



# SHARED BELIEFS AND PRACTICES FOR PUTTING PURPOSE FIRST IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION



This document represents a shared vision for incorporating early career exploration and academic planning into the student onboarding experience. Alignment with student success efforts and research focused on ensuring students make an informed choice of a program and gain the momentum they need to earn a postsecondary credential of value is essential to optimize these practices and ensure the greatest outcomes for students.

- I. Higher education should be a launching pad toward a meaningful career, empowering students with the knowledge to make informed choices, the structures to explore available opportunities, and the tools needed for success.
- II. Career exploration and planning must be intentional and start early in the educational experience.
- III. States, systems and institutions must build a *culture of purpose* across all tiers in higher education, including education policy makers, administrators, faculty, staff, and amongst their students.

# I. False Starts

Far too often, today's college students find themselves wandering through their academic experiences, choosing from a dizzying array of majors, courses, and out-of-classroom learning experiences.

And while this smorgasbord of options is often portrayed as beneficial to the student experience, more than a decade of research suggests that too many choices, especially in the absence of adequate information, can at a minimum add unnecessary time and credits to a postsecondary credential and at worst prevent students from earning a postsecondary credential altogether.

In Complete College America's 2014 report, *Four-Year Myth*, psychologist Barry Schwartz put it this way:

*“Freedom and choice are surely good, but there can be too much of a good thing. The last thing we want to do if our aim is to increase college completion rates is to offer students a set of possibilities that will paralyze them, weaken their self-discipline, and undermine the satisfaction they get from the work they have already done. Smart institutions aiming to increase completion will offer students choice, to be sure. But the choice will be within well-defined limits, or constraints, so that the path to success is clearly marked. Paradoxically, the more opportunities we give students to do exactly what they want, the less likely they are to do anything at all.”*

**MORE THAN  
31 MILLION**

AMERICANS HAVE ENROLLED IN COLLEGE AND LEFT WITHOUT RECEIVING A DEGREE OR OTHER CREDENTIAL OVER THE LAST 20 YEARS

[Source >](#)

**51%**

WOULD CHANGE AT LEAST ONE OF THEIR EDUCATION DECISIONS IF THEY HAD TO DO IT ALL OVER AGAIN

**36%**

WOULD CHOOSE A DIFFERENT MAJOR

[Source >](#)

While these overwhelming choices negatively impact persistence for all students, additional research suggests that underrepresented and less advantaged students are more adversely affected by them. In fact, when presented with too many choices, and irrespective of prior academic preparation, the “social class and racial differences in choice of major often persist” (Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Porter & Umbach, 2006). [Source >](#)

At worst, this “paradox of choice” leads to a dead end for students, yielding some college credit but no degree or other credential of value. But even for those who do complete, data reveal that many have swirled, accumulating excess credits, extending their time to degree, and tacking on extra costs in the process. Further, more than half of U.S. adults report regrets about decisions they made in regards to their selected major, institution, and degree type (Gallup/Strada).

The cost of not supporting students in their quests to find purpose and relevance in their major and career choices is too great. To ensure students make informed decisions regarding major and career pathways that align with career opportunities institutions must design a collaborative onboarding structure among admissions, enrollment, advising, career services, and student affairs. While many systems and institutions, several of which are highlighted in this publication, are tackling challenges and are leading this work across the country, much more must be done – and done to scale.

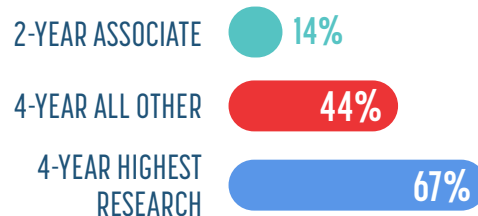
Mechanisms must be created that guide students’ early college decisions by helping

them to evaluate their interests and identify programs aligned to those interests. Labor market data should be provided to offer a clear outlook on areas of opportunity and local market demands. Students should have access to mentors, alumni and others who can provide career guidance, and institutions should strive to provide integrated support along the way, ensuring students don’t just make informed choices but that they succeed, complete degrees and move into fulfilling careers.

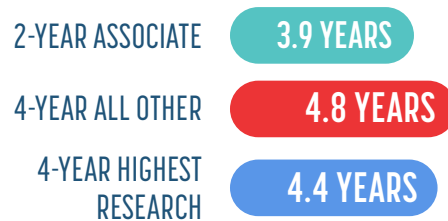
### Credits to Degree



### 150% Graduation Rate\*



### Average Time to Degree



[Source>](#)

\*3 years for a 2-year degree, 6 years for a 4-year degree

## II. Purpose First

In 2016, Complete College America and Strada Education Network announced an initiative with the Community College System of New Hampshire, members of the University System of New Hampshire, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, Tennessee Board of Regents, University of Hawaii System, University of Houston and Houston Community Colleges to design new models of advising and student intake that would equip students with valuable information to empower their decision-making and build early academic momentum as they work toward degrees and ultimately careers.

Purpose First is an initiative designed to help students locate the intersection of their passions and their programs of study by shifting the way higher education operationalizes students' initial time on campus. Campuses should design selection of majors and meta majors, the information provided to students as they prepare for careers, and the institutional norms and supports that empower students' success throughout their college journey.

In an effort to better design these models, Complete College America partnered with professional organizations that provide expertise and experience on the different practices already in place at institutions.

### THE INSTITUTION

A Purpose First institution is one in which the organizational capacity, advising practices, and tools for meaningful academic and career achievement and progression to ensure all

students have the support they need to make an informed choice of program aligned with their interests. Such an institution recognizes that building a culture of purpose and planning requires a willingness to rethink traditional structures, processes and attitudes.

Purpose First institutions emphasize career exploration and planning throughout the full student experience, while recognizing that the first year provides unique opportunities to assist students in articulating goals and aligning their academic experience to those goals.

An institution that is committed to a Purpose First agenda and the resulting culture shift might begin by asking all stakeholders:

#### Organizational Capacity

*“Does our campus have a shared vision for academic and career advising and how is that vision designed structurally? How is that vision integrated with the student onboarding experience?”*

### Advising Practices

*“How does our campus encourage early and sustained academic/career planning with students? Does our structure compel or deter meaningful student-advisor interactions that result in informed choices?”*

### Equitable Practices

*“Has our campus identified majors where there is a lack of presence from underrepresented students? If so, do we have a plan to expose more of these students to these career pathways? How can we ensure that all students are exposed to a variety of majors and associated careers that would lead to closing gaps in workforce demands?”*

### Technology Tools

*“Are our academic and career advising technology tools aligned to meet our new vision? Are these tools integrated to ensure students are equipped to make informed decisions about their program of study and career pathway?”*

## THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Students at Purpose First institutions, regardless of the school’s size, type or mission, are at the center of the educational process. From the point of admission, all students at these institutions are provided with the support necessary to explore career opportunities and make informed choices.

## A Purpose-Driven Student Experience

### RECRUITMENT AND ADMISSIONS

- Career and Interest Assessments
- Admissions applications and recruitment strategies that highlight careers and high-demand fields alongside their associated programs of study

### STUDENT ONBOARDING, ORIENTATION & REGISTRATION

- Advising and Career Services Appointments Resulting in Identification of Academic and Career Interests
- Student Interaction with Labor Market Data and Other Preliminary Career Field Information
- Default Pathways Into Broad Areas of Study or Meta Majors Based on Students Initial Program Interest

### THE FIRST SEMESTER

- First-Year Experience Course/ Career Exploration Course
- Curricular and Co-Curricular Learning Aligned to Career Interests and Exploration

### ONGOING SUPPORT AND OPERATIONS

- Proactive Advising
- Skill and Tool Development
- Intentional Career Advising
- Capstone to Pathways



Students benefit from a variety of touchpoints during the informed choice process that are both intentional and actionable. Career and interests assessments reveal options, labor market data illuminates the workforce landscape, default pathways enable focused exploration, and proactive advising keeps students moving forward. Taken together, these strategies empower students to make informed choices, get on track and ultimately complete their degrees.

Institutions cultivate this student-centered environment by building shared responsibility and deepening partnerships across student serving offices, particularly admissions, registrar, advising, career services, and student affairs, ultimately creating comprehensive onboarding experiences that inform and guide students toward their career goals and aspirations. A focus must also be placed on designing a culture of intentional

change, spurring educational stakeholders and decision-makers to continually examine the structural barriers that inhibit efficient and purposeful pathways for all, particularly underrepresented students.

In order for all students to explore learning in a scholarly way, institutional leaders must effectively construct systems of support and intentional processes for integrated curricula and experiential activities that contribute to students' active educational journey. At the center of these complex connections should be fully-involved and well-informed academic advisors (both primary role advisors and faculty advisors) who take an intentional approach to interacting with students. These professionals should strive to use technological and interpersonal tools that align with the Purpose First vision and **equip students to become authentic owners of their career aspirations.**

# III. Our Shared Beliefs and Purpose-Driven Practices

The following statements capture our shared beliefs, provide a guiding framework for how this work should be approached, and suggest actions that can be taken to ensure we are putting Purpose First for our students.

## 1. HIGHER EDUCATION SHOULD BE A LAUNCHING PAD TOWARD A MEANINGFUL CAREER BY DESIGNING STRUCTURES AND PROVIDING THE TOOLS STUDENTS NEED TO EXPLORE AVAILABLE OPPORTUNITIES, EMPOWERING THEM WITH THE KNOWLEDGE TO MAKE INFORMED CHOICES.

- Offer meta majors that allow students to explore a variety of fields and career options without wasting time and money.
- Help students become self-advocates in their efforts to secure careers.
- Provide labor-market data, in-depth career information (including locally focused information on earnings and job growth), and resources regarding programs-to-career alignment.
- Provide technology that supports academic and career exploration to empower this process.



### IMPACT

*“In UH’s College Success course, we looked at data for all of the different degrees offered and their associated careers. It’s nice to see what’s most in demand now and what will be in demand in ten years. I realized accounting is what I want to do, and seeing the numbers helped me to know it’s something I can do and that I’ll be able to find a job.”*

– Monica Hernandez, University of Houston ('19, Accounting and Finance)



### SPOTLIGHT: THE FLORIDA COLLEGE SYSTEM

Institutions in the Florida College System are finding innovative ways to implement the state-approved eight meta majors, and in the process, sharing information on careers that align to those programs

of study. Hillsborough Community College has reorganized academic divisions to align with the broad areas of study. St. Petersburg College students become part of a community that aligns with their chosen meta major and provides them with opportunities to explore program offerings and engage with students on the same academic pathway.



## 2. CAREER EXPLORATION AND PLANNING MUST BE INTENTIONAL AND START EARLY IN THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE.

- Integrate career exploration discussions during new student orientation and connect students with career-aligned organizations on campus.
- Offer a First-Year Experience that allows for exploration and exposure to available opportunities.
- Create and activate social capital through the use of mentoring and internships, providing students opportunities to build connections with alumni and local professionals.
- Administer early assessments that evaluate students' strengths and interests and require career exploration.
- Develop an advising system that requires students to connect with academic advisors and career services professionals.



### IMPACT

*“The Ethnography of Work course at my school is helpful even if you already know what you want to do. I*

*wasn't so sure, and working part-time as waitress, there isn't much time to explore career options outside of school. The course provides great information, pushing you and reminding you two years is going to go by really fast.”*

— Hannah Croce, Nashua Community College Graduate

### SPOTLIGHT: INDIANA UNIVERSITY- PURDUE UNIVERSITY INDIANAPOLIS (IUPUI)

The cluster advising model at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) puts first-year students in small groups with student success advisors who have specialized knowledge about programs they are interested in and the career fields attached to those programs. The advisors work closely with their cluster career consultants to help students hone in on majors and careers that interest them, challenge them and fit their personal skills. The advisors and career consultants work in clusters that group majors into similar themes and interests. Students who have not yet chosen a major are served through an exploratory cluster.

### 3. STATES, SYSTEMS AND INSTITUTIONS MUST BUILD A CULTURE OF PURPOSE ACROSS AMONG ALL HIGHER EDUCATION STAKEHOLDERS, INCLUDING EDUCATION POLICY MAKERS, ADMINISTRATORS, FACULTY, STAFF, AND STUDENTS.

- From recruitment, onboarding and enrollment, through year one, show students that higher education is not simply a box to be checked, but an opportunity to engage in intentional self-discovery, align interests with real-world opportunities, and make informed choices based on future aspirations.
- Create a shared vision for success among faculty, student success staff, advisors, and career services professionals through the use of data, and develop processes and structures that empower students and their pursuit of meaningful careers.
- Institutions must take ownership of processes and outcomes that ensure all students benefit from career exploration tools during their first year.



#### IMPACT

*“Purpose First is one of the Hawai’i Graduation Initiative (HGI) strategies to encourage students to explore career aspirations early in their college years, integrate career and academic advising, and provides real-time, region-specific labor market data to students. Research has reaffirmed that when students pursue their college goals more purposefully and with confidence that their majors match their academic and personal strengths, they have higher retention and graduation rates.”*

— Donald O. Straney, Ph.D., Vice President  
for Academic Planning and Policy,  
University of Hawai’i System



#### SPOTLIGHT: HOUSTON COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Houston Community College’s *Choose Your Path* completely revamps the onboarding process. An online registration system, *Career Coach*, replaced tedious, often repetitive campus visits once required to complete enrollment. Additionally, in their first semester, all HCC students now take a success course that includes an experiential learning component, providing a work-based opportunity to solidify interest in a particular career path. To generate buy-in for the overhaul, HCC assembled a cross-functional team that included registration, data, IT and executive staff, along with faculty and advisors. The team reviewed placement, persistence and success data and heard from students about their experiences, empowering them to create change across the 23 commuter campuses.

## PURPOSE FIRST AND CCA'S MOMENTUM PATHWAYS

Complete College America's Momentum Pathways strategy is an integrated approach that is singularly focused on significantly improving college completion, permanently closing achievement gaps and reducing time and credits to degree. Purpose First provides an onramp for students onto these pathways, building academic mindset and boosting success.

Designed as the optimal sequence of Game Changers implementation, the suite of Momentum Pathways strategies, which includes 15 to Finish, Corequisite Support, Math Pathways, Academic Maps with Proactive Advising, and the Momentum Year, has been shown to dramatically improve credit accumulation for all students and increase the percent of academically underprepared students who complete gateway math and English courses. Further, students who reach these benchmarks in the first year have higher

retention and graduation rates. As a combined approach, Momentum Pathways directly address the elimination of attainment gaps for students of color and low-income students.

[Source >](#)

While Momentum Pathways are focused on helping students progress through their chosen degree maps, CCA had not, until Purpose First, provided direction on how best to guide students into majors and meta-majors. This new partnership between CCA and the professional organizations that support students' onboarding experience and career exploration will empower the ongoing work and design of best practices associated with admissions, enrollment, academic advising, student affairs, and career services to provide relevant information so students make informed decisions on their majors and career pathways.



## NUMBERS TO KNOW: PURPOSE FIRST METRICS

Purpose First empowers students to make informed, early choices of majors and programs of study, ultimately increasing their likelihood of success and completion. The following metrics should be used to measure the impact of your Purpose First efforts.

### Enrollment into a Degree Pathway

- **Enrolled in a degree pathway at entry:** Number of students enrolled in the associated degree pathway when they first enter the institution and register for courses.
- **Enrolled in a degree pathway by the end of the first academic year:** Number of students enrolled in the associated degree pathway any time during the first year of entry into the institution. Students who enrolled in this degree pathway at entry (reported in the previous group) should be excluded.

Together these groups make up the cohort that will be reported in all later sections.

### Credit Completion

- Students enrolled in the degree pathway that completed 30+ credits in the first academic year

- Students enrolled in the degree pathway that completed 9+ credits in the degree pathway

### Major Stability & Success

- Students enrolled in the degree pathway that remained enrolled in that degree pathway at the start of their second academic year
- Average grade point of students enrolled in a degree pathway after the first academic year



Share how your campus is using Purpose First to empower career exploration and student success: **#PurposeFirst**

Stay informed and help us shape the Purpose First initiative. Visit [completecollege.org/purposefirst](https://completecollege.org/purposefirst).