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## That Elusive Diploma

For college students, finishing what you start hasn't gotten any easier. It takes academic preparation. Oh, and money.

By ALINA TUGEND

**C**LIFFORD WADSWORTH III dropped out of college in 2010 after two semesters. He couldn't relate to the other students, who mostly came from wealthier families; he suffered some ill health; and he didn't like the courses in his political-science major. Now gone from the State University of New York (Buffalo), he owes about \$6,000 in student loans and is doing sheet-metal construction work. And he isn't happy about it.

"The more I work, the more I want to go back to school," said Wadsworth, who's now 21. "This is not the path I want."

In the national debate about higher education, so much attention is focused on the cost and competition of getting into college that the reality—that lots of kids never finish—has been pretty much ignored. But now that's changing, largely because the statistics have become so dire. The United States has dropped to 13th in

the percentage of young people with four-year college degrees, according to the latest figures from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Just over half (58 percent) of first-time, full-time students who entered a four-year U.S. college or university in 2004 graduated by 2010, according to the government's National Center for Education Statistics. Among Hispanics, the proportion is only 50 percent; for African-Americans, just 40 percent. And of students who attend two-year public community colleges, only about 20 percent earn a certificate or a degree within three years.

Why is this happening? The problem is complicated, but two major reasons emerge: Students drop out because of a lack of money, a lack of preparation to meet the academic challenges, or both.

The most common explanation, according to a survey of 600 Americans ages 22-30 conducted for the Bill and Melinda

Gates Foundation in 2009, is the need to hold a job while going to school. "We know if you work more than 15 hours a week, it reduces the chances of succeeding," said Anthony Carnevale, director of Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce. "More than half the students attending post-secondary institutions work more than 15 hours a week—and almost 30 percent of all students work full time. The least-advantaged are the least likely to make it."

Overcoming this hurdle is hard. As college costs explode and state governments spend less on public institutions of higher learning, the need to shoulder debt has become the norm. In the early 1990s, fewer than half of the students at four-year colleges owed money upon graduation, said Lauren Asher, president of the nonprofit Institute for College Access & Success. Now, at least two-thirds of them do.

The federal government has stepped in—to a degree. Pell Grants, the cornerstone of federal financial aid for low-income students, have an increased maximum limit of \$5,500 for the current academic year, about \$1,200 higher than five years ago. Washington has also addressed the growing difficulty in repaying student loans. A law enacted in 2010 will cap the amount that students who take out loans after mid-2014 must pay back each year at 10 percent—rather than the current 15 percent—of their discretionary income (defined as anything above 150 percent of the poverty level). The measure will forgive the balance of a borrower's debt after 20 years of repayments instead of 25 years. The first 1.6 million of the current 36 million borrowers may start to take advantage of these changes sooner, under an order that President Obama issued last year.

Of course, a college's sticker price, versus the actual cost after counting financial aid, can vary widely. Schools have made it a little easier to clarify the real cost of attending, Asher noted; most of them include net-cost calculators on their websites that are helpful, though not always simple to use. Jennifer Engle, the director of higher-education research and policy at the Education Trust, an advocacy group, argues that universities should base more of their financial aid on need rather than merit.

Borrowing to excess or relying on high-interest private loans isn't a good idea, experts say. But trying to avoid taking out any loans at all may not be optimal either, Asher said. That's because students who need money but don't want to shoulder loans sometimes compensate by working long hours, attending school part time, or jumping in and out of college—all of which, data show, “reduce the chances of getting a degree,” according to Asher. She regards federally insured loans as “a really important source of financial aid, and, if borrowed wisely, can help you get through college.”

For-profit colleges pose a particular problem. Graduation rates for these four-year institutions amount to just 28 percent within six years, compared with 56 percent for public nonprofit schools and 65 percent for private nonprofits, according to federal figures. Too many students, hoping to start a career, borrow a lot of money to attend for-profit colleges but

wind up dropping out, loaded with debt, Asher said. Nationwide, she pointed out, these institutions enroll about 13 percent of all undergraduates, but their students are responsible for half of all student-loan defaults.

“Unconscionable,” said education consultant Barmak Nassirian, until recently an official at the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. But advocates of for-profit colleges say the comparison is unfair. These schools tend to serve working adults and poorer, part-time students “with multiple barriers to success,” noted Steve Gunderson, the president of the Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities. Graduation rates are no higher for such students at nonprofit colleges, he contends.

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Another crucial variable in predicting who will drop out and who will finish college is a student's socioeconomic status. Among new full-time students who started a four-year college in fall 2003, only 47 percent of those from families with limited means (less than twice the poverty line) earned a bachelor's degree within six years, according to federal figures, compared with 61 percent of students from wealthier families.

Education experts cite a lack of academic preparation as another big reason why students drop out. This is a problem colleges can ease by instituting programs and processes that nudge the graduation rate higher. “We see places that have students from similarly diverse backgrounds that can have a spread of 10, 20, 30 percent in graduation rates,” the Education Trust's Engle said. “What we hear over and over again is the importance of top leadership—the president and provost—making student retention a top priority and backing it up with resources.” This entails collecting and examining data, she said, that show the ways in which “students are struggling—what are the patterns and institutional barriers.”

One strategy that has proven successful is to offer courses, often known as First-Year Experience programs, that teach students the basic skills of academic life. “It's one of the very few interventions in education that has data behind it,” said Robert S. Feldman, dean of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Massachusetts. These courses teach how to take notes, ask questions in class, navigate a campus, and get along with roommates. “The majority of students don't have great preparation coming out of high school,” Feldman said. Students who take First Year Experience courses are less likely to drop out, are more socially engaged, and have higher grade-point averages when they graduate than students who don't. Feldman prefers that these courses be required and offered for credit because, if given a choice, “students always think they don't need it.”

Tracking students closely is another way to help keep them in school. The University of Maryland, for example, has raised its graduation rate from 64.6 percent in 1992-98 to 81.8 percent in 2005-11, said Lisa Kiely, the school's assistant dean of undergraduate studies. A pivotal tactic in its anti-dropout strategy is to require freshmen to craft a four-year graduation plan that an adviser will review every year or so. The idea is to ensure that students are taking the right courses to fulfill their academic requirements to graduate on time, rather than just drifting.

Maryland's flagship public university, Kiely said, also watches students who are struggling academically and makes sure that an adviser in their discipline keeps in contact. A student who has engaged with even a single nonstudent—a faculty member, an adviser, a coach, even “the guy who empties the trash,” said UMass's Feldman—is less likely to drop out.

That personal connection was completely missing for Wadsworth, the Buffalo student who quit school. When he was struggling, he recalls, “I got e-mail reminders from teachers letting me know that if I didn't take an exam, I was in danger of failing.”

Period. Nobody from the university contacted him in any other way—except to send him a bill for his tuition. ■

*The writer is a business columnist for The New York Times and the author of Better by Mistake. She's at [twitter.com/atugend](https://twitter.com/atugend).*