

IMAGINE CONNECT PRACTICE

If you ask people who work in 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, focusing on teaching, and paying it forward—particularly those who benefited from attending community college themselves. But sometimes, when colleges strive to implement reform efforts, these motivations can fade to the background. Nevertheless, this passion for community, learning, and 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 faculty aspire to do.



IMAGINE



CONNECT



PRACTICE

Three Words for Wednesday

For the people who work most closely with students, particularly faculty, one of the challenges of implementing education reform efforts is that these frameworks may not spell out what that practice looks like in the classroom. While you may agree with the goals set by your college, it may not be clear what you would do differently in your day-to-day work when you are leading classroom activities, worrying about grading assignments, and finding time to coach a struggling student. And yet, faculty spend the most time with students on campus

and can have one of the biggest impacts on whether they attain their goals.

We have identified three words that can help focus your improvement efforts—imagine, connect, and practice. These concepts are based on the experience of community college 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 better job. However, for many people, the path to a career is not a straight line and is 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. Faculty can help students make this connection.

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.



Faculty have a key role to play in helping students to imagine their future, which can be especially impactful when these activities are embedded in class assignments. For example, you can design activities that enable students to:

- 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.

Right now...

How do you 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 to help more students imagine their futures and identify pathways to their goals?

Ideas for Wednesday from the Field

- Participate in outreach and onboarding
- Teach dual enrollment courses
- Participate in the development of outreach messages, tailored to both high school students and adult learners
- *COVID-19 response:* Clarify for students how your specific discipline will help them qualify for better-paying jobs, to address the pressures that they may be feeling to work instead of going to college



Many people have a story about a teacher who inspired them to stay in school or classmates who became their support network. Faculty can help to connect students with peers, teachers, and employers who share their interests and create mechanisms to stay connected with them. You can design opportunities for students to:

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

Faculty do not need to personally serve as mentors for all of their students. By joining networks of people who share a passion, you can spread this support role across many people, while building a community to support and sustain your own work.

Right now...

How do you 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

- Participate in mentoring and student organization activities
- Develop knowledge of college resources to ensure students can access support and employment services within their pathway
- Cultivate relationships with employers to develop connections for students
- *COVID-19 response:* Support the development of a clearly-sequenced set of shorter term credentials that address immediate employment needs while still making progress toward a degree



There is no better way to figure out one's true interests than getting hands-on experience. By anchoring your curriculum in real-world challenges and linking content across courses, starting in the very first classes they take, students can:

- 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

Although getting to see how concepts are applied in work or service-learning contexts is an excellent way to implement active learning, there are other ways for students

to practice the content that you teach. You can design assignments that apply both foundational and advanced skills to the problems that fuel students' passions.

Right now...

How do you 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 the knowledge you are teaching and understand its practical application?

Ideas for Wednesday from the Field

- Participate in activities to learn about employer needs
- Develop experiential learning activities that can be implemented inside your classroom (no matter what subject you teach) that allow students to practice core competencies for the regional job market
- Create assignments that introduce students to the employment value of 21st Century skills
- *COVID-19 response:* Work with faculty in other departments to integrate 21st Century skills into career and technical education pathways, so that students addressing immediate economic needs can engage in expansive learning

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.