



# Redesigning College Admissions in Kentucky

*A Case for Collective Action*

2025



The Kentucky  
Student Success  
Collaborative



## About the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education

The Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) is the state's higher education coordinating agency committed to strengthening our workforce, economy and quality of life. We do this by guiding the continuous improvement and efficient operation of a high-quality, diverse and accessible system of postsecondary education.

Key responsibilities include:

- Developing and implementing a strategic agenda for postsecondary education that includes measures of progress.
- Producing and submitting a biennial budget request for adequate public funding of postsecondary education.
- Determining tuition rates and admission criteria at public postsecondary institutions.
- Collecting and distributing data about postsecondary education performance.
- Ensuring the coordination and connectivity of technology among public institutions.
- Licensing non-public postsecondary institutions to operate in the Commonwealth.





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## About the Kentucky Student Success Collaborative (KYSSC)

To accelerate meaningful transformation of student success priorities and challenges, the CPE launched the Kentucky Student Success Collaborative (KYSSC), a first-of-its-kind statewide program supporting holistic student success and greater degree completion. The KYSSC works with diverse campus and community stakeholders to develop and lead collaborative work around critical strategy areas, such as mental health, transfer, gateway courses, basic needs, and adult attainment to advance the state’s strategic agenda and 60x30 goal. The KYSSC is made possible through funding from the James Graham Brown Foundation.

# From the CPE President

Dear Colleagues,

As Kentucky faces workforce demands and increasing questions about the value of a postsecondary credential, we must reexamine every point at which higher education touches a student's life. One of the most critical, and often overlooked, is the moment of entry: admissions.

The policies and processes that shape admissions are the first things students encounter. They influence how students perceive higher education and whether they feel welcomed and supported. Too often, these systems reflect outdated, overly bureaucratic practices and create unnecessary obstacles for students. That's why we are undertaking a strategic redesign of college admissions in Kentucky; not as a matter of procedure, but as a key strategy for boosting enrollment and advancing student success.

As we embark on this work, we cannot limit ourselves to removing barriers alone. We also must focus on proactively building clear, accessible, and student-centered pathways informed by national research and best practices. That means broadening our approach to redesign - ensuring it's not just about meeting enrollment targets, but about nurturing students' desire to learn and equipping them for long-term success.

I am proud of the work of our Kentucky Student Success Collaborative in bringing campuses together to look at admissions processes and procedures from the student's perspective, as well as our campuses for being willing to innovate and collaborate to enhance Student Ready strategies. Lastly, I am truly grateful for Lumina Foundation's support of this important work through its Great Admissions Redesign grant.

As we move forward, I encourage your engagement, your ideas, and your commitment to this shared vision. Together, we can build a higher education system that truly meets the needs of our students and our state.

Sincerely,



Aaron Thompson, Ph.D.  
President, Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education





## A Call to Redesign with Purpose

The transition from high school to postsecondary education should be seamless and easy to navigate. Unfortunately, for many Kentucky students, especially those who are low-income, first-generation, or from underrepresented backgrounds, the admissions journey is often confusing and filled with unnecessary roadblocks. In Kentucky and nationally, college admissions processes can be fragmented and confusing, leading to students giving up on the process and deciding not to enroll, or enrolling but missing out on financial aid and other opportunities.

In response, the Kentucky Student Success Collaborative (KYSSC), an initiative of the Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE), launched a comprehensive admissions redesign effort in partnership with Kentucky's public colleges and universities. Admission redesign offers an opportunity to bolster early postsecondary engagement through dual credit and proactive communication with high school students. Early exploration helps students connect interests to academic pathways, build confidence and feel supported in preparing for higher education.

The KYSSC's admission redesign project has been shaped by more than a year of discovery, student input, and cross-sector engagement, and is aligned with national efforts led by Lumina Foundation which call for a redesign of the college admissions journey to prioritize simplicity and transparency.

### Why Redesign? Why Now?

- Too many Kentucky students face avoidable obstacles in applying, paying for, and enrolling in college.
- Gaps in college-going rates persist across geography, income, and race—even among students who are academically prepared.<sup>1</sup>

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1. National Association for College Admission Counseling, & National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators. (2022). Toward a more equitable future for postsecondary access. <https://www.nacacnet.org/advocacy/student-and-equity-centered-college-admission/toward-a-more-equitable-future-for-postsecondary-access/>

- Students want early, clear, consistent communication and processes designed to address real life challenges and circumstances.
- Research confirms that complicated forms, unclear costs, and confusion about processes are top reasons for “summer melt,” when students who are accepted into college drop out before their first semester.

## The Vision

A simpler, smarter admissions journey that:

- Starts earlier, reaching students as early as 9th grade with proactive messaging.
- Streamlines processes through automation and data sharing.
- Centers student experience, using student journey data to drive policy and practice improvements.
- Ensures all students have access to early postsecondary opportunities like dual credit, strong advising, and financial aid.

## Project and Process Overview

**Purpose:** CPE’s Student Success Collaborative launched the Admissions Redesign project to simplify, modernize, and humanize the college admissions journey for Kentucky students. The goal is three-fold: alleviate stress, increase opportunity, and improve outcomes by creating a more transparent and automated admissions system.

**Process Overview:** Adapted from CivicLab’s nationally recognized Process Wheel for Collaborative Action,” Kentucky’s redesign project followed this student-centered process:

### 1. Map the Landscape

We conducted four statewide discovery projects to understand barriers:

- Data Exploration
- Artificial Intelligence
- Admissions Staff Focus Groups
- Student Journey Mapping

### 2. Elevate Student Voice

We collected hundreds of reflections from 30+ high school seniors on the emotions, barriers, and high points of the admissions process through a diary-based study. Students participated in co-creation labs to share a vision for admissions redesign that centers the student experience.

### 3. Identify Leverage Points

Analyzed insights from students, practitioners, and data to identify high-impact intervention areas like transcript access, dual credit, financial aid communication, and support for transitions.

### 4. Codify Shared Commitments

We developed 11 implementation commitments in five strategy areas:

- Accessible Transcripts
- Expanded Dual Credit Opportunities
- Transparent Financial Aid Information
- Proactive 9–12 Grade Communications
- Seamless Transfer

### 5. Build Capacity and Partnerships

We clarified responsibilities for institutions and state agencies, aligned funding, and launched professional development and communications supports.

### 6. Implement, Measure, and Learn

We established an 18-month implementation timeline with shared metrics and continuous improvement processes across sectors.

## Strategic Alignment

This work complements national efforts led by Lumina Foundation, Education Strategy Group (ESG), and others to reimagine admissions in ways that advance economic mobility and reduce complexity.

## Current Status

As of mid-2025, the project has transitioned into its implementation phase, with early efforts focused on launching a statewide transcript exchange, conducting a dual credit access audit, and developing grade-specific communication tools for students and counselors.





# Discovery Project 1: Data Exploration

## Big Takeaways:

### 💡 Dual Credit Drives Success, but Access Is Uneven

Students who complete at least one dual credit course are 40 percentage points more likely to enroll in college, earn 1.3 more credits in their first term, and are 22 percentage points more likely to complete a degree.

Yet 57% of Kentucky graduates do not participate in dual credit. Participation gaps by income (21 points) and race (14 points) persist, especially in Louisville, Lexington, and in the Big Sandy and Northern Kentucky area development districts.

### 💡 Academic Readiness Is a Key Retention Driver

Underprepared students – especially those with ACT < 22 or GPA < 3.0 – are at higher risk for low GPAs and attrition, regardless of their demographic background.

### 💡 There is Misalignment Between Indicators and Supports

Many students in the academic “gray zone” (e.g., 3.0 GPA, 20 ACT) are neither flagged for support nor engaged in summer bridge or co-requisite programs, even though data show they are at risk.

## Implications for Redesign:

- \* Expand access to dual credit with special attention to underserved populations.
- \* Use readiness data to proactively offer academic supports before students arrive on campus.
- \* Streamline pathways from dual credit to matriculation. 1 in 4 students complete college-level work in high school but don’t enroll in college.





## Discovery Project 2: AI Webinar Series

### Big Takeaways:

#### Artificial Intelligence (AI) Has Untapped Potential in Admissions

Campus stakeholders were largely unfamiliar with AI tools for student engagement, communication, and administrative workflow.

Yet clear opportunities exist to use AI for nudging students, answering questions in real time, and flagging high-need students.

#### Professional Development Is Essential

Staff want more training and time to explore AI's role in admissions and enrollment—especially in areas like ethics, bias, and transparency.

#### Ethics and Trust Matter

Admissions leaders voiced concerns about protecting student data and ensuring that AI-supported decisions don't reinforce systemic inequities.

### Implications for Redesign:

- \* Provide targeted training for admissions staff on AI applications and ethical use.
- \* Pilot AI-enabled tools (e.g., chatbots, outreach triggers) that reduce friction and enhance responsiveness.
- \* Develop statewide guidelines to support responsible implementation of AI in college-going and admissions communications.



## Discovery Project 3: Admissions Staff Focus Groups

### Big Takeaways:

#### 💡 Inconsistent Messaging and Siloed Practices

Students hear different messages from admissions offices, financial aid, academic departments, and high school counselors—creating confusion and undermining trust.

#### 💡 High Staff Turnover and Low Capacity

Many teams are understaffed, leading to surface-level training and reactive support models. Reliance on “students figuring it out” is common.

#### 💡 Key Friction Points Identified

Housing communication is unclear. Transcript processes are burdensome. Pre-senior year engagement is underdeveloped. Financial aid information is inconsistent.

### Implications for Redesign:

- \* Improve alignment across departments to create a consistent student experience.
- \* Invest in admissions and advising staff capacity—especially frontline training and support tools.
- \* Develop a common core of communications and checklists for students beginning in 9th grade.



## Discovery Project 4: Student Journey Mapping

### Big Takeaways:

#### **The Admissions Process Is Emotionally Loaded**

Students feel real anxiety about making decisions, being unprepared, and not knowing what's next. The emotional load—especially around finances and commitment—is a major driver of melt between high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment.

#### **Support = Joy**

Moments of joy stemmed from supportive counselors, parents, and college staff. Personalized communication—like a handwritten card—mattered more than slick marketing.

#### **Lack of Transparency Undermines Trust**

Students expressed deep frustration with unclear costs, misleading messages about dual credit transfer, and inconsistent scholarship information.

#### **Preparedness Is More Emotional than Technical**

Students often met eligibility requirements but still felt unprepared to make decisions. Feeling supported and “seen” mattered as much as technical readiness.

### Implications for Redesign:

- \* Reframe admissions as a relationship, not just a transaction. Early and personalized communication matters.
- \* Build systems that prioritize clarity and coordination—especially around cost, deadlines, and credit transfer.
- \* Design outreach that affirms student purpose and supports decision-making, not just enrollment.





# Strategic Priorities and Shared Commitments

After more than a year of statewide engagement, the Kentucky Admissions Redesign Project identified five strategic priorities supported by 11 shared commitments.

## 1. Accessible Transcripts

**The Challenge:** Students must often pay for and manually coordinate transcript delivery, particularly for dual credit. Delays, errors, and lack of clarity around transcript submission create stress and disrupt enrollment.

### Commitments:

- **KY Postsecondary Transcript Exchange:** Launch a centralized transcript retrieval system via the National Student Clearinghouse, allowing postsecondary institutions to proactively retrieve dual credit student records with consent.
- **Parchment Best Practices:** Establish and train high school personnel on a common transcript submission protocol, including use of Infinite Campus for efficient processing.

**Expected Impact:** Reduced summer melt, faster registration, and decreased administrative burden on both students and institutions.

## 2. Expanded Dual Credit Opportunities

**The Challenge:** Dual credit improves college-going and success but is not accessible for all students. Many students are unaware of costs beyond tuition or face barriers transferring credits into their college programs.

### Commitments:

- **Opportunity Audit:** Conduct a statewide audit of dual credit access by district to identify opportunity gaps.

- **Cost Transparency:** Research hidden expenses (e.g., textbooks, transportation) and develop policy recommendations to close affordability gaps.

**Expected Impact:** Higher participation in dual credit among low-income and first generation students, improved academic momentum, and increased postsecondary readiness.

### 3. Transparency in Financial Aid

**The Challenge:** Students and families struggle to compare financial aid offers due to inconsistent formats and language. Many underestimate true college costs, leading to unanticipated debt and melt.

**Commitments:**

- **NASFAA Code Compliance:** Review and update institutional aid notifications with clear definitions, total cost, and renewable aid indicators.
- **Searchable Aid Tools:** Integrate scholarships, grants, and employer reimbursement programs into the Futuriti website through a user-friendly search interface.

**Expected Impact:** Better financial planning, fewer surprises about affordability, and reduced stress in aid decision-making.

### 4. Proactive 9–12 Grade Communications

**The Challenge:** Many students don't begin thinking about college early enough. When they do, they receive mixed messages or miss key steps because outreach is uncoordinated across high schools, postsecondary institutions, and agencies.

**Commitments:**

- **Grade-Level Messaging Plan:** Develop a communications roadmap for grades 9–12, aligned with key milestones and student development stages.
- **Futuriti.org Enhancement:** Update the statewide site with accurate, up-to-date guidance and curated content for families, students, and counselors.

**Expected Impact:** Earlier student engagement, fewer missed deadlines, and improved confidence in navigating college choices.

### 5. Seamless Transfer

**The Challenge:** Kentucky students who start at two-year institutions often encounter opaque or inconsistent transfer pathways—delaying or derailing bachelor's completion.

**Commitments:**

- **Guaranteed Admission Awareness:** Launch a communications campaign to promote Kentucky's guaranteed transfer policy for AA/AS graduates with 2.0+ GPAs.

- **Reverse Transfer Agreements:** Allow students who transfer before earning an associate degree to retroactively earn one by adding consent language to university applications.
- **KCTCS Data Sharing:** Strengthen proactive communication between two-year and four-year institutions using intent-to-transfer flags.

**Expected Impact:** Higher bachelor's degree completion rates, improved transparency, and greater utilization of existing transfer policies.

## Collective Action Required

These 11 commitments reflect Kentucky's consensus on where the system must change—and how. They require collaboration across K-12 districts, higher education institutions, state agencies, and nonprofits. By aligning around shared priorities and investing in the right programs and policies, Kentucky can lead the nation in building admissions systems that work for all students.

## What's Next: Moving from Redesign to Implementation

The Kentucky College Admissions Redesign Project has moved from planning to action. With shared priorities and commitments in place, the next phase focuses on implementation, coordination, and continuous improvement. This work will be collaborative, iterative, and centered on student outcomes.

### Immediate Priorities (Next 6–12 Months)

- **Launch the KY Postsecondary Transcript Exchange:** CPE will work with the National Student Clearinghouse to establish a centralized system that allows institutions to retrieve dual credit transcripts automatically and at no cost to students.
- **Complete the Statewide Dual Credit Audit:** A comprehensive audit will identify schools and regions where access is limited, guiding policy and funding decisions to close participation gaps.
- **Roll Out Grade 9–12 Messaging and Resources:** New communications templates and guidance will be shared with schools and counselors, aligned with key milestones and supported through the Futuriti platform.
- **Standardize Financial Aid Communications:** Institutions will receive tools and examples to align financial aid letters with NASFAA best practices, improving clarity and comparability for students and families.
- **Activate the Transfer Communications Campaign:** A public awareness push will highlight Kentucky's guaranteed admission policy for students who earn an associate degree from KCTCS, as well as new reverse transfer options.



## Building Capacity and Engagement

- **Professional Development and Training:** Targeted workshops and on-demand resources will support admissions staff, counselors, and district leaders in adopting new practices and tools.
- **Pilot AI and Communications Tools:** Institutions may participate in AI pilot projects to test student-facing tools that support proactive nudging, real-time Q&A, and early engagement.
- **Support for High-Impact Practices:** CPE will provide technical assistance for summer bridge programs, personalized advising models, and transcript automation pilots.

## How Partners Can Engage

- **Join Implementation Working Groups:** These cross-sector teams will shape tools, test strategies, and troubleshoot barriers across the five priority areas.
- **Share Data and Insights:** Institutions and schools are encouraged to share what's working—and what's not—so the system can learn and improve in real time.
- **Center Student Voice:** As Phase 2 of the student journey mapping continues, university partners will receive custom journey maps based on student experience, which they can use to test assumptions and adjust messaging and supports.

# Our Admissions Redesign Partners

We invite postsecondary providers, K-12 districts, nonprofits, counselors, employers and state agencies to join us in reshaping admissions to ensure all Kentuckians have clear and obstacle-free pathways to education and training beyond high school. Your voice and expertise are essential to ensure the redesign reflects the complexity and aspirations of the students we serve.

**Many thanks our Admissions Redesign Guiding Team and Network for their thought partnership in co-creating this strategy and for their ongoing engagement as we move to implementation.**

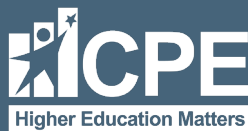
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The Kentucky Student Success Collaborative (KYSSC) is made possible through a partnership and financial investment from the James Graham Brown Foundation with the goal of engaging Kentucky's postsecondary partners with nonprofit, workforce and governmental stakeholders to address the state's most pressing challenges and barriers to student success.

