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Lumina
FOUNDATION

The State of Higher Education 2022 Report

Quantifying the perspectives of the
currently, previously, and never enrolled after
unprecedented disruptions to higher education



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Background

Higher education institutions, as well as the students they serve, have been severely impacted by COVID-19 — high levels of isolation, disruptions due to unscheduled openings and closures, navigation of remote learning, and a heightened burnout among faculty and staff due to increased workloads, have combined to create a challenging environment for all colleges and universities. This reality — along with recent declines in birth rates among traditional-aged college students — has led to lower enrollment rates across two-year and four-year colleges and universities from 2015 to 2021.¹

Despite these disruptions, U.S. adults view higher education as a critical variable in achieving a great job and a great life. As millions of Americans map their post-pandemic pathways, higher education institutions are poised to have an important impact on the upskilling and reskilling of U.S. adults. In 2021, Lumina Foundation partnered with Gallup to understand more about U.S. adults' experiences with and perceptions of higher education given these recent trends.

Gallup surveyed the following groups, which included adults aged 18 or older who completed high school and were living in the U.S., to help inform institutions how they can better support current and prospective students, allowing them to achieve additional education and training that can lead to better jobs and lives:

Currently enrolled students: 5,215 adults currently pursuing a bachelor's degree or associate degree

Pre-COVID students: 2,541 adults who were enrolled in a certificate or degree program after high school before COVID-19 but have been unenrolled since

Enrolled during COVID, not currently enrolled: 469 prior students who have been enrolled in a certificate or degree program after high school since COVID-19 began, but are not currently enrolled

Prospective students: 3,002 U.S. adults aged 18-59 who have never been enrolled in a certificate or degree program after high school

¹ *Term Enrollment Estimates: Fall 2021.* (2021, December). National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CTEE_Report_Fall_2021.pdf

This report builds upon important findings reported in the 2020 survey, which was fielded directly following a uniquely disruptive period for higher education.² In the [2020 State of Higher Education Study](#), Gallup and Lumina Foundation found high overall ratings of quality, with important differences by modality that reflected the significant shift from in-person to remote learning.

The research confirmed COVID-19 posed an important risk to retention for currently enrolled students, as about half of these students reported it was likely or very likely to impact their ability to remain enrolled.

In 2021, Gallup and Lumina asked currently enrolled students about ongoing risks to their enrollment and the policies and programs that allowed them to remain. Those who had stopped out or had never enrolled before were asked a series of questions about the reasons they were not currently enrolled to better understand how policymakers and institutions can evolve their programming to attract these prospective students.



² *Gallup State of the Student Experience: Fall 2020 Report*. (2020, December). Gallup, Inc. <https://www.gallup.com/education/327485/state-of-the-student-experience-fall-2020.aspx>

Key Findings Among the Unenrolled

Among U.S. adults without a college degree, who are not currently enrolled in any certificate or college degree program:

- 1 Forty-four percent report they have considered enrolling** in a bachelor's degree, associate degree, industry certification, or certificate program in the past two years.
- 2 Eighty-five percent** of those who were recently enrolled in a certificate or degree program, but stopped out during the COVID-19 pandemic, **have considered reenrolling.**
- 3 Fifty-one percent of Black and multiracial U.S. adults without a college degree have considered enrolling in a post-high school certificate or degree** experience in the past two years — a higher percentage than unenrolled Asian (39%), Hispanic (44%), American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian (45%), or white (42%) adults.
- 4 Associate degrees and certificate programs are the most popular credential of interest for unenrolled individuals:** 20% of adults who are not currently enrolled in a certificate or degree program report they have considered a two-year pathway in the past two years, and 19% have considered earning a certificate.
- 5 More than half of all unenrolled adults report the cost of a college degree is a very important reason they have not continued their education.** The importance of cost is consistent across all subgroups of the unenrolled population, including racial and ethnic subgroups and individuals from different income levels, underscoring how limiting cost is for all groups considering additional education after high school.

Key Findings Among the Enrolled

Among U.S. adults without a college degree, **who are currently enrolled** in a certificate or college degree program:

- 1** **Thirty-six percent of bachelor's degree students and 39% of associate degree students report it was difficult or very difficult to remain enrolled** heading into the fall of 2021. Historically marginalized students, including American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian and multiracial students, are most likely to report it was very difficult or difficult to remain enrolled.
- 2** About one-third (32%) of bachelor's degree students and 41% of associate degree students **report they have considered stopping out in the past six months**, similar to 2020 levels.
- 3** In keeping with elevated stress levels related to the pandemic,³ **76% of bachelor's degree students who have considered stopping out in the past six months say emotional stress was a reason**, and 63% of associate degree students say the same. Students are about twice as likely to cite stress as they are to report the three next-most reported reasons (the pandemic, cost of attendance, and coursework difficulty).
- 4** For those who remained enrolled, about half of associate or bachelor's degree **students report the financial aid they received (51%) and their confidence in the value of their eventual degree (49%)** were very important reasons they were able to remain enrolled.
- 5** **Most currently enrolled students report they are pursuing their degrees to increase their knowledge, purpose, and pay:** 65% say an important reason is to obtain knowledge and skills, 61% say that it will allow them to pursue a more fulfilling career, and 60% report it will help them achieve a higher-paying job.

³ Ray, J. (2021, July 21). *2020 Sets Records for Negative Emotions*. news.gallup.com. Retrieved March 28, 2022, from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/352205/2020-sets-records-negative-emotions.aspx>

Detailed Findings

Demand for higher education is high among those who have never enrolled before and those who have stopped out of their coursework



About Half of U.S. Adults Have Recently Considered Enrolling

Forty-four percent of U.S. adults who are not currently enrolled in a college degree or certificate program report they have considered enrolling in the past two years.

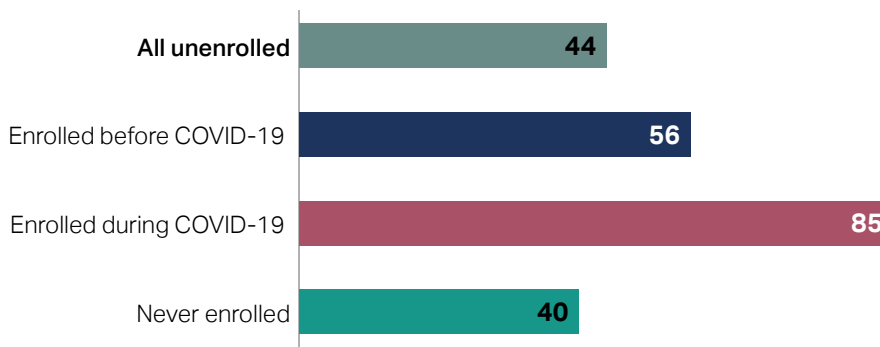
Forty percent of those who have *never* enrolled in higher education training or a formal program toward a degree report they have considered enrollment in the past two years. Enrollment considerations are extremely high for those who report they have stopped out during the pandemic. The vast majority (85%) of those who stopped out more recently report they have considered reenrolling in courses, and just over half (56%) of those who stopped out before the pandemic report they have also considered reenrollment in the past two years.

FIGURE 1

Percentage of U.S. adults who have considered enrolling in a college degree or certificate program in the past two years, by education experience

Which of the following, if any, have you considered pursuing in the past two years?

% Reporting they have considered pursuing any of the following: bachelor's degree, associate degree, certificate, or certification program





Black and Multiracial Adults Most Likely to Consider Reenrollment

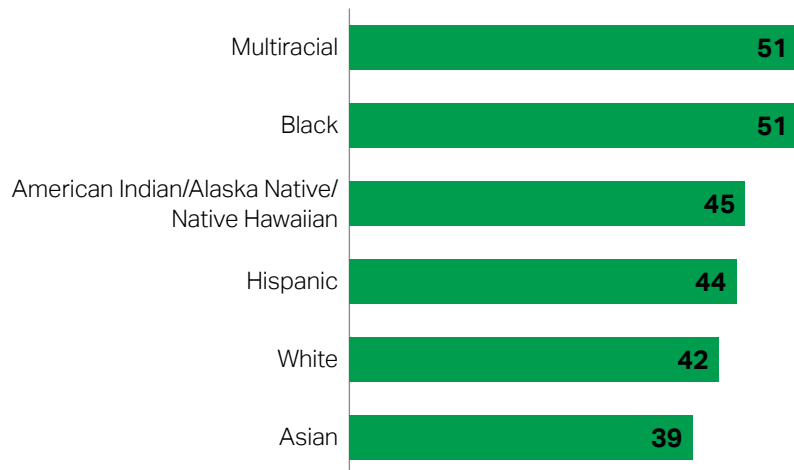
Members of groups historically underrepresented in higher education are more likely than their peers to report they have considered reenrolling. Black and multiracial adults are most likely to report they have considered reenrolling, at 51%, while white (44%) and Asian (39%) adults are less likely.

FIGURE 2

Percentage of U.S. adults who have considered enrolling in a college degree or certificate program in the past two years, by race/ethnicity

Which of the following, if any, have you considered pursuing in the past two years?

% Reporting they have considered pursuing any of the following: bachelor's degree, associate degree, certificate, or certification program



Patterns in consideration of reenrollment mirror public perception of the value of a college education. In 2019, Gallup found that 51% of all U.S. adults viewed a college education as very important, but Black (65%) and Hispanic (66%) adults were notably more likely to report a college education was very important than white adults (44%).⁴

⁴ Marken, S. (2019, December 30). *Half in U.S. Now Consider College Education Very Important*. [gallup.com](https://www.gallup.com/education/272228/half-consider-college-education-important.aspx). Retrieved March 28, 2022, from <https://www.gallup.com/education/272228/half-consider-college-education-important.aspx>



Associate Degrees and Short-Term Credentials Are the Most Popular Pathways Among the Unenrolled

Across all groups, including those who have no education after high school and those who have stopped out temporarily or for a longer period, associate degrees are the most considered degree/program, with 20% of all individuals who are not currently enrolled reporting they have considered an associate degree. Industry certificates are also popular prospects, with 19% of all U.S. adults not currently enrolled reporting they have considered a certificate in the past two years.

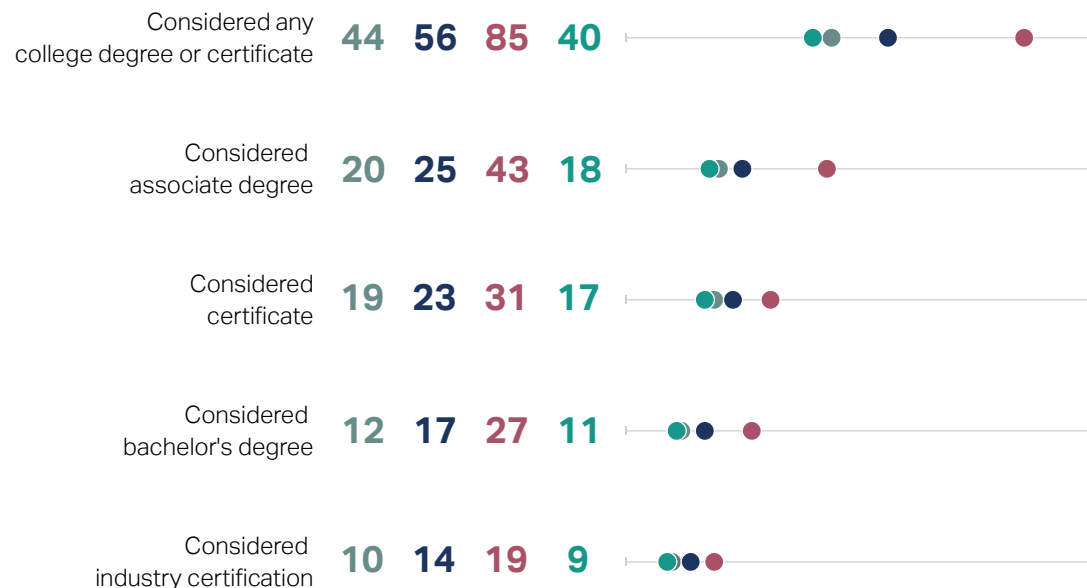
FIGURE 3

Forty-four percent of adults not currently enrolled in a college degree or certificate program have considered doing so in the past two years

Which of the following, if any, have you considered pursuing in the past two years?

% Reporting they have considered pursuing any of the following: bachelor's degree, associate degree, certificate, or certification program

● All unenrolled ● Enrolled before COVID-19 ● Enrolled during COVID-19 ● Never enrolled



Associate degree pathways are particularly attractive among those who have stopped out of higher education as more than one-third (37%) of previously enrolled students did so from two-year programs. Those previously enrolled in an associate degree program are also more likely than those who were enrolled in other types of sub-associate or bachelor’s degree programs to report they are interested in reenrolling.

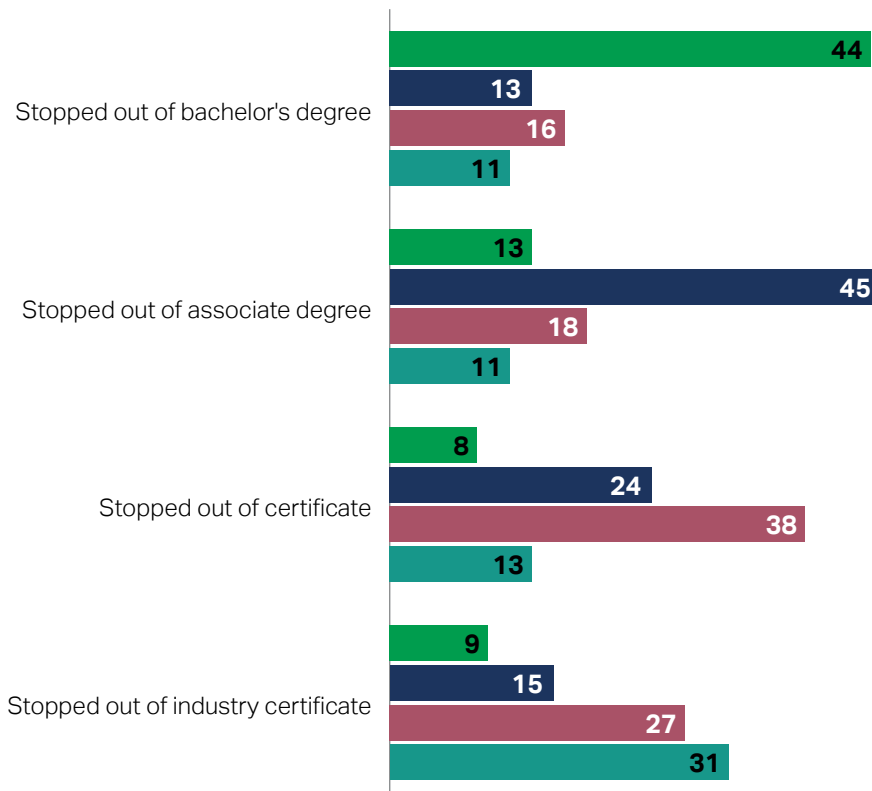
FIGURE 4

Nearly half of adults who stopped out of a degree program have considered reenrolling in the past two years

Which of the following, if any, have you considered pursuing in the past two years?

% Reporting they have considered pursuing any of the following: bachelor’s degree, associate degree, certificate, or certification program

● Bachelor’s degree ● Associate degree ● Certificate ● Industry certificate



Age is also a strong predictor of the likelihood to explore enrollment. Younger adults are far more likely than their older peers to report they have considered enrolling in a college degree or certificate program in the past two years. For every year increase in age, the likelihood of considering enrolling in a college degree or certificate program decreases by approximately 0.9 percentage points (see Appendix, Table 6 for detailed results by age). These results are consistent with recent enrollment trends, as traditional-aged college students (aged 18 to 24) are still more likely than older cohorts of Americans to be enrolled in higher education.⁵

5 Marken, S. (2019, December 30). *Half in U.S. Now Consider College Education Very Important*. [gallup.com](https://www.gallup.com/education/272228/half-consider-college-education-important.aspx). Retrieved March 28, 2022, from <https://www.gallup.com/education/272228/half-consider-college-education-important.aspx>



Cost Is Most Significant Factor for the Unenrolled

Moreover, cost is a significant barrier to both the never-enrolled, as well as the previously enrolled. More than half of students who stopped out of a college degree or certificate program prior to COVID-19 (59%) or during the pandemic (52%) say cost is a very important reason they remain unenrolled. Among those who have never enrolled in a college degree or certificate program, 54% cite cost as a very important barrier.

All other reasons significantly trail financial considerations; however, 38% of unenrolled adults also mention family responsibilities — including childcare and adult caregiver responsibilities — as very important reasons they are not currently taking courses or pursuing a degree. Very few say they are unenrolled because they do not see value in additional training or education (19%), or that their degree does not align with their beliefs or values (16%). This underscores the perceived importance of education, even for those who have stopped out or have chosen not to enroll at all.

TABLE 1

Reasons U.S. adults are not currently enrolled, by their enrollment experience

Thinking now about some reasons why people may not enroll in a degree or certificate program, how important are each of the following as reasons why you are not currently enrolled?

% Very important

	Enrolled before COVID	Enrolled during COVID	Never enrolled
The cost of the degree/credential program (tuition, fees, etc.)	59%	52%	54%
Family responsibilities (lack of care for children or sick family members)	36%	39%	38%
Work conflicts	24%	24%	24%
Program requires COVID-19 vaccination, and you are not vaccinated	21%	24%	27%
A degree or credential is not needed for your job/career	20%	20%	23%
Personal health reasons (unrelated to COVID-19)	19%	24%	28%
Lack of interest in getting further education	18%	18%	24%
Lack of remote learning options/Requirements for in-person	18%	27%	23%
Concerns about getting COVID-19	17%	26%	29%
You don't see value in getting further education	16%	16%	20%
Degree or credential doesn't fit with your personal beliefs	9%	16%	18%

The reasons U.S. adults are not currently enrolled in any post-high school education are relatively similar among those who have never enrolled and those who have stopped out.

Two exceptions are health-related: Adults who have never enrolled are notably more likely than those who stopped out before COVID-19 to say they are not enrolled due to personal health reasons not related to COVID-19 (28%) or concerns about getting COVID-19 (29%).

This suggests a not insignificant proportion of Americans would be enrolled in additional education programs after high school, were there programs that provided greater accommodations for Americans with health conditions or disabilities.

Given how limiting the cost of attendance is for prospective students, Gallup finds few demographic differences in the percentages of adults reporting cost as a very important factor. Similar percentages of white (56%), Asian (56%), Hispanic (54%), American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian (54%), multiracial (52%), and Black (50%) students select cost as a very important reason they are not currently enrolled.

Respondents across income levels are also similarly likely to mention cost as a major factor in their ability to enroll, suggesting absolute cost still impacts those with greater ability to pay. While 53% of those from households earning less than \$24,000 annually report cost is a major factor, 45% of those from households making \$240,000 or more annually also report cost as a reason they were not enrolled.⁶



⁶ See Appendix, Table 9 for reporting by additional demographic groups.

About one-third of currently enrolled students report it was difficult to remain enrolled this academic year

About 10% of students currently pursuing a bachelor's or associate degree report it was very difficult to remain enrolled or enroll for the first time (depending upon their status as a returning or new student) heading into the fall of 2021, and 27% report it was difficult.

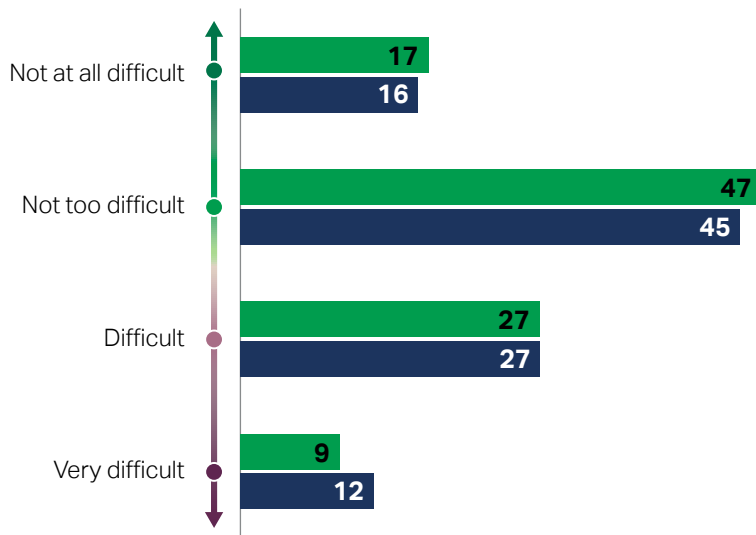
FIGURE 5

More than one-third of current associate and bachelor's degree students had difficulty remaining enrolled in fall 2021

Taking all factors into account, how difficult was it for you to remain enrolled in your program heading into the fall of 2021?

% Selected

■ Bachelor's degree students ■ Associate degree students



Students coming from households earning less than \$24,000 annually report the most difficulty remaining enrolled. Forty-five percent of all bachelor's and associate degree students in this group report it was very difficult or difficult to remain enrolled headed into the fall, compared with 28% of those from the highest-income households (those with an income of \$240,000 or more annually).⁷

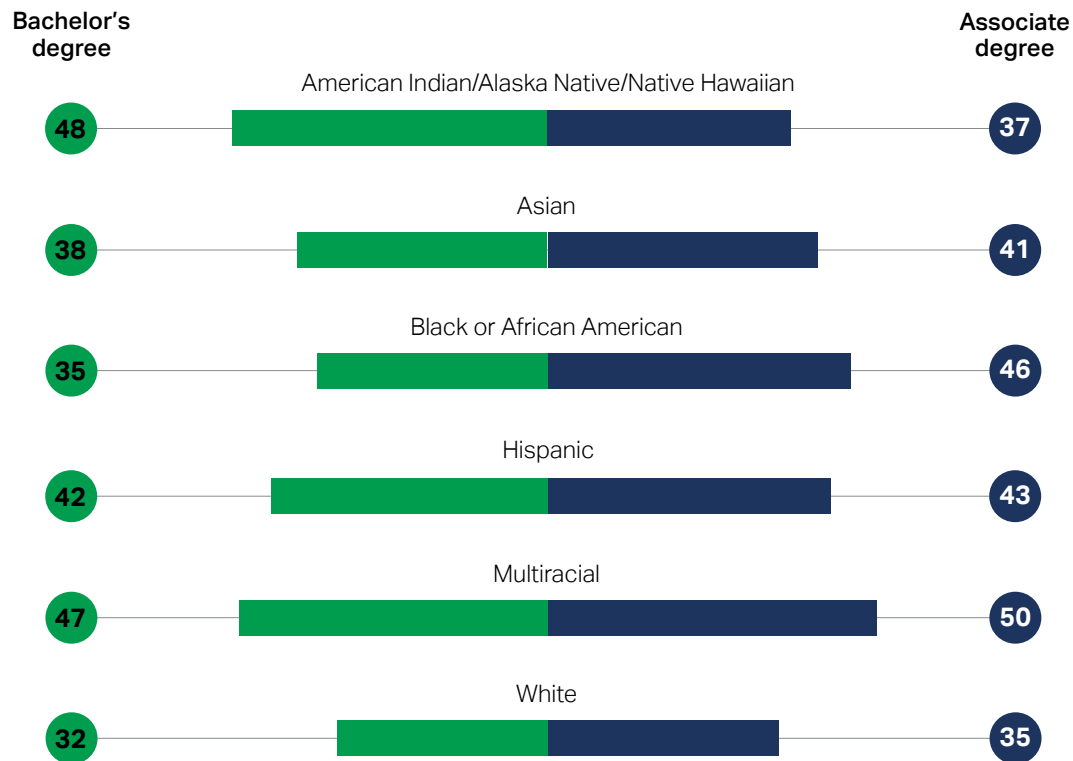
Multiracial bachelor's and associate degree students are the most likely of all racial and ethnic groups to report it was very difficult or difficult to remain enrolled in the fall of 2021.

FIGURE 6

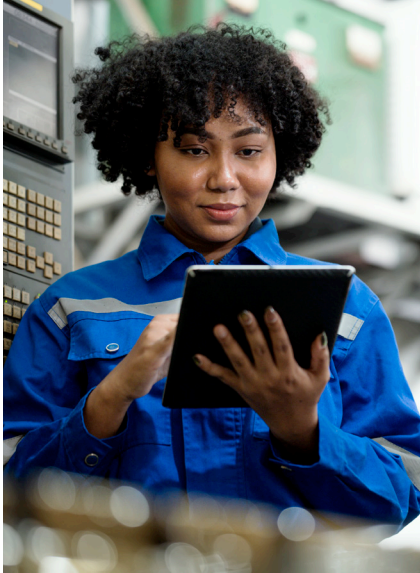
Students of color are most likely to have experienced difficulty remaining enrolled in their program

Taking all factors into account, how difficult was it for you to remain enrolled in your program heading into the fall of 2021?

% Difficult/Very difficult



⁷ See Appendix, Table 9 for reporting by additional demographic groups.



Considerations About Stopping Out Similar to 2020 Levels for Bachelor's and Associate Degree Students

About one-third (32%) of students currently enrolled in a bachelor's degree program report they have considered stopping out in the past six months, similar to 2020's proportion (33%). Associate degree students are also about as likely to report they have considered withdrawing (41%) as they were in 2020 (38%).

FIGURE 7

Current students are about as likely to have considered withdrawing as they were in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic

In the past six months, have you considered stopping your coursework (that is, withdrawing from the program for at least one term)?

% Yes

■ Bachelor's degree students ■ Associate degree students



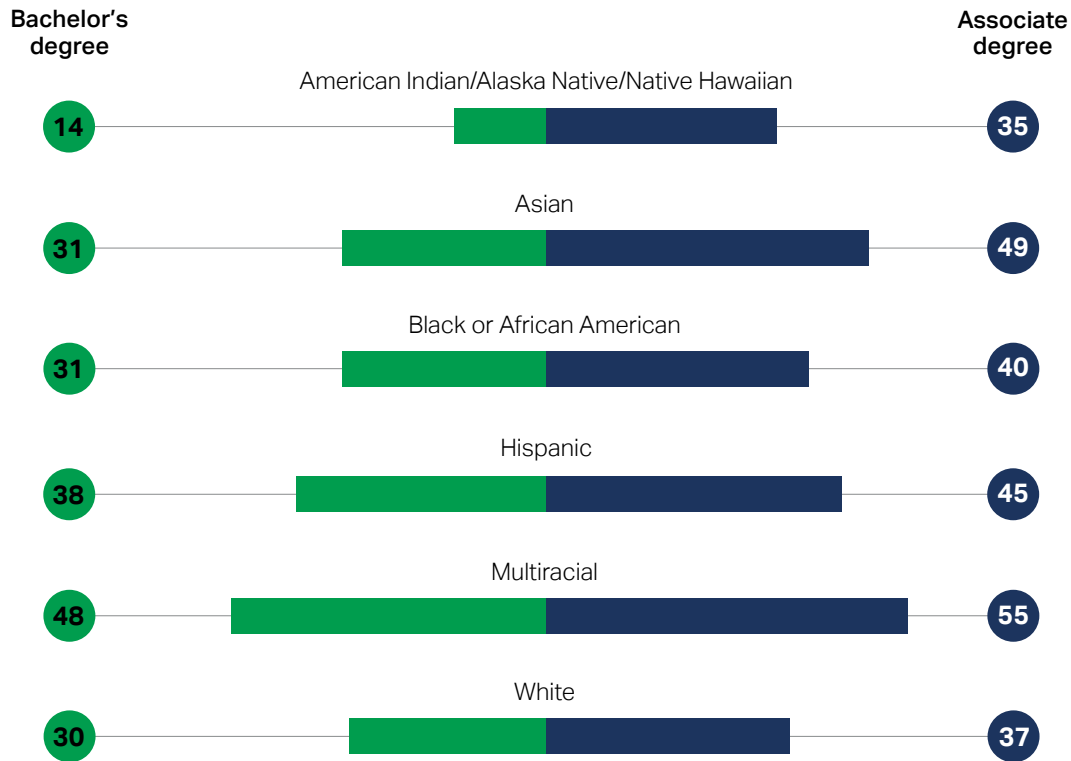
Multiracial students are the most likely racial and/or ethnic group to report they have considered stopping out of their program, with 55% of associate degree students and 48% of bachelor's degree students considering stopping out in the past six months.

FIGURE 8

Associate degree students — particularly those of color — are most likely to have considered withdrawing from their program

In the past six months, have you considered stopping your coursework (that is, withdrawing from the program for at least one term)?

% Yes





Stress Is Most-Cited Reason for Considering Stopping Out

While the overall percentage of students who have considered stopping out remained relatively stable between 2020 and 2021, the reasons have changed significantly. When asked why they have considered stopping out, the most-cited reason in 2021, by far, is emotional stress.

The majority (71%) of bachelor and associate degree students who report they have considered stopping out in the past six months say emotional stress was among the most important reasons. The pandemic was the second most-mentioned factor (34%) impacting students' ability to remain enrolled, followed closely by cost of attendance (31%).

Students pursuing a bachelor's degree are more likely (76%) to report emotional stress was a reason they considered stopping out than associate degree students (63%).



The percentage of bachelor's degree students reporting emotional stress was the reason they considered stopping out **increased by 34 percentage points.**



The percentage of associate degree students reporting emotional stress was the reason they considered stopping out **increased by 39 percentage points.**

Moreover, emotional stress is far more commonly cited in 2021 as a stop-out reason than it was in 2020. In 2020, 42% of students pursuing a bachelor's degree reported emotional stress was a reason they considered stopping taking courses, compared with 76% in 2021. Similarly, 24% of students pursuing an associate degree said emotional stress was a major reason they had considered stopping out in 2020, compared with 63% in 2021.

While a growing mental health crisis challenged institutions prior to the pandemic, feelings of isolation and academic difficulties caused by the pandemic have exacerbated mental health struggles nationally. In 2020, researchers at the University of Michigan found that 39% of college students reported experiencing some form of depression, and 34% reported experiencing anxiety.⁸ Now, one year later, students are still struggling with their wellbeing, and it is posing a significant risk to their ability to complete their degrees.

⁸ *The Healthy Minds Study: Fall 2020 Data Report.* (2020). Healthy Minds Network. <https://healthymindsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/HMS-Fall-2020-National-Data-Report.pdf>

Coursework difficulty is also more frequently cited as a reason for stopping out in 2021 than it was in 2020. In 2021, the percentage of bachelor’s degree students who report it was a major reason they considered stopping out increased by 17 percentage points to 34%. Similarly, the percentage of associate degree students mentioning coursework difficulty increased by 10 points from 2020 (14%) to 2021 (24%). Increased coursework difficulty may be the result of a year-over-year learning challenge many currently enrolled students have faced, particularly first- and second-year students who spent their final high school year in a remote classroom and experienced related challenges early on in their college careers. Among 18- to 21-year-old students, 30% say they considered stopping out due to coursework difficulty, compared with 20% of students of all other ages.

TABLE 2
Emotional stress is the most common reason students consider stopping out

Which of the following describes why you considered stopping your coursework?
Select all that apply.

% Selected

	Bachelor's degree	Change from 2020	Associate degree	Change from 2020
Emotional stress	76%	▲ +34%	63%	▲ +39%
COVID-19	33%	▼ -18%	33%	▲ +3%
Cost of attendance	36%	▲ +3%	31%	▲ +6%
Coursework was too difficult	34%	▲ +17%	24%	▲ +10%
Health related reasons not related to COVID-19	20%	▲ +6%	20%	▲ +6%
Childcare/caregiver responsibilities	12%	▼ -12%	22%	▼ -10%
The degree was taking longer than expected	12%	▲ +5%	12%	▲ +2%
Education received was low quality	14%	▼ -1%	9%	▲ +1%
You did not believe the degree/credential would help you achieve your personal goals	12%	▲ +2%	12%	▲ +1%
The courses were not relevant to your future career	11%	▲ +3%	9%	▲ +2%
You got a new job	5%	▼ -6%	14%	▼ -6%
You did not believe the degree/credential would help you achieve your career goals	12%	▲ +5%	9%	▲ +2%
You lost your job	6%	▼ -6%	8%	▼ -8%
No longer interested	15%	*	14%	*

* Not asked in 2020 survey.



Financial Aid and Perceived Degree Value Have Served as Important Retention Tools for Those Who Remain Enrolled

Approximately half of currently enrolled students report the financial aid they received was a key reason they remained enrolled during the 2021-2022 academic year.

Perceived value of their eventual degree was also important to their decision-making, followed closely by program enjoyment, and desire to finish their program as quickly as possible. The reasons students remained enrolled are generally similar for associate and bachelor’s degree students, though flexibility is marginally more important for associate degree students.

TABLE 3

Financial considerations — financial aid and the projected value of a degree — are most likely to convince students to remain enrolled

How important were each of the following in your being able to remain enrolled/enroll in your program in the fall of 2021?

% Very important

	Bachelor's degree	Associate degree
Financial aid that you received	52%	48%
Confidence in the value of the degree or credential	48%	49%
Your enjoyment of the program	45%	45%
Personally getting vaccinated against COVID-19	43%	39%
Wanting to finish the program as quickly as possible/Committed to finishing	43%	44%
Encouragement from family members and friends to stay enrolled	41%	41%
Safety policies in place at your institution related to COVID-19	36%	40%
Greater flexibility in your work or personal schedule	35%	45%
Greater flexibility in course delivery	33%	41%
Increase in personal income	31%	37%
Concern about losing your spot in the program if you took time off	27%	27%
Improvement in a previous health or family situation	26%	32%
Change in college, program or major	19%	26%
Your children are now back in school/Childcare needs are worked out	12%	18%

All U.S. adults, including currently enrolled and prospective students, still see a higher-paying job and a more fulfilling career as outcomes of higher education



Knowledge, Purpose, and Pay Are Key Motivators for Continuing or Considering Education After High School

Nearly two-thirds (65%) of currently enrolled students say they opted to continue their education to obtain knowledge or skills, making it the most frequently selected motivating factor. Nearly as many students say they were motivated by a degree’s ability to help them pursue a more fulfilling career (61%) or get a higher-paying job (60%) — many of which may require the additional knowledge and skills they are acquiring in their program. Moreover, more than half of all students who are not enrolled consider these as important reasons they would consider continuing their education.

TABLE 4
Percentage indicating each reason as important, by education experience

Which of the following are important reasons why you are continuing your education/ considering continuing your education? Select all that apply.

% Selected

	Enrolled	Was enrolled before COVID	Was enrolled during COVID	Never enrolled but considering
To obtain knowledge or skills	65%	66%	68%	63%
It will allow you to pursue a more fulfilling career	61%	56%	55%	53%
It will help you get a higher-paying job	60%	56%	64%	53%
It will make you a more competitive job candidate	43%	41%	36%	34%
Your family or society’s expectations	38%	16%	27%	16%
You are unable to find a good job without a degree/credential	25%	20%	22%	17%
It will give you an opportunity to advance in your current job	24%	26%	29%	23%
It will allow you to get a salary increase in your current job	21%	22%	27%	22%
Your employer is helping you pay for the degree/credential	8%	6%	11%	7%
You have recently lost your job	6%	8%	8%	8%

An Ideal Job Is a Clear Motivator for Current and Prospective Students

Prior Gallup research finds purpose and pay are equally important hallmarks of a “good job,” as defined by college graduates.⁹ Data from the most recent Lumina study confirm current and prospective students still associated this great or ideal job with additional training beyond high school. In fact, nearly all (94%) currently enrolled students say having at least one additional credential beyond a high school diploma is important to obtaining their ideal job. A majority (80%) of U.S. adults who have considered enrolling but have not yet done so also report a credential is critical to obtaining their ideal job. In contrast, 51% of U.S. adults who are not currently enrolled and have not considered doing so in the past two years say a credential is important to finding that ideal job, suggesting this lack of belief that higher education leads to a better job is impacting their desire to enroll.

TABLE 5

Percentage of respondents who say a credential is important for success in their ideal job

Which of the following are important reasons why you are continuing your education/ considering continuing your education? Select all that apply.

% Selected

	At least one form of credential is important to ideal job	In ideal job now, if in labor force
Have not considered enrolling in any degree program		
Was enrolled before COVID	42%	44%
Was enrolled during COVID	51%	43%
Never enrolled	51%	33%
Have considered enrolling in any degree program		
Was enrolled before COVID	76%	31%
Was enrolled during COVID	81%	30%
Never enrolled	80%	32%
Currently enrolled		
	94%	24%

Analytical note: Adults who are working were asked if they were currently in their ideal job. Adults who are not working but looking for work or enrolled full-time were coded as not being in their ideal job. Adults out of the labor force are not included in the ideal job item.

⁹ Marken, S. (2020, July 1). *Purpose and Pay Define a “Good Job” for College Grads*. [gallup.com](https://news.gallup.com/poll/312623/purpose-pay-define-good-job-college-grads.aspx). Retrieved March 28, 2022, from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/312623/purpose-pay-define-good-job-college-grads.aspx>

Methodology

Results for the Lumina-Gallup Student Study are based on web surveys conducted October 19, 2021 to November 22, 2021, with U.S. adults aged 18-59 who have a high school degree/diploma or equivalent and have not yet completed an associate or bachelor's degree. Gallup surveyed 11,227 total U.S. adults, including 5,215 who were currently enrolled in an associate or bachelor's degree program, 3,010 who have some college experience, but no degree and are not currently enrolled, and 3,002 individuals who have never enrolled in higher education.

Respondents were interviewed via Dynata's web-based panel. The data are weighted to match national demographics of gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, and region. Demographic weighting targets are based on the most recent American Community Survey figures for the aged 18 and older U.S. population.

All reported margins of sampling error for the study include the computed design effects for weighting.

- For results based on the total sample of 11,227 respondents, the margin of error is ± 1.4 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.
- For results based on the sample of 5,215 currently enrolled students pursuing an associate or bachelor's degree, the error range is ± 1.8 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.
- For results based on the sample of 3,010 who have some college experience, but no degree, the error range is ± 2.0 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.
- For results based on the sample of 3,002 who have never enrolled in a college degree or certificate program, the error range is ± 2.0 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

All reported margins of sampling error include computed design effects for weighting.

In addition to sampling error, question wording, and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

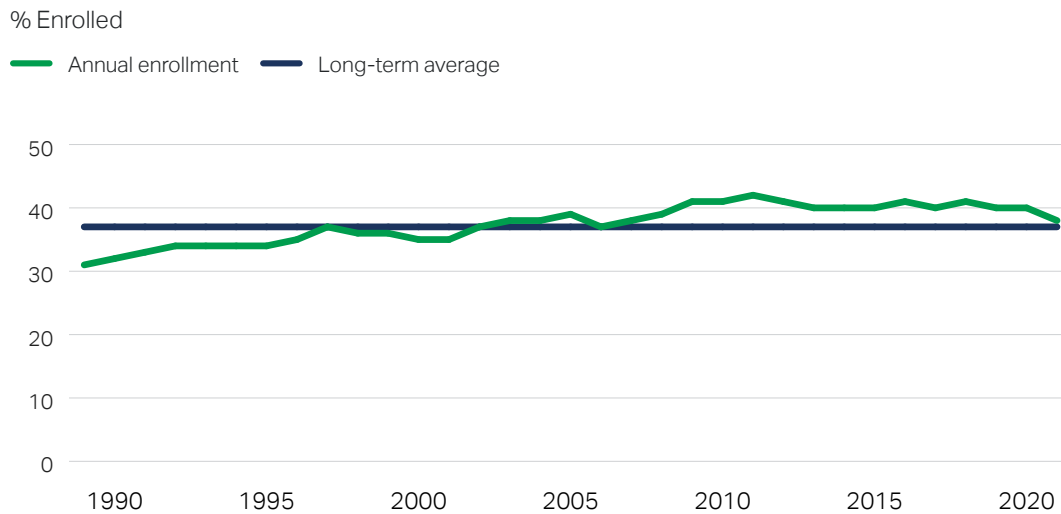
Appendix

Enrollment Changes Over Time

U.S. adults aged 18-29 have comprised the majority of enrolled students going back to at least 1970.¹⁰ In recent decades and through 2019, 59% of all college students are 18 to 24 years old.¹¹ Among the 18- to 29-year-old population, enrollment rates — measured in October of each year — have been above their long-term average (measured from 1989-2021) in recent years and only fell meaningfully during the pandemic (Figure 9).

In the fall of 2019, 40% of the youngest adults (aged 18 to 24) were enrolled in college, well above the long-term average of 37%. In 2020, enrollment remained steady at 40% and it fell in 2021 to 38%. Now that the pandemic has receded and vaccinations have become widely available, it is possible that enrollment rates will rise to pre-COVID levels for this group. This should result in roughly 0.9 million more students enrolling in 2022 than in 2021 in the 18- to 24-year-old group.

FIGURE 9
College enrollment among 18- to 24-year-old Americans falls to 15-year low



Note: Figure shows the percentage of U.S. residents aged 18 to 24 who report being enrolled in college in October of the given year. Source: IPUMS-CPS, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org. Respondent data are weighted to match national population shares.

10 National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, Table 303.40. Total fall enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by attendance status, sex, and age of student: Selected years, 1970 through 2029, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_303.40.asp

11 Data.Census.Gov, U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 1-year. Table B14004. Sex by College or Graduate School Enrollment by Type of School by Age for the Population 15 Years and Over. <https://censusreporter.org/tables/B14004/>

Although enrollment rates have remained rather stable over time, the demographic composition of currently enrolled students has changed. In 1989, 79% of college students aged 18 to 24 were non-Hispanic white. That fell to 54% by 2021. The proportion of Hispanic students went from 6% to 20%, and the proportion of Asian students went from 4% to 10%. The proportion of Black students went up more gradually from 10% in 1989 to 13% in 2021. These trends reflect big gains in enrollment rates for Black and Hispanic students over the period. In the fall of 1989, 23% of Black adults aged 18-24 and 16% of Hispanic adults that age were enrolled in college. These rates were far behind Asian and white adult rates, which were 39% and 34%, respectively. By 2021, enrollment rates for Black (36%) and Hispanic (33%) adults were nearly the same as white adults in the same age group (38%), while Asian adult rates soared to 55%.

A key driver of enrollment rate changes nationally is the shrinking 18- to 24-year-old population. This population peaked in 2013, according to Census data. By 2020, there were 1.5 million fewer people aged 18 to 24 living in the U.S. than in 2013 (Table 6). Thus, even with no change in the enrollment rate from 2013 to 2020, enrollment would have declined 0.6 million in this group in 2020 and even more in 2021. The 0- to 17-year-old population is also shrinking in the U.S. as births peaked in 2007, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and were down approximately 700,000 from 2007 to 2020.¹² Fewer births in the U.S. will likely place downward pressure on the number of young adults enrolling in college in 2025.

TABLE 6
Demographic changes by population age and the rate of college enrollment

	Change in population, 2013-2020	Change in enrollment, 2013-2020	Predicted change in enrollment, using 2013 enrollment rate	Change in enrollment rate, 2013-2020
Less than 18 years old	-769,624	-118,078	-3,698	-0.2%
18 to 24	-1,479,352	-653,458	-588,390	-0.2%
25 to 29	1,648,892	-321,710	221,653	-2.3%
30 to 34	1,566,352	-69,037	104,760	-0.8%
35 to 39	2,223,608	-152,848	110,306	-1.2%
40 to 44	-533,584	-214,969	-19,233	-1.0%
45 to 49	-1,232,306	-175,927	-32,099	-0.7%
50 to 54	-2,150,824	-50,165	-34,415	-0.1%
55 and older	14,151,016	N/A	N/A	N/A

Sources: Census Bureau, Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Single Year of Age and Sex, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest/technical-documentation/research/evaluation-estimates/2020-evaluation-estimates/2010s-national-detail.html>. Sarah Flood, Miriam King, Renae Rodgers, Steven Ruggles, J. Robert Warren and Michael Westberry. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Current Population Survey: Version 9.0 [Monthly 1989-2021, October]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D030.V9.0>

12 NCHS, National Vital Statistics System, birth data (see <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/births.htm>); public-use data files (see https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data_access/VitalStatsOnline.htm); and CDC WONDER (see <http://wonder.cdc.gov/>).

U.S. adults aged 25 to 39 are an increasing population in the U.S., as this cohort increased by 5.4 million from 2013 to 2020. However, this group of young adults is much less likely to enroll in college than their younger peers. Even before COVID-19, enrollment rates of 25- to 39-year-olds were down from 2013 levels.

TABLE 7
College enrollment rate in October, by year, by age group, 2013-2021

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Less than 18 years old	0.5%	0.4%	0.3%	0.4%	0.4%	0.3%	0.4%	0.3%	0.5%
18 to 24	39.8%	39.8%	40.2%	40.8%	40.0%	40.5%	40.5%	39.6%	37.5%
25 to 29	13.4%	13.3%	13.1%	12.9%	12.2%	13.0%	11.6%	11.1%	12.2%
30 to 34	6.7%	6.4%	6.9%	6.6%	6.0%	6.3%	6.1%	5.9%	5.8%
35 to 39	5.0%	5.1%	4.3%	4.2%	4.0%	3.7%	3.9%	3.8%	4.3%
40 to 44	3.6%	3.3%	3.0%	3.4%	2.8%	3.4%	2.9%	2.6%	2.6%
45 to 49	2.6%	2.4%	2.4%	2.1%	2.1%	2.6%	2.2%	1.9%	2.1%
50 to 54	1.6%	1.6%	1.6%	1.4%	1.3%	1.4%	1.4%	1.5%	1.6%

Source: IPUMS-CPS, Sarah Flood, Miriam King, Renae Rodgers, Steven Ruggles, J. Robert Warren and Michael Westberry. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Current Population Survey: Version 9.0 [Monthly 1989-2021, October]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D030.V9.0>

Detailed Tables

TABLE 8

Percentage of adults without a college degree or certificate who have considered entering a degree or certificate program within the past two years, by age and education experience

Which of the following, if any, have you considered pursuing in the past two years?

% Reporting they have considered pursuing any of the following: bachelor's degree, associate degree, certificate, or certification program

	Enrolled before COVID	Enrolled during COVID	Never enrolled
18 to 24	79%	91%	52%
25 to 29	79%	82%	46%
30 to 34	73%	95%	49%
35 to 39	65%	87%	41%
40 to 44	60%	94%	42%
45 to 49	49%	71%	34%
50 to 54	42%	63%	29%
55 to 59	31%	65%	21%

TABLE 9

Percentage of adults who report it was difficult/very difficult to remain enrolled heading into fall of 2021

Taking all factors into account, how difficult was it for you to remain enrolled/enroll in your program heading into the fall of 2021?

% Reporting it was difficult/very difficult

	All students	Associate degree pursuers	Bachelor's degree pursuers
Income			
Income 240K or higher	28%	10%	4%
Income 120K to below 240K	38%	10%	6%
Income 48k to below 120K	36%	8%	7%
Income 24K to below 48k	40%	12%	9%
Income Below 24K	48%	19%	15%
Race/Ethnicity			
White	35%	35%	35%
Asian	41%	41%	41%
Black	42%	42%	42%
Hispanic	44%	44%	44%
American Indian/Native Hawaiian/Alaska Native	47%	47%	47%
Multiracial	47%	47%	47%
Age			
18 to 21	37%	37%	37%
22 to 29	44%	44%	44%
30 to 34	45%	45%	45%
35 to 39	43%	43%	43%
40 to 49	36%	36%	36%
50 to 59	37%	37%	37%
Gender			
Female	38%	38%	38%
Male	39%	39%	39%
Caregiver status			
Parent	45%	49%	39%
Adult caregiver	52%	53%	52%

TABLE 10

Groups of non-enrolled adults most likely to say cost is a very important reason why they are not enrolled

Thinking now about some reasons why people may not enroll in a degree or certificate program, how important are each of the following as reasons why you are not currently enrolled?

% Reporting cost as “very important”

	Enrolled	Was enrolled before COVID	Was enrolled during COVID	Never enrolled but considering
Caregiver status				
Working with children	57%	56%	53%	58%
Not working with children	57%	66%	64%	55%
Gender				
Men with children	51%	50%	54%	51%
Men without children	50%	53%	45%	50%
Women with children	60%	67%	59%	59%
Women without children	57%	65%	53%	55%
Income				
Below \$24k	53%	61%	55%	52%
\$24K to below \$48K	59%	66%	55%	58%
\$48K to below \$120K	53%	57%	51%	52%
\$120K to below \$240K	46%	41%	21%	50%
\$240K or higher	45%	18%	59%	55%
Race/Ethnicity				
White	56%	57%	50%	56%
Asian	56%	63%	45%	55%
Hispanic	54%	60%	54%	54%
American Indian/Alaska Native/ Native Hawaiian	54%	60%	23%	53%
Multiracial	52%	65%	68%	47%
Black	50%	62%	54%	48%

	Enrolled	Was enrolled before COVID	Was enrolled during COVID	Never enrolled but considering
Party affiliation				
Independent	56%	62%	56%	54%
Republican	54%	51%	43%	55%
Democrat	54%	61%	51%	53%
Employment status				
Employed	54%	56%	49%	54%
Not working	55%	63%	55%	54%
Age				
18-21	50%	62%	60%	48%
22-29	54%	64%	52%	53%
30-34	55%	60%	49%	53%
35-39	57%	63%	70%	55%
40-49	57%	60%	39%	56%
50-59	53%	52%	35%	54%

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