

# A MAJOR STEP

What Adults Without Degrees Say  
About Going (Back) to College





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## What Adults Without Degrees Say About Going (Back) to College

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# INTRODUCTION

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Millions of American adults either have no education beyond high school or have some college but no degree. Helping more adults attain a degree or certificate is crucial for our nation's competitiveness—as of 2016, we ranked 10th in the world in postsecondary attainment—and for individuals' economic prospects as well. By 2020, 65 percent of all jobs will require a degree or certificate.<sup>1</sup> People with a degree or certificate earn substantially more than those with a high school diploma, are less likely to be unemployed and are more likely to have access to retirement plans and health care.<sup>2</sup>

Although traditional-age students outnumber adult learners in college, the percent of adults enrolling in college continues to grow.<sup>3</sup> Yet adult students have lower graduation rates than their younger peers. One report found that only about 36 percent of students who enroll in college when they are 20 years or older complete a degree within six years, compared with 59 percent of students who enroll when they are 19 years old or younger.<sup>4</sup>

A number of factors may be at work: Adults going to college usually have other responsibilities, such as work or family, which may limit the hours and energy they can bring to their studies. Financial responsibilities such as rent or mortgage payments make it difficult to afford ever-increasing college tuition. Adults, as opposed to traditional students, do not come directly from high school but have taken years off from studies and may have forgotten academic concepts and habits and need developmental courses.<sup>5</sup>

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1 Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith and Jeff Strohl, "Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements Through 2020," Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2013, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/recovery-job-growth-and-education-requirements-through-2020/>.

2 "Unemployment Rate 2.5 Percent for College Grads, 7.7 Percent for High School Dropouts, January 2017," Economics Daily, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, February 7, 2017, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2017/unemployment-rate-2-point-5-percent-for-college-grads-7-point-7-percent-for-high-school-dropouts-january-2017.htm>;

Jennifer Ma, Matea Pender and Meredith Welch, "Education Pays 2016: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society," Trends in Higher Education Series, College Board, 2016, <https://trends.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/education-pays-2016-full-report.pdf>.

3 National Center for Education Statistics, NCES Fast Facts, <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=98>.

4 Doug Shapiro et al., "Completing College: A National View of Student Attainment Rates—Fall 2009 Cohort," National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, November 16, 2015, <https://nscresearchcenter.org/signaturereport10/>.

5 Ben Miller, "Breaking with Tradition: Making Federal Grant Aid Work for Today's Students," Policy Brief, New America Education, 2014, [http://www.edcentral.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/BreakingWithTradition\\_7\\_8\\_2014\\_2.pdf](http://www.edcentral.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/BreakingWithTradition_7_8_2014_2.pdf).

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Low-income adult students face these and other barriers. In general, lower-income students of all ages are less likely to graduate than their more economically advantaged peers and are more likely to face various challenges. They may lack guidance and information to help them make good decisions about college, they may have less financial support from their families and they are more likely to attend colleges with lower graduation rates.<sup>6</sup>

The path to educational attainment starts before someone is accepted into college. Higher education leaders, administrators, educators and policymakers need to understand adults' aspirations, worries and needs as they consider whether college is worth it for them and, if it is, what college they will choose. What motivates adults to get a degree or certificate? Where do they go for help in making decisions about college? How will they fit school into their already busy lives? What makes a particular school appealing to them? How do lower-income adult prospective students' motivations, concerns and decisions differ from those of their higher-income counterparts? Understanding the perspectives of adults who are considering going (back) to college or a university can position higher education institutions and other stakeholders to help adult learners make good choices and get the support they need to complete their degrees or certificates.

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<sup>6</sup> Alanna Bjorklund-Young, "Family Income and the College Completion Gap," Institute for Education Policy, Johns Hopkins School of Education, March 10, 2016, <http://edpolicy.education.jhu.edu/family-income-and-the-college-completion-gap/>.

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# THIS RESEARCH

In an effort to help higher education institutions and other stakeholders understand the unique needs of adults who are considering going (back) to school, Public Agenda, with support from The Kresge Foundation, conducted a representative survey of 18- to 55-year-olds who have graduated from high school and are not currently enrolled in a postsecondary educational program but are looking to enroll in a degree or certificate program within the next two years. We call this group “adult prospective students” to highlight that these Americans are making decisions about college as workers, parents or temporarily unemployed adults and that their circumstances are markedly different from those of high school students who are planning to enter a higher education institution right after graduation.

This research is a follow-up to our 2013 survey of adult prospective students.<sup>7</sup> It is designed to explore adult prospective students’ perspectives on issues such as the following:

- The connection between education and career goals
- How adult prospective students plan to attend college or university
- The types and sources of information that can help them make decisions about higher education
- How they view various higher education options such as online education, competency-based education and guided pathways
- How they view different approaches to making higher education more affordable and increasing student success

## HOW THIS RESEARCH DEFINES ADULT PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS

- They are 18- to 55-year-old Americans who do not hold an associate or bachelor’s degree (although they may have earned a postsecondary diploma or certificate).
- They have finished high school but are not entering college straight out of high school.
- They are not currently enrolled in any kind of higher education institution.
- They are considering enrolling in a degree or certificate program and say it is likely that they will do so within two years.

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<sup>7</sup> Carolin Hagelskamp, David Schleifer and Christopher DiStasi, “Is College Worth It for Me?” (New York: Public Agenda, November 2013), <https://www.publicagenda.org/pages/is-college-worth-it-for-me>.

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This survey includes some of the same questions we asked in 2013 to understand whether and how adult prospective students' perspectives and expectations may have changed, but we've added new questions as well. Unlike the research conducted in 2013, this study was designed to explore the needs of low-income adults, who may require additional support, and of adults in cities, which may offer both more challenges and more opportunities for degree seekers.

Our findings and recommendations are based on survey data from a nationally representative sample of 1,328 adult prospective students that were collected via phone and online interviews from August 17 through November 12, 2017. In addition, we conducted three focus groups with adult prospective students to better understand their motivations, expectations, strategies and concerns as they consider their postsecondary options, including both adults with some college experience but no degree and adults with no college experience at all. Focus groups were held in New York City, New York; Fort Lauderdale, Florida; and Los Angeles, California.

The Methodology in Brief on page 37 of this report provides information about how this research was conducted. A complete methodology providing more detail, including sample characteristics and the survey's topline with full question wording, can be found at [www.publicagenda.org/pages/a-major-step-what-adults-without-degrees-say-about-going-back-to-college-topline](http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/a-major-step-what-adults-without-degrees-say-about-going-back-to-college-topline).

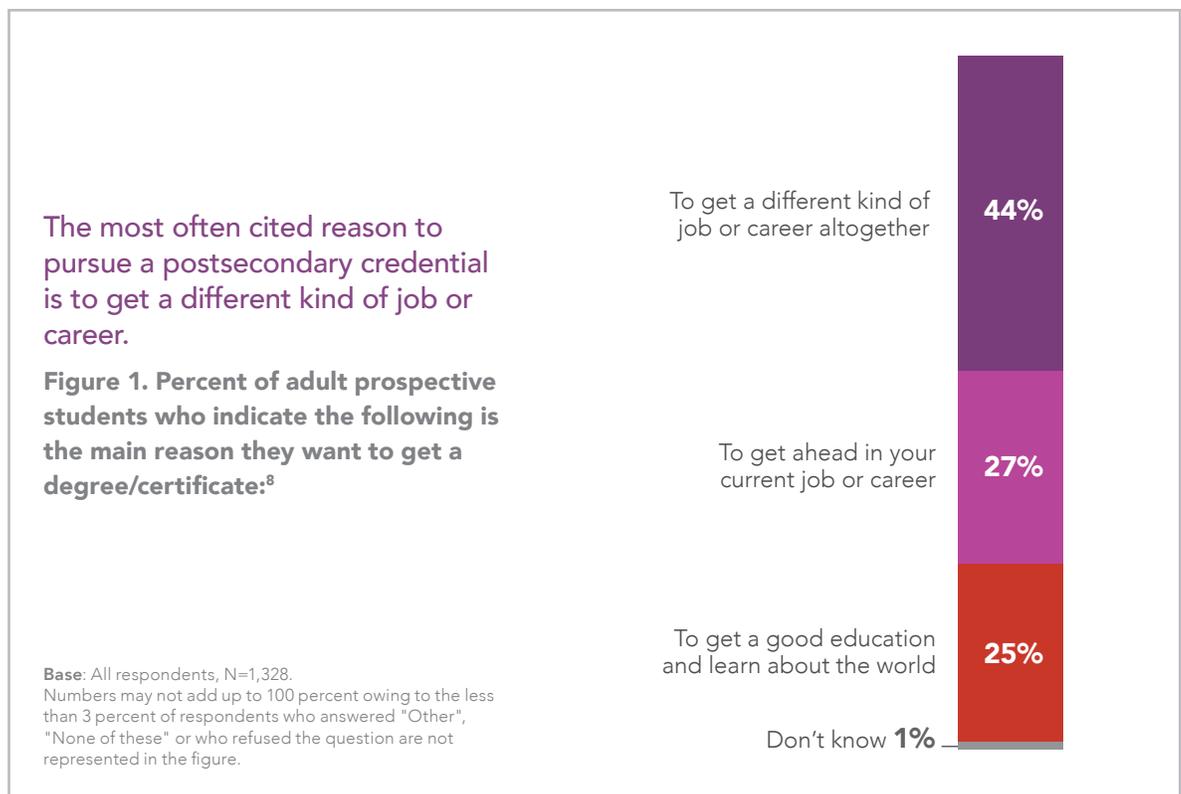


# MAIN FINDINGS

# 1

Most adult prospective students say their primary motivation for pursuing a degree or certificate is to improve their career prospects. About half of them think pursuing a degree or certificate is a wise investment despite the cost, but the rest are not convinced.

Seventy-one percent of adults who are planning to pursue a degree or certificate want to do so to expand their career options. This includes 44 percent looking to get a different kind of job or career altogether and 27 percent looking to get ahead in their current job or career. Only 25 percent say they want to do so in order to get a good education and learn about the world; see figure 1.



<sup>8</sup> Respondents were asked at the beginning of the survey if they were planning on pursuing a degree or certificate. Some subsequent questions were programmed so that respondents were asked about their intended postsecondary outcome. These questions are identified by *degree/certificate* in chart titles.

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In our focus groups, some adult prospective students expressed frustration that they had to get a degree or certificate in order to advance their careers. Some believed they already have the skills they need but that employers are just looking for a piece of paper. For example, a woman in Fort Lauderdale who is considering getting a degree explained, “I lost out on a really good job about a year and a half ago. The upper management told me, ‘You gotta get that piece of paper.’ He told me, ‘I went through college. I didn’t really care about it, but I knew that if I didn’t get that degree, I wasn’t going to get where I am.’”<sup>9</sup>

A woman in Los Angeles said, “I fell into a job with an insurance company at an entry-level position. Fifteen years later, I moved my way on up and I feel like I’ve reached the maximum capacity without a degree. I don’t really think I can go any further without the degree.”

### **Fewer adults looking to complete an associate degree or certificate think doing so is a wise investment compared with those considering a bachelor’s degree.**

Public Agenda’s previous research found that the general public’s confidence in higher education is waning. In a 2016 survey, only 42 percent of Americans said that a college education is necessary for success in today’s work world, whereas 55 percent of Americans said so in 2009, the last time the question was asked.<sup>10</sup>

This survey found that a little over half of adult prospective students—55 percent—think a college degree is a wise investment for them despite the cost. But their confidence in the value of the degree depends on what degree they plan to get.

Adults considering an associate degree or certificate appear more doubtful about the value of doing so compared with adults considering a bachelor’s degree; see figure 2.<sup>11</sup> These doubts about the value of an associate degree or certificate may be justified. In May 2016, 21 percent of entry-level occupations required a bachelor’s degree, while only 8 percent required an associate degree or postsecondary nondegree award. The median annual full-time earnings of those with an associate degree was about \$40,600, compared to about \$60,000 for those who have a bachelor’s degree.<sup>12</sup>

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9 Focus group quotations have been minimally edited for clarity.

10 David Schleifer and Rebecca Silliman, “What’s the Payoff?” (New York: Public Agenda, October 3, 2016), <https://www.publicagenda.org/media/research-brief-whats-the-payoff>.

11 Adults considering a bachelor’s degree includes adults who plan to enroll directly into a bachelor’s program and those who plan to transfer into a bachelor’s program after receiving some credit or completing an associate degree.

12 “37 Percent of May 2016 Employment in Occupations Typically Requiring Postsecondary Education,” Economics Daily, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, June 28, 2017, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2017/37-percent-of-may-2016-employment-in-occupations-typically-requiring-postsecondary-education.htm>;

“Weekly Earnings by Educational Attainment in First Quarter 2016,” Economics Daily, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 11, 2016, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2016/weekly-earnings-by-educational-attainment-in-first-quarter-2016.htm>.

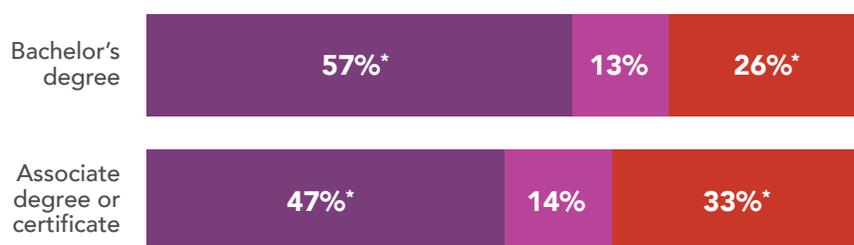
Fewer adults looking to complete an associate degree or certificate think doing so is a wise investment.

**Figure 2a. Percent of adult prospective students who indicate one of the following statements comes closest to describing how they feel about getting a certificate/associate degree/bachelor's degree:**



■ It is a wise investment for me even if it is expensive, because it is necessary to get ahead in my career

**Figure 2b. Percent of adult prospective students who indicate one of the following statements comes closest to describing how they feel about getting a certificate/associate degree/bachelor's degree, by type of degree they wish to attain:**



■ It is both a wise investment and a questionable investment for me

■ It is a questionable investment for me, because it is expensive and there's no guarantee that it will result in a better job

Base: All respondents, N = 1,328; bachelor's degree, n = 1,027; associate degree or certificate, n = 301.

\*Indicates group estimates are statistically different from one another at the p < .05 level.

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding and the less than 5 percent of respondents who answered "Neither" or "Don't know" or who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

# 2

## Taking on debt and balancing their studies with work and family are adult prospective students' top concerns about pursuing a degree. Relatively few worry about dropping out of their program.

At any age, attending college requires time and resources—and can leave people with substantial debt. Over 40 percent of student loan borrowers owe at least \$20,000, and about a third are not able to pay down their debt within five years.<sup>13</sup> Compared with recent high school graduates, more adults planning to pursue a degree or certificate may have to balance their studies with jobs and other responsibilities.

Not surprisingly, we found that adult prospective students' top worries about pursuing a degree or certificate are taking on too much debt and balancing work and family responsibilities with the demands of school; see figure 3.

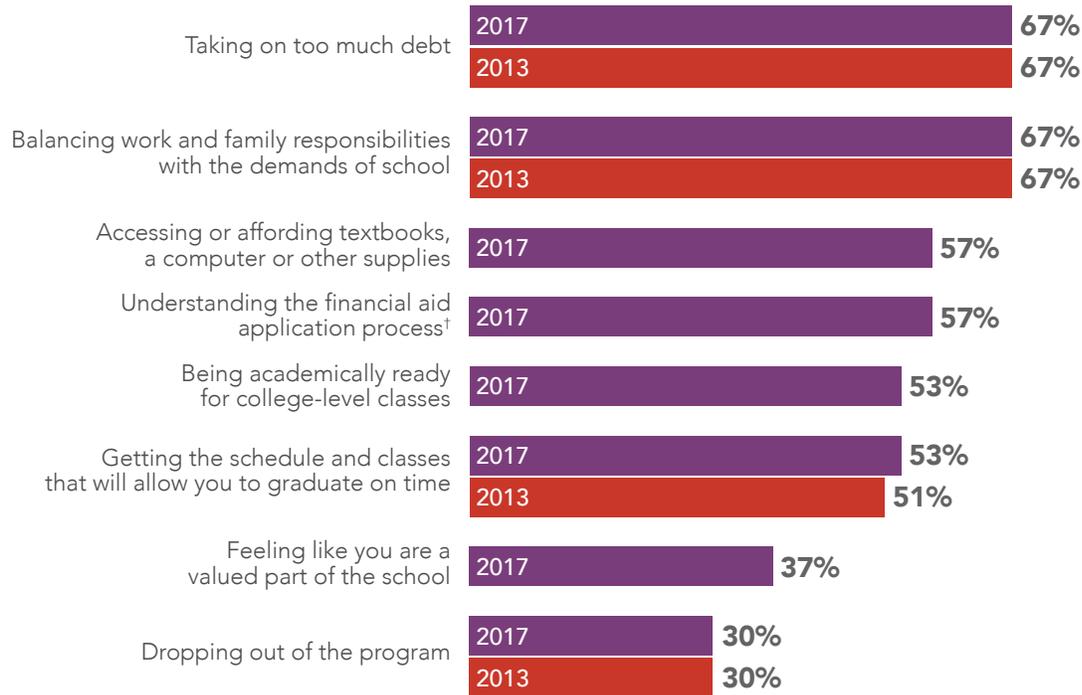
For example, a woman in our Fort Lauderdale focus group expressed her concerns about staying on top of family and work responsibilities when she starts school. "Mommy has to make sure that while she's in school my kids are not being neglected. If I don't go to school, how can I have a stable life for them? If I go back to school, it's gonna be hard. I still have to work and I still have to take care of my responsibilities." A woman in our New York City focus group pointed out, "If you ain't got a strong support system, it's not gonna work as far as somebody being home and taking care of the kids. Somebody being able to make a bed or somebody being able to cook. If you don't have those things and you're not on the same page, it's not gonna work."

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<sup>13</sup> "CFPB Finds Percentage of Borrowers with \$20K in Student Debt Doubled over Last Decade," Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, August 16, 2017, <https://www.consumerfinance.gov/about-us/newsroom/cfpb-finds-percentage-borrowers-20k-student-debt-doubled-over-last-decade/>.

Most adult prospective students worry about debt and about how to balance school with their work and family.

**Figure 3. Percent of adult prospective students who say they worry about the following as they are thinking about going back to school, by year:**



**Base:** The number of respondents for each item varies between n = 1,017 and n = 982 by design, as each respondent was asked six random items.

**†Base:** Only those who think they will pay for school by applying for student loans or applying for grants and scholarships, n = 855.

Group estimates are not statistically different from one another.

### Dropping out is not a top concern for adults considering getting a degree or certificate.

Although more than half of adult prospective students are worried about factors that have been linked to dropping out—such as keeping up with family and work demands and being academically ready<sup>14</sup>—only 30 percent of them are concerned about dropping out; see figure 3. Yet people who start a degree at an older age are less likely to complete it. One study found that six years after enrolling in a two-year or four-year program, 48 percent of those who enrolled when they were over the age of 20 did not complete a degree and were no longer enrolled in a program. In comparison, only 26 percent of those who enrolled when they were 20 or younger had these outcomes.<sup>15</sup>

14 Jean Johnson, Jon Rochkind, Amber N. Ott and Samantha DuPont, “With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them” (New York: Public Agenda, 2009), <https://www.publicagenda.org/pages/with-their-whole-lives-ahead-of-them>.

15 Doug Shapiro et al., “Completing College: A National View of Student Completion Rates—Fall 2011 Cohort,” National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, December 13, 2017, <https://nscresearchcenter.org/signaturereport14/>.

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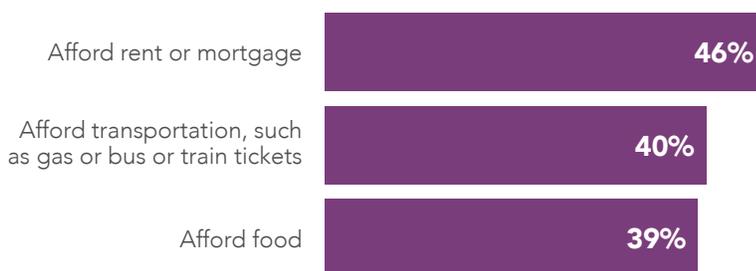
## Adult prospective students expect daily expenses to become more difficult to afford when they start college. Few expect to receive help paying for college from family, friends or employers.

While policymakers and media often focus on rising college tuition, there are other costs involved in attending school, such as textbooks, transportation and housing. This research found that 67 percent of adult prospective students worry about debt and 57 percent worry about accessing or affording school supplies; see figure 3. Moreover, some say that attending college will make it harder for them to afford necessities such as rent or mortgage payments, transportation or food; see figure 4.

Previous research has demonstrated that these worries are well-founded. In 2017–18, 61 percent of a student’s budget at public two-year colleges went to expenses other than tuition and fees, such as books, supplies and transportation. At a public four-year college, 31 percent of a student’s budget went to expenses other than tuition and fees when paying in-state tuition.<sup>16</sup> About half of all students at two-year and four-year colleges are food insecure. At least 33 percent of students at two-year colleges are housing insecure, including up to 14 percent of students who are actually homeless.<sup>17</sup>

Nearly half of adult prospective students think that attending college will make it harder for them to afford rent or mortgage payments.

**Figure 4. Percent of adult prospective students who say that, looking ahead, they think attending college will make it *harder* for them to do each of the following:**



Base: All respondents, N=1,328.

16 Jennifer Ma et al., “Trends in College Pricing 2017,” Trends in Higher Education Series, College Board, 2017, [https://trends.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/2017-trends-in-college-pricing\\_1.pdf](https://trends.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/2017-trends-in-college-pricing_1.pdf).

17 Katharine M. Broton and Sara Goldrick-Rab, “Going Without: An Exploration of Food and Housing Insecurity Among Undergraduates,” *Educational Researcher* 47, no. 2 (March 2018): 121–33, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X17741303>.

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A woman in our New York City focus group who is considering getting a degree said that these factors may affect her decision about whether to go back to school. “I hesitate to apply for school because living in Brooklyn is expensive. I have a \$1,400 rent that I pay. So do I just want to work and live paycheck to paycheck, or do I want to go to school and stop work? At the end of the day I feel going to school is gonna be better in the long run, but you have to pay these bills.”

A woman in our Los Angeles focus group added: “I haven’t gone to school yet because I’m trying to find a school that’s close enough to me where it’s not gonna cost me an arm and a leg to drive a car to get there.”

### **Attending college will make it harder for adults with low incomes to afford food and transportation.**

Forty-five percent of adult prospective students who have an annual household income of \$40,000 or under believe that it will be harder for them to afford transportation, while only 33 percent of adult prospective students whose household income is over \$40,000 believe this. Forty-one percent of adult prospective students with lower household incomes say that it will be harder for them to afford food, while 36 percent of their higher-income counterparts say this.

### **Most adult prospective students plan to pay for college with grants or scholarships and savings. Few will receive help from their family, friends or employers.**

Most adult prospective students will use multiple sources to pay for college, with 82 percent saying they will use two or more of the five sources we asked about. Applying for grants and scholarships and using their own earnings or savings are the most common ways adult prospective students plan to pay for college; see figure 5. However, while 70 percent say they will use money they earn or have saved, very few—6 percent—say this is the *only* way they think they will pay for college. Relatively few of them expect to receive help from sources such as family, friends or employers.

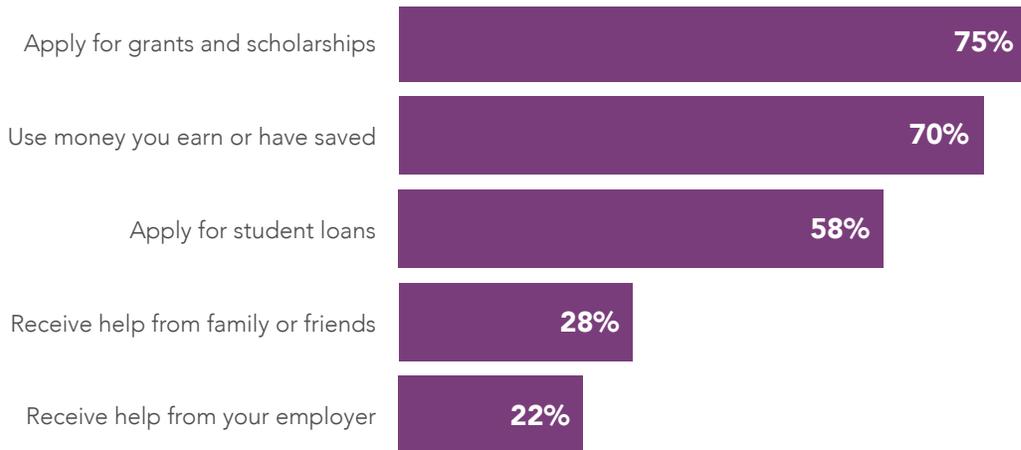
Because so many adults planning to get a degree or certificate are concerned about taking on too much debt, it is not surprising that more are planning to apply for grants and scholarships than to take out loans. But they may be too hopeful about getting scholarships: In 2017, only 8.6 million students received Federal Pell Grants or Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants, compared with 13.1 million students who received direct subsidized loans, direct unsubsidized loans or Perkins Loans.<sup>18</sup>

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18 Sandy Baum et al., “Trends in Student Aid 2017,” Trends in Higher Education Series, College Board, October 2017. [https://trends.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/2017-trends-student-aid\\_0.pdf](https://trends.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/2017-trends-student-aid_0.pdf).

More adult prospective students think they will apply for grants and scholarships, and fewer say they will apply for student loans.

**Figure 5. Percent who think they will pay for college by doing any of the following:**



Base: All respondents, N=1,328.

### Requiring schools to offer thorough financial aid counseling strikes most adult prospective students as a very good idea.

It should not come as a surprise that 69 percent of adult prospective students believe it is a very good idea to require schools to offer comprehensive financial aid counseling. After all, while 75 percent say they will apply for grants or scholarships and 58 percent will apply for loans, 57 percent of adult prospective students are worried about understanding the financial aid application process and 67 percent are worried about taking on too much debt.

While most schools offer some form of financial aid counseling, its quality and intensity may vary. For example, any student who receives a federal loan must complete entrance and exit counseling interviews. While some schools provide financial aid counselors to conduct these interviews, others simply offer a link to an online interview.

# 4

**Most adult prospective students plan to attend college in ways that can make completion more difficult, including transferring between institutions and going to school part-time. Moreover, about a third will start college unsure of what they want to study, an increase since 2013.**

Starting at a community college and transferring to a four-year institution can be a cost-effective way to earn a bachelor's degree. But many institutions and states do not have effective transfer policies in place. Therefore many students who try to transfer previously earned credits are unable to do so, wasting time and money.<sup>19</sup> Our research found that most adult prospective students will be looking to transfer at some point. While 80 percent of them say they are looking to complete a bachelor's degree, very few adult prospective students—only 9 percent—will enroll directly into a bachelor's program. Fifty-six percent will transfer into a bachelor's program at some point; see figure 6.

Not only is transferring a difficult process, but the timing of when one transfers matters. There are benefits to completing an associate degree first—rather than taking only a few courses and then trying to transfer into a bachelor's program. It can be a less expensive pathway to a degree and confers greater labor market benefits.<sup>20</sup> Thirty percent of adult prospective students plan to transfer into a bachelor's program after completing an associate degree. Yet 26 percent of adults considering a degree are looking only to complete some courses or receive a certificate prior to transferring into a bachelor's program.

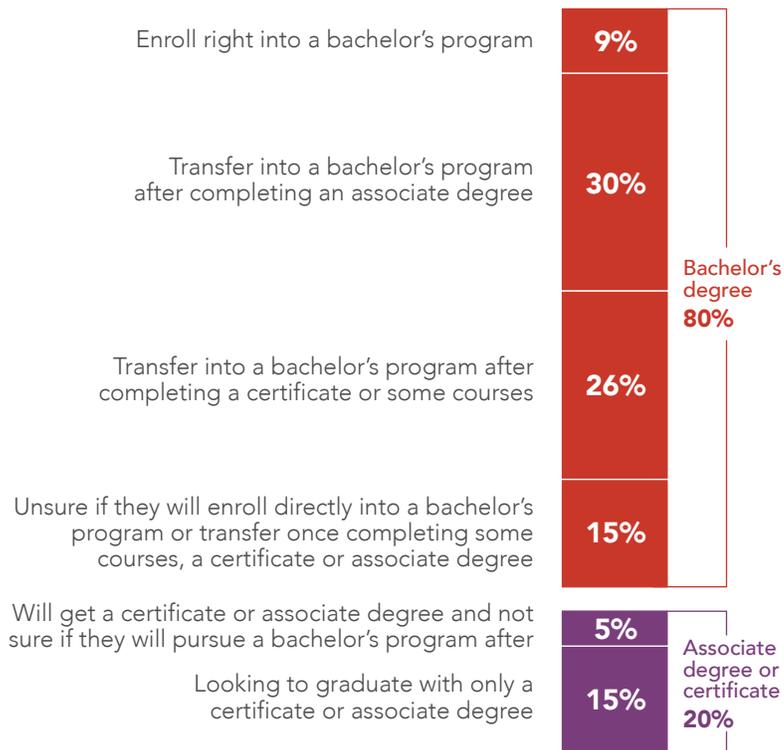
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19 Davis Jenkins and John Fink, "Tracking Transfer: New Measures of Institutional and State Effectiveness in Helping Community College Students Attain Bachelor's Degrees," Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, January 2016, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/tracking-transfer-institutional-state-effectiveness.html>; K. C. Deane et al., "Tackling Transfer: Partners in Learning: Improving Preparation of Community College Transfer Students for Upper Division Coursework," Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2016, <https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/AM16/Transfer%20Partners%20in%20Learning%20PPT.pdf>.

20 Clive Belfield, "The Economic Benefits of Attaining an Associate Degree Before Transfer: Evidence from North Carolina," Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, July 2013, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/economic-benefits-associate-degree-before-transfer.html>.

Most adult prospective students will complete an associate degree or certificate or receive some college credits before transferring to a bachelor's program.

**Figure 6. Percent of adult prospective students who plan to get a postsecondary degree any of the following ways:**



Base: All respondents, N=1,328.

### A third of adult prospective students do not know what they want to study, an increase since 2013.

Thirty-one percent of adult prospective students say they will figure out what they want to study once they are in school, an increase from 2013 when only 21 percent said they would figure out what they want to study once they were in school; see figure 7.<sup>21</sup> More adult prospective students with annual household incomes \$40,000 or less do not know what they want to study compared with their higher-income counterparts; see figure 8.

Entering a program of study early is correlated with successfully completing a degree or transferring.<sup>22</sup> Some institutions have created guided pathway programs to provide students with road maps or highly structured plans of study.<sup>23</sup> The growing share of adult prospective students who may be entering college unsure of what they want to study demonstrates the need for such programs, which can help students make sense of their options and get on a path to a major and to timely graduation.

21 Hagelskamp, Schleifer and DiStasi, "Is College Worth It for Me?"

22 Thomas Bailey, Shanna Smith Jaggars and Davis Jenkins, "What We Know About Guided Pathways," Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, April 2015, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/what-we-know-about-guided-pathways-packet.html>.

23 Bailey, Jaggars and Jenkins, "What We Know About Guided Pathways."

Compared with our research from 2013, this survey found that more adult prospective students are looking to pursue a degree or certificate without knowing what they want to study.

**Figure 7. Percent who indicate, when thinking about getting a certificate/associate degree/degree, they know what they want to study, they have narrowed it down to a few options or they will figure it out once they are in school, by year:**



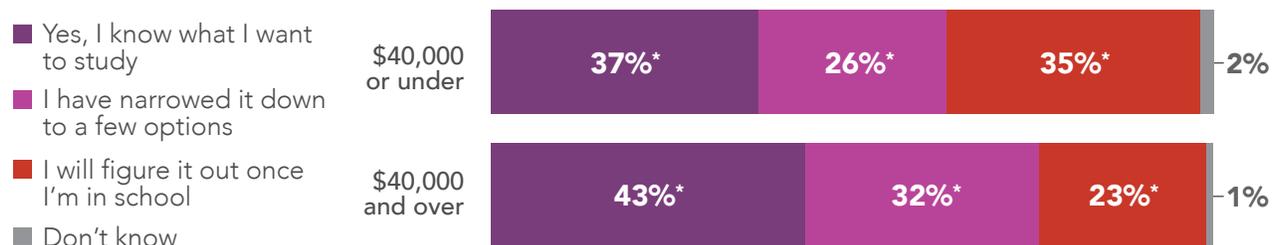
Base: All respondents, N=1,328.

\*Indicates group estimates are statistically different from one another at the p < .05 level.

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding and the less than 1 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

More low-income adult prospective students plan to enroll without knowing what they want to study.

**Figure 8. Percent who indicate, when thinking about getting a certificate/associate degree/degree, that they know what they want to study, they have narrowed it down to a few options or they will figure it out once they are in school, by household income:**



Base: All respondents, N=1,328.

\*Indicates group estimates are statistically different from one another at the p < .05 level.

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding and the less than 1 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

## Almost half of adult prospective students plan to attend school part-time.

Previous research has found that students who are enrolled part-time are less likely to graduate and tend to spend more money on tuition.<sup>24</sup> Yet we found that 46 percent of adult prospective students plan to go to school part-time. Only 24 percent plan to go full-time, and 29 percent are not yet sure.

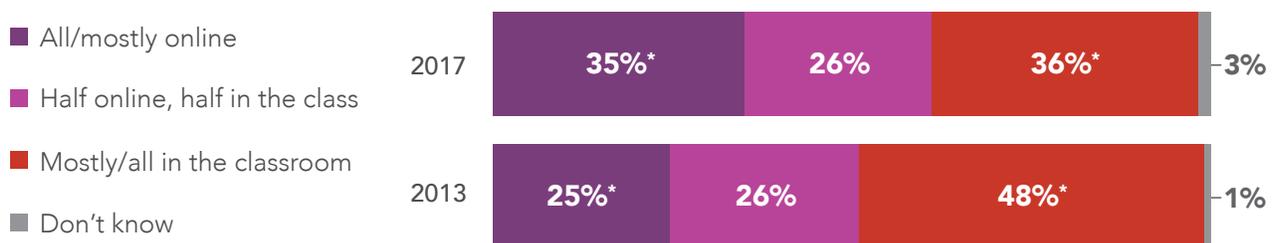
## A growing number of adult prospective students are looking to take courses online, yet most think in-person courses are better.

Most adult prospective students are planning on taking an online class, including 61 percent who are looking to take at least half of their classes online, an increase from 2013; see figure 9.

However, online courses have lower completion rates than in-person classes.<sup>25</sup> Adult prospective students appear to perceive a difference in quality. Sixty-eight percent of adults agree that although online courses are more flexible, students get more out of in-person courses. Even among those who are looking to take all or most of their classes online, 63 percent indicate that in-person classes are better for students; see figure 10.

Compared with our 2013 study, this survey revealed that more adult prospective students are looking to take most of their classes online.

**Figure 9. Percent who are looking to take their classes all or mostly online, half online and half in the classroom or mostly or all in the classroom, by year:**



Base: All respondents, N=1,328.

\*Indicates group estimates are statistically different from one another at the  $p < .05$  level.

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding and the less than 1 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

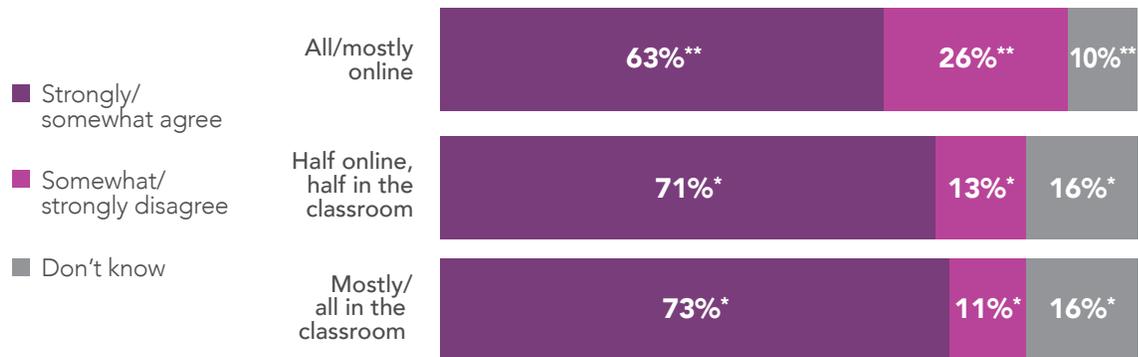
24 Paul Fain, "Full-Time Finishers," Inside Higher Ed, April 19, 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/04/19/students-who-attend-college-full-time-even-one-semester-are-more-likely-graduate>.

25 Pedro A. Willging and Scott D. Johnson, "Factors That Influence Students' Decision to Drop Out of Online Courses," *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* 13, no. 3 (October 2009): 115–27, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ862360>.

Over half of those looking to take their courses mostly or all online believe that students get more out of in-person courses.

**Figure 10. Percent who agree or disagree with the following statement, by how they plan on enrolling in online courses:**

**Although online courses are more flexible, overall, students get more out of in-person courses than they do out of online courses.**



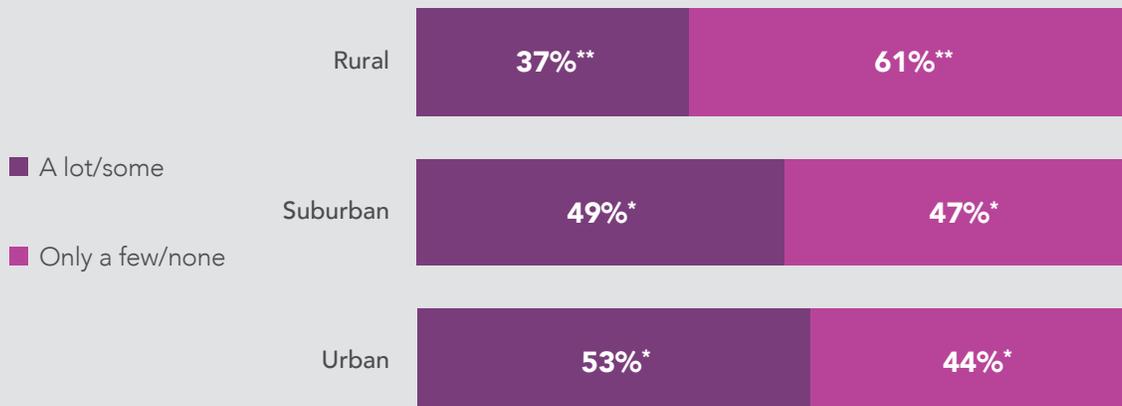
**Base:** All respondents, N=1,328.

Estimates for groups indicated by \* are not statistically different from one another; groups indicated by \*\* are statistically different from groups indicated by \* at the  $p < .05$  level.

## RURAL ADULT PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS DIFFER FROM THEIR URBAN COUNTERPARTS.

Rural adult prospective students feel they have fewer schools in the area in which they live that are right for them.

**Figure 11. Percent of adult prospective students who say, considering the area in which they live, there are a lot, some, only a few or no schools there that are right for them, by location.**



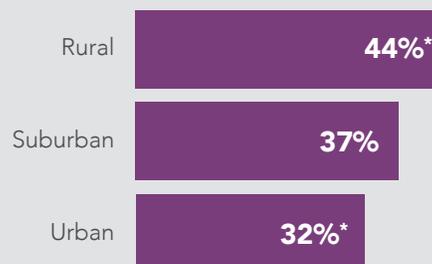
**Base:** All respondents, N=1,328.

Estimates for groups indicated by \* are not statistically different from one another; groups indicated by \*\* are statistically different from groups indicated by \* at the  $p < .05$  level. Variations between rural and urban adult prospective students remain significant when taking into consideration a range of demographics such as income, gender, age and race and ethnicity.

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding and the less than 5 percent of respondents who answered "Don't know" or who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

Adults considering a degree in rural areas are looking to take more classes online compared with adults in urban areas.

**Figure 12. Percent who are looking to take their classes all or mostly online, by location:**



**Base:** All respondents, N=1,328.

\*Indicates group estimates are statistically different from one another at the  $p < .05$  level.

Variations between rural and urban adult prospective students remain significant when taking into consideration a range of demographics such as income, gender, age and race and ethnicity.

In both urban and rural areas most think that in-person classes are better. Sixty-five percent of adult prospective students in rural areas and 70 percent of those in urban areas agree that although online courses are more flexible, overall, students get more out of in-person courses than they do out of online courses.

# 5

**High-quality teachers, affordability and gaining workplace skills are adult prospective students' top priorities when choosing a college. Most would be attracted to colleges that help students stay on track in their studies and find a job after graduation.**

Choosing a school can be difficult and overwhelming, yet it is a very important first step in the process of getting a degree or certificate. Students who choose colleges or universities that fit their financial, academic and geographic needs are more likely to complete their degrees.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, it is essential to understand what adults are looking for as they consider going (back) to school in order to help them make good choices. As a man in our focus group in Los Angeles pointed out, "Anywhere else I can return an item 30 days later and say this didn't work for me. But with education you can't necessarily do that. Once you're there, you're stuck."

## **Caring, skillful teachers are absolutely essential to adult prospective students—at a time when colleges are increasingly relying on adjunct faculty.**

Similar to our 2013 findings, most adult prospective students say that when choosing a school, it is absolutely essential that instructors care about students and know how to teach; see figure 13. Yet in 2015, part-time faculty, adjuncts, lecturers or graduate assistantships made up 50 percent of all faculty appointments at institutions that offer postsecondary education. While adjuncts and other non-tenure-track faculty are often skilled and caring teachers and scholars, they are typically paid per course, have heavy workloads and may therefore lack the support and job security to live up to their full potential in helping students succeed.<sup>27</sup>

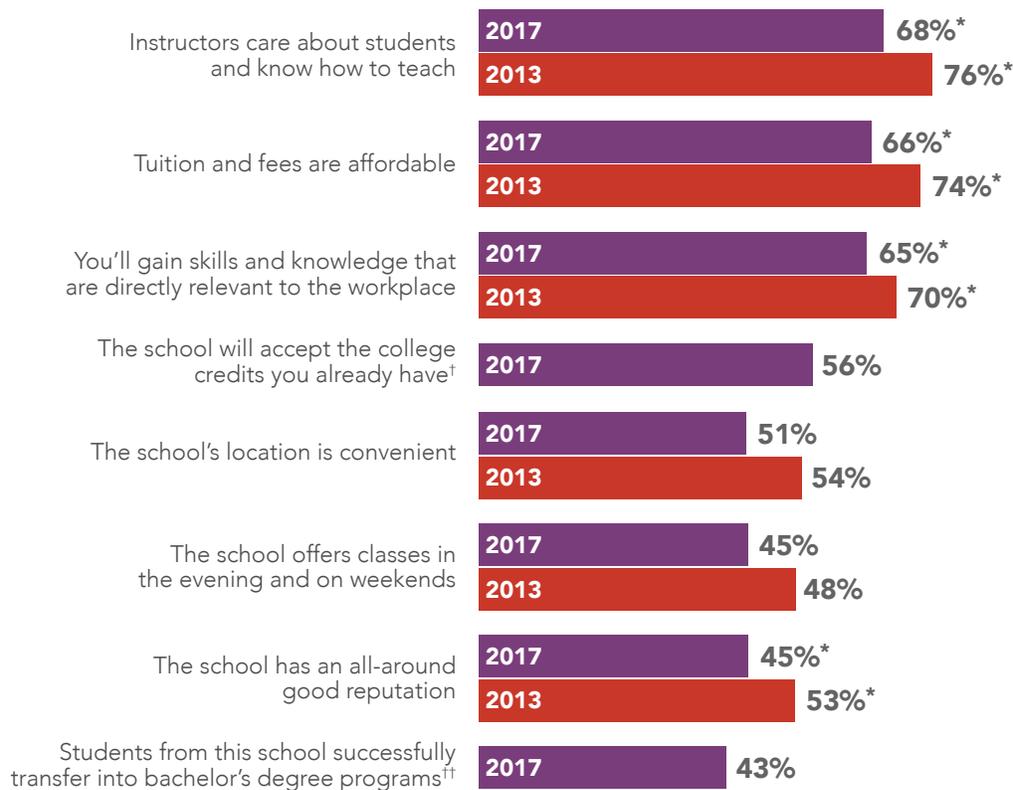
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<sup>26</sup> Andrew P. Kelly, Jessica S. Howell and Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj, *Matching Students to Opportunity: Expanding College Choice, Access, and Quality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2016).

<sup>27</sup> "Background Facts on Contingent Faculty," American Association of University Professors, n.d., <https://www.aaup.org/issues/contingency/background-facts>.

Adult prospective students' priorities are finding high-quality teachers, securing affordable tuition and gaining workplace-relevant skills and knowledge.

**Figure 13. Percent who say the following are absolutely essential when they are choosing a school, by year:**



**Base:** The number of respondents for each item varies between n = 849 and n = 801 by design, as each respondent was asked a random five items.

**†Base:** Only those who have some college experience, n = 620.

**††Base:** Only those who indicate that they plan on enrolling in a bachelor's program once they complete an associate degree, a certificate or some college credit, n = 761.

\*Indicates group estimates are statistically different from one another at the p < .05 level.

### When choosing a school, most adult prospective students feel that affordable tuition and fees and workplace-relevant skills are absolutely essential.

Sixty-six percent of adult prospective students say that affordable tuition and fees are absolutely essential; see figure 13. This aligns with our finding that many of them are concerned about taking on too much debt. Most adult prospective students also think it is absolutely essential to gain skills that are relevant to the workplace—which is not surprising, since 71 percent of them want to get a degree or certificate to broaden their career options.

**Among those who are looking to transfer across institutions, few think it is absolutely essential to know whether students from a school have successfully transferred.**

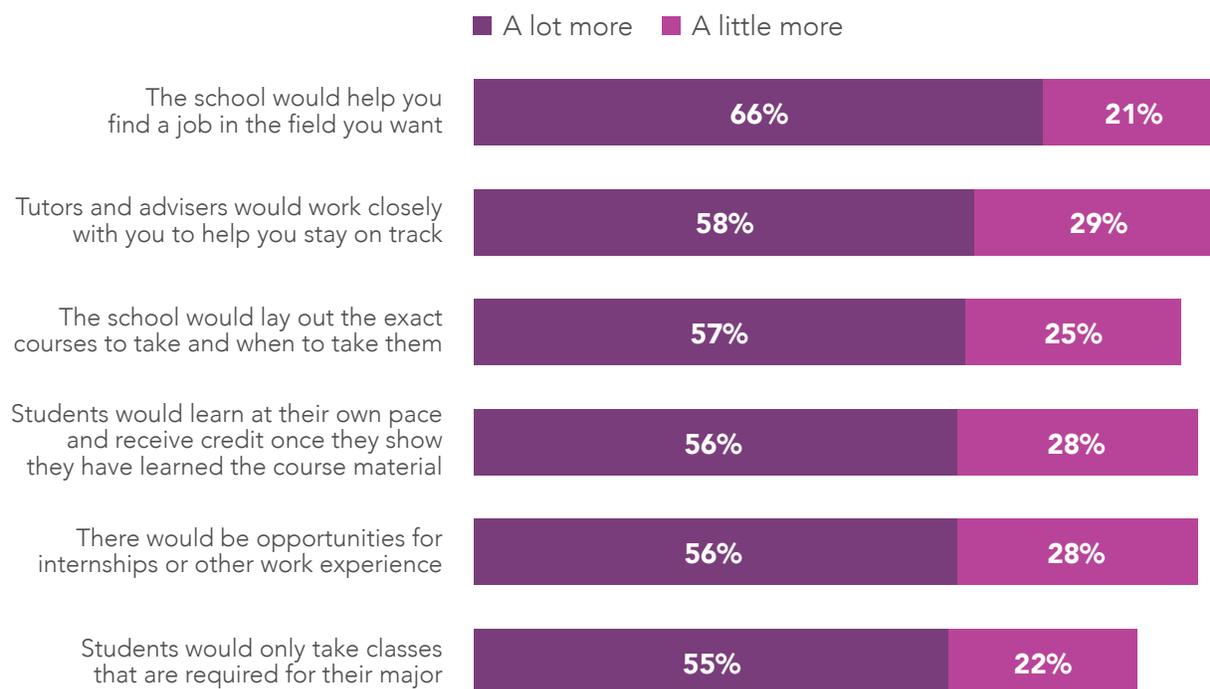
While 56 percent of adult prospective students would like to transfer into a bachelor’s program after receiving some college credit, a certificate or an associate degree, only 43 percent of those who indicate that they plan on transferring say it is absolutely essential to know that students from a particular school have successfully transferred; see figure 13.

**Most adults would be more interested in a school if they knew it would help them stay on track and get a job after graduating.**

Adult prospective students would also be more attracted to schools that provide support to help them graduate—such as having advisers or tutors who would work closely with them or lay out exactly which courses to take; see figure 14. As mentioned in Finding 4, many colleges and universities are exploring how to institute pathway programs that would guide students to courses, into majors and toward graduation. Our findings indicate that adult prospective students may be more attracted to schools that have these types of programs.

**Adult prospective students would be more attracted to schools that would help them find jobs and provide support to help them stay on track.**

**Figure 14. Percent who say they would be a lot or a little more interested in a school if they knew the following:**



Base: The number of respondents for each item varies between n = 1,128 and n = 1,072 by design, as each respondent was asked a random five items.

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## Although most want workplace-relevant skills, adult prospective students are not necessarily looking for schools that offer internships or work experience.

Sixty-five percent of adult prospective students think it is absolutely essential to gain skills and knowledge that are directly relevant to the workplace, but only 56 percent would be a lot more interested in a school if they knew there would be opportunities for internships or other work experience. Internships provide benefits including hands-on training, better job prospects, higher job satisfaction upon employment and an easier transition from school to work.<sup>28</sup> But adults simply may not have time to complete an internship or may already be working full-time jobs while in school.

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28 Michael Hergert, "Student Perceptions of the Value of Internships in Business Education," *American Journal of Business Education* 2, no. 8 (November 2009): 9-13, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1052655.pdf>.

"Employers Prefer Candidates with Work Experience," National Association of Colleges and Employers, April 5, 2017, <http://www.naceweb.org/talent-acquisition/candidate-selection/employers-prefer-candidates-with-work-experience/>.

# 6

**Although most adult prospective students are confident they will choose the right school, many are overlooking important information that experts think could help them do so.**

Experts and policymakers have been working to make information about the cost and quality of colleges and universities more transparent. For example, the U.S. Department of Education created the College Scorecard, a website that compares colleges across metrics including graduation rate, retention and student debt. Theoretically, greater transparency should allow prospective students of any age to identify and choose higher-performing institutions.<sup>29</sup> But do these metrics matter to adult prospective students?

**Most think they will choose the right school, but nearly half say there are few or no schools that are right for them in the area where they live.**

Eighty-nine percent of adult prospective students are confident that they will choose the right school. Although 49 percent say that, considering the area in which they live, there are a lot or some schools that are right for them, 48 percent say that there are only a few or no schools at all. Fifty-one percent of adult prospective students with annual household incomes under \$40,000 and 42 percent of those with household incomes above \$40,000 say this; see figure 15.

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<sup>29</sup> "Better Information for Better College Choice & Institutional Performance," U.S. Department of Education, January 2017, <https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/assets/BetterInformationForBetterCollegeChoiceAndInstitutionalPerformance.pdf>.

More low-income adult prospective students report having few or no schools that are right for them in the area where they live.

**Figure 15. Percent of adult prospective students who say, considering the area in which they live, there are a lot, some, only a few or no schools there that are right for them, by household income:**



Base: All respondents, N=1,328.

\*Indicates group estimates are statistically different from one another at the  $p < .05$  level.

Variations between higher- and lower-income adult prospective students remain significant when taking into consideration a range of demographics such as location, gender, age and race and ethnicity.

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding and the less than 3 percent of respondents who answered "Don't know" or who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

## Most adult prospective students do not think it is absolutely essential to have the information that experts prioritize, such as dropout rates.

Interestingly, when it comes to some of the metrics that experts think are important to know about a school, 51 percent or less of adult prospective students think any of them are absolutely essential—including only 28 percent who think it is absolutely essential to know a school's dropout rate; see figure 16.

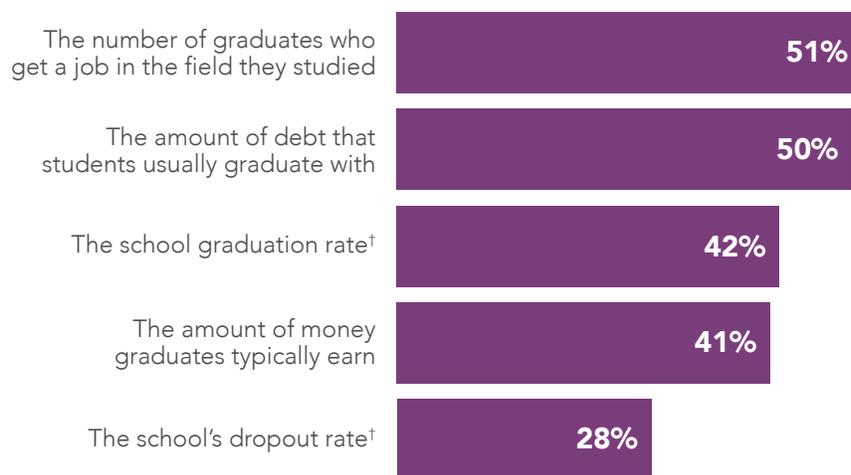
Such information could help adult prospective students identify which schools are most likely to meet their needs. For example, while 66 percent of adult prospective students say they would be a lot more interested in a school if it helped them find a job in the field they wanted, only 51 percent think it is absolutely essential to know the number of graduates who get a job in the field they study. Likewise, while 67 percent are worried about taking on too much debt, only 50 percent think it is absolutely essential to know the amount of debt that students usually graduate with, and only 41 percent think it is absolutely essential to know the amount of money graduates typically earn.

One possible reason adult prospective students may not believe these metrics are absolutely essential is that they may think students themselves are solely responsible for graduating or finding a job—rather than linking these outcomes to the policies and practices of higher education institutions.

For example, a man in our New York City focus group said, “I think what you get out of it is what you put into it. There could be schools where you don’t get the type of advisement or advising that you really need. But you have to be a person who’s going to continuously go back to that counselor over and over again until they know who you are and they realize that if they do not help you, you will help yourself.”

**Most adult prospective students do not believe that it is absolutely essential to know the statistics about schools that experts prioritize.**

**Figure 16. Percent who say it is absolutely essential to know the following before enrolling at a school:**



Base: All respondents, N=1,328.

<sup>†</sup>Base: Random half, respondents were asked only one of the two items.

# 7

## Most adult prospective students think colleges and faculty can help inform their decisions about schools.

In order to help adult prospective students make decisions about which schools will meet their needs, it is essential to know the sources they would rely on to make these decisions. Some of the adult prospective students we surveyed may be actively searching for information about which schools are best for them, while others may have not yet begun their college search. Regardless, our findings show that colleges themselves clearly have important roles to play in helping adults start their journey toward a degree or certificate.

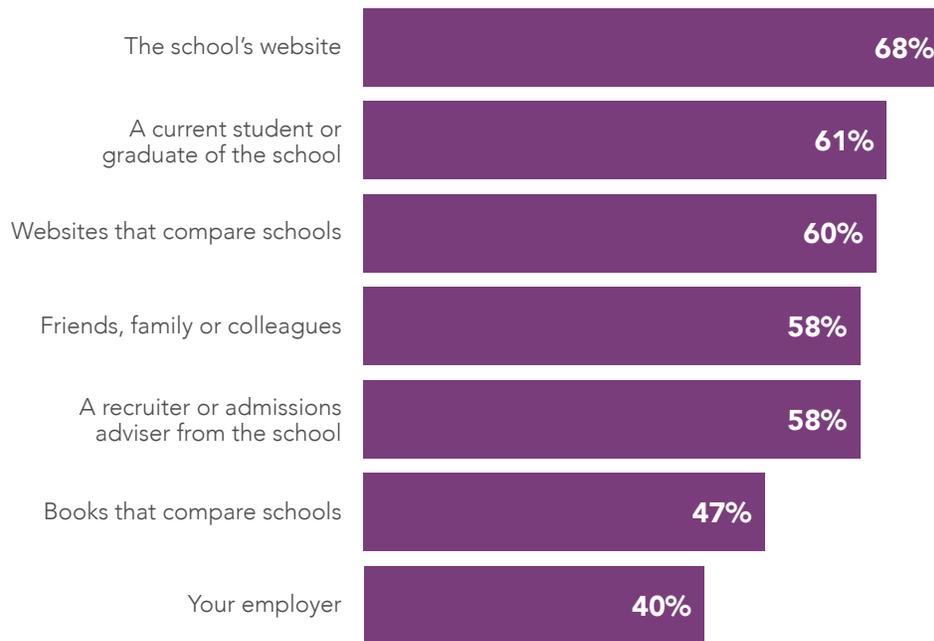
### **Schools themselves are especially important sources of information for adult prospective students.**

When it comes to choosing a school, adult prospective students say they would rely on an average of four of the seven sources of information that we asked about. In a variety of ways, schools themselves are particularly important sources: Most adult prospective students say they would rely on the school's website, a current student or graduate of the school, or a school's recruiter or admissions adviser; see figure 17. More would use the internet than books to compare schools.

During focus groups, adult prospective students discussed the important roles schools play as trusted sources of information. A man in our New York City focus group said, "I would say going to the schools and getting to talk with one of the deans, that's probably the best thing to do. Not just looking online because that's just people's opinions." A woman in our Fort Lauderdale focus group said, "You could just go on the school's actual website. It has whatever I'm looking for, let's say tuition cost. You can find everything on there. I haven't tried Facebook yet, but usually I've just gone straight to the school's web page."

When choosing schools, adult prospective students would rely on schools themselves for information.

**Figure 17. Percent who say that, when considering a school, they would rely on the following a great deal or somewhat to help them make a decision:**



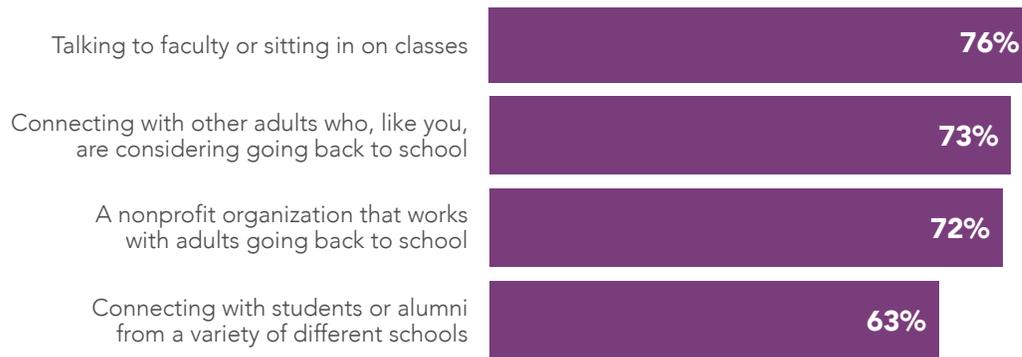
Base: All respondents, N=1,328.

### When choosing a school, adult prospective students think faculty can play an important role.

Not only do adult prospective students say they would rely on schools in a variety of ways to help them make decisions, but 76 percent say that talking to faculty or sitting in on classes would help them a great deal or somewhat in choosing a school; see figure 18. Doing so may help them evaluate whether teachers care about students and know how to teach, which most say is absolutely essential.

## Most adult prospective students think faculty can help them choose a school.

**Figure 18. Percent who say that when it comes to choosing a school, they think the following would help them a great deal or somewhat:**



**Base:** The number of respondents for each item varies between n = 690 and n = 644 by design, as each respondent was asked a random two items.

## More urban than rural adult prospective students think that nonprofits would be helpful to them in choosing a school.

Overall, 72 percent of adult prospective students think that nonprofit organizations that work with adults going back to school can help them a great deal or somewhat when it comes to choosing a school. But rural adult prospective students differ from their urban counterparts in their view on nonprofit organizations' potential roles. In urban areas, 77 percent of adult prospective students think that nonprofit organizations would be helpful, compared with only 64 percent who think this in rural areas. This could reflect the fact that there are fewer nonprofits in rural areas or that urban adult prospective students are more trusting of or more willing to use these organizations.

# 8

## Adult prospective students believe that business, community organizations and government can work together alongside colleges to help students succeed.

With only 36 percent of students who enroll in college at age 20 or older managing to complete a degree within six years, what more can be done to help adult students graduate?<sup>30</sup> Colleges alone cannot address the various challenges that students may face, such as balancing work and school and affording daily expenses. There are other entities in the community that may be better positioned to support students as they encounter these challenges.

Most adult prospective students favor a variety of roles for employers, businesses and community organizations in helping students succeed in college; see figure 19. For example, while only 40 percent of adult prospective students say they would rely on their employer for information to help them choose the right school, 67 percent think that it is a very good idea to encourage employers to support employees who want to earn a degree or certificate.

### **Most adult prospective students think it is a very good idea to require schools to work together to make transferring between institutions easier.**

Although few adult prospective students think it is absolutely essential to know a school's transfer rate, most support the idea of making the transfer process easier. Fifty-nine percent of adult prospective students think it is a very good idea to create partnerships between schools so that students can transfer easily from associate degree programs to bachelor's degree programs; see figure 19.

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30 Shapiro et al., "Completing College: A National View of Student Attainment Rates—Fall 2009 Cohort."

Adult prospective students support multiple ideas for how the community can help them complete a degree or certificate.

Figure 19. Percent of adult prospective students who indicate each of the following is a very good idea or a somewhat good idea:



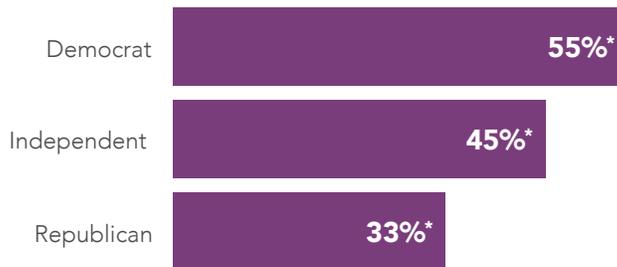
Base: The number of respondents for each item varies between n = 694 and n = 629 by design, as each respondent was asked a random three items.

## Fewer Republican adult prospective students than Democrats or Independents think using taxpayer money to make public colleges free for low- or middle-income students is a good idea.

Support for free college tuition for low- and middle-income students varies by political affiliation among adult prospective students; see figure 20. When Public Agenda surveyed the general public in 2016, we reached similar findings. Democrats are much more likely than Republicans to say it is a very or somewhat good idea to use taxpayer money to make public colleges free for students from low- and middle-income families, with Independents falling in between.<sup>31</sup>

Few Republican adult prospective students support using taxpayer money to make public college free for low- or middle- income students.

**Figure 20. Percent who think it is a very good idea to use taxpayer money to make public colleges free for low- and middle-income students, by political party affiliation:**



Base: All respondents, N=1,328.

\*Indicates group estimates are statistically different from one another at the  $p < .05$  level.

31 Schleifer and Silliman, "What's the Payoff?"



# IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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In order to increase the number of people with postsecondary credentials and ensure that the United States remains internationally competitive, it is necessary to allocate more energy and resources to ensuring that adult students complete their degrees or certificates. Based on our findings, this report concludes with implications and recommendations for helping more adult prospective students attain postsecondary success.

- **Broaden the conversation about college costs to include not only tuition, but housing, transportation and food.** About half of adult prospective students say that attending college will make it harder for them to afford rent or mortgage payments, and 39 percent say it will be harder to afford food. It is essential to support these students financially beyond tuition. Emergency financial aid, transportation stipends and food assistance can all be scaled up to alleviate some of the most pressing affordability burdens of attending college, helping more students complete their degrees. This is especially important for low-income students.
- **Help adult prospective students gain a more realistic understanding of how to pay for college, and provide comprehensive counseling on loans and the financial aid process.** Since most adult prospective students are worried about taking on debt, it is understandable that more say they will rely on grants and scholarships than on loans. But for many students, loans may be unavoidable. Applying for loans can be daunting, and more than half of those who are looking to apply for loans are worried about understanding the financial aid process. While many schools offer financial aid counseling to enrolled students, such counseling is clearly a priority for adult prospective students. Financial aid counseling need not be limited to entrance and exit interviews. Relevant, easily accessible financial aid counseling should be available when choosing a college, during enrollment and even after college completion.
- **Provide guidance about when to transfer, and help adults understand potential challenges.** Few adult prospective students think it is absolutely essential that students enrolled at a particular school have successfully transferred into bachelor's programs. Yet about half of them are looking to transfer at some point, including 26 percent who will transfer with only some credits or a certificate, thus missing out on labor market and financial benefits. Adult prospective students need to be engaged on when and how to transfer to maximize their likelihood of graduating and minimize their costs and time spent in school. They need to understand that some schools have higher transfer rates than others—before they start investing time and money in an institution.

- 
- **Create structures to help undecided adult prospective students pick a program of study prior to enrollment or soon thereafter.** Studies have found a correlation between early program entry and degree completion or successfully transferring. It is therefore concerning that since 2013, the percent of adults who are unsure of what they want to study increased 10 percent. Enrolling undeclared means students may use up valuable time and money deciding on a field of study. Approaches such as intensive advising or guided pathway programs can help students narrow down their options so that they enter a program of study earlier and start earning credits toward their major. These approaches may be especially helpful for low-income students, who are even more likely to enter college unsure of what to study.
  - **Provide additional support for adult prospective students to stay on track and ensure they graduate.** Unlike traditional students, adult prospective students may have to go to school part-time, transfer between schools or take more classes online—all factors related to a lower likelihood of graduation. Adult prospective students will need more support to stay on track, and they appear open to such help. Consider ways different departments such as academic affairs and career services can work together and provide easily accessible and relevant tutoring or other services that can address students' academic needs.
  - **Colleges and universities should prioritize faculty.** Most adult prospective students say that when choosing a school, it is absolutely essential that instructors care about students and know how to teach. Although they are looking for high-quality teachers once they enroll, they recognize that faculty can also play an important role prior to enrollment, by helping them decide which colleges are right for them. Therefore, it is essential for colleges and universities to attract and retain high-quality faculty and give them the time they need to connect with adult prospective students and serve as advisers.
  - **Find innovative ways to provide workplace-relevant instruction in classrooms.** Many adult prospective students are planning to pursue a degree or certificate to broaden their career options, and most think it is absolutely essential to gain skills that are relevant to the workplace. Graduates' career success is increasingly one of the metrics by which the quality of colleges and universities is measured. However, internships are not appealing to most adult prospective students. Colleges and faculty need to find other ways to integrate workplace-relevant skills and foster experiential learning into their curricula and instruction.

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- **The metrics that matter to experts—such as graduation rates—need to be made relevant to adult prospective students.** Many experts believe that making information about the cost and quality of schools more transparent will help adult prospective students identify and choose higher-performing institutions. However, most adults do not think information such as graduation rates or the number of graduates who get a job in the field they studied is absolutely essential. While transparency is important for leaders and policymakers to hold institutions accountable, more needs to be done to help individual adult prospective students understand how those metrics matter to them.
  - **Ensure that colleges and universities are equipped to help adult prospective students make informed choices.** Most adult prospective students would turn directly to schools for information. Faculty, current students and staff should be provided with the time, training and information needed to enable them to engage adult prospective students and help them make informed choices. School websites should be easy to navigate, have information specific to adult learners and provide ways for adult prospective students to connect directly with faculty, students, alumni and advisers.
  - **Encourage businesses and community organizations to work together to support adult prospective students.** While adult prospective students may attribute postsecondary success more to students themselves than to colleges, they clearly believe that other entities in their communities can play roles in helping adults graduate. Consider ways to create partnerships between businesses, community organizations and colleges themselves to create support systems for adult learners. Such support will help adult students gain workplace-relevant skills, transfer without encountering barriers and find support for critical needs such as food and transportation.

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# METHODOLOGY IN BRIEF

The findings in “A Major Step: What Adults Without Degrees Say About Going (Back) to College” are based on a nationally representative survey of adults who are considering enrolling in college to earn an undergraduate degree or certificate, a group we refer to as “adult prospective students.” A total of 1,336 interviews were completed from August 17 through November 12, 2017; 1,328 interviews were included in the analysis. The survey was conducted by telephone, including cell phones, and online. Respondents completed the surveys in English.

This research follows up on a nationally representative survey of adult prospective students by Public Agenda—fielded and published in 2013—that was also funded by The Kresge Foundation. The methodology of this survey is similar to that of the previous survey to ensure comparability of results over time and to minimize the possibility that any stability or change in findings could be attributed to methodological differences. The methodology differs in that, in this survey, 36 percent of interviews were completed through probability-based phone sampling and the remainder through both a probability-based web panel and a nonprobability-based, opt-in web panel. In the 2013 survey, 70 percent of the interviews were completed through probability-based phone sampling and the remainder through a nonprobability-based web panel.

The telephone response rate for the phone portion of the survey was calculated to be 7.4 percent using the American Association for Public Opinion Research Response Rate Three (RR3) formula. The web portion of the study was calculated to be 14 percent using the same formula.

The final data were weighted to correct for variance in the likelihood of selection for a given case and to balance the sample to known population parameters in order to correct for systematic under- or overrepresentation of different demographic groups.

The design effect for the survey was 1.5, and the survey has an overall margin of error of +/- 3.3 at the 95 percent confidence level. The surveys were designed by Public Agenda and fielded by Social Science Research Solutions Inc.

Before developing the survey instrument, we conducted three demographically diverse focus groups with adult prospective students. Focus groups were held in July 2016 in New York City, New York; in July 2016 in Fort Lauderdale, Florida; and in December 2016 in Los Angeles, California. In total, 28 adult prospective students participated in these focus groups.

This research was funded through a grant to Public Agenda from The Kresge Foundation. For briefs on this research and the full methodology, including topline findings, full question wordings and sample characteristics, please go to [www.publicagenda.org/pages/a-major-step-what-adults-without-degrees-say-about-going-back-to-college-research-brief](http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/a-major-step-what-adults-without-degrees-say-about-going-back-to-college-research-brief).

# SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

	N=1,328
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	39%
Female	60%
Refused	1%
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>	
White Non-Hispanic	60%
Black or African American Non-Hispanic	14%
White Hispanic	9%
Black or African American Hispanic	1%
Unspecified Hispanic	9%
Asian/Chinese/Japanese	2%
Native American/American Indian/Alaska Native	2%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	*
Mixed	3%
Other (specify)	1%
Refused	1%
<b>Age</b>	
18-29	41%
30-49	48%
50-64	12%
<b>Educational attainment</b>	
High school graduate	53%
Some college (but not associate's degree)	47%
<b>Metro status</b>	
Urban	52%
Suburban	25%
Rural	22%
Undetermined	2%

	N=1,328
<b>Employment status</b>	
Full-time	47%
Part-time	16%
Retired	1%
A homemaker	17%
A Student	1%
Temporarily unemployed	12%
Disabled/handicapped (vol.)	4%
Other - not employed (vol.)	1%
Refused	*
<b>Marital status</b>	
Single, never married	35%
Single, living with a partner	18%
Married	34%
Separated	3%
Widowed	1%
Divorced	8%
Refused	1%
<b>Household income</b>	
Less than \$50,000	67%
\$50,000 but less than \$100,000	24%
\$100,000 and over	7%
Don't know	2%
Refused	1%
<b>Political party affiliation</b>	
Republican	23%
Democrat	30%
Independent	38%
Other	1%
Don't know	8%
Refused	1%

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Or contact: [research@publicagenda.org](mailto:research@publicagenda.org), tel: 212.686.6610