



“
This is truly an authentic
evaluation of candidates
out in the field. That’s
what I like about it.”

— Tyler Wells, Assistant Professor and Chair
of Clinical Studies, Wilmington University

Planning for the PPAT® Assessment means thinking about teaching... within the EPP and in the field.

At Wilmington University in New Castle, Delaware, an existing collaborative culture helped smooth implementation of the PPAT® assessment and quickly sparked deep conversations about the teaching taking place both within the EPP and in the field. Tyler Wells, Assistant Professor and Chair of Clinical Studies, said the process has induced “a philosophical change” in the EPP’s thinking about how candidates work in the field.

“The college of education can change very quickly because of our collaborative nature and how well we work together,” Wells said. At the outset, he and his team recognized that the PPAT assessment was more than just another state licensure requirement. “This was a paradigm shift, a cultural shift, first and foremost,” he said.

They identified their first challenge as “ensuring that all parties, all stakeholders —not just students but also faculty and supervisors working with candidates in schools — were aware that this is a true measure of performance in the field,” he recalled.

Spurred on by that recognition, they identified an even larger challenge: “How can we integrate the assessment fully into our program? Not just the clinical component of the program, but the coursework leading up to the fieldwork as well?”

As they prepared to start a one-year PPAT pilot, the EPP identified program concepts they realized could be better supported in the curriculum. Then, as Wells and his colleagues watched their first students apply their learning throughout the pilot, additional insights about the connection between EPP learning and the nature of work in the field emerged. “The students liked that it was reflective in nature,” he said. “It afforded them the ability to truly reflect on their performance and put them in the position of the teacher.”

As a result of the implementation process, Wells said, “As faculty and the college of education, we all have grown in the area of understanding our candidate needs, and in what it is we need to do to work with our candidates and the population that we’re serving.” Here are some highlights of Wilmington University’s implementation of the PPAT assessment and the larger philosophical discussions the implementation triggered.



The Role of Strong Relationships with Cooperating Schools in PPAT® Implementation

The college of education's collaborative framework extends to its strong relationship with cooperating schools. This bond stems from (1) the number of Wilmington University alumni among Delaware's K-12 teachers (about 40 percent); (2) the fact that many K-12 mentor teachers also serve as adjuncts in the college of education, due in part to the program's immersive field experiences; and (3) supportive state regulations that require the university and K-12 schools to work together to foster quality mentoring experiences for teacher candidates. These strong partnerships play a role in the depth and structure of the EPP's field experiences, which include three pre-clinical semesters of introductory fieldwork called practicums; clinical experiences that span one semester to one year; options in which mentor teachers also act as EPP course instructors; and a uniquely structured team-mentoring option that provides candidates with a window into how learning occurs before and after the grade level of the class they student teach. The preexisting strength also played a role in the EPP's PPAT implementation.



PPAT® Professional Development for Mentor Teachers

One Delaware regulation makes institutes of higher education responsible for providing training to ensure "high-quality cooperating teachers" are available to teacher candidates. Consequently, prior to implementation, Wilmington University launched a daylong professional development series called High Quality Cooperating Teacher, into which they embedded information and training related to the PPAT assessment. "We invited approximately 200–250 mentor teachers from across the state of Delaware — and some from New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Maryland — to come to the university to engage in conversations around our program's clinical components, experiences, and expectations," Wells said. "In addition to that, we took a deep dive into the PPAT implementation. We looked at its administration, expectations of the mentor teacher, what their role would be, facilitation of the examination within the K-12 setting, even diving down to the ethical components of the examination — what they can and can't do to support candidates." The EPP plans to provide this training once a semester to ensure that a wide range of K-12 options are available for Wilmington University teacher candidates. In addition, recognizing that the college cannot require K-12 mentors to take the course, EPP supervisors will also deliver the course one-on-one to cooperating teachers as needed.



Restructuring the Student Teaching Orientation and Seminar (PPAT® Task 1)

"Knowing that PPAT Task 1 is an extremely important task because it's the foundation for building all responses," Wells said, he and colleagues restructured the program's student teaching seminar. They pushed the application for the field experience back six months to allow earlier identification of candidates and qualified cooperating teachers, and they extended the seminar so it begins about two weeks before candidates start student teaching. During an orientation held prior to the seminar, faculty review PPAT deadlines and tasks with candidates. And during the pre-clinical weeks of the seminar, candidates delve into Task 1. "Even though they haven't actually set foot in the classroom, they can obtain basic information connected to the demographics of the school and community, and about instructional resources," he said. The field experience begins before the Task 1 deadline, so candidates can revise their responses and add data about their specific students after arriving in the classroom. A bonus of the design is it gives EPP supervisors time to provide training to cooperating teachers who have not participated in the college's PPAT-aligned professional development series. "By integrating the essential components of the PPAT into our curriculum for the fieldwork prior to student teaching, our candidates have time to engage in concepts connected to the assessment — descriptive, analytic, and reflective writing; connecting with the mentor teacher; examining their focus students' baseline data. Those activities have led these individuals to a much deeper understanding of the expectations of the assessment."



Curriculum Changes Related to Assessment Practices (PPAT® Task 2)

Before the Wilmington EPP participated in a yearlong PPAT pilot, faculty started revising curriculum to support candidate success on the assessment. They began by infusing essential concepts into a variety of existing courses. However, during the pilot and review, they realized their candidates were not engaging deeply enough with assessment practices. "That was the area of greatest change for us because we identified early on that it was an area in which our program needed strengthening," Wells said. The additions they made to pre-clinical coursework included not only the concept of assessment, but how the assessment impacts student learning and achievement, specific ways of working with whole-class data, and using individual assessment data to differentiate instruction. That led Wells and his team to another revelation: "It wasn't just the candidates. We were talking about another paradigm shift here related to instructors' and supervisors' knowledge. That was a challenge in its own right." The EPP arranged professional development for faculty on ways to implement, discuss, share, and create assessments to measure student learning. "We had to ensure we were all on the same page in terms of the message and information being shared with candidates," Wells said. "It was a really double-sided effect:"



Philosophical Reflections on Technology (PPAT® Task 3)

The value and impact of technology on instruction is something Wilmington EPP faculty recognize, “but it’s a philosophical question for us as well,” Wells noted. “What is technology?” He pointed, for example, to assistive technology, which takes the definition of the term beyond electronics to nearly any device that supports a learning need — from low-tech, fuzzy-felt communication boards to high-tech screen readers and communication programs. Another philosophical issue is that, while Wilmington teacher candidates are comfortable using electronics, they don’t always find the same level of comfort or abundance of resources in cooperating schools. When candidates integrate technology into a planned lesson to support student learning for PPAT Task 3, Wells and his colleagues want them to be prepared for what that may mean beyond computers, tablets, and SMART Boards. “This has been another opportunity for us to go back into our program and reflect on where we see our strengths and challenges so we can integrate that further into our coursework,” he said. “We now are discussing assistive technology and how that connects to personalized learning. But there’s another very interesting layer: It’s not just our candidates we have to look at. We have to look at our supervisors and instructors, and what’s going on out in the field.” Wells continues, “Candidates should be prepared to use alternative technologies when a cooperating teacher is not comfortable with the level of technology a candidate chooses. That’s a major challenge, because what we’re saying there goes back to, How do we select and assign mentor teachers? That’s a different conversation in its own right. It’s a systemic issue. But it connects to this particular task.”

Videotaping Lessons (PPAT® Task 4)

Videotaping candidates’ lessons for PPAT Task 4 presented this EPP with varying degrees of challenge. “The act of videoing itself turned out to be the easiest,” Wells said. Faculty integrated the requirement into pre-clinical practicums, so that now candidates record themselves multiple times prior to student teaching, and the department identified an in-house system to secure candidates’ videos. A second level of challenge involved negotiating permissions at the district level. Because videotaping is attached to a state requirement, Wells said Delaware schools willingly comply, but situations in which parents deny permission or that involve out-of-state districts must be approached on a case-by-case basis. A third level of challenge speaks to the many ways of realizing the intent and purpose of the videos. “That’s actually been the most influential component of this process,” Wells said. Since candidates now record themselves throughout the program, supervisors and mentor teachers are learning to use the system’s video-annotation tools to give candidates informal, pre-clinical feedback in safe, informal settings, which scaffolds candidates’ ability to review and reflect on their teaching, while also preparing them for PPAT Task 4. Also, faculty who now use video for formal observations and data collection appreciate the concrete evidence the tapes provide for communicating with candidates about teaching and learning. “That has been a powerful tool for supervisors and instructors,” Wells said. Further, most Delaware teachers record themselves annually for the Delaware Performance Appraisal System, so mentor teachers eagerly support candidates in honing this professional skill. And, in the future, Wells and his colleagues see video-sharing enriching early coursework and the clinical seminar by providing opportunities for peer learning and critique. “It’s still very new to us,” he said. “I know video recording has been around, but now everyone sees the value of it. It’s a very exciting process.”



The PPAT® Professional Growth Plan (PGP)

Wilmington candidates begin using the reflection tool associated with Delaware’s teacher evaluation program in their first pre-clinical practicum. Since that document and the PPAT PGP are both aligned with the InTASC Model Core Teaching Standards, Wells believes they serve the same purpose. In practicum I, candidates use the tool to reflect on their professional growth as well as on student achievement. To help candidates develop their reflective skills, faculty also engage them in an interview process designed to increase their awareness of dispositions connected to the teaching profession. “It allows us to gain a better picture of our candidates,” he said. “Candidates are interviewed by a panel of faculty and peers, then they are monitored throughout practicums II and III so we see a progression of growth.” Inadequate progress on candidates’ development of key dispositions can serve as a gatekeeper to student teaching. The dispositions assessments provide snapshots of how students collaborate with families, cooperating teachers, principals, and administrators, and how they connect with such issues as social justice, culturally responsive classrooms, and diversity. The process is used to support candidate understanding of how such dispositions impact teaching and learning, and the program offers service learning opportunities to help candidates sharpen this understanding.



PPAT® Data Adds to Robust Data Collection

Prior to implementing the PPAT assessment, the EPP had a robust data collection system in place. It is aligned to multiple standards, including the InTASC standards, Wilmington’s own teacher preparation program and graduation standards, and for programs at the initial licensure level, the standards on which the state’s teacher evaluations are based. The collection system integrates data about candidates’ progression of growth throughout the program, and now, PPAT Task 1 data is an integral part of the EPP’s data array. Candidates upload their Task 1 responses to the in-house system, and faculty evaluate them using a method modeled on ETS’s process for rating responses to PPAT Tasks 2, 3, and 4, which provides candidates with valuable information about the level of quality expected of them on later PPAT tasks. In addition, Delaware now requires EPPs to use data from the state’s teacher evaluation system to track how their graduates fare during the first five years of teaching. This information will allow the university to gauge, for the first time, how performance in the program and on the PPAT assessment correlate with job success. “This is all very new for us,” Wells said. “We are beginning now to go down that pathway.”



PPAT® Implementation Enriches Existing Culture of Reflective Practice

"Reflective practice is part of our vision and mission at the university and within the college of education," Wells said. Faculty use EPP-collected data to reflect annually on both program quality and candidate performance. "We call that a closing-of-the-loop event in which we review data that is connected to all of those standards and each individual student's progression through the program." The data collection system allows faculty to drill down to the granular level on any aspect of candidate performance on any standard, "and that flows back to our reflective side, to who we are as a college of education." The process naturally feeds discussion of program enhancements, since "our decisions are data-driven." One early observation coming out of the college's data is that candidates who spend more time learning through immersion in their K-12 districts — either by completing both practicum III and the clinical experience in the same school, or by taking the program's yearlong, immersive clinical experience — become better teachers faster. And that's led to discussion of always requiring that the final practicum and fieldwork both be set in the same school. "During the past two years, we saw significant improvement in candidate performance because they were able to be in that same setting and practice what they had learned," Wells said. "Our plan is to have 100% of our candidates in practicum III going right into student teaching in the same placement. What I foresee is an impact on student performance and success in the PPAT by doing that."



EPP Snapshot



- A private, nonprofit, open-enrollment institution with flexible scheduling options
- Student body of traditional and nontraditional candidates
- Graduates up to 200 candidates per year for initial licensure
- Prepares about 40% of the teachers in the state of Delaware
- Offers undergraduate and graduate degrees in a range of education specialties
- Prepares candidates for licensure in Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Maryland
- Offers one-semester and two-semester options for student teaching
- Small classes taught by current K-12 practitioners with masters degrees
- Accredited by CAEP and the Delaware Department of Education
- PPAT required for graduation from initial-licensure teaching programs

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