

The Squeeze

Studies show that students don't quit college because they're lazy or inadequately prepared—they quit because they can't afford to continue.

By Yosef Getachew

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(Flickr/Billie Hara)

The traditional college student—one who pre-games for a big football game between Michigan and Ohio State on a Saturday morning—is rapidly fading from existence and is being replaced with another kind—a student that rises at 6 a.m. to work his or her full-time job while struggling to complete college.

But two independent studies done by the non-profit organizations [Demos](#) and [Public Agenda](#) reveal that the number one reason why students fail to complete college is because they are working a full-time job. A student may drop out of the very institution that is supposed to help him or her land a full-time job because he or she are already working one. The jobs they are working, however, are hardly their dream jobs. If anyone hasn't noticed, college is **extremely expensive** and it's only getting more expensive every year. As living costs increase and wages remain stagnant in the current economic climate, students who drop out are forced to pay for their own housing, transportation, and food are squeezed even more.

The Problem

There are generally three goals in college: attaining good grades, getting a good night's rest, and having a good social life, but you can usually only get two of the three at anytime. Imagine how much more difficult this becomes when you are forced to work anywhere from 20 to 40 hours a week. It becomes nearly

impossible for students to maintain this complex balance. In the [survey](#) conducted by Public Agenda, 60 percent of students who dropped out of college cited problems of juggling work and school.

“I had to work as well, and it was too stressful trying to do both,” said one student cited in the study. Another student who dropped out reportedly said “it’s very hard because I go to school three nights a week and work from 8 to 5... I also think my dedication to my classes could be better if I didn’t work as much.” If these statements reveal anything, it’s that the life of a college student has dramatically changed and must be addressed by higher education programs and institutions.

At this point many may be wondering why college students who are forced to work full time are not adequately covered by financial aid. Herein lies another problem – the inefficiencies of the current financial aid system. Financial aid [no longer provides the same coverage it once did](#) as it has shifted from grant-based aid toward loans. In the [report published](#) by Demos, 63 percent of federal aid was distributed as loans and only 26 percent as grants in 2008. Furthermore, Pell grants now only cover 1/3 of tuition costs (\$4,400 is the maximum Pell grant awarded). Demos also reports that spending on merit-based aid grew at three and a half times the rate of need-based aid over the past decade. Low-income backgrounds and minority groups are among those who are most affected because they depend heavily on need-based awards. Likewise, the Public Agenda survey shows that about seven in 10 of those who leave school before graduating report that they did not have enough scholarships or financial aid. These staggering statistics reveal that the financial aid plays a huge role in college completion and forcing students to acquire a full-time job.

Solutions: Passing SAFRA

Luckily, there has been legislation introduced in Congress that is attempting to remedy the financial aid system. The [Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act](#) proposes to end federally subsidized private loans and pour all federal funding into direct loans. In addition, the act would increase the maximum amount of Pell grants. Even more important, the legislation would create a competitive grant program for community colleges to improve completion rates and invest funds in college grant programs that help low-income students prepare for the academic challenges of college. While the bill is poised to improve several of the problems of the financial aid system, it still must be introduced (and passed) by the Senate. In the meantime, millions of college students will continue to struggle with maintaining the balance between work and school.

Solutions: Flexible Class Times

Besides fixing the financial aid system, there are still several other options for improving college completion rates. For instance, universities can hold more evening and weekend classes to accommodate students who work a full or part-time job. **Clackamas Community College** in Oregon [began offering welding](#)

classes that began at 10 p.m. and ended at 2 a.m. to accommodate their students' schedules. Other schools are beginning to offer late-night classes as well.

Solutions: Increasing Work Study and Reducing Other Costs

Colleges can also increase the amount of work-study jobs available. Although outside jobs can sometimes compete with attaining good grades, studies have shown that a job of no more than fifteen hours a week is actually optimal for a college student's academic career.

Furthermore, colleges can subsidize the cost of textbooks, campus housing, and food to students who simply cannot afford it. Academic advisors must also do a better job of raising awareness of possible scholarships, grants, and low-interest loans as many students are not aware that these financial tools exist.

Ultimately, fixing the financial aid system still remains the best solution to improving completion rates. Until these changes are made, this new generation of college students will bare the financial burden of paying for school while attempting to earn a degree.

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