

[Skip navigation](#)[▲ Home](#)[◀ Contents](#)

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Why College Students Drop Out and What We Do about It
By Frank Daley

College and university education in North America is in trouble. Education surpasses health, war and the economy as the most important issue for our future. It doesn't get the attention it deserves because its effects are long term and we have short attention spans. Now it's on the radar.

Why do so many students fail college or drop out.

North American education circles are quietly asking a desperate question; but soon, wider circles will be asking the question aloud and the response is not going to be quiet unless it is a cry of despair. There will not be a quick fix. The question is "Why do so many students fail or drop out of high school, college, and university in North America?"

- Why, given our lauded Western society, do more than 30 percent of students fail to graduate from high school in many areas?
- Why do 50 percent of U.S. community college students fail to complete their programs after six years?
- Why are the general dropout rates at universities so high?
- Why are immigrant students performing worse than 30 years ago?
- Why are Hispanic students not represented in college numbers that reflect their percentage of the population?
- Why are Black students dropping out at a furious rate? (In 2005, Texas Southern University found that that dropout rate was 79 percent, and that was an improvement over earlier years.) In the U.S., Black colleges and universities have a graduation rate (again, after six years) of 38 percent.

(Source: *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*.)

David Leonhardt, writing in the New York Times on Sept. 9, 2009, reports that "only 33 percent of the freshmen who enter the University of Massachusetts, Boston, graduate within six years. Less than 41 percent graduate from the University of Montana, and 44 percent from the University of New Mexico. The economist Mark Schneider refers to colleges with such dropout rates as 'failure factories' and they are the norm."

I could quote statistics from all over North America—there is a great deal of supportive documentation—but the point is there is a crisis in higher education regarding dropout rates.

What does it take to create a successful college student? The answer is self-knowledge.

General Causes of Student Attrition

The general and underlying causes that lead to the dropout statistics in education are complex. They are an amalgam of poverty, illiteracy, weak family structure, inadequate parenting, and an overburdened basic education system.

I am writing principally about college students but the carnage starts long before that. Roughly 70 percent

(69.6) of students graduate from high school in the U.S. Of the thirty percent of students who drop out of high school, thirty percent of them never get past the ninth grade. (“Diplomas Count: An Essential Guide to Graduation Rates and Policies” published by the Education Research Center, 2006.)

There are also special problems facing immigrant, Native, Black, and Hispanic people (chiefly language, poverty, and joblessness). The general solutions are obvious: more help and education for parents, language training, better grade schools and high schools, more money for everything, and so forth. All these are well known, long-term, and expensive, and they are not within our immediate grasp. Improving the dropout rate, however, is achievable.

The State of Student Preparedness upon Entering College

The typical student has two great problems before arriving at college, which collide with a third problem in college that causes a crisis.

First, many students are unprepared for the rigors of college academically. They have low academic skills: they do not read and write well enough.

Second, they don't know why they are in college. When they get out of high school (if they get out of high school), they do not have the knowledge of themselves that they require to succeed. If they did, they would have fewer problems with motivation, discipline, energy, or focus; however, they do have problems with those things. So, we must add a lack of self-knowledge to their inadequate academic skills.

In college, they meet the third critical factor: time: Be successful in three months—that is, pass or be gone. This tipping point results in a kind of psychic paralysis.

Students drop out for many reasons—some legitimate, most not. Illness, a lack of funds, and depression may be too much for anybody to handle, but many students cannot deal with day-to-day things, such as normal relationships, or making the adjustment from high school to college, or reading and writing adequately. I would say they get off track, but many of them were never on track in the first place.

When their academic deficiencies and lack of direction meet the time crunch, students freeze. They cannot get up, get to class, do the reading, write the essays, or complete the work. It's partly because they don't know how to do the work (many never having had to do it in high school). It's academic ineptitude but also a lack of motivation: they lack a burning desire to succeed at something specific.

They are confused, many not knowing whether to work or attend school. If they choose school, they are unsure as to what kind: university, college, trade, or other.

If they choose college, which one?

If college 'X,' then which program? Often they enter a program because it sounds interesting, a friend is going, their parents suggested it, someone has said it will lead to a good job, or they've heard program 'X' is the “next big thing.”

Many college students miss a few classes, a few assignments, and then more classes (because they are embarrassed to go to class without the assignments), and then they default to the psychological defense mechanisms. Some of these mechanisms manifest themselves in (apparently) socially acceptable ways such as lassitude, partying, working (at paying jobs), overuse of the Internet and so on. They miss too much too fast, become discouraged, then depressed and then they drop out.

What Colleges Are Doing to Help

Almost all colleges have experts on student retention and all kinds of student aid from financial to academic remediation, but all not all of these are successful. They also have college success courses (often poorly designed). Often, too, teachers, administrators, and students misguidedly hold these courses in contempt.

Colleges also offer counseling services (mostly underfunded). More students than you can imagine suffer from emotional or psychological problems. Colleges are centers of education, not health, but you might reconsider that if you spoke with many students. A recent study conducted by Cornell and Princeton discovered that one-fifth of their student populations were self-abusive (cutting and burning themselves, for example). A subsequent survey of many U.S. colleges found this to be a commonplace. This far surpasses the usual student problems such as alcohol, drugs, and gambling.

What's the Problem?

There are many superficial causes but the underlying cause is a lack of self-knowledge. Why do many students go into the wrong area of study or the wrong type of educational institution?

They don't know who they are and what they want and cannot choose an appropriate program or course of study.

They have no goals so they have no self-discipline, no stick-to-itiveness, no academic galvanization, no self-direction.

Students will admit that they have trouble with time management, procrastination, goal setting, communication skills, course selection and study skills. (This is aside from their obvious literacy, and numeracy deficiencies.) However, those student comments only confirm what all the literature has already reported. It's all true, but there is nothing new here. Something is missing; something not reflected in the college success texts; something the students cannot identify and that most administrators do not even know about. That something, I finally discovered, is self-knowledge.

Some students acknowledge the theoretical value of, say, study tips, but they do not use them. Others dismiss academic assistance, believing in a false sense of security and "success" gained by graduating from high school. (Given the quality of many high schools, that is a false sense of achievement if I ever saw one.)

These students do not adopt the strategies that successful students always use. Some are contemptuous, don't listen, or feel the information isn't for them. Some assume they already know the point being made (a study tip or strategy) because they've heard it before. They didn't actually listen at the time, however, so they do not know it, they just know of it.

They do not know the value of time management, for example, because they don't know the principles of time management and don't apply them to their goals. That's because they don't have any defined goals. They don't realize, moreover, that time management is a function of self-management. They don't know what they want, so they don't know how to get it. Drifting is mysterious to them. Time loss is meaningless if you don't understand the implications of wasting it. These students don't even recognize the roads that lead to their goals because they don't have any specific goals, just vague notions.

When students do have self-knowledge, they become self-directed; they automatically set meaningful goals and seek ways to achieve them. Nothing stands in their way. They are eager, energized, and self-motivated.

The reason for this transformation is simple: When students do the inner work on their dreams, aspirations and hopes, and begin to concretize these by planning, setting goals, and organizing priorities, they visualize success. They can see it happening. They believe in themselves. There is no angst in getting them to work toward it. The teacher obtains the cooperation and energy of the students, instead of trying to crank-start them at the beginning of every class. It becomes a creative, active, and effective collaboration. They become terrific, successful students.

Who Should Go to College?

One of the reasons students fail at college is because they should not be there. The idea that everyone should go to college or university is nonsense.

For brevity's sake, let's avoid listing the qualities of both colleges and universities and assume that both are valuable if suitable for their students. In any case, many students now take both college and university courses simultaneously, or they attend each sequentially.

There are several aspects to this business of going to college.

First, non-college graduates receive less pay and respect than college graduates do. However, they might get more psychic income.

Second, because people choose not to go to college, it does not mean they aren't bright enough. It could mean that, but there are many kinds of abilities and talents and our society does not regard them all the same way. Many parents want their children to have only university-based professions. This narrow idea of success is responsible for much unhappiness and resentment. Many lawyers, to cite one example, are deeply unhappy in their work.

Third, colleges and universities cannot be all things to all people. If an institution doesn't offer the education or training you want, don't go there.

Fourth, colleges compress knowledge and training. College can fast track you, if you know what you want to learn. Otherwise, why go there?

Fifth, many people who go to college or university and drop out feel like failures unnecessarily. Multitudes of people leave school to make a fortune. Bill Gates is an example. (Do we really need more examples?)

This is a credentialist society. If you have a degree or diploma, you generally have a chance at a "better" job. But better for whom? Trades, skilled work, home care, small business entrepreneurship, cooking, and other similar fields of work are honorable, valuable, and can bring great joy and satisfaction (and money) to the individual practitioner and to society. They don't all require college educations. To be fair, some colleges graduate excellent chefs, and some work admirably in conjunction with artisans and apprenticeship programs, but the majority of students do not leave college with a skilled trade, and some acquire neither an immediately marketable "skill-set" nor a genuine liberal education while they are there.

Self-knowledge is the key to personal, academic and professional success. If you don't have self-knowledge, however, and you listen to the advice of others, you might go to college. If you make the wrong choice of program, you will likely fail or drop out. Even if you "succeed" you won't be happy about it. That's not success.

I've taught students who couldn't get into a regular college program (students at the high-school level and/or pre-college level), students in regular college or university students, and post-graduate university students.

All these students except the post-graduate students had problems with academic skills. But almost everybody lacked self-knowledge!

We know the obvious causes of lack of success in college, but the underlying basis for a lack of academic or skills (or the desire to improve them) or self-motivation, is a lack of self knowledge. If you don't know who you are and what you want, why would you make any effort to get anywhere?

Successful people use the same universal "rules of engagement" with life. There are some rules in the world that operate outside of our acceptance or knowledge of them. They affect us whether we know the rules or not, obey them or not, dismiss them or not. They apply whether we go to college or not. You might have three degrees, but maybe you have never asked yourself the question, "Why do I have three degrees in this subject?"

Going to college and succeeding depends on many things, but the primary one is to know why you are attending this program at this college. In order to do that you must know yourself. We all know ourselves to some degree regarding things such as favorite foods, sports and TV programs, and we know whether we are

morning or night people. However, that is not enough to prevent us from making serious errors in our choice of a mate, college program, or career. That comes only with some serious internal work: self-knowledge. Socrates was right.

Many of our North American students are failing or dropping out because they don't know why they are in college. They lack academic skills, and self-knowledge and these two lacks meet a strict time restraint in college. The collision of all these powerful forces results in an unacceptable failure rate.

The Solution?

We can't fix the problem completely, of course, but we can improve students' academic state of preparedness. They can also develop self-knowledge. They can study themselves and their relationship to others, the world, and work in senior high school or in the first semester at college. I know it works because we do it at Seneca College.

When they do, the dropout rate will drop itself drop.

Frank Daley is a former dean of English and Communication and professor at Seneca College in Toronto. This article is adapted from his book *Who Are You And What Are You Doing Here? The way to know yourself and get what you want*. The book is based on his course, Communication and Problem Solving, which is used in the three programs at the King campus of Seneca College. The success rates for students in this course ranges from 67-93 percent. His blog is thedaleypost.com and his new service for helping students and the general reader discover themselves, is Self-Knowledge College. He can be reached at <frank.daley@senecac.on.ca>.

◀ [Contents](#)

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