

# Selecting a Program of Study: How Certain Are Community College Students About Their Choice and Does It Change?

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Choosing a program of study is one of the most important decisions community college students make, one that defines the college experience and lays a foundation for future career trajectories. Making the choice is not always easy. Many students are unsure about it (Baker, 2018; Schudde et al., 2020), and many will change programs at some point during their time in college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Part of the difficulty is the sheer number of options—well more than 100<sup>1</sup> at many colleges—that students are asked to select from when they apply. Some of these programs are organized within the same area yet lead to different credentials—including certificates, applied associate degrees, and associate degrees for transfer. This means that, to make an informed choice, students must not only have a good sense of what academic and career topics appeal to them but also have a clear understanding of how the program for each type of credential involves different course requirements and time commitments, and how each one may lead to very different opportunities for employment or further education once they complete it.

Program choice—and the strength and certainty of that decision—can have lasting effects on students' educational progress, career path, and financial security. Students who are enrolled in programs that reflect their interests are more likely to persist and complete (Allen & Robbins, 2010). And students who are unsure about choosing a program are more likely to be encouraged by college personnel to enroll in a general or exploratory degree program, which often leads to weak transfer and labor market outcomes (Jenkins, Fink, & Velasco, 2025; Jepsen et al., 2014; Stevens et al., 2019).

Based primarily on interviews that took place in summer 2025 with students who first enrolled at one of four community colleges in fall 2023, this report examines the program choice process for these students and how they felt about it. The 42 students we interviewed for the study also completed three waves of a longitudinal survey about their educational and career goals, the programs they were interested in pursuing, and what supports they received to help them select a program.

## About This Research Project

This report describes findings from a study that is part of a larger project exploring how first-time-in-college students learn about and choose programs of study. The project uses a three-wave student survey; student transcript data; and student, faculty, and staff interviews to better understand students' decision-making about programs of study over time. The project takes place at four community colleges in California, Maryland, Ohio, and Texas.

After describing the student sample and methods used in the study, this report presents program enrollment information for the 42 interviewees. It then discusses how certain these students felt about their initial program choice and the factors that contributed to their feelings of certainty. Although many interviewees expressed high levels of certainty about their program choices, half changed programs at least once between fall 2023 and summer 2025, and some reported that their feelings of certainty fluctuated over time. Based on the study findings, the report concludes with recommendations on how community colleges can better support students in choosing a program.

## Study Sample and Methods

This study is based largely on interviews with first-time-in-college students who enrolled in fall 2023 in one of four community colleges located in California, Maryland, Ohio, and Texas. The colleges include one urban, two suburban, and one rural college. Two of the colleges are Hispanic Serving Institutions, and one is a Predominantly Black Institution. In fall 2023, we administered the first wave of a longitudinal survey about program and career decision-making to 12,628 incoming students at these colleges. The 4,515 students who responded were also invited to complete a second and third wave of the survey in spring 2024 and fall 2024 respectively.

### Interview Sample

In summer 2025, we randomly selected 307 students from a pool of 2,571 who completed all three waves of the survey to participate in qualitative interviews to further explore their decision-making process around programs and careers and how their choice of program evolved over time. Out of the 307 students, 65 responded to our email and 42 completed an interview with our team. We oversampled at two of the four colleges, which were smaller institutions located in California and Ohio. Among the 42 interviews, 12 were conducted with students from California, 8 from Ohio, 11 from Maryland, and 11 from Texas.

Among interviewed students, female and male students were equally represented (48% each). The sample was racially/ethnically diverse, with over half of the interviewees identifying as Hispanic (54%) and about 21% identifying as Black. Finally, for students who supplied information about their parents' educational attainment, the majority had at least one parent who had attended college (70%).

## Interview Protocol

We conducted individual, online, semi-structured interviews with students that lasted 30–60 minutes. The interview protocol we used was designed to elicit additional insight on answers that emerged from the first wave of the survey. In particular, the interviews explored a seeming disconnect in survey responses regarding students' level of certainty about their program choice and the number and variety of programs they were considering. Although surveyed students reported feeling confident about their program choice, the majority also reported that they were still considering more than one program option, very often in different program areas (Lahr et al., 2025).<sup>2</sup>

## Findings: College and Program Enrollment and Program Choice Certainty

### College Enrollment Status of Interviewees

All 42 interviewees first enrolled in college in fall 2023. At the time of the interviews (summer 2025), 24 were still enrolled, three had transferred and were attending a four-year institution, eight had completed or were on track to complete their programs by the end of the summer 2025 term with plans to transfer in fall 2025, five had completed their programs with no plans for transfer, and two had stopped out.

### Initial Program Choices of Students and How They Changed

We organize students' program choices into program clusters, where each cluster represents a single two-digit Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) code.<sup>3</sup> The most common clusters in which students initially enrolled were health professions and related programs (six students), computer and information sciences and support services (five), multi-/interdisciplinary studies (five), and business, management, marketing, and related support services (four).

Of the 42 students in the interview sample, half (21) remained in the same program from their initial enrollment in fall 2023 until the time of the interviews in summer 2025. Among the other half of students who changed programs, nearly all (18) changed to a program in a different cluster (two-digit CIP code).<sup>4</sup> Among the three who changed to a program within the same program cluster, two switched to a different health program after failing to be accepted in a limited-access health program.<sup>5</sup> Among the students who changed program clusters, the most common program clusters to which they changed included health professions and related programs (three students); liberal arts and sciences, general studies, and humanities (three); and psychology (three).

**Table 1. Initial and Current Program Enrollment Cluster Among Interviewees**

| CIP code / program cluster                                        | Initial choice<br>(fall 2023) | Current choice<br>(summer 2025) |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 03. Natural resources and conservation                            | 1                             | 0                               |
| 09. Communication, journalism, and related programs               | 1                             | 0                               |
| 11. Computer and info sciences and support services               | 5                             | 4                               |
| 13. Education                                                     | 0                             | 2                               |
| 14. Engineering                                                   | 3                             | 3                               |
| 15. Engineering technologies/technicians                          | 1                             | 0                               |
| 23. English language and literature/letters                       | 2                             | 2                               |
| 24. Liberal arts and sciences, general studies and humanities     | 3                             | 5                               |
| 26. Biological and biomedical sciences                            | 3                             | 3                               |
| 27. Mathematics & statistics                                      | 0                             | 1                               |
| 30. Multi/interdisciplinary studies                               | 5                             | 4                               |
| 41. Science technologies / technicians                            | 0                             | 1                               |
| 42. Psychology                                                    | 1                             | 4 <sup>a</sup>                  |
| 44. Public administration and social service professions          | 1                             | 1                               |
| 45. Social sciences                                               | 2                             | 2 <sup>a</sup>                  |
| 48. Precision production                                          | 1                             | 0                               |
| 50. Visual and performing arts                                    | 3                             | 3                               |
| 51. Health professions and related clinical sciences              | 6                             | 6                               |
| 52. Business, management, marketing, and related support services | 4                             | 2                               |

<sup>a</sup>The current choice of one student double-majoring in psychology and social sciences is counted in both program clusters.

## How Certain Students Felt About Their Program Choices

Overall, interviewees expressed high levels of certainty about their program choices, both when asked to reflect on their initial choice in fall 2023 and when asked about their current level of certainty at the time of the interviews in summer 2025. This was true among students who stayed in the same program the entire time as well as among students who changed programs.

Table 2. Certainty About Initial and Current Program Choice

| Change in level           | Percent | Description                                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------------|---------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Remained certain          | 48%     | Nearly half of students (20) appeared to be very certain at both time points, including 12 students who did not change their program and 8 who did.        |
| Became more certain       | 38%     | Another 16 students, including 7 who did not change their program and 9 who did, became more certain over time.                                            |
| Remained somewhat certain | 7%      | Three students were somewhat but not entirely certain at both time points, including 2 who did not change their program and 1 who did.                     |
| Became less certain       | 2%      | One student started off seeming very certain about their program but was slightly less certain at the time of the interview after having changed programs. |
| Remained uncertain        | 5%      | Only 2 students (both of whom changed programs) appeared to be very uncertain at both time points.                                                         |

## Findings: Influences on Program Choice and Program Choice Certainty

A variety of factors can influence which program students choose and how certain they feel about their choice, including students’ perceptions of the following: their talents and skills, program fit and enjoyment, what family and peers think, and expected labor market and earnings outcomes. In addition, experiences over time, both within and outside of college, may shape students’ thinking. The interviews we conducted shed light on what factors affect decision-making and contribute to students’ feelings of certainty about their choice.

### Students Who Started and Remained Certain About Their Program

In total, 12 interviewees who did not change their program said that they were very certain about their choice both initially and at the time of the interviews. Students who felt very certain about their program choice throughout the duration of the study period tended to have longstanding interests that influenced their choice and tended to value program fit and enjoyment. They also had positive experiences during college that reinforced their interests and commitment to their program. These experiences included receiving support from friends and family, enjoying program courses, feeling increased self-confidence after successfully completing program courses, and identifying a path from their program to career opportunities. Overall, they appear

to have had limited interactions with college supports for program choice, likely because they had a good idea of what they wanted to do when they started and their college experiences helped confirm their decision.

Personal interests supported by positive classroom experiences can have a strong impact on students' program choice. One of our interviewees named Ana,<sup>6</sup> a behavioral science major, had a lifelong interest in psychology rooted in personal experience and a desire to understand more about how mental illness affected her grandmother. The psychology classes she took helped affirm her choice—the more she learned, the more certain she felt that behavioral science was a good choice for her. Because she already knew what program she wanted to pursue when she started college, she never reached out to staff about her decision. However, she did feel like support would have been available if she had needed it. At the time of her interview, she was planning to graduate with her associate degree in fall 2025. While she was still exploring career options, Ana was most interested in starting her own business to support survivors of domestic violence.

Like Ana, Juan, an engineering major, strongly valued program fit and enjoyment. However, he started out with a more general interest in wanting to do “something with my hands that would also let me use my brain.” He found a way to channel that interest when he took an engineering class in high school. When asked how certain he initially felt about choosing engineering as his program of study in college, he replied that he had felt pretty certain about wanting to study engineering “since the day I learned about what engineering is.” Although he thought the associated math classes were difficult, he was willing to stick with them because of how much he enjoyed the program overall. He also received additional encouragement from seeing that engineering would allow him to pursue careers that interested him. From talking with his father and his father's friend, he learned that electricians and HVAC workers were in high demand locally. Although Juan was not sure how long it would take him to complete his engineering degree, he was confident that he would. He felt like he needed to take a break, so he did not take any classes during the spring 2025 term. He was planning to enroll in classes for the fall 2025 term.

## Students Who Changed Programs and Felt Certain About Both Choices

Eight interviewees changed programs but said they felt certain about both their initial program choice and the program in which they were enrolled at the time of the interviews. These students started college with a clear interest, and they strongly valued program fit and enjoyment. However, at some point something changed—they learned they did not enjoy the program as much as they thought they would, they were struggling academically in program courses, or they became concerned about employment opportunities. While several of these students found a different way of pursuing their original interest, others developed a new interest or opted to pursue another existing interest. Advisors appeared to play a larger role in supporting these students than in supporting those who remained certain and did not change programs, primarily because the students who changed programs looked for assistance in doing so.

After participating in a certified nursing assistant program in high school and observing nurses working in a hospital, Mary was inspired to become a nurse herself. She initially enrolled in health sciences, but after failing anatomy and physiology twice was unable to apply to the nursing program. The health sciences advisor helped her select the medical assistant program as an

alternative pathway in the health field and figure out which classes to take. Mary felt confident she would complete the medical assistant program and was planning to graduate in spring 2026. She hoped to work in a hospital after graduating and then pursue a bachelor's in nursing. Although she felt optimistic about the new route to becoming a nurse, she wished that the college had provided more information from the start about the requirements for the nursing program, including prerequisites, the number of times core classes can be attempted, and GPA minimums.

Laura had wanted to become a veterinarian for as long as she could remember. Because her college does not offer a veterinary program, an advisor recommended health and science as a program offering relevant coursework that would transfer to another college. Laura found the health and science classes to be challenging, however, and became stressed and discouraged. After a friend who was enrolled in the early childhood education program at the college and was working at a day care center referred her for a job at the same day care center, Laura took the job and decided to switch to early childhood education as well. She loved working at the day care center and said that she always had early childhood in mind as a second choice. She also appreciated that her family and friends were supportive of the change; they let her know that they wanted her to be happy and not stressed all the time. The advisor for the early childhood education program helped her understand which of the classes that she had already taken would fulfill requirements for early childhood. At the time of her interview, Laura was on track to graduate in spring 2026 with the goal of becoming an elementary school teacher.

## Students Who Became More Certain Over Time

Sixteen interviewees who started college feeling either less sure about what they wanted to do or unclear about which programs would be a good fit for their interests became more certain about their initial program or new program over time. Seven of the 16 students stayed in the same program, and nine changed programs. Capturing the sentiments expressed by several students, one described how she felt about her initial program choice (natural science with the goal of becoming an aesthetic nurse) by saying she didn't know if this was something she would want to do for the rest of her life but that "you have to do something." For both students who remained in the same program and those who changed programs, finding a program with coursework they enjoyed and being able to see a viable pathway to a career from a subject they were interested in were instrumental in increasing certainty about their program. Students who changed programs tended to choose their initial program based on external factors such as familial influence or perceived earnings potential and then switch to a program more aligned with their interests.

Initially, Emilio was "not totally sure" about selecting English, but he had enjoyed his English classes in high school and thought the major would set him up well for transferring, pursuing a bachelor's degree, and possibly becoming an English teacher. As he made progress in the program and discovered how much he liked the courses, he became more confident about his choice. By his last semester, he felt "for sure, for sure" about it. At the time of his interview, he had already transferred to a four-year university and was majoring in English with the intent of applying to law school and becoming a lawyer. Although he described the general advising he received at the community college as being not very helpful, the career advisor at the four-year university helped him develop a clearer sense of what he wanted to do with an English degree and led him to change his career plans.

Before starting college, Luke had been working for a real estate company. He enrolled in a short-term real estate certificate program to obtain a license that would allow him to become



a property manager. He wasn't completely sure about the program, but thought it would provide a good opportunity for him to advance in the company. However, the company was not supportive, and, after learning more about the process of selling houses in his classes, he realized he did not want to continue in real estate. From there, he enrolled in a construction engineering class because he also had experience working in construction. After a semester, though, he felt like—even if he could earn a good salary—he would never be happy or feel like the work was worthwhile. At that point, his wife reminded him that he had previously enjoyed working for a prison and told him about someone she knew who was a social worker in a prison. The idea of being able to draw upon his prior experience and of helping people through direct service appealed to him. He noted that he enjoys talking with people and feels like people are comfortable opening up to him. When he switched to the social work program, he said that “it felt natural to me; it felt like where I should have been all along.” At the time of his interview, Luke was planning to spend one or two more semesters at the community college and then transfer to a four-year university in either spring or summer of 2026 to pursue a bachelor's in social work. His goal is to secure a job as a social worker in a local correctional facility.

## Students Who Never Felt Completely Certain

Students who remained only somewhat certain about their program choice throughout (two who stayed in the same program and one who changed programs) began college in a position similar to the group of students who became more certain over time. They had general ideas about their interests but lacked a clear sense of purpose. One had a difficult time choosing among multiple interests, another selected a program based on what peers in high school were doing, and the third was persuaded by family members to change programs. Unlike students who became more certain, after two years the somewhat certain students had never had a pivotal experience that increased their confidence; they still had some doubts about their educational path and had questions about how to connect it to a career. One of the students sought out guidance from a high school mentor on career paths and also was strongly influenced by hearing a college instructor discuss their career trajectory, but none of the three appears to have had in-depth conversations with anyone at their respective colleges about choosing a program or career. All three had met with an advisor or counselor but primarily for assistance with administrative tasks such as registering for classes, understanding transfer equivalencies, and changing programs.

Omar was not sure what he wanted to do when he was in high school. Most of his peers were interested in technology, so he decided on information technology. He “wasn't 100%,” but after doing his own research and watching YouTube videos about IT careers he felt “certain enough” because “there was nothing else to do.” At the time of the interview, he had transferred to a four-year university and was planning to graduate with a bachelor's degree in information technology after another two years, in 2027. However, although he had some ideas in mind, he did not have a career plan and wished that the college had provided more in-depth support to help him learn about the specific types of jobs he might be able to get with his degree.

Luis was another interviewee who remained unsure. When community college staff visited his high school to help interested students apply, Luis readily chose psychology, although he was also interested in nursing and public health. His interests in psychology and public health were driven by participation in a high school club that involved volunteering at a mental health institute and doing public health outreach on issues ranging from dental hygiene to smoking. Because he had spent time in the hospital as a child and was inspired by the nurses who cared for



him, he also considered pursuing an associate degree in biology with the intent of becoming a pediatric nurse—but he was also worried that that job would be too stressful. He graduated with an associate degree in psychology in spring 2025 and was accepted at a four-year university. Luis reflected back on his level of certainty when choosing psychology:

*I'd say it was a solid fifty-fifty. Of course, there were some times when I was like, "Man, do I really want to do this?" And I did have a lot of that towards the end, where I was like, "Do I really want to continue with this?" But then I stuck through it, and I graduated, and I enjoyed it. I really did. But again, it was like a fifty-fifty most of the time.*

Initially, Luis had been planning to continue in psychology after transferring. However, after speaking with a high school mentor about the kinds of jobs he could get with a psychology bachelor's degree versus a public health degree, he began considering switching to public health. He was also considering pursuing a master's degree in social work that would enable him to do social work in a hospital. He enjoyed a social work class he took at the community college, and the instructor introduced him to the wide variety of employers who hire social workers. Summing up his current thinking about his educational and career path, Luis stated, "I know I'm going to second-guess a lot of the stuff I'm doing because that's just what happens when you're trying to choose a career for the rest of your life."

## Students Who Became Less Certain Over Time

Only one interviewee became less certain over time. He started off with a clear interest, feeling very certain about the program he selected. He lost some of his initial enthusiasm, however, after needing to change programs when he learned the first program he had selected would not transfer.

Tyrone had liked computers since he was a child and had long been interested in understanding how they work. He decided that he wanted to go to college to study something related to computers when he was in high school. Enrolling in community college with the goal of transferring to a four-year university, he chose computer engineering technologies from multiple information technology programs because he enjoys the hands-on aspect of working with computer hardware. After reading the program description and talking with a few friends and family members about his choice, he initially felt 100% certain. Wanting to double check and make sure he was on the right path, he met with an advisor and learned that the computer engineering technologies program would not transfer to a similar program at his four-year destination college. As soon as he learned the program would not transfer, he switched midway through his first semester to computer science, a more comprehensive program accepted for transfer at most universities. Even though all of the classes he was taking counted for computer science, and even though he believed the new program would lead to good educational and career opportunities, he was still disappointed about the change. His level of certainty dropped to "70%–80%." By the time of his interview, Tyrone reported that his certainty had increased slightly (to "85%"), but he did not think he would ever feel 100% certain again.

*It doesn't have the potential to reach the initial 100%, because the initial 100% is, like, you're excited to get into college. You're going to meet new people. And that first excitement on the first college major of your own, [it] just never quite reaches up to any other major you choose down the line.*

Nonetheless, Tyrone felt confident he would graduate with an associate degree in computer science. He had three classes left to complete in fall 2025 and was then planning to transfer in spring 2026 to pursue a bachelor's degree in applied technologies.

## Students Who Started and Remained Uncertain

Only two interviewees were never certain about their program choice. One had no idea what she wanted to do when she started, and the other tried multiple short-term certificate programs but was not satisfied with any of them. A large part of the uncertainty both students reported feeling appears to be driven by labor market concerns. Neither had been able to find a program that both aligned with their interests and offered a pathway to a well-paying job in the amount of time they felt able to dedicate to education. Both have primarily relied on doing their own online research to learn about program and career options.

Aisha was not sure what she wanted to do when she enrolled in college, but she did not then give selecting a program much thought because she was taking courses to fulfill general education requirements in English and math her first two semesters. An interest in social work and law led her to choose a program in human services, but after researching social work jobs on sites like USAJobs.gov and reading about people's experiences as social workers on social media sites she became concerned about low earnings and the possibility of needing a master's degree to get a good job. She visited the college's career services office, but her career assessment results simply indicated that social work would be a good fit for her; they did not help her identify a viable career pathway. Even though she was performing well academically and had made the dean's list, she frequently felt anxious to the point of being in tears. She switched to general studies but still was not sure what she wanted to do with her life and considered stopping out entirely. In summer 2025, she was debating switching back to human services and had not yet enrolled in classes for the fall.

When asked how certain he felt about his initial program choice, a short-term certificate program in welding, Miguel replied, "Not certain at all. It was just picking something to, like, pick something." He was looking for a credential with high earnings potential that would not require an extensive time commitment and thought the job market for welding would be strong even at the entry level. He soon changed his mind, however, switching briefly to another short-term certificate program that he did not remember and then to a plant operator certificate program. A friend had mentioned that a new project would be bringing a large number of plant operator jobs to the community, and Miguel thought it would be a good opportunity. He completed the program, which included doing an internship, but the experience led him to realize that the long work hours and monotonous tasks were not for him. At that point, he began reevaluating his education and career goals:

*But then, with the welding and the plant operator, I realized that money isn't everything. Because after completing those programs, or while doing them, I'm, like, this just isn't for me. I don't care how much I make or how easy it is—it's just not something I want to do. So at first it was like based on time [in the program] and the job market. And then from there I realized, like, let me pick something more ... aligned with my interests.*

Miguel thought he had found a program more aligned with his interests: the chemical technician certificate program. Its requirements overlapped with the plant operator certificate program, so he would have needed to take only two more chemistry classes to complete it. However, both classes were offered only in the spring term and could not be taken simultaneously, so he would have had to wait until spring 2026 to take the first one and spring 2027 to take the second one. The wait did not seem worth it, so at the time of his interview he had dropped that program and was considering enrolling in an entirely new program in fall 2025, a three-month emergency medical technician certificate program.

## Discussion and Recommendations

Consistent with results from the first wave of CCRC's program choice survey, findings from the qualitative interviews suggest that many students feel certain about their program choice. Those feelings of certainty, however, obscure a set of complex dynamics. Among interviewees in our sample, some started college with a very clear idea of their interests and the educational and career path they wanted to take and were able to stick with it. Some students started with clear goals but were derailed by a lack of understanding about requirements for selective admission programs and transfer. Some thought they had a clear idea of their interests and the path they wanted to take until they enrolled in program courses and learned more about the reality of what that path entailed. Others had a clear sense of their educational interests but not of how to turn those interests into a viable career. Still others had general interests but needed the experience of taking program coursework, connecting with faculty members, and learning about career opportunities to increase their confidence. Finally, a few students were wrestling with deeper uncertainties about their educational and career goals.

Across interviews, however, few students either sought help from college faculty and staff or talked about participating in experiences at their college intended to help them explore programs and careers. Faculty and staff at the four colleges participating in the study described multiple opportunities to help students explore programs and careers, including program and career fairs, multiple types of skills assessments and career interest surveys and tools, advising and career counseling, and a range of internship opportunities (Klempin et al., 2025). Yet, offering various support services does not ensure participation. Research on participation in student support services and advising in community colleges frequently finds that many students do not seek out guidance or support (Cheche, 2024; Shaw et al., 2023). A big question, therefore, is how to better promote and increase participation in these support activities so that more students can benefit from them.

In research examining how youth envision their futures, Leslie-Rule (2025) makes an important distinction between having goals and having a realistic sense of the steps involved in achieving those goals. She finds that young people may have a good sense of both, one but not the other, or neither. Regardless of how certain youth are about their goals or the steps to get there, however, they are deeply invested in making educational and career decisions to shape their future. For college stakeholders, findings from this prior research and the study discussed here illustrate the importance of understanding the aspirations, goals, and knowledge students bring with them in order to best meet their needs. Based on where students are, this could involve helping students who are still exploring various educational and career pathways solidify their interests, ensuring students who think they know what they want to do are fully

informed about their options and have accurate information about their intended pathway, or providing detailed information about transfer requirements for students who are committed to further education after community college.

In accord with prior research, findings from our student interviews highlight the importance not only of providing additional support for program choice but also of recognizing which students could benefit from which types of support, and ensuring that these experiences are embedded into every community college student's experience. Providing opportunities for exploration is critical. From an external perspective, it is not always clear what is driving students' decisions because students are evaluating programs across a number of dimensions. In some cases, they may change programs not because their interests have changed but because their college experience has shown them a new way of pursuing their goals. We offer four suggestions on how colleges could help students with program choice.

**1. Understand which students are truly certain about their program choice, which students could benefit from additional guidance, and what type of guidance they need.**

After selecting a program of study on their application to college, it is often the case that new students are not engaged in any follow-up conversations about how or why they made that choice. Even well-designed onboarding processes that include new student advising often fall to the side during the crunch time prior to the start of a new academic year. As a result, what colleges typically know about students' goals is limited to the program they selected upon application. However, as we learned from our survey of incoming students' program and career interests, the majority of students are considering multiple programs upon entry, often in very different fields. And these interviews further show that many students end up changing their mind even if they were quite certain about their program upon entry. A new student survey administered either during the application process or alongside other onboarding activities can help colleges capture information about students' goals, the programs they are considering, how certain students are about what they want to do after completing their programs, and how much they know about further education and careers. Information collected in this survey could be used in several ways: as the basis for an advising appointment, during a first-year experience course, or as part of an outreach campaign during students' first term focused on those who expressed more uncertainty.

**2. Make program and career exploration part of every new student's college experience.**

Supports for program and career exploration may not be reaching all students for a number of reasons—supports may be optional, or students may not be aware of them, may not see the benefit of them, or may not feel comfortable seeking them out. Recent work by CCRC includes recommendations for addressing the support participation gap and increasing student engagement by redesigning new student onboarding to focus less on providing information about college policies and procedures and more on helping students explore their interests, choose a program, and make an educational plan (Jenkins, Lahr, et al., 2025). To do this at scale without significant new funding sources, some colleges have restructured student services to prioritize advising and case management (Jenkins, et al., 2022). Other colleges are making this type of support a part of every student's experience by redesigning mandatory first-year experience courses to focus less on college knowledge and skills and more on program exploration and planning.

This type of in-depth support can help students with different needs. In our study, students who experienced a great deal of anxiety about their program choice were often those who

also couldn't see a path to a living-wage career aligned with their interests. The connection to careers is further complicated by the fact that some programs offer clearer pathways to specific careers than others, which can affect students' ability to imagine their future. This underscores the importance of providing opportunities for students to have conversations with faculty, advisors, and career counselors.

- 3. Provide support to guide students' use of program and career information.** While the findings of this study point to a need for colleges to enable a student experience that includes embedded support for career and program exploration, we also learned from the interviews that students rely a great deal on doing their own research using a variety of online sources to learn about program and career options and to confirm their choices. To help students access and use reliable information, colleges can enhance the information on their own websites, prepare career guides to direct students to trustworthy external sources, incorporate assignments involving program and career research into first-year experience courses, and use advising time to talk to students about what they have learned through their own research to provide additional guidance, suggestions, and direction to their search process.
- 4. Ensure that students are able to enroll in an "Inspire" course in their first term.** Given the critical role that program courses played in helping some students we interviewed either confirm their program choice or make the decision to change programs, it is important to give students the opportunity to take a course in their field of study as soon as possible (Jenkins & Lahr, 2022). New students are often advised to take math, English, or other general education courses without prerequisite requirements in their first term, which limits their access to courses that are either in their intended program of study or are in a field they hope to explore. As a critical part of CCRC's Ask-Connect-Inspire-Plan framework for reimagining program onboarding (Jenkins, Lahr, et al., 2025), courses that have the potential to inspire students can prompt them to further explore their interests and careers, help them develop the confidence to pursue future coursework, and build a community with other learners and faculty in their field of interest.

The process of choosing a program of study is complicated: Students are attempting to balance family expectations, their personal interests and goals, and hopes for future employment opportunities. Half of the students we interviewed changed their program of study, and most of these students felt certain both before and after they switched. Many students in our study also became more certain over time. In both of these groups, pivotal experiences in the classroom seemed to help solidify their choice of a program, pointing to the importance of helping students take courses and connect with faculty in their field of interest. At the same time, there were a couple of students who never felt very certain, and among all students in our interview sample, participation in college resources and activities designed to help with program choice were underutilized. The recommendations we provide respond to what we learned from all our interviewees; they are intended to help colleges provide guidance and support to all students as they explore and choose a program of study.

## Endnotes

1. Students attending the four community colleges involved in the current study are asked to select from 102–152 programs; programs leading to different credentials in the same program area (such as certificate or applied associate degree in cybersecurity) are counted separately (Lahr et al., 2025).
2. Eighty-four percent of students surveyed in the first wave reported being either “somewhat” or “very” certain about their first-choice program, but 76% of students were still considering other programs in addition to their first-choice program (61% were considering a total of three programs, and 15% were considering two). Of the students who were considering more than one program, 66% indicated that they were choosing between programs in different program clusters (Lahr et al., 2025).
3. CIP is a standard taxonomy for academic programs developed by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics. The first two digits in the six-digit format represent the most general grouping of related programs.
4. For the two interviewees who stopped out, we count the program they were enrolled in when they stopped out as their current choice.
5. The third initially started in a transfer-oriented associate degree program in natural science with the intention of pursuing nursing, briefly switched to general studies, and then switched back to natural science because the general studies classes would not meet requirements for nursing.
6. The names we give to all interviewees are pseudonyms.

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