

Opinion

Commentary: ‘Stopped-out’ students need hand up

By Ray Hexamer / Special to The Canton Repository

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Completing a college degree or a credential program isn't only a smart decision, it also can profoundly and permanently change lives for the better and pave the way to the middle class.

Yet each year one out of every five students leaves college without earning a degree. That translates into more than 1.6 million adults in Ohio who started college but didn't finish.

By 2020 — one year from now — 65% of all jobs will require some post-secondary education beyond high school. To get and keep a good job that pays enough to support a family, all adults must have the knowledge and training employers require.

As we look at ways to strengthen Stark County, we need to reach this population of “stopped-out” students in our communities and offer help. We need to find ways to help them get back to school and finish what they started.

Stopped-out students — adults who started college but didn't complete a degree — might be only a few courses away from finishing their education. More than 135,000 Ohioans, many of them in Stark County, are only a few credits away from better pay, more job security and greater job opportunities.

Stopped-out students typically quit college or a credential program for good reasons. They might have run out of money for tuition or books. They might not be able to find reliable or affordable child care. Maybe they simply were overwhelmed with juggling school, work and family responsibilities. Almost 40% of students today attend college part time because they don't have the luxury of focusing only on school.

How can we support stopped-out students?

- We need to build on the small emergency grants colleges offer to students who run into a temporary but surmountable financial challenges. Just being able to pay for new brakes or tires can prevent a student from stopping out or dropping out

altogether.

- We must make sure student transcripts aren't "held hostage" because of relatively insignificant outstanding tuition balances or parking fines that are preventing former students from re-enrolling.
- We need employers to incentivize employees to go back to school by offering tuition assistance, contingent upon the employee pledging to stay with the company for a set period upon completion of a degree or credential.
- We need to help stopped-out students get credit for their work experience and demonstrable skills.
- We need to make sure stopped-out students know how little time it can take to earn their degree or credential. Many students don't know how fast they can finish or that colleges like Stark State offer opportunities to get credit for prior learning.

Possibly the easiest group to help is stopped out students who need only a nudge over the education finish line. Together, let's strengthen Stark County by showing these adults the path to completing a certificate or degree in a high-demand field. Let's share information to help people get back on track to a career that will pay well and offer further growth opportunities.

Stark State College is offering an Adult Student Night on May 14 at its main campus from 6 to 7:30 p.m. in the Gateway Student Services Center. The event will provide information on scholarships, support services, financial aid and other topics.

Ray Hexamer, a lifelong Stark County resident, is president of the Stark Economic Development Board and holds a leadership position with Strengthening Stark. He is the former CEO of First Communications in Akron and former executive director of the Massillon Development Foundation.