

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

META-MAJORS

AN ESSENTIAL FIRST STEP
ON THE PATH TO COLLEGE COMPLETION

BY ALEXANDRA WAUGH JULY 2016



Transforming the Cafeteria into a Prix Fixe Menu

We know that the completion statistics for low-income and underprepared students enrolled in certificate and degree programs at community colleges are dismal. A growing body of evidence reveals that a central factor in these low completion rates is the “cafeteria” style approach to college, which provides entering students with a dizzying array of choices and little guidance on navigating those choices. Recent brain science research demonstrates that people feel anxiety and irritation when faced with too many choices and, as a result, are more likely to make poor choices or avoid the situation entirely. A poor decision on which classes to take can cost community college students a significant amount of time and potentially mean the difference between earning a credential or degree and stopping or dropping out. This scenario is supported by research in the field, which demonstrates that lack of structure and too many academic options inhibit student progress and completion. Meta-majors are a programmatic response to these findings.

Meta-majors are the prix fixe alternative to the cafeteria style approach to college. Designed with the end (college completion) in mind, and using student’s interests as a starting point, meta-majors provide structure and narrow choices to support student success. They are designed to help students choose

a program of study within the first year of attendance, which increases completion rates significantly. Davis Jenkins and Sung-Woo Cho’s influential study “Get With the Program,” from the Community College Research Center, finds that students entering a program of study within a year of enrollment are far more likely to earn a credential. In fact, more than half of students in the study entering a program within their first year of enrollment earned a certificate or degree, transferred to a four-year institution, or completed a baccalaureate degree at a different institution, compared to 37 percent of students entering a program of study in their second year. “Get with the Program” aligns with earlier longitudinal research by Clifford Adelman, which found that credit accumulation in the first year is a key determinant of student success.

Spurred by Achieving the Dream’s emphasis on using data to guide change directed toward strengthening student outcomes, many community colleges introduced myriad interventions and student support reforms. Research shows that the design and implementation of strategies for improving student success must be comprehensive and focus on the entirety of a student’s experience, integrate programs across the campus, and be implemented at scale to be effective. While the research makes it clear that there is no silver bullet, the insights generated over the past decade have led the field to an evidence-based approach commonly referred to as “structured”

or “guided” pathways, leading campuses to redesign how they interact with students from the point of entry through completion. Meta-majors provide this structure from a student’s entry to college all the way through completion.

Sometimes also referred to as “career clusters” or “communities of interest,” meta-majors refers to the creation of broad program streams such as allied health or business as a key component of guided pathways reforms. Meta-majors have emerged as a viable way for a student to enter a general major or area of interest and complete coursework in this interest area before deciding on a more specific major or program of study. Meta-majors are designed to get students on a pathway quickly. To that end, meta-majors create sets of courses that fulfill academic requirements for a broad discipline or program grouping such as STEM, business, or health sciences. They assist in the early decision-making process for choosing a major or program of study and provide additional structure and guidance for students entering as undecided.

Key Meta-Major Questions to Consider

Jobs for the Future, in partnership with Lorain County Community College and Miami Dade College’s Medical Campus, developed a set of key questions to consider to highlight the five critical decision points for designing and implementing meta-majors:

- **Planning:** Does the college want to implement meta-majors?
- **Review of Programs:** What is the full scope of programmatic offerings at this college?
- **Student Intake:** How will the college place students into meta-majors?
- **Kickoff:** What happens once a student has chosen a meta-major?
- **Progress:** How does the meta-major infrastructure facilitate improved student progress and persistence in their pathway?

Each of the five areas includes a robust set of questions designed to guide college teams through key decisions as they consider whether and how to develop and implement meta-majors. The questions also give states a window into the issues the colleges must consider to implement meta-majors, which could help states align policy so that it accelerates and supports the colleges’ efforts. To explore the complete set of questions, see www.jff.org/meta-majors.

As the field moves toward an understanding of the importance of guided pathways, we turn our attention to the challenges of developing systems and structures that fulfill the promise of improving persistence and completion rates for low-income students. Structures and policies that narrow the overwhelming choices incoming students face and help them get on a clear path toward their goal of earning a credential or a degree are essential to effective guided pathways. Meta-majors are one such structure, replacing the overwhelming number of choices students face with sets of thoughtfully designed menus of options that allow students to complete a set of courses that fulfill basic requirements even before they are ready to settle on a specific career track. Meta-majors and similar programmatic approaches address a fundamental structural barrier that contributed to producing the abysmally low rates of college completion over the past decades. This paper seeks to scale the meta-majors conversation in the field by exploring the concept looking at two in-depth examples from colleges in Ohio and Florida, offering a set of design principles, and posing the key questions to help guide colleges’ thinking.

The full publication is available for download at www.jff.org/meta-majors.