

The State of Higher Education 2025

Demand for Higher Education
Remains Strong Despite Barriers



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Introduction

Since 2020, Lumina Foundation and Gallup have partnered to produce the State of Higher Education study, an annual survey of thousands of U.S. adults without a college degree. Each year, Lumina and Gallup measure their attitudes toward education beyond high school, interest in pursuing a degree or credential, the barriers they face to enrolling or completion, and the experiences of currently enrolled students.

The 2025 State of Higher Education study includes responses from nearly 14,000 U.S. adults aged 18 to 59 who do not have a college degree and fall into one of the following groups:

Currently enrolled students: 6,000 adults currently enrolled in a certificate, industry certification, associate degree or bachelor's degree program, with 2,327 pursuing a bachelor's degree, 1,473 pursuing an associate degree, 1,355 pursuing a certificate and 845 pursuing a certification

Stopped-out adults: 4,931 adults previously enrolled in a certificate, certification, associate degree or bachelor's degree program who did not complete it

Never-enrolled adults: 3,002 adults who never enrolled in a degree or certificate program after high school

As colleges and universities are reporting that undergraduate enrollment in the U.S. had rebounded to near pre-pandemic levels last fall, the 2025 State of Higher Education study confirms that U.S. adults without degrees or credentials still overwhelmingly believe that education beyond high school is valuable and essential for career success.

Interest in higher education remains near record highs, with 57% of adults not enrolled in a degree or credential program reporting that they have considered enrolling in the past two years; more than eight in 10 among this group say they are likely to enroll within the next five years.

However, most U.S. adults without degrees or other credentials still believe that access to quality, affordable education remains limited, and major barriers to enrollment and completion endure. Financial concerns and program flexibility are the most influential factors in enrollment decisions, while emotional stress and mental health issues continue to hinder completion.

Currently enrolled students also face significant challenges within their programs. Although fewer enrolled adults today are considering stopping their coursework than in recent years, nearly a third have considered stopping out. Mental health struggles and cost issues continue to be the main reasons they are considering leaving their program; these same factors are also why those who stopped out left their programs.



Key Findings

- 1 U.S. adults without a degree or credential continue to see value in higher education, and demand remains strong.** Non-degree or credential-holding adults highly regard all pathways to higher education, with majorities saying industry certifications, associate or bachelor's degrees, or certificates are "extremely" or "very valuable." Nearly nine in 10 adults without a degree or credential believe at least one type of academic credential is valuable.
- 2 Finances and flexibility influence enrollment choices, but priorities vary between unenrolled and enrolled adults.** Unenrolled adults who are considering a degree but are unlikely to enroll often cite higher personal income or financial aid as key motivators for enrollment. For current students and those who have stopped out, the promise of future job opportunities is the most important factor attracting them to higher education.
- 3 Fewer enrolled adults are considering stopping out, but nearly a third have thought about it, largely due to mental health and cost concerns.** The percentage of enrolled adults who have considered stopping out or withdrawing from their program continued to trend downward in 2024, dropping three points from 35% in 2023 to 32%. Students who considered stopping out are about twice as likely to cite mental health or emotional stress as the reason as to cite cost.
- 4 Emotional stress, personal mental health issues and cost are also among the top reasons for stopping out.** Roughly one in three who stopped out mention emotional stress, mental health or cost as reasons they stopped out. The major sources of emotional stress were anxiety/depression or mental health conditions (74%), loneliness/isolation (60%), financial matters related to school (59%), amount of coursework (56%) and job stresses (50%).
- 5 Currently enrolled students believe their institutions will deliver the future job opportunities they hoped for when they first enrolled.** Between 85% and 92% of students are at least somewhat confident that their degree or credential will teach them job-related skills, get them a job they love doing or help them earn enough money to live comfortably.

Building off the key findings from prior administrations of the State of Higher Education study, Lumina and Gallup also dedicated two separate reports to the following topics:

- **Bridging the Gap: Insights on Cost and Value of a College Degree.** The public agrees there is room for improvement in the cost of a degree, but it has not wavered in the belief that a college education is valuable.
- **Beyond the Headlines: The Reality of Free Speech on Campus.** Most currently enrolled bachelor's degree students say their campus does a good job of promoting free speech. They also feel free to express their opinions on campus, including views related to race, religion and politics.

Detailed Findings

Interest and Intent to Enroll

U.S. adults without a degree or credential continue to see value in higher education, and demand remains strong.

Amid growing public skepticism toward higher education, slightly fewer adults without college degrees or credentials in 2024 than in 2023 believe various degrees and credentials are valuable. Nonetheless, most continue to believe in the value of all credentials asked about, with the majority rating each as “extremely” or “very valuable.”

Non-degree or credential-holding adults place the highest value on graduate degrees, bachelor’s degrees and industry certifications, with at least seven in 10 saying they are extremely or very valuable. While still esteemed, fewer than six in 10 view certificate programs (58%) and associate degrees (55%) as equally valuable.

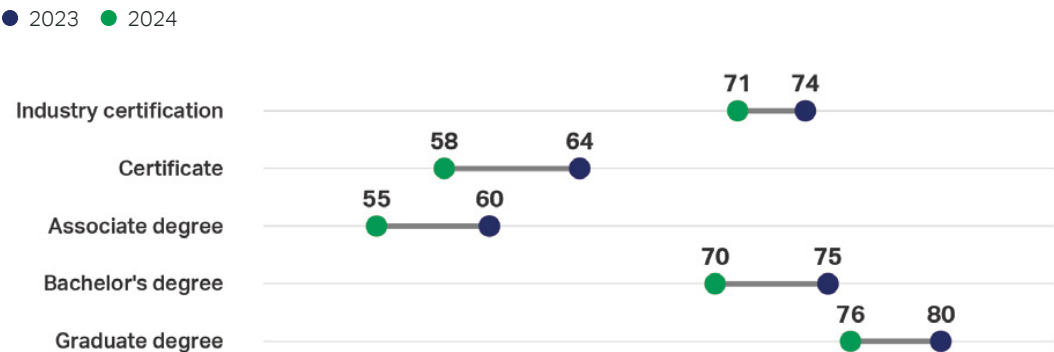
“

When you get a college degree, it makes you value yourself. It makes you feel like you’re achieving in life. It makes you feel like ‘I’m on top now. I got this. There’s no more looking back ... I can find a career in everything that I’ve always wanted to do.’”

**- Black female, 23,
current student**

CHART 1
Change in Perceived Value of a College Degree or Credential (2023-2024)
Among adults without a college degree or credential

In general, how valuable are each of the following types of degrees and credentials?
(% Extremely valuable + % Very valuable)



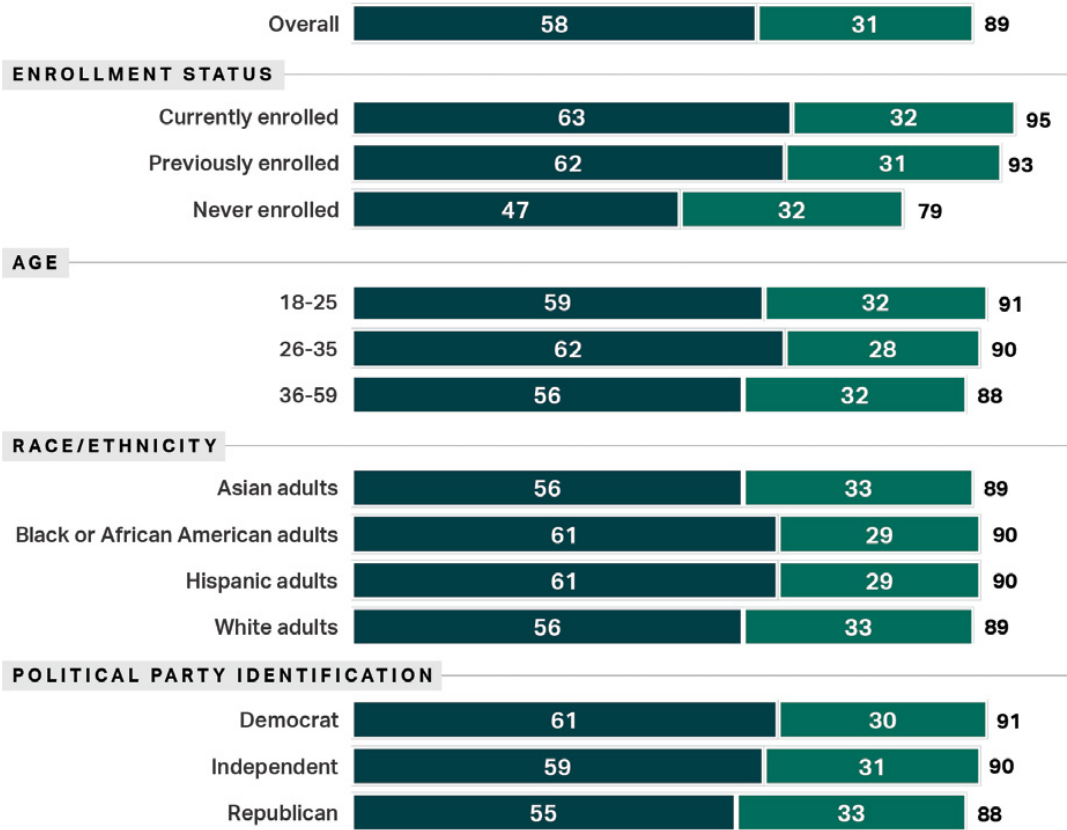


Nearly nine in 10 adults (89%) without a degree or credential believe at least one type of academic credential is valuable. **Across non-degree or credential-holding adults of all ages, educational backgrounds, races and political affiliations, between 79% and 95% say at least one degree or credential is extremely or very valuable.**

CHART 2
Perceived Value of Having at Least One Degree or Credential by Enrollment Status and Demographic Groups
Among adults without a college degree or credential

In general, how valuable are each of the following types of degrees and credentials?

■ % At least one credential extremely valuable ■ % At least one credential very valuable



Note: Due to rounding, percentages may sum to ± 1 pct. pt.

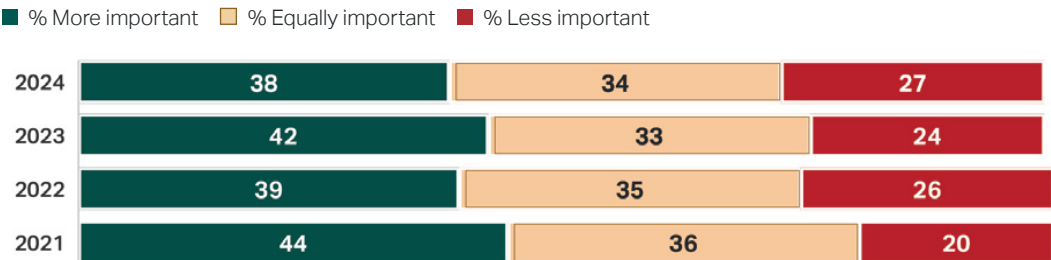
That so many adults without a degree or credential continue to value some form of education after high school likely relates to the influence they believe higher education, and particularly degrees, can have on career outcomes. Consistent with attitudes in the past several years, more than seven in 10 say a two- or four-year degree has become “more important” (38%) or remained “equally important” (34%) to career success over the past 20 years.

CHART 3

Views on the Importance of a College Degree Now Compared to 20 Years Ago (2021-2024)

Among adults without a college degree or credential

Compared to 20 years ago, how important is it for people today to have a two-year or four-year college degree in order for them to have a successful career?



Note: Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100%.

Interest in pursuing higher education remains near the record highs set in 2023, with bachelor’s and associate degrees gaining traction.

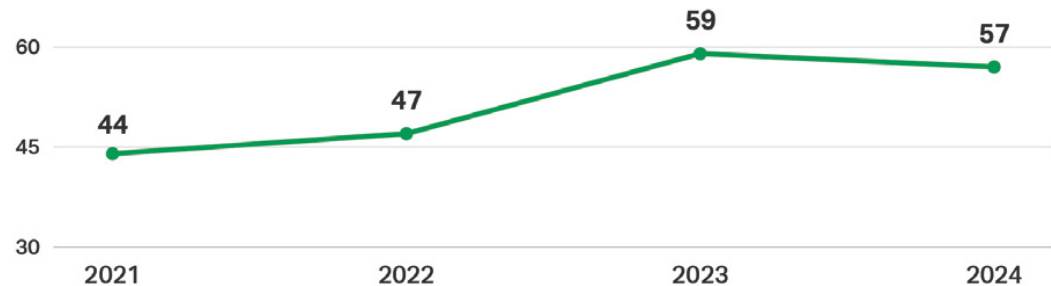
The majority of unenrolled Americans (57%) say they have considered pursuing a credential or degree in the past two years, on par with the record-high 59% who said so in 2023.

CHART 4

Interest in Higher Education, 2021-2024

Among adults not enrolled in a certificate, certification, associate or bachelor’s degree program

% Who considered pursuing at least one degree or credential in the past two years



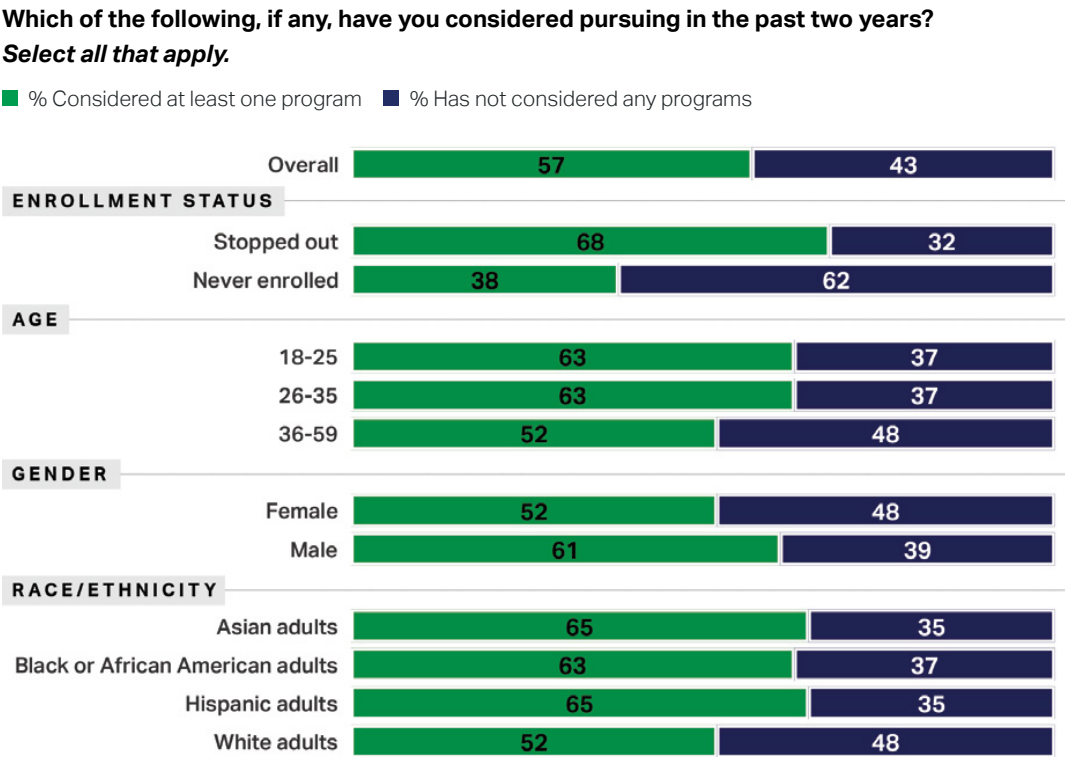
Unenrolled men are more likely than their female counterparts to have considered pursuing higher education (61% vs. 52%), and at 52%, unenrolled White adults are the least likely of any racial or ethnic group to have considered a degree or credential. Adults who have never enrolled are substantially less likely than those who have stopped out to have considered enrolling or re-enrolling (38% vs. 68%).

Despite unenrolled women’s lower interest, recent enrollment data show undergraduate enrollment among both men and women increased last fall, with women continuing to enroll at greater rates than men. Notably, enrollment among White adults grew for the first time in the same period, whereas Hispanic and Black adults have experienced consistent enrollment growth for the past three years.¹

These patterns suggest that while overall interest in higher education remains strong, disparities persist in who is actively considering and enrolling in these programs.

CHART 5
Unenrolled Adults’ Interest in Pursuing Higher Education in the Past Two Years by Enrollment Status and Demographic Groups

Among adults not enrolled in a certificate, certification, associate or bachelor’s degree program



¹ Current term enrollment estimates: Fall 2024. (2025, January 23). National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates>

Interest in pursuing associate and bachelor’s degrees continued to rise in 2024, with 24% of unenrolled adults considering an associate degree and 18% considering a bachelor’s degree.

At the same time, interest in certificates and industry certifications slightly softened from previous years, with 22% considering a certificate and 16% considering an industry certification.



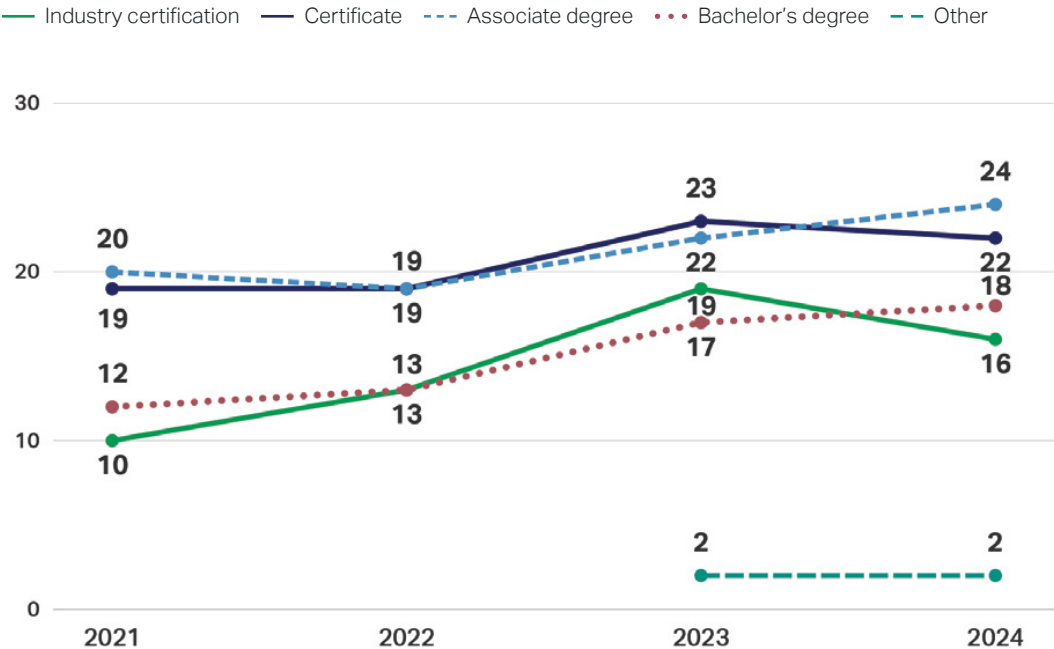
These trajectories align with broader enrollment growth, as undergraduate enrollment neared 16 million — just 1.0% below 2019 levels — rising 4.7% last fall. **Associate and bachelor’s degree programs saw enrollment increases of 6.3% and 2.9%, respectively, though both remain below pre-pandemic levels.²**

CHART 6
Unenrolled Adults’ Interest in Pursuing Higher Education by Program/Credential

Among adults not enrolled in a certificate, certification, associate or bachelor’s degree program

Which of the following, if any, have you considered pursuing in the past two years?
Select all that apply.

(% Considered)



² Ibid.

However, certificate interest remains nearly as high as that for associate degrees, supported by strong growth in undergraduate certificate program enrollment, which rose for the fourth consecutive year (+9.9%) and now stands 28.5% above 2019 levels. Community colleges, a key provider of certificates and associate degrees, saw a 5.9% enrollment increase, reflecting their continued role in workforce-aligned education.

Women without degrees are less likely than their male counterparts to say they are considering pursuing an industry certification (8% vs. 22%) or a bachelor's degree (14% vs. 21%). However, they are similarly likely to say they have considered an associate degree and certificate programs.

Unenrolled women are less likely than men to consider industry certifications regardless of whether they have stopped out or never enrolled. However, men are almost three times as likely as women (29% vs. 11%) to say they have ever enrolled or taken courses in an industry certification program at any time since graduating from high school, which may reflect that many industry certifications are often offered in male-dominated fields such as information technology, manufacturing and construction.³

Meanwhile, the gender gap in interest in pursuing bachelor's degrees is almost entirely attributable to women who have stopped out of their programs. Fewer women (17%) than men (26%) who have stopped out say they are considering pursuing a four-year degree. However, women (9%) and men (10%) who have never enrolled are similarly likely to say they have considered pursuing a bachelor's degree.

3 Lederman, D. (2018, September 13). New data on gender gaps, benefits of nondegree credentials. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/09/13/new-data-gender-gaps-benefits-nondegree-credentials>

CHART 7

Unenrolled Adults' Interest in Pursuing Higher Education by Gender

Among adults not enrolled in a certificate, certification, associate or bachelor's degree program

Which of the following, if any, have you considered pursuing in the past two years? *Select all that apply.*

(% Considered)



“

I see significant value [in higher education]. You can't really get a lot of jobs. Even with a certificate, you need a higher education just for them to really consider you.”

- White female, 22,
Unenrolled

More than eight in 10 adults without a degree or credential who have considered pursuing higher education are likely to enroll in a program in the next five years.

Prospective enrollment remains as high as in 2023. Taking into account those who are and are not considering pursuing higher education, just under half of all unenrolled adults say they are “very likely” (22%) or “likely” (26%) to enroll in higher education in the next five years. However, most of the 57% of adults without a degree or credential who have considered pursuing higher education fully intend to do so: 85% say they are very likely (39%) or likely (46%) to enroll in the next five years.

Adults who were previously enrolled are 23 percentage points more likely to enroll in the next five years than those who have never been enrolled. Prospective enrollment is especially high among adults 35 or younger, Black or Hispanic adults and men.



“

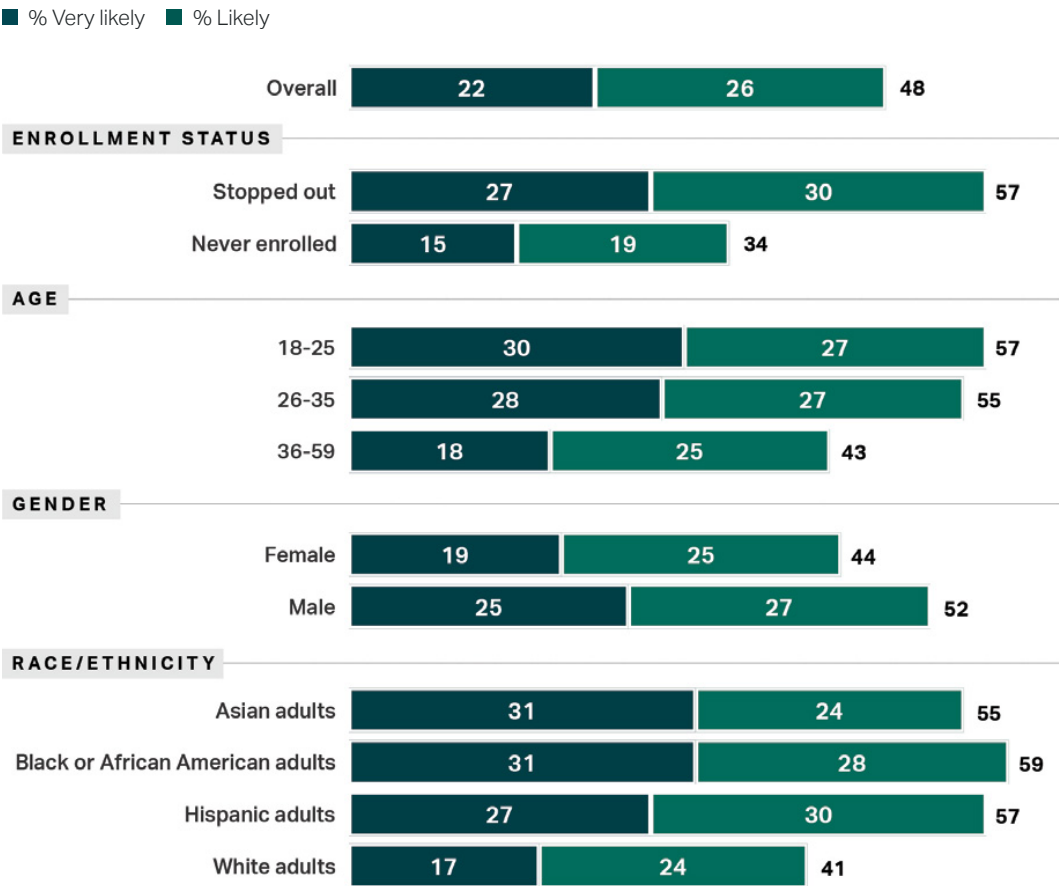
I'm going to college next year for child development. I just feel like college is a big part of your future because you can't do anything really without college.”

**- Black female, 20,
current student**

CHART 8
Likelihood of Pursuing Higher Education in the Next Five Years by Enrollment Status and Demographic Groups

Among adults not enrolled in a certificate, certification, associate or bachelor's degree program

Please indicate how likely you are in the next five years to enroll in a program for any of the following. [Type of degree program or credential]



Note: Due to rounding, percentages may sum to ± 1 pct. pt.

While U.S. adults without a degree continue to see value in higher education and demand remains strong, pursuing higher education is not without its obstacles. Only 30% of unenrolled adults believe that all or most Americans have access to quality, affordable education after high school if they want it, down slightly from 35% in 2023 but up from the low of 24% in 2022. Thirty-three percent estimate that about half of Americans have access, and 37% say that not too many or no Americans can access quality, affordable education and training after high school.

Enrollment Decisions

Finances and flexibility drive enrollment decisions, though priorities differ among unenrolled and enrolled adults.

Unenrolled adults who are considering a two- or four-year degree but are unlikely to enroll often cite higher personal income or financial aid as key motivators for enrollment. However, schedule flexibility and convenience factors such as being able to finish a program in a short time frame or the school's location are nearly as important.

Among those interested in four-year degree programs, student loans and student loan forgiveness programs are also critical: About one in four mentions each of these as important factors that would influence their enrollment, although those who have stopped out are more likely to mention them than those who never enrolled.

“

It's really hard to continue a degree when you don't have the appropriate financing. Loans — I'm trying to avoid loans as much as I can, but it's getting really hard every day because not even maintaining two jobs, because I work two jobs now, maintaining two jobs is hard. Paying for tuition is very hard.”

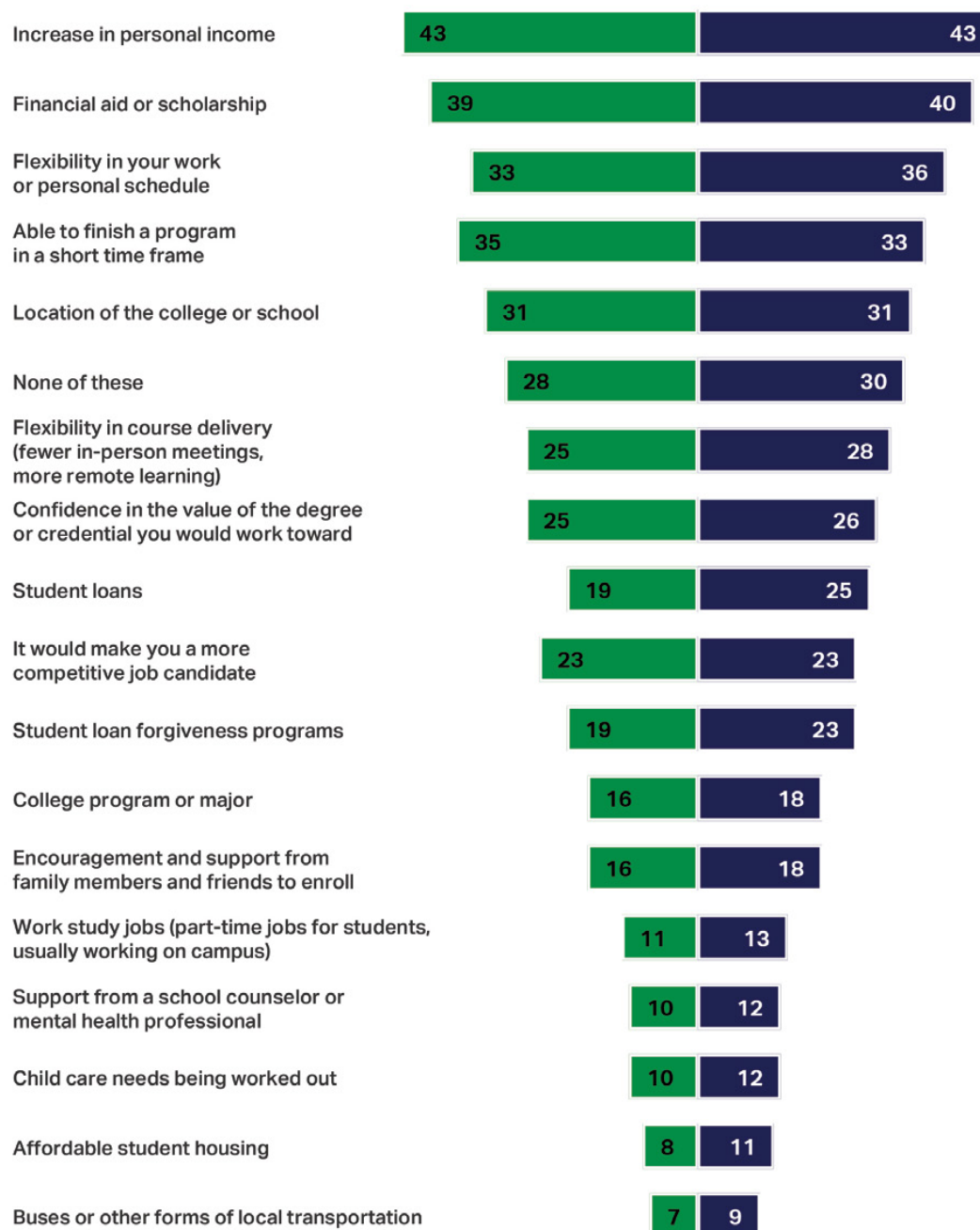
**- Asian-Hispanic female, 22,
current student**

CHART 9

Factors That Influence Enrollment in Higher Education*Among students interested in at least one program but unlikely to enroll***Please indicate if any of the following would be important factors in getting you to enroll in a _____ program.**

(% Selected)

■ Two-year degree ■ Four-year degree



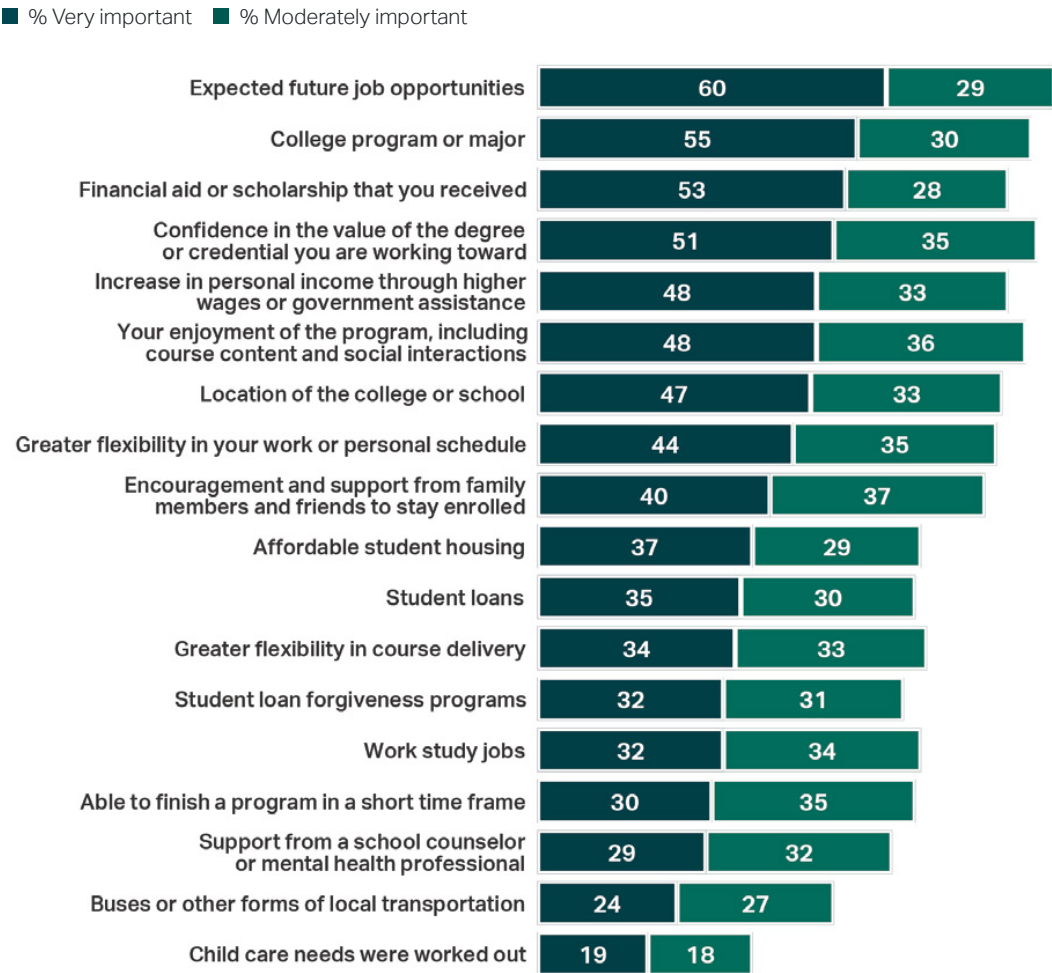
For current students and those who have stopped out, the promise of future job opportunities was the most important factor attracting them to higher education.

Career outcomes remain the primary motivation for pursuing additional formal education after high school, regardless of whether students are still in college or have paused their education. However, it is not the only factor drawing people to higher education.

Six in 10 currently enrolled students say expected future job opportunities were a “very important” factor in their initial decision to enroll, but over half also mention factors such as their college major or program, the financial aid or scholarship they received, and their confidence in the value of the degree or credential they are working toward.

CHART 10
Enrollment Motivators for Current Students
Among currently enrolled students

Thinking back to when you first enrolled in an education program after high school, how important were each of the following in your decision to enroll?



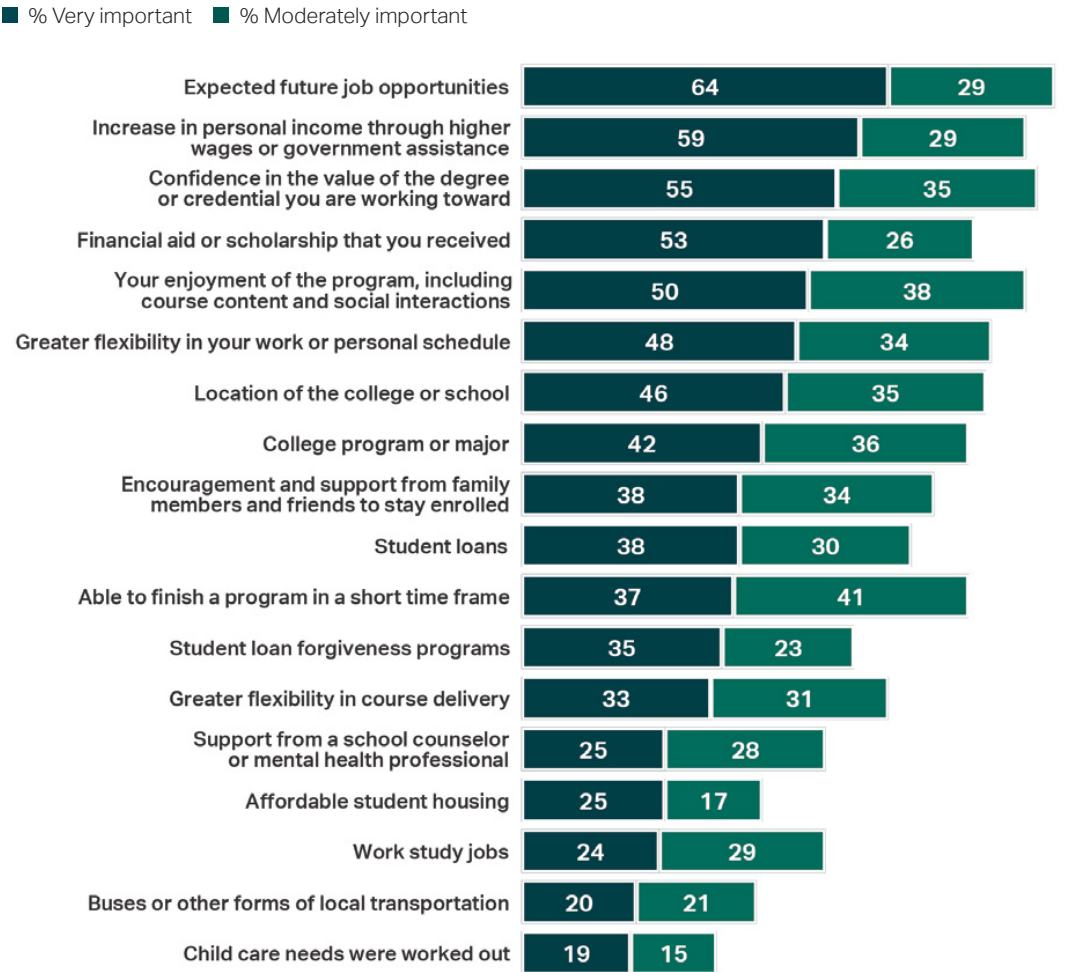
For those who stopped out, expected job opportunities were also the main draw when they enrolled, but rather than factors like their college major or program, they cite more financially driven motivators such as personal income through higher wages or government assistance.

Notably, current students and stopped-out adults both mention financial aid and confidence in the value of a degree or credential among the top factors influencing their initial enrollment decision.

CHART 11
Enrollment Motivators for Those Who Stopped Out

Among those who have stopped out of their program

Thinking back to when you first enrolled in an education program after high school, how important were each of the following in your decision to enroll?



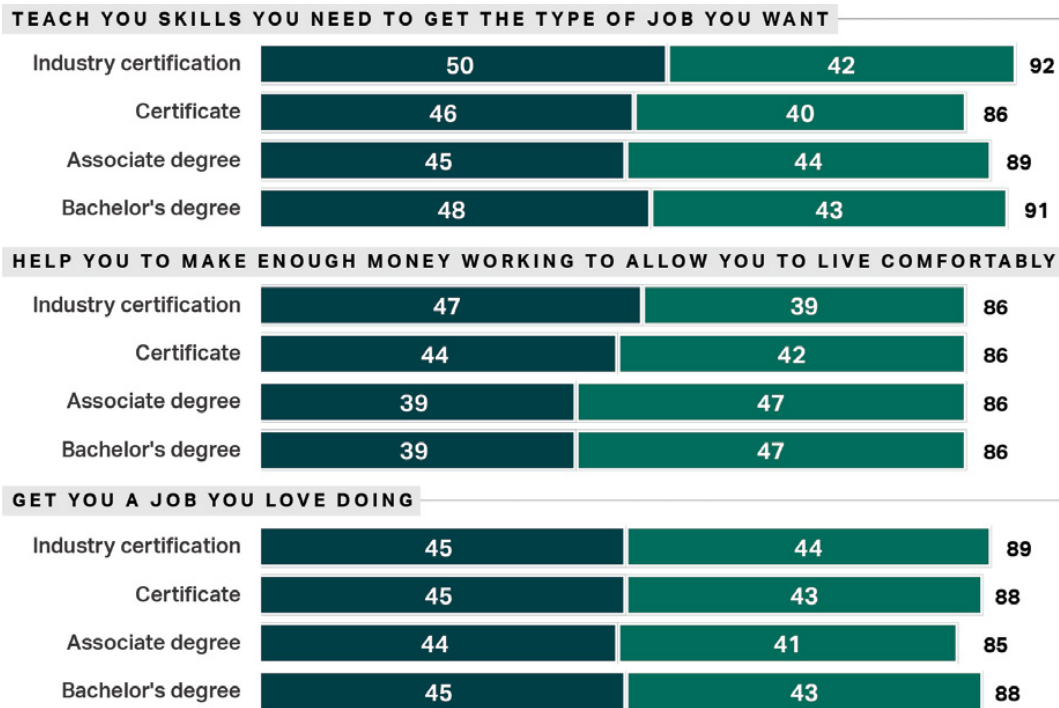
Currently enrolled students believe their institutions will deliver the future job opportunities they hoped for when they first enrolled.

Between 85% and 92% of students are at least somewhat confident that their degree or credential will teach them job-related skills, get them a job they love doing or help them earn enough money to live comfortably. These attitudes vary only slightly depending on whether the student is pursuing a two- or four-year degree, a certificate or an industry certification.

CHART 12
Confidence in Degree or Credential Outcomes by Program Type
Among currently enrolled students

How confident are you that the degree or credential you are working towards will:

■ % Very confident ■ % Confident



Note: Due to rounding, percentages may sum to ±1 pct. pt.

“

I just recently finished a certificate for forensic science, but I'm also currently pursuing a degree in criminal justice and law enforcement administration because someday I'm hoping to go into more of a law enforcement career, or perhaps just even more of public service in general. I really like working with the public, seeing how social services can provide more than just the usual police calls every day.”

- Asian-Hispanic female, 22,
current student

Attrition Risks

Fewer enrolled adults are considering stopping out, but nearly a third have still considered it, largely due to mental health and cost concerns.

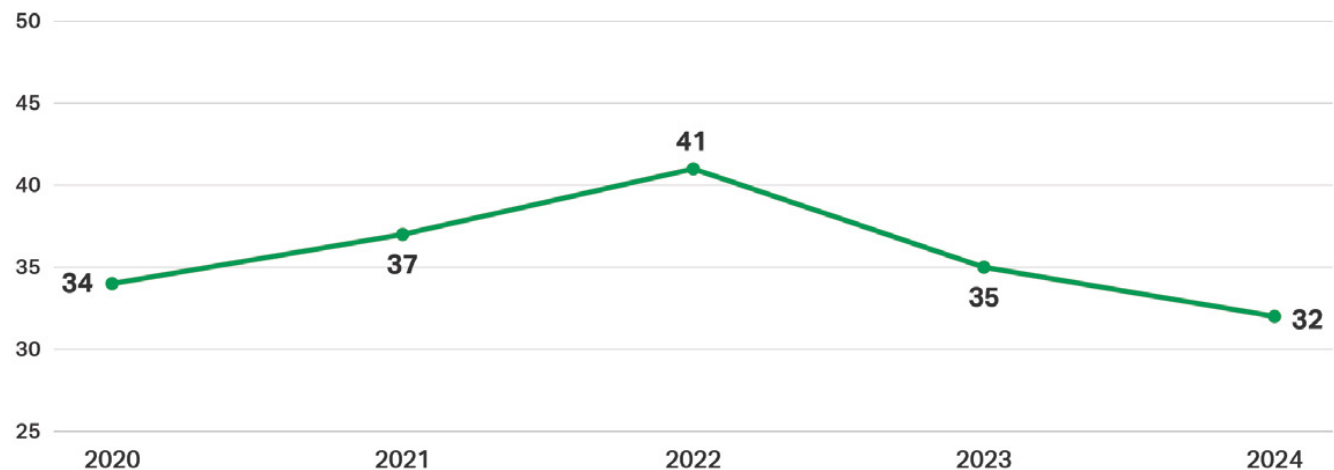
The percentage of enrolled adults who have considered stopping out or withdrawing from their program continued to trend downward in 2024. The current 32% is now almost 10 points lower than the trend-high 41% in 2022 and more in line with the 34% measured in 2020, the study’s inaugural year.

CHART 13
Trends in Considering Stopping Out (2020-2024)

Among currently enrolled adults pursuing a certificate, certification, associate or bachelor’s degree

In the past six months, have you considered stopping your coursework (that is, withdrawing from the program for at least one term)?

(% Considered)



The trends suggest a partial return to pre-pandemic conditions, although the pandemic itself may have had lasting effects on higher education (including opportunities for online or hybrid learning and alternative education providers), which provides students with greater flexibility in managing their studies.

“

So back when COVID first happened, we switched to online, and my grades dropped a significant amount. That almost caused me to drop out due to the change of scenery and not being able to go in person and then having to do it at home.”

**- White female, 20,
unenrolled**

However, shifts in the past year warrant attention. At the program or credential level, 25% of bachelor’s degree-seeking students say they have considered stopping out — down from 32% in 2023 — while 32% of those in industry certification programs say the same — down from 39%. Those in associate degree (39%) or certificate (38%) programs remain just as likely to have considered stopping out as in the previous year.

Further, compared with 2023, the percentages who considered stopping out declined in all racial and ethnic groups except for Hispanic adults, among whom it remained the same as the previous year. Unlike in 2023, men and women are equally as likely to report that they have considered stopping out of their program (32%).

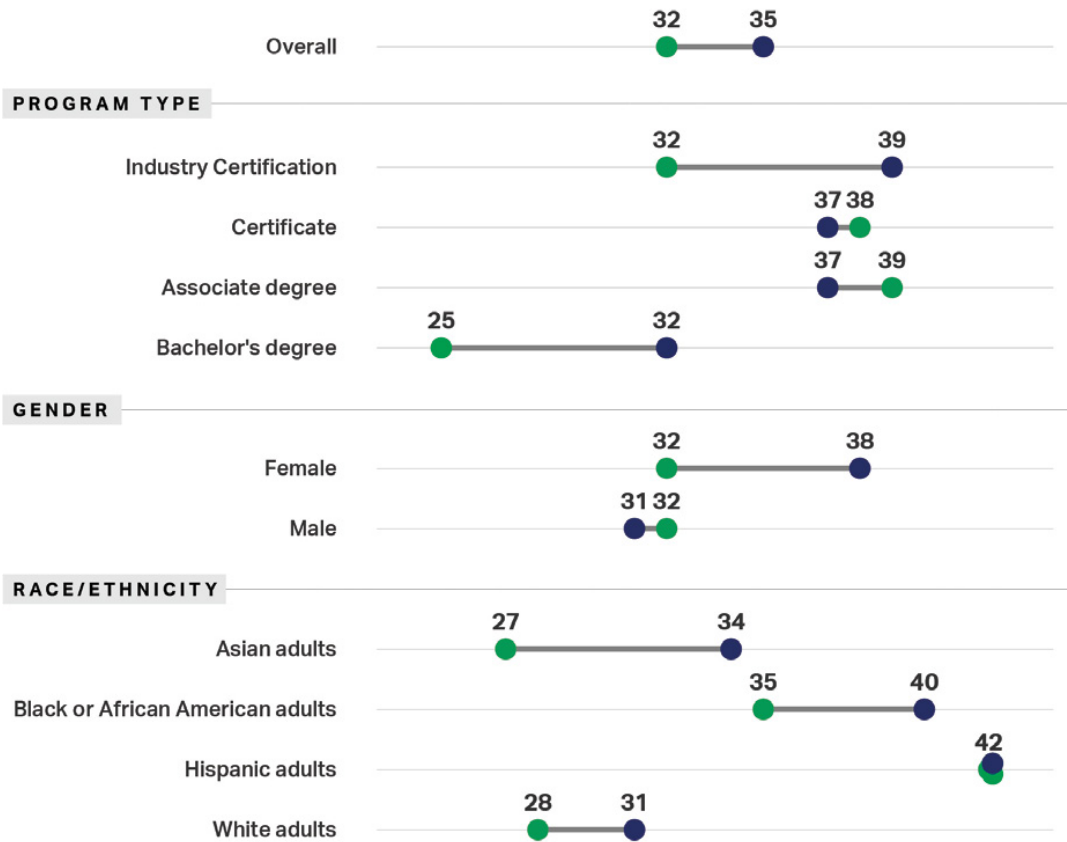
CHART 14
Shifts in Considering Stopping Out by Demographic Groups and Program Type (2023-2024)

Among currently enrolled students

In the past six months, have you considered stopping your coursework (that is, withdrawing from the program for at least one term)?

(% Yes)

● 2023 ● 2024



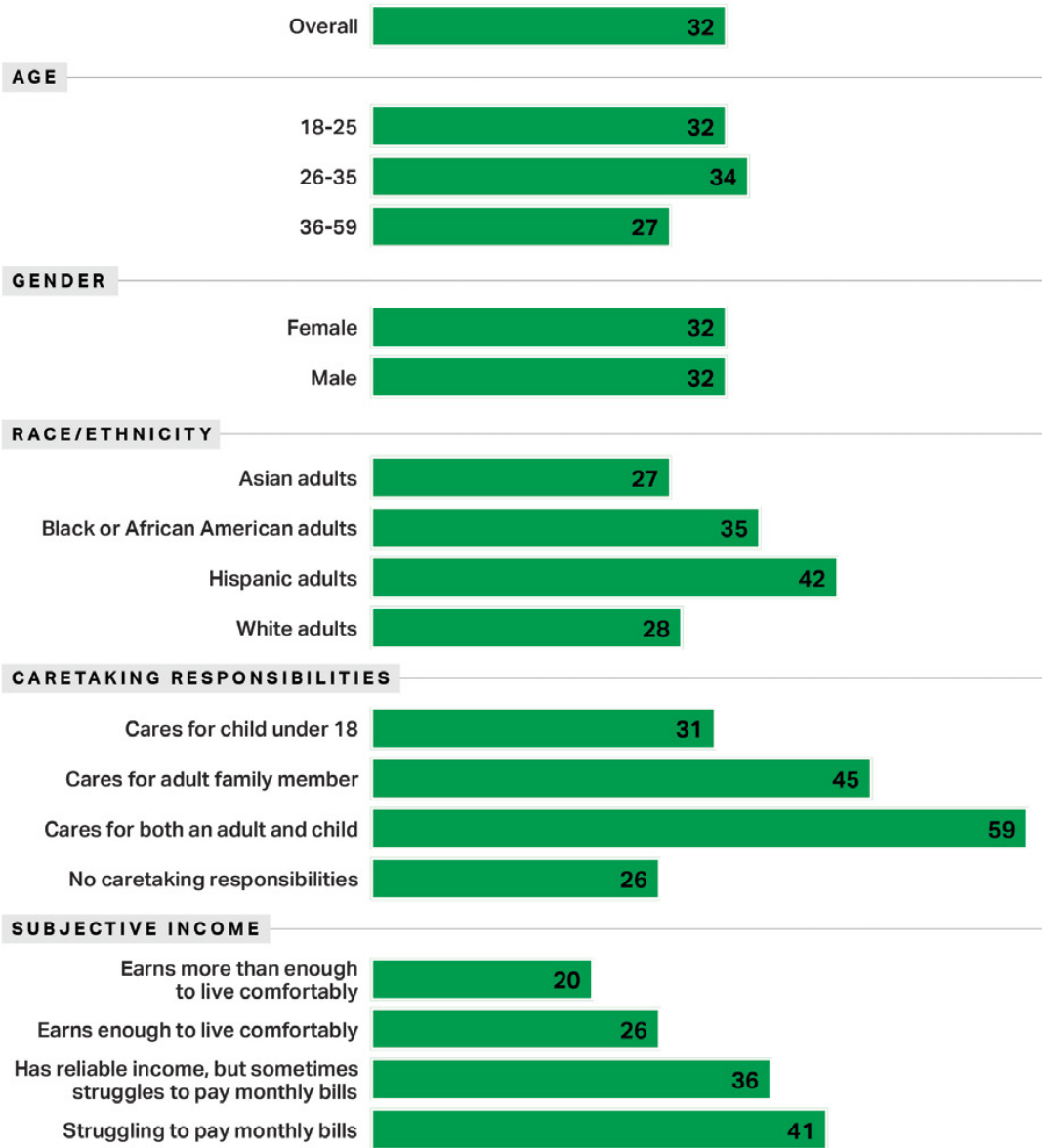
Despite the relatively positive shifts, certain groups remain at higher risk of attrition. Students with caretaking responsibilities, Hispanic adults and those struggling financially are significantly more likely than their peers to have considered stopping out of their program. Among all caregiver groups, those caring for an adult family member and child are at the highest risk of stopping out (59%).

CHART 15
Percentage Considering Stopping Out by Demographic Groups

Among currently enrolled students

In the past six months, have you considered stopping your coursework (that is, withdrawing from the program for at least one term)?

(% Yes)



“

It's a lot to work a full-time job and be a full-time student, like, really time consuming. I am only taking 12 credit hours right now, but that doesn't mean you're only gonna take 3 hours a week to do all your classwork and all the things. So, a lot of time, a lot of money. You might feel like the degree you got is not worth the time or the money you spent on it.”

**- White female, 26,
current student**

Students who considered stopping out are about twice as likely to cite mental health or emotional stress as the reason as to cite cost.

Emotional stress and personal mental health issues continue to be the top reasons why enrolled students say they considered stopping their coursework. Nearly half mention emotional stress (49%) and more than four in 10 (41%) mention mental health reasons to explain why they considered it.

CHART 16
Reasons Currently Enrolled Students Have Considered Stopping Out (2020-2024)
Among currently enrolled students who have considered leaving their program in the past six months

Which of the following describes why you considered stopping your coursework? *Select all that apply.*

(% Selected)

	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020
Emotional stress	49	54	55	63	36
Personal mental health reasons	41	43	47	*	*
Cost of attendance	24	31	29	31	30
Don't feel I belong	24	24	*	*	*
The coursework was too difficult	20	24	21	26	16
Personal physical health reasons	20	16	17	*	*
No longer interested	15	13	14	13	*
You got a new job	14	13	10	11	14
The courses you took were not relevant to your future career	13	13	12	11	7
Completing the degree or credential was taking longer than you expected	13	13	13	12	8
Lack of remote learning options	13	12	14	*	*
Don't feel prior schoolwork prepared you well for further education	12	14	14	*	*
You did not believe the degree or credential would help you achieve your career goals	12	12	12	10	7
You lost your job	11	9	8	9	14
Child care, or care for an adult family member or friend	10	10	*	*	*
The education you were receiving was low quality	8	5	10	12	13

*Response option was not offered

For the first time in the State of Higher Education study, Gallup asked those who had stopped out of their degree or certificate program why they had done so. The study shows that the top reasons for those who have stopped out are the same as those who are just considering it. Those who have stopped out are most likely to cite emotional stress, personal mental health issues and cost.

CHART 17

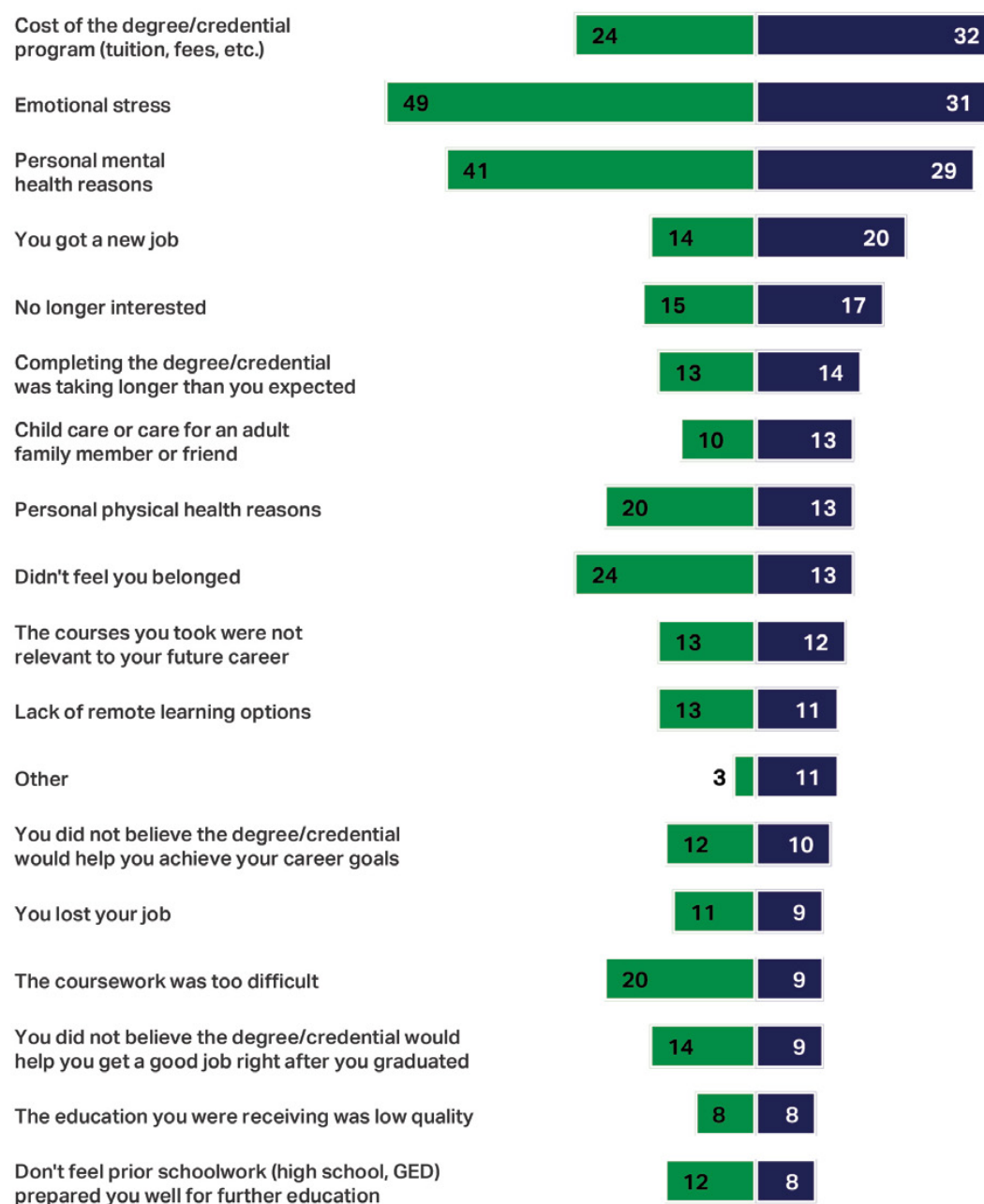
Top Reasons for Stopping Out

Among currently enrolled and stopped-out students

**Which of the following describes why you considered stopping/stopped your coursework?
Select all that apply.**

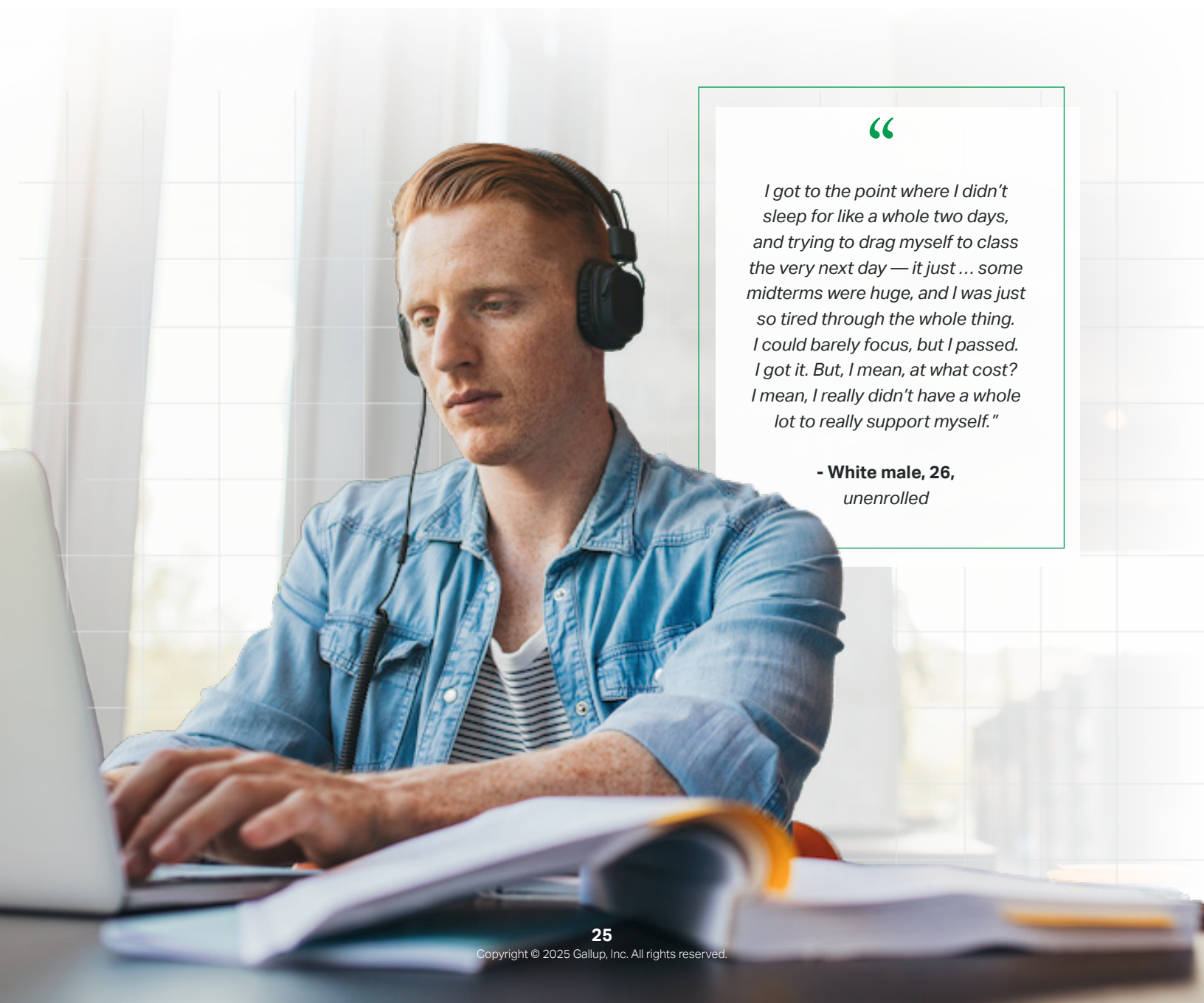
(% Selected)

■ Currently enrolled ■ Stopped out





When those who cite emotional stress as a reason for stopping out were asked about the sources of that stress, the most common answers were anxiety/depression or a mental health condition (74%), loneliness/isolation (60%), financial matters related to school (59%), amount of coursework (56%) and job stresses (50%).



“

I got to the point where I didn't sleep for like a whole two days, and trying to drag myself to class the very next day — it just ... some midterms were huge, and I was just so tired through the whole thing. I could barely focus, but I passed. I got it. But, I mean, at what cost? I mean, I really didn't have a whole lot to really support myself.”

**- White male, 26,
unenrolled**

Conclusion

While U.S. adults without a degree or other credentials continue to perceive significant challenges in accessing and completing higher education, their belief in its value remains steadfast.

Despite public skepticism and personal obstacles such as mental health concerns, financial strain and time constraints, the majority still see degrees and credentials as critical pathways to career advancement and personal growth.

Interest in pursuing higher education remains strong, with many unenrolled adults actively considering enrollment and planning to take that step within the next five years. However, disparities by gender, race and enrollment history highlight ongoing issues in access. At the same time, recent enrollment increases suggest progress, particularly in associate and certificate programs, which continue to play a vital role in workforce development.

The consistent link between perceived value and career outcomes underscores the importance of affordability, flexibility and student support — especially for those balancing work, caregiving or mental health struggles. To sustain this momentum and close remaining gaps, higher education institutions and policymakers will need to focus on removing barriers and reinforcing the connection between credentials and meaningful, well-paying jobs. Ultimately, the desire for opportunity, self-worth and long-term success continues to drive strong demand for higher education among U.S. adults without a degree or other credentials.

Methodology

Results for the Lumina-Gallup study are based on web surveys conducted from Oct. 2-31, 2024, with samples of 6,000 students who are currently enrolled in a postsecondary education program (certificate, associate or bachelor's degree), 4,931 adults who were previously enrolled in a postsecondary education program but had not completed an associate or bachelor's degree, and 3,002 adults who had never enrolled in a postsecondary education program.

Of the currently enrolled students, 2,327 say they are pursuing a bachelor's degree, 1,473 are pursuing an associate degree, 1,355 are pursuing a certificate, and 845 are pursuing an industry certification.

All respondents were between the ages of 18 and 59 and had a high school diploma or equivalent but not an associate or bachelor's degree. Respondents were interviewed via Dynata's non-probability web-based panel.

The data are weighted to match national demographics of gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education and region for the population of U.S. 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.



GALLUP®

World Headquarters

The Gallup Building
901 F Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004

t +1.877.242.5587

f +1.888.500.8282

www.gallup.com