

Insights from Guided Pathways Webinar:

“Operationalizing Student Experience Redesign With a Design & Implementation Approach”

Presented in February 2022 by Dr. Rob Johnstone,

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Who can use this: administrators, faculty, classified staff

PRESENTATION OBJECTIVES:

- Understand NCII’s core values and process of redesigning the student experience with an equity lens.
- Learn from college professionals’ experiences in operationalizing student experience redesign.

Keywords: Continuous improvement, design, design thinking, equity, student experience



Redesigning the Student Experience at Scale

VALUES TO PRIORITIZE WHEN USING AN EQUITY LENS

Big change requires turning big ideas into action. From enrollment to completion, ample opportunities exist to improve and make student experiences more equitable. Some colleges have already explored how to redesign the student experience at scale using a creative problem-solving approach. In this document, we explore insights from those using a design thinking approach to remake the student experience.

Redesigning the student experience starts with empathy and understanding, grounded in the idea that products and services should address the real needs of the people who will use them. At its core, design thinking in higher education prioritizes students’ needs and feedback with a bias toward action, continuous improvement and equity.

This brief shares the fundamentals of design thinking that National Center for Inquiry & Improvement (NCII) suggests college professionals should employ when they embark on an equity-centered student experience redesign process.

“ Focusing on what the end users are experiencing, versus how we think they are experiencing it, is a place to start.

— Dr. Rob Johnstone, *Founder & President, NCII*

VALUES FOR DESIGN

The following values should guide teams leading the student experience redesign process.

1. Center the student experience.

Stay focused on students' aspirations and goals, and redesign your institution's educational experience with students' life experiences and goals in mind rather than redesigning outcomes. As you gain a deeper understanding of the student experience and question long-held beliefs or ways of doing things, you will identify barriers that challenge students' success.

2. Go bold with a fundamental redesign.

Aim for a redesign at a structural level rather than marginal tweaks on a surface level to the status quo. This will ultimately lead to the greatest amount of improved outcomes for more students at scale.

3. Prioritize engagement across teams, departments and divisions.

Build a problem-solving team from across the campus. Oftentimes the same people are invited to the table — deans, presidents and vice presidents. However, high-functioning teams are those that include people from a variety of different perspectives who feel valued, heard and validated in the process.



STRATEGY IN PRACTICE:

When Guilford Technical Community College (GTCC) in North Carolina first began its redesign process, a small, tight-knit team of individuals who were each focused on one element of the redesign drove the work. This dynamic promoted accountability and highly focused work, resulting in version 1.0 solutions. At the same time, these solutions reflected a narrow perspective and prevented professionals across the campus from engaging in important components of this work.

From there, managers, administrators, faculty and staff participated in a survey about what they wanted the student experience to look like and how the college measured up. The results set focus areas for the next phase of redesign. In that iteration, more than 50 people from various college roles participated across five design teams, each with a different focus area. The teams came up with 35 challenges and solutions.

Through this experience, they learned that students' experiences would best benefit from a wider scope of individuals contributing to the work. Ed Bowling, executive director at GTCC, said, “This time the work was more broadly dispersed, and in doing that, it created more ownership.”

4. Be equity-minded.

A culture of equity-mindedness is crucial to design work. Stay laser-focused on the fact that students have different lived experiences before they come to college. Consider how communities of color who face systemic barriers to success will experience designs. Infusing and leveraging equity expertise can help integrate equity into your design work.

5. Make evidence-based decisions.

Use data to understand your students, their experiences and capacities, and underlying systems. When developing solutions and recommendations, consult the national and state experts who base their suggestions on data. What does local data say about what students are experiencing?

6. Create a culture of continuous improvement.

Apple did not start with the iPhone 14, so why should your team start its redesign with the most elite and most optimized version of your process? The goal is to make students' experiences better — not perfect — in the beginning. Create a solution, try it out and repeat the design cycle to keep learning and improving.

7. Lean toward action.

Prioritize doing over lengthy strategizing. Among design teams, create a culture of innovation, one that celebrates action and learns from both successes and failures. At the end of each design project, you have something to work from and build upon.

STRATEGY IN PRACTICE:

Through the iterative design process at Maricopa College in Arizona, college professionals learned that three-, six- and nine-month timelines were more effective than 18-month timelines to keep folks engaged in the work. While three months is still a commitment, it's a shorter, more focused commitment.

The team established shared design principles and utilized leaders who were trusted among the group to encourage others to take action. Ultimately, people felt energized by working collaboratively across campus on a discrete project for a short amount of time that they knew would make meaningful change.

“We’ve seen a lot of positive, much wider engagement across the institution about sustaining the change because people feel a strong sense of ownership and accountability to be in on the ground level,” said Bettina Celis, interim associate vice chancellor of Academic Affairs at Maricopa College.



DESIGN & IMPLEMENTATION STAGES

1. Understand current student experiences.

Start by gaining a better understanding of students. The following are some activities to guide you in understanding their experiences:

- Source data about experiences directly from students using focus groups, surveys and in-class interviews. Build strong relationships with students to gather honest experiences in class to get an understanding of the circumstances that shaped those experiences and form ideas of how to iterate and improve.
- Experience a day-in-the-life scenario by engaging directly in a student activity (e.g., apply for classes, walk through the onboarding process, sign up for advising).
- Map student journeys by examining how the experiences and institutional processes vary for students with differing identities, previous educational experience, backgrounds and needs.
- **Equity lens:** Disaggregate data by race/ethnicity and understand, validate and design with students' lived experiences in mind.



2. Frame the problem, and identify one to three specific problems to solve.

Identify up to three key problems you will solve in the redesign. Write a meaningful problem statement that clearly names the problem, explains why it's important and establishes who will be affected. For example: "Too many of our students of color do not feel a sense of connection and belonging through our onboarding plan." Try the following:

- An exercise called the Five Whys can help identify the root cause of a problem. Start by stating a problem, continue by asking "Why?" five times and see what root causes you unearth.
- **Equity lens:** Identify student groups of focus, identify institutional and individual assumptions, and acknowledge students as experts of their lived experiences.

3. Brainstorm and ideate.

Dream big about what is possible for student experiences. In your teams, create a brave space for open conversations and exploration of ideas without limits. At this stage, there are no bad ideas. Consider the following questions:

- What are limiting assumptions and beliefs about students and systems?
- What if things didn't have to be the way they are? What could that look like?
- What exemplary practices are peer institutions doing?
- What is already happening that you can leverage?

- ♦ What is the desired future state of the specific student experience? Can you map it?
- ♦ What are possible institutional approaches to addressing the problem?
- ♦ What have historically underserved groups of students likely already experienced? What impact will proposed approaches have on them?
- ♦ **Equity lens:** Would the proposed approaches unintentionally deepen inequities with historically underserved groups of students?

4. Design for scale.

Think about what your team can accomplish in version 1.0 and what features may come in future versions. Focus on features as the student will experience them. Formulate your success metrics. Discomfort is to be expected because it's an indicator that you are challenging something that will lead to better solutions. Consider the following activities:

- ♦ Create a process flow for desired future student experiences, establish success metrics and plan to update the experience.
- ♦ Identify necessary changes in institutional infrastructure, policy, process, roles, resource allocation and professional development to support your design.
- ♦ Map student journeys by examining how the experiences and institutional processes vary for students with differing identities, previous educational experience, backgrounds and needs.
- ♦ **Equity lens:** Pinpoint structures and supports that reduce or remove structural barriers and inequities for students of color. Check that you have accounted for differences in students' experiences, and identify mechanisms in place that ensure equitable outcomes.



5. Implement version 1.0.

At this stage, it is time to roll out version 1.0 at scale and learn. Glean insights from your successes and challenges. Evaluate your [success metrics](#). Incorporate student focus groups and practitioner focus groups to assess the outcomes.

- ♦ **Equity lens:** Explore how priority student groups have experienced the implemented student experience and what you need to change for these particular groups.

6. Reflect and improve.

The last phase of version 1.0 is just the beginning. At this stage, you're armed with knowledge about what works and what still needs some work. From here, prioritize what needs to happen in the next improved iteration. A growth mindset is key in developing some productive persistence to keep the momentum going. Think about the costs and benefits of your design moving forward.

- ♦ **Equity lens:** Reflect on the experiences of disproportionately impacted student populations. Consider targeted and affinity programs to add to future scaled designs.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- See California Virtual Campus Online Education Initiative’s [Resources for Teaching and Learning Online](#).
- View the “Operationalizing Student Experience Redesign With a Design & Implementation Approach” [webinar recording](#) in the Vision Resource Center.
- To find design thinking resources, see the [Stanford d.school](#)’s tools for taking action.
- Explore design thinking resources and courses on [IDEOU.com](#).
- Learn about designing Student Success Teams in the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office’s “Leading Holistic Student Support Reform” webinar [brief](#) and related [webinar recording](#) in the Vision Resource Center.
- See examples of how colleges have designed programs in the “Developing a Holistic and Student-Centered Support Ecosystem” Guided Pathways Institute #3 [brief](#) in the Vision Resource Center.

The Success Center at the Foundation for California Community Colleges independently prepared this overview based on the presentation; the overview may not fully represent the presenters’ viewpoints.



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