

A breakdown on enrollment barriers



SEPTEMBER 15, 2021

Everyone knows that cost is a major barrier to college enrollment. Now there's more data to back that up.

This summer, the Cengage Group [surveyed](#) 1,622 people – a mix of currently enrolled college students (40%), high school graduates (21%) and those who dropped out of college (39%) – about the obstacles they face enrolling in and completing college. About half (49%) of respondents say cost of living or cost of tuition and course materials are the biggest barriers to education.

Cost concerns

When looking just at the cost of tuition, three out of five respondents were worried about having enough money to pay for school. High school graduates were especially worried about this: 70% said they worried about money.

Though enrolled college students may have found a way to pay for tuition, the cost of course materials and food were cause for concern, and 20% were unsure of how they'd pay for the next term. Breaking it down further, a quarter of two-year college students (25%) are unsure how they will pay for their next term.

"There is a clear need for payment planning assistance, as well as consideration of tuition cuts or freezes," according to the report.

Those who dropped out of college were most concerned with paying their rent or mortgage.

What would help? Nearly half of all respondents (46%) said that free tuition, as proposed in President Joe Biden's proposed American Families Plan, could nudge them to return to or complete their postsecondary education. Additionally, 36% would like to see additional government assistance, such as increased Pell grants. A cheaper cost of living (36%) and cheaper course materials (35%) also would affect their decision.

Almost 30% of those who dropped out said that past student debt forgiveness would impact their returning to school.

"In a country with 35 million postsecondary education dropouts, past debt forgiveness could help more than 10 million people return and complete their degrees," the report says, citing a Hechinger Report [article](#).

Covid, of course

Non-monetary factors also affected enrollment. One big factor: Covid. More than half (53%) of current college students surveyed stated that the pandemic swayed them to seriously consider not enrolling in school, and 39% of recent high school graduates said the pandemic affected their decision to enroll.

Another factor was the flexibility to take courses online. More than a one-third (37%) said that course flexibility would affect their decision to enroll. Other aspects influencing their decisions were the time required to complete a program and family obligations.

Reasons to enroll

The survey respondents also had good reasons to enroll. Not surprisingly, the top reason for going to college was related to work, with 44% of enrolled college students and 61% of high school graduates indicating education was necessary for their career path.

More than 40% of two-year college students indicated enrolling in college was “necessary for my career path/job opportunities.” Also, more than 40% indicated enrollment was necessary to “complete requirements for a future educational program.”

Two-year students are less likely than four-year students to enroll in order to expand social and/or professional networks, for the on-campus experience or because their family expected or advised them to, according to the report.

Recommendations for removing barriers

The Cengage report has recommendations to help increase enrollment, retention and completion, and prevent high drop-out rates. It suggests rethinking the high cost of tuition and fees and reducing non-tuition costs, such as textbooks and course materials. It also pitches expanding online education options as well as competency-based education.

Another recommendation is for the “unbundling of education and stackable credentials,” which could allow students to access “just-in-time education in a cycle of learn-work-learn, and stack their education and its costs over time.”

Connecting students to resources, such as housing, food and emergency funding, can help remove barriers, the report adds.