

RESEARCH BRIEF

CASE STUDY

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From Goals to Graduation to Post-Completion Success: Why Every Student Needs an Educational Plan

CASE STUDY 6:

A United Approach to Educational Planning at University of Arkansas Community College at Batesville

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University of Arkansas Community College at Batesville (UACCB), a rural campus in north-central Arkansas, has transformed the student experience with individualized educational planning for the more than 1,200 students who rely on the college for education and training that leads to living-wage occupations. Before the transformation, many students were disappearing between application and enrollment, and retention was low. Students received little guidance about available programs or the careers they connected to, program maps were old and out of date, and a fragmented and siloed organizational structure left students bouncing from office to office for support. Now every new student who enrolls builds an educational plan and receives ongoing career and academic support from a navigator who specializes in the student's program. Chancellor Brian Shonk acknowledged the need for change: "As we became involved with the guided pathways work, we realized it's more than just developing these educational plans for students that has to be the full picture. It's the end in mind." Educational plans, he said, keep students focused on their career goal.

Educational plans, called Graduation Maps, help students start and stick with their end goals in mind throughout their academic journey. UACCB distinguishes its educational planning efforts through a unified approach where leadership, staff, and faculty share a common mission and improving retention and degree completion is everyone's job. Administrators, the registrar, recruiters, and navigators continually ask how they can make the student experience better, easier, and more comfortable. Because UACCB is a small college with a little over 100 employees, staff often do many jobs at once, so cooperation and collaboration are key. The transformation to become student-centered took years of adjustment and decisive action.

This case study of UACCB is based on interviews with nine administrators and staff conducted via Zoom in July 2026. In the sections that follow, I describe how organizational and staff restructuring, along with new operating procedures in student services and scheduling, made it possible to scale educational planning.

The Road to Change

The change began in 2017, when the college started working with the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement (NCII). Then, in 2022, the college joined the [Rural Guided Pathways project](#) (also led by NCII). The project encourages colleges to improve the student experience while prioritizing programs and credentials that either lead to living-wage jobs or transfer to a four-year institution without excess credits. The project provided the motivation and guidance for UACCB to start this journey by analyzing its academic and workforce programs, reorganizing programs by meta-major, and recreating and refining program maps.

One of the first steps was evaluating existing programs and consolidating them into five meta-majors that align with the local job market: Business and Computer Science, General Education and Transfer, Health Professions, Human Services, and Skilled Trades and Agriculture. In addition, the existing program maps were not up to date and did not reflect how a student would follow a path to completion. College staff noted that streamlining and reorganizing the program offerings and mapping course sequences were essential for being able to help every student make their educational plan. Using the updated program maps for meta-majors, navigators can customize the generic sequences into customized educational plans suited to each student's goals and circumstances.

As this work was underway, the college completed a Title III grant to transition from faculty to professional advising. Part of this involved incorporating career discussions into advising using regional labor market data. But the advisors were not trained in career advising. While leaders recognized that the key to student success is educational planning that begins with career exploration, the staffing and processes were not yet in place.

While tackling these reforms, it became clear that the leadership structure was not set up to support the college's new approach to onboarding and advising students into strong programs of study. The leadership team was siloed in different divisions that had little interaction. Additionally, academic and student affairs operated independently, while some crucial functions like maintaining up-to-date program maps were not squarely housed within a single division. In 2024, Shonk named Zachary Perrine as provost to oversee student and academic affairs. Shonk and Perrine include in the cabinet the five deans who report to the provost: general education, career and technical education, academic operations, student services, and learning and communications. The deans work closely with the staff in their areas and bring ideas for new processes and other changes to the cabinet for discussion. Once the cabinet agrees on a proposed idea, the deans have the authority to implement changes. This new structure removed barriers, increased interaction, and united the college behind a shared mission. Perrine noted how the new structure has changed how departments work together:

The trick has been to make it so no one can be siloed, so every dean has an interrelation with every other dean. You get this neat web, then all the people within their structure also have ties to every other manager type, so then you pretty much can't avoid having a conversation at the college, which is awesome. And it's gotten to a point where ... the

deans don't even worry about turf. It's really more about: What do the students need? What are we missing? What gaps do we need to fill? When you come at it from that approach, it keeps the silos from building back up. It has been really refreshing.

The college also redesigned onboarding and advising to better support career and educational planning. Navigators in a new and expanded advising role interact with most of the areas that the deans oversee—from academics and workforce education to operations and student services—as they advise students and connect them to services. The navigators have become a link to the deans' areas, further deepening the interactions between them.

UACCB also established a Welcome Center that consolidates onboarding and advising services, recruiters, admissions coordinators, the registrar, navigators, and financial aid staff. For new students, advising at UACCB used to be last minute, and 80% of enrollment happened in the last two weeks before classes. Today, at the Welcome Center, a receptionist greets students at the center, directs them to either admissions or advising, and helps them make future appointments for whichever services they need. Since the college processes applications on a rolling basis, advising and registration occur right away, and more than 75% of students register as soon as the period begins rather than at the last minute.

How Students Develop Educational Plans at UACCB

Many students in the Batesville-area school districts learn about UACCB in the fifth grade when the college conducts outreach that includes providing information about different careers. The college also hosts a kids college program and youth programming for pre-high school students. By the time they get to high school, there are more comprehensive programs, including an introduction to the college and the programs available and a Preview Day, when potential college students meet with faculty from different programs to tour the facilities and see programs in action.

To build awareness about program options, recruiters work in conjunction with program faculty to visit high schools and local businesses where they may meet with potential adult students. Recruiters also organize open house days on campus where faculty bring equipment used in their programs to what happens in different fields.

Once a potential student applies, the Welcome Center administrative assistant reaches out within a week to confirm their program selection, sends them a link to a career coach assessment, and schedules the first advising appointment with a navigator who is assigned based on the program. All new students in general education and career and workforce programs meet with a navigator to build an educational plan and register for their first-term courses.

The first navigator meeting is mandatory and occurs as soon as possible after the application is complete. It is considered an orientation and planning meeting, usually lasting 60 to 90 minutes. The navigator and student discuss the results of the career coach assessment and the related programs at UACCB. They also discuss the student's life circumstances to identify any needed support services, review financial aid if necessary, and complete the FAFSA. The navigator and student work together to create the student's educational plan using a tool developed by navigators and housed in the Workday student platform accessible to students, faculty, and staff. The plan lays out the courses for the student's program in sequence, accounting for part- or full-time status, and notes any needed corequisite courses. Finally, during the first meeting, the navigator registers the student for the first

term. Through this extensive discussion, the navigator and student begin building a relationship that will continue until the student completes their degree or transfers.

The navigator and student meet each semester to review the educational plan and make any adjustments needed. The navigator registers the student for classes and follows up on issues that faculty may have raised through the early alert system. Continuing students can meet with navigators a week or two before registration opens to be sure they secure a spot in classes that fill quickly. As one navigator explained, the relationship with the student is lasting:

We call ourselves navigators because we do largely just help students navigate the entire college experience from the first step of application all the way to graduation, transfer, and beyond, even. I still have students who've transferred who say, "Hey, my current school does this. Can you help me understand?" And I respond, "Of course. You have me for life."

Before classes begin, the college holds an optional open house where admissions staff and navigators are available for last-minute changes, questions, and preparation. Because many students meet with their navigator months earlier, the open house is an opportunity to make sure they have their student IDs, parking passes, login information, and schedules. Students can also visit classrooms so they will know where they are going when the semester starts. Some faculty also attend the open house to meet new students and introduce them to their programs.

UACCB has a large dual enrollment or concurrent credit population through relationships with five of the seven local school districts, and it is refining its approach to educational planning for these students. Advisors create a Workday record for concurrent credit students indicating that they are in high school, and recently a second field was created so the college can track their interest in a particular program. In 2026, the college started mandatory orientation for concurrent credit students—either face to face, facilitated by UACCB at their high school, or at the college—but it does not yet develop graduation maps for this population.

How UACCB Scaled Educational Planning

The new vision took several years to fully implement. Changes in leadership structures, onboarding and advising, scheduling and course formats, along with new technologies and partnerships with other University of Arkansas (UA) institutions, strengthened and unified the college, making it possible to scale educational planning for all students.

Create Interactive and Empowered Leadership

Adding a provost with a cabinet of deans united academic, student affairs, and operations into a team of leaders with a high level of authority and responsibility. Regular and frequent cabinet meetings with the provost nurtured interaction and discussion and promoted a shared understanding and vision.

The five deans recommend processes and changes, seek support from the provost during a cabinet meeting, then drive implementation with their teams. Because they meet frequently, the deans say they can see trends more easily and respond to issues more quickly. For example, the dean of institutional effectiveness and academic operations, who is responsible for the course schedule, also

manages the navigators who track students' course needs based on the graduation maps. If a navigator sees that several students need a summer EMT course in preparation for the Paramedic program that begins in the fall, they tell the dean, who adjusts the course schedule.

Prioritize the Navigator Advising Model and Technology to Support Planning

UACCB developed the role of navigators as it was building the model. Its four navigators provide students with ongoing advising about career and academic pathways. They developed shared checklists and procedures and received training in financial aid and career conversations. They also spent time with faculty learning about programs and continue to occasionally sit in on classes to get first-hand knowledge of the courses in the meta-majors they cover—all to ensure that they provide consistent guidance across a range of programs. While the navigators are specialists in specific programs, they also have a strong working knowledge of other programs. Navigators stay with students who switch programs, since they have already built a relationship, rather than having a student transition to a new navigator.

As the navigators were developing internal processes for scaling educational planning, the college was working with the UA system office to create new processes in Workday. Many of the tools the navigators developed were originally in Excel but have now been recreated in Workday, including the updated program maps and the educational plan template used by navigators as they work with students. The college adjusted the Workday system to accommodate up to three years of courses for a program, which supports the development of complete graduation maps.

Create Back Office and Student-Facing Roles for Onboarding and Advising Staff

The Welcome Center centralized onboarding, advising, financial aid, and other services. One change that increased efficiency was separating student-facing and back-office roles. Navigators, recruiters, and the Welcome Center administrative assistant have student-facing roles, while the registrar, processing coordinators, and financial aid staff interact with students less frequently.

Navigators are the first stop for students for anything they need. A navigator described her role as being entirely focused on supporting students throughout their journey:

I am kind of a combination of several student support roles. Academic advising is probably the biggest part, but I also serve as an admissions counselor, a financial aid advisor, a resource connector, for lack of a better word. Pretty much anything the students need.... I help them get to where they need to go or even do the legwork for them. I translate from higher ed speak to something the student will be able to understand and [we can] solve together.

The student-facing roles are supported by the back-office processing center staff, including a coordinator who handles application processing, transcripts, and documentation in Workday, and an academic coordinator who audits transcripts through graduation. An admissions coordinator oversees the processing center staff and interacts with students to field questions about applications and transfer of credits from other colleges.

The division of roles within the Welcome Center frees up the navigators, who have caseloads of about 250 to 300 students, to work intensively on developing graduation maps and registering students. Navigators also reach out to struggling students to follow up on flags from early alerts from faculty and keep faculty informed about their communications with those students.

Change Scheduling Process to Be More Responsive to Student Needs

Changes in the course scheduling process supported scaled educational planning. Previously, the college organized scheduling around faculty preferences that often did not meet the needs of students trying to complete a degree in a particular timeframe. Centralizing scheduling among the deans resulted in a more student-focused and streamlined process. The individualized educational plans cover the courses needed for a program, and navigators and students are able to see a schedule that extends at least three semesters.

The educational plans serve as a guide not just for the students but also for the college. The deans rely on data from the plans to determine which courses students need during which semester. Because UACCB does not offer every course each semester, it is critical for retention and completion that it strategically offers key courses for a program. Navigators are able to see course schedules for three semesters at a time, and the college is working on developing a full two-year course schedule.

Increase Transfer Options Through Partnerships With UA Institutions

Educational plans help students plan for transfer or employment in local businesses. Students who would like to transfer to a four-year college benefit from UACCB's partnerships with other institutions in the UA system. For example, the UA Transfer Achievement Scholarship guarantees that students who complete an associate degree at UACCB can maintain the same tuition rate when they transfer to pursue a four-year degree at UA–Fayetteville, the state's flagship institution. Other four-year schools in the UA system offer similar scholarships.

Batesville is more than 90 minutes away from the closest public four-year college. For this reason, UACCB has recently developed a campus-within-a-campus partnership with the University of Arkansas at Monticello (UAM), which offers bachelor's-level courses in business and education on the UACCB campus. This arrangement brings a public four-year school into the region with flexible course formats that meet the needs of local students. UACCB navigators work with UAM to map out guides and help students plan courses that will transfer seamlessly to the UAM programs.

UACCB is also exploring ways going forward to use the UA system's Workday platform to build eight-semester-long academic plans using common course codes for universities in the system. These plans are still being developed with one UA university, and there is potential to work with more UA universities as well. These plans would allow UACCB navigators to map out which courses students would need to complete at the community college to transfer as a junior.

Sustaining and Further Improving the Model

UACCB aligned advising, program maps, graduation maps, course scheduling, and day-to-day staff responsibilities so a student's plan can guide the student and the college. Completion and retention rates that had been in the low 20-percent range before engaging in guided pathways reforms improved, according to 2024 data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. Graduation rose to 66% and retention to 70%. The chancellor also described a steady increase in retention and graduation over the last two years.

UACCB plans to enhance its advising approach for the growing number of concurrent credit students. The college has career coaches embedded in several of the local high schools and is considering having navigators also visit or work within the schools to develop student plans for taking credits that will count toward a degree. Recently, concurrent credit students have been enrolling in more online courses, which reduces their need to come to campus but may result in credits that do not relate to a pathway. The college would like to work more closely with high school partners to map out a general education pathway for these students.

Conclusion

As a small, rural college, UACCB is committed to providing its students with every opportunity to complete a degree that leads to a living-wage job. To do this, the college must continually adjust its programming to align with commerce in the region and help students plan a course of study that will lead to a career.

The process of transformation that made it possible to scale guided pathways and educational planning began almost eight years ago and continues as the college fine tunes processes and creates new ones. Leading with a mantra, “Mistakes are not failure but indicate a need for change,” the chancellor and provost have strived to unify the college behind the mission of helping students map their path to completing a degree that will lead to the employment they seek.

The transformation began with a reevaluation of the college's programs to ensure they reflect the current needs of the community. Restructuring the leadership team and redesigning onboarding and advising changed the focus from employee-centered to student-centered, and old policies and procedures that were not serving students' needs were revised. The new provost role and the cabinet of deans created an interactive relationship that fosters interdependence over independence. A navigator advising model made it possible to provide new students with customized graduation maps and ongoing guidance and support throughout their time at the college.

At UACCB, the constant questions asked are, “What do the students need? How can we do this better to support them?” This aligns with the college's recent Gold-level certification from Caring Campus—one of only two across the nation—demonstrating a campuswide culture of care designed to empower every student to succeed. The work the college has done to get to this point is testament to how a vision for creating pathways can become an exemplar for supporting each student's journey with an educational plan.

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