

Just the Essentials

An Introduction to MORE ESSENTIAL THAN EVER

More Essential Than Ever: Community College Pathways to Educational and Career Success (Harvard Education Press, 2025) presents research-based strategies with case-study examples for tackling pressing challenges facing community colleges—from declining enrollment and related fiscal uncertainty to questions about the value of higher education—while ensuring that students from all backgrounds can succeed in college and beyond. *More Essential Than Ever* is a resource to foster conversations about how your institution can adopt large-scale innovations to improve outcomes for large numbers of students.

Is *More Essential Than Ever* right for my college or state system?

Absolutely. This book is for colleges at different stages of the redesign process, from those that are just getting started to those that have spent years adopting guided pathways innovations and are looking for their next steps.

The book is meant to be action-oriented.

Each chapter ends with a section called “Taking Action” in which the authors lay out steps colleges can take to adopt these next-frontier practices at scale. We also encourage you to read this book with your colleagues. You can use our discussion guide to facilitate conversation at your college about these practices, explore what this work could look like on your campus or in your state, and begin planning steps toward implementation. Scan the QR code to learn more about *More Essential Than Ever*.



What's Inside



Introduction

The introduction lays out the thesis of the book: To recruit and retain more students, colleges must focus on post-completion success for students. Programs must lead to a good job or transfer to a four-year college with no excess credits to be worth the time, energy, and money that students are spending. Students won't complete programs that don't deliver value.

Chapter 1

Lessons From Two Major Guided Pathways Evaluations

Chapter 1 outlines the progress community colleges nationally have made in enacting large-scale changes following the “guided pathways” model, and it discusses the effects of their efforts on student progression.

Chapters 2-6 present five frontiers for further improving community college student success.

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

Create “learning-and-earning career ladders” that enable students to enter and advance in well-paying, high-opportunity fields and to pursue a career-technical associate or bachelor’s degree while they are working.

Work with university partners to abandon the “2+2” general education transfer model and instead map pre-major pathways in specific major fields so that students can transfer with no excess credits in their field of interest.

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

Build students’ confidence and skills as versatile learners by embedding active and contextualized teaching and learning across the curriculum, especially in key program foundation courses.

Ensure students have work based and experiential learning opportunities where they can apply what they’ve learned in college to their work and life outside of college.

Chapter 4: Creating a More Engaging Recruitment and Onboarding Experience

Recruit students not just into the college but into programs of study.

Reimagine program onboarding as a process of helping students discuss their interests, strengths, and goals, and learn about different programs and their connection to careers.

Ensure that every student is helped to develop a full-program educational plan that shows them their path and timeline for meeting their goals.

Chapter 5: Helping Students Complete Programs on Schedule and Affordably

- | Implement mandatory case management advising by field.
- | Monitor students’ progress on an ongoing basis.
- | Design course schedules based on students’ preferences and plans.
- | Embed supports for basic needs into advising.

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

Move away from the conventional “random acts” and “programs of privilege” model of dual enrollment and instead rethink it as an on-ramp to high-opportunity college programs and careers for students who would not otherwise continue their education after high school.

Chapter 7

Reorganizing Community Colleges for Student Success and Institutional Sustainability

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

Leading College Transformation Across States and Systems

Chapter 8 identifies the supports and funding state systems can provide to help colleges undertake and sustain large-scale institutional innovations that deliver value for students, communities, and taxpayers.