Hey there, Greg Kemble again…

This video looks at the last of the Four Pillars of the Guided Pathways framework: ensuring that students are learning on these pathways, which we’ve created for them, which we’ve encouraged them to enter, and which we want them to stay on.

I see this pillar as having two facets: alignment and, let’s call it, experience.

So first, let’s talk about alignment.

During convocation, there was an SLO workshop--run by Shawn Frederking, the SLO Coordinator, and Jeremy Brown, our Dean of Institutional Effectiveness. They brought in some case studies of how other colleges successfully handle SLOs, which is, of course, something we’ve struggled with.

Now, what stood out most to me is how pretty much all those colleges were focused less on course SLOs, and more on program outcomes. And this focus on program outcomes—specifically, aligning them with the expectations of employers or transfer institutions—this focus is in line with what the fourth pillar encourages.

Now, it’s simple enough to align course learning outcomes with the goals of a program. But it’s less clear how to ensure that our program’s learning outcomes align with the needs of those who take our students when they leave us—again, employers and transfer institutions.

This is an important shift in focus. In an earlier video, I said that the Guided Pathways framework helps us develop ways to support our students from the moment they show interest in us until the moment they leave us.

But, in fact, Guided Pathways—and in particular, though this type of alignment, program alignment—it seeks to set students up to succeed well after they’ve left us. We’ll come back to that.

The other facet refers to our students’ *experience*.

Thomas Friedman, writing in the *New York Times*, reported that a 2014 Gallup poll identified two components that link education to long term success in the workplace. “Successful students,” he writes, “had one or more teachers who were mentors and took a real interest in their aspirations, and they had an internship related to what they were learning in school.”

The first of those—mentor teachers—probably relates a bit to the third pillar—keeping students on the path. But the second—internships, or more generally, opportunities for authentic, active learning—it’s directly supported by this fourth pillar.

And, ideally, this isn’t just about tagging internships onto the student’s college experience, but it’s about faculty embedding such opportunities into the curriculum—group projects, service learning, learning communities, stuff like that—even in early courses in a program, so students are engaged earlier in the process.

And if that’s going to happen, the institution needs to offer faculty its support—finding internships or clinical placements, providing technology that allows students to develop e-portfolios (that’s something that came up several times at the SLO workshop), offering professional development, encouraging cross-disciplinary collaboration. And so on.

Now, like much of the Guided Pathways framework, many of the concepts related to this pillar—both regarding alignment and active learning experiences--are almost second nature for our colleagues in Career Technical Education—in CTE—because much of this is baked into what they already do—hands-on learning, advisory boards, and so on.

But the point of Guided Pathways is to scale things that are working—to bring things that are working for a group of students to the entire student population. I’m not saying that, for example, my department, English, should become a CTE program. But we can learn from the practices that our CTE colleagues have developed and refined—program-focused, work-based learning, alignment with employer expectations.

Now, I know that some faculty bristle at this pragmatic focus on employer expectations when we’re talking about non-CTE programs. But a couple things seem worth mentioning: first, especially for our students, our college has the potential to be a pathway to a better life for our students—not just intellectually, or culturally, or spiritually (all these may be important), but physically, economically—we can improve the quality of life for our students and their families.

Second, surveys with employers—and this is no different for community college students as for four-year or even grad students—employers aren’t complaining that students are struggling with degree-specific skills. They’re struggling with problem solving, communications, computation.

So aligning our programs with employer expectations doesn’t involve narrowing or limiting our students’ education or its value. It’s right in line with that.

In fact, that value extends well beyond employment prospects: aside from the fact that many students will be working at jobs that haven’t even been invented yet, we want to be sure that we’ve helped them develop the critical thinking skills needed to navigate our world—to tell the difference between real and fake news, to apply and adapt their knowledge and skills to unfamiliar situation, and to build the mindset and tenacity necessary to work through challenging problems.

In the next video, we’ll talk about opportunities and challenges and concerns related to the Guided Pathways framework. See you then.