

How Community College Students Choose a Program of Study: Faculty and Staff Perspectives

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Until recently, the idea that community colleges should play an active role in helping students choose a program of study was far from mainstream. Colleges' initial engagement with students has traditionally focused on orientation to the college and the provision of information about administrative policies and procedures. Yet, as a part of whole-college "guided pathways" reform efforts (CCRC, 2021), a growing number of community colleges are restructuring how their programs are organized and adopting new onboarding practices to better introduce students to available programs and related career pathways and to help students weigh their own interests and strengths in choosing an academic and career path (Jenkins et al., 2020).

As people who interact a great deal with students and who are knowledgeable about program and career options, faculty members, advisors, career counselors, and other student services staff are an integral part of onboarding. Their perceptions provide valuable insights into how students experience the program choice process and what colleges can do to support that process. This brief describes findings from faculty and staff interviews about these questions conducted as part of a study on how community college students choose a program.

In the following sections, we first review prior research on how faculty and staff contribute to program and career exploration. We then describe the faculty and staff interview sample and discuss findings in three key areas: the types of supports colleges offer related to program and career exploration, barriers that students face in the program choice process, and challenges that colleges face in facilitating program choice. We conclude with implications for improving supports to help students explore and select a program.

About This Research Project

This brief is part of a larger study that explores how first-time-in-college students learn about and choose a program of study. The study uses a three-wave panel student survey, student transcript data, and student, faculty, and staff interviews to better understand students' decision-making about programs of study over time. We examine what perceptions students have about programs when they arrive at college, how these were shaped before their arrival, and how their perceptions about programs change over three terms at college. The study takes place at four community colleges in California, Maryland, Ohio, and Texas.

Prior Literature on Program and Career Exploration

Program and career exploration is not comprised of a discrete event or two but rather is an ongoing process occurring throughout students' time in college that includes learning about program options and the careers to which they lead, making an initial program choice, engaging in experiences inside and outside of the classroom that either confirm that choice or open up new possibilities, and building connections to the labor market. A number of people, in particular faculty members, advisors, and career services staff, play critical roles in this process.

As experts in an academic discipline, faculty members introduce students to a field of study and teach the classes that give students an understanding of what a program involves. In doing so, they can spark students' interests, "lighting the fire within," to help students find an educational path that aligns with their interests and goals (London et al., 2006). In addition to introducing students to programs, faculty members offer career guidance and provide opportunities for career exploration. While a significant number of two- and four-year students never use career services (Flaherty, 2023), they routinely engage with faculty throughout their time in college. When asked who they rely on for information about future careers, students responding to a survey conducted at seven community colleges selected "college instructor" most frequently, with more than 60% of students indicating that they rely on a college instructor either "a fair amount" or "a lot" for career guidance (D'Amico et al., 2019).

Overall, little research has focused exclusively on the role of community college faculty in students' career development, making that a key contribution of this brief. In a survey of nearly 7,000 faculty members representing over 3,000 institutions (only 10% of which were associate-degree-granting institutions), 92% of faculty indicated that students in their academic discipline had asked them for career advice during the past year (Gatta et al., 2024). Faculty from both two- and four-year institutions also support career exploration in multiple other ways, including by referring students to the career center, inviting career center staff to class, integrating career preparation into course assignments and learning objectives, and building students' social capital by making connections to employers (Diaz & Diaz, 2020; Gatta et al., 2024; Van Noy, 2019).

As opposed to four-year institutions, where faculty often perform advising functions in addition to their primary teaching responsibilities, community colleges are more likely to employ full-time professional advisors (McKinney et al., 2024). Community college advisors are often some of the first people with whom students interact when enrolling in college and selecting classes for their first term. They play an essential role in helping students navigate the college, choose a program, and make an educational plan (McKinney et al., 2024). The positive impacts of advising on student success have been well documented. Two decades of research on college access and completion have consistently shown that high-quality advising has small but positive effects on student outcomes (Reber, 2024).

Career services offices are particularly important for helping students clarify their educational and career goals. Students who enter college undecided about a program of study are frequently referred to career services to complete interest inventories and career assessments. One of the most impactful ways in which career services staff can help students explore their interests is by connecting students to opportunities for work-based learning. Participation in work-based learning (e.g., internships, apprenticeships, and work-study jobs) enables students to gain valuable experience and skills that provide a realistic sense of what a career in that field would entail (Jobs for the Future, 2020; Love & Rush-Marlowe, 2024). Students who

participate in paid internships earn more after completing college and are more satisfied with and confident about their career (Torpey-Saboe et al., 2022). However, community college students are significantly less likely than students attending four-year institutions to have the opportunity to participate in internships, and when they do they are less likely to be paid (Love & Rush-Marlowe, 2024).

Study Method: Faculty and Staff Interviews

For the current study, interviews with faculty and staff were conducted remotely in the summer through the early fall of 2024. At each college, we sent the site liaison for the study a list of the general roles that are typically most involved in program and career exploration and asked them to identify individuals at their college occupying similar positions. We then emailed those individuals to invite them to participate in the interviews. Interviewees represented a variety of roles, including directors of student services, advisors, Extended Opportunity Program counselors, representatives of career services, intake specialists, and faculty who taught first-year introductory courses. We conducted 8–11 interviews per college, for a total of 38 interviews.

Helping Students Explore and Choose Programs and Careers

The first time students are asked to choose a program is typically when they apply to college, in large measure because students cannot receive federal financial aid until they have chosen a program. However, interviewees acknowledged that the program students select when applying is likely to change. Explaining that students may initially select a program at random if they are unsure about what they want to do, a counselor noted that “some students have a sense of what they want to do and some just pick something even if they don’t know.” Similarly, an advisor from another college observed that even students who start off thinking they know what they want to do may change their mind, commenting that “most students enter with a general interest, which may switch a little or can change completely.”

Given that students’ initial thinking about programs is likely to evolve, the supports that colleges provide to help students choose a program and the supports they provide to help students confirm they have chosen a program that is a good fit are critical. When asked to describe how their college helps new students choose a program, faculty and staff from all four colleges discussed a wide range of services and supports. The services and supports interviewees identified involve varying degrees of student engagement, ranging from relatively passive exposure to information to interactive exploration through online tools, course assignments, and one-on-one discussions with faculty, advisors, and career counselors, to directly experiencing the career paths to which programs lead in the form of internships, job shadowing, and other types of work-based learning.

As shown in Table 1, we categorized the services and supports that faculty and staff identified into three types based on our interpretation of students’ level of engagement: information exposure, interactive exploration, and direct experience.

Table 1.
Supports Provided to Help Students Choose Programs

INFORMATION EXPOSURE	
Program and career events	Program and career events (e.g., open houses, major and career fairs) are designed to introduce current students as well as high school and middle school students to the range of opportunities available to them. Events for some programs are hands-on and immersive—e.g., culinary demonstrations and tours of a Micro Electromechanical Systems (MEMs) clean room—but not all programs lend themselves easily to these types of activities.
INTERACTIVE EXPLORATION	
Online tools	Online skills assessments and career inventories help students connect their interests to programs and careers. Interviewees reported use of a wide range of tools, including both free sites and purchased products. In most cases students can use these tools independently, but ideally they will discuss the results with an advisor or career counselor.
Student success course	The inclusion of assignments related to program and career exploration in student success courses was mentioned as a strategy for helping students learn more about their options in order to make an informed choice.
Advising	Although each of the colleges has a slightly different advising system and different advising requirements, interviewees noted that advisors play a large role in helping new students find a program that is a good fit. Advisors acknowledge the limits of their knowledge about specific career pathways; they often refer students to career services and/or relevant disciplinary faculty for more detailed information, especially if students are undecided.
Career services	Career services staff offer numerous resources for helping students learn more about career options and connecting students to internship and job opportunities.
Specialized programs	Programs designed to offer additional support for target populations, such as students who are economically disadvantaged or first-generation college students, typically include mandatory meetings with a counselor or advisor. Meetings with new students usually involve program and career exploration.
DIRECT EXPERIENCE	
Work-based learning	Work-based learning includes paid and unpaid internships that may or may not earn students college credit. Career centers often play a central role in connecting students to internships. In addition, some programs require mandatory practicums in the field as part of their curricula.

Perceptions About the Most Important Supports

After discussing the range of services and supports in place to help students explore and choose programs at a college, we asked interviewees to identify which ones they felt were most important or impactful. The supports interviewees mentioned most frequently include advising, career exploration embedded in student success courses, career assessments, the opportunity to take an inspiring course and make connections with faculty members, and experiential learning opportunities, such as internships. Despite their usefulness, however, some interviewees noted that student awareness and use of these resources were low, and they stressed the importance of making support mandatory.

Across three of the four colleges, advising was repeatedly identified as one of the most impactful services. Interviewees noted that advising is most impactful when advisors have assigned caseloads with a limited number of students, giving them the capacity to provide more

individualized attention and build trusting relationships. At the fourth college (which does not use assigned advising caseloads), interviewees attributed less impact to advising and spoke more about the importance of exposure and exploration through supports such as program/career events, the college success course, and career assessments.

According to interviewees, one of the main benefits of embedding career exploration assignments in student success courses is that they raise awareness about relevant campus resources and encourage or require students to use advising and career services. Additionally, interviewees considered career interest assessments impactful because they help students learn about programs and associated careers they may not have been familiar with and give students insight into important issues such as salary. Interviewees noted that career assessments are most useful when coupled with a meeting with an advisor or career counselor to discuss how the results might inform students' educational and career plans.

A number of interviewees talked about the crucial role that faculty play in program and career exploration. Inspiring courses can introduce students to educational and career paths they may not have otherwise known about or considered. In addition, faculty provide students with industry-specific knowledge and career guidance.

Finally, work-based or experiential learning emerged as a highly influential support but also one that interviewees believed too few students are able to access. Addressing the value of work-based learning, an advisor noted that opportunities such as internships and job shadow days are effective in helping students choose a program because of the “direct exposure” they provide. A career services member commented that “terrible internships are still good” because they help students learn about what they don't like.

Challenges Students Face in Choosing a Program

We asked faculty and staff to discuss what they considered to be the biggest challenges in helping students explore and choose programs of study. Interviewees identified a range of challenges confronted by both students and institutions. In this section, we address challenges from the point of view of students; in the following section, we discuss challenges for colleges. A number of factors can hinder students' ability to make an informed program choice. These include limited knowledge of career options, unrealistic expectations and misperceptions of career options, misalignment between family or cultural demands and students' interests and strengths, and financial constraints that pressure students to prioritize short-term earnings.

Limited Awareness of Career Options

One of the challenges most consistently noted by our interviewees was students' limited exposure to different career paths. Faculty and staff pointed out that many students enter college with a narrow view of career options, often influenced by a limited range of high school experiences and what they observe in their immediate surroundings:

Students often base their career choices on what they see in their immediate environment or what is portrayed in the media. If their environment lacks diversity in job roles, their career aspirations might be similarly limited.

— Student services administrator

Some students consider only fields like law, medicine, or law enforcement that they are familiar with either from seeing them in the media or knowing family members employed in the field. One faculty member commented that this lack of exposure “confines students to a small set of options and keeps them from fully exploring fields they might be passionate about.” This can lead students to make early decisions about programs without a true understanding of their interests or how a limited number of careers align with their skills.

In addition, students may believe they have an accurate understanding of a broad field without being aware of specific occupations or of different settings in which it is possible to pursue careers. One advisor noted that students’ understanding of engineering may be limited to viewing it as a career that “involves a lot of math,” while they are unaware of different types of engineering, such as materials engineering, that are much more hands-on. As one student services administrator put it, students “might understand the major career but be unaware of the ancillary ones.” The same administrator also commented that students often have a narrow perception of employment opportunities within a field; they may not realize, for example, that it is possible to obtain IT jobs in organizations ranging from hospitals to law firms.

To address these challenges, faculty and staff have emphasized the need for more structured and intentional exposure to a diverse set of career fields early in students’ college experiences. Several faculty members discussed introducing guest speakers from various industries and connecting course assignments to potential career paths as methods to bridge this gap, though they noted that these opportunities are not always consistently provided across departments.

Misperceptions About Job Roles and Career Opportunities

A lack of career exposure may also lead students to develop impressions of careers based on faulty sources of information. Faculty and staff described several examples in which students’ expectations about certain professions were informed by inaccurate representations of those fields. For example, interviewees mentioned that TV shows and social media often glamorize specific professions—such as forensic science, business entrepreneurship, or criminal law—leading students to develop unrealistic expectations of what these roles entail. This disconnect between perception and reality may disappoint students as they progress in their programs and learn more about the actual demands of these careers.

Alternatively, negative misperceptions of a field may deter students from considering jobs that provide a promising pathway to well-paid, fulfilling careers. An administrator highlighted manufacturing as a field in which the college was struggling to engage students: “We’re struggling to get students to go into manufacturing. People don’t know what the jobs are. There is still a perception that they are not good jobs. [There are] still a lot of myths about manufacturing.”

To mitigate these challenges, staff suggested that more realistic career exploration opportunities, such as job shadowing or informational interviews, should be integrated into the community college experience. These opportunities would allow students to gain first-hand knowledge of various professions, reducing the impact of media-driven misconceptions on their decision-making about programs.

Misalignment Between Family Expectations and Personal Interests

Faculty and staff observed that family expectations play a significant role in shaping students' choices, sometimes in ways that may not align with students' interests or strengths. Many students feel pressured to pursue certain prestigious or financially stable careers due to parental or cultural expectations, leading them to select programs based on these external factors rather than personal preference. Multiple advisors and instructors reported that it is not uncommon for students to choose programs in areas such as healthcare or business because these fields are seen as “safe” choices by their families, despite students' own interests lying elsewhere.

This pressure can result in students feeling disconnected from their studies, potentially leading to poor academic performance. Faculty observed that students often struggle in courses that do not align with their interests, increasing the likelihood that students will reconsider their program choice late in their college journey, which delays progress toward graduation.

Financial Constraints That Prioritize Immediate Needs

Some students face a limited set of program choices from the beginning due to financial pressures and conflicting responsibilities outside of school. Not all students have the flexibility to consider a full range of program options even though they are often being encouraged by the college to do so:

Sometimes I think people forget it's hard to dream when you are surviving. ... People are just like, "Do whatever you want to do, do your passion." But when you are surviving, you can't dream like that. You have to just continue surviving and do what's best at that moment. That's what I'm here for, too. It's meeting the students where they are. We can't project, "Oh, well you want to be a nurse now, go for it." Well, we're setting that student up for failure. Maybe not academically, because they may be super smart, but they're not going to be able to focus on school, work full-time, pay their bills, and have a child. Picking your major—that step is so much more complex than people think. ... It's about that student and where they are.

— Advisor

Students from low-income backgrounds may feel compelled to select programs that promise quick employment or high wages, even if these fields do not align with their interests or skills. Faculty and advisors observed that financial constraints push students to view their education as a means to secure immediate financial stability, often at the expense of their long-term career satisfaction and growth. Faculty noted that when students are forced to prioritize financial considerations over personal interest, it not only affects their engagement with coursework but may also limit their academic success. For instance, students may choose short-term certificate programs or high-demand technical fields with a rapid path to employment, fearing that longer educational pathways will lead to financial hardship.

Caretaking responsibilities and employment schedules can also affect students' program choice. Students with family responsibilities or working students may restrict the programs they consider to those that offer flexible scheduling to make it easier to balance competing demands. Staff suggested that increased access to financial counseling and support for career exploration could help students make choices that balance immediate needs with long-term career goals.

Challenges Colleges Face in the Program Choice Process

Beyond the challenges students face in choosing a program, colleges also face institutional constraints that hamper their capacity to support program and career exploration. These include limited student time for meaningful program exploration, limited number of staff involved in the program choice process, limited support for faculty's role in program choice, difficulty keeping advisors informed about fast-changing local labor markets, and barriers to scaling highly impactful supports such as paid internships.

Limited Student Time for Meaningful Program Exploration

Faculty and staff described program choice as a developmental process in which students often need time to meaningfully experience a program through coursework and work-based or applied learning in order to evaluate whether it is truly a good fit. However, facilitating such exploration on a short timeline is a challenge. Ideally, students spend two years or less completing degrees or certificates at community colleges, and, as noted above, some students may be on shorter timelines to increase their earnings. Thus, there is a fundamental tension between meaningful program exploration and the need to help students enter programs relatively quickly and complete degrees in a timely manner. According to some interviewees, the onus is on colleges to create the infrastructure to help students efficiently choose a program of study, without which students may spend unnecessary time trying to figure things out on their own:

So when we don't have that clear pathway for students or we're not making an effort to ensure that the students are aware of what's available to them and helping them make that selection, then what we're doing is—we're just letting students linger at the community college level until they figure it out on their own.

— Student affairs administrator

Additionally, while supports that are less time intensive, such as program and career fairs, can offer students critical exposure to programs and careers, they can't provide the types of in-depth experiences that may be most influential for students' decision-making. Moreover, it is often easier for colleges to showcase programs that have clear career pathways or that are delivered in facilities students can see and interact with (e.g., healthcare, culinary arts), while programs in arts and humanities may not lend themselves as easily to direct career connections or hands-on demonstrations.

Limited Number of Staff Involved in Program Choice

While interviewees observed that high-quality program exploration requires a range of support, from information exposure to more in-depth experiences, staff members at some colleges noted that only a few positions, such as advisors and onboarding staff, bear much of the responsibility for helping new students explore program options. Limited staffing and poorly delegated responsibilities were identified as a challenge:

I think we could do more, but the staffing [is problematic]. The college tends to pick on the same people who are doing a lot of stuff. It's like, "Well, okay, we can only do this much over here." It's put back on the same people. ... The whole college needs to contribute to helping [students].

— Program coordinator in an advising department

Some interviewees reported being overburdened from having to “wear many hats.” One staff member suggested that using AI tools to automate some services could help the college’s small career and transfer department reach more students:

I think the usage of AI a little bit more would be helpful, too. We have, what, 35,000 unduplicated students each year? Our career and transfer department is six people. So, you know, we need to automate and use technology in an ethical way as much as possible for us to be able to really get those touch points that we would want to have on students.

— Career services representative

Time Constraints on the Important Role Faculty Play

Faculty often have the most face-to-face contact with students, they represent the fields that students are interested in, and they can offer direct connections to employers as well as reflections on their own experiences in the field. Several faculty members provided examples of how they integrate discussions about careers into introductory courses. Some said that they share experiences from their own lives to encourage students’ interest and exploration of majors and career paths. One faculty member, who is also a newscaster, shared that they provide their students with first-hand “specific industry knowledge” that helps their students visualize what is possible for them:

I would say that the faculty-to-student relationship is probably the most important. I think what the faculty does is provide an example of what is possible in a specific career..

— Communications faculty member

Other faculty shared ways they consistently try to teach their students skills that will apply to them not only in the current class they are taking but in their careers as well:

I always try to stress to students: “You are not learning how to analyze a movie here. This is something to help you develop your analytical skills, right? And your analytical skills will be needed in your career, whatever that may be.” And I try to always ask students, “Envision you in your career. How would you use these analytical skills?” And so I’m personally trying to always connect what we’re doing in the classroom to what they might be doing.

— English faculty member

However, time constraints often limit faculty’s ability to support students’ programs and career exploration. Faculty members discussed having limited time to devote to teaching skills like interviewing and resume-building, attending professional development training sessions to stay current on the newest programs and career opportunities, and matching students with the right faculty members for guidance. Additionally, some faculty members have heavy workloads, competing deadlines, and other responsibilities that make it difficult for them to engage with their students more deeply.

Staying Informed About Shifting Labor Markets

Students often seek training for jobs in their community, so staying abreast of local employer demand is critical. Staff noted that students are interested in programs leading to jobs that are in demand in the area, and that they may be less likely to pursue programs without local employment opportunities. A career services staff member commented that some students will only explore

programs related to jobs in the local area and are unwilling or unable to venture further. Given how rapidly the labor market is evolving, however, it can be challenging for advisors and other staff to keep pace with current employment trends. Talking about how difficult it can be to stay up to date, one staff member said, “My biggest challenge is not knowing all the details of the opportunities for employment in all of the areas. That’s key [because] students want to be employed.” She referenced the expansion of a large technology company into a nearby city as an example, saying, “We offer amazing opportunities in that field. I would like to improve my knowledge of job opportunities so [students] can make an informed choice.”

Barriers to Scaling Work-Based Learning

As previously discussed, while many interviewees agreed about the value of work-based learning, they also noted that student participation in such activities is limited. Several interviewees suggested that more students would participate in internships if they were required, pointing to lack of awareness of such opportunities as a factor impeding students’ involvement. For example, one student services administrator commented, “Many students, particularly those nearing graduation, realize too late the benefits of internships, career services, and other resources.”

Merely mandating participation in internships, however, would not address the problem of colleges’ capacity to provide them. A career services staff member at a different college pointed to finances as a challenge for both students and the college, noting that many students cannot afford to participate in unpaid internships and that the college has limited funding to support paid internships: “One thing that gets brought up is paid and unpaid internships. Some students need the financial incentive. It’s really up to the employer; unfortunately, we don’t have the funding [to pay students].”

Conclusion: Implications for Supporting Program Choice

Faculty and staff perspectives on the program choice process point to a number of practices that can improve support for program and career exploration.

Raise awareness about the range of career opportunities within broad fields as well as the variety of settings and industries in which a specific occupation may be located. Our interviews suggest there is still work to be done to increase students’ awareness of the range of program and career opportunities available to them, especially in emerging and less common fields.

Increase support for the faculty’s role in program and career exploration. Given the importance of faculty-student relationships and classroom learning in the program choice process, it is critical to offer professional development to instructors related to program and career exploration and address workload concerns so that faculty feel equipped and available to offer guidance.

Provide professional development to keep faculty and staff informed about local labor market trends. Ensuring that the programs of study that students choose to enter and complete lead to living-wage jobs and a pathway for socioeconomic mobility is an integral part of the community college mission. To fulfill that mission, faculty and staff need access to training and current information about evolving regional labor market demands and especially local employment opportunities.

Expand opportunities for work-based learning. Confirming prior research findings, our interviews with faculty and staff indicate that work-based learning opportunities are often the most impactful but least accessible form of support.

To ensure that these practices reach all students, a systematic framework for organizing and scaling program and career exploration is needed. The Ask-Connect-Inspire-Plan (ACIP) framework views exploration not as a series of isolated practices but as an ongoing program onboarding experience that occurs throughout students' first year (Jenkins & Lahr, 2022). It provides a coherent structure for helping students learn about program options, choose a program that aligns with their interests and goals, and begin making progress in their program. The four main components of the framework include *asking* students about their aspirations and goals; *connecting* students to people, resources, and experiences in their field of interest; *inspiring* students from the start through engaging classes related to students' interests; and creating full-program educational *plans* that map out all of the courses students will need to complete based on their individual timeline (Jenkins et al., 2025). While the insights from the faculty and staff interviews are useful on their own, the practices highlighted by faculty and staff are likely more impactful if applied within the context of the ACIP framework.

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