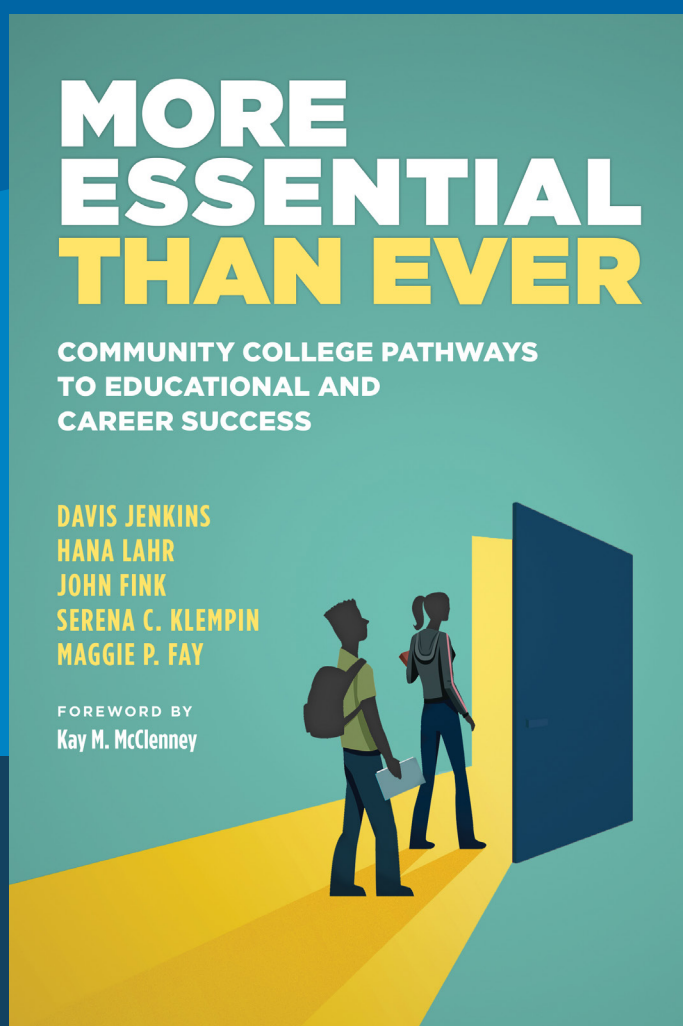# MORE ESSENTIAL THAN EVER:

Community College Pathways to Educational and Career Success

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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, staff, and administrators discuss the big ideas presented in the book and consider which might be helpful for 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 outcomes. *More Essential Than Ever* presents research-based strategies with case-study examples for tackling 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's a resource to foster conversations about how your institution might manage large-scale changes to improve outcomes for large numbers of your students. The process involves rethinking how your college supports students—from ensuring the post-completion value of credentials to strengthening the transition to career-path college degree programs after high school—and that requires collaboration and shared commitment. We hope that this discussion guide will provide a starting point for cross-college 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 chapters:

- The **Introduction** lays out the thesis of the book and introduces five reform "frontiers" for strengthening pathways to post-completion success for students.

- **Chapter 1** outlines the progress early adopter colleges have made in enacting large-scale changes and discusses their effects on student progression.

- **Chapters 2 through 6** provide lessons the authors learned about transforming college practice in five frontiers of reform: (1) ensuring the post-completion value of programs; (2) strengthening teaching and learning; (3) improving recruiting and student onboarding into a program of study; (4) revamping advising, scheduling, and supports to ensure students complete on schedule; 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 and staff 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 undertake and sustain these reforms.

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

If your college has already begun the reform process, this guide can help you think about how to take 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 consider how changing mindsets across your institution can create the impetus needed to achieve your goals.

INTRODUCTION:
More Essential Than Ever

The Introduction describes challenges that community colleges face in providing education and training to support economic mobility and talent development for their communities. It argues that while community colleges have made progress in removing barriers to completion, more can be done to strengthen pathways to post-completion student success in careers and further education.

1. In the introduction to the book, the authors discuss several reasons community colleges have lost enrollment since the early 2010s.

    a. What have been the enrollment trends in your college/system during this time?

    b. Among which student groups have you seen increased enrollment? Which groups have declined?

    c. What do you think are the main forces behind the enrollment trends at your college/system?

2. The book's central thesis is that large-scale reforms in community colleges have generally focused on removing barriers to completion. Removing barriers to completion is important, but to achieve better outcomes—and recruit and retain more students in a competitive marketplace—colleges must do more to tap into students' motivation to enroll in college and complete a program of study by strengthening pathways to post-completion success in jobs and further education.

    a. Does this thesis resonate with you?

    b. What do you find compelling about it? What does not ring true for you?

3. The authors introduce five reform "frontiers" for strengthening community college pathways to post-completion success for students, which they discuss in chapters 2–6 of the book: (1) ensuring all programs lead to good jobs or transfer in a major; (2) helping students develop the versatile skills to thrive in a fast-changing workplace and society; (3) redesigning the recruitment and onboarding experience to help students to explore, choose, and plan a program of study; (4) enabling students with many competing priorities and pressures to complete in as little time and cost as possible; and (5) rethinking dual enrollment as a more equitable on-ramp to debt-free, career-connected postsecondary pathways after high school.

    a. What do you think of this list of areas for further community college reform?

    b. What needed improvements in practice are the authors missing?

    c. Which of these frontiers has your college/system tried to tackle? At what scale? What has worked? What has not worked and why?

    d. Which of these frontiers do you think hold promise to improve student outcomes at your college/system? Why? What are the opportunities for your college/system to undertake reforms in these areas? What is the process for establishing priorities for taking on the work?

Lessons From Two
Major Guided Pathways Evaluations

This chapter describes the evolution of the guided pathways model and findings from two major evaluations CCRC conducted of the scale and effects of guided pathways reforms.

1. The authors discovered that though some colleges have successfully adopted guided pathways reforms, it took several years for most to implement these changes at scale.

   a. What has been your experience implementing guided pathways or guided-pathways-like reforms?

   b. What strategies did you find effective in scaling guided pathways practices?

   c. What aspects of the framework have taken the most time?

   d. What aspects of the framework have been the most challenging? Were you able to overcome these challenges? If so, how?

   e. What are your strategies for maintaining focus on the reform work over a period of years?

2. The authors' research on early adopters of guided pathways led them to identify areas where reforms could substantially improve student outcomes while also addressing ongoing disparities in student outcomes: removing prerequisite remediation, strengthening program gateway courses, offering ongoing advising and predictable schedules, and building on-ramps to career-path postsecondary programs.

   a. Has your college/system sought to implement reforms in any of these areas?

   b. If so, what has worked? What evidence do you have that student outcomes have improved?

   c. What did not work well? Why was this the case?

   d. Which of these areas has your college not tackled? Which should it consider prioritizing and why?

CHAPTER 2:
Ensuring Programs Lead to Good Jobs and Further Education

This chapter argues that community colleges need to expand career-technical associate and (where offered) community college bachelor's degree programs to meet the strong projected demand for technicians to fill well-paying, career-path jobs in fields such as allied health and nursing, computer and engineering technology, industrial and construction technology, and public safety. To expand these programs, colleges will need to create "learning-and-earning career ladders" that enable underemployed workers and new labor market entrants coming out of high school to enter and advance in these and other high-demand fields and pursue a degree while they are working. Given that most jobs that pay at least a living wage require at least a bachelor's degree, the authors argue that colleges need to work with university partners to abandon the ineffective "2+2" general education transfer model and instead map pre-major pathways in specific major fields of interest to students so that students can transfer with no excess credits in their field of interest.

1. What ideas presented in this chapter resonated with you? Are there any you take issue with?

2. Do administrators, program leaders, advisors, and faculty across the college know what the living wage is for your service area? If not, how can that information be shared and be made an integral part of work on the curriculum and student support services, as well as a strategic "north star" for students' educational and career pathways?

3. Which workforce certificate and degree programs at your college enable students to secure jobs that pay at least a living wage and offer opportunities for advancement? Which do not? How do you know?

4. Are students and graduates of programs that lead to well-paying, career-path jobs representative of the student body and larger communities you serve? Are some groups overrepresented in programs associated with strong job outcomes or underrepresented in programs that lead to lower paying jobs?

5. To what extent are students in your college's credit and noncredit certificate training programs able to enter well-paying, high-demand fields and pursue further education and training to advance while they are working? What currently works well? Where does the college need to improve?

6. What are examples of programs in your college that work closely with employers to identify and map opportunities for students to enter and advance in well-paying jobs in your college's region? How might your college's collaboration with employers be improved overall?

7. How does your college and/or system work with four-year institutions to ensure that your transfer programs prepare students to transfer efficiently to bachelor's programs in their field of interest? Are AA/AAS students at your college developing a map that leads them beyond the community college credential and through transfer (or post-baccalaureate) programs that lead to living-wage jobs and achievement of their goals? What is working well? What are areas for improvement?

8. How might the actions presented at the end of the chapter help your college strengthen your program review process and ensure that your workforce and transfer programs enable students to secure living-wage jobs directly or transfer efficiently in a major field of interest? What challenges do you foresee in implementing these actions?

CHAPTER 3:
Teaching Versatile Learners for a Fast-Changing World

In this chapter, the authors argue that to help students develop versatile skills that will enable them to thrive in well-paying jobs and further education, colleges need to help faculty embed active and contextualized teaching and learning across the curriculum, especially in key program foundation courses. The chapter also discusses how a small vanguard of colleges is expanding work-based and other experiential learning opportunities across programs to ensure that students are able to apply what they've learned in college to their work and life outside of college.

1. What ideas presented in this chapter resonated with you? Are there any you take issue with?

2. To what extent do students have opportunities for active and contextualized learning in program foundation courses at your college? What support does the college currently provide to faculty to strengthen teaching in those courses? What additional support or professional development would benefit faculty?

3. How well do students in your college's program foundation courses do when they take them online compared to face-to-face?

4. How common are opportunities for active and collaborative learning in online classes? What more can be done?

5. What work-based and other experiential learning opportunities do students typically have outside of nursing and other career-technical programs where it is already an integral part of the curriculum? Looking at the Alamo Experience case study presented in the chapter, how might your college begin to embed experiential learning opportunities across programs, including for students in transfer programs?

6. Looking at the case study of South Puget Sound Community College, how might your college move toward creating a more systematic approach to helping all faculty across program areas work to improve teaching and learning in their courses?

CHAPTER 4:
Creating a More Engaging Recruitment and Onboarding Experience

Chapter 4 advocates for a new type of student onboarding that begins during the recruitment process, extends through students' first year, and is focused on helping all students explore, choose, and make a plan in a program of study aligned with their interests and goals. The authors describe how colleges can use a framework called Ask-Connect-Inspire-Plan to develop and adopt scaled and personalized program-focused recruitment and onboarding practices.

1. What ideas presented in this chapter resonated with you? Are there any you take issue with?

2. What is the onboarding experience of students entering your college?
   a. What does your recruitment process entail?
   b. To what extent does recruitment focus on recruiting students into programs and helping them learn about related careers?
   c. Many students come to colleges with strong ideas about what they want to pursue. To what extent is your college helping students chart a path to meeting their goals that includes consideration of educational requirements, a budget, and work experience?

3. What are some of your strengths in each part of the Ask-Connect-Inspire-Plan onboarding framework? In which areas does your college excel, 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? What might the college stop doing in order to focus on high-priority changes?
   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?

4. What data shared in this chapter was compelling? What data points are you interested in for your college?

5. Looking at the actions suggested at the end of the chapter, what strategies presented (or others you have thought of) might be useful for strengthening your practice and student outcomes during students' first year of college? What might be the barriers to or challenges with implementing these further reforms?

Helping Students Complete Programs On-Schedule and Affordably

This chapter argues that, in general, colleges have focused more on whether students complete and less on *how long* it takes them to complete. Despite the importance of time and cost to degree for students, very few of them receive guidance on how long it will take them to graduate. The authors identify four strategies colleges can adopt to help more students finish on schedule and affordably: (1) mandatory case management advising by field, (2) ongoing progress monitoring, (3) student-centered scheduling, and (4) embedded supports for basic needs.

1. What ideas presented in this chapter resonated with you? Are there any you take issue with?

2. What do you know about on-time completion at your college/system? What quantitative and qualitative data do you have?
   a. How long does it take students on average to complete?
   b. How many credits have students accumulated on average when they complete?
   c. How many students are able to complete on schedule, as assessed by the timeline in their educational plan?
   d. Does the amount of time it takes to complete or the average number of credits at completion vary by student demographics? By program?

3. What is your college/system doing to improve on-time completion rates? What is working well? Where does the college need to improve?

4. Looking at the actions suggested at the end of the chapter, what strategies presented (or others you have thought of) might be useful for (further) strengthening college practice and increasing on-time completion rates? What would be the barriers to or challenges with implementing these reforms?

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?

Reorganizing Community Colleges for Student Success and Institutional Stability

This chapter argues that to successfully implement the reforms described in the book colleges need to reorganize staff and redesign business processes to break down organizational silos and promote collaboration and efficiency.

1. What ideas presented in this chapter resonated with you? Are there any you take issue with?

2. Overall, how effective is your college/system at managing change related to the key reform areas described in the book (program management and development, instructional innovation and professional development for faculty, new student onboarding, advising and other supports for on-time completion, and dual enrollment)? What are you doing well? Where do you need to improve?

3. A key part of successfully implementing reforms involves changing organizational culture to challenge the status quo and make the case for why reforms are important. What types of culture change would need to happen at your college to make progress in reorganizing the institution with an emphasis on post-completion success?

4. How does your college currently budget for student success reforms? What are you doing well? Where are there opportunities to rethink and align the budgeting process with institutional priorities?

5. Looking at the actions suggested at the end of the chapter, what strategies presented (or others you thought of) might be useful for strengthening your capacity to lead and sustain institutional transformation? What might be barriers to or challenges with implementing these strategies in your college/ system?

Leading College Transformation Across States and Systems
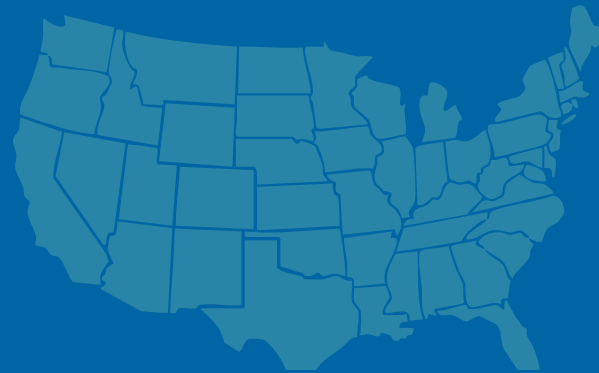
Chapter 8 examines how state agencies and community college associations are providing support and reevaluating funding models to promote the adoption of reforms that strengthen post-completion success.

1. What is your state doing to help colleges increase post-completion success for community college students? Does your state have statewide student success goals or a statewide student success agenda?

2. *For colleges*: What data on post-completion success do your state provide that your college can use to improve transfer and employment outcomes?

   For state agencies: What data on post-completion success do you already collect? What additional data could you collect?

3. Are any colleges in your state working together on post-completion success reforms? If not, how could you support greater collaboration?

4. *For colleges*: What support would you want from your state agency or association?

   For state agencies: Have you asked colleges what types of support would be helpful to them?

5. Are there any policy initiatives in your state that have the potential to help community colleges strengthen supports for post-completion success? How can those be leveraged?