

Second Year PCC Pathways Students: Interviews and Observations

Executive Summary

Study Purpose

- This study explored the second year student experience at PCC. Specifically, it investigated the needs and experiences of the Second Year Pathway student and probed student engagement related to the Pathways program structure. In addition, general comparisons were made between the Second Year Pathways student (SYP), the second year student who chose not to continue in Pathways for a second year (SY), and the second-year non-Pathways students (SYNP).
- This study has important implications for program improvement related to perceived benefits and challenges of the Second Year Pathways program, outsider perspectives of the pathways program, and student outcomes.

Method

- Qualitative data (interviews, observations, and artifacts) were gathered in 2016 – 2017.
- Five Second Year Pathways coaches; six SYP students; four second year students who left Pathways after their first year; six non-Pathways students; and one SYP student, who permitted the researcher to shadow him for a day, participated in the study. All participants were second year students at Pasadena City College.
- Participants were interviewed in the fall and spring semesters. SYP students were observed in Pathways settings, such as the SYP coach office, the SYP learning center, and the First Year Pathways (FYP) learning center.

Findings

- SYP and SY student participants credit Pathways with their success and describe outcomes including personal growth, self-discovery, independence, and a solid foundation from which to explore. In contrast, two of the SY participants detailed an impersonal prescribed path with logistical support, which left the students feeling personally unfulfilled.
- Second year program requirements target the average student. Students on academic probation feel they need additional support beyond increased coaching support, such as financial planning (i.e. paying for 4-year institutions), budgeting (e.g. how to live off of \$360/month), time management skills, psychological services, or assistance building connections with faculty and staff. SYP and SY students feel the requirements could be “upped” a little for struggling students.
- SYP participants do not feel incentivized to complete fourth semester requirements, as registration precedes the requirement deadline.
- SYP and SY participants felt more connected to peers and the Pathways environment in their first year. One hundred percent of Pathways participants developed meaningful and lasting friendships during the first year College 1 and Jam and found the colorful and spacious first year learning center more conducive to studying and maintaining close connections. SYP and SY

participants confess that they visit the second year learning center to print or quickly use a computer, rather than a study or social space.

- The focus on career and intensive two-year associate's or transfer degree is both a detriment and a benefit. Participants feel they are able to transfer in two (or three years for STEM majors) due to the transfer culture; however, participants feel pressured to "get in and get out." Participants who are not on the two-year fast-track feel they are categorized in a different way or as viewed as non-traditional. SY participants feel pressured to meet the Pathways standard and some feel that Pathways does not value education for education's sake.
- Perceptions of the Pathways program varies across campus. Fifty-percent of SYNP students have seen the Pathways signs and banners on campus, but were unfamiliar with the program beyond priority registration. The other SYNP participants thought Pathways served special-needs students who need extra support or motivated students who are "on the Pathway" to knowing what they want to do.
- SYP and SY participants use terms like "give and take" when describing Pathways requirements; you give me coaches and priority registration and I do x, y, and z for you. Many see the requirements as opportunities to develop time-management skills and explore the college environment. Coaches encourage students to explore off-campus activities and volunteer opportunities; however, students who felt "lost" the first year view the second year as a time to take advantage of campus activities, such as research opportunities, building relationships with faculty, leadership positions, campus-based volunteer opportunities, and clubs.
- Meaningful first year experiences beyond the coaches, tutoring, and priority registration: speaker series, the community-building and critical thinking aspects of College 1, orientation day (complete FAFSA, student ID, etc. in one room), and club rush.
- Meaningful second year experiences beyond the coaches, tutoring, and priority registration: education plan preparation with coaches to streamline counseling appointment (i.e. referencing online resources, refining questions), drop-in counseling, leadership positions in the clubs discovered during first year, and developing relationships with professors in their major. Participants had mixed feelings about the career center. Those who attended the career center for immediate and personal reasons, such as a job search or creating an online profile with LinkedIn found the career center useful; those who completed the discovery survey or attended a last-minute workshop that accommodated their schedule felt they were "jumping through hoops." A large proportion of SYP and SY students visited the transfer on numerous occasions for application assistance or to visit recruiters from various campuses and found the resource helpful.
- The personal attention and goal orientation described by the SYP and SY participants contrasted starkly with the SYNP participants. SYNP participants found their PCC experience frustrating as they struggled to register for math classes or felt like they were in a "Starbucks line" while waiting to see a counselor. They described themselves as, "immature" or "dense" for their inability to interpret and complete the education plan or fulfill requirements for a major that they had yet to identify. Participants replied, "not sure" or "looking at options" when asked about their career goals and reassured themselves, and me, that they were in "no rush" and would figure it out on their own. In contrast, SYP and SY participants articulated their major (or meta-major) and career goals with ease.

Conclusion/Recommendations

- SYP students and coaches suggested the following: more interpersonal encounters with the coaches (e.g. coach-led workshops); focus on empowerment and critical thinking in College 1, rather than recall; integrate workshops within the college community (i.e. make students aware of the career workshop hosted by the international club), which may reduce the demand on the career center; multi-disciplined opportunities (i.e. science students who are interested in the arts); speakers to help cultivate student identity with a focus on cultural diversity and cultural difference; provide support to coaches to better grasp the purpose of the program and align coaching with the mission of the program; pipeline resources continuously and fluently in the second year coaching office (i.e. invite career or transfer staff to present or host coach-led workshops); reshape student learning outcome for College 1 (i.e. more critical thinking, prepare students for demands of college-level English); include more specialized resources like the Safe Zone for LGBTQ and previously incarcerated students or the health center; and develop a near-peer mentor program.
- SYP student participants describe a need to give back to the campus; they gain so much from Pathways, they want to reciprocate in kind. Students feel they add to the program through formalized tutoring, informally sharing their personal experiences with incoming freshmen, or disseminating information via word of mouth. Coaches describe a similar phenomenon during group coaching meetings where students benefit from the sharing of ideas and experiences.
- Build a Pathways identity and program value beyond priority registration. Reinforcing benefits outside of priority registration may retain students who are unable to enroll in an impacted math or science class, even with priority registration, or students in their fourth quarter who have already enrolled.
- To develop a student's identity beyond their intended career and their perceived role in the program, Pathways can integrate diversity, personal awareness, and empowerment within the College 1 curriculum and apply alternative pedagogies to teach the content. Participants who were asked about the value they add, or what they personally bring, to Pathways were unable to articulate an answer.
- Draw clear the connections between the requirements and their intended purpose, specifically, the volunteer requirement. Participants in the health sciences noted the value of volunteering (e.g. networking, "real life" experience in their field, personal satisfaction); however, participants with non-science interests would benefit from a more transparent approach to fulfilling the volunteer requirement. Near-peer mentors could provide personal insight to more inexperienced students regarding the benefits of fulfilling the requirements.