

Why Do Students Leave College? Student Voice Research Report

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Prepared on behalf of Tacoma Completes, an initiative of Degrees of Change

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**TACOMA
COMPLETES**



The research presented here utilizes confidential data from Tacoma Community College and the University of Washington Tacoma. All data in this report has been de-identified to protect student privacy and is shared with student permission. The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of TCC, UWT or other data contributors. Any errors are attributable to the authors.

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Executive Summary

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 Tacoma college students persist and graduate.

In total, 56 students participated in interviews: 23 former TCC and 33 former UWT students who graduated from high schools in Pierce County and left college within the past five years. 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:

- 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:

- 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?

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?

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:

- 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.

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.

Degrees of Change would like to thank the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Foundation for Tacoma Students for funding this project. We would also like to thank the individuals who generously shared their time, expertise and passion for the work over many months to support this research project: Dr. Bonnie Becker (UWT), Elvin Bucu (FFTS), Amanda Figueroa (UWT), Dolores Haugen (TCC), Dr. Sharon Laing (UWT), Joe Lawless (UWT), Dr. Judy Loveless-Morris (TCC) and Levon Williams (UWT).

This report provides a brief summary of the background research used to help frame this research project before describing the methodology and interview sample. The findings section is divided into seven meta-themes, followed by a discussion section that reflects on key questions for the Tacoma Completes collective impact effort to consider moving forward. Appendices include sample outreach materials (emails, voicemails and text messages), informed consent form, interview protocol and interview codebook.

Background

According to the Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey of over 42,000 people between the ages of 18-65 across the United States, there are many reasons why college students do not complete their college degree: work-related (17%); financial pressure (12%); other life event or personal problem (11%); just wanted to learn more or didn't need a degree (7%); pregnant or had children (7%); classes, degree or school was not a good fit (4%); got bored, lost interest or became distracted (4%); family obligations (4%); personal health reasons (3%); didn't have enough time for classes (3%); couldn't decide on a career or field of study (2%); was not mature enough (1%); family pressure (1%); classes were too difficult (1%); deployed (1%). Based on these findings, the report concludes that adults have three key needs that must be met to re-enroll: (1) Education must be affordable; (2) They must be able to fit education into the rest of their lives, including work and family; and (3) They want to see a clear career benefit to invest the time and money in further education.¹

While national, quantitative studies like this are certainly a helpful starting point to inform collective impact work focused on increasing college persistence and completion, this data is focused on a much broader population of adults (through retirement age); it does not help us understand local challenges within our community context; and it does not speak to the complexity of student lives and the multiple, reinforcing factors that are likely at play when students withdraw or do not re-enroll in college.

To address these gaps in the research, the Tacoma Completes Student Voice Research Project seeks to learn directly from the voices of students in our local community. To capture the complexity of their stories, we focus on collecting qualitative data.

Methodology

Given that students who leave college are likely working and may not feel comfortable sharing the personal circumstances under which they left college to a broader group, phone interviews were chosen as the data collection methodology over focus groups. Phone interviews allowed researchers to schedule calls at a time that was convenient for each participant, did not require transportation, and minimized the time required to participate.

Given that qualitative research is not intended to generate statistically generalizable results and is more interested in "why" and "how" questions, there is no set standard for sample size. Instead, sample size depends on when "data saturation" is reached: when information occurs so repeatedly that the researcher can anticipate it and collection of more data

¹ Lumina Foundation, Gallup & Strada Education Network. (2019). Some College and No Degree: How Individuals Who Attend and Don't Graduate Feel about Education. Retrieved from <https://www.stradaeducation.org/report/some-college-and-no-degree/>.

appears to have no additional worth.² Based on practical guidance provided in academic research, Degrees of Change targeted 25-30 interviews per college, for a total of 50-60 interviews.³

Between January 24 and April 17, 2020, Degrees of Change staff sent a series of ten emails, six ringless voicemails and 243 individual phone calls to 462 former TCC and UWT students.⁴ These students' contact information was provided by TCC and UWT according to the following criteria: 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.⁵ Students who initially pursued their bachelor's degree at UWT but then transferred to TCC to pursue their associate degree were also included in the original sample. We also engaged former TCC students through snowball sampling based on referrals from interviewees and community partners and reached out to former UWT and TCC students from Degrees of Change's Ready to Rise program.

Former students interested in participating were asked to confirm their eligibility and demographic information and read and sign an informed consent form through an electronic form⁶. Students were asked questions regarding their experience at TCC or UWT, the reasons why they did not re-enroll and what it would take for them to re-enroll.⁷ Interviews lasted between 20 and 60 minutes. All students who completed interviews were emailed a \$50 Amazon or Starbucks card of their choice.

In total, 56 students participated in interviews (one in-person and 55 over the phone). The sample includes 23 former TCC and 33 former UWT students. Fifty-five interviewees were identified from the sample lists provided by partner colleges and one from snowball sampling referrals. There are no statistically significant differences between the UWT sampling frame and interviewees by gender, race/ethnicity, age or graduating high school district (Tacoma Public Schools vs. Other).⁸ There are no statistically significant differences

² Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D., & Guassora, A. D. (2016). Sample Size in Qualitative Interview Studies: Guided by Information Power. *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(13), 1753–1760. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315617444>.

³ Dworkin, S.L. Sample Size Policy for Qualitative Studies Using In-Depth Interviews. *Arch Sex Behav* 41, 1319–1320 (2012). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-012-0016-6>.

⁴ Among 462 students, Degrees of Change was able to contact 457 (99%) via email; 394 (85%) via voicemail; and 462 (100%) via email and/or phone due to a small number of bounced emails or inaccurate phone numbers. See Appendix A – Student Engagement for email and voicemail content.

⁵ Students who left in poor academic standing were not included because, in these cases, colleges are essentially requiring students to leave.

⁶ See Appendix B – Interview Sign-up and Informed Consent Form

⁷ See Appendix C – Interview Protocol

⁸ Since gender, race/ethnicity and high school data is not required for students to enroll at TCC, the TCC sampling frame is missing gender data for 29%; race/ethnicity data for 27%; and graduated high school data for 100% of students in the sampling frame. As a result, we are unable to test for statistical differences between the sampling frame and interviewees with respect to gender, race/ethnicity or school district for TCC students.

between the TCC sampling frame and interviewees by income status.⁹ There is a statistically significant difference between the TCC sampling frame and interviewees by age: A statistically higher proportion of 19-year-olds responded to the interview invitation (30% interviewees vs. 7% sampling frame) and a statistically lower proportion of 21-year-olds responded (9% interviewees vs. 31% sampling frame). (See Table 1).

Table 1. Demographics of Interviewees vs. Sampling Frame

DEMOGRAPHICS		INTERVIEWEES			SAMPLING FRAME		
		TCC (n=23)	UWT (n=33)	TOTAL (n=56)	TCC (n=178)	UWT (n=289)	TOTAL (n=467)
Gender	Female	57%	64%	61%	35%	55%	48%
	Male	35%	36%	36%	36%	45%	41%
	Non-Binary	9%	0%	4%	0%	0%	0%
	Not Provided	0%	0%	0%	29%	0%	11%
Race or Ethnicity	White	26%	42%	36%	27%	32%	30%
	Hispanic/Latinx	44%	18%	29%	12%	25%	20%
	Two or more races	13%	15%	14%	14%	17%	16%
	Asian	9%	12%	11%	8%	11%	10%
	Black or African American	9%	6%	7%	11%	6%	8%
	Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0%	3%	2%	0%	3%	2%
	American Indian or Alaska Native	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Not Provided	0%	0%	0%	27%	6%	14%
Income	Pell or SNG Eligible	48%	64%	57%	60%	N/A	N/A
	Not Sure if Pell or SNG Eligible	26%	9%	16%	0%	N/A	N/A
	Not Pell or SNG Eligible	26%	27%	27%	40%	N/A	N/A
Age	19	30%	12%	20%	7%	11%	10%
	20	4%	30%	20%	11%	23%	18%
	21	9%	27%	20%	31%	23%	26%
	22	39%	21%	29%	31%	28%	29%
	23 or older	17%	9%	13%	22%	15%	17%
School District	Tacoma Public Schools	96%	27%	55%	N/A	27%	N/A
	Other	4%	73%	45%	N/A	73%	N/A

⁹ UWT was unable to provide income related data for the sampling frame. As a result, we are unable to test for statistical differences between the sampling frame and interviewees with respect to Pell or State Need Grant eligibility for UWT students.

Interviews were audio recorded using Microsoft Teams and transcribed using Otter.ai. Each interview was coded independently by two researchers according to a common codebook¹⁰ that was refined over the course of the coding process to identify 19 themes. The first researcher coded directly on the transcript in a Word document and exported the quotes with their codes using an Excel macro. The second researcher coded the quotes directly on the spreadsheets, then compared the codes to the first researcher’s codes. If the codes did not match, they were highlighted and discussed by the two researchers until consensus was reached on the most appropriate coding. A third researcher reviewed all coded quotes, identified the primary reason(s) students indicated were most important in their decision to stop out of college, and then organized these primary reasons into similar clusters that became seven meta-themes: College Fit (Sense of Belonging and Sense of Purpose), Financial and Basic Needs, Family Care and Life Events, Mental Health, Physical Health, Classroom Experience, and College Navigation (Table 2).

Table 2. Meta-Themes and Themes

Meta-Themes	Themes
College Fit (Sense of Belonging + Sense of Purpose)	College Fit and Match, Career, Sense of Belonging (if related to College Fit), Mindset (if related to Career)
Financial + Basic Needs	Financial, Basic Needs, Culture/Identity (if related to religious beliefs around accepting loans)
Family Care + Life Events	Family, Personal
Mental Health	Mental Health, Culture/Identity (if related to stress and identity and social acceptance), Personal (if related to events that exacerbated mental health challenges)
Physical Health	Physical Health, Physical Barriers/Accessibility (if related to physical health)
Classroom Experience	Academic Experience, Discrimination/Harassment (if related to classroom experience)
College Navigation	College Knowledge, Academic, Academic Prep and Academic Behaviors (if related to college navigation), Physical Barriers/Accessibility (if related to navigating parking)

Findings

This section is structured according to the seven meta-themes that emerged in the data, ordered from the most frequent to least frequent primary reason(s) mentioned by interviewees. To help each college better understand the reasons behind students stopping out versus transferring to another institution, each section is sub-divided into four

¹⁰ See Appendix D – Interview Codebook

parts: Stopped Out from TCC, Transferred from TCC, Stopped Out from UWT, and Transferred from UWT.

Theme 1 – 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 at both TCC and UWT transferred to different colleges because they switched to majors that were not offered. Several students at UWT transferred to a residential college to seek a stronger sense of community.

Stopped out from TCC

Eight former TCC students mention that they really had no idea what career they wanted to pursue and felt they were wasting their time and money without a clear goal in mind. Since leaving TCC, two have joined the military; two plan to re-enroll at TCC now that they have found career paths that interests them; one has started their own business; one is in an apprenticeship program; one is torn between giving up a full-time job and re-enrolling to pursue something they are passionate about; and one would like to re-enroll once they know what career they would like to pursue.

Two students who joined the military explain that they did not know what they wanted to do with their careers, and they wanted to better themselves personally:

I didn't really have any idea what I wanted to do. And I think that's kind of the reason why I didn't continue with school...I really just think that I didn't have much motivation to be there because I didn't see what I was actually gaining by being in school. It was just kind of doing what everybody had always told me to do, that I was supposed to be at school...So I left TCC to join the military...I felt personally like I was pretty lazy, and that the Marine Corps would be fairly demanding for me. (White, male student).

I think, as a student, as any student, it's hard for you to make a decision or choose what you want to have in life that early...One of the main reasons why I joined the military was because I wanted to have an idea of where to go in life, as well as have the basic fundamentals of being, you know, to be on time, being able to follow a directive email, to make sure that what you do is up to the utmost point of what's expected of you. (White, male student).

The second interviewee does mention attempting to see an academic advisor to discuss career goals but explains that each appointment was only five minutes long and appointments were not available that fit their work schedule.

Two students who plan to re-enroll at TCC now that they have a career goal in mind explain,

Yeah, I just ended up leaving because I was really honestly like, I just felt like I didn't really know what I was doing and 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... I really loved the school... There's nothing different that they could have done to make me stay there. (White, female student).

I didn't want to waste any more time and money not knowing what career I wanted to go into. So that's why I took a break, so I could figure it all out and see which career [I] actually wanted, to see a bit more of what I was interested in. (Hispanic/Latinx, female student).

The second interviewee explains that they never talked to an academic advisor because they thought advisors were there for academic purposes only.

Another student who started a cleaning business reflects on their decision to go to TCC in the first place and their need to gain different experiences to determine their career path:

I really don't know why I decided to come to TCC. I think maybe the person I was with at the time...decided to go to TCC and they're like 'I have friends who are going to TCC.'...I was right out of high school so it's like, you know, it's still in the expectation place of you got to be in school right afterwards...I kept feeling pressure like I needed to know what...I wanted to do, but I really was interested in a lot of things...So I was like, okay, well, even if I drop out, I'll still have opportunities to learn these things, and to gain skills in these to be able to succeed in these areas. And so I chose to drop out and do my cleaning stuff. And, honestly, it really was what I thought it was. I learned a whole bunch. I gained lots of knowledge and all that and like experience. (Hispanic/Latinx, non-binary student).

Similarly, another student without a career goal stopped out to "stop wasting money." (They are now pursuing an apprenticeship program.) They explain,

I was just pretty much wasting my mind money on classes, on things I wasn't even sure...that I wanted to pursue... So this process kind of went for like three years...and then I just decided, I was like, you know what, I'm just gonna stop wasting my money right now...That's not a problem financially. It wasn't a problem. It's just the biggest problem is just I couldn't find something that I like. (White, male student).

Likewise, another student who initially stopped out because they did not know what they wanted to do for their career, is now torn between working full-time to meet family demands or pursuing a career that really interests them. They reflect,

I was kind of still trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I was taking it at my pace. And then after I left, after that quarter, I was going back but...there was a nursing program that was going to happen...this summer, and, in the end, I wanted to get into that. So I was gonna do the nursing program, but it was [an] all-day program and I needed to start working. So there was a job opportunity, and I took advantage of it. And so it limited my time and so...I couldn't...do that program. (Hispanic/Latinx, male student).

Another student explains that they do not have current plans to re-enroll because they do not know what career they want to pursue yet:

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. (White, female student).

Transferred from TCC

Among the five students who transferred from TCC to another college, two explain that they had been enrolled concurrently at a four-year university and took a few prerequisite courses at TCC; one transferred to a four-year college to play sports and pursue a degree not offered at TCC; and two transferred to different two-year colleges to pursue degrees not offered at TCC.

The two students who were enrolled concurrently at a four-year university explain that they were able to save money by taking prerequisite courses at TCC, but that TCC does not offer the degree they are ultimately pursuing:

So my major is animal science with the pre veterinary medicine. So TCC didn't offer the specific major that I wanted, then that's why I decided to go to [a four-year university]... I would really recommend students doing that specifically. They have like a lot of prereqs...in their community college like TCC, just because it's way cheaper. And at a large university, you'd have to pay for rent or the class. It's just \$2,000, but I'd rather just pay \$700 instead of all the rest of the money. (Hispanic/Latinx, female).

I originally enrolled [at TCC] because my degree at [my university is] like crazy. We take about 16 to 18 credits per semester, and that's a lot and I don't want to like [be] overstressed out curriculums and trying to manage 16 to 18 credits. [It] made more sense to stay here [in Tacoma]...and then transfer the credits over rather than being in [another city]... The reason why I stopped taking credits [at TCC] in the summer is because they moved up to like three or four hundred level courses for my degree. (Multi-racial, male student).

Another student clarifies that they had a good experience at TCC, but they transferred to another four-year university to play sports:

I wanted to play sports and so that's the main reason I went to [another four-year university] is to join the sports teams that weren't offered at TCC. [The university] was almost essentially the same price, and I was able to play football and lacrosse over there, so that's why I'm making a transfer. Sports was kind of the biggest thing because if you don't have a certain GPA, you can't play. That was the biggest reason. [TCC] was definitely a good experience. I mean, everything I needed was really accessible. (Hispanic/Latinx, male student).

Two students who transferred to different two-year colleges explain that the program they wanted to pursue was not offered at TCC:

I really want to do beauty school, you know, so I just started looking at different schools and...I saw that [another two-year college] has...a good program and for a good price and good FAFSA. (Hispanic/Latinx, female student).

Towards the end, after my second year, I found out about this other program [invasive cardiovascular technology]...which is why I ended up going transferring to [a different two-year college]...There's a satellite program in Tacoma so I didn't have to go all the way to [another city]. (Black, female student).

Stopped out from UWT

Among the twelve students who stopped out from UWT for reasons related to college fit or career goals, five stopped to start their own businesses; two stopped to assess their passions and pursue different careers; one student is considering re-enrolling at another college because UWT does not offer the degree they would like to pursue; one felt like they were not getting the full university experience at UWT but may consider re-enrolling; and one joined the military and is completing their degree through another university's online program. Several students also reflect upon the pressure they felt to enroll in college right after high school without understanding their own passions or desired career paths.

The five students who left to start their own businesses did not believe a degree was necessary for them to achieve their career goals, felt the courses had no practical application to their career goals, and wanted to educate themselves through new experiences or other free resources:

I really wanted to get that university experience...It's just the matter of being the right fit or not, that simple...As an entrepreneur, I really wanted to build something...A lot of them were able to start a business without completing any of their [degrees], even Bill Gates, I guess...I was thinking to myself, 'Okay, maybe I don't need school in order to start my business.' (This White, male student has since relocated out-of-state.)

It just wasn't until I realized that I just really didn't want to continue going to school. It wasn't something I was passionate about at the time, so I withdrew again...I figured I'd take my prerequisites and then transfer over, and then I started to do a little bit more research about what kind of business I wanted to do. So I wanted to own my own dispensary...I did hear about business and how it was a great school for business, so I did think about going back to UWT and that sort of plan...I haven't looked into anything after I had withdrew. At the moment, I'm just really focusing on work and helping my mom. (White, female student).

The reason I stopped attending college was more from a personal standpoint of, you know, I never really enjoyed school, I was never a fan of just going to class and stuff like that. A lot of times, it felt like I was learning things that didn't really apply to my field and that became really frustrating. I wanted to go in for business, managing or business management, because I aspire, you know, to own a business of my own eventually. Just going to school, it felt like a lot of classes that I was taking just didn't apply in any way to the business field. But I understand why it's done, you know, to help people know what options they have out there and to be able to diversify people's options, but it just [didn't] feel right for me... Like I said, school will always be there...If I could have a solid reason for going back and a very, very attainable goal, then that would probably propel me to go back. (Hispanic/Latinx, male student).

I kind of went into college with kind of that a little bit of a misconception like you have to go into college after high school and you have to do your four years and just to get a degree--doesn't matter what it's in...so you can then you can start, you know, living life after that kind of a thing...And I knew that I should have talked to somebody, but...I had this conception in my head, like I knew that they're going to tell me to stay in school...I needed to ask myself those questions before I could just, you know, trust somebody else's perspective without even knowing truly what I was looking for...Right now I think I want to get more into event planning in general... I'm kind of making it a goal to be financially separated from my parents, and once I can be comfortable, I think definitely I would love going back to school. (White, female student).

After high school...they always just preach college, college, college, college, go to college, like, the key to everything. Then I got to college and I didn't learn anything that I wanted to learn at all. I went to counselors and everything even though I was in the business program, and like was supposed to be learning stuff related to my major...They told me I was going to be put in business classes as soon as I started because I got into the business school as a freshman. So that's what I expected, but I didn't get any of that. So it's just a bunch of empty promises...Yeah, I found free online college courses...straight from Harvard professors, USC professors, even UW professors and whatnot...I was learning everything I was trying to learn outside of college... In my opinion, all the degree does is validates your worth to somebody else. I'm not trying to validate my worth to somebody else, because I know what my worth is. So I'm going to create it myself. I don't need a degree to do that... I was taking the

path that everybody was telling me I needed to take while not seeing any correlation... If you just study what school is teaching you, you're just going through the motions, and you just limit yourself. (White, male student).

Echoing the pressure to enroll in college without discerning their own passions, another student reflects on their decision to leave and pursue their passion:

A week into the spring quarter starting I just had this breakdown, and it was really a personal thing...I think I'm just doing this because I was raised like college...is what you do, and do school, you're good at this. I never really pursued the things that I love...I always wanted to model or sing...but I just grew up believing like, oh, that'll never happen. And then when I had this breakdown, I was like, I think I need to go just give it a shot... I'm a worship leader at our church, but then also a model on the side as well and enjoying life. (This multi-racial, female student would like to return to college to become a midwife, but that program is not available at UWT.)

Similarly, another student describes the pressure they felt throughout their K-12 experience to enroll in college and how college did not end up fitting their passions:

During elementary school and during high school, there, you're stuck in your head with ideas of just going to college. That's the only way you can be successful. You got to have that on your mind at all times. You know, they're putting you down a straight path of basically the education system, and just working with not fighting against it and not actually experiencing life as the way it's supposed to be. And I personally realized that I didn't want to really become a computer scientist...During my time of working at UWT I started, I started to work in the food industry...I put as much effort as I could into it and I ended up getting pretty good at it...If I were to consider going back to school my first choice as a right now would probably be trying to get you know, learn more about culinary. (Multi-racial, male student).

Likewise, another student who is currently considering pursuing a surgical tech program at a different two-year college describes how she initially went to college “for everybody else”:

I went in, kind of not exactly sure what I wanted to do, so the classes I took were very random...I think I just got too distracted. I wasn't, you know, doing all of my work to the best of my ability and I just was kind of losing motivation to be there. So I kind of just started slowly not going as often...I was kind of still experimenting with the school...So I figured I can just leave and then, you know, handle things in life first, and then go back to school... And I think, you know, a big part of the reason why I went to school was kind of just for everybody else around me. (Hispanic/Latinx, male student).

Discovering that she wanted to pursue a degree that was not offered at UWT, one student intends to eventually re-enroll at a different college,

I really want to become an ultrasound technician, so if UWT has a program for that then, of course, I'll go back to UWT, but, if not, then, unfortunately, have to look for another college to provide the type of program that I'm looking for. (Multi-racial, female student).

Feeling like he was not getting the college experience he envisioned, another student indicates,

I've always wanted that college feel, and I felt like at UW Tacoma I wasn't really getting it because I feel like it's more of a...community college feeling...I'm happy that I was able to attend until two years. I got done with it, you know, I'm happy. I'm not satisfied yet, which is why I'm still going back to school. I'm not saying for sure it's going to be UW Tacoma. (Hispanic/Latinx, male student).

After realizing how long their original degree path would take, one student changed their major without talking it through with an advisor, ended up failing several classes and then decided to enlist in the military. He now has plans to complete his remaining credits online through a different university:

So I did like the pharmaceutical route...and then I realize, OK, this is actually...8 years, plus 2 years of residency. I was like that's a long time and I'm young...Instead of going to talk to someone like I should've been...I kinda just did by myself...I just changed all my classes to like more business oriented... Just like I can really like admit that I don't know kind of embarrassed 'cause like after my grades started dropping...I didn't wanna risk... [if] I failed another class and I gotta pay for that quarter of college and living on my own and working as a server wasn't gonna pay that off too fast...I wanted to find something that I could do that I was passionate about and I would find it interesting. I was looking into air traffic controlling... So [I joined] the Air Force because...they help you with schooling with a tuition assistance. (Asian, male student).

Transferred from UWT

Among the seven students who transferred from UWT to a different college for college fit reasons, five transferred to two-year colleges (three to different two-year colleges and two to TCC) to pursue degrees not offered at UWT and two transferred to different four-year colleges.

According to one student who transferred to a two-year college due to major,

I was trying to get an anthropology degree...It was mainly not having the major, the right requirements for what I want to do major-wise...I guess if having my major was at UW Tacoma, I would have stayed....I can't really think of anything else other than that. It's kinda like the big deciding factor... I'm actually currently enrolled at [at a two-year college]. I'm almost done with completing my AA. Yeah, I'm mainly just trying to finish my prerequisites. (White, female student).

A second student who transferred to a two-year college due to switching majors explains,

Yeah, I've really enjoyed my time at UW Tacoma. I transferred because I changed my major. So it wasn't any negative reason why I wanted to leave. I'm going for dental hygiene now, and it wasn't offered at UW Tacoma. (White, female student).

A third student who transferred to a two-year college after deciding on a new career path explains,

I told myself that I really wanted to become an orthodontist...so I just looked into their biomedical sciences degree...And then I went for like two years and my prereqs were taking like a really long time. I just felt like I wasn't really getting anywhere. And it got really expensive after a while, since my parents were paying out of pocket. I don't have financial aid or anything like that, or scholarships or nothing. So I just decided to stop going basically because I just didn't feel like I was really going anywhere with the degree that I was going to get... And I just was really looking into looking into [a different two-year college], basically. And their aesthetics program really, kind of, I don't know, intrigued me...[UWT] was a good school, you know, like I'm not hating on it. I'm not saying that things should change. I just feel like it was me that needed to experience that in order to tell myself this is not right for me...I just didn't really think that [my parents] should have been paying almost like \$4,000, \$3,000 for me to go to school when they could be paying half that price at [a two-year college]. (White, female student).

A fourth student who transferred to TCC after switching majors describes,

I left because I switched my major. I didn't want to do Bio med anymore. I wanted to do nursing instead. And I didn't know this, but they don't have a nursing program at UWT. Or they do, but it's only meant for like BSN or whatever. And TCC has a nursing program...I talked to my advisor a lot...And then she just told me like, I think you should, if you really care about nursing, you should switch over to TCC. (Asian, male student).

A fifth student who also transferred to TCC indicates that UWT did not offer them the sense of community that they needed right out of high school:

A couple things are a little hard for me. I felt a little just kind of like disconnected, you know, from what I was used to just coming right out of high school. It was a transition. I'm being very involved coming right out of high school and having that strong sense of community and I just felt kind of a little lonely there. I didn't really have any friends that I would talk to in my classes, and then, my professors, I just felt like a little bit disconnected from them. In a way, I didn't really have great relationships with the professors either, which [is] not necessarily a bad thing either. It was just kind of like it didn't really fit by what I needed in that moment. (Black, female student).

A sixth student transferred to a different four-year college to play sports and to better align with their degree goals explains,

I knew coming to UWT that there wasn't sports there, so it's not like it was a big surprise, but it didn't seem that there was as many school events, necessarily, if that makes sense. It kind of made me feel like I wasn't necessarily at a university. It made me feel like I was still in a community college. I attended [a two-year college] for two years while I was still in high school, and so it kind of felt the same. I go to class, I would go home, and I would live on my day and not even interact with a lot of people on campus...I think not being able to participate in sports was what was challenging for me and one of the reasons why I ended up leaving...Like a bigger university, you know, typically you live on campus, you see a lot more people and there's a lot of events happening...I think that kind of drew me closer and kept me there... I was wanting to switch from psychology over to more of like the criminal justice situation. And at UW it's not as in heightened of a degree as it was [at a different four-year college]...And so I ended up trying out for the cheer team at [a different four-year college] and so it kind of just all fell into place that I was able to reintroduce myself into the sports aspects of myself and as well as going for the new degree that I really wanted to go for that I just decided that I wanted to leave. (White, female student).

A seventh student transferred to a different four-year college to be with close friends and to have a residential college experience shares,

I think at least for me personally, I really wanted to be more involved... But I just never had the opportunity or the time to take part in that, especially with work and the fact that I wasn't [living] close. So I didn't wanna have to drive back to school again to go to a club or an after school thing...I wish that there was also more sports on campus...Then it's just easier that way to make relationships and make friends. I guess that's another thing as well is the fact that I was just going to class and going back home every day. I really didn't make a lot of friends at UW Tacoma...[At a different four-year college], where I am now,...my best friends who went there...just had talked about how they loved it and everything and I think I wanted to kind of get out and get away from like where I was living... I really love it. It's kind of a good it was a good transition...I'm living with them and I'm having an awesome experience...Ultimately, I wanted more of an experience more of a college experience I guess I just wasn't happy with. I guess more of the social experience. (White, female student).

Theme 2 – Financial and 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.

Stopped out from TCC

Living on their own for the first time, one student explains that they found it too difficult to balance working full-time with coursework. They are now considering finishing their degree online with a different college because they have coworkers who have been successful with that program:

I was living on my own, so I needed to be able to pay my own rent, my own bills as an adult. And so I've been a juggle that financial hardship and make sure my schedule was my full forty hours and not anything short of it. But still trying to balance a full-time school schedule was hard trying to find the classes that fit my schedule with work was kind of hard to and so that was that was kind of what I mean by financial hardship...I actually just recently started thinking about going back to school to get an accounting certification, but I think I plan on doing that online or at [a different college]...I've had coworkers [who have had] positive experiences with it. (Hispanic/Latinx, female student).

A second student who had recently moved out of their parents' house dropped because they could not afford to pay their bills and meet their basic needs. They have since participated in a community service program and intend to use their education award to finish their associate degree:

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 I stopped getting 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...I joined [a community service program] last year. I did a [community service] term for ten-and-a-half months because they give you an education award at the end and it's about how much I need to finish my associates, I think. So, I changed my job so that I could pay for school. I just haven't been able to go back yet...I had looked into the affordable housing that they had there. At some point and saw that I didn't qualify for it either...Yeah, I definitely want to finish my associates and I have some money that's specifically for that. I'm just stuck in other full-time jobs now, so it's not gonna happen right now. It's probably not gonna happen until the winter. (Hispanic/Latinx, non-binary student).

A third student who recently moved out decided to join the military to receive free housing while being paid for work explains,

My folks [were] putting pressure on me of moving out, having a job, and trying to make sure that I was at that age where I should be moving out of the house...I decided that...what would be smart for me is to...join the military, which got me into free housing, be able to get paid while also having a home...and that's how it's worked for me. (White, male student).

Another student left after her mother remarried and they no longer qualified for financial aid

The main reason I did leave, I mean, I would have liked to continue attending, but my mom and stepdad had gotten married at the time, and I lost my FAFSA, so I ended up owing money and I didn't want to continue on going with a process that I wasn't fully capable of at the moment...I think I owe the university about \$2,200. And you know, during this Coronavirus stuff, I can't really pay it. But, yeah, eventually, if I did pay it back, I would like to probably hone something medical and with that focus, rather than just putting around and an associate degree. I think that I'd be more driven, maybe be able to receive more help from a counselor or guidance source...I was paying rent, paying books, buying food...But the books were a huge burden financially, and I kind of just took it in my head that I have to be going to school. It's going to be debt, and it has to happen, which is a burden I'm still carrying and wish I wouldn't have...No, there really weren't many things that I could find online or looking to online because, technically, both of my parents make too much money. And it's a huge frustration because my stepdad's not helping, and my dad's not helping, but I don't get FAFSA, but at this point in my life now that I'm not a dependent, I think that I'd be able to file for FAFSA and get some financial support. (White, female student).

A second student also left because they did not qualify for financial aid:

I left because...my financial aid...was weird because...I filled it out and everything and then I had to pay out-of-pocket and I wasn't working full-time, so it was family help...I went for two quarters. The first quarter I had to pay the whole tuition out-of-pocket and then the second quarter I was still enrolled, but I didn't know I was still enrolled, and they charged me for that quarter, even though I thought they dropped my classes because financial reasons...I went off of my parents' income and we had the same problem...because if you make a certain amount, or if you make too much over a certain amount and they don't really support you financially, I guess, but just finding resources was probably the most challenging. (Black, male student).

Unable to pay for Internet or fix her computer, one student explains,

I didn't have Internet a month later, and my term was ending so that kind of caused struggle for me, and then my computer also broke so I couldn't do any work at home. And so I tried staying after school but...it was almost kind of impossible for me. And so I couldn't get any work done and my grades are starting to fall and so I knew that it was too late in the term to really try to get them up so, I shouldn't have, but I gave up anyway, and so I just stopped attending.

When asked if they reached out for resources, she said,

I probably didn't think to because of all the stress of moving, knowing that I have like piles of schoolwork, and so I think it just slipped my mind. And, plus, I don't think I

knew where to really look for all those resources...The only roadblock [to re-enrolling] is my computer hasn't been fixed yet, because...money's been kind of tight, so I haven't been able to get that. So if I were to do online classes, I'd have to get that fixed first. (White, female student).

Stopped out from UWT

Among those who stopped out from UWT for primarily financial reasons, many mention gaps or changes in their financial aid packages and the challenges they faced working enough hours to pay bills and meet basic needs.

Though grateful for their financial aid package, one student stopped out because he could not cover other living expenses and his religion prohibits him from accepting loans:

One of the biggest reasons also was finance—being able to pay for everything. I really am happy with the support that I got from UWT. I mean, they went above and beyond. They help[ed] me take care of a lot of payments...covering my tuition, covering the book cost...It definitely made me cry 'cause I was at one stage taking in that I won't be able to afford college...It's just, it's I still had other expenses to take care of...I had the rent...car bills, gas and insurance, and phone bills and food expenses. It...totals up to like over \$1,500 a month...Maybe you could easily make that from working [at] McDonald's or Uber or whatever but you gotta consider the amount of work you have to do for school in order to keep up your grades... As a Muslim...taking a loan was not...an option for me. (White, male student).

A second student who stopped out for financial reasons expresses frustration with completing the FAFSA and her experience with the financial aid office:

With the FAFSA, I felt like there was always not going for one visit, and these are the things you need to do. It's always like, oh, something happens, and then something else happens. And then they're like, 'Oh, we didn't receive that,' like three weeks later, or like two weeks later. And I understand there's a lot of paperwork going on, so you guys are always busy. And then there's—I feel like the staff there—I don't know how long they had been working there. Maybe they've dealt with a lot of things, but they're not very kind or understanding. It felt like I was at a DOL office. (Asian, female student).

A third student explains how his financial aid package changed drastically between quarters and that he was also facing homelessness when he stopped out:

My first quarter, I got a check for like \$3,000 or something like that, so I could go get my books and everything that I needed, and then there's still money left over for me. And then the following quarter, instead of getting a check, I got a bill, so like \$7,000, \$8,000 or something like that...I was homeless, sleeping under the stairs at my school...studying for a test the next day. (White, male student).

A fourth student explains how her financial aid did not cover living on campus, that her commute on the bus was long and unreliable, and that she is trying to become financially stable and pay off the \$5,000 she owes UWT before she could think about re-enrolling:

I think most of my issues...[were that] I lived out...about an hour away from UW Tacoma...[O]n the bus with all the stops that actually ended up being about an hour and a half...I had about four or five experiences [where the bus] broke down, which is not really nobody's fault, but ended up leaving the class, and I started to feel like I had missed so much class that I couldn't do much [because] at a certain point it becomes like 'excuses, excuses' to the professors...so I just decided to take a break from college until I get an apartment, which is going to happen here soon.. I would have liked to have stayed to a dorm, but I wish that I could have got financial aid for that, but I was able to get financial aid for that. And I decided that I couldn't afford it...I don't think that going right after high school was the right choice for me. But I believe some of it, I think the Pell grant that I did get was you had to use it within the first four years after high school, so I had to do that right away. I didn't get to take a year off or anything to get kind of fun...So I'm trying to get financially stable enough to do that. So I know that it would be hard to go back. So I'm still debating if I actually went up, because I'm stuck with about five grand to pay back for the two semesters that I went. (White, female student).

Living on her own for the first time but not qualifying for financial aid based her parents' income (even though her parents do not pay for her college or living expenses), a fifth student explains,

I originally left UW Tacoma because I just I couldn't afford going to school and trying to live on my own. And unfortunately, FAFSA also doesn't make that easier because...I have a parent who makes good money. My parent is supposed to provide more than a certain amount, which is unfair, considering I have other kids in my family. My dad has expenses that he has to pay. He has a mortgage, he has a car, he has other things in his life and he can't afford to pay for my college, and he can't afford to sign a loan for me...And then I did get kicked out when I was 18. I wasn't allowed to live at home anymore, so because I wasn't living at home, I also had to learn how to find an apartment. But I think that this, the way that the system is set up is kind of, it doesn't necessarily help everyone, to people who are in like a middle class, and their parents make good money doesn't mean that their parents are going to help them or their parents are going to let them live at home after. So, I mean, it kind of screws you over once you go into college, because then I had to find a job a full time job. It wasn't paying the best. And I lived in my car for like, a couple months, because I couldn't find a place. I just didn't know exactly what to do. So I did it until I was able to find something... And I wish that there was an option on FAFSA to say that you are not a dependent, you don't live with your parents. If you can show financially that you provide for yourself and you live by yourself, I feel like that would help so many people because a lot of people want to go back to college. We just don't have the financial means to do so. (Asian, female student).

A sixth student laments buying a new car with his financial aid money, as well as not being able to keep up with full-time coursework (to maintain financial aid) while working to pay for other living expenses:

I had a full-ride, and they paid me like \$6,000 a year to go. And so it was like separate every quarter it was \$2,000 a quarter. So it was nice. You know, it was awesome. But like I said, [I was] pretty dumb, young and dumb, bought a brand-new car, I had to pay my own rent. And so that all adds up. And you can't do that full-time...And, of course, one of the unfortunate things about my Pell Grant was that I had to be full-time in order to get that free schooling. So, you know, that's one of the reasons I had to leave...They're putting me in a situation where it's almost an ultimatum...go to school full-time or just get in all this debt, you know? Honestly, if it wasn't for housing, I probably would have kept going. Because that's obviously the biggest expense that you have. And I felt like that's what kind of really screwed me over and I had it. That's what twisted my wrist into, like, walking out, you know...If I was able to go part-time, aw man, I'd do it in a heartbeat. (Hispanic/Latinx, male student).

Financially supporting himself for the first time, a seventh student explains that he was unable to balance work and school:

In my personal life...it was just like a lot of changes, and [I] kind of ended up having to support myself. Well, so, starting out, I lived with my mom...I ended up moving, and then the move ended up affecting it more than I was expected to. I've never had a job prior to that. So it was kind of just a lot of pressure to get a job and go to school the same time. But at the same time, I was still trying to learn, and then I ended up getting a job anyways and then I just couldn't handle this. (Hispanic/Latinx, male student).

Working full-time and facing homelessness, an eighth student describes,

When I had to stop going to school, the most challenging thing was I had to start working full-time at work. But I ended up not being able to live at the place I was living at the time, so I had to work full-time to sleep in like hotels and stuff, but that was only until I was able to stay with some family members...Early on when I lost my housing, I reached out to a financial aid and they were able to give me a grant that also helps so that I was able to pay off like other hotels and stuff like that, so I was able to sleep somewhere...I had to make a quick decision: either balance school and work and have a hard time trying to pay off like hotels or I can just work full-time, know that I have somewhere to stay every night for however long. And I can always go back to school. So, at the time, putting in a pause so that I can focus on my more pressing needs. It was a no brainer. (Multi-racial, female student).

Switching from working full-time to working part-time to attend classes, a ninth student explains that she was not making enough money to support their family:

I had worked about full-time hours the year before I had decided to go back [to college], and, so, it was a big drastic change...money-wise. I do help my mom with bills, and I do pay bills myself. And so, it was me making less money was a good reason to withdraw. (Hispanic/Latinx, female student).

After losing his job, a tenth student was unable to afford tuition or attend classes while job searching:

I needed better finances and stuff like that. So that's why I decided to take a break from school. I had lost my job, still going to school, and so I needed money...My grades started declining pretty rapidly because I wasn't able to attend school because of trying to find work and stuff like that. So I just decided to leave before it got worse. (Hispanic/Latinx, male student).

Transferred from UWT

One student who transferred from UWT to TCC did so primarily for financial reasons. She explains,

I had a lot of interest in different clubs. It was kind of hard for me to be involved in the way that I wanted [because] I was working full-time also, so I don't really have much time to really be involved in anything other than like my classes... I don't get a lot of FAFSA money back either just 'cause my parents make more...The price was a big thing, too that I had to take into consideration 'cause I was paying out of pocket. So I wasn't really doing well enough and...I just didn't want to justify spending thousands of dollars more than I needed to just to not do well. (Black, female student).

Theme 3 – 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.

Stopped out from TCC

One student who left TCC explains that she stopped out to take care of her grandma in the final stages of cancer:

I had to take a break because my grandma was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer...I put my life on hold to help my mom transferring my grandma back and forth to the doctor, making sure my siblings get to school on time and helping with my three-year-old sister...I was still going to school, but I was only going to school like two days out of the week...So when I came back my teachers were like, 'OK, well, this is how you can pass your classes.' I started turning the work in, but my grandma had to get her port put back in the day that we were supposed to do the final... Because I didn't finish the final the teacher was trying to get a form in so that I wouldn't lose

my financial aid, but we didn't get the form in in time...for me to get financial aid for spring quarter. (Multi-racial, female student).

Another student stopped out from TCC to work full-time and support his family:

I was trying to help my family financial wise. So that's also why it made me make that decision...It's mostly because of my job and then to take care of the family. (Hispanic/Latinx, male student).

Stopped out from UWT

One student who stopped out from UWT explains that she had just married and did not want to start school immediately after their honeymoon:

My husband and I got engaged. I think it was right before I stepped out of school. And we were planning to get married in September. And I was planning, not thinking at all. I'll finish my prereqs in the spring for nursing school, and then I'll start nursing school in the fall. I would have just gotten married, got home from my honeymoon, and then starting nursing school, which is one of the most competitive and tough schools that you can go to, and be working a full-time job while my husband and I also youth pastor together, and I was like, 'Oh my gosh, I could not have done that.' I would have been a totally absent wife hiding behind my nursing book, like you're trying to survive. (Multi-racial, female student).

A second student explains how she stopped out to take care of her sister, who was suffering with her mental health:

My first year, actually, my sister, she was depressed. She was going through a lot of things. She's also suicidal...And I essentially became part of like a counselor for my sister because she wasn't comfortable talking to anyone other than my family. So just sitting down with her for hours letting her...kind of just being there for her takes a lot of toll on you. You can't let your sister know, 'Hey, I have an exam, sorry, I can't talk to her...' And then, at same time my mother, she was in a very crucial pregnancy and then at seven months, she had a stillborn baby, and then also being there for your mother. (Asian, female student).

A third student explains how a death in the family led her to withdraw from college:

I started to go to therapy because I had a death in my family...I had so many things going wrong, I felt in my life outside of school, and, for that, my kind of attention towards school started weaning. (White, female student).

A fourth student explains how she left to be her grandmother's full-time caregiver:

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. (White, female student).

A fifth student went through a divorce and the birth of a child, leading him to prioritize financial needs over college:

The first time I left because I was in the middle of a divorce, and that was just stressful and effortful and kind of demanded my full attention... I recently found out that I am going to be a dad. This will be my first child and my partner [and I] are both very excited. But what comes along with that is added financial burden. And also...I need to allocate my time to my partner right now, and then, after our child was born, then to our child, so, really, it's probably gonna be a while before I'm able to re-enroll because I want to make sure that I can provide my kid a stable life which means I need to become more financially secure. My primary concern now is saving up enough money to be able to own a home instead of renting. The place I'm renting now, it's not a great place for the kids, so I don't think I really have that luxury. But I am in line to get a very well-paying job. And from there, I'm planning on returning once I secure that job, returning part-time in order to finish my bachelor's because it's important to me to finish that I started it. I'm so close to getting it. I want to return and finish. (Multi-racial, male student)

A sixth student explains how difficulties within their family led her to stop attending college:

I was having like a lot of family problems and everything at home kind of affected how I was doing at school, so I kind of stopped going to school. (Hispanic/Latinx, female student).

A seventh student experienced a death in a family, the disablement of another family member and was also trying to comfort other family members:

There's a lot of stuff going on around that time. Halfway through [my] senior year we had a death in the family, and then we had another family member ending up with [having] a stroke and being disabled. And so I had to help my mom basically empty out one family member's house...and then help move my family member into an assisted living home, and helping take care of them helping my mom with her own struggles because she just lost a parent... And my next quarter, I was like, 'Okay, I'm gonna get it together. I'm gonna pull myself together.' And then I forced myself to do four classes... I attended college for one or two weeks. I didn't go to all my classes and then I completely stopped going. (White, female student).

Transferred from UWT

Only one student transferred from UWT due to family related reasons. This student did so because their family moved to another state:

The only reason why I left was because we had some family issues. My aunt got diagnosed with cancer, and, my family, we're originally from [out of state]. The only reason we moved to Washington was because my dad had a job opportunity with [a local company]. So I feel because my aunt got diagnosed, we just wanted to be around family. So we just made the family decision to move back and be with her. But that's really the only reason why I stopped attending. (Hispanic/Latinx, female student).

Theme 4 – Mental Health

Many students described facing mental health challenges while in college. Those who left primarily for mental health reasons are summarized here, which include depression, anxiety, and addiction. Social anxiety emerged as a sub-theme with several students describing the debilitating anxiety they experienced while attempting to navigate college life for the first time.

Stopped out from TCC

One student who left TCC struggled with seasonal depression:

I have a reason that I left, like my own thing. Once winter quarter comes around, it's just a hard time mentally...mostly came down to like my mental health. (Multi-racial, non-binary student).

Transferred from TCC

Another student who left TCC and eventually transferred to another college explains how she started seeing a therapist to cope with stress after revealing that she was gay to her mom:

I came out to my mom and everything, but then on top of that she also got engaged twice last year. The first time was to this one dude in [another state], so she was going to move and live there, and then I didn't find out until later, and I would have had to find my own place, which was stressful because it was really last minute...That's when I started going to therapy too, was after that. Also, that was going on at the same time as the whole coming out thing. (Hispanic/Latinx, female student).

A third student left TCC due to suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder:

I was also...suffering from some depression symptoms due to chronic PTSD, but I didn't know at the time, but I think that also prevented me from going to just even showing up or being willing to just leave my bed and going to class as well. (Hispanic/Latinx, male student).

Stopped out from UWT

One student describes leaving college after having a “breakdown” about what they were doing with their life:

I just had this breakdown, and it was really a personal thing. Just because I don't think I'm just doing this because I think this is right. I think I'm just doing this because I was raised [that] this is what you do and do school, you're good at this. I never really pursued the things that I love. (Multi-racial, female student).

A second student explains how the pressure of going to school exacerbated their depression and anxiety:

I have struggled with depression and anxiety for a really long time before I even started going to college or attending classes in college, and I just wasn't sure what I wanted to do. It was a lot of anxiety of the fact that I did not know what I wanted to do. The fact that I didn't know what I wanted to do kind of just made me really sad. It made me sad I didn't enjoy going to school, I didn't enjoy doing classes or I didn't enjoy doing assignments. It just made me more sad, and I didn't feel motivated...I didn't want to do anything. I didn't want to do assignments or, or any of that things. And anxiety and depression had a lot to do with it. (Hispanic/Latinx, female student).

Similarly, a third student explains how college exacerbated their anxiety and how their anxiousness about figuring out their financial aid is the main barrier to their return:

So I return back to school and ended up actually being diagnosed with a 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 just know without paying attention in class or would be a little bit late or things like that... I started seeing a therapist, and she said you need to stop pushing yourself. And I had gotten so obsessed with school and my grades and finishing and keeping up with other people's standards... This person does two internships this whole time, and they did this and that, and I am like, 'Wow, there's so much I should be doing right now.' And it just kind of broke me, I guess you could say, and my therapist had to say, you know, 'Dude, you need to stop going to school because you have this pedestal. And instead of putting yourself and your health on that, you have school up there, the whole time, school, school, school.' So I had to kind of take myself and I will never forget her saying that because that actually really changed the way I thought about things... And I could still be successful, even if I didn't go back to school that quarter, which was such a tough pill to swallow because I thought, 'Oh my gosh, I'm a dropout.' ...And so I'm really grateful that I stopped going to school because I think it probably saved my life and the way I think about myself and I've gone through so much growth since then, because I have not returned since then. And I do plan to return, although there still are some financial aid things preventing me from going back to school and that's actually the only thing preventing me from going back to school. This past year was my fear of financial aid and just the anxiety around. Oh my gosh, I'm gonna have to go back into that office and figure everything out again, so that I can finish my last

quarter and a half, two quarters of my degree and then be done with it. (White, female student).

Also suffering from anxiety, a fourth student explains how overwhelmed they felt navigating the campus and making friends:

I had a lot of anxiety just going to class so it would take me a minute before entering and then just having to calm down...And the buildings were connected but separated at the same time. So one class I would have in this building and then I would have to walk all the way to the other building. And then sometimes I wouldn't know [if] I'm in the correct building and I just feel overwhelmed...I just feel like I'm a little awkward. And talking to people or making new friends makes me feel a little anxiety. So sometimes I stop myself from doing stuff...I would miss assignments...and I wouldn't be able to fully concentrate or I would overthink it. (Hispanic/Latinx, female student).

Similarly, a fifth student explains how their anxiety made it difficult to speak up in class or make friends:

I think [I was] going through really bad social anxiety at the time, so it was really hard to talk to people and make eye contact and all that. I was in the back of the class and not talk. So yeah, I guess college is hard cuz, you know, you're with all these new people—not high school friends. You had like all these like adults. And you're just, it was just hard for me to like, go out there and make new friends. I had many sessions with the mental health counselor there at the college. And I think that was an amazing thing that was offered to me. I think the program is still there. I hope it is. Because the mental health counselors, they really impacted me. Yeah, I don't remember his name. I would like to give him a shout out. It was a biology teacher...He just came up to me one day and noticed I was like being very being very down and recommended going to see the mental health counselor and gave me their card. And I went in during session...The anxiety was really bad where I don't like surely after I was like done, I did like a lot of sessions. I dropped out. But I think that was what was best for me at the time. I don't think I was [where] I wanted to be. I didn't want to be going to class every day. I think I needed to separate myself from that. I think the mental health counselors helped me come to that realization like I need to take a step away from this right now. (Pacific Islander, male student).

A sixth student explains how anxiety negatively impacted their grades and led them to stop out:

I didn't even officially like drop out. I just let that quarter roll through because I was dealing with a lot of anxiety and stuff. And so I ended up with a really bad GPA, and I just didn't reenroll for the spring quarter. (White, female student).

A seventh student describes how they struggled with addiction, overdosed, and is now focused on his recovery:

My focus was not on school or learning. My focus was on substances that I was using. And when you're inebriated, it's harder to learn. And it's also harder to retain any information that you do learn or to actually recall it when it's needed. You know, so it just it really suppresses your neural firing. So as a result, basically, it made me stupid. I ended up leaving right away...It's a life and death situation. So, it was much more important to me that I focus on my recovery than on my academics...It was my partner at the time was really kind of pointing out to me how quickly my life was falling apart, and I ended up having a drug overdose. And that was kind of a wakeup call that it took for me, unfortunately, but at least it was a wakeup call. (Multi-racial, male student).

Grieving after a tough break up, an eighth student explains how his depression consumed his attention:

My second year I just wasn't doing good academically. I was going through a breakup and just home stuff. I don't want to tell anyone because I don't know why, but I think there's just me being prideful. It was just embarrassing to have to open up and explain that to people, what I was actually going through. (Black, male student).

Theme 5 – Physical Health

Those who attribute withdrawing or not re-enrolling to physical health conditions range from students who experienced pregnancy, car accidents, cancer, narcolepsy, and short-term illnesses.

Stopped out from TCC

One student withdrew from TCC after experiencing complications with her pregnancy. She lost her scholarship after withdrawing and is now faced with paying a tuition bill before she could re-enroll:

I found out that I was pregnant...And so, at that time, I was working, full-time student, and pregnant. It was just very difficult for me. And I also didn't spend as much time studying as I used to when I started school...And so from then I decided to go part-time student. So first, my scholarships will only allow me to be a full-time person, so I had some scholarships taken away because I decided that I wanted to be a part-time student...And one of the times I almost fainted in the hallway and it was nighttime, so that was really scary for me because not only am I pregnant, but I'm fainting in in the hallway at night, and I'm trying to take an exam. So I decided that I wasn't going to finish the class and I decided that I was going to take a break from there and just focus on pregnancy and work...Because I could always come back and try again... So the only reason why I haven't gone back to school is because I lost the scholarship, and because I lost all scholarships I actually had to pay back what they had given me towards that class I didn't finish and because I've never actually paid it...And so in order for me to go back to school, I need to pay that... I don't even know if there is like a collections building to go to and pay it or just do it online and how to get to the document, so I just never took care of it. (Hispanic/Latinx, female student).

A second student sustained injuries in a car accident and experienced difficulties registering for online courses:

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. (Hispanic/Latinx, female student).

A third student developed symptoms for a critical health condition that led them to withdraw from college:

So the year that I started school, I started feeling a lot of like heavy symptoms, my hands are shaking, I'm stuttering a lot, and I didn't know if that was because I started having anxiety as well. But I didn't go to doctors...Until this year, actually, in January, I just, I had to. I saw my throat swell up really bad, and I was like, yeah, it's time to go to the doctors. So I was diagnosed with the health issue and kind of prohibits me from doing a lot of things now. (Asian, female student).

A fourth student who left TCC was diagnosed with cervical cancer and is struggling to pay medical bills before she considers re-enrolling:

After I left TCC I was diagnosed with cervical cancer and have a ton of medical debt now. And that has to come first before I even think about going back to school and paying off my community college debt. So, I mean, it's just another twig on the fire at the moment. (White, female student).

Stopped out from UWT

Struggling to stay awake in class and at home to complete assignments, one student was eventually diagnosed with narcolepsy and depression and struggled to work with the disability office:

A couple weeks into fall quarter I actually got diagnosed with narcolepsy...I know that you can get accommodations and things at school, but I guess it was just a lot and I didn't really know how to approach it. I know I talked to them in the disability office or whatever it's called but the whole process is kind of confusing to me...I was like, well, I'll take a quarter off and when I come back I'll sort that out, but then I just didn't. But I was having trouble with just...being awake to do my assignments and things like that, so that definitely made it harder to keep up with everything. Being really stressed out and extremely depressed to the point where I was like having thoughts of like suicide and stuff like it was really bad. (Multi-racial, female student).

A second student initially withdrew after a medical emergency. Later, she explains that she could not balance working full-time and attending college full-time:

I just had like a medical emergency. So I was hospitalized later that day because my kidneys were messing up. I had to call 911 and was in the hospital for three weeks and had two surgeries and it was very insane. I immediately had to go to drop out of college, so I didn't really answer any of my emails. I just had to go to my admissions counselor. I think I remember what she's called. And she like figured everything out for me. She was really helpful and all that...I did reapply the following year...I just, financially, couldn't tackle going to school full-time and working full-time. So I just couldn't, didn't ended up going back to school. And I'm still in that situation. So I don't know, in the near future, if I'll even be able to go to college. (White, female student).

Suffering from post-concussion syndrome after a car wreck, a third student worked with UWT to qualify for a hardship withdrawal, but has since lost his confidence in his ability to perform academically:

I had gotten into a pretty bad car wreck that caused me to have a mild to moderate concussion and having to go back to school even after a week of recovering as well as work, you know, just having the stress of work on it. Going into school having to do some hardcore Calculus II really did not fare well with me. I immediately was in danger of failing the class...The testing just didn't fare well with me. I ended up having to do a hardship withdraw and tuition waiver and I wasn't able to go back. I had to start a whole injury claim...I guess it just took a blow on my own...confidence in my own academics...I've been cleared from my injuries and I've recovered from the concussions, but I feel like if I were to go back still, I would just struggle. I feel like that path has been kinda deserted for me. (Multi-racial, male student).

A fourth student found out she was pregnant, was struggling to support herself and find a place to live, and did not want to ask for help:

Because around the same time I started school, I found out I was pregnant...I guess there was a lot of factors that could have went into it. The decisions I made to leave was part of just me having to grow up and ask for help. If I would, I think if I was given a house sooner, I could have avoided a lot of stuff. A lot of it was pride because I felt like...I wanted to prove...I'm able to do this on my own, and I'm able to just to figure it out, but there are times when you just have to put that aside and like ask for help. (Multi-racial, female student).

Transferred from UWT

The one student who transferred from UWT due to physical health reasons explains how the timing of a week-long illness led him to fail his courses because it was the same week as midterms:

I remember, it was my second quarter at UWT. And I got sick for a week at the very beginning of the quarter, and I missed two classes, which by the curriculum standards can believe that considered a week, but after just missing that one week, I failed

Calculus II. Well, failing calculus two, it made me reconsider attending UWT... It wouldn't have been as much of a problem if it weren't for the fact that the week I came back was also the one of the three midterms are one of the three large tests the entire quarter...I went to community college and completed all of my calculus and upper division math there. And that's how I got my second associates. I graduated there [TCC] last year with another associates in computer engineering. I'm currently at [another four-year college] seeking my Engineering Bachelor's. (White, male student).

Theme 6 – Classroom Experience

Several students describe negative classroom experiences in which they felt discriminated against, sometimes after expressing their political views, or retaliated against after questioning their instructor's arguments.

Stopped out from TCC

One student questioned whether they were ready for college after a negative experience in a class where they felt discriminated against for their race:

I wasn't shy to ask [questions] because I was curious or I just didn't understand fully. And I just knew a couple people they used to look at me and be like, 'Oh, she sounds stupid.' And so this teacher, she's like, 'What kind of question is that?' You know, like, would say these rude things and I'm like, 'What do you mean?' I'm asking these questions for clarification. I had a really bad time in our class and I'm asking for advice or clarification through email at home. She...wouldn't respond at all or it would take her days to respond. And I was like, oh, this sucks. I think I'm gonna fail this class. I don't want to proclaim that she was racist. But I felt like I had hints that she was. That's why I didn't feel comfortable in my classes just because I had a teacher or students that were kind of like her. You know? Yeah, I don't know what to do at that point. I'm not gonna just be like, 'Hey, stop being racist to me.' Yeah, that would be awkward because you don't know if she's being racist or it's her sense of humor or anything or how she teaches. Taking that class, I was just like, I should have took a one year gap, so I could have got ready for college. (Asian, female student).

Stopped out from UWT

One student explains that he left UWT after a negative classroom experience where he felt they were penalized for not agreeing with the instructor:

I would ask a counter question like, 'How's that work when you just said this? How's this work?' And instead of explaining it or trying to help me understand it, they would just dismiss it. And when I would point out a flaw in whatever they're saying...and I'd be able to prove that what they were saying is wrong, they weren't trying to hear me. Instead, I actually got a lower grade on something that I passed. They did something, I don't remember what it was, but they deducted me 15% because I was questioning what they were saying even though I still got the questions right. (White, male student).

A second student explains how she felt harassed and discriminated against after her instructor and classmates found out that she is a Trump supporter:

It was around the time of the election year and I've always been wanting to be open minded and have a conversation about things. I'm very open minded. I'm not biased or judgmental. I like learning from other people's experiences, but I was completely disrespected and targeted by other students and to include mainly professors, certain professors there. And the Dean was not doing anything about it. My advisors were not doing anything about it. My mom wanted to get money back for it actually because she actually sent me like mental health links and stuff because I was a Trump supporter. Basically she found out I was traveling to Florida...and she decided to target me with half the class after the election and sent me a bunch of anti-white links, anti-cop links, also knowing I came from a very big family full of law enforcement who have also lost friends and family in the line of duty. So she [was] just bluntly disrespectful. And then there was another class I was in American politics. And they took a quiz. And it was we had to write a reflection report on it. And it was basically answering questions based on policies such as abortion and stuff like that. And it tells you if you're conservative or you lean more liberal and then you had to have two people that are friends or family do it and then they asked, I think it was, 'Do you agree with your results? Are you surprised?' stuff like that. It was just a reflection and I still got like a straight failure on it for whatever reason. So when I was trying to talk to the advisor or the professor, I believe that was online too. He never got back to me, just blatantly didn't care, I guess. I don't know. But the Dean did nothing about it... 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... And I knew I was more conservative. It's more of a liberal school, obviously, which is fine. But I kept my mouth shut about my opinion, because I knew I kind of felt like that would happen. So I just, you know, kept my mouth shut and listened to others. But once people found out it was like all hell broke loose. So they automatically probably just assume that I was racist because I'm a Trump supporter. I honestly don't know after that experience. I really don't know if I trust it, because that was a lot of money that went down the drain that I'm never gonna probably see it again. (White, female student).

On the opposite side of the political spectrum, a third student who describes themselves as “very liberal” was discouraged after a negative classroom experience with a politically conservative instructor:

I felt like a lot of teachers force things down your throat in terms of the ideologies and their beliefs and stuff. So I guess that's one of the reasons I stopped liking it as much. So that's one of the reasons that I left...It's that, at the time, it really offended me because...it's just like you grew up not learning [about] Native Americans and stuff and when you learn about them, you learn about how a lot of them were killed. And then here comes this guy telling me that this didn't happen... 'We're going to

read specifically from my book and my book is the Bible' basically. He didn't say that but you know he acted like he was the Bible, like this is the facts, like there's no other arguing...I had another teacher that was pretty liberal...I always felt bad for the kids [who were] ever like Republican or more leaning to the right or conservative because I felt like whenever they spoke in class, because, like I said, it was a lefty class. I felt bad that they were, almost like people were wanting them to feel ashamed about themselves...And that's the number one thing I think that was worse [at] UW Tacoma. I had just one experience with a Republican teacher. There was countless of my teachers there that would like shame their students, and I saw, I feel like a university are supposed to be the most open minded and this is where new ideas and thoughts are planted...You're afraid that you're gonna get a bad grade just because you disagree with the teacher...I was very liberal and I felt like I was gonna...learn new stuff and you maybe change your mind about certain things. And I felt like if I disagreed with a teacher about something, then...she might feel differently about me and I might not get as good a grade. You almost want to keep your mouth shut. (Hispanic/Latinx, male student).

Theme 7 – 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. The examples provided below are from students who primarily attribute leaving college to college navigation challenges.

Stopped out from TCC

One student stopped because she felt she was wasting money because she didn't know what classes she needed:

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. (White, female student).

A second student struggled to meet with an academic advisor:

At TCC I didn't really have a set person, and so that was kind of my concern there. I didn't really have anybody to go to directly and if I did that person interchanging for whatever reasons...I was switched with advisor three times...I would try to go in-person, but they wouldn't have appointments available...I don't think I would go back to TCC just because...I didn't really have a good experience the first time just as far as guidance on knowing what to do. So I don't think I would go back unfortunately ...Maybe when a new student is enrolled, maybe if there was a way to have like an auto-generated email that kind of detailed all the places they can go for help, not just one place. (Hispanic/Latinx, female student).

A third student faced challenges registering for classes, figuring out financial aid, and meeting with an academic advisor:

Registering for classes seems unnecessarily difficult, just the website, figuring out what classes, and getting them, just like registering in general...And I think I was on the phone with somebody who referred me to the wrong department. And then, I don't know, I had to go run an errand or go to work or something. So, yeah, I think calling to try to get help with various things like registration or financial aid or whatnot. It normally makes things a little bit more confusing when I've called TCC to try to figure out a problem. Yeah, I think I ended up asking my dad for help maybe the first time I register for classes, but I believe that there are two different websites. I think I had to log into my TCC account and then go on to this and it will take me to another page. I'm pretty sure I only actually met in-person with an advisor one time, so if I ever do end up going back, I know that I have to go in and meet with somebody cuz I have no idea what class I'm supposed to take. And I didn't really know what classes I was supposed to take when I was going there. I was just kind of like taking the stuff I assumed I had to take or stuff that I wanted to take...I think it was just prereqs. I don't really understand how college even works. I'm gonna be honest. But yeah, that's really the main thing is the confusion made it easier to stop...I don't think I did an orientation type thing. I barely talked to or saw anyone at the college. (Hispanic/Latinx, non-binary student).

A fourth student explains her frustration over the enrollment process and academic advising:

Students that are fresh out of high school are kind of ill-equipped with enrolling in courses and stuff like that. I didn't feel entirely supported by counselors, a lot of stress was provided by that. I think that that could be a bit more streamlined to better assist new students because they kind of just throw you in and expect you to figure it all out yourself...There was a lot of formatting issues and stuff like that that I had never learned [when] I attended with of high school previously, and the precision of MLA. And all of that was something that kind of threw me through a loop. But the actual content and curriculum I found really exciting...I think that public high schools and Tacoma aren't really preparing children that aren't on a track to attend colleges. And that was a lot of the reason why I left. I think that's kind of what we're setting into here, but I just wasn't fully prepared yet...And I was on about, I think my fifth quarter of the time and still hadn't gotten in contact with the counselor or anyone, didn't even know what classes I was supposed to be taking and decided that I could continue enrolling in random classes or I could just quit going. And I didn't want to waste money on classes that I didn't know were contributing to my degree, so I decided to just not do it anymore. It was kind of a snowball effect...A while ago, I think that I had sent emails and went into the counseling office multiple times to try and make an appointment. I think they were just always booked, because I think that an issue that the university may have is that they are probably a little bit stretched out. But I was also working full-time when I was in college, so if there were any

availabilities I usually couldn't go. I don't even think there were any availability...The lottery grab of when you need the classes came up and you had to enroll right at 12 o'clock every night when you're a full-time worker, that's really stressful. I think that honestly the main point for me was just being lost and lack of support I think if there's one thing and one grain of salt I could share that with definitely be it and not necessarily for adults now because I'm an adult now I know that I need to go get that help but for fresh out of high school students, I think that there does need to be definitely more. (White, female student).

A fifth student explains that he stopped attending because he could not fit the nursing program within their full-time work schedule:

I was gonna do the nursing program, but it was all day program. And I needed to start working. So there was a job opportunity, and I took advantage of it. And so it limited my time and so I just, I couldn't take that I couldn't do that program. (Hispanic/Latinx, male student).

Transferred from TCC

One student transferred to a different two-year college after not experiencing enough general guidance at TCC, declining grades, and parking challenges:

With me being a first-generation college student, I quickly found out that [college] was an entirely new place...and I really didn't have enough guidance there...I did fail to notice was that there was also a TRiO Center in TCC. And usually TRiO is actually like, they're supposed to be supporting first gen or low-income students and stuff like that. But I was completely unaware about them. I've almost went into TCC for a year and have not even heard about that...When I went to [a different two-year college], I've noticed that, like immediately, they required people to attend orientation. So I did, and they highly advertised about TRiO if you're a first gen or low income or a veteran students, and so, yeah, I went to TRiO and they have their own offices and multiple advisors...I left TCC because every quarter passed by, I think my grades were dwindling down a little bit more. And I just found it challenging...to even go to class as well because of like the parking and the navigating...I decided to go to [a different two-year college] because...I kind of looked at it as a fresh start, so I can just basically press the reset button and restart my GPA. (Hispanic/Latinx, male student).

A second student who transferred to a different two-year college also notes parking and course registration as primary factors:

Problems starting probably with the parking. I was located about 15 minutes from TCC and 30 minutes from [my current college], so it would have been easier to go to TCC, but...sometimes I'd have to scan like 15 minutes for parking. It ended up being about the same time as going to [my current college] if I had just driven straight to [my current college] and just parked, versus 15 minutes at TCC and then scanning 15 minutes for parking...And then when it came to registering for classes, I felt the TCC system was super confusing...My first time going to TCC I had to stop in and do two

different appointments, and I felt like the whole system was kind of chaotic because some of the first people wouldn't be able to help me so they'd be like, oh, here, we'll move you over to a different part of the office so that they could teach you how to use the system...And the amount of time that they gave for you to be able to drop your classes or move your classes around is longer than TCC gives. [TCC] gives you like until the end of the first week to change your mind about your class, which I thought wasn't really long enough, because you might have only gone through like the syllabus. Your class started on a Wednesday and you had till Friday to choose if you could drop out of it... At [my current college]...if I wanted to switch classes, I would be able to just stay in one building and only have to walk ten feet away and be like, 'Oh, I'd like to talk to the transcript people,' and they're in the same office room as the Registrar's and everybody else, but with TCC I'd have to walk super far [between] buildings and being there for the first time and having to go from building 10 to building 14, and I would keep getting bounced around. (Asian, female student).

Stopped out from UWT

One student who stopped out from UWT explains that she is a first-generation college student and needed more guidance on course selection and degree pathways from her academic advisor:

It was stressful because my advisor didn't really make it easier for me. Being the first person in my family, in my entire family, to go to college, coming from a different country. My advisors didn't really give me...a lot of information...I'm the kind of person that I really needed my advisor to really advise me what to do...There was no sitting down with me telling me, okay, these are the classes that you need to take by this quarter to be done with it...So I'm thinking, more compassionate towards students understanding their way because it really does, being a first gen, it really does affect you, because you see it and you have so many other things that are going on and then it could either discourage you not to go to school anymore. (Asian, female student).

Transferred from UWT

Another student transferred to a different four-year college after a math course taken at TCC was not accepted by UWT and she was unable to reach her academic advisor:

I did Running Start in high school and then going into the next fall I could not get ahold of my advisor all of summer. I tried showing up at the office, and it just seemed that people are saying she was never there. So I had signed up for my classes and I had planned to meet with my advisor the first day of class to try to figure out if I was on the right track to graduate. And I got an email from her saying I was no longer a student at UW Tacoma because one of my math requirements, the one math credit that I needed, had to have been taken...at UW Tacoma. During the first year, I was never advised of that. I knew I had to take that class before I graduated... I called every single day trying to get ahold of my advisor just to explain my side of everything...I was walking into the advisory building and my advisor was probably

100 feet in front of me, so I followed up into the office and the receptionist said that they were not in the office and I couldn't get ahold of anybody. And, yeah, once all this went down, I tried contacting the head of the department of Communication and just nobody wanted to return my emails. I tried calling and everything, so I just I just decided to transfer if I wasn't a student anymore...Tuition's a lot cheaper at [my current college]. And knowing that I pay out of pocket it just worked in my favor, you know, even taking a full extra year classes my student debt is still relatively low. So I feel good with my financial aid...But I have thought about going back to psychology and if I could go back to UW Tacoma. I would just be a little concerned about advisors. That's just my experience. (White, female student).

Other Considerations

Given that only one student mentioned this, we do not consider this story a trend or theme; however, we wanted to highlight this student's story given the important concern that it raises about student safety on campus. One student who left TCC shares about their involvement in sex trafficking, how she left college after being triggered by a human trafficking seminar, and how students are targeted on campus:

*For the end of the quarter...we went and sat in the seminar for human trafficking. And after that human trafficking seminar I kinda took a break from school for a week because it had bothered me so much...There's different versions of human trafficking. There's where people are forcing you and those when you're doing it to yourself, and I [speak] personally from experience...A lot of people are hunted on the college campus. I know about five people are that go to TCC right now...[There] is a place where young women, older women and some males walk to sell themselves...We went there and I'm looking like, damn, I go to school with you...They're all pimps. I was like, 'This **** is all in school.' (Multi-racial, female student).*

Discussion

In the spirit of authentically engaging students in the decisions that impact their lives, this report does not provide explicit policy recommendations. Instead, this 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 and Sense of Belonging)

The most prevalent theme that emerged for why students leave college was around college fit. Many students indicated that college was not a good fit for them because they did not know what they wanted to do for their careers, and they did not have a strong sense of purpose. They felt a lot of pressure from high school to enroll in college immediately and many did so without a clear plan. Several students at both TCC and UWT transferred to different colleges because they switched to majors that were not offered. Notably, several UWT business majors stopped out because they did not feel the courses they were taking

had any practical application to what they wanted to do, they were not allowed to take business courses their first year in college, and they sought other ways to gain business knowledge and experience. Several students at UWT transferred to a residential college to seek a stronger sense of community on campus with residential life and sports, as opposed to a commuter campus feel.

These findings lead us to ask, “How can we better support students who do not have a clear career path in mind?” and “What else can we do to strengthen students’ sense of belonging on campus?”.

Financial + Basic Needs

Many students are working full-time and taking a full course load to meet the eligibility requirements for federal and state aid or other scholarships. Many of these students are also living on their own for the first time—attempting to pay rent and all their other bills on their own, budgeting for the first time, struggling with time management and feeling over-stressed. While many are grateful for the financial aid they receive, they are still working full-time because their financial aid does not adequately cover their cost of living (rent, car, insurance, cell phone, food, clothes, text books, computer, etc.). Many others are also financially supporting family members. One student explains how they could not accept loans for religious reasons. Others receive little or no financial aid because their parents make too much money for them to qualify, even though most of their parents are unable or unwilling to contribute to their college expenses.

Several students mention affordable housing as a key barrier to continuing with college. Several struggled to secure housing and were living in hotels, on people’s couches or even outside. Reliable transportation, parking on campus, and the cost of textbooks, Internet and computing devices were other basic needs that were challenging for students. Several were unsure what resources existed and where to find them.

Many students were confused and frustrated by the financial aid process; felt unwelcome in the financial aid office; and did not understand when they could use their FAFSA or that they could renew their FAFSA as an independent student. Several students explain how they stopped out after their financial aid changed drastically from one quarter to the next (when a parent remarried or for an unknown reason) or when they were required to pay back financial aid after failing courses. Owing the college several thousand dollars is a barrier to return to college for several students.

These findings lead us to ask, “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, “What additional supports are possible for students who are caring for family members or experiencing other major life events?”.

Mental Health

Many students describe facing mental health challenges while in college. Those who left primarily for mental health reasons include those suffering from depression, anxiety, and addiction. Social anxiety emerged as a sub-theme with several students describing the debilitating anxiety they experienced while attempting to navigate college life for the first time.

These findings lead us to ask, “How can we better support students’ mental health preemptively, as well as better care for those who are suffering from acute mental health needs?”

Physical Health

Those who attribute withdrawing or not re-enrolling to physical health conditions range from students who experienced pregnancy, car accidents, cancer, narcolepsy, and short-term illnesses.

These findings lead us to ask, “How can students who are experiencing physical health challenges be better supported?”

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 after questioning their instructor’s arguments.

These findings lead us to ask, “How can we ensure that students can express their political views or question their instructors’ arguments without fear of discrimination or retaliation?”

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; challenges knowing where to go or who to talk to; and frustration finding a place to park their car.

These findings lead us to ask, “How can we ensure that students are able to successfully navigate college systems?”

Conclusion

Overall, these findings and key questions 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 suggests that collective impact efforts like the Tacoma Completes initiative, that 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.

Appendices

Appendix A - Student Engagement

Email Samples

GROUP A: LEFT TCC AND DID NOT RE-ENROLL AT ANY COLLEGE

Email Invitation

Subject: Share Your TCC Story, Earn \$50 & Help Future Students

Hi [Preferred Name],

My name is Kanwal, and I am a researcher supporting Tacoma Completes, a community-wide initiative to increase college completion among Tacoma high school graduates.

Would you be willing to share your story about why you did not re-enroll at TCC? You would be joining dozens of other former TCC students who are sharing their stories so that TCC and the greater Tacoma community can work together **to better support future students.**

Your participation is completely voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate. We would be very honored to hear your story. If you are interested, please click on the link below to let us know when you are available to hop on the phone or meet in-person for about 30 minutes. To thank you for your time, we will email you a **\$50 Amazon or Starbucks card** of your choice after you complete the interview.

[**REGISTER HERE**](#)

Interviews will be conducted through the end of February. **Please register by Friday, February 7.**

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to reply to this email or call me at 253-372-2598.

We would be happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you for considering!

Warm regards,
Kanwal

Kanwal Yousuf, M.A.
Research and Evaluation Associate, Degrees of Change
kanwal.yousuf@degreesofchange.org
253-372-2598

GROUP B: LEFT UWT AND DID NOT RE-ENROLL AT ANY COLLEGE

Email Invitation 1

Subject: Share Your UWT Story, Earn \$50 & Help Future Students

Hi [Preferred Name],

My name is Kanwal, and I am a researcher supporting Tacoma Completes, a community-wide initiative to increase college completion among Tacoma high school graduates.

Would you be willing to share your story about why you did not re-enroll at UWT? You would be joining dozens of other former UWT students who are sharing their stories so that UWT and the greater Tacoma community can work together **to better support future students.**

Your participation is completely voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate. We would be very honored to hear your story. If you are interested, please click on the link below to let us know when you are available to hop on the phone or meet in-person for about 30 minutes. To thank you for your time, we will email you a **\$50 Amazon or Starbucks card** of your choice after you complete the interview.

[REGISTER HERE](#)

Interviews will be conducted through the end of February. **Please register by Friday, February 7.**

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to reply to this email or call me at 253-372-2598.

We would be happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you for considering!

Warm regards,
Kanwal

GROUP C: TRANSFERRED FROM UWT TO TCC

Email Invitation

Subject: Share Your UWT Story, Earn \$50 & Help Future Students

Hi [Preferred Name],

My name is Kanwal, and I am a researcher supporting Tacoma Completes, a community-wide initiative to increase college completion among Tacoma high school graduates.

Would you be willing to share your story about why you did not re-enroll at UWT? You would be joining dozens of other former UWT students who are sharing their stories so that UWT and the greater Tacoma community can work together **to better support future students.**

Your participation is completely voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate. We would be very honored to hear your story. If you are interested, please click on the link below to let us know when you are available to hop on the phone or meet in-person for about 30 minutes. To thank you for your time, we will email you a **\$50 Amazon or Starbucks card** of your choice after you complete the interview.

[REGISTER HERE](#)

Interviews will be conducted through the end of February. **Please register by Friday, February 7.**

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to reply to this email or call me at 253-372-2598.

We would be happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you for considering!

Warm regards,

Kanwal

ALL – Outreach Email 10

[Preferred Name], check out this **\$50** gift card opportunity. 🤖

Stores are closed, but Amazon stays delivering, and Starbucks stays open! Chat with us over the phone about your experience as a **former** TCC student and you get a **\$50 Amazon or Starbucks gift card** 🤖 for your valuable time. Many former TCC students shared their story to support future students and to be **heard**. Only **two weeks left** for this opportunity!

Who: This project focuses on **those who left TCC**.

When: 30 minutes, you pick a day and time. 📅

Where: Over the phone! 📞

Sign up here: [Bit.ly/svisignup](https://bit.ly/svisignup) or text (253) 905-3455. 🤖

Make a specific plan now so you don't miss this opportunity, **April 17th** is the last day for interviews!

Date? and Time?

Best,

Kanwal

Hi [Preferred Name],

My name is Kanwal, and I am a researcher partnered with TCC, supporting a project to better understand how to support future students.

We have a **\$50 gift card** opportunity for you **if you share your story about your experience at TCC**. Join dozens of other former TCC students who shared their stories so that TCC and the greater Tacoma community can work together **to better support future students**.

Your participation is completely voluntary.

We would be very honored to hear your story over a 30-minute phone call. If you are interested, please click on ["Register Here"](#) to pick a date and gift card of your choice. We will email you the **\$50 Amazon or Starbucks card** after you complete the interview.

[REGISTER HERE](#)

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to text me at 253- 905-3455
We would be happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you for considering!

Warm regards,
Kanwal

Ringless Voicemail Example

Hi {Preferred Name},

My name is Kanwal, and I am working with UW/TCC on a project to better support future students from Tacoma. We are offering you a **\$50 Amazon or Starbucks card** of your choice if you would be willing to chat with me over the phone about your experience at TCC/UWT. **Your voice matters** and I would be very honored to hear your story.

Please give me a call back or text me at 253-905-3455 to set up a time to talk.

Cold Call Script

Hi, is this [Student Preferred Name]?

My name is [NAME] and I am researcher partnered with TCC. We're offering a \$50 gift card for students who are willing to share their story.

-If answers phone

Do you have a few minutes to schedule a time that works best for you?

If available to take the call

- Okay great [read interview protocol].

- Remind interviewee that the gift card will be sent as soon as the registration form is completed.
- Ask them to text

If not available to take the call

- Okay no worries, thanks for your interest. Let's schedule a time. What day works best for you?
- Great, I have you scheduled for [Day / Time]

Interested but not sure day / time

- Okay, no problem. I can send you a link to the registration form. It's pretty simple to sign up, can you send me a text? I'll respond back with a link.

Thank you so much for your time, I look forward to hearing from you.

-If phone not answered

Appendix B – Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

Research studies require participants to read and sign an "informed consent form." This form emphasizes that your participation is voluntary and describes the purpose of the project, data confidentiality, benefits and risks, and who to contact if you have any questions. You will receive a signed copy of this form via email after you sign and submit it.

OVERVIEW. Tacoma Completes is a community-wide initiative to increase college persistence and completion among Tacoma Public Schools graduates. The Student Voice Research Project is being conducted by Degrees of Change, a Tacoma-based, non-profit organization dedicated to college success and community transformation. Degrees of Change is working with Tacoma Community College (TCC) and University of Washington Tacoma (UWT) to identify former students who transferred from UWT to TCC or who were in good academic standing but chose not to re-enroll in college. Degrees of Change seeks to conduct phone interviews with 50 former students who meet these criteria.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION. I acknowledge that my participation in this research study is completely voluntary, and I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

PURPOSE. This research project will provide in-depth insights about why Tacoma Public Schools students transfer from UWT to TCC or leave UWT or TCC in good academic standing without re-enrolling at another institution. These insights will be used to inform community-wide policy and programming to help increase college persistence and bring students back to college in Tacoma.

DURATION. I understand that my participation will require approximately 30 minutes to complete the phone interview.

PROCEDURES: Individuals will be invited to participate by Degrees of Change researchers via email and/or phone. Individuals who choose to participate will be asked to read and sign this electronic Informed Consent Form and to indicate their interview time preferences using the same electronic form. A copy of the signed Informed Consent Form will be emailed back to the participant for their records. Participants will receive a meeting invitation containing the date and time for their interview, as well as the phone number and conference code to dial-in at the scheduled time of the interview. At the time of the interview, researchers will review the Informed Consent Form.

I understand that the questions asked will relate to the reasons why I did not re-enroll at TCC or UWT and what it would take for me to re-enroll. I acknowledge that interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed to allow the Degrees of Change researchers to code my responses for themes and write a final report. I consent to my interview being audio recorded and transcribed. I understand that all my responses will be de-identified to ensure my confidentiality. I acknowledge that my interview audio recording will be destroyed. I understand that my de-identified written transcript from my interview will be provided to my college (TCC or UWT) for their own future use.

CONFIDENTIALITY. I understand that my interview data will be kept private and will only be exchanged among researchers at Degrees of Change, Tacoma Community College and University of Washington

Tacoma. Data will be shared securely and stored electronically on secure servers. Audio recordings and transcript files will be saved using research IDs instead of participant names. I recognize that the findings from this research project will be made available to the public in an aggregated form, though never in a form that would allow me to be identified.

BENEFITS AND RISKS. I acknowledge that the benefits of my participation are that I will contribute information to help improve community-wide policies and programs to support college persistence and completion. I will be emailed a \$50 Amazon or Starbucks card after successfully completing the interview. I understand that a potential risk to participating in the interview is the potential for emotional discomfort depending on what I choose to share about my college experience and the reasons why I left college.

QUESTIONS. If I have any questions or concerns about my participation in the research study, I understand that I can contact the Operations Director at Degrees of Change, Kelly Bay-Meyer, at 253-444-0013 or kelly.bay.meyer@degreesofchange.org.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT. By my signature below, I acknowledge that I have read and understand the above information. I authorize the exchange of information described above and consent to be included in the research study. This notice is valid until I revoke it in writing.

Participant Signature _____

Date _____

Appendix C – Interview Protocol

BEFORE RECORDING INTERVIEW

- Hi. Is this **[FirstName]**? My name is **[ResearcherName]** and I am talking with local college students on behalf of the Tacoma Completes Student Voice Research Project. Is this still a good time for us to chat?
- Great! Thank you again for taking the time to talk about your college experience with me today. It is a privilege for us to hear your story.
- Before we get started, I just wanted to make sure that we review some important information that was included in the Informed Consent Form that you signed online when you signed-up for the interview.
- First, I just want to emphasize that your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. You are not required to participate in this research project, and you can stop the interview at any time.
- Second, the purpose of this research project is to learn from the experiences of students like yourself who were...
 - **[IF GROUP A]:** enrolled at Tacoma Community College, left in good academic standing, and did not re-enroll in college
 - **[IF GROUP B]:** enrolled at University of Washington Tacoma, left in good academic standing, and did not re-enroll in college
 - **[IF GROUP C]:** enrolled at University of Washington Tacoma, left in good academic standing, and did not re-enroll at Tacoma Community College
- Learning more about your story, your experiences at college—both the good and the bad—and the detailed reasons why you left will be extremely helpful for community and college partners who are part of the Tacoma Completes Initiative to understand as we begin to explore how to better support students like you.
- Third, your responses will be audio recorded and transcribed to make sure that we capture your words accurately and remember what you said among the group of 50-60 students that we will be interviewing. We will destroy the audio recording after we ensure that the written transcript is complete and accurate. We will then analyze the interview transcripts to identify themes about why students leave college and how the community can better support students.
- Fourth, your name will not be used in the analysis; and there will be no way for your former college to identify you in the interview transcript or for anyone reading the final report to identify you.
- Finally, the interview is expected to last between 30 and 60 minutes, and we will email you a \$50 Amazon or Starbucks gift card of your choice after you successfully complete the interview as a thank you for your time.
- Do you have any questions about the research project or the interview process?
- Do I have your permission to begin audio recording our conversation?
- Thank you. I have begun audio recording our conversation.

AFTER BEGIN AUDIO RECORDING

GROUP A: LEFT TCC AND DID NOT RE-ENROLL AT ANY COLLEGE

1. To start, could you share about your experience attending Tacoma Community College?
 - a. Probes if participant is unsure where to begin:
 - i. Why did you originally enroll at TCC?
 - ii. What did you like about attending college at TCC?
 - iii. What was challenging about attending college at TCC?
 - b. Probes if participant shares general statements about their experience:
 - i. Could you say more about that?
 - ii. Why do you describe it as X?
2. Could you share about why you originally left Tacoma Community College?
 - a. Probes if participant is unsure where to begin:
 - i. What was going on in your life at the time when you left TCC?

- b. Probes if participant shares general statements about their decision:
 - i. Could you say more about that?
 - 3. Thinking back, what would have needed to be different for you to have stayed enrolled at TCC?
 - a. Probes if participant shares general statements about their circumstances:
 - i. Could you say more about that?
 - ii. What were you hoping to experience?
 - iii. Did you consider asking for help?
 - iv. Were you aware of any resources available to you?
 - v. Did you attempt to access these resources or supports?
 - vi. Were they helpful? Why or why not?
 - vii. Are there any other resources that you wish had been available to you?
 - 4. Are you planning on enrolling in college again in the near future?
 - a. Probes if participant is planning to enroll:
 - i. Where are you planning to enroll?
 - ii. Why are you motivated to return to college now?
 - b. Probes if participant shares general statements about their decision:
 - i. Could you say more about that?
 - 5. If you are not planning on enrolling in the near future, what would need to be different for you to re-enroll at TCC or another college?
 - a. Probes if participant is unsure where to begin:
 - i. What would make it easy for you to return to school?
 - ii. What would make it difficult for you to return to school?
 - b. Probes if participant shares general statements about their circumstances:
 - i. Could you say more about that?
 - 6. Is there anything else that you would like to tell us that we have not touched on here?
 - 7. Thank you so much for your time and for your willingness to share your experiences with us. If you are interested in learning more about X, we do have a point of contact who would be happy to help you. Would you like me to share their contact information with you now?
 - a. Academic Advising – 253-566-6091
 - b. Enrollment Services – 253-566-5325
 - c. Childcare – 253-566-5180
 - d. Financial Aid - 253-566-5080
 - e. Housing – TCC’s College Housing Assistance Program – 253-566-5335

GROUP B: LEFT UWT AND DID NOT RE-ENROLL AT ANY COLLEGE

- 1. To start, could you share about your experience attending University of Washington Tacoma?
 - a. Probes if participant is unsure where to begin:
 - i. Why did you originally enroll at UWT?
 - ii. What did you like about attending college at UWT?
 - iii. What was challenging about attending college at UWT?
 - b. Probes if participant shares general statements about their experience:
 - i. Could you say more about that?
 - ii. Why do you describe it as X?
- 2. Could you share about why you originally left University of Washington Tacoma?
 - a. Probes if participant is unsure where to begin:
 - i. What was going on in your life at the time when you made that decision?
 - b. Probes if participant shares general statements about their decision:
 - i. Could you say more about that?
- 3. Thinking back, what would have needed to be different for you to have stayed enrolled at UWT?
 - a. Probes if participant shares general statements about their circumstances:
 - i. Could you say more about that?
 - ii. What were you hoping to experience?
 - iii. Did you consider asking for help?
 - iv. Were you aware of any resources available to you?
 - v. Did you attempt to access these resources or supports?
 - vi. Were they helpful? Why or why not?

- vi. Are there any other resources that you wish had been available to you?
- 4. Are you planning on enrolling at UWT or another college in the near future?
 - a. Probes if participant is planning to enroll:
 - i. Where are you planning to enroll?
 - ii. Why are you motivated to return to college now?
 - b. Probes if participant shares general statements about their decision:
 - i. Could you say more about that?
- 5. If you are not planning on enrolling in the near future, what would need to be different for you to re-enroll at UWT or another college?
 - a. Probes if participant is unsure where to begin:
 - i. What would make it easy for you to return to school?
 - ii. What would make it difficult for you to return to school?
 - b. Probes if participant shares general statements about their circumstances:
 - i. Could you say more about that?
- 6. Is there anything else that you would like to tell us that we have not touched on here?
- 7. Thank you so much for your time and for your willingness to share your experiences with us. If you were interested in learning more about X, we do have a point of contact of a Student Advocate who would be happy to help you. Would you like me to share their contact information with you now?
 - a. Student Advocate - Roseann Martinez – 253-692-5934

GROUP C: TRANSFERRED FROM UWT TO TCC

- 1. To start, could you share about your experience attending University of Washington Tacoma?
 - a. Probes if participant is unsure where to begin:
 - i. Why did you originally enroll at UWT?
 - ii. What did you like about attending college at UWT?
 - iii. What was challenging about attending college at UWT?
 - b. Probes if participant shares general statements about their experience:
 - i. Could you say more about that?
 - ii. Why do you describe it as X?
- 2. Could you share about why you originally decided to leave University of Washington Tacoma and enroll at Tacoma Community College?
 - a. Probes if participant is unsure where to begin:
 - i. What was going on in your life at the time when you made that decision?
 - b. Probes if participant shares general statements about their decision:
 - i. Could you say more about that?
- 3. Thinking back, what would have needed to be different for you to have stayed enrolled at UWT?
 - a. Probes if participant shares general statements about their circumstances:
 - i. Could you say more about that?
 - ii. What were you hoping to experience?
 - iii. Did you consider asking for help?
 - iiii. Were you aware of any resources available to you?
 - v. Did you attempt to access these resources or supports?
 - vi. Were they helpful? Why or why not?
 - vii. Are there any other resources that you wish had been available to you?
- 4. Now that you have transferred to TCC, how has your experience been at TCC?
 - a. Probes if participant is unsure where to begin:
 - i. Why did you originally enroll at TCC?
 - ii. What have you liked about attending college at TCC?
 - iii. What has been challenging about attending college at TCC?
- 5. Could you share about why you haven't returned to University of Washington Tacoma?
 - a. Probes if participant is unsure where to begin:
 - i. What would make it easy for you to return to school?
 - ii. What would make it difficult for you to return to school?
 - b. Probes if participant shares general statements about their decision:
 - i. Could you say more about that?

6. Are you planning on re-enrolling at UWT or another four-year college in the future? Why or why not?
 - a. Probes if participant is planning to enroll:
 - i. Where are you planning to enroll?
 - ii. Why are you motivated to return to a four-year college now?
 - b. Probes if participant shares general statements about their decision:
 - i. Could you say more about that?
7. Is there anything else that you would like to tell us that we have not touched on here?
8. Thank you so much for your time and for your willingness to share your experiences with us. If you were interested in learning more about X, we do have a point of contact who would be happy to help you. Would you like me to share their contact information with you now?
 - a. TCC
 - i. Academic Advising – 253-566-6091
 - ii. Enrollment Services – 253-566-5325
 - iii. Childcare – 253-566-5180
 - iv. Financial Aid - 253-566-5080
 - v. Housing – TCC's College Housing Assistance Program – 253-566-5335
 - b. UWT
 - i. Student Advocate - Roseann Martinez – 253-692-5934

Appendix D – Interview Codebook

Mindset	Desire to go to college
	Belief that college is possible
	Sense of purpose
	Growth mindset
	Resilience
	Self-regulation
	Help-seeking
	Self-efficacy/ task completion
	Time management
	Goals
	Balance
	Planning
	Taking off a quarter and leading to a permanent stop out
	Value of college
	Seeking for new experience outside of college
Sense of Belonging	Safe place
	Meditation center
	Self-expression
	Feeling of acceptance
	Making new friends
	Common values with peers
	Common challenges as peers
	Relationship with peers on campus
	Relationships with faculty & staff
	Outreach
	Social Experience
	Engagement
	Campus job
	Clubs and activities
	Networking
	Engagement
	Campus job
Customer Experience	
Lack of sports	
College Knowledge	College application & admissions process
	Summer melt (paperwork, deposits)
	Navigating bureaucracy
	Registration for classes
	Major requirements
	Graduation course requirements
	High School Prep
	Graduation prep
	College prep program
	Knowledge of withdrawal rather than fail
Effective study practices	

	Office hours
	Tasks
	Adaptation to college individualization
	Mentor
	Time to graduate
	Self-navigation
	High school to college transition
	Campus Visit
	Importance of grades
	Writing Appeals
	Clubs and Activities location and info
	Resources
	Other peers going to college
	Class and major requirements for career
	Separation of Academic and personal life
College Fit and Match	Other college and program options
	UWT or TCC as a back-up plan (wanted to go to another college)
	Commuter college experience
	College Experience didn't meet expectations
	Location of college (close to home)
Academic	College entrance exams
	Math avoidance
	Coursework planning (courses, credits)
	Academic performance (SAP)
	Study skills
	Curriculum Assessment and Scoring
	Meeting Academic Advisor
	Major selection
	Engagement
	Taking wrong classes
	Free writing classes
	Classes that express
	Final Exams
	College program
	Credits
Prerequisites	
Program competitiveness	
Academic Prep	College entrance exams
	Developmental coursework
	Study skills
	Running Start (credits, prepared for rigor)
	IB (credits, prepared for rigor)
	Retaking classes
	Final exams
	Class rigor
	Course load

	First year remedial courses
	Developmental coursework
	College entrance exams
Academic Behaviors	Class attendance
	Math avoidance
	Office hours
	Poor time management
Academic Experience	Classroom structure
	Class/School Size
	Lack of interest in class / lack of interest in pre-reqs
	Space to get into a major
	Like or Dislike of Professors
	Disappointment of grades
	Class / School environment
Financial	College entrance exam fees
	College application fee
	FAFSA/WASFA completion
	Interpreting financial aid award letters
	Tuition & fees
	Books & supplies
	Child-care
	Transportation
	Health insurance
	Student loan debt
	Budgeting
	Savings
	Scholarships
	Hours
	Minimum wage
	Industry
	Flexibility
	Shared
	Full time work
	Part-Time work
Jobless	
Basic Needs	Housing
	Food
	Transportation
	Healthcare
	Access Public assistance
	Safety
Career	Career prep
	Career interest
	Career mentor or inspiration
	Career readiness
	Major to career map

	Network
	Internship
	Career Change (i.e., army)
Family	Expectations
	Responsibilities
	Dependent
	Independent
	Kids
	Home environment
	Lack of independence
	Foster care
	Relationship with parents
	Distance
	First Gen
Mental Health	Anxiety
	Isolation
	Depression
	Fear of failure
	Acceptance
	Grief
Culture / Identity	Separation of home, work, and school
	Interdependence -aiding or caring for other community members or neighbors
	Gender
	Embracing Self
	Campus culture
	Campus diversity
	Peer Exclusion
	Home Community (expectations, norms)
	Exploring/Seeking independence
	Individual Personality
	Independence
	Passion and interest exploring
Language	
Personal	Relationships
	Relationship status
	Death of a close person
	Life events
	Legal challenges
	Moving or change in living situation
	Involved in church or other communities
	Personal Support
	Decisions, relationships (outside of family), reference to past work unrelated to career path or academic path
Discrimination / Harassment	Racism
	Religion

	Gender
	Peers
	Mentors
	Campus staff / professors
	Biases
	Campus Safety
Physical Barriers/Accessibility	Parking
	Class times
	Commute
	Learning disabilities
	Lack of availability
Social issues	Human trafficking
Physical Health	Illness interfering with academics
	Physical medical diagnosis
	Chronic physical disease
	Addiction
	Abuse
	Accidents