Guided Pathway Elements from the California Community College Counselor Perspective

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Guided Pathway Elements from the California Community College Counselor Perspective

A Dissertation by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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November 2020

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This is dedicated to my beloved stepfather, Robert, who passed away during the gestation of this study. I thank him for his engaging conversation, knowledge of travel and history he shared generously, and the love and laughs for which he showered us.

To my mom. You have unconditionally loved and supported me for 40 years. I have come to you with many ideas including some pursuits that were unconventional. You supported all of them.

To my dad. I pursued this degree for you. For the look on your face as you watch me walk the stage as Dr. Welter.

To my sister. There is no one else in the world who shares with me the memories, joys, love, and challenges as you. I would walk to the ends of the earth for you.

To the best match I’ve ever met for myself. During my studies, having simultaneous careers, being multi passionate, you never once complained that I worked too much.

To my cohort members, Jay and Cristina, and my mentor, Dr. McCarty. The three of you have become family to me. Without your love, support and encouragement, this process would have been much more difficult. Thank you to my dissertation chair and committee member, Dr. Burnett and Dr. Enomoto for your strong leadership and encouragement.

May you all, as well as any student or anyone reading this, find success, as you define it, to be your destiny.
ABSTRACT

Guided Pathway Elements from the California Community College Counselor Perspective
by Tiffany Welter

Purpose: The purpose of this qualitative multicase study was to describe what California community college counselors consider important elements of guided pathways that increase student success. Additionally, this study will explore how counselors describe the challenges of guided pathways. Lastly, this study identified counselor recommendations for improving guided pathways to increase student success.

Methodology: This qualitative study used a multiple-case study to explore what important guided pathway features California community colleges offer students from the counselor’s perspective. Semi-structured interviews were held with 12 counselors from six California community colleges that have implemented guided pathways on their campuses to capture rich data regarding guided pathways. Additionally, archival records and documentation were used to triangulate the data.

Findings: Research question one covered important elements of guided pathways. The findings showed six major themes: provide student supports or wraparound services, have strong communication with students, provide specialized or embedded counseling, offer communities, offer clear options, and use a student-centered approach. Research question two covered challenges of guided pathways from the counselor perspective. The three major themes were lack of administrative support, getting started with the process, and misconceptions or outdated beliefs. The final research question asked counselors about recommendations for improving guided pathways to increase student success.
success. Three themes were identified: have strong communication, involve all staff, and show data.

**Conclusions:** Examination of key findings resulted in seven conclusions. Colleges should have strong student support wraparound services, have strong communication with students, colleges should offer specialized or embedded counseling, high school outreach is critical, colleges should have a strong career focus, strong faculty engagement, and strong leadership.

**Recommendations:** The study of California community colleges as they relate to guided pathway features from the counselor perspectives is relatively unexplored, and there are recommendations to conduct further research to broaden the scope and add to the body of literature available. The recommendations for action for colleges as they design and implement guided pathways in their institutions are improve counseling, invest in high school outreach, and offer strong student support services.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The college completion rate in the United States is significantly low at 40 percent (Shapiro et al., December 2018; Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). California community colleges report 48 percent of their students complete a degree or certificate within six years (California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office Scorecard, 2019). Out of 100 California students, only 7 percent will graduate high school and college, enter the workforce, and earn a liveable wage (Fleming, 2016). According to the California Community College Taskforce Advancing Student Success in the California Community Colleges, the college completion rate is even lower for African American and Latino students at 22 percent (California Community Colleges Taskforce, 2012). This low college completion (Educational Advisory Board, 2012) affects the employment rate, the economy, and ultimately, the infrastructure of the nation.

United States Workforce

Community colleges are necessary for the production of the United States workforce. Many community college program curriculums are designed to align with the needs of local industry (Jacobs & Worth, March 2019). The institutions adapt as needed to current economic conditions (Felix & Pope, January 01, 2010). Community colleges train first-time workers as well as provide training for many existing essential workers (Felix & Pope, January 01, 2010) such as construction, electrical technicians, and nurses.

Status of United States Infrastructure

An educated workforce is crucial for the United States to be economically competitive. A country’s infrastructure connects people to energy, employment, education, health care, goods, and much more. Infrastructure is defined as the country’s
roads, bridges, freight rail, ports, electrical grids, and Internet (Petroski, 2017).

Poor infrastructure can lead to large costs, catastrophes, and loss of productivity (Petroski, 2017). Billions of dollars are lost each year in the United States due to traffic congestion, and poor states of airports and rail lines (Petroski, 2017). The current status of the American infrastructure has depleted in part because of the 2008 financial crisis (Ryan, 2012).

New infrastructure would positively impact the economy. It would increase competitiveness and employment. The United States needs infrastructure workers to mend this crisis. Many of these workers could go to work immediately after high school or spend two years or less at a community college and earn a certificate or degree in areas such as construction management, electrical and instrumentation, or welding. The California community college system is the largest provider of workforce training in the state and nation (California Community College Chancellor’s Office, Key Facts, 2019).

**Other Career Opportunities in the United States**

Without community colleges training skilled workers who enter the workforce, America’s prosperity is at risk (Goldrick-Rab, 2009). There are 8.5 million science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) careers in the United States. Ninety-three of out one hundred STEM careers earn above the national average. Health care careers in the United States account for 16.2 million jobs (Commins, 2019). Industries such as financial, retail trade, and wholesale trade also rely on workers trained at community colleges (Felix & Pope, January 01, 2010).
Community College Graduation and Completion in the United States

With over 1,132 community colleges in the United States, the community-college system has a total headcount of 7 million students, of whom 2.6 million attend full time and 4.4 million attend part time (AACC, 2019). In the 2016-2017 academic school year, 839,855 associate degrees and 549,149 certificates were awarded (AACC, 2019).

California Community College Graduation and Completion

With 115 campuses, the number of students in California community colleges who complete community college in two years or less is 70 percent (Kirp, 2018). Many students entering community college find choosing a major overwhelming, selecting courses confusing, and are unaware of the student services available to them (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Dagar et al., 2017). Many students enter community college but drop out after a brief period of time (Johnson, 1998). There have been many grants, initiatives, and strategies utilized throughout California all designed to improve matriculation, retention, and completion. However, only 30 percent of students finish their degree within three years (Aud et al., 2012). One California community college reports 42 percent of their students complete a degree or certificate within six years (Allen Craig, 2015).

Background

California Community College System

The California community college system is the largest system of higher education in the United States with more than 2.4 million students on 115 campuses (CCCCCO, 2019). California community colleges offer associate and transfer degrees as well as short-term job training certificates in more than 175 fields. More than
100,000 individuals are trained each year in industry-specific workforce skills (CCCOO, 2019). In California, 70 percent of all nurses and 80 percent of firefighters, law-enforcement personnel, and emergency technicians who hold degrees or certificates received their training at a California community college (CCCOO, 2019).

Community colleges are appealing to many since they are less expensive (Novak, 2017) or free in some cases, often nearby (Solis, 2012), offer open access (Scott-Clayton & Columbia University, 2011; Acree, 1998; Pongracz, 2016; Skaff, 2018), are known for equity and diversity (Acree, 1998; Stanley, 2007), seamlessly transfer students to four-year universities as juniors (Stanley, 2007), offer skills certificates (Pongracz, 2016) to enter and perform in the workforce (ACT, Inc., 2013), and provide a variety of flexible classes such as nights, weekends, and online courses.

Community College Counselors

Counselors are the most important resource to help new college students identify their goals and choose the classes aligned with those goals (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Fink & Columbia University, 2017; McClenney, Dare, & Thompson, 2013; Novak, 2017). Counselors often have the best understanding of course sequencing (Educational Advisory Board, 2012). Counselors not only assist students in the creation of comprehensive educational plans, help select courses aligned with transfer and career goals, exploration of major, vocational, and career choices (Karp, 2013; Novak, 2017), provide resources for internship opportunities (Khalil & Williamson, 2014), relay job market data (McClenney, Dare, & Thompson, 2013), align goals with employment options (Karp, 2013), but also they are mental health professionals. Counselors support students adjusting to college and help students readjust when needed (Educational

A Nation at Risk

The awareness there would be a need for a significant change in our secondary and post-secondary education structure is not a new concept. This was perhaps first identified broadly in a report based on an eighteen-month study done in 1983. *A Nation at Risk*, authored by a special commission President Ronald Regan convened, shared this study. They referred to the “mediocre educational performance” in the United States and a need to reform education (ETATS-UNIS, 1983). The authors indicated other countries could bypass the United States in the areas of science, technology, and more (ETATS-UNIS, 1983).

“Secondary school curricula have been homogenized, diluted, and diffused to the point they no longer have a central purpose. In effect, we have a cafeteria style curriculum in which the appetizers and desserts can easily be mistaken for the main courses” (ETATS-UNIS, p 35).

Guided Pathways

Guided pathways is a relatively new term but not a new concept. A framework that many community colleges throughout the United States are moving toward implementing is guided pathways. Instead of waiting for new initiatives, some believe
substantial reform can be made within higher education institutions (David, et al., 2015). In his book, *(Re)Defining the Goal: The true path to career readiness in the 21st century,* Kevin Fleming, PhD., dean of career and technical education at Citrus College in Glendora, California, has written about the importance of moving away from the way colleges were designed eighty years ago to meet the needs of our new economy (Fleming, 2016). Fleming emphasized education systems can do this by thinking outside the box by creating a college system and process rather than a one-size-fits-all approach (Fleming, 2016). The guided pathways model is not a one-size-fits-all approach but rather a framework. Guided pathways are clear and highly structured curricular paths that are designed to help students achieve their educational goals in a specific area of study (Ashby, 2018; Bailey et al., 2015).

**What Are Guided Pathways?**

The low college completion rate may be attributed to many factors. One of these factors is the number of major choices (or areas of study) a student has upon matriculating to community college (Jenkins & Cho, 2013; McClenney, Dare, & Thompson, 2013). Therefore, one of the primary purposes of the guided pathways movement is to not limit student choices but to help students better organize their choices and to resign the structure of the colleges (Johnstone, 2015). A guided pathway is “a highly structured, coherent educational experience that is built around and through an area of study” (AACC, 2014).

Bailey, Smith Jaggars, and Jenkins introduced guided pathways in their book, *Redesigning America’s Community Colleges* (2015). The authors have written about community colleges currently offering a cafeteria-style —the same language used thirty-
seven years ago in *A Nation at Risk* (ETATS-UNIS, 1983) for students selecting classes. They argue this can lead to students feeling overwhelmed (McClenney, Dare, & Thompson, 2013). Using a guided-pathways model, colleges group together up to hundreds of majors into smaller categories often referred to as meta majors. Additionally, along with meta majors, colleges are offering more support throughout the student’s college experience. This support may be better student tracking, appointing advisors or counselors, ensuring students are genuinely learning, and narrowing down class choices. Students sometimes have up to 300 courses from which to choose (Jenkins & Cho, 2013). Fifty percent of students are concerned about making a mistake when choosing classes (Moore & Shulock, 2014).

The premise of guided pathways is to provide a simple, holistic support system to students as they progress through college (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Van Campen, Sowers, & Strother, 2013).

The Four Pillars

According to the California Community Colleges Report (California Community Colleges, 2012), guided pathways have four dimensions and were adapted and implemented by the California Community College Chancellor’s Office. The four pillars are:

1. Clarifying the path for students.
2. Helping students choose and enter a pathway.
3. Helping students stay on the path.
4. Ensuring students are learning.
In the 2012 report, “Advancing Student Success in California Community Colleges,” the Student Success Task Force recommended, “Structured pathways to help students identify a program of study and get an educational roadmap to indicate appropriate courses and available support services” (California Community Colleges, 2012).

Figure 1. Illustration of the four pillars.


Clarifying the Path for Students. Strobel and Christian (2016) describe clarifying the path for students as creating programs with the end goal in mind. This pillar involves mapping out programs to ensure colleges prepare students for, and lead to, employment available in their region.

Helping Students Choose and Enter a Pathway. Helping students choose and enter a pathway is preparing students with career assessments and other career exploration options. The pathway process can begin in high school through dual enrollment, a feature that allows students to earn both high school and college credit.
These students get ahead of the game while learning about career options before graduating high school (Strobel & Christian, 2016)

**Helping Students Stay on the Path.** Once students have chosen a pathway, it becomes very important to help them stay on that pathway, which involves better monitoring and tracking students with mandatory (McClenney, Dare, & Thompson, 2013) intrusive or proactive counseling and utilizing student retention or early-alert technology (Strobel & Christian, 2016). Internships and work-based learning can help students stay on their path. Contextualized classes make college relevant to students. For example, Los Medanos Community College in Pittsburg, California, introduced a math class in 2017 for their electrical and instrumentation technology students. This is a transfer level math class that is contextualized, meaning it is math these students will be using in the field. Through contextualization, instructors have students learn real life workplace skills (Curry, 2017).

**Ensuring Students Are Learning.** Better defining of student learning outcomes and aligning these outcomes with the transfer colleges and industry solidifies student learning. This means improving industry advisories to ensure students are learning what is needed in the field. Embedding employability (or soft) skills into all classes produces a well-rounded graduate. Technical skills are important, but many employers agree employability skills are critical (Robles, 2012).

**Student Perspectives on Current Community College Process**

Students have expressed their viewpoints on guided pathways. “Bringing Student Voices to Guided Pathways Inquiry and Design,” a study of 137 students who completed California community colleges in 2017, evaluated student perspectives on the guided
pathways model. Students unanimously agreed selecting courses could be confusing, were unsure of what student services they needed, and which were available to them (if they did locate services, it was three to four semesters in), preferred to see the same counselor, and would have liked to feel a part of a community (Dager et al., 2017). These elements are all covered within the guided-pathway framework.

Counselor Perspective

Trends in the research identified a need for this study. There is a lack of research on counselors or academic advisors regarding guided pathways. There are many hypotheses on guided pathways best practices but not a lot of evidence-based solutions and even less from the counselor perspective. Counseling offers a critical component to student engagement and student success (Pongracz, 2016; Shaffer, Zalewski, & Leveille, 2010). Counselors and advisors are one of the most important elements of guided pathways (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Fleming, 2016; Jenkins & Cho, 2013; Dadgar, 2017).

It would be valuable to learn from the counselors which elements of guided pathways are effective in assisting students in community college, supporting their completion of their academic goal, ensuring their learning, what specific tools they are given to make informed choices while in college, and assisting them in graduating, or seamlessly transferring to a four-year university in two years or less.

For example, what is the impact of students identifying a major, or area of study, within their first semester? As the reader can glean from the aforementioned descriptions of guided pathway pillars, there are many components of each pillar. The components of guided pathways can look different at various colleges.
A component of pillar number two (entering the path) is assisting students in choosing a meta major at the onset of applying to the college. Traditionally, prospective students would apply to community colleges and be required to select from an overwhelming number of majors (sometimes hundreds) before completing their application. A meta major is a narrower set of programs or majors (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Skaff, 2018; Ashby, 2018; Jenkins, Lahr, Fink, & Ganga, 2018; Fink, 2017). Examples of a meta major might be education, business, health science, or public safety. With meta majors, students choose a career cluster of interest. For example, a student who is interested in a health-related career can choose the health science meta major, which may include majors such as biology, chemistry, nursing, etc. This is merely one example of an element of guided pathways. There are many other elements of guided pathways to be explored from the counselor’s perspective.

It is important to consider the counselor perspectives as they play a pivotal role in students’ success (Schreiner, Schreiner, & Tobolowsky, 2018; Khalil & Williamson, 2014; Scholl, 1999; Fink & Columbia University, 2017). Sixty-seven percent of college students said an advisor or counselor helped them set academic goals and create a plan for achieving them (CCSSE, 2018). Ninety-two percent of returning students said academic advising or counseling was somewhat important or very important to their academic success (CCSSE, 2018).

The student-to-counselor ratio is high—usually over 400 to one (Solis, 2012) and as high as 800 to 1,200 students to one counselor (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Ramos, 2013). While that is undeniably a high ratio, it is lower than recorded ratios of 3,000 to one (Scolari & San Francisco State University, 2012).
Counselors are on the front lines, assisting students with their academic classes and majors, providing transfer information, making connections to campus resources, explaining degree and certificate options, providing internships opportunities (Khalil & Williamson, 2014), relaying job market data, aligning goals with employment options (Karp, 2013), as well as offering mental health support to students. Counselors can directly impact a student’s college success (Gordon, Habley, & Grites, 2008) and indirectly effect student retention (Montag et al, 2012; King, 1993). Since the role of the counselor is so valuable, their perspectives on effective guided pathways should be considered.

**Optimism of Guided Pathways**

Though some colleges may hesitate to rearrange their entire catalog of course offerings and programs, guided pathways are evidence-based frameworks. Studies show colleges that focus on guided pathways and reduce student choices are critical elements for students’ completion. Evidence-based recommendations for creating clear roadmaps, embedded advising, tracking student progress, and general support strategies. Studies have shown more and more colleges and universities are implementing guided pathways in their institutions (Jenkins & Cho, 2013; Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015).

All 114 community colleges in California and all twenty-three community colleges in Ohio are moving forward with guided pathways in some way. All participating schools plan to track and report progress and impact (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). By implementing guided pathways, colleges will have more ability to guide students from matriculation to graduation (Noy et al., 2016).
Controversy Surrounding Guided Pathways

There are several cautions or concerns about implementing guided-pathway frameworks. A lack of buy-in or commitment from administrators and faculty (Rose, 2016; Logue, 2017), restricted course selection, concern quality in education will be lost, too much handholding of students, fear of losing liberal arts (Johnstone, 2015), and that clear paths leave little room to find themselves and deviate if needed (Johnstone, 2015; Karp, 2013) are expressed concerns.

Statement of the Research Problem

California Community Colleges chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley worked with California’s legislature to approve a budget of $150 million to disperse to all 114 California community colleges to implement guided pathways in their colleges in an effort to boost student success (Fischer, 2018). As colleges have conversations about guided pathways and begin to implement them, they may want to consider elements of guided pathway that are having positive effects for other colleges and their students. This is particularly true since guided pathways can be an enormous undertaking, often requiring a whole institution redesign. Counselors have not been asked enough about their perspectives of guided pathways. Before time, money, energy, and other resources are spent on designing and implementing guided pathways, this study examines colleges that are already implementing guided pathways in their colleges. The study takes a closer look at which elements are having positive outcomes for students.

Student Perspectives. Students have unanimously agreed selecting courses can be confusing, they are unsure of what student services they need and which are available to them (if they did locate services, it was three to four semesters in), prefer to see the
same counselor, and would like to feel a part of a community (Dager et al., 2017). These
elements are all covered within the guided-pathway framework.

**Counselor Perspectives.** Counseling offers a critical component to student
engagement and student success (Pongracz, 2016; Shaffer, Zalewski, & Leveille, 2010).
Counselors and advisors are one of the most important elements in guided pathways
(Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Fleming, 2016; Jenkins & Cho, 2013; Dadgar,
2017). It would be valuable to learn from counselors the elements of guided pathways
that are effective in assisting students in community college by supporting their
completion and ensuring their learning, as well as the specific tools they are given to
make informed choices while in college and assist them in graduating or seamlessly
transferring to a four-year university in two years or less from the counselor’s
perspective.

**Trends and Gaps in Research**

There has been research on guided pathways in the following areas: defining
guided pathways, elements that make up guided pathways, colleges implementing guided
pathways, success of colleges implementing guided pathways, and more.

Additional information is needed on examining structure and connection to
student outcomes, connecting specific college practices, a more specific look at variables
(student success, transfer, etc.), and conducting previous research on the same issues in
different states. Additionally, whether there is an increase in wages and career
advancement for students who have completed degrees or certificates from colleges using
the pathway model is another area for further study.
The problem statement, or justification, for this particular study is the tremendous need to ensure colleges’ redesigns are student focused. As colleges design and implement guided pathways in their institutions, the counselors’ perspectives should be considered to determine what elements of guided pathways are effective for student success.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multicase study was to describe what California community college counselors describe as important elements of guided pathways that increase student success. Additionally, this study will explore how California community college counselors describe the challenges of guided pathways. Lastly, this study identified California community college counselors recommendations for improving guided pathways to increase student success.

**Research Questions**

1. What do California community college counselors describe as the important elements of guided pathways to increase student success?

2. What do California community college counselors describe as the challenges of guided pathways?

3. What do California community college counselors recommend for improving guided pathways to increase student success?

**Significance of the Problem**

The main purpose of guided pathways is to benefit students by providing them with a highly structured experience. The premise of guided pathways is to provide a
simple, holistic support system to students as they progress through college (Bailey et al., 2015). If $150 million is dispersed to all 114 California community colleges to implement guided pathways in their colleges, evidence-based practices should be studied to ensure the money is spent creating effective structures and support systems for students as they progress through college. This study is one of the first to explore preliminary feedback from counselors on their unique perspectives on the impact of guided pathways.

During this study, counselors will be asked about the strategies they have been using for decades that already cover areas of guided pathways pillars—helping students choose, enter, and stay on educational paths to achieve their educational goal (Nguyen, 2018). They will be asked about the current guided pathways structures from which students are benefiting. The findings from this study will allow California community colleges, as well as other colleges throughout the nation, to learn best practices as they implement their own guided-pathway structures in their institutions.

Definitions

The following are terms that can provide insight and clarity to this research and conclusions made by the study.

**California Community Colleges:** With more than 2.4 million students on 114 campuses, the California community colleges is the largest system of higher education and has the highest rate of public attendance of all community colleges in the United States (CCCO.edu).

**Counselors:** Counselors assist students in the creation comprehensive educational plans, recommend courses aligned with transfer and career goals, assist with
exploration of major, vocational, and career choices, support adjusting to college, provide college success tools (Scholl, 1999; O’Banion, 1972; Kuh, 2015), as well as social emotional development and much more. There are several names for someone who provides advising to students such as advisors, navigators, mentors, coaches, counselors and more. Herein, these student service professionals will be identified as counselors.

**Educational Plan:** The student educational plan is an outline, ideally created with the assistance and guidance of a counselor, containing the courses a student will take semester by semester. Based on the student’s goals and interests, the plan may include general education courses, courses needed for the intended major, and/or courses needed to transfer to a four-year institution. Educational plans can typically be modified at any time.

**Evidence-Based Practice:** An approach used to improve the process through which high-quality research evidence can be obtained and translated into the best practices in the field of study.

**Guided Pathways:** An evidence-based, student-centered framework to better structure what colleges offer students. Guided pathways have four pillars: clarify the path, enter the path, stay on the path and ensure students are learning. This may involve establishing clear college and/or career pathways, smooth intake processes, embedded advising, and tracking student progress (Johnstone, 2015; Jenkins & Cho, 2013; Bailey, Jaggars & Jenkins, 2015). Guided pathways may also include clear information from the beginning, early-alert systems, and mentors.
**Major or Area of Study:** A group of courses selected by a college that a student must take in order to receive a degree or certificate from that college (Jones, 2018). A major, or area of study, is an area student choose to specialize in such as nursing, psychology, welding, etc.

**Retention:** When students remain enrolled in consecutive fall semesters (Voight & Hundrieser, 2008; Bennett, 2016).

**Student Success:** For the purposes of this study, student success is defined as the community college students’ completion of certificates, degrees, and/or transfers.

**Delimitations of the Study**

Delimitations in research studies always exist. Delimitations are when the researcher draws a line and establishes boundaries in a study (Creswell, 2018). This case study is delimited to counselors employed for at least two years by California community colleges that implement guided-pathway frameworks and who were available to be interviewed between August and September 2020.

**Study Overview**

The remainder of the study is organized into four chapters, references, and appendices. Chapter II reviews the existing related literature on guided pathways frameworks. Chapter III presents the methodology and procedures germane to this study. Chapter IV organizes and reports the findings from the data collected. Lastly, Chapter V provides conclusions, recommendations for future studies, and closing remarks. The study concludes with references and appendices.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Many colleges throughout the nation, and all 114 California community colleges, are moving forward with implementation of guided pathways. Therefore, evidence-based practices should be studied to ensure the time, money, and energy are spent creating effective structures and support systems for students as they progress through college.

This review of the literature was conducted to provide background and context for the urgent need for institutional change in community colleges. The organization of this literature review begins with the infrastructure of the United States, the California Community College System, past student support efforts, career education, student perspectives on the current structure of community colleges, the importance of community college counselors, community college relationships with four-year universities, the four pillars of guided pathways, how some colleges are implementing guided pathways in their colleges, the California Guided Pathways Project, and examples of positive outcomes of guided pathways that several of these colleges have seen. This section concludes with themes discovered within those colleges that are implementing guided pathways in their colleges.

Review of the Literature

United States Workforce

Community colleges are necessary for the production of the United States workforce. Many community college program curriculums are designed to align with the needs of local industry (Jacobs & Worth, March 2019). They adapt as needed to current economic conditions (Felix & Pope, January 01, 2010). Community colleges train first
time workers as well as provide training for many existing essential workers (Felix & Pope, January 01, 2010) such as construction, electrical technicians and nurses.

**Status of United States Infrastructure**

A country’s infrastructure connects people to energy, employment, education, health care, goods and much more. Infrastructure is defined as the country’s roads, bridges, freight rail, ports, electrical grids, and Internet (Petroski, 2017). Poor infrastructure can lead to higher costs, catastrophes, and loss of productivity (Petroski, 2017). Billions of dollars are lost each year in the United States because of traffic congestion, and the poor state of airports and rail lines (Petroski, 2017). The current status of the United States infrastructure has declined in part because of the 2008 financial crisis (Ryan, 2012).

New infrastructure would positively impact the economy. It would increase competitiveness and employment. The United States needs infrastructure workers to mend this crisis. Many of these workers can go to work immediately after high school or spend two years or less at a community college and earn a certificate or degree in areas such as construction management, electrical and instrumentation, and welding. An educated workforce is crucial for the United States to be economically competitive. The California community college system is the largest provider of workforce training in the state and nation (California Community College Chancellor’s Office, Key Facts, 2019).

**Career Opportunities in the United States**

Without community colleges training skilled workers who enter the workforce, the United States prosperity is at risk (Goldrick-Rab, 2009). There are 8.5 million science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) careers in the United States.
Ninety-three of out one hundred STEM careers earn above the national average. Health care careers in the United States account for 16.2 million jobs (Commins, 2019). Industries such as financial, retail trade, and wholesale trade also rely on workers trained at community colleges (Felix & Pope, January 01, 2010).

**United States Infrastructure and the Impact of Community Colleges**

Upward social and economic mobility keeps the nation’s economy alive (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). Higher education is crucial to keeping the United States’ economy alive (Goldrick-Rab, 2009; ACT, Inc., 2013). Community colleges have tremendous ability to positively impact the United States workforce (Goldrick-Rab, 2009). Thus, low community college graduation rates can negatively affect student employability and the overall economy (Pongracz, 2016). Nearly three million jobs go unfilled in the United States, particularly in technical fields. Community colleges can provide the training necessary for these positions (Rollcall Staff, 2015). “Education may not be able to completely solve our cities’ problems, but it is key to addressing some of the deepest issues,” wrote Carol J. de Fries in her article “Workforce and Economic Innovations: Trends and Changes in the Landscape.” Colleges that implement guided-pathways elements could ignite a larger percentage of students who pursue careers such as construction management, electrical and instrumentation, welding, etc. A ready pool of labor in these critical occupations could positively affect the infrastructure of the country substantially and increase the United States human capital.

**Education in the United States**

Education in the United States is comprised of primary, secondary, and post-secondary schools. Students attend primary (elementary) and secondary (high) school
before entering post-secondary or higher education (college or university). The number of students enrolled in elementary, high school, and colleges reached nearly 77 million in 2018 according to the census bureau (United States Census Bureau, 2019).

The United States high school graduation rate is 84 percent according to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (“Public High School Graduation Rate,” 2018). According to the United States Department of Labor and Statistics, the rate of these graduates matriculating to college is 69 percent. It is imperative for students to have a clear understanding of their options after high school whether it’s attending two- or four-year college, going straight to work, entering the military, joining the Peace Corps, etc.

The official four-year graduation rate for public colleges and universities is 33.3 percent, the six-year rate is at 57.6 percent, and the rate for private colleges and universities is 52 percent (O’Shaughnessy, n.d.). These rates are based on first-time, full-time students. This study did not account for part-time and transfer students who actually represent the majority of students (O’Shaughnessy, n.d.).

Community College Graduation and Completion in the United States

With over 1,132 community colleges in the United States, the community college system has a total headcount of 7 million students; 2.6 million attend full time and 4.4 million attend part time (AACC, 2019). In the 2016-2017 academic school year, 839,855 associate degrees and 549,149 certificates were awarded (AACC, 2019).

California Community College System

The California community college system is the largest system of higher education in the United States with more than 2.4 million students on 114 campuses
California community colleges offer associate and transfer degrees as well as short-term job-training certificates in more than 175 fields. More than 100,000 individuals are trained each year in industry-specific workforce skills (CCCCO, 2019). In California, 70 percent of all nurses and 80 percent of firefighters, law-enforcement personnel, and emergency technicians held degrees or certificates received their training at a California community college (CCCCO, 2019).

Community colleges are appealing to many since they are less expensive (Novak, 2017) or free in some cases, often nearby (Solis, 2012), offer open access (Scott-Clayton & Columbia University 2011; Acree, 1998; Pongracz, 2016; Skaff, 2018), are known for equity and diversity (Acree, 1998; Stanley, 2007), facilitate a student’s seamless transfer to four-year universities as a junior (Stanley, 2007), allow a student to gain skills certificates (Pongracz, 2016) necessary to enter and perform in the workforce (ACT, Inc., 2013), and offer a variety of flexible classes such as nights, weekends, and online courses.

The skills gap refers to certain skills employers seek from workers, but the applicant pool lacks (ACT, Inc., 2013). This gap leads to more job vacancies than people qualified to fill them (Skaff, 2019). The skills gap is prevalent in California, particularly in areas such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) jobs (Ashby, 2018). Having an education alone does not guarantee a student with the skills they need to get and hold a job. Community colleges are a viable solution to help close the skills gap through their career and technical education programs.
Past Student Support Efforts

Since the conception of California community colleges, efforts have been made to ensure students’ success and to help remedy the low college completion rate. TRiO services were introduced in the 1960s and included counseling, tutoring, and employer connections (Spencer, 2014).

Another effort is California’s Student Success and Support Services (SSSP). Millions of dollars have been spent each year since 2014 for this program. It was created to ensure all students entering community college complete an orientation, assessments, and meet with a counselor (California Community College Chancellor’s Office, 2016). While the mandate was well intended, measuring the success of this initiative has been difficult (Schoenecker, 2017).

Basic Skills Initiative (BSI) was introduced in 2006 to assist with basic skill course completion (Schoenecker, 2017). These courses are below college-level math and English and are sometimes referred to as remedial skills. In 2017, Assembly Bill 705 was signed. This is an elimination of basic skills courses with the goal that students would complete transfer-level coursework in a significantly shorter period of time (Skaff, 2018; CCCCCO, 2019).

Learning communities have existed for decades and are designed to provide strong support to students (Jedele, 2007). Learning communities are cohorts of students often taking similar courses, and they have organized events. Many learning communities have a dedicated counselor. Learning communities are known to lead to higher retention rates (Jedele, 2007) and create a sense of belongingness for students. Learning communities are very effective with first generation students (Dins, 2005).
Students often take courses together, are enrolled in a college success class (Scott-Clayton & Columbia University, 2011), and have a dedicated counselor.

Similar to guided pathway elements, many California community colleges offer counselors specific to student athletes. These counselors, who are knowledgeable on the requirements for athletes, complete comprehensive educational plans for athletes and offer college success strategies (Iino, 2014). This support is often tied to the athletes’ retention and transfer success (Iino, 2014).

Another effort to assist students seamlessly transitioning from high school to community college system is dual enrollment. Students who are enrolled in both high school and college earn college credit and are considered dual enrolled (Hochstrat, 2019). Dual enrollment courses are an agreement made with colleges and feeder high schools. They are college classes held at the high schools. College or high school faculty who meet the minimum qualifications usually teach dual enrollment courses. Dual enrollment students attest that taking college classes while in high school exposes them to more rigorous coursework, better prepares them for college, and assists them in completing their educational goals faster at no cost (Hochstrat, 2019). Researchers have concluded that dual enrollment participation can increase GPA, persistence rates, and credits completed (Allen & Dadgar, 2012).

An excellent example of a dual enrollment program is the Get Focused Stay Focused model that began in Santa Barbara, California. Get Focused Stay Focused (GFSF) is a comprehensive classroom-based curriculum for ninth graders. Students learn who they are, what they want, and how to get it in the yearlong course. The GFSF model is designed to increase high school attendance, graduation rates, college matriculation
rates, and provide students with the skills they need to enter the workforce (Get Focused Stay Focused, 2019).

Guided pathways are not meant to necessarily replace any of these previous efforts to ensure students’ success. They exist to help remedy the low college completion rate and may function alongside some of the previous efforts. Guided pathways are frameworks that colleges can use to better align those efforts.

**Career Education**

Career Education (CE) is also referred to as Career and Technical Education. CE programs were intended to close the gap between middle-skills jobs (those that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree) and those with the technical skills to fill the positions (Wegner, 2010; ACT, Inc., 2013). Approximately 30 million jobs in the United States are middle-skills positions (Georgetown University Center, 2017). These programs are designed to get students through targeted skills that support a career path in the least amount of time. They are career oriented (Gauthier, 2017), generally specific skills based, and provide hands-on learning. CE programs are usually taught at community colleges, vocational, and trade schools.

In many ways, CE programs are designed as guided pathways (Solano, 2019). When students select the CE program they are interested in, they know upfront what line of work or occupation the degree or certificate can lead them. Many CE programs offer major and/or career pathways, prescribed courses (Helguera, 2018), contextualized learning (Mattoon, 2009), cohort models, and embedded counseling. CE programs have often been criticized for being too narrow (Gauthier, 2017), a common criticism of guided pathways. Conversely, one could argue CE classes are only too restricted for
those who are in search of what interests them but not too narrow for those who have selected a career and are eager to join or rejoin the workforce. CE classes are the most relevant for those who desire to be career ready (Fleming, 2016).

**Student Perspectives of Current College Systems**

There is strong evidence that community college students are often confused and overwhelmed by the current community college structures (Scott-Clayton & Columbia University 2011; Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). In the video “Explaining Guided Pathways to Your College,” one student remarked, “So many classes to choose from. They just gave me this sheet of paper, and they were, like, pick a class from here and there was, like, thirty classes. They only had it by their number. It didn’t even have the name of the classes, so you’re like, all right, I guess I’ll have to look into it” (Interact Communications, 2017).

About half of community college students are not aware academic counseling is available to them (Anderson, 2019). Many students speak about rushed counseling sessions (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Acree, 1998; Pongracz, 2016; Fink & Columbia University, 2017; Ramos, 2013), and seeing multiple counselors (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). Unfortunately, many students are simply wandering through college with little guidance (Symonds, 2015).

“Bringing Student Voices to Guided Pathways Inquiry and Design,” a study of 137 students who completed California community colleges in 2017, evaluated student perspectives on the guided-pathways model. Students unanimously agreed selecting courses can be confusing, they were unsure of what student services they needed and which were available to them (if they did locate services, it was three to four semesters
in), preferred to see the same counselor, and would like to feel a part of a community (Dager et al., 2017). These elements are all covered within the guided-pathway framework. In the video “Explaining Guided Pathways to Your College,” a student posed, “We need clarity. We need structures that make sense to students,” (Interact Communications, 2017). Kathy Booth, associate director of the California Pathways Project, said, “The information we give students is just incomprehensible” (Fischer, 2018).

The Role of Community College Counselors

Counseling has become much more holistic than in the past (Bennett, 2016). Counselors assist students in the creation of comprehensive educational plans, help them select courses aligned with transfer and career goals, aid their exploration of major, vocational, and career choices (Karp, 2013; Novak, 2017), provide resources for internship opportunities (Khalil & Williamson, 2014), relay job market data (McClenney, Dare, & Thompson, 2013), align students’ goals with employment options (Karp, 2013), support students’ adjustment to college and help them readjust when needed (Educational Advisory Board, 2012), offer crisis counseling (Acree, 1998; Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015), provide college success tools (Scholl, 1999; O’Banion, 1972; Kuh, 2015), including how to locate and utilize the support services available to students, help with increased student retention (Bennett, 2016) as well as promote social emotional development (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). Community College counselors no longer simply provide information and help schedule classes (IES, 2009; Karp, 2013; Lowenstein, 2000; Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). The individualized counseling and student services that community colleges provide are two of the reasons
Isa Adney noted in her book *Community College Success* that “Community college is like private school experience with public school cost” (Adney, 2012, p. 79).

Counselors are the most important resource to help new students identify their goals and choose the classes aligned with those goals (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Fink & Columbia University, 2017; McClenny, Dare, & Thompson, 2013; Novak, 2017). Counselors often have the best understanding of course sequencing (Educational Advisory Board, 2012). For example, many community college students enter college with the notion they will be completing their degree in two years. However, there are myriad factors that may prohibit a student from completing a degree in that time frame. If students need to attend part time because of family or work obligations, it may take students longer to complete the degree. Additionally, there are several majors that cannot realistically be completed in two years such as some sciences or engineering. Without meeting with a counselor, a student may not know the way to complete a certain major in two years is to take fifteen units or credits a semester. This may not work for students with family or work obligations. When a student meets with a counselor, the counselor can build a realistic, personalized educational plan based on the student’s goals and life outside of college.

Counselors may offer individual and group counseling. Many counselors also teach courses (Acree, 1998; Lowenstein, 2000; Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). Gordon, Habley, and Grites (2008, p. 462) attested “academic counseling has become recognized as a viable and necessary component of higher education that results in the success of college students.” Counselors are crucial to student success (Kuh, 2015; Novak, 2017; Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; CCCSE, 2018). Student surveys
indicate that student engagement positively corresponds with the frequency of seeing an academic advisor or counselor (Hirsch, n.d.). For students who immigrated to the United States when they were young, their success in college is directly correlated to counseling and advising, especially during the first semester of college (Goldschmidt & Miller, 2005). When students have a caring mentor, their engagement rises (Symonds, 2015).

Counseling Approaches. There are various counseling approaches professionals use. Proactive (sometimes referred to as intrusive) or developmental counseling is a type of counseling style. Rather than passive counseling approaches where counselors allow students to come to them with their issues and challenges, proactive counseling is more assertive. When using a proactive style, the counselor may anticipate students’ needs using a friendly and inviting approach. Though the counselor provides information, the counselor also facilitates learning and goal attainment (Karp, 2013). Counselors may ask questions about the student’s life, work, schedule, goals as well as challenges or issues they face. The counselor is viewed as a partner (Karp, 2013). This type of proactive counseling can help lead to higher student retention rates (Cuseo, 2012).

Four-Year Universities: Relationships with Community Colleges

The community colleges work closely with four-year universities. The relationship between the community colleges and four-year universities is important as they assist students to acquire bachelor’s degrees seamlessly. These systems, ideally, are in constant communication to make this possible. Twenty-nine percent of University of California graduates and 51 percent of California State University graduates started at a community college (CCCCO, 2019). Students attend community college because they
are less expensive, and in some cases free, often nearby (Solis, 2012), offer open access (Scott-Clayton & Columbia University 2011; Acree, 1998; Pongracz, 2016; Skaff, 2018; Iino, 2014), are known for equity and diversity (Acree, 1998), and offer a variety of flexible classes such as nights and weekends. Once a student acquires a certain number of credits, they can then apply and transfer to a four-year institution and begin that college as a junior. Each year, students transfer to four-year universities after completing their general education courses at community colleges.

Most California community colleges have strong partnerships with their local universities. The community colleges offer transfer guarantee agreements to the California State Universities (CSU) and University of California (UC) systems. These agreements are designed to ensure students seamlessly transfer to the CSU and UC systems.

**Four Pillars of Guided Pathways**
Pillar 1: Clarifying the Path for Students

Clarifying the path for students begins before the students arrive on campus. It is ensuring the college offers programs and courses that lead to certificates and degrees, often referred to as pathways. These pathways lead to transferring to four-year universities or lead to employment. Putting these pathways together may involve voices from instructional faculty, counselors, and workforce partners. This could begin with the college and the feeder high schools coming together and aligning their programs (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015).

Multiple methods have been developed to clarify the path for students. An example is to offer a narrower set of programs, majors, or areas of study. These are widely referred to as meta majors (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Skaff, 2018; Ashby, 2018; Jenkins, Lahr, Fink, & Ganga, 2018; Fink, 2017). While this approach could be criticized for taking away students’ freedom to roam (exploring their options), many students will benefit from a highly prescribed set of courses since they are more likely to stay on track (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). Clear pathways for students can leave little room for them to deviate (Karp, 2013). Students may find it is easier to navigate their program requirements (Van et al., 2016). In offering highly structured programs, students may enroll in block-scheduled classes. When programs are prescribed, it is less likely students will take classes they do not need (Van et al., 2016).
A criticism of block schedules is they are not flexible enough to satisfy the unique needs of students (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015).

Another way to clarify the path for students is to offer cohort models. A cohort is defined as students who enter a pathway together, take all classes with the same classmates (Van et al., 2016), and are common with career education programs particularly nursing programs. Cohort models can inspire bonds between students, adding extra support to students, and allow faculty to get to know students better (Van et al., 2016). Within each cohort, there may be specific faculty, designated counselors, and other student support professionals that help create cohesiveness (Ashby, 2018).

Labor market alignment is another way to clarify paths for students (Van et al., 2016). This involves colleges offering programs that are aligned with the labor market in their zip codes. Building pathways by utilizing workforce boards and advisory boards are ways for the colleges to ensure students are on pathways that lead to employment (Ashby, 2018). These sources can keep colleges updated on changes in the industry (Van et al., 2016), job outlooks, and salary information. Similar to cohort models, labor market alignment is common with career education programs.

**Pillar 2: Helping Students Choose and Enter a Pathway**

This pillar focuses on helping students choose and enter a pathway. In Dr. Laurie Scolari’s dissertation, titled *First-generation students of color: Easing their transition to community college*, 94 percent of her focus group participants indicated that they received no help from their parents in applying to community college because of a lack of knowledge of the college-going process (Scolari & San Francisco State University, 2012). Additionally, 94 percent of the participants indicated that they had no friends or
acquaintances that could have assisted them when applying to college (Scolari & San Francisco State University, 2012). Ninety-four percent reported that their high school counselors were less likely to help them with the community college process and more likely to assist them in transferring to a four-year university (Scolari & San Francisco State University, 2012). Scolari’s findings confirm the need for colleges to provide assistance from the beginning of students’ college careers.

Colleges may offer opportunities for new students to apply, set goals, and learn ways to achieve those goals with a clear set of courses (The RP Group, March 2017). Rather than select from oftentimes hundreds of majors when applying, students can now select groupings of areas of study or meta majors (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; AACC, 2017).

This strategy would help alleviate the cafeteria-style approach used in the past where students select from á la carte classes (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). Students would instead be directed to take a sequence of courses mapped out in advance. This would include providing students with application assistance and full comprehensive educational plans at the start of college (Jenkins, Lahr, Fink, & Ganga, 2018). Assisting students with tools will help them clarify goals such as career assessment inventories (Karp, 2013; AACC, 2017; Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015) and then creating goals and timelines based on the results. This pillar may also include services such as orientation, assessments, counseling, transfer timelines, and project-based learning.

**Pillar 3: Helping Students Stay on the Path**

The third pillar is designed to help students stay on the path. This involves enhancing student services, including counseling services. It could be monitoring and
tracking students with mandatory, ongoing intrusive or proactive counseling, and utilizing student retention or early-alert technology (Strobel & Christian, 2016; AACC, 2017; Jenkins, Lahr, Fink, & Columbia University, 2017). This may include designing students’ schedules to fit their needs. Helping students stay on the path might include shifting the culture to one where counselors teach and teachers counsel (Jenkins, Lahr, Fink, & Ganga, 2018).

In this pillar, counselors are one of the most important resources for students (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). The counseling approach is more holistic than the counseling styles used in the past. Counselors can provide more intentional sessions with their students to create comprehensive educational plans (Wheeler, 2019). Students might be encouraged to see the same counselor to help establish rapport. In the past, students might have seen any available counselor, which could have resulted in the student receiving conflicting information (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015).

To help students stay on track as this pillar suggests, counselors can monitor and track students using student tracking software. Instructional faculty can notify counselors when a student is off track. A counselor can then reach out to the student to offer support. This case management approach is designed to meet the students where they are as opposed to waiting for students to ask for assistance and prevents student services from operating in isolation (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015).

**Pillar 4: Ensure Students Are Learning**

The fourth and final pillar is designed to ensure students are learning. This can be a difficult aspect to measure. There are, though, certainly services and structures colleges can offer to support this pillar such as applied-learning opportunities, applied placements,
contextualization, internships (AACC, 2017), professional development for faculty, and backward mapping. Embedding employability or soft skills (interpersonal skills necessary for increased productivity in the workplace [Mishra, 2014]) into all classes produces a well-rounded graduate. An aspect of ensuring students are learning could be re-evaluating and improving course student learning outcomes regularly (AACC, 2017; Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015).

**Contextualizing Guided Pathways to Provide Equitable Supports**

In the brief “(Re)Contextualizing Guided Pathways to Provide Equitable Supports for Community College Students,” authors Rose, Neri, and Rios-Aguilar gathered existing literature and knowledge gleaned from facilitating colleges and provided recommendations for practitioners as they move forward with their guided pathways designs.

Rose, Neri, and Rios-Aguilar discuss how the guided pathway model is grounded in perspectives from psychology, marketing, and economics (Rose, Neri, and Rose-Aguilar, 2020; Bailey et al., 2015) and how said perspectives do not consider how students make decisions (Rose, Neri, and Rose-Aguilar, 2020). They wrote how equity, race, and racism have often not been a part of the guided pathways conversation (Rose, Neri, and Rose-Aguilar, 2020).

Even with guided pathways, the authors voice their concern that there will still be students who veer from the paths to take time off from college to figure out their lives for a variety of reasons. They advise this requires colleges to think beyond guided pathways. With all of this in mind, the authors offer three recommendations (Rose, Neri, and Rose-Aguilar, 2020):
1. Developing career communities that integrate students’ funds of knowledge and labor histories.

2. Creating differentiated work-based learning opportunities for diverse subgroups of students (adult learners, minorities, etc.)

3. Utilizing regional and equity-focused labor market data to inform practice.

   Developing career communities that integrate students’ funds of knowledge and labor histories. Many students of color come from communities where information is shared extensively. Colleges can create what the authors refer to as “career communities” that bring together students lived experiences (Rose, Neri, and Rose-Aguilar, 2020). Students would be connected to faculty, counselors, support staff, peers, and alumni who match their major or career interest (Rose, Neri, and Rose-Aguilar, 2020). Within these career communities, there may be career panels, engagement activities, volunteering, mentoring, and networking that allows students to gain career knowledge (Rose, Neri, and Rose-Aguilar, 2020).

   Creating differentiated work-based learning opportunities for diverse subgroups of students (adult learners, minorities, etc.). Work-based learning involves internships, apprenticeships, guest speakers, school-based projects, job shadowing, and/or mentors to increase employability of students (Rose, Neri, and Rose-Aguilar, 2020). With these opportunities, students can become more prepared for the workforce (Rose, Neri, and Rose-Aguilar, 2020). To create an effective work-based environment, colleges must examine student needs and utilize institutional data.

   Utilizing regional and equity-focused labor market data to inform practice. Colleges need to provide more information for students about career, job outlook, degrees
and training required, and salaries based on what is available in their area (Rose, Neri, and Rose-Aguilar, 2020). Equity-focused labor market data can inform both the course content and teaching practices employed by faculty as well as counselors (Rose, Neri, and Rose-Aguilar, 2020).

**Student Perspectives of Guided Pathways**

A survey of California community college students showed that 80 percent said that being directed (as in making a connection between their success in college and their life goals) was very important to their progress (The RP Group, 2013).

In a study of fifty students, thirty-seven expressed something positive about guided pathways, including feeling “on track” and “motivated” (Fink & Kopko, 2017). Some comments from these students surveyed were as follows:

*If you stick you your plan, you can’t help but succeed.*

*It motivates you to stay on track.*

*It puts you in the right direction.*

*You just gotta follow it and then graduate.*

Center for Community College Student Engagement conducted video interviews with students on guided pathways (Center for Community College Student Engagement, September 12, 2018). This was some of the feedback:

*It really gives you that direction so you’re not lost. I feel like it’s really helpful.*

*I feel like it’s a lifesaver. Guided pathways have really help me out.*

*My advisor was really good. I actually had two. I feel like they cared about my education. They had my back.*

Cuesta College in San Luis Obispo, California, has added new systems, designs, and structures to their campus that reflect the four pillars of guided pathways (clarifying
the paths for students, helping students get on a path, helping students stay on a path, and ensuring students are learning). During spring 2018, the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) conducted a study of 134 Cuesta College students’ perspectives of guided pathways at Cuesta College (Cooper & Rassen, August 2018). Students in general reported feelings of enthusiasm and positivity toward Cuesta College. Some are the students’ comments were:

*I feel like it’s very welcoming [here]. Like when you go in [to a campus office] you can tell like they want to help you.*

*People are very helpful—not just the staff but students.*

*Everyone...every single one of [the staff]...goes above and beyond.*

*I think our school counselors help a lot, as well as two of the Cuesta counselor ladies [who] came to help us.*

*[The counselors are] just super...I thought mine was super good.*

**Examples of Guided Pathway Colleges**

At least 300 colleges in twenty-nine states are implementing institution redesigns based on the guided pathways framework (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). The following are colleges that provide examples of exemplary guided pathway practices.

**City College of New York (CUNY).** CUNY is a system with eighteen colleges in New York. Their guided pathways framework involves block scheduling of classes, meaning students take a prescribed set of courses once they choose a major. Students at CUNY are required to meet with their assigned counselors (many of whom use proactive counseling techniques [Karp, 2013]) twice a semester (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Karp, 2013). They have added a significant number of counselors (Karp, 2013); thus CUNY’s student-counselor ratio is low at less than 100 students to each counselor.
CUNY offers learning communities and intervention services such as mentoring programs (Karp, 2013). Counselors and other staff provide students with college skills training in study skills, time management, and stress reduction (Strumbos & Kolenovic, 2017). Counselors at CUNY ensure students do not leave the college until they have earned a degree, certificate, or credential (Strumbos & Kolenovic, 2017).

Ohio Community Colleges. In an effort to improve state community college graduation rates, Ohio developed completion plans (Jenkins, Lahr, Fink, & Columbia University, 2017). All of their twenty-three community colleges implemented guided pathway models or frameworks. Elements offered to students vary from college to college. They may include early career exploration, meta majors or career clusters, customized educational plans, and counselors who monitor student progress and intervene when needed (Jenkins, Lahr, Fink, & Columbia University, 2017). Counselors and faculty have created program maps, curriculum guides, or curriculum sheets (Jenkins, Lahr, Fink, & Columbia University, 2017), all designed to ensure students are taking only the classes they need for their respective programs.

City College of Chicago. Elements of City College of Chicago’s revamping are focus areas (or meta majors), program maps, enhanced educational planning, and individual monitoring (Fink & Columbia University, 2017). Counselors assist with major selection, customization of educational plans, and utilize technology to help students stay on track.

Miami Dade Community College. All entering students at Miami Dade sign up for a mandatory orientation (Hope, 2017). Students are required to see an assigned
counselor (Hughes, et al., 2014) to create an educational plan (Jenkins & Cho, 2013) with the counselor embedded in their selected pathway. The college hired twenty-five new full-time counselors, a $1,000,000 investment (Hughes, et al., 2014). Through the college’s three-phase counseling process, students have assigned counselors and receive advising, coaching, and mentoring as they progress through their pathways (Hope, 2017; Community College Research Center, 2015). Miami Dade has created program pathways that align with the local four-year (Hughes, et al., 2014). Miami Dade also offers pre-college counseling to high schools (Community College Research Center, 2015; Hughes, et al., 2014).

Honolulu Community College. Honolulu Community College is a small school in Hawaii that restructured their design years ago. Since their philosophy is student centered and student focused, this college uses a tool called STAR, which helps the college improve student success (Mullins Veney & Sugimoto, 2017). STAR is a guided-pathway tool used by both counselors and students. The tool assists with degree planning, auditing, and registration, which are areas that are common barriers because of confusion. In 2015, Honolulu Community College transferred 43 percent of their students to four-year universities. Their goal is to send 55 percent to four-year universities by 2015 with the help of this guided pathway tool (Mullins Veney & Sugimoto, 2017).

Tennessee Community Colleges. All thirteen community colleges in Tennessee are moving forward with guided pathways referred to as “Tennessee completion practices” (Jenkins et al., 2018). All of the academic programs prepare students for employment and are entirely mapped out so there is no confusion about which courses to
take. All new students explore major and career options. Through mandatory counseling, students work with a counselor to develop individualized educational plans. Counselors monitor and track every student’s progress closely. College-level math and English courses are completed during the student’s first year. Counselors utilize early-alert software to alert students when they are at risk of getting off track.

Upon entering Cleveland State Community College in Tennessee, all students choose a career community (or meta major). This intake system for students is designed to speed their entry into college courses. The college has more than doubled the rate at which students are completing both college-level math and English in the first year (Jenkins, Lahr, Fink, & Ganga, 2018).

Because of high student-counselor ratios, some of these Tennessee community colleges now offer success coaches in addition to counseling. These coaches assist with career exploration, use the early-alert system to track students’ progress, and ensure students make academic progress. At one campus, students are sent an email when they register for orientation that provides details about meeting with a counselor before the orientation (Jenkins et al., 2018). These students are frontloaded with assistance and support to ensure their success rather than attempting to navigate the system blindly.

Fresno City College. Thirty-five percent of Fresno City College students did not attain a certificate, degree, or transfer in the six years after matriculation (Burdick, 2018). This prompted the college to look at redesign. The college created a Welcome Day that all incoming students are invited to attend. This Ram Ready day includes several student services such as outreach, counselors, and financial aid. Students are introduced to their student success team, given a campus tour, and shown how to access online student
portals. Ninety-seven percent of students report that Ram Ready helped them feel prepared for college. The college has seen an increase in participation. Three hundred seventy students attended Ram Ready in 2017. Fifteen hundred students attended in 2019 (Career Ladders Project, 2019).

**Pasadena City College.** Pasadena City College (PCC) requires all new faculty to attend a year-long equity training. PCC opted to not use the four pillars as they were but rather created their own pillars (Career Ladders Project, 2019).

1. Guided Entry
2. Career Opportunities
3. Support Services
4. Guided Exit

All incoming PCC freshmen attend a four-day orientation during which they choose pathways and focus on goal setting. Students are connected to a pathways support team, which includes mentors and coaches. PCC also offers Pathway Centers that offer coaching, counseling, and tutoring. PCC employs social workers on campus for foster youth and CalWorks students (Career Ladders Project, 2019). Students are required to see their counselor once a semester (Preston-Smith, 2018) and are required to have a comprehensive educational plan (Pasadena City College, 2019). PCC offers a career fair as well as a majors fair since many students do not know what to select for a major plan (Pasadena City College, 2019). PCC uses Starfish, an early-alert student-tracking software. Their meta majors are referred to as *career opportunities* (Pasadena City College, 2019).
**Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College (A-B Tech).** A-B Tech in Asheville, North Carolina, learned just how important counselors are to the success of their students when they began implementing guided pathways in their college (Schwartz, 2019). Beth Stewart, vice president of instructional services at A-B Tech, stated, “Quality advising is more important to the success of the [guided pathways] project than developing structured curricula” (Schwartz, 2019). A-B Tech offered professional development on guided pathways for their counselors. Their counselors also utilize technology that restricts students from registering for classes without their counselors’ approval (Schwartz, 2019). The college offers students eight semester educational plans aligned with the four-year school of their choice which can be found on A-B Tech’s website. These were designed to make the transition from community college to four-year university as seamless as possible (8-Semester Plans: A-B Tech to 4-Year College/University, 2020).

**Cypress Community College.** When Cypress Community College in Cypress, California, learned only 6 percent of their students had been earning their degree within three years, they determined this was inequitable (Cypress College, 2019) and was a catalyst to the creation of their guided pathways. Students can select from nine meta majors with 158 degrees that are fully mapped out (Cypress College, 2019). Students receive emails and push notifications from support staff to ensure they are on track. Cypress also offers each student a completion team, which is a cross-functional team that consists of faculty, coaches (career, financial aid, transfer, etc.), and embedded counselors (Cypress College, 2019).
Positive Outcomes of Colleges Implementing Guided Pathways. While it may be challenging to evaluate guided pathways, several studies point in positive directions. Various studies have proven that early enrollment and intentional student support services (guided pathway elements) lead to higher completion rates (Bailey, Jaggars, Jenkins, & Columbia University, 2015). The Community College Research Center has found a correlation between students choosing a major or area of study early in their college education (a guided pathway element) and degree completion (Bailey, Jaggars, Jenkins, & Columbia University, 2015). One of their studies found that half the students who selected a major in the first year of college graduated or transferred within five years.

A study of City University of New York (CUNY) showed that their program that offers strong student support and requires students to attend full time (their Accelerated Study in Associate Program [ASAP] program) has a substantially higher completion rate than those students not in the program. The completion rate for an associate degree in three years at CUNY was 22 percent. The completion rate for an associate degree in three years at CUNY for students in their ASAP program was 40 percent (Bailey, Jaggars, Jenkins, & Columbia University, 2015). Regarding transfer rates, an estimated fifty-nine percent of ASAP students enrolled in baccalaureate programs transferred, compared to forty-nine percent of non-ASAP students.

Ohio Community Colleges adapted CUNY’s program. According to a study by MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research firm, the Ohio colleges have seen a 37 percent increase in credit accumulation and their graduation rate had doubled after two years (MDRC, 2018).
City College of Chicago has seen an increase of graduation from 7 percent to 17 percent. One of their colleges, Kennedy King, rose to 26 percent (Guided Pathways: An Uncompromising Focus on Student Success, n.d.).

Tennessee Community Colleges have more than doubled the rate at which students are completing both college-level math and English in the first year (Jenkins, Lahr, Fink, & Ganga, 2018).

All entering students at Miami Dade Community College sign up for a mandatory orientation (Hope, 2017). Out of 9,000 students, 70 percent met with an advisor or counselor, which is twice as many as in previous years (Bailey, Jaggars, Jenkins, & Columbia University, 2015).

Pasadena Community College (PCC) followed 5,537 first-time students for six years. Twenty-five percent transferred and 65 percent had no discoverable milestone. The college identified equity gaps by race: African American and Latino students ranked the lowest (Pasadena City College, 2019). With this discovery, PCC created a master plan beginning in 2010 (Pasadena City College, 2019). PCC is now ranked number two in California for awarding transfer degrees (Evaluation Reports - PCC Pathways - Pasadena City, 2019). Approximately 48 percent of students achieved transfer status compared to 32 percent in the years before Christie, 2019).

**California Guided Pathways Project**

In 2017, twenty California community colleges were selected to participate in the California Guided Pathways Project (Schmidt, n.d.). Theses colleges engaged in the large undertaking of redesigning their institutions. The colleges designed and implemented guided pathway frameworks in their colleges beginning fall 2019. Over the
next three years, teams from each college attended guided pathway workshops to receive advice and feedback from pathways coaches (Schmidt, n.d.). The participating colleges were:

- American River College
- Butte College
- Cabrillo College
- College of the Canyons
- Cosumnes River College
- Chaffey College
- Cuyamaca College
- Los Angeles Trade Tech College
- Long Beach City College
- MiraCosta College
- Modesto Junior College
- Norco College
- Reedley College
- Rio Hondo College
- Riverside City College
- San Joaquin Delta College
- Santa Ana College
- Santa Barbara City College
- Southwestern College
- Yuba College
Only Cuyamaca College acted on the need to gather counselors’ feedback on guided pathways best practices before moving forward with their counseling redesign. In May 2018, the Cuyamaca College Counseling Department conducted an informal survey that was dispersed to counselors from each of the twenty participating California Guided Pathway Project colleges. The survey was then extended to counselors at other California community colleges.

The respondents were primarily full-time counselors, whose main job function was counseling (Nguyen, May 2018). Results from thirty-five respondents from colleges that serve on average 13,000-19,000 students provided information on guided pathways best practices according to the counselors (Nguyen, May 2018). Forty-eight percent of the respondents stated their college was at the “beginning stages of implementing guided pathways” (Nguyen, May 2018).

Some of these colleges have added meta majors, some continue to use the term pathways, and many of the colleges were still designing meta majors according to the survey results (Nguyen, May 2018). Twenty-five percent of the respondents were from colleges that have a centralized counseling office (Nguyen, May 2018). Twenty percent responded that their colleges have counselors in various locations based on their assigned guided pathway work (Nguyen, May 2018). An example of this could be a STEM counselor located in the science building rather than a designated counseling building. Respondents from nineteen of the colleges survey (57 percent) stated categorical programs such as EOPS, DSPS, CalWorks, etc.) are still in centralized locations (Nguyen, May 2018).
The use of paraprofessionals in counseling is something many colleges are considering in their redesign. These paraprofessionals might be assistants, coaches, mentors, and other student service professionals. When asked about paraprofessionals, 31 percent of the respondents stated their colleges are not utilizing paraprofessionals (Nguyen, May 2018). Thirteen percent of the respondents stated their colleges did employ such professionals and described the professionals as mentors, interns, peer advocates, specialists, assistants, advisors, and coaches who are supervised by counselors and/or the dean of student services (Nguyen, May 2018). Some respondents explained these professionals do not complete student educational plans and are not expected to counsel (Nguyen, May 2018).

When asked about the challenges of guided pathways, respondents mentioned the lack of staff and space, time for planning, and not yet having a clear picture of what guided pathways are and how they will look on their campus were current challenges (Nguyen, May 2018). One respondent mentioned that there was no feedback from counselors requested from administration at their college before moving forward with their guided pathways planning process (Nguyen, May 2018). Respondents stated that “there should be more counselor involvement [in guided pathways design],” “there should be guided pathways workshops for counselors,” and “if counseling isn’t involved, [guided pathways] won’t work” (Nguyen, May 2018).

**Themes**

Precisely how colleges roll out guided pathway frameworks varies from college to college based on demographics, funding, student needs, and myriad other factors. However, several themes emerge in the literature that have captured these practices.
Several consistent themes frequently occurred in the literature review. These themes are evidence there are several best practices, though, guided pathways are still in their infancy in California community colleges. Themes included were colleges offering:

1) Majors divided into meta majors

2) Mandatory, intensive counseling

3) The use of cohort models

4) Leveraging technology (early alert systems)

5) Creating success teams to monitor student progress

Summary

While having assigned counselors offers consistency, structure, and the ability to build rapport with students, an identified research gap is the perspectives of the counselors with regard to guided pathways. Counseling offers a critical component to student engagement and student success (Pongracz, 2016; Shaffer, Zalewski, & Leveille, 2010). Counselors and advisors are one of the most important elements in guided pathways (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Fleming, 2016; Jenkins & Cho, 2013; Dadgar, 2017).

Despite a growing body of research on guided pathways, little research has been conducted from the counselors’ perspective. Much of the existing literature covers how colleges are implementing guided pathways and much of the research comes from a general or administrative perspective. An area that could benefit institutions as they move forward with designing their guided pathways is perspective from the counselors. As stated previously, counselors work one on one with the very population for whom the institutions are designing these pathways. Counselors have a unique perspective on what
elements of guided pathways are effective in assisting students in community college, supporting students’ completion, ensuring students are learning, and the tools that are given to students so they can make informed choices while in college and graduate or transfer in two years or less. From the counselor perspective, what elements of guided pathways are most effective for increasing student success?
CHAPTER III METHODOLOGY

Overview

This study explores what unique guided pathway features California community colleges offer students from the counselor’s perspective. This study interviewed twelve counselors from these colleges to capture rich data regarding guided pathways. To achieve this goal, this chapter describes the research methods and procedures that best address the research questions. This includes the purpose of the study, the research questions, the rationale for the research design, the population and sample, and instrumentation. This chapter describes the data collection, analysis, limitations of the study, and provides an overview of the data.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multicase study was to identify what California community college counselors describe as important elements of guided pathways that increase student success. Additionally, this study will explore what California community college counselors describe the challenges of guided pathways. Lastly, this study identified California community college counselor recommendations for improving guided pathways to increase student success.

Research Questions

1. What do California community college counselors describe as the important elements of guided pathways to increase student success?

2. What do California community college counselors describe as the challenges of guided pathways?
3. What do California community college counselors recommend for improving guided pathways to increase student success?

**Qualitative Research Design**

To address the research questions, this research design utilized a qualitative multicase study. The format of the data collected was words rather than numbers, designating this study as qualitative instead of quantitative. This research design is a qualitative approach where the researcher explores a real-life case through detailed, in-depth data collection involving such methods such as interviews and artifacts (Patton, 2015). This qualitative design allowed the researcher to find information-rich cases as described by Patton, 2015 that allow for a deeper understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In qualitative research, the researcher develops a picture by reporting the perspectives of those most closely related to the challenge or phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 2009). This study gathered data from interviews and artifacts from twelve counselors from six California community colleges that have implemented guided pathway frameworks in their colleges. The intent of this study was to discover the most beneficial elements for students from the counselors’ perspectives.

Qualitative research is an in-depth study that collects data that is then analyzed to identify trends or themes (Patten, 2012). Most qualitative data is gathered from semi-structured interviews and is triangulated with artifacts (Patten, 2012). Qualitative research is ideal for this study as it allows the researcher to find meaning in a study topic. The goal of qualitative research is to learn a great deal about the phenomena under study (Patton, 2015). Once we learn more about what the effective elements, as well as the
challenges, of guided pathways are from the counselor perspective, colleges can illuminate these patterns and themes as they incorporate them into their college redesign.

**Case Study Research**

A case study is an in-depth analysis of a single entity or system (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010; Creswell, 2012). Case studies learn about participants’ lived experiences (Patten, 2012). This qualitative case study explores perspectives of counselors from California community colleges that implement guided pathways at their colleges. There are several types of case studies a researcher can utilize. This study used a multiple-case study focusing on the counselor perceptions of important elements of guided pathways contributing to student success.

**Population**

The population for studies can be a group of individuals that conform to specific criteria the researcher intends to study (McMillan, Schumacher, & Pearson, 2010). Creswell 2012 described a population as a group of individuals having one characteristic that differentiates them from other groups. It is the group the researcher is most interested in studying (Patten, 2012). The population for this study were counselors from community colleges that implemented guided pathways at their colleges.

**Target Population**

A target population for a study is the entire set of individuals selected from the overall population (McMillan, Schumacher, 2010) who have characteristics that distinguish them from other groups (Creswell, 2012). McMillan and Schumacher (2010) noted that it is not feasible for a researcher to investigate the entire population for a study. Consequently, a smaller number of participants was selected, and these sampled
participants were those to whom the results were generalized. This smaller set of participants is referred to as the target population and is defined by Creswell and Guetterman (2019) as persons who meet set criteria, and importantly, are directly accessible to the researcher. The target population for this study consisted of counselors from California community colleges.

When researchers can learn a great deal from their participants it is referred to as purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015). Purposeful sampling is when the researcher has an idea of which individuals might be key informants to the study (Patten, 2012). The samples for this study qualitative research study were twelve counselors employed as counselors for at least two years at California community colleges that implemented guided pathways at their colleges.

Gatekeepers. Salient and integral components to studies are gatekeepers. Gatekeepers give access to the field of study (McMillan, Schumacher, & Pearson, 2010) and to study participants. Career Ladders Projects in Oakland, California, collaborates with California community colleges and their partners to assist with building equity-minded redesign of guided pathways and other relevant work such as career advancement. The researcher contacted Luis Chavez, executive director of Career Ladders Project to assist making connections to some of these colleges. The researcher desired information-rich community colleges that had implemented guided pathways and that are ideally making a difference in student success. Mr. Chavez assisted in the identification of those colleges.

Additionally, the researcher utilized Basecamp, a state-wide online forum for California community college counselors, advisors, and student-service professionals.
Basecamp is intended for counselors and advisors to communicate, share, and collaborate counseling and student-support ideas throughout the state. The researcher posted a query that went to 323 members of this forum, seeking connections to counselors and advisors from colleges that were implementing guided pathways in their colleges. Once the researcher randomly selected six California Community Colleges, Luis Chavez, executive director of Career Ladders Project confirmed these colleges had been implementing guided pathways on their campuses for two or more years.

**Sample**

A sample population is defined as “the group of subjects or participants from whom the data are collected” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 129). Samples for studies are a small subgroup derived from the population (McMillan, Schumacher, & Pearson, 2010; Patten, 2012) that the researcher studies for generalizing about the target population (Creswell, 2012). Qualitative samples typically range from one to forty or more interview participants (McMillan, Schumacher, & Pearson, 2010).

The sample consisted of twelve counselors from California community colleges that implemented guided pathways at their colleges. Given the time restriction, the sample size of twelve was reasonable to gain enough rich data for the research. The counselors were selected from six California Community Colleges that have been implementing guided pathways frameworks at their college for two or more years.

The researcher posted a query on the platform Basecamp that went to 323 members of this forum, seeking connections to counselors and advisors from colleges that were implementing guided pathways in their colleges. Based on the responses from the query, the researcher created a list of the respondents and their respective colleges.
The researcher randomly selected six of those California Community Colleges. Luis Chavez, executive director of Career Ladders Project, confirmed these colleges had been implementing guided pathways on their campuses for two or more years. The colleges selected were Skyline College, Chaffey College, Modesto College, Fresno City College, West Hills Lemoore College, and Cabrillo College.

Figure 3. Population, target population, and sample.

To avoid gender bias in the research, two counselors were selected from each college, one male and one female. Snowball sampling was also used. This type of sampling is used when a study participant is able to locate another participant (Patton, 2015). Once the researcher identified and secured a participant from each college, the researcher corresponded with either the dean of counseling or the counselor at each of the six colleges. This was to obtain a second participant from the college of the opposite gender to ensure the researcher had two counselors from each institution, one male and one female. The counselors were a range of ages and racial and ethnic affiliations. The counselors selected were considered:
1. General counselors

2. Full-time status

3. Had been employed with the college as a counselor for two or more years

*Convenience sampling.* Selecting participants who are available and accessible is considered convenience sampling (McMillan, Schumacher, & Pearson, 2010). This type of sampling was utilized in this study as the researcher selected counselors who were from California community colleges and available for interviewing during summer of 2020. Figure 4 displays the sample colleges in their counties.

*Figure 4. Sample colleges and counties.*
Instrumentation

This qualitative multicase study design allowed the researcher to collect diverse types of data that helped determine the lived experiences, important elements, challenges, and recommendations of guided pathways from the California community college counselors’ perspective. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) explained that a researcher might gather two kinds of data when conducting fieldwork: interviews and artifact review (p. 349). Interviews may need to have validating information from another source such as artifact review and analysis. In this study, qualitative data consisting primarily of interviews that were collected were confirmed by artifact review. The researcher reviewed important artifacts relevant to the research questions followed by conducting interviews using semi-structured questions. Findings from both the interviews and the artifact review were used to provide answers to the study’s research questions. These types of data were then compared to the literature review in this study. The artifacts in this study were documents and publications describing how each of the six community colleges designed and implemented their guided pathway program.

Research as an Instrument of the Study

This researcher represents the primary instrument in this qualitative research study (Patton, 2015) as she conducted the interviews. The researcher has knowledge of the California community college system as a counselor herself, which could result in biases. “The researcher’s background, experience, training, skills, interpersonal competence, and how the researcher engages in the fieldwork and analysis undergird the credibility of the findings” (Patton, 2015, p. 3). Thus, the researcher was mindful about projecting biases during the interview and data analysis phases of this study. It is also
important for the interviewer to be empathetic, attentive, and ready to respond to unanticipated responses (Patton, 2015).

Once the researcher identified California community colleges that have been implementing guided pathways structures for at least two years, six California community colleges that implement guided pathways in their colleges were selected randomly. The researcher identified counselors from each college to conduct one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The researcher developed an interview protocol (Appendix E). The interview began with background information on the study with a set of interview questions to follow.

**Interviews**

Interviews are a deeper way of understanding thoughts, feelings, beliefs, perspectives, and opinions of individuals on specific research areas (Patton, 2015). Qualitative interviews are usually used for in-depth, semi-structured forms of interviewing (Patton, 2015). In this study, the interview provided substantive data in regard to the strategies, important elements of, challenges, and recommendations for guided pathways from California community college counselors. These interviews gathered their perspectives and allowed for in-depth conversations on the topic.

One-on-one interviews provide firsthand information. The interview consisted of semi-structured questions and probes that gathered in-depth responses about the counselors’ experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge (Patton, 2015). The interview questions were designed to allow counselors to share their perspectives on guided pathways. Using the purpose statement, research questions, artifacts, and literature review as a guide, the researcher prepared semi-structured interview questions.
The researcher for this study was deliberate and reflective during the interviews, taking notes, and recording the interviews (McMillan, Schumacher, & Pearson, 2010).

**Artifact Analysis**

Before the interviews, sources of evidence were collected for the study. These evidences, or artifacts, help researchers learn about a bounded system. Artifacts are necessary to supplement the interviews and can provide additional context (Patton, 2015). The artifacts collected were documents about the community colleges’ particular implementation of guided pathways. The artifacts collected were public information. The researcher evaluated the artifacts and relevant ideas were placed into the interview themes. Themes in the artifacts included strategies, phrases, terms, and comments that were made regarding the design and implementation of guided pathways. Any strategies or information from the artifacts that did not fit within one of the existing themes was named and given its own theme name. Interview data and artifacts were used to triangulate the themes in the data.

The consistency, or inconsistency, of the data compared with the interview findings helped establish strength of the overall analysis. The results of this qualitative data analysis guided the researcher in fulfilling the purpose of the study and answering the research questions. The results of the study indicated the knowledge and experiences of the participants regarding the design and implementation of guided pathways in their community colleges. The artifacts were analyzed, recorded, digitally scanned, and placed in secure folders on the researcher’s computer and portable hard drive.
Artifacts: Guided Pathways Efforts of Sample Colleges

Chaffey Community College. Following the California community colleges chancellor’s definition of guided pathways, Chaffey wanted to create a framework to integrate support services, so students get the assistance they need throughout their college experience. Chaffey follows the four pillars (clarify the path, enter the path, stay on the path, and ensure learning) with equity being the main goal of each pillar. Using literature, focus groups, and surveys, Chaffey developed three elements of practice.

1. Innovation: support institution-wide transformational change.
2. Ownership: awareness around current practices and areas of improvement.
3. Commitment: designing and implementing a student-centered college.

West Hills Lemoore Community College. West Hills College Lemoore wanted to drive student success by implementing guided pathway frameworks in their college. Over the course of five years faculty, staff, and administration have been attending conferences to create their pathways. Their Strong framework aims to close achievement gaps for students. All activities, services, and programs are aligned with their Strong framework. The Strong framework has four pillars:

1. Get Strong: Prepares students to enroll in an academic or career pathway by defining the process of enrolling and choosing a program or major. Activities in this pillar include career planning classes at the high schools, promoting college at the high schools, summer programs, and assisting students with college application and registration processes.
2. Start Strong: provides guidance for students’ goals and pathways. Activities in this pillar include financial support, student engagement activities, and faculty and staff
professional development.

3. Stay Strong: Helps keep students on their education or career pathway. This pillar helps retain students from fall to spring and assists the completion their transfer-level math and English. This pillar includes non-academic support services like mental health, food, and transportation, intrusive counseling, and case management.

4. Finish Strong: assistance completion of academic or career pathway by creating visions and goals and transferring to a four-year institution or career. Activities in this pillar are transfer services, transportation to four-year universities, financial planning, campus tours of colleges, and auto-awarding certificates and degrees (West Hills College Lemoore, 2019).

*Skyline Community College.* Skyline took a multifaceted approach to understanding obstacle student face and solutions to those. They created skyline college promise to address these barriers and offer solutions that were meaningful to the student experience. Using data gleaned from a student survey, skyline created three goals:

1. Getting into the college. Work closely with students helping them choose a major and get connected to college support. Skyline counselors visit high schools along with a high school liaison and conduct orientation and student meetings. During the first counseling session, students are guided in choosing a meta major. During the second counseling session, counselors discuss course schedule and encourage success and career classes.

2. Getting through college and completing. Developed a comprehensive and holistic approach to counseling. Students are assigned meta major counselors who connect them to campus resources. Students are grouped into three groups in order to meet the needs of students.
High need: The students have struggled academically and are undecided on career goals. The students may also face other obstacles such as work, family responsibilities, and/or mental health struggles. It is recommended these students see their counselor three times a semester.

Medium need: These students have withdrawn from classes in the past or have struggled with attendance. They may have some idea of what their career goals are but are not completely clear. They may have outside struggles such as personal issues and are able to communicate these issues with their counselors. It is recommended these students visit their counselor twice a semester.

Low need: These students are actively engaged, driven, have succeeded in academic settings in the past, and have clearly defined a career and academic goals. They are organized, able to follow instructions well, and can assess their own needs. It is recommended the student see the counselor once a semester.

3. Developing career goals. Utilize a career development approach with students. Students have a student success team to ensure they are engaging in career development activities to further explore career options and development. This career focus is a part of every student experience (Career Ladders Project, 2018).

Modesto Junior College. Modesto Junior College is one of the 20 California community colleges participating in the California guided pathways project. Modesto has implemented an institution-wide design with a goal of student success. Modesto uses the four pillars (clarifying the path, enter the path, stay on the path, and ensure students are learning).

1. Clarify the path: Modesto has delineated their academic majors and programs into
schools. There are nine schools to choose from: agriculture, arts, performance and the humanities, behavior and social sciences, business and computing, fitness and health professions, industry and trades, language arts and education, public safety, and science and mathematics.

2. Enter the path: Once students choose a school, they can narrow down their choice and major and go to the college’s website to locate exactly what classes to take. They can then work with a counselor to create an educational plan that leads to a degree or certificate.

3. Stay on the path: Modesto offers wraparound student services such as career services and a pathways center. Modesto utilizes an early-alert system to keep students, faculty and staff in communication about student needs (Modesto Junior College, 2020).

   *Cabrillo Community College.* Cabrillo Community College is one of the 20 California community colleges participating in the California guided pathways project. Cabrillo has restructured their processes to better serve students. Cabrillo uses the four pillars (clarify the path, enter the path, stay on the path and ensure students are learning).

   1. Clarify the path: Cabrillo has delineated their majors or programs of study into five families or career and academic pathways (CAPS).

   2. Enter the path: They have drafted student-friendly semester-by-semester program maps of courses students need to complete their certificates or degrees. All incoming students are placed in college-level math and English with support, if needed.

   3. Stay on the path: Cabrillo offers mentoring, student employment, and methods of communication that support students. Cabrillo offers student success teams to help students stay on their path.
4. Ensuring students are learning: Cabrillo uses practices like revising student learning outcomes as needed to ensure students are learning. Cabrillo integrates career activities throughout their curriculum (Cabrillo Community College, 2020).

*Fresno City College.* The college created a Welcome Day that all incoming students are invited to attend. This Ram Ready day includes several student services such as outreach, counselors, and financial aid. Students are introduced to their student success team, given a campus tour, and shown how to access online student portals. Ninety-seven percent of students report that Ram Ready helped them feel prepared for college. The college has seen an increase in participation. Three hundred and seventy students attended Ram Ready in 2017. Fifteen hundred students attended in 2019 (Career Ladders Project, 2019).

**Validity**

Validity in research has been defined as how well the test instrument measures what it is intended to measure (Creswell, 2015). Since all traits of a study may be difficult to measure, perfect validity may not exist. One of the strengths of qualitative research is validity (Creswell, 2012). Qualitative validity is used when the researcher checks the accuracy of the findings of the procedures (Creswell, 2012). The strategies used were field-testing and utilizing outside experts.

**Field Test**

Field (or pilot) tests are given to gather evidence for validity before the study is done (McMillan, Schumacher, & Pearson, 2010). Conducting a pilot test can serve as a way to enhance the trustworthiness of the data (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010). The interview questions were given to a fellow researcher and student of Brandman
University who was asked to review them for understanding, context regarding the research questions, and make suggestions for change to the researcher. Before conducting interviews, a field test for this study was given to a fellow researcher knowledgeable in qualitative methods. This fellow researcher observed the researcher interviewing a volunteer who met the study criteria but was not included in the study. The volunteer was a full-time counselor from a California community college who has some experience with guided pathways. The volunteer and fellow researcher provided feedback on the questions asked (Appendix C) and the behavior of the researcher. The researcher amended the questions accordingly based on the feedback. This study also utilized experts to establish the content of validity of the study. The experts checked the interview questions to ensure the questions were consistent with the purpose of the study.

**Reliability**

Another important measurement device is reliability. Reliability in a research study is often defined as the ability to repeat findings in the absence of change (Creswell, 2015) and when a study yields consistent results (Patten, 2012). To establish validity and reliability, the researcher incorporated a variety of best practices such as extensive review of the literature, artifacts, field-testing, triangulation, and recorded questions. The researcher used a guide asking interview participants consistent interview questions. The assumption of this study was individual community college counselors were valid and reliable. Additionally, the researcher conducted a field test of the interview with an expert not included as a study participant.
**Intercoder Reliability**

Another measure for reliability is confirming the consistency of the interview questions. This can be a process of cross-checking data codes using multiple researchers (Creswell, 2015). A fellow expert researcher familiar with the coding process assisted with coding some of the data from the transcripts independent of the researcher. The researcher used the NVivo software to locate themes from the data. The results from the independent coder were compared to the researcher’s results. When any discrepancies were located, the researchers convened to determine the final codes to ensure researcher bias did not impact the final results (Patton, 2002).

**Triangulation**

Utilizing only one source to gather information can lead to errors (Patton, 2015). No single method of gathering information can efficiently solve problems (Patton, 2015). Triangulation refers to using multiple types of data sources for better accuracy and to strengthen the study (McMillan, Schumacher, & Pearson, 2010; Patton, 2015). In the study, this researcher utilized triangulation by collecting data using multiple instruments, including twelve interviews conducted at six sites, documentation, and archival records. The themes derived from the interviews were compared to the literature review found in chapter II of this study.

**Ethical Assurances**

A method to ensure researcher’s work is ethical is to have the study reviewed by an institutional review board (IRB). IRB policies were introduced to protect human subjects in research, to confirm compliance with federal regulations, and to verify that ethical considerations have been demonstrated (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). All
interviews were conducted with Brandman University’s Institutional Review Board’s (BUIRB’s) approval, received on August 7, 2020 (Appendix H).

Data Collection

The following points outline the methods used to gather data. The researcher first secured the participation of study subjects who are counselors from California community colleges who use a guided pathways framework at their colleges. All Brandman University guidelines were followed in order to maintain confidentiality to the participants including IRB approval and assurances of confidentiality. The researcher arranged phone or video interviews. Before each interview, study participants received four documents for their review: the semi-structured interview questions (Appendix A), the Brandman University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Research Participant’s Bill of Rights (Appendix F), and the Informed Consent (Appendix G) and Audio Recording Release (Appendix J). The study participants were asked to review each of these documents for their understanding of the research study being conducted. Each participant was asked to provide signed consent before the start of each interview. The researcher used an audio recording device to ensure all information shared was captured. The results of the interviews were complied.

Interview Protocol

An interview protocol is written directions for conducting the interview (Patten, 2012). The interview protocol was designed to assist a flow of conversation but not to force the dialogue. Several necessary steps were taken at the start of the interview to ensure consistently and accuracy of the interviews.
1. The one-on-one interview began with the researcher confirming the participant and the researcher introducing herself.

2. The researcher inquired if there were any questions for the researcher in regard to the study. The researcher verified the informed consent (Appendix G) for the study and consent for audio recording (Appendix J).

3. The researcher informed the interviewee when recording of interview would begin.

4. The researcher commenced interview questions and began taking notes.

5. The research began with questions about the interviewee’s college and implementation of guided pathways.

6. The researcher asked follow-up or clarifying questions and/or used probes when necessary throughout the interview to gain a deeper understanding on the participant’s perspective.

7. At the conclusion of the interview, the participant was thanked and asked if there was anything else that needed to be included.

8. The researcher ended the audio recording.

9. The transcription was dated and saved for data analysis.

**Interview Questions**

The researcher utilized semi-structured interviews to explore California community colleges as they relate to guided pathway features from the counselor perspectives. Interview questions focused on collecting information about the perceptions of the counselors’ lived experience within the culture of guided pathways in their colleges. Interviews were conducted by telephone or video and lasted between
forty-five to sixty minutes in duration. Each interview participant answered the semi-structured questions that embedded questions regarding elements of guided pathways in the interviewee’s college. Probing and follow-up questions were also asked to gather additional information (Appendix A). Interviews were recorded with participants’ permission.

**Data Analysis**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the main instrument of the data collection (Creswell, 2012). Researchers can create a picture from the pieces of data gathered (Patton, 2015). Through interviews, the researcher gleaned information on the experiences of California community college counselors who were employed with colleges that have implemented guided pathways in their institutions. The researcher created and asked semi-structured questions to gather counselor perceptions on important elements of guided pathways that contribute to student success as well as the challenges of guided pathways. The interviews were recorded with permission.

**Identifying Themes and Coding**

The qualitative data were collected, transcribed, and analyzed. First, the researcher read through each artifact locating initial themes. Once the interviews were conducted, the researcher had the audio recordings transcribed. A formal coding process followed transcription. The coding process for this study began with an initial review of the transcriptions to identify themes (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010). As themes emerged, the researcher created codes to identify similar perspectives and ideas.

The process of analysis involves reviewing the data and deriving themes from the data (McMillan, Schumacher, & Pearson, 2010; Patton, 2015). Patton (2015) suggested
using computers, or specialized software, that can assist researchers in finding patterns in the data. The transcripts and artifacts were uploaded into NVivo, the software used to organize the data in this study. This software allowed ease of the creation of common themes that answered the research questions.

**Limitations**

Though the researcher utilized strategies to confirm validity and reliability, the study still contained limitations. Limitations are weaknesses in a study that are out of the researcher’s control (Simon, 2011). There are limitations in all research designs. Limitations for this particular study include the small size of twelve interviewees. This sample size was not representative of the larger population. A small sample size prohibits generalizability of the findings (Patton, 2015). Therefore, the results may not be generalized to all community college counselors (Creswell, 2012).

In qualitative research, the researcher as instrument poses a limitation since the researcher can potentially influence the data. This researcher also acknowledged bringing a potential bias as the researcher is a counselor at a California community college that is currently at the beginning stages of implementing guided pathways. Thus, this study was subject to the researcher having bias that could have filtered data (Patton, 2015). The researcher used skills such as building rapport and active listening to help mitigate this bias (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015).

Another limitation was time. The study was limited to one-hour interviews, possibly limiting the depth of the interviews. Additionally, this study was conducted over the course of a few months and is merely a snapshot in time (Simon, 2011).
Lastly, the truthfulness and accuracy of the counselors’ knowledge and assessment of their colleges’ guided pathway elements limited the study. In some cases, study participants might be hesitant to provide accurate information in response to the interview questions in the event their superiors will review their responses. This can occur even when a confidentiality agreement is rendered.

**Summary**

This study is one of the first to explore preliminary feedback from counselors on their unique perspectives on the impact of guided pathways. This qualitative multicase study was to describe what California community college counselors identify as important elements of guided pathways that increase student success. Additionally, this study explored what the counselors described as the challenges of guided pathways. Lastly, the study identified counselors’ recommendations for improving guided pathways to increase student success.

Chapter III reviewed the methodology and procedures of this study. The purpose statement and research questions of the study were reiterated. Next, the research design was presented along with the population and sample for the study. The data collection and analysis procedures were reviewed. Lastly, the limitations were explained. Chapter IV explains the research findings, data collection and results.
CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

Overview

Chapter I began with an introduction to the study consisting of the background, statement of the problem, significance and purpose of the study, research questions, definitions of terms, and delimitations of the study. Chapter II reviewed the existing related literature on guided pathways frameworks. Chapter III presented the methodology and procedures germane to this study. Chapter IV organizes and reports the findings from the data collected. The purpose statement, research questions, research methods, and data collection are restated. At this juncture, the researcher presents the data collected from the 12 interviews. The counselors that participated in this study shared their personal counseling experiences as it pertains to guided pathways.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multicase study was to identify what California community college counselors describe as important elements of guided pathways that increase student success. Additionally, this study will explore what California community college counselors describe the challenges of guided pathways. Lastly, this study identified California community college counselor recommendations for improving guided pathways to increase student success.

Research Questions

In this study, the researcher investigated the following questions:

1. What do California community college counselors describe as the important elements of guided pathways to increase student success?
2. What do California community college counselors describe as the challenges of guided pathways?

3. What do California community college counselors recommend for improving guided pathways to increase student success?

**Qualitative Design**

Qualitative research is an in-depth study that collects data that is then analyzed to identify trends or themes (Patten, 2012). Most qualitative data is gathered from semi-structured interviews (Patten, 2012). Qualitative research is ideal for this study as it allows the researcher to find meaning in a study topic. The goal of qualitative research is to learn (Patton, 2015). When more is known about the effective elements of guided pathways from the counselor perspective, colleges can illuminate these patterns and themes as they incorporate them into their college redesign.

**Research Methods and Data Collection**

The research design utilized was a qualitative case study. A case study research design is a qualitative approach that allows the researcher to explore a real-life case through detailed, in-depth data collection that involves methods such as interviews and artifacts. This makes it possible for the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of a subject matter (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study gathered data from interviews with counselors from California community colleges that have implemented guided pathway frameworks in their colleges.

The research design, interview questions, and data collection procedures were approved by Brandman University Institutional Review Board (BUIRB) on August 6, 2020 (Appendix H). The research participants bill of rights outlined the methods used to
ensure the confidentiality and privacy of the study participants. Research participants completed an informed consent form provided by the researcher. The researcher provided these documents to all interview participants. For the phone or video interviews, participants sent a signed copy to the researcher through email. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The researcher reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy. To protect the identity of the participants, the researcher changed the names used in the transcription. The researcher collected documents, archival records from college websites, and materials from participants, if provided, related to the implementation of guided pathways at the college for triangulation purposes.

**Population**

The population for studies can be a group of individuals that conform to specific criteria the researcher intends to study (McMillan, Schumacher, & Pearson, 2010). Creswell 2012 described a population as a group of individuals having characteristics that differentiate them from other groups. It is the group the researcher is most interested in studying (Patten, 2012). The population for this study were counselors from community colleges.

**Target Population**

A target population for a study is the entire set of individuals selected from the overall population (McMillan, Schumacher, 2010) who have characteristics that distinguish them from other groups (Creswell, 2012). McMillan and Schumacher (2010) noted that it is not feasible for a researcher to investigate the entire population for a study. Consequently, a smaller number of participants were selected, and these sampled
participants were those to whom the results were generalized. This smaller set of participants is referred to as the target population and is defined by Creswell and Guetterman (2019) as persons who meet set criteria, and importantly, are directly accessible to the researcher. The target population for this study consisted of counselors from California community colleges that have implemented guided pathways in their colleges for two or more years.

**Sample**

A sample population is defined as “the group of subjects or participants from whom the data are collected” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 129). Samples for studies are a small subgroup derived from the population (McMillan, Schumacher, & Pearson, 2010; Patten, 2012) that the researcher studies for generalizing about the target population (Creswell, 2012). Qualitative samples typically range from 1 to 40 or more interview participants (McMillan, Schumacher, & Pearson, 2010).

The sample consisted of 12 counselors from California community colleges that implemented guided pathways at their colleges. Given the time restriction, the sample size of 12 was reasonable to gain enough rich data for the research. The counselors were selected from six California Community Colleges that have been implementing guided pathways frameworks at their college for two or more years. The colleges were: Skyline College, Chaffey College, Modesto College, Fresno City College, West Hills Lemoore College and Cabrillo College. Table 1 displays the demographics of each of the community college used in the sample.
Table 1: Community College Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Minority</th>
<th>Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chaffey</td>
<td>Rancho Cucamongo</td>
<td>19,682</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Hills</td>
<td>Lemoore</td>
<td>3,976</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skyline</td>
<td>San Bruno</td>
<td>9,393</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modesto</td>
<td>Modesto</td>
<td>19,262</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabrillo</td>
<td>Aptos</td>
<td>13,594</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresno</td>
<td>Fresno</td>
<td>22,307</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Participant Demographic Information

The demographic data was gathered from the 12 interview participants who met eligibility criteria to participate to gain a deeper understanding of effective guided pathway elements look like from the counselor perspective. The researcher opted to seek diversity in the sample. Specific demographic information was collected to describe participants, including their race or ethnicity, years as a counselor, college, and gender. Interviewed were six females and six males who are counselors at California community colleges ranging between the ages of 33 to 61 with an average of age of 47 who are counselors at California community colleges. The counselors had been at their current college between 5 and 22 years with an average of 13.5 years. The participants identified as African American (one participant), Caucasian (five participants), Filipino (two participants), or Latino (four participants).
Table 2: Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>College/County</th>
<th>Years employed at college</th>
<th>Counseling Title</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 1</td>
<td>Chaffey/San Bernardino</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 2</td>
<td>West Hills Lemoore/Kings</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>CALWorks/EOPS</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 3</td>
<td>Chaffey/San Bernardino</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>DPS</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 4</td>
<td>Skyline/San Mateo</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Pathway Counselor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 5</td>
<td>Fresno/San Joaquin</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Pathway Counselor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 6</td>
<td>Modesto/Stanislaus</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 7</td>
<td>Cabrillo/Santa Cruz</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 8</td>
<td>Skyline/San Mateo</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 9</td>
<td>Fresno/San Joaquin</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Counselor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 10</td>
<td>Modesto/Stanislaus</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Embedded Counselor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 11</td>
<td>West Hills Lemoore/Kings</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Pathway Counselor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 12</td>
<td>Cabrillo/Santa Cruz</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Field Test

Field (or pilot) tests are given to gather evidence for validity before the study is done (McMillan, Schumacher, & Pearson, 2010). Conducting a pilot test can serve as a way to enhance the trustworthiness of the data (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010). The interview questions were given to a fellow researcher and student of Brandman University who was asked to review them for understanding, context regarding the research questions, and make suggestions for change to the researcher. Before conducting interviews, a field test for this study was given to a fellow researcher.
knowledgeable in qualitative methods. This fellow researcher observed the researcher interviewing a volunteer who met the study criteria but was not included in the study. The volunteer was a full-time counselor from a California community college who has some experience with guided pathways. The volunteer and fellow researcher provided feedback on the questions asked (Appendix C) and the behavior of the researcher. The researcher amended the questions accordingly based on the feedback. This study also utilized experts to establish the content of validity of the study. The experts checked the interview questions to ensure the questions were consistent with the purpose of the study.

**Intercoder Reliability**

A measure for reliability is confirming the consistency of the interview questions. This can be a process of cross-checking data codes using multiple researchers (Creswell, 2015). A fellow researcher of Brandman University, familiar with the coding process, assisted with coding some of the data from the transcripts independent of the researcher. The researcher also used the NVivo software to organize themes from the data. The results from the independent coder were compared to the researchers results. When any discrepancies were located, the researchers convened to determine the final codes to ensure researcher bias did not impact the final results (Patton, 2002).

**Presentation and Analysis of Data**

The researcher collected and analyzed data from the 12 participants in an attempt to gather their lived experiences as counselors at California community colleges that have implemented guided pathways at their colleges for two years or more. Each counselor interview became a case study. The case study allows readers to understand the case as an individual, detailed story (Patton, 2015). Data was collected and analyzed for
important elements of guided pathways that increase student success as well as challenges and recommendations. The researcher conducted three phone and nine video interviews with semi-structured, open-ended questions guided by the artifacts and literature review. The interviews were recorded with permission.

Data collection began August 12, 2020 and ended September 11, 2020. Once the interviews were completed, the researcher revisited the research questions to set the stage for analysis. Qualitative analysis requires a deep dive into the data (Patton, 2015). The researcher analyzed the findings based around the research questions and the four pillars of guided pathways. During the qualitative analysis, the researcher noted and recorded patterns and themes as they emerged while remaining mindful of predispositions or biases.

The researcher reviewed the transcripts several times and took copious notes in attempt to represent the data fairly and accurately. The researcher did her own interview transcriptions and to deepen analysis, utilized the transcription software, NVivo, a tool to assist in organizing the data. Several themes were identified and explored below.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

**Research Question 1: What do California community college counselors describe as the important elements of guided pathways to increase student success?**

**Describe Guided Pathways**

The first interview question asked counselor participants to describe guided pathways in their own words. Many of the participants defined guided pathways as a “reform” or “redesign” of their college that provides structured “guidance,” “roadmaps” and/or “student supports” to help “streamline” the path for students to “completion.”
This is consistent with definitions the researcher found in the literature. A guided pathway is “a highly structured, coherent educational experience that is built around and through an area of study” (AACC, 2014). The premise of guided pathways is to provide a simple, holistic support system to students as they progress through college (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Van Campen, Sowers, & Strother, 2013).

Counselor 1: It’s a redesign of the way services are provided to community college students from instruction to student services to guide them through to completion.

Counselor 2: It’s a reform to help students earn their college credits in a framework in a reasonable timeline.

Counselor 3: Pathways or a framework that we used as an institution so students can easily understand their major and how to access services through our educational system.

Counselor 8: Giving students a roadmap to follow in order to reduce unnecessary courses.

Counselor 10: From the student perspective, they will have a plan all mapped out for them. From the faculty member’s the perspective, it is working more as a team on campus. We’re better able to serve our students.

Counselor 11: A campus-wide structure that’s physical and virtual, that helps students navigate their college experience, and have a seamless process toward the completion of their educational goal.

Counselor 4: Guided pathways is an integration of student services and instructional support.
Counselor 8: It’s a framework to streamline things for students in a holistic approach to un-muddy the waters a little for incoming students.

Counselor 9: How we are going to move students through college to be successful by implementing different ways to nudge students and use educational planning to make sure students stay on their path.

Counselor 7: I see it as trying to systematize a clean way for students to enter into and work their way through to graduation. Minimizing the confusions, and the choices, and trying to lay out a clear path for them.

Counselor 12: It really lends to kind of our learning communities. When you’re talking about getting on in the past first-year experience, having nonintrusive inviting, staying on the path, making sure they are connected with resources, or really looking at our programs to make sure they are on the right path.

**Important Elements of Guided Pathways**

The participants recounted what they believed to be important elements of guided pathways. The researcher coded emergent themes from the data into six primary themes from the counselor participant responses. The six major themes are: (1) provide student supports or wraparound services, (2) have strong communication with students, (3) provide specialized or embedded counseling, (4) offer communities, (5) offer clear options, and (6) use a student-centered approach. The six themes identified as important elements of guided pathways during this study are presented in Table 3.
Table 3: Important Elements of Guided Pathways

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide student supports or wraparound services</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have strong communication with students</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide specialized or embedded counseling</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer communities</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer clear options</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use a student centered approach</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme 1: Provide Student Supports or Wraparound Services.** The first theme that occurred in the counselor interviews was the importance of student supports or wraparound services. This theme was reported with a frequency of 66. Not only offering accessible student services but knowing when and where to send students when needed. These services might include, but are not limited to, transfer and career centers, financial aid, and having approachable faculty.

Counselor 1: I would say that, for me, the most important thing was to have the structures in place and really redesigning the way we provide those services that support the instruction for students. Really refining those resources. I think its really about having those resources available that we can quickly reference with students that even faculty could use as part of their…you know…when they are taking their intro to business class or intro to psych classes, they are like, hey, you know what this is? If you are a psychology major, this is kind of what you are going to do. And that they support us in that work because, again, we cannot do it all and not everybody’s going to come in and meet with their counselor. So it’s really about engaging, you know, that we have the resources in place, really good, solid resources. Having those resources easily accessible.
Counselor 11: Just having the support services in place that are going to be able to reach out to individual students for whatever needs they have, whether it’s a financial need, academic needs in terms of tutoring, or additional support services.

Counselor 3: …[W]hen we are looking at that equity approach, I think that is a really strong component of that, having a holistic view of students and having those wraparound services that can really help.

Counselor 12: We are making sure they are connected to support resources that we have then connected to student services, but also the instructional faculty.

**Theme 2: Have Strong Communication with Students.** Counselors shared that connections with students are imperative for student success. The theme of communication was supported by 4 of 12 counselors and had a frequency of 30. Communication could be the student being informed of who their counselor is and how to contact the counselor, the counselor taking the time let students know their options, as well as counselors communicating with faculty about student progress.

Counselor 1: Having conversations with students so they know what their options are and understand the program to help keep them on the path.

Counselor 5: Students love it. They know to contact me and only me, and get direct answers they need.

Counselor 10: Having a counselor that communicates with faculty and faculty members that communicate with counselors. We can better serve students because they have better connections and good communication.

Counselor 11: Having strong collaboration and communication between counseling and faculty.
Theme 3: Provide Specialized or Embedded Counseling. The next theme uncovered was the use of specialized or embedded counselors. Previous literature supports that guided pathways are often modeled after learning communities that typically provide specialized or embedded counselors.

The literature states students have unanimously agreed selecting courses can be confusing, they are unsure of what student services they need and which are available to them (if they did locate services, it was three to four semesters in), prefer to see the same counselor, and would like to feel a part of a community (Dager et al., 2017). Previous literature asserts about half of community college students are not aware academic counseling is available to them (Anderson, 2019). Many students speak about rushed counseling sessions (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Acree, 1998; Pongracz, 2016; Fink & Columbia University, 2017; Ramos, 2013), and seeing multiple counselors (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). Unfortunately, many students are simply wandering through college with little guidance (Symonds, 2015). With specialized or embedded counselors as an element of guided pathways, students are getting a more personalized and holistic experience.

Counselor 5: I started initially as an embedded counselor, and eight years of my career have been embedded. So what I am advocating for is specialized counseling and that really has been pivotal for my students. They love it. They know to contact me and only me, and they get direct answers that they need. I work with faculty counselors, transfer institutions, and the faculty on campus. So I think having that connection with students, and they know that I am talking to their faculty leads, and I am talking to the
transferring institution. It really makes them feel like they are getting the correct information needed in order for them to graduate and transfer.

Counselor 10: As a counselor, I would say I now am embedded, and I am going to be able to serve faculty and students better because I have a connection and good communication. And again, I’m part of a team that’s going to help these students succeed. It’s a team approach. You have a counselor that’s familiar with the program. You have a counselor that’s communicating with faculty. You have faculty members that are communicating with counselors, and the students are surrounded with a success team. And we also have a student success specialist in our area. So they are surrounded with the success team that’s going to make sure they succeed. So students in our area do not fall through the cracks. But, you know, I was asked early on [to be an embedded counselor], and there was a counselor that did it before me. You know, when they asked me to come over and be part of the team, I am like ‘Sure!’ because I know it works.

Counselor 4: Embedded counseling. The high school on-ramping program is led by counseling faculty and developed by counselors. So, I mean, that is a key component of the meta majors and explorer program…that’s counselor developed. Counselors are the most important.

Counselor 7: Our counseling was really at the forefront of guided pathways. Counselors just kind of immediately synthesized all of this and created program maps. It’s one of many things that have really helped forge this better bond between student services. The counseling role is definitely important. We get them set up with counseling appointments. We also do a one unit counseling course and offer guidance.
Theme 4: Offer Communities. Another theme that occurred in the counselor interviews was the importance of having communities. Literature supports that guided pathways are often modeled after learning communities. Many learning communities have a dedicated counselor. Learning communities are known to lead to higher retention rates (Jedele, 2007) and create a sense of belongingness for students.

Counselor 1: Another thing we were able to do is organize all those maps into communities. So now, the student can identify a learning or an academic community. So if, for instance, the student didn’t want to be a nurse, how can we use those other courses that you have already earned to keep you on a path that would be the same type of career field? It’s easy to do that now because you have it all designed out. I think that’s the most effective element and the most important element is, I think, that this whole thing has done is really bring our community together.

Counselor 3: So [removed] College did a really good job of putting everything into these sort of academic career communities. And it’s really good because there is like if you like this, then you probably would like a major in this area. And if you like this, you probably like a major in that area.

Counselor 11: Every counselor that’s part of these teams is the lead counselor for these students.

Theme 5: Offer Clear Options. Counselors expressed that offering students options is an important or effective elements of guided pathways. This is not to be confused with offering many options. In the guided pathways framework, options are organized. A few counselors recounted the importance of making students aware of their
options and which options would be most suitable for them based on their interests and goals.

Counselor 1: Having conversations with students so they know what their options are and understand the program to help keep them on the path.

Counselor 8: Let them know what their choices are.

**Theme 6: Use a Student Centered Approach.** Counselors identified being student centered as of primary importance or an effective element of guided pathways. Being student centered can include having a case-management approach, counseling, contacting students, gaining their trust, offering program maps, and ensuring students are learning.

This theme aligns with Honolulu Community College, which is mentioned in the literature review. It is a small school in Hawaii that restructured its design years ago. A student centered philosophy has helped the college improve student success through use of degree planning, auditing, and registration (Mullins Veney & Sugimoto, 2017).

Counselor 6: We are student centered, use an early-alert system, and have a case-management approach. We use intrusive counseling; calling and emailing students and helping students get what they need. We are building trust with students.

Counselor 2: I think program maps help students finish in two years. This filled in equity gaps and kept whole process student centered. Be student centered. It’s all about students learning and achievement.

Counselor 3: Having a student centered approach is crucial.
Four Pillars of Guided Pathways

Following the general question pertaining to guided pathways, the researcher then inquired about each of the pillars of guided pathways. The principles of guided pathways are delineated in four pillars: clarify the path, enter the path, stay on the path, and ensure students are learning (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015).

Clarify the Path. The counselors were asked to share their experiences of engaging their students in guided pathways pillar number one, which is clarify the path. Coding of counselor interviews resulted into four primary themes: (1) provide high school outreach and assist with early decision-making, (2) use a career focus, (3) provide program maps, and (4) create meta majors. Table 4 presents these four themes.

Table 4: Guided Pathways Pillar Number One: Clarify the Path

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide high school outreach and assist with early decision-making</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use a career focus</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide program maps</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create meta majors</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Theme 1: Provide High School Outreach and Assist with Early Decision-Making. The most prominent theme that emerged from the data was the importance of encouraging students to make decisions early on and the importance of high school outreach. This theme occurred with a frequency of 59. Several of the colleges offer some kind of outreach to local feeder high schools. There are designated classified staff and/or counselors who conduct this work. During this high school outreach, staff and counselors may introduce students to the college various pathways, help students apply to
the college, select a major or pathway, determine their correct math and English, offer financial aid assistance, and even do educational planning.

Counselor 2: On our campus, we really just looked at how we are on boarding our students and especially how we are helping them make an informed educational decision early on.

Counselor 5: So the way we do it, and it’s very unique, from what I understand, because we start off with high school. So we as an institution have a really good relationship with our feeder high schools. And we are actually out there. I go out to the high schools. A lot of our counselors go out to the high schools. And that’s their first initial kind of introduction to us as a college and to possible majors. So it really is I am going out there having that conversation with students, understanding why picking a major before they even get onto campus is important. So for us, we have 100 percent of our students choosing a major before they even step foot on campus, and they have the information readily available to them to understand what that major is. So for us, it’s really a community outreach, community events, and educating our students prior to their arrival at [removed] College.

Counselor 11: So for pillar number one, we have counselors and advisors and for this one, the advisors are the ones that have more of a direct contact with our incoming students, and particularly for the high school students that are getting ready to go to college or university. So we start…they start doing outreach the year before by going out to our local high schools, introducing them to the various pathways that we have. And up until this year, they were providing a one-year plan for these students. We are actually doing comprehensive plans for each individual student. Which we have on our website,
we have the pathways and then we have a link to the catalog, which shows like a generic plan for each major for a total of four semesters.

Our financial aid department is also going out to the high schools, making sure that students submit their FAFSA or their dream application. That way when they are getting ready to start that second pillar, hopefully a lot of those things have been done already, and the student is not going to experience additional hurdles that they’re going to have to navigate through during their first week of school. We have the pathways on the website link to the catalog. Our advisors are going out to the high schools to identify specific math and English placement to determine how these pathways might be a little bit different for each student. Some lead full-time faculty go out to a couple of our local high schools to do presentations regarding their majors.

Counselor 4: So the first component is on-ramp processes that help students into their college experiences, and the way that we have implemented that, or what that looks like in practice, we have our high school liaison program where we coordinate with all of our local feeder high schools and continuation/alternative high schools. And we go out there, and we complete our whole enrollment process. So that includes helping students fill out the application, helping them with the financial aid application, conducting an orientation in person. And then we would have hour-long counseling appointments on-site at the high school and then help with registration. So, that’s one of the processes that we’ve developed to help with that on ramping, that sort of transition.

Counselor 7: We try to front load as much…more of the career pathways thing where we are having them do some assessments early on so that they can kind of get a better sense as to where they are headed academically.
Counselor 12: We have to get them involved early on in order to make the other pillars work great. So we have to make sure that during orientation and first year experience, we’re doing all of that career focus at the front and not at the back end, that we are making sure they are connected to support resources, and that we have then connected to student services and also the instructional faculty. We totally redid our orientation, and we really revamped our welcome. It’s just a day where students learn about all the support resources. It’s basically a mini version of what a university orientation would be to have access to counselors, they go on a tour, they are able to get their I.D. card, and all of those things. We have a collaboration with our county high school counselors that we meet with monthly, really getting their feedback, introducing guided pathways to them so that they could also start that conversation, and help streamline.

**Theme 2: Use a Career Focus.** Several counselors participating in this study noted the importance of being career focused. Many of them commented on the need for students to choose a major early, that is, a major that interests them, that aligns with their skills and abilities, and that leads to a career at some point. Deciding on which major to choose is done through counseling sessions, career courses, and/or career services available to students, and should be done early on (even in high school) in the students college career rather than later.

This aligns with the literature review. An excellent example of early on career focus is the dual enrollment program Get Focused Stay Focused (GFSF), mentioned in chapter II. The GFSF model began in Santa Barbara, California, and is a comprehensive
classroom-based curriculum for ninth graders. Students learn who they are, what they want, and how to get it in the yearlong course.

Counselor 2: We need to make sure we have them in the right major, and that it’s not just about the major, that it’s really something that’s going to prepare them for a career. What kind of jobs can students really get with these programs? So that was kind of one of the first things and really looking at how do we partner more with our high schools to really work more intentionally with these students and to align the career activities that they are doing in high school and tapping into that and supporting that work and adding more to it. Just ensuring that they’ve made the right decision in terms of the majors that they are pursuing. That it’s really going to prepare them for that career that they want to go into.

Counselor 1: We also look at careers that line up with our pathways, so that about their interests, their personal situation, then I can work together with the student to make a decision. Once that decision is made, the path is pretty much clarified.

Counselor 8: When the data actually shows a large number of students are truly undecided and undeclared. So, the data shows students earning close to 100 units when they really need 60, and they come from anywhere between 80 to 85. As a counselor, I am setting very specific benchmarks. And those benchmarks are just discover. Discover who you truly are. What your skills and values. And then moving into using those personality traits to begin to explore the different possibilities and then eventually having choices. And when you have different choices, after you have done the exploration, then you can decide what is the best pathway for you. And then eventually that would lead
into planning on doing a comprehensive educational plan to get them in, get them through, and get them to graduate on time.

Counselor 10: That’s part of what we have done to define the path. Of course, we have a career awareness classes. And the career center services and things like that to help students who are undecided and define their major. But yes, they enter the pathway. We…if you go to our website…you will able to see how they have broken down those high schools. This is a real key to what we do, and I would recommend every school do the same thing because it works. And that you require students to take a class similar to what we do in the class that is called in our case…is called Introduction to [program removed] Careers. So the students take the one-unit class and as part of the requirement to pass the class, they have to meet with me as a counselor to do a full comprehensive educational plan. So nobody gets away. Unless they want to fail it without meeting with me and seeing them, you know, an individual plan is mapped out for them. And then throughout the semesters this is a big part of students completing successfully. We have one of the highest completion rates. That is because we have faculty that are fully engaged. And, you know, it’s a family. So they care for students like they were their own kids. Every division, every major should have a career class like that.

Counselor 3: I say to student “Let’s look at the different academic and career communities. What do you like doing? Tell me about yourself.” Right? And we start with those conversations. But again, they have come from a system where everything was decided for them. So I would say about 60 to 70 percent of the time the student does not know. And its like, look, I’m here to help you, but I need some back and forth here. Like, do you like, what do you like to do? Do you like to work in groups? Do you like to
work by yourself, do you like to write, do you like to draw, what are you passionate about? What do you like doing?

Counselor 7: First of all, the ability and the emphasis on thinking long term and thinking career and thinking how an educational path will play into that career, it gives them confidence.

Counselor 12: We are doing the career focus at the front and not at the back end. Then there is a team going with more of the career elements, contextualizing our first year of planning for success class and then really putting that career exploration at the beginning. So really taking that assessment because you want them to have other career exploration classes, but really making that information available. When they set foot at [college], they have a better idea of their interests and abilities, and then move to different careers.

**Theme 3: Provide Program Maps.** Program maps were another reoccurring theme with a frequency of 18. It was repeated several times in the interviews that simply having the visual of a roadmap to show students was effective. The program maps contain pertinent information such as the courses students need to take for a specific pathway, including classes for their major and classes for general education, the order they should take them, and information on support services. A few of the colleges have these program maps available on their websites. Many of these maps came to fruition during meetings with faculty and counselors.

Counselor 2: Of course, alongside all that was also just creating program maps.

Counselor 1: Having our program map is something visual that I can, as a counselor, show a student where to find this information and how to link this information.
Counselor 11: So we start they start doing outreach the year before by going out to our local high schools, introducing them to the various pathways that we have. And up until this year, they were providing a one-year plan for these students. We are actually doing comprehensive plans for each individual student. Which we on our website…we have the pathways, and then we have a link to the catalog, which shows a generic plan for each major for a total of four semesters. Our advisors are going out to the high schools to identify specific math and English placement to determine how these pathways might be a little bit different for each student.

Counselor 3: It was really helpful to showcase to students just visually…here are some areas that you could get into based on the information that you’re giving me. And so I think that was really good. I tell them “Take this class this semester, this one this semester, and this one this semester.” Before we had to plug everything into a plan.

Counselor 7: Giving them some type of tangible roadmap, although it’s a suggested road map, giving them something tangible to go on up front in terms of a list of kind of can’t-go-wrong courses and a basic layout of how they could go about that particular major. Not that it’s all set in stone, but just giving them something to be going on. The maps are certainly a part of that entry path.

Counselor 12: Making program maps for all of our different programs. Instructional faculty and counselors got together and looked at the requirements and balancing their course load.

**Theme 4: Create Meta Majors.** Half of the counselors stated their college has clustered together their academic areas of study or majors into *meta majors, pathways, learning areas, schools, career academic pathways,* or *academic career communities.*
The researcher noted this was the most common element of pillar number one that most counselors implement at their colleges.

The use of meta majors was also discovered in the literature review. To offer a narrower set of programs, majors, or areas of study is widely referred to as meta majors (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Skaff, 2018; Ashby, 2018; Jenkins, Lahr, Fink, & Ganga, 2018; Fink, 2017). While this approach could be criticized for taking away students’ freedom to roam (exploring their options), many students will benefit from a highly prescribed set of courses since they are more likely to stay on track (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). Clear pathways for students can leave little room for them to deviate (Karp, 2013). Students may find it is easier to navigate their program requirements (Van et al., 2016).

Counselor 10: We created nine different schools, so we have a school of agriculture, for example, which includes all of the majors, and the other areas are divided by schools as well.

Counselor 3: [removed] College did a really good job of putting everything into these sort of academic career communities.

Counselor 4: We developed our kind of two pathways for students. They either going to go into a meta major if they know kind of what their major is coming in, or they go into the explorers program, where they work with career counselors and other support to try to help them discover their major or interests early on so that they can start taking courses towards their degree or transfer, whatever their educational goal is. And the way that we have determined which path students should go, either meta majors or explorers, is through my majors. So it’s an online assessment that we have built.
Counselor 7: We call them career academic pathways referred to as our CAPS now. One of the big tangible outcomes was the [degree program] map, and that was a big, big deal. We have got a map for every one of our degree programs, for our associate for transfer degrees, for our nontransferable occupational degrees, and for many of our certificates of achievement. Those are presented to students. If you looked around on our website at all, you get to the counseling page that shows programs broken down into certificates and degrees by the different CAPS.

Enter the Path. The principles of guided pathways are delineated in four pillars (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). The counselors were asked to share their experiences of engaging their students in guided pathways pillar number two, which is enter the path. The researcher coded emergent themes from the data into three primary themes from the counselor participant responses. The three major themes are: (1) importance of counselors, (2) have strong faculty engagement, and (3) provide accessible resources. Table 5 represents the three themes of pillar number two: enter the path.

Table 5: Guided Pathways Pillar Two: Enter the Path

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of counselors</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have strong faculty engagement</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide accessible resources</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
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</tbody>
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Theme 1: Importance of Counselors. Counselors were another commonly discussed theme that emerged in all of the interviews for pillar number two: enter the path at a frequency of 198. Counselors stated their services are important in this pillar as they offer support, rapport, checkpoints, educational planning, completing the correct forms, transfer assistance, and referrals.
Counselor 2: Counselor focused. Once someone has decided on a pathway, depending again on their personal situation, we start selecting courses, right? So, we have the academic maps with the first and second semester recommended courses from faculty that students would do well in entry level without any skill, so we kinda work together. Then I have them get registered and create rapport.

Counselor 11: Counselors meeting one-on-one with students. For contacting students, we use a platform as a way for us to communicate with faculty regarding early alerts for students. I can send the students a nudge or send a tutoring schedule, etc.

Counselor 12: After their orientation (students cannot apply for classes until orientation is completed) they get a confirmation email to meet with a counselor to create a student educational plan.

Counselor 10: Counselors that take the time to work individually with students and not do group educational planning, which does not work.

Counselor 7: The importance of counseling in this pillar. We tried group meetings with some of the science departments and having some counselors there as a group coming up with these maps. Well, that was just unwieldy because the academic departments have no idea about university admission requirements, the subtleties and the differences between, you see, in case you transfer, but counselors do.

Counselor 12: Access to counselors. Making sure that they’re hitting the milestones that they need to be, so making sure they are meeting with the counselor every semester, making sure they are aware of transfer applications, and dates and deadlines when appropriate.
**Theme 2: Have Strong Faculty Engagement.** Another theme that occurred was faculty engagement. This was referenced 109 times during the counselor interviews. In order for colleges to offer program maps of their majors, faculty need to approve that these maps include the correct courses for their majors. Faculty may be involved to confirm that the pathways lead to careers. Some faculty even do outreach to prospective students making them aware of the program, requirements, and potential careers.

Counselor 5: The engagement with entering the path is really is focused on faculty. That’s where the faculty piece comes in, engaging with their faculty and their majors, so that they understand the career path, and so that the student is making the right selection within their…within our pathways and understanding what will this degree do. How am I going to get employed at the end of the day? So that’s a big component of what we’re working on now. And that’s actually one of our goals for this year—connecting our students with faculty members so that they understand that this is the right measure for them.

Counselor 10: Faculty do outreach. Our faculty are out there probably every weekend, if you look at their calendar, there is not a day in the year that they are not doing something, some kind of activity with students. So, whether its competitive teams or are going to conferences or, you know, participating in something, they are spreading the word. So, faculty are out there doing outreach everywhere they go. You have faculty members that are communicating with counselors, and the students are surrounded with a success team. The whole team works together to get students plugged in and apply. We have community college interns that live on campus.
This is a big part of students completing successfully and why we have one of the highest completion rates. That is because we have faculty that are fully engaged. And, you know, it’s a family. So, they care for students like they were their own kids.

And, I just do not see that across campus and all divisions. So, they take a real interest in students. They have an open-door policy. So, it’s really…it’s really about the team, the people that are on the team and their philosophy about what they are there for. And they have their heart. Their hearts are for students and the success of students. The faculty, one of the things that they do is…the students are required to go out and meet every faculty member of the division, and those students, they get to know the students, even their families sometimes.

Counselor 3: Having regular effective communications with instructors.

Counselor 12: This has really brought instructional faculty and student services together in the same room to talk about our obstacles. How we can best serve the students?

**Theme 3: Provide Accessible Resources.** Some participants reported offering students resources as an important aspect of pillar number two at a frequency of 28. Counselors shared these resources include, but are not limited to, work-based learning opportunities, career and transfer centers, clubs, organizations, counseling services, and/or professionals in their field of interest. Counselors emphasized it is not only about offering the resources but ensuring students knew about the resources and how to access them.

Counselor 2: Enter the path is really about connecting students to other support resources. Once they have registered here at the college, you know, are they connected to
all the right programs? Are they connected to any special programs? Do we need to get them connected? Are there work-based learning opportunities that we can connect them to, you know, really or even student clubs and organizations like helping them get connected early on? So that way they know that there’s a support system, these other opportunities to enhance their educational experience.

Counselor 5: If they do not choose the right major, then going back and then referring to our career services so that they can then take some assessments to find out. If and what is the best choice selection that they can make and what are the options that they have?

Counselor 8: Having a career center to cover the things that students truly, truly enjoy and what they are really passionate about, that the world needs, and that you would get paid for. Doing self-discovery and understanding their personality traits and values, and then they have explored the different options and how those can be applied into a career. Encourage students to connect with people who are doing careers they are interested in. The intention is gathering information.

Counselor 10: We have a room that is just for our students to hang out in. There are computers. There are chairs in there. There are tables for them. There is a student success specialist there so many days a week, and then with embedding, the counselor in the division, I am available. I am there on walk-ins as well as appointments. So, I am there to support faculty as well as students just to stop by and then just to follow-up with. We are now able to run a list of students that are in academic probation, so with a student success specialist, they can start contacting the students and say, how are you doing this
semester? How are things going or is there anything you’re struggling with? Just follow up and find out how they’re doing.

Counselor 11: And so those additional steps could be making sure that they have a connection to our WIN center, which is the workforce internship and network center. And so, they can get connected to local employers. That’s how they can sign up for at least currently in virtual...we call them *chats*. So, this is professionals in the field providing a brief presentation and a Q&A for students to understand what the expectations are for them once they enter the workforce. And it is a way for them to get connected to someone and possibly find a job. We also know that in that second pillar, we have a conversation about what is to come in pillar number three such as application workshops for transfer, getting connected with university reps to get additional feedback from them of how to prepare themselves for that next step.

Counselor 12: I think one of the biggest things, especially for our district, is that collaboration between student services and instruction in some departments has been done really well. It is really guided policy and really just highlighted where we were during that miscommunication and has really brought instructional faculty and student services together in the same room to talk about our obstacles. How we can best serve the students?

**Stay on the Path.** The third principle of guided pathways is stay on the path. The counselors were asked to share their experiences of engaging their students with this pillar. The researcher coded emergent themes from the data into five primary themes from the counselor participant responses. The five major themes are: (1) importance of counselors, (2) provide accessible resources, (3) utilize an early-alert system, (4) identify
student milestones, and (5) have a case-management approach. Table 6 represents the five themes identified for pillar number three: stay on the path.

Table 6: *Guided Pathways Pillar Number Three: Stay on the Path*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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<tr>
<td>Importance of counselors</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide accessible resources</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Utilize an early-alert system</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify student milestones</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a case-management approach</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme 1: Importance of Counselors.** The most prevalent theme revealed once again the importance of counselors for helping students stay on the path. Counselor participants stated their services are important in this pillar as they offer support, rapport, checkpoints, educational plans, completion of the correct forms, transfer assistance, follow-up with students, and offer referrals. This pillar is where counselors’ strengths really shine.

  Counselor 2: We use a platform called Inspire for Advisers, which feeds into Canvas and includes our data platform. Retention coaches can leave notes there. This helps counselors know what to connect students to—financial aid, mental health, etc. This helps students to finish line.

  Counselor 1: Counselors staying updated on programs and tools, the more students will trust counselors. This is the time for counselors to evaluate how students are doing in the courses, are they using tutoring, talking to instructors, looking at their future semester, and further. This is where the counselors’ expertise and guidance come in. This is midpoint.
Counselor 5: Counseling, appointments, meeting with counselors every semester, checking in with them, and ensuring students meet graduation or transfer deadlines. We have an in-person orientation in the first semester. Students attend to get information and learn the importance of meeting with the counselor.

Counselor 6: We are student centered, use an early-alert system, and have a case-management approach. We use intrusive counseling, calling and emailing students, and helping students get what they need. We are building trust with students.

Counselor 8: This pillar helps students understand what their choices are and create benchmarks. Counselors help them make a plan. We use a case-management approach and track students.

Counselor 11: This pillar is follow-up meetings with students after the second semester or after the first year. It’s a progress check. How are they performing? Review any additional needed courses if articulation agreements have changed. We are making sure they stay on track and that they know what their next steps are. Helping them make the right connections.

Counselor 10: This is key to what we do. We require students to take a class that is an intro class and covers careers. To pass the class, they have to meet with a counselor to complete a comprehensive educational plan. They have an individual mapped out plan. We have an open-door policy. We have a room for students to hang out that includes computers, chairs, student-success specialists, and an embedded counselor.

Counselor 3: Counselors are looking at students from a holistic perspective, being flexible, finding out their individual needs, and using an early-alert system.
Counselor 12: This pillar is where their student success teams come in. Counselors follow up using early alerts. A pathways counselor follows up via phone calls, text, or email. We create comprehensive educational plans. We have a point system for at risk students.

Counselor 7: The counseling role is definitely important. We are heavily involved.

Counselor 4: Embedded counseling. It really has to do with having dedicated counselors throughout the way and also the kind of things…we call them our successful navigators…to help students figure out just how to navigate our really complicated system.

**Theme 2: Provide Accessible Resources.** As mentioned in pillar number two, counselors interviewed suggested availability of resources was also an important component of pillar number three: stay on the path. Participants reported offering students resources at a frequency of 28. Counselors shared that these resources include, but are not limited to, work-based learning opportunities, career and transfer centers, clubs, organizations, counseling services, and/or professionals in their field of interest. Counselors emphasized it is not only about offering the resources but ensuring students know about the resources and how to access them.

Counselor 2: It is really refining those resources. I think it is really about having those resources available that we can quickly reference with students that even faculty could use as part of their, you know, when they are taking their intro to business class or intro to psych classes, they are like, hey, you know what this is? If you are a psychology major, this is kind of what you are going to do. And that they support us in that work
because, again, we cannot do it all and not everybody is going to come in and meet with their counselor. So it’s really about engaging, you know, that we have the resources in place, really good, solid resources, and that everybody is on the same page with how we share that information with others and really to just understand how everybody is in this together, but that if a student has a concern about something, this is who they go to. Or if you have stuff about your transfer and maybe connecting to other services, then go to your counselor and meet with them, and again, for our staff to be timely about checking in with students at certain times.

Counselor 3: We’re getting all the information to them, doing a full educational plan, and referring to resources.

Counselor 11: It’s important to connect students to resources.

**Theme 3: Utilize an Early-Alert System.** The next theme that emerged was having an early-alert system. Counselors shared several different platforms and software used to monitor and track students. Leveraging technology was a reoccurring theme in the literature. Both City College of Chicago (Fink & Columbia University, 2017) and Tennessee Community Colleges (Jenkins et el, 2018) utilize technology such as early-alert systems to help track and monitor students in their colleges.

Counselor 2: They use a platform called Inspire for Advisers, which feeds into Canvas and includes data software. Retention coaches can leave notes there. This helps counselors know what to connect students to—financial aid, mental health, etc. This helps students reach the finish line.
Counselor 6: We have an early-alert system, and we have gone to more kind of a case load type of management. We use intrusive counseling. If a student is not on the path, we physically call or email students.

Counselor 8: Case-management approach, tracking students. Using technology.

Counselor 3: They are working on implementing that right now. So, CRM Advise is there, they are still doing meetings and implementations for that. So, it’s not live yet, but we are putting together the early-alert system.

Counselor 12: Counselors follow-up using an early-alert system called Starfish. A pathways counselor follows up via phone calls, text, or email.

**Theme 4: Identify Student Milestones.** One theme that emerged for pillar number three: stay on the path is helping students identifying milestones. When counselors assist students in identifying success milestones, students can recognize their progress, that they have possibly overcome challenges and are reaching their goals.

Counselor 2: As part of their pathway experience, certain things are happening. These milestones are being reached. These connections are being made.

Counselor 4: Then the third component is the intentional course sequencing, which clearly defines career and academic milestones. So, for that third component, several years ago, counseling and instructional faculty kind of worked together on degree mapping.

Counselor 1: This happens in every single session in which students meet with counselors. They identify milestones and how they are doing in courses.

**Theme 5: Use a Case-Management Approach.** The final theme that surfaced was having a case-management approach. This theme was referenced five times during
the interviews. This is parallel to the literature. Counselors can provide more intentional sessions with their students to create comprehensive educational plans (Wheeler, 2019). Students might be encouraged to see the same counselor to help establish rapport. In the past, students might have seen any available counselor, which could have resulted in the student receiving conflicting information (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015).

As this pillar suggests, to help students stay on track, counselors can monitor and track students using student tracking software. Instructional faculty can notify counselors when a student is off track. A counselor can then reach out to the student to offer support. This case-management approach is designed to meet the students where they are as opposed to waiting for students to ask for assistance, and it prevents student services from operating in isolation (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015).

Counselor 2: We have a case-management approach. We have what they consider retention coaches (including classified staff, faculty, full time and part time). They use a platform called Inspire for Advisers, which feeds into Canvas (where courses are housed) and includes data. Retention coaches can leave notes there. This helps counselors know what to connect students to—financial aid, mental health, etc. This helps students to the finish line. This case-management approach that we have deployed on our campus, which we have kind of been doing for two years, has been…it’s a big shift in how we do things. We are not in the classroom all the time with students to be able to understand what is going on. And I think that the tool that we are using for that has really helped to really close the loop on how we are serving students, getting a better picture of the student, what they are going through, so that has been a real plus.
Counselor 6: We have an early-alert system, and we have gone to more of a kind of a caseload type of management with intrusive counseling. So, if a student is not on the path, we actually physically call or email students.

Counselor 8: We help students understand what their choices are, create benchmarks, and help them plan. We have a case management approach and track students using technology. We have a design team that includes an instructional component, a counseling component, and a career component. We also have peer mentor support.

**Ensure Students Are Learning.** The fourth and final principle of guided pathways is ensuring students are learning. The counselors were asked to share their experiences of engaging their students with this pillar. Interestingly, this is the pillar that many of the counselors claimed to be less clear.

Counselor 12: To be honest with you, I feel like I am so involved with the other part of the path for sure.

Counselor 7: I think that is probably the one area where I have not seen as much real, tangible, visible work. It is just that we are also kind of wired into our everyday stuff that I do not know what is been coming out of that particular group.

Counselor 9: You know what? Interestingly enough, I do not think we have done well. We have some equity works that we have done with it. But in terms of the actual guided pathways, we actually had a guest come in, one of the instructors last week with experience from another college, kind of explaining how we are lacking on that particular pillar, how we really do not do so much for that.
Counselor 10: I am probably not the best person to talk to because when it comes to all the technical jargon that is being used out there that meets the state requirements and exceeds the state requirements because our campus does a great job with those kinds of things.

The researcher coded emergent themes from the data into four primary themes from the counselor participant responses. The four major themes were: (1) importance of counselors, (2) provide accessible resources, (3) gather student feedback and (4) use student-learning outcomes (SLOs). Table 7 represents the themes gleaned from the interviews for pillar number four: ensure students are learning.

Table 7: Guided Pathways Pillar Number Four: Ensure Students are Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of counselors</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide accessible resources</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gather student feedback</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use student-learning outcomes (SLOs)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme 1: Importance of Counselors.** The theme of counselors emerged yet again during counselor interviews on ensuring students are learning. Counselor participants stated their services are important in this pillar as they offer support, rapport, checkpoints, educational plans, completion of the correct forms, transfer assistance, follow-up with students, and offer referrals.

Counselor 2: Counselors and advisor helping students to finish line and make transition. Helping them understand which classes are relevant to their general education and majors, and connecting to many other services like career center, recommending internships, clubs, organizations.
Counselor 1: Counselor ensures they know where to find the information they need. Helping them learn how to make decisions about what they want.

Counselor 3: During counseling appointments, counselors engage them and ask them how they are doing in their classes. Any struggles? Refer to resources as needed.

Counselor 4: Embedded counseling to assist with academic support and regular communication to students.

**Theme 2: Provide Accessible Resources.** Another theme that surfaced was resources. For some counselors, to ensure students are learning means making the correct referrals, ensuring students know how to find the information they need, and finding out how students are doing in their courses. Counselors describe the theme this way:

Counselor 2: Connecting students to many other services like the career center and recommending internships clubs and organizations.

Counselor 1: Counselors ensure students know where to find the information they need.

Counselor 5: During counseling appointments, counselors engage them and ask them how they are doing in their classes. Any struggles? We refer to resources as needed.

Counselor 11: Connecting students to the workforce internship and networking center and assisting with transfer applications.

**Theme 3: Gather Student Feedback.** The next theme in this pillar that emerged at a frequency of 15 was gathering feedback from students on how they are doing in
college either through pre-testing and post-testing or asking the students directly for feedback. Having this feedback can be used to refine the pillars at the colleges.

Counselor 10: SLOs built into each course. Faculty does pre-testing and post-testing to ensure students are learning.

Counselor 11: Gathering feedback from students in terms of their journey and the pillars, and feedback on their individual experiences. This information is used to interact with future students and perfect the pillars.

Counselor 4: Getting feedback on student progress throughout their educational journey.

**Theme 4: Use Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs).** The fourth and final theme emerged when counselors were asked about pillar number four: ensure students are learning. That theme was student-learning outcomes (SLOs). SLOs are designed to show what students would be able to know, do, or demonstrate when they have completed a course (Student Learning Outcomes Oxnard College, n.d). SLOs are achievable and measurable.

Counselor 2: I have always kind of seen this one as the instructional one with learning outcomes and stuff.

Counselor 10: We have SLOs built into each course.

Counselor 9: We have SLOs and program review every four years.

Counselor 7: Our college was heavily involved in our SLOs. And our counseling department was meeting every semester to review our courses and SLOs to establish departmental SLOs, student assessments, discussing the results of those assessments, and the results of those assessments of our program plan goals.
Research Question 2: What Do California Community College Counselors Describe as the Challenges of Guided Pathways?

The counselors were asked what do California community college counselors describe as the challenges of guided pathways? The researcher coded emergent themes from the data into three primary themes from the counselor participant responses on challenges. The three major themes are: (1) lack of administrative support, (2) getting started with the process, and (3) misconceptions or outdated beliefs. Table 8 represents the challenges counselors identified.

Table 8: Challenges of Guided Pathways

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of administrative support</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting started with the process</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misconceptions or outdated beliefs</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Theme 1: Lack of Administrative Support

The most prevalent theme that arose when counselors were asked to share their experiences with the challenges of guided pathways was having administrative support with a frequency of 13. Counselors readily discussed that without solid administrative support, faculty and staff may not have a sense of where to begin and what their role is in the guided pathways endeavor. One counselor revealed their high administration turnover impeded their ability to move forward with guided pathways.

Counselor 2: I think having the administrative support, I mean, oftentimes, especially for faculty, we feel like we are getting all these directives from administration, and we are just kind of going with it.
Counselor 11: Being a part of a district is a challenge. Since other colleges are involved, it takes a while to make a decision on items. If challenges happen at our college, we could just fix it. But rather, we have to wait for the other college to respond before moving forward. It could take months. A solution to this is we recently got a local registrar at each campus. We have weekly meetings with this person about schedule, catalog, and all things campus level. Communication is a lot more straightforward. Another challenge is changes in administration. We have had a lot of new administration roles and replaced several others. This slows down the process of what needs to be done. We have to be able to move forward.

Counselor 9: There was a fear about what they would actually end up doing. We just leaped in, and it was well received. All counselors report to one dean of counseling. This helped centralize and calm fears. There was no confusion over who someone’s boss was.

Once counselors addressed the challenges they discovered with guided pathways, they were asked a follow-up question about obstacles for overcoming any challenges. Some counselor suggestions were to: “remember guided pathways are about guiding students,” “communicate well and listen to staff,” “offer paid incentives for guided pathways work,” “have a registrar at every campus,” and “be sure staff are reporting to one dean only.”

**Theme 2: Getting Started with the Process**

This theme involved the struggles with getting the whole college institution committed, involved, and redesigned. Many of the counselors interviewed agreed the initial design was a challenge because creating and implementing guided pathways was
an institution-wide effort. Where the design and implementation of the program was successful, a culture shift and cooperation among administration, faculty, and counselors, as well as availability of many resources, were essential.

Counselor 12: So, I think the biggest challenge is just making sure everyone that needs to be is at the table. So, I think one thing for us is making sure that faculty were involved and that they were committed.

Counselor 2: Having administrative support. It was scary for faculty at first to redesign. It’s important to bring all the services together and make it comprehensive.

Counselor 2: Getting started. Where do you begin? It was a whole institution effort. A good administration team is important to get the initial conversations going. You should have everyone’s support to make it work.

Counselor 8: It requires a culture shift and heavy lifting. Time, money, getting buy-in, getting people to understand guided pathways, and innovation fatigue (meaning we create, create, create, and lack the resources to implement).

Counselor 10: Getting cooperation. Getting faculty to participate. It took a year for us to get on board. A lot of work sessions, which were paid to incentivize participation. Finding committed team members who are willing to make it work. We had resistance from people.

Counselor 4: A huge cultural shift in order for this to be successful. Ask what is my role? What is within my locus of control? Am I perpetuating a system that is not working?
Theme 3: Misconceptions or Outdated Beliefs

Several counselors participating in this study noted that some faculty and staff held beliefs that posed a challenge when designing and implementing guided pathways in their colleges. A belief that emerged at a frequency of six was the notion that students should find counselors when they need one rather than counselors reaching out to students. This theory makes sense if you pull data from the literature review in this paper. It shows that student/counselor ratios can be quite high—usually over 400 to one (Solis, 2012) and as high as 800 to 1,200 students to one counselor (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Ramos, 2013).

Counselor 2: Letting go of the thought “it’s the way that it’s been done historically” if it’s not effective for students.

Counselor 5: You know, some believing that students have the right to fail. Basically, you have that whole mindset that’s old school. That students will figure it out on their own. They should know this already. And that’s just been the hardest because guided pathways is not about that. Guided pathways is about just what it said—guiding them. Also, some thinking that guided pathways is just a new trend.

Counselor 4: Another challenge is getting away from the system of students come to us.

Counselor 9: We had a very strong mindset of students need to come to us if they need help...that they need to come to us. We have several thousand students. How are we supposed to help them all? We had a pushback for embedded counselors at first. But it’s working great.
Research Question 3: What Do California Community College Counselors Recommend for Improving Guided Pathways to Increase Student Success?

The final question of the study asked counselors what do California community college counselors recommend for improving guided pathways to increase student success? Three themes were identified: (1) have strong communication, (2) involve all staff, and (3) show the data. Table 9 outlines the themes for counselor recommendations for guided pathways.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have strong communication</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involve all staff</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show the data</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme 1: Have Strong Communication**

The first theme was communication. Counselors recommended having good communication between faculty and students as well as communication between faculty at a frequency of 24.

Counselor 2: Be transparent with what students need to get started. Ensure they know the different opportunities (careers, partners with universities). Making sure they know who their team is, clubs, and organizations.

Counselor 1: Collaborating with other schools. Communicating with them. Staying open and not being afraid of trying new things.

Counselor 11: Communicate. Before redesigning, assess how things are being done in both educational and student services. Assess communication and what channels of communication are already there and which could be created to increase understanding.
of what guided pathways are. Figure out how to connect initiatives so that you are not replacing anything with something new. Maybe two committees join forces that are essentially assessing the same thing and discussing the same thing. With every topic brought up, ask how will this help the students? Have a guided pathways team dedicated to do whatever it takes to make a change.

Counselor 8: Communication is paramount, right? I think one of the biggest challenges is that this is a state initiative.

Counselor 7: The communication is a really big challenge. You will get one group working on something and not really realizing that other group needs to be a part of this particular discussion.

**Theme 2: Involve All Staff**

Another recommendation counselors brought up at a frequency of 24 was involving all staff in the design and implementation of guided pathways. Some emphasized the need to have mandatory, incentivised meetings where all voices can be heard.

Counselor 5: Involvement. Mandatory meetings where all voices are heard even those against it. If everyone has input, it becomes a group decision. Hear all sides of the situation and evaluate. Maybe your concern needs to just be reframed.

Counselor 1: Our biggest strength was our administrative team looped in to full-time faculty and reassigned them to go to pathways project. The most important thing this has done is really bring our community together. Counselors, faculty, instructional support, and student support curriculum all came together.
Counselor 4: We brainstormed for one year and then implemented a design team that was a larger body of different groups on campus. We discussed how to carry out implementing pathways.

Counselor 2: Make sure faculty and staff know what the role is and how they are contributing. Understand we’re all in this together.

Counselor 12: I think really the collaboration with student services and instruction is what is going to make this work. So, breaking down those barriers and making sure that everyone is at the same table to do what is best for their students I think is most important.

**Theme 3: Show the Data**

The counselors expressed the importance of showing the data as a recommendation with a frequency of 20. Counselors shared their thoughts on showing the data as a recommendation to other colleges when moving forward toward designing and implementing guided pathways in their colleges.

Counselor 2: Our district research office has created amazing dashboards to help track student numbers. This helps with targets, goals, and gives us something to work toward. Data is really important and should be the driving force. Identify where the equity gaps are and help leverage how we focus our work on campus.

Counselor 1: Data. Data is really important. I think that has to be at the table. You really understand where you are going with this and what it is you are trying to implement. You have to have data so that could take time to build surveys from the students. And when you are building the surveys, really asking the most important question you want to know. You know, I have seen surveys that are not really reaching
what we want to know. You know down to that fundamental research. I think that is really important.

Counselor 4: Start with data. Know retention rates how many students are pursuing any degrees, and how long it takes to earn a degree. We had something called design co-leads that included a counselor, four instructional faculty, and two deans. We brainstormed for one year and then implemented that design team, which was a larger body of different groups on campus. We discussed how to carry out implementing go to pathways.

Counselor 5: Show data. Show what the numbers are.

**Additional Recommendations for Colleges**

During the 12 interviews, counselor participants were asked to share anything else pertinent to guided pathways. A few of the counselors had some additional information to add about guided pathways as their interviews were concluding.

Counselor 2: Bridge this connection between educational services and student services. It is a work in progress. Be student centered. It is all about students learning and achievement. Our case-management approach has really helped students. Embed everything.

Counselor 5: Integrate guided pathways in everything you do. Restructure governance. Faculty got excited when we made it relatable to them. For example, we went to faculty and criminology, and let them know students have stopped earning certificates. They felt their job was on the line. So, to make something work, they adjusted their programs. Show data. This is what the numbers are. We want an
institution where nobody is left behind. Let us align what we are doing with our programs and our faculty. It is a holistic approach.

Counselor 3: Have something to show faculty. Say here is how we can make things easier, here is how we can make things better rather than using the approach of we are gonna do it like this.

Counselor 6: Hire more faculty of color. Hire administrators of color. Discuss pedagogy. Find out what works best on your campus and develop a model from where your students are. Hire talented people, not political people.

Counselor 1: Stay updated and look at other models out there. Keep in mind the type of resources they have and the student population they have.

Counselor 9: There is a lot of planning and a lot of buy-in that needs to happen. Counselors need to be in the equation. Accept things will not be clean at first. If you never make the changes or never try, you are never going to know. You are not going to grow.

**Best Practices**

Counselors were asked if they or their colleges used any models or frameworks of best practices when designing their guided pathways. Many counselors shared that their colleges utilized City University of New York (CUNY) as a model of best practices. One counselor stated that one of their college directors had taken a sabbatical to visit CUNY to get a deeper sense of how the college in New York operates. Other colleges that were mentioned were community colleges in California (Pasadena City College, Mt. San Antonio College, Bakersfield College, and LA Trade Technical College), and the Texas Community College system.
Summary of the Findings

Chapter IV provided a detailed review of the purpose of the study, the research questions, methodology, data collection, population, and sample. A presentation and analysis of the findings collected from the data, including 12 interview participants with supporting evidence from the artifact review. In pursuit of better understanding of counselor perspective on guided pathways, this qualitative multicase study was designed to determine what California community college counselors describe as important elements of guided pathways that increase student success. Additionally, this study explored how counselors describe the challenges of guided pathways. Lastly, this study identified counselor recommendations for improving guided pathways to increase student success. Twenty-eight themes emerged from the artifacts and data regarding the counselors lived experiences of guided pathways as well as the challenges and recommendations for guided pathways. Table 10 is a summary matrix of the study findings.

Table 10: Summary Matrix of the Study Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Important Elements of Guided Pathways</th>
<th>Interview Frequencies</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Artifact frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide student supports or wraparound services</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have strong communication with students</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide specialized or embedded counseling</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer communities</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer clear options</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use a student-centered approach</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Guided Pathways Pillar #1 Clarify the Path</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prove high school outreach and assist with early decision-making</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use a career focus</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide program maps</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create meta majors</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research question one covered important elements of guided pathways. The findings showed that six major themes: (1) provide student supports or wraparound services, (2) have strong communication with students, (3) provide specialized or embedded counseling, (4) offer communities, (5) offer clear options, and (6) use a student-centered approach.

Research question one also covered the four pillars of guided pathways. Coding of counselor interviews resulted into four primary themes: (1) provide high school outreach and assist with early decision-making, (2) use a career focus, (3) provide program maps, and (4) create meta majors. The researcher coded emergent themes from

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guided Pathways Pillar #2 Enter the Path</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of counselors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have strong faculty engagement</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide accessible resources</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guided Pathways Pillar #3 Stay on the Path</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of counselors</td>
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<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide accessible resources</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilize an early-alert system</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify student milestones</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use a case-management approach</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guided Pathways Pillar #4 Ensure Students Are Learning</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of counselors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provide accessible resources</td>
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<td>Gather student feedback</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use student-learning outcomes (SLOs)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
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<th>Challenges of Guided Pathways</th>
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<th>Recommendations for Guided Pathways</th>
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<td>Have strong communication</td>
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<td>Involve all staff</td>
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pillar number two: stay on the path into three primary themes: (1) importance of counselors, (2) have strong faculty engagement, and (3) provide accessible resources. The third principle of guided pathways is stay on the path. The researcher coded common themes from that data into five primary themes: (1) importance of counselors, (2) provide accessible resources, (3) utilize an early-alert system, (4) identify student milestones, and (5) have a case-management approach. Lastly, pillar number four, ensure students are learning, presented four major themes: (1) importance of counselors, (2) provide accessible resources, (3) gather student feedback, and (4) use student-learning outcomes (SLOs).

Research question two covered challenges of guided pathways from the counselors’ perspective. The three major themes were: (1) lack of administrative support, (2) getting started with the process, and (3) misconceptions or outdated beliefs.

The third and final research question of the study asked counselors about recommendations for improving guided pathways to increase student success. Three themes were identified: (1) have strong communication, (2) involve all staff, and (3) show the data.

Other recommendations counselors made were to “Bridge this connection between educational services and student services,” “Be student centered,” “Our case management approach has really helped students,” “Embed everything,” “Restructure governance,” “Have something to show faculty,” “Hire more faculty and administrators of color,” “Hire talented people, not political people,” “Stay updated and look at other models out there. Keep in mind the type of resources they have and the student population they have.” There is a lot of planning and a lot of buy-in that needs to happen.
Counselors need to be in the equation. Accept things will not be clean at first. If you never make the changes or never try, you are never going to know. You are not going to grow.”

Counselors were asked if they or their colleges used any models or frameworks of best practices when designing their guided pathways. Many counselors shared that their colleges utilized City University of New York (CUNY) as a model of best practices. Other colleges mentioned were community colleges in California (Pasadena City College, Mt. San Antonio College, Bakersfield College, LA Trade Technical College), and the Texas Community College system.

The final chapter presents a summary of the research study, including major findings, unexpected findings, and conclusions of the study. The findings and conclusions are followed by implications for action, recommendations for further research, and concluding remarks.
CHAPTER V: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

Chapter I began with an introduction to the study consisting of the background, statement of the problem, significance and purpose of the study, research questions, definitions of terms, and delimitations of the study. Chapter II reviewed the existing related literature on guided pathways frameworks. Chapter III presented the methodology and procedures germane to this study. Chapter IV organized and reported the findings from the data collected. The purpose statement, research questions, research methods, and data collection are restated. Chapter IV presented the data collected from the 12 interviews and the themes that emerged. Chapter V begins with the purpose statement and research questions and also covers the research methods and data collection. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future studies and closing remarks. Chapter V will provide answers to the problem stated in chapter I and intends to give a whole picture of the research.

As colleges design and implement guided pathways in their institutions, a changing landscape will occur for students. Consequently, this study investigated what the California community college counselor perceives as important elements of guided pathways to increase student success, what the counselor describes as challenges of guided pathways, and counselor recommendations for improving guided pathways to increase student success. Institutions can use these study results gleaned from counselors’ expertise in their design and implementation of guided pathways at their colleges to ensure that changes in the landscape for students is effective and student centered.
Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multicase study was to identify what California community college counselors describe as important elements of guided pathways that increase student success. Additionally, this study will explore what California community college counselors describe the challenges of guided pathways. Lastly, this study identified California community college counselor recommendations for improving guided pathways to increase student success.

Research Questions

The research questions that frame this study are as follows:

1. What do California community college counselors describe as the important elements of guided pathways to increase student success?

2. What do California community college counselors describe as the challenges of guided pathways?

3. What do California community college counselors recommend for improving guided pathways to increase student success?

Research Methods and Data Collection

The following points outline the methods used to gather data. The research design utilized was a qualitative case study. A case study research design is qualitative approach where the researcher explores a real-life case through detailed, in-depth data collection involving methods such as interviews. This allows for a deeper understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
This study gathered data from interviews with 12 counselors with California community colleges that have implemented guided pathway frameworks in their colleges. The researcher first secured the participation of study subjects who are counselors from California community colleges who use a guided pathways framework at their colleges. All Brandman University guidelines were followed in order to maintain the confidentiality of the participants, including Brandman University Institutional Review Board (BUIRB) approval and assurances of confidentiality. The researcher arranged phone or video interviews. Before each interview, study participants received four documents for their review: the semi-structured interview questions (Appendix A), the BUIRB Research Participants Bill of Rights (Appendix F), the Informed Consent (Appendix G), and Audio Recording Release (Appendix J). The study participants were asked to review each of these documents for their understanding of the research study being conducted. Each participant was asked to provide signed consent before the start of each interview. The researcher used an audio recording device to ensure all information shared was captured. The results of the interviews were compiled. Findings from both the interviews and the artifact review were used to provide answers to the study’s research questions.

**Population**

The population for studies can be a group of individuals that conform to specific criteria the researcher intends to study (McMillan, Schumacher, & Pearson, 2010). Creswell 2012 described a population as a group of individuals having characteristics that differentiates them from other groups. It is the group the researcher is most interested in
studying (Patten, 2012). The population for this study were counselors from community colleges that implemented guided pathways at their colleges.

**Target Population**

A target population for a study is the entire set of individuals selected from the overall population (McMillan, Schumacher, 2010) who have characteristics that distinguish them from other groups (Creswell, 2012). McMillan and Schumacher (2010) noted that it is not feasible for a researcher to investigate the entire population for a study. Consequently, a smaller number of participants was selected, and these sampled participants were those to whom the results were generalized. This smaller set of participants is referred to as the target population and is defined by Creswell and Guetterman (2019) as persons who meet set criteria, and importantly, are directly accessible to the researcher. The target population for this study consisted of counselors from California community colleges.

**Sample**

A sample population is defined as “the group of subjects or participants from whom the data are collected” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 129). Samples for studies are a small subgroup derived from the population (McMillan, Schumacher, & Pearson, 2010; Patten, 2012) that the researcher studies for generalizing about the target population (Creswell, 2012). Qualitative samples typically range from 1 to 40 or more interview participants (McMillan, Schumacher, & Pearson, 2010).

The sample consisted of 12 counselors from California community colleges that implemented guided pathways at their colleges. Given the time restriction, the sample size of 12 was reasonable to gain enough rich data for the research. The counselors were
selected from six California Community Colleges that have been implementing guided pathways frameworks at their college for two or more years. The colleges were: Skyline College, Chaffey College, Modesto College, Fresno City College, West Hills Lemoore College and Cabrillo College.

Major Findings

This section presents a summary of the major findings from chapter IV organized by research question.

Research Question 1: What Do California Community College Counselors Describe as the Important Elements of Guided Pathways to Increase Student Success?

According to the counselor participants, the six important elements of guided pathways are student supports or wraparound services, strong communication with students, specialized or embedded counseling, offering communities, clear options, and having a student-centered approach.

Key Finding 1: Student Supports or Wraparound Services. Counselors explained that it is paramount to offer students support and/or wraparound services. Not only offering accessible student services but ensuring students know when and where to get the information when needed. These services might include, but are not limited to, transfer and career centers, financial aid, clubs, organizations, mental health, food, transportation, intrusive counseling, and case management.

Key Finding 2: Strong Communication with Students. It is essential to have strong communication with students. Counselors shared that connections with students are imperative to student success. Communication could be the student being informed of who their counselor is and how to contact the counselor, the counselor taking the time
let students know their options as well as counselors communicating with faculty about student progress.

**Key Finding 3: Specialized or Embedded Counseling.** The use of specialized or embedded counselors is critical to student success and successful implementation of guided pathways. Previous literature supports that guided pathways are often modeled after learning communities that typically provide specialized or embedded counselors. The literature states students have unanimously agreed selecting courses can be confusing, they are unsure of what student services they need and which are available to them (if they did locate services, it was three to four semesters in), prefer to see the same counselor, and would like to feel a part of a community (Dager et al., 2017). Previous literature asserts about half of community college students are not aware academic counseling is available to them (Anderson, 2019). Many students speak about rushed counseling sessions (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Acree, 1998; Pongracz, 2016; Fink & Columbia University, 2017; Ramos, 2013), and seeing multiple counselors (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). Unfortunately, many students are simply wandering through college with little guidance (Symonds, 2015). With specialized or embedded counselors as an element of guided pathways, students are getting more of a personalized and holistic experience.

**Key Finding 4: Offering Communities.** The counselor interviews revealed the importance of having communities. Literature supports that guided pathways are often modeled after learning communities. Many learning communities have a dedicated counselor. Learning communities are known to lead to higher retention rates (Jedele, 2007) and create a sense of belongingness for students.
**Key Finding 5: Clear Options for Students.** Counselors expressed that offering students options is an important element of guided pathways. This is not to be confused with offering *many* options. In the guided-pathways framework, options are organized. A few counselors recounted the importance of making students aware of their options and which options would be most suitable for them based on their interests and goals.

**Key Finding 6: Student Centered Approach.** Use a student centered approach. Counselors identified being student centered as a primary element of guided pathways. Being student centered can include having a case-management approach, counseling, contacting students, gaining their trust, offering program maps, and ensuring students are learning. This aligns with Honolulu Community College, which is mentioned in the literature review. A small school in Hawaii, Honolulu Community College, restructured their design years ago. Their philosophy is student centered and student focused by helping the college improve student success (Mullins Veney & Sugimoto, 2017) through degree planning, auditing, and registration.

Student supports or wraparound services, strong communication with students, specialized or embedded counseling, communities, clear options, and a student-centered approach are vital to creating effective guided pathways in colleges.

**Key Findings for the Four Pillars:** The principles of guided pathways are delineated in four pillars (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). The counselor participants were asked about their experiences engaging with their students in each of the pillars.
**Clarify the Path**

Counselor interviews resulted in four primary themes for the first pillar (clarify the path). The themes were to provide high school outreach and assist with early decision making, use a career focus, provide program maps, and create meta majors.

**Key Finding 1.** Provide high school outreach and assist students with early decision-making. The most prominent theme that emerged from the data was the importance of encouraging students to make decisions early on and the importance of high school outreach. Several of the colleges offer some kind of outreach to local feeder high school. There are designated classified staff and/or counselors who conduct this work. During this high school outreach, staff and counselors may introduce students to the college’s various pathways, help students apply to the college, select a major or pathway, determine their correct math and English, offer financial aid assistance, and even do educational planning.

**Key Finding 2:** Several counselors participating in this study noted the importance of being career focused. Many of them commented on the need for students to choose a major early: a major that interests them, that aligns with their skills and abilities, and leads to a career at some point. Deciding on which major to choose is done through counseling sessions, career courses, and/or career services available to students and should be done early on (ideally in high school) in the student’s college career rather than later. This mirrors the literature review. An excellent illustration of early on career focus is the dual enrollment program Get Focused Stay Focused (GFSF) mentioned in chapter II. The GFSF model began in Santa Barbara, California, and is a comprehensive
classroom-based curriculum for ninth graders. Students learn who they are, what they want, and how to get it in the yearlong course.

**Key Finding 3:** Provide program maps for students. It was repeated several times in the interviews that simply having the visual of a roadmap to show students was effective. The program maps contain pertinent information such as the courses students need to take for a specific pathway, including classes for their major and classes for general education, the order in which they should take them, and information on support services. A few of the colleges have these program maps available on their websites. Many of these maps came to fruition during meetings with faculty and counselors.

**Key Finding 4:** Organize majors into larger groups or meta majors. Many of the counselors stated their college has clustered together their academic areas of study or majors into meta majors, pathways, learning areas, schools, career academic pathways, or academic career communities. The researcher noted this was the most common element of pillar number one that most counselors implement at their colleges. The use of meta majors was also discovered in the literature review. To offer a narrower set of programs, majors, or areas of study is widely referred to as offering meta majors (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Skaff, 2018; Ashby, 2018; Jenkins, Lahr, Fink, & Ganga, 2018; Fink, 2017). While this approach could be criticized for taking away students’ freedom to roam (exploring their options), many students will benefit from a highly prescribed set of courses since they are more likely to stay on track (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). Clear pathways for students can leave little room for them to deviate (Karp, 2013). Students may find it is easier to navigate their program requirements (Van et al., 2016).


Enter the Path

The counselors shared their experiences of engaging their students in guided pathways pillar number two: enter the path. The three major themes were importance of counselors, strong faculty engagement, and accessible resources.

**Key Finding 1:** The importance of counselors was another commonly discussed theme that emerged in all of the interviews. Counselors stated their services are important in this pillar as they offer support, rapport, checkpoints, educational planning, completing the correct forms, transfer assistance, and offer referrals.

**Key Finding 2:** Encourage strong faculty engagement. In order for colleges to offer program maps of their majors, faculty need to approve that these maps include the correct courses for their majors. Faculty may be involved to confirm that the pathways lead to careers. Some faculty even do outreach to prospective students, making them aware of the program, requirements, and potential careers.

**Key Finding 3:** Participants reported offering student resources as an important aspect of pillar number two. These resources include, but are not limited to, work-based learning opportunities, career and transfer centers, clubs, organizations, counseling services, and/or professionals in their field of interest. It is not only about offering the resources but ensuring students know about the resources and how to access them.

Stay on the Path

The findings from the counselor interviews show the important elements of the third principle of guided pathways: stay on the path were counselors, accessible resources, early-alert systems, identify student milestones, and have a case-management approach.
Key Finding 1: It was revealed the most prevalent theme for helping students stay on the path was the importance of counselors. Counselor participants stated their services are important in this pillar as they offer support, rapport, checkpoints, educational plans, completion of the correct forms, transfer assistance, follow-up with students, and offer referrals. This pillar is where counselors strengths really shine.

Key Finding 2: Providing accessible resources is an important component of stay on the path. These resources include, but are not limited to, work-based learning opportunities, career and transfer centers, clubs, organizations, counseling services, and/or professionals in their field of interest. Counselors emphasized it is not only about offering the resources but ensuring students know about the resources and how to access them.

Key Finding 3: Utilize an early-alert system. Counselors shared several different platforms and software used to monitor and track students. Leveraging technology was a reoccurring theme in the literature. Both City College of Chicago (Fink & Columbia University, 2017) and Tennessee Community Colleges (Jenkins et el, 2018) utilize technology such as early-alert systems to help track and monitor students in their colleges.

Key Finding 4: Another critical aspect of stay on the path is to help students identify milestones. When counselors assist students with identifying success milestones, students can recognize their progress, that they have possibly overcome challenges, and are reaching their goals. This can foster self-confidence, purpose, and create motivation.

Key Finding 5: Using a case-management approach is essential to student success. This was confirmed in the interviews and is parallel to the literature.
case-management approach, counselors can provide more intentional sessions with their students to create comprehensive educational plans (Wheeler, 2019). Students might be encouraged to see the same counselor to help establish rapport. In the past, students might have seen any available counselor, which could have resulted in the student receiving conflicting information (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). To help students stay on track as this pillar advises, counselors can monitor and track students using student-tracking software. Instructional faculty can notify counselors when a student is off track. A counselor can then reach out to the student to offer support. A case-management approach is designed to meet the students where they are as opposed to waiting for students to ask for assistance and prevents student services from operating in isolation (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015).

**Ensure Students Are Learning**

The final principle of guided pathways is ensuring students are learning. The four major themes were: importance of counselors, provide accessible resources, gather student feedback, and the use of student-learning outcomes (SLOs).

**Key Finding 1:** The theme of counselors emerged yet again during counselor interviews on ensuring students are learning. Counselor participants stated their services are important in this pillar as they offer support, rapport, checkpoints, educational plans, completion of the correct forms, transfer assistance, follow-up with students, and referrals.

**Key Finding 2:** Another theme that surfaced was providing accessible resources. For some counselors, to ensure student are learning means making the correct referrals,
ensuring students know how to find the information they need, and finding out how students are doing in their courses.

**Key Finding 3:** Another crucial component was gathering feedback from students on how they are doing in college either through pre-testing and post-testing or asking the students directly for feedback. Having this feedback can be used to refine the guided pathway pillars at the colleges.

**Key Finding 4:** The fourth and final theme emerged was student-learning outcomes (SLOs). SLOs are achievable and measurable (Student Learning Outcomes Oxnard College, n.d) outcomes designed to show what students would be able to know, do, or demonstrate when they have completed a course. These should be updated regularly.

**Research Question 2: What Do California Community College Counselors Describe as the Challenges of Guided Pathways?**

According to the counselor participants, prominent challenges of guided pathways were lack of administrative support, getting started with the process, and misconceptions or outdated beliefs.

**Key Finding 1: Lack of Administrative Support.** The most prevalent theme that arose when counselors were asked to share their experiences with the challenges of guided pathways was having administrative support. Counselors readily discussed that without solid administrative support, faculty and staff may not have a sense of where to begin and what their role is in the guided pathways endeavor. One counselor revealed their institution’s high administration turnover impeded their ability to move forward with guided pathways. Another counselor recalled they were getting directives and just
“going with it” rather than having clear goals. Being a part of a district was a challenge for another counselor because other colleges in the district were involved, and it sometimes took months for decisions to be made on items.

Key Finding 2: Getting Started with the Process. The next challenge was getting started with the process. Where does a college begin? The theme of getting started involved the struggles with getting the whole college institution committed, involved, and redesigned. Many counselors interviewed agreed the initial design was a challenge as creating and implementing guided pathways was an institution-wide effort. One counselor stated, “The biggest challenge is just making sure everyone that needs to be is at the table. Making sure that faculty were involved and that they we are committed.” Another counselor remembered, “It was scary for faculty at first to redesign. It is important to bring all the services together and make it comprehensive.” It took a “culture shift,” cooperation, many resources, and strong administrative support. “It was a whole institution effort.”

Key Finding 3: Misconceptions or Outdated Beliefs. Several counselors participating in this study noted that some faculty and staff held beliefs that posed a challenge when designing and implementing guided pathways in their colleges. A belief that emerged several times was the notion that students should find counselors when they need one rather than counselors reaching out to students. This theory makes sense if you pull data from the literature review in this paper. It shows that student/counselor ratios can be quite high—usually over 400 to one (Solis, 2012) and as high as 800 to 1,200 students to one counselor (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Ramos, 2013). Counselors interviewed suggested letting go of beliefs such as “it’s the way that it has
been done historically,” “students have the right to fail”, “students will figure it out on
t heir own,” “students should come to us,” and “[students] should know this already” if
they are not effective for students.

Research Question 3: What Do California Community College Counselors
Recommend for Improving Guided Pathways to Increase Student Success?

Three recommendations for colleges that are implementing guided pathways are
identified: have strong communication, involve all staff, and show the data.

Key Finding 1: Have Strong Communication. Counselors recommended
having good communication between faculty and students as well as communication
between faculty. The need to be transparent about what students need to get started is
demed essential. “Ensure they know the different opportunities (careers, partners with
universities). Making sure they know who their team is, clubs, and organizations.” It is
also suggested the college have strong communication. “Communicate. Before
redesigning, assess how things are being done in both educational and student services.
Assess communication and what channels of communication are already there and which
could be created to increase understanding of what guided pathways are. Figure out how
to connect initiatives so that you are not replacing anything with something new. Maybe
two committees join forces that are essentially assessing the same thing and discussing
the same thing. With every topic brought up, ask how will this help the students?”

Key Finding 2: Involve All Staff. Another recommendation counselors brought
up was involving all staff in the design and implementation of guided pathways. Some
emphasized the need to have mandatory, incentivized meetings during which voices can
be heard. “Hear all sides of the situation and evaluate. Maybe your concern needs to just
be reframed,” “Our biggest strength was our administrative team looped into full-time faculty and reassigned them to go to pathways project. Counselors, faculty, instructional support, student support, and curriculum all came together,” “Make sure faculty and staff know what their role is and how they are contributing. Understand we are all in this together,” and “Make sure that everyone is at the same table to do what is best for their students.”

**Key Finding 3: Show the Data.** Lastly, the counselors expressed the importance of showing the data as a recommendation for colleges moving forward to designing and implementing guided pathways in their colleges. It was suggested that showing data allows faculty to feel guided pathways are relevant to them as opposed to guided pathways being a soon-to-be forgotten trend. One counselor shared how their district creates dashboards to help track student numbers. These dashboards help with targets, goals, and give them something to work toward. “Start with data. Know retention rates how many students are pursuing any degrees and how long it takes to earn a degree,” “Data is really important and should be the driving force,” “Data has to be at the table to really understand where you’re going with this and what it is you are trying to implement.”

**Additional Recommendations**

Other recommendations counselors made were to:

- Bridge this connection between educational services and student service.
- Be student centered.
- Our case-management approach has really helped students.
• Embed everything.
• Restructure governance.
• Have something to show faculty.
• Hire more faculty and administrators of color.
• Hire talented people, not political people.
• Stay updated and look at other models out there. Keep in mind the type of resources they have and student population they have.
• There is a lot of planning and a lot of buy-in that needs to happen.
  Counselors need to be in the equation. Accept things will not be clean at first. If you never make the changes or never try, you’re never going to know. You’re not going to grow.

Best Practices

Counselors were asked if they or their colleges used any models or frameworks of best practices when designing their guided pathways. Many counselors shared their colleges utilized the City University of New York (CUNY) as a model of best practices. Other colleges mentioned were community colleges in California (Pasadena City College, Mt. San Antonio College, Bakersfield College, and LA Trade Technical College), and the Texas Community College system.

Conclusions

Community colleges across the nation are implementing positive changes for students in their institutional redesigns. The results of this study could possibly assist other community colleges in California, as well as throughout the nation, as they build their guided pathways. The four elements of guided pathways are clarifying the path for
students, helping students choose and enter a pathway, helping students stay on the path, and ensuring students are learning (Jenkins et al., 2017; Strobel & Christian, 2016; Noy et al., 2016; Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). Learning important elements of guided pathways from the counselor’s perspective can assist colleges when designing the four pillars of guided pathways in their institutions. The following are conclusions drawn from the findings and literature: Colleges should have strong student support or wraparound services, have strong communication with students, colleges should offer specialized or embedded counseling, high school outreach is critical, colleges should have a strong career focus, strong faculty engagement, and strong leadership.

Conclusion 1: Colleges Need to Have Strong Student Support or Wraparound Services

Counselors indicated the importance of offering student resources, including but are not limited to, work-based learning opportunities, career and transfer centers, clubs, organizations, professionals in their field of interest, mental health, food services, transportation, intrusive counseling, and case management. Counselors emphasized it is not only about offering the resources but ensuring students know about the resources and how to access them. The literature review addresses several ways in which students benefit from having resources or wraparound services. TRiO services were introduced in the 1960s and included counseling, tutoring, and employer connections (Spencer, 2014). California’s Student Success and Support Services (SSSP) was created to ensure all students entering community college complete an orientation, assessments, and meet with a counselor (California Community College Chancellor’s Office, 2016). Learning communities are cohorts of students who are often enrolled in similar courses, have
organized events, a dedicated counselor, and create a sense of belongingness for students. Learning communities are very effective with first-generation students (Dins, 2005). Students at Tennessee Community College are frontloaded with assistance and support to ensure their success rather than attempting to navigate the system blindly. CUNY offers learning communities and intervention services such as mentoring programs (Karp, 2013). Counselors and other staff provide students with college skills training in study skills, time management, and stress reduction (Strumbos & Kolenovic, 2017). Lastly, Fresno City College offers Ram Ready, a day that includes several student services such as outreach, counselors, and financial aid. Students are introduced to their student success team, given a campus tour, and shown how to access online student portals. Student supports or wraparound services should be available to students from the onset of their college career if not sooner. Students should know how to access these services or know who to reach out to when seeking services. These resources can enhance students’ educational experience and help increase student success.

**Conclusion 2: Colleges Need to Have Strong Communication with Students**

The findings showed the fundamental importance of communicating with students. This could include contacting students by phone, email, or text, or utilizing early-alert systems. It could be faculty reaching out to students who are in danger of failing their courses. Both City College of Chicago (Fink & Columbia University, 2017) and Tennessee Community Colleges (Jenkins et al, 2018) utilize technology such as early-alert systems to help track and monitor students in their colleges. CUNY offers learning communities and intervention services such as mentoring programs (Karp, 2013). Ohio Community Colleges offer counselors who monitor student progress and
intervene when needed (Jenkins, Lahr, Fink, & Columbia University, 2017). Miami Dade begins communication early by offering pre-college counseling to high schools (Community College Research Center, 2015; Hughes, et al., 2014). The counselors in A-B Tech in Ashville, North Carolina, utilize technology that restricts students from registering for classes without their counselor’s approval (Schwartz, 2019) to encourage communication. Students at Cypress Community College in Cypress, California, receive emails and push notifications from support staff to ensure they are on track.

**Conclusion 3: Colleges Need to Offer Specialized or Embedded Counseling**

Counselors are the most important resource to help new students identify their goals and choose the classes aligned with those goals (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Fink & Columbia University, 2017; McClenny, Dare, & Thompson, 2013; Novak, 2017). Counselors are crucial to student success (Kuh, 2015; Novak, 2017; Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; CCCSE, 2018). Counselor participants stated their services are critical to each of the pillars. They offer support, rapport, checkpoints, educational plans, completion of the correct forms, transfer assistance, follow-up with students, referrals, provide mental health support and more. Counselors should be embedded, specialized or sometimes referred to as centralized, when possible.

Students at CUNY are required to meet with their assigned counselor twice a semester (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Karp, 2013). Ohio Community College counselors monitor student progress and intervene when needed (Jenkins, Lahr, Fink, & Columbia University, 2017). Their counselors and faculty have created program maps, curriculum guides, or curriculum sheets (Jenkins, Lahr, Fink, & Columbia University, 2017), all designed to ensure students are taking only the classes they need
for their respective programs. City College of Chicago counselors assist with major selection, customization of educational plans, and utilize technology to help students stay on track. Students at Miami Dade Community Colleges are required to see an assigned counselor (Hughes, et al., 2014) to create an educational plan (Jenkins & Cho, 2013) with the counselor embedded in their selected pathway. Out of 9,000 students at Miami Dade, 70 percent met with an advisor or counselor, which is twice as many as in previous years (Bailey, Jaggars, Jenkins, & Columbia University, 2015). Through mandatory counseling, students at Tennessee Community Colleges work with a counselor to develop individualized educational plans. Counselors monitor and track every student’s progress closely. Students at Pasadena City College are required to see their counselor once a semester (Preston-Smith, 2018) and are required to have a comprehensive educational plan (Pasadena City College, 2019). Cypress Community College in Cypress, California, offers embedded counselors (Cypress College, 2019). Students at Skyline Community College are assigned meta major counselors. With specialized or embedded counselors as an element of guided pathways, students are getting more of a personalized and holistic experience.

For counselors to be effective, it is not required they be embedded in specific programs. If embedded or specialized counseling is not an option for colleges, at a minimum, more counselors should be hired. CUNY has added a significant number of counselors (Karp, 2013); thus, CUNY’s student-counselor ratio is low at less than 100 students each (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). Miami Dade hired twenty-five new full-time counselors, a $1,000,000 investment (Hughes, et al., 2014).
Conclusion 4: High School Outreach Is Critical

Counselors talked about the importance of high school outreach. One of the most prominent themes that emerged from the data was the importance of encouraging students to make decisions early, even in high school. This is most efficiently accomplished through high school outreach. Several of the colleges offer some kind of outreach to local feeder high schools. There are designated, classified staff and/or counselors who conduct this work. During this high school outreach, staff and counselors may introduce students to the college’s various pathways, help students apply to the college, assist in selecting a major or pathway, determine their correct math and English, offer financial aid assistance, and even do educational planning. Counselors shared, “We are on boarding our students and helping them make an informed educational decision early on.” “We as an institution have a really good relationship with our feeder high schools. We are actually out there. I go out to the high schools. A lot of our counselors go out to the high schools. And that’s their first initial kind of introduction to us as a college and majors. So, it really is I am going out there having that conversation with students, understanding why picking a major before they even get onto campus is important. One hundred percent of our students are choosing a major before they even step foot on campus, and they have the information readily available to them to understand what that major is.” “Counselors and advisors are the ones that have more of a direct contact with our incoming students, particularly for the high school students that are getting ready to go to college or university. So, we start doing outreach the year before by going out to our local high schools, introducing them to the various pathways that we have, and providing a one-year plan for these students. We are actually
doing comprehensive plans for each individual student.” “We have our high school liaison program where we coordinate with all of our local feeder high schools and continuation/alternative high schools. And we go out there, and we complete our whole enrollment process.” “We totally redid our orientation, and we really revamped our welcome. It is just a day where students learn about all the support resources. It is basically a mini version of what a university orientation would be to have access to counselors, they go on a tour, and they are able to get their I.D. card.”

Counselor responses were consistent with the literature. Miami Dade also offers pre-college counseling to high schools (Community College Research Center, 2015; Hughes, et al., 2014). West Hills Lemoore Community College has activities that include career-planning classes at the high schools, promoting college at the high schools, summer programs, and assisting students with college application and registration processes. Skyline counselors visit high schools along with a high school liaison and conduct orientation and student meetings.

**Conclusion 5: Colleges Need to Have a Strong Career Focus**

Counselors and other staff at CUNY provide students with college skills training in study skills, time management, and stress reduction (Strumbos & Kolenovic, 2017). Counselors at CUNY ensure students do not leave the college until they have earned a degree, certificate, or credential (Strumbos & Kolenovic, 2017). All new students at Tennessee Community College explore their major and career options. Pasadena City College offers a career fair as well as a major fair since many students do not know what to select for a major plan (Pasadena City College, 2019). Their meta majors are referred to as career opportunities (Pasadena City College, 2019). Skyline Community College
assists students with developing career goals. They utilize a career-development approach with students. Students have a student success team to ensure they are engaging in career development activities to further explore career options and development. This career focus is a part of every student’s experience (Career Ladders Project, 2018).

**Conclusion 6: Colleges Need to Have Strong Faculty Engagement**

Faculty engagement was mentioned many times during the counselor interviews. In order for colleges to offer program maps of their majors, faculty need to approve that these maps include the correct courses for their majors. Faculty may be involved to confirm that the pathways lead to careers. Some faculty even do outreach to prospective students making them aware of the program, requirements, and potential careers. “The engagement with entering the path is really focused on faculty. That is where the faculty piece comes in, engaging with their faculty and their majors so that they understand the career path, so that the student is making the right selection within their…within our pathways, understanding what will this degree do, and answering the question How am I going to get employed at the end of the day? We connect our students with faculty members so that they understand that this is the right measure for them.” “Faculty do outreach. Our faculty members are out there probably every weekend, if you look at their calendar. There’s not a day in the year that they’re not doing something, some kind of activity with students. So, whether it is competitive teams or are going to conferences or participating in something, they are spreading the word. So, faculty are out there doing outreach everywhere they go. You have faculty members that are communicating with counselors, and the students are surrounded with a success team. The whole team works
together to get students plugged in and apply. This is a big part of students completing successfully and why we have one of the highest completion rates. That is because we have faculty that are fully engaged.” “This has really brought instructional faculty and student services together in the same room to talk about our obstacles. How we can best serve the students?”

**Conclusion 7: Colleges Need to Have Strong Leadership.**

During data collection, the researcher identified that there were some counselor participants who have experienced a lack of clear communication or direction from leadership in their colleges. During the counselor interviews, one counselor commented that the college for which he worked had not yet implemented guided pathways at his institution. A surprise came when the researcher interviewed this counselor’s female counterpart at the same institution. She boasted the college had been using guided-pathways frameworks for over 30 years.

A second example of a lack of clear communication or direction from leadership was during an interview when a counselor was not sure how to address what her college provided in one of the pillars. She asserted she was “too busy doing the work” to pay attention to a framework hanging on a poster. Both of these are strong examples of silos and further reiterated the importance of solid leadership and involving all staff.

Counselors interviewed offered feedback on leadership’s challenges. Some counselor suggestions were to: “remember guided pathways are about guiding students,” “communicate well and listen to staff,” “offer paid incentives for guided pathways work,” “have a registrar at every campus,” “be sure staff are reporting to one dean only,” and “a
good administration team is important to get the initial conversations going. You should have everyone’s support to make it work.”

A guided pathways redesign is not a small endeavor. It requires large-scale transformation. It requires strong administrative support that provides clear communication and show relevant data. Administration should hold incentivised meetings where all voices and concerns can be heard. This will best meet the needs of all stakeholders. Collaboration is essential.

**Recommendations for Action**

The researcher integrated study findings with theory, research, and practice. This study’s findings led to recommended actions for guided pathways implementation. These recommendations for action are suggestions for colleges as they design and implement guided pathways in their institutions: improve counseling, invest in high school outreach, and offer strong student support services.

**Recommended for Action 1: Improve Counseling**

Counselors were mentioned in the interviews and artifacts at an overwhelming frequency of 258; thus, it would make the utmost sense to use resources and hire more counselors. It has been a complaint from students nationally for decades that there are not enough counselors, that they have trouble reaching a counselor, that they get misinformation, or they do not know counselors exist. At some point, it needs to be recognized counselors are not tertiary but absolutely essential in student success. It makes sense to emulate learning communities as they are highly successful in part because of their dedicated counselor. Let us get student counselor ratios down to a
manageable and effective number. Investing in counselors is investing in student success.

**Recommended for Action 2: Invest in High School Outreach**

To achieve student success, colleges need to develop strategies that will connect the college to their local feeder high schools regularly and consistently. High school outreach programs can have a markedly positive effect on student success. Creating programs and events that involve college faculty and staff regularly visiting the high school campuses can play a key role in college completion rates. Outreach may include dual enrollment, articulation, career fairs, college faculty presenting their majors at high schools, college readiness workshops, and having dedicated college counselors for the high school.

Through this outreach, students learn about programs and majors available to them at their local community college that may be unfamiliar to them. Most high schools do not offer classes in choosing college major or careers. High school outreach can ensure students know what their options are after high school. Additionally, students can get ahead by completing college orientation, math and English placement, choose a major, create an educational plan with a counselor, and register for classes all before stepping foot on the college campus. Strong high school outreach will serve underprepared students by preventing them from spending time and money on classes they may not need and better prepare them for transferring to a four-year institution or career.
Recommended for Action 3: Offer Strong Student Support Services

Based on the qualitative data reported in this research study, there was a significant push for colleges to offer strong student support services. It is recommended that colleges not only offer accessible student services but also ensure students know about these services. These services might include, but are not limited to, transfer and career centers, financial aid, work-based learning opportunities, clubs, organizations, counseling services, and/or professionals in their field of interest. Counselors acknowledged that “the most important thing was to have the structures in place and really redesigning the way we provide those services that support the instruction for students. I think it is really about having those resources available that we can quickly reference with students.” “It is an equity approach, a really strong component of that is having a holistic view of students. Having wraparound services that can really help.”

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher recommends future research continue to examine structure and student services around guided pathways.

Opportunities for further research could include:

1. A study to examine important elements of guided pathways, the challenges of guided pathways and the recommendations for guided pathways from the counselor perspective in other California community colleges.

2. A study to examine important elements of guided pathways, the challenges of guided pathways, and the recommendations for guided pathways.
pathways from the community college counselor perspective in states outside California.

3. A study to examine important elements of guided pathways, the challenges of guided pathways, and the recommendations for guided pathways from the student perspective in community colleges in California or outside the state.

4. A study to conduct research on demographics such as gender to discover the impact of guided pathways and student success.

5. A study to conduct research on demographics such as race to discover the impact of guided pathways and student success.

6. A study to conduct research on demographics such as ethnicity to discover the impact of guided pathways and student success.

7. A study that examines guided-pathway structure in specific areas or programs such as transfer programs (Noy, Trimble, Jenkins, Barnett, & Wachen, 2016).

8. A study that examines guided pathway structure in specific areas or programs such as learning communities (Noy, Trimble, Jenkins, Barnett, & Wachen, 2016).

9. A study that examines guided pathway structure in specific areas or programs such as liberal arts (Noy, Trimble, Jenkins, Barnett, & Wachen, 2016).
10. A study that examines guided pathway structure in specific areas or programs such as career education (Noy, Trimble, Jenkins, Barnett, & Wachen, 2016).

11. A study to examine important elements of guided pathways, the challenges of guided pathways and the recommendations for guided pathways from the college Deans’ perspective.

12. A study to examine important elements of guided pathways, the challenges of guided pathways and the recommendations for guided pathways from the high school counselor perspective.

**Concluding Remarks**

Community colleges across the United States serve 10.5 million students annually (www.nces.ed.gov/ipeds, 2017). With fewer than half of college students completing their degrees, it makes sense that colleges are rethinking their current community college models. There have been grants, initiatives, and strategies throughout California and the United States all designed to improve matriculation, retention, and completion. While many colleges have attempted to make positive changes using some of these tools and resources, there is not a lot of evidence that shows any of these changes are working for the majority of their students and with longevity. With the current model, seven out of every 100 students stay in high school, graduate from college, and secure employment (Fleming, 2016). Colleges that are implementing guided pathways are beginning to see improvements in completion rates since the effort is an institutional shift and a policy redesign (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). In his article “How Will Guided Pathways Benefit Our Students?” posted on the Community College of Philadelphia
website Samuel Hirsch, EdD, discusses the benefits of guided pathways. “Students are better able to make connections across courses, to see the purpose of the particular curriculum, and to see how the program helps them achieve their goals” (Hirsch, n.d).

Designing and implementing guided pathways in colleges without consultation of students and/or the counselors who see students daily is akin to planning a party without knowing who your guests are. This study provides insight into the counseling needs of community college students through the lens of the counselors. Learning elements of guided pathways from the counselor perspective, colleges can add these practices to their college-wide redesign to ideally benefit students and enhance the counseling role.

The impetus for this research arose from the researcher’s own experience as a counselor at a California community college that is currently at early stages of designing and implementing guided pathways. These research findings will be valuable to this college as well as other colleges considering redesign. The study will add to the literature and research on effective elements of guided pathways.

The guided pathways reform effort focuses on assisting students through college in an expeditious and organized way with customized maps to reach their goals. As a social worker and California community college counselor, this researcher is passionate about helping others navigate the systems necessary to reach their highest potential. For these systems to be effective, they must be organized, explicity clear, and focused on the needs of the client or student. Additionally, as a former community college student, the researcher can relate to feeling lost and disoriented with the college process. Rather than a cafeteria-style approach, colleges can move toward having a
system in place “in which the appetizers and desserts” (ETATS-UNIS, 1983, p. 35) are easily differentiated from the main courses.
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Appendices

Appendix A - Interview

My name is Tiffany Welter and I am a doctoral candidate at Brandman University in the area of organizational leadership. I am conducting research to determine exemplary guided pathways features from the counselor perspective.

I am conducting approximately twelve interviews with counselors like you. The information you provide, along with historical and archival data, hopefully will provide a clear picture of guided pathways features from the counselor perspective. The findings can then ideally be used to share with other community colleges as they implement guided pathways.

I have a script to ensure my interviews with all participating counselors will be conducted in the most similar manner possible. I also want to mention there are no right answers to the interview questions.

Informed Consent (required for Dissertation Research)

I would like to remind you any information that is obtained in connection to this study will remain confidential. All of the data will be reported without reference to any individual(s) or any institution(s). After I record and transcribe the data, I will send it to you via electronic mail so that you can check to make sure that I have accurately captured your thoughts and ideas.

You received the Informed Consent and Brandman Bill of Rights in an email and responded with your approval to participate in the interview. Before we start, do you have any questions or need clarification about either document?

We have scheduled an hour for the interview. At any point during the interview you may ask that I skip a particular question or stop the interview altogether. For ease of our discussion and accuracy I will record our conversation as indicated in the Informed Consent.

Do you have any questions before we begin? Okay, let us get started. Thank you so much for your time.

Interview Questions

Question #1: Background Information (Introduction)

1. How many years have you been working as a community college counselor?
2. How many years have you been counseling at your current community college?
3. What is your current counselor title (general, etc.)?

Question #2: (Research Question #1)

4. How do you describe guided pathways?
5. What do you believe are the important, or most effective, elements of guided pathways for helping students succeed?
6. The principles of guided pathways are delineated in four pillars (Bailey, Smith Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015)
   a. Tell me about your experiences of engaging your students in Pillar #1 (Clarify the path)? See Guided Pathway Pillar chart below, if needed.
   b. Tell me about your experiences of engaging your students in Pillar #2 (Enter the path)? See Guided Pathway Pillar chart below, if needed.
   c. Tell me about your experiences of engaging your students in Pillar #3 (Stay on the path)? See Guided Pathway Pillar chart below, if needed.
   d. Tell me about your experiences of engaging your students in Pillar #4 (Ensure students are learning)? See Guided Pathway Pillar chart below, if needed.

7. If your college does not use the four pillars, which principles does your college follow?

**Question #3: (Research Question #2)**

8. Please describe the challenges of guided pathways you have experienced.
9. What strategies have you employed to overcome these challenges?

**Question #4: (Research Question #3)**

10. What recommendations do you have for colleges as they design their guided pathways to increase student success?

Potential follow-up question:
11. Are you aware of other guided-pathways models or frameworks that could be viewed as best practices?
12. If so, which one/s and why do you think that?

**Question #5: (Conclusion)**

13. Are there any other aspects of guided pathways at your college that you would like to share?

Potential follow-up question:
14. Is there anything you would like to add or have any questions for me?

**Question #6 Demographic Questions (Conclusion)**

15. What is your age?
16. What is your gender?
17. What is your race/ethnicity?

**POSSIBLE GENERIC PROBES:**
- “Would you expand upon that a bit?”
- “Do you have more to add?”
- “What did you mean by…”
- “Why do think that was the case?”
• “Could you please tell me more about…“
• “Can you give me an example of…”
• “How did you feel about that?”

If you like, when the results of our research are known, we will send you a copy of our findings.

Thank you very much for your time!
## Appendix B - Alignment of Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guided Pathway Features</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
<td>How many years have you been working as a community college counselor?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
<td>How many years have you been counseling at your current community college?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
<td>What is your current counselor title (general, etc.)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research question #1</strong></td>
<td>How do you describe guided pathways?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research question #1</strong></td>
<td>What do you believe are the important, or most effective, elements of guided pathways for helping students succeed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research question #1</strong></td>
<td>Can you provide any examples? If so, which of the pillars of guided pathways do your examples represent?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research question #1</strong></td>
<td>Tell me about your experiences of engaging your students in Pillar #1 (Clarify the path)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research question #1</strong></td>
<td>Tell me about your experiences of engaging your students in Pillar #2 (Enter the path)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research question #1</strong></td>
<td>Tell me about your experiences of engaging your students in Pillar #3 (Stay on the path)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research question #1</strong></td>
<td>Tell me about your experiences of engaging your students in Pillar #4 (Ensure learning)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research question #1</strong></td>
<td>If your college does not use the four pillars, which principles does your college follow?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research question #2</strong></td>
<td>Please describe the challenges of the elements of guided pathways.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research question #2</strong></td>
<td>What strategies have you employed to overcome these challenges?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research question # 3

What recommendations do you have for colleges as they design their guided pathways to increase student success?

Research question # 3

Are you aware of other guided pathways models or frameworks that could be viewed as best practices?

Conclusion

Are there any other aspects of guided pathways at your college that you would like to share?

Demographic questions

What is your age?
What is your gender?
What is your race/ethnicity?

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**Four Pillars of Guided Pathways**

1. **Create clear curricular pathways to employment and further education.**
2. **Help students choose and enter their pathway.**
3. **Help students stay on their path.**
4. **Ensure that learning is happening with intentional outcomes.**
Appendix C - Field Test Interviewee Feedback Questions

1. How did you feel about the interview? Do you think you had ample opportunities to describe your experience with Guided Pathways in their colleges?

2. Did you feel the amount of time for the interview was okay?

3. Were the questions by and large clear or were there places where you were uncertain what was being asked?

4. Can you recall any words or terms being asked about during the interview that were confusing?

5. What was the impact of the conducting interview online?

6. Did I appear comfortable during the interview?
Appendix D - Interview Feedback Reflection Questions

1. How long did the interview take? Did the time seem to be appropriate?

2. How did you feel during the interview? Comfortable? Nervous?

3. Going into it, did you feel prepared to conduct the interview? Is there something you could have done to be better prepared?

4. What parts of the interview went the most smoothly and why do you think that was the case?

5. What parts of the interview seemed to struggle and why do you think that was the case?

6. If you were to change any part of the interview, what would that part be and how would you change it?

7. What was the impact of the interview being online? Were there challenges that can be improved?

8. What suggestions do you have for improving the overall process?
Appendix E - Case Study Protocol

1. The one-on-one interview began with the researcher confirming the participant and the researcher introducing herself.

2. The researcher inquired if there were any questions for the researcher in regards to the study. The researcher verified the informed consent for the study and consent for audio recording.

3. The researcher informed the interviewee when recording of interview would begin.

4. The researcher commenced interview questions and began taking notes.

5. The research began with questions about the interviewees college and implementation of guided pathways.

6. The researcher asked follow-up or clarifying questions when necessary throughout the interview to gain a deeper understanding on the participants perspective.

7. At the conclusion of the interview, the participant was thanked and asked if there was anything else that needed to be included.

8. The researcher ended the audio recording.

9. The transcription was dated and saved for data analysis.
Appendix F - BU Bill of Rights

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Research Participants Bill of Rights

Any person who is requested to consent to participate as a subject in an experiment, or who is requested to consent on behalf of another, has the following rights:

1. To be told what the study is attempting to discover.
2. To be told what will happen in the study and whether any of the procedures, drugs, or devices are different from what would be used in standard practice.
3. To be told about the risks, side effects, or discomforts of the things that may happen to him/her.
4. To be told if he/she can expect any benefit from participating and, if so, what the benefits might be.
5. To be told what other choices he/she has and how they may be better or worse than being in the study.
6. To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study both before agreeing to be involved and during the course of the study.
7. To be told what sort of medical treatment is available if any complications arise.
8. To refuse to participate at all before or after the study is started without any adverse effects.
9. To receive a copy of the signed and dated consent form.
10. To be free of pressures when considering whether he/she wishes to agree to be in the study.

If at any time you have questions regarding a research study, you should ask the researcher to answer them. You also may contact the Brandman University Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. The Brandman University Institutional Review Board may be contacted either by telephoning the Office of Academic Affairs at (949) 341-9937 or by writing to the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA, 92618.
Appendix G - Informed Consent

INFORMATION ABOUT: Guided Pathway Elements From the California Community College Counselor Perspective

RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Tiffany Welter, M.S.W., doctoral candidate

PURPOSE OF STUDY: You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Tiffany Welter, a doctoral candidate from the Ed.D. program in organizational leadership at Brandman University. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify and describe guided pathway features at California community colleges from the counselor perspective.

This study will contribute to existing knowledge of best practices for guided pathways.

ACTIVITY: By participating in this study, occurring in August 2020, I agree to the following:

1.) Participate in an individual phone or Zoom interview lasting approximately sixty minutes at a time convenient to you.

I understand that:

a) There are minimal risks associated with participating in this research.

b) The researcher will protect my confidentiality by keeping the identifying codes and research materials in a locked file drawer that is available only to the researcher.

c) The interview will be audio recorded. The recordings will be available only to the researcher and the professional transcriptionist. The audio recordings will be used to capture the interview dialogue and to ensure the accuracy of the information collected during the interview. All information will be identifier redacted, and my confidentiality will be maintained. Upon completion of the study, all audio recordings will be destroyed.

d) All other data and consents will be securely stored for three years after completion of data collection and confidentially shredded or fully deleted.

e) The possible benefits of this study to me is that my input may bring the potential benefits of adding additional knowledge of best practices for
community colleges as they implement guided pathway frameworks on their campuses.

f) The findings will be available to the researcher at the conclusion of the study and will provide new insights about guided pathways from the counselor perspective.

g) I will not be compensated for my participation.

h) If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, you are encouraged to contact Tiffany Welter at twelter@mail.brandman.edu or by phone at 360-901-3988 or contact the dissertation chair, Dr. Tod Burnett at tburnett@brandman.edu

i) I understand that I may refuse to participate in or I may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. Also, the investigator may stop the study at any time. I also understand that no information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent and that all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent obtained. I understand that if I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Vice Chancellor Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the Research Participants Bill of Rights.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the Research Participants Bill of Rights. I have read the above and understand it, and hereby consent to the procedure(s) set forth.

____________________________________  ______________________
Signature of Participant                  Date

____________________________________  ______________________
Signature of Principal Investigator       Date
Dear Tiffany Welter,

Congratulations, your IRB application to conduct research has been approved by the Brandman University Institutional Review Board. This approval grants permission for you to proceed with data collection for your research. Please keep this email for your records, as it will need to be included in your research appendix.

If any issues should arise that are pertinent to your IRB approval, please contact the IRB immediately at BUIRB@brandman.edu. If you need to modify your BUIRB application for any reason, please fill out the “Application Modification Form” before proceeding with your research. The Modification form can be found at the following link: [https://irb.brandman.edu/Applications/Modification.pdf](https://irb.brandman.edu/Applications/Modification.pdf).

Best wishes for a successful completion of your study.

Thank you,

Doug DeVore, Ed.D.
Professor

[Institutional Review Board]
Appendix I - Invitation to Participate

August 9, 2020

Dear ____________,

I am a graduate student in the doctorate of education in Organizational Leadership Program in the School of Education at Brandman University. I am conducting a study on how exemplary guided pathway features at California community colleges from the counselors perspective. As such, I am asking for assistance in the research study by participating in a phone or Zoom interview, which will take about forty-five to sixty minutes. You are being interviewed on guided pathway features at California community colleges from the counselors perspective.

If you agree to participate in the interview, you may be assured that it will be completely confidential. No names will be attached to any notes or records from the survey. All information will remain in locked files accessible only to the researcher. No employer, supervisor, or agency will have access to the survey information. You also have the freedom to stop the interview and withdraw from the study at any time. Further, you may be assured that the researchers are not in any way affiliated with __________ college district. I will be contacting you via e-mail to ensure that the interview will be completed in the window of the time specified.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this qualitative case study is to identify and describe guided pathway features from the counselor perspective.

PROCEDURES: If you decide to participate, you will participate in a phone or Zoom interview that is estimated to take forty-five to sixty minutes total. There are a series of questions about your colleges guided pathway framework and your opinion on features of guided pathways based on your experience. The interview is confidential, and your responses will be coded to create patterns and themes for the study.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS: Your participation in this study may bring the potential benefits of adding additional knowledge of best practices for current and future colleges implementing guided pathways by potentially giving leaders more fundamental tools to effectively redesign their colleges. Furthermore, this study may raise the awareness of the multifaceted challenges in redesigning colleges.

RISKS, INCONVENIENCES, AND DISCOMFORTS: There are no known major risks associated with your participation in this research study. The interview will be at a time convenient for you when you have access to a telephone.
ANONYMITY: Records of information that you provide for the research study and any personal information you provide will not be linked to you in any way. It will not be possible to identify you as the person who provided any specific information for the study. You are encouraged to ask any questions at any time that will help you understand how this study will be performed and/or how it will affect you. For any questions, please contact the researcher using the information below. If you have any questions about this study or your rights as a study participant, you may call or write the Office of Executive Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618, 949.764.1.

I would love to discuss my topic further and encourage you to ask any questions you may have that may help you understand how this study will be performed and/or how it may affect you.

The researcher, Tiffany Welter, is available anytime to answer any questions, clarify any information, or discuss the study further. Contact information is below. Your participation would be greatly valued and appreciated.

Sincerely,

Tiffany Welter, M.S.W.
Doctoral candidate, Ed.D.
360-901-3988
twelter@mail.brandman.edu
tiffanymwelter@gmail.com
Appendix J - Audio Release Form

RESEARCH TITLE: Guided Pathway Elements from the California Community Counselor Perspective

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY
16355 LAGUNA CANYON ROAD
IRVINE, CA 92618
RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Tiffany Welter, MSW

I authorize Tiffany Welter, MSW, Brandman University doctoral candidate, to record my voice. I give Brandman University and all persons or entities associate with this study permission or authority to use this recording for activities associated with this research study.

I understand that the recording will be used for transcription purposes and the identified-redacted information obtained during the interview may be published in a journal or presented at meetings and/or presentations. I will be consulted about the use of audio recordings for any purposes other than those listed above. Additionally, I waive any rights and royalties or other compensation arising from or related to the use of information obtained from the recordings. By signing this form, I acknowledge that I have completely read and fully understand the above release and agree to the outlined terms. I hereby release any and all claims against any person or organization utilizing this material.

Signature of Participant: ___________________ Date: __________

Signature of Principal Investigator: ____________ Date: __________
Appendix K – Thank You Letter

Dear Qualitative Research Study Participant,

Thank you for participating in my qualitative research study. It was my pleasure to interview you as part of the data collection for my study. It was an honor to interview a fellow community college counselor who is dedicated to student success. Through your participation, I have gained tremendous insight into guided pathways. I appreciate your involvement in my study as it is my hope it will be instrumental for colleges to use in their redesign.

Thank you for your participation in this research study.

Tiffany Welter, MSW
Doctoral Candidate
Appendix L – Literature Matrix