

Report Finds That 36 Million Americans Have Some College But No Degree

[By Hunter B. Martin, NASFAA Staff Reporter](#)

Most researchers agree that college is one of the best methods of career advancement and a step toward financial stability. Yet there are 36 million people in America who have started but not finished degrees, according to a [new report](#) by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

The report, released during a panel discussion event on Wednesday, analyzed data collected over the past 25 years and provided an update on the research center's last report on students with some college, but no degree (SCND), which was published in 2014.

Today, there are 7 million more SCND students than in 2014. The report tracked the 29 million SCND students over the last five years and found that 3.8 million of all SCND students had re-enrolled in college, while another 940,000 had "against all the odds," completed a degree, certificate, or other credential. Another 1.1 million SCND students are still enrolled in higher education.

"There are a lot of student successes among this student population," said Doug Shapiro, the executive research director at the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. "We should be celebrating them more because these successes represent huge dedication on the part of students. These successes have been invisible and ignored by traditional graduation rates."

The report sought to pin down characteristics that could shed light on this population and signal where there might be potential to help get some of these students across the finish line to complete their programs of study. Overall, students in this population were on average in their early 40s and were last enrolled in college during their 20s. While these students are widespread across the nation, some states face additional difficulties in filling job openings due to disproportionately high rates of SCND and disproportionately low rates of potential completers when compared with other states.

According to Mikyung Ryu, the director of research publication at the research center, the report focuses on strategies to re-engage some of the 3.5 million potential completers because "it's not realistic" to expect all 36 million students to re-enroll in college and complete their programs.

By measuring enrollment records, the report found that potential completers had better outcomes than other SCND students. They were also younger, were enrolled within the last four years on average, stopped out more frequently, and were less likely to start or be last enrolled at a community college, according to the report.

However, "community colleges are the single largest sector awarding credentials to returning SCND adults," Ryu said. So while many SCND students do not start their degrees at community colleges, approximately 43% complete their degrees at two-year institutions, according to the report.

"The marginalized populations of our community are disproportionately affected by [SCND]: low-income, students of color, immigrant students," said Courtney Brown, the vice president of strategic impact at the Lumina Foundation.

Research has found that students of color and first generation students are at a higher risk of degree non-completion. The report found that black or Hispanic potential completers made up a larger percentage of the SCND population than the national pool of college graduates. The report also found that SCND students are three times as likely to default on their student loans than those who completed their credentials, and often end up in a worse job than those who have only a high school diploma, according to Brown.

“The higher education system is not set up for today’s reality,” Brown said. “Our policymakers still think about ‘college kids,’ but the reality is many of today’s students are over 25, work full-time, and have children.”

Several panelists said removing institutional barriers and reshaping legislation to better support the evolving demographic of students could help more potential completers re-enroll, and prevent others from falling short to begin with. Legislation barriers such as proof of inoculations and information about parental salaries often create “unintentional barriers” to older students, according to Leanne Davis, the assistant director of applied research at the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP). “Institutions don’t always know they’re putting up barriers,” she added.

For example, last year Wayne State University [launched](#) the Warrior Way Back initiative to help former students overcome financial barriers that prevented them from obtaining their degrees. As part of the program, students have the potential to have a portion of their institutional student debt forgiven if they return and make progress toward earning their degrees.

Likewise, IHEP’s [Degrees When Due](#) initiative provides institutions with resources to implement “degree reclamation strategies” to help students who are close to earning their degrees.

“We’ve got to look into what [institutions] are doing and how they’re doing it,” recommended Sally Johnstone, president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. “It is significantly cheaper for institutions to engage and keep an enrolled student than to recruit a new student.”

Other panelist recommendations included offering a broader range of class times, such as night options, weekend availability, or online options, as well as increasing access to child care, health care services, and [emergency food banks](#) to help students persist and complete credentials despite temporary or long standing financial hardships.

“It’s very scary to put yourself back into a place where you think you failed,” said Hadass Sheffer, president of the Graduate! Network, Inc. “There are a growing number of institutions that do work for adults, but it’s hard to find them.”

Overall, the panelists believed the report offered a glimmer of hope for future institutional and legislative changes that could help the millions of students who started college but left without a degree.

“Every one of these data points is a human being. It could be the person walking next to you on the street,” Davis said.

Brown suggesting a change in tone surrounding the conversation of non-completers. “The person didn’t fail, the system failed them. Individuals want to know this is going to be different than the first time.”

Publication Date: 10/31/2019