Disengaged Learners & Return Paths to Higher Education

Barriers & Opportunities for Reengaging the Some College, No Degree Population

OCTOBER 2023

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Methodology

SURVEY GOAL

To understand the experiences, perspectives, and motivations of the some college, no credential population to help determine how colleges and universities can encourage and aid their return to higher education.

DATA SET

Target age range was from 19-63 years old. In total, 2,384 respondents participated in the study, of which 1,070 met all study qualifications and completed the entire survey. Qualified respondents were pursuing an associate or a bachelor's degree when they were last enrolled in a college or university.

PERSONA DEVELOPMENT

Researchers looked at respondents' different perceptions, experiences, and opinions around disengagement and potential future enrollment, which yielded a number of insights. The study population was further segmented into four personas to best represent and understand the differences among the survey respondents.

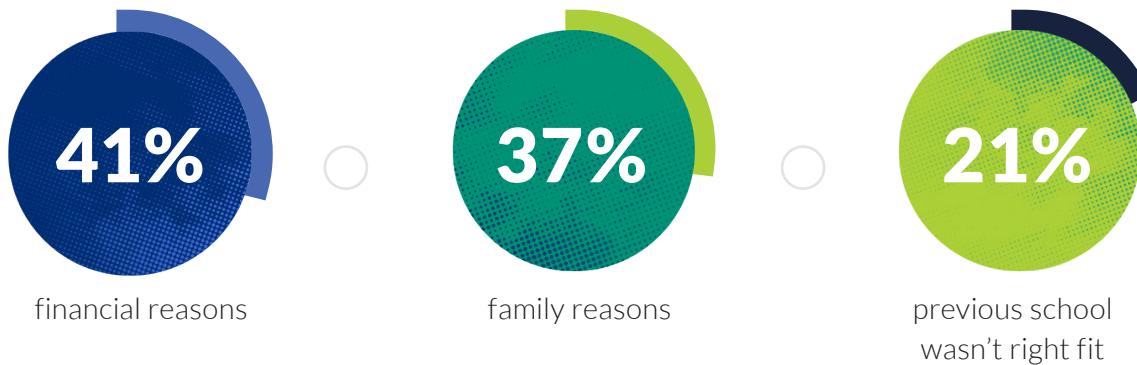### CRITICAL EMPIRICAL RESEARCH STUDY

Co-Lead Principal Investigators

— Dr. Amy Smith, Chief Learning Officer, StraighterLine

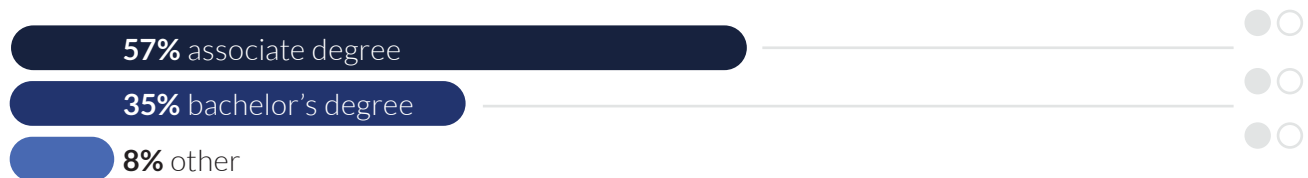— Jim Fong, Chief Research Officer and Director of the Center for Research and Strategy, UPCEA

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Key Findings

PROGRESS IN ORIGINAL DEGREE PROGRAM

Top reasons for disengaging from a degree program?

41%
financial reasons

37%
family reasons

21%
previous school wasn't right fit

What were they pursuing when they were last enrolled?

57% associate degree

35% bachelor's degree

8% other

At what point in their degree program did they stop?

17%
just started

26%
quarter of the way

29%
halfway

28%
three-quarters or more

INTEREST IN DEGREE COMPLETION PROGRAMS

Likelihood of pursuing a degree completion program?

60% somewhat to extremely likely

40% not very to not at all likely

What increases the likelihood? Feeling stuck in a career.

68% of respondents who strongly agree they are **STUCK IN THEIR CAREER** are somewhat to extremely likely to pursue a degree completion program

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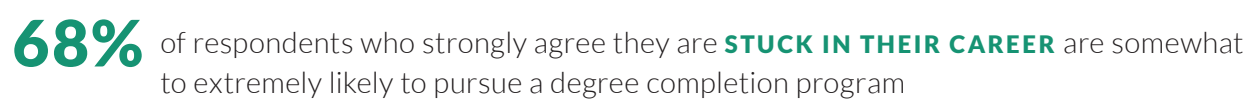
Top reasons for considering a degree completion program?

48% improve salary

44% personal goal

32% career advancement

29% change careers
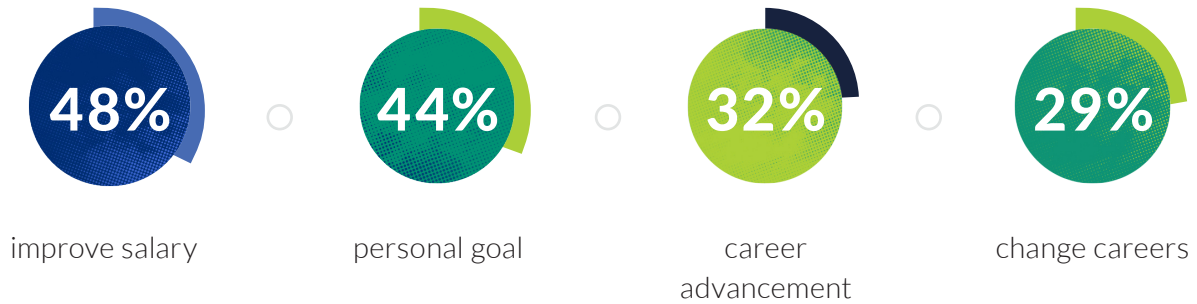
Top factors when selecting a degree completion program?

68% tuition/cost

56% speed to complete

33% transferable credits
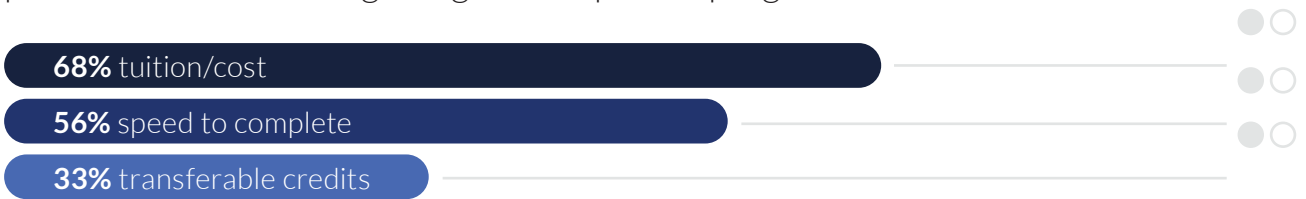
Learners strongly desire additional layers of value, such as prior learning assessment (PLA), microcredentials, and stackability. These offerings can greatly increase to increase interest in pursuing a degree completion program.

PLA Credits increase interest by **78%**

Stackable Microcredentials increase interest by **76%**

Among survey respondents who identified as being extremely likely to pursue a degree completion program, the value-adds that greatly increase to increase their interest the most:

94% want PLA credit

67% want stackable microcredentials

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Impact on Higher Education

While the number of individuals enrolling in traditional undergraduate programs is declining, the number of Americans with some college, no credential is ballooning. The convergence of these two populations will undoubtedly force higher education into rethinking its long-held value equation. As we venture deeper into the disrupting waters of the new economy, and Americans continue to feel the sting of inflation, individuals are looking at avenues for improving their earning potential. Those with some college, no credential face a difficult choice. Should they remain in a career in which they feel stuck, or should they return to a system that provided a questionable return on their previous investment?

This research found that while 46% of respondents feel as though they've reached a point in their career where they are stuck or don't have the opportunity to advance, only 29% were extremely (12%) or very likely (17%) to pursue a degree completion program. Clearly, the traditional degree completion program alone is not enough to entice many learners to return to higher education.

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The findings of this study reinforce the reality that higher ed institutions need to rethink degree completion programs to attract the some college, no credential learner. Microcredentials, stackable pathways, and credit for life or work experience all offer considerable benefits that increase learner interest. Institutions that develop and communicate this type of value-add will see the greatest success in the years to come.

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About StraighterLine

The leading provider of high-quality, online courses, StraighterLine helps learners earn college credit and meet their professional goals. All StraighterLine courses go through an intensive quality review process by ACE CREDIT prior to being available to students. Each year, over 45,000 learners take StraighterLine courses to upskill into new careers or earn transferable credit to over 3,000 colleges and universities worldwide. StraighterLine works with higher education institutions and corporate partners to provide their students and employees with flexible education options that allow them to work and learn at their own pace.

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About UPCEA

UPCEA is the leading association for professional, continuing, and online education. For more than 100 years, UPCEA has served most of the leading public and private colleges and universities in North America. Founded in 1915, the association serves its members with innovative conferences and specialty seminars, research and benchmarking information, professional networking opportunities and timely publications. Based in Washington, D.C., UPCEA also builds greater awareness of the vital link between contemporary learners and public policy issues.

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