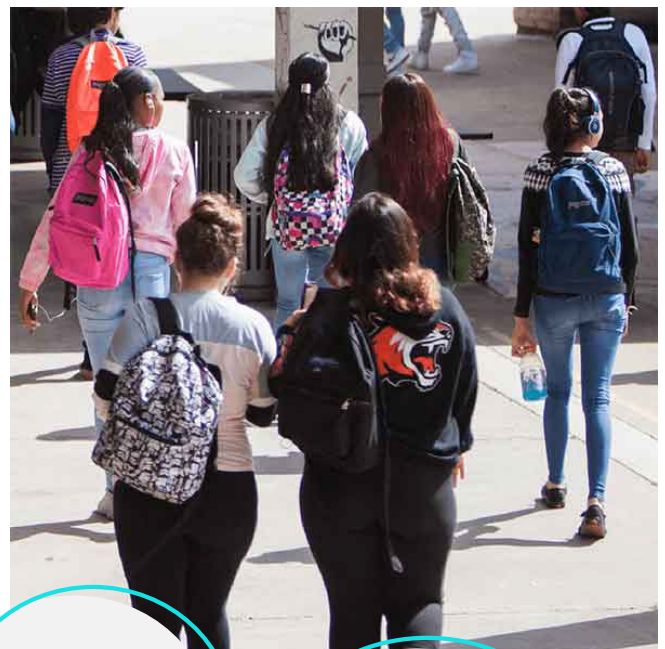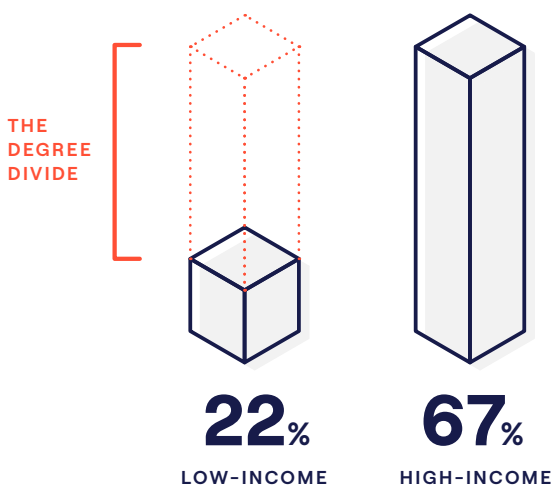# What are the Root Causes Preventing Students from Completing a Degree?

First-Generation Students Share their Experiences ↘

Project Overview

Many postsecondary access and success programs successfully support students to enroll in a degree or credential program after high school, but completion rates of students from low-income communities still are far behind their peers from high-income areas.

STUDENT GRADUATION RATE*

THE DEGREE DIVIDE

22% LOW-INCOME

67% HIGH-INCOME

To understand why, OneGoal designed and executed a year-long qualitative study to identify the root causes behind our students withdrawing from their postsecondary pathway, otherwise known as "stopping out." We focused on two research questions →

What is the root cause of student stop out?

Why do students who stop out return to complete their degree/ credential?

🎓 **OneGoal.**

Methodology

Our research process included and honored the voices, experiences, and expertise of students and key community members in the postsecondary access and success field, both within and beyond OneGoal.

Inputs for our study included:

An online form distributed to unenrolled OneGoal students

Individual interviews with OneGoal students who had initially enrolled in postsecondary but then withdrew

Review of internal quantitative and qualitative enrollment, persistence, and completion data

Review of external existing root cause of stop out/non-completion research

Demographic Information of the Students Interviewed for this Study →

SURVEY RESPONSES

75

INTERVIEWS

40

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATING CLASSES OF

2011 – 2019

Our qualitative research design employed purposive sampling to select OneGoal students for interviews whose experiences could best inform program improvements that would lead to increased postsecondary persistence and completion outcomes.

Specifically, we included students who initially enrolled in a 2-year or 4-year institution following high school graduation and encountered circumstances that prevented them from completing their degree.

We interviewed 40 OneGoal students from high school graduating Classes of 2011-2019 for this study.

GEOGRAPHIC REGION

55% Chicago

23% Houston

10% New York

10% Massachusetts

3% Metro Atlanta

GENDER

58% Male

38% Female

3% Nonbinary

3% Preferred not to answer

RACE / ETHNICITY

55% Black or African American

38% Hispanic or Latinx

3% Middle Eastern

3% Afro-Latino

3% White

* Percentages have been rounded and do not add up to 100.

OneGoal.

Research Findings

75 students named challenges that led them to stop out. Several named multiple causes, which underscores the compounding nature of these obstacles. →

Challenges*

71% Financial

61% Social Emotional

26% Academic

25% Aspirational

*Based on 75 survey respondents, some identified concurrent challenges, so the sum of the figures do not equal 100%. Data collected as part of a qualitative research study, and thus is not representative of all OneGoal alumni.

FINANCIAL

"I had a scholarship that was supposed to last a year. But I went in a little blinded on what that looked like. I was taking classes and dropping classes, and I didn't know that was taking money. Nobody really told me that's what happens."

– Alum, Class of 2014

Financial reasons were the strongest factor contributing to stop out for students interviewed in this study. Some students named postsecondary-specific financial challenges, such as not being able to pay off their account balance each semester, while others reported difficulties with navigating general financial challenges related to having basic needs met.

Lack of College Knowledge

Students reported not fully understanding the requirements for their major, add/drop policies, or not knowing how many classes they were supposed to take, which in turn led to an inability to meet financial aid requirements.

Inability to Pay Off Account Balance

When students were unable to pay off their account balance from previous semester(s), it made them ineligible to register for classes the following semester. Some reported their first year of postsecondary was fully paid "for by scholarships and grants. However, that aid was nonrenewable, and they did not feel equipped to seek out additional funds.

Inability to Meet Basic Needs

Students reported they stopped out due to an inability to pay for food, rent, bills, and/or because of a sense of obligation to financially support their families.

Transportation Issues

Long commutes and lack of convenient, affordable transportation options created unsustainable challenges for students who did not live on campus.

FINANCIAL CONT.

OVERCOMING FINANCIAL BARRIERS

Students who eventually re-enrolled accessed resources or programs they either did not know about or did not have access to when they were previously enrolled. Examples include: Southern New Hampshire University's low-cost online program, work-study opportunities, and scholarships.

SOCIAL - EMOTIONAL

" The school couldn't sympathize with my situation, with me being depressed, anxious, and dealing with all these problems in my life. I had to pay out of pocket in order to return to the next semester, but coming from a low-income family, that's something that was way beyond reach for me."

– Alum, Class of 2014

When combined with other issues, social-emotional challenges create a compounding feedback loop: financial struggles create social-emotional challenges which negatively impact academic performance. But social-emotional challenges aren't always tied to financial hardship:

Mental Health Challenges

The most common struggles identified by students were mental health challenges - particularly depression, anxiety, and grief - and dealing with illness or deaths of close family members.

Lack of Social Belonging

Students were less likely to reach out for support if they didn't feel a strong sense of belonging on campus. Several students reported that negative experiences with a single professor played a strong contributing role in their eventual stop out.

Lack of Parent College Knowledge

For first-generation students specifically, their parents' lack of familiarity and understanding of college-specific processes and systems was a significant barrier to postsecondary success.

OVERCOMING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL BARRIERS

Students who eventually re-enrolled experienced one or more of the following: involvement in an on-campus student organization that fostered social belonging; motivation by friends, family members, or other adult role models who had successfully completed postsecondary; or time away from school to intentionally shift their mindset or academic approach before re-enrolling.

ASPIRATIONAL

"

I went to a high school where college was our option. That's what we were taught. You need to go to college. There's literally nothing else that you can do but go to college."

– Alum, Class of 2017

Many students attributed stopping out to lacking a clear purpose for pursuing their initial postsecondary pathway beyond a sense of obligation from external social pressures. This often led to students attending a degree program that was not aligned to the student's individual aspiration.

Lack of Information About Postsecondary Pathways

Students reported being interested in non-degree credentials, but they lacked information about those options. Several students had internalized messaging that "four-year college is best" from their high schools, OneGoal, or family members. This message, combined with lack of clarity or alignment of institutions with their professional aspirations, led to students stopping out.

Motivation for Degree

The majority of students interviewed for this study are first-generation college students, and they reported their motivation for obtaining a degree was to make their family proud. While this promise to family can be a strong motivating factor for staying in school, many students spoke openly about the pressure of being first-generation and internalizing failure when circumstances led them to stop out.

OVERCOMING ASPIRATIONAL BARRIERS

Students who eventually re-enrolled were successful because they had close relationships with adults in their lives who supported their professional aspirations. Students reported feeling empowered by these adult mentors to determine their postsecondary pathway according to their own definition of success.

ACADEMIC

"

It felt like the academics I received in high school weren't on par to everybody else's, so I would go to basic college general education classes and everybody's skill set was at a ten, but I'm at a six. It would cause me to feel like, well, what's the point of me being here if I have to play catch up?"

– Alum, Class of 2014

ACADEMIC

"

I feel like especially for kids of color from the hood, we have it a lot harder. I was like, no shade, but college is a whole bunch of white people [teachers and staff] just talking down to me. I want to see people like me."

– Alum, Class of 2017

While many students felt academically underprepared by their high schools and struggled to adjust to the rigor of college, academic reasons were not the main obstacle for the students who participated in this study. In each circumstance, the root cause of their stop out was tied to financial, social-emotional, and/or aspiration-related challenges. However, we still want to name two important academic-related trends we heard:

Under-resourced High Schools
Many students reported attending high schools that did not prepare them for college-level academics, which manifested in low self-confidence during their postsecondary experience.

Systemic Racism
Students shared personal experiences with systemic racism that impeded their academic success (e.g. having negative experiences with professors because the student wasn't engaging in the classroom in the specific way the professor thought was appropriate), reflecting a keen awareness that educational systems at both the secondary and postsecondary level are not designed for first-generation students of color to thrive.

OVERCOMING ACADEMIC BARRIERS
Students who eventually re-enrolled were successful because they were able to access meaningful support in navigating financial, social-emotional, and/or aspiration-related challenges that had been negatively impacting their academic performance. With the right support in place to address non-academic obstacles, students are able to better manage academically rigorous course loads.

Implications + Research-Based Recommendations

These findings are directly informing program innovations for OneGoal and can be summarized into four top-line recommendations for those working in the field of postsecondary access and success; we hope that together, we can all take action to reduce stop out and improve our support of students to complete their pathway of choice.

1 → Build Partnerships

While many who focus on postsecondary success provide academic and tactical support for students, most interventions are not designed to address the two leading root causes of student non-completion: financial and social-emotional challenges. We must bolster this support by cultivating new partnerships with organizations who focus on these areas.

What this looks like at OneGoal // Our regions partner with local colleges to set up scholarships for OneGoal students, and we recently piloted a partnership with BetterHelp to give students and alumni access to professional online counseling.

2 → Embrace Non-Degree Pathways

Across our field, we need to think more inclusively about postsecondary pathways. Many programs are solely focused on 2-year and 4-year degrees, which reinforces the "college is best" mindset in students. However, a study conducted by Michael B. Horn and Bob Moesta found that 74% of students who attended college for extrinsic reasons dropped out or transferred. Organizations supporting first-generation students and students of color should adopt an equity-based approach that allows students to pursue postsecondary options - including non-degree pathways - according to their own definition of success.

What this looks like at OneGoal // We infused culturally relevant pedagogy throughout our curriculum, centering students' identities in determining their own highest postsecondary aspirations, and we incorporated non-degree pathways into our Key Performance Indicators.

3 → Think Bigger than Academic + Financial Fit

In addition to focusing on academic match and financial fit, we should guide students toward institutions that are ready for them -- those with Underrepresented Minority (URM) graduation rates that are on par with overall graduation rates -- to support developing social belonging and positive relationships with faculty and staff on campus. Considering the overall "personal fit" of an institution is critical for student success.

What this looks like at OneGoal // We developed a research-based framework that guides students to examine personal fit, financial fit, academic match, and completion support when evaluating their postsecondary options.

4 → Listen to Students' Feedback to Bolster Your Curriculum

Our students identified concrete ways that OneGoal and other organizations can improve our content to support their postsecondary journeys:

Financial literacy // Integrate learning opportunities that prepare students to manage their personal finances (including topics such as budgeting, saving, credit, and debt management) throughout their postsecondary experience.

Parent engagement // Increase parent engagement during high school to build parents' postsecondary knowledge, which in turn allows them to better support their children when navigating challenges.

Coaching during postsecondary // Provide ongoing coaching after high school that focuses on problem-solving, building social belonging, and increasing knowledge of institutional policies (degree plans, add/drop deadlines, and academic requirements).

At OneGoal, we have a bold vision for closing the degree divide while centering equity and inclusion to support students in reaching their highest postsecondary aspiration with dignity. We urge researchers and practitioners from the broader postsecondary access and success field to join us in tackling these challenges. We'd love to share our process, learnings, and best practices.

To learn more, visit onegoalgraduation.org/about/contact-us/

About OneGoal

OneGoal is a national postsecondary access and success organization dedicated to closing the degree divide in America and creating a more equitable future for all students whose career aspirations require a degree, certificate or credential.

We partner with schools in low-income communities across the country to ensure postsecondary planning, preparation, and support are no longer extracurricular luxuries but integral components of the high school experience. OneGoal is a three-year program that starts as a credit-bearing class in students' junior and senior years of high school and continues during the critical transitional period of their first year of college or other postsecondary path.

84% of OneGoal high school graduates enroll in a postsecondary institution and 75% of those who enroll persist one year after high school.

Many paths, one goal.

Graduation. Period.

OneGoal.

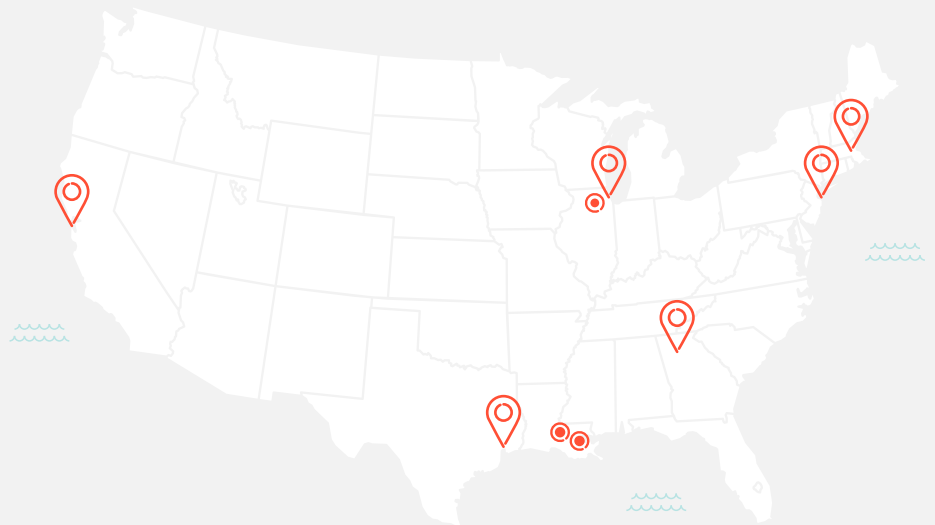→ onegoalgraduation.org

OUR REACH

Across six regions in the 2021/22 school year, we will reach close to 14,000 students nationwide.

📍 Classroom-based Model

◎ District Partnership Program

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