

UNDERSTANDING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE THROUGH THE LOSS/MOMENTUM FRAMEWORK:

Clearing the Path
to Completion

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About the Authors

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Rob Johnstone leads the RP Group's national programs and provides strategic consulting & technical assistance that help community colleges across the country improve student completion outcomes. Through his work on projects such as the RP Group's Bridging Research, Information and Culture (BRIC) Initiative, the Gates Foundation's Completion by Design initiative, and the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, he has catalyzed the evolution of college cultures that use inquiry, research and evidence at the practitioner level to create the conditions for change. Dr. Johnstone has over a decade of experience as a Director, Dean, and Vice President of Instruction in community colleges in California, and brings a practitioner's experience and perspective to bear on complex structural issues. Dr. Johnstone also served as a strategic consultant in industry prior to his work in higher education, where he specialized in working with companies on how to utilize information and analytics to more purposefully manage customer relationships.

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- The Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence - www.aspeninstitute.org/policy-work/aspens-prize/about
- Bridging Research, Information & Cultures (BRIC) – www.rpgroup.org/projects/BRIC.html
- Student Support (Re)Defined - www.rpgroup.org/projects/student-support
- Hewlett Leaders in Student Success - www.rpgroup.org/hewlettleadersinstudentsuccess

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SARAH'S STORY



Two years after Sarah graduates from high school, she applies to her local community college. Sarah cannot wait to start this next phase of her life; finally, she is getting the chance to take the classes she likes and will become more independent. Knowing that college will be a stretch financially and that her part-time job just covers her living expenses, she immediately registers for a financial aid workshop. At the workshop, she hears that meeting with an academic counselor could help her figure out the right classes to take. She sets up an appointment and while she is on campus, she takes her placement test (even though she hasn't had time to study).

At her counseling session, Sarah finds out that she is not quite “college-ready” (she is not sure what that even means!) and needs to take developmental education courses. Even worse, she is confused—how can she be placed in Introductory Algebra when she passed high school algebra years ago? On top of this news, the counselor wants her to choose a major and create an educational plan, but Sarah has no idea what she wants to study, let alone what she wants to do with the rest of her life. She takes a deep breath, follows the counselor’s advice to join a learning community and picks a smattering of other classes that seem interesting.

Over the next three years, Sarah struggles to stay motivated. The money from financial aid is not enough for her to pay for her education and her escalating rent, so she takes another job that eats up much of her time and energy, requiring her to reduce her course load to part-time. She tries to keep in touch with the counselor and stick to her educational plan, but there are only so many hours in the day. The semester is challenging, but Sarah manages to pass her courses. She is determined to finish what she started and earn her bachelor's degree and chooses healthcare as her career path.

Reinvigorated, Sarah makes an appointment with her counselor to redo her educational plan. Unfortunately, many of the classes she has taken so far do not count towards a degree in her program, and some of the new classes she needs are full. To make things worse, a course that is key to her progress in her program is not being offered that semester. To speed things along, she concurrently enrolls at another college nearby; this helps her meet her requirements, but juggling two colleges with different systems and approaches to teaching can get confusing. Feeling overwhelmed and defeated, she wonders if she should just drop the whole idea of college—at this rate, she feels as though she'll never graduate.

Sarah takes another deep breath and decides to keep on going. She reduces her work hours and enrolls in a summer session. After nearly six years in college, Sarah sees the finish line approaching. Soon she will have enough credits to transfer to the nearby four-year college, though she will not get her associate's degree. Having waited this long, and seeing no real value in spending more time just to get a credential that is not her end goal, Sarah transfers. More than anything she is ready to just move on to the next step in her life. Surely once she gets to the university, this will all be a lot easier . . .

right?

Introduction

Why do so many students struggle to complete their educational goals in a timely manner, or at all? As we can see from Sarah's story, students who are motivated and excited about college are often derailed in their quest for credentials or transfers. While Sarah's life outside of school sometimes gave her a raw deal, she also encountered a number of obstacles just trying to move through the institution and achieve her goals. Across the nation, community colleges are exploring how they can align their systems, programs and services to best meet student needs and help them to succeed in this global economy.

In today's economic climate, community colleges are one of the most essential resources for low-income Americans seeking a better life. At the same time, colleges are facing disheartening educational outcomes for the students they want to help most. Across the country, schools have poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into new initiatives and interventions that have promised to turn things around for their students, only to find that limited, if any, progress has been made. In the face of these stubbornly low credential attainment and transfer rates, paired with tapped-out community college budgets, it is vital that college practitioners find a fresh way of building student success.



Additional information about *Completion by Design* and other relevant studies can be found at www.completionbydesign.org and in the list of Additional Resources at the end of this guide.

How Can You Use This Guide?

In the first half of this guide, we begin by defining the concept of the “student experience” and showing how it can fundamentally turn around discussions among college leaders and practitioners about the institution's programs and services. Next, we introduce the Loss/Momentum Framework as a means to better understand the student experience and identify the specific areas within a college that, when addressed, could be the lynchpins for reform and redesign.

In the second half, we provide a step-by-step guide to exploring the student experience, using the Loss/Momentum Framework, and discovering areas for further inquiry as the first step toward transforming students' educational journey. With each step, we offer examples, discussion questions and relevant resources to aid in your discovery.

With the information and tools provided, both community college leaders and practitioners can begin developing an in-depth understanding of students' educational journeys at your institution. This work can be conducted at the institutional level or within a particular program, major, or discipline (referred to here as a “program of study,” a structured set of courses with clearly defined requirements and outcomes). By investigating students' journeys across the institution or in a program of study, you will

be able to identify how students' interactions with the college's systems, processes and personnel either facilitate or impede the achievement of their educational goals. Finally, you will be equipped with the information you need to begin to strategize about how to remove obstacles in the educational pathway and expedite student success.

It is important to note that while the exploration and activities suggested in this guide can be conducted by individual community college administrators, faculty or staff, their effectiveness is greatly amplified when shared among a team. In particular, a diverse team that brings together leaders and practitioners at different levels of the institution, along with students themselves, will be empowered by this new approach to building student success by enacting real and lasting change.

Community Colleges Seeking Answers

Colleges across the country have been working diligently for years to boost the success of under-performing student groups. While “success” has had different definitions at different times, it is increasingly interpreted as completion of awards, certificates, degrees and transfer. When examining students' achievement of this success, many colleges find stark gaps between student groups and seek to address that inequity. These interventions are usually directed at specific needs of certain students; as such, many are quite limited in their impact and only nibble at the edges of students' educational experience. While these supports can help individual students, they are less likely to transform the fundamental facets of the institution that might be impeding student success—not just for these identified types of students, but for all students.

Moreover, many institutional challenges such as improving transfer rates or achievement of credentials are discussed in isolation. Colleges often ask questions like “How can we move transfer rates from 15% to 20%?” or, “How can we increase completion rates among developmental education students?” While it is important to look to the “bottom line” as a measure of accountability, a problem such as low transfer rates is a product of a great number of complex interactions between the student and the institution. Looking at student outcomes in a conventional bottom-line way limits a college's ability to peel back the layers of *why* certain favorable or unfavorable results have developed, and what *specific elements* of students' paths from enrollment to graduation made the difference between their success and failure.

Without this critical information, reform efforts can struggle to get to the heart of what needs to change at the college in order to catalyze student achievement. In the sections below, we will explore how to uncover these essential data and use them to spur the kind of substantive inquiry that ultimately leads to meaningful change for the institution.

What is Completion by Design?



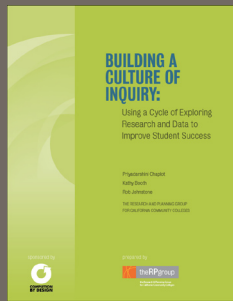
Completion by Design is a five-year initiative sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Through this project, cadres of community colleges within three states—Florida, North Carolina and Ohio—are working to increase the ability of students to succeed by developing coherent pathways of study. Completion by Design has identified three key completion goals on which to focus: earning certificates and degrees, transferring to four-year institutions and raising their value in the labor market.

The aim of the initiative is to raise community college completion rates for large numbers of students while containing college costs, maintaining open access and ensuring the quality of college programs and credentials. The Completion by Design initiative provides each cadre with grants as well as a broad range of technical assistance and other supports. These supports include assistance in data gathering and use; cost and productivity gains; research about implementation options; change management including policy change; and faculty engagement.

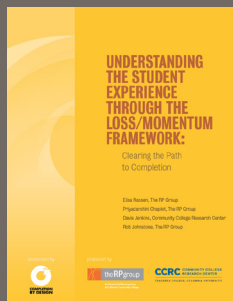
In addition to monetary funds to catalyze implementation of the proposals from the planning year, these colleges are receiving strategic support within their own cadre from a managing partner as well as focused technical assistance from a host of national partners. This support includes on-campus presentations, workshops and within-cadre convenings from national assistance partners such as the RP Group, Public Agenda and Columbia University's Community College Research Center (CCRC). In addition, the national assistance partners work with the Foundation as well as each other to engage colleges in the implementation strategy while maintaining a focus on practitioner engagement. This engagement focuses on such issues as exploring and integrating research evidence into strategy, engaging in difficult conversations around the implications of implementation and empowering practitioners to visualize the changes in their own work as a result of the implementation. Equipped with such varied support, these cadres work collaboratively to review, rethink and ultimately, redesign their organizational systems to raise student completion rates. Instrumental in this redesign process is the act of student-focused inquiry that the cadres will use to fundamentally rethink their systems. This activity requires administrators, faculty, student services professionals and students to:

- Construct thoughtful questions to better understand the student experience
- Face realities about the status quo
- Collect and examining various types of data
- Interpret the evidence among colleagues
- Collectively engage in passionate discourse on how to interpret this evidence and use it to inform action

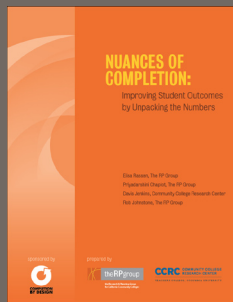
In completing each of these critical steps, colleges are evolving from institutions that work with cultures of evidence to institutions that work with cultures of inquiry.¹ In order to bring these concepts to other colleges around the country, a set of four inquiry guides documenting these approaches and insights has been developed:



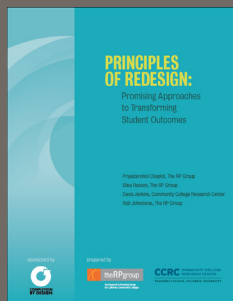
Building a Culture of Inquiry: Using a Cycle of Exploring Research and Data to Improve Student Success explores the concept of a culture of inquiry and introduces a framework to strengthen a college's ability to better use research and evidence to inform improvement efforts.



Understanding the Student Experience Through the Loss/Momentum Framework: Clearing the Path to Completion introduces an approach to examining students' own experiences at community college, identifying factors that catalyze and impede student progress and using these insights to address opportunities to improve student outcomes.



The Nuances of Completion: Improving Student Outcomes by Unpacking the Numbers examines the hidden complexity of completion outcome data and offers an approach to teasing out the complex factors that affect student completion in order to boost student success.



Principles of Redesign: Promising Approaches to Transforming Student Outcomes presents eight core ideas to help colleges address the fundamental challenges to student success.

The Student Experience

This section examines the concept of the “student experience.” We provide a definition for this term and discuss why it is a critical component of any community college’s effort to improve student outcomes. We focus here on students who are seeking credentials, transfer and/or increased labor market value. However, it is important to remember that a noteworthy number of students at many community colleges have enrolled for personal enrichment rather than to achieve these specific goals.

What is the “Student Experience”?

Within the context of this guide and the work of Completion by Design, the phrase “student experience” refers to the series of interactions between the student and the college. The student experience starts when prospective students first make a connection to higher education, and it continues through to that student’s exit. Throughout this complex journey, students interact with college personnel (e.g., instructors and counselors), college structures and systems (e.g., placement/assessment processes and class scheduling) and college policies (e.g., rules around retaking placement tests). Each of these interactions makes an impact on whether students will continue on in their studies toward successful completion or whether they will drop out along the way.

To understand the student experience, it helps to first visualize the journey of one student. To get started, one might imagine the board game “Game of Life.” Kids playing this game move small cars around a twisting and turning pathway that leads from one end of the board to the other, encountering both obstacles and shortcuts as they try to go to college, earn money, buy insurance, avoid getting sued and work toward living happily ever after.

With that in mind, practitioners can select a particular student they have gotten to know or worked with and trace that student’s experience from start to finish. It might be helpful to think back to Sarah’s journey, described at the start of this guide. What were the meaningful steps forward and backward in her progress toward completion? Aspects of the student experience that would be useful to consider include:

- Demographic information, such as financial status (for example, low-income or financially secure), academic preparation (college-ready or needing remediation) and educational goal
- Students’ initial engagement with the institution, including how the decision to attend community college was made, what happened during the assessment/ placement process, access (or lack thereof) to financial aid and selection of a major or program of study
- Movement through coursework, such as the ease or difficulty of completing the developmental education sequence, gaining entry to needed courses, deciding on a focus area or program of study, understanding what’s required in that program and in what sequence and moving from one level of that program to the next
- Quality of instruction and student learning, such as the effectiveness of pedagogical approaches used by instructors, students’ level of preparedness to succeed in the

next course in the sequence or program of study and alignment between programs of study and relevant labor market or transfer opportunities

- Use of support systems to overcome obstacles, such as advising, counseling, financial aid, tutoring and individualized support from instructors, and the level of effectiveness of each of these supports
- Completion of their goals, including the process of finishing the last few needed courses, securing required forms, paying necessary fees and ensuring that coursework articulates to their four-year institution of choice

Of course, each student engages with the institution and its programs in a unique way based on a number of factors, such as academic strengths or weaknesses, personal interests, or economic stability. Nonetheless, there are certain events and encounters with the institution that *all* students experience during their path to completion. While no college can account for the life challenges and personalities of every single student, a college that is able to identify those common institutional events and encounters is primed to make changes where needed.

Like drivers on a highway who utilize a variety of on-ramps and off-ramps but are all headed in the same direction, each student's experience has distinctive components within the shared progression toward educational goals such as credentials, transfers or increased labor market value. Much like drivers who must slow down or exit the highway due to traffic, accidents or road construction, all students come up against obstacles that impede progress and might dissuade them from reaching their educational destination. Colleges that can help remove those roadblocks have the power to clear the way for students to make meaningful progress toward their goals.



DISCUSS

1. What interactions do your students have with your college's programs, structures, systems and policies that contribute to their student experience? In each of these interactions, how does your institution help students progress through their journey or perhaps introduce obstacles?
2. How much of your students' educational outcomes do you feel is the result of internal factors (their own motivation, drive or personality) as opposed to external factors (college structures, systems and processes)? Why?
3. Think of different types of students at your institution. Whose experiences do you want to explore and better understand? For what reasons?
4. When you envision those students' journey through your institution, which parts of the journey are most familiar to you—places where you fully understand specific interactions between the student and the college? Which parts of the experience are less familiar to you? How can you get more information about those unfamiliar parts of a student's journey at your college?

Why Does Understanding the Student Experience Matter?

Understanding the student experience allows colleges to, perhaps for the first time, truly investigate the numerous systems, protocols, departments and personnel that each and every student encounters on the way to completion outcomes²—*these are the building blocks of completion*. Looking at the college from the students' perspective begins to reveal why past interventions, however well-intentioned, have not consistently had a transformative impact on outcomes for large numbers of students. While adding extra support programs can assist struggling students, these programs are unable to address barriers to completion that might be fundamental to the institution and/or its programs of study.

Community colleges and four-year institutions have historically set up their operational infrastructures based on the services delivered, such as student services or instruction. This makes sense from an internal organizational standpoint since there are clear lines of responsibility and ownership over individual functions. However, for the student, this creates a series of discrete interactions to navigate, which can create an experience that to them feels inconsistent and disconnected.

For example, consider the impact of the course schedule for students in a particular program of study. The schedule for the upcoming semester is likely put together far in advance based on numerous different factors, each of which is located in a different part of the institution. These factors often include administrative management of course fill rates and associated costs; faculty availability; student demand; classroom or lab availability; accessibility of resources for certain course materials; and/or the time it takes to develop a new curriculum. However, the student engages with all of those components in a singular experience: she or he needs to be able to enroll in a specific course to meet the requirements of a program of study. When that course is unavailable because the numerous “ingredients” of the course schedule have all come from separate silos, the student's future can be derailed.

College leaders and practitioners who are able to holistically comprehend the student experience are better equipped to align programs with services that provide stronger structures that help expedite the path to completion.

Defining the Loss/Momentum Framework

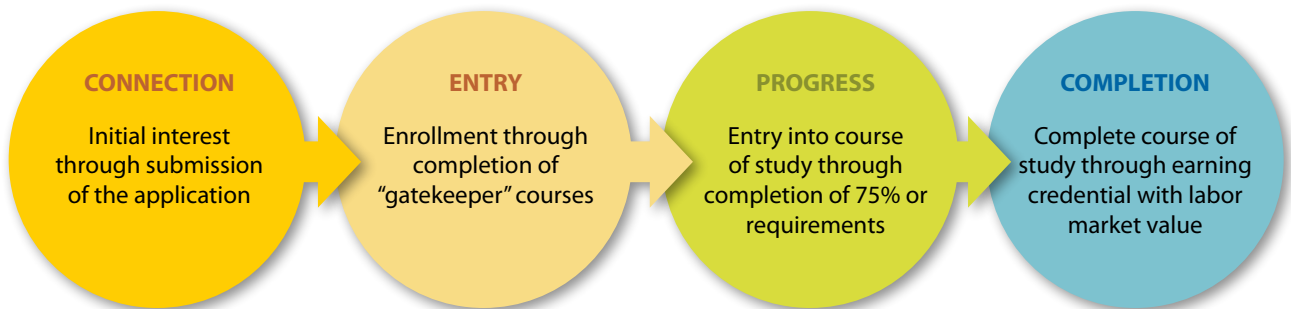
This section introduces the Preventing Loss, Creating Momentum Framework, a tool that helps organize the student experience into four key phases that comprise the educational journey.³ Furthermore, the Loss/Momentum Framework provides a mechanism for colleges to identify in each of those phases, how their structures, systems, policies and personnel either facilitate or impede their students' success.

First, we explore each phase of the student experience by defining and describing the interactions that occur between the students and institutions. Then, we examine underlying factors that influence community colleges in each of these four areas. Finally, we discuss what "loss points" and "momentum points" are, providing specific examples of each.

An Organizational Tool for Mapping the Path to Completion

In creating the Loss/Momentum Framework, the Completion by Design initiative identified components that are universal to almost every student's experience with postsecondary education. This process resulted in pinpointing four key phases that all students move through. Each phase, no matter how early or late in a student's college journey, entails interactions with the college that can make the difference between the achievement of educational goals, or leaving the college with nothing to show for it.

The Four Phases of the Preventing Loss, Creating Momentum Framework⁴



The Four Key Phases of the Student Experience

Below is a summary of the four phases of the student experience explored in the Loss/Momentum Framework. As with each concept explored in this guide, these phases can be applied both at an institutional level and within a specific program of study.

- In the *connection* phase, students first engage with the idea of going to college. They are provided or gather on their own the information and resources that lead to the decision to attend college in general, and one college in particular. When looking at the student experience at the institutional level, this phase includes students' selection of a community college to attend. When examining the student experience within a particular program of study, this includes students' exposure to different disciplines and career opportunities.
- During the *entry* phase, students arrive at the institution or begin the onramp to a program of study. At the institutional level, this includes admission, financial aid, assessment testing and counseling appointments, as well as the completion of "gatekeeper" courses (such as general education requirements). At the program level, the entry phase begins with students' decision to pursue a particular discipline or program and ends when students have passed the initial required courses or "gatekeepers" for that program.
- When experiencing the *progress* phase, students move from their initial engagement with postsecondary education or a particular educational program to a long-term commitment. Specifically, the Loss/Momentum Framework defines progress specifically as completing program requirements, whether that is completion of a credential/degree or a particular program of study. This includes students' enrollment in the courses they need to achieve their educational goal; the learning experience in each of these courses; and the support that is available to move students closer to completion, both inside and outside the classroom.
- The *completion* phase comprises both the student's final movement through an institution or program and the attainment of his or her end goals: typically, meaningful employment and/or pursuit of further education.

Many community colleges looking to improve student completion rates focus on the connection and entry phases, putting energy and resources into setting students up for success early on. While these efforts are certainly important, each of these four phases represents a critical component of students' educational experience. The progress phase in particular typically receives minimal attention. However, if students cannot gain entry into required courses at the right time or fail to understand what's needed to succeed in their program of study, completion becomes much less likely. Ultimately, ensuring that students encounter systems, structures and support that facilitate their progression through each of these phases offers them the best chance at success.

Loss Points and Momentum Points

The foundation of the Loss/Momentum Framework is a simple idea: within these four phases, students interact with the institution at numerous points. Each of these interactions can boost students' momentum toward completion or cause them to lose steam in pursuing their goals. If community college leaders and practitioners can identify the specific interactions that are catalyzing or impeding student success, then they will be equipped with the information necessary for a targeted strategy to increase student success.

In this framework, “loss points” are junctures at which students often delay or decide not to continue with postsecondary education. In contrast, “momentum points” are interactions with the institution that facilitate and encourage the completion of programs, achievement of credentials and transfer to four-year institutions. While some loss and momentum points can be generalized across many institutions, the Loss/Momentum Framework is designed so that practitioners can examine the specific experiences of their *own* students and identify the loss and momentum points particular to that college, its programs and services and its student demographics.

It is important to note that students themselves must also be held accountable for their own choices that promote or impede success in higher education. No college will be able to ensure perfectly smooth, forward-only movement through the stages of connection, entry, progress and completion for every single student. However, each and every college *can* strive to facilitate effective, efficient advancement and create a structure that, by default, puts students in a position to succeed.

In the tables below, we offer some examples of loss and momentum points.

Sample Momentum Points

Connection	Entry	Progress	Completion
Prospective students receive outreach support that sets up realistic expectations and helps them effectively prepare for college.	Students work with an advisor to create an educational plan and receive follow-up support.	Students participate in a structured program of study in which they are aware at all times of what they need to do to succeed.	Students are incentivized to earn a credential before transferring to a four-year institution.
High school students dually enroll in community college courses, giving them a jump-start on their educational goals.	Students engage in a holistic assessment process that accurately places them in courses commensurate with their skill level.	Students get regular feedback via technology on progress in their program of study.	Students do not face barriers to graduation in the form of fees or paperwork.
High school students are given the placement test for the local community college so they understand their current level of academic preparedness and can make adjustments as needed.	Students meet with financial aid advisors and receive ongoing guidance on funding their educational pursuits.	Students can see a clear connection to and path from their program of study to their desired occupation or transfer destination and major.	Students receive support in transitioning to advanced study and/or career pathways.

Sample Loss Points

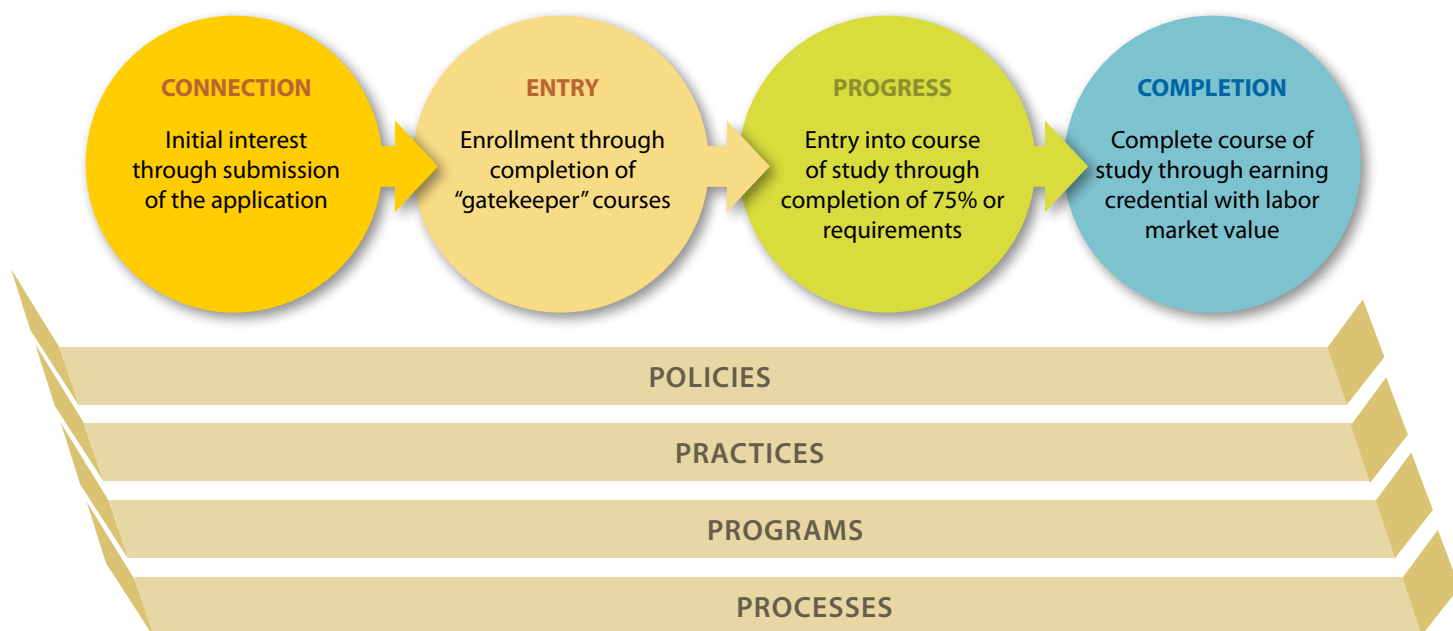
Connection	Entry	Progress	Completion
Prospective students do not learn about their college of choice via outreach activities and arrive poorly prepared for success.	Students do not understand the assessment process and failure to prepare for placement tests results in assignments to courses that are not aligned with real skill levels.	Students are unclear on the requirements for success in their program of study and do not enroll in the right courses in the right sequence.	Students earn a credential that is not “stackable”, or part of a sequence of credentials that accumulate to build students’ qualifications in the field; to pursue further study that would allow advancement in their field, they must start all over again.
Students do not get information about postsecondary options that help them select the college that is the best fit for their skills and goals.	Students must seek help in choosing a program of study on their own and fail to do so early on.	Students encounter limited availability for their required courses, which slows their progress toward completion.	Students receive limited guidance in their choice of courses and accumulate credits that do not lead to a credential.
Students do not meet with financial counselors and fail to understand how much assistance is available to them.	Students complete the developmental education sequence only to find that they are not prepared to succeed in courses in their program of study.	Students lack information about whether their course of study will prepare them for transfer and/or desired careers.	Students accumulate credits that do not count towards a degree and/or are not transferable to a four-year institution.

As can be seen above, students interact with the college during each phase of their educational experiences in ways that have a powerful impact. Colleges that can pinpoint which of these interactions facilitate their success have the opportunity to expand and replicate effective practices. Moreover, colleges that are able to identify the specific interactions creating additional barriers for students are also empowered to work on removing them.

Underlying Factors

The way that students interface with colleges in these four phases is often influenced by four corresponding types of underlying factors: policies, practices, programs and processes. Taking these into consideration, the student experience can be looked at in this way:

The Four Phases of the Preventing Loss, Creating Momentum Framework⁵



Examples of the impact of these underlying factors on both colleges and students are provided below.

- **Policies** set by a department, college, district and/or state can both create limitations and provide opportunities for students. For example, colleges that mandate students' selection of a program of study in a timely manner often see a significant increase in completion outcomes. Other policies that can impact the student experience include college rules about students retaking placement tests and common course numbering across a district or state.
- **Practices** used by faculty and staff in both instruction and student services can impact student learning in both positive and negative ways. For example, developmental education programs that use a contextualized curriculum to give additional meaning to core English and math concepts often see an increase in student interest and learning. On the other hand, colleges whose developmental education courses are poorly aligned (e.g., having multiple sections of a course taught by different instructors without collaboratively defined and assessed learning outcomes that are shared across the course) often end up with students moving from one level to the next with widely varied degrees of preparation.

- **Programs** that are available to support students academically or financially also have structures and regulations that impact a student's ability to benefit from that program. For example, some college counseling departments mandate a certain number of appointments for each student rather than leaving it to students to decide when they are ready for help (often too late). In another example, some support programs require students to enroll full-time before they can receive support, leaving part-time students who are lost in the educational maze without assistance.
- **Processes** embedded in admissions, assessment, enrollment and every other part of an institution must be navigated in order for students to reach completion and can present either roadblocks or reinforcements. For example, a college using a single placement test for initial assessment that is not well-aligned with the institution's educational programs can result in thousands of students being misplaced in developmental education who are in fact college-ready or quite close to it. On the other hand, schools that require students to prepare for the placement test and/or use academic records and other holistic approaches to paint a more comprehensive picture of students' academic readiness might avoid the aforementioned challenges.



DISCUSS

1. How can you and your colleagues increase or enhance outreach activities so that new students are better prepared for success? How can you deepen prospective students' understanding of the expectations they will encounter at a community colleges?
2. How might you and your colleagues accelerate the rate at which new students choose and successfully enter a program? How can you support students who are initially undecided through facilitated/guided exploration?
3. How can you and your colleagues help students in a program of study complete their requirements in a timely fashion? How can you provide support to students during the period between the beginning and end of their educational experience?
4. How could you and your colleagues ensure that all programs of study prepare students for further education and career advancement? How might you assist students who are close to completion in crossing the educational finish line?

Using the Loss/Momentum Framework to Develop a Strategy for Transforming Student Success

Now that we have examined the importance of shifting one's perspective to that of the students themselves, as well as the ways in which the Loss/Momentum Framework can illuminate a pathway to improved student success, it's time to take action.

The following five sections provide a step-by-step guide to translating an understanding of the student experience and the Loss/Momentum Framework into a process for change. The key instrument in this process is visualizing the student experience in a way that traces the interactions that a specific type of student has with their institution. In Step 1, we focus on identifying the problem you wish to solve and gathering pertinent information. Step 2 then guides you in creating this map of students' current experience, either across your institution or within a program of study. With Step 3, you use the Loss/Momentum Framework to assess how the college is catalyzing or impeding students' success. Using Step 4, you identify what an optimized student experience would be and examine the gap between things as they are right now and things as you would like them to be. Finally, with Step 5, you set your priorities for change.

As noted earlier, the impact of these five action steps will be greatly increased if they are undertaken by a thoughtful and diverse group of stakeholders at your institution. No one person can transform student outcomes alone, whether that person is the college president or an adjunct faculty member. However, when leaders and practitioners at all levels work together, they have the capacity to set a clear vision, generate innovative ideas, enthusiastically implement and assess innovations and support effective practices with sustainable resources.

Prepare to Explore the Student Experience

Understanding the student experience begins with identifying the interactions a student has within and outside the institution that impact academic progress. This process of discovery can be undertaken in different ways. One approach is to create a visual diagram or a map of students' interactions with the college, either at the institutional or program level. Many may find that a map of the student experience provides powerful insights about the pathway from connection to completion, one that is often fraught with twists and turns as students make progress and fall back. Others might prefer to create a list of the wide range of offices, services, programs and personnel with which students must engage on the way to achieving their goals. Whichever approach is taken, exploring the student experience offers invaluable information for administrators and practitioners looking to improve student outcomes.

From Examining One Student to a Type of Student

In the previous section, you began to visualize the journey of one student as he or she navigates the maze of procedures, processes, practices and personnel at your institution. When embarking on an exploration of the current student experience, it is important to shift from thinking about one student to a type of student attending your institution.

A student like Sarah might be described as a low-income, development education student, a type that struggles to succeed at most institutions. Shifting from looking at Sarah's specific experiences to the experiences of the group of students to which she belongs might look like this:

Sarah: Takes assessment test without adequate preparation.

Group: Students take assessment tests without adequate pre- and post-test advising and preparation.

Sarah: Chooses too many courses off pathway.

Group: Lack of academic and career advising leads to students taking courses that do not help them meet their specific educational goals.

Sarah: Reduces her work hours and enrolls in a summer session.

Group: Full-time enrollment enables students to take more courses and stay focused.

Sarah: Selects a program of study and works with her counselor to create a new educational plan.

Group: Counselors work with students to identify a career pathway and select a relevant program of study.

Sarah: Required courses are full.

Group: Poor scheduling and coordination across college departments leads to impacted courses.

Keep in mind that students like Sarah represent only one type of student (or student group) that might be struggling at your institution. Your map of the student experience

will need to focus on the specific student type(s) at your institution whose completion outcomes you would like to improve. More guidance on selecting a student group for your inquiry is provided in the next section.

Key Decisions

As you get ready to create a map of the student experience, develop a clear goal for this undertaking: **what barriers to student progress do you want to address at the college, division, department or program level?** While the specific details of what you might want to restructure or rethink will be illuminated by the exploration process, it is important to start by identifying a problem that needs to be solved. Next, decide who else should be involved in this work. In order to lay a foundation for real change, it is essential that there is a coalition in favor of reform. Moreover, in order to develop a thorough understanding of the student experience, you will need voices from all corners of the college, which could include administration, instruction, student services, institutional research, and/or other departments/offices relevant to your inquiry. In addition, enabling students to participate in the discussion offers a powerful opportunity to gain important insights.

Once you have considered the above issues, you are ready move through some key decisions with your collaborative group. First, **choose type(s) of students whose journey(s) will be traced.** Most colleges know which groups of students struggle the most to complete educational goals. Examples of these can include developmental education students, low-income students, students from a particular ethnic group, or a subset of students in a particular program of study. Sometimes it is helpful to think in terms of having a big impact: which student type encompasses a significant portion of the student body? Furthermore, you will want to trace the experiences of students who interact with the institution in a variety of ways, including both instruction and student services, so that you can shed light on how each facet of the college is catalyzing or inhibiting success.

Next, select the start and end points of your exploration. The parameters of the student experience are flexible. You can begin with the moment students connect with higher education and end with departure from the institution. On the other hand, an investigation into a specific program of study might start with students' choice of that program in their educational plan and end with the earning of a certificate or degree.



DISCUSS

1. For which types of students would it be most important to explore their educational journeys at your college? Why examine these types of students in particular—what do you think investigating their experience would reveal?
2. To explore these students' experiences in a collaborative way, who else needs to be engaged in the conversation? Who knows those students the best? Who understands the related programs and services?
3. How would you articulate the value of understanding the student experience to these individuals?

STEP

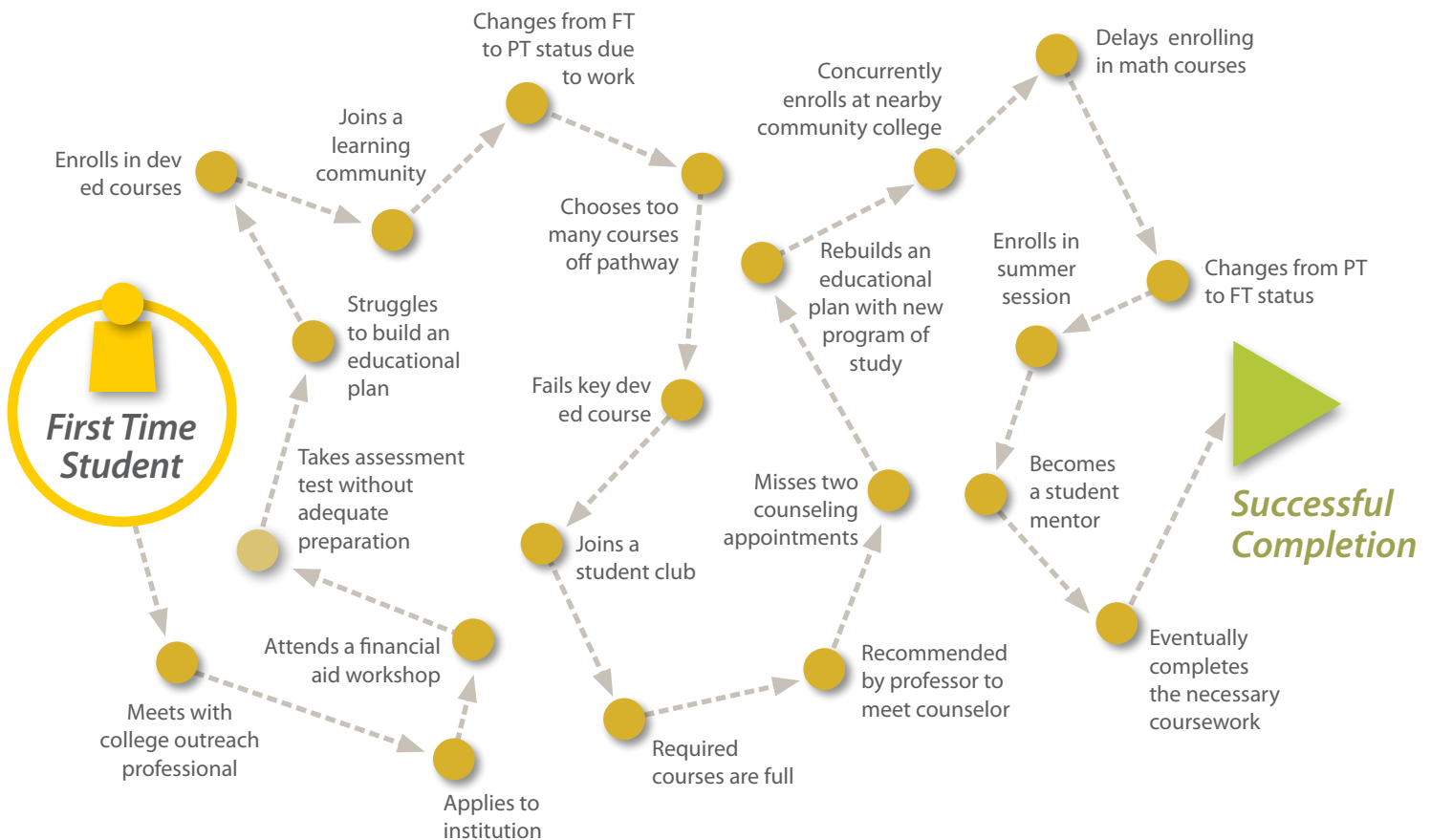
2

Ascertain Your Students' Current Experience

With this information in hand, you are ready to investigate the current student experience. In doing so, you will identify the ways in which the selected type of student currently interfaces with the institution's programs, services, activities, faculty and staff. In order to paint a more holistic picture, it may be helpful to include any factors outside the institution that can also impact students' academic progress.

As we discussed earlier, visualizing the student experience in the form of a map can have a powerful impact and provide numerous insights. For some, it might be easiest to start with the experience of one student and then translate those interactions for a type of student; others might want to jump immediately to looking at a group of students. The transformation of Sarah's story into a visual map might look like this:

For some, it can be challenging to transition from thinking in terms of lists and bullet points to thinking visually. An alternative approach is to use an actual map of the college campus to trace students' daily movement between campus departments on the campus map as they work to get their needs met and succeed in their coursework.



This map clearly shows the meandering and confusing route that many students take when trying to navigate between the wide range of departments, offices and personnel—each with its own systems, processes and policies. While not every student will engage in every interaction, it is critical to be as thorough as possible in this exercise. Your map does not need to look exactly like this one; for example, this sample map shows the current student experience at the institutional level, while yours might focus on a students' experience with a particular department or program of study.

For those who prefer not to create a diagram, a bulleted list can also encapsulate students' interactions with the institution. Using the details of Sarah's story once again, an exploration of her experience could begin in this way:

- Meets with college outreach personnel
- Applies to the institution
- Attends a financial aid workshop
- Takes assessment test without adequate preparation

While both approaches will enable you to identify the interactions with the college that comprise your students' current experience, creating a map is often particularly revealing. A map of the student experience can help community college administrators and practitioners truly grasp the challenges that students face in reaching their goals, traveling from one end of campus to the other as they engage with separately managed departments, offices and programs on a daily basis. With each interaction, students might inch forward or be nudged backward on the path to completion.

Finally, it is important to recognize that analyzing the student experience can be a challenging process, revealing unpleasant realities about systems and processes that are standing in the way of student success. Discovering that your institution or program is unintentionally inhibiting student progress does not mean that the college and its practitioners are not devoted to the students and committed to their success. Ultimately, only a candid assessment of the college's or program's strengths and weaknesses will create opportunities to truly transform student outcomes at your institution.



DISCUSS

1. What are the key characteristics of the type of student you have selected? For example, consider demographics, level of academic preparation, majors and number of students in the group.
2. What are the most common pathways that these students take at your institution? How do you know?
3. In what ways could students themselves contribute information about their experiences to your map?
4. After you have completed your map, how would you articulate what it reveals about your students? With whom would you want to share what you have learned, and for what purpose?

STEP 3

Use the Loss/Momentum Framework

Once the components of the student experience have been identified, either in a map or a list, the next step is to use the Loss/Momentum Framework to identify areas for redesign within that experience. To get started, it is useful to identify the four key phases of connection, entry, progress and completion in your vision of the student group's current experience. If you are using a map, you might overlay what you have so far with shading for each of the phases. If you have created a list, you might create four sub-sections to categorize each experience that corresponds with each phase. In this process, you lay the foundation for understanding the role that each interaction plays in student's educational journey.

Now that you can see which aspects of the student experience belong in each phase of the student's movement toward completion, it is time to identify the specific loss and momentum points. For each point on your map or bullet in your list, discuss with your colleagues whether this interaction with the institution helps students get closer to their goals or presents an obstacle to progress.

There is no type of interaction with the college that is automatically a loss or momentum point; each one must be fully explored to understand its impact on students. For example, meeting with a counselor could easily be at face value considered a momentum point. However, if the institution's counseling staff is not comprehensively informed about the student's options or requirements for certain programs of study, the meeting could turn out to be a loss point. As such, the most important component of discovering loss and momentum points is to identify *how the college engages with the student at each point*—specifically, the quality of that engagement and its impact.

Earlier, we translated Sarah's experiences into interactions that low-income students in developmental education would have with that institution. Returning to that list, the identification of loss and momentum points might look like this:

Experience: Students take assessment tests without adequate pre- and post-test advising and preparation.

Loss or Momentum? If students are not prepared for assessment tests, they are more likely to be placed in courses below their actual skill level, prolonging the path to completion. LOSS

Experience: Lack of academic and career advising leads to students taking courses that do not help them meet their specific educational goals.

Loss or Momentum? When students take a high number of courses that do not contribute toward credentials, transfer, or increased labor market value, it will take them longer to reach those goals. LOSS

Experience: Full-time enrollment enables students to take more courses and stay focused.

Loss or Momentum? Assistance provided by the college that helps students increase their course-load will speed up the path to completion. MOMENTUM

Experience: Counselors work with students to identify a career pathway and select a relevant program of study.

Loss or Momentum? When counselors at the college encourage students to commit to a program of study and help them with the exploration and selection process, students are more likely to achieve their goals in a timely fashion.

MOMENTUM

Experience: Poor scheduling and coordination across college departments leads to impacted courses.

Loss or Momentum? If students are unable to enroll in courses that are critical to progress in their educational pathway, they are more likely to take courses unrelated to their educational goals or “stop out” for a period of time, creating a significant delay in completion. **LOSS**

By identifying which of students’ interactions with the college are loss or momentum points, you are now armed with a meaningful and specific understanding of how your institution both catalyzes and inhibits student success.



DISCUSS

1. Were there any loss and momentum points identified by this process that surprised you? Which ones and why?
2. How do your college’s programs and services help or hinder the ability of these students to compete?
3. How do institutional and state policies affect the progression of these types of students?
4. Are there subgroups within this larger group that might be warrant further investigation?
5. In what capacity and venues can you continue this conversation at the institution?

Envisioning an Optimized Student Experience

The Thinking Behind an Optimized Student Experience

The process of envisioning an optimized student experience is similar to building the current student experience, but the greatest difference lies in the approach. The fundamental question at work here is: What *should* the student experience be? While even an optimized student experience will not be able to guarantee success for all students, it can create a framework that *structures success* in which each student interaction with the college is part of a coherent, intentional educational experience that paves the way to completion.

As was noted earlier, it's important to keep in mind that a unidirectional path that moves smoothly and seamlessly from connection to entry to progress to completion is probably not a realistic outcome for any college. Nonetheless, this exercise provides an opportunity for you to visualize a student experience in which the college's structures continuously and efficiently facilitate students' progress toward their educational goals.

What Does an Optimized Student Experience Look Like?

The key components of this optimized student experience should incorporate both the strengths of the college as revealed in the identified momentum points and best practices in community college education. An optimized student experience will likely include reflection and possibly, revision, at every level of the college, from administrative policies to departmental processes to course instruction. The Completion by Design initiative has identified a number of "principles of redesign," promising practices in increasing student achievement at many institutions that have been built on decades of research. These principles are discussed in depth in *Principles of Redesign: Promising Approaches to Transforming Student Outcomes*. A brief summary of these principles is provided below.

- **Accelerate entry into clear programs of study:** Provide a structured, efficient and strongly guided student progression experience and offer students a clear sequence of courses that lead to completion.
- **Ensure students know the requirements to succeed:** Provide clear information to students about the assessment and placement process as well as the importance of completion; clearly communicate requirements for credentials and the path to achieving them.

- **Minimize time required to get “college-ready”:** Clearly map out program requirements and the program sequence and prescribe a course of study for students based on their goals and level of readiness.
- **Customize and contextualize instruction:** Use program-specific content and experiential learning to make programs such as developmental education relevant to their goal and engaging.
- **Integrate student support with instruction:** Embed student support within instruction where appropriate and ensure this support serves students who need it most.
- **Continually monitor student progress and proactively provide feedback:** Track and celebrate student progress toward goals, provide prompt and tailored feedback and use data on student progress to inform planning and the creation of safety nets.
- **Reward behaviors that contribute to completion:** Consider both monetary and non-monetary incentives (such as recognition) to encourage progress and completion.
- **Leverage technology to improve learning and student delivery:** Use technology to monitor and recognize student progress and to enhance curriculum.

In addition, colleges can learn a great deal about what an optimized student experience might be by listening to the students themselves. In 2012, the Completion by Design initiative collaborated with WestEd and Public Agenda to produce *Connection by Design: Students’ Perception of Their Community College Experiences*.⁶ Researchers conducted focus groups with current and former community college students across four states and found a consistent call from students to be more connected to their institutions. Some of the key findings from this study include:

- When it comes to making decisions about their education, students often do not know until too late what questions to ask.
- Students are concerned about the time commitment involved if more activities become mandatory, such as orientation or student success classes; they want colleges to ensure that any mandatory service is clearly connected to their goals as well as high-quality and engaging.
- Students who were at risk of dropping out wanted the college to be more proactive in reaching out to them with support, even if that support came in the form of emails or text messages.
- Aware of the benefits and drawbacks to both committing to a program of study early on and having time to investigate educational options, students would prefer structured opportunities for exploration.

Whether you choose to start from the information highlighted above, other research-supported effective practices, promising approaches already in place in pockets of your own institution, or new ideas that come out of the diverse voices in your coalition, you can create a clear and precise vision for how your college can best set students on the pathway to completion.

Prioritizing Inquiry and Action

While the steps you have taken so far are critical, the process you have just gone through will not by itself lead to increases in student success. Rather, it must be used as a resource within a larger process of examination, reflection and willingness to implement change.

The first component of this big-picture process of change is prioritizing the loss and momentum points that you have identified. Likely the results of your exploration will show loss points in all four of the core phases of the student experience; however, not all processes and programs can be redesigned simultaneously. Similarly, not all of the momentum points you discovered can be emphasized or scaled up immediately. Moreover, some changes will eventually require extensive investments of time, energy and (perhaps) resources. On the other hand, other points may require only small adjustments to transform a student's interface with a particular part of the institution.

Ultimately, the selection of which loss and momentum points are most urgent to address can be based on institutional priorities, personal perspective built on years of experience, input from and collaboration with peers, and/or conversations with diverse colleagues and students. To get started, consider the following questions:

- Which changes are likely to affect the largest number of students? Which will affect the most vulnerable students?
- Which have the most potential to have a powerful impact on students' intermediate or long-term educational outcomes?
- Are there particular types of students that are at a "tipping point," needing only a small change in a loss or momentum point to catalyze their success?
- Are there areas in the institution or program where loss and momentum points intersect, such that making one change can transform a loss point into a momentum point?
- Consider the political capital and time needed for your proposed redesign efforts; which changes will have a medium or high impact while also being relatively easy to implement politically?
- What changes can you implement in a short timeframe?

Once that selection has been made, the college is ready to dive into further inquiry and, ultimately, reform. While it might be tempting to jump into action based on the discoveries you have made in this process, efforts are more likely to be successful if the next step is further exploration. Some college programs or structures might need only to be tweaked, while others might need to be rethought completely. Ultimately, the more inclusive the process, by engaging administrators, faculty and staff across the college, the better foundation you will have for lasting change.

Final Thoughts

The simple act of looking at community colleges from the students' point-of-view offers both practitioners and leaders a remarkable opportunity to make significant strides in turning around today's often dismaying student outcomes. Moving away from decades of investment in isolated interventions that affect only a small number of students, this guide asks community college practitioners to look at students' journeys with a magnifying lens and use that new vision as a launching pad for meaningful, lasting change.

Additional Resources

Completion by Design

This website shares information about the Completion by Design initiative, including its approach, tools, news, participants, partners and resources.

www.completionbydesign.org/

Completion by Design Knowledge Center

This searchable database catalogs foundational and emerging research and planning documents to support colleges through the stages of planning, decision making and implementation of reform efforts.

<http://knowledgecenter.completionbydesign.org/knowledge-center>

Completion by Design Inquiry Guides

This set of four inquiry guides documents the approaches and insights gleaned from the planning phase of the Completion by Design initiative.

- *Building a Culture of Inquiry: Using a Cycle of Exploring Research and Data to Improve Student Success* explores the concept of a culture of inquiry and introduces a framework to strengthen a college's ability to better use research and evidence to inform improvement efforts.
- *Understanding the Student Experience Through the Loss/Momentum Framework: Clearing the Path to Completion* introduces an approach to examining students' own experiences at community college, identifying factors that catalyze and impede student progress and using these insights to address opportunities to improve student outcomes.
- *The Nuances of Completion: Improving Student Outcomes by Unpacking the Numbers* examines the hidden complexity of completion outcome data and offers an approach to teasing out the complex factors that affect student completion in order to boost student success.
- *Principles of Redesign: Promising Approaches to Transforming Student Outcomes* presents eight core ideas to help colleges address the fundamental challenges to student success.

www.rpgroup.org/content/inquiry-guides

Assessment of Evidence Series

Gathered and synthesized by the Community College Research Center, this large body of research evidence showcases concrete evidence-based recommendations and strategies to practitioners, policymakers and researchers in the following eight major topic areas that may improve the success of community college students.

- Developmental assessment and placement
- Developmental acceleration
- Developmental mathematics pedagogy
- Contextualization of basic skills instruction
- Online learning
- Non-Academic support
- Institutional and program structure
- Organizational improvement

<http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/research-project/assessment-of-evidence.html>

Changing Course: A Guide to Increasing Student Completion in Community Colleges

Developed by WestEd, this guide summarizes key design principles for improving completion rates in order to assist community college practitioners in rethinking and redesigning their systems, programs and instruction.

http://knowledgecenter.completionbydesign.org/sites/default/files/changing_course_V1_fb_10032011.pdf

Changing Course: A Planning Tool for Increasing Student Completion in Community Colleges

Developed by WestEd, this tool offers additional information and strategies, including a series of self-reflective questions to assist colleges in planning their own approaches to improving college completion.

http://knowledgecenter.completionbydesign.org/sites/default/files/changing_course_tool_10032011.pdf

Game Changers Series

Prepared by WestEd, this series includes the following three reports that highlight current efforts and suggested reforms aimed at increasing completion rates:

- *Providing Structured Pathways to Guide Students Toward Completion*
This report outlines issues related to the creation of more structured student pathways.
- *Acceleration in Developmental Education*
This report shares the value of acceleration and highlights key principles of successful acceleration models.
- *Integrating Student Supports and Academics*
This report explores how the integration of student supports and academics can build a more seamless and engaging learning experience for students.

www.wested.org/cs/we/view/spl/185

Stakeholder Engagement: An Overview

Developed by Public Agenda, these materials provide a frame for understanding public engagement and provide a philosophy, best practices and general tools consistent with this technique. This toolkit includes:

- *Principles of Conflict Resolution*
This guide provides a brief overview of conflict management techniques, identifying the popular styles.
- *Public Engagement: A Primer from Public Agenda*
A primer introducing Public Agenda's public engagement philosophy and practices.

<http://knowledgecenter.completionbydesign.org/binder/440/stakeholder-engagement-overview>

Stakeholder Engagement: Facilitation Toolkit

Developed by Public Agenda, this toolkit supports the facilitator and recorder in their work in designing and implementing conversations of engagement. This toolkit includes:

- *Campus and Community Conversations: Working Together for Community College Success*
A step-by-step planning guide on seven key principles for building effective dialogues around improvement efforts
- *Completion by Design Facilitator & Recorder Training, July 25–26, 2011, Miami Dade College*
A guide for facilitators and recorders in group decision-making processes
- *Completion by Design Facilitator's Handbook*
A ready-made reference guide to support Completion by Design facilitators
- *The Recipe for a Great Moderator: A Self Assessment Tool*
This self-assessment tool provides moderators a series of criteria on which they may rank their performance.

<http://knowledgecenter.completionbydesign.org/binder/244/stakeholder-engagement-facilitation>

Stakeholder Engagement: Faculty Buy-In

Developed by Public Agenda, this toolkit focuses on how to engage faculty buy-in through facilitated conversations. The toolkit includes:

- *Changing the Conversation about Productivity: Strategies for Engaging Faculty and Institutional Leaders*
This Public Agenda report explores how to more effectively engage faculty in reform efforts.
- *Engaging Adjunct and Full-time Faculty in Student Success Innovation*
This publication identifies the principles and practices that best support effective faculty engagement.
- *Internal Stakeholder Engagement Workshop Toolkit*
This toolkit is designed to support cadres' and colleges' efforts to more effectively engage key internal stakeholders during the final quarter of the Completion by Design (CBD) planning year.
- *Planning Guide: Campus and Community Conversations*
This planning guide provides a comprehensive overview to Community Conversations.

<http://knowledgecenter.completionbydesign.org/binder/441/stakeholder-engagement-faculty-buy>

Building Research, Information and Cultures Inquiry Guides

Developed by the RP Group, this set of ten inquiry guides support needs of various college constituency groups – faculty, student services professionals, institutional researchers and administrators – in areas of inquiry-based practice at the institution.

- *Assessing Student Learning Outcomes*
- *Assessing Basic Skills Outcomes*
- *Research and Assessment for Noncredit Colleges and Programs*
- *Improving CTE Programs with Data and Evidence*
- *Assessing Strategic Intervention Points in Student Services*
- *Using an Equity Lens to Assess Student Outcomes*
- *Maximizing the Program Review Process*
- *Assessing and Planning for Institutional Effectiveness*
- *A Model for Building Information Capacity and Promoting a Culture of Inquiry*
- *Turning Data into Meaningful Action*

www.rpgroup.org/content/BRIC-inquiry-guides

Endnotes

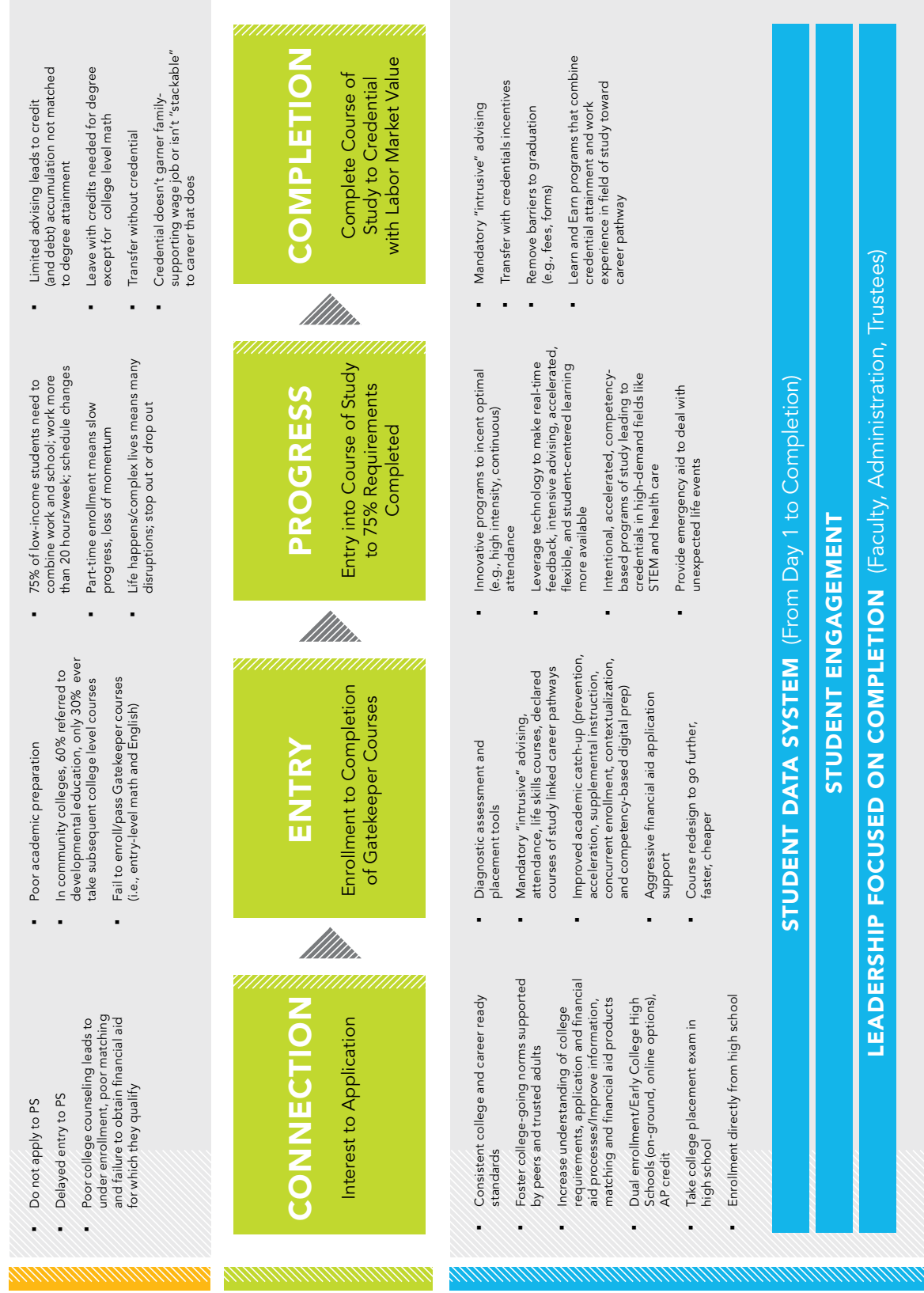
1. Chaplot, P., Booth, K., and Johnstone, R. (2013). *Building a Culture of Inquiry: Using a Cycle of Exploring Research and Data to Improve Student Success*. Berkeley, CA: The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges. www.rpgroup.org/sites/default/files/CbD-Building.pdf
2. As noted earlier, Completion by Design describes completion outcomes as attainment of a credential, transfer to a four-year institution and/or gaining increased labor market value.
3. For the full Preventing Loss, Creating Momentum Framework, please see the Appendix.
4. This graphic represents an excerpt of the Preventing Loss, Creating Momentum Framework. For the full graphic, please see the Appendix.
5. This graphic represents an excerpt of the Preventing Loss, Creating Momentum Framework. For the full graphic, please see the Appendix.
6. Nodine, T., Jaeger, L., Venezia, A., Bracco, K. R. (2013). *Connection by Design: Students' Perceptions of Their Community College Experiences*. San Francisco: WestEd. www.wested.org/cs/we/view/rs/1268

Supporting Student Success: PREVENTING LOSS, CREATING MOMENTUM

a system designed for student completion



Appendix





COMPLETION BY DESIGN

Completion by Design is a five-year Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation initiative that works with community colleges to significantly increase completion and graduation rates for low-income students under 26 while holding down costs and maintaining access and quality. The Gates Foundation has awarded competitive grants to groups of community colleges to help transform their students' experience.



the RPgroup

the Research & Planning Group
for California Community Colleges

Based in Berkeley, CA, the **Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group)** strengthens the ability of California community colleges to undertake high quality research, planning and assessments that improve evidence-based decision making, institutional effectiveness and success for all students.

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Housed at Teachers College, Columbia University, the **Community College Research Center (CCRC)** is the leading independent authority on the nation's nearly 1200 two-year colleges. CCRC conducts research on the major issues affecting community colleges and contributes to the development of practice and policy that expands access to higher education and promotes success for all students.



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