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News

STORY : EDUCATION

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Meet the 'Meta-Major'

By: Ryan ZumMallen

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Cal State Fullerton student Joshua McKinley presents his research, conducted with oversight from Fullerton faculty. Student-faculty research is a high-impact practice that plays an important role in meta-major programs at CSU campuses. Photo courtesy of Cal State Fullerton

The effort to improve four-year and six-year graduation rates (/csu-system/why-the-csu-matters/graduation-initiative-2025/Pages/default.aspx) is one of the defining missions of the

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California State University today.

And one of the best ways to grow graduation rates is to engage students very early on in their college career with a classroom experience that's tailored to what they're most interested in, says Complete College America (<http://completecollege.org/the-game-changers/#clickBoxTeal>), a national nonprofit organization focused on increasing the number of Americans with a college degree.

That's where meta-majors come in.

Essentially, a meta-major is a designed program of courses that crosses different majors and fields but with similar content—focusing on, say, health sciences or STEM or liberal arts.

The program creates a clear pathway toward a variety of careers, but features a level of freedom that gives students ample room for exploration.

Tying Meta-Majors to a Shorter Time to Degree

The idea of meta-majors—still in its infancy—is gaining steam in higher education, particularly for undergraduate students who don't want to declare a major before they're ready.

Engaging these students—who are also among those most at risk of dropping out before graduation—is crucial to improving the completion rate.

"What we're hoping is that with more meta-major programs we'll see a reduction in the time to degree," says Dawn Digrius, Ph.D., senior project manager, STEM Collaboratives (<http://www.calstate.edu/stem/>) at the Office of the Chancellor of the California State University.

Meta-majors are not in wide effect across the California State University system just yet. About a half-dozen campuses have created similar programs, however, including:

- San Francisco State University (<http://www.sfsu.edu/>), which has a "Causeways" (https://ueap.sfsu.edu/sites/default/files/assets/docs/newsletter/Spring16_Newsletter_DUEAP.pdf) initiative funded by the Keck Foundation. The program integrates similar courses across multiple majors and can be structured to progress toward specific career goals.
- California State University, Long Beach

and in Life' (<https://www2.calstate.system/news/Pages/A-Commitment-to-Rise-Together,-Through-Graduation-and-in-Life.aspx>)

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(<http://www.csulb.edu/>) pays special attention to undeclared students who can be guided toward exploring their fields of interest before declaring a major.

Encouraging Exploration from the Start

Research is clear: Early preparation is key to student success at the university level.

Dr. Digrius notes that the appeal of meta-majors is the programs' ability to engage undergraduate students and Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT) students from community colleges, allowing them to choose a broad area of interest early on, and then sharpen their focus as they near graduation.

"We should be thinking about a cradle-to-career kind of structure," she says.

Many California community colleges are already fervent proponents of meta-majors. Some, like Bakersfield College and Pasadena City College, are pioneering these programs specifically to prepare their students for a four-year university.

One of the most powerful aspects of meta-majors is that they bring students in contact with CSU faculty across a variety of disciplines.

Professors and instructors within health and social sciences, for example, work together to find ways to expose students to different career paths, internship opportunities, and other high-impact practices (<http://www.calstate.edu/highimpact/about/>) that are more likely to engage them early on—and keep them interested and committed over the course of their college career.

The CSU is currently exploring the potential for an integrated, systemwide meta-majors program that would connect campuses with students in high school or community college, well before they reach the university.

"It's a rich collaboration spectrum that's opened up now," says Digrius.



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