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Some students discover that college isn't for them

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For everything that college brings -- new social experiences, intellectual explorations and the likelihood of better-paying jobs after graduation higher education doesn't satisfy everyone who enrolls.

Other priorities can transform a college student into a college dropout. And while some may feel social stigma or regret, they often seek success by other means.

Dominic Catalano, of Poway, Calif., was studying television and film at California State University, Fullerton, with hopes of directing soap operas. In 1988, his father became too ill to work; Catalano left school to manage the family business of casual Italian restaurants.

"I feel bad, because I know if I would have finished, I would have ended up doing what I always wanted to do, and I would have been good at it," said Catalano, 41.

After several years of owning his own deli business, this year he opened Lasting Memories Video, which transforms family photos and films into DVD keepsakes.

"I sold my business in order to pursue my passion and dreams that I had for all my life" without a college degree, he said.

ACT, known for its college entrance exam, tracks college retention rates by surveying schools for the percentage of freshmen who returned as sophomores.

From 1988 to 2008, the number who left four-year colleges remained relatively steady, fluctuating between 25 percent and 28 percent, the Iowa City, Iowa-based organization reports. (That figure does not count students who transferred to other schools, took time off or quit during sophomore year or later.)

Jenny Sawyer, executive director of admissions at the University of Louisville in Kentucky, administers a state program called Project Graduate at her school. The effort, which colleges implemented in January, encourages adults who left state schools to return, offering incentives including tuition help and application fee waivers.

Sawyer said that in many cases, former students considering re-entry say they dropped out because "life happened." They ran out of money. They had children. They needed to handle family obligations.

It's impossible to anticipate all the reasons for leaving college, but some administrators and educators are trying to address what they see often among slipping students. At particular risk: those who feel overwhelmed or uninspired by course work and those who suffer social isolation.

"You can't really divorce what keeps people in school from what forces them to drop out," said Laurie L. Hazard, director of the Academic Center for Excellence at Bryant University in Smithfield, R.I.

Some students simply don't know why they're there, said George Kuh, director of Indiana University's Center for Postsecondary Research.

Sarah Sowers, 22, of Terre Haute, Ind., couldn't justify staying in college: "I was unhappy going to school. It was not what I wanted to do, and more and more it felt like a waste of time and money. I'll be paying off student loans for years. And it's definitely not money well spent."

She left Indiana Business College in 2006 with no regrets. She has since married her high school sweetheart and is excited about starting a family. She works nights cleaning medical buildings.

Kuh said the challenge for schools is to maintain an "early warning system" that will flag struggling students and provide one-on-one guidance. Even then, he said, "for some students, not being in college might be better."

Andrew Skelton of Washington came to that conclusion before leaving Howard University last year. He simply didn't know what course he wanted to pursue.

"I'd hate to be one of those people that goes to college, gets a degree, then starts a career just to realize they've been living a lie by the time they're 35," said Skelton, who turns 23 on Oct. 9.

He's working part-time at a health club while hunting for full-time clerical work. "Things might be tough now, but at least I'm not living a lie," he said.

Still, as they get older, former students must grapple with their identity as dropouts.

"A lot of it is the feeling of embarrassment," a sense of lacking credibility, said Becky Wai-Ling Packard, associate professor of psychology and education at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Mass. There's an unfair perception that "if you don't have a college degree, you're not educated."

Carla Weffenstette, 22, said she senses that some silently judge her, "especially when all the people you hang out with are college-educated and you're the one who dropped out."

Weffenstette has cystic fibrosis, a disease that affects the lungs and makes it hard to breathe. Her demanding science classes, which required hours of lab work, were too taxing on her physically. Frequent hospitalizations forced her to miss classes. She left the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 2006 and lives on disability payments.

"I have accepted that it was not my fault," said Weffenstette, who still lives in Madison and is satisfying a passion for ballroom dancing with lessons when her health allows. "Other people can think what they want."