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## College Dropouts Cite Low Money and High Stress

By [TAMAR LEWIN](#)

Most dropouts leave college because they have trouble going to school while working to support themselves, according to a report released Wednesday by [Public Agenda](#), a nonpartisan research group.

The report, "[With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them](#)," was based on a recent survey of more than 600 individuals aged 22 to 30, comparing those who started a college education but did not complete it with those who received a degree or certificate from a two- or four-year institution.

With the Obama administration pushing to improve the nation's competitiveness by doubling the number of college graduates, many educators, foundations and policy groups are turning their attention to college dropouts.

While 2.8 million students enroll in some form of higher education each year, most do not proceed straight through to graduation. Only one in five of those who enroll in two-year institutions earn an associate degree within three years, and only two in five of those who start four-year colleges complete their degrees within six years.

"The conventional wisdom is that students leave school because they aren't willing to work hard and aren't really interested in more education," said Jean Johnson, executive vice president of Public Agenda. "What we found was almost precisely the opposite. Most work and go to school at the same time, and most are not getting financial help from their families or the system itself."

The study, which has a margin of error of plus or minus five percentage points, found substantial differences between those who completed a degree and those who did not. Among those who dropped out, nearly 6 in 10 got no help from their parents in paying tuition. Among those who got degrees, more than 6 in 10 had tuition help from their families.

About 7 in 10 of the dropouts said they had no scholarship or loan aid. Among those who got degrees, only about four in 10 went without such aid.

Almost three-quarters of those who completed a degree had household incomes above \$35,000. Among the dropouts, more than half had household incomes below \$35,000. And while 7 in 10 of the college graduates had parents who had completed at least some college work, four in 10 of the dropouts had parents with nothing beyond a high school diploma.

Colleges need to be aware, the report emphasized, that only about a quarter of those enrolled in higher education fit the popular image of a college student living in a dorm and attending classes full time. Almost

as many have dependent children.

The top reason the dropouts gave for leaving college was that it was just too hard to support themselves and go to school at the same time. Balancing work and school was a bigger barrier than finding money for tuition, they said. In fact, more than a third of the dropouts said that even if they got a grant that covered their books and tuition, it would be hard to go back to school, given their work and family commitments.

At a news conference Wednesday announcing the report, underwritten by the [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#), Frankie Barria, a 24-year-old former student from New York City, described the stops and starts of his educational journey.

“When I started college, I was living on my own at age 19,” Mr. Barria said. “My mom had left. Usually the bird leaves the nest, but in my case, the nest left the bird.”

Mr. Barria first enrolled at City College, but found it “unbelievably hard” to do well in school and maintain his job, so he left school. Later, he completed a semester at Kingsborough Community College, but stopped when his job became too demanding. Eventually, he enrolled at Medgar Evers College, but did not finish even one semester.

“Having a roof over my head and food to eat was more important,” he said.

Asked to rate 12 possible changes, the dropouts’ most popular solutions were allowing part-time students to qualify for financial aid, offering more courses on weekends and evenings, cutting costs and providing child care. The least popular were putting more classes online and making the college application process easier.

Hilary Pennington, a Gates Foundation education official, said two big factors associated with degree completion were going straight to college after high school and enrolling full time. But, Ms. Pennington added, colleges need to be more accountable for making sure their students graduate.

“If you try to leave a cellphone system, they almost won’t let you leave, and I just wonder if there’s something we need to think about in higher education,” she said. “We need a system where, if someone is struggling, if professors notice that somebody is missing a lot of classes, if someone doesn’t early register, they immediately go to student-life services, and someone reaches out.”

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