

# Purpose and a Plan: Implementing an Engaging and Motivating Program Onboarding Experience

Hana Lahr

Louisiana Meauxmentum Summit | February 4-5, 2026



# About CCRC

CCRC studies community colleges because they provide critical access to postsecondary education and are uniquely positioned to promote equity and social mobility in the United States. Our mission is to conduct research that helps these institutions strengthen opportunities and improve outcomes for their students, particularly those from underserved populations.



# About me



**Hana Lahr**

Assistant Director of Research  
Director of Applied Learning  
**CCRC**

- **Studied music and counseling**
- **Academic advisor & student life coordinator**
- **Researcher focused on organizational change and studying strategies to improve outcomes for students who begin at community colleges**

# Agenda

- A shifting focus: From completion to post-completion success
- Why the first year is so important for retention, completion, and post-completion success
- Research findings on how students choose programs and careers
- Discussion and recommendations for next steps

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# MORE ESSENTIAL THAN EVER

COMMUNITY COLLEGE PATHWAYS  
TO EDUCATIONAL AND  
CAREER SUCCESS

DAVIS JENKINS  
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FOREWORD BY  
Kay M. McClenney



CCRC COMMUNITY COLLEGE  
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Teachers College, Columbia University

# More Essential Than Ever

Community College Pathways to  
Educational and Career Success

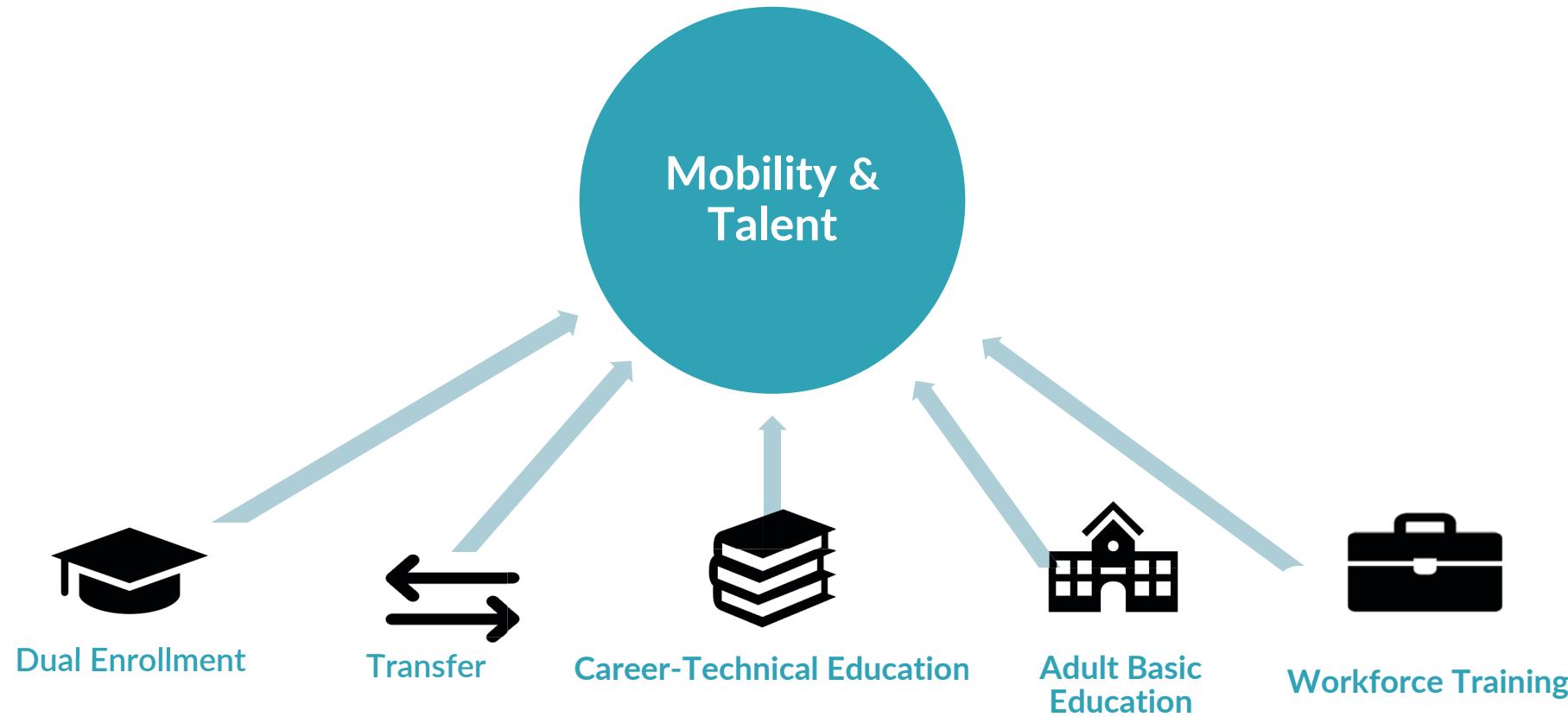


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A photograph showing a group of diverse individuals walking outdoors in a modern city setting. In the foreground, a person with short, light-colored hair and a backpack is seen from the side. Behind them, a person with dark hair and a backpack is walking away. Further back, a person with long, light-colored hair and a backpack is walking away. To the right, a person with short, dark hair and a backpack is walking away. The background features a large, modern building with many windows and a glass facade. The overall atmosphere is one of movement and urban life.

# Essential Institutions Facing Unprecedented Challenges

Community colleges play a linchpin role in providing postsecondary education and training to enable upward mobility for their students



# Yet, community colleges and higher education face challenges



Enrollments have declined across the country since 2010 and accelerated during the pandemic.



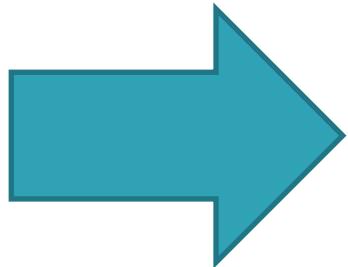
There is growing skepticism about the value of a college degree, though community colleges are perceived to offer more value than four-years.



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

# *In More Essential Than Ever, We Focus on Post-Completion Success*

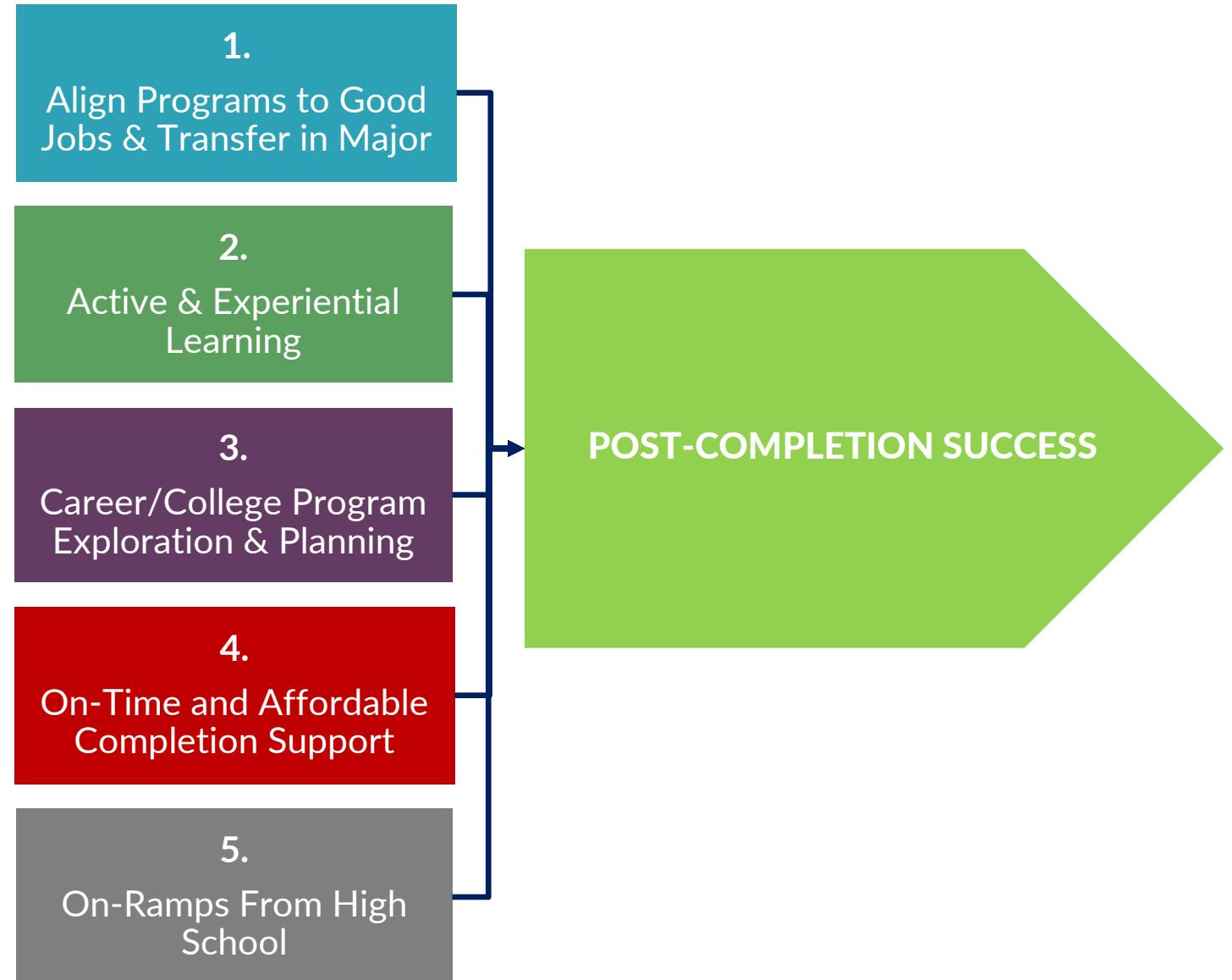
Pathways reforms to date have focused on **removing barriers to completion.**



Moving forward, colleges need to do more to tap into students' motivation to enroll and complete by **strengthening pathways to post-completion success.**

# Five frontier strategies for strengthening college pathways

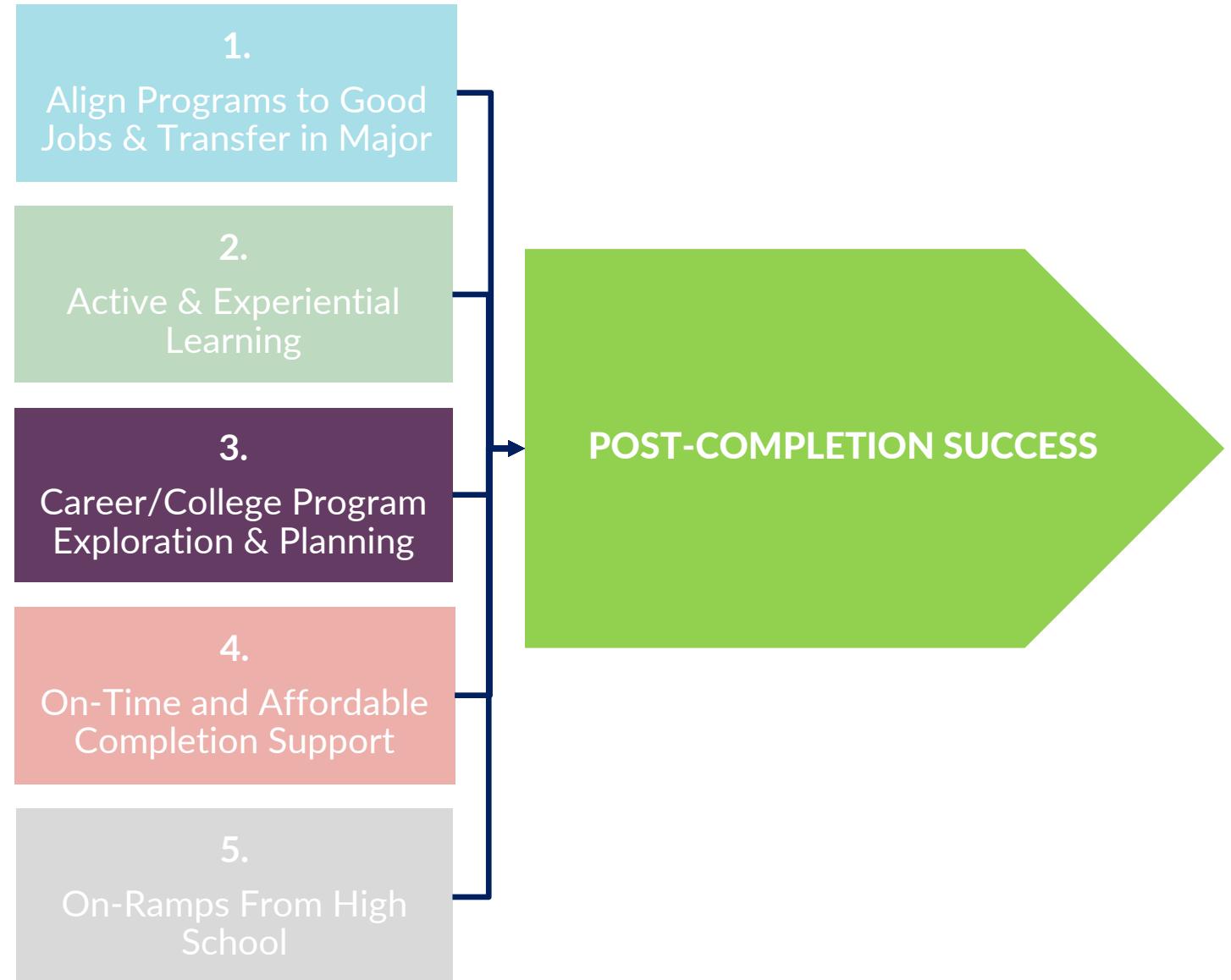
Starting with post-completion success in mind





# Improving Retention, Completion, and Post-Completion Success by Redesigning Students' First Year

**To help students gain momentum in a program of study, CCRC's research suggests that colleges focus on creating a motivating and engaging program onboarding experience**



# Why focus on students' first year?

## **The takeaway:**

If we want to increase outcomes like completion, transfer, and post-completion success, we need to first improve one-year outcomes.

- Many students apply but don't enroll
- Close to half of community college starters leave higher education before the start of their second year
- Gaining momentum in the first year means students are more likely to meet their goals



What is the typical  
experience as  
students are entering  
your college or  
university?

# What students want during onboarding

- **Explore** academic and career interests
- **Interact** with other new and current students, faculty, 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**



***What was your  
major in college  
and how did you  
choose it?***

# Students' Program Choices Matter For Retention and Post-Completion Success



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



Many new students end up enrolled in programs like Liberal/General Studies which has weak transfer and labor market outcomes

# About the Program and Career Choices Survey

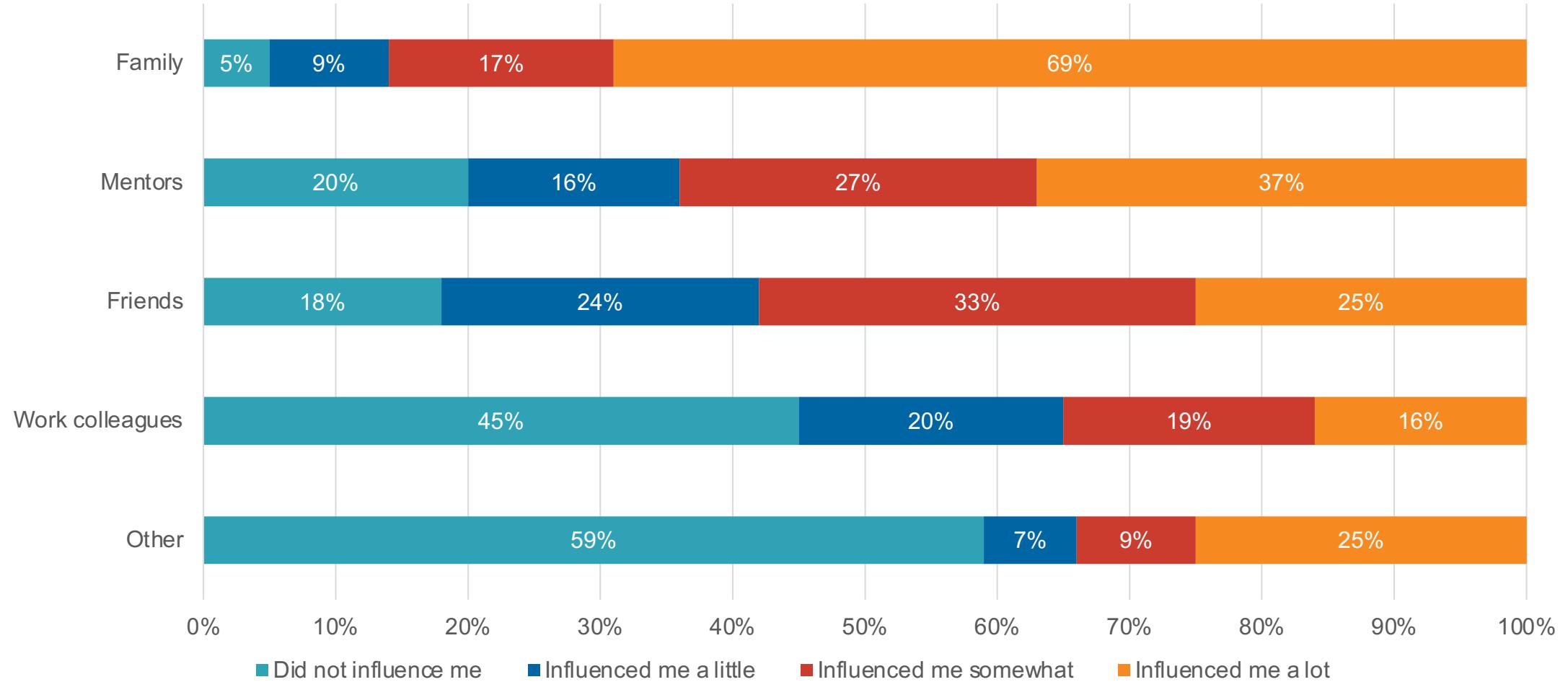
## 3-Wave Survey administered in Fall 2023, Spring 2024, & Fall 2024

- Survey first administered to 12,628 first-time community college students in four colleges in fall 2023
- 4,515 students completed the survey (36% response rate)
  - Wave 2: 2,774 completers (61%); Wave 3: 2,834 completers (63%)
- Survey asked about 1) educational and career goals, 2) thoughts on the program(s) they intend to pursue and the factors most important to them when selecting a program, 3) experiences inside and outside the college that are informing the student's program choice(s).
- Interviews with faculty, staff and students

A photograph of four people walking away from the camera on a city street. They are carrying backpacks and appear to be students. The background is a modern building with large windows.

# Our Findings

# Who most influenced students to attend college?



# Most New College Students are Considering Multiple Careers

Number of selected careers or programs	Students who identified this many <u>careers</u>
One	10%
Two	14%
Three	65%
Four or more	9%

Source: Lahr et al., (2025). *How Do Incoming Community College Students Think About Programs of Study and Potential Careers?*  
<https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/community-college-students-program-study-career.html>

# Most New College Students are Considering Multiple Careers & Programs

Number of selected careers or programs	Students who identified this many <u>careers</u>	Students who identified this many <u>programs</u>
One	10%	21%
Two	14%	15%
Three	65%	61%
Four or more	9%	--

Source: Lahr et al., (2025). *How Do Incoming Community College Students Think About Programs of Study and Potential Careers?*  
<https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/community-college-students-program-study-career.html>

**38%**

Of students listed careers in **1 career cluster**

**44%**

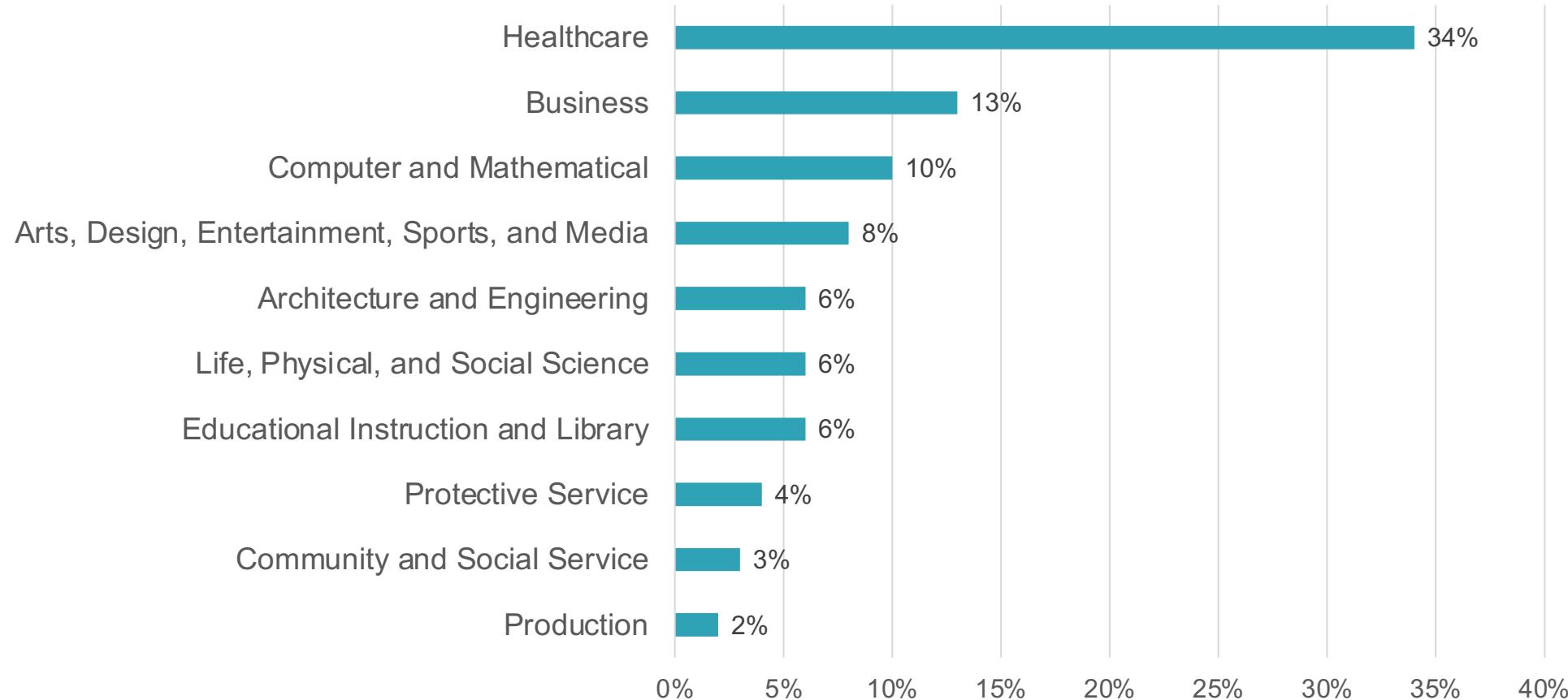
Of students listed careers in **2 different career clusters**

**18%**

Of students listed careers in **3 different career clusters**

**Most students are  
considering careers  
in different fields**

# Students first choice careers by cluster (top 10 career clusters)



Source:

**34%**

Of students listed programs in **1 cluster**

**43%**

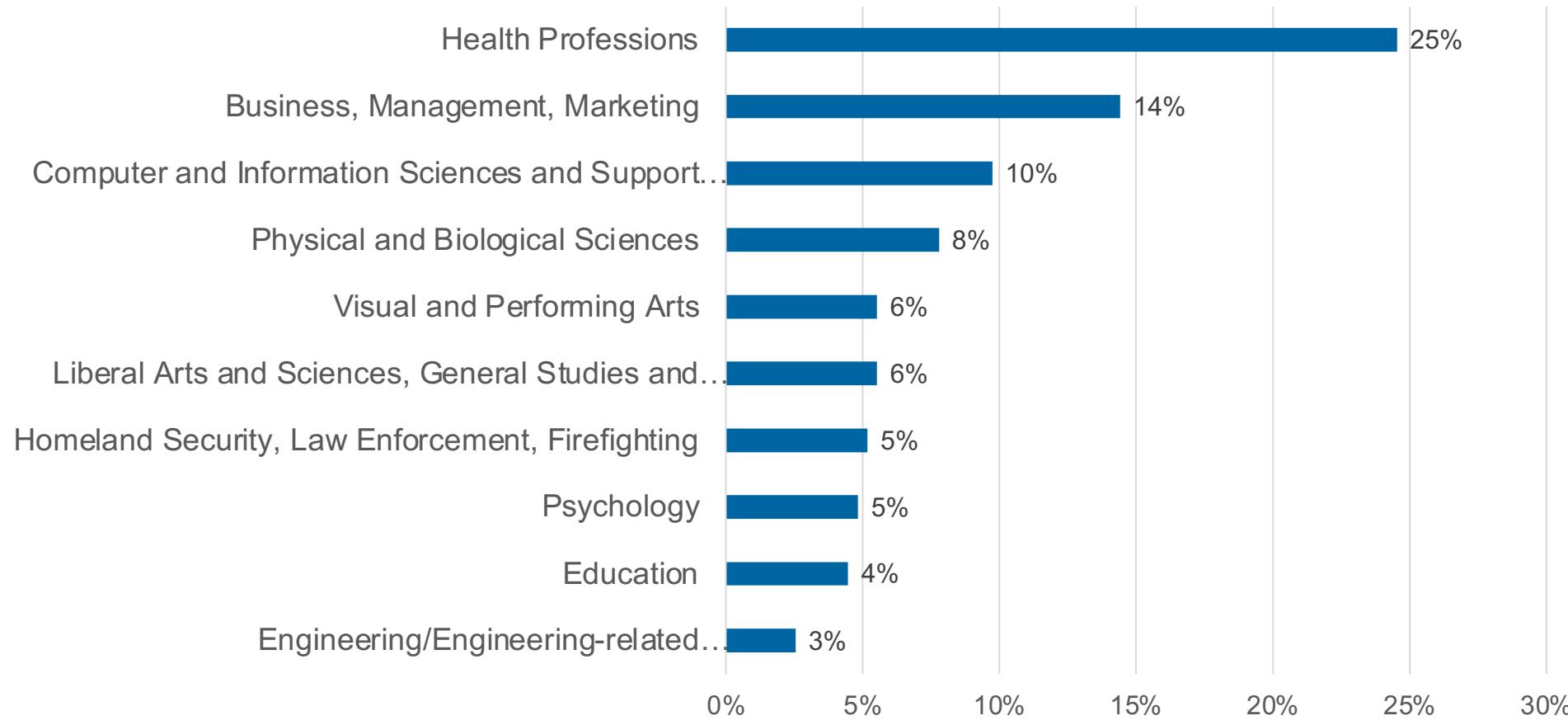
Of students listed programs in **2 different clusters**

**23%**

Of students listed programs in **3 different clusters**

**Most students are considering programs in different fields of study**

# Students first choice programs of study by cluster (top 10 program clusters)



Source:

In the first wave, we were able to code

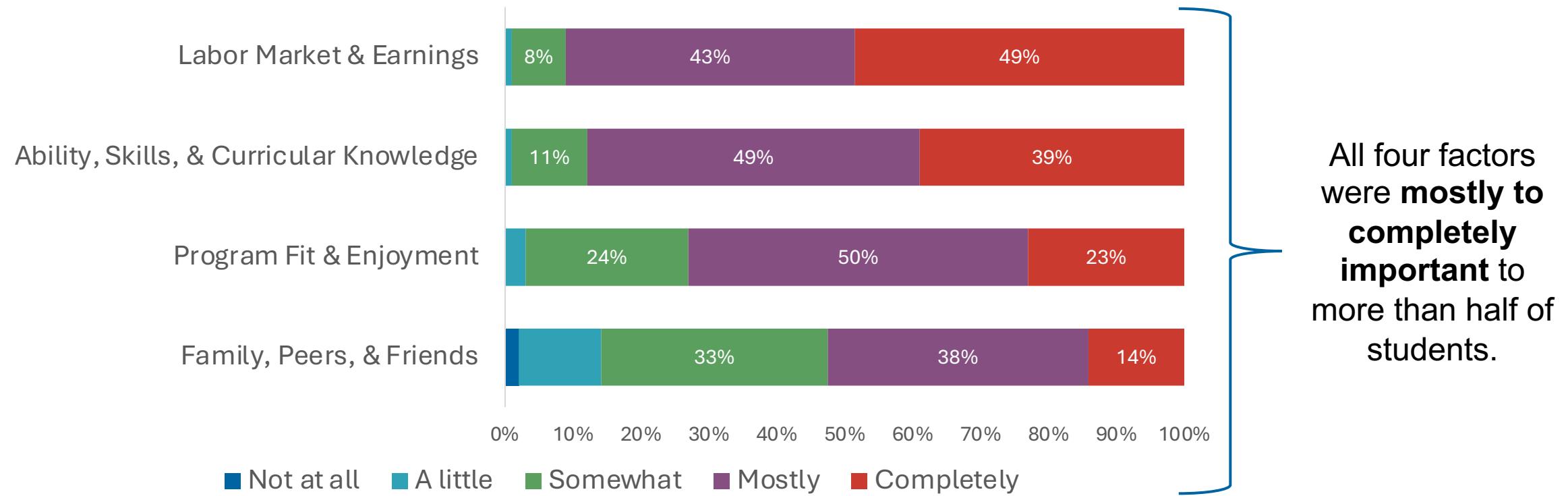
**88%**

of all career responses to a corresponding 8-digit O\*NET code, indicating that most students had specific careers in mind.

A group of students, both male and female, are walking outdoors in front of a modern building with large glass windows. They are carrying backpacks and casual clothing. The scene is set during the day with natural light.

We're Studying How Students  
Choose Programs and Careers

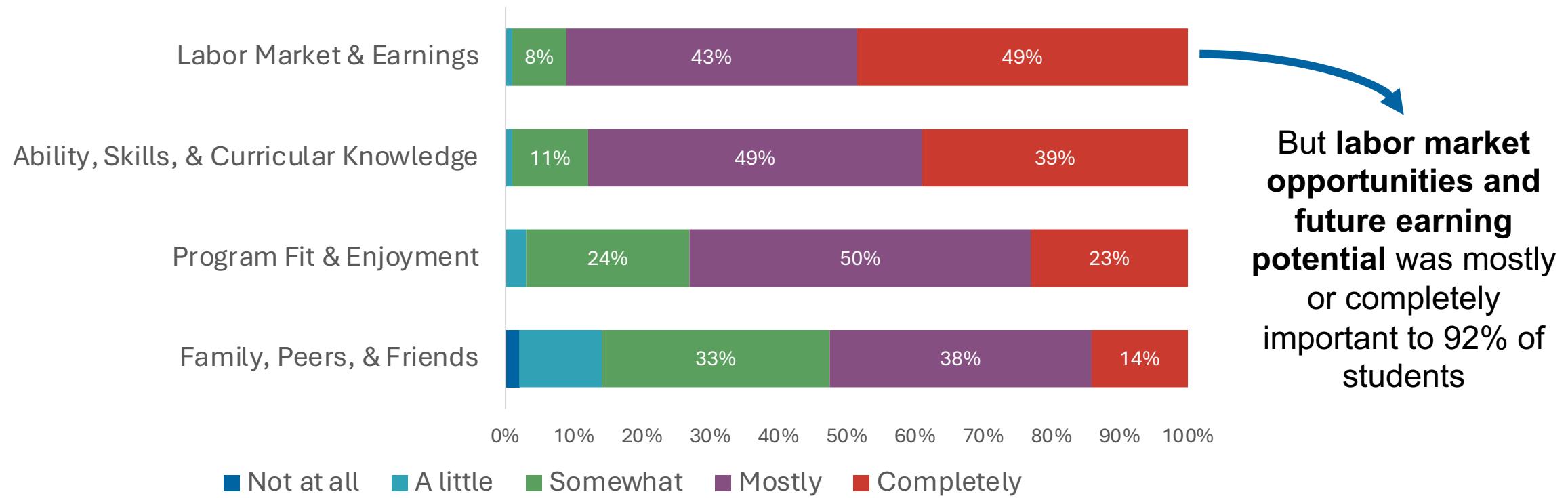
# Multiple Factors Are Important to Students When Choosing a Program of Study



Source:

CCRC

# But Post-Completion Labor Market Opportunities are Most Important



Source:

CCRC

# Faculty & staff perceptions of challenges students face in choosing a program

- 1 | Limited awareness of career options
- 2 | Misperceptions about job roles and career opportunities
- 3 | Misalignment between family expectations and personal interests
- 4 | Financial constraints that prioritize immediate needs

**53%**

of surveyed students said that they were “**very certain**” about their first-choice program

**31%**

of surveyed students said that they were “**somewhat certain**” about their first-choice program

# Half of students we interviewed changed their initial program of study

- Being able to see viable career options and earnings opportunities is important to students
- Taking classes in their area of interest and learning more about the field and potential outcomes either confirmed their interest or led them to change their program
- Reasons not related to their own interests or career outcomes (e.g. original program wouldn't transfer, not accepted into selective admission health programs) can cause students to change

# Faculty and Staff Discussed Many Supports To Help Students Choose Programs

We identified 3 types of support:



Information Exposure



Interactive Exploration



Direct Experience

# Faculty and Staff Discussed Many Supports To Help Students Choose Programs

Most impactful supports:

1. Advising
2. Career exploration in FYE courses
3. Taking inspiring courses
4. Connections with faculty
5. Experiential learning

Interviewees noted that **student awareness and use of these resources were low**

# A Few Takeaways From Our Research

- Most students enter college with many interests
  - Is your college accurately capturing the range of students' interests?
  - Are exploratory students defaulted into specific majors (e.g., liberal studies) ?
- New students may seem certain about their program interests but is this the whole story?
  - At what point is someone asking students about programs of study they are considering?
  - Does the conversation allow for uncertainty and exploration?
- Many factors play into students' program choices. How is your college helping students untangle this complex choice?

**How much do you currently learn about your students' interests and goals?**

**How do you help students learn about different fields of study and careers?**

**Are all students helped to choose a program aligned with their interests and goals in their first term?**



Creating an **educational plan** is a critical part of onboarding because it ensures that students are on the right track from the start.

Educational plans helps students see the full path to their goals.



# Program maps are designed for the “ideal” student



# But real community college students need educational plans that are personalized to their timeline and goals



“

*I know exactly what classes I should take at what times and so I can graduate on time. ... Makes me feel good. Makes me feel like it's doable and I can see exactly what I need to do in order to achieve my goals.”*

# Designing an engaging and motivating program onboarding experience

- What is the onboarding experience of students entering your institution?
  - What does your recruitment process entail?
  - To what extent does recruitment focus on recruiting students into programs and helping them learn about related careers?
- Many students come to colleges with ideas about what they want to pursue. To what extent is the college helping students chart a path to meeting their goals that includes consideration of educational requirements, a budget, and work experience?

**For more research on how  
students choose programs  
and careers, why these  
choices change, and why they  
leave within their first year**



# Thanks!

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For more information visit <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/>

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# Why do students leave within their first year?

**Table 5. Top Reasons for Leaving College**

Selected reason	<i>n</i>	Percent
Financial hardship	216	45%
Feeling unsuccessful academically	188	39%
Stress related to being a college student	160	33%
Change in career goals	152	32%
Not enough time to dedicate to school	137	29%
Family obligations	120	25%
Issues with financial aid	105	22%
Difficulty with scheduling or attending courses	102	21%
Other unexpected events outside of my control	86	18%
Health-related issues (mine or a relative's)	72	15%
Total number of respondents	480	100%

# Categories of Reasons for Student Departure in Their First Year

Reasons for Leaving	N	Percent
External Environment	377	79%
Stress, self-efficacy, perceptions of value	273	57%
Institutional barriers	196	41%
Change in career goals	152	32%
Lack of support or sense of belonging	97	20%
Total number of respondents	480	