



# Fulfilling the Promise: Re-enrolling America's College Stopouts

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# Table of Contents

**01**

Understanding the Stopout Challenge

**02**

What Happens to Stopouts?

**03**

Taking Action: Finding and Re-recruiting Stopouts

**04**

Conclusion

01

# Understanding the Stopout Challenge





I was 26 at the time when I went back to school then. It was just uncomfortable... I couldn't relate to anybody."

This student described one of the challenges she faced as she tried to re-enroll in college years after she had left. She knew she needed a degree to fulfill her professional and personal goals and had never expected to wait so long to finish, but when she returned to campus, she hit barrier after barrier and nearly gave up. As millions of former students face the frustration of a goal unachieved, colleges across the country are beginning to ask, "Is there more we can do to meet the needs of students who return after stopping out?"

In recent years, colleges have made significant investments in student success. Fortunately, their investments are starting to pay off. The percentage of students who earn a degree within 150% of their expected completion time has increased at both universities and community colleges (source: NCES).

However, this overview of student success overlooks concerning data. While more people are entering college and student success rates are on the rise, far too many students fail to earn the degrees they seek. In fact, between 2013 and 2018 the quantity of individual students who left college before graduating rose from 29 million to 36 million students—an increase of 22% (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center). These students put their faith in the promise of higher education without reaping the benefits afforded to graduates.

The effect of not having a degree becomes especially poignant during times of economic distress. The COVID-19 pandemic led to widespread unemployment, and individuals without a bachelor's degree were affected most.

Unemployment rates among individuals with a degree were about 2.5 times higher in May 2020 than they were in May 2019. Meanwhile, unemployment rates among those with some college but no bachelor's degree were 3.7 times higher than a year before, and unemployment among those whose highest level of education was a high school diploma was 3.25 times higher in May 2020 as compared to the previous year.

During previous economic downturns, higher education has had an insulating effect on college graduates. What's more, college has provided refuge and opportunity to individuals faced with joblessness in previous recessions. Higher education offers upskilling to more secure professional opportunities and can be an opportunity to complete a credential that had been started in the past. To help colleges reach these former students, known as "stopouts," EAB has researched the most effective strategies for finding, re-recruiting, and supporting students who left their institutions without earning a degree.

### COVID-19 Unemployment Rates Compared to Unemployment Rates in 2019



2.5x

Higher for individuals with a degree



3.7x

Higher for individuals with some college, but no bachelor's degree



3.25x

Higher for individuals with only a high school diploma



## Student Stopout Can Perpetuate the Cycle of Poverty

One in five Americans has some college but no degree. Of those, 17% have loans in default. Loan default can have cascading consequences on students who placed their faith in the promise of higher education, even when they knew it could be a risky investment.

**First, students with loans in default cannot receive future aid until they have made steady payments on their loans for an extended period of time.**

While this may seem like a relatively small penalty, it can force students whose circumstances have stabilized since default to delay their academic pursuits, holding them back from achieving their goals. Another obstacle for stopouts who have defaulted on their loans is that most colleges will not release transcripts until the debt has been reconciled. Thus, even if students can continue coursework through avenues such as employer-paid tuition benefits, they cannot access previously completed coursework. Such practices can force students who have stopped out to become dropouts because on-ramps into the classroom are difficult to access.

**In addition, students who have loans in default are in jeopardy of having federal funds withheld.**

For example, low-income students who may have been counting on their federal tax refunds for important purchases such as car repairs or medical bills can find themselves without the money they need for these essentials. In addition, their credit reports could be damaged, and their wages could be garnished in order to cover their federal loan debts. These problems are further compounded due to loan acceleration, whereby the entire loan balance and interest becomes due immediately upon default.

While default can have devastating effects on stopped-out students' finances, students may also face unexpected roadblocks if they attempt to return to college while their loans are in default.

# 1 in 5

Americans has some college, but no degree. Of those, 17% have loans in default.

# 02

## What Happens to Stopouts?



## A stopout is someone who withdraws from enrollment at a college or university for a period of time.

This definition implies that a stopout is a dropout who intends to go back to college. Since we rarely know students' intentions and want to re-recruit these students, and since this white paper is about re-recruiting these students, this report makes the assumption that all dropouts are potentially stopouts and uses the term accordingly.

At the end of any given term, all institutions have stopouts. There are always students who attended during the previous term but are now unaccounted for. They didn't graduate, and they didn't re-enroll. But little is known about what happens to these unaccounted-for students.

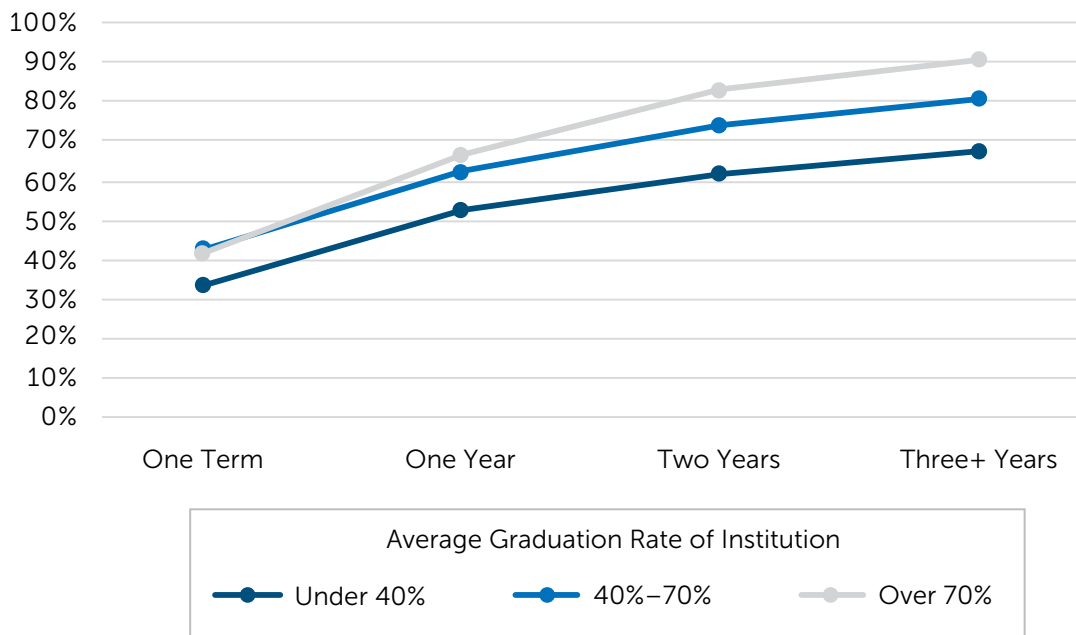
Data from more than 150 of EAB's student success partners shows that many students return to school after short absences, either on their own initiative or in response to re-enrollment outreach from their institution. We wanted to know at what point in time standard re-enrollment efforts begin to lose efficacy and necessitate additional outreach and support.

We conducted our review by following a given cohort of students to see what percentage would return in an upcoming term. In other words, if we looked at students who attended in fall 2018, what percentage was accounted for (attended or graduated) in spring 2019, fall 2019, etc. This review would identify students who maintained steady enrollment and those who stopped out but returned in a future term. We then categorized the data by institutional graduation rate in order to find different trends across institution types.



The graph below summarizes our findings. Following students from any given term, you can see how many of them stop out for one term and then return the next term as compared to those who are gone for longer periods. For example, at colleges with graduation rates above 70% (the top gray line), 42% of the previous term’s stopouts will return after one term’s absence. However, as time goes by, that percentage increases until after three years, when 91% of the given term’s stopouts have returned. Meanwhile, at institutions where the graduation rate is below 40%, 33% of the given term’s stopouts will return in the next term, and after three years, 67% of those students will have continued enrollment or graduated.

### Percentage of Stopouts Who Return by Duration of Stopout




- ▶ One point that impressed us is that more than half of all students who stop out are likely to return within a year. This appears to indicate that the efforts that so many colleges are putting into re-enrollment campaigns are paying off.

In addition to the prevalence of student stopouts across institutions, it is noteworthy that the rate of student return is fairly similar in each group, as indicated by the trendlines closely mirroring each other. In other words, students from schools with lower graduation rates are nearly as likely to return as those who attend colleges with higher graduation rates. The biggest difference is in the percentage of students who fail to consistently persist term-over-term, leading to the initial differences in next-term retention. In other words, the biggest difference at institutions with better graduation rates is that fewer students take breaks in enrollment. Thus, there is a strong correlation between consistent enrollment and overall graduation rates, but all students are nearly as likely to return to their institutions, regardless of whether the institution has a high graduation rate or not.


Re-enrollment in response to standard outreach efforts and organic student behavior seems to fall off after one year of stopout. Beyond this point, institutions will need to deploy special programs to recover stopped-out students. Thus, for our purposes, we will additionally define stopouts as students who have been stopped out for more than one year.



Strategies highlighted in this report focus on average stopouts—those who leave on their own volition rather than as a result of conduct issues and do not enroll elsewhere.



The biggest difference at institutions with better graduation rates is that fewer students take breaks in enrollment.



## Not All Stopouts Are the Same



### New Student



### Final Year



**Probable Fail Point:**  
finances, academic rigor,  
adjustment issues



**Probable Fail Point:**  
life event, emergency, or  
draw employment



**Financial Impact:**  
relatively low debt amount, little  
change in employment



**Financial Impact:**  
high debt, struggles to find work  
related to newfound skills



**Reengagement Strategy:**  
explain improved service and  
majors with high ROI



**Reengagement Strategy:**  
could be as simple as a phone  
call explaining path to graduation



**Advising Approach:**  
concierge service to provide  
direction and support



**Advising Approach:**  
concierge service to provide  
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The reasons students leave an institution evolve as they advance toward graduation, and these differences should play a critical role in defining institutional strategy. Students who stop out in their first term are likely leaving due to struggles acclimating to your school. The reasons may include environment, rigor, or the fact that finances didn't quite play out.

On the other hand, students who depart in their final year have proven that they can succeed at your college and have invested financially in the progress they made. These students are more likely to have left due to a family emergency or major life event or, in high-demand fields, a compelling job offer.

The financial impact of departing from college varies for students at different points in their enrollment. Students who left in their first term or two likely accumulated little loan debt. Even so, this debt can be a struggle to pay off since the former student will likely return to work in similar roles to those they worked prior to attending college. However, those who left in their final year are more likely to have severe problems paying off their loan debts. After attending classes for multiple terms, their debt amounts are higher, which can increase stress about how to pay off the debt. These former students may have the opportunity to find work closely related to the program they nearly completed, but without a degree there's no guarantee they will earn more than their peers who left in the first term.

These differences should inform your re-enrollment strategy. If students leave your college in their first term or two, your value proposition has to be based on what's different today, so they can see how they might fit in on your campus now, even though they were unable to succeed in the past. Early in conversations with student stopouts, identify the cause of their departures.

This is an opportunity to share information about new programs and services that might meet the students' needs. Highlight the work your college has done to help all students feel like they belong, including initiating including affinity groups, clubs, meet-ups for special populations, or expanded support services.

### Re-enrollment Communications



Personalize outreach to address the circumstances that prevented completion in the past



Emphasize flexible degrees, course times, and support that allow college to fit into their busy lives



Highlight returning stopout success stories to build belongingness



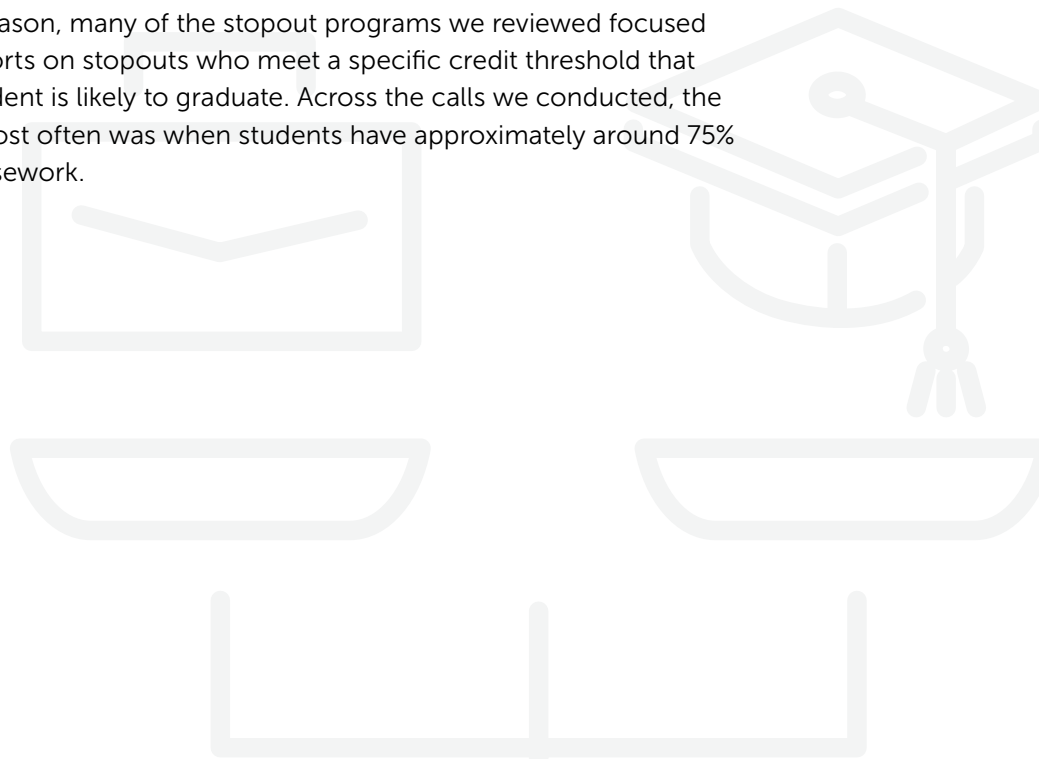
Outline a simple roadmap they can follow to help them graduate

Those who left late in their programs often need to hear how simple their path to graduation will be. Oftentimes, stopouts who were near graduation when they departed fear that they will lose credits they had already completed or that program requirements may have changed since they left. In addition, they may need more flexibility than they had when they enrolled previously.

Point out how many courses they must complete, whether those courses will be available in a format or schedule that works for them, and a timeline for completion of their degree.

All returning stopouts need an informed ally on campus. This person must have the competency and authority to connect students to the resources they need to stay on track for graduation. In many of the research interviews we conducted, this role was described as analogous to a concierge on campus. They knew stakeholders across the college and were well-informed about a variety of service areas including financial aid, enrollment, and student support. They offered students clear direction and connections across campus.

Providing this support to students who stopped out early in their degree programs demands more resources than providing similar support to those who are close to graduation. For this reason, many of the stopout programs we reviewed focused their engagement efforts on stopouts who meet a specific credit threshold that demonstrates the student is likely to graduate. Across the calls we conducted, the time frame chosen most often was when students have approximately around 75% of their required coursework.





## Practice Profile: Reconnect with York Tech

York Tech focused efforts on reforming some fundamental parts of the academic and student support experience to build a more student-centric college. They now use EAB's Navigate as a tool to support their efforts to build guided pathways while empowering staff and students with data and direction.

To better meet the needs of students, the college shortened term lengths, introduced more scheduling flexibility, improved access of supplemental instruction, and made advising a key component of student success. With so many campus improvements, York Tech quickly began to see results. **In just two years, fall-to-fall persistence rates reached the highest level in the college's history, and graduation rates have improved by 4.4%.**

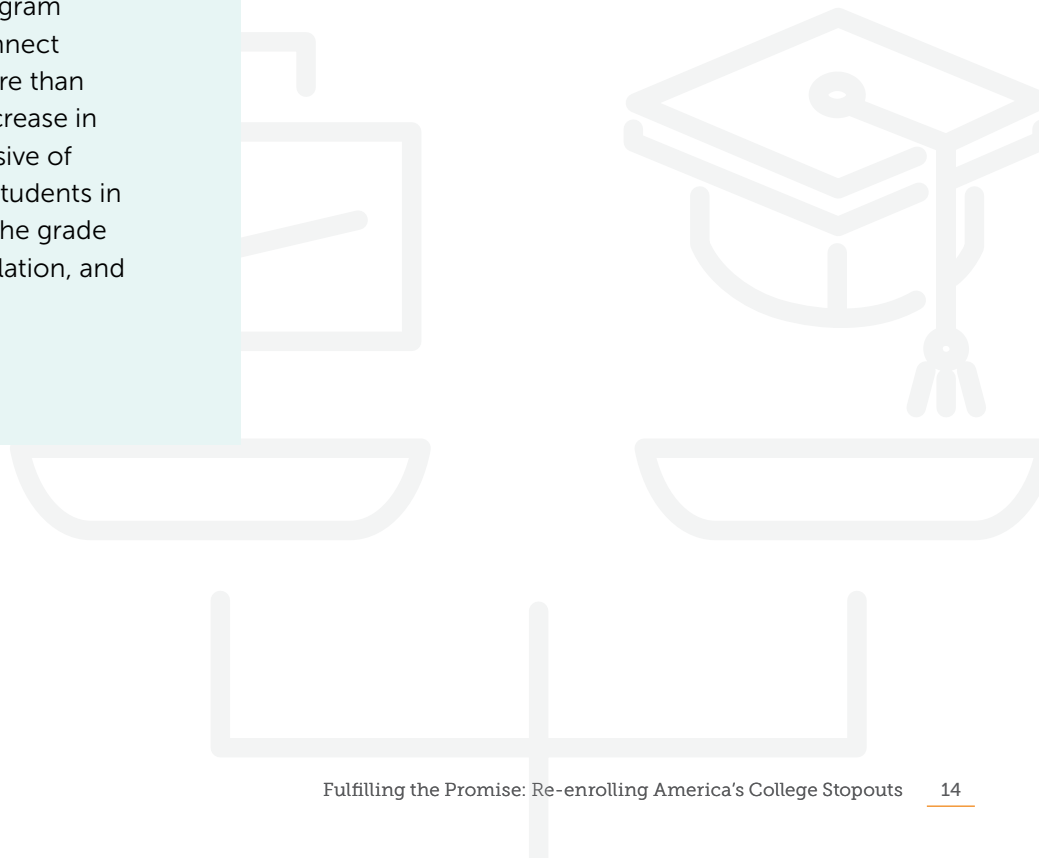
While these improvements served current students well, York Tech also recognized that many others who could have benefited from these new approaches had already left the college before these initiatives had been deployed. In Fall 2019, the college introduced Reconnect with York Tech, a program designed to provide funding and support to returning stopouts interested in completing an in-demand credential. Nearly 70 credit and noncredit programs qualify, and returning students can choose between staying in the program they started or pursuing a different one. The program must be completed within 12–15 months.

York Tech began by surveying former students to determine their needs and ensure the college had the right resources in place. Once they were confident they had what they needed for students to successfully complete their programs of study, administrators engaged local news media and offered regular information sessions to share information about the program with stopouts in their community.

Within just a few months, the college enrolled more than 250 students in Reconnect.

The success of these students is paramount to staff members. College leaders EAB's Student Success Management System, Navigate, to group or "tag" students, allowing them to direct communication, monitor progress, and track data about these students. This type of segmentation makes it easier for teams across the campus to work together to provide coordinated care for Reconnect students as they complete their programs of study.

Early indications suggest this program is exceeding expectations. Reconnect contributed to an increase of more than 20% in enrollments and a 15% increase in applications to the college (inclusive of applications for re-enrollment). Students in Reconnect perform at or above the grade distributions of the general population, and 78% persisted from fall to spring.





# 03

## Taking Action: Finding and Re-recruiting Stopouts



# Step 1

## Find Your Stopouts

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College leaders universally agree that finding former students presents the greatest challenge to their attempts to serve stopouts.

**Our first recommendation is to establish a procedure for interviewing or surveying students who don't return in a subsequent term.**

Communicating with students who have decided not to return to your college provides great insight about what is causing their departure, and these insights can effectively inform future student support resources. It can also serve as an opportunity to ask students for updated contact information and a point in the future when they would like to be contacted about re-enrolling. Staff can use this engagement to dispel preconceived notions that students may have in regard to their ability to return and consequences of a lapse in enrollment. This approach can reduce the stigma of stopping out for students.

Having the advantage of current contact information for stopped-out students will make it much easier to connect with them. We anticipated that our research would lead to a definitive recommendation on the most effective strategies for outreach. However, across the numerous research interviews we conducted, we found many examples of one college reporting great success with a method that had failed at another college. To determine which approach works best for your stopped-out students, test formats and track responses to determine which style works best.

## Strategies for Finding the Student Who Left

### Advantages

- ▶ Engaging
- ▶ Can be saved



#### Printed Outreach

### Disadvantages

- ▶ Costly
- ▶ Addresses change

- ▶ Low-cost
- ▶ May include read-receipt



#### Social Media

- ▶ Response rates are low
- ▶ Time-consuming to identify individuals

- ▶ Easy to A/B test and track
- ▶ Expected communication method from college



#### Email

- ▶ Email addresses change
- ▶ May get lost in spam

- ▶ Personal contact
- ▶ Ability to provide detail



#### Cold-Calling

- ▶ People often don't answer their phones
- ▶ Phone numbers change

- ▶ No additional staff resources
- ▶ Can discontinue if ineffective



#### External Vendor

- ▶ Expensive
- ▶ Privacy concerns

**Our second recommendation is to use images and language that reflect the probable life situations of stopouts receiving outreach.**

Feature images of older students or graduates, and highlight the tools your college has in place to help students balance their professional responsibilities along with academics.

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While each outreach approach has advantages and disadvantages, one point was repeated across our research calls: students will keep outreach and reply when they are ready to return.

**Therefore, our third recommendation is to use staff contact information that will outlast staff transitions that may occur before students reply to the outreach they received.**

College administrators told us that whether they sent a voice-mail message, a printed letter through the mail, or an email, they would receive responses from stopouts months later. This suggests that college contact information provided to stopped-out students should not be the phone number or email address of an individual staff member who may vacate his or her position before the student responds. Instead, colleges should use a main office phone number or an email address to which a team of individuals has access.

National Student Clearinghouse reports that just 38% of re-enrolled stopouts return to the same institution, so college staff need to make sure departing students are aware that the college is eager to have them return when their life circumstances allow. This invitation can go a long way in addressing students' fears about whether the college will support their eventual return to campus.



## Practice Profile: Florida State University **Outreach to Near-Completers**

At Florida State University (FSU), administrators sought to encourage more near-graduates to complete their programs of study. Delegating this responsibility to colleges with varied budgets and capacity would lead to inconsistencies. Instead, university leaders dedicated half of a centralized full-time position to focus on reaching out to stopped-out students who had completed more than 100 semester hours toward a degree in any of FSU's colleges.

This commitment from the university provides returning stopouts with consistent support from someone who is knowledgeable about available resources, experienced in troubleshooting with students, and committed to the success of these returning students.

Outreach from this staff member is very detailed. She spends about 10 minutes preparing for each call. She reviews students' advising reports, existing notes in Navigate, and transcripts in order to better understand former students' unique circumstances. During the conversation, she talks to them about what happened during their last enrollment, potential resources they need to succeed in the future, and what steps must be taken to complete their degrees, including online options.

Since this effort was initiated in the spring of 2017, FSU has reached out to more than 1,800 students, and about half of those are actively engaged or enrolled. To date, these efforts have led 675 former stopouts to graduate from FSU.


Colleges that empower staff with knowledge of community and campus resources will support students more effectively than those with bureaucratic practices that stand in the way of student progress.


## Step 2

# Enable Re-enrollment

Once you have found your stopped-out students, demonstrate enthusiasm for their return. Remove barriers that impede re-enrollment and implement low-cost incentives that can have an outsize effect on students' desire to re-enroll at your institution.

Colleges that are leading the way with returning stopouts use simplified reapplication forms. We heard from some colleges that they required students to provide only their updated contact information, with staff completing the rest of the process. In addition, most colleges waived their reapplication fee to encourage students to get started.

Re-enrollment can be a challenge for many returning students. In our research calls, institutions attempted to make the process as easy as possible for students, assigning staff to work with them throughout the financial aid application and verification process or resolving administrative holds that would otherwise prohibit registration.

As we mentioned previously, students returning after stopping out need a clear path to graduation. Address any barriers that might delay completion. For example, student graduation plans should highlight limitations such as courses that are offered in select terms across the year. As students get closer to graduation, consider offering priority registration to ensure they can get the classes they need at times that work for their schedules.



### Practice Profile: University of Kentucky **Flexible New Degree Program**

The Bachelor of Liberal Studies was introduced at the University of Kentucky to create individualized programs and serve as a degree-completion option for students. After introducing this degree option, college staff realized that 178 students who had stopped out met the requirements for the degree with no additional coursework required.

The university conducted outreach to students who already met the requirements, as well as many others who would benefit from the degree program flexibility and the recent addition of expanded online course offerings. To date, hundreds of students who otherwise might not have graduated have completed this degree.



Many returning student stopouts are dealing with more complex circumstances than traditional students. They may be working or raising families. Many of the college leaders we spoke to in this research indicated they modify operational hours and services to provide support to students. They provide evening services or use Navigate to interact and support students who cannot spend much time on campus. Shared workspaces for academic planning, text interactions, and timely nudges to direct students to take action on a task offer virtual support from afar.

Oftentimes, these students will enroll in online or evening classes. The most effective colleges bolstered online course offerings and support services to ensure students had the tools they needed. Many had extended their online course catalog to provide more pathways for their returning stopouts. Others offered free parking on campus during off-peak hours when returning students are more likely to take classes.

Most importantly, returning student stopouts need to have a single point of contact if new challenges arise. They need someone who can help them navigate situations that could otherwise derail their efforts to complete their college degrees. **Colleges that empower staff with knowledge of community and campus resources will support students more effectively than those with bureaucratic practices that stand in the way of student progress.**



## Program Spotlight: Pueblo Community College's Return to Earn

Pueblo Community College started its Return to Earn program in 2016 with grant funding that was intended to bring back near-graduates by offering them a onetime scholarship. The program is managed through the call center, and during off-peak times, the project director conducts outreach to students who have stopped out and who have earned over 30 credits.

The project director quickly realized that most of these students had stopped out of college due to some kind of life circumstance that was beyond their control. While they were certainly interested in coming back, their lives continued to be incredibly complex, which demanded that he serve as many of their needs as possible or students would likely lose momentum as they were bounced from office to office. Therefore, the director meets one-on-one with returning stopouts to help them complete the readmission application and financial aid paperwork and also lets them know how to resolve any holds on their accounts.

Many of these students had debt on their student accounts as a result of withdrawing in the middle of the term. When appropriate, the project director works internally to help students secure retroactive medical withdrawals or set up plans to pay outstanding balances. One unique element in the Return to Earn program is that students are eligible for a onetime scholarship to incentivize their return. This funding can be used to pay current or past balances, but the project director explained to us that in an effort to be a good steward of the limited funding available, the scholarship is made available only after students successfully complete their first term back. Students have a note placed on their records indicating the anticipated award to allow enrollment, but the funds aren't released until completion of the term.

This approach has led to an incredible 94% success rate in program participants' first term back at Pueblo Community College. To date, the program has re-enrolled 320 students. Most impressively, of the 320 re-enrolled stopouts since the program's inception, 207 program participants have now graduated.

**94%**

Success rate in program participants' first term back at PCC

04

# Conclusion



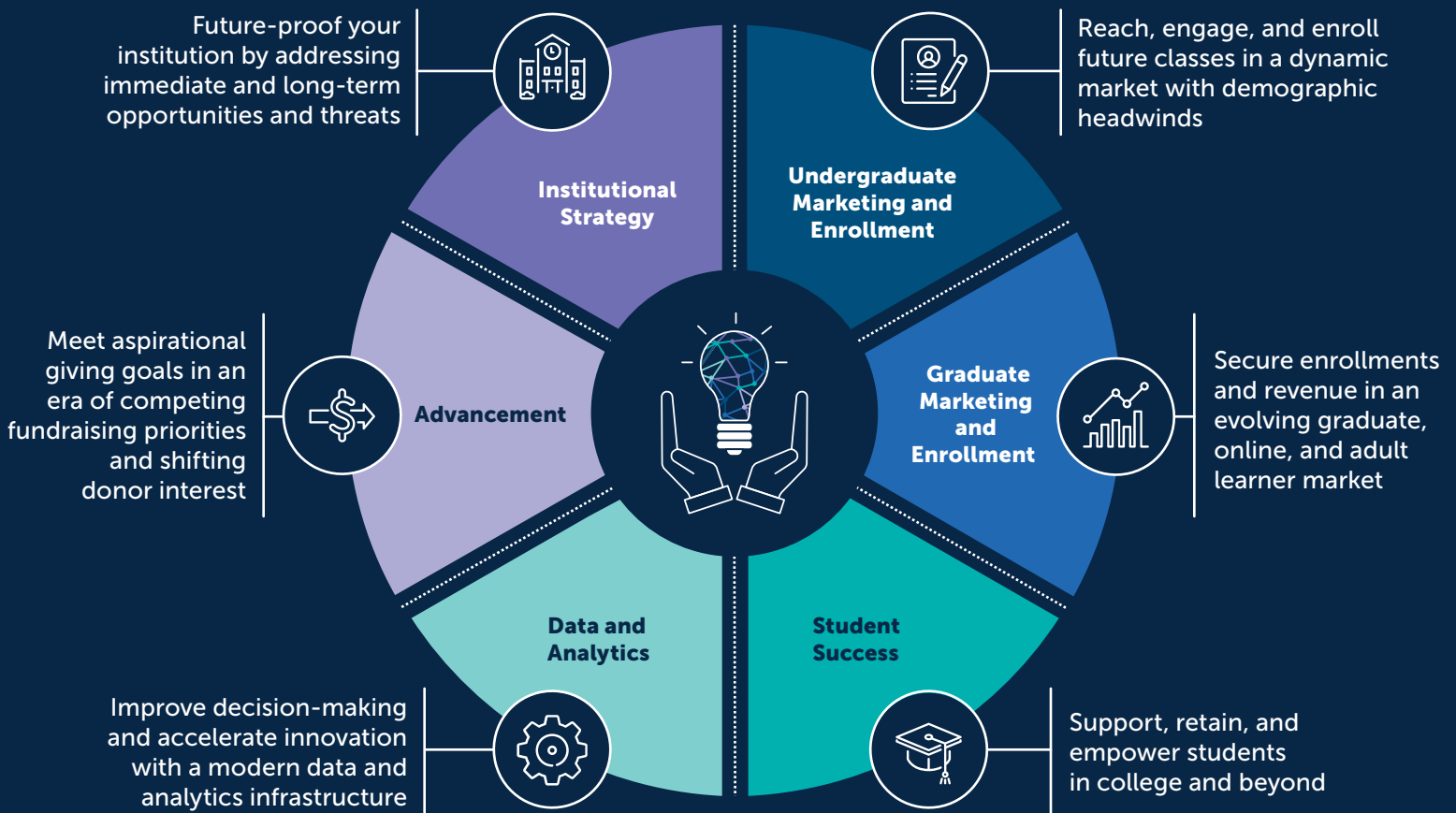


**Our world is changing.** Populations of high school graduates are declining and the needs of students attending college are evolving.

Students have new responsibilities, and their lives are increasingly complex. Many work or raise children while attending college. And higher education has been slow to adapt, leaving too many students falling short of the college credential they sought from our institutions. However, there has been momentum in changing our campuses to better address students' needs. These improvements will continue to drive increased rates of student success and help our students meet the needs of today's competitive labor market.

We are better prepared to support today's students than ever before, so now is the time to reach out to those we have failed in the past and support them through graduation. It's the right answer for our students, our institutions, and our communities.

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