Introduction
The issue of students failing courses and dropping out of college is a concern for students, faculty and academic leaders. It is a student concern because the “impact of college failure can cause lasting damage to self-esteem, and the consequences can influence an entire lifetime” (University of Alabama Center for Academic Success, n.d., n.p., ¶ 1). It is a faculty concern, because all too often faculty feel a sense of personal failure and blame their own teaching for the failure of some students (Tennen and Hagar 2007; Dawley 1999). It is also the concern of academic leaders, because colleges and universities are accountable not only for their graduation rate, but also for their students’ success from enrollment through and past graduation. These multiple concerns led the authors to embark on three separate but connected studies to understand students’, faculty members’ and academic leaders’ perspectives on why students fail courses and drop out of colleges.

In 2011 the authors conducted a survey of 739 students, asking them why students fail courses and drop out of college. The many reasons students provided for failing were grouped into seven main categories, including motivation (35 percent), study habits (17 percent), academic preparedness (12 percent), external factors (11 percent), attitudes (11 percent), instruction and instructional materials (10 percent) and relevancy issues (4 percent) (Cherif et al. 2013).

Two years later, the authors posed the same question to 190 faculty members from two- and four-year institutions to ask their perspectives of why students fail courses and drop out of colleges. Faculty members’ responses were grouped into eight categories, including students not being ready for college (38 percent); faculty instruction and behavior (12 percent); students’ lack of motivation (12 percent); students’ lack of effort (12 percent); students’ life, work, and career issues (9 percent); facilities, materials, and delivery systems (8 percent); students’ personality issues (6 percent); and economic issues (3 percent) (Cherif et al. 2014).

In this third study, the authors posed the same question to 237 academic leaders from two-year and four-year institutions to hear what they think are the reasons why students fail courses and drop out of college. This paper presents preliminary results. Being aware of how students, faculty members, and academic leaders perceive the root causes of student failure in academic settings is a necessary step in clinically analyzing the complexity of the problem and in finding workable solutions.

Analysis and Discussion
Of the 237 academic leaders who participated in this study, more were from four-year institutions (65 percent) than from two-year institutions (35 percent). Department chairs (35 percent) constituted the largest proportion and college and university presidents (7 percent) the smallest proportion among the participants (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this study, the authors posed the same question to 237 academic leaders from two-year and four-year institutions to hear what they think are the reasons why students fail courses and drop out of college. This paper presents preliminary results. Being aware of how students, faculty members, and academic leaders perceive the root causes of student failure in academic settings is a necessary step in clinically analyzing the complexity of the problem and in finding workable solutions.
The study's participants provided 758 identifiable answers to the open question: As an academic leader, and from your own perspective, why do you think students fail classes at the college level? Based on the analysis of the answers provided, the reasons for student failure were placed into three main areas, which were further broken into nine categories. All responses from the academic leaders fell into one of the specific categories. After compiling the results, the authors discussed the findings with separate groups of academic leaders. The feedback from the face-to-face, in-depth discussion with the academic leaders helped in the analysis of the results.

Members of the academic leadership perceive that the three main root-cause factors for students failing are (1) student-related factors, which were mentioned 531 times, or 70 percent of the responses; (2) life and socioeconomic issues, which were mentioned 108 times, or 14 percent of the responses; and (3) issues and factors related to the existing educational system, which were mentioned 119 times or 16 percent of the responses (Table 2).

Table 2. Categories of Root-Cause Factors, Ranked by Respondents' Answers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Area</th>
<th>Categories, Ranked by Number of Respondents</th>
<th>Times Mentioned</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Student-related Factors (531 times, or 70%)</td>
<td>Not ready for college work, challenges and life (1)</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of effort (2)</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of motivation or interest (3)</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Life and Socioeconomic Issues (108 times, or 14%)</td>
<td>Life, work and career issues (6)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Economic issues (8)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cost of education (4)</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
III. Issues and Factors Related to the Existing Educational System (119 times, or 16%)

| Structure of existing educational system (4) | 51 | 7% |
| Instruction-related matters (5) | 37 | 5% |
| Leadership-related matters (7) | 31 | 4% |

Total Responses 758 100%

**Student-related Factors**

Respondents ranked Student-related Factors (cited 531 times, or 70 percent) as the most frequent cause of student failure. As seen in Table 2, in this area there are three categories: (1) Not ready for college work, challenges and life (mentioned 352 times, or 46 percent of responses); (2) Lack of effort (mentioned 105 times, or 14 percent of responses); and (3) Lack of motivation or interest (mentioned 74 times, or 10 percent of responses).

**Not Ready for College Work and Challenges**

The student-related factor that college academic leaders mentioned most often was students not being ready for college-level work and challenges (cited 352 times, or 46 percent of responses). Academic leaders stated many academic, psychological and cognitive reasons, including lack of academic preparedness for college courses, lack of learning and study skills and lack of organizational skills, to name a few. As one participant put it, “This is probably the easiest question that I have ever been asked to answer in my 30 years in higher education. The answer is those who fail, they don’t do the work and make the grade; that simple. There could be many reasons for that, including lack of interest, don’t know what and how to do it, etc., but the answer is straightforward, we award grades for agreed upon tasks and assignments. If you don’t make the grade, you fail.”

Among those who cited Not ready for college, there was agreement that remedial and developmental courses are not effective, based on a cost/benefit formula. However, there was no agreement among the participants on why many students are not ready for college work, nor who really is responsible for dealing with this issue at the local, state and national levels. Some participants blamed high school education, some others blamed the isolation of higher education institutions from public schools, and yet another group blamed the state and the federal governments for not putting enough emphasis on the importance of K–12 education to the well-being of society.

The participants agreed that students who are not academically ready for college need more than just help in math and language skills. One participant effectively summarized these needs saying, “One thing that I have noted over the years is that students who need these preparatory courses also bring additional issues beyond needing help mathematics-wise. These additional issues may be technology related, reading/writing concerns, study skills and time management, self-discipline, etc.”

However, the majority of the participants said that it is ethically unacceptable to admit students to college and not provide all the needed support for them to succeed. The better diagnostic assessment tools and procedures used to assess prospective students, the better success rate and completion rate colleges and universities (and students) will enjoy.
Finally, a few participants indicated that they are not in the business of preparing students for college work, but that they are in the business of educating students with breadth of knowledge and depth of understanding, as well as for careers and citizenship. But the same group also agreed that if an institution accepts a student, that institution must provide all of the opportunities and platforms for the student to succeed, but the student must do the work.

**Lack of Effort**
The next category of student-related issues was Lack of effort (ranking second overall and reported 105 times, 14 percent of responses). Many academic leaders, especially chairpersons and deans, were disturbed by daily encounters with students who do not exert enough effort and do not bother to learn, either from the instructor or fellow students, how much work is really needed to pass any given class. A few participants also mentioned a poor or nonexistent work ethic among some college students, who, when they get behind, don't know what to do to catch up. Another group of respondents was concerned about the growing number of students who feel entitled to good grades as long as they pay tuition.

**Lack of Motivation or Interest**
Lack of motivation or interest among today’s students ranks third in terms of how often it was mentioned by participants as a root-cause factor of students failing (reported 74 times, or 10 percent of responses). This category included several issues: lack of motivation, lack of engagement, and lack of interest, direction or focus. Participants stated that it is always easier to help those who know what they want to achieve, compared to those who have no idea why they are in college in the first place. The same participants also felt that colleges and universities are not doing a good enough job in helping students to set clear goals as to where they want to go. However, while many participants did mention lack of effort and motivation, they also gave the impression that for them, students not being ready for college work is what ultimately causes failure.

**Issues and Factors Related to the Existing Educational System**
Issues and Factors Related to the Existing Educational System, collectively, ranked second as a main area of root causes for students failing college courses; categories in this area were reported 119 times, or 16 percent of the responses. This area included Structure of existing educational system (cited 51 times, or 7 percent); Instruction-related matters (cited 37 times, or 5 percent); and Leadership-related matters (cited 31 times, or 4 percent). However, even though this main factor was only mentioned in 16 percent of all the responses, the participants provided more inputs on the subject and freely expressed more thought and perspectives.

**Structure of Existing Educational System**
Participants mentioned Structure of the existing educational system as a root cause of student failure 51 times (7 percent of responses), ranking it fourth. A number of the participants argued that “multiple pathways” to admitting students to colleges and for completing college degrees are needed more today than ever before. However, the same participants expressed the concern that this might lead to depleting the existing resources or to a “watered-down” quality of academic programs. A few presidents and vice presidents stated that everyone knows that change is needed, but most are waiting to see which institutions will take the lead and move toward alternative approaches to accepting students and leading them through their programs for better rates of success. One president stated that he would like to offer one-year certificate
programs, with students choosing four that lead to a degree at the end of four years, but he knows that his board of trustees and other constituencies would not accept it even as an alternative pathway to a college degree within some existing programs.

**Time-to-Degree vs. Time-to-Career:**
A number of presidents, vice presidents and deans stated that what is required to earn a degree in all accredited institutions in higher education is well known. Most often, there is a straightforward pathway to the achievement of a particular degree. But this is not the case for following an educational path toward a career. What is clear for now is that “Time-to-Degree” and “Time-to-Career” are not the same. There is no clear formula for that second path that American society, government, civic organizations and career industries demand is needed to catch up with the rest of the world. This is and will continue to be a problem the higher education community will have to confront.

**From Four-to-Three Years of Completion:**
Another related point that came across very strongly in the survey is that “Time-to-Career” has been perceived by many students and their parents as a long road, especially at the four-year college level. This has caused some students to look for certificate programs that might bring immediate employability. As one dean explained, when students find out that they still need to be trained at the workplace, they wonder why they must spend four years in college and pay a great deal of money if they still have to be trained at their first job. This leads to lack of interest and motivation among some, who subsequently encounter difficulty focusing on school and finishing course work.

A number of colleges and universities have started to restructure their programs to be completed in fewer than four years and to provide certificates within their curricula for those who might be interested. However, a number of the respondents, especially deans, vice presidents and presidents, indicated that there are no data to document the rates of completion and employment capability that would show whether the approach of reducing completion time is really working. They argue that data are needed to demonstrate that students in accelerated completion programs have enough “soak in” time to understand and apply their knowledge in real-world employment situations.

**Instruction-related Matters**
Instruction-related matters ranked fifth as a root-cause factor (reported 37 times, 5 percent of responses). A number of the participants argued that colleges and universities often don’t have the right instructors in the right positions to teach what students most need. Respondents noted that many colleges and universities assign less experienced graduate students, teaching aids or part-time faculty to teach the lower-level, developmental and transitional courses. Students in these courses need the most help and support to learn and to overcome their lack of confidence and lower self-esteem; they need to be taught by experienced faculty who have the will to teach and help the students most in need. However, academic managers try to save money by assigning graduate students, teaching aids or part-time faculty instead. However, assigning the best faculty members to teach lower-level courses will save more money and help students gain not only the needed knowledge but also the confidence and trust in their own ability to learn and succeed. As one provost effectively summarized, “Most of the students in upper-level courses have already reached a level of cognitive development that enables them to even learn on their own with proper monitoring and guidance. It is the students in the lower-level courses and those who just started college who need the help the most. Yet, we are all still not following the approved and
common sense approach.” But, as another participant observed, it is not an easy task to assign the best instructor to a course given such faculty issues as seniority, tenure regulations and union policy and procedures.

**Leadership-related Matters**

The category of Leadership-related matters ranked seventh as a root-cause factor contributing to students failing courses (cited 31 times, or 4 percent). It included two subcategories.

**Leadership Is Far Removed from the Teaching and Learning Environment:**

A number of the department chairs, directors, deans and associate deans expressed concern that many upper-level academic leaders are far removed from the processes of teaching and learning. Thus, compared to faculty members, chairpersons and deans, upper-level academic leaders’ perspectives on what is needed to help students succeed are less deeply rooted in experience. These lower- and mid-level administrators expressed the desire to see more people promoted from within institutions to upper management levels rather than bring people from outside who either don’t know the institutions and student population, or worse, have no academic background at all. As one dean put it, “So often, those who come from outside academia not only don’t consider what we send them, but also don’t listen to what we say to them.” Another participant stated, “the irony is that it doesn’t worry them when we keep silent and not open our mouths, which speaks volumes!”

**Doers vs. Inventors:**

A number of department chairs, directors and some deans and associate deans argued that students’ success needs a continuous invention of ideas, strategies and pedagogical approaches to both existing and foreseen issues and problems in higher education. Many of them, however, thought that these days the upper levels of higher education leadership are filled with “doers and managers” instead of “inventors.”

**Life and Socioeconomic Issues**

According to participants, the third-highest-ranked area of reasons for student failure was Life and Socioeconomic Issues (cited 108 times, or 14 percent of responses). As seen in Table 2, in this area there are three categories: Life, work and career issues (mentioned 34 times, or 4 percent of responses); Economic issues (mentioned 23 times, or 3 percent of responses); and Cost of education (mentioned 51 times, or 7 percent).

**Life, Work and Career Issues**

Life, work and career issues ranked as the sixth most frequently mentioned root-cause factor of student failure (cited 34 times, or 4 percent). Academic leaders cited life issues, such as poverty, single parenting, excessive workload and family responsibilities among the root causes in this category. However, while most of the participants think that poverty and cost of the education can be dealt with if students make it to the university level because of the many initiatives proposed these days, the issue of poverty is really more related to students’ performance in K–12 schools. Those students end up dropping school or going to college unprepared.

Poverty is also behind many students working full-time jobs or multiple part-time jobs while going to school full-time. In this situation only a few students have the determination and the self-discipline to complete an education that could improve their lives. It is a fact that students who deal with poverty, the demands of a full-time job, and caring for family and going to school are naturally at high risk of failure because their ability to put in the required time on coursework, or even to attend class regularly,
is so compromised. In general, the participants, especially department chairs and deans, agreed that for many failing students, the most common cause of failure is not intrinsic lack of ability but the distractions of life outside of the classroom. As one associate dean put it, “For all of us, with no exception, when outside life issues such as feeding a family, paying the bills, caring for sick relations, etc., they always take priority over the classroom, and are all much more important than any grade.” However, as we noticed when we interviewed faculty members in our previous study, respondents sounded very understanding about these life issues but also helpless to do anything about them, for two reasons. First, colleges and universities institutionally are very limited in what they can provide to assist students in their personal lives. Second, most often, students don’t want to bring their personal life issues to the attention of faculty members, supervisors or even their student union. The only suggestion that a few participants proposed is that if colleges provided multiple delivery systems with flexibility in time, space and delivery format, students might be better able to cope with some of the difficult circumstances they encounter.

**Economic Issues**

Economic issues (primarily, lack of resources) was another category of reasons for student failure. This root cause ranked eighth in the study (cited 23 times, or 3 percent of responses). As in the earlier study conducted with faculty, a number of academic leaders labeled lack of resources “economic disability,” with a direct link to students failing to complete college. While many participants thought that socioeconomic demographics play a major role in student success, a significant number of participants said that if students make the grades at the high school level, there is always a way for them to come to college without worrying that much about the cost of their education. Other participants said that if colleges can develop means by which students can borrow textbooks, laptop computers and access to the Internet when they can’t otherwise afford them, this could alleviate some measure of financial difficulty. However, as one dean stated: “If parents and students are worrying about what to eat and how to pay for medicine, heating bills and transportation costs during their K–12 years, there is no chance for many of these students to make the grades that bring scholarships and college tuition waivers.” Lack of wealth or access to funding for schooling reduces the number of opportunities available for students in both education and life. However, what is unique about American higher education is that it is the only system in the world where students can enter, exit and reenter as many times as they want if they have the motivation and the will to make something out of themselves. This point was also raised by faculty in the previous study (Cherif et al. 2014).

**Cost of Education**

Cost of education as a root-cause factor in failing and dropping college courses was ranked fourth by participants (cited 51 times, or 7 percent). Lack of predictability in the cost of education, mainly tuition, contributes to stress and worry, which leads students to not perform as well. However, while the cost of education continues to rise, most participants thought that this is the easiest root-cause factor for schools to deal with, not only at the institutional level, but also at governmental levels. A number of participants indicated that their own institution, county or state have already started the dialogues on how to deal with the cost of education so that more students can attend colleges and universities. Government and nongovernmental organizations are willing to step in to help if the right programs and mechanisms are in place to attract students.

**Conclusion**

This study was the final data-gathering step in understanding student failure from the
perspectives of students, faculty and administrators. Although there were similarities in each group, there were also new viewpoints in each phase of the study. The authors of this project plan to continue to analyze these data with the goal of developing strategies to increase student success at both the two-year and four-year college levels.

REFERENCES


Note: The authors have included the summary of in-depth, face-to-face discussion with academic leaders and a list of recommendations in the appendices of this study. Readers who are interested in that summary or in details of the study’s methodology, basic demographics of the participants, disaggregation of the data into categories by college level and so on will find an expanded version of the paper at http://www.abourcherif.com. Interested persons can send questions or comments to the email address on that Web page.