



**STRONG START  
TO FINISH**

Building momentum for postsecondary success



**EDUCATION COMMISSION  
OF THE STATES**

Your education policy team.

# Ohio Strong Start to Finish: Early Progress

LEARNING FROM  
**THE REFORM**   
from **STRONG START TO FINISH**

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**August 2020**

## Acknowledgements

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## About Strong Start to Finish

Right now, a first-year student sits in a college classroom being ill-served by remedial math. And if we fail them, they most likely will not earn their degree. There is a persistent trend among students placed in remedial or developmental courses—particularly math and English. They are not completing the courses and, in most cases, should not be taking them in the first place. This should not be their path.

We are a network of like-minded individuals and organizations from the policy, research, and practice spaces who've come together for one reason—to help all students, not just the select few, find success in postsecondary education.

[Strong Start to Finish](#), an initiative of [Education Commission of the States](#), was created to better the chances of low-income students, students of color, and returning adult students to create a fundamental shift in the outcome of their college journey. We have networked higher education leaders, policy entrepreneurs, institutions, and technical assistance providers to drive toward an outcome where all students pass their first credit-bearing English and math courses during the first year of study.

# Introduction

Working with a coalition of stakeholders, the state of Ohio has established a goal that, by 2025, 65% of Ohioans aged 25-64 will have a postsecondary credential of value. This goal has resulted in an increased focus on educational attainment both at the state level and at the colleges and universities, as illustrated in the supporting programs and legislative initiatives.

Over time, state policymakers have made changes that provide context and guidance for improving first-year success—from modifications to placement policies, to shifts in the state funding formula, and to requirements that institutions provide plans for improving completion. In addition, reform initiatives such as Guided Pathways and the faculty-driven Ohio Mathematics Initiative have supported reforms at the campus level. Now, there is movement toward focusing on promising efforts that help students complete gateway courses and bring them to scale through systemic change.

It is recognized that the goal of 65% of Ohio adults having a postsecondary credential cannot be achieved without addressing equity gaps in postsecondary attainment, especially for adult students, students of color, and economically disadvantaged students. In addition, further attention is required for students deemed underprepared for transitioning into postsecondary education and to the completion of gateway English and math courses in their first year. Currently, many Ohio students cannot complete those courses [without additional support](#). Specifically, 27.8% of the 2018 high school graduating class who attended a public higher education institution in Ohio required developmental education in math, English, or both. Adult students do not fare much better—24.1% of students between 22 and 25 and 14.8% of students over age 25 required developmental education in math, English, or both. Economically disadvantaged students, regardless of age, are far more likely to need developmental education. In 2018, 38.5% of PELL-eligible students needed developmental education, whereas 18.2% of non-PELL eligible students were placed in developmental education.

Timeline of Reform	
2009	Achieving the Dream Developmental Education Initiative
2011	Completion by Design Ohio Cadre
2011	Ohio Uniform Statewide Standards for Remediation-Free Status
2013	Ohio Mathematics Initiative Launched
2014	Campus Completion Plans Instituted
2015	Ohio Guided Pathways Scaling Project Launched
2015	Legislation Passed to Establish Guaranteed Transfer Pathways
2018	Ohio Strong Start to Finish Launched

Through [Ohio Strong Start to Finish](#), the Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE), along with the Ohio Association of Community Colleges (OACC) and the Inter-University Council of Ohio (IUC), are working with 30 public 2- and 4-year institutions to advance the goal of college completion

and decreasing attainment gaps for historically underserved students. Participating institutions collectively serve 62,000 first-time students each year. Initial data suggested that only 33% of first-time students at these institutions complete college-level math and English courses in their first year.

Ohio Strong Start to Finish set a goal to increase that percentage to 50% by 2021, while reducing equity gaps for students of color, rural students, and students over age 25 by 2021.

A crucial component of that goal, according to the Ohio SSTF website, is to “significantly increase the number of students completing gateway English and math courses as part of a guided pathway within their first academic year.” To achieve this objective, institutions committed to four priority action areas:

1. Ensuring that clearly structured programs of study exist for all majors
2. Aligning redesigned gateway mathematics and English courses to all programs of study
3. Implementing corequisite remediation at scale in mathematics and English
4. Building advising structures to ensure all students register for coursework aligned with their programs.

Institutions that chose to participate in Ohio Strong Start to Finish had to agree to develop institutional goals—including specific goals for equity—and to assemble a campus leadership team. Institutions also committed to submitting data, participating in convenings and technical assistance, and integrating the priority action areas on campus. Each institution received baseline data on the number and percentage of first-time students completing gateway English and math courses in their first year, disaggregated for disadvantaged groups, in order to inform the goals as well as the initiative as a whole. In return for these commitments, sub-grants were provided to the institutions—called Campus-Level Action and Success Supports (CLASS grants)—to meet individual campus needs, using coaching, release time, or guidance from state or national experts.

Participating campus leadership teams are being supported in their work in a number of ways. For example, a Governance Council composed of representatives from ODHE, OACC, and IUC provides overall guidance and vision for the project. It is supported by an Advisory Council made up of 16 campus leaders, including representatives from universities, community colleges, faculty, staff, and administrative groups. The Advisory Committee helps with tactical, on-the-ground solutions. In addition, Sova Solutions was engaged as a technical assistance partner to help with implementation of project strategies.

The following sections describe the context of reform within the state, the current status of project activities, and some early insights coming out of the work.

## Policy Background

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Coordinated statewide change is challenging in Ohio due to the fact that the system is highly decentralized, where each institution is governed autonomously by its Board of Trustees. However, there have been a number of efforts, both legislative and voluntary, that are fostering change.

## Performance Funding

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Ohio’s performance funding model is an important contextual factor. Since 2013, the model has distributed all state higher education funding to institutions based on student progression and completion, weighted for at-risk students. There is a different formula for community colleges and universities, but both are based on outcomes and are weighted to address equity concerns. Both the community college and university funding models provide financial incentives for course and degree completion. This model is motivating Ohio public institutions to adopt policies and practices that lead to student success.

## Campus Completion Plans

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As recommended by the Complete College Ohio Task Force, in 2014, the Ohio General Assembly began requiring each institution to develop a Campus Completion Plan for how it will increase completion—consistent with their mission and context—that must be reviewed, updated, and resubmitted every two years. For many institutions, the plans have included a focus on placement, guided pathways, and corequisite instruction as potential strategies to increase completion. Recent guidance for completion plan updates has suggested that campuses add goals related to increasing the percentage of students completing gateway math and English courses in the first year and reducing the number of students enrolled in standalone developmental education courses.

## Placement Policies

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The Ohio General Assembly decided in 2011 that cut-score policies for placement varied too widely across Ohio's public institutions, leading to the Uniform Statewide Standards for Remediation-Free Status in math, science, reading, and writing. The standards provide a consistent set of goals for [students entering](#) postsecondary education. They clarified placement into credit-bearing courses—students who meet the standards are guaranteed placement into credit-bearing courses if they are at or above a benchmark assessment score. Given the independence of institutions, faculty panels from Ohio public colleges and universities established rules for the implementation of the standards.

## Ohio Mathematics Initiative

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The “remediation free” standards led to a number of [discussions within the state](#), including what math skills should be required for a postsecondary degree, how to improve transferable math courses, and reexamination of gateway math courses/curricula. The Ohio Department of Higher Education convened math faculty leaders to develop recommendations for designing new and transferable math courses, leading to the 2014 report [Rethinking Postsecondary Mathematics](#), which made 10 recommendations on improving math outcomes and the establishment of new pathways and learning outcomes. These recommendations included aligning math to programs of study and developing corequisite math strategies to support students deemed underprepared.

The Ohio Mathematics Initiative ([OMI](#)) was launched as a voluntary, faculty-driven collaboration between mathematics faculty from the state's public institutions and Ohio high schools (see appendix). Core strategies include developing quality entry-level math courses and pathways leading to coherent programs of study as well as policies that facilitate transfer of course credit. The Ohio mathematics community has developed learning outcomes for transferable gateway courses in three pathways—STEM, Statistics, and Quantitative Reasoning. Currently, development of corequisite courses to match those pathways is underway at many institutions. Further, the Ohio Mathematics Bridges to Success ([B2S](#)) Initiative sought to connect strategies on structured degree pathways, redesigned math gateway courses, and corequisite remediation, as well as provide resources and tools for implementation of those strategies. The initiative

is piloting the development of guided pathways that align with redesigned gateway math courses paired with corequisite instruction.

**“Corequisite remediation has helped a great number of students accelerate through their college level math courses, but I am most proud of improved success rates in student groups who have been underserved by the traditional math pathways. Corequisite math courses have shown promise in narrowing equity gaps.”**

*-Nicholas Shay, Columbus State Community College,  
Assistant Professor of Mathematics*

## Related Initiatives

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All of this work is aligned with several other Ohio activities and initiatives, including:

- The Ohio Transfer and Articulation Network, which works to implement transferable course outcomes, as well as the Ohio Guaranteed Transfer Pathways ([OGTP](#)), which provide a path for associate degree students to transfer to an Ohio public university for a bachelor's degree. An important part of this work is ensuring that aligned gateway mathematics and English courses are part of the first year of each pathway.
- The Ohio Guided Pathways Scaling Project, launched in 2015, includes coaching and technical assistance to support implementation of Guided Pathways for Ohio community colleges. In 2018-19, the project's focus area was increasing the number of students completing gateway English and math courses in their first year.
- Ohio's Lumina Foundation supported the Finish for Your Future initiative, which seeks to provide affordable and equitable educational opportunities to adult students. Finish for Your Future establishes the goal of increasing the proportion of adults over age 25 enrolled in public higher education from the current 27% to at least 40% by 2025.

- The Ohio Department of Education created a program called Algebra 2 Equivalent (A2E) Pathways for high schools. The Ohio Departments of Education and Higher Education are partnering with Education Strategy Group, the Charles A. Dana Center, the Ohio Mathematics Initiative and other education stakeholders across the state to rethink Ohio's high school-to-college and career mathematics pathways.

These previous efforts provide a foundation for ongoing developmental education reform. Ohio Strong Start to Finish is helping further these efforts by providing support through technical assistance, convenings, and direct grants to institutions for implementation of reforms on campus.

## Priority Action Areas

Ohio Strong Start to Finish was designed to build on student success efforts at both the institutional and state policy levels, rather than being introduced as a standalone new initiative. As noted earlier, the priority action areas are: ensuring that clearly structured programs of study exist for all majors; aligning redesigned gateway mathematics and English courses to all programs of study; implementing corequisite remediation at scale in mathematics and English; and building advising structures to ensure all students register for coursework in sequences to meet the goal.

Taken together, these strategies should help meet the goal of increasing completion of gateway courses in the first year, while reducing equity gaps.

The project supports curricular redesign so that there are clear programs of study aligned with redesigned gateway courses. Importantly, these changes are supported by corequisite instruction and academic advising that considers appropriate course selection and sequences for the student's major. Accomplishing these improvements requires a range of resources and activities, from knowledge of best practices to professional development on how to implement change. Thus, some of the primary activities of the project are focused on bringing together faculty and administrators, connecting them with resources to assist with implementation, and communicating across the participating institutions.

Project activities include:

- Convenings—from broad, statewide meetings to targeted forums on specific reform efforts
- Capacity building grants for implementation of strategies on campus
- Establishment of an Ohio English Initiative (OEI) to help foster success in English courses

A survey was conducted in the initial phases of Strong Start to Finish planning showing that the participating institutions were at very different stages in their implementation of the four priority strategies at the outset. For example, 57% had begun to implement math pathways with gateway math courses aligned to a student's major, while 33% were in the planning/development stage. About a quarter had fully implemented corequisite remediation in English, with most others just beginning implementation; about 30% had fully implemented corequisite math for at least one pathway. This confirmed that an important piece of the implementation puzzle would be to differentiate activities, such as trainings and events, to make them more useful for faculty and other campus stakeholders.

## Learning Network Convenings

Participating campuses have joined a statewide Learning Network, with convenings to bring together the campus teams from all the institutions and provide information and resources to the attendees. The goal is to promote cross-institution sharing and address implementation issues, including change management.

- The first convening in spring 2018 oriented participants to Ohio Strong Start to Finish goals and priority actions and campus responsibilities; another goal was to review campus and state data with a focus on equity.
- The 2018 Fall Learning Network convening focused on needs assessment, data to identify gaps in implementation, and Sova workshops on action planning and change management; institutions also began to develop action plans.
- The Spring Learning Network meeting in March 2019 was attended by over 200 participants from campus teams, with breakouts on topics being addressed through Strong Start to Finish and roundtable discussions to share best practices.

- The Fall 2019 Learning Network meeting included teams from all institutions—again, over 200 participants—and included 10 breakout sessions and 18 roundtable discussions on various topics.

In the future, Learning Network convenings will address topics such as ongoing research in the field of Developmental education reform, enhancing equity in higher education, progress in implementing institutional action plans, and sharing lessons learned and successes with each other.

**“Strong Start to Finish has had three main impacts on our work at Ohio University. First, it provided Ohio University faculty and staff with excellent educational opportunities so that we are all working with the same information and from the same theoretical understanding. Second, it encouraged and inspired us to work as a team...Third, SSTF working groups have provided an opportunity for people with similar positions all over the state to come together and learn from each other. As a result of Strong Start to Finish, I believe we will be able to discontinue developmental English and mathematics courses and improve our overall advising and guidance practices to help students make decisions that result in efficient graduation timelines.”**

*-Jenny Klein, Ohio University, Assistant Dean,  
Student Persistence and Success*

## Implementation Forums

Structured working groups, known as Implementation Forums—are being used to identify best practices and provide examples of successful implementation in five areas: 1) placement; 2) advising; 3) corequisite models; 4) data collection and use; and 5) closing equity gaps. These Forums have provided opportunities for dialogue by bringing together faculty, administrators, and staff to discuss specific topics and effective implementation on college campuses. The aim of the Forums, which are co-chaired by practitioners, is to connect best practices with implementation strategies and identify levers for improvement.

All of these working groups will complete final reports on their topic areas, as well as submitting recommendations to guide institutional efforts and state policies to support the reforms. These will then be disseminated to institutions to engage a broader audience.

- The Data Forum was created to develop data standards for collecting and reporting items such as identification of gateway courses, accurate reflection of AP credit, dual enrollment and other alternative credit paths, and consistent counting of corequisite coursework. A report with recommendations was disseminated in summer 2018.
- The Equity and Inclusion Forum shares examples of effective ways to promote equity and inclusion, with the goal of capturing and disseminating successful practices and policies. It has convened multiple times to date. In addition, the Equity Forum hosted a retreat in June 2019 to vet promising practices. Forum members plan to complete various forms of dissemination by June 2020.
- The Placement Forum was created to promote more effective ways to place students in math and English courses, including clarifying placement and corequisite strategies for those above and below the remediation-free threshold. The Forum had its first meeting in March 2019, where members began sharing their placement policies and procedures. Throughout their spring meetings, the members developed a statewide survey on placement strategies and procedures that informed a practical report applicable to institutions across the state. The results and recommendations of the Forum were presented at the Fall 2019 Learning Network convening.
- The Advising Forum was empaneled in January 2020 to review advising models and to recommend practices that ensure holistic student support that aligns academic advising with career goals and the guided pathways in the curriculum associated with those career goals. The Advising Forum will present its recommendations at the Fall 2020 Network Convening.
- The Corequisite Forum was empaneled in February 2020 and is working synergistically with the corequisite subgroup of the Ohio Mathematics Initiative. The Forum is reviewing research on the effectiveness of corequisite remediation, challenges to implementation,

and recommendations for corequisite remediation strategies and policies to support their implementation.

**“Participating in SSTF has undoubtedly been the most collaborative endeavor of my professional career. Through campus meetings with our UToledo SSTF committee, and my involvement in both the Placement and Advising Forums with colleagues statewide, I take great pride in knowing we are making a positive impact to increase opportunities for student success and course completion. Collectively, these conversations have enhanced our delivery of corequisite English and math courses for our first-year students.”**

*-Adam Hintz,  
University of Toledo, Student Success*

## CLASS Grants

Capacity building sub-grants—Campus Level Action and Success Supports, or CLASS grants—are being used to support specific activities at the campus level, such as faculty/staff release time, technical assistance, curriculum development, professional development, or institutional coaching. Because of the range of institutions and their varying degrees of progress toward achieving the four priority goals, each has different needs and challenges. Each team conducted a needs assessment to inform their request for funding. The grants have been disbursed in two stages to allow for changes in campus needs.

All 30 Ohio Strong Start to Finish institutions submitted CLASS grant proposals by the end of 2018. They were subsequently reviewed by the Governance Council and agreements with applicants were approved. The first Learning Network meeting then focused on assisting the campuses in implementing their CLASS grant plans. The plans focused on strategies such as improving entry to gateway courses, aligning courses within pathways, or conducting research on the impact of their work to date. In the summer of 2019, institutions submitted their second round of proposals for CLASS grants, with most proposing to use the resources toward gaps that need to be filled in order to fully scale pedagogical improvements.

## Communication and Change Management

From the beginning of the project, the project partners decided it was important to hold monthly meetings for campus leads to share updates and solicit feedback from other teams. Over time, as the project progressed, the partners saw a need for more intensive communication with campuses. As a result, conference calls transitioned to monthly Campus Lead Webinars, at which partners could share information and campus leads could ask questions or offer suggestions. These webinars have proven to be highly effective communication tools.

Another key component of project management and communication has been the Governance and Advisory Councils. Advisory Council members meet each spring and fall semester to provide guidance, to review current project status and recommend changes, to assist with analysis of metrics, and to review the outcomes of the Implementation Forums. The Governance Council meets regularly to approve institutional and state metrics, establish the charge for each implementation forum, approve the CLASS grants and process, review agendas for the Learning Network meetings and other convenings, and review report recommendations. Last fall, the Council met to help define the work for fall 2019 and spring 2020, in consultation with Sova Solutions. The most recent meetings have discussed the impact of corequisite remediation on the state’s performance funding model and suggestions for legislative changes that support student success.

In order to further assist the institutions, Sova has provided guidance on change management practices to several grantees and will be providing webinar clinics to all institutions. Topics to date have included the use of 90-day planning cycles (March 2019), ways to address initiative fatigue (April 2019), improving communication across silos (May 2019), and Introduction to Core Principles 3.0 (March 2020). [The Core Principles for Transforming Remediation within a Comprehensive Student Success Strategy](#) are informed by a wide range of stakeholders to discuss developmental education reform within larger strategies designed for student success. Two more webinars have been scheduled for spring of 2020. The webinar topic originally scheduled for April 17, 2020, was changed to Leading Student Success Work in a Time of Crisis to address current needs faced by campus leads during the Coronavirus outbreak. In addition, site visits have been conducted to about one-quarter of the institutions; thus far, the site visits

have been useful in identifying areas of excellence as well as challenges that are being faced on campuses.

## Successes, Challenges and Lessons

### Successes to Date

According to the Ohio Strong Start to Finish project team, an important factor supporting the work thus far has been the use of activities that can be adapted for individual campus contexts. This includes the statewide convenings, which prompt thematic discussions that can be applied to institutions differently, as well as the Implementation Forums, which are exploring best practices that will foster “deeper dives” within institutions to understand their particular needs. The CLASS grants are supporting these activities, with individual campuses able to craft their own activities to reflect their capacity to effect change. Overall, early feedback suggests that institutions were already doing a lot of work in these areas but that Ohio Strong Start to Finish has allowed them to do more than they could have accomplished without the initiative. The leadership of the Governance Council and Advisory Council has enabled “touchpoints” with every public institution in the state, which has helped refine and deepen the work.

In addition, equity is an explicit focus of the work and the project team feels it is already being reflected in many of the activities—including a strong presence in Implementation Forum sessions and Learning Network meetings, where participants have responded positively to the discussions. College teams appear to be organically developing a “common vocabulary” that focuses on equity as well as how to talk about data using an equity lens.

### Challenges

Although there has been much progress, there are a number of challenges to future implementation. Many institutions have identified areas where they need more support, such as professional development and assistance in areas such as working with historically underserved populations and best practices in advising and embedded tutoring. However, project team members are finding that time constraints, both their own and that of faculty and staff at their institutions, are a barrier given their other responsibilities.

In addition, project staff note that it is time consuming to be in touch with all 30 campuses. There are many opportunities for engagement through Network meetings, Campus Lead calls, and Forum meetings. But more one-on-one time through calls and site visits can be a challenge. Finally, in some cases, campus teams are finding that changing ingrained perceptions can be difficult.

### Emerging Lessons

Although project activities are ongoing, it has already become clear that peer-to-peer interaction has been very useful, as well as other forms of communication across institutions. The learning network developed for Ohio Strong Start to Finish is making an impact, with college teams learning from their peers across the state. In addition, institutional teams have responded positively to approaches that blend national, state, and regional best practices but that also can be adapted to their unique campus contexts.

However, there is no “silver bullet” for increasing completion of gateway courses. All of the components of the work—aligning gateway courses with students’ pathways, accelerating preparation, and using corequisite instruction and other supports—need to be viewed within a broader context of student success.

# Early Outcomes

In the spring of 2018, after a competitive selection process, Ohio SSTF was awarded \$2.1 million to implement developmental education reform efforts at scale. Ohio SSTF began implementing reform efforts by the fall semester with the goal to increase the

number and proportion of students completing both college-level (gateway) math and English courses in the student's first year of study. The data provided here serve as a baseline against which the progress of the grant may be made.

Figure 1:

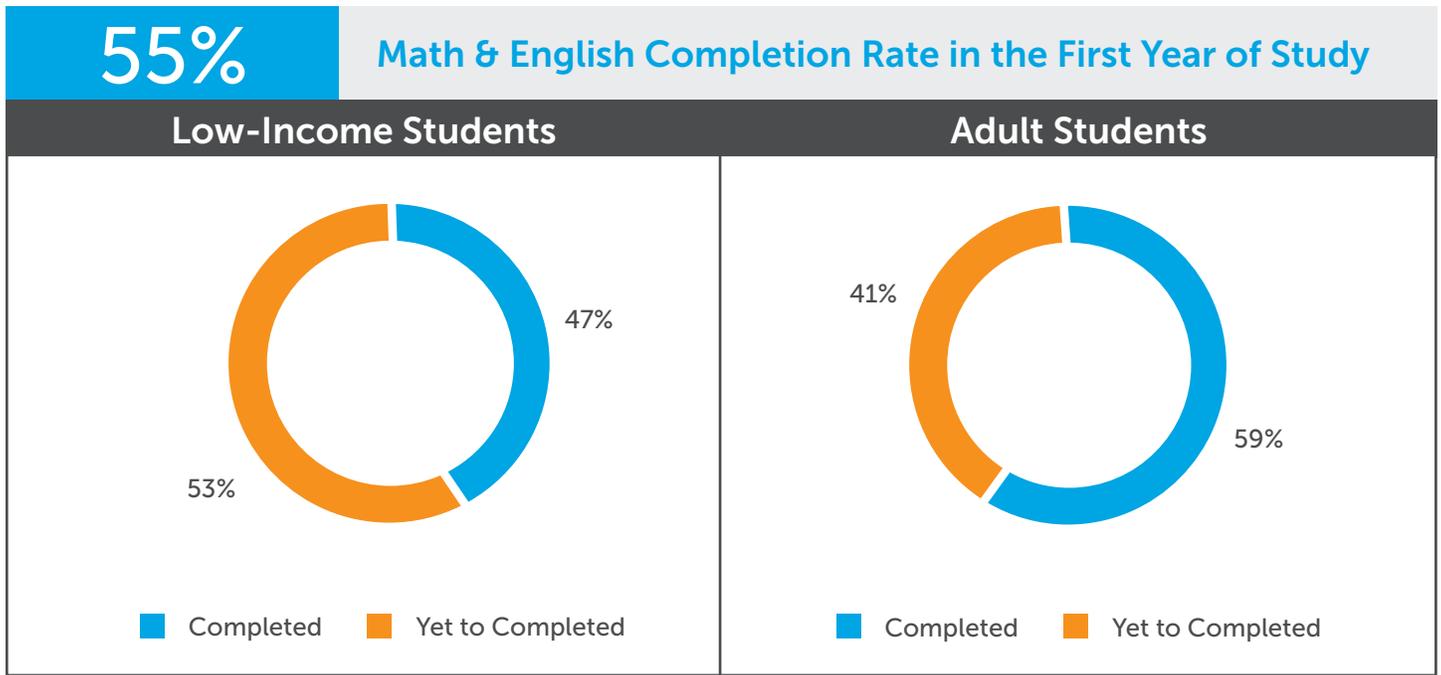
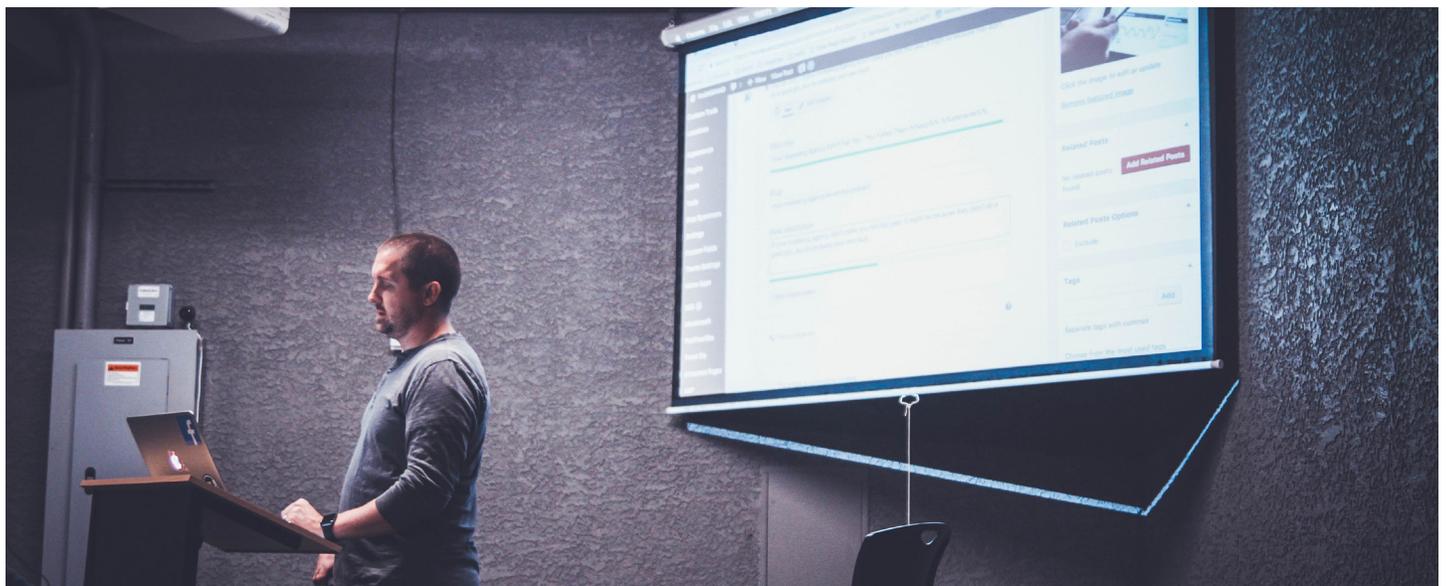


Figure 1. Gateway math & English completion in the first year of study rates overall and for low-income and adult students: Fall 2018 cohort.

For the cohort starting in the fall of 2018, 55% completed a gateway math and English course in their first year of study. Completion rates were 47% for low-income students and 59% for adult students.



**Figure 2:**

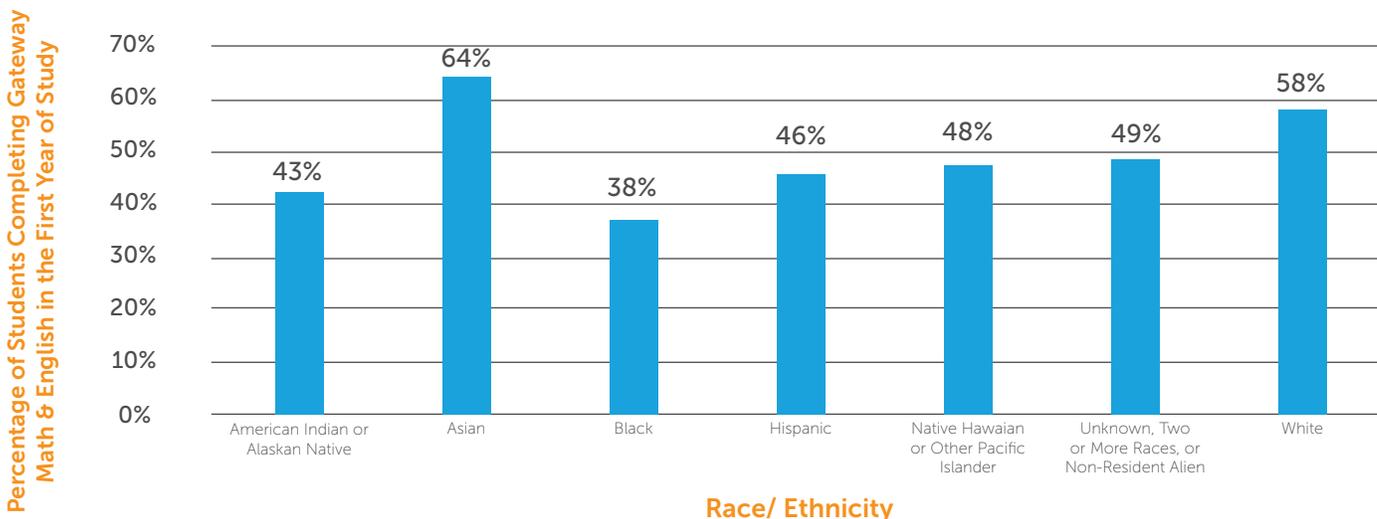


Figure 2. Gateway math & English completion in the first year of study rates by race/ethnicity: Fall 2018 cohort.

When examined by a student’s race or ethnicity, completion rates varied for students who identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native (43%); Asian (64%); Black (38%); Hispanic (46%); Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (48%); Unknown, Two or more races or Non-resident Alien (49%); or White (58%).

## Next Steps

Despite recent changes in Ohio’s Governor and the Chancellor of the Ohio Department of Higher Education, Ohio Strong Start to Finish continues to be a priority for the administration. The project has made progress by bringing stakeholders together, building capacity at the campus level, and initiating change management strategies, but much work remains.

### Implementation Forums

Recommendations from the first three Forums—Equity, Placement, and Data—have been shared with various stakeholders. Participants are being brought together for the last two Implementation Forums—on Corequisite Instruction and Advising—to develop their final reports and recommendations, which will be disseminated by fall 2020.

### Convenings

In addition to the Forums, Ohio Strong Start to Finish will continue to host Learning Network convenings. The 2019 fall Learning Network was held on September 27, 2019, to provide an opportunity for SSTF participants to learn and share best practices with one another, with the goal of assisting implementation

of their CLASS grant plans. Ten breakout sessions were presented along with 18 roundtable discussions. The next Learning Network meeting will be held October 22, 2020 (depending on Coronavirus disruptions). The project will end with a Capstone meeting in spring 2021.

### Work for Future Years

Some initial strategies for the project have not yet seen progress, such as revising the community college funding formula to ensure that it is promoting early completion of gateway courses. In addition, although members of the Ohio English Initiative have met, most of the related activities have not begun.

Though still in its early stages, the project is building a foundation for implementing change at the campus level. Collectively, the strategies being used should help increase the number of students succeeding in gateway courses as the project work continues to move forward.