

**CCRC** COMMUNITY COLLEGE  
RESEARCH CENTER

Teachers College, Columbia University

# More Essential Than Ever: Helping Every Student Make a Career-Connected Educational Plan

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DREAM 2026 | March 3, 2026



# MORE ESSENTIAL THAN EVER

COMMUNITY COLLEGE PATHWAYS  
TO EDUCATIONAL AND  
CAREER SUCCESS

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FOREWORD BY  
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# More Essential Than Ever

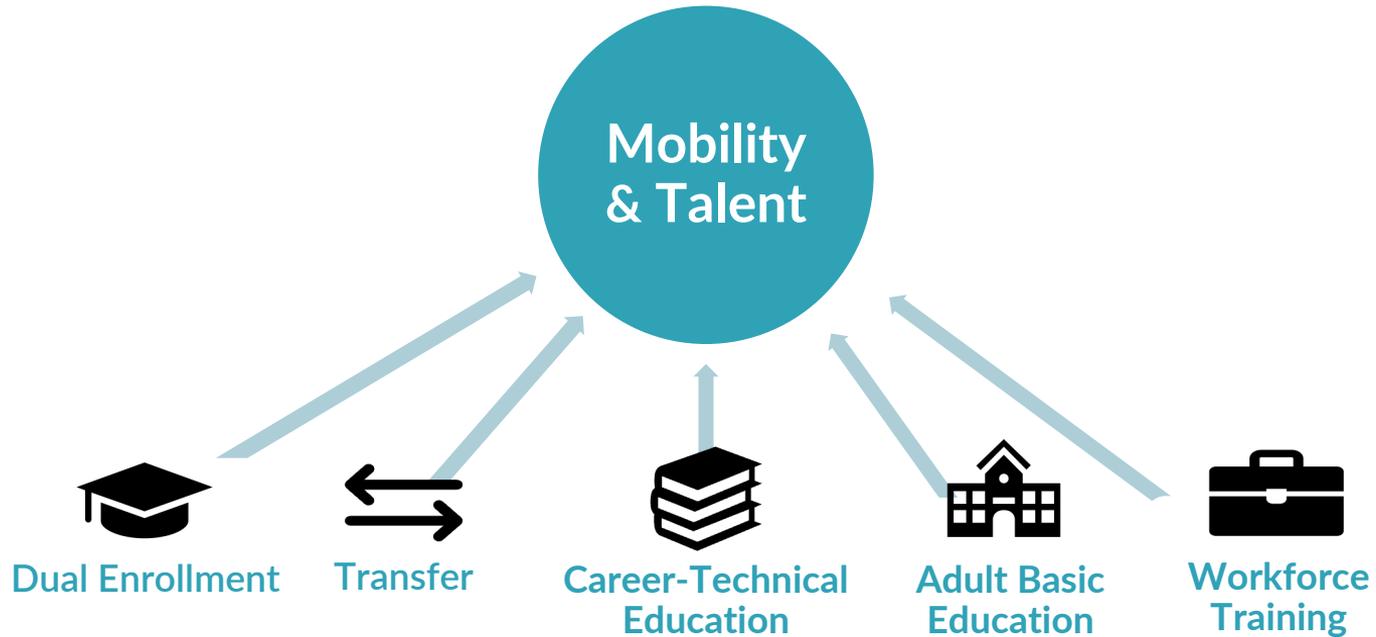
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# Community colleges are more essential than ever for their communities



Post-high school enrollment in community colleges has declined for more than a decade

## Fall Enrollment Trends by Sector and Age, 2000-2023

Sector (CCRC Definition)

- Community colleges
- Public four-years
- Private not-for-profit four-yea..
- Private for-profits
- Other public two-years, less-t..
- Other private not-for-profits

Select a State/Territory

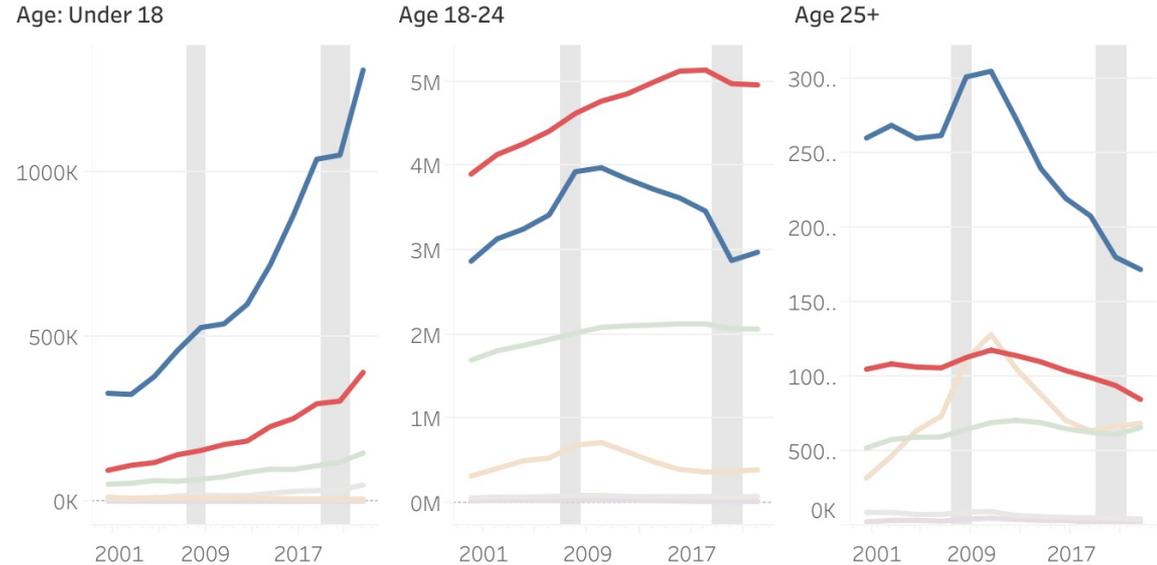
All

Select an Institution

All

### Fall Undergraduate Enrollments

*Detail for student age*



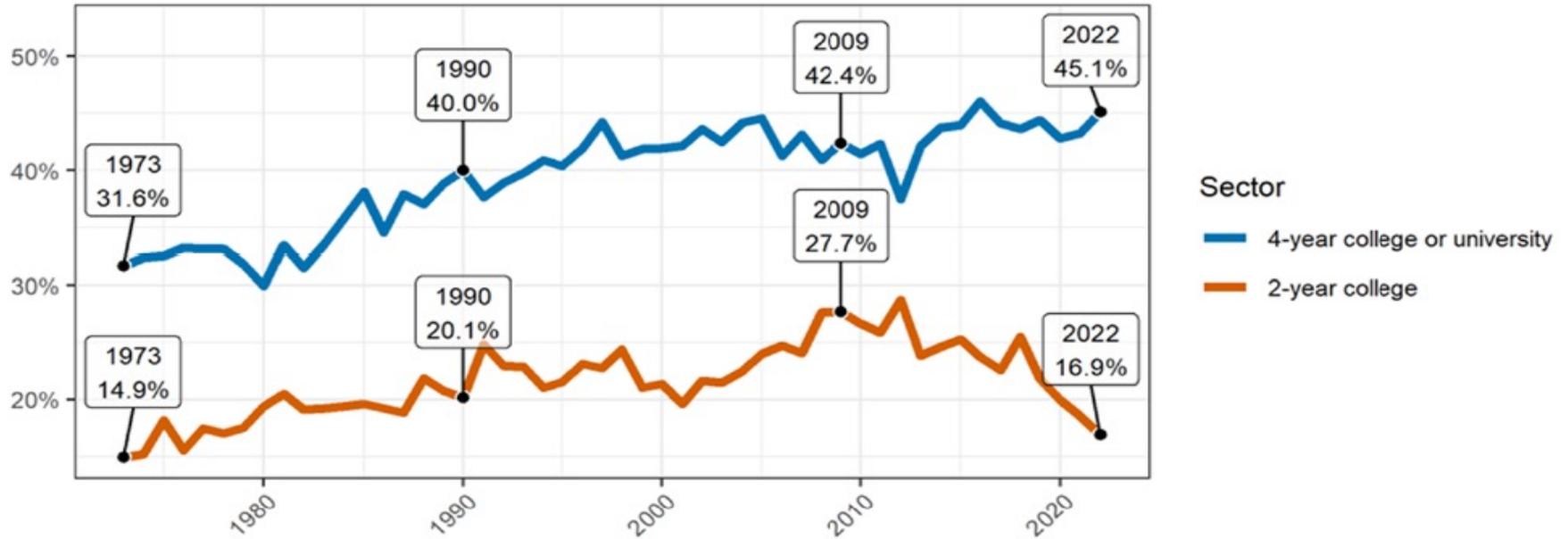
Source:

<https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/john.fink/viz/UndergraduateEnrollmentTrendsbySector/Summary>

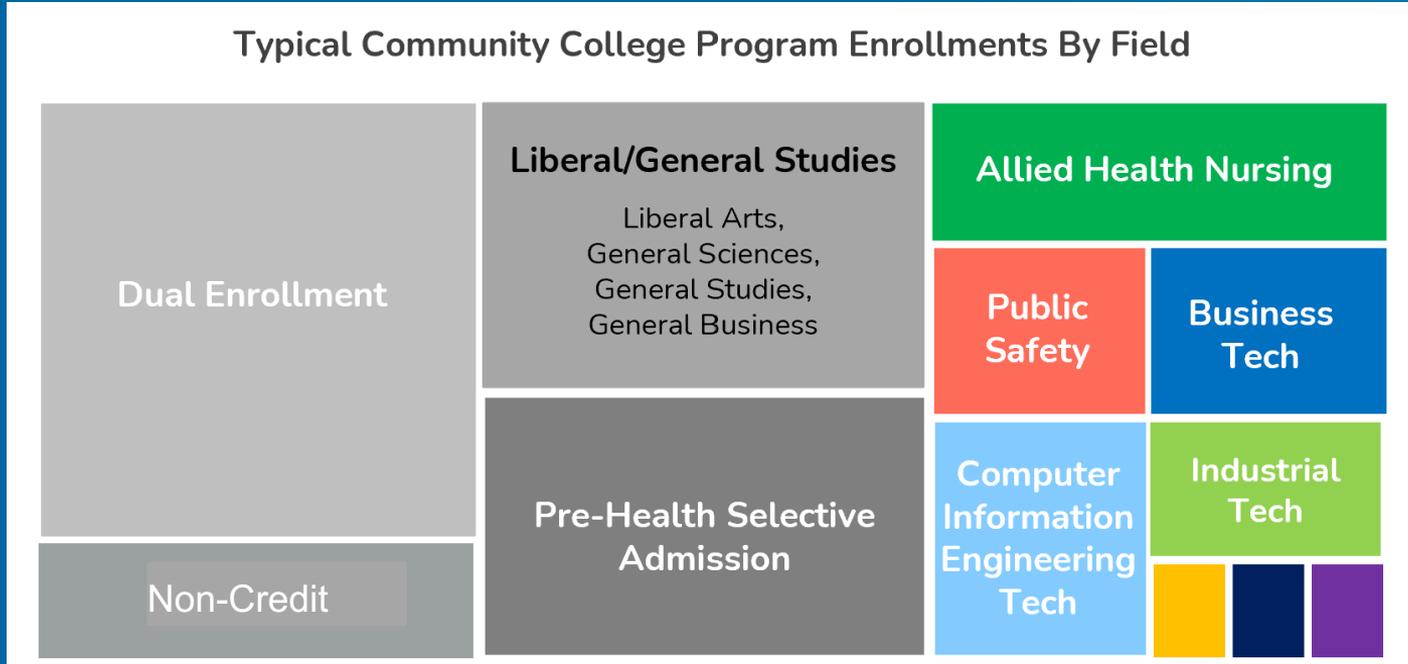


# Community colleges are losing market share to four-year institutions for recent high school graduates

Percent of Recent High-School Completers Enrolled in College by Sector: 1973 through 2022



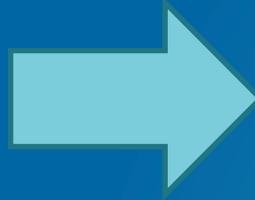
# Too many students are not enrolled in a program that clearly leads to a good job or transfer in their major field of interest



What motivation do these students have to continue and complete?

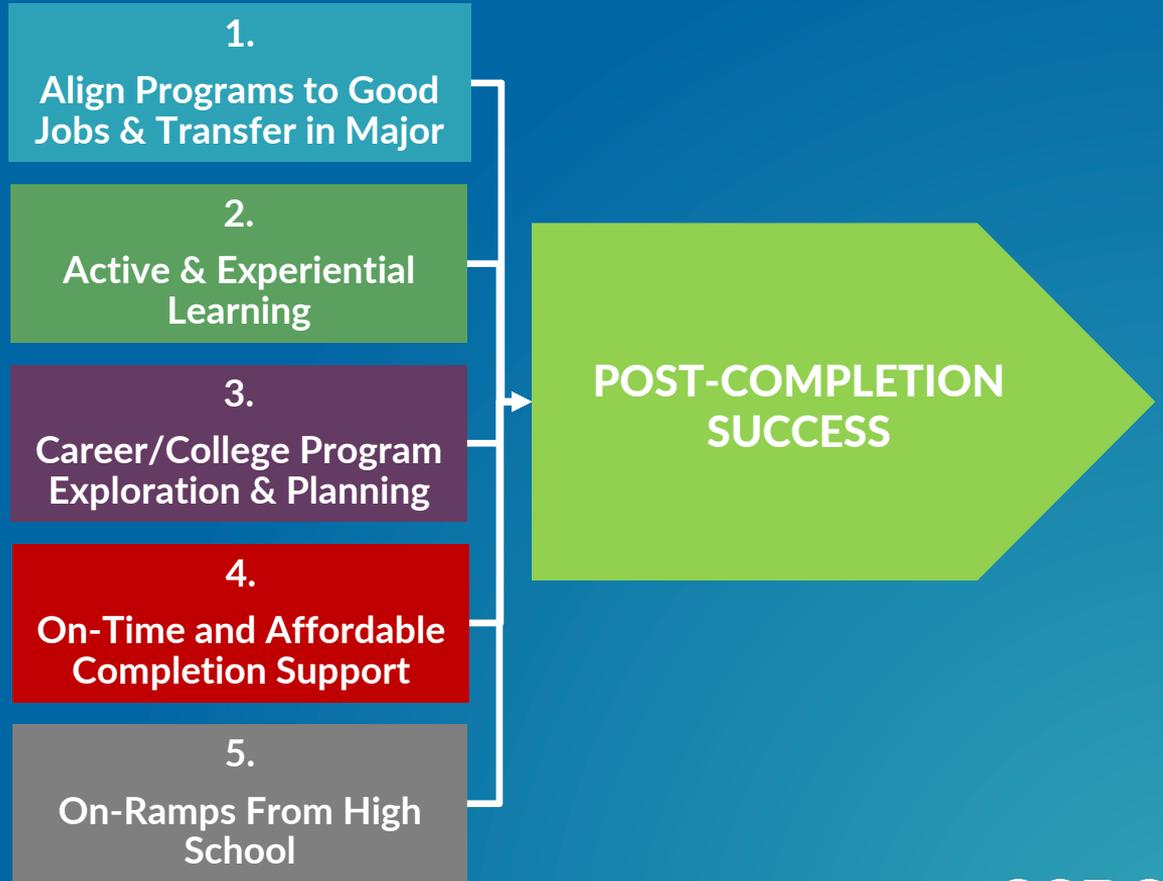
# *More Essential Than Ever:* From Completion to Post-Completion Success

Pathways reforms to date have achieved gains by **removing barriers to completion**

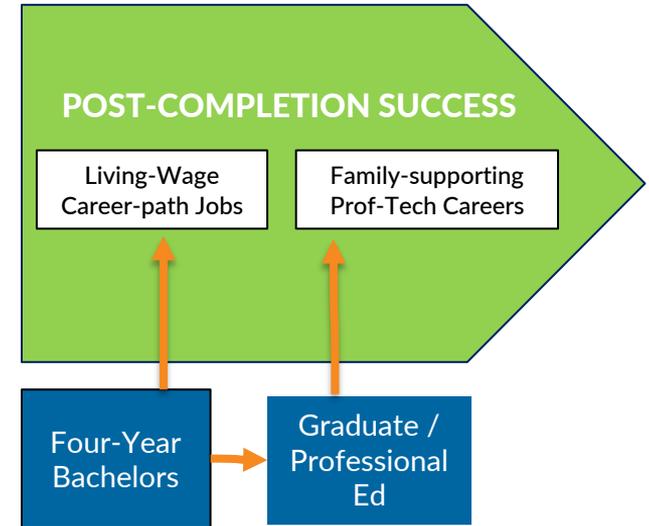


To attract and retain students, colleges must also focus on **strengthening pathways to post-completion success**—and thus make students' investment of time, money and effort worth it

# Five frontiers for strengthening community college pathways to post-completion success

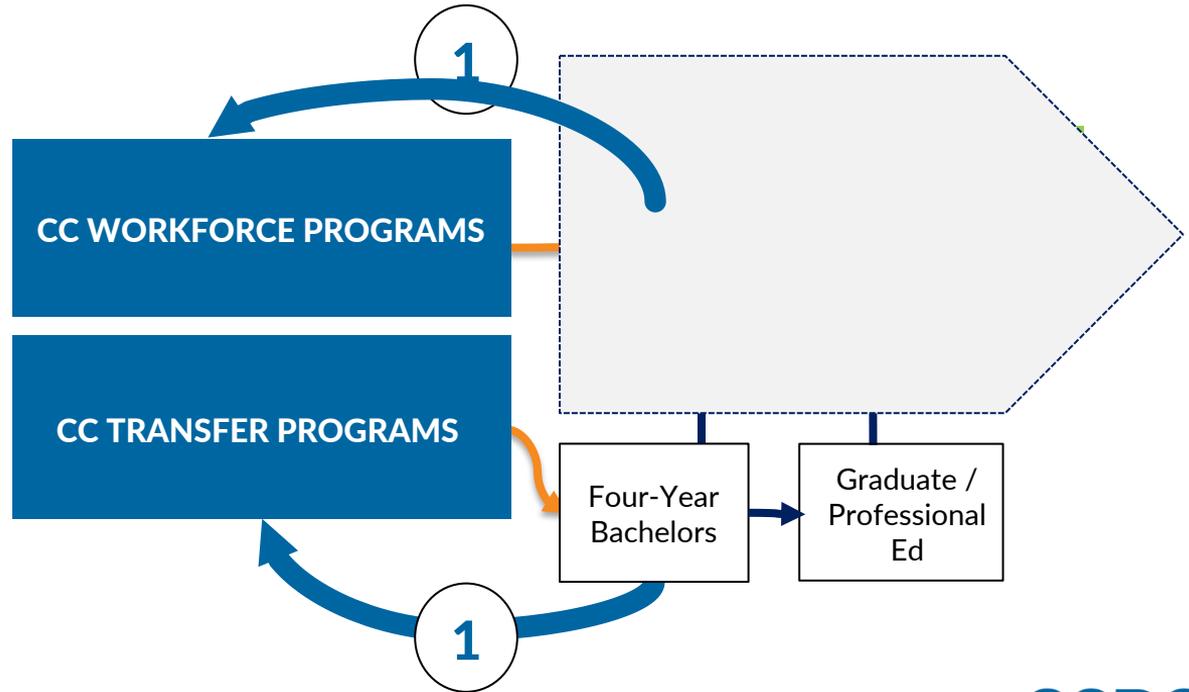


Start with **post-completion success** in mind, and “backward design”



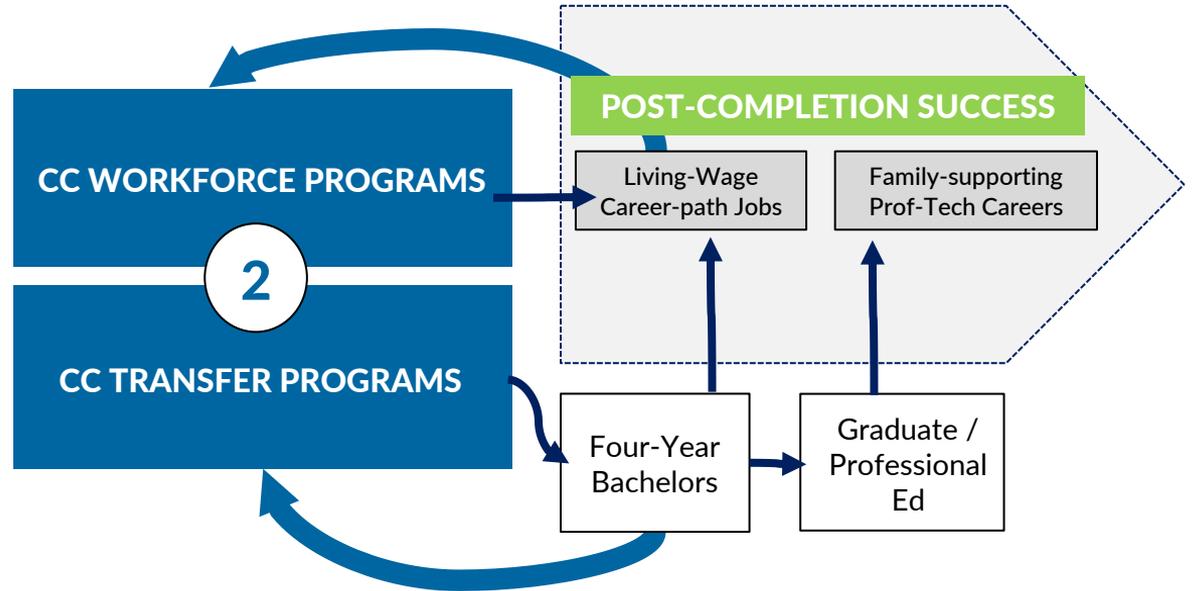
**Frontier 1:**

Partner with employers and universities to ensure programs lead to living-wage jobs or transfer in major.



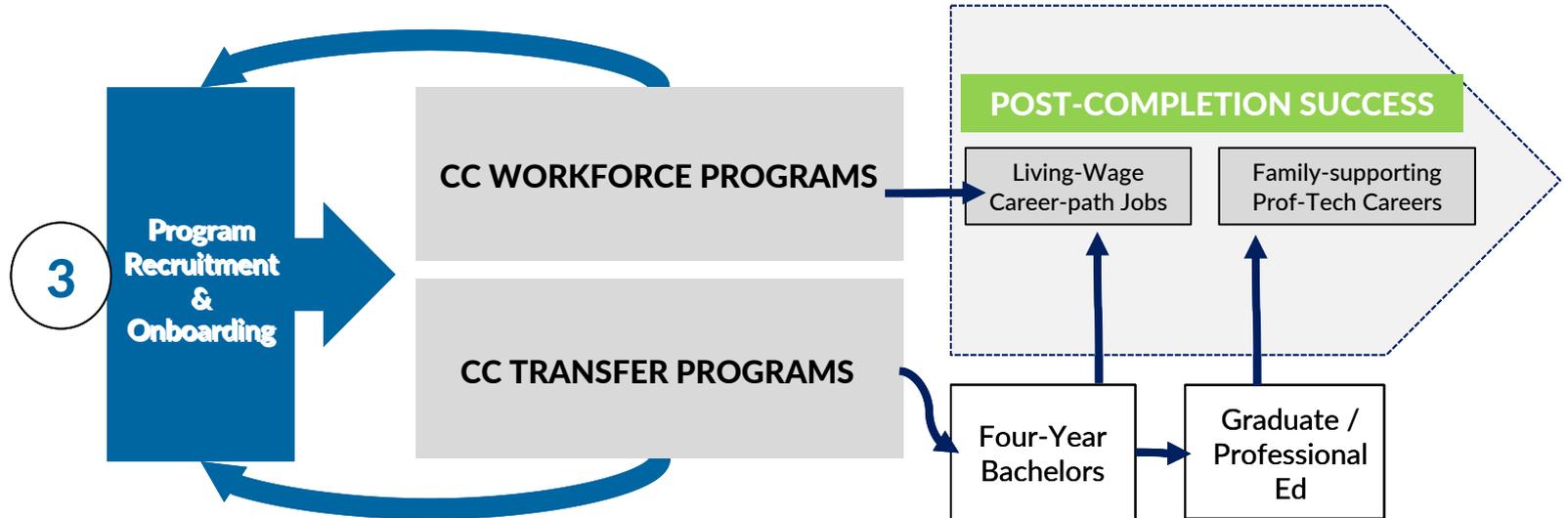
## Frontier 2:

Help students develop versatile skills by embedding active and experiential learning throughout all programs.



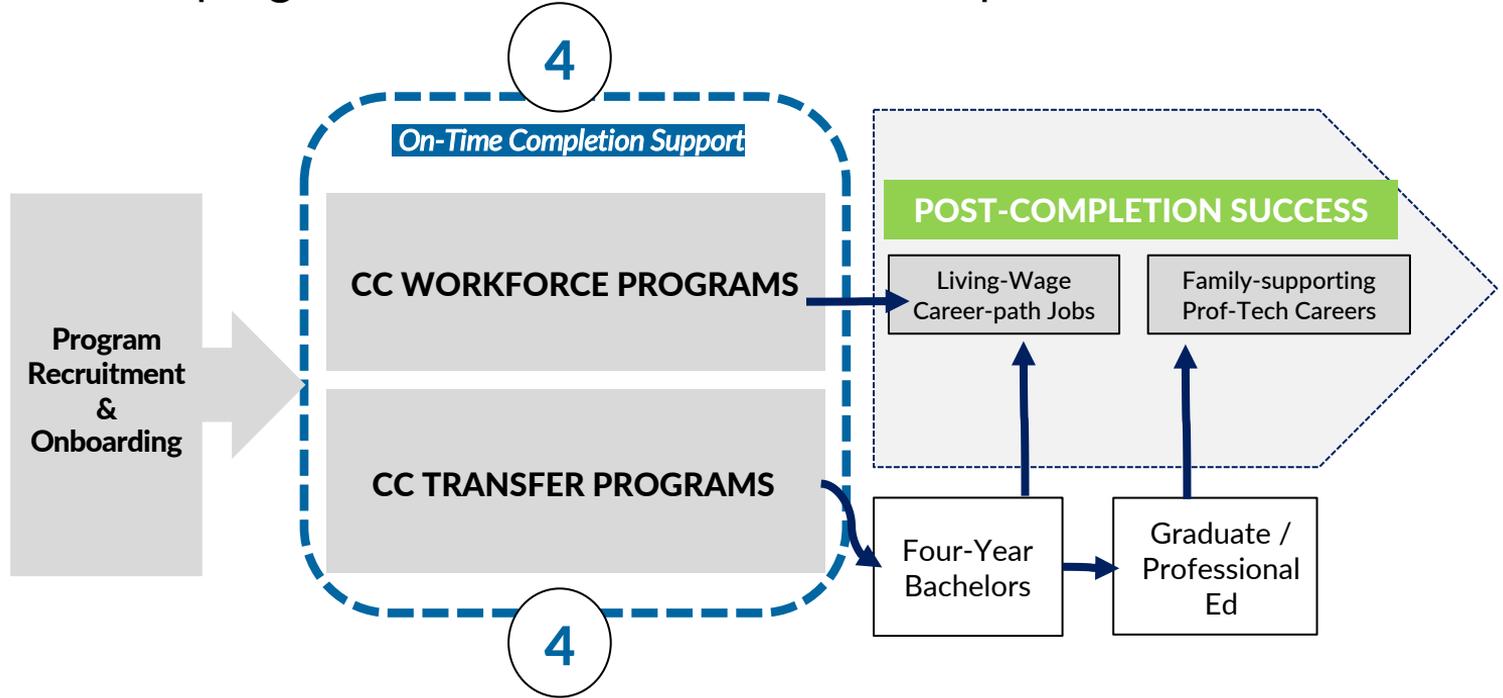
### Frontier 3:

Rethink the onboarding experience to help students explore, choose, and plan a program of study aligned with their interests and aspirations.



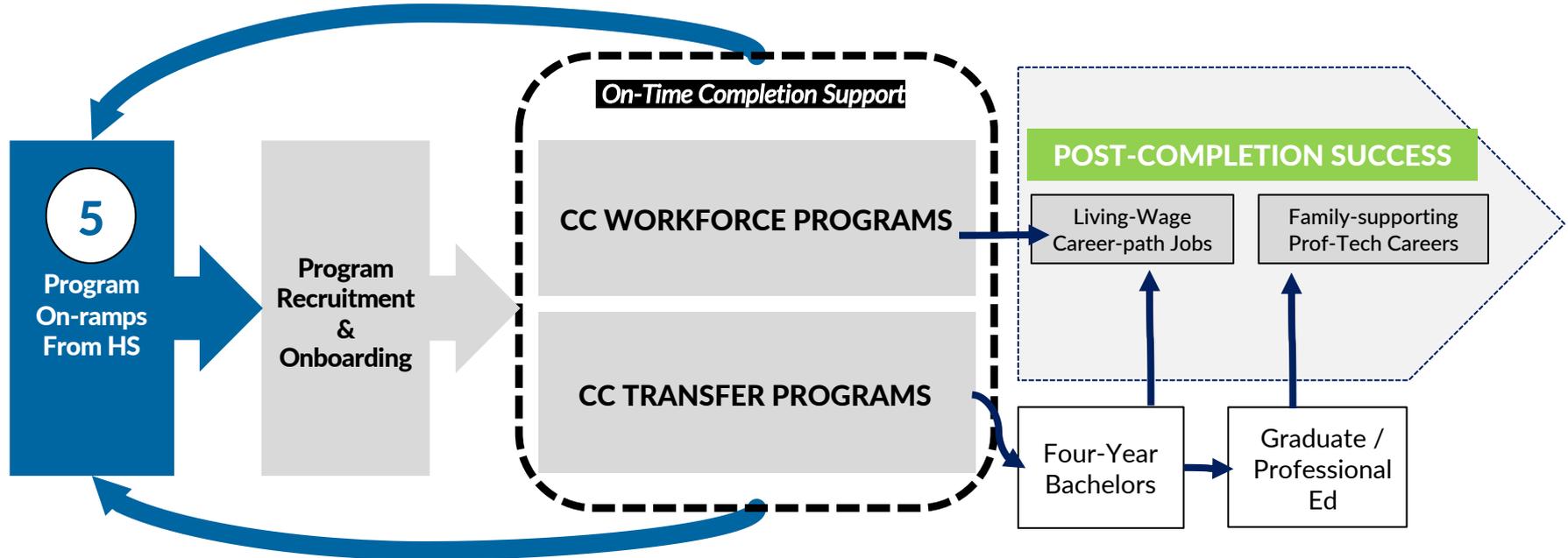
## Frontier 4:

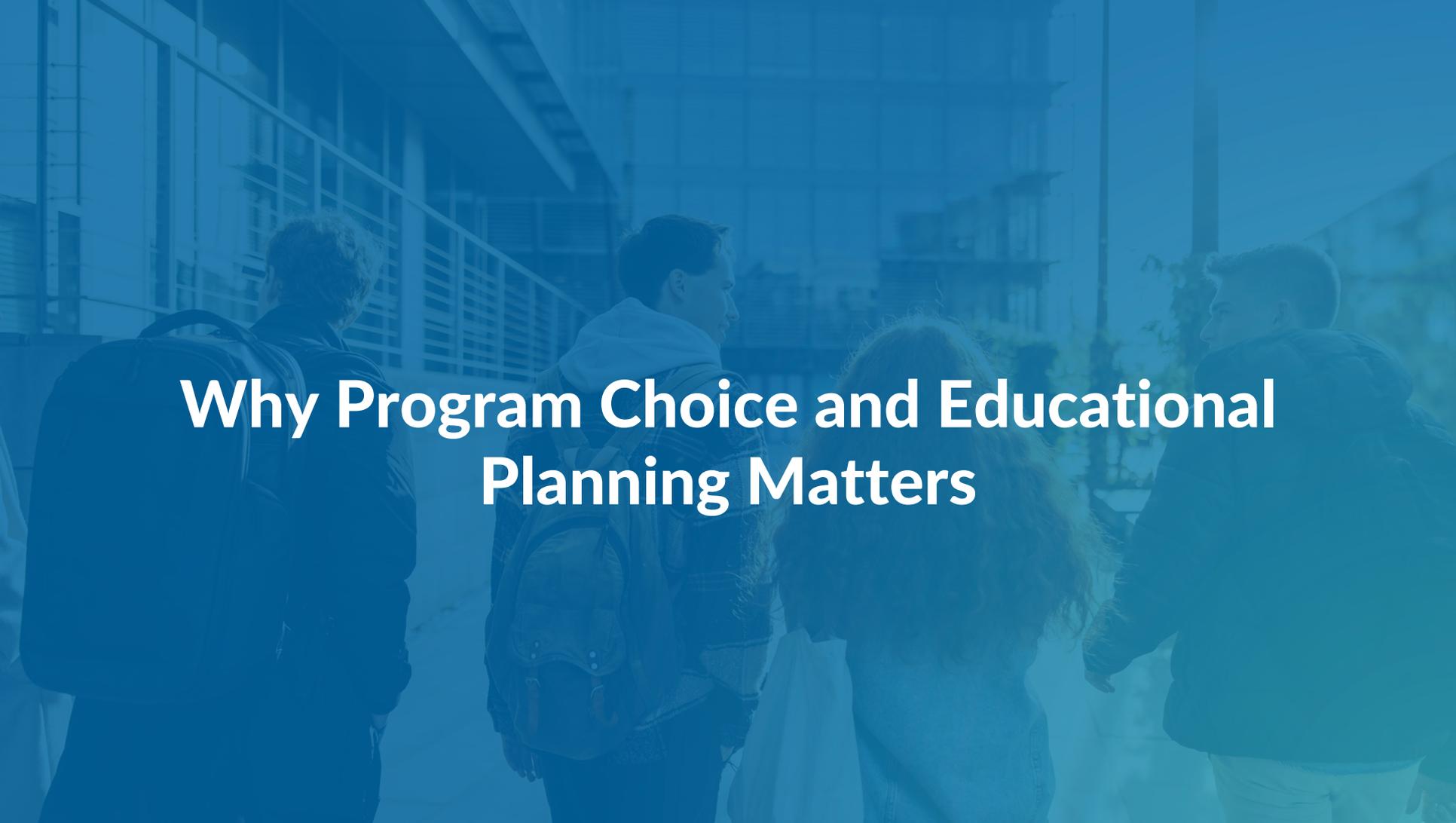
Structure, schedule and deliver courses—and provide progress monitoring and support—to enable busy students to complete their programs in as little time and cost as possible.



## Frontier 5:

Rethink the high school dual enrollment as an onramp to a debt-free, career-connected postsecondary pathways for students who wouldn't otherwise continue their education after high school.



A photograph of four students walking away from the camera on a paved path. The student on the far left is a young man with a large backpack. Next to him is another young man with a backpack. In the center is a young woman with long hair, also with a backpack. On the far right is a young man in a dark jacket. The background shows a modern building with a grid of windows. The entire image is covered with a semi-transparent blue overlay.

# Why Program Choice and Educational Planning Matters

# Students' Program Choices Matter



Many new students end up in general studies programs, which have weak transfer and employment outcomes



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

# A Few Takeaways From Our Research



Most students enter college with many interests in different fields. How is your college capturing the range of students' interests? Are exploratory students defaulted into generic majors?



Multiple factors play into students' program choices. How is your college helping students untangle this complex choice?



New students may seem certain about their program interests but is this the whole story? Does the conversation allow for uncertainty and exploration?

# What students want during onboarding

- Explore academic and career interests
- Interact with other new and current students, faculty, and others who share similar academic and career interests
- Take a course on **topics of interest** in term 1
- Develop a **full-program educational plan**

**How much does the  
typical onboarding  
experience at your  
college focus on  
program choice and  
educational planning?**



# From “Welcome to College” to Onboarding into a Program of Study

There’s a role for everyone in ACIP.



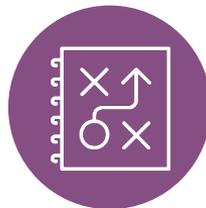
**ASK**



**CONNECT**



**INSPIRE**



**PLAN**

Read more about Ask-Connect-Inspire-Plan here:  
<https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/ask-connect-inspire-plan-onboarding.html>

**CCRC**

# ASK



Every student is engaged in an ongoing conversation about their interests, strengths, aspirations, and life circumstances with the aim of helping them explore programs of study and career paths aligned with their goals.

# CONNECT



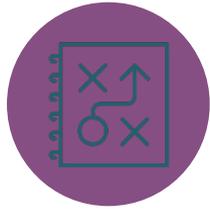
From the start, colleges organize opportunities for every student to meet with faculty, students, alumni, and employers in fields of interest to them and access college and community resources that can help support their needs.

# INSPIRE



Every student takes at least one college-level course in term 1 on a topic of interest that "lights their fire" for learning.

# PLAN



Every student is helped by the end of their first term to develop a full-program educational plan that shows them a path to their goals.

# Panel Discussion

**Holly Clendenen**

Southwest Wisconsin  
Technical College



**Kellie Zeimak**

St. Petersburg College



# New CCRC Data Tool and Guide

## Planning Student Paths to Post-Completion Success: A Guide for Using the Community College Program Mapper

By Davis Jenkins, John Fink, and Hana Lahr

In our new book, *More Essential Than Ever: Community College Pathways to Educational and Career Success* (Jenkins, Lahr, et al., 2025), coauthored with Serena C. Klemplin and Maggie P. Fay, we argue that if community colleges are to recruit and retain more students, they need to ensure that their programs of study are worth completing in that they enable students to secure good jobs or transfer successfully to bachelor's programs. Colleges must also ensure that students with many competing obligations can complete their programs in as little time and as affordably as possible.

Crucial to accomplishing these aims is helping all entering students explore career and academic interests, choose a program of study, and develop an individualized educational plan aligned to their career and educational goals. As explained in the textbox on the following page, creating an individualized plan is critical for having students develop clarity about their program path and motivating them to complete it. Students and college staff can use these plans to monitor student progress, and colleges can use the plans to schedule classes at times students need them so that students can complete their programs on time, according to their individual timelines.

Yet many colleges have difficulty understanding which or how many of their students have individualized educational plans; they also have difficulty in capturing a bird's eye view of which of their program pathways lead to good jobs and further education for students and which meet local workforce needs. Knowing more about the broad college enrollment picture is critical for thinking about what programs of study should be offered, expanded, and encouraged. It is also helpful in undertaking strategies to help students develop a high-quality, goal-aligned plan.

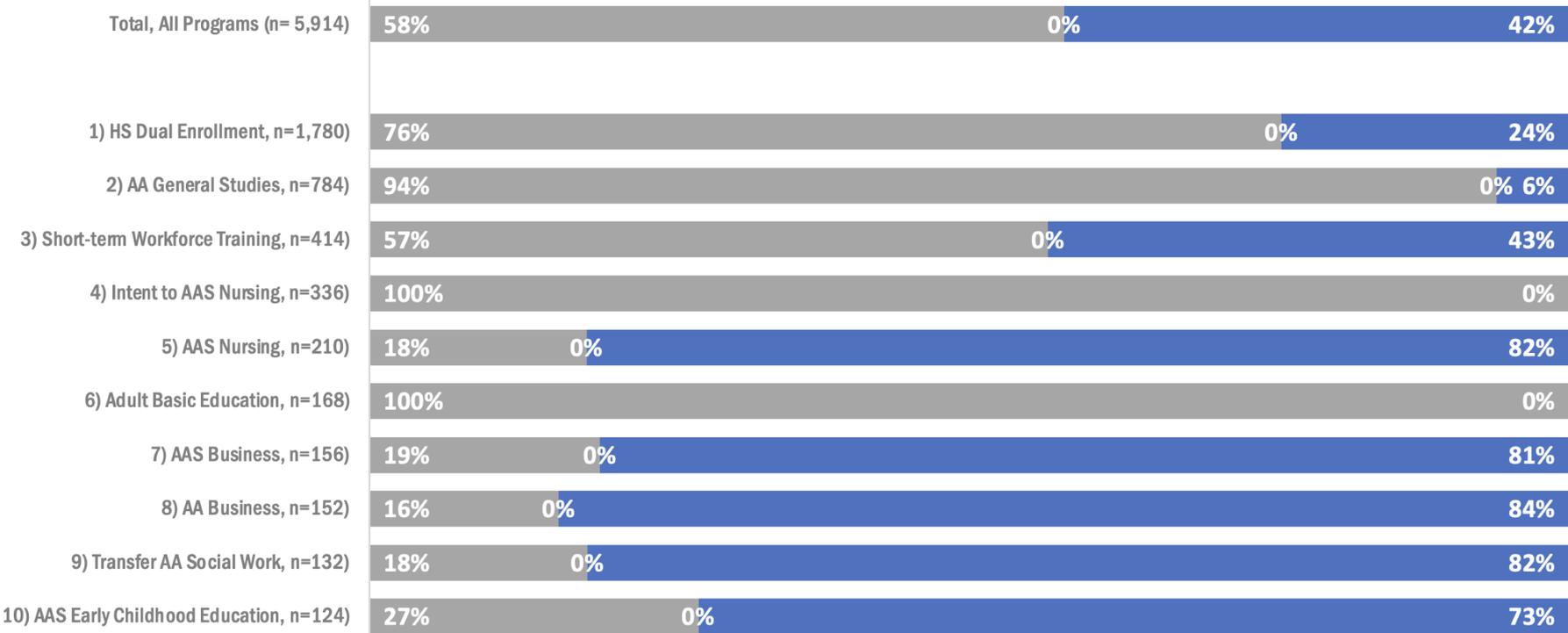
**CCRC's Program Mapper  
is a tool for examining  
enrollments and plans by  
post-completion  
program outcomes.**



# How many new and continuing students in each program track have a full-program educational plan?

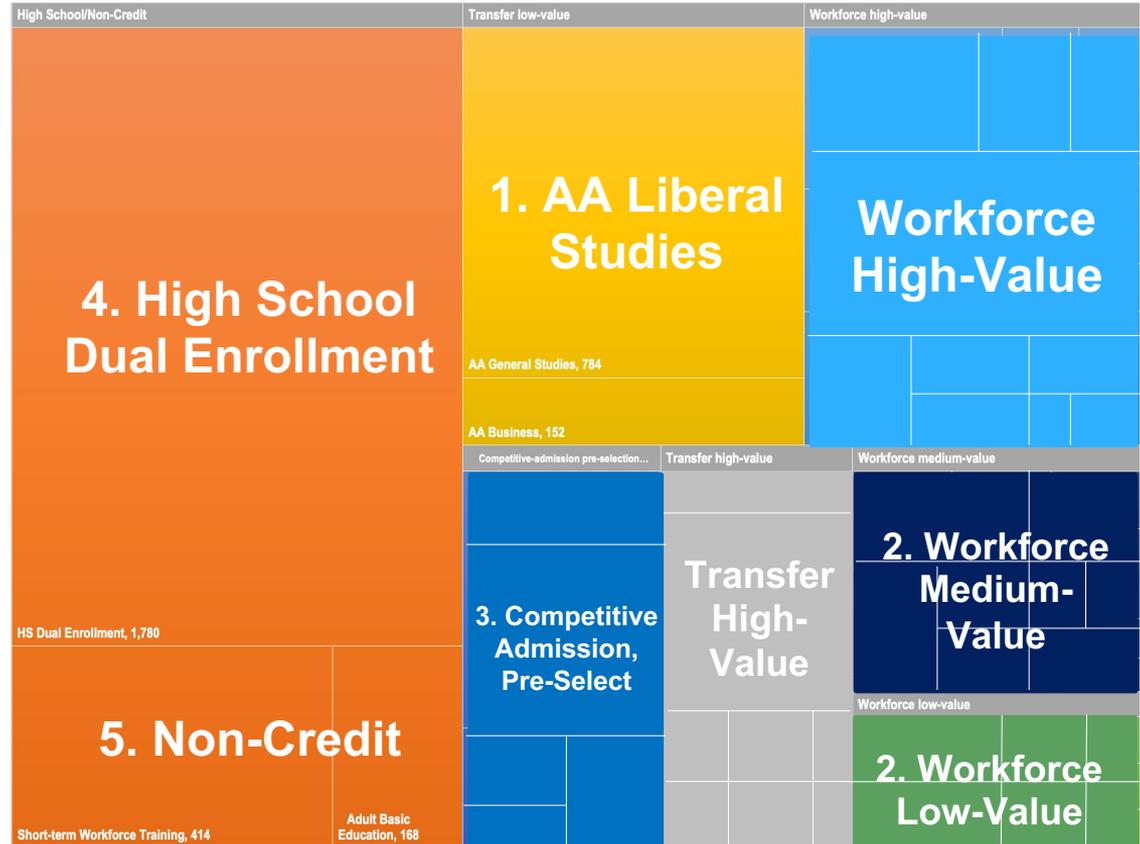
■ No ■ Yes

Percentage of Students With an Educational Plan: Hypothetical Community College



# Five High-Leverage Strategies For Strengthening Pathways to Post-Completion Success

1. Help transfer-intending students develop a major-specific transfer plan
2. Help students in low-value workforce programs build career advancement plans—not just earn entry credentials.
3. Help students in competitive-admission pre-selection tracks develop a “Plan B” leading to degrees and career-path employment.
4. Rethink dual enrollment from “random acts” to on-ramps to career-connected postsecondary pathways.
5. Build bridges into credit-bearing, high-opportunity pathways for non-credit workforce and adult basic education programs.



*More Essential Than Ever*



Program mapper brief and tool



Program & career choice research





# Thank you!

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