

# AMERICA'S CALL FOR HIGHER EDUCATION REDESIGN

THE 2012 LUMINA FOUNDATION STUDY OF THE  
AMERICAN PUBLIC'S OPINION ON HIGHER EDUCATION

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Lumina Foundation, an Indianapolis-based private foundation, is committed to enrolling and graduating more students from college — especially 21<sup>st</sup> century students: low-income students, students of color, first-generation students, and adult learners. Lumina's goal is to increase the percentage of Americans who hold high-quality degrees, certificates, and other credentials to 60 percent by 2025. Lumina pursues this goal in three ways: by identifying and supporting effective practices, through public policy advocacy, and by using communications and convening power to build public will for change.

More information is available at <http://www.luminafoundation.org>.

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## FOREWORD

While Lumina's goal is that by 2025, 60% of Americans will hold a high-quality degree, certificate, or other credential, the reality is that today only about 4 in 10 U.S. adults possess a two- or four-year degree.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, more needs to be done to understand the issues underlying degree attainment and who goes to college and why. The Lumina Foundation poll aims to understand the public's opinion on key issues facing higher education in this country.

Some of the questions addressed in the study are:

- How important is having a certificate or degree beyond high school?
- How important is higher education to personal financial and job security?
- What are the most important reasons people get education beyond high school?
- How likely are adults to go back to school to earn a college degree or certificate?
- What are some of the barriers adults face in pursuing higher education?
- How do Americans perceive the quality of higher education institutions in this country?
- Is higher education affordable for everyone who needs it?

## SNAPSHOT OF FINDINGS

- Nearly all Americans (97%) say having a degree or certificate beyond high school is at least somewhat important.
- Nearly all Americans (97%) say having a degree or certificate beyond high school is at least somewhat important to a person's financial security.
- More than two-thirds (67%) say getting a good job is a very important reason for getting education beyond high school. Nearly as many, 65%, say earning more money is a very important reason to get education beyond high school.
- Of Americans who do not have a postsecondary degree or certificate, the majority agree or strongly agree that they would feel more secure in their job and their financial future if they did have one.
- About four in 10 (41%) Americans without a postsecondary degree or certificate say they have thought about going back to school to earn one.

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1 "Lumina Foundation Strategic Plan 2013-2016," executive summary, Jan. 10, 2013, [http://www.luminafoundation.org/advantage/document/goal\\_2025/2013-Strategic\\_Plan-Executive\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.luminafoundation.org/advantage/document/goal_2025/2013-Strategic_Plan-Executive_Summary.pdf)

## METHODOLOGY

The following report presents findings from a quantitative survey that Gallup conducted on behalf of Lumina Foundation. The overall objective of the study was to determine the perceptions of the general American population about several important issues pertaining to higher education, including degree attainment, quality and value, costs, and innovative learning models. The study measures public attitudes about higher education generally, as well as other topics, namely, barriers to degree attainment and responsibility for financing higher education. To achieve these objectives, Gallup conducted 1,009 interviews with individuals 18 years and older residing in landline-telephone households, cell-phone-only households, and cell-phone-user households.

Gallup conducted surveys in English only from Nov. 9-Dec. 4, 2012. Up to three calls were made to each household to reach an eligible respondent.

The data set was statistically adjusted (weighted) using the following variables: race/ethnicity, gender, education, and age as defined by the most recent data from the Current Population Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. The final overall results are representative of the U.S. adult population 18 years and older.

The questionnaire was developed in consultation with representatives from Lumina Foundation and Gallup. All interviewing was supervised and conducted by Gallup's full-time interviewing staff. For results based on the total sample size of 1,009 adults, one can say with 95% confidence that the margin of error attributable to sampling and other random effects is  $\pm 4$  percentage points. For subgroups within this population (e.g., education level, gender, and income), the margin of error would be greater. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls. The following paper presents key findings of the survey. Reported frequencies may not add up to 100% due to rounding or the exclusion of "don't know" and refused results in some cases.

## DETAILED FINDINGS

### IMPORTANCE OF DEGREE ATTAINMENT

There is consensus among Americans that degree attainment beyond high school is important. While only about 3 in 10 U.S. adults report having a bachelor's degree<sup>2</sup>, most Americans are nonetheless convinced of the importance of getting an education beyond high school. More than 7 in 10 (72%) say it is very important to have a certificate or degree beyond high school, and another 1 in 4 (25%) say it is somewhat important. Only 3% say that degree attainment is not very or not at all important.

How important is having a certificate or degree beyond high school?	
Very important	72%
Somewhat important	25%
Not very important	2%
Not at all important	1%

Americans say financial security is one of the reasons why having education beyond high school is important. Most (97%) say having education beyond high school is important or very important to a person's financial security in the future. Again, only a small fraction (4%) say education beyond high school is not very or not at all important to a person's financial security.

How important is having education beyond high school to a person's financial security in the future?	
Very important	71%
Somewhat important	26%
Not very important	3%
Not at all important	1%

More than 9 in 10 Americans say that getting a good job and earning more money are at least somewhat important reasons for getting education beyond high school. About two-thirds (67%) of Americans say getting a good job is a very important reason for getting education beyond high school. Nearly that many (65%) say earning more money is a very important reason.

Please tell me whether each of these is a very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not at all important reason for getting education beyond high school. How about ... ?				
	Not at all important	Not very important	Somewhat important	Very important
To get a good job	< 1%	3%	29%	67%
To earn more money	1%	3%	31%	65%

2 "Bachelor's Degree Attainment Tops 30 Percent for the First Time, Census Bureau Reports," U.S. Census Bureau news release, Feb. 23, 2012, <http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/education/cb12-33.html>

Respondents were asked about their education level. Those without a college degree or certificate were asked about their intentions for pursuing additional education and how a degree or certificate beyond high school would make them feel about their job and financial future. Some of those who lack a postsecondary credential have a strong interest in attaining more education.

About four in 10 (41%) say they have thought about going back to school to earn a college degree or certificate. About 2 in 10 (21%) say they are very likely to do so, and another 17% say they are somewhat likely to go back to school to earn a degree or certificate.

In the last 12 months, have you thought about going back to school to earn a college degree or certificate?*	
Yes	41%
No	58%

\*Asked of those without a college degree or certificate

How likely are you to go back to school to earn a college degree or certificate?*	
Very likely	21%
Somewhat likely	17%
Not very likely	19%
Not at all likely	42%

\*Asked of those without a college degree or certificate

A majority of those who lack a certificate or degree beyond high school agree or strongly agree that if they had one, they would feel more secure in their job and in their financial future. Four in 10 (41%) strongly agree they would feel more secure in their job and another 17% agree with this statement. More than 6 in 10 (64%) of those without a degree or certificate agree or strongly agree they would feel more secure in their financial future if they had a degree or certificate.

Again, thinking about education beyond high school, on a five-point scale, where 5 means strongly agree and 1 means strongly disagree, please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements. How about ... ?*					
	%1 Strongly Disagree	%2	%3	%4	%5 Strongly Agree
If I had a certificate or degree, I would feel more secure in my job.	18%	10%	11%	17%	41%
If I had a certificate or degree, I would feel more secure in my financial future.	17%	7%	12%	19%	45%

\*Asked of those without a college degree or certificate

**COST AND QUALITY**

While Americans are confident that postsecondary degree attainment is important, and many of those who do not yet have a degree or certificate say they intend to pursue education beyond high school, most Americans have some concern about the cost and quality of higher education in this country.

Respondents were asked their opinion of the quality of higher education in this country relative to other countries. Less than half (46%) say that the quality of higher education is better than it is in other countries. As many respondents (46%) say that the quality is the same as or worse than it is in other countries.

<b>In your opinion, is the quality of higher education better than it is in other countries, about the same, or is the quality of higher education worse than it is in other countries?</b>	
Better than other countries	46%
Same as other countries	30%
Worse than other countries	16%
Don't know/Refused	8%

More than half of Americans (58%) say the quality of higher education in this country is the same as or worse than it has been in the past. More than 1 in 4 (27%) say quality is worse. Nearly 4 in 10 (38%) say quality is better than it has been in the past.

<b>In your opinion, is the quality of higher education better than it has been in the past, about the same, or is the quality of higher education worse than it has been in the past?</b>	
Better than the past	38%
Same as the past	31%
Worse than the past	27%

Respondents were asked to reflect on the quality of online colleges and universities, community colleges, and traditional institutions. Similar to findings from the 2011 Lumina Foundation national poll on higher education, people are most confident in the quality of traditional colleges and universities, with 29% strongly agreeing that traditional colleges and universities offer high-quality education. Another 47% agree with this statement.

Despite the growth of online colleges and universities, there is a persistent perception that they do not offer the level of quality that traditional colleges and universities have. Similar to 2011 findings, about 1 in 10 (11%) strongly agree that online institutions offer high-quality education. Another 22% agree. More people (54%) agree or strongly agree that community colleges offer high-quality education.

<b>On a five-point scale, where 5 means strongly agree and 1 means strongly disagree, please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements.</b>					
	%1 Strongly Disagree	%2	%3	%4	%5 Strongly Agree
Traditional colleges and universities offer high-quality education	1%	3%	20%	47%	29%
Community colleges offer high-quality education	2%	8%	36%	35%	19%
Online colleges and universities offer high-quality education	7%	18%	39%	22%	11%

Only about 1 in 4 Americans (26%) think that higher education is affordable for everyone who needs it. The majority (74%) think that higher education is not affordable for all.

<b>Do you think higher education is affordable for everyone who needs it?</b>	
Yes	26%
No	74%

However, Americans still do not think that cost is the biggest barrier to re-enrollment that adults face when pursuing higher education. More respondents (36%) say that family responsibilities are the biggest barrier to adult re-enrollment, among the options presented. More than 1 in 4 (28%) cite cost as the biggest barrier, and others say that job responsibilities (15%) and the time it takes to complete (11%) are the biggest impediments. Few Americans say that the lack of information (4%) or social support (3%) is the biggest barrier.

<b>Many adults in the workforce do not have a post high school credential or degree but are interested in returning to school to complete one. In your opinion, which ONE of the following is the biggest barrier to re-enrollment that such adults face when pursuing higher education?</b>	
Family responsibilities	36%
The cost of higher education	28%
Job responsibilities	15%
The time it takes to complete	11%
Lack of information	4%
Lack of social support	3%

**HIGHER EDUCATION REDESIGN**

Americans are convinced that degree attainment is important for financial security. Still, many lack a degree or certificate beyond high school. Some of these Americans are eager to return to school in the near future. Yet barriers exist for those who seek to map a pathway to completion and attainment.

This study shows there is strong public support for redesigning pathways to higher education, to re-enroll in degree and certificate programs, and to attain a postsecondary credential or degree.

When asked whether they think students should be able to receive college credit for knowledge and skills acquired outside the classroom, nearly 9 in 10 Americans (87%) say yes. This suggests that higher education institutions could initiate community collaborations/partnerships to help facilitate certificate or degree completion for some working Americans.

<b>Do you think students should be able to receive college credit for knowledge and skills acquired outside the classroom?</b>	
Yes	87%
No	12%

Additionally, three-quarters of Americans (75%) indicate that they would be more likely to enroll in a higher education program if they could be evaluated and receive credit for what they already know.

<b>If you could be evaluated and receive credits for what you already know, would you be more likely to enroll in a higher education program?</b>	
Yes	75%
No	25%

Americans also favor redesigning ways that college credit is awarded, saying credits should be given based on mastery of content rather than time spent in the classroom. Seven in 10 (70%) say if students demonstrate mastery of the material in less time, they should be able to get credit for the course without completing the full session, typically 16 weeks.

<b>An average college course takes 16 weeks to complete. If a student demonstrates they have mastered the material in less time, should they be able to get credit for the course without completing the 16-week session?</b>	
Yes	70%
No	30%

With cost being one of the barriers for adults planning on returning to college, there is an ongoing challenge for institutions and students to determine who should bear that cost.

More than half (59%) strongly agree and another 18% agree that higher education institutions should reduce tuition and fees. Only 4% strongly disagree. More than half (59%) agree or strongly agree that state governments should provide more financial assistance for students to go to college, with a similar number (55%) agreeing or strongly agreeing that the federal government should provide more assistance.

Nearly 7 in 10 Americans (68%) agree or strongly agree that companies should provide more assistance to employees to pursue education beyond high school.

On the whole, many Americans say others must step up to provide assistance to cover the costs of higher education, which they say is not affordable for all who need it.

**On a five-point scale, where 5 means strongly agree and 1 means strongly disagree, please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements. You may use any number between 1 and 5.**

	%1 Strongly Disagree	%2	%3	%4	%5 Strongly Agree
Higher education institutions should reduce tuition and fees	4%	6%	13%	18%	59%
State governments should provide more assistance	10%	11%	20%	21%	38%
The federal government should provide more assistance	15%	10%	19%	15%	40%
Companies should provide more assistance to employees	6%	6%	20%	22%	46%

## CONCLUSION

Americans say higher education is important and feel a college degree or certificate affords more financial and job security in their future. However, barriers exist to re-enrollment and degree attainment for many. These include the demands of supporting and caring for a family and the high cost of tuition and fees. Americans indicate they are ready for a redesign in the mechanisms for delivering and awarding higher education certificates and other high-quality degrees. The findings of this study suggest that Americans are open to new ways to make higher education attainment accessible and affordable for all.

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