling sessions, more discussions with faculty…There's not enough of us to go around. - Counselor #6

Once again, if the aim of Guided Pathways is to streamline major selection and course registration, leading to a reduction in counselors' caseloads, engaging in more discussions with faculty serves a purpose. By doing so, faculty members can potentially incorporate conversations in class about the next courses in a sequence, making the process more inclusive and sharing the responsibility of supporting students' academic journey.

Considering the broader goals of Guided Pathways, it seems unlikely that relying solely on technology would be a sustainable long-term solution, especially considering the potential intention of reducing the burden on counselors. As the implementation evolves and program maps become more established, counselors made it increasingly evident that more human interaction, where students have more counseling sessions and discussions with academic faculty in their CAP, is needed.

What I would say is that we say that we have these big ideas and we're innovative and we're this and we're that. But at the end of the day, there's not enough of us. - Counselor #4

While the Guided Pathways implementation is not responsible for the large volume of work or high student-to-counselor ratio, more could be done to address the need for more personalized counseling. Acknowledging the dilemma at hand, counselors indeed understand the importance of reducing their caseloads, given that their numbers may not

be sufficient to support all students effectively. However, there is frustration regarding the current approach to easing this burden. It would be beneficial to explore concrete and practical measures to address the unique challenges faced by these student populations and tailor support services accordingly. Counselors expressed challenges of a one-size-fits-all model, particularly when it comes to challenges faced by underrepresented students.

> *It goes back to one size doesn't fit everyone. And sometimes Guided Pathways, I might not be understanding correctly, but that's how sometimes I see it. - Counselor #5*

First-generation students or students from underrepresented backgrounds may feel pressured to choose a major without sufficient exposure or understanding of their options and normally have less educational support to help them make those decisions.

> *I want to say 95% of my students are Latino or Latino descendant. And a lot of them are first-generation. So I see that we're asking them to choose something that they don't know yet because they haven't been exposed. So right at the beginning, we're asking them, you got to be in social behavior or whatever the CAP is, but they have no idea. So we add those extra layers. I guess Guided Pathways, its intention is great, but it's missing those factors. - Counselor #5*

The extra layers referenced by Counselor 5 refer to the process of asking primarily first-generation students who do not have as much career exposure, to select a major and therefore a CAP at the beginning of their academic journey. The limited availability of counseling and academic advising can hinder underrepresented students' ability to make informed major and career decisions. Without a professional to help guide them, they are oftentimes making decisions alone or based on information provided to them by their peers. Further, underrepresented students often face financial challenges that may

influence their choice of major and career pathway. Many times they are balancing family

life, with work, and school and do not always have the same college knowledge as students

who come from families with a history of attending college. They may feel pressure to

pursue careers that their parents or family members want for them, rather than following

their own interests and passions.

In regards to barriers faced by students, one counselor shared:

I think awareness is definitely one of them. We throw a lot of titles at them in terms of

majors, but aren't giving the time to really define those for them. So to us, it may make

sense that we say it's STEM, these are all the science majors, so to us it makes sense.

But to a first-generation college student, it may not make sense. What is STEM? I don't

know. I'm not sure where my major falls. I'm not even sure what the title of my major

is. I really want to do something in this. But I think for a lot of our first-generation

college students, that's a barrier that there's the assumption that coming in, they are

going to be able to identify the major, be able to open up that catalog, and find exactly

what they need to take based on those maps that have already been created. -

Counselor #11

The provided statement highlights a critical issue with Guided Pathways in its

assumption that all students can readily understand the terminology and concepts related

to majors and careers. This can be particularly challenging for first-generation students

who might lack exposure to such language and might not even be familiar with the name of

their current major, let alone how it fits within a specific CAP. This underscores the

importance of providing more personalized counseling support to address the needs of

first-generation students and others who may struggle with navigating the complexities of

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academia. Guided Pathways implementation should recognize the diverse backgrounds and experiences of students and avoid relying on assumptions that might not align with the reality of their academic journey. Counselors play a vital role in providing tailored guidance, addressing students' specific concerns, and helping them connect their interests and goals to relevant CAPs and career paths.

Summary

To recap, I conducted interviews with 11 counselors from one Southern California community college. The interviewees varied in terms of their roles, experience level, and background. I spoke with the counselors about the needs of community college students. I analyzed the transcripts from these interviews in order to capture the counselors' perspectives.

With respect to research question #1, I found that counselors emphasized the need to provide career-specific information to students (Finding 1.1). Counselors highlighted the significance of real-world career exposure for students (Finding 1.2). They emphasized the value of internships, volunteer work, and shadowing experiences to help students gain practical knowledge and understand the realities of various professions. Counselors identified the need for early intervention to support students in their career exploration and decision-making process (Finding 1.3). They emphasized the importance of providing guidance and resources early on to help students explore different pathways and make informed choices. Moreover, counselors recognized the need to have an "Undecided" option for students who are uncertain about their majors (Finding 1.4). They highlighted the importance of providing resources and support tailored to the unique needs of undecided students.

Moving on to research question #2, counselors discussed the innovation of Career and Academic Pathways (CAPs) as a way to provide structured guidance to students selecting a major (Finding 2.1). They shared their perspectives on the usefulness of implementing CAPs within the community college system. Counselors discussed the use of course program maps as a tool to guide students' course selection (Finding 2.2). They shared insights on how program maps can help students understand program requirements and compare options.

With respect to research question #3, counselors expressed concerns about the slow roll-out of Guided Pathways (Finding 3.1). They discussed the challenges and limitations of implementing new initiatives. Lastly, counselors emphasized the need for more personalized advising and support for students (Finding 3.2). They highlighted the importance of human interaction, counseling sessions, and discussions with faculty to better understand and address student needs, particularly for first-generation and disadvantaged populations.

In the following chapter, I will discuss these findings and their implications.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

This study delved into the perspectives of community college counselors in

California, focusing on their insights into students' major and career decision-making

processes. The research questions revolved around understanding counselors' perceptions

of students' needs when selecting a major, their evaluation of successful innovations within

the Guided Pathways approach, and their identification of the limitations and overlooked

aspects of Guided Pathways. To answer these questions, I collected qualitative data through

interviews with eleven counselors from one Southern California community college

campus. Thematic analysis involving an iterative process from data collection to

transcription and analysis was employed to dissect the collected data. The collected

interview transcripts were organized and analyzed using Dedoose software. The coding

process facilitated the emergence of themes and sub-themes that shed light on community

college counselors' insights into students' major and career decisions during the

implementation of Guided Pathways, contributing to a deeper understanding of the

processes involved.

Summary of Major Findings

In response to Research Question #1, the study's findings on students' needs when

choosing a major were divided into four key areas. First, counselors highlighted the

importance of providing students with career-specific information, as many students lack

knowledge about various career options and the connections between majors and careers.

Second, participants noted the vitality of real-world career exposure, as hands-on

experiences and internships help students gain practical insights into different professions,

identify personal strengths, and understand the job market. Third, early interventions provide opportunities to introduce career education and exploration as early as middle school or early high school to assist students in making well-informed decisions from the outset. Fourth, the counselors expressed concerns about the absence of an undecided option, stating that certain policies or practices may prompt some students to rush into making premature decisions, leading to potential consequences such as wasted credits and frustration.

In response to Research Question #2, the main successes identified by counselors included Career and Academic Pathways (CAPs) and Course Program Maps. First, CAPs group related majors into clusters, providing students with clear academic roadmaps and reducing the pressure of choosing a specific major upon entry to college. Counselors described CAPs as beneficial for helping students explore their interests and fostering a sense of community among students with similar academic pursuits. However, some counselors noted the need for an undecided option and more collaboration between the CAP counseling team and faculty. Second, Course Program Maps showcase the courses required for degree completion, aiding students in planning their academic journey. While they are helpful for full-time students, participants noted room for improvement, particularly with respect to accommodating part-time students. Program maps are primarily constructed with full-time students in mind, assuming a consistent and continuous enrollment pattern. Part-time students, on the other hand, often have varying schedules, commitments, and educational needs. The fixed nature of program maps can be less accommodating for part-time students who may need more flexibility to balance their studies with work, family responsibilities, or other commitments. Overall, these

innovations aim to enhance student success by providing clearer pathways and support for their educational and career goals.

With respect to Research Question #3, counselors in this study identified two critical shortcomings of the Guided Pathways implementation. First, the institution has rolled out Guided Pathways more slowly than expected due to the complexity of implementing a comprehensive system-wide reform. Coordinating and adjusting multiple departments and administrative levels requires time and patience. Counselors expressed the need for a more cohesive structure and emphasized the importance of ongoing support from administration to successfully integrate the new policy. Second, counselors expressed the school does not currently provide adequate personalized advising and support, especially for disadvantaged and first-generation students. They observed that relying solely on technology-driven approaches can lead to uninformed decisions and inadequate guidance. Students may feel lost or pressured to choose majors without proper support, and counselors stressed the value of face-to-face interactions to address individual needs effectively. This study suggests that those implementing the Guided Pathways framework should consider the challenges faced by students and prioritize tailored counseling and advisement to ensure successful academic and career decision-making.

Connections to Prior Research

Upon analyzing the findings from the interviews, it became evident that some experiences and insights of the counselors aligned with the existing literature. However, other experiences and insights contrasted with that literature. This section connects the findings of this study with the established research discussed in Chapter 2.

Concerning the impact of an undecided major, Leppel (2001) found that students with undecided majors tend to have lower academic performance and persistence rates, reinforcing the need for comprehensive support and guidance, as suggested in the findings, to prevent hasty and ill-informed decisions that may lead to dissatisfaction and delayed degree completion. In the current study, counselors expressed concern about the trajectory for undecided students within the Guided Pathways implementation, since the site is no longer identifying them to allow for targeted support. This study sheds light on the nuanced challenges undecided students encounter, especially within the Guided Pathways/CAPs framework. This is a significant contribution, as it presents the implications of the site removing the "Undecided" option. The decision of the college to eliminate the option for students to remain undecided in their majors, as revealed in this study, raised concerns among counselors. The potential pressure this places on students to make premature and uninformed decisions was not well documented in the Guided Pathways literature. This finding calls for further exploration of how colleges can best support undecided students without undue pressure.

In the context of counseling, the present study emphasizes the vital role counselors play in helping students navigate their academic and career decisions. Xiong et al. (2016) found that counselors contribute to students' confidence-building and personal development, which aligns with the counseling-related needs highlighted in this study. Tovar (2015) emphasized that counselors can significantly influence students' socialization at the college and their exposure to resources that support their success, further supporting the importance of connecting students with counselors to provide effective counseling services and a human element to the process. The relationships with counselors

were found to impact students' sense of belonging and degree progression, as supported by the studies of Barnett (2011), Rendón (1994), Tovar (2013), and Tovar et al. (2009). This study reiterates the multifaceted role of counselors, corroborating the findings of Novak (2017) and others, by emphasizing their involvement in helping students create comprehensive educational plans and explore potential careers. Additionally, the reinforcement of counselors' roles in bolstering student confidence, facilitating academic and personal growth (as echoed by Xiong et al., 2016), and shaping college socialization experiences (Tovar, 2015) adds weight to the already established literature. Counselors are indeed the bridge between students and effective academic and career planning, even with the creation of program maps.

The use of program maps to develop educational plans, as mentioned by Jenkins et al. (2021), aligns with the counselors' reviews that program maps are a valuable resource to guide students on which courses are helpful for specific majors. However, counselors in this study noted that in order for students to fully understand the connections between majors and careers and make well-informed decisions about their educational pathways, a session with a counselor is very important. Jenkins et al. (2021) highlighted the utility of these maps in developing coherent educational plans. These program maps, often visual and detailed, serve as roadmaps, outlining the sequential coursework and key milestones a student needs to achieve within a specific major. Counselors, in this study, echoed the sentiments captured by Jenkins et al., emphasizing the helpful nature of program maps in detailing which courses are needed for specific majors. They believed that these maps provided a structured pathway, helping to demystify the academic journey, especially for students who may be first-generation college-goers or those unfamiliar with the intricacies

of academic planning. These maps give students a clear vision of what lies ahead, the courses they need to undertake, and the sequence in which they should be approached. However, while program maps offer a clear academic trajectory, counselors identified a gap in their ability to accommodate part-time students effectively. Their expertise goes beyond merely guiding students on course selection; they help students navigate the landscape of career possibilities associated with each major. Counselors, with their wealth of knowledge on job market trends, employment data, and vocational opportunities, can provide students with a holistic view, linking their academic choices to potential career outcomes. While previous research recognized the importance of counselors, this study emphasized the crucial role they play in guiding students, building their confidence, and fostering a sense of belonging. The insights provided by counselors in this study add depth and nuance to the understanding of how counseling impacts students' academic and career journeys.

Several key insights were uncovered in this study that were not previously well-documented in the literature. This study identified four distinct needs that students have when choosing a major at community colleges: Career-Specific Information, Real-World Career Exposure, Early Intervention, and access to an Undecided Option. While previous research may have touched on some of these aspects individually, this study brought them together comprehensively, providing a holistic understanding of the multifaceted support students require during this critical decision-making process.

In conclusion, while my research is in line with many findings from previous studies, it also offers fresh perspectives and insights. This interplay between past and present research is key for a holistic understanding of student experiences in community colleges.

Recommendations for Practice

In the following section, recommendations will be presented, starting with those tailored for the study site. This will be followed by suggestions for district leaders and culminating with recommendations for policymakers.

Recommendations for the Study Site

Based on the findings and information gathered in this study, several recommendations for practice can be made for the site.

Enhance Career Exposure and Exploration

Most participants in this study emphasized the need for more consistent, more accessible, and earlier access to interventions focused on real-world career exposure and exploration. These types of initiatives might include a comprehensive program that offers students regular and structured opportunities for real-world career exposure, such as internships, job shadowing, and volunteer work. Community colleges should consider establishing a centralized resource hub that provides career-specific information, detailing potential career paths and the connections between majors and respective career options. This initiative should be integrated into the college's curriculum and counseling services, ensuring all students have access to these invaluable experiences and resources as they navigate their major decision-making process. Counselors shared that students could benefit from having these resources explicitly incorporated into first-year college success courses taught by counselors. Counseling chairs could consider creating course syllabi examples for instructors that include this type of career programming built into their courses to make it easier to implement across the discipline.

Intervene Early

      Another initiative counselors shared that the college might consider could be developing and implementing a proactive early intervention program that starts in middle school or early high school to help students explore and decide on their major and career path. This program could include workshops, career assessments, and personalized counseling sessions led by trained professionals to guide students through the decision-making process. As recommended by counselors, colleges can establish partnerships with local high schools to deliver career education and exploration opportunities to their students, equipping them with the necessary information and resources to make well-informed choices before entering college. For this to be successful, colleges should continuously track and evaluate the program's effectiveness to ensure it positively impacts students' decision-making and leads to more successful educational and career outcomes.

Strategically Allocate Counseling Resources

      As the implementation of tools like CAPs and Course Program Maps effectively eases counseling burdens for specific student populations, it becomes imperative for institutions to address the persisting unmet needs of other student groups, as highlighted by counselors' insights. In essence, the question arises: How can we innovate the Guided Pathways approach to strategically decrease counselors' responsibilities in certain aspects or with particular students, thus enabling their expertise to be redirected towards higher-priority areas and students with greater needs? By strategically reallocating counseling efforts, community colleges can better optimize the impact of Guided Pathways strategies and ensure that counselors are efficiently supporting students across diverse pathways and circumstances. To enhance the efficiency of community college counselors and allow them

to focus more on counseling students, several strategic approaches can be considered. Colleges should implement user-friendly technology platforms that offer self-service resources and tools for routine tasks such as schedule planning, registration, and basic academic advising. This can free up counselors' time from administrative duties, allowing them to dedicate more attention to personalized counseling.

Colleges should develop comprehensive online resources, FAQ sections, and tutorials that address common student inquiries and concerns. Providing readily accessible information can reduce the need for one-on-one sessions for basic queries, enabling counselors to concentrate on more complex and individualized counseling needs. Colleges can consider increasing student access to counseling assistants or trained peer advisors who can assist students with general inquiries, such as course selection and campus resources. This can alleviate some of the routine tasks from counselors and direct students to the appropriate resources. Counselors suggested that faculty could partake in providing subject-specific guidance to provide students with additional faculty for support in their CAP. Something else colleges can consider is Implementing a tiered appointment system where urgent matters or students with complex needs are given priority for individual counseling sessions, while routine matters are addressed through other means, like online resources or peer advisors.

Provide Specific Support to First-Generation Students

To effectively support first-generation students the site should establish a peer mentoring program where current first-generation students act as mentors to incoming first-generation students. This creates a relatable support system and provides insights into navigating college life successfully. The site could design workshops tailored to

address the unique challenges faced by first-generation students, such as time management, study skills, and financial literacy. These workshops can equip them with essential tools for academic and personal success. Offering students access to a resource hub that offers information on scholarships, grants, community resources, and workshops specifically curated for first-generation students could be helpful. As far as professional development, the campus could provide faculty and staff with training to enhance their understanding of the unique challenges and strengths of first-generation students to promote a supportive campus environment. A counselor recommended that the college actively involve parents and families of underrepresented and first-generation students. This could work by developing workshops and resources to engage the families of first-gen students, offering guidance on how to support their academic journey. Further connecting students with an alumni network of successful first-gen alumni as mentors, guest speakers, or resources for current students, could inspire them and showcase potential career pathways. By integrating these strategies, including the insight from a couple of counselors who emphasized the importance of fostering a sense of belonging, the site could holistically support first-generation students, empowering them to make informed decisions about their education and career paths while nurturing a strong sense of belonging within the college community.

At the research site, an observation emerged as some community college counselors displayed a lack of awareness regarding specific provisions within the Guided Pathways framework. For example, out of the 16 counselors who responded to the questionnaire question "How knowledgeable are you about the following topics related to Guided Pathways?", two counselors indicated that they were not knowledgeable at all about Career

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Academic Pathways (CAPs)/meta-majors. This raises pertinent questions about the institution's efficacy in adequately preparing counselors to navigate and implement the policy's new practices. The evident knowledge gaps suggest that there might be room for improvement in terms of disseminating comprehensive information and training pertaining to Guided Pathways. To address this issue, it is crucial for the institution to prioritize the professional development of counselors. To facilitate this, the institution could carve out dedicated time for counselors, allowing them the opportunity to engage in meaningful and focused professional development activities. Moreover, it is imperative for the institution to take a proactive stance in designing targeted professional development opportunities. These initiatives should be thoughtfully crafted to address the specific needs and challenges faced by counselors and CAP teams.

Provide Targeted Support to Undecided Students

This site should take into serious consideration the feedback and concerns raised by counselors regarding the elimination of the "Undecided" major option. Instead of rushing students into making premature decisions about their academic and career paths, this site should explore alternative approaches that offer adequate support and guidance for students who are uncertain or unclear about their major and career goals. One possible approach is to implement an option designed specifically for undecided students, providing them with career assessment tools, workshops, and counseling sessions to help students explore various career options and identify their interests and strengths. Additionally, the college could establish a designated team of counselors specializing in career development and exploration to work closely with the undecided student population, providing personalized guidance and resources tailored to each student's unique needs and

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aspirations. They would help students navigate their decision-making process, assess their skills and interests, and connect them with real-world career exposure opportunities, such as internships and shadowing experiences.

To address concerns about academic performance and persistence rates among undecided students, community colleges should implement academic support services tailored to meet the needs of these students. This support might include academic advising, tutoring, and workshops aimed at improving study skills and time management. Furthermore, community colleges should regularly evaluate and assess the effectiveness of their career counseling and support services. Gathering feedback from students and counselors can help identify areas for improvement and inform future program enhancements.

Solicit Feedback from Counselors on Guided Pathways Implementation

This study revealed that counselors have not been extensively consulted or invited to contribute their insights regarding the execution of Guided Pathways initiatives. This lack of consultation raises questions about the extent to which counselors' expertise and on-the-ground experiences are being integrated into the development and refinement of Guided Pathways policies and practices. While some institutions may have mechanisms for counselor involvement, they might not be robust or effectively leveraged. The absence of established channels to gather regular feedback from counselors is a missed opportunity to tap into their valuable perspectives and expertise, which could play a pivotal role in refining and adapting Guided Pathways strategies to better align with students' diverse needs and challenges.

To invite feedback from counselors on the Guided Pathways policy, community colleges can implement various strategies that recognize and value their input. To encourage counselors to share their perspectives and concerns, community colleges can organize townhall-style meetings where counselors can openly discuss their thoughts on the Guided Pathways policy. These meetings provide a platform for counselors to voice their feedback, ask questions, and engage in constructive dialogue with college administrators and policymakers. They could conduct climate surveys that include all college faculty and staff to gather anonymous feedback on their experiences with the Guided Pathways policy. These surveys can assess perceptions of the policy's impact, effectiveness, and any challenges they might be facing.

Community colleges could also consider establishing focus groups comprising counselors to delve deeper into specific aspects of the Guided Pathways policy. These sessions can facilitate more in-depth discussions and generate valuable insights that might not emerge in larger settings. Furthermore, they could offer PD sessions for counselors that focus on the implementation and impact of the Guided Pathways policy. These sessions can create a space for counselors to share their experiences, discuss challenges, and collaboratively explore solutions.

Community colleges can set up physical feedback boxes or online platforms where counselors can submit their feedback anonymously or confidentially. This provides an alternative way for counselors who may be hesitant to share openly to contribute their thoughts. Community colleges should include counselors in committees and work groups responsible for reviewing and assessing the Guided Pathways policy. This involvement not only ensures their voices are heard but also gives them an active role in shaping policy

decisions. College leaders should establish regular check-ins with counselors to keep them updated on the progress made in response to their feedback.

Develop and Disseminate Resources for Career Exploration

The site, in conjunction with the counseling department, should implement a comprehensive career information section on the college website that includes detailed profiles of various careers, outlining their job responsibilities, required qualifications, salary ranges, and growth prospects. The website could also feature video interviews with professionals from different industries, showcasing their daily work routines and experiences. Additionally, establish partnerships with local businesses and organizations to offer regular career exploration events, such as industry-specific workshops, job fairs, and networking sessions. To support undecided students, consider requiring a first-year counseling course that focuses on career exploration, guiding students through self-assessment exercises, and exposing them to diverse career paths. This course should be facilitated by both counselors and faculty members, encouraging collaboration between academic and career advising.

Recommendations for District Leaders

From the insights and data collected in this study, a couple of actionable recommendations emerged for district leaders.

Elevate Counselor Voices

District leaders should carefully review and consider the insights and recommendations presented in this study when making decisions regarding the implementation of Guided Pathways in community colleges. These recommendations emphasize the critical role of counselors in supporting students' career exploration, major

selection, and academic planning, which significantly influences students' overall success and well-being. District leaders hold a pivotal responsibility in leveraging counselors' feedback to enhance the effectiveness of Guided Pathways implementation. Building upon the notion of policy-driven engagement, these leaders should proactively seek input from counselors through ongoing dialogues. By valuing counselors' on-the-ground experiences and insights, leaders can ensure that Guided Pathways policies resonate with the practical needs of both students and counselors. This collaborative approach empowers counselors to contribute to the design of policies that address challenges and concerns related to the implementation of Guided Pathways. Moreover, the integration of counselors' perspectives into policy decisions also cultivates a culture of shared ownership and accountability.

Prioritize Counselor Accessibility by Hiring More Counselors

The California Community College system does not have a specific statewide standard or regulation that dictates a fixed student-to-counselor ratio. However, individual community colleges within the system can establish their own guidelines or recommendations for student-to-counselor ratios based on their unique needs and resources. Counseling resources and student-to-counselor ratios can vary widely across different community colleges within the California Community College system. Some colleges might prioritize smaller ratios to provide more personalized attention to students, while others might have larger ratios due to budget constraints or other factors.

In light of counselor feedback regarding the limited time available for meaningful student connections, the following recommendations underscore the importance of optimizing counselor-student interactions. By implementing strategies that streamline administrative tasks and enhance counselor efficiency, colleges can enable counselors to

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allocate more time to fostering impactful relationships with students. District leaders should consider conducting an assessment of the current student-to-counselor ratios and its impact on students' access to personalized support and guidance. Based on the findings, leaders could also allocate resources to hire additional counselors to reduce the ratio and ensure that students receive adequate attention and assistance in their career exploration, major selection, and academic planning process. Counselors play a pivotal role in providing essential guidance and support to students, addressing their academic, career, and personal needs. By placing an emphasis on hiring counselors, the district demonstrates its commitment to enhancing student success.

Recommendation for Policymakers

Drawing from the insights and data obtained in this study, there is a clear suggestion that policymakers should consider.

Empower Knowledge Exchange through Effective Use of Technology

Policymakers play a critical role in facilitating the dissemination of successful practices within Guided Pathways implementation across colleges. Policymakers can establish a centralized platform or online hub where colleges can share their successful strategies, initiatives, and best practices. This platform would allow colleges to access real-world examples and insights directly from their peers. Policymakers and district leaders could incentivize colleges to showcase their successful Guided Pathways implementation strategies by recognizing and celebrating their achievements. Awards, grants, and recognition programs could motivate colleges to share their experiences and strategies openly. Furthermore, district leaders should encourage regular cross-college knowledge-sharing events, such as conferences, workshops, and webinars. These events provide

opportunities for colleges to present their successful Guided Pathways practices and engage in discussions, fostering a culture of collaboration and idea exchange.

In conclusion, by actively engaging with counselors' feedback and implementing student-centered policies, community colleges can create a more supportive and effective Guided Pathways framework that caters to the diverse needs of students.

Suggestions for Future Research

Building upon the valuable insights from this study, and in light of the ongoing implementation of Guided Pathways, several avenues for future research become apparent. A promising initial approach would be to conduct an expansive quantitative survey across multiple community colleges in California to gain a more comprehensive perspective on the reach and impact of Guided Pathways. Such quantitative studies, aiming to gauge the effectiveness of Guided Pathways, could be enriched by employing diverse methodologies. For instance, considering a longitudinal study that spans multiple academic terms offers a chance to observe the evolving impact of Guided Pathways on student outcomes. This kind of investigation would benefit from incorporating multiple community colleges from various districts or regions, ensuring the representation of a diverse sample. Key metrics to examine include the average time students under Guided Pathways take to complete their degrees compared to their predecessors. Indicators such as a decrease in time-to-degree could act as markers of the system's efficiency. Evaluating course completion within CAPs and transfer rates to four-year colleges would further showcase the efficacy of Guided Pathways in smoothening the transfer process. Direct comparisons between pre-implementation and post-implementation data can shed light on shifts in student outcomes.

To delve deeper, a larger sample of counselors from colleges at different stages of Guided Pathways implementation can provide a deeper understanding of the pivotal role counselors play. The objective would be to discern how various phases of implementation influence counselor perceptions, their strategies, and their approach to guiding students through major selection. Longitudinal studies in this context can offer insights into the lasting effects of Guided Pathways and its potential for adaptability and growth.

A distinct focus on the experience of first-generation students within Guided Pathways would be helpful. These students, faced with unique challenges in their academic journey, need particular attention to gauge how they fare in career and major selection within this structure. Assessing key outcomes such as time to earn credentials, transfer rates, and GPA would reveal the system's effectiveness for this group.

Deepening this exploration, intensive case studies on selected institutions can provide a detailed narrative of the challenges and strategies in Guided Pathways implementation, bridging the breadth of quantitative research with the depth of qualitative insights.

To test the universality of the findings, replicating the study in community colleges beyond California could add more to the conversation. This would address the possibility of regional biases and elevate the generalizability of the results.

An important avenue, not yet delved into, could be the exploration of staff perspectives. Staff, being at the frontline of academic interactions, may offer unique insights into the student experience under the Guided Pathways framework. Their perceptions of the academic rigor, student engagement, and curriculum alignment in line with Guided Pathways could offer an added layer of depth.

Potential administrative hurdles and resistance towards the implementation of Guided Pathways also warrant investigation. Such insights can preemptively inform strategies to facilitate smoother transitions to the new system.

In addition to first-generation students, attention should also pivot towards adult learners, students with disabilities, English language learners, veterans re-integrating into civilian life, and international students navigating the American community college system. Each of these groups, and other non-traditional students, would bring unique perspectives and challenges within the Guided Pathways framework.

By exploring these avenues of research, scholars can contribute to the ongoing evolution and improvement of Guided Pathways, enhance counselor practices, inform institutional policies, and ultimately support student success in community colleges.

Reflection

Conducting this study has provided valuable insights that extend beyond the specific findings. Through the process of data collection, analysis, and engagement with community college counselors, several key reflections have emerged for me.

The insights I've gained from this study will undoubtedly shape the way I approach my work with students and my interactions with colleagues. The in-depth engagement with community college counselors and the thorough process of data collection and analysis have provided me with a wealth of valuable perspectives and knowledge that will inform my student-centered practices. In working with students, I now have a deeper appreciation for the pivotal role that counselors play in guiding them through the major selection process. In my interactions with colleagues, this study has underscored the value of interdisciplinary collaboration. Understanding the collaborative efforts between

counselors, administrators, and policymakers in shaping Guided Pathways' success will

prompt me to seek opportunities to work collaboratively with my colleagues to create

interventions that benefit our students. It has deepened my understanding of the nuances

of Guided Pathways. My interest in advocating for students has been further ignited by the

insights I've gained from this study. Armed with the understanding of the challenges they

face, particularly undecided students, I'm inspired to champion initiatives that provide

them with clearer directions and more personalized support.

The study has strengthened my understanding and appreciation for the knowledge

and expertise that community college counselors bring to supporting students in their

major selection process. Their insights, perspectives, and recommendations have shed light

on the critical role of counselors in guiding students toward successful academic and career

pathways.

During the course of this study, I realized the dynamic nature of Guided Pathways

implementation. This study has highlighted the evolving nature of implementing Guided

Pathways within one California community college. The insights gained have underscored

the need for flexibility, ongoing evaluation, and adaptation to ensure that Guided Pathways

effectively meets the diverse needs of students and counselors.

More than ever, I understand the importance of ongoing professional development.

Engaging with counselors and understanding their varying levels of comfort and

experience with Guided Pathways has emphasized the significance of continuous

professional development opportunities. Ongoing training, support, and resources are

essential to help counselors navigate the challenges and changes associated with Guided

Pathways implementation. People need to understand the larger picture in order to strive for it.

I see the value of interdisciplinary collaboration. This study has revealed the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration between counselors, administrators, and policymakers in shaping the success of Guided Pathways. Collaborative efforts can lead to the development of comprehensive support systems, effective interventions, and a shared understanding of the needs and goals of students. A cycle of feedback and implementation is important to experience continuous improvement.

This study has highlighted the potential impact of Guided Pathways on underrepresented students (first-generation), special populations, and special programs. There is a need for targeted interventions, resources, and support structures that address the unique challenges and requirements of these student groups within the Guided Pathways framework.

Overall, this study has given me valuable insights that go beyond what I initially set out to investigate. It has emphasized the importance of counselors' expertise, the dynamic nature of Guided Pathways implementation, the need for ongoing professional development, the value of interdisciplinary collaboration, and the potential for broader impact. These reflections serve as a foundation for future research, practice, and policy efforts aimed at improving the effectiveness and outcomes of Guided Pathways in community colleges.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this dissertation explored the intricate landscape of students' major pathway selection process within California community colleges, as viewed through the

eyes of counselors in the context of the Guided Pathways movement. The research findings reveal key factors that could improve Guided Pathways in helping students with their education and career choices. Regarding the first research question, counselors' perspectives illuminated four distinct needs that students require when choosing a major: access to career-specific information, exposure to real-world career possibilities, early interventions to foster informed decisions, and the presence of an undecided option. Findings related to the second research question highlighted the successful innovations of Guided Pathways from counselors' viewpoints. Career and Academic Pathways (CAPs) emerged as a significant accomplishment, creating communities of students with shared academic pursuits. Additionally, Course Program Maps played a role in aiding degree planning, although improvements were suggested to cater to the diverse needs of part-time students. However, the third research question pointed to certain limitations and areas where Guided Pathways falls short. While acknowledging its successes, counselors identified a slower than expected roll-out and a lack of personalized advising and support, particularly for underrepresented and first-generation students.

The insights gained from this study highlight the significance of counselors' expertise in shaping students' academic journeys. They also highlight the necessity of refining Guided Pathways' implementation to address challenges, optimize support structures, and ensure its alignment with the diverse needs of students. In the ongoing evolution of Guided Pathways, this research may offer insights to guide efforts aimed at enhancing student success, promoting equity, and improving the educational environment in community colleges.

APPENDIX A

COUNSELOR QUESTIONNAIRE

CONSENT *This questionnaire gathers information about community college counselors' perspectives on the student major selection process during the implementation of Guided Pathways. I would be very grateful if you would take the time to complete this questionnaire, which should take less than 10 minutes. I encourage you to try to complete the questionnaire in one sitting and ask that you do your best to complete the questionnaire on your own as opposed to collaborating with a colleague. You don't need to track down information. Instead, please answer "off the top of your head."*

Your responses will be received by the researcher and will not be shared in any way that identifies you, your college, or your district. If you have any questions about the research study, please feel free to contact any of the individuals listed below. If you decide not to participate, your current employment will not be affected, nor will you suffer any consequences or penalties of any kind.

For information about the questionnaire and the research study, please contact the researcher, Kassidy Camilleri, by phone or by email (kassidy03@g.ucla.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, or you have concerns or suggestions, and you want to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may contact the UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program by phone (310-206-2040), by email (participants@research.ucla.edu), or by mail (UCLA OHRRP, Box 951406, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1406).

Do you agree to take this survey?
- o Yes
- o No

PRIM_COUNS What is your primary counseling area?
- ☑ ASU
- ☐ Articulation
- ☐ Athletics
- ☐ Basic Needs
- ☐ Black Scholars Umoja
- ☐ CalWORKs
- ☐ Dream Resource Center
- ☐ EOP&S
- ☐ General Counseling
- ☐ International
- ☐ Non-Credit
- ☐ Puente
- ☐ Rainbow Pride Center
- ☑ SSD
- ☐ TAP/Honors

☐   TRiO
☐   Veterans
☐   Welcome Center
☐   Other _____

TIME_COUNS Are you a full-time or part-time counselor at this college?
    o Full-time (35 hours weekly)
    o Part-time (less than 35 hours weekly)

YEARS_COUNS Including this year, how many years have you worked…

	0	5	10	15	20	25	30	35	40	45	50

In community college education	
At this college	
In your current role at the campus	

TIME_INTERACT_COUNS On average, how much time per week do you spend directly interacting with community college students?
    o 1-5 hours
    o 6-10 hours
    o 11-15 hours
    o 16-20 hours
    o 21-25 hours
    o 26+ hours

GP_CONFIDENCE How confident would you be explaining the Guided Pathways framework to a colleague?

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Least confident (0) to most confident (10)	

KNOW_GP How knowledgeable are you about the following topics related to Guided Pathways?

	Not knowledgeable at all	Slightly knowledgeable	Moderately knowledgeable	Very knowledgeable	Extremely knowledgeable
Meta-majors/CAPS (Career Academic Pathways)	o	o	o	o	o
The student major selection process	o	o	o	o	o
The college's onboarding process for students	o	o	o	o	o

IMPACT_GP How does the current process by which students select their majors compare to what the process was before Guided Pathways?

o The current process is substantially harder for students than it was before Guided Pathways

o The current process is somewhat harder for students than it was before Guided Pathways

o The current process is neither harder nor easier for students than it was before Guided Pathways

o The current process is somewhat easier for students than it was before Guided Pathways

o The current process is substantially easier for students than it was before Guided Pathways

GP_CHANGE_MAJOR How much do you believe that Guided Pathways has changed the counseling process for counselors working with students who are making a major selection decision?

o The current process is substantially harder for counselors than it was before Guided Pathways

o The current process is somewhat harder for counselors than it was before Guided Pathways

o The current process is neither harder nor easier for counselors than it was before Guided Pathways

o The current process is somewhat easier for counselors than it was before Guided Pathways

o The current process is substantially easier for counselors than it was before Guided Pathways

INT_AGREE I will be conducting a small number of one-on-one interviews. These will last about 45-60 minutes and will take place in February and March via Zoom. All interview participants will receive a $25 gift card. Would you be interested in receiving information about participating in a one-on-one interview?
    o No
    o Yes

I will be conducting a small number of one-on-one interviews. These will last about 45-60 minutes... = Yes
EMAIL Thank you for your interest in participating in an interview. Please enter your email address in the space below:

    _____

I will be conducting a small number of one-on-one interviews. These will last about 45-60 minutes... = Yes
INT_BLOCK Please indicate your preferred days and times that generally would work for an interview.

	Morning (9-12)	Afternoon (12-5)	Evening (5-8)
Mondays	⬚	⬚	⬚
Tuesdays	⬚	⬚	⬚
Wednesdays	⬚	⬚	⬚
Thursdays	⬚	⬚	⬚
Fridays	⬚	⬚	⬚

END Please note: you have reached the end of this survey and clicking "next" will submit your responses and won't allow you to go back.

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interviewee:

Date:

Time:

Preferred Pseudonym:

Introduction

My name is Kassidy Camilleri, and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of California Los Angeles in the area of educational leadership.

I am conducting approximately ten interviews with counselors like you to gain insights about how community college counselors interpret the intentions and implementation of Guided Pathways vis a vis the needs they perceive students have with respect to choosing a major. The findings can then ideally be used to share with other community colleges. I have a script to ensure my interviews with all participating counselors will be conducted in the most similar manner possible. I also want to mention there are no right answers to the interview questions.

Informed Consent

I would like to remind you that any information obtained in connection to this study will remain confidential. All of the data will be reported without reference to any individual(s). Before we start, do you have any questions or need any clarification? We have scheduled 45 minutes to one hour for the interview. At any point during the interview, you may ask that I skip a particular question or stop the interview altogether. For ease of our discussion and

accuracy, I will record our conversation as indicated on the Informed Consent form. Do you

have any questions before we begin? Okay, let us get started. Thank you so much for your

time.

Background & Rapport Building Questions

1. How many years have you been working as a community college counselor?

2. How many years have you been counseling at your current community college?

3. What brought you to the field of counseling?

4. What is your current counselor title (general, etc.)?

5. How much time do you spend weekly working directly with students?

Research Focused Questions

1. Tell me a little bit about how you use Guided Pathways when working with students to select a major.

2. What aspects of Guided Pathways have you or your students found to be helpful in the major selection process?

3. What aspects have you or your students found to be less helpful?

4. In your opinion, how important is it for students to select a pathway/major, and at what point in the student's academic process?

5. What are your thoughts or opinions about the Guided Pathways approach of providing students with meta-majors (CAPs) and career communities?

6. I'd like you to think about a student you worked with recently who was struggling with choosing a major. Walk me through what that process was like for you and the student.

   a. What seemed to help the student most?

b. Which parts of the guided pathways process seemed less helpful to that student?

7. What do you find to be helpful for students who are selecting a major and career pathway?

8. What do you think is missing in your college's major selection/career exploration process that would support students?

9. What do you see as critical barriers to students choosing a major?

10. What do you see as facilitators of students choosing a major?

11. What recommendations do you have for colleges as they design ways to increase student success?

12. If necessary, as part of the analysis, would you be okay with me contacting you for a shorter follow-up interview on a specific topic related to the first interview?

Is there anything you would like to add or do you have any questions for me?

POSSIBLE FOLLOW UP PROBES:

• "Would you expand upon that a bit?"

• "Do you have more to add?"

• "What did you mean by…"

• "Could you please tell me more about…"

• "Can you give me an example of…"

Thank you very much for your time!

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