

More Essential Than Ever: Community College Pathways to Educational and Career Success

Student Success Strategies from CCRC's Forthcoming Book

Davis Jenkins, Hana Lahr, John Fink

DREAM 2025 • February 19, 2025

Harvard
Education
Press

CCRC COMMUNITY COLLEGE
RESEARCH CENTER

Teachers College, Columbia University

Coming in **AUGUST 2025**

A new book from the **Community College Research Center**



PRE-ORDER NOW!

Save **20%** with sales code
HCPR25 at hep.gse.harvard.edu
or by scanning the QR code

MORE ESSENTIAL THAN EVER

COMMUNITY COLLEGE PATHWAYS
TO EDUCATIONAL AND
CAREER SUCCESS

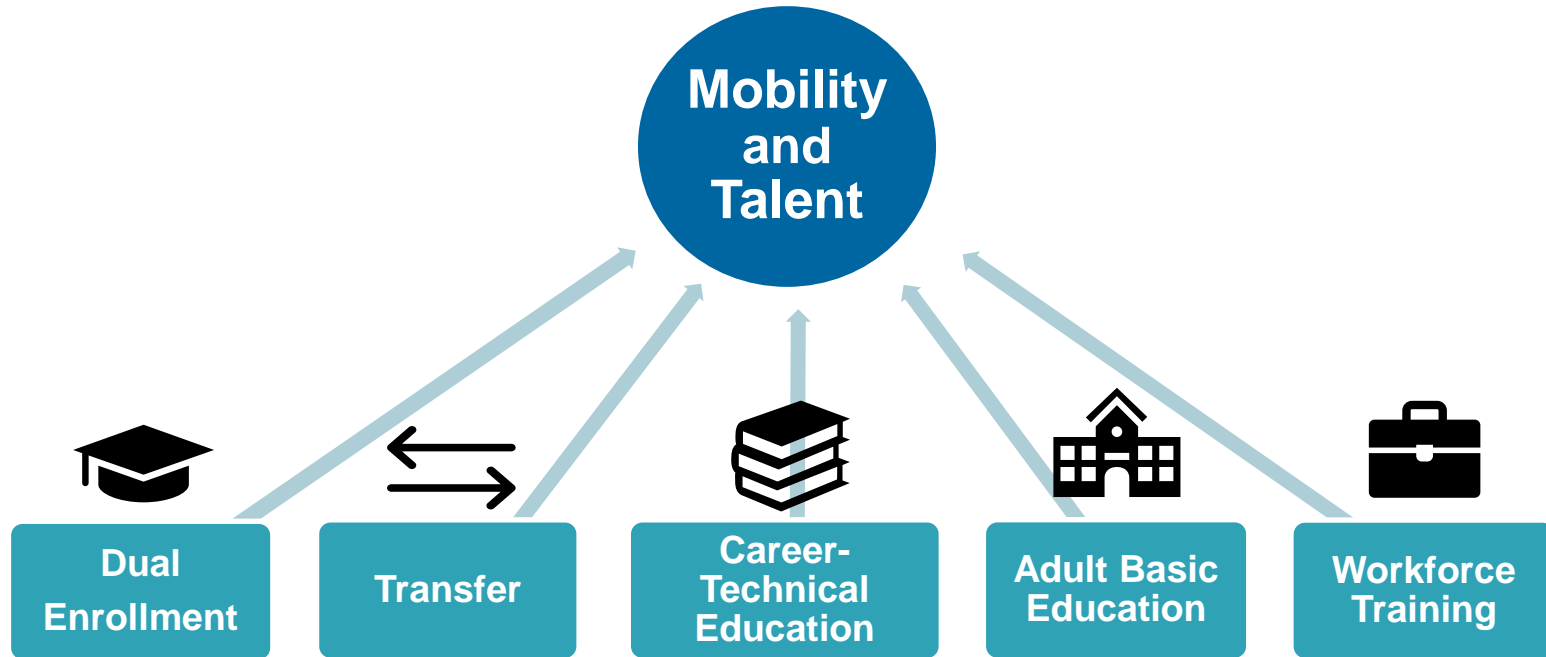
DAVIS JENKINS
HANA LAHR
JOHN FINK
SERENA C. KLEMPIN
MAGGIE P. FAY

FOREWORD BY
Kay M. McClenney

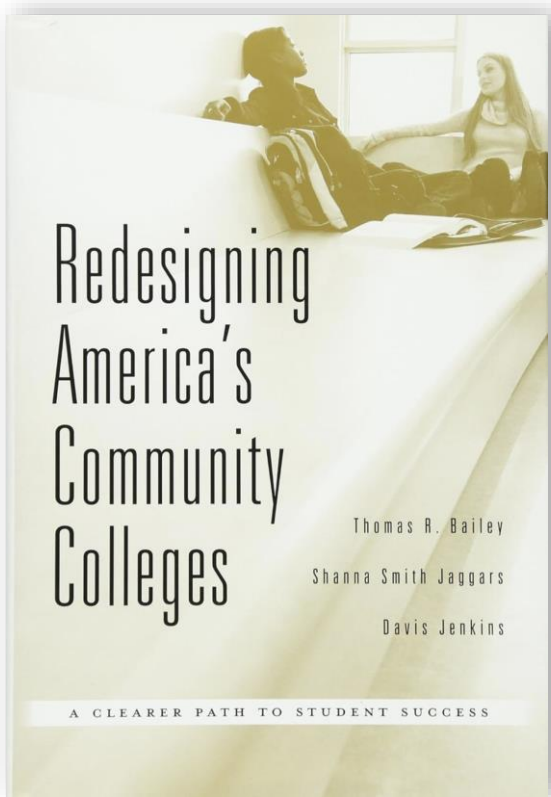


Essential Institutions for Communities Facing Unprecedented Challenges

Community colleges are essential for community mobility and talent development



Guided Pathways: Redesigning College Programs and Supports at Scale for Student Access and Success



CCRC's 2015 book argued that to move the needle on student success, **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.

Guided Pathways Theory of Change



Lessons from Two Major CCRC Guided Pathways Evaluations

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.

Next Frontiers for Strengthening Community College Pathways

Pathways reforms to date have focused on removing barriers to completion. That's important, but colleges must do more to tap into students' motivation to enroll and complete by strengthening pathways to post-completion success.

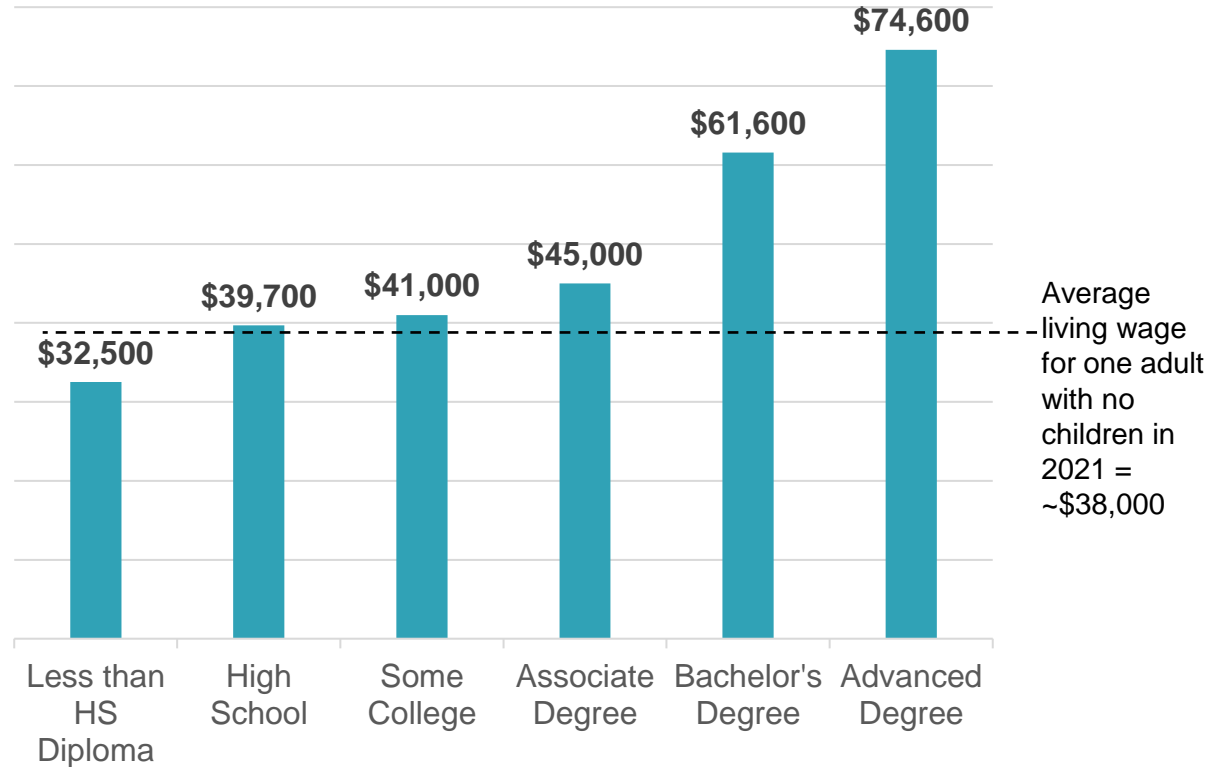


Program Frontier #1:

**Ensuring that programs prepare
students for good jobs and/or
bachelor's transfer in field of interest**

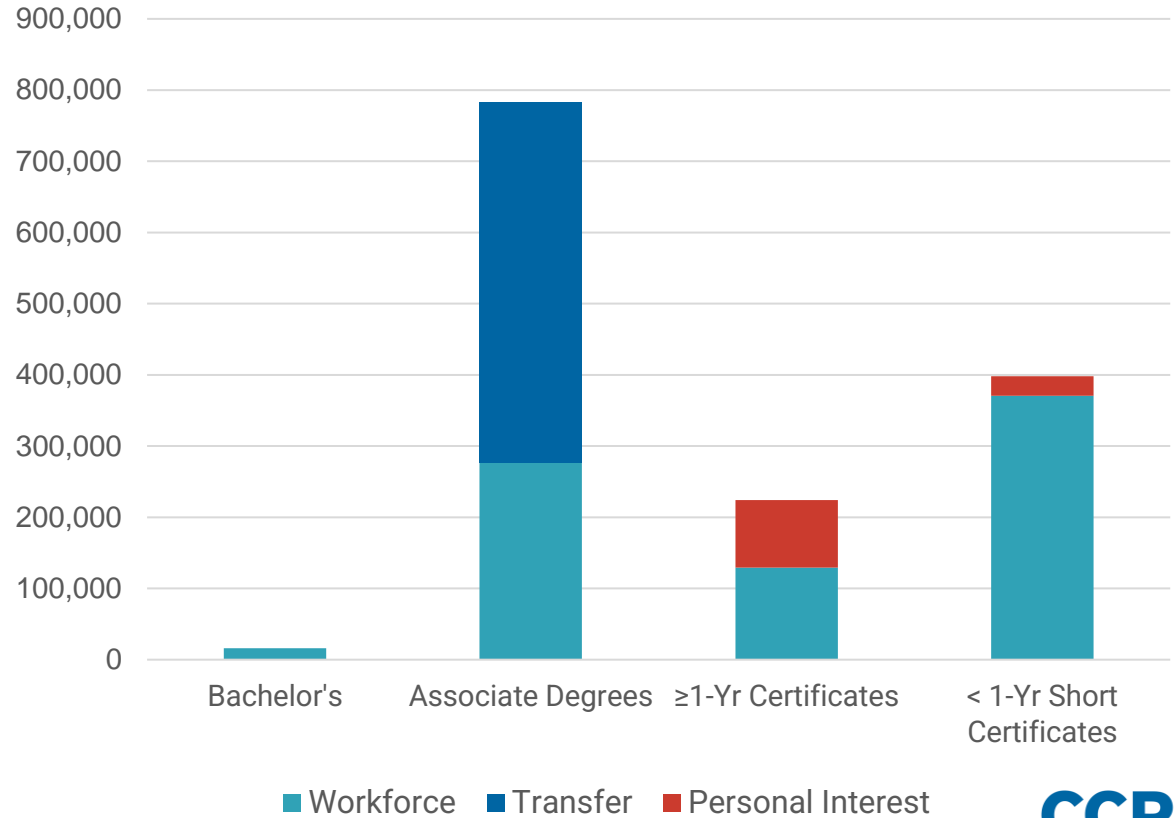
Most jobs that pay a **living wage** for an individual, let alone support a family, are held by **workers with degrees and experience....** **skills training is not enough**

Median Annual Earnings of Full-Time, Year-Round Workers Ages 25-35: 2021



Source: NCES, *Condition of Education*. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cba> and MIT Living Wage Calculator,

Community College Awards by Intended Program Outcome: AY 2022-23



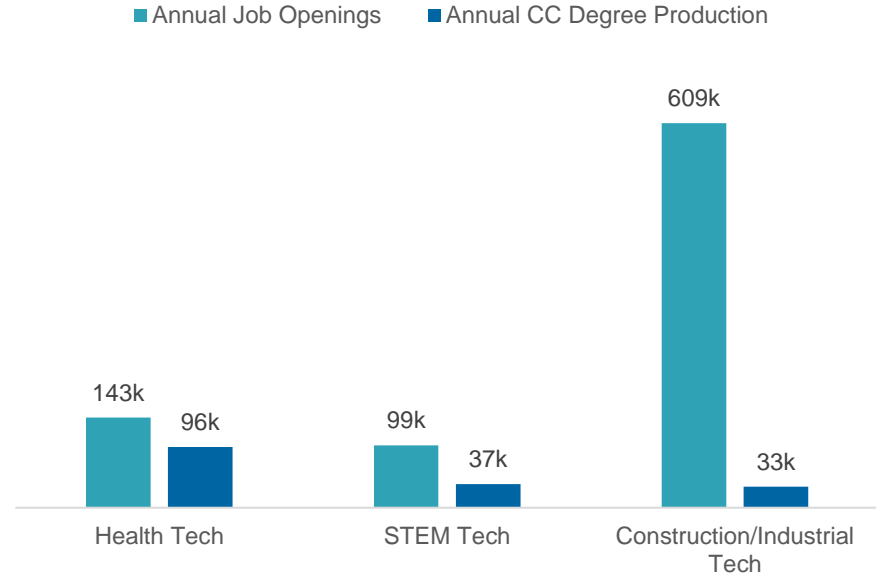
Assessing the post-completion value of community college credentials requires examining the award level, field and intent

There is **strong projected demand for well-paying middle skill jobs** that require a strong applied technical and communication and problem-solving skills.

Community colleges are **not on track to meet this demand**.

Programs leading to higher earnings also have **greater need to diversify**.

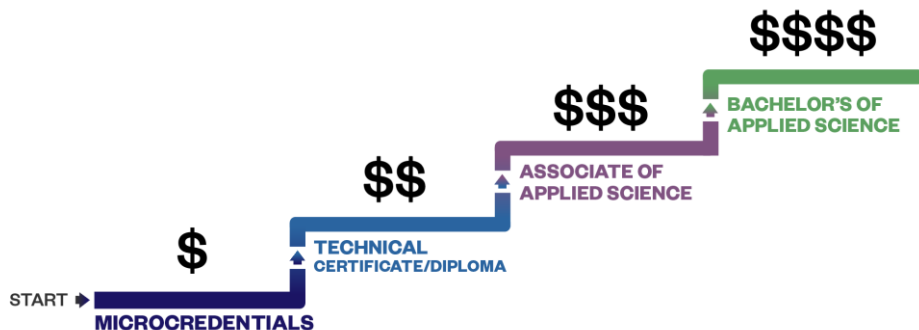
Projected Middle-Skill Job Openings in Tech Fields 2021-31 compared to Community College Workforce Degrees in Technology Fields 2022-23



On paper, community college CTE credentials are often designed to be “stackable”...

Stackable credentials:

Earn workforce certifications on your way to college degrees



...In reality, colleges too often leave it to students to figure out how to stack credentials to better jobs and degrees

Most workers who stack in high-wage fields already have experience in the field and degrees

Women, low-income, and students of color disproportionately represented among short CTE certificate awardees in low-wage fields

“Fast-start” short-term training programs for underemployed workers to enter well-paying, high demand fields are rare

Learning and Earning Career Ladder Programs Key Features

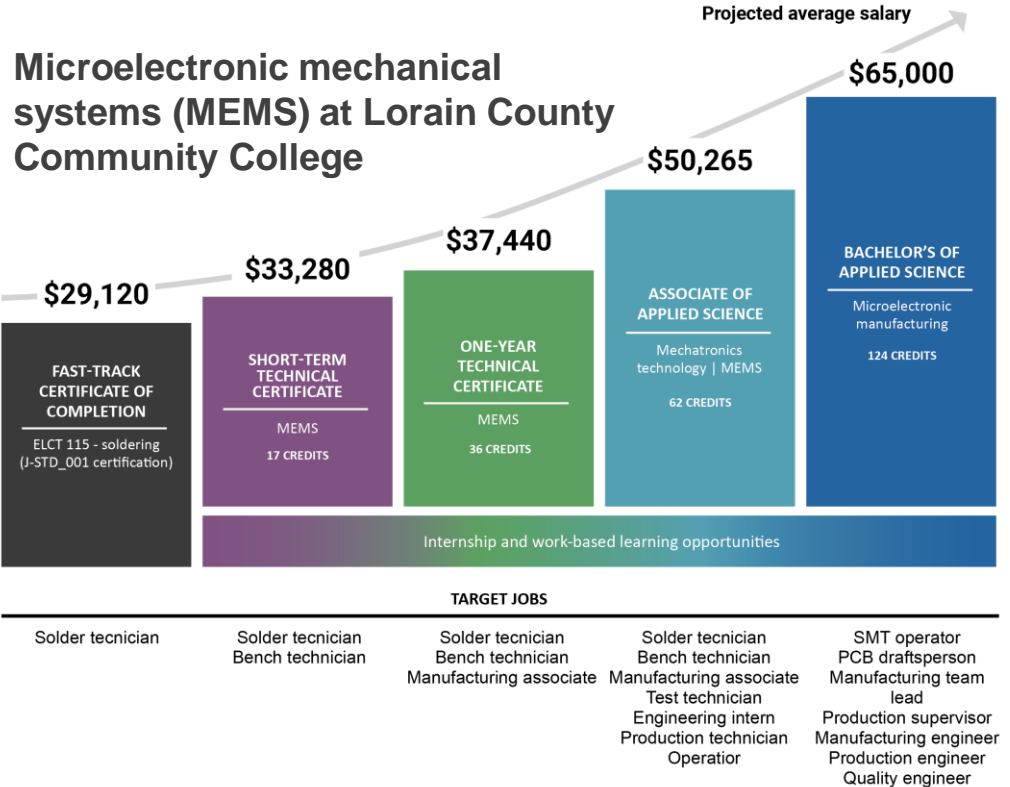
Fast-start foothold training

Curriculum maps

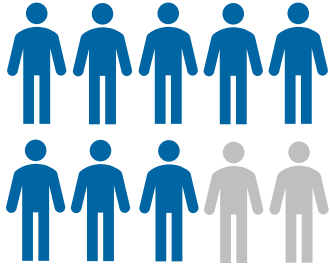
Scheduled and delivered for working adults

On-ramps from high school

Students not on their own to navigate

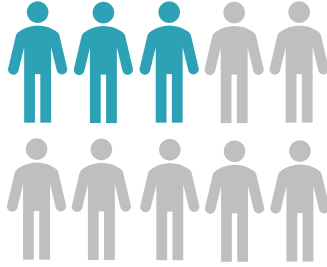


Broken transfer systems negatively impact millions of students



80%

Of community college students
want a bachelor's degree



33%

Of community college students
**transfer to a four-year
institution**



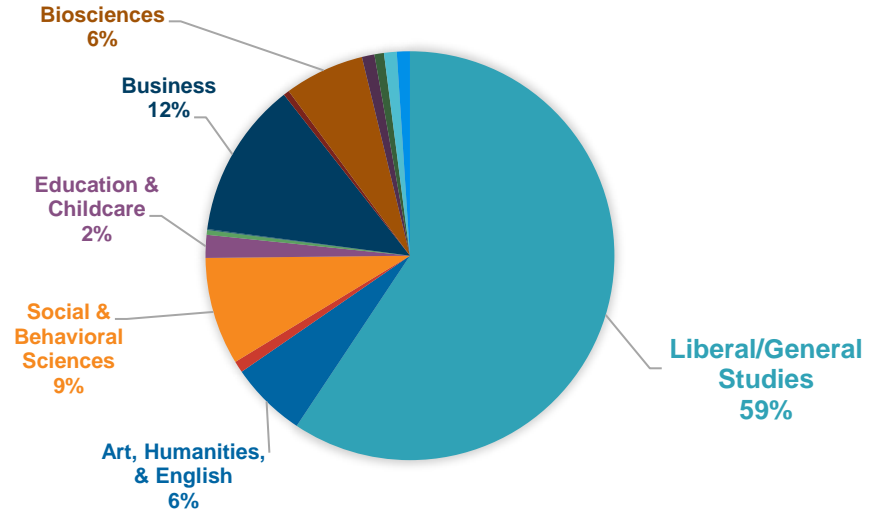
16%

Of community college students
**will graduate with a bachelor's
degree within six years of
starting college**

Community college transfer associates are not well aligned with bachelor's degrees awarded by four-year institutions.

Community College Transfer Associate Degrees by Field:

AY 2022-23



STEM Majors

Liberal/General Studies Majors

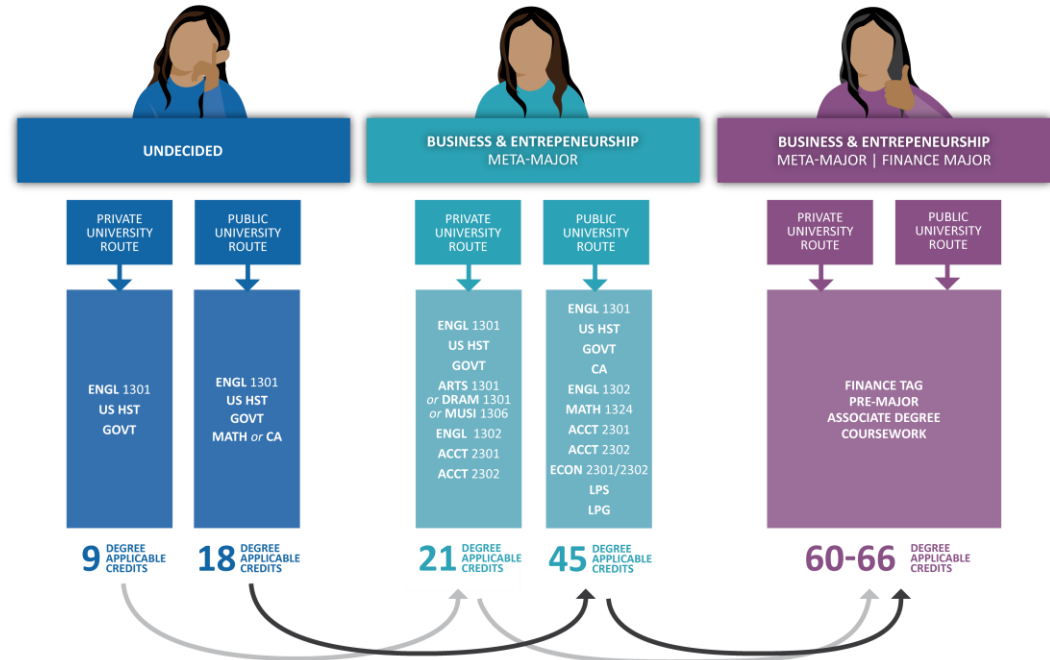
CC Transfer Associate Degrees	Bachelor's Degrees, Public Four-Years
10%	24%

CC Transfer Associate Degrees	Bachelor's Degrees, Public Four-Years
59%	3%

Pre-Major Transfer Pathways Key Features

- Transfer maps with universities in specific bachelor's majors
- Entering students develop institution and major-specific transfer plan
- Mandatory advising by field-embedded advisors at key checkpoints
- Ongoing processes for updating transfer curriculum maps
- Collective responsibility through joint/dual admissions

Transfer Advising Guides at Alamo Colleges



Program Frontier #2:

Helping students develop the versatile skills to thrive in a fast-changing workplace and society through active and experiential learning

The need for change in teaching and learning practices in community colleges

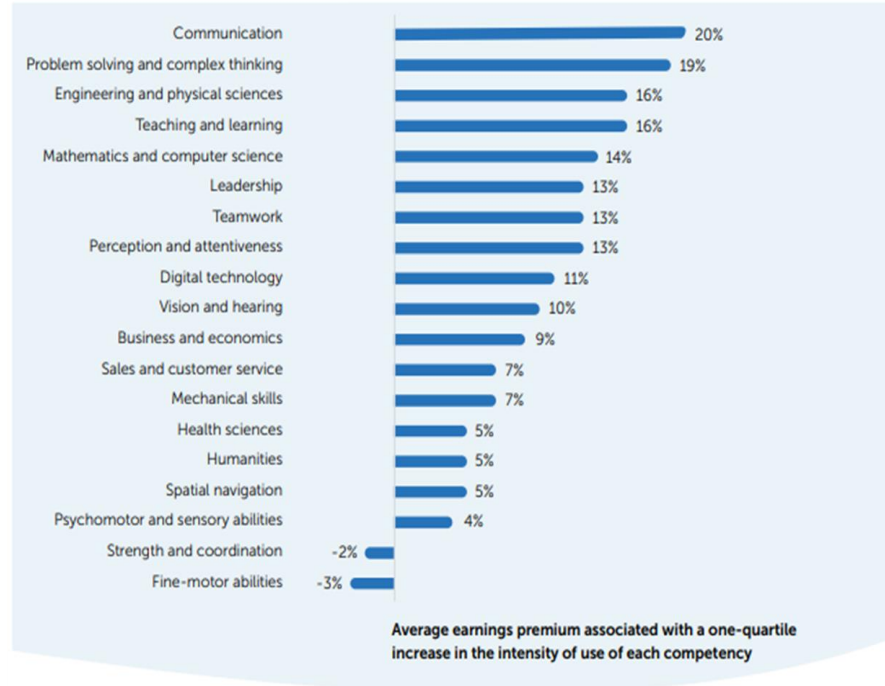
Innovation in pedagogy and curriculum often occurs in pockets

Focused on placement policy and structural reforms in gateway math and English courses

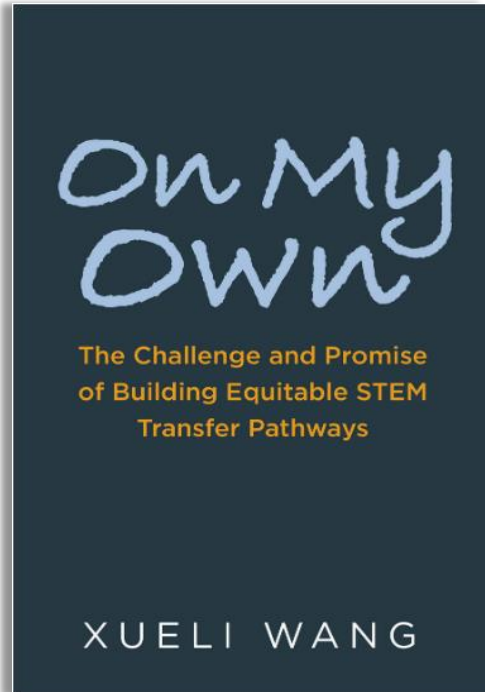
Experiential learning opportunities are rare for students outside workforce programs where they are an integral part of the curriculum

Employers value workers with strong communication, problem-solving, learning skills who can apply what they learned in college

Figure 5. Communication has the highest earnings premium associated with higher intensity of use.



Teaching that actively engages students in learning on topics of interest is a powerful motivator and equalizer.



New students are more likely to persist and thrive in challenging programs like STEM if they can **take courses in their first term that engage them with course material on topics of interest** through discussions, problem-solving, case studies, role plays, and other “active learning” activities. The benefits for students with poor previous education and low social capital are especially strong.

Liberal Arts and Sciences, Associate in Arts

(N = 1300 students)

Rank	Course Title	Program students who took the course (#)	Program students who took the course (%)
1	INTRODUCTION TO PSYCHOLOGY	254	19%
2	FRESHMAN ENGLISH I	250	19%
3	HUMAN ANATOMY/PHYSIOLOGY I	248	19%
4	FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE SEMINAR	241	18%
5	INTRO TO MICROCOMP/WINDOWS	180	14%
6	FUND OF SPEECH COMMUNICATION	164	13%
7	INTERMEDIATE ALGEBRA	146	11%
8	AMERICAN GOVERNMENT	128	10%
9	COLLEGE ALGEBRA	126	10%
10	GENERAL SOCIOLOGY	90	7%
>10	2 other different courses attempted by at least 1 student from this program		

What **courses** are students in our programs taking **in their first term**?

Are faculty in these courses supported to **teach in ways that build students' confidence** as college learners?

Pathways Frontier #3:

Redesigning the recruitment and onboarding experience to help students to explore, choose, and plan program of study

Why focus on students' early experiences?

The takeaway:

If we want to increase outcomes like completion, transfer, and post-completion success, we need to start at the beginning of students' time in college.

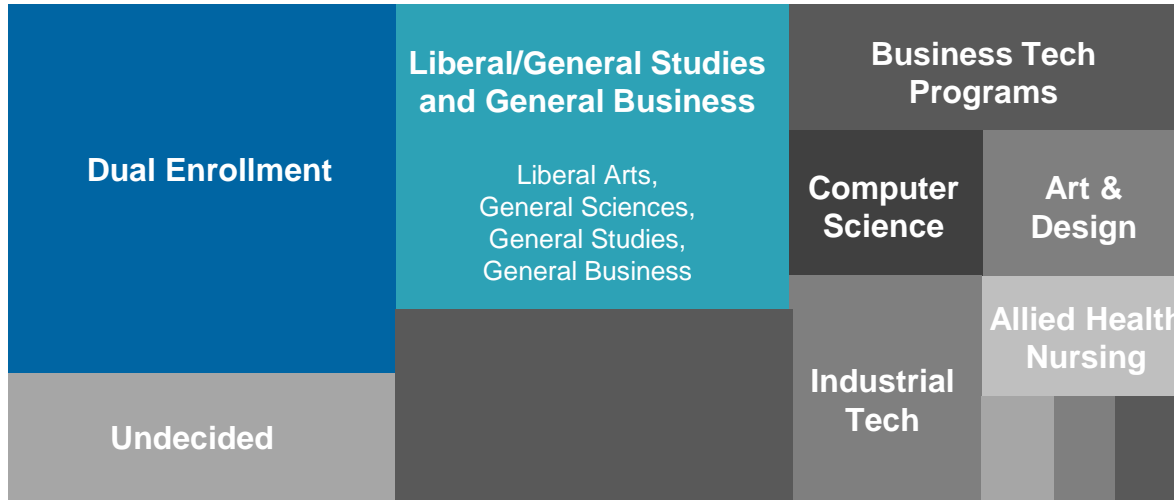
Many students apply but don't enroll

Close to half of community college starters leave higher education before the start of their second year

Gaining momentum in the first year means students are more likely to meet their goals

Many students are not enrolled in a program that clearly leads to a 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?

From “welcome to college” to onboarding into a program of study

Ask students about their goals, interests, and career aspirations

Connect students with students, faculty, and others who share similar academic and career interests

Inspire students with courses on topics of interest in term 1

Ensure every student is helped to develop a full program **educational plan**

Creating an **educational plan** is a critical part of onboarding because it ensures that students are on the right track from the start.

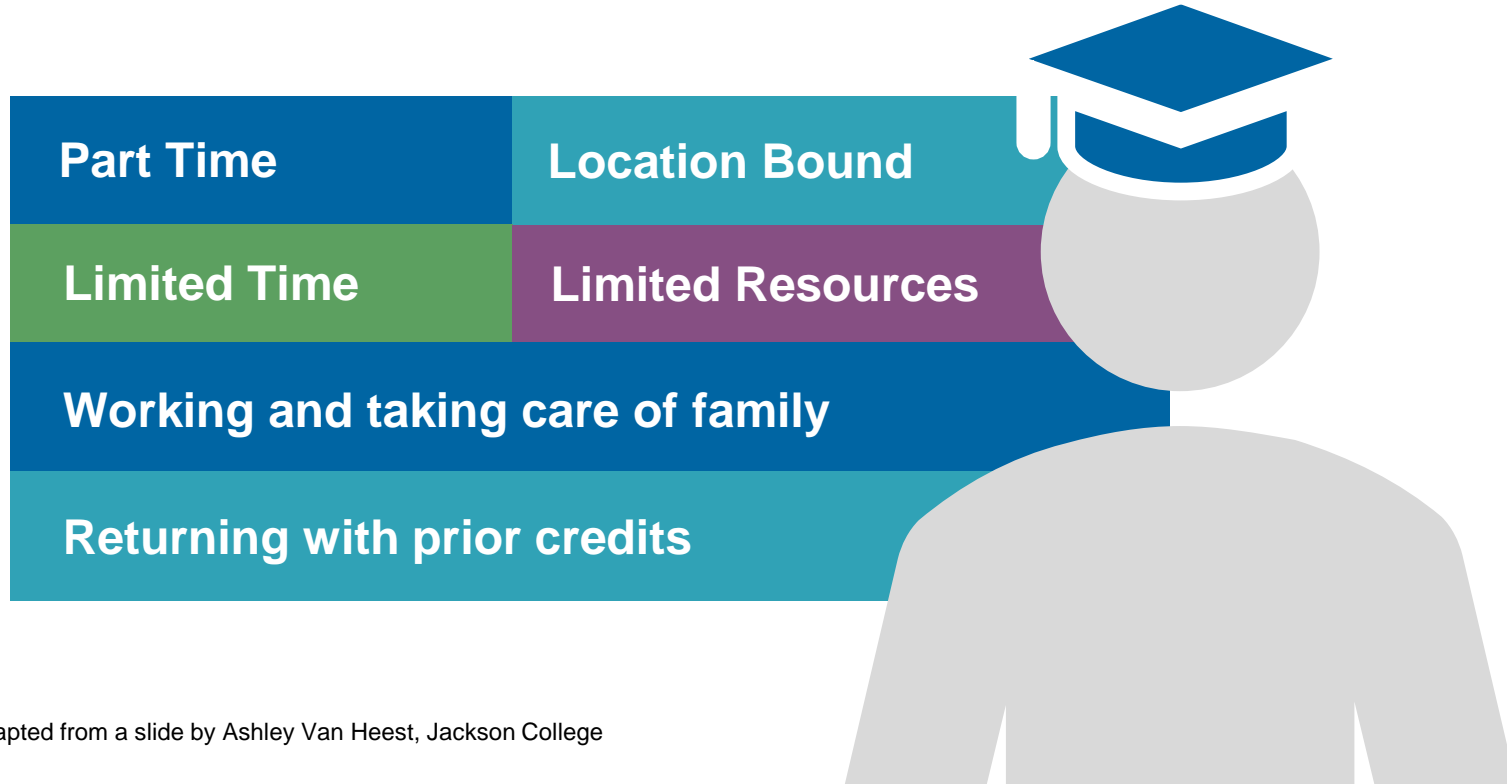
Educational plans helps students see the full path to their goals.



Program maps are designed for the “ideal” student



But real community college students need educational plans that are personalized to their timeline and goals



“ *I know exactly what classes I should take at what times and so I can graduate on time. ... Makes me feel good. Makes me feel like it's doable and I can see exactly what I need to do in order to achieve my goals.*”

Pathways Frontier #4:

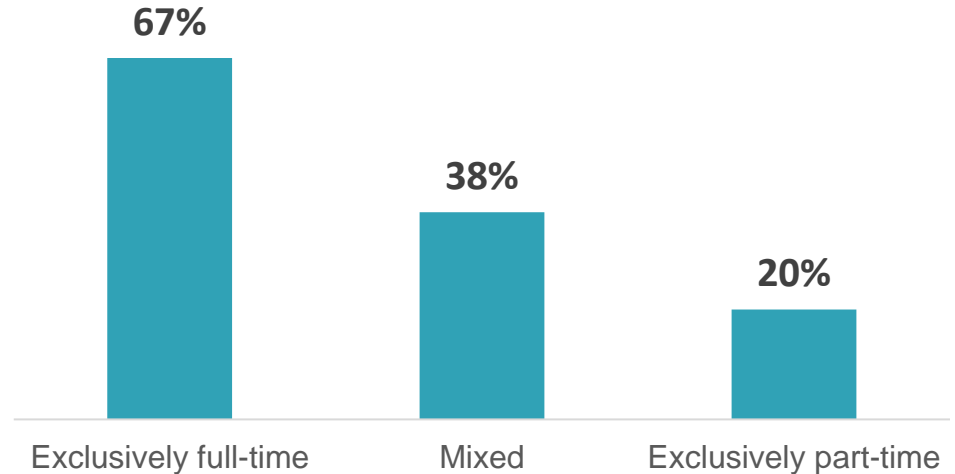
Enabling students with many competing priorities and pressures to complete in as little time and cost as possible

Program maps are designed for the “ideal” student

Full-time students are ***much*** more likely to complete than part-time students. A big reason is that class schedules, instructional modalities, and student supports, are designed for full-time students.

Source: National Student Clearinghouse, *Completing College 2023*, which tracks the fall 2017 FTIC (including former dual enrollment) degree-seeking cohorts.

Six-Year Completion Rate for Two-Year Public Starters by Enrollment Intensity



Key strategies for supporting on-time and affordable completion



Caseload advising by field



Progress monitoring on educational plans



Student responsive course schedules

Student-responsive scheduling benefits students and the college



Benefits to students:

- Take the classes they need when they need them
- Plan in advance without having to make frequent changes
- Access programs that are limited to students who can enroll full-time



Benefits to colleges:

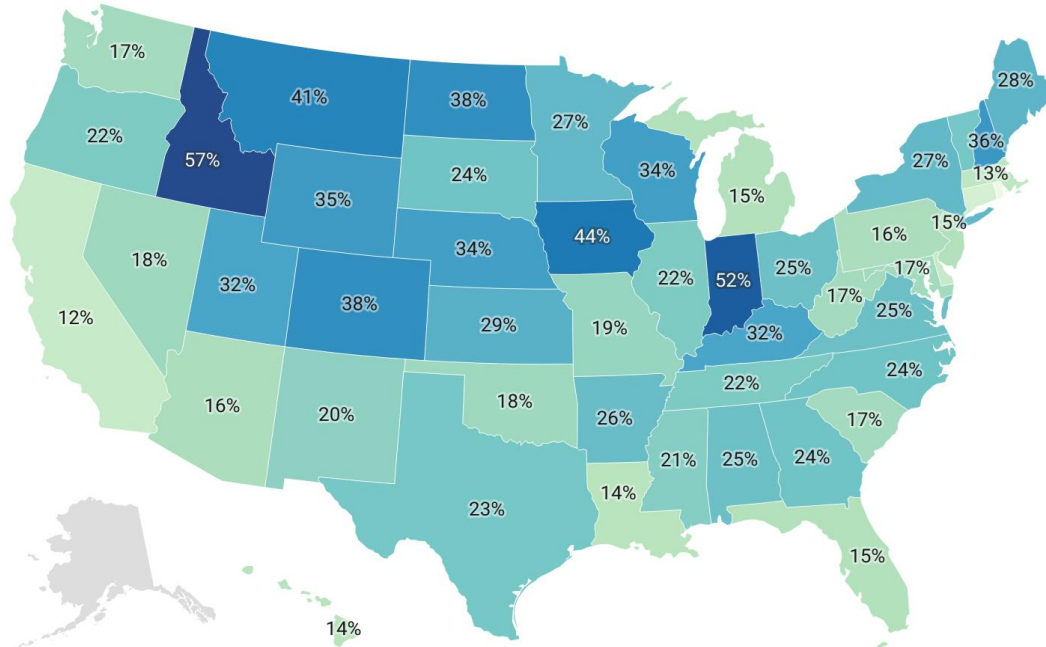
- Increase FTE and tuition revenue (how many PT students are PT because of course schedules?)
- Prevent last-minute course cancellations due to low-enrollment classes

Pathways Frontier #5:

Rethinking dual enrollment as an on-ramp to debt-free, career-connected postsecondary pathways after high school

Percentage of Community College Students in High School in 2022-23

Dual enrollment as a percent of
community college headcount



Created with Datawrapper

**Dual Enrollment:
21% of 2022-23
Community College
Enrollment**

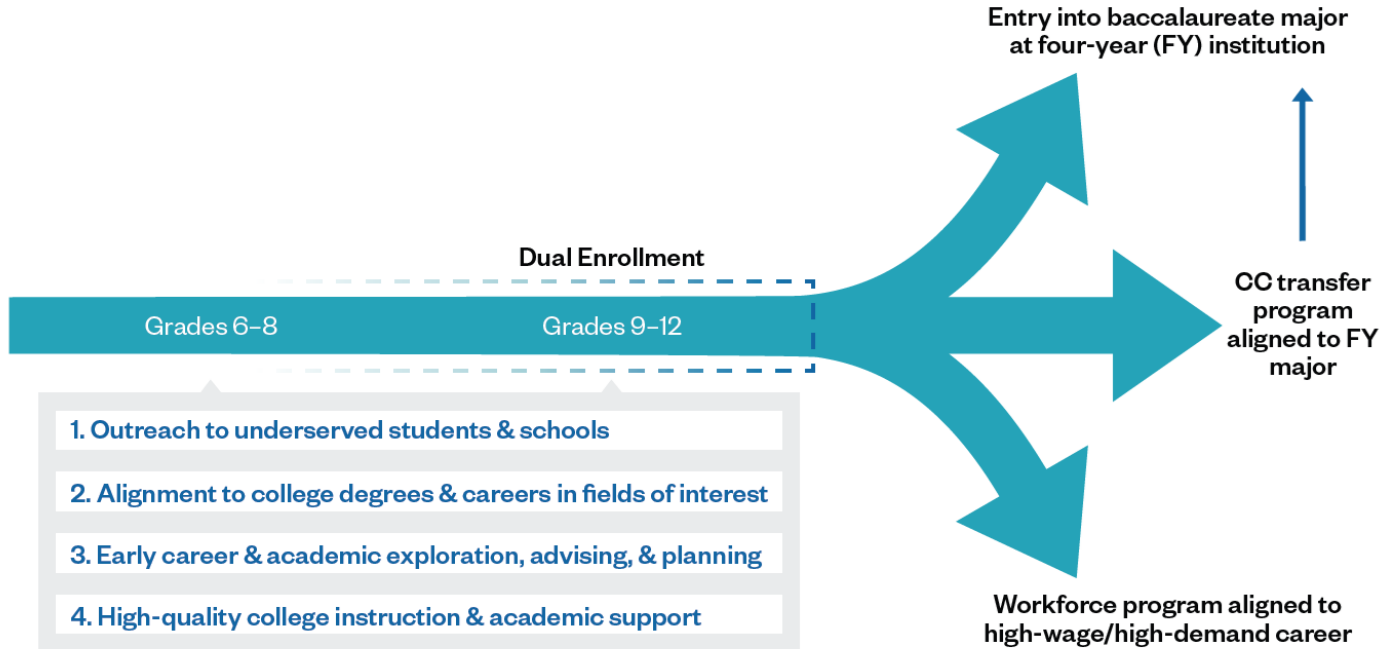
CCRC analysis of IPEDS Data

<https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/easyblog/how-many-students-are-taking-dual-enrollment-courses-in-high-school-new-national-state-and-college-level-data.html>

CCRC

DEEP Framework for Reform

Extending Guided Pathways to HS Dual Enrollment



More Essential Than Ever presents an evolution of the pathways framework focused on helping students explore, plan and complete programs that prepare them for good jobs/transfer in a major and that can be completed in as little time and cost as possible.

Why Now?

- To build back enrollment (and become more financially secure) colleges must ensure that their programs are worth completing
- Community colleges are well-positioned to play this role
- Widespread bipartisan support for affordable education and training for upward mobility and workforce development
- Community college education and training is essential for local communities to "grow their own" talent

Thank you!

Visit our website: ccrc.tc.columbia.edu

John Fink john.fink@tc.columbia.edu

Hana Lahr lahr@tc.columbia.edu

Davis Jenkins pdj2102@tc.columbia.edu