

Stop, Drop, Enroll!

Executive Summary

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TO: The Executive Leadership of North Hennepin Community College, Hennepin Technical College, and the Brooklyn Bridge Alliance for Youth

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Background

Stop Drop Enroll! is the first local research study on persistence conducted in partnership with North Hennepin Community College (NHCC), Hennepin Technical College (HTC), and the Brooklyn Bridge Alliance for Youth (Alliance). The purpose of this study was: 1) to understand the individual and institutional reasons students do not persist one year after they begin college, and 2) to propose actions that would increase student persistence.

We began this study for several reasons:

- We are experiencing a regional workforce shortage
- Our college partners lose roughly **\$6.8M in tuition annually**
- For our cities and county to be vibrant we must do all we can to support students to complete their educational goals

The following terms are defined by Minnesota State System of Colleges and Universities:
Dropout: Student left college within the 1st year before transferring or completing a degree and did not return by the 3rd semester. Stopout: Student left college after the 1st semester before transferring or completing a degree, did not enroll the 2nd semester, and re-enrolled the 3rd semester.

Our collaborative intent is to increase college and career success of students in the cities of Brooklyn Center and Brooklyn Park, Minnesota. We seek to promote systemic change to dramatically increase students' completion of higher education. This may include addressing policy, practices, and underlying mindsets that are barriers to student success.

Our research team included students to ensure student perspectives and insights were integrated into the survey design and research process. Through four methods we answered the following research questions:

1. Who are the students who dropout or stopout?
2. Why do students dropout or stopout? (personal, institutional, and systemic reasons)
3. What changes would prevent dropping out?
4. For students that remain enrolled after the first year, what assets and strengths do these students have that help them persist that we could foster systemically?

Methods

1. *Student Enrollment Data.* Information on 1st year students from the 2014-2017 school years (N=23,234) at both colleges was analyzed.
2. *Surveys.* One hundred four (104) students who had dropped out and 168 faculty and staff were surveyed to gather data on reasons why students dropout and stopout, and institutional barriers and assets to student success.
3. *Interviews.* In-depth interviews were conducted of current students (N=19), and faculty and staff (N=17) to further explore reasons and assets why students persist or not.
4. *Photovoice.* Students on our research team captured visual images that represent the data collected in methods 1, 2, and 3.

Overall Findings

We learned more about students who enroll at HTC and NHCC, especially those who dropout or stopout of college.

- Data analysis from 4 years starting in Fall 2013 through Spring 2017 (N=23,234) showed that:
 - 38% of 1st year students dropped out 1st or 2nd semester
 - 2% of 1st year students stopped-out (dropped out and then re-enrolled)
- Students with the following academic experiences had the highest probability of dropping out of college:
 - 61% Unsuccessful Course (less than a C grade) in the 1st term
 - Holds on a student account (61% - *data only available from NHCC*)
 - 57% Withdrew from a Course 1st term
- In some cases, disparities related to student racial or ethnic groups increased their probabilities of an unsuccessful course, a hold, or a withdrawn course.

We learned more about the reasons why students dropout or stopout of college.

- Multiple factors add up to create the conditions where students dropout of college.
- Students dropout of college for many different personal and life event, academic, and financial reasons. In our survey of students who had dropped-out (or stopped-out), the top reasons why they left college early were:
 - Financial challenges (could not afford tuition or to take on more debt, or did not receive enough financial aid)
 - Difficulty balancing school with work schedule
 - Too difficult to schedule the classes they needed

We learned more about the institutional cultures, expectations, or processes that may contribute to students dropping out or stopping out of college.

- There is a lack of coordination of services college-wide to ensure that no students slip through the cracks. Accurate data is not available to all faculty and staff (especially administration) to track students at risk or those who have dropped out.
- Students are not always able to find classes that fit their transportation or work schedule.
- Only about half of students receive the assistance and information needed to apply and pay for college. Students had difficulty navigating the financial aid process and it can be challenging to access guidance from academic advisors and counselors.
- Some faculty and staff are perceived as not understanding, representing, or accommodating students and their needs.

We learned more about the assets and supports (both personal and institutional) that may contribute to persistence in college.

- Institutional supports are vital to students persisting in college, including:
 - Faculty and staff
 - Family and peers
 - Access to student support services (Student Life, FYE, TRiO, etc.)
- Student mindsets, assets and strengths that contribute to success in college, include:
 - Help-seeking
 - Motivation/focus
 - Time management
- Many students rely on themselves for resources and guidance through college.
- Wrap-around supports (TRiO & Disability Services) were identified as the most effective.

Summary of Final Results

METHOD 1 – Student Enrollment Data Analysis

The purpose of analyzing student enrollment data was to answer the question: Who are the students who dropout or stopout?

Challenges with the Data. During the Method 1 process, there were several challenges that may affect the validity of the results.

- Accessing the Student Information System to retrieve the data to understand student persistence was more time-consuming than expected.
- Data on holds from one of the colleges was not accurate; enrollment data collected by the colleges does not report persistence accurately; and Pell Grant Eligibility Status is not an accurate proxy for low-income status.
- Students' motivations for attending college are not understood. They include more than graduating with a degree or certificate or transferring to another institute of higher education.

Results

Analysis of the student data from the 4 years starting in Fall 2013 through Spring 2017 showed that after students' first 2 semesters:

- 23,234 students from HTC and NHCC
- 38% dropped out 1st or 2nd semester
- 37% progressed to a 3rd semester
- 16% transferred to another institution
- 7% graduated (e.g. transfers into the college who then finished their degree)
- 2% stopped-out (dropped out the 1st semester, not enrolled the 2nd semester, and re-enrolled the 3rd semester)

Student Data also showed that students with the following experiences had the highest probability of dropping out of college:

- Unsuccessful Course (less than a C grade) 1st term (61%)
- Holds* (61%)
- Withdrew from a Course 1st term (57%)
- Academic Development or Developmental Course 1st term (44%)

- Part-time Load (44%)

We also found that when broken down by race or ethnicity, students who identified as Black or African American students, and students who identified as Two or More Races, were disproportionately more likely to:

- Have an unsuccessful course
- Have a hold
- Withdraw from a course

METHOD 2 – Surveys to Students Who Dropped Out, Faculty and Staff

The purpose of these surveys was to answer: Why do students who dropout or stopout?

Reasons Students Dropout

Students, faculty and staff offered similar reasons why students dropout of college.

Student Insight

Students who dropped out responded that their top reasons for leaving college early were:

- 74% of students who previously dropped out responded that personal and life events influenced their leaving college (inability to balance school with work, and mental health challenges)
- 65% cited academic reasons (inability to enroll in the classes they needed because they were not offered at times that worked with their schedule)
- 61% cited financial reasons (inter-related challenges such as the cost of tuition and fees, the amount of financial aid available, and willingness to take on loans)

Faculty and Staff Insight

Faculty and staff surveyed responded that the biggest institutional reasons that students dropped out were:

- A student failing one or more classes
- Students aren't prepared for the academic rigor of college, or that their personal lives intruded with their studies
- Colleges do not prepare students with academic skills to be successful

Difficulty balancing work and school was a top reason offered by students who dropped out from college, which aligns with the faculty and staff's reason of student's personal lives affecting their academic performance (e.g. failing a class).

Multiple factors add up to create the conditions where students dropout of college. There is no one "smoking gun" variable, but rather a confluence or overlapping of multiple variables that describe the "typical" dropout or stopout student. We met many students that are resilient enough to overcome numerous barriers, but there were many who faced blocks (such as classes that conflict with work schedules) that the student alone cannot overcome.

Institutional Supports That Help Students Succeed

Students, faculty, and staff agree on what students need to succeed.

Student Insight

Students surveyed identified the following factors that would have helped them stay in college:

- Financial supports
- Guidance and support from school

- Academic supports
- Classes that better fit their work and family obligation schedule

Faculty and Staff Insight

Faculty and staff surveyed responded that the top academic, health, and basic needs supports that helped students succeed were:

- Tutors, Writing Center, CSA, Math Resource Center
- Academic advising services
- Counseling services

Student Assets or Strengths

Students, faculty and staff do not agree on which assets help students succeed.

Student Insight

Students said assets and strengths that help them succeed are:

- Motivation: they have the desire to succeed
- Self-awareness: they can judge their performance and behavior
- Persistence: they are willing to keep trying in the face of challenge

Faculty and Staff Insight

Faculty and staff responded that the following assets or strengths help students succeed:

- Caring faculty and staff
- Academic supports offered by the college
- Advising / guidance offered by the college

Faculty and staff responded to the question on **student** assets and strengths with **institutional** assets. Faculty and staff may have misunderstood the question and reported institutional assets rather than student assets.

Also, an important question to consider is: If these assets are key to student success, where do they learn them? And, how do we develop these assets in college students?

Process for Identifying and Supporting Students at Risk

Almost all students and a quarter of faculty and staff were not aware of a process for identifying and supporting students at risk for dropout or stopout.

Student Insight

Students were asked how struggling students were addressed by their colleges;

- 53% responded that the college did nothing

Faculty and Staff Insight

Faculty and staff were asked a similar question;

- 54% of NHCC faculty and staff identified the Early Alert Referral System
- 36% of HTC faculty and staff identified the Student of Concern Process
- 25% of faculty and staff at both colleges were not aware of any process

Readiness for College

Students, faculty and staff do not agree about students' readiness (academic knowledge, academic skills, social and emotional skills) for college.

- 68% of students Completely Agreed or Agreed that they were either “Very Well” or “Well” prepared for college
- Only 17% of faculty and staff believed that students were “Very Well” or “Well” prepared for success in college

Motivations for Enrolling in College

Colleges tend to measure success as earning a degree or certificate or transferring to another institution of higher education. However, students shared many other motivations for enrolling in college, and may require different guidance and supports than standard outcomes.

Students were surveyed about their original motivations for enrolling in college;

- **Earn a degree (43%)**
- To get a higher earning job (36%)
- Learn new skills (35%)
- New career (30%)
- **Transfer to a 4-year college or university (23%)**
- Try out college (21%)
- Advancing in my current job (18%)
- **Earn a certificate (16%)**

Information About Applying and Paying for College

- More than half of students did not receive assistance in applying and paying.
- More than half of students did not find the colleges’ information helpful.
- Based on an analysis of student responses, students of color reported they received less assistance on applying and paying for college than white students, and they rated the information they received as less helpful than the ratings provided by white students.

Less than 50% of students received the help they needed to apply and to pay for college. This data indicates that students of color and indigenous students received less information, and were less satisfied with the information they received, about applying and paying for college than white students. Suggesting a need to improve outreach and orientation efforts.

METHOD 3 – Interviews with Enrolled Students, Faculty and Staff

Barriers to Persistence

We asked students about barriers they had to overcome and faculty and staff about institutional barriers that students face.

Student Insight

Students identified the following as the top barriers that students have had to overcome:

- Transportation (37%)
- Work – School Balance (32%)
- Unclear Academic Requirements (16%)
- Online classes / Technology Issues (16%)

Faculty and Staff Insight

Faculty and staff identified the following as the top institutional barriers students face:

- Faculty and institution do not understand, represent, or accommodate students and student needs (76%)
- Advising and counseling (not enough available, and uncoordinated services) (59%)
- Institution does not prepare students to understand the college culture, expectations or processes (59%)
- Financial aid process is too complex for students (53%)
- Students are required to navigate the maze of student services on their own, with no guidance or trusted advisor (41%)
- Difficulties in the relationship between administration, staff, and faculty can cause tension and create turnover (35%)

Assets That Lead to Persistence

We asked students about their top assets and strengths and faculty and staff about institutional assets that contribute to student success. The answers received in the interviews mirror the results of the survey.

Student Insight

Students identified the following as the top assets or strengths that help students succeed:

- Help-seeking (63%)
- Motivation / Focus (58%)
- Time Management (37%)

Faculty and Staff Insight

Faculty and staff identified the following as the top institutional assets that contribute to student success:

- Faculty and Staff (71%)
- Student Support Services (FYE, TRiO, Disability Services, etc.) (53%)
- Facilities: location, technology, comfort, cleanliness (47%)

Measuring Faculty and Staff's Impact on Student Success

We asked faculty and staff how the colleges and/or interviewees were measuring the impact of their role on student success. Their responses follow:

- Anecdotal or informal evidence (47%)
- No measurement or evaluation (35%)
- Surveys and assessments created by individual or department (29%)

There was no consistent college-wide process used to gather and report data. Many of these faculty and staff mentioned that it would be valuable to have this information.

Faculty and Staff Training and Education

We asked faculty and staff interviewees what training or education they had received for their roles at their college. Faculty all had advanced degrees or certificates in their area of instruction as well as many years of experience working in the field. Most staff had college degrees related to their roles and half also had a degree in education.

Many of our interviewees mentioned that they did not receive any kind of coordinated departmental or college-wide training related to teaching or supporting students as they navigate the college academic programs or student support services.

Student Motivations

The interviews allowed a deeper understanding of why students enrolled in community college and why they decided to enroll full-time or part-time. Among the responses:

- Students reported that they decided to attend community college based on the college offering a degree program in their area of interest and the college's affordability.
- Some students reported that they were not ready for a four-year institution and they were still figuring out their interests while they completed their general education courses.
- Students who made the decision to enroll part-time did so to accommodate work.
- Students who made the decision to enroll full-time reported doing so mostly because they wanted to finish as fast as possible.

Suggestions from Students, Faculty, and Staff

Interviewees were asked what changes would improve student success.

Student Insight

- Advertise existing student support resources so that students are aware of them.
- Add new, increase or improve existing student support resources (increase mental health resources and health clinic hours, offer on-campus child-care, etc.).
- Make academic or enrollment improvements (more scheduling options for classes, tutorials on how to navigate D2L, etc.).

Faculty and Staff Insight

- Provide better access to student supports (revamp orientation process, expand TRiO-type wrap-around services, create student-centered face-to-face one-stop shop for student support services, active outreach and engagement from Financial Aid to students, etc.)
- More support for faculty and staff (more advisors and financial aid staff positions, efforts to decrease constant turnover, college-wide professional development opportunities for all faculty and staff, etc.)

Discussion

How do we build on existing student and institutional assets?

What conversations are needed right now that would advance this notion? Do people believe that developing assets can replace, shift, overtake, and change the conditions that are creating the persistence problem?

How could we use an equity lens advance our shared goals? By focusing on each student and exploring how policies and practices impact student groups differently, could we unlock new approaches to student achievement? Could we ultimately make college more accessible? If we were successful how would this mitigate the workforce shortage?

Which of these recommendations seems to unlock the greatest potential for change? By bringing together diverse internal and external stakeholders, could we move this forward in a way that allows for new partnerships, accountability and innovation to emerge?

Recommendations

From the results of the research study, the following are a summary of the recommendations.

“(The college has) pockets of really good people and programs. Some are terrific, but the whole thing isn’t coordinated, there is some connection, but nothing official. Not that people don’t work hard...people are overwhelmed, but with the wrong things.”

1. **Create intentional, coordinated college-wide programs with the goal of student success:**

The quote above speaks to many of the challenges and barriers discussed in the report. Specific departments and individuals are really making a difference in students’ lives, but those efforts are not coordinated to be accessible to all students. The administration at both colleges should explore new ways to lead these efforts, while communicating, engaging, and partnering with faculty and staff. Specific actions could include:

- Implement consistent communications from the colleges’ Administration offices to ensure that all faculty and staff understand the college’s goals and their role related to student success.
- Correct deficiencies with collecting and reporting Student Information System data. Improve ability to track students at risk and understand the reasons why students dropout of college.
- Offer coordinated departmental and college-wide training to all faculty and staff related to teaching or supporting a diverse population of students.
- Create a performance management system to track and report data on the impact of departments on student success.
- Continue working to improve how faculty and staff understand, represent, or accommodate the diverse population of students (and their backgrounds, strengths, and needs). Increase the diversity of tenured and adjunct faculty.

2. **Programs and processes should be designed with students at the center:** Our research revealed a disconnect between how academic programs and institutional processes function compared to the backgrounds and needs of the diverse student population. Specific actions could include:

- Replicate wrap-around programs and departments that work for students, such as TRiO and Disability Services, to increase access to and quality of advising and counseling services and academic, health, and basic supports.
- Offer (or require) First Year Experience courses for all students and focus the course on understanding college culture, expectations, and gaining the skills (both academic and life) to be successful.
- Understand what students’ goals are for enrolling and ensure that the proper supports are available to help them achieve those goals. Consider how academic programs can be adjusted to align with student goals for their college experience.
- Reconsider scheduling of classes to accommodate all students. Offer enough sessions of key courses so that especially part-time students who need to balance their schedule with work can access the courses they need.
- Ensure that the financial aid departments are fully staffed and trained, students receive and understand all the necessary information before they enroll, have check-ins while they are students, and get supports if an adverse event occurs.

- Re-examine the orientation process, with student leadership, to determine if students are learning and understanding what they need to begin their college education.
- Work with public (city, county, school district) and private partners to provide reliable transportation options that work with class scheduling, so students can always attend the classes they need.
- Work with public partners to build affordable housing options for colleges students.
- Engage families in helping to support their students. Families were listed as their biggest support systems. Colleges should consider ways to strengthen that support system, especially for first generation college students.

3. Continue to ask questions and find answers: This report has just scratched the surface of what the colleges need to understand to increase persistence for each student. Further research needs to be completed to understand how to coordinate efforts for student success and design programs and processes with students at the center. Specific actions could include:

- Understand institutional processes and student experiences behind unsuccessful courses, holds, and withdrawn courses.
- Explore why Black or African-American students get holds, unsuccessful courses, or withdrawn courses more than other racial/ethnic populations.
- Understand why students of color feel they have less information and are less satisfied with the information they receive about applying and paying for college.