

Unlocking Opportunity:

Progress Moving More Students Toward Good Jobs

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**COLLEGE
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The Unlocking Opportunity network is a project of the [Aspen Institute College Excellence Program](#) (Aspen) in collaboration with the [Community College Research Center](#) (CCRC).

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UNLOCKING OPPORTUNITY PILOT COLLEGES:

- Laramie County Community College
- Lorain County Community College
- Monroe Community College
- Odessa College
- San Antonio College
- Sinclair Community College
- Southwest Wisconsin Technical College
- St. Petersburg College
- Tulsa Community College
- Valencia College

The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program

The Aspen Institute is a global nonprofit organization whose purpose is to ignite human potential, build understanding, and create new possibilities for a better world. Founded in 1949, the Institute drives change through dialogue, leadership, and action to help solve society's greatest challenges. The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program supports colleges and universities in their quest to achieve a higher standard of excellence, delivering credentials that unlock life-changing careers and strengthen our economy, society, and democracy.

Community College Research Center

The Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Teachers College, Columbia University, has been a leader in community college research and reform for 30 years. CCRC's work provides a foundation for innovations in policy and practice that help give every community college student the best chance of success.

Executive Summary

While more community college students are earning credentials than ever before, the data show that more than a third of these credentials are unlikely to lead directly to good jobs that pay living wages or bachelor's degrees that open doors to good jobs.¹ For this reason, an increasing number of community colleges are working to improve student outcomes by ensuring that more students enter and complete programs that lead to good jobs, either directly after earning a community college credential or by transferring and attaining a bachelor's degree. This effort helps develop regional talent and leads to increased economic mobility and a better life for students, one of the primary reasons they attend college.²

To advance this goal, the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program (Aspen) and the Community College Research Center (CCRC) launched the Unlocking Opportunity network in 2023. The initiative began with 10 pilot colleges that together serve more than 170,000 students across diverse institutional contexts—from large, urban institutions to small, rural-serving colleges. Together, these colleges committed to enacting large-scale innovations that: (1) increase the number of students entering and completing high-value programs and (2) reduce the number of students enrolled in programs with weak post-completion outcomes. The idea: If more students enroll in programs that have high value for employment or transfer post-completion, more will graduate into good jobs, and more will attain bachelor's degrees.

Early results from Unlocking Opportunity show that such changes can be enacted in a relatively short time. From 2022 to 2025, the 10 pilot colleges increased enrollment in high-value pathways by more than 20,000 students (a 27 percent increase) and reduced enrollment in low-value programs by more than 7,600 students (a 25 percent decrease). Among students of color and lower-income students, the gains were particularly strong, with enrollment in high-value programs increasing by more than 17,000 (a 40 percent increase). Pilot colleges also increased the number of dual enrollment students—a large and growing share of community college enrollment—who entered programs. Over 6,000 more dual enrollment students are now on structured educational plans relative to the 2022 baseline. These shifts represent a substantial change in student enrollment patterns and provide strong early evidence that focused college reforms can rapidly impact the programs students enter.

The work ahead remains significant. These community colleges will need to ensure that students not only enroll in but also complete high-value pathways. And they will need to assess the extent to which shifts in enrollment patterns and strengthened programs of study actually help graduates earn higher wages and achieve higher bachelor's attainment rates. But the research is clear: Some programs of study lead to better post-graduation outcomes than others. For this reason, the enrollment changes at the 10 pilot colleges hold great promise. And their work demonstrates that, with focused, intentional reform, community colleges across the country can significantly improve their students' chances of a fulfilling future.

1 Davis Jenkins, John Fink, and Tatiana Velasco, *Which Community College Awards Are Likely to Prepare Students for Post-Completion Success?* (New York, NY: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, April 2025), <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Executive-Summary-What-Credentials-Do-Community-Colleges-Award-and-Which-Are-Likely-to-Prepare-Students-for-Post-Completion-Success.pdf>

2 Strada Education Foundation, *The Value of Community Colleges: Recent Students' Motivations and Outcomes* (Indianapolis, IN: Strada Education Foundation, September 2023), <https://www.strada.org/reports/the-value-of-community-colleges-recent-students-motivations-and-outcomes>



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01 Introduction

American postsecondary education is facing a crisis of confidence: Students and their families are investing significant time and resources in higher education, yet many are unsure that these investments will lead to good jobs and economic opportunity.³ Their concern is not unfounded. On one hand, research clearly indicates that college degrees remain one of the strongest protections against unemployment and are consistently associated with higher lifetime wages.⁴ But that broad truth obscures a more uncomfortable one: Not all degrees deliver on that promise. More than a third of community college credentials are unlikely to lead directly to good jobs or bachelor's degrees that open doors to good jobs.⁵

The good news is that community colleges have made meaningful progress in improving student completion rates over the last decade.⁶ Reforms such as Guided Pathways have helped colleges strengthen program structure, improve advising, and ultimately increase credential attainment.⁷ Yet, it is increasingly apparent that further gains in completion—while still important—will not restore confidence in community colleges because: (1) Many of the workforce credentials students earn do not lead directly to living-wage jobs,⁸ and (2) Only 16 percent of students who aim to earn a bachelor's degree do so within six years of community college entry.⁹ Research shows that strong, major-specific transfer pathways and advising are associated with higher levels of bachelor's attainment, but such practices are not the norm at most colleges.¹⁰ Similarly, while some colleges regularly work to ensure that every workforce program leads to earnings at or above a living wage, many do not.¹¹ Altogether, too many students are enrolling in programs that offer limited economic opportunity, eroding the belief that higher education delivers a path to economic mobility.¹²

In 2023, the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program (Aspen) and the Community College Research Center (CCRC) launched the Unlocking Opportunity network to tackle these challenges, working with 10 pilot colleges to devise, enact, and research strategies that would result in more students in programs that have high value for employment or transfer post-completion and fewer students in low-value programs.¹³ We selected the 10 pilot

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- 3 Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Public Trust in Higher Ed Rises From Recent Low," Gallup, July 16, 2025, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/692519/public-trust-higher-rises-recent-low.aspx>
 - 4 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Education Pays, 2024," *Career Outlook*, May 2025, <https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2025/data-on-display/education-pays.htm>
 - 5 Jenkins, Fink, and Velasco, *Which Community College Awards Are Likely to Prepare Students for Post-Completion Success?*
 - 6 The Aspen Institute, *The 2025 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence* (Aspen Institute, 2025), <https://highered.aspeninstitute.org/media/956>
 - 7 Davis Jenkins et al., *More Essential Than Ever: Community College Pathways to Educational and Career Success* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2025).
 - 8 Jenkins, Fink, and Velasco, *Which Community College Awards Are Likely to Prepare Students for Post-Completion Success?*
 - 9 Tatiana Velasco et al., *Tracking Transfer: Community College Effectiveness in Broadening Bachelor's Degree Attainment* (Aspen Institute, Community College Research Center, and National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, February 1, 2024), <https://highered.aspeninstitute.org/research-reports/tracking-transfer-community-college-effectiveness-broadening-bachelors-degree>
 - 10 Tania LaViolet et al., *The Transfer Playbook 2.0: A Practical Guide for Achieving Excellence in Transfer and Bachelor's Attainment for Community College Students* (Washington, DC: Aspen Institute College Excellence Program and Community College Research Center, March 2025), <https://highered.aspeninstitute.org/playbooks/transfer-playbook-20-practical-guide-achieving-excellence-transfer-and-bachelors>
 - 11 Jenkins, Fink, and Velasco, *Which Community College Awards Are Likely to Prepare Students for Post-Completion Success?*
 - 12 Sophie Nguyen, Rachel Fishman, and Olivia Cheche, *New America, Varying Degrees 2024: Value* (Washington, DC: New America, 2024), <https://www.newamerica.org/insights/varying-degrees-2024/value/>
 - 13 Unlocking Opportunity pilot colleges began formal network engagement in 2023; colleges submitted fall 2022 program enrollment data, which is referenced as a baseline throughout this report.

colleges from diverse institutional contexts, from large urban institutions such as Valencia College in Orlando, Florida, which enrolls over 50,000 students, to small, rural-serving colleges such as Southwest Wisconsin Technical College in Fennimore, Wisconsin, which enrolls fewer than 3,000. Collectively, the 10 colleges enroll over 170,000 credit students. These institutions signed on to a shared goal: substantially increase the number of students who enter and complete programs that lead to good jobs, either directly after graduation from the community college or through transfer and completion of a bachelor's degree, and substantially reduce the number of students enrolled in pathways that rarely lead to such outcomes. This report details the collective effect of the first three years of that work—including the number of students impacted—and looks ahead to what comes next. Because it will take many years to see the final outcomes, future data will show if these reforms achieved the end goals. However, early indicators offer promising signals for how colleges can improve value for their students and communities.

DEFINING “VALUE”

Aspen and CCRC use “value” to describe the economic value of community college programs for students after completion. For programs designed to lead to a job directly after community college, value is defined by post-completion earnings. For programs designed to lead to a job after transfer to a four-year institution and attainment of a bachelor's degree, value is defined by transfer rates, bachelor's completion rates, and individualized program mapping between community colleges and their four-year counterparts.

To begin, the 10 Unlocking Opportunity colleges classified every program at their institution by estimated post-completion earnings and bachelor's attainment. They then identified areas for improvement and set goals for how many more students would enroll in high-value programs and how many fewer would enroll in low-value programs. Next, the colleges identified and implemented strategies to meet those goals. Their strategies included expanding high-value workforce programs, strengthening the labor market value of workforce programs, clarifying major-specific transfer pathways, redesigning onboarding and advising, and increasing program advising for dual enrollment students.¹⁴

Early data from the network's first three years show that meaningful change in program enrollments can be achieved relatively quickly. At the same time, what Aspen and CCRC learned underscores the need for sustained institutional commitment to ensure that improved program enrollment patterns translate into timely completion, better wages, and bachelor's attainment outcomes for many more community college students.

¹⁴ The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program and Community College Research Center, *Unlocking Opportunity: Eight Strategies for Community Colleges to Improve Post-Completion Outcomes* (December 2025), <https://highered.aspeninstitute.org/media/1060>

02

Theory of Change and Methods

Unlocking Opportunity's theory of change is that colleges can improve students' post-completion outcomes by ensuring that many more enroll in and complete high-value programs while fewer enroll in programs unlikely to lead to post-graduation success. To accomplish these goals, colleges need to focus on two key changes: (1) strengthen programs to ensure that many more students enter programs aligned with good jobs or effective and efficient bachelor's attainment, and (2) redesign program onboarding, academic planning, and advising practices so that all students have an individualized educational plan aligned with their career and education goals, which has been shown to improve students' chances of completing a credential and in less time and at lower cost.¹⁵ Together, these improvements are intended to produce a measurable shift in which programs students enroll in and complete. The shift in program enrollment toward more high-value programs is also intended to translate into stronger overall completion rates, since students will be more motivated to complete programs that clearly lead to better outcomes, higher rates of successful transfer and bachelor's attainment, and improved employment and earnings outcomes. In short, having a greater share of students enrolled in high-value programs is a leading indicator of completion and post-completion success, as well as the network's long-term impact on students' lives.

Knowing each program's post-completion value is essential to this work. To determine that value, colleges used a taxonomy developed by Aspen and CCRC to classify programs into 11 categories based on several criteria. High-value workforce programs lead directly to jobs that pay living wages, while high-value transfer programs maintain high rates of transfer into bachelor's programs in students' major fields of interest, fewer excess credits, and, ultimately, higher bachelor's degree completion rates. Definitions of other categories—including low-value workforce and transfer programs and medium-value workforce programs—are reflected on the subsequent page.¹⁶

To track progress, the Unlocking Opportunity pilot colleges used these classifications to report annual enrollment data, starting with fall 2022 as the baseline. While this report covers changes through fall 2025 enrollment, pilot colleges will continue to submit data for future years to assess the longer-term impact of their efforts.¹⁷

15 Davis Jenkins and Hana Lahr, Research Evidence on Community College Ask-Connect-Inspire-Plan Onboarding Practices, CCRC Research Brief (May 2022). <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/ask-connect-inspire-plan-onboarding.html>

16 Davis Jenkins, Konrad Mugglestone, and Josh Wyner, Classifying Community College Programs by Post-Completion Success in Transfer and Workforce (Aspen Institute College Excellence Program and Community College Research Center, August 2025), <https://highered.aspeninstitute.org/media/1038>

17 Pilot colleges will continue to submit data to Aspen for at least the next three years, although they will not be provided with the same level of facilitation and coaching as the first three years. Additionally, it is worth acknowledging the limitations of this data. For privacy and security reasons, colleges do not submit personally identifiable student data to Aspen and CCRC. Because of this, we are unable to track whether individual students change their enrollment from one program to another. Instead, we must make inferences from the college's broader enrollment patterns.

A SUMMARY OF THE UNLOCKING OPPORTUNITY NETWORK'S POST-COMPLETION VALUE CLASSIFICATION TAXONOMY

Workforce programs are categorized based on typical earnings and advancement opportunities associated with jobs in the field:

- **High-value programs** lead to jobs that pay above a living wage in a college's region and offer strong opportunities for career advancement.
- **Medium-value programs** lead to jobs that pay near a living wage but typically require additional education, training, or experience for advancement.
- **Low-value programs** lead to jobs that pay well below a living wage and offer limited advancement without substantial further education.
- **Upskilling programs** help students in a field build or document skills, but they may not lead to immediate wage gains.

Transfer programs are classified based on how effectively they position students to earn a bachelor's degree in their intended major:

- **High-value transfer** pathways enable students to transfer most or all credits into a major-specific bachelor's program; these programs feature strong program maps, from entry at a community college to a bachelor's degree.
- **Low-value transfer** pathways lack clear alignment to a major, often resulting in credit loss during transfer, excess credits taken, and lower rates of bachelor's completion. This is often the case with liberal/general studies programs, which produce nearly 60 percent of community college transfer awards.

Additional categories capture important student entry points and pathways:

- **Competitive-admission pre-selection pathways** (e.g., pre-nursing) include students preparing for selective programs.
- **Dual enrollment** includes high school students earning college credit, potentially as part of early postsecondary pathway exploration.
- **Noncredit** includes adult basic education and workforce programs not eligible for federal financial aid.
- **Undecided/unclassified** includes students who have not yet entered a defined program pathway, as well as programs that are impossible to classify.

03 Overall Network Outcomes

The Big Picture

During the first three years of Unlocking Opportunity, the pilot colleges made meaningful progress toward shifting student enrollment into pathways with stronger post-completion value. Cumulatively, between 2022 and 2025, the 10 pilot colleges reported a 27 percent increase (20,104) of students enrolled in high-value pathways, including 13,385 traditional (post-high school) degree-seeking college students as well as 6,719 dual enrollment students who identified a program pathway and developed an educational plan with their community college.¹⁸ To give a sense of the scope of change, the increase in enrollment in high-value programs represents a 12 percent shift in total enrollment at the 10 colleges.

For low-value pathways, the pilot colleges reported a combined 25 percent decrease in enrollment, or 7,648 students, from the 2022 baseline (30,824). This figure includes reductions in the number of students enrolled in low-value workforce and transfer programs, as well as approximately 1,500 students who were undecided and, through redesigned advising and program onboarding, enrolled in a defined program of study.

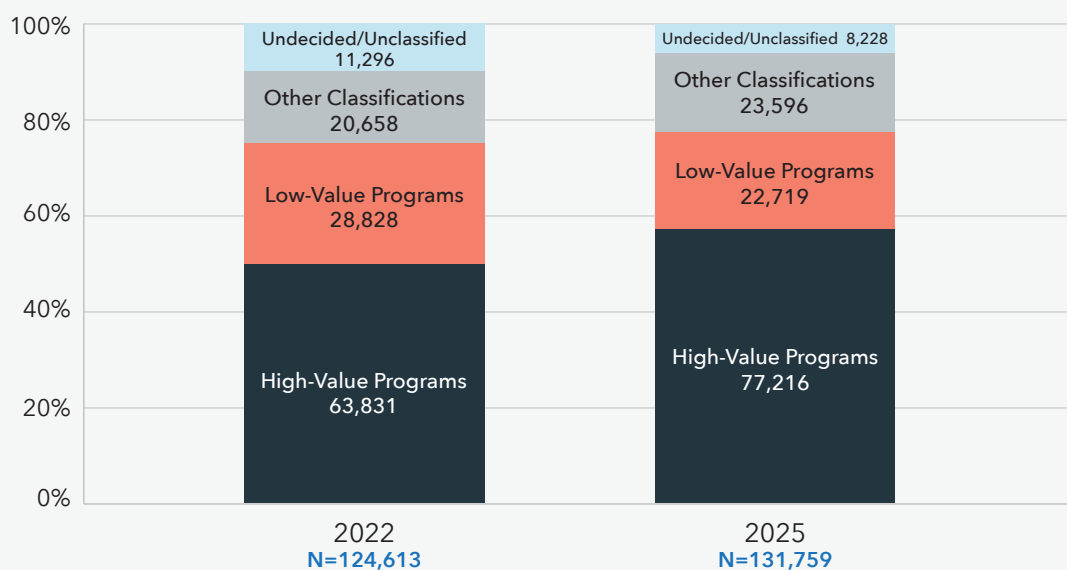
Combined, these results represent early evidence that Unlocking Opportunity-related strategies can shape the program choices students make and the quality of programs students enter.

The growth in high-value program enrollment exceeds the reduction in low-value enrollment for two reasons. First, over the three years, total enrollment across the network colleges grew by over 11,000 credit-seeking students. Many colleges prioritized onboarding new students into high-value pathways, which resulted in increased enrollment in high-value programs among new students without an equivalent decrease on the low-value side among continuing students. Second, many colleges offer a substantial number of medium-value workforce programs (which offer immediate returns near a living wage, but with experience or more training, completers can advance to jobs paying more than a living wage). And some colleges improved the post-completion opportunities associated with medium-value programs, which were then reclassified as high-value. As a result, high-value programs gained enrollment, but low-value programs did not lose an equivalent number of students.¹⁹

18 This is likely a conservative estimate of the Unlocking Opportunity network's broader impact. In particular, several colleges worked extensively to provide alternate pathways to the more than 13,000 students who enrolled in pre-selective admissions programs (e.g., pre-nursing, pre-radiology, or in some cases, engineering), many of whom would not be admitted into a selective program. Colleges worked to provide these students with high-value alternative pathways if they were not selected, but in many cases this may not be reflected in the enrollment data. Aspen is conducting additional research on these populations with the Unlocking Opportunity expansion colleges.

19 In Figure One, medium-value programs are captured as part of "other classifications."

FIGURE ONE
Unlocking Opportunity Network Pilot Colleges Fall Enrollment by Post-Completion Value



Note: Data visualized was submitted by network colleges in fall 2022 and fall 2025. These charts exclude dually enrolled students and non-credit students.

Shifts in Enrollment Among Underrepresented Student Groups

In addition to the overall improvements, enrollment patterns for students of color and low-income students are notable.²⁰ On the whole, 17,451 more students from among these groups enrolled in high-value programs (including dual enrollment students on educational plans), a remarkable 40 percent upward shift from a baseline of 43,761. On the other hand, declines in low-value program enrollment among these students were more modest, decreasing by 3,222 students—a 16 percent reduction from the baseline of 20,543.

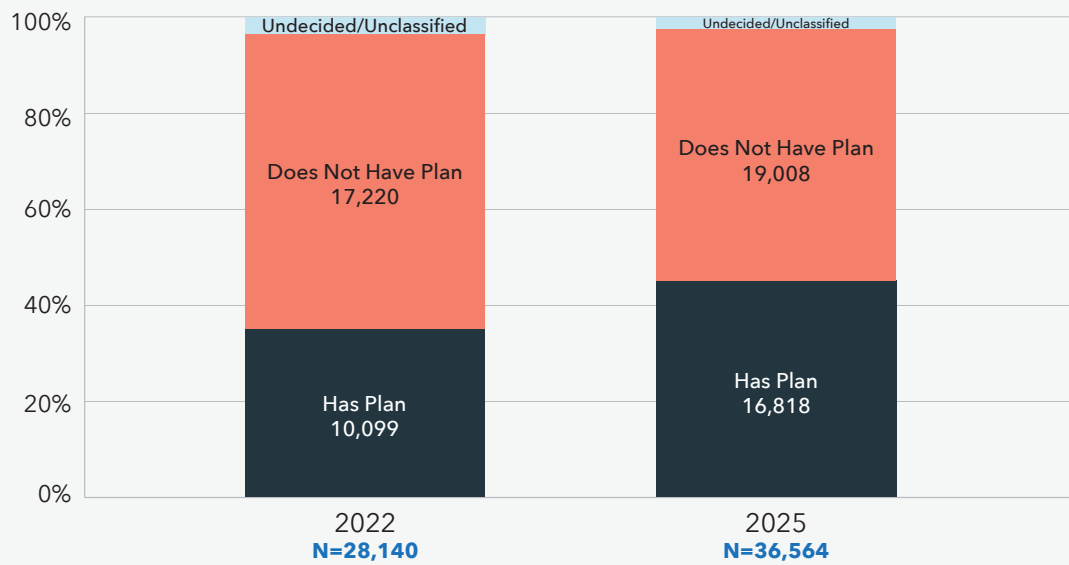
Growth in Dual Enrollment Students with Educational Plans

In addition to shifts among traditional community college students, the pilot colleges made substantial progress in helping dual enrollment students enter high-value pathways. While traditional dual enrollment is often an à la carte selection of random college-level coursework taught at the high school, research indicates that deliberately getting dually enrolled students on a structured pathway can help them identify career opportunities through higher education.²¹ As a result, helping these students develop educational plans represented a key goal of Unlocking Opportunity colleges focused on this population. Over three years, the number of dually enrolled students on educational plans increased by 6,719, from 10,099 to 16,818. At network colleges, these efforts differed from those for traditional students because they helped a broader group explore and enter high-value pathways earlier, including many who would matriculate to four-year colleges and universities after high school. For this reason, these results are presented separately in this report.

20 Defined as Pell recipients or—if the college has the data capacity to identify them—Pell-eligible students.

21 Community College Research Center, “Introducing DEEP: A Research-Based Framework for Broadening the Benefits of Dual Enrollment,” (CCRC, 2023), <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/easyblog/introducing-deep-research-based-framework.html>

FIGURE TWO
Unlocking Opportunity Pilot Colleges
Dual Enrollment Students by Educational Plan Status (2022-2025)



04 College Case Studies

SOUTHWEST WISCONSIN TECHNICAL COLLEGE

Fall 2025 Enrollment: 3,580 (including 1,537 dually enrolled students)

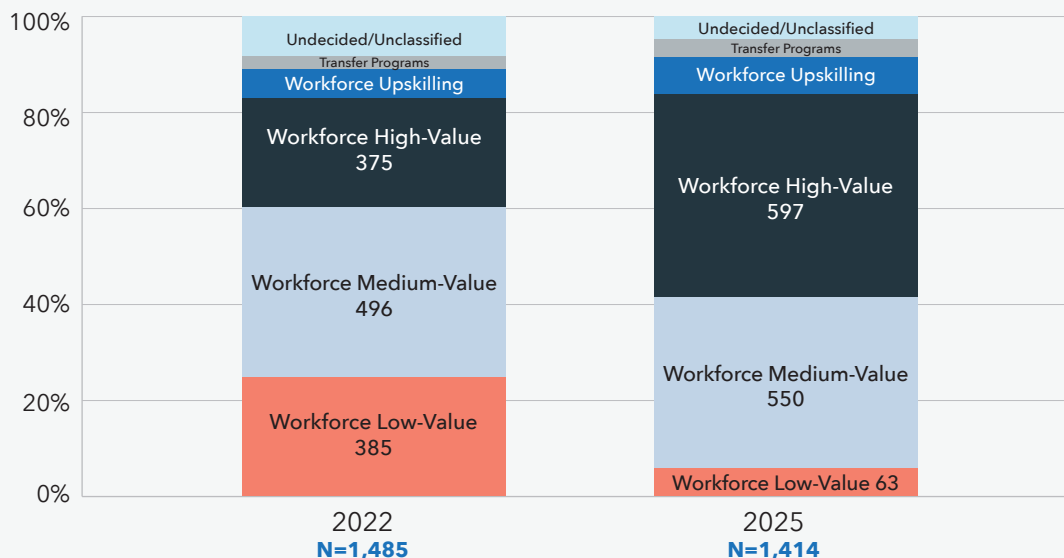
At Southwest Wisconsin Technical College (SWTC), leaders made a commitment not to graduate any students into poverty, meaning the college would make sure every student completed a program that led to a living-wage job, either directly after SWTC or through transfer to a four-year institution. To accomplish this goal, the college implemented two primary strategies: (1) strengthen the post-completion value of lower-value programs, and (2) revamp how all students explore and choose a program of study, including developing individualized, comprehensive plans to help them complete a program.

SWTC used its 2023 assessment of program outcomes to identify 11 low-wage programs that needed reform. These programs had typical wages for graduates of less than \$16.50 an hour, accounting for 430 students, or 12 percent of the student body. To strengthen these programs and raise wages for graduates, SWTC worked with each program leader to devise a plan to improve graduates' earnings. For example, in the agronomy program, which trains workers for essential but low-paying agricultural jobs in the region, the college learned that employers were willing to pay more to workers who could operate drones and apply pesticides. In response, SWTC updated the curriculum to focus on precision agronomy, including drone certification and a new course in pesticide application. The college closed three of its 11 programs (culinary arts, culinary management, and automotive collision) that could not be strengthened in a way that would lead to higher wages in its service area.

At the same time, the college revised program onboarding processes for new students to ensure that all complete a comprehensive, three-part success plan, including academic, career, and financial components. How this works: First, students learn about the programs offered at the college and the careers they lead to, helping them understand the connections between program choices and employment opportunities, and make informed decisions. After students choose a program, advisors help them develop specific plans for completing required coursework and out-of-course experiences, such as internships, and financial aid staff help them develop plans for how they will pay for their entire degree program, including tuition, fees, supplies, and living expenses. Finally, students are required to submit all three plans—career, academic, and financial—before registering for classes. The college has implemented touchpoints to ensure that students and staff regularly review the plans and make adjustments if things change.

Because of these innovations, SWTC reduced enrollment in low-value workforce programs by 322 students (an 84 percent decrease over the three years) while increasing the number of students enrolled in medium- and high-value programs by 276, or 32 percent. Additionally, the college's student planning strategy has increased the share of students who have an individualized educational plan from 0 to 42 percent (including dual enrollment students). In fall 2025, 97 percent of incoming program students developed a plan.

FIGURE THREE: SOUTHWEST WISCONSIN TECHNICAL COLLEGE
Fall Enrollment by Post-Completion Value



Note: Data visualized was submitted by network colleges in fall 2022 and fall 2025. These charts exclude dually enrolled students and non-credit students.

SAN ANTONIO COLLEGE

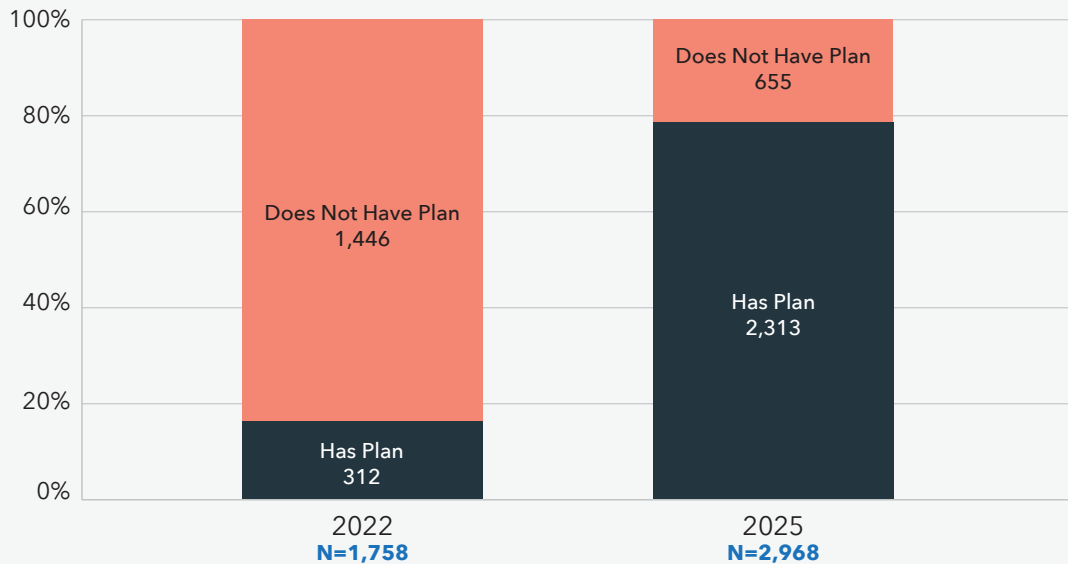
Fall 2025 Enrollment: 17,748 (including 2,968 dually enrolled students)

At San Antonio College (SAC), leaders identified two priority reforms to improve students' post-completion success. The first was expanding capacity in health care programs that had more student demand—and unmet labor demand—than program slots and also corresponded to good-paying jobs. The second focus was on ensuring that the college's growing dual enrollment population developed educational plans to enter high-value programs.

For health care programs, the most significant impediment to expanding capacity was the limited availability of clinical slots in the region. To respond, the college hired a clinical coordinator who worked with 12 nearby health care facilities to identify clinical slots for an additional 160 nursing students. SAC also built a state-of-the-art simulation lab on campus, which can fulfill portions of students' clinical education requirements. As a result, the college increased enrollment in its three selective nursing programs by 321 students, a 71 percent increase from the fall 2022 baseline.

SAC decided to focus on dual enrollment because a large and growing portion of its students were in high school—2,968 in fall 2025, or 17 percent of total enrollment—and relatively few had comprehensive educational plans. The college worked with its K-12 partners to engage certified advisors, program coordinators, and high school counselors to help every dually enrolled student create an educational plan. Now, dual credit students benefit from the college's advising model in high school. In addition, the college extended its successful model for ongoing advising to dual enrollment students, who meet with an advisor when they complete 15, 30, and 45 credit hours to ensure they are making progress and make changes if needed. As a result, the share of dual credit students on educational plans increased from 18 percent to 78 percent from 2022 to 2025.

FIGURE FOUR: SAN ANTONIO COLLEGE
Dual Enrollment Students on an Educational Plan (2022-2025)



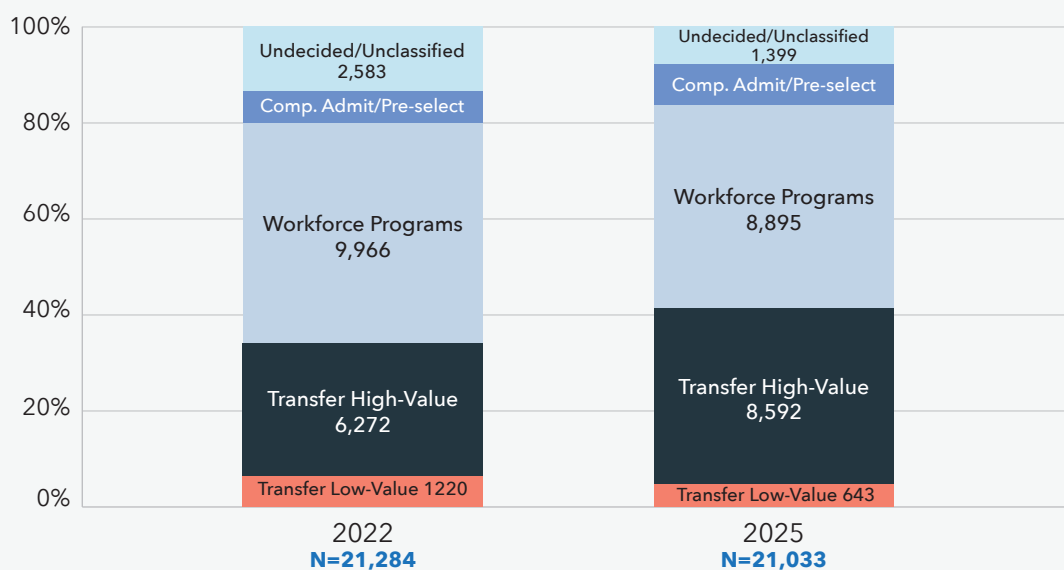
ST. PETERSBURG COLLEGE

Fall 2025 Enrollment: 25,116 (including 4,083 dually enrolled students)

St. Petersburg College focused on changing advising processes to reduce the number of students in general studies and increase the number in high-value programs. The college worked with advisors and student services leaders to shift from using a general associate of arts as a default classification that did not trigger any focused advising to using it as a “red flag” to target supports for undecided students. To connect these students with high-value programs, the college developed a plan to consistently help “red flag” students explore career interests, choose a program, and develop an individualized educational plan. Because most undecided students were in transfer programs, the college incorporated into the redesign earlier, more structured conversations about pathways to bachelor’s programs at four-year university partners, as well as the college’s own bachelor’s degrees. This advising redesign was built on the college’s prior guided pathways work, which included mapping pathways to its own bachelor’s degrees and automatically admitting students to those bachelor’s programs who met the prerequisites.

St. Petersburg has made substantial progress in shifting enrollments over the past three years, increasing students in high-value transfer programs by 2,320 (a 37 percent increase from fall 2022) and decreasing enrollment in low-value transfer programs by 577 students (a 47 percent decrease). The college also reduced the number of undecided students by 1,055, representing more than 5 percent of the college’s total enrollment.

FIGURE FIVE: ST. PETERSBURG COLLEGE



Note: Data visualized was submitted by network colleges in fall 2022 and fall 2025. These charts exclude dually enrolled students and non-credit students.

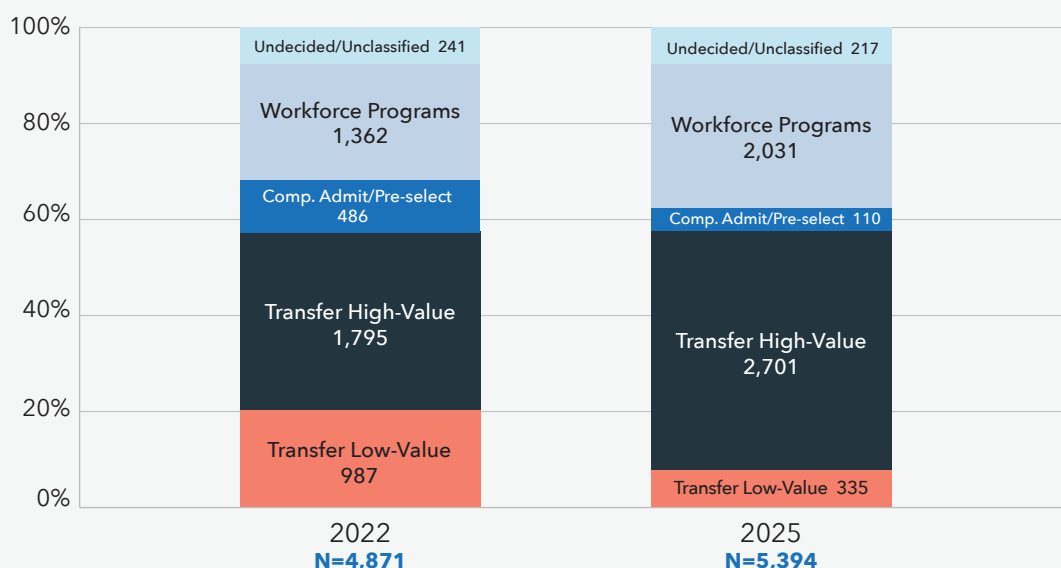
ODESSA COLLEGE

Fall 2025 Enrollment: 10,389 (including 5,083 dually enrolled students)²²

Odessa College prioritized increasing the number of students in high-value pathways, with a commensurate reduction in students in general studies. The college's focus began with what its data analyses revealed: Students in the general studies associate degree program were much less likely than students in other transfer pathways to transfer to a four-year university and, if they did, were also much less likely to earn a bachelor's degree. To start its redesign work, the college indicated that this was a priority by removing the general studies program from the new student application, so it was no longer an option. The college then engaged in three strategies to move current students from general studies to higher-value programs. First, it revamped career exploration and advising for new students to help them choose a pre-major program aligned to their career and academic interests. Second, the college advised currently enrolled students who had accumulated fewer than 30 credit hours in general studies into high-value career-technical programs or pre-major bachelor's pathways. Third, after realizing that many students classified as general studies were not actually undecided, but rather pre-health students who had repeatedly failed to gain admission to selective nursing and other health care programs, the college created a new health science transfer-oriented program. Odessa then devised a plan to advise pre-health students who were unlikely to be admitted to highly selective degree pathways into this new program.

²² This value reflects the college's official census enrollment, which varies slightly from the original fall 2025 data submission.

FIGURE SIX: ODESSA COLLEGE



Note: Data visualized was submitted by network colleges in fall 2022 and fall 2025. These charts exclude dually enrolled students and non-credit students.

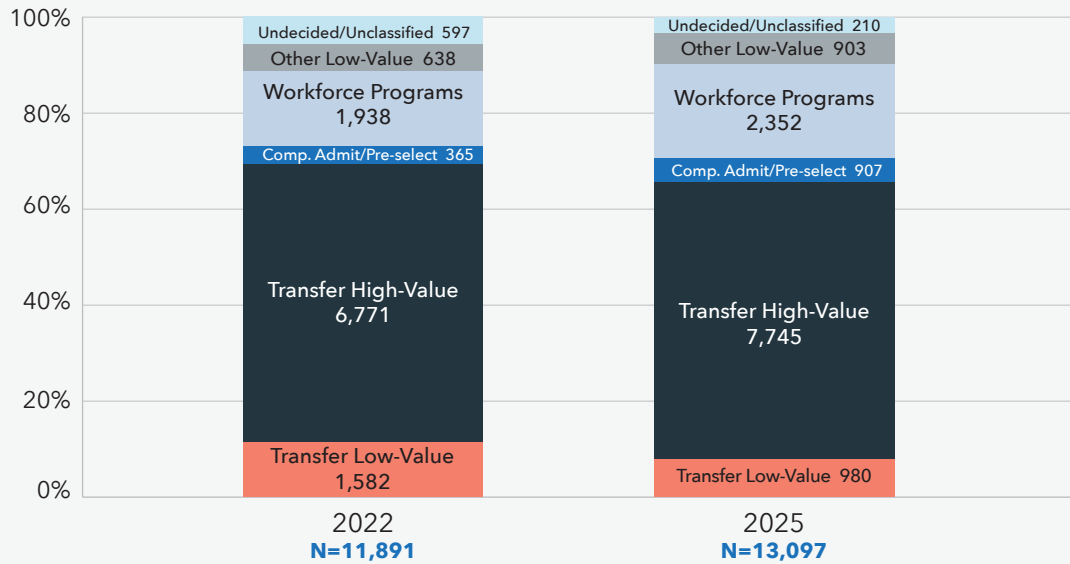
Since fall 2022, Odessa has achieved meaningful changes in enrollment patterns, reducing enrollment in low-value transfer programs by 652 students (a 66 percent decrease) while increasing enrollment in high-value transfer programs by 906 students (a 50 percent increase). With its reforms to pre-selective programs, the college has reduced the number of students in these tracks by 376 (a 75 percent decrease), while enrolling 794 students in the new health science program, a high-value transfer pathway, in fall 2025.

TULSA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Fall 2025 Enrollment: 17,153 (including 3,706 dually enrolled students)

Tulsa Community College also chose to focus its reforms on pre-health programs, where nearly 10 percent of the college's approximately 13,000 traditional students are enrolled (not including those dually enrolled). The challenge: The majority of pre-health students want to become nurses but, even with strong academic records, they cannot gain admission due to limited space in the nursing program. To expand opportunities for pre-health students, Tulsa created a new Associate of Science in Healthcare Administration program that offers a structured path to in-demand health care jobs other than nursing. The new program includes courses that provide two routes to health care jobs: (1) preparation for transfer into a bachelor's degree in Healthcare Administration at a nearby university, and (2) a path to living-wage jobs in the health sector, including case manager assistants, quality and improvement outcomes analysts, and medical records specialists. All pre-nursing students now start in the Healthcare Administration or Pre-Nursing associate degree program so they can move into an alternative high-value health care pathway even if they are not admitted to the nursing program. The college has also implemented mandatory, team-based advising for selective admission programs, as well as the Associate of Science in Healthcare Administration, and is starting earlier advising for students who intend to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree.

FIGURE SEVEN: TULSA COMMUNITY COLLEGE



Note: Data visualized was submitted by network colleges in fall 2022 and fall 2025. These charts exclude dually enrolled students and non-credit students.

These and related Unlocking Opportunity reforms have helped Tulsa increase enrollment in high-value transfer programs by 974 students and decrease enrollment in low-value transfer programs by 602 students. Because the college is phasing out the old pre-selective admission health track, 837 of the 974 new high-value transfer students are enrolled in the Associate of Science in Healthcare Administration pathway, the college's new option for pre-health students.

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Lessons Learned

During the three years of Unlocking Opportunity's pilot phase, Aspen and CCRC gained insights into strategies that contributed to the outcomes detailed above. Many of those insights are contained in our December 2025 publication, *Unlocking Opportunity: Eight Strategies for Community Colleges to Improve Post-Completion Outcomes*. In addition, we have identified three broad leadership and change management practices that enabled Unlocking Opportunity institutions to improve the distribution of program enrollments in a relatively short period of time. Those are:

1. **Prioritization is essential for colleges to successfully implement scaled reforms.** Each reform that led to large-scale enrollment changes at network colleges required substantial shifts to internal college policies, procedures, and systems, and often, how the college worked with external partners. Designing and implementing those changes required the focused attention of leaders, faculty, and staff as well as reallocation of resources. Meanwhile, other operational and strategic priorities continued to demand attention and scarce resources. For this reason, Unlocking Opportunity colleges that succeeded in transforming practice benefited from an intense focus on no more than three reforms at any given time. While Unlocking Opportunity presidents all indicated that their students could benefit if their college implemented most—and in some cases all—of the eight reforms the network colleges pursued, they understood the importance of concentrating their energy, resources, and staff on changes most likely to shift enrollments and achieve more in a shorter period of time.
2. **Integrating Unlocking Opportunity goals into college-wide strategies and plans ensures that changes will be systemic and sustained over time.** When colleges embark on a new project like Unlocking Opportunity, there is a risk that the work might be seen as temporary or just another initiative to be completed by those who must lead and implement it. But the goals of Unlocking Opportunity—ensuring that more students complete programs that lead to good jobs, either immediately after graduating or by transferring and earning a bachelor's degree—are central to the community college mission. Realizing the importance of these reforms, many network colleges used their engagement in Unlocking Opportunity to elevate post-completion value as a college-wide priority. Multiple network colleges translated the key principles of this work into their strategic plans and goals, including Tulsa Community College, Lorain County Community College, Monroe Community College, and St. Petersburg College. And a few colleges integrated post-graduation success measures into processes to annually review and evaluate their programs. These changes ensure that the work during Unlocking Opportunity will extend into future improvement efforts.
3. **Cross-functional teams are essential to make changes in institution-wide practices.** Designing and effectively implementing any of the eight Unlocking Opportunity reform strategies requires broad involvement in the change process, including administrators, faculty, and staff within individual programs, as well as advisors and student success coaches. Each of the pilot colleges in the Unlocking Opportunity network convened a cross-functional steering committee that included representatives from across the institution, and many of the colleges then launched working groups to implement each strategy their institution adopted. Both sets of teams included individuals from academics, student services, admissions and enrollment management, information technology, and institutional research. Each team also included cabinet-level and project leaders who tracked whether the reforms were advancing the quantitative goals to increase students in high-value programs and decrease students in low-value programs. By including both leaders and members of each key division on these teams, the colleges helped build ownership of the Unlocking Opportunity goals and reforms across the campus.

What's Next?

Three years into Unlocking Opportunity, the 10 pilot colleges have implemented innovations in policy, practice, and systems that hold the promise of fundamentally altering the post-completion success of tens of thousands of students. Because their changes have been systemic and will affect future students, even larger numeric improvements are likely in future years. To assess those impacts, Aspen will track enrollment changes, transfer and bachelor's completion outcomes, and wage outcomes at the 10 pilot colleges through at least 2028.

Unlocking Opportunity also welcomed [54 additional colleges](#) to the network in September 2025. Like the 10 pilot colleges, these institutions are (1) setting quantitative goals to increase the number of students in high-value pathways and decrease the number of students enrolled in low-value pathways, and (2) identifying reform strategies to achieve their goals. Aspen will annually report on the goals and progress of these 54 colleges as their work progresses. We will also continue learning about effective reform strategies from all 64 Unlocking Opportunity colleges, building on the evidence-based strategies outlined in [Unlocking Opportunity: Eight Strategies for Community Colleges to Improve Post-Completion Outcomes](#).

To learn more about these insights and continued Unlocking Opportunity developments and updates, please visit [our webpage](#) and [sign up for our newsletter](#).