REENGAGING STOPPED-OUT LEARNERS:
INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR RETURN AND COMPLETION

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More than 37 million adults under 65 have some college but no credential because they stopped out during the course of their degree. While a stop-out—an interruption in a learner's continuous enrollment with the expectation of eventual return—is the result of both personal and systemic challenges, the systemic barriers are within institutional control, giving leaders the opportunity to identify obstacles and advance strategies that bring stopped-out learners back to campus.

ACE—in collaboration with Pearson—conducted four focus groups in September 2025 to gather insights from college and university leaders to examine, assess, and strengthen efforts toward learners' reentry and completion. All participants in the focus groups worked closely with the some-college-no-degree population, and they represented a variety of institution types and positions.[1]

WHO STOPS OUT?

Focus group participants highlighted the diversity of the stop-out population. Certain groups, however, face additional pressures, making them more likely to stop out over the course of their education, including transfer, adult, low-income, and first-generation students. The likelihood of a stop-out increases if they are not provided with sufficient academic resources to encourage persistence. Near-completers—or learners close to or a few credits shy of obtaining their credentials—were also named by participants as one of the most frustrating student populations who stop out.

WHY DO LEARNERS STOP OUT?

Input from the focus groups highlights a variety of reasons students pause their educational experience, with many students facing several intersecting challenges.

> I think there are various reasons. Some students need the support services that are not provided by their institution. So they have barriers that are keeping them from pursuing their credential. They can get so far and then things somehow fall apart because the support systems aren't there. Sometimes it's just personal reasons. They are not really sure that they can meet the requirements. They don't have enough information to measure what they need to do and how to be prepared. Sometimes it's the institution.

1. Financial concerns

Focus group participants consistently cited learners' financial concerns as the primary reason for stop-outs. Over the past 30 years, the average cost of college at four-year institutions has increased around 70 percent, significantly impacting the affordability of a degree (College Board, 2024). The tuition costs and, more broadly, the living expenses associated with a full-time undergraduate education, such as housing, books, and meal costs, equate to some students needing significant additional contributions through scholarships and financial aid.

Financial concerns often encompass more than just the affordability of higher education. Many students often need to financially contribute to family expenses while enrolled in school, forcing them to make a choice between continuing their educational pursuits or supporting their families.

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1   Participants represented institution types including four-year public and four-year private, not-for-profit institutions; two-year public and private not-for-profit colleges; one for-profit institution; one graduate-only institution; one institutional system; and one association. Among the positions of those who participated included a president; a couple of vice chancellors, vice presidents, and provosts; a few deans and professors; and several directors, program managers, and coordinators/specialists.

2. Competing responsibilities

Often, stop-out students are unable to prioritize their education when, for example, a deadline emerges at work, causing them to fall behind in their courses and ultimately stop out. Other students serve as caregivers, with a significant amount of time spent dedicated to their families. Such responsibilities can overwhelm students, forcing them to make choices among every aspect of their lives. In these moments, some students see their education as their current lowest priority. Simply put, some students lack sufficient time to dedicate to their education.

3. Lack of readiness

Some students do not have enough information to accurately predict their level of preparedness for college. This issue of readiness is largely encountered on two fronts: academically, where students are not meeting the level of academic rigor at their institution; or practically, where students have trouble managing the new range of responsibilities that come with a significant change in lifestyle.

Participants noted a recurring theme among students who struggled academically before stopping out: a lack of interest in their classes, chosen major, or the career they were planning to enter after graduation. Waning interest in their career is particularly indicative of a stop-out, as what once led a student to pursue education is no longer a significant motivator. Similarly, students who struggle to commit to a major often stop out. With frequently changing majors, students fall behind on degree requirements, extending the time to completion and ultimately causing some students to stop out.

Faculty and administration worry that a lack of readiness will remain a consistent issue due to COVID-19 pandemic learning loss, with research suggesting that English language arts test scores have shown no signs of recovery five years after the pandemic (Brookings, 2025).

A lack of readiness can also relate to maturity; some students are not yet ready for the internal and situational struggles that come with a significant life change and stop out as a result.

While these three categories capture a large portion of stop-outs, other factors such as emerging career opportunities, a lack of institutional support services, mental health struggles, and the perception that there is no reason to complete a degree were also recognized by focus groups.

WHAT MOTIVATES LEARNERS TO REENGAGE?

Focus group participants shared that career advancement, personal achievement, and family dynamics motivated stopped-out students to return to school.

> We try to really tap into what were the mitigating factors that students faced when they made the separation decision, and then what were the motivating factors, not only personally, but from the institutions that they returned to, how did they reconnect and how did they make the decision that it was worth it and that they could actually do it, answering those two questions. And we found a range of thematic, you know, reasons for that, including, you know, the long-held hope of finishing a degree for personal fulfillment, inspiration of children and family as we all experience and love to see students trying to walk the talk.

1. Career advancement

Career advancement was one of the most consistently cited motivating factors when considering why students return to higher education. Career advancement can take a number of forms, with many students looking to upskill or reskill their abilities through a completed or new credential. A return to formal collegiate education is often seen as the most efficient way to further develop a chosen skillset, motivating stop-outs to return to an institution.

Some students also stop out because they can get a well-paying, entry-level job without a degree, but then later in their careers, they recognize additional credentials are needed to advance. A recent report from the World Economic Forum found that with the changing job landscape, nearly 70 percent of the North American workforce is projected to require upskilling or reskilling by 2030, creating more opportunities for colleges and universities to reengage stopped-out learners (World Economic Forum, 2025).

Individuals who have stopped out may also want to change fields, and higher education provides that opportunity. The desire to change fields is related to the lack of academic readiness cited earlier; what caused a student to stop-out is bringing them back to campus now. For these students, once they have begun to develop their careers, they return to obtain a degree or credential that provides new career opportunities.

2. Personal achievement

Focus group participants also discussed students who stopped out returning because of personal goals and a sense of achievement. Indeed, students who have taken time away often return feeling more focused, confident, and prepared, and they can approach their degree with a better understanding of the higher education system and a plan for how to succeed.

3. Family dynamics

Adult students are also motivated to return to college to serve as an inspiration to their children or families, with many members of the focus groups noting this reason. While familial obligations were one of the most consistently cited factors for students stopping out, familial relationships can also be the catalyst that brings students back to college.

Although career advancement, personal achievement, and family dynamics were the three primary motivational factors, participants also recognized the increased ability for institutions to provide a more tailored experience, specifically through mental health services and more flexible programming, as a significant motivating factor to encourage reengagement. In this instance, stopped-out students need to clearly see that the institution they are returning to has evolved since they left. Demonstrating tangible changes, such as improved support services, flexible scheduling, and a stronger sense of belonging, helps rebuild trust and shows that the college improved the overall student experience.

AT WHAT POINTS CAN INSTITUTIONS REENGAGE STOPPED-OUT STUDENTS?

Reengaging stopped-out learners requires intentional design and delivery of services across units—from recruitment to materials to support services.

> " For all the multitude of reasons that they stopped out, what makes us think that they're going to want to come back into the program that is the same program they left in the same format, in the same structure that they left? And so we have to recognize there needs to be a difference here.

1. Recruitment

For many colleges and universities, a reengagement strategy begins with recruiting stopped-out students in the surrounding community. Focus group participants noted that reacquiring previously enrolled students demands a different strategy than what is used to recruit or advise new students.

Clear communication about what pathways exist and an emphasis on prospective learners' goals and lived experiences are critical to building and maintaining genuine progress toward reengagement. Several participants recommended that marketing materials be connected to the reenrollment motivations learners have expressed and reflect how returning to an academic program can fit into their busy lives.

Collaboration was also described by participants as central to effective recruitment, bringing together admissions, academic advising, and student affairs staff to coordinate outreach. These efforts to share communication with prospective learners can decrease the intensity for any one person and create multiple touchpoints for a learner once they reengage.

2. Information and orientation

Coupled with the reengagement of stopped-out learners are intentional efforts to onboard and reorient students on their return to the classroom and academic life. Focus group participants shared several examples of what these efforts encompass—both before and after a student decides to return. Most notably, making information available and accessible is crucial. This includes accessible formats, such as webinars after traditional work hours, and tailored content to the specific needs of the reengaged learner population focused on key deadlines, credit for prior learning (CPL) policies, information on credit transfer, financial aid, and other student services.

Once reengaged, focus group participants acknowledged the use of bridge courses and self-paced learning modules can acclimate students to the institution and increase understanding of what services are available to help them succeed.

3. Advising

Focus group participants saw academic and career advising as crucial to successful reengagement. Participants acknowledged advising as both relational and data-informed, connecting students to resources, sustaining engagement, and improving completion and employment outcomes.

Academic advising was portrayed as a proactive, ongoing process that begins early and continues through graduation, helping students navigate reentry, credit transfer, and academic planning. Many participants emphasized coordinated approaches involving advisors, coaches, faculty, and peer mentors, coupled with systems that flag returning students and trigger early alerts.

Participants noted that career advising is most effective when it is integrated early, sustained throughout the student experience, and connected to industry and community partnerships. Many participants described efforts at their institutions to introduce career development from the outset, such as having career staff speak with reengaged students about graduation, employment goals, and resume building, which helps learners connect the dots from education to employment. Career advising was also framed as a bridge between academic learning and professional application, supporting both student success and regional workforce development.

4. Flexible program delivery

Recognizing the variety of responsibilities returning students are balancing, flexible program delivery was identified as a key strategy for helping reengaged learners be successful in their return to coursework. Participants shared how their institutions are adopting flexible course formats and student services to better align with the realities of students' work and family responsibilities. Examples include expanded online course and service offerings, after-hours access

to advising and support, and shortened course blocks—such as eight-week terms—that allow for more manageable enrollment patterns.

Flexibility was also reflected in policies like leaves of absence that allow students to pause their studies without losing progress or status. Collectively, these practices are a shift to student-centered design, recognizing that responsive scheduling, varied modalities, and adaptable academic structures can help sustain persistence.

5. Support services

Focus group participants agreed that support services, including related activities and policies, are at the core of ensuring students feel seen, cared for, and like they belong—all of which contribute to their success both inside and outside the classroom.

Building and sustaining wrap-around services for students promotes persistence, especially for reengaged learners. Institutions are factoring in regular and consistent outreach to individuals across their academic journeys, enabling faculty and staff to connect students directly with campus and community resources, including childcare, transportation assistance, and access to basic needs such as food, clothing, and housing. A specific emphasis on mental health resources—both institutionally and within the surrounding community—was discussed by focus group participants as well, highlighting the importance of holistic well-being.

Financial assistance for credential completion was also named as an important support service. Several participants described institutional efforts, including financial incentives for reengagement, student debt forgiveness, and access to scholarships to help reengaged learners reach the finish line of their academic programs without finances being a barrier.

WHICH SYSTEMS CAN HAVE GREATER IMPACT?

While the institutional practices described above have demonstrated promising outcomes, certain efforts would benefit from greater focus to achieve stronger system-level impact.

> With the goal of increasing that population, what are the services that are needed and the times that those services are needed? And then culturally, how do we get a university, a traditional university system or campus to adjust to the different changes of this population, their needs, and again, the timing of their needs. It has to be an institutional priority that's owned by stakeholders across all of the different silos of a higher education institution.

1. Quantitative and qualitative data collection

Gathering data on stopped-out students at an institutional level is difficult. A recurring theme across focus group participants was the inability to effectively communicate and gauge student perspectives once students step away from the institution, leading to informational gaps on how to support reengagement. Several participants noted institutional collaborations can be effective in managing data collection on stopped-out learners, including institutional research offices, academic units, and registrars. When it does occur, data collection from stop-outs takes two forms: student surveys and individual conversations.

Several participants discussed their use of student surveys—often exit surveys—to identify the academic, financial, or personal challenges that led to a student's departure. These surveys can help institutions tailor interventions and shape future policies that address student needs. Outreach efforts to students who have already left, however, are resource-intensive and yield limited responses, constraining the ability to gather meaningful insights from stopped-out learners.

In addition, personalized conversations between students and faculty and staff offer valuable qualitative insights, particularly when held proactively with students showing signs of disengagement. Focus group participants highlighted how these discussions help identify supports that may prevent stop-outs before they occur. While both approaches are valuable, focus group participants emphasized the need for more consistent, well-resourced systems to track, communicate with, and learn from stopped-out students over time.

2. Resource allocation

Efforts to reengage learners and keep them on track toward credential completion are not immune from other aspects of institutions' operations; financial limitations, reduction in faculty and staff, and removal of critical offices to support success all have implications for reengaged learners, especially as institutions strive to serve specific student needs.

Several participants acknowledged state- and system-funded efforts to reengage stopped-out learners, which have enabled these colleges and universities to continue reengagement efforts despite challenges with constrained institutional resources.

3. Community and employer partnerships

Focus group participants also described the value of strong community and employer partnerships to support student success and improve alignment of academic programs with workforce needs. Participants provided several examples of how their institutions are creating opportunities for direct engagement with employers through career fairs, information sessions, internships, and live case collaborations, where students apply their learning to real-world problems.

A recurring theme across participants was the importance of two-way partnerships with local and regional employers, aligning programs to the needs of the workforce while fostering student motivation and employability.

WHAT SHOULD CHANGE?

1. Flexible program delivery

Colleges and universities should establish and normalize program models that center learners so they can complete credentials on their own terms.

- Accreditation flexibility: modify time-to-completion requirements to better account for varied modalities in program delivery
- Course-sharing agreements: provide guaranteed credit transfer for students taking courses across institutions to improve completion
- Hybrid and online courses: support institutions that offer multiple evening, weekend, and compressed-term courses aligned with working learners' schedules and family responsibilities to reduce time-to-completion barriers
- Orientation modules: tailor programs to returning learners and cover technology support, aid renewal, and academic planning basics

2. Data infrastructure

Institutions should integrate data sources to identify, track, and support stopped-out learners.

- Data standards: institutionalize efforts to capture data on stopped-out learners by establishing standard exit surveys that capture reasons for stopping out (financial, academic, personal, institutional factors) and combine these surveys with follow-up interviews or outreach efforts for greater understanding

- State longitudinal data: devote specific funds to expand and improve state longitudinal data systems to better capture metrics on reenrollment, awarding CPL, and other standardized metrics
- Interoperability: create guidance for states and systems to link data across higher education and workforce agencies while maintaining compatibility and privacy compliance

3. Credit for prior learning, work experiences, and military training

Colleges and universities should promote broader acceptance of CPL to accelerate completion and reduce costs for reengaged learners.

- Assessment and transfer practices: implement consistent standards for CPL evaluation and transcription to facilitate credit transfer across institutions
- Employer partnerships: incentivize employer–institution partnerships to develop industry-aligned CPL pathways that turn workplace training into credits toward credential completion
- Learning and employment records: integrate records into postsecondary programs to provide learners and workers with portable verification that reduces friction in the hiring process
- Short credentials: stackable credentials can act as "on-ramps," helping reengaged students gain quick wins to improve completion

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