RESEARCH BRIEF

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Understanding the Needs of First-Generation College Students Who Stop Out

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College stop-out rates have long been a challenge in higher education and particularly at community colleges, where more than one third of students do not return for their second year of study (National Student Clearinghouse, 2025). More than 40 million people in the United States have some college but no degree (Berg et al., 2024), which is a substantial concern given the critical role that a college credential plays in securing stable employment and facilitating upward mobility. Among those most likely to stop out are first-generation college students (Sallie Mae, 2024), who represent a large proportion of students. About half the nation's undergraduates identify as a first-generation college student, indicating that neither of their parents earned a bachelor's degree (RTI International, 2023). Despite efforts on the part of many colleges to support them, about 40% of such students say that they have seriously considered leaving college, about twice the rate of continuing-generation students. And a recent report from the Common App (Nolan et al., 2025) finds that even first-generation students with strong academic backgrounds and more resources are about twice as likely as similar continuing-generation students to not earn a bachelor's degree within six years.

Compared with students whose parents completed a college degree, first-generation college students are more likely to leave college. Many stop out because of financial, work, and family responsibilities, but feeling isolated at college is often also an important factor.

Based on a study using survey and interview data on first-generation college students who stopped out during the fall 2022 term at four Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) in California, this brief examines the reasons these students gave for stopping out, the role that particular kinds of persons in their social networks played in informing and supporting their decision to stop out, and how they thought about their future, including any considerations they may have had for reenrollment. While first-generation students nationally are from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds, most of the individuals in the survey and interview sample in this study identified as Hispanic.

A closer look at the social ecosystems that first-generation students rely on can help reveal how the decision to leave college is shaped by the presence or absence of emotional, informational, and social support from family, peers, and institutional staff. We find that the students in our sample left college primarily due to financial, familial, employment, and other responsibilities, which appeared more difficult to

manage when students were uncertain about their academic pathway or were feeling isolated at their college. The students in our study mostly relied on family and friends for support when they decided to stop out. Few of them indicated that an advisor or other institutional actor was a part of their social network. Our findings thus point to the potential of stronger engagement from institutional faculty and staff as a means to support first-generation students who are considering stopping out.

Sample and Methods

This study is part of a larger three-year project exploring the social networks of first-generation college students and the support their networks provide at four public HSIs in California (two community colleges and two four-year institutions) (see Herman & Kalamkarian, forthcoming). In the second of two waves of survey data collection conducted in spring 2023, first-generation students were surveyed about their college enrollment status for the fall 2022 term. Those who indicated that they were no longer enrolled in that term and had not completed a credential before leaving college (i.e., they stopped out) were asked follow-up questions in the survey about their reasons for leaving and the individuals they turned to for support when grappling with the decision to leave.

This brief focuses on the subset of 55 students (out of a total of 1,183 who completed the spring 2023 survey) who reported stopping out in fall 2022. Ten of these students also participated in a 60-minute interview after completing the survey. Five interviewees were traditional-aged students (24 or younger) and five were older students (25 or older). Eight attended a community college, and two attended a four-year college. Nine identified as Hispanic, and one identified as Black. Seven were women. Eight out of ten reported original intentions to complete an associate degree or higher. The remaining two reported enrolling in college for other reasons, such as to learn English or to take classes for career exploration. While not enrolled in college to pursue a degree, we include these two students as stop-out students in our data, as they represent many students who begin at community college to explore education and career pathways.

During the interviews, we asked students to tell us more about the individuals (indicated in their survey responses) that they turned to when deciding to stop out. If students had not completed the network questionnaire in the survey, we asked them to respond to the questions verbally. We also asked about any relationships they mentioned during the interviews that were not originally indicated on the survey. The interview questions were designed to better understand students' social networks and the support they provided to the students (whose names have been changed in our descriptions below).

Findings

Reasons for Stopping Out

Many of the stopped-out students we interviewed went on to prioritize work—at jobs including Starbucks worker and licensed contractor—and some had plans to return to college in the near future. One had already re-enrolled at another two-year college.

Financial strain and family responsibilities were common factors in students' decision to stop out.

Over 70% of stopped-out students who responded to our survey identified familial responsibilities, financial considerations, and/or other personal challenges as affecting their decision to leave college, exemplifying the way external conditions mediate students' academic experience. Ted, an older student who stopped out of a two-year college, elaborated on these reasons in an interview. He started his college journey in fall 2020 and stopped out due to several factors, including financial difficulties stemming from debt incurred after several car accidents. Additionally, he did not receive financial aid from the college and was reluctant to continue taking on loans. During his interview, he shared that he was very "relational" and was passionate about helping people. In college, he hoped to explore that interest further by pursuing paths that would allow him to help others. However, over time, he felt overwhelmed by the pressure. As he put it, he was "done trying to be everything to everybody, including myself." This combination eventually led to what he described as a "slow fizzle" from college.

In the case of an interviewee named Silvia, an older student who stopped out of a two-year college, the practical responsibilities that come with caring for a family made it difficult to stay in college. At the time of the interview, Silvia and her husband had a three-month-old baby and a seven-year-old daughter. Since she did not have family nearby to help with childcare, it became difficult to find time for her studies. Although she had made significant progress at college, moving from English language courses to more skills-based courses, because she was enrolled in college for personal enrichment, she felt that her enrollment was more "flexible" and did not carry the same procedural or academic consequences as it would if she were in a degree program.

Prioritizing employment to ensure financial stability made it difficult for some students to balance both school and work.

Students who needed to work found it difficult to balance work, family, and school. Over 20% of survey respondents listed employment commitments as a consideration in their decision to stop out. During his interview, Dale, an older student who left a two-year college, shared that his inconsistent work schedule interfered with his class schedule and that he needed to prioritize his finances. As Dale explained, "I actually did figure out what career path I wanted to take, but I don't have the time to necessarily commit to which career I want to do…. I still have bills I have to pay, so I have to work."

Uncertainty about an academic pathway often contributed to the decision to leave college.

Sixty-four percent of survey respondents indicated an intention to pursue an associate degree or higher, including 27% aiming for a bachelor's degree or higher. Although most students were interested in earning a credential, our interviews found that uncertainty about what to study contributed to the decision to leave.

Two students we interviewed described feeling uncertain about their chosen field of study, which contributed to their decision to stop out. Abel, a traditional-aged student who left a four-year college, stopped out primarily because he felt uncertain about his academic path and believed he was "wasting time." After his first year, he decided he needed to take a break

to reflect on his goals and decide whether to return to college or pursue a different direction. Similarly, Ally, a traditional-aged student who stopped out of a four-year college, was grappling with uncertainty about being in college and wondering if attending right after high school had been the right decision for her. Ally described feeling pressured by her family in both her decision to attend college and the type of program to pursue, saying, "I felt like [my brother and his wife] were trying to influence me to go into [a school counseling program]."

Feeling isolated and disengaged made it even harder to stay in college.

Disengagement from staff, faculty, and the overall college experience contributed to students feeling disconnected from college. Six of the ten interviewees we spoke with described a lack of meaningful relationships within the classroom or elsewhere on campus. They said that their relationships with college staff and peers were largely transactional (i.e., focused on classes and requirements) rather than relational. Some felt that they were navigating college mostly alone and making decisions about their academic and career goals with limited institutional support. For instance, Monica, a traditional-aged student who stopped out of a two-year college, felt disconnected in her online courses, stating, "My experience was mostly online, so I didn't really have a connection with anybody." This sentiment was echoed by Katie, a traditional-aged student who said that she had not developed relationships with staff at the two-year college she left and was hoping a new college would be more encouraging and "involved" with her academic journey.

Moreover, three of these six interviewees said that a lack of trusted relationships at their college was compounded by limited time on campus because of commuting, learning online, or juggling work and family responsibilities. As a result, trying to establish a sense of belonging felt like it fell entirely on themselves. For example, Ally reported feeling unprepared for the social isolation that came with living off-campus:

> *Honestly, just from the very beginning, I felt very alone aside from the fact that I did have a couple of classmates from my previous school year who were attending there. I was never close to any of them. So it just felt very lonely walking onto campus and not knowing where you were.*

Feeling pressured into an unwanted major by her family and isolated from campus life due to commuting, Ally experienced mental health struggles that were exacerbated by other expectations of her at home and by academic demands.

Academic challenges in online courses contributed to the decision to stop out.

Three interviewees said that they struggled with online learning, and two of them noted that they did not seek additional academic support even though they needed it. As mentioned above, Monica felt disconnected in her online classes. She stopped out primarily due to "academic challenges," including difficulty with online classes and poor time management, which led her to feel discouraged. While she hoped to transition to in-person classes, she continued to struggle for personal reasons—transportation difficulties and her parents' health problems prevented her from attending in person, which led her to prioritize helping her family over continuing her college education. As a result, Monica put college on hold and enrolled in a certified nursing assistant program at a trade school, choosing a faster career path to support her family financially.

Peyton had a similar experience. An older student who stopped out of a two-year college, Peyton recorded only "employment reasons" on the survey as the basis for her stopping out. Yet in her

interview, she said that academic challenges also contributed to her leaving college. Although Peyton was not a non-degree-seeking student, her plan had been to complete her general education courses and eventually enroll in a nursing program at the college. Peyton was overwhelmed trying to balance a full-time job and an asynchronous online math course she struggled to understand. Despite attending general tutoring sessions, she was unable to improve her performance and chose to stop out rather than receive a failing grade and no credit on her transcript.

Help-Seeking Preferences and Behaviors

How students navigated the range of challenges illustrated above provides insights into their help-seeking preferences and behaviors as they contemplated stopping out and just after they stopped out. The survey asked students about the people in their lives that they turned to for help or support when they were deciding to stop out (respondents could select from as many listed types of persons that they deemed relevant). One third of respondents indicated that they turned to their parents, and one fourth indicated that they turned to spouses or partners. Surveyed students also indicated siblings (18%), cousins (9%), and coworkers (9%), among others (see Appendix Table A1). Only 7% indicated a college advisor, and no surveyed student identified a faculty member, suggesting that students preferred seeking help or support from personal connections rather than from college academic or support staff when deciding to pause their studies.

Students engaged in only limited help-seeking when facing the challenges that prompted them to consider stopping out. Seeking guidance from advisors was uncommon, and no respondents in our study mentioned seeking help from faculty.

Both survey and interview data from our study suggest that students engage in limited help-seeking when facing challenges that prompt them to consider stopping out. Thirty-eight percent of survey respondents did not answer questions about using their networks in help-seeking; since the students continued completing the rest of the survey, we interpret their lack of a response as intentional. Even when students chose one or more type of person in help-seeking, our interviews revealed students' limited engagement with these people. Most interviewed students did not have extensive discussions with the individuals in their network when deciding to stop out. Rather, their decision to stop out was largely made on their own; discussions with others often occurred after the decision was made, not during the deliberation phase.

Discussing stop-out with a family member was common, but students mostly sought support after deciding to stop out rather than guidance on the decision-making itself.

When asked about who they turned to when considering leaving college, eight of the 10 interviewed students identified specific family members. For example, Abel had a strong support system at home from both his parents and sister. When considering his decision to stop out, Abel turned to his sister. Although Abel's sister had recently graduated from a four-year institution, she felt that college was not the only way to achieve success in life. She respected and prioritized Abel's well-being over his taking a conventional path to a career (like college). Abel shared that an advisor at his college guided him through the process of taking a semester off, explaining that as long as he re-enrolled in classes the following semester, his enrollment at his college would remain active. The advisor also informed him that if he failed to enroll by the next

semester, he would be required to reapply for admission. Abel also reported that he did not speak with any faculty or professors about his decision to take a break.

Six interviewees identified their spouse/partner as one of the connections they turned to. Students described spouses/partners as a source of emotional or practical support once having decided to stop out. For instance, Monica turned to her boyfriend for academic and emotional support after she left college, as she felt she knew that he would support her choice. For Monica, sharing the news afterward with her boyfriend was a way to stay in control of the process while maintaining her relationship. She said, "He understood. He was more supportive than anything. And at the time, he saw my whole situation at home and everything, so he was like, 'Just do what you got to do; just support yourself.'" Similarly, Silvia, who had emigrated from Mexico a couple of years prior to stopping out, did not have her immediate family nearby for support. She discussed the decision with her husband after she decided to leave, and he supported her choice.

Friends were sometimes important for support.

Small proportions of survey respondents mentioned college friends (4%) or prior friends (5%) as persons they had discussions with when stopping out. Two interviewees described reaching out to their friends given their strong relationships with them and the confidence they felt that their friends would be supportive and non-judgmental. For instance, Mia, a traditional-aged student at a two-year college, sought out a friend who had long helped her with practical assistance (such as driving her to classes) for emotional encouragement when she stopped out.

Seeking guidance from college faculty and staff was uncommon, but advisors were sometimes important.

Only 7% of survey respondents mentioned reaching out to college advisors, and none mentioned faculty. One interviewee, Ally, who felt pressure from her family to stay in college, sought support by meeting with an advisor for the first time on her own to discuss her decision to stop out. In seeking out an advisor, she deliberately chose someone outside her immediate circle whom she perceived as professionally equipped to help her process the decision. Ally perceived the advisor, who encouraged her to return to college when she felt better emotionally, as very validating. The advisor even shared her own story, creating a sense of empathy and connection. Ally's advisor also referred her to the academic department that offered the program of study that Ally was interested in pursuing later. As Ally explained, "[My advisor] told me it's okay to take a break and to put yourself first, because if you're not doing well mentally, you're just putting more on top of your plate by wanting to also pursue school."

Other students made their decision independently and sought out no one from the college or from their personal network to either help in the decision-making or support their choice to stop out.

Nearly 40% of survey respondents did not indicate discussing their decision with anyone. Some of these students may not have felt the need for extensive discussion; others may have purposely avoided it. One of our interviewees, Sandra, an older student who stopped out of a two-year college, said that she did not feel the need to share her decision to leave at all because she was learning at college for personal enrichment rather than fulfilling an academic goal—even while she had indicated on the survey that she wanted to earn an associate degree.

Notably, some interviewees appeared to largely perceive themselves as solely responsible for their inability to continue their education, viewing their struggle—whether financial, academic, or personal—as a reflection of their own shortcomings. For instance, Peyton, a part-time student who was also working full-time, considered her academic difficulty in a math course as a personal failure. Without a connection to an advisor or professor on campus, she had no support figure at the college to challenge her self-critical beliefs or encourage her to seek help.

Considerations for Reenrollment

Many students in our study expressed a desire to return to college when the timing was right, emphasizing the importance of personal readiness and financial stability. Thirty-eight percent of survey respondents indicated that they planned to return to college but were not sure when they would. Of the 10 students interviewed, seven planned to return to college but were uncertain when, and one student had already enrolled at another two-year college in the following fall term.

After five of our interviewees started college, it appears as though their academic goals changed; several wanted to shift to opportunities that provided more immediate economic returns. Some came to believe that traditional education programs were limiting their opportunities for further growth and exploration. For instance, Abel decided to follow in his father's footsteps as a landscape contractor and started his own business after leaving college. Now an entrepreneur, Abel is looking for postsecondary opportunities that align with his business goals. He is seeking a way to build skills, work with a mentor, network, and engage in project-based learning rather than participate in traditional academics. Monica originally wanted to pursue a career in criminal justice. After switching to nursing in college for a short period, she stopped out but then decided that she could go to a trade school to become a nursing assistant rather than pursuing a four-year nursing degree. While many of the stopped-out first-generation students we interviewed wanted to return to college, their educational aspirations and career goals were also changing.

Discussion and Conclusion

The large majority of stopped-out first-generation college students in our study identified family responsibilities, financial considerations, and/or other personal challenges as important factors in their decision to leave college. Yet many also seemed to interpret these struggles as part of their own shortcomings, which may indicate the need for greater institutional support in shaping the goals, pathways, and sense of belonging of first-generation college students. What is more, students in our study appeared to make the decision to stop out on their own. While they sought out emotional support from their personal networks, they rarely requested guidance either from friends and family or from advisors or faculty at the college about whether or how to stop out, what their options might be, or how they could plan for reenrollment. Finally, the educational and career goals of the students in our study seemed to be in flux. Many appeared to want to experience the economic returns to postsecondary education more quickly than what they thought was likely under their plan before stopping out.

Many students in our study interpreted their struggles as part of their own shortcomings, which points to the need for greater institutional support in shaping the goals, pathways, and sense of belonging of first-generation college students.

We offer the following considerations for college leaders and practitioners for enhancing student engagement—especially among first-generation students—as a means for reducing stop-out among students and for supporting re-enrollment among those who do leave college.

Strengthen efforts to identify and understand students' goals upon entry. A good way to prevent student stop-out is to provide structures for ongoing dialogue early in students' college experience to see if their goals and career aspirations have changed. The lack of institutional contact and guidance at the beginning of students' academic careers can leave them feeling disconnected, misinformed, or unsupported in making critical academic and career decisions. While some first-generation college students seek information and support from sources outside of college—particularly family members, partners, and friends—institutional resources are underutilized. Advisors and counselors should ask students about their program of study, whether they believe it is still a good fit, and if they plan to return next semester as part of an ongoing dialogue. Creating a toolbox of targeted sample questions for advisors could help standardize these advising sessions. This approach can help advisors build relationships with students and provide relevant guidance to them, potentially reducing the risk of stop-out.

Engage faculty in supporting student advising. The classroom—whether online or in-person—was the only consistent point of contact students in our sample had with their colleges. Additionally, as many students were online learners, commuters, or students juggling multiple responsibilities, reaching out for support from advisors was likely challenging. Therefore, faculty should play a larger role in ensuring that students are connected to someone who can support them—whether an academic advisor, staff member, or faculty mentor. For instance, faculty can include standardized syllabus language reminding students to meet with their advisor, administer quick in-class polls or surveys to check whether students have connected with anyone for support, and assign optional reflections that prompt students to identify someone they can turn to on campus for help. Additionally, advising offices can share lists of students who have not yet met with advisors, allowing faculty to offer gentle in-class encouragement. By keeping these actions lightweight, optional, and easy to implement, colleges can engage faculty in reinforcing help-seeking behavior without overwhelming them.

Adopt a more nuanced framing of stop-out. This study suggests that stopping out represents a deliberate response to personal, academic, financial, and psychological challenges; it may not always signal disengagement per se. Taking a leave from college offers students the opportunity to reflect on their goals and return with greater clarity, especially after taking care of responsibilities at home, gaining financial stability, or developing their sense of purpose. Stopped-out students may also choose to pursue alternative learning or employment opportunities—such as entrepreneurship or on-the-job training—that offer more direct routes to their career goals. Colleges can strive to be more intentional about creating a culture of care where students know they matter, even if they have left the college.

Establish a reengagement initiative to proactively reach out to students who do not return. When asked, students in our survey indicated that they did not receive any correspondence from the college after stopping out. Some students expressed interest in returning but did not specify when. Stopped-out students may benefit from accessible information about re-enrolling, especially when they are feeling lost or are disengaged from their prior college journey. Even when support services are made readily available for first-generation college

students (or prior students), the emotional barriers to accessing them can outweigh students' perceived need for help (Halger et al., 2023). Having a reliable, approachable, and supportive contact can make it easier for students who have paused their studies to ask for help when they need it. Outreach efforts should be highly personalized when possible to respond to students' specific academic and career goals. Re-entry programs could provide information about enrollment and financial aid deadlines as well as advising. Such a program could be integrated within student support services departments.

Endnotes

1. For example, individuals with a bachelor's degree are far more likely to obtain a "good job"—a job that provides $43,000 annually for workers aged 25 to 44 or at least $55,000 for those aged 45 to 64—than those who have not completed college (Strohl et al., 2024).
2. Recent data show that 73% of Hispanic, 65% of Black, and 64% of American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander undergraduates identify as first-generation. By contrast, only 46% of White and 44% of Asian students do so (RTI International, 2023).
3. In spring 2022, 2,082 first-generation students across all four institutions completed the first wave of the survey; 58 students participated in individual semi-structured interviews, further exploring the network relationships each student identified in response to the survey. In spring 2023, 1,183 students, or 57% of the first-wave cohort, completed the second wave of the survey; 40 of the 58 students interviewed in the first wave of interviews participated in a second interview after completing the second survey.
4. Ally, like nine of the ten interviewees in our sample, is a Hispanic first-generation college student. It is worth noting that longitudinal survey data show that Hispanic college students are less likely to seek mental health support from their institutions (36%) compared to college students in general (50%) (Lipson et al., 2022). Although there has been a modest increase in help-seeking among Hispanic students in recent years, Lipson and colleagues argue that the growth has not kept pace with the severity of mental health concerns.

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Appendix: Survey Data

Table A1.

Student Demographics and Selected Survey/Interview Responses

Characteristic/response	Interviewed students (n = 10)	Surveyed students (n = 55[a])
	Number	Percent
Gender		
Male	3	35%
Female	7	60%
Missing/other	0	5%
Institution type		
Two-year	8	75%
Four-year	2	25%
Race/ethnicity		
Hispanic	9	69%
African American	1	5%
Age		
24 years old or younger	5	72%
25 years old or older	5	28%
Reasons for stopping out (students could select more than one)		
College did not offer desired program/courses	2	13%
Personal reason	5	46%
Employment reason	3	22%
Affordability/other financial reason	2	25%
Academic challenges	3	22%
Social reason	2	24%
Other	0	22%
Connection identified by student		
Professor	0	0%
Advisor	2	7%
Parent	6	33%
Sibling	4	18%
Spouse/partner	6	24%
Cousin	1	9%
Other family member	0	9%
College friend	0	4%
High school/childhood friend	2	5%
Coworker	1	9%

[a] Survey data is available for fewer than 55 total students in some categories.

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