

QEP NEWSLETTER

FALL 2025 | EDITION 2

GUIDED PATHWAYS: CAREER CLUSTERS. WHY DO WE NEED THEM?

Why have career clusters? Career clusters are the foundation of the Guided Pathways framework, the basis of the first pillar.

- Access and Clarity--choose a field of study without needing to know exact credentials up front.
 - Multiple onramps for a diverse population
 - Multiple outcomes to support a variety of goals.
- Cohorts--career clusters enable contextualized ACA, English, Math, and familiar faces throughout the journey.
- The division between Continuing Education and curriculum disappears for students.
- Marketing and communication--clusters can be branded--given clear, distinct identities that extend to websites, documents, and more.



HELP ME UNDERSTAND...

Some programs appear to fit into two career clusters. That is okay--programs can appear in multiple clusters. The goal is not to put things in boxes, but rather to facilitate access and clarity for our students and our community.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Strengthening Guided Pathways and Career Success by Ensuring Students are Learning](#)
- [What We Know About Guided Pathways](#)
- [Guided Pathways Resource Series](#)
- [ICC's QEP Website](#)

CAREER CLUSTERS IDENTIFIED:

The QEP Steering Committee has identified the following career clusters which have been reviewed by Academic Council:

- Business, Finance, and Marketing
- Healthcare and Wellness
- Human Services and Education
- Public Safety
- Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math
- Arts, Entertainment, and Design
- Industry, Trades, and Transportation

WHAT ABOUT THE OTHER PROGRAMS?

Some programs do not appear to fit cleanly into any of these clusters. This is addressed in a variety of ways:

- **College and Career Readiness:** this area can be visually distinct to ensure it is immediately and easily accessible to its audience. At the same time, it integrates into every cluster as a potential onramp.
- **Arts and Sciences:** This area is integral to all clusters, representing important coursework for every degree, as well as a likely transfer pathway for students in every cluster who seek a four-year degree.
- **Community Engagement and Personal Enrichment:** This encompasses offerings that do not focus on pathways with economic outcomes for our students. It can stand alone, allowing students to easily engage with particular offerings.

ISOTHERMAL'S TIMELINE

2024-2025 (Year Zero)

- **Identify Career Clusters (meta majors) to organize programs accordingly.**
- Complete Articulation Agreement review
- **Revise academic maps for ACA in first semester, gateway English and Math in first year, balanced semesters**
- **Preliminary pathway building**

2025-2026 (Year One) YOU ARE HERE

- Host SACSCOC team on campus (October)
- Continue building pathways
- Marketing rollout
- Develop and launch contextualized ACA and English by Career Cluster
- Revise curriculums to optimized program length (within 5% of state mandated minimums)
- New Student Orientation Spring 2026

2026-2027 (Year Two)

- Contextualized ACA Spring 2027
- Contextualized ENG 111 Fall 2027

2027-2028 (Year Three)

- Contextualized MAT Spring 2028

Have a question or feedback to share with the QEP Steering Committee? Submit it by clicking here.



ATTENTION

LEAD INSTRUCTORS

SCAN HERE!!

BY 09.18.25

Help the
QEP Steering Committee
align programs with career
clusters.



“I am committed to this work because building intentional pathways not only improves student outcomes, but also strengthens our college's mission to serve our community.

— Katie Canipe

GUIDED PATHWAYS MYTHS VS TRUTHS

Myth 1: “Guided Pathways limits student choices.”

Truth: Pathways don’t take away options — they organize them. Students still choose their career goals, but now with a clear roadmap that shows how each course leads to a degree, transfer, or career.

Myth 2: “Guided Pathways makes every student’s journey the same.”

Truth: Each student’s journey is personalized. The pathway provides structure, but advisors help students adjust their plan to fit personal interests, transfer destinations, and career goals.

Myth 3: “Guided Pathways is only about getting students to graduate faster.”

Truth: While completion is important, pathways also help students make informed decisions, avoid excess credits, and connect to career opportunities in Rutherford and Polk Counties. It’s about success, not just speed.

Myth 4: “Advising isn’t needed if students have a pathway.”

Truth: Advisors are even more important in a pathways model. They serve as guides, mentors, and problem-solvers, helping students choose the right track and stay on course when life gets complicated.

Myth 5: “Pathways are only for students who already know what they want to do.”

Truth: Pathways help undecided students explore broad fields (like Health Sciences, Business, STEM, or Arts & Humanities) while earning credits that count toward a degree. They can explore without losing time or money.

Myth 6: “Guided Pathways is just a new trend.”

Truth: Guided Pathways is a research-based model used nationally. Colleges implementing it have seen higher student retention, graduation, and transfer success — and employers’ benefit from a stronger local workforce.



GUIDED PATHWAYS MYTHS VS TRUTHS

Myth 7: “Guided Pathways only helps students who want to transfer.”

Truth: Pathways serve all students — whether transferring, earning an industry credential, or entering the workforce. In counties like Rutherford and Polk, this means stronger connections between education and local career opportunities.

Myth 8: “Guided Pathways weakens academic programs by making them too generic.”

Truth: Pathways strengthen programs by clarifying requirements, aligning courses, and ensuring every class builds relevant skills. This gives programs a stronger identity and makes graduates more prepared.

Myth 9: “All programs are treated the same under Guided Pathways.”

Truth: Each program retains its unique strengths and faculty expertise. Pathways highlight these strengths by showcasing program outcomes, career connections, and transfer opportunities in a clear, student-centered way.

Myth 10: “Pathways will water down rigor to move students through more quickly.”

Truth: Academic rigor stays intact. What changes is the clarity — students understand why each course matters and how it fits into their program. This helps them stay motivated and engaged, which in turn strengthens completion rates.

Myth 11: “Guided Pathways means programs lose flexibility and creativity.”

Truth: Programs actually gain flexibility by reducing unnecessary barriers and emphasizing electives or concentrations that serve student and community needs. Faculty input shapes pathways, so programs keep their creative edge.

Myth 12: “Program identity will get lost in broad pathways.”

Truth: Pathways shine a spotlight on program strengths by grouping them into larger areas of study. This makes it easier for undecided students to discover programs they might not have considered otherwise.

