Synopsis of *Redesigning America's Community Colleges*, by Thomas R. Bailey, Shanna Smith Jaggars, and Davis Jenkins

Introduction:

Community colleges serve more than 10 million students annually, and many students are from historically underrepresented populations. Unfortunately, fewer than half of all community college students "complete any type of degree or certificate within six years" (p. 1).

The authors refer to colleges offering many courses without structured "high-quality programs of study" (p. 2) as the "cafeteria-style, self-service model" (p. 3), leaving students "to navigate often complex and ill-defined pathways mostly on their own" (p. 13). The authors state that in order "to shift away from the cafeteria model [we] must overcome an entrenched organizational structure and culture" (p. 15). The guided pathways model incorporates developmental education as part of the "on-ramp" process for students to gear up for a structured program of study.

Chapter 1: Redesigning College Programs

The authors contend the sheer number of course/program offerings at a cafeteria-style community college can be overwhelming to students—particularly those from low socio-economic backgrounds and/or first generation students.

In discussing transfer and occupational programs, the authors state that "*course* learning outcomes are not always tied to *program* learning outcomes, making it difficult for students to build a coherent set of skills as they progress across the curriculum" (p. 21). They feel this "lack of coherence" can "create barriers to advancement for students" (p. 22). The authors frame some of this chapter around behavioral economics wherein people will make decisions based on limited time, resources, knowledge, not making a decision, and without the "capacity to process vast amounts of information" (p. 23). They argue that providing students with limited options may simplify the decision-making process.

"A 2014 study using a nationally representative sample found that students who were able to transfer almost all their earned community college credits to a four-year institution were two and a half times more likely to earn a bachelor's degree, compared to students who were able to transfer fewer than half of their earned credits" (p. 29). Many students begin at a community college with the intention of transferring to a four-year institution, yet "the majority of students who enter a community college seeking to transfer end up with no credential—neither an associate nor a bachelor's degree" (p. 31).

"Simplifying and clarifying program pathways requires complementary changes to other college practices, particularly in how colleges approach student support services, instruction, and the intake process" (p. 50).

Chapter 2: Guiding Students

The authors discuss the dominate public perception of four-year selective institutions—and the years of supportive guidance many students receive with the "fundamentally different" (P. 53) experiences for many community college students and those attending non-selective four-year colleges.

The chapter focuses on the college intake process and the difficulties faced by students who don't have clear goals, or an understanding of how to navigate the "structure of the cafeteria college" (p. 52).

Orientation and the first registration process can be particularly frustrating for students who may feel rushed through the process and not offered enough quality time with an advisor to develop clear goals. Students are anxious for the development of a plan of study, but, given the nature of the process, it may not happen for undecided students. Whereas, students who come in with a determined plan of action are more comfortable with a short orientation and/or registration session.

When services are located in many offices, students can get lost, frustrated, and "unsure which office is the most appropriate for a given issue or problem" (p. 57). The result can be that students learn about services by word of mouth, and this could mean that many of them are unaware of important support services.

Structured and consistent academic advising is integral to students' development and execution of goals. This process requires "sustained one-on-one interaction between the students and an advisor" (p. 58). The authors caution that many community colleges "lack shared case management systems that would allow them to coordinate assistance across the disparate offices, personnel, and services" (p. 60). The authors support case management systems that allow tracking of students throughout their time at the college, to provide students with consistent support.

It is important for colleges to maintain easy to navigate, clear, and up-to-date web sites—particularly in regard to programs and transfer requirements.

The authors encourage colleges to strengthen and narrow content of student success courses, so essential topics are covered in-depth, rather than a plethora of topics being reviewed quickly.

Chapter 3: Rethinking Student Instruction

It is acknowledged that many community college students lead complicated lives—working, supporting families, and attending classes. Financial worries impact students greatly, and many students cannot afford to make mistakes in taking courses that don't help them meet their academic goals.

The cafeteria style college, while providing students access to many choices, creates confusion because the "courses often do not connect with one another to create a clear and coherent learning pathway; instead, course selection is fraught with complexity and risk" (p. 81).

In this chapter the authors stress the importance of using technology in ways that support redesigned courses and pedagogical initiatives.

On p. 82 the authors state, "incoming students may not be prepared for the level of conceptual and critical thinking expected in college-level courses because they were not exposed to that type of thinking in their previous education experiences."

The authors argue that to "take control of their learning, students need to practice skills such as self-regulation, task planning, time management, note taking, and organizing study time" (p. 84), and these functions must be learned by many students and developed as metacognitive skills.

Two modes of teaching are discussed in this chapter—knowledge transmission (lecture) and learning facilitation (helping students scale and organize concepts). They discuss the creation of teaching centers for faculty—which provide opportunity for sharing and knowledge, observations, and peer support.

Academic services, such as tutoring, learning communities, and supplemental instruction are promoted, although the authors acknowledge that students who may need the services may not seek them out, so colleges should be more proactive about encouraging students to utilize the services.

While on-line learning is mentioned, the authors seem to encourage a hybrid of face-to-face and on-line engagement for students to get the most out of a course.

Chapter 4: Helping Underprepared Students

On p. 119 the authors state, “standardized tests cannot clearly distinguish between students who are ‘college ready” and those who are not… among the students who begin on the developmental education track, fewer than half successfully complete it, and even fewer move on to eventual graduation.”

Effective reforms to traditional developmental education, according to the authors, “seek to immediately engage all students in challenging college-level material that is relevant to their program of study” (p. 118).

The authors’ share study results that imply “that students at many points in the development continuum are unlikely to be harmed by attempting courses that are slightly more challenging than their placement scores suggest they can handle” (p. 123).

On p. 127 the authors list three reasons why stand-alone placement tests result in students being placed in a course that is inappropriate:

1. Students are “unaware of the purpose and consequences of the placement tests,” and don’t prepare properly for them
2. Content of the placement tests is often poorly aligned with larger academic expectations, and
3. The tests don’t adequately test the knowledge students need to be successful in college-level coursework.

There is a great deal of focus on transitional math and English courses, but the authors (and other researchers at CCRC) assert that students’ performance in other introductory level coursework also determines their ultimate success.

Chapter 5: Engaging Faculty and Staff

The authors state that a “divide between administrative and academic governance bodies reinforces a corresponding divide between student services professionals and teaching faculty, who often report to distinct and disconnected parts of the college and rarely interact with one another (p. 145).

This chapter focuses on the importance of administration, faculty, and professional staff working together on issues such as “relational trust” (p. 146), “transparent budgeting” (p. 148), working through “contentious issues” (p. 149), and “focus on practices, not politics” (p. 151).

Data, data, data.

Cross-functional teams have the opportunity to provide “a positive impact on the organization,” (p. 157) so long as they are “empowered to make decisions that will be accepted and supported by the administration” (p. 157).

Providing faculty and staff with opportunities for professional development is crucial and worthwhile for the long-term payoffs of enthusiasm and motivation.

The authors mention that "research literature on adjunct faculty suggests that if colleges want to improve teaching and learning, they cannot afford to exclude adjuncts from the process" (p. 169).

Chapter 6: The Economics of College Redesign

The focus of the guided pathways model is "on the cost per high-quality completion" (p. 172) and completion of a credential "can be considered a measure of efficiency" (p. 172).

The authors review some traditional and pathway cost and funding models—"cost-per-completion … show[ing] that remedial students are more expensive to graduate. Students requiring development courses "are more likely to drop out, resulting in high institutional costs for a relatively low number of completions" (p. 178).

They discuss strengthening transfer opportunities for students, and look at several state-wide systems attempting to bridge the gaps between two-year and four-year institutional requirements.

Conclusion:

Important recommendations include:

Creating academic pathways for each program

Build and develop strong partnerships with four-year institutions and industry to align students with local labor force needs

Help students develop metacognitive skills

Create a strong support matrix for faculty

Data, data, data – use it to track students and assess programs and processes

Create committees that are empowered to bring about change with a "focus on student success" (p. 210)

Hiring and promoting should be done based on "a strong commitment to improving student outcomes" (p. 210)

The authors conclude by stating, "We still have a great deal to learn about how to meet the challenge of increasing postsecondary student success, but the guided pathways model synthesizes our best knowledge thus far, and it offers a framework within which to align promising reform strategies" (p. 219).

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Synopsis by Karen McCarthy