

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

MORE ESSENTIAL THAN EVER

COMMUNITY COLLEGE PATHWAYS
TO EDUCATIONAL AND
CAREER SUCCESS

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CCRC COMMUNITY COLLEGE
RESEARCH CENTER
Teachers College, Columbia University

More Essential Than Ever

Community College Pathways to
Educational and Career Success

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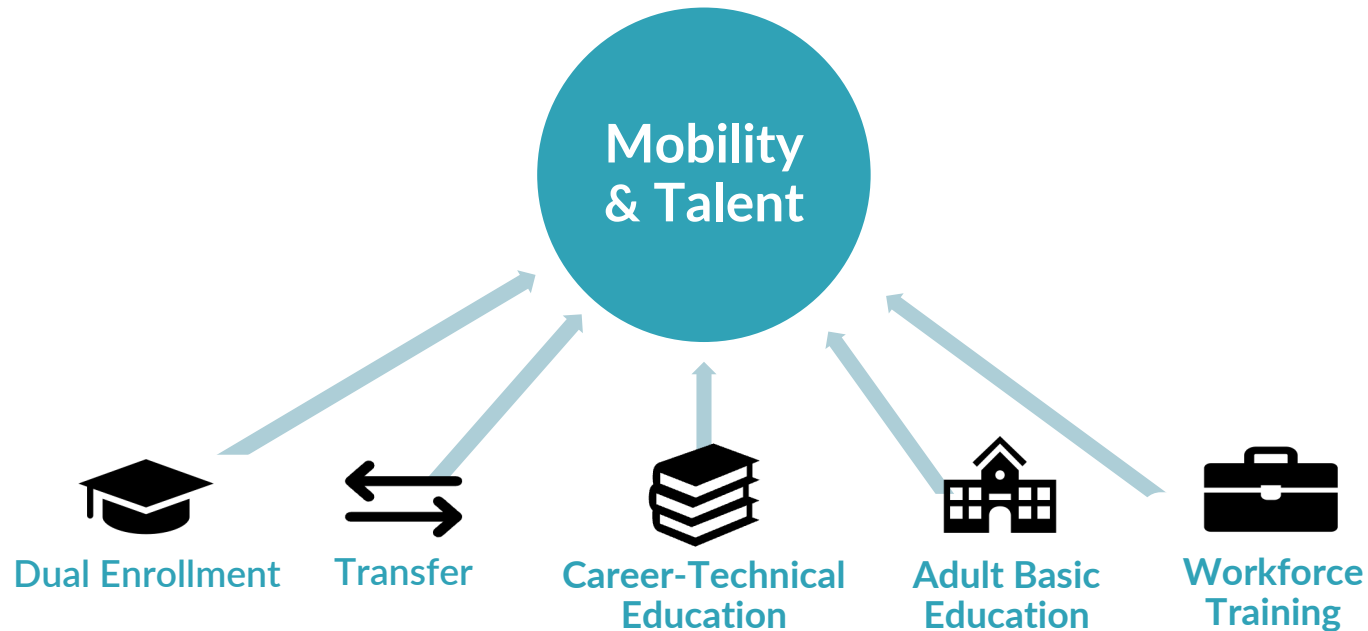


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A blue-tinted photograph of a modern, multi-level staircase in a university building. Several students are visible: some are sitting on the steps, one is using a laptop, and others are walking up and down. The architecture features glass railings and multiple levels with indoor plants.

Essential Institutions Facing Unprecedented Challenges

Community colleges are more essential than ever for their communities



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.

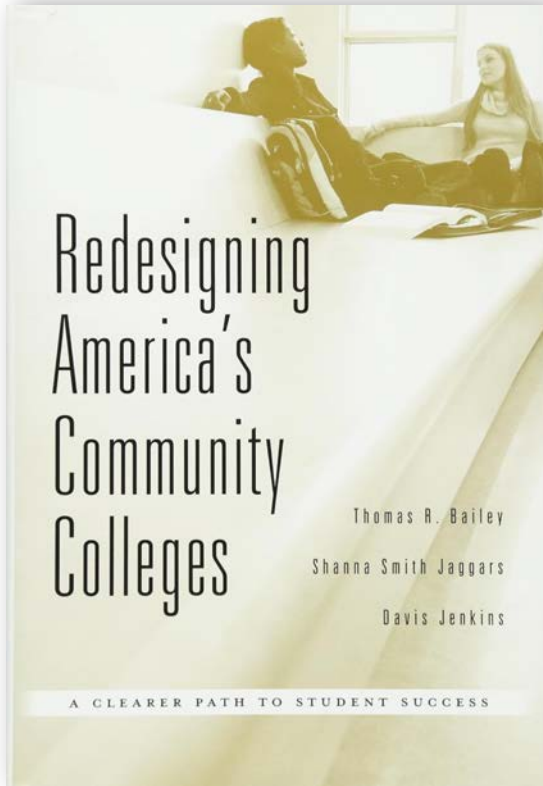


While completion rates have improved, most community college starters do not earn any postsecondary credential six years later.

The background is a blue-tinted image of a document. It features several faint, overlapping charts and graphs. There are bar charts, line graphs with data points, and some text that is partially legible, such as "400" and "0". The overall aesthetic is professional and data-oriented.

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

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

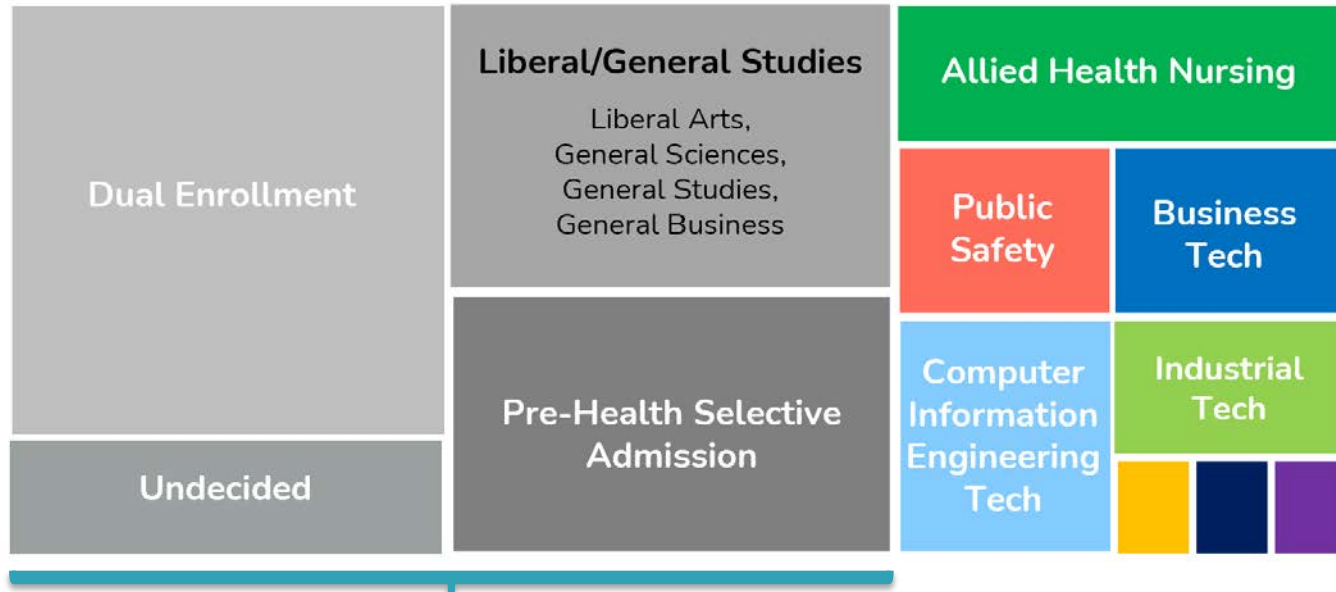
- 1 | Whole-college reform is **possible, but it takes time**—at least five years.
- 2 | Positive outcomes are associated with the scaled adoption of a **complementary set of practices** across multiple pathways areas.
- 3 | Practices that had the biggest impact on momentum were **case-management advising 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.

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



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

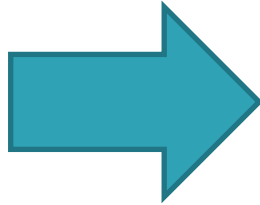
Typical Community College Program Enrollments By Field



What motivation do these students have to continue and complete?

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.**

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

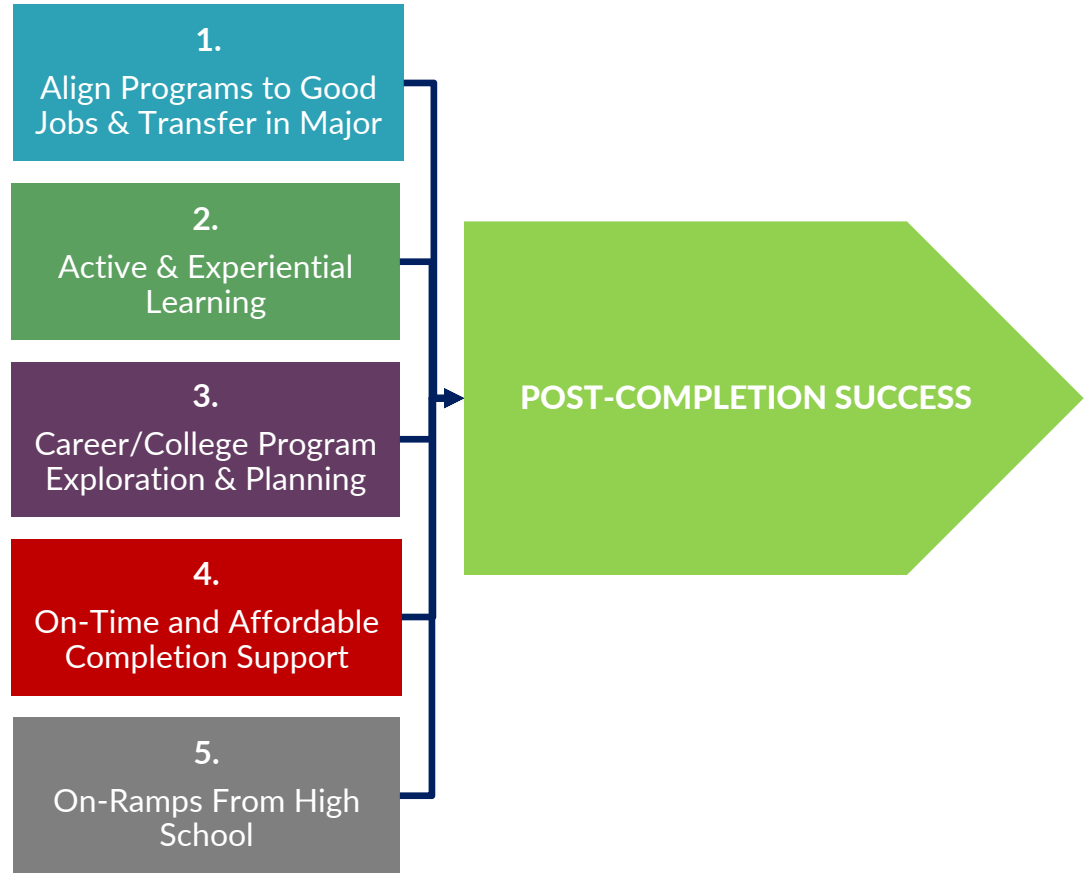
A photograph of four students walking away from the camera on a paved path. The student on the left is wearing a dark jacket and a backpack. The student next to them is wearing a plaid shirt and a backpack. The student in the center has long, wavy hair and is wearing a light-colored shirt. The student on the right is wearing a dark jacket. In the background, there is a modern building with large windows and a staircase. The entire image is covered with a semi-transparent blue overlay.

Five Frontier Strategies

For Strengthening Community College Pathways to Post-Completion Success

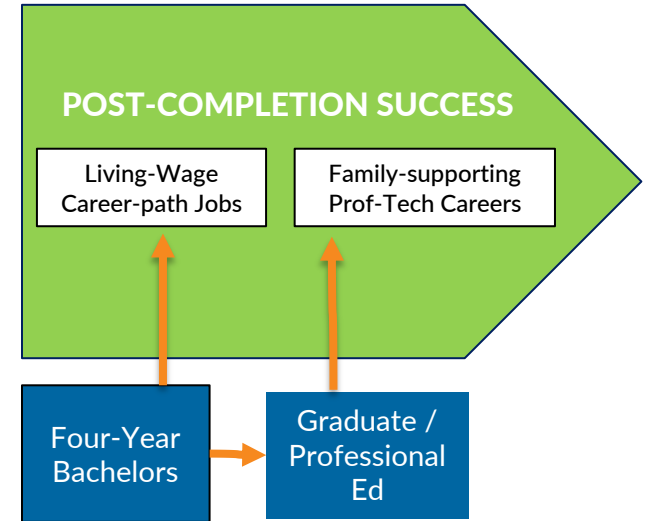
Five frontier strategies for strengthening community colleges pathways

Starting with post-completion success in mind

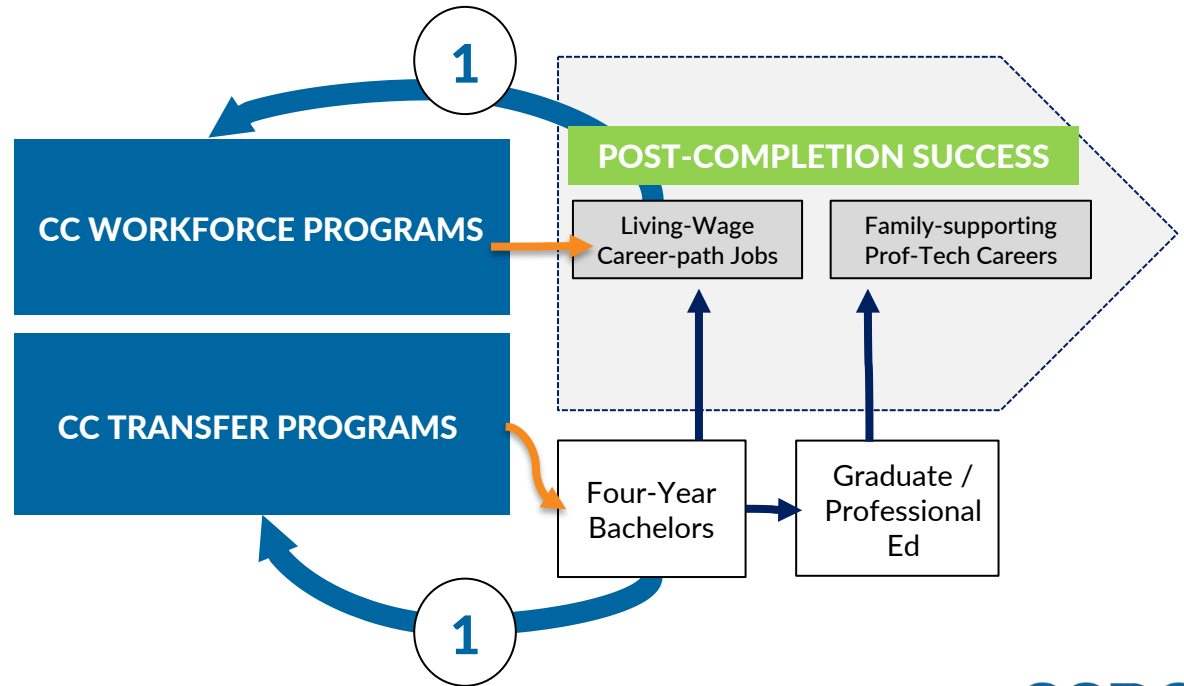


Five frontier strategies for strengthening community colleges pathways

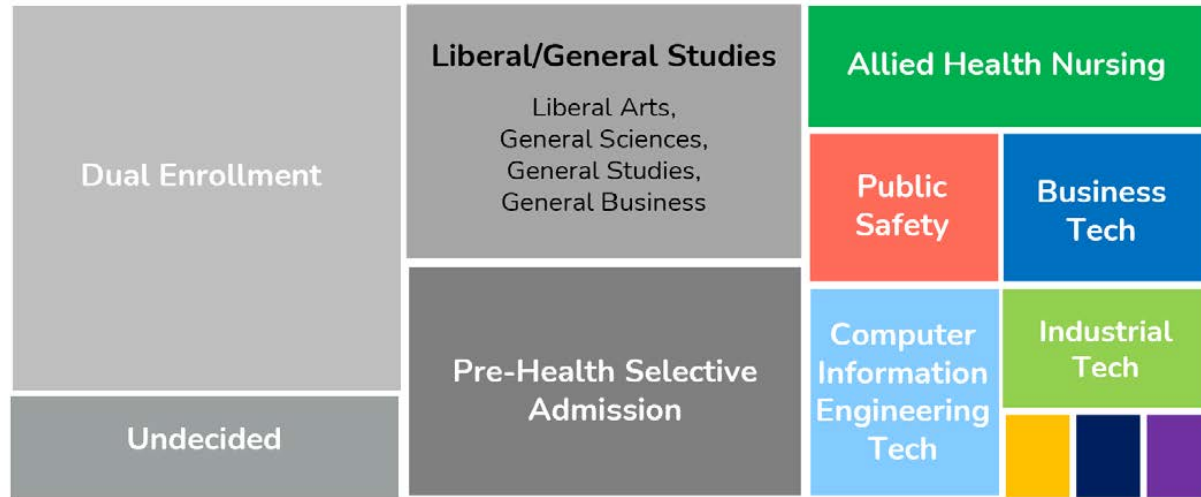
Starting with **post-completion success** in mind



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

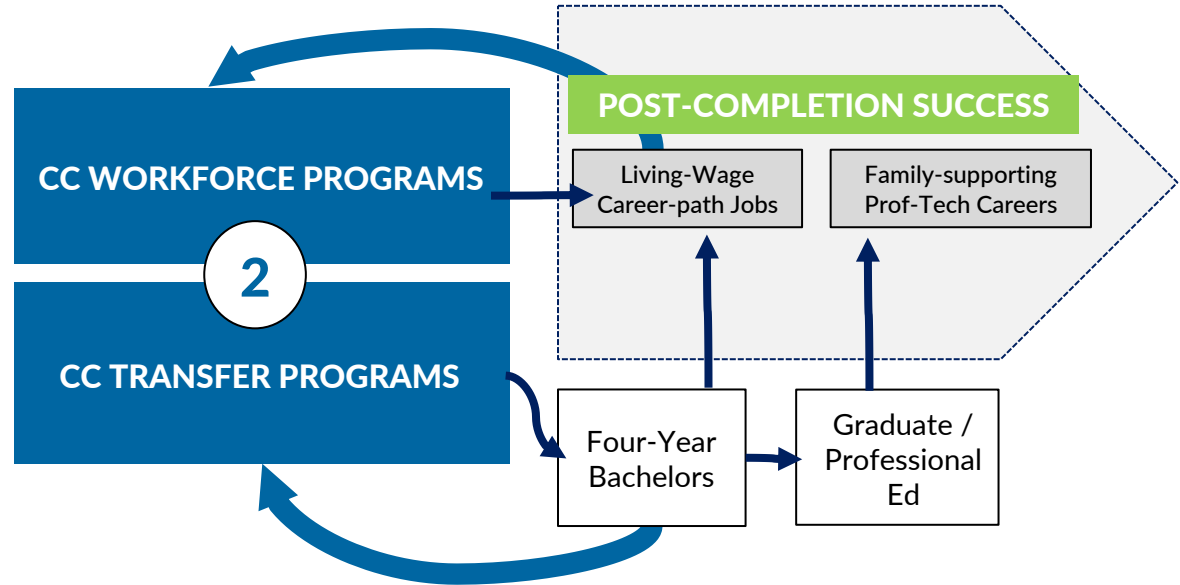


Opportunities for Improving Programs' Post-Completion Opportunities



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

Frontier 2: Help students develop versatile skills by embedding active and experiential learning throughout all workforce and transfer programs



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

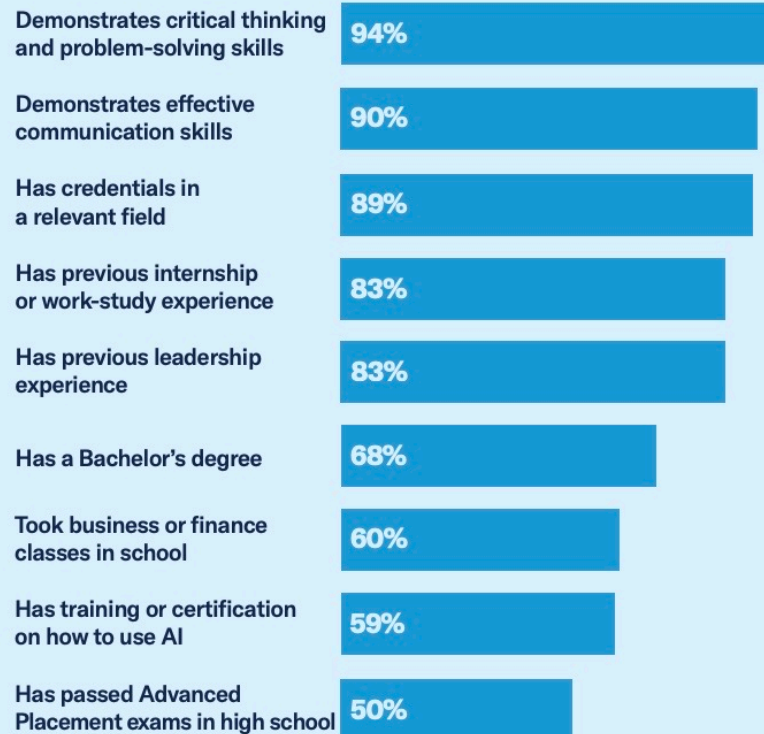
Innovation in pedagogy and curriculum often occurs in pockets.

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

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

Key finding: Hiring managers
are more likely to hire entry-level
employee if...



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

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

AlamoEXPERIENCE Model



Our experiential learning model, AlamoEXPERIENCE, provides a variety of opportunities that supplement the connections for their future careers.

Mission: Provide students across the district with opportunities that enhance student learning.

Vision: Transform every student's life.

AlamoEXPERIENCE Platform



Students can find experiential learning opportunities using the AlamoEXPERIENCE platform (aces.alamo.edu) through the AlamoEXPERIENCE platform.

Faculty and staff also have access to the platform and can view existing opportunities and engage students across the AlamoEXPERIENCE platform.

Experience Transcript

This transcript highlights the students' experiences in a document that is downloaded and shared on job, internship, college transfer, and graduate school applications.

1 Access the AlamoEXPERIENCE portal through ACES

2 Click on your profile and select 'Experience Transcript'

AlamoEXPERIENCE Guiding Principles



- Every student will have complete access to experiential learning opportunities
- Every student will be able to apply for and complete their career pathway
- All experiential learning may be documented on the Experience Transcript

For more information, visit [aces.alamo.edu](#)

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 LEARNING

1

Co-Curricular

Activities related to course curriculum

Examples: Classroom-based learning projects, public speaking, research projects, and faculty-led study abroad

2

Extracurricular

Activities that foster student involvement and leadership outside of the institution.

Examples: Student clubs and organizations, sports, student government, and study abroad

3

Field Experience

Hands-on workplace learning that directly relates to the student's application

Examples: Apprenticeships, internships, community/private industry placements, field observations, and student teaching

4

Service Learning

Activities that combine learning objectives, civic responsibility, and meet the community's needs

Examples: Volunteering with college advocacy centers, Service for Humanity, and other non-profit organizations



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

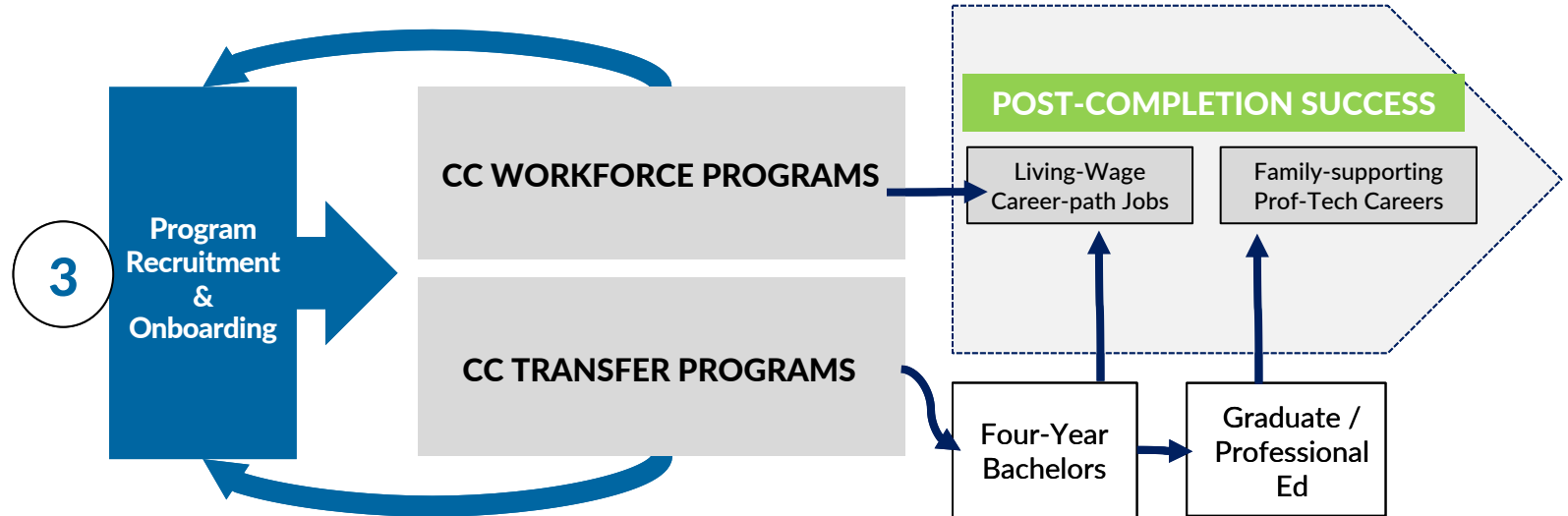


Ensure each experience meets one or more of the [NACE competencies](#) and [Institutional Learning Outcomes \(ILO\)](#)



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.



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

- | **Ask** students about their goals, interests, and career aspirations

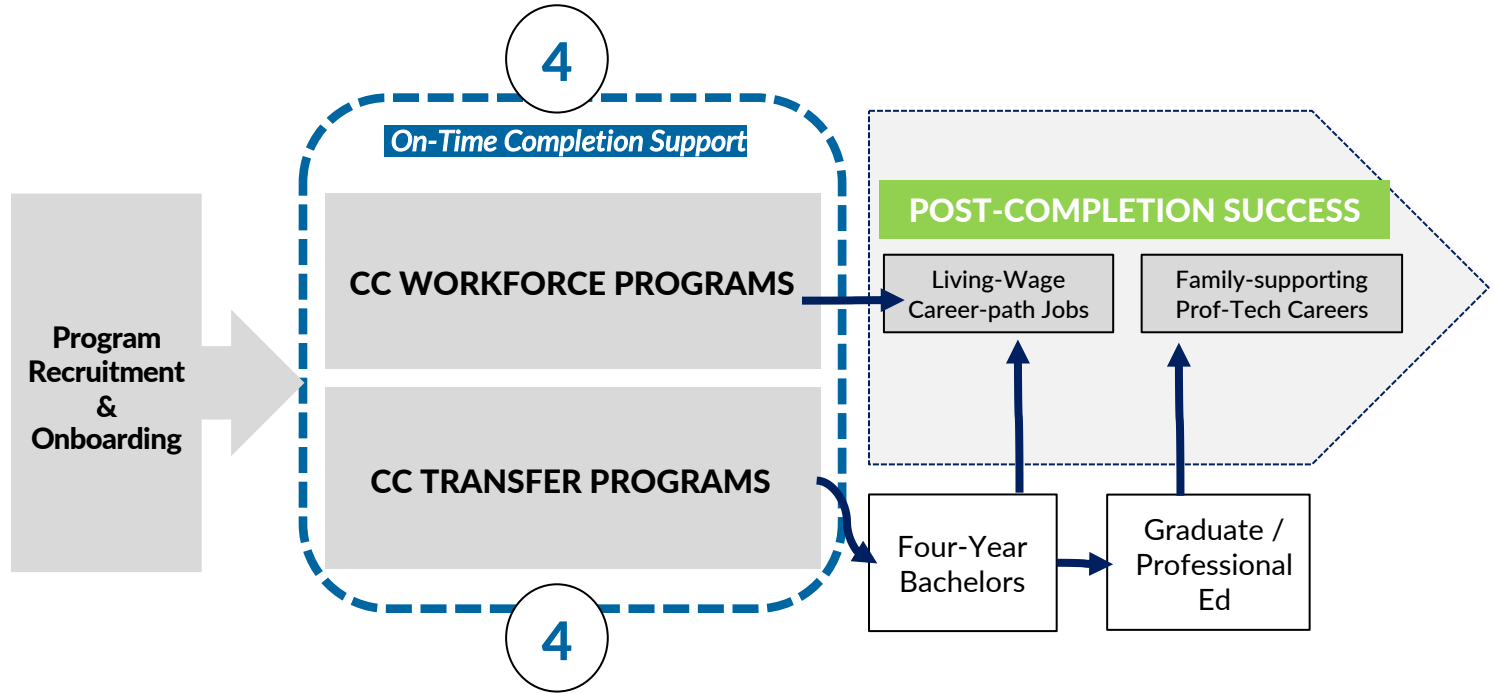
- | **Connect** students with students, faculty, and others who share similar academic and career interests

- | **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**

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.



Key strategies for supporting on-time and affordable completion



Caseload advising by field



Progress monitoring & updating educational plans



Student-responsive course schedules

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

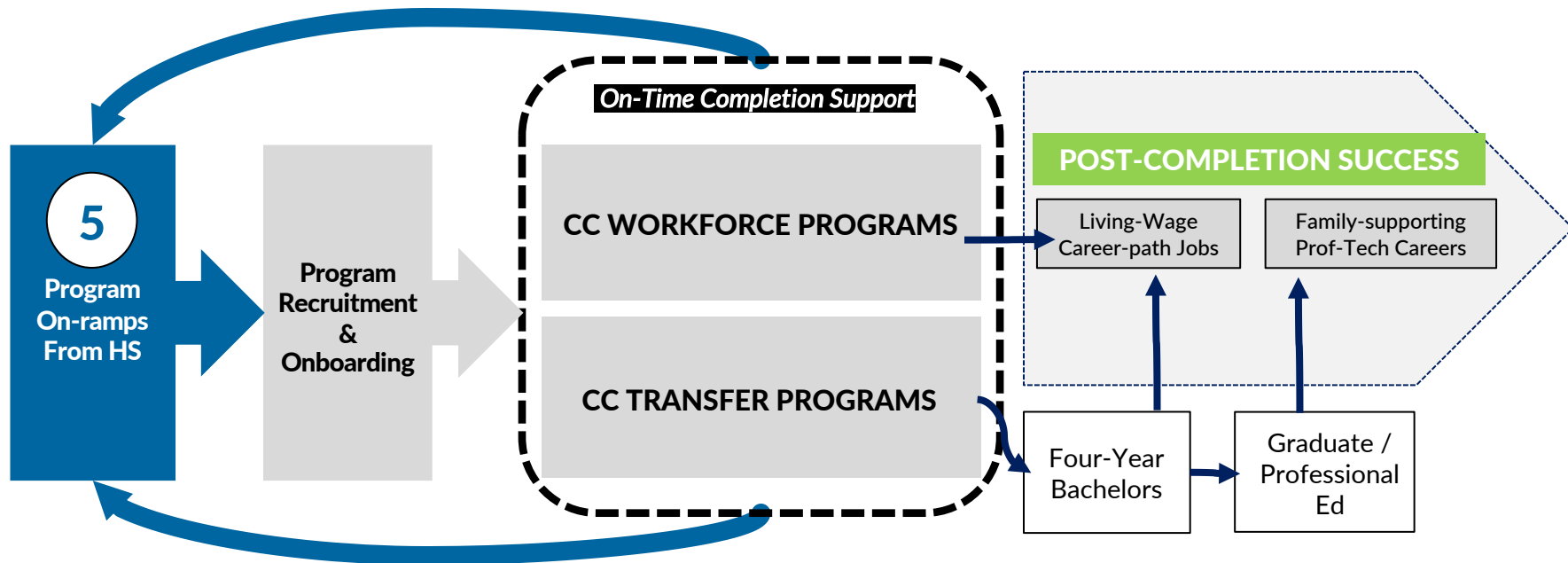


Benefits to colleges:

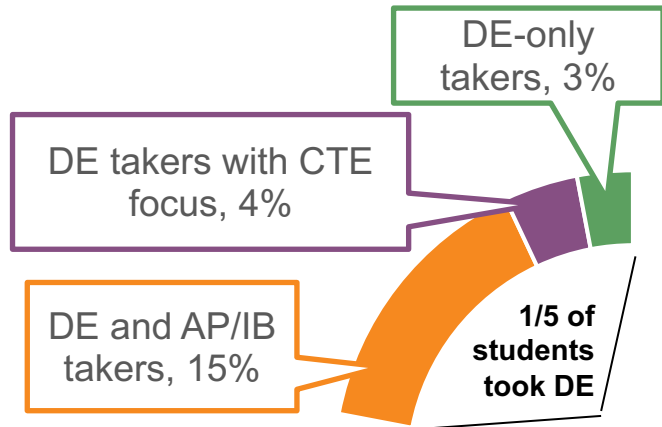
- Increase FTE and tuition revenue (how many PT students are PT because of course schedules?)
- Prevent last-minute course cancellations due to low-enrollment classes

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.



Promising Combinations, Untapped Potential



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

REPORT | OCTOBER 2025

Promising Combinations of Dual Enrollment, AP/IB, and CTE

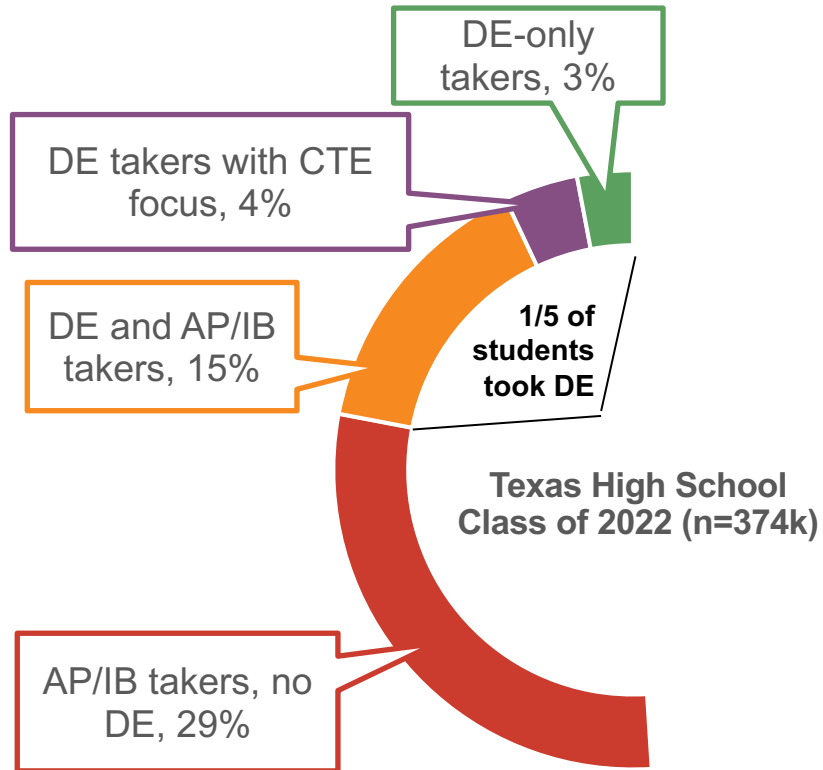
The College and Earnings Trajectories of Texas High School
Students Who Take Accelerated Coursework

Tatiana Velasco | Wonam Ryou | Lauren Schudde | Karissa Grano | Davis Jenkins | John Fink



[Velasco et al., 2025](#)

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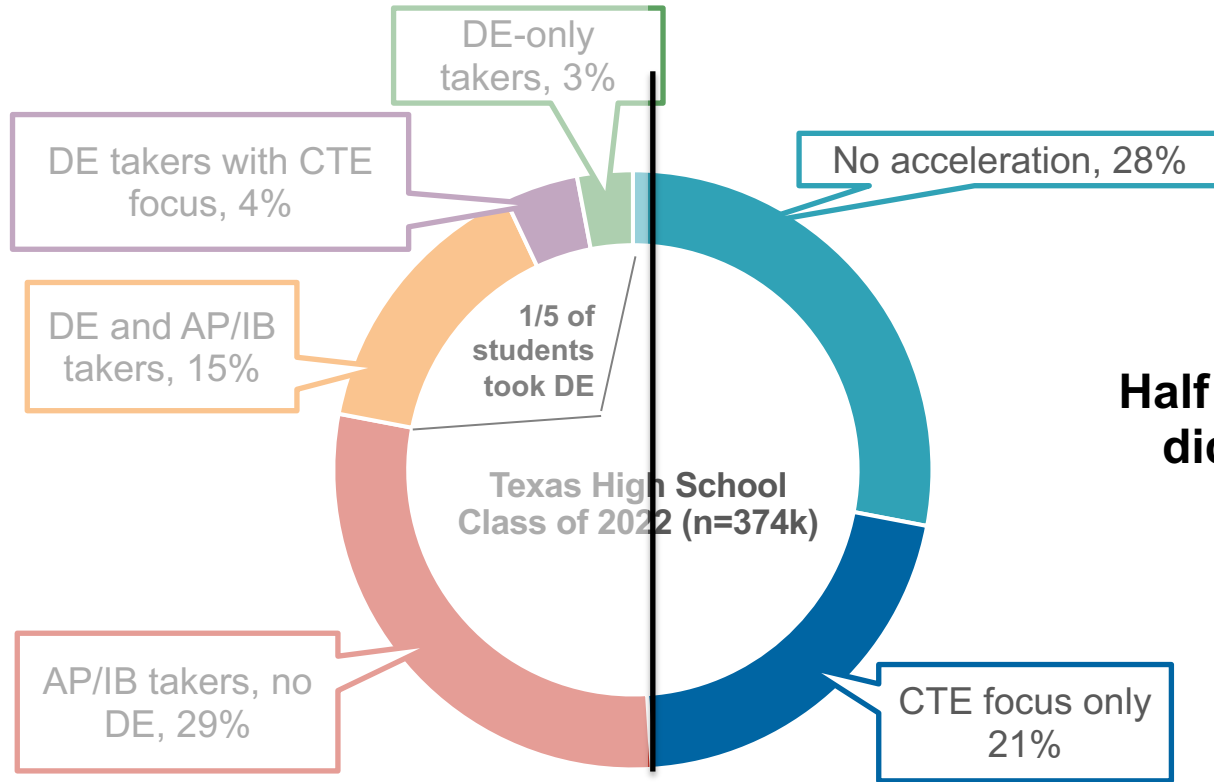
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[Velasco et al., 2025](#)

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)

CCRC

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

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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DEEP Approach

All students, especially those who might not otherwise pursue further education after high school

Foundational coursework (including general education courses) aligned to college degree programs in fields of interest to students

Strong quality control and professional development through collaboration with college faculty and programs

Unavoidable and proactive academic support, frontloaded for new DE students

College-provided advising for all students at key checkpoints to help explore interests and create an individualized post-high school learning plan

Higher costs, more supports, greater downstream revenues

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

Introduction Summary College-HS Pair Table DC Coursetaking DC Outcomes

Texas Dual Credit Data Dashboard

Beta Version 03/27/2025

CCRC COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESEARCH CENTER
TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

The University of Texas at Austin
College of Education

The purpose of this dashboard is to support college and K12 improvement planning to further strengthen dual credit. The dashboard was developed by CCRC (John Fink) and UT (Wonsun Ryu & Lauren Schudde) and draws on statewide, longitudinal, student-level data from the Texas Education Research Center (ERC). Per the requirements of the ERC, results with small cell sizes or otherwise identifiable combinations of released data have been suppressed for privacy. As a result, some results may appear blank or otherwise be masked.

What students are included in this dashboard? This dashboard includes data on two cohorts of 9th grade students entering Texas public high schools in fall 2018 and fall 2019 (e.g., the HS classes of 2022 and 2023). Note that for DC Outcome in the first year after high school, the dashboard only shows results for the class of 2022.

Link to Inquiry Guide to support college planning: <https://tinyurl.com/CCRC-UT-DC-Dashboard-Guide>

Link to dashboard with statewide results: <https://tinyurl.com/CCRC-UT-DC-Dashboard-Statewide>

Link to prior version (2023): <https://tinyurl.com/CCRC-UT-DC-Dashboard-2023>

The dashboard is divided up into four tabs:

Summary. Select your college and see an overview of results for your dual credit students in terms of access and participation in dual credit by student group, top dual credit course enrollments, and top college destinations and majors after high school.

College-HS Pair Table. View results specific to dual credit students from your high school partners, ranked by the number of dual credit students enrolled at your college.

DC Coursetaking. This tab shows information about dual credit students and their coursetaking patterns and outcomes for the selected college, ISO, and high school pair.

DC Outcomes. This tab shows college completions in high school and college enrollments among former dual credit students within one year of graduating high school.

Data Definitions

Data Element	Definition
High school student cohort	Class of 2022 and 2023. Number of students ever enrolled at the HS within 4 years from HS entrance (2018-2019 HS freshmen cohort).
Dual Credit participation	Percent of students—in the HS cohort—who attempted any dual credit (DC) courses through the HS-CC pairing within 4 years from HS entrance.
CTE Dual Credit participation	Percent of students—in the HS cohort—who attempted any CTE DC courses through the HS-CC pairing within 4 years from HS entrance.
AP/IB/DC participation	Percent of students—in the HS cohort—who attempted any AP, IB, or DC courses through the HS-CC pairing within 4 years from HS entrance.
Results disaggregated by student characteristics:	
Gender	Student sex (male/female) as provided by TEA.
Race/ethnicity	Student race or ethnicity as provided by TEA.
Income	Students categorized as low-income if they were ever eligible for Free or Reduced Price Lunch, as provided by TEA.
Among students who took DC courses via the high school-community college (HS-CC) pairing:	
Pct. OF DC by Location	DC credits attempted at the college, high school, or another location (e.g., multi-institution teaching center) as a percent of DC credits attempted through the HS-CC pairing.
Pct. OF DC by Modality	DC credits attempted face-to-face, online, or hybrid as a percent of DC credits attempted through the HS-CC pairing.
DC Course Pass Rates	Percent of DC courses completed (Pass, C, or above) among DC courses attempted via the HS-CC pairing.
Completed 15+ CL Credits in DC	Percent of high school students who took any DC who completed 15 or more college-level DC credits in the HS-CC pairing prior to HS graduation.
Completed CL English in DC	Percent of high school students who took any DC who completed a college-level English DC course in the HS-CC pairing prior to HS graduation.
Completed CL Math in DC	Percent of high school students who took any DC who completed a college-level math DC course in the HS-CC pairing prior to HS graduation.
Avg. Credits Attempted in DC per Student	Average number of DC credits attempted via the HS-CC pairing per student in the HS-CC pairing.
Attended any college post HS	Percent of high school students who took any DC via the HS-CC pairing who enrolled at any postsecondary institution after HS by the end of the first academic year.
Re-enrolled at DC college	Percent of high school students who took any DC via the HS-CC pairing who enrolled at the same DC college by the end of the first academic year after HS graduation.
College persistence in first year	Percent of college-going high school students who took any DC via the HS-CC pairing who continued enrolling in through the end of the first academic year after HS graduation.
Top College Destinations	Top colleges that high school students who took any DC via the HS-CC pairing enrolled at during the first academic year after HS graduation.
Top College Majors	Top majors that high school students who took any DC via the HS-CC pairing enrolled in during the first academic year after HS graduation.

Go to Summary

Go to Pair Table

Go to Coursetaking

Go to Outcomes

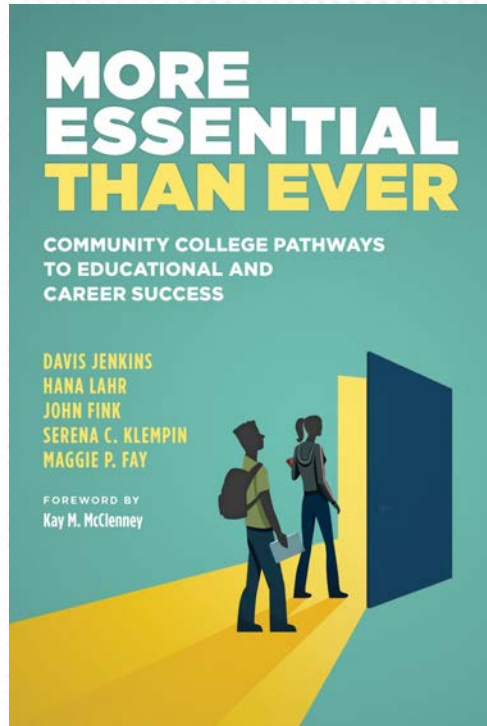
Dashboard: <https://tinyurl.com/TXDualCreditDashboard>



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

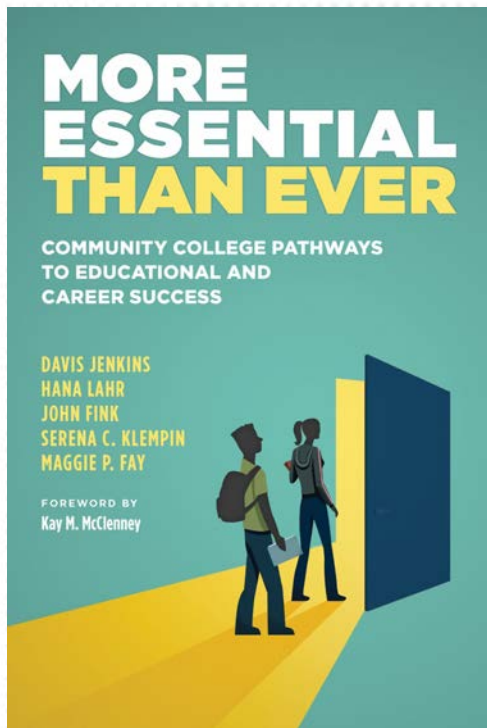


New to systemic, whole-college innovation

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
More Essential Than Ever



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



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Thank you!

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John Fink: john.fink@tc.columbia.edu