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More Graduates for a
Thriving California

State of Higher Education in California:

Motivators and Barriers to Postsecondary Attainment

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Foreword

At College Futures Foundation, we aspire to help shape better futures for Californians and their families. We believe that achieving a robust, inclusive society and economy in California requires moving beyond the status quo and ensuring that the most underserved learners and workers in our state — Black and Latinx adults, those aged 25 or older, and those facing outsized financial barriers — have clear pathways to prosperity. At the core of our commitment to learner success is our belief in the transformative power of innovation and collaboration.

Today, we stand at a critical inflection point for our state and nation. The pace of change in technologies and job markets is increasing while income gaps persist. It is time to center and update our collective perspectives on learners' aspirations and ensure that postsecondary education supports a thriving democracy and delivers on the promise of economic mobility for people of all backgrounds. We aim to tackle the crisis of value in postsecondary education by adopting a deeply learner-centered approach tailored to meet current challenges and opportunities.

For College Futures Foundation, being learner-centered begins by hearing directly from learners — not only those who are currently enrolled, but more importantly, those who have stopped out and those who have never had the chance to enroll. We are particularly interested in hearing from and developing solutions for older adult learners, a critical and often overlooked population essential to achieving postsecondary attainment goals and improving social and economic outcomes across the state. As we work to deliver on a future where education fosters racial, social, and economic equity and unlocks upward mobility for generations of Californians, we are committed to regularly listening to learners — current and future — and sharing what we learn with our partners to inform action.

Through our vital partnership with Gallup and Lumina Foundation, we have gathered insights from over 1,300 Californians without a college degree about their attitudes, values, experiences, and challenges related to postsecondary education. The findings reveal that while Californians overwhelmingly value a postsecondary degree or credential, many struggle with attainment because of the difficulties balancing education with work or personal responsibilities. Additionally, emotional stress and mental health issues are significant barriers to students currently enrolled, and for some, causes them to stop out.

In this ever-changing environment, we believe learners hold the keys to their own futures. We hope the insights from this survey will empower institutional leaders, innovators, policymakers, and advocates to better understand how to support learner-centered innovations, reduce barriers to obtaining postsecondary degrees or credentials, and ensure attainment aligns to better jobs and upward economic mobility. Together, we can meet this moment and set a course toward a brighter future where all Californians can thrive.



Elizabeth González, Ph.D.
Chief Program & Strategy Officer
COLLEGE FUTURES FOUNDATION

Introduction

Since 2020, Gallup and Lumina Foundation have measured Americans' attitudes and experiences with postsecondary education. The latest administration of this annual survey was conducted Oct. 9-Nov. 16, 2023, and collected nearly 14,000 responses from U.S. adults without a college degree.

Using this most recent national sample, Gallup has partnered with College Futures Foundation to explore the experiences of more than 1,300 Californians without a college degree, including 659 currently enrolled students, 426 adults who started but did not complete a degree or credential program, and 277 adults who have never enrolled in any kind of education after high school.

Key findings include:

- ▶ Californians overwhelmingly value postsecondary degrees or credentials, particularly because of the career-related benefits they offer.
- ▶ More than half of unenrolled Californians have considered pursuing postsecondary education in the last two years; however, many are unable to do so because of cost, inability to integrate education into their work or personal lives, or stress and mental health challenges.
- ▶ About one in three currently enrolled students have considered stopping out of their program in the past six months, largely due to emotional stress or mental health reasons.

Enabling more Californians to realize their postsecondary education goals — and ensuring those who have started that journey do not join the 5.6 million Californians under the age of 65 who have stopped out of a degree program¹ — begins with addressing these barriers, several of which are uniquely problematic for adults with low incomes and those with caretaking responsibilities.



¹ Some college, no credential student outcomes: 2024 report for the nation and the states. (2024, June 6). National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/some-college-no-credential/>

CHART 1.

Key Metrics: California vs. All Other U.S. States

■ % California ■ % All other U.S. states

Believes at least one postsecondary credential is “extremely” or “very” valuable



Considered pursuing any postsecondary education in the past two years



Considered stopping out of program in the last six months



Nearly all Californians value postsecondary education — particularly bachelor’s degrees and industry certifications

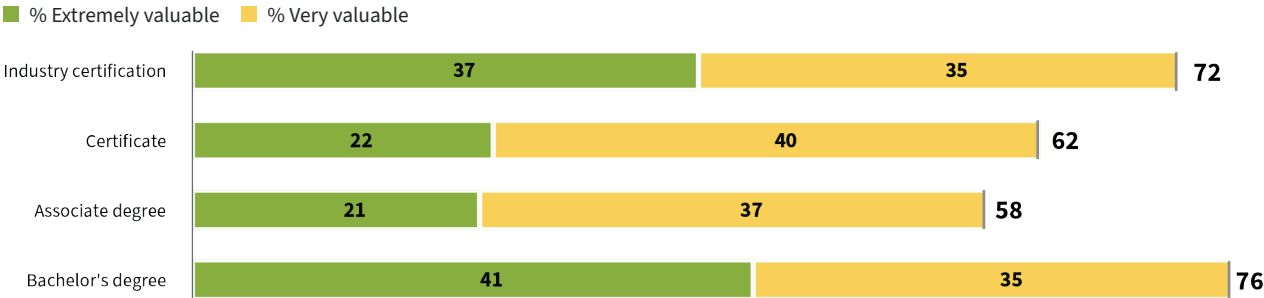
When asked whether they value four different postsecondary credentials — industry certifications, certificates, associate degrees, and bachelor’s degrees — nearly all Californians without a college degree say at least one of those four credentials is “extremely” valuable (74%) or “very” valuable (21%). Unsurprisingly, 99% of currently enrolled students say at least one of these degrees or credentials is valuable. However, more than nine in 10 unenrolled California adults also believe some kind of postsecondary education is valuable, including 95% of those who previously stopped out of a postsecondary program and 91% of those who have never enrolled.

While most Californians without a degree say all four of these degrees and credentials are extremely or very valuable, they have especially favorable opinions of bachelor’s degrees (76%) and industry certifications (72%).

CHART 2.

A strong majority of Californians (94%) say at least one kind of postsecondary credential is extremely or very valuable

In general, how valuable are each of the following types of degrees and credentials?



Despite living in a state that boasts the largest community college system in the country,² Californians are least likely to say an associate degree is extremely or very valuable at 58%, which is slightly lower than the percentage among U.S. adults living outside of California (60%).

Currently enrolled community college students are somewhat more likely to say a two-year degree is valuable (67%), though this percentage is still lower than the value they place in certificates (72%), industry certifications (80%), and bachelor’s degrees (82%).

The extent to which Californians value postsecondary education overall does not vary significantly by gender, race, age, or income; however, women, Asian adults, and those under the age of 25 are somewhat more likely to value bachelor’s degrees than their peers. Meanwhile, men and White adults in California are more likely to see value in industry certifications, perhaps due to their association with occupations disproportionately comprising male workers, such as information technology, manufacturing, and trades like construction and plumbing.³

“I think in terms of college, I think it taught me a lot of who I was as a person ... I have the opportunity to do these certain classes, and I think it really helped me with getting hobbies that I would’ve never had if I had taken a different path or even if I had gone to a different university.

... Now, I’m following a different career path that I feel like is helping me a lot ... I feel like if college wasn’t so expensive, I would push everyone to do it and to go just because it’s like four years of just getting to know yourself, learning whatever you want to learn.”

Currently enrolled Californian
Hispanic female, 21 years old

“In my opinion, I think it depends on what degree you’re going to be going for. I’d say, like, the hard sciences would definitely be something — if you’re trying to do anything that involves that, you should go to college. ... But other than that, I don’t think certain degrees would be that useful. I feel like there are some degrees that maybe you shouldn’t go to college for due to the cost.”

Currently enrolled Californian
Hispanic male, 18 years old

2 Key facts. (n.d.). California Community College. Retrieved October 7, 2024, from <https://www.cccco.edu/About-Us/Key-Facts>

3 Employed persons by detailed occupation, sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity. (n.d.). Bureau of Labor Statistics. Retrieved October 8, 2024, from <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm>

CHART 3.

Californians under 25, women, and Asian adults are marginally more likely to value bachelor’s degrees

In general, how valuable are each of the following types of degrees and credentials?

% Extremely valuable + Very valuable

■ Industry certification ■ Certificate ■ Associate degree ■ Bachelor’s degree



More than half of unenrolled Californians have recently considered postsecondary education, largely in pursuit of career benefits

The widespread value Californians place on higher education translates into sizeable interest in pursuing it themselves: 53% of unenrolled Californians say they have considered enrolling in at least one postsecondary credential program within the last two years. This interest is almost equally distributed across industry certifications (16%) and associate degree (20%), certificate (19%), and bachelor’s degree programs (15%). Notably, while community college-based credentials are seen as less valuable than others, they garner the most interest from Californians — perhaps due to their relative affordability and accessibility, particularly compared to bachelor’s degree programs.

The Californians most interested in pursuing postsecondary education are those who stopped out of a degree or credential program: **About two-thirds of stopped-out Californians (65%) say they have considered re-enrolling in the last two years.** A significant portion of those who have never enrolled in postsecondary education also say they have recently considered doing so (41%).

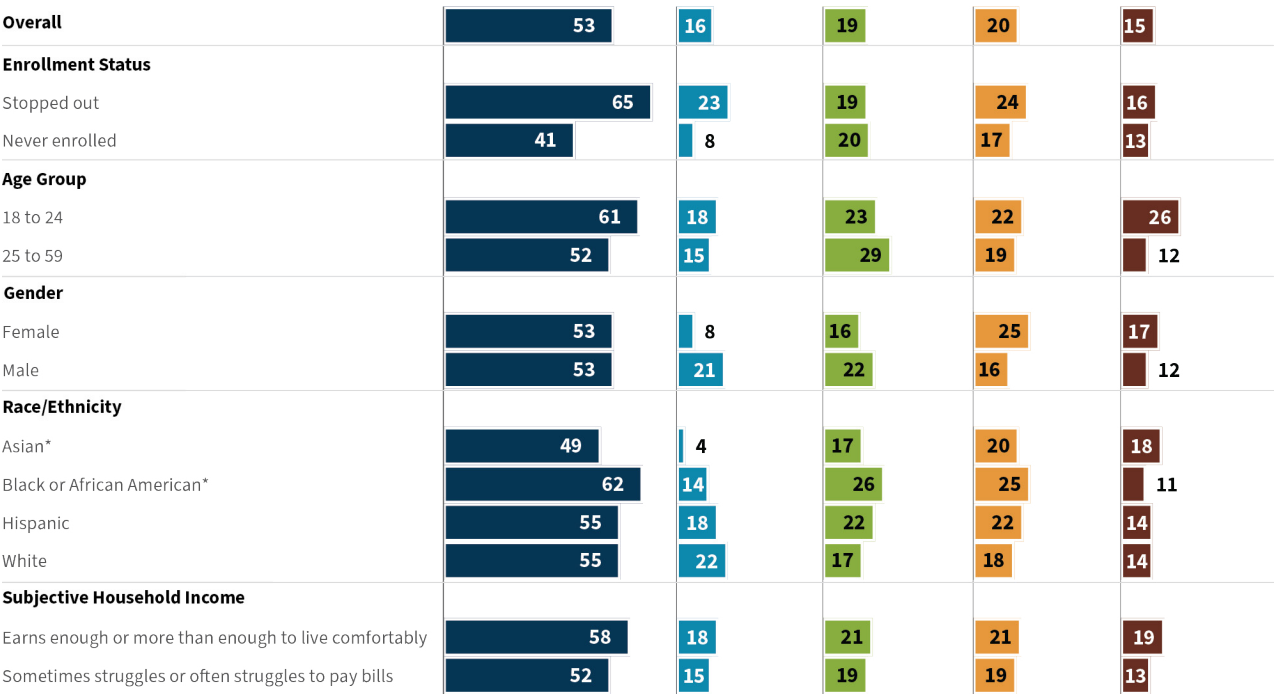
CHART 4.

Nearly two-thirds of Californians who have stopped out, are under 25, or are Black or African American have recently considered postsecondary education

Which of the following, if any, have you considered pursuing in the past two years? Select all that apply.

% Selected

Any program Industry certification Certificate Associate degree Bachelor's degree



Among California adults not currently enrolled in any postsecondary education
*Sample size is <100; results should be interpreted with caution

Black Californians (62%) and 18- to 24-year-olds (61%) are especially likely to say they have considered enrolling in a degree or credential program in the last two years. However, majorities of several traditionally underserved student groups — including adults 25 years or older and those with low incomes — also express interest in pursuing postsecondary education.

On a programmatic basis, men are most likely to have considered enrolling in an industry certification or certificate program (21% and 22%, respectively), while women are disproportionately likely to say they have considered a two- or four-year degree program (25% and 17%, respectively).

Regardless of their postsecondary path of interest, the primary motivations for Californians considering additional education are related to their careers.

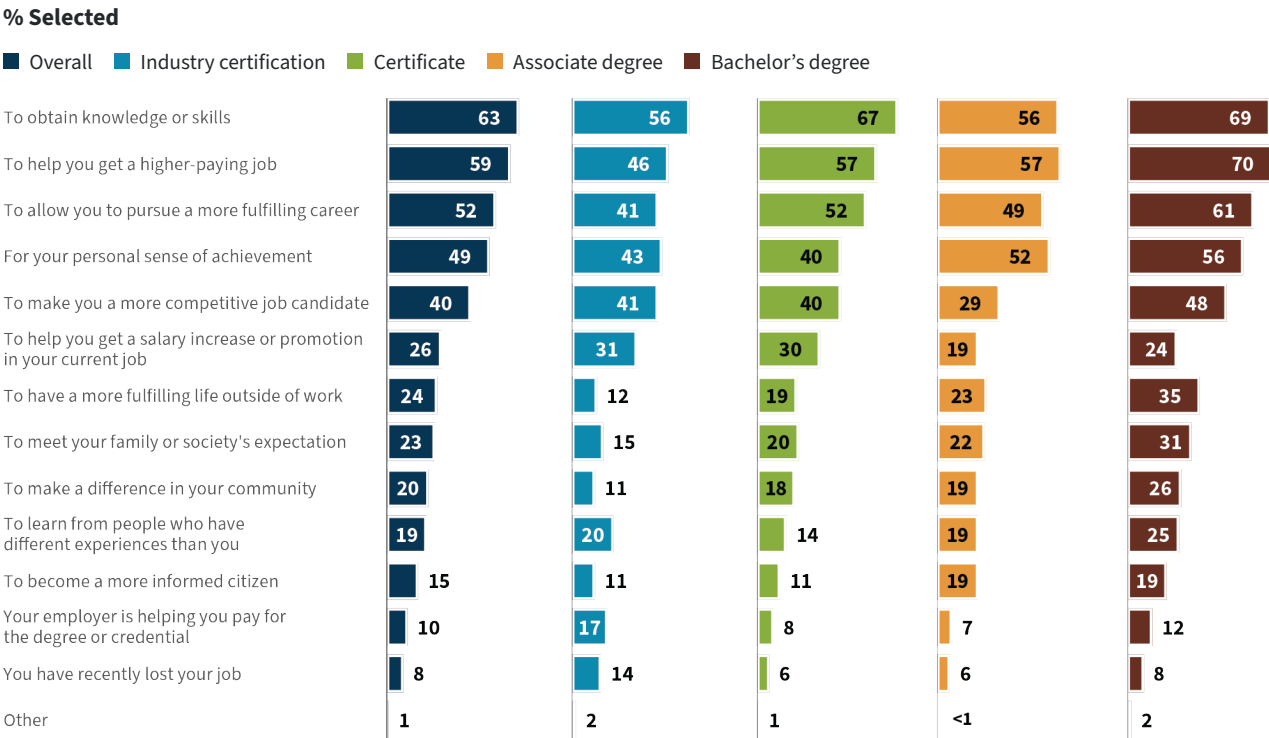
Securing a higher-paying job (59%), earning a salary increase or promotion (26%), pursuing a more fulfilling career (52%), or becoming a more competitive job candidate (40%) are among top motivations.

“I feel like a lot of people are like ‘Oh, going the community college route is not good, and it means that you’re not as good.’ But I feel like if you don’t know exactly what you want to do, and you want to explore a lot of different outlets, I think community college is great because you’re saving a lot of time ... you’re saving a lot of money, and you’re not going to go into financial debt versus automatically going to a university.”

Currently enrolled Californian
Hispanic female, 21 years old

CHART 5.
The majority of Californians (86%) cite at least one employment-related reason for enrolling in or considering postsecondary education

Which of the following are important reasons why you are [enrolled/considering enrolling] and obtaining [your/a] degree or credential? Select all that apply.



Among Californians who are currently enrolled in or considering postsecondary education

Eighty-six percent of all Californians say at least one of these career-related factors is an important reason for enrolling in or considering postsecondary education, and more than eight in 10 current and prospective students of all ages, genders, races, ethnicities, and income groups cite at least one career-related motivation. This finding also holds regardless of the type of program Californians are enrolled in or considering; however, it is particularly high among current and prospective bachelor's degree students (92%).

Finances are the primary barrier to postsecondary enrollment; however, flexibility is a close second, especially for underserved populations

Despite significant interest in pursuing postsecondary education, between 29% and 39% of prospective students say they are “very likely” to enroll in the program they

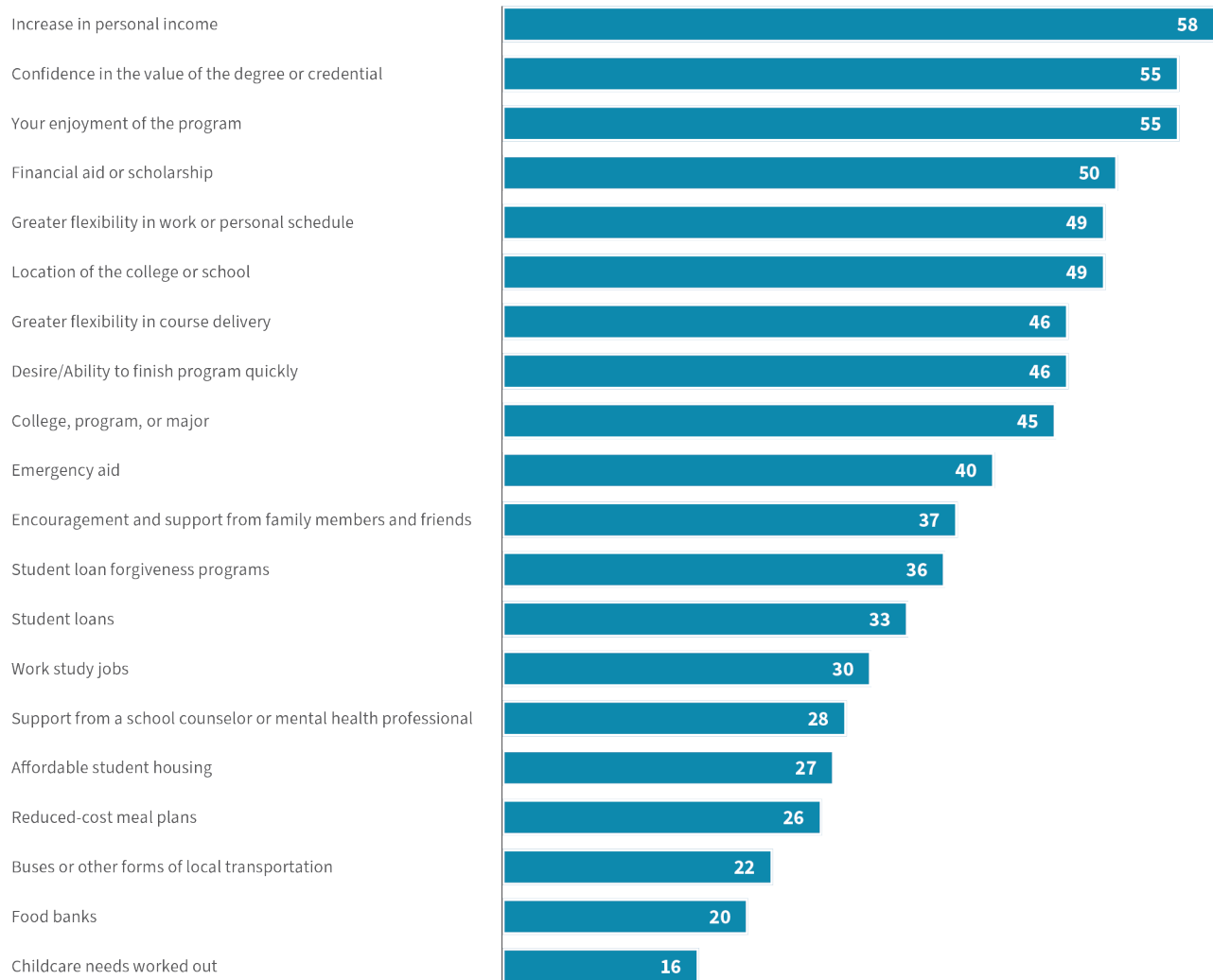
are considering within the next five years. Among the factors that would convince or enable these Californians to successfully enroll, additional income is cited most frequently (58%). Value of the credential (55%) and financial aid (50%) are also cost-adjacent influences in more than half of unenrolled adults’ enrollment decisions.

“That’s something [taking out student loans] that I sort of thought about just because I wanted to be able to see, like, if I could put myself through college without having to ask my parents for help. There were some schools that I was looking at, but it just didn’t seem practical to be taking out such a big loan at my age.”

—
Currently enrolled Californian
Hispanic female, 21 years old

CHART 6.**About half of those considering postsecondary education say greater flexibility and program duration are very important factors in their enrollment decision**

How important would each of the following be in getting you to enroll?

% Very important

Still, finances are not the sole enabler of enrollment: Nearly half of Californians considering postsecondary education say greater flexibility in their work or personal schedule (49%), greater flexibility in course delivery (46%), and the ability to finish the program quickly (46%) would be important factors in their decision to enroll. These flexibility considerations are especially important to Californians who are caretakers, as well as those who have stopped out of a program.

Similarly, while just over half of unenrolled Californians say cost is a “very” important reason they are not enrolled, between 30% and 46% of these adults also say flexibility-related considerations — such as the need to work, duration of the program, and a lack of remote learning options — are very important barriers to enrollment.

CHART 7.

While cost is the most important barrier to enrollment, nearly half of adults cite work conflicts, and about one in three need remote or accelerated learning options

Which of the following are important reasons why you are not enrolled?

% Very important



Among unenrolled California adults

These flexibility-related barriers are especially burdensome to **stopped-out adults, caretakers, and those struggling financially.**

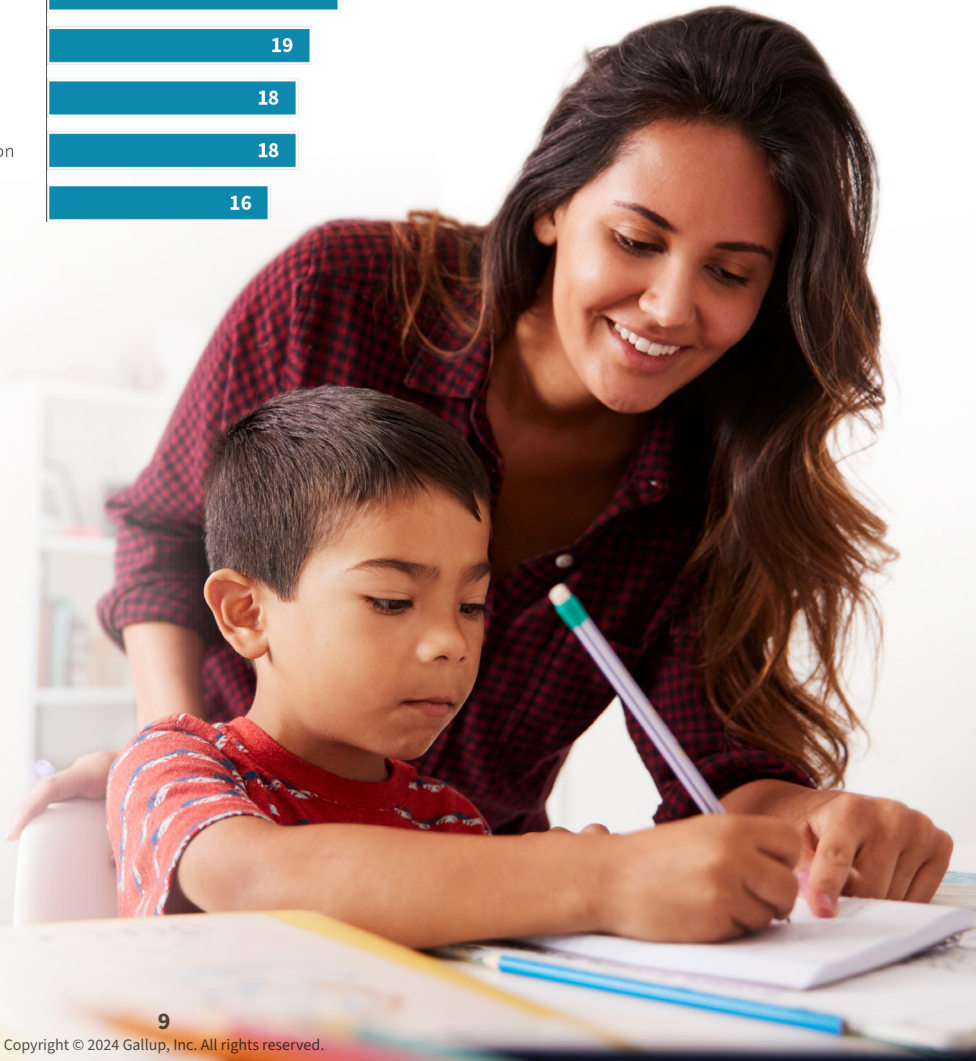


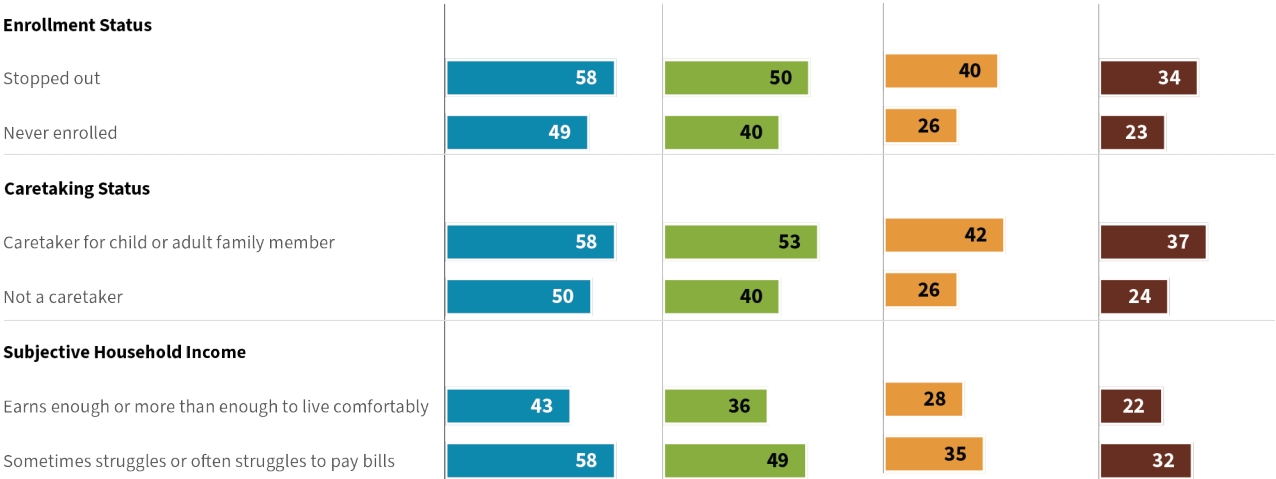
CHART 8.

Cost and flexibility are especially important to adults who are caretakers, those with low income, and those who have stopped out of a program

Which of the following are important reasons why you are not enrolled?

% Very important

- Cost of the degree or credential ■ Work conflicts or need to work ■ Would take too long to get a degree or certificate
■ Lack of remote learning options/Requirement for in-person class meetings



About one in three California students have recently considered stopping out of their program, primarily due to stress and mental health challenges

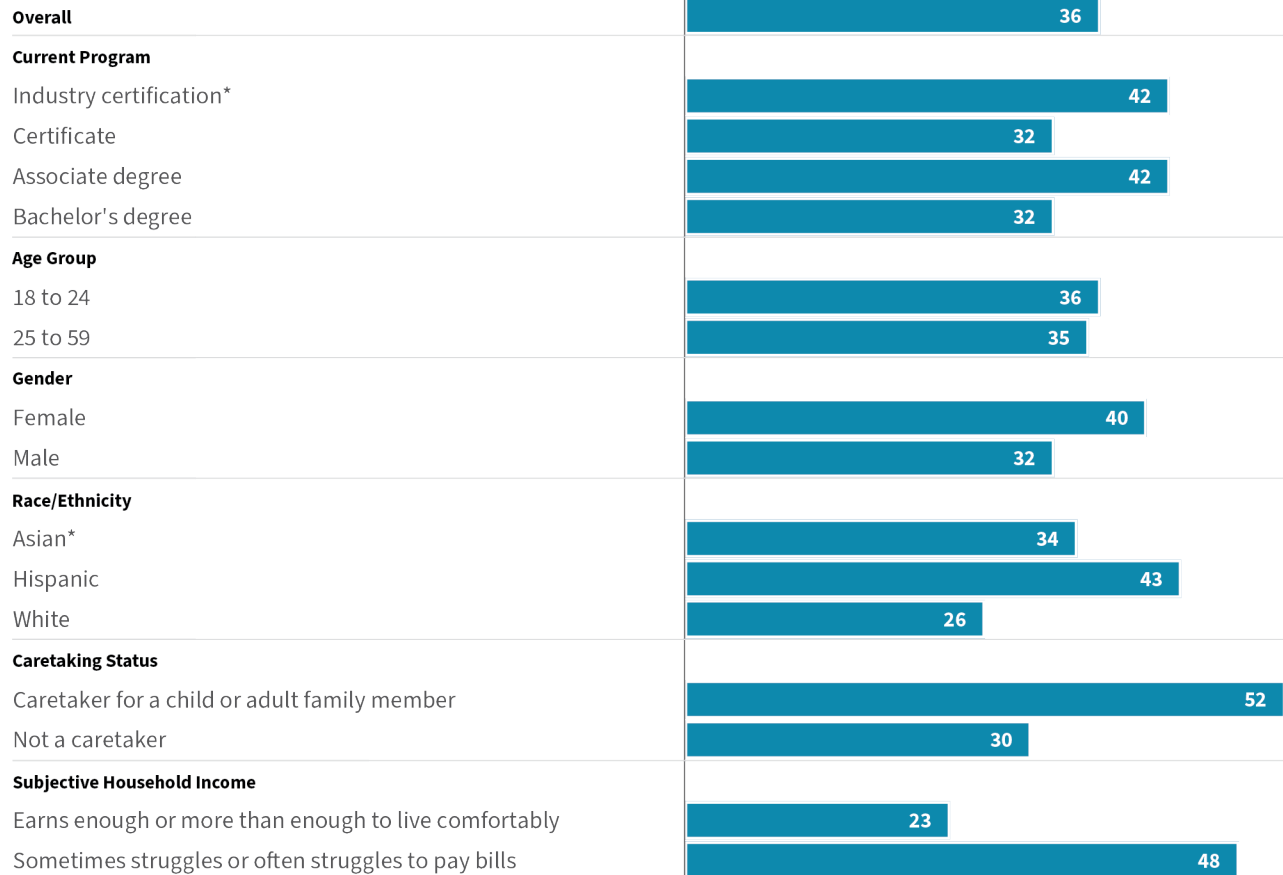
While removing barriers to enrollment for Californians who aspire to pursue higher education is an important step in increasing postsecondary attainment, it is arguably more important to ensure that those who start a degree or credential program persist and complete that program. Students who spend time and resources enrolling in postsecondary education — often incurring debt to do so — but stop out of their program before completing it are frequently left to repay those costs without the earnings and experience that come with a degree or credential.

Unfortunately, 36% of California students have considered stopping out of their program in the past six months. This percentage is especially high among caretakers (52%) and those struggling financially (48%). Hispanic (43%) and female students (40%) are also more likely than their peers to consider stopping out, as are students in industry certification (42%) and associate degree programs (42%).

CHART 9.**Low-income California students and caretakers are especially at risk of stopping out of their postsecondary education program**

In the past six months, have you considered stopping your coursework (that is, withdrawing from the program for at least one term)?

% Yes



* Sample size is <100; results should be interpreted with caution

The primary factor driving students to consider stopping out is emotional stress and mental health (63%). Emotional stress and mental health issues are about twice as likely to cause California students to consider stopping out as program cost (28%) or difficulties with coursework (33%).

Additionally, female students are 24 points more likely than male students to report that emotional stress or mental health challenges are the reason they are considering stopping out (73% vs. 49%).

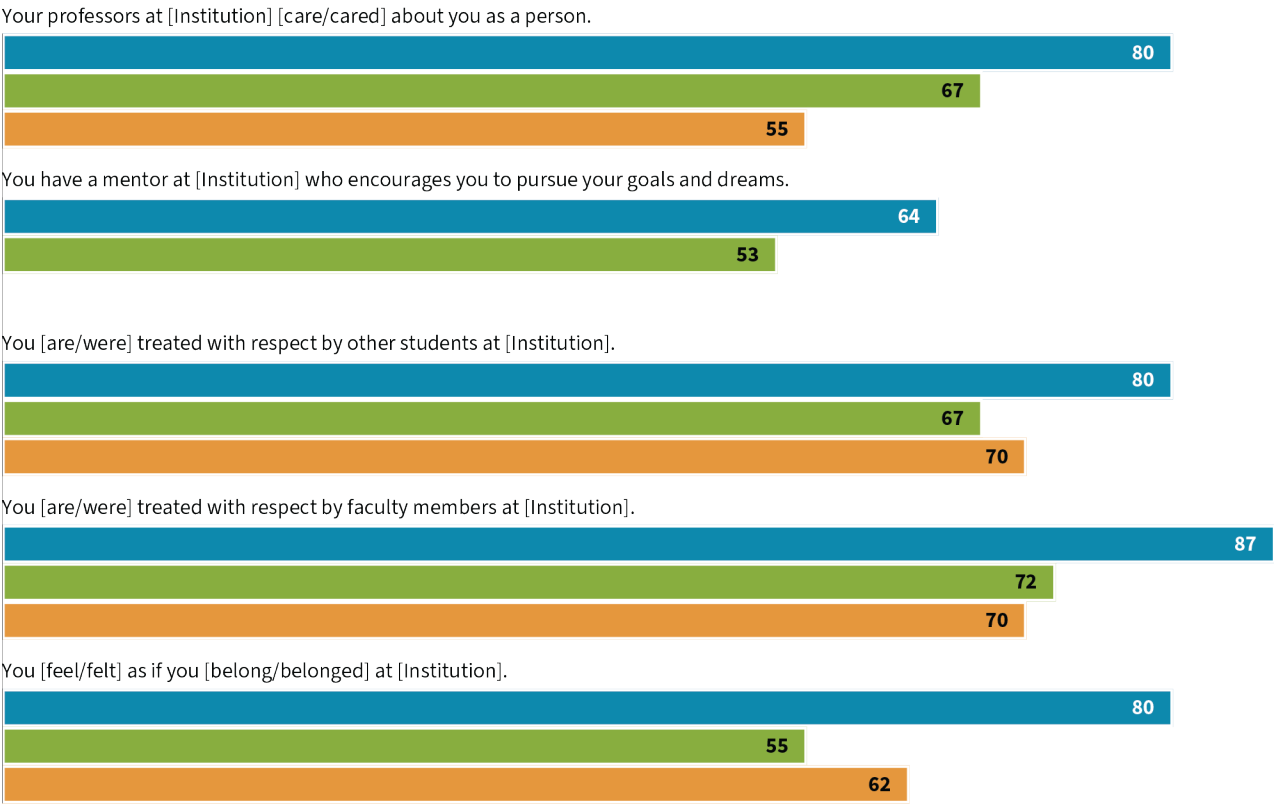
One potential buffer against the high incidence of stopping out is ensuring students feel supported by their institutions and programs. Adults who have stopped out of their programs or are considering doing so are also less likely to report that their teachers care about them and provide them mentorship and less likely to feel like they belong and are respected in their programs.

CHART 10.

Adults who stopped out or are considering stopping out are less likely to feel supported, respected, and a sense of belonging

% Strongly agree + Agree

Currently enrolled; not considering stopping out Currently enrolled; considering stopping out Stopped out



Despite feeling cared about and respected at similar rates to their peers, Hispanic students are least likely to feel like they have a mentor in their program (53%). Women are also less likely than men to feel cared about by their professors (53% vs. 62%) or have a sense of belonging in their program (57% vs. 68%).



Implications

Overall, Californians' attitudes about postsecondary education largely mirror those of Americans nationally. More than 90% of Californians without a college degree say some type of postsecondary education is very valuable, and more than half of unenrolled Californians have considered postsecondary education within the last two years.

However, as of 2020, more than half of Californians still do not have a college education,⁴ and about one in four 18- to 64-year-olds in the state have stopped out of a degree program. Giving these Californians the opportunity to start or re-enroll would create meaningful benefits for these individuals as well as California's communities and economy. This is particularly important for those with some college credit but no credential, as these former students may have invested significant time and resources in their program without receiving any of the benefits of the degree or credential they were pursuing.

Several studies demonstrate that additional education after high school creates both monetary and non-monetary benefits for graduates. The Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce estimates that adults in the United States who obtain an associate degree are expected to earn \$561,000 more over the course of their lives than adults without a college degree, and bachelor's degree holders are expected to earn over \$1 million more than high school graduates.⁵ Gallup research has also shown that postsecondary education is positively related to higher levels of wellbeing, job satisfaction, innovation, and civic engagement.⁶

While cost is a significant barrier to enrollment, it is not the only hurdle prospective students face. For caretakers and adults with low income, finding a program that fits into their work schedule is nearly as important as affordability. In a similar vein, accelerated programs — such as those that allow for competency-based credit rather than credit hours — and those that offer remote learning opportunities would also make higher education more accessible to California's underserved learners. Continuing to study what these and other barriers to enrollment look like for Californians would allow policymakers, colleges, and universities to better understand and accommodate students who want to pursue the potentially life-altering benefits of higher education but are unable to do so.

4 *California* | Data. (n.d.). Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/cew-attainment_gains-california.pdf

5 Carnevale, A. P., Strohl, J., Peltier Campbell, K., Gulish, A., Cheah, B., Nyhof, E., & Fix, L. (2024). *Learning and earning by degrees*. Georgetown University McCourt School of Public Policy Center on Education and the Workforce. https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/CEW-attainment-gains-full_report.pdf

6 Lumina Foundation, & Gallup, Inc. (2023, August 30). *Education for what?* <https://www.luminafoundation.org/resource/education-for-what/>

Methodology

The overall Lumina-Gallup State of Higher Education study results are based on web surveys conducted from Oct. 9-Nov. 16, 2023. Respondents were interviewed via Dynata's non-probability web-based panel. All respondents were between the ages of 18 and 59 and had a high school diploma or equivalent but not an associate or bachelor's degree.

The final national sample includes 6,015 students who are currently enrolled in a postsecondary education program (certificate, associate or bachelor's degree), 5,012 adults who were previously enrolled in a postsecondary education program but had not completed an associate or bachelor's degree, and 2,943 adults who had never enrolled in a postsecondary education program.

The data are weighted to match national demographics of gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education, and region for the population of U.S. adults aged 18 to 59 with a high school diploma but without a college degree. Demographic weighting targets are based on the most recent American Community Survey figures.

Results for this report are based on respondents from the Lumina-Gallup State of Higher Education survey who indicated they are currently living in California, including 659 currently enrolled students, 426 adults who started but did not complete a degree or credential program, and 277 adults who have never enrolled in any kind of education after high school.

For results based on the total sample of California adults, the margin of error is ± 4.4 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For the sample of 659 currently enrolled students, the margin of error is ± 4.5 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For the sample of 426 adults who started but did not complete a degree or credential program, the margin of error is ± 6.6 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For the sample of 277 adults who have never enrolled in education after high school, the margin of error is ± 8.4 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Margins of error for subgroups are higher.

All reported margins of error account for sampling error and design effects of weighting; however, they do not account for coverage, non-response or measurement errors.

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