COLLEGE COMPLETION

Why Students Stopout
Why Stopouts Return

By Sarah Horn and Andrew Lyle

ReUp
EDUCATION

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Preface

BY **MICHAEL HORN**, AUTHOR, CO-FOUNDER OF CLAYTON CHRISTENSEN INSTITUTE FOR DISRUPTIVE INNOVATION AND SENIOR PARTNER AT ENTANGLED SOLUTIONS

In the United States, we have a college-choosing problem. Fifty-one percent of students report that they would change something about their college decision—their major, institution, or degree.

Put simply, although more than 2 million high school seniors graduate and attend college each year, over a million students drop out of college each year. That adds up to 31 million Americans in the last two decades.

Although a major focus of the last few decades in education reform has been to make sure students are college ready, a significant reason students leave is that colleges are not "student ready." They are not built to work with and ensure success for students from a much wider range of backgrounds than in the past.

Some students do leave college because they lack the proper academic preparedness. Colleges are largely unprepared to personalize learning to meet the academic gaps many students bring to school.

But as this research from ReUp Education shows, more students actually leave for other reasons—from life balance preventing students from completing to a lack of financial resources and from professional commitments crowding out education to health challenges getting in the way. Many of these are almost certainly interwoven with each other.

Colleges have historically ignored students once they leave their midst and remain un-enrolled for at least two terms. But as ReUp has built its operations around re-enrolling thousands of students and helping them complete, its research shows that students have plenty of motivation to reenroll.

What's revealing and affirming to me is that ReUp's research for why students re-enroll mirrors the extensive research we did on why students enroll, which Bob Moesta and I describe in our forthcoming book, **Choosing College** (September 2019).

In the book, we use the **Jobs to Be Done** theory to analyze the sets of reasons why students choose college in the first place. People are complicated, and they rarely do things for just one reason. We uncovered five distinct Jobs to Be Done for which students hire college. What's notable is that the forces underlying each of these Jobs—what's pushing and pulling them to school—are strikingly similar to the top 10 that ReUp has found over the thousands of students with which it has worked.

The forces leading students to go back to school are often not what people might imagine them to be. Yes, students want job mobility, a promotion, or to change careers and boost their earning potential—all forces we found in the Job we call "Help me step it up." But even more striking are the social and emotional

reasons they re-enroll—from a desire to finish what they started to fulfilling a personal goal of theirs and from serving as a role model for their family to wanting a degree for its own sake and to a family commitment they had made—forces that we found in the "Help me extend myself" and "Help me do what's expected of me" Jobs. The last two reasons ReUp discovered—to have a backup plan and to escape from a current circumstance—are also causal forces we saw clearly in our research.

One conclusion? Yes, students go to college for functional reasons, but just as, if not more important are the social and emotional reasons they attend. To ensure students are successful, schools need to support them along all of these lines with the mentors and care that entities like ReUp bring to bear.

Completing college isn't always easy, but pairing the insights for why students leave school with why they return can unleash the support students need to pave the way for their success.
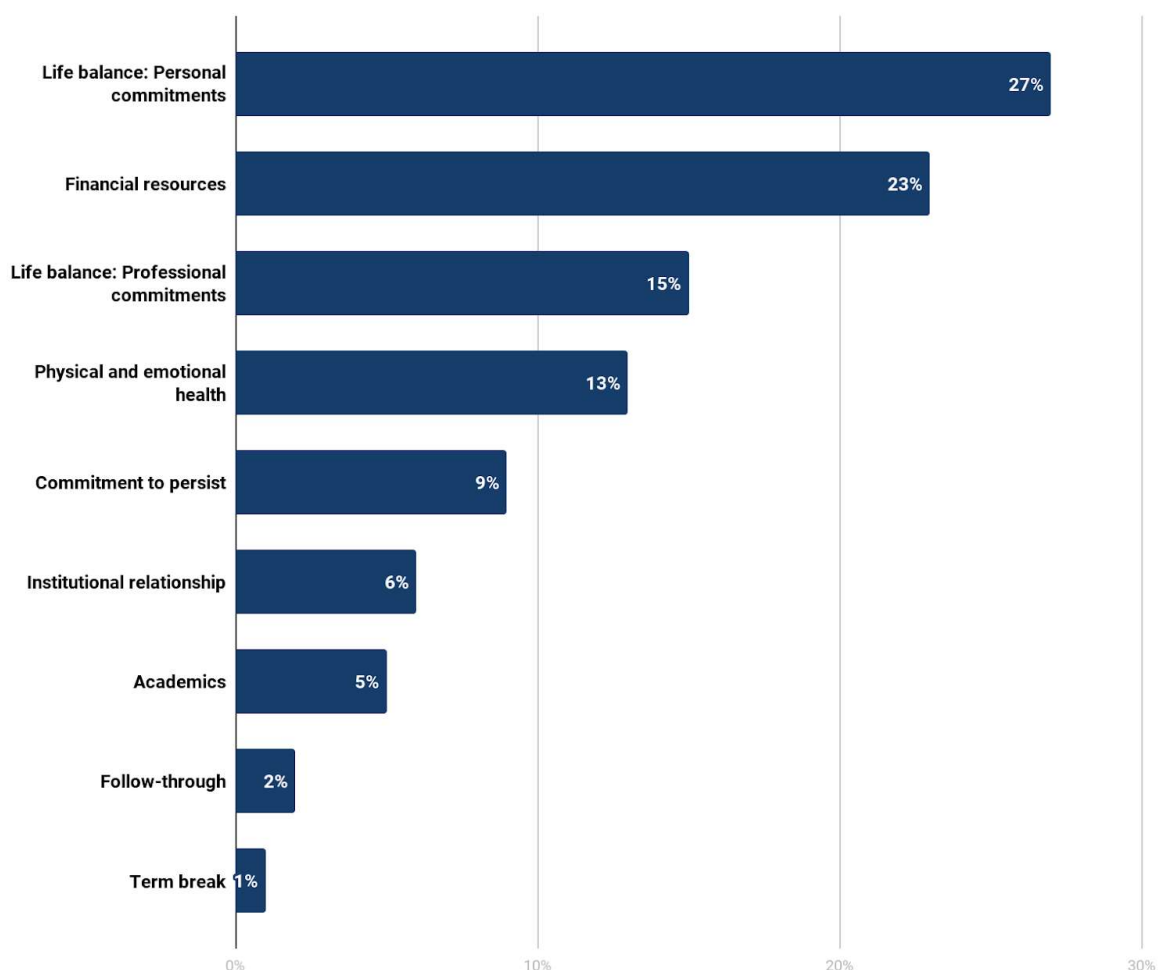
Michael B. Horn

Section 1: Results Overview

The dataset used to create this report was collected through interactions with stopped out and returning college students between 2016 and 2019 through the work of ReUp Education, serving more than 125,000 stopped out students. The institutions from which these students stopped out are both public and private, but were more often public institutions. More than 85% of students from which the data was collected were pursuing Bachelor's degrees.

REASONS FOR STOPPING-OUT OF COLLEGE

MOTIVATIONS FOR RETURNING TO COLLEGE

Motivation	Percentage
Finish what they started	34%
Personal goal	18%
Job mobility or promotion	18%
Career change	10%
Earning potential	6%
Role model for family	4%
Just want to hold a degree	3%
Family commitment	3%
Backup plan	2%
Escape current circumstances	1%
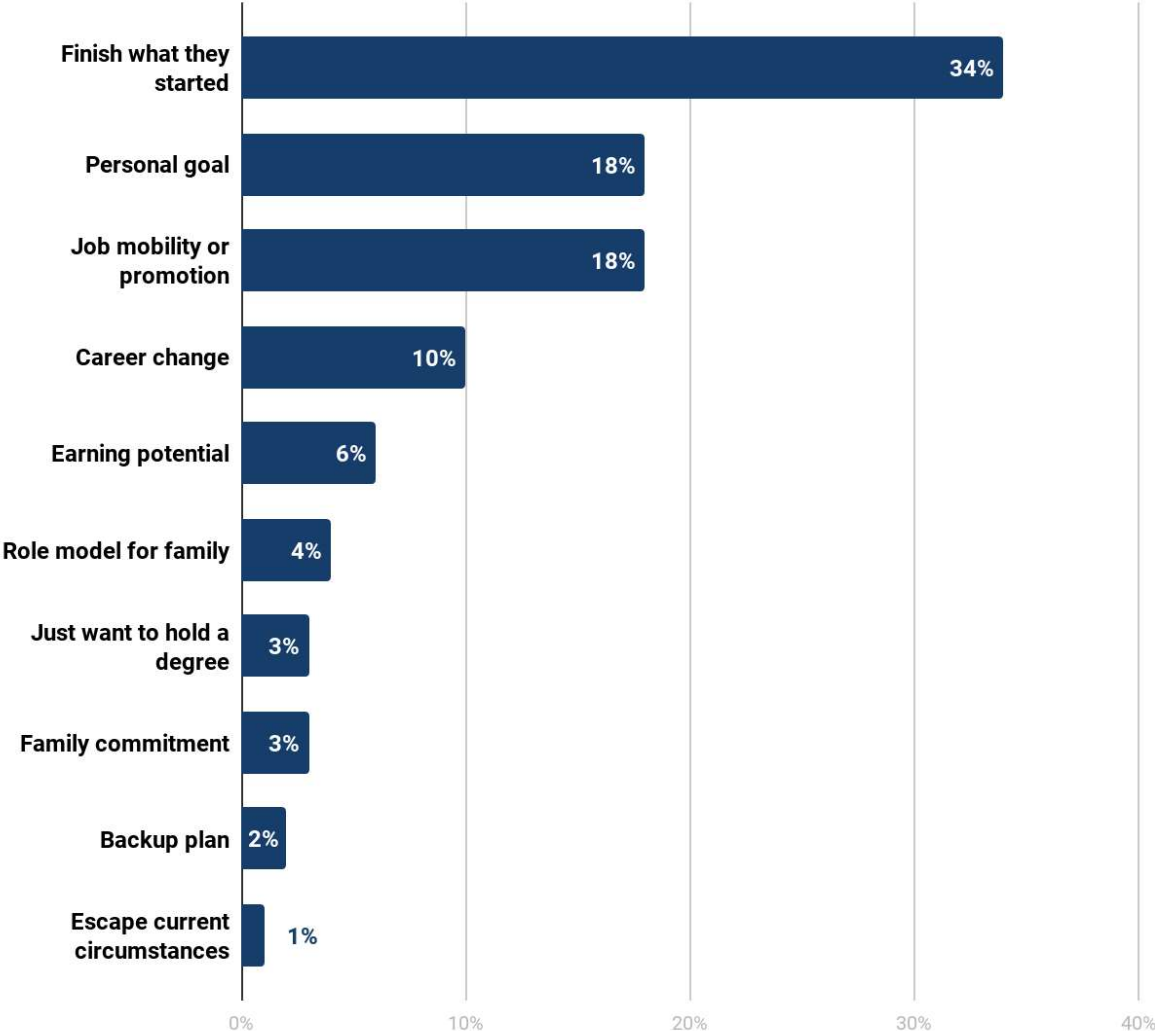
Section 2:
Reasons for Stopping-out

1. Life balance: Personal commitments: 27%

Many college students carry responsibilities beyond their coursework. For some of these students, the amount of time and energy required to support their personal obligations does not leave enough bandwidth to adequately focus on their studies. Some students who struggle with this type of life balance are attempting to juggle commitments they were already aware of as they decided to attend college, and find that they cannot manage as effectively as they thought they could. For other students, the personal commitments were initially manageable, but over time additional unforeseen responsibilities came into play. Students experiencing this kind of challenge are faced with the difficult decision of what to prioritize in their life, and select their personal obligations over school. This context is key to recognize, because the student is not dismissing their education as unimportant or not valuable, they are acknowledging that their competing priorities have a higher level of immediate urgency. When those more urgent priorities subside, the value the student places on education is still there.

2. Financial resources: 23%

While many students qualify for financial aid, the overwhelming majority of college students still have some amount of out-of-pocket costs to fund. Issues stemming from limited financial resources have a significant ability to impact a student's persistence in college. The specific situations causing students to stop out for financial reasons are varied and multi-faceted. Some students do not have sufficient support to gain a complete understanding about the actual cost of college or how to develop a realistic plan for obtaining the needed resources. Of these students, some have struggles specifically around navigating the process of obtaining financial aid. Other students entered college with a solid understanding of the costs and a realistic plan for funding their education, but then found their plans changing. For these students, the loss of a job or scholarship can be at the root of this challenge. Some of these students end up needing to fund more credits than they initially planned for because they changed their major or exhausted their financial aid, in many cases paying out of pocket as a result, which they had not initially planned on.

3. Life balance: Professional commitments: 15%

The college-funding strategy for many students includes full or part-time employment. For students that are working a job while going to college, professional commitments can become a barrier to completion. Such situations include cases where the demands of a studen't job increased with changes to their role and situations where a student's work schedule shifted to different hours. Students serving in the military can experience this type of issue if their duty station is changed. A student who lost a job that enabled them to fund their education and was unable to replace that income would be understood to have stopped-out for financial reasons. However, a student whose job initially allowed the scheduling flexibility they need in

order to attend college but lost that flexibility and was unable to find a new job that enabled them to attend class would be considered to have stopped out because of professional commitments.

4. Physical and emotional health: 13%

A student's well-being impacts their ability not only to do the work required for their degree, but also to maintain an overall positive outlook about college. Students who enjoy good health tend to be more effective and enjoy their time in school more thoroughly. One key factor typically underlying good emotional health is the personal support network (friends, family, groups, and activities) that students have in place during their time in college. Without a support network, college and its associated responsibilities can overwhelm students. It's not just a student's own health that contributes to this issue. The health challenges of a family member can also lead to a student stopping-out if they become the caregiver and no longer have time for college, or if they need to seek a job to replace the earnings of their sick family member.

5. Commitment to persist: 9%

For some students, the leading factor behind stopping-out is the absence of an internal dedication to college. The drivers of commitment to degree completion include the value they place in pursuing their education, their understanding of how education fits into their future plans, their desire to be in college, and their sense of connection between current actions and long-term goals. While a student can respond to various external pressures that may push them towards enrolling in college without having their own personal commitment, those same external forces typically lack the strength to drive completion without the student personally believing that a college degree is the right next step for them. These students do not have a clear sense of the return on investment for the work of completing their degree, so they struggle to answer the question "Why am I in college?"

6. Institutional relationship: 6%

The relationship a student has with their college can become a barrier to completion. If a student develops a negative attitude toward or comes to feel disconnected from their institution, the resulting fractured relationship can eventually lead to a student stopping-out. This situation can emerge from challenges using technical systems required by the institution, struggles with the modality available for their chosen program, difficulty understanding the administrative policies of the institution, or not feeling a sufficient sense of belonging to their college. The kind of frustrations produced by this category of obstacles can impact the students' willingness to proactively seek help or effectively identify and utilize resources that exist at the institution.

7. Academics: 5%

Issues with academic performance can pose an obvious obstacle to completing college. The root causes underneath academic struggles can include a student's test-taking skills, study habits, communication with instructors, understanding of their personal learning style, or level of confidence in their academic abilities. For some students experiencing academic difficulties, the coursework itself ultimately proved too challenging and they did not seek out or could not find the support they needed. Struggling in the learning process is normal, but in the right learning environment and with the right support, academic struggles do not need to lead to stopping-out, and can instead lead to breakthroughs. It is important to note that a

falling GPA is not automatically an indicator of academic struggles. Any reason cited in this report could ultimately result in a lower GPA.

8. Follow-through: 2%

Students who stop out because of challenges related to follow-through struggle to control or effectively execute intended actions. These students have challenges with ownership and execution of tasks, planning and prioritization, meeting deadlines, and avoiding procrastination. For these students, the issue is not about identifying what they need to do, but rather appropriately carrying out the tasks they know need to complete in order to be successful in college.

9. Term break: less than 1%

Students that leave college with a plan to come back after taking a term off are considered to be stopping-out for a "term break." These students are typically seeking to understand themselves better or think through their career goals more clearly during this time. Unfortunately, in many cases, the term they planned to take off turns into a year, which turns into multiple years.

Section 3:

Motivation to Return

1. Finish what they started: 34%

For many students who stopped out, the reasons they originally wanted to get a college education never diminished, other factors just got in the way. When those factors are mitigated and the student gains a pathway to re-enroll, the degree is still as meaningful to them as it was in the first place—or even more so. The internal accountability of completing something that has been so important and meaningful to them drives their interest in realizing the dream they never lost sight of.

2. Personal goal: 18%

Some returning students are primarily motivated by having set a life goal of becoming a college graduate. For these students, the driving force is not related to "using the degree" in order to achieve a specific goal, the degree itself is the goal. These students may describe their interest in finishing college by saying "doing this is just for me" or "I've accomplished so much, but I still haven't finished college, so I just want to have my degree even though I have no use for it." Because these students have such a firm commitment to complete, they typically pull from an internal reservoir of motivations when met with challenges and are highly determined to succeed.

3. Job mobility or promotion: 18%

Some stopped out students have identified advancement opportunities they could make in their chosen career if they finish their degree, some even know the specific promotion or role they would be able to obtain upon completion of their degree. These students benefit from having a clear sense of how the degree would immediately open doors for their work. In some cases, employers provide financial support to returning students, further encouraging this motivating factor.

4. Career change: 10%

While some students want to finish their degree so they can dive deeper into the work they are already doing, others want to use the degree to get out of their current career pathway. In some cases, their current job offers little to no possibility of growth potential or social mobility. These students have determined that without a degree they can not move into the industry or discipline they have now decided they want to work.

5. Earning potential: 6%

While obtaining a new role motivates some returning students to finish their degree, others have a related, yet slightly different driving force: the earning power of the degree. These students cite the potential increased earnings as the most significant reason they want to complete their degree.

6. Role model for family: 4%

Family is often connected to the reasons students leave college in the first place. Life balance issues can be related to family members or institutional satisfaction issues that come from being the first in their family to attend college. Family can be a powerful driver on the opposite side of the equation as well, with students wanting to set an example for their children or relatives that a college education is attainable. In many cases these returning students recognize their achievement increases the likelihood of their own children completing college.

7. Just want to hold a degree: 3%

While the most frequently occurring motivation to return is students seeking to "finish what they started" and complete a degree that is still meaningful to them, other students still want to finish despite their original degree program not being as meaningful as it once was. These are students who have changed their minds about their career pathway since stopping-out of college, and the degree they were working towards is no longer the best fit for their future plans. In many cases, these are students who are relatively near completion and are mindful of how much time and money they have already invested in pursuing their degree. While the coursework itself may not be as relevant to them, they recognize that holding a degree, even one not perfectly aligned with their dreams, will still open doors for them in areas they care about. In contrast to returning students driven by a "personal goal" to complete, these students do intend to leverage their degree in order to accomplish something. However, what they want to "use their degree" for is typically about needing to have a degree rather than needing to have specific knowledge or skills gained from a certain degree program. Consequently, when a "General Studies" or similar degree completion program is offered, these are students that are likely to change majors into such a program in order to complete a degree as quickly as possible.

8. Family commitment: 3%

When the reason a student drops out of college is a life balance issue that stems from family-related needs or a health issue that involves caring for a family member, the student often makes a promise to their family that they will eventually complete their degree when the time is right. Returning students motivated by family commitment are the ones coming back to make good on those promises to finish college. This is different from "Role model for family" in that these students had always planned to return when circumstances allowed, where students driven by wanting to be a role model normally grow into the desire to return as they become parents or start to recognize the influence of their college attainment on their family.

9. Backup plan: 2%

While some students are motivated to return to college because of pressing current desires for a different job or increased earnings, others are driven by what might happen. While not facing what they consider an immediate need for the degree, these students anticipate the possibility of changing circumstances which could mean that they do need a degree in the future, so they want to have the degree as a "backup plan"

in case that happens. In other cases, going back to college was always their backup plan if all other options failed to deliver sufficient opportunity in their life, and they are now returning to college because they are at the point where they now are ready to activate this backup plan.

10. Escape from current circumstance: 1%

Promotion, career change, and earning potential all stand on their own as specific motivations for students wanting to return to college. However, some students cite something deeper when they talk about their reasons for wanting a degree. For them, it's not just about the new job or increased earnings, they are focused on how that new job or increased earnings are their gateway out of present circumstances. Whether that means getting to leave a detrimental relationship or being able to take their family into a better place to live, they are driven by removing themselves from present conditions that they do not want to experience any longer and have identified finishing their degree as the way forward for them.

Section 4: Conclusions

When you get to the deepest cause, the reasons students stopout do not match the most common assumptions.

Stakeholders within and outside of higher education consistently enter conversations about college completion with the assumption that money is the top cause of students stopping-out and academics is not far behind. The biggest surprise in this report is that those two reasons—combined—represent only 28% of students in this analysis.

It is easy to see how those two factors came to be viewed as the dominant reasons. Institutions often notice falling GPA's and unpaid tuition balances among students leading up to their stopout. Stopped-out students themselves often initially cite academics or finances as the reason they are leaving. Yet looking at it only on the surface level allows the possibility of conflating symptoms with the underlying cause. By talking with students to get a more complete sense of their story, there is an opportunity to discuss their circumstances and understand the root cause of the obstacles they faced.

As we have seen in this report, life balance issues are more often a cause of stopping-out than academics, but given that a student's academic performance can suffer because of life balance issues, the student may report on an exit survey that they are leaving because of academic reasons. While financial issues rank second as a top reason for students leaving, they too hold the possibility of being over-counted because the source of financial pressures can also stem from deeper challenges.

When collecting stopout-cause data, accuracy hinges on having a way to dig into why a specific reason is being cited by a student. **Institutions should evaluate whether their data about why students stopout is collected in a way that can get to the root cause.** If the institution mistakenly believes that academics is the most common driver of stopping-out when it is actually life balance issues, they may focus attention on scaling up writing centers and tutoring labs when the biggest potential difference-makers are actually counseling centers or affordable child-care centers located near campus.

The time required to overcome many stopout causes calls into question the metrics most often being discussed about college completion.

The top three stopout reasons, personal/professional life balance and finances, together account for 65% of all stopouts. The nature of these challenges are complex situations that often take substantial time to overcome. Students struggling with life balance may need years to find a healthy rhythm that allows them to devote time to college again. Likewise, students with financial challenges may need years to save up the money they need to return to college. When they do return, they may need to take a part-time course load.

While these students work hard to overcome significant obstacles, and many colleges devote resources to opening pathways that ease their return, this effort will never be counted in a 4-year or 6-year graduation rate. Although these graduation rates are valuable metrics that ought to be reported and discussed, they do not have the ability to capture the story of returning students.

Similarly, term to term cohort persistence, unintentionally leaves the students who left that cohort behind by no longer seeking to monitor their activity after stopping-out. When success is framed only in terms of cohort persistence, the ongoing attention can easily shift towards only considering retention of the students that stayed rather than bringing back the ones who left.

There is a compelling story that ought to be told: stopped out students are overcoming obstacles and returning to finish their degrees as colleges are making adjustments targeted at seeking to ensure that these students can successfully complete. However, in many cases the existing metrics do not allow for the possibility of telling that story.

It should be the role of colleges to suggest to their stakeholders and communities what metrics actually demonstrate success, recognizing those metrics may be different than the ones that are asked of them. **Colleges should identify and begin promoting new metrics that capture the completion of students who started more than 6 years ago.** Providing an opportunity to understand what is happening within the returning student population is helpful in gaining a more complete understanding of the overall total student population. Statistics should not be designed only to capture the success of those students on a more "traditional" timeline. In order to deliver these new statistics, colleges need to ensure that they have sufficient tracking mechanisms for the returning student population.

Recognizing that the reasons students leave and their motivations for returning are so often personal presents a great opportunity for improving retention strategy: ensuring access to a person who can be an ongoing relational support system.

Retention approaches generally seek to ensure that students are appropriately connected to the right resources that can make a difference in their lives before it is too late. In order to effectively scale these resources, institutions need to have reliable mechanisms to match the right student with the resources they actually need.

If a student's GPA is falling and they receive an automated recommendation highlighting the academic resources that exist for the specific courses they are enrolled in, that will only make an impact to the extent that academics was the real challenge and the student is equipped to translate the information into action. In this analysis, only 5% of stopped-out students truly had an academic-related reason for leaving college.

Given how often the reasons students leave and their motivations for returning are personal, retention approaches for both first-time and returning students should be designed in a way that anticipates the difference-making power of empathy, encouragement, and accountability rooted in an authentic ongoing relationship with a trusted advocate. **Institutions should evaluate whether such a personal advocate is available to students. Moreover, they should consider whether such a resource is proactively offered to**

students who are not comfortable reaching out to ask for help or would never consider the possibility that it might be available apart from someone contacting them to let them know.

Having a relationship with someone adept at navigating the college's procedures and equipped to encourage and guide the student on a personal level best situates the student to overcome the types of circumstances this report reveals to most often be drivers of stopping-out. Further, ensuring the availability of a personal advocate uniquely benefits first-generation students who are less likely to already have a relationship with someone who has successfully navigated through college and the personal challenges that often accompany the college experience.

Section 5:
Data Collection Methodology

The dataset used to create this report was collected through interactions with stopped out and returning college students between 2016 and 2019 through the work of ReUp Education, serving more than 125,000 stopped-out students. Colleges and Universities partner with ReUp to find, engage, re-enroll, and support stopped-out students in completing their degree.

ReUp uses a model developed specifically for the stopped out population that combines data, technology, and personalized success coaching. Because the purpose of ReUp's work is not only to help students return, but ultimately to ensure their degree completion, the model is designed to address the obstacles that students face in order to re-enroll, as well as the challenges they face to complete their degree once they return. These challenges are unique to each student, so in order for the support provided to be effective, it must be tailored and personalized.

This type of customized support is possible when the story of each student and their specific set of circumstances informs the approach. As a part of ReUp's model, students that have expressed an interest in discussing the possibility of finishing college are provided with a success coach who specializes in supporting returning students. The coach has detailed conversations with the student that include discussion of the events surrounding their departure from college. The coach uses this information to inform their ongoing personalized support of the student once they have returned. A student who struggled to stay engaged with college because their personal network of friends and family did not include anyone who had a college degree needs a different support approach than a student who stopped-out because they became a parent and no longer had the bandwidth to focus on their education. Knowing each specific story allows the coach to provide the personalized support that is needed.

ReUp's methodology digs deeply into the reasons cited by students to ensure clarity of root cause. For example, if a student says that they stopped going to college because of financial reasons, the ReUp coach will ask follow up questions in order to understand if money is really the root cause or if money is just the symptom of some other cause. For example, a student may at first say that they stopped out because of money, but with some follow-up discussion go on to clarify that the financial issues were driven by the death of a parent, and the student needed to get a job to provide financial support for their siblings.

In addition to discussing the reasons a student left their institution before graduation, coaches also discuss the motivations compelling a student to desire to come back and finish. In order to tease out what is driving each student to return, coaches ask questions such as "What would finishing this degree mean to you?" and "What would having this degree allow you to do?" This information is critically important in informing

the personalization of coaching provided to each student. When returning students have a difficult season, one key way for a coach to encourage their persistence is to remind them of their specific hopes and dreams for finishing college. While one student may be driven by obtaining the earning power of a college degree, another student may have decided to return in order to be a role model for their family, and each of them benefit from the accountability of talking with someone who can help them keep perspective about why they wanted to come back.

Colleges that are partnering with ReUp are eager to better understand their stopped out population. For this reason ReUp periodically aggregates the individual student data and reports it back to partner institutions so that they can see the reasons why their students left and the reasons why they want to come back, as well as what barriers remain in the way of that path.

In this report, ReUp is sharing for the first time the high-level reasons given for leaving college and returning to college in aggregate across the institutions ReUp serves.

The reasons for students leaving college and the motivations for returning can be multifaceted and interconnected. This report presents the leading or most significant factor driving them to stop out and motivating them to return.

About the Authors

Sarah Horn

Sarah is CEO of ReUp Education. Sarah's entire career has been in higher education, with a specific focus on strategies that drive student success and improve student outcomes. For more than 15 years she has created, implemented, and managed student retention solutions at dozens of colleges and universities across the country. From 2013 to 2016, Sarah led the Retention Services division at Helix Education, and her team coached thousands of students. They saw up to a 5 percent annual retention improvement at their university partners. At Altius Schools, she managed the retention division for associate degree-seeking students. Under her guidance, students successfully transferred or graduated at a rate of 65 percent – compared to a national benchmark of 28 percent. At the beginning of her career, Sarah was a Success Coach at InsideTrack and eventually led one of the largest teams in the company.

Sarah holds a BA from the University of Rochester and an MA from John F Kennedy University. She has been invited to present her work at Educause, APSCU, UPCEA, NSSR, and CampusTech.

Andrew Lyle

Andrew is Director of Partnerships at ReUp Education. Andrew has served higher education institutions as they explore innovative solutions for improving learning and increasing student success since 2011. Prior to joining ReUp, Andrew was a regional director of business growth at Campus Labs where he gained expertise in learning outcomes assessment, accreditation, retention, and completion strategies. With a background that also includes customer service and account management roles, he helps prospective partners analyze the factors that will enable their long-term success as they design a partnership strategy based on the nuances of their specific context.

Andrew holds a BBA from the University of Georgia.

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Learn More

While there is great value in understanding trends across a large group of stopped-out students, ReUp recognizes that what ultimately matters most to each institution is better knowing and serving their own stopped out population. For questions about this report, or to begin a conversation about better understanding what drives your specific stopped out student population, visit reupeducation.com or contact Andrew Lyle at andrew.lyle@reupeducation.com.