

**COLLEGE
FUTURES**

GALLUP®

THE 2025 STATE OF CALIFORNIA LEARNERS



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FOREWORD

At College Futures Foundation, everything we do is grounded in our belief that rebuilding the California Dream starts with listening to the learners shaping our state's future. We also understand that postsecondary education has the potential to unlock opportunity and power economic and social mobility for all Californians, but only if it's built around the people it is meant to serve.

Conversations focused on college students have remained fixed for far too long: 18 to 24 years old, enrolled full time, supported by parents or guardians and living on or near campus. While that experience matters, and this report includes critical insights from younger adult learners, it's not the full picture. Today, a growing share of learners are older, working full time, parenting, caregiving and navigating a rapidly shifting economy. Their educational journeys are not linear, and they shouldn't have to be. Higher education in general has long recognized this, yet institutions cling to outdated assumptions and operating systems that serve too few.

The 2025 State of California Learners report reflects our actionable commitment to listen regularly and rigorously to what learners across California are telling us. In partnership with Gallup, we asked learners of all ages what they need from postsecondary education, what gets in the way, and what would make it more accessible, relevant and aligned with their goals. The message is clear: They want to grow, contribute and build better lives for themselves and their families. Yet too often, they are navigating institutions that were not designed with them in mind.

Now, in the second year of this work, we are intentionally shifting our focus to adult learners because their success is essential to California's civic and economic future. With six million Californians under 65 who have some college but no credential, reaching our attainment goals and honoring our commitment to equity depends on better serving this population — especially those 25 and older. When we design systems that support adult learners, we not only help them succeed, we also strengthen outcomes for all students.

We are at a pivotal moment. Learners are clearly and consistently telling us what they need. It's up to us to listen with humility, act with urgency and build with equity at the center.

Onward,

Elizabeth González, Ph.D.

Chief Program & Strategy Officer

COLLEGE FUTURES FOUNDATION

INTRODUCTION

By 2031, 67% of California's jobs are projected to require some form of postsecondary education or training.¹ However, just 56% of California adults hold a degree or credential,² and over six million Californians under the age of 65 are estimated to have started a college program but eventually stopped out.³ For too many, the promise of higher education remains unfulfilled, leaving them locked out of the economic mobility they were striving for.

College Futures Foundation (College Futures) is committed to removing the barriers California students face in completing their postsecondary goals and, ultimately, expanding their economic opportunities — especially for underserved learners.

To better understand the experiences of Californians without a college degree, College Futures partnered with Gallup to conduct a statewide study of three populations: 1) currently enrolled students (without a degree), 2) adults who enrolled in a postsecondary degree or credential program but stopped out before completing it and 3) adults who have never enrolled in a degree or credential program. This work builds on the 2024 inaugural report as well as the Lumina Foundation-Gallup national State of Higher Education study, which measures Americans' attitudes and experiences with postsecondary education.

The 2025 findings delve deeper into the diverse experiences of California learners, highlighting the varied life circumstances they navigate and the shared motivations that drive many to pursue postsecondary education. Factors such as full-time employment, caregiving responsibilities, emotional and physical health, and inflexible work schedules can play a significant role in adults' decisions about whether — and how — to engage in higher education.

1 *After everything: Projections of jobs, education, and training requirements through 2031.* (n.d.). CEW Georgetown. Retrieved July 9, 2025, from <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/projections2031/>

2 *Educational attainment.* (n.d.). Stronger Nation. Retrieved July 9, 2025, from <https://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/attainment/california>

3 *Some college, no credential: A 2025 snapshot for the nation and the states.* (2025, June). National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/some-college-no-credential/>

KEY FINDINGS

- 1 The vast majority of Californians surveyed (91%) say at least one type of postsecondary credential is “very” or “extremely” valuable, including 90% of adult learners over age 25.
- 2 Over six in 10 unenrolled Californians (62%) have considered pursuing higher education in the past two years, and one in four say they are “very likely” to enroll.
- 3 Future job opportunities is the number one reason currently enrolled (57%) and stopped-out California students (69%) cite for initially enrolling in higher education.
- 4 Over one in three California students without a degree (36%) have considered stopping out in the past six months. Hispanic students (48%) and those who are employed full-time (45%) or are caretakers (50%) are particularly likely to consider stopping out.
- 5 California students are committed and hopeful: Nine in 10 currently enrolled students (91%) are “confident” or “very confident” they will complete their program. Among students who are considering stopping out, 81% are confident they will complete their program.

Both currently enrolled and stopped-out students say that job opportunities were top of mind when they first began their degree or credential program, highlighting the value that Californians place on postsecondary education as an avenue to economic mobility. But when students face challenges and must stop out (or are unable to enroll in the first place), they miss out on the job or career development they first went to school for, often incurring debt in the process. More broadly, California’s businesses lose out on the talent needed for an educated, thriving workforce. Identifying and reducing the barriers to accessing postsecondary education is crucial to persistence and obtaining a good job in California.

As part of the 2025 study, College Futures and Gallup focused on adult learners — those aged 25 or older — and adults in low-income households⁴ to understand their experiences and stories in greater depth. Hearing from these populations supports the study’s goal of amplifying the voices often underrepresented in traditional education narratives. Qualitative interviews were conducted with currently enrolled, stopped-out and never-enrolled California adults without a college degree.

When asked about the advice they would give to education leaders, a common theme surfaced: the need for leaders to understand students’ experiences and the realities they navigate while enrolled.

“College leaders need to have a deep curiosity for what their students are experiencing ... Having to leave was devastating. I would beg education leaders to understand that the education they were able to pursue should be a right of all Americans. It’s so deeply important.”

— KRISTIN, 36, STOPPED OUT

⁴ Low-income households were defined for qualitative interviews as those earning \$75,000 annually or less.

DETAILED FINDINGS

The Value of Postsecondary Education for Californians

The overwhelming majority of survey respondents acknowledge the value of postsecondary education. Nine in 10 Californians without a degree say at least one type of credential is “very” or “extremely” valuable, with the highest value placed on four-year degrees (74%) and industry certifications (67%).

NINE IN 10

CALIFORNIANS WITHOUT A DEGREE

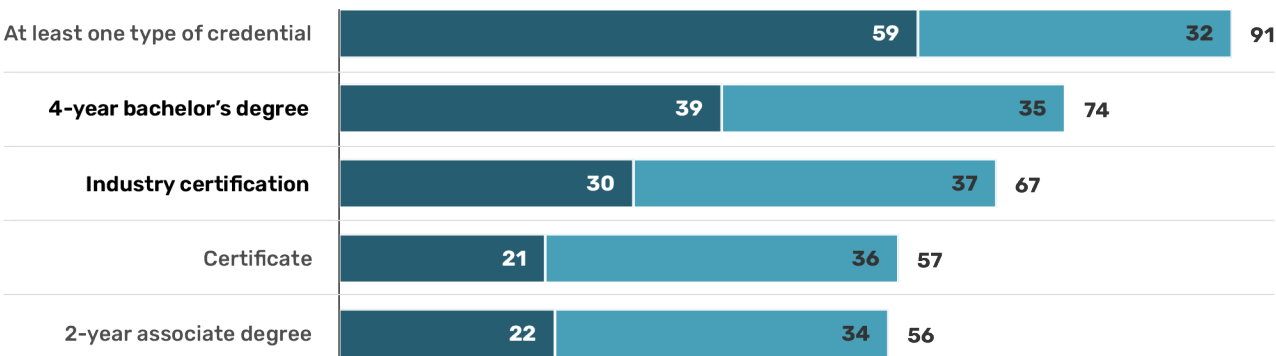
say at least one type of credential is “very” or “extremely” valuable.

CHART 1

Nine in 10 Californians without a degree see postsecondary credentials as valuable.

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

■ % Extremely valuable ■ % Very valuable



Among Californians without a college degree.

Note: Percentages may sum to ±1 due to rounding. Industry certification was defined for survey respondents as a credential awarded by a third-party, standard-setting organization (e.g., manufacturing, IT, electrician). A certificate is generally given by a two-year institution and represents a series of courses with a specific focus.

Californians from all walks of life value postsecondary degrees and credentials.

Across factors including age, employment status and caretaker responsibilities, roughly nine in 10 Californians without a degree believe that at least one degree or credential is very or extremely valuable. For example, 25- to 59-year-olds are about as likely as 18- to 24-year-olds to believe a credential is valuable (90% vs. 91%), highlighting the value a postsecondary education poses to adults at any age.

Among adults who have never enrolled in postsecondary education, the perceived value of postsecondary credentials is strong: 87% say at least one credential is very or extremely valuable, just slightly fewer than among adults who have pursued postsecondary education at some point (91% and 94% of stopped-out and currently enrolled adults, respectively).

CHART 2

Californians across ages and life circumstances see value in postsecondary credentials.

In general, how valuable are each of the following types of degrees and credentials: [4-year bachelor's degree, 2-year associate degree, Graduate degree, Certificate, Industry certification]

■ % Believes at least one credential is extremely valuable ■ % Believes at least one credential is very valuable

Overall	59	32	91
AGE GROUP			
18 to 24	60	31	91
25 to 59	58	32	90
CARETAKER STATUS			
Cares for adult family member or friend	66	25	91
Cares for child under 18	59	34	93
Cares for both adult family member or friend and a child under 18	70	19	89
No caretaking responsibilities	55	34	89
EMPLOYMENT STATUS			
Employed full-time	61	30	91
Employed part-time	56	38	94
Full-time student	64	31	95
Unemployed	53	32	85
POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT STATUS			
Currently enrolled	64	30	94
Stopped out	62	29	91

Among California adults without a college degree.

Note: Percentages may sum to ±1 due to rounding.

In qualitative interviews, many adult learners described higher education as a long-term investment in financial security that, if completed, could expand life opportunities for them and their families.

“It’s worth the cost because if I would have just paid the money and went through everything with the program, then I feel that today, I would be a homeowner ... have a good savings, I would be able to travel, provide different opportunities for my children.”

– TIFFANI, 32, STOPPED OUT

“Looking at the wages I’m making now, it really makes no sense for me to have chosen to not go [to college] ... You can’t make a decent wage. You kind of get stuck with whatever job is available. It’s a regrettable decision.”

– NICHOLAS, 34, NEVER ENROLLED

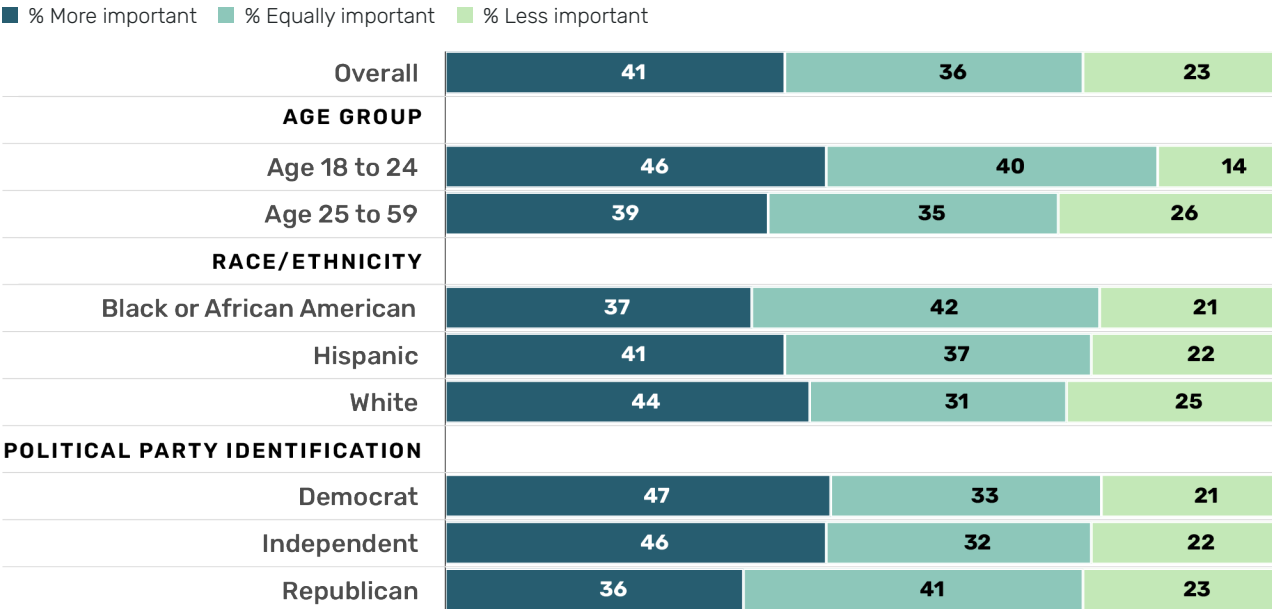


Many Californians also think the value of a college education is enduring. Three-quarters of surveyed adults (77%) believe college is at least as important for career success as it was 20 years ago. This is true across age groups, races and political party affiliation.

FOUR IN 10
CALIFORNIA ADULTS
believe college degrees are more
important now than two decades ago.

CHART 3
Most Californians say a college degree is equally or more important than 20 years ago.

Compared to 20 years ago, how important is it for people today to have a two-year or four-year college degree in order for them to have a successful career?



Among California adults without a college degree.

Six in 10 Unenrolled Californians Are Considering Higher Education, With Upward Mobility a Driving Factor

Over six in 10 unenrolled Californians (62%) have considered pursuing higher education in the past two years. This figure is even higher among unenrolled Black adults (67%) and young adults under age 25 (74%).

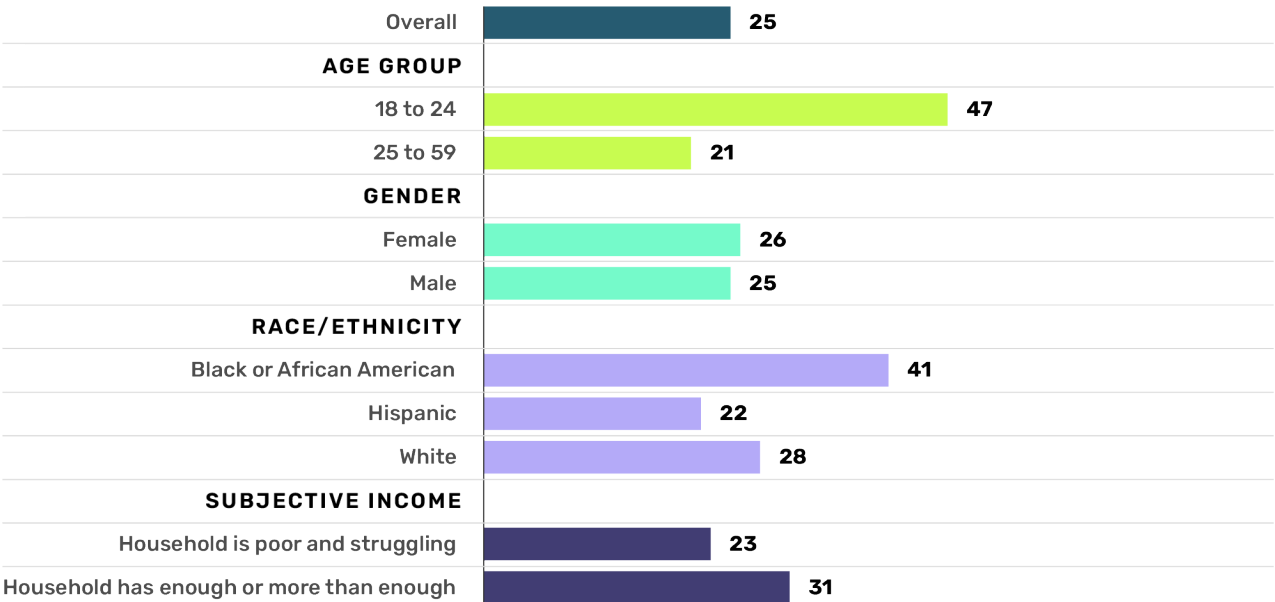
For one in four unenrolled Californians, this interest is “very likely” to lead to enrollment, with likelihood highest among the youngest Californians (47%) and Black adults (41%). Notably, unenrolled adults in households that struggle at least sometimes to pay bills are about as likely as those in more affluent households to consider enrolling (61% vs. 62%), but they are significantly less likely to believe they are very likely to enroll in a program (23% vs. 31%).

CHART 4

Young and Black or African American adults are most likely to say they will enroll in higher education in the next five years.

Please indicate how likely you are in the next five years to enroll in a program for any of the following.

% Very likely to enroll in at least one program



Among unenrolled adults.

One in five unenrolled adults aged 25 and older say it is very likely they will enroll in a postsecondary program in the next five years. Many of those interviewed described it as a matter of finding the right time and circumstances to revisit their education goals.

“I’m stopping now, but I always tell myself I will definitely go back. It’s not like I’m quitting, it’s more so I’m just waiting for a better time to go for it ... right now, I have a little baby – a one-year-old.”

– TIFFANI, 32, STOPPED OUT

In addition to finances, flexibility and program duration are top factors that could encourage more adults to enroll.

Many unenrolled adults see postsecondary education as having the potential to improve their financial situation. However, finances pose a major barrier to enrollment: Stopped-out adults most commonly cite increased personal income (62%) as the most important factor in getting them to enroll in a four-year program, with the ability to receive financial aid a close second (61%). These factors are also important to never-enrolled adults (32% and 34%, respectively).

Flexibility (60%), program duration (58%) and confidence in the value of a program (51%) are also among the top factors cited by stopped-out students that could get them to enroll. In contrast to students' financial situations, these factors are directly tied to how educational programs are designed and delivered and, therefore, more squarely within the control of educational institutions to address. Never-enrolled adults also cite flexibility (26%) and program duration (21%), in addition to the school's location (23%) and affordable student housing (22%).

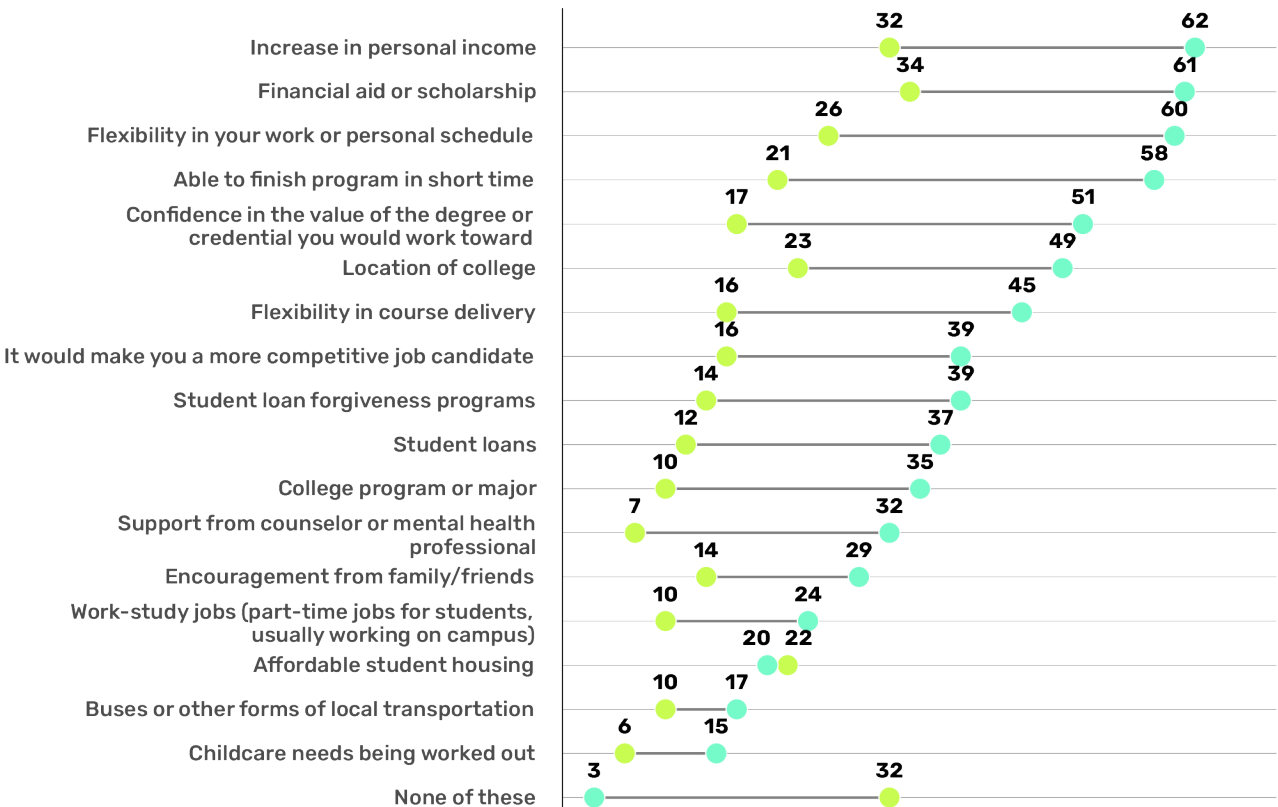
CHART 5

Finances, flexibility and program duration are important factors in getting Californians to enroll in higher education.

Please indicate if any of the following would be important factors in getting you to enroll in a four-year degree program? Select all that apply.

% Selected

■ Never enrolled ■ Stopped out



Among enrolled students and stopped-out adults.

Financial considerations are a serious barrier to re-enrollment for adult learners who live in lower-income households (those earning less than \$75,000 annually). Among adult learners who also work, being in school takes up hours they previously used to earn money, resulting in lost wages. For others, the cost of postsecondary education is or was too high of a barrier to begin with.

“I would need the money ... the time I’m at school could be the times I’m working.”
– TIFFANI, 32, STOPPED OUT

“My living situation’s kind of up in the air, and it’s really frustrating. If I had stability, I would definitely consider, probably would go back [to school] ... My daughter’s going to a UC right now, so my focus has been on her, not myself.”
– ERIN, 47, STOPPED OUT

At Least Six in 10 California Students Enrolled to Unlock Career Opportunities

While Californians cite a variety of reasons for pursuing higher education, job-related factors are at the top of their lists. This finding underscores the crucial role higher education plays in California’s workforce and the aspirations Californians have for their future employment when beginning a new degree or credential program.

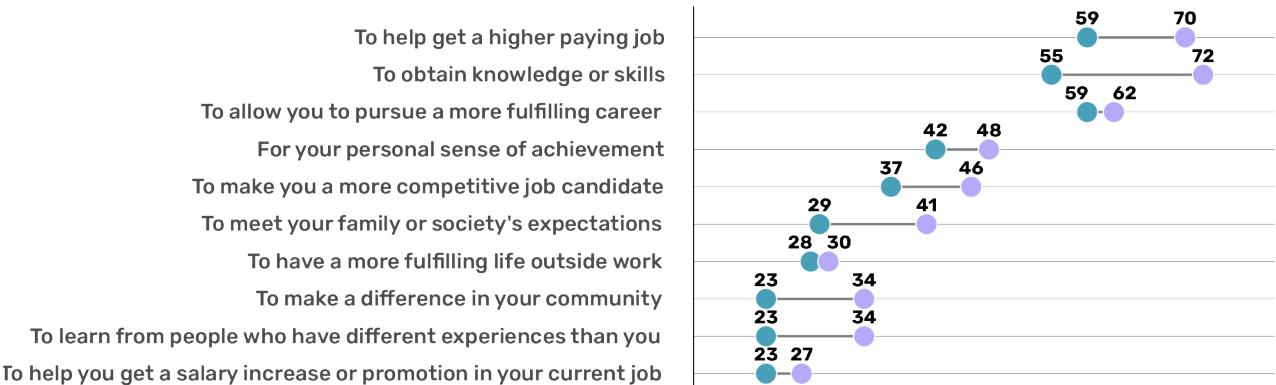
Getting a higher-paying job and pursuing a more fulfilling career are two of the top three reasons cited for pursuing postsecondary education, along with obtaining knowledge or skills. California students in two- and four-year degree programs give similar reasons for enrolling, although exact rates differ.

CHART 6
Most California students enroll in higher education for job opportunities, skill building and career fulfillment.

Which of the following are important reasons why you are enrolled and obtaining your degree or credential?

% Selected

■ Associate degree students ■ Bachelor’s degree students



Among currently enrolled associate and bachelor’s degree students.

Upward mobility can include a higher-paying job or one that is more personally fulfilling. It is a key goal of many adult learners who want to formalize their education, both for those who wish to begin a new job or career and those who want to advance in their current careers.

"I would return [to higher education] because I live in California, and the cost of living is only going up. With my phlebotomy certificate that I have now, it kind of has a cap at how much I can earn. Eventually, I want to be a homeowner ... a nursing degree would allow me to do that."

– TIFFANI, 32, STOPPED OUT

"A good job means you can make a decent amount of money to live. Not necessarily afford a mansion, but to be able to put gas in your tank and food on your table."

– MONET, 33, STOPPED OUT

"The position I'm currently in, I have human resources duties ... but I want to become a human resource manager. I enrolled in the program so that I could get my degree in human resources and possibly increase my income."

– EILEEN, 44, CURRENTLY ENROLLED



The promise of education as a pathway to a good job is important to enrolled and stopped-out students alike. Findings show that both populations first enrolled in their program with their future job or career in mind: “Expected future job opportunities” is the most important factor stopped-out adults (69%) and currently enrolled students (57%) cite in their enrollment decision.

CHART 7
Future job opportunities is the top reason adults initially enroll in postsecondary programs.

Thinking back to when you first enrolled in an education program after high school, how important were each of the following in your decision to enroll?

% Very important

■ Currently enrolled adults ■ Stopped-out adults



Among enrolled students and stopped-out adults.

More Than One in Three Students Have Considered Stopping Out in the Past Six Months, Citing Stress as a Top Reason

Institutional barriers and challenges related to life circumstances prevent many students from completing their degree or credential program and from gaining their desired job skills and opportunities. Addressing these barriers by reimagining the institutional systems in place could bolster California’s workforce by supporting learners who may not otherwise be able to finish their degree program.

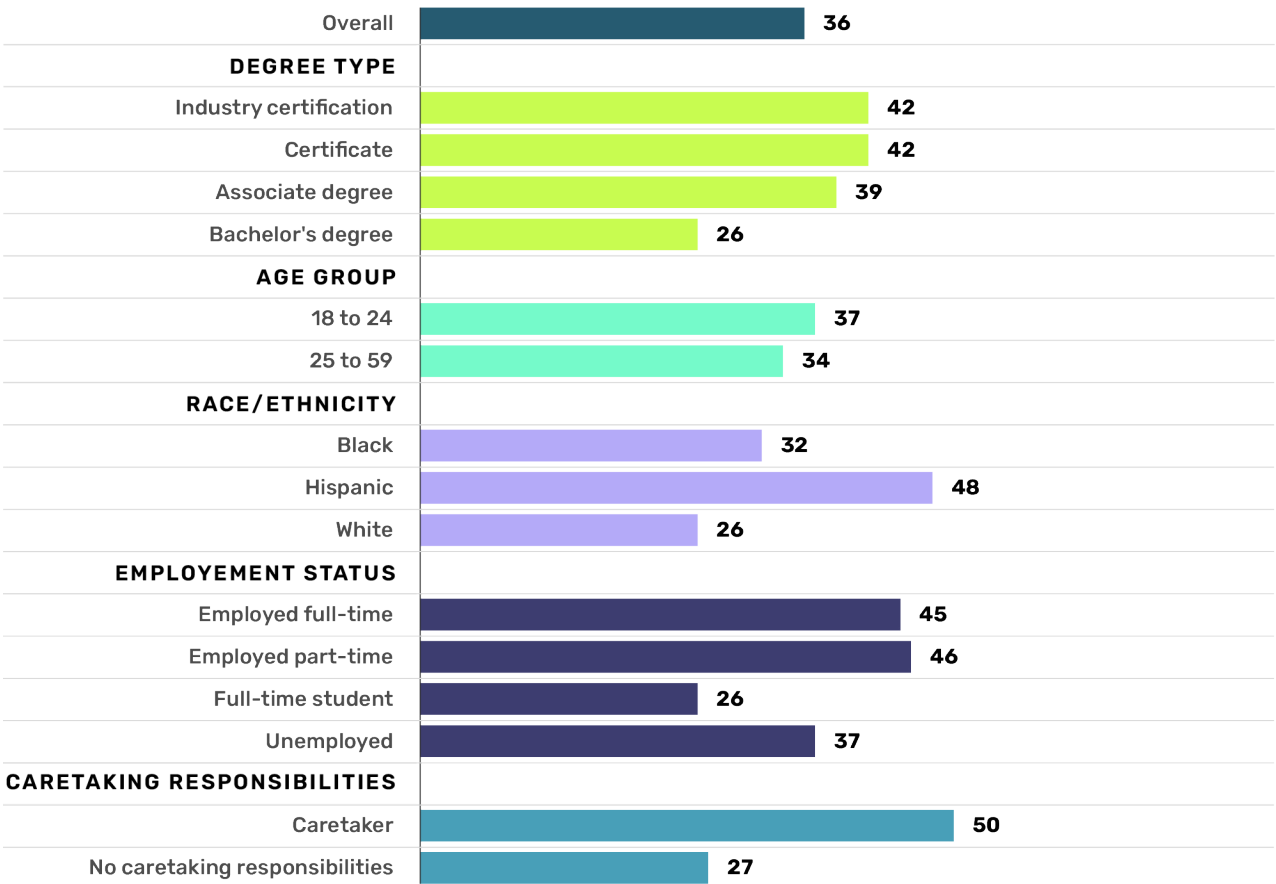
More than one in three currently enrolled California students (36%) have considered stopping out in the past six months. Hispanic students are especially likely to consider stopping out (48%), as well as students who are employed full-time (45%) or who are caregivers (50%).

CHART 8

Full-time workers and caregivers are among the students most likely to consider stopping out.

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

% Yes



Among currently enrolled students.

Emotional stress and mental health concerns continue to be the most common reasons for stopping out or considering stopping out. These stressors can be brought on or exacerbated by the demands of work responsibilities, caregiving, or the many other roles juggled by today’s learners. More than half of enrolled students who are considering stopping out (56%) list it as a reason they may need to withdraw from their coursework, and 45% of stopped-out adults say it was a factor in their decision to do so. The cost of the program and employment considerations are also important reasons students leave or consider leaving their program.

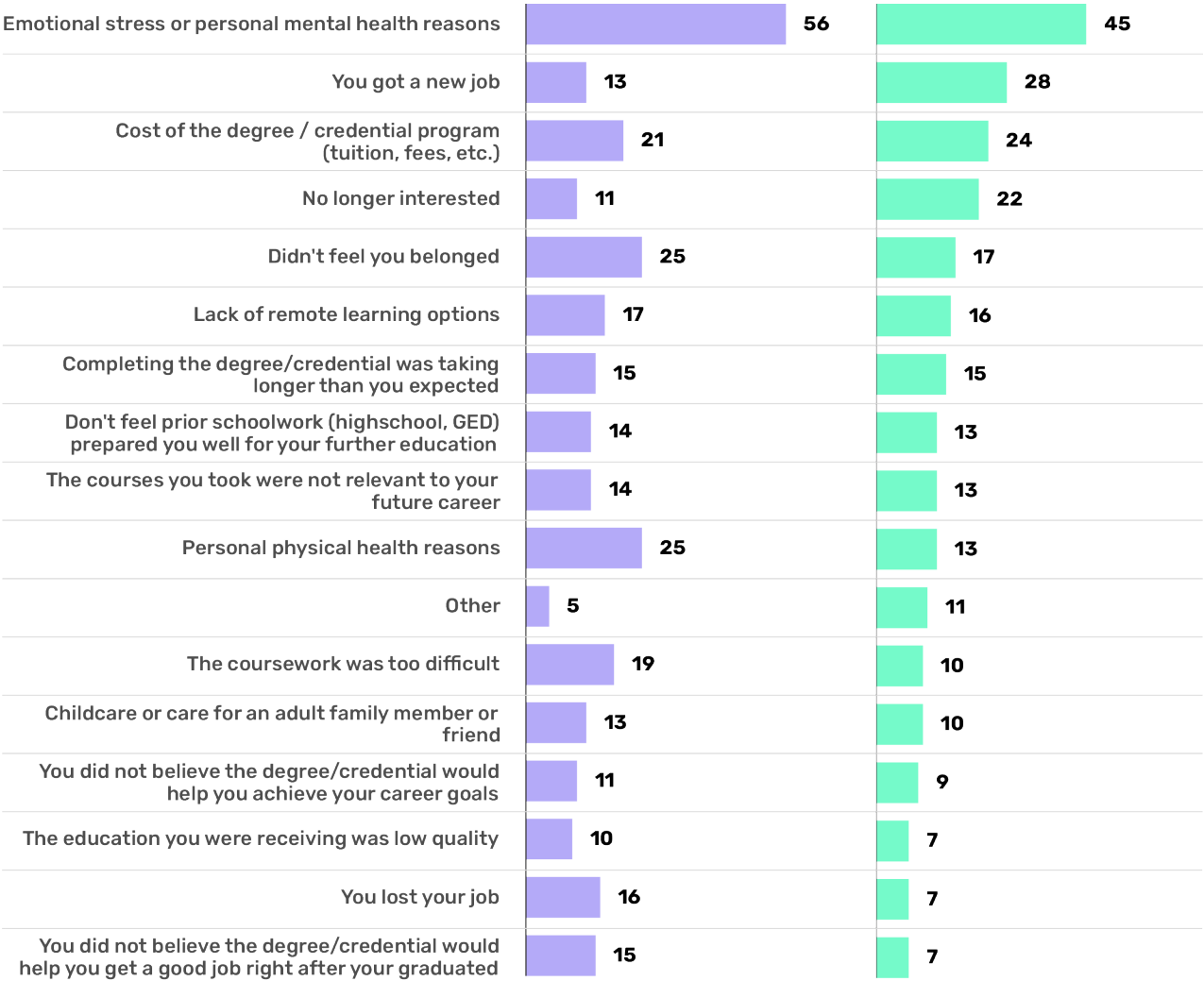
CHART 9

Emotional stress and cost are top reasons students consider leaving school.

Which of the following describes why you considered stopping your coursework? Select all that apply.
Which of the following are reasons why you stopped your coursework? Select all that apply.

% Selected

Considering stopping Stopped out



Among enrolled and recently stopped-out students.

Challenges to Remaining Enrolled Vary by Age.

While students of all ages report challenges to remaining enrolled, some challenges are more common among older versus younger students. Emotional stress is less likely to be the reason that 25- to 59-year-olds consider stopping out (38%) compared to 18- to 24-year-olds (45%), but older students are more likely than younger students to cite personal physical health reasons (35% vs. 22%). Time to completion (26% vs. 11%), losing a job (25% vs. 14%) and caregiving responsibilities (22% vs. 10%) are also challenges that are more prevalent among adult learners.

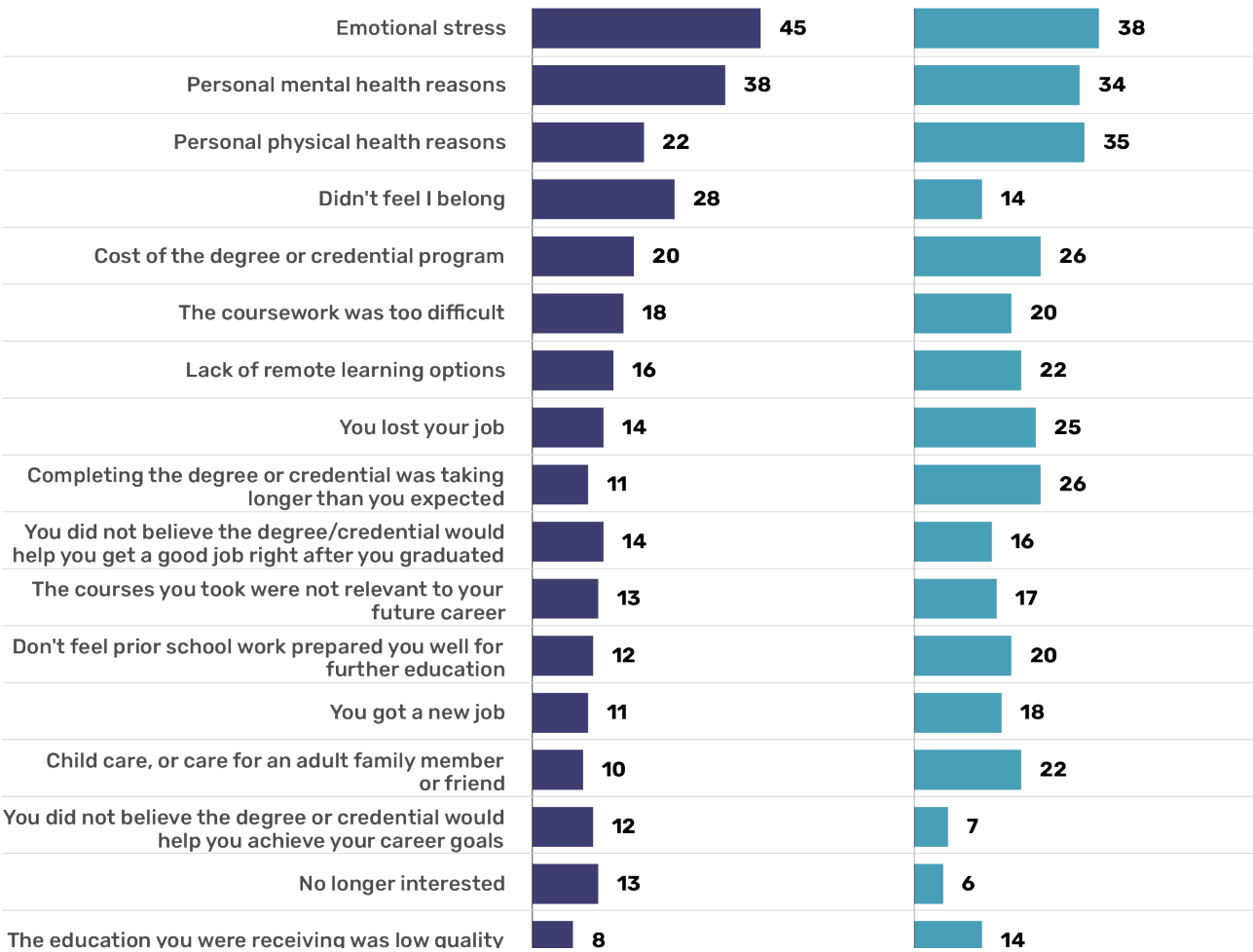
CHART 10

Adult learners are more likely to face barriers to staying enrolled that are related to life circumstances.

Which of the following describes why you considered stopping your coursework? Select all that apply.

% Selected

■ Aged 18 to 24 ■ Aged 25 to 59



Among enrolled students.

In qualitative interviews, adult learners and those who had stopped out shared stories about the pressures they faced due to systemic challenges and life circumstances. Compounding financial and family responsibilities added to their academic stress, which left some students feeling out of place, overwhelmed, isolated or unsupported. Some described it as feeling like they were quietly carrying more than others realized.

"I want to finish and get a degree, but at the same time, I have responsibilities ... I can't just say, 'I have homework, so I'm going to ignore work' ... I can't do that because I also have bills."

– EILEEN, 44, CURRENTLY ENROLLED

"The responsibility of needing to be there by a certain time or the work being done at a certain time, finals. I have anxiety when it comes to tests and stuff, so that was a struggle."

– CANDI, 39, STOPPED OUT

"I just remember doing my assignment ... and I just remember also feeling like 'okay, well I also have to make dinner, give my son a bath, and get ready for work in the morning' ... It was just at a point where it was like 'okay, either I finish this assignment and not get anything done, my responsibilities of daily living done, or I don't.'"

– TIFFANI, 32, STOPPED OUT

"I can't just say 'alright, well I have homework, so I'm gonna ignore work' because I also have bills. So, there are times ... I'm probably gonna have to work extra days, which cuts down my time that I have for school."

– JON, 40, CURRENTLY ENROLLED



Nine in 10 California Students Are Confident They Will Complete Their Program

Despite the challenges many students face during their program, about nine in 10 currently enrolled California students are “very confident” (49%) or “confident” (42%) that they will complete their program. That confidence drops only somewhat to 81% among students who are considering stopping their coursework. Older students, bachelor’s degree students, non-first-generation students and non-caregivers are more likely than other types of students to say they are very confident they will finish their degree or certificate program.

ABOUT NINE IN 10 ENROLLED CALIFORNIA STUDENTS

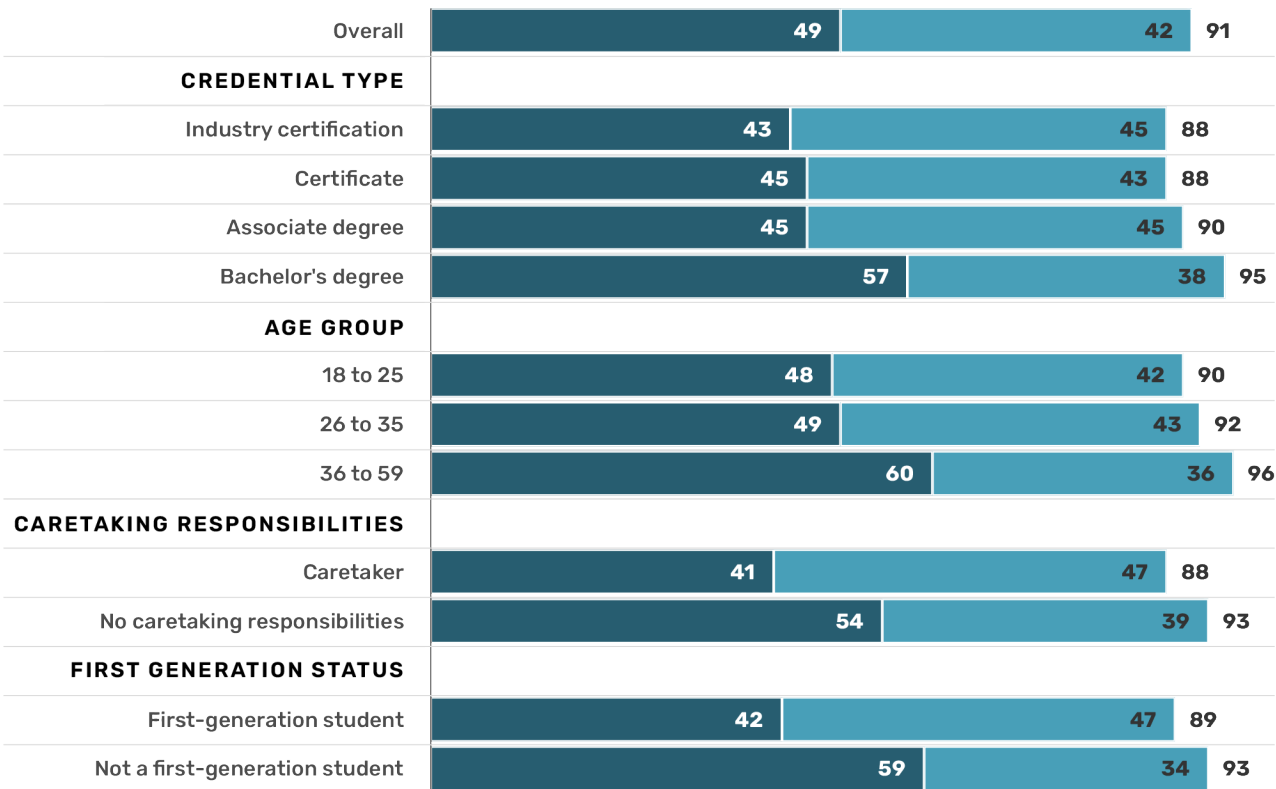
are “very confident” (49%) or “confident” (42%) that they will complete their program.

CHART 11

Nine in 10 students are confident they will complete their program.

How confident are you that you will complete your program?

■ % Very confident ■ % Confident



Among enrolled students.

Note: Percentages may sum to ± 1 due to rounding.

Adult learners also bring unique perspectives and strengths to the learning environment. In many cases, the aspects of school that younger students might typically feel are a challenge – maintaining a focus on school, knowing what they want to do with their degree or motivation to keep going – were cited as strengths by their older counterparts.

“I feel like me now in school versus me in high school, I’m more focused. I actually have a goal, and I’m trying to meet that goal as opposed to ‘I just got to get this over with.’”

– EILEEN, 44, CURRENTLY ENROLLED

“I actually enjoy going to school more than I did when I was younger. Being young, you kind of just want to get in and get out, and it feels like a chore. Now that I’m older, it’s more enjoyable.”

– CANDI, 39, STOPPED OUT

“I just have a more clear and concise path. I’m going for the highest degree of efficiency ... no galivanting around, so to speak.”

– EMILIO, 35, STOPPED OUT

Adult learners report a sense of personal commitment that strengthens persistence in their program. Their commitment grows from the potential for economic mobility, the pride in being a role model for their children or simply the joy of learning.

“I really felt bad from the first time that I dropped out because of personal reasons. This time, I’m [going to] stick with it no matter what.”

– JON, 40, CURRENTLY ENROLLED

“As an adult learner, you enter it with such a different perspective. Where you’re really excited to learn. You acknowledge all the reasons that you’re there.”

– KRISTIN, 36, STOPPED OUT

“I want to actually do something better with my life and have an actual career, not just a job ... [be a] good role model for my kids ... and not quit.”

– MELISSA, 44, CURRENTLY ENROLLED

When it comes to supporting adults who wish to enroll or re-enroll, more resources could be dedicated to providing easily accessible information about potential career outcomes. Even among adults who ultimately enrolled, four in 10 say they found it difficult to locate resources on career outcomes such as job placement rates (43%) and typical starting salaries for graduates (39%).

CHART 12

Many Californians struggle to find career outcome information before enrolling.

How easy or difficult was it for you to find information about the following from the colleges you considered attending?

■ % Very easy ■ % Somewhat easy ■ % Somewhat difficult ■ % Very difficult ■ % Did not look for this information

Job placement rates for graduates of the college	14	33	31	12	9
Resources the college offers to assist with job placement	16	32	32	11	8
Typical starting salaries for graduates of the college	17	35	29	10	10
Total cost of attendance	20	35	26	11	7
How to apply for financial aid	23	37	25	9	6
Course requirements	27	43	22	7	

Note: Percentages may sum to ±1 due to rounding; values under 5% are not displayed.

When asked about the advice they would give to education leaders, participants suggested more adult-specific outreach and curricular design, as well as rethinking traditional credit requirements. They also suggested more flexible enrollment options and more robust career support, such as networking, internships or job placement assistance.

“It seems like a lot of the advertising ... is targeted towards high school students. But there are a lot of things that would benefit not just older people like myself, trying to go to school for the first time, but people who just want to update their skills or something along that line.”

– EILEEN, 44, CURRENTLY ENROLLED

IMPLICATIONS

Despite the significant cost and commitment required to pursue higher education, Californians' belief in its value remains strong. The vast majority of adults surveyed continue to view postsecondary education as a launch pad to economic mobility and long-term personal and professional growth. Among currently enrolled students and those who have had to stop out, future job opportunities consistently emerge as a primary motivation for initial enrollment.

However, the journey toward a degree is not without challenges. One in three currently enrolled students has considered stopping out, most often citing emotional or physical health concerns, financial pressures or a lack of belonging within the educational system. Adult learners who have already stopped out report similar barriers, often compounded by work-related demands. For students who are also parents or caregivers, the challenges of staying enrolled are even more pronounced.

Across all age groups, Californians have often thought deeply about what they want for their life and career, and arrive at their degree or credential program full of hope for what postsecondary education can offer them. Most currently enrolled students are determined to persist: Nine in 10 students are confident they will finish their program, as are eight in 10 students who are currently enrolled but have considered stopping out. To ensure these learners succeed and support those yet to begin, their experiences must be heard and understood. Educators, policymakers, institutional leaders and other stakeholders have a vital role to play in removing the barriers that stand in their way and in building systems that reflect the realities of today's students.

METHODOLOGY

The results are based on web surveys from Oct. 2–31 and Nov. 4–13, 2024. Respondents were interviewed via Dynata's non-probability web-based panel. All respondents were between the ages of 18 and 59, living in California, and had a high school diploma or equivalent but not an associate or bachelor's degree.

The final sample includes 1,786 adults living in California. The sample includes 918 adults who were currently enrolled in a postsecondary education program (certificate, associate or bachelor's degree), 532 adults who were previously enrolled in a postsecondary education program but had not completed an associate or bachelor's degree, and 332 adults who had never enrolled in a postsecondary education program.

The data are weighted to match state demographics of gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education and region for the population of California 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.

Qualitative Interviews

Qualitative interviews were used to generate the quotes presented in this report. Interviews were conducted March 6–April 11, 2025, with Gallup panelists living in California without a college degree. Three participants were currently enrolled in an undergraduate program, 13 participants started but did not complete an undergraduate program and three participants had never enrolled in an undergraduate program. Participants were all aged 25 or older and living in households earning less than \$75,000 annually. Nineteen interviews were completed using a semi-structured approach via a video conferencing platform. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

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