

**Speaker: Dr. Nikolas Huot**

**Title: Structuring Curriculum to Support Focus Area Exploration**

**Audience: Administrators**

**Topic: Policy and Structural Support for Early Focus Area Integration**

**Summit track: Curricular Engagement**

**Objectives:**

- Guide administrators in developing policies to ensure focus area courses are available in students' first year.
- Use curriculum mapping to align focus area courses with milestones and key learning outcomes.
- Develop evaluation frameworks to measure the impact of focus area integration on retention and completion.

**Session Description**

This presentation by Nikolas Huot, Assistant Vice President for Institutional Transformation at Complete College America, addresses the critical need for purpose-driven curriculum design in higher education. Highlighting alarming statistics—only 1 in 3 recent graduates find their degree "extremely useful" for workplace skills, 50% feel underqualified for entry-level jobs, and 75% of low-income/first-generation students leave without relevant employment—Huot advocates for a comprehensive "Purpose First" approach to improve student outcomes.

The framework emphasizes early career engagement, transparent academic pathways, and curriculum aligned with career competencies. Key implementation strategies include meta-majors for exploration, first-year experience courses with experiential learning, comprehensive academic maps with career information, and faculty engagement in connecting coursework to career readiness. The presentation showcases successful institutional models, including Baker College's reduction in program changes from 26.1% to 13.9% through labor market alignment and career assessment integration.

Rather than relying on students to navigate complex systems independently, Purpose First 2.0 proposes a whole-campus approach involving academic affairs, student affairs, faculty, and external partners. The model aims to address rising skepticism about higher education's value by ensuring students' academic choices connect to clear purposes aligned with personal, academic, financial, and civic goals.

Implementation tools include assessment frameworks combining self-reflection and external feedback to build career competencies throughout the college experience.

**Speaker Bio**

Nikolas Huot is the assistant vice president for institutional transformation at Complete College America, where he previously served as strategy director. Before CCA, he was associate director for first-year and transition programs at Georgia State University, coordinating success initiatives for incoming students across degree levels. Nikolas brings five years of college scheduling experience to his work. At CCA, he develops strategies aligning student choices with their goals while restructuring systems to improve completion rates. He co-led the Purpose First pilot across five states, contributed to publications on purpose, and created processes for developing academic and career maps.

**Materials and/or Links**

<https://completecollege.org/purposefirst/>