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Stress weighs heavily on those who remain in college, a new Gallup-Lumina study finds

Meanwhile, many adults, cautious about the price tag, are considering a return to college amid steep enrollment declines.

INDIANAPOLIS – Within the past six months, three-fourths of students in bachelor’s programs and two-thirds of adults seeking associate degrees who have considered taking a break from college cited emotional stress, according to a [new Gallup-Lumina report](#).

The research also shows 44% of adults who are not currently enrolled in a college degree or certificate program say they have considered enrolling in the past two years.

Gallup and Lumina conducted the latest study last fall. The survey of 11,227 U.S. adults expands on a 2020 study of U.S. higher education that found rising concerns among students about the shift from in-person to remote learning. That research confirmed the spread of COVID-19 had jeopardized student retention, with about half reporting the pandemic was “likely” or “very likely” to affect their enrollment. In 2021, Gallup and Lumina asked students about the ongoing risks of staying enrolled and the policies and programs that allowed them to continue. Those who had left college without finishing or had never registered were also asked why they were not in college to better understand how colleges and universities — and policymakers who support them — must adapt to attract these prospective students.

Mental health was cited twice as often as the pandemic, the cost of college, or the difficulty of coursework as the reason college students had considered stopping out.

Within the past six months, about one-third of bachelor’s degree students and four in 10 associate degree-seekers report they have considered stopping out. These are consistent with 2020 levels when the pandemic precipitated steep declines in college enrollment nationally.

College enrollment began declining slowly a decade ago, and enrollments have fallen precipitously during the pandemic. Understanding why people leave college — or do not go at all — is essential to helping colleges and universities design programs that better enable people to earn credentials, said Courtney Brown, Lumina’s vice president for impact and planning.

“Enrollment has plunged alarmingly,” Brown said. “To reverse this trend, we must understand students’ perspectives, especially those of non-traditionally aged students. This includes what barriers they face and the practices that support them. This survey offers insights that can help us meet today’s students where they are.”

Gallup and Lumina surveyed the following groups of U.S. adults aged 18 to 59 who had finished high school and were living in the U.S.:

- Currently enrolled students: 5,215 adults 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

Thirty-six percent of bachelor’s program students and four in 10 students working toward associate degrees reported it was “difficult” or “very difficult” to stay enrolled in the 2021-22 school year. Students of color, including Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students, and multiracial students, were most likely to report challenges.

Among those who stayed in college, about half of associate or bachelor’s degree program students reported the financial aid they received and their confidence in the value of their education were “very important” reasons for staying in school. Six in 10 students said earning college degrees would allow them to pursue more fulfilling careers or seek higher-paying work.

Less expensive, shorter-term programs also are drawing interest, with 85% of those recently enrolled in certificate or degree programs who stopped out during the pandemic considering reenrollment.

The Gallup-Lumina research shows that tuition and other financial concerns were the chief barriers for adults considering higher education, a constituency that may continue to grow as a higher percentage of jobs require formal education, including college degrees. More than half of adults not in college say the price tag is a “very important” reason they stopped out or never enrolled. Unenrolled adults consistently cited the expense of college, regardless of race, ethnicity, or income level.

“This research confirms many people still view cost as the greatest barrier,” said Stephanie Marken, Gallup executive director for education. “Yet, more students need to benefit from the social mobility possible with a college degree or other credential.”

About Lumina Foundation

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. We envision a system that is easy to navigate, delivers fair results, and meets the nation’s need for talent through a broad range of credentials. Our goal is to prepare people for informed citizenship and success in a global economy.

About Gallup

Gallup delivers analytics and advice to help leaders and organizations solve their most pressing problems. Combining more than 80 years of experience with its global reach, Gallup knows more about the attitudes and behaviors of employees, customers, students, and citizens than any other organization in the world.