Colleges and universities are under increasing pressure to demonstrate the value they provide in students’ post-collegiate lives. Such demands for greater accountability and transparency are due to concerns from policymakers and the public about college costs, student debt, and completion rates. Unfortunately, policymakers, colleges and universities, and a wide variety of stakeholders, including taxpayers, parents, and students tend to focus primarily on the short-term economic outcomes of college such as first year salaries and overlook less-accessible, quantifiable, and long-term outcomes. College graduates are more likely to vote and be active in their communities through volunteer service and philanthropy. Conversely, they are less likely to have chronic health problems and experience greater longevity than those who do not hold a college degree. These long-term outcomes are missing from much of the current conversation about post-collegiate outcomes.

The goal of the Post-Collegiate Outcomes (PCO) Initiative is to provide a framework for a richer and more comprehensive discussion of post-collegiate student outcomes, as well as the development of consistent and meaningful measurement tools for reporting those outcomes. The PCO Framework (see Figure 1) focuses on four quadrants illustrating post-collegiate outcomes: public/economic, public/social capital, private/economic, and private/social capital. As the PCO Framework explains, the public/economic quadrant (top left) represents outcomes related to the public good, defined primarily in financial terms. The public/social capital quadrant (bottom left) represents outcomes related to the public good, defined primarily in non-financial terms. Likewise, the personal/economic (top right) quadrant encompasses outcomes related to the personal (or individual) financial good. Whereas the personal/social capital (bottom right) quadrant includes outcomes that demonstrate the personal (or individual) value not defined in financial terms.

A toolkit supplement to the PCO Framework consists of documents that: illustrate how the framework can be used as a lens through which different stakeholders understand and measure post-collegiate outcomes; explore potential post-collegiate outcomes measures for use within the framework; and consider potential policy actions and implications within the context of the framework. Together, the PCO Framework and Toolkit create a common understanding of definitions, parameters, outcomes, metrics, and indicators for reporting an array of post-collegiate outcomes which more accurately assess the value of a college education.