



JUNE 2026

65 Million Reasons Why Intent Matters Most:

Adding On to the Largest National Survey
of Prospective Adult Students

intentmattersmost.com



College  **APP**
The Adult Prospect Pipeline

Acknowledgments

In the spring of 2019, I had the most important discussion of my career.

It was with Dr. Seth Reichlin, the recently retired Senior Vice President of Market Research at Pearson Education.

We spoke about the importance of adult learners to the higher education ecosystem and yet how they remained a mystery to most colleges and universities. Dr. Reichlin shared how difficult, expensive and inefficient it was for community colleges and universities to identify, recruit and enroll adults and non-traditional students. The discussion advanced to the demographic changes afoot in America and we agreed solving that problem would be, as Dr. Reichlin said, game changing for higher education and for adults in America. We endeavored to do so.

We turned to techniques created by presidential campaigns and honed in the commercial space. The basic premise was proven: it is absolutely possible to accurately predict which adults, among the 263-plus million in the US, already had intent to enroll in education and training.

Over the next six years we conducted surveys nearly every day and in every state and began building the largest dataset of potential adult learners ever assembled. This report is based on the first 300,000 of those surveys.

In 2022 **Lumina Foundation** took note of our data and generously funded the first publicly available version of the survey data. *Intent Matters: Avoiding the Enrollment Cliff* was published in 2023.

Upon reaching the milestone of 300,000 survey responses, Lumina Foundation recognized the burgeoning potential of our work once more. We invited the seasoned experts at **CAEL** to join our efforts, applying their half-century of mastery in adult and non-traditional education to rigorously evaluate the findings. We are beyond pleased and proud to be a part of this new findings report.

I want to express my gratitude to the CAEL team for their exceptional leadership and guidance throughout this project, with special thanks to Earl Buford, Dr. Beth Doyle, and Rafael Pasillas. This research was made possible through the generous support of Lumina Foundation, specifically Wendy Sedlak and Mary Laphen Pope. I also wish to extend a heartfelt thank you to the entire CollegeAPP team for their ongoing dedication. Specifically, I would like to congratulate Dr. Seth Reichlin, Sean Godlewski, and Michiel Besseling for their tireless efforts in maintaining the integrity of our surveys and data. My thanks also go to Mari Bulgarelli for her vital contributions to data collection and analysis, and to Andy Carlson for his vision in recognizing the significance of this data and his commitment to its broad distribution.

Jack MacKenzie, Founder & CEO



Executive Summary	3
Introduction	7
Who Is Intending to Enroll in Education or Training	11
Motivations and Barriers to Enrollment	20
Profiles of Prospective Adult Students	28
Key Takeaways	36
Appendices	41

**65 Million Reasons
Why Intent Matters Most:**
Adding On to the Largest National Survey
of Prospective Adult Students

Executive Summary

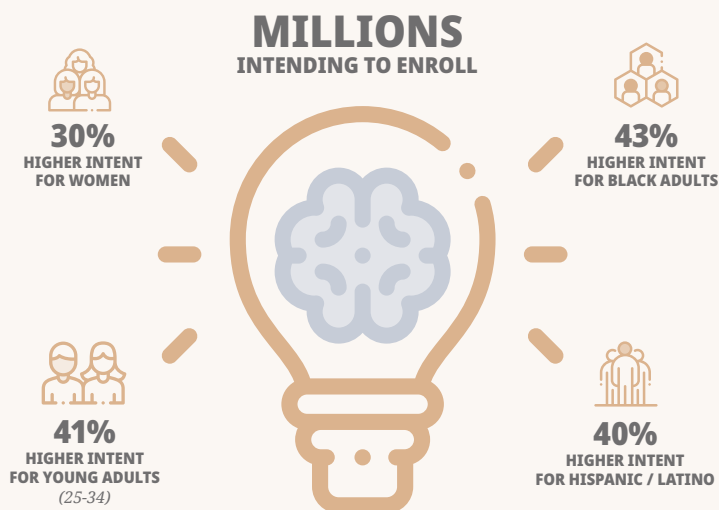
This report, *65 Million Reasons Why Intent Matters Most: Adding On to the Largest National Survey of Prospective Adult Students* provides an updated national view of demand for postsecondary education and training with actionable implications for increasing participation of adult learners and workers.

The Adult Education and Training Landscape

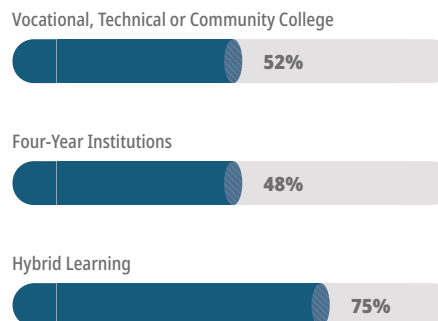
The current postsecondary landscape is shaped by shifting demographics, labor market turmoil, and evolving prioritizations of various types of educational opportunities. The so-called demographic cliff is beginning in 2026, and, as anticipated, the quantity of traditional-age students has contracted. The population is projected to remain flat-to-down over the next fifteen years. The number of workers disadvantaged by skills gaps in the modern economy is adding increasing pressure on the postsecondary ecosystem to be responsive at a time when there are fewer traditional age students. At the same time, there is an ongoing debate over the value of a four-year degree and a societal emphasis on shorter, more career-oriented training and upskilling. All of these factors contribute to the need for increased resources in support of adult and other nontraditional student enrollment. The high-level question of which adults are more likely to fill those seats is central to the thesis of the survey work analyzed for this report. As colleges, universities, and training providers know all too well, it's not enough to want or need adult learners to overcome these societal forces. Providers must understand the barriers and motivations of potential adult learners, have their fingers on the pulse of program interest and career goals, and be willing and able to use that information to properly and successfully communicate the benefits of education and training to potential adult learners.



Adult Learner Intent Varies by Subgroup



INSTITUTION AND PROGRAM PREFERENCES



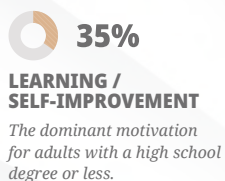
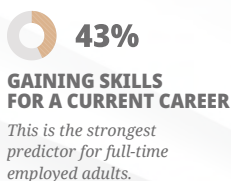
Key Findings on Adult Learner Demand

- **Widespread Intent:** Just over one-quarter (27%) of adults (ages 25-64) intend to enroll in education or training within the next two years. This represents approximately 41.7 million adults within this age range across the country. Extrapolating out to the broader adult population ages 18 and up represents more than 65 million adults with intent to enroll.
- **Intent Varies by Subgroup:** Intent is significantly higher among certain groups, including women (30%), younger adults (41% for ages 25-34), Black (43%), Hispanic/Latino (40%) respondents, individuals with lower household incomes, and those with some college experience but no degree.
- **Program Preference:** Demand for shorter-term, workforce-aligned pathways (vocational/technical college and community college, totaling 52%) collectively exceeds the preference for four-year institutions (48%). Interest in hybrid learning options remains relatively high (75%).

Motivations and Barriers to Enrollment

Intent to enroll is typically driven by career-related motivations, but conversion is heavily constrained by structural barriers.

Primary Motivations



Dominant Barriers

COST

Nearly universal for low-income (91%) and single-parent (83%) adults.



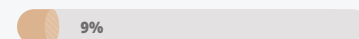
TIME CONSTRAINTS

The leading non-cost barrier, especially pronounced for degree-holders and middle-aged adults (ages 45-64).



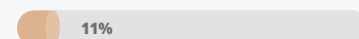
CHILD CARE

A uniquely prominent secondary barrier for single parents.



DIFFICULTY NAVIGATING ENROLLMENT

More salient for those with less education and lower incomes.



Key Profiles

The profiles presented in this report illustrate the diversity of prospective adult learners with shared intent but differing motivations and barriers. Individuals with less education and lower incomes are learning-motivated and face the greatest structural barriers; they need strong advising, simplified processes, and financial support. Those with some college or degrees are more skills-oriented and time-constrained, highlighting the value of flexible, efficient, pathways that are clearly job-aligned. Single parents and mid-career adults face compounded pressures that require integrated solutions spanning scheduling, delivery, and support services.

Individuals with a High School Degree or Less

Among adults with a high school degree or less, learning/self-improvement is the dominant motivation, substantially outweighing skill gain. Cost is a significant barrier for a large majority, and time constraints are the leading non-cost barrier. Compared with other groups, this subgroup is more likely to cite enrollment concerns as a primary barrier, suggesting that system navigation and uncertainty about how to begin are salient challenges.

Individuals with Lower Household Incomes

Low-income adults are learning-motivated, with gaining skills close behind as a primary motivation. Cost is nearly universal as a barrier, and time constraints are the most common non-cost barrier. Compared with higher-income or degree-holding groups, enrollment barriers are more prominent. Like those with a high school degree or less, affordability challenges are likely intertwined with administrative and procedural friction.

Single Parents with Children at Home

This subgroup combines a very high rate of cost barriers with distinctive non-cost barriers: time constraints remain the leading non-cost barrier, but child care emerges as the second most prominent barrier, setting this group apart from all others. Motivations are split between gaining skills and learning/self-improvement. Compared with other subgroups, this group faces a compounded set of constraints related to finances, time, and caregiving responsibilities.

Individuals with Some College Experience

Adults with some college experience represent a diverse group, predominantly female and racially diverse, with over half reporting household incomes under \$50,000. Within this population, those who started college but did not earn a degree exhibit slightly different patterns: they are more likely to be male and are most commonly in the 25-34 age group. The primary non-cost barrier to



enrollment is time constraints, and childcare remains a notable issue, particularly for women and younger adults. Concerns about fitting in, along with general enrollment barriers and academic worries, are less common. This suggests that their prior exposure to postsecondary education lessens apprehension about belonging. Considering their existing educational background and significant time constraints, key solutions should focus on responsive and accelerated pathways. These include flexible scheduling, credit mobility, credit for prior learning (CPL), and competency-based education (CBE).

Individuals with a Four-Year Degree or Higher

Adults with a four-year degree or higher are the most strongly skills-oriented subgroup. Although cost barriers are somewhat lower in this subgroup than in other subgroups, they remain substantial. Time constraints dominate all other non-cost barriers to a greater extent than in any other subgroup. Enrollment barriers and academic concerns are comparatively minimal: prior experience with postsecondary education may reduce procedural concerns, but it does not alleviate time pressure.

Tailored Strategies

Because adult learners are not monolithic, there is no single effective “adult learner strategy”; institutions must tailor their approach to meet adult learners where they are.

TAILORED STRATEGY I **For lower-income learners and** **those with less formal education**

.....

Affordability and navigation support are essential, as this group is often learning-motivated and faces the greatest structural barriers, including challenges related to enrollment procedures.

TAILORED STRATEGY II **For degree-holders** **and older adults**

.....

Flexible, skills-focused approaches across educational pathways are critical to address challenging time constraints, as this group is more strongly skills-oriented.

TAILORED STRATEGY III **For single parents**

.....

Integrated solutions are necessary to manage the compounded constraints related to finances, time, and caregiving responsibilities.

Introduction

Higher education remains a critical pathway to individual economic mobility and societal prosperity, yet its value proposition is undergoing a critical reexamination due to rising costs and shifting labor market demands. Since 2019, CollegeAPP has been surveying Americans nationwide to identify individuals who intend to pursue postsecondary education and training. Survey results are linked to publicly and commercially available data sources to better inform postsecondary marketing and recruitment strategies.

This report, *65 Million Reasons Why Intent Matters Most: Adding On to the Largest National Survey of Prospective Adult Students*, is a collaborative effort between **CollegeAPP** and **CAEL** to analyze a subsample of the over 300,000 nationwide survey responses collected by CollegeAPP between 2019 and 2025 from individuals regarding their intentions to pursue postsecondary education. It builds upon the foundational insights of the fall 2022 *Intent Matters: Avoiding the Enrollment Cliff* report, which covered CollegeAPP's first 150,000 survey responses and provided insights on who intended to enroll in college. *65 Million Reasons Why Intent Matters Most* seeks to ground this research in current context and issues confronting higher education enrollment to provide actionable insights for postsecondary education and training providers and other stakeholders, with a dedicated focus on the adult learner population. Ultimately, it seeks to help identify key prospective adult student subgroups and deliver evidence-based implications for policies and practices that can expand college access and success for all adult learners.





The College Enrollment Landscape

Postsecondary enrollment is shifting. After peaking in 2010, enrollment declined through the early 2020s (Hansen, 2025). Data from 2025 show a rebound in enrollment, driven largely by community colleges, certificate programs, and vocational or technical colleges. Undergraduate enrollment growth has been strongest in two-year and workforce-focused programs, while four-year institutions have experienced more modest gains (Kim, et al., 2025). Starting in 2026, demographic shifts associated with lower birthrates after the end of the Great Recession in 2007 are culminating in an “enrollment cliff” — a significant decline in the number of traditional-age college students. This has caused institutions to consider a concerted shift to serving nontraditional students, especially adult learners. Institutions that offer high-quality, affordable programs and recruit beyond their traditional student populations are projected to be more resilient (National Center for Education and Statistics, 2023).

At the personal level, enrollment decisions are shaped by a combination of individual preference, previous schooling, institutional choice, and broader contextual factors (Pawar, 2020; Perna, 2006; Moore & Williams, 2021). Academic readiness and socioeconomic status strongly predict enrollment, while family, peer networks, and access to advising influence students’ ability to navigate the process. School and community support — such as counseling and dual enrollment — can increase college enrollment rates (Barr & Castleman, 2021; Moore & Williams, 2022). However, some of these strategies may contribute to undermatching between students and institutions, where students enroll in institutions that are less selective than those for which they are qualified. At the institutional level, marketing practices, program availability, cost, and proximity to students’ homes affect access and choice. Broader economic conditions, labor markets, and public policy — including state appropriations and financial aid — further shape enrollment behavior.

As institutions of higher education navigate the evolving enrollment landscape, they must respond to barriers that hinder adult learner access and enrollment. Common barriers include affordability, administrative complexity, time constraints, academic confidence, and a feeling they do not belong (Darnell, et al., 2022). Addressing these challenges requires a combination of strategies for improving persistence and completion, from simplified enrollment processes to proactive advising, flexible scheduling, targeted financial aid, and comprehensive support services.

Amidst this dynamic enrollment environment, higher education continues to deliver substantial economic and social returns for both individuals and society. College graduates benefit from higher lifetime earnings, lower unemployment rates, better health outcomes, and reduced likelihood of incarceration, while societal advantages include a more productive workforce, higher tax revenues, and greater civic engagement (Trostel, 2015; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2021; Carnevale, et al., 2024). Despite these benefits, trust in higher education has eroded over the past decade due to rising costs, student debt, and concerns about relevance (Saad, 2025; Jones, 2025). Recent data, however, suggest modest improvements

in public confidence, particularly when institutions emphasize practical training, affordability, and workforce alignment (Jones, 2025), as community colleges and technical training often do.

While the survey data overall covered adults under age 25 and over age 64, this report was weighted to focus on prospective adult learners ages 25 through 64 — individuals who, in addition to being older, are, on average, more economically constrained and more likely to be balancing work and family responsibilities than traditional students (ages 18 through 24). However, this is a generalized statement. It should be noted that there are many adults under age 25 who may also be facing these complex life circumstances. Institutions of higher education that rely primarily on historical enrollment data or conventional recruiting channels risk missing a substantial share of motivated learners who are considering education but have not translated that intent into action (Gallup/Lumina, 2025). This report provides unique insights into an untapped population of prospective postsecondary students — and an opportunity for more inclusive participation in the economic and social benefits of postsecondary education.



Report Methodology

This report draws on large-scale survey data from CollegeAPP online surveys administered to samples of respondents across different states between 2019 and 2025.¹ The survey included close-ended and scaled questions on personal demographics, academic intentions, barriers, and motivations. Survey data were also linked with a large-scale dataset to validate or impute additional demographic information. The survey data was cleaned for quality and the data was weighted to align with population benchmarks,² differentiating the methodology from the original *Intent Matters* report. Additional differences include focusing analyses on people ages 25–64 only and excluding respondents who indicated that they were currently enrolled in school. The survey provides a large sample of respondents for analysis of intent to enroll in educational programs. This report is grounded in robust descriptive analyses (e.g., frequencies and chi-square tests to detect significant differences between observed and expected frequencies) and targeted predictive analyses to build hypotheses around motivations behind intent to enroll. All charts included in the report are sourced to the CollegeAPP survey. The sample includes different states from year to year, so data described over multiple years should be interpreted as snapshots over time rather than longitudinal trend analyses.

¹ Survey invitation emails were distributed randomly and participation was entirely voluntary, which may introduce self-selection bias. This was addressed through weighting and analysis techniques to support reliable insights.

² The survey included 191,744 unweighted survey responses from adults between the ages of 25 and 64 who were not full-time or part-time students at the time of the survey. More females (60%) than males (40%) completed the survey. Survey respondents were primarily white (70%), with 10% Black, 9% Hispanic/Latino, 8% Multiracial/Other, and 4% Asian respondents. Respondent age groups were 16% 25-34, 22% 35-44, 33% 45-54, and 30% 55-64.

Key Findings

Key findings emerging from the survey analysis can inform education and training provider strategy and maximize its impact:

- Intent to enroll is widespread but varies by subgroup. In the weighted sample ($N=152,972$), just 27% ($n=41,614$) reported intending to enroll in education or training within the next two years — representing millions of prospective adult learners nationwide.
- Similar to findings from the previous *Intent Matters* report, published in 2022, intent to enroll in education and training is higher among women, younger adults, Black and Hispanic/Latino respondents, individuals with lower household incomes, and those without a four-year degree.
- Although less pronounced, intent to enroll remains substantial and is growing among older adults and those with four-year degrees or higher.
- Motivations reflect both workforce and lifelong-learning priorities: gaining skills for a current career and learning/self-improvement are the most common primary drivers, while career change remains meaningful for a sizable minority.
- Persistent barriers are preventing adult learners from realizing their intent to enroll and cost is a widespread challenge (81% of intending respondents report cost as a barrier), and time constraints are the leading non-cost barrier (67%).
- Navigation and enrollment support matters most for adults with less than a four-year degree and for low-income adults, whereas program design and flexibility matter most for degree-holders and adults ages 45–64.



Who Is Intending to Enroll in Education or Training

Understanding who intends to enroll in education or training over the next two years is a critical first step for institutions seeking to stabilize or increase enrollment in a shifting demographic and economic landscape. It also provides a meaningful opportunity to extend the benefits of postsecondary education and training to a broader swath of the population, contributing to improved economic mobility, equity and workforce development.

While enrollment patterns reflect who has successfully navigated on-ramps to institutional pathways, intent data reveals a broader — and often overlooked — population of prospective adult learners who are considering postsecondary education but may not be visible through traditional recruitment channels (Gallup/Lumina, 2025). This section examines the characteristics, patterns, and trends among individuals who express intent to enroll, and what these findings imply for educational organization strategies.

Overall Patterns of Intent to Enroll

Across the full weighted survey sample ($N=152,972$), just over one-quarter of respondents ($n=41,614$) reported intending to enroll in education or training within the next two years. Applied to the U.S. population as a whole, this figure represents millions of adults who consider postsecondary education or training relevant to their lives in the near term, even amid concerns about cost, time, and return on investment.

More Than a Quarter of Respondents Intend to Enroll in Education or Training

A higher proportion of women, compared to men, indicated an intent to enroll in education or training within the subsequent two years. This observation is consistent with the findings of the 2022 *Intent Matters*

FIGURE 1

Percentage of Respondents
Responding Yes or No to Intending
to Enroll in Education or Training
Within the Next Two Years

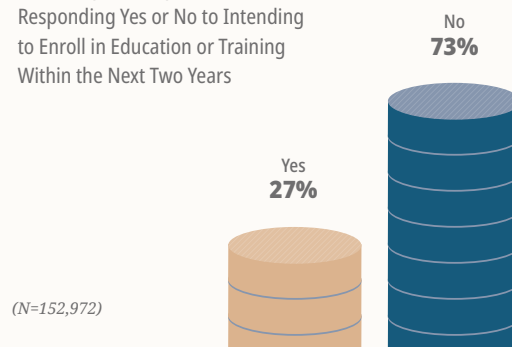
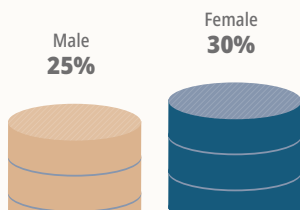


FIGURE 2

Percentage of Respondents Intending to Enroll in Education or Training within the Next Two Years, by Gender

(N=41,614)



report and persisted across all measured demographics, including age cohorts, income brackets, and prior educational attainment. This suggests that women constitute a principal demographic influencing the near-term demand for postsecondary education.

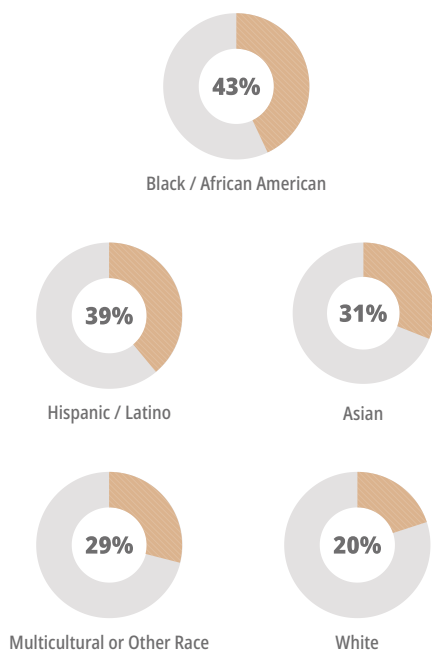
Women More Likely to Express Intent to Enroll

Also consistent with the 2022 findings, intent to enroll demonstrated substantial variation by race and ethnicity, with Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian respondents all reporting considerably higher levels of intent compared to White respondents. For Black and Hispanic/Latino adults, these disparities remained even after controlling for age, income, and educational attainment, which indicates that higher levels of intent are not merely a consequence of socioeconomic status or life stage.

FIGURE 3

Percentage of Respondents Intending to Enroll in Education or Training within the Next Two Years, by Race/Ethnicity

(N=41,614)



Respondents Intending to Enroll are Racially and Ethnically Diverse

Within the survey group, younger adults were significantly more likely to indicate plans for enrollment, with a steady decrease in intent observed across successive age groups. Adults aged from their mid-twenties to mid-thirties constitute a particularly important segment: they exhibited high levels of intent yet were considerably less likely to be enrolled than traditional college-aged students. Concurrently, intent among older adults is substantial, particularly for those who already possess some college credit or a bachelor's degree. These findings are consistent with those reported in the 2022 *Intent Matters* report.

Although Intent Decreases with Age, It Remains Sizeable Among All Age Groups

Paralleling the 2022 findings, single individuals demonstrated a higher propensity for expressing intent compared to married individuals, and parents with dependent children exhibited a greater likelihood of indicating enrollment plans than those without children. All subgroups of individuals without a four-year degree, which includes those who did not complete high school, those with some college but no degree, and those who completed an associate degree, displayed high levels of intent (consistent with the 2022 *Intent Matters* report). Furthermore, individuals holding bachelor's degrees or advanced degrees also manifested notable levels of intent.

Intent to Enroll Spread Across Respondents with Varying Existing Education Levels

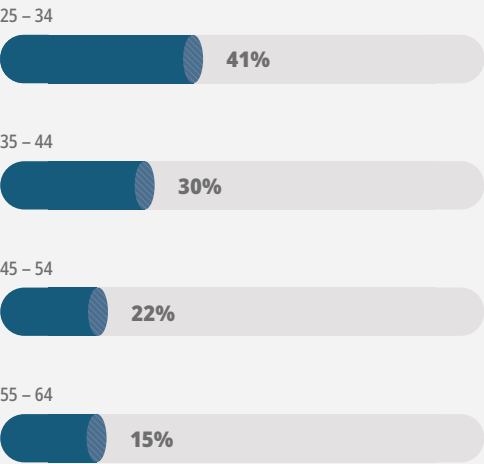
An inverse relationship was observed between income and intent to enroll: individuals with lower household incomes were more likely to express intent than those with higher incomes, a finding consistent with the 2022 *Intent Matters* report. Individuals with lower incomes may realize the most significant economic benefit from postsecondary training and education compared to those with higher initial incomes. This dynamic underscores a critical and widely recognized tension for institutions: many of the most highly motivated prospective students are also those confronting the most substantial financial obstacles to enrollment, whether due to the cost of education, the necessity of prioritizing employment over academic pursuits, or a combination of both.

Individuals with Lower Household Incomes More Likely to Express Intent to Enroll

Education and training are frequently perceived as essential for navigating labor market uncertainty, facilitating reskilling, or advancing one’s career. Consequently, individuals who were unemployed or anticipated a career transition demonstrated a significantly higher propensity to express intent to enroll.

FIGURE 4

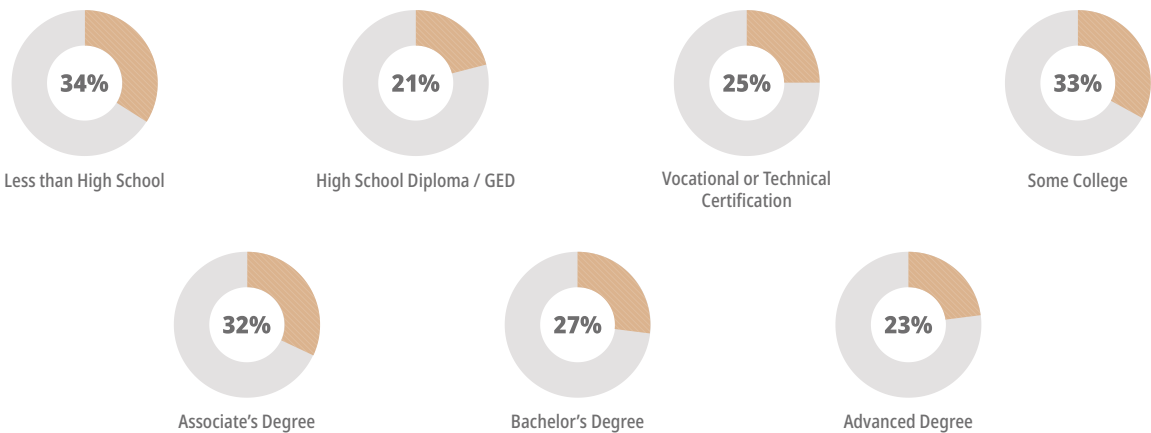
Percentage of Respondents Intending to Enroll in Education or Training within the Next Two Years, by Age Group



(N=41,614)

FIGURE 5

Percentage of Respondents Intending to Enroll in Education or Training within the Next Two Years, by Current Educational Attainment



(N= 39,064)



Multivariate Analyses

Multivariate analyses confirm that women, younger adults, Black and Hispanic/Latino respondents, individuals with some college experience, and those who have not retired had higher odds of intending to enroll. Importantly, these characteristics interact. For example, the effect of income on intent to apply differed by age group. Among the youngest participants, a lower-or middle-income status correlated with the greatest increases in enrollment intention compared to the oldest age group. A similar pattern emerged for education level. Younger participants with lower education attainment had substantially higher odds of intending to enroll than their older peers.

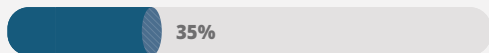
Change Over Time

The CollegeAPP survey is fielded annually across changing cohorts of participating states. While year-to-year data does not reflect longitudinal trends among the same sample, it provides a comparison of intent to enroll via multiple snapshots over time. Although the overall percentage of adult learners who plan to enroll remains stable year over year, its composition has shifted. Intent has increased among Black respondents, older adults, and parents with children at home. Parents with bachelor's degrees, in particular, have shown notable growth in intent, potentially pointing to rising interest in lifelong learning and reskilling. However, these findings must be interpreted with caution given that sampling varied from year to year.

FIGURE 6

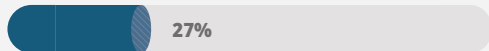
Percentage of Respondents Intending to Enroll in Education or Training within the Next Two Years, by Level of Household Income

Less than \$50,000



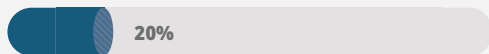
35%

\$50,000 – \$99,999



27%

\$100,000 or More



20%

(N=40,457)

Learning Preferences

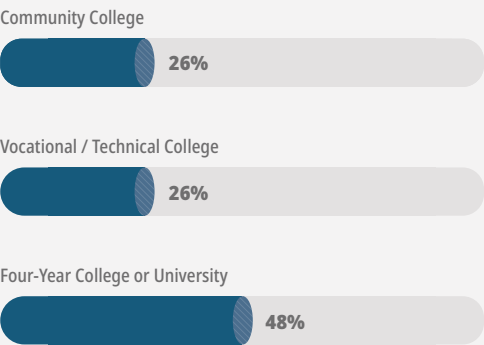
Respondents Who Do Not Have a Bachelor's Degree Prefer a Vocational, Technical or Community College

Respondents expressing an intent to enroll in education or training exhibit a diverse array of preferences regarding institution type. While approximately 48% of respondents favor a four-year college or university, the combined preference for vocational/technical college (26%) and community college (26%) totals 52%, signifying that the collective intent for shorter-term, workforce-aligned educational pathways surpasses the demand for four-year institutions. Moreover, since the 48% preference for four-year institutions incorporates individuals planning to pursue master's and advanced degrees, the proportion of prospective students with lower prior degree attainment specifically focused on bachelor's degree enrollment is even less than this 48% figure.

Current education level is the strongest differentiator of institutional preference. Those with a high school degree or less are more likely to prefer community college, those already holding vocational or technical credentials strongly prefer returning to that pathway, and respondents with bachelor's or advanced degrees prefer four-year institutions.

FIGURE 7

Percentage of Respondents Intending to Enroll in Education or Training within the Next Two Years, by Preferred Education Type



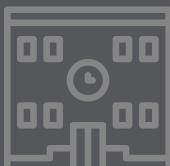
(N=40,479)

Community College

This institution type is most preferred by those with the lowest educational attainment.

Preference peaks among respondents with less than high school (56.8%) and a high school diploma / GED (49.7%).

Preference is lowest among those with a bachelor's degree (15.1%) or an advanced degree (13.9%).



Vocational / Technical College

This choice is strongly preferred by those who have already completed similar training.

Preference is highest among respondents who already possess a vocational or technical certification (54.5%).

It also shows above-average interest from those with a high school diploma / GED (36.4%).



Four-Year College or University

Preference is overwhelmingly highest among those who already hold a bachelor's degree (63.7%) or an advanced degree (66.2%).

Preference is lowest among those with less than high school (8.9%) and a vocational or technical certification (13.7%).



Preferred Education Type by Education Status

PREFERRED EDUCATION TYPE	CURRENT EDUCATION LEVEL						
	Less than high school	High school diploma or GED	Vocational or technical certification	Some college	Associate's degree	Bachelor's degree	Advanced degree
Vocational/Technical College	34.3%	36.4%	28.8%	22.6%	21.3%	36.4%	19.9%
Community College <i>Percentage within current education level</i>	56.8%	49.7%	40.4%	22.8%	15.1%	49.7%	13.9%
Four-Year College or University <i>Percentage within current education level</i>	8.9%	13.9%	30.7%	54.6%	13.9%	63.7%	66.2%

Variances by Demographics and Income

By gender, men significantly prefer vocational or technical college (32.2% of all men vs. 21.1% of all women), while women show stronger preference for both community college (28.3% of women vs. 22.0% of men) and four-year institutions (50.6% of women vs. 45.8% of men).

Preference for vocational or technical college increases with age, while preference for four-year college decreases with age.

Vocational or technical preference is relatively stable across income levels, while respondents with higher income are more likely to prefer four-year institutions and respondents with lower incomes are more likely to prefer community college.

Employment status matters.

Respondents who are employed full-time prefer four-year institutions, while unemployed, retired, and part-time workers are more likely to prefer vocational, technical and community college options. Moreover, those planning to change jobs show higher vocational or technical college preference.

Preferences by Employment Status and Job-Seeking

Preferences by Employment Status

Full-Time Employees

This group, which constitutes the largest segment of respondents, shows the highest preference for four-year institutions (52.2%) and the lowest interest in community colleges (22.7%).

Unemployed and Retired

These groups display a more balanced distribution of preferences compared to employed adults. When community college and vocational/technical college responses are combined they overwhelmingly prefer those shorter term pathways over a four-year degree (62.7% of unemployed adults and 62.9% of retired people).

Part-Time Employees

This group's preferences are concentrated in four-year colleges (43.8%) and community colleges (30.9%).

Preferred Education Type by Employment Status

PREFERRED EDUCATION TYPE	EMPLOYMENT STATUS				TOTAL
	Unemployed	Employed part-time	Employed full-time	Retired	
Vocational/Technical College <i>Percentage within employment status</i>	30.5%	25.3%	25.1%	30.6%	26.1%
COUNT	1,850	1,146	6,987	429	10,412
Community College <i>Percentage within employment status</i>	32.2%	30.9%	22.7%	32.3%	25.4%
COUNT	1,954	1,402	6,342	452	10,150
Four-Year College or University <i>Percentage within employment status</i>	37.3%	43.8%	52.2%	37.1%	48.5%
COUNT	2,264	1,984	14,561	519	19,328



Preferred Education Type by Intent to Seek a New Job Within The Next 12 Months

PREFERRED EDUCATION TYPE	INTEND TO SEEK A NEW JOB WITHIN THE NEXT 12 MONTHS		TOTAL
	NO	YES	
Vocational/Technical College <i>Percentage within</i>	24.1%	27.2%	25.6%
Community College <i>Percentage within</i>	25.6%	26.6%	26.1%
Four-Year College or University <i>Percentage within</i>	50.3%	46.2%	48.3%

Seeking a New Job within the Next 12 Months

Differences in Preferred Education Type

Vocational / Technical College

Prospective adult learners who intend to seek a new job show a higher preference for vocational or technical colleges (27.2%) compared to non-job seekers (24.1%).

Community College

Preferences for community college are similar between the two groups, with 26.6% of job seekers and 25.6% of non-job seekers preferring this option.

Four-year College or University

This type is the overall most preferred, but the preference is significantly higher among prospective adult learners who do not intend to seek a new job (50.3%). Those who do intend to seek a new job show a lower preference for four-year institutions (46.2%).

Preferences in Learning Modalities

Prospective adult learners' preferences for how and where they study evolved following the pandemic period. While interest in fully online learning has declined substantially from its peak during the pandemic, respondents continued to value the flexibility of virtual delivery formats. Affinity for online learning reached a high point in 2022, when more than four in five respondents expressed interest, but it has since fallen to approximately one-third of respondents. In contrast, while interest in hybrid learning — combining online and in-person instruction — has also declined from its pandemic-era peak, it remains relatively high. Traditional on-campus-only programs were the least preferred option.

Learning preferences varied by demographic characteristics. While individuals balancing work and family responsibilities expressed more interest in online learning, younger, single respondents, and those with lower incomes expressed more interest in on-campus learning. As adult learner preferences continue to shift, education and training systems that provide diverse pathways — across disciplines, delivery modes, and institutional types — may be better equipped to meet the varied needs and goals of prospective students.

Interest in fields of study was distributed across several major disciplines, with no single area dominating overall demand. Business and economics, healthcare, education, and information technology and data-related fields all attracted substantial interest. Preferences for institution type and learning modality were largely consistent across these fields of study, with most respondents favoring public four-year institutions offering online or hybrid delivery.



Business and Economics | 27%

Interest was higher among males, higher-income respondents, and those who were unemployed or employed full-time. The oldest age group expressed slightly lower interest.



Healthcare | 26%

Females, Black respondents, younger adults, single individuals, and those with children at home were more likely to express interest.



Education | 26%

Females, lower-income respondents, individuals with children at home, and those with advanced degrees were more likely to express interest.



IT / Computer Science Data Science | 20%

Interest was higher among males and Asian respondents and among individuals without children at home.

Motivations and Barriers to Enrollment

This section analyzes the most frequent motivations and obstacles influencing adult learners' decisions regarding enrollment in education or training within the forthcoming two years. Comprehending these motivations is crucial for informing course content and structure to optimally address the underlying drivers of enrollment. However, for many individuals, a mere interest in additional education and training may be insufficient to convert intent into enrollment without focused support. Based on survey responses from adult learners who expressed intent to enroll, the ensuing analysis underscores both the factors that promote participation and the challenges that may impede interested individuals from progressing.³

Primary Motivations

Education is central to enabling individuals to maintain competitiveness in the labor market, achieve professional advancement, or effectively respond to shifting occupational demands. Among prospective students, the most frequent motivation for enrollment (43%) was the objective of acquiring skills pertinent to their current career path.³ For a significant number of adult learners considering higher education, this pursuit may be perceived as a strategic investment directly correlated with employment success, enhanced productivity, and greater economic stability.



³ Questions about motivation and barriers were added to later versions of the survey, so not all survey respondents received these questions. Data on primary motivation were available for 16,292 people. Data on cost as a barrier were available for 10,346 people. Data on primary barriers other than cost were available for 10,208 people.

Gaining Skills in Current Career Is Top Motivation Among Those with Intent to Enroll

Interest in learning/self-improvement was the second most frequently cited motivation, identified by 35 percent of respondents, highlighting the role of education as a lifelong pursuit that provides both foundational learning and initial workforce skills, as well as personal growth, intellectual engagement, and self-fulfillment.

A smaller but still meaningful share of respondents — 21 percent — identified changing careers as their primary motivation. These individuals may be responding to job dissatisfaction, limited advancement opportunities, economic disruption, or shifts in labor market demand. Education and training programs that offer clear pathways into new fields, particularly those aligned with high-demand occupations, are likely to be especially relevant for this group. Short-term credentials, career-focused certificates, and programs that recognize prior learning may be particularly attractive to individuals seeking to transition into new careers.

A negligible number of respondents cited making their family proud as their primary reason for enrolling. Those who did tended to be younger adults with lower current levels of educational attainment. While social motivations may exert influence on decision-making in more indirect capacities, the survey results indicate that practical and intrinsic motivations predominantly drive intent to enroll.

Variation in Motivation Across Subgroups

Motivations to enroll vary across demographic groups, revealing important differences in how individuals perceive the role of education in their lives. A complex interaction between motivations related to career prospects and learning/self-improvement emerged across age, income, and current educational attainment. These patterns may reflect differences in job stability and opportunity. For instance, individuals with elevated incomes may seek to augment or update their skills within relatively secure career trajectories, whereas those with lower incomes may regard education as a means to achieve fundamentally distinct and potentially more stable employment.

Full-time employment status proved to be the strongest predictor for identifying “gaining skills in my current career” as a principal motivator. Individuals holding a bachelor’s degree and possessing higher incomes were also more inclined to cite skill development as a primary driver. This pattern suggests that individuals more firmly integrated into the labor market — specifically, those employed full-time, with higher educational qualifications, and earning greater incomes — may be particularly prone to pursuing further education and training to reinforce their competencies, advance professionally, and remain current with shifts in the labor market. Conversely, interest in enrolling

FIGURE 8

Percentage of Respondents Intending to Enroll, by Primary Motivation

To Gain Skills in My Current Career



For the Interest of Learning / Self-Improvement



To Change Careers



To Make My Family Proud



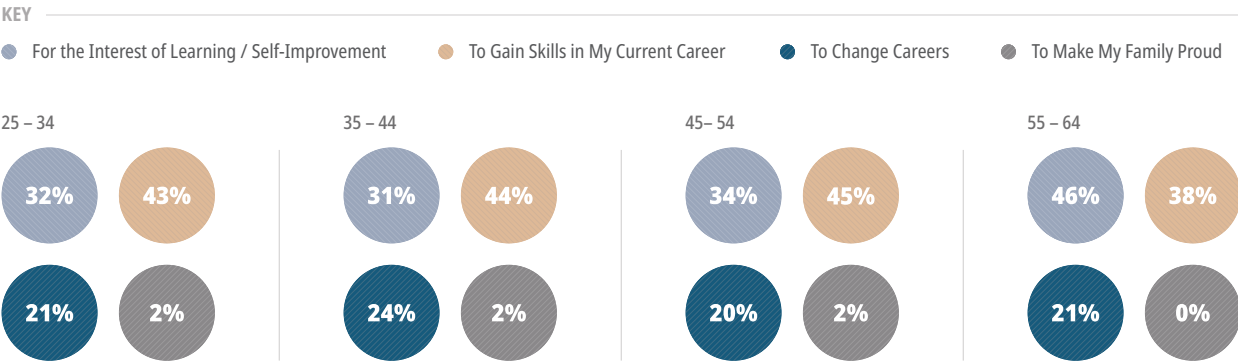
(N=16,292)

to effect a career change was more prevalent among adults facing greater economic constraints or transition requirements, particularly individuals with household incomes below \$50,000 and those who were unemployed or employed on a part-time basis.

Prior educational experiences may also shape how individuals view the purpose and value of additional education, influencing whether they approach enrollment as a means to advance, explore, or engage in lifelong learning. Individuals who were most likely to identify learning/self-improvement as a primary motivation comprised a unique mix of respondents, including respondents with the lowest educational attainment levels (who are likely looking for foundational skills and first degrees) and individuals with the highest income levels and the oldest respondents (who may be leaning toward the self-improvement aspects of learning). More specifically, among individuals with a high school degree or less, nearly half (49%) identified interest in learning/self-improvement as their primary motivation. About one-third of people who have completed some college, vocational training, an associate degree, or a bachelor's degree or higher identified learning/self-improvement as a primary motivator. This suggests that many individuals along the spectrum of education attainment remain interested in continuing to grow, stay engaged, and adapt over the course of their lives.



FIGURE 9
Percentage of Respondents Identifying Primary Motivation to Enroll, by Age Group



(N=16,293)

- The oldest respondents (aged 55 to 64 years) were most likely to identify interest in learning/self-improvement and least likely to identify skill gain or career change as their primary motivator.
- Adult learners with household incomes below \$50,000 were least likely to report skill gain and most likely to report career change as their primary motivator, compared to other income groups. However, they were just as likely as the highest income earners (with incomes above \$100,000) and more likely than the middle income earners (with incomes between \$50,000 and \$99,999) to identify interest in learning/self-improvement. Individuals with the highest household income were the least likely to identify career change as a motivation to enroll.
- Adult learners possessing a high school diploma or less were the most inclined to cite learning and self-improvement as a primary motivation. Conversely, those holding a vocational or technical certificate (46%) or an Associate's degree (44%) were more driven by the acquisition of new skills compared to individuals with some college experience (33%). Similarly, a desire to change careers was a key motivator for these groups. Individuals with some college experience (39%) were somewhat more motivated by learning than those with a vocational or technical certificate (33%) and an Associate's degree (31%). Finally, those with some college experience were more likely to be motivated by the desire to make their family proud (3.6%) compared to those with a vocational-technical certificate (1.3%) or an Associate's Degree (1.8%).



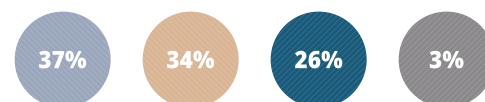
FIGURE 10

Percentage of Respondents Identifying Primary Motivation to Enroll, by Household Income Level

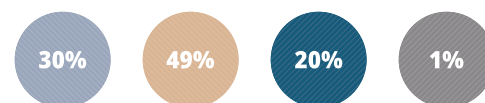
KEY

- For the Interest of Learning / Self-Improvement
- To Gain Skills in My Current Career
- To Change Careers
- To Make My Family Proud

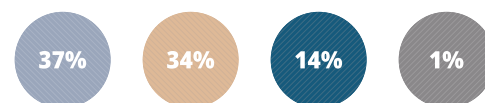
Less than \$50,000



\$50,000 – \$99,999



\$100,000 or More



(N=15,291)

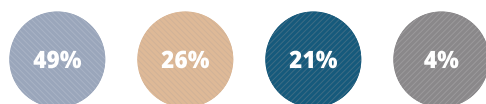
FIGURE 11

Percentage of Respondents Identifying Primary Motivation to Enroll, by Education Level

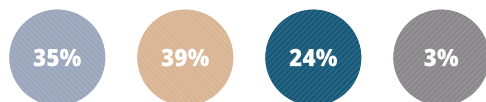
KEY

- For the Interest of Learning / Self-Improvement
- To Gain Skills in My Current Career
- To Change Careers
- To Make My Family Proud

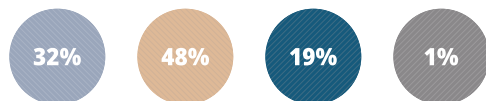
High School Diploma / GED or Less



Vocational / Technical, Some College or Associate's Degree



Bachelor's Degree or Higher



(N=16,294)

Dynamic Relationship between Motivation to Enroll by Age Group, Education, and Income Level

Motivation for enrolling in education and training exhibited variation based on the preferred type of educational institution. While career advancement and general self-improvement were prominent motivators across all institutional preference groups, individuals intending to enroll in a four-year college or university were more likely to be driven by the acquisition of career-furthering skills (48%) compared to those enrolling in a vocational or technical school (39%) or a community college (36%). A change in career was a greater impetus for a larger proportion of people intending to enroll in vocational or technical school (23%) or community college (21%) than for those intending to enroll in a four-year college or university (19%). Learning and self-improvement served as an important motivation for more individuals intending to enroll in community college (40%) compared to those intending to enroll in vocational or technical school (37%) or a four-year college or university (31%).

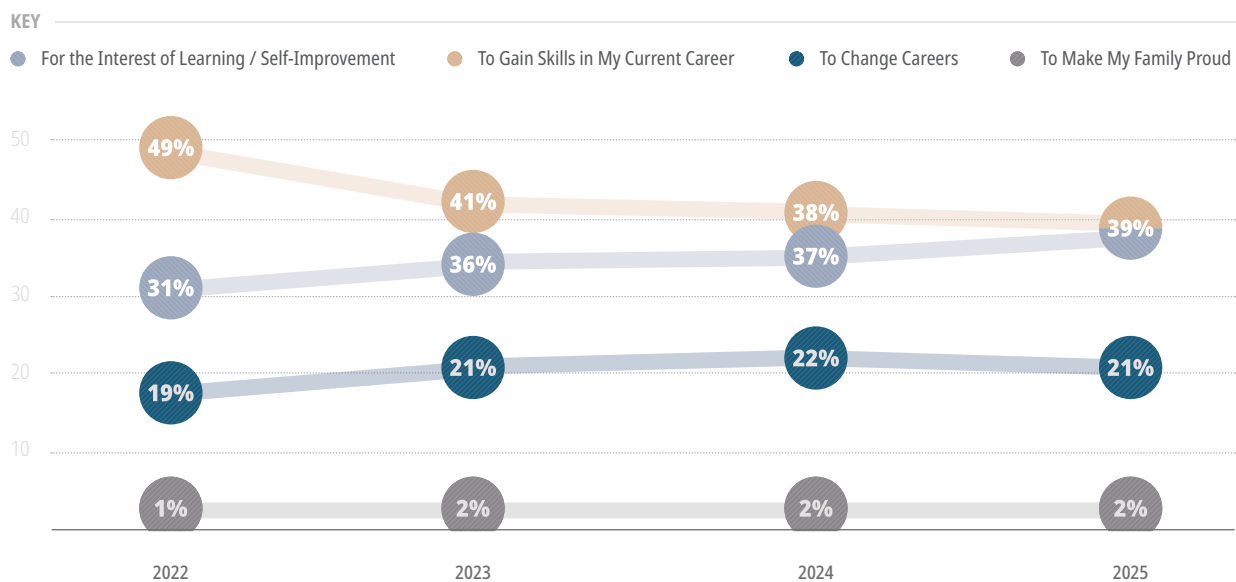
Change in Motivation Over Time

Motivations for enrollment appear to have shifted over time, based on responses from unique survey respondents each year. Although the CollegeAPP survey does not provide longitudinal data from the same cohort of respondents over time for trend analysis, it provides a year-to-year snapshot of motivations and barriers that can be used to build hypotheses around the changing enrollment context.

The share of respondents citing skill development as their primary motivation declined from 2022 (49%) to 2025 (39%), while interest in learning or self-improvement increased over the same period (31% to 39%). This pattern was true across multiple subgroups of respondents, suggesting broader population shifts in motivation to seek postsecondary training and education. The share of respondents citing a change in careers as their primary motivation remained relatively steady from 2022 (19%) to 2025 (21%).

FIGURE 12

Percentage of Respondents Identifying Primary Motivation to Enroll, by Survey Year



(N=16,292)

Primary Barriers

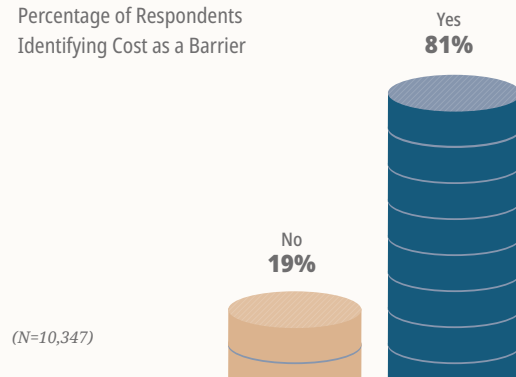
While motivations explain why individuals consider enrolling, barriers reveal the challenges that can prevent interested individuals from taking the next step. Whether or not cost was among them was a standalone question asked of respondents intending to enroll. Eighty-one percent of respondents reported that cost indeed posed a barrier to enrollment.

Cost Is a Widespread Barrier to Enrollment

Concerns regarding cost permeated all demographic groups, though the intensity varied. Individuals with lower incomes and lower levels of educational attainment were substantially more likely to report cost as an impediment. Employment status also proved a significant factor, with unemployed and part-time employed adults more likely to identify cost concerns than those employed full-time. Women were more likely than men to cite cost as a barrier, and younger adults were more likely than older adults to report cost-related barriers. In addition, having children at home further increased the likelihood of perceiving cost as a barrier, reflecting the combined financial pressures of education and family responsibilities.

FIGURE 13

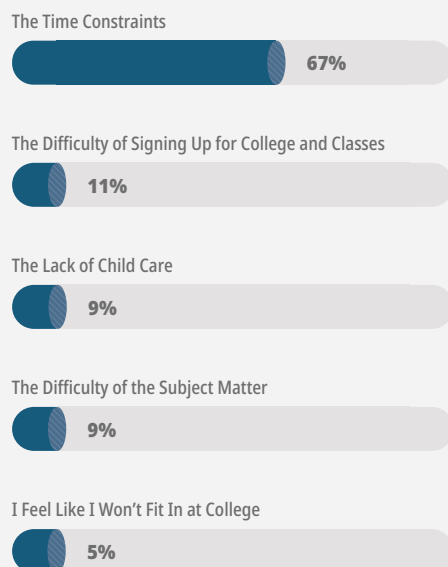
Percentage of Respondents Identifying Cost as a Barrier



(N=10,347)

FIGURE 14

Percentage of Respondents Identifying Non-Cost Barriers



(N=10,208)

When subsequently queried about impediments distinct from cost, time constraints emerged as the most frequently cited barrier, reported by 67 percent of respondents who intended to enroll. In contrast to cost, apprehension regarding time constraints increased commensurately with age and educational attainment. Older respondents and those possessing higher levels of education were more apt to report time limitations as a significant impediment, potentially attributable to increased professional obligations, caregiving demands, or competing career commitments. Individuals intending to enroll in a four-year college or university reported a higher incidence of time constraints (73%) compared to those planning to enroll in vocational or technical school (64%) or community college (59%). Males were marginally more likely than females to cite time constraints, although the differential was comparatively modest.

Time Constraints a Resounding Barrier Outside of Cost

Other barriers, while less frequently cited overall, remained important for certain populations. Difficulty in navigating the college enrollment and course registration process was identified by 11 percent of respondents. A lack of adequate child care and challenges with subject matter were each reported by 9 percent of respondents, while concerns regarding social integration were mentioned by 5 percent. These barriers were more commonly reported by respondents with lower incomes, lower levels of education, and by females, particularly those with children. With the exception of time constraints, respondents with the lowest incomes were more likely to report all barriers (i.e., navigating enrollment processes, lack of child care, academic difficulty, and concerns about fitting in). Similarly, concerns about fitting in, navigating enrollment processes, and academic difficulty were most common among respondents with less than a bachelor's degree, particularly those with a high school diploma or less. People intending to enroll in a four-year college or university expressed lower rates of barriers related to fitting in, enrollment, and academics compared to people intending to enroll in other types of programs. These patterns suggest that impediments frequently intersect and accumulate, especially for individuals who have historically encountered limited access to higher education.

Change in Barriers Over Time

The prevalence of primary barriers remained relatively stable from 2022 to 2025. This stability suggests that longstanding challenges — particularly cost and time constraints — continue to shape enrollment decisions despite changes in the broader education and workforce landscape.

Factors Among Those Not Intending to Enroll

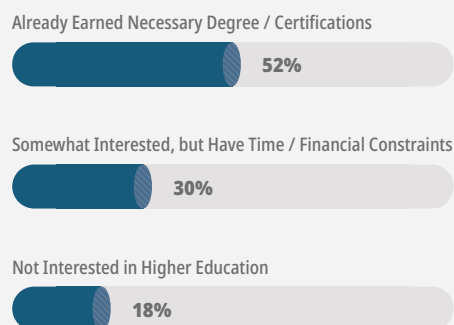
The survey also provides insight into why some individuals do not intend to enroll.⁴ Among respondents not intending to enroll who answered questions on factors affecting their decision ($n=47,612$), the most common reason (52%) was that they had already earned the necessary degrees or certifications. Not surprisingly, this reason was most prevalent among individuals with higher levels of education and income, suggesting that for some, additional formal education may not be perceived as necessary.

Most Individuals Not Intending to Enroll Already Have Necessary Degree

Another substantial share of respondents with no intention of enrolling (30%) reported that they were somewhat interested in further education but faced time or financial constraints. This reason was most likely to be cited by individuals who were unemployed, had lower household income levels, or had less than a bachelor's degree. A smaller share of respondents (18%) indicated that they were not interested in higher education. Lack of interest was least common among individuals with higher income and education levels and most common among those with the lowest levels of education, precisely the population that education and training providers may most want to engage. This pattern suggests that disengagement from education may be shaped by prior experiences and perceived relevance. Findings from a CAEL research brief on individuals who had never enrolled in postsecondary education or training, for example, suggest that lack of confidence in their ability to complete a program of study diminishes prospective students' likelihood to enroll (Darnell, et al., 2022). It also suggests an ongoing opportunity in meeting learners where they are at each stage of their educational engagement to ensure relevance and interest and better connect education with individuals' goals and circumstances.

FIGURE 15

Percentage of Respondents Identifying Reason for Not Intending to Enroll



($N=47,612$)

⁴ Among the total weighted survey sample of 152,972, 73%, or 111,358, did not intend to enroll in education or training within the next two years.

65 Million Reasons
Why Intent Matters Most:
Adding On to the Largest National Survey
of Prospective Adult Students

Profiles of Prospective Adult Students



Using data-driven findings from the CollegeAPP survey, we have identified several key subgroups of prospective students (“market segments”) who may benefit from more customized outreach, programming, and support. The market segmentations we discuss include:

Individuals with No College and No Degree

This group may face persistent navigational and financial barriers to enrollment, but their engagement in postsecondary education may provide the biggest impact at an individual and collective level.

Individuals with Low Household Income

Like individuals with a high school degree or less, this group may face significant barriers to enrollment, but their participation in education and training could yield broader personal and social impact.

Single Parents

This group faces unique barriers to enrollment, including child care and time constraints, but they continue to express interest in enrollment.

Some College and No Four-Year Degree

Individuals with some college have clear interest, intent, and experience with the postsecondary system, but may need specific support to help them complete or further their education.

Individuals with a Four-Year Degree

They represent a smaller market, but one with higher conversion potential.

Mid-career Individuals Between the Ages of 45 and 64

This group represents a small but eager market with clear intention and, in some cases, more resources, to facilitate enrollment.



Adults with a High School Degree or Less

Who Are They?

Adult learners with a high school degree or less who intend to enroll skew female and younger, with the largest share concentrated among adults ages 25–34. Racial and ethnic representation is diverse. Income is heavily concentrated at the lower end of the distribution, with roughly three-quarters reporting household incomes below \$50,000. Most are working-age adults balancing employment, family responsibilities, and limited financial flexibility. They typically have limited experience navigating postsecondary systems. Individuals with a high school degree or less are most likely to prefer community college, followed by vocational or technical college. They are least likely to prefer a four-year college or university.

What Motivates Them?

Learning/self-improvement is the dominant motivation for enrollment among this group, followed by gaining skills and changing careers. Motivation varies by household income and gender: women are more likely to be motivated by learning/self-improvement, while individuals with somewhat higher incomes are more likely to prioritize gaining skills.

What Barriers Do They Face?

Cost is nearly universal as a barrier for individuals with a high school degree or less, particularly among women. While cost concerns decrease as household income rises, they remain salient even among those with higher incomes. In addition to cost, time constraints and enrollment-related concerns are prominent. These findings align with recent research: among individuals who had never enrolled in postsecondary education or training, more than three-quarters each indicated that they would have been more likely to apply and more likely to enroll if the program was cheaper, and more than one-third would have been more likely to enroll if they had more time for their education and training (Darnell, et al., 2022). Women and younger adults are more likely to cite child care barriers, while men and older adults more often cite time constraints. Lower-income individuals are more likely to report difficulty navigating enrollment processes.

Key Implications

For individuals with a high school degree or less, learning/self improvement-led motivation combined with relatively high enrollment barriers suggests the need for clear on-ramps, simplified enrollment processes, high-touch advising, and strong affordability messaging. For example, research suggests that effective postsecondary education providers facilitate student support at the front end of the student journey, such as through upfront advising and outreach during the application, admission, enrollment, and onboarding processes (Darnell, et al., 2022), and throughout their educational experience (Soliz, 2025). Institutions are implementing these high-touch supports through small-scale changes to staff roles and large-scale organizational redesign to centralize advising and support services (Howard, et al., 2025).

Adults with Lower Incomes

Who Are They?

Adult respondents with household incomes below \$50,000 who intend to enroll are racially and ethnically diverse. They are more likely to be female, and over half are between the ages of 25 and 34. This subgroup has a range of educational experiences: more than half have completed some postsecondary credential, with roughly one-third possessing a bachelor's degree or higher. Individuals with lower incomes planning to seek education or training are most likely to prefer a four-year college or university, followed by a community college and then a vocational or technical institution.

What Motivates Them?

Motivations are split between learning/self-improvement and gaining skills, though many in this subgroup also indicated that they were motivated by a career change. Individuals with less education tend to be motivated by learning/self-improvement, while those with more education are more likely to be motivated by gaining skills. This variation reflects different starting points and goals within the same income-constrained population.

What Barriers Do They Face?

Not surprisingly, cost is close to universal among low-income adults with intent to enroll. Time constraints are the leading non-cost barrier, particularly among those with higher educational attainment. Enrollment navigation, academic concerns, and concerns about fitting in are more common among individuals with high school education or less. Child care remains a notable barrier across education levels but is most salient among those with less than a college degree.

Key Implications

Near-universal cost barriers and prominent concerns about navigating enrollment among respondents with lower incomes suggest that reducing financial uncertainty and administrative barriers is central, alongside flexible delivery models that accommodate time constraints. Institutions that empower adult learners through diverse delivery modalities, variable pacing and scheduling, and adult-centered teaching and learning make it possible for students to balance learning and life commitments (Darnell, et al., 2022).



Single Parents

Who Are They?

Single parents with children at home are predominantly women and concentrated in the 25–44 age range. The group is racially and ethnically diverse, with household income skewed toward the lower end of the distribution: about two-thirds report household income under \$50,000 and about one-quarter report \$50,000–\$99,999. More women (71%) than men (52%) in this subgroup earn less than \$50,000 per year. Over half report some college, vocational or technical training or receiving an associate degree, and nearly one-third report a bachelor's degree or higher. Overall, single parents intending to enroll are most likely to prefer a four-year college or university, followed by a community college and then a vocational or technical institution, though single fathers are more likely to prefer vocational institutions over four-year institutions. People in this subgroup face “stacked constraints”: caregiving responsibilities combined with lower incomes and, for many, incomplete postsecondary pathways.

What Motivates Them?

Gaining skills is the most common motivation, followed closely by learning/self-improvement and career change. Motivation patterns vary by income and educational attainment within the subgroup. Similar to broader survey patterns, as household income rises and current education level increases, respondents are more likely to identify gaining skills as their primary motivation. Women in this subgroup were more likely to identify career change as a motivation (26%) than men (17%).

What Barriers Do They Face?

Cost is exceptionally prevalent, cited by the vast majority of respondents in this subgroup. Financial concerns are a hurdle even among higher-income respondents, cited by 92% of women and 85% of men. Time constraints and child care are defining non-cost barriers (for both men and women), particularly among younger parents. Similar to broader survey patterns, enrollment barriers and academic concerns are most pronounced among those with less education, while time constraints are more prominent among those with higher incomes.

Key Implications

For single parents, extremely high rates of cost barriers combined with significant child care constraints suggest that affordability strategies must be paired with family-aligned scheduling and caregiver support to enable enrollment and persistence. Indeed, results from a study of comprehensive wraparound support to community college students showed particular benefits to student success among adult learners (Daugherty, et al., 2020).



Adults with Some College but No Four-Year Degree

Who Are They?

Adults with some college experience, vocational, technical credentials, or associate degrees who intend to enroll are a heterogeneous population. Women comprise the majority of this group. Racial and ethnic representation is diverse. Over half report household incomes below \$50,000. This group has prior exposure to postsecondary systems but often incomplete pathways. Their educational institutional preference is mixed, with just over a third favoring a four-year institution while about a third each prefer community college or vocational/technical schools.

Some College No Degree

The demographic profile of adults with some college, but no degree shows patterns slightly distinct from those with degrees. Males (24.0%) were more likely than females (22.4%) and the 25-34 age group was the most likely (27.8%) to have started college, but not completed. In terms of race and ethnicity, Black/African American (25.2%), Hispanic/Latino (25.8%), and Multiracial/Other (24.5%) groups were all more likely than the White group (21.8%), while the Asian group (11.7%) was less likely than all other groups. This group consists largely of “returning” or “stop-out” students, as 86.1% had been enrolled in the past five years, a rate significantly higher than those with a Bachelor’s or Advanced degree.

What Motivates Them?

For this subgroup, motivations reflect both continuity and transition. Gaining skills and learning/self-improvement are nearly equally endorsed as motivations at roughly one-third each, and changing careers remains a substantial motivation. Motivations vary modestly by gender, with women somewhat more likely to be motivated by changing careers, and men somewhat more likely to be motivated by gaining skills. Similar to broader patterns, older adults within this subgroup are more likely to cite learning/self-improvement as a primary motivation, suggesting interest in personal growth later in their life course. Those with some college and no degree were more likely to cite learning (39.4%) and gaining skills (32.5%) compared to changing careers (24.5%) or making family proud (3.6%).

What Barriers Do They Face?

Cost remains a significant barrier, particularly among women. Time constraints are the dominant non-cost barrier, and child care remains a concern, particularly among women and younger adults. Enrollment barriers and academic concerns are less common, and concerns about fitting in are relatively rare, suggesting that prior postsecondary exposure reduces apprehension about belonging. For those with some college and no degree, time constraints overwhelmingly dominated as the most frequently cited non-cost barrier at 57.2%, standing out significantly above other concerns like enrollment difficulties (12.7%), academic preparedness (12.0%), and child care (11.5%).

Key Implications

For individuals with some college, skill-building and learning/self-improvement interests intersect with existing educational foundations and strong time constraints. This underscores the importance of responsive education and training pathways that feature flexible scheduling, credit mobility, credit for prior learning, and competency-based education programs to accelerate adult learning (Carnevale, et al., 2025).



Adults with Four-Year College Degrees or Higher

Who Are They?

Adults with a four-year college degree or higher who intend to enroll skew female and are racially and ethnically diverse. The age distribution is widespread across the continuum. Not surprisingly, given the impact of postsecondary education on employment and earnings, this group has a markedly higher household income profile than those with less than a bachelor's degree. Respondents with a four-year college degree seeking education and training overwhelmingly prefer a four-year institution, followed by a vocational or technical college, with the fewest favoring a community college.

What Motivates Them?

Motivation is strongly skills-oriented: nearly half of individuals in this subgroup cite gaining skills as their primary motivation, followed by learning or self-improvement and changing careers. This motivational profile differs from those of people with lower educational attainment in important ways. Among adults with a high school degree or less, learning or self-improvement is the most common motivation — cited by nearly half — while gaining skills is secondary. Among adults with some college and no degree, 32.5 percent are motivated primarily to gain skills, but this jumps higher for those with vocational or technical certifications (45.9%) or associate degrees (43.6%). However, among four-year degree holders, gaining skills is overwhelmingly the primary motivation, at 48.7%. These patterns suggest that as educational attainment rises, intent to enroll may be increasingly driven by perceived skill gaps and the need to stay competitive in the labor market (*U.S. News & World Report*, 2026).

What Barriers Do They Face?

Cost remains a significant barrier for most four-year degree-holders who intend to enroll: roughly three-quarters report cost as a major barrier. Cost concerns decline with household income, but they do not disappear. Among those reporting \$100,000 or more in household income, a majority still identifies cost as a barrier. Among four-year degree-holders, affordability may be linked not only to ability to pay but also to perceived return on investment, uncertainty about pricing, and the opportunity costs of time. Time constraints overwhelmingly dominate non-cost barriers, far exceeding other concerns. Other barriers are comparatively uncommon.

Key Implications

Strong skills-oriented motivation and the most intense time-pressure profile suggest that short, skills-forward, job-relevant offerings may be most likely to resonate with prospective adult learners with existing four-year college degrees, even as cost remains a concern. Since 63.7 percent of this group also prefers to enroll in a four-year college or university, this indicates these colleges should increasingly promote education as an ongoing service rather than a “one-and-done,” offering lifelong “education as a service” that bridges skills gained throughout one’s career via modular courses and credentials. This may suggest a shift in focus as providers target this subgroup, building skill-based, durable relationships with adult learners that extend over time (Evans, 2026).



Middle-Age Respondents

Who Are They?

Adults ages 45–64 who intend to enroll are diverse by race/ethnicity and gender and relatively advantaged in income and education compared to younger groups. Roughly one-third of middle-aged respondents each report household incomes below \$50,000, \$50,000–\$99,999, and above \$100,000. Nearly 60 percent hold a bachelor's degree or higher, and almost 40 percent report some college or credentials. This group prefers to seek training at a four-year institution, followed by a community college, and last by a vocational or technical school.

What Motivates Them?

For middle-aged respondents, the main motivations are gaining skills for their current career and learning/self-improvement, with career change being a less common motivator. Current education levels in this subgroup suggest that older adult learner “intent” is not primarily about initial access to college; rather, it is often about sustaining employability, staying current, and adapting to changing workplace demands (*U.S. News & World Report*, 2026).

What Barriers Do They Face?

Cost remains a significant barrier, though less acute than for lower-income groups. Time constraints are the dominant non-cost barrier, potentially driven by work intensity, caregiving for family members, age-related health needs, or competing life responsibilities.

Key Implications

A balanced focus on learning/self-improvement and skill development among middle-aged prospective learners, coupled with dominant time constraints, underscores the importance of concise, predictable schedules, short-term credentials, credit for prior learning, and clear time-to-value propositions. For example, educational institutions are adjusting their offerings to meet this growing demand by keeping modular course pricing lower than degree track offerings and providing diverse instruction modalities and schedules (*U.S. News & World Report*, 2026).





Cross-Segment Synthesis

Across all subgroups, learning/self-improvement and skill development are common motivators. Among adults with a high school degree or less, some college and no degree, and for those with household income under \$50,000, learning/self-improvement is the most common primary motivation, with gaining skills close behind. Among adults with a vocational or technical certification, an associate degree, or a four-year college degree or higher, and adults ages 45–64, gaining skills is the most common motivation, followed by learning/self-improvement. Adults who are not married and have children at home also show a split between gaining skills and learning/self-improvement as motivators, with neither overwhelmingly dominant. Across all groups, motivations related to making family proud are rare.

Cost is a significant barrier across all subgroups. Cost barriers are highest among adults who are not married and have children at home and among adults with income under \$50,000, but they remain substantial even among college-educated adults and those ages 45–64.

Time constraints are the primary non-cost barrier in every subgroup, though the strength of this barrier varies. Time constraints are especially pronounced among adults with a college degree or higher and adults ages 45–64. Among adults with a high school degree or less and among low-income adults, time constraints remain the most common non-cost barrier, but they are followed closely by enrollment-related concerns. For adults who are not married and have children at home, child care emerges as a uniquely prominent secondary barrier, distinguishing this group from all others.

Key Takeaways

There is no single “adult learner strategy” that works for everyone. Institutions that tailor their approaches — offering affordability and navigation supports for learners with lower-income or those with less formal education, while providing flexible, skills-focused pathways across the lifespan — are better positioned to turn intent into actual enrollment and persistence. For example, there may need to be an intentional redesign of planning and operational strategies to support adult learners. Data-driven planning promotes the use of student and labor market metrics, adult and equity-focused strategies, and a culture of change and adaptivity. Organizational capacity building supports inclusive policies and governance, faculty and staff professional development, and impactful partnerships that focus on improved access, experience, and outcomes for adult learners. Planning for improved student experience requires affordable programs, student support, academic empowerment, and career relevance and connections.

The following working hypotheses build on survey findings and current research on postsecondary adaptation to serve adult learners. Based on the research findings from this report and broader postsecondary literature, these policy and institutional levers are recommended to bridge the gap between adult learner intent and actual matriculation:

Addressing
Financial Barriers

Mitigating Time
Constraints

Simplifying Navigation
and Enrollment

Simplifying
Navigation

Addressing Financial Barriers | 81% OF RESPONDENTS

- **Affordability Guarantees:** States and institutions can implement “Promise Programs” or last-dollar scholarships to provide predictability and transparency in the total cost of a program.
- **Transparent Cost Communication:** Reducing financial uncertainty through clear, upfront aid navigation, payment plans, and “all-in” pricing models can increase adult learner confidence (Darnell, et al., 2022).
- **Emergency & Cash-Flow Support:** Implementing short-term loans, microgrants, or supply grants can reduce the financial disadvantages that often deters low-income and unemployed adults (Darnell, et al., 2022).

Mitigating Time Constraints 67% OF RESPONDENTS

- **Flexible Delivery Modalities:**
Expanding online, hybrid, and asynchronous learning options allows adults to balance education with full-time work and family obligations.
- **Modular & Accelerated Pathways:**
Offering short-term credentials, “stackable” certificates, and competency-based education (CBE) allows adult learners to progress at their own pace and achieve a faster time-to-value (Carnevale, et al., 2025).
- **Predictable Scheduling:**
Implementing fixed, block-style, or nontraditional scheduling (e.g., nights/weekends) helps time-constrained adult learners plan around existing commitments.

Simplifying Navigation and Enrollment 11% OF RESPONDENTS

- **Administrative Friction Reduction:**
Shortening application forms, providing rapid admission decisions, and centralizing advising can lower the “procedural burden” that disproportionately impacts first-time adult learners (Darnell, et al., 2022).
- **Credit for Prior Learning (CPL):**
Providing academic credit for work experience, military service, and other learning completed outside of the classroom accelerates progress and acknowledges the existing expertise of nontraditional students (Carnevale, et al., 2025).
- **High-Touch Onboarding:**
Dedicated “navigator” roles or one-on-one coaching help marginalized students overcome uncertainty about how to begin the enrollment process (Daugherty, et al., 2020; Darnell, et al., 2022).

Targeted Support for Specific Barriers | 5 – 9% OF RESPONDENTS

- **Family-Aligned Supports:** For the 83% of parents citing cost and 9% citing child care as barriers, formal partnerships with child care providers and family-friendly campus policies are critical for persistence (Daugherty, et al., 2020).
- **Wraparound Services:** Integrating nonacademic support — such as food assistance, mental health counseling, and transportation referrals — helps students focus on their studies by addressing basic needs (Daugherty, et al., 2020).
- **Industry-Aligned Curricula:** Explicitly linking programs to labor market demand and skill outcomes helps justify the opportunity cost of education for career-focused adult learners.

Areas for Future Research

The current dataset provides important insights on intent to enroll, additional research could deepen the field's understanding of how to convert intent into actual matriculation, and better serve adult students overall. For example, further data on barriers for sub-populations of adult learners could be especially valuable to drive student success.

Barrier Differentiation by Adult Learner Population

While high intent is a commonality, the barriers preventing that intent from becoming enrollment vary significantly in nature and severity. For example, the literature demonstrates that Black and Latino men face significant economic and structural barriers, often choosing immediate workforce entry over higher education due to rising inflation and high opportunity costs. This population is further hindered by a lack of faculty diversity and institutional support (EdInsights, n.d.; Public Policy Institute of California, 2024). For Latino students, educational progress is often impeded by financial constraints, heavy familial responsibilities, and systemic discrimination, alongside a lack of linguistic and psychological support (Ibarra, 2024; UnidosUS, 2019; University of Miami, 2015). Black women, despite high educational aspirations, navigate a “glass cliff” of underrepresentation and a “concrete ceiling” in leadership, relying heavily on mentorship and culturally affirming support systems to overcome institutional bias (Gray-Nicolas & Miles, 2024; Stewart, 2024). Low-income and first-generation students face a “support gap,” where a lack of “college knowledge” and the complexity of financial aid processes, such as the FAFSA, create significant hurdles to enrollment (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2024; Trellis Strategies, 2024). Furthermore, mental health and emotional stress have emerged as primary reasons for considering “stopping out,” particularly for female and bachelor’s degree students (Gallup, 2024; Lumina Foundation, 2023).



Barrier Differentiation by Key Market Segments

MARKET SEGMENT	PRIMARY BARRIER TYPES	INTENSITY AND CONTEXT
Black & Latino Men	ECONOMIC STRUCTURAL	These groups face high opportunity costs due to rising inflation and low unemployment. They are disproportionately affected by a lack of diverse faculty and institutional support, making the “opportunity cost” of education exceptionally high.
Latino Students	CONTEXTUAL FINANCIAL	Common barriers include a lack of financial resources, heavy family responsibilities, and systemic discrimination. They are also less likely to attend schools with counseling programs that adequately prepare them for postsecondary education.
Black Women	NAVIGATIONAL	This group relies more heavily on mentors, advisors, and recruiters. Their high intent is often met with a greater need for relationship-based support to navigate the application process.
Low-Income / First-Generation	FINANCIAL INFORMATION	One of the most significant barriers is the complexity of financial aid and the appeal of short-term job opportunities over long-term degree completion.

Key Thematic Differences in Intensity

- **Financial Pressure vs. Enthusiasm:** Despite high enthusiasm, more than a third of enrolled students consider quitting due to cost and mental health concerns (Gallup, 2024; Lumina Foundation, 2023). For adults who have never enrolled, the cost of college remains a top three issue.
- **The Support Gap:** Latino and Black students often experience a gap between high aspirations and actual enrollment due to limited access to career guidance and financial support at the K-12 level (Ithaka S+R, 2023).
- **Environmental Constraints:** For many high-intent adult learners, family background factors such as immigrant status, language, and low income create an initial barrier that is significantly harder to overcome than for their White counterparts.



- **Schedule & Flexibility:** Adult learners across these demographics prioritize “having control over the days and times of needed classes,” suggesting that traditional rigid scheduling is a high-intensity barrier for working adults.
- **Belonging & Narrative:** A unique barrier for adult learners of color is the “lack of belonging,” where they may not see themselves reflected in the standard post-secondary narrative, requiring more targeted, person-centered outreach.

While there is value in the existing research and sources on these populations, none of them focus on adult learners, as this dataset does. In depth studies on these issues among adult learners would be valuable to the field and to institutions desiring to serve more adult learners.

There are many more areas that are ripe for further research. Qualitative studies of people in each of the profiles in this report could build a more nuanced understanding of what helps potential students move from expressing intent to enrolling to matriculation and persistence. Future research could also track a cohort of potential students longitudinally to better understand what factors influence enrollment over time. Finally, research into how regional economic conditions and specific state policies influence intent to enroll would inform the development of more strategically minded marketing and recruitment strategies for educational institutions.



65 Million Reasons
Why Intent Matters Most:
Adding On to the Largest National Survey
of Prospective Adult Students

Appendices

Appendix A: Works Consulted

The following is a list of works consulted to provide context when analyzing and interpreting survey findings. Not all of these references are cited in the body of the report.

AIR/Lumina. (2023). *Key findings on the college decision-making experiences among adult learners of color: Implications and recommendations for post-secondary institutions*. <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/Adult-Learners-of-Color-Implications-Infographic-Oct-2023.pdf>

Alvarado, S. E. (2021). *The role of college-bound friends in college enrollment decisions by race, ethnicity, and gender*. American Educational Research Journal, 58(6). <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1317137>

Allensworth, E. M., & Clark, K. (2020). *High school GPAs and ACT scores as predictors of college completion: Examining assumptions about consistency across high schools*. Educational Researcher, 49(3), 198–211. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20902110>

Baek, C., & Song, M. (2021). *College enrollment and real-life factors*. Research in Higher Education Journal, 40(1).

Barr, A. & Castleman, B. L. (2021). *The bottom line on college advising: Large increases in degree attainment* (EdWorkingPaper No. 21-481). <https://edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai21-481.pdf>

Carnevale, A.P., Smith, N., Melton, M., Price, E. (2015). *Learning while earning: The new normal*. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/workinglearners/>

Carnevale, A. P., Strohl, J., Peltier Campbell, K., Gulish, A., Cheah, B., Nyhof, E., & Fix, L. (2024). *Learning and earning by degrees: Gains in college degree attainment have enriched the nation and every state, but racial and gender inequality persists*. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/AttainmentGains>

Chakrabarti, R., Gorton, N., & Lovenheim, M. F. (2020). *State investment in higher education: Effects on human capital formation, student debt, and long-term financial outcomes of students* (NBER Working Paper No. 27885). National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w27885>

Chetty, R., Friedman, J. N., Saez, E., Turner, N., & Yagan, D. (2017). *Mobility report cards: The role of colleges in intergenerational mobility*. Discussion paper. National Bureau of Economic Research. https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w23618/w23618.pdf

CollegeAPP. (2022). *Intent Matters: Avoiding the enrollment cliff*. <https://www.luminafoundation.org/resource/avoiding-the-enrollment-cliff/>

Cooper, P. (2025, September 29). *The college enrollment plunge is a correction, not a crisis*. American Enterprise Institute. <https://www.aei.org/articles/the-college-enrollment-plunge-is-a-correction-not-a-crisis/>

Darnell, B. (2022). *"It's a little stressful when I think of it..." A CAEL Research Brief*. <https://www.cael.org/hubfs/CAEL%20Never%20Enrolled%20Report%202022.pdf>

- Darnell, B., Klein-Collins, R., & Shafenberg, K. (2022). *Building Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness (ALLIES): Research findings and a new framework for supporting institutional change*. CAEL. <https://www.cael.org/hubfs/CAEL%20ALLIES%20Executive%20Summary%202022.pdf>
- Daugherty, L., Johnston, W., & Berglund, T. (2020). *Connecting college students to alternative sources of support: The Single Stop Community College Initiative and postsecondary outcomes*. RAND. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1740-1.html
- Delaney, T., & Marcotte, D. E. (2024). *The cost of public higher education and college enrollment*. The Journal of Higher Education, 95(4), 496–525. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2023.2216610>
- EdInsights. (n.d.). *Bridging the gap: The decline of Latino/Black men in higher education*.
- Evans, M. (2026). *The rise of the lifelong learning model. Insight into Academia*. <https://insightintoacademia.com/the-lifelong-learning-model/>
- Gallup. (2023, December 14). *Black, Hispanic students at greatest risk of leaving program*. Referenced within the “Cost Leading Reason” report <https://news.gallup.com/poll/646088/cost-leading-reason-college-students-stopping.aspx>
- Gallup. (2024, May 8). *Mental health, stress top reasons students consider leaving*. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/644645/mental-health-stress-top-reasons-students-consider-leaving.aspx>
- Gallup/Lumina. (2025). *The state of higher education 2025: Demands for higher education remains strong despite barriers*. <https://www.luminafoundation.org/resource/the-state-of-higher-education-2025/>
- Glass, L. E. (2023). *Social capital and first-generation college students: Examining the relationship between mentoring and college enrollment*. Education and Urban Society, 55(2), 143–174. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1360785>
- Gray-Nicolas, N., & Miles, S. D. (2024). *The perilous experiences of Black women in higher education leadership who were placed on the glass cliff*. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12111-025-09713-9>
- Hanson, M. (2025, March 17). *College enrollment & student demographic statistics*. EducationData.org. <https://educationdata.org/college-enrollment-statistics>
- Hanushek, E., & Woessmann, L. (2021). *Education and economic growth*. Oxford Research Encyclopedias: Economics and Finance. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190625979.013.651>
- Harvard Graduate School of Education. (2024, March 28). *Getting to college: FAFSA challenges for first-gen students*. <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/edcast/24/03/getting-college-fafsa-challenges-first-gen-students>
- Hillman, N., & Wetchman, T. (2016). *Education deserts: The continued significance of “place” in the twenty-first century*. American Council on Education. <https://www.acenet.edu/documents/education-deserts-the-continued-significance-of-place-in-the-twenty-first-century.pdf>

- Howard, J., Oates, S., Dominguez, A., Mason, J., & Parsons, K. (2025). *Institutional change for adult learner success: Lessons learned from postsecondary education institutions*. American Institutes for Research. <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/AIR-Adult-Learner-Institutional-Change-Report-June-2025.pdf>
- Ibarra, M. (2024). *Unveiling educational barriers: Examining disparities and inequalities faced by Latinx Individuals in Higher Education Access and Attainment in the United States*. https://www.csus.edu/college/social-sciences-interdisciplinary-studies/public-policy-administration/_internal/_documents/thesis-bank/ibarra-m-s24-thesis.pdf
- Irwin, V., Wang, K., Jung, J., Kessler, E., Tezil, T., Alhassani, S., Filbey, A., Dilig, R., Bullock Mann, F., Barnett, M., Purcell, S., & Nachazel, T. (2024, May). *Report on the condition of education 2024*. Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2024/2024144.pdf>
- Ithaka S+R. (2023, March 30). *Increasing adult and Latino adult student success*. <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/increasing-adult-and-latino-adult-student-success/>
- Jagesic, S., Ewing, M., Wyatt, J., & Feng, J. (2020). *Unintended consequences: Understanding the relationship between dual enrollment participation, college undermatch, and bachelor's degree attainment*. *Research in Higher Education*, 63, 119–139. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3698991>
- Jaquette, O., Salazar, K., & Han, C. (2022). *Student List Policy: Problems, regulations, and a solution*. *The Institute for College Access and Success*. https://ticas.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Student-list-policy_problems_regulations_a_solution.pdf
- Jones, J. (2025). *U.S. Public Trust in Higher Ed Rises from Recent Low*. Gallup. July 15, 2025. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/692519/public-trust-higher-rises-recent-low.aspx>
- Kania-Gosche, B. (2025). *The enrollment cliff Is worse than we think (opinion)*. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/views/2025/10/27/enrollment-cliff-worse-we-think-opinion>
- Kim, H., Berg, B., Karamarkovich, S., Holsapple, M., & Shapiro, D. (2025, May). *Current term enrollment estimates: Spring 2025*. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CTEESpring2025-MethodNotes.pdf>
- Kofoed, M. (2017). *To apply or not to apply: FAFSA completion and financial aid gaps*. *Research in Higher Education*, 58, 1–39. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11162-016-9418-y>
- Lin, Y., Fay, M., & Fink, J. (2023). *Stratified trajectories: Charting equity gaps in program pathways among community college students*. *Research in Higher Education*, 64, 547–573. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11162-022-09714-7>
- Lumina Foundation. (2023). *Stressed out and stopping out: The mental health crisis in higher education*. <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Stressed-Out-and-Stopping-Out.pdf>
- Marken, S. (2025, August 6). *Most parents prefer college pathway for their child*. Gallup. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/693047/parents-prefer-college-pathway-child.aspx>

McKinney, L., Backscheider Burrridge, A., Lee, M. M., Bourdeau, G. V., & Miller-Waters, M. (2022). *Incentivizing full-time enrollment at community colleges: What influences students' decision to take more courses?* *Community College Review*, 50(2), 144–170. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00915521211061416>

McNamee, T. C., & Ganss, K. M. (2023). *Rural students in higher education: From college preparation and enrollment to experiences and persistence*. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 98(4), 380–395. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2023.2238508>

Moore, K. P., & Williams, M. R. (2022). *Factors encouraging student enrollment following dual enrollment participation*. *Community College Enterprise*. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1358764>

Mowreader, A. (2025). *Survey: Understanding incoming college student demographics*. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/college-experience/2025/03/24/survey-understanding-incoming-college-student#>

National Center for Education Statistics. (2018). *Working before, during, and after beginning at a public 2-year institution: Labor market experiences of community college students*. U.S. Department of Education. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED585106.pdf>

National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). *Characteristics of postsecondary students*. Condition of Education. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved October 2025, from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/csb>

National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). *Condition of Education 2024: At a glance*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2024/2024144_AtaGlance.pdf

Nyhof McLeod, E., Peltier Campbell, K., Mabel, Z., & Strohl, J. (2025). *Bridging the middle-skills gap: Connecting a diverse workforce to economic opportunity through certificates and associate's degrees*. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/bridging-middle-skills-gap/>

Parsons, K., Mason, J., Blume, R., Hatcher, M., & Howard, J. (2023). *"Can I make this work with my life?": Exploring the college (re) enrollment decisions of adult learners of color*. AIR and Lumina Foundation. <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/Adult-Learners-of-Color-Narrative-Final-Report-October-2023.pdf>

Pawar, A. (2020). *College enrollment trends and pattern evaluation: A data analytics investigation* (Master's thesis, University of Michigan-Dearborn). <https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/items/c1723965-c532-47bb-a4f2-5c8f91b81523>

Perna, L. W. (2006). *Studying college access and choice: A proposed conceptual model*. In J. C. Smart (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (pp. 99–157). Springer.

Piepenburg, S., & Fervers, K. (2022). *Do students need more information to leave the beaten paths? The causal effect of a counseling intervention on students' choice of major*. *Higher Education*, 84(2), 321–341. <https://d-nb.info/1248448480/34>

Public Policy Institute of California. (2024, October). *Policy brief: How are Black and Latino men faring after developmental education reform?* <https://www.ppic.org/publication/policy-brief-how-are-black-and-latino-men-faring-after-developmental-education-reform/>

Reber, S., & Smith, E. (2023). *College enrollment disparities: Understanding the role of academic preparation*. Center on Children and Families at Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/college-enrollment-disparities/>

Renn, K., & Reason, R. (2021). *College students in the United States: Characteristics, experiences, and outcomes* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Rusk, J., Leslie, L., & Brinkman, P. T. (1982). *The increasing impact of economic conditions upon higher education enrollments*. Economics of Education Review, 2(1), 25–48. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ267056>

Saad, L. (2025, September 11). *Perceived importance of college hits new low*. Gallup. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/695003/perceived-importance-college-hits-new-low.aspx>

Salazar, K. G. (2022). *Recruitment redlining by public research universities in the Los Angeles and Dallas metropolitan areas*. The Journal of Higher Education, 93(4), 577–601. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2021.2004811>

Soliz, A. (2025). *Improving community college student persistence and degree completion*. Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 12(2), 139–146. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23727322251361761>

Stewart, Q. M. (2024). *Persistence and resistance: Black women navigating barriers in higher education*. <https://tcf.org/content/report/persistence-and-resistance-black-women-navigating-barriers-in-higher-education/>

Swanzy Eissen, F., & Parsons, K. (2023). *Why college? A deep dive into adult learners' journeys*. Lumina Foundation. <https://www.luminafoundation.org/news-and-views/why-college-a-deep-dive-into-adult-learners-journeys/>

Trellis Strategies. (2024, October). *Understanding first-generation students: Financial, academic, and well-being insights*. https://www.trellisstrategies.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Research-Brief_TSOCT25_FirstGenStudents.pdf

Trostel, P. (2015). *It's not just the money: The benefits of college education to individuals and to society*. Lumina Foundation. <https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/its-not-just-the-money.pdf>

UnidosUS. (2019, June). *Latinos face barriers to access in higher education*. https://unidosus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/unidosus_highereducationact_access.pdf

University of Miami. (2015). *Perceived barriers to higher education among first-generation and non-first-generation Latino male high school students*. <https://scholarship.miami.edu/esploro/outputs/doctoral/Perceived-Barriers-to-Higher-Education-Among/991031447281802976>

U.S. News & World Report. (2026, Feb 22). *Why adults pursuing career growth or personal interests are the new majority student*. <https://www.usnews.com/news/business/articles/2026-02-22/why-adults-pursuing-career-growth-or-personal-interests-are-the-new-majority-student>

Appendix B: Prospective Student Profile Summary Table

MARKET SEGMENT	SUMMARY	KEY IMPLICATIONS
High School Degree or Less	Among adults with a high school degree or less, learning/self-improvement is the dominant motivation, substantially outweighing skill acquisition. About half prefer community college. Cost is a significant barrier for a large majority, and time constraints are the leading non-cost barrier, followed by enrollment-related concerns. Compared with other groups, this subgroup shows a relatively high share citing enrollment concerns as a primary barrier, suggesting that system navigation and uncertainty about how to begin are salient challenges.	Learning-led motivation combined with relatively high enrollment barriers suggests the need for clear on-ramps, simplified enrollment processes, high-touch advising, and strong affordability messaging.
Incomes Less Than \$50,000	Low-income adults are learning-motivated, with gaining skills close behind as a primary motivation. About two in five prefer a four-year institution. Cost is nearly universal as a barrier, and time constraints are the most common non-cost barrier, followed by enrollment concerns. Compared with higher-income or degree-holding groups, enrollment barriers are more prominent, suggesting that affordability challenges are intertwined with administrative and procedural friction.	Near-universal cost barriers and prominent enrollment concerns suggest that reducing financial uncertainty and administrative barriers is central, alongside flexible delivery models that accommodate time constraints.
Not Married with Children at Home	This subgroup combines very high cost barriers with a distinctive profile of non-cost barriers. About four in five prefer a four-year institution. Time constraints remain the leading non-cost barrier, but child care emerges as the second most prominent barrier, setting this group apart from all others. Motivations are split between gaining skills and learning/self-improvement. Compared with other subgroups, this group faces a compounded set of constraints related to finances, time, and caregiving responsibilities.	Extremely high rate of cost barriers combined with significant child care constraints indicate that affordability strategies must be paired with family-aligned scheduling and child care supports to enable enrollment and persistence.
Some College	This subgroup shows a balanced motivation profile between gaining skills and learning/self-improvement. Over one-third prefer a four-year institution. Cost remains a major barrier, and time constraints are a much stronger non-cost barrier than enrollment barriers or academic concerns. Compared with individuals with less than a high school degree, enrollment barriers are less prominent, while time pressure is more acute, indicating a shift from access/navigation challenges toward balancing education with work and life demands.	A balance between skill-building and learning/self-improvement interests, paired with strong time constraints, points to the importance of flexible scheduling, credit mobility, and pathways that build efficiently on prior education.
College Degree or Higher	Adults with a college degree or higher are the most strongly skills-oriented subgroup. Nearly two-thirds prefer a four-year institution. Although cost barriers are somewhat lower in this subgroup than in other subgroups, they remain substantial. Time constraints dominate all other non-cost barriers to a greater extent than in any other subgroup. Enrollment barriers and academic concerns are comparatively minimal: prior experience with post-secondary education may reduce procedural concerns, but does not alleviate time pressure.	Strongly skills-oriented motivation and the most intense time-pressure profile suggest that short, skills-forward, and offerings that are clearly job-relevant are most likely to resonate, even though cost remains a concern.
Ages 45–64	Middle-aged adults show a balanced motivational profile between gaining skills and learning/self-improvement, with a relatively low emphasis on changing careers. Over two in five prefer a four-year institution. Cost remains a barrier for a substantial majority, though at lower levels than for low-income or single-parent groups. Time constraints overwhelmingly dominate non-cost barriers, while child care is comparatively rare. This subgroup's profile closely resembles college-degree holders in its focus on time constraints, but with a slightly stronger learning orientation.	A balanced focus on learning/self-improvement and skill development, coupled with dominant time constraints, underscores the importance of predictable schedules, short-term credentials, and clear time-to-value propositions.

Learn more at intentmattersmost.com



About CollegeAPP: CollegeAPP is a data analytics service that helps higher education institutions identify and recruit potential adult students. By leveraging proprietary predictive analytics and person-level data, CollegeAPP provides colleges and universities with the insights needed to find adults who have the intent and capacity to return to school, making education more accessible to workforce-ready populations.

About CAEL: Recognizing that adult learners are the backbone of the U.S. economy, CAEL, a national nonprofit membership organization established in 1974, helps forge a clear, viable connection between education and career success, providing solutions that promote sustainable and equitable economic growth. CAEL opens doors to opportunity in collaboration with workforce and economic developers; postsecondary educators and trainers; employers and industry groups; and foundations and other mission-aligned organizations, engaging with these stakeholders to foster a culture of innovative, lifelong learning that helps individuals, and their communities, thrive. Learn more at cael.org.

© 2026 CAEL. All rights reserved. (004-26_06/26)