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# Balancing Act:

## The Tradeoffs and Challenges Facing Black Students in Higher Education

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FOUNDATION



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## Background

### Many Black students in the U.S. face distinctive challenges to completing postsecondary programs.

Six-year completion rates for any type of degree or certificate program are lower for Black students than for those in any other racial or ethnic group.<sup>1</sup> Barriers to completion include the high financial cost of higher education and implicit and overt forms of racial discrimination that cause many to stop out or never enroll in the first place.<sup>2</sup>

Findings from *Balancing Act: The Tradeoffs and Challenges Facing Black Students in Higher Education* are derived from the Lumina Foundation-Gallup State of Higher Education 2022 study. The Lumina Foundation-Gallup State of Higher Education 2022 study identifies the psychological, physical and financial barriers to high-quality post-high school training and builds on insights Gallup and Lumina gained in the fall of 2020 and fall of 2021. In the fall of 2022, Gallup interviewed 6,008 currently enrolled students across program types, including 1,106 non-Hispanic Black students. Among non-Hispanic Black students included in the study, 155 were pursuing professional certifications, 287 were in certificate programs, 347 were in associate degree programs and 317 were in bachelor's degree programs. This report, dedicated to the experience of Black learners, provides a deep dive into the exceptional barriers Black students face in higher education today and makes further examination of these differences valuable for reducing inequities in higher education.

1 National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (29, November 2022). Completing College National and State Reports With Six- and Eight-Year Completion Rates Dashboards. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/completing-college/>

2 Museus, S.D., Ledesma, M.C., & Parker, T.L. (2015). Systemic Racism in Higher Education. *Racism and Racial Equity in Higher Education. ASHE Higher Education Report*, 42(1), 49-71.

# Part 1: Discrimination

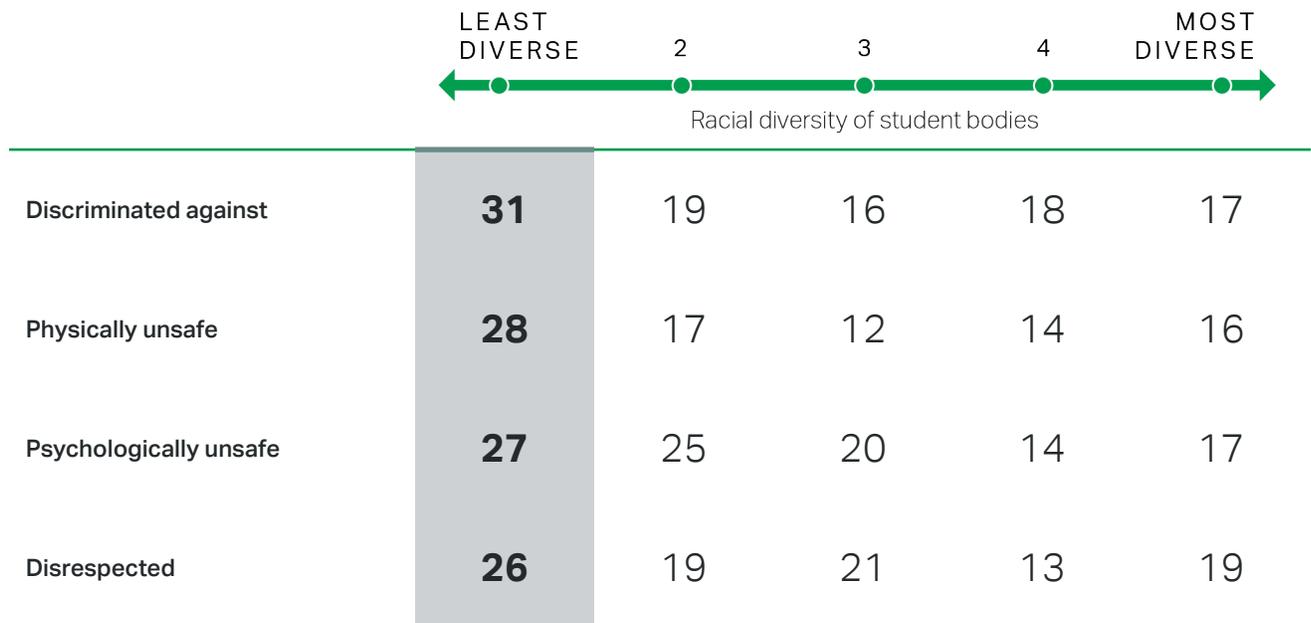
## Black students in least racially diverse programs more likely to feel discriminated against or unsafe

Among all postsecondary institutions, 21% of currently enrolled Black students say they feel discriminated against “frequently” or “occasionally” in their program, vs. 15% of all other students. Black learners are more likely to feel discriminated against at institutions with the least racially diverse student bodies. At schools that score in the bottom quintile on the Simpson racial diversity index,<sup>3</sup> Black students are not only more likely to say they frequently or occasionally feel discriminated against but also to say they feel disrespected and physically or psychologically unsafe. Such findings support the idea that staff and students at institutions with few students of color may be less likely to adhere to norms of inclusivity and intolerance of racist acts.<sup>4</sup>

**TABLE 1**

**How often do you feel any of the following at [school name] — frequently, occasionally, once or twice, or never ?**

% “Frequently” or “occasionally” among Black students



3 The Simpson racial diversity index is based on the probability that any two randomly selected members of a system — in this case, students in a postsecondary certificate or degree program — will be from the same racial or ethnic group.

4 Newsome, M. (1, April 2022). Black Students Experiencing Racism on Campus Lack Mental Health Support. KHN. <https://khn.org/news/article/black-students-experiencing-racism-on-campus-lack-mental-health-support/>

## Black learners in short-term credential programs most likely to feel discriminated against

Twenty-one percent of Black students say they frequently or occasionally experience discrimination at their postsecondary institution. Black students' perceptions of discrimination vary considerably according to the type of credential they are pursuing. Among those in short-term credential programs — including certificates and professional certifications — about one-third (32%) say they feel discriminated against at least occasionally, compared with 16% in associate degree programs and 14% in bachelor's programs.

**FIGURE 1**

**How often do you feel discriminated against at [school name] — frequently, occasionally, once or twice, or never?**



Due to rounding, percentages may sum to 100% ±1.

These findings call into question the safeguards against systemic discrimination in short-term credential programs, which are increasingly popular in the U.S. and provide prospective adult learners additional pathways to education and training with lower financial and time investments.

"I did get into a verbal disagreement with someone, and I felt like the situation should have been handled better. ... I'm Black and this person was Caucasian, and because of the person's smaller stature and voice, they [the university administration] just automatically assumed that I'm the one who started this verbal disagreement when it ended up showing that it was her. ... I'm not an aggressive person, but they automatically assumed [it was me]."

— Kia B., Black woman, 30-44



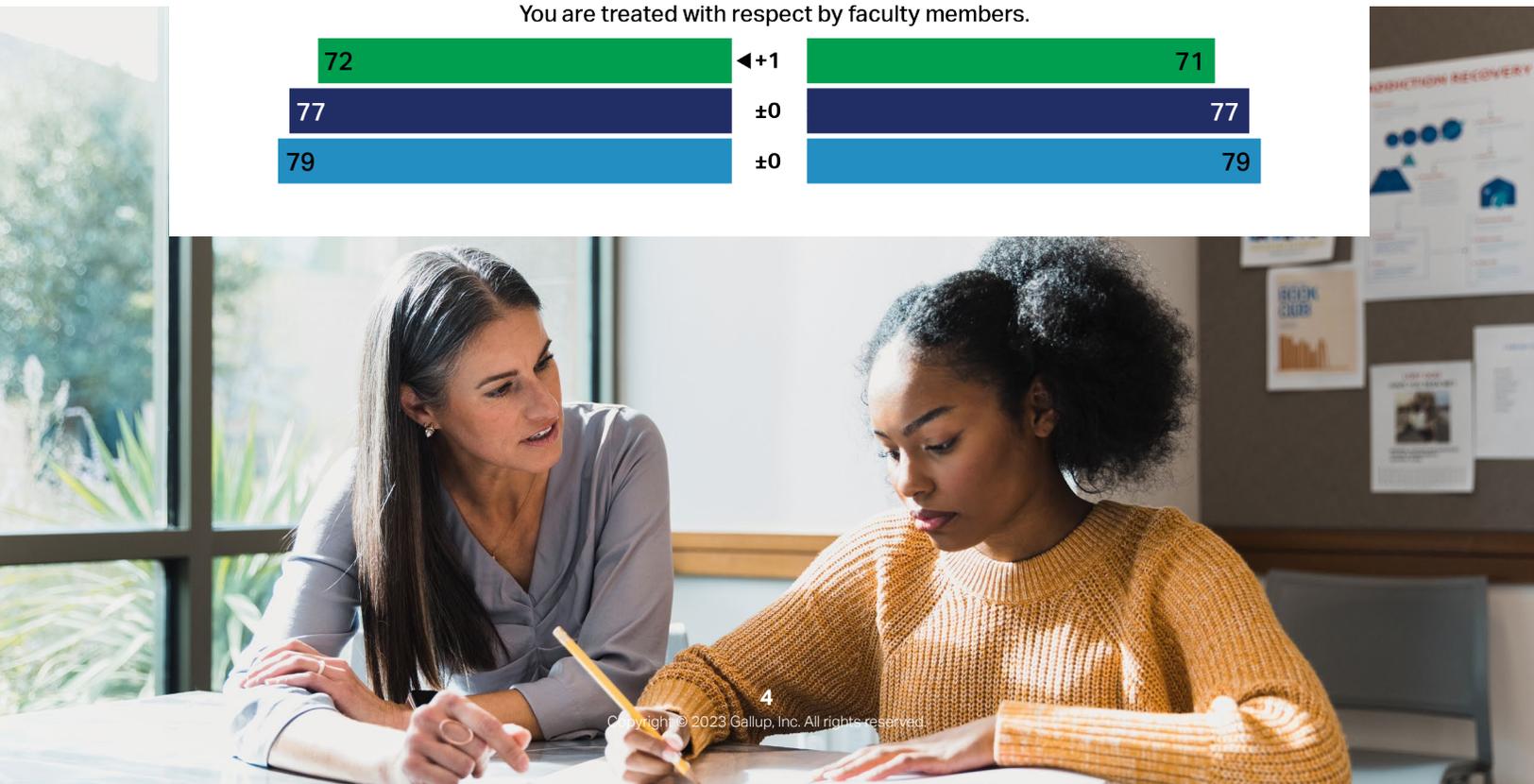
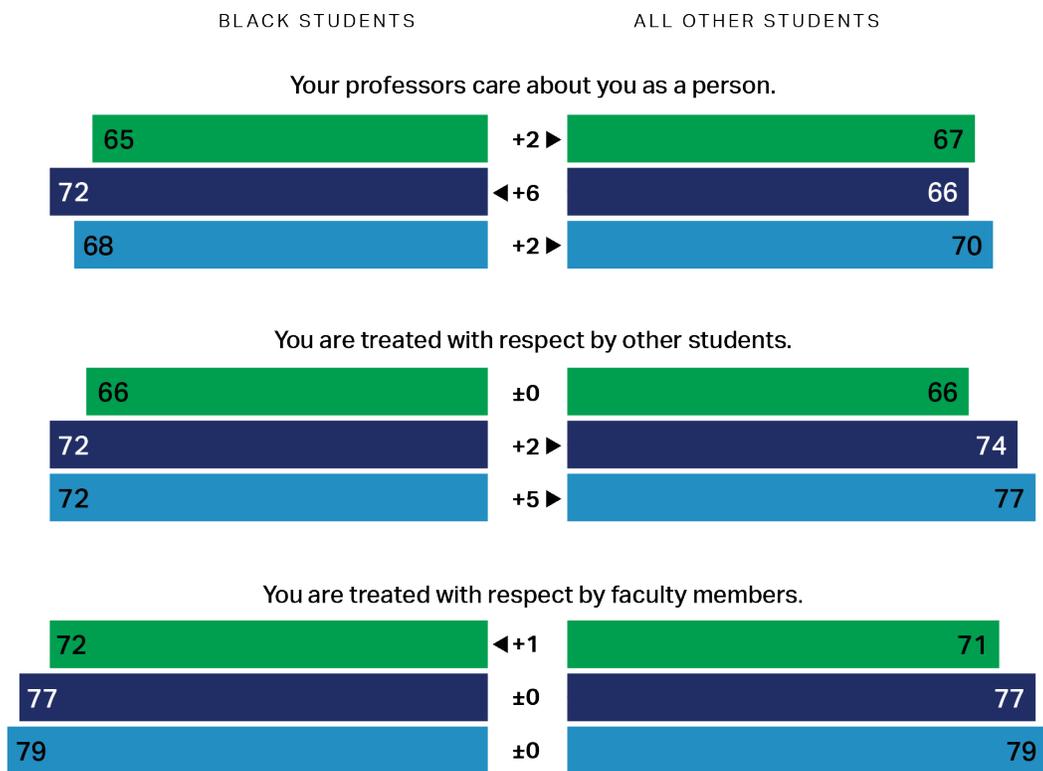
Black students' ratings of routine interactions with faculty and other students differ somewhat by program or institution type. Those in short-term credential programs are somewhat less likely to agree that they are treated with respect by other students and faculty members. In general, however, these results do not vary as much as those for perceived discrimination. Moreover, results for these items are generally similar between Black students in each program type and students in all other racial or ethnic groups.

**FIGURE 2**

**Using a 5-point scale in which 1 means strongly disagree and 5 means strongly agree, please rate your level of agreement with the following statements.**

**% "4" or "5" among Black students vs. all other students**

■ Certification/Certificate program ■ Associate degree ■ Bachelor's degree



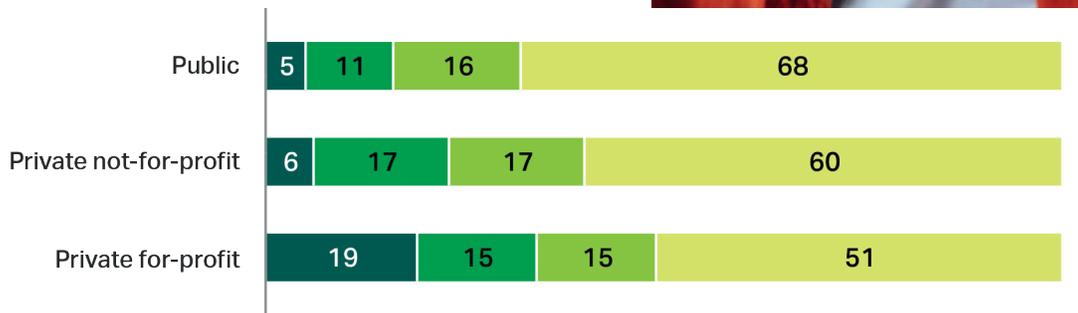
## Black learners at private for-profit schools more likely to report discrimination

Black students' experiences with discrimination vary significantly by the type of institution in which they are enrolled. One-third of those at private for-profit schools (34%) say they experience discrimination frequently or occasionally, vs. 23% of those in private not-for-profit institutions and 17% at public institutions. This is particularly problematic given that Black students make up a larger share of the student population in private for-profit institutions than in public or private not-for-profit universities.<sup>5</sup>

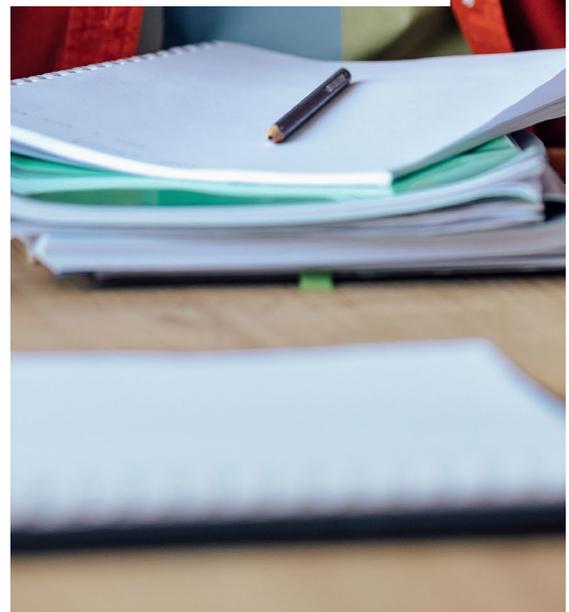
**FIGURE 3**

**How often do you feel discriminated against at [school name] — frequently, occasionally, once or twice, or never?**

■ % Frequently ■ % Occasionally ■ % Once or twice ■ % Never



Due to rounding, percentages may sum to 100% ± 1. Totals of combined categories presented in this report may differ by ± 1 percentage point due to rounding.



<sup>5</sup> Postsecondary National Policy Institute. (2022). Factsheets: Black Students. <https://pnpi.org/black-students/>

"I'm basically a single parent, and I don't really have much help when it comes to watching my child when I have to do things, so it can get in the way of a lot."

— Bianca F., Black woman, 30-44



## Part 2: Multiple priorities

### Many Black bachelor's students forced to balance studies with other duties

As with other credential and degree types, Black students in four-year bachelor's degree programs are more likely to stop their coursework prior to completion than those in other racial/ethnic groups.<sup>6</sup> Black students are also more likely than others to report having caregiver responsibilities and to be working full time.

**15% vs. 8%**

15% of Black students are caregivers for adult family members or friends, vs. 8% of other students.

**11% vs. 7%**

11% of Black students are parents or guardians of children under 18, vs. 7% of other students.

**22% vs. 11%**

Overall, 22% of Black students have caregiver responsibilities, vs. 11% of other students.

**20% vs. 11%**

20% of Black students are employed full time, vs. 11% of other students.

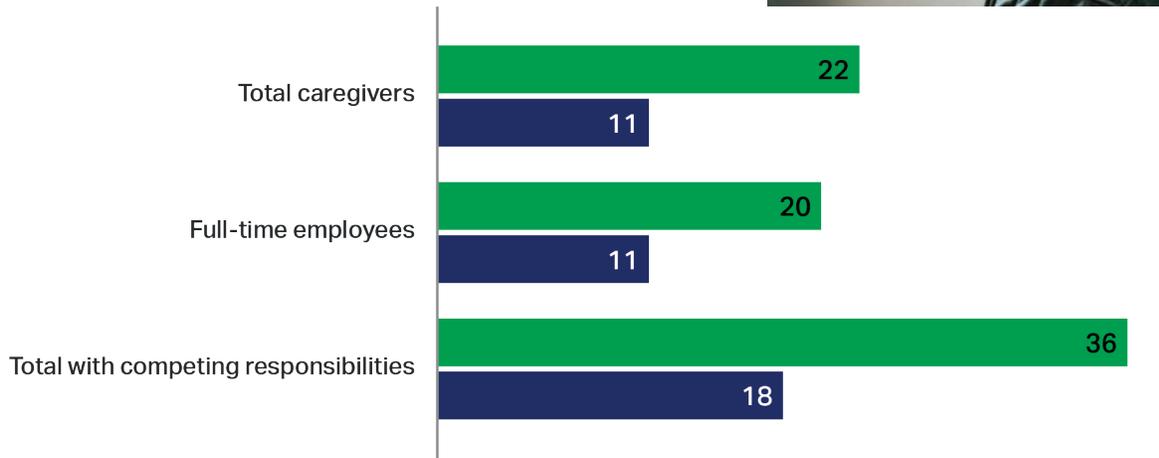
Altogether, Black bachelor's students are twice as likely as other bachelor's students to have additional responsibilities as caregivers or full-time workers — **36% vs. 18%**, respectively.

<sup>6</sup> National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (29, November 2022). Completing College National and State Reports With Six- and Eight-Year Completion Rates Dashboards. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/completing-college/>

**FIGURE 4**

**Percentage of bachelor’s students who have responsibilities as caregivers or full-time employees**

■ % Black bachelor’s students ■ % All other students



Black bachelor’s students with competing responsibilities are also significantly more likely than those without to say they have considered stopping their coursework in the past six months — 46% vs. 34%, respectively.

## Black bachelor’s students more likely than others to cite importance of flexibility in schedules and course delivery

When asked about the importance of various considerations in their ability to remain enrolled, Black bachelor’s students are more likely than others to consider most factors very important, including financial supports like their financial aid/scholarship or an increase in personal income. However, the items that most distinguish them from other students are those relating to greater course or work flexibility, which is essential for many struggling to keep up with classes and coursework amid other demands on their time.

A majority of Black bachelor’s students (59%) say greater flexibility in their work or personal schedule is very important to remaining enrolled, vs. 37% of other students. Almost half of Black students (47%) say flexibility in course delivery — including remote learning options — is very important, vs. 29% of other students.

### Almost half of Black associate degree students must balance multiple responsibilities.

Among those currently enrolled in two-year associate degree programs, Black students are about as likely as others to have additional responsibilities as caregivers or full-time employees — but such responsibilities are more common among both groups than they are among bachelor’s students.

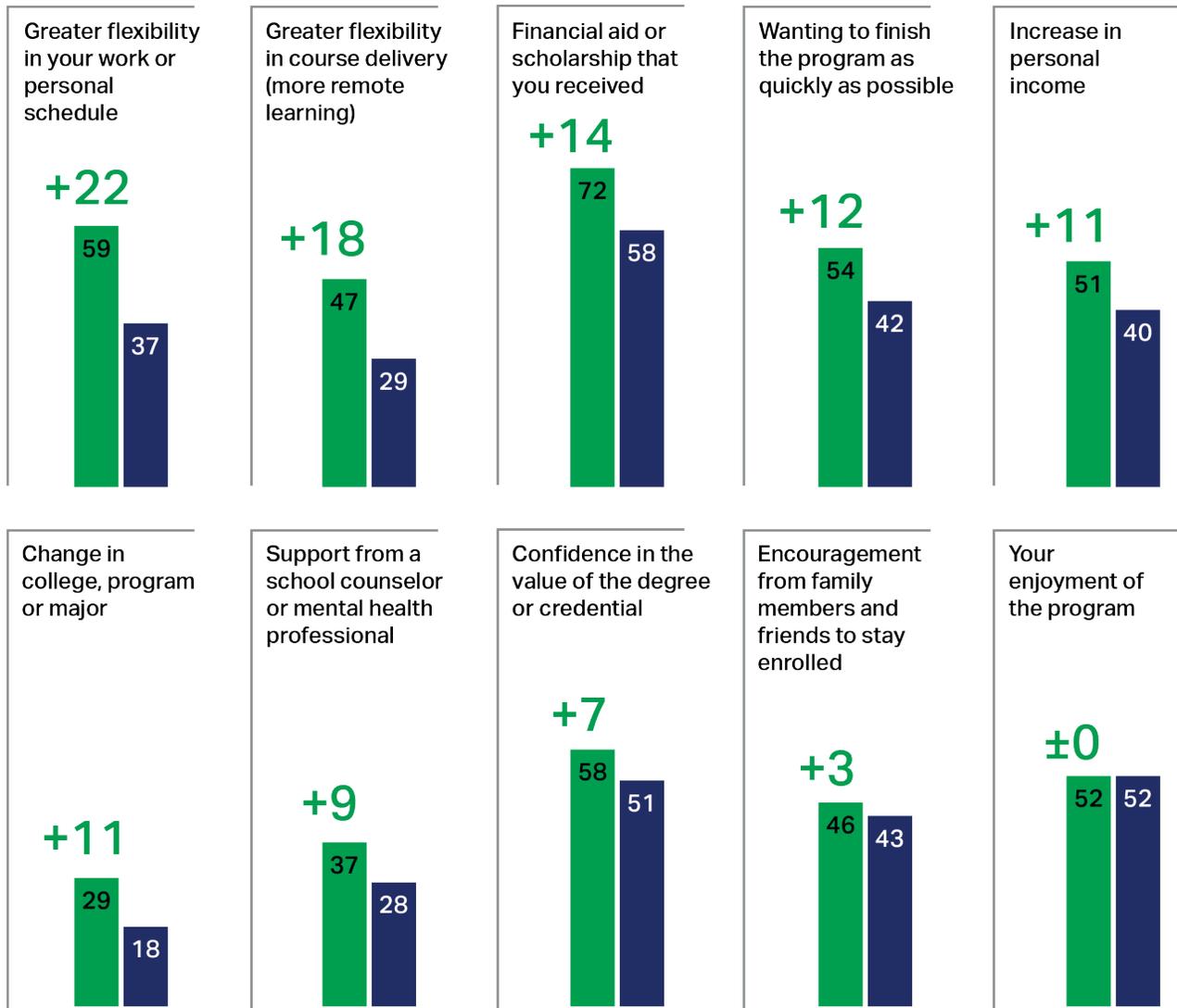
- 32% of associate degree students have caregiver duties, including 36% of Black students and 31% of other students.
- 27% of associate degree students work full time, with this figure nearly identical among Black students (28%) and others (27%).
- Overall, 46% of associate degree students have responsibilities that compete for time with their studies, including 47% of Black students and 46% of others.

FIGURE 5

**How important are each of the following in your being able to remain enrolled in your program?**

% "Very important" among bachelor's students

■ Black students ■ All other students



When asked what they would be looking for in a college or university: "I would like to see remote learning. And, for moms that are busy during the day, night classes."

– Malika R., Black woman, 30-44



# Conclusion

The current findings on Black learners demonstrate the need for data on the experiences of students enrolled in all forms of postsecondary education to identify specific challenges that threaten to derail their progress. Students' experiences with discrimination may in some cases suggest a need for greater regulatory oversight; for example, some advocacy organizations have called for greater accountability measures that prevent for-profit colleges from targeting minority communities with inferior program qualities and predatory lending practices.<sup>7</sup>

Strategies for helping Black bachelor's students stay enrolled while fulfilling other responsibilities, meanwhile, may require institutions to continue developing best practices in integrating in-person and online course options. Clear access to counseling services that help such students manage scheduling and resource challenges, as well as strategies for coping with the stress they may experience balancing multiple priorities, may also be particularly important to helping them remain enrolled.

# Methodology Statement

Results for *Balancing Act: The Tradeoffs and Challenges Facing Black Students in Higher Education*, which are derived from the Lumina Foundation-Gallup State of Higher Education 2022 study, are based on web surveys conducted Oct. 26 to Nov. 17, 2022, with U.S. adults aged 18 to 59 who have a high school degree/diploma or equivalent and have not yet completed an associate or bachelor's degree. Gallup surveyed 12,015 total U.S. adults, including 3,949 who were currently enrolled in an associate or bachelor's degree program, 2,059 who were enrolled in a certificate or certification program, 3,004 who have some college experience but no degree and are not currently enrolled, and 3,003 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, education and region. Demographic weighting targets are based on the most recent American Community Survey figures for the aged 18 to 59 U.S. population.

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7 Sheffey, A. (24, August 2021). For-profit schools target minority communities that typically owe more student debt, report says. Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/for-profit-schools-target-minority-communities-student-borrower-protection-center-2021-8>

## 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. Gallup has served more than 1,000 education organizations with advice and analytics based on over 85 years of research, including nearly half a million interviews with education leaders and their teams about their workplace experiences and the perspectives of more than 6 million students and alumni captured by the Gallup Student Poll and Gallup Alumni Survey. Gallup assists districts, schools, universities and institutions nationwide with research-based strategies to provide a culture shift in education to help students on their path toward great careers and great lives.

## About Lumina Foundation

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis that is 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. Lumina Foundation works with governmental, nonprofit, and private-sector organizations to bring about change. We rely on communications outreach, meetings and events that engage and mobilize people, state and federal policy outreach, investments in proven and promising practices, and targeted efforts to measure and evaluate progress.



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