Strategic Implementation for Guided Pathways Reform

Josh Wyner, Founder and Executive Director
Aspen Institute College Excellence Program

Rural Guided Pathways Virtual Leadership Session
September 3, 2026

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Today's Agenda

Time (ET)	Activity
9:00 – 9:05 AM	Welcome and Session Overview
9:05 – 9:20 AM	Strategic Implementation for Guided Pathways Reform
9:20 – 9:50 AM	A Lesson from the Field: Sustaining Implementation for Continuous Institutional Improvement
9:50 – 11:20 AM	Team Time: Strategically Implementing Guided Pathways Reforms
11:20 – 11:30 AM	Evaluation and Closing

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Today's Agenda

Time (ET)	Activity
1:00 – 1:05 PM	Welcome and Session Overview
1:05 – 1:20 PM	Strategic Implementation for Guided Pathways Reform
1:20 – 1:50 PM	A Lesson from the Field: Sustaining Implementation for Continuous Institutional Improvement
1:50 – 3:20 PM	Team Time: Strategically Implementing Guided Pathways Reforms
3:20 – 3:30 PM	Evaluation and Closing

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Today's Objectives

Learning Goals

- Understand and apply a logic model to strategically connect guided pathway reforms to an improvement in student outcomes
- Understand strategies for rural colleges to more effectively use limited institutional resources to design, implement, and evaluate guided pathway reforms

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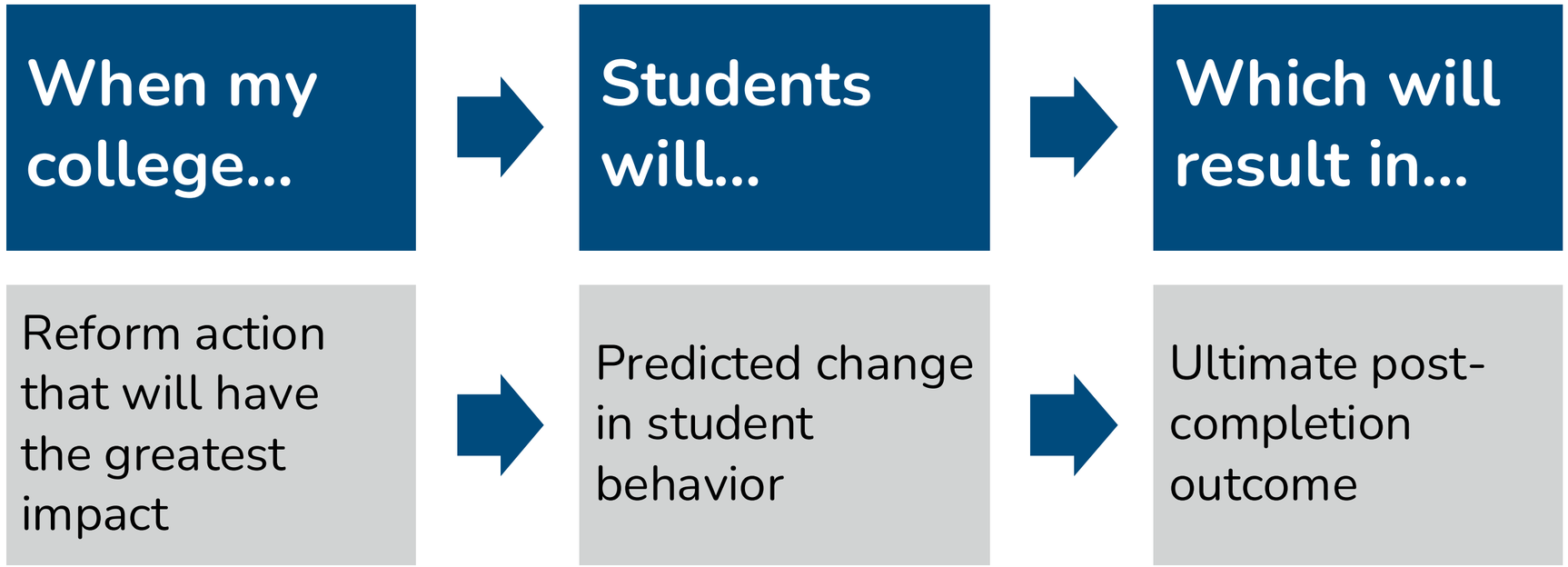
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Logic Model

Connecting College Actions to Post-Completion Outcomes



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Example: Alamo Colleges District (San Antonio College)

Students Are Moved Through Educational Plans to Pathway Completion

Logic Model

Reform action

If the college implements an advising system with mandatory touchpoints, strong advisor training, and a low student-advisor ratio….

- Scaled Alamo ADVISE to entire 90k student system, including robust systems for advising with six mandatory touchpoints; strong advisor training and student-advisor ratio of 350:1
- Strong dual enrollment and early college partnerships enable thousands of additional students to participate before graduating high school

Change in student behavior and related outcomes

…students will make earlier decisions about program choice and courses aligned to their pathway and be more likely to stay on that pathway…

ALAMO COLLEGES DISTRICT

San Antonio College
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Ultimate outcomes

…resulting in increased community college graduation and transfer/bachelor's outcomes, and decreased credits/time to degree.

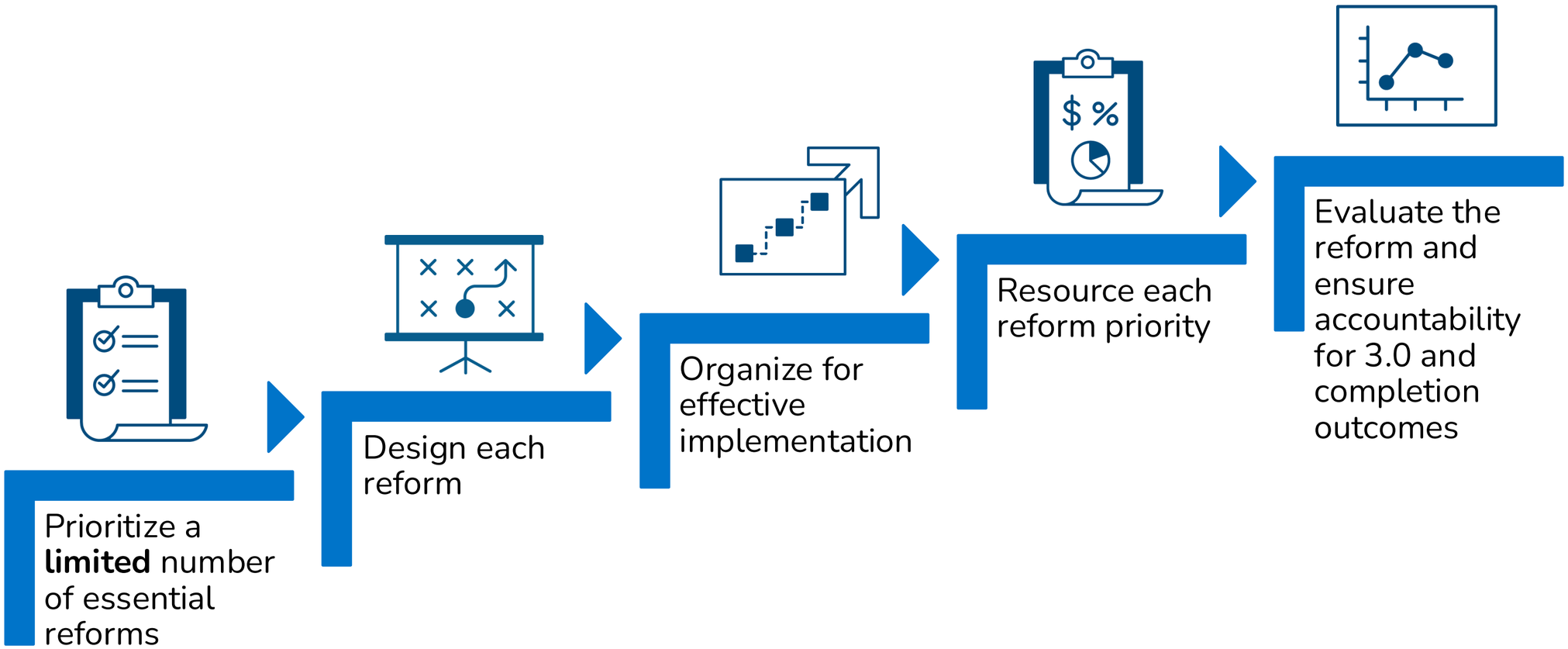
At San Antonio College:

- Reduced credit hours to degree from 80.5 to 65.1
- Reduced time to degree from 4.36 years to 3.76 years
- Increased three-year graduation rate from 19.9% to 30.4%

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Steps in Strategic Implementation



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Prioritize a Limited Number of Essential Reforms

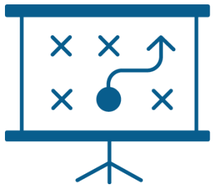


	From Traditional	To Transformational
Clarity	Long list of disconnected, initiatives, none taken to scale	Clear focus on a limited number of prioritized reforms, each grounded in specific student outcomes goals and a clear theory of change aimed at scale
Scale	Even if successful, reforms will impact a small proportion of students in the short term and are not developed with a plan to scale what works over the long run	Reforms are designed for scale, meaning they will impact outcomes for large numbers of students and, if successful, could reach every student who could benefit
Decision-Making	Decisions on which reforms to pursue are bottom-up, subject to group consensus, and are not adequately tied to specific student outcomes that drive decision-making	Decisions about reform strategies are tied to specific outcomes goals, rigorously tested using a logic model, and decided by the president with other senior leaders

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Design Each Reform

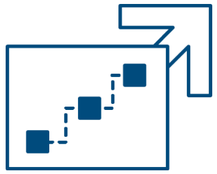


	From Traditional	To Transformational
Planning	Reform work begins with immediate, most obvious tasks with no vision for ultimate success in mind or plans to complete and institutionalize work in place	Reform work begins with an ideal vision for future state, planning end-to-end redesign over multiple years, and metrics and milestones selected place for entire reform lifecycle, through institutionalization
Consideration of Context	Reforms are designed without consideration of alignment to other institutional priorities or likelihood of success	Reforms are designed to reach specific goals and chosen considering what is possible, given past institutional reform successes and capacity to do the work
Strategy for Implementation	Limited to no consideration is given to details of implementation, including people, resources, and communications needed for success	Leaders consider key implementation questions during design, including how to communicate the importance of reform, who and what resources are needed, and over what time the work can/should be done

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Organize for Effective Implementation



	From Traditional	To Transformational
Team Structure and Composition	Siloed efforts with separate design teams and implementation teams, or work teams within individual divisions	• Cross-functional teams including those who design and implement on the same team • Senior team members are deeply engaged • Strong implementation capacity with training/coaching for managing reforms is included where needed
Charging the Team	Committees are assigned a reform task without clarity on outcomes to be achieved or timelines for completion	Reform teams are provided clear reasons the reform matters, specific outcomes expected from their work, timelines for completion, and agency to be partners to the president and senior team in the reform
Climate	Culture demands rigid adherence to the plan	Leaders proactively create an implementation climate that makes clear that the outcomes are what matter most and that fidelity to the model should be balanced with adaptability needed to succeed

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Resource Each Reform Priority

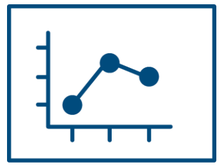


	From Traditional	To Transformational
Design & Resourcing	Readily available resources or current budget drives scope and design of the reform	Design a reform that will work and then determine resourcing from multiple years' budgets and external partners
Budget Relevance	Reform is viewed as an “add on” to budget	Ongoing budget relevance is ensured, with reallocation from core functions as needed
Resourcing	Little planning for what resources and training are needed for success	Proactive planning for all necessary resources and training that will lead to successful implementation
Human Capital	Belief that all new reforms require new personnel	• New reforms take existing personnel into account (i.e., retrain or restructure) • New reforms are used to shift resources away from less impactful work

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Evaluate the Reform and Ensure Accountability for 3.0 and Completion Outcomes



	From Traditional	To Transformational
Focus	Colleges define success as completing the initiative rather than impact (e.g., installing early alert system versus assessing how many faculty use it and how it improves student success)	College leaders and implementation teams have a clear working theory in mind that connects reform activities to changed behaviors to specific student outcome goals
Goals	Goals and outcomes for the reform always seem to fluctuate	Maintain fidelity to original goals and outcomes with discipline, recharging the team or introducing new members as needed
Components of Reform	Failures to meet milestones are explained away and reform components or even goals change to fit status quo	Adhere to “keep-stop-start”

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Indian River State College

Cross-Functional Work Groups for Transformational and Efficient Guided Pathways Implementation



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Context: Cabinet oversees student success initiatives while a broad range of stakeholders works in cross-functional "work groups"—no more "committees"

Reforms:

- Work groups are:
  - Formed at the direction of the senior team to address a critical area for improvement and are always temporary
  - Charged to meet for a predetermined amount of time to study a particular topic, propose a reform and deadlines to the cabinet, and then disband
  - Limited in number and elevated as important to the college and a form of professional development
  - Always started with members studying student success data to understand the problem holistically and then deliberating to propose solutions

Results: Less than a year passed from the decision to launch guided pathways reforms to the establishment of clear course sequences and pathways maps for every program.

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Lessons from the Field: Sustaining Implementation for Continuous Institutional Improvement



John Enamait

President, Stanly Community College

Moderator: Josh Wyner

Founder and Executive Director, Aspen Institute College Excellence Program

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Participant Toolkit p. 6

Team Time: Strategically Implementing Guided Pathways Reforms



- For the next **90 minutes**, you will spend time in breakout rooms with your college team.
- Coaches will join you for a portion of the breakout session as they move between teams.
- Complete the activity on pp. 7-8 of the Participant Toolkit to develop a logic model for your guided pathways reform implementation and review your Strategic Implementation Assessment results.
- We will return to the main room at **11:20 AM ET.**

Participant Toolkit pp. 7-8

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Participant Toolkit pp. 7-8

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Session Evaluation

Thank you for completing our session evaluation!
We value your feedback and use it to continuously improve.

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Thank You



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