



Finish What We Start

A Case Study From Madison College

Zong Her, *Founder & Principal Consultant*



Dr. Marco Torrez-Miranda, *Dean of the School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*



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(Zong Her - Lead)

Welcome to: "Finish What We Start: A Case Study on Momentum, Transfer, and Completion."

Introduction: Zong Her, Founder/Principal Consultant, Her Data Insights.

SDP Connection: Proud member, SDP-CTE Cohort 2.

Context: Based on previous role as Madison College Director of IR; analyzed/shared this specific data with Marco.

Core Focus: Intersection of early student momentum, transfer behaviors, and long-term credential completion.

Session Tone: Reflective narrative of institutional journey; not prescriptive rules.

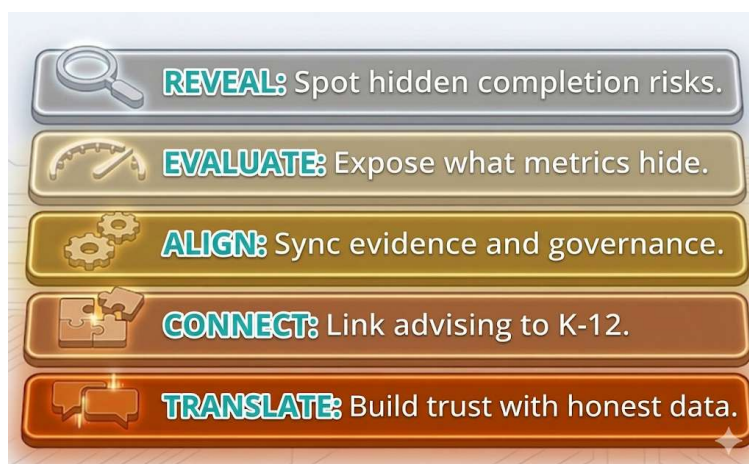
Transition: Handing over to co-presenter.

(Dr. Marco Torrez-Miranda)

Introduction: Dr. Marco Torrez-Miranda, Dean, School of Arts, Humanities and Social Services, Madison Area Technical College.

Goal: Sharing institutional data, initial assumptions, and key lessons learned.

Key Objectives: The REACT Framework



The session emphasizes interpretation and application of evidence, not technical analytics.

Our goal today is to give you a framework to **REACT** to hidden completion gaps in your own institutions.

First, we'll look at how to **Reveal** counterintuitive completion risks among high-momentum transfer students using disaggregated data.

We will **Evaluate** how board-level completion metrics and leading indicators can surface—or obscure—meaningful student outcomes.

We'll explore how to **Align** evidence, governance, and messaging to improve those outcomes.

We'll examine how to **Connect** advising practices and K–12 partnerships to influence students' decisions to complete before transferring.

And finally, we will reflect on how to **Translate** honest results into communications that build trust rather than resistance.

A Reflective Starting Point



The Hook: Addressing a counter-intuitive truth surfaced during analysis.

The Process: Not a day-one "Aha!"; emerged late after deep-dive of internal and partner evidence.

The Disruption: Challenged institutional DNA; high momentum \neq strong long-term outcomes for a specific subset.

The Reality: Most academically prepared students "winning" transfer, but "losing" completion.

Madison College Context



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Location: Capital city of Wisconsin, Madison; serving 12 counties.

Scale: Over 28,000 students in AY 24-25; large urban technical/community college.

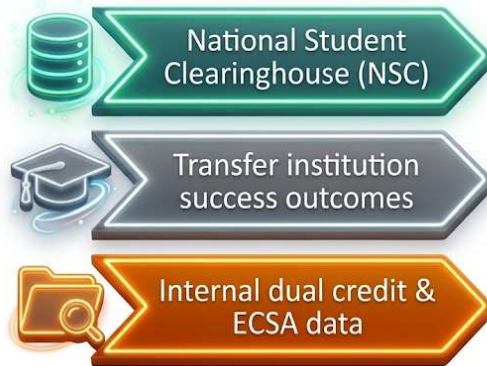
Historical Framing: Transfer historically framed as a major success.

Momentum Lens: Dual credit seen as early momentum.

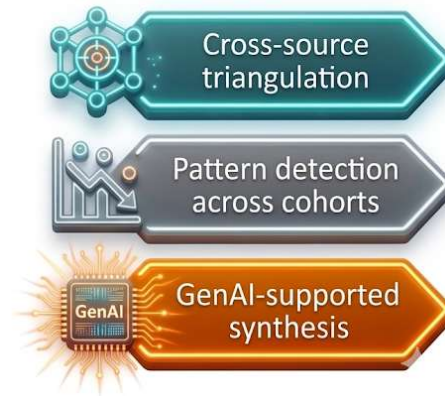
The Paradox: Completion gap issue exists despite these deep institutional strengths.

Finish What We Start

Evidence Sources



Analytic Approach



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Longitudinal Data: NSC for longitudinal outcomes.

Pathway Context: Internal data for pathway context.

GenAI Role: GenAI used for synthesis only.

Quality Control: Human validation of findings.

REVEAL

The Assumption We Tested



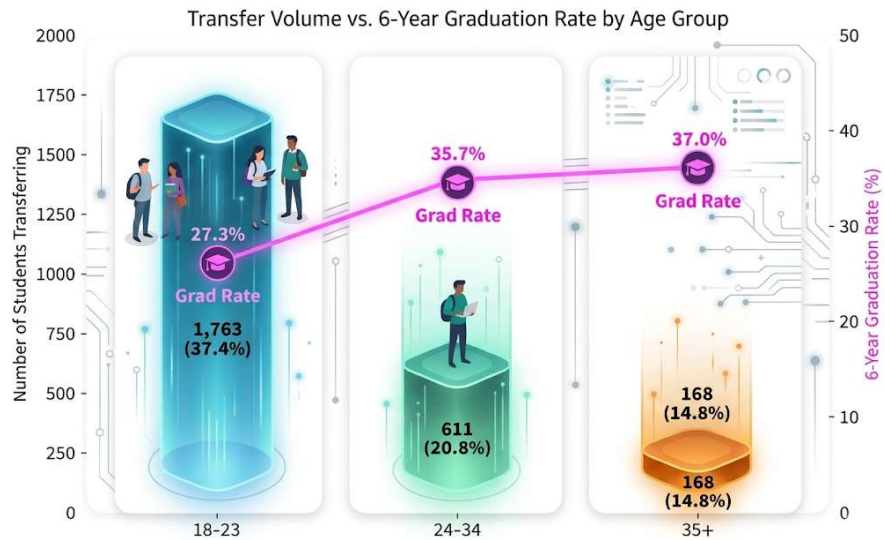
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Institutional Norm: Longstanding institutional belief.

Broader Context: Common sector-wide assumption.

The Gap: Rarely tested with actual long-term outcomes.

REVEAL
The Paradox:
High Volume,
Low
Completion
for
Younger
Cohorts



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Speaker Notes:

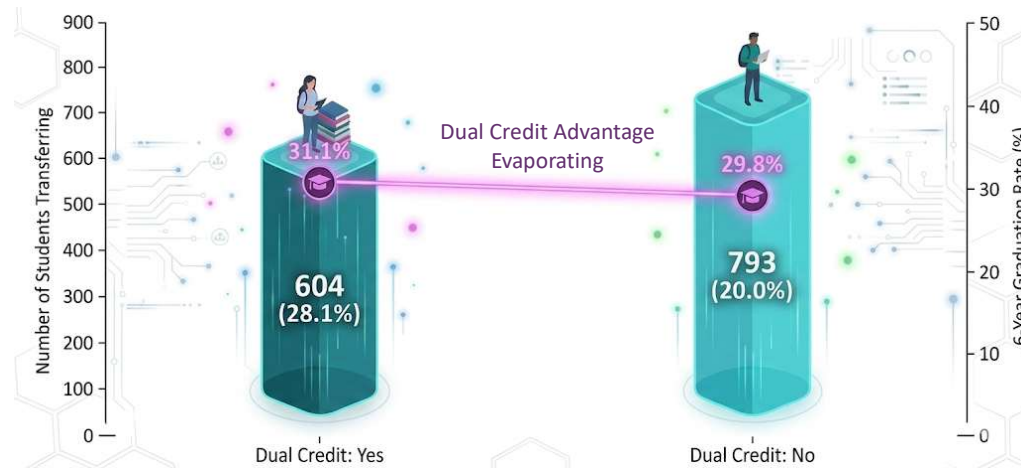
Volume Leader: Age 18–23 drastically dominates overall transfer volume.

The Paradox: This cohort has the highest transfer rate but the lowest 6-year graduation rate.

Older Cohorts: Older students transfer much less frequently.

Outcome Reversal: Older students successfully complete credentials at a significantly higher rate.

REVEAL Dual Credit Students: Transfer Volume vs. 6-Year Graduation



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Transfer Frequency: Dual credit students transfer at a notably higher rate.

Volume Context: This cohort represents a significant overall transfer volume.

Outcome Parity: 6-year graduation rates remain nearly identical to non-dual credit peers.

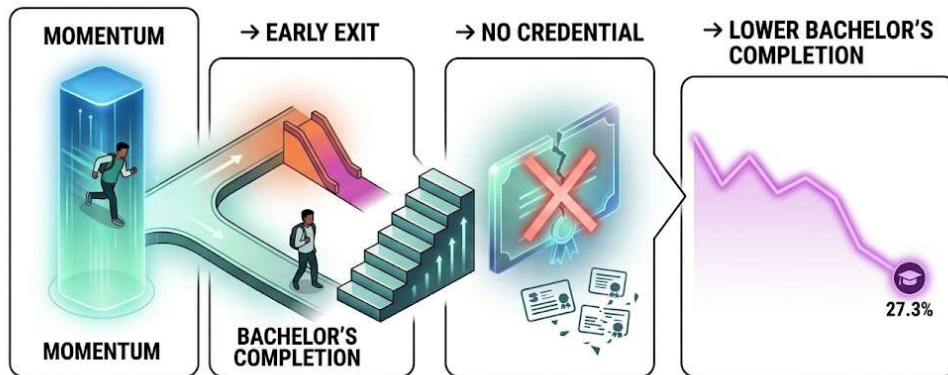
The Disconnect: Early academic momentum is simply not translating into final degree completion.

The Gap: A clear post-high school completion gap remains highly visible despite the early head start.

EVALUATE

Why Transfer Without a Credential Matters

Award Status Changes Outcomes



EARLY EXIT PATHS CAN LEAD TO LOWER FINAL BA ATTAINMENT



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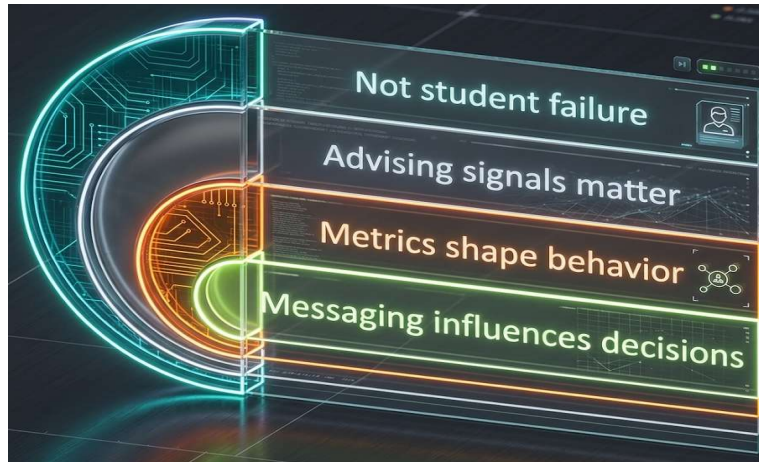
Tracking Outcomes: NSC data reveals a significantly lower Bachelor's degree attainment for the early-exit path.

The Anchor Effect: Earning a foundational credential before transferring acts as a crucial anchor for long-term persistence.

The Illusion of Success: High transfer counts actively hide this completion divergence from standard institutional view.

EVALUATE

This Is a Systems Issue



System Design: The college controls the messaging and levers.

Student Choices: Students act on the best, albeit incomplete, information available.

Transfer Incentives: The system structurally rewards transfer.

Overlooked Completion: Degree completion is not the primary focus.

ALIGN

Governance Shapes Outcomes

Why Board Metrics Matter



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The "Binary" Transfer Problem

- Historic view of transfer: "Did they go?" (Yes/No)
- The danger: Celebrating a binary "Yes" masks the actual completion risk
- Need to move beyond raw transfer volume

Award Status (The Metric Shift)

Point to the right column on the slide

- Must split the "Transfer" bucket into two realities:

Transfer *without* award

Transfer *with* award

The credential = an academic/psychological anchor for the Bachelor's

Governance Drives Campus Action

- What the Board measures = what the campus does
- Old metric (Credit volume/Transfer counts) -> Advisors signal "Move Fast"
- New metric (Primary diplomas/Any credential) -> Campus signals "Finish What We Start"
- Shift the metric, shift the advising culture

CONNECT

Dual Credit Is a Partnership



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Beyond Just an Enrollment Strategy

Point to the left column (Momentum Starts in High School)

- Dual credit not just a college entry point
- But *momentum pathway*
- But as the data showed: Momentum alone does not guarantee completion

The Messaging Trap

Point to the center column (Completion Happens Later)

- Current default message to families: "You're ahead" or "You're ready to transfer"
- The missing message: "Finishing this credential first strengthens your long-term success"
- Students must understand what those early credits are actually building toward

Aligning the Partnership

Point to the right column (Messaging Must Align)

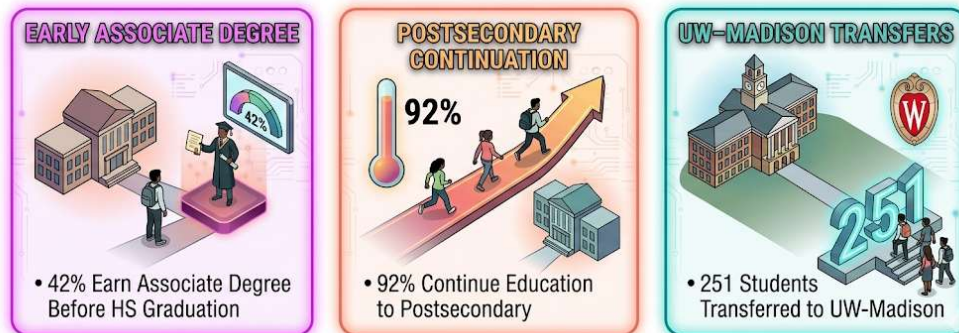
- Shared responsibility between the college and K-12 partners
- Requires intentional alignment:
 - High school counselor partnerships

Unified family messaging

Clear post-HS completion pathways

CONNECT – A MODEL THAT WORKS

Early Momentum + Structure = Completion (Early College STEM Academy)



Momentum + Structure

Power of momentum = intentional structure.

Beyond just earning "early credits."

Completion embedded by design.

The Real Problem

Early momentum \neq the problem.

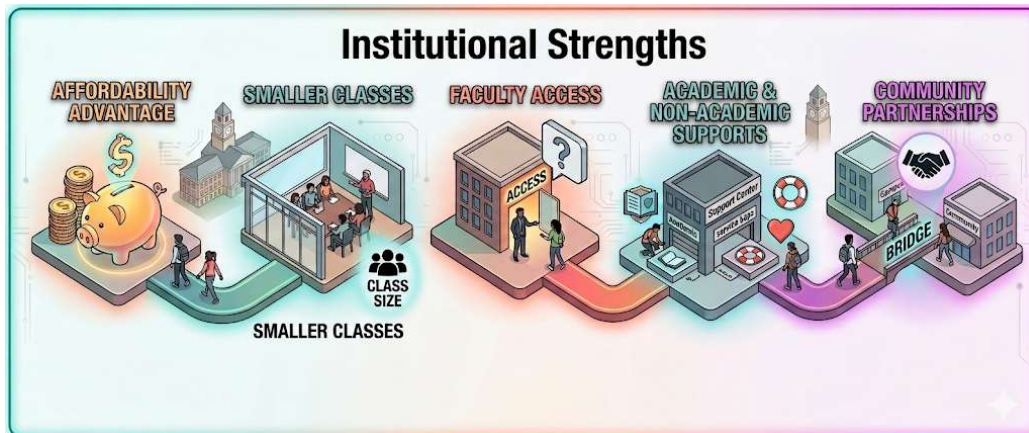
Momentum *MINUS* structure/advising/signaling = early exit.

The Ultimate Takeaway

ECSA reminder: Pathway design matters.

CONNECT

Why Staying Can Work for Students



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Existing Strengths

No need to build from scratch.

Leveraging Madison College's current assets.

Academic/community supports already active.

The Value Proposition

Affordability: One more semester = smart financial investment.

Environment: Smaller classes + faculty access = deeper engagement.

Support: Wraparound systems already working for them.

Reframing the Narrative

Strategic Goal: Staying ≠ "falling behind."

One extra semester/year yields:

- Lower overall cost.

- Stronger academic foundation.

- Completed credential in hand.

The Connection Factor: Seen + connected = higher completion.

TRANSLATE

What the Evidence Prompted: From Insight to Action



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From Finding to Action

Evidence = strategic reflection.

Focus: Better alignment, not new mandates.

Reframe Advising

Completion front and center (never an afterthought).

The Tool: Academic Plans for all (full & part-time).

The Timing: Earlier conversations (students are often closer than they realize).

Strengthen Messaging

The Audience: Students, families, and partners.

The Focus: Clear, intentional value of the credential (stability, career value).

Foster Culture

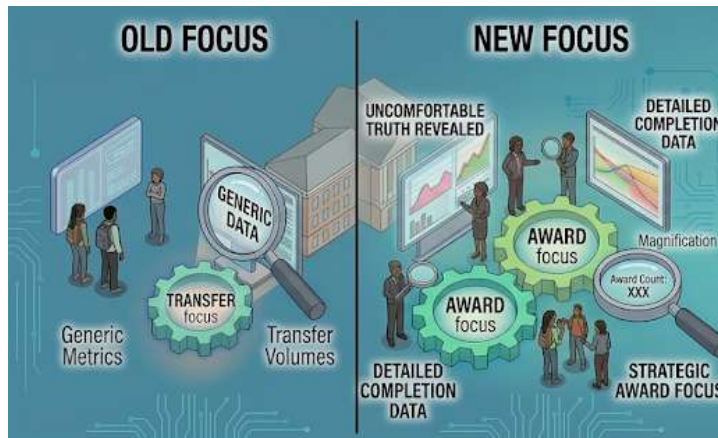
The Mindset: Campus-wide "Finish What We Start" approach.

The Core Belief: Strong momentum = completion (not just early departure).

The Approach: Alignment over mandates.

TRANSLATE

Can we head towards this new focus?



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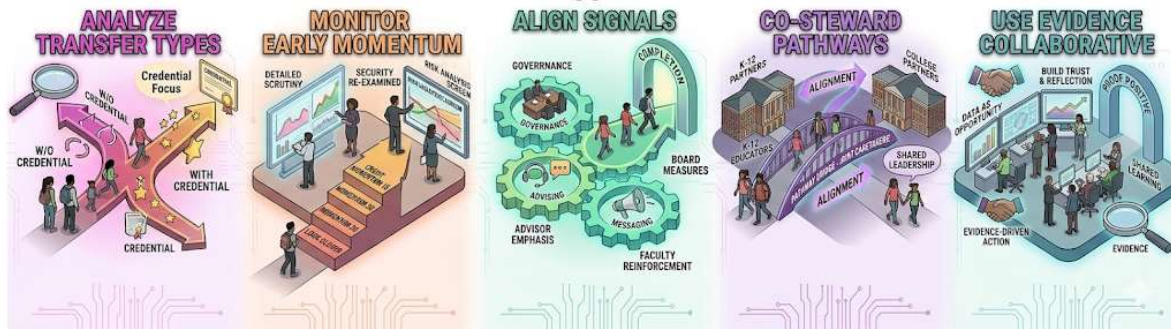
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Strategic Practices Others Can Adapt



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Broader Application

Specific to Madison College, but applicable anywhere.

Uncover Hidden Risks (Columns 1 & 2)

Look closer at students "assumed" to be on track.

Transfer *without* completion = a hidden completion risk.

Signals Drive Behavior (Column 3)

Institutional behavior follows institutional signals.

What gets measured and emphasized matters (Boards, Advisors, Faculty).

The Power of Communication (Columns 4 & 5)

The delivery of evidence matters.

Evidence framed as blame = campus resistance.

Evidence framed as shared learning = campus engagement.

The Ultimate Takeaway

Turning uncomfortable data into shared opportunity defines "Proof Positive."

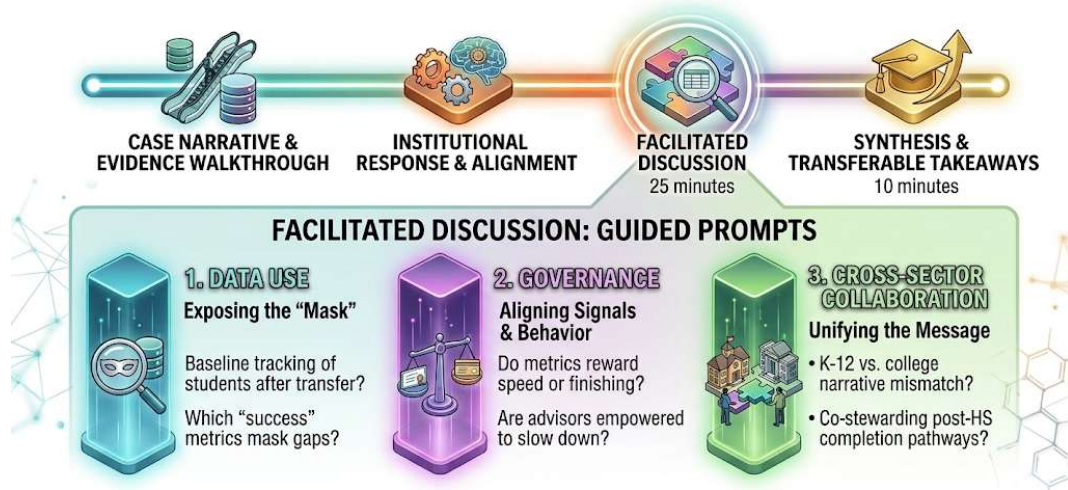
5 Minute Stretch Break

Feel free to turn off your video



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Facilitated Discussion



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Please fill out your handout as a take-away.

Synthesis: Your Table's Action Plan - 10 Minutes

The infographic is set within a rounded rectangular frame with a light purple and blue gradient. At the top center, a glowing circular ring contains the title. Below the title, the content is split into two main sections. The left section, '1. THE BARRIER', features a blue pedestal with a brick wall on top. The bricks are labeled 'STRUCTURAL', 'CULTURAL', and 'BARRIER'. A yellow and black striped barrier sign stands in front of the wall. The right section, '2. THE ACTION', features a purple pedestal with a clipboard labeled 'ACTION PLAN' on top. The clipboard has a checklist with three items, each with a checkmark. A pencil is positioned as if writing on the clipboard. An arrow points from the clipboard towards the right, with four checkmarks along its path. The background includes faint molecular structures and a grid pattern.

1. THE BARRIER
One Word/Phrase Whip-Around
What is the biggest structural or cultural roadblock your table identified today?

2. THE ACTION
Commit to Change
What is one specific, actionable change you plan to take back to your campus to help students "Finish What We Start"?

 **PROOF POSITIVE** 

Please fill out your handout as a take-away.

Presenters Thank You!

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End of Session Reminders



[Insert Instructions]



[Insert Instructions]



[Insert Instructions]



Thank You