



BREAKTHROUGH MOMENTS



IMAGINE Whole-College Improvement

Being part of the Rural Guided Pathways Project inspired Kilgore College (KC) to completely overhaul its student experience.

“I’ve never walked away from a Rural Guided Pathways meeting without an aha moment,” says Brenda Kays, president. “But the emphasis on structured student onboarding and first-year experience led us to make the structural changes that were essential for lasting improvement.”

KC initially tried to reform onboarding with a series of small steps but soon determined that minor tweaks would not lead to significant change. College leaders realized they needed a comprehensive approach, and they found it with IMAGINE.

Serving Students and Finding New Approaches

All of KC’s work is now built around IMAGINE, an acronym for Innovation, Motivation, Adaptive, Growth mindset, Inclusive, Nurturing, and Empowering. This framework drives decision making and actions at every level of the institution.

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College leaders presented IMAGINE as a whole-college effort to better serve students and told all faculty and staff that they would participate. They might, for example, be part of a team or be a subject matter expert. Ultimately, the college set up a team structure that covered the entire life cycle of a student, including recruiting and onboarding, retention, preparing students for transfer or entering the workforce, and developing alumni who are lifelong learners.



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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Each team looked at what the college is doing now and how it should move forward in ways that better serve students. Kays provided three guidelines for moving forward:

1. Be innovative;
2. Ask “why not?” instead of asking “why?”; and
3. Never utter the words “because we’ve always done it that way.”

“We knew other colleges were being more successful by making changes, and I wanted people to see that there was no reason we also couldn’t do the work and improve,” Kays explains.

“We knew our pathway needed to be much smoother for our students,” she adds. “We often say that we need to give students the Amazon experience. There’s something to be said for pushing some buttons on my computer or phone, and the next thing you know, whatever I need is showing up on my doorstep.”

KC set out to give entering students a similarly direct, uncomplicated experience.

“There is no reason that a student who wants to come to college at KC should ever be sent away because they didn’t bring a transcript, or they didn’t bring test scores, or they didn’t have a vaccine record, or whatever the case might be,” Kays says. “They are here in front of us, and we’re going to take care of them. We’re going to get them a schedule, and by the time they leave, they will know they are a KC student. And we’ll worry about those other details afterward.”

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Using Data and Developing Student Personas

KC teams use a meeting cadence that the college developed when it converted to eight-week classes. During that process, every group met twice a month and reported out to a steering committee, which also met twice a month.

KC also has teams that are looking closely at who KC students are. These teams are identifying key populations, including dual credit students, students who need credit for prior learning, the college’s growing Latino population, and so on. Using data, teams of faculty and staff are focusing on who is attending KC and developing different personas that represent their students.

The college currently is developing those personas, each of whom will have a name. KC then will test the personas with focus groups. The college expects that the personas will remind faculty and staff of whom they are serving — and of the powerful impact of earning credentials, transferring, and having a living-wage job.

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Using Small Details to Set the Stage

Just as the student personas will help faculty and staff focus on students, KC makes sure that students themselves identify as KC students. For example, every high school that has dual enrollment students has a color scheme that combines the high school colors with KC blue.

“We’re trying to send a message that even though they are at their high school, they are in college,” Kays says. “We are saying, ‘You are a Kilgore College student, and we want you to continue to be a Kilgore College student.’”

KC also uses color to help faculty and staff feel like they are part of the KC team. One college dean designs t-shirts for key college events, and employees know that if something important is happening, it will be accompanied by a t-shirt. The IMAGINE process also has a specially designed shirt, and every team got to pick a color for their team’s shirts.

The effort to help everyone belong extends to practical steps that save students time and make it easier for them to persist. For example, until recently, dual credit students who wanted to attend KC after high school graduation had to complete a new application for admission.

“They were already a Kilgore College student as a dual credit student, and we were acting as if something had changed,” Kays says. “That was ridiculous. We only really needed to know if they lived at the same address, and that is for residency purposes. So we simplified that process to make things easier and more welcoming for students.”

Working Toward Fewer Silos and More Improvements

KC has used the Rural Pathways experience to grow new leaders at the college.

“We’ve varied our attendees for each Institute based on the topics, and it’s important that not just the top-level leaders attend,” Kays says. “We have seen employees at all levels have all kinds of aha moments. In addition, people in separate parts of the organization get to know one another through this shared experience.”

The college’s overhaul of the student experience also included significant reorganization. “We tore down the silo between student services and instructional services, and we combined them,” she adds. “It hasn’t been without tears and angst and everything else that goes with it, but it has paid off.”

- * KC had record enrollment for fall 2024 and spring 2025.
- * The 150 percent graduation rate for the fall 2021 cohort is up 6 percent compared with the fall 2020 cohort.

- * Hispanic student enrollment is up 7 percent in 2024–25 compared with 2023–24.
- * The fall-to-fall retention/graduation rate continues to trend upward since 2020, rising by 6 percent overall.
- * The fall-to-spring retention/graduation rate remains steady at 79 percent.
- * Hispanic retention/graduation rates are continuing to outpace those of White students.

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The work is ongoing, of course. KC, for example, has implemented early alerts and has a benefits navigator who connects students with the services they need. The college also is considering what additional changes, such as creating a transfer center, will best serve students. Ultimately, Kays hopes to have — or perhaps develop — a database with student information that can be shared across departments.

“Students wouldn’t have to complete a separate intake form for financial aid or advising or to go to the food pantry,” Kays says. “No matter what office they visit, the staff would have access to their information.” Such software would have appropriate permission levels so each staff member would have access to only the information they need, and students’ privacy would be protected.

“We’ll be honing as we go, but we are testing ideas and moving ahead,” Kays says. “We have people who are smart and motivated, and when they come together, we see that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. And that’s what the IMAGINE experience has been.”