



COLLEGE, ON PURPOSE

A guide to implementing the Purpose First strategy—
the missing link between career choice,
guided pathways, and first-year momentum

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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I. INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE MATTERS

Beginning college with a clear sense of purpose is a critical step to ensuring an investment in higher education pays personal and financial dividends for a lifetime. College-bound students, however, are too often presented with an overwhelming number of major options with little guidance in making the best decision. **Uninformed decisions about a course of study can lead students to “spin their wheels,” causing them to accumulate excess credits, extend their time to degree, or drop out altogether.** For those who do complete, the additional time results in increased costs and makes it difficult for graduates to build a solid financial foundation early on. Underrepresented and less advantaged students are disproportionately affected by these challenges, diminishing critical efforts to close achievement gaps.

36% of graduates

would choose a different major.

(Gallup-Strada, 2017)



African Americans & Hispanics are underrepresented

in the fastest-growing, highest-paying occupations: STEM, health, and business.

(Georgetown University, 2016 & Georgetown University, 2015)

GENERAL ENGINEERING	MATHEMATICS	COMPUTER ENGINEERING	FINANCE/ MARKETING	HEALTHCARE
8%	7%	5%	7%	10%
11%	6%	9%	6-7%	6.5%

African Americans in major
(12% of U.S. Population)

Hispanics in major
(17% of U.S. Population)

PURPOSE FIRST

Early momentum in college has been proven to dramatically increase the likelihood of reaching a degree. Students, including those who have declared a major during the application process, need a college onboarding experience that supports them in making informed choices while building momentum toward a credential of value and a rewarding career. **The Purpose First strategy builds on CCA's work around guided pathways and informed choice, restructuring the onboarding process to ensure students identify their interests, explore possible careers and understand important job market data that could impact their financial futures.** Equipped with this information, students will be better positioned to choose a program of study and start earning credits towards their degree.

| 63% more likely

Graduates are 63% more likely to value their education if they understand the relevance of their courses and degree to their career.

[\(National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, 2018\)](#)



| 58% of students

say getting a good job is their primary motivation for pursuing an education.

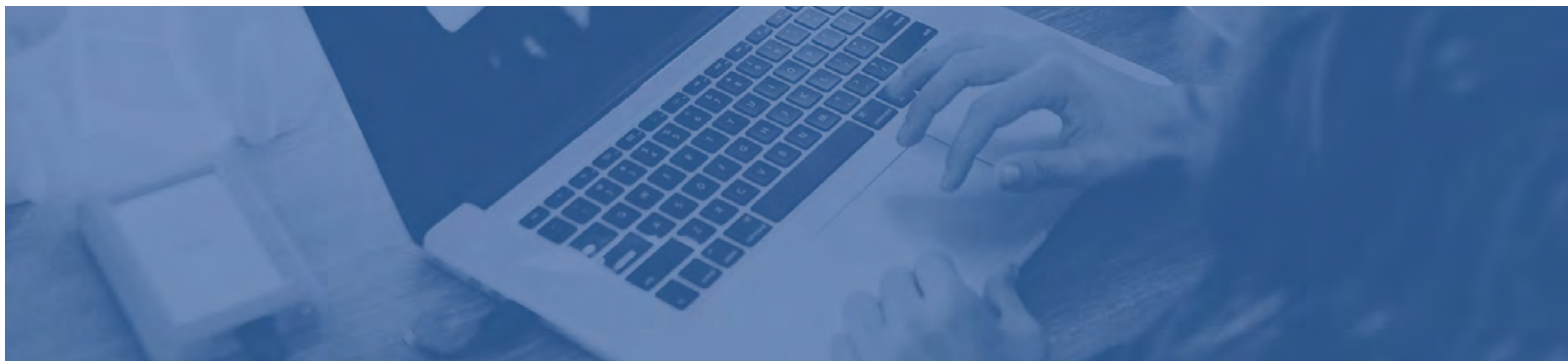
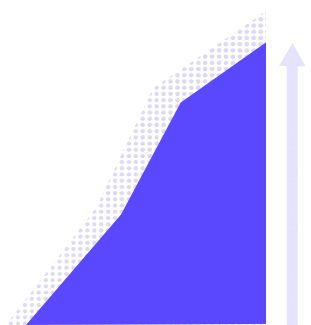
[\(Gallup-Strada Education Network, 2018\)](#)



| \$2.3 trillion

estimated benefit to the U.S. economy by 2050 if educational achievement gaps were closed.

[\(W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2018\)](#)



II. THE PURPOSE FIRST STUDENT EXPERIENCE



RECRUITMENT & ADMISSIONS

Students are presented with opportunities to explore their individual interests, skill sets and financial goals, preparing them to engage with campus staff and faculty during the onboarding process in identifying an academic path.



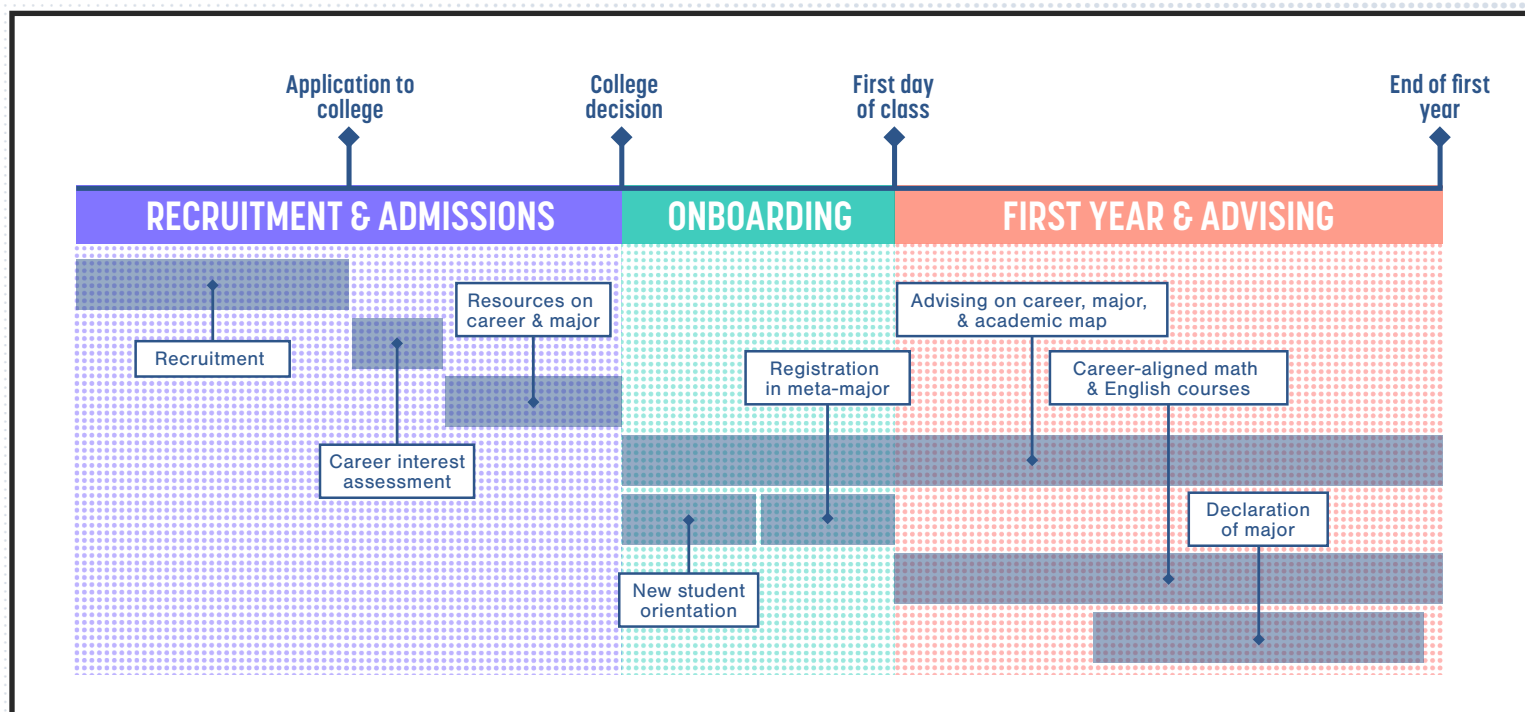
ONBOARDING

Students receive additional major and career guidance, ultimately selecting a major or meta-major that supports continued exploration while gaining momentum toward graduation. It is critical that the design of meta-majors as well as the registration guidance students receive not only incorporates the student's career ambitions, but also CCA's Momentum Pathway strategies—15 to Finish, Momentum Year, Academic Maps with Proactive Advising, Corequisite Support, and Math Pathways.



FIRST YEAR & ADVISING

From connections with career-aligned organizations on campus to career exploration assignments through First-Year Experience courses, students are provided with the exposure and guidance needed to select a major with confidence and continue on a structured path toward a credential of value.



III. RESPONDING TO COMMON QUESTIONS

Are you saying all students should be encouraged to go into high-paying careers regardless of whether or not those careers are aligned with their skills and interests?

No, but let's make sure we are providing them with the information and guidance they need to make an **informed choice** of career based on their **interests, skill set and financial goals**.

If the data suggests that certain student populations are less likely to pursue high-paying careers, are you suggesting we intentionally work to funnel these underrepresented students into majors associated with high-paying careers?

Yes and no. Too often underrepresented students **are not exposed to major and career information** that would lead to high-paying occupations. It is only by ensuring that all students receive the necessary information and support to make an **informed decision** that we can close and **eliminate opportunity and achievement gaps**. It is crucial that institutions examine the disaggregation of majors/meta-majors by race/ethnicity, age, gender, and Pell status so as to best understand how to resolve equity gaps.

Aren't you worried that students won't have the time and opportunities they need to explore?

No, Purpose First provides **additional, more structured opportunities** for students to explore **while still maintaining momentum** toward an on-time graduation. In fact, by providing early information and assessments and encouraging students to select a meta-major, students have **more time** to consider and explore their options.

What about the role of higher education in creating well-rounded individuals?

Purpose First **does not limit** our ability to create well-rounded individuals; it simply ensures that students are **also** provided the tools and experiences needed to **graduate on time** and successfully pursue a **meaningful career**.

How do employers fit into this?

Employers play an important role in helping institutions **identify the skill sets prioritized** for new hires, and in **supporting career exploration** through internships, mentorship, and presentations.

Shouldn't only undeclared students go through this new onboarding structure?

No. All students (undeclared, declared, and returning adults) should be provided with a Purpose First experience. For students that have declared a major, additional information and support can help them either **confirm their choice or explore new opportunities** they hadn't yet considered.

IV. IMPLEMENTATION

Successful implementation of the Purpose First student experience requires coordinated and intentional efforts at institutions across five key areas: Institutional Culture; Recruiting, Admissions & Onboarding; Career Exploration; Academic Structures; and The First Year & Beyond. This section provides guidance and best practices to support this process.

01. INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PURPOSE FIRST STRATEGY STARTS BY BUILDING A CULTURE THAT VALUES ACADEMIC SUCCESS AND CAREER OUTCOMES.

STATUS QUO

While institutional leaders understand the reality that students primarily pursue higher education as a means for a career, data and anecdotal evidence suggest that career exploration and advising are more often ancillary to—and not a central part of—the core academic experience. Far too many students complete college without a clear understanding of how their academics connect to their career goals, and are left unemployed or unprepared for the workplace after graduation.

PURPOSE FIRST PRINCIPLES

01

Student success—while enrolled and after graduation—is the responsibility of everyone on campus.

02

The value of a postsecondary education is closely tied to a student's future career goals.

03

Supporting students in identifying their academic purpose and career goals is a central part of the postsecondary experience.

50%+ more likely

Students at historically black colleges and universities, where preparing students for both lifelong learning and future employment remains a high priority, **were over 50% more likely to use resources from career services** to learn about careers than their peers at predominantly white institutions.

(National Survey of Student Engagement, 2018)



02. RECRUITING, ADMISSIONS & ONBOARDING

PURPOSE FIRST INSTITUTIONS BEGIN PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THEIR FUTURE CAREER FROM THE MOMENT THEY START TO BUILD A RELATIONSHIP WITH A PROSPECTIVE STUDENT.

STATUS QUO

Many students don't begin thinking seriously about life after college until their junior or senior year, when the proximity of decisions creates a sense of urgency. At the same time, institutions don't begin to strongly encourage students to participate in available career services until later in their college career, rather than when students are making early decisions about a course of study that will affect their career trajectory.

PURPOSE FIRST PRINCIPLES

01

Earlier is better. Students should be provided opportunities to explore their personal interests and future career goals during the recruitment, admissions and onboarding process.

02

A general sense of purpose is not enough. It's important to help students engage in deep, purposeful consideration of what their personal and professional goals are.

03

Institutions should provide numerous well-aligned interventions that ensure no student "falls through the cracks" early in their college career.



50% decrease

Baker College has seen a **50% decrease in the number of students changing their major since partnering with MyMajors** to guide students through an interest assessment and provide admissions and advising with a comprehensive advisement report about potential majors on campus.



03. CAREER EXPLORATION

PURPOSE FIRST INSTITUTIONS PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH NUMEROUS AND DIVERSE OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPLORE THEIR CAREER INTERESTS.

STATUS QUO

Students are largely dependent on their social networks for guidance about possible careers. They look to family and friends to help them evaluate their options and rarely supplement their search with concrete data. At worst, students are left to their own devices to explore majors and careers while accumulating credit hours that may not lead to a degree.

PURPOSE FIRST PRINCIPLES

01

It is the responsibility of the institution to help students realize 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.

02

Given the number and diversity of possible careers, there should be numerous built-in opportunities for students to explore professional pathways as early as their freshman year.

03

Data is good. Insights from leaders and peers are better. Giving students access to both is best.

33% higher retention rate

A **33% higher retention rate** for first- and second-semester students enrolled in Ethnography of Work courses at New Hampshire's community colleges has resulted in an increase in **overall retention from below 66% to above 75%**. In the course, students visit local employers, engage with an online tool, Career Coach, and apply the principles of ethnography in their exploration of workplaces and future careers.



04. ACADEMIC STRUCTURES

PURPOSE FIRST INSTITUTIONS DESIGN META-MAJORS THAT HELP STUDENTS BUILD CRITICAL EARLY MOMENTUM AND SUPPLEMENT THE TRADITIONAL ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE WITH CAREER-ALIGNED COURSEWORK AND LEARNING EXPERIENCES.

STATUS QUO

The vast majority of institutions still ask students to make very specific choices of major and fail to create meta-majors that act as a funnel into critical coursework sequences. Additionally, the competencies learned in coursework are often not clearly aligned with the skills students require for success in their future careers.

PURPOSE FIRST PRINCIPLES

01

Helping students choose a broad area of study ensures momentum towards a credential is not lost.

02

Programs of study should identify learning outcomes and critical work-ready competencies and skills.

03

Experiential learning is essential to a well-rounded education.

 **30% reduction**

Georgia State University has experienced a **30% reduction in students changing their majors** since implementing meta-majors. And students who do end up changing majors are more likely to have enough courses under their belt that will cross over.

(EAB, 2016)



05. THE FIRST YEAR & BEYOND

PURPOSE FIRST INSTITUTIONS BUILD FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCES THAT HELP STUDENTS PLAN AHEAD AND MAKE IMPORTANT EARLY DECISIONS ABOUT THEIR ACADEMIC PURPOSE AND FUTURE CAREER GOALS.

STATUS QUO

Many institutions view the first year as a settling in period and fail to provide students with important guidance and structure intended to help them build momentum and reach critical milestones proven to drive student success.

PURPOSE FIRST PRINCIPLES

01

Purpose does not simply make a degree more valuable, it makes attainment of a degree more likely.

02

The first year is critical to student success. Institutions should ensure that year one is a robust, well-supported experience that provides all students with tools and networks that will help them maintain momentum.

03

Academic and career advising requires regular connections with students from the first year onward.



87.5% of students

87.5% of students reported feeling more confident about their major choices after completing a career assignment woven into their first-year experience at Kapi'olani Community College and **90.2% reported a better understanding about the connection between their careers and majors.**



BEST PRACTICES

INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

- 1 Collect data on undeclared majors and on the frequency and number of major changes.
- 2 Evaluate underrepresentation across colleges, meta-majors and majors.
- 3 Audit the current activities across the institution related to helping students identify their academic purpose and future career goals.
- 4 Meet with students to understand how you can better help them reach their future career goals.
- 5 Create transparency by ensuring information about the current state is shared broadly across the campus community.
- 6 Establish an institution-wide working group focused on Purpose First with representation from faculty, administration, student support professionals, and students.
- 7 Commit to collaborating across the institution when developing and implementing new approaches.
- 8 Encourage students to participate in campus activities and organizations that build skills and connect to future careers as a part of a well-rounded postsecondary experience.

RECRUITING, ADMISSIONS & ONBOARDING

- 1 Emphasize your institution's commitment to helping students explore their interests and find a meaningful career after graduation.
- 2 Integrate comprehensive interest assessments into the admissions and application process and follow up with students committed to attend about their results.

RECRUITING, ADMISSIONS & ONBOARDING (continued)

- 3 Incorporate meta-majors in the application process to better introduce and develop each student's initial interests and goals.
- 4 Require all new students to go through a student orientation that incorporates the connection between major selection and career options.
- 5 Provide opportunities for career exploration discussions during student orientation.

CAREER EXPLORATION

Building Student Ownership

- 1 Provide tools for students to compile a Comprehensive Learner Record (CLR) or e-Portfolio; allow students to connect learning with skills associated with career.
- 2 Ask students to identify two parallel paths (majors) to best explore their options.

Informing Student Choice

- 3 Provide labor market data and relevant information (job demand, starting salary, benefits, associated skills, and education requirement) for each major and associated careers.
- 4 Showcase the success of graduates by highlighting their careers and approximate salaries.
- 5 Host workshops and opportunities for students to meet faculty members and student organizations connected to careers and professional organizations.

CAREER EXPLORATION (continued)

Exploring Career Opportunities

- 6 Host major and career fairs designed to facilitate exploration of career opportunities and greater understanding of how coursework aligns to potential careers.
- 7 Create Peer Mentoring programs under meta-majors and/or career areas.
- 8 Connect with regional employers to identify future high-demand jobs and skills.
- 9 Host networking events with regional employers and alumni.
- 10 Connect students with career-aligned organizations on campus.

ACADEMIC STRUCTURES

Implementing Meta-Majors

- 1 Categorize the existing list of majors into meta-majors and, in doing so, work to eliminate choice paralysis and help students gain momentum in an area of study aligned with related career opportunities. For better tracking and reporting purposes, build meta-majors into student information system.
- 2 Cross-train academic advisors, career counselors, and recruitment counselors on meta-majors and associated careers.
- 3 Create academic maps that include potential career options and information.

Exploring Career Opportunities

- 4 Have faculty liaison identify career competencies and resources in departments.
- 5 Have faculty members design competencies that are connected with career outcomes.
- 6 Have students reflect on competencies learned in coursework with career goals.

ACADEMIC STRUCTURES (continued)

- 7 Create career-interest milestones for each year of study.
- 8 Integrate internships and/or experiential learning in academic maps, highlighting paid internships.
- 9 Integrate co-curricular experiences and programs into the academic map for each year of study.

THE FIRST YEAR & BEYOND

First-Year Milestones

- 1 Require all students go through a First-Year Experience/Student Success course.
- 2 Include a career exploration assignment in First-Year Experience/Student Success course.
- 3 Require students to select a major (with guidance) by the end of their first academic year.

Academic Advising

- 4 Require all students to connect, virtually or in person, with an academic advisor prior to selecting meta-major.
- 5 Require students to connect with career counselors and/or faculty members to discuss careers.
- 6 Ensure academic advising and career counseling happen regularly to confirm students are on track to meet their graduation and career goals.
- 7 Reach out to all students about their major or meta-major selection to confirm their choice and provide them with relevant career information.

V. MEASUREMENT & EVALUATION

Frequent measurement is critical to evaluating the effectiveness of Purpose First initiatives and planning for ongoing improvements. CCA and its partners have identified the following outcomes to facilitate consistent measurement and the sharing of actionable learnings across institutions.

QUANTITATIVE OUTCOMES

For each meta-major category, the following outcomes should be measured with disaggregation by race/ethnicity, age, gender, Pell status and remedial status.

- > Number of students enrolled in a major or meta-major within 1 year
- > Number of students who complete 30+ credits within 1 year
- > Number of students with at least 9 credits associated with program of study after 1 year
- > Number of students who change their major at the end of the 1st year
- > GPA or Level of Academic Standing by meta-major in the first year

It is worth noting that schools should continually assess the appropriate configuration of each major within the meta-majors. Frequent changes between specific majors across different meta-majors might indicate that there are misalignments in the composition of the meta-majors.

QUALITATIVE OUTCOMES

Students should receive a survey that analyzes the percentage of students that see the following statements as true.

- > Have an increased understanding of careers connected to majors
- > Have meaningful exposure to career and labor market data
- > Feel career and labor market data helps inform their major choice
- > Feel their advisors incorporated career and labor market data into discussion regarding major choice
- > Feel like first year courses are applicable to career

DOWNLOAD THE FULL REPORT AT [COMPLETECOLLEGE.ORG/COLLEGEONPURPOSE](https://completecollege.org/collegeonpurpose)

Have learnings to share?

Let us know by using the [#PurposeFirst](https://twitter.com/PurposeFirst) hashtag or by emailing us at info@completecollege.org

Ready to get started?

Reach out to us at info@completecollege.org to learn how we can support your implementation efforts.

Need more information?

Follow the [#PurposeFirst](https://twitter.com/PurposeFirst) hashtag and check out completecollege.org/purposefirst for more resources.

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