What are some characteristics of early college dropouts?

Recent findings based on a representative sample show that:

- Federal, state, and local authorities spent about $4 billion over a period of 5 years on first-time, full-time community college students who did not return for a second year of school.\(^1\)
- Two groups of students were compared: very “early dropouts,” who only enrolled for one term and then did not return, and “early persisters,” who enrolled at least twice in the first four enrollment terms.
- Analysis of first-time college student transcript data illustrates that more students dropped out after the first term than any other time, and the majority of these students never enrolled in any other college again.
- These “early dropouts” are usually older (averaging 27 year old), which can mean a few significant things (Figure 1):
  - They have more time constraints due to working, being married and/or having a family.
  - These responsibilities may cause more financial constraints than for younger students.
  - Early dropouts/older adults are less likely to receive financial aid as much as early persisters, possibly due to higher socioeconomic status (Figure 2).
  - Overall, early dropouts enroll in fewer credits than early persisters, which makes it difficult to complete a degree.
- Early dropouts are slightly less likely to have earned a high school diploma, illustrating that these students were already less academically prepared than early persisters.
- Early dropouts were more likely to be referred to developmental education classes, and even in these courses, they performed poorly in their first and only term at a community college.
- Online course offerings continue to be a possible partial solution to early dropout rates, but have not been shown to conclusively stem dropout rates or improve success rates over traditional course offerings.

Suggestions for improvement:

- Since results show that first-term experiences of early dropouts is not positive, institutional researchers and administration should work to understand the early dropout population in better detail.
- Specifically, colleges should continue to make an effort to learn better, specific ways to detect early failure and also provide meaningful academic support for students who are at risk of struggling in the first semester.

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Understanding Student Progression through Completion of “Core Curriculum”

Recent findings based on a representative sample of two community colleges show that:

- Students who completed all required “core curriculum” courses had higher levels of degree attainment compared to students who only completed a large number (but not all) of core curriculum courses.
- Over 5 years of tracking, students who accumulated fewer credits also showed less successful outcomes.
- Completion of core curriculum may be halted due to the difficulty for some students to complete required subject area courses in Math and Science, especially for students who are placed in developmental studies (“basic skills”) courses.
- On the other hand, students in the sample colleges who took more credits than required to complete the core curriculum were mostly enrolled in Social/Behavioral Sciences courses, which may indicate:
  - Students needed it for their major as a subject area course.
  - Students tend to take courses they feel successful in rather than required courses they might struggle with.
  - Students did not know, or were confused about, core curriculum requirements and were therefore taking more courses than were needed.

- Suggestions for improvement:
  - Tracking the completion of general education “core curriculum” courses can help community colleges understand the performance of transfer students who plan to achieve a bachelor’s degree at another institution.
  - Engage in practices that encourage core curriculum completion. It is essential that colleges continue to make an effort to provide guidance through subject area requirements, especially in courses that most students believe are difficult.
  - Motivate students who have completed a majority of “core curriculum” courses to earn an associate degree before transferring to a four-year college—perhaps by increasing or introducing incentives for this to occur.
    - In addition, develop or maintain articulation agreements between colleges and neighboring four-year colleges in order to guarantee junior standing to associate degree completers.
  - Increase efforts to guide and support students, especially those in Science and Math courses. This can be done by increasing (or continuing) assistance to students in developing a plan to complete the core curriculum, so that taking challenging courses is not delayed.