Why Do Students Leave College? Student Voice Research Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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TACOMA COMPLETES

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Introduction

The Tacoma Completes Student Voice research project is an applied, qualitative research project to explore why Tacoma Public Schools (TPS) graduates leave college prior to completing their degree. The target population for this study is TPS graduates who enrolled at Tacoma Community College (TCC) or University of Washington (UWT) and left the college in good academic standing within the last five years. Part of the Tacoma Completes initiative, this report is intended to support deeper understanding and programmatic decision-making for systems-level changes to increase completion rates at each institution.

Tacoma Completes is a community-wide collective impact effort powered by Degrees of Change in Tacoma, Washington. Tacoma Completes envisions a comprehensive, coordinated, community-wide system of supports helping all TPS college students persist and graduate. Its goal is to significantly increase the number of TPS high school graduates who complete college within six years of enrolling and to eliminate racial and socioeconomic completion gaps.

To better understand the reasons why TPS college students leave prior to completing their degrees, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Foundation for Tacoma Students (FFTS) contracted Degrees of Change to conduct local, qualitative research to learn directly from the students' voices. Tacoma Completes Director Nalani Linder and the research team at Degrees of Change (Dr. Kelly Bay-Meyer, Naticcia McNamara and Kanwal Yousuf) collaborated with faculty and staff from TCC, UWT and FFTS to design the research project, ensure IRB approval, formalize data-sharing agreements, share student demographic and contact information securely, troubleshoot student outreach challenges, and provide their feedback on the final report.

Methodology

In total, 56 students participated in interviews: 23 former TCC and 33 former UWT students who graduated from a Pierce County high school between 2013 and 2019, attended TCC or UWT for at least two terms, and left the institution in good academic standing before earning their degree. Interviews lasted between 20 and 60 minutes, and all interviewees received $50 gift cards for their time. Interviews were audio recorded and coded independently by two researchers. Primary reasons for leaving were grouped into similar clusters that became seven meta-themes: College Fit (Sense of Purpose and Sense of

Belonging), Financial and Basic Needs, Family Care and Life Events, Mental Health, Physical Health, Classroom Experience, and College Navigation.

In the spirit of authentically engaging students in the decisions that impact their lives, this report does not provide explicit policy recommendations. Instead, the report is intended to provide a common framework and key questions that are intended to guide ongoing policy conversations among students, college staff and community partners.

College Fit (Sense of Purpose + Sense of Belonging)

Many students at both TCC and UWT indicate that they left college prior to graduating because the college was not a good fit for them—either because they did not have a strong sense of purpose (e.g., no clear career goal in mind), changed their purpose to pursue a degree not offered at the institution, or because the student did not have a strong sense of belonging at the college. At TCC, many students did not have a clear career goal in mind or determined that college was not for them. At UWT, several students determined that their career goals did not require a college degree. Several students who transferred to different colleges explain that they switched to majors that were not offered or chose to transfer to a residential college to seek a stronger sense of community. These findings lead us to ask the following questions:

I didn't really have a goal in mind, and, eventually, I would like to reattend when I figure out what the heck I want to do with my life.

How can we better support students who do not have a clear career path in mind?

What else can we do to strengthen students' sense of belonging on campus?

Financial + Basic Needs

While three-quarters of interviewees mention financial struggles as influencing their decision to leave TCC or UWT, those who consider finances as the most important reason offer a combination of one or more of the following circumstances: they were newly living on their own, did not receive adequate financial aid, could not afford tuition and pay their other expenses, and/or could not balance working full-time with coursework. These findings lead us to ask the following:

I ultimately stopped with TCC because I couldn't afford to finish my associate degree...I had just moved so I had more bills and...my parents weren't able to help me with tuition as much as they had before, and I had taken all the classes I was super interested in taking already as well. Think all those things I just realized that I couldn't afford it for the coming quarter...I was just paying someone to let me sleep on their couch.

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- What else could be done to better meet the financial and basic needs of all students?

Family Care + Life Events

Several students mention stopping out to take care of family members financially, physically, or emotionally; to get married or divorced; to mourn the loss of a family member or welcome a new baby; or to relocate out of state. These findings lead us to ask the following:

What additional supports are possible for students who are caring for family members of experiencing other major life events?

Mental Health

Many students described facing mental health challenges while in college. Those who left primarily for mental health reasons include those suffering from depression, anxiety, and addiction. These findings lead us to ask the following:

How can we better support students' mental health preemptively, as well as better care for those who are suffering with acute mental health needs?

Physical Health

Those who attribute withdrawing or not re-enrolling to physical health conditions range from pregnancy, car accidents, cancer, narcolepsy, and short-term illnesses. These findings lead us to ask the following:

How can students who are experiencing physical health challenges be better supported?

But at the time that I did drop out, my grandma had just come out of the nursing home, and she needed 24-hour support, and my parents had full-time jobs that they had to stay at, so I started helping with her a little bit so she won't be left alone all day to do nothing. I was her caregiver for a while. I wasn't paid for it, but I was her caregiver.

So I return back to school and ended up actually being diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. I started to go to therapy because I had a death in my family…My attention towards school started weaning and I was just really, I would say, mentally ill at that point, pretty just depressed and not motivated like I was before. And I ended up kind of falling away from school a little bit as hard as I tried.

I was in a car accident…I was really hurt and injured…I cannot sit down for too long…I have to keep moving…I was trying to get on online classes, because I didn't feel ready to go back to on campus, but I did want to continue with my life and my study…I just went to the classes to see the enrollment of classes and I saw that all…the online classes…had like 20, 25, 30 people on the waiting list and I'm like, no, that's impossible.

Classroom Experience

Several students describe negative classroom experiences that primarily caused them to stop-out or transfer. These students felt discriminated against after expressing their political views or questioned their instructor's arguments. These findings lead us to ask the following:

How can we ensure that students can express their political views or question their instructors' arguments without fear of discrimination or retaliation?

…I also was called a white supremacist for being a cop daughter and in the middle of a law class and nothing was done about it. So I just ended up leaving. It was my dream school and I ended up leaving go to [a different college], finished my associates there and then join the military.

College Navigation

Several students describe challenges navigating college, particularly as first-generation college students—from not knowing what classes to take, struggling to use the course registration system to add or drop classes, challenges finding courses or meeting times with their academic advisors that met their work schedules, obstacles with financial aid and frustration finding a place to park their car. These findings lead us to ask the following:

I didn't want to spend money on classes that I might not need, and I wasn't really sure what I needed and what I didn't. So I just decided to focus on work for a little bit.

How can we ensure that students are able to successfully navigate college systems?

Conclusion

Overall, these findings suggest that while colleges certainly have a major role to play in student persistence and completion, the reasons why students leave often go beyond what a college could reasonably offer on its own. It suggests that advocacy efforts are needed to change federal, state, and local laws and policies to address broader systemic failures. It also indicates that collective impact efforts like the Tacoma Completes initiative, which bring together school districts, colleges, government agencies, private companies and community-based organizations, are needed to coordinate resources and address student needs as a community.