



# 2023 - 2024 Progress Report Unlocking Opportunity: The Post-Graduation Success and Equity Network

**Unlocking Opportunity:** The Post-Graduation Success and Equity Network is a project of the [Aspen Institute College Excellence Program](#) (Aspen) in collaboration with the [Community College Research Center](#) (CCRC), and is supported through grants from five foundations: Arnold Ventures, Ascendium Education Group, Bank of America, ECMC Foundation, and the Strada Education Foundation. If you have questions about Unlocking Opportunity, please email [unlockingopportunity@aspeninstitute.org](mailto:unlockingopportunity@aspeninstitute.org).

### **UNLOCKING OPPORTUNITY COLLEGES**

- Alamo Colleges District | San Antonio College (pilot institution)
- Laramie County Community College
- Lorain County Community College
- Monroe Community College
- Odessa College
- Sinclair Community College
- Southwest Wisconsin Technical College
- St. Petersburg College
- Tulsa Community College
- Valencia College

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### **The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program**

The Aspen Institute is a global nonprofit organization whose purpose is to ignite human potential to build understanding and create new possibilities for a better world. Founded in 1949, the Institute drives change through dialogue, leadership, and action to help solve society's greatest challenges. The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program supports colleges and universities in their quest to achieve a higher standard of excellence, delivering credentials that unlock life-changing careers and strengthen our economy, society, and democracy.

### **Community College Research Center**

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.

# Background

Community colleges are essential higher education access points for over 6 million students every year. Their low cost and open-access admissions policies ensure that any student can pursue an education that can ultimately change their lives, whether that means gaining skills that help them secure a better and more fulfilling job directly after community college or being well prepared to enter and complete a bachelor's degree program.

The value of a community college education has been substantially strengthened in recent years through multiple reform efforts aimed at improving graduation rates. Over the last decade, the average combined graduation and transfer rate for community colleges has increased substantially, from 39 to 47 percent.<sup>1</sup> That means hundreds of thousands more students today have a better chance of benefiting from their college education: securing a good job, transferring and earning a bachelor's degree, and repaying their college debt.

But community colleges must engage in additional reforms to further develop the diverse talent our nation needs and enable the economic mobility individuals deserve. They must increase the alignment of what they offer to students' post-graduation success in transfer/bachelor's attainment and in securing good jobs and strengthen supports to help more students enter and complete high-value programs. National data shows that only 18 percent of students who earned a certificate earned \$40,000 or more annually six years after graduation, and only 24 percent of students who earned an associate degree earned \$40,000 or more annually—below most living-wage standards.<sup>2</sup> Data also reveal that students struggle to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree. Most community college students state they want to earn a bachelor's degree within six years of starting at a community college.<sup>3,4</sup> In both transfer and workforce pathways, students of color and low-income students are least likely to enroll in and complete programs that are aligned with high levels of post-graduation success.<sup>5, 6, 7, 8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Average graduation and transfer rates for all community colleges are calculated based on data collected for the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence.

<sup>2</sup> Sandy, Baum, Harry Holzer, and Grace Luetmer, "Should the Federal Government Fund Short-Term Postsecondary Certificate Programs?," Urban Institute, January 2021, [https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/103370/should-the-federal-government-fund-short-term-postsecondary-certificate-programs\\_0\\_0.pdf](https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/103370/should-the-federal-government-fund-short-term-postsecondary-certificate-programs_0_0.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Tatiana Velasco, John Fink, Mariel Bedoya, Davis Jenkins, and Tania LaViolet, "Tracking Transfer: Community College Effectiveness in Broadening Bachelor's Degree Attainment," Community College Research Center, Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, and the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, February 2024, [https://higher.ed.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/CCRC-ASP-NSCRC-TT-2Y-Report\\_Final.pdf](https://higher.ed.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/CCRC-ASP-NSCRC-TT-2Y-Report_Final.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> "Students Need More Information to Help Reduce Challenges Transferring Credits," United States Government Accountability Office, August 2017, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-17-574.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> "Community College STEM Pathways," Community College Research Center, July 2022, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/community-college-stem-pathways.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> "African Americans: College Majors and Earnings," Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, Accessed September 6, 2024, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/african-american-majors/>.

<sup>7</sup> Tom Allison, Konrad Mugglestone, and Kendall Foster, "Major Malfunction: Racial & Ethnic Disparities in What Students Study," Young Invincibles, September 2015, [https://younginvincibles.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Major-Malfunction\\_FINAL.pdf](https://younginvincibles.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Major-Malfunction_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Velasco, Fink, Bedoya, Jenkins, and LaViolet, "Tracking Transfer."

Launched in January 2023, Unlocking Opportunity: The Post-Graduation Success and Equity Network is designed to address these challenges. Through generous support from Arnold Ventures, Ascendium Education Group, ECMC Foundation, and Strada Education Foundation, the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program (Aspen) and Columbia University's Community College Research Center (CCRC) are working with 10 community colleges committed to significantly increasing the number and percentage of their students—including students of color and those from lower-income backgrounds—who enter and complete high-value programs. Unlocking Opportunity defines high-value programs as ones that lead directly to jobs that pay a living wage or to efficient and effective completion of a bachelor's degree.

Unlocking Opportunity is designed as a three-year project. In the first 20 months, Unlocking Opportunity colleges have done substantial work to ensure they deliver on their promise to improve students' outcomes after graduation. Since January 2023, network college teams have:

- Set quantitative goals for improving student enrollment in and completion of high-value programs.
- Crafted reform strategies aligned to these quantitative goals that aim to both strengthen programs and improve recruitment and support for students to explore, choose, plan, and complete high-value programs.
- Engaged in two multi-day, in-person convenings and multiple virtual convenings to examine their institutional data and learn about research-based effective practices.
- Received technical support from five expert coaches, network college leaders, and Aspen and CCRC, including multiple in-person site visits and feedback reports.

This year's Unlocking Opportunity progress report highlights the network's work to date in setting quantitative goals and strategies aimed at improving the lives of over 28,000 students across the 10 colleges.

In the 2023-2024 academic year, Unlocking Opportunity colleges set goals, defined strategies, and implemented substantial reforms. Some eliminated general studies programs and are helping students learn about and choose a pre-major transfer program. Others have developed new systems for onboarding students into high-value programs. Through these and other reforms, colleges have already achieved measurable results, making progress toward their quantitative goals as they continue to implement and refine reforms through the remainder of 2024 and through 2025 and beyond.

# Progress to Date: Setting Quantitative Goals

At the outset of the project, Aspen, CCRC, and five Unlocking Opportunity coaches engaged college presidents and teams from each of the 10 colleges to set specific quantitative goals to:

1. Increase the number of students in higher-value workforce and bachelor's pathways, both overall and for students of color and/or low-income students, and
2. Decrease the number of students in lower-value pathways, both overall and for students of color and/or low-income students.

To support this goal-setting process, Aspen and CCRC developed several resources to help colleges set a living-wage standard, classify program enrollments and awards by post-completion value, and submit data to Aspen and CCRC on program enrollments by post-completion value category, disaggregated by race/ethnicity. Those tools have since been refined and released for open-access use by other colleges. The guide, *[Classifying Community College Programs by Post-Completion Outcomes in Transfer and Workforce](#)*, and companion data tools are available on the Aspen and CCRC websites.

## Unlocking Opportunity by the Numbers

Between June and December 2023, each network community college set its own quantitative goals, which were refined with feedback and support from coaches and Aspen and CCRC staff. Collectively, the network of 10 colleges has set the following goals to meet by December 2025:

- Increase enrollment in and completion of higher-value pathways (specifically, pre-major associate degree transfer programs and CTE/workforce programs aligned to jobs that pay living wages and offer opportunities for learning and career advancement) by **28,441 students**, including **12,717 underserved students**.
- Reduce enrollment in lower-value pathways (including undecided, general studies associate degree programs, and CTE/workforce programs aligned to low-wage jobs) by **16,129 students**, including **8,028 underserved students**.

# Progress to Date: Devising Reforms to Strengthen Programs and Program Onboarding

Beginning in mid-2023, each network college president and their team began crafting specific reform strategies to meet their quantitative goals by December 2025. With guidance and support from Aspen, CCRC, coaches, and other network colleges, each college completed the initial strategy-setting process in November 2023.

Reform strategies for Unlocking Opportunity colleges fall into three focus areas:

1. Strengthening workforce programs;
2. Strengthening transfer and bachelor's programs; and
3. Strengthening advising and program onboarding to increase the number of students who choose, plan, and complete high-value programs.

Since September 2023, Unlocking Opportunity colleges have made significant changes aligned to these focus areas. Below are examples of each college's specific reform efforts connected to the three areas.

## Strengthening Workforce Programs

Unlocking Opportunity college leaders and teams have worked to strengthen their programs so more students are on pathways likely to lead to strong post-completion outcomes. In most cases, this has meant tying existing workforce programs to jobs and fields that offer good wages. For some, it has included starting new high-value programs that are responsive to local labor market needs.

### Laramie County Community College (Cheyenne, Wyoming)

**Strengthening and creating pathways for pre-health students.** Laramie County Community College is addressing a significant challenge it identified in its data: Hundreds of students take prerequisites to enter high-value associate degree programs in nursing and other health care fields but never gain admittance due to the limited capacity of these programs. To strengthen the value of the associate degree and related health care programs, the college is taking several steps to help students in those pathways, including (1) adding more slots to nursing and other high-value health care associate degree programs; (2) revising its broader transfer-oriented health care associate degree program to include more content that leads to good regional jobs immediately after completion; (3) increasing slots in its own Bachelor of Applied Science (BAS) degree in Health Care Administration; and (4) strengthening its transfer partnerships, with a focus on the University of Wyoming, where most students transfer.



## San Antonio College (San Antonio, Texas)

**Strategically tackling capacity issues in nursing clinical sites.** San Antonio College identified a significant nursing shortage in the region but did not have clinical site capacity to enroll and graduate additional students. The college responded with three strategies: working closely with nearby hospitals to increase the number of clinical slots for students; beginning to develop a state-of-the-art simulation lab, which will become a clinical site; and partnering with other colleges in the Alamo Colleges District so San Antonio students can use their clinical sites. The college has added a full-time coordinator to work directly with these clinical sites to address capacity issues and find additional clinical sites beyond hospitals. In 2023, San Antonio College also launched an accelerated RN-to-BSN program, which has graduated 94 students to date and will increase capacity to 155 students in the next academic year.

## Strengthening Transfer and Bachelor's Programs

Recognizing that many good jobs in each of their regions require a bachelor's degree, Unlocking Opportunity college leaders have worked to strengthen their transfer and bachelor's programs. Their goals have centered on ensuring that transfer programs enable students to transfer efficiently (i.e., with minimal/no credit loss) and earn bachelor's degrees in their chosen major field in a timely manner. A few have launched new or expanded existing high-value bachelor's programs at the community college.

## Odessa College (Odessa, Texas)

**Eliminating General Studies.** Odessa College took the bold step of eliminating its “general studies” associate degree program. Recognizing that the program was not tied to specific good job opportunities in its regional labor market and did not lead to high levels of successful transfer and bachelor's attainment, college leaders decided to remove it as an option from its new student application in summer 2023. The college also has begun intervening with all students already enrolled in general studies who have accumulated fewer than 30 credit hours to redirect them to a high-value pre-major transfer or career-technical pathway, including pre-major transfer degrees with higher transfer and bachelor's attainment rates. Now, the college is working to strengthen advising to help students choose a stronger pathway—whether a pre-major transfer program or a valuable workforce credential.

## Sinclair Community College (Dayton, Ohio)

**Adding bachelor's degree programs to meet regional demand.** After analyzing labor market and post-graduation outcomes data, Sinclair Community College discovered that the region's colleges and universities were not fully meeting the labor market demand for jobs that typically require a bachelor's degree. So, in addition to efforts to strengthen existing transfer partnerships, Sinclair has launched two new applied bachelor's programs that respond to growing regional demand for integrated systems technicians and nurses. Average salaries for graduates in these fields are \$72,800 and \$86,070, respectively, exceeding the standard the college has set for a family-sustaining wage for \$43,315 per year.<sup>10, 11, 12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Jeff Strohl, Artem Gulish, and Catherine Morris, “The Future of Good Jobs: Projections Through 2031,” Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, July 2024, [https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/cew-the\\_future\\_of\\_good\\_jobs-fr.pdf](https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/cew-the_future_of_good_jobs-fr.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> The family-sustaining wage of \$43,315 at Sinclair Community College is the standard for two adults and no children.

<sup>11</sup> “Electrical and Electronic Engineering Technologists and Technicians,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook, accessed September 6, 2024, <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/architecture-and-engineering/electrical-and-electronics-engineering-technicians.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> “Registered Nurses,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook, accessed September 6, 2024, <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/registered-nurses.htm>.

## Strengthening Advising and Program Onboarding

As Unlocking Opportunity colleges work to strengthen their program portfolios, they are also revamping how they recruit and support students to ensure that more enter and complete programs that lead to strong post-graduation outcomes. These efforts have focused on two areas of reform: improving the initial guidance students receive to emphasize high-value program paths and helping students make earlier choices, including through dual enrollment, and developing individual educational plans aligned to those pathways. In some cases, colleges are working to strengthen systems so more students explore career pathways and develop individual educational plans during onboarding. In others, reforms are aimed at ensuring that every student is connected with an advisor in their field of interest who ensures they take the classes on their educational plans to stay on course and graduate from a high-value program.

### **Lorain County Community College (Elyria, Ohio)**

**Connecting dual enrollment students to high-value pathways.** Lorain County Community College is further evolving its strong, longstanding partnerships with K-12 schools, as featured in Aspen and CCRC's [Dual Enrollment Playbook](#). The college's analysis revealed that substantial numbers of its large and growing population of dually enrolled students were not taking courses aligned with high-value apprenticeship and degree programs after high school. So, the college has begun expanding course offerings and creating new course sequences that connect dual enrollment courses to structured high-value pathways for dual enrollment students. The ultimate goal is to help many more students explore and begin a high-value credential during high school so more complete them after high school.

### **Monroe Community College (Rochester, New York)**

**Redesigning advising to strengthen post-graduation outcomes.** Monroe Community College recognized from its data that a high percentage of students were undecided and others were choosing programs misaligned with strong post-completion outcomes. To address both of these issues, the college is redesigning advising to a proactive, caseload-oriented model that will help students make earlier and better program decisions. Upon starting the redesign, Monroe realized it would need more advisors trained in helping students align their decisions with post-graduation success and developing individualized educational plans. As a first step, the college began hiring additional advisors in the summer of 2024.

### **Southwest Wisconsin Technical College (Fennimore, Wisconsin)**

**Developing student success plans tied to post-graduation outcomes.** After analyzing program enrollment data and processes, Southwest Wisconsin Technical College realized its student onboarding system was leading a substantial number of students to choose programs of study that were not aligned with strong post-graduation outcomes. So, as the college makes concentrated efforts to increase alignment between its curriculum and the needs of local employers, it is also implementing a process to help every new student develop a comprehensive student success plan. The ultimate goal is for each student to have a clear plan that includes a career assessment, an individualized academic plan that includes courses as well as student supports and services, and a financial plan to facilitate completing a credential. The college is moving quickly: 621 of its 1,937 students have success plans in place as of August 2024.



### **St. Petersburg College (St. Petersburg, Florida)**

#### **Increasing career guidance connected to labor market demand for dual enrollment students.**

Petersburg College is working to build on long-standing, deep partnerships with nearby K-12 schools. The college's Unlocking Opportunity deliberations revealed that many dual credit students were not receiving proactive support to explore career opportunities. To respond, the college is increasing career guidance at its partner high schools so more dual credit students will explore and choose courses that connect to programs in high-value careers. First up: Leaders are implementing a "Career and Life Planning" course for all dual enrollment students, which provides data about employment opportunities and the regional labor market in addition to opportunities to identify professional interests and aptitudes.

### **Tulsa Community College (Tulsa, Oklahoma)**

#### **Redesigning systems to help students choose a major connected to strong outcomes.**

Tulsa Community College determined that, notwithstanding a revamped advising model that has helped increase completion rates, some students were not adequately supported in choosing a major aligned to a strong program of study early in their college career. The college has redesigned its intake processes, orientation, and advising to better help students explore career and college interests, develop a full program plan, and regularly monitor progress on their plans. The college projects that 99 percent of enrolled, degree-seeking post-high school students will have a full-program individualized educational plan, including an intended transfer destination for students who aim to earn a bachelor's degree, and every student will connect with an advisor every term to assess their progress by fall 2024

### **Valencia College (Orlando, Florida)**

#### **Restructuring advising to ensure students learn about multiple high-value pathways.**

Valencia College has trained specialized advisors to help students choose high-value workforce programs. Unlocking Opportunity deliberations revealed that the same was not true for students in transfer degree programs, which the college team concluded could explain some weaknesses in transfer outcomes. The college is now restructuring advising to a centralized model that employs coaches (rather than advisors), redistributes caseloads, and reduces the student-to-advisor ratio. Coaches will be cross-trained on both transfer and workforce programs, including technical certificates, which will allow students to learn about multiple high-value program opportunities earlier in their college journey. For example, if students decide that it is not the right time to pursue an associate degree, they can be advised on opportunities for technical certificates that lead directly to sustaining-wage jobs.

## Next Steps

Unlocking Opportunity colleges have set bold goals to collectively change the life trajectories of more than 28,000 students by 2025. Network colleges have demonstrated the capacity to make the kind of scaled and systemic changes required to meet that goal—and they are continuing to implement those strategies with the support from one another, their coaches, and Aspen and CCRC staff. This collaborative work will continue through December 2025, with in-person and virtual workshops on topics including dual enrollment, four-year transfer, health care programs, and student advising.

Aspen and CCRC will continue to track outcomes at network colleges through December 2025, reporting publicly on their progress. We will also continue learning about effective reform strategies from these colleges through in-person site visits and research interviews, synthesizing lessons into practical guidance and tools for the field. The areas we are delving into include insights around classifying programs by post-completion value, redesigning student success plans, and expanding the number of students in strong programs, including pre-health programs.

To learn more about these insights and continued Unlocking Opportunity developments, please visit [our webpage](#) and [sign up for our newsletter](#) for the latest updates.

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