

# How New Community College Students Think About Programs of Study and Potential Careers

Hana Lahr | Veronica Minaya | Rachel Baker | Marisa Vernon White





**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**

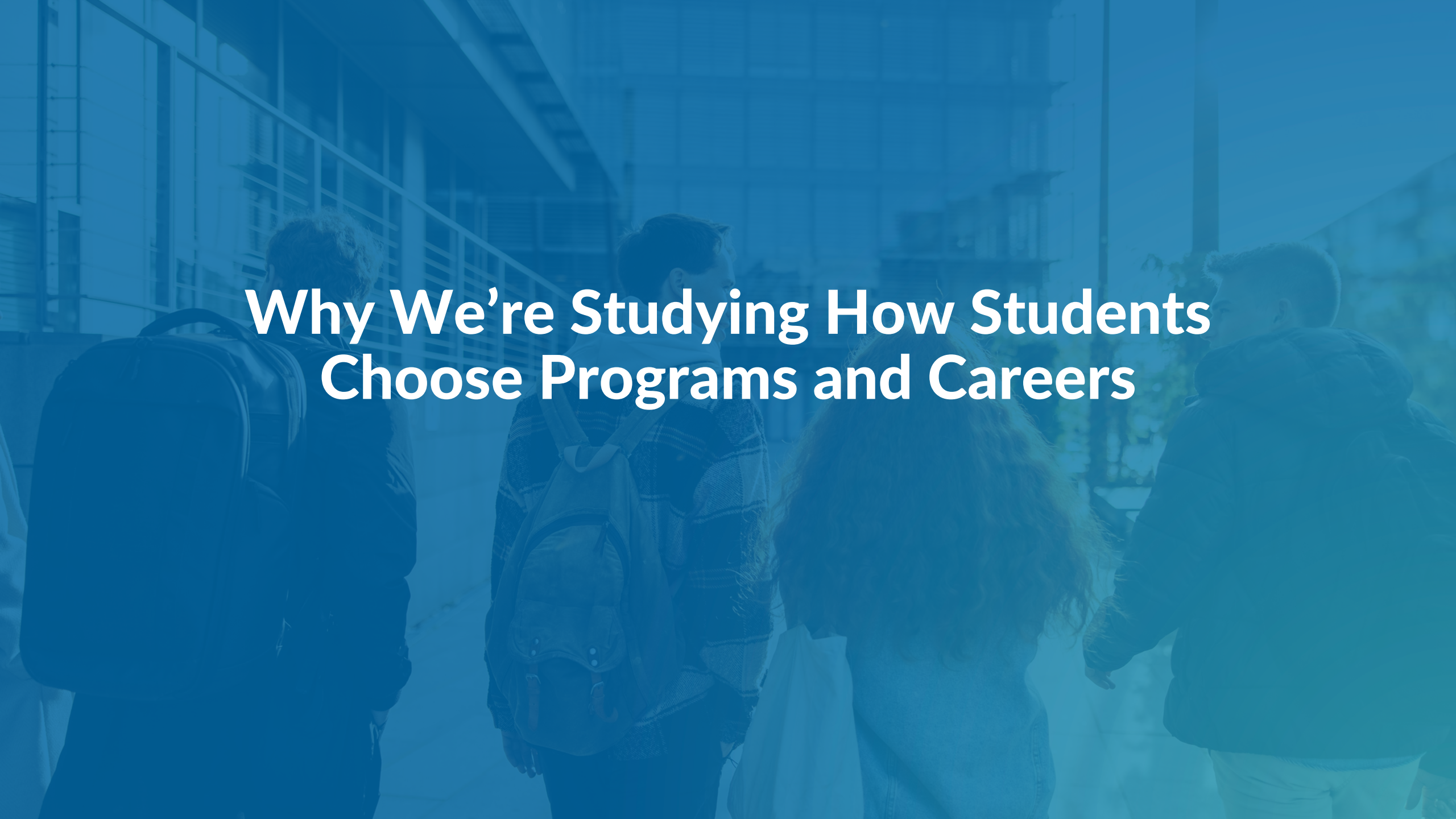
Survey Specialist  
**University of Michigan**

**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



A blue-tinted photograph of four students walking away from the camera on a paved path. The student on the far left is a man with a large backpack. Next to him is another man with a backpack. Then a woman with long, curly hair carrying a white bag. On the far right is a man in a dark jacket. In the background, there are modern buildings with large windows and a staircase on the left.

# 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

# 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?



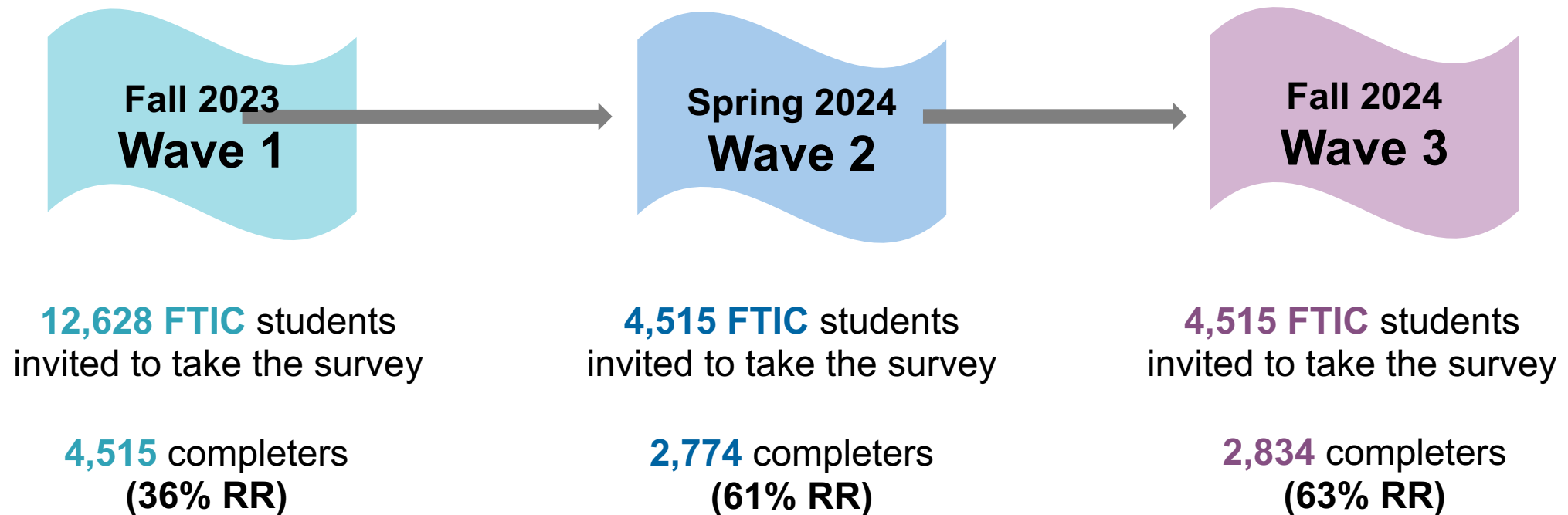
# Data Collection

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



# Survey Recruitment Strategies

|                       | Fall 2023<br>Wave 1  | Spring 2024<br>Wave 2 | Fall 2024<br>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                |

# 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



# 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

The background of the slide is a dense, repeating pattern of 3D cubes. The cubes are in various shades of blue and teal, creating a textured, isometric effect. They are arranged in a grid-like fashion, with some cubes appearing slightly more prominent than others due to perspective.

# 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 <u>careers</u> |
|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| One                                    | 10%                                              |
| Two                                    | 14%                                              |
| Three                                  | 65%                                              |
| Four or more                           | 9%                                               |

Source: Lahr et al., (2025). *How Do Incoming Community College Students Think About Programs of Study and Potential Careers?*  
<https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/community-college-students-program-study-career.html>



# 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%                                               | --                                                |

Source: Lahr et al., (2025). *How Do Incoming Community College Students Think About Programs of Study and Potential Careers?*  
<https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/community-college-students-program-study-career.html>

38%

Of students listed careers in 1 career cluster

44%

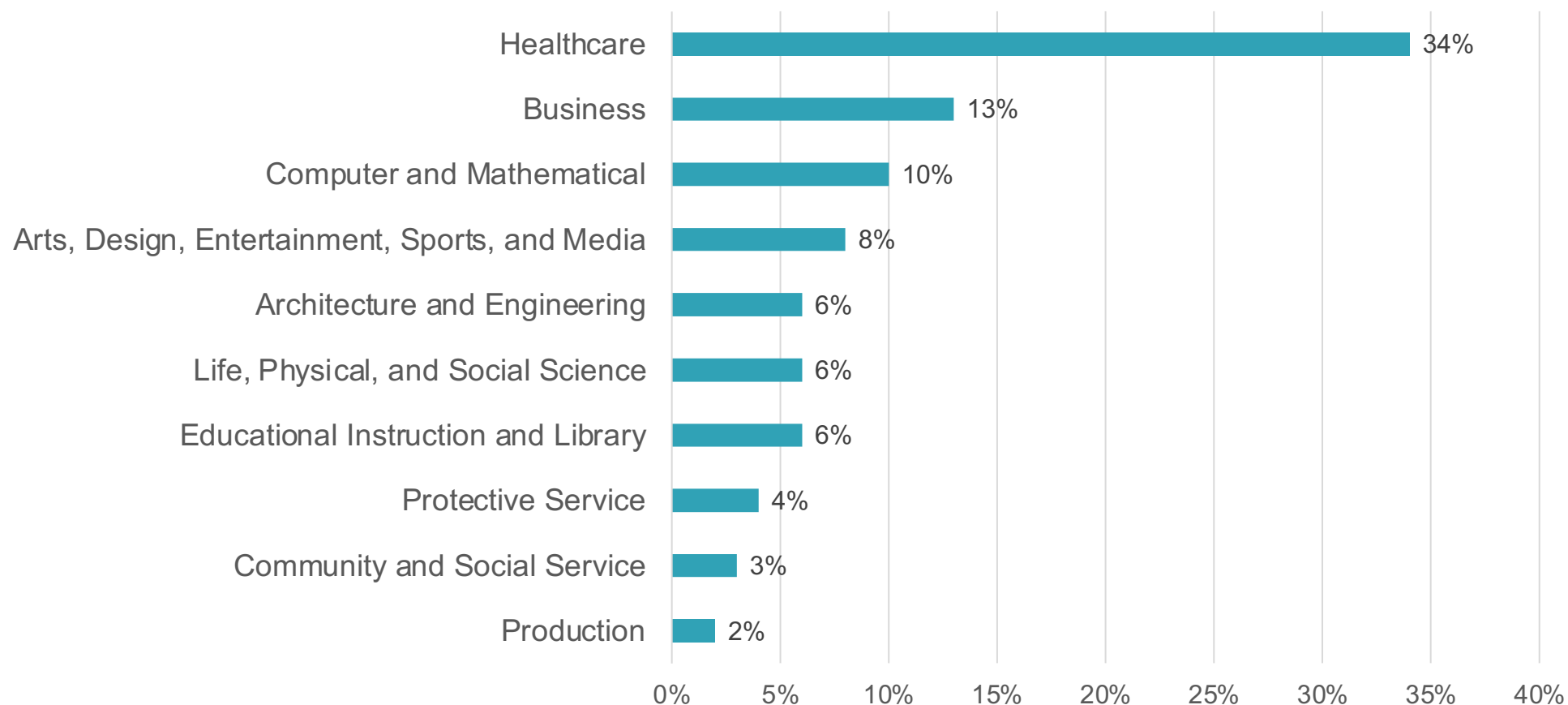
Of students listed careers in 2 different career clusters

18%

Of students listed careers in 3 different career clusters

Most students are  
considering careers  
in different fields

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



Source:

34%

Of students listed programs in 1 cluster

43%

Of students listed programs in 2 different clusters

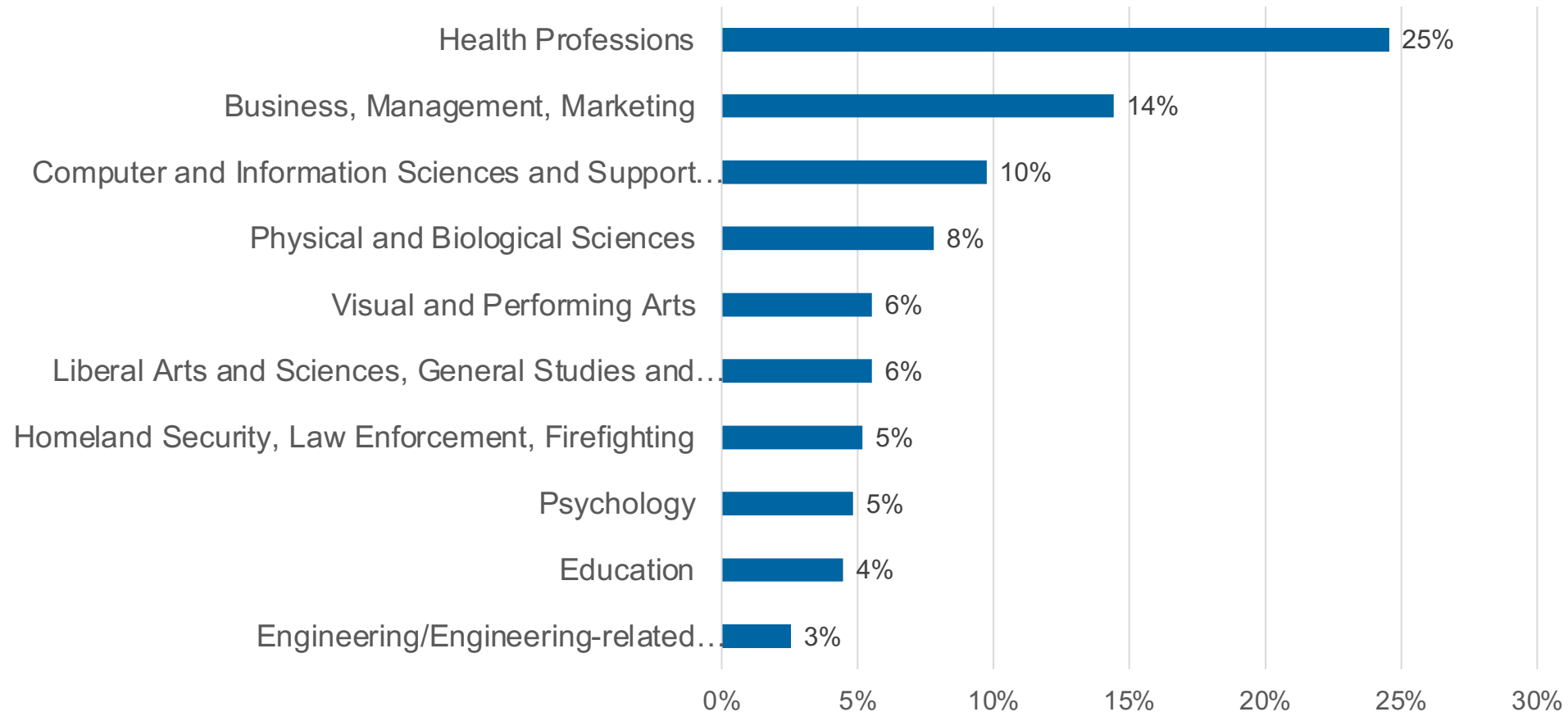
23%

Of students listed programs in 3 different clusters

Most students are  
considering programs  
in different fields of  
study



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



Source:

In the first wave, we were able to code

**88%**

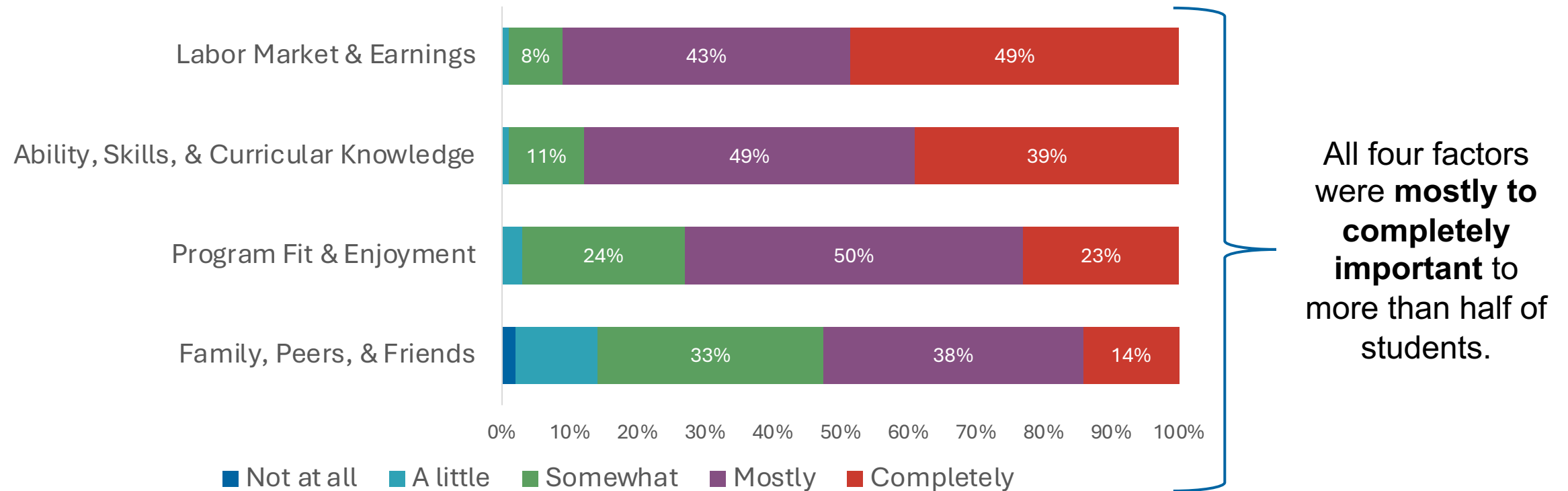
of all career responses to a corresponding 8-digit O\*NET code, indicating that most students had specific careers in mind.

## Finding #2:

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



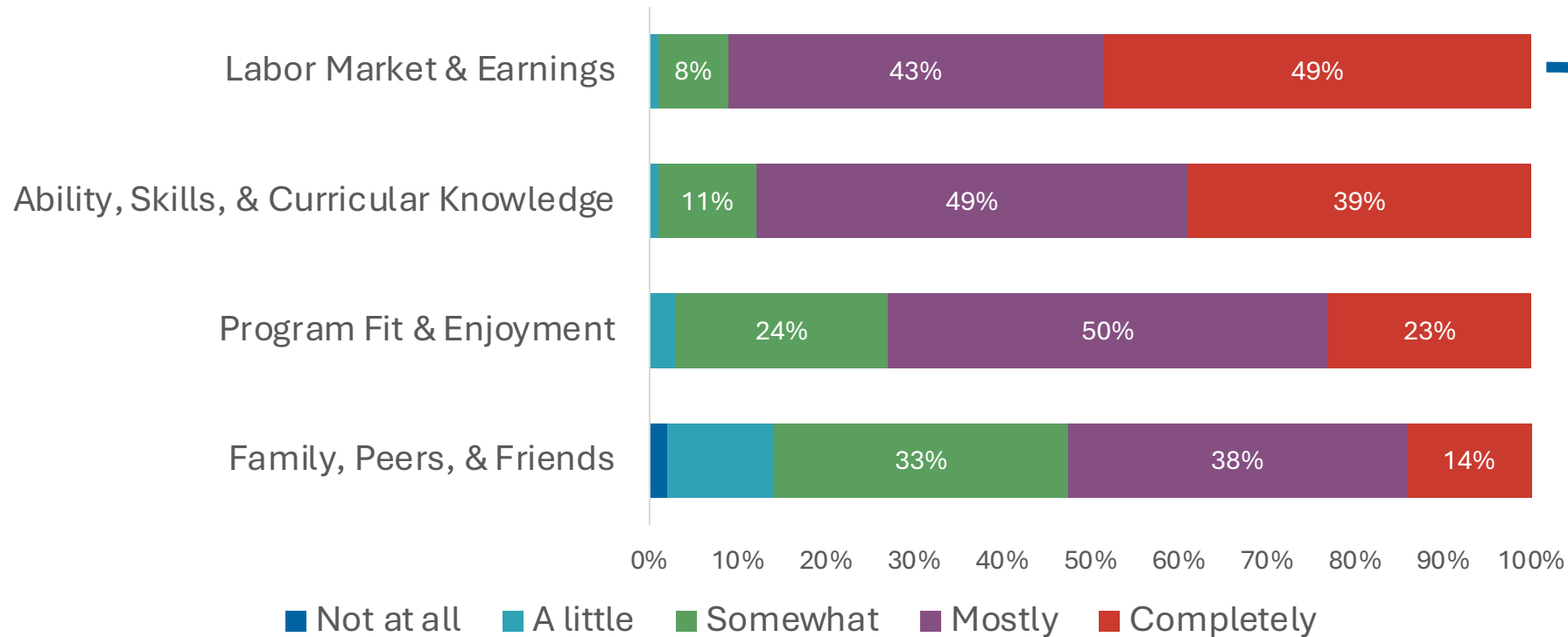
# Multiple Factors Are Important to Students When Choosing a Program of Study



Source:



# But Post-Completion Labor Market Opportunities are Most Important



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

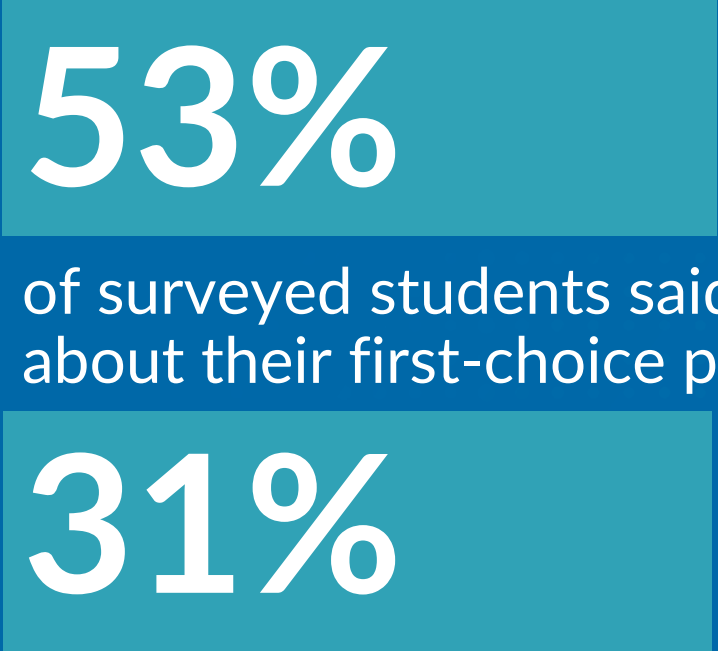
# Faculty & staff perceptions of challenges students face in choosing a program

- 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

## 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



# 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

## 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

# 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**



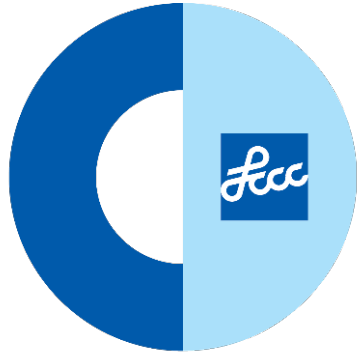
# Welcome, Marisa!



**Marisa Vernon White**

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

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



career by design

## Guiding Principles

Est. 2022



Lorain County  
Community College

**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

# 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

# Q&A

# 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?

# 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!

# Thanks!

Hana Lahr | [lahr@tc.edu](mailto:lahr@tc.edu)

Veronica Minaya | [vmm2122@tc.columbia.edu](mailto:vmm2122@tc.columbia.edu)

Rachel Baker | [rbbaker@gse.upenn.edu](mailto: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](mailto:ccrc@columbia.edu)



CommunityCCRC



CommunityCollegeResearchCenter



CommunityCCRC

**CCRC**