

From Goals to Graduation to Post-Completion Success: Why Every Student Needs an Educational Plan

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Many students enter community college with education and career goals that range from nebulous to concrete. Yet, even when their goals are well conceived, students often lack a clear understanding of how to achieve them. They are frequently uncertain about what courses to enroll in, how long completion will take, and how their coursework connects to specific jobs or bachelor's degree pathways. This uncertainty stems largely from a lack of guidance in creating a structured educational plan. Without a clear plan to refine and realize their goals, students often enroll in courses that do not count toward their program of study—a primary factor in the decision to stop out. Nationally, more than 40% of students who start at a community college leave higher education before the start of their second year (NSCRC, 2025).

These high attrition rates come at a time when community colleges are facing rising expectations from students, policymakers, and taxpayers. States and systems are increasingly holding colleges accountable not only for enrollment and persistence but for timely completion, transfer without credit loss, and employment that leads to family-sustaining wages. At the same time, colleges are serving students whose lives are more complex than ever: Students are balancing work, caregiving, and financial pressures, often while navigating college systems for the first time. In this context, simply helping students get started in college is no longer enough. Students need early, ongoing, facilitated support to explore, choose, and complete a program of study aligned with their aspirations.

Educational plans are essential in providing such support. When the planning process is well designed, students develop customized roadmaps in the first term that show how their courses will prepare them to meet their education and career goals. This structured planning is a practical and powerful way to address uncertainty for students and institutions. For students, an explicit plan makes the purpose of each course visible, and it helps them anticipate key decision points along the way. For colleges, educational plans are more than just an advising tool; they enable colleges to schedule courses based on what students actually need to complete programs on time. In short, plans are not just about finishing college; they are about finishing the right program as quickly and affordably as possible.

Structured planning is a practical and powerful way to address uncertainty for students and institutions.

This institutional shift reflects a central finding in *More Essential Than Ever: Community College Pathways to Educational and Career Success* (Jenkins et al., 2025). Students are far more likely to build momentum when they start with the development of clear goals and a structured plan to achieve them. By mapping out all required coursework based on a student's specific timeline and post-completion intentions, these plans translate abstract institutional options into a concrete, personalized path forward.

This brief describes how educational plans can promote student engagement and persistence. We also explain how CCRC's new Community College Program Mapper can help colleges visualize their total enrollment by program of study and track the percentage of students in each program who have an educational plan (Jenkins et al., 2026). Following this brief, we include a series of case studies of several community colleges about how they developed and scaled career and educational planning. As CCRC researchers spoke with these colleges during the spring and summer of 2026, we learned about what makes the educational planning process successful, and their advice for other colleges that would like to adopt similar practices.

How Not Having a Plan Contributes to Student Departure From College

A consistent pattern across studies is clear: Students who leave college often lack clarity about their path through college. Many community college students begin their educational journey highly motivated to complete a degree, aiming to secure a good job in their field of interest or transfer to a four-year college (Aguilar Padilla et al., 2025; CCCSE, 2022). Indeed, in a survey of more than 8,000 public two-year college students, 96% of first-year students expressed a strong commitment to their education (RNL, 2025).

However, real and persistent challenges frequently derail this initial motivation. In a recent study of students at four community colleges who stopped out before the start of their second year, financial hardship and academic struggles were the top two reasons reported for leaving. Moreover, a third of respondents cited student-related stress and shifting career goals as contributing factors (Aguilar Padilla et al., 2025).

In the face of these challenges, students who cannot see a clear path to completion are far less likely to persist. When students lack institutional guidance, they are left to navigate complex systems alone. For instance, the Aguilar Padilla et al. (2025) study revealed a stark institutional gap: A quarter of non-returning students never met with an advisor in their first year, 78% reported that no one helped them choose a program of study, and 61% never developed an educational plan. This lack of information correlates with student attrition. Using a nationally representative survey, Cheche and Fishman (2023) found that 23% of community college students who stopped out lacked basic information about how many semesters they needed to complete their degree, compared with just 4% of continuing students.

Other data suggest that students are actively looking to colleges to bridge this gap. In *Inside Higher Ed's* Student Voice survey, 26% of students stated that their institution could better support their success by clarifying pathways to credentials (Flaherty, 2024). Clear pathways are also a powerful re-enrollment tool; in a national survey of 1,500 students, including 500 who had left college, 60% reported they would consider returning if they received clear guidance about a path to degree completion (Ellucian, 2025).

Effective educational planning should begin with understanding a student's holistic profile—including their academic and career interests, personal circumstances, financial needs, and desired timeline for completing a degree or transferring to a four-year college. By addressing these factors early, educational planning provides the explicit roadmap students want while strengthening a college's overall retention strategy.

Educational Plans Get Students on a Pathway and Promote Persistence

An educational planning process that incorporates early career discussions helps students select a program suited to their interests and goals. While most colleges require students to choose a major during the application process, they usually provide only limited support to help them make an informed choice. Research shows that many incoming students are contemplating multiple programs across entirely different fields (Lahr et al., 2025). Without structured guidance to help them navigate these possibilities and build awareness of various fields, industries, and career routes (Klempin et al., 2025), students often default to general studies programs. Unfortunately, these broad tracks are often poorly aligned with successful transfer pathways or strong labor market outcomes (Lahr et al., 2025).

Educational planning solves this both by making the path to completion more strategic and thoughtful and by making it more visible and actionable—showing students exactly what courses to take, when to take them, and why. This clarity contributes to student motivation to persist (CCCSE, 2022). A comprehensive onboarding process that blends exploration with academic and career guidance can inspire students to think about options they may not have considered before while ensuring that they establish a realistic timeline to graduation that also meets their goals (Jenkins et al., 2025). Without this transparency, students are more likely to accumulate excess credits, delay completion, or leave without a credential.

Tailoring Educational Plans

For many colleges, establishing an educational planning process and scaling it for large numbers of students means redesigning internal structures for existing recruitment, enrollment, onboarding, and advising functions. Colleges must build the capacity to help students develop plans, help them update plans if students' goals change, and monitor students' progress. Colleges that have adopted guided pathways reforms usually make available program maps that provide a guide for all students entering a particular pathway. However, educational plans go beyond program maps by specifying exactly what each student will take and when, laying out the coursework students need to complete as well as other activities, such as experiential learning, that will enhance their academic experience. In this way, educational planning operationalizes program maps at the individual student level.

Educational plans are tailored for community college students at distinct stages of their academic journeys. These include first-time-in-college students navigating higher education for the first time; returning students re-entering college after an extended absence; transfer-bound students with specific four-year college destination goals; and dual-enrollment students who need to understand how the courses they take while in high school can build toward a degree of their choice, including which will be transferable later to a four-year college (Jenkins et al., 2025). To be effective, educational plans must also be grounded in reality, accounting for other obligations such as work or caregiving to give students a transparent view of their timeline to a credential of value (Jenkins et al., 2026). Students who have plans know what to expect and how long it will take to reach their goals, reducing surprise factors and enabling students to better manage their lives and finances.

Having a viable plan with a clear endpoint is especially important for part-time enrollees, who constitute the majority of community college students but graduate at a much lower rate than their full-time peers—20% compared to 67% over six years (NSCRC, 2023). By ensuring that every student has the opportunity to develop a plan, institutions can shift the focus from “full-time vs. part-time” to “on-plan vs. off-plan.” In a National Science Foundation–funded evaluation of guided pathways whole-college reforms across all community colleges in three states, CCRC found that two practices had especially strong associations with student momentum toward completion: case-managed advising by field and scheduling classes based on students’ plans (Jenkins et al., 2024).

Challenges in Adopting and Scaling Educational Planning

Adopting and scaling educational planning can feel daunting, but it is doable because it is about examining and redesigning existing processes including onboarding, advising, and technology systems to make planning possible.

Traditionally, college onboarding focuses on policies and procedures rather than on meaningful program exploration. Yet, developing an effective educational plan requires students to select a program, a decision many struggle to make in isolation. Students need deliberate opportunities to talk to an advisor about careers and aspirations, graduation timelines, and their external commitments beyond college. They also need to connect with faculty, students, and industry professionals to find out more about programs they are interested in. And when they’ve made a provisional choice, they should take foundation courses tied to a program or career goal to ensure that their interest is sustained and that they have a talent for the field they are entering (Jenkins & Lahr, 2022). Shifting the focus of onboarding may mean rethinking the timing, duration, requirements, and staffing of the onboarding process. The Ask Connect Inspire Plan (ACIP) approach provides a framework for re-envisioning the onboarding experience (Jenkins & Lahr, 2022; Jenkins et al., 2025).

The Ask-Connect-Inspire-Plan (ACIP) Onboarding Approach



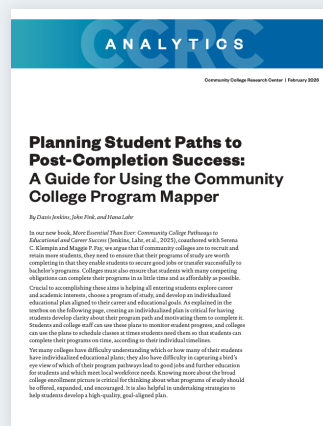
Another challenge is that advisor and staff capacity at most colleges does not allow for meeting individually with students to develop plans, and to monitor and adjust plans over time. Some colleges that have successfully incorporated educational planning have organized case management advising by meta-majors, opening channels for faculty, advisors, and other student services staff to collaborate and scale educational planning and monitoring (Jenkins et al., 2025). Other colleges conduct group advising for students, sometimes in synchronous virtual meetings, that include large group sessions and smaller breakout discussions in which students receive personal guidance from an advisor.

Technology that does not integrate between student information systems and enterprise resource planning systems may also be a barrier to fully supporting new onboarding and planning practices. Fostering more active use of early alert systems for monitoring, and housing educational plans in systems that advisors, students, and faculty can all access is an important support for meeting some of the challenges of adopting educational planning. Further, when the platform where the plans are stored connects directly to the registration system, the registration process is streamlined for students and advisors (Flaherty, 2024).

The CCRC Program Mapper: Supporting Student Success in High-Value Programs

Many colleges are taking guided pathways to a new level, embracing the next frontiers of community college reform work to ensure not just that students complete programs, but that the programs they complete lead to jobs that pay family-sustaining wages or to transfer to a bachelor's program without lost credits. With educational planning as a cornerstone for post-completion success, colleges can enact changes to recruitment, onboarding, and advising to ensure that students start with a roadmap to their goals in hand.

A first step, however, is understanding where students are and whether they have a plan. CCRC developed the [Community College Program Mapper](#) to make visible a core institutional challenge: Many students are not on a clear path to success in employment and further education beyond completion—and many of those lack a plan (Jenkins et al., 2026). Using a ready-made Excel workbook, colleges can upload their enrollment data to create interactive maps, graphs, and tables showing the distribution of students across programs that lead to living-wage jobs or transfer in specific majors for post-completion success. Colleges can also see which of their students have educational plans by program of study. The tool's accompanying *Guide for Using the Community College Program Mapper* also outlines key strategies to strengthen educational planning for high-value programs (Jenkins et al., 2026).



Case Studies: Implementing and Scaling Educational Planning

Helping every student develop and follow a clear, goal-aligned plan is one of the most powerful—and achievable—steps colleges can take to improve completion and post-college outcomes. As expectations for student success continue to rise, educational planning is no longer a support service—it is a core piece of institutional infrastructure.

CCRC is studying colleges nationwide to identify and share effective, scalable educational planning practices. This research builds on previous work to explore how colleges have planned, implemented, and scaled educational planning, how they managed the necessary changes and adjustments to college business processes and technology, and how they engaged faculty and staff to develop and support those changes. Importantly, the case studies following this brief include colleges of different sizes, geographic regions, and state governance systems to highlight how diverse colleges created their planning processes and scaled implementation.

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