



# SOME COLLEGE AND NO DEGREE

How individuals who attend and don't graduate feel about education



GALLUP



## INTRODUCTION

Over the past 20 years, more than 31 million students have enrolled in college and left without receiving a degree or certificate.<sup>1</sup> Re-enrolling this “some college, no degree” population is at the center of many states’ plans for boosting the educational attainment of their population.

Among many resources highlighting the importance of these efforts, the National Student Clearinghouse recently came out with a report providing a descriptive overview of the some college, no degree population nationally and for each of the 50 states on key objective variables.<sup>2</sup> The report highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of this population to make re-enrollment efforts more effective. Adding to this descriptive understanding, our report provides the firsthand subjective perspectives of more than 40,000 individuals who stopped out of college before completing a degree.

The data and insights shared here are drawn from the Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey: an unprecedented telephone survey of more than 340,000 U.S. adults ages 18–65 that explores their educational experiences and attitudes. Strada Education Network, Lumina Foundation, and Gallup collaborated on this report as part of a larger series of reports on adults without degrees.

<sup>1</sup> National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Some College, No Degree: A National View of Students with Some College Enrollment, but No Completion. Accessed Dec. 4, 2019, <https://nscresearchcenter.org/signaturereport7>.

<sup>2</sup> National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Some College, No Degree. Accessed Dec. 4, 2019, [https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SCND\\_Report\\_2019.pdf](https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SCND_Report_2019.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Sample size for likely to enroll questions = 3,021. Sample size for quality questions=8,860.



Based on the responses of 42,190 adults ages 25-64 with some college, but no degree and who are not currently enrolled,<sup>3</sup> the report's key findings include:

- The most common reason people cited for stopping out was difficulty balancing school and work at the same time.
- The factors that would have the most impact on getting this population to re-enroll are affordability, schedule flexibility and a guaranteed employment outcome connected to further education.
- Those who stopped out rated lower the quality of the academic and career advising they received than peers who completed degrees.
- Only 19 percent of these adults report they are no longer interested or don't need to complete their education. Cost and time pressures continue to be barriers that keep people from re-enrolling.
- Adults with some college but no degree say that if they enroll in additional courses or training, they are most likely to do so via an employer. When considering nonemployer providers, they are most likely to enroll at a community college.
- Younger people, people of color and those who are working in certain occupations, such as food preparation, are more likely to say they will enroll in additional courses or training.



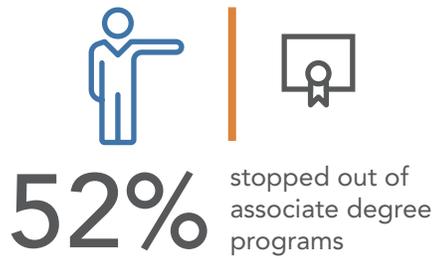
## WHO ARE THEY?

Many state policies are focused on re-enrolling adults with some college, no degree, but these policies are often broadly stated and could improve their impact with additional understanding of this population. There is a wide range of experience in terms of when people stopped out, where they had previously been enrolled, and their current income and employment status. The adults in the survey were split almost evenly between the type of institution they had attended, with slightly more having been enrolled at a two-year institution. Highlighting their repeated efforts, about half of these individuals had attended multiple postsecondary institutions – one-third had attended two, 12 percent had attended three, and 5 percent had attended four or more. While Black and Hispanic students are more likely to stop out than white students, the majority of college stop-outs are white.<sup>4</sup> The race and ethnicity breakdown of the some college, no degree survey sample was 65 percent white, 17 percent Black, 15 percent Hispanic, 1 percent Asian and 2 percent some other race or ethnicity. About half were earning less than \$35,000 per year, one-fourth between \$35,000 and \$60,000, and another fourth \$60,000 or more. About two-thirds were employed full-time.

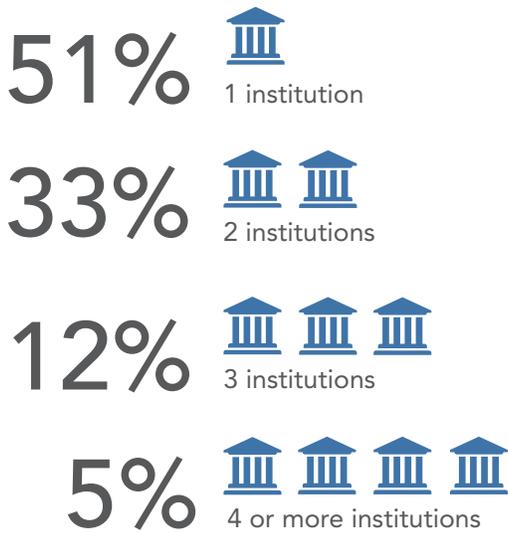
<sup>4</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups, Indicator 23: Postsecondary Graduation Rates. Accessed Dec. 4, 2019, [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator\\_red.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_red.asp).

FIGURE 1 THE SOME COLLEGE, NO DEGREE POPULATION

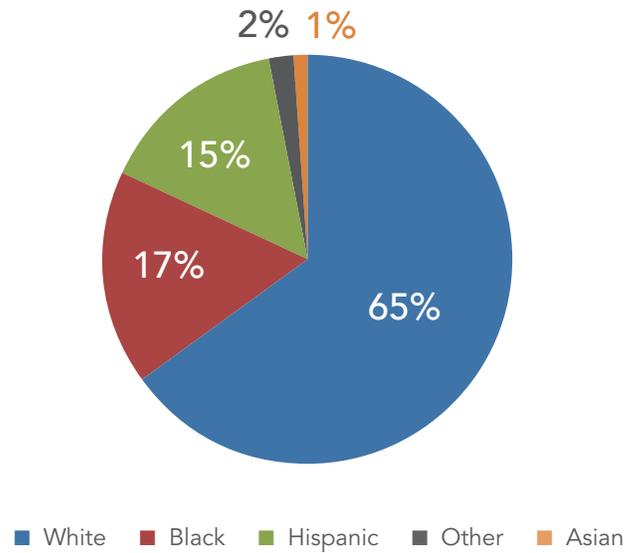
Type of Institutions Attended



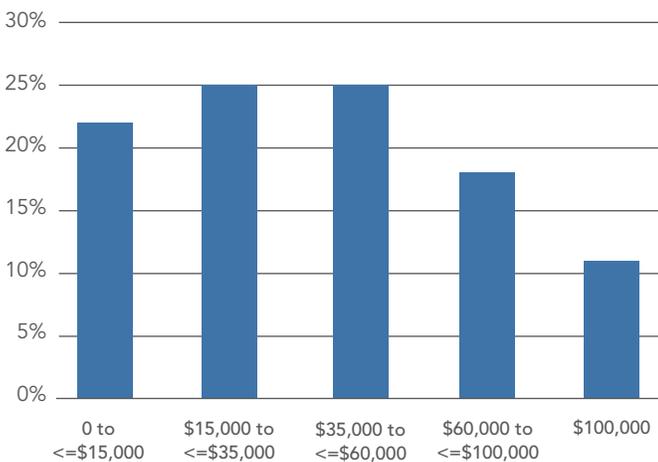
Number of Institutions Attended



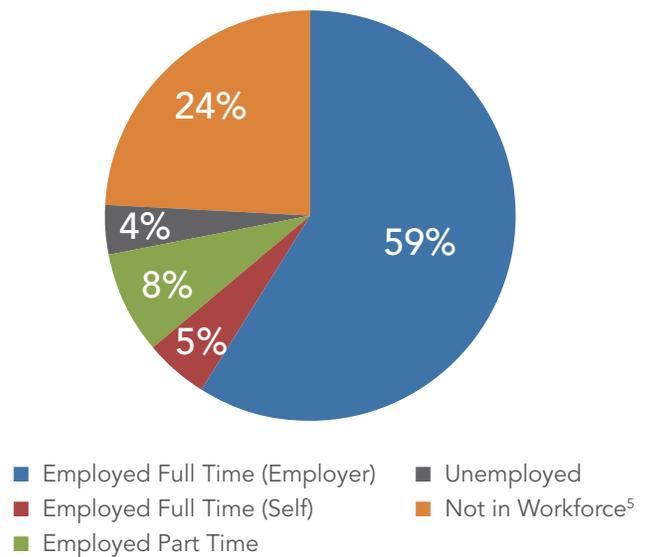
Race/Ethnicity



Income Level



Employment Status



<sup>5</sup> Not in the workforce refers to people who are not working and not looking for work, as opposed to unemployed, who are not working but are seeking work.

## WHY DID THEY STOP OUT?

Understanding why people stopped out is key both to re-enrolling as well as increasing retention and preventing future stop-outs. As part of the Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey, an open-ended question was asked about why the respondent took college courses but did not complete a degree. In all, 38,468 adults between the ages of 25-64 answered this question. Adults gave many different reasons for why they did not complete the degree they started. The most common had to do with the need to work and the difficulty balancing school and work:

### **What is the main reason you took college courses but did not complete a degree?**

*"The main reason was I was trying to work and go to college, and I wasn't getting good grades, so I just stopped going to college. I couldn't multitask."*

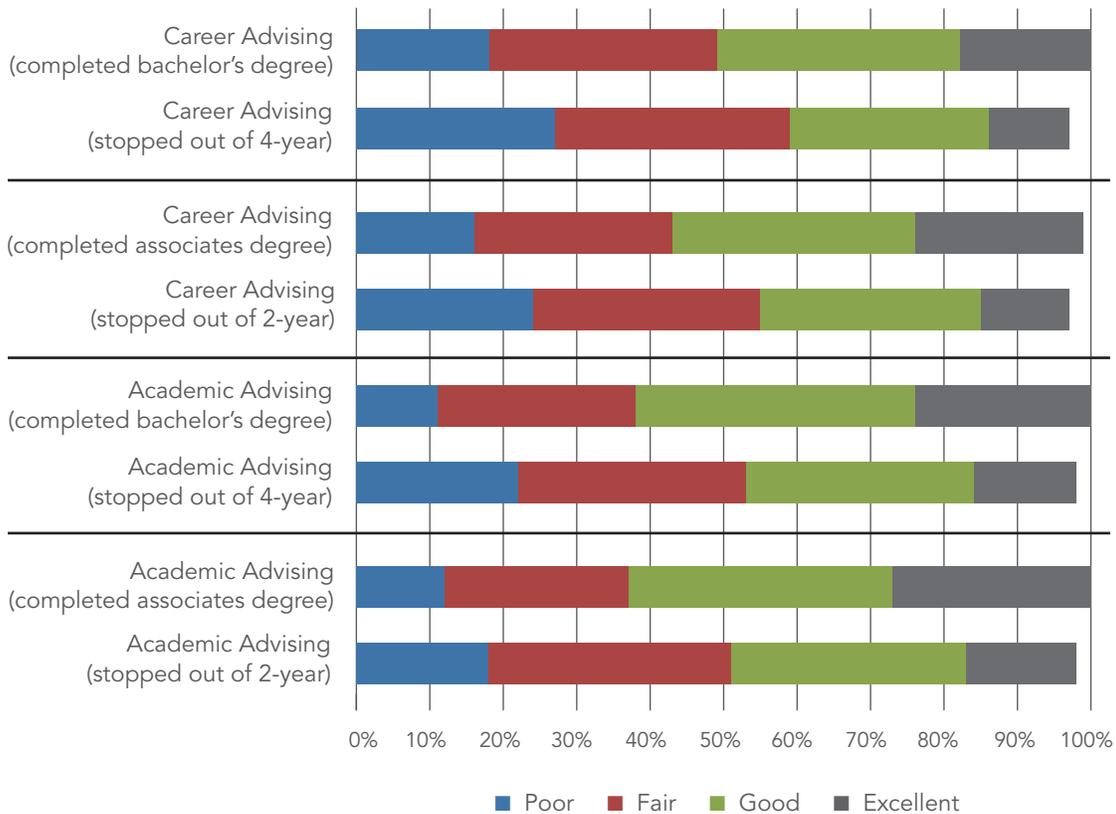
*"I worked full time and went to school full time. It became too much. I had four kids at home at the time. It was just too much."*

*"Family – you have to make money; it's hard to go to college and make money at the same time, especially in nursing school."*

Other common reasons cited were financial pressures or other life events or personal challenges (See appendix for Table 1: What is the main reason you took college courses but did not complete a degree?).

Stopped out students also may have suffered from a lack of guidance – most did not have good experiences with academic or career advising while they were enrolled. As seen in Figure 2, more than half (51 percent) of students who had stopped out from a two-year institution rated their academic advising as poor or fair, and 55 percent rated their career advising as poor or fair. For those who had stopped out of a four-year institution, 54 percent rated academic advising as poor or fair, and 59 percent rated career advising as poor or fair. In contrast, most adults who attained an associate or bachelor's degree rated their academic and career advising as good or excellent.

FIGURE 2  
 QUALITY OF ADVISING FOR COLLEGE GRADUATES AND STUDENTS WHO DO NOT COMPLETE A DEGREE



## WHY HAVE THEY NOT RE-ENROLLED?

Another open-ended question on the survey asked adults with some college, no degree why they are not currently enrolled. This question was answered by 37,101 adults age 25-64. We found that for most people, the reasons they stopped out of college continue to be the primary barriers to them returning. Those who stopped out because of difficulty balancing school and work were most likely to say that they are not enrolled because they are already working and do not have enough time for classes. Those who stopped out due to financial issues are most likely to say that they are not enrolled because of cost. Many times, worries about time and cost are bound together – people need money to pay for education, but they need to work to have the money and, therefore, do not have enough time.

At the same time, a new theme also emerges: About 1 in 5 were simply no longer interested or did not feel that additional education would benefit them in their career (19 percent). Others express a similar sentiment: They are unsure if school would be worth the investment of time (11 percent) and money (12 percent), and they have work responsibilities that are pre-eminent (17 percent). (See appendix for Table 2 : What is the main reason you are not currently taking college courses?).

<sup>6</sup> Percentages do not sum to 100 as some respondents chose to answer "don't know" or refused the question.

## What is the main reason you are not currently taking college courses?

*"There's no need for me to. I own my own business, and I am doing well at it."*

*"I just don't feel the need to go. I like the job I have right now, and I don't need to go to school with what I do."*

*"Too many bills to pay and I have to work full time and can't afford to go back until I get more financially stable."*

*"I have my family, so I have to pay rent, and I don't get paid much, so I don't have time."*

*"I want to know which direction I want to go. I don't want to just go to college to go to college; I want my degree to be towards something that's useful."*

## WILL THEY COME BACK?

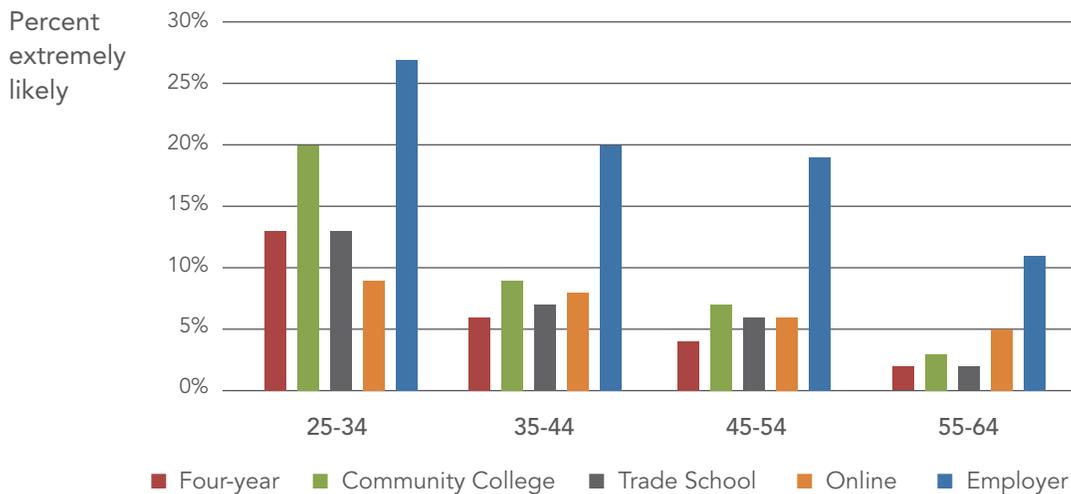
In Strada's report *"Back to School?"*, we found that adults with some college, no degree are no more likely than those who never went to college at all to say that they need additional education. They are only marginally more likely than other adults without degrees to say that they plan to enroll in postsecondary education within the next five years. Given the priority of the some college, no degree population for many state policies and institutional efforts, it is worth digging deeper to understand the nuance in likelihood to enroll within this group.<sup>6</sup>

Across all groups, people said they would be more likely to enroll in courses or training offered by an employer than any other provider. The role of employers has become increasingly paramount given the ever-evolving changes in skills needed to compete. Employers have always been responsible for creating jobs and, to some degree, providing training, but there has been a significant shift toward identifying market needs and helping to ensure that education providers, including employers, are preparing learners to meet those needs. Given that many of those who have stopped out are working, it makes sense that they would prefer to re-enroll in courses or training where they are.

<sup>7</sup> The question wording was: "On a five-point scale, where 5 means extremely likely and 1 means not at all likely, in the next five years, how likely are you to enroll in courses or training offered through each of the following?" This series of questions was added to the survey in January 2019. The total n for these questions for the some college, no degree population is 3,021. After January 2019 this series of questions was only asked of those age 49 and younger, so the sample differs from the broader sample in terms of age categories: 38 percent age 25-34, 32 percent age 35-44, 21 percent age 45-54, and 10 percent age 55-64. This group is also slightly more likely to be in the workforce than the broader sample (81 percent versus 76 percent). Race and ethnicity, income and type of institution attended were similar to the broader sample.

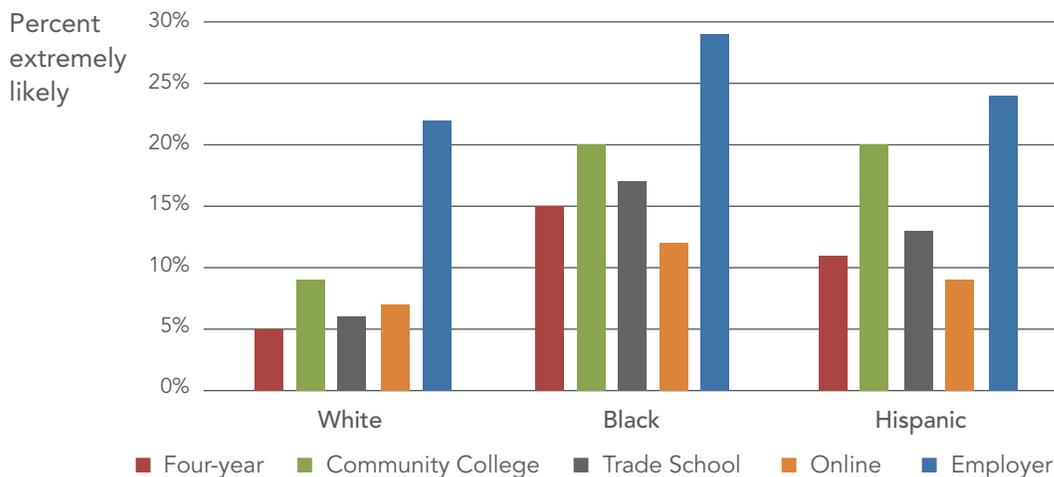
Looking at nuances within subpopulations, age is the first distinction found (See Figure 3). Unsurprisingly, younger people were more likely to say they plan to re-enroll.<sup>7</sup> While all age groups said they would be most likely to enroll via an employer, the youngest group of stop-outs had a relatively higher likelihood of enrolling at a community college compared to older age groups.

FIGURE 3  
SELF-REPORTED LIKELIHOOD TO ENROLL IN COURSES OR TRAINING WITHIN FIVE YEARS BY AGE



There were distinct differences across racial and ethnic groups as well (See Figure 4). Whites were much less likely to report that they would enroll anywhere within the next five years. Likelihood to enroll was more similar among Blacks and Hispanics, with Blacks reporting slightly higher likelihood. All racial and ethnic groups reported the highest likelihood to enroll in courses or training offered by employers, followed by community colleges.

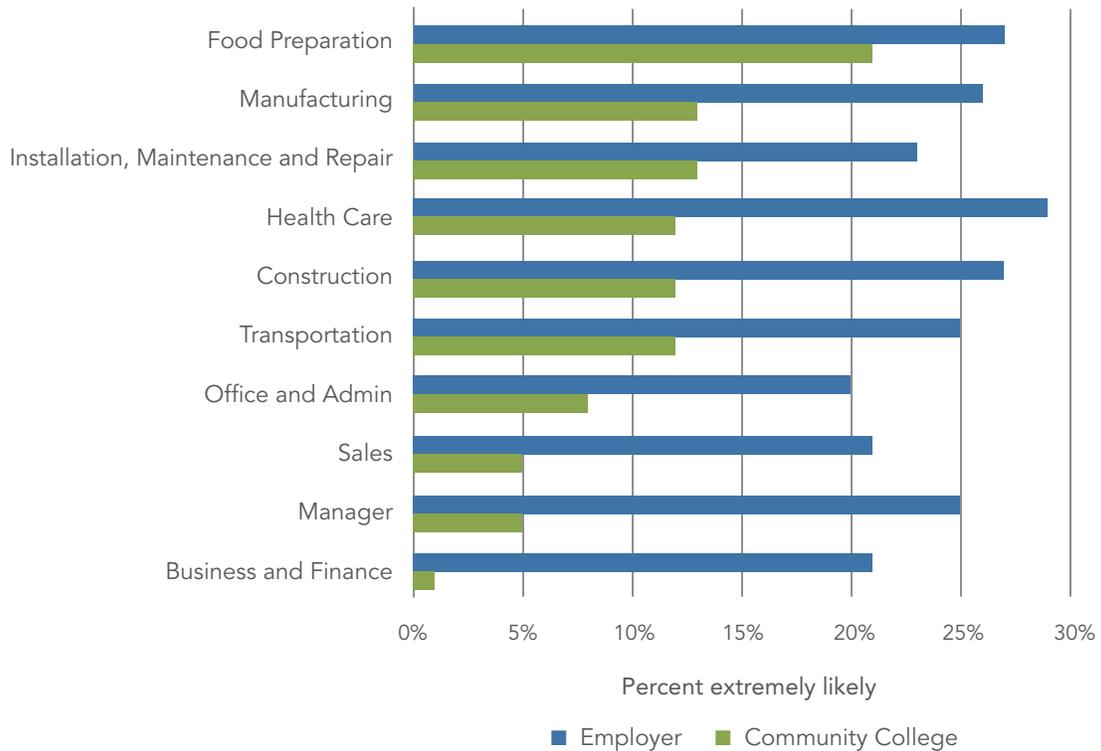
FIGURE 4  
SELF-REPORTED LIKELIHOOD TO ENROLL IN COURSES OR TRAINING WITHIN FIVE YEARS BY RACE AND ETHNICITY



<sup>8</sup> Previous Strada research has found that younger people are more likely than older people to consider enrolling in education (Strada Education Network. Back to School? Accessed Dec. 4, 2019, <https://www.stradaeducation.org/report/back-to-school/>). Some older adults report feeling that they are now too old to go back to school and that colleges aren't well designed to serve older students.

There were also some notable differences in likelihood of re-enrolling by occupation. Figure 5 shows the top 10 occupational categories in which the some college, no degree population is employed, along with the percent who said they were extremely likely to enroll in either community college (the most popular of the four nonemployer types of academic providers) or with an employer within the next five years. Those working in food preparation occupations stand out as significantly more likely to enroll in community college than those working in other categories. Health care workers were the most likely to say they would enroll in additional education and training through their employer.

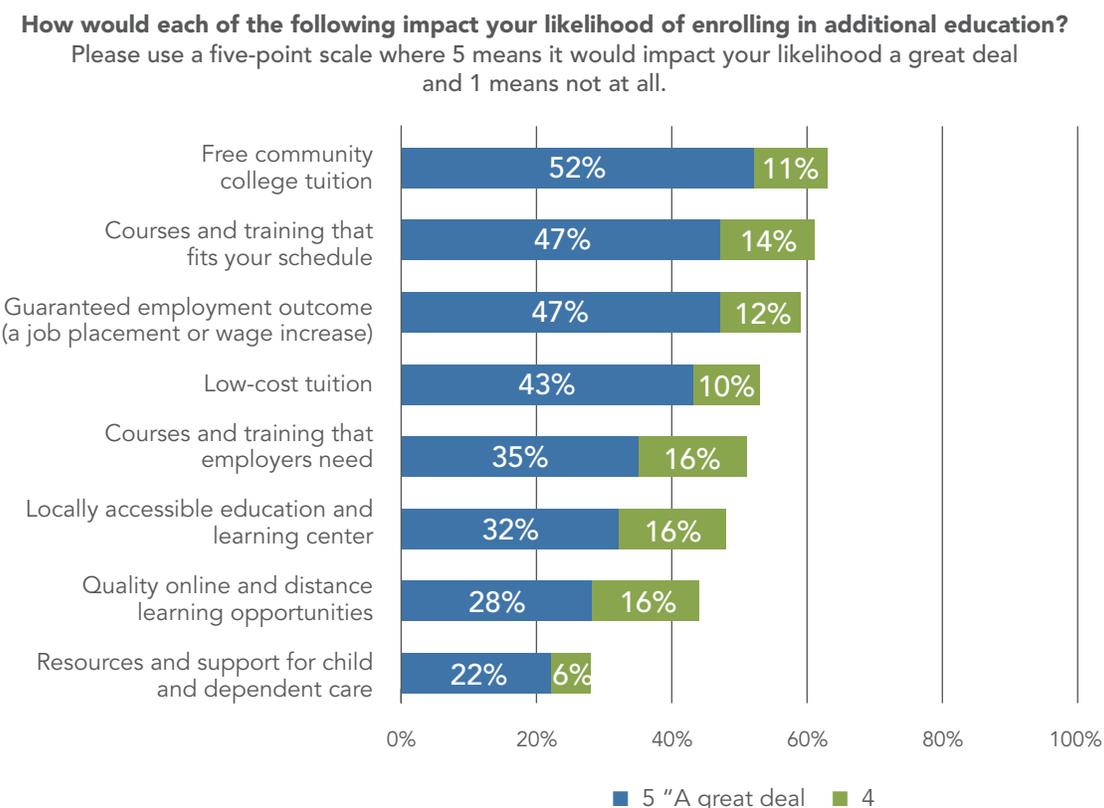
FIGURE 5  
 SELF-REPORTED LIKELIHOOD TO ENROLL IN COURSES OR TRAINING WITHIN FIVE YEARS BY CURRENT OCCUPATION



## WHAT COULD HELP THEM RE-ENROLL?

When asked about a variety of factors that may impact their likelihood to enroll, adults with some college, no degree said the factors that would have the biggest impact on them were free community college tuition, courses and training that fit their schedule and a guaranteed employment outcome, such as a job placement or wage increase (See Figure 7). These three factors are also the top three among all adults without degrees<sup>9</sup> but in a slightly different order. The categories, however, are consistent: adults without degrees need career outcomes, affordability and schedule flexibility to enroll.

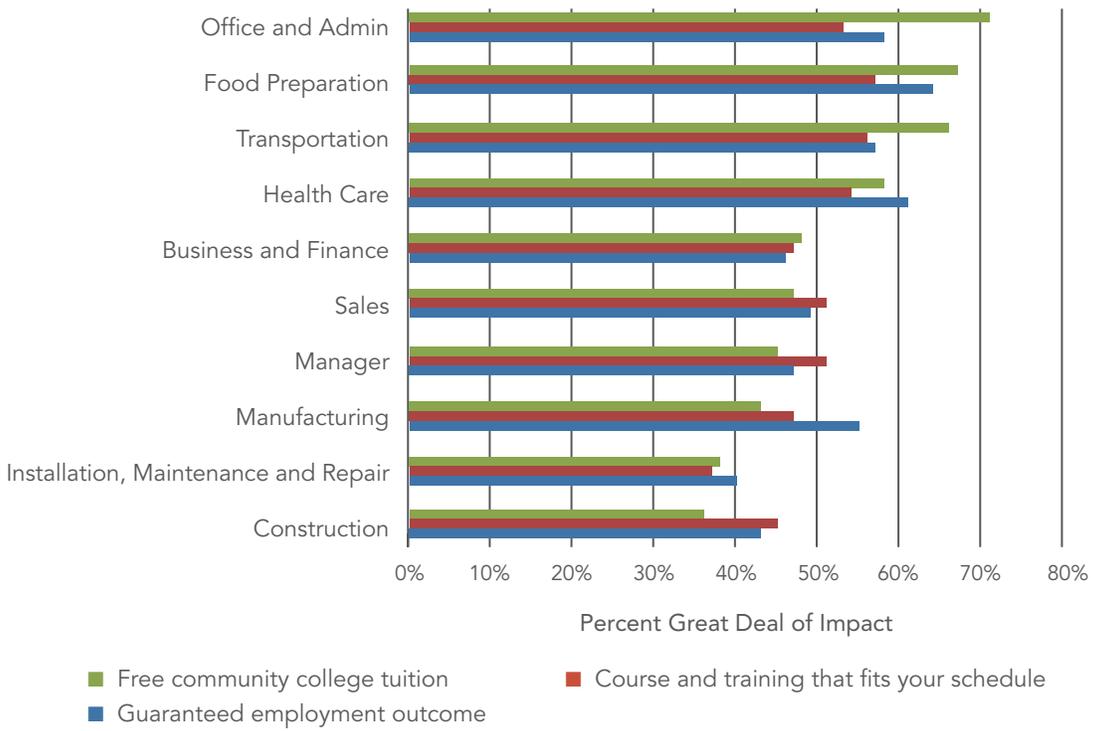
FIGURE 7  
FACTORS IMPACTING SELF-REPORTED LIKELIHOOD TO ENROLL IN COURSES OR TRAINING



Focusing on the top three categories and breaking them apart by occupation reveals interesting nuance in terms of which policies have the biggest impact on which groups, as seen in Figure 8. For example, free community college tuition has the biggest reported impact on enrollment for those working in office and administrative, food preparation and transportation occupations; while for those working in health care or manufacturing, guaranteed employment outcomes would be much more impactful. Those working in sales, management or construction place the most emphasis on schedule flexibility.

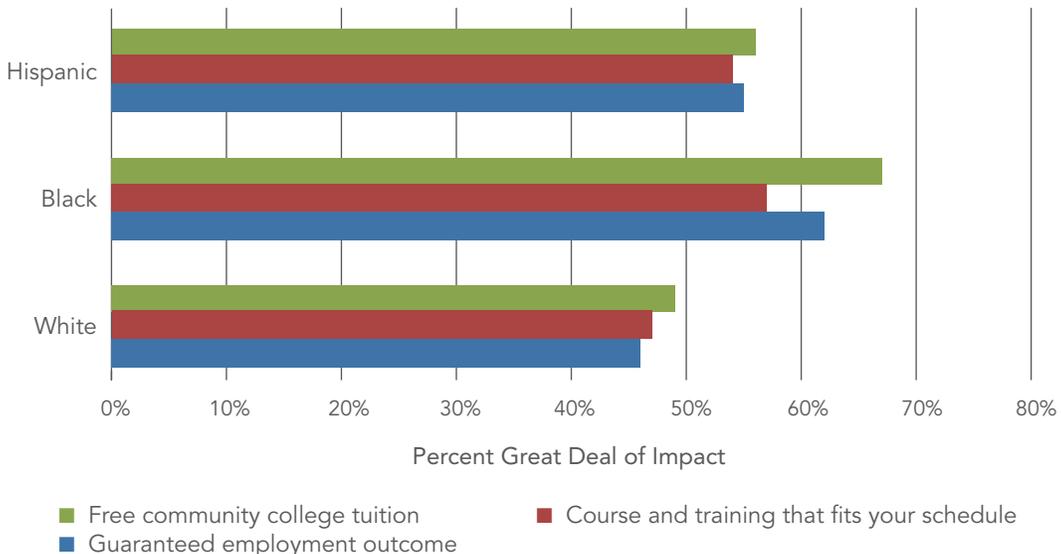
<sup>9</sup> Strada Education Network. Back to School? Accessed Dec. 4, 2019, <https://www.stradaeducation.org/report/back-to-school>.

**FIGURE 8**  
FACTORS IMPACTING SELF-REPORTED LIKELIHOOD TO ENROLL  
BY CURRENT OCCUPATION



When looking at the impact on likelihood to enroll across racial and ethnic groups, compared to whites, people of color report a higher impact for all factors (Figure 9). This is consistent with earlier findings that whites report being less likely to enroll in additional education or training. All groups said that free community college tuition would have the greatest impact on their likelihood to enroll.

**FIGURE 9**  
FACTORS IMPACTING SELF-REPORTED LIKELIHOOD TO ENROLL  
BY RACE AND ETHNICITY



## CONCLUSION

By speaking directly with individuals who have some college but no degree, we obtain new insights to guide policy makers and education providers in developing more effective solutions to serve these adults. Based on their personal experiences:

- Difficulty balancing school and work is a key reason people stop out of college. Educational providers need to acknowledge that a high percentage of their students will be working and going to school – and provide the flexibility to make it possible for these students to do both.
- Better experiences with higher-quality academic and career advising are linked with completion. Students need to see how their education connects to a purpose. Implementing a proactive advising model is one approach that could be taken to better support learners.
- Employers are identified as the most likely pathway for individuals across all demographic breakdowns of those with some college, no degree to enroll in additional courses or training. Strategies to meet educational attainment goals will be more effective as they integrate employers.
- When considering whether to re-enroll, adults with some college, no degree have three key needs:
  - Education must be affordable.
  - They must be able to fit education into the rest of their lives, including work and family.
  - They want to see a clear career benefit to invest the time and money in further education.

To bring back the some college, no degree population, state policymakers and institutions of higher education must be more responsive to these individuals' needs and circumstances.

## APPENDIX

TABLE 1

**What is the main reason you took college courses but did not complete a degree?**

Work-related	17%
Financial pressure	12%
Other life event or personal problem	11%
Just wanted to learn more or didn't need a degree	7%
Pregnant or had children	7%
Classes, degree or school was not a good fit	4%
Got bored, lost interest or became distracted	4%
Family obligations	4%
Personal health reasons	3%
Didn't have enough time for classes	3%
Couldn't decide on a career or field of study	2%
Was not mature enough	1%
Family pressure	1%
Classes were too difficult	1%
Deployed	1%

TABLE 2

**What is the main reason you are not currently taking college courses?**

Don't need it or not interested	19%
Work-related	17%
Too expensive	12%
No time for classes	11%
Family obligations	7%
Age	6%
Personal health problems	5%
Retired	4%
Life	1%
Inconvenient location	1%

## ABOUT THE STRADA-GALLUP EDUCATION CONSUMER SURVEY

Results for the Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey are based on telephone surveys conducted from June 2016 through April 2019 with a random sample of more than 340,000 respondents aged 18 to 65, living in all fifty U.S. states and the District of Columbia. The sample includes national adults with a minimum quota of 70 percent cellphone respondents and 30 percent landline respondents, with additional minimum quotas by time zone within a region. Landline and cellular telephone numbers are selected using random-digit-dial methods. Landline respondents are chosen at random within each household based on which member will have the next birthday.

Interviews are conducted in English and Spanish. Samples are weighted to correct for unequal selection probability and nonresponse. The data are weighted to match national demographics of gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education and region. Demographic weighting targets are based on the most recent current population survey figures for the population aged 18 to 65.

All reported margins of sampling error include the computed design effects for weighting. At the 95 percent confidence level, the percentage point margin of error for sample size of 42,000 is  $\pm 0.6$  percent, for 3,000 it is  $\pm 2.1$  percent. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

Strada Education Network is a national social impact organization dedicated to improving lives by forging clearer and more purposeful pathways between education and employment. We engage partners across education, nonprofits, business and government to focus relentlessly on students' success throughout all phases of their working lives.

Learn more about how Strada Education Network is listening to education consumers and compiling the nation's largest dataset of consumer insights on education experiences after high school, as well as collecting insights from employers, alumni and current college students. Visit [stradaeducation.org/consumer-insights](https://stradaeducation.org/consumer-insights).



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