



BREAKTHROUGH MOMENTS



Eliminating “Random Acts of College Credit”

Today, close to 100 percent of Washington State College of Ohio (WSCO) students are on a pathway. This success is the result of redesigned advising, particularly in combination with high schools; a reinvigorated Center for Student Success (CSS); and the Student OneStop, a single place where students can begin their enrollment process and manage their financial aid.

“Too many students didn’t have a defined transfer or technical path,” says Jona Rinard, dean of technology and transfer. “They were taking classes, but they didn’t have a plan. One of our former vice presidents called it ‘random acts of college credit.’”

To make these changes, administrators, faculty, and staff had to discuss and approach problem solving in new ways. Participating in the Rural Guided Pathways Project gave them the tools to do so.

More Intentional Advising Puts More Students on a Pathway

Rinard says that attending the Rural Guided Pathways Institutes inspired the college to make changes that put almost every student on a pathway.

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“One aha moment for me was seeing the number of our students, particularly dual enrollment students, who were enrolling in classes without a plan for a career,” Rinard explains. “Parents would hear ‘free college’ and tell their children to take as many credits as they can, but that’s only useful if there is a plan.”



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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She adds, “I often compare it to taking a vacation. Very few families just jump in a car and say, ‘We’re going on vacation.’ They have to know where they are going and budget for it. They have to know how long the trip will be, where they will stop along the way, and what they will do if there is an emergency. All of that planning has to happen.”

With having clear, stated plans as a goal, WSCO became more intentional about advising students and doing so earlier in the students’ college experience.

“Almost 100 percent of our students are on a pathway,” Rinard says. “Have we met with every student? Yes. Have we convinced all of them to get on a path? Not quite yet, but we are so close.” The college also aligned its liberal arts transfer pathway — which is the choice of many dual enrollment students — to the Ohio Transfer 36, which are 36 credits that are guaranteed to transfer to any state college in Ohio.

Better Partnering With High Schools

WSCO brought people from two high school districts to the Rural Guided Pathways Institute in Birmingham, AL. The college has always collaborated well with these districts, but attending the Institute together dramatically improved these partnerships.

The full team — college and high school district representatives — reviewed and discussed student data. That shared experience helped the high school personnel develop a better understanding of the college’s work.

“I can remember Dr. Wood [former WSCO president] saying that it’s our responsibility at the community college to provide service and to uplift our community,” Rinard recalls. “And one of the superintendents said, ‘I never thought of it that way — that the college is providing opportunities for the community.’”

Before the Institute, the high school representatives viewed the college largely in transactional terms — the college offers classes, and students take them. During the Institute, they began to see the college as an agent of community engagement and economic mobility.

“When they really started understanding the role of higher education and the role of a community college, it was a huge aha moment for them,” Rinard says. “So at one of

those institutions we are now a secondary site. We have instructors there, we provide services to those students, and we make sure those students are on a pathway.”

At another high school, WSCO built Graduation Pathways to Success. The high school offers criminal justice, cyber security, education, and liberal arts pathways

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all at the high school. When students graduate from high school, they are within one semester of earning an associate degree at WSCO — all without setting foot on the WSCO campus.

“I thought we had a pretty good relationship with WSCO before we went to Birmingham, but it wasn’t very strategic,” says Andy Schob, principal, Fort Frye High School. “The Institute in Birmingham gave us a chance to hear how other districts collaborated with colleges and to think about what was missing for us.”

Schob realized that his school need to educate staff about what WSCO can provide and why it offers a good option.

“This year, we took our entire teaching staff to WSCO for our first professional development day. We had them meet with everybody and look at all the programs WSCO offers,” he says. “And now we are more intentional about advising our students and telling them what classes they need to take based on the field they want to work in.”

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Redesigned CSS and Student OneStop

When the college redesigned its CSS, it put more resources into student support services — including tutoring, transfer assistance, mentoring, and mental health counseling — and consolidated them in one area of the campus. The library is located in the same place.

The college also created the Student OneStop, which is a centralized space for admissions, including early advising; College Credit Plus (Ohio’s dual enrollment program); financial aid; records; and the college’s business office.

Before these changes, essential student resources were disjointed. Students would have to find and then visit multiple locations as they began their time at WSCO.

“Now students can get all of this buttoned up in one day, in one location,” Rinard says. “Students can get enrolled, set up financial aid, and have first-time advising, all taken care of in one location.”

Changing the Conversation

Rinard says that the Rural Guided Pathways Project helped WSCO bring together its team with colleagues outside of higher education, including school districts and business leaders.

“Rural Guided Pathways helped us structure our conversations around why we do the work we do,” she says. “It gave us a better explanation about why change needed to happen. The conversation has changed.”