

North Central State College

Stabilizing Enrollment Through Strategic Realignment of Resources



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Overview of Guided Pathways Reforms at the College

Large-Scale Changes to Practices

North Central State College provides a case study of how a small college can increase revenue by strategically realigning its existing staff resources for improving student retention and success, even in a period of stagnant enrollment. Between 2010 and 2012, enrollment at North Central State, which had risen during the Great Recession, dropped precipitously. In the eight years after that and prior to COVID, the college managed to stabilize enrollment. College leaders recognized that to avoid further declines in enrollment, they would need to take steps to improve student retention and expand the pool of applicants to the college even as the population of traditional college-age individuals in its service area was declining. Improving student retention and success was now especially important because, in 2009, Ohio had enacted a performance funding model that allocated 100% of state funds for community colleges based on performance as measured by course success, progress milestones, credential completion, and transfer.

FAST FACTS

- Location:** Mansfield, Ohio
- Fall 2020 headcount enrollment:** 2,729
- Number of students by race/ethnicity:**
 - Asian – 21
 - Black – 74
 - Hispanic – 79
 - White – 2,403
- FY 2020 operating budget:** \$20.7 million
- Year started guided pathways reforms:** 2016

Overview: Guided Pathways at North Central State College

Key Practices Implemented at Scale

1. Clarifying paths to student end goals

- Strengthened website information on program requirements, career and transfer opportunities, and program costs.
- Embedded certificates in degree program maps; registrar runs audit after every semester and awards certificates to students who have taken the requisite courses.

2. Helping students get on a program path

- Reorganized intake advising under the Student Success Center and redesigned three existing advisor positions as success coaches who help entering students choose a program of study.
- Redesigned FYE course to focus on career, academic, and financial planning.
- Allow students to submit high school GPA in lieu of placement test scores and set a GPA of 2.5 as the minimum to allow placement into college-level math and English with no corequisite support.
- Implemented math pathways and corequisite remediation.
- Hired two dual enrollment (COP) advisors to help high school students develop post-high school career and education plans in fields based on their interests.
- Offers tuition-free scholarships to high school students who earn at least 8 credits through dual enrollment and/or career-technical programs at the college.

3. Keeping students on path

- Created new division liaison positions tasked with advising students in each of the college's three main academic divisions. Once students have completed 30 credits in their program, they are also assigned a faculty mentor.
- Hired a full-time advisor to help students with nonacademic needs such as financial problems, food and housing insecurity, and mental health.
- Implemented student case records system that facilitates information sharing among faculty, advisors, and other student support staff on the progress of individual students and efforts to help them stay on track.

4. Ensuring that students are learning

- Supporting all faculty to become trained and certified in effective teaching through ACUE.
- Rewrote existing instructional design staff positions to focus on helping faculty teaching online and evening classes.
- Embedded peer tutors in introductory courses in math, writing, and other critical program courses.

Promising Trends in Student Success

- Increased rate at which students passed college math in their first year from 28% for the fall 2015 cohort to 39% for the fall 2020 cohort.
- Increased rate at which entering students earned at least 24 college credits in their first year from 14% for the fall 2015 cohort to 24% for the fall 2020 cohort.
- Increased four-year completion rates from 19% for the 2013 cohort to 28% for the 2016 cohort.
- Increased performance funding by 22% compared to an average of 6% for Ohio community colleges overall.

Under the leadership of Dr. Dorey Diab, who became the college's president in 2013, North Central State implemented a series of major reforms with the aim of improving student retention and completion on a substantial scale. These reforms are outlined in the accompanying table under the four major practice areas of the guided pathways model, which college leaders say they used as a framework for aligning their student success efforts. The reforms are described in more detail in the Appendix.

Dr. Diab and his leadership team recognized that to improve student outcomes without substantial new revenue, the college would have to better align its existing resources, especially its human resources, with a central focus on improving student retention and completion rates. The college expanded the roles of the success coaches, who help new students, and cross-trained them with staff in admissions, financial aid, and other front-end offices to better answer incoming students' questions. The college also redefined a student services position that had been vacated to add a success coach who works with dual enrollment students taking college courses in local high schools.

Because the handoff of students to faculty advisors in particular fields was often not smooth in the past, the college assigned each success coach to work with students interested in one of the college's three discipline areas and, using funds from a Title III grant, created three "division liaison" advisor positions to help faculty advise students in each division. The liaisons not only attend departmental meetings in their division but also meet weekly with success coaches and other student services staff, thus ensuring communication and coordination among staff who help students onboard into the college and program and those who help students complete their programs successfully. Once students complete 30 credits in their program, they are assigned a faculty coach to provide field- and career-specific guidance, although the division liaisons often continue to provide higher-level advising to students in their program area since they are experts in the program requirements for their respective fields. The combination of initial meetings with a success coach and then with a division liaison and connection to a faculty mentor in the student's field of study ensures that students are helped to choose a program direction and receive specialized advice and connections in their chosen field as they enter and progress toward program completion. The college also used Title III funds to purchase a system to create and store individual education plans for each student as well as a case management software package that allows staff and faculty to see all of the case notes staff write when interacting with an individual student.

To ensure that the college is investing its limited resources in ways that advance student success, college leaders strategically scrutinize the return on investment (ROI) of all its resource-allocation decisions. For example, the college is using Perkins funds to partially support a retention specialist hired to help students with nonacademic needs. According to college leaders, this position has more than paid for itself because the advisor has helped many students negotiate personal challenges and stay in school. College leaders say that the three division liaisons hired using Title III funds have helped to generate enough revenue through increased student persistence that they are now covered through general operating funds.

Effects on Student Performance

North Central State's strategic and disciplined investment of resources for improving student success has paid off in terms of increased student persistence and completion.

- **Persistence.** Fall-to-fall persistence rates increased from 53% for full-time students in the 2012 cohort to 67% for the 2019 full-time cohort, with even more impressive gains for part-time students from 41% in 2012 to 71% in 2019.
- **Completion.** Four-year completion rates at North Central State have increased from 19% for the 2013 cohort to 28% for the 2016 cohort, during which time the college narrowed equity gaps between women and men by 5 percentage points.

Strategies for Funding Guided Pathways Reforms

These improvements in student persistence and completion have increased revenue to the college from tuition and state performance funding. From fiscal year 2017 to 2021, the college increased its funding from the state's Student Success Initiative performance funding policy by 22%, compared to an average increase of 6% for Ohio's community colleges overall. In particular, there was a dramatic increase in the number of students earning certificates, which are now embedded in associate degree programs, and in the rate at which entering students completed college-level math. The college has used revenue from gains in performance funding to fund additional efforts to improve student success. For example, because the college earns performance funding when dual enrollment students earn college credits, complete college math and English, and complete other success-point milestones, the college has used some of its performance funding revenue to fund tuition-free scholarships for students who earn at least 8 credits through dual enrollment with the college while in high school.

As with the other two colleges in our study, North Central State leaders said that the college benefited greatly from the opportunities for free professional development and cross-college sharing on guided pathways and other student success strategies that were afforded by the institutes, workshops, and coaching organized for all Ohio community colleges by the Success Center at the Ohio Association of Community Colleges.

Appendix: Details on Guided Pathways Innovations and Funding Strategies

In the following, we provide more detail on the innovations that North Central State College has implemented under the four guided pathways practice areas as well as how the college covered the costs of these reforms.

1. Clarifying Paths to Student End Goals

Innovations the college implemented at scale

- Information on career and transfer opportunities and program costs.** College leaders have worked hard to ensure that the information available on the college's programs is useful to students. The college added data on the demand for and earnings of current workers in program-related jobs in the college's service area to the college webpage of every career-technical program. It also added information on what students need to take to transfer to specific majors at partner universities. College leaders say that students frequently ask about the cost of attending college, but the cost per credit hour or term data available on the college's website in the past did not help students estimate the full cost of earning a credential in their field of interest. Each program webpage now includes a tab showing the full cost of completing the given program and the value of pursuing that credential at North Central State (or starting there before transferring) relative to competitor institutions. (See <https://ncstatecollege.edu/associate-degrees/business-analytics/> for an example.)
- Curriculum guides.** Each program webpage now includes information about course requirements and sequences, which are summarized in easy-to-read downloadable pdf files. The curriculum guides also highlight "milestone courses" that are critical to success in the given program.
- Embedded certificates.** In mapping out each program, college faculty embedded certificates that students earn after passing sequences of courses. At the end of the term, the registrar runs an audit and notifies students who have earned certificates. College leaders believe that the earned certificates give students more incentive to continue in the program.

How the college funded these innovations

The college's efforts to improve program mapping and information on the college's website required a considerable investment of time and effort from administrators, IT staff, and faculty, but these tasks were carried out as part of their regular duties at the college and did not require extra funding.

2. Helping Students Get on a Program Path

Innovations the college implemented at scale

- **Success coach advising for incoming students.** North Central State organized intake advising in its Student Success Center and expanded the role of its three student advisors to create success coaches who work with all new students to help them choose a program. During the first semester, the success coaches meet with all new students to create a two-term plan. Students are required to take a first-year experience (FYE) course in which they develop a full program plan. Students are required to meet with their coaches during their first two terms. When students have chosen a program and completed prerequisite courses, they are transitioned to advisors called division liaisons who are embedded in each of three main program areas—health care, business and technology, and liberal arts/public service (see below).
- **FYE course.** The college redesigned its FYE course to focus on helping students develop career, academic, and financial plans. Once students have developed a preliminary full-program plan, they review it with an advisor. The students take the RNL College Student Inventory to help the coaches identify risk factors particular students might be facing and refer them to support services as appropriate. The college also created a version of the FYE course appropriate for high schoolers that it teaches as a dual enrollment course in multiple high schools in the area. The course fulfills high school graduation requirements related to financial literacy.
- **High school GPA for placement.** In 2020, the college started allowing students to submit high school GPAs in lieu of placement test scores, and it set a GPA of 2.75 as the minimum to allow placement into college-level math and English with no corequisite support. Having analyzed the data showing that students at or slightly above 2.75 were taking and completing college math and English at high rates, the college lowered the minimum to 2.5 last year. This move led to an increase in first-time students enrolling directly in college-level courses with no developmental courses from 26% in fall 2019 to 62% in 2020.
- **Math pathways and corequisite support.** North Central State was an early adopter of these innovations, having implemented both math pathways and corequisite remediation at scale by fall 2017. All new students at the college are required to choose a major or career field when they enroll. The math students take is determined by which field they choose. For example, students in nursing and allied health programs take statistics. In the past, most students were assigned to an algebra track (usually at the remedial level); now, over 70% take statistics, and only students pursuing engineering or other STEM-related degrees are required to take algebra. In addition, the college has implemented corequisite support for nearly all of its math courses. Through these efforts, combined with using GPA for placement, the rate at which students passed college math in their first year increased from 28% for the fall 2015 first-time-in-college cohort to 39% for the fall 2020 cohort.
- **Enhanced advising for dual enrollment students.** The college recently hired another College Credit Plus (CCP) advisor, bringing the total to two in addition to the CCP program director. The CCP advisors spend a lot of time working in local

high schools, giving information sessions about CCP opportunities and college programs more generally and doing one-on-one advising sessions with both CCP and non-CCP students. During these sessions, advisors work with students to develop at least a preliminary program plan aligned with the college's career-technical or transfer program pathways. College leaders say that helping high school students develop post-high school education plans is especially important in a rural community where there is not a strong college-going culture and where rates of college attainment are low. College advisors work hard to encourage students to pursue college after high school, whether at North Central State or elsewhere. But too many students who graduate from local high schools—including those who have earned college credit through CCP—do not continue their education. COVID has exacerbated this situation as students are choosing jobs over college.

- **Tuition Freedom Scholarships.** To provide a financial incentive to continue their education after high school, if students take at least 8 credits through CCP and/or career-technical programs, the college awards students a Tuition Freedom Scholarship covering tuition to complete an associate degree post-high school. College leaders say that this scholarship is a big reason why only 25% of their students take out loans to pay for their education at the college—one of the lowest rates in the state.

How the college funded these innovations

The college redesigned its existing intake advisor positions to serve as success coaches who help students explore interests and enter a program. In 2019, the college combined the testing center director and another student services position to create an advisor for dual enrollment (CCP) students who take courses on the college's campus. More recently, the college hired a second dual enrollment advisor to work with students taking the college's courses at their high school. All of these positions are funded using general operating funds.

To train and support faculty (including adjunct instructors) in redesigning and teaching corequisite courses in math and English, the college received a small grant from the Ohio Association of Community Colleges as part of the national Strong Start to Finish (SSF) initiative in which Ohio was a partner. Under this initiative, faculty attended meetings with other faculty from community colleges and universities throughout the state to discuss strategies for strengthening curriculum and pedagogy.

To fund the Tuition Freedom Scholarships, the college has used revenue from gains in performance funding generated in part from current and former CCP students' earning college credits, completing college math and English, and completing other success-point milestones.

3. Keeping Students on Path

Innovations the college implemented at scale

- **Division liaisons and faculty coaches.** The college created three new advisor positions, each of whom advises students in one of the college's three main academic program areas: health care, business and technology, and liberal arts/public service. Once students have chosen a program of study, the liaisons work with them to develop a full-program plan in their major field of interest. If students intend to transfer to a four-year institution, the liaisons help them figure out what courses they need to take to prepare for their intended transfer destination and major. Once students complete 30 credits in their program, they are assigned a faculty coach to provide field- and career-specific guidance, although the division liaisons often continue to provide higher-level advising to students in their program area since they are experts in the requirements of the programs in their respective fields. The combination of initial meetings with a student success coach followed by a division liaison and connection to a faculty mentor in the student's field of study ensures that students are helped to choose a program direction and receive specialized advice and connections in their chosen field as they enter the program and progress toward completion.
- **Academic planning and progress monitoring.** The college purchased the Student Planning module for its Colleague platform to create and store educational plans for each student. With advice from a consultant, the college also purchased a case management software system, Aviso Retention, which enables faculty and success coaches to see all the case notes on each student. The college invested a lot of time and effort in training faculty and staff to use the case notes system, and college leaders say it is now used extensively. The director of advising produces regular reports on the use of the system by individual faculty and staff, which leaders consult to both recognize those who are extensive users and encourage others to use it more.
- **Advisor for nonacademic needs.** Two years ago, the college hired a fourth full-time advisor as a retention specialist who helps students with nonacademic issues that threaten their ability to stay in school—"a sort of embedded social worker," according to college leaders. The retention specialist helps students find supports both on campus and through community social service agencies.
- **Early alert and enhanced student support communication.** Faculty in introductory courses with high failure rates are asked to complete a short report on all students three weeks into the term to indicate whether or not they are making satisfactory progress. Alerts for students who are struggling three weeks into the term are communicated using the Aviso Retention case management records system, which allows faculty, advisors, financial aid staff, and other support staff to find information about issues experienced by individual students and about the supports provided to them.

How the college funded these innovations

The college used a Title III grant to initially fund the three division liaison advisors, although it now uses general operating funds to support these positions. The consultant who helped the college review student planning systems was paid by the Success Center at the Ohio Association of Community Colleges. The college used Title III funds to purchase the Colleague Student Planning and Aviso systems and train faculty and staff to use them. Funding for ongoing system maintenance and upgrading is now built into the operating budget.

The college is funding the retention specialist who helps students with non-academic needs using Perkins funds. According to college leaders, this position has more than paid for itself because the retention specialist has helped many students negotiate personal challenges and stay in school.

4. Ensuring That Students Are Learning

Innovations the college implemented at scale

- **Faculty professional development.** Over the past two years, as more instruction has moved online, the college has provided support for faculty to become certified through the Association of College and University Educators (ACUE). The majority of full-time faculty have been certified or are currently going through training. The college also supports ACUE training and certification for adjunct faculty. As a result, more faculty at the college are trying new ways of teaching in their classes—and seeking feedback from students on how effective these innovations are.
- **Instructional design support for evening and online courses.** The college rewrote the job descriptions for two existing instructional design staff persons so that they focus their efforts on helping faculty teach online courses and evening classes, which are often taught by industry individuals who lack formal training in teaching.
- **Embedded tutoring.** The director of the tutoring center works with faculty to embed peer tutors into introductory math, English, and other courses with high failure rates. The director of the tutoring center also oversees TRIO and student groups including Phi Theta Kappa and the National Society for Leadership and Success. In part because the director of the tutoring center connects with so many students through these other roles, the center (which is next to the TRIO program office) is highly utilized.

How the college funded these innovations

The college used Title III to provide ACUE certification training to some faculty, and the college is funding the rest.

Student fees are used to pay for embedded tutors.

Management and Infrastructure for Guided Pathways Reforms

Innovations the college implemented at scale

Although North Central State did not change the organization and roles of its leadership team, it did make changes to key committees to increase their effectiveness in supporting improved student success. First, it expanded the Academic Council to include not only academic deans but also directors of advising and other student services areas. This has increased communication and cooperation between academic and student affairs in support of student success. Also, the college has narrowed the focus of its Student Success Committee to concentrate on college policies and how they can be modified to foster student success. The Committee reviews all college policies on a regular cycle. For example, the Committee recently examined its course withdrawal policy and proposed revisions to accommodate the college's move to offer more eight-week courses.

How the college funded these innovations

The college was able to improve the impact of its committees on student success without added costs.

The authors thank the administrators, staff, faculty, and advisors at North Central State College for the time they took to share their experience implementing guided pathways. Funding for this research was provided by Ascendium Education Group.

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