



Finishing the Degree: An Empirical Study Examining the Intentions of Young Adults to Re-enroll in College

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This research study was conducted as part of the US Department of Labor’s WIRED (Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development) Initiative, for which the Detroit Regional Chamber coordinated Southeast Michigan efforts. The Talent Team – chaired by Eleanor Josaitis, Focus Hope Co-founder, and Daniel E. Little, Chancellor of the University of Michigan-Dearborn – have the objective to increase the number of adults in the region with post-secondary degrees. This research study is part of those broader efforts. The authors thank the Talent Team for their support and input throughout the study.

The intended audiences for this report are policy makers, human resource professionals, leaders in higher education, and others engaged with workforce development activities. All correspondence regarding this report may be directed to:

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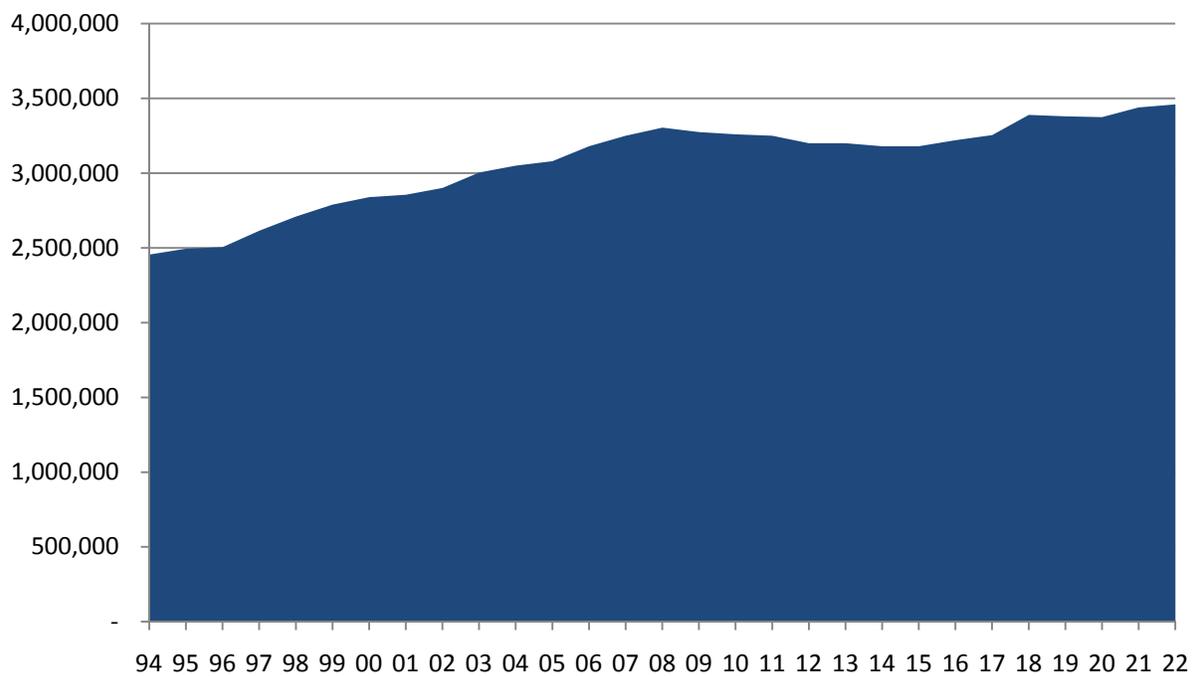
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Introduction

As two-year and four-year institutions of higher learning deal with harsh economic times, they also face shrinking numbers of their largest pool of potential students: First-time enrollees. Demographics indicate that the projected number of graduates from high schools is not expected to equal its 2008 peak until after 2018 (College Board, 2008), as shown in exhibit 1. However, it has been estimated that 21% of 25 to 34 year olds, about eight million individuals, in the United States have previously attended college but left before completing their degree (US Census Bureau, 2007). These young adults have recent college experience and represent a segment of the population who are possible candidates to continue their college education.

Exhibit 1

Number of High School Graduates 1994-2022



Data Source: College Board/WICHE

Those among this group who left college but intend to re-enroll in college are referred to as stop-outs (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1973), to distinguish them from individuals who do not plan to return to college (Tinto, 1993). O'Toole, Stratton, and Wetzel (2003) estimate that during the first year stop-outs comprise about 40% of total student attrition.

For institutions of higher learning, this segment of the population represents a large and unique pool of potential students, who already have college experience and express intentions to re-enroll in higher education. From a policy perspective, if demographic and psychographic characteristics of these individuals with interests in re-enrolling can be identified, more efficient and cost-effective recruitment programs can be developed and implemented to serve this group.

Purpose of the Study

Previously, the identification of the characteristics and intentions of stop-outs has been studied within two distinct lines of research. From educational economics, the characteristics of this segment have been studied with data from large national databases, such as those created by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Horn (1998); Horn and Berger (2004); O'Toole et al. (2003); Stratton, O'Toole, and Wetzel (2007); and Stratton, O'Toole, and Wetzel (2008) have examined the NCES data to study stop-outs from a national sample of institutions of higher education. The major strength of these studies is that they produce results that are generalizable to the identification of the characteristics of a national population of people who wish to re-enroll. However, NCES data is not specifically designed to study individuals who are interested in re-enrolling. The lack of an ex-ante intention to re-enroll question has limited the utility of this database for research about re-enrollment behaviors (Stratton et al., 2008).

The second line of research associated with stop-outs can be described as emanating from the areas of education or education administration. This line of research analyzes data from a single or a small number of educational institutions (e.g. Ahson, Gentemann, and Phelps, 1998; Bynum and Thompson, 1983; Daubman, Williams, Johnson, and Crump, 1985; Grosset, 1993; Herzog, 2005; Hoyt and Wynn, 2004; Johnson, 2006; Okun, Benin, and Brant-Williams, 1996; Pascarella, Duby, Miller, and Rasher, 1981; Stokes and Zusman, 1992; Woosley, 2004; Woosley, Slabaugh, Sadler, and Mason, 2005). These studies focus on the intentions of stop-outs to re-enroll at the institution from which they withdrew, but do not examine intention to re-enroll at any institution.

To date, there appear to be no empirical studies that have been expressly designed to study stop-outs' characteristics, behaviors, and general intentions to re-enroll in any college to complete their degree. Within the stop-out population, young adults (25 to 34 year olds) are a segment of specific interest as they have the most recent college experience. The purposes of

this study were to identify the demographic and psychographic factors that influence the interest in and the intention to re-enroll among people who have previously left college. In doing so, the study made use of research methods more commonly used in the examination of consumer groups and their behavior as buyers. The study's unique application of marketing theory and methods provided that young adults who did not complete a college degree were now examined as past "buyers" of a college education, leading to a greater understanding of why they left college or "stopped buying a college education," and, finally, what solutions might impact their likelihood to re-enroll in college and complete their degrees. Of particular interest was to better examine the demographics and psychographics of this group, their past experience when they attended college, what factors motivated their decision to leave college, and, lastly, what factors might influence their returning to college.

Previous research has been conducted using two key data sources:

- National databases
- Single or small number of educational institutions

This study collected responses from a region of 4.8 million residents

Methodology

Respondents: Respondents were randomly selected to participate in telephone survey interviews and asked screening questions to confirm that they had some previous college experience but no degree, were not currently enrolled in college, and were between the ages of 25-34. The sample frame was built from purchased telephone number lists that included voter registration lists, warranty card responders, and targeted lists based on census demographics of the 25-34 year old age range. A screening question confirmed that all respondents were residents of the Michigan counties of Lapeer, Lenawee, Macomb, Monroe, Oakland, St. Clair, Washtenaw, and Wayne, which comprise a metropolitan area of over 4.8 million residents. The telephone interview process was conducted by a third-party service between July 2008 and October 2008. Of the 33,468 connected phone calls, 9,269 individuals agreed to participate in the interview for a response rate of 28%. Our final sample included 599 individuals who met all of the study criteria and answered the relevant survey questions.

Instrument: The survey instrument contained both demographic and psychographic items. Demographic variables included factors such as age, gender, marital status, amount of college education previously completed, and employment status. Areas that the psychographic items assessed included perceptions about interest in and intentions to return to college, perceptions of previous success at college, the importance respondents placed on education, and perceptions of family and financial responsibilities, among others.

Depending on the respondent's response to their level of interest in returning to college, the survey followed one of two sets of questions. For almost all of the questions, the content of the items on both sets of questions was the same, but the verb tenses and moods were changed for appropriate meaning. For example, for those intending to return to college, the item assessing perceptions of family support to return to college was written in the subjunctive mood: "Family responsibilities might make returning to college difficult." For those did not intend to return to college, the item contained present tense: "Family responsibilities prevent you from returning to college."

Data Analysis: The focus of this paper is to give an overview of the key demographic and psychographic differences between people who indicate they are likely to re-enroll in college and those who indicate they are unlikely to re-enroll in college. Using the survey question, "How likely are you to return to a community or four-year college in the next few years" and its accompanying five-point scale, two subgroups of respondents were examined. Those who are likely to re-enroll in college (LTR) were identified as individuals who indicated they were "likely" or "very likely" to return; they totaled 39% of the full sample. This paper considers LTR different from stop-outs, as the LTR group may chose to re-enroll at any college and not solely the institution they last attended. Those who are unlikely to return (UTR) were individuals who indicated they were "unlikely" or "very unlikely" to return in the next few years; they totaled 37% of the sample. The remaining 24% of respondents who indicated they were "somewhat likely" to return are not included in either group. An attempt was made to equalize the group sizes for LTR and UTR, as well as provide representative sub-samples from eight counties. To accomplish this, near the end of the data collection, interviewers declined to interview some respondents who were likely or very likely to return.

For the purposes of this paper, data will be presented using frequencies comparing the two groups of interest: LTR and UTR. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Scheffe's post-hoc

tests, where appropriate, were the statistical techniques through which statistical differences are identified. Preliminary analysis was conducted on the data including principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation, which indicated that the data associated with the Likert scale items were not uni-dimensional. The factor analysis produced 10 factors with eigen-values greater than one. A review of the literature guided the development of scales representing respondents' perceptions about their previous success in college, time constraints, importance of education, financial constraints, family responsibilities, and encouragement from family and friends.

39% of respondents indicated they are likely or very likely to return to college. This represents a substantial market for which colleges and universities should prepare to understand their differing needs compared to freshman students from high schools.

Findings

As mentioned, previous research has not examined the likelihood for people to re-enroll in any college after having been out of the educational process for a period of time. This study specifically asked two questions to that point: How interested are they in returning and how likely are they to return in the next few years. As mentioned above, 39% of respondents indicated they were likely or very likely to return to college, the LTR group. This finding indicates there are approximately 57,000 young adults with some college but no degree in the eight-county study area who are hoping and planning to soon re-enroll in college. The size of this group is similar to the region's high-school senior cohort of 61,000 students (Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2008). This indicates a substantial market for which colleges and universities should prepare to serve and understand their differing needs compared to new freshmen students from high schools.

Intention to re-enroll and interest in re-enrolling have been common variables in the literature. They represent cognitive variables, not behavioral variables. Theoretically, interests and intentions might have no relationships, or even negative relationships, with actual re-enrollment behaviors. Evidence that intentions correlate with behaviors is reported by Woosley (2004). At the university she studied, 54% of stop-outs intended to re-enroll. Of those, 34% actually re-enrolled in that university within one year. Arguably, this relationship is likely

higher. Her data excludes re-enrollment at any other institution and tracked students for only a period of one year following their withdrawals.

Exhibit 2 shows the LTR group is split evenly on whether they intend to re-enroll in two-year community colleges or four-year colleges and universities. For their long-term goals, 43% are seeking a bachelor’s degree, while an additional 31% are seeking education beyond a bachelors degree, as shown in exhibit 3.

74% intend to seek a bachelor’s degree or beyond

Exhibit 2

Re-enrollment Institution

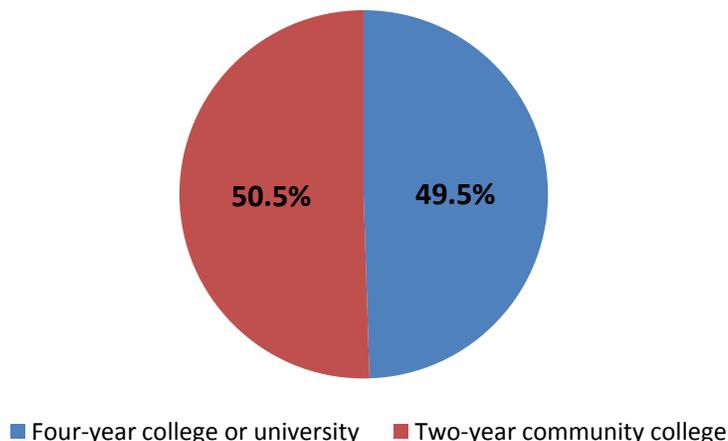
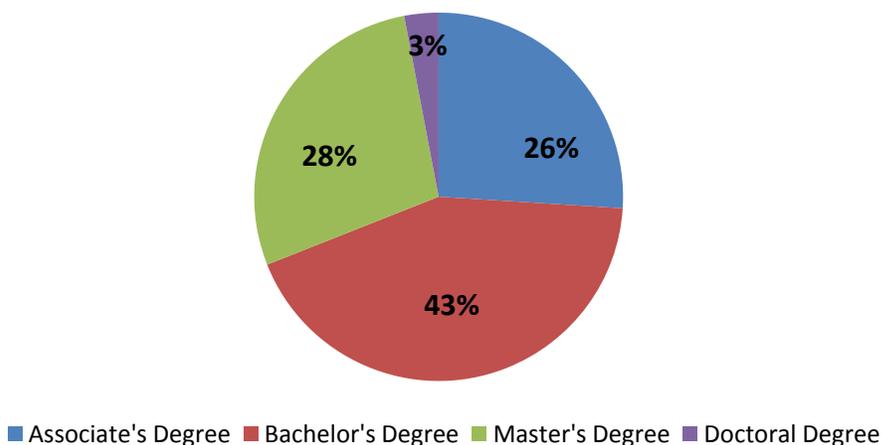


Exhibit 3

Long-term Educational Goal



Demographic Differences Between Groups

Demographic differences exist between the LTR and the UTR groups. LTR are younger, averaging 29.1 years of age, while UTR average 30.3 years of age. Exhibit 4 shows that 25% of LTR are between the ages of 25 and 26. These findings support the previous research, which indicates that age has a negative relationship with the intention to reenroll in higher education. For example, Horn (1998) has reported that older students are less likely to re-enroll after leaving higher education. Thomas (2001) summarizes the literature that describes barriers faced by older students (e.g. Benshoff, 1991; Richter-Antion, 1986; and Terrell, 1990). Previous research

shows barriers for older individuals are related to limited social support systems, a lack of peer group classmates, and the presence of the financial, family, and work obligations that older adults are

likely to face. O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007) contend that adult students may believe that they are less entitled to an education that has been created for a young student population. Re-enrolling adults also express the belief that they are treated as newcomers or peripheral learners in higher education settings. Klein (1990) believes that re-enrolling students may feel academically less capable and socially more uncertain than their younger peers.

Exhibit 4

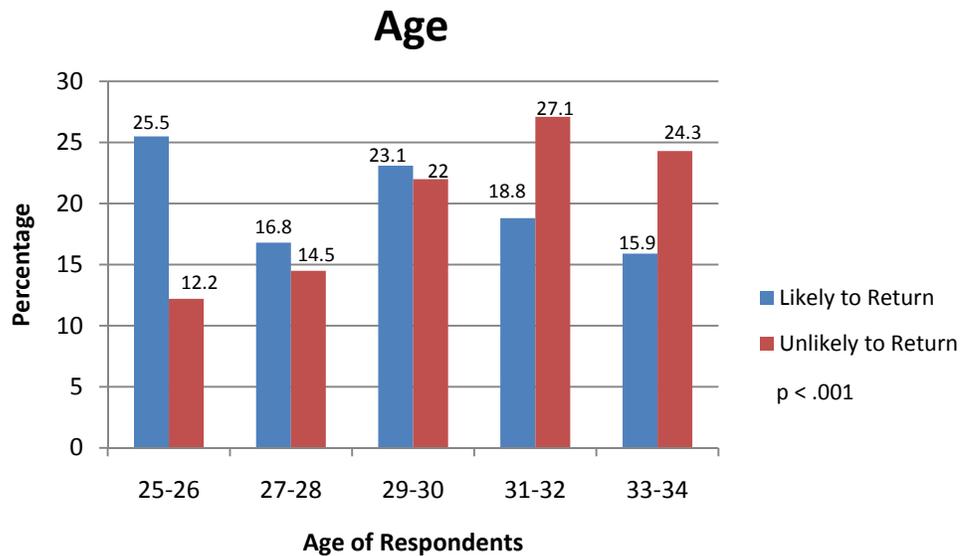
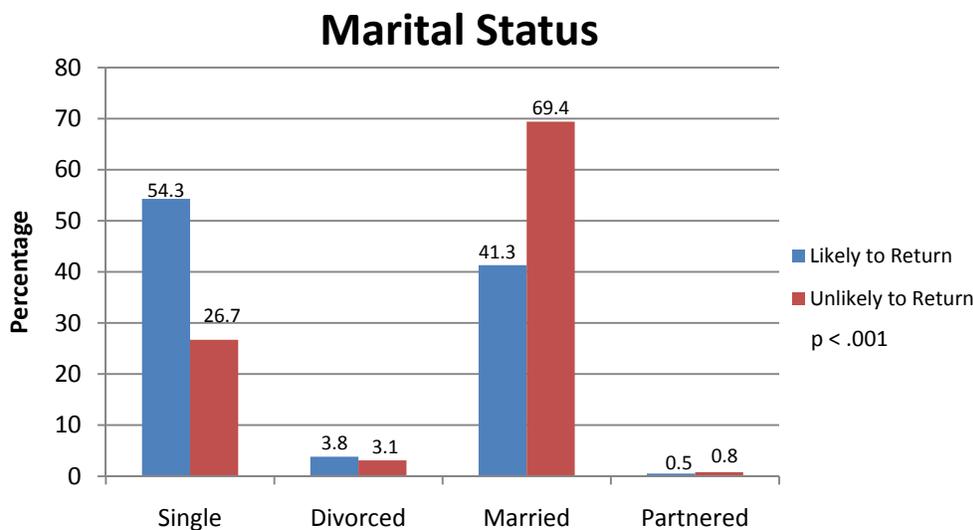


Exhibit 5



Marital status, number of children for whom the respondent is primary caregiver, and race all showed differences between the groups. Exhibit 5 shows that

58% of the LTR group indicate they are single, divorced, or widowed, compared to less than

30% of the UTR group. Similarly, exhibit 6 shows that the LTR group are more likely to have no children, with 60% so indicating; while only 27% of the UTR group have no children. In terms of race and ethnicity, 26% of LTR respondents are African American or multi-racial, compared to less than 7% of the UTR group, as shown in exhibit 7.

Exhibit 6

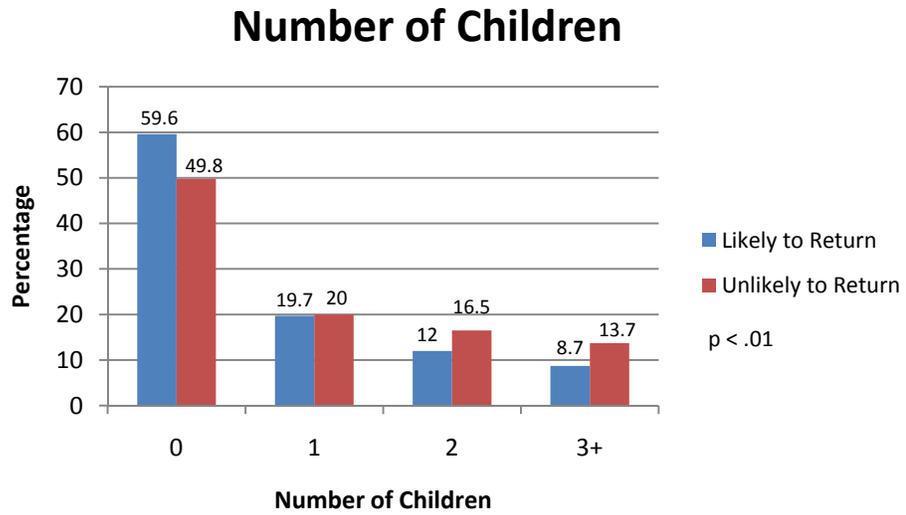
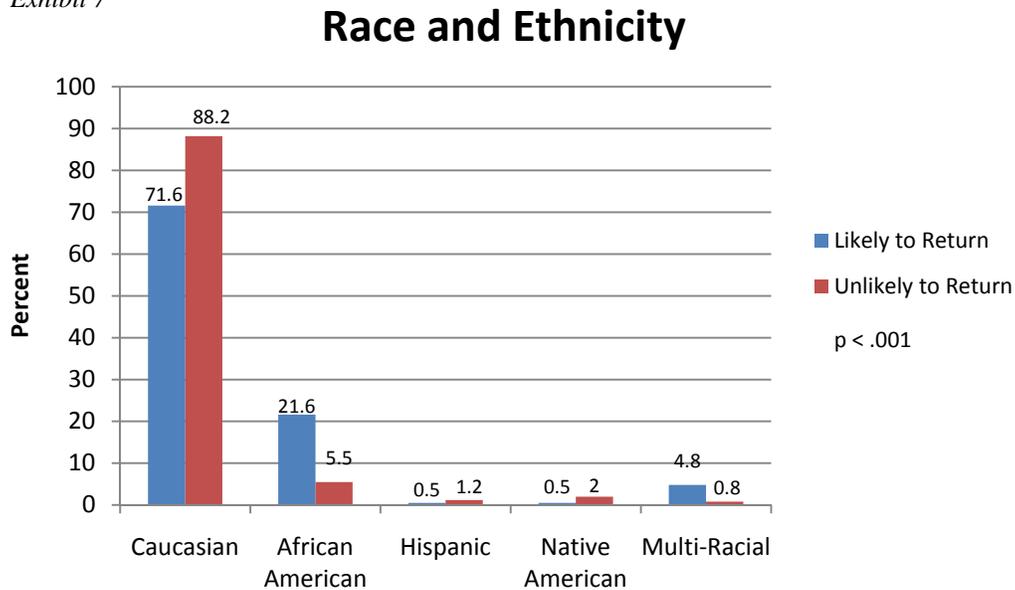


Exhibit 7

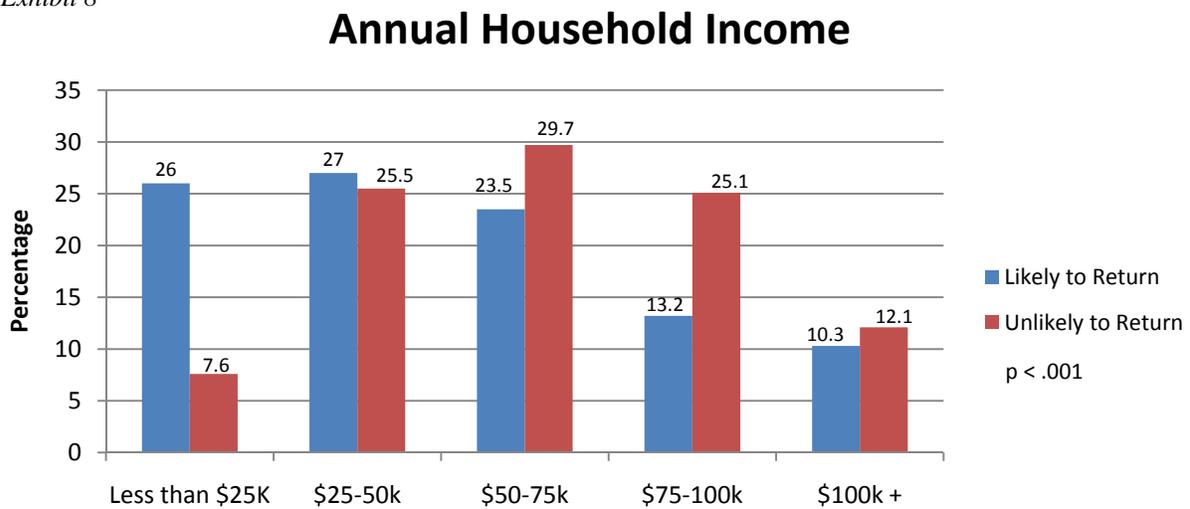


This last finding does not support previous research on re-enrollment intentions. Johnson (2006) has reported that minority students are less likely to return to college than are Caucasians. As the time from withdrawal increases, minorities are progressively less likely to re-enroll when

compared to majority group members (Johnson, 2006). In empirical research that has included both intentions and behaviors, Woosley et al. (2005) have shown that at one university minority groups are less likely to state the intention to re-enroll in college, but do not differ in their actual re-enrollment behaviors. Some research has found the opposite to be true: Kimmel and McNeese (2006) report that members of minority groups are more likely to be motivated to enter higher education, despite reports of barriers they may face, and Light and Strayer (2002) report that actual minority enrollment in higher education is proportionately higher than for Caucasians.

Income and employment activities also highlight differences between the LTR and UTR groups. Lower income individuals are more likely to have an interest in re-enrolling in college. Exhibit 8 shows that 26% of the LTR group report annual household incomes of less than \$25,000 per year, while only 8% of the UTR group report incomes of less than \$25,000. Kleiner, Carver, Hagedorn, and Chapman (2007) found that participation in higher education and training is affected by income levels. Individuals making less than \$50,000 are least likely to attend post-secondary education or training when compared to the highest income group. Silva, Calahan, Lacierno-Paquet, and Stowe (1998) note that cost concerns are highest among those with low incomes. Moreover, individuals with lower incomes bear the brunt of consequences arising from the financial costs of higher education (Horn, 1998).

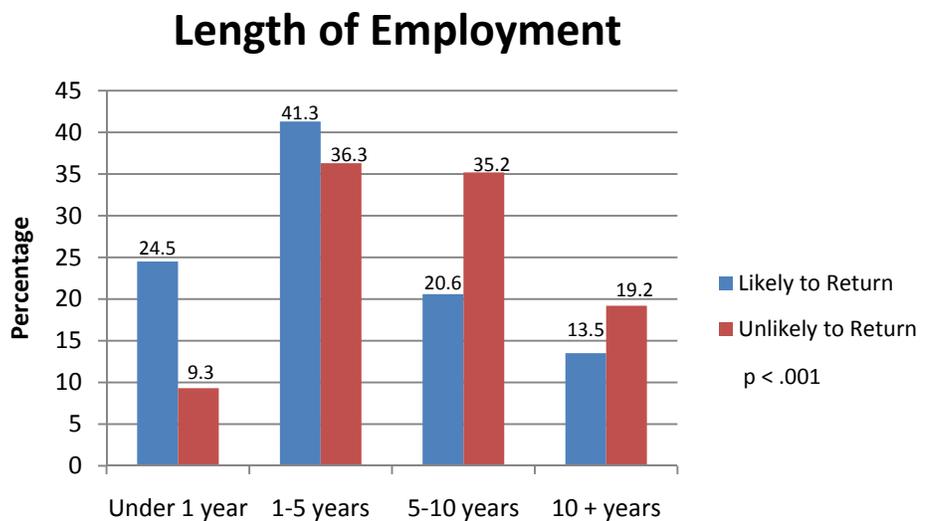
Exhibit 8



Previous research found differences between full-time and part-time employees with respect to continuing their education. Creighton and Hudson (2002) describe how part-time workers are less likely to involve themselves in work-related higher education, whereas retired workers are disproportionately more likely to enroll in courses. Horn (1998) presents empirical evidence that full-time workers are less likely to return to college than are part-time workers. The studies describing the full-time work and school conflicts appear to be more generalizable to all college classes rather than just work-related education. The conclusions from these studies highlight the difficulties full-time workers face when attempting to further their educations.

While being employed full-time, part-time, or not at all did not show differences between the groups in this study, the length of time with the current employer and having been laid off in the past two years does provide for

Exhibit 9



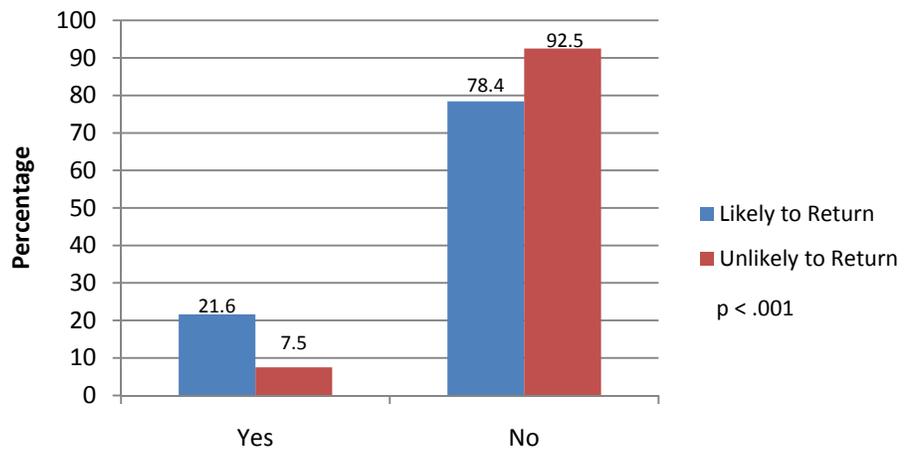
differences between groups. Exhibit 9 shows that 66% of the LTR group have worked for their current employer for less than five years, while only 46% of the UTR have spent less than 5 years with their employer. The numbers are more dramatic for those working less than one year with their employer, with 25% of the LTR group so indicating compared to 9% of the UTR group.

Moreover, 22% of the LTR group indicate they have been laid off, or displaced, from a job in the past two years while less than 8% of the UTR have been affected by a layoff from their job recently, as shown in exhibit 10. Whether these displaced workers are likely to seek higher education and whether furthering their education better their post lay-off economic condition has been the subject of debate (Ghilani, 2008; Knapp and Harms, 2002). Couch, Jolly, and Placzek (2009) have established that the higher the educational level a displaced

worker has attained, the higher her/his salary will be at a subsequent job. As stated by Jacobson, Lalonde, and Sullivan (2005), math and technical community college classes raise salaries for displaced

Exhibit 10

Laid Off or Displaced in Past 2 Years



workers. However, according to these authors, up to two-thirds of the salary differential between those who choose to return to community college and those who do not is attributable to increased hours of work for the more educated workers. Regardless of pay differences between those who choose further education and those who do not, retraining programs focusing primarily on job search and interview skills provide little benefit to displaced workers (Knapp and Harms, 2002). At any rate, most evidence indicates that many displaced workers choose education following layoffs (Ghilani, 2008; Knapp and Harms, 2002).

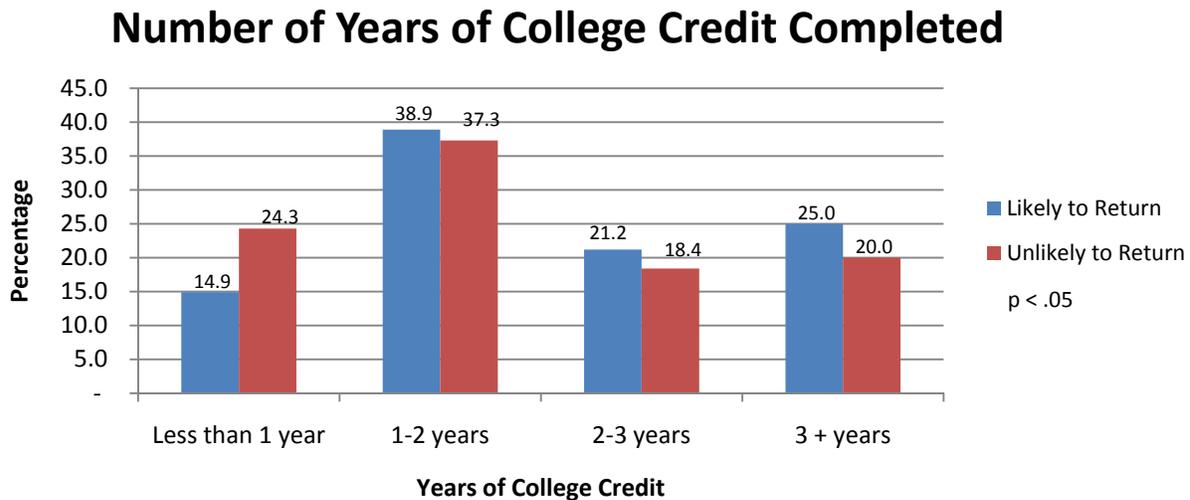
Individuals who were laid off from a job in the past two years were nearly three times as likely to say they intend to return to college as those who have not been displaced from a job

The amount of time previously spent in college also gives insight into differences between the LTR and UTR groups. Exhibit 11 shows that 46% of the LTR group have at least two years of college credit completed, and 25% have completed more than three years of their college credits. Only 38% of UTR have more than two years completed with 20% having more than three years of college experience.

Previous research on amount of previous college experience has been focused on adults participating in continuing education and not re-enrolling to complete degrees. As such, the research has found that those with more education are more likely to continue with educational

pursuits. Kleiner et al. (2007) have reported that education level exhibits a positive relationship with participation in adult education. That is, individuals with graduate or professional degrees participate in additional educational opportunities more than do individuals with all other levels

Exhibit 11



of educational attainment. Also Creighton and Hudson (2002) have found that when all other factors are held constant, level of educational attainment predicts participation in adult education. To explain these results, they rely on the reasoning of Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, and Kolstad (1993), stating that higher levels of educational attainment correlate with higher literacy and reasoning skills. Simply put, educated adults may find classes easier or more enjoyable. Similar results have been reported by Koeber and Wright (2006) and Darkenwald, Kim, and Stowe (1998). Regarding their results, Koeber and Wright (2006) hypothesize that higher education levels may be associated with more familiarity with the variety of options available for education and training. It has been established that actual re-enrollment is predicted by extent of previous educational experiences (Woosley et al., 2005).

46% of the “Likely to Return” group have at least 2 years of college credit, 25% of the group have completed at least 3 years of credit

Worth noting are some demographics that did not show differences between LTR and UTR groups. As mentioned, working full-time, part-time, or not at all does not provide for differences between groups. These findings do not support previous research such as Creighton

and Hudson (2002), who describe how part-time workers are less likely to involve themselves in work-related higher education, whereas retired workers are disproportionately more likely to enroll in courses. Regardless, as Blais, Duqueite, and Painchaud (1989) have observed, there may be little incentive to continue education in many work environments. The work itself may create the disincentives through high-stress levels and temporal demands (Kaplan and Saltiel, 1997). Horn (1998) presents empirical evidence that full-time workers are less likely to return to college than are part-time workers.

Additionally, differences did not exist between counties of respondents, which included urban and rural areas. Whether the respondent previously attended a two-year community college or a four-year college or university showed no differences between the groups. Finally, there were no differences between genders with respect to interest in re-enrolling. This is contrary to previous research which has shown that women express more motivation to enroll and participate in higher education in greater percentages than do men (Blais, et al., 1989; Creighton and Hudson, 2002; Furst-Bowe and Dittmann, 2001; Lockhart, 2003; and Horn, Peter, and Rooney, 2002). Other research (Kimmel and McNeese, 2006) has reported no differences related to gender when assessing motivations to attend college. They do believe however, that this hypothesized relationship is partially masked by the interaction of gender with age in their study.

Barriers and Motivational Differences Between Groups

Differences were also found between groups with respect to some of the psychographic and attitudinal questions. In terms of views on the value of education, exhibit 12 shows that the LTR respondents are more likely than the UTR respondents to agree with the statements examining the value that they and their family place on education.

Exhibit 12

Personal and Family Value of Education	% Agree LTR	% Agree UTR
To make a good living you need a college education	77.9	57.6
A college education is important for a person's success	89.4	73.7
Your family and friends believe a college education is a key to success	91.8	73.5

p < .001 for all

On personal views, exhibit 13 shows that the LTR respondents are more likely than the UTR respondents to agree with the statements regarding the importance of personal success and giving back to the community.

Exhibit 13

Value of Success and Community Involvement	% Agree LTR	% Agree UTR
To be financially successful is important to me	85.6	74.5
Working for the betterment of my community is important to me	97.1	88.2

$p < .001$ for all

These findings support the research that has examined why individuals are motivated to return to higher education and the value they place on completing their degree. For example, Aslanian and Brickell (1980) maintain that primary motivators for the choices made by these adults are to gain career-related credentials and improve job opportunities. Other researchers (e.g. Anderson and Darkenwald, 1979; Apps, 1981; Klein, 1990; O'Donnell and Tobell, 2007; Palazesi and Bower, 2006; Steltenpohl and Shipton, 1986) have agreed that these decisions are outcome-driven and rational in an economic sense.

Other motivators include affiliation or social needs (Graham, 1988; Steltenpohl and Shipton, 1986; Wolfgang and Dowling, 1981). Klein (1990) describes social needs of adult learners as being low to moderate when summarizing the results of this research. Cross (1981) depicts the motivation of some adult students as an itch to learn, and others have identified needs for personal growth and enrichment as being important to some adult learners (Klein, 1990; O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007). Blunt and Yang (2002) identified three dimensions: (1) Enjoyment of learning activities, (2) Importance of adult education, and (3) Intrinsic value of adult education. These authors argue that these three dimensions adequately explain the motivations of adult learners to participate in higher education.

When asked about some of the barriers to returning to college, the LTR respondents are more likely than the UTR respondents to indicate that completing a degree would not take too long, that their job does require a degree, and that their family and friends would encourage their re-enrollment in college. (Note these three questions had negative wording to make the percent agreeing appear smaller for the LTR group in exhibit 14). Additionally, the LTR respondents are

more likely to express concern over the impact on family finances if they re-enroll, and, while a small percentage, the LTR group are more likely to say transportation is a concern for re-enrolling.

Exhibit 14

Barriers to Re-enrollment	% Agree LTR	% Agree UTR
The time it will take to finish makes returning to college difficult	27.4	37.6
Your job does not require a college degree, so returning is difficult	21.9	63.7
Your friends and family do not encourage your return to college	5.8	8.6
Family finances might make returning to college difficult	56.3	41.2
Lack of reliable transportation makes returning to college difficult	13.5	3.9

$p < .01$ for all, except $p < .001$ for job does not require a degree

Cost and time concerns are cited as barriers in previous research. O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007) have reported that more than half of their survey respondents believed that costs have impeded their educational attainment. Other studies consistently have identified tuition and living expenses as barriers to pursuing higher education for adult populations (Chao, DeRocco, and Flynn, 2007; Darkenwald, Gordon, and Valentine, 1985; Hoyt, 1999; Hoyt and Winn, 2004; Silva et al., 1998). Among students who were already enrolled in higher education, the future repayment of student loans is a concern (Johnson, 2006; Kimmel & McNeese, 2006; Stratton, et al., 2008). Chao et al. (2007) believe that costs disproportionately affect adult students because they usually do not have the parental support systems that are available to younger students.

Silva et al. (1989) believe that time creates the strongest barrier of all for adult learners. Adult learners juggle the time constraints created by jobs and families to participate in higher education (Chao et al., 2007; Ellsworth, Pierson, Welborn, and Frost, 1991). While the impact on family finances showed the LTR group having greater cost concerns than the UTR group, only the total length of time to complete a degree showed differences between the two groups, with the LTR less concerned with the overall time to complete their degree. Three other questions related to time constraints – “finding the time to attend classes might make returning to college difficult,” “fitting classes around your work schedule might make returning to college difficult,” and “family responsibilities might make returning to college difficult” – did not show

differences between the two groups. That is not to say that these are not concerns of the LTR group. Each of these statements had at least 58% agreement from the LTR group; however, a similar percentage of UTR group also agreed with the statements.

65% believe they do not have the time to return to college
60% believe family responsibilities make retuning to college difficult
58% believe it is difficult to fit college classes around work schedules

Discussion

This study finds that there are some 57,000 young adults in Metro Detroit who intend to re-enroll in college in the next few years. This is a substantial market similar in size to the region's graduating class of high school seniors; however, these individuals who are likely to re-enroll are different on various factors from the high school cohort and are different from young adults who are unlikely to re-enroll in college.

This study provides support for the findings of previous studies that have identified factors associated with individuals' intentions to re-enroll in higher education. Confirming previous research, those who intend to re-enroll have more financial concerns than do those who have no plans to re-enroll. Additionally, individuals who believe that education is important to success are more likely to express intentions to re-enroll. Moreover, results indicate that individuals who have had more college classes are also more likely to plan on re-enrolling than are those who have had fewer college classes. Displaced workers also are more likely to express the intention to re-enroll than are those with other employment statuses. Among adults 25 to 34 years old, results indicate that younger adults are more likely to intend to re-enroll in higher education than are their older counterparts. Similarly, results indicate that adults with no children are more likely to plan on returning to college.

This study did not support some previous research findings. As examples, previous research indicates that females disproportionately enroll in college. Yet in this study, males have equal interests in re-enrolling and are as likely as females to intend to re-enroll. Other research, based on relatively robust previous findings, failed to be supported; including research showing that planning to enroll is impacted by time constraints, which show no differences between those who intend to re-enroll and those who do not intend to re-enroll.

The primary contributions of this study are results that diverge from previous findings from research of adults returning to college. Among the more important findings, despite racial or cultural barriers, minority members are more likely to express intent to re-enroll in higher education. Moreover, in contrast to some previous research, low-income individuals are most likely to intend to resume their college educations.

These findings also identify critical policy implications. As stated earlier, these young adults who plan to re-enroll in higher education represent a significant source of potential students for colleges and universities. From an outreach perspective, current college recruitment efforts should be reviewed and redirected at segments of previous students who intend to pursue education in the future.

For example, African American stop-outs represent an identifiable segment to which recruitment efforts could be directed. Intensified recruitment, outreach, and marketing efforts to African Americans would appear to be justified in light of the above results. Likewise, displaced workers, younger adults, and men represent other segments that may require non-traditional outreach efforts by college recruitment offices. This last point is due to men being underrepresented in college according to current enrollment figures.

Moreover, lower-income individuals are more likely to intend to re-enroll in college. This fact underscores the critical need for financial aid. Stratton et al. (2008) have found that work-study aid and grants, as opposed to loans, increase the chances that a student will persist toward a degree. Among barriers to re-enrollment, money represents a key hurdle young adults must overcome.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study has limitations. The sample frame focused on one metropolitan area. Admittedly, the findings may not be generalizable to other areas of the country. At the time of this study, the Detroit metropolitan area was experiencing serious economic pain. High unemployment rates and a plethora of plant closures may be intensified in areas experiencing difficult economic conditions. Similarly, the telephone survey method resulted in a low response rate. Some of that low response rate was caused by the strict selection criteria, but even among those who fit all criteria, the response rate was low.

As pointed out before, explaining re-enrollment in higher education is a relatively small area of research. Some of the work in this area (e.g. Horn, 1998; Johnson, 2006; Stratton et al., 2007 and 2008; Woosley, 2004; Woosley et al., 2005) has provided the groundwork for future research as the study of re-enrollment defines itself as separate and distinct from studies of withdrawal and persistence behavior. From this, a redirection of studies toward research for which the study of stop-outs is the main objective is recommended. Also recommend is further research attempting to replicate or refute findings from this study that contradict or do not confirm previous research findings (i.e. minority status, income).

The size of this potential market – 57,000 in southeast Michigan – makes it equivalent in size to the traditional high school senior cohort and places tremendous value on understanding the motivations and concerns of adults who intend to re-enroll in college

Conclusion

The size of this potential market, equivalent in size to the traditional high school senior cohort, places tremendous value on understanding the motivations and concerns of adults who intend to re-enroll in college. The need for a well-educated workforce to help states and countries remain economically competitive is often discussed in the media, political debates, and professional circles. Adults are expressing intentions to re-enroll in college. It is logical to assume they are doing so to prepare themselves for the changing employment market as both they and their families indicate that a college education leads to success.

These potential students differ in various aspects from high-school seniors. Stop-outs have constraints that include fitting school around their career and family. They are older with previous experience in a college setting. Some have been affected by a layoff from a career and are looking for a change. Given these differences, traditional admissions processes and other campus structures are not the most efficient mechanism to convert them to enrolled students.

Incoming freshmen and their high-school counselors spend considerable effort assembling application data, thinking about majors, ordering standardized test scores, and providing academic transcripts. Stop-outs do not have the same infrastructure to assist them with those duties. Universities or consortia of universities should create one-stop centers that can support the litany of administrative tasks needed to apply to return to college.

Similarly, costs are also identified as a potential barrier to the re-enrolling students. While they are not alone in their concerns, many traditional financial aid programs are designed for incoming freshmen and not working adults with family obligations. Development and investment in funding sources specifically targeted at the needs of working young adults is needed to offset the cost of returning to college and its significant effect on their family's short-term finances. Government and academic leaders need to examine opportunities to expand current financial aid options or create new tools targeted at this large pool of potential students.

While time does not appear as a significant barrier when comparing the LTR to the UTR group, several statements about time as a concern did register with the LTR group. Finding the time to attend classes might make returning to college difficult (65%), family responsibilities might make returning to college difficult (61%), and fitting classes around your work schedule might make returning to college difficult (58%) are statements which a majority of the LTR group agreed are potential barriers to re-enrolling in college. Highly-flexible offerings are needed in response to the time constraints this group faces as they juggle the demands of their professional and personal lives.

Stop-outs differ from traditional incoming freshmen in various aspects, and universities need to provide resources to assist stop-outs with the barriers that are presented because of those differences

Weekend and evening courses provide flexibility for working adults to continue their education. Expansion of such course offerings is important to assist adults in their progression towards degrees, as are shorter academic terms. Traditional academic cycles include three 15-week semesters per year in which students' class schedules do not change. Having six to eight week-long academic terms provide more flexibility in adjusting for changes in work and family commitments. Online courses also offer much greater flexibility than traditional on-campus courses. Many colleges and universities in Southeast Michigan currently offer individual courses online. However, of universities and community colleges sampled in the region, few were found to offer degrees – either bachelors or associates programs – that can be completed entirely online. This study points to the expansion of online degree programs as an important future consideration.

This is not a single-university or single-state issue. The nation's supply of high school seniors is shrinking and there are eight million Americans with previous college experience who should be encouraged to re-enroll in higher education and assisted with the re-enrollment process. Government and university leaders at both state and national levels must act to reduce the barriers this group faces and create opportunities for these young adults to return to college to complete their college education.

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