

California's Learners Weigh Benefits of Degrees Against Resource Constraints, Evolving Technology

College Futures Foundation-Gallup study explores the value of postsecondary education, enrollment barriers and AI's impact on learners.

WASHINGTON, D.C. — October 5, 2026 — 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, according to a [new study released today](#) from College Futures Foundation and Gallup. At the same time, most unenrolled adults report facing at least one significant barrier to enrollment, and many express a preference for education models that offer greater flexibility in when and how they learn.

Most Say a Degree Is Worth the Investment, but Information Can Be Hard to Find

Among unenrolled Californians, 82% say the investment they could make in postsecondary education would be worth it. An even higher rate (88%) report that some type of postsecondary education is “very” (47%) or “somewhat” (41%) important to their personal long-term goals.

When considering value, career outcomes are essential. Eighty-two percent of Californians without degrees say the value of a postsecondary credential depends on whether graduates find good jobs. 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.

“Californians still believe deeply in the power of education to change their lives, but we sure don't make it easy for them,” said Eloy Ortiz Oakley, President and CEO of College Futures Foundation. “What working learners are asking for is education that fits the realities of their lives, leads to a good job and provides a real return on the time, money and effort they invest. They have told us what they need, and now it is up to California to act on what we have heard.”

For many students, information about the return on investment of a degree can be difficult to obtain. Among current students, 62% have looked for information about how quickly graduates of their program earn back the money they paid for their education. Of those students, 35% say that information was difficult to find.

Cost and Logistics Remain Significant Obstacles

Among unenrolled adults interested in pursuing postsecondary education, 56% describe cost as a very significant barrier, while 53% say the same about class times and 51% about program location.

Work and family responsibilities also present challenges. Overall, 44% of students and prospective students say responsibilities at home are a very significant barrier, rising to 54% among caregivers. Forty-three percent cite work responsibilities, including half of adults employed full time.

At the same time, Californians without degrees express greater interest in models that offer more flexibility in when and how they learn. When respondents compared two hypothetical colleges, 64% preferred a college with features of evolving learning models, including monthly start dates, online and in-person options, and progression based on demonstrated mastery. Just 27% preferred the traditional campus-based model.

AI is Shaping Education and Expectations About Work

Artificial intelligence is already part of many students' educational experiences. Twenty percent of students report using it on a daily basis, and an additional 35% do so weekly. Men are more likely than women to report weekly or daily use, 65% compared with 44%.

Nearly three-quarters (74%) of California students and unenrolled adults expect AI to have at least some impact on their future jobs. Among those anticipating an impact, 36% expect it to be positive and 37% negative. More than half of current students (55%) say AI had at least some impact on their choice of program of study.

Methodology

The results of this study are based on web surveys of 1,250 adults living in California 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 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

About College Futures Foundation

At College Futures Foundation, we believe in the power of postsecondary opportunity. We believe that securing the postsecondary success of learners facing the most formidable barriers will ensure that all of us can thrive — our communities, our economy and our state. We believe that the equitable education system of the future, one that enables every learner to achieve their dreams and participate in an inclusive and robust economy, will be realized if we are focused, determined and active in our leadership and partnership.

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.