REASONS STUDENTS CONSIDER LEAVING OR STOPPING OUT:

Insights from the 2023 Diverse Learning Environments Survey

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Introduction

Administered by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) and housed at the Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST), the Diverse Learning Environments Survey (DLE) captures student perceptions regarding institutional climate; campus practices as experienced by faculty, staff, and peers; and student learning outcomes. Diverse student populations are at the center of the survey, and the instrument is based on studies of diverse student bodies and the complexity of issues that range from student mobility to intergroup relations.

The 2023 DLE survey was fielded from October 2022 to April 2023. Data from the 2023 survey offer useful insights for college and university administrators, faculty, and staff to better understand students' experiences.

15 institutions[1]

10 states[2]

9,248 students[3]

This brief highlights differences in students' perceptions of their learning environments—even within the same campus contexts—to identify potential pressure points against persistence and completion.

70% used financial aid during the academic year

57% were students of color

32% identified as LGBTQ+

26% were ages 25 and older

26% were first-generation students

34% had a total household income <$40,000

2% were students with military service

While the **first data brief** presented insights on students' sense of belonging, this brief addresses reasons students leave or stop out from their academic programs.

Research on college student persistence consistently shows that students who are from less socioeconomically privileged backgrounds are more likely to leave college before graduation (Reason 2009). Furthermore, students

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1   The 15 institutions included three universities, 10 four-year colleges, and two community colleges. Of these, nine were public institutions and six were private.

2   The 10 states were California, Colorado, Illinois, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Missouri, North Carolina, New Jersey, New York, and Oregon.

3   Data analysis for this brief was based on the 8,559 students who completed 10 percent or more of the survey.

from traditionally underrepresented racial and ethnic groups and first-generation college students face similar challenges.[4] Economic background has been identified as a crucial predictor of college persistence alongside race and ethnicity, which independently influence academic achievement and persistence rates among college students (Bailey and Dynarski 2011). Understanding the reasons why students choose to stop out or leave college is critical to addressing retention and success in higher education. This analysis highlights several key factors that influence these decisions, such as financial constraints, family responsibilities, academic challenges, and experiences of discrimination or harassment.

Consideration of Dropout

Students were asked to what extent they had seriously considered dropping out of college (see figure 1). Among survey respondents, one in three students indicated that they had considered dropping out of college, with 25 percent who had considered this to some extent and 8 percent who had considered this to a great extent. A higher share of students whose total household income was less than $40,000 considered dropping out of college to any extent (39 percent), compared with those whose total household income was $40,000 or more (31 percent).

FIGURE 1. SHARE OF STUDENTS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED DROPPING OUT

7.9%
To a great extent

25.4%
To some extent

66.8%
Not at all
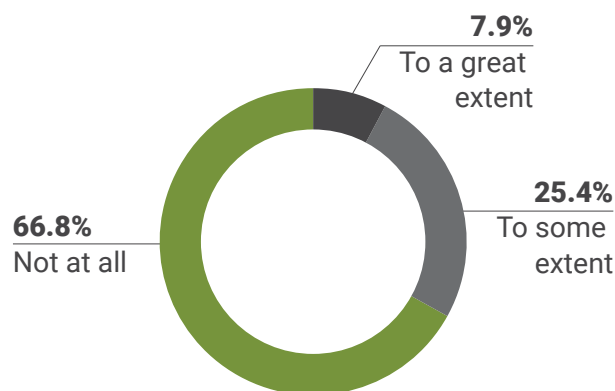
Occurrence of Stop-Out

Students were asked if they had stopped taking classes for more than one term since entering their college or university. Among survey respondents, 6 percent of students (n=424) indicated that they had stopped taking classes for more than one term. Students of color and White students (6 percent) indicated at equal rates that they had stopped taking classes for more than one term since entering the college that they currently attended, and a larger share of Black students (11 percent) indicated this when compared with other students across racial and ethnic groups.[5] A higher share of students whose total household income was less than $40,000 had stopped taking classes for more than one term (7 percent), compared with those students whose total household incomes were $40,000 or more (5 percent). More students who had military service (15 percent) than those who did not have military service (6 percent) had stopped taking classes for more than one term.[6]

Equal shares of LGBTQ+ (6 percent) and non-LGBTQ+ (6 percent) students reported that they had stopped

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4   The term *first-generation students* includes respondents who reported that their parents or guardians had completed less than some college. The term *some college* describes the experience of individuals who made any progress in college but did not complete their degree or credential.

5   The term *students of color* includes respondents who identified as racial and ethnic categories other than White.

6   The term *military service* refers to any student who indicated that they were Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), a cadet, or midshipman at a service academy; in the Reserve or National Guard; on active duty; or a discharged veteran not serving on active duty or in the Reserve or National Guard.

taking classes for more than one term.[7] Among LGBTQ+ students, gay or lesbian students (9 percent) were the highest share to report that they had stopped taking classes for more than one term.

Adult learners (11 percent) had stopped taking classes for more than one term at nearly three times the rate of traditional-aged students (4 percent). The following analysis expands upon the reasons that contribute to students' decisions to stop taking classes for more than one term.

Reasons for Stop-Out

Students who indicated that they had stopped taking classes for more than one term were provided with a list of 13 possible reasons, and they were asked to rate these potential reasons in order to illuminate how important each reason was in their decision to stop taking classes (see figure 2). When considering any indication of importance ("essential," "very important," or "somewhat important"), the reason with the highest share of selection was "wasn't doing as well academically as expected," with three in five students who considered this important. Three other reasons with over half of students who indicated any level of importance included "had family responsibilities" (55 percent), "changed my career plans" (52 percent), and "had money problems and could no longer afford college" (51 percent). The reasons identified by the highest share of students as "not important" included "military permanent change of station (PCS), mobilization or deployment" (91 percent), "discrimination or harassment" (83 percent), "was placed on academic probation" (73 percent), and "had a good job offer" (72 percent).

FIGURE 2. PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF REASONS STUDENTS HAD STOPPED TAKING CLASSES FOR MORE THAN ONE TERM
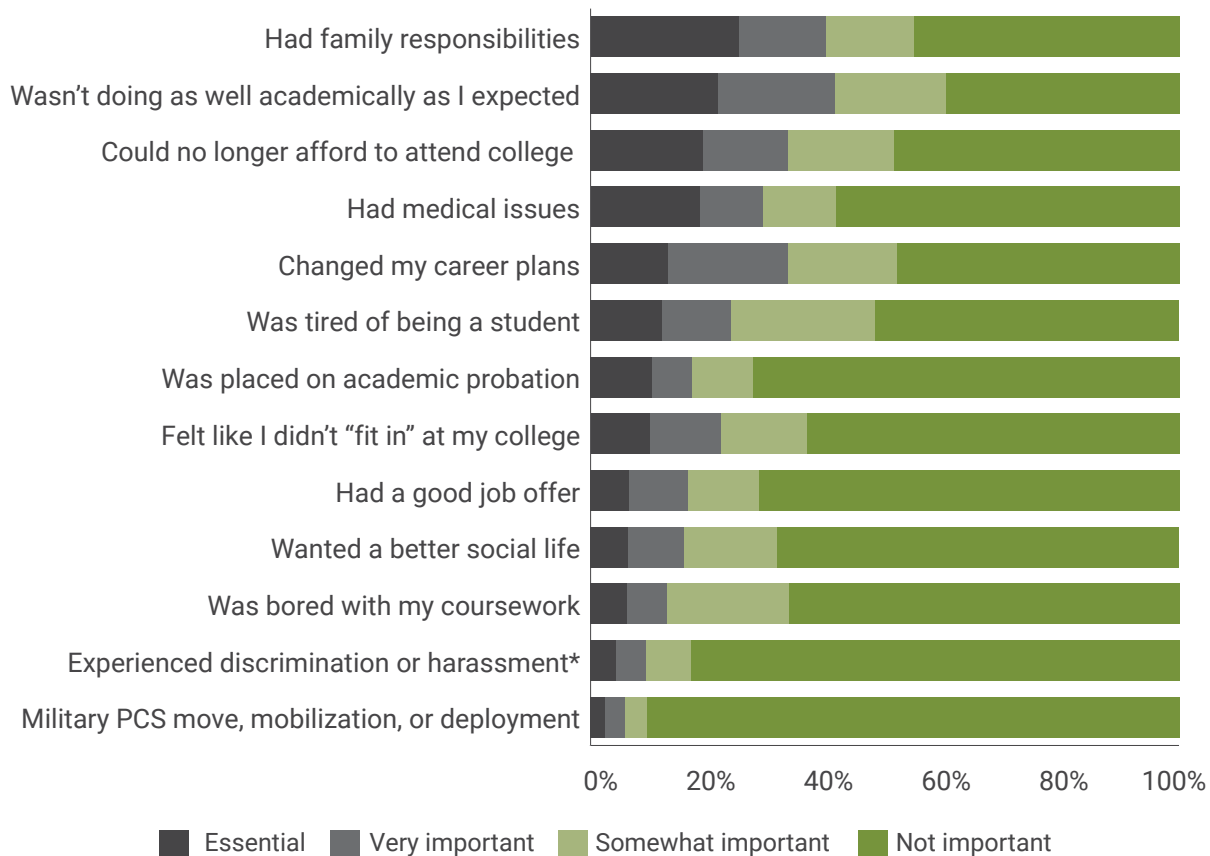
*Examples of discrimination or harassment include racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, religious intolerance, and classism.

7   The term *LGBTQ+* includes respondents who identified as bisexual, gay or lesbian, transgender, or queer or other identity.

Contributed Money to Help Support Family

Two-thirds (67 percent) of students who had stopped taking classes for more than one term occasionally (28 percent) or frequently (39 percent) contributed money to help support their families. Student populations who indicated that they frequently contributed money to help support their families included first-generation students (53 percent), adult learners (51 percent), Hispanic students (51 percent), Black students (49 percent), and those whose total household incomes were less than $40,000 (46 percent).

Family Responsibilities

One in four students who had stopped taking classes for more than one term selected family responsibilities as an essential reason for doing so. More students of color (28 percent) than White students (21 percent) indicated family responsibilities as essential to their decision to stop taking classes. Additionally, more than one-third (37 percent) of first-generation students reported that family responsibilities were essential to their decision to stop taking classes for more than one term, compared with students whose parents had at least some college (20 percent). Adult learners (34 percent) indicated family responsibilities as essential to their decision to stop taking classes for more than one term at twice the share of traditional-aged students (16 percent) who did so. One in four students with military service selected family responsibilities as essential to their decision to stop taking classes for more than one term, which was similar to the share of students without military service (25 percent).

Not Doing as Well Academically as Expected

Another essential reason students reported they had stopped taking classes for more than one term was that they were not doing as well academically as expected. For students who had total household incomes of less than $40,000, 27 percent indicated not doing as well academically as an essential reason they stopped taking classes for more than one term, compared with 18 percent of students who had total household incomes of $40,000 or more. Traditional-aged students (26 percent) indicated this as essential to their decision to stop taking classes for more than one term at a higher share than that of adult learners (18 percent). When compared with White students (14 percent), nearly twice the amount of students of color (27 percent) reported this as an essential reason.

No Longer Able to Afford College

Having the resources to finance one's education was also an essential reason students stopped taking classes for more than one term. More than one in five students of color (22 percent) and 14 percent of White students reported that they had money problems and were no longer able to afford to attend college as essential reasons for their decision to stop taking classes. Students who had total household incomes of less than $40,000 also had a higher share who reported money problems as essential to their decision to stop taking classes (28 percent), compared with those who had total household incomes of $40,000 or more (13 percent). First-generation students (28 percent) and adult learners (22 percent) also reported money problems as an essential reason they had stopped taking classes for more than one term.

Experienced Discrimination or Harassment

A slightly larger share of students of color (5 percent) than that of White students (2 percent) indicated experiences with discrimination or harassment (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, religious intolerance, classism) as essential to their decision to stop taking classes. Black students reported experiences of discrimination or harassment as essential to their decision to stop taking classes (9 percent) at a higher share when compared with those of all other racial and ethnic groups.

Considerations for Senior Leaders

According to a recent analysis by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, an estimated 37 million adults ages 65 and younger were included in the population of students in 2022 who had completed some college but earned no credential (Berg et al. 2024). Using insights from the Higher Education Research Institute's (HERI) DLE survey improves our collective understanding of not only the consideration of stop-out but also of the obstacles encountered by those who had left and then returned to their coursework. Mitigating the challenges that contribute to students' decisions to stop taking classes improves the postsecondary experience for all students. College presidents and senior leaders can start by asking the following questions to better understand the context of stop-out on their campuses:

- How does our institution define stop-out? What data does our institution collect on stop-out? How can it be leveraged to inform policies and practices aimed at reducing stop-out?

- What mechanisms exist for matching students who are at risk of stopping out with available institutional services and community resources?

- How does our institution reengage students who have stopped out?

As college presidents and senior executives navigate these conversations, it may also be useful to consult the following resources:

- ACE National Guide: A critical resource for resuming and new students, the ACE National Guide evaluates students' past learning—from the workplace, certifications, and other areas—to ensure these experiences can yield postsecondary credit and progress toward their credentials.

- The State of Higher Education: This series of annual reports from Gallup and Lumina Foundation offers insights on U.S. adults without a college degree, looking at individuals currently enrolled in bachelor's degree programs, those who stopped out before completing their credentials, and others who never enrolled in college. The 2024 report offers critical findings on individuals' attitudes, experiences, and obstacles in pursuing postsecondary education.

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