Hana Lahr
Assistant Director of Research
Director of Applied Learning
CCRC

Veronica Minaya
Senior Research Associate
and Program Lead
CCRC

Rachel Baker
Associate Professor
University of Pennsylvania
Graduate School of Education

Serena Klempin
Senior Research Associate
CCRC

Estefanie Aguilar Padilla
PhD Student
University of Pennsylvania

Patrick Lavallee Delgado
PhD Student
University of Pennsylvania

Jeffrey Albrecht
Survey Specialist
University of Michigan

CCRC

Agenda

- Why we're studying program choice

- Data collection

- What we learned about how students make decisions about programs and careers

- How Lorain County Community College reimagining students' program onboarding experience

- Q&A

CCRC

Why We're Studying How Students Choose Programs and Careers

Students' Program Choices Matter

Students' employment and long-term earnings vary by field of study and type of award

Students are more likely to complete a credential if their program is aligned with interests and goals

Many new students end up enrolled in programs like Liberal/General Studies

CCRC

Questions Guiding Our Study

- How do students choose a program of study?
  - What factors and influences shape this decision?
  - What are the institutional practices and resources (people and programs) that are most helpful to students?
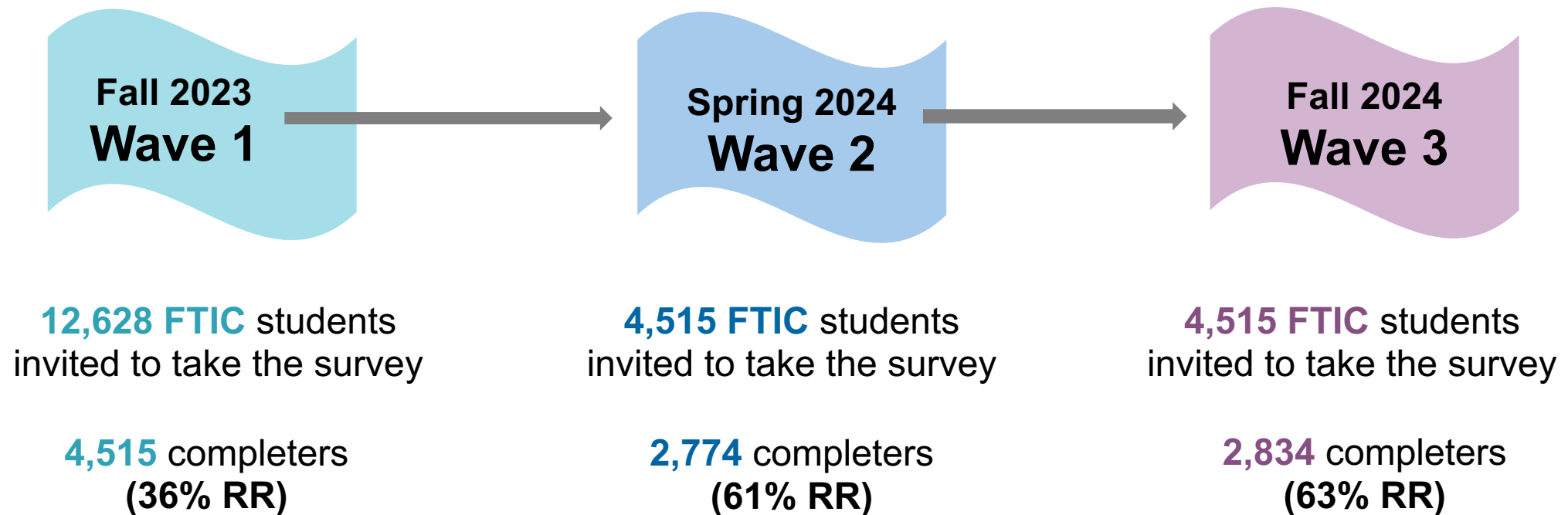- How do students' choices of programs change over time and what informs these evolving decisions?

CCRC

Data Collection
Included a Three-Wave Survey and Interviews with Faculty, Staff, and Students

Research Overview: Program Choice Survey

We administered our survey to **first-time-in-college students** at **four community colleges** in California, Maryland, Ohio, and Texas

Fall 2023
Wave 1

Spring 2024
Wave 2

Fall 2024
Wave 3

12,628 FTIC students invited to take the survey

4,515 completers
(36% RR)

4,515 FTIC students invited to take the survey

2,774 completers
(61% RR)

4,515 FTIC students invited to take the survey

2,834 completers
(63% RR)

CCRC

Survey Recruitment Strategies

	Fall 2023 **Wave 1**	Spring 2024 **Wave 2**	Fall 2024 **Wave 3**
Campus visits	188 classroom visits	Yes	--
Cards + prepayment	--	Yes	Yes
Email	9 emails	11 emails	8 emails
Text	1 text	3 texts	3 texts
Reminder calls	--	Up to 3 calls	Up to 6 calls
Token of appreciation	$25	$40	$40

CCRC

About the Program and Career Choices Survey

- **Survey topics (Waves 1 – 3)**
  - Students' educational and career goals
  - Program(s) students are considering and the factors that are most important when selecting a program
  - Experiences inside and outside the college informing students' program choice(s).
- **Wave 3 additions**
  - Experiences with peers, faculty, and advising in year 1
  - Questions for students who had left higher education since fall 2023 about their reasons for leaving

CCRC

Interviews with Faculty, Staff, and Students

Faculty and staff interviews

- 38 interviews in Fall 2024
- One-hour interviews over Zoom
- Directors of student services, advisors, special population program counselors, career services, intake specialists, faculty who teach first-year introductory courses

Student interviews

- 42 interviews in summer 2025
- One-hour interviews over Zoom
- Students who had completed all three waves of the survey

CCRC

Our Findings

Finding #1:

New students are considering multiple careers and programs of study in different fields upon college entry.

Most New College Students are Considering Multiple Careers

Number of selected careers or programs	Students who identified this many careers
One	10%
Two	14%
Three	65%
Four or more	9%

CCRC

Most New College Students are Considering Multiple Careers & Programs

Number of selected careers or programs	Students who identified this many <u>careers</u>	Students who identified this many <u>programs</u>
One	10%	21%
Two	14%	15%
Three	65%	61%
Four or more	9%	--

CCRC

38%

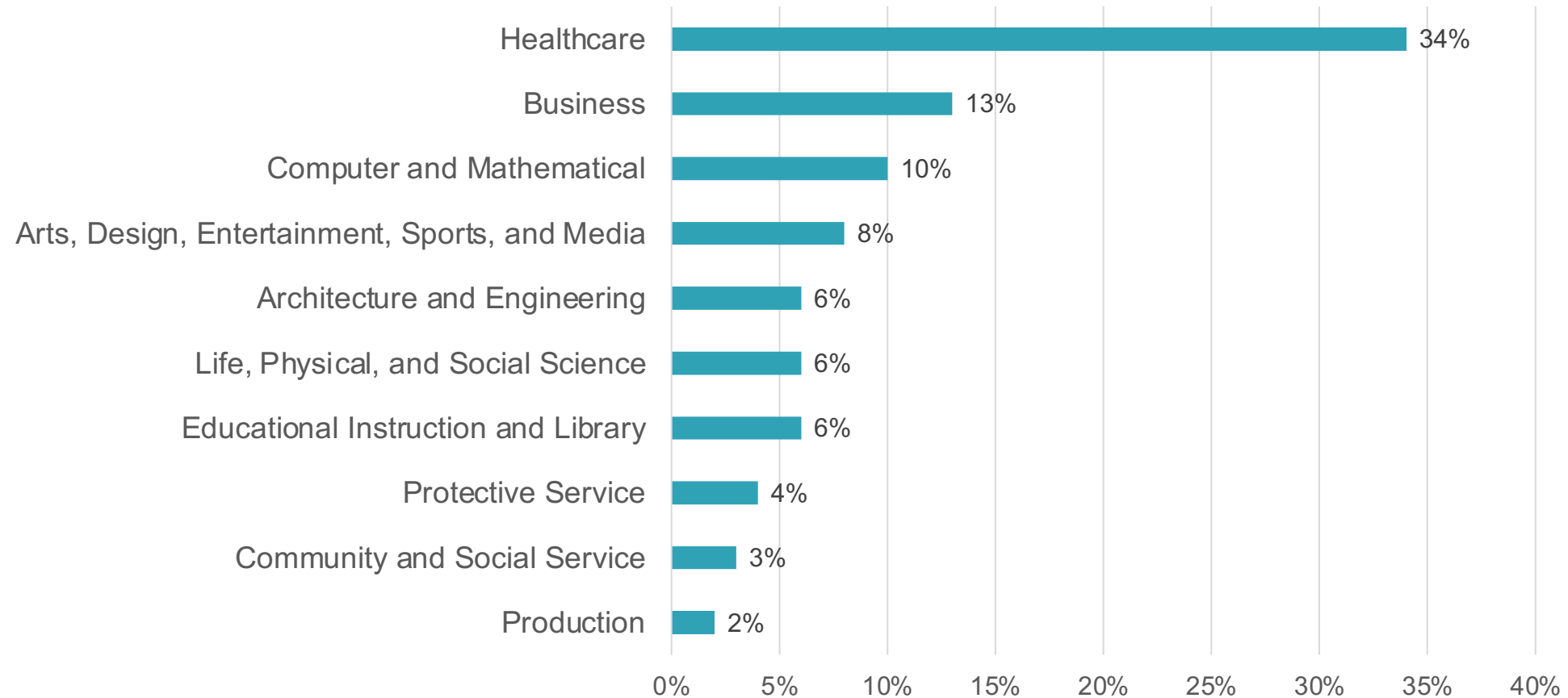Of students listed careers in **1 career cluster**

44%

Of students listed careers in **2 different career clusters**

18%

Of students listed careers in **3 different career clusters**

Most students are considering <u>careers</u> in different fields

CCRC

Students first choice careers by cluster
(top 10 career clusters)

Career Cluster	Percentage
Healthcare	34%
Business	13%
Computer and Mathematical	10%
Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media	8%
Architecture and Engineering	6%
Life, Physical, and Social Science	6%
Educational Instruction and Library	6%
Protective Service	4%
Community and Social Service	3%
Production	2%

CCRC

34%

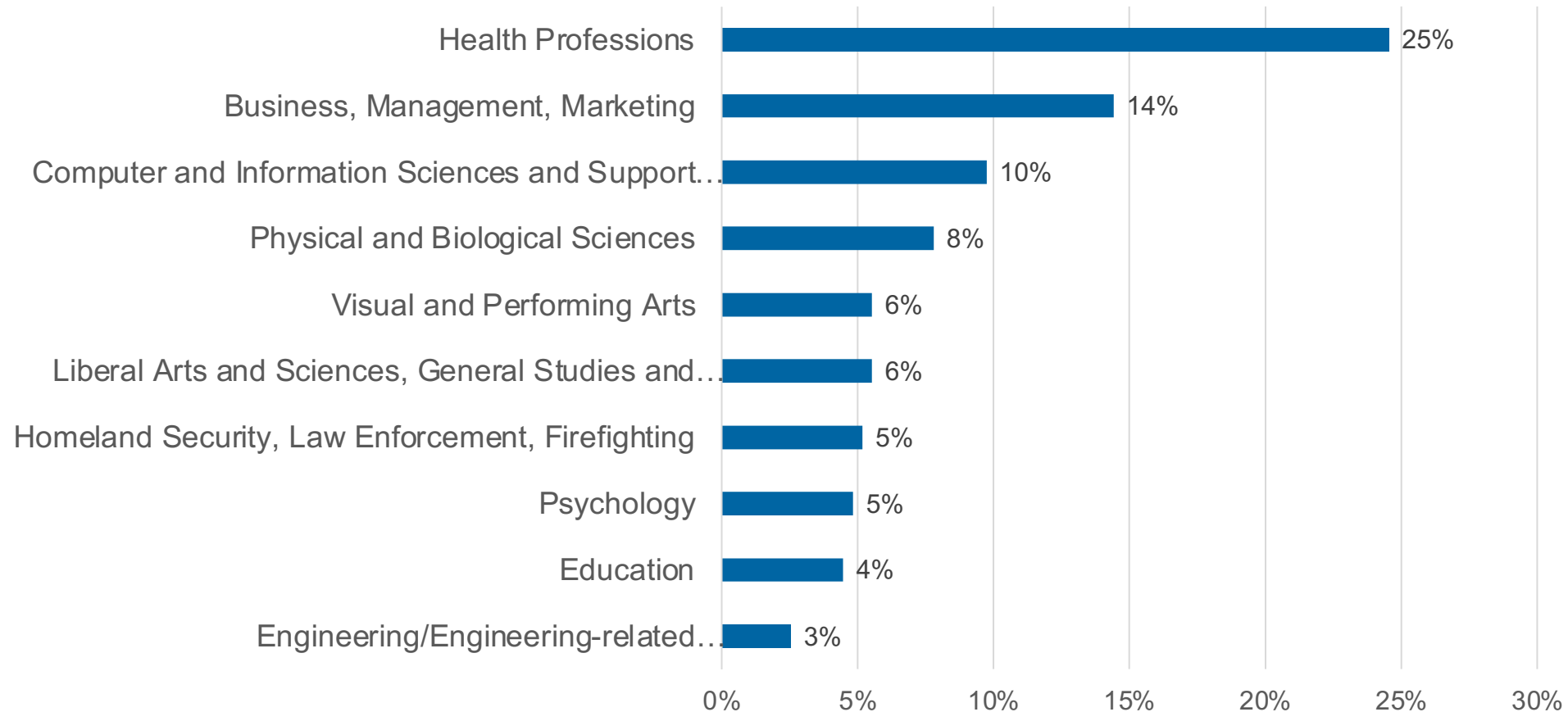Of students listed programs in **1 cluster**

43%

Of students listed programs in **2 different clusters**

23%

Of students listed programs in **3 different clusters**

Most students are considering <u>programs</u> in different fields of study

CCRC

Students first choice programs of study by cluster (top 10 program clusters)

Program Cluster	Percentage
Health Professions	25%
Business, Management, Marketing	14%
Computer and Information Sciences and Support…	10%
Physical and Biological Sciences	8%
Visual and Performing Arts	6%
Liberal Arts and Sciences, General Studies and…	6%
Homeland Security, Law Enforcement, Firefighting	5%
Psychology	5%
Education	4%
Engineering/Engineering-related…	3%

CCRC

In the first wave, we were able to code
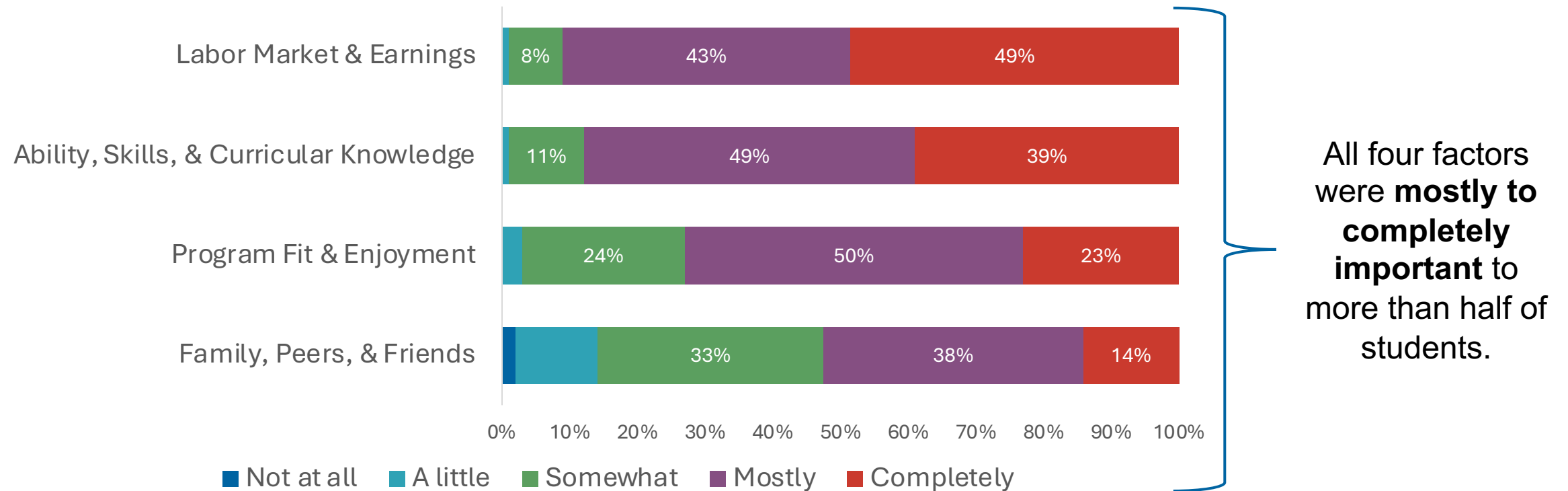
88%

of all career responses to a corresponding 8-digit O*NET code, indicating that most students had specific careers in mind.
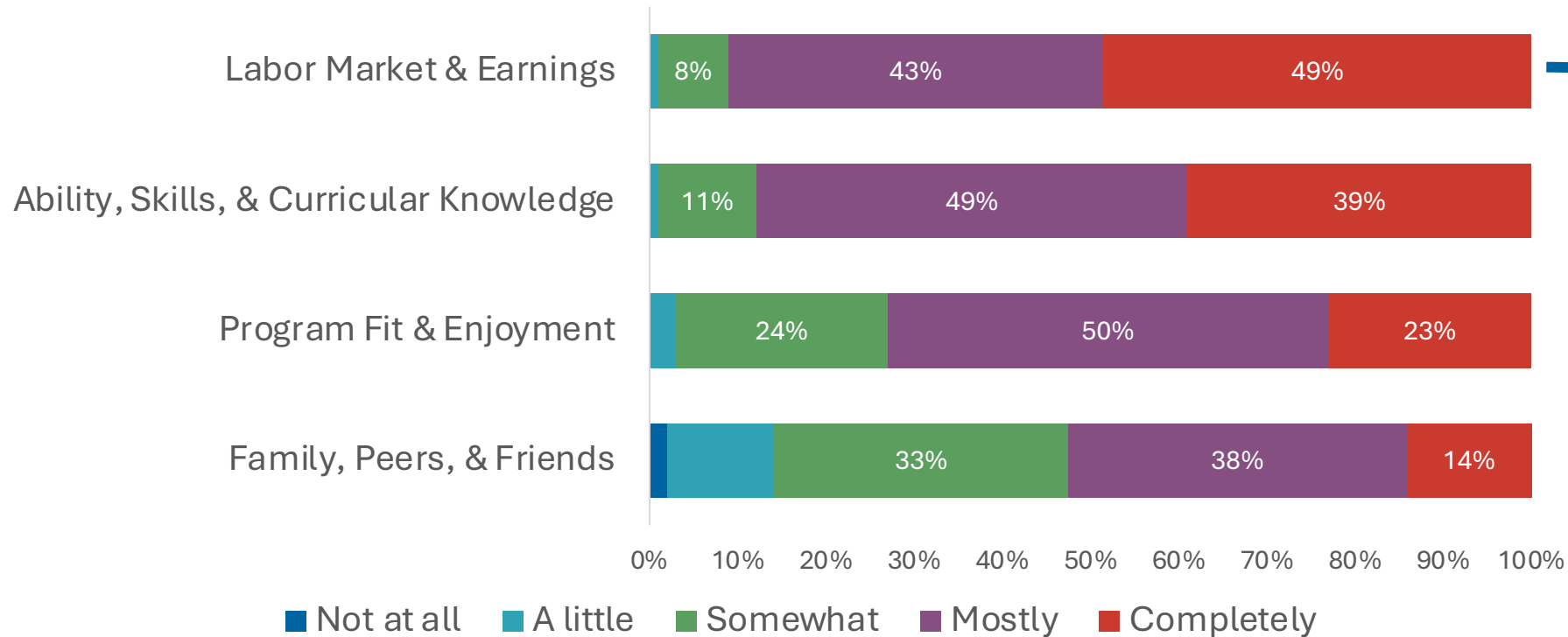
CCRC

Finding #2:

Students are balancing multiple competing pressures, but post-completion opportunities for employment are top of mind.

But Post-Completion Labor Market Opportunities are Most Important

	Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Mostly	Completely
Labor Market & Earnings			8%	43%	49%
Ability, Skills, & Curricular Knowledge			11%	49%	39%
Program Fit & Enjoyment			24%	50%	23%
Family, Peers, & Friends			33%	38%	14%

But **labor market opportunities and future earning potential** was mostly or completely important to 92% of students

CCRC

Faculty & staff perceptions of challenges students face in choosing a program

1 | Limited awareness of career options

2 | Misperceptions about job roles and career opportunities

3 | Misalignment between family expectations and personal interests

4 | Financial constraints that prioritize immediate needs

CCRC

Finding #3:

Students are expressing high levels of certainty, but this may be masking more mixed feelings students have about programs they may pursue

53% of surveyed students said that they were **"very certain"** about their first-choice program

31% of surveyed students said that they were **"somewhat certain"** about their first-choice program

CCRC

Half of students we interviewed changed their initial program of study

- Being able to see viable career options and earnings opportunities is important to students
- Taking classes in their area of interest and learning more about the field and potential outcomes either confirmed their interest or led them to change their program
- Reasons not related to their own interests or career outcomes (e.g. original program wouldn't transfer, not accepted into selective admission health programs) can cause students to change

CCRC

Finding #4:

There are opportunities to increase students' use of various career and program supports to help students explore and plan – and when necessary - rethink programs and careers choices

Faculty and Staff Discussed Many Supports To Help Students Choose Programs

We identified 3 types of support:

Information Exposure

Interactive Exploration

Direct Experience

CCRC

Faculty and Staff Discussed Many Supports To Help Students Choose Programs

Most impactful supports:

1. Advising
2. Career exploration in FYE courses
3. Taking inspiring courses
4. Connections with faculty
5. Experiential learning

Interviewees noted that **student awareness and use of these resources were low**

CCRC

Welcome, Marisa!

Marisa Vernon White

Vice President for Enrollment
Management and Student Services
**Lorain County Community
College**

CCRC

How Lorain County Community College is Helping Students Choose Programs and Careers

Guiding Principles
Est. 2022

All students have a career support system such as a mentor or learning community of peers (via learning communities, co-curriculars, faculty, etc)

All students can identify a path to career, economic, and social mobility and how their chosen pathway will get them there

All students become familiar with the areas of high opportunity in the region

All students see themselves as transfer students despite their own unique timelines

All students are making *informed* academic and career path decisions based on:

- Recognition of strengths/ interests, careers and life goals alignment
- Full understanding of how credentials stack in their chosen field
- High quality and high impact forms of experiential learning
- Understand how general education and courses within programs align to career skills
- The application of skill sets within a given work context
- Their own personal/ family geographic mobility

Creating Dialogue:
Applying the CCRC Study Findings

LCCC faculty and staff **reviewed and discussed the findings** in the September 2025 Career by Design Committee meeting.

Focused on these *high-level findings:*

1. **Building an understanding of 3 categories of "services and programs":** *informative, interactive, direct experience* (these will be used in the next meeting to categorize what we are doing with target populations of students)
2. **Perception gaps/ disconnects:** Between what we think students are experiencing vs what they actually experience
3. **Snapshot of findings across 3 distinct areas:** Education/ Career Goals, Decision-Making, and Program-Career Alignment

Lorain County Community College

Takeaways and Discussion

- "Decided vs undecided" is not nuanced enough to account for how community college students think about their programs & careers
- Most students are considering multiple careers & fields of study
- Students say they have what they need to make a good decision…but is this true? Can we be doing more, or doing it differently?
- While others (family/ friends) are important in the decision to go to college, they are less influential in making career decisions (as reported by students)
- Conversations about career/ program choice should also include "why"
- Further integration of career into academic- and non-academic services would likely be beneficial in gaining capacity for a collegewide approach to career

> "What is one thing **you** hope to gain this year [through engaging with Career by Design work] that will help you better serve students in **your current role** at LCCC?"

Responses reflected 4 categories of needs/ knowledge to do this work well:

Enhanced understanding of student needs/ readiness.
- Better understanding of where students are in their decision-making/ planning to improve messaging and communication
- How students think about long-term career adaptability
- More knowledge of student perspectives to better inform support strategies

Improved systems and processes for students.
- Clarity on roles to support students on career planning
- Understanding how financial aid can support career goals
- Mapping work-based learning options to match students
- Comprehensive understanding of key programs, like SDEV and Bridges, and how they are preparing students for career choice

Strong tools to direct student service.
- Current employment data and market alignment
- Up-to-date information about the actual landscape, given changes (i.e. IT pathways)
- Creative messaging and support materials for unknown areas of high opportunity
- Clear articulation of stacking to help make informed choices

Stronger connection to student opportunities.
- Direct connection between programs and employers
- Further integration of Career Services into academic programs and pathways
- Strategies to help students from all background build professional networks

A Few Takeaways From Our Research

- Students often enter college with many interests
  - Is your college accurately capturing the range of students' interests?
  - Are exploratory students defaulted into specific majors (e.g., liberal studies) ?
- New students may seem certain about their program interests but is this the whole story?
  - At what point is anyone asking students about programs of study they are considering?
  - Does the conversation allow for uncertainty and exploration?
- Many factors play into students' program choices. How is your college helping students untangle this complex choice?

CCRC

What's Next?

- Analyzing data from fall 2023 through fall 2024 to examine how student program and career choices evolve and what factors contribute to these changes

- Fourth and fifth waves of the survey in spring 2026 and 2027

  - Including specific sets of questions for students who transferred, students who are working, and students who left higher education

- What do you want to know? Let us know!

CCRC

Thanks!

Hana Lahr | lahr@tc.edu

Veronica Minaya | vmm2122@tc.columbia.edu

Rachel Baker | rbbaker@gse.upenn.edu

For more information visit **https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/**

CCRC

Subscribe our mailing list and follow us for more news and updates!

✉ ccrc@columbia.edu

f CommunityCCRC

▶ CommunityCollegeResearchCenter

🐦 CommunityCCRC

CCRC