CCRC COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESEARCH CENTER
Teachers College, Columbia University

# Purpose and a Plan: Implementing an Engaging Program Onboarding Experience for All Students

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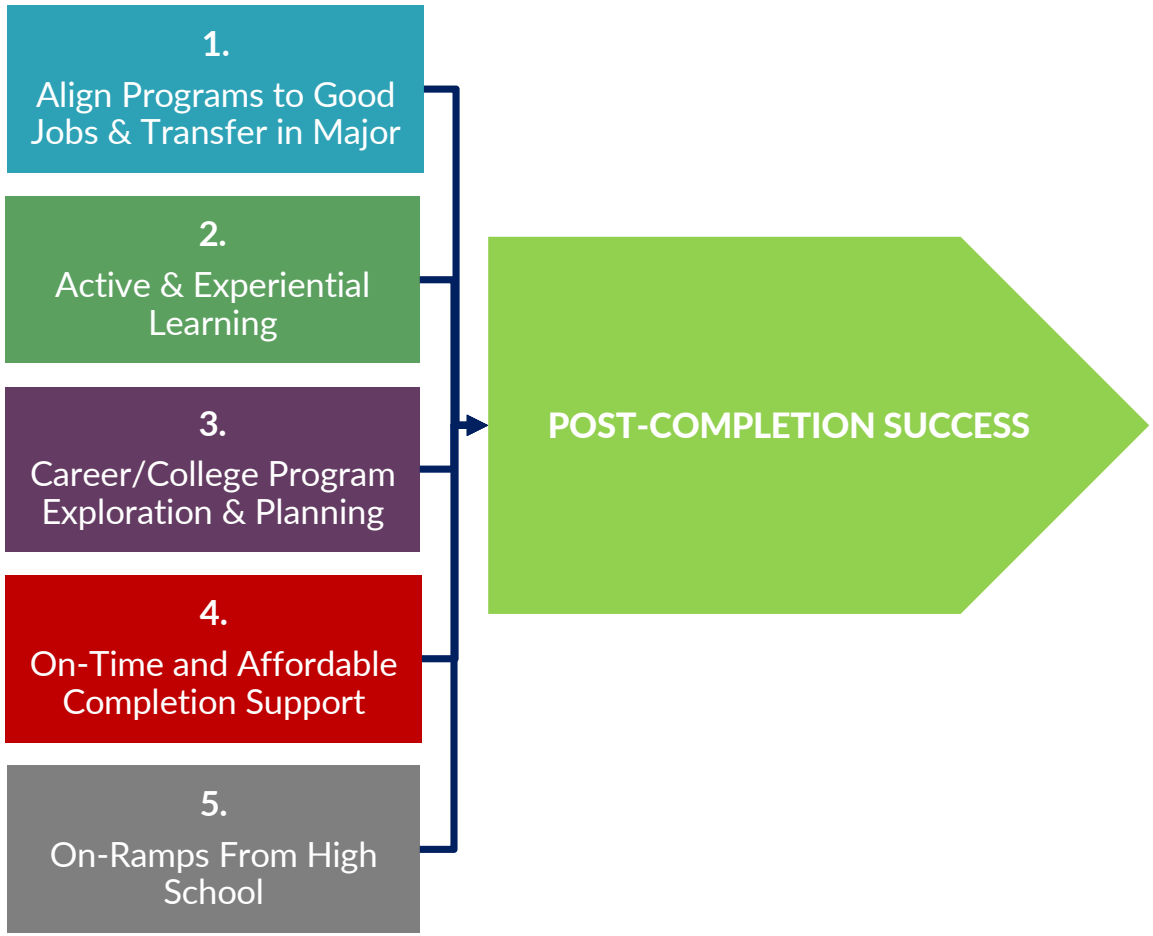
Talent Strong Texas Pathways Institute #1: November 2025

# Five frontier strategies for strengthening community colleges pathways

Starting with post-completion success in mind

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# Five frontier strategies for strengthening community colleges pathways

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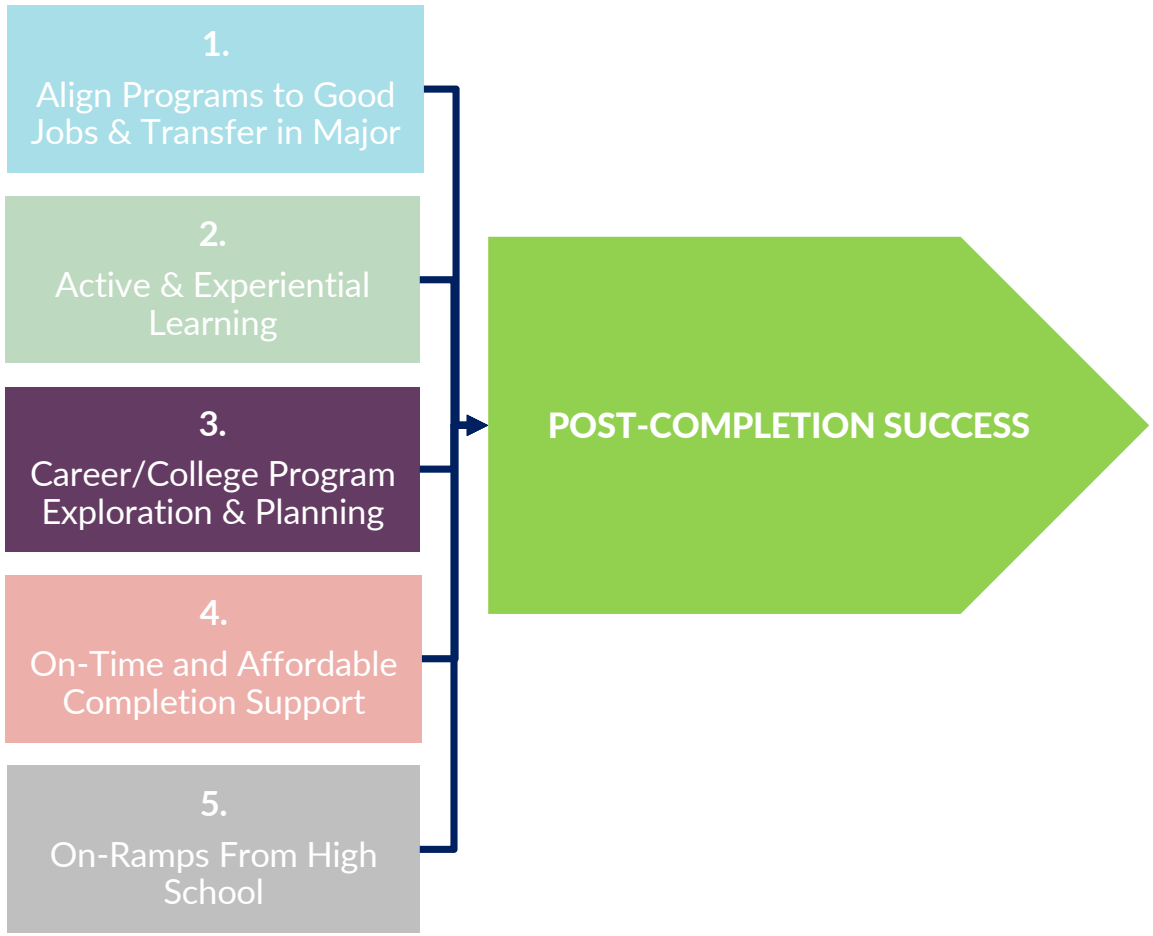


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## Why focus on students' early experiences?

If we want to increase outcomes like completion, transfer, and post-completion success, we need to start at the beginning of students' time in college.

- Many students apply but don't enroll
- Close to half of community college starters leave higher education before the start of their second year
- Gaining momentum in the first year means students are more likely to meet their goals
- Many new students end up in programs like Liberal/General Studies

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## CCRC's Program and Career Choice Research Overview

- Survey administered to 12,628 first-time community colleges students in four colleges in fall 2023
- 4,515 students completed the survey (36% response rate)
- Survey asked about 1) educational and career goals, 2) student's current thoughts on the program(s) they intend to pursue and the factors that are most important to them when selecting a program, 3) experiences inside and outside the college that are informing the student's program choice(s).
- Interviews with faculty, staff and students

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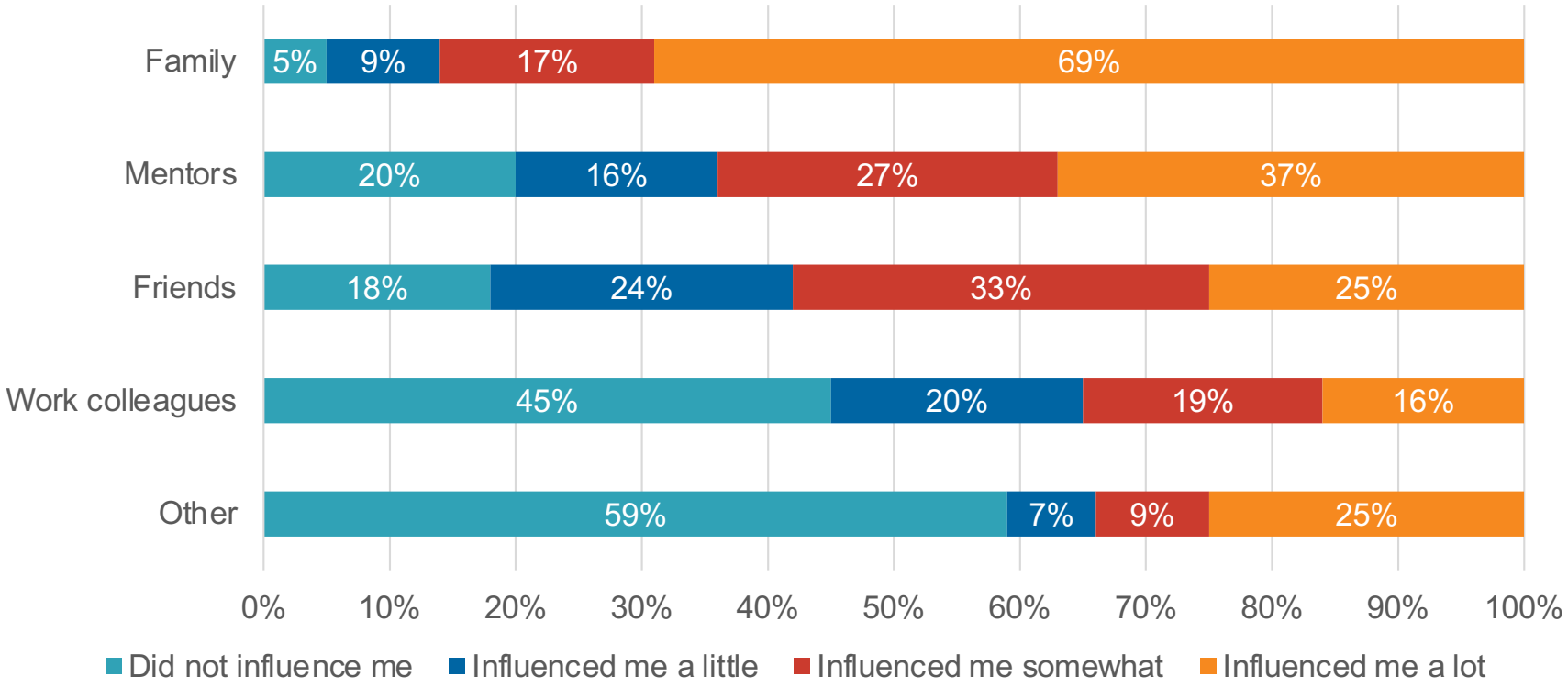
# Findings

## Incoming Students' Educational and Career Goals

# Who most influenced students to attend college?

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# How many careers and programs are new community college students considering?

| Number of reported careers or programs | Respondents who chose this many careers |
|---|---|
| One | 10% |
| Two | 14% |
| Three | 65% |
| Four or more | 9% |

Source: Lahr et al., (2025). *How Do Incoming Community College Students Think About Programs of Study and Potential Careers?* https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/community-college-students-program-study-career.html

# How many careers and programs are new community college students considering?

| Number of reported careers or programs | Respondents who chose this many careers | Respondents who choose this many programs |
|---|---|---|
| One | 10% | 21% |
| Two | 14% | 15% |
| Three | 65% | 61% |
| Four or more | 9% | -- |

Source: Lahr et al., (2025). *How Do Incoming Community College Students Think About Programs of Study and Potential Careers?* https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/community-college-students-program-study-career.html

# Are students considering careers in similar or different fields?

**18%** of students listed careers in 3 different career clusters

**44%** of students listed careers in 2 different career clusters

**38%** of students listed careers in 1 career cluster

Lahr et al., (2025). *How Do Incoming Community College Students Think About Programs of Study and Potential Careers?* https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/community-college-students-program-study-career.html

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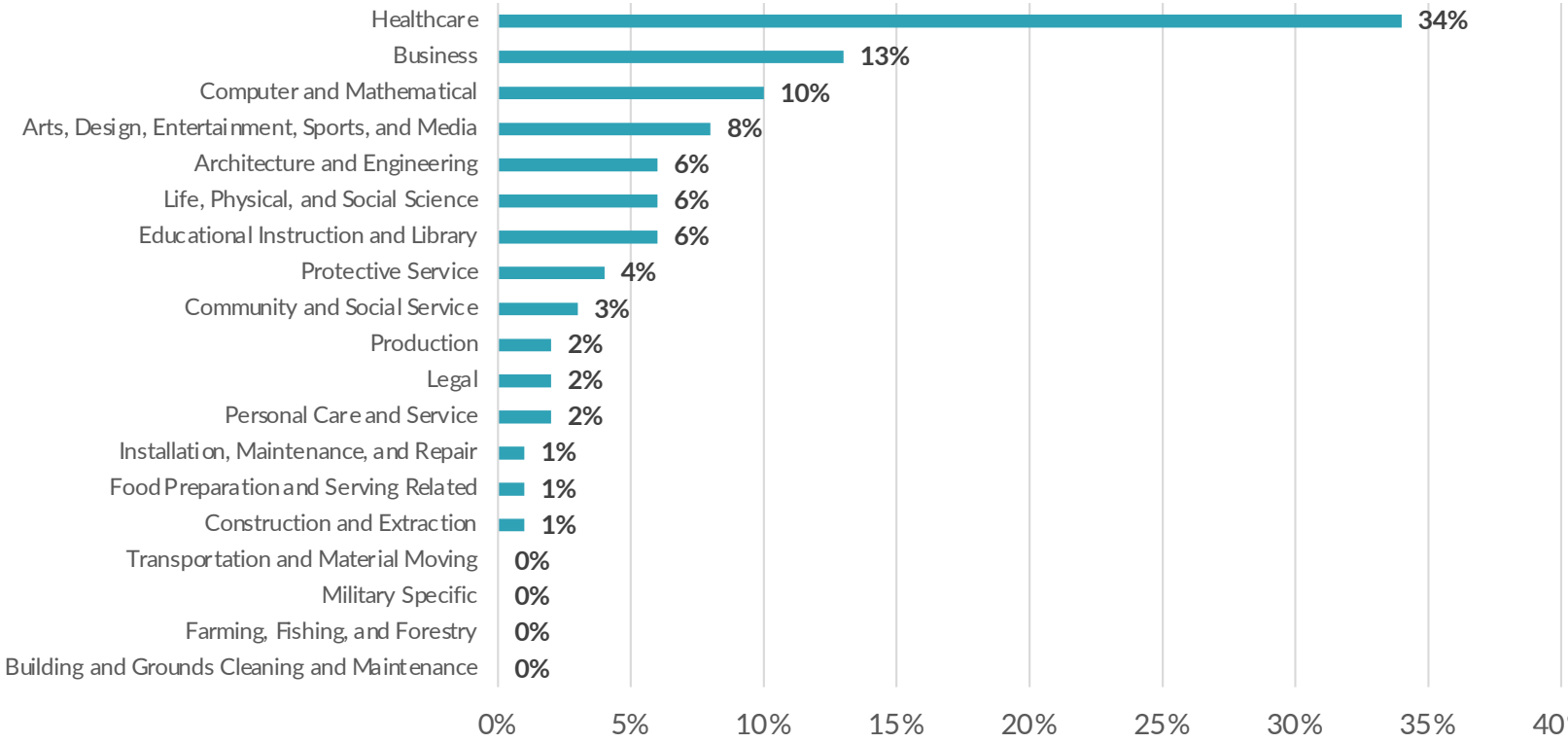
# What careers are students considering?
# First choice careers by cluster

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# Are students considering programs in similar or different fields?

**23%** of students listed programs in 3 different clusters

**43%** of students listed programs in 2 different clusters

**34%** of students listed programs in 1 cluster

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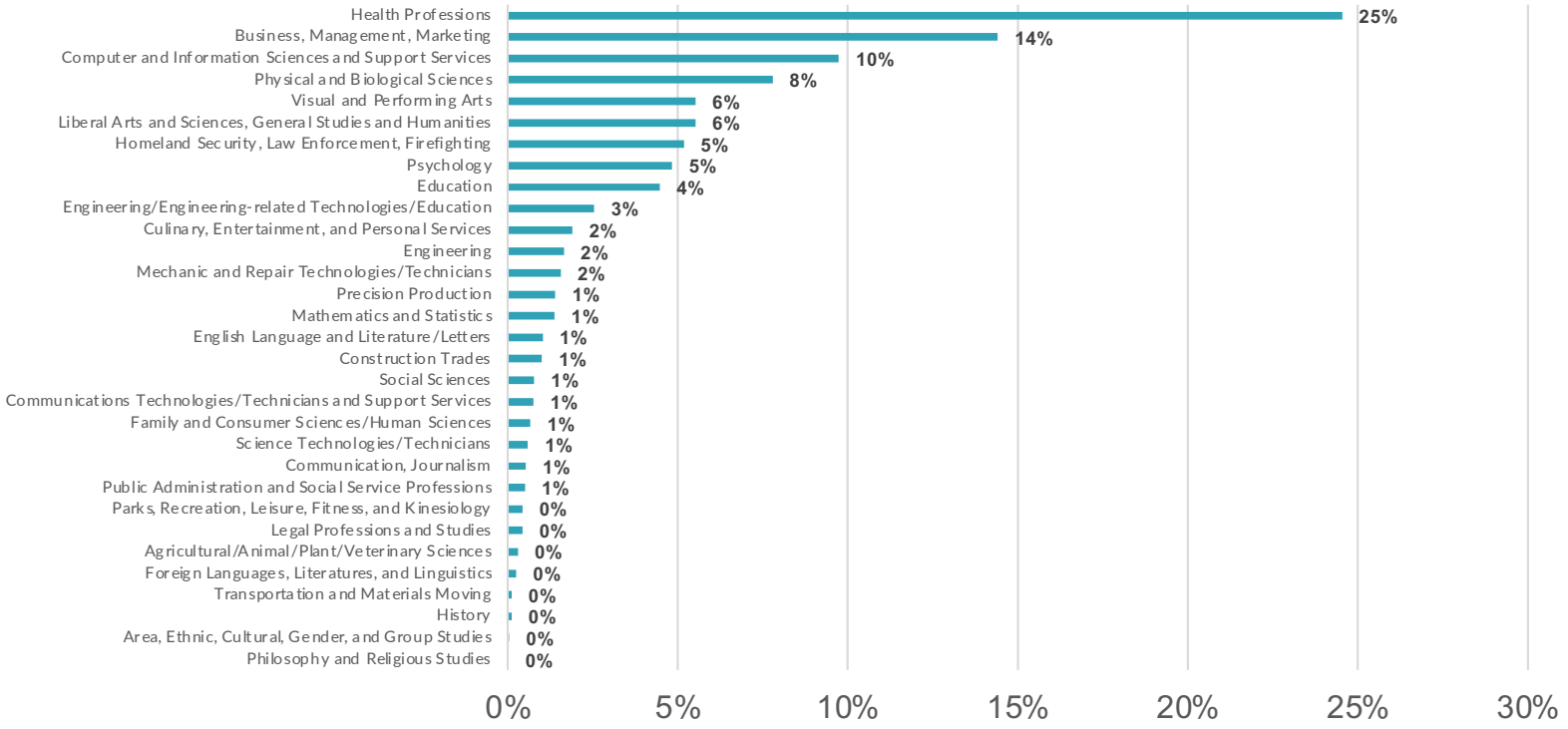
# First-Choice Programs of Students by Program Cluster

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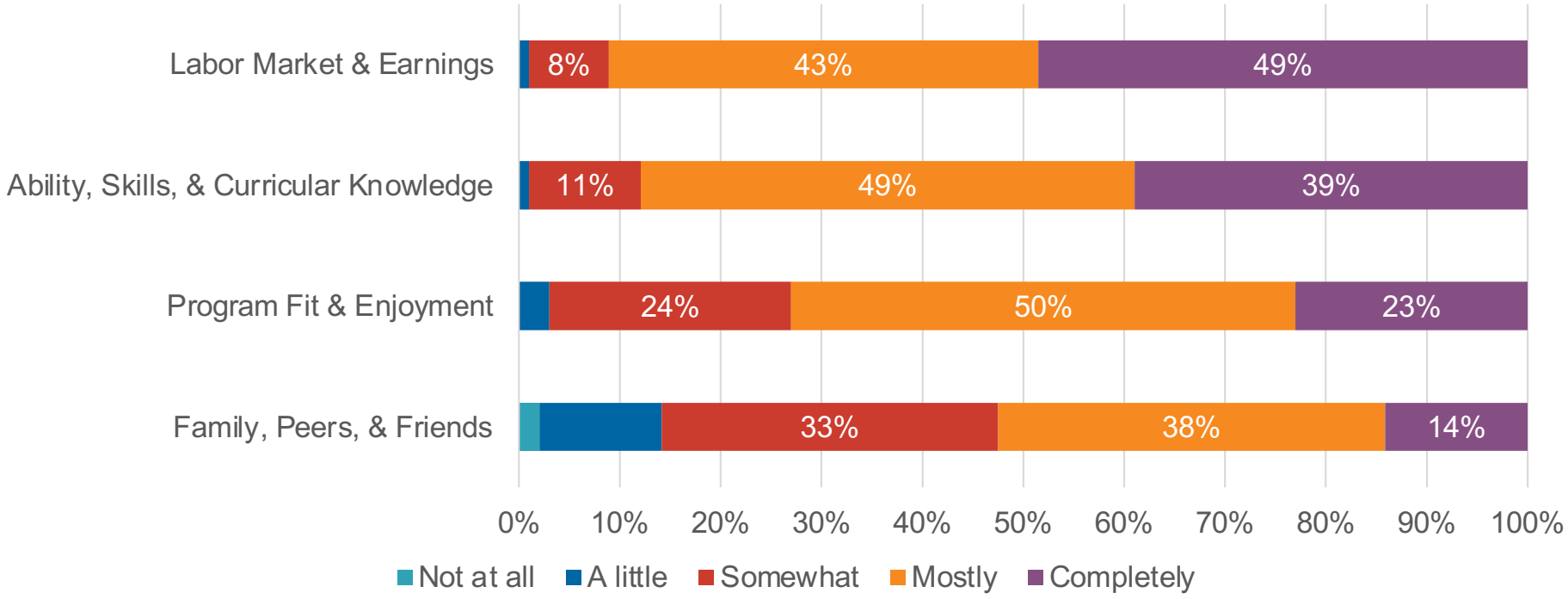
# What factors are important to students when choosing a program?

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**53%** of students said that they were **”very certain”** about their first choice program

**31%** of students said that they were **”somewhat certain”** about their first choice program

## Focusing on Program and Career Exploration

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

- **Ask** students about their goals, interests, and career aspirations
- **Connect** students with students, faculty, and others who share similar academic and career interests
- **Inspire** students with college-level courses on topics of interest in term 1
- Ensure every student is helped to develop a full program **educational plan**

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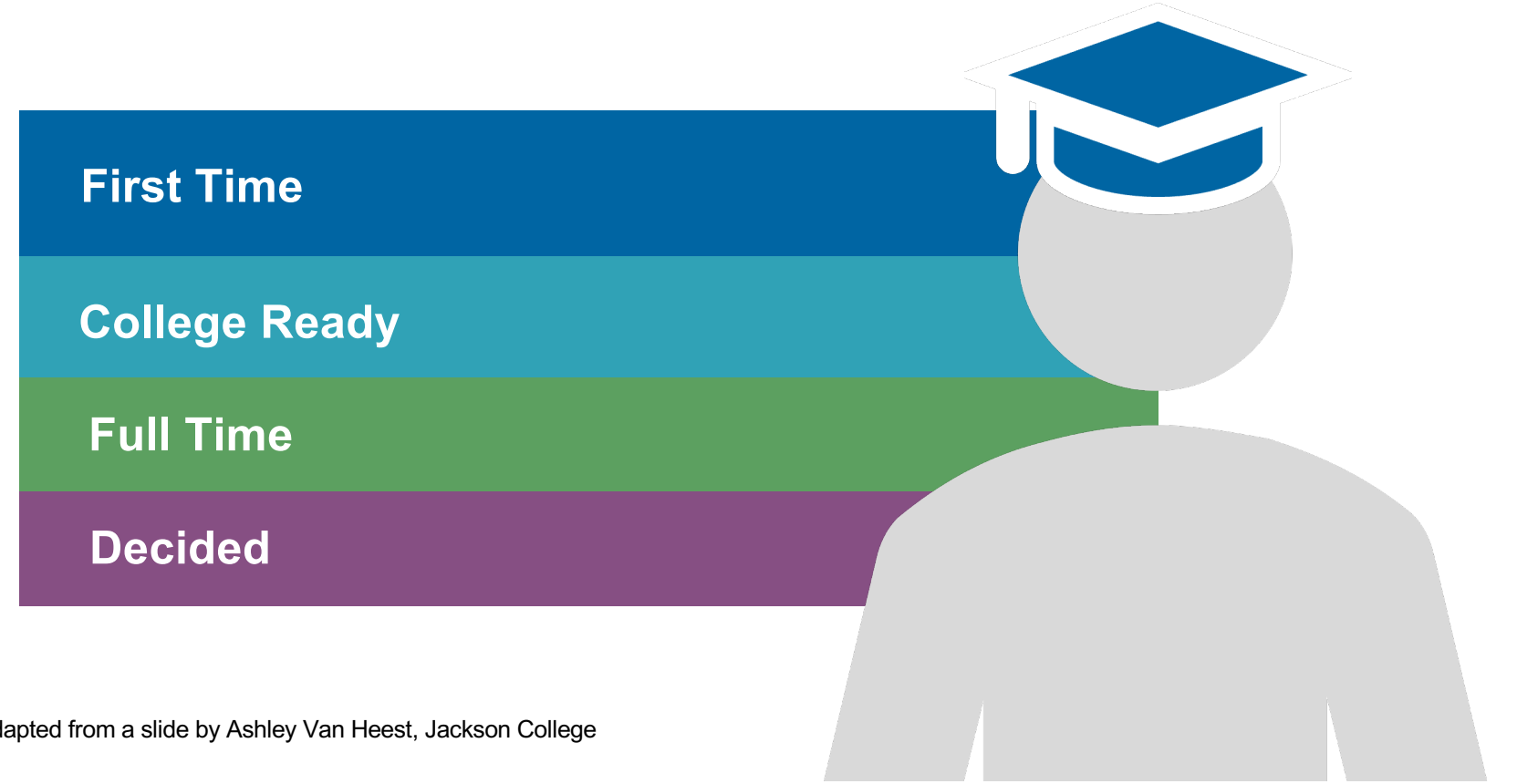
Creating an **educational plan** is a critical part of onboarding because it ensures that students are on the right track from the start.

Educational plans helps students see the full path to their goals.

# Program maps are designed for the “ideal” student




Adapted from a slide by Ashley Van Heest, Jackson College

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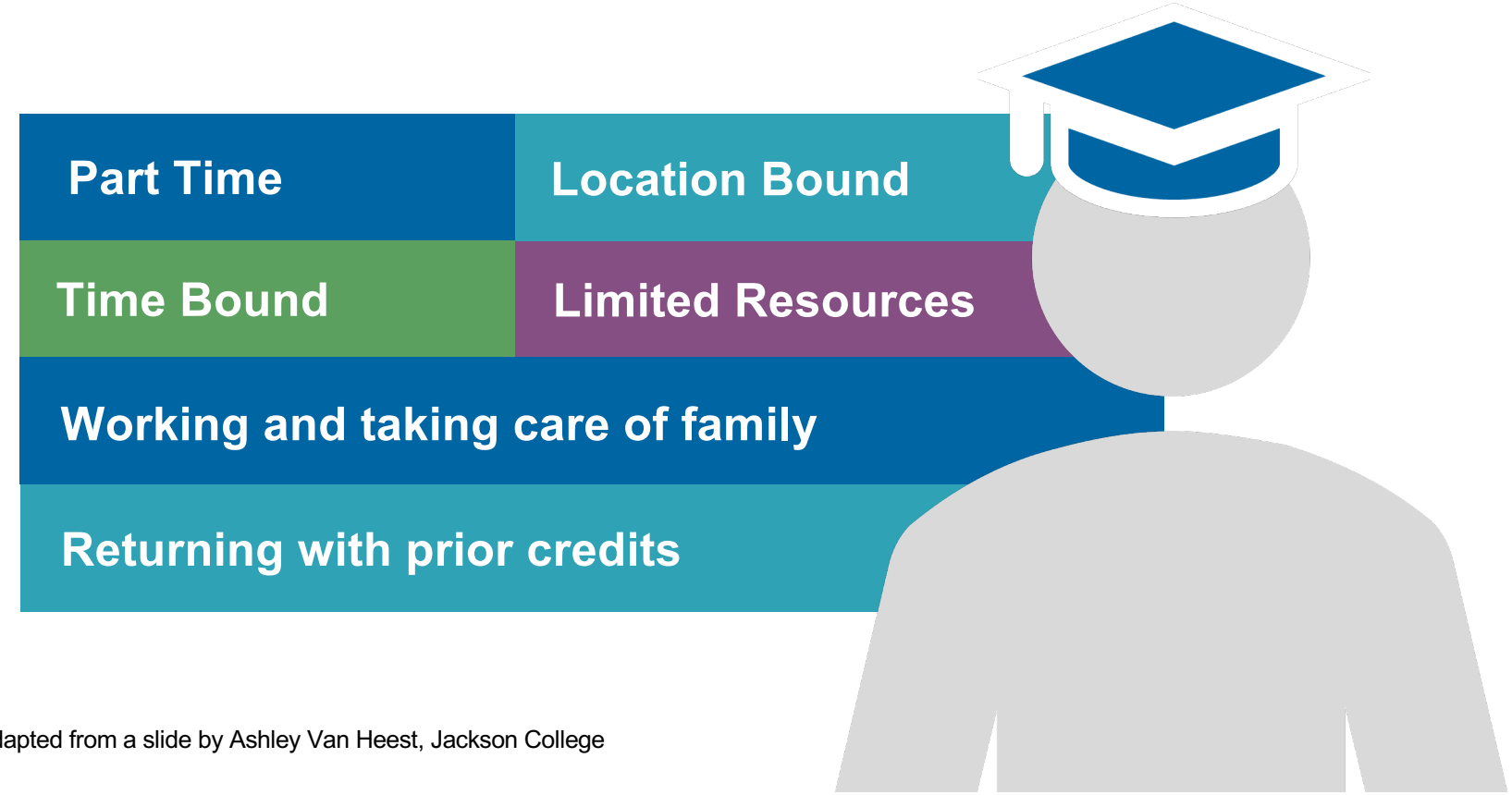
## But real community college students need educational plans that are personalized to their timeline and goals




Adapted from a slide by Ashley Van Heest, Jackson College

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*I know exactly what classes I should take at what times and so I can graduate on time. … Makes me feel good. Makes me feel like it's doable and I can see exactly what I need to do in order to achieve my goals."*

# Findings

From Faculty and Staff Interviews

## Challenges student face in choosing a program

1. Limited awareness of career options
2. Misperceptions about job roles and career opportunities
3. Misalignment between family expectations and personal interests
4. Financial constraints that prioritize immediate needs

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## Challenges colleges face in supporting students' program choice process

1. Limited student time for meaningful program exploration
2. Limited number of staff involved in program choice
3. Time constraints on the role that faculty can play
4. Barriers to scaling work-based learning

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## For Discussion

1. The study found that most students are considering multiple careers and programs of study in different fields. What are the implications of this for rethinking onboarding students into programs of study using ACIP?
2. Most students say that they are certain about their program choice, even if they are still considering multiple programs. What might be factoring into this certainty and what are the implications for early advising interactions?
3. Students are clearly considering post-completion labor market outcomes. What are the implications of this and how can colleges support students with better data, advising, and support as they explore different opportunities?

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Students' Program and Career Choices Paper

Faculty and Staff Experiences Paper

WEBINAR! November 19

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# Thank you!

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For more information visit **https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/**