

CCRC COMMUNITY COLLEGE
RESEARCH CENTER

Teachers College, Columbia University

More Essential Than Ever: Strengthening New Jersey Community College Pathways to Post-Completion Success

Davis Jenkins and Hana Lahr

NJCCC Opportunity Summit 2026 | June 10, 2026



MORE ESSENTIAL THAN EVER

COMMUNITY COLLEGE PATHWAYS
TO EDUCATIONAL AND
CAREER SUCCESS

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More Essential Than Ever

Community College Pathways to
Educational and Career Success

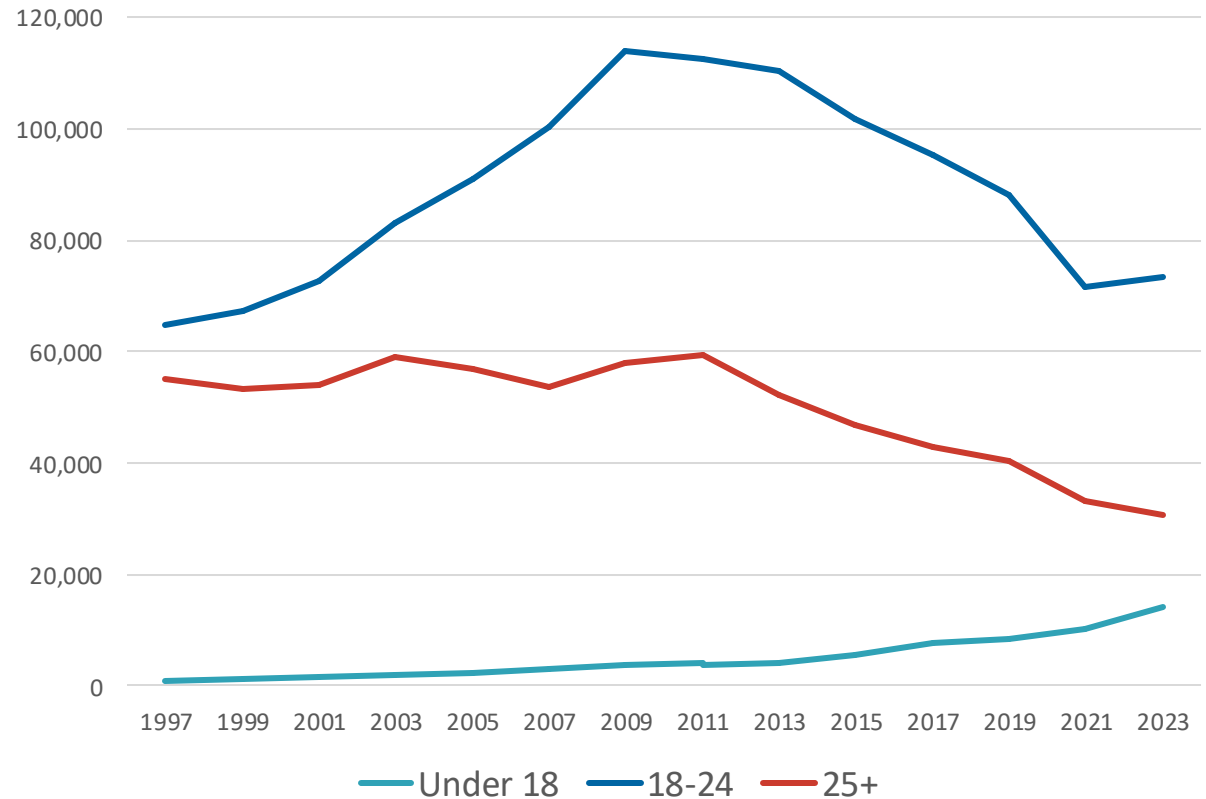
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Post-high school enrollment in New Jersey community colleges has declined for more than a decade.

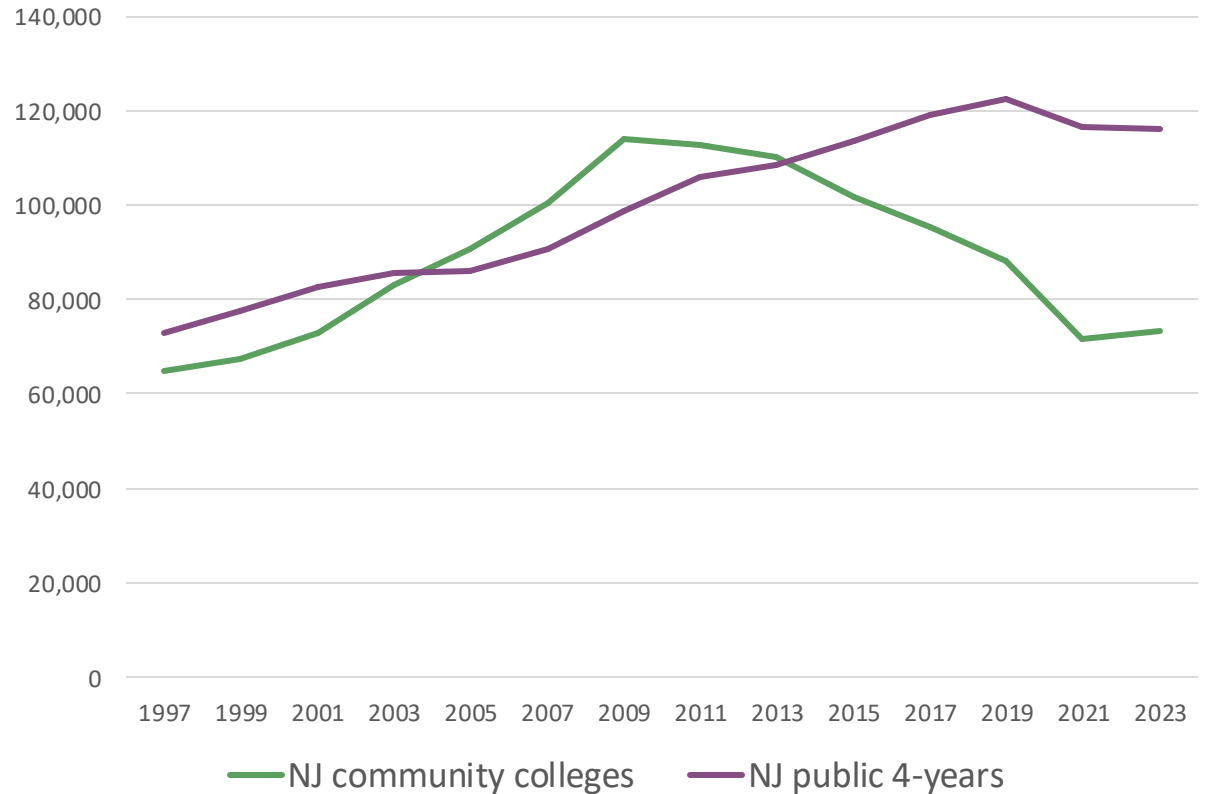
New Jersey Community College Fall Credit Enrollment by Age: 1997-2023



Source: CCRC analysis of IPEDS enrollment data.
<https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/john.fink/viz/UndergraduateEnrollmentTrendsbySector/Summary>

NJ community colleges have lost market share to NJ public 4-years for traditional college-age students.

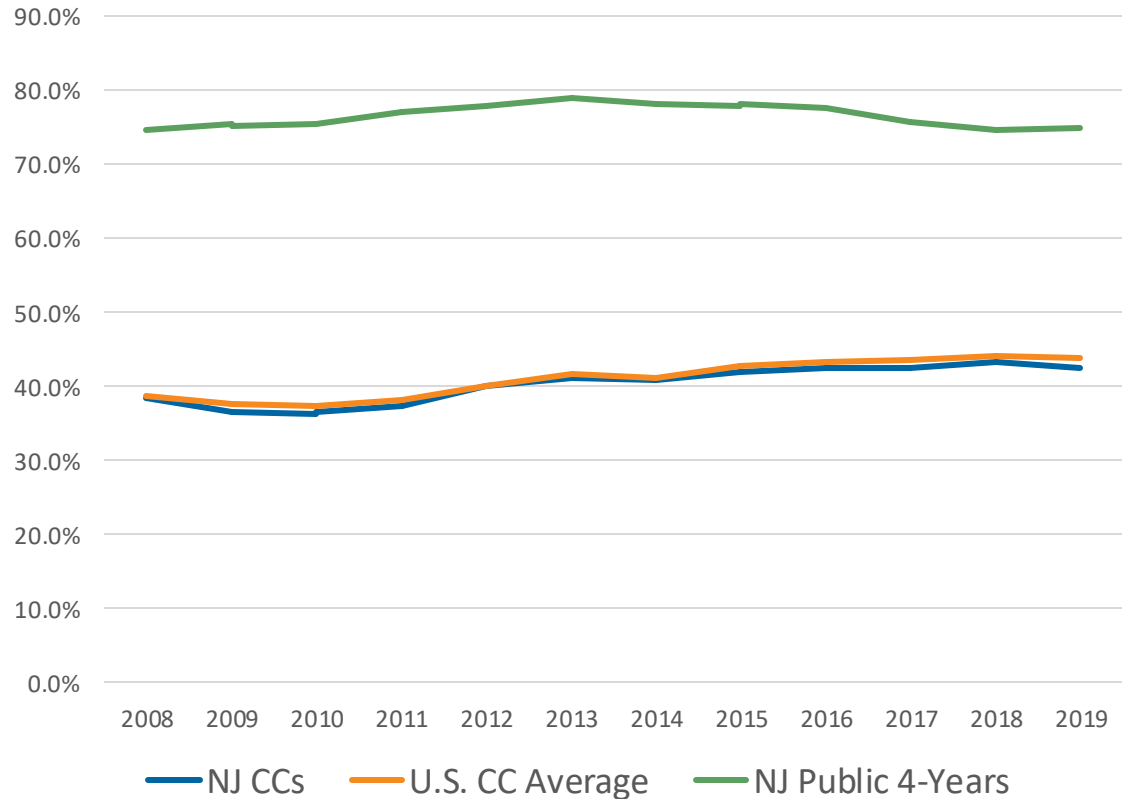
Fall Enrollment Students Ages 18-24: New Jersey Community Colleges vs. Public 4-Years



Source: CCRC analysis of IPEDS enrollment data.
<https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/john.fink/viz/UndergraduateEnrollmentTrendsbySector/Summary>

New Jersey community college completion rates have improved since 2010 in line with national averages, but **fewer than half of cc starters complete any credential in six years...**

Six-Year Completion Rates for Starting Cohorts 2008-2019: NJ CCs, US CC Average, and NJ Public 4-Years

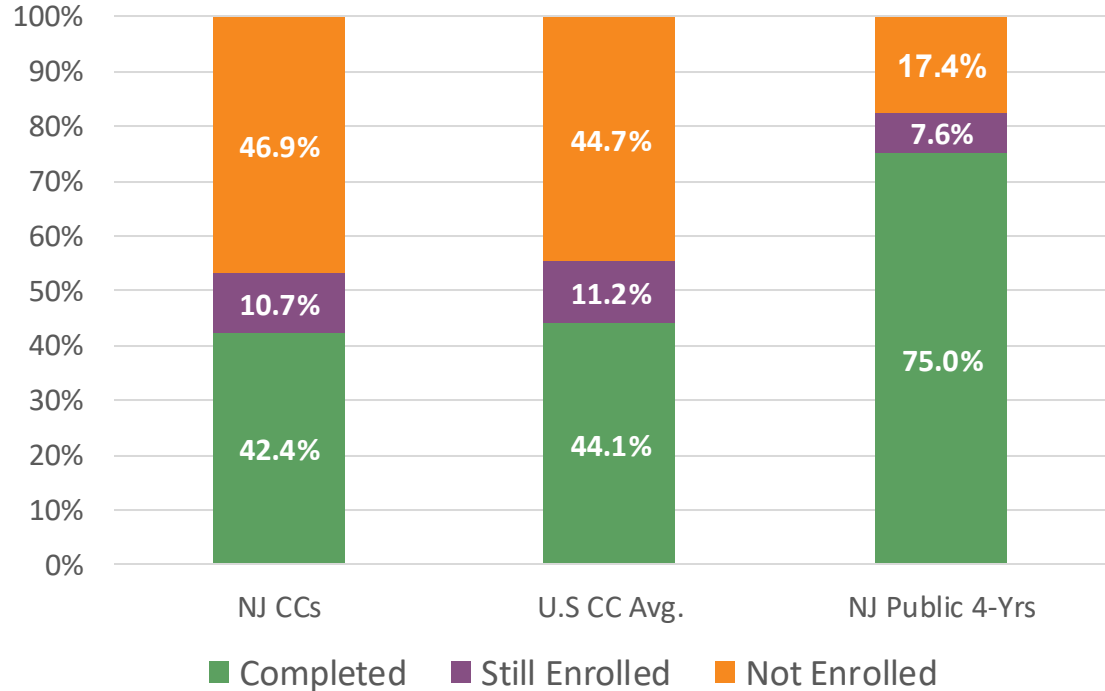


Source: National Student Clearinghouse, Completing College, 2025



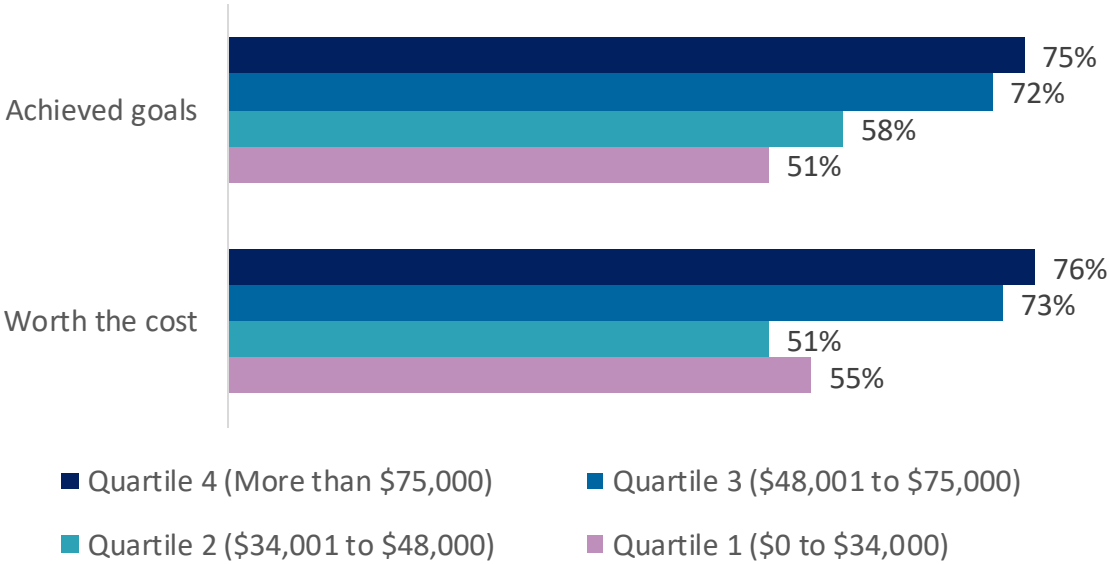
...And one in 10 New Jersey community college starters is still enrolled after six years with no credential.

Six-Year Outcomes 2019 Starting Cohort: NJ CCs, U.S. CC Avg. and NJ Public 4-Yrs



Higher paying jobs or successful transfer → Higher perception of value

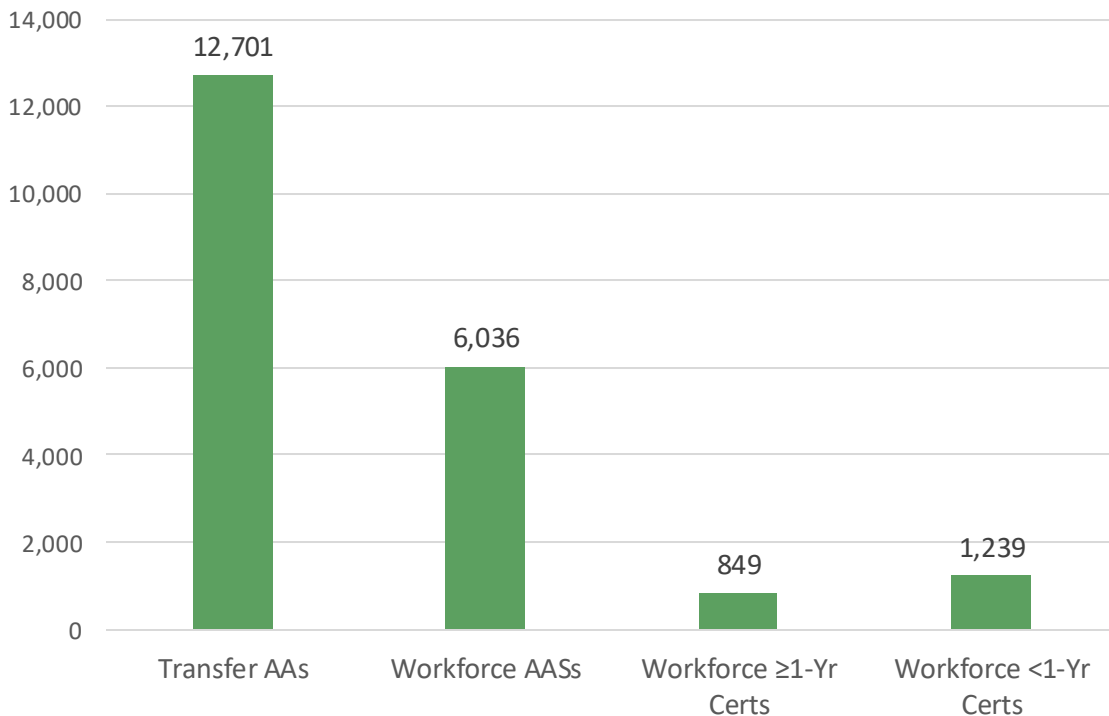
Recent Community College Students' Perceptions of Value
by Post-Completion Earnings Quartiles



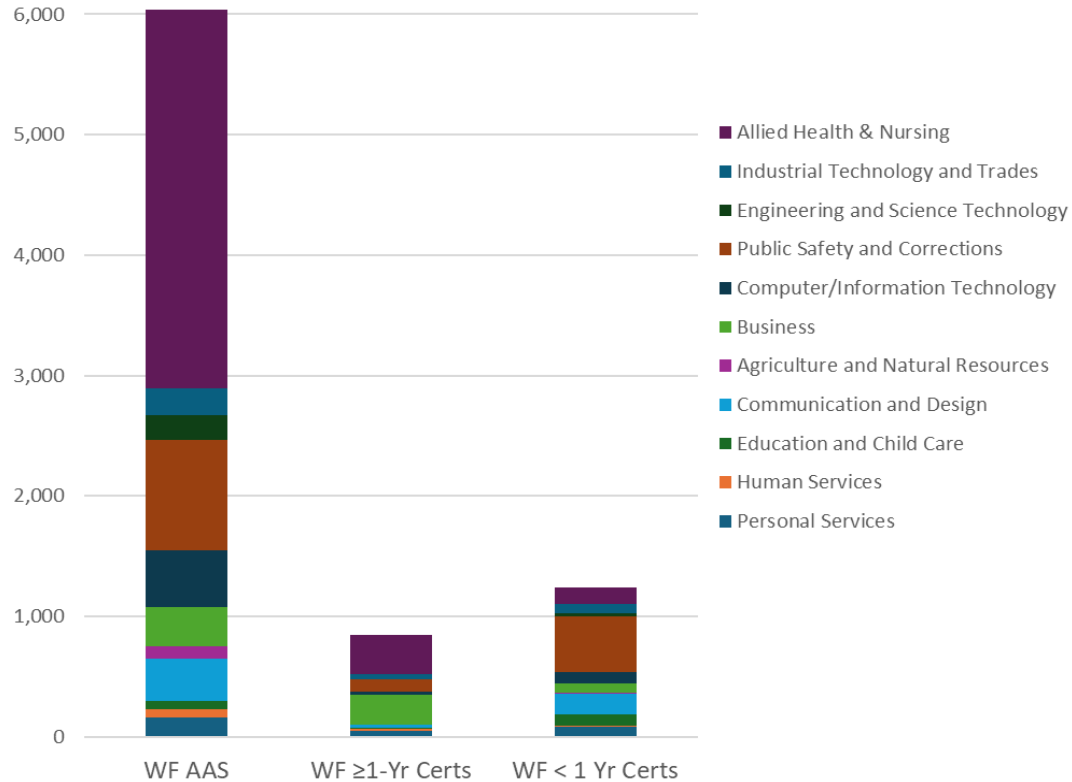
Source: <https://stradaeducation.org/report/the-value-of-community-colleges-recent-students-motivations-and-outcomes/#:~:text=Overall%2C%20perceptions%20of%20the%20value,those%20of%20bachelor's%20degree%20completers.>

Do our programs enable students to secure a living-wage job and/or transfer efficiently in their major field of interest?

New Jersey Community College Awards By Level and Intent: 2023-24



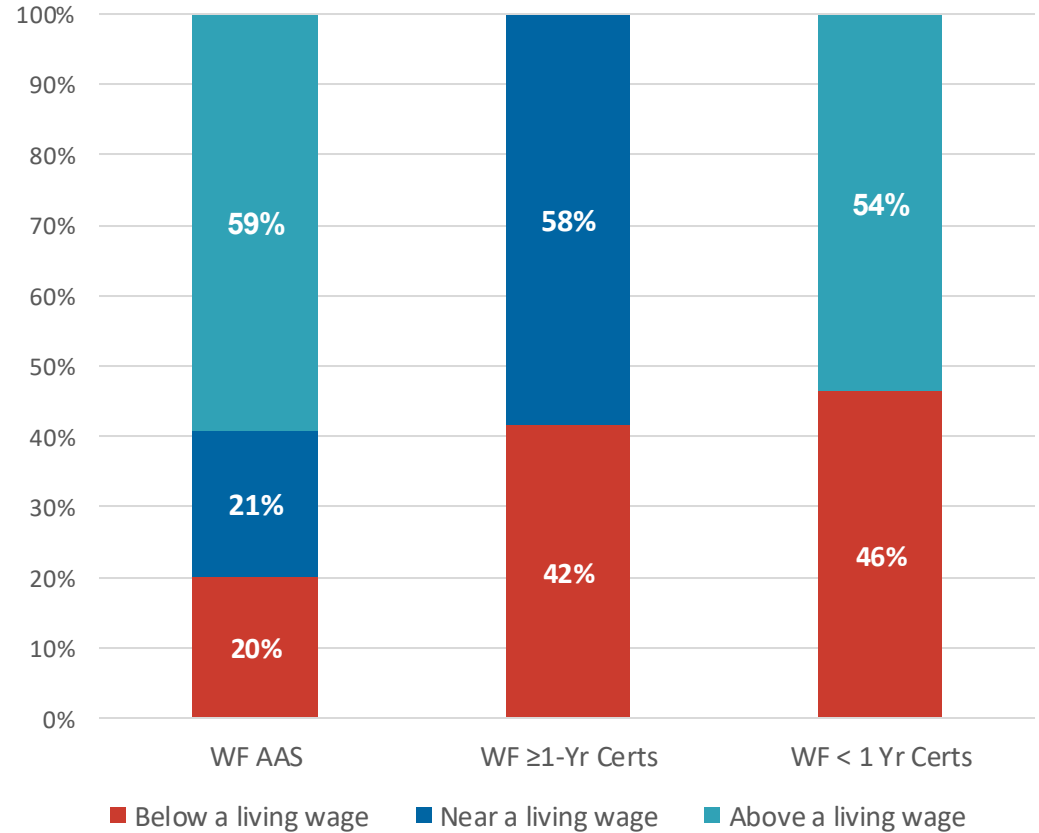
New Jersey Community College Workforce Awards by Field: 2023-24



The value of community college workforce awards varies by level and field.

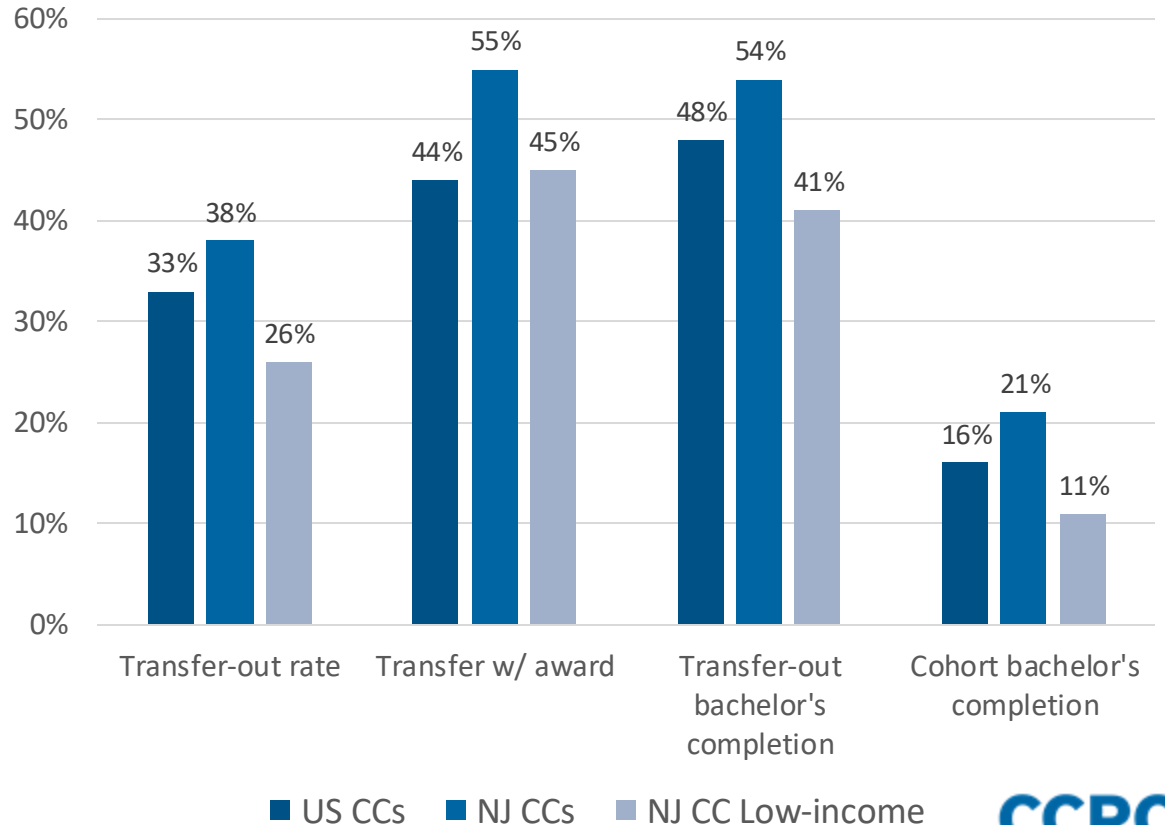
Most NJ cc workforce AAS programs lead to living wages. Some certificates enable students to secure “stepping-stone” jobs, but too often it is left to students to figure out how to “stack” credentials.

New Jersey Community Colleges Share of Awards w/ Associated Earnings Relative to Living Wage: 2023-24



NJ CC students transfer and earn transfer AAs and BAs at higher rates than CC starters nationally, but there are big gaps in outcomes for low-income students.

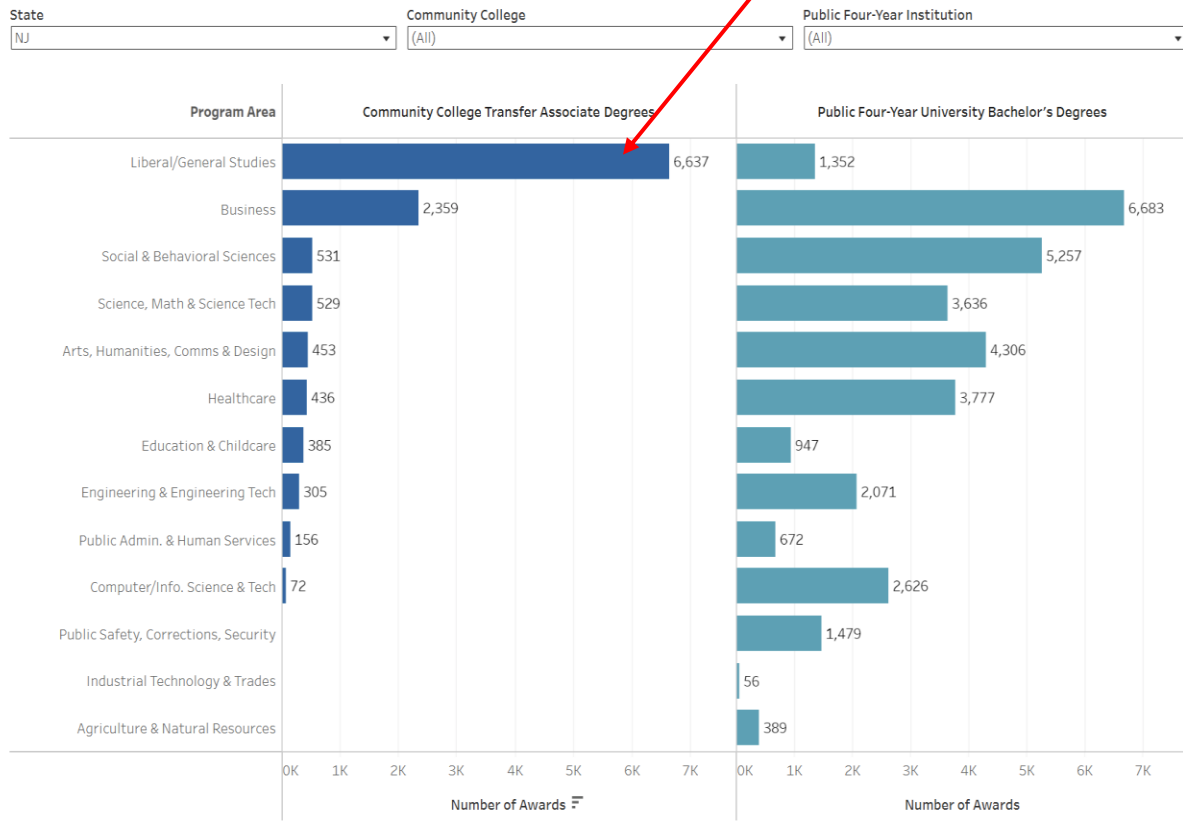
Community College Transfer Outcomes 2015 Cohort: US CCs, NJ CCs, NJ CCs Low-income



New Jersey community college transfer associates are not well aligned with NJ public university bachelor's majors.

Community College Transfer Associate Degrees Compared to Public Four-Year Bachelor's Degrees by Program Area

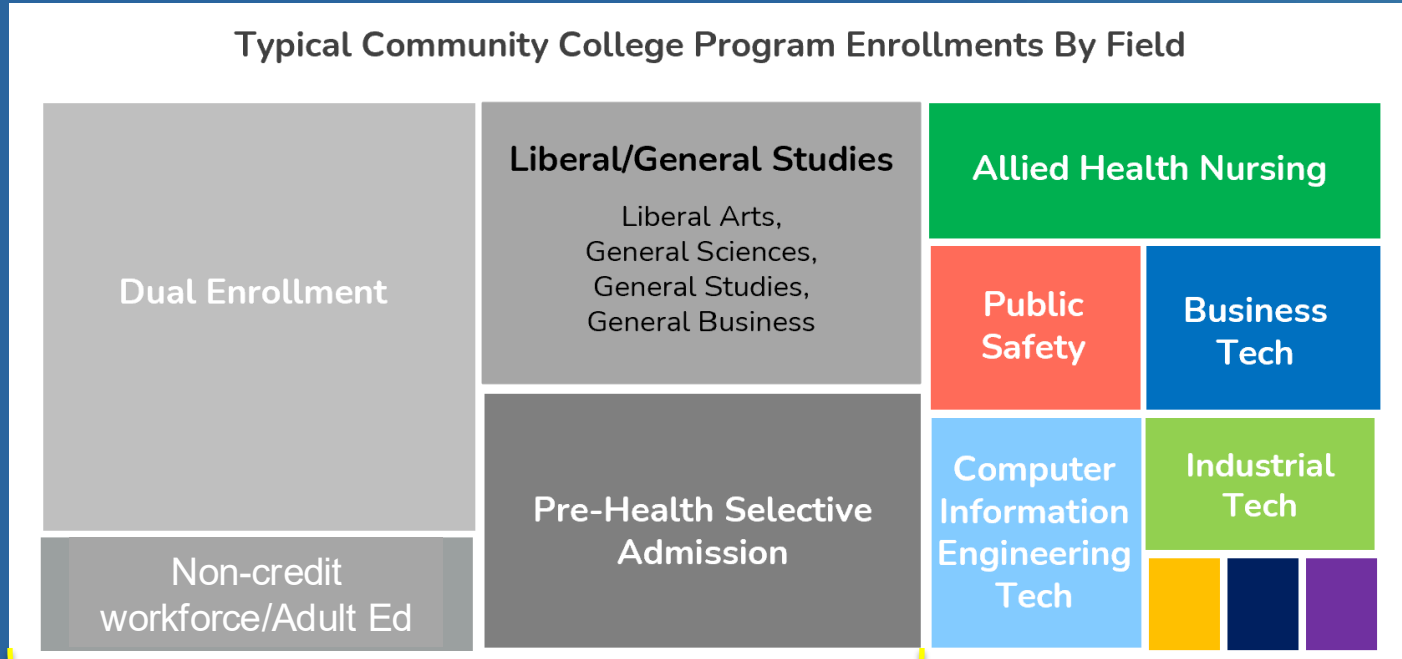
Median earnings 2-years post: \$24,023 (2021\$)



Source: CCRC analysis of IPEDS awards data <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/dashboard/community-college-awards-for-post-completion-success.html>.



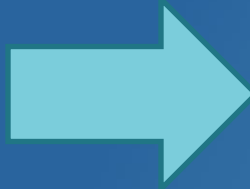
Too many students are not enrolled in a program that clearly leads to a good job or transfer in their major field of interest.



What motivation do these students have to continue and complete?

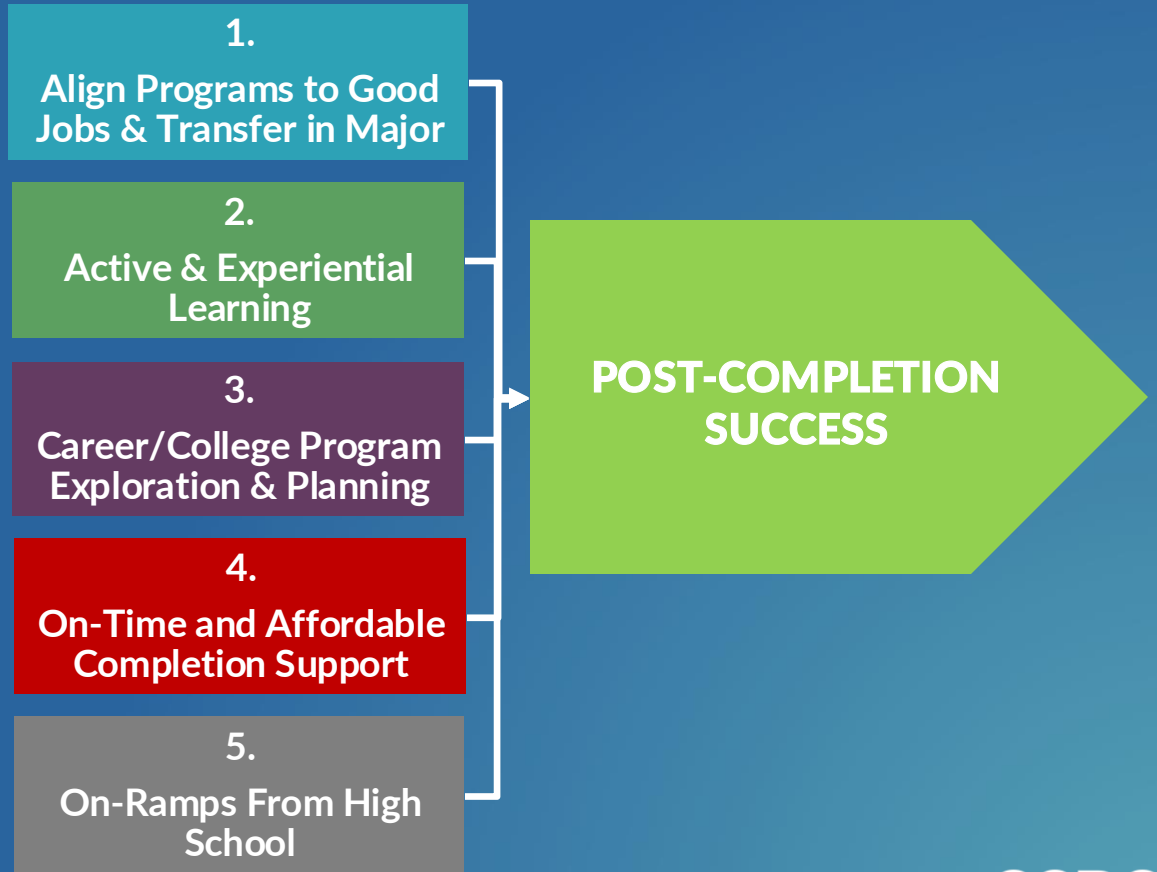
More Essential Than Ever: From Completion to Post-Completion Success

Pathways reforms to date have achieved gains by **removing barriers to completion**

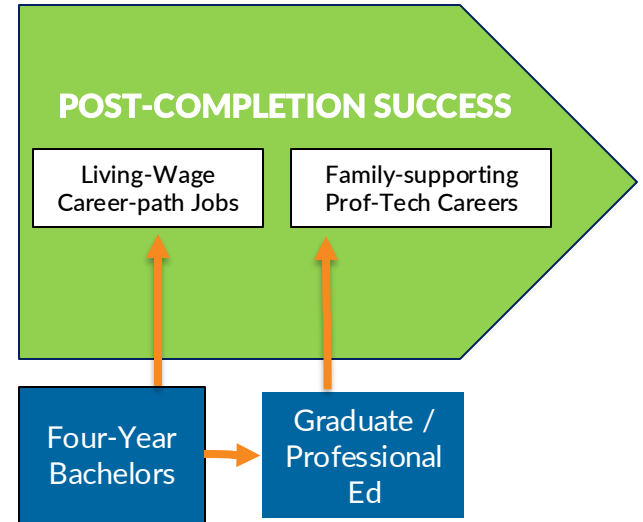


Moving forward, community colleges also need to focus on **strengthening pathways to post-completion success**—and thus make students' investment of time, money and effort worth it

Five frontiers for strengthening community college pathways to post-completion success

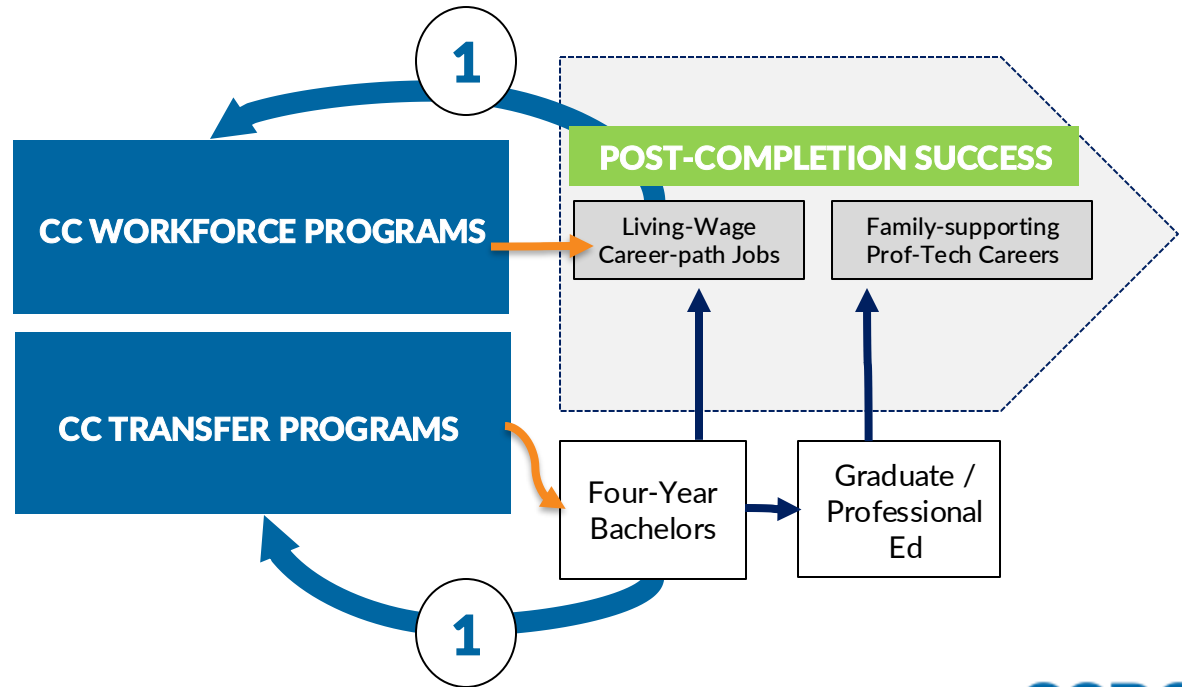


Start with **post-completion success** in mind, and backward design



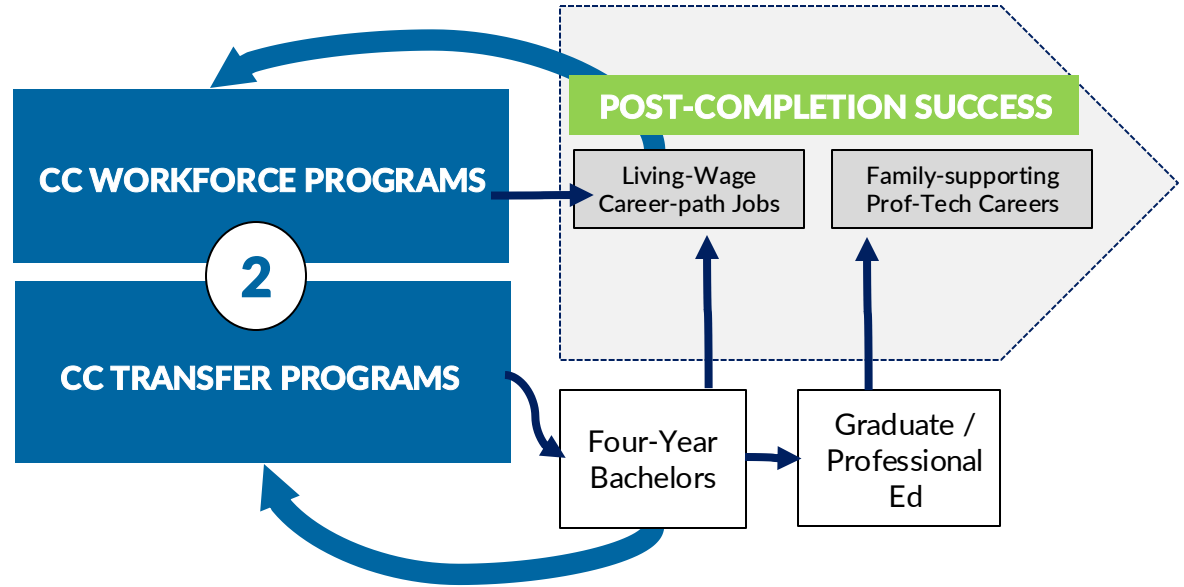
Frontier 1:

Partner with employers and universities to ensure programs lead to living-wage jobs or transfer in major.



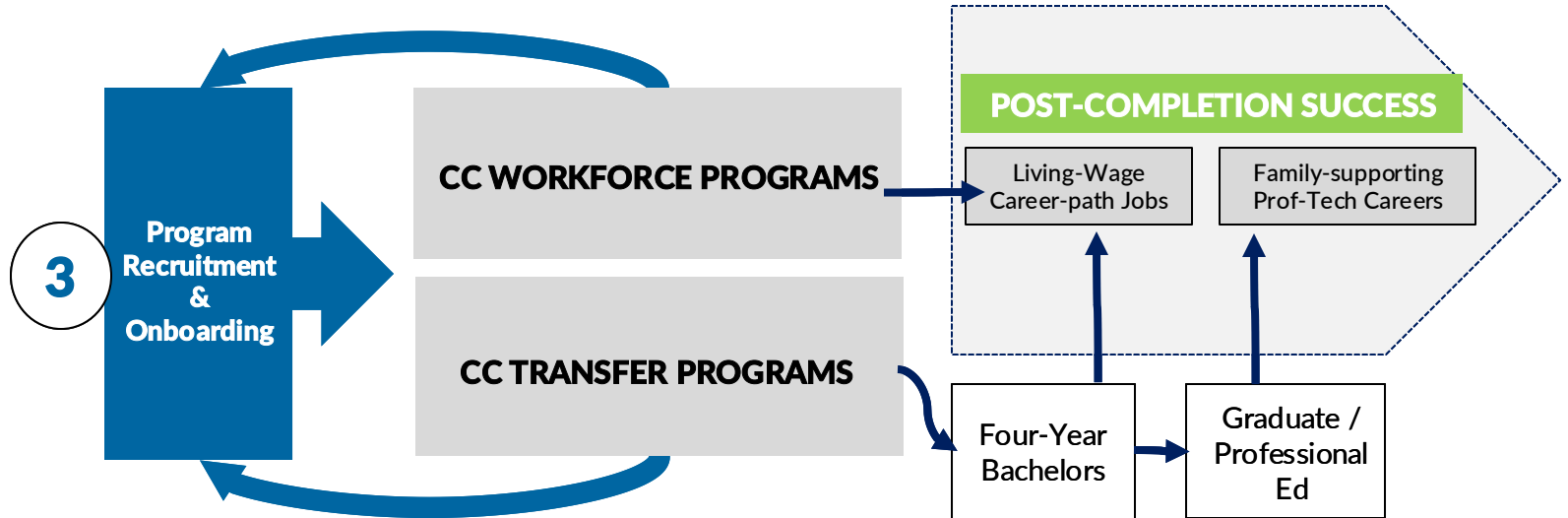
Frontier 2:

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



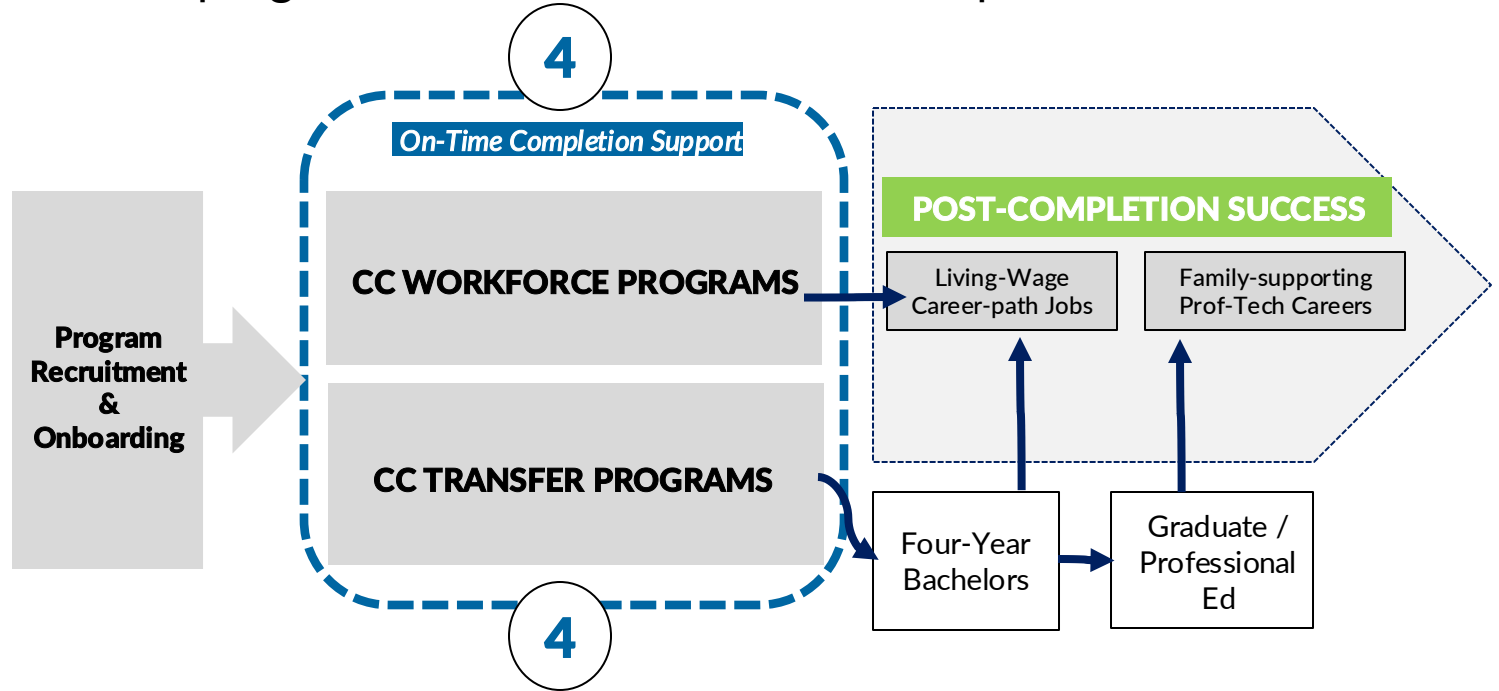
Frontier 3:

Rethink the onboarding experience to help students explore, choose, and plan a program of study aligned with their interests and aspirations.



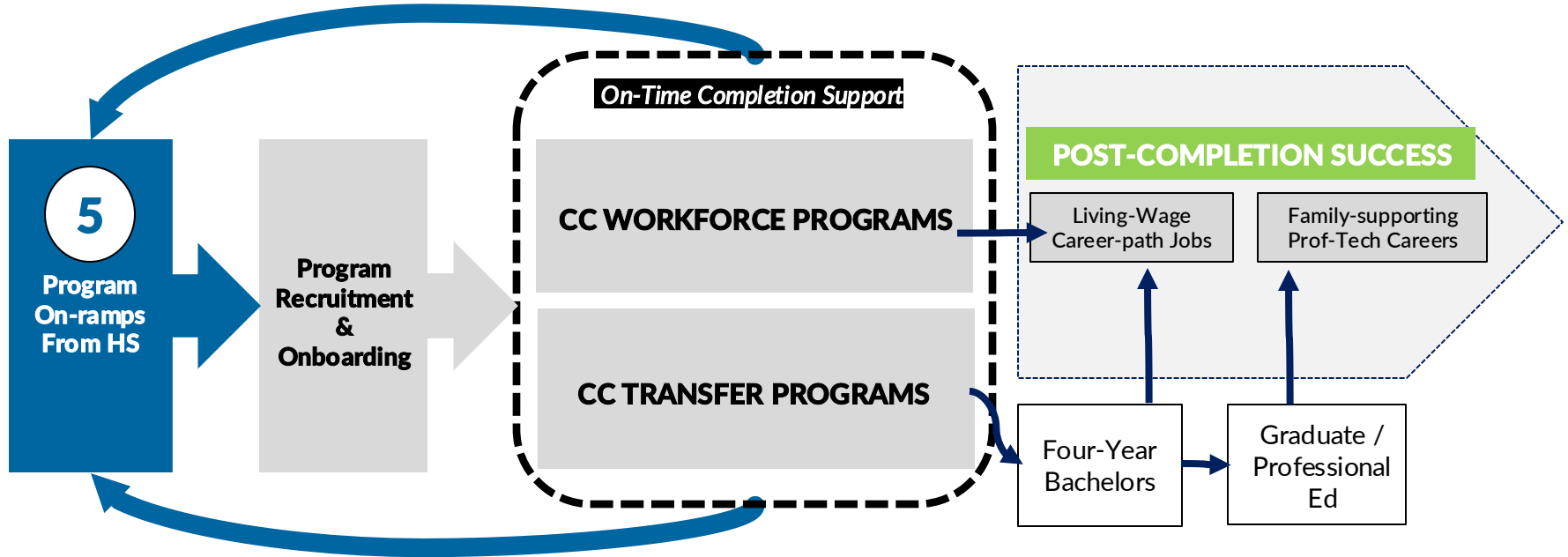
Frontier 4:

Structure, schedule and deliver courses—and provide progress monitoring and support—to enable busy students to complete their programs in as little time and cost as possible.

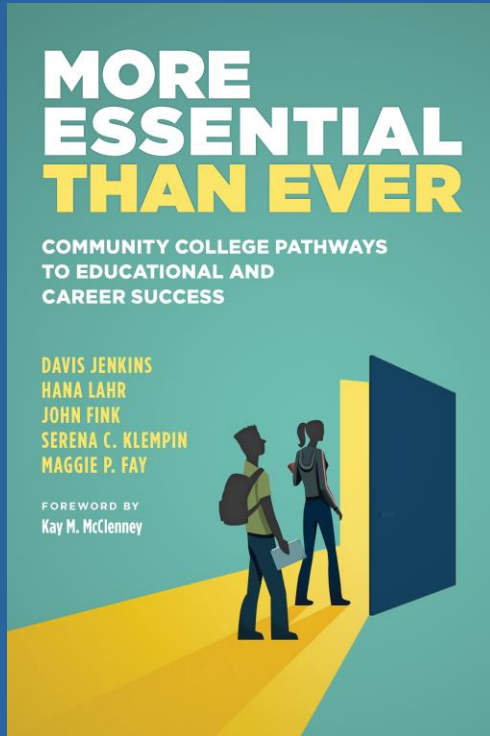


Frontier 5:

Rethink the high school dual enrollment as an onramp to a debt-free, career-connected postsecondary pathways for students who wouldn't otherwise continue their education after high school.



More Essential Than Ever is filled with practical guidance and examples



“Taking Action” steps at the end of each chapter

Dozens of examples and case studies from different colleges

Blog series and discussion guide to facilitate broad engagement

A blue-tinted background image showing a group of students walking in a hallway. The students are seen from behind, some carrying backpacks. The hallway has a modern design with large windows and a staircase in the background. The overall atmosphere is educational and active.

How to have an impact from the start:
Help all students explore and choose a program and make an educational plan

Students' Program Choices Matter



Many new students end up in general studies programs, which have weak transfer and employment outcomes



Students' employment and long-term earnings vary by field of study and type of award



Students are more likely to complete a credential if their program is aligned with interests and goals

What students want during onboarding

A photograph of a student with glasses and a red shirt, seen from the side, writing in a notebook. In the background, a male instructor in a sweater and tie stands near a whiteboard, holding papers. The scene is set in a classroom or lecture hall.

- Explore academic and career interests
- Interact with faculty, new and current students, and others who share similar academic and career interests
- Take a course on **topics of interest** in term 1
- Develop a **full-program educational plan**

Takeaways From Our Recent Research About How Students Choose Programs and Careers



Most students enter college with many interests in different fields. How is your college capturing the range of students' interests? Are exploratory students defaulted into generic majors?



Multiple factors play into students' program choices. How is your college helping students untangle these complex decisions?



New students may seem certain about their program interests but is this the whole story? Does the conversation allow for uncertainty and exploration?

Planning Student Paths to Post-Completion Success: A Guide for Using the Community College Program Mapper

By Davis Jenkins, John Fink, and Hana Lahr

In our new book, *More Essential Than Ever: Community College Pathways to Educational and Career Success* (Jenkins, Lahr, et al., 2025), coauthored with Serena C. Klemplin and Maggie P. Fay, we argue that if community colleges are to recruit and retain more students, they need to ensure that their programs of study are worth completing in that they enable students to secure good jobs or transfer successfully to bachelor's programs. Colleges must also ensure that students with many competing obligations can complete their programs in as little time and as affordably as possible.

Crucial to accomplishing these aims is helping all entering students explore career and academic interests, choose a program of study, and develop an individualized educational plan aligned to their career and educational goals. As explained in the textbox on the following page, creating an individualized plan is critical for having students develop clarity about their program path and motivating them to complete it. Students and college staff can use these plans to monitor student progress, and colleges can use the plans to schedule classes at times students need them so that students can complete their programs on time, according to their individual timelines.

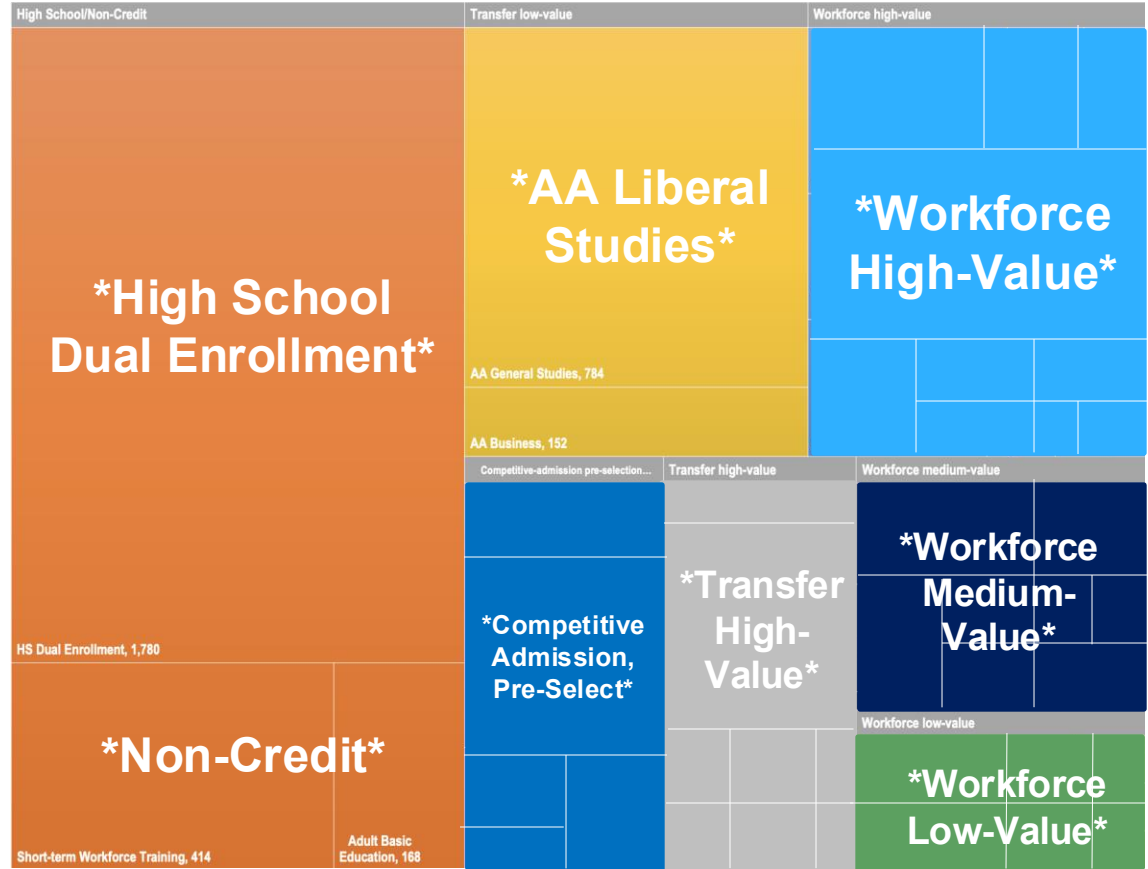
Yet many colleges have difficulty understanding which or how many of their students have individualized educational plans; they also have difficulty in capturing a bird's eye view of which of their program pathways lead to good jobs and further education for students and which meet local workforce needs. Knowing more about the broad college enrollment picture is critical for thinking about what programs of study should be offered, expanded, and encouraged. It is also helpful in undertaking strategies to help students develop a high-quality, goal-aligned plan.

CCRC's Program Mapper is a tool for examining enrollments and plans by post-completion program outcomes.

Which students are enrolled in a program that leads to living-wage job or major-specific transfer?

Which are not?

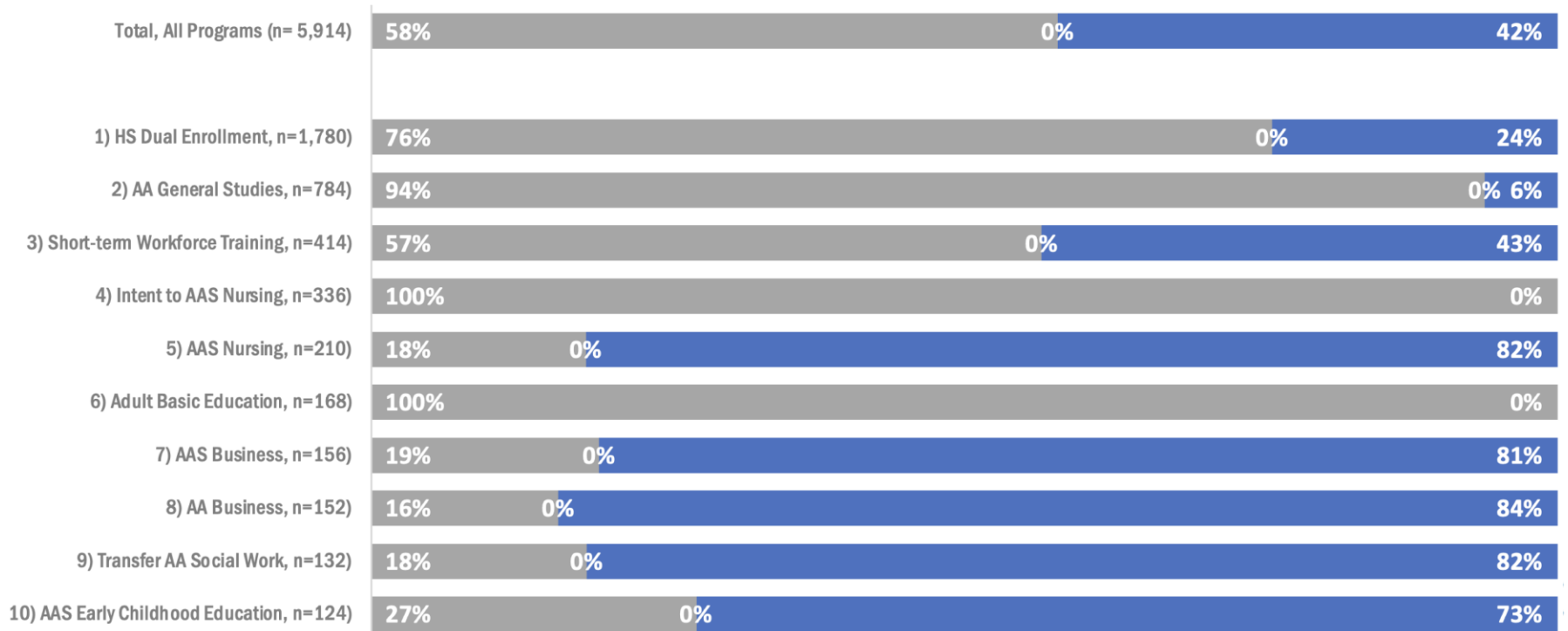
Without a clear path and plan to a good job or BA, what motivation do students have to complete?



How many new and continuing students in each program track have a full-program educational plan?

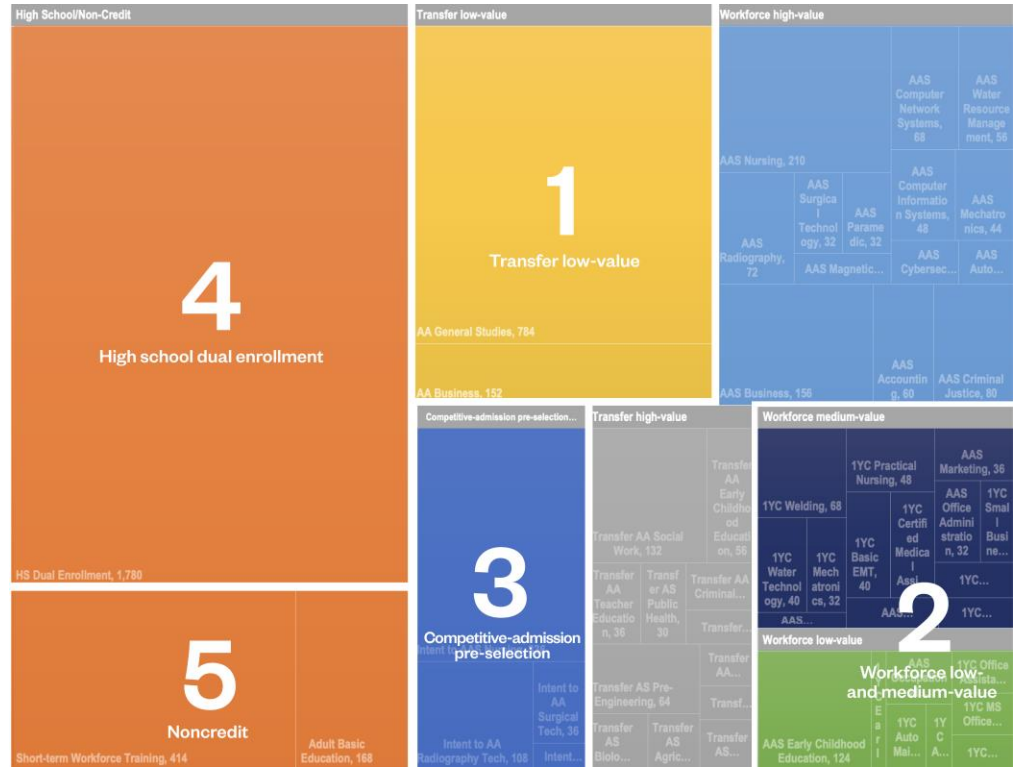
■ No ■ Yes

Percentage of Students With an Educational Plan: Hypothetical Community College



Five High-Leverage Strategies For Strengthening Pathways to Post-Completion Success

1. Help transfer-intending students develop a major-specific transfer plan
2. Help students in low-value workforce programs build career advancement plans—not just earn entry credentials.
3. Help students in competitive-admission pre-selection tracks develop a “Plan B” leading to degrees and career-path employment.
4. Rethink dual enrollment from “random acts” to on-ramps to career-connected postsecondary pathways.
5. Build bridges into credit-bearing, high-opportunity pathways for non-credit workforce and adult basic education programs.



More Essential Than Ever



Program mapper brief and tool



Program & career choice research





Thank you!

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