

Teaching and Learning Together

The data is in—quantitative, qualitative, anecdotal, and old-fashioned common sense—to achieve success colleges must build healthy relationships between faculty, staff, and students.

When students experience campuses as places of nurturing and belonging, they reach their educational and career goals, say experts, including those at The Research and Planning Group for California Community College, a non-profit organization focused on improving teaching and learning across the state.

Gavilan College has been responding to these insights through a statewide initiative called Guided Pathways, and much of this work continues despite the COVID-19 shut down in March 2020. By

figures and Gavilan's is not currently possible.

A Guided Pathways approach offers an antidote to low-rate success rates, and beginning a few years ago our campus decided to integrate its six recommended elements:

1. Direct students to a goal.
2. Keep them focused on it.
3. Nurture them along the way.
4. Engage them during and after class.
5. Connect them to the larger campus community.
6. Value their existing talents, abilities, and expertise.

By grouping students into groups based on their interests and goals, providing targeted financial and emotional support where needed, and connecting students to tutors and mentors, Gavilan plans to increase the number of students who transfer or who enter immediately into satisfying well-paid careers upon graduation.

“[H]ere we come find you because otherwise you may not find us.”

—Vania Parakati,
Gavilan College Counselor

building better connections between students, staff, and faculty, upping support levels for all, and easing students' confusion about transfer, certificates, and degrees, Gavilan hopes to improve the rate at which our students transfer and complete programs.

Across the state those numbers haven't been pretty. According to the publication Community College Review 70 percent of community college students fail to earn a degree or transfer. There have been indicators that the success rates at Gavilan are even lower that. According to our research office, however, a one-to-one comparison between state

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On the one hand, the level of change required is, indeed, daunting. On the other hand, some key Guided Pathways features are already in place or were until recently. As expected, wherever the recommended program features already exist, students are more successful. For example, programs such as Puente, Early Connect, TRIO, and EOPS all have consistently higher completion rates for their participants when compared to Gavilan's non-participating students. Not surprisingly, each



Darlene Del Carmen, a counselor in the Kinesiology and Athletics Department, greets a student athlete, who dropped by between practice and classes for a quick update on his progress.

prioritizes creating healthy relationships between faculty, staff, and students. Connection is at the center of each program, providing students with a sense of belonging and family, which is also key to the Guided Pathways model.

Let's take a tour of some of other key program practices and how they worked prior to the spring COVID-19 shutdown.

Cohorts & Counselors

For several semesters, Gavilan College's athletics department and Learning Commons (a peer-tutoring center in the Library building) have worked together. They are using student athletes' existing team relationships and channeling them into academic success.

Cohort groups of football and basketball players, come to the Learning Commons each week to meet with highly-trained tutors, who support them in beginning and completing assignments across the disciplines.

An athlete's time is precious, says Darlene Del Carmen, a counselor in the Kinesiology

and Athletics Department. Athletes must enroll fulltime on top of spending hours in training and practice, yet they are sometimes far from home with limited funds for housing and rent. But work schedules must fit in between classes and team responsibilities.

The pressure and challenge are great, something Del Carmen knows firsthand as a former college athlete herself. Our athletes "were pulled in because of sports," says Del Carmen, "but athletics is just the carrot." She brings a special passion and dedication to helping each player realize their specific educational and professional goal because she understands what is possible. She landed in a job she loves, helping people she cares about.

Students enter her office whenever its open; they don't need an appointment, and she does a lot of reaching out, gathering insight from an athlete's teammates, coaches, and instructors about who may need extra-support.

"I wouldn't be able to do this without our coaches," she says. They know their students, and as the only athletics counselor, she depends on them for helping her give necessary support in a timely manner.

Such close working extends beyond her department to the Learning Commons, where athletes work with peer-tutors, which Del Carmen likens to a bridge—literal and metaphorical—to academic parts of the campus.

It's now a mandatory part of some athlete's educational plans, and according to Del Carmen they find value and community while enjoying access to the Learning Commons's technology and computers.

It's all part of "making it matter," she says. It's "creating an environment that our student athletes are going to be successful."

That includes fostering strong student-to-student relationships, first between teammates and then with the Learning Commons' highly-trained student tutors.

"They are always helpful here," says Rich Denton-Rodriguez, a member of the football team who completes many of his assignments inside the Learning Commons. He does so in the company of people he already knows and trusts while getting to know people who aren't on the football team.

The Learning Commons' resources, such as laptops, are necessary and the people who work there are friendly, says Denton-Rodriguez.

His teammates agree. D'Vaughn Jones, for example. He appreciates the connection between Del Carmen, football players, and the Learning Commons, seeing it all as a pool of support.

He credits the model for keeping him on track. "It would take me five classes a year if it wasn't for them," he says, meaning he wouldn't meet his educational goals as quickly as he is able to do so now. Instead of perusing the class schedule himself, choosing classes at odd times only because they fit between his packed work and practice schedule, with Del Carmen's help his schedule is actually reasonable. Because of his teammate's and the Learning Commons, he is successfully completing assignments in a timely manner, which gives him the confidence needed to reach his learning goals.

Colleague to Colleague

While creating supportive peer relationships is critical to improving student success, of equal value is the bonding that happens between colleagues across roles and assigned duties. When colleagues are tasked with working together to support students, everyone benefits.

For example, beginning in about 2011 the English and Math Department began an experimental project that opened communication between instructors, counselors, and students. Most recently it went by the name Early Connect.

Through Early Connect, instructors had access to a designated counselor, who visited their classes, met their students, and contacted them when they appeared to be struggling or falling behind. Thus, a critical gap between the classroom and outside services was bridged, and it developed enduring relationships between student, teachers, and counselors alike.

As a result of direct instructor contact with a designated counselor, students got help in identifying resources and received necessary support for crises such as hunger, depression, rent and transportation insecurity, and learning and behavioral difficulties.

One hundred percent of the Early Connect instructors who responded to an anonymous survey said they would use the program again. Unfortunately, it was recently disbanded, and its counselor, Vania Parakati, assigned to other duties. But instructors most closely involved with it hope for a

quick return, perhaps, under a Guided Pathways designation. After all, its success was always clear to those most directly involved.

"I rely on her a lot," says Kyle Hull, an English Instructor, who worked closely with the program for years. He explains that it does require vulnerability. Welcoming Parakati into his classrooms and sharing information about relationships with students that are sometimes challenging, means he sometimes feels exposed.

It works, he says, because "we all need to be vulnerable to learn." It's a lesson that's not only helped him establish stronger connections with Parakati but to his students as well. In part because of Early Connect, they knew he was there for them, as was the institution for him, which through Parakati provided concrete support for the work of the classroom in a visible and nurturing manner.

Semester after semester, trust had been built and students benefited. The by-product of relationships such as the ones between Parakati and the English and Math departments has been trust, says Hull.

"It goes both ways," Parakati concurs. "There are things that are happening in the classroom that I would not know otherwise," she says. "That's what you come to realize. There could be an argument about how it this different from other counseling relationships, but I've been here to specifically support you guys," she says gesturing to Hull.

"It's intentional," he says, describing the inherent value in being able to talk directly and in a sustained manner with

a counselor who's visited his classes multiple times, knew his students, and understood his teaching philosophy and curricular approaches.

"You have to meet [students] where they are," explains Parakati. In other models, students have to come find the counselor. "But here we come find you because otherwise you may not find us."

Keys to Academic Success

Across campus, Gavilan's most successful programs include an opportunity for student, staff, and faculty participants to bond, feel included, and develop trust.

As we have seen, this happens, in part, through tutoring and counseling programs that connect faculty and students in immediate, ongoing, and concrete ways. People, who play different roles on campus get to know each professionally but also more personally.

In its most ideal forms, the Guided Pathways project will allow the college to build on what is already working well (or has done so in the past) while also deepening our understanding about how to continue fostering healthy vibrant relationships across campus.

Because our institutional financial well-being is tied more than ever to the number of students completing our programs, focus on creating such relationships is necessarily a top priority.



Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, LaRonn Chapman, Benny Knowles, Jr., Steven, Rich Denton-Rodriguez, and D'Vaughn Jones—Gavilan College football players—build on their team relationships to help each other study in the Learning Commons, a peer-tutoring center in the Library.