NEW RULES
Policies to Meet Attainment Goals and Close Equity Gaps

COMPLETE COLLEGE AMERICA
In 2016, we published *New Rules: Policies to Strengthen and Scale the Game Changers*. We did so because we perceived a need: In a sea of policy briefs and white papers, policymakers still lacked the tools they needed to do effective college completion work — language, talking points, Q&A preparation, and a clear sense of the results they can expect.

We sensed a hunger for that level of clarity. We were right. As booklets flew off our shelves, the suggested policies started emerging from statehouses and system offices. But since the first version of this resource was published, a lot has changed:

- After years of efforts to raise **awareness**, a critical mass of policymakers now openly acknowledge the **economic** and **social imperatives** to permanently **close achievement gaps** for low-income students and students of color.
- Research emerged to identify discrete things students can do to gain **momentum** toward graduation day.
- States and regions realized that meeting attainment goals requires significant numbers of **returning adults**.
- Free-tuition “**Promise Programs**” proliferated across the country.
- Complete College America’s implementations of Game Changers revealed an optimal **sequence**, moving us beyond an a la carte approach.

In **NEW RULES 2.0**, existing sections have been updated with new policies and new exemplars. New sections have been added to address student momentum and returning adults. Information in Money and Metrics now includes an architecture for Promise Programs to ensure that they are built for completion. We have retained the focus on equity from the first version but enhanced the content with even more specifics.

These updates ensure that **NEW RULES** continues to be an **up-to-date, evidence-based policy resource** that helps policymakers **listen, lead**, and ultimately **close gaps** and **meet workforce needs**.

Sarah Ancel  
*Vice President of the Alliance and Policy*
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College completion is good policy ...

More college graduates deliver the results policymakers want.

**College completion gets people good jobs.**
A completed degree or credential unlocks access to hundreds of good-paying jobs not available to those who did not graduate. A college degree translates into more than $1 million in extra earnings over a person’s career.

**College completion closes equity gaps.**
A college degree or credential is a great equalizer — providing a path to prosperity for citizens of every race and income bracket.

**College completion builds stronger families.**
College graduates have stronger financial foundations but are also less likely to get divorced, less likely to have children outside of marriage, and more likely to send their own children to college.

**College completion fuels economic development.**
A college-educated workforce offers area employers the talent pool they need to grow and innovate. This fuels the new economy and supports workforce needs across industries.

**College completion benefits the state budget.**
College graduates earn more, pay more in taxes, and use fewer government services compared to those who did not go to college or did not finish.

**College completion drives civic engagement.**
College graduates are more likely to be educated about their government and involved in shaping their communities.

College completion closes equity gaps.
College completion gets people good jobs.
College completion builds stronger families.
College completion benefits the state budget.
College completion fuels economic development.
College completion drives civic engagement.
Follow these recommendations to ensure that your efforts produce transformative results.

**Do not let anyone convince you that some students cannot succeed.**

Be steadfast in the philosophy that all students can succeed if higher education serves all students. Options ranging from short-term workforce credentials to doctoral degrees provide choices for students no matter their interests and abilities.

**Draw distinction between academics and structure.**

Argue that state and institutional stakeholders must work together to ensure an optimal structure in higher education, while respecting faculty control over matters of curriculum.

**Be aware of turf.**

Do not overstep. For institution-level policies, resolutions adopted at the state level are a good way to drive change and signal state priorities without excessive intervention.

**Talk to stakeholders before going public.**

To generate goodwill and ensure full understanding of the history and context, talk to your state’s higher education chief and leadership of two-year and four-year institutions before making policy proposals public.

**Set the conditions for change.**

If it matters, measure it and tie funding to it. Money tends to focus minds.

**Listen. Lead. In that order and with urgency.**

If you enact the NEW RULES, your talking points, handouts, and other tools are provided and tested to boost returns on your valuable investments of time and effort.

For more advice about the steps to take to ensure successful enactment and implementation of policy, visit https://tinyurl.com/CCAScalingStandards.
Leverage the Metrics

Complete College America collects important data from Alliance Members every year to help them identify gaps, describe outcomes, and drive change:

**ENTRY:** placement in remediation, success in remediation, success in gateway courses

**MOMENTUM:** completion of 24 and 30 credits, retention, course completion rate, transfer rate

**COMPLETION:** degrees conferred, on-time graduation rate, overall graduation rate, time to degree, credits to degree

Examine these metrics, and how they break down by race, age, income, and location, at CCA’s new state-of-the-art web platform. Visit completecollege.org to learn more.

Leverage the Money

When states allocate taxpayer dollars to public colleges and universities, they should consider student outcomes as part of that process — and a growing number do. But how strong are their formulas?

**Outcomes-Based Funding Strength Test: How Does Your Formula Stack Up?**

**CRITICAL COMPONENTS**

**Does the formula reward institutions for underrepresented students’ success and overall completion?**

- YES
- NO

**What percentage of total operating funding flows through the formula?**

- 50%+
- 0%

**Can institutions lose money year over year if they do not perform well?**

- YES
- NO

**STRENGTHENERS**

**Are metrics aligned to established state goals?**

- YES
- NO

**How many metrics are there?**

- 3–6
- 7+

**Are all public institutions included in the model?**

- YES
- NO

**Does the formula incorporate workforce outcomes?**

- YES
- NO

**Do the metrics change over time?**

- YES
- NO

**How is success defined?**

- CONTINUOUS
- IMPROVEMENT
- FIXED
- GOAL

**Is the formula tailored to the differing missions of two-year and four-year institutions?**

- YES
- NO

**CHANGE THE CONVERSATION ON CAPITAL.**

Move beyond “cost per square foot” and ask about “degrees per dollar invested.”
STUDENTS promise to:
• Complete **30 credits** per year (including summer); and
• Meet periodically with an **adviser** or mentor.

INSTITUTIONS serving these students promise to:
• Deliver any required remediation as a **corequisite**, not a prerequisite;
• Provide students term-by-term **academic maps** with the following characteristics proven to drive momentum:
  ▪ Are based on **30 credits** per year,
  ▪ Include at least **nine credits** in the student’s selected **content area** within the first year, and
  ▪ Include program-aligned gateway **math** and **English** in the first year;
• Operate a **registration process** that registers students based on their maps by default; and
• Assign an **adviser** or mentor to each scholarship recipient for the duration of the program.

STATE OR LOCAL LEADERS promise to:
• Annually **collect and report** on-time graduation rates disaggregated by race, age, and income for each participating institution;
• Monitor the percentage of students **meeting credit completion benchmarks** at each institution and address deficiencies, if they exist;
• Operate an **appeals process** for students who do not complete their required credits due to extenuating circumstances (e.g., illness), and allow such students to continue receiving funding; and
• **Keep the Promise!** Fully fund the program, and in the event of unintended shortfalls, ensure that currently enrolled students are unaffected.

Leverage the Promise

The “Promise” of free tuition is sweeping the country, making significant strides in college access and affordability. But are these programs built for completion and equity? Use this architecture to get the best return for these investments. New dollars can quickly disappear if they do not produce results.
The Game Changer Strategies

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<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>15 to Finish</strong></td>
<td>Boost the number of students who are on track for on-time graduation by encouraging enrollment in 15 credits each semester (30 credits per year, including summers). Financial aid dollars, as well as institutional process and practice, should support that standard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Math Pathways</strong></td>
<td>Ensure that all students enroll in and complete gateway math in their first year by designing math courses that are aligned with the skills students need for their chosen program of study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Corequisite Support</strong></td>
<td>Increase gateway course completion within the first year by enrolling entering students in college-level math and English courses, providing those who need additional help a concurrent course or lab that offers just-in-time academic support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Momentum Year</strong></td>
<td>Build early momentum so students meet key, first-year benchmarks: informed choice of a meta major or major, enrollment in 30 credits, completion of nine credits in the program of study, and completion of gateway math and English requirements. Provide early support and guidance that empower decisionmaking, including the use of interest assessments and labor-market data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Maps with Proactive Advising</strong></td>
<td>Default students onto highly structured academic maps that lay out a semester-by-semester plan toward on-time completion. Design maps to include 15 credits per semester (or 30 per year), indicate milestone and prerequisite courses, and empower advisers to effectively monitor progress and provide intervention as needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Better Deal for Returning Adults</strong></td>
<td>Increase degree attainment by inviting adult learners back to complete their education, providing a redesigned system that offers accelerated courses, year-round enrollment, and predictable schedules that fit their busy lives. Give credit for prior learning and experience and additional support to help students navigate the system.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Game-Changing Sequence

There is an optimal sequence for implementing the Game Changers. Follow this plan to create momentum for your scale efforts and momentum for students.

1. Establish the Conditions for Change

- Form a Beliefs Compact
- Create a Diverse Team
- Set Attainment and Equity Goals
- Collect and Disaggregate Metrics
- Align Funding to Outcomes

2. Use Momentum Pathways to Restructure Systems, Improve Outcomes, and Eliminate Gaps

Advisers

- 15 to Finish
- Momentum Year
- Academic Maps with Proactive Advising

Faculty

- Math Pathways
- Corequisite Support

3. Deploy Targeted Interventions to Permanently Close Gaps

- Monitor Game Changer Scaling Efforts to Drive Continuous Improvement
- A Better Deal for Returning Adults and Interventions for Underserved Populations
LISTEN

THE PROBLEM
Students reasonably assume that if they attend school full time, they will graduate on time. But an on-time pace is 30 credits per year — more than the minimum 12 credits per semester required for full-time status. If students do not enroll in 15 credits per semester or make a plan to attend school during the summer, they have no chance of graduating on time. The cost of extra time is staggering — roughly $150,000 for each additional year.¹

THE SOLUTION
All full-time students are advised to enroll in 15 credits each semester or craft a plan for summer enrollment. Tuition structure, as well as institutional process and practice, supports that standard.

CLOSE the GAP
Fifteen to Finish benefits all students but benefits students of color more because only 19 percent of African American students and 20 percent of Latino students are on track to graduate after their first year compared to 33 percent of white students.

THE BIG PICTURE
The vast majority of students do not take enough credits to graduate on time, costing them significantly more time and money.

Full-Time Students Completing 30 Credits Per Year

Cost of Additional Year

$150,000 per student
(tuition, lost wages, and retirement and other costs)

¹ https://www.nerdwallet.com/blog/loans/student-loans/victory-lap/
In 2013, the University of Oklahoma converted to a flat-rate tuition as part of its Think 15 campaign. Since then, retention rates have risen from 86 percent to 93 percent, and the median cost per degree has dropped $5,600. A year later, the Oklahoma State University system implemented this tuition structure on all of its campuses to support its Finish in Four project, resulting in all-time-high on-time graduation rates. Statewide, credit hours per semester have ticked up sharply.

The University of Hawai‘i conducted an aggressive 15 to Finish marketing campaign. In just one year, the state saw double-digit percentage point increases in the proportion of students taking 15 credits.

Mississippi Valley State University, a historically black university, increased its percentage of full-time students taking 15 credits in the first semester from 66 percent in 2013 to 90 percent in 2015 after conducting a 15 to Finish campaign and training advisers on the 15 to Finish message.

MYTH BUSTING
Ask these questions to separate fact from fiction:

• What do you currently do to make sure students know what it takes to graduate on time?
• What is the current on-time graduation rate for full-time students?
• What are the on-time graduation rates for low-income students and students of color?
• What percentage of the student population is ages 18–24 and attending full time? Do they graduate on time?
• How many years can a student get state financial aid?
• What do students do when they run out of financial aid before graduation?
• What percentage of degree programs require more than 60 credits for an associate degree or 120 credits for a bachelor’s?
• How much money would students save in tuition if credit caps were in place?
NACADA, the Global Community for Academic Advising, has committed to sharing 15 to Finish materials with its members.

**Academic advisers** may reject the notion of 15 credits as the default because they have, with the best intentions, been advising students into lighter course loads. Show them Complete College America data proving that speeding up, not slowing down, is what ensures success.

Institutions serving significant part-time or **nontraditional populations** will likely be skeptical or outright opposed to this campaign. Reiterate that the 15 to Finish message is for full-time students, but ask them to think about how part-time students can graduate faster.

**Currently enrolled students**, especially those taking lighter course loads, may find it unfair that rules on how they are charged tuition are changing. Grandfather current students to avoid this critique and the public outcry that may come with it.

**Faculty** will have to make tough choices and some sacrifices to scale back program requirements to 60 credits for an associate degree or 120 credits for a bachelor’s degree. Acknowledge and thank them for doing this work to help students graduate faster.

TALKING POINTS

• Significant percentages of college students do not graduate on time.

• The key reason: Students assume that if they attend full time they will graduate on time.

• This assumption is false. Full time is 12 credits; on time is 15.

• Higher education is structured around the 12-credit standard, designed for delayed graduation.

• Every additional year of college costs a student roughly $150,000 in additional tuition and foregone income and retirement.

• We should refuse to let our students incur these life-altering costs because of how we built the system.

• Advising, financing, and incentives must be updated to the 15-credit standard to support on-time graduation.

BE READY FOR QUESTIONS

“Are you saying all students will need to take 15 credits?” No, but let’s make sure we are not delaying their graduation simply because we did not advise them properly.

“ Aren’t you worried that students’ grades will suffer if they take too many courses?” The truth is that speeding up, not slowing down, gets the best results. Students who take more courses each semester get better grades and are less likely to drop or fail their courses.

“What about the single working parents and other students with complicated lives?” They are the least likely to be able to afford the $150,000 price tag for delayed graduation that results from additional tuition, lost wages, and foregone retirement. These students may benefit from spreading courses over the full year, including summer.

“What about the fact that many institutions charge more for 15 credits than they do for 12?” Students should weigh the short-term and long-term costs. Fifteen credits may cost up to $1,000 more per term, but that is far less than the $150,000 for the additional year. Institutions can defray the additional cost by converting to a banded tuition model.

“Won’t banded tuition just shift the cost to students taking 12 credits?” No, banded tuition will make it in students’ financial best interest to take 15 credits and lower the long-term cost of their degrees. This makes short-term and long-term cost structures consistent with one another.
THE PROBLEM
There is a costly mismatch in college math. For too long, the default math course for the vast majority of students has been College Algebra — a course designed solely to prepare students for Calculus. Millions of students are forced to struggle through polynomial factoring and logarithmic functions with no intentions of using these skills in future coursework or a career. Many will not make it: College Algebra frequently ends college dreams. Even those who pass will have missed the opportunity to learn statistical and quantitative reasoning skills they need for their life and career.

THE SOLUTION
Students who are required to take only one math course in college take a course that is designed to help them navigate the increasingly data-driven world. That way, more students take and pass gateway math without the need for remediation, and graduates are better equipped to understand the mathematical content they will face in their lives and careers. Mathematicians nationwide recommend pathways for statistics, quantitative reasoning, College Algebra/Calculus, and technical math.

Math Pathways benefit all students but benefit students of color more since only 64 percent of schools serving the highest percentages of African American or Latino students offer Algebra II, compared to 88 percent of schools serving the lowest percentages of students of color.

THE BIG PICTURE
Very few students who take College Algebra ever start Calculus, which is a key course for science, technology, engineering, and math majors.


MYTH BUSTING
Ask these questions to separate fact from fiction:

• What do your math faculty members say is the purpose of College Algebra?
• What percentage of students who take College Algebra end up retaking it because they withdrew or failed?
• What percentage of those who pass College Algebra go on to take Calculus?
• Why are students advised to take College Algebra when their programs do not include Calculus?
The **Colorado Department of Higher Education** convened a task force of math faculty as part of an overall completion strategy. The result is a set of recommendations by math leaders for creating three clear pathways, statewide reforms in math requirements for many high enrollment academic programs, improved advising strategies, a blueprint for improved professional development, and a commitment to improved communication among institutions on the implementation of Math Pathways. Already, many programs have realigned their math requirements to align with the new Math Pathways.

The **Nevada System of Higher Education** was facing low gateway math completion rates at public institutions and even lower graduation rates for students who did not complete gateway math in their first year. In response, the system convened math faculty to develop a strategy to improve these outcomes. The group recommended a policy so that the vast majority of students would have the opportunity to complete gateway math courses within their first academic year. The system adopted the recommended policy shortly thereafter.

**Ohio** adopted a remediation-free standard that set in motion conversations among math faculty leaders on what math students really need. At the same time, difficulties were surfacing with math courses receiving approval for transfer through the Ohio Transfer Module. Against this backdrop, math faculty convened to create Math Pathways with clear learning outcomes that transfer seamlessly through the Transfer Module. Ohio embraced another of the group’s recommendations, overturning a policy that required Intermediate Algebra as a prerequisite for all gateway math courses.
Math Pathways have the support of Achieving the Dream, the American Association of Community Colleges, Education Commission of the States, Jobs for the Future, and the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin — a national leader in mathematics.

Some will misunderstand or misrepresent Math Pathways as watering down mathematical rigor. Addressing this misunderstanding head on is best: Proactively state that this is not about just getting students through their math course, it is about giving them skills they will use in their life after graduation.

Math faculty will likely be the most natural supporters of Math Pathways, but they will also bear the heaviest burden for implementing them. Support the math department’s professional development and ensure that it can secure classroom space to teach new sections or new courses.

Provosts and department chairs in other disciplines must also be convinced about the value of Math Pathways because they are the ones who must alter their degree requirements, which may have been in place for decades.

Advisers often encourage students to “keep doors open” by taking College Algebra or Calculus if they are undeclared or if there is any chance they might change majors. Establish the premise that if a student cannot pass College Algebra but can pass another course, College Algebra is the closed door.

• The United States is 27th in the world in mathematical competency, far below global competitors like China and the European Union.\(^2\)

• The default math course for many students is College Algebra, a course designed solely to prepare students for Calculus.

• Sixty percent of students who take College Algebra do not go on to take Calculus, making the College Algebra course irrelevant to their college and career goals.

• At the same time, College Algebra has lower success rates than any other course, even more advanced courses like Calculus.

• College Algebra not only is a stumbling block for students en route to a degree, but it also does not serve them well long term even if they do master the content.

• College graduates need to be mathematically literate in today’s increasingly data-driven world, which means colleges need to rethink their approach to math.

**TALKING POINTS**

- The United States is 27th in the world in mathematical competency, far below global competitors like China and the European Union.\(^2\)
- At the same time, College Algebra has lower success rates than any other course, even more advanced courses like Calculus.
- College Algebra not only is a stumbling block for students en route to a degree, but it also does not serve them well long term even if they do master the content.
- College graduates need to be mathematically literate in today’s increasingly data-driven world, which means colleges need to rethink their approach to math.

**BE READY FOR QUESTIONS**

**“Aren’t you just watering down math to get more students through college?”**

Quantitative reasoning courses are actually quite challenging, with assignments like analyzing a data set and writing an essay about the findings. They are built around the skills needed for academic and career success, so they are not only rigorous, they are relevant.

**“Is there a cost to implementing Math Pathways?”**

There are plenty of free resources to help faculty and advisers with implementation, many developed through a partnership with Complete College America and the Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin, which is leading the way in Math Pathways.

**“Will we need to add math faculty?”**

Because the new math courses are more interactive in nature, they may require a smaller student-faculty ratio. If the courses require additional instructors, these costs should be viewed as an investment in student retention, which improves the bottom line.

**“Can underprepared students still pursue STEM fields?”**

Students from lesser resourced school districts may have the aptitude but not the prior coursework needed to start directly in Calculus. Math Pathways include an efficient pathway to college-level calculus coursework for such students rather than tracking them into other disciplines.

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\(^2\) [https://www.oecd.org/unitedstates/PISA-2012-results-US.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/unitedstates/PISA-2012-results-US.pdf)
Corequisite Support

THE PROBLEM
Some students inevitably will start college with deficits in math and language skills. Well-intentioned efforts created a system to deal with that fact — a series of stand-alone “remedial” courses that cost money but do not grant college credit. This gauntlet created several points of attrition (students exiting) before college-level courses even begin, and students drop out more often than they fail.

THE SOLUTION
Entering students are enrolled in the college-level “gateway” course, while those who need additional support co-enroll in a course or lab during the same semester that provides just-in-time academic support, referred to as “corequisite support.” Colleges move from a single exam as an indicator of college readiness to a process that looks at high school performance and other factors.

Corequisite Support benefits all students but benefits students of color more because more than half of African American students and a third of Hispanic students drop out when they are in the remedial pipeline compared to a quarter of white students.

THE BIG PICTURE
Students placed in remediation are more likely to drop out than to fail.

Of Those Entering a 2-Year College ...

- 51.7% enroll in remediation
- 22.3% of those students complete remediation and associated college-level courses in 2 years
- 9.5% graduate within 3 years

MYTH BUSTING
Ask these questions to separate fact from fiction:

- What percentage of your remedial students stay enrolled past the first semester?
- What percentage of your remedial students graduate?
- How many students take stand-alone remediation each year?
- What is the total cost to these students?
- Have you seen the data from the six states that scaled Corequisite Support?
- Can our state match the tremendous success of states that have doubled or tripled the success of underprepared students by using Corequisite Support?
In 2017, California passed legislation requiring institutions to consider high school coursework, grades, and grade point average (GPA) when determining readiness for college-level courses. It shifted the burden of proof; institutions must now produce evidence that students are unlikely to succeed in college-level courses before they can mandate stand-alone remediation.

In 2017, the Texas Legislature enacted law that set a standard for statewide scale of Corequisite Support. Over three years, institutions across Texas must scale up the practice such that 75 percent of underprepared students receive Corequisite Support instead of traditional remediation.

Under the traditional remedial model at the West Virginia Community and Technical Colleges, only 14 percent of students placed into remedial math were completing the associated gateway course within two years. Armed with evidence that the corequisite model could achieve meaningful improvements, West Virginia made the switch to Corequisite Support. Within just one year of the reforms, success rates skyrocketed to 62 percent.

The Colorado Community College System was one of the first in the nation to enact a new state policy that explicitly called for Corequisite Support. The system’s chief academic officer convened faculty leaders from all campuses in a review of the research and experimentation that has resulted in an approach in which more than 5,000 otherwise traditional remedial students are now in corequisites. The reforms resulted in success rates that improved from 31 percent to 64 percent.
NEW RULES

STATE ACTION
- Set a threshold for **statewide scale** of Corequisite Support and a **target date** for institutions to reach it.
- Establish expectations that **high school coursework** and grades will be used to **assess college readiness**.
- **Prohibit institutions** from mandating that students take stand-alone remedial courses.

INSTITUTION ACTION
- **End mandatory placement** into stand-alone remediation.
- **Offer a corequisite option** for all gateway math and English courses.
- **Modify assessment** and placement processes to incorporate **high school coursework** and grades and reduce reliance on stand-alone placement exams.

GET STARTED


NEW RULES

STAKEHOLDER P.O.V.

Corequisite Support has the support of Achieving the Dream, the American Association of Community Colleges, Education Commission of the States, Jobs for the Future, and the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin.

**Developmental educators** will argue that students pass their remedial courses. Ask them if the students take and pass the gateway course as well.

**Accreditors** require additional credentials from an instructor of a college-level course than an instructor teaching stand-alone remediation. Faculty may need some professional development or additional credentialing to make the corequisite model work at scale since many more students will go directly into college-level courses.

Converting to a corequisite approach takes time. **Institutional leaders** may convey that they need up to three years to fully scale the model. Watch out for unnecessarily long implementation timelines, but do not expect institutions to fully implement it the next academic year.
“Is it really in students’ best interest to place them into college-level courses if they aren’t ready?” Looking at the success rates of the corequisite approach, it clearly is. It is not in students’ best interest to send them into a remedial path that is most likely to end with the student dropping out.

“How do institutions figure out if a student is college ready?” As it turns out, not very well. Students often take a placement test without being told why they are taking it or being given the opportunity to prepare. In places that have ended mandatory remediation, it has become clear that many, many students who test below the cut score on the placement test are able to succeed in college-level courses.

“What are the costs associated with Corequisite Support?” To the students, the costs are lower. They will no longer pay for a series of courses that do not count toward their degree and will graduate faster, saving them time and money. Short-term transition costs to the institution may result from the need for faculty to increase their credential level so that more sections of college-level gateway courses can be offered.

“In Corequisite Support, does the student take two courses at the same time, or is it organized some other way?” There are a variety of models. Some include two courses — one remedial and one gateway — that a student takes in the same semester. Others offer two different versions of the gateway course, one of which embeds more preparatory material into the curriculum than the other. Another model adds a lab to the gateway course for students in need of additional support. The improvements are the same regardless of the model used.
THE PROBLEM
Too few students start college with momentum — they delay selecting a program, take too few credits in their first year, and put off critical math and English gateway courses. Research proves that each of these choices dramatically reduces the likelihood that students will ever graduate. Colleges and universities allow this to persist through their policies and advising.

THE SOLUTION
Students’ first year is intentionally designed as a Momentum Year. They take gateway math and English courses, nine credits in their academic interest area, and 30 credits overall. Institutional policy and practice reinforce this standard.

CLOSE the GAP
Momentum Year benefits all students but benefits students of color more because African American students are currently half as likely to complete gateway courses in the first year as their white peers.³

THE BIG PICTURE
Without momentum, students are much less likely to graduate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Percentage Points</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not taking 15 credits in the first semester</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not completing 9 credits in academic area</td>
<td>18–24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not completing gateway math and English</td>
<td>20–40</td>
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Sources: https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/momentum-15-credit-course-load.pdf
http://system.nevada.edu/tasks/sites/Nshe/assets/File/BoardOFRegents/Agendas/2015/jun-mtgs/arsa-refs/ARSA-10b.pdf
https://www.tbr.edu/sites/tbr.edu/files/media/2016/12/TBR%20Focus%20Study%202015-16.pdf

Maryland enacted law in 2013 that requires students to complete at least one college-level, nonremedial math and English course as part of the first 24 credits they earn. This law was part of comprehensive college completion legislation that also scaled remedial reform and academic maps statewide.

The Tennessee Board of Regents created a choice architecture for students such that they choose either a major or an academic focus from a list of eight possibilities. No student is classified as “undecided” or placed in a general degree classification. Prior to the policy, 32 percent of students were undeclared; after, 83 percent declare a major, and 17 percent select an academic focus. This has resulted in a 10–20 percentage point increase in students taking nine credits in their academic focus area, and graduation rates for those students have increased dramatically.

Indiana set a standard of 30 credits per year for its need-based 21st Century Scholars financial aid program. This program proved that changing behavior in a big way is possible if the system is built for it. Now, more than three-quarters of scholarship recipients at four-year institutions and nearly half at two-year institutions complete enough credits to graduate on time.

Source: https://www.tbr.edu/sites/tbr.edu/files/media/2016/12/TBR%20Focus%20Study%202015-16.pdf
Math and English departments will likely need to increase the number of sections they offer for gateway courses. It is critical that they receive sufficient resources (instructors and classroom space) to do so.

Campus academic leaders may resist using a state-suggested set of interest areas and want to customize the list to fit their campus. Ensure that they have this flexibility.

Those serving nontraditional students may be anxious about tying financial aid eligibility to 30 credits per year. Encourage them to use summer and winter sessions to help nontraditional students meet this threshold, or consider fully redesigning the term structure as described in the A Better Deal for Returning Adults portion of this publication.

Students may struggle to complete gateway math courses in the first year if they are required to take stand-alone remedial courses first or if they are required to take College Algebra and do not pass it. Campuses are strongly encouraged to put Math Pathways and Corequisite Support in place before implementing the Momentum Year.

Financial aid professionals will rightly be worried about how changes to financial aid rules will affect their internal processes. Devise implementation plans to minimize the burden on financial aid offices.
**Talking Points**

- The way students approach their first year in college dramatically affects their likelihood of graduating.
- Students gain momentum by completing math and English early and immediately starting in classes aligned to their academic interests.
- Taking and completing more credits also creates momentum because students progress more quickly to graduation day.
- Evidence proves that nine credits in an academic interest area and 30 credits overall is the tipping point that dramatically improves students’ likelihood of graduating.
- Unfortunately, traditional higher education has very little structure that ensures that students meet these key benchmarks.
- Institutions should systematically guide students through a first-year curriculum that includes these Momentum Year components.
- The state has an obligation to ensure return on investment for the taxpayer dollars that fund financial aid and Promise programs and should use this leverage to ensure that institutions put the Momentum Year in place.

**Be Ready for Questions**

**“Why is student momentum so important?”**

Momentum is what carries a student forward to graduation. It is the difference between releasing a ball at the top of a hill and releasing it in the middle. The ball is much more likely to get to its destination, and get there quickly, if it has momentum. The same is true for students.

**“Why is completing nine credits in the content area so important?”**

It is important because students go to college to learn the things that are aligned to their interests and career pursuits. Taking relevant courses early on reinforces their reason for going to college. Failing to do so may make them question why they are really there.

**“How do you explain the dramatic impact of completing gateway math and English in the first year?”**

These courses are foundational to the rest of the content the student will learn in the degree program, especially if math is aligned to the major. Mastering these skills early not only gets students some critical successes early, but it also ensures that they have a strong foundation for their other coursework.

**“What if financial aid recipients have a death in the family or a learning disability and don’t complete their 30 credits?”**

It is recommended that the state set up an appeals process to allow these students to keep their financial aid. Other students could earn their eligibility back if they meet the benchmark the next year.

**“Do you really think financial aid recipients can complete 30 credits in a year? Don’t they typically have to work?”**

Indiana’s financial aid policy proves that significantly more students can complete 30 credits per year, even low-income students. The impact of aligning financial aid to 30 credits was actually even more positive for community college students and students of color than it was for the general population.
**THE PROBLEM**

Students select from a dizzying array of programs and majors, frequently with no built-in career advising. Once they pick a major, they must track down degree requirements and roam the course catalog to piece together a degree plan — despite the fact that faculty have already established the optimal sequence. To make students discover that sequence independently wastes the time of students and their advisers and leaves far too much room for error.

**THE SOLUTION**

Students are placed on academic maps that take the guesswork out of semester-by-semester course selection and streamline the registration process. One-on-one career advising is replaced with a structured, intentional first-semester process for students to explore their academic interest area and related careers. Advisers, with significant time freed up, track student progress on degree plans, monitor early-alert systems, and reach out to students before the students realize they are vulnerable.

**Academic Maps with Proactive Advising benefits all students but benefits students of color more because 60 percent of African American students are enrolled in community colleges where advisers have twice as many students as those who advise at four-year research institutions.**

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**THE BIG PICTURE**

**Students take more credits than they need.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NEED</th>
<th>TAKE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s (non-flagship)</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s (flagship)</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nearly half of the excess credits students accrue could be avoided with Academic Maps with Proactive Advising in place.

**Causes of Excess Credits (in Semester Credit Hours)**

- Academic challenges; F grades: 13
- Transfer problems: 3
- Degree requirements: 3
- Other academic challenges: 7
- Poor student choices: 12
- Unavailable courses: 1

Academic Maps with Proactive Advising directly addresses these problems.
MYTH BUSTING

Ask these questions to separate fact from fiction:

- What is your current on-time graduation rate?
- What are the on-time graduation rates for low-income students and students of color?
- How many credits, on average, do your students accumulate before they graduate?
- What is your current student to adviser ratio?
- How do students currently get advice about their choices of programs and majors?
- What percentage of your students change their major after the first year?
- How do you currently determine if a student is off track for graduation, and what do you do about it?

POLICY IN ACTION

Georgia State University implemented Academic Maps with Proactive Advising and as a result saw a 20 percentage-point increase in graduation rates. Perhaps even more notable, its achievement gap closed entirely, with African American, Hispanic, and Pell-eligible students graduating at greater rates than the overall student body.

Florida State University (FSU) combines academic maps with other strategies to increase graduation rates and close attainment gaps. In 10 years, FSU’s graduation rate for all students has increased by 12 percentage points — to 74 percent. More significantly, the graduation rate for African American students has increased to 77 percent, for first-generation Pell students to 72 percent, and for Hispanic students to more than 70 percent.

The University System of Hawai‘i, in support of its Academic Maps with Proactive Advising efforts, developed a state-of-the-art technology system that defaults students onto their academic pathways and recalculates when they stray from that path. Preliminary results show that the system has reduced the average percentage of off-track credits to 4 percent for students at the University of Hawai‘i, far below the national average of 25 percent and at the cost of zero additional advising resources.
Institutions may convey that they do not have or cannot afford the technology they need to implement these policies. View technology as an investment that will increase retention (and bring in tuition dollars), and look for products that have received Complete College America’s Seal of Approval.

Academic advisers may worry about the additional workload of proactive advising. Assure them that academic mapping means they will be doing proactive advising instead of student schedule-building, not in addition to it.

Faculty may portray prescriptive academic maps as “limiting choice” or “prohibiting exploration.” Make clear that academic maps still include electives. Convey that whatever cognitive value there is in students’ discovering their path on their own is not worth the $150,000 cost of an extra year in college.
**TALKING POINTS**

- **Significant percentages** of college students **take longer** than two years to earn an associate degree and four years to earn a baccalaureate degree.

- Every **additional year** of college costs a student roughly **$150,000** in additional tuition and foregone income and retirement savings.

- Students **will not graduate** on time if they cannot **get into** the courses they need, take courses that do not count toward graduation, or **change majors** late in the game.

- Roughly half of excess credits taken result from **poor student choices**, **unavailable courses**, **transfer issues**, and **degree requirements** — problems that can be solved if the institutions provide **better navigation** for students.

- We should refuse to let our students incur these **life-altering costs** because we **fail** to get them and keep them on the **path to on-time completion** and a good-fit career.

**BE READY FOR QUESTIONS**

“**Aren’t students already informed about the courses they need to take?**”

Sort of, but not really. At most institutions, the information is housed in **at least two different systems**, and students have to **figure out** how they fit together. It is no wonder advisers spend most of their time helping students with their schedules.

“**Isn’t college about exploration and discovery?**”

Of course it is. Academic Maps with Proactive Advising allows students to explore their choices through a **structured, intentionally designed** process. Student “exploration” that results from random, haphazard, or uninformed course-taking has never been proven to get students on the right path quickly.

“**If we default students onto their maps, doesn’t that restrict their choices?**”

No, it **guides** their choices. The policy allows for students to register for courses off map but only after speaking to an adviser and signaling that they **understand the consequences** of that choice.

“**Don’t advisers already have enough to do? Now they have to do proactive advising too?**”

Academic maps **automate scheduling**, and structured exploration replaces one-on-one career advising. This **frees up advisers’ time**, which they can then dedicate to serving students who **need them the most**.

“**What is the difference between credits transferring and credits applying to a program?**”

Often institutions will transfer the credit, but they go into an “**undistributed**” or general elective spot. If the transfer credits **apply**, it means they fulfill a **specific course** required for graduation.
The attainment goals set by state and national leaders cannot be met unless significantly more adults and other nontraditional students return to higher education and complete a degree or credential. Unfortunately, these students have been asked to choose between making life-altering sacrifices to attend full time or attending part time with a much lower chance of ever graduating and greater long-term costs.

A Better Deal for Returning Adults helps all adult students but benefits adult students of color more because the “some college, no degree” population is overrepresented with students of color. Among the nation’s adults 25 or older who have attended college, only 61 percent of African American and Hispanic students have earned a degree, compared to 74 percent of white students and 86 percent of Asian students.4

To meet the goal of 60 percent postsecondary attainment, the following students are needed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Needed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional aged</td>
<td>4.8 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previously attended college but did not graduate</td>
<td>6.1 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never attended college</td>
<td>5.5 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nationwide, 11.6 million additional adults will need to earn a degree or credential, compared to 4.8 million traditional-aged students, to meet the attainment goal.


**MYTH BUSTING**

Ask these questions to separate fact from fiction:

- What percentage of students start out full time and drop to part time in a future semester?
- How many years do your nontraditional students take to graduate on average?
- What percentage of your nontraditional students drop out before they graduate?
- How do you currently determine when you offer a particular course?
- Do you tell faculty when they need to teach, or do they set the course schedule based on preference or past semesters?
- What percentage of your students receive college credit for the competencies they have mastered when they enter?
- How many years do your nontraditional students take to graduate on average?
- What percentage of your nontraditional students drop out before they graduate?
- How do you currently determine when you offer a particular course?
- Do you tell faculty when they need to teach, or do they set the course schedule based on preference or past semesters?
- How do students find out about opportunities to get credit for previous learning or experience? Is there any systematic advising around it?
- Can you say with a high level of confidence that your students know who they can reach out to if they experience struggles such as life events?

**POLICY IN ACTION**

**Indiana** estimated that to meet its attainment goals, roughly 200,000 adults needed to return to higher education and complete a credential. It tackled this challenge two ways — a significant policy review and a full-fledged direct marketing campaign. These efforts successfully brought back more than 13,000 former students with some college but no degree in just one year!

The **University of Memphis**, as part of its adult re-engagement efforts, adopted a “Fresh Start” policy for returning students who had been out of school for at least four years. This policy allows courses the student failed in the past to be excluded from the GPA calculation used to determine admission. Now many more former students can re-enroll even if they had a disastrous semester in the past.

**Mississippi** analyzed its student records to identify former students with enough credits to have already earned an associate or baccalaureate degree. The state identified 17,000 residents who may qualify to receive a degree with no additional coursework and nearly 67,500 who could earn one with just a few more courses. The state then reached out to these students to encourage them to complete their degree.
STATE ACTION

- Coordinate with employers and institutions to launch a direct marketing campaign encouraging adults to go back to college, but nudge students to institutions that have scaled A Better Deal for Returning Adults.

- Revise criteria for state financial aid and free college programs to ensure that they do not exclude adult students, and decouple state aid eligibility from federal aid status.

- Adopt statewide standards for prior learning assessment, provide a method for consistent transcripting of the credits, and allow state aid dollars to pay related costs.

INSTITUTION ACTION

- Redesign the term structure to allow for accelerated courses, and create consistent, year-round schedules that lead to on-time graduation.

- Adopt a clear policy on prior learning assessment that includes the methods for earning credit, the courses these credits replace, and the cost to students.

- Invest in coaches for returning adult students or redesign the existing advising model to provide this coaching.

- Create a grade forgiveness policy and audit the enrollment process to eliminate unnecessary documentation (e.g., immunization records) and processes that may serve as barriers.


STAKEHOLDER P.O.V.

When redesigning schedules, recognize that faculty will have less control over when they teach and may need to teach in the evening or on weekends. Be sensitive to the new demands on instructors, but make the case that student-focused schedules will increase enrollment and completion within the program.

Institutional business offices and chief financial officers will identify the fact that granting credit for learning outside the institution reduces the revenue that comes in through tuition dollars. Be ready to discuss the increase in retention and future tuition dollars that this practice secures.

Lawmakers and philanthropies that provide resources for state and institutional efforts do not readily fund marketing efforts. Explain why re-engagement efforts are different, and show them the return on investment seen in other states.

Academic advisers will tell you that coaching is very similar to what advising professionals call “proactive advising.” They are right. Honor the advancements in the field of advising, and explore the possibility of empowering current advisers to serve as coaches.

Employers may be hesitant partners in re-engagement efforts if they fear that their employees will leave upon completion of a credential. Show them data that supporting employees’ college pursuits actually improves worker satisfaction and retention.
We have ambitious postsecondary attainment goals that cannot be met unless we attract back significant numbers of adults.

Unfortunately, traditional higher education has not provided adult students with an efficient and effective path to graduation.

We can reach out to encourage adults to return, but this outreach will only work if we can offer them a better deal.

Adult students come in with college-level, credit-worthy knowledge and deserve a clear process for demonstrating and transcripting it.

Taking one or two courses at a time can lead to on-time completion if those courses can be completed faster than the traditional 16-week semester.

For adult students, it is not “if” life gets in the way of college completion. It is “when” and “how often.” Coaches help students navigate these life events — and navigate the institution’s bureaucracies and processes.

Scaling these practices is critical to attracting and graduating adult students and getting us to our degree attainment goals.

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**Talking Points**

“Why should we be concerned with adult students?”

First of all, they are a growing portion of our student body. Thirty-eight percent are older than 25, 58 percent work, 26 percent are raising children, and 47 percent support themselves financially.

Not only do we need to provide these students with a better path to graduation, but we also need to attract significantly more of them if we are going to meet workforce needs.

“What exactly is coaching? How is it different from academic advising?”

Students are not always assigned a single adviser for the duration of their program, but a coach stays with them from start to finish. Traditional advisers see students when the students are required to go. Coaches (or “proactive advisers”) visit students where they are; reach out to students when problems arise; and develop a relationship of trust so that students can come to them with any problem, academic or otherwise.

“Are high structured schedules less flexible?”

Current scheduling practice is not as flexible as it seems. Required courses are offered when faculty want to teach them, and students must rearrange everything to get to campus whenever that is.

“Does a grade forgiveness policy give students credit for courses they failed?”

No. A student must have passed a course for it to be included on his or her transcript as college credit. What grade forgiveness does is exclude failed courses from the calculation of GPA so that a disastrous semester does not keep a student from returning.

“Does credit for learning that occurred outside the institution water down the quality of the degree?”

Absolutely not. When students get credit for college-level, credit-worthy learning from their previous experience, it is granted by faculty. Faculty use their own expertise and the advice from national experts to ensure that the learning is consistent with the rigor of the degree program.

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1. https://www.luminafoundation.org/todays-student

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Related Resources

Following are additional resources from Complete College America.

For a complete collection of reports, briefs, and presentations, visit completecollege.org/resources.

OUR PHILANTHROPIC PARTNERS
Barr Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, College Futures Foundation, Kresge Foundation, Lumina Foundation, Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, and USA Funds.
Complete College America has built an Alliance taking bold actions to significantly increase the number of students successfully completing college. That means achieving degrees and credentials with value in the labor market and closing attainment gaps for traditionally underrepresented populations.

**Alliance members**

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Arkansas  
Central Valley (CA) Higher Education Consortium  
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Colorado  
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Georgia  
Hawaii  
Houston  
Idaho  
Illinois  
Indiana  
Kentucky  
Louisiana  
Maine  
Maryland  
Massachusetts  
Minnesota  
Mississippi  
Missouri  
Montana  
Nevada  
New Hampshire  
New Mexico  
Ohio  
Oklahoma  
Oregon  
Pennsylvania  
Puerto Rico  
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South Dakota  
Tennessee  
Texas  
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ABOUT COMPLETE COLLEGE AMERICA

Established in 2009, Complete College America is a national nonprofit with a single mission: to work with states and regions to significantly increase the number of Americans with quality career certificates or college degrees and to close attainment gaps for traditionally under-represented populations.

The need for this work is compelling. Between 1970 and 2009, undergraduate enrollment in the United States more than doubled, while the completion rate has been virtually unchanged. We’ve made progress in giving students from all backgrounds access to college — but we haven’t finished the all-important job of helping them achieve a degree. Counting the success of all students is an essential first step. And then we must move with urgency to reinvent American higher education to meet the needs of the new majority of students on our campuses, delicately balancing the jobs they need with the education they desire.

Complete College America believes there is great reason for optimism ... and a clear path forward. With a little more support — and a lot of common sense — we can ensure that many more get the high-quality college education that will help them live productive and fulfilling lives. All Americans will share in the benefits of their success.