

# Symposium: Students Guiding Pathways

> Christie Toth, Emily Brown, Priscilla Hansen, Laura Burnham, Adriana Zarate, Aloyious Soranno, Trey Sanders, and Kathryn Henderson

In this symposium, seven community college transfer students present their perspectives on Guided Pathways curricular reforms. Drawing on published scholarship and policy documents as well as their own lived experiences, they identify positive aspects of the Guided Pathways model as well as shortcomings in its conceptualization and local implementation.

## Christie Toth

As coeditors Kirsten Higgins, Anthony Warnke, and I discussed this special issue of *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, we observed how much of the discourse surrounding Guided Pathways talks *about* students without ever directly involving them in local decision-making, development, or implementation. Articles in the special issue document ways that Guided Pathways initiatives have sidelined disciplinary knowledge and values, undercut critical education for democratic participation, and marginalized community college literacy faculty. All these dynamics are assumed to have negative consequences for students. However, we believe *students* should be direct participants in this conversation—not as generalized figures whose “success” is invoked rhetorically, and not just as survey respondents, focus group participants, or interviewees in faculty-driven research (although that work is valuable, too), but as intellectuals and writers capable of reading Guided Pathways publications and relevant scholarship and drawing on their lived experiences to offer essential perspectives on the “redesign” undertaken in their names.

The seven essays in this Symposium were written by Salt Lake Community College (SLCC) students who have transferred to the University of Utah (U of U), majored or minored in writing and rhetoric studies, and participated in the Writing Studies Scholars transfer bridge program: Emily Brown, Priscilla Hansen, Laura Burnham, Adriana Zarate, Aloyious Soranno, Trey Sanders, and Kathryn Henderson. I currently co-coordinate Writing Studies Scholars with a team of three transfer students that includes Emily Brown. The program is an ever-evolving partnership between SLCC and the U of U. As writing faculty, we began working with transfer student co-researchers to develop the bridge program in 2015. It was officially launched in 2017, right after SLCC started its Guided Pathways initiatives and just before the

Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) started putting pressure on the U of U to develop more coherent “transfer pathways.” Despite some shared skepticism regarding the Guided Pathways model, we have sometimes made strategic use of “pathways” discourse to advance Writing Studies Scholars and SLCC’s new transfer AS degree in writing studies (see Ruffus and Toth; Ruffus et al.; Toth; Toth et al.). Over the last seven years, SLCC transfer students have been navigating the ever-shifting terrain of Guided Pathways–related curricular reforms, changes to advising, and the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Those experiences shaped the essays these student authors crafted for this symposium.

Here’s how we went about composing it. Using the Writing Studies Scholars email listserv and Slack channel, I invited all students in the program to participate in a special tuition-free section of WRTG 4990: Undergraduate Research, a three-credit U of U course that counts toward the writing and rhetoric studies major or minor. This invitation stated that the course would meet weekly over Zoom at a day and time that worked for every student on the team and that everyone in WRTG 4990 would have an optional opportunity to publish the short essay they developed for the course. Nine students signed up, and six were able to sustain their participation through the spring 2023 semester. (All students enrolled in WRTG 4990 had a no-penalty drop option for the course if they needed it.)

Those six contributors met weekly throughout the semester (a seventh student joined the project after the spring semester ended, caught up on the readings listed, and met with me regularly to develop their symposium contribution). During the first half of the semester, we read, group-annotated, and discussed the following texts:

- > *Reimagining America’s Community Colleges* (Bailey et al.)
- > Mike Rose’s 2016 blog posts and *Inside Higher Ed* article responding to that book
- > A series of reports by the Community College Research Center (CCRC) published between 2017 and 2021 (Fink; Jenkins et al., *How*; Jenkins et al., “What”)
- > Articles by several non-CCRC scholars complicating or critiquing aspects of the Guided Pathways model (Bensimon; Goudas; Huerta et al.; Schnee)

After some early-semester brainstorming about our collaborative process, we also decided to maintain a group reading log where students commented on aspects of each week’s readings that resonated with their experiences, noted questions or confusions that arose, and questioned ideas or proposals they found to be off base, ineffective, or potentially harmful. Throughout the semester, we reflected on our respective experiences navigating postsecondary education and our emerging assessments of Guided Pathways in theory and practice. The students independently researched additional sources relevant to their symposium essays. In the latter half of the semester, they planned and drafted their essays, provided feedback to one another, revised, and conferenced with me individually. We finalized the essays through summer and fall 2023, and Emily Brown, Priscilla Hansen, and Kathryn Henderson shared their work at the 2023 TYCA-West conference in Salt Lake.

Throughout the semester, we discussed a range of ways we could approach writing the essays. Most contributors chose to write primarily about their own experiences, some drew on conversations with other students, and they varied in the degree to which they chose to engage directly with the pieces we read and/or with additional sources they found through their own research. In their individual essays, these authors chose to discuss which aspects of their identities they see as relevant to their paths through education, and they did so in their own terms.

The conversations we had throughout the semester—and what and how everyone chose to write—were inevitably shaped by my own positionality as the facilitator of the project. I am a white, middle-class, able-bodied, forty-one-year-old cis woman who was born a US citizen and grew up speaking a variety of English that approximates the mythical standard advantaged in US academic settings. My parents were both career military officers with college degrees. I enrolled full-time in a four-year college right out of high school. I am a parent now, but I did not have those responsibilities when I was a student. Although I have taught part-time at several community colleges and worked closely with community college transfer students over the last decade, my educational path has been privileged relative to these authors. I know them as their professor and as coordinator of Writing Studies Scholars; indeed, I met several of them when they were still students at SLCC. While our multiyear relationships foster some degree of trust, those ties can also be constraints. I am a conduit for institutional resources, and that heightens my relative power. This symposium would have turned out differently if it had been facilitated by someone who came to the project with other identities, experiences, and/or commitments.

The essays in this symposium foreground some of the diverse paths community college students take to and through postsecondary education, the evolving goals and values that motivate them, and the personal experiences and material conditions that shape their choices and their journeys. The authors highlight aspects of the Guided Pathways model that did—or might have—provided them with useful support. They also identify shortcomings in its conceptualization and implementation, particularly its failures to account for their complex lives and desires to learn. I came away from our many conversations with a deeper understanding of how much these students have sacrificed and continue to juggle as they pursue education amid the many demands on their time, attention, and resources. I am moved by their drive for learning experiences that are about more than the job at some imagined end of the path. In their various ways, each of these authors is seeking personal growth and fulfillment in their day-to-day labor, as well as wider opportunities for their families and ways

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to contribute to positive social change. Every one of them deserves more options and support than the system has provided, and I don't believe there is one singular path, however well guided, that could serve all of them equitably.

## **Emily Brown**

I am a first-generation college student. I enrolled at Salt Lake Community College (SLCC) the fall after high school in 2019. Part of my admission phase was during my senior year. I took concurrent enrollment classes credited to SLCC and had help from a guidance counselor when it came to my initial application and financial aid. She was knowledgeable and patient in helping me determine my goals in higher education. By the time I graduated, I was equipped with a plan to go to SLCC and get my associate degree before transferring to the University of Utah.

There were some initial tasks to do in order to register for classes at SLCC. First, I was required to meet with an advisor with the goal to declare a major. When I met my advisor, I told him about my potential career goals. I said that I wanted to study history and that I was also passionate about the humanities and psychology. He told me that history “wouldn't make me money” and that he had been a history major too and regretted it. He then pulled up my registration portal and asked, “How about something like an education major?” explaining that it would be “a more profitable pursuit.” The next few moments I remember being on autopilot: nodding along as he declared me in the education major while I spiraled into the anxious pit of wondering what to do with my life. I changed my declaration many times throughout the next two years, going from education, to humanities, a brief time in English, then finally sociology.

I'm told that I attended SLCC when the Guided Pathways model was already introduced, but it still felt like a cafeteria model in the sense that I was self-serving with little institutional interference. I chose not to continue seeing my advisor as I felt that all it would get me was deterrence from my interests. Without him, though, it was up to me to navigate the college climate. I figured that if I could learn enough about what classes were being offered, then I would be able to spot the avenues that were available to me. This is where the Guided Pathways model concerns me, and where I feel that the advisor and I clashed. I wanted to enroll in an array of subjects so that I could narrow down what felt right for me. Instead, the pressure to have clarity and stick to a path was a direct contrast of that. Partly why I was swapping majors so much was because I couldn't take some classes without being declared in the program that the class was “for.” I was weaving in and out of pathways rather than being guided on one. Was this approach very cost-effective? Was it time-efficient? I'll never be sure because there was no other option for me. After all, what was I supposed to know about my future without first knowing what I was good at?

I understand the advisor's intentions for placing me into a path, and I want to say that I ultimately agree with the Guided Pathways model in its goal to be a precise path carved for students to travel down. But I still feel like that only works with the students who know what they're there for or have an equally precise idea of

what they want to “be.” Where is the room for students to experiment? Where can first-generation college students take the time and space to learn about themselves? Knowing what you want to do in life is a privilege and is often paired with the assumption that adolescence is spent on “discovering” yourself. That wasn’t the case for me. I did what was required of me to go to SLCC, and I felt that also earned me the right to treat education as a process. I’d like to see Guided Pathways make space for that liberty to simply learn.

### **Priscilla Hansen**

In the fall of 2016, I would approach my third attempt at a college education, as a thirty-five-year-old Latina single mother. I enrolled at SLCC with a clear goal of obtaining my associate degree in economics with the hope of transferring to the University of Utah. I am a first-generation college student who was in the foster care system until I was adopted at the age of twelve. Neither my adopted parents nor my birth parent had an education past high school, and I was not equipped with the tools or knowledge on how colleges worked or how to even navigate the college experience. My dad had passed away in March of 2015, and my mom was on the verge of her own death after being diagnosed with lung cancer. To say the odds were stacked against me is treading the topic lightly. The one thing I did have going was a burning desire to get an education beyond my GED and to succeed, no matter the cost.

My first attempt at college was a community college in Denver in the spring of 2001, where I attended a few classes one semester and then was forced to withdraw after being caught in a blizzard that caused a horrible car accident that landed me in the hospital with a severe concussion. When I enrolled at SLCC, the furthest I had gotten in my education was through Weber State University, where I attended two semesters during the 2009–2010 academic year. During my second semester at Weber State, I would face my first difficulties with my mental health in that I would start to experience panic attacks, unbeknownst to me at the time. I had never experienced a panic attack before, but I knew something was not right due to the feeling of an elephant sitting on my chest, my scattered mental focus, and inability to retain the information I was attempting to read for my sociology class. I would eventually withdraw after seeking therapy weekly and being told I needed to be on medication to manage my diagnosis: severe PTSD and depression. Shamefully and regretfully, I withdrew from all classes with a written note by my psychiatrist outlining my diagnosis.

Fast-forward to summer of 2016. I had spent the past five or so years in trauma therapy and learning how to manage my diagnosis in a holistic, natural way. Eating well for gut care, meditating to ease and calm the mind, doing yoga for breath awareness, engaging in running and other physical movement to feel the air expand in my lungs, and getting my hands on all reading material pertaining to mental health and self-help. These practices also taught me the importance of boundaries and self-advocacy, fighting for what you want and will work for, and not allowing anyone or anything to get in your way. In the months leading up to my first semester at SLCC,

I thought I had prepared myself mentally for this journey, determined to succeed no matter how long this path would be. Because of my limited availability outside of my full-time job and raising my daughter, it would take me six years to earn my associate degree, with honors, in economics.

In Guided Pathways, one of the processes mentioned for success is creating a “path” for students by requiring meetings with an advisor and creating the plan—your blueprint, essentially. It also mentions the need for the teachers to be involved and have a certain level of care and compassion for the students. The one thing I do not recall reading is the absolutely essential requirement of the student’s willingness to participate in the plan and be guided. I credit my success to hard work, having an open mind to navigate a system I was entirely ignorant about, persistence, tenacity, and serendipitously meeting the right individuals, professors, advisors, and assistant

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deans. My goal here is to recount these experiences, identify the hurdles I was faced with, and describe how I went about overcoming these hurdles.

The Guided Pathways approach in *Redesigning America’s Community Colleges* (Bailey et al.) recommends creating a path for the student from the moment they enroll and having them choose a field of study their courses would inherently be modeled around. The end goal being the student will take courses that are aligned

with their field of study, resulting in a higher completion and transfer rate with the ultimate goal of transferring successfully to a university to complete their bachelor’s degree. Through the readings and discussions with peers for this symposium, the Guided Pathways model felt oddly familiar, as I felt this model had possibly been implemented throughout my time at SLCC and guided me to where I am now, a junior at the University of Utah double-majoring in economics and writing and rhetoric studies. I found that the first academic year this model was implemented was the first year I enrolled, 2016–2017. Based on interactions with my peers, I recognized early that the model had flaws for some and did not and sometimes does not work for students, leading them to drop out after feeling defeated when they get low placement on math and English tests, experience financial burdens, or simply because of life. While I experienced my fair share of turbulence during my tenure at SLCC, I had a little girl reminding me to never stop and always fight for what I want.

The Guided Pathways model ensured that I met with an advisor within the first semester of my enrollment to create a plan and to sign up for placement tests for math and English. I’ve since learned these placement tests can be quite a barrier to individuals completing or even staying enrolled in community colleges. During the advising meeting, I was shown Degree Works, which is an online platform that allows you to build an educational plan along with what-if scenarios, should something in life arise, and for someone like me it allowed for me to visualize a path forward. I’ll

be honest: the advisor created a plan for me, but it wouldn't be until my fourth year that I would understand how to access this plan and review it. My advisor changed multiple times during my time at SLCC, one of the frustrating experiences that is also highlighted in the Guided Pathways model: the need for full-time advisors and for that advisor to stay with the student throughout their time in the college.

I was placed in Math 980 and English 1010 and decided to start there. Easy enough, right? Not so much. My next math class, Math 1010, proved to be a difficult hurdle for me and would be a deciding factor in me attending in-person classes. I took this class three different times before finally passing, and because of the failed classes I was placed on probation for my financial aid and required to create a plan with an advisor on how I

would ensure my success going forward, should they give me a pass to try again. Most students would have given up. I instead took advantage of the failure to learn from it and realized I had certain learning requirements for me to succeed. I enrolled in in-person classes and took Math 1010 at a 7 a.m. time slot with a professor I learned to trust, which led to me feeling comfortable enough to be vulnerable about my learning needs and requirements. This experience empowered me to overcome the hurdles and advocate for myself and what I required as a student. Because I felt empowered, I also started to feel comfortable speaking during class lectures and allowed myself to become acquainted with my peers and professors, creating connections that would ensure my success. I finally felt like I had a community of support, a community that I did not have outside of the classroom.

When I had Covid in December of 2020, I had to postpone my final exams. Upon taking the exams, I was accused of cheating by my Econ 1010 professor. I was shattered, frustrated, scared and felt a little hopeless. How? He explained he added six trick questions to the final exam and I got four out of the six correct. If I wanted to appeal, I would first have to have a Zoom session with him and prove my work and then I must file an appeal with the Econ department. It was during this appeal that I connected with the assistant interim dean of economics. He provided me with the information necessary and guided me through the process and followed up with me frequently, which made me feel seen and heard. I filed my appeal, pleaded my case, was found to be innocent and moved on from that experience, never looking back.

As I became more familiar with the college experience, I also learned how to choose the right questions to ask when I met with my advisor, a practice I continued through my academic career at SLCC. Questions like: When are courses offered? Are they during spring or fall semester? This was crucial when I neared graduation to ensure I took courses that were applicable to my associate degree and eventual major, economics. During my final semester, my new advisor reached out to advise me that I would not graduate, because I was short one credit. In my ignorance, I did not know that each course catalog has a time limit, and when you enroll, that

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same course catalog follows you through your academic career. I quickly reached out to the assistant dean, explaining my situation, armored with my notes from all previous meetings with advisors. Once again, a committee would meet and review my transcripts and decide on whether I could graduate. Each advisor, professor, assistant dean, and peer I encountered genuinely helped me pave my path forward. While I will note how frustrating it was that my advisors changed so often and how the hurdles in themselves created a mountain of work and institutional systems for me to navigate, in the end, all these connections I made guided me to the pathway I am currently on.

I graduated in May 2022 with honors and my associate degree in economics. I transferred successfully to the University of Utah in the fall of 2022 to pursue my bachelor's degree in economics, with every single credit I completed at SLCC accounted for and applied toward my major and without taking any unnecessary classes.

### **Laura Burnham**

My path through the education system has been less than conventional. I started university as many do, eighteen, fresh out of high school, and hardly even a little prepared for the responsibilities ahead despite having a parent with multiple college degrees and three older siblings who were on that same path. Like most students, my high school had not properly prepared me, but I also had a couple of learning disabilities that made this jump in education even harder. High school had not prepared me for having to hold myself accountable for all the work I had to do, and resources that might've helped me with this transition were not readily available. Before, I had teachers and parents who were quick to jump in if assignments were missing. In first-year college courses, I was one of sometimes a hundred other students. If I didn't do an assignment, my professors were too busy to care or notice. Like many students, I floundered, struggled, and then eventually did not make the cut, flunking out after two semesters. Over the next several years, I took time to understand the disabilities I had and work out strategies to help me learn and manage my time with my executive dysfunction, taking a few classes here and there before eventually enrolling in a program where I studied to become a massage therapist. The skills I taught myself proved valuable, and I passed all my exams with flying colors. It was not until several years later that I decided to go back to more academic studies and first encountered the Guided Pathways program at SLCC. I definitely feel that the Guided Pathways program has some great ideas, and the intentions behind it are good, but the execution of it at SLCC leaves much to be desired, and it is still the students who suffer for it.

Attempting to implement a Guided Pathways program into community colleges was a noble goal, better by far than the method that has been dubbed the "cafeteria style" model of students picking courses that seem interesting, with no real layout of what their major requires. In a world where roughly two-thirds of incoming students are not prepared for college (Bailey et al. 119), more guidance, not less, should be the default. But what good are these guided pathways when students still have trouble accessing them? Community colleges, while incredibly affordable



compared to state universities, are often lacking in resources due to budget cuts and a lack of advocates who can help direct where funding should go. It can be difficult for students to make contact with academic advisors or set up meetings with teachers. This is especially so when considering the fact that most students at a community college are older; they have jobs, families, and other obligations outside of the classroom. Now take into account the number of students who deal with all of that with at least one disability, and managing school becomes much more difficult.

The Guided Pathways model has many virtues, but it has many faults as well, and perhaps one of its most glaring is the lack of consideration for students with disabilities. Within the many pages in *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* (Bailey et al.) outlining the initial plan, next to nothing is said by way of consideration for disabled students, and in the years since the initial publication, little has changed. This is important to keep in mind when reading the Community College Research Center's initial and later writings, as the Guided Pathways proponents often made a point of implying that students who attended school part-time, or who frequently took semesters off to work, were shortsighted. Instead of thinking long-term, and powering through school and toward better job opportunities, they were prioritizing present issues.

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According to the National Disability Institute, people with disabilities are more than twice as likely to live in poverty compared to those without disabilities (27 percent versus 12 percent) (Goodman et al. 12). With this in mind, is it any wonder why so many disabled students might need to take time off school, delaying their graduation? For many in poverty, they often have to make choices between paying the rent or eating. Community colleges are cheaper than university, true, but that cost can still be insurmountable for those already struggling. Taking breaks between semesters to work and save up can often be the only sensible option for students. Refusal to acknowledge this reality can and will discourage students from returning to school, or if they do, they will not likely trust their institutions to provide aid should they need it. What good is the Guided Pathways system if those who could most benefit from it do not trust it to be helpful?

Not everyone has the same twenty-four hours in a day, and this is especially true for those with disabilities. From physical to mental limitations, students with disabilities often need more time to get to and from places and get work done. Often, the most direct routes to classes are not compliant with the American with Disabilities Act, so students who use wheelchairs, crutches, and other mobile aids may need much longer to get to and from classes. This may mean leaving work or home much earlier, and it is difficult to get work done during a commute, even if that commute consists of taking a bus or train into town.

For students like myself who have ADHD or other executive functioning disorders, the process of just starting classwork can take longer. And college and university staff are often not understanding of our struggles. More than once, I have had instructors insist that my ADHD is not real or that I do not have it because I get good grades (and one even accused me of having a “crank problem”). I only get decent marks now because I took years to understand just how my disorder impacted me. Many cannot even get a diagnosis, which then bars them from treatment and medication if they feel they need it. Professors who are dismissive of their students’ disabilities lose the trust of those students. More than once, I chose to withdraw from the classes taught by professors who erased or belittled my disabilities, choosing to try the course again with a different professor. This meant I delayed my academic progress. But my struggles, and the decisions I made in order to minimize them and make school work for me are not unique.

I do not think that the Guided Pathways program should be entirely done away with. Personally, I found some resources helpful. It was very easy to see what was required of me to earn my degree and then track my progress. If I could not meet with an academic advisor (which was often the case), I had a system in place to help keep me on track. But the system was built without giving many people a seat at the table. How can anyone create a system designed to work for all students without including people with disabilities, impoverished people, people of color, and other marginalized groups? The program needs to be revamped, bringing in people from all walks of life to lend their voices and experiences in order to create something that works for more people. Perhaps then, it will be easier to fully implement the program across community colleges.

### **Adriana Yazmin Zarate Sandoval**

The transition to college can lead to mental distress. College students have responsibilities to meet deadlines and balance personal life with college life, grades, financial support, attending different workshops for scholarships, clubs, finding resources at college, how to elaborate a good resume and scholarship essays, deciding on a major, and exam pressures (Barber et al.). Also, there are expectations for acquiring new skills, making new relations, living apart from family and friends, and living independently in some cases. Higher education is a difficult transition with expectations for learning how to navigate the higher education system. Guided Pathways is meant to provide a plan for getting to your chosen career. Those pathways should be aware of the racial identity, expectations, and practices of the students, and their gender, age, immigration status, full-time/part-time status, ability/disability status, language learning status, and other identities (Cooper and Leegwater). I will talk about the limitations of the Guided Pathways model from my perspective as a Hispanic, first-generation, part-time student. I use “Hispanic” because that is the common term used in institutions, as well as “Latina.”

I have learned from some conversations with first-generation students who are still learning about the language and system of higher education, the US job market,

and what kinds of employment opportunities might or might not be available to them based on documentation or citizenship status. GPA is really important in education and plays a big role in your career options and financial support. First-generation student immigrants have a harder time when it comes to changing their major or career path since they have to do research and find financial assistance that works for them because of the requirements. Most of the time, the lack of financial aid means they end up being part-time students.

Underrepresented minorities (URMs; defined by the National Science Foundation as Black, Hispanic, Native American, Alaska Native, or Pacific Islander) typically have lower persistence and graduation rates in college compared to white or Asian students, especially in STEM majors (Barber et al.). In *Chingonas y Chingones: Testimonios of Latinx First Generation College Students*, Jacqueline Contreras states that Hispanic students in higher education have the lowest rate

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of graduation due to lack of mentorship and accumulative stress. Dropping out of college impacts the physical and mental well-being of the student and potentially the financial well-being of the entire family. One of the solutions that the author comments on is for counselors to visit the classroom to let students know what services they offer and how they can help students out. Also, knowing about this population's values helps to understand. As a Hispanic first-generation student, I have to look for resources to be able to succeed in school without the help of my family members to guide me. I had to learn the system of education by myself, search for a career that I would like to pursue, make appointments with different advisors, apply for scholarships, and maintain a good GPA. Financial support is really essential to accomplish my goal to be the first college graduate in my family. Looking for scholarships for part-time students is really hard because most of the time the financial help is for full-time students and I don't fit into this group. In addition, STEM careers are easier to find financial help for, but it is harder to find funds for careers in the humanities.

Hispanic challenges are related to family obligations, cultural and social values, and the transition from high school to college. Some of the reasons that students drop off are the increase in stress, anxiety, sleep difficulties, and feelings associated with depression (Arellano and Cazares Armenta). Hispanic culture values the importance of family and focuses on family structure, gender roles, and patriarchal structure. As the oldest and only girl in my family, I have to take care of my brothers and help them with their homework. My family responsibilities include translating because I feel more comfortable with English and I have more knowledge of the US education system than my parents. I go with my mom to the parents' conference to see how my brother is doing and talk with his advisor to know what are the next steps. I am glad to be someone to guide my brother, but that adds more to my plate. Guided Pathways doesn't account for each student's demands outside of school. I have responsibilities with my family on top of my school responsibilities.

One of the biggest struggles of being a first-generation student is not knowing how higher education works, not having someone to guide you, figuring out resources and expectations. Guided Pathways attempts to address this problem, but each student's path is different, and we can't fit all on the same pathway. When you enter college, you decide your major and make an appointment with an advisor who tells you what classes you need to take for the semester. However, pathways are designed with just one way to follow, and every student has their own path shaped by their life situation. One of the things to keep in mind is if the student is a part-time, full-time, nontraditional, transfer, or returning student. If a student starts taking classes but drops off for personal reasons, then when the student comes back to college, it can add more classes to their general requirements and take a longer time to catch up. The pathways are different in each college or university, so if a student transfers from one institution to another, some credits may not count toward their degree. Some may count your electives as the best option.

Part-timers take longer to finish their degree, and in some cases, they drop off from school. Required classes often need to be taken in order, but college programs sometimes don't keep in mind that if the student is part-time and if in one of the semesters they don't offer the course, it slows down the process of students taking the following class and completing their degree. When you start taking classes at a college, you have to keep in mind what university you are going to transfer to so that way you take the right course that will be counted toward your degree at the university, because depending on the institution the requirements differ for the degree. My friend was a part-time student because she had to take care of her kids, and when she stopped for a couple of semesters, Guided Pathways reforms changed the degree requirements while she was gone. When she came back, she found out that she needed to do one more class, which slowed down the process of her being graduated. She filled out a form so she doesn't have to take certain classes, because when she started college they didn't have the elective. It was accepted, so she was able to graduate without taking the additional course. Part-time students that need to go more slowly because of their responsibility out of school or need to stop out temporarily are the ones that end up suffering from negative consequences when Guided Pathways changes degree requirements. Student credits no longer fulfill requirements at a community college, or they add more courses, which slows down graduation.

### **Aloyious Soranno**

“Approximately two-thirds of incoming college students fail to meet their institution's standards for college readiness” (Bailey et al. 119). This means that students are often placed into developmental education courses that are only worth institutional credits and do not count toward any degree. Some students even go beyond one semester taking these classes, causing an even greater financial burden on them and placing their desired educational goal further away from them.

One solution the team from the Community College Research Center (CCRC) has suggested is to eliminate unnecessary classes or topics within these developmental

courses. The primary reason behind this move would be to reduce the amount of pre-college education coursework students would get stuck doing. “In a CCRC analysis of approximately 150,000 students from community colleges across the country, we found that just 30 percent of students referred to developmental math completed their sequence within three years” (Bailey et al. 121). The data later show that very few students even show up to their classes, let alone complete them. Shortening the amount of time students spend in these classes will improve completion rates, or so I hope and believe.

Is it enough to place students into developmental education courses through placement tests? Are there resources through the school to which they have applied that will help with taking these placement tests? And are they made available with easy access? When I first applied to community college in 2016 and took my placement test, I did not have resources. I just showed up and took it and hoped for the best. But I have no idea if there were resources offered through the school at the time, because they weren't presented. Would I have done better and gotten into classes that counted toward something if I had been able to study prior to the test? Probably.

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Instead, I had to use the first semester to take developmental math and reading. The math class met every single morning from 7 to 9, Monday through Thursday. The concern here for many students is morale. Being told that you aren't good enough for the “real” classes stinks. Then finding out that it still costs money but doesn't count toward a degree? My math class started with twenty-four students. Less than two weeks later, we were down to fifteen.

Now, there could have been a number of reasons students dropped the class. But that is a significant number. Perhaps if schools were more interested in providing support, resources, and programs to ensure students are getting the quality education they deserve instead of fixating only on the number of students, they would incite some real change in our society. We can start with finding a better way to help incoming students.

Eliminating developmental courses without another system in place is not the answer. Some Guided Pathways reformers would have us believe that it is the answer, but in reality, these prep courses are often what allow students to continue their college education and reach their desired goals. Without these developmental courses, students may just give up after seeing how difficult college can be. Developmental learning shouldn't be discouraged. It is okay to have to take the time to really learn the basics of a subject. Who knows, it may just give those students an edge over their peers. Many colleges across the US have been phasing out their developmental education courses. Instead of eliminating the courses outright, over the last fifteen

years some colleges have begun a new way of approaching the underlying issue by implementing a corequisite model that replaces the remedial approach.

One college that has led this charge is the City University of New York. CUNY has successfully replaced its zero-credit developmental courses with ones that do grant students institutional credits by implementing the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP). ASAP helps provide financial support, tutoring, career development, course navigation, and more. Although it is too soon to see true results, “the percentage of associate degree students who earned math credits in their first year jumped from 36% in 2016 to 50% in 2020” (Elsen-Rooney). This isn’t proof that the ASAP program solves all of the challenges students face. But it goes to show that when a student’s hard work actually matters and the student is given the proper academic and financial support, they are going to stick around.

Simply eliminating developmental courses without an alternative system in place is not a solution, as these courses are often necessary for students to continue their education. I for one am glad I took a semester of remedial coursework. It prepared me well for the following year. I might have been even better off with a corequisite program like ASAP, which has resulted in a higher percentage of students earning math credits in their first year. When students’ hard work counts for something, they are more likely to buckle down and endure the passing storm.

## **Trey Sanders**

Before I started my college career in 2017, I was writing freelance articles for a local magazine and website. All of them were reviews or coverage of video games and events. I loved doing it so much that I wanted to turn it into my full-time job instead of working nine more years at the same coffee shop. I knew that the only way to make that happen was to go to school. When I first met with an advisor at SLCC to talk about the admissions process, I was met with elated smiles and a welcoming atmosphere. Once I was in the advisor’s office, we talked about my interests and why I wanted to start school again. I told the advisor about my existing background and that I was interested in literature and writing. She suggested I look into journalism or go for an English degree. I wasn’t sure I wanted to fully commit to journalism, so I decided to pursue English. From there, the advisor pulled out a checklist and broke down each section, what I needed to do to graduate, how to apply to classes through their online catalog, and how to check my graduation status via Degree Works.

After I chose between journalism and English, our discussion primarily centered on the requirements I needed to graduate with an English degree and credits that would be transferable to the University of Utah. There was no discussion about whether or not classes would build on each other or be useful in discovering a specific career path. According to the authors of *Redesigning America’s Community Colleges*, what we went over in the initial meeting was my introduction to the “cafeteria-style model” (Bailey et al. 3). In this model, a student selects various classes that satisfy specific credits to get them to graduation. At the time, schools like SLCC focused on “courses rather than programs” (Bailey et al. 22). They didn’t curate scholastic “paths”

or map out a structure of classes that built on or worked in conjunction with each other. The point was to get you in, then get you out and on your way to a university.

Guided Pathways promises plenty of ambitious benefits for every student: “In this model, students who have chosen a major or program are provided with a program map that defines a default sequence of courses, each with clear learning outcomes that build across the curriculum into a coherent set of skills, which in turn are aligned with requirements for successful transfer or career advancement” (Bailey et al. 22). Instead of choosing classes that interested me, I should have been taking a coherent program of classes that linked to a program at the U of U and a career that interested me, something that was never brought up in my advisor meetings. Because of this, I didn’t know what I should have been working toward.

While it was nice having the freedom to take classes that fit my interest, none of them were “guiding” me toward anything. All I knew was that I was working toward my associate degree to transfer and finish my bachelor’s degree at the U of U. No subsequent meetings with my advisor led to a conversation geared toward a more seamless transition into a bachelor’s program or finding a career. In fact, most conversations were spent trying to figure out who I was and reassuring me that I was on the right path to graduation. Needless to say, I could have benefited from some kind of road map to follow and guide me, which is something Guided Pathways could have provided.

In 2017, the same year I enrolled, SLCC began implementing aspects of Guided Pathways for English and for writing and rhetoric studies. However, if I did receive any emails related to Guided Pathways, they got lost among the Phi Theta Kappa spam, Grammarly discounts, Army propaganda, financial aid messages, and tuition statements. I received a handout from the math department on my first day of Math 0920 (Developmental Math). It laid out the number of math classes required for each degree program to satisfy graduation and transfer. I needed only to complete up to Math 1030 (Quantitative Literacy). During the first couple weeks of the semester, several English department staff members popped in to English 1010 to talk about required classes and how credits would transfer, as well as the writing center’s hours and where it was located. Outside of that, I pieced the rest together on my own. The required classes I needed to satisfy my English degree involved two required courses and plenty of electives. As long as I got my 61 credits in Core Skills, Diversity, Institutional Requirements, and Distribution Areas, I would graduate with an associate of science degree in English. Also, as far as I knew, checking required classes off the list and satisfying program requirements was the goal, which allowed me to pick and choose my classes and see if a path presented itself.

While I was trying to find a path at SLCC, nothing materialized. The classes I took checked the boxes off the grab bag of courses that satisfied graduation require-

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ments, but I wasn't finding a coherent path toward a comprehensive degree program or career. Despite the school actively implementing a more streamlined college experience to "guide" students from their halls to a university, it felt more like the cafeteria model to me. Subsequent meetings with my advisor could have helped steer me toward a major in writing and rhetoric studies, but I don't think I knew that was an option. As the authors of *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* point out, "advisors should begin by guiding students through an exploration of their own skills and interests, followed by a structured investigation into various occupational and professional career areas" (Bailey et al. 58). I don't doubt that my advisor helped—and is still helping—plenty of students explore their educational and professional interests, but I was balancing school, work, home, and some semblance of social life. I put my head down, did the work, and stayed the course. For the most part, I only reached out to my advisor, predominantly over the phone, to make sure I was still on track to

graduate. It's hard for an advisor to steer a student like me toward their interests when meetings are few and far between.

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After I graduated with my associate degree and transferred to the U of U, I was committed to completing a bachelor of science degree in English. While at transfer student orientation, I met with Christie Toth, the Director of Undergraduate Studies for the Department of Writing and Rhetoric Studies.

This meeting helped me see that Writing

and Rhetoric was a different department and major at the U, one that didn't focus on literary studies. Our brief conversation inspired me to switch my degree to something more applicable to my now career-specific mindset. For the record, Guided Pathways is designed toward degree programs that lead to careers. Its purpose is "to build a coherent set of skills as [students] progress across the curriculum" (Bailey et al. 21), which can lead to careers. But at SLCC, I wasn't acquiring curriculum-wide skills that applied directly to writing and rhetoric studies at the U of U. I learned a lot from the classes I took at SLCC, but I was ultimately checking classes off of my graduation list. I did become more self-sufficient and productive with my time, more goal-oriented; learned good research practices; improved my writing skills; and embraced a strong work ethic. While these are valuable skills, I could have benefited from acquiring degree-specific skills in writing and rhetoric instead of English before I transferred.

Degree-specific and career-relevant pathways are more present at the U of U, specifically in the writing and rhetoric studies department. I'm still choosing classes that fulfill degree requirements, but I'm taking classes that complement and build on each other while allowing flexibility to discover a more specific career track. I can emphasize digital, technical, science, business, or nonprofit writing; the decision is mine. Additionally, emails go out regularly offering support services, opportunities to report educational barriers, various departmental announcements, and intern-



ship opportunities. Professors share information about other classes, and advisors make themselves visible and available. While it's not perfect, I have a better sense of direction and ongoing knowledge that makes sense for my degree. The diversity in courses teaches me new skills that align with my interests and apply to a career. It's a much better direction to go. The structure of the program and the additional communication are only a sliver of the ambitious groundwork laid out by the authors of *Redesigning America's Community Colleges*, to be sure, but for a state university to have something like this is huge for a nontraditional student like me.

While SLCC was implementing aspects of Guided Pathways in 2017 for English as well as for writing and rhetoric, my "path" toward my English degree was ad hoc, directed by me and my interests. My advisor, and the school, didn't make an effort to help steer me toward something comprehensive, which might have helped me see a potential career path. A few courses did build on or complement one another, but that was because I chose them, not because they were path-specific. Additionally, I was not informed of a transfer program—including the existence of the Writing Studies Scholars program—beyond knowing my credits would transfer. Only when I attended the mandatory transfer orientation at the U of U was I introduced to a more comprehensive transfer program. Since switching to a writing and rhetoric studies major, I have received better, more involved guidance. The course handouts are filled with degree-specific courses that help me get a better idea of what I can pursue as a student looking to finish my bachelor's degree as well as a better idea of what careers I could pursue. I have been enrolling in classes that scaffold or build on one another's concepts, which has enabled me to see various career paths in professional and technical communication. Had this kind of guidance been introduced to me sooner, I might have already decided on a career path instead of continuing to search for one.

### **Kathryn Henderson**

My dad turned twenty the night I was born, and my mom turned twenty a few weeks later. To support our family, my dad enlisted in the Navy. For much of my childhood, we were stationed outside of the continental United States, which, before the internet, social media, and video chat, meant we had limited options for staying in touch with extended family and family friends. Today, having raised my own children as a young mom within a tight-knit support network, I realize how difficult it must have been for my folks, also young parents, to raise us alone, with their own support networks thousands of miles away. I think we all struggled with feelings of isolation as we grew up together, my parents included, so far away from family. Looking back, I know I missed key foundational social experiences, and opportunities for mentorship from outside of my own immediate family, that would have helped me with a smooth transition into a successful adulthood. I think I've done all right on balance, but it has been a journey fraught with struggles of all kinds as I've learned and continue to learn through trial and error how to "do life."

I'll be forty-four this semester, and I just started my senior year at the University of Utah. I was around twenty when I first started college and, during the

nearly twenty-five years that I spent as a first-year, sophomore, and junior, a lot of life happened: marriage, children, and career, among other things. My struggles each time I attended school had little to do with what classes I took, or with not being fast-tracked into a degree and a job. What I struggled with was everything going on outside of school: trying to raise children and dealing with the guilt of taking quality time away from them; trying to balance a full-time career with school and with my children's schooling; financial stress; relationship issues; car issues; getting sick, or worse yet, having the whole family get sick, which usually meant getting behind

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I had no real sense of belonging at school because I didn't know . . . how to make meaningful connections with students and teachers who shared my background or interests.

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on everything. I could go on and on, but that's the gist. And when I couldn't keep up with it all, and if my teachers weren't understanding or accommodating, and if I ended up getting behind and missing assignments, it became defeating, and it often took a toll on my mental and physical health. On top of it all, I had no real sense of belonging at school because I didn't know, or have time to figure out, how to make meaningful connections

with students and teachers who shared my background or interests, or with people who could point me to the resources I needed and wanted.

When I went back to college in 2018 after not attending school for several years, I enrolled at SLCC and was incredibly fortunate to stumble upon Writing Studies Scholars, a bridge program that offered University of Utah classes at the SLCC campus. In addition to free classes, scholarship funds, and parking passes, we had opportunities to engage with faculty and academic and professional counseling staff from the University of Utah, which allowed us to network and to learn how to locate and make use of the many resources available to students. Additionally, we were welcomed into a cohort of writing and rhetoric studies pre-transfer and transfer students that bridged the two schools, and many of them were, like me, first-generation and nontraditional students. Because of these bridge courses, when I transferred to the University of Utah, I already knew some of the students and teachers I encountered in my classes, and I was familiar with the campus and campus resources, which made the transition less overwhelming. Throughout my time at the University of Utah, I've participated in four semesters of Writing Studies Scholars Study Groups—one-credit courses where I was able to get credit for meeting and studying regularly with other students from Writing Studies Scholars. In addition to providing dedicated, for-credit study time, the study groups encourage community-building and provide regular gathering places where students are able to share experiences and resources and commiserate about things like financial aid, finals, and even personal issues.

My involvement with Writing Studies Scholars has provided me with mentorship, friendship, support, and a sense of community, and it's gotten me through several tough times where I would have (and kind of tried to, at times) quit school (many thanks to my mentor for always tracking me down and reeling me back in!). It's given

me opportunities to publish; to serve on the Writing Studies Scholars board, where we work to make student-led improvements to the program; and, most recently, to be involved with undergraduate research on the national community college reform effort known as Guided Pathways.

As we were reading about Guided Pathways and subsequent criticisms and responses, the thing I kept coming back to over and over again in my mind, and in discussions with our research group, was how important community and mentorship have been to my personal growth and success throughout my life, my career, and my college experience.

There are as many unique combinations of experiences and challenges as there are people. Not everyone has the same access to community and mentorship. People figure things out and find their paths in life on different timelines. So, how do we make education available to students with different backgrounds, different levels of support, and different timelines while also ensuring the clear path and completion rates that Guided Pathways seeks to provide? As an alternative to a *guided pathway*, I suggest that we move toward a *path of guidance*.

Whether we use the term *advisor*, *case worker*, *guidance counselor*, *mentor*, or another name, students stand to benefit from regular, ongoing guidance from someone who has more knowledge, experience, and access to resources in a given environment than they might have on their own. These people have the ability to lend their own social and cultural capital to students in a variety of capacities, helping to identify, supplement, and even *increase* the social and cultural capital each student brings with them upon entering school.

Knowing what we don't know, and knowing where to look for answers, are critical success skills. Students would benefit greatly if they had at least one person in their network right from the start who could teach them what networking is; help them identify resources; demystify the complex college landscape; introduce them to opportunities for creating community and fostering a sense of belonging at school; advise them on the importance of mentorship and on how to seek out a mentor in their area of interest; help them find resources for navigating personal challenges like work, finances and family; and encourage them to take steps toward recognizing and increasing their own social and cultural capital.

The Guided Pathways approach described in *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* (Bailey et al.) seems to me to be, in large part, a response to the problem of advisor caseloads being too cumbersome, not allowing for the individualized attention and assistance each student needs. Students might see a different advisor each time they need one. Advisors they've seen previously might not remember them. Advisors might not have access to the information students need or might offer information that conflicts with other advisors, other departments, or other institutions. Some students might have limited interaction with their advisors, or they might never engage with advisors at all. Because of obstacles such as these, students aren't getting the input and support they need, and they often end up feeling isolated, overwhelmed, and unsuccessful.

The solution offered by Guided Pathways to streamline the programs offered at community colleges so that students are able to navigate the system more efficiently and with less assistance has resulted, whether intentionally or unintentionally, in sacrificing a broad education in favor of a narrower education in some community colleges. The types of courses available have become more limited, unfairly and unequally depriving their students, and the communities they come from, of the opportunity to learn about, benefit from, and contribute to those areas of study, something which I find incredibly concerning.

Another concern I have with this approach is that it seems to miss the point: many community college students need significantly more help than just streamlining their schedules. What would really benefit community college students would be to invest in advisors—or better yet, *advocates*—and to give them small caseloads so they are better able to help students navigate the system, to offer personalized

attention to educational planning, and to help students overcome personal and educational challenges as they arise.

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What would really benefit community college students would be to invest in advisors—or better yet, *advocates*—and to give them small caseloads so they are better able to help students navigate the system.

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I propose that, at the time of enrollment, each student be assigned an advocate who will stay with them throughout their community college career, helping them overcome any kind of challenges they may encounter. These advocates would not only point students to valuable resources, but would also help find creative solutions to problems

and help students interface with other people and departments to resolve issues. If a student is feeling overwhelmed by homework, their advocate might help them find tutoring, study resources, study groups, or library services, or they might even make recommendations for self-care. If a student is looking for a sense of community, and ways to engage, their advocate might help them find resources for internships, volunteer work, undergraduate research, or school groups and clubs that match their interests and identities. If a student is having trouble with enrollment or financial aid, their advocate might help them coordinate interdepartmentally to identify and resolve issues, including assisting the student in completing tasks such as filling out paperwork, making phone calls, or meeting with other faculty or staff, virtually or in person. If a student is experiencing personal, financial, or family issues, their advocate could put them in touch with counselors, job services, or financial resources, or even help them apply for a leave of absence.

Furthermore, because of their proximity to student issues, advocates would be uniquely positioned to identify patterns and opportunities for additional support for *all* students, providing community colleges, universities, and researchers with a wealth of context-informed data on how to better support a diverse student body and improve completion rates.

Ultimately, whether the goal is to improve community college completion rates, get people into jobs, or ensure that all people and communities have the opportunity to engage with and benefit from a broad education, it seems clear to me that the answer lies in respecting and acknowledging the many and varied backgrounds from which students approach education; in honoring the social and cultural capital they bring with them upon entering school, as well as the social and cultural capital they may need help building; and in providing two fundamental resources that all human beings need to succeed: community and mentorship. If we can establish this kind of foundational social support for students, while ensuring they have the material support required to access educational opportunities, I believe college completion rates will skyrocket and communities and individuals will benefit and thrive.

Guided Pathways aims to get students from point A to point B in the most efficient way possible. Moving, instead, toward a *path of guidance*, one that works within the social framework in which human beings learn most naturally, would be the most effective way to achieve that goal while also providing access to a broad education, nurturing curiosity, encouraging compassionate and cooperative education, empowering individuals toward personal growth, and prioritizing education as a means and an end in and of itself. ◀

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**Emily Brown** is a writer, artist, and student activist who has spent her college years serving on boards such as those of the Salt Lake Community College Student Association and the Associated

Students of the University of Utah. Emily's focus is on resource accessibility, equity, and mental health. She believes that education is a human right. Student involvement, writing, and art are just a few of the ways that she uses her voice to spread awareness about first-generation students like her: **Laura Burnham** began her university career in 2011 and took a long, winding road to get to the University of Utah in 2020. She has worked as a licensed massage therapist for nine years and attended Salt Lake Community College for a few years before her eventual transfer to the U. At the University of Utah, she spent much of her time working on and researching ADHD, a disability she has, so that she could help educate others on the complexity of the disorder. She graduated at the end of 2023 with a BS in writing and rhetoric studies. **Priscilla Hansen** has over eleven years' experience working in the financial services industry, specializing in client relations and operations. She currently holds the director of client services role for a private registered investment advisory firm. Priscilla loves developing strong relationships with advisors, clients, and business partners and has a unique ability to streamline and create processes with great attention to detail. This passion has led Priscilla to further her education at the University of Utah, where she is currently earning a double major in writing and rhetoric studies and economics. She holds her life and annuity insurance license. Priscilla grew up in Roy, Utah, then moved to Denver and spent nearly a decade there to pursue her career. She moved back to Utah in 2007 to be with her family and raise her daughter. In her free time, Priscilla enjoys dedicating time in her community, spending time with her partner and her daughter, listening to live music, reading, cooking, experiencing the arts, traveling, and doing anything involving the outdoors with her huskies, Gustavo and Moqui. **Kathryn Henderson** is a senior attending school part-time at the University of Utah, where she is studying anthropology and writing and rhetoric. She is also a wife, a mom, and a twenty-year veteran of the mortgage industry. She's interested in human history, behavior, and ecology and how research in these areas might be leveraged to facilitate responsible and ethical interactions among humans and between humans and the planet. After graduating, she hopes to use her education and work experience to contribute to a more sustainable and humane human experience through research, public outreach, and social activism. **Trey Sanders** is a senior at the University of Utah, finishing his bachelor's degree in writing and rhetoric studies. He's a lifelong Utah Jazz and basketball fanatic who has lived in Utah his entire life. When he's not playing video games with his friends, he's hanging out with his fiancée and their three cats, Franky, Bill Murray, and Goose, and their dog Sweetie. He has written dozens of video game reviews for *SLUG Magazine* and analysis of Utah Jazz games for [Hashtagbasketball.com](https://www.hashtagbasketball.com). **Aloyious Soranno** has honed his editorial prowess as a copyeditor for *Wasatch Magazine*, an entity of the Student Media Center at the University of Utah. This role has not only sharpened his grammatical acumen but also fostered a deep appreciation for the artistry of language. Prior to his editorial endeavors, Aloyious served as a journalist for *City Journals*, where he delved into the heart of communities, particularly within the Granite School District of Salt Lake County. Beyond the realms of traditional journalism, Aloyious finds solace and inspiration in the dynamic world of comic book scripts. With a flair for crafting captivating narratives and larger-than-life characters, he weaves tales that transcend the boundaries of reality, inviting readers into immersive and fantastical worlds. As a seasoned wordsmith and storyteller, Aloyious Soranno is a passionate, multifaceted writer. Currently a senior at the University of Utah, Aloyious is honing his writing skills and readying himself for the next chapter in his life. **Christie Toth** is an associate professor in the University of Utah's Department of Writing and Rhetoric Studies. She coordinates the department's transfer partnerships with Salt Lake Community College, including the Writing Studies Scholars bridge program for students transferring into writing and rhetoric studies degree programs. She has collaborated with SLCC transfer students and faculty on a variety of co-researching and co-teaching projects, including the 2023 book *Transfer in an Urban Writing Ecology: Reimagining Community College–University Relations in Composition Studies*. **Adriana Yazmin Zarate Sandoval** started to take classes in 2018 at Salt Lake Community College with the goal of completing her general education and transferring to the University of Utah. After she took WRTG 3030 and WRTG 3020 in the summer, she decided to major in writing and rhetoric studies. Yazmin graduated in spring 2022 with her general studies AA degree at SLCC and in summer 2023 at the University of Utah with her bachelor's degree in writing and rhetoric studies.