CREATING SUCCESS FOR POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Post-traditional students represent the new normal for college students. But by and large, college advising services and support still cater to an outdated, "traditional" understanding of a college student's profile. In 2018, Webber Family Foundation sponsored research to better define and understand these post-traditional students in Austin, Texas. From October-December 2018, Austin-based student support organization PelotonU conducted a survey of 187 post-traditional students and alumni, and local interaction design program Austin Center for Design developed actionable insights into the problem of college persistence and completion. Together, AC4D and PelotonU discovered that post-traditional students do not fit a single mold; that in existing college support models, post-traditional students get lost in the mix; and that different types of resources are required to support these students. This report concludes that to effectively serve post-traditional students, caseworkers and their respective organizations need to better understand, prioritize, and guide this population of students.

WHY POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS?

We often think of a "college student" as an eighteen-year-old individual living on campus at a four-year university.

But today, that student is the exception.

Many students are supporting themselves and their families, working full-time, or commuting to a single class each semester. They may be 18 years old and supporting their family who recently immigrated to the United States; or 25 years old and working two part-time jobs in the service industry, with changing shifts that preclude regular class attendance.

> **Colleges are not equipped to offer the kinds of support that 74% of today's students need in order to be successful.**

The National Center for Education Statistics estimates that **74% of college students** have **at least one "post-traditional" characteristic**. According to the American Council on Education,[1] post-traditional students include people who are: above the age of 24, attending school part-time, working full-time, caring for at least one dependent, a single caregiver, and/or financially independent from their parents.

"Post-traditional students" are the new normal. But their varying responsibilities don't fit within the fixed structure of higher education. Of part-time students, 40% will never finish. In Central Texas, that number is lower—only 17% of part-time students ever earn a credential.[2] If students are working 20 hours or more, 37% will never earn their degree. If they are the first in their family to pursue a college degree, 41% won't finish.[3]

In short: Colleges are not equipped to offer the kinds of support that 74% of today's students need in order to be successful.

[1] https://www.acenet.edu/news-room/pages/the-post-traditional-learners-manifesto-revisited.aspx

[2] http://data.e3alliance.org/complete/

[3] https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_326.50.asp?current=yes

Why does this matter? Because we know that **a college credential is more important than ever for economic mobility**. Nearly 65% of jobs in 2020 will require some form of post-secondary education.[4] Those with no more than a high school diploma are twice as likely to be unemployed as those with a Bachelor's degree, and three times as likely to live in poverty.[5]

That's why Texas outlined the ambitious goal to have 60% of its workforce earn a credential by 2030.[6]

With just 48% of the workforce credentialed today, the best chance for success is to **expand access to education credentials**, by **creating new degree paths for post-traditional students.**

This is the question we wrestle with alongside our students at PelotonU: How might we design the college experience to fit the responsibilities of post-traditional students?

[4] *https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/ the-college-payoff/*

[5] *https://data.e3alliance.org//slides/ DemographicsWorkforce/Slide26.PNG?v=999*

[6] *http://www.60x30tx.com/*

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

As of 2017, more than 148,000 people in Travis County, Texas, have some college but no degree.[7] Many of them have at least one characteristic of a post-traditional student.

The unique circumstances, behaviors, and obstacles faced by post-traditional students directly tie to college persistence and success. But these factors are not yet well understood, screened for, or accommodated. For students who stopped out, better advice is needed to navigate the obstacles that confronted them on their first attempt to pursue a degree. And for incoming post-traditional students, better advice is needed to set them up for success the first time through.

PelotonU and AC4D explored this area toward one objective: Developing actionable insights on how to better support post-traditional students throughout college. Those insights are below.

[7] *https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/ tableservices/jsf/pages/productview. xhtml?src=CF*

METHODOLOGY

From October-December 2018, PelotonU and AC4D surveyed 187 students and conducted follow-up research, in the form of in-depth one-on-one interviews and site visits, with 53 students.

PelotonU surveyed alumni of local college persistence programs, including College Forward, College Hub, Hispanic Scholarship Consortium, and KIPP Through College. The survey's 25 questions were developed to uncover common factors shared by, and obstacles facing, these students.

The questions included identifying student "stop-outs," students working 20+ hours per week, students seeking a level of education higher than their parents, and students who work regularly with advisors to track their goals. [See Findings and Appendix for more.]

A final survey question invited respondents to participate in a follow-up in-person interview with design research graduate students from Austin Center for Design. PelotonU provided $25 gift cards to each student participant.

14 AC4D design researchers conducted in-person interviews at participating student's choice of homes, places of study, or places of work. Researchers sat with students for 60-to-90-minute interviews, asked them to complete activities that reflected students' stories and decision-making models, and in some cases walked with students through their daily routines.

AC4D researchers recorded more than 135 hours of interviews. In partnership with PelotonU, AC4D researchers synthesized this data to develop actionable insights into how to support post-traditional students through college.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Responses to the PelotonU survey yielded a variety of key insights into the barriers facing post-traditional students. These insights shaped the direction of AC4D's design research.

Nearly 60% of all respondents are working 20+ hours a week—including 39% of currently-enrolled students. 57% of all respondents receive no financial support from their family. And 20% are taking care of someone at home—either as parents, or providing financially for their parents or siblings.

In total, 64 respondents identified barriers that led to them "stopping out"—taking time off from college, and, in some cases, not returning. 61 of those respondents listed school expenses or outside expenses as barriers, and 54 listed family-related concerns (including reliable transportation, family illness, and childcare).

These factors, key characteristics of post-traditional students, prove to also be a determinant in whether these students will persist.

AC4D design research students conducted follow-up interviews with 53 students around the following areas: Stopping out and decisions to return; balancing work and school; the role of advising in college persistence; managing impostorism; and (for first-generation American students) navigating family and cultural expectations around education.

From this research, AC4D researchers developed three deeper insights into post-traditional students. What follows are stories from the research that help illuminate those insights.

FINDING #1
DIFFERENT TYPES OF RESOURCES ARE REQUIRED TO SUPPORT POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

16% of currently enrolled students are taking care of someone at home. The consequences of improper support for those taking care of a dependent are clear: 54 of 64 respondents listed family-related concerns (including reliable transportation and childcare) as a primary reason for stopping out of a college program.

After graduating from high school, Vanessa moved into an apartment with her boyfriend to escape a suppressive home life. However, after becoming pregnant, she struggled to find a stable home environment.

"I was living with my boyfriend. My son's dad isn't really the best person so [my friend] thought it would be a safer place if I lived with her, so I moved in with her. I always wanted to do school but I kept moving around. I didn't have balance. I didn't have a home. I probably moved around 10 times."

Without a place to feel safe, or even to receive mail, she became trapped in a cycle of putting off college applications. Instead, Vanessa took a job at Walgreens

where she became interested in the pharmaceutical field.

After her child was born, Vanessa moved back home to live with her mother. She was accepted to the pharmacy technician program at ACC and has been in school for a few semesters. Vanessa relies heavily on her mother to care for her son while she is at work and at school, which takes up most of her day.

> **Post-traditional students with dependents need external support to enable focus on their own goals.**

Recently she learned that ACC offers child care resources for its students.

"I found out ACC has a daycare system now, so I'll be enrolling my son next semester."

FINDING #1
DIFFERENT TYPES OF RESOURCES ARE REQUIRED TO SUPPORT POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

Gloria is a first-generation American student attending the University of Texas at Austin. She comes from a home that nurtures her education and provides emotional support. But when we sat down with Gloria, she shared some challenges she faces in reconciling her school experience with the traditional values of her family's Mexican heritage.

"I still had that very, like, Mexican culture, and tradition and everything… Super family oriented and 'listen to your parents' - whatever they say. I feel like there's a lot of pressure whenever you are born in Mexico and migrate to the United States to keep up with those Mexican values."

Gloria found unexpected support from her high school soccer coach, who pushed her to break out of cultural norms, especially as they pertain to gender roles.

"My coach was the first male in the school setting who I felt was really a feminist. There's this norm for women—just get married and then have a kid and you'll be fine. But he told me, 'Don't do that. Get out of this little town and go be your own independent woman.'"

> The influence of people outside of a post-traditional student's network of family and friends can motivate self-sufficiency.

That little bit of inspiration made all the difference for Gloria. Currently, she is excelling in her pre-med studies at the University of Texas and aspires to be a pediatric surgeon.

FINDING #2
POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS DO NOT FIT A SINGLE MOLD

45% of currently enrolled students receive no financial support from their family, and 39% are working more than 20 hours/week. The toll of these financial barriers is significant: 61 of 64 respondents listed school expenses or outside expenses as a primary factor in their decision to stop out of college.

Ophelia is a financially independent student at ACC who is passionate for the fine arts. She entertained the idea of going to school in Los Angeles but was turned off to the idea when she learned how expensive tuition is.

Ophelia fears student loan debt, a common theme among the many post-traditional students we interviewed.

"I hear all of these horror stories about so many people that are still having to pay back their loans so it just scared me," she said.

However, Ophelia continually delays graduation because her work schedule limits the amount of time she can devote to school.

She told us that it was hard to

afford even part-time school. "I could only do one or two classes a semester. There was one year that I did like three classes, just because I didn't have time. I didn't have the money."

Many post-traditional students must prioritize financial concerns. As a result, they sacrifice a 4-year path to graduation.

Ophelia is one of many post-traditional students who fears debt, but in its absence must reduce her course load in order to accommodate her work schedule, delaying graduation year-after-year.

Because of this, her degree plan has changed several times and many of the classes she took no longer apply toward her degree.

She graduates this Spring with no debt, but it's taken her eight years to get an Associate Degree.
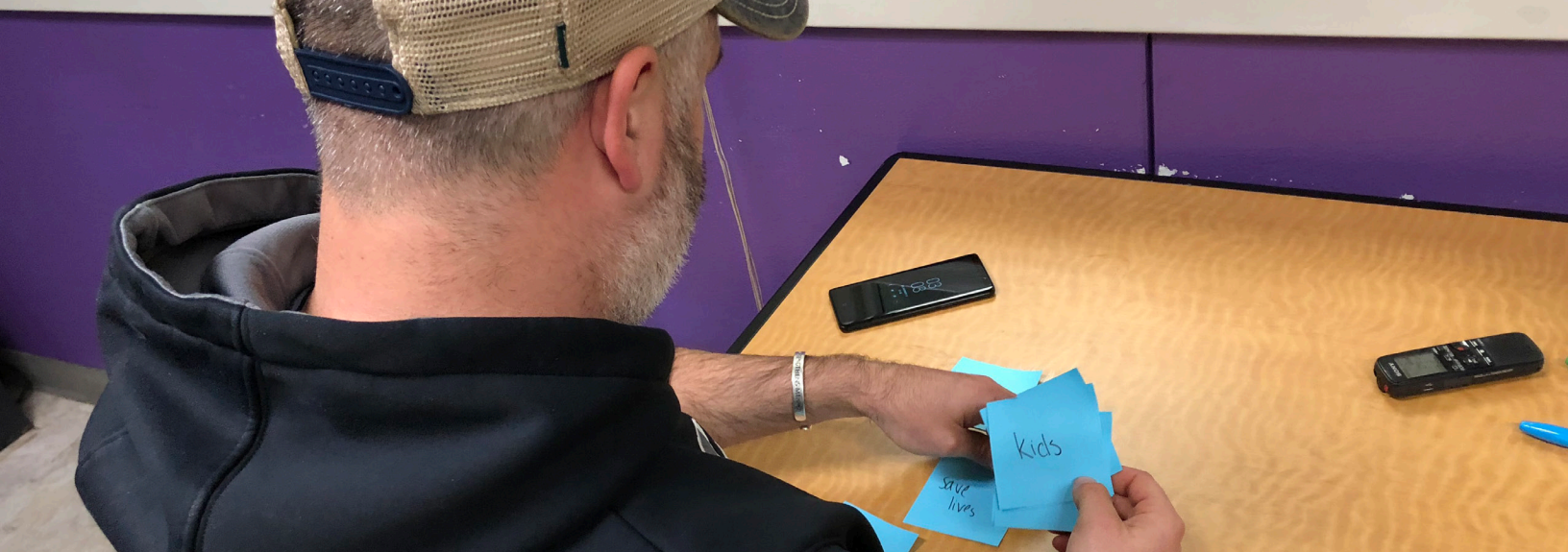
FINDING #2
POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS DO NOT FIT A SINGLE MOLD

More than 1-in-10 post-traditional students name "belonging" as a factor in their decision to stop out. One student wrote: "I didn't feel like I belonged—I didn't find peers or feel like part of the campus."

Michael is a military veteran in his 30's attending school at three different campuses between Austin and San Marcos, Texas. When we spoke with Michael, he acknowledged his lack of direction after high school and cited his training in the military as the major reason for his ability to overcome obstacles.

"The military training prepared me for [handling responsibility]... If I don't know what I'm doing, if I don't know how to learn something, if I don't know what's going on in the classroom, the military prepared me in a way that if I don't know it, I'm going to be the hardest worker there."

Michael currently bartends to pay for day-to-day expenses but is in school to become an EMT.

He loves the feeling of being an EMT because it's a career that bears similarities to his time in the armed forces.

"I love working under pressure. I like the butterflies when we get a call and I get to go out and do things. I love the work-up. I love that feeling."

> **Even when post-traditional students are succeeding, they often do so in isolation.**

However, Michael feels like an outsider at school due to his age and has trouble relating to younger students in his class.

"The younger generation, they just don't seem to be where you would want them to be. I feel like there are so much social media and stuff that instead of doing what they need to do, their faces are buried in [their phones]."

education but between no access to a computer, a broken car requiring expensive repairs, and a home environment where she can barely hear herself think, she feels as if she is up against insurmountable odds.

FINDING #3
POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS GET LOST IN THE MIX

More than half of respondents identified logistical hurdles as a cause of stopping out. One respondent wrote: "I didn't have enough time for my family or friends. [Or my] personal schedule — I couldn't fit school around my work shifts. And [I encountered] a confusing college process — picking classes, re-enrolling."

Grace has started and dropped out of community colleges several times. She desires to prioritize school but never seems to be able to get passed a backlog of minor obstacles.

She told us, "I couldn't keep up with homework, so I just jumped into working."

The most recent event that caused her to drop out of school was a misplaced charging cable for her laptop. While this may seem like a small issue, to Grace it felt like yet another setback in a long list of hinderances. After seeing her family's disastrous storage room, however, we were able to understand why such a small problem could feel so overwhelming.

Grace believes in the value of

As the list of minor obstacles grows, larger goals seem less attainable.

"I keep fighting for [my education] because once I get it, then I can do what everyone says, do more," she said.

Grace is a post-traditional student who struggles to get over a mountain of small obstacles. She views her burdens as one impassible object, rather than a summation of smaller, more manageable hurdles. Despite all the resources that colleges offer to help students help themselves, Grace continues to fall through the cracks of the post-secondary education system.
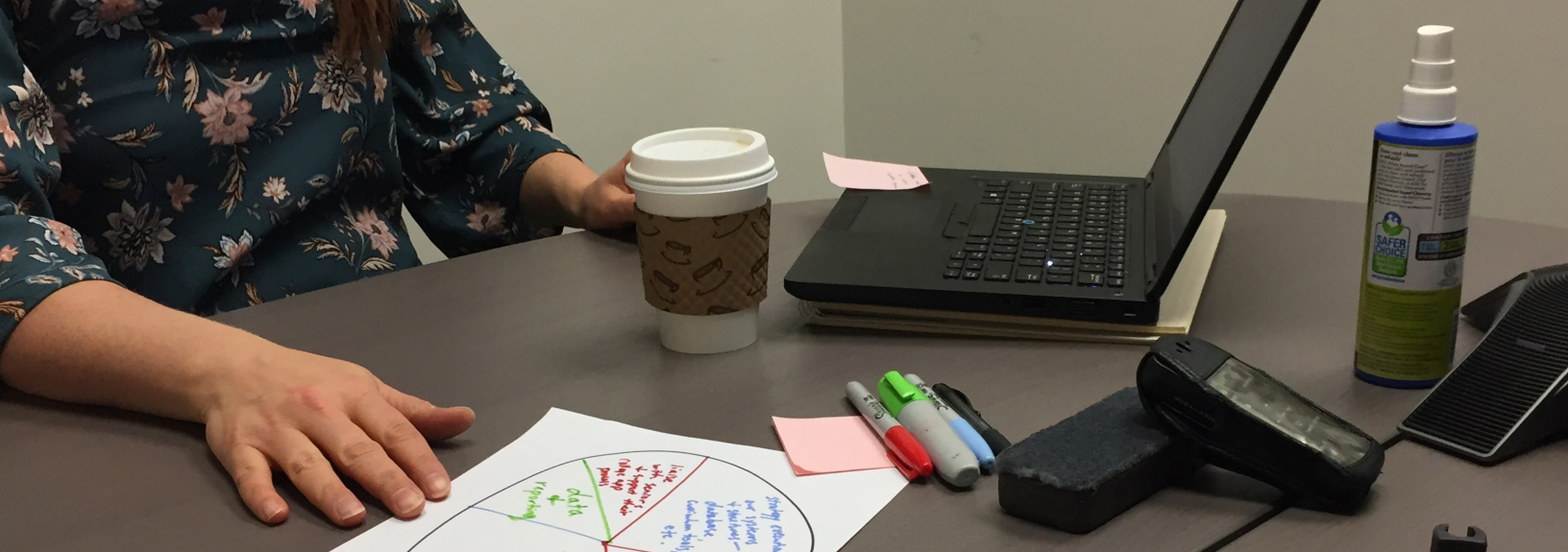
FINDING #3
POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS GET LOST IN THE MIX

Amy is an advisor for a college persistence program that focuses on under-resourced communities. In meeting with us, Amy told a story about an experience she had counseling a student in Dallas, Texas. The student she met with was a first-generation college student with eligibility for accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

She told us, "He hasn't been attending his classes. He stopped taking his medication and his mom doesn't know that he stopped taking his medication. He doesn't want to tell anyone."

Counseling college students comes with unique challenges because the students are legal adults. Involving a student's parents is not always an option, even if the situation is severe.

"If I had a 10th grader tell me that [he/she has stopped taking medication], I would set up a family conference to talk to

> ## Intrusive advising is effective advising.

the parents. But that's not the step that I take in this situation because he's an adult, and he's choosing to confide this in me."

Amy is able to be a resource for this student that he doesn't otherwise have in his home life. However, this scenario was difficult for Amy because she felt that she lacked the necessary skills to support the student in the way he needed most.

"I am not a trained therapist. I'm not a mental health expert. My background is in education."

RECOMMENDATIONS

To effectively serve post-traditional students, caseworkers and their respective organizations need to better understand, prioritize, and guide this population of students.

Better understanding

Today's post-traditional students face a range of variable circumstances, and a large proportion of all students today identify with at least one of these circumstances. In fact, "post-traditional" students are the new normal.

Yet while some common opportunities and challenges face this cohort, specific needs vary—and as a result, so will effective types of support. Organizations need to consider these characteristics and identify general and specific tactics for supporting students and for improving understanding within stakeholder populations.

Our recommended approach for organizations to better understand post-traditional students is to:

Identify whether anyone the organization serves is post-traditional, using the following characteristics: above the age of 24; attending school part-time, working full-time, caring for at least one dependent, acting as a single caregiver, or being financially independent from parents;

Understand that post-traditional students will face three key barriers: lack of time, lack of money, and lack of proper support;

Recognize that post-traditional students need unique advice, support, and tailored degree paths; and

Learn from positive deviants, in order to inform services: Who is doing well? Why?

Better prioritization

College access and completion non-profits, and case managers in associated fields, grasp the nuances of poverty, gender, race, and family education on a student's college persistence.

We believe post-traditional characteristics are as important, if not more so, to a student's success—because these characteristics directly tie to persistence, and yet are not well understood, screened for, or accommodated.

This leads to advice designed for 18-year-olds in 4-year, full-time, campus residency degrees, but *distributed* to working parents commuting to attend part-time.

RECOMMENDATIONS (cont'd)

This has a negative result, and can in fact be detrimental to persistence.

Our recommended approach for organizations to better prioritize post-traditional students is to: Revise systems and training to ensure post-traditional student populations are prioritized, at a rate equal to or greater than systems and trainings that prioritize poverty, gender, race, and family education.

Better guidance

Multiple organizations in Austin, Texas, are currently providing support to meet the needs of post-traditional students. These Austin-based organizations provide a variety of touchpoints and guidance for post-traditional students along the path to post-secondary credentials.

Our recommended approach for organizations to better guide post-traditional students is to seek out support from and partnerships with the following specialized support services.

PelotonU offers advising and guidance to post-traditional students. Support includes: A dedicated space for students to work; a College Completion Advisor to work with the student to set rigorous goals, maintain accountability, and overcome obstacles; and access to resources, including needs-based scholarships.

PelotonU also works with post-traditional students to develop a personalized pathway to **graduate from college on time and debt-free.**

OTHER SERVICES

Advising and mentoring:

College Hub (Foundation Communities) provides guidance and support for securing financial aid and coaching through college.

PelotonU has redesigned a path to graduation specifically for working adults who benefit from flexible schedules in a supportive peer environment.

Workforce Solutions (Capital Area) provides career services, including training, education and literacy, and childcare assistance for working parents.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this report suggest that the ability to effectively support post-traditional students is crucial to the success of student support organizations and to degree-granting programs. Caseworkers must prioritize understanding this cohort, developing systems and programs that prioritize their unique needs, and seek out the partnership and support of programs like PelotonU that are well-positioned to guide post-traditional students through college persistence and completion.

APPENDIX

Webber Foundation

Founded in 1999, the Webber Family Foundation has distributed approximately $16 million in grants to support a wide variety of education programs in Austin, Texas, and the Washington, D.C. area. The Webber Family Foundation focuses on the gap between proficiency and potential for lower-income youth, with an emphasis on school readiness and early literacy; out-of-school time enrichment; and high-performing charter schools.

PelotonU

PelotonU's vision is that any student with the will and drive to graduate from college can earn a degree debt-free, regardless of geography or economics. PelotonU works to provide working students with a pathway and the support to graduate from college on time and debt-free. Support for each student includes: a dedicated space for students to work on school alongside staff, fellow students, and PelotonU supporters; a College Completion Advisor to work with the student to set rigorous goals, maintain accountability, and overcome obstacles; a personalized pathway through college toward a degree that supports future goals; and access to resources, including needs-based scholarships.

Austin Center for Design (AC4D)

Austin Center for Design is a one-year program (evenings and weekends) in Interaction Design & Social Entrepreneurship. AC4D's educational pedagogy focuses on empathy, abductive reasoning, and rapid prototyping to build a foundation for impact: focusing on problems worth solving. Curriculum includes instruction in design research, design theory, service design, systems design, UX design, ethnography, prototyping, theory, usability testing, and business modeling. Each year, AC4D students take on a wicked problem — a social or cultural problem difficult to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements, including poverty, sustainability, equality, and health. In 2018-2019, AC4D students conducted design research into access and persistence in the post-traditional education landscape, and prototyped a broad range of solutions.

Survey Results

PelotonU surveyed 187 alumni of local college persistence programs, including College Forward, College Hub, Hispanic Scholarship Consortium, and KIPP Through College. The survey's 25 questions were developed to uncover characteristics of these post-traditional students.

Key snapshots are below. View the full survey here.

Of all respondents:
- 57% are working 20+ hours per week
- 20% are taking care of someone at home (either parent or providing financially for their parents / siblings)
- 57% receive no financial support from their family

Of currently enrolled students:
- 39% are working more than 20 hours
- 45% receive no financial support from their family
- 34% are attending part-time
- 26% have taken a semester off
- 16% are taking care of someone at home

Of non-enrolled respondents:
- 86% are working more than 20 hours
- 77% receive no financial support from their family
- 26% are taking care of someone at home