

# What Can Stop Kids from Dropping Out

By [DAVID L. KIRP](#) APRIL 30, 2016

HILLARY CLINTON and Bernie Sanders have both trumpeted their proposals to expand college access and reduce student debt, but an even bigger problem is going ignored, at least by politicians: college dropouts.

The statistics are jaw-dropping. Only [53 percent](#) of college freshmen earn a bachelor's degree within six years. Even fewer community-college students — [39 percent](#) — obtain a credential from a two- or four-year institution within six years. Of the 31 million adults who attended college between 1994 and 2014, about four million spent at least two years there and never earned a degree.

An American Institute for Research [study](#) from 2011 estimates the cost of dropping out, measured in lost earnings and taxes, at \$4.5 billion. If any company had as much trouble hanging on to its customers, it would go out of business.

The scandal — and it really is a scandal — is that many colleges and universities aren't using tools that have been proved to substantially raise graduation rates. Instead, they duck the issue by pointing a finger at high schools for turning out underprepared students.

But while high schools could doubtlessly improve, this excuse won't wash. As Kati Haycock, the chief executive of the Education Trust, a Washington, D.C., nonprofit, pointed out, "among otherwise similar institutions, graduation rates can vary by as many as 20 percentage points, and graduation rates for Latino or black students by even more."

To cite one comparison, North Carolina State and Auburn enroll similar students, but the two universities have significantly [different track records](#) for the years 2003 through 2013. N.C. State raised minority students' graduation rates by 12 percentage points during that time, nearly halving the gap between them and white students, while graduation rates for underrepresented students at Auburn actually declined and the gap grew to more than 20 percentage points.

It doesn't require a genius to change the story line. Universities must give students personalized attention and useful academic feedback, leveraging technology to support them at scale. That's Ivy League-style ministrations, adapted for mass higher education. And it won't break the bank.

A decade ago, Georgia State University — racially segregated until the 1960s and a stone's throw from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthplace — was a poor-performing, big urban institution with low graduation rates and yawningly wide racial gaps. But even as the student body has become poorer and more ethnically and racially diverse, the overall graduation rate has climbed to 56 percent from 41 percent.

Even more remarkably, minority students, first-generation students and low-income students with federal Pell grants are earning degrees at a higher rate than their white peers.

Georgia State didn't "solve" its dropout problem by recruiting better-pedigreed students. It found a model for the students they had. "Despite the conventional wisdom, demographics are not destiny," Timothy Renick, the vice president for enrollment management and student success, told me. "Rather than blaming the students, we took a hard look in the mirror."

Rewriting the script of failure has meant identifying roadblocks. That started with data crunching millions of grades to spot problems Georgia State hadn't even known about.

One surprising example — passing an introductory course in a student's major isn't as good a predictor of graduation as the actual letter grade. The student who earns a B in first-year political science has a 70 percent probability of graduating in that field, while a classmate who gets a C has only a 25 percent chance.

Now a C grade prompts a meeting between the student and an academic adviser. The student gets extra help before the C grade becomes a D or an F in more advanced courses in that major. Students say they value having this data in hand, and faculty members appreciate knowing what makes for success. The nursing faculty, for instance, changed its criteria for admission after learning that grades in introductory math and chemistry are solid predictors of doing well in that program.

Instead of waiting for undergraduates to show up, academic advisers reach out at the first hint of trouble — poor grades, spotty attendance or not registering for the right class — holding 50,000 meetings with students annually. "At times when I was at my lowest, the professors and my adviser encouraged and reassured me to stay in the program and finish strong," said Luis Perez, who will graduate this spring.

Faculty members feared that this proactive approach would push students into easier fields, steering would-be scientists into sociology. But contrary to expectations, computer science and biology are the fastest-growing majors.

Sink-or-swim used to be the university's way of handling students with weak math backgrounds interested in becoming STEM majors. Now they get help even before they take their first class. Expectations haven't been lowered — pre-med students still take organic chemistry — but Georgia State is providing a pathway that helps them to make it.

As in many universities, required college algebra and pre-calculus classes were particularly a bugaboo. In 2009, 43 percent of the students taking those courses got D's or F's. Not only did they have to retake the class, but they also lost their state scholarships, critically important to their staying in school.

But when the courses were converted from a lecture to a class in which substantial time was spent in a computer lab — with immediate online feedback and instructors at the ready — the number of D's and F's plummeted to 19 percent. Data showed that first-generation and low-income students were less likely to reach out for help from their professors, so the university hired upperclassmen as tutors. Students who attended at least three tutoring sessions did half a letter grade better and were 10 percent likelier to graduate.

In pinpointing roadblocks, the university also looked beyond academics. About a thousand Georgia State undergraduates were dropping out every semester because they couldn't pay the tuition. When a closer look revealed that many were short just a few hundred dollars, the university started awarding small just-in-time grants and financial counseling. Last year, some 400 students who otherwise would have dropped out were able to receive their degrees.

Shaniece Alexanderia Withrow found her schoolwork suffering after she gave birth to her son during her junior year. But she finished on time. "The retention grant allowed me to complete the last course that I needed to acquire to fulfill my degree requirement," she said.

"Those grants aren't just financial lifesavers," said Mr. Renick. "They also change attitudes. For students who never thought anyone was watching out for them, it has meant a lot for the university to say, 'We want you to graduate.'"

Mr. Perez agreed: "After receiving the retention grant, I was able to focus more on my school work, and since then nothing but awesome things have come my way. My biggest fear was being unsuccessful. Now I feel like I can achieve anything I put my efforts into."

The good news for financially strapped universities: not only do these initiatives change students' lives, they more than pay for themselves. Although the state cut \$40 million from the Georgia State budget during the Great Recession, the additional \$18.9 million in annual revenue generated by improving student retention went a considerable way toward making up the difference.

Invariably, the impetus for reform comes from academic leaders who insist that student success be regarded, not as an afterthought, but as a practical imperative and a moral obligation.

"I'm appalled that so many universities continue to engage in practices known to be, at best, modestly effective," said Mark Becker, president of Georgia State.

Here's a plank for both parties' 2016 platforms — higher education institutions should receive public dollars based not only on how many students they enroll but also on how effectively they help students earn a degree.

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