

Strengthening Community College Pathways To Post-Completion Success

Lessons from a Decade of CCRC Guided Pathways Research

August 7, 2025

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MORE ESSENTIAL THAN EVER

COMMUNITY COLLEGE PATHWAYS
TO EDUCATIONAL AND
CAREER SUCCESS

DAVIS JENKINS
HANA LAHR
JOHN FINK
SERENA C. KLEMPIN
MAGGIE P. FAY

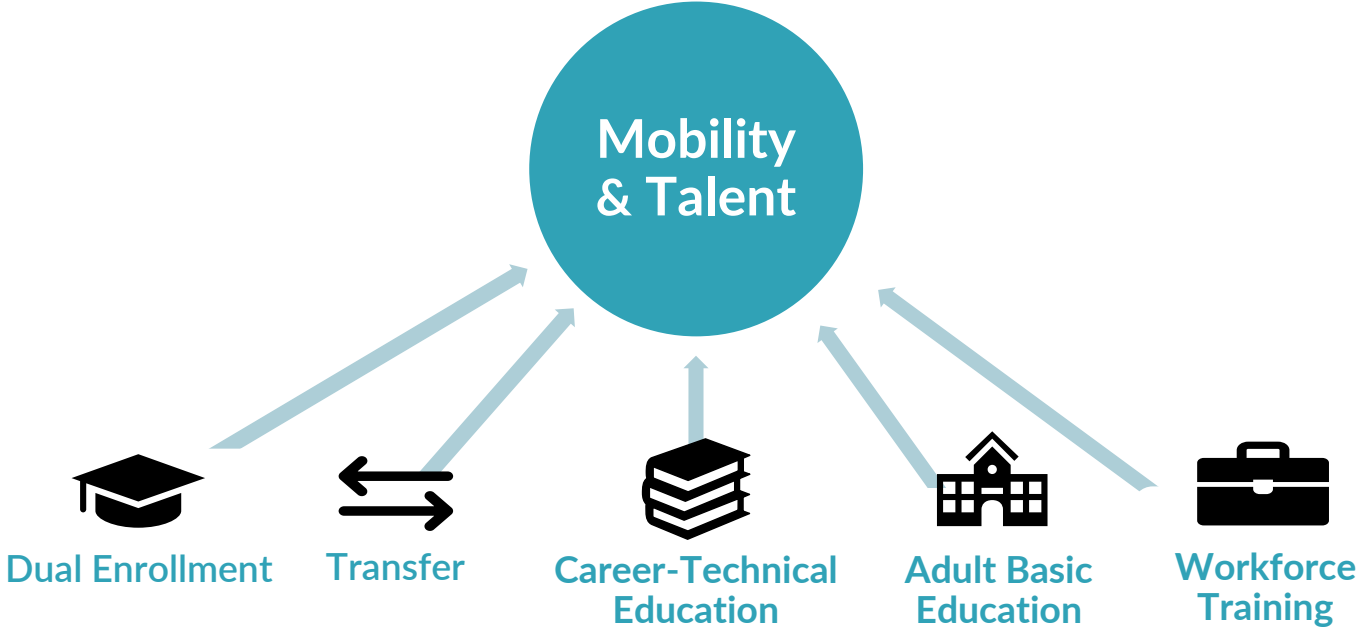
FOREWORD BY
Kay M. McClenney



Essential Institutions for Communities Facing
Unprecedented Challenges



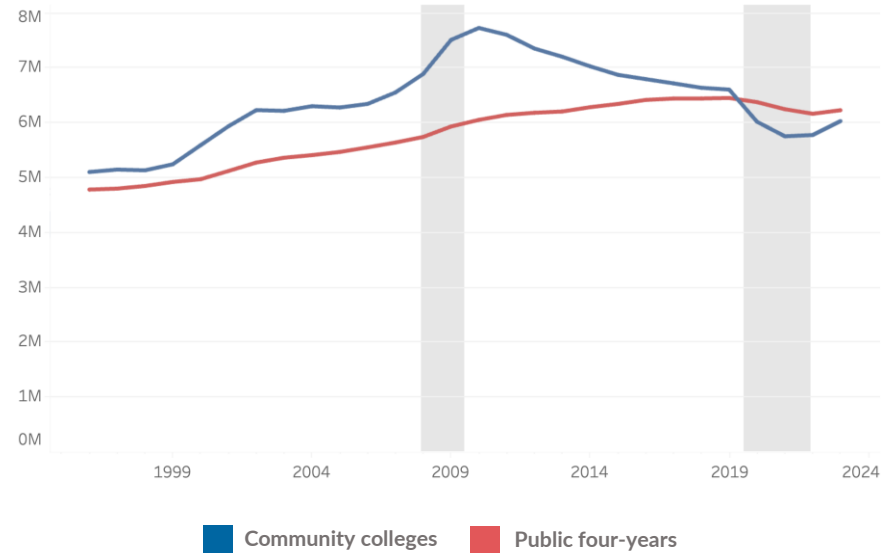
Community colleges are **more essential than ever** for their communities



Community college enrollment decline → Financial uncertainty

Fall Enrollment Trends by Sector, All Undergraduates

IPEDS Data, 1996-2023

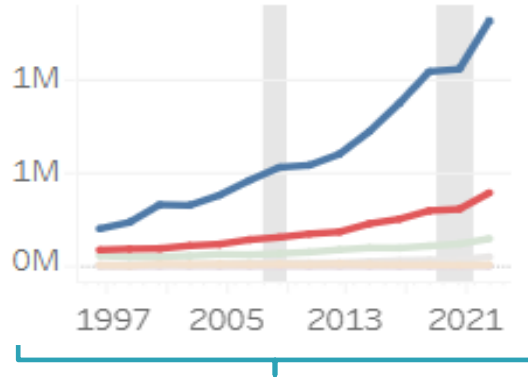


Community college enrollment decline ➡ Financial uncertainty

Fall Enrollment Trends by Sector and Age

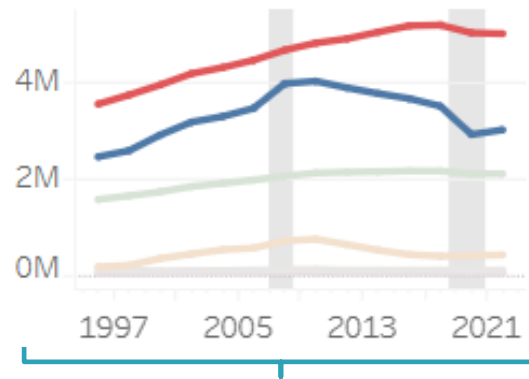
IPEDS Data, 1996-2023

Age: Under 18



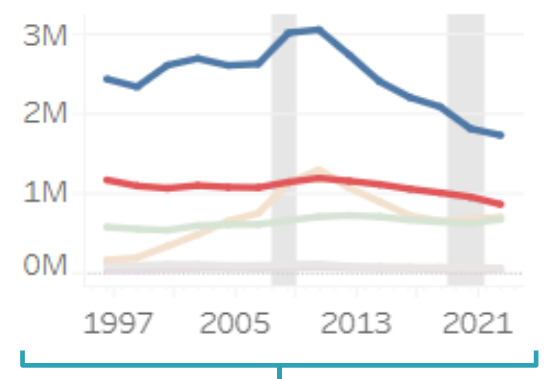
HS dual enrollment **only growing student segment**

Age 18-24



CCs have **lost market share** to public four-years

Age 25+

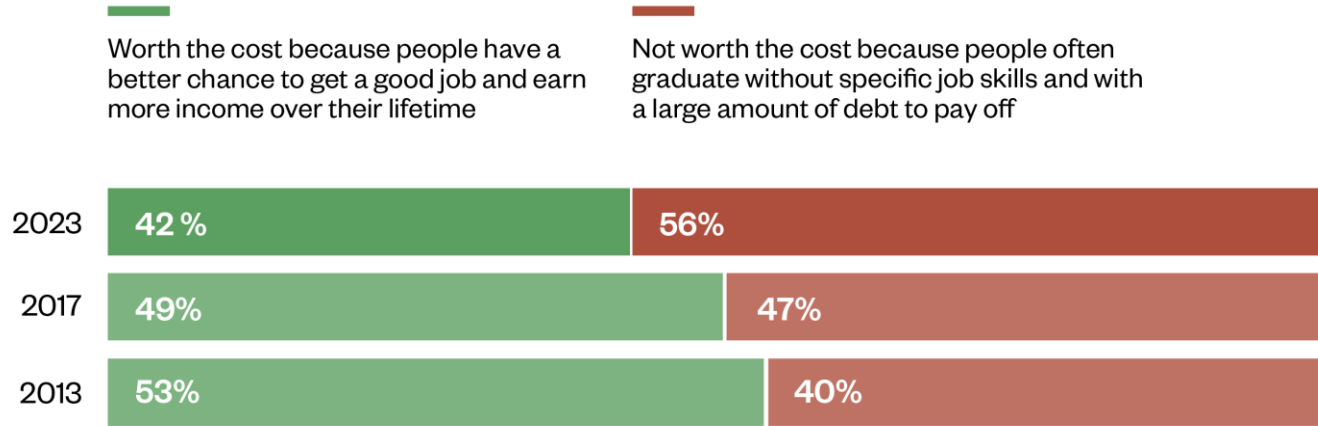


Older student enrollment at **historic lows**

■ Community colleges ■ Public four-years

Growing skepticism about the value of a college degree

When it comes to getting a four-year college degree, which of the following statements comes closer to your point of view? A four-year college education is...

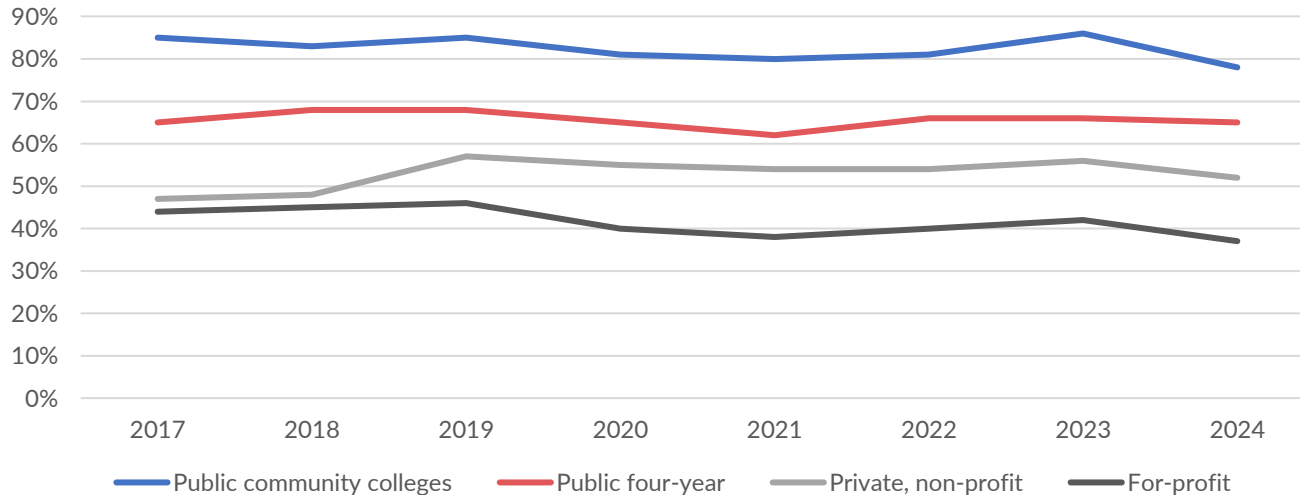


The Wall Street Journal

Community colleges perceived to offer higher value than four-years

Do Americans think the following institutions are worth the cost?

Varying Degrees, 2017-2024

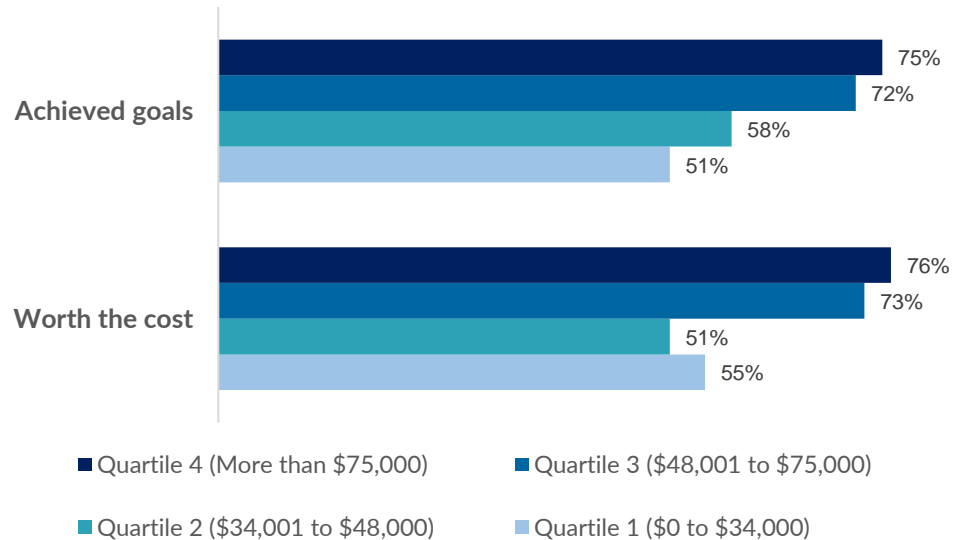


Sample size varies over year and by demographic. Please refer to Varying Degrees 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023 for exact sample size.

Source: <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/varying-degrees-2024/value>

Higher paying jobs or successful transfer → Higher perception of value

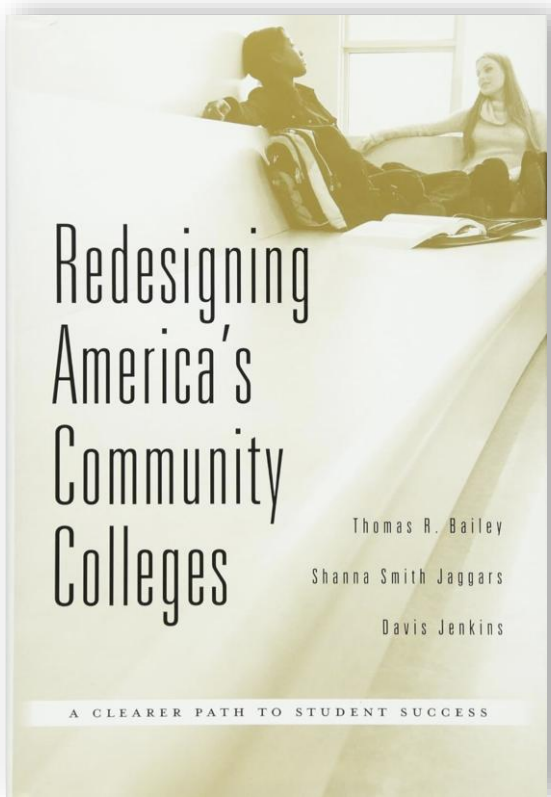
Recent Community College Students' Perceptions of Value
by Post-Completion Earnings Quartiles



Insights

From a Decade of Learning Alongside
Colleges and State Systems Implementing Guided Pathways





CCRC's 2015 book argued that to move the needle on completion rates, **scaling discrete interventions is not enough**; rather, community colleges must **redesign at scale**.

Redesigning America's Community Colleges presented “**guided pathways**” as an outcomes-focused alternative to the **access-oriented “cafeteria college” model** that predominated since the 1970s.

The Guided Pathways Framework had Four Pillars

CLARIFYING PATHS TO STUDENT END GOALS

- Meta-majors
- Programs mapped to careers & transfer
- Math pathways

HELPING STUDENTS GET ON A PATH

- Early career & program exploration
- Required educational planning
- Early program coursetaking

KEEPING STUDENTS ON PATH

- Mandatory caseload advising by field
- Progress monitoring & feedback
- Scheduling for on-time completion

ENSURING STUDENTS ARE LEARNING

- Active learning & academic support in program foundation coursework
- Cocurricular experiential learning

CCRC Guided Pathways Evaluations

RESEARCH BRIEF

Community College Research Center | March 2024

Lessons From Two Major Evaluations of Guided Pathways

By Davis Jenkins, Hana Lehr, and Thomas Brock

Community colleges in the United States do a remarkable job of making postsecondary education accessible to students from all backgrounds. Where they do less well is making sure that all degree-seeking students earn a credential or transfer to a four-year institution within a reasonable amount of time. A recent report from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center shows that nearly 60% of degree-seeking community college students do not earn a certificate or degree at *any* postsecondary institution within six years of beginning at a community college. It also shows troubling disparities by race and ethnicity, with Asian and White students who enter community colleges earning credentials at notably higher rates than Black, Hispanic, and Native American students (Lee & Shapiro, 2023).

Numerous programs and initiatives have been launched in recent years to improve student outcomes at community colleges, but perhaps none are as well known or widespread as guided pathways. Guided pathways is a framework for whole-college reform designed to help all students explore, choose, plan, and complete programs aligned with their career and education goals efficiently and affordably. It emerged from years of research by CCRC and others and was introduced to the field in the 2015 book *Redesigning America's Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success* (Bailey et al., 2015). Since then, guided pathways has been supported by national organizations such as the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and has been used as a model for reform by over 400 community colleges and 18 state systems.

This brief summarizes the results of two recent evaluations conducted by CCRC to examine the scale at which colleges have implemented guided pathways reforms and the association between guided pathways practices and student outcomes. The first is an evaluation of the AACC Pathways Project, which involved 30 colleges from around the country that were committed to making guided pathways reforms. The second is an evaluation of guided pathways implementation in three states—Ohio, Tennessee, and Washington State—that launched initiatives to assist colleges across their systems—70 institutions in total—to adopt the reforms. In brief, we find that:

- Whole-college reform is feasible but takes time—at least five years—to accomplish.
- There is a positive relationship between the scaled implementation of complementary sets of guided pathways practices and some measures of student achievement in AACC Pathways colleges that made the most progress in implementing guided pathways

Guided pathways is a framework for whole-college reform designed to help all students explore, choose, plan, and complete programs aligned with their education and career goals. It has been used as a model for reform by more than 400 community colleges.

30

colleges participating in the AACC Pathways Project

70

public 2-year colleges in three states (OH, TN and WA) with statewide guided pathways initiatives (NSF evaluation)

Key Guided Pathways Evaluation Takeaways

- 1** | Whole-college reform is **possible, but it takes time**—at least five years.
- 2** | **Progress scaling guided pathways** is associated with greater improvements in early student momentum rates
- 3** | Positive outcomes are associated with the scaled adoption of a **complementary set of practices** across multiple pathways areas.

Key Guided Pathways Evaluation Takeaways

- 4** | Practices that had the biggest impact on momentum were **case-management advising by field and scheduling** based on educational plans.
- 5** | Colleges that **did not reform prerequisite developmental education did not see any improvement.**
- 6** | Outcomes improved across student groups, but **no closing of the gaps** between groups.
- 7** | State agencies, associations and success centers play a vital role in catalyzing and spreading reforms.

Guided Pathways Theory of Change



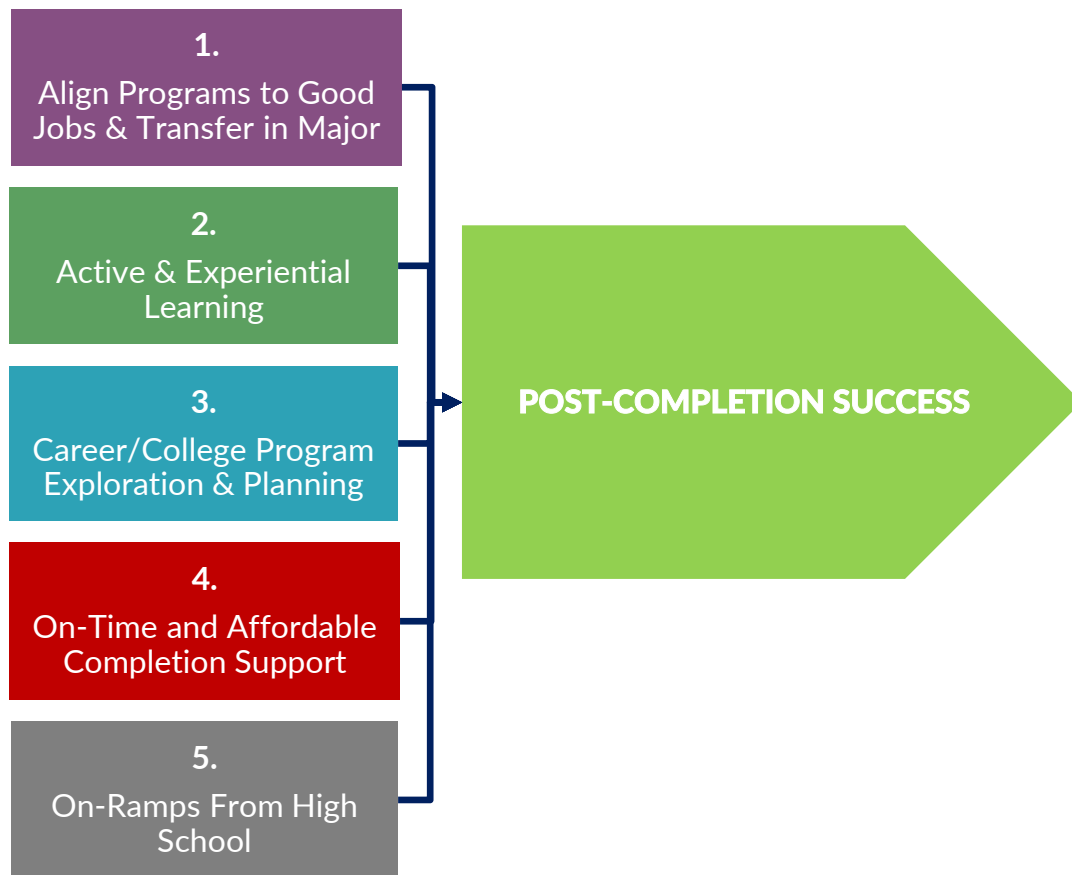
Five Frontier Strategies

For Strengthening Community
Pathways to Post-Completion Success



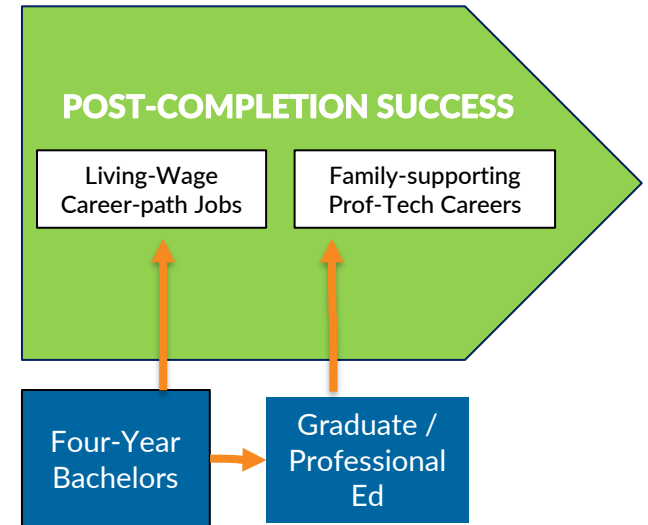
Pathways reforms to date have focused on **removing barriers to completion.**

Moving forward, colleges need to do more to tap into students' motivation to enroll and complete by **strengthening pathways to post-completion success**—and thus ensure students' investment of time, money and effort pays off.

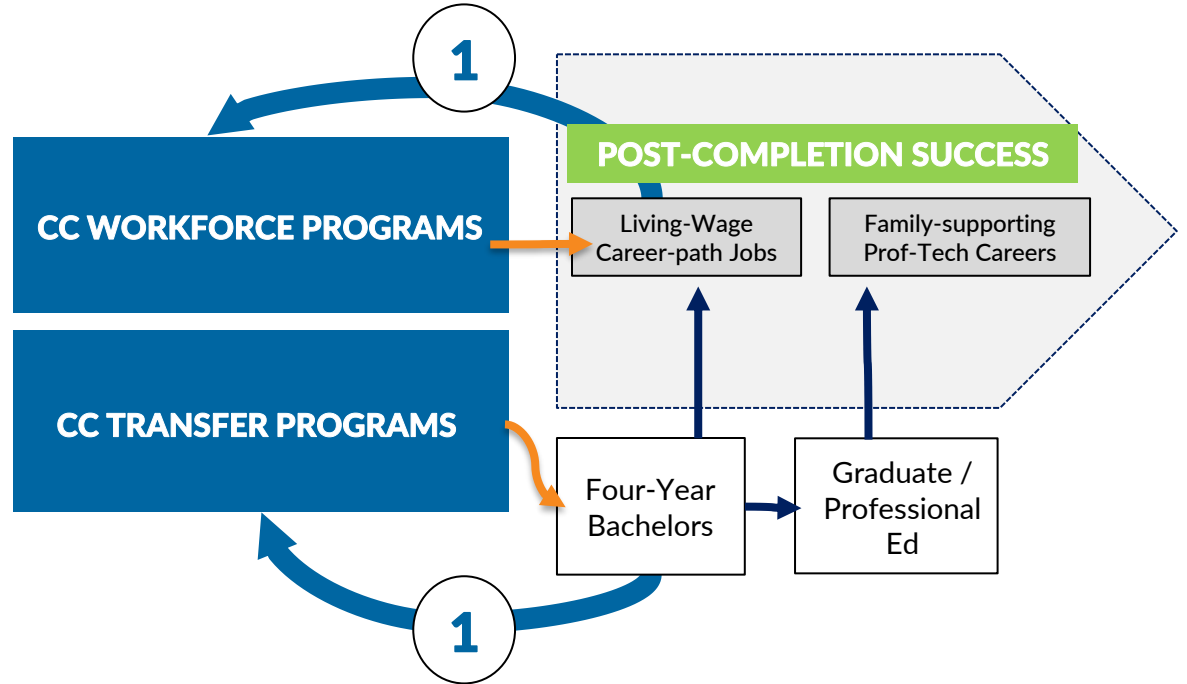


Five frontier strategies for strengthening community colleges pathways

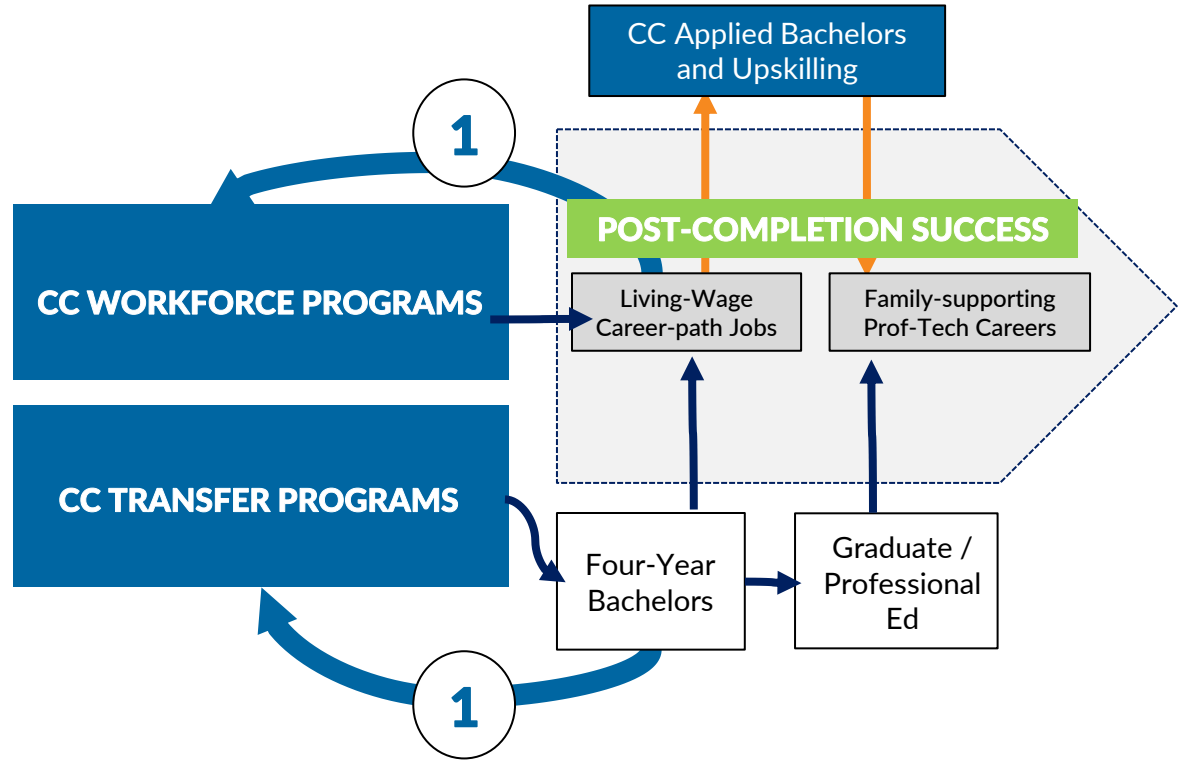
Starting with post-completion success in mind



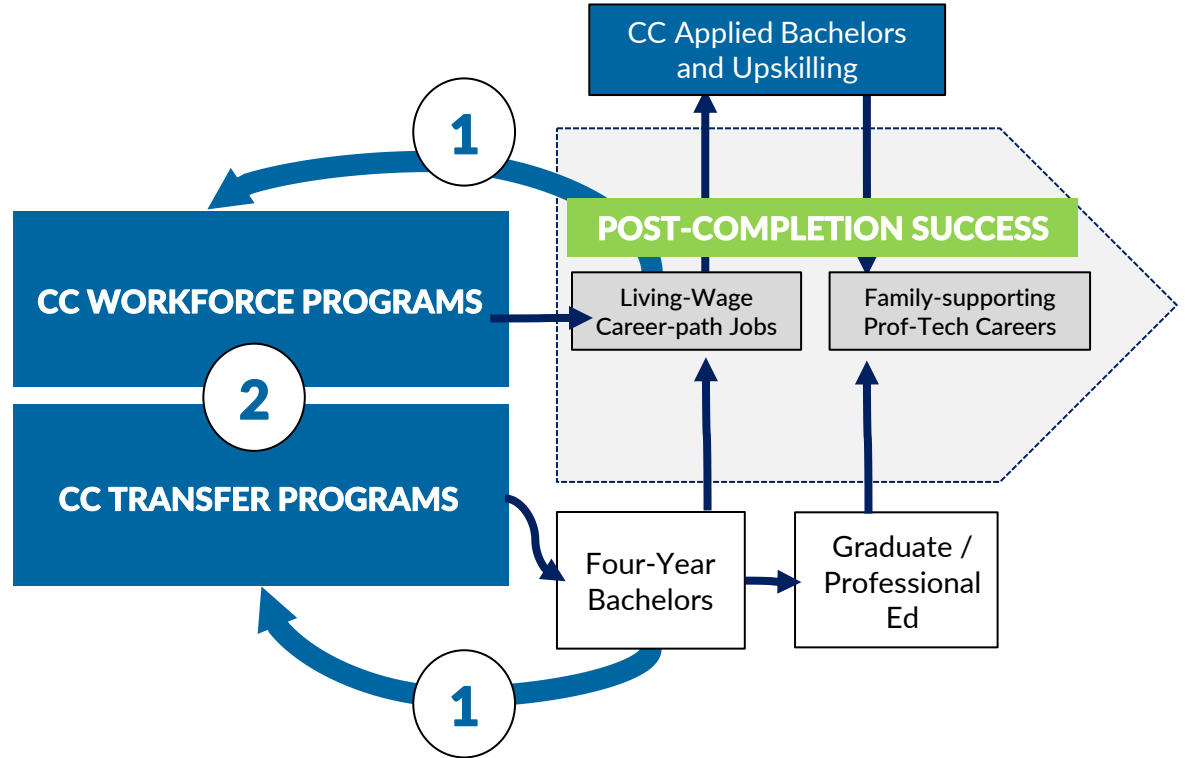
- 1 Work closely with employers/university schools to ensure programs lead to living-wage jobs/transfer in major.



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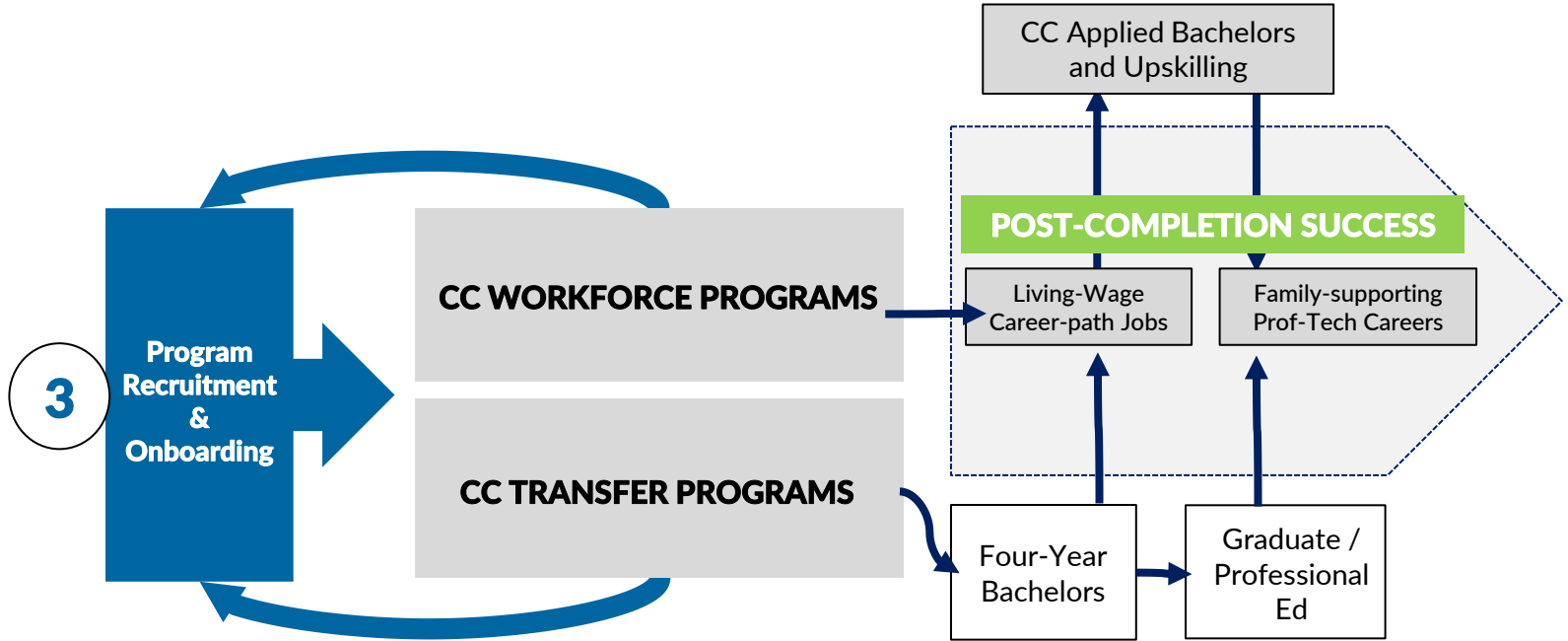


- 1 Work closely with employers/university schools to ensure programs lead to living-wage jobs/transfer in major.
- 2 Help students develop versatile skills by embedding active and experiential learning throughout programs.



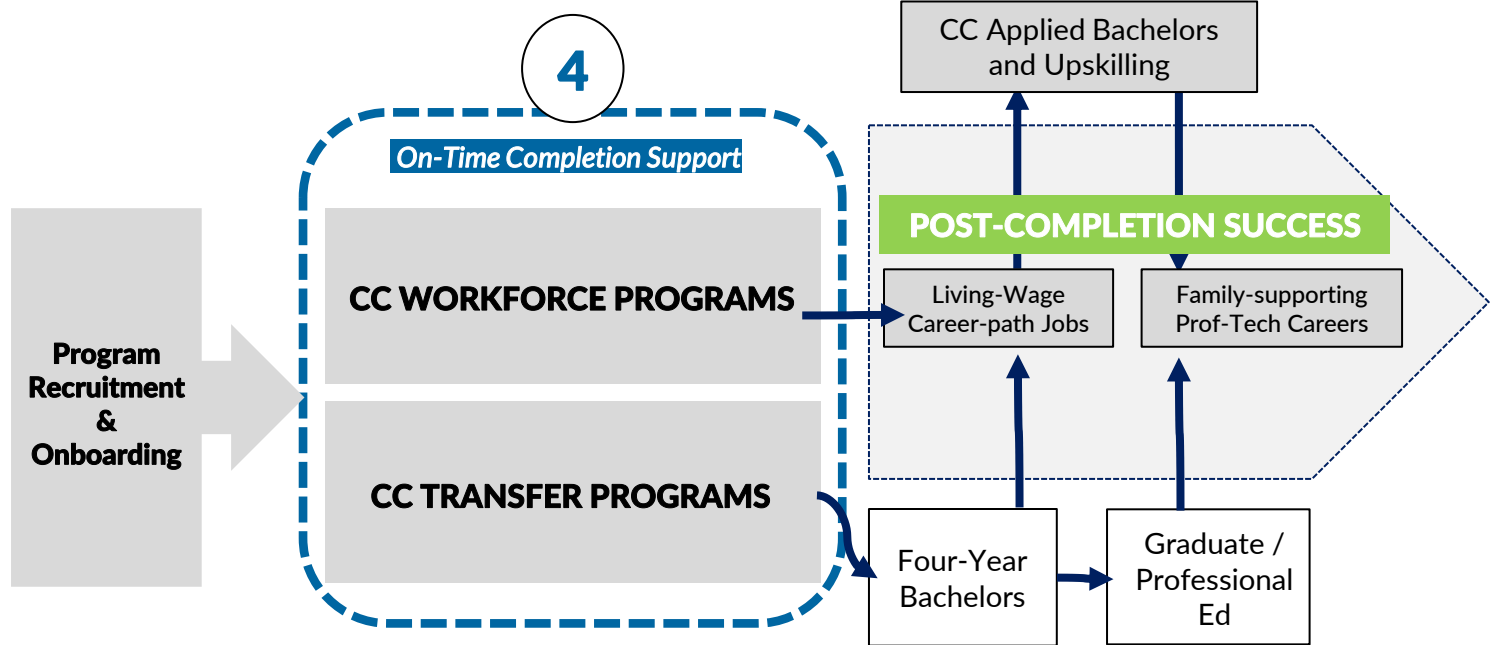
3

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

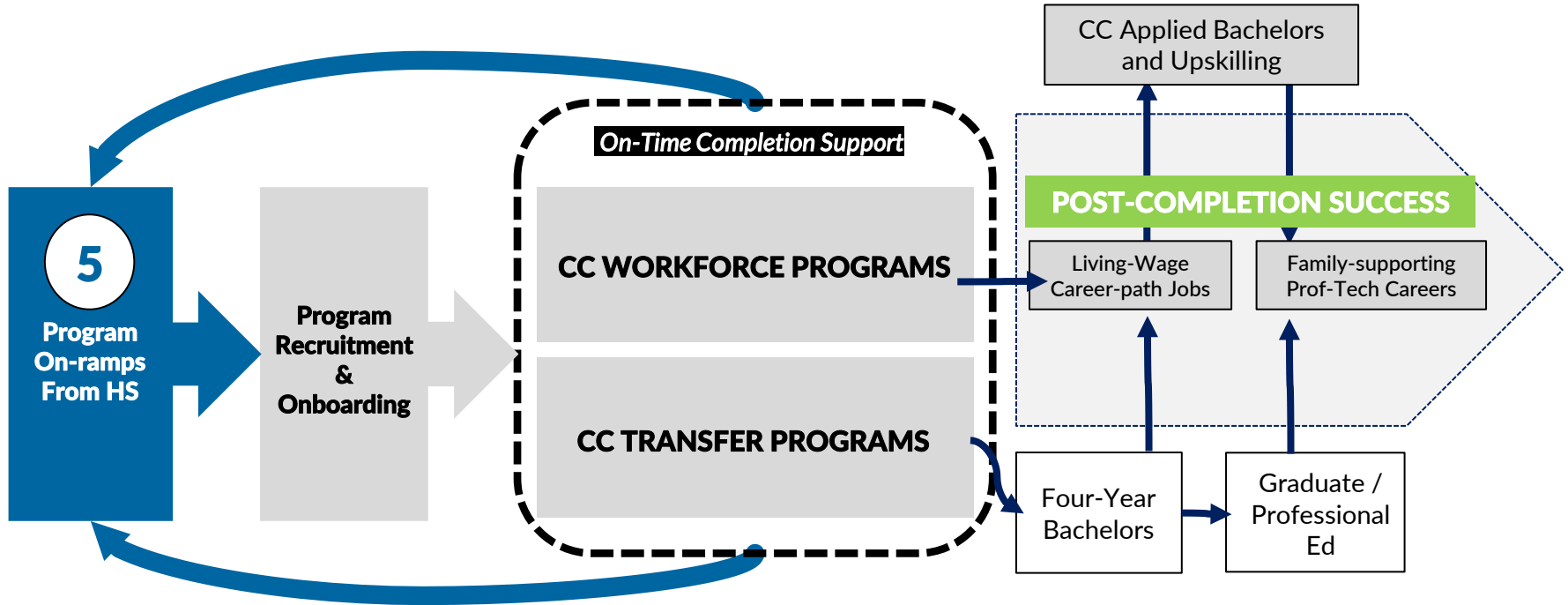


4

Structure, schedule and deliver courses—and provide embedded supports—to enable busy working students to complete their programs in as little time and cost as possible.



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

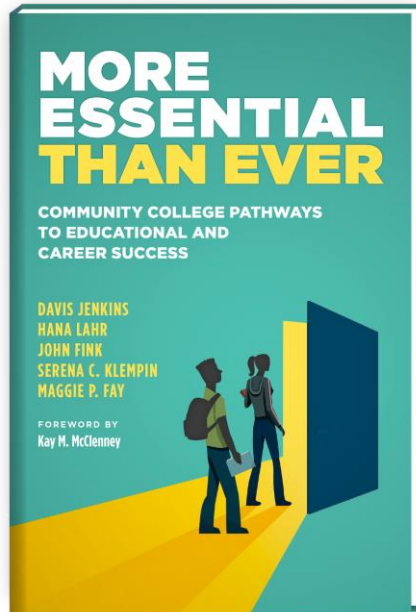


A Preview of the Book

And how it can help inform college and state redesign work



This book is for colleges and states at different stages of the redesign process, including those that haven't started



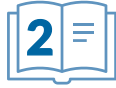
New to systemic, whole-college reforms

Started systemic reforms, was slowed by Covid, but looking to restart

Spent several years adopting systemic reforms and looking to take work to next level

Case studies featured in *More Essential Than Ever*

CHAPTER



Alamo Colleges - Transfer advising guides

Lorain County Community College - Aligning programs with the local job market

CHAPTER



Lorain County Community College - Gateway course redesign for health programs

South Puget Sound Community College - Faculty-led innovation in curriculum and instruction

CHAPTER



Southwest Wisconsin Technical College - Building comprehensive student success plans

Tulsa Community College - Expanding program pathways in healthcare

Valencia College - Recruiting adult students into high-demand short-term programs

Case studies featured in *More Essential Than Ever*

CHAPTER



Northeast Wisconsin Technical College- Advising case management and progress monitoring progress by field

Odessa College – Scaled adoption of eight week courses

CHAPTER



Lee College – Dual credit coursework aligned to degrees and transfer pathways

CHAPTER



Wake Technical Community College – Care teams by meta-major

Washington State College of Ohio – ‘One-stop’ college and program onboarding

CHAPTER



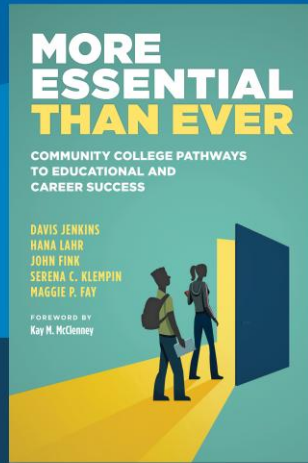
Texas Success Center – Scaling statewide reform

Ohio Association of Community Colleges – Scaling statewide reform

DISCUSSION GUIDE

MORE ESSENTIAL THAN EVER:

Community College Pathways to
Educational and Career Success



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*Using More Essential Than
Ever to start (or restart)
college reforms*

CCRC

Blogs on book chapters

- [Strengthening Community College Pathways to Post-Completion Success: Lessons From a Decade of CCRC Research](#)
- [Community College Programs That Prepare Students for Post-Completion Success](#)
- [Teaching Community College Students to Be Versatile Learners: An Imperative for Ensuring Post-Completion Success](#)
- [Reimagining Program Recruitment and Onboarding Using the Ask-Connect-Inspire-Plan Framework](#)
- [On Path and On Schedule: Strategies for Prioritizing Time to Completion for Community College Students](#)
- [Introducing DEEP: A Research-Based Framework for Broadening the Benefits of Dual Enrollment](#)
- [How State Systems Can Help Scale Student Success Reforms](#)

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FOREWORD BY
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