Survey: Work, Family to Blame For Low College Completion

A lack of financial support and a need to work simply to make ends meet are keeping college students from earning degrees or certificates, says a recent Public Agenda survey.

Underwritten with funds from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the nationwide survey, “With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them,” asked 600 young adults aged 22 to 30 to describe the biggest roadblocks to their college educations.

Fifty-six percent of respondents listed the need to work full time as a major impediment preventing them from returning to school. More than half of respondents also cited family commitments as a major factor. Even more troubling, perhaps, more than one-third of students indicated that they wouldn’t be able to return to college even if their tuition and books were fully paid for.

“The conventional wisdom is that students leave school because they aren’t willing to work hard and aren’t really interested in more education,” said Jean Johnson, director of Education Insights for Public Agenda. “What we found was almost precisely the opposite. Most work and go to school at the same time, and most are not getting financial help from their families or the system itself. It is the stress of this juggling act that forces many of them to abandon their pursuit of a college degree.”

Of those who failed to graduate, the survey found, 58 percent did not receive support from parents or relatives, and 69 percent did not receive support from scholarships or other financial aid.

President Obama already has pledged to make U.S. postsecondary graduation rates the highest in the world by the year 2020. And he has asked Congress for more than $12 billion through his landmark American Graduation Initiative to get the job done. According to the U.S. Department of Education, a paltry 20 percent of community college students currently graduate within three years.

But there is hope. Eighty-nine percent of respondents who failed to complete a degree said they thought about returning to college, and nearly all (97 percent) said it was important to them that their children attend college.

Students said better financial aid for part-time enrollees, more flexible class times, tuition reductions, and more childcare options and assistance were among the incentives that would encourage them to re-enroll and see their educations through to completion.

“Getting more and more students into college means nothing if we don’t also provide them with the support they need to graduate,” said Hilary Pennington, director of Education, Post-Secondary Success, and Special Initiatives at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.