



**CASE STUDY:**

# How technology and curriculum reform help empower students

Pearl River Community College uses Ellucian Degree Works and guided pathways to help students reach their goals

At Pearl River Community College (PRCC), Mississippi's first and oldest two-year academic institution, modernization is playing a key role in helping students reach successful outcomes.

Committed to improving student success and spurred by a state mandate, PRCC has combined the latest in higher education technology and evidence-based curriculum reform in the form of guided pathways.

In its effort to guide more of its students toward successful outcomes—from degree completion to transfer to updated skills leading to gainful employment—PRCC has streamlined its course offerings into eight plans of study, or “meta-majors.” That has helped narrow down the huge array of courses and majors that can be overwhelming and hard to navigate.



**PEARL RIVER**  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Pearl River Community College is a public two-year institution with locations in Poplarville, Hattiesburg, and Waveland, Mississippi.

**Enrollment**

5,037 students

**Challenge**

Simplify and improve degree planning and advising as part of a pathways initiative

**Solutions**

Ellucian Degree Works™  
Ellucian Banner®

**Result**

A 3.8% increase in year-over-year retention

“There are so many students who don’t know what they want to do,” says Martha Lou Smith, vice president for general education and technology services at PRCC. “Too many of them are not ready to make those kinds of decisions. So instead of saying to them, ‘You have to pick a major right now,’ giving them the pathway option helps them realize, ‘Oh, there are a lot of things I might want to do.’”

To help students stay on track, the college strengthened its advising and degree-planning processes—two critical elements of the guided pathways model. To transform those services, PRCC implemented Ellucian Degree Works™, an online degree-planning tool that integrates with the college’s Ellucian Banner® student information system (SIS).

The tool offers “a very visual way for students to see, ‘Here I am, and this is how much further I have to go,’” says Smith. “They can see a check mark by the classes and know, ‘I’ve got that one done.’”

Just one year into its reforms, Pearl River is seeing results. With widespread approval from students, staff, and faculty members, the college has already seen a 3.8 percent<sup>1</sup> increase in first-year, full-time retention rates.

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1. First-year, full-time retention rates increased from 53% in fall 2016–2017 to 55% in fall 2017–2018.

## Laying the foundation

As PRCC prepared its move to pathways, the college had multiple goals in mind. In addition to giving its students more targeted guidance and greater visibility into their degree progress, the college also wanted to reduce barriers to transfer and give busy advisors better tools and more holistic insight into their advisees’ progress. Yet the college was still using paper and pencil for registration, and data governance was a significant problem.

So Pearl River tackled its challenges strategically, beginning with the critical work of implementing a sound data governance system using its SIS. With the foundation in place, PRCC then used its SIS to organize its courses into eight pathways. Finally, PRCC was ready to implement its new degree auditing system for better degree planning, progress tracking, advising, and accreditation-related reporting.

As planned, the two systems now work together to streamline the work of staff, advisors, and students. “Everything from Banner feeds into Degree Works so smoothly,” Smith says. For example, when “a student is coded in Banner as an instrumentation major, that information feeds directly over into Degree Works so it says exactly the courses they need to take. It is just amazing. In such a short amount of time [our advisors] have come to rely on it very heavily.”

“I am an advocate for Degree Works. If a school wants to implement the concept of pathways, it’s almost a no-brainer.”

**MARTHA SMITH**, Vice President for General Education and Technology Services, Pearl River Community College

## Centralized information for enhanced advising

With advisors now able to see everything they need to know about an advisee at a glance, the time savings are significant, Smith says.

“We’re not a large institution,” she points out, so for advisors with a large number of advisees, this centralization of key student information “makes a tremendous difference.” They don’t have to switch from one screen to another, toggling between the SIS and the course catalog, trying to figure out what a student has already taken and what courses remain for completion.

The college’s new system has also given advisors a significant boost in their ability to help their advisees understand what’s required of them.

“Before we had Degree Works, we had nothing,” Smith says. “We had a folder and a piece of paper. You were hopeful that students went to get advice before they registered for classes, [but] there was very little control over the process. It was, ‘Well, come on, let me see if I can find somebody to print your transcript, and we’ll figure it out.’ It wasn’t a smooth process at all. We graduated people, but it did not have the structure and organization to it that we now have.”

## Empowering students with easy progress tracking

And how are students interacting with the new system? According to Smith, they can now easily check their progress and like seeing where they are on their paths.

Emily Brennan, a sophomore majoring in English, plans to transfer to a four-year institution. She likes the system’s Class History feature that shows her which credits will qualify for transfer, and she appreciates the visual display of her progress toward graduation.

Jonathan Dixon, a sophomore majoring in music education, likes the self-service aspect of the tool. “It lets me be more independent instead of me being dependent on my advisor,” he says. “It lets me choose my classes instead of letting someone else help me, making me be more responsible. When it’s time to make schedules, my schedule’s already made because I’ve sat down and taken the time. ‘Okay, this is the class that I need to take. Boom, boom, boom.’”

## Support for accreditation and reporting

For all its new capabilities with planning and advising, the college has even more uses in mind for the new



auditing system: namely as a reporting aid for state and accreditation reporting.

“Everything that I do on a daily basis, I always have accreditation in the back of my mind,” says Smith. “It’s just part of who we are and what we do. But the truth is, there are so many rules and regulations that it is just very burdensome.” With PRCC’s fifth-year report looming, “there’s no doubt that I will refer to Degree Works and that I will actually have examples of the audits of different students that I will reference in my writings and that I will link to,” Smith says.

Together with the defined, streamlined structure of PRCC’s eight pathways, established in accordance with state guidelines, the tool will enable easier state reporting of student data as well.

## Managing change on campus

So how does an institution roll out both structural changes to the curriculum and a new planning and advising tool on campus? Carefully and with clear communication, Smith says.

With the shift to pathways, “helping everyone see these ideas and where we were going was at first a little bit of a hurdle,” says Smith. “But people came on board very quickly with understanding what we were trying to do.” PRCC’s pathways also align well with the state’s high school career clusters, which has helped ease the transition.

The new system has helped pave the college’s pathways rollout, too, Smith says. “It’s such a great way to say, ‘Hey, look at this, it’s right here and it’s all structured for you.’ Without Degree Works, I don’t know that that conversation would have gone very smoothly.”

As for introducing the system, PRCC started with “baby steps,” says Smith. The college initially rolled it out at summer orientation when students came to campus to build their fall schedules. After showing students how to log into PRCC’s portal and use various features, staff members placed registration holds on the students’ accounts—holds that could only be lifted after meeting with their advisors and getting the PIN numbers.

“At some point, the student has to take ownership of the classes,” Smith says. “So when they leave the advisor, they have the registration PIN and the courses that they should take, and they know how to go make their schedule at that point.”

## Looking ahead

As PRCC enters its second year with its new pathways and systems in place, Smith feels satisfied with the rollout and what lies ahead.

“Degree Works has opened the door for us to a lot of opportunities that we may not have had otherwise,” she says. “I don’t think it would have flowed as smoothly. It would have been file folders and papers.”

“I am an advocate for Degree Works,” she says. “If a school wants to implement the concept of pathways, it’s almost a no-brainer.”



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