

# Let Students Explore Without Wasting Credits

## THE CHALLENGE

Increase the graduation rate and reduce time to degree.

## THE APPROACH

Create nine "meta-majors" that let students explore an area of study before choosing a specific major.

## THE RESULT

Students are taking fewer unnecessary courses, and the graduation rate has risen by 15 percentage points.

**I**N 2011, student success at Lorain County Community College looked bleak: The retention rate was below 60 percent, and the three-year graduation rate stood at 8 percent.

"We had to challenge ourselves to ask: Do our students deserve more?" says Marcia Ballinger, president of the college, in northern Ohio.

It proved to be a pivotal year. The college was awarded a grant as part of the Completion by Design program, supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, to improve student success at nine institutions.

Over the next five years, Lorain embarked on a number of reforms, including an ambitious redesign of its degree tracks. For years it had let students choose, cafeteria-style, from more than 120 majors — and from many disparate courses to fulfill requirements, says Ballinger. In an effort to save students both time and money, the college scrapped that model and instead created degree programs in nine meta-majors, called Program and Career Pathways, such as business and entrepreneurship, education, and health and wellness. The overhaul, which took full effect in the 2015-16 academic year, was influenced by research endorsed by the Completion by Design program.

Now, new students typically enter a meta-major and start taking core courses. They later pick a specific major

within that meta-major.

The model allows students to explore a range of programs under a thematic umbrella without wasting credits or taking unnecessary courses, says Jonathan Dryden, provost and vice president for academic and learner services. For example, 9 percent of accounting students were taking anatomy and physiology, considered a tough course, to fulfill a science requirement. Now

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they are guided toward science courses more relevant to their major. The model also discourages algebra and subsequent courses unless students need them.

So far the results of all Lorain's efforts, including the academic overhaul, are promising. In 2017, the three-year graduation rate rose to 23 percent.