

Why Did They Leave? Learning From the Experiences of Former Community College Students

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Many community college students begin their journey with high educational aspirations. Unfortunately, a large percentage of students leave college before they achieve their academic goals. In a recent survey of entering community college students, 83% reported plans to earn a bachelor's degree (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2023). Yet, nearly 40% of students in public two-year colleges do not return for their second year and have not earned a certificate or degree (National Student Clearinghouse [NSC], 2025a). Students who leave without earning a credential are unlikely to return (NSC, 2025b). As a result, many students miss out on the socioeconomic benefits associated with completing a postsecondary credential. Given the gap between students' initial goals and actual attainment rates, understanding why students depart college is a critical step in helping to prevent attrition and its negative implications.

Past research points to several key factors that shape students' decisions to remain enrolled. Students enter college with goals and expectations that are modified by their experiences during their journey, both inside and outside the institution (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1993). Interpersonal relationships and interactions within the college, such as those with peers, faculty, and staff, can foster a stronger sense of belonging and provide support in navigating college, which encourages persistence (Deil-Amen, 2011; Karp, 2011; Schudde, 2019; Tinto, 1993). Additionally, psychological factors like satisfaction and the perceived value of a college degree, which evolve over the course of the college experience, can influence students' decision to remain enrolled (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Finally, self-efficacy, the confidence in one's ability to accomplish a goal, can positively influence academic achievement (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

Past research also points to several factors that shape students' decisions to depart college before earning a credential. A lack of purpose, such as not having a clear sense of direction in relation to educational and career goals, can undermine persistence (Becker et al., 2025). The ability to complete a credential is also often constrained by personal challenges (e.g., financial hardship and health concerns) and competing demands (e.g., work and family obligations) (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Even among academically successful community college students,

financial hardship is the most frequently cited reason for early departure, with other nonfinancial barriers also salient (Ortagus et al., 2021).

In this report, we examine survey findings from recently stopped-out community college students to shed more light on the experiences of this population and their reasons for leaving college. Using two waves of survey data from 480 former students who attended one of four community colleges (in California, Ohio, Maryland, or Texas) in fall 2023 but left before the start of their second year in fall 2024, we first review respondents' educational goals and expectations upon college entry. We then examine how these former students described their college experiences and interactions with their peers, in courses and programs, and with faculty and advisors. Third, we explore the factors that students reported contributed to their departure. Finally, we discuss respondents' plans regarding their college education and their perceptions about whether leaving college was a good decision.

While different facets of a student's life influence the choice to leave college, we focus on those related to the college environment (such as relationships within the institution and student perceptions of their performance) and personal factors (e.g., work, family, and financial issues). Our findings suggest that students rarely leave college for a single reason; rather, departure decisions are shaped by a combination of factors, many of which can be addressed by colleges. Understanding former students' initial aspirations and expectations, their experiences while enrolled, and challenges that influence college departure can help institutions better serve students and increase retention or re-enrollment. We discuss recommendations based on our findings at the end of this report.

Study Design

About the Survey

The data used in this report are part of a larger longitudinal study to examine community college students' program and career decision-making over time. Our community college student survey was focused on three topics: (1) each student's educational and career goals, (2) their thoughts on the program(s) they intend to pursue and the factors that are most important to them when selecting a program, and (3) the people and experiences inside and outside the college that are informing the student's program choice(s). We also included a series of demographic questions to better understand each student's financial, career, and familial contexts.

The broad study employed three survey waves. This report draws on data from the first wave (administered within the first two months of college entry in fall 2023) and the third wave (administered one year later in fall 2024, after the population of interest in this report left college). Given that attrition remains a persistent issue in higher education, our research team developed a set of questions for students who participated in the first wave of the study but left their starting institution before their second year of college.¹

The survey was administered in Qualtrics, was optimized to be easily completed on a computer, tablet, or cell phone, and was designed to be completed in 10–15 minutes. The full survey was professionally translated into Spanish, and students could choose to respond to questions in either Spanish or English.

Student Sample and Survey Administration

In fall 2023, we administered the first wave of the survey to 12,628 first-time-in-college students at four community colleges in California, Ohio, Maryland, and Texas. The colleges in our sample include one urban, two suburban, and one rural college; two colleges are Hispanic Serving Institutions, and one is a Predominantly Black Institution. In fall 2024, wave three was administered to the 4,515 wave-one respondents. Of the 2,834 individuals who responded to wave three of the survey,² 648 said that they were no longer enrolled in their first institution. When we restricted the sample to those who had left higher education altogether (rather than having transferred to another community college or four-year institution³) and had answered the section of the survey central to our questions, there were 480 students in our sample. The proportion of non-returning students in our sample is lower than what would be expected given national patterns of attrition.⁴

Our sample is predominantly Hispanic and Black (80%), with a higher percentage of women (59%) than men (38%). Slightly more than half of the respondents (56%) reported that they were first-generation college students. The majority of our sample (64%) enrolled full-time in their first term.

Research Questions

Discussion in the report is guided by the following research questions:

1. What educational goals and expectations did former community college students have when they entered college?
2. How do former community college students describe their experiences in college?
3. What reasons do former community college students report for leaving college?

Findings

Educational Goals at College Entry

To frame our findings about why students left higher education, we first examine what former students said they wanted to accomplish when they first enrolled, followed by their first-term academic expectations.⁵ Table 1 presents the stated educational goals of students who initially enrolled in fall 2023 but departed before their second year. (The stated goal was only for their tenure at that particular college; we report on their highest postsecondary education goal overall below.)

Among the students who departed before the start of their second year, 16% initially wanted to earn a certificate, 69% wanted to earn an associate degree, and 11% wanted to transfer before completing a credential. Overall, 87% of students in our sample who ultimately left college before the start of their second year initially had a goal to earn some type of credential at their starting college.

Table 1. Highest Educational Goal at Starting Community College

Highest educational goal	<i>n</i>	Percent
None	9	2%
Transfer without earning credential	54	11%
Certificate	75	16%
Associate degree	332	69%
Bachelor's degree ^a	8	2%
Total number of respondents	478	100%

Note. Respondents provided their goal for their starting community college (not their highest postsecondary education goal).

^a Students could seek a bachelor's degree at two of the four colleges.

We next asked students about the credentials they hoped to earn in their lifetime (categorized by their highest goal, shown in Table 2). We found that most respondents entered college with educational aspirations that extended beyond the community college. Over two thirds wanted to earn a bachelor's degree or higher: 37% wanted to earn a four-year degree, while 32% wanted to earn a graduate degree.

Table 2. Highest Lifetime Educational Goal

Highest educational goal	<i>n</i>	Percent
Don't know	34	7%
Certificate	29	6%
Associate degree	81	17%
Bachelor's degree	178	37%
Graduate degree	154	32%
Total number of respondents	476	100%

Academic Courseloads and Expectations

In the first wave of data collection, administered in students' first semester of college, respondents were asked to report how many courses they were taking, the number of courses they anticipated that they would successfully complete, and the average grade they expected across their classes.

While part-time enrollment is prevalent at community colleges nationally, students in our sample predominantly enrolled full-time in their first semester. The proportion of full- and

part-time students responding to our survey in fall 2023 reflects the broader patterns of enrollment at the same four institutions. In fall 2023, among first-time degree- or certificate-seeking students at our four colleges, 39% enrolled part-time and 61% enrolled full-time; this compares to 36% and 64%, respectively, in our sample.

Next, we examine students' academic expectations, presented in Table 3. Expectations are important motivational factors that can lead students to exert more effort (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Prior research has found that higher grade expectations predict retention (Acee et al., 2023). Most of our respondents had high initial expectations about their academic performance. Eighty-four percent of former students indicated that they expected to complete all the classes they enrolled in, and more than three-quarters (78%) anticipated their average letter grade to be between A and B. These findings suggest that these students began their postsecondary journey with high academic expectations, as reflected in the high proportion who reported taking a full-time load and the expectations of their performance.

Table 3. Anticipated Average Grade in First Semester of College

Grade	<i>n</i>	Percent
A	42	9%
A- to B+	215	45%
B	112	24%
B- to C+	86	18%
C	13	3%
C- or lower	8	2%
Total number of respondents	476	100%

Responses to College Experiences

We know from prior research that a student's decision to leave college is often not abrupt but rather arises from interactions over time between the student and the environment, systems, and resources of an institution (Tinto, 1993). Positive interactions and experiences at college can strengthen students' sense of connection, reinforce commitment to their educational goals, and provide support, all of which can influence decisions about college enrollment (Tinto, 1993; Deil-Amen, 2011; Karp, 2011). Further, they can foster students' confidence through validation from peers, positive feedback from faculty, or guidance from advisors (Rendon, 1994; Deil-Amen, 2011; Schudde, 2019). On the other hand, the absence of many positive experiences can lead students to withdraw both socially and intellectually from an institution.

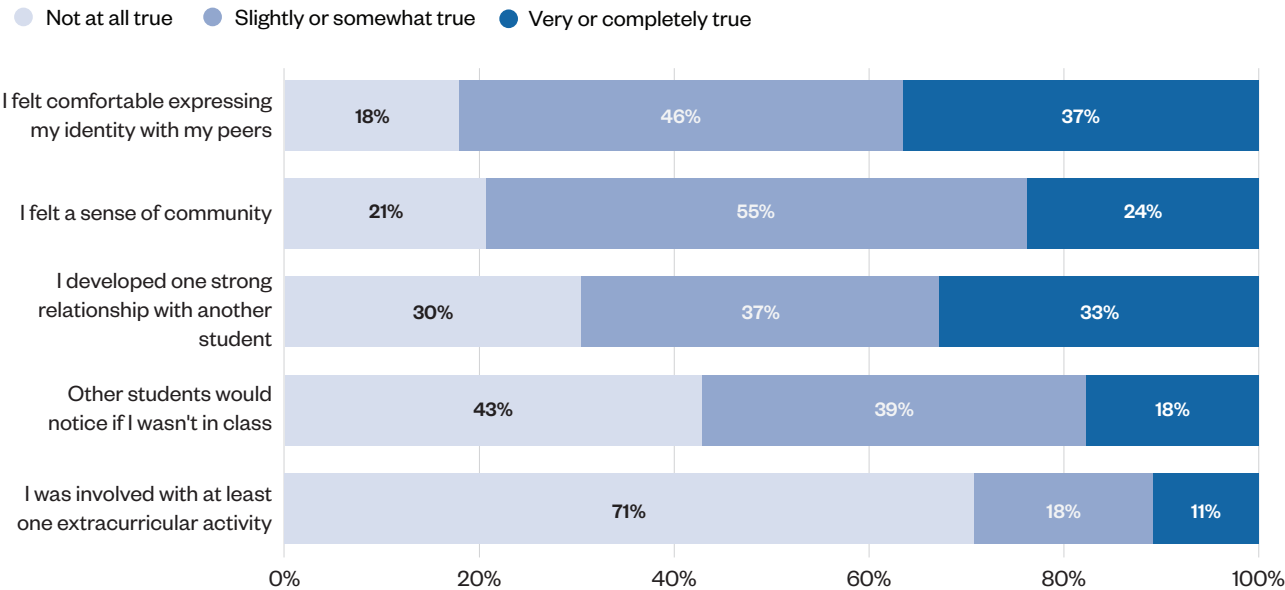
We share former students' reactions about their experiences in four domains: (1) with peers, (2) in courses and programs, (3) with faculty, and (4) in advising. For the first three domains, students rated the truthfulness of five statements about their college experience on a scale of 1

(“Not at all true”) to 5 (“Completely true”). For advising, students indicated the frequency of meetings with an advisor during their first year and the nature of their interactions with advising staff. All data presented here draw from the third wave of data collection, administered in fall 2024, one year after initial enrollment and after college departure.

Experiences With Peers

Of the first three domains (with peers, in courses and programs, and with faculty), experiences with peers received the least positive ratings overall. Figure 1 provides an overview of students’ responses. Students reported limited meaningful connections with peers: Only one third said they definitely developed at least one strong friendship, and only 37% definitely felt comfortable expressing themselves around peers. Most respondents were not involved in extracurricular activities, which may not be surprising in a two-year college context where many students commute, work outside of campus, and often have many competing responsibilities. Only 24% of respondents felt a definite sense of community in their first year.

Figure 1. Responses About Peers in First Year



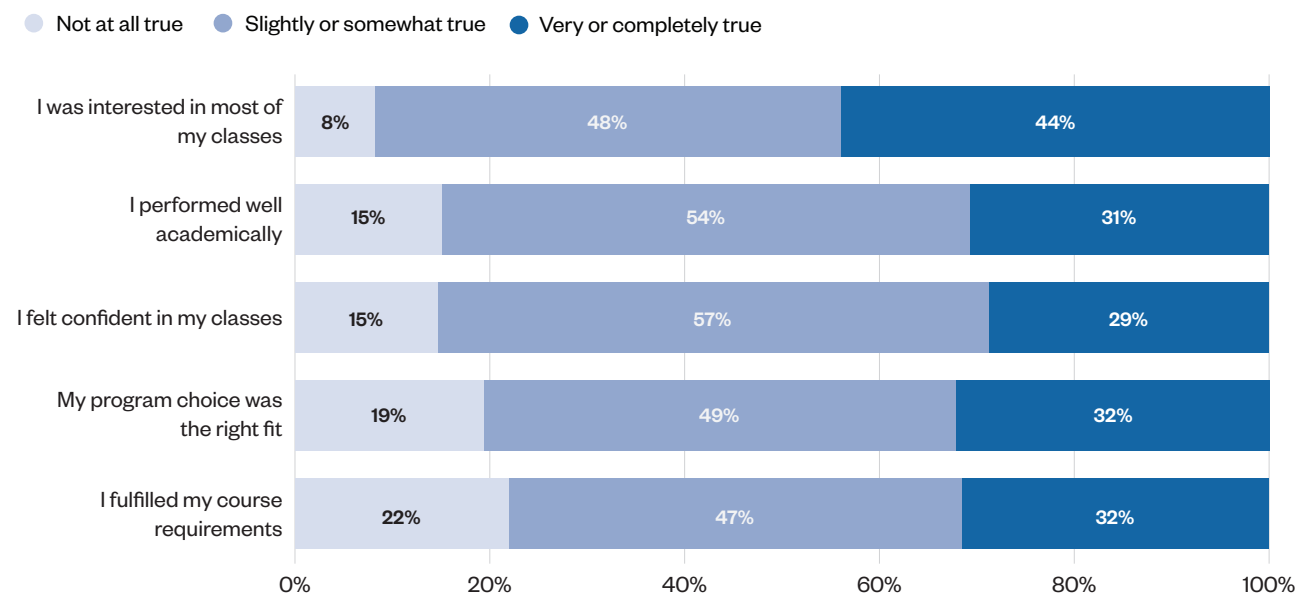
Experiences in Courses and Programs

To understand former students’ academic experiences, we asked about their interest levels, confidence, and performance in their courses and the fit of their program choice (see Figure 2). Almost half (44%) reported that they were definitely interested in most of their classes. Perceptions of academic performance were more mixed: Only 31% of respondents felt very certain that they performed well academically, while about half (54%) said this was slightly or somewhat true.

A similar pattern emerged in former students’ confidence levels: 29% said that they definitely felt confident in their classes, while more than half (57%) felt only slightly or somewhat confident in

their classes. About one third of students (32%) felt like they fulfilled their course requirements, while just under half (47%) felt like this was slightly or somewhat true and 22% felt that this was not true at all. About one third (32%) felt like their program was definitely a good fit, while about half (49%) felt that this was slightly or somewhat true. About one in five (19%) felt strongly that their program choice was not the right fit.

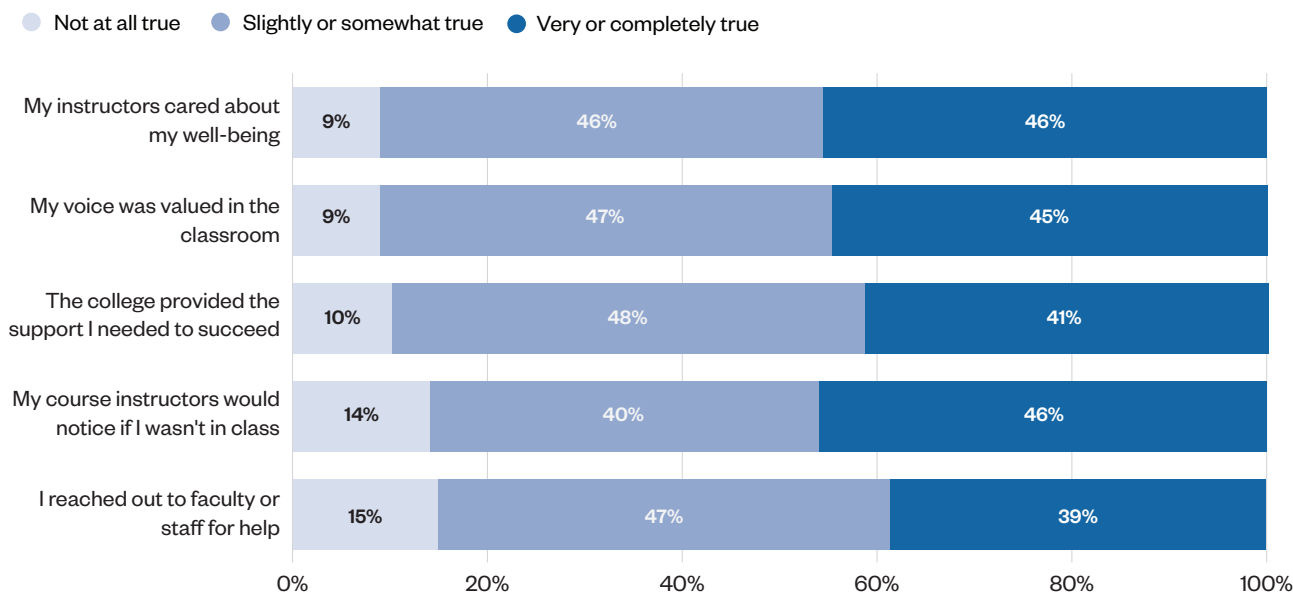
Figure 2. Responses About Courses and Programs in First Year



Experiences With Faculty

Students reported stronger positive perceptions about faculty (see Figure 3) than about their interactions with peers. The overwhelming majority of respondents felt either strongly (46%) or felt slightly or somewhat (46%) that instructors cared about their well-being. Likewise, 45% felt strongly and 47% felt slightly or somewhat that their voice was valued in the classroom. Forty-six percent felt strongly and 40% felt slightly or somewhat that instructors would notice their absence in class. Despite these perceptions, only 39% of respondents said that they had definitely reached out to faculty or staff for help, though an additional 47% felt that they did so at least slightly. And while 41% of students strongly felt the college met their support expectations, a larger percentage (48%) felt that it was only slightly or somewhat true that faculty and staff at the college provided the support they needed to succeed.

Figure 3. Responses About Faculty in First Year



Experiences in Advising

Most students (59%) said they met with an advisor 1–2 times in their first year (see Table 4). However, a quarter of respondents never met with an advisor in their first year.

Table 4. Number of Advising Meetings in First Year

Number of times met with academic advisor	<i>n</i>	Percent
0	105	25%
1–2	247	59%
3 or more	64	15%
Total number of respondents	416	100%

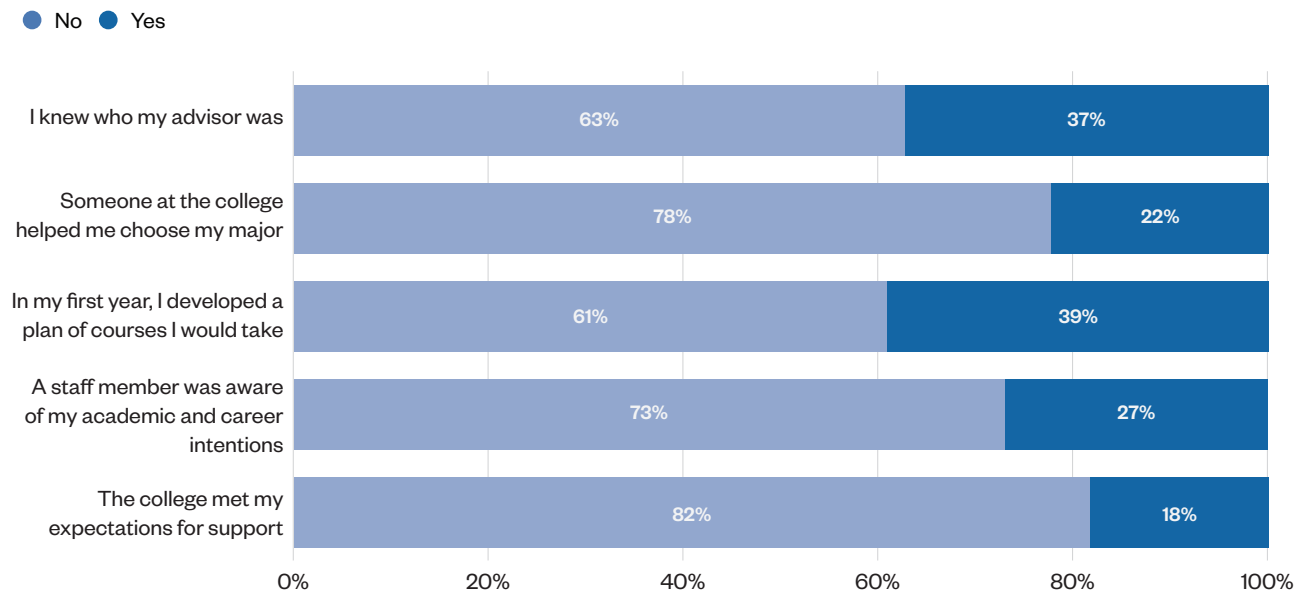
It follows, then, that students reported having only limited kinds of experiences with advising and student support staff. From a list of five options, we asked students to indicate whether any of the following applied to them: (1) knew their advisor, (2) an advisor helped them choose a program, (3) an advisor helped them develop a first-year course plan, (4) an advisor was aware of student’s academic and career intentions, and (5) their expectations for support were met. Results are presented in Figure 4.

Nearly two thirds (63%) of respondents reported not knowing their advisor. Seventy-eight percent said that no one at the college helped them choose their program, and 61% said they didn’t develop an educational plan in their first year. Further, 73% of students felt that no one at

the college was aware of their academic or career goals, and 82% reported that the college did not meet their expectations for support.

Although more than half of former students said they had met with an advisor, more than half were also unaware of who their advisor was. This may imply a lack of depth in many student interactions with advising. It may also reflect other distinctions respondents were making—meeting with a general advisor rather than a program-specific advisor, participating in a mandatory one-time meeting instead of receiving more regular advising, or receiving more general rather than more personalized guidance.

Figure 4. Responses About Advising in First Year



Reasons for Leaving College

In the third wave of the survey, we asked our respondents to share their reasons for leaving college. We provided 18 potential reasons for leaving college that they could choose from. On average, students selected 3.7 reasons. The most frequently selected responses were financial hardship (selected by 45% of respondents), feeling unsuccessful academically (39%), stress related to being a college student (33%), and a change in career goals (32%). Table 5 presents the top 10 reasons students selected for leaving college.

Table 5. Top Reasons for Leaving College

Selected reason	<i>n</i>	Percent
Financial hardship	216	45%
Feeling unsuccessful academically	188	39%
Stress related to being a college student	160	33%
Change in career goals	152	32%
Not enough time to dedicate to school	137	29%
Family obligations	120	25%
Issues with financial aid	105	22%
Difficulty with scheduling or attending courses	102	21%
Other unexpected events outside of my control	86	18%
Health-related issues (mine or a relative's)	72	15%
Total number of respondents	480	100%

We categorize the 18 potential reasons for departure into five groups to simplify interpretation of broader challenges students face in continuing their college education. We consider a student to have experienced a particular challenge if they selected at least one individual reason in the group. Table 6 presents the five groups of challenges related to college departure, along with the individual reasons within each group.

Table 6. Grouped Reasons for Leaving College

Selected group/reason	<i>n</i>	Percent
1. External environment	377	79%
Financial hardship	216	45%
Not enough time to dedicate to school	137	29%
Family obligations	120	25%
Other unexpected events outside of my control	86	18%
Health-related issues (mine or a relative's)	72	15%
Lack of transportation	71	15%
Change in employment hours	67	14%
Lack of childcare	30	6%
2. Stress, self-efficacy, perceptions of value	273	57%
Feeling unsuccessful academically	188	39%
Stress related to being a college student	160	33%
College wasn't for me	64	13%
I didn't see the value of college	32	7%
3. Institutional barriers	196	41%
Issues with financial aid	105	22%
Difficulty with scheduling or attending courses	102	21%
Missed required deadlines	64	13%
4. Change in career goals	152	32%
5. Lack of support and sense of belonging	97	20%
Felt unsupported by the college	70	15%
Lack of college community	48	10%
Total number of respondents	480	100%
Average number of groups selected (from 5 in total) = 2.3 Average number of reasons selected (from 18 in total) = 3.7		

1. External environment. This group includes reasons for leaving arising from responsibilities or circumstances outside of college. Nearly four in five respondents (79%) reported reasons in this group. Three barriers stood out: financial hardship (selected by 45% of respondents), lack of time (29%), and family obligations (25%).

2. Self-efficacy and stress. This group captures reasons for leaving related to students' perceptions of their academic abilities, stress levels, and beliefs about the value of college. More than half of the former students (57%) reported at least one of these concerns. The most common were feeling unsuccessful academically (39%) and stress related to being a college student (33%).

3. Institutional barriers. This group reflects institutional or administrative barriers, with students selecting at least one of the following: difficulty scheduling or attending courses (25%), issues with financial aid (24%), or missed required deadlines (16%). Forty-one percent of respondents reported facing at least one institutional barrier.

4. Change in career goals. This category, selected by 32% of respondents, concerns the challenge in changing career goals.

5. Lack of support and sense of belonging. This group includes reasons for leaving related to a perceived lack of support from the college and/or feeling disconnected from the campus community. About one in five (19%) former students reported this challenge.

One key finding from the survey data is that most former students (69%) indicated that reasons from multiple groups of challenges influenced their decision to leave. On average, students chose reasons from just more than two of the five broad groups of challenges, indicating that most students' departures were influenced by multiple, often unrelated, factors. This suggests that one factor alone might not be enough to induce departure in the case of some students; there could be an interactive effect.

This point is important for colleges as they consider which students' trajectories toward departure could be swayed by some type of intervention. We find that 78% of the 377 respondents who indicated that an external factor (e.g., financial hardship, lack of time) was a reason for leaving college also selected a reason from another group (see Table 7). For example, 57% also selected a reason related to stress or self-efficacy, and 46% also selected a reason related to institutional barriers, like difficulty in scheduling or attending classes. While some reasons for departure might be more difficult for colleges to address, most students' decision to leave is multifaceted—so there might be opportunities for colleges to intervene to influence students' trajectories prior to their departure.

Table 7. Grouped Reasons for Leaving College Among Those Who Also Selected External Environment Reasons for Leaving College

Additional reason	<i>n</i>	Percent
Stress, self-efficacy, perceptions of value	214	57%
Feeling unsuccessful academically	153	41%
College wasn't for me	42	11%
I didn't see the value of college	22	6%
Stress related to being a college student	132	35%
Institutional barriers	173	46%
Difficulty with scheduling or attending courses	93	25%
Issues with financial aid	92	24%
Missed required deadlines	59	16%
Change in career goals	110	29%
Lack of support and sense of belonging	72	19%
Felt unsupported by the college	51	14%
Lack of college community	36	10%
Total number of respondents	377	100%

Plans to Return to College

The majority of former students we surveyed intended to return to higher education (see Table 8). Seventy-eight percent of respondents viewed their leave as temporary and planned to return to their starting college. Twelve percent intended to re-enroll in the future at another institution. Only 10% of former students had no plans to resume their postsecondary education.

Table 8. Intentions to Return to College

Future enrollment goals	<i>n</i>	Percent
I left temporarily for a break but hope to return	376	78%
I left permanently and do not intend to return	46	10%
I left but I hope to enroll at another college	58	12%
Total number of respondents	480	100%

These findings align with other recent survey results showing strong interest in returning to college among students who left without earning a certificate or degree. For example, in a recent Gallup-Lumina survey (2025), among former students who left college without a credential, 68% considered returning to higher education. Similarly, among those in a smaller survey, 72% reported that they definitely planned to return (Sallie Mae, 2024). However, re-enrollment happens less frequently than students seem to expect; recent national data show that only 2.7% of students from the “some college, no credential” population (working age, under 65) actually re-enrolled in the 2023-24 academic year (NSC, 2025b).

Reflections on Having Left College

While findings from the prior section show that the overwhelming majority of former students in the study intended to return to higher education, our respondents had mixed feelings about their decision to leave (see Table 9). Forty-six percent expressed some certainty that this was the right decision, with 31% saying that it was “likely the best” choice and another 15% saying that it “was the best” decision for them. On the other hand, 54% of the former students were much less certain. We interpret these results as potentially reflecting the non-linear paths that community college students often take toward their goals, where competing demands and life circumstances can lead to enrollment decisions that may appear counterintuitive to long-term aspirations (Wickersham, 2020). At the same time, it is worth asking whether non-linear paths work well for students, whether they reflect well-informed preferences, and whether better guidance and support to help students address challenges that occur both inside and outside of college would promote more continuous enrollment.

Table 9. Student Perspectives on Their Decision to Leave College

Decision to leave	<i>n</i>	Percent
This was not the best decision for me	44	9%
This was probably not the best decision for me	58	11%
I am unsure if this was the best decision for me	173	34%
This was likely the best decision for me	157	31%
This was the best decision for me	76	15%
Total number of respondents	480	100%

Discussion and Conclusion: Preventing Student Departure

The characteristics and aspirations of students in our sample—who left community college within one year of first enrollment—are not what many might expect: These students entered with clear goals and high academic aspirations. Very few left because they did not see the value of college. And most still plan to return to higher education in the future. So why did they leave? Students indicated that financial strain and competing demands were common reasons for departing college, which reflects similar findings from prior research on student attrition. Other top reasons included feeling unsuccessful academically, stress related to being a college student, and changing career goals.

Students' reasons for leaving are reflected in what they shared about their experiences in college. By the time they left, many students reported low confidence in their academic abilities—a shift from the high expectations and optimism they expressed at college entry—and a diminished sense of connection to their college. Engagement with faculty and peers was uneven. While faculty interactions were generally positive, connections with peers were more mixed. And the depth of interaction with advising was mostly modest or minimal. Despite beginning college with positive expectations about grades and course completion, fewer than a third of students strongly believed that they had fulfilled their course requirements, underscoring how academic confidence and progress eroded over time.

A key finding from this study is that students reported multiple, varied reasons for leaving. Furthermore, most students who cited a reason for leaving that colleges have historically considered outside their control (e.g., financial hardship) also cited a reason that is within the typical purview of colleges (e.g., institutional barriers). This finding has important actionable insights. First, factors that lead to a student's departure can be interactive; addressing one factor (e.g., by offering classes at more varied times) could reduce the impact of another factor (e.g., transportation concerns). Additionally, factors may be multiplicative such that reducing a student's perception of one challenge (e.g., a lack of college community) could reduce or eliminate their perception of another challenge (e.g., the stress of being a college student).

These findings point to several strategies that may improve students' experiences in college and address some of the reasons students have for leaving higher education:

1. Assisting students with financial planning
2. Fostering students' confidence and academic self-efficacy
3. Ensuring that students receive ongoing support for program choice
4. Bolstering students' relationships within the college

Assist students with financial planning

Financial challenges clearly affect students' ability to persist, as indicated by the 45% of students in our sample who stated that this was a reason for leaving higher education. Another recent student survey found that most students who responded did not understand the full cost of attending college, that surprise costs could jeopardize their ability to stay enrolled, and that they did not know what types of financial assistance were available from their college (Flaherty, 2025). While a community college cannot be expected to fully anticipate and address students' financial challenges, colleges can implement practices designed to lessen financial surprises and ensure that students have a plan for paying for college—both the direct expenses of enrollment (e.g., tuition) and related expenses outside of college costs (e.g., housing and transportation). For example, Southwest Wisconsin Technical College helps every new student develop a student success plan that includes an educational plan showing what courses students need to take and their timeline for completion, as well as an accompanying financial plan (Jenkins et al., 2025). The financial plan, developed by the student and a financial aid representative, includes all inside- and outside-of-college expenses and helps identify gaps in a student's funding. The college then provides financial assistance through scholarships and other sources of income, like on-campus jobs. The plan is also regularly updated as students' situations evolve.

Foster students' confidence and academic self-efficacy

Given the large share of students in our survey who felt academically unsuccessful and cited stress related to being a college student as reasons for leaving, fostering students' confidence and self-efficacy is essential. To address this challenge, academic program staff and faculty can design course-embedded supports to help students experience early academic wins and translate faculty and peer engagement into confidence and academic momentum. Research points to several instructional strategies, including expanding active and contextualized learning, that build confidence and promote other benefits. Active learning, which includes a range of pedagogical approaches including group work and engagement with peers, is positively associated with student learning, the development of problem-solving skills, persistence, and degree completion (Theobald et al., 2020). Research in community colleges on students in STEM programs finds that the use of active learning reduces outcome gaps by race and gender and that active learning motivates students to persist in challenging programs (Wang, 2020).

Ensure that students receive ongoing support for program choice

As we learned from our related research about how community college students are choosing a program and thinking about different careers (Lahr et al., 2025), students often enter college with multiple paths in mind, sometimes in very different fields. It should be expected, then, that the process of choosing a program will play out over time as students learn more about

different fields and careers and continue to clarify their interests and goals. This is consistent with a survey finding in the current study: 32% of former students said that they left college because of a change in career goals. While changes in students' interests, goals, and program choice are expected, this finding raises critical questions about why many students leave higher education altogether rather than changing their program of study. When students are not connected to services and supports on campus, they may leave rather than reach out for help to explore other educational paths.

Bolster students' relationships within the college

Colleges can also adopt practices to improve students' connections and support with key people like faculty and advisors. One promising practice is a proactive, field-based caseload advising model. Using such a model would ensure that students have a point of contact who is an expert in their field of interest and that they are meeting with their advisor at frequent intervals, especially when students are at an important juncture, such as needing to adjust their educational plan or considering a new program of study (Jenkins et al., 2025). While making services and supports (both academic and nonacademic) available to students is frequently not enough to prevent students from leaving college (Klempin et al., 2025), students should not be expected to seek out support and connection on their own. When students are well connected to people at their college, and meaningful touchpoints are built into every students' journey starting from their earliest days at college, they will be better able to navigate challenges such as working through scheduling challenges and engaging in difficult decision-making about programs and careers.

Community college students face many struggles in completing a credential and meeting other educational goals. Attrition—especially in students' first year—is common. While we are encouraged that many students in our sample said that they intend to return to higher education—and re-engagement campaigns can assist in bringing back some of them—students' completion is not very likely after they stop-out (Ortagus et al., 2021). The best efforts to support credential completion may come from preventing students from leaving college in the first place (Adelman, 2013). The strategies we have outlined are intended to provide guidance to colleges on how to address the multiple reasons that students leave.

Endnotes

1. The larger longitudinal study uses three survey waves, administered in fall 2023, spring 2024, and fall 2024. In spring 2024, we piloted a survey for students who left college that informed the development of the fall 2024 survey questions for college departers used in this report.
2. The first wave of the survey had a response rate of 36%; the third wave of the survey had a response rate of 63%.
3. Of the 648 who were no longer enrolled, 111 indicated that they left their starting institution and transferred to a two-year or four-year college or university. This transfer subsample of students was excluded in the current report because our focus is on the experiences of former students who reported leaving higher education altogether.
4. National estimates from an entering cohort of public two-year students starting in fall 2023, report that 25% of students did not return the following spring and that, by fall 2024, 38% did not return the following fall (NSC, 2025a). In comparison, the share of non-returning students in our sample (480 out of 4,515) is much lower. We attribute this to characteristics of our sample (e.g., a higher proportion of full-time enrollees and a higher attempted number of credits) and non-response, where a higher proportion of students may not have returned but did not respond to our survey. Future analyses incorporating administrative data will help clarify these patterns.
5. This report examines survey results from a sample of 480 respondents. The proportion of missing observations varies across sections of the survey; each table and figure reports the total number of non-missing responses for clarity. All percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

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