

Strengthening Community College Pathways To Post-Completion Success

Next Frontiers for Whole-College Community College Reforms

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OACC SSLI | Sept 12, 2025

MORE ESSENTIAL THAN EVER

COMMUNITY COLLEGE PATHWAYS
TO EDUCATIONAL AND
CAREER SUCCESS

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CCRC COMMUNITY COLLEGE
RESEARCH CENTER
Teachers College, Columbia University

More Essential Than Ever

Community College Pathways to
Educational and Career Success

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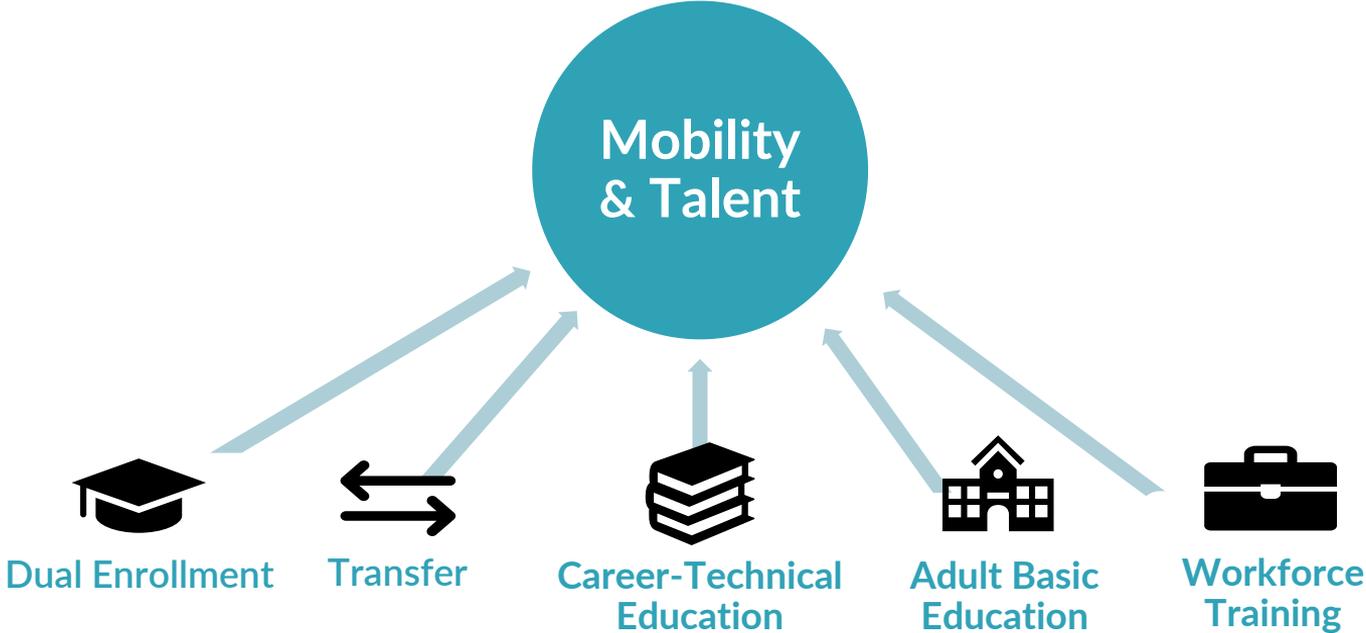


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Essential Institutions for Communities Facing
Unprecedented Challenges



Community colleges are **more essential than ever** for their communities

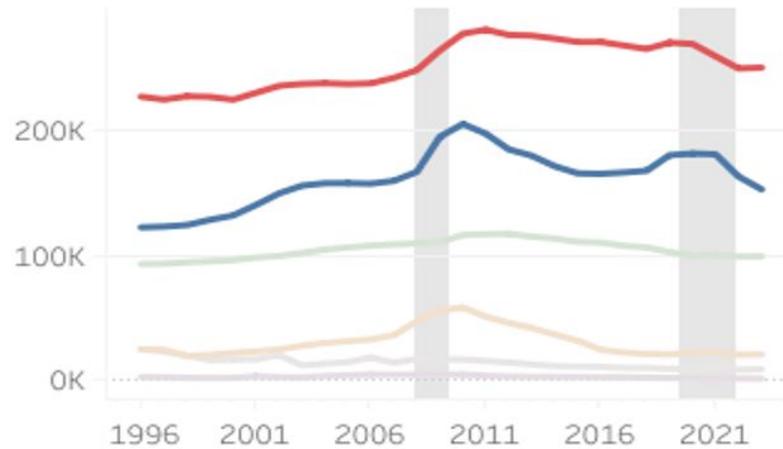


Community college enrollment decline ➡ Financial uncertainty

Ohio AY Headcount Trends by Sector, All Undergraduates

IPEDS Data, 1996-2023

Fall Enrollments
All undergraduates



Ohio Community Colleges

Ohio Public 4-Years

Community college enrollment decline ➡ Financial uncertainty

Ohio Undergraduate Fall Enrollment Trends by Sector and Age

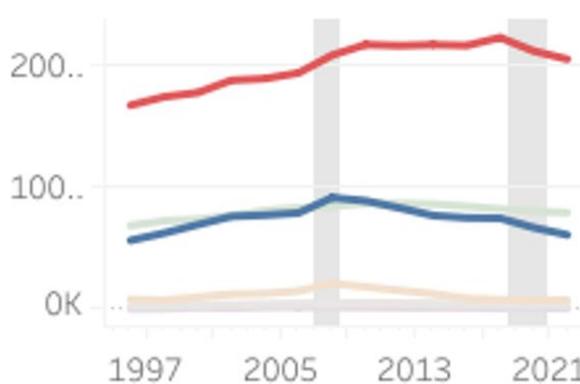
IPEDS Data, 1996-2023

Age: Under 18



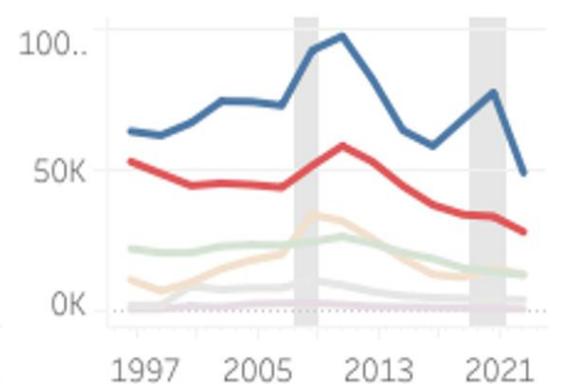
HS dual enrollment **only**
growing student segment

Age 18-24



CCs have **lost market share** to
public four-years

Age 25+



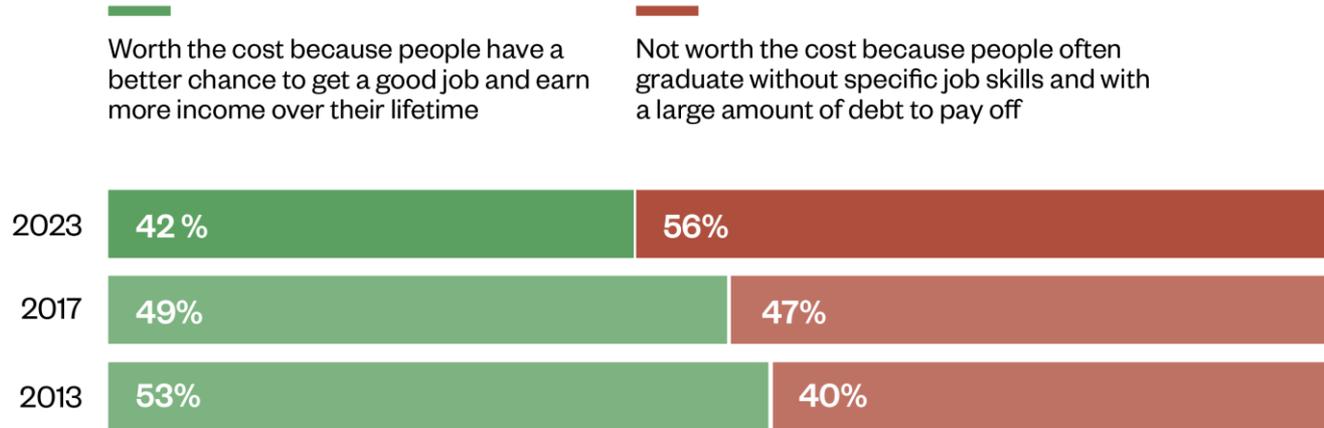
Older student enrollment
at **historic lows**

Ohio Community Colleges

Ohio Public 4-Years

Growing skepticism about the value of a college degree

When it comes to getting a four-year college degree, which of the following statements comes closer to your point of view? A four-year college education is...

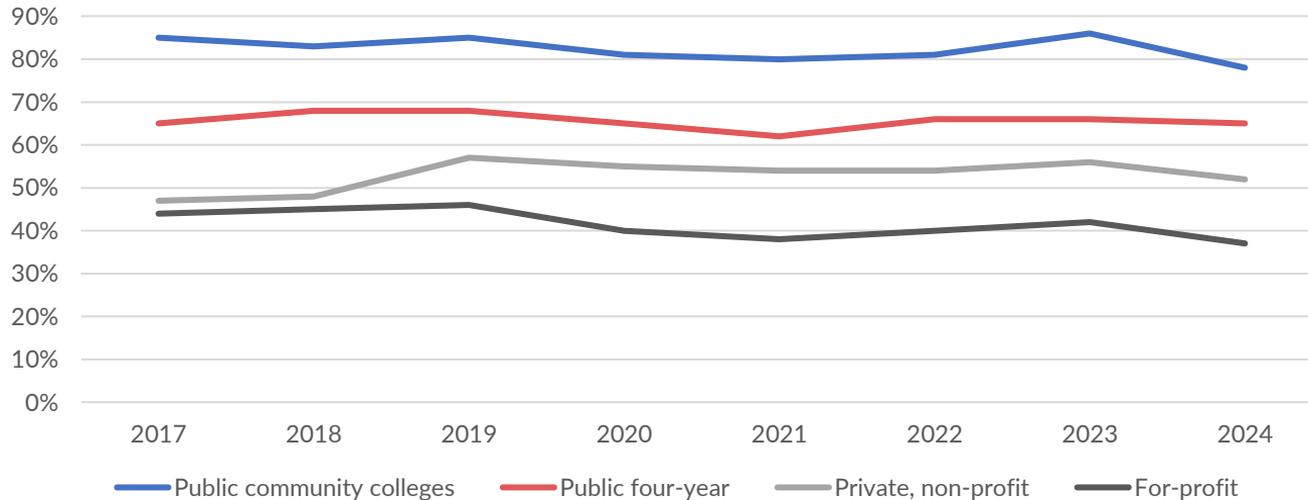


The Wall Street Journal

Community colleges perceived to offer higher value than four-years

Do Americans think the following institutions are worth the cost?

Varying Degrees, 2017-2024

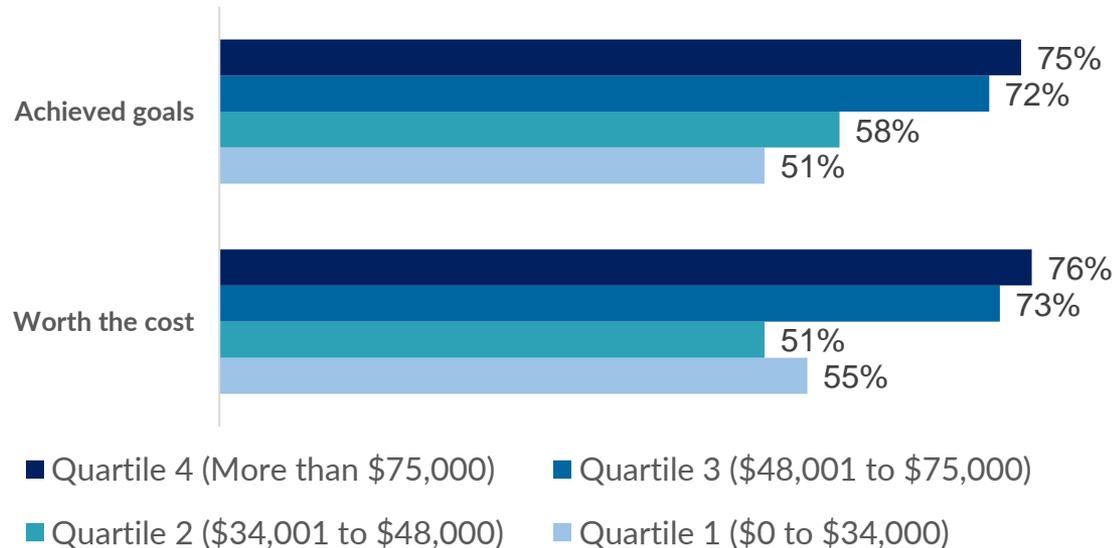


Sample size varies over year and by demographic. Please refer to Varying Degrees 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023 for exact sample size.

Source: <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/varying-degrees-2024/value>

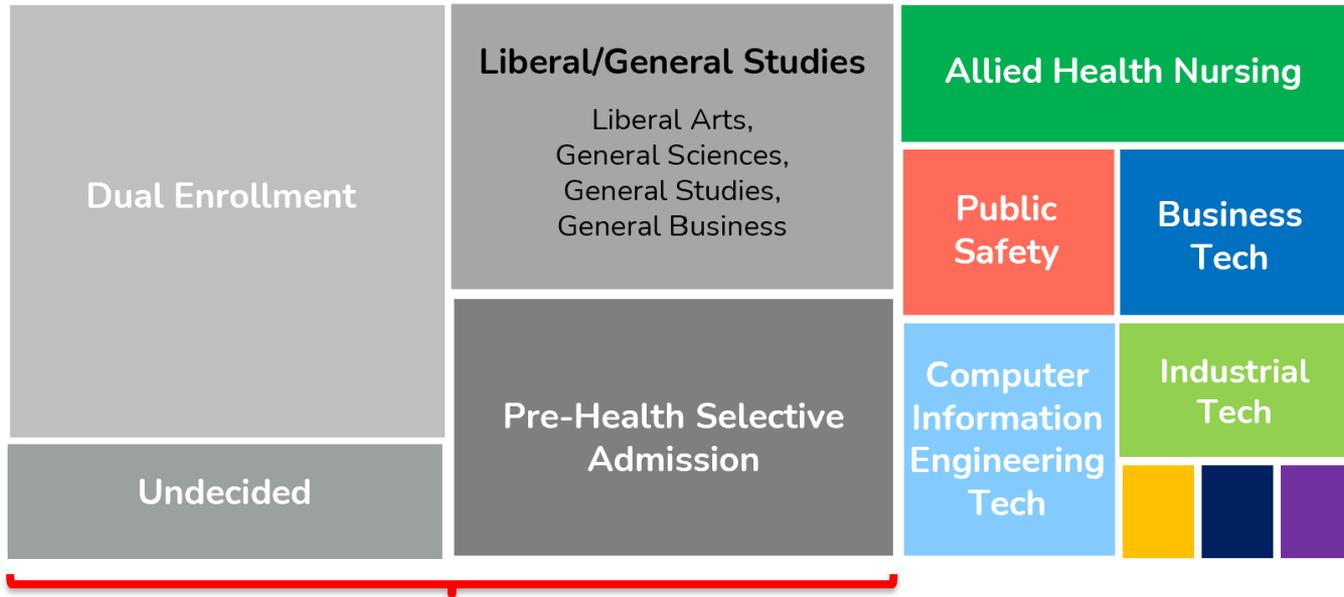
Higher paying jobs or successful transfer → Higher perception of value

Recent Community College Students' Perceptions of Value
by Post-Completion Earnings Quartiles



Many Students Are Not Enrolled In a Program That Clearly Leads to a Good Job or Transfer in their Major Field of Interest

Typical Community College Program Enrollments By Field

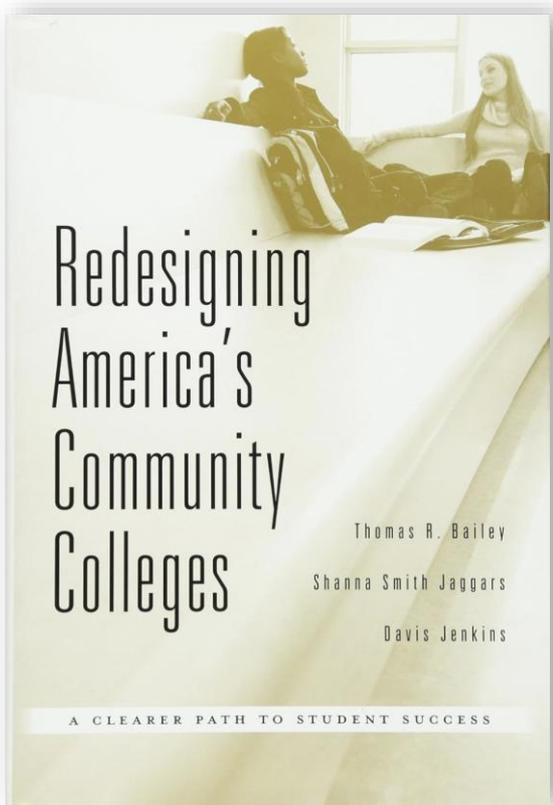


What motivation do these students have to continue and complete?

Insights

From a Decade of Learning Alongside
Colleges and State Systems Implementing Guided Pathways





CCRC's 2015 book argued that to move the needle on completion rates, **scaling discrete interventions is not enough**; rather, community colleges must **redesign at scale**.

Redesigning America's Community Colleges presented “**guided pathways**” as an outcomes-focused alternative to the **access-oriented “cafeteria college” model** that predominated since the 1970s.

The original guided pathways framework had four pillars of reform focused changing the student experience into and through programs of study.

**CLARIFYING
PATHS TO STUDENT
END GOALS**

- Meta-majors
- Programs mapped to careers & transfer
- Math pathways

**HELPING
STUDENTS GET
ON A PATH**

- Early career & program exploration
- Required educational planning
- Early program coursetaking

**KEEPING
STUDENTS
ON PATH**

- Mandatory caseload advising by field
- Progress monitoring & feedback
- Scheduling for on-time completion

**ENSURING
STUDENTS ARE
LEARNING**

- Active learning & academic support in program foundation coursework
- Cocurricular experiential learning

CCRC Guided Pathways Evaluations

RESEARCH BRIEF

Community College Research Center | March 2024

Lessons From Two Major Evaluations of Guided Pathways

By Davis Jenkins, Hana Lehr, and Thomas Brock

Community colleges in the United States do a remarkable job of making postsecondary education accessible to students from all backgrounds. Where they do less well is making sure that all degree-seeking students earn a credential or transfer to a four-year institution within a reasonable amount of time. A recent report from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center shows that nearly 60% of degree-seeking community college students do not earn a certificate or degree at *any* postsecondary institution within six years of beginning at a community college. It also shows troubling disparities by race and ethnicity, with Asian and White students who enter community colleges earning credentials at notably higher rates than Black, Hispanic, and Native American students (Lee & Shapiro, 2023).

Numerous programs and initiatives have been launched in recent years to improve student outcomes at community colleges, but perhaps none are as well known or widespread as guided pathways. Guided pathways is a framework for whole-college reform designed to help all students explore, choose, plan, and complete programs aligned with their career and education goals efficiently and affordably. It emerged from years of research by CCRC and others and was introduced to the field in the 2015 book *Redesigning America's Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success* (Bailey et al., 2015). Since then, guided pathways has been supported by national organizations such as the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and has been used as a model for reform by over 400 community colleges and 18 state systems.

This brief summarizes the results of two recent evaluations conducted by CCRC to examine the scale at which colleges have implemented guided pathways reforms and the association between guided pathways practices and student outcomes. The first is an evaluation of the AACC Pathways Project, which involved 30 colleges from around the country that were committed to making guided pathways reforms. The second is an evaluation of guided pathways implementation in three states—Ohio, Tennessee, and Washington State—that launched initiatives to assist colleges across their systems—70 institutions in total—to adopt the reforms. In brief, we find that:

- Whole-college reform is feasible but takes time—at least five years—to accomplish.
- There is a positive relationship between the scaled implementation of complementary sets of guided pathways practices and some measures of student achievement in AACC Pathways colleges that made the most progress in implementing guided pathways

Guided pathways is a framework for whole-college reform designed to help all students explore, choose, plan, and complete programs aligned with their education and career goals. It has been used as a model for reform by more than 400 community colleges.

30

colleges participating in the AACC Pathways Project

70

public 2-year colleges in three states (OH, TN and WA) with statewide guided pathways initiatives (NSF evaluation)

Key Guided Pathways Evaluation Takeaways

- 1** | Whole-college reform is **possible, but it takes time**—at least five years.
- 2** | **Progress scaling guided pathways** is associated with greater improvements in early student momentum rates
- 3** | Positive outcomes are associated with the scaled adoption of a **complementary set of practices** across multiple pathways areas.

Key Guided Pathways Evaluation Takeaways

- 4** | Practices that had the biggest impact on momentum were **case-management advising by field and scheduling** based on educational plans.
- 5** | Colleges that **did not reform prerequisite developmental education did not see any improvement.**
- 6** | Outcomes improved across student groups, but **no closing of the gaps** between groups.
- 7** | State agencies, associations and success centers play a vital role in catalyzing and spreading reforms.

Guided Pathways Theory of Change



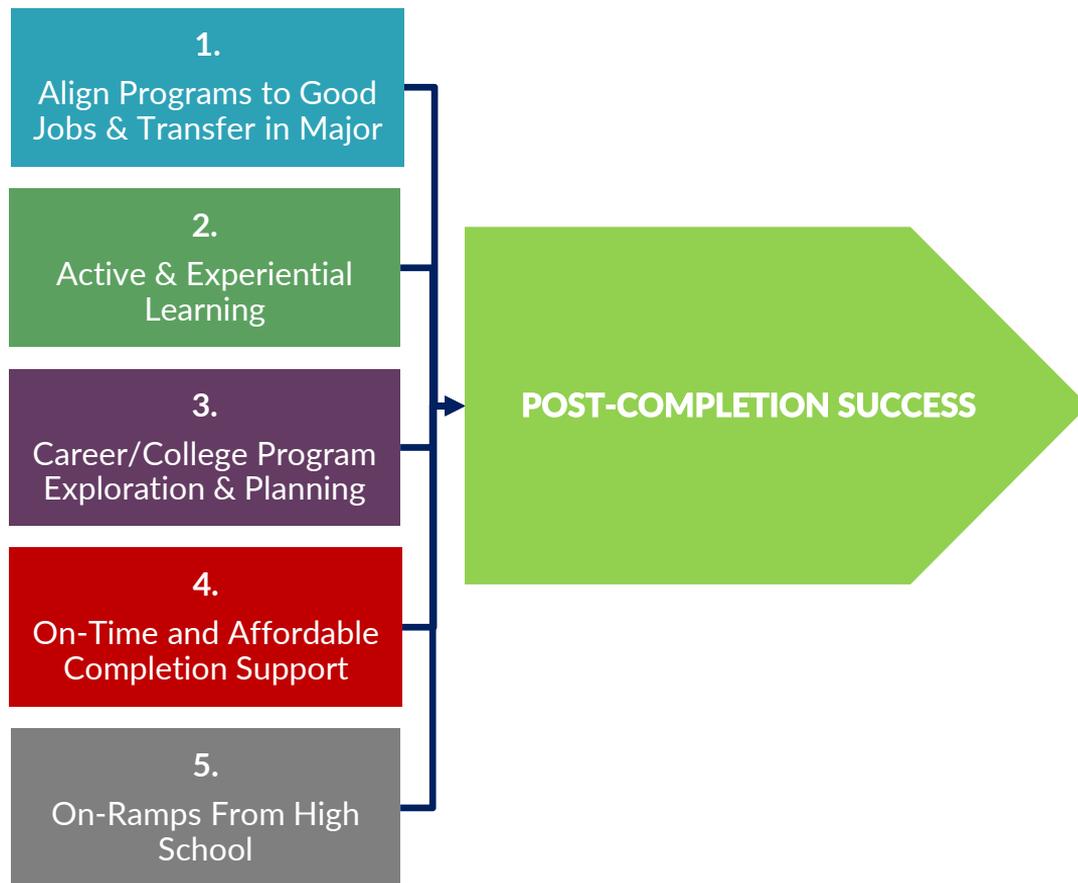
Five Frontier Strategies

For Strengthening Community
Pathways to Post-Completion Success



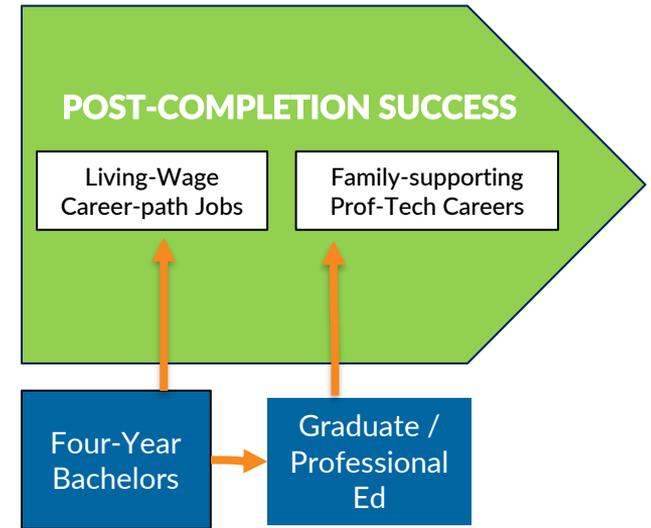
Pathways reforms to date have focused on **removing barriers to completion**.

Moving forward, colleges need to do more to tap into students' motivation to enroll and complete by **strengthening pathways to post-completion success**—and thus ensure students' investment of time, money and effort pays off.

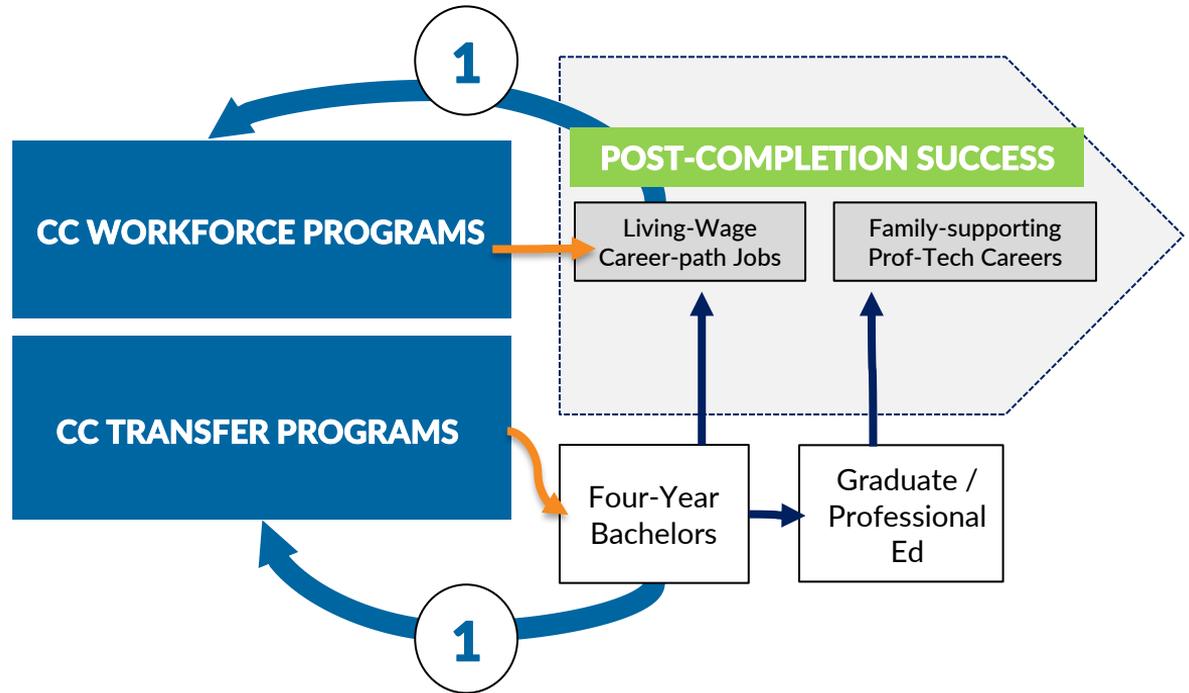


Five frontier strategies for strengthening community colleges pathways

Starting with post-completion success in mind

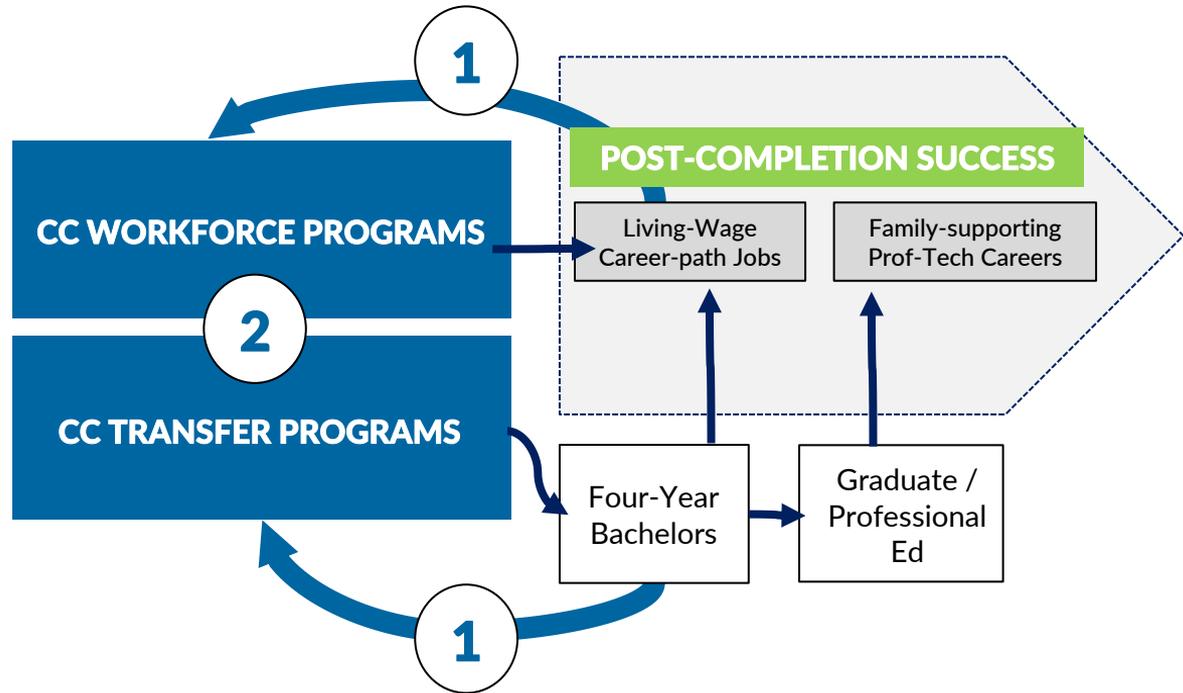


- 1 Work closely with employers/university schools to ensure programs lead to living-wage jobs/transfer in major.

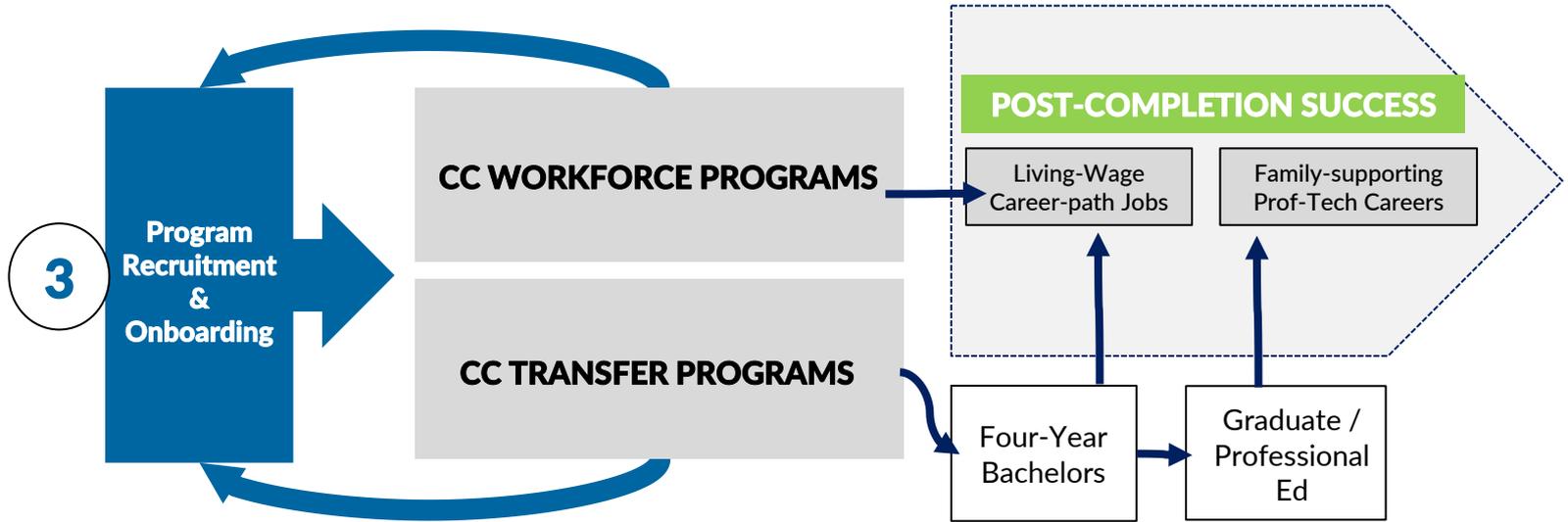


1 Work closely with employers/university schools to ensure programs lead to living-wage jobs/transfer in major.

2 Help students develop versatile skills by embedding active and experiential learning throughout programs.

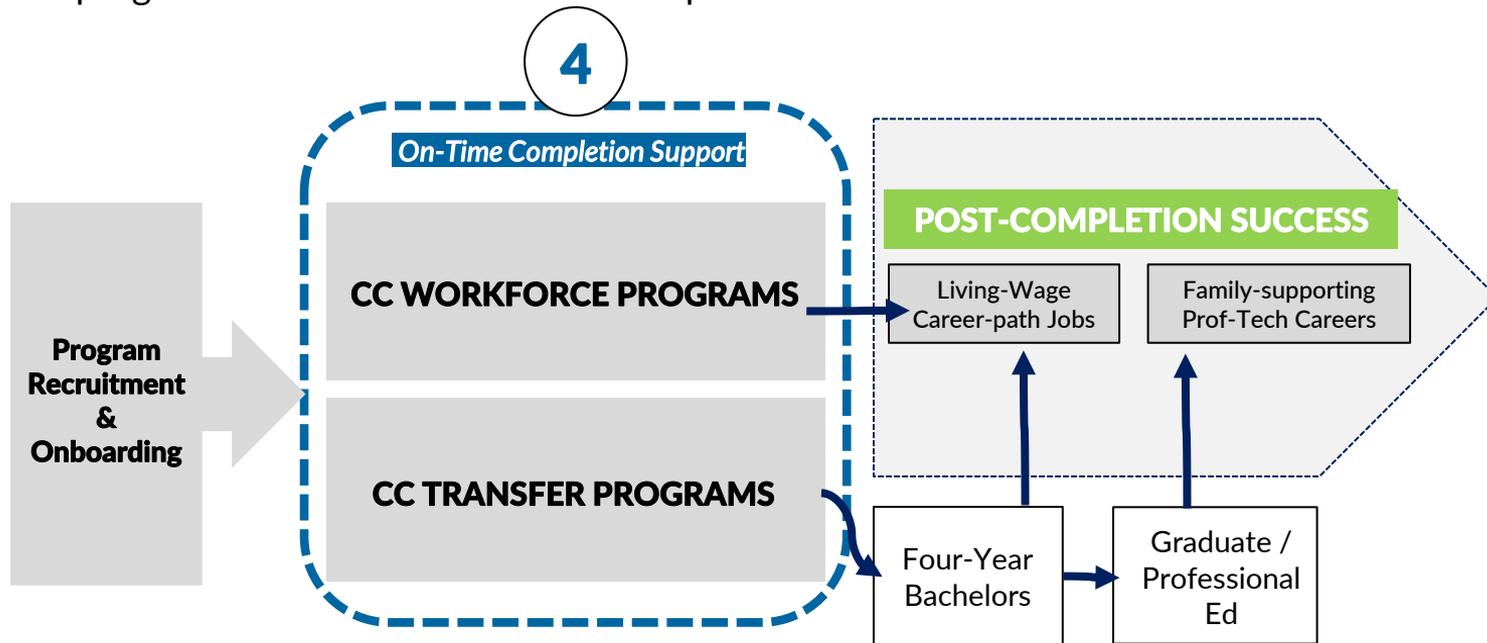


- 3 Rethink the onboarding experience to help students explore, choose, plan, and gain momentum in a program of study aligned with their interests and aspirations

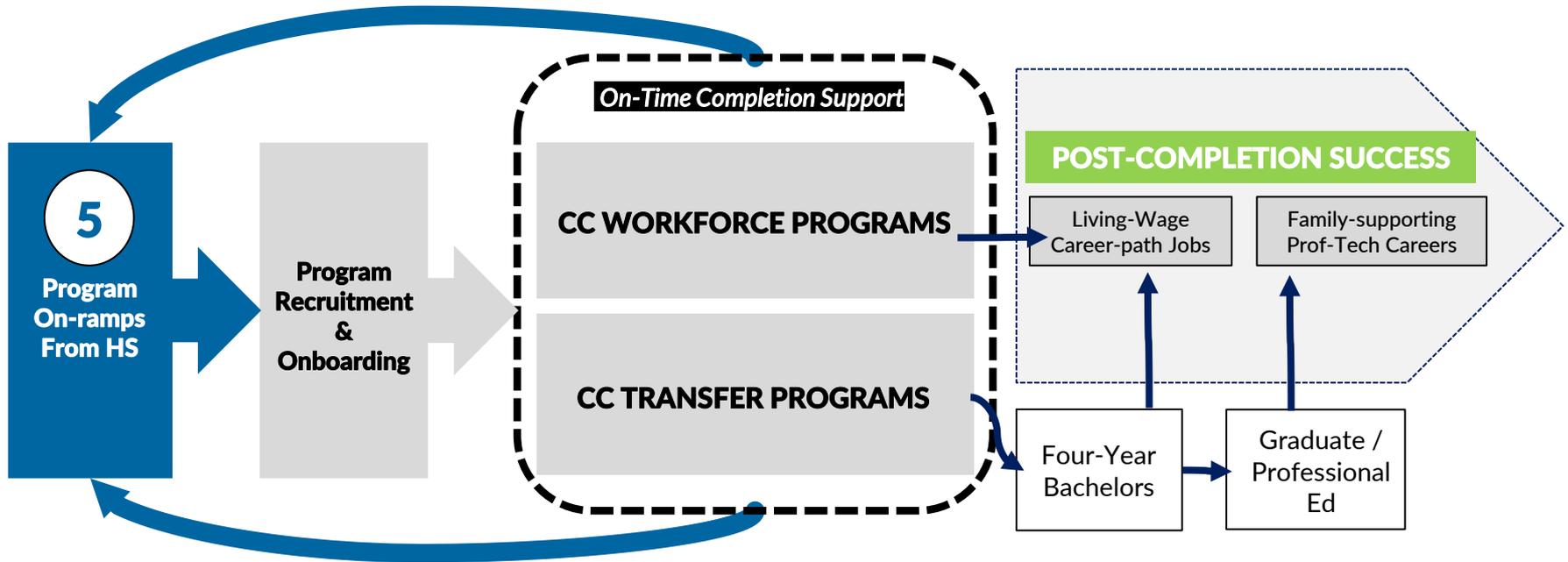


4

Structure, schedule and deliver courses—and provide embedded supports—to enable busy working students to complete their programs in as little time and cost as possible.

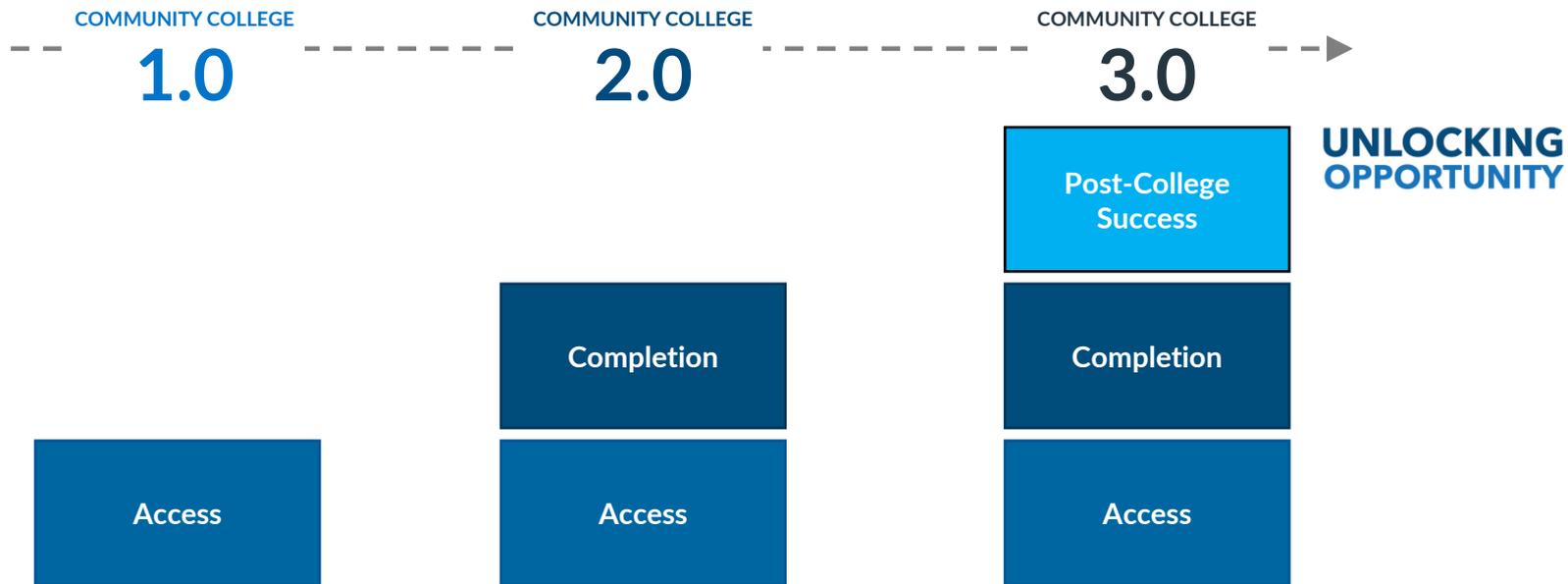


5 Rethink the high school dual enrollment as an onramp to a debt-free, career-connected program for students who wouldn't otherwise pursue postsecondary education after HS.



Community College 3.0

Unlocking Opportunity Through Focusing on Post-College Success



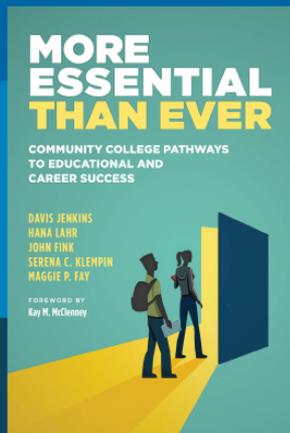
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Discussion and Q&A

MORE ESSENTIAL THAN EVER

Community College Pathways to Educational and Career Success



Welcome to This Discussion Guide

Welcome to the discussion guide for *More Essential Than Ever: Community College Pathways to Educational and Career Success*. This guide is designed to help community college faculty administrators discuss the big ideas presented in the book and consider which might be improving student success at their institutions.

As the book reminds us, community colleges are at the heart of advancing upward mobility for individuals and families and economic growth for the country. Yet they face unprecedented challenges—from declining enrollment and related fiscal uncertainty to disparities in student success. *More Essential Than Ever* presents research-based strategies with case-study examples for addressing these challenges and ensuring that students from all backgrounds can succeed in college and beyond.

More Essential Than Ever isn't a set of instructions or a one-size-fits-all manual. Instead, it fosters conversations about how your institution might manage large-scale changes that lead to better outcomes for large numbers of your students. The process involves rethinking how you support students—from ensuring the post-completion value of credentials to strengthening transition to career-path college degree programs after high school—and that requires a shared commitment. We hope that this discussion guide will provide a starting point for conversations about how to better help your students succeed and your college and community thrive.

Each section of this guide provides topics and questions for discussion based on the book's content.

- The **Introduction** lays out the thesis of the book and introduces five reform “frontiers” strengthening pathways to post-completion success for students.
- **Chapter 1** outlines the progress early adopter colleges have made in enacting large-scale reforms and discusses their effects on student progression.
- **Chapters 2 through 6** provide lessons the authors learned about transforming college through five frontiers of reform: (1) ensuring the post-completion value of programs; (2) streamlining teaching and learning; (3) improving recruiting and student onboarding into a program; (4) revamping advising, scheduling, and supports to ensure students complete on time; and (5) building on-ramps to college and career pathways for students after high school.
- **Chapter 7** offers lessons on rethinking college organization and finance to enable faculty to work together in ways that more effectively lead to improved student learning and success.
- **Chapter 8** considers the support and funding state systems can provide to help colleges implement and sustain these reforms.

If your college is new to considering the sweeping changes outlined in *More Essential Than Ever*, this discussion guide will help you explore practical steps to strengthen student success and ways to sustain change over time.

If your college has already begun the reform process, this guide can help you think about how your work to the next level of scale and impact.

For all colleges seeking to improve student success, this guide also will encourage you to change mindsets across your institution can create the impetus needed to achieve your goals.

CHAPTER 6: Rethinking Dual Enrollment as an On-Ramp to College and Career Opportunity

Chapter 6 makes the case that colleges need to move away from the conventional model of dual enrollment and instead rethink it as an on-ramp to high-opportunity college programs and careers.

1. What are the purposes and goals of dual enrollment (DE) at your college?
 - a. What goals are you trying to achieve for students and your community?
 - b. How might your students benefit from a more intentional, collaborative approach to DE focused on increasing access and preparing students for postsecondary college and career paths? How might your college and high school partners benefit?
2. How can your college broaden access to DE?
 - a. What are the biggest barriers for students in accessing DE?
 - b. How can you work with your primary high school partners to further increase participation in DE?
 - c. Which high schools in your service area do you not partner with as much? What's the potential for further outreach in partnership with those schools?
3. What's the potential for recruiting DE students into your college's programs after high school?
 - a. What do you know about the goals and aspirations of your DE students? How familiar are students with your college's programs?
 - b. How are you helping DE students explore, enter, and succeed in program foundation courses (in addition to math and English or other gen eds)?
 - c. To what extent are you helping DE students develop a pathway map to achieve their post-high-school educational and career goals?
4. Considering the DEEP practice areas outlined in chapter 6 (i.e., outreach, alignment, advising, and support), which areas does your college excel in, and which areas have the greatest opportunity for improvement?
 - a. What are some compelling reasons to help make the case for additional resources or support?
 - b. What are the current institutional priorities with which you can align your case-making?
 - c. Who else do you need to engage in related discussion and planning?
 - d. What are the key messages that you want to communicate? Who are the key audiences you need to reach?
 - e. What data and further information (e.g., testimonials from students or families) can be used to support your case?

Reflection Questions

How can our college better:

- Package and market our programs to show students how long they will take to complete, how much it will cost, and what outcome they can expect? (Ch 2)
- Redesign program gateway courses to enhance active learning and expand experiential learning opportunities for all students? (Ch 3)
- Better recruit and help new students explore, choose, plan and gain momentum in a program of study? (Ch 4)
- Design, schedule and deliver courses to ensure that busy working students can complete their programs in as little time and cost as possible? (Ch 5)
- Motivate and prepare high school students who do not have postsecondary plans to enroll in our college after high school? (Ch 6)



Thank you!

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