



# BREAKTHROUGH MOMENTS



## The Gravity of the Work Became Clear

Participation in the Rural Guided Pathways Institutes led many participants to rethink aspects of their college and their work. The experience was particularly powerful for Randall Warn, who is part of the University of Arkansas Community College-Batesville (UACCB) pathways team. Warn is a member of UACCB's Industrial Technology faculty and the co-chair of the UACCB strategic planning team. He also graduated from the department where he currently teaches.

### Urgency and Gravity

"I was happy to be in a room with people who are very intentional thinkers and who are very committed to this work. I also picked up on a certain degree of urgency — urgency that I hadn't felt before," Warn says. "The big breakthrough moment was the keynote speaker."

"I picked up on a certain degree of urgency — urgency that I hadn't felt before."

Warn is referring to Anthony Ray Hinton, author of *The Sun Does Shine: How I Found Life, Freedom, and Justice*. At Institute #3 in Birmingham, AL, Hinton told his story of surviving for 30 years on Alabama's death row, his exoneration, and his work today speaking out against the death penalty.

"He was a young Black man imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit, and in his closing, he said that what we're working against, as educators, isn't keeping kids out of prison. It is dismantling historic, systemic barriers," Warn says.

"I already was happy to be an instructor and to have whatever positive impact I could have on students and give back to UACCB, which had given me so much," he continues. "But in that moment, the gravity of the work became clear."



The Rural Guided Pathways Project helps a national cohort of rural community colleges implement evidence-based, institution-wide reforms grounded in the guided pathways framework. College teams include community partners in their regions, and they receive support from coaches, subject matter experts, and other colleges that are part of the project. The National Center for Inquiry & Improvement leads the project.

For more information, contact Gretchen Schmidt, [gretchen@ncii-improve.com](mailto:gretchen@ncii-improve.com).

---

### Strategic Planning Focused on Empowerment

Hearing Hinton speak — and seeing region-specific data about which educational paths lead to living-wage jobs — affected how Warn approached his work as co-chair of the college’s strategic planning process.

“The goal of strategic planning is to clarify who we are. It’s like a big introspection exercise,” Warn says. “We arrived at a very simple purpose: Improve people’s lives. Our mission is to empower the people of North Central Arkansas to be whatever they want to be.”

---

### Teaching Built on Personal Experience

After high school, Warn was in the Air Force for six years. He then attended culinary school and worked as a cook with a focus on sourcing ingredients from small, sustainable farms. He decided to attend UACCB to learn welding and acquire a new skill.

After earning an associate degree in applied science, he worked at a manufacturing company; made a brief return to professional cooking with local ingredients; and worked at a limestone quarry, which he realized was not going to be sustainable.

“I knew I had something to offer. I just needed a shot,” he says. “And then the director of the workforce training program at UACCB asked me to come back and teach. It was a weird, winding route to a position that I adore.”

Warn’s focus on empowerment also has affected his teaching. He tells his students, “There is no piece of knowledge that I can give you, no factual tidbit that will open all the possibilities of the world to you. But as soon as you grab hold of the responsibility of your own learning, I will go with you as far down the rabbit hole as you want.”

He explains that the reason students are in his class — because of a particular interest or to fulfill a requirement — does not matter. He tells them, “You are here. What will you do with this knowledge?”

“Students have a phone in their pocket where they can look up the entirety of human knowledge,” he says. “I want them to see that if they keep working at something, they will improve.”

“Students have a phone in their pocket where they can look up the entirety of human knowledge. I want them to see that if they keep working at something, they will improve.”

He tells students, “I want to see you mess up over and over and over and over and over again. And then watch. You will keep working until you get it. And then we’ll set aside that project and try something else that you don’t know how to do. Because going through that process is how you learn — and how you learn to get better at anything.”

### A Springboard to a Better Future

A great deal of Warn's approach grew out of hearing Anthony Ray Hinton's story.

"The reality is without UACCB, without an educational option, high school may be the only education that a lot of people know," he says. "And to me, that doesn't sound very empowering. That sounds like there's an end."

**"If a community college can do anything, it can act like a springboard."**

Warn continues, "If a community college can do anything, it can act like a springboard. You can come here and get, let's say, five weeks of welding training. In five weeks, you

can go from not knowing anything about welding to being a reasonably good manufacturing welder. And now you can make a living wage that can support a family. Five weeks is really fast. It's a huge thing for a person who might have grown up destitute."

Warn also teaches an Industrial Manufacturing capstone class and enjoys watching the students work as a team, communicate, and own the project.

"I love being there and asking, 'What information do you need? Which piece of equipment do we need to teach to move things forward?'" he says. "I like watching them and thinking, 'You guys are going to be all right.'"