

# LEAVERS, STAYERS, AND CONTEMPLATORS

UNDERSTANDING THE DRIVERS OF  
STUDENT SUCCESS FOR LOW-  
INCOME STUDENTS

Research Summary

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## LEAVERS, STAYERS, AND CONTEMPLATORS

At many universities, graduation rates for low-income students trail university averages. These students are often invisible because they span race, ethnicity, and gender categories. Students are also reluctant to voice challenges. Available data on these students are typically limited to academic achievement and financial profile, but fail to shed light on the student experience.

This “stayers study” examines what keeps students (particularly low-income students) at school. The primary focus is on students who considered leaving college but decided to stay. Survey and focus group insights give voice to student experiences and also provide institutions of higher education with information about success drivers for college completion.

### CASE STUDY: UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE

The University of Tennessee at Knoxville (UT) is the flagship and land grant institution in the state of Tennessee with an undergraduate enrollment of about 22,000. UT has made improvements in six-year graduation rates, increasing by 10 percentage points in only five years. But a closer look at graduation rates shows that Pell-eligible students trail university averages by more than 10 percentage points. With 30% of students in the Pell-eligible category, improving persistence for this population is critical to achieving the university’s strategic goals related to graduation and retention improvement.

UT has been studying students who leave by conducting interviews with students who did not return after their first year. Those studies found that students left for three primary reasons: 1) financial reasons, 2) problems adjusting academically and 3) personal issues. This information had proved useful in helping to build targeted support programs. But the “leavers” study was limited. It did not address how successful students navigated their way through college and it lacked targeted information about low-income students – the population that was deemed most likely to leave after the first year.

The “stayers” study sought to better understand students who contemplated leaving but did not. The goal was to understand how Pell-eligible students differ from other students in terms of their patterns of staying at the university through their senior year, contemplating leaving, and returning after having sat out for a semester or more.

### THE STAYERS STUDY

Research engaged 700+ seniors in a survey that allowed comparison of Pell and non-Pell students. A survey was sent to all students who had senior standing. Demographics of respondents were roughly similar to the institutional profile.

Nine questionnaire items were used to break the population into three primary groups based on response options: “never made me want to leave,” “made me consider leaving but was resolved,” or “led me to sit out for at least one semester.” Students were then categorized as stayers, contemplators, or returners. Overall, the study showed that more than half of UT students contemplated leaving. However, Pell-eligible students were more likely to contemplate leaving than are non-Pell students.

“Stayer” Categories	All	Pell	Non-Pell
Stayers	36%	30%	41%
Contemplators	54%	<b>59%</b>	50%
Returners	10%	11%	9%

The study shows that overall, Pell-eligible students contemplated leaving for financial reasons more than non-Pell students. Trouble paying bills ranked higher than loss of financial aid.

Financial Reasons	Pell	Non-Pell
Trouble paying bills	<b>39%</b>	21%
Lost financial aid	<b>24%</b>	13%

Pell-eligible students were more likely than others to contemplate leaving due to difficulty adjusting to academic demands and almost quarter of them perceived lack of faculty support.

Academic Reasons	Pell	Non-Pell
Difficulty adjusting to academic demands	<b>33%</b>	22%
Faculty did not support me	<b>24%</b>	17%

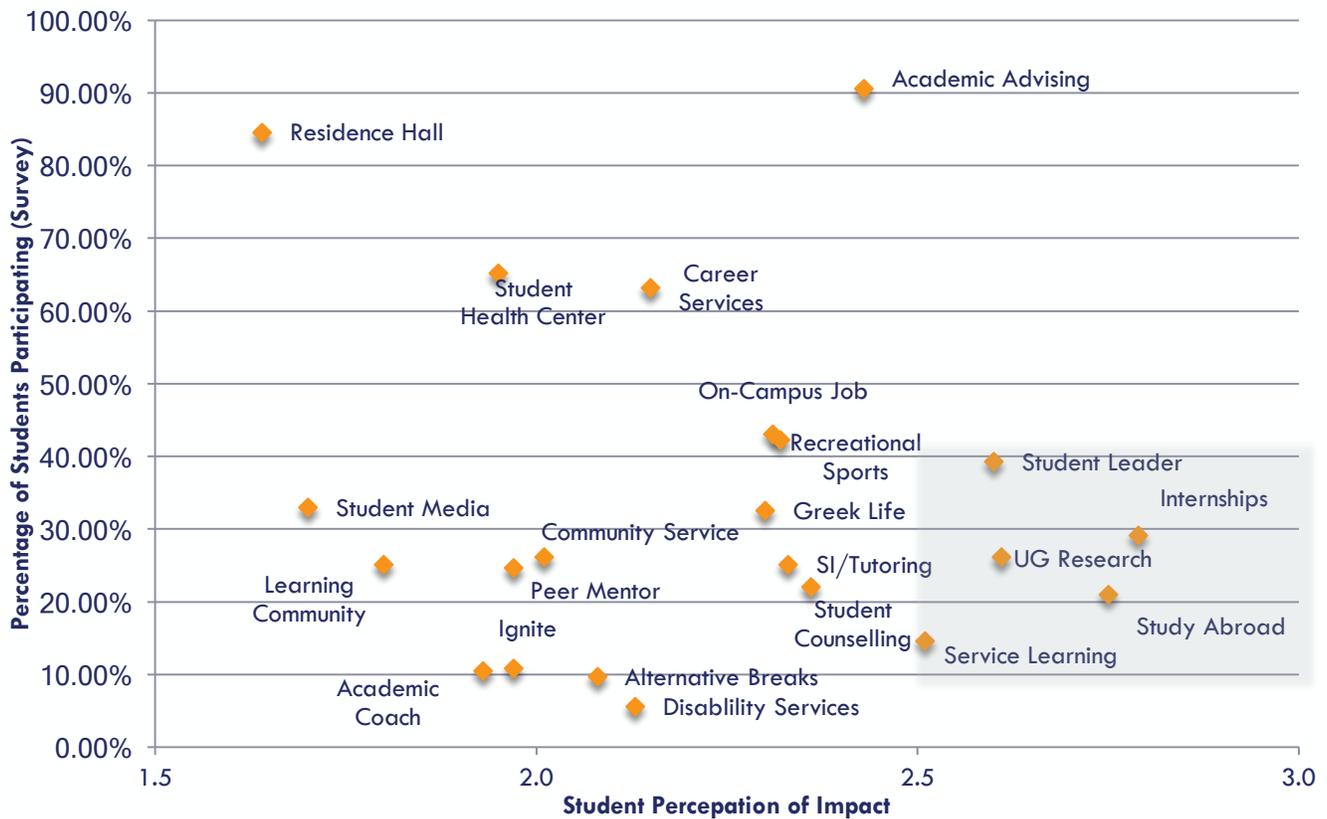
While differences existed on items related to academics and finances, Pell-eligible students were fairly similar to others in that about a quarter of all students reported contemplating leaving because they did not “fit in.” Homesickness and distance from home were secondary factors.

Personal Reasons	Pell	Non-Pell
Felt like I didn’t fit in	26%	23%
Homesick	14%	12%
Wanted to be closer to home	10%	8%

The survey listed 22 programs and services and asked students to select those that they had used. For those that had been used, students rated their perceptions of how important programs and services had been to their overall success. Overall, there were few significant differences between Pell and Non-Pell students with the exception of three programs and services: on-campus jobs, student counseling, and academic coaching.

Use of Services	Pell	Non-Pell
On-Campus Job	<b>38%</b>	30%
Student Counseling Center	<b>21%</b>	13%
Academic Coach	<b>12%</b>	7%

Student “contemplators” reported that programs such as service learning, study abroad, and undergraduate research had a high impact on their success. But unfortunately, fewer than 30% reported having engaged in any of these programs. Among the programs and services reviewed, highest use was for advising. Survey respondents were all in at least their fourth year and did not rate first year experiences as highly impactful. However, these programs reflect standard best practices in student retention. The table below shows responses from all contemplators, not just those who were Pell eligible.



## STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

To gain greater understanding into factors that led to success for these students, the survey included an open-ended question that allowed students to use their own words to describe their “secrets to success.”

While finances were often viewed as a barrier, success factors focused more on individual characteristics and support systems. Pell students were more likely than others to identify mentors and less likely to identify family members as important factors in their ability to persist until their senior year.

Secrets to Success	Pell	Non-Pell
Grit/determination/etc.	43%	44%
Friends/clubs/Greek life, etc.	34%	33%
Mentors	<b>26%</b>	23%
Family	<b>12%</b>	16%
University Programs	9%	8%
Finances	4%	7%
University Services	4%	4%

In addition, targeted focus groups were conducted among contemplators. Focus groups engaged 24 students in three small groups. Questions were designed to understand the student experience and to identify barriers, struggles, and success factors for students who considered leaving UT.

Student stories showed that contemplation occurred at different points at which students seriously considered leaving the university – some actually started steps for transfer or departure. Even though contemplation occurred at different times for different students, all of their reasons for contemplating leaving fell into one or more of the three broad categories of academic challenges, financial struggles, or personal issues.

Successful students owned their problems and found solutions. Some were able to navigate the university system to identify the help they needed. Others leaned on family, friends, and community groups. Many struggled to find appropriate resources, programs and services at the time of need. Providing “just-in-time” services is both an opportunity and a challenge for universities.

### STUDENT VOICE: SECRETS TO SUCCESS

*“I had an amazing academic advisor. She was wonderful. That has really helped. Also, my courses have had lots of hands on opportunities that allowed me to be in a classroom, and it just showed me that this is what I want to do with my life.”*

*“I feel obligated to get my degree because my parents want it for me and I believe my parents have good intentions. I trust them even though I may branch away from my degree completely.”*

*“I found a close-knit community through the multicultural student life center where it was easy to meet people and connections and bonds.”*

*“I was able to be independent and make my bills on my own otherwise I would have needed to drop out.”*

*“The thought of one day being somebody.”*

*“A bit of hard work and a whole lot of Jesus.”*

*“Loved ones, Friends, Faculty, Peers, aaaand coffee...”*

## FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION

By looking at Pell-eligible students who are often invisible, the stayer study provided a better understanding of what leads these students to consider leaving and what helps them stay and succeed.

Many universities cannot reach retention, graduation, and access goals without addressing the specific challenges of students who have high financial need.

The stayer study provided a catalyst for more directly addressing the challenges that are salient to this population through the following:

- The study served as a tool for talking with colleges, academic affairs units, and student life offices about how to improve outcomes for Pell-eligible students – particularly those who contemplate leaving the university.
- The student voice added important context to available data. These perspectives contributed to focusing in on acute areas of challenge for the Pell-eligible population that were not visible through data analysis alone.
- The full picture allowed UT to prioritize areas of action and allocate resources accordingly. Areas include retention of financial aid, strategic usage of work-study, and coordination of academic advising and financial aid counseling.

## CONTACTS

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