Unlocking Opportunity:
Eight Strategies for Community Colleges to Improve Post-Completion Outcomes

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COLLEGE EXCELLENCE PROGRAM
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CCRC COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESEARCH CENTER
Teachers College, Columbia University

The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program

The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program aims to strengthen higher education leadership and practice to improve student outcomes—with the ultimate goal of advancing economic mobility and developing talent for the good of each individual and society as a whole.

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The Community College Research Center (CCRC), Teachers College, Columbia University, has been a leader in the field of community college research and reform for more than 25 years. CCRC's work provides a foundation for innovations in policy and practice that help give every community college student the best chance of success.

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01 Introduction

Over 6 million students are enrolled in community colleges, pursuing a technical education designed to provide skills needed in the workforce or the first two years of a bachelor's degree. For the past several decades, the primary focus of a national community college reform movement has been to strengthen the value of the education students receive, primarily by increasing graduation rates.[1] While more needs to be done, the efforts of community college leaders, faculty, and staff have proven successful: Graduation rates have increased from 22 percent for those who began in 2011 to 35 percent for those who began in 2020. As a result, hundreds of thousands more students complete a community college degree or certificate every year.

However, community college completion, regardless of what the credential is, should not be the end goal. Data show that while the majority of community college students aim to earn a bachelor's degree, only 16 percent do so within six years of community college entry—a figure that has barely changed, even as community college graduation rates have improved. Data also show that in labor markets nationwide, the large and increasing majority of good jobs are held by individuals with bachelor's degrees. And, while most community college workforce credentials result in some earnings increase for graduates, research suggests that only about half lead to graduates earning a living wage.

Today, a new focus is needed: ensuring that many more of the credentials community college students earn have value after they graduate. Currently, many college leaders and policymakers are aware of that need and are prioritizing students' post-completion success. Several states have recently adopted legislation that ties some community college funding to students' post-graduation success in jobs and transfer/bachelor's attainment.[2] National higher education philanthropies are increasingly focused on the connections between higher education and workforce preparation. And federal lawmakers passed legislation in 2025 conditioning eligibility for student loans to college programs—including those offered by community colleges—that demonstrate their graduates earn higher wages than high school graduates.

To help community colleges increase the value of credentials for students after graduation, the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program (Aspen) partnered with the Community College Research Center (CCRC) in 2023 to launch a new program called Unlocking Opportunity. Starting with 10 colleges (and expanding to 65 colleges in 2025), Unlocking Opportunity offers support, coaching, and tools to help colleges analyze their programs and advising systems, and to help them strengthen them so that more students are on a path to benefit economically from attending community college. Based on the scaled reforms the first 10 colleges have implemented to achieve that goal, Aspen and CCRC have produced research insights and actionable tools—including this practice guide—that colleges can use to strengthen their programs and advising so that many more students graduate with credentials of value that lead to good jobs either directly after completing community college or after successfully transferring and earning a bachelor's degree.

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1   See: e.g., The founding of Achieving the Dream, the Community College Research Center, the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, and Lumina Foundation, among others.

2   See: e.g., Texas' House Bill 8, Ohio's House Bill 96, and Florida Statute Section 1001.66, F.S.

Purpose of this guide

This guide is designed for college presidents, their senior teams, and others at community colleges who aim to enact reforms that improve graduates' wages and transfer/bachelor's attainment rates. It offers concrete guidance on eight strategies that the initial 10 Unlocking Opportunity colleges have used to improve these outcomes for thousands of students. In each section, we provide:

1. Case-making language and data that leaders can use to support the reform strategy
2. Case studies showing the approaches pilot Unlocking Opportunity colleges took
3. A "From - To" framework that shows the typical current state of practice and the envisioned ideal state after reform
4. Action steps to guide leaders and others through the reform process at a high level

A note on leadership, prioritization, and institutional capacity

Each of the eight reforms outlined in this guide requires major institutional change. All entail revamping internal community college systems and most necessitate deep work with external partners. For these reasons, accomplishing any of these eight reforms requires that it become one of a community college's top priorities. This means it must be among the president's top priorities, as well. Everyone at the college—as well as external partners—must understand the importance of the reform so that adequate staff time and financial resources are applied to the reform effort and data are consistently used to track progress and identify opportunities for improvement. As we worked with the 10 pilot colleges, we were struck by how important this kind of focus is to the success of scaled reforms that result in many more students being enrolled in—and on track to graduate from—programs that provide strong workforce outcomes and/or bachelor's attainment.

02 Preparing to do the work

Analyzing labor market realities and program value

In order to set goals and strategies to improve students' post-completion success, Aspen and CCRC recommend that college leaders and teams conduct analytic work to understand which programs students are currently enrolled in and how well aligned those programs are to either good jobs or success in attaining a bachelor's degree. Colleges should ground their work in a clear understanding of the economic context their students live and work in, and the long-term outcomes that typically result when students earn different credentials. The following activity aims to help colleges:

1. Identify labor market opportunities and needs in the college's service area
2. Assess how aligned the college's programs are with those opportunities (including those that require a bachelor's degree)
3. Identify opportunities
   a. to expand enrollment in existing high-value programs or create new ones
   b. to revamp programs that fail to provide students with strong post-graduation outcomes

To do this, three areas of analysis are critical: 1) regional labor market conditions; 2) post-completion earnings relative to a regionally adjusted living-wage standard for workforce-aligned programs; and 3) transfer outcomes and bachelor's degree completion rates for transfer-aligned programs.

RESOURCES: For complete instructions on labor market analysis and program classification, see the Aspen-CCRC Program Classification Guide.

Additionally, Aspen and CCRC developed a downloadable Excel tool to visualize program enrollment classified by post-completion value, as well as an accompanying inquiry guide to help analyze this data.

1. **Analyzing the regional labor market:** First, colleges should establish a living-wage standard by determining the local cost of living using available data sources, such as the MIT Living Wage Calculator, regional workforce boards, or local government data. In addition, institutions must consider the composition of their student population when setting wage benchmarks. For example, if the majority of students are supporting families, the college may consider adopting a family-sustaining wage as its benchmark. The college can also define a secondary wage standard—one between the living wage and a standard that defines poverty wages (e.g., one Unlocking Opportunity college set a "high-wage" standard at $25/hour, and a "medium-wage" standard at $16.50/hour, allowing it to classify programs in three bands).

   Then, the college should identify which jobs in the region offer wages that meet or exceed the living-wage standard, and which do not, and which cross the low-wage standard. This analysis should also include the number of workers currently employed in each occupation, as well as projected growth or contraction over time. High-opportunity occupations are typically defined by a combination of scale, wage, and growth, but educational requirements must also be factored in. For instance, some high-wage occupations may require a bachelor's degree or more, while others may be accessible with an associate degree or industry credential.

2. **Classifying workforce programs:** Using the Aspen-CCRC Program Classification Guide as a reference, colleges should evaluate each workforce program based on the actual earnings of students after completion, relative to the local living wage. Programs can then be grouped into three categories: high-value (earnings above the living wage), middle-value (e.g., within 20% below the living wage), and low-value (e.g., more than 20% below the living wage).

3. **Classifying transfer programs:** Colleges should evaluate whether each program features a clearly mapped pathway, with minimal credit loss, to and through a bachelor's degree. Community colleges should also use all available data to examine the percentage of students, by program of study, who transfer to a four-year institution within three years and the percentage who earn a bachelor's degree within six years of community college entry.

Through these analyses, colleges can set a clear, evidence-based foundation for strategic decision-making. These insights inform goal-setting and can help shift the college's focus from program design and enrollment volume to student outcomes and economic advancement. Perhaps more importantly, identifying and visualizing these patterns can be an integral tool for communicating to faculty and staff, students, and local stakeholders (e.g., employers, elected officials, etc.) why a focus on improving post-graduation success is so important.

Identifying strategies with potential for high impact

From these analyses, colleges will likely identify multiple opportunities for reform. However, tackling every opportunity at once is neither feasible nor strategic. None of the colleges in the Unlocking Opportunity pilot attempted to implement reform strategies to respond to every challenge and opportunity they identified. Instead, the most effective colleges identified their "big bets"—the two or three high-impact reforms most likely to improve student outcomes—with at least one aligned with strengthening programs of study, the core objective of Unlocking Opportunity.

Colleges interested in pursuing more than two or three areas of reform should develop a clear sequencing strategy, which allows the institution to build early momentum, demonstrate progress, and lay the groundwork operationally and culturally for broader transformation over time. Prioritizing and sequencing reforms also makes it easier to allocate resources, maintain focus, and communicate clearly with faculty, staff, and external stakeholders. By focusing on a few large-scale, impactful reforms in the short term, colleges can achieve greater advances in student outcomes over the long run.

Communicating the work

Communicating findings from the post-completion value analysis—as well as new specific goals for improving post-graduation success—can lead to difficult conversations. Program leaders and faculty may struggle with the idea that their work (and deeply held interests) may not pay off for students. Advisors may not readily welcome the idea that students should be more assertively guided toward higher-opportunity programs. As a result, college leaders must be deliberate and plan how they will communicate this work.

The pilot Unlocking Opportunity colleges found that the most effective internal communications were those that focused on shared success. Rather than framing programs as "high-value" or "low-value," some colleges used language like "high/low opportunity" or "high/low wage" in communications about student outcomes. Colleges chose language they believed would effectively invite faculty, staff, and community partners into a collaborative conversation about how to improve post-graduation outcomes across the entire college, no matter what program students enrolled in, and they were careful not to assign blame to any individual program. Additionally, some colleges revised their strategic plans to explicitly include post-completion outcomes as core goals as a way to embed the idea of program value into institutional culture.

External communication about this work can be impactful as well. By elevating the concept of post-completion value, colleges can appeal to current and prospective students, who regularly report that improving economic outcomes is one of their top reasons for entering college. Demonstrating that community college programs lead to living-wage jobs or bachelor's degrees offers a compelling reason for prospective students to enroll. This message also resonates with employers and local economic development leaders, who appreciate the college's focus on delivering work-ready talent. And it can capture the attention of four-year colleges/universities that are eager for additional enrollments, as well as higher education policy leaders who appreciate the need for greater efficiency in transfer and bachelor's attainment. Many of the pilot colleges found that centering their communications about the importance of the work on student success and community impact held the most promise for bringing partners on board.

The remainder of this guide presents eight strategies pursued by Unlocking Opportunity colleges. These strategies are divided into three sections: 1) Strengthening Workforce Programs, 2) Improving Bachelor's Degree Pathways, and 3) Enhancing Program Onboarding.

03 Strengthening Workforce Programs

The following four strategies focus on ensuring that, for every program designed for students to graduate directly into the workforce, students will advance into jobs that provide economic opportunity. Each strategy tackles a different dimension of the challenge: developing and expanding high-value programs that align with employer demand; strengthening programs that lead to low wages or closing them, if necessary; enrolling adult students in high-value, short-term credentials that meet adult learners' needs and stack into degrees; and strengthening or expanding pre-health pathways so all students pursuing health care careers have structured routes to good jobs. These strategies share several themes:

1. **Rooted in labor market intelligence:** Effective strategies require that college leaders use labor market data and employer input to determine which programs to grow, revamp, or sunset, ensuring offerings match the workforce demand.

2. **Deeply engage employers:** Each relies on employers to, for example, design curricula, provide equipment, ensure scaled, work-based learning opportunities, and commit to hiring qualified graduates.

3. **Provide work-based learning for every student:** Programs embed work-based learning, including apprenticeships, clinical placements, internships, or simulation labs, to ensure students gain experience that prepares them for the labor market.

4. **Connect to programs that offer higher value:** Especially for programs that fail to provide a living wage ("low-value" programs), colleges ensure that students have structured opportunities to continue their education and advance through embedded certificates, or clear ladders from short-term programs to degrees.

5. **Include clear maps and proactive guidance:** High-value programs are structured to include clear career maps of course sequences and other experiences, strong ladders through career pathways, and high-quality advising structures to ensure that every student understands which credentials lead to good jobs and how to move from one credential to the next.

STRATEGY 1: Develop and expand high-value programs

Why pursue this strategy?

In many parts of the country, community colleges are falling short of meeting demand for workers to fill well-paying jobs in fields such as health care, advanced manufacturing, construction, and more. This is a problem as well as an opportunity for colleges. New technologies are changing the skills required for jobs in these fields, so colleges must work closely with employers to ensure their programs prepare students with the skills to thrive. Colleges also need to build programs that enable both current workers and those still in school to enter and advance in these fields, ensuring that credentials at all levels of a program are stepping stones to higher-wage positions.

Colleges that expand and develop high-value program ladders at scale use labor market data and employer conversations about relevant skills and the number of workers needed to develop their goals. They strategize on how to secure the resources needed to expand and develop these programs, including paying higher faculty salaries and ensuring enough slots for work-based learning, such as clinical placements.

Additionally, colleges should offer more hands-on work experience, ideally paid, for students. While research indicates that having relevant work experience can provide a leg up for students seeking better-paying jobs, colleges often offer few paid work-based learning opportunities. This not only limits skills development but also prevents students from "learning and earning" at the same time. Colleges need to build more required or inevitable hands-on experience into degree programs to address this need, ideally on a schedule that works for students.

Case Studies:

In Ohio, regional manufacturers and other industries are increasingly incorporating smart chips into their products. While these employers initially focused on hiring engineers with bachelor's degrees, this proved expensive and, due to competition, led to high employee turnover. This gave **Lorain County Community College (LCCC)** in Ohio an opening to collaborate with employers to meet workforce needs. The college began by reviewing job postings and visiting workplaces to observe the work firsthand. Then, in partnership with employers, the college developed a microelectronic manufacturing systems (MEMS) learning-and-earning career ladder. LCCC's program features hands-on instruction in applied technical fundamentals and embedded work-based learning and offers industry certifications essential for students to progress to the next rung of the job ladder. Classes are scheduled to accommodate working students, and all credits from lower-level programs are applicable toward the college's associate and bachelor's of applied science programs in MEMS. Additionally, the program maps are shared with workforce partners to aid in curriculum design and updates. This fosters a sense of ownership for employers and encourages them to support their workers' participation in the program.

Analyzing their regional labor market, **Southwest Wisconsin Technical College (SWTC)** recognized a significant unmet demand for radiologic technologists—a field with a national median wage of nearly $80,000 per year. Without an existing radiography program, college leaders partnered with industry to develop a solution. In the end, challenges identified were collaboratively resolved—local hospitals donated the necessary technological equipment for students to train on while the college repurposed available space to build a radiography lab. On launch, the program immediately filled, and the college is now working to expand clinical site placements to reduce the waitlist.

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FROM:

Basing the size of programs on program-level decisions that focus on enrollments and revenues

Determining the content and size of workforce programs based on student demand and legacy industries/partnerships, which can lead to program curriculum misaligned with local labor market needs and/or not keeping up with demand in key industries

Accepting that many students will be in workforce programs that are tied to regional jobs but offer limited advancement opportunities after graduation

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TO:

Making centralized, college-wide decisions about which programs to start or grow based on review of labor market and program outcome data, with presidents and senior teams working closely with academic departments and faculty to implement this work

Using labor market data and employer conversations to identify good jobs and scale of demand, and collaborating closely with employers to set measurable goals, define essential skills, co-design programs, and secure needed investments to deliver against goals

Designing complete degree programs with laddered certificates and industry certifications aligned to better jobs in high-demand fields, along with realistic strategies to conduct outreach and structure programs so that many more students climb the ladder

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Taking Action:

1. Analyze labor market data and identify programs (or potential opportunities) that lead to medium- or high-wage work (See: Analyzing Labor Market Realities and Program Value). Use these analyses to set priorities and goals for action. Ask:

    a. What new programs are needed to meet projected labor market demands in high-wage fields?

    b. Which existing high-value programs have high/increasing labor market demand and could be expanded to meet this demand?

2. Partner with employers and economic development groups to validate labor market data, identify opportunities for new programs, and inform the content of these programs

    a. Identify education and training requirements for high- and medium-wage positions

    b. Clearly map training and credentials needed to advance in the field, alongside the time needed to complete training. Leverage available data to show sample local jobs with entry-level salaries that students can expect to earn upon completing each program in the sequence

    c. Wherever possible, engage employers to secure direct investments in these programs consistent with their goals for the number of graduates

3. Engage employers in reviewing and suggesting improvements to existing middle- and lower-value programs that have the potential to be high value. (Several Unlocking Opportunity colleges use the Business and Industry Leadership Team (BILT) approach developed through the National Science Foundation Advanced Technological Education program)

a. Identify essential skills and other qualifications needed to secure high- and medium-wage positions

b. Develop and work with employers to review curriculum maps that show the sequence of courses and other learning experiences students must complete, the embedded work-based or other cocurricular experiential learning, and the credentials (including industry certifications) built into the program

c. Wherever possible, engage employers to secure direct investments in these programs consistent with their goals for the number of graduates they need

4. Establish regular ways for faculty to be deeply engaged to ensure that their curricular and instructional expertise is informed by employer insights

5. Assess existing recruitment strategies and amend them to bring in new students.

a. Use career maps and earnings projections for program marketing, recruitment, and advising

b. Collaborate with employers and community-based organizations to recruit prospective students, including strategies for unemployed, underemployed, and incumbent workers

c. Work with K-12 schools to offer dual enrollment courses and advising to encourage students to take foundational coursework in their target field and, where feasible, earn college credits and industry certifications so they can pursue the postsecondary education needed to advance to career-path jobs after high school

STRATEGY 2: Strengthen low-opportunity programs

Why pursue this strategy?

Nationally, nearly a quarter of workforce associate degrees awarded lead to median incomes well below a living wage. We consider these to be low-opportunity programs. Common examples include culinary arts, childcare, and some agricultural programs. Recognizing this reality, colleges must work to understand which programs do not lead to jobs that offer good (or even decent) wages. Too often, colleges avoid this analysis and avoid taking action, even when they know programs lead to low-wage work. The result: Students graduate into poverty.

College leaders and teams that honestly identify low-opportunity programs can improve them in several ways: revamp them to prepare students for efficient transfer and bachelor's attainment; embed skills in the core curriculum that cause employers to offer higher wages; and tailor the curriculum to the specific hiring requirements of employers that offer higher wages. In some cases, colleges may determine that none of the above strategies is feasible and decide to sunset or shrink programs with limited regional demand.[3]

Case Study:

At **Southwest Wisconsin Technical College (SWTC)**, leaders made a commitment to not graduate any students into poverty. After assessing program outcomes, the college identified 11 low-wage programs where graduates made less than $16.50 an hour. In the following year, the college strengthened those 11 programs that together enroll nearly 430 students, meaning almost 12 percent of the student body is expected to earn higher wages after graduation.

To accomplish this, college leaders began by meeting with each program leader, asking them to devise a plan over the ensuing year to improve graduates' earnings. For example, in the agronomy program—which serves an industry key to the college's rural community but typically led to low-wage work—SWTC met with local employers and

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3   For some programs, colleges may decide to maintain a low-opportunity program, either because of legislative requirements or high societal value. In that case, colleges must be sure that students fully understand likely wage outcomes, and they should work to minimize the costs to students and the time needed to complete the credential.

learned they needed workers who could operate drones and apply pesticides. Neither skill was part of the existing curriculum. So, SWTC updated the curriculum to focus on precision agronomy, which includes drone certification, and added a course on pesticide application, which typically increases wages by $1-$2 an hour. Since these changes in 2023, enrollment in the program has doubled.

For the college's early childhood education program, leaders built a program map with a transfer agreement to a bachelor's degree in elementary education, providing a clear pathway to a living-wage job. Within a year, advisors moved many of the program's students onto the new four-year program map. Leaders also realized that SWTC's on-site day care center was a low-wage employer for graduates of the early childhood program. The college raised its on-campus "minimum wage" to $19.56 an hour, well above that of some local employers, and used its regional influence to encourage other nearby employers to do the same. In golf course management, program leaders realized students would earn substantially more if they were willing to relocate out of the region to cities such as Chicago. Faculty cultivated relationships with golf industry employers outside the region that pay higher wages, resulting in more opportunities for students to engage in work-based learning and increased median earnings for program graduates.

Finally, the college decided to eliminate its highly-enrolled but low-wage culinary arts program after determining that most employers were not willing to pay higher wages, did not require a college certification for hiring, and could train employees on the job. And, after attempting to improve the auto technology program in ways that failed to substantially increase wages, the college closed it as well.

FROM:	TO:
Offering programs based on student and/or employer demand, some of which result in low-wage work	Routinely evaluating workforce programs based on post-completion outcomes and committing to acting whenever a program leads to low-wage work
Demonstrating program value by citing a limited number of students who have done well after graduating, even if average wages after graduation are low	Investigating why some students who graduate from programs that typically result in low-wage work attain higher wages, and then revamping the program curriculum and/or focusing on employer partnerships to ensure that the exception becomes the norm
Accepting that wages in certain fields are inherently low and cannot be changed	Meeting with employers who offer low wages to graduates and exploring what skills would allow them to pay better wages, then revamping programs accordingly

Taking Action:

1. Analyze labor market data, classify programs, and identify programs that lead to low-wage work (without leading to successful transfer/bachelor's attainment) (See: Analyzing Labor Market Realities and Program Value) Ask:

   a. Which programs do not prepare students to earn strong wages immediately upon graduation?

   b. Among those programs, which do not prepare students to readily transfer and attain a bachelor's degree without losing many credits?

2. Meet with employers to:

   a. Discuss how well existing programs enable graduates to secure living-wage jobs in their field and, where students earn low wages, what skills would enable the employer to offer higher wages

   b. Understand workforce needs for more skilled workers in positions that pay medium and high wages, including the projected scale of demand for each job

   c. Identify the skills needed for in-demand, living-wage jobs, especially those that can provide a stepping stone for low-wage workers

   d. Communicate that it is important to the college that every student graduates into a job that offers good (or decent) wages

3. Meet with graduates who have successfully secured medium- or high-wage employment and determine from them (and employers) what skills may explain their higher wages

4. Engage program leaders and faculty to revamp programs to ensure that students develop the skills and other qualifications necessary for higher-paid jobs

   a. Engage faculty to ensure they are aware of why this work is important, emphasizing how they can contribute to improving post-graduation outcomes

   b. Make program elements that deliver skills needed for higher wages inevitable/mandatory for every student

   c. Include work-based learning opportunities to provide practice in hard and soft skills

   d. Ensure continuous improvement by regularly surveying graduates, engaging with employers, and annually reviewing programs to ensure curricula are aligned to medium- or high-wage jobs

5. Additional action steps may include:

   a. Using the college's economic clout in the community to set an example (e.g., raising the wages of on-campus childcare workers, driving up regional wages)

   b. Assessing local employers and guiding students toward those that offer better wages, creating competition in the marketplace

STRATEGY 3: Enroll adults in high-value, short-term credentials with ladders to credit programs

Why pursue this strategy?

Enrollment of adults over the age of 24 in community college has declined by nearly 1.3 million students since its peak in 2011. There are many likely reasons for this decline. First, many community college programs are not offered at times that accommodate the busy lives of working adults. Second, community college programs that require a year or two to complete may take too long for many adults, especially those who work full-time or have children of their own. And, finally, adult students may recognize that some short-term credentials—those that require a year or less to complete—often fail to result in earning decent wages.

Community colleges working to increase the number of students in high- and medium-value workforce programs take a focused approach to recruiting and educating adult students in short-term credential programs. Those colleges look for regional jobs that offer decent wages, where talent could be trained in shorter-term programs. They develop those programs, strategically recruit students into them, and develop strategies to ease financial burdens on students enrolled.

Case Studies:

Recognizing that many current and prospective students could not afford to stop working long enough to complete a traditional associate degree or extended workforce program, leaders at **Valencia College** in Florida developed and scaled a new set of short-term programs. Most of the college's 17 Accelerated Skills Training (AST) programs can be completed in 8 to 12 weeks and connect to jobs in four high-demand sectors: advanced manufacturing, construction, health care, and transportation logistics. To ensure relevance and impact, every AST credential must meet two criteria: resulting in employment with wages above $15 an hour and connecting to a pathway to higher-level jobs in the field.

Valencia's approach is notable for its scale, its efforts to reduce the time and money required of students, and its processes that align education with employers' needs. The college worked directly with industry partners to co-develop curricula for each of the 17 credentials, with a focus on minimizing the cost and time needed to complete each program. Seeing the college's commitment to rapidly increase the number of work-ready graduates, employers have provided cutting-edge equipment, committed to interview all graduates, and, in some cases, contributed scholarships. Together, these elements add up to a highly responsive adult-education model that enables students to earn, learn, and advance—without having to choose between education and earning income. Through the program, the college confers more than 1,000 industry-recognized credentials annually, with over 90 percent at no cost to students.

At **Lorain County Community College** in Ohio, leaders established Fast-Track programs to deliver certificates aligned to specific jobs in high-demand industries. Fast-Track programs can be completed in as little as 16 weeks at relatively low cost to students, and they align with well-paid jobs projected to grow in the region in the coming years, including in advanced manufacturing, health care, information technology, trades, and finance. One of the best examples of the college's Fast-Track programs is a nationally recognized soldering certificate embedded in the Electronic Fabrication and Microelectronic Manufacturing (MEMS). These certificate programs help inexperienced workers gain a foothold in industries requiring MEMS skills, allowing them to secure entry-level technician jobs, gain industry experience, and earn money while continuing their training part-time. The college actively recruits students into this program through local community organizations.

Each Fast-Track program also stacks into advanced certificates and degrees, providing students clear and direct pathways toward career advancement and higher pay. Although there are multiple exit points where students can stop and enter the workforce, LCCC's faculty and advisors show students how additional credentials will lead to career advancement, and they use ladder maps to help students create plans to continue their education

after finding a job. Classes are scheduled to accommodate working students, and staff attribute high retention to talented faculty, hands-on learning, and networking opportunities. The MEMS ladder maps and curricula are dynamic, shared with workforce partners to aid in curriculum design and updates. This collaboration fosters a sense of employer ownership in the college's programs, which, in turn, encourages employers to support their workers' participation. The college also uses these maps to show employers wages paid by comparable other companies, prompting some employers to increase wages to remain competitive.

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FROM:

Offering many short-term credentials that are often disconnected from labor market demand and jobs with sustaining wages, leading graduates to low-wage work and inadequate connections to career mobility

Failure to strategically recruit adult students, perpetuating a perception that serving adult students is not a primary goal of the college

Structures/schedules that are misaligned to the needs of adult students, with few accessible, flexible, or "stackable" options

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TO:

Short-term credentials redesigned or built to align with high-demand, medium- or high-wage occupations, informed by labor market data and employer partnerships

Actively recruiting and onboarding adult students with the goal of providing many more clear on-ramps to programs of value and ladders to further education

Programs scheduled and delivered in formats (e.g., accelerated, remote, off-campus) that meet the needs of working adults, with clear, "stackable" pathways to degrees

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Taking Action:

1. Examine and analyze the value of programs students (including those 25 or older) are enrolling in and completing (See: Analyzing Labor Market Realities and Program Value)

2. Assess local labor markets through data analysis and employer interviews/conversations to identify jobs that offer medium to high wages that require defined skills that could be conferred through short-term programs

3. Set clear goals and define leadership

   a. Establish measurable targets for increasing enrollment in high-value programs and decreasing enrollment in low-value programs, including specific goals for adults 25 or older

   b. Appoint a dedicated leader for this work with entrepreneurial skills and the ability to respond quickly to employer needs

4. Improve the value of existing programs using labor market feedback from employers and graduates

   a. Engage employers to identify skills, credentials, and experiences that make graduates competitive and justify higher wages, and to set targets for the number of graduates needed in each program to fill job demand

   b. Incorporate program elements such as work-based learning or industry-recognized certifications into core curriculum that data show can improve wages

   c. If sustainable improvements tied to higher wages are not possible, reduce or phase out programs that consistently lead to low-wage jobs

5. Build new high-value, short-term programs

   a. Identify regional sectors with sustained employer demand, strong wage outcomes, and clear advancement opportunities, and identify jobs that offer medium to high wages that require defined skills that could be conferred through short-term programs

   b. Prioritize program development where long-term wage growth and program sustainability are likely

   c. Avoid creating programs solely in response to temporary labor shortages or employer pressure

6. Design for adult learners' needs and accessibility

   a. Schedule programs in accelerated, flexible formats (e.g., evenings, weekends, hybrid, or 8- to 16-week formats)

   b. Locate training at accessible sites, including off-campus or community-based facilities, to reduce travel barriers

   c. Use cohort models to foster peer support and improve retention

7. Define a structure for short-term program leadership that meets goals and promotes cross-college learning

   a. Decide intentionally whether programs are housed within the workforce division, continuing education, or another structure—making sure that the chosen structure has the capacity to meet the quantitative goals for high-value, short-term credentials and be responsive to employers

   b. Leverage cross-department collaboration to share resources and maintain agility in program design and delivery

8. Create clear ladders to credit programs

   a. Embed short-term credentials into stackable pathways leading to advanced certificates and degrees

   b. Use career ladder maps to guide advising and show students how additional credentials connect to higher wages and career advancement

Why pursue this strategy?

Many students enter community college aiming to become nurses. Unfortunately, the number of spots in nursing programs is quite limited, both because these programs are expensive to operate and because clinical training sites are in short supply. As a result, admission to community college nursing programs is very competitive. This means that most students who consider themselves nursing students are actually in a pre-nursing program, taking courses like biology and anatomy and physiology before applying to the actual nursing program (usually after several terms at the college). Because of limited spaces in nursing programs, most students are turned away. Many either reapply the following semester or year, or leave the college altogether.

Many community colleges fail to track what happens to these students, and few do enough to help pre-health students who are not admitted to nursing enter alternative health-related pathways. This pattern is sometimes replicated in other high-value health care programs, such as dental hygiene, respiratory therapy, and surgical technology.

Colleges must do more to ensure that pre-nursing students who have been rejected from nursing programs or whose grades suggest a low likelihood of admission do not stop out or substantially delay completion of a credential of value. Unlocking Opportunity pilot colleges devised strategies to resolve this issue by expanding capacity in selective programs, developing alternative high-value pathways in health care-adjacent fields, and more consistently advising students into alternative pathways. These strategies can enable colleges to help many more pre-health students enter and complete a high-value program that leads to a health-related job and stay on track to graduate or transfer.

Case Studies:

At **San Antonio College**, demand for clinical placements routinely exceeded available slots, which limited student access to, and progress in, high-demand health programs. To address this, the college worked closely with more than 12 nearby sites to identify new clinical slots to accommodate 160 nursing students. It created a new full-time coordinator position dedicated to collaborating with clinical sites, identifying capacity issues, and locating more opportunities outside of traditional hospital settings leading to increasing enrollment. San Antonio College has also added a state-of-the-art simulation lab aligned with health care partners that functions as an on-campus clinical site, integrating simulation as a clinical rotation throughout the nursing programs. This strategy offers a way to expand available clinical slots with rigorous experiential learning standards when hospital and other clinical sites are not available.

In Oklahoma, **Tulsa Community College** faced a similar challenge: Nearly 10 percent of the college's total enrollment is in pre-health programs, but while most of those students want to be nurses, the majority cannot gain admission to the college's nursing program due to limited program space. Recognizing that those students need alternative high-value pathways, the college launched a new Associate of Science in Health Administration program in fall 2025. This degree program offers a structured route to in-demand, career-path jobs in health care. All pre-applicant students will be shifted into this program as a primary major aligned to one of two high-value pathways: preparing students for transfer into a bachelor's degree in Health Administration at a nearby university, or an associate degree that prepares students for living-wage jobs in the health sector. This design ensures that students maintain momentum on a high-value pathway, even if they are not admitted to the nursing program.

Finally, at **Laramie County Community College** in Cheyenne, Wyoming, the health care reform team was tasked with creating new programs and expanding existing ones to increase slots for pre-health students in high-value programs. As the team was designing reforms, it identified a challenge: Students preparing to enter each of the college's nine health care programs were sometimes required to take different, overlapping prerequisite courses. This made it difficult for pre-health students—including those who were not admitted into nursing—to switch tracks

without having to take a new set of prerequisites. So, a team reviewed and synchronized early pre-health course requirements to minimize credit loss for students. By creating a standard set of prerequisites, the college is giving students more flexible routes to a health care career.

FROM:	TO:
Enrolling large numbers of students in pre-nursing tracks without tracking which programs they enter and their graduation and post-graduation outcomes	Regularly evaluating—by program of study—enrollment and graduation rates for all students in pre-nursing and other pre-health tracks
Providing pre-health students with limited chances of admission to nursing and other high-value health programs, and no structured alternative pathways	Ensuring that every pre-health student has a structured path to a high-value credential—either directly into nursing or another health-related workforce program (not a general pre-health program) and/or to transfer into junior year standing in a health-related bachelor's degree
Failing to graduate many pre-health students or graduating many with a low-value credential with little alignment to regional health care workforce needs and poor chances of transfer/bachelor's attainment	Expanding health care program capacity to provide space for every pre-health student to enter a program of value, creating clear prerequisite alignment and establishing an advising system that guides students toward realistic and valuable outcomes
Failing to make students who aim for nursing and other selective programs aware of alternatives until they are not admitted to their first-choice program	Developing advising and other structures to ensure that every student is aware of valuable alternatives to their first-choice health care program, from entry into college through application to nursing or other first-choice programs

Taking Action:

1. Classify programs by post-completion value and assess regional needs for health care jobs (See: Analyzing Labor Market Realities and Program Value)

2. Assess what happens to students who are not admitted into selective health care programs. Ask:

   a. Are non-admitted students counseled into alternative pathways?

   b. Do they earn a degree from your institution?

   c. If they earn a degree, does it result in a good job for most students (is it a high-value or medium-value program)?

   d. Do they transfer and earn a bachelor's degree?

3. Identify employer workforce needs in fields related to the college's health care programs and determine: 1) where program expansion/creation is possible, 2) where the college does not offer programs, and 3) whether new programs are feasible. Ask:

a. How many more workers are needed in fields that offer good jobs where the college does not currently maintain programs? In fields where the college has programs? Are other providers in the area ramping up to meet part of the increased demand?

b. How many students could be served in new programs? In expanded programs?

c. What would it take to create or expand to the scale needed? Consider faculty salaries, clinical placements, and other financial and administrative implications

4. Use these analyses to identify specific high-value health care programs (selective and nonselective) worth expanding (or launching) and set goals for how many additional students could be served in these programs

5. Solidify goals with employers

a. What goals for increasing the number of graduates could be set with partners (e.g., can more clinicals be offered)?

b. Can the college work with more than one employer at a time? Is there a broader shortage in the sector?

c. Be as specific as possible to address internal challenges at the necessary scale. Setting targets for specific numbers of graduates can help employer partners calculate the potential return on their investment, which, in turn, provides an incentive for employers to invest in expanded work-based learning opportunities, salaries for additional faculty, expanded scholarships, and/or training equipment

6. Consider standardizing prerequisite courses for all health care programs

a. This can be done by bringing all pre-health programs together to consider areas of alignment among prerequisite courses. It may be helpful to set a boundary: Programs may subtract prerequisites from the list but may not add any

b. It also may be helpful to include certificates with labor market value in some programs—preferably early in the sequence—so every pre-health student has a marketable credential

7. Inform all entering students of all health care options through revised onboarding, career counseling, and/or a dedicated student success course (See: Strategy 7)

8. Establish a system to advise students who are not on track to enter nursing (or another first-choice health care program) to select other workforce or transfer programs as soon as their performance suggests that admission is unlikely/impossible

04 Improving Bachelor's Degree Pathways

Community college students aspiring to earn a bachelor's degree have long faced structural barriers that limit their chances of success, including poorly designed transfer pathways, inadequate advising, and default enrollment in general studies pathways. It is critical that community colleges address these issues for transfer students, because data show that in labor markets nationwide, the large and increasing majority of good jobs are held by individuals with bachelor's degrees.

The next two strategies described in this guide focus on redesigning transfer and degree pathways to accelerate bachelor's attainment. By strengthening partnerships with four-year institutions, creating new applied baccalaureate programs, and replacing general studies with structured pre-majors, colleges can increase the likelihood that students not only complete associate degrees but also make timely progress toward bachelor's degrees. The strategies have these common principles:

1. **Begin with the end in mind:** Colleges should move beyond viewing associate degree completion as the endpoint and instead align programs and partnerships to bachelor's completion and the labor market value a bachelor's degree provides.

2. **Create structured maps:** Create clear, sequenced program maps that guide students efficiently from enrollment to bachelor's completion, deeply engaging faculty and program leaders in the process.

3. **Use data to drive reform:** Leverage transfer, labor market, and enrollment data to make the case for change, set goals with four-year partners, and develop strategies to improve transfer.

4. **Build and grow four-year partnerships:** Work intentionally with universities to align curricula, share goals, and improve student outcomes.

STRATEGY 5: Accelerate bachelor's attainment

Why pursue this strategy?

The vast majority of community college students indicate a desire to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree. However, only about one-third of students transfer to a four-year institution, and only 16% of starting community college students earn a bachelor's degree within six years, a figure that has remained stubbornly low for at least a decade. Yet, by 2031, 66 percent of good jobs that will pay family-sustaining wages will be associated with a bachelor's degree or higher, up from 59 percent in 2021. Community colleges (and their four-year partners) must intensify their focus on bachelor's attainment and reform or replace existing transfer practices in order to meet the workforce needs of today and the future and to improve post-graduate success outcomes for students who start at community college.

Community colleges across the nation that have focused on transfer outcomes and transfer students' needs have shown that radically better outcomes are possible. In rural, suburban, and urban contexts, community colleges have helped more students achieve a bachelor's degree affordably and efficiently by deepening partnerships with their local universities, fundamentally reforming transfer program maps and advising structures, and advancing other large-scale, intentional practices to improve the transfer student experience from community college entry through bachelor's attainment. These strategies are detailed in Aspen and CCRC's Transfer Playbook.

Case Studies:

Laramie County Community College (LCCC) in Cheyenne, Wyoming saw an opportunity to improve transfer outcomes for students at the University of Wyoming (UW), the only in-state public university destination for transfer students. More than half of LCCC students who completed a transfer associate degree crossed the state border to Colorado to complete their bachelor's degree. Leaders from LCCC arranged a meeting with senior leaders from UW and state legislators and presented data points showing that a stronger transfer partnership would benefit UW, the community college, and state employers. Data included: declining enrollment at UW; the large number of LCCC students transferring to Colorado colleges or not transferring at all; state workforce shortages in jobs that require a bachelor's degree (including teachers); the number of students who succeeded in dual enrollment but left the state to go to college or did not enroll in college; and performance of LCCC students who transferred to UW, which tended to be as good or better than students who started at UW. Taken together, these data helped jumpstart more intentional partnership efforts, leading to multiple reforms, including a dual admission program for seven fields of study that have high rates of transfer from LCCC to UW. At the same time, LCCC is working to expand the pipeline of students going into its workforce-aligned Bachelor of Applied Science degrees in Applied Management and Healthcare Administration.

In Ohio, **Lorain County Community College** has seen improvements in its timely transfer rates after it implemented an advising model that helps every student develop a personalized education plan early in their college experience, and each plan aims to include an intended transfer destination. As a way to build and deepen partnerships with those intended transfer destinations, Lorain's vice president for Institutional Research built a data dashboard that demonstrates the financial benefits of transfer to four-year institutions. The dashboard models revenue for four-year Ohio universities that accept and graduate Lorain transfer students, based on when students transfer (e.g., after 15 credit hours, after completing an associate degree, 3+1 transfer).

Some colleges use local labor market data to develop their own workforce-focused bachelor's degrees. **Sinclair Community College** in Dayton, Ohio, identified specific gaps between labor market demand and bachelor's degree attainment in their region by analyzing job market and graduate outcomes data. In response, the college launched five applied bachelor's degrees—Professional Pilot, Unmanned Aerial Systems, Integrated Systems Technician, Nursing, and Health Health Sciences—to directly address high-demand regional workforce needs. Combined enrollment across these new programs is approximately 250 students.

FROM:	**TO:**
Enrolling many students in transfer tracks and focusing on retention and completion without understanding how many transfer and earn bachelor's degrees	Regularly gathering and analyzing data on student transfers to four-year colleges and universities and subsequent bachelor's attainment, and using that data to craft transfer reforms
Making incremental improvements in transfer articulation and recruitment, primarily driven by individual staff at institutions	Building strong partnerships that fundamentally redesign the transfer student experience—including through better maps and advising—to deliver strong outcomes to students, institutions, and local employers
Disconnection between two- and four-year institutions, lacking shared goals, data, or leadership alignment	Shared goals and metrics between colleges and universities, supported by high-level leadership engagement, joint planning, and data-informed decision-making
Not meeting demand for bachelor's-trained workers due to low levels of transfer student success and misalignment of transfer pathways with workforce needs	Designing community college baccalaureate programs and transfer partnerships with input from local employers to meet regional needs and delivering credentials to working adults

Taking Action:

1. Review the data to understand how many students earn bachelor's degrees either after transfer or at the community college itself
   a. Examine differences in transfer and bachelor's attainment rates and numbers by program of study at the community college (e.g., pre-psychology, nursing, general/liberal studies)
   b. Examine differences in transfer and bachelor's attainment rates and numbers by the specific college/university students transfer to

2. Set ambitious goals that align with large-scale reform
   a. Consider where the college would like to be in five to 10 years across the measures reviewed
   b. Identify interim targets and leading indicators, and refine these while setting specific strategies
   c. Decide on priority four-year partners and consider priority programs of study/majors based on labor market demand (See: Preparing to do the work)

3. Engage and make the case to four-year partners by using data to show them how a partnership can help solve their challenges and advance their priorities. Ask:

   a. How can colleges work with four-year partners to recruit students into the focus areas that lead to good jobs?

   b. By increasing transfer and bachelor's attainment rates and counts, what increases in enrollment and tuition revenue might partners expect?

   c. What low-enrollment, high-return university programs might be strengthened through transfer pathways?

   d. What goals evident in the university's strategic plans, website, or other communications might the transfer partnership help advance?

   e. What new funding opportunities might be available through partnerships, including state or employer investments, to meet regional labor market needs in jobs requiring bachelor's degrees?

4. Set an internal transfer and bachelor's attainment reform agenda by considering:

   a. Are there clear, high-quality program maps that can easily be used by students, advisors, and faculty to help students devise a personal program plan from entry to bachelor's attainment?

   b. How is the college onboarding and advising new students into high-opportunity fields of interest and personalized education plans that lead to transfer and bachelor's attainment in specific majors at specific four-year destinations?

   c. How is the college ensuring that students are following their personalized plans or intervening to make adjustments in a timely manner?

   d. How is the college leveraging relationships with K-12 partners and dual enrollment to support stronger transfer aspirations and earlier planning?

   e. How are faculty and academic support staff preparing students to thrive at the university level?

   f. What regional workforce needs are not being met by university partners' bachelor's degree programs? Is the college in a position to meet them through its own bachelor's degree programs or targeted, refocused transfer partnerships?

5. Strengthen partnerships through end-to-end redesign of the transfer student experience

   a. Develop durable structures and routines to support long-term partnerships and outcomes

      i. Foster cross-institutional relationships at the presidential, cabinet, program leadership, and faculty levels to support effective strategy development, implementation, and continuous improvement

      ii. Assign ownership and responsibilities, and support and hold members of the team accountable for meeting goals.

      iii. Hold regular meetings to implement ideas and troubleshoot when teams encounter barriers or student outcomes fail to meet goals

b. Identify strategies that create a strong value proposition for students, systematically address the barriers they face, and meet transfer partners' and community workforce needs

    i. Consider integrating programmatic elements like high school on-ramps, dual or guaranteed admissions, major or career-linked pathways with timely completion assurances, financial aid incentives, co-enrollment, or delivery of university courses on community college campuses into the partnership's end-to-end redesign

    ii. Leverage ideas to raise funds for the college, transfer partners, and transfer students, including from state legislatures, local philanthropy, or employers.

    iii. Identify and scale successful partnership elements to other partnerships

STRATEGY 6: Shrink or eliminate general studies

Why pursue this strategy?

While many community colleges are working to advance completion of any associate degree, many degrees fail to prepare students either for good jobs after graduating from community college or for success in transferring and attaining a bachelor's degree. One credential that usually fails to lead to strong wages or bachelor's attainment is the general studies associate of arts degree (often called "liberal studies"[4]), which has become the default transfer degree at many community colleges. Reforming this degree pathway requires special attention because it accounts for most associate degrees conferred by community colleges, estimated at nearly 60 percent of all transfer associate degrees conferred nationally in 2022-2023. Students who say they are undecided are often placed in this pathway to have time to explore the college's offerings. As well, students who have not met with an advisor before their first term often end up in general studies by default.

Without a subsequent bachelor's degree, general studies AA degrees lack post-completion value. Median earnings for graduates with a general/liberal studies AA degree and no bachelor's degree were estimated at $24,000 nationally in 2019. Bachelor's attainment outcomes for transfer students with a general studies degree are also poor. The flexibility built into the degree, intended to be helpful to students who are undecided, has a downside: Students often take lower-level courses that fail to prepare them for courses they need for successful transfer into a major with junior standing, and thus often have to take many more credits than needed for a bachelor's degree. By connecting students to a structured, pre-major transfer program, rather than a general studies pathway, community colleges can ensure that many more students are effectively prepared for efficient completion of a bachelor's degree. (See, for instance, California's progress with this model.)

Case Studies:

In 2023, **Odessa College** in Texas removed the option to enroll in general studies from the new student application. Leaders made this bold change after reviewing data showing that many students enrolled in this pathway, and they were substantially less likely than students in other transfer pathways to earn a bachelor's degree. After removing that option for new students, the college intervened to redirect students who had accumulated fewer than 30 credit hours in a general studies pathway into high-value career-technical pathways or pre-major transfer degrees that demonstrated strong transfer and bachelor's attainment rates. In addition, the college discovered that students in general studies were often pre-health students, many of whom had repeatedly failed to gain admission to selective nursing and other health care programs. So, the college developed a plan for creating more high-value program slots for students interested in health sciences who were unlikely to be admitted to highly

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4   This General/Liberal Studies degree pathway is distinct from pre-major transfer pathways in the liberal arts that are specifically connected to major programs at four-year institutions.

selective programs. In the first two years, the college observed a 75 percent decrease in the number of students enrolled in a general studies program (from 1,190 to 294).

Some states, including Florida, require community colleges to offer a general transfer-intent associate of arts degree. Working in this context, **Valencia College** leaders assessed their data and found that close to 9,000 students in the general transfer-intent program had no record of choosing a specific pre-major degree pathway. So, the college developed a plan to reach out to those students to guide them into a structured, pre-major pathway that would increase their likelihood of transferring to a university with junior year standing in a major. By fall 2025, nearly 2,800 of these students (approximately 30 percent) selected a specific pre-major or career program, and the college is continuing to reach out to the remaining students. The college has also improved its tracking of these students to ensure it knows when students select a pre-major pathway and whether their courses are aligned.

As colleges reform advising systems and pathways to prevent entering students from choosing a general studies pathway, they need to figure out how to connect students already in general studies with other programs. **St. Petersburg College** leveraged data and analytics in tracking student enrollment patterns and degree-seeking behaviors to identify its strategy. The strategy required a major shift in how general studies students were advised. The college, and particularly the advising staff, embraced a mindset shift from using a general associate of arts as the default classification for students who are undecided about their direction to using it only as a "true red flag," indicating that students need help exploring interests, choosing a direction, and developing an individualized educational plan. The college then developed a plan to reach out to "red flag" students to advise them into a pre-major pathway. The result: A nearly 60 percent reduction in students classified as general AA without a pre-major designation—from 1,309 students in fall 2023 to 539 in fall 2025—immediately improving the prospect of post graduation success for those students.

FROM:	TO:
Enrolling large numbers of undecided students in general studies or non-specific transfer programs with inadequate connections to either bachelor's degree pathways or specific, good jobs	Developing a plan to advise all transfer/liberal arts students onto clearly defined pre-major pathways aligned to specific bachelor's degree programs with strong transfer value and labor market outcomes
Allowing students to accumulate unrelated electives leading to excess credits, delayed completion, and low transfer and bachelor's attainment rates	Replacing general studies with (or restructuring general studies into) pre-major program maps that include sequenced coursework, built-in milestones, and full four-year degree planning
Offering limited career advising or structured guidance to help students clarify academic purpose early in their college journey	Early, intentional career advising and onboarding—including required planning courses and first-semester, program-related coursework—that help all students make informed program selection and achieve academic momentum

Taking Action:

1. Analyze transfer data, classify programs, and identify goals for reducing the number of students in low-value transfer pathways, often including general/liberal studies, and for increasing students in pre-major programs that lead to higher bachelor's attainment rates. (See: Analyzing Labor Market Realities and Program Enrollments) Ask:

   a. How many students are enrolled in general/liberal studies or other general transfer-intent degrees without a pre-major focus (e.g., general business)?

   b. At what rate do those students transfer to four-year institutions compared to students in other transfer/liberal arts pre-major pathways?

   c. Among students who transfer to a four-year institution, how likely are those who completed general/liberal studies associate degrees to earn a bachelor's degree compared to other transfer/liberal arts pre-majors?

2. Develop strong, pre-major transfer maps aligned to junior standing in a major at a four-year institution that the college's students frequently transfer to (See: Aspen and CCRC's practical guide on this subject)

   a. Maps should be easily accessible and easy for both students and advisors to use

   b. Whenever possible, program maps should be developed for a full four years (through the completion of a bachelor's degree), ensuring major-specific courses in each semester will apply to the student's chosen major, even after transfer

   c. Maps should contain clear checkpoints to ensure students remain on their selected path

   d. Planning for new students also entails either removing general studies from the list of programs students can choose or, for colleges in states with a general AA degree policy, breaking out general studies into subspecialties that serve as pre-majors (See: This resource for guidance on creating those pathways in the humanities)

3. Develop a strategy to guide new students onto these maps (See: Strategy 7)

   a. Begin career advising prior to students' initial enrollment (including dual enrollment, if possible) or when they enter community college

   b. Ensure students are connected to a high-quality, major-specific course in their first semester that relates to their program of study

4. Develop a strategy to manage students currently enrolled in general/liberal studies.

   a. Create a plan for advising students out of general studies and into new pre-major maps (See: Strategy 7)

   b. Set a goal for reducing students in general studies and track progress toward that goal

05 Enhancing Program Onboarding

The course and program choices students make at the start of their college experiences—whether as a new college student or through dual enrollment—are important for helping students gain momentum in a high-opportunity field aligned with their interests and goals. The two strategies outlined in this section highlight the importance of intentional program onboarding focused on ensuring students are not left to navigate complex choices on their own; instead, they are guided to explore high-value programs with clear pathways to completion and career success either directly after community college or after transferring and earning a bachelor's degree. Together, these strategies underscore how colleges can move from offering access alone to delivering structured opportunities for students to explore, choose, and persist on pathways that pay off after graduation. Within these strategies, several common themes emerge:

1. **Intentional Choices:** Both strategies stress the need to replace default enrollment into general education with early guidance to enroll students into programs aligned with their interests and strong labor market and transfer outcomes.

2. **Comprehensive Planning:** Regardless of how a student enters, colleges should integrate academic, career, and financial planning that helps them see a clear route through graduation and beyond.

3. **Early Momentum:** Both strategies focus on helping students build momentum in high-opportunity programs aligned with the students' goals and interests from the start, increasing the likelihood of on-time completion and successful transfer/bachelor's attainment or a good job.

4. **Leveraging External Partnerships:** External collaborations (with employers, economic development agencies, and universities) are essential to keeping pathways aligned with workforce needs and ensuring that faculty and staff are equipped to support students.

STRATEGY 7: Redesign program onboarding to ensure all students are on high-value pathways

Why pursue this strategy?

At community colleges, onboarding is often optional and focused on providing students with information on administration, policies, and procedures. In short, onboarding processes at most community colleges focus on introducing students to and enrolling them at the college, rather than onboarding them into a program of study. Many students do not have the opportunity to discuss their interests and goals with college faculty and staff, or learn about what programs are offered and how they prepare students for getting a job or transferring to a four-year college.

Research from the Community College Research Center (CCRC) found that new students' decision-making is complicated, and most students are considering several programs and career options when they start college. When asked to list up to three programs they were considering, most students selected two or three, often in very different fields. Similarly, when asked to list up to three careers they were considering, most wrote in two or three, often in different occupational fields. Coding students' career goals to the O*NET taxonomy indicates that the vast majority of goals that students list are aligned with specific careers. This suggests that while many new students are still deciding on an educational and career path, they are coming into college with clear interests in mind. Yet,

national data show that the majority of community college transfer associate degrees are in general/liberal studies. Given this degree's poor transfer and labor market outcomes, colleges have an opportunity to enroll more students in high-value programs by helping them choose a program aligned with their interests.

Over the last decade, there has been a concerted effort in community colleges to offer more onboarding support, including orientations, student success courses, career interest inventories, and program and career fairs. The challenge is that many of these are optional and/or not offered at scale for all new students. And even those that are offered at scale are often aimed at helping students choose any program of study, without regard to which programs lead to strong labor market and/or transfer outcomes.

Many students slip through the cracks and are left to navigate the complicated decisions about choosing a program of study on their own. Among those who make decisions, many lack good information about the tie between their program choices and the likelihood of post-graduation success. A related challenge is that most onboarding support focuses on helping students choose a program, not on ensuring they have a plan for making progress in and completing their program. CCRC has identified the creation of a full-program educational plan as a critical part of the onboarding process, but most community college students do not have this. As a result, students are often uncertain about their timeline for completion as well as the associated costs. Improving program onboarding emerged as an important strategy for Unlocking Opportunity colleges, aiming to shift enrollments into higher-value workforce and transfer programs.

Case Studies:

Onboarding students into high-value programs requires faculty and staff who are knowledgeable about which programs lead to careers providing family-sustaining wages, and what knowledge and skills are involved in pursuing those pathways. Given a rapidly shifting economy, however, it can be difficult for advisors, career counselors, and other staff to keep up-to-date with this information. To address this challenge, **Lorain County Community College (LCCC)** partnered with Team NEO, an economic development agency serving northeast Ohio, to develop Career by Design, a training series on regional labor market needs and high-growth employment sectors. The training consists of five sessions focused on providing a broad overview of workforce trends, trends in specific employment sectors, and how LCCC partners with employers to build a talent pipeline and promote regional economic growth.

A critical part of LCCC's Career by Design work is that it is tied to measurable student outcomes aligned with the Loss/Momentum Framework. Examples of the metrics LCCC is tracking at each stage include:

1. Connection: Percent of students completing career selection within the first term

2. Entry: Percent of students reaching program momentum (completion of 9+ credits or short-term certificate in the first year) in their area of study

3. Progress: Percent of students mastering learning outcomes

4. Completion and Beyond: Percent of students reporting being employed or transferring 6-9 months after earning a credential

Southwest Wisconsin Technical College (SWTC) reformed its program onboarding to ensure that all new students complete a comprehensive success plan that includes a career, financial, and academic (or educational) plan. As of August 2025, nearly 80 percent of the college's program students and more than 500 dual enrollment students have a complete student success plan. Students are required to create all three plans in order to register for classes. To create the career plan, students meet with a staff member trained in career development facilitation to take a career assessment and learn about SWTC programs aligned with their interests. To create the academic plan, an academic advisor helps students develop a semester-by-semester course schedule customized to include electives, work-based learning opportunities, and any support services (e.g., academic success coaching) that may be needed. Finally, to create the financial plan, SWTC developed a budget and financial planning tool that students use with support from a financial aid representative to enter their expenses and income. If the financial

plan reveals gaps in students' ability to pay for college, financial aid staff provide information about scholarships and other potential sources of income. Prior to registration, students complete a "welcome survey" that is used to inform all three plans and asks about educational and career interests, work schedules, family responsibilities, and basic needs like food, housing, transportation, and child care. To ensure plans are regularly reviewed and kept up-to-date, SWTC developed a custom application where students, advisors, financial aid staff, and others will all be able to access the plans. The college is also planning to require students to complete an advising check-in prior to registering for subsequent semesters to ensure that students and staff review plans and make necessary adjustments throughout the student's enrollment. Combined with the college's efforts to ensure that every program leads to strong post-graduation success (See: Strategy 2), this new onboarding system helps ensure that many more students enter and complete programs that lead to strong levels of post-graduation success.

FROM:	TO:
Student recruitment and onboarding focused on general reasons to enroll in the college (e.g., accessibility, affordability, program options)	Student recruitment and onboarding focused on the educational and career opportunities afforded by specific programs
New student onboarding consists primarily of information about college policies and procedures, and getting students enrolled in courses with payment in place	New student onboarding that ensures every student is helped to explore their interests and goals, provides clear program and career options, and features touchpoints with faculty, students, and others in fields of interest
Students choose one program at application with minimal guidance, and often default into general/liberal studies.	Program onboarding processes that help students learn about the career and labor market opportunities associated with different programs of study
Limited or no educational planning, leading to front-loaded general education, academic disengagement, excess credits, and lower retention	Development of comprehensive, individualized program plans for all students, integrated with financial aid, support services, and career goals

Taking Action:

1. Gather all individuals involved in the program onboarding function (e.g., advisors, admissions staff, financial aid staff, and faculty) to build a shared understanding of the college's goals related to onboarding more students into high-opportunity programs and advising students away from low-opportunity programs

2. Map out the typical student onboarding experience to understand:

   a. What students are currently experiencing in terms of early advising?

   b. Whether and how current onboarding is focused on program exploration and planning, and for which students?

   c. Why the current system is resulting in program enrollment patterns that the college wants to change?

3. Using the Ask-Connect-Inspire-Plan (ACIP) framework, develop strategies to reimagine onboarding for all incoming students

a. Key features of the framework include:

    i. **Focused on program choice:** The goal of using ACIP for onboarding is to ensure that all students are able to explore, choose, plan, and begin making progress in a high-opportunity program of study aligned with their interests and goals

    ii. **Ongoing:** Program onboarding is a yearlong process of exploration that ideally includes multiple touchpoints for assessing students' evolving interests, their progress in their programs, reviewing and updating educational plans, and ensuring their program choice is aligned with likely post-graduation success

    iii. **Individualized:** Support is focused on meeting each student's needs, including understanding their goals and what brought them to college, ensuring that their choices are informed by programs likely to lead to post-graduation success, and then developing a plan for them to meet their goals

    iv. **Interrelated:** Each component of the framework is intended to inform the others. For example, 'ask' is intended to identify which people to 'connect' students with, to deepen their exploration of high-opportunity programs and careers of interest

4. Reimagine the roles, responsibilities, and structure of front-end staff to ensure that all new students are engaged in early conversations about their goals and interests and making program choices connected to strong post-graduation success prior to the start of college, as well as throughout the first term, to help modify plans as needed. Ask:

    a. What needs to change structurally?

    b. How should staff be trained to ensure they understand which pathways lead to strong post-graduation outcomes and how to help students connect those pathways to their academic and career goals?

    c. How will the college monitor the impact of changes to the onboarding process?

    d. How will the success of advisors be assessed?

    e. What metrics will be used to indicate success, including progress to goals around better and earlier program choice?

5. Establish leadership goals for onboarding reforms

    a. Determine a timeline for a redesigned program onboarding experience

        i. When will the college begin to roll out new practices?

        ii. When will they be adopted at scale?

        iii. When will they lead to desired changes in program enrollment patterns?

    b. Establish a timeline for scaling full-program educational planning for all new students

STRATEGY 8: Connect dual enrollment to high-value pathways

Why pursue this strategy?

Over 1.7 million community college students are high schoolers taking courses at community colleges through dual enrollment partnerships. Despite growing evidence that taking college courses in high school can increase college-going and completion by students from underserved groups, colleges generally have not capitalized on the potential of dual enrollment to connect students to high-value programs of study after high school. So, dual enrollment students tend to take courses not connected to a program or plan, choosing whatever courses happen to be offered based on teacher availability, without much intentionality or advising.

As a result, many students who could benefit from dual enrollment are not taking advantage of the chance to save money on college courses and start making progress toward a high-opportunity college credential. Among those who do take dual enrollment courses, taking college courses without strong advising and support may not be enough to propel students who lack strong guidance and support to pursue a high-value postsecondary program after high school.

Case Study:

Northwest Vista College (NVC), part of the Alamo Colleges District, is redesigning its dual credit programs to expand access and increase economic mobility. In partnership with the District's High School Programs team, NVC is using the Community College Research Center's DEEP framework to move beyond fragmented course offerings that largely served affluent, college-bound students. By aligning dual credit pathways to degree and workforce programs and credentialing more instructors for Title I high schools, NVC is creating stronger college-going opportunities for students who have often been left out.

To achieve this vision, NVC and its partners are connecting their professional development, tools, and data-driven strategies to Alamo's goal of eradicating poverty through education. Annual conferences bring together educators to align outreach and programming across the region, while intentional course design ensures students earn transferable, high-value credits. In 2025, NVC launched the Dual Credit Faculty Expansion Project with St. Mary's University, offering free master's degrees to high school teachers who commit to teaching dual credit in underserved schools. This model addresses instructor shortages and expands access, advancing NVC's mission to build more equitable educational pathways across Bexar County.

FROM:	TO:
Dual enrollment courses are made available, but are not intentionally promoted to the middle- and high-school populations least likely to attend college	Active outreach and support for students least likely to attend college (and their families) starting in middle school
Dual enrollment offerings consist mainly of disconnected general education courses, with minimal alignment to career or transfer pathways	Dual enrollment offerings clearly mapped to high-value workforce and bachelor's pathways
Optional (or non-existent) career and college advising for dual enrollment students results in missed opportunities for students to explore and build momentum toward high-value credentials	Embedded advising to help all dual enrollment students develop and begin to follow individualized education plans aligned with high-value credentials and their college and career goals
Focus on the achievement of basic academic content standards	Focus on active teaching and learning, enabling prospective college students to become better learners and gain academic momentum in high-value credential pathways

Taking Action:

1. Engage leaders at regional K-12 districts and high schools to emphasize, build, and strengthen dual enrollment partnerships (See: Dual Enrollment Playbook)

    a. Establish regular communications and regularly emphasize that dual enrollment is a win-win for the district and the college

    b. Set a shared vision and goals aligned with developing regional economic talent and mobility

    c. Regularly review data to identify additional opportunities for collaboration on outreach and recruitment, and to assess outcomes

    d. Create opportunities for information sharing and professional development for high school counselors, high school dual enrollment instructors, and others

2. Review and revamp college organization, business process, and technology infrastructure to operationalize purposeful dual enrollment pathways tied to high-value programs.

3. Consider whether the individual leading the college's dual enrollment strategy has adequate time and agency, and ensure senior team accountability for implementing dual enrollment strategy.

4. Explore ways to promote the involvement of core college staff to provide support for students to enter high-value dual enrollment pathways

5. Engage faculty and staff to explore, plan, and implement changes in practice to:

    a. Improve outreach to and recruitment of students into dual enrollment

    b. Map dual enrollment offerings to high-value postsecondary transfer and workforce pathways

    c. Strengthen career and college advising and planning support for dual enrollment students so more begin on high-value program paths

    d. Ensure dual enrollment students have a high-quality, rigorous college learning experience and academic support tied to high-value pathways

06 Conclusion

The strategies outlined in this guide are based on the foundational work of the 10 Unlocking Opportunity pilot colleges. The eight strategies outlined here offer community colleges practical ways to increase the post-completion value of credentials, accelerate bachelor's attainment, and expand access to good jobs—all with the ultimate goal of advancing economic mobility and talent development in the regions that community colleges serve.

We are energized by these innovations and are even more excited about what we will learn next. As the Unlocking Opportunity network expands from 10 to 65 community colleges in the coming year, we will continue to share findings, tools, and examples from colleges implementing these (and other emerging) approaches at scale and refining strategies with partners across the field.

Most importantly, we hope all college leaders will act to unlock more economic opportunities for many more students. Three steps matter most:

1. Analyzing programs and program outcomes: Using labor market, transfer, and outcomes data to classify programs by post-completion value and identify gaps and opportunities.

2. Identifying opportunities and setting strategies: Begin by prioritizing a small set of large-scale reforms with the greatest potential impact in your context. Then, set clear targets and align leadership, resources, and partnerships to meet them.

3. Focusing on program value: Redesigning program offerings so that more students enter pathways that reliably lead to living-wage jobs and bachelor's completion.

We look forward to learning more and continuing to support college leaders as they translate these strategies into sustained gains in student outcomes, economic mobility, and talent development so communities across the nation can thrive.