

# Today's Disengaged Learner is Tomorrow's Adult Learner

## *Why Do Students Leave Higher Ed and How Do We Get Them Back?*

### CRITICAL EMPIRICAL RESEARCH STUDY

#### Co-Lead Principal Investigators

- Dr. Amy Smith, Chief Learning Officer, StraighterLine
- Jim Fong, Chief Research Officer and Director of the Center for Research and Strategy, University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA)

## METHODOLOGY & OBJECTIVES



### Survey Goal

To better understand the situations and motivations of disengaged learners who have higher education credits but are no longer attending. Study wanted to address four main questions:

1. Who leaves college?
2. Why do they leave?
3. Who is most likely to come back?
4. What can institutions do to get them back?



### Data Set

Target age range was from 20-24 years old. 3,236 respondents participated in the study of which 1,021 met all qualifications. Students who were currently enrolled or were out of the target age range were removed from the study.



### Multivariate Analysis

Researchers looked at students' decision factors and motivations, perceptions and attitudes, and likelihood of re-enrollment in higher ed based on many factors including gender, level of education, income, and employment status. Respondents were evaluated across three generations.

# KEY FINDINGS

## 1. Who Are the Disengaged Learners?

### Generation

- 36% mid-millennials,
- 19% young millennials,
- 29% Gen Z

### Gender

- 63% female
- 33% male
- 4% other/prefer not to say

### Employment Status

- 51% full-time
- 19% part-time
- 9% unemployed and not seeking employment
- 22% unemployed and seeking employment

### Fields of Study

- 18% business
- 14% healthcare
- 9% arts
- 7% computer science/education
- 6% social sciences
- 4% law/engineering
- 3% communications
- 22% other

### Current Industry

- 15% retail / consumer durables
- 14% food and beverage
- 8% construction and manufacturing
- 7% education
- 4% business, healthcare, government, or telecommunications
- 3% advertising
- 15% other

### Household Income

- 41% <\$35,000
- 24% \$35,000 - \$50,000
- 29% \$50,000 - \$100,000
- 4% \$100,000 - \$150,000
- 2% \$150,000+

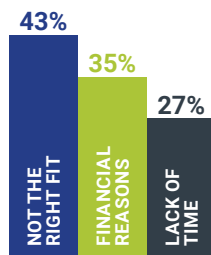
## 2. What Causes Them to Disengage With Higher Ed?

### Top 3 Overall Reasons for Leaving

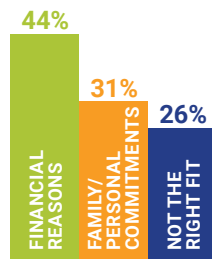
Financial Reasons  
42%

Family/  
Personal  
Commitments  
32%

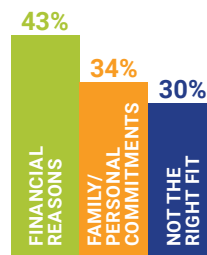
Not the  
Right Fit  
30%



Gen Z



Young Millennial



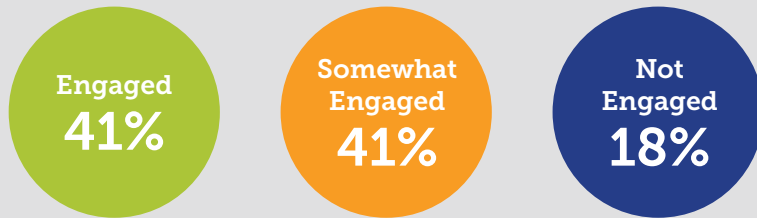
Mid-Millennial

“Why are students leaving? The overall finding across the board was students left school for financial reasons. One interesting point is this study was conducted during COVID-19 but loss of job was not a variable, so students are leaving for financial reasons, but not because they aren't working. The youngest generation's primary reason, however, was 'Not the Right Fit' signaling their priorities aren't tied to financial independence like the older demographics.

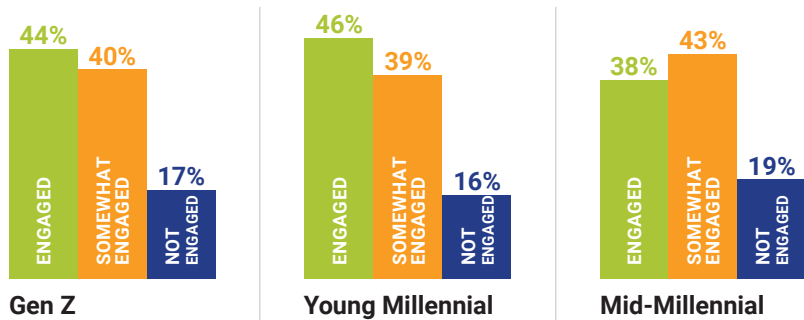
Dr. Amy Smith, Chief Learning Officer, StraighterLine

### 3. Which Students Are Most Likely to Re-Engage and Why?

#### Overall Level of Engagement Before Leaving



#### Level of engagement with their institution when a student



“Data showed a strong correlation between level of engagement as a student and satisfaction. Keeping your students happy matters. How you left the school, satisfied or upset, impacted whether or not you went back to that original school.”

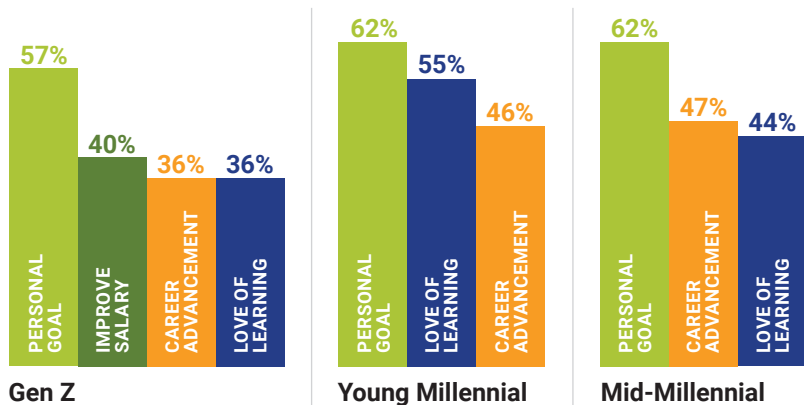
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#### Top 3 Overall Motivations for Enrolling



#### Learner's motivations to enroll



## 4. Effective Retention Strategies and Tactics



### What could your institution have provided to keep you enrolled?

FEMALES	Gen Z	Young	Mid-
		Millennial	Millennial
Courses at Lower Price	65%	77%	51%
Counseling to Re-engage Student	46%	67%	49%
Workshop to Address Struggles	58%	67%	48%
Concierge Service to Help Student	31%	47%	35%
Certificate for Credits Earned	65%	87%	65%

MALES	Gen Z	Young	Mid-
		Millennial	Millennial
Courses at Lower Price	70%	50%	69%
Counseling to Re-engage Student	80%	40%	59%
Workshop to Address Struggles	70%	70%	62%
Concierge Service to Help Student	70%	60%	64%
Certificate for Credits Earned	70%	60%	69%

“This research highlights the critical need for institutions to know their students and engage with them on their terms. Modern learners are unique, and so too are their needs and preferences. It is imperative that institutions cultivate meaningful connections to their students from the moment they enter the enrollment funnel. Life happens, students disengage. In this increasingly competitive marketplace, it is essential that institutions have an established relationship and tactics of engagement with their disengaged learners to bring them back into the fold.

Jim Fong, Chief Research Officer and Director of the Center for Research and Strategy, UPCEA

Learn more about how your institution can partner with StraighterLine

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