

LEVERAGING STRONG WORKFORCE FUNDING TO BUILD AN INNOVATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE

HOW COMMUNITY COLLEGES TAKE A REGIONAL APPROACH TO
GUIDED PATHWAYS IN THE SAN DIEGO AND IMPERIAL REGION

In California, the leadership of the San Diego and Imperial Counties Community Colleges Association (SDICCCA)¹ has come together to work on a common initiative, serving as a model for large-scale institutional reform. These 10 colleges are committed to reconceptualizing the student community college experience enabling students to follow clear, streamlined, and efficient paths leading to a certificate, associate degree, transfer to bachelor's degree, or living-wage attainment. Through collaborative leadership across the colleges, this reform process is building regional coherence and helping to ensure sustainability of the regional workforce.

Describing a typical California community college student is difficult, as each student has unique needs and goals. Mark, for example, is a 24-year-old Army veteran with a wife and two young children. He has some community college credits from prior to his enlistment, has military training in information systems, and works part-time at his uncle's repair shop. Ernesto lives in a rural area with his parents, his wife, and an infant son. He needs to take courses to improve his English and acquire career education skills, ideally courses that will help him work toward earning an industry-recognized certificate in an automotive program so he can get a steady job to support his family. And Marisol is a recent high school graduate working 25 hours a week at the mall, while enrolled full time at her local community college to save two years of university tuition before transferring to UC San Diego to pursue a bachelor's degree in computer science.

These students differ in their goals, academic preparation, workplace readiness, and financial barriers, as well as in their education and career-placement counseling needs. When Mark, Ernesto, and Marisol make the decision to enroll at their local community college, they confront several pressing questions: Which course of study will get them to their end goal? Who on campus can help them explore their options

and guide them toward a certificate, credential, or degree? What if they cannot afford the tuition and other fees? What happens if they encounter a roadblock and veer off track?

With a sense of urgency and an understanding that students are facing these sorts of pressing questions every day, 10 community colleges are taking action through an ambitious new initiative. The SDICCCA Regional Consortium (The Consortium) is launching major reforms by leveraging California's Strong Workforce Program (SWP). The aim is to revamp how students progress in their community college experience, enabling them to maintain steady momentum as they follow clear, streamlined, and efficient paths toward attaining a certificate, degree, or living-wage employment.

SDICCCA Regional Consortium

- Cuyamaca College
- Grossmont College
- Imperial Valley College
- MiraCosta College
- Palomar College
- San Diego City College
- San Diego Continuing Education
- San Diego Mesa College
- San Diego Miramar College
- Southwestern College

The Statewide Strategy: Strong Workforce Program

In 2016, California legislature approved the Strong Workforce Program (SWP) to increase the Golden State's workforce and to prepare its future workforce for the 21st century. In particular, SWP aims to fill the middle- and high-skill, high-wage, and high-demand jobs that require education and training beyond high school, but don't necessarily require a four-year college degree. The state's labor market needs are growing, as are the number of unfilled jobs in sectors such as health care, advanced manufacturing, clean energy, and information technology. At the same time, the state's economic divide is widening and more Californians struggle to earn a living-wage income.²

Through SWP, California's 114 community colleges receive annual funds of \$248 million to increase the number of students completing career education programs. The SWP's objective is twofold: to meet the current demands of the state's changing labor market needs by increasing employment and to enable Californians to earn family-sustaining wages.

The Problem: Barriers to Student Success

For decades, community college students have faced systemic barriers to completing their courses. Community college data revealed that students spent years paying for and taking a series of non-credit-bearing, remedial courses in math and English, often never reaching the requisite, college-level courses that count towards graduation.³ When MiraCosta College, for example, began its efforts to promote equity and close achievement gaps, college staff examined their student data and were dismayed to learn that students who started three levels below college-level math had a 6 percent chance of ever completing the gatekeeper course. Equally troubling was that many of those students were African American, Latinx, or economically disadvantaged students. From day one, the odds of completion were already stacked against these students due to community colleges' student placement practices and a structure of multi-tiered developmental course requirements. Getting stuck in a cycle of remediation is an

institutional barrier ubiquitous for students in community colleges nationwide.

Additionally, selecting the right courses from the hundreds offered in a course catalogue is an overwhelming process for students to complete on their own. They often end up choosing courses based on their work schedule, rather than guided by career goals and an education plan. Over several semesters or years, students often accumulate course credits that don't result in a certificate, degree, or a comprehensive set of employable skills, unknowingly wasting time and money.

A New Road to Student Success

In the SDICCCA region, community college reform is actively underway. The 10 community colleges are embarking on a multi-year redesign of their institutions with the implementation of Guided Pathways, a nationwide, higher education reform strategy. The region's community colleges are making intentional, institution-wide programmatic changes aimed at ensuring all students have a coherent college experience that puts them on the road to success.

The reform goals are to increase students' success in college completion and to promote equity by addressing gaps in student achievement. At the core of these reform efforts is eliminating barriers to academic success and ensuring that students are on a focused and viable education and career path from start to finish.

In the new community college experience with Guided Pathways, all students would participate in career exploration and guidance, create an education plan informed by career interests and goals, embark on a pathway of sequenced courses and experiences, utilize student academic and support services, engage in applied and work-based learning, and advance to their end goal with the skills to navigate future education and career opportunities. More than ever before, these community colleges are exerting a proactive stance – providing extra safety nets through improved enrollment and onboarding processes at the start of each student's journey, as well as increased and intrusive student supports to keep students on track throughout their community college experience.

Supporting the needs of all students with Guided Pathways

As the SWP aims to prepare a ready workforce in California through strong career education programs, the 10 community colleges are implementing Guided Pathways in tight alignment with SWP – with particular attention to students' career-related success. The Guided Pathways strategy is to create a well-supported college experience for all college students, laying out a clear academic path and trajectory from pre-enrollment to completion.

The Consortium created a roadmap, [A Community College Student's Road to Success](#), which allows each college to systematically strengthen aspects of the college in alignment with how students experience their college.⁴ The roadmap illustrates the paths that an entering community college student might take and the common elements that every student's college experience should include: career exploration and onboarding; an identified education plan based on career interests; relevant courses; just-in-time support services; applied and work-based learning; employment preparation; and guidance for the transition to their desired next steps, whether that is a four-year degree or employment in an in-demand, living-wage career. The *Student's Road to Success* serves as a framework for all of the region's community colleges, allowing flexibility for tailoring programs to a college's unique student population, community, or local industry needs.

"We're all trying to create our own pathways," explains Southwestern College president Kindred Murillo. "The pathway has to be unique to us and to our students. Each of the colleges in the region takes the *Student's Road to Success* framework and individualizes it as part of our transformation in the college."

The San Diego and Imperial Way

The 10 community colleges in the SDICCCA region serve the two southernmost counties of California. The SDICCCA college presidents and chancellors are committed to improving outcomes and economic and social-mobility opportunities for the more than 230,000 California students they serve, and they agreed to leverage the SWP to champion this important effort.



It's not easy. We believe we are better together than individually.

– Sunita Cooke, MiraCosta College

To carry out the bold reforms envisioned through the SWP, the presidents, superintendents, deans, and faculty of the 10 participating California community colleges, along with leaders from K-12 education, adult education, and local industry, have come together to form a unique collaborative infrastructure. These stakeholders have been intentionally working together to plan, listen, and learn from one another; engaging in an organizational model involving staff at all levels of each institution; and reaching consensus about institution-wide changes with the goal of building a clear path for all students' success on every community college campus across the region. As in all major initiatives, the college presidents agreed to share the leadership to ensure the success of these reforms in the region.

"It's a huge investment in time, personnel, and leadership that people have to give," says Sunita Cooke, president of MiraCosta College. "It takes time to do this work right. It's not easy. We believe we are better together than individually."

Leveraging a history of regional collaboration

Six community college presidents participated in telephone interviews to share their insights about their college's progress in the reform efforts underway through the SWP. Unequivocally, each president expressed gratitude for the pre-existing regional structure in SDICCCA, which for decades has supported how the region's 10 community college presidents network and collaborate. It is through SDICCCA's monthly meetings that strong rapport, fellowship, and regional pride have developed among the regional leaders.

"Without a doubt, the way we work together and the trust we have built is invaluable," notes Pamela Luster, president of Mesa College. "We have great leadership. We have really good people caring about the work they are doing. We think as a region. I wouldn't trade it for anything."

This collaborative and established way of working has set precedence for the type of regional infrastructure needed to carry out the SWP efforts, which requires a collective body of stakeholders to plan and carry out ambitious efforts across multiple colleges.

Understanding regional needs

In 2016, the first year of the Strong Workforce Program, California divided the SDICCCA region's allotted \$16.5 million into two pots. Nearly \$10 million went directly to the region's community colleges to invest in their campuses' career education programs. The remaining \$6.5 million was allocated to the building of a regional infrastructure to support the regional priorities, which included conducting labor market research, planning and implementing SWP within the Guided Pathways model, and making a significant investment in marketing.

Initial infrastructure development began with an inquiry by conducting a needs assessment of the regional community colleges, asking several key questions: *Who were the students attending their community colleges? What did their course-taking and college experiences look like? What barriers were in the way of their education goals? What were the perspectives and expectations of the colleges' education leaders and teachers?*

The Consortium engaged with consultants to conduct interviews and focus groups with community college leaders, faculty, and students; researched best practices among other postsecondary institutions; and reviewed student enrollment and student support tools. All of that initial work led to the development of a set of comprehensive recommendations for the community colleges to guide systemic change at their campuses.

A unique and powerful infrastructure: Collaborative leadership

The Consortium has developed a unique infrastructure that undergirds how the participating colleges carry out their planning and decision-making for these reforms. The Consortium members agree to work collaboratively through an organizational structure that includes a regional oversight committee, a deans' council, a workforce development

council, a marketing committee, and a data/research committee. There is a set of work groups, each focused on a specific component of implementation: Career Pathways; Middle and High School Engagement; Pathway Navigation; Work-Based Learning and Job Placement; Retention, Success, and Support; and Employer Engagement. The work groups are unique as they include a mixed representation of roles, comprising more than 150 active stakeholders from across the 10 colleges.



We think as a region.

– Pamela Luster, San Diego Mesa College

The governance structure is inherently inclusive and hierarchically flat, giving voice to the cross-representation of college presidents, deans, counselors, career technical educators, employers, and K-12 partners. All are actively engaged in the shared responsibility of planning the reforms to be carried out through the SWP. The organizational setup reflects a kind of forward-thinking innovation that isn't commonly seen in the operations of community college systems. The innovative and collaborative approach – which is simultaneously a horizontal and vertical infrastructure (i.e., there are staff representing multiple levels of the system and all of them have an equal voice) – has helped to build capacity at the colleges across the region. Such a model for professional collaboration is critical to maintaining long-term momentum and commitment for this ambitious, multi-year reform effort.

"This whole regional approach is making a lot of progress toward Strong Workforce, toward being very collaborative, and toward using our money wisely," says Murillo. "We work together, we learn from each other."

One significant and early milestone of this regional collaborative approach was the development of the framework, *A Community College Student's Road to Success*, described earlier. The development process was iterative and collaborative, involving feedback from many key stakeholders across the community colleges.

A Focus on Promoting Equity and Closing the Achievement Gap

Closing the student achievement gap has been a central focus of all of the region's initiatives, no less so for the SWP efforts. To start, faculty, staff, and administrators have been participating in SWP professional development "about the importance of career preparation to ensure equity of opportunity for all students."⁵ All colleges are examining student data to identify which student populations are and are not enrolling in the region's community colleges, especially in career education programs, and which students are and are not completing certificates, awards, and transfers. Based on its campus's student data, each college has an equity plan with specific indicators that they track.

Luster says, "Every grant we pursue is through an equity lens." Murillo similarly states, "Everything we do is tied to student equity. You can't waver from it. When groups are not achieving at the same levels, we are doing a disservice. Social justice is our 'why' and what drives this work."

Integrating the SWP and Guided Pathways into their equity plans was a natural fit. As one of the 20 colleges in the California Guided Pathways Project,⁶ MiraCosta College, for example, examined all definitions of equitable outcomes. One of the activities was to identify which of its students were enrolled in programs that lead to careers in the top 5 percent of living-wage earnings (such as nursing) and which students were enrolled in programs that lead to careers in the bottom 5 percent (such as child development), as well as which students in those programs were reaching completion.

"The Strong Workforce Program forced us to look at where students are after they graduate," says Cooke. "The synergy of the Strong Workforce Program and Guided Pathways is all about equitable outcomes and opportunities. Are students making informed choices or basing their decisions on limited exposure?"

At Mesa College, work had already begun on how to use multiple measures to determine English and math course placements to eliminate the policy that relied solely on the score from a single placement test. As a result, Mesa College's data

show an increase in student enrollment in college-level math courses, which were redesigned to be more student-centered and to include a supplemental class for additional support. As with the region's other initiatives, SWP reforms will get the same attention around equity, and by tracking which students are progressing toward and reaching completion, the disaggregated student data will specify which equity indicators are met.



Everything we do is tied to student equity. You can't waver from it.

– Kindred Murillo, Southwestern College

Extending student services beyond academic supports

It's no secret that California community colleges have their work cut out for them. Overall, more than one-third of the community college student population is at or near poverty level, nearly half are students over the age of 25, and more than one quarter are first-generation college students. The community colleges in the SDICCCA region serve, to varying degrees, a high-needs student population requiring an array of student supports beyond academic advising. The colleges located in high-poverty communities invest in providing wrap-around services – which include social services such as mental health counseling, access to nutritious food, and housing assistance – because they know these services are critical to their students' fundamental needs.

In rural Imperial Valley College, geographically isolated from the region's other colleges, more than 90 percent of its students are Latinx, 85 percent are eligible for tuition-fee waivers through the College Promise, and nearly 60 percent are first-generation college-going students. Imperial Valley College president Martha Garcia and her leadership team are committed to developing community partnerships to ensure that they can provide year-round social services, including full-time social workers, housing assistance, a food pantry, hygiene kits, and career clothing closets, to help ensure their students' basic needs are met. They are prepared to serve the college's most vulnerable students, including

155 self-identified homeless students and young adults still in the foster care system.

“When we’re talking about social justice and economically impoverished communities, community colleges are the pathways to education that provide opportunities,” explains Garcia. “I am here to serve all students, but especially to advocate and create the best services for those who are the most vulnerable. They’re here because they believe that with an education, opportunities will arise that will ultimately transform their lives.”

Challenges to Overcome

As with any major new initiative, there are a variety of challenges to overcome in order to successfully carry out the reforms envisioned through the Consortium’s SWP efforts.

Institutional culture change

Leading any change initiative – whether involving 50 or 500 people – begins with knowing that changing the culture of an institution is challenging. More than one community college president acknowledged that institutions of higher education are set in their ways and that institutional change is akin to trying to steer a very big ship that is not designed to readily change course. “It’s a redesign of a college,” says Murillo. “And it’s a culture change, which is difficult. It’s trying to keep a whole organization to shift its thinking differently.”

Another challenge, says Garcia, “is for the campus collectively to understand what the [*Student’s Road to Success*] framework is, and how everyone sees how they contribute to student success.”

Despite the challenges of leading a systemic change, a range of data contribute to a clear case for why change is needed – state data indicate low community college completion rates; persistent achievement gaps between student populations by ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and family college-going experiences; and an ever-increasing economic divide among Californians. Understanding all of these issues, the college presidents recognize that it’s time for change. They embrace the SWP as an opportunity to reform programs and supports in order to improve students’ educational experiences,

increase student success, and achieve equitable academic and employment outcomes. And college faculty, accustomed to “flavor-of-the-month” initiatives, are beginning to understand that this initiative is long-term and far-reaching, and imperative if improving student outcomes is the ultimate goal.

Fortunately, the evidence from the field on Guided Pathways is promising. For instance, one study shows how 13 Tennessee community colleges are supporting students to enter and stay on a pathway, and as a result, are seeing gains in first-year course completion and persistence.⁷ Another study of 30 community colleges implementing Guided Pathways describes evidence of progress in their campuswide reform efforts. The study’s early findings offer insightful examples of planning and implementation practices that support comprehensive change processes.⁸ At a four-year college, compelling 10-year pathway data from Georgia State University show that tracking student academic progress and increasing student advising, along with other deliberate improvement efforts, provides a proven approach to dramatically improving student success rates, especially for students of color and students of low socioeconomic status.⁹

Career relevance

Integrating the notion of career relevance into instruction, especially in non-career education courses, is a new paradigm shift in community college teaching. For some faculty, experts in their disciplines, making connections between academic content and careers may call for integrating different pedagogical approaches, such as contextualizing content with career-related examples, incorporating work-based learning, or shifting from lectures to small-group problem solving to simulate workplace collaboration.

The region’s college leaders are also building K-12 and adult education partnerships so that when students arrive to their community college campuses, they can continue learning in a coordinated K-14 pathway, if they choose. Entering students, for example, may have taken career education courses in high school, such as sustainable energy or environmental science, and are ready to enter a path in Energy, Construction, and Utilities at the start of their community college experience.

Palomar College president Joi Lin Blake explains the importance of exploration and coordination with K-12 programs to meet the social justice goals:

We have students living at or below poverty, and we've created short-term certificates so they can begin to earn a living wage to support their families. We are increasing early career exploration and outreach to K-12 using concurrent enrollment to expose them early on to career options, so they are not floundering when they get here. We expose students from vulnerable communities to job options they didn't know were possible . . . [to] help them identify careers other than what they see in their very local areas.

Performance-based funding

Another paradigm shift creating a challenge to SWP implementation is performance-based funding. Unlike traditional higher education funding, which is based on student enrollment numbers, these California community colleges are now held accountable for how well they guide students to a successful outcome. While 83 percent of the SWP funding is automatic, 17 percent is incentive-based, awarded to colleges based on progress, completion, and employment metrics that are aligned with the state's Student Success Metrics.¹⁰

"It's more than just bringing students to the college – we have to be accountable for graduating them," says Patricia Hsieh, president at Miramar College. "This is part of the funding formula now. Traditionally, community colleges have not been asked to demonstrate student success accountability for funding purposes. This is a mentality change for us to increase both student access and student success at the same time."

The metrics-tied funding has helped to bring a clearer focus to the college leaders and staff, especially where there are overlapping and competing priorities. "We can't just cast a net and hope it all works out," says Blake. "With performance-based funding, we have to be intentional about how we make changes. We have to be smart and deliberate about how to meet the demands of students. We can't do 'random' programs if they don't help us meet our goals." Such change may range from introducing new campuswide, differentiated student-orientation and onboarding practices to adjusting

scheduling or programming so they are a better fit to students' course-taking behaviors.



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– Patricia Hsieh,
San Diego Miramar College

At Imperial Valley College, which serves primarily high-poverty and first-generation students, Garcia describes how the performance-based funding "has benefitted us in rural Imperial County and allowed us to fund needs that have never been funded or have not been funded in many years. Under the new student-centered funding formula, it is important to evolve with this significant change and be proactive. We have a responsibility to do the best we can because it's the right thing to do for our students."

Looking Ahead

The presidents of these 10 community colleges are making this bold move together. Admittedly, it's messy work, and there is much more work to be done. As the presidents lead and support their colleges through organizational change, they are engaged in a reform effort that aims to fundamentally change the higher education experience for their students. These colleges are committed to doing it the SDICCCA way, where they will continue to learn promising practices from one another, and collectively make decisions and regional investments with Strong Workforce dollars to develop a robust and ready workforce in their region. They are redefining the community college experience – improving the academic and career outcomes of Mark, Ernesto, Marisol and approximately 230,000 other students each year, to help them become workplace ready and prepared to navigate economic opportunities for a better tomorrow.

To learn more about this work, please contact Mollie Smith, Chair, San Diego Imperial Counties Regional Consortium, at mollie.smith@gcccd.edu

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Endnotes

- ¹ SDICCCA (San Diego & Imperial Counties Community Colleges Association) is a collaboration between the 10 community colleges in the two-county region dedicated to providing the highest quality education to its more than 230,000 students.
- ² See Living Wage Calculator (2019). <http://livingwage.mit.edu/>
- ³ Mejia, M. C., Rodriguez, O., & Johnson, H. (November 2016). *Preparing students for success in California's community colleges*. Public Policy Institute of California. https://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R_1116MMR.pdf
- ⁴ To learn more about *A Community College Student's Road to Success* or to download the framework, please visit <https://swp-library.myworkforceconnection.org/resource/a-community-college-students-road-to-success/>
- ⁵ The final version of the Consortium's needs assessment report, *The "Fifth Pillar": The San Diego and Imperial Counties Employment Readiness and Job Placement Services Project Report* (February 2018), offers recommendations for implementing Guided Pathways, including providing professional development to build awareness of the importance of career preparation in addressing student equity.
- ⁶ California Guided Pathways Project is a multi-year initiative supporting 20 selected California community colleges to implement Guided Pathways, an institution-wide approach to improve student completion through structured educational experiences. To learn more, visit <https://www.caguidedpathways.org/>
- ⁷ Jenkins, D., Brown, A. E., Fink, J., Lahr, H., & Yanagiura, T. (2018). *Building guided pathways to community college student success: Promising practices and early evidence from Tennessee*. Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University. Accessed at <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/building-guided-pathways-community-college-student-success.pdf>
- ⁸ *Implementing Guided Pathways: Early Insights from the AACC Pathways Colleges* (April 2017) reports on the early insights of the approaches, strategies, and lessons learned of 30 community colleges in the process of reform to improve student success rates: <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/implementing-guided-pathways-aacc.pdf>
- ⁹ *Building a Pathway to Student Success at Georgia State University* (2015) is a case study of the set of Student Success Initiatives that Georgia State University implemented to effectively close achievement gaps over 10 years and the remarkable rates of increased student success for underserved students: https://sr.ithaka.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/SR_Case_Study_Building_Pathway_Student_Success_042315_0.pdf
- ¹⁰ For example, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office measures the number of students who earn 9 or more CE credits in an academic year, or the number of students who earn a certificate, degree, or apprenticeship journey status. Based on a formula that assigns points for each metric, a proportion of the funding is awarded. More points are awarded when colleges demonstrate progress in the same metrics for economically disadvantaged students.