



**COMPLETE
COLLEGE
AMERICA**

 **Ad Astra**

Building a Healthy Culture for Academic Scheduling

A Joint Publication from Complete
College America and Ad Astra

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Higher education cannot meet its completion goals without transforming how institutions approach academic scheduling. States and systems often create accountability mechanisms for institutions to increase completion rates, but institutions may lack the tools and culture framework to institutionalize the changes needed.

This white paper, a collaboration between Complete College America (CCA) and Ad Astra, provides a practical guide for building and sustaining a culture that supports effective academic scheduling. By combining CCA's proven strategies for scaled change with Ad Astra's expertise in strategic scheduling, we offer actionable guidance for institutions seeking to transform their scheduling culture to dramatically improve accountability and outcomes for students.



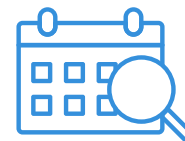
INSTITUTIONS MUST IMMEDIATELY:



Conduct **comprehensive audits** of current scheduling practices and eliminate barriers blocking student progress



Build **strategic scheduling teams** that prioritize student success over administrative convenience



Implement **smart scheduling principles** ensuring every student has access to needed courses when and where they need them



Transform scheduling from a back-office function into a strategic student success intervention

The Case for Change

The United States cannot meet its higher education and workforce goals without bold action. By 2031, 72% of U.S. jobs will require education or training beyond high school. However, current enrollment and completion rates fall far short of meeting this demand. Currently, only 62% of high school graduates matriculate to a postsecondary institution. The current two-year graduation rate for public, degree-granting two-year colleges is 17%. The four-year graduation rate at public four-year institutions is 40%, a figure buoyed by selective enrollment public institutions.



17%

The two-year graduation rate
for two-year colleges

40%

The four-year graduation rate
for four-year institutions

THE SOCIETAL IMPERATIVE

The attainment gap becomes even more concerning when examined through a demographic lens:

- + Nearly one in two White adults hold a postsecondary credential
- + Fewer than one in three Black adults hold a postsecondary credential
- + Roughly one in four Latinx adults hold a postsecondary credential

These gaps represent not just individual challenges but significant economic impacts. Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce found that the U.S. economy "misses out on \$956 billion per year, along with numerous nonmonetary benefits, as a result of postsecondary attainment gaps by economic status and race/ethnicity."

THE CHANGING STUDENT POPULATION

These challenges particularly impact post-traditional students (those age 25 or older), who represent an increasing majority on many campuses. The American Council on Education reports approximately 60% of students fall into this category. Additionally:

- + 43% of full-time students and 81% of part-time students work while enrolled
- + Research in Tennessee found that working students are 10% less likely to complete their degree
- + Working students typically require an extra semester to finish their programs



GLOBAL COMPETITION

Between 2009 and 2023, the proportion of U.S. adults with a postsecondary credential increased from 38% to 54%. While this growth demonstrates progress, the trajectory is insufficient to meet future workforce demands. Other countries are expanding educational attainment more rapidly:

- + Between 2011 and 2022, U.S. credential holders increased by 8 percentage points
- + During the same period, credential holders increased by:
 - 16 percentage points in the Netherlands
 - 10 percentage points in the United Kingdom
 - 9 percentage points in OECD countries overall

CURRENT SCHEDULING CHALLENGES

Traditional scheduling practices create unintended barriers for students. [Ad Astra's 2024 Benchmark Report](#), a comprehensive analysis reveals several critical challenges that institutions must address:



26% of program requirements are **not offered during the terms** indicated in pathway guidance

- + Nearly one-quarter of course sections (23%) are overloaded (exceeding the 95% enrollment ratio threshold), while about 45% of all sections are underutilized (the enrollment ratio is less than 70%).
- + Scheduling imbalance presents a significant opportunity to improve student success. Institutions that improve their enrollment ratio have improved retention by about 0.5% percent.



A FRAMEWORK FOR CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

Building a healthy scheduling culture requires intentional change management that acknowledges both the technical and adaptive challenges institutions face. Our framework focuses on three essential stages that align with proven change management approaches while providing clear, actionable steps for implementation.

Creating a Culture of Strategic Scheduling: Understanding Your Current Environment

Before embarking on transformative change in academic scheduling, institutions must conduct a thorough **assessment of their readiness for change across three critical dimensions: current scheduling practices, stakeholder perspectives, and institutional context**. This foundational analysis ensures that subsequent changes are built on a clear understanding of existing strengths and challenges.

When examining current scheduling practices, institutions must evaluate both their **operational processes and outcomes**. This includes analyzing how courses are currently scheduled and assigned, understanding the impact of these practices on student success, identifying existing bottlenecks and inefficiencies, and assessing resource utilization patterns. This analysis often reveals opportunities for improvement that might otherwise go unnoticed in day-to-day operations.

Stakeholder perspectives form another crucial element of the assessment. **Faculty concerns and priorities** must be understood and addressed, while student needs and preferences must guide scheduling decisions. Additionally, institutions must realistically evaluate their **administrative capabilities, constraints, and staff capacity** to implement and sustain change.

The broader institutional context also plays a vital role in change readiness. **Past experiences with change initiatives** often shape current attitudes toward transformation. Available resources, technical infrastructure, and cultural barriers all influence an institution's capacity for change and must be carefully considered in planning. San Jose State University demonstrates success in managing change through strategic optimization and campus-wide collaboration.



BUILDING A STRATEGIC SCHEDULING TEAM

Successful transformation requires a strong guiding coalition in the form of a Strategic Scheduling Team that brings together diverse perspectives and expertise. This team must include representatives from three key groups:

- 1 Leadership representatives** bring strategic vision and institutional authority to the team. This includes academic affairs administrators, department chairs, student success leaders, and technology directors who can champion the initiative and remove institutional barriers.
- 2 Frontline practitioners** provide crucial operational expertise and day-to-day implementation insights. Faculty members, academic advisors, scheduling staff, and data analysts ensure that changes are practical and effective at the ground level.
- 3 Student support specialists** ensure that scheduling changes align with student needs and support services. Success coaches, financial aid representatives, career services staff, and student life professionals bring valuable perspective on how scheduling impacts the complete student experience.

This team must embody CCA's commitment to collaborative leadership and approaches that can benefit any student. Team members must be selected not only for their roles but for their demonstrated commitment to student success and institutional transformation.

CREATING URGENCY THROUGH DATA

The Strategic Scheduling Team must leverage institutional data to build a compelling case for change. This data-driven approach must examine three key areas:



Student impact metrics provide direct evidence of how current scheduling practices affect student success. Course availability rates, the leading statistic Degree Velocity®, gateway course completion rates, and program pathway blockages help identify where scheduling creates barriers to student progress.



Resource utilization data reveals operational inefficiencies and opportunities for improvement. Analysis of classroom usage patterns, faculty teaching loads, course fill rates, and schedule compression helps optimize institutional resources while improving student access.



Financial implications demonstrate the business case for change. Examining cost per graduate, revenue implications, resource allocation efficiency, and completion rate impacts helps secure institutional support and resources for transformation.

Capacity Building

Successfully transforming academic scheduling requires more than just technical training. Institutions must build comprehensive capacity for both the technical and adaptive aspects of scheduling transformation. This dual focus ensures that changes are not only implemented effectively but become deeply embedded in institutional culture.



Technical Knowledge Development

A strong technical foundation is essential for effective scheduling transformation. Staff must develop robust data analysis skills, including the ability to understand student success metrics, analyze enrollment patterns, evaluate resource utilization, and track progress indicators. Technology proficiency is equally crucial, encompassing scheduling software expertise, data visualization tools, communication platforms, and project management systems. Additionally, operational understanding must be developed around pathway development, course sequencing, resource optimization, and schedule construction.



Adaptive Skill Development

The human side of change requires equal attention through the development of adaptive skills. Change leadership capabilities are fundamental, including stakeholder engagement, resistance management, communication strategies, and coalition building. Cross-functional collaboration becomes increasingly important as institutions work to coordinate teams, integrate processes, resolve conflicts, and facilitate shared decision-making. Equity-minded practice must be woven throughout, emphasizing data disaggregation, impact analysis, inclusive decision-making, and systematic barrier removal.



Implementation Support

Sustained support is crucial for successful implementation. Institutions must provide comprehensive training resources, including regular workshops, online tutorials, reference materials, and best practice guides. Ongoing assistance through technical support, peer mentoring, expert consultation, and problem-solving help ensures that teams can overcome challenges as they arise. Progress monitoring through data dashboards, regular check-ins, feedback mechanisms, and assessment tools helps keep transformation efforts on track.

STAGE 3

Reinforcing and Sustaining Change

Sustainable transformation requires ongoing attention to both results and culture. This final stage focuses on measuring impact, celebrating progress, and ensuring long-term sustainability.

MEASURING IMPACT

A comprehensive measurement strategy examines multiple dimensions of success. Student success metrics track improvements in course completion rates, credit accumulation, gateway course success, retention, and graduation rates. Operational efficiency measures assess resource utilization, schedule optimization, cost effectiveness, and process improvements. Equity outcomes must be carefully monitored through gap closure progress, demographic impacts, access improvements, and success rate equity. Montgomery College has improved course completion by focusing on improving equitable outcomes through scheduling efficiency.





CELEBRATING PROGRESS

Regular celebration and recognition reinforce positive change. Consistent communication through data updates, success stories, team achievements, and student testimonials maintains momentum. Recognition programs including team awards, individual acknowledgments, department achievements, and innovation highlights help embed new practices in institutional culture. Knowledge sharing through best practices, lessons learned, implementation tips, and challenge solutions creates a learning community focused on continuous improvement.

SUSTAINING CHANGE

Long-term sustainability requires ongoing attention and support. Continuous improvement processes must include regular assessment, strategy refinement, process updates, and policy alignment. Stakeholder engagement must be maintained through ongoing feedback, regular updates, partnership maintenance, and community building. Resource support through budget alignment, staff development, technology updates, and infrastructure maintenance ensures that changes can be sustained over time. An example of an assessment tool is Ad Astra's Course Scheduling Diagnostic Survey, a tool that provides an institution with a level of institutional course scheduling infrastructure and information on how to progress to the next level of course scheduling maturity.

SMART SCHEDULING: A STRUCTURE PILLAR STRATEGY

CCA's Structure pillar focuses on building course road maps that make the path to a degree or valued workplace credential clear. Smart scheduling serves as a critical strategy within this pillar, ensuring that the structured pathways institutions create are supported by scheduling practices that remove barriers rather than create them.

Structure pillar strategies—including Math Pathways, Meta Majors, Academic Maps & Milestones, Smart Schedules, and Stackable Certificates & Credentials—work together to create clear, navigable pathways for students. Smart scheduling ensures that these pathways are not just theoretical constructs but practical realities that students can actually follow to completion.

Institutions must align their scheduling practices with their structured pathways to guarantee students can access the courses they need when they need them. This alignment transforms scheduling from an administrative function into a strategic student success intervention that directly supports completion goals.

By following this comprehensive approach to culture change, institutions can transform their scheduling practices in ways that significantly improve student success while creating sustainable, positive change in institutional culture. This transformation requires patience, persistence, and a long-term commitment to both technical excellence and cultural evolution.



CONCLUSION

Building a healthy culture for academic scheduling represents a critical opportunity to advance both institutional effectiveness and student success. The data clearly shows the **urgent need for transformation**, while our framework provides practical **guidance for implementation**.

This work demands sustained **commitment to both excellence and equity, supported by clear change management strategies and practical implementation tools**. Through thoughtful planning, effective implementation, and ongoing assessment, institutions can create a scheduling culture that truly serves all students while optimizing institutional resources.

Institutions must **review and revise their current scheduling policies and practices to align with smart scheduling principles** that prioritize student success over administrative convenience. This includes examining course offering patterns, registration processes, and resource allocation decisions through the lens of student completion and equity.

The path forward demands **patience and persistence**, but the potential impact—dramatically improved completion rates, reduced equity gaps, and enhanced institutional effectiveness—makes this transformation both necessary and urgent. By combining CCA’s proven strategies for scaled change with Ad Astra’s expertise in strategic scheduling, institutions can **create lasting cultural change** that supports both operational excellence and student success.

For institutions ready to transform their scheduling culture and improve student outcomes, **Complete College America and Ad Astra offer comprehensive support and expertise**. Contact Complete College America to learn about proven strategies for scaled institutional change, or reach out to Ad Astra to explore strategic scheduling solutions and assessment tools. Together, CCA and Ad Astra can help your institution build the scheduling culture needed to meet completion goals and serve all students effectively.



About Ad Astra

Ad Astra is the only end-to-end academic scheduling solution for efficiently building high-quality schedules that drive student progress while supporting financial sustainability. Our intuitive solution simplifies room, course, faculty, and event scheduling, while also enabling strategic initiatives like Annual Scheduling, Shortened Terms, and Degree and Transfer Pathways.

More than just a technology provider, Ad Astra serves as a strategic advisor to 550+ partners, leveraging deep industry expertise, data-driven insights, and evidence-based practices to streamline processes and achieve better student outcomes.



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About Complete College America

Complete College America (CCA) builds movements for scaled change and transforms institutions. Specifically, CCA drives systemic change that leads to better college completion rates; more equitable outcomes; and greater economic and social mobility, especially for historically excluded students. CCA operates at the federal, state, and institutional levels and works with its national network of forward-thinking state and higher education leaders. Since its founding in 2009, CCA and its network have introduced bold initiatives that help states and institutions implement data-driven policies, student-centered perspectives, and equity-driven practices.



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