

Research Evidence on Community College Ask-Connect-Inspire-Plan Onboarding Practices

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Consistent with prior research, a recent CCRC study on student trajectories

through community college found that students who gain “early momentum” by earning a substantial number of credits or passing college-level math and English courses in their first year are much more likely than students who have a slower start to reach successful outcomes, such as completion of a strong workforce credential, transfer to a four-year college, or completion of a bachelor’s degree (Lin et al., 2020). The study also found that the benefits of early momentum are especially strong for Black, Hispanic, and low-income students. Unfortunately, too few students are provided enough help from community colleges to gain early momentum. Nearly half of students who start at a community college—and the majority of Black community college starters—do not return for their second year (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center [NSCRC], 2021).

Helping students gain early momentum is essential not only for improving student success rates and for closing equity gaps but also for countering declining community college enrollments. Amid the COVID shock, both enrollment and retention rates at community colleges fell substantially, far more than at public four-year colleges (NSCRC, 2020), and declines among students of color and low-income students were much more severe at community colleges (Brock, 2021; Howell et al., 2021). Yet it is also the case that enrollments at community colleges had been on a downward trend for a decade before COVID, especially among male, Black, and older students (Jenkins & Fink, 2020). To build back enrollments, community colleges need to substantially increase retention as well as recruitment, particularly among students from underserved groups, who represent a growing share of prospective college students. CCRC has developed a framework that we call Ask-Connect-Inspire-Plan (ACIP) for colleges to use to enrich entering students’ experiences in exploring, choosing, and planning a program of study. The ultimate aim of the ACIP framework is to increase retention among students, especially those who are likely to stop out in response to prevailing college practices. This brief describes the motivation, research evidence, and equity implications that underlie the ACIP framework as a useful strategy for colleges.



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Why Conventional Onboarding Fails to Motivate Students

The fact that so many community college starters do not persist past the first term or two is not surprising given what they frequently experience entering college. Community college student onboarding is typically intended to orient students to college procedures, assess whether students need remediation, and register students for first-term classes. Too often, it never goes beyond these important but routine functions to help students consider how to get the most out of college (Kalamkarian et al., 2018). Especially in the weeks just before the start of a new term, when many students register, admission and advising staff work overtime to get students into classes (Ledworth, 2014). Thus, they have little time to discuss students' interests, strengths, and goals or to help students develop an educational plan beyond the first term or two. Many students, and especially those not familiar with postsecondary education, need more guidance in this very early phase of college (Karp, 2013).

What is more, many entering students are not able to take a course on a topic that really interests them in their first term. Instead, they are required to take one or more remedial courses, often in algebra-based math and in writing (Chen, 2016), before moving on to most of their college-level courses. Research by CCRC and others has questioned the predictive accuracy of standardized tests that are commonly used to place students into remedial courses (Barnett et al., 2020). Research also suggests that the typical prerequisite developmental curriculum in math and writing fails to help most students pass college-level coursework, diverting too many to a remedial track from which they do not emerge (Scott-Clayton & Rodriguez, 2015). While recent research suggests that students who participate in corequisite rather than prerequisite remediation¹ are more likely to complete college-level math and English courses (Logue et al. 2019; What Works Clearinghouse, 2021), the effects of corequisite remediation on student success in subjects other than math and English are at best mixed (Cuellar Mejia et al. 2020; Ran & Lin, 2022). Completing courses beyond introductory college math and writing early on may be very important in helping students develop plans and goals. Indeed, college-level math and English are often viewed by students (and sometimes by college educators) as requirements students must “get through” rather than opportunities to engage students in active learning on topics that might inspire them to choose a program direction.

A growing number of community colleges are recognizing that the conventional model of new student onboarding—focused on orienting students to the college, determining their remedial placement, and helping them enroll in first-term classes—is frequently failing to motivate students to stay in college. Many students get discouraged and stop out in the first couple of terms. As part of broader guided pathways reforms,² many such colleges are redesigning the entire student onboarding experience—from initial application through choice of academic program and the passing of critical foundation courses—around broad fields or “meta-majors” with the goal of helping students explore interests and options, choose a program direction, and develop a full-program plan (Jenkins et al., 2020).

Genesis of the ACIP Framework

The process by which students explore and choose an academic and career field that is a good fit for them is ideally a developmental one in which students explore options and interests, gain confidence by taking and passing challenging program foundation courses, and establish a network with faculty, students, and others with similar interests and aspirations (see Bailey et al., 2016, for a review of relevant literature). The guided pathways reform approach emphasizes the need to onboard students not only into college but into programs of study. CCRC's research on efforts by colleges to redesign onboarding following the guided pathways model, together with other recent research on the experiences of community college students, suggests that colleges can help incoming students make the most out of college through the following ACIP practices:

1. **Ask** every student about their interests, strengths, aspirations, and life circumstances with the aim of helping them explore programs of study and career paths aligned with their goals.
2. **Connect** every student with faculty, peers, alumni, and employers in fields of interest to them and to college and community resources that can help support their needs.
3. **Inspire** students by ensuring that they are able to take at least one well-taught, college-level course on a topic that interests them in their first term.
4. **Plan:** Help every student develop—by the end of the first term—at least a preliminary individualized education plan that is aligned to jobs and/or transfer in a field of interest.

By ensuring that all entering students have experiences shaped by ACIP practices, colleges can unleash students' talent and motivation in ways that will help them gain momentum on a path of learning, networking, and personal growth.

Evidence Supporting ACIP Practices

In the following we describe in more detail the research underlying each of the four ACIP practices. We discuss evidence on why ACIP practices are needed and how they may be helpful to students. We also mention some of the ways that these practices have been implemented by colleges undertaking guided pathways reforms.

ASK students about their interests, strengths, and aspirations.

Many students enter community colleges without clear goals for college or careers. Nearly 40% of community college students report being undecided about their program of study at the end of their first year (authors' calculations using data from the 2004/09 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study). The proportion who are truly undecided may be much higher, as students must declare a program of study to qualify for financial aid. A national survey of entering community college students found that fewer than half had met with an advisor and that a third of those who had done so did not receive help in creating an academic plan (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2018).

Research on persistence indicates that college students are more likely to complete a program of study if they choose one that aligns with their interests and goals (Allen & Robbins, 2010). But first-generation students, students of color, and students from low-income families may have

limited ideas about their college options, about what academic fields might be a good fit for them, or about how college can help them realize ambitions and goals they may have for careers and for contributing to community and society (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003). They may also have limited ideas about what study and work in particular fields consist of and how a career in a particular field might connect with their interests and aspirations. Research on strategies for retaining minoritized students in STEM, for example, emphasizes the importance of increasing awareness among students about how careers in STEM fields can enable them to achieve goals for contributing to social and environmental justice (Eccles, 2007). Discussing programs of study in terms of students' interests and goals may be key. As Scott Byington, dean for university transfer and advising at Central Carolina Community College, has argued, students come to college thinking about interests and dreams, and yet colleges talk about academic programs and credentials—often in terms inscrutable to new college students and laypersons more generally.

Therefore, an essential first step in helping students explore interests and connect with a program that is a good fit is to have conversations with them about what they are interested in, what they would like to do with their lives, and what they see as their strengths. Some colleges ask students to indicate a field of interest on their application form. Others require students to take a career interest assessment before they register. Ideally advisors use this information to discuss with students how certain they are about their goals, to help students develop an initial plan in a program of study, and to connect them with others who can help them actively explore their interests.

CONNECT students to faculty, peers, and others with similar interests.

There is extensive evidence that college students benefit from engaging with faculty, peers, and alumni in a field of interest early on (Tinto, 2012). Indeed, when asked what would help them to choose a program or area of study, entering community college students often say they want to talk to a faculty member or an advisor who knows the field or fields they are attracted to (Kopko & Griffin, 2020).

To provide a more personalized onboarding experience, guided pathways colleges are organizing new student orientation by meta-major so students can meet faculty, existing students, and others in programs of interest to them (Klempin & Lahr, 2021b). In some colleges, first-year experience courses are also organized by meta-major, or they include opportunities for students to explore careers and transfer opportunities in their fields of interest. Faculty and staff at some colleges organize events during the school year where undecided students can learn about different fields and connect with faculty and others in those fields.

INSPIRE students with coursework that “lights the fire” for learning in their first term.

Community college practitioners, policymakers, and researchers have focused a huge amount of attention on helping entering students take and pass college-level math and composition courses. Far less scrutiny has been given to improving student success in other foundation courses in subjects such as business, STEM, humanities, and social and behavioral science, even though evidence suggests that passing such courses is as predictive of program completion as passing college courses in math and English (Zeidenberg et al., 2012). In unpublished analyses of the

transcripts of community college students across state systems and in individual institutions, we have observed that the course schedules of first-time students frequently consist of math (often prerequisite and increasingly corequisite developmental coursework alongside a college-level course), English (again, often prerequisite and increasingly corequisite developmental coursework alongside a college-level course), a college success course, and a computer skills or general studies course. This pattern of earlier entry into college-level math and English courses has undoubtedly been spurred by research that CCRC and others have done on the association between passing such courses in the first year and completion of college credentials, further reinforced by policies in states including California, Florida, and Texas that encourage colleges to help students pass college-level math and English in their first year.

Yet we are concerned about the effects this early focus on taking college-level math and English may have on students' motivation for learning and their enthusiasm about college, as it tends to delay enrollment in program foundation courses that might be of more interest to them. Indeed, introductory math and English courses must sometimes be completed before enrolling in program courses. Using data-mining techniques, Wang (2016) analyzed survey and transcript data from a nationally representative sample of baccalaureate-seeking community college students who took at least one college-level STEM course in their first term to identify which student characteristics and coursetaking patterns were associated with upward transfer in STEM. The most common early coursetaking pattern among STEM transfer students was taking a transferable STEM course in the first term and math courses in subsequent terms. This finding is noteworthy because community college students often must take math courses as prerequisites to courses in STEM and other math-intensive fields. It suggests that entering students should have opportunities to take courses on topics that interest them from the start rather than deferring such courses to focus on math and English, which may be less likely to engage and motivate them.

In addition to offering entering students courses on topics that interest them, colleges need to do more to ensure that these courses are taught in an engaging way. Numerous studies have found that providing students with opportunities for active learning—in which they are engaged in critical thinking, problem-solving, questioning, or analysis—is positively associated with mastery of course content, along with problem-solving skill development, strong academic performance, college persistence, and undergraduate degree completion across fields (Theobald et al., 2020). In research on students who entered community colleges intending to transfer to a bachelor's program in STEM, Wang (2017, 2020) found a strong association between the experience of active learning in early coursework and students' sense of self-efficacy as transfer students. The sense of self-efficacy helped students who lacked a strong support network outside of school, particularly students of color and others from groups that have not been well served in STEM education. Similarly, a central focus of the Academy for College Excellence (ACE) model, developed by former Cabrillo College faculty member Diego Navarro as an alternative to conventional community college remediation, is to “light the fire for learning” by helping students tap into their intrinsic motivation to improve their lives. Rather than remediate students, the ACE model accelerates them into rigorous college-level courses in which students are helped to reflect on their experiences inside and outside of school, consider their strengths, learn about their work styles, set goals for education, and begin to develop skills for effective teamwork. The ACE model has been found to enable students who have not been well served by their earlier educational experiences to not only enter and complete college programs but also to advance further in their careers than other students in similar programs (Rassen et al., 2017).

Help students develop a full-program **PLAN** by the end of the first term.

It is essential that all entering community college students are helped to develop at least a preliminary full-program educational plan aligned with their career and academic interests by the end of their first term. Having clear learning goals and plans is associated with sustained motivation, better coping in the face of challenges, and higher completion rates among college students (Grant & Dweck, 2003). Consequently, many guided pathways colleges require first-year experience courses for all entering students, and they make college and career exploration and planning a central focus of these courses. The individual educational plans created in the courses are typically based on program maps developed by faculty and advisors and made available on college websites. Yet the educational plans are tailored to each student based on their timeline to completion, electives of interest, and whether they need to include certain courses to fulfill transfer requirements.

Many students, of course, do go on to change their initial plans. And colleges should develop policies for ensuring that advisors and students are meeting regularly to update the plans as needed. But research indicates that early program changes do not hurt community college students' chances of completing their programs (Liu et al., 2020). The costs of delaying planning are far greater than those associated with changing plans. Moreover, without every student on a full-program plan, colleges cannot optimize their class schedules to offer the courses students need to advance toward completion, and they have limited ability to monitor students' progress and offer targeted supports.

Advancing Equity Through ACIP Practices

The conventional community college onboarding process has been designed for recent high school graduates who enroll full-time starting in the fall term. Even these students may need additional supports to choose and plan a program of study, because conventional onboarding emphasizes getting students enrolled in their first term rather than exploration or longer-term planning. But many community college students do not fit this profile. Colleges need to be able to tailor onboarding to the needs of particular students. For example, older students, on average, may have a clearer idea of what field they are interested in and may need help in developing a plan that is focused on efficient completion, whereas younger students may need more time and support to explore options. Many community college students, younger and older, go to college while working, often in full-time jobs. These students may need help in considering how to balance work and schooling. Students who are unfamiliar with college likely need the most help in feeling connected with the college and with exploration and planning.

Privileged students often have access to numerous people who ask about their interests, connect them with like-minded individuals, and help them think through a plan for college. Underserved students may know few others who have completed college and may have no one in their circle to carry out these kinds of roles. Privileged students also have generally enjoyed better supported and more engaging educational opportunities before arriving at college. In contrast, students of color and low-income students have likely had less meaningful educational experiences in the past and may require more assistance in understanding how to benefit from college. All students, especially those who lack experiences and networks that can be useful in thinking through ideas for college, should be provided onboarding shaped by ACIP practices like those described above.

To make this happen, colleges need to proactively reach out to offer these supports to underserved students and to adapt them to particular student groups, including not only students of color, first-generation students, returning adult students, veterans, and other underserved students in degree credit programs, but also students whom colleges sometimes do not see as candidates for credit programs: dual enrollment students (particularly those from poorly resourced high schools) and students in adult basic education and noncredit workforce training programs. Colleges implementing guided pathways have recognized that they need to provide more to support students with different life experiences and goals.³

Conclusion

Ensuring that all students have an onboarding experience that reflects the ACIP framework and that is also tailored to their particular needs is challenging at community colleges, where resources for advising are extremely limited and where many students lacked supports for exploration and networking in their previous education and may continue to lack support from their networks outside of college. Creating a rich onboarding experience for all students requires stakeholders from throughout the college to work together (and with K-12 schools, community groups, employers, and other outside partners) in ways that are very different from conventional practice. Some of the key mindset changes required for each practice area are outlined in the following table.

Table 1.

College Staff Expectations Under Conventional Versus ACIP-Framework Onboarding

	Conventional Practice	ACIP Practice
Ask	Academic and career exploration is mainly limited to information provision and students' self-directed efforts.	Every student is engaged in an ongoing conversation about their interests, strengths, and aspirations and is guided to relevant programs and people at the college.
Connect	Students forge relationships in their field mostly independently.	Colleges provide organized opportunities for all students to meet with faculty, peers, alumni, and employers who are in fields of interest to them.
Inspire	Students spend the first term or year completing math and English requirements and general education courses.	Every student takes at least one well-taught, college-level course on a topic that interests them in their first term.
Plan	Students are helped to develop a first-term or first-year schedule, followed by self-directed efforts.	Colleges help every student to develop a full-program educational plan used to schedule classes and monitor progress.

Perhaps the greatest mindset shift required is to come to believe that, with intentional outreach and high-quality advising and teaching, colleges can harness the talents and dreams of students who are often deemed “not college ready” and enable them to gain early momentum that will increase their chances of completion. Conventional college practices may serve to undervalue—and even stifle—the aspirations that students bring with them. Because students’ talent and drive often become more evident through conversations with them, we recommend that colleges start the process of redesigning student onboarding by engaging with the first ACIP practice: College stakeholders should begin asking entering students more questions about their interests, strengths, and aspirations, and they should strive to guide students to programs and people who can help them explore their ideas and gain momentum on paths to college and career success.

Endnotes

1. Corequisite remedial models enroll students directly in college-level courses with concurrent academic support (Ran, 2020).
2. Guided pathways is a comprehensive reform approach whereby community colleges fundamentally redesign their programs and support services in ways that create clearer, more educationally coherent pathways to credentials with strong labor-market value. It is currently being implemented by hundreds of colleges across the country. For more on guided pathways, see CCRC (2021).
3. See Klempin & Lahr (2021a) on ideas for supporting onboarding for adult students; see Mehl et al. (2020) on ideas for supporting dual enrollment students of color.

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