Exploring the Exodus from Higher Education
Findings from Focus Groups and a Survey of High School Graduates who have not completed college

May 2022 for the: BILL & MELINDA GATES foundation
Qualitative Research
Eleven focus groups with high school graduates ages 18-30 who decided not to go to college or have dropped out of a 2-year or 4-year college program
January – February

Quantitative Research
Survey of high school graduates with oversamples in 7 target states (CA, FL, NY, OH, TN, TX, WA) and among Black adults
March – April

Statistical Analysis
Conduct in-depth statistical analyses, including development of an audience segmentation to identify key mindsets within the broader audience
April

Reporting
Full report on survey findings, implications, and recommendations for engaging prospective students
May
Survey Methodology

Online survey of:
1,675 high school graduates ages 18-30 who had decided not to go to college or have dropped out of a 2-year or 4-year college program.

Including oversamples of:
- N=303 Black adults
- N=216 in California
- N=153 in Florida
- N=154 in New York
- N=153 in Ohio
- N=149 in Tennessee
- N=151 in Texas
- N=154 in Washington

Fielded:
March 18th to April 14th, 2022

Participants were recruited through three reputable non-probability panel providers. These panels are built using multiple certified sources, and survey respondents are validated/authenticated and incentivized for participation.

Quotas set and data weighted to be representative of adults ages 18-30 years with a high school but not college degree on age, gender, race, ethnicity and geography.

Edge Research is a member of Insight's Association and follows its best practices for survey sampling and research.

Blue/Red text throughout indicates higher and lower statistically significant differences within subgroups.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Finding</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The decision against obtaining a degree is mostly financial.</td>
<td>Although dollars and debt are significant barriers, multiple factors impact this audience’s ability and/or interest in getting a degree. They express limited life satisfaction, and many note they could not manage the stress/challenges associated with college. Addressing financial burdens alone will not solve the problem.</td>
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<tr>
<td>This audience questions the value of a college degree.</td>
<td>Yes, although this audience is not a monolith. Some need reassurance of the ROI. Others need supports to make the transition a success. That being said, the value proposition of finding oneself/one’s passion misses the mark for many, especially with multiple other educational options at their disposal.</td>
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<td>This audience is unclear about their next step.</td>
<td>Uncertainty looms large. There are a range of mindsets, with different needs and potential solutions. Segmentation helps to uncover which groups’ hesitations have the greatest potential to overcome.</td>
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<td>The pandemic makes the college path less attractive.</td>
<td>Potentially. Most notably, it complicates the question of value (i.e., are online classes “worth it”). But this audience remains open to hybrid and flexible education options that meet them where they are and may not have been as available before the need for online learning as a result of the pandemic.</td>
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Just under half say they plan to go to college or finish their degree – those who started college are most likely

- It is vital to understand the difference between the “Definites” and those who do not fall in that camp.

**Future Plans Regarding College**

- Definitely plan on going: 46%
- Don’t plan on going: 13%
- May or may not: 26%
- Not sure: 16%

**% Definitely Plan on Going**

- Female – 47%
- Male – 46%
- Black – 50%
- Hispanic – 50%
- White – 42%
- Some College – 55%
- HS Only – 44%

**When do you plan to go to college?** (n=1,206)

- Within the next 6 months: 15%
- 6 to 12 months from now: 31%
- 1-3 years from now: 37%
- More than 3 years from now: 8%
- Not sure: 9%
These young adults are exploring a variety of learning options: about 4-in-10 say they plan to do a course for a license/certificate, and/or attend a 2- or 4-year college

- Almost half indicate they have taken or are taking classes on YouTube

![Experience with/Interest in Educational Options](image)
As they look to the future, feelings are a mix of hope and excitement, with uncertainty and stress.

- Certainty of obtaining more education does not necessarily impact feelings about the future.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feelings About Future</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hopeful</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>31%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stressed</td>
<td>27%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Excited</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grateful</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scared</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustrated</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depressed</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proud</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tired</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secure</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disappointed</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fulfilled</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angry</td>
<td>3%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
But when it come to priorities for the next few years, emotional and financial stability top the list, college is at the bottom

Personal Goals for the Next Few Years

- **Being in a good place emotionally/positive mental health**
  - Important: 87%
  - Top Priority: 62%

- **Feeling financially stable**
  - Important: 85%
  - Top Priority: 56%

- **Earning more money**
  - Important: 80%
  - Top Priority: 51%

- **Being able to spend time with your family**
  - Important: 78%
  - Top Priority: 51%

- **Doing something you are passionate about**
  - Important: 79%
  - Top Priority: 49%

- **Continuing to learn and grow personally**
  - Important: 80%
  - Top Priority: 49%

- **Having work-life balance**
  - Important: 76%
  - Top Priority: 43%

- **Finding a good job**
  - Important: 76%
  - Top Priority: 42%

- **Owning your own home**
  - Important: 71%
  - Top Priority: 42%

- **Having a set plan for your future**
  - Important: 72%
  - Top Priority: 42%

- **Getting your dream job**
  - Important: 67%
  - Top Priority: 38%

- **Having a family**
  - Important: 61%
  - Top Priority: 38%

- **Having the ability to travel**
  - Important: 59%
  - Top Priority: 32%

- **Having your own business**
  - Important: 49%
  - Top Priority: 29%

- **Getting a college degree**
  - Important: 48%
  - Top Priority: 24%
On-the-job training is considered the best value, although just as many choose college when forced to select one from the list.

Value of Additional Education and Training Opportunities

- On-the-job training: 44% Excellent value, 74% Good value
- A course/courses to receive a license: 35% Excellent value, 70% Good value
- 4-year college or university degree: 35% Excellent value, 60% Good value
- Course/s to receive a verified certificate: 34% Excellent value, 67% Good value
- Course/s to receive a professional certification: 33% Excellent value, 68% Good value
- Trade or vocational school: 30% Excellent value, 58% Good value
- 2-year college/community college degree: 28% Excellent value, 61% Good value
- YouTube courses in a particular field: 22% Excellent value, 48% Good value
- Single-subject short course: 20% Excellent value, 51% Good value
- Bootcamp program: 18% Excellent value, 44% Good value

20% say “best value” when made to select only one, 21% say “best value” when made to select only one.
Half say high school taught them how to get into college but not how to succeed there; few believe it prepared them for life

How well did high school prepare you for your next step in life?

- Extremely well: 11%
- Very well: 19%
- Somewhat well: 31%
- Not too well: 22%
- Not well at all: 16%

What they wish they learned in high school but did not:

- How to do taxes
- How to maintain & establish good credit
- How to get a job
- How to keep a job
- Determining the best step for each student to take after high school

“Extremely/very well” higher among:
- Black
- Hispanic
- Men
All key subgroups indicate making more money and getting a better job are top reasons to get a degree

- Getting a degree is less about becoming well-rounded and networking.

### Reasons to get a Degree

- To be able to make more money: 44% (Extremely Important) 75% (Very Important)
- To be able to get a better job: 41% (Extremely Important) 73% (Very Important)
- To get training for a specific career: 37% (Extremely Important) 70% (Very Important)
- To prepare myself for life: 37% (Extremely Important) 66% (Very Important)
- To gain knowledge and appreciation of ideas: 36% (Extremely Important) 70% (Very Important)
- To learn more about things that interest me: 34% (Extremely Important) 65% (Very Important)
- To validate or prove my skills and expertise in a specific area: 34% (Extremely Important) 65% (Very Important)
- To get a degree I can show to employers: 31% (Extremely Important) 62% (Very Important)
- To prepare myself for graduate or professional school: 28% (Extremely Important) 57% (Very Important)
- To network and meet the right people: 27% (Extremely Important) 58% (Very Important)
- To make me a more cultured person: 25% (Extremely Important) 52% (Very Important)

Respondents who definitely plan to go to college rate all reasons as more important.
Although money is the #1 obstacle, stress and uncertainty are also key barriers to college

- Too much stress is a larger barrier for those who have already experienced college.

Reasons not to go to college/finish degree

- Too expensive/do not want to take on (more) debt: 38%
- Too stressful/too much pressure: 27%
- More important to get a job and make money: 26%
- Unsure about major/future career: 25%
- Not worth the money it costs to attend: 21%
- Family obligations: 19%
- Did not enjoy going to school: 18%
- Unsure how to pick the right classes: 16%
- Can get the skills and credentials needed through other educational programs: 16%
- COVID/did not want to take virtual classes: 14%
- Not prepared for the college experience/living on my own: 13%
- Not prepared academically/classes too hard: 13%
- Did not feel like I fit in/like I would fit in: 13%
- Did not feel supported in college/do not feel like I would be supported in college: 11%
- Did not like classes/chosen major: 7%
- Not accepted to the school I want(ed) to attend: 5%
In addition to helping with debt, many of the solutions to help with college receive positive reactions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Helpful to get/complete degree</th>
<th>Extremely Helpful</th>
<th>Very Helpful</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being able to get more education without additional debt</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a free class for all new students on managing personal finances</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being matched with a financial aid advisor who can help w. financial aid, scholarships, questions about money management</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having more flexibility in programs to fit your life</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job counselor who will help you make connections, prepare for interviews, help you find job you are looking for</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free technology, such as a laptop and internet access, when you enroll</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistance with costs of living, such as childcare and free transportation, etc.</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor to help you figure out what to study, classes to take, meeting major requirements</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having opportunities to get real-world, hands-on experience while in school</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing that all of your classes will be in person</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>44%</td>
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Segmentation Analysis, based on key psychographic variables, reveals targets for supports and intervention

**Audience Segments**

- **Where's the ROI**
  - 35%
  - They question the value of college and need reassurance and support that pursuing a degree is “worth it.”

- **It's Not for Me**
  - 19%

- **Cost-Conscious Explorers**
  - 18%
  - This segment does not see the value of college nor their path to going/returning.

- **Why Change the Status Quo**
  - 29%
  - These individuals question whether they should disrupt their lives/livelihoods to obtain a degree.

- They have the strongest intent to go/return to college but must navigate challenges (and would welcome supports) to do so.
Key Insights and Implications for the Field

1. **The question of those moving away from college is not solely one of demographics.** Psychographics, such as satisfaction with one’s current life situation, confidence, as well as a “connection to college” (e.g., have previously taken classes and/or have a parent with a college degree) foster a greater likelihood to attend/return to college.

2. **The education marketplace has fundamentally shifted.** Of course, there are more education options than ever before. Whether through YouTube, stackable courses, certifications, or on-the-job training, this audience sees multiple avenues for learning outside of a college or university, and they have taken advantage of them. The reference to the arena as a “marketplace” is important to emphasize—this audience makes their decisions about education based on value, investment, and opportunity cost. As such, the traditional value proposition of college as a place of exploration and finding one’s passion misses the mark for many.

3. **The language and pathways associated with higher education do not resonate.** This audience does not use nor understand the term, “Postsecondary Education,” and as such, it fails to clearly communicate educational opportunities after high school. Also, this audience contends that high school should have done/do more to prepare and support students for paths other than college. Although they value the soft skills learned in high school, they identify little else that prepared them for the real world.

4. **Obtaining a college degree is “off the table” for much of this audience; however, they desire a guarantee that it will be worth their time and money—both during school and after graduation.** A majority of this audience is willing to pay for a college education if they know they will get something “real” in return. Creating such a successful path would include financial supports but also guidance to take the right courses and manage stress/anxiety while in school and assistance with getting a good job upon receiving their degree.
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