

# IMAGINE CONNECT PRACTICE

If you ask people who lead community colleges why they chose this career path, they often give reasons like wanting to help students attain a better life, supporting the resiliency of their communities, and paying it forward—particularly those who benefited from attending community college themselves. But sometimes, when colleges strive to implement reform efforts, these motivations fade to the background. This passion for community and fulfilling dreams can serve as a north star when the work of change gets difficult, whether for students or for practitioners. Therefore, this guide provides a framework that can help link reform efforts back to the work that community college administrators aspire to do.



IMAGINE



CONNECT



PRACTICE

## Three Words for Wednesday

When shepherding change frameworks like Guided Pathways, it can be challenging to align the intended goals with the specific culture and practices of your institution. Communication efforts are often focused on explaining the big picture ideas, rather than articulating how to translate those ideas into concrete changes in day-to-day work. And yet, without the leadership and clarity that administrators can provide, faculty and staff may struggle to identify the shifts in their practice necessary to move forward the goals of the college. If

the activity isn't directly related to their current responsibilities, it can be understandably difficult for them to see what they would do differently on a given Wednesday.

We have identified three words that can help your colleagues focus on what to emphasize in their work—image, connect, and practice. These concepts are based on the experience of practitioners who are leading student-centered redesign efforts in places like

California, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Texas. This guide will outline why these three ideas are critical for culture change and equitably improving student outcomes. The guide will also provide you with a framework to identify where your college is already supporting students in these ways and what else you could be doing — as soon as Wednesday.

## The Underlying Challenge: The Gap Between Dreams and Economic Pressures

Many students go to community college to attain a dream, like being the first in their family to earn a degree, but the most common reason they give for attending is to get a job. However, for many people, the path to a career is not a straight line. The choices they make are driven by family members and friends, images they see in the media, inspirational teachers, and economic pressures.

Young people often dream of growing up and getting a specific type of job, but they may not know what it is like

to do that type of work or what skills are required. Once they learn more about that career pathway, they may discover that it is not a good match. But often people do not make this connection until after they have started college or completed their studies. Setting an academic and career direction is made more complicated by the rapidly changing job market. Students may not know about the jobs that are available, where to study for those jobs, or how their skills could qualify them for careers that may seem out of reach.

Establishing educational and career goals early on is particularly important for first-generation and low-income students, who face stark decisions about staying in school or deferring their dreams to take low-skill jobs in order to pay for food and housing. It is also critical for students who have already been tracked into education pathways that are unlikely to lead to living wage jobs.

Career discussions do not just belong in technical programs. Arts, humanities, and social science majors also teach critical skills that prepare students for leadership positions and innovation-focused jobs. However, students are not always able to articulate how their education experience relates to the jobs they want.

In the next section, we will provide practical examples to help make these ideas more concrete, including ideas for how to implement these changes in the context of the pandemic.



Administrators can ensure that students are given opportunities to imagine their future, both at your college and in partnership with K-12 and adult schools. For example, outreach, onboarding, and a student's first year can be structured to help:

- Explore their interests
- Learn about academic and career paths where they can pursue those interests
- Develop a plan for their future

These activities are not intended to focus narrowly on specific jobs. Instead, they support students in identifying what motivates them and understanding the changes they want to make in their own lives, their communities, and the world at large. Therefore, the earlier these experiences happen, the better prepared students will be to select their program of study.

## Right now...

How does your college currently help students imagine their future, provide opportunities to explore, and identify clear pathways to reach goals?

## On Wednesday...

What is one action you could take on Wednesday at your college?

## Ideas for Wednesday from the Field

- Restructure dual enrollment agreements with feeder schools to align with academic and career communities
- Support colleagues to articulate the labor market value of each academic program at the middle skills and bachelor's degree levels and to prioritize economic mobility as a key component of outreach efforts
- Support colleagues to redesign orientation around academic and career communities, with embedded career exploration, and establish expectations about multi-year educational plans
- *COVID-19 response:* Support colleagues to identify, understand, and document how short-term skills training fits into academic and career pathways



Students who see themselves as part of a community are more likely to stay enrolled, but students may not know how to build those connections on campus. Administrators can ensure their colleges provide structured opportunities for students to connect with peers, faculty, and employers who share their interests and create mechanisms to stay connected with them. You can support the design of opportunities for students to:

- Meet others who share their interests
- Connect with mentors and peers in their field of interest
- Learn about academic and career opportunities aligned to their interests

Too often, connections are left up to chance or are led by small cadre of people within an institution. By creating intentional support networks both within the campus and

the broader community, administrators can strengthen the resilience among both students and staff, foster an exchange of new ideas, and cultivate additional resources.

### Right now...

How does your college currently help students connect with a career and/or interest-based community that includes faculty, peers, advisors and potential employers?

### On Wednesday...

What is one action you could take on Wednesday to help more students build connections that will help them complete, transfer, and find employment?

### Ideas for Wednesday from the Field

- Amend administrative processes and resource allocation so that academic and career advisors are embedded in each academic and career community
- Adjust faculty responsibilities to allow for time to mentor students and build knowledge about advising resources
- Cultivate relationships with employers to develop connections for students
- *COVID-19 response:* Amend administrative processes and resource allocation so that each academic and career pathway includes options for students to earn a clearly-sequenced set of shorter term credentials to address immediate employment needs while still making progress toward a degree



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There is no better way to figure out—or affirm—one’s true interests than getting hands-on experience. Administrators can support the development of pathways that are anchored in real-world challenges and create intentional linkages between courses to help students:

- Build self-efficacy as problem-solvers and learners
- Understand and articulate why they are learning specific topics
- Determine whether they have picked the right pathway

Capstone projects that apply academic concepts to work or service learning are an excellent way to build practical knowledge, but administrators can also encourage this type of active learning in classroom-based activities, starting in the first classes students take.

### Right now...

How does your college currently help students practice their skills, create opportunities to gain experience and timely feedback, and evaluate the fit of an area of study?

### On Wednesday...

What is one action you could take on Wednesday to help more students practice their knowledge and build experience in a field of interest in their first year of college?

### Ideas for Wednesday from the Field

- Amend administrative processes and resource allocation so that experiential learning opportunities are embedded in each program
- Adjust faculty responsibilities to allow for time to learn about employer needs
- Provide resources and amend administrative processes so that 21st Century skills can be embedded in career and technical education pathways
- *COVID-19 response:* Provide resources to develop documentation on how 21st Century skills relate to employment and use these in recruitment materials

### Find Out More

Learn more about how communities are implementing helping students to imagine, connect, and practice at [www.WestEd.org/project/e3-economic-mobility-education-equity](http://www.WestEd.org/project/e3-economic-mobility-education-equity).