In Their Own Voices
Young Texans Talk About the Barriers to College Completion
Prepared by Public Agenda for the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board
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Background
Through its ongoing work as part of the Lumina Foundation’s Productivity Initiative, Public Agenda partnered with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) and the Pathways Project to elevate the voices of students in the conversations around retention, persistence, and completion of postsecondary degrees and certificates.

While Texas colleges and universities have seen large enrollment growth in the past few years, most students are not completing their college degrees. A study conducted by the THECB and the Texas Education Agency, which tracked the cohort of students who graduated high school in Texas in 2003, has yielded sobering information.

Six years after graduation:

- The large majority of these students (76%) had not earned a college degree of any kind.
- Only one out of every five of these students (18%) had earned a bachelor’s degree.
- Only one out of every 20 students (6%) had earned a two-year degree, certificate, or Associate in Arts degree.

By focusing on the perspectives of those who have failed to complete degrees, and of those who are currently struggling to stay in school, we hope this report will help add texture and depth to ongoing research around issues associated with college completion. This project builds on and complements recent research conducted by Public Agenda on behalf of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, summarized in the reports With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them: Myths and Realities About Why So Many Students Fail to Finish College and Can I Get a Little Help Here: How an Overstretched High School Guidance System Is Undermining Students’ College Aspirations.

In conducting focus groups with noncompleters and current students, we sought to learn more about the barriers that prevent students from completing their degrees and to better understand the role that high schools and colleges play in creating or minimizing obstacles to persistence and completion. Key areas of inquiry included academic preparation, high school advising practices, the transition from high school to college, navigating the bureaucratic aspects of
college (e.g., financial aid), college advising practices, support structures and academic quality, and work/life pressures facing college students.

Methodology
Thirteen focus groups were conducted between November 2010 and January 2011 in five Texas cities: Houston, El Paso, San Antonio, McAllen, and Austin. In total, roughly 125 participants provided their thoughts, feedback, and ideas in these groups. Seven groups were conducted with noncompleters, five groups were conducted with current students (three groups with students at two-year institutions, two groups with students at four-year institutions), and one group was conducted with recent graduates.

Two out of three groups of current students were held on campuses and were coordinated and recruited through contacts of the THECB and Pathways Project staff. One of the groups of current students was held at a focus group facility in the Rio Grande Valley region. Most were first-year students and represented a mix of genders, races, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The recent college graduate group and the noncompleter groups were held at professional focus group facilities and were screened according to census data to be representative of their communities.

Although we originally intended to speak with recent college graduates in each of the cities, after the San Antonio group with recent graduates, we made the executive decision to focus only on noncompleters and current students. We made this decision because the graduates we spoke with did not seem to have deep insights into the challenges associated with persistence and completion that we were most interested in learning about. We felt it would be of best use to the project to focus our efforts on the needs and experiences of current students and recent noncompleters. A moderator’s guide and some visual stimuli were developed by Public Agenda and approved by THECB and Pathways Project staff.

Please note that verbatim comments have been lightly edited but fully represent respondents’ views and opinions. Instances of slang and imperfect grammar have been maintained for authenticity.

A note on qualitative research
What emerges from focus groups is often fascinating: This kind of qualitative research offers a richness and level of detail that is impossible to capture in quantitative research, and it can provide crucial insights into the deeper meanings underlying the findings of quantitative studies. In addition, as the title of this report suggests, qualitative research can help remind us that there are people behind the numbers—people who have knowledge to share by virtue of experiencing firsthand the problems we seek to understand and address. We believe qualitative research is a powerful and essential complement to quantitative research, but it is important to acknowledge
that qualitative research of this scope and scale has important limitations. While our research in this project builds on knowledge gained in other related quantitative and qualitative research, this project is a small-scale, exploratory study. It offers interesting avenues of inquiry and, we hope, useful insights, but it should not be treated as a comprehensive picture of obstacles to persistence and completion in Texas. Therefore, the findings should be viewed as suggestive, rather than definitive, and should be examined in the broader context of other existing research.
The Findings in Brief

The findings are presented here in chronological order. That is, we begin by looking at the high school experience and then move to the transition from high school to college, finishing by looking at the college experience itself.

Finding 1: Postsecondary attainment is highly valued by all, though some question whether or not it is worth the effort
The value of receiving a college degree and the associated benefits of getting a diploma are clear to all audiences. At the same time, concerns about debt and the economy cause some to wonder if a degree is really worth the effort.

Finding 2: Inadequate academic preparation and poor advising in high school set the stage for failure
Expectations for student achievement, especially among challenged students, appear to be diminished through a focus on standardized tests at school and a lack of good advice from faculty, school counselors, or family.

Finding 3: For those without strong support systems, solid preparation, and a clear sense of purpose, the transition to college can quickly lead to a desire to give up
Between more challenging academics, financial issues, and family concerns, pressures mount quickly and powerfully to derail students, particularly those who enter college without clear goals.

Finding 4: Faculty at two-year institutions get better marks than faculty at four-year institutions or advisers at any type of institution
The intimacy of the small class structure and the quality of interaction between faculty and students generally make the experience at two-year institutions more positive for students, yet the advising system leaves many feeling adrift.
The Findings in Greater Detail

Finding 1: Postsecondary attainment is highly valued by all, though some question whether or not it is worth the effort

It was clear from our conversations that higher education attainment is broadly viewed as extremely important for improving one’s condition both financially and as a contributing member of one’s community.

*It seems like the jobs they have for people without a college education is like—there’s a cap on it. You can only make so much. My brother works for [a dead-end job]. He’s been doing that for 12 years. [He didn’t finish his degree.] He can’t make more than about 20-something thousand a year. My oldest brother, who got his master’s, I don’t know how much he’s making, but he has a house and a wife and kids. There’s a difference.* —Male, noncompleter, El Paso

*I mean, jobs are hard to find. So someone with a college education is more likely to get a job that you can live off of than someone who doesn’t have a college education. Because jobs are so tight, they’re being pretty selective, so in order to find a job that you’re going to have stability with and be able to live your future...a college education makes the biggest difference.* —Female, current student, Austin

*Basically, the reason I’m going to college right now is because they won’t hire you without a certain degree or whatever, and there’s so many things out there, I mean, that it’s required for you to go to college, to succeed, to become somebody.* —Male, current student, McAllen

*[A postsecondary credential or degree] is an investment in your future, but it’s also an investment in someone else’s future.... It’s not just that person’s future, but whatever career choice you choose can help someone else.* —Female, noncompleter, San Antonio

Although virtually everyone recognized the financial rewards of a postsecondary degree in the workplace, some questioned assumptions regarding the economic returns from a college education given the nation’s economic situation. Even more, those noncompleters who accumulated student loan debt were particularly likely to question the economic value of a degree that comes with huge debt.

*My sister-in-law went to college for, like, four years or five years, and she still can’t find a job, and she got out of college about a year ago, two years ago.... It’s, like, sometimes is it even worth it?* —Female, noncompleter, McAllen
I felt that you really don’t get—I don’t think you get enough out of it, considering what you put into the financial aspect. When I went into school, I was thinking, “Man, this is going to be a good opportunity. I’ll be able to make money, this and that.” I started working, and everybody at work would have degrees, and I was basically in the same position as them, minus the however many thousands dollars of debt they had from school. —Male, noncompleter, Houston

I just think that there are people that don’t have the money going in, and they put themselves in a lot of debt to go through college—if you put yourself $50,000 in debt and you get a teaching degree, and you make $27,000 a year coming out of school, you’re going to be in the hole for a while, whereas if you can go through an apprenticeship and come out making $60,000 or $70,000, you have no debt to pay back, you’re not going to have the anxiety of dealing with your debt. —Female, noncompleter, Houston

It is also important to note that those who questioned the value of attaining postsecondary credentials were noncompleters: For these former students, knowing that their investment is going to pay off and that they won’t be crippled by debt is a critical consideration that will factor into their decision to go back and complete their degrees.

**Finding 2: Inadequate academic preparation and poor advising in high school set the stage for failure**

Students report that more tests means lower expectations
For a large number of respondents, high school was a time of lots of tests, too much hand-holding, and low expectations from teachers. Many participants described feeling as though they were essentially told to do as little as possible to get by so that the school wouldn’t “look bad” for having high numbers of struggling/failing students.

*Nobody pushed you [in high school]. Like, it was up to you whether you wanted to do it or not. They baby you too much, I’m sorry to say.* —Female, noncompleter, McAllen

*They’re not pushing you, they’re not preparing you.... Especially with [all] this testing...the expectations are dropped lower and lower every year so everybody can meet it, so the school can make more money.... I mean, it’s more about meeting that test and everybody passing so that the school can get more money, rather than actually teaching the students...to be real knowledgeable about the subject that the teacher’s supposed to be showing them and everything.* —Female, two-year student, El Paso
I only felt pushed when they wanted us to pass those standard tests. —Female, noncompleter, Houston

I feel like I wasn’t prepared when I went into college with math and stuff. I feel like I didn’t know the stuff that I should’ve known….. Unfortunately, down here they prep you more for passing your tests more than actually learning. —Female, noncompleter, McAllen

Many reported that by choosing (or being advised) to do the absolute minimum, they finished their most rigorous academic requirements when they were juniors or even sophomores in high school and that their senior year was just a “blow-off.” As a result, they arrived at college totally unprepared for basic math, since more than a year had passed without them taking any serious academic courses before graduation.

The last math in high school I remember I was a sophomore. In junior and senior year you didn’t have to take it anymore, because they give you different plans that you want to follow, and you get to choose. I remember I took Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II. That was it. The precalculus and calc and anything else that they offered, it was up to you if you wanted to take it. —Female, noncompleter, McAllen

[Senior year] just went by so quick because I had only three classes that I needed to take. Everything else were electives. —Female, two-year student, Houston

They make the two hardest subjects the ones you opt out on senior year. Those are the ones you need to be refreshed on when you go in [to college]. —Female, noncompleter, San Antonio

Data collected by THECB indicates that students’ decisions regarding the level of academic rigor they pursued in high school, and the type of diploma they earned as a result of their efforts, are important factors in whether or not they go on to complete postsecondary degrees. For example, students who entered a public two-year college with a Distinguished diploma were more than twice as likely to earn a bachelor’s degree (36%) than students with a Recommended diploma (17%).

Poor advising practices in high school reinforce low expectations, further undercut preparation. We heard almost no stories of high school guidance counselors who provided students with the information and help they needed in order to get ready for college academically or otherwise. The following quotes are representative of what we heard about the experiences with high school guidance counselors:
I don’t know of any experience with a counselor telling me to go to college or motivating me to go. —Male, current student, McAllen

I think [guidance counselors] told us didn’t go into detail to tell you the hardships that would actually happen once you get to college as far as applying for financial aid or preparing beforehand for it. It just kind of seemed like this Disneyland-esque thing. … They didn’t tell us what it actually takes to prepare for this and what it’s going to take as far as study skills and how to prepare your time and stuff like that. —Female, noncompleter, San Antonio

Basically, if they know you’re not going to pass, [they advise you] to do the basic minimum. [Choose the basic option, with the fewest requirements] because they know that’s all you’re going to do. … You’re just going to do what you can to pass is what they [want]. —Female, noncompleter, San Antonio

I feel like [guidance counselors] felt like the students in our school were most likely to succeed if they went to a branch of military [rather] than going to college. —Male, noncompleter, Houston

I wasn’t counseled by anyone or anything like that. I don’t even recall ever talking to a counselor or anything about college. —Female, noncompleter, Houston

I think that’s why... a lot of us started school and then ended up not [finishing]. It’s like if we weren’t ready, I think it was because in high school we didn’t have the support or encouragement. —Female, current student, McAllen

**Inadequate Advising Is Not Unique to Texas…**

Public Agenda’s 2009 national report, *Can I Get a Little Help Here: How an Overstretched High School Guidance System Is Undermining Students’ College Aspirations*, reflects the opinion of more than 600 young adults’ experiences with guidance and advisement in their high school and college years and critically examines how the advisement process is preventing students from greater achievement.

The four key findings of the study are particularly bad news for students and reflect poorly on their high school advisers:

- Most students, even those who successfully complete college, give their high school guidance counselors fair or poor ratings
- Students who get perfunctory counseling are more likely to delay college and make more questionable higher education choices
It is reasonable to surmise that the lack of adequate advisement (in terms of both academic and social/emotional preparation for college), and the accompanying low expectations that many described, had a particularly negative impact on first-generation students and those who came from communities where there was not a strong college-going culture. When noncompleters were asked about their backgrounds, many said things like:

* College wasn’t really a spoken language in my household. I got my college information from, like, TV shows and stuff. —Male, noncompleter, Houston

* The farthest grade [my mom] went was third.... My dad graduated from high school, but right after he went to the Army. I’m the baby, so I didn’t get no motivation except from my husband. —Female, noncompleter, El Paso

* My parents didn’t go to college, so I would ask them, “Help me with my algebra homework,” and they turned the book upside down. They didn’t know what they were looking at. —Female, noncompleter, McAllen

* If you come from a patriarchal society, your fathers or the men of the family, they kind of frown upon the women getting an education. They think that they should still be at home with the children, being a full-time mom. That right there, it kind

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High school counselors are viewed as less helpful than teachers
Advisers at higher education institutions get better ratings, but there’s room for improvement

When students were asked about their high school advisers’ ability to advise them on their careers, decide on the right schools, and get them help with the application process or financial aid forms, negative responses outweighed positive ones by far; almost half of the students surveyed described their experience with high school advisers as “just being another face in the crowd.”

While one reason for this is that counselors are woefully overstretched, especially in larger urban schools, the fact that a correlation exists between perfunctory counseling and poor student outcomes suggests that more needs to be done to improve the availability of counselors and to improve their professional training.

The findings in this report are not surprising but reinforce the fact that a mind-set of low expectations can be built among students early in their high school careers by poor counseling and advice.
of makes you feel, “Am I doing the right thing?” In the end, of course, you get the benefit of having an education and you’ll eventually give your children a better life because you’ll have a better job, be able to provide for them more. But then you have your family, the men in the family, still kind of telling you that this is wrong. You shouldn’t be doing this, you should be at home. —Female, two-year student, El Paso

Finding 3: For those without strong support systems, solid preparation, and a clear sense of purpose, the transition to college can quickly lead to a desire to give up

Navigating financial aid, course selection, studying, work schedules, family needs, and a new social situation is overwhelming for many students. In almost all of the groups with current students, we could easily identify a few who felt they were not going to make it to graduation.

We were particularly struck that these students, as well as the noncompleters, seem to lack a clear sense of direction. Many students talked about feeling adrift after high school, saying things like:

"It would have been nice to understand what my options were at a younger age so I'd have more time to aim more to that goal. Instead, senior year was like, okay, you're out. Go to college." —Female, noncompleter, El Paso

"I wish I had the other support, because my parents told me, “Okay, go to college,” but it's hard to get through college. I don't have this information how to make application, how to apply for scholarships, how to apply for anything. I didn't have a lot of information." —Male, noncompleter, McAllen

"I know a lot of people—I was the first one who was going to college. I have nobody to show me. I'm just blind, just trying to pick out of a bag and decide what I need to be doing." —Female, noncompleter, San Antonio

"I changed my major so many times. Even throughout one semester, I would just decide to do something else, but I think my main thing was also just looking for something that was going to help me later on financially, even if I didn’t like it." —Female, current student, McAllen

Given the quotes above, it is not surprising that noncompleters cite lack of clear direction and goals as a major contributor to their lack of persistence

"I didn’t give myself time to think. What did I want to do? I took all these classes that I can’t even use [together toward a degree]"—Female, noncompleter, San Antonio
I started off with wanting to do a computer science degree, and from there, I jumped to philosophy and then biology and then physics and now math, and now I’m realizing that I actually did want to go back to computer science. —Male, current student, McAllen

I never knew like, “I’m going to go to college so that I can do this.” It was just more—I don’t know. I went in…and then I started jumping around, “No, I want to do this. I want to do this.” …But I don’t remember myself ever thinking when I was in high school, “I’m going to graduate so that I can do this.” —Female, current student, McAllen

I honestly wasn’t ready to go [to college]. I just wasn’t, because…when I went to school, I didn’t know what I was going for; I just was going to take basics just to see and then determine what I wanted to do. —Male, noncompleter, McAllen

Academic challenges take many forms
On the academic front, many quickly realized that they were not prepared for the challenge of college-level classes, did not have the requisite study skills or the discipline, and were not ready for the sink-or-swim approach of faculty compared with that of their high school teachers.

I think if you didn’t take dual credit or didn’t take AP classes, you wouldn’t be prepared for college at all. —Male, current student, Austin

I was doing good in high school, but I had to go the extra mile to learn everything that I needed later on in college. I was having trouble with my writing…. In college, I would write an essay, and it was all full of red ink of all the errors that I made. I thought I did it right. I used to do this back in high school, but it’s not good enough in college. —Male, noncompleter, McAllen

I’m taking history. I’ve never taken a history class. It’s really weird. I never had to learn the dates. I know in high school I didn’t—I had history, but the teachers would baby you and tell you all the dates, and the test comes, and it’s straight off the review. —Female, four-year student, Houston

Me, personally, I just wish I had learned to be more organized back in high school, because now it’s a mess, basically. —Female, two-year student, El Paso
It’s a lot more independent than what I thought. I really didn’t think that it would be [like that]. It’s really all you, no one else. If anything goes wrong, it falls on you. —Female, two-year student, El Paso
They’d just be like, keep up. If you don’t understand it, well, go to tutoring. Go somewhere else. They weren’t going to take the time to help you. —Female, noncompleter, McAllen

It is clear that students are quite often unprepared for the academic rigor of college based on the percentage of students who are required to enroll in developmental education courses. According to data provided by THECB, nearly three-fourths (73%) of students that started a public two-year college and did not earn a degree within six years were enrolled in at least one developmental education course.

Life pressures can easily derail students
Those with children and/or jobs and debt have the extra pressures of these commitments in their lives and are constantly trying to find some balance.

You can balance your job and your bills and school and your child, but you’re going to have to take a crappy job that pays $7.50 an hour that allows you to get a schedule that works with your school and allows you to get a schedule. Not going to get weekends off to spend with your child, to go to church. —Female, noncompleter, El Paso

At that time, I had to work full-time. I had a baby, and I have to finish my homework till one o’clock in the morning, two o’clock in the morning, so that was pretty stressful. —Female, noncompleter, Houston

It’s hard to struggle with a child and work and school, and I had gone to school full-time…I have to go from school, go pick [my son] up, drop him off with my mom, then rush back to school, rush home, make him dinner, feed him, bathe him, get him ready for bed, and then it’s just a whole other thing the next day. —Female, noncompleter, McAllen

I thought I could handle both school and work, and then work became full-time; it was just overwhelming. —Male, noncompleter, San Antonio

You get financial aid or you get a loan or something. It takes forever to get your loan. It takes forever to get your financial aid. By that time, one month has passed, three weeks have passed, your teacher is giving you homework. Your teacher is giving you a test. Second week, you haven’t passed your test. You fail because you have to worry about all this stuff to pay for your college, the loan and all that. You end up dropping because your grade was really low at the beginning. —Female, noncompleter, El Paso
Finding 4: Faculty at two-year institutions get better marks than faculty at four-year institutions or advisers at any type of institution

Participants reported that the quality of support systems is mixed. In general, faculty tended to be more helpful than staff (e.g., advisers), especially if students took the initiative and asked for assistance. Current and former students typically found that community college faculty were more approachable than those at four-year schools.

Those who attended two-year institutions were far more likely to say things like:

*They were always open. They were always offering: “Did you get the lesson today? Do you need any help? I’m available from certain times. Come in before your classes.” I can’t complain about that. The professors I had, they were good people. They were good to us.* —Male, noncompleter, El Paso

*I’ve had… professors that have handed us a cell phone number and said, “Text me at 2:00 a.m. if you have problems with this research paper.”* —Female, two-year student, Houston

While those who attended four-year institutions were more likely to say things like:

*Their job [faculty] is to help you a little bit. If you come and ask for help, they’ll tell you what you did wrong, but I don’t think they’re going to go out of their way to specifically help you a ton.* —Male, four-year student, Houston

*They just took my money and were, like, “You’re on your own, good luck!”* —Female, noncompleter, San Antonio

While not quite as negatively cast as high school guidance counselors, college advisement systems generally received poor marks from students who were struggling. The inability to have a regularly assigned adviser and the quality of advisement were often considered to be subpar. The advisers were often ill-informed about the requirements associated with various programs, particularly in fields that are rapidly changing. The following story is typical of what we heard:

*With my advising session, during the summer I basically had to go to two different advisers because one of them messed up my schedule, so I had to talk to another adviser. Recently, I had to talk to two advisers as well because the first one, she didn’t know anything about premed at all. I already told the people before I came in, I was like, “I have to go talk to a prehealth adviser. That way they can help me.” They’re like, “No, you have to go to the one you’re assigned to.” I went to her, and she was like, “I’m not sure. Let me send you to the prehealth adviser.” In my mind, I’m like, “I’ve already asked. Why am I going when I already asked in*
the first place?" I had to go to another adviser. —Female, four-year student, Houston

We also heard about situations in which potentially overworked advisers didn’t really have the time or inclination to care about their individual advisees:

I was like, these are my counselors; these are the people that are supposed to guide me in the right direction....Dude didn’t even talk to me last time, so how does he know what’s best for me? Like she said, they’re just doing their job. —Male, noncompleter, El Paso

Their office is always busy and crowded. If you have to go to work right after your last class, but you want to see an adviser then, it’s like, I have to go to work. —Male, noncompleter, McAllen

You’re an adult already, 18...you want to feel self-confident. At the same time, you want to know somebody’s there [for you]... You sit down and tell them, “This is my plan, this is what I hope to achieve,” and you hope that someone’s there.... In case you get a flat tire, somebody’s there with a spare tire. At least that’s how I felt. Nobody had a spare tire for me. —Male, noncompleter, El Paso

Money, Money, Money

A major undercurrent of this study was the issue of money—how little students learned about financing their education and the difficulties they have in making ends meet to support or return to their education. Public Agenda’s 2009 study, With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them, quantified that the number one reason students didn’t complete their education is because they needed to work to make money, and that this same reason was also at the top of their list for why they didn’t go back to complete their degrees. We heard endless stories of students who learned the hard way about taking out loans or just struggling to balance the financial demands of school, family, and general living expenses.

While community college students generally described getting fairly generous student aid packages, most at the university level needed to also apply for loans (nearly 60% of students in four-year colleges and universities receive student loans vs. only 20% of students in two-year colleges), often unknowing of what the real financial burden would be.
I have $35,000 in student loans. I partied my butt off for $35,000. Now I’m paying for it. —Female, noncompleter, San Antonio

I do have a little bit of debt…. It bothers me just to have that little bit, because that little bit is going to accrue over time and time and time, especially with interest and stuff. I don’t want to be $30,000, $40,000 in debt after college, because you know it’s going to be difficult for me to get that paid off in the timeframe. —Male, current student, Austin

Associated expenses like books, for which there were often no low-cost alternatives, also proved to be troublesome. Needing to buy new editions of texts that only had minor updates since the last year’s edition or a professor’s own (expensive) text only fueled participants’ cynicism and scorn at the college and their growing belief that the school only wanted them for their money.

That’s when I noticed. I’m like, could easily go $600 to $800 on books. That’s at U Tech. It’s almost quarter of tuition. —Male, noncompleter, El Paso

I took a Spanish class this semester. You cannot buy the book used. We had to spend almost $300 on this set of a lab manual, a workbook, and a textbook. The only thing we’ve used out of that set is the access code. We haven’t cracked the book. We haven’t cracked the lab manual. We haven’t cracked the workbook, nothing. I can’t sell them back because they need that access code for the next student, and it’s only good for a semester. —Female, current two-year student, Houston

In addition to the actual costs of school, we witnessed a great need for better education on how to finance a college education. While a few had learned from either an older sibling, a high school counselor or teacher, or a nonprofit school-based program, the majority had no idea about what the financing process was like, what was needed in terms of paperwork, and how to manage their interactions with the financial aid office. We heard endless cases of students waiting hours in line to see an aid officer, being told to fix one thing on their package, and then being told something else was wrong when they returned with the updated materials.

I thought it was going to be really, really easy, and a lot of it was going to be handed to me, much like high school was handed to me. I don’t mean study-wise. I mean financial-wise. —Female, noncompleter, San Antonio

Provide a little bit more scholarships for people, too. Sometimes you apply for scholarships and they tell you, no, you don’t qualify for it. It’s kind of like you tell us money is out there, but how are we supposed to get it? —
Conclusion: Student Recommendations

By way of conclusion, we end here with some specific recommendations made by students. In each group we made sure to ask for ideas that students had for helping more students persist and succeed. Here are some of the things they wished for earlier in their academic career knowing what they know now about the challenges of making it through high school and transitioning to college:

- Require four years of math so that students don’t waste senior year and end up in challenging college math classes after a year away from the subject
- Have college students talk to high school students each year (freshman through senior year), so that high school students learn more about the realities of college
- Put more focus on writing across the curricula and have students write longer essays and papers
- Provide a college skills course in high school that includes the college application and financial aid processes, as well as study habits and time management
- Don’t let high schools “dumb down” the curricula just so students can pass
- Encourage students to take higher-credit graduation tracks and AP and dual-credit classes
- Make the transfer of credits between two- and four-year institutions easier
- Create better systems targeted toward students who are struggling and are not equipped to (or don’t know that they can) ask for help
- Provide more flexible course schedules, partnerships with employers, and financial aid for part-time students in order to better support working students and those with greater family pressures
- Develop innovative ways to instill the idea in our youth that college is attainable

We also asked students for the one most important thing they could tell Austin education officials about what would help them graduate. Here are some highlights of those requests:

- Make advisement not just a one-time proposition, but a plan that can be followed over the years
- Provide informal café-like settings where students can get counseling and online advice about colleges in the community
- Provide help like what Project Quest and Education Partner Ambassadors offer in San Antonio (and different organizations offer in other cities) for filling out financial aid forms and other college prep
- Maintain tuition rates at an affordable level
- Make it easier for more students to get financial aid, especially those who are balancing work and school, or living independently from their parents
• Offer a second chance to students who did not complete their degrees by providing several financing options and waiving any applicable penalties
• Help with defaults on loans so students who want to can get back to their studies
• Don’t change graduation requirements in the middle of the game
• Allow students to specialize their education sooner
• Provide more online classes for working students
• Find a way to rein in the textbook companies that require the use of costly new editions each year

Given the wealth of information provided by students in these conversations, we strongly suggest the pursuit of additional strategies to elevate their voices and bring them to the table as critical resources for problem solving around the challenges of retention, persistence and completion.