

**COLLEGE
FUTURES**

GALLUP®

THE 2026 STATE OF CALIFORNIA LEARNERS



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FOREWORD

At College Futures Foundation, we believe listening to learners is fundamental to understanding their experiences, aspirations and expectations of postsecondary education. It is a commitment we approach regularly, rigorously and with a willingness to let what we hear challenge our assumptions about what learners value, what they need and what education must become.

For the past three years, our partnership with Gallup has helped us listen at scale to California learners who are working, raising families and caregiving; learners who have stopped out; and learners who have never enrolled but still see education as part of their future. This year, we went deeper, developing a custom survey to better understand three questions central to the future of postsecondary education: What makes an education worth the investment? How must education be designed to fit into learners' lives? And how is artificial intelligence changing what learners expect from education and work?

What learners told us offers both affirmation and a challenge.

They continue to believe in the promise of postsecondary education and its ability to help them build better lives. But they are asking important questions about whether that promise will be realized: whether the time, money and effort they invest will lead to meaningful economic opportunity; whether education can fit alongside work, family and other responsibilities; and whether it is preparing them for a world of work being reshaped by AI.

When it comes to flexibility, learners are telling us something fundamental. **For many, flexibility is not a preference. It is a prerequisite.** But flexibility is about more than making education fit into learners' lives. It is about designing for dignity and creating an experience that respects the fullness of learners' lives — an experience that gives them greater agency to pursue their goals and makes learning feel less like another demand to manage and more like a source of possibility.

Through [Our Golden Ticket](#), we have been making the case that California has an extraordinary opportunity to build greater economic mobility and prosperity by ensuring more Californians earn postsecondary credentials of value. This report adds an essential perspective to that conversation: Learners are telling us what needs to be true for that opportunity to become real in their lives.

Our responsibility is not simply to hear them. It is to act on what we hear.

That is the work ahead: to reimagine postsecondary education around the people it is meant to serve, creating more ways for Californians to learn throughout their lives, translate that learning into economic opportunity, and build the futures they envision for themselves and their families.

Onward,

Elizabeth González, Ph.D.

Chief Program & Strategy Officer

COLLEGE FUTURES FOUNDATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Postsecondary education has long been shaped and reshaped by evolving technologies, industry needs and shifts in learner populations. In recent years, labor force researchers have projected that the percentage of high-quality jobs requiring some type of postsecondary education will increase.¹ Employers and workers have grappled with AI-related disruptions that have already swept through workplaces and job markets, while simultaneously trying to predict how this technology will impact their roles in the future. At the same time, colleges and universities face their own balancing exercise: determining how the emerging technology should reshape teaching and learning, integrating AI in ways that deepen – rather than circumvent – the learning process and preparing students to succeed in an AI-enabled workforce.

Meanwhile, current and prospective students in California are left to determine whether postsecondary education is worth the often-significant investment of time and resources in this rapidly changing environment – all while figuring out how they can fit a program of study into their existing job and family responsibilities.

Since 2024, College Futures Foundation has partnered with Gallup to understand how Californians who do not hold a college degree are making these calculations, and the barriers they face to pursuing higher education. This includes adults who are currently enrolled in postsecondary education, those who have previously enrolled in a degree or credential program but stopped out before completing it, and those who have never been enrolled in a degree or credential program. In prior years, the State of California Learners study has explored the extent to which Californians value higher education, as well as the unique experiences and barriers that adult learners in the state face.

The 2026 iteration of the study explores several new topics related to higher education in California, including perceptions about return on investment, learners' interest in evolving learning models that better meet their individual needs, and the current and future impact of artificial intelligence on education and the job market. It finds that most adults in California, including those who are not currently enrolled in a postsecondary program, value higher education and believe it is or would be worth the investment. However, most unenrolled adults say they face at least one significant barrier to enrollment – such as the cost, schedule or location of the program – and many students who look for information about the expected return on their investment have difficulty finding it.

While some of these current and prospective students may struggle to overcome these barriers to enrollment and persistence, most are not only open to innovative models of education – they appear to prefer them. California adults without college degrees are more than twice as likely to say they would prefer to enroll in a college that offered online, competency-based education over in-person, semester-based programs.

All of these considerations exist alongside the uncertainty that artificial intelligence is adding to the employment landscape. Most Californians without a degree believe AI will have a notable impact on their future jobs and are just as likely to believe that impact will be negative as to believe it will be positive. In response, more than half of students say they took the impact of AI into account when selecting their program or major.

Amid these factors, about two-thirds of California adults who are not currently enrolled in higher education say they have considered pursuing a degree or credential within the past two years.

Listening to and understanding the challenges that California learners share will allow policymakers and institutions of higher education to respond more effectively to those concerns, and to ensure that as many aspiring students as possible are able to pursue and achieve their higher education goals.

1 Strohl, J., Gulish, A., & Morris, C. (2024). The Future of Good Jobs: Projections Through 2031. Georgetown University, McCourt School of Public Policy, Center on Education and the Workforce. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/goodjobsprojections2031/>

KEY FINDINGS

- 1 Nine in 10 California adults without a college education say at least one type of postsecondary credential is “extremely valuable” or “very valuable,” and nearly two-thirds of unenrolled adults (64%) say they have considered enrolling in a postsecondary program within the past two years.
- 2 More than eight in 10 unenrolled adults believe the investment they could make in postsecondary education would be worth it, but many face barriers to doing so: More than half of unenrolled adults say cost (56%), scheduling (53%) and program location (51%) are “very significant” barriers to enrollment.
- 3 About six in 10 students (62%) say they looked for information about the expected return on investment of their program; however, about one in three students (35%) who searched for this information had difficulty finding it.
- 4 California adults without a college degree express strong interest in evolving learning models: More than eight in 10 of these adults say they would be “very likely” (44%) or “somewhat likely” (42%) to enroll in a college that offered competency-based, online coursework. This is higher than the percentage of these adults who would be very (24%) or somewhat (47%) likely to enroll in an in-person, semester-based program.
- 5 Artificial intelligence is already embedded in California classrooms: Over half of students (54%) say they use AI for their schoolwork on at least a weekly basis, and about the same share of students say this technology had at least some influence on the program or major in which they enrolled.
- 6 One in three California students and unenrolled adults believe artificial intelligence will have “a great impact” on their future jobs. Among those who project AI will have at least a little impact on their jobs, these adults are equally split as to whether they believe that impact will be mostly positive or negative.



DETAILED FINDINGS

Nine in 10 Californians value postsecondary education – particularly for its career benefits.

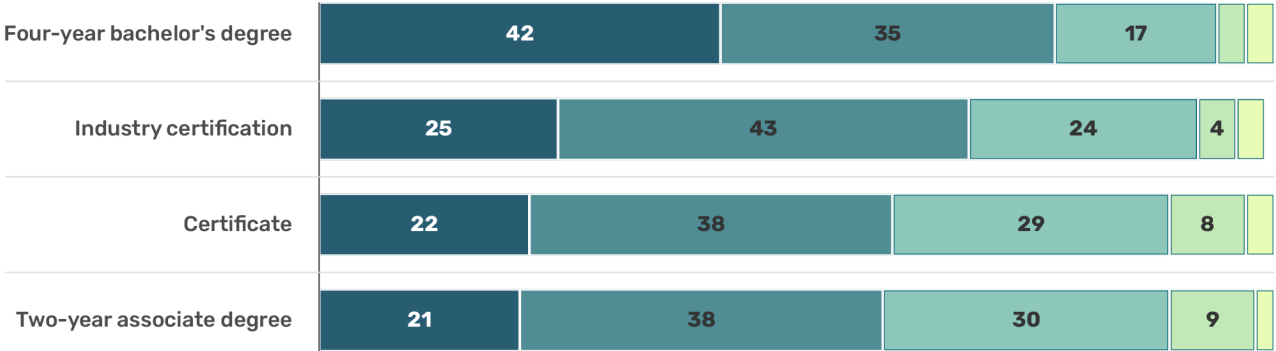
As in prior years, Californians without a two- or four-year college degree continue to value postsecondary education. Nine in 10 adults say at least one type of postsecondary credential – two- and four-year college degrees, certificates and industry certifications – is “extremely valuable” or “very valuable.” While young adults ages 18 to 25 (95%) and 26 to 35 (93%) are more likely to value higher education than their older peers, 86% of 36- to 59-year-olds also value some type of education beyond high school. The extent to which Californians value at least one type of higher education is similar between men and women (90% and 91%, respectively), as well as across Black (91%), Hispanic (90%) and White adults (89%).

77%
OF CALIFORNIANS WITHOUT A DEGREE
believe bachelor’s degrees are “extremely valuable” or “very valuable.”

Across all four credentials, Californians are most likely to value bachelor’s degrees, as 77% of these adults believe four-year degrees are at least very valuable, with 42% saying they are extremely valuable.

CHART 1
In general, how valuable are each of the following?

■ % Extremely valuable ■ % Very valuable ■ % Somewhat valuable ■ % Not too valuable ■ % Not valuable at all



Note: Data labels less than 4% are not displayed. Sums of response categories presented in this report are calculated by addition prior to rounding. They may differ by ±1 percentage point from sums derived by adding rounded numbers. Totals of response percentages within bars may sum to 100% ±1 due to rounding.

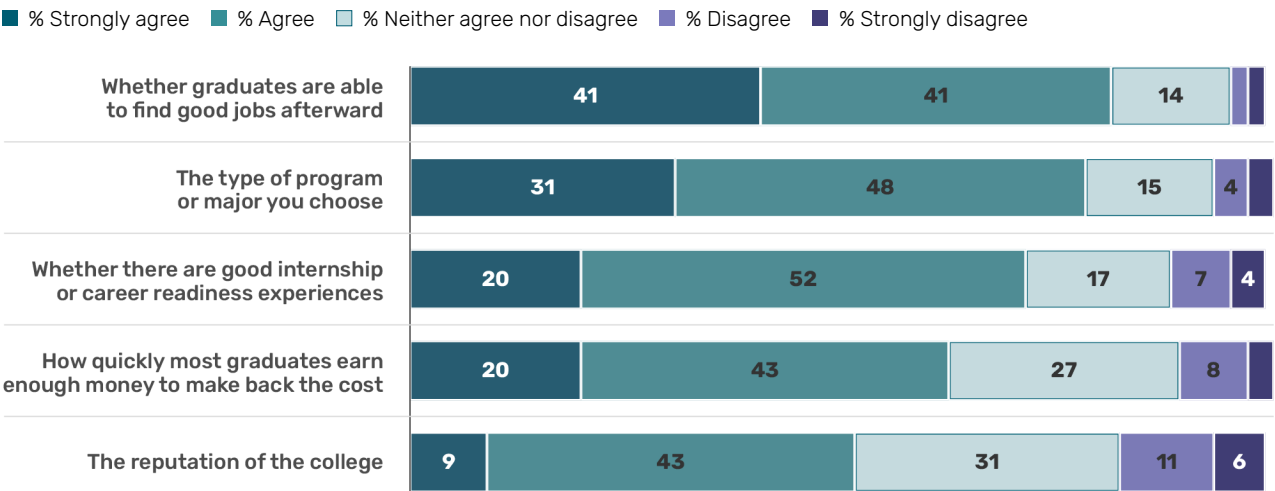
A slightly lower percentage of Californians (69%) feel industry certifications – job- or industry-specific credentials typically designed and awarded by third-party standard-setting organizations, rather than colleges and universities – are extremely or very valuable. Meanwhile, about six in 10 Californians say the same of associate degrees (59%) and certificates (60%).

This sense of value translates into a significant percentage of Californians considering pursuing a postsecondary credential of their own. About two-thirds of adults who are not currently enrolled in postsecondary education (64%) say they have considered doing so within the past two years. This is especially high among stopped-out adults (72%) – those Californians who were previously enrolled in higher education but did not complete their program – who have considered re-enrolling. Men are slightly more likely than women to say they have recently considered pursuing a degree or credential (69% vs. 58%), while young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 (79%) are more likely than their older peers to consider enrolling. Still, well over half of 26- to 35-year-olds (64%) and 36- to 59-year-olds (58%) have also considered pursuing postsecondary education within the past two years.

For adults weighing the decision of whether to enroll in postsecondary education, career outcomes are a critical measure of value. Eighty-two percent of 18- to 59-year-old California adults without a degree agree that the value of a postsecondary credential is based on whether graduates of these programs find good jobs after completing their program. This is notably higher than the percentage of these adults who agree the value of a degree is based on the reputation of the college (52%) or the time it takes for graduates to earn back the money they invested into acquiring their degree or credential (63%).

“Most people want to be trained to do a job. They’re not there for the higher education purpose of it – they’re there to learn how to do a job”
– RUSSELL S., 36, STOPPED-OUT ADULT, 36 YEARS OLD

CHART 2
The value of postsecondary education depends on ...



Note: Data labels less than 4% are not displayed. Totals of response percentages within bars may sum to 100% ±1 due to rounding.

The centrality of career and financial outcomes to the overall value of a degree or credential is further reflected in how adults prioritize the outcomes of postsecondary education. Nearly half of adults (47%) say that the single most valuable aspect of a college education is earning a better salary or achieving financial stability, and an additional 21% say the primary benefit is access to more job options. Both percentages are higher than the share of adults who say the most valuable aspect of a college education is a sense of personal accomplishment (16%), allowing them to get a job that gives back to their community (6%) or expanding their own network (6%).

“The degree definitely matters, at least in where I’m working. ... It definitely makes it a little harder to kind of move up in the career scale if you don’t have the certain degrees for the specific jobs.”

— DAISY A., STOPPED-OUT ADULT,
33 YEARS OLD



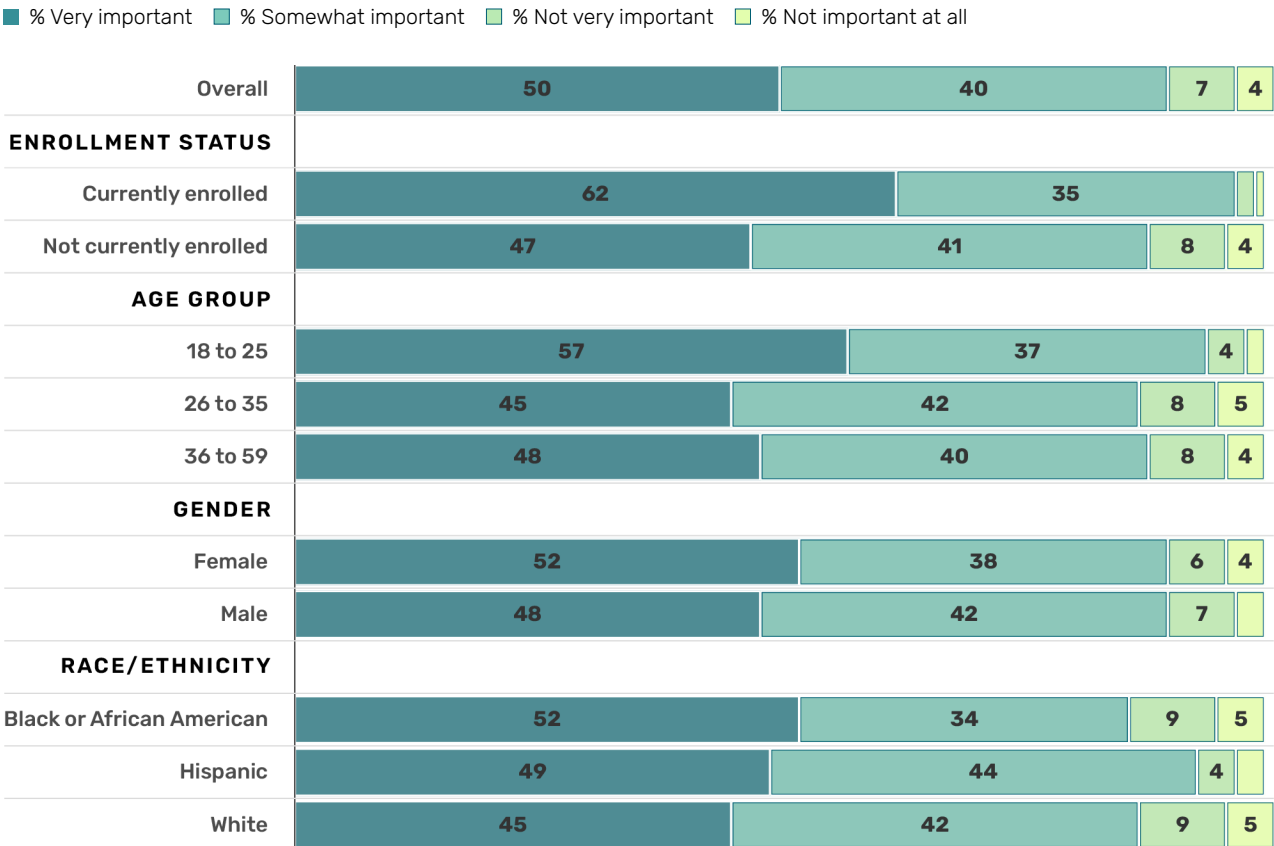
47%
**OF CALIFORNIANS
WITHOUT A DEGREE**

say the single most valuable aspect of a college education is earning a better salary or achieving financial stability.

Significant majorities say postsecondary education is important to their goals and worth the investment.

California residents also view postsecondary education as a critical tool for achieving their personal goals. Nine in 10 adults without a college degree say that some type of postsecondary education is “very” (50%) or “somewhat” (40%) important to their personal long-term goals. While it may be unsurprising that 62% of Californians currently enrolled in higher education view postsecondary education as very important to achieving their goals, 47% of Californians who are not currently pursuing postsecondary education say the same.

CHART 3
How important is a postsecondary education for you to reach your long-term goals?



Note: Data labels less than 4% are not displayed. Totals of response percentages within bars may sum to 100% ±1 due to rounding.

While the youngest adults in California are most likely to say that postsecondary education is very important to their future (57%), nearly half of adults between the ages of 26 and 59 say the same, underscoring the broad importance of degrees and credentials to Californians of all ages.

Despite recent skews in college enrollment toward women, there are no notable differences between men and women regarding the importance of postsecondary education to their long-term goals. This is also generally true across Black, Hispanic and White Californians.

Perhaps most importantly, over eight in 10 adults who are not currently pursuing postsecondary education say that the investment they could make in such a program would be worth the cost of doing so. This is true across age groups, as well as both men and women. Those who struggle to pay their monthly bills are slightly less likely than their more financially secure peers to feel an investment in higher education would be worth it; however, a strong majority of these adults (76%) still agree the investment would be worthwhile.

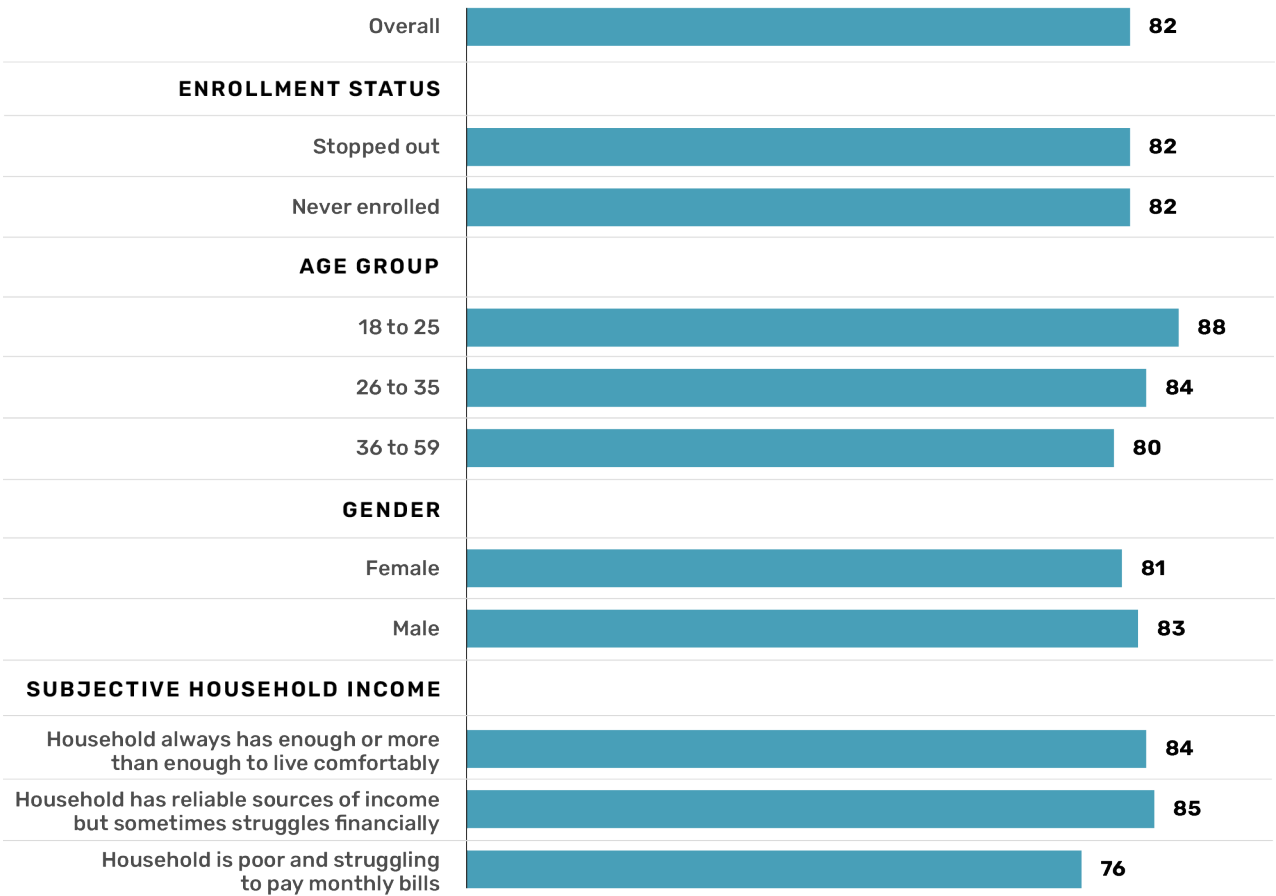
"If you're going to get a degree that you don't know what you're going for, I think it doesn't really make sense. But if you're going for something that's really going to benefit you, I think it does have more rewards."

— DE'JHA E., STOPPED-OUT ADULT, 28 YEARS OLD

CHART 4

Generally speaking, do you think the investment you could make in postsecondary education would be worth it for you?

% Yes, worth it



Among unenrolled adults

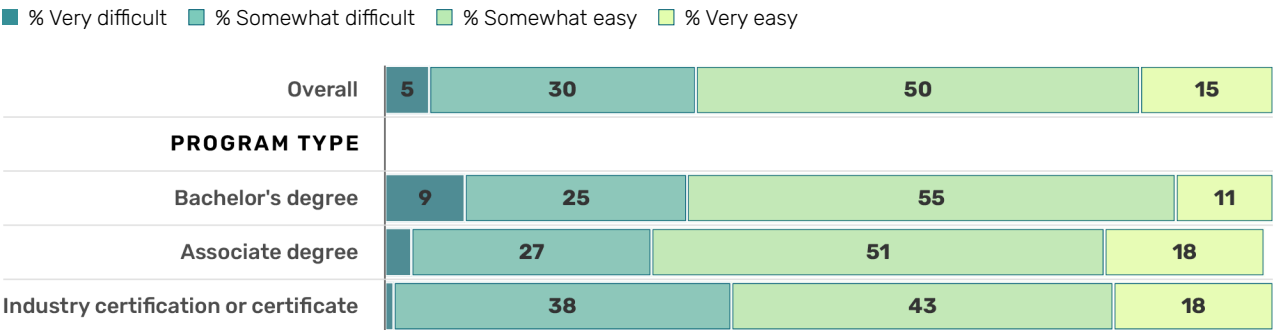
One-third of students who look for information about their program’s ROI struggle to find it.

Unfortunately, while a clear majority of unenrolled Californians *believe* that the cost of postsecondary education would be worthwhile, many who pursue it say it is difficult to find information about the degree’s actual return on investment.

Overall, 62% of California students say they have tried to find information about how quickly graduates from their program earn back the money they paid for their education. Of those students, about one in three say that finding that information was “somewhat difficult” (30%) or “very difficult” (5%). Fifteen percent report it was “very easy.”

CHART 5

Was [information about how quickly graduates of your college typically earn back the money they paid for their education] easy or difficult to find?



Among currently enrolled students who looked for this type of information

Note: Data labels less than 4% are not displayed. Sums of response categories presented in this report are calculated by addition prior to rounding. They may differ by ±1 percentage point from sums derived by adding rounded numbers. Totals of response percentages within bars may sum to 100% ±1 due to rounding.

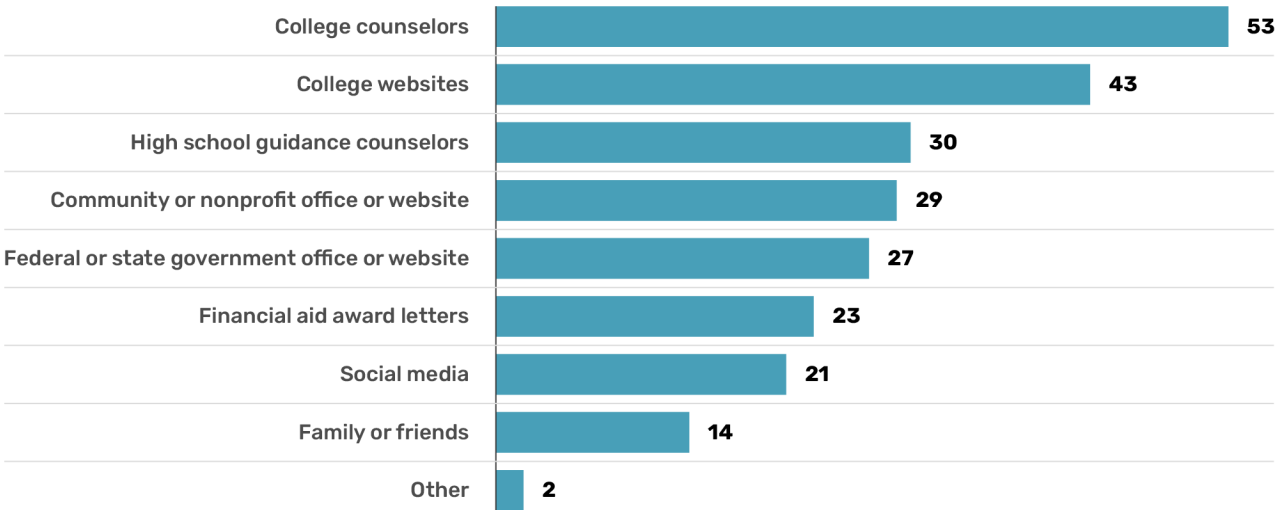
Students in certificate and industry certification programs are most likely to say that this information was difficult to find (39%), though more than three in 10 students in bachelor’s degree (35%) and associate degree (30%) programs also had difficulty finding information about their expected return on investment.

When asked about the most reliable sources of this type of information, most students who sought it out (53%) say college counselors were the best source of guidance. Importantly, this most reliable source is likely only available *after* students have already enrolled in their program. Meanwhile, fewer students say the sources that would likely be available *before* making their enrollment decision — and potentially investing a significant amount of time and money into it — are as helpful as college counselors. Less than half of students listed college websites (43%), high school guidance counselors (30%), nonprofit websites (29%) and government websites (27%) among their most helpful sources of information regarding return on investment.

CHART 6

In your opinion, what are the best places to get information about how quickly graduates of a college earn back the money they paid for their education?

% Selected



Among currently enrolled students who looked for this type of information



Half of unenrolled adults say cost, scheduling and location are significant barriers to enrollment.

Students and prospective students face several barriers that stand in the way of pursuing a degree or credential, even if they deem such a program to be worth the investment. Cost is the most frequently cited, as 53% of California students and unenrolled adults say that it is a “very significant” barrier to enrolling or staying enrolled. However, it is just as important to note that while cost is a critical issue for institutions of higher education to consider, it is far from the only barrier students face. Nearly as many adults say that the logistics of these programs – such as class times (51%) and location (49%) – are significant barriers to enrollment and persistence. These barriers are particularly pervasive for unenrolled adults (53% and 51%, respectively).

“I had a hard time getting a hold of someone to help me ... [figure out] how you pick your classes and all that. By the time I did get in contact with somebody, the class was already done.”

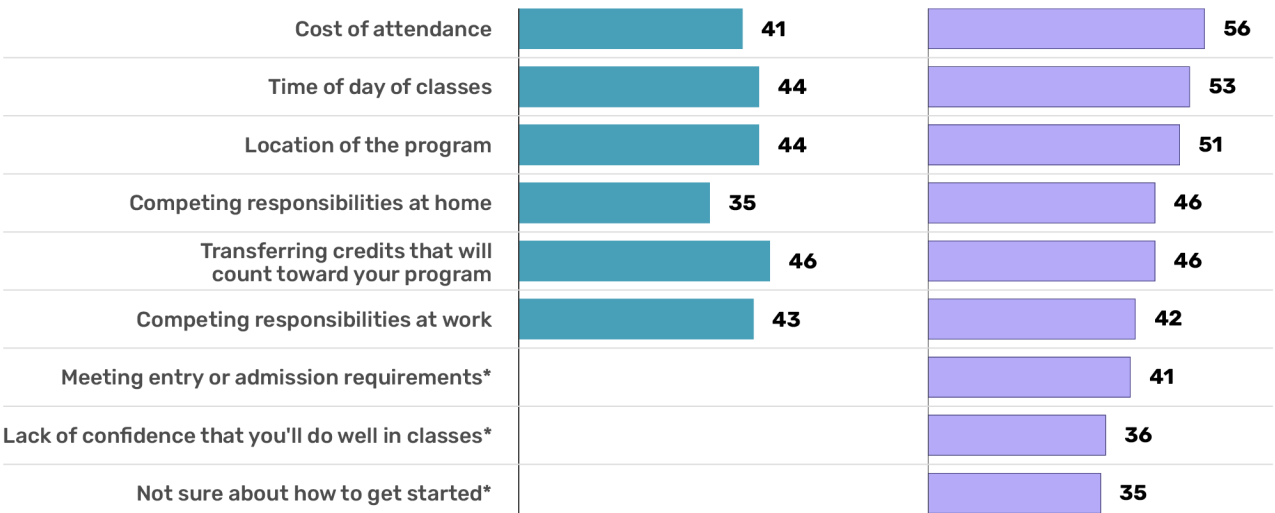
– KATHY G., NEVER-ENROLLED ADULT, 55 YEARS OLD

CHART 7

How significant, if at all, are the following barriers to you [enrolling/staying enrolled] in postsecondary education?

% Very significant

Currently enrolled Not currently enrolled



Respondents who have no interest in enrolling are excluded from these percentages

*Question was asked only of adults who are not currently enrolled.

Moreover, many adults struggle to fit these programs into their existing daily responsibilities. More than four in 10 adults (44%) say that competing responsibilities at home are very significant barriers to their enrollment or program completion; this includes 54% of those who are caregivers for a child or adult family member. Similarly, 43% of adults, including 50% of those who are employed full time, say competing responsibilities at work present a very significant barrier.

“Don’t give up on them. Don’t give up on school ... on these parents. Don’t give up on students who are just trying to make it to class on time. They deserve a chance. Everybody deserves a chance.”

— CHRISTOPHER L., CURRENTLY ENROLLED STUDENT, 35 YEARS OLD

More than eight in 10 Californians are interested in models that offer greater flexibility in when and how they learn.

While most Californians feel the current, conventional models of higher education present barriers to obtaining a degree or credential, they are also broadly interested in evolving learning models. This includes approaches that are more flexible in when and how students learn, recognize existing knowledge and experience, and allow students to progress at a pace that reflects what they know and can do.

To explore these preferences, survey respondents were presented with two hypothetical colleges. The first example (“College A”) reflects features found in evolving learning models, including monthly start dates, online and in-person options, and progression based on demonstrated mastery of the course materials. The second example (“College B”) centers on semester-based scheduling and credit hours.

Imagine you are enrolling in a college for the first time. For the following scenarios we’re going to share two colleges that you could enroll in. Each offers a different method of earning college credits. How likely would you be to enroll in either of these colleges?

College A offers classes with start dates every month rather than each semester. Students earn credit by showing what they know and can do, through lessons, projects or tests. Students must pass each unit before moving on to the next one. This means some students may finish certain classes faster if they already know the material, while others take more time when needed. Classes happen both online and in person. **Earning college credits is based on learning the material rather than spending a set amount of time in class.**

College B offers classes with start dates each semester. Students begin and end each class together, and each class lasts a specific number of weeks and includes assignments, quizzes and exams. Students earn credit by completing the class and earning a final passing grade by the end of the scheduled term. Classes are typically taken on campus, where students have the option to live in campus housing and participate in campus-based activities and student life as part of their college experience. **Earning college credits is based on finishing each course with a passing grade within the set timeframe.**

Following the introduction of these two hypothetical colleges, respondents were first asked to assess their own likelihood of enrolling in each institution. Overall, 72% of California adults without a degree say they would be “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to enroll in College B, which reflects a more traditional campus-based model centered on campus-based instruction, set semester schedules and credits awarded at the end of a defined term. This model is noticeably more appealing to currently enrolled students (87%), who are 19 percentage points more likely to express interest in enrolling in this type of institution than their unenrolled peers (68%).

By comparison, a higher percentage of these Californians (85%) would be very or somewhat likely to enroll in College A, which reflects features of evolving learning models, including online and in-person options, monthly enrollment and progression based on demonstrated mastery.

While it is worth noting that currently enrolled students are about as receptive to this model as the more traditional college (89% vs. 87%), adults who are not currently enrolled in higher education show a much stronger preference for College A (84% vs. 68%). These unenrolled adults are also twice as likely to say they would “very likely” enroll in College A versus College B (44% vs. 22%).

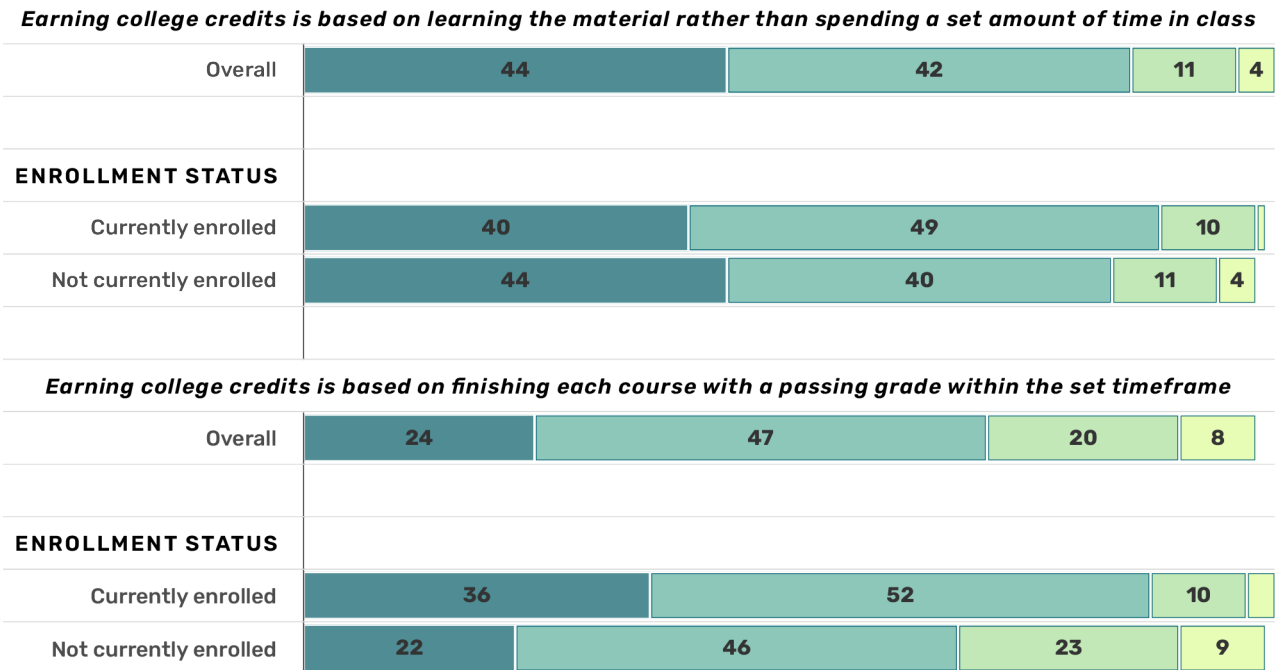
“Adding flexibility is not adding a lack of discipline. When people want to learn, when they want a college degree, they will go get it. People are not lazy the way that it is said. Young people are not lazy the way that it is said. ... I think that they need to focus on flexibility and finances.”

– DEE W., STOPPED-OUT ADULT, 51 YEARS OLD

CHART 8

How likely would you be to enroll in each of these colleges?

■ % Very likely ■ % Somewhat likely ■ % Not very likely ■ % Not at all likely



Note: Data labels less than 4% are not displayed. Sums of response categories presented in this report are calculated by addition prior to rounding. They may differ by ±1 percentage point from sums derived by adding rounded numbers. Totals of response percentages within bars may sum to 100% ±1 due to rounding.



While independent ratings of each model reveal some gaps in Californians' preferences, a direct, exclusive comparison shows an even starker contrast. When asked to select which of the two colleges they would be most likely to enroll in, nearly two-thirds of Californians without a degree (64%) say they would prefer College A, which reflects features of evolving learning models, while just 27% prefer College B, which reflects the traditional campus-based model. The remaining 9% of adults express no preference for one school over the other.

College A is especially appealing to Californians who are not currently enrolled, as this group is 40 percentage points more likely to prefer it over the more traditional alternative (65% vs. 25%). Currently enrolled students also prefer this model over the traditional model by a nearly two-to-one margin (61% vs. 32%).

NEARLY TWO IN THREE CALIFORNIANS WITHOUT A DEGREE

would prefer to enroll in flexible models over traditional campus-based ones.

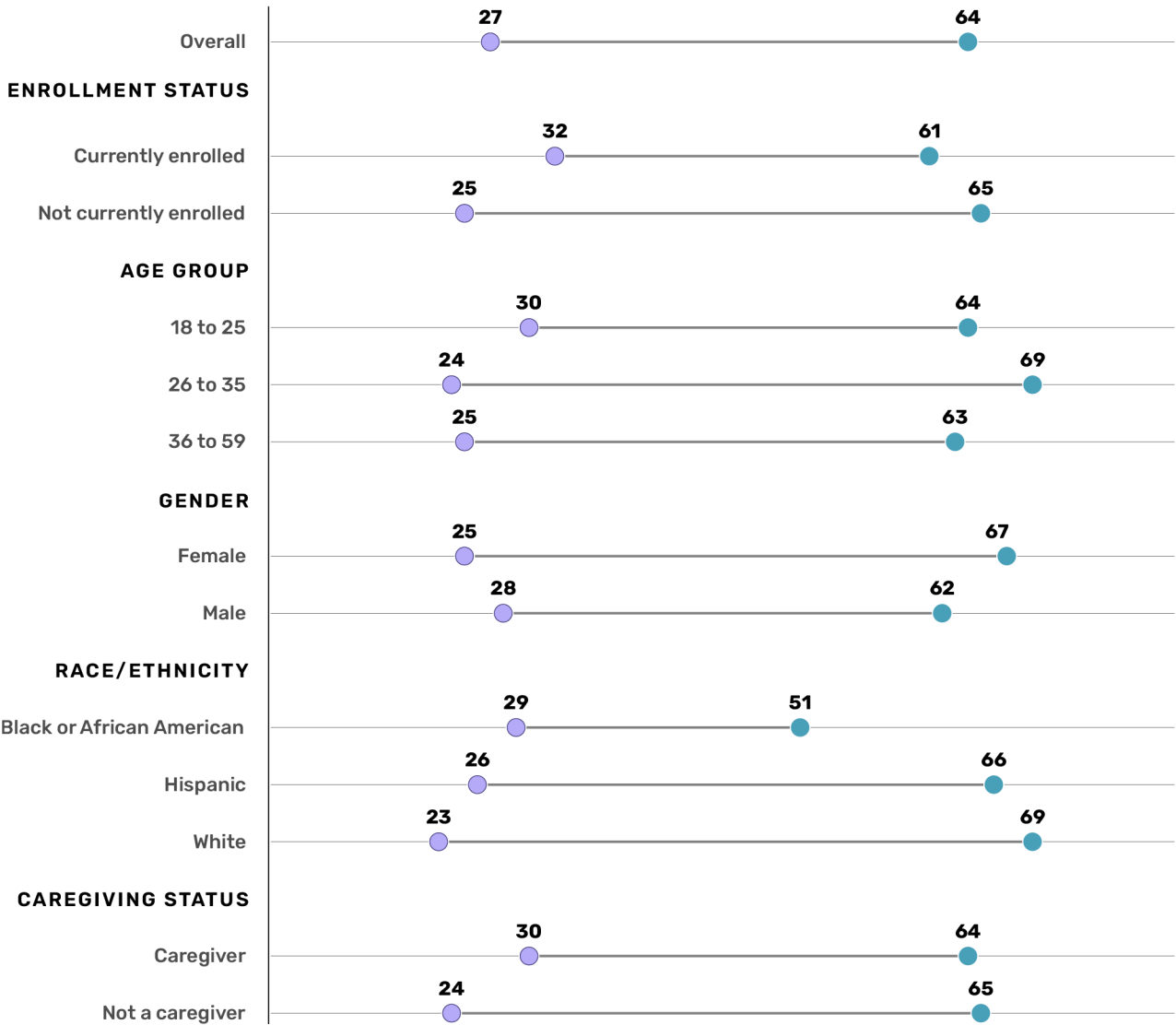
"For where I'm in my life now, [College B] doesn't sound great, because I wouldn't be going on the college campus. ... If I was 18 again, absolutely, I would want that experience. But it doesn't fit in my life now."

— CANDICE B., NEVER-ENROLLED ADULT,
54 YEARS OLD

CHART 9

Which college would you select, if you were to choose only one?

- College A: Earning college credits is based on learning the material rather than spending a set amount of time in class.
- College B: Earning college credits is based on finishing each course with a passing grade within the set timeframe.



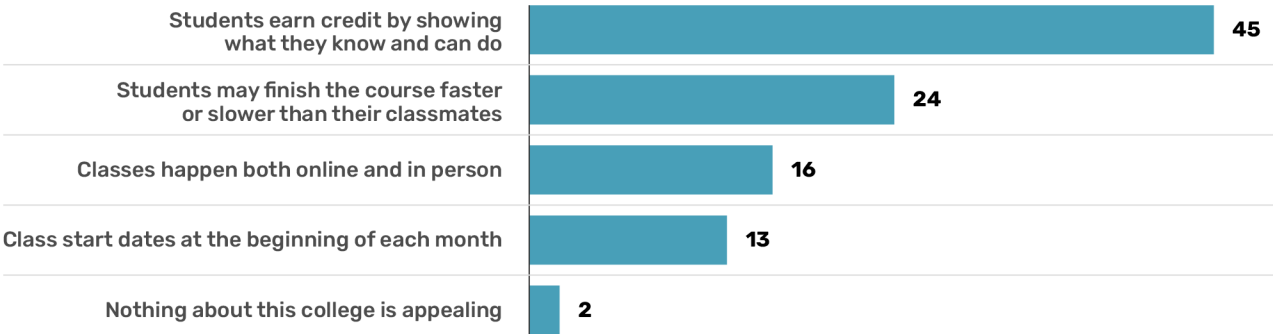
Note: Remaining respondents indicated they did not have a preference between the two colleges.

Among adults who prefer College A, the features they value most are directly tied to how learning and progress are structured. Nearly half (45%) say the college is most appealing to them due to their ability to earn credit for demonstrating knowledge, while an additional 24% say it is because they can demonstrate this competency on their own timeline, regardless of their classmates' pace.

CHART 10

Which part of this college is most appealing to you, if any: *Earning college credits is based on learning the material rather than spending a set amount of time in class*

% Selected

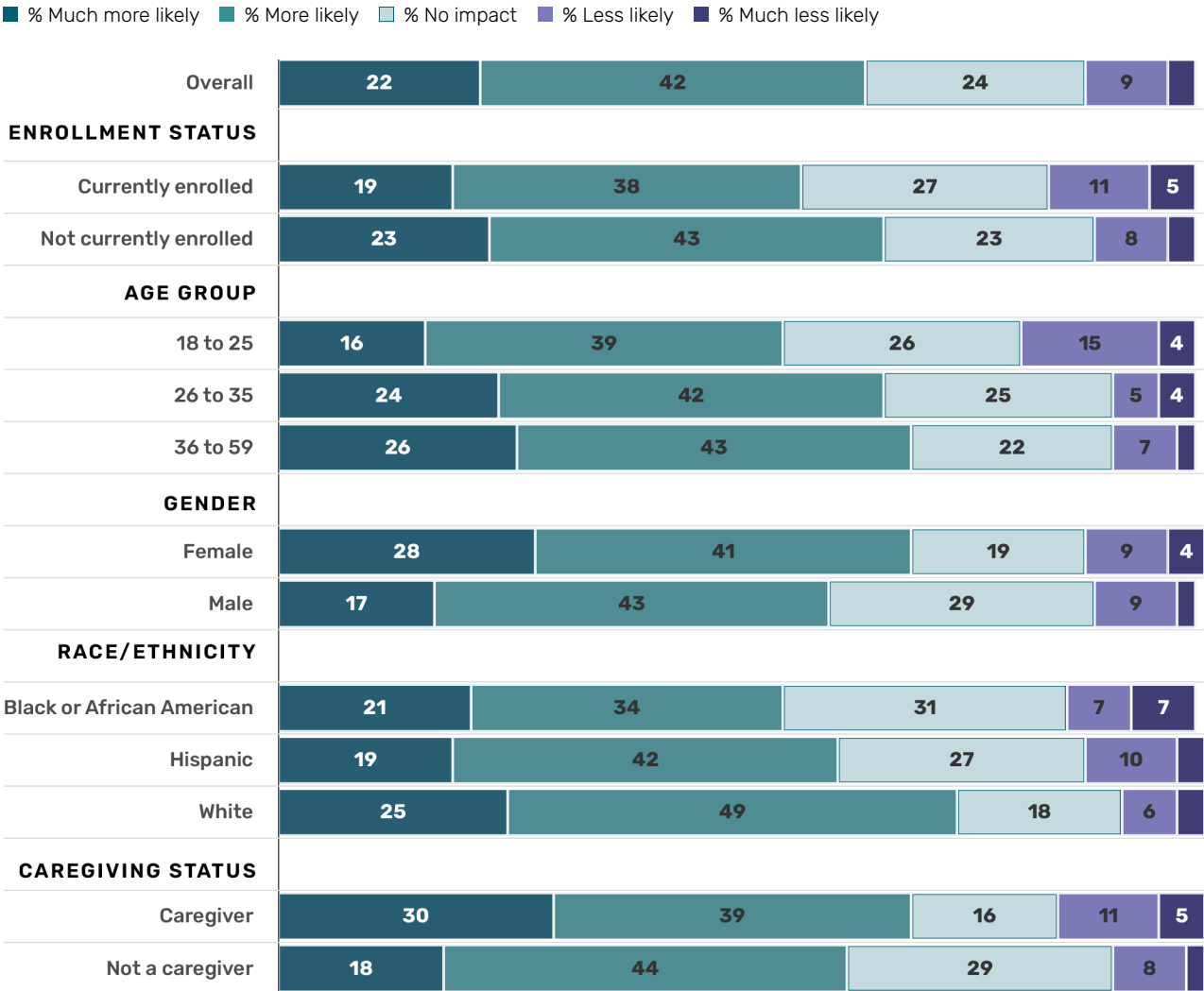


Among respondents who prefer College A



While online modality is not the primary reason that respondents prefer College A, this feature is also broadly appealing in its own right. Nearly two-thirds of California adults say that the option to take coursework online would make them more likely to enroll or remain in their program. Older adults and caregivers are especially likely to say that online coursework would have a significant impact on their likelihood to enroll or persist.

CHART 11
If you had the opportunity to take online courses for all or part of a postsecondary education program, would the online format make you more or less likely to [enroll/stay enrolled]?



Note: Data labels less than 4% are not displayed. Totals of response percentages within bars may sum to 100% ±1 due to rounding.

These findings reinforce the promise of competency-based education as a tool for designing higher education around the realities of adult learners. For adults who are not currently enrolled and who favor College A by a wide margin, the preference may indicate that the design features from College A are not simply appealing but meaningful prerequisites for enrollment.

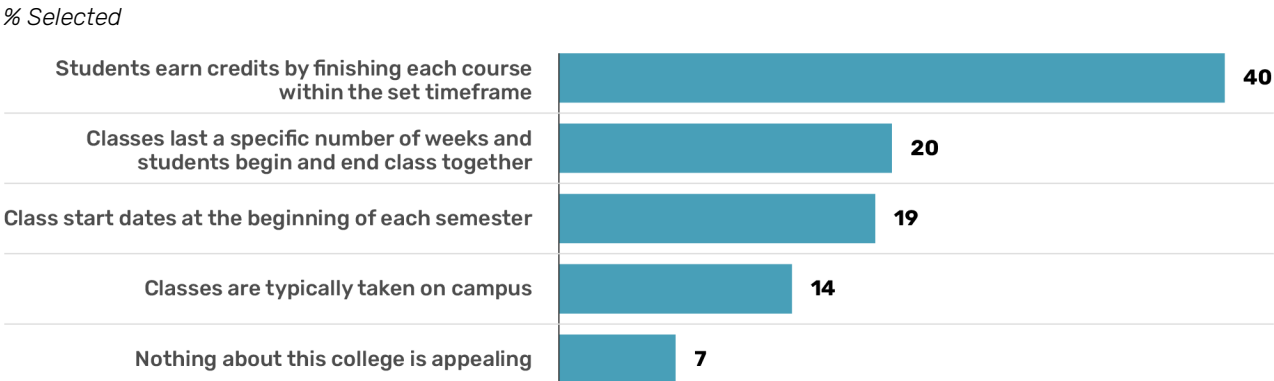
Among adults who prefer a traditional semester-based model, 40% say the most appealing aspect is having a set timeframe to earn their credits, and an additional 20% appreciate having a course that is synchronized across their classmates.

"I do really like College B. But in my life right now ... [College] A seems a little more fit for my life — a little more flexible — because of, like, my work schedule and then my kids. I want to prioritize school, but I also want to prioritize them. So I feel like College A would maybe be an okay fit for me right now."

— NICOLE C., STOPPED-OUT ADULT, 28 YEARS OLD

CHART 12

Which part of this college is most appealing to you, if any: *Earning college credits is based on finishing each course with a passing grade within the set timeframe*



Among respondents who prefer College B

Taken together, these findings suggest that adult learners do not have a single set of needs or preferences. While Californians without a degree are most likely to value the flexibility and self-pacing reflected in College A, others are drawn to the structure and familiarity of College B. Ensuring as many Californians have access to the education they aspire to likely requires a broader range of options that reflect the diverse circumstances and needs of these adults.

"It's not just school. It's not just courses that you're learning about — you're learning about who you are as a person, and interacting with people. College A, you don't really have to interact with anybody if you don't feel like it."

— LARA S., STOPPED-OUT ADULT, 57 YEARS OLD

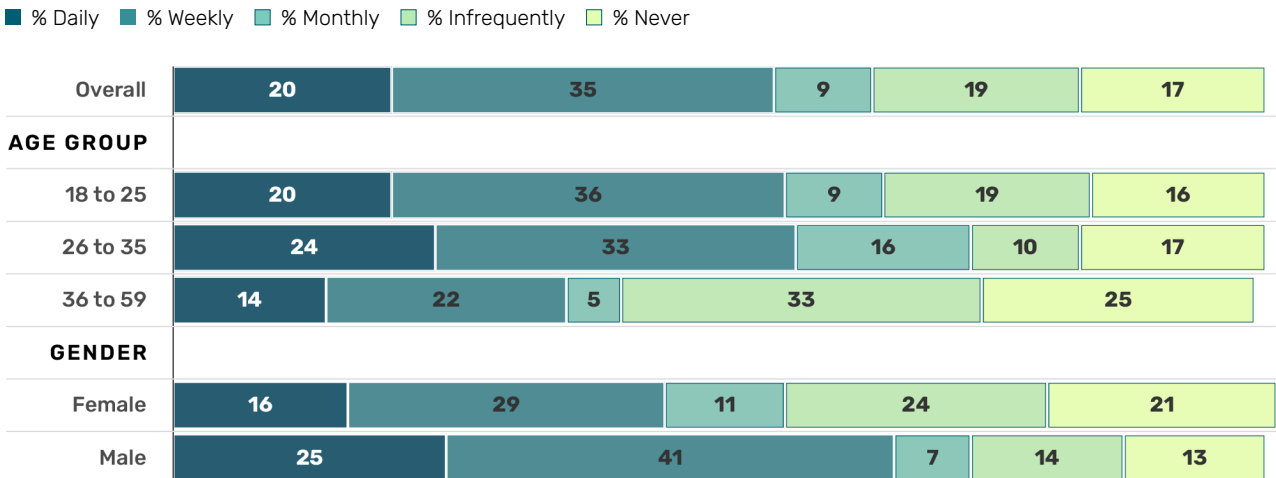
Three-quarters of Californians project job disruption due to AI and are evenly split on the nature of its impact.

On top of these longstanding features of and barriers to higher education, the past several years have witnessed artificial intelligence rapidly integrating itself into classrooms and conversations about the value of a degree or credential.

Most California students are regularly using artificial intelligence for their schoolwork. Twenty percent of students report using it on a daily basis, and an additional 35% do so weekly; just 17% of students say they never use AI for their coursework. Usage varies notably by age, with about 56% of 18- to 35-year-old students using AI on at least a weekly basis, compared with about one in three 36- to 59-year-olds (36%). Additionally, men are significantly more likely than women to use AI at school at least weekly (65% vs. 44%).

“AI is definitely helpful in certain situations ... but I think related to school, it wouldn’t be helpful and beneficial, because it really has to be oneself to try to study and gain [information]. ... I definitely try to stay the more traditional route. ... I feel like I retain more information just the old-school way.”
– DAISY A., STOPPED-OUT, 33 YEARS OLD

CHART 13
How often do you use artificial intelligence in your coursework?



Among currently enrolled students

Note: Sums of response categories presented in this report are calculated by addition prior to rounding. They may differ by ±1 percentage point from sums derived by adding rounded numbers. Totals of response percentages within bars may sum to 100% ±1 due to rounding.

One might speculate that these usage patterns may be due, at least in part, to students’ belief that they must develop these skills during their programs so that they are ready to apply them in their postgraduation careers. But while it is true that students are certainly aware of the potential impact of AI on their careers – about two-thirds of students say they believe that AI will have “a great impact” (32%) or “some impact” (36%) on their future jobs – this does not appear to influence their adoption of AI.

“You know, AI is taking over, and AI doesn’t have a college degree. ... Will your degree still be as good in three years as it is now? ... You’re going to have to keep going and stay updated.”
– MELISSA P., NEVER-ENROLLED ADULT, 56 YEARS OLD

Students who use AI for their schoolwork less frequently, such as women and 36- to 59-year-old students, are still about as likely as their peers to say AI will impact their future work. Moreover, students who believe AI will have “a great impact” on their future jobs are about as likely to say that they incorporate AI into their schoolwork on at least a weekly basis (54%) as those who believe AI will only have “some impact” or “very little impact” on their future jobs (61% and 56%, respectively).

“I think we need to retool the college experience around AI. ... Professors are spending more time making sure people aren’t turning in AI slop for their papers than they are teaching. I think we need to devise an entire curriculum around AI, as opposed to fighting it, because it’s not going anywhere.”

— DAVID J., CURRENTLY ENROLLED STUDENT, 57 YEARS OLD

CHART 14

How much do you think artificial intelligence will have an impact on your future jobs?

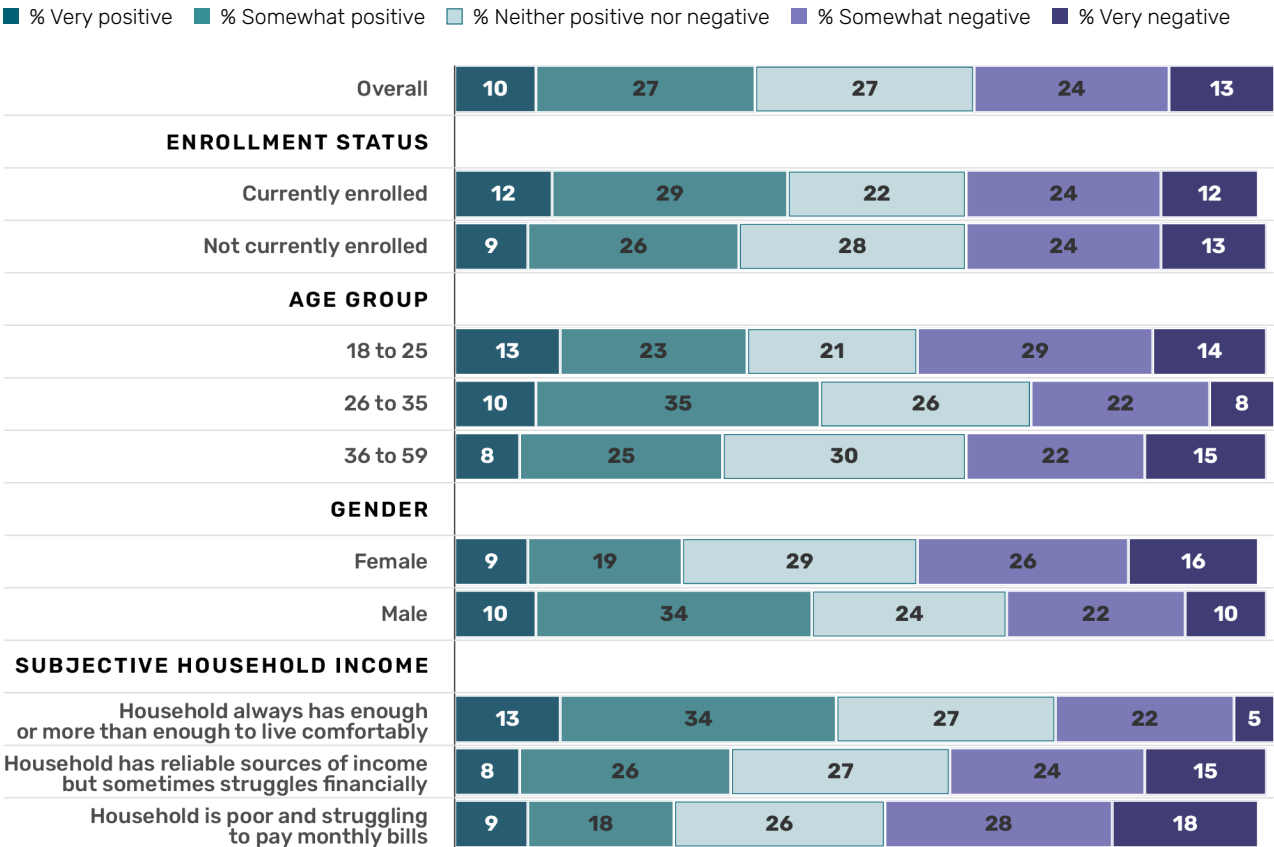
■ % A great impact ■ % Some impact ■ % Very little impact ■ % No impact

Overall	33	41	18	8
ENROLLMENT STATUS				
Currently enrolled	32	36	20	11
Not currently enrolled	33	42	17	7
AGE GROUP				
18 to 25	35	41	15	9
26 to 35	30	42	22	6
36 to 59	33	41	18	9
GENDER				
Female	35	40	15	10
Male	31	42	21	6
SUBJECTIVE HOUSEHOLD INCOME				
Household always has enough or more than enough to live comfortably	29	46	16	9
Household has reliable sources of income but sometimes struggles financially	31	42	20	8
Household is poor and struggling to pay monthly bills	42	34	15	9

Note: Totals of response percentages within bars may sum to 100% ±1 due to rounding.

Students and unenrolled adults are evenly divided on the nature of the impact artificial intelligence will have on their jobs: 36% of adults believe the impact of AI will be positive, and 37% believe it will be negative. The remaining 27% believe the impact will be neither positive nor negative.

CHART 15
Do you think the impact of artificial intelligence on your jobs will be negative, positive or neither?



Among those who say artificial intelligence will have “a great deal,” “some” or “very little” impact on their future jobs

Note: Sums of response categories presented in this report are calculated by addition prior to rounding. They may differ by ±1 percentage point from sums derived by adding rounded numbers. Totals of response percentages within bars may sum to 100% ±1 due to rounding.

The youngest Californians — those between the ages of 18 and 25 — are most likely to believe the impact of AI will be negative (43%). This may be related to the unique impact that AI is projected to have on entry-level jobs, the types of roles likely to be disproportionately filled by the youngest cohort of workers. Meanwhile, the next-youngest age group of 26- to 35-year-olds have the most optimistic outlook on AI, as nearly half of this group (44%) believes AI will have a net positive impact, compared with 29% who believe its overall impact will be negative.

Men are significantly more likely than women to believe that the overall impact of AI will be positive (44% vs. 28%), while Californians from more financially secure households are more likely than their less financially secure peers to have an optimistic outlook on the impact of AI on their jobs.

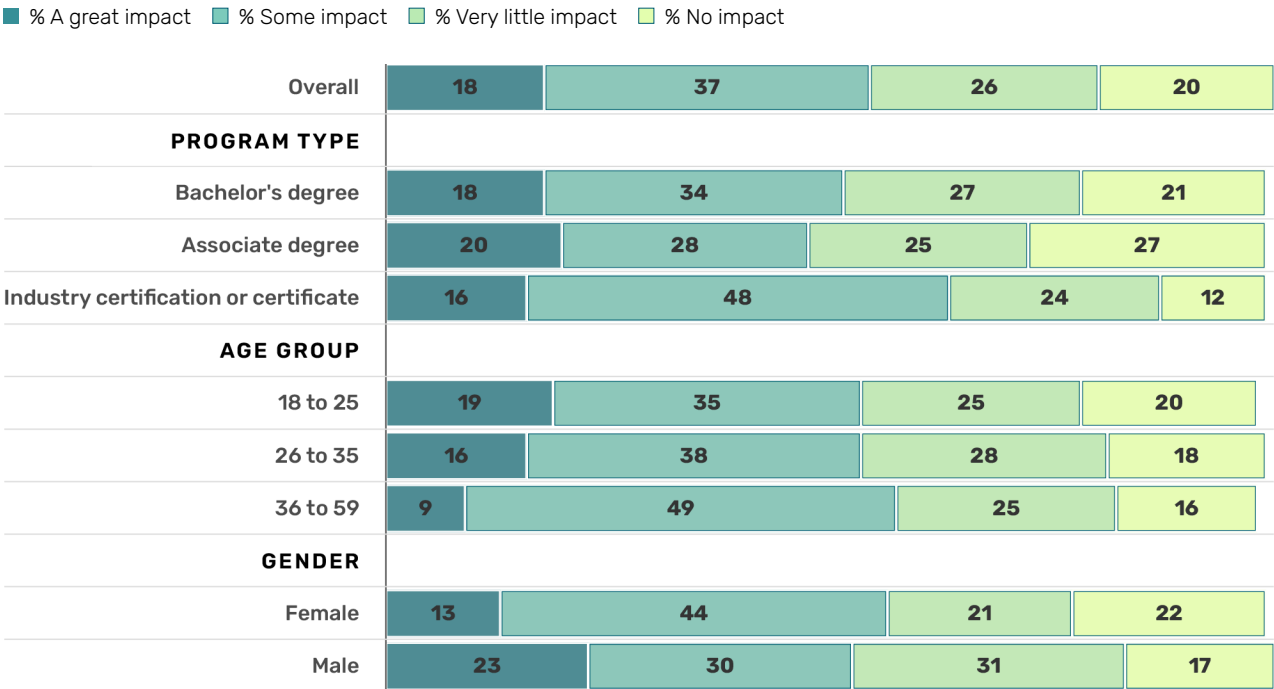
This perceived impact — whether positive or negative — is already affecting students’ postsecondary education decisions. More than half of students in California say the rise of artificial intelligence had “a great impact” (18%) or “some impact” (37%) on the program of study they selected. This is especially true of those enrolled in industry certification or certificate programs (63%).

“With the AI and everything, I just don’t really ... I don’t want to waste time going to school for something that’s not going to bear any fruit.”

– SHAWN H., STOPPED-OUT ADULT, 45 YEARS OLD

55%
OF CALIFORNIA STUDENTS
say the rise of artificial intelligence had at least “some impact” on the program of study they selected.

CHART 16
To what extent did artificial intelligence have an impact on which program of study you chose?



Among currently enrolled students

Note: Sums of response categories presented in this report are calculated by addition prior to rounding. They may differ by ±1 percentage point from sums derived by adding rounded numbers. Totals of response percentages within bars may sum to 100% ±1 due to rounding.

IMPLICATIONS

Overall, Californians without a college education see value in degrees and credentials. This is especially true of four-year college degrees, and for good reason: Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics suggests that the median full-time worker with a bachelor's degree earns about 66% more than workers with only a high school diploma. An associate degree earns workers a more modest 18% premium over their high school graduate peers.²

But while the data are clear on average, one-third of students looking for information on the return on investment of graduates from their college report having a difficult time finding reliable information to validate the value of *their* degree or credential. Ensuring students have clear, easy access to information that confirms their degree will most likely pay off — or, in the exceptional cases where it does not, allowing them to make that decision in an informed manner — will be critical to persuading more students to make the significant investments of time, money and opportunity cost required to realize those future benefits.

Still, while financial considerations like cost and return on investment should be a critical area of focus for institutions of higher education, they cannot be the sole emphasis. Even if schools could instantaneously remedy this barrier for the more than half of Californians that worry about it, most prospective students would still face at least one additional hurdle to enrolling in or completing a postsecondary program. Adults are about as likely to say that the logistics of these programs — such as class times and location — are significant barriers to enrollment and persistence as they are to say the cost of the program. Nearly as many adults say that competing responsibilities at home and in the workplace get in the way of education, barriers that are especially pervasive for caregivers and employed adults.

To that end, current and prospective students do not only express interest in programs designed to offer greater flexibility in when and how they learn — they prefer them. Nearly two-thirds of California students and unenrolled adults say they would be more likely to enroll in a program that is competency-based, offers rolling admissions and has flexible online coursework over a traditional, campus-based program. Increased knowledge of and access to these non-traditional models of education may increase enrollment in postsecondary education by providing additional options for those who do not fit the more traditional models.

Finally, artificial intelligence is here to stay. AI use in classrooms is already widespread, with most students having integrated it into their coursework on a daily or weekly basis, and even more being wary of the impact it may have on their future jobs. Institutions of higher education must not only consider how AI can strengthen teaching and deepen learning, but also ensure students are being prepared to graduate into a job market that increasingly expects its employees to have the skills necessary for an AI-integrated workforce.

2 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2025, May). Data on Display: Education Pays, 2024. Career Outlook. <https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2025/data-on-display/education-pays.htm>

METHODOLOGY

The results of this study are based on web surveys from Feb. 18–March 13, 2026. Respondents were interviewed via Dynata’s non-probability web-based panel. All respondents were between the ages of 18 and 59, living in California, and had a high school diploma or equivalent but not an associate or bachelor’s degree.

The final sample includes 1,250 adults living in California. The sample includes 536 adults who were currently enrolled in a postsecondary education program (certificate, associate or bachelor’s degree), 446 adults who were previously enrolled in a postsecondary education program but had not completed an associate or bachelor’s degree, and 268 adults who had never enrolled in a postsecondary education program.

The data are weighted to match state demographics of gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education and region for the population of California adults aged 18 to 59 with a high school diploma but without a college degree. Demographic weighting targets are based on the most recent American Community Survey figures.

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