

Education Consumer Pulse

On Second Thought: U.S. Adults Reflect on Their Education Decisions

June 2017 Inaugural Report

Empowering the Consumer Voice in Education



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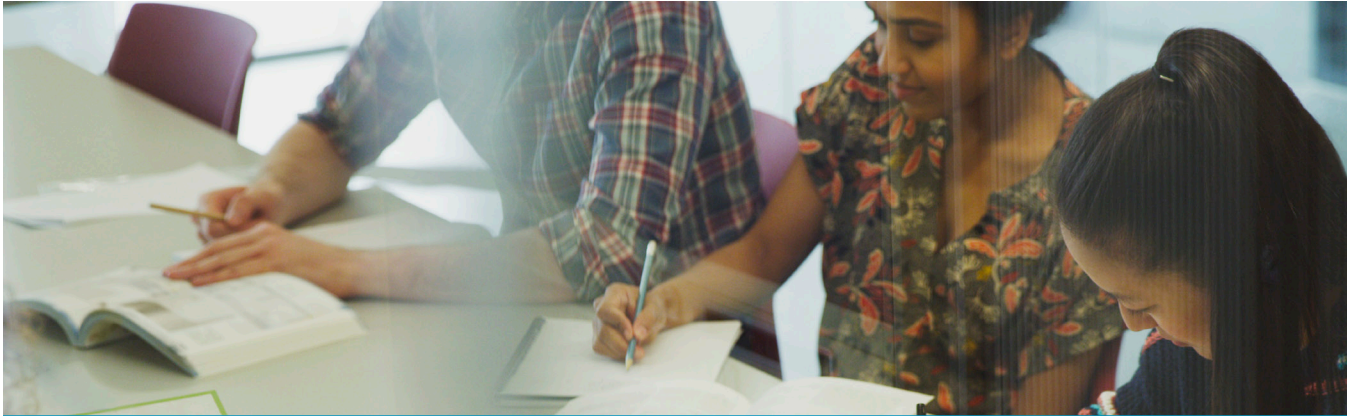
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About Strada Education Network

Strada Education Network is a new kind of nonprofit organization that takes a fresh approach to improving the connection between a postsecondary education and a career. Through a unique combination of strategic philanthropy, research and insights, and innovative solutions, Strada Education Network is advancing its Completion With a Purpose mission to build a more purposeful path for America's students to and through college and on to rewarding careers and fulfilling lives. Learn more at StradaEducation.org.



About Gallup

Gallup delivers forward-thinking research, analytics and advice to help leaders solve their most pressing problems. Combining more than 75 years of experience with its global reach, Gallup knows more about the attitudes and behaviors of the world's constituents, employees and customers than any other organization. Gallup consultants help private and public sector organizations boost organic growth through measurement tools, strategic advice and education. Gallup's 2,000 professionals deliver services at client organizations, through the web and in nearly 40 offices around the world.

Preface

Students have more options than ever before when it comes to deciding where to gain the education and training they need to succeed in a career. Yet, too many students aren't completing what they start when it comes to their education. Among those who do graduate, too many aren't progressing into fulfilling careers with the skills employers need in the 21st-century workforce.¹

Strada Education Network was created to help bridge this growing disconnect. Building on our 56-year legacy of helping more than 22 million students and families pay for college, today our nonprofit mission is focused on Completion With a Purpose® — helping students achieve a more purposeful path to and through college and on to rewarding careers and fulfilling lives.

This means students graduate high school and pursue the postsecondary education or training that is most relevant to their career aspirations and lifestyle goals. We do not presume a single pathway is right for all students. However, we do believe empowering students to understand their options and define their path is the key to unleashing their potential, thereby ensuring our nation's economic growth and prosperity.

In order to empower students, we must listen to them. While there is no lack of data collected about postsecondary education, the consumer perspective is surprisingly absent. At Strada Education, we believe consumer insights have the power to shape the future of postsecondary education. In virtually every other industry, similar research has ignited innovation, increased satisfaction and improved outcomes. The Strada Education-Gallup partnership was born out of our commitment to elevate the voice of the education consumer.

We are proud to partner with the world leader in consumer insights to launch the Education Consumer Pulse, a three-year study that will create the largest set of education consumer insights in the nation to date. This first report in a series establishes a baseline understanding of how consumers perceive their education experiences when reflecting on their past decisions.

When coupled with existing data, the nuanced insights gathered from listening to consumers are powerful tools for postsecondary leaders, policymakers, educators, employers and other education consumers. Consumers' perspectives shed light on major issues facing postsecondary education in the U.S., such as career guidance, student debt and the role postsecondary education plays in addressing our nation's growing skills gap.

These insights also lay an important foundation as we begin to measure how many U.S. adults are achieving Completion With a Purpose as a means to help inform postsecondary education and workforce development policies and best practices.

We hope that, starting with this report, the Education Consumer Pulse will serve as a catalyst for deeper exploration and application of these consumer insights to help shape the future of postsecondary education. We don't presume to know all the answers, but we believe that by listening to consumers and elevating their voice in the national conversation, we'll arrive at better solutions together.



Bill Hansen
President and CEO
Strada Education Network

¹ U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics. (2015). Digest of education statistics.

Executive Summary

Postsecondary education has become increasingly vital to an individual's ability to secure and advance in a career, especially a career that is rewarding and allows each person to meet their life goals. Yet, in the United States, students often make the decision whether or not to pursue postsecondary education without being fully informed of the available educational opportunities or which are required to pursue their chosen career path. These decisions, whether students pursued postsecondary education or not, have long-standing implications for their careers, their finances and their well-being.

In the current economy, most jobs require at least some postsecondary training, and some experts predict that share of jobs will grow to 65% by 2020.² Individuals' incomes also differ dramatically by educational attainment levels, and the overall earnings gap between those with at least a bachelor's degree and those with only a high school diploma continues to grow.³ The education decisions individuals make are becoming increasingly more important and, right now, students lack access to key information to help inform their decision-making and achieve the lives they want to live.

That is why Gallup and Strada Education Network are partnering to ask consumers about their education paths — where they attended college and if the coursework was relevant to their careers, among other subjects. These insights provide clarity about how many Americans successfully pursue and complete postsecondary education that is tied to a clear purpose — be it to obtain work, advance in a career, or develop a new skill or expertise.

Consumer insights are used as a valid measure of success and improvement in nearly every other industry. Over the last few decades, consumer insights have been used effectively to inform best practices, redesign models, and drive innovation that enhances the experience for both the consumer and the service provider. When coupled with objective data sets, consumer insights provide a fuller picture of provider-consumer engagement and its outcomes.

Empowering consumers to make informed education investments is even more important in postsecondary education, compared with most other sectors, because of the high costs and unique features of education services. In many markets, consumers can recoup at least a portion of their investment if they judge that the goods or service failed to meet their expectations. This is not the case for postsecondary education.

Unfortunately, researchers widely agree that many of the current measures available to consumers to help determine the value of their education fall short, and they are not widely used.⁴ There is, for example, no national database that shows how much graduates of different colleges earn by major or how satisfied they are with their experience. When economic challenges are coupled with a lack of reliable information, it creates a situation ripe for education outcomes to fall short of consumer expectations, leading many consumers to have second thoughts about the choices they made.

While plenty of data are already collected about postsecondary education, there has not yet been a comprehensive look at student and graduate experiences and how those experiences shaped their lives. Through a new comprehensive research platform, the Education Consumer Pulse, Gallup and Strada Education Network aim to listen to education consumers at all levels of educational attainment. As a result, postsecondary leaders, policymakers and employers will be able to better understand the critical consumer insights and experiences that shape the many complex issues facing postsecondary education today.

2 Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2013). *Recovery: Job growth and education requirements through 2020*. Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce. Washington, D.C.

3 Oreopoulos, P. & Petronijevic, U. (2013). Making college worth it: A review of the returns to higher education. *The Future of Children*, 23(1), 41-65.

4 Espinosa, L. L., Crandall, J. R., & Tpbayeva, M. (2015). Rankings, institutional behavior, and college and university choice framing the national dialogue on Obama's ratings plan. American Council on Education. Washington, D.C.

The Education Consumer Pulse is a daily survey of approximately 350 U.S. adults, with more than 122,500 interviews annually. It explores the extent to which education consumers in the U.S. are pursuing and completing postsecondary education programs that advance their chosen careers and life goals. The survey launched in June 2016 and includes a representative sample of Americans aged 18-65 currently living in the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

This report — the first of a three-year series that will explore individuals' perceptions of their education paths — provides initial insights and sets a foundation for additional research about how postsecondary leaders, policymakers, educators and employers can help students most effectively and efficiently achieve their economic and personal goals. This first look focuses on three key questions asked of U.S. adults who previously enrolled in or completed postsecondary education or training:

If you had to do it all over again, would you still ...

Pursue the same level of education?

Pursue the same area of study?

Attend the same institution?

Consumers are also asked how they feel about the quality of their education. As the report details, while the majority of U.S. adults believe they received a quality education, more than half would make at least one education decision differently if they could do it over again: degree type, choice of major or institution.

These data suggest that the perceptions of education consumers who would make different decisions about their education path are not exclusively driven by the institutions they chose. It seems individuals' desires to make different choices may, instead, be a function of having made decisions without complete information, such as future employment opportunities, earning potential or the long-term effect of student debt. In short, education consumers' regret about their previous decisions could be read as a signal to improve the resources available to inform future education decisions.

Furthermore, there are important nuances to these consumers' experiences. Few adults say they would pursue a different degree type, but many more report that they would choose a different institution or field of study. U.S. adults from distinct groups within the greater population, such as those who graduated at the age of 30 or older, also view their experiences differently. These insights reveal that, upon reflection, education consumers have a sophisticated understanding of their experiences and can separate various aspects of their education path to understand how each piece of the puzzle shaped their current career and well-being. This is important for postsecondary leaders and policymakers to note as they work to address critical issues in the education landscape.

What these consumer insights reveal is a need for more accessible information about the outcomes of peers who have pursued similar paths. Where did they receive helpful advice? Would they recommend their path? Was their coursework relevant to their daily tasks on the job? Do they regret taking on debt to finance their education? The Education Consumer Pulse will address these and other questions in future reports.

Education consumer insights afford the postsecondary community the opportunity to do what other sectors have successfully executed by understanding the nuanced needs of the individuals they serve. By starting with a baseline understanding of how education consumers perceive their past experiences, we can shape the future by leveraging these insights, and those in upcoming reports, to empower students of all ages with the information they need to make informed decisions about the best education path to help them achieve their purpose in their careers and lives.

Key Findings

- More than half of Americans (51%) would change at least one of their education decisions if they had to do it all over again: 36% would choose a different major, 28% would choose a different institution and 12% would pursue a different degree.
- Those with some college but no degree are the most likely to say they would change at least one of these three education decisions.
- Individuals who complete a vocational, trade or technical program are more positive about their education decisions than are individuals with an associate or bachelor's degree. Those with postgraduate work or a degree are the least likely to say they would make different education decisions.
- Given the opportunity to make changes, U.S. adults are most likely to select a different major. This is particularly true of students who pursue or complete a bachelor's degree: Two-fifths of these students would choose a different major. By comparison, just 7% of bachelor's degree earners would choose a different degree type.
- Across the three areas of reflection (degree type, institution and field of study), individuals are least likely to report they would make a different decision about the type of degree they pursued.
- Individuals who attended a for-profit institution at the sub-baccalaureate level or who attended a private, nonprofit institution at the two-year level are more likely to regret their decisions than those who earned credentials from other institutions.
- Bachelor's degree holders who completed their education later in life — those aged 30 or older at the time of graduation — reflect more positively on their education choices than do those who completed at a younger age.
- Other than the small percentage of adults whose own parents pursued graduate degrees, parental education levels are largely unrelated to whether individuals would choose a different degree, major or institution.
- STEM graduates at all education levels are the least likely to report they would make different education decisions.
- Employed individuals who earn a higher income generally reflect more positively on their education decisions than do those who earn a lower income; although, more than a third of high-income earners still express some regret over their decisions.
- Individuals who borrowed larger amounts of student loans to pay for undergraduate training are more likely to report they would make different education decisions.
- When asked to reflect on their experiences, more than four out of five U.S. adults who completed a credential or a degree either agree or strongly agree that they received a high-quality education: 81% of adults with technical, trade or vocational credentials; 81% of adults with an associate degree; 89% of adults with a bachelor's degree; and 95% of postgraduate degree holders.
- Even those adults who started a degree but did not finish it consider their experiences to have been high quality: 70% of adults with some college but no degree and 88% of adults who started a postgraduate degree highly rate the education they received.

Introduction

In today's job market, most occupations require at least some postsecondary training, and that share of jobs is expected to grow to 65% by 2020.⁵ Pay is also closely tied with education level. The gap in average pay between those with a bachelor's degree or higher and those with only a high school diploma has widened steadily since 1980 and now stands at close to 80%.⁶ This reality has created a world where postsecondary education is now widely regarded as an economic necessity rather than a luxury.⁷

Close to

80%

The gap in average pay between those with a bachelor's degree or higher and those with only a high school diploma has widened steadily since 1980.

Even after accounting for average tuition costs, there is strong evidence that attending college is a sound financial investment for most people.⁸ However, despite this evidence, there is increasing concern about the cost of a postsecondary education, its relevance to one's career and the importance of choosing the right school. While prices for all goods and services increased by around 2.5 times between 1980 and 2015, postsecondary education prices rose a staggering 11 times.⁹

Beyond cost, there also appears to be disconnect between the education students receive and the needs of employers. Surveys routinely suggest that colleges are not providing students with the skills valued by employers, and graduates often complain about difficulty finding jobs in their preferred fields.¹⁰ Previous research finds that many Americans express regret about their education choices. Surveys of young adults and recent graduates find that, depending on the survey, between 29% and 37% would choose a different major.¹¹ Another 14% to 36% would choose a different college.¹² These realities have produced no shortage of popular press pieces asking whether college is still "worth it."¹³

- 5 Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2013). Recovery: Job growth and education requirements through 2020. Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce. Washington, D.C.
- 6 Oreopoulos, P. & Petronijevic, U. (2013). Making college worth it: A review of the returns to higher education. *The Future of Children*, 23(1), 41-65.
- 7 A stronger nation through higher education: An annual report from the Lumina Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/a-stronger-nation-through-higher-education-2014.pdf>
- 8 Greenstone, M. & Looney, A. (2011). Where is the best place to invest \$102,000 — In stocks, bonds, or a college degree. Brookings Institution, Hamilton Project. Washington, D.C.
- 9 U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, Personal Consumption Expenditure. Retrieved from http://www.gallup.com/reports/198776/no-recovery-analysis-long-term-productivity-decline.aspx?utm_source=blog&utm_campaign=TCB12616
- 10 <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/01/20/study-finds-big-gaps-between-student-and-employer-perceptions>; https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2013/05/20/only-27-percent-of-college-grads-have-a-job-related-to-their-major/?utm_term=.5576bd669058 or https://www.newyorkfed.org/medialibrary/media/research/current_issues/ci20-1.pdf
- 11 Pew Research Center. (2014). The rising cost of not going to college. Retrieved from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/02/11/the-rising-cost-of-not-going-to-college/>; Stone, C., Van Horn, C., & Zukin, C. (2013). Chasing the American dream: Recent college graduates and the Great Recession. John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development.; McKinsey. Voice of the graduate.
- 12 Stone, C., Van Horn, C., & Zukin, C. Chasing the American dream: Recent college graduates and the Great Recession. John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development.
- 13 Oreopoulos, P. & Petronijevic, U. (2013). Making college worth it: A review of the returns to higher education. *The Future of Children*, 23(1), 41-65.; Douglas-Gabriel, D. (2016). Still questioning whether college is worth it? Read this. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/07/01/still-questioning-whether-college-is-worth-it-read-this/?utm_term=.9c239650a6a9

Policymakers and higher education experts have noticed these complaints and sought to implement new forms of accountability for institutions, like performance-based funding and other solutions to keep rising tuition in check.¹⁴ During the 2016 presidential campaign, most of the leading candidates issued proposals for how to reduce college costs.¹⁵ Likewise, the Obama administration emphasized the need to provide consumers with more and better information to inform their education choices, resulting in the U.S. Department of Education's *College Scorecard*. In 2009, the Census Bureau began asking survey respondents with at least a bachelor's degree to report their field of study, revealing large differences in earnings by major. These data show that where people attend college and what they study is highly predictive of their earnings.¹⁶ While there have been steps in the right direction to address these gaps, there remains an absence of information to which individuals can refer when making pivotal education choices.

Empowering consumers to make informed postsecondary education investments is even more important in higher education than in most other markets because of the high costs and unique features of education services. In many markets, consumers have the opportunity to recoup at least a portion of their investment if they judge that the goods or service failed to meet their expectations. The retail industry loses 7% of sales every year from customer returns, according to estimates.¹⁷ With certain large, expensive products, like homes and automobiles, even if the purchase proves disappointing, the consumer can resell it.

With higher education, however, there are no returns, no refunds, and no way to sell your education and replace it with a new one. Recognizing the increasing financial risk of college, a handful of schools and private training organizations are beginning to move in the direction of providing tuition discounts or reimbursements under certain conditions.¹⁸ Still, consumers must try to reduce the risk upfront, using a mix of the school's reputation, its ranking in popular magazines and information from other sources. Yet, these resources still leave much to be desired in terms of measuring the value that students can expect to receive from their education.¹⁹

Unfortunately, researchers widely agree that many of the current measures available to consumers to help determine education quality are inadequate, and they are not widely used.²⁰ There is, for example, no national database that shows how much graduates of different colleges earn by major or how satisfied they are with their experience. When the economic challenges are coupled with a lack of reliable information, it creates a situation ripe for education outcomes to fall short of consumer expectations, leading many consumers to have second thoughts about the choices they make.

14 Kelly, A. (2016). Share the risk. American Enterprise Institute. Washington, D.C.

15 Desai, P. (2016, February 2). Overview of 2016 presidential candidates' college affordability platforms. The Ithacan. Retrieved from <https://theithacan.org/news/overview-of-2016-candidates-college-affordability-platforms/>

16 Rothwell, J. (2016). Using earnings data to rank colleges: A value-added approach updated with scorecard data. Brookings Institution. Washington, D.C.; Julian, T. (2012). Work-life earnings by field of degree and occupation for people with a bachelor's degree: 2011. American Community Survey Briefs. ACSBR/11-04. U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED537269>

17 Yang, F., Hu, P., Zhao, F., & Hu, C. (2015). Customer returns model in a dual-channel supply chain. *Journal of Modelling in Management*, 10(3), 360-379.

18 Akers, B. & Butler, S. M. (2016). Should college come with a money-back guarantee? Brookings Institution. Washington, D.C.

19 Rothwell, J. & Kulkarni, S. (2015). Beyond college rankings: A value-added approach to assessing two- and four-year schools. Brookings Institution. Washington, D.C.

20 Espinosa, L. L., Crandall, J. R., & Tpbayeva, M. (2015). Rankings, institutional behavior, and college and university choice framing the national dialogue on Obama's ratings plan. American Council on Education. Washington, D.C.

Empowering the Consumer Voice in Education

While there are much data currently collected about postsecondary education, there has not yet been a comprehensive look at student and graduate experiences and how those experiences shaped their lives. Through a new research platform, the Education Consumer Pulse, Gallup and Strada Education Network aim to listen to and share the perspectives of education consumers at all levels of educational attainment. As a result, postsecondary leaders, policymakers, employers and other consumers will be able to better understand the critical decisions and nuances that shape the many complex issues facing postsecondary education today.

The Education Consumer Pulse is a daily survey of approximately 350 U.S. adults, with more than 122,500 interviews annually. It explores the extent to which students in the U.S. are pursuing and completing postsecondary education programs that advance their chosen careers and life goals. The survey launched in June 2016 and focuses on the education experiences of U.S. adults aged 18-65 currently living in the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

This report, which is meant to establish a baseline of information on education consumers' experiences, provides insights about the challenges consumers face when making education decisions that, once made, are extremely difficult to change. Consumers must select from among a crowded field of potential education pathways, while the economy around them continues to evolve. As the economy evolves, so do the skills required to compete in the workforce. This raises the stakes for consumers' decisions about the training they decide to undertake, as they must understand how their education decisions today will fit in a continually evolving economy. These decisions are made more difficult because much of the higher education paradigm is rooted in training individuals for an industrial economy,²¹ meaning that individuals must be purposeful in selecting an education path that effectively prepares them for a 21st-century economy.

For this first report, Gallup and Strada Education asked individuals who had previously enrolled in or completed postsecondary education three key questions:

If you had to do it all over again, would you still ...

Pursue the same level of education?

Pursue the same area of study?

Attend the same institution?

The findings that follow are based on interviews conducted with 89,492 adults between June 29, 2016, and March 26, 2017.

²¹ Baker, J. (2013). Industrial age education is a disservice to students. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-baker/industrial-age-education-_b_2974297.html; Selingo, J. (2017). The future of work and what it means for higher education. LinkedIn. Retrieved from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/future-work-what-means-higher-education-jeff-selingo>

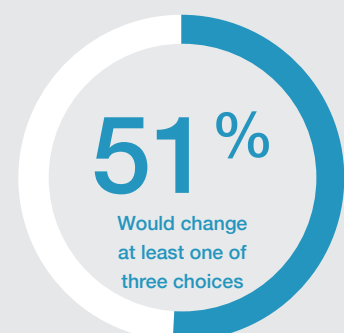
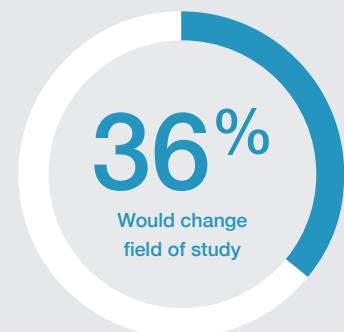
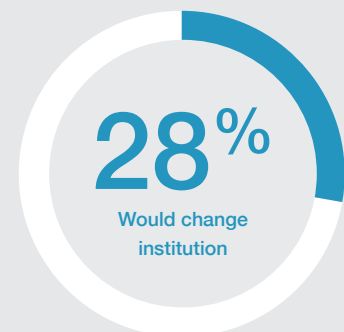
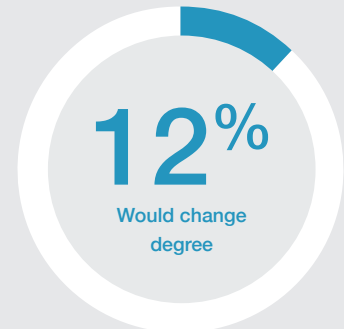
U.S. Adults Reflect on Their Education Decisions

About half of all U.S. adults would change at least one of the decisions they made along their education path, whether that be choosing a different major or field of study, a different institution, or another degree type. Overall, relatively few people would choose another degree type (12%). Many more adults would choose another major or field of study (36%) or a different institution (28%).

The desire to make different education decisions, however, differs by individuals' education levels. While education consumers of all levels, overall, are unlikely to say they would pursue a different degree type (12%), less than one in 10 adults with at least a bachelor's degree say they would pursue a different degree. Though associate degree holders are the most likely to say they would pursue a different degree, less than a quarter of those individuals say they would choose a different degree path. In fact, only 13% of those with some college but no degree — the group that is most likely to say they would make at least one of their education choices differently — say they would pursue a different degree.

Although few report they would change their degree type, a much larger percentage, across all levels of education, report they would change their field of study. That sentiment is most pronounced for those with some college, but no degree and those with a bachelor's degree. Forty-two percent of those with some college but no degree and 40% of those with a bachelor's degree would study a different major if they had to do it all over again. Associate degree holders and those who completed a technical or vocational program trail these groups with 36% and 31%, respectively, reporting they would change their field of study. Postgraduate degree holders are the least likely to report they would pursue a different field of study, with about a quarter of those who pursued (26%) or obtained (24%) a postgraduate degree saying they would change their field of study.

More than half of U.S. adults would change at least one of their education decisions.



Those with some college but no degree are the most likely to say they would change at least one of these three education decisions, which may not be surprising given that many may feel that they have little to show for their time and financial investment. Perhaps more surprising is the relatively small gap that separates this group from bachelor’s and associate degree holders. While 59% of those who have some college but no degree would make different education decisions, more than half of associate degree holders (54%) and bachelor’s degree holders (52%) report they would do the same. Meanwhile, those who pursued (41%) or obtained (37%) a postgraduate degree are the least likely to say they would change at least one of these education decisions.

TABLE 1. Percentage who would change their education decisions, by level of education for adults with at least some postsecondary education.

	Would obtain a different degree	Would study a different major	Would attend a different institution	Would make one or more decisions differently
Vocational/Tech/Trade program	19%	31%	35%	48%
Some college, no degree	13%	42%	35%	59%
Associate degree	23%	36%	30%	54%
Bachelor's degree	7%	40%	25%	52%
Some postgraduate work	9%	26%	26%	41%
Postgraduate degree	7%	24%	22%	37%

Numbers may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

The desire to change education decisions differs by institution type.

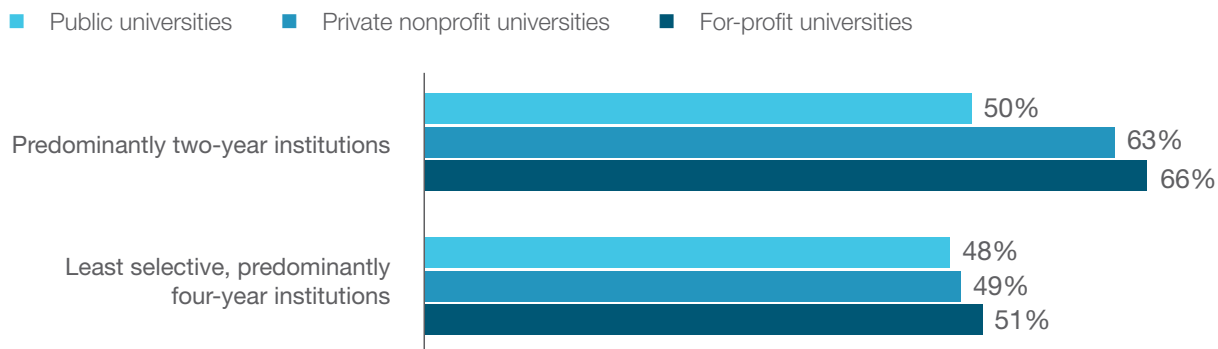
The desire to make different education decisions varies by the type of institution individuals attended. Individuals who received their degree from the most selective public (44%) and private (42%) four-year schools are the least likely to indicate they would change their education decisions. Meanwhile, adults who attended for-profit, certificate-granting institutions (62%), private nonprofit two-year schools (63%) and for-profit two-year schools (66%) are most likely to say they would change at least one of their education decisions.

However, less variation exists for mid-tier, inclusive²² and less-selective four-year institutions. About half of adults who attended inclusive public (48%) and private (49%) institutions say they would make at least one different decision about their education path. Similarly, around half of those who attended less selective public (50%) and private (47%) four-year institutions say the same.

²² Inclusive institutions are those with few, if any, admission requirements in terms of GPA or test scores.

Many education consumers attend mid-tier and inclusive institutions. Yet, little information exists to help consumers choose between those institutions compared with the plethora of information, rankings and assessments available for more selective institutions. Still, the lack of disparity between mid-tier and inclusive institutions, and the substantial desire to make different education decisions among alumni of selective schools, implies that selectivity is a relatively minor factor in determining whether consumers would make different education decisions.

TABLE 2. Percentage who would change their education decisions, by institution type and selectivity.²³



**Selectivity is determined for four-year colleges using the Carnegie Undergraduate Student Profile classification. Using combined ACT and SAT test score data for students at the 25th percentile of admitted students, schools are classified as least selective colleges if they fall in the bottom quintile, less selective if scores are in the middle three quintiles and “most selective” if scores are in the top quintile. Details are available here: http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/methodology/ugrad_profile.php*

See Appendix B of this report for the extended table.

Individuals who earn more are less likely to say they would change their education decisions, although many high earners would still make changes.

While income may be an imperfect indicator of an education’s value, salary for those in the labor market does correspond with consumers’ perceptions about their education decisions. Overall, individuals with higher incomes are less likely to say they would make different choices about their education. Nearly six in 10 U.S. adults aged 30 to 40,²⁴ and earning less than \$20,000 annually, say they would change at least one of their education decisions, compared with about two-fifths of those making \$250,000 or more.

Adults reporting higher incomes are particularly less likely to report they would attend a different institution or study a different major. Less than a third (31%) of those earning less than \$20,000 say they would choose a different institution, compared with 23% of those earning \$250,000 or more.

²³ Cells show mean percentage of respondents who express regret on degree, major or institution. Data are only available for those who complete degree programs and are matched to institutions.

²⁴ For the purposes of this analysis, Gallup analyzed income for individuals aged 30 to 40 because — for most — income levels are still close to graduation without being too distant. Many state and federal income data metrics focus on 10 years from entry or 10 years from graduation.

Similarly, far fewer adults in the highest income category of \$250,000 or more annually report they would study a different major than those with annual incomes of less than \$20,000. Despite lower levels of regret among these higher earners, nearly a third (31%) report they would study a different major if provided the opportunity.

TABLE 3. Percentage who would change their education decisions, by annual personal income for those in the labor force, aged 30 to 40.

	Would obtain a different degree	Would study a different major	Would attend a different institution	Would make one or more decisions differently
\$0-\$19,999	15%	44%	31%	57%
\$20,000-\$39,999	17%	44%	33%	58%
\$40,000-\$59,999	13%	39%	28%	55%
\$60,000-\$79,999	13%	35%	27%	50%
\$80,000-\$99,999	12%	34%	28%	50%
\$100,000-\$149,999	9%	28%	23%	41%
\$150,000-\$199,999	12%	32%	26%	45%
\$200,000-\$249,999	9%	23%	23%	35%
\$250,000 or more	12%	31%	23%	43%

Numbers may not total 100% due to rounding.

Consumers with more student loan debt are more likely to say they would make different education decisions.

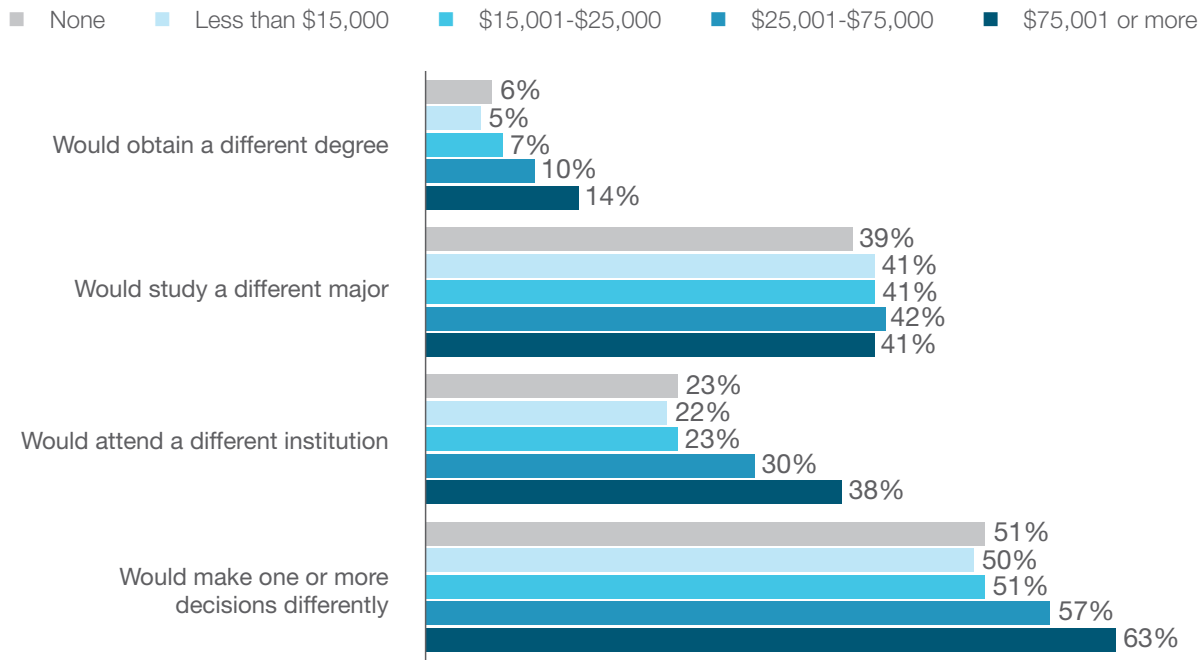
Like income, student loan burden is singularly insufficient to evaluate individuals’ education experiences, but it remains a critical factor in consumers’ perceptions about their education decisions. In prior research, Gallup has demonstrated that college graduates who shoulder large student loan debt are less likely to believe their education was worth the cost.²⁵

As might be expected, the relationship between a desire to change education decisions and student loan amount is concentrated among those who would change which institution they attended — since the cost of attendance varies substantially across different higher education institutions. In fact, across all undergraduate and graduate student loan amounts, no more than 14% of U.S. adults say they would pursue a different degree. However, just under a quarter (23%) of those who borrowed no money to pursue their undergraduate degree say they would attend a different institution, compared with 38% of those who borrowed more than \$75,000.

Overall, student loan debt for postgraduate education elicits less regret among U.S. adults than undergraduate debt. Even among those with more than \$75,000 in postgraduate student loans, slightly more than one in 10 say they would pursue a different degree. As with undergraduate student loan debt, adults with postgraduate student loan debt are more likely to say they would choose a different institution than to say they would choose a different degree. A fifth of those who borrowed no money to pursue their graduate degree say they would choose another school, compared with 27% of those who borrowed more than \$75,000.

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TABLE 4. Percentage of undergraduates who would change at least one education decision, by student loan debt.



See Appendix B of this report for the extended table.

Those who complete degrees later in life are more satisfied with their education decisions.

Regardless of their age at the time of graduation, few bachelor’s degree holders would pursue a different degree. However, those aged 30 or older at the time of their graduation are less likely than those under age 30 at the time of their graduation to say they would pursue a different field of study. This difference in the percentage of older and younger graduates who would select a different field of study is notable among public university graduates regardless of institution selectivity. Across institutions of varying selectivity, about two-fifths of those who graduated before age 30 say they would change their field of study, compared with about 30% of those who graduated at age 30 or older.

TABLE 5. Percentage of graduates who received degree before and after age 30 who would obtain a different degree.

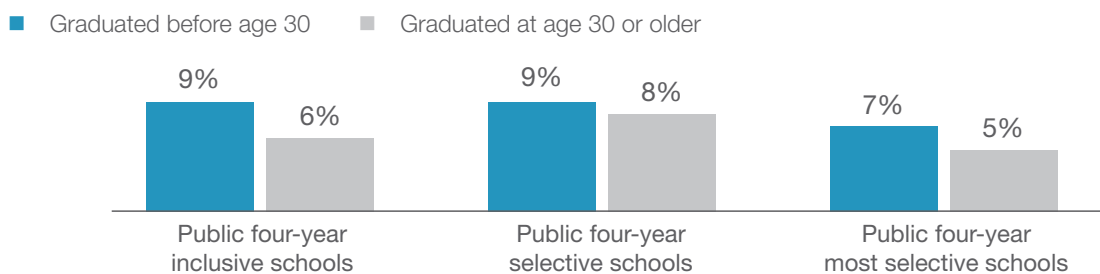
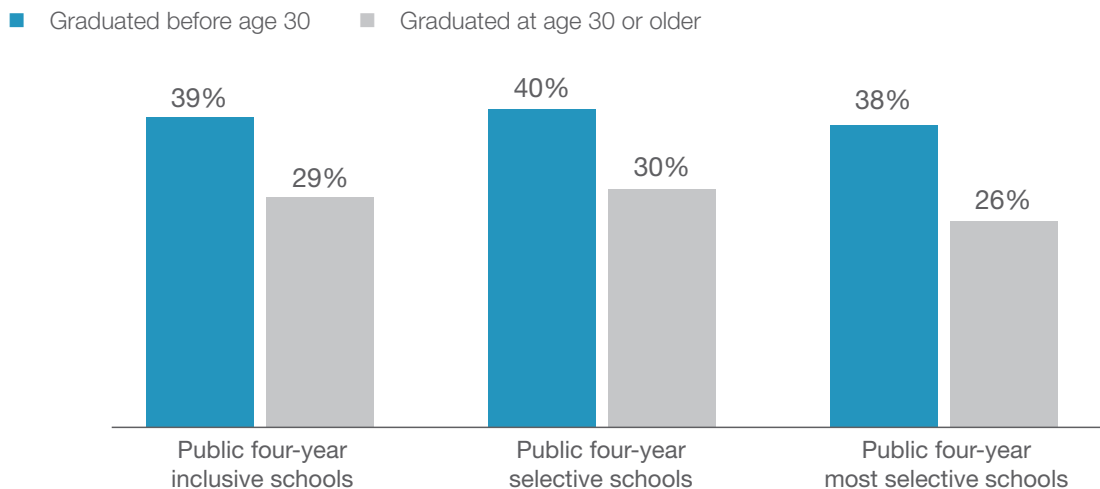


TABLE 6. Percentage of graduates who received a degree before and after age 30 who would study a different major.



Parents’ education levels are unrelated to the likelihood that individuals would make different education decisions.

Except for the small percentage of adults whose own parents pursued graduate degrees, parental education levels are largely unrelated to whether individuals would make different education decisions. This holds true for perceptions about degree type, field of study and institution. Indeed, the percentage of adults reporting they would change their education decisions is nearly identical at all levels of parental education.

TABLE 7. Percentage who would change at least one of their education decisions, by parental education level.

Would make one or more decisions differently

53%	Less than high school diploma	52%	Associate degree
53%	High school diploma or GED	50%	Bachelor's degree
53%	Vocational/Tech/Trade program	50%	Some postgraduate work
52%	Some college, no degree	46%	Postgraduate degree

See Appendix B of this report for the extended table.

STEM graduates are the least likely to report they would make different education decisions.

Regardless of education level, few individuals in any field of study would choose a different degree type. In fact, less than one in 10 bachelor’s or postgraduate degree holders and just under a quarter of associate degree holders — regardless of field of study — say they would pursue a different degree. Likewise, little variation in a desire to choose a different institution exists across education levels and fields of study.

Most notably, those who studied STEM fields to earn an associate, bachelor’s or postgraduate degree are the least likely to report they would choose another major, while those who studied liberal arts are the most likely to say they would change their field of study among associate and bachelor’s degree holders. Since respondents did not indicate the field of study they would have chosen instead, some of these graduates may have preferred a major within the same category as their original major. For example, someone with a liberal arts degree who indicated they would choose a different major might have selected a different liberal arts major if given the chance to choose again.

However, graduates of all degree levels and fields of study are more likely to say they would choose another field of study than choose a different degree type or institution. Associate degree holders are the most likely of those with a STEM degree to say they would change their major, with three in 10 saying they would do so.

TABLE 8. Percentage who would make different education choices if they could do it all over again.*

	Would study a different major	Would make one or more decisions differently
Associate degree		
Business	37%	56%
Liberal arts	40%	57%
STEM**	30%	49%
Public service	41%	55%
Bachelor’s degree		
Business	40%	52%
Liberal arts	48%	57%
STEM**	28%	42%
Public service	41%	52%
Postgraduate degree		
Business	24%	37%
Liberal arts	24%	39%
STEM**	20%	31%
Public service	33%	44%

*See the methodology section of this report for a detailed description of how major fields of studies are categorized and reported.

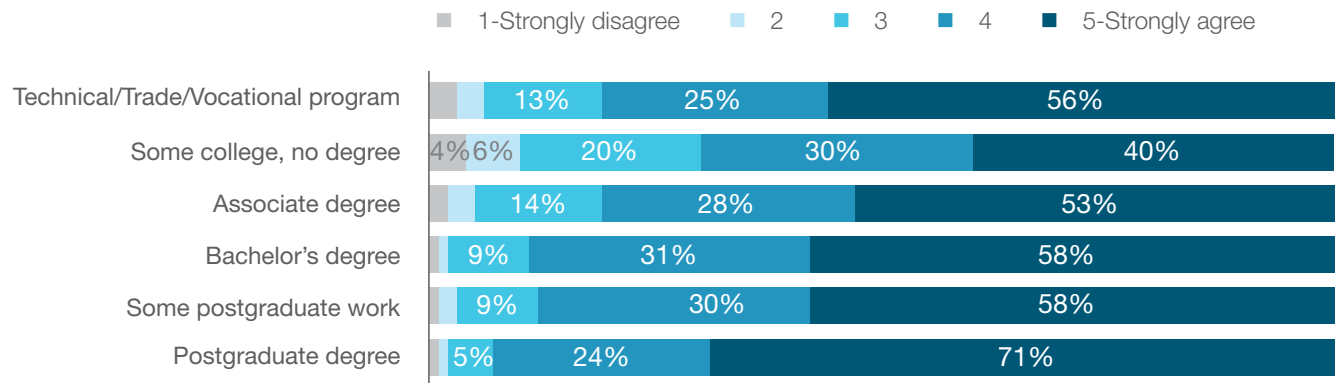
**For the purposes of this analysis, majors are classified as STEM majors if the curriculum prepares students to work in fields that require high levels of STEM knowledge in one or more domains.

See Appendix B of this report for the extended table.

Despite desired changes, most U.S. adults still say they received a high-quality education.

Though more than half of U.S. adults say they would make at least one different education decision, about four in five adults who completed a credential or a degree either agree or strongly agree that they received a high-quality education. In fact, even among those who started a postsecondary degree but have not yet completed it, most say they received a high-quality education.

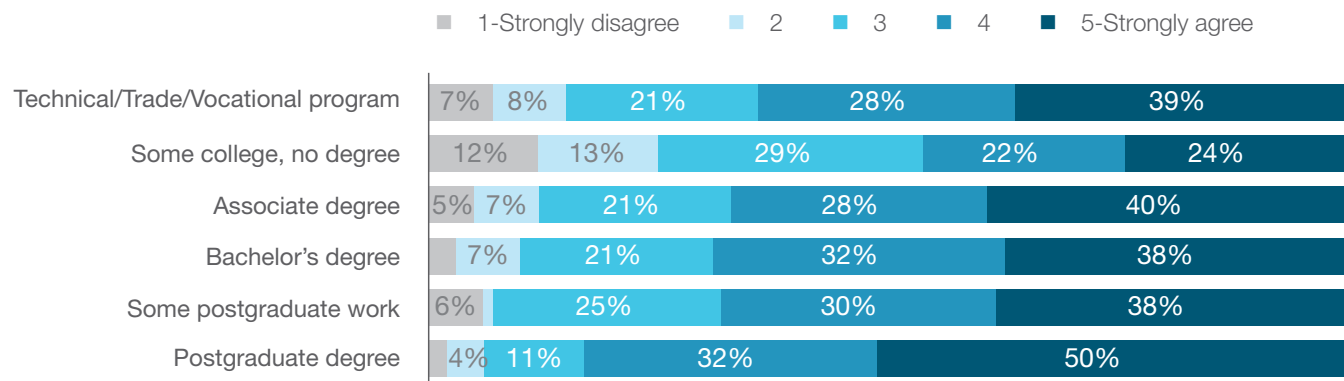
TABLE 9. Percentage who feel they received a high-quality education, by education level.



Numbers may not total 100% due to rounding.

Across all education levels, only 12% of adults say they would pursue a different degree type. But even among this small number of individuals, many still highly rate the quality of the education they did receive. The only notable exception is among adults who started college but did not complete, among whom just under half agree or strongly agree that they received a high-quality education.

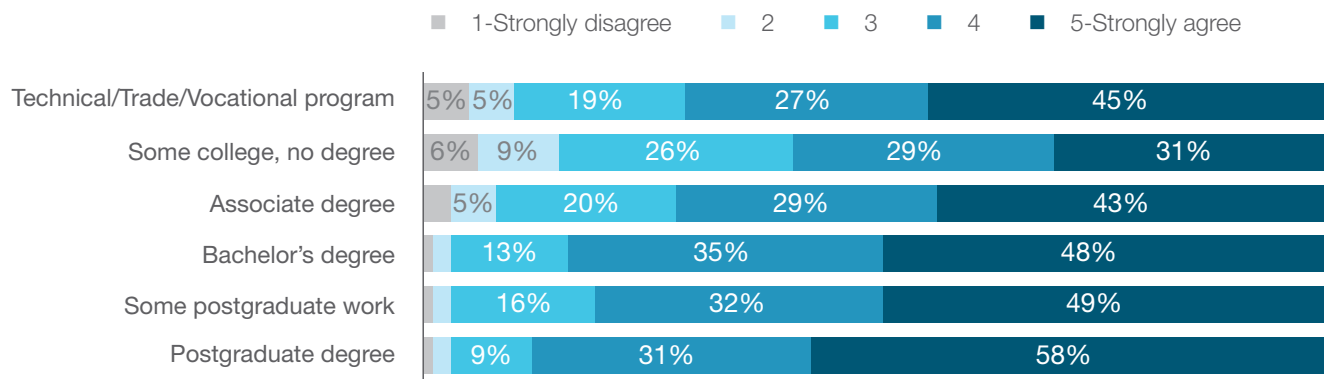
TABLE 10. Percentage who believe they received a high-quality education *among those who would change their degree type*, by education level.



Numbers may not total 100% due to rounding.

The most common source of regret stems from an individual’s chosen field of study, particularly among those pursuing a bachelor’s degree. But even among those who would choose a different field of study, the majority of adults rate the quality of their education highly. Among bachelor’s degree holders, of whom 40% would choose a different major, more than eight in 10 of those who would change their major agree or strongly agree that they received a high-quality education. By contrast, education ratings fall substantially for those who started college but never completed. But even among that population, six in 10 highly rate the quality of education they did receive.

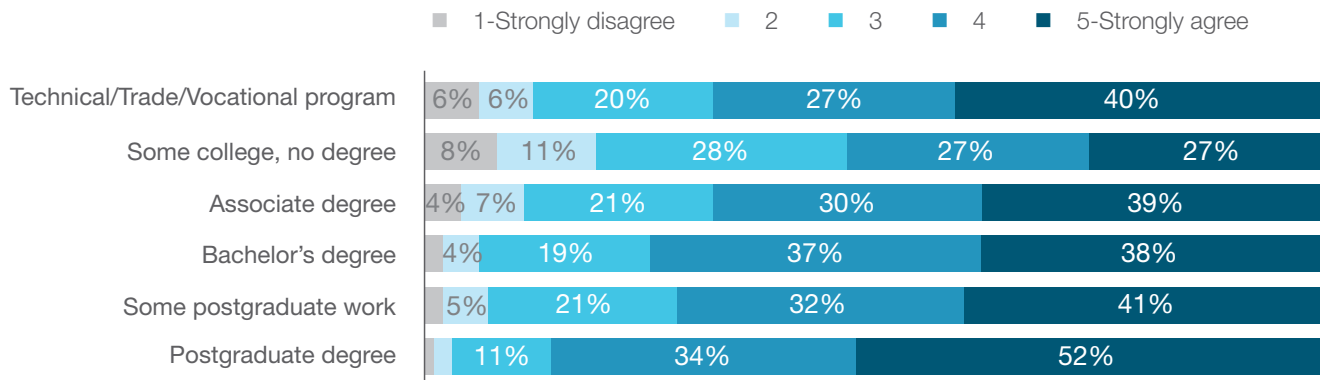
TABLE 11. Percentage who believe they received a high-quality education *among those who would change their major field of study*, by education level.



Numbers may not total 100% due to rounding.

Finally, individuals' beliefs about the quality of their education remain high among those who indicate they would now attend a different institution. The desire to choose another institution is particularly strong for adults with technical/trade/vocational certifications and among those who started college but did not finish. However, even among those populations, two-thirds and more than half, respectively, rate the quality of their education highly.

TABLE 12. Percentage who believe they received a high-quality education *among those who would change their institution*, by education level.



Numbers may not total 100% due to rounding.

These results suggest that regret about education decisions is not exclusively driven by individuals' perceptions of the institutions themselves. Rather, individuals' desires to change their education decisions may be a function of having made decisions without comprehensive information, such as an understanding of employment opportunities, earning potential or the implications of long-term student debt. In short, education consumers' regret about their previous decisions could be read as a signal to improve the resources available to inform future education decisions.

Conclusion

Overall, the fact that millions of Americans report receiving a quality education and only a small fraction would change the degree type they obtained indicates broad satisfaction with the postsecondary experience for the majority of consumers. This is a positive outcome for current postsecondary leaders; however, the fuller picture of education consumers' experiences reveals there is room for improvement in guiding them to and through their paths to successful completion and on to rewarding careers. When comparing consumers' experiences across the three critical types of education choices — degree type, institution and major — consumers across various education levels indicate that they would do things at least slightly differently. This baseline is a call for postsecondary leaders and policymakers to conduct a deeper dive with alumni and constituents to ask what can be done to ensure a more purposeful experience for their students and graduates.

Of the three critical education decisions, individuals are most likely to say they would choose a different field of study. The concentration of second thoughts over field of study could be rooted in the challenges that consumers face in using their education to obtain their ideal job. Or it could simply be that the changing workforce landscape has reduced or eliminated the need for their specialty. Perhaps more than decisions made about the type of degree or institution, choice of field of study has the most direct workforce implications. The field of study one selects in many ways dictates the skills an individual acquires which, in turn, influences how well they can compete and perform in the workforce. If individuals struggle to translate their field of study into their chosen career, they may be more likely to say they would choose a different field of study if given the chance. These data suggest that the current landscape of information available to consumers may be insufficient for them to make the education decisions that best align with their goals.

Regardless, these insights raise several key questions for postsecondary leaders, policymakers, employers and consumers of education:

- How and why do people select their field of study?
- Why would so many education consumers change part of their education path?
- How should we be guiding those under 30 to select the best majors for their individual goals?
- Are the choices of majors clearly aligned with career paths that will be available to students after graduation or completion of their program?
- Are those who pursue postsecondary education with a career in mind more likely to finish and feel they made good decisions about their education?
- How satisfied are those who started college but did not finish, and how likely is it that they will return?

The answers to these questions are just the starting point for rethinking the ways we deliver information about various paths in education and how we deliver education itself. Like other industries, asking education consumers their perspectives on how well-served they were can move the needle on student success and innovation in postsecondary education.

We know the stakes have never been higher for Americans to graduate high school and complete some type of postsecondary education or training. Aforementioned research reveals education to be a driver of financial, social and physical well-being, all of which are critical to living a fulfilling life. The results shared in this report present a starting point for policymakers, postsecondary education leaders and other stakeholders to engage in an important conversation about how we can help education consumers find their purpose, pursue the best education path aligned with that purpose and complete their path to achieve their desired career. Through the Education Consumer Pulse, Gallup and Strada Education Network continue to explore more education consumer insights on other topics. Join the conversation at stradaeducation.gallup.com.

Methodology

Study Design

Results for the Education Consumer Pulse are based on telephone surveys conducted June 29, 2016-March 26, 2017, with a random sample of 89,492 respondents aged 18 and older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia.

The Education Consumer Pulse sample includes national adults with a minimum quota of 70% cellphone respondents and 30% landline respondents, with additional minimum quotas by time zone within region. Landline and cellular telephone numbers are selected using RDD methods. Landline respondents are chosen at random within each household on the basis of which member will have the next birthday.

Interviews are conducted in English and Spanish. Samples are weighted to correct for unequal selection probability and nonresponse. The data are weighted to match national demographics of gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education and region. Demographic weighting targets are based on the most recent Current Population Survey figures for the population aged 18-65 years with a U.S. bachelor's degree or higher level of education.

All reported margins of sampling error include the computed design effects for weighting.

For results based on 5,154 of those with less than a high school degree, the margin of sampling error is ± 1.9 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

For results based on 20,550 of those with a high school diploma or GED, the margin of sampling error is ± 1.0 percentage point at the 95% confidence level.

For results based on 3,426 of those who completed technical/trade/vocational program, the margin of sampling error is ± 2.4 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

For results based on 13,384 of those with some college, no degree, the margin of sampling error is ± 1.3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

For results based on 9,144 of associate degree holders, the margin of sampling error is ± 1.4 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

For results based on 21,596 bachelor's degree holders, the margin of sampling error is ± 0.9 percentage point at the 95% confidence level.

For results based on 1,095 of those with some postgraduate work but no degree, the margin of sampling error is ± 4.2 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

For results based on 15,143 of those with a postgraduate degree, the margin of sampling error is ± 1.1 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

Appendix A: Major Classification

Business	Liberal Arts	Public Service	STEM
Accounting	Anthropology	Criminal Justice	Aerospace
Architecture/Urban Planning	Art	Early Childhood Education	Agriculture/Natural Resources
Business	Classical and Modern Languages and Literature	Education	Animal Biology (Zoology)
Business Administration	English (Language and Literature)	Education Leadership	Astronomy and Astrophysics
Economics	Ethnic/Cultural Studies	Elementary Education	Atmospheric Sciences
Entrepreneurship	Geography	Homeland	Biochemistry/Biophysics
Finance	History	Library Science	Biological/Agricultural Engineering
Healthcare Administration/Studies	Liberal Arts and Sciences, General Studies, and Humanities	Music/Art Education	Biology (General)
Hospitality/Tourism	Media/Film Studies	Physical Education/Recreation	Biomedical Engineering
Human Resources Management	Music	Public Policy	Building Trades
International Business	Other	Secondary Education	Chemical Engineering
Journalism/Communication	Philosophy	Security and Protective Services	Chemistry
Law	Political Science	Social Work	Civil Engineering
Management	Psychology	Special Education	Clinical Laboratory Science
Marketing	Sociology	Theology/Religion	Computer
Real Estate	Theatre/Drama		Computer Engineering
	Women's/Gender Studies		Computer Science
			Computer/Management Information Systems
			Data Processing or Computer Programming
			Drafting or Design
			Earth and Planetary Sciences
			Ecology and Evolutionary Biology
			Electrical Engineering

Business	Liberal Arts	Public Service	STEM
			Electronics
			Engineering
			Engineering Science/Engineering Physics
			Environmental Science
			Environmental/Environmental Health Engineering
			Health
			Health Technology
			Industrial/Manufacturing Engineering
			Kinesiology
			Marine Biology
			Marine Sciences
			Materials Engineering
			Mathematics/Statistics
			Mechanic
			Mechanical Engineering
			Mechanics
			Medicine
			Microbiology
			Military Sciences/Technology/Operations
			Molecular, Cellular and Developmental Biology
			Neurobiology/Neuroscience
			Nursing
			Pharmacy
			Physics
			Plant Biology (Botany)
			Robotics Engineering
			Technologies
			Therapy (Occupational, Physical, Speech)

Appendix B: Extended Tables

TABLE 2. Percentage who would change their education decisions, by institution type and selectivity.

Selectivity*	Public universities	Private nonprofit universities	For-profit universities
Primarily certificate-granting institutions	46%	48%	62%
Predominately two-year institutions	50%	63%	66%
Least selective, predominately four-year institutions	48%	49%	51%
Moderately selective, predominately four-year institutions	50%	47%	**
Most selective, predominately four-year institutions	44%	42%	**
Exclusively graduate degree granting institutions	**	40%	**

Cells show mean percentage of respondents who express regret on degree, major or institution. Data are only available for those who complete degree programs and are matched to institutions.

*Selectivity is determined for four-year colleges using the Carnegie Undergraduate Student Profile classification. Using combined ACT and SAT test score data for students at the 25th percentile of admitted students, schools are classified as least selective colleges if they fall in the bottom quintile; less selective if scores are in the middle three quintiles and “most selective” if scores are in the top quintile. Details are available here: http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/methodology/ugrad_profile.php

**Estimates are not reportable due to sample sizes of less than 100.

TABLE 4. Percentage who would change at least one education decision, by student loan debt and degree levels.

	Would obtain a different degree	Would study a different major	Would attend a different institution	Would make one or more decisions differently
Undergraduate				
None	6%	39%	23%	51%
Less than \$15,000	5%	41%	22%	50%
\$15,001-\$25,000	7%	41%	23%	51%
\$25,001-\$75,000	10%	42%	30%	57%
\$75,001 or more	14%	41%	38%	63%
Postgraduate				
None	6%	23%	20%	35%
Less than \$15,000	4%	24%	19%	35%
\$15,001-\$25,000	5%	23%	22%	36%
\$25,001-\$75,000	8%	26%	22%	38%
\$75,001 or more	11%	25%	27%	41%

TABLE 7. Percentage who would change at least one of their education decisions, by parental education level.

	Would change degree type	Would study a different major	Would attend a different institution	Would make one or more decisions differently
Less than high school diploma	14%	36%	31%	53%
High school diploma or GED	14%	38%	29%	53%
Vocational/Tech/Trade program	13%	37%	30%	53%
Some college, no degree	13%	38%	29%	52%
Associate degree	13%	36%	29%	52%
Bachelor's degree	11%	36%	28%	50%
Some postgraduate work	11%	34%	31%	50%
Postgraduate degree	9%	33%	25%	46%

TABLE 8. Percentage who would make different education choices if they could do it all over again.*

	Would change degree type	Would study a different major	Would attend a different institution	Would make one or more decisions differently
Associate degree				
Business	23%	37%	33%	56%
Liberal arts	23%	40%	30%	57%
STEM**	23%	30%	29%	49%
Public service	20%	41%	25%	55%
Bachelor's degree				
Business	9%	40%	26%	52%
Liberal arts	8%	48%	27%	57%
STEM**	7%	28%	21%	42%
Public service	4%	41%	21%	52%
Postgraduate degree				
Business	7%	24%	22%	37%
Liberal arts	4%	24%	23%	39%
STEM**	5%	20%	21%	31%
Public service	9%	33%	23%	44%

*See the methodology section of this report for a detailed description of how major fields of studies are categorized and reported.

**For the purposes of this analysis, majors are classified as STEM majors if the curriculum prepares students to work in fields that require high levels of STEM knowledge in one or more domains.

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