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Making Pathways work for Alamo Colleges students and faculty thanks to IEBC guidance

Leaders at the Alamo Colleges District in Texas are wholeheartedly embracing the approaching changes surrounding the Pathways movement at its five campuses serving the San Antonio region.

Dr. Jo-Carol Fabianke, Vice Chancellor for Academic Success, said six general career pathways were originally created for their students based on identified marketable skills, including those within all transfer programs and workforce programs. But in many cases, courses within traditional major programs weren't being accepted when students transferred to area universities. This precipitated a bold move.



“We did away with majors in our colleges all at the same time,” explains Dr. Fabianke. Transfer students were asked to declare a “pre-major” and the colleges would work diligently to make sure each student would take courses that would count when they transferred.

Dr. Fabianke knew Alamo needed guidance to construct ways to make it work, and called upon Dr. Brad Phillips, President/CEO of IEBC, to speak to a small leadership group about IEBC and how it might help Alamo's programs develop learning-focused pathways incorporating

student learning outcomes (SLOs) with College to Career Pathways.

“On the transfer side, the whole Pathways movement starts with the understanding that every student who goes to college is really looking for a career,” said Dr. Fabianke. “That's a different way of thinking for liberal arts and even science faculty. Students want to get on the pathway, get a job, and move on.”

Dr. Fabianke acknowledges this can be troubling to liberal arts faculty. “There was a lot of ‘you don't care about liberal arts anymore, you're only concerned about the student working toward a career,’” said Dr. Fabianke. But with proper alignment, “the liberal arts courses are going to become even more important. The critical thinking and teamwork they teach are workforce skills.”

Alamo Colleges assembled a team made up of several faculty members from each of its five campuses to work with IEBC's Marianne Wokeck, Director, CtCC SmartPathways; John Yopp Director, Strategic Partnerships, and Jean Petty, CtCC SmartPathways Facilitator, to work through the complex mapping process.

“Dr. Yopp did a phenomenal job mapping jobs with four year degrees in each of our career pathways,” said Dr. Fabianke. “He looked at the requirements from employers for each of our jobs. This is what we used to align SLOs in core curriculum with requirements for specific jobs. His work was just unbelievable. John explained how he came up with the jobs and the competencies for each of those jobs in the career pathways ... Faculty were really starting with something that was well researched and documented.”

Throughout the work process, Dr. Fabianke said the faculty became aware of the connection between what they teach to what students acquire from being in their classes, with the goal of creating productive members of the workforce.

“(Faculty) can see the bigger results, the bigger picture when they finish a class. They could see the real alignment which is what IEBC is about, the alignment of their courses to the students’ future skills for life,” said Dr. Fabianke.

Seismic shifts aren’t accomplished quickly, but they begin with clear recognition of the goals. “(IEBC’s program) didn’t solve every problem we ever had, but on the closing day (participants) made comments that were evidence of a better understanding of how their piece fits in with the whole. The whole idea of a core curriculum is that you’re preparing the student for the rest of their educational career and setting the foundation. It’s no one course alone,” said Dr. Fabianke.

Dr. Fabianke hopes the Alamo Colleges faculty who feel disenfranchised from the Pathways approach will feel included and that they are playing an important role in the process.

“We are asking faculty as part of the Pathways work to think about how they can engage students in applying the subject matter,” said Dr. Fabianke. “We need to help students apply critical thinking to the career field they’re going to enter. What are the career requirements for that job they want to enter? We can’t do it overnight, but we can get faculty talking and that’s what gets them excited.”

“Faculty love to explore and talk about ideas,” explained Dr. Fabianke. “This was a way to have a structured discussion about what they teach and how it impacts students longer term.”

“I was surprised, by the last day the real skeptics at the beginning were not totally convinced, but they were more convinced than they wanted to admit. They’ll take the parts that work for them.”

Dr. Fabianke says it’s vital to help students visualize their end goal, and see their progress toward that goal throughout their course of study. “We want students to begin to see this in their first two years, to know they are headed toward something. So many of our students don’t continue. It doesn’t take much for a single mother to quit. We want them to believe they’re progressing,” said Dr. Fabianke.

Dr. Fabianke hopes to bring IEBC back to Alamo Colleges early in 2018 to meet with the college leadership and reflect on what they’ve learned to date, and work with Dr. Phillips and John Yopp to help identify some gaps.

“We sometimes want to wait until everyone’s on board. That’s never going to happen,” admitted Dr. Fabianke. “We’re going to do it, and see if it works ... Sometimes you need skeptics to test your hypotheses. It was a good process. Sometimes the process is as important as the product. In this case, the process was very valuable.”

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