



*College of*  
Education

## A labor of love

Cultivating authentic assessment at  
The University of Alabama College of Education



# At a glance

## THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

### INSTITUTION SNAPSHOT

The University of Alabama | Tuscaloosa, Alabama

The College of Education (COE) is one of the 12 colleges and schools offered within the institution.



**Institution type:**  
Public, 4-year



**Total enrolled students:**  
39,623; 3,111 in COE



**Total full-time faculty:**  
1,583; 121 in COE



**Number of campuses:**  
3\*

### The obstacle

- An overwhelming, conflicting reporting process to several accreditation bodies
- Outdated tools and processes that caused inefficiencies and frustration

### The solution

- [Watermark Student Learning & Licensure](#)
- [Watermark Faculty Success](#)
- [Watermark Planning & Self-Study](#)

### The outcome

- A cultural shift toward authentic assessment practices
- A streamlined tech stack, able to meet varying institutional needs
- Greater collaboration among faculty, students, and staff

\*The University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa is one of three campuses in The University of Alabama System, all of which are governed by The University of Alabama Board of Trustees.



“A meaningful assessment process takes time to curate. It's not a one-time event. It will not be brainstormed, created, and implemented in one meeting or even over the course of just a semester.”

### The University of Alabama College of Education Assessment Team:

Dr. Liza Wilson (Interim Dean, Professor)

Dr. Emily Sims (Associate Dean and Certification Officer, Clinical Associate Professor)

Dr. Akeisha Young (Director of Accreditation and Assessment, Assistant Clinical Professor)

Dr. James Hardin (Coordinator of Technology Applications and Assessment Systems, Clinical Associate Professor)

Dr. Lisa Matherson (Coordinator of Continuous Improvement, Clinical Associate Professor)

Mrs. Diana Winchester (Clinical Instructor of Student Assessment and edTPA)



## CASE STUDY: THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

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"If I am a master teacher, do you know what I hope I'm teaching you? That love will take care of everything in our world."

These are the words of American educator, activist, and first Black student to attend The University of Alabama (UA), Dr. Atherine Lucy Foster. Today, Foster's words inspire The College of Education (COE) at UA as it prepares students who will go on to teach at the K-12 and higher education levels.

Made up of 6 departments, 29 undergraduate and graduate majors, and 112 certification programs, the College of Education's mission is organized around this basic principle: purpose as love, and love as service. It is through this principle and the COE's excellence in teaching, scholarship, advocacy, and service that the College of Education at The University of Alabama is able to develop educational leaders and professionals who 1) support democracy and social justice for all and 2) advance the intellectual and social conditions of all learners in globalized society.

The University of Alabama, the state's largest and oldest public institution, is well-acquainted both with the importance of tradition and the necessity of change. As with the change within The University of Alabama about a decade ago, the COE recognized the need to change its culture and reimagined a new collaborative culture that highlighted assessment with a data-first mindset.



## The problem

While the College of Education focused on its accrediting body, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), and The University of Alabama's accrediting body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), the COE recognized that many of its programs also had their own accrediting agencies that led to a multitude of continuous improvement processes.

These numerous processes, combined with legacy systems that had been firmly in place over the last ten years, posed a problem: "Everybody wanted something different," recalls Dr. Liza Wilson, Professor and Interim Dean of the COE.

After coming together with their faculty, students, staff, and other stakeholders, the COE was able to locate some recurring themes:

### Faculty frustration.

With various accreditors, assessment reports, and associated activities came isolated processes, extra work, and inefficient use of resources — all things that made faculty's roles much more difficult.

### Overlapping systems.

Working in silos resulted in several people working on the same tasks but with different tools or sets of standards. This created unnecessary labor and inconsistent results.

### Tool overload.

[Digital sprawl](#) meant that not only were people doing redundant work using different tools across departments, but also that individuals were overwhelmed with too many tools, creating inefficiencies and confusion.

### Inauthentic assessment practices.

People were using the same rubrics with significant discrepancies, causing skewed data.



**The COE recognized that many of its programs had their own accrediting agencies that led to a multitude of continuous improvement processes.**

**These numerous processes, combined with legacy systems that had been firmly in place over the last ten years, posed a problem.**

The College of Education knew they needed to deconstruct and reimagine their existing systems to arrive somewhere new — at a culture of continuous improvement that would benefit both the COE's students and its faculty by being intentional in its purpose to gain a clearer picture of areas where the COE was excelling and areas where it could benefit from more targeted efforts. With this in mind, they set out to develop a more streamlined assessment process that incorporated data-informed practices and tools for improvement that would last.

A large stone sign for the University of Alabama, set against a brick wall. The sign features the text "UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA" in large, serif letters. Below this, it says "FOUNDED" followed by a small oil lamp icon and "1831". At the bottom of the sign, it reads "TEACHING RESEARCH SERVICE". The sign is surrounded by a bed of white and red flowers.

# UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

FOUNDED  1831

TEACHING RESEARCH SERVICE

## The solution

To start, COE established a multi-year, compact plan for continuous improvement that could be broken down into three steps.

### Step 1: Examination of mission, vision, and goals.

Using a strategic set of questions that focused on outcomes, curriculum, assessment, analysis of results, and program improvement, the COE had discussions with various stakeholders, faculty, staff, and students to explore the questions that were most pertinent to individuals within these different groups.

**Step 2: Design of an assessment system for shared governance.** As part of its assessment system, the COE highlighted the importance of and implemented a system centered on shared governance. Their two-pronged process focused on student performance and program quality in one sphere, and college operations in another. The COE Assessment Committee, made up of select representatives from COE departments along with faculty from the College of Arts and Sciences and College of Communication and Information Sciences, collaboratively oversaw student performance and program quality. Meanwhile, the Dean of the College of Education and the COE's Leadership Council collaborated to oversee college operations.

**Step 3: Development of a framework for this assessment system.** COE examined assessment and reporting processes required of their programs from all of their entities, such as the university, college, and national and state agencies, and brought them

together under one umbrella. Under this umbrella, the assessment committee and the assessment staff worked together to achieve a culture of collaboration defined by greater authenticity, increased efficiency, and actionable data.

Led by the Assessment Committee, COE worked to establish open lines of communication among students, faculty, and staff by finding opportunities for reflection and a collaborative assessment of the college's progress. Changing their portfolio review process, for example, was particularly impactful.

**As part of its assessment system, the COE highlighted the importance of and implemented a system centered on shared governance.**

Previously, the portfolio had been a tool used to meet checklist requirements, but there was nothing built into the process that encouraged long-term growth, such as revisiting skills at a later date for comparison. Now, portfolios are reviewed through a system that involves three checkpoints selected over the course of the student's program of study. Results allow COE to examine and compare the growth of not only individual students but also students across academic programs.

**“We’re really exploring ways to use Planning & Self-Study to do our annual reports and also some program review — and it being able to connect with Student Learning & Licensure, which is where we do our portfolio systems.”**

Integral to the development of COE’s continuous improvement plan was their elevated approach to data. In addition to refining some of their existing internal systems, COE tapped Watermark solutions Student Learning & Licensure to assist with dispositions and portfolios, Planning & Self-Study to aid in program reviews and annual reporting, and Faculty Success to optimize annual performance reviews. Combined, these allowed COE to consolidate its tech stack, meeting the varying needs of both the institution and the faculty — all while gaining a more vivid, comprehensive picture of student performance.

These software transitions have allowed the college to restructure processes so that they can make their data more meaningful. “We’re really exploring ways to use Planning & Self-Study to do our annual reports and also some program review — and it being able to connect with Student Learning & Licensure, which is where we do our portfolio systems,” says Dr. Akeisha Young, Director of Accreditation and Assessment at UA and Dr. James Hardin, Coordinator of Technology and Applications and Assessment Systems at UA. “Those two can talk with each other to pull data and help our programs inform their change.”

## Conclusion

At COE, they know that this work is ongoing. To achieve such a cultural shift every day — from being a college that simply “does assessment” to one that holds authentic, continuous improvement as a driving value — COE has to be willing to engage in difficult conversations.

When reflecting on how the COE engaged in these difficult conversations and transformed them into something productive, The University of Alabama College of Education Assessment Team begins by opening dialogue:

“What does continuous improvement mean? What does continuous improvement look like?” These, they say, are the questions institutions must ask themselves as they embark on building a culture of assessment. “A meaningful assessment process takes time to curate. It’s not a one-time event. It will not be brainstormed, created, and implemented in one meeting or even over the course of just a semester.”

It’s a transformation that never stops. And for COE, this is a challenge they’ve grown to love.

Sources:

<https://www.ua.edu/>

<https://education.ua.edu/>



At Watermark, insights inspire progress. Watermark's software gives higher education institutions the insights they need to improve, evolve, and empower student success. Watermark's integrated digital solutions support assessment and accreditation, faculty activity reporting, course evaluation and surveys, and catalog and curriculum development for more than 1,700 higher education institutions around the world.

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