



BREAKTHROUGH MOMENTS



Urgency for Change Leads to Results

San Juan College (SJC) has improved its graduation and transfer rates by focusing on students' needs in and outside the classroom. The college also is encouraging future students to develop a college-going mindset.

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"The Rural Guided Pathways Project helped us have very focused discussions and look at the data in new ways," says Toni Pendergrass, president. "And it helped with the work that has always been really important to us."

"The second Institute helped us cultivate the urgency for change," adds Lorenzo Reyes, vice president for workforce and economic development. "We reviewed our data, saw gaps, and heard about strategies other community colleges had successfully implemented. They were successful, and that led to internal conversations about whether some of those strategies would also work for us."

From Placement Through Transfer and the Workforce

SJC has made changes to every aspect of the student experience, and the results are impressive:

- * Graduation/transfer rates increased from 32 percent for the 2018 cohort to 41 percent — the highest in SJC's history — for the 2020 cohort.
- * For the 2020 cohort, graduation and transfer rates for Native American students were 45 percent, the highest in SJC's history for Native American students and higher than all other demographic groups.
- * Since 2010, the number of graduates has increased by more than 7 percent each year.



The Rural Guided Pathways Project helps a national cohort of rural community colleges implement evidence-based, institution-wide reforms grounded in the guided pathways framework. College teams include community partners in their regions, and they receive support from coaches, subject matter experts, and other colleges that are part of the project. The National Center for Inquiry & Improvement leads the project.

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The focus on student success begins with onboarding. SJC places students in classes based on their high school grade point average rather than a standalone placement test. And most entry-level English and math classes are available with corequisite support for students who need it.

“We have identified the classes with the lowest success rates, and faculty are working together to improve student success in those courses,” Pendergrass says. “They are figuring out what strategies will work best to help more students succeed.”

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SJC also established a transfer center and increased related outreach. The percentage of degree-seeking students who intend to transfer increased from 12 percent in fall 2020 to 57 percent in fall 2024.

In addition, advisors ask incoming students if they plan to transfer and where they might want to transfer.

“We keep that information in our system, and then the transfer advisors reach out to the students,” says Yolanda Benally, dean of students. “And if a student expressed interest in transferring to New Mexico State, for example, they get an email when the college is coming to campus.”

The transfer center has three counselors, one of whom is provided by a partner university. The counselors make sure the transition to the student’s next institution is seamless. They also conduct outreach, such as setting up tables near the cafeteria to talk with students and holding an annual transfer fair.

“They started the transfer fair three years ago, and every year it gets bigger and better,” Benally says. “This year, it’s five days so it’s basically transfer week. It includes a number of colleges that come to campus and give students information about how to transfer and what classes will transfer.”

Participating in Rural Pathways also helped SJC think about how to keep more students on a pathway even when their initial plans must change.

“Because of the data Rural Pathways provided us, we know, for example, that a lot of our students want to become nurses, but not all of them get into the nursing program,” Pendergrass explains. “So we aligned prerequisites across health sciences so students who originally planned on nursing can enter into a related pathway.”

Meeting Students' Basic Needs

"Rural Pathways led to changes in eliminating prerequisite remediation courses and new strategies for onboarding and advising, which were all important, but another big part of our success has been focusing more on students' needs beyond the classroom," Reyes says. "We have done a lot to help students with food insecurity, housing, health care, and other needs. This holistic approach has been critical to helping students succeed."

The outreach begins with better understanding each student's circumstances.

"We started using a New Student Basic Needs Intake Survey that we got from the Rural Pathways project," Benally explains. "Every student is surveyed about food insecurity and other needs when they enter SJC."

"We also have conversations with our students when we advise them," adds Pendergrass. "We ask every student the same seven questions, and as a result, we learn more about our students and connect them to resources."

At SJC:

- * 1 in 3 students are experiencing housing insecurity;
- * 1 in 3 students do not have reliable home technology (internet access or a personal computer);
- * 1 in 5 students do not have reliable utilities;
- * 1 in 8 students do not have reliable transportation; and
- * 1 in 10 students are experiencing food insecurity.

SJC is in its third year of providing housing for students, and college leaders learned that one in three students who use the college's housing did not return home for breaks because of life circumstances or lack of resources. The college then provided students who did not leave campus with \$150 meal cards to local establishments to use while campus food service was closed.

Career Pathways and Starting Early

"Because of Rural Pathways, we started focusing on ensuring students get placed into jobs and get work experience while they're here," Pendergrass says. "During the first few Institutes, we talked about what our vision is. And we really wanted to place students into family-sustaining jobs here in our community. So we do a lot of recruiting events and mock interviews. We obtained funding to pay students \$15 to \$20 an hour to work as interns with local employers."

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SJC hosts a career pathways expo for all eighth graders in the college's service area. The expo includes more than 50 local employers who talk with the young students about jobs.

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"That's 1,700 eighth graders coming to our campus each year," Pendergrass says. "They get some career coaching and choose two pathways. They explore one pathway in the morning and one in the afternoon, and over lunch, they visit the employers' booths."

To continue to build the college-going mindset, SJC hosts a National Signing Day that is modeled on sports signing days. Any student who plans to enroll in one of SJC's career technical education programs is invited to sign a letter of intent and commit to their education.

"Students put on the college's cap and sign their letter in front of friends and family," Pendergrass explains. "We also have a drawing for 10 \$1,000 scholarships."