

Redesigning Community College Student Onboarding Through Guided Pathways

Part 2: Student Perspectives on Reformed Practices at Two Florida Colleges

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Until recently, most community colleges have done little through the new student onboarding process to help entering students explore academic and career interests, choose a program of study aligned to their interests, and develop a plan for completing such a program. This has been the case even though many students start college without clear goals or even a good sense of how academic programs are connected to particular career areas. Students can visit the campus career center for help—if they are aware of this resource and choose to use it. But most students do not make use of the career center until they near graduation, if at all. And while students may be assigned an academic advisor and indeed may be required or encouraged to attend an advising session before or during their first term, advising is typically focused on selecting and registering for courses for the upcoming semester rather than on helping students explore interests, develop goals, and build an appropriate educational plan. While this characterizes the situation at many community colleges, those that are undertaking whole-college guided pathways reforms (see [Jenkins, Lahr, Fink, & Ganga, 2018](#)) are modifying the onboarding process to give entering students active support with exploration, goal-setting, and educational planning.



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This is Part 2 of a three-part packet designed to provide guidance to colleges seeking to redesign their new student onboarding practices. **Part 1** of the packet reviews research on why the conventional community college approach to new student onboarding is often unsuccessful in helping students choose and plan a program; it also describes how some colleges are rethinking the onboarding process as part of larger guided pathways reforms. This second part summarizes students' experiences with, and reactions to, the onboarding process as it occurs at two Florida community colleges that have redesigned their onboarding practices for degree-seeking students: Indian River State College (IRSC) and St. Petersburg College (SPC). We organize the discussion around three key onboarding goals: helping students to (1) explore interests and programs of study, (2) gain experiences in a program so as to gain confidence in their selected pathway, and (3) engage in academic and career

planning so as to understand the best route to program completion. **Part 3** of the packet provides exercises to help colleges plan an onboarding redesign.

Because onboarding redesigns target the early student experience, hearing from students themselves about that experience is invaluable for understanding how well revised practices are working and how onboarding can best support students' needs. The student perspectives we describe here are drawn from semi-structured interviews and focus groups conducted in spring 2018 and spring 2019 with 161 IRSC and SPC degree-seeking students, most of whom were in their first year of study.

Overview of Onboarding Reforms at IRSC and SPC

Indian River State College is a large, public community college located in southeast Florida. An early adopter of guided pathways, IRSC has, since 2016, created and refined a student onboarding process that helps new students explore career options, choose a program, and develop a plan for completing that program. The onboarding process begins with IRSC's application, which provides students with information about each of the college's eight meta-majors, and continues with new student orientation, where students have the opportunity to learn more about any particular meta-major that interests them. The emphasis on career and program exploration and planning continues into the first semester, where students enrolled in IRSC's student success course—required of all students enrolled in a transfer-oriented degree program—complete a curriculum to learn more about potential programs and careers. Further, all students are encouraged to meet with their assigned advisor to discuss program options and create an educational plan, called a customized academic plan at IRSC, by the end of their first semester.

Florida is also home to **St. Petersburg College**, another early adopter of guided pathways. In 2014, SPC reviewed and mapped out all of its academic programs and organized them into 10 meta-majors, called career and academic communities, each aligned with particular career areas and further educational opportunities available in the region. SPC offers several ways for students to learn about and engage with its meta-majors, including through new student orientation, a student success course, and regular on-campus events sponsored by specific programs or meta-majors. Additionally, the college has trained all of its professional advisors—now called career and academic advisors—as certified career development facilitators. All incoming students are assigned a career and academic advisor, and most students work with their advisor during their first year both to select a program or program direction within their meta-major and to create an educational plan.

Guided Pathways Terms

Meta-major: Career-focused academic community in which similar programs of study are grouped together to facilitate student exploration and selection of a program.

Program map: A default term-by-term sequence of courses for a particular program of study. Program maps are used by students and advisors to create customized educational plans.

Educational plan: A program map customized for a student that accounts for the student's timeline to completion, prior credits, learning support needs, and elective choices.

Student Perspectives on Reformed Practices

Here we describe specific reformed onboarding practices as they occurred at IRSC and SPC at the time of our data collection. (Both colleges continue to improve and refine their onboarding practices.) We also summarize students' accounts of their experiences with the reformed practices, and we provide lessons—informed by these accounts—for other colleges interested in improving the onboarding process.

It is important to keep in mind that several of the activities associated with each of the goals described below overlap in time. It is also worth noting that while students are encouraged to choose a program or program direction early on, there is variation in when students select a program and in their level of confidence in such a choice.

Goal 1: Helping Students to Explore Interests and Programs

Students reported that career and program exploration activities that are integrated into the beginning of college helped them to develop their interests and grasp how emerging interests and prospective career goals match with program options and requirements. Students at both colleges select a meta-major at the time of application. For some students, selecting a single meta-major upon entry is easy to do, and for others it is difficult.

New Student Orientation

IRSC and SPC have expanded their mandatory orientations to include a thorough explanation of meta-majors. This allows students to better comprehend relationships between various programs of study within one field of interest and associated career paths. Students learn about available programs thematically, and they are introduced to resources for further exploration of career areas and programs early on. At IRSC's orientation, for example, students are introduced to the college's meta-majors by attending presentations (or, alternatively, watching videos online) that explain the meta-majors and the programs of study each one contains. In-person orientation at IRSC also encourages new students to interact with faculty members, current students, and other incoming students in particular meta-majors that interest them. This introduction allows students to explore a collection of programs that might be suited to their interests and goals, and it provides information about the similarities and differences between programs within the same meta-major.

In interviews and focus groups, students said that orientation provided valuable information:

- Incoming students, especially those who were undecided, younger, or unfamiliar with college procedures and expectations, said they wanted information about available programs as early as possible and that orientation provided this information.
- While not familiar with them before starting college, most students found meta-majors to be useful for program exploration and selection after having attended orientation.



I didn't know that we actually had meta-majors when I first came in. I just thought, "Okay, I'm going to be a psychology major." So that was really interesting to learn about. [Orientation] gave me a bit more insight that there's a lot more [programs] that I could move around [to]. If I do choose to change from psychology to something else, that I'm still within that meta-major.

– SPC student



- Students attending online orientation missed out on valuable opportunities built into in-person orientation, such as interacting with students or faculty in a meta-major that interests them.

Students from both colleges reported that orientation helped them with basic college knowledge, citing, for example, the usefulness of campus tours and information about course registration. However, students seemed more interested in learning about programs and potential careers, especially if they were new to college. As one SPC student explained, orientation provided information about unfamiliar program options: “Before I came to college I had no idea what I wanted to do. I knew I wanted to do [something in] music, but I didn’t know what. ... [Orientation] opens your eyes.” Even students who were already committed to their program choice during orientation saw value in learning about programs and associated career avenues available to them at each college. As one IRSC student in the human services program explained:

Just because I have one career set in mind doesn’t mean I don’t have the ability to choose something else if I get unsure at some point. I have the ability to say, “I don’t fit in this [particular career path any longer], but I [still] like the idea around helping someone and being within that human services area.” Then I can always go back and be like, “Okay, this is something similar—not the same—but similar.”

Many IRSC and SPC students opted to participate in an online orientation. Students from both colleges overwhelmingly agreed that the online format should be more engaging, and they reported wanting more information about programs and career paths. To make online orientation more engaging and informative, students recommended that it feature videos of current students discussing and giving their opinions about their program choices and college experiences:

I think if they had students’ opinions on the videos..., that would have been really cool to hear—good opinions and bad opinions from students with different majors. That would have been really interesting to hear before coming to a college that you don’t know—because I didn’t know much about IRSC before I came here.

Career Assessment

IRSC and SPC both offer a career assessment to help students learn about prospective careers and aligned program options that might appeal to them. The computer-based assessment first asks students to answer a series of questions about their personal interests and preferences and then provides a list of program and career options that may match well based on their responses.

Students said that taking a career assessment was not always helpful:

- Undecided students were more likely to consider a career assessment useful, especially when the results included specific program options that aligned with interests they had developed to some extent before taking the assessment.
- Students who did not talk with a faculty member or an advisor after taking the assessment often did not know what to do with their results.

Many students said that taking an assessment helped to reinforce what they already knew about themselves (such as personality traits or learning styles) or to affirm their existing program or career interests. But, overall, students suggested that the results of the career assessment were not particularly useful. In many cases, students who found the assessment to be less useful did not discuss their results with anyone, which might have helped them interpret the results in a meaningful way. As one IRSC student stated, “It seemed like that’s what [the assessment] was trying to do, [help us figure out what program or career we should pursue], but [the college] didn’t really do anything to help us figure it out.”

Exploration Activities in Student Success Courses

IRSC and SPC students have the opportunity to more fully investigate their program and career interests during semester-long student success courses. For example, during IRSC’s course, students carry out research on a career path they are interested in and reflect on how that career path (including information about initial jobs, growth, and salary) and the associated program requirements (as shown on the program map) may or may not align with their own interests, skills, and priorities. Based on this information, students explain in a culminating project whether or not they want to pursue that career path and how they came to that decision. SPC students who took its semester-long success course and/or who enrolled in a somewhat similar four-week course designed to assist in the transition to college¹ were required to complete a similar assignment.

Students had different opinions of the usefulness of program and career exploration activities:

- Younger students and those less certain about their program or career choices appreciated learning how to research programs and careers. Older students and those who were more certain about their program and career choices were less likely to value these exercises.
- All students, including students with firmer program and career goals, seemed to value opportunities to discuss their program and career interests with faculty and other students.

Many students said that career research activities helped them to learn new information about their career interests and clarify why they liked a particular career area. One student, for example, was “more confident” about becoming a nurse after researching the nursing field: “I learned that there are different types of nurses. . . . I learned more about their hours and wages. I learned about their education and how to obtain that degree, and then [I learned] how to enter into the program at IRSC and the main campus. And then I learned about the pros and cons of being a nurse.”

In some cases, these research activities also helped students identify unanticipated programs or careers that aligned with their interests and preferences more closely than they would have thought. One IRSC student said, “I did [research] on chemical engineering, and it helped me find my career. With international relations and economics, I was always like, ‘Is this what I want to do?’ I don’t feel this way anymore. Now I know what I want to do.”

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Starting pay, job environment, the jobs, the skills—all of that stuff I had to research because of a class I was in, the student success [course]. I don’t know that I would have looked at that information had that teacher ... not given us that project.

- IRSC student

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However, the majority of students—especially older students—explained that such activities did not provide them new insights or information about their existing or emerging goals. Older students were most likely to report that exploration activities were less useful than their prior professional experiences, and most agreed that career exploration activities were more suitable for traditional-age college students who were still gaining experience and developing their goals. As one adult student from SPC reflected: “I feel like that [student success] class would be more beneficial to an 18- or 19-year-old coming out of high school. I’m a grown person. I don’t need to do a personality test. It’s a waste, and I could be using that time knocking out my required courses so I could get my bachelor’s earlier.”

Lessons We Learned From Students

- Introduce students to meta-majors at entry so they can begin to explore careers and programs thematically.
- Help students develop interests and goals early on by having advisors and others systematically refer students to important college resources such as career and transfer services.
- Ensure that online versions of new student orientation provide similar content and engagement as in-person versions.
- Offer opportunities for students to interact with new and returning students who have similar career and program interests.
- Train advisors and faculty to provide students with guidance on how to use information obtained through exploration activities, especially career assessments.
- Tailor exploration activities for students who already have firm career goals.

Goal 2: Helping Students to Gain Experiences in a Program

After selecting a program or program direction, students should “try out” their choice in order to gain confidence in their selected pathway. Effective onboarding practices should thus provide students with opportunities to actively engage with a program and career field so that, as one SPC student said, “we know for sure that that’s what we want to do before we go through years and years of schooling.”

Program Courses During the First Year

Students who take program-specific courses during their first year earn meaningful credits toward their credential while becoming immersed in skills and knowledge essential to their long-term goals. At IRSC, students in all programs of study take program-specific key courses within their first year of study. Similarly, at SPC, it is best practice that students in all degree programs take an introductory program course within the first 15 credit hours. Some also undertake internships or courses with hands-on activities. Based on these experiences, students can decide whether they can thrive in the particular program they have selected and whether they enjoy content that is fundamental to their chosen career path.

Students said that taking program-specific courses helped them gauge whether a program aligned with their interests and goals:

- Taking a program course early on helped students assess whether they enjoyed learning relevant content and thus helped them decide whether to remain in the program.
- Early program courses allowed students to be more realistic about what would be expected of them as they progressed through the program and about what resources and supports they might need in order to succeed.
- Students reported that internships were among the most valuable career exploration activities.
- Program courses that build hands-on experiences into the curriculum were particularly valuable to students.
- Students in less structured programs reported taking fewer program courses in their first year than students in more structured programs.



It wasn't just the labs that convinced me, it was my interest. So it was more like getting a taste of [my program] before actually committing myself. ... I was just, like, testing it out.

– IRSC Student



Students we spoke with who took program-specific courses in their first year agreed that these courses were instrumental in helping them determine whether to stay in their programs or not. While some persisted in their initial program and others ultimately decided to switch programs, most students appreciated having early program-specific experiences.

Yet, in many cases, students were unable to register for specific program courses because of remediation or prerequisite requirements, or because they switched programs after having initially chosen their classes. In other cases, students lacked access to program-specific courses because their particular meta-major or program area did not require or encourage program-specific courses in the first year.

Certain programs provide strong program and career exposure because their program maps require hands-on experiences such as internships, practicums, or labs.² For example, students in some education programs (throughout Florida) are required to undertake field experience in an elementary or secondary school. Students we spoke with taking first-year science courses requiring labs at IRSC and SPC reported that the hands-on experience allowed them to better understand material learned in lectures and to reflect on how they might perform in more advanced courses. Students in less structured programs, however, frequently said that opportunities to engage with their chosen program or career were not readily available to them during the first year of college. A business student from SPC, for example, described his first year as “fluff,” explaining that he had yet to take a program course or interact with program faculty. Instead, he was taking general education classes that were “not paying off other than fulfilling graduation requirements.”

Networking Experiences Outside the Curriculum

To provide program-related experiences for all students, both IRSC and SPC hold events aimed at exposing students to relevant persons and activities outside of the classroom. These events, which are held throughout the year and are often sponsored by individual programs or meta-majors, facilitate student interaction with program faculty, industry professionals, and other students. For example, SPC holds faculty meet-and-greet events sponsored by a meta-major at the start of each semester; students have the opportunity to speak with faculty members as well as other students with similar program and career interests. SPC also provides meta-major-specific information sessions and career summits. At the health

sciences and veterinary technology career summit, for example, students can hear from an alumni panel, network with employers, and have their resume reviewed.

Students said that out-of-class experiences were valuable but not always available:

- Some students said that their out-of-class interactions were especially memorable because they received advice on their career goals or made professional contacts early on in their program.
- Some students did not attend out-of-class events for their meta-major or program, either because their program did not sponsor such activities or because they did not know about them.
- Students in less-structured programs as well as those in smaller or less popular programs were more likely to report that their programs offered few or no out-of-class networking activities.

Students reported that out-of-class interactions with faculty, staff, and peers with similar interests were among the most important experiences during their first year at college. Students explained that these opportunities allowed them to interact with peers and influential faculty whom they might not have otherwise met until later in their program. An SPC student noted that she spoke with faculty in ways that class time does not typically afford:

I got to speak with a number of the different professors somewhat in-depth about [my program options]. I didn't even know what the educational studies degree was other than the blurb in the course catalog. Then I got to speak to them at that event, and that kind of started [me thinking], "Wait a minute, this might be a better path because it would enable me to utilize the degree immediately." – SPC student

Yet not all students were able to engage in these opportunities. Some students explained that while their college offered out-of-class activities in programs directly aligned with specific careers—such as nursing, education, or engineering—they felt that there were fewer opportunities to engage with students, program faculty, or industry professionals in programs that were perceived as attracting undecided students or those that were less tied to a specific career, such as business. Consequently, for some students, out-of-class activities and experiences were rare. In other cases, students indicated that they did not know how to access relevant experiences.

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It was nice meeting the people I got to meet because ... unless you physically sought out these people you don't [otherwise] get to meet them. It was educational.

– SPC student

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Lessons We Learned From Students

- Design programs so that students can enroll in program-specific courses in their first year.
- Embed career-related activities such as internships into program coursework.
- Host on-campus events for students in all meta-majors and programs to network with relevant faculty and career professionals.
- Provide opportunities for all students to reflect on their academic and career goals during class and through on-campus activities

Goal 3: Helping Students With Academic and Career Planning

Supporting students to develop a full-program educational plan is an essential guided pathways practice intended to help students meet their program and career goals. The plan is based on the appropriate program map and is ideally customized to account for each student's timeline to completion, prior credits, personal interests, and—if the student seeks to transfer—their specific transfer destination. Importantly, while educational planning for incoming students takes place mostly through one-on-one advising appointments at IRSC and SPC, it could be further integrated into other additional settings, such as new student orientation or a required student success course.

Educational Planning

The majority of IRSC and SPC students meet with their assigned advisors during the first term to choose a program of study and develop their educational plan. Advising sessions dedicated to educational planning are designed so that advisors can better understand students' interests and aspirations. Advisors can then help students formulate academic and career goals and help them better understand how to reach those goals. During these meetings, advisors provide students with practical information about degree and program requirements and course sequencing that are necessary to create a sound educational plan. Advisors at both colleges have received training on how to engage students in thinking about their interests, goals, and non-college commitments in ways that inform the development of their plans. For example, through the college's Advising Excellence Academy, advisors at IRSC participate in monthly training on a breadth of advising topics, including how to help students develop customized academic plans. Advisors at SPC also participate in ongoing training to learn about case management principles, program features and requirements, and career opportunities for each meta-major.



Especially being a freshman in college, [while] I did have an idea of what classes to take, I didn't know what classes *not* to take. ... Having that [educational plan] really helped me to be able to follow it, just so that I could make sure I was on the right track.

– IRSC student



Students said that they appreciated planning that takes account of their interests and gives them a realistic route through a program:

- Students relied strongly on their educational plan to understand various requirements and to gauge their progress toward completion.
- Educational planning was particularly helpful for students concerned about the rigor of college-level courses or about balancing course-taking with non-college responsibilities.
- Undecided students in particular appreciated that the planning process provided opportunities for students and advisors to reflect on, revise, or complete their full-program plan.
- Students who criticized their educational planning experience often cited a lack of consistent or accurate information from advisors or felt that their plan was not sufficiently customized to their needs.

The majority of students we spoke with were satisfied with the educational planning process, and they intended to follow their plans to completion. Students expressed a strong

desire to know the steps to complete their program and said that they felt more confident in their ability to complete their program because they had a customized educational plan to follow. As one IRSC student explained, “It helped me because it gave me a clear view of, ‘Okay, this is what you need to check off so you can get [the program] done.’”

Students who reported being worried about balancing college-level coursework and personal responsibilities often expressed strong appreciation for educational planning. For example, one SPC student liked how his advisor took account of the constraints on his time in formulating the educational plan. He said that the advisor “sat with me and walked me through everything, and I explained to her I work [many] hours a week. I have these other obligations that I have to attend to. And she kind of mapped it out in a way that made sense and made it easy for me.”

Students frequently reported that the educational planning process helped them learn about the types of courses that they needed to take to complete their program. One IRSC student said, “Before [creating the educational plan] I never actually looked at classes that I had to take for engineering besides, obviously, high levels of math and high levels of physics. So, we looked at all the classes and I was like, ‘Okay, this is what I actually have to take.’” Educational plans also gave students a more realistic understanding of their degree completion timeline. An IRSC student said:

The [educational plan] was eye opening as far as knowing that if I don't crunch and do more classes during each semester [that I will not] be a part of the big graduation. I didn't realize that that could not be a possibility if I didn't [take more courses each semester].

Importantly, many undecided students said that they were required, or at least encouraged, to choose a program of study and develop an educational plan before adequately exploring their interests. In these cases, students valued multiple opportunities to revisit their original, somewhat provisional plan and discuss whether it matched their developing interests and goals. As one student explained, reviewing the educational plan with an advisor was the catalyst for ultimately switching programs:

We were going over [the full-program educational plan] and I had asked about taking a psychology course. And [the advisor] said, “Well, it doesn't actually fit. You'd have to take it as an elective, and that might mess up your financial aid,” and so on. I said, “That's something I'm interested in.” And that's when we got talking about the educational studies [program versus the education program], and he kind of brought up, “Let's look at this path instead for you and see, one versus the other, where your area of interest is and what you want to do with it after you finish the degree.” And so being able to talk to him about the different pathways and [saying], “this is what I'm thinking, this is where I want to go with it,” was definitely very helpful.

Students who said that their educational planning experience with an advisor was not very helpful often received inconsistent or conflicting information about which courses were required or recommended for their program, or they were not able to verify whether specific course credits would transfer or apply to a degree program at a particular four-year

institution. Other students mentioned that when they created their educational plan, their advisor recommended courses without asking for their input or preferences. One IRSC student said, “I think that I didn’t really get to say much about what classes I was going to take and I figured she knew what she was doing, so I tried to just trust in her. But I then realized that this wasn’t for me and that I needed to make my own choices on taking specific classes.”

Lessons We Learned From Students

- Use program maps and other resources during initial advising sessions to increase students’ awareness of requirements and expectations as they enter a program.
- Increase the accuracy of information transmitted to students by providing advisors and other key staff with up-to-date information about program maps and transfer requirements.
- Encourage students to actively participate in customizing their plan in accord with both their academic and career interests and their personal responsibilities outside of college.
- Provide multiple opportunities for students and advisors to revisit and modify each student’s educational plan.

Conclusion

What we heard from students about onboarding at IRSC and SPC helps to identify how well particular practices are working in assisting students as they engage in a host of overlapping choices and experiences: program and career exploration, program selection, gaining useful program-related experiences that can serve to confirm or undermine an early program choice, and long-term educational planning. Talking with students also reveals that onboarding experiences are not the same for all first-year students; they vary based on student characteristics as well as differences in programs.

Other colleges that are reforming their onboarding process should reach out to their own students to understand their experiences. Doing so can help colleges recognize what challenges and barriers students (or specific groups of students) encounter, which can be useful in the further refinement of onboarding reforms. While we acknowledge that soliciting students’ input on their onboarding experiences requires institutional planning and resources, we think these efforts are worthwhile. Student reflections on their own experiences provide a highly useful lens through which colleges can understand whether the design and delivery of specific onboarding practices are meeting their intended goals.

Building on the information shared in [Parts 1](#) and [2](#), [Part 3](#) of this packet provides college practitioners with a set of planning exercises—informed by the student perspectives shared here—that facilitate an examination and redesign of the college onboarding process.

Endnotes

1. This second SPC course, called Smart Start Orientation, was previously required of associate of arts students during the first four weeks of enrollment. The course, which was offered instead of the new student orientation described earlier, focused on providing students with the experiences and skills necessary to effectively use academic support services, navigate SPC systems and processes, determine a career direction, and develop a learning plan (SPC's term for an educational plan).
2. Such programs include those with specific accreditation requirements or other standards mandated by the State of Florida.

References

Jenkins, D., Lahr, H., Fink, J., & Ganga, E. (2018). *What we are learning about guided pathways*. New York, NY: Columbia University, Teachers College, Community College Research Center.

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