

No Credential?

Post-Secondary Participation and Life Activity Patterns of the Class of '88

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Introduction

Why do individuals invest in post-secondary studies but never complete any form of post-secondary credential? Why do some individuals never attend at all? There is a perception that an unacceptably high proportion of high school graduates do not complete their post-secondary studies. But this perception is often based on figures calculated over a short time span and by employing data that do not extend past institutional and provincial boundaries.

When post-secondary participation patterns are examined over the long term, a more complete picture emerges. The *Paths on Life's Way*¹ data allows for an extensive examination of post-secondary and other life course participation patterns over the long term. The *Paths on Life's Way* project is the only longitudinal data base of its kind in British Columbia that follows a sample of high school graduates over 22 years.

Using *Paths* data, Andres & Offerhaus (2012)² demonstrated that

- 20% of *Paths* respondents did not attend any post-secondary institution directly out of high school in 1988–1989;
- within five years following high school graduation (by 1993), however, only 7% remained non-attendees; and
- by 2010, only 3% remained *never attendees* over the entire 22 year period.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Only 3% of *Paths* respondents remained post-secondary never-attendees over 22 years.
- Non-completers were less likely than completers to attend post-secondary institutions directly out of high school.
- Post-secondary attendance patterns of male non-completers are similar to those of male university graduates. The patterns for female non-completers are more complicated.
- Non-completers were less likely than completers to participate in any kind of post-secondary study after the first four or five years out of high school.
- Median incomes of non-completers are comparable to those of non-baccalaureate completers. Income differentials between baccalaureate completers and those without baccalaureate credentials are substantial. However, large gender differences remain.

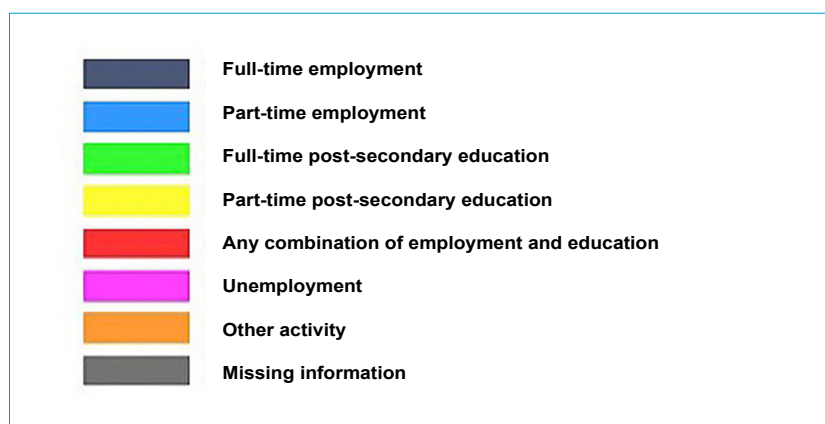
In our most recent research report (Andres & Offerhaus, 2013³), we looked at the relationships among post-secondary participation and other life course activities such as work, unemployment, and “other” activities. This summary examines post-secondary non-completers. (See the full report on which this is based: bccat.ca/publications/research/paths)

¹ Details of the *Paths* project can be found at the *Paths on Life's Way* Project website: <http://blogs.ubc.ca/paths>

² Customized Lives? Multiple Life Course Activities of the Class of '88 Over 22 Years: bccat.ca/publications/research/paths

³ See Andres & Offerhaus (2012) for a description of the sample and the institutions, and a primer in reading sequence analysis graphs. See bccat.ca/pubs/rr-june2012.pdf

FIGURE 1. Life Course Activity States



Analyses

This summary focuses on the life course activities of *Paths* respondents from September 1988 to March 2010. Information reported monthly (i.e., at 259 time points) on post-secondary education, employment, unemployment, and “other” activities are employed. Each type of life course activity is considered a “state.” Individuals could have participated in more than one state at a given time (e.g., full-time post-secondary education and part-time work); however, because each state must be mutually exclusive, the categories are collapsed into eight different states, as portrayed in Figure 1 above (see Andres & Offerhaus, 2013). The story is told through the intensity and continuity of the colour patterns.

Life Course Activities by Post-secondary Completion Status, 1988-2010

Figures 2 and 3 are divided into three main categories:

- A** – those who work directly out of high school;
- B** – those who studied full-time directly out of high school; and
- C** – those who either combined study and work or studied part-time only directly out of high school.

Findings

Approximately equal proportions of non-completers and those who earned baccalaureate credentials worked for one or more months from September 1988 on (1988 summer employment is excluded from these analyses) (A).

However, by 1989 those who completed baccalaureate level studies were participating in post-secondary studies either full-time or in combination with work.

Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate that non-completers in this group – particularly the men – were more likely to be unemployed than to participate in post-secondary studies.

- Non-completers who began their studies full-time in September 1988 resembled baccalaureate graduates more than those who have earned non-baccalaureate credentials (B). That is, they have participated for four or more consecutive years full-time; during this time, few combined work and study.
- Non-completers who started their studies while working simultaneously are more similar to the non-baccalaureate completers than the baccalaureate completers (C). Unlike the baccalaureate completer group who combined study and work, participation patterns of non-completers resembles a funnel of attrition over four to five years. A few women, but not men, shifted from a combination of study and work to full-time study.
- Female non-completers who commenced their studies full time were as likely to work part-time as full time. Women who worked (A) or combined study and work directly out of high school (C) were more likely to work full-time in the long run. This pattern is similar to the non-baccalaureate completers.
- Male non-completers worked almost exclusively full-time. However, since late 2009 and coinciding with the global financial crisis, more men reported working part-time.
- Overall, non-completers were not likely to participate in any kind of post-secondary study after the first four or five years out of high school.

FIGURE 2. Life Course Activities by Post-secondary Completion Status, 1988-2010, Males

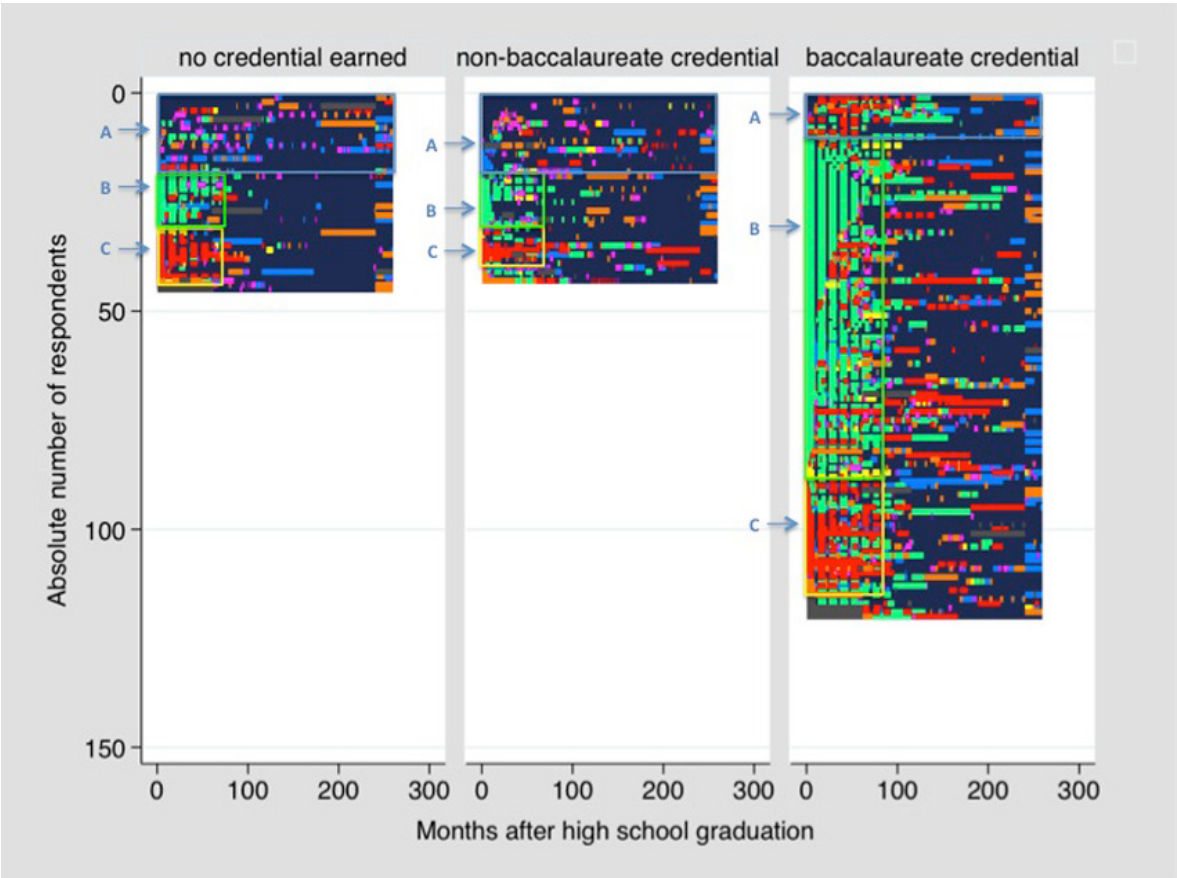
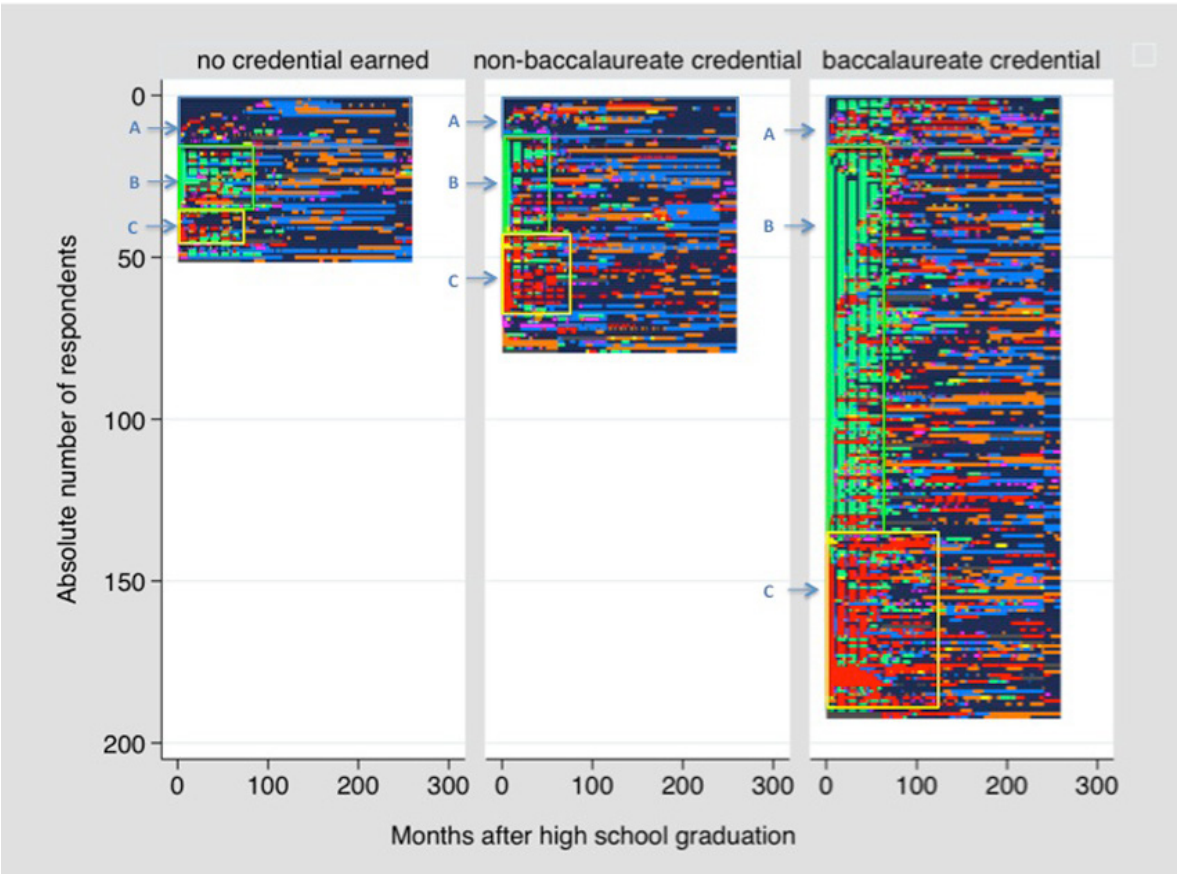


FIGURE 3. Life Course Activities by Post-secondary Completion Status, 1988-2010, Females



Conclusion

As the findings in this report reveal, post-secondary non-completers are not a homogenous group. Only a tiny proportion of respondents (2% of women and 4% of men) to all waves of the *Paths on Life's Way* project remained *never attendees*. A somewhat larger proportion (13% of women and 17% of men) commenced post-secondary studies at some time between 1988 and 2010 but did not earn any credential.

Should non-completers be encouraged to complete their post-secondary studies? As demonstrated in this report, the vast majority of non-completers did attend post-secondary institutions and a substantial proportion invested many years in their studies. This suggests that they were interested, at least for a time, in completing post-secondary credentials. Further analyses of the *Paths* data are required to reveal the reasons why respondents did not complete their studies and to determine the extent of personal and financial well-being they report in relation to the other groups.

One vulnerable group appears to be those who did not attend post-secondary education directly out of high school. Incentives to encourage enrolment for at least one semester of post-secondary education within the first 12 months following high school may reduce the proportion of individuals who never attend or do not complete their studies. The rationale for this recommendation is that about half of those in the non-completion category who did not commence studies directly out of high school never did attend a post-secondary institution. In comparison, a similar

proportion of those who did not attend a post-secondary institution in September 1988 did eventually complete university degrees. Analyses of background characteristics and high school curricular differentiation and GPAs may reveal important differences between these two groups.

Male non-completers appear to invest heavily in post-secondary education by attending directly out of high school and studying for several consecutive years. Are they lured into high paying and/or demanding employment and simply never get around to completing their studies? Does degree completion become irrelevant? The picture for women is more complicated. Post-secondary participation in the early years was not as consistent as it was for male non-completers. For women, childbearing and family responsibilities may have disrupted commencement or completion of post-secondary studies. Accommodating students – particularly females – with children is an ongoing challenge.

As the figures in this summary (and the full report) demonstrate, the non-completion rate would be much higher for all post-secondary completion groups if the cut-off point under consideration were, 5, 10, or even 15 years out of high school. In other words, *Paths* respondents continue to study across the life course and not only in their twenties. They are aided in doing so by seamless post-secondary systems such as that of British Columbia. Only longitudinal studies can capture such dynamics.

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