



# BREAKTHROUGH MOMENTS



## The Pathways Framework Makes Everything Possible

Missoula College used the guided pathways framework to develop a change process that drove improvements throughout the institution. Through this work, the college discovered new efficiencies — and the power to say “no.”

“Rural guided pathways is not just an initiative. It’s everything we do at Missoula College. It’s our North Star,” says Grace Gardner, associate dean. “Everything we’re doing for student success, academic planning, and financial planning is driven by guided pathways.”

### Focusing on the End Game

Missoula College is part of the University of Montana (UM). The college includes four campuses — River Campus, Mountain Campus, and West Campus in Missoula as well as the Bitterroot Campus in Hamilton.

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“We’re challenged by the same things as every other college and university — lack of funding, the pandemic, changing enrollment — as well as some challenges specific to our college,” explains Tom Gallagher, dean. “It felt like we were carrying around this big load, and the tasks seemed overwhelming. We needed to figure out what was most important and how to move our college forward.”



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.

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He continues, “Guided pathways has really done that. It’s helped us put our work in the context of better serving our students and making sure that all our programs lead to living-wage jobs. It’s helped us look more at the end game, which is retaining students, getting them from the first year to the second year, and helping them graduate.”

Missoula has had success engaging faculty and staff and making sure everyone understands their role. “Here or there, someone might not see how the work impacts their particular piece of the college,” Gallagher says. “And then we discuss it and explain how their work fits in the guided pathways framework. And that’s how we’re taking our college in the direction it needs to go.”

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### Making Significant Changes Using the Pathways Framework

Since joining the Rural Guided Pathways Project, changes at Missoula College include replacing developmental education with corequisite support, introducing a four-day schedule, and revamping its onboarding process.

**Moving to corequisite support.** UM has eliminated developmental education, and Missoula College is now the hub for corequisite writing and math for both two-year and four-year students.

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“Our students have access to remedial math through a partnership we developed with the Lifelong Learning Center,” Gardner explains. “It’s a community-based organization that serves adult and lifelong learners who want to brush up on their math. They offer their class at our college. Even though their class is separate from our corequisite class, having it on our campus allows their students to get to know some faculty, become familiar with our campus, and see that higher education is really not that scary.”

**Introducing a four-day student-centered schedule.** “Students want a Monday–Wednesday, Tuesday–Thursday schedule. It is easier for them and helps them balance their other commitments,” Gardner says. “It also gives faculty a Focus Friday for professional development, working with students through tutoring, and committees and other campus obligations.”

**Revamping the onboarding process.** “In the past, our onboarding process was part of UM’s onboarding for four-year degree-seeking students,” Gardner explains. “So we really looked at that language and changed it so it works better for our two-year degree-seeking students and explains our meta majors.”

### Tracking Measurable Improvements

As a result of these and other changes, the college is starting to see its key performance indicators (KPIs) tick up, and it is meeting other goals it has set.

“So far it is small changes, but we are moving in the right direction,” Gardner says. For example:

- \* FTE enrollment increased 5 percent from fall 2023 to fall 2024; in the same time period, Native American student enrollment increased 23 percent.
- \* Fall-to-fall retention was 55 percent for new students who enrolled in fall 2022. This rate was the college’s highest fall-to-fall retention in 10 years.
- \* Gateway course completion increased 18 percent (40 percent to 47 percent) from 2019–20 to 2022–23.

### The Benefits of Saying the Hardest Word in Higher Education: No

Now that Missoula is using a clear framework for everything at the college, identifying actions that the college should *not* take is easier. If a policy, practice, or activity does not fit in the framework, then it is not a good use of time and other resources.

“If it does not fit the framework — if it doesn’t actually keep us on that critical path of getting to where we need to be with guided pathways — it has become easier to say ‘no,’ which is a really hard thing to say in higher education.”

“It’s really easy to get wrapped up in the immediate crisis and try to fix what’s in front of you or just find a quick win,” says John Freer, director of Sustainable Construction Technology and department chair for Industrial Technology. “Now, if it does not fit the framework — if it doesn’t actually keep us on that critical path of getting to where we need to be with guided pathways — it has become easier to say ‘no,’ which is a really hard thing to say in higher education.”

As a result, the college is providing better service to its students and community — and doing so more effectively and efficiently.

“I often find myself drifting away because there’s a new thing that pops up,” Freer adds. “And you just have to pull back and look at whether it fits in the framework. And if it doesn’t fit, it doesn’t fit.”

“When I started at Bitterroot, the first thing I worked on was degree maps — making sure that we had the right courses on our campus and that students could actually complete things,” says Kristina Berger, director of the Bitterroot Campus. “Things were a little in disarray, but I was able to make informed decisions about

what would be best for our students and the degrees they were seeking. And now persistence and enrollment are up on our campus.”

“In our department, we’ve gotten rid of a handful of certificates and programs that were low enrollment and not leading to high-demand, high-paying jobs,” Freer adds. “They were a drain on resources, and they didn’t fit into what we’re trying to build here. A change like this creates very short-term minor heartburn, but then we don’t have these orphan programs with no students and no one to teach them.”

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### **A More Mature Decision Process as the College Moves Forward**

“We wouldn’t be where we are today if we were not part of the Rural Guided Pathways Project,” Gallagher says. “The Institutes have allowed us to provide professional development in a very structured and organized fashion. Meeting with other colleges has also been very helpful because we’ve been able to share our challenges and hear about practices that other colleges have developed.”

He continues, “It’s helped us mature our decision process so we’re more aligned, working together better, and more effective right now. If somebody says we should offer a certificate in fly fishing or another topic, our first question is, ‘Does that lead to livable wage job?’ And I’ll remind the person who raised it of our

shared vision for our institution. And we’ll say ‘no’ to the fly fishing certificate.”

The Missoula team also notes that discussions and decisions go more smoothly now. It is no longer a dire challenge to revisit a program, identify its weaknesses, and consider how it might be redesigned to better serve students.

“I hope we’ve created an ecosystem where it’s okay to make mistakes because we’re never going to be innovative unless we have some things that don’t work,” Gallagher says. “But I recognize that higher education is very risk averse.”

“We never had a ‘normal year.’ That just doesn’t happen. That comment is a cry for ‘We don’t want change anymore.’ And if you’re not good in an environment of change, I think going forward in higher education is going to be a real challenge for you.”

He recalls a recent meeting at which someone asked if the college could just have a “normal year.”

“We never had a ‘normal year.’ That just doesn’t happen,” Gallagher says. “That comment is a cry for ‘We don’t want change anymore.’ And if you’re not good in an environment of change, I think going forward in higher education is going to be a real challenge for you.”