



# BREAKTHROUGH MOMENTS



## Eliminating Placement Tests: “We’re Not Going To Do This to Any More Students”

Many faculty and staff at West Virginia Northern Community College (WVNCC) were skeptical of the Accuplacer, but the college continued to use it. The Rural Guided Pathways Project gave the college the push it needed to make a change — and to develop a new system that gives students agency and better serves their needs. Participating in Rural Guided Pathways also inspired the college to make sure that incoming students enroll in a Light the Fire course — a course that inspires their learning — in their first term.

### Longstanding Concerns Change to Action

“For me, the greatest impact came in the first Institute, when Gretchen Schmidt kind of hit us between the eyes with data about placement testing,” recalls Daniel Mosser, WVNCC president. “She challenged us and asked, ‘When do we say enough is enough?’” Schmidt is senior fellow at the National Center for Inquiry & Improvement, which leads the Rural Guided Pathways Project.

“The data gave us the guts to finally say, ‘Enough is enough. We’re not going to do this to any more students.’”

“Accuplacer lacks validity and predictability for what it is designed to measure. There was no statistical correlation between Accuplacer scores and performance in college or college completion,” Mosser says. “We all had our doubts, but the data gave us the guts to finally say, ‘Enough is enough. We’re not going to do this to any more students.’”



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).

“I was very excited to learn that we were involved with Rural Guided Pathways,” says Angela Hawk, vice president of learning. “I saw that we were not just acknowledging the research, but we had momentum to actually follow through.”

In spring 2023, Mosser directed faculty and staff to have a new placement process in place by fall 2023. Hawk was part of a team of faculty, student services staff, academic affairs staff, and administrators who met regularly to reach this goal.

The team had to determine what measures they would use to replace Accuplacer as well as what process they would use for placement. Decisions about measures came first.

“It seemed like everyone would sign up for classes without passing placement tests and maybe without prerequisites, and maybe without anything. Letting everyone sign up for any class they want to take, frankly, sounded like nightmare.”

“Some students might have an SAT or ACT score. They may have been to college somewhere else or taken college classes while they were in high school,” says Tami Alfred, director of student services. “We’ve also gotten permission from the state to use some other things, such as high school grades, as predictors.”

Identifying the placement process was more challenging. While many people were enthusiastic about eliminating placement tests, some faculty members had concerns about how placement would unfold.

“I was surprised,” says Hollie Buchanan, assistant professor of mathematics. “It seemed like everyone would sign up for classes without passing placement tests and maybe without prerequisites, and maybe without anything. Letting everyone sign up for any class they want to take, frankly, sounded like nightmare.”

To address concerns such as these, the team set up a process that includes two key elements: self-placement guides and detailed conversations with students.

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### **Self-Placement Guides Give Students Agency**

“When we discussed self-placement, we decided it was important for students to see a sample assignment of what they might encounter in our English 101 course or Math 108,” Hawk explains. “That way, they could get a sense for what they would find in the class and decide for themselves whether or not to opt into that class. I had seen some presentations on guided placement, but it was completely foreign to most of us.”

The team had many conversations about the guides, and Buchanan, who had been skeptical of self-placement, advocated strongly for the guides and what they should include.

"We created guides for each of the entry-level classes, and honestly, we did it for several of the other classes as well," Buchanan says. "The guides show a selection of exercises so students have a good idea of what to expect in the class."

Each guide starts with the question students need to answer to determine placement. For example, "I need English 101. Should I enroll in it directly or in a preliminary course?" Or "What's the difference between Math 101 and Math 101S?"

("S" denotes a supplemental section that is taken concurrently with the college-level class. For English, "preliminary course" refers to an integrated reading and writing developmental English class. "The integrated class is still an option. But with multiple measures we've really been, I would say, *strongly suggesting* that students enroll in the college-level class with a supplement," says Chana Baker, assistant professor of English.)

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Each guide then provides sample questions or assignments from the class, and it tells students how they can use these sample questions to determine their placement. For example, the English 101 guide explains the specific knowledge or skills students need for the assignment. It advises students that if they lack that knowledge, they should consider a standalone

preliminary class or both English 101 and English 101S, a supplemental class that is taken during the same semester and with the same instructor.

The Math 101 guide provides seven math questions. It tells students that if they feel confident that they could correctly answer four to six of the questions, then they should enroll in Math 101. If they feel less confident or think they could answer zero to three questions correctly, they should enroll in Math 101 and Math 101S. And if they are uncomfortable with all of these options and do not need Math 101 as a prerequisite for another math class, they could consider Math 116 (Mathematics Appreciation) as an alternative.

### See the WVNCC Self-Placement Guides

**Overview:** <https://catalog.wvncc.edu/content.php?catoid=10&navoid=539>

**Math Self-Placement Guides:** <https://catalog.wvncc.edu/content.php?catoid=10&navoid=541>

**English Self-Placement Guides:** <https://catalog.wvncc.edu/content.php?catoid=10&navoid=540>

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### **Detailed Conversations Give Students Guidance**

While the guides provide valuable information, students are not left to process what they learn on their own. Every student has an opportunity to have a one-on-one conversation with an advisor. Each student is assigned a faculty advisor based on their major. They also have access to a team of staff advisors. And the college has meta advisors, who are faculty members who advise students in any major.

“When we have advising conversations with students, we look at what they bring to the college and what their options for classes are,” Alfred says. “We use the guides to discuss what type of material each class will cover, their comfort level with that material, and how to make sure they are in the right class.”

“I can see the difference in the classroom. When I taught developmental classes, there was an overhanging, depressed feeling in that room. As if students thought, ‘I’m not enough.’ But now the feeling is more like, ‘Look at me. I’m doing it.’”

She continues, “You might think that with self-selection, every student will decide they are ready for any class, but that’s not what the students are doing. And nontraditional students often think they know less than they do. But when advisors sit down with students, we help them be placed into the proper class, rather than being placed in class after class after class that has nothing to do with why they came to college. It’s been a game changer.”

“The students take the guides very seriously,” adds Maclaine Murad, education program director and meta advisor. “Some nontraditional students may even take a couple of days to look over it. It makes our appointments go a little longer because I go through the guide step by step, but they really understand what class they will be successful in.”

“Students are taking back the power of what they want to do with their education,” Baker adds. “And I can see the difference in the classroom. When I taught developmental classes, there was an overhanging, depressed feeling in that room. As if students thought, ‘I’m not enough.’ But now the feeling is more like, ‘Look at me. I’m doing it.’”

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### **Light the Fire Classes Help Students Understand Their Fields of Interest**

The Community College Research Center (CCRC) recommends that students take at least one course in their first term “on topics of interest that ‘light their fire’ for learning.” CCRC is a partner in the Rural Guided Pathways Project.

The WVNCC team has been working on its Light the Fire classes because the Rural Guided Pathways Project repeatedly highlighted their value.

“In the past, students might have had a first college semester that was 100 percent developmental education with no connection to what they were interested in studying,” Alfred says. “And then they didn’t do well, decided they were done, and walked away.”

“We are identifying which courses are Light the Fire classes and then redesigning them to include additional learning outcomes,” explains Natalia Omelchenko, program director of Associate of Science. “Without losing content, we are adding outcomes related to helping students understand their field of interest.”

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She continues, “For example, an Associate of Science program can prepare you for a successful career in chemistry or physics, or students can go into pre-engineering and other fields. Early in the students’ studies, we need to explain what they can do with the degree.”

For example, the college incorporated 40 hours of observation in the first-semester class that all education students take.

“We have multiple pathways within education, such as early childhood, elementary, and secondary, and we realized that many students were not on the best pathway for their interests,” Murad says. “Once we added this observation

time, I started having students say, for example, that they wanted to work with older students or expand their certification to cover more grades so they have more options when they graduate.”

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### **What Comes Next**

These programs and practices are new, and the college will be looking at data over time. Faculty and staff are continuing to apply their new approach throughout the college.

“Rural Guided Pathways focuses on being student centered, and it has helped us evaluate how we can get students onto the right path and into the right classes while giving them agency,” says Crystal Harbert, division chair, communications, liberal arts, and social sciences. “And of course, how we keep students on the path to completion and get them to jobs where they will earn living wages.”

“Rural Guided Pathways led us to examine how we were helping students make decisions about their major and what career path they want to pursue,” Baker adds. “It shed some light on places where we needed to reexamine, reevaluate, and change. And those changes have built more of a community among students in the institution. From the first day you walk off the street, you have a person who can answer your questions, advise you, and connect you to everything you need.”