

# University of Hawai'i Returning Students

*Qualitative Report*

May 2018

Prepared by Islander Institute



islander

## I. INTRODUCTION

The University of Hawai'i System (UH) approached Islander in late 2017 to help better understand how to re-engage students who leave college ("stop out") after obtaining some credits but prior to receiving a degree. Through qualitative research, UH wanted to better understand the experiences of these students, including their reasons for leaving, the barriers to fulfilling their educational goal, and the perceived value of their education in the broader context of their life.

Beginning in Spring 2018, the UH System and campuses reached out to a list of 200 randomly selected and recommended students who stopped out and have since returned to college. Islander followed up with willing students and set up 13 one-on-one interviews. The conversations lasted between 45 to 90 minutes in a setting that was comfortable and safe, which enabled students to share deeply about not just their educational experiences but also about the life experiences that shape their goals and actions.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The interview instrument was semi-structured (see interview questionnaire in Appendix A) and qualitative in nature in order to explore personal aspects of each student's educational and life experiences.

The primary advantages of qualitative interviews include:

- A more personal approach for respondents that allows them to tell their own story without external bias
- Interviewer can follow up for deeper comprehension based on student responses
- Interviewer can explore thematic areas while being flexible with the questions used
- Interviewer can identify feelings, behaviors, and opinions that are difficult to measure through other methods
- Interviewer can elicit details of the student's stories in order to find general themes that can be useful for the entire student population

The students interviewed ranged in ages, geography, campuses, majors, and ethnic backgrounds (more detailed information can be found in Appendix B). The interviewees included:

1. Male, 22, UH-Hilo
2. Male, 25, UH-Hilo
3. Female, 31, Hawai'i Community College
4. Female, 22, UH-Maui College
5. Male, 30, UH-Maui College
6. Female, 28, Honolulu Community College
7. Male, 31, Kapi'olani Community College
8. Female, 45, Kapi'olani Community College
9. Female, 38, Windward Community College
10. Female, 43, UH-Mānoa
11. Female, 31, UH-Mānoa
12. Female, 24, Leeward Community College
13. Male, 30, Leeward Community College

Through these interviews, common themes emerged that cut across ages, disciplines, and campuses.

### III. FINDINGS

Though the students have unique stories and circumstances, several themes emerged about their educational experience. For some students, these themes interact and impact one another in layers. We present these findings in four categories: 1) reasons for leaving school; 2) reasons for returning; 3) positive enablers; and 4) barriers.

#### A. REASONS FOR LEAVING SCHOOL

##### 1. *Age - Immaturity*

One of the key reasons interviewees cited for dropping out in the first place was their immaturity at a young age. They didn't take their studies seriously at that time and were focused on other things, such as their social life. They didn't have the maturity to value their experience or the ability to handle multiple priorities. More than one person simply stated that they just weren't ready for school at that time.

2. *Age - Lack of goal clarity*

Tied to their age is the lack of a goal for being in school. Many stated that they enrolled in college after high school only because that was expected of them by their parents, high school, or society. This lack of intrinsic motivation and a valued goal made them feel like school was a waste of time.

3. *School as a lesser priority; burn out*

Many students were juggling multiple priorities at once when they they stopped out -- working one or more jobs, taking care of family, adjusting to life on campus, etc. Going to school in addition to serving these priorities was just too much for some. Many shared that there were burnt out, and without clear goals or the maturity to handle everything, dropping out of school seemed like the best and easiest answer.

4. *School as a lesser priority; unexpected life event*

Some interviewees experienced an unexpected life event -- a serious health issue, family death, marriage or divorce -- that caused them to drop out of school. Some said they received compassion and understanding from their campus at the time, but they felt that dealing with the unexpected event was more important than finishing school.

5. *Not enough support or good options*

Many felt they had only two options: continue their schooling in the same way (full time while still juggling other priorities) or drop out. There was no spectrum of available options or supports. One person said that when speaking to a counselor about the different things going on in her life, she felt like the person was focused on just her educational experience rather than listening to her as a whole person.

## B. REASONS FOR RETURNING TO SCHOOL

### 1. *Intrinsic motivation*

Though all students have their own unique life experiences, they all shared an internal desire, or intrinsic motivation, to return to school. Some pointed to wanting to fulfill the goal of obtaining their degree for their own sense of accomplishment. Others want to be a role model for their children. Some want to have a greater feeling of self-confidence. Intrinsic motivation was key for overcoming any feelings of fear or shame and any barriers in returning to school.

### 2. *Tangible career advancement*

All the interviewees worked full time (sometimes two or three jobs) after stopping out of school. As working people, they experienced being limited in their careers by not having a degree. Some working in healthcare related fields said they are not able to advance without a bachelor's degree, which also limits their earning potential. Others said they opted out of applying for jobs that called for a bachelor's degree, while some said they felt stuck in dead-end jobs that gave them little purpose. By returning to school, they could see concretely how a degree could help them advance in their career path.

### 3. *Maturity - understanding value of their education*

While many pointed to their immaturity for stopping out, they also pointed to their growing sense of maturity as a factor in returning to school. Because they were in the working world, many now fully or better understand the value of education -- much more than when they were in school without a clear goal. They understand the value of their education both in an intrinsic sense (sense of accomplishment, self-confidence) and extrinsically (tangible career advancement, more income).

### 4. *Counselor encouragement*

One person, who left school to take care of family, reported that a UH campus counselor continued to keep in touch with her during her absence from school. This sense of feeling valued contributed to her decision to return to school. Another

student said her counselor helped her find a scholarship and that because another person was invested in her, she felt more committed to staying in school upon returning. A personalized, continual interaction with students helps develop a commitment to achieving educational goals.

## C. POSITIVE ENABLERS

### 1. *Scholarship and financial support*

Most students interviewed received scholarships and/or financial support. Of those, most continued to work while pursuing school full time, because many had families or other obligations. One Windward Community College student received the Paipai O Ko'olau scholarship, which she cited as the biggest enabler for her to return to college.

### 2. *Nighttime and online classes*

Because many of the students were working, the flexibility of nighttime and online classes was key to returning. For some, coming to campus during work hours is impossible, so nighttime and online classes are the only options.

### 3. *Clear, personalized graduation plans*

Upon returning to school, students interviewed are more serious about their education. Clear, personalized graduation plans are especially important. Some had to figure out which credits were still viable and found it helpful knowing which courses they needed to take and which semesters they were offered. Because many of them were clearer about their educational goal, they had a better sense of which majors they wanted and what help they needed to navigate the system.

### 4. *Cultivating a sense of identity and belonging*

Of course, some interviewees go to school and are happy to leave it behind as soon as class is over. For others, however, having a connection and sense of belonging to their campus is important. One Windward Community College student was in a cohort with other returning adults and she said having a cohort

was beneficial to her experience. She said she knew who she could turn to for help and liked that they were all in a shared experience together. Others created their own community with study partners or friends.

#### 5. *Campus care and encouragement*

Many are grateful to their professors, whom they said were generally understanding of their need to work and attend school. Others said that academic counselors are important to understanding requirements for graduation. Having someone who cares about them and knows them as a person helps build a sense of belonging to a campus. Some also noted that having someone care about them as a whole person -- including their life story, family, goals -- rather than just their educational plans was important. This helped in building a relationship with the campus and a greater investment in themselves.

#### 6. *Other factors*

Students also cited employer and family support as important. Not all had that kind of support or flexibility from family and employers. It is important to note that for those who had employer support, the flexibility allowed them to take some classes that were only offered during the day. This was particularly important for these students since not all required classes are available during nighttime or online.

### **D. BARRIERS**

The following are common barriers that many interviewees said could cause them to drop out again or could stop others who aren't as motivated to return.

#### 1. *Lack of financial aid and scholarships*

Since many relied on financial aid and scholarships, students cited a lack of these resources as a reason why they would need to drop out again. Some said there are not enough financial resources offered for nontraditional students, especially because many are working adults and disqualified from income-based aid. Several

students cited difficulty clearing financial balances that came due when they stopped out. They likely would have returned sooner if this had not been a barrier.

2. *Lack of class options, especially for required courses*

As much as students said they value nighttime and online courses, not all the required courses are offered these ways. Some shared experiences about one course required for their major or for advancement to other required courses, and because they either didn't know about it or it was offered only during the day, they would have to wait another semester or year, delaying their graduation plans even further (and increasing chances of stopping out again).

3. *Lengthy, complicated re-enrollment process*

No one said the re-enrollment process was easy. The more common description was that the re-enrollment process was "a necessary hassle" or "frustrating." Some had to resolve previous issues, such as financial, library, or academic holds which were not easy to fix because it happened so long ago, at another campus, or was simply confusing. Others said they had to return numerous times with the same paperwork and were sent to different campus staffers.

4. *Other barriers*

Other barriers to note are the higher cost of summer classes (since many want to continue taking classes throughout the year), unknown or unforeseen financial penalties for stopping out in the first place (the need to start repaying their loan, which inhibited them from being able to re-enroll in a more timely manner), and the lack of proactive support (they need to ask for help rather than having a school member reach out to them).

#### IV. INFORMATION STILL UNKNOWN

Some experiences that could not be explored with this group of interviewed students include:

- Students who dropped out and didn't return
- People without childcare
- English language learners
- Persons with disabilities
- People in poverty

We suspect the stories of students who have not returned would provide valuable insights that might help refine these findings. It would be particularly interesting to learn how they value a college degree. Also, we interviewed several mothers whose children are older or who had childcare (spouses, grandparents, daycare). Some did note that they waited so long to return to school because they had to take care of their children. Also, students who are nontraditional learners, such as those whose first language is not English, persons differently abled, and those living in poverty, may have unique needs that are not captured in this document.

#### V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Every single student faces potential barriers to graduation -- financial burdens, family responsibilities, academic challenges, social/emotional factors, and unexpected crises are some of the most common ones. Sometimes these barriers are too strong, often conspiring with one another to make staying in school too difficult.

These interviews revealed that those who are able to return after stopping out have intrinsic motivation -- they all value their educations with a sense of purpose, determination, and effort that comes from within. This trait may emerge with maturity and encouragement, or develop through circumstance. In any case, it seems to be the common denominator for having the wherewithal to overcome barriers and complete a degree. The only powerful extrinsic factor that came up in the interviews was having a certain, tangible, job/career-related reward that would result from graduation.

Students who have returned to UH campuses may point the way to improving resilience and completion rates for all students -- across age groups, campuses, and majors. The key may be adopting a holistic approach that helps identify and cultivate intrinsic motivation in every student, while providing supports and incentives that can connect to every individual's circumstance. Four aspects of this strategy that could work together in concert include:

1. *Continue to innovate and provide supports.* Course flexibility, rule flexibility, financial assistance, navigation and planning, cohort approaches, problem-solving, and other accommodations were cited by students as helpful. Many of these are already being implemented by campuses.
2. *Acknowledge and serve the whole person.* For students, staying in school or returning after dropping out is more than just an academic decision. When campuses promise life-changing results, but only concern themselves with the academic aspects of a person's life, students feel free to abandon school for other priorities. Acknowledging, understanding, and supporting the whole person can help keep them in school.
3. *Connect with each person's personal, intrinsic motivation.* Generalized, one-size-fits-all, marketing-reliant approaches to attracting and supporting students do not seem effective at connecting with the important intrinsic motivators that allow students to overcome barriers and stay in school. A more personalized approach that meets people where they are is already finding success in some campuses where individual students feel encouraged, accountable, and connected to UH.
4. *Develop employer partnerships.* Specific, employer-driven incentives seem to be effective. Having one or more jobs in addition to being a student is a reality for a great many in Hawai'i. Conversations with employers to get their perspectives might be a good place to begin the process of developing incentives and coordination with local employers, which will help keep students in school and attract new ones to the tangible benefits of getting a degree.

An intentional, concerted effort to get students to come back to school requires campus buy-in and support. Some campuses may be more ready or able to do so. This could also include starting at campuses where the number of potential students to target is smaller and more manageable. A targeted outreach could also prioritize students who are closer to graduation

with messages that demonstrate knowledge and care (i.e. “Tammi, you have just 15 more credits to graduate, and we can help you in achieving this goal”).

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

Through deep, one-on-one interviews with 13 current UH students, Islander was able to learn about the life situations that propelled them both to drop out and to return. While each story is unique, many common themes emerged and cut across their different socioeconomic backgrounds, campuses, ages, and majors. These valuable students all had clear, intrinsic motivation to accomplish their goal of getting a degree. They want to feel proud of themselves. They want greater self-confidence. They want to serve as role models for their children. They want to prove something to themselves.

Effective strategies in engaging students to return to school must tap into these intrinsic motivations, by appealing to their life stories and challenges; sharing stories of redemption by returning; celebrating the hard work required of working students; showcasing the possibility of a different life with a degree; and so on. Understanding and tapping into the genuine stories that Hawai‘i’s students face and caring about them as persons will likely yield better outcomes than marketing plans based on generalizations and one-size-fits-all solutions.

## APPENDIX A - Interview Questions

Islander met with students in a location of their choice to create as safe and comfortable an environment as possible. Islander began with open-ended questions that allowed deeper follow-up questions to best understand life experiences. Below is a list of questions that Islander generally asked each student interviewee:

1. When did you decide to go to college? Why did you choose your school?
2. What is your educational goal? Has it changed?
3. Why did you decide to stop out of school in the first place? What are the barriers that make/made staying in school difficult?
  - a. Family
  - b. Finances
  - c. Time
  - d. Class times
  - e. Availability of classes
  - f. Multiple jobs
  - g. Venue of classes
  - h. Enrollment process
  - i. Lack of information
  - j. Lack of counseling and support
  - k. Bad experience
  - l. Inability to connect with other classmates
4. Why did you return to school? What helped in your decision to return to school? What resources, information, or support would be helpful? (What role did the scholarship play in your decision to return to school?)
5. Transportation – How do you get to school?
6. How much do finances and the cost of education factor into your decision making? How much can you afford?
7. How much value would an associate’s degree or bachelor’s degree bring to your current job? To your aspirational job? Is the investment of time, money, and effort worth it?
8. How is your experience in school? What makes it worthwhile? What makes it challenging or unfavorable? How was the overall process of going to school—enrolling and attending classes?
9. What are the strengths of your college? Weaknesses?
10. Do you think the classes you are taking are worthwhile? Is it too challenging or not enough?
11. Describe a time in school when you felt most motivated. What was going on in your life or in the class you were taking?
12. For your challenges are you aware of any resources the school offers to help? Did you use them? If so, how was that experience? Are there any additional support services that could help your situation?
13. When you had difficulty in school, who did you turn to? Did the school provide adequate resources? Did you talk to anyone about your decision to stop enrolling?
14. Do you feel those closest to you support your education?
15. What do you wish you had for resources that you don’t today?

## APPENDIX B – Summary of Student Interviews

OVERVIEW	CAMPUS	AGE
He enrolled in school after high school and was working three jobs to pay for school and support his family, all of whom have a disability. The stress and slow pace of progress led him to drop out and enroll in the military. After working in a well paying job that gave him little purpose, he decided to re-enroll for greater purpose and self-determination. He is currently working in a job and wants to get his BA and eventually his JD to become a disability rights lawyer	UH-Hilo	22
He enrolled at UH-Manoa after high school in order to meet his family's expectations. He was a victim of a violent crime while at UH and dropped out. He always wanted to get his degree and returned to school when he realized a degree would be necessary for his job. He is a psychology and communications major working one job and hoping to become a case manager for rehab patients.	UH-Hilo	25
She enrolled in college out of high school but school schedule and family obligations were hard to manage. She stopped to out to work full time at McDonald's and they were very supportive and provided information on going back to school. She returned to school because she wanted to set a good example for her children.	Hawai'i Community College	31
She enrolled right out of high school for early childhood education and took time off after 3 years. She checked the registrar's office and realized she was close to finishing a general degree. She re-enrolled because she couldn't find a full time job	Maui Community College	22
He went into the military right out of high school and enrolled in school through the GI Bill when his qualification was nearly up. His friend encouraged him to re-enroll. A feeling of accomplishment and self motivation also drove him to re-enroll.	Maui Community College	30
She stopped out because she had a baby and couldn't find affordable childcare. She initially began at Maui then re-enrolled at Manoa. She didn't realize the financial penalties of stopping, so the re-enrollment process took months to get cleared. She felt it was very difficult to find the right information. Her long break made adjusting back to school difficult.	Honolulu Community College	28
He originally enrolled at UH-Mānoa in Sports/Athletic Training. After four years, he was only two semesters away from a degree but couldn't afford to stay in school so left to get a full time restaurant job. He went back to KCC to be an EMT, graduated in 2010 and was later hired by the City and County. He got burnt out in that job and is now applying for a nursing program.	Kapiolani Community College	31

OVERVIEW	CAMPUS	AGE
<p>She stopped out many times (in her home state of California as well) because of having a family and family deaths. She went back to school when her adult daughter decided to go to college. Currently a certified nurse, getting her degree as a LPN will help her advance in her current job and increase her pay.</p>	<p>Kapiolani Community College</p>	<p>45</p>
<p>She was frequently accepted into school but never enrolled because she had a family and going to college wouldn't allow her to support her family. After working in her current job at a nonprofit for former drug users, she feels her career has plateaued and wants a bachelor's in social work to advance. She received the Paipai o Ko'olau scholarship (her biggest incentive to return) to pay for her first year of school, but said finances is the only reason why she is likely to stop out again. A person with two jobs, she says she's disqualified out of many scholarships because of her and her husband's income.</p>	<p>Windward Community College</p>	<p>38</p>
<p>She dropped out after five years with just two semesters left because of health issues, relationship problems, and feeling overwhelmed. After returning to school after 20 years, she thought that she would need to start over with her credits expiring. She returned because she always wanted her degree and she believes a bachelor's will enable her to do more. She will be graduating in May 2018 with a bachelor's in communicology.</p>	<p>UH-Mānoa</p>	<p>43</p>
<p>She was homeschooled and didn't know anything about college. She briefly stopped out because she wasn't focused on school and then returned. Later, family circumstances changed and she decided to go back to school overseas. She had problems with transferring credits, which delayed her progress and then a lump sum fee came due to the school that she couldn't pay. She stopped out for three years until she could pay the fee. A counselor stayed in touch and was one reason that she came back.</p>	<p>UH-Mānoa</p>	<p>31</p>
<p>She initially enrolled right out of high school with little direction and began having trouble keeping up grades, which led to financial aid being withdrawn. She always wanted to finish and when she received the postcard about a free class, it motivated her to re-enroll. She got married and can use GI Bill benefits and is more motivated now. She will be receiving an associate's degree and is working towards a bachelor's degree.</p>	<p>Leeward Community College</p>	<p>24</p>
<p>He originally enrolled in LCC right out of high school, but didn't have specific goals in mind and enrolled in a few general classes. He joined the military and left after several years on active duty left. He re-enrolled in school with more focus and discipline. His absence was long enough that he re-enrolled as a new student. Financial considerations require him to work full time, which also contributes to class scheduling challenges. He didn't really have a mentor when he was younger and says that possibly could have helped. He initially didn't talk to counselors much but is in more contact now. He feels confident that he will complete his associate's degree in the Fall and a bachelor's in 2019.</p>	<p>Leeward Community College</p>	<p>30</p>