

Some College, No Credential (SCNC) Survey Report: Spring 2025

By Allyson Cornett, Morgan Beckham, Lydia Mentzer, and Bryan Ashton
April 2026

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About Trellis Strategies

Trellis Strategies is a leading nonprofit strategic research and technical assistance firm focused on advancing postsecondary education and strengthening the workforce. Our commitment is to provide unparalleled insights into the modern learner experience, spanning from application through graduation. Leveraging over four decades of experience in serving higher education institutions and assisting students in navigating intricate processes, Trellis Strategies' dedicated team possesses the knowledge, insight, and expertise to empower organizations to turn data into impactful action and tangible results.

Guided by our mission, we navigate the non-linear landscape of postsecondary education, assisting institutions in adapting policies and programs to accommodate diverse learner journeys. By dismantling barriers in policy and processes, we aim to enhance learner outcomes and rebuild trust in the credentialing process. We are dedicated to the belief that education serves as the cornerstone for unlocking new opportunities, fostering individual economic mobility, and growing community prosperity. For more information, visit our website: www.trellisstrategies.org/about-us/

About the Some College, No Credential (SCNC) Survey

The Some College No Credential (SCNC) Survey is a self-reported, online survey that determines the reasons that stop-out students have departed their institution in recent years and how the institution can assist students with re-enrollment. The SCNC Survey was designed and implemented by Trellis Strategies, starting in 2025. For more information about how to participate in future implementations of the SCNC Survey, please contact Trellis Strategies at surveys@trellisstrategies.org.

We are currently recruiting for the Fall 2026 implementation of the Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS), which explores the financial wellbeing and success indicators of currently enrolled postsecondary students. Want to participate? Contact us at surveys@trellisstrategies.org.

Newsletter subscription: Interested in receiving our monthly newsletter, Strategies 360, via email? Subscribe here: <https://www.trellisstrategies.org/insights/newsletter/>

Trellis Strategies SCNC Support

Trellis Strategies partners with organizations across the postsecondary ecosystem to identify, reconnect with, and support individuals with Some College, No Credential on a path back to enrollment and completion. Re-engaging this population strengthens enrollment pipelines, supports workforce alignment, and helps unlock human capital already earned.

Our [Some College, No Credential Toolkit](#) offers practical strategies, research-based insights, and implementation tools to support re-engagement efforts and learners' return to higher education.

Trellis Strategies also offers the [SCNC Data Explorer](#), an interactive tool that supports data-informed re-enrollment planning by helping users identify and prioritize high-opportunity areas using Some College, No Credential data states, counties, and census tracts.

Learn more about our re-enrollment work and access these resources at <https://www.trellisstrategies.org/solutions/some-college-no-credential/>

Recommended Citation

Cornett, A., Beckham, M., Mentzer, L., and Ashton, B. (2026). *Some College, No Credential Survey report: Spring 2025*. Trellis Strategies.

About the Authors

Allyson Cornett, CPH, MPH, is the Director of Research at Trellis Strategies. Her latest research highlights the intersection of student success, mental health, and basic needs insecurity among college students, illuminating critical pathways toward holistic support and well-being in higher education. Allyson has a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology from Texas State University and a Master of Public Health with a concentration in Behavioral and Community Health from the University of North Texas Health Science Center.

Morgan Beckham, MPH, is a Research Analyst who supports qualitative research initiatives focused on addressing challenges in higher education and advancing student success. Her work has included projects examining equity in STEM education pathways and informing institutional strategies to better support students. Morgan holds a Master of Public Health and a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from the University of Georgia.

Lydia Mentzer, M.A., is a Research Analyst who leads and assists with survey creation and administration, reporting, and analysis. She is committed to research in support of students' basic needs, educational achievement, and funding in higher education to produce equitable outcomes and determine support for vulnerable populations. Lydia received her B.S. in Political Science from Florida State University and later received her M.A. in Political Science from the University of Central Florida.

Bryan Ashton, Ed.M., serves as the Chief Strategy and Growth Officer at Trellis and the Head of Trellis Strategies. In this capacity, he is responsible for leading the organization's research, consulting, and talent pathways work in higher education. Bryan is the Co-Founder of the Higher Education Financial Wellness Alliance and is a frequent speaker at national conferences on issues of college access and affordability. Bryan holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration with an emphasis in accounting from Ohio State University and a Master's in Education, with a focus in Higher Education, from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Study Team

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Overview

“Some College, No Credential” (SCNC) refers to learners who enrolled in postsecondary education, but left without earning their intended degree or certificate. In the United States, this translates into approximately 43.1 million people, including 37.6 million working age adults under the age of 65. For many institutions and policymakers, re-engaging SCNC students is a top priority due to the scale of this population as well as the national push to increase postsecondary attainment among U.S. adults. At least 43 states have set ambitious college completion goals, making it critical to reach SCNC learners in order to meet those targets and strengthen the workforce.¹

ABOUT
60%

OF RE-ENROLLED SCNC
EITHER REMAIN ENROLLED
OR HAVE EARNED A
CREDENTIAL WITHIN TWO
YEARS, INDICATING THAT A
MAJORITY OF RETURNEES
ARE MAKING PROGRESS.

Educational journeys are increasingly nonlinear and frequently interrupted by life circumstances outside of students’ control. Many SCNC learners leave higher education due to factors like financial hardship, work conflicts, caregiving responsibilities, or other personal challenges, not academic failure. In this way, re-engaging SCNC students represents both a persistent challenge and a significant opportunity for today’s higher education system. Successfully bringing these learners back to complete their degrees can not only improve individual life outcomes, but also generate ripple effects that benefit families, strengthen communities, and support institutions and states in achieving attainment goals and meeting critical workforce needs.

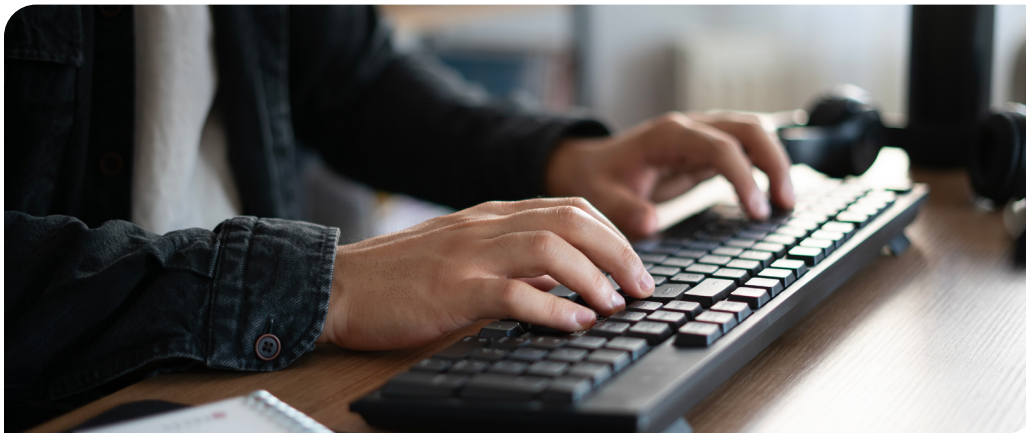
According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, re-enrollment among SCNC students has been rising modestly in recent years with more than one million SCNC adults returning to college in the 2023-2024 academic year (a 7 percent increase compared to the previous year).² While encouraging, this still represents fewer than three percent of the total SCNC population re-enrolling annually. During the same period, roughly 2.1 million additional students became new “stop-outs” (leaving college without their intended degree), outpacing those who returned. As a result, the overall SCNC population continues to grow despite re-engagement efforts.

Outcomes for learners who return highlight both progress and remaining gaps. About 60 percent of re-enrolled students either remain enrolled or have earned a credential within two years, indicating that a majority of returnees are making progress. However, the two-year completion rate for these returning students is relatively low (around 18 to 19 percent for the most recent cohort, down from approximately 22 percent two years prior). In practice, this means many returning SCNC learners persist in school but take longer to finish or remain on the path to a degree.

These findings emphasize the central challenge of SCNC initiatives. Even as more former students are returning, the vast majority of this population remains disengaged. Furthermore, a significant share of those who do return still struggle to earn a credential quickly. Addressing the factors that prompted their departure, from financial insecurity and caregiving responsibilities to skepticism about the value of a degree, is crucial for converting SCNC students into college graduates. The importance of addressing the SCNC phenomenon is clear. Not only is it integral to boosting national college attainment rates and meeting labor market demands for skilled workers, but also to fulfilling higher education's promise of upward mobility for millions who have "stopped out" but not given up on their educational goals.

To better understand the experiences behind these trends, Trellis Strategies developed the Some College, No Credential (SCNC) Survey to capture the voices of students who left college without completing their degree. While national data provide insight into enrollment patterns and outcomes, this survey offers a closer look at the personal, financial, and institutional factors that shape students' decisions to stop out, as well as what might encourage them to return.

THIS SURVEY OFFERS A CLOSER LOOK AT THE PERSONAL, FINANCIAL, AND INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS THAT SHAPE STUDENTS' DECISIONS TO STOP OUT, AS WELL AS WHAT MIGHT ENCOURAGE THEM TO RETURN.



About the Survey

This report shares the aggregated findings from the Spring 2025 implementation of the Some College, No Credential (SCNC) Survey. The results highlight the complex challenges faced by students who left college without completing a credential, many of whom balanced higher education with competing responsibilities such as employment and caregiving. By centering the voices of these modern learners, the report aims to inform institutional leaders and policymakers seeking to better support SCNC students in re-enrolling and completing their academic goals.

Between mid-March and mid-June 2025, nearly 500,000 former undergraduate students were invited to participate in the survey based on their most recent enrollment at 58 institutions across 13 states. These institutions included 25 four-year universities and 33 two-year colleges. A total of 3,182 students responded to the SCNC Survey.

3,182

STUDENTS RESPONDED TO THE SCNC SURVEY.



Key Findings

The following findings offer a detailed look into why students left their institutions and what they believe colleges and universities can do to support their return. These insights provide actionable guidance for institutional leaders and policymakers working to strengthen re-enrollment strategies and improve degree completion outcomes for the millions of postsecondary students with some college experience but no credential.

Reasons for Leaving

MANY SCNC STUDENTS LEAVE NOT DUE TO A LACK OF ACADEMIC ABILITY, BUT BECAUSE OF CHALLENGES THAT COULD POTENTIALLY BE ADDRESSED THROUGH MORE RESPONSIVE INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS.

SCNC students cited a range of personal, financial, and institution-related factors that contributed to their decision to leave college. The most common reasons were not academic in nature, but rather reflected life circumstances and systemic barriers that made it difficult to persist. Among the 2,923 respondents who answered this question, the top reasons included personal finances (35 percent), family or personal responsibilities (32 percent), employment (27 percent), and cost of attendance (25 percent). These findings reinforce that many SCNC students leave not due to a lack of academic ability, but because of challenges that could potentially be addressed through more responsive institutional policies and support systems.

Table 1. Did any of the reasons below contribute to your decision to leave [former institution]?
Check all that apply.

	ALL 2-YEAR n=1,944	ALL 4-YEAR n=979	ALL SECTORS n=2,923
Personal finances	33%	38%	35%
Family or personal reasons	31%	32%	32%
Employment	29%	22%	27%
Cost of attendance / tuition	20%	35%	25%
Health reasons	22%	29%	24%
Financial aid issues	20%	25%	22%
I have transferred or intend to transfer to another institution	19%	21%	20%
Academics	15%	25%	19%
Course / Major offerings	16%	16%	16%
Other	18%	12%	16%
Institutional services	11%	15%	13%
Campus life / location	5%	21%	10%
Transportation	8%	9%	8%

Financial strain was the most frequently cited barrier

Over a third (35 percent) of SCNC students reported that personal finances played a key role in their decision to leave. Students described struggling to cover living expenses, manage debt, or meet their monthly bills. One student shared:



“In Spring 2021, after Covid, I was having difficulties finishing and passing my courses and was falling behind financially in paying off my tuition for that semester. I had lost my job, and my grades had dropped to where I lost any financial aid and scholarships, [and] I had to pay the debt with the school. I only have one semester remaining but owe \$3200 to pay that semester, so I was dropped.”

Family and personal responsibilities were a close second

Cited by 32 percent of respondents, these challenges included family and caregiving obligations, difficulty balancing work obligations with school and personal life, and health conditions, especially interruptions and complications caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. One student explained:



“Balancing working full time, going to school, and raising a child became overwhelming and [also] trying [to] find classes that fit my work schedule and child’s school.”

Employment pressures added to the burden

More than one in four students (27 percent) said that work obligations contributed to their decision to stop out. These pressures often compounded other challenges, such as scheduling conflicts or financial instability.

Institution type influenced student experiences

Students from four-year institutions were more likely to cite cost of attendance (35 percent) and financial barriers (38 percent) than those from two-year institutions (20 percent and 33 percent, respectively). Conversely, employment was more frequently cited by students from two-year institutions (29 percent) compared to those from four-year schools (22 percent). These differences suggest that institutional context plays a role in shaping the types of challenges students face.

These findings point to a clear opportunity for institutions to address preventable barriers, particularly those related to affordability, advising, and flexibility, to better support students in persisting toward a credential.

FAMILY AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITIES WERE CITED BY 32 PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS, INCLUDING FAMILY AND CAREGIVING OBLIGATIONS, WORK-SCHOOL-LIFE BALANCE, AND HEALTH CONDITIONS



Perceptions of their Institution and Educational Value

SCNC students offered a nuanced perspective on their former institutions and the value of their unfinished education. Notably, 44 percent were reflecting on the only college or university they had ever attended, meaning their perceptions were shaped without the benefit of comparison to other institutions. While many respondents expressed continued belief in the long-term value of higher education, their views on institutional support and quality were more mixed, highlighting both appreciation for the promise of a degree and dissatisfaction with some campus experiences.

Belief in the value of higher education remains strong

Despite growing public concerns about the return on investment in higher education, a majority of SCNC respondents still view college as worthwhile. Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) agreed that the cost of college is a good investment for their financial future, and 70 percent believed a college degree would provide them with a higher quality of life. Nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of SCNC students said that completing their degree would improve their career earnings and potential. One respondent shared:



“Returning to [my former institution] can help with my career for myself and my family. It will help me provide a better life [along] with an accomplishment of having a degree.”

NEARLY
73%

OF SCNC STUDENTS SAID THAT COMPLETING THEIR DEGREE WOULD IMPROVE THEIR CAREER EARNINGS AND POTENTIAL.

High marks for academics and administration, mixed perceptions of cost and support

When rating their satisfaction with various areas at their prior institutions, SCNC respondents gave the highest marks to core academic and administrative experiences, such as the enrollment process, admissions, course quality, and application process. For example, 91 percent were satisfied or very satisfied with their school’s registration process, reflecting smooth initial interactions. However, the lowest satisfaction came in areas related to finances and student support, specifically cost of attendance, financial aid services, and academic advising. One respondent explained their reasoning for leaving their former school:



“The cost of attendance, including tuition and associated fees, was significantly high and not reflective of the value I felt I was receiving.”

Another student shared:



“I never had much advising during my time [at my previous institution]. I emailed my advising contact and I don’t think I received much [of a] response.”

Campus experience and belonging

Although 46 percent of respondents felt they belonged at their former institution, 24 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. Similarly, 51 percent felt valued as a student, while 22 percent did not. These findings suggest that a meaningful portion of SCNC students did not feel included or supported on campus, highlighting the importance of fostering a sense of belonging and student-centered engagement to support retention and re-enrollment.

Future Plans

The SCNC survey also asked respondents about their intentions to return to higher education and what support they might need. The results show cautious optimism, with a sizable share of former students expressing interest in continuing their education, although not necessarily at the same institution they last attended. Understanding these plans is crucial, as it highlights opportunities for both the original institutions and the broader higher education community to re-engage SCNC students.

ONLY
24%
OF ALL SCNC
RESPONDENTS
REPORTED HAVING
SUCH A CONVERSATION,
SUGGESTING THAT MANY
STUDENTS DEPART WITHOUT
INSTITUTIONS HAVING A
CHANCE TO OFFER SUPPORT
OR ALTERNATIVES.

Few students discussed their decision to leave beforehand

Nearly three-quarters (71 percent) of respondents did not speak with a faculty or staff member about their decision to leave. This was especially true among students from two-year institutions (75 percent) compared to 62 percent at four-year schools. Only 24 percent of all SCNC respondents reported having such a conversation, suggesting that many students depart without institutions having a chance to offer support or alternatives.

Limited plans to return to the same institution

Only 28 percent of respondents shared that they intend to re-enroll at the same college or university, indicating that the majority of SCNC students do not see their original institution as part of their future. This did vary by sector, with students from two-year institutions more likely to express interest in returning (32 percent) compared to those who stopped out from four-year institutions (19 percent). Among those who do plan to return, urgency is high, with 59 percent aiming to re-enroll within the next year, and an additional 19 percent planning to come back after more than a year.

Many remain committed to completing their education, even if elsewhere

Across all SCNC respondents, 63 percent reported plans to enroll in a college or university at some point, either at their former institution (28 percent) or somewhere else (35 percent). Among those students who were unsure or did not plan to return to their former institution, nearly half (49 percent) indicated plans to enroll at a different institution of higher education in the future.

Re-enrollment support needs emerged through student voices

When asked in a write-in question how their former institution could support their return, students provided thousands of responses that were coded and analyzed. The most frequently cited needs included better information about financial aid (n=650), course and major offerings (n=232), and academic advising (n=158). For example, one respondent conveyed:



“I would need some financial aid to return. I would also need an advisor to tell me what the best courses for my degree would be”. These responses point to actionable areas where institutions can improve communication and reduce barriers to re-entry.”

Modern Learner Demographics

The SCNC survey shed light on the diverse backgrounds and identities of respondents, emphasizing that different groups of students face distinct challenges on the path to a degree. Three important subpopulations emerged, each encountering unique obstacles that often contributed to their decision to leave college. Understanding these demographic insights is crucial for institutions looking to tailor re-engagement strategies and foster an inclusive, supportive environment for all returning learners.

First-generation experiences

Over one-third (36 percent) of respondents were the first in their immediate family to attend college. Many of these first-generation students struggled to navigate college without family guidance or prior examples to follow. As one student admitted:



“I didn’t have the support I needed. I was a first-generation college student... I had no idea what I was doing.”

Lacking familial know-how can leave first-generation students feeling lost, highlighting the need for mentorship and support systems to help them persist.

Student parents balance pregnancy, caregiving, and academics

Student parents, constituting a mosaic of identities, experiences, and backgrounds, made up 25 percent of the surveyed SCNC population. Compared to their peers without dependents, these students may struggle to balance their caregiving responsibilities with their educational goals. One single mother described her experience:



“As a single mom, [I] couldn’t get assignments in on time while still meeting my daughter’s needs.”

National data shows that over half of undergraduate students with children leave their institutions without a degree, highlighting how vital family-friendly policies, flexible course scheduling, and childcare are to helping student parents stay enrolled.^{3,4}

Working students with heavy commitments

Working while enrolled was the norm for most SCNC students. Seventy-two percent of respondents held a job while enrolled, and nearly half were working 40 or more hours per week. Such intense work schedules can make it difficult to keep up with classes and coursework. As one student recalled:



“I was working full time and trying to squeeze in classes. My responsibilities increased greatly at work which left me [with] not enough time and energy to continue classes.”

Prior research has consistently found that students working full-time are more likely to stop their educational journeys before graduation.⁵ These findings highlight the need for flexible scheduling, online course options, and supportive employer partnerships to accommodate working learners.



Campus Implications

WHEN STUDENTS HAVE
PAUSED THEIR EDUCATION,
CAMPUSES SHOULD
ADOPT A SYSTEMS-BASED
APPROACH TO RE-
ENROLLMENT.

Supporting SCNC students begins with implementing strategies that help them remain enrolled. Given the findings of this study, colleges and universities should prioritize providing robust, proactive support throughout students' enrollment. With personal finances (35 percent) and cost of attendance (25 percent) among the primary drivers of stopping out, institutions should use available student financial information, to the extent possible, to identify risks early and intervene before students disengage, recognizing the significant consequences for noncompletion.

When students have paused their education, campuses should adopt a systems-based approach to re-enrollment. This may include investing in research and related strategies to better understand this population, establishing an ongoing outreach cadence to encourage re-enrollment, and redesigning institutional systems to reduce barriers for returning students.

We recommend institutional leadership to explore the [SCNC Data Explorer](#) to better understand the scope and geographic distribution of potential re-enrollment opportunities within their service area. In addition, campuses can use the [SCNC Toolkit](#) to support the planning and implementation of reengagement initiatives.

After forming a campuswide working group, we advise institutions to pursue the following steps:

STEP 1

Assess Causes for Student Stop Out

Understand why students have stopped out as a first step to supporting their return

STEP 2

Complete the Checklist

Answer the questions on page 11 of the [SCNC Toolkit](#) to see how ready your campus is to re-enroll students with some college, but no credential

STEP 3

Identify Your SCNC Population

After reviewing reasons for stop-out, create lists of student to invite back

STEP 4

Design Student Friendly Processes

Create infrastructure to support re-enrollment

STEP 5

Begin Re-Engagement Outreach

Reach out to students with a clear and easy path to re-enrollment

STEP 6

Provide Ongoing Support After Re-Enrollment

Identify risks for stopping out again and monitor student progress

STEP 7

Assess Impact

Create a feedback loop that allows assessment of the impact of outreach efforts

Appendix A: Methodology

SURVEY METRICS 2025 SCNC COHORT			
	Two-year Institutions	Four-year Institutions	Total
Survey Population	373,052	109,967	483,019
Responses	2,143	1,039	3,182
Completion Rate	86%	89%	87%
Median Time Spent	6 minutes	6 minutes	6 minutes

Survey Administration

In order to host and deliver the survey to students, participating institutions provided Trellis with the contact information and select demographics (to allow assessment of representativeness) of study participants. Participants in the SCNC Survey were asked to consent to having additional select student-level records (e.g., number of credit hours, gender, age) released by their institution for matching with their survey responses.

To maximize student responses, Trellis contributed twenty, \$50 Amazon gift cards which were randomly awarded to 20 study participants. Institutions were encouraged to supplement the survey-wide incentive offered by Trellis with their own incentives where possible. For survey-wide incentives provided by Trellis, Trellis randomly chose incentive winners, contacted the incentive winners, and disbursed the incentives.

Data were de-identified in order to create a dataset for analysis. In most instances, reports primarily consist of descriptive statistics; however, additional exploratory data analysis was conducted to identify trends among groups of respondents and answer the research questions. All data are reported in aggregate form only and reported data do not identify individual institutions outside of confidential institution-level reports.

Scale: Net Promoter Score

Trellis’ Some College, No Credential Survey includes a customer satisfaction rating for institutions to benchmark future work and to better understand how learners perceive their institution. Trellis collected the information with a scale that allows a Net Promoter Score (NPS) to be calculated. NPS is a method, based in research, to benchmark customer satisfaction ratings across different services, businesses, and products. NPS uses a 0-10 scale. Those respondents who score 9-10 are promoters, 7-8 are passives, and 0-6 are detractors. $\%Promoters - \%Detractors = NPS$. A positive NPS (>0) is generally considered good, with highest performers usually between 50 and 80.

Appendix B: Endnotes

- 1 State Higher Education Executive Officers Association. (n.d.). *State Postsecondary Attainment Academy*. <https://sheeo.org/project/state-postsecondary-attainment-academy/#:~:text=The%20Attainment%20Academy%20is%20supported,have%20a%20postsecondary%20attainment%20goal>
- 2 Cohen, J., Causey, J., Randolph, B., Holsapple, M., and Shapiro, D. (2024, June). *Some College, No Credential Student Outcomes, Annual Progress Report – Academic Year 2023/24*. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/some-college-no-credential/>
- 3 Cornett, A. (2023). *Navigating college and parenthood: Insights from the Fall 2021 Student Financial Wellness Survey*. Trellis Strategies. https://www.trellisstrategies.org/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2023/10/Navigating-College-and-Parenting.pdf
- 4 Contreras-Mendez, S., & Reichlin Cruse, L. (2021). *Busy with purpose: Lessons for education and policy leaders from returning student parents (C496; IWPR)*. Institute for Women’s Policy Research. <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Busy-With-Purpose-v2b.pdf>
- 5 Nieuwoudt, J. E., & Pedler, M. L. (2023). Student retention in higher education: Why students choose to remain at university. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 25(2), 326-349. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025120985228>

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