

This paper is from a series presenting information on subjects of interest, using data from the **BC Student Outcomes** surveys.

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Completers Versus Leavers: Beyond the Simplistic “Drop-Out” Label

Thousands of students pass through the B.C. public post-secondary education system each year. The majority complete programs and get a credential before they leave; however, a considerable number leave the system without achieving a credential. Are there significant differences between those who attain their credential and those who leave early, particularly with regard to their goals for enrolling, their goal realization and satisfaction with education, and their financial situations?

Introduction

Every year, a large number of students leave the B.C. public post-secondary system without completing their programs of study and without a credential. The **2009 Short Stay Early Leaver Student Outcomes (SSELSO) Survey** was developed specifically to gather information from these former students.

The key finding of the SSELSO survey is that of the thousands of students annually who leave the post-secondary system without a credential, most were satisfied with

their education and gave high ratings to the quality of the instruction they received. Achieving a credential is not the primary goal of many students who enrol in post-secondary institutions, and over half of the SSELSO respondents said they completely or mostly met their goals for enrolling. Most leavers depart because of circumstances beyond the direct control of the institution, and the most commonly-cited factors that may have influenced students to stay longer

Overview

Completers often had employment-related reasons for enrolling in post-secondary education, while Leavers were more likely to have started their studies with the goal of getting a credential. The majority of both Completers and Leavers said they achieved their main goal for enrolling, although not surprisingly, Completers were more likely than Leavers to say they completely met their main objective.

Leavers had enrolled in longer programs, typically arts and sciences, while Completers had taken shorter programs that focussed on preparation for employment. Leavers were more likely to have borrowed for their studies and ended up owing more than Completers did, in spite of leaving before completing a credential. When asked how satisfied they were with their education, almost all Completers (94 percent) said they were *very satisfied* or *satisfied*; most Leavers (88 percent) said the same.

are money-related. The survey also found that many of these former students eventually return to post-secondary studies, even after an absence of two or three years.

The annual **Diploma, Associate Degree, and Certificate Student Outcomes (DACSO) Survey**¹ also provides information on some students who leave without a credential. The DACSO Survey is administered to former students who complete all or a substantial portion of their programs—the majority of these students leave with a credential. Of the students who do not achieve a credential, many will go on to further studies at a later date.

Findings from the SSEL SO and DACSO surveys are similar in many respects, but they are not identical. Combining the results for non-graduates or “leavers” from both surveys makes for a more complete picture of this subpopulation. Comparing these **Leavers** (DACSO and SSEL SO respondents who completed a substantial portion of their programs but who did not receive a credential) with **Completers** (DACSO respondents who received a credential) will lead us to a better understanding of a student population that is sometimes erroneously, and sometimes accurately, described as “drop-outs.”

Data for this paper

The data used in this analysis are from the 2009 Short Stay Early Leaver Student Outcomes (SSEL SO) Survey and the 2009 Diploma, Associate Degree, and Certificate Student Outcomes (DACSO) Survey.

The SSEL SO Survey was conducted in the spring and summer of 2009. The eligible cohort included 15,008 students from 25 B.C. public post-secondary institutions who had been registered during the 2006/2007 academic year, had not received a credential, and had not been enrolled at any public post-secondary institution at any point between September 1, 2007 and February of 2009. Overall, 5,036 leavers responded to the survey, for a response rate of 34 percent.

The eligible cohort for the 2009 DACSO Survey included 27,070 former students who completed or nearly completed programs in 20 of B.C.’s public post-secondary institutions. The survey was conducted in the winter and spring of 2009, some 9 to 20 months after the respondents left their studies; 15,856 former students answered the survey, for an overall response rate of 59 percent.

Definitions

➤ **Completers** are DACSO respondents who have received “graduation status” from their institution. In 2009, there were 11,562 respondents who had graduated.

➤ **Leavers** are a combination of DACSO Near Completers and SSEL SO Early Leavers:

- DACSO Near Completers are respondents who have not received “graduation status” from their institution, but who met the survey eligibility criteria: completion of at least 24 credits for arts and sciences programs, with 75% of those credits at the first- and second-year level, or for applied programs, completion of at least 75 percent of the program requirements. There were 4,279 respondents who had not graduated.
- Early Leavers are SSEL SO respondents, who had earned at least 24 credits. (In the case of students who took courses without credits attached, it was assumed that three months of full-time attendance equals 15 credits.) This definition removes respondents from SSEL SO who had taken only a few courses, improving comparability with the DACSO data. There were 1,763 respondents who had earned at least 24 credits.

By the time they were surveyed, a number of respondents from both the SSEL SO and DACSO surveys were enrolled in further education. Many of these students were likely to have been pursuing university transfer programs—in that sense, they were neither leavers nor completers, they were simply moving along their educational path. They were removed from the analysis: 3,055 from the Completer group and 3,235 from the Leavers. The final numbers in each group are as follows:

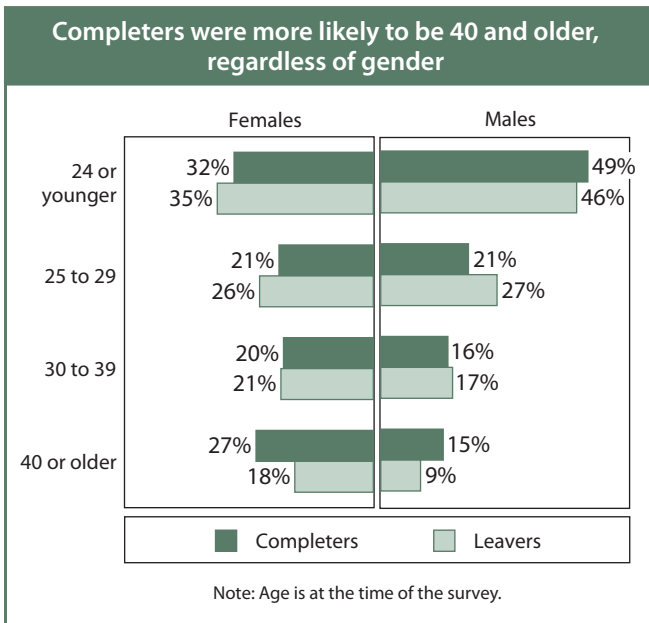
- Completers: n= 8,507
- Leavers: n= 2,807

Description of former students

The overall characteristics—for gender, age, and Aboriginal status—of Leavers and Completers were similar. In each group, over half of the former students surveyed were female, a small percentage identified themselves as Aboriginal, and the median age was 26, although the mean ages differed slightly.

The characteristics of the two groups of former students were similar				
Group	Female	Aboriginal	Median age	Mean age
Completers	54%	5%	26	30
Leavers	56%	6%	26	29

For both groups, females tended to be older. Regardless of gender, the proportion of those 40 or older was higher for Completers than it was for Leavers.



Over half (52 percent) of the Completers had taken some post-secondary studies before enrolling in their recent program of studies. This figure was much lower for the Leavers: 38 percent had previous post-secondary experience. The difference between Completers and Leavers remains significant by gender and persists across all age groups.

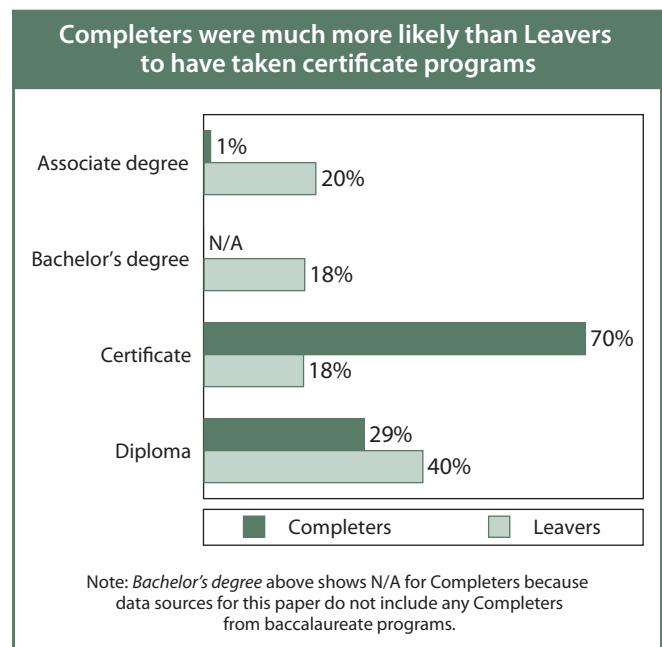
Program selections

There were significant differences in the types of programs that the groups had taken. Two-thirds of the Completers had done studies in the trades, health, or business and management areas. Over half of the Leavers had been in arts and sciences or business and management programs.

Completers and Leavers had taken a different mix of programs		
Program Area	Completers	Leavers
Arts and Sciences	5%	43%
Business and Management	15%	15%
Education	6%	5%
Engineering and Applied Sciences	12%	8%
Health	22%	7%
Human and Social Services	7%	6%
Trades	29%	6%
Visual and Performing Arts	4%	8%
Other	0%	2%
Total	100%	100%

Note: All former students who were studying at the time of the survey have been excluded.

Completers were more likely to have taken shorter programs—70 percent had been in certificate programs, which were typically 6 to 12 months. On the other hand, the majority of Leavers had been in longer programs; only 18 percent had taken certificate programs. Other Leavers had been in diploma or as-



sociate degree programs (usually 12 to 24 months) or baccalaureate programs (normally four years).²

The credential type of program that former students chose influenced their decisions to relocate from their home communities to attend post-secondary institutions. The overall difference in relocation rates between Completers and Leavers was not great—19 percent of Completers relocated to study, compared with 21 percent of Leavers. However, only 16 percent of the Completers who chose certificate programs moved to study, while Leavers from Bachelor’s programs relocated at a much higher rate of 35 percent.

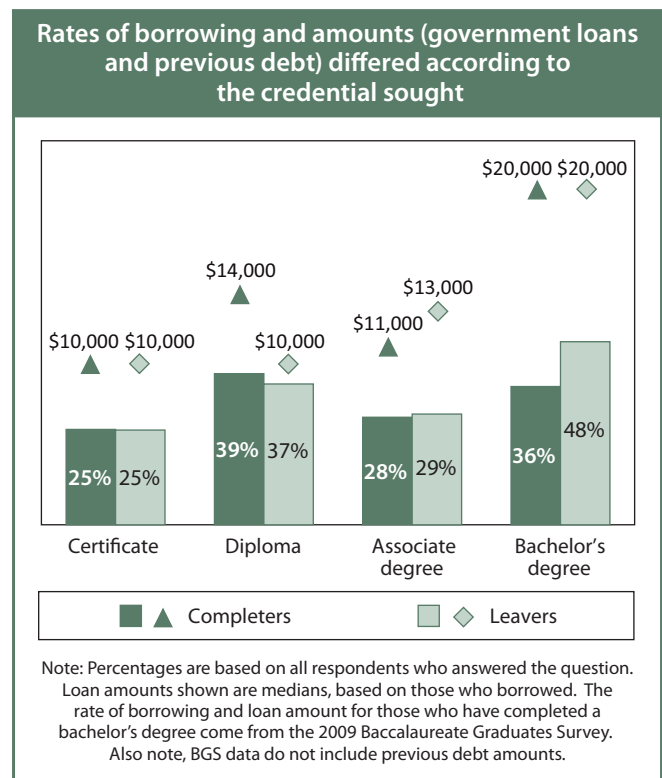
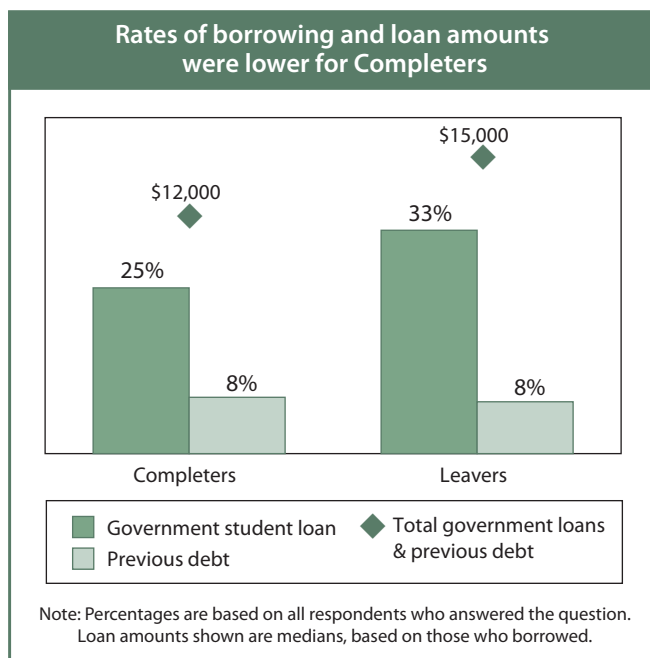
Financial support

Former students were asked to report amounts borrowed from the government student loan program for their recent studies and to say if they had outstanding debt from previous post-secondary studies. The financial questions asked in DACSO differed slightly from those asked in SSEL SO, but the percentage who borrowed and the loan amounts are comparable.³

Completers were less likely than Leavers to have borrowed for their studies, and of those who had taken loans, the amounts were lower, on average. These lower loan amounts reflect the shorter programs they had taken. The Leavers had a higher rate of receiving

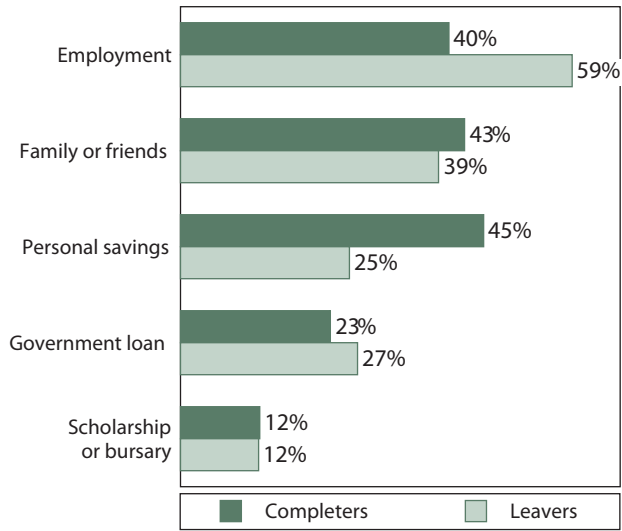
government student loans and had borrowed larger amounts, on average. Their loan rates reflect their greater participation in longer programs, especially those intended to lead to a baccalaureate.

For Both Completers and Leavers, the type of credential program they attended made a difference in their rate of borrowing and the amount borrowed. As expected, longer programs resulted in higher loan amounts. At the time they left their studies, Completers and Leavers from certificate programs owed a median amount of \$10,000; those who left a bachelor’s degree program without a credential owed a median of \$20,000. This was also the median amount owed by degree graduates when they left their studies.⁴ Borrowing rates followed the same pattern: only one-quarter of former students from certificate programs had a government student loan (including previous debt), compared with almost half of Leavers from baccalaureate programs.



The surveys asked former students to report their main or most important sources of financial support during their studies. Completers used personal savings first, then took help from family or friends; Leavers relied heavily on employment while studying.

Employment while studying was the most important source of funding for Leavers



Note: Respondents could choose up to three sources of funding; percentages add to more than 100.

Reasons for enrolling and goal achievement

Completers were more likely than Leavers to have had work-related reasons for enrolling; the largest proportion said they had enrolled to learn new job skills. The Leavers were more likely than Completers to say they had enrolled in their program of study for academic reasons: to complete a credential, in particular.

Completers were more likely to have enrolled to learn employment skills

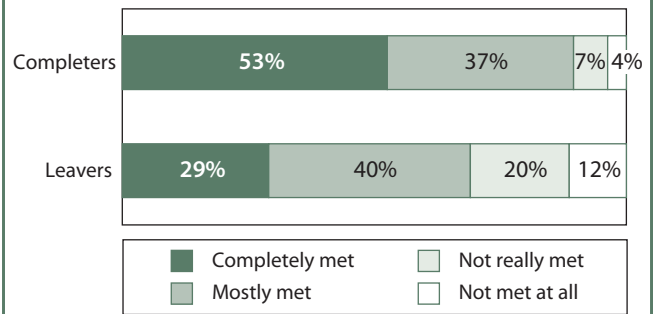
Reasons for enrolling	Completers	Leavers
Academic reasons		
Complete a credential at this institution	26%	42%
Prepare to transfer to another institution	2%	12%
Qualify to enter a program in another field	5%	8%
Employment reasons		
Learn new job skills	39%	23%
Decide on a career or change careers	36%	27%
Improve existing job skills	21%	13%
Other		
Personal interest	17%	19%
Improve basic skills	4%	4%

Note: Respondents were allowed to choose up to three reasons; percentages add to more than 100.

It is not surprising that Completers were the most likely to have been focussed on employment-related goals when they enrolled, since their study choices were largely “applied” programs that lead to employment in specific fields. A large portion (43 percent) of the Leavers in this study had been in arts and sciences programs, so their initial focus would have been academic, even though they did not continue their studies. Nevertheless, 63 percent of the Leavers also cited employment reasons for enrolling.

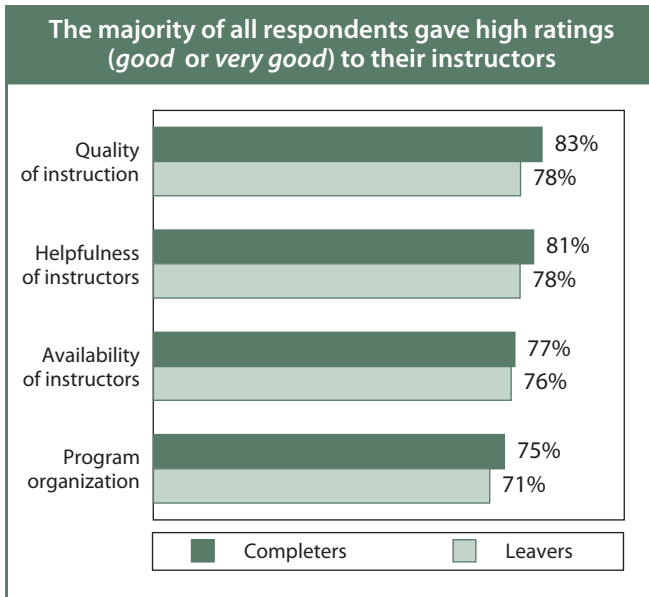
All respondents were asked to report the extent to which they achieved their main goal for enrolling. Not surprisingly, the Completers were much more likely than Leavers to say they had *completely* or *mostly met* their goal: 90 percent of Completers achieved their main objective for enrolling. It is worth noting, however, that a majority of 69 percent of Leavers said they met their main goal.

Most Completers said they met their main objective for enrolling

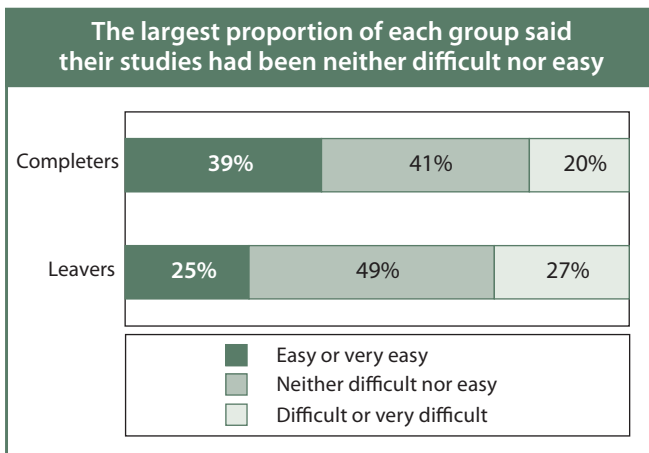


Evaluation of education

The former students who were surveyed were asked to evaluate the quality of selected aspects of their studies. Using a 5-point scale, from *very good* to *very poor*, respondents rated the availability of instructors for course help outside of class, helpfulness of instructors outside of class, quality of instruction, and organization of the program. In all cases, the majority of responses were in the *very good* or *good* categories.

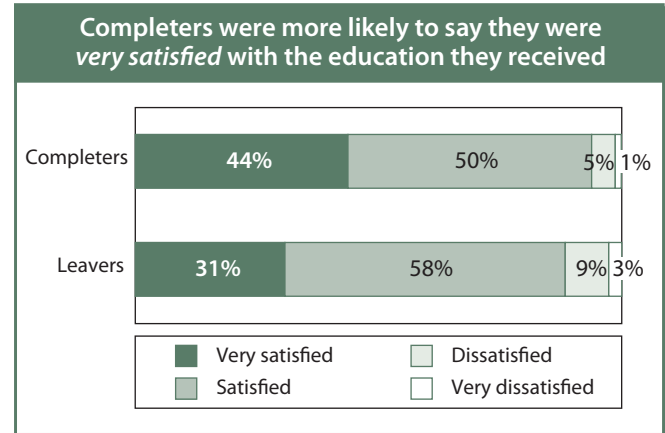


Although the Leavers' ratings of instructors and programs were not too far from the ratings given by Completers, their evaluation of the difficulty of their studies was markedly different. Compared with Completers, a significantly lower proportion of Leavers said their studies had been *easy* or *very easy*. On the other end of the scale, the percentage of Leavers who said they found their studies to have been *difficult* or *very difficult* was higher than the portion of Completers who said the same. It should be noted, however, that the largest proportion of each group said their studies had been *neither difficult nor easy*.



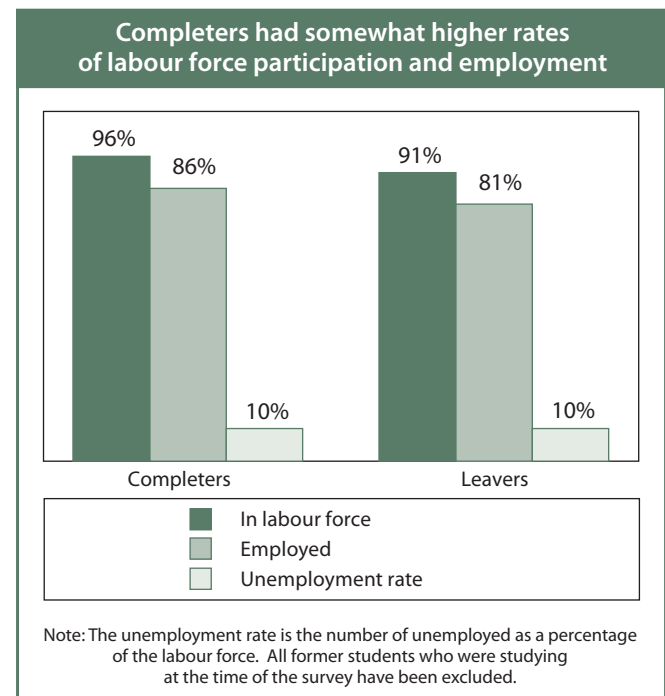
Most former students, whatever their graduation status, reported that they were satisfied with the education they received at their post-secondary institution. There was a difference, however, between the

responses of the Completers and the Leavers. Of the Completers who answered the question about satisfaction, 94 percent said they were *satisfied* or *very satisfied* with their education; 88 percent of Leavers said the same.



Employment

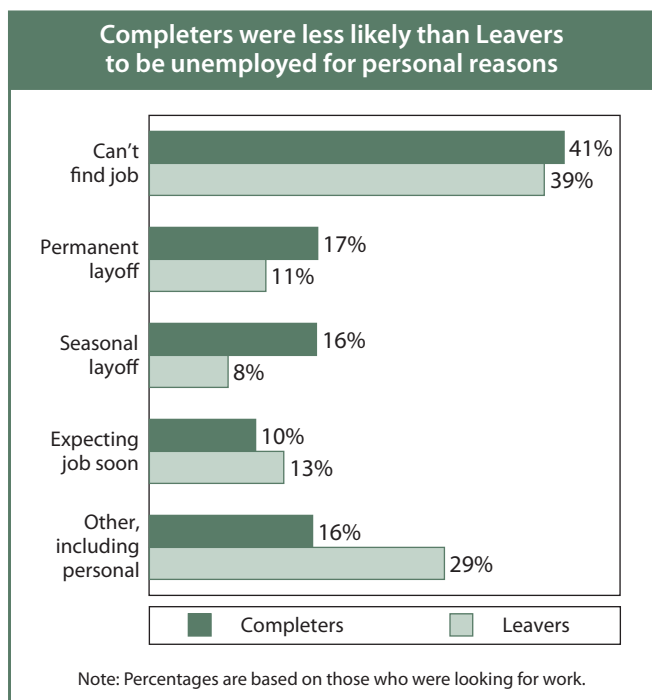
At the time they were surveyed, most respondents were in the labour force (employed or looking for work) and large majorities were employed. (The labour force participation rates for Completers and Leavers are higher than the overall rates for DACSO and SSELSo respondents, because this analysis does not include



those who were studying at the time of the survey—studying is the reason most often given for not looking for work.) The unemployment rate for each group was the same, but the Completers had a higher rate of participation in the labour force and were correspondingly more likely to be employed than Leavers.

Although Leavers had a somewhat lower employment rate than Completers, those who were employed were more likely than employed Completers to have had the same job while they were studying: 40 percent of Leavers had the same job, compared with 29 percent of Completers.

Former students who were unemployed were asked to give the main reason they were not currently working. Completers were more likely than Leavers to say they couldn't find suitable employment or there were no jobs available and more likely to say they were permanently laid off. They were also twice as likely to say they were temporarily laid off or had seasonal employment. Leavers, on the other hand, were more likely to say they were temporarily between jobs or expecting a job soon and were much more prone to say they had other reasons for not working—mostly personal, non-work-related reasons.



Conclusion

It has been widely assumed the measure of success for a post-secondary education is achieving a credential, while “dropping out” is a sign of failure. It is also assumed, therefore, that the goal of everyone who starts a post-secondary program must be to get a credential; however, using data from the DACSO and SSELSON surveys to look for differences and similarities between Completers and Leavers has shown that former students often had other reasons for enrolling and that they achieved other outcomes they considered satisfactory.

Paradoxically, those who left with a credential—the Completers—were more likely to have enrolled for job skills than for a credential; the Leavers, who left without a credential, were more likely to have enrolled for academic reasons.

The programs that Completers had enrolled in were generally shorter and more likely to be focussed on preparation for employment, rather than on further academic study. In general, Completers were focussed on jobs: from their reasons for enrolling through their choice of programs (with concentrations in the trades, health, and business) to their employment outcomes. They were more likely than Leavers to be in the labour force; if they were unemployed, the reasons they gave for not working were job related, not personal.

Leavers, who were pursuing academic goals, typically chose longer arts and sciences programs and were more likely than Completers to have moved from their home communities to study. Not surprisingly, given longer programs and greater likelihood of relocation, Leavers had higher rates of borrowing for their studies and, on average, owed higher amounts. Compared with Completers, Leavers were more likely to have used employment income to support themselves while they were studying.

Even though many Leavers had originally enrolled for a credential, they may have considered their rising debt and the fact that they already had employment and decided that *some* post-secondary education was enough for their purposes. They didn't necessarily see their departure as a failure—when they were asked if they met their main goal for enrolling, the majority said they had achieved their objective.

For the Leavers who did not achieve their credential objective, the label of “drop-out” may still be inappropriate, since that status could be temporary. SSEL SO data showed that even after two or three years, former students returned to continue post-secondary studies. Research with a longer time frame has also shown that many of those who leave early are actually “stop-outs”—not “drop-outs”—eventually returning to their studies and, in many cases, completing a credential.⁵

In summary, the evidence from the SSEL SO and DACSO surveys indicates that credential rates are not the only way of viewing the success of post-secondary education. Regardless of their credential status, reasons for enrolling, or employment outcomes, a large majority of all respondents said they were *satisfied* or *very satisfied* with the education they received in B.C.’s post-secondary institutions.

Endnotes

1 While the cohort for the SSEL SO Survey was drawn from across the post-secondary system, the former students who are eligible for the DACSO Survey come from colleges, institutes, and teaching intensive universities only.

2 The data for Completers comes from the DACSO Survey only, and therefore, does not include information on students who were in baccalaureate programs.

3 Leavers from the SSEL SO cohort reported the total amount of all government student loans they owed at the time they left their studies. The financial questions in the DACSO Survey were asked of a 50% random sample. Completers and the Leavers from the DACSO cohort reported separate

amounts: the amount of the government student loan for the program of studies they recently left and the amount of debt accumulated from previous post-secondary studies. For the comparisons in this paper, the government student loan amount and the previous debt amount have been combined for respondents from the DACSO cohort.

4 Information on the borrowing of baccalaureate completers is from the 2009 Baccalaureate Graduates

Survey, Summary of Survey Results, All Institutions, BGS Reports by Institutions and Discipline (<http://outcomes.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/BGS/BGSTupeReports.aspx>).

5 Lesley Andres, *The Dynamics of Post-Secondary Participation and Completion: A Fifteen Year Portrayal of BC Young Adults*, BCCAT Research Results, December 2009.

About the surveys

The Diploma, Associate Degree, and Certificate Student Outcomes (DACSO) Survey is an annual province-wide survey of former students from B.C.’s public post-secondary institutions who have taken diploma, certificate, or associate degree programs. It is conducted with funding from the Ministry of Advanced Education and from the participating post-secondary institutions. Former students are contacted 9 to 20 months after completing all, or a significant portion, of their program of study and asked to evaluate their educational experience and to talk about their employment and further education. The results of the survey are used by the institutions to improve programs. The province uses the information for post-secondary policy development and accountability. Students, parents, and the general public can Search BC Post-Secondary Student Survey Results through the student outcomes website <http://outcomes.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/SORSLite/SORSLiteHome.aspx> or Education Planner <http://www.educationplanner.ca/> to help them make informed post-secondary education choices. For more information on student outcomes, please see <http://outcomes.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/>.

The Short Stay Early Leaver Student Outcomes (SSEL SO) Survey was developed by the province and participating post-secondary institutions to gather data on the educational experiences and outcomes of those who left B.C.’s post-secondary system without a credential. This study made use of newly consolidated data to remove known transfer students. This approach, made possible for the first time by the Student Transitions Project (http://www.aved.gov.bc.ca/student_transitions/welcome.htm), allowed the focus of the research to be on true leavers rather than those who were using the province’s transfer system to continue their education elsewhere in B.C. A “short stay” student is one who left after taking only a few courses. An “early leaver” is one who took quite a few courses, but left before completing all program requirements. For more information on the SSEL SO Survey, see <http://outcomes.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/OtherSurveys/OtherSurveys.aspx>.