

Back to School?

What Adults Without Degrees Say About Pursuing Additional Education and Training



Strada Education Network has undertaken a major initiative to hear directly from Americans about how they view the connections between education and employment. We believe that the key to increasing the value of higher education starts with talking to people about their educational experiences, not just about them. This consumer-centered approach is particularly critical in efforts to engage individuals who have not completed any education after high school.

Over the past three years, the Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey has interviewed nearly 350,000 individuals about their education, work and life experiences. This nationally representative sample of adults ages 18-65 includes all education and work pathways. The data are also representative for states and large metropolitan areas, as well as demographic groups and other subgroups.

Policymakers, employers and higher education leaders all champion the power of education to improve economic health and well-being. The workforce demand for skilled employees is greater than ever—with longstanding forecasts that 65% of job openings would require postsecondary education by 2020.¹ And the 7 million job openings in the country now outstrip the number of unemployed Americans, in part because of a mismatch between the demands of available jobs and the skills in the pool of talent. More than half of employers say that job candidates' lack of requisite skills is harming their companies' productivity.²

To address this skills gap, enormous resources are focused on engaging individuals to complete meaningful credentials and develop skills that will increase their value in the job market and fuel local and state economies. A dozen states have started free community college initiatives to encourage more residents to enroll, and another dozen are considering a similar move. Many of the initiatives are focused on recent high school graduates, but a significant number of states are looking to expand them to working adults. Tennessee, a leader in the free community college movement, has already done so. In an ambitious effort to reach more of the adult population, California is creating an entirely new online community college, which will offer competency-based and other programs that maximize flexibility for students. Still other states, such as Kentucky and Maryland, have focused on getting “near-completers”—residents with a significant number of college credits but no degree—back into college and to graduation.

But despite such significant effort at both the state and federal level to get more Americans to start and complete postsecondary credentials, too many policymakers and practitioners have paid too little attention to what actually motivates individuals to pursue additional education.

This Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey report focuses on the perceived need for additional education among Americans of all backgrounds, as well as how likely they are to pursue additional education and training and

what would motivate them to do so. Perhaps not surprising, career outcomes lie at the heart of their decision-making. We examine three related questions here: perceived need for education to advance in career, self-reported likelihood to actually enroll with different providers, and incentives or supports that would impact enrollment. Some key findings include:

- Almost half of Americans believe they need additional education to advance in their careers. Forty-six percent of all Americans—and 46% of those without a college degree—say they need additional education to advance in their careers.
- The perceived need for additional education varies widely by state and metropolitan area, with younger, non-white and urban residents feeling a greater need than their peers.
- Americans not only see the need for additional education, but they plan to pursue it. A majority (53%) of adults without degrees say they are likely or very likely to enroll in some type of courses or training within the next five years—with younger adults, low-income individuals and people of color even more likely to say they will enroll.
- Adults without degrees say they are more likely to seek additional education and training from employers than from traditional education institutions.
- When it comes to policy, adults without degrees are most likely to say a guaranteed employment outcome, such as a job placement or wage increase, would have the greatest impact on their likelihood to enroll.
- Adults with some college but no degree—often a primary target of college completion campaigns—have a complex set of thoughts when it comes to pursuing more education. Despite already having college credits to their name, such adults are no more likely than others without degrees to say they are interested in returning to education to advance in their careers.

¹ Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. *Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements Through 2020*. 2013. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/recovery-job-growth-and-education-requirements-through-2020>

² Davidson, Kate. “Employers Find ‘Soft Skills’ Like Critical Thinking in Short Supply.” *The Wall Street Journal*. 2016. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/employers-find-soft-skills-like-critical-thinking-in-short-supply-1472549400>

Insights for action

Hearing from education consumers about their needs and motivations when it comes to additional education highlights key principles for solutions:

- **Consumer data can help states target their programs and outreach.** Policies designed to boost postsecondary attainment must recognize that the perceived need for additional education and likelihood to enroll varies by location, demographics and prior education. Strategies and outreach should be tailored accordingly. For example, in states where people with less than a high school diploma have the highest perceived need for additional education, strategies will need to ensure access to GED diploma programs. Similarly, where the highest perceived need is among young, urban women of color, states could focus their outreach and programs to fit this group's needs. Conversely, when demand for additional education is low among certain groups, states should invest more time and resources in understanding why postsecondary education is not seen as valuable and what changes are necessary to create pathways that better serve consumers.
- **Employers are essential partners in designing and delivering valuable education to work pathways.** Education consumers without degrees seek work outcomes, and they often look first to employers and work-centered providers for additional education and training. More can be done to recognize and give credit for training that takes place on the job and to foster partnerships among employers and higher education.
- **Traditional education providers should improve their career focus.** For adults without degrees who seek education through traditional providers, such as community colleges or four-year colleges, increasing the links with career can further enhance the value of these pathways. Education is a means to an end for adults without degrees, and the most powerful solutions will ensure the end results of positive career outcomes are a point of focus from the very start.
- **Successful real-world solutions will be built upon career value, cost value and access.** The three attributes that adults without degrees say would have the biggest impact on their likelihood to enroll are career impact, affordability and flexibility. They need programs that are within reach for their budget and their busy lives; and to make it worth the time and money, they have to see a positive employment outcome at the end.
- **Adults with some college but no degree have complex motivations around additional education.** Over the past 20 years, more than 31 million Americans have enrolled in college but left without a degree—and many completion campaigns focus on getting these individuals back into college and to graduation.³ However, adults with some college experience are only marginally more likely than those who stopped with a high school or GED diploma to say that they plan to return to traditional higher education or need additional training to advance in their careers. States looking to move these individuals, especially near-completers, to a degree need more detailed information to understand their motivations and target their efforts with this group. Based on these initial findings, Strada has undertaken additional research with this group.

The detailed findings that follow provide the data underlying these insights for action.

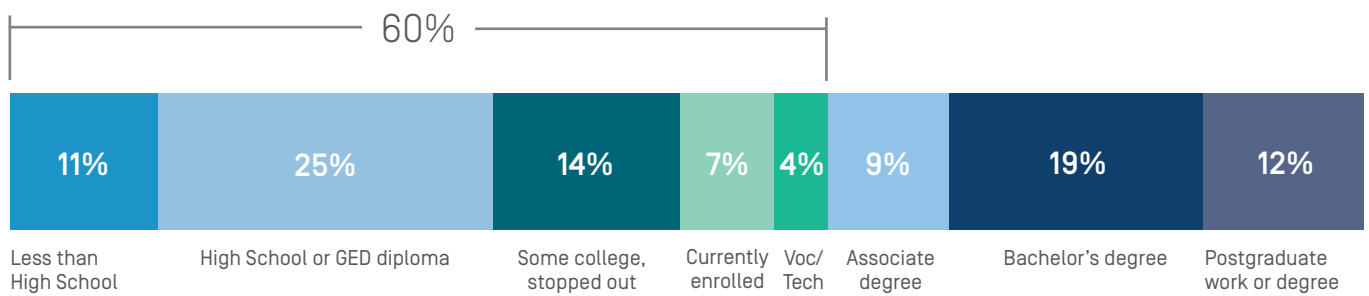
³ National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. *Some College, No Degree – 2014*. 2014. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/signaturereport/>



The big picture

The majority of our nation's workforce does not have a college degree. As leaders in education and work talk about the modern workforce, lifelong learning, global competitiveness and a skill-based economy, they still have a long way to go in preparing Americans for the future of work.

FIGURE 1:
60% OF AMERICANS DO NOT HAVE A COLLEGE DEGREE



Source: Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey Base: U.S. adults ages 18-65, n=339,047

Who feels like they need more education?

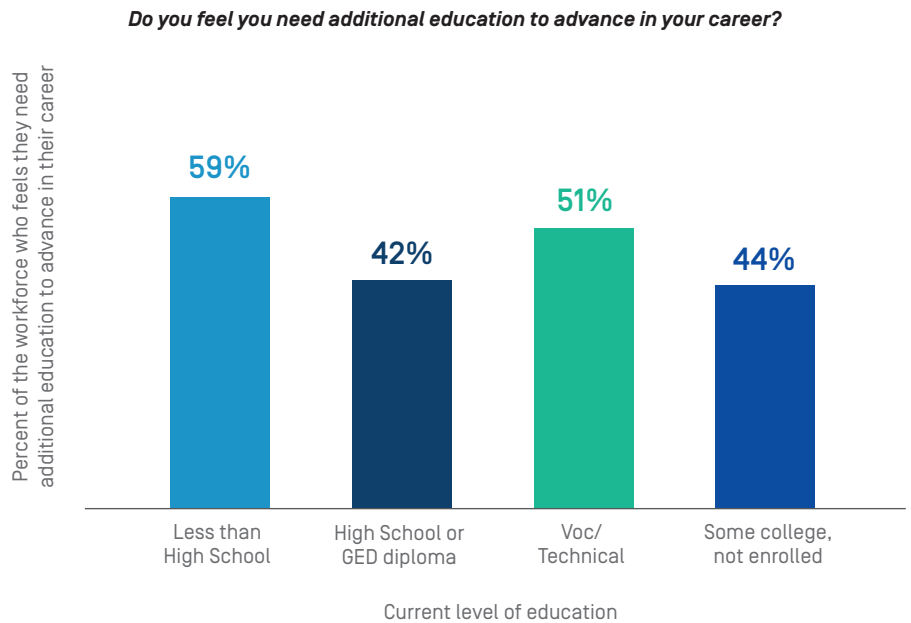
Education Differences

Forecasts say that the jobs of the future will increasingly require postsecondary education, and many Americans without degrees are feeling this pressure. Almost half (46%) of adults without degrees who are not currently enrolled in college say they need additional education to advance in their career. Those with the least education—adults without a high school or GED diploma—feel this need the most, with 59 percent believing they need more education. However, perceived need for additional education does not have a linear relationship with educational attainment (see Figure 2). Vocational and technical program completers, rather than high school or GED completers, come next in their stated need for more education to advance (51%). Those with a high school diploma or GED (42%) and those with some college experience but no degree (44%) are significantly less likely to say they need additional education to advance. This pattern shows us that successful completion of vocational and technical credentials is associated with the perspective that more education is needed.

State Differences

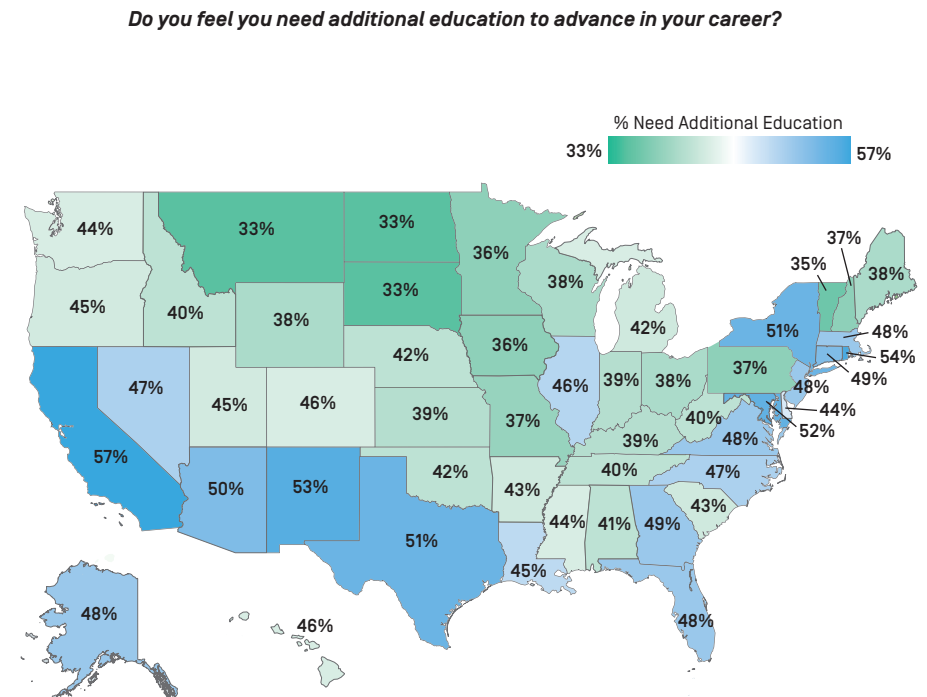
We also see that among those in the workforce who do not hold an associate or bachelor's degree, demand for postsecondary education varies greatly from state to state (see Figure 3). In California, 57% of workers without a college degree feel they need additional education to advance in their careers, while in North Dakota only 33% feel this need. This perceived need for education is correlated with local labor market needs: states where a higher percent of jobs require a bachelor's degree also see higher perceived need for additional education.

FIGURE 2:
PERCEIVED NEED FOR ADDITIONAL EDUCATION, BY CURRENT LEVEL OF EDUCATION



Source: Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey 2016-2019. Base: U.S. Adults 18-65 with less than an associate degree and not currently enrolled, n=106,214.

FIGURE 3:
PERCEIVED NEED FOR ADDITIONAL EDUCATION BY STATE



Residents of State not currently enrolled

Source: Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey 2016-2019. Base: U.S. Adults 18-65 with less than an associate degree and not currently enrolled, n=106,214.

Who feels like they need more education? (continued)

Local Differences

Further, there is a significant gap between the perceived need for additional education in urban and rural areas, with 53% of urban residents, compared to 43% of rural residents, saying they see the need for additional training. Perception of need also varies by metropolitan areas [see Figure 4].

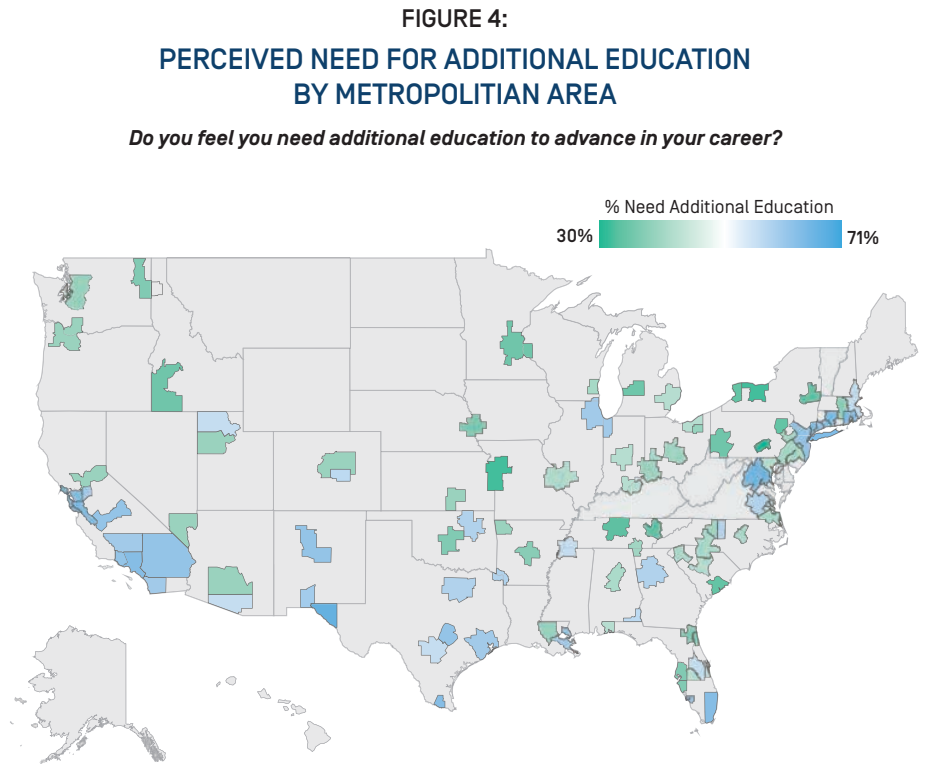
Demographic Differences

Beyond geography and educational attainment, there is also significantly higher perceived need for education among women, people of color and younger individuals relative to their counterparts [see Figure 5].

Implications

Taken together, consumer perceptions are clearly showing that states must take a nuanced and place- and population-specific approach to policies designed to increase enrollment and educational attainment. Specifically, the data demonstrate:

- There is high perceived need for postsecondary education, but it varies significantly by population subgroup and by place. More needs to be done to meet that overall demand and especially to reach underserved populations.
- Where demand is not as high, policymakers and education leaders need to understand why. What can be done to demonstrate the value of postsecondary education and also to ensure that pathways are better meeting consumers' needs?



Residents of MSA not currently enrolled

Source: Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey 2016-2019. Base: U.S. Adults 18-65 with less than an associate degree and not currently enrolled, n=106,214.

FIGURE 5
PERCEIVED NEED FOR ADDITIONAL EDUCATION BY DEMOGRAPHIC GROUP

Demographic group	Perceived need for additional education
Female	50%
Male	44%
Hispanic	65%
Black	56%
Asian	51%
Other	43%
White	36%
18-24	55%
25-34	47%
35-44	45%
45-54	40%
55-64	31%

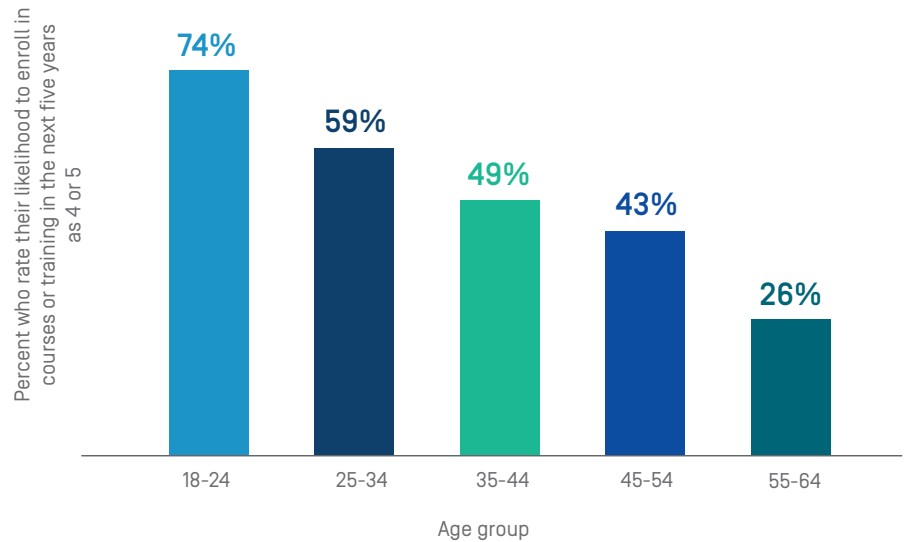
Source: Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey 2016-2019. Base: U.S. Adults 18-65 with less than an associate degree and not currently enrolled, n=106,214.

Who is most likely to take action and pursue more education—and where do they expect to get it?

Likelihood to Enroll

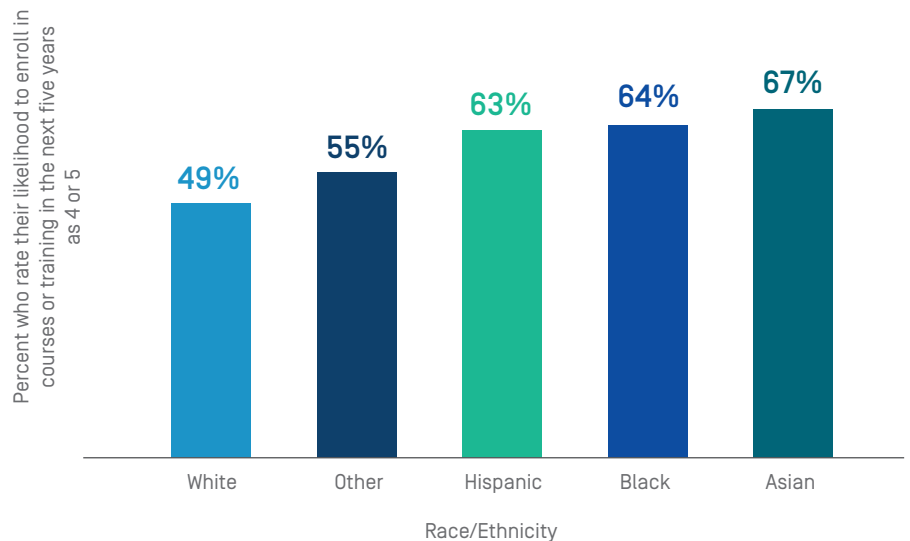
While many adults without degrees feel they need additional education to advance in their careers, it is also important to understand how likely they are to take action and enroll. Just as many adults without a degree feel they need additional education to advance in their career (46%), a majority (53%) also rate their likelihood to enroll in courses or training within the next five years as a four or five on a five-point scale, where five is extremely likely and one is not at all likely. The stated likelihood to enroll varies significantly across demographic subgroups. Younger individuals report both greater need for and likelihood to pursue education (see Figure 6). While people of color are more likely to feel the need for additional education and to report they will enroll, racial and ethnic subgroups have different patterns. Hispanics are the most likely to say they need additional education, with fully two-thirds feeling this way, but Asians are the most likely to say they will enroll in courses or training (see Figure 7). Some groups may benefit from outreach emphasizing the value of education, while emphasis on opportunities and accessibility may be a relative priority for other communities.

FIGURE 6:
YOUNGER PEOPLE SAY THEY ARE MORE LIKELY TO ENROLL



Source: Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey 2019. Base: U.S. Adults 18-65 with less than an associate degree and who are not currently enrolled. n=8,849

FIGURE 7:
PEOPLE OF COLOR SAY THEY ARE MORE LIKELY TO ENROLL



Source: Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey 2019. Base: U.S. Adults 18-65 with less than an associate degree and who are not currently enrolled. n=8,849

Who is most likely to take action and pursue more education—and where do they expect to get it? (continued)

Preferred Education Providers

Among those indicating they are most likely to enroll in additional education within the next five years, it is important to understand where they expect to study. Traditional postsecondary institutions are not at the top of the list. Adults without degrees say they are most likely to look to employers for courses and training, with one-third of them (33%) looking at this path, followed by community colleges (23%) and trade schools or programs (21%) [see Figure 8].

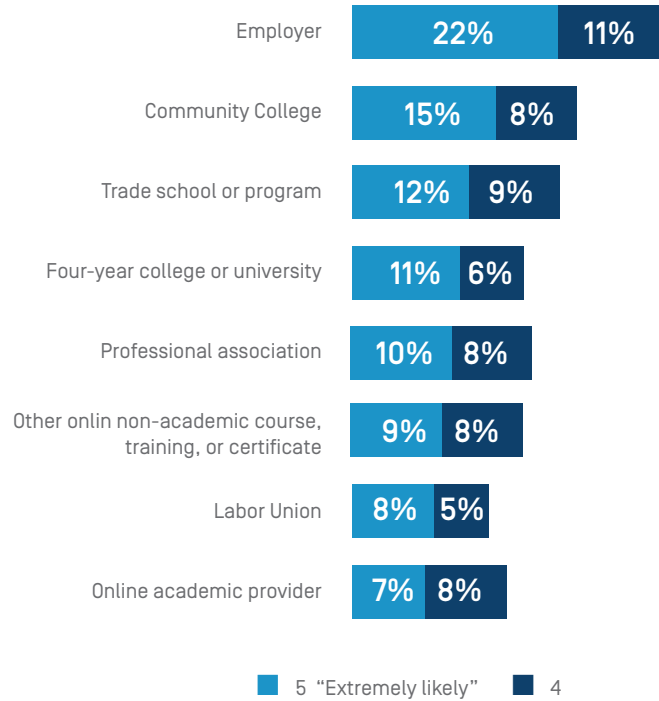
Overall, more individuals look to work-centered sources (employers, labor unions, professional associations) than traditional education institutions (four-year university, community college, trade school) or online academic providers. When categories are combined, 44% of adults without degrees say they are likely or very likely to enroll in courses or training from a work-based setting, 38% from a traditional education institution, and just 15% from an online academic provider.

Interestingly, however, individuals with less than a high school education are far more likely (50%) than other adults without degrees to say they will enroll in a traditional higher education institution within the next five years. Conventional wisdom suggests that those with the greatest distance to travel—completing a GED diploma before enrolling—will be the least likely to enroll, but the individuals themselves report higher expectations. This is important to bear in mind as policymakers, philanthropists and education providers look to create more on-ramps and other training programs for this population.

If they are going to meet people where they are, education solutions must embrace employers and work-centered pathways alongside more traditional providers.

FIGURE 8:
ADULTS WITHOUT DEGREES SAY THEY ARE MOST LIKELY TO SEEK ADDITIONAL EDUCATION FROM EMPLOYERS

On a five-point scale, where 5 means extremely likely and 1 means not at all likely, in the next five years, how likely are you to enroll in courses or training offered through each of the following?



Source: Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey 2019. Base: U.S. Adults 18-65 with less than an associate degree and who are not currently enrolled. N=8,849

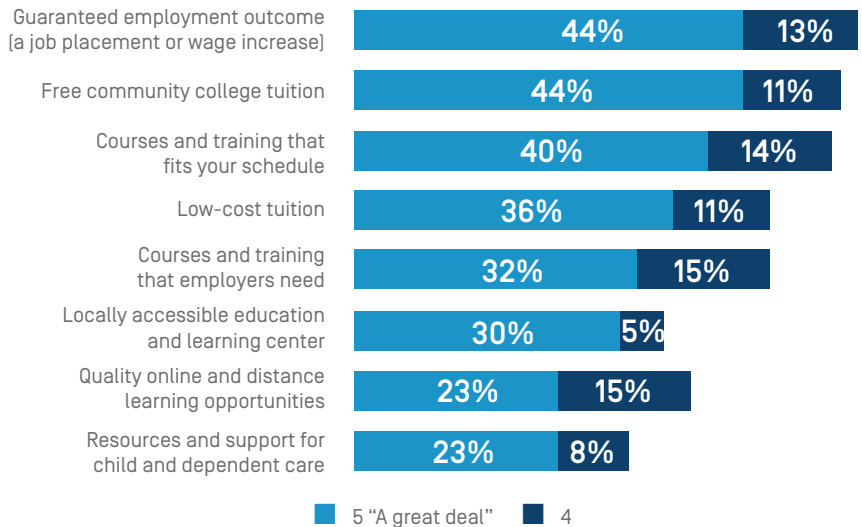
What has the greatest impact on the likelihood to enroll?

When asked how a variety of resources and policies would impact their likelihood to enroll (on a five-point scale), consumers focus on career value and cost value. The greatest impact is for career value, with 57% rating the impact of a guaranteed employment outcome (such as a job placement or wage increase) as a four or a five [see Figure 9].

Cost value is a close second, with 55% rating the impact of free community college tuition as either a four or a five. And flexible schedules have the next highest impact. Career value, cost value and access are the keys to motivating Americans to pursue additional education—and comprehensive solutions should leverage all three.

FIGURE 9:
CONSUMERS SAY EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES, AFFORDABILITY AND ACCESS WILL HAVE THE STRONGEST IMPACT ON ENROLLMENT

How would each of the following impact your likelihood of enrolling in additional education?
Please use a five-point scale where 5 means it would impact your likelihood a great deal and 1 means not at all.

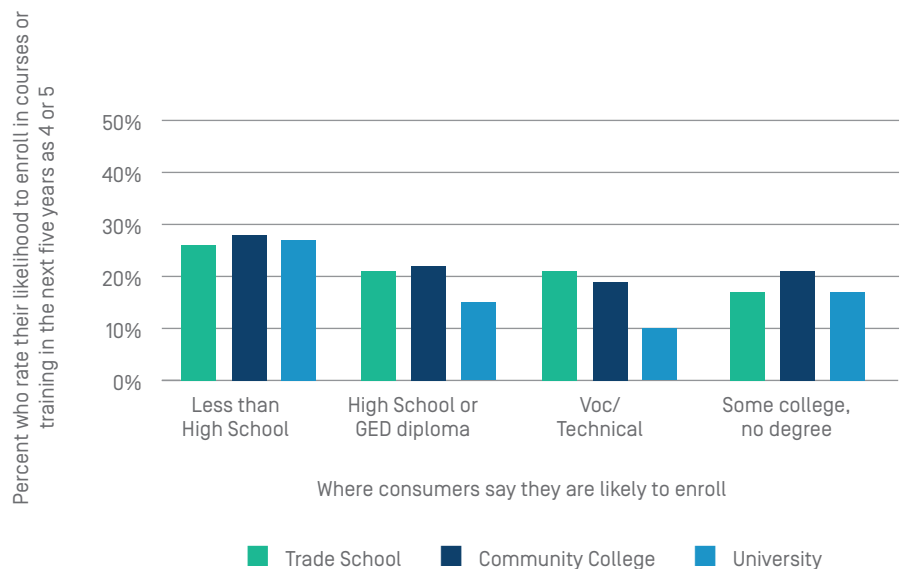


Source: Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey 2019. Base: U.S. Adults 18-65 with less than an associate degree and who are not currently enrolled. N=8,849

Some college and no degree

Individuals with some college and no degree express complex thoughts about education that merit targeted solutions and further research. Their perceived need for additional education to advance in their careers is among the lowest for adults without a college degree (see Figure 2). Did they get enough education for their career needs—and thus don't feel the need to complete the degree? Did they have a negative experience that has alienated them from higher education? Conversely, when we look at self-reported likelihood to enroll during the coming five years, the some college and no degree group is among the most likely to say it will enroll in a university or community college setting (see Figure 10). Is it a lingering aspiration to go back and finish? Do they know relatively more than other groups about how to navigate the higher education system? Leaders in education and the workforce need to know more about this group's needs and confidence in postsecondary education.

FIGURE 10:
STATED LIKELIHOOD TO ENROLL BY CURRENT EDUCATION LEVEL AND PROVIDER



Source: Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey 2019. Base: U.S. Adults 18-65 with less than an associate degree and who are not currently enrolled. n=8,849

Conclusion

There is no one-size-fits-all solution for preparing the workforce of the 21st century and no single best pathway to economic mobility, whether a particular credential level or field of study. The most promising solutions for Miami will be different than those for Missoula. State- and local-level data are critical. So too are data that enable us to better gauge each demographic group's interest in additional education and their motivation levels.

With this report, we seek to advance the conversation about how the country and individual states might better tailor postsecondary policies and programs to what Americans tell us they want. To create better policies that both power regional economic growth and individual mobility, leaders in education and work must listen to education consumers about their needs, and about what will move them from interested in education to enrolled to achieving their ultimate goals.

For more information, visit stradaeducation.org/consumer-insights.

Strada Education Network® is a national nonprofit dedicated to improving lives by catalyzing more direct and promising pathways between education and employment. We engage partners across education, nonprofits, business, and government to focus relentlessly on students' success throughout all phases of their working lives.

Learn more about how Strada Education Network is listening to education consumers and compiling the nation's largest database of consumer insights on education experiences after high school, as well as collecting insights from employers, alumni, and current college students.

Visit stradaeducation.org/consumer-insights



GALLUP