

Cost and Emotional Stress Continue to Prevent Adults From Completing Degrees

Research from Lumina Foundation and Gallup finds women and people of color are less likely to feel belonging, respect, and support in their programs.

WASHINGTON, D.C. — May 8, 2024 — Gallup and Lumina Foundation released the 2024 [State of Higher Education](#) report today, an annual survey of thousands of U.S. adults without a college degree. The research reveals that six in 10 unenrolled adults say they have recently considered pursuing a credential, but concerns around cost and mental wellness, among other factors, are stopping many from beginning or continuing a degree program.

While college enrollment has declined over the past 10 years, adults' interest in pursuing some form of higher education is at the highest level Lumina and Gallup have recorded. More than half of currently unenrolled adults are likely (26 percent) or very likely (25 percent) to enroll in higher education in the next five years, citing career outcomes as their primary motivator.

Despite this increase in interest, concerns around cost, value of credentials, and other obligations such as work and caretaking weigh heavily on enrollment decisions. The price tag of a degree remains the predominant barrier for unenrolled adults of all ages, genders, races, and ethnicities. This is especially a concern for women: Two-thirds of women say cost is a significant barrier to enrollment, compared with less than half of men. Emotional and mental health concerns are also commonly cited barriers, particularly for younger adults. Fifty-five percent of 18- to 25-year-old unenrolled adults say mental health or emotional stress are very important reasons they are not enrolled, compared with 46 percent of 36- to 59-year-olds.

The research shows that mental health and emotional stress are not only major barriers to enrollment, but they are also commonly cited as the reason to stop out by students who are considering leaving their programs. Across all students, one in five (22 percent) have considered stopping out due to mental health challenges or emotional stress, and female students cite this reason at nearly twice the percentage (28 percent) as their male counterparts (15 percent).

"In today's ever-changing landscape, the 2024 State of Higher Education report underscores Americans' desire to further their education, even with some big hurdles in the way," says Courtney Brown, Lumina's vice president for impact and planning. "It's crystal clear: Colleges, institutions, and policymakers need to step up and tackle issues like costs and mental health head-on to make sure everyone has a fair shot at accessing and succeeding in education beyond high school."

Mental health and emotional stress levels could also play a role in negative enrollment experiences. Women and students of color are less likely than their white and male peers to feel cared for, mentored, and respected at their colleges or universities. Additionally, when asked if they feel like they belong at their institutions, white students are more likely to agree that they do (76 percent) than their Hispanic (71 percent), Black (69 percent), or Asian (62 percent) counterparts, as are male students (77 percent) compared with female students (67 percent).

“With so many colleges and universities facing enrollment challenges, many institutions cannot afford students to stop out due to emotional stress or poor mental health,” said Stephanie Marken, Gallup senior partner and head of education research. “Higher education leaders must prioritize the wellbeing of their students. By providing the right resources that foster inclusion and belonging, and promoting mental health services, they can better support students to finish their programs.”

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 higher learning that is easy to navigate, addresses racial injustice, and meets the nation's talent needs through a broad range of credentials. We are working toward a system that prepares 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.