

2021

# TEACHING FOR TRANSFORMATION



Amarillo College



# SMART START SMART FINISH

By Frank Sobey • Illustrations by Shutterstock

*“You have heard of the adage that it takes a village to raise a child. At AC, it takes the entire campus to love our students to success.”*



**A**t Amarillo College, we have been committed to systematically implementing Guided Pathways. Implementation of the pathways model has revitalized institutions of higher education in recent years by emphasizing four pillars of focus to improve student retention, completion, and workforce entry/transfer.

## **FOUR PILLARS OF FOCUS**

- Clarify the path
- Enter the path
- Stay on the path
- Learn on the path

Since 2014, we have continuously reimagined the way we operate, transformed many aspects of the college, and strengthened our innovation muscle to improve the educational experiences of our students and enable them to achieve their goals—all within a pathways framework that is unique to AC. Although we have enhanced the student experience at AC, more work remains. To that end, we are implementing a new Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) designed to help our students achieve their goals.

Let's celebrate what we have accomplished because of implementing various aspects of pathways reform, from increasing completion and raising course success rates to moving more students to full-time status. We must also clarify how our efforts will have to evolve over the next 5-10 years to address equitable access and recruitment into high-quality workforce and transfer programs for disadvantaged students whom we can guide, from start to finish, toward living-wage jobs.

The challenge of pathways reform is that, inevitably, it has to take shape within a particular institutional context and must therefore be responsive to the unique aspects of that context. Understanding our context begins with understanding our community—the students we have and the communities they belong to when they come to us. As a result, faculty and academic leaders have worked closely together in Academic Affairs, for example, to create a



robust faculty professional development model and a mandatory Tutoring for Success policy, along with increased tutoring supports. In spite of our efforts, retention still remains our most pressing issue. We are losing too many FTIC students from fall-to-spring and fall-to-fall.

Fall-to-spring and fall-to-fall retention is a primary metric of determining whether we are keeping our students on the path. We use this information to determine how effective we are at increasing

year to year. However, retention rates have only marginally improved. For example, the fall 2014 FTIC cohort was retained from fall-to-fall at a rate of 54.87%, and the fall 2018 FTIC cohort at a rate of 58.42%. We are losing roughly 40% of our students after one year with us.

For our last SACSCOC decennial, our Quality Enhancement Plan focused on developing a First Year Seminar (FYS) course designed to address retention. Required of all transfer

# RETENTION RATE RATIONALES

*During our 2019 Data Summit on transfer and retention, faculty and staff were surprised by the low retention rates but demonstrated a deep understanding of the appropriate steps to take to improve these rates.*

## IMPROVEMENT STEPS

### CLEARLY MAPPED PATHWAYS

from high school to  
AC to our primary  
transfer institutions

### More opportunities for FACULTY-STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

outside (and well before  
the start) of coursework

### Transitional and career-focused ADVISING

Earlier  
**OUTREACH**  
at the high schools

### BETTER REAL-TIME INTERNAL AND CROSS-DEPARTMENTAL COMMUNICATION

regarding student performance that is consolidated in one place for easy access

### CAREER community-based COHORTS

*We now understand more profoundly that retention is linked to clear educational objectives/intent, and students without clearly articulated academic and career goals are much more likely to drop out of community college.*

the numbers of students who complete a certificate degree or transfer to a four-year institution. Simply put, students who are not retained do not complete. The most accurate way to measure time to completion is to track the retention of FTIC cohorts from

students, FYS featured a skills-based curriculum focused on helping FTICs become better college students. While it increased course success in their first year, it did not lead to greater persistence from

fall-to-fall. The decontextualized curriculum was not sufficiently connected to our transfer programs, and subsequent iterations failed to address that piece until the most recent through course redesign. Our last QEP relied on a single FYS course to fix the problem with retention, but this new QEP offers a more unified and interconnected approach that enlists all AC employees (but especially faculty) in the work around retention.

You have heard of the adage that it takes a village to raise a child. At AC, it takes the entire campus to love our students to success.

We have learned that we need to connect with our students (and create buy-in) much earlier.

# WE ARE LOSING ROUGHLY 40% OF OUR STUDENTS AFTER ONE YEAR WITH US.

## SMART START TO FINISH

Thus, our next Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), called Smart Start to Finish, is a suite of programs that focuses on clarifying and entering the pathway early to create a support framework that encourages staying on the path, forges faculty connections, and ensures that students are learning on the path.

- Success 360
- Springboard (community activities)
- Badger Beginnings
- EDUC 1100 Learning Frameworks (career-focused, community-based cohort model)
- Ongoing Success Networks
- Retention Software

In a community college environment with commuter students, our brick and mortar is building relationships.

We expect that Smart Start to Finish will help students achieve the goals that caused them to come to AC in the first place. It will help

them find their place in their career community. It will introduce them to like-minded students in their cohort and keep them curious to learn more about their disciplines. It will support them during their time at AC while focusing their eyes on their next chapter, whether it's succeeding at the university or entering the career of their dreams.