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Teachers College, Columbia University

Strengthening Community College Pathways To Post-Completion Success:
Taking the Next Steps Toward Purpose and Value

Hana Lahr & John Fink

Talent Strong Texas Pathways Institute #1: November 12, 2025

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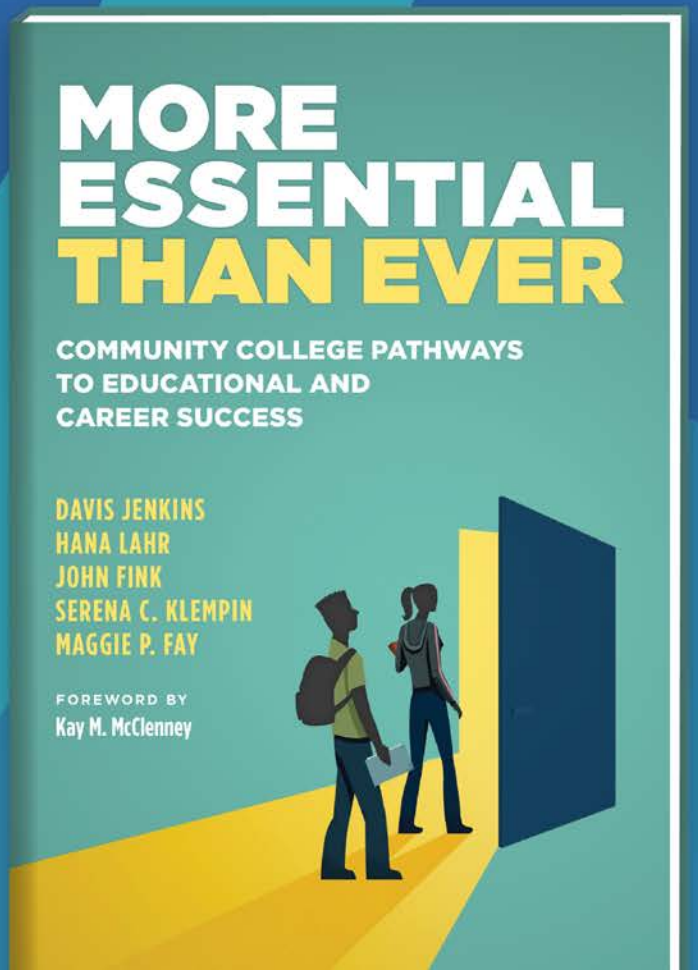

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Community College Pathways to Educational and Career Success

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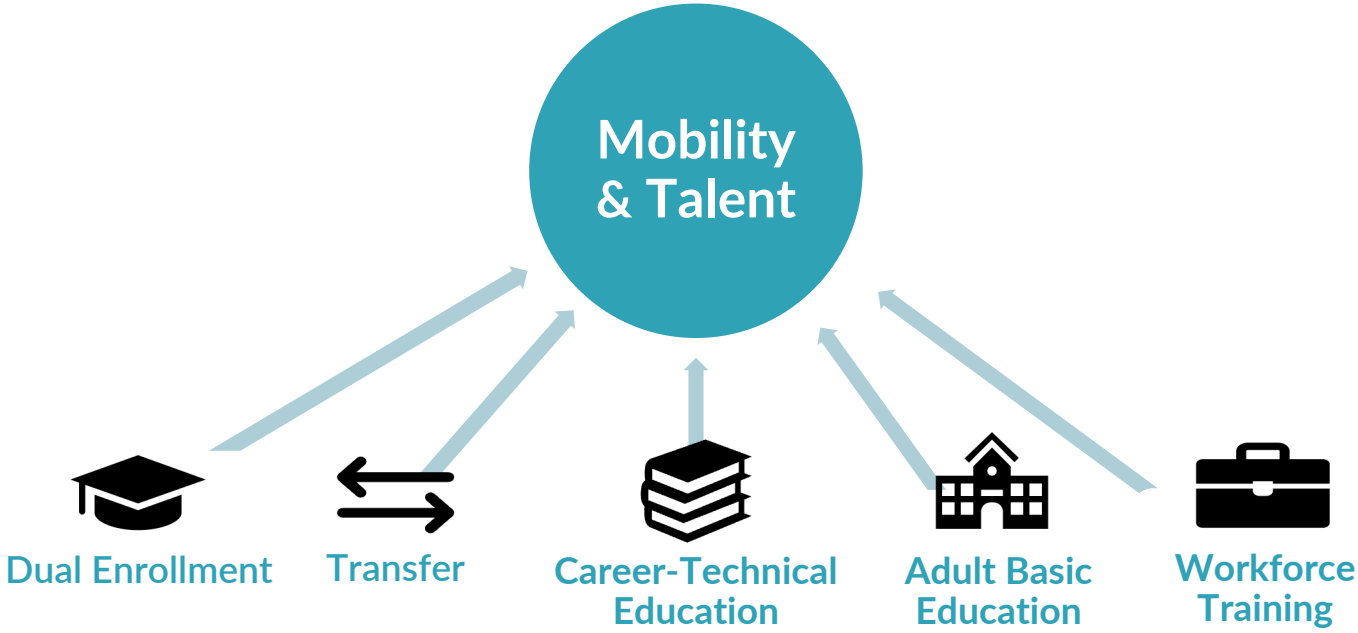
Essential Institutions Facing

Unprecedented Challenges

Community colleges are more essential than ever for their communities



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Yet, community colleges and higher education face challenges

Enrollments have declined across the country since 2010 and accelerated during the pandemic.

There is growing skepticism about the value of a college degree, though community colleges are perceived to offer more value than four-years.

While completion rates have improved, most community college starters do not earn any postsecondary credential six years later.

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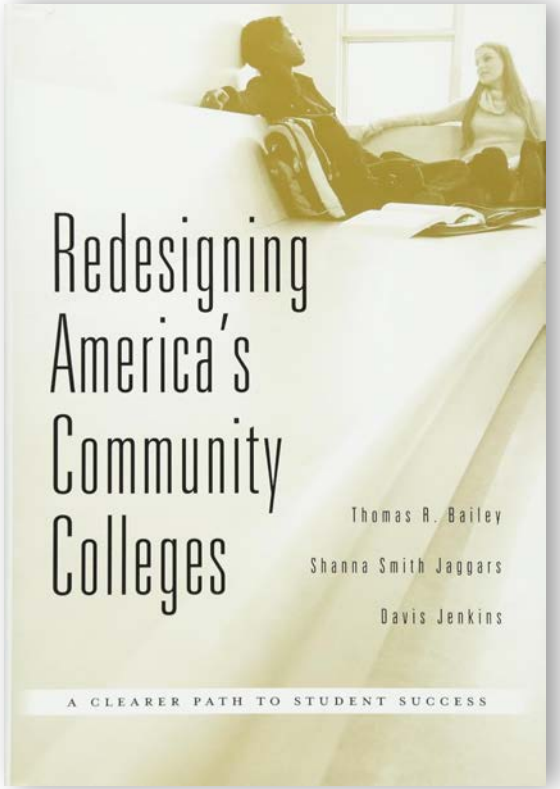
Insights

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.

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The original guided pathways framework focused on changing the student experience through programs of study to completion

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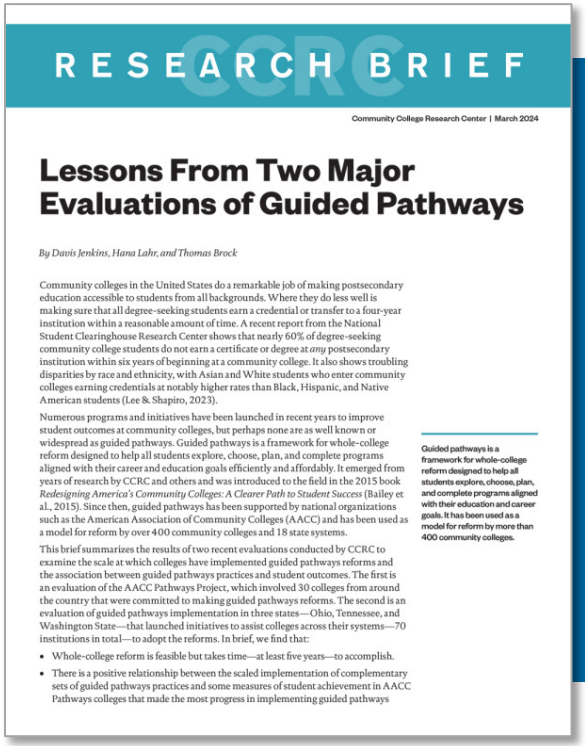
CCRC Guided Pathways Evaluations



RESEARCH BRIEF

Community College Research Center | March 2024

Lessons From Two Major Evaluations of Guided Pathways

By Davis Jenkins, Hana Lahr, 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)**

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Key Guided Pathways Evaluation Takeaways

1. Whole-college reform is **possible, but it takes time**—at least five years.

2. Positive outcomes are associated with the scaled adoption of a **complementary set of practices** across multiple pathways areas.

3. Practices that had the biggest impact on momentum were **case-management advising by field and scheduling** based on educational plans.

4. Colleges that **did not reform prerequisite developmental education did not see any improvement** in students outcomes.

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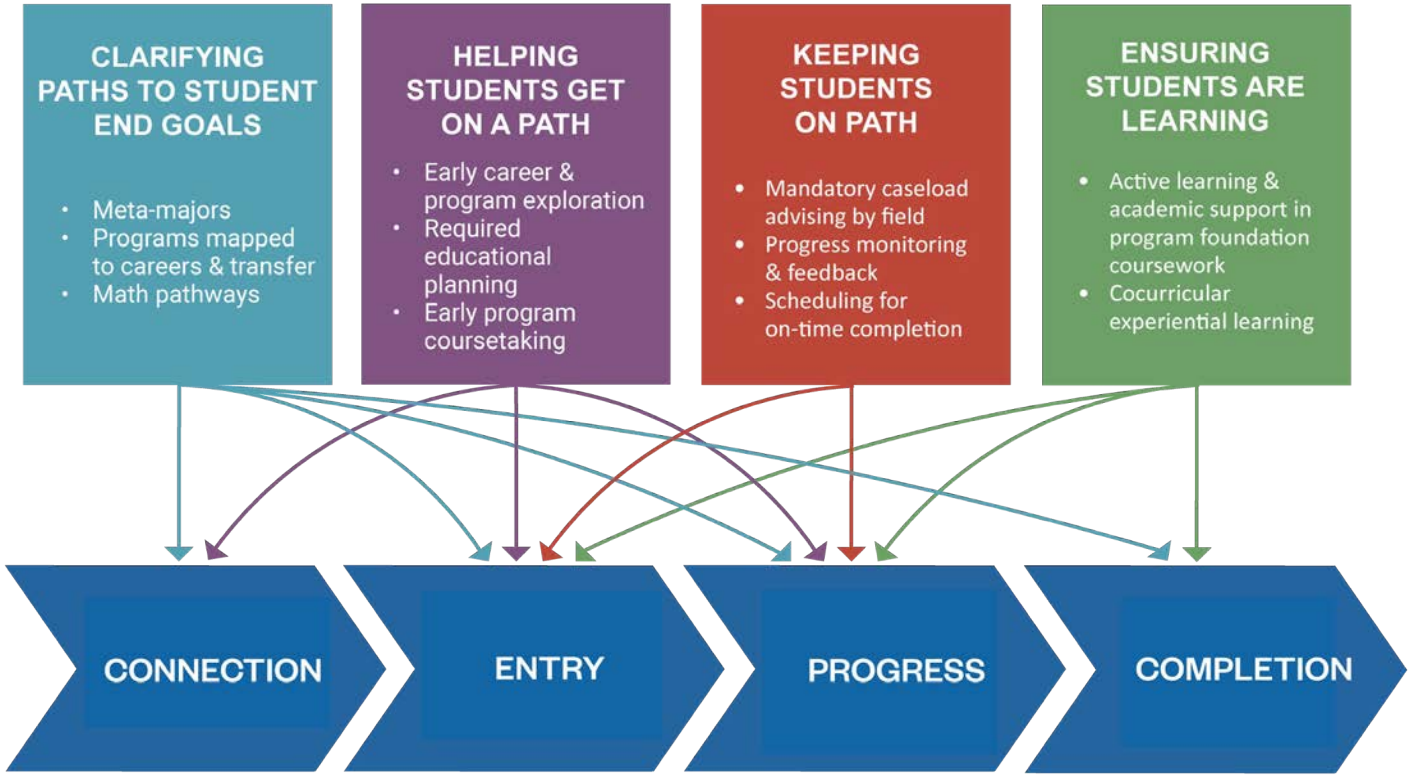
The original guided pathways framework focused on changing the student experience through programs of study to completion.



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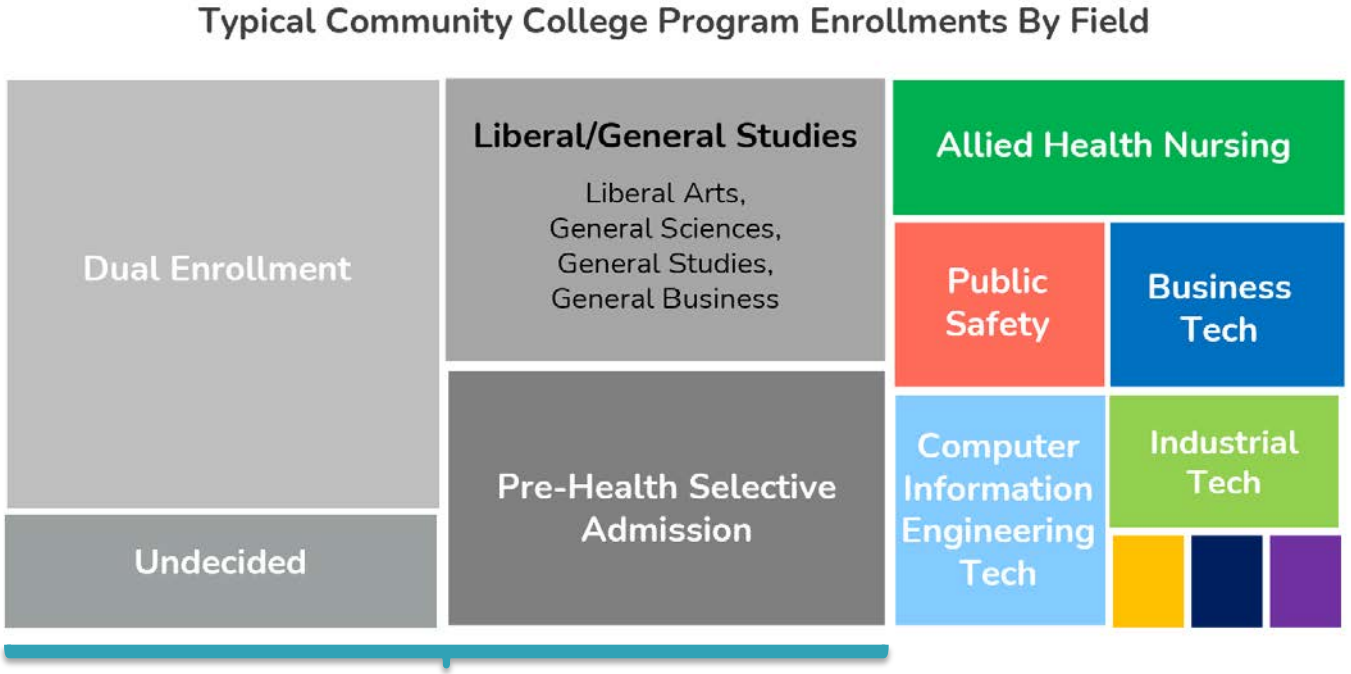
Many community college students are not enrolled in a program that clearly leads to a good job or transfer in their major field of interest



What motivation do these students have to continue and complete?

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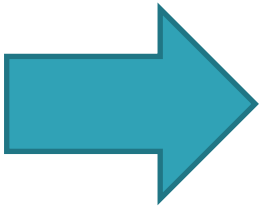
Moving from Completion to a *Post-Completion* Mindset

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**.

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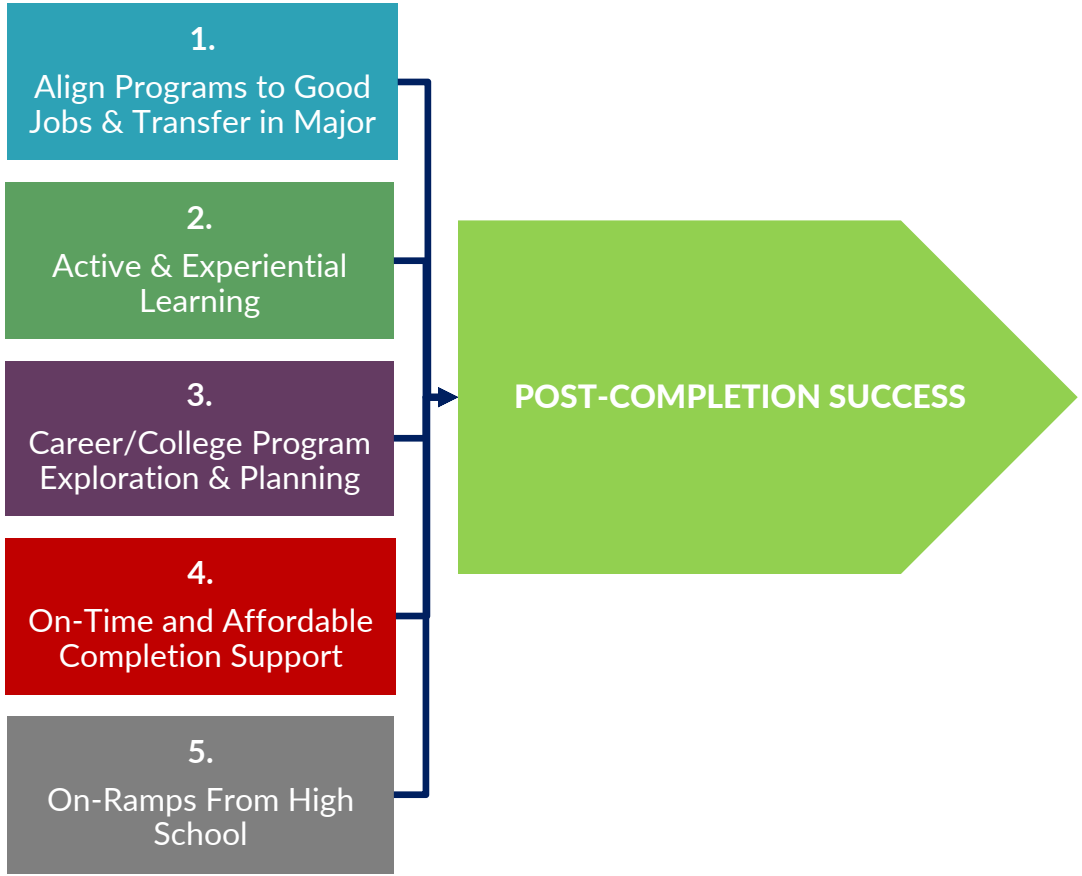
What will it take to shift to a post-completion mindset at our college? How can we focus our efforts moving forward?

Five Frontier Strategies

For Strengthening Community College Pathways to Post-Completion Success

Five frontier strategies for strengthening community colleges pathways

Starting with post-completion success in mind



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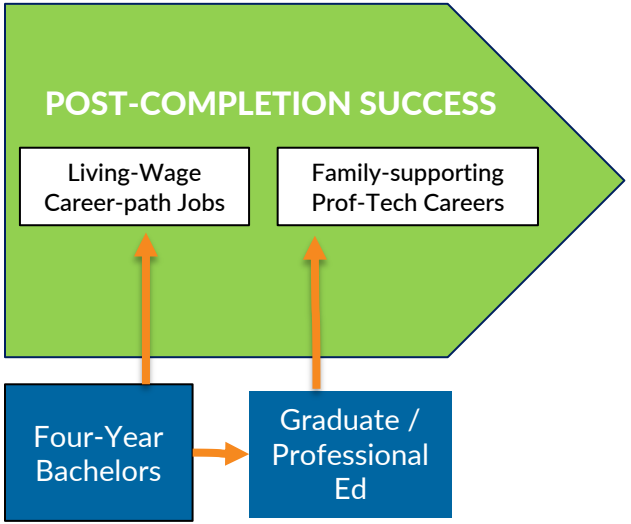
Five frontier strategies for strengthening community colleges pathways

Starting with **post-completion success** in mind



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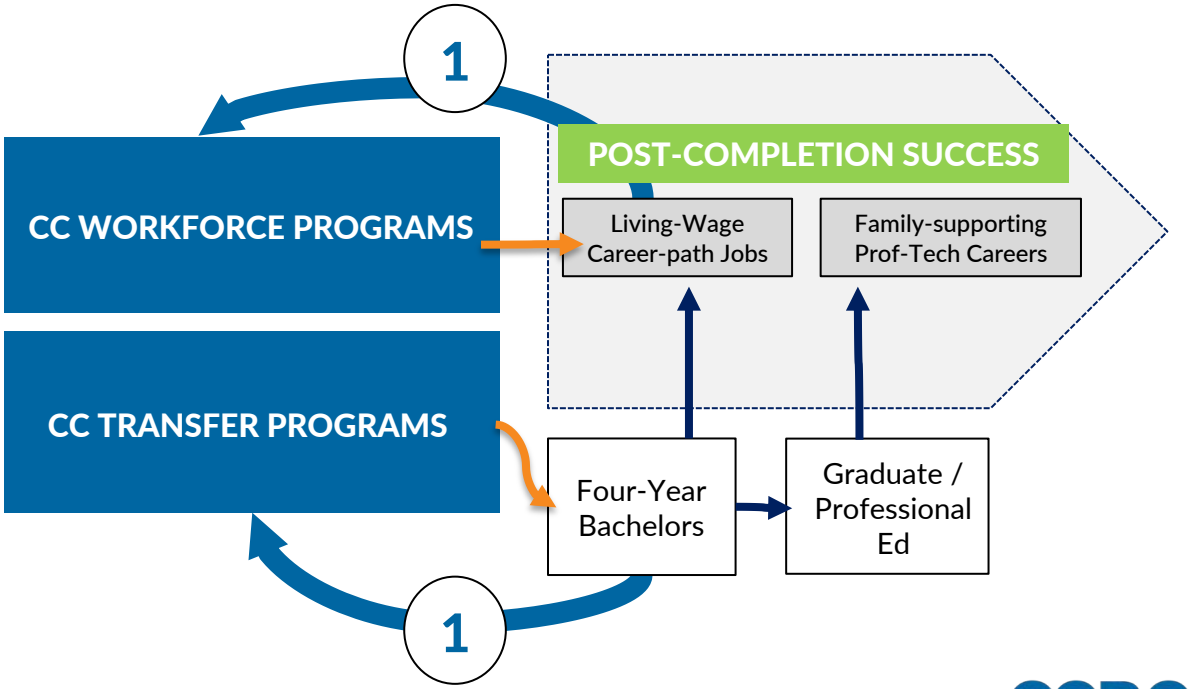
Frontier 1: Work closely with employers and universities to ensure programs lead to living-wage jobs or transfer in major



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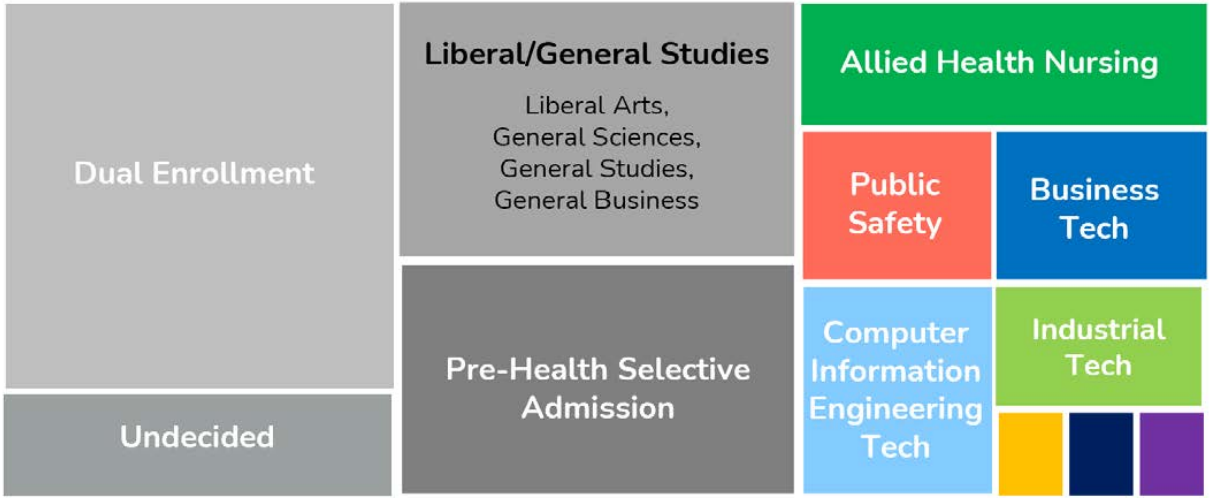
Opportunities for Improving Programs' Post-Completion Opportunities



1. Transfer: AA Gen Studies → Pre-major transfer plans
2. Workforce: Strengthen low-value workforce programs
3. Workforce: Expand and diversify high-value programs
4. Workforce: Embed certificates in degree programs
5. Selective Pre-admit: Backup plan(s) for students not admitted to selective programs
6. Non-Credit: Building onramps to credit programs
7. Dual Enrollment: Building on-ramps for students without postsecondary plans

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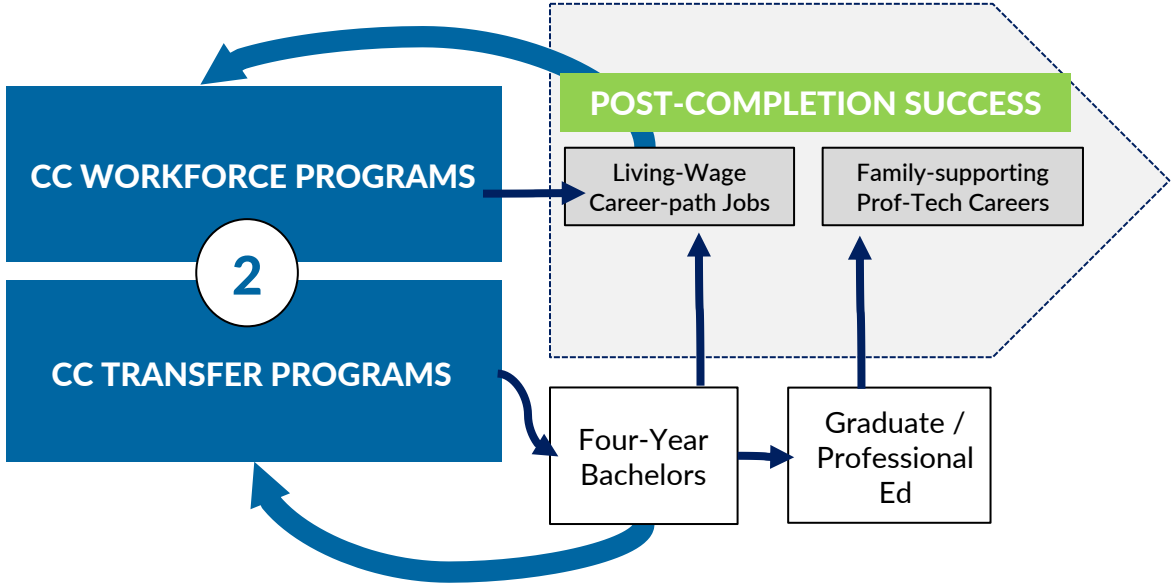
Frontier 2:

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



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Need for systemic innovation in teaching and learning practices in community colleges

Innovation in pedagogy and curriculum often occurs in pockets.

Reforms have focused on placement and structural changes in gateway math and English courses; not enough on improving pedagogy in these and other program foundation courses.

Experiential learning opportunities are rare for CC students outside workforce programs where they are an integral part of the curriculum

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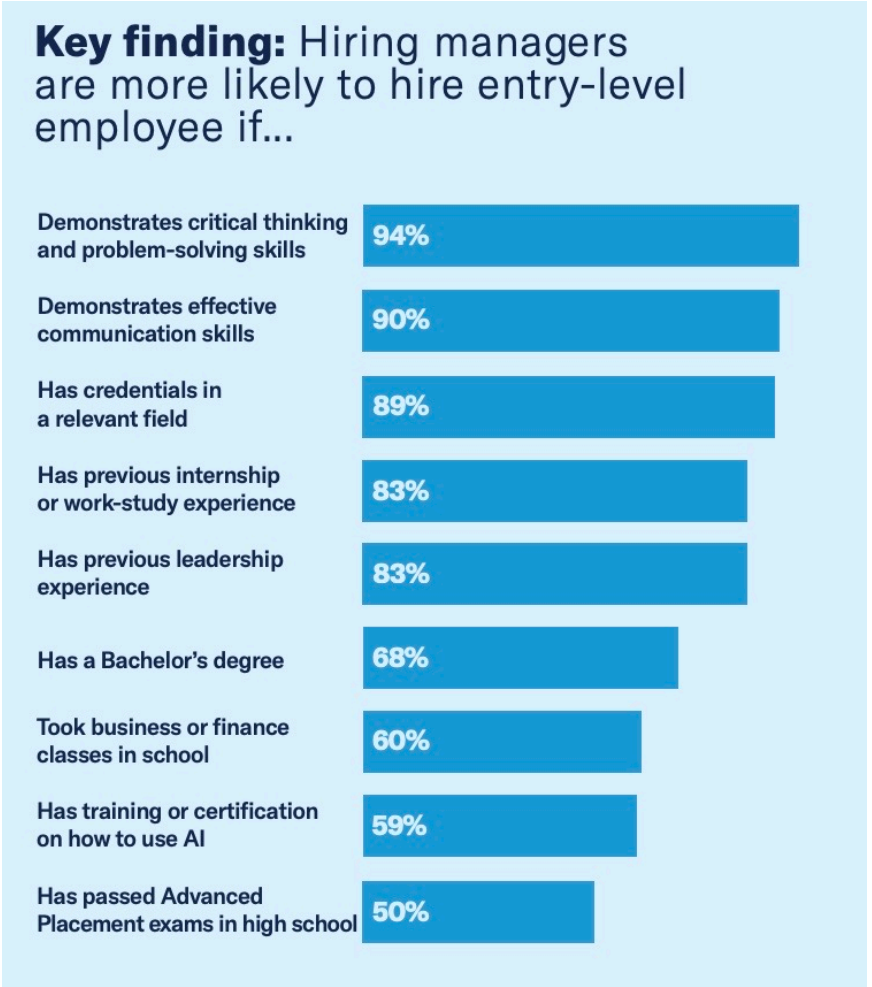
Employers value workers with *demonstrated* communication, problem-solving, learning skills who can apply what they learned in college on the job



Source: US Chamber of Commerce and the College Board: New Hire Readiness Report 2025: Insights from Hiring Managers on Entry-Level Workforce Preparedness

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ALAMO EXPERIENCE

A college degree or certificate often plays an essential r
achieving career goals, but the skills obtained through
experiential learning can give students confidence in th
career path and make an application stand out to poter
employers.

Experiential learning can play a critical role in providing
with hands-on experience and personal reflection. The
gained can also give them the marketable skills they ne
employment after graduation.

AlamoEXPERIENCE Model

Our experiential learning model, Ala
of opportunities that supplement the
connections for their future careers.

Mission: *Provide students across the*
opportunities that enhance student le

Vision: *Transform every student's life*

AlamoEXPERIENCE Platform

Students can find experiential learni
using the AlamoEXPERIENCE platfo
ACES (aces.alamo.edu) through the

Faculty and staff also have access to
can view existing opportunities and
engage students across the Alamo C

Experience Transcript

This transcript highlights the students' experiences in a doc
downloaded and shared on job, internship, college transfer,
Experience Transcript:

1. Access the AlamoEXPERIENCE portal through ACES
2. Click on you Profile and Experience

AlamoEXPERIENCE Guiding Principle

- Every student will have complete
- Experiential learning will engage opportunities
- Every student will be able to app guide their career pathway
- All experiential learning may be

For more information, visit a

ALAMO EXPERIENCE

WHAT IS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?

Experiential learning provides a real-world understanding that enhances academic success. It is the process of learning through experience, where students are actively involved in the experience, reflect on the activity, and apply the value of the experience to broader areas of life. Self-reflection empowers students to take charge of their own learning and make connections to launch their career journey.

FOUR CATEGORIES OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNIN

1. **Co-Curricular**
   Activities related to course curriculum
   Examples: Classroom-based learning projects, public spe research projects, and faculty-led study abroad

2. **Extracurricular**
   Activities that foster student involvement an of the institution.
   Examples: Student clubs and organizations, sports, stud abroad

3. **Field Experience**
   Hands-on workplace learning that directly r application
   Examples: Apprenticeships, internships, community/priv clinicals, field observations, and student teaching

4. **Service Learning**
   Activities that combine learning objectives, t responsibility, and meet the community's ne
   Examples: Volunteering with college advocacy centers, S for Humanity, and other non-profit organizations

ALAMO EXPERIENCE

ALAMO COLLEGES DISTRICT

NORTHEAST LAKEVIEW COLLEGE
NORTHWEST VISTA COLLEGE
PALO ALTO COLLEGE
ST. PHILIP'S COLLEGE
SAN ANTONIO COLLEGE

HOW DO I KNOW IF AN ACTIVITY QUALIFIES AS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?

The goal of experiential learning is to provide opportunities to students to supplement their classroom learning, develop their skills and build connections for their future careers.

Experiential learning opportunities include co-curricular learning, extra-curricular activities, field experience and service learning/community service.

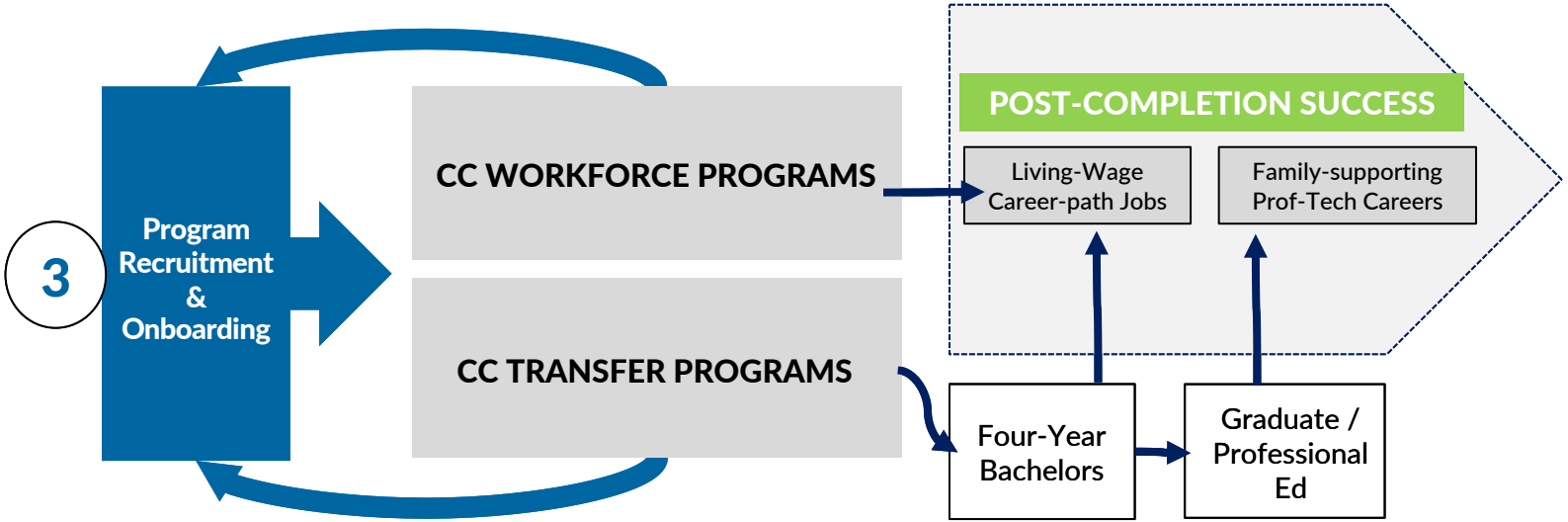
Below is a checklist to determine how to designate an activity as experiential learning.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CHECKLIST

- ☐ Connect with your campus Career Experience Team Lead and/or Certified Career Experience Navigator
- ☐ Align each activity with one of the four experiential learning opportunities
- ☐ Ensure activity allows student(s) to apply and demonstrate soft-skills such as teamwork, problem-solving, leadership, etc.
- ☐ Provide opportunities for self-reflection to empower student to make academic and experience connections related to career pathway
- ☐ Ensure each experience meets one or more of the NACE competencies and Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILO)
- ☐ Record and share student attendance (name, banner ID) with Certified Career Experience Navigator to record in AlamoEXPERIENCE for credit on transcript

Frontier 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.



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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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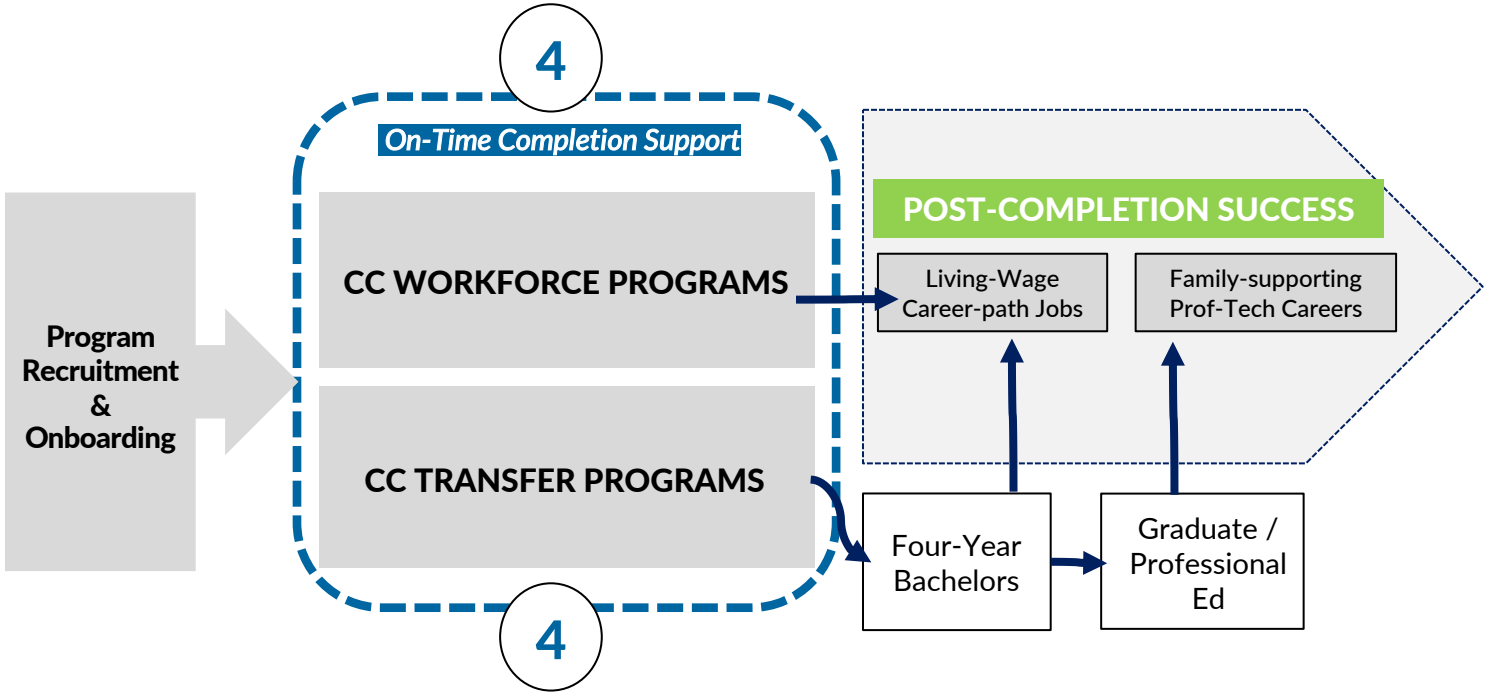
Frontier 4:

Schedule and deliver courses—and provide ongoing advising and progress monitoring—to enable busy students to complete their programs in as little time and cost as possible.



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Key strategies for supporting on-time and affordable completion

Caseload advising by field

Progress monitoring & updating educational plans

Student-responsive course schedules

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Student-responsive scheduling benefits students and the college

Benefits to students:

- Take the classes they need when they need them
- Plan in advance without having to make frequent changes
- Access programs that are limited to students who can enroll full-time

Benefits to colleges:

- Increase FTE and tuition revenue (how many PT students are PT because of course schedules?)
- Prevent last-minute course cancellations due to low-enrollment classes

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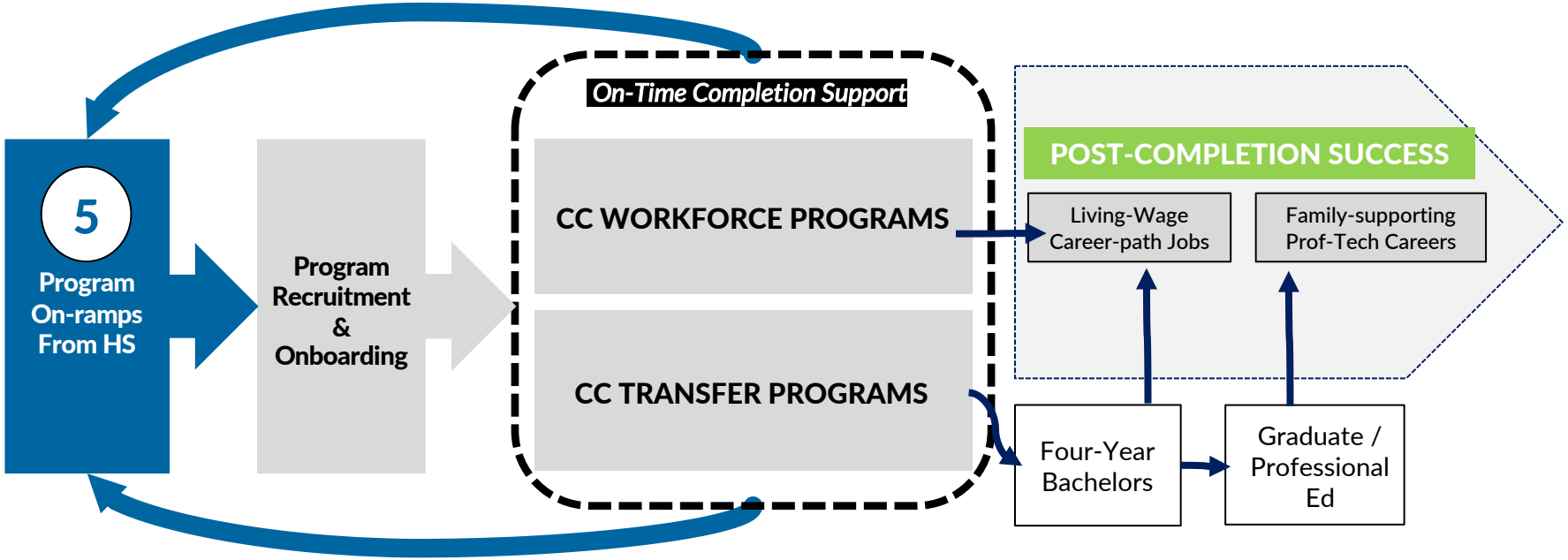
Frontier 5:

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 high school.



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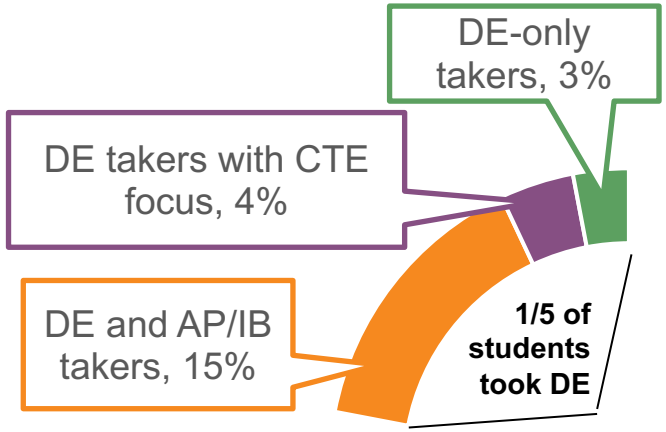
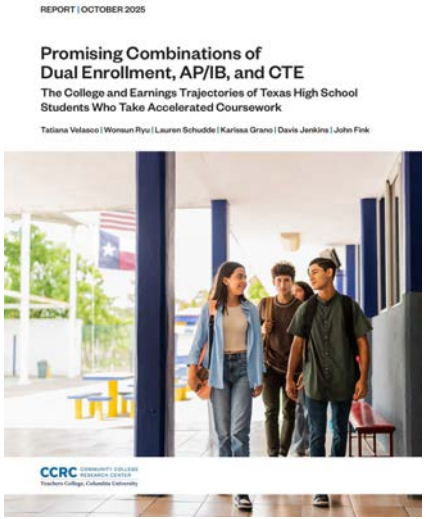
Promising Combinations, Untapped Potential



Texas High School Class of 2022 (n=374k)



Velasco et al., 2025

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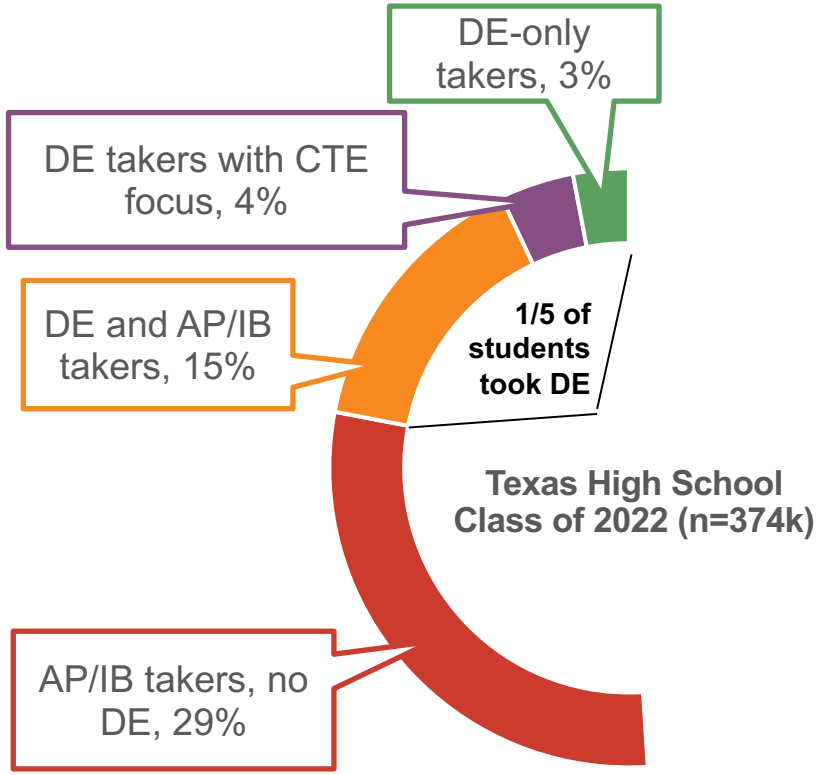

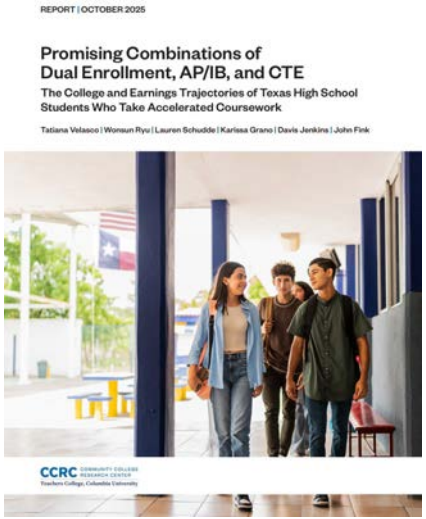

Velasco et al., 2025

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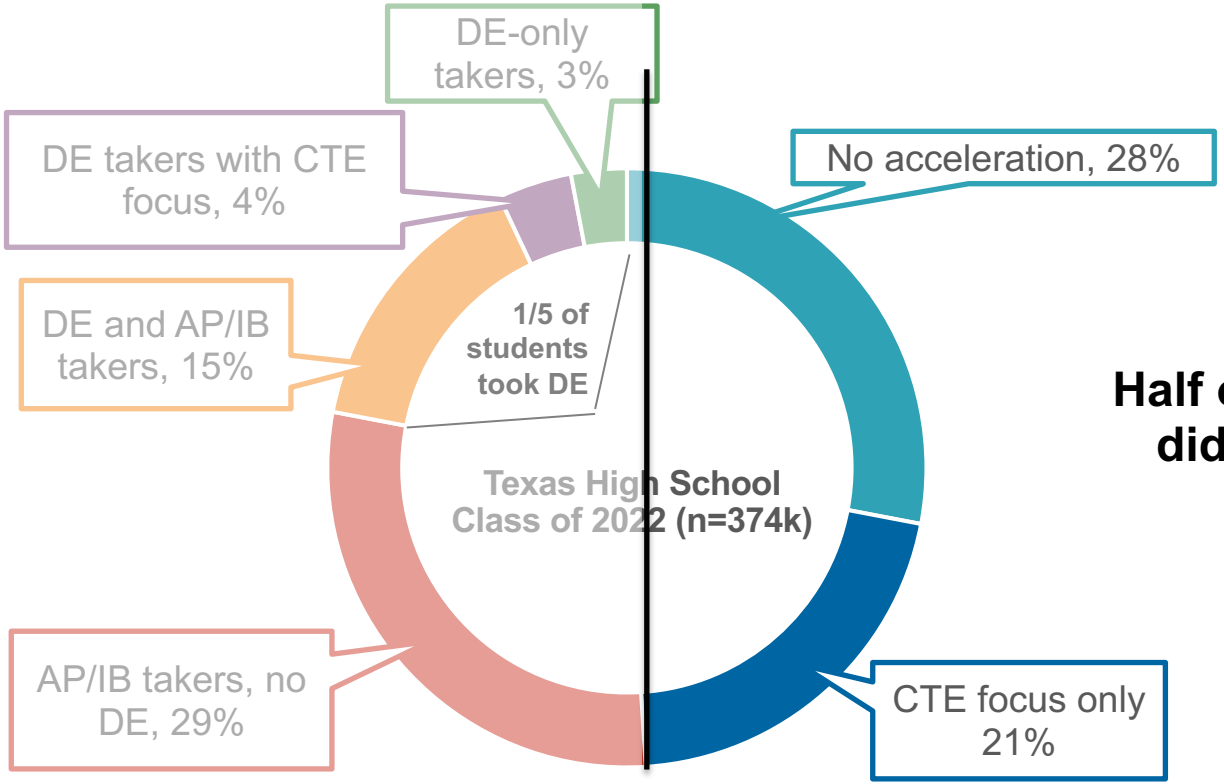
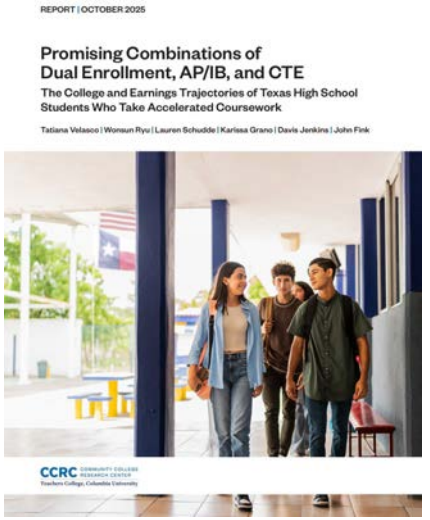
Promising Combinations, Untapped Potential





Velasco et al., 2025

Half of Texas HS Students did not take DE or AP/IB

Overrepresented:
Men, Black, & low-income students
56-57% men (51% baseline)
14-18% Black (13% baseline)
62-65% low-income (54% baseline)

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DEEP Framework Extends Guided Pathways to High School through Dual Enrollment

Outreach

Outreach to Underserved Students & Schools

Support

Support Students by Delivering High-Quality Instruction

Alignment

Align DE to College Degrees & Careers

Advise

Advise Students to Explore Interests and Develop Plans

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From “Random Acts” to Purposeful Pathways

Conventional Approach

Who is it designed for?	Primarily students who are already headed to college after high school
What courses are offered?	Primarily gen eds or whatever is easy to offer based on teacher availability
What is the approach to teaching?	Reliance on qualified HS teachers with limited quality control and professional development
What academic supports are provided?	Ad hoc, if students reach out for help
What college advising is provided?	Advising from the college available to students who seek it out
Business model	Lower costs, lighter supports, less re-enrollment after high school

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From “Random Acts” to Purposeful Pathways

	Conventional Approach	DEEP Approach
Who is it designed for?	Primarily students who are already headed to college after high school	All students, especially those who might not otherwise pursue further education after high school
What courses are offered?	Primarily gen eds or whatever is easy to offer based on teacher availability	Foundational coursework (including general education courses) aligned to college degree programs in fields of interest to students
What is the approach to teaching?	Reliance on qualified HS teachers with limited quality control and professional development	Strong quality control and professional development through collaboration with college faculty and programs
What academic supports are provided?	Ad hoc, if students reach out for help	Unavoidable and proactive academic support, frontloaded for new DE students
What college advising is provided?	Advising from the college available to students who seek it out	College-provided advising for all students at key checkpoints to help explore interests and create an individualized post-high school learning plan
Business model	Lower costs, lighter supports, less re-enrollment after high school	Higher costs, more supports, greater downstream revenues

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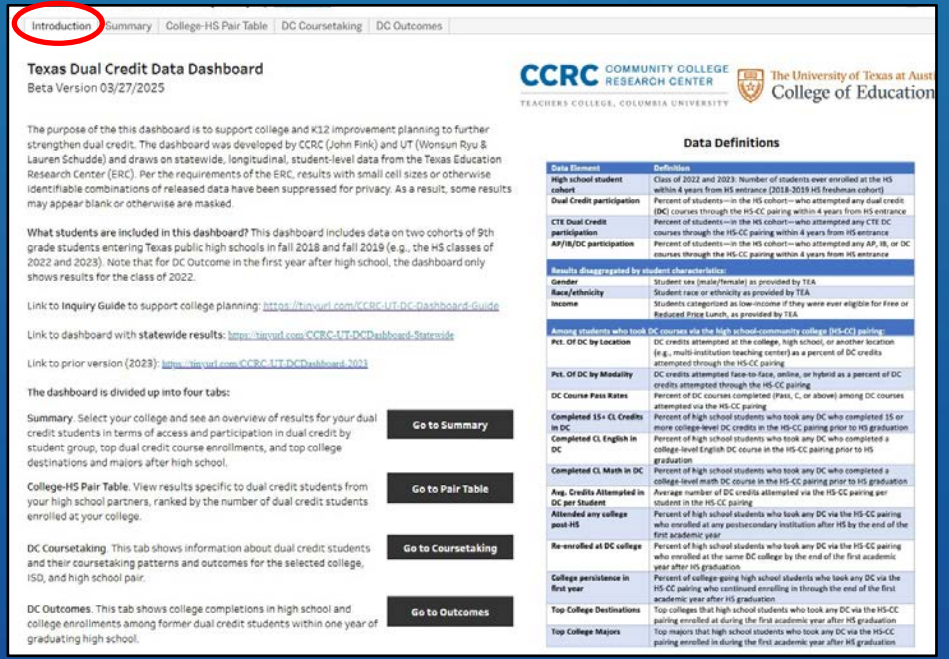
CCRC Resource: Texas Dual Credit Data Dashboard

The Texas Dual Credit Dashboard tracks Texas high school students':

- Access to DC
- DC course location and modality
- DC course pass rates
- DC credit and gateway course momentum
- Post-HS college enrollments and persistence

The Dashboard's Homepage



Dashboard: https://tinyurl.com/TXDualCreditDashboard

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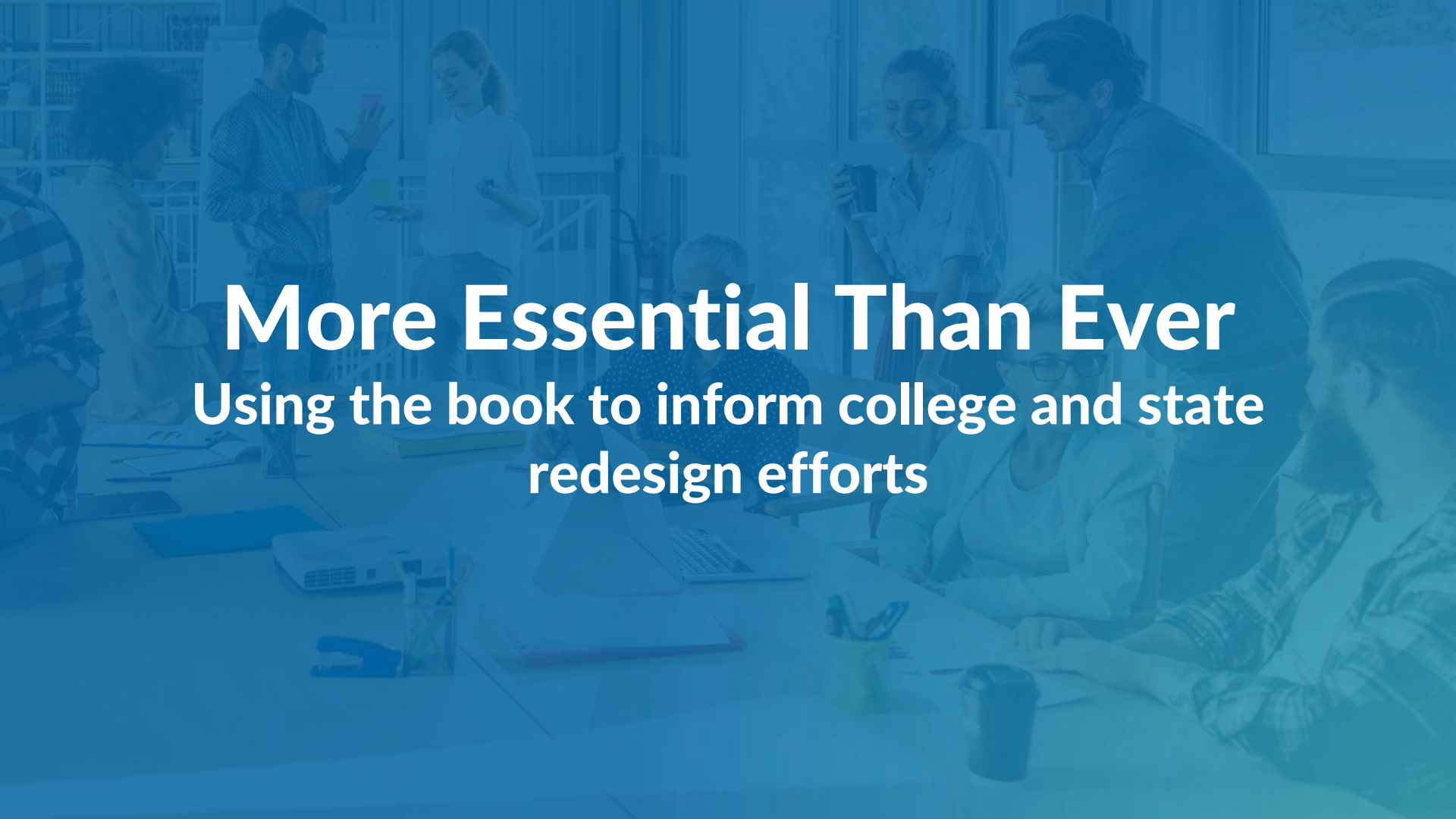
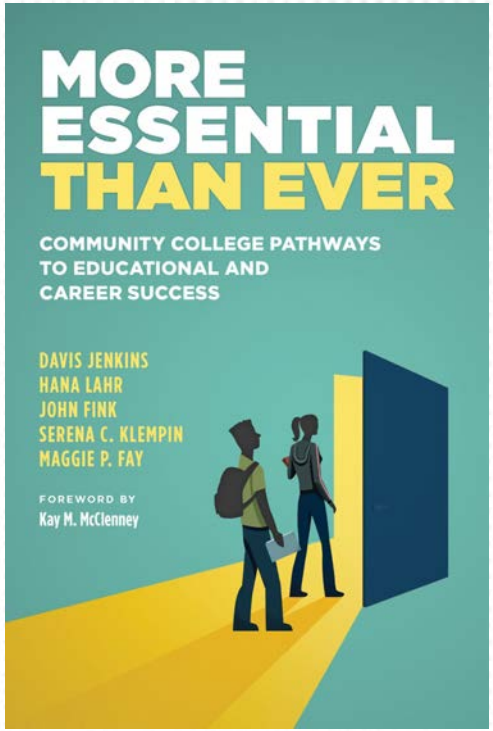


More Essential Than Ever

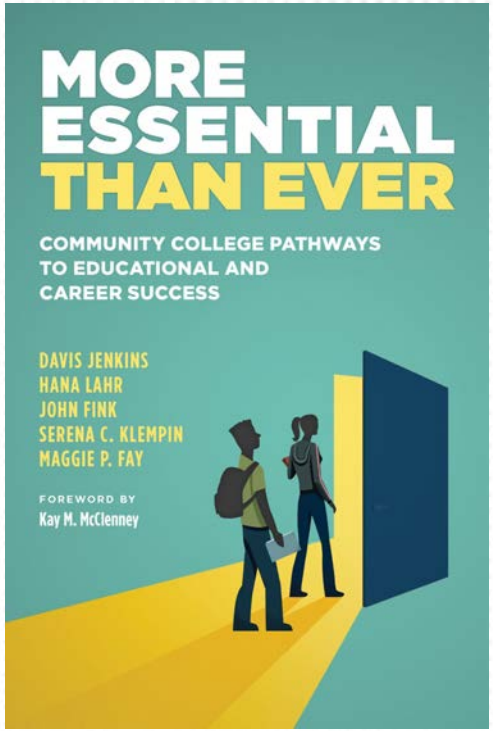
Using the book to inform college and state redesign efforts

This book is for colleges and states at different stages of the redesign process



- New to systemic, whole-college innovation
- Started systemic reforms, was slowed by the pandemic or other challenges, and looking to restart
- Spent several years adopting systemic reforms and planning to take the work to next level

And includes practical guidance and examples



- “Taking Action” steps at the end of each chapter
- Dozens of examples and case studies of reforms in practices in different colleges
- Accompanying blog series and discussion guide to facilitate broad engagement

Scan here to order
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Scan here to download the (free!)
More Essential Discussion Guide

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Hana Lahr: lahr@tc.columbia.edu
John Fink: john.fink@tc.columbia.edu