

CCRC COMMUNITY COLLEGE
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Teachers College, Columbia University

More Essential Than Ever: Strengthening Community College Pathways to Post-Completion Success

Davis Jenkins, Hana Lahr, Joe Shaffer & Greg Williams
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MORE ESSENTIAL THAN EVER

COMMUNITY COLLEGE PATHWAYS
TO EDUCATIONAL AND
CAREER SUCCESS

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More Essential Than Ever

Community College Pathways to
Educational and Career Success

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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)



Select a State/Territory

All

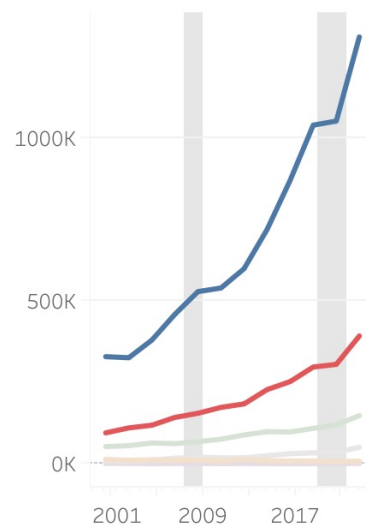
Select an Institution

All

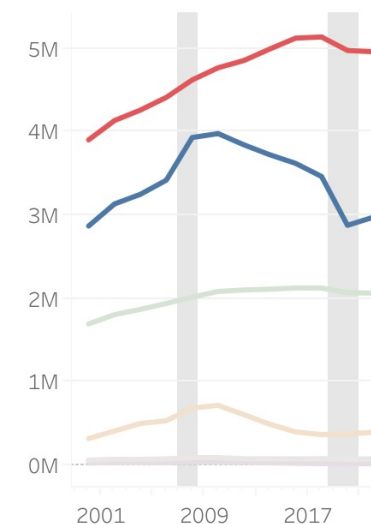
Fall Undergraduate Enrollments

Detail for student age

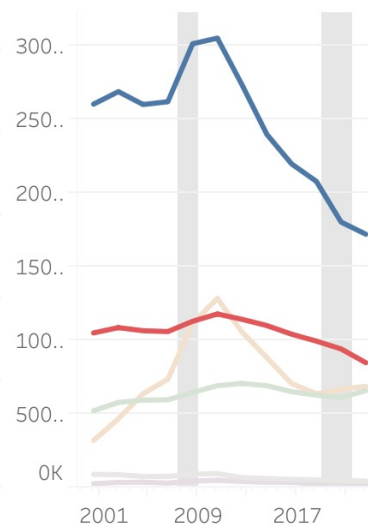
Age: Under 18



Age 18-24



Age 25+



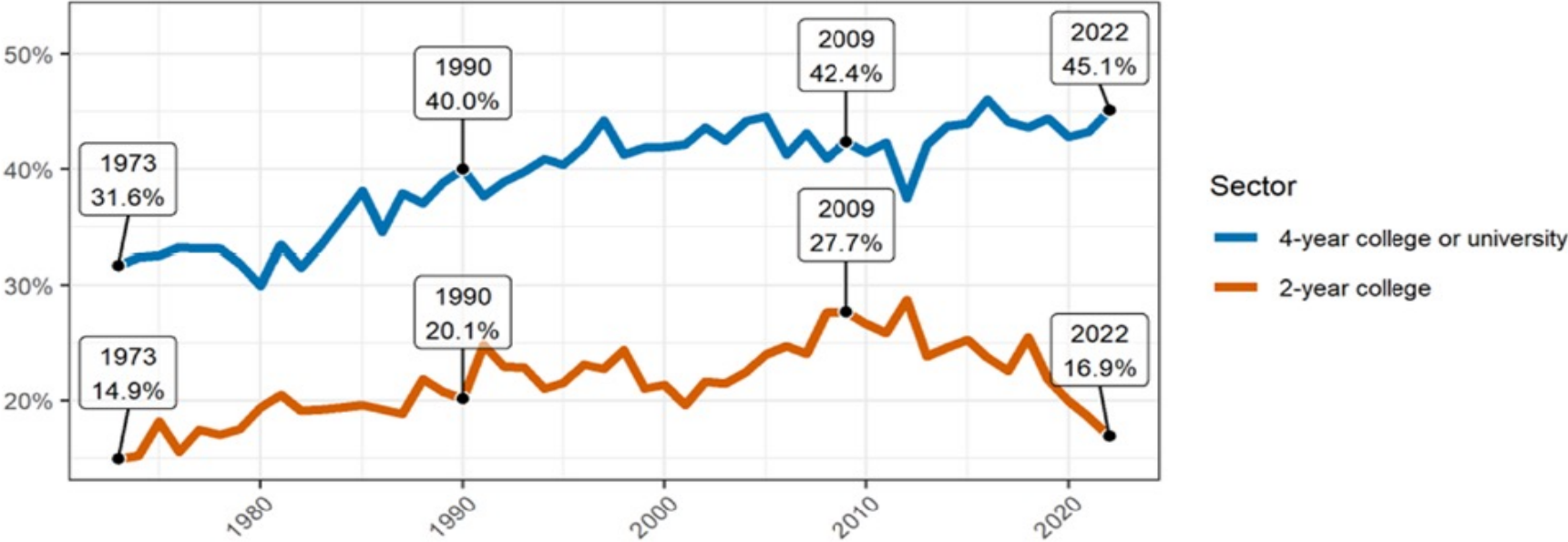
Source:

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



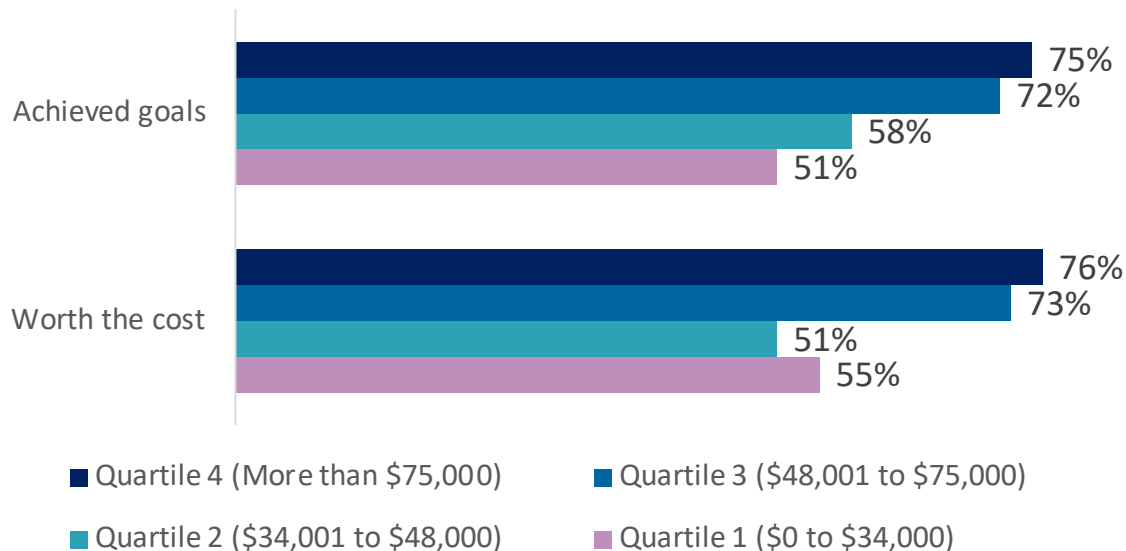
Community colleges are losing market share to four-years for recent high school graduates

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

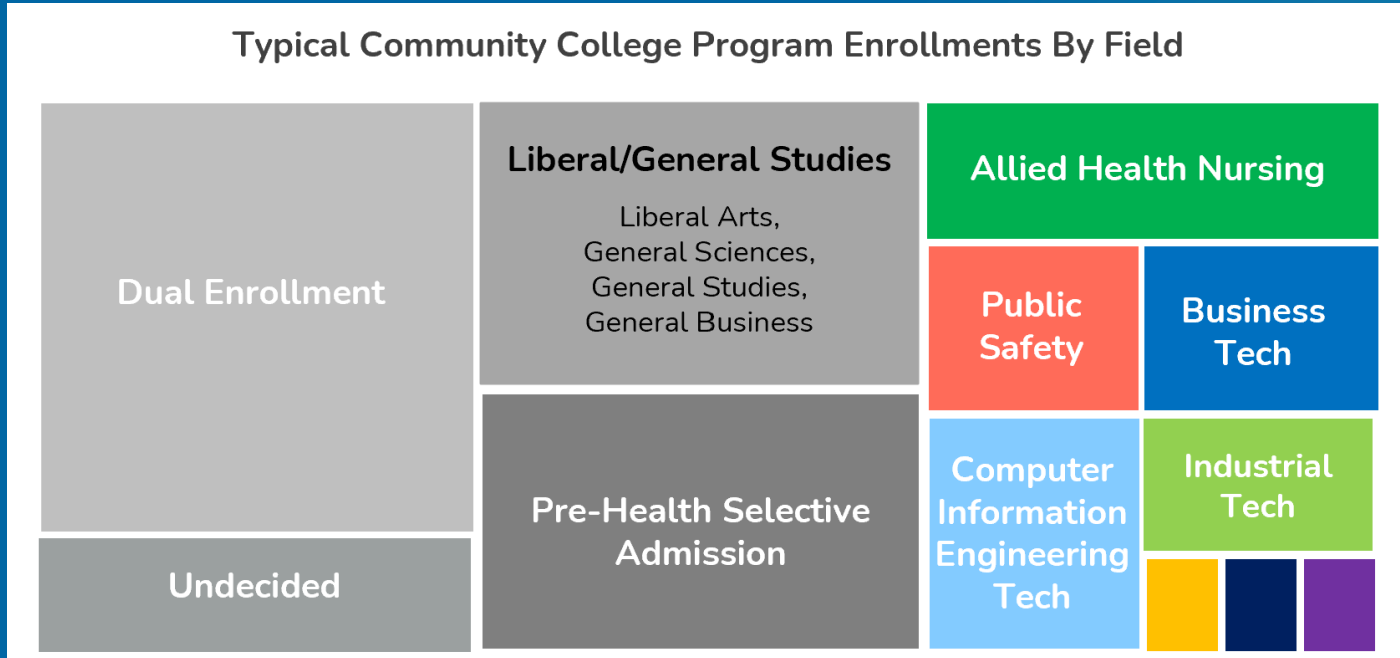


Higher paying jobs or successful transfer ➡ Higher perception of value

Recent Community College Students' Perceptions of Value by Post-Completion Earnings Quartiles



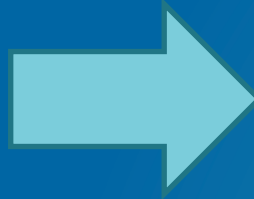
Too many students are not enrolled in a program that clearly leads to a good job or transfer in their major field of interest



What motivation do these students have to continue and complete?

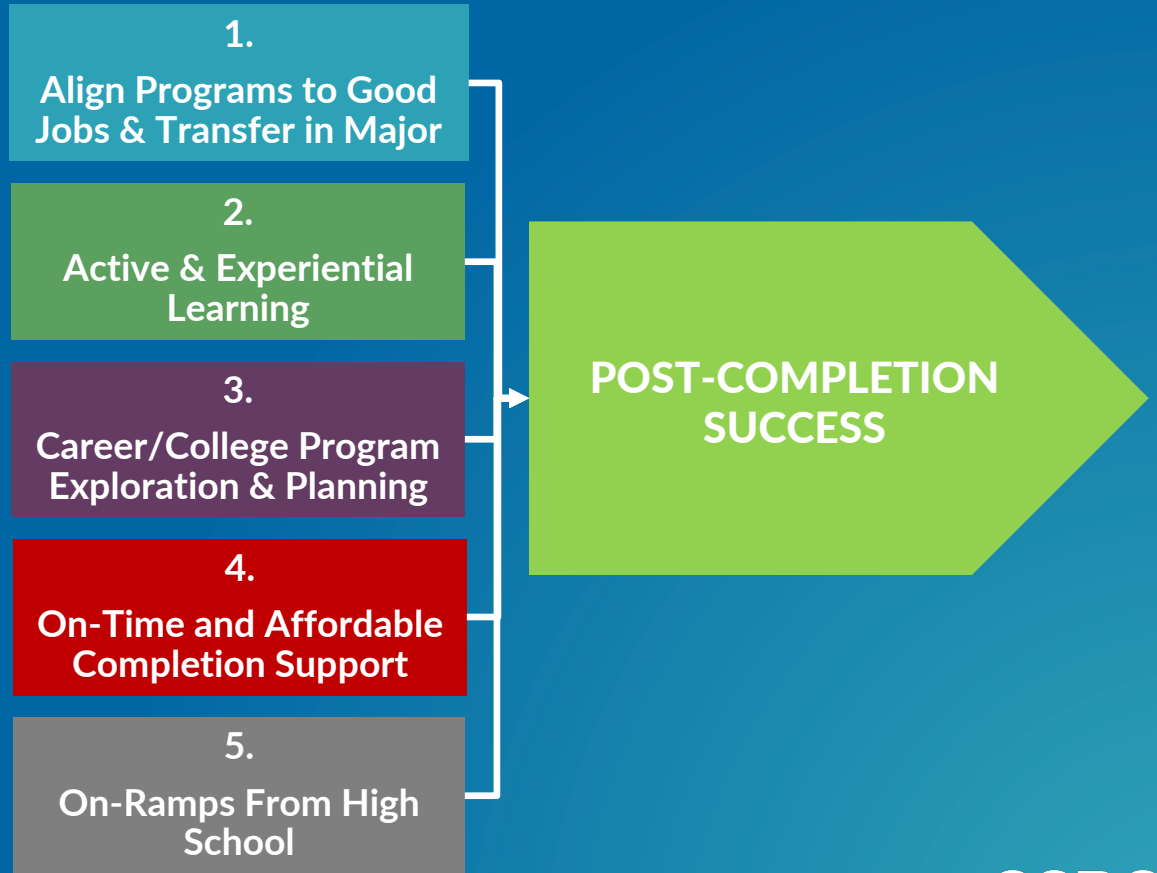
More Essential Than Ever: From Completion to Post-Completion Success

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

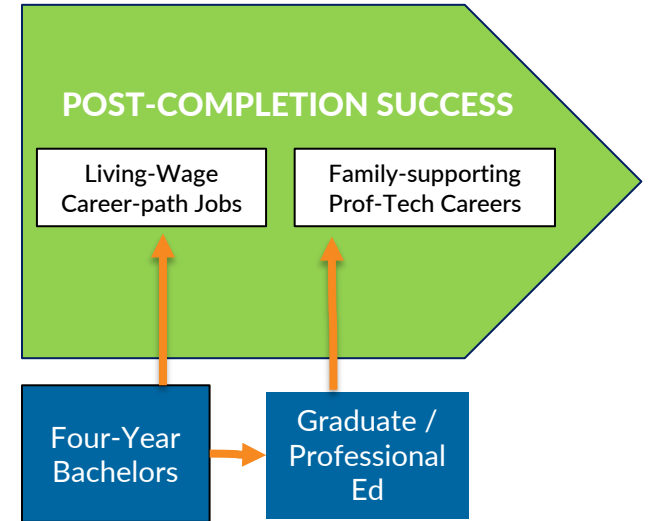


To attract and retain students, colleges must also focus on **strengthening pathways to post-completion success**—and thus make students' investment of time, money and effort worth it

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

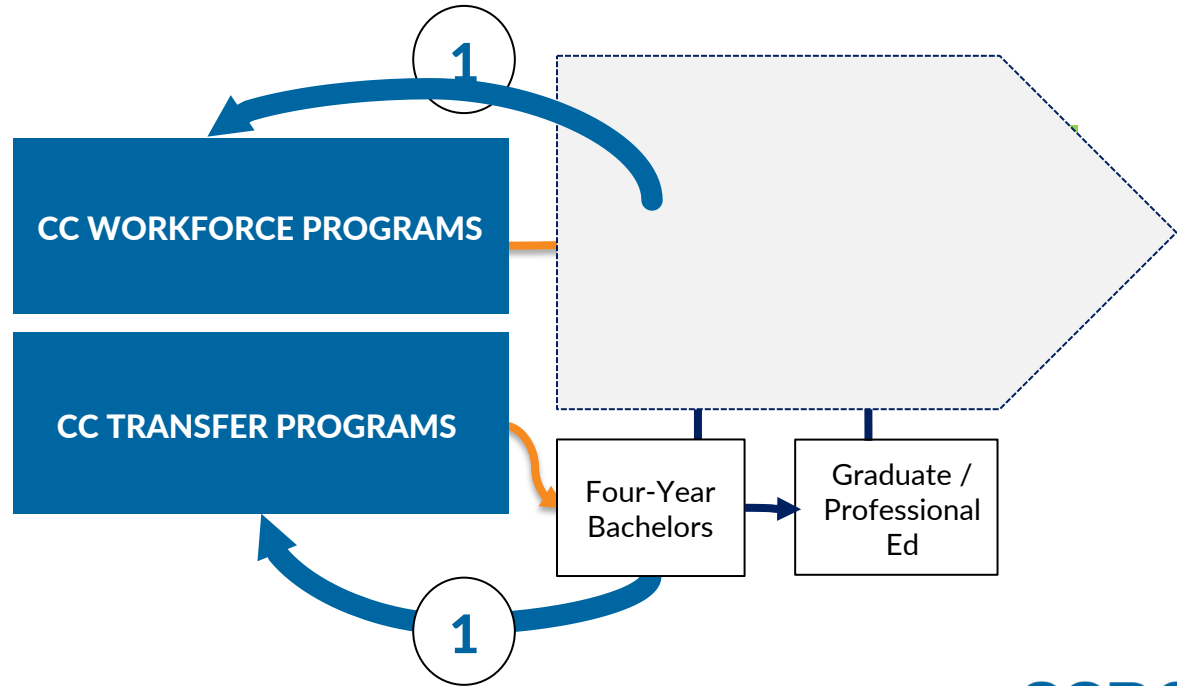


Start with **post-completion success** in mind, and “backward design”



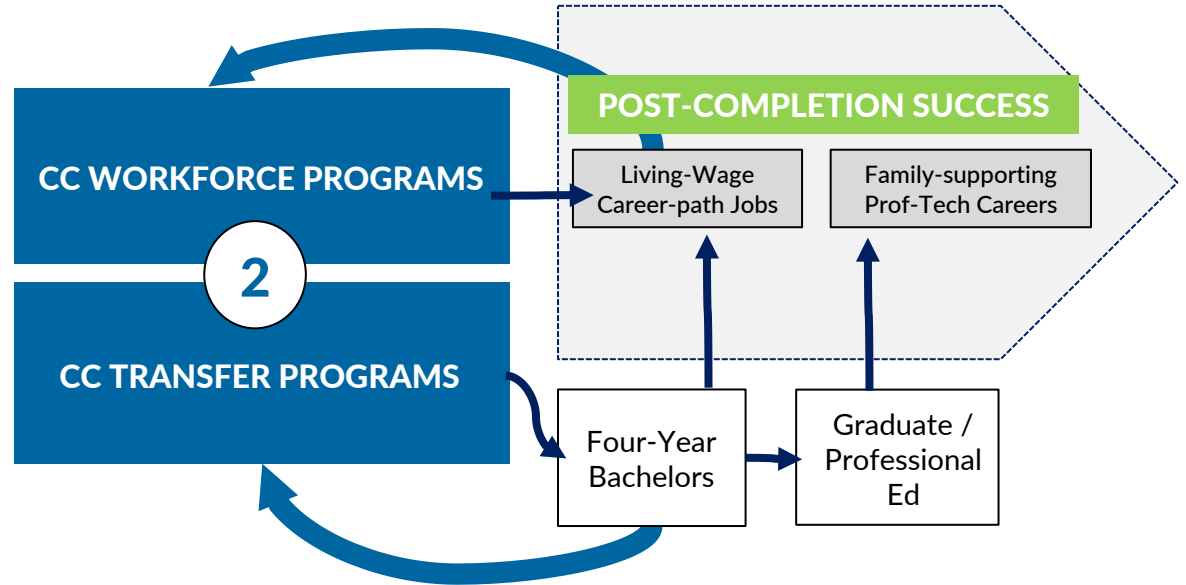
Frontier 1:

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



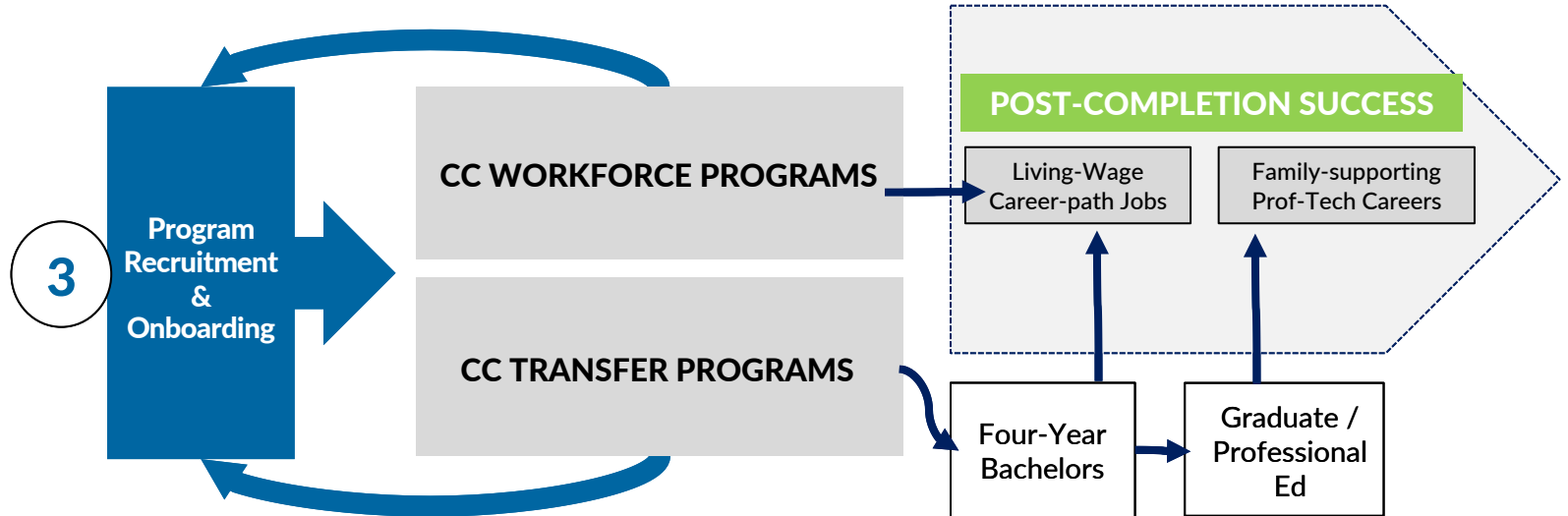
Frontier 2:

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



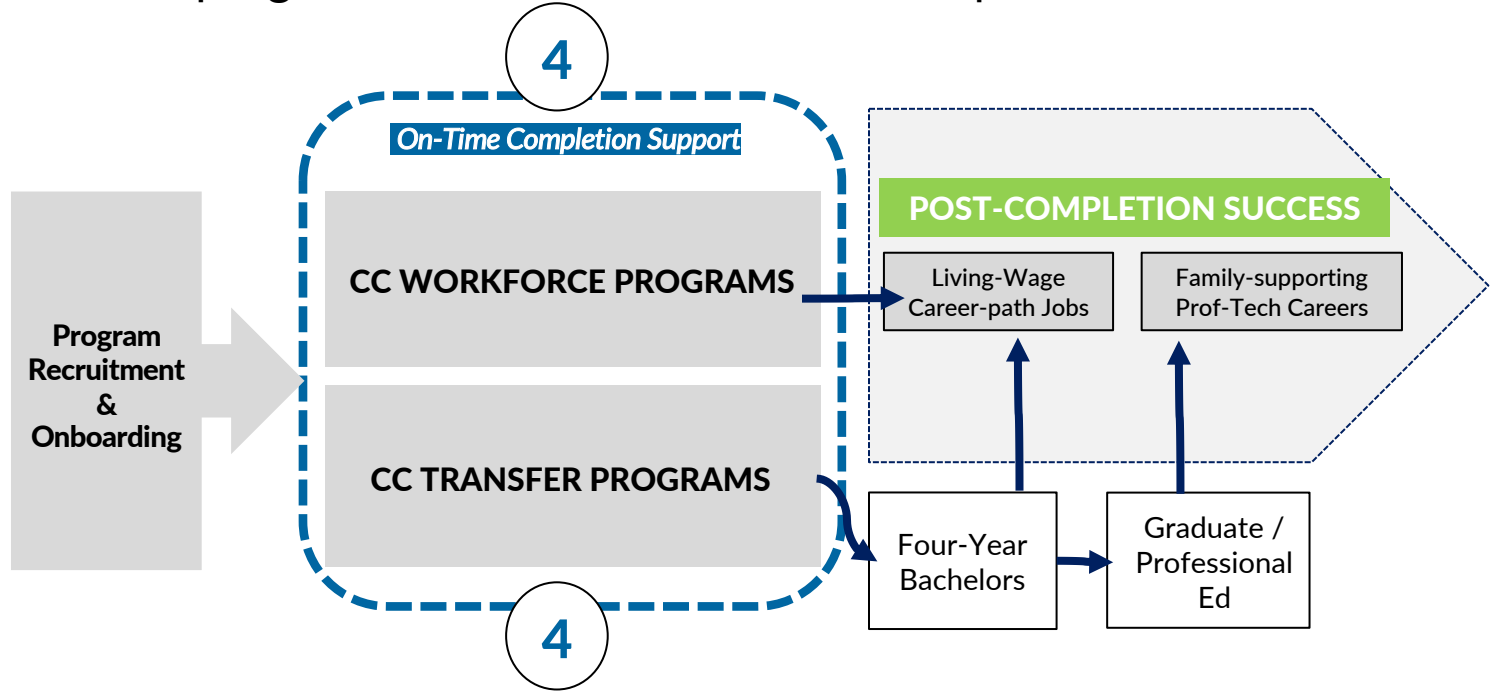
Frontier 3:

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



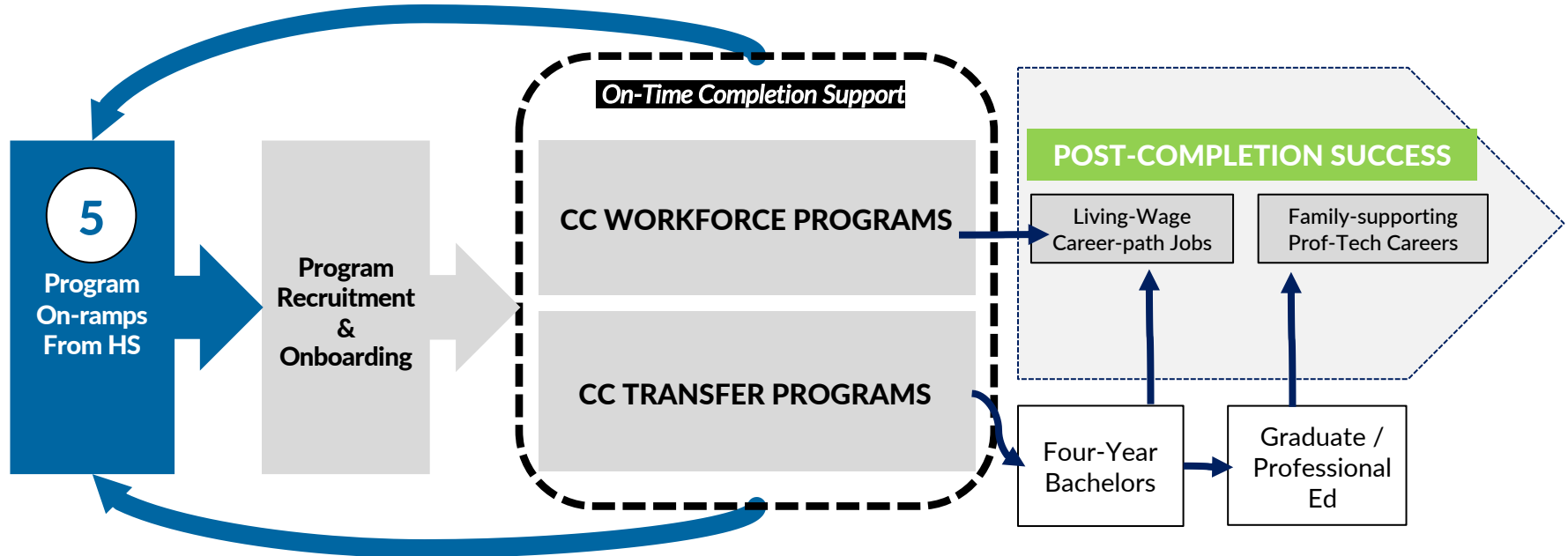
Frontier 4:

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.

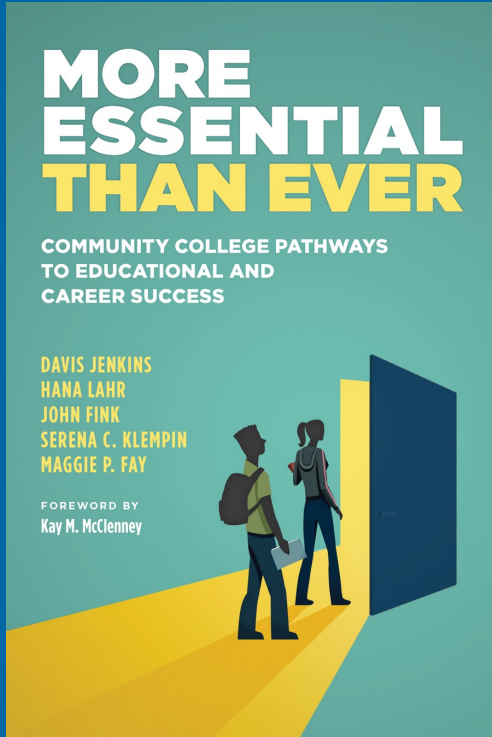


Frontier 5:

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.



More Essential Than Ever is filled with practical guidance and examples



“Taking Action” steps at the end of each chapter

Dozens of examples and case studies from different colleges

Blog series and discussion guide to facilitate broad engagement

President Panel

Joe Schaffer

Laramie County Community College



Greg Williams

Odessa College



A blue-tinted photograph of four students walking away from the camera on a campus path. They are wearing backpacks and casual clothing. The background shows a modern building with large windows and a staircase.

**Where to start (or restart):
Help all students explore and choose a
program and make an educational plan**

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

What students want during onboarding

- Explore academic and career interests
- Interact with faculty, new and current students, 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**

Takeaways From Our Research About How Students Choose Programs and Careers



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 these complex decisions?



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

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.

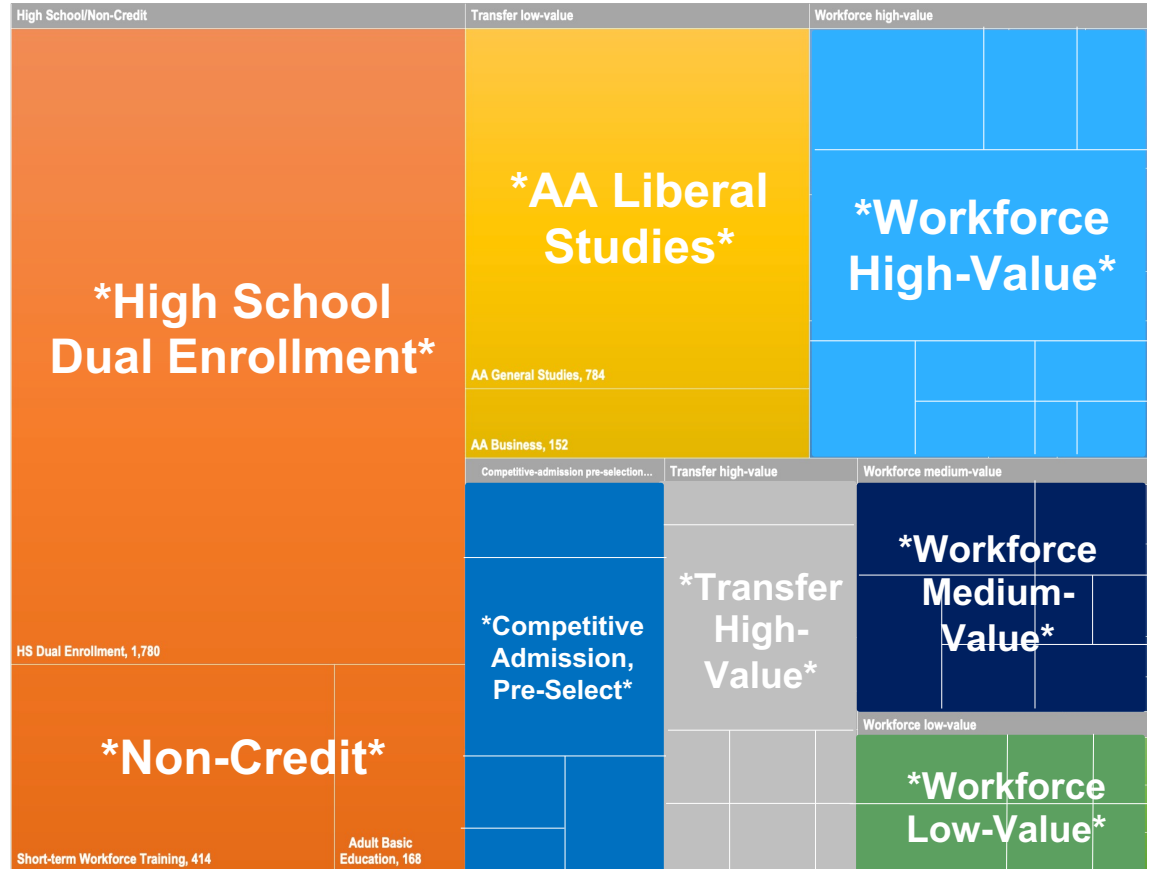
Yet many colleges have difficulty understanding which or how many of their students have individualized educational plans; they also have difficulty in capturing a bird's eye view of which of their program pathways lead to good jobs and further education for students and which meet local workforce needs. 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.**

Program Enrollment by Post-Completion Value (Data Tool, Tab 2): Hypothetical Community College

How many students are enrolled in a program that leads to living-wage employment or major-specific transfer

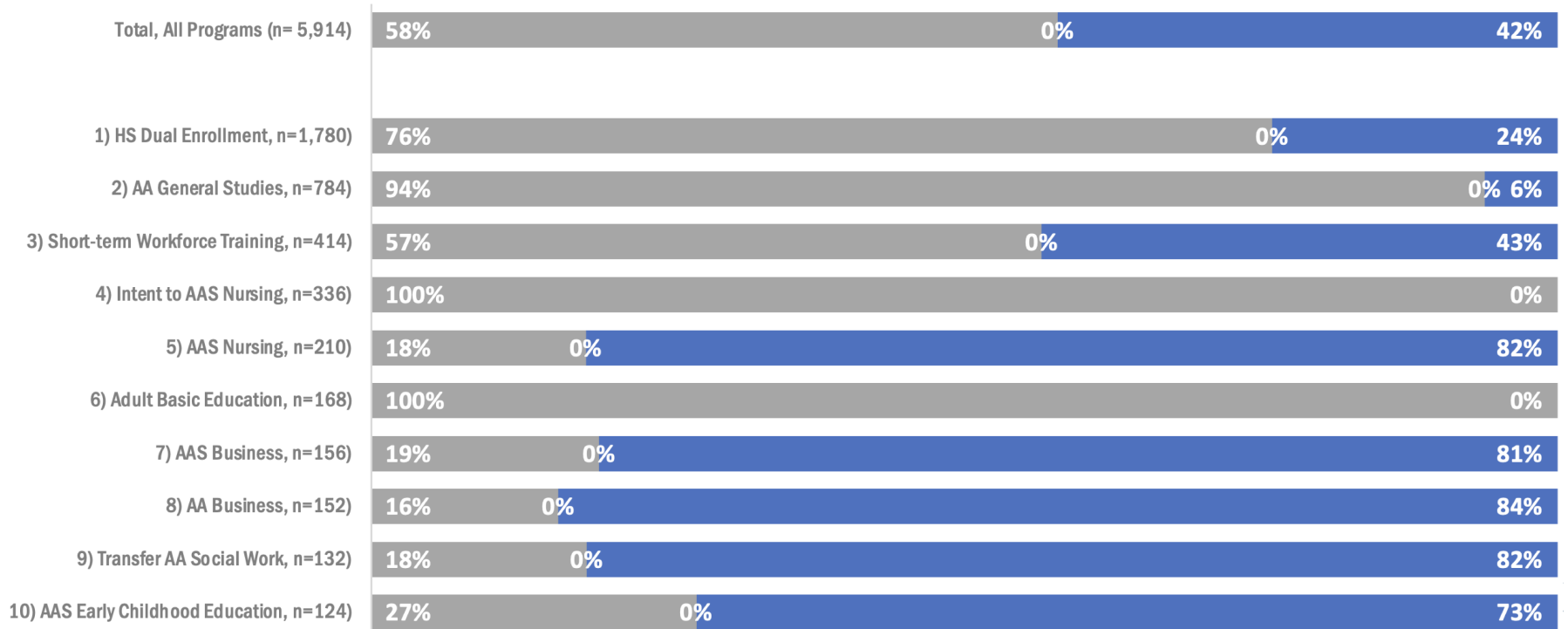
How many are not?



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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