

A Third of U.S. Adults Who Stopped Out of College Did so Due to Mental Health, Cost Concerns

Lumina Foundation-Gallup study finds nearly seven in 10 stopped-out students have recently considered re-enrolling.

WASHINGTON, D.C. — May 7, 2025 — About a third of students who have stopped out of a degree or certificate program cite emotional stress, mental health or cost as reasons for leaving their program, according to the [Lumina Foundation-Gallup State of Higher Education 2025](#) report, released today. Among currently enrolled students, 32% say they have considered stopping out in the past six months, down from a high of 41% in 2022.

Despite this, interest in higher education remains near historic highs, with more than half (57%) of unenrolled adults having considered pursuing a degree or credential program in the past two years.

Mental Health and Cost Are Key Barriers to Completion

For the first time in the State of Higher Education study, respondents who stopped out were asked why they had done so. About one in three cite cost (32%), emotional stress (31%) or mental health concerns (29%) as their reason for stopping their program.

Mental health (41%) and emotional stress (49%) are also the most-cited reasons currently enrolled students say they have considered stopping out — mentioned nearly twice as often as cost (24%).

“College can open doors — but right now, too many students are walking away before they get the key,” says Courtney Brown, vice president of Impact and Planning at Lumina. “Emotional stress and financial pressure remain the top reasons students stop out, yet most still believe a credential is worth pursuing. That tells us something powerful: The value of education isn’t lost — it’s just out of reach. We need to build systems that meet students where they are and help them stay the course.”

Fewer Current Students Are Considering Stopping Out

The percentage of currently enrolled adults considering withdrawing from their program declined slightly in 2024, falling to 32%. The largest shift was seen among bachelor’s degree students: 25% say they’ve considered stopping out, compared to 32% in 2023. Women also show a decrease, with 32% saying they have considered stopping out — down from 38% last year.

Certain groups remain at higher risk of attrition, including students with caretaking responsibilities, Hispanic adults and those struggling financially.

Interest in Future Enrollment Varies by Enrollment History

Enrollment decisions may be influenced by prior enrollment status. Adults who were previously enrolled are 23 percentage points more likely to say they will enroll in the next five years than those who have never been enrolled (57% vs. 34%). They are also more likely to have recently considered enrolling than those who have never been enrolled (68% vs. 38%).

“It’s encouraging that so many of those who have stopped out are considering returning to higher education,” said Stephanie Marken, senior partner for U.S. research at Gallup. “To turn that interest into completion, institutions must focus on removing barriers and creating pathways that meet students’ real-world needs.”

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, delivers fair results and meets the nation’s talent needs through a broad range of credentials. We work 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.