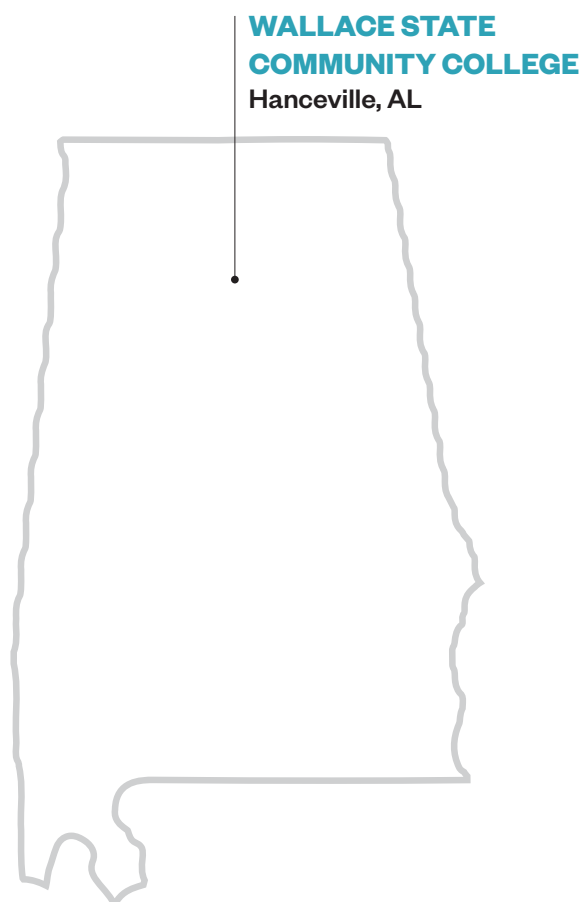


Approaching Institutional Change With Clarity and Commitment

Guided Pathways at Wallace State Community College

By Amy E. Brown and Hana Lahr

SERIES ON CHANGE MANAGEMENT AT AACC PATHWAYS COLLEGES: CASE STUDY 5 OF 5



In fall 2018, CCRC researchers conducted site visits at eight community colleges implementing guided pathways to learn how they are managing the whole-college change process involved. These colleges are among the 30 nationally that were in the first cohort of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Pathways Project, a national demonstration initiative that was launched in late 2015 to show how community colleges could create clearer pathways to program completion, employment, and further education for all students.

Our full report on this study, *Redesigning Your College Through Guided Pathways: Lessons From Community Colleges in the AACC Pathways Project*, synthesizes lessons from all eight colleges we visited and shares new findings on how long it takes to implement guided pathways at scale. Here, we provide a case study of Wallace State Community College in Alabama. During a two-day site visit to the college, CCRC researchers conducted one-hour interviews with 14 faculty members, administrators, advisors and counselors, and other staff. Researchers also held hour-long focus groups with 15 additional faculty members, advisors and counselors, and students at the college. Based on the data we collected, in this report we describe the organizational change work that has enabled Wallace State's exceptional progress in redesigning academic programs, student services, and related support systems using the guided pathways model.

About Wallace State

Wallace State Community College is the only postsecondary institution in Cullman County, Alabama, situated in an agricultural community halfway between Birmingham and Huntsville. Wallace State enrolled over 7,000 students in credit-bearing courses in 2016–17 across more than 50 majors on its main campus in Hanceville and its satellite campus in Oneonta. Wallace State has partnerships and articulation agreements with several four-year institutions in Alabama, including the University of Alabama and Auburn University. In fall 2018, the college received a \$2 million grant to build a business incubation center and welding facility that will help fill regional workforce needs.

Overview

Wallace State’s leaders began rethinking the college’s approach to serving students more than a decade before guided pathways emerged as a reform model. But while the college had implemented numerous small-scale reforms before joining the AACC Pathways Project, adopting guided pathways required a shift toward larger scale change. To align its student success efforts and support students from entry to completion would require the participation and commitment of the entire college.

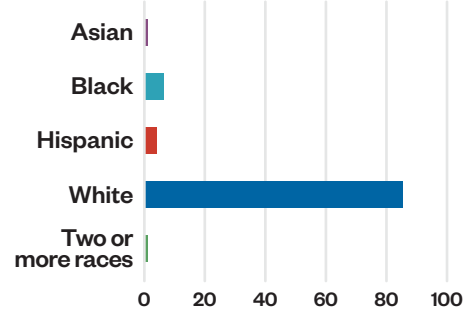
In introducing guided pathways reforms, college leaders tapped into community members’ dedication to helping students meet their goals, and they took care to make the planning process transparent and inclusive, soliciting input from across the college through cross-functional teams and whole-college gatherings. Leaders particularly encouraged faculty members’ involvement and leadership in guided pathways, as some faculty had initially expressed reservations about the reforms. With this collaborative approach, Wallace State was able to build on its earlier student success efforts and swiftly implement many foundational guided pathways practices at scale. College leaders aimed for clarity and simplicity with the reforms for students and staff alike, and they communicated that adjustments could be made along the way.

More recently, faculty and staff have delved into the curricular implications of pathways reforms by incorporating program and career exploration into coursework and advising, selecting program-relevant recommended electives, and leading statewide reform efforts in developmental education and math pathways. Wallace State is currently working to solidify the gains it has made and strengthen its commitment to college-wide redesign by aligning resources to support guided pathways priorities and benefitting from a reflective pause to acknowledge accomplishments and plan next steps.

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS 2016-17

Credit program students enrolled: **7,270**

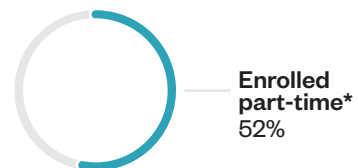
Race/ethnicity:



Gender:



Enrollment status:



*Fall 2017 only

Guided Pathways Practices Wallace State Has Implemented at Scale

Meta-majors

Wallace State has organized its programs into four meta-majors, which it calls “pathways,” and uses them to frame students’ experience from their initial contact with the college onward. Meta-majors are used to acquaint local high school students with program options, help entering students select a program of interest, and provide a sense of community for students throughout their time at college.

Program Maps

Wallace State has created program maps for all of its programs with sequenced academic coursework and recommended electives. The maps are revised regularly to ensure accuracy, and the college’s website features local career and wage information for each program. Most faculty and staff we interviewed said the maps provide helpful guidance without being overly restrictive.

Full-Program Educational Planning

As part of the college’s Goals-Planning-Success Seminar, a course that is required for first-year students and recommended for returning and transfer students, students meet with their advisor to create a full-program educational plan.

Supports for Gateway Math and English Completion in the First Year

In fall 2018, Wallace State scaled one-credit corequisite courses for college-level English and math and fully implemented a multiple measures placement system that takes students’ ACT scores and high school grades into account. These changes are part of statewide efforts to redesign developmental education and implement program-relevant math pathways.

Laying the Groundwork for Whole-College Redesign

Early Student Success Initiatives

According to Wallace State’s president, Dr. Vicki Karolewics, the college’s guided pathways journey began during the first few months of her tenure in fall 2003. When she arrived on campus, technology systems were outdated, the student intake process was overly complex, and the college needed to create a Quality Enhancement Plan for accreditation with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. In response to these challenges, and with Dr. Karolewics’s leadership, members of the college began examining Wallace State’s approach to onboarding,

orientation, advising, and the first-year experience. College leaders also adopted Terry O'Banion's "learning college" paradigm (1997), which prioritizes learning in institutional policy and practice, and created a working group focused on excellence in teaching and learning. In 2009, through Alabama's career clusters initiative and with support from the U.S. Department of Labor, the college began reorganizing its career-technical programs within the National Career Clusters Framework (Advance CTE: State Leaders Connecting Learning to Work, 2019) and partnering with local high schools to support students' career exploration and college planning.

By the mid-2010s, Wallace State had become involved with a variety of initiatives to improve student success. The college joined Achieving the Dream (ATD) in 2012 and began to implement a Quality Enhancement Plan focused on developing and scaling a first-year experience seminar to support students' program and career exploration and educational planning. In 2013, the college became involved with the American Association of Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) Roadmap Project, which facilitated curricular alignment and program mapping to support students' persistence and achievement. Alongside these more formal initiatives, Wallace State began shortening its developmental education sequences and implementing new developmental placement policies. The college also made significant investments in advising and technology, strategically allocating existing resources while seeking external funding. In 2017, Wallace State was named an ATD Leader College in recognition of the scale of its efforts.

A Framework for Aligning Student Success Efforts

Despite the benefits of the above-mentioned initiatives, Dr. Karolewics realized that many of them focused on a limited aspect of the student experience and that they were not being undertaken in a coordinated way. When she learned about the AACC Pathways Project in 2015, she thought that participating could help Wallace State strengthen connections between its existing student success efforts. She and other college leaders anticipated that joining the project would allow them to learn from other institutions and experts in the field and share what they learned with other community colleges in Alabama.

The language of guided pathways was not new to Dr. Karolewics or others at Wallace State. They had been exposed to similar ideas, for example, in the AACC 21st-Century Commission's report on the future of community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012). Dr. Karolewics envisioned guided pathways as the "glue" for the college's student success efforts, uniting its strategic planning efforts, involvement in the AAC&U Roadmap Project, participation in ATD, and statewide work on career clusters. Guided pathways would provide a framework for organizing reform efforts and mobilizing the college community to work toward shared goals.

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Introducing Guided Pathways to the College Community

A Clear Rationale for Guided Pathways

When Wallace State joined ATD in 2012, its three-year completion rate for first-time, full-time students was 21 percent. College leaders began examining practices at peer colleges with completion rates above 40 percent and determined that Wallace State could do better for its students. Three years later, the college had made some improvements through various initiatives, but its leaders saw opportunities to accelerate its progress by adopting guided pathways.

College leaders knew they had to make the case for whole-college reform, which they did by tapping into the community's commitment to its students. Dr. Karolewics explained:

Every student who comes here has a goal. If we fail any of those, then we have not done our job. ... As long as we have not yet done everything that we know we need to do or must do to help every student succeed, we will always be striving to do better.

College leaders also knew they had to make the case for guided pathways in particular. Dr. Karolewics and the college dean introduced the guided pathways model and its rationale to the college community through whole-college gatherings and communication channels—in particular, the college's annual convocation address and all-staff emails. Highlighting three main issues helped them make their case:

- **Declining enrollment:** Between fall 2010 and fall 2015, enrollment of first-time students dropped from 1,152 to 914, making it important to retain students rather than relying on new enrollments every fall.
- **State funding cuts to public colleges:** Between 2008 and 2018, per-student funding from the state of Alabama dropped by 35 percent (Mitchell, Leachman, Masterson, & Waxman, 2018).
- **The ethical consequences of underperformance:** As Dr. Ryan Smith, dean of students, explained, “If a student is paying for college and is not being assisted to reach their goals, and is taking too many classes, and not the right classes, then it's an ethical issue.”

Hearing these points articulated persuaded a wide range of stakeholders of the need for large-scale transformation—and the potential utility of guided pathways in Wallace State's institutional context.

In-Person Meetings and Workshops on Guided Pathways

Despite a growing awareness of the need for institutional transformation, when the guided pathways model was first introduced at Wallace State, some faculty and staff had concerns about it being “just another initiative” that would not last. Some faculty

College leaders knew they had to make the case for whole-college reform, which they did by tapping into the community's commitment to its students.

were also concerned that overly structured programs would limit student choice, or that certain courses would be eliminated.

To address these concerns, Wallace State held college-wide professional development days and faculty-led workshops that clarified the purpose and promise of guided pathways. College leaders included faculty in initial conversations about adopting guided pathways, on teams attending AACC Pathways Institutes, and on college committees. As more people at the college learned about the model, senior leaders began to step back and encourage faculty members to teach their colleagues about it. For example, in one workshop, a faculty member who had attended one of the AACC Pathways Institutes led a discussion of the *Guided Pathways Demystified* report (Johnstone, 2015). Because faculty contributed to the early development of the reforms at Wallace State, the college's discussions about guided pathways addressed critical questions about the implications for teaching and learning. Many of our interviewees credited these professional development activities with encouraging college-wide responsibility for student success and greater collaboration.

Additionally, Wallace State's leaders involved existing committees and working groups in the reform planning process. One of these was a 12-member, cross-functional group of faculty, advisors, and administrators called Pipeline, which had been meeting weekly since 2014 to examine data and identify "loss points" in student progression. Others included a group focused on reforming developmental education and a group managing the college's learning communities. When Wallace State joined the AACC Pathways Project, its leaders created a 30-member pathways team to lead planning and program mapping efforts. However, they respected the expertise and dedication of the college's existing working groups and saw benefit in maintaining their membership, meetings, and efforts alongside and in coordination with the pathways team's work.

Guided pathways discussions were also prominent in other college forums, including faculty department meetings and administrative council meetings, with attendees asking questions of college leaders, weighing in on redesign options, and shaping implementation plans. Wallace State continues to hold summits and workshops on guided pathways to ensure all staff and faculty have a clear understanding of the reform model and to communicate how evolving efforts are contributing to comprehensive student support.

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Supporting Collaborative Planning and Implementation

College and Career Exploration Using Meta-Majors

As Wallace State began implementing guided pathways, the college drew upon previous work, existing and emerging expertise, and broad-based input to ensure that reforms were straightforward and easy to adopt for students and staff alike. For example, Wallace State had made earlier efforts to organize its career-technical programs into career clusters as part of a statewide initiative. In adopting guided pathways, the college worked to further clarify how all programs fit into a meta-major structure that could facilitate program exploration.

Shortly after the first AACC Pathways Institute in February 2016, faculty, staff, and administrators jointly created Wallace State's four meta-majors, which they refer to as "pathways":

- health science;
- science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM);
- liberal arts and general studies; and
- applied technology.

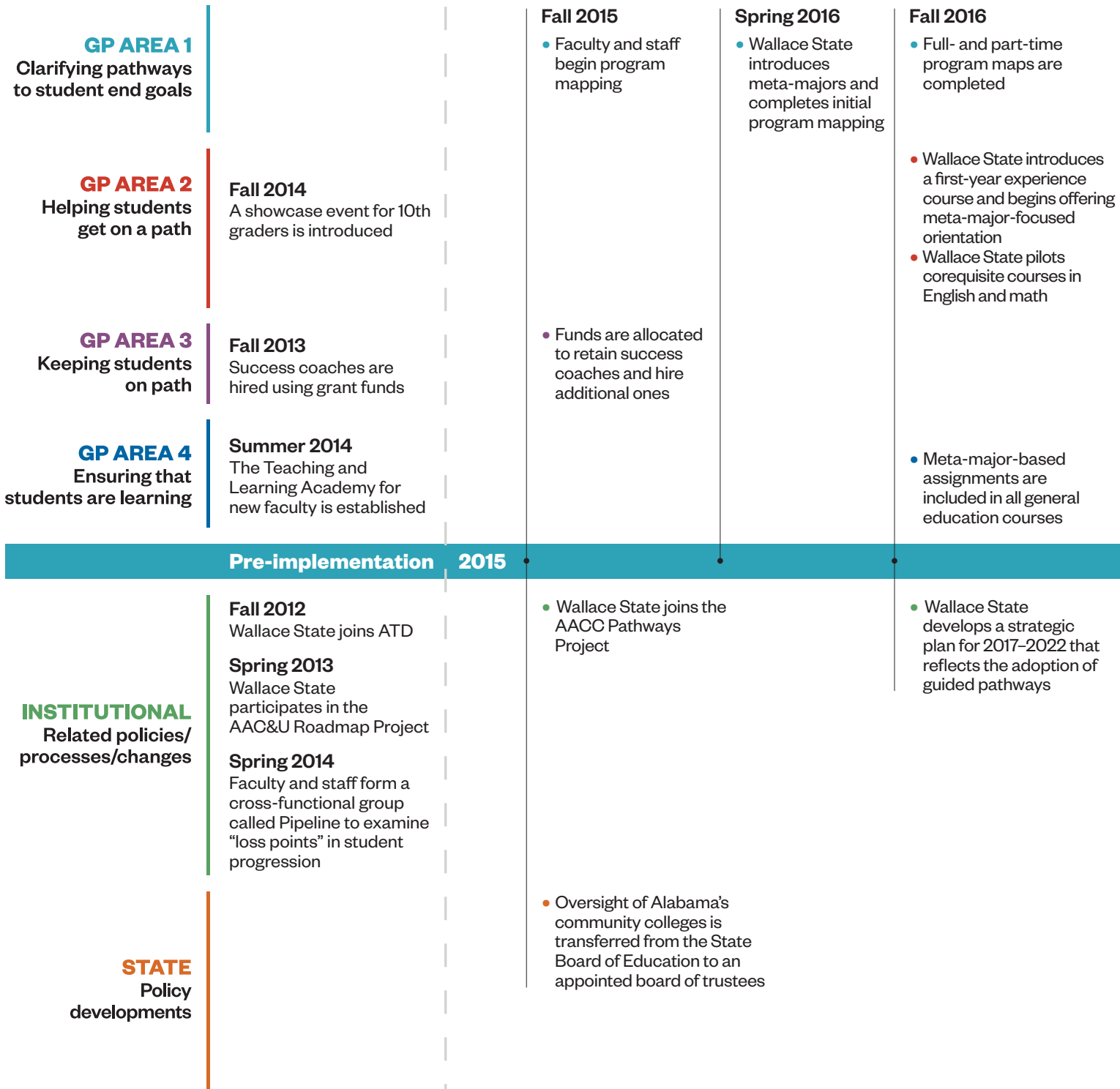
Importantly, college staff did not lose time or momentum deliberating over a complicated meta-major structure. Instead, they used simple names and designations to create meta-majors that made sense to incoming students. Meta-majors are identified by icons on the college's website and printed materials and used to aid students' exploration of their interests and goals.

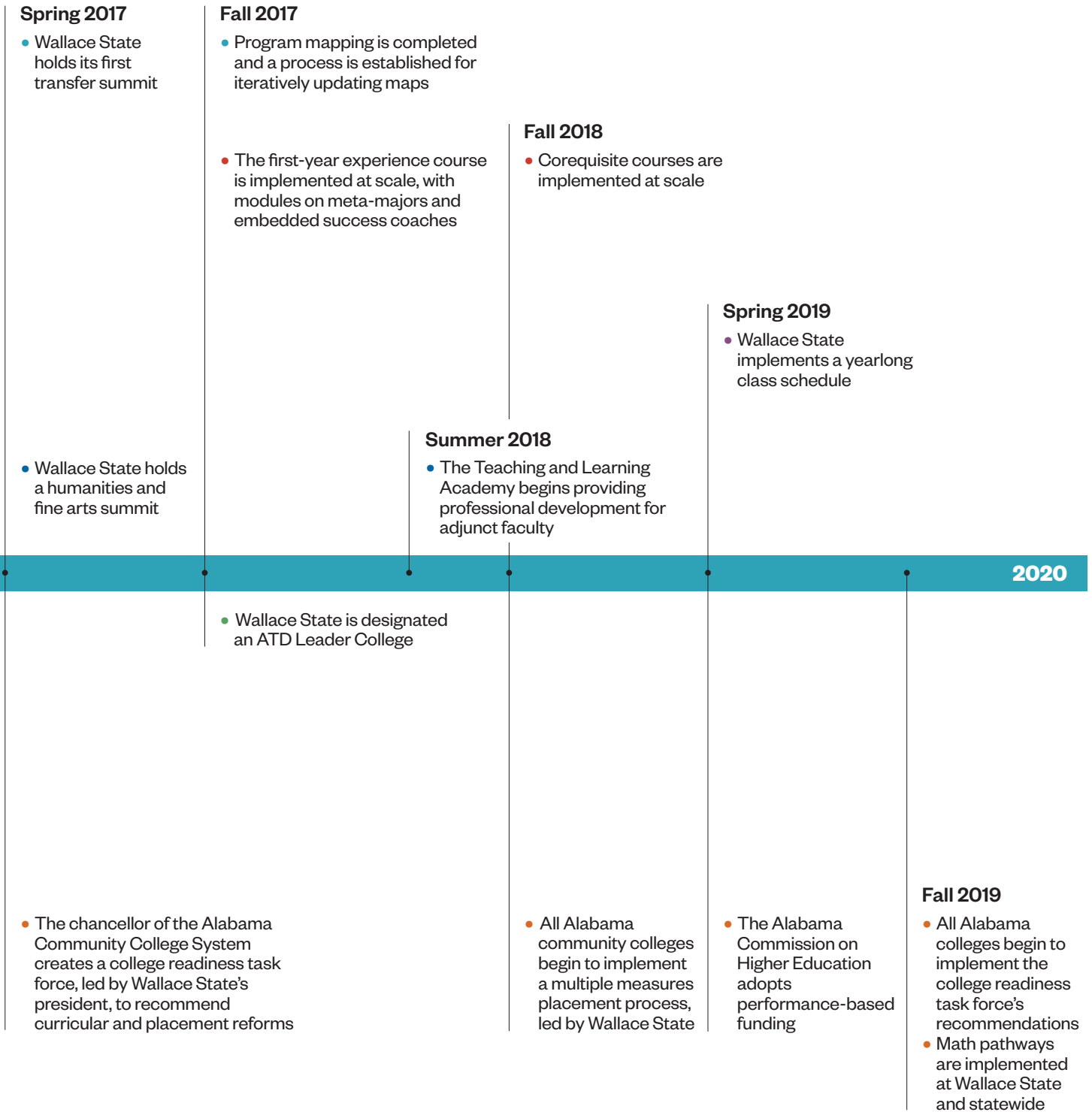
As the college's reforms progressed, faculty and staff increasingly used the meta-majors to organize new student orientation sessions and events geared toward high school students exploring their college options. For example, faculty and staff developed an annual fall showcase event in which 10th graders from local high schools are introduced to the four meta-majors; visit program-specific booths grouped by meta-major; meet program faculty, staff, and current students; learn about careers related to each meta-major; and engage firsthand in program-relevant activities. As the college's Quality Enhancement Plan team redesigned its Goals-Planning-Success Seminar, a required course for first-year students, they incorporated the meta-majors into the curriculum, adding modules on career and meta-major exploration and educational planning in fall 2017.

Furthermore, disciplinary faculty have incorporated meta-major-specific assignments into their courses. Faculty in English, for example, decided that all English courses would include at least one assignment related to careers in students' field of interest. Students may be asked to write essays on potential career paths, research job growth and salary projections, interview people working in different fields, or complete literature-based assignments with prompts such as, "What characteristics did Ben Franklin have that would work well in your career choice?" As of fall 2016, all general education courses at Wallace State include meta-major-based assignments.

Timeline of Guided Pathways Implementation

Pathways implementation





Faculty members said they believe that students benefit from such assignments and that they themselves have gained insight into gaps in students' awareness of their career options as a result of the activities. For example, they learned that students who are still exploring meta-majors often have not considered geographical variations in employment demand, and that more opportunities to learn about financial planning would be welcomed by students, many of whom are underinformed about salary ranges in their areas of interest and uncertain about cost-of-living projections.

A Meta-Major-Based Math Assignment

Suppose that Wallace State's placement office is planning to publish an occupational handbook on math used in all of its job placement opportunities. If you know your pathway, choose the career you want to obtain once you complete your degree; if you are undecided, choose a job you would consider. Research the occupation. Then write a brief (300–500 word) entry for the occupational handbook that describes how a person in that career would use math in their job. Include three scenarios with examples of the math problems.

Communication Across Disciplines to Strengthen Program Coherence

While Wallace State's program mapping efforts reach back to its involvement in the AAC&U Roadmap Project in 2013, faculty and staff returned to the mapping process in 2016 with a focus on developing recommended course sequences and clarifying program requirements. But at Wallace State, as at many colleges, the departmental structure did not always allow faculty to recognize the relevance (or indeed, sometimes, the existence) of courses in other areas that could enhance their programs.

As faculty worked on the program maps, the dean of academic affairs and the college dean encouraged them to recommend electives for each program that would satisfy general education requirements while supporting students' learning in their field. One event that facilitated this process was Wallace State's spring 2017 humanities and fine arts summit. At the summit, faculty in the humanities and fine arts made presentations to a wide-ranging group of full-time and adjunct faculty, staff, and administrators on how the knowledge and skills taught in specific humanities and fine arts courses relate to the college's meta-majors. Their presentations provided insights into how course content is contextualized within other fields and conveyed the value of specific courses for students in other programs. Faculty who attended the summit used what they learned to recommend electives for program maps. Additionally, presenters' explanations were incorporated into an advising guide for faculty and advisors, and even staff not directly involved in program mapping reported finding the explanations valuable.

A culture of trust, transparency, and student focus was essential when selecting recommended electives.

Because the college dean anticipated that the process of selecting recommended electives would be challenging and uncomfortable for the humanities and fine arts faculty, he set a few ground rules at the outset. He explained that faculty would not be in danger of losing their positions based on the outcomes of the summit, and that the expectation was that there would be balance and variety across the program maps in terms of the electives selected. Dr. Karolewics told us that "a culture of trust, transparency, and student focus" was essential when selecting recommended electives.

By clarifying courses' relevance to different meta-majors, Wallace State faculty encouraged college personnel and students not to think in terms of "getting general education courses out of the way" but rather to think of electives as essential to disciplinary learning. Advisors said that using the advising guide, they could provide better answers to students asking why they have to take general education courses and offer more informed guidance about how the content of particular elective courses might align with students' interests and goals.

Connections Between an Introductory Humanities Course and Wallace State's Meta-Majors

The humanities and fine arts summit gave faculty in those disciplines the opportunity to explain the direct relevance of their course offerings to students in other fields. One faculty member explained the applicability of Introduction to Humanities to each meta-major as follows.

STEM

This course combines analysis and creativity and covers many of the great mathematicians, scientists, and engineers in history, such as Pythagoras, Vitruvius, Kepler, Boyle, Newton, and others. Also, many of the greatest thinkers in history did innovative work in both science and the fine arts—men like Leonardo da Vinci and Ansel Adams—or people today like Mae Jemison, an astronaut, engineer, art collector, and dancer.

Health Science

This course touches on the history of medicine from Galen all the way to Pasteur and the 21st century, noting changing ideas about medicine from circulation to disease theory and more. This course immerses you in the human experience, which helps you to be more empathetic to client needs. The course also helps you connect science and art. When it comes to patient care, you need both analysis and creativity.

Liberal Arts and General Studies

This course gives you a great foundation in music, philosophy, literature, religion, art, and history—all in one three-hour course.

Applied Technology

This course covers a lot of engineering and construction techniques from the Great Pyramids through great buildings of the 20th century.

Teaching and Learning Across Roles to Support Students

Wallace State's guided pathways reforms have opened up opportunities for faculty and advisors to work together, share knowledge, and use the insights gained from their exchanges to provide more comprehensive support for students. For example, the humanities and fine arts summit was an opportunity for faculty to share insights about which courses may be most relevant for students in other programs. Program mapping teams incorporated this information into their course recommendations, and now advisors can offer better guidance to students selecting their coursework each term.

Advisors and faculty have also gained a better understanding of each other's roles, with new faculty members shadowing advisors and advisors getting detailed information on programs from faculty. Additionally, both groups have learned more about how Wallace State's programs connect to programs at four-year colleges through Wallace State's transfer summit, which brought them together with faculty and staff from four-year transfer destinations. As a result of these types of cross-functional collaborations, advisors and faculty are now able to have more informed conversations with students about their goals and decisions, engage in enhanced career advising, and better facilitate referrals across different areas of expertise.

Faculty and advisors have also collaborated to support students' success in gateway courses, particularly those that historically have had high failure rates. For example, biology faculty worked with advisors to identify the top five things students need to do to be successful in Biology 103—such as forming study groups; attending office hours; and studying more diligently for the second exam, which has proven particularly difficult for students—so that they could engage in deeper conversations about good practices beyond attending class and completing homework. Advisors and faculty then shared their top-five list through a student outreach campaign.

Leading the Way for Statewide Reforms

Sometimes, state policies and long-standing practice make change within one college more difficult. For example, developing program-relevant alternatives to algebra that students can use to fulfill their math course requirement (such as statistics, quantitative reasoning, and math for educators) proved challenging for Wallace State due to longstanding state and university requirements that students take college algebra.

When oversight of Alabama's community colleges was transferred from the State Board of Education to an appointed board of trustees in 2015, Wallace State's leadership team saw an opening to shape state policy in ways that could facilitate reform. Leaders looked to engage in statewide efforts to mitigate barriers to student progression by coordinating with other institutions to redesign developmental education and implement program-relevant math pathways.

In June 2017, Dr. Karolewics was appointed by the chancellor of the Alabama Community College System to lead the state's college readiness task force, which included faculty, advisors, and admissions representatives. The task force was charged with recommending "curricular and placement reforms that would allow thousands of Alabama students to accelerate into a program of study leading to a credential and transfer or entry-level employment" (Wallace State Community College, 2018, p. 21). In June 2018, the chancellor accepted the task force's recommendations, which included revised placement policies, the restructuring of developmental English and math as one four-credit course in each subject, the elimination of developmental reading courses, and the creation of one-credit corequisite courses for students placed into college-level English and math who need additional academic support. Wallace State began implementing these reforms in fall 2018, with some other Alabama colleges piloting them that semester and some implementing them in fall 2019. Alternative math pathways are being implemented statewide in fall 2019.

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Sustaining and Institutionalizing Student Success Reforms

Strategic Planning and Resource Allocation

As Wallace State’s implementation of guided pathways reforms has progressed, its strategic efforts have been bolstered by planning and documentation to clarify and affirm the college’s commitment to student success. In 2016, shortly after Wallace State began implementing guided pathways, the president commissioned a task force of about 60 representatives from the college and community to develop a five-year strategic plan. The plan that emerged, *Readiness Cubed: Ready for College, Ready for Work, Ready for Life*, reflects the college’s adoption of guided pathways and provides a basis for resource allocation (Wallace State Community College, 2016). Amid stagnant funding from the state and declining enrollments, Dr. Karolewics explained that leaders at the college “had to decide where the most precious resources will be allocated” and which services needed to be streamlined. In making those decisions, college leaders prioritized funding the areas and services most closely related to student success.

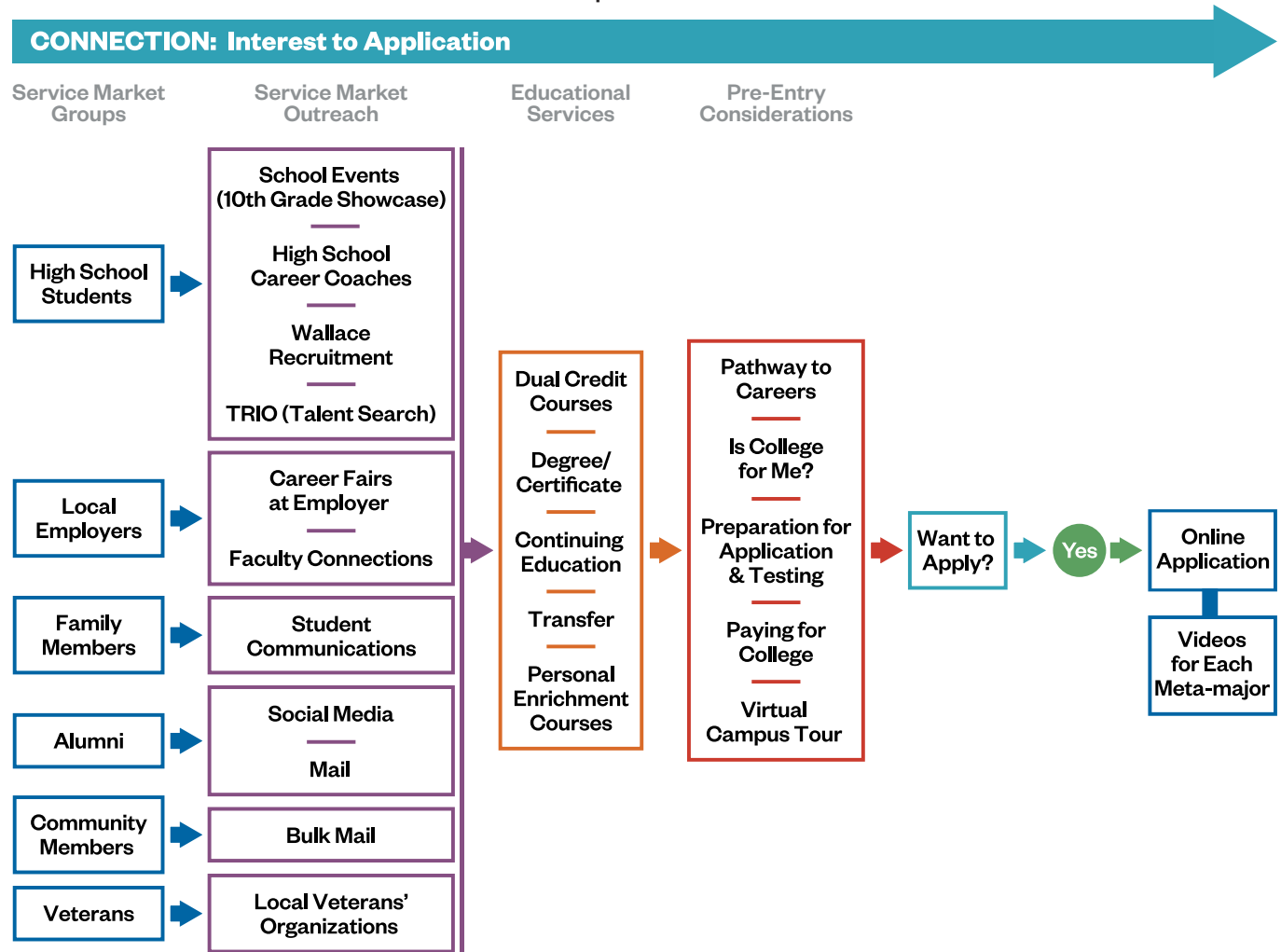
For example, in deciding whether to allocate funds to retain the college’s student success coaches, who had been hired in 2013 using grant funds, college leaders considered their role in promoting student success. Coaches provided targeted guidance to students during intake and onboarding and throughout the first year, and they ran a college success program for high school students. Given their contributions to student success, the college decided to retain the coaches and hire additional ones. Under the current strategic plan, the college also hired a student engagement coordinator to examine how students experience the college and enhance student life programming.

Institutional Mapping

In addition to developing a strategic plan, the college created an “institutional map” based on Completion by Design’s loss/momentum framework, whose four phases—connection, entry, progress, and completion—span students’ progression through college (Rassen, Chaplot, Jenkins, & Johnstone, 2012). The map is highly detailed, laying out the many steps that occur in each of these phases to help identify gaps in practice and areas for reform. For example, as shown in Figure 1, the connection phase of the map identifies potential student markets, outreach strategies, educational services entry points, and pre-entry considerations. As one college dean described it, the map helps to “articulate how proposed strategies interact with one another to benefit student success.”

Wallace State’s institutional map affirms that guided pathways is a comprehensive, coherent set of reforms whose adoption requires a college-wide commitment to student success. Dr. Karolewics noted that the map clarifies staff roles and responsibilities and helps all college stakeholders consider how they are “creating intentionality at every step of the way to prevent problems rather than remediate once the problem has occurred.” By representing the depth and breadth of the college’s efforts in a single graphic, according to the director of advising, the map emphasizes that “we are all working toward the same goals, perhaps with just different vantage points, so processes

Figure 1.
The Connection Phase of Wallace State's Institutional Map



Note. Adapted with permission from Wallace State Community College.

have become more unified and relational.” Although staffing, resource availability, and initiatives inevitably change over time, the institutional mapping process preserves a system-level view and a structure within which to carry out necessary functions at critical points of the student experience. A major focus of Wallace State’s future work will be to develop a plan for communicating about the map to the college community.

A Year of Reflection to Inform Next Steps

At Wallace State’s fall 2018 convocation, Dr. Karolewics reviewed the college’s successes, presented the latest student success data, and communicated the need for a “year of reflection.” Because many at the college had been working hard to continuously improve their practice for a long time, and because others had recently begun to understand how their roles contribute to the college’s overall efforts, the president viewed a reflective pause as essential. She told us:

Since we have been in a front-facing period of momentum for years now, working hard every day, it’s time to step back and ... make sure that we’re doing all the things we’ve changed extremely well and then assess where we are at the end of the year.

She encouraged faculty and staff to “go back to the basics”—to step back, take stock, and ensure that the most important institutional changes were being carried out consistently and that everyone felt comfortable with their work. When we visited Wallace State, she was hoping to facilitate campus-wide reflection by meeting with faculty and staff informally and providing opportunities for people to connect and debrief. At these gatherings, she planned to collect insights from the community to inform future changes. As the year of reflection came to a close this spring, college leaders were encouraged by faculty and staff’s acceptance of and involvement in operationalizing guided pathways through curricula, institutional processes and policies, and practice.

Plans for Building on Improvements to Date

As Wallace State looks to the future, its intention is not only to solidify gains but also to continue to advance its guided pathways efforts. Areas of future focus are described below.

Systematizing and Scaling Advising and Educational Planning Processes

While many students are meeting with advisors, updating their educational plans, and making progress toward their degrees, the college is examining how processes can be improved and standardized so that all students have a plan that is kept up to date in DegreeWorks.

Scaling Contextualized Supports for Gateway Math and English

Wallace State is leading the state in implementing developmental education, developmental placement, and math pathways reforms, and it plans to further develop course curricula, refine and evaluate placement policies, and increase the number of students reached by these changes.

Using Data to Examine Guided Pathways Outcomes and Areas for Improvement

Wallace State is working with its ATD data coach to analyze and use student outcomes data to inform improvement efforts. The college plans to conduct a longitudinal study to estimate the impacts of its guided pathways reforms on student progression and completion across all programs. It also plans to develop dashboards that display program-level data in order to enable program directors to better track their students’ outcomes. Additionally, Wallace State is interested in supplementing outcomes data with focus group data to understand how students are experiencing guided pathways.

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