

The COVID-19 CRISIS:

Its Impact on Education and Work

INSIDE
HIGHER ED

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A compilation of *Inside Higher Ed's* best coverage of the Strada Education Network's Public Viewpoint polling data during the summer and fall of 2020.

Editor's Letter

As the pandemic brought an unprecedented level of disruption to higher education during the spring term, the industry was hungry for information about how the crisis was affecting their students and institutions. And the broad societal impact of the changes felt on college campuses brought a wider range of readers to *Inside Higher Ed*.

To help cover this fast-moving story, we partnered with the Strada Education Network on its Public Viewpoint project. The polling data cut through the noise with real-time information and trends on how COVID-19 is affecting the work and education of Americans, with a particular focus on vulnerable student groups.

This booklet features our best coverage related to the Public Viewpoint data, with news analysis articles that used the polling information as jumping-off points to report on key challenges and change the pandemic has magnified.

For example, on June 17 we published an article on how the crisis is widening equity gaps through its disproportionate impacts on Black, Latino and low-income college students. The piece quoted Richard V. Reeves, a writer and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, who likened the U.S. political economy to a "giant pre-existing condition" that COVID-19 exposed.

Our coverage included more granular findings, including a July 30 piece on how the Strada polling data showed that the crisis may be influencing women to choose online education over in-person options. And earlier in July we reported on how more of the survey's respondents were citing self-doubt as a greater barrier than cost to pursuing a college education.

The partnership helped us get more personal in our coverage, in particular through profiles we published on eight learners from underserved backgrounds. We used the profiles to explore the anxiety and disruption these students experienced in the early months of the pandemic. The positive attitudes and resiliency of the learners in turn helped inform our reporting -- their voices included nuance and minimized the kind of deficit thinking that can dominate assessments from experts.

This compilation also features opinion writing related to the issues we've explored with reporting on the Strada data. And the booklet is organized around key issues from the coverage.

COVID-19 and the recession's impact on higher education is far from over. Neither is our reporting on these issues and the Public Viewpoint data. Thanks to our readers for joining us in trying to make sense of these unprecedented times.

Sincerely,

Paul Fain

Contributing editor, *Inside Higher Ed*

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From Crisis to Transformation

Amid worries about a possible exodus of vulnerable students, postsecondary education providers face new urgency in finding ways to better serve working adults.

By **Paul Fain** // Sept. 28, 2020



SOURCE: ISTOCK.COM/MICROSTOCKHUB

Unsustainable gaps between postsecondary education and the workforce were on display before 2020. But this year of crisis has dramatically exacerbated those inequities and inefficiencies.

Meanwhile, the pace of change has accelerated for colleges and universities, particularly those that are most likely to thrive in coming years.

Take Southern New Hampshire University, one of the nation's largest and most entrepreneurial institutions, which enrolls more than 130,000 students online. For years the university had been planning an overhaul for its campus-based programs, anchored by an annual tuition rate of \$10,000. But the university in April said it would roll out the reimagined campus model next year, rather than in 2023.

Even the old timeline would've

been tough, said Paul LeBlanc, SNHU's president. "We have to structurally rethink the whole," he said in April. "We just thought we had more time."

LeBlanc said affordability is the main reason behind the overhaul, as the university's price tag increasingly is out of reach for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Higher education has long been too expensive for too many people, he said. And beyond that well-established consensus, LeBlanc said college business models increasingly are broken and states are underfunding public institutions. At the same time, online education's quality is on the rise and digital natives are becoming more comfortable with technology in higher education.

"The pandemic, it's like rocket

fuel to all of those truths. So you can't wait," LeBlanc said. "You have to figure it out now."

The urgency is bolstered by the disproportionate impact of the pandemic and recession on Black and Latino families, which was apparent from the first weeks of the crisis. And six months into it, concern among experts is growing about a possible exodus from higher education by these and other vulnerable student populations.

Polling data released in June by the Strada Education Network found that 23 percent of Black respondents and 24 percent of Latinos had been laid off, compared to 15 percent of white respondents.

In August, the unemployment rate for Black Americans was 13 percent, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. It was 10.5 percent for Latinos and 7.3

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percent for white Americans.

The disruption due to the pandemic, recession and racial reckoning also appears to be extending to the education trajectories for Black, Latino and lower-income Americans. Strada in September found that fully half of Latino respondents said they had canceled or changed education plans, compared to 42 percent of Black Americans and 26 percent of white Americans.

Childcare has become an even bigger barrier for many student parents in their pursuit of a college credential, as they must help care for children who are unable to attend in-person K-12 schools.

"We also have a large number of our students who are not student parents, they are having to care for and homeschool their brothers and sisters," said Margaret McMenamin, president of Union County College, a two-year institution located in New Jersey "This is an extraordinary challenge."

Amid the worsening barriers, roughly 100,000 fewer students in the U.S. completed applications for federal financial aid by the end of August compared to last year, according to an analysis by the National College Attainment Network (NCAN). And the U.S. Census Bureau found that students from the lower income brackets are much more likely to have canceled plans to take college courses this fall.

The impact on fall college enrollments was still unclear in September. Yet compared to last year, summer enrollments declined substantially among Black undergraduates (8.3 percent) and at community colleges (5.6 percent), the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center found.

If those slides continue, it would mean this recession is different from previous ones, in which more



The pandemic, it's like rocket fuel to all of those truths. So you can't wait. You have to figure it out now.

Paul LeBlanc

President of Southern New Hampshire University



students enrolled in postsecondary education to gain skills and ride out the downturn. This time around, experts fear many students from vulnerable backgrounds may wash out of the system forever.

"This might be the first data we've seen that confirms our fears," Kim Cook, NCAN's executive director, said of the summer enrollment numbers. "I can only hope those community college enrollments will come back, because that means students are staying on track."

Reaching a Plastic Hour?

Higher education tends to change slowly. But some observers think the pandemic could create a so-called plastic hour, a rare moment in history where politics, public opinion and a crisis line up to drive a transformation rather than iterative change.

For colleges and universities, that could mean an overall decline in enrollment, but perhaps also a corresponding market shift where innovative, adaptable providers serve a larger share of students. Likewise, more students may bypass traditional higher education and instead opt for short-term credentials, employer-connected learning

pathways and other alternatives to the college degree.

Kevin Carey, vice president for education policy and knowledge management at New America, a left-leaning Washington, D.C.-based think tank, said the political will for drastic change in higher education is stronger than it has been in 50 years.

"Federal policy tends to change not at all, and then all at once," said Carey, an influential voice among Democrats. "College unaffordability and student debt injustice have become fully integrated into the foundational mind-set of the largest generation in American history, all now of voting age and a growing number in public office. That has consequences."

Carey recently published a sweeping proposal to restructure higher education. His plan includes a uniform pricing system for colleges that opt in to an annual federal subsidy of \$10,000 per full-time-equivalent student. Carey also said participating institutions should be required to join a national system for college credit reciprocity, meaning every college in the network would need to accept credits from every other college in the system.

From Crisis to Transformation

A national credit transfer system could go a long way toward helping students not lose time and money when they move between institutions, particularly as the swirl of transfer seems almost certain to increase amid the online pivots and other disruptions.

And a version of Carey's vision is shared by the Charles Koch Foundation, which in September announced \$12 million in funding for Arizona State University's attempt to redesign higher education in the U.S. The project seeks to develop technology for a "Trusted Learner Network," which would replace college transcripts with a verifiable, learner-owned record system. This new approach would feature stackable, competency-based credentials that learners would have more control over than current transcripts.

"The public health pandemic that has swept the globe and the stress it has placed on our education system has exposed weaknesses that have existed for years," said Michael Crow, ASU's president. "Universities are being forced to adapt right now, and so we're saying, 'let's take advantage of this opportunity' and let's build things

in a way that serves the learner in a new world that doesn't look anything like the one that existed when most of America's institutions of higher learning were designed."

During the crisis, Strada's polling data have found consistent interest among consumers in short-term, online alternatives to the college degree. Yet that interest so far does not appear to be driving enrollment patterns, at least for undergraduate certificate programs, which saw an 11.7 percent decline this summer compared to last year.

However, that disconnect may be due largely to the crippling uncertainty most lower-income adults face now, as well the relative dearth of information about connections between education and work. Strada found that fewer than one in three adults without college degrees reported a good understanding of available career pathways, valuable skills and details about potential education programs.

In addition, experts say most colleges still have a long way to go toward creating affordable, stackable entry points for working adults to get started on earning a college credential.

"The problem is there are not

enough colleges that have really built education specifically for adult learners with complicated lives," said Eric Bing, CEO of the College of Health Care Professions, the largest producer in Texas of allied health workers, which enrolls mostly Latino and Black students. "It's hard because you structurally have to change so much."

Some postsecondary institutions, either upstarts or traditional colleges, will figure out how to better serve working adult students who are seeking skills and viable career pathways amid the rapidly transforming economy. But those that do probably began designing those programs this spring, if not before.

"All of our governance processes, our slow processes of the past when we had the luxury of time -- no one has the luxury of time," SNHU's LeBlanc said in April.

He said the college degree probably will not be the answer for millions of unemployed and displaced U.S. workers.

"If you've been thinking about shorter-term credentials, just-in-time learning, very skills-based, very aligned to where the jobs are, this is the day that you start that work," said LeBlanc. ■

Graduate Degrees Boost Job Prospects During Pandemic

Researchers expected any kind of higher education to boost job prospects for Americans recently out of work. But they found those with graduate degrees are doing better than other degree holders.

By **Emma Whitford** // May 14, 2020

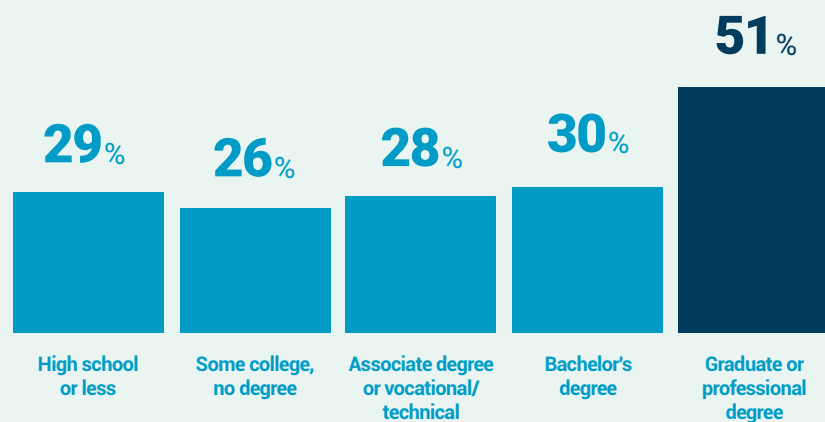


SOURCE: ISTOCK.COM/CHAINARONG PRASERTTHAI

It's been well accepted for years that a college degree makes it easier to get a job. A new survey shows that amid the coronavirus pandemic, that may not be true across the board.

More than 33 million Americans have filed for unemployment since the pandemic began, and the nationwide unemployment rate has climbed to 14.7 percent, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. A [Strada Education Network survey](#) released Wednesday shows that more than half of Americans have lost jobs, hours or income as a result of the pandemic. Of those people, graduate and professional degree holders are more likely to have started a new job in the past month than people with a bachelor's degree, associate or vocational degree, some college education, or a high school diploma or less.

Those who have completed **graduate or professional degrees** are much more likely to have started a new job.



Source: Strada Education Network

Graduate Degrees Boost Job Prospects During Pandemic (cont.)

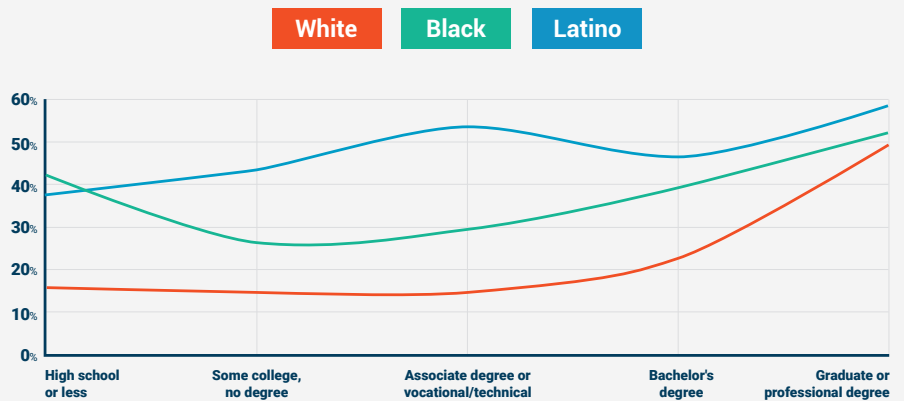
"You would expect, typically, that any kind of higher education would really be giving people a boost in terms of jobs. And here what we see is at the very highest levels -- people who have graduate and professional degrees -- that is true," said Nichole Torpey-Saboe, director at the Strada Center for Consumer Insights. "But we're not seeing the same kind of bump for people with bachelor's degrees or associate's degrees."

Strada's ongoing survey has been running for eight weeks and has reached more than 7,000 respondents to date. Each week, researchers ask Americans about job loss, hour and income reductions, future education plans, and general feelings of worry about the pandemic.

Latinx and Black Americans are more likely to have started a new job in the past month than white Americans, the survey shows. This is true for all education levels. The greatest disparity is among those with a high school diploma or less education: 18 percent of white Americans with a high school education or less have changed jobs in the past month, while 43 percent of Black Americans and 38 percent of Latinos with a high school diploma or less have done the same.

Strada's research cannot explain the reasons behind this difference,

Across all education levels, **Latinos and Black Americans** are more likely to have started a new job than white Americans.



Source: Strada Education Network

Torpey-Saboe said, but she noted that Latinx and Black Americans are among those losing jobs, hours and income at the highest rates.

Responses to Strada's recurrent questions remained mostly steady this week. More than six in 10 Americans, 62 percent, report feeling worried about losing their jobs, a slight decrease from last week's 63 percent. This metric is significant, Torpey-Saboe pointed out, because it's not decreasing as more Americans are put out of work.

"Even among those who have made it this far, you still have six in 10 saying that they're worried," she

said.

General feelings of worry increased this week, from 46 percent to 49 percent.

"People are not feeling better about things," Torpey-Saboe said. "They're not necessarily feeling worse, but they're not expecting that this is over by any means."

This week's survey was conducted between May 6 and 7.

Next week, Strada will look more closely at the people who have changed education plans as a result of the pandemic, how those plans have changed and what types of education people are looking for in the future. ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/05/14/graduate-degree-holders-starting-new-jobs-higher-rates-all-other-americans-survey>

Higher Education and Work Amid Crisis

The pandemic has accelerated and worsened equity gaps in higher education and its connection to work, according to new data, which may also show paths to improving this connection.

By Paul Fain // June 17, 2020



SOURCE: ISTOCK.COM/FG TRADE

Even before the pandemic, higher education faced growing scrutiny about its role in contributing to severe societal **equity gaps** that afflict Black and Latino Americans, as well as Native Americans and other historically underserved groups.

But that pressure is certain to increase amid what Richard V. Reeves, a writer and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, calls an extraordinary “collision of crises” that has further exposed multiple inequities and inequalities.

Those widening chasms include the pandemic’s impact on the labor market. Black and Latino workers are more likely to have lost their jobs, while white and wealthier Americans are much more likely to be able to work from home and to not be deemed essential, front-line workers, who are more likely to be

exposed to the virus, said Reeves during a **webcast** hosted by Jobs for the Future last week.

Likewise, the severe wealth gap means people of color are much less able to cope with the loss of a job or wages. And inequity in society has contributed to higher COVID-19 mortality rates among Black and Latino Americans, said Reeves, due to poverty’s relative impact on their health and the enhanced risks of coming down with COVID-19 on the job or on public transportation.

“The whole U.S. political economy was like a giant pre-existing condition,” Reeves said. “And COVID came along and exposed it all.”

None of the pandemic’s disproportionate impacts on postsecondary education and training should be a surprise, said a wide range of experts. But the crises have accel-

erated those problems while also worsening them.

“The toll of this pandemic is, in a word, devastating,” John King Jr., president and CEO of the Education Trust and a former U.S. secretary of education during the Obama administration, said during a call with reporters in late May. “It’s eroding students’ academic success, their emotional well-being and their personal finances.”

That impact has been felt most profoundly by students of color. And some initial data suggest that lower-income students and those from minority groups may leave higher education, perhaps permanently.

Lorelle Espinosa, vice president for research at the American Council on Education, cited growing evidence that underserved student

Higher Education and Work Amid Crisis (cont.)

groups may be falling away from higher education amid the pandemic, recession and national racial crisis. And Espinosa said students who stick around may take on more debt.

"I'm really worried that those students won't come back at all, or they might come back much later," she said. "Even if they stay, the educational experience may be really disruptive and misaligned to their learning needs."

Disproportionate Impacts

When colleges around the country closed campuses and pivoted to online learning in mid-March, leadership at the Strada Education Network felt that the country was on "wartime footing," said Dave Clayton, senior vice president of the nonprofit corporation's Center for Consumer Insights.

Strada quickly decided to shift its polling and survey efforts to monitor the pandemic's impact on American's lives, work and needs for education and training.

The former student loan guarantee agency USA Funds became Strada in 2017 after a multiyear restructuring. The group features an unusually arrayed network of affiliates focused on connections between education and work.

Strada for years had teamed up with Gallup on a large polling data set of consumer perspectives on the value of education to people's careers and lives. By late March, however, as unprecedented disruptions roiled higher education and the economy, Strada's Consumer Insights had revamped its survey approach to create the Public Viewpoint poll, which focuses on COVID-19 and its impact on education and work.

The nationally representative survey was in the field by March 25 and received more than 10,000 re-

sponses by May 28. Strada asked respondents about their job security, income and anxiety. The poll, which began on a weekly basis and has since moved to every other week, also includes questions about future education plans.

"Immediately it was clear that leaders who were going to be serving people needed more information," Clayton said. "Americans need their leaders to understand their circumstances."

The survey quickly identified areas where the pandemic has exacerbated inequity in work and post-secondary education.

Results released on June 10, for example, found that roughly one-quarter of Black Americans (23 percent) and Latinos (24 percent) have been laid off, higher shares than white (15 percent) and Asian Americans (13 percent). Black and Latino respondents also were likelier to report starting new full- or part-time jobs in the past month, Strada found.

Most respondents are anxious about their employment, with more than half reporting worries about losing their job during each of the 10 weeks of polling -- a high of 68 percent said so in results released April 1. Given the nation's wealth gap, with research showing that an unexpected cost of \$500 or less can severely derail large percentages of Black and Latino families, reduced hours or a layoff can be catastrophic.

"How are people going to manage through this?" Clayton said.

The survey includes some forward-looking elements, with an eye toward changing employment opportunities (and barriers). It looks at the integration of postsecondary education and training with the job market, to help state policy makers and workforce development offi-

cial focus on "preparation to get back to work," said Clayton.

That approach is both useful and, to some degree, uplifting, said Jane Oates, president of Working-Nation and a former official in the U.S. Department of Labor during the Obama administration.

Oates said that's because colleges and employers can draw from the data to help design pathways for low-income people back into the workforce during a recovery, ideally with credentials that lead to both a well-paying job and, eventually, to a college degree.

"How do we make sure that this temporary shift doesn't become a brick wall?" she said.

Exodus of Low-Income Students?

In a more immediate sense, with a recovery still likely months or years away, the Strada data build on other indicators that students, particularly those from low-income and minority backgrounds, may ditch higher education.

Roughly three-quarters of undergraduate students (77 percent) who responded to a recent poll from Education Trust and the Global Strategy Group said they were worried about being able to stay on track and graduate. Those shares were higher among Black (84 percent) and Latino (81 percent) students.

"Many may soon not be students at all. They're considering leaving school," said King, in part due to the heavy burdens of stress they're shouldering.

The survey also found that 80 percent of students are very concerned about not being able to get the skills or work experience they need to get a job after completing college -- a number that rose to 85 percent among students of color.

Those numbers reinforce a federal data analysis from the Nation-

Higher Education and Work Amid Crisis (cont.)

al College Attainment Network. The group is tracking college student renewals of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, which it says correlate strongly with college enrollment and so far are **down over all** by 3.2 percent compared to last year.

NCAN found steep declines in renewals beginning in mid-March. Those numbers improved in May, but not enough to cover earlier declines, particularly among low-income students.

Through May 31, the group found a 7.2 percent decline in renewals among returning college students with annual family incomes of less than \$25,000 -- a drop-off of roughly 240,000 students.

Strada on June 10 released **survey results** on whether respondents had canceled or changed their education plans. Higher percentages of Latino (50 percent) and Black (42 percent) Americans reported disrupted plans than did white (26 percent) respondents.

Kim Cook, NCAN's executive director, said anxiety and uncertainty are likely drivers of these trends.

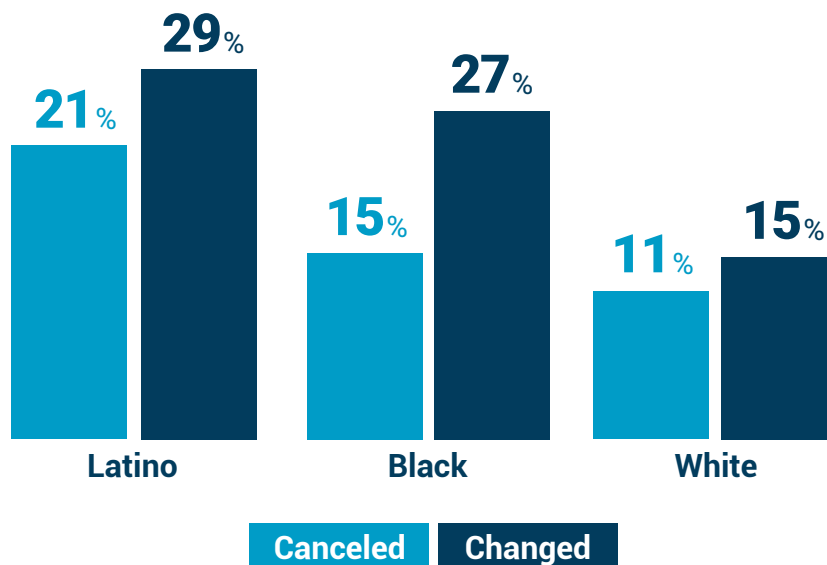
"Any uncertainty can really rattle you," she said, "particularly if you're the first in your family to go to college."

Scrutiny for Employers and Colleges

Doubts among lower-income Americans about investing in a college education are understandable, particularly during this time of crisis, said Aimée Eubanks Davis, founder and CEO of Braven, which works with San José State University and three other colleges and universities around the country to help underrepresented students transition from college to jobs.

"Before COVID you already had a big recession happening for certain groups of students," said Davis,

Black Americans and Latinos are more likely than white Americans to have canceled or canceled their education plans.



pointing to data that show a much smaller wage bump for bachelor's degree holders who come from lower-income backgrounds compared to their wealthier peers.

Getting a well-paying job often depends on skills that too many underserved student groups don't get while attending college, Davis said. "Higher-income kids are getting that from their parents and their peer groups."

Those challenges likely won't ease during a prolonged recession, she said, where the cash-strapped public colleges that enroll most lower-income students already have career services departments that are stretched too thin to adequately help many students.

Even so, Davis is more optimistic that traditional higher education will change in coming months and years to close equity gaps than she is about employers.

"I get more skeptical in a recession," she said, adding that a scarcity of jobs makes her worried about companies meaningfully changing how they find more diverse talent.

"If there's not intentionality, these things don't happen."

Employers must not go back to business as usual amid the recovery, Jim Shelton, chief investment and impact officer at Blue Meridian Partners, an investment firm focused on economic mobility, said during the Jobs for the Future webcast.

Companies need to "lean as hard as ever" into thinking differently about their talent strategies, said Shelton, who formerly led the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative's education arm and worked as an official at the Education Department. "We've got to make those things a part of the way that companies see their role in creating a new future and an economy that can work for everyone."

The Strada survey can help connect the dots with actionable data for both employers and education providers, said Maria Flynn, JFF's president and CEO.

"What are the actions that can be taken coming out of this that keep the equity frame in the center?" she said in an interview. "What are

Higher Education and Work Amid Crisis (cont.)

those no-regret solutions, regardless of how the recovery comes?"

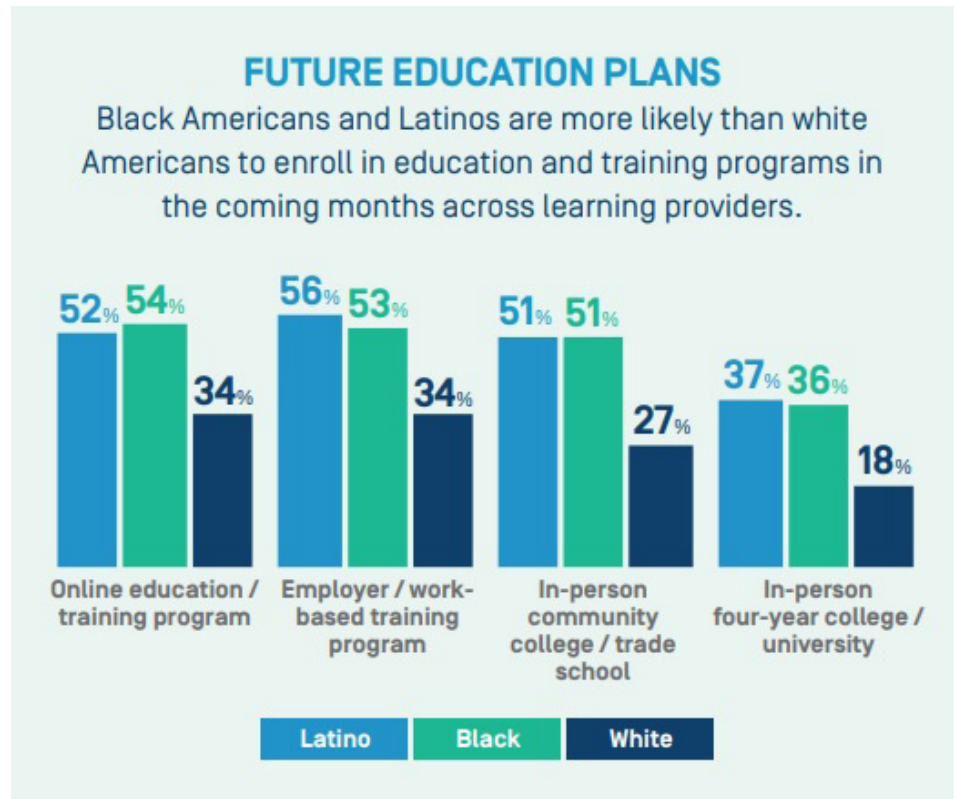
Trust and Advice

The Strada survey found that Black and Latino Americans are particularly likely to say they will enroll in education and training programs in coming months. That could be an opportunity for higher education to make inroads with underserved populations.

However, the poll found that these potential students are more likely to consider nontraditional providers, such as online and employer-based training programs, as well as community college, over an in-person, four-year college or university for that education and training.

Likewise, Black Americans rank advice from colleges about education and training options as less valuable than advice from other sources.

Strada found that Black respondents put higher education last, after advice from family, the internet and employers. Latino and white respondents said advice from colleges and universities was the second most valuable, after their families.



To better serve these student groups, Espinosa said she is encouraging college leaders to directly take on diversity, equity and inclusion as top priorities. And she said that means taking real action rather than just acknowledging the

industry's shortcomings.

"It's unfortunate that you have to go through a crisis, often in higher education, to get serious about something," said Espinosa. "But I see that we have the potential to get serious right now." ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/06/17/pandemic-has-worsened-equity-gaps-higher-education-and-work>

Looking Beyond the College Degree

A quarter of Americans say they would pursue education or training within six months if they lost their job, but most prefer nondegree training over the traditional college route.

By **Paul Fain** // June 24, 2020



SOURCE: ISTOCK.COM/LAURENCE DUTTON

As the pandemic wreaks havoc on the job market, a quarter of American adults say they plan to enroll in an education or training program within the next six months, according to the latest results of a **national poll** conducted by the Strada Education Network. That share was 37 percent for 18- to 24-year-olds and 23 percent for 25- to 64-year-olds.

But the survey also found most of the workers who said they would change fields if they lost their job due to the pandemic (35 percent of all respondents) are more interested in nondegree skills training (62 percent) than pursuing a college degree (38 percent).

Strada's Center for Consumer Insights has been conducting the nationally representative poll since

March 25. It's designed to track the pandemic's impacts on Americans' lives, work and needs for education and training.

The poll has found that Black and Latino Americans have absorbed the **most economic pain** from the pandemic so far, with disproportionate losses of jobs and pay. They also are more likely than white Americans to have had their education plans disrupted, as Strada's poll and other survey data suggest that Black, Latino and low-income Americans may be more likely to leave or avoid enrolling in higher education.

The latest data from the now bi-weekly survey (it was conducted weekly until late May) uncovered disparities between college degree

holders and those without college degrees in their career and education plans.

The two sides of the education divide were about as likely to say they would change fields if they lost their job: 39 percent of respondents who hold a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 33 percent with a high school credential or less. (The survey found that 34 percent of those with some college credits, a certificate or an associate degree planned to change fields if they lost their job.)

However, 55 percent of respondents with at least a four-year degree who are looking to change fields said they have access to the education and training they want, with 15 percent strongly agreeing

Looking Beyond the College Degree (cont.)

with that statement. Just 38 percent of those with a high school credential or less education who are looking to change fields agreed with that statement. And 39 percent of respondents in the some-college, certificate or two-year-degree category said they could get desired education and training.

Most respondents (61 percent) who are looking to change fields said more education or training would not be worth the price. Those with at least a bachelor's degree were most likely to say more education would be worth it (48 percent), compared to 36 percent of other respondents.

And even college degree holders who are looking to change fields were more likely to say they would look outside traditional higher education for nondegree programs or skills training if they were to pursue education or training within the next six months, with 60 percent of respondents with at least a bachelor's degree and 56 percent with at least some college saying they prefer the nondegree route.

Among those with a high school credential or less, that share rose to nearly three-quarters, with just 29 percent saying they would choose degree programs.

Likewise, workers across education levels who are looking to change fields said that, if they had \$5,000 to invest in future education or training, they would prefer online programs (46 percent) or work-based ones (23 percent) to in-person programs (30 percent). And the more postsecondary education under their belts, the more likely respondents were to say they would go the online route.

The societal backlash to the college degree has gone too far, said Brent Orrell, a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute who

focuses on workforce development and criminal justice reform.

"We've done a pretty good job persuading people that a four-year degree is not that helpful," said Orrell, who worked for the U.S. Department of Labor during the George W. Bush administration. "That's a mistake."

A key reason is that workers with a high school credential or less are particularly vulnerable during economic turmoil, he said, citing a wide range of research showing that college degrees give more flexibility and broader skill sets to navigate a changing job market.

Low Interest in Health Care

Survey respondents who work in IT, finance and manufacturing were the mostly likely to say they would change fields, Strada found. More than 40 percent in all three fields said they would look elsewhere if they lost their job because of events related to COVID-19.

In comparison, 29 percent of those who work in business said they would change fields, as would 33 percent in education and 34 percent in health care.

Yet health care is among fields that are least interesting to those looking to make a transition.

Just 8 percent of respondents who would change fields cited health care as one of their top three choices, the survey found -- a share that was tied by the hard-hit leisure/hospitality industry, education and others. Retail (6 percent), personal care (4 percent) and manufacturing (2 percent) were at the bottom of the list.

"Very few people are interested in moving into those fields," said Andrew R. Hanson, director of research at Strada's Consumer Insights. "Is that going to be a permanent change?"

Health care is at the top of the list for job openings, however, Strada said. The industry had 970,000 positions unfilled as of April, just behind business, which had one million. Retail and manufacturing also were among fields with relatively large numbers of job openings.

Hanson said health-care jobs tend to come with credential and licensing requirements that can be barriers for lower-income people. And he speculated that fear and unease about the industry during a pandemic could also be at play.

"That's got to be one of the drivers," he said. "It looks pretty risky."

Many in health care also have

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Very few people are interested in moving into those fields. Is that going to be a permanent change?

Andrew R. Hanson

Director of research at Strada's Consumer Insights

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Looking Beyond the College Degree (cont.)

been laid off in recent months as hospitals have hemorrhaged money with elective procedures largely on hold, said Orrell, which could be contributing to wariness about the field.

"We're going to need a lot more health-care workers," he said, noting that the jobs tend to be good ones that pay well.

More than half of the survey's respondents looking to change fields (52 percent) said improving their finances or advancing their careers were the most important reasons for making a jump. And 34 percent said earning more money was their primary motivation.

But beyond that, respondents cited a wide range of reasons for wanting to change career fields, including a desire to do work that is a better fit for their talents (30 percent), that gives them more control

A quarter of Americans say they would pursue education or training within six months if they lost their job, with most preferring nondegree training.

■ Nondegree/skills training ■ Degree programs

Bachelor's degree or higher

60%

40%

Some college/associate degree/certificate

56%

44%

High school or less

71%

29%

over their work lives (18 percent) and provides more opportunities

to advance (9 percent) and a more stable paycheck (8 percent). ■

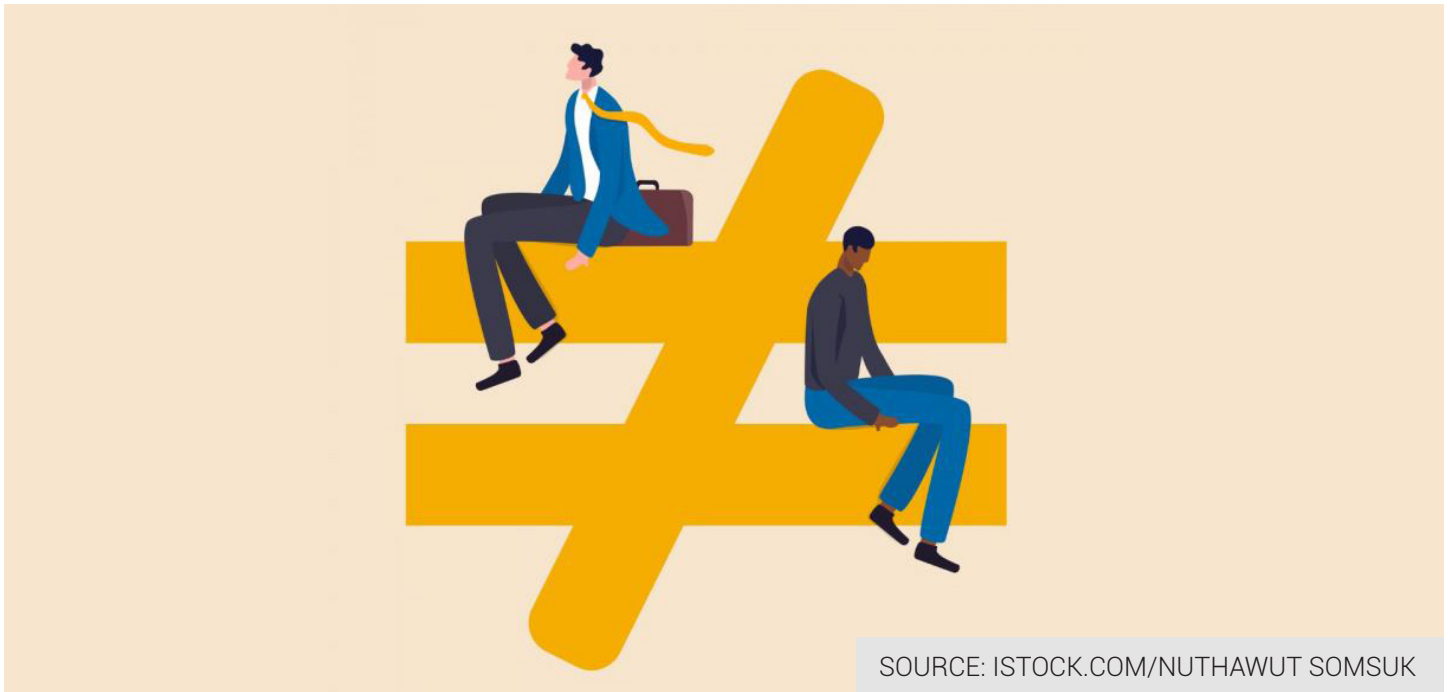
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Opinion: Fighting Patterns of Inequity

COVID-19 has highlighted and exacerbated profound economic disparities that higher ed can -- and must -- combat, Yolanda Watson Spiva and Danette Howard write.

By **Yolanda Watson Spiva** and **Danette Howard** // September 16, 2020



SOURCE: ISTOCK.COM/NUTHAWUT SOMSUK

COVID-19 has transformed the United States -- and especially its economy -- but the consequences for everyday Americans have varied widely based on race, income and education level. The pandemic has exposed long-standing inequity in social mobility, economic resilience and racial justice. It has also clearly shown that the causes and consequences of such inequity are numerous and interconnected.

With close to **40 million American jobs** lost in the pandemic, economic hardship is falling on Americans of all backgrounds. But just as Black and brown Americans have faced more devastating health outcomes and **acute health disparities** from COVID-19, they're also enduring **greater economic consequences**.

Moreover, estimates suggest that 39 percent of jobs that Black Americans now hold -- up to seven million -- are in jeopardy due to COVID-19.

Beyond such racial inequity, the pandemic's economic fallout is likely to intensify the job-displacing trends -- including automation and technology -- that affect all Americans. Already, economists **predict** that two-thirds of adults will need some sort of degree or credential of value by 2025 to meet individual, economic and social demands -- a number that might very well increase in the wake of the pandemic.

If we are to emerge from this crisis with a robust economy and without leaving people behind, we

need to urgently identify, implement and scale solutions that help people adjust to the realities of our talent economy.

Higher education is not only distinctly positioned to lead such an adjustment, but it also can be a powerful weapon in the larger fight to interrupt and circumvent patterns of inequity. Survey data suggests that Black, Latinx and Asian American students are at **least three times more likely** than white students to report that the COVID-19 pandemic has boosted the value they place on a college education. That holds true even as survey data suggest that students of color and low-income students are likely to take fewer classes this fall, jeopardizing their progress to-

Opinion: Fighting Patterns of Inequity (cont.)

ward graduation.

Postsecondary education alone is not a panacea, but a more responsive system can meet the long-term needs of traditionally underserved students and develop the talent required to fuel an economic recovery.

But to do so, college, industry and policy leaders must each play a role in restructuring academic systems to better serve all students. And philanthropic and nonprofit organizations such as ours must work in tandem as conveners and advocates, elevating proven solutions and helping scale true structural reform.

First, we need systems that give all students agency to confidently -- and successfully -- pursue their career paths.

Consider that underrepresented students are **more likely** to pursue degrees that don't align with their career or earning aspirations. This mismatch contributes to lost income and widening employment gaps in fast-growing fields like STEM, health and business.

Such disparities are unmistakably grounded in systemic and institutional racism. But confronting them directly is possible when higher education institutions center their curricula, advising culture and career services around two key questions that students should ask themselves: What are my personal interests? And what careers offer me the best opportunity to reach my goals?

Colleges should encourage students of color and low-income students to explore their passions or aspirations, but they should also

offer coursework and advising that help those students link their interests to a larger career and personal purpose.

As Complete College America's "College, On Purpose" report demonstrates, the results and **track record** for higher education institutions that do this are clear. Retention rates improve. Fewer students hop between unrelated majors. And students are more likely to be confident in their career paths.

At Houston Community College, for example, where 77 percent of students are Black, Latinx or Asian American, educators introduced a new virtual onboarding system alongside advising to help students connect academic disciplines and potential careers. The result was an 88 percent increase in the number of students who had declared an academic plan by the end of their first term.

And at historically Black colleges and universities, which have a history of preparing their students for high-demand fields including STEM, robust career services and other key resources are viewed credibly in part because they reflect students' backgrounds and cultural values. It should come as no shock that students at HBCUs are **more than 50 percent more likely** to take advantage of career-development resources than their peers at predominantly white institutions.

Second, a consistent mismatch persists between the skills employers want and the skills prospective employees, in fact, possess. In such a volatile and constantly changing economic environment,

this disconnect cannot continue.

Employers must play a key role in helping institutions prepare students for in-demand jobs. In June, Bank of America announced a \$1 billion **economic opportunity initiative**, a portion of which will focus explicitly on supporting reskilling and upskilling initiatives through partnerships with high schools and community colleges. And in January, Boeing announced a **\$6 million partnership with the Thurgood Marshall College Fund**, which will fund scholarships, internships, boot camps and other professional development opportunities in aerospace engineering at eight HBCUs. These partnerships model the type of collaboration required at a much larger scale if we are to maximize opportunity for students and fill employers' needs.

And finally, policy makers must do their part to shield institutions and students from growing budget pressures that threaten the programs and approaches that are driving better outcomes.

This pandemic has already upended our higher education system at a time when Americans -- particularly Black and brown Americans -- will depend on it more than ever. Yet our current model for career alignment and readiness will leave many of these same students struggling to find good-paying jobs in an economy marked by uncertainty and change. If we fail to invest and create systemic change, we'll simply continue to embrace the painfully inequitable status quo. That can no longer be an acceptable option. ■

Bio

Yolanda Watson Spiva is president of Complete College America. Danette Howard is senior vice president and chief strategy officer at Lumina Foundation.

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/09/16/colleges-must-combat-economic-disparities-pandemic-has-exacerbated-opinion>

Self-Doubt Is a Barrier to College

More respondents cited self-doubt as a barrier to pursuing education than cost, according to the latest Strada Education Network survey results.

By **Madeline St. Amour** // July 15, 2020

Nearly half of adults who responded to a national survey said self-doubt is one of the largest challenges they would face if they enrolled in a postsecondary education or training program.

Self-doubt was one of the top three challenges respondents cited, below time and above cost.

The new data are included in the findings from the latest "Public Viewpoint" report from Strada Education Network, which surveyed American adults on their motivations for pursuing more education, as well as the barriers they face.

The importance of mental barriers was one of the findings that stuck out the most, said Nichole Torpey-Saboe, director of research at Strada. It's yet another layer colleges have to consider when trying to attract people without degrees for enrollment.

"As important as it is to make it affordable, they also have to think about how they can make students feel like they belong," Torpey-Saboe said.

Nearly half of respondents said it would be challenging to pursue more education because they fear they won't succeed or that they've been out of school too long, or both.

"I think the finding on self-doubt as a major barrier is one we should be paying closer attention to in higher ed," said Sarah Horn, CEO of ReUp Education.

Through her work with people who have some college credits but no degree, Horn has found that about 80 percent are motivated to improve their family's life or set an example.



SOURCE: ISTOCK.COM/PEOPLEIMAGES

"If learners don't see a way that they can become successful, they start to question if it's worth it -- and that has large ripple effects," Horn said.

Paul Dosal, vice president for student success at the University of South Florida, also was surprised to see how high self-doubt ranked. The finding shows that institutions need to focus on students' emotional well-being, in addition to their academic and financial needs, he said.

Time and cost also are concerns, however. Nearly 40 percent of respondents said it would be difficult to get time away from work, and 35 percent said schedules and course times were a barrier. More than one-quarter also said balancing school and childcare would be a problem.

More than half of respondents said they would face at least one logistical barrier if they pursued further education, and about one-quarter said they would face at least three barriers related to time.

Equity Gaps With Technology

Other challenges flagged by respondents highlighted the digital divide. Urban residents and Latinx adults were most likely to say access to a computer or the internet would be a significant barrier in pursuing further education, followed by Black adults and rural residents. Suburban residents and white adults were least likely to say those things are a significant barrier.

"That's particularly timely right now," Dosal said. "We all suspect there is a digital divide, and this certainly confirms it."

Self-Doubt Is a Barrier to College (cont.)

The survey also found that one-quarter of adults plan to enroll in an education or training program in the next six months, but they would prefer to enroll in a nondegree program.

A combined 63 percent of respondents said that, if they were to enroll in a program in the next six months, they would prefer it to be a certification program or just a few courses to gain skills for work or to pursue personal interests.

Sixty percent or more of the respondents said advancing their careers and earning more money were the biggest factors in their decisions for pursuing further education.

This reflects a disconnect in what people know about which programs are most valuable, said Wil Del Pilar, vice president of higher education policy and practice at the Education Trust.

"Research shows that shorter-term credentials have very little to no financial impact," he said, adding that the greatest value is at the bachelor's degree level. It's possible that people also view these programs as cheaper, easier and faster compared to traditional degree programs. If they have self-doubt, they may be more inclined to take the program with less risk

attached and that they perceive as less rigorous, Del Pilar said.

Of those who said they were not likely to enroll in a program in the next five years, many -- 42 percent -- said they wouldn't get any real benefits at work from doing so. Another 19 percent cited health or disability reasons for not pursuing further education, and 13 percent said they couldn't make the time commitment.

The survey also looked at respondents' expectations around education. Slightly more than 40 percent said they were very interested in pursuing higher education after graduating high school. Only 36 percent of those without degrees or credentials said they felt they had a good understanding of their options for paying for further education when they left high school.

Adults without degrees who are now considering education also underestimate the time and costs to complete a degree, compared to national averages. They estimated it would take 2.5 years to complete an associate degree, while the average enrollment time is 3.3 years. They estimated the degree would cost about \$18,000, but the average cost to complete is about \$21,000.

The underestimation is even more pronounced for bachelor's degrees. Respondents estimated it would take 3.5 years to complete this degree program, while the average enrollment time is 5.1 years. They also estimated it would cost about \$33,000. The average cost to complete is about \$106,000.

Adults who don't have degrees also are torn on whether or not further education is valuable. Half think that further education would help them get stable jobs in times of uncertainty, 62 percent think it would advance their career and about half think it would be worth the cost.

This reflects a messaging problem in higher education, according to Del Pilar. The industry needs to message more around affordability and financial aid, he said, so people understand their options. Colleges also need to improve transferability and stackability, so if people pursue a certificate first, they can put that work toward a degree later on.

Del Pilar also emphasized alignment with workforce demands. If people feel higher education wouldn't help them in their careers, perhaps colleges should help people explore other careers where they can get more opportunities, he said. ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/07/15/barriers-higher-education-not-just-financial-also-emotional>

Personal Stories from the Pandemic

I How the crisis is affecting eight learners and their education and work plans.

By IHE Staff // August 4, 2020



A growing mountain of evidence shows that COVID-19 has taken a **disproportionate toll** on Latino, Black, Native American and lower-income people. People in these groups are more likely to have lost jobs, pay, family members or their own lives due to the pandemic.

Meanwhile, millions of college students had their campus experiences cut short this year, and are facing uncertainty about how and if they can return to college. Preliminary **data suggest** students from low-income, first-generation-college and minority backgrounds **may leave** higher education. And surveys, including **polling data** from the Strada Education Network, show **high anxiety** among Americans about college and the job market, particularly among first-generation students without the safety nets enjoyed by their wealthy peers.

Inside Higher Ed recently reached out to a wide range of nonprofit or-

ganizations that work with students from underserved backgrounds to get snapshots of how people were coping last month. Below are the stories of eight learners, whom we intend to follow up with in future interviews.



Alicia Cardoza Regalado, 21,
Indianapolis
Marian University

Alicia Cardoza Regalado is home now. Though the 21-year-old wasn't living too far from her parents, just in another part of Indianapolis, she moved back in when the pandemic arrived. Her college, Marian University, where she studies mathematics, recommended she leave her residence hall.

Like thousands of other students nationwide, Alicia finished her classes online. It was challenging at times, she says. "It can be hard to pay attention 100 percent of the time."

She found herself listening to lectures in the car, or covertly checking email. "That temptation is right there," she says.

Collaborating with other students to study and do homework, which can be common in STEM fields, also suddenly became more challenging. Cardoza Regalado says that compared with her life on campus, she needed to do twice the research and watch three times

Personal Stories From the Pandemic (cont.)

the number of online videos to get through her work.

"If we had a test coming up, I would say to my classmates, 'Let's get together and study for a few hours at the library,'" she says. "Now, they're not there with you to help."

Cardoza Regalado says it was also stressful to be doing her work at home with her family.

"My mom would be cleaning throughout the day, because she's a stay-at-home mom, and I would be worried," she says. "Like, 'Oh, will she, like, come into my room mid-lecture?'"

Cardoza Regalado, who grew up in Indianapolis, chose Marian in part because she is a recipient of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, or DACA.

"When I applied for colleges in 2017, a lot of college websites and college admissions offices didn't have the resources available for DACA recipients," she says. "They would all tell me, 'Oh, you might have to apply as an international student,' and I was like 'Holy moly, that's like twice the amount!'"

With in-state public universities not giving her what she needed, Cardoza Regalado decided to apply to a private college.

Though no one in her family has been infected with the new coronavirus, she says it's a constant source of anxiety for her and her family. Her mother has respiratory health issues, and her sister is a health-care worker in a downtown hospital.

"There's that fear of 'What if because I went to the grocery store she gets sick?'" she says. "What if she's in intensive care because of me?"

"What if I lose my mom?" she adds. "Will we be able to live with it if something happened to her?"

Though Cardoza Regalado is coming to the end of her bachelor's degree program, she isn't sure about her career path just yet. She was first drawn to being a math teacher, but she was wary of having to fail or discipline students for their performance. She's now studying actuarial science, which is about assessing risk, but she isn't sure she wants to be an actuary.

Through multiple internships with the Indiana Latino Institute, the mayor's office and other organizations, she's realized her goal is to help people, but she hasn't hammered out exactly how to connect that with math. She's considering going to grad school a few years after graduation but also looking at helping low-income families with financial advising or encouraging math students who look like her.

"I genuinely want to help people," she says. "How can I help people with math?"

Right now, Marian University's plan for the fall is to have students live on campus in double rooms with hybrid instruction. Cardoza Regalado says she isn't sure if that's the right move.

"Right now with all the cases and how the U.S. is doing, I'm a little nervous about going to in-person classes," she says. "If someone gets it in the dorm rooms, probably everybody else is going to be affected by it."

But she has mixed feelings about the fall term. She's sympathetic to international students and others who are paying a lot of money to attend. And she thinks she will have an easier time with classes if they are in person.

One fact is clear, though: the pandemic and its attendant economic downturn are anxiety inducing.

"I do come from a low-income household, and I've seen the strug-

gle," she says. "There's still that imminent fear that you will be jobless, because we've been there before."

-- Lilah Burke



Dija Manly, 19,
Madison, Wis.
Stanford University

Dija Manly was halfway through her freshman year at Stanford University when the first coronavirus cases were identified in the United States. In mid-March, as a wave of campus shutdowns swept the country, Manly and her peers were sent home to finish the term remotely.

"Everybody was scrambling to get tickets and throw one last big party before everybody left," she says.

She returned home to Madison, Wis., and remained there through the spring term, which was held entirely online. Stanford extended the winter term final period and made the spring term "pass-no record" to ease student concerns about remote learning.

Manly says it was difficult to focus on her coursework.

"It was very dystopian," she says. "At first everybody was just excit-

“

It was hard, especially for a bunch of the freshmen who were hoping to establish friendships and generally have that sense of belonging on campus.

Dija Manly

Student at Stanford University

”

ed, and was like, ‘Oh, I’ll see you in three weeks when this pandemic is over.’ Then everybody went home, and you read the news every day and see things are getting worse and worse.”

The pandemic didn’t just interrupt her studies -- it also threw a wrench into her undergraduate experience. Manly says she feels slighted that she was never able to make a home for herself at Stanford and lean into her new independence. Living at home again feels like high school, but “without the benefits of high school,” she says.

“It was hard, especially for a bunch of the freshmen who were hoping to establish friendships and generally have that sense of belonging on campus,” Manly says.

After graduating from a low-performing Wisconsin public high school, she was admitted to the highly selective Stanford. Manly says she chose the university in part because she has family in the Bay Area and wanted to get out of Wisconsin. A STEM student looking to major in bioengineering with a minor in African and African American studies, Manly hopes to

pursue a career in health disparities research.

“I want to make medicine that keeps in mind people’s different races and ethnicities, and the role and impact that has,” she says.

Her studies are particularly relevant to the pandemic. Data show severe **racial and ethnic disparities** in who contracts and dies from the coronavirus. Manly has made her peace with getting the disease.

“I have come to terms with the idea that I will probably get COVID in Madison,” she says. “Even though we have the mask order that was just implemented, I think COVID is going around rapidly. Wisconsin is still a red state, and I don’t think you can stop people from going to visit family.”

Stanford plans to bring some students back to campus in the fall. As a rising sophomore, Manly’s classes will be held entirely online for the fall term. She’s weighing her options and trying to decide if it makes more financial sense for her to return to campus, study remotely or take a term off.

“A lot of my financial aid has been taken away,” she says. “For

me, it would be more expensive to do online school than to actually be on campus.”

Manly worries about staying home and having to rely on her parents for food and housing expenses. Stanford offers some subsidized off-campus housing, which she’s looking into. She’s also considering splitting an off-campus apartment with some other friends who may take classes online in the fall.

Regardless of her decision, Manly knows her sophomore year won’t be the college experience she was hoping for.

“They won’t be hosting any gatherings. They’re going to be setting up sick dorms for students because they’re expecting students to get sick. You can’t go to study spaces, you can’t eat meals in the dining hall, you have to eat meals in your dorm room,” she says. “All of those aspects just make going back to campus seem pretty bleak.”

-- Emma Whitford



Charles O., 38 (but he’s not sure of his precise age), San Diego
Bus driver, National University

All in all, **Charles O.** has a steady job. He makes more than \$15 an hour driving buses for the city of

Personal Stories From the Pandemic (cont.)

San Diego. He's worked for the city for eight years.

"It pays good," he says. "It's not the best, but it's OK."

But Charles (whose name has been changed) would like to do something different.

"My kids are the ones that motivate me the most," he says. "I took some loans going to school, and I don't like that for my kids, to do that in the future. I think the right thing for me to do is work on my education. If I get a good job, I will be able to cash-flow their education."

A higher-paying job might also be able to lead to some small luxuries. Recently, Charles decided to move out of his apartment and into his car to save money. His kids live with their mother.

Charles came to the United States as a refugee in 2006, when he was 23. He is ethnically Ugandan but came by way of Sudan.

His first experience with American education was at community college, where he took a few courses while working as a security guard. His dream was to go to a University of California campus and become an engineer.

But Charles found he couldn't complete his engineering course work while working 60 to 80 hours per week with one kid.

"My GPA went down, and I'm like, 'If I'm not going to go to [UC San Diego] or one of the UC schools, I'm not going to pursue the degree,'" he says. He was also worried about whether he would even be able to attend a UC as a working adult with a child. Instead he took general education courses.

In the decade since his community college days, Charles has had an on-again, off-again relationship with being a student.

In 2012, he enrolled as an online

student at National University, a California-based nonprofit aimed at working adults. After years of stopping and restarting, he is set to graduate with a bachelor's degree in financial management this November. His goal is to be a business intelligence developer -- someone who uses software to analyze and present data to inform business decisions. He is well versed in programming languages like Python and Java.

"I love technology and that is the kind of thing I want to do for the rest of my life," he says.

Despite Charles's fondness for the subject, his lack of a degree has held him back.

He took a business development course at UCSD Extension but found it was not enough.

"Most of the jobs say you need either five or seven years' experience," he says, "or you have to have a bachelor's degree."

Charles says that because his classes were online to start, the pandemic hasn't directly affected his instruction. But he can no longer study in libraries and now does schoolwork in his car, using his phone plan's hotspot. He appreciates the flexibility of online classes, since his driving schedule changes every three months.

Though National is more affordable than other institutions, Charles still took on debt for his education, one of the reasons he decided to move into his car.

The pandemic makes him worried about the prospects of getting hired for his dream job as companies tighten their belts and lay off employees.

"It's almost impossible. I've applied for a lot of jobs," he says. "It's hard, but I am studying every day."

-- Lilah Burke



Rocque Perez, 21,
Tucson, Ariz.
University of Arizona

The transition from high school to college wasn't easy for **Rocque Perez**.

The 21-year-old is a first-generation college student at the University of Arizona. His mother moved to the United States from Mexico for the opportunities it could offer her family, he says.

But throughout high school, Perez was pulled in and out of school. He felt that his parents didn't have his best interests at heart, and his academics suffered.

Before his college journey even began, Perez moved out of the abusive household and began supporting himself.

"It did take me breaking away and wanting something for myself to do that," Perez says. "But I didn't have the emotional or financial support of anybody. That alone served as a huge barrier."

His college experience has been different from his more privileged peers' in that way. He recalled getting sick and having to go to the hospital alone, because he does not have a relationship with his parents.

Personal Stories From the Pandemic (cont.)

"It takes a huge toll on your mental health," he says.

Perez had always considered going to college, but he didn't start chasing after that dream until his senior year of high school. He wanted to pursue a career where he could help people, and the recent election of President Trump created "a new political fire that was lit under me," he says.

Choosing where to go was the easiest part, he says. Perez grew up in Tucson, Ariz., and he's always loved the pride and spirit of his hometown campus. "For me, the University of Arizona was always just home," he says.

Arizona also has many opportunities for the career Perez wants to pursue -- public administration. He hopes to work in higher education administration.

But college hasn't just been about academics. It also is a relatively easy way for Perez to get a job. He has been working for the university throughout his time as an undergraduate.

He typically worked 40 hours per week, on top of full course loads. While Perez receives financial aid, he still anticipates having about \$40,000 in student loan debt to cover leftover tuition expenses and help him pay for housing.

When asked how he managed all those hours, Perez says he had "no idea."

"I think it was a lot of time management skills," he says. "It was also a matter of knowing I had to get through college."

Perez acknowledged he didn't do as well academically as he could have because of the long hours he worked. But, he says, sacrificing a few assignments to get a degree was worth it, even if it wasn't a real representation of who he is as an academic.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented another challenge. By May, Perez's job helping to develop a fundraising campaign in the Office of Multicultural Advancement was eliminated.

To continue building his résumé, Perez created a marketing portfolio and presented it to senior leadership at the university. He's been able to create his own internship, he says, though it is unpaid.

As the \$600-per-week supplemental unemployment insurance runs out, Perez says he's getting worried.

"I am applying for a bunch of full-time jobs," he says. "This is the first time I'm gravitating away from the university, which kind of sucks because that's the profession I want to go into. But I don't have a safety net."

His job options are also limited by the public health crisis, as he doesn't want to put himself at too much risk. Perez is open to going into an office job but doesn't want to work in retail right now.

As a student and a resident, Perez is worried what will happen when his university opens back up. Two of his courses are slated to be face-to-face because that is what his professors prefer. And he needs those classes to graduate on time next spring.

Many of his friends have gotten sick from COVID-19, and some of his acquaintances have died from the virus.

"We're so close to Native nations and so many vulnerable communities in southern Arizona. It sucks that all of these vulnerable populations are going to be jeopardized by students who just want to come here and have fun," he says. "The university is putting out this image that they can control the student population, but nobody can control

Chad and Brad in Greek life celebrating syllabus week at a party the first week they get here."

The university didn't decide what to do for the fall in time for many students who were signing off-campus leases. If he had known most of his courses would be online, Perez would have lived farther away to save money.

Yet his time in college has been worth it, Perez says, in part because of the opportunity to stand up with his peers on social justice issues.

As a first-generation Latinx student and a person from the LGBTQ+ community, Perez gets emotional when hateful incidents occur on campus.

"It's disheartening and it does take a toll," he says. "But at the end of the day, that's something I'm super passionate about."

-- Madeline St. Amour



Felecia Cannon, 31,
Dallas
Software support specialist

After graduating high school, **Felecia Cannon** enrolled at Dallas Baptist University. But she quickly decided the traditional four-year college route was too risky.



You don't
pay anything up front.
It almost sounds too good
to be true.

Felecia Cannon

Graduate of Google's IT support certificate program



"I realized that it wasn't for me and that I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life," she says.

Cannon enrolled as a psychology major. But she was unsure whether the degree would lead to a career and was unwilling to take on the student loan debt.

"I didn't want to have wasted four years," says Cannon.

So it was off to work for Cannon. For almost eight years she worked as an assistant manager on the night shift at a QuickTrip, a convenience store.

"It was very exhausting. I couldn't get my sleep schedule right," says Cannon. "Thankfully, I didn't have kids."

During that time, she sporadically enrolled at Tarrant County College, a two-year institution.

When she'd arrive home from work, at 7 a.m., Cannon would sleep for three or four hours. That schedule made it hard for her to focus and be motivated to do schoolwork. But she eventually earned a general studies degree. While at Tarrant, Cannon took a computer programming course, which helped spark her interest in development and information technology.

"It laid down the foundation for learning later in life," Cannon says of her time in community college, citing a technical writing course as being particularly helpful.

Cannon in 2016 signed on as warehouse associate at an Amazon fulfillment center. She worked 10-hour shifts, with two to three hours of lifting medium-sized packages broken up by 15-minute breaks.

"It was a very physical job," she says, adding that she thought, "I'm just going to run my body down" and that "I can do more with my mind."

Cannon wanted challenge and growth. At some point, she heard about [Amazon's Career Choice program](#), which pays up to 95 percent of tuition and fees (with an annual cap) in certain fields of study leading to in-demand jobs -- typically not at Amazon. Some Amazon facilities feature classrooms for students who are enrolled in the program.

"You don't pay anything up front," says Cannon. "It almost sounds too good to be true."

She was a participant in Merit America, a [nonprofit group](#) and Career Choice preferred partner that offers live support through

small group meetings and one-to-one coaching. Merit America also is a partner of Grow With Google, which works with community organizations to offer free digital skills training.

Cannon enrolled in [Google's IT certificate program](#), the company's first major move into postsecondary education and a core part of her Merit America program. The certificate is offered through Coursera, the online learning platform, and features a curriculum created by Google, which seeks to create a diversified pipeline of applicants for entry-level IT jobs.

She says the nonacademic support she received through the Amazon, Google and Merit America programs helped her gain confidence.

"It really gave me an advantage," Cannon says, citing as an example mock interviews she did in groups with Merit America. "That helped me so much."

The Google curriculum was designed for her to absorb a lot of information in an accelerated format. And subtle aspects of the program were just as important, she says.

All of the instructors in the online Google program work for the tech giant. And Cannon says as the instructors gave their own background stories, she learned many didn't have a technology background.

"That encouraged me," she says. "It made them feel real."

Cannon applied to jobs each week as she worked toward the certificate, a requirement of the Merit America program. One, for a software and education company, required at least a bachelor's degree.

She applied anyhow. "I just highlighted those soft skills," Cannon says.

The day after her graduation

Personal Stories From the Pandemic (cont.)

from the Google program, she got an email about the job and was hired shortly thereafter.

Her last day at Amazon was July 12. She can work from home in her new job, which came with a substantial pay boost and computing and work gear her employer delivered to her.

Cannon says she wants to continue learning, starting with a new computer programming language.

"I was so unsure of myself before. There was a part of me who didn't think I could be successful," she says. But now, "I want to go as high as I can go."

-- Paul Fain



Ayomide Ajao, 18, Indianapolis
Indiana University,
Purdue University Indianapolis

Ayomide Ajao isn't especially worried about contracting COVID-19 as she enters her freshman year at Indiana University, Purdue University Indianapolis.

But she is worried about facing discrimination or racism.

"I'm worried about the way people are going to treat me because of my color, or maybe because of my accent, or maybe because of

the way I look," she says.

Ajao was born in Nigeria and moved to the United States in 2016. She says she didn't know anything about how the U.S. worked when she first arrived in the country.

But she has always loved math and won the student-of-the-month award for the subject in middle school.

"They take a picture of you and put it on the wall," she says. "But when I got to school the next day, people started laughing at me."

Her peers insulted her, saying she thought she was important even though she had just enrolled at the school.

"I was like, OK, this doesn't happen in my country," Ajao says.

Thankfully, Ajao found support in other places. Her teacher asked why she stopped raising her hand in class, and Ajao explained the bullying.

"She says, 'Don't let what they say weigh you down, they're just jealous,'" she says. After that conversation, she regained her pride in her good grades, even as her peers kept laughing.

She also gained confidence in debate club, an activity she hopes to continue in college.

Ajao will have a few other things on her mind in college, though. She will be working part-time and helping her single mother take care of her younger siblings. She's also still trying to get scholarships and grants so she can avoid taking out loans.

Ajao was accepted to several historically Black colleges and universities during a special admissions event hosted by her high school, and she even received a full scholarship to one. But she decided to stay close to her hometown of Indianapolis.

"I can't leave my mom and my

siblings," she says.

She also couldn't apply for federal financial aid because of her immigration status, which makes things difficult. She is trying to get a green card so she can join the U.S. Navy, she says.

"Loans you have to pay for the rest of your life, and I don't want that to be me," Ajao says. "I wish that status didn't matter and color didn't matter."

She was frustrated when applying for scholarships because many were tailored to race or ethnicity. As a straight-A student, she doesn't understand why race needs to be a factor.

"I was like, OK, what does that have to do with anything?" she says. "But it is what it is."

The application process was also difficult. Her family hadn't been through the process, so they couldn't help Ajao. She had to rely on friends and advisers.

Ajao credits her high school counselor and an adviser from the Center for Leadership Development, a local organization that helps minority youth with college prep and other programs, as being crucial resources.

While her family wasn't able to help much with her journey to college, Ajao says they have been very supportive.

"I'm going to college because basically I'm the first person in my family to go to college," she says. "I want to be somebody. I want to be a role model to others in my family."

Right now, she's working full-time at McDonald's. Ajao is thinking about trying to get a job on campus.

She isn't worried about contracting COVID-19 at work because customers aren't allowed to enter without wearing masks, and she

Personal Stories From the Pandemic (cont.)

washes her hands frequently. Her classes will be in the hybrid format in the fall, which she is happy about.

"I am the kind of person that if I sit at home and don't do anything, my head is going to start blowing up," she says, adding that she also learns better with face-to-face instruction.

But despite the uncertainty about the fall, Ajao is proud of her achievements.

"I graduated with flying colors," she says. "It was successful for me."

The one thing that's missing is her father, she added. She doesn't know where he is, but she wishes he could see her proud moment.

-- Madeline St. Amour



Heather-Alysia McNeil, 49, Prince George's County, Md. Pharmacy technician intern, University of the District of Columbia

Heather-Alysia McNeil is a go-getter. A divorced, single mom of six with a 16-year-old son still at home, she chose to pursue a bachelor's degree after the bank where she worked relocated and left her without a job.

McNeil, 49, is older than the traditional college student. She "did the family life first," she says, and wor-

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It's not a rock and a hard place,
it's a rock and a rock. A rock and a rock
and a wall.

Heather-Alysia McNeil

Student at the University of the District of Columbia

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ried she was too old to go to school.

"I found phenomenal women who have gone on to get their bachelor's, or even went back to high school, and I was like, 'OK, if they can do it, I can do it,'" she says.

After doing some research to find a college within her budget, McNeil enrolled at the University of the District of Columbia. She was nearing the end of her junior year, working toward a bachelor's degree in psychology, when the coronavirus reached the United States.

"When I say overwhelming, I feel that's an understatement," she says of the pandemic. UDC moved classes online in March, and she had to choose between supporting her son through rigorous online schooling or continuing her own classes remotely.

"I decided to take the semester as a loss," McNeil says. "It was really devastating."

Since then, the pandemic has presented her with significant familial, financial and personal challenges. McNeil has taken all of them in stride.

"It's not a rock and a hard place, it's a rock and a rock. A rock and a rock and a wall," she says.

She works part-time as pharmacy technician intern and has continued to do so as an essential worker for the last five months. The toll the pandemic has taken on essential workers is immeasurable, she says.

As soon as she gets home, she has to "go in a room, strip at the door, put my clothes in a bag, hit the shower," McNeil says. "I don't even know how to describe the head space that I'm in."

But McNeil has put herself on the back burner to help those around her.

"However I can help my coworkers get through it, so be it. However I can help my son get through it, so be it," she says. "I will pick up myself later."

McNeil is a cancer survivor and lives with sickle cell anemia. Because she is immunocompromised, she's at high risk for COVID-19 complications. Instead of using a doctor's note to file for unemployment, she opted to continue working on the front lines. To protect her asthmatic son from potential exposure to the virus, McNeil sent him to live with his older sister in Atlanta.

"It's a snowball effect," she says.

Personal Stories From the Pandemic (cont.)

"I had to take out funds to send my son to Atlanta that I didn't have and care for him in another home. Because I elected to opt out, now I have a school bill."

The fall, McNeil plans to return to college and finish her degree. Going back to UDC isn't financially feasible, so she applied for a grant from the state of Maryland and hopes to be admitted to Morgan State University.

In the interim, McNeil is studying to get her pharmacy technician license.

"While I'm on this so-called break, why not do something productive? If you have a pause in your life ... bring in something that will speak to your goals or whatever you're aspiring to do," she says. "I decided to become a pharmaceutical tech."

-- Emma Whitford



Joshua Christie, 22,
Newark, N.J.

The end of college came suddenly for **Joshua Christie**.

The Newark native was part of the Rutgers University, Newark, Honors Living-Learning Community. He received a residential scholarship for his time on campus.

"I really loved the program," says

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Had it not been
for the scholarships I received,
I really don't think I'd be able to afford it.
I probably would've had to take out
so many loans.

Joshua Christie

Recent graduate of Rutgers University, Newark

”

Christie.

Then the pandemic hit. The first-generation college student received an email from the university in mid-March, saying students had 48 hours to leave residence halls and that the remainder of the spring term would be online only.

"I was looking forward to graduation," he says. "I didn't get my senior photos."

That stings for Christie, an aspiring photographer.

But perhaps the worst blow was that he couldn't do a planned study abroad this spring in England. Christie's twin brother was going to join him there, and they would have celebrated their birthday together last month in Britain.

"I was so excited," he says. "We would be there now."

Asked how it felt to have that experience taken away, Christie describes being at the beach and picking up a handful of sand and watching it stream through your fingers.

"Say the sand was your dream," he says. "So many dreams and so many aspirations were just slipping away really quickly."

Christie doesn't blame the uni-

versity. "They tried their best."

The online course work during the spring term was decent, he says. And Christie enjoyed a virtual course the university hosted jointly with a school in France -- a substitute for the canceled study abroad program.

Christie also is grateful for the grant aid from Rutgers.

"Had it not been for the scholarships I received, I really don't think I'd be able to afford it," he says. "I probably would've had to take out so many loans."

The university also helped him get work experience. Early on as an undergraduate, Christie worked in concessions at the nearby Red Bull Arena, home of the New York Red Bulls, a Major League Soccer franchise. Traveling back and forth to campus from the stadium was difficult for him, and he wanted something more stable.

Christie met an admissions officer for the Newark campus, who offered him a job. He took the Federal Work-Study gig and helped send out letters for the admissions office. Later, Christie got a work-study job as a community service officer for the university. He patrolled the

Personal Stories From the Pandemic (cont.)

campus at night, giving directions, escorting people around and signing them into facilities.

"I always like helping people," says Christie. But he decided not to pursue a career in law enforcement. "I just couldn't see myself getting fully into it."

Christie got serious about photography early in his time on campus after winning a photography contest. He started posting photos on social media, sometimes of models, and the positive feedback spurred his ambition to make a career of it.

He created a business-oriented site for his photographs, [Purpose Portraits](#), and a personal [portfolio site](#) for creative projects.

The pandemic postponed some of Christie's photography plans. But he's sticking with it.

Christie is a fellow with Braven, a nonprofit group that provides academic and career support to college students from underrepresented and low-income backgrounds. The experience has been helpful, he says, and helped him find photography projects. For example, he recently visited the

homes of 20 students he found through the program to take their graduation photos.

Braven also is helping Christie develop small business skills. His goal is to land a job in branding and imaging, which would combine his social media and photography chops.

"It's just a really hard job market. But I'm trying to stay hopeful," he says. "Even though there's clouds in the sky, that doesn't mean the sun isn't shining behind it."

-- Paul Fain ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/08/04/pandemics-impact-eight-learners-and-their-education-and-work-plans>

Cautious Interest in College Among Working Adults

Working adults increasingly are interested in pursuing postsecondary education, but they are also less confident about the value of college.

By **Paul Fain** // September 17, 2020



SOURCE: ISTOCK.COM/FIZKES

Working adults enrolled in record numbers this summer at the University of Washington Continuum College, where roughly 51,000 students last year attended continuing education and professional development programs.

Continuum has seen a softening of enrollment numbers so far for the still-young fall term, amid **growing national concern** about Black, Latino, lower-income and other vulnerable student groups leaving higher education.

Yet the college is fielding more calls these days from prospective adult students, said Rovy Branon, vice provost for Continuum College, who oversees all professional and continuing education programs at UW. And the average call time has gotten longer.

"We're hearing from a lot of adults with increasingly complex lives," Branon said, noting that many feel they need to get through the fall before deciding whether to enroll next year. "They want at least one certain thing in their lives."

Branon's observations line up with the **latest polling data** from the Strada Education Network, a non-profit focused on pathways between education and work.

The nationally representative **Public Viewpoint** poll conducted by Strada's Center for Consumer Insights found growing interest in postsecondary education or training among aspiring adult learners (25 to 44 years old, without a college degree but seriously considering enrolling in additional education programs), with 42 percent

of respondents saying COVID-19 has made them more likely to enroll, compared to 21 percent who say the pandemic makes them less likely to do so.

However, aspiring adult learners also were less confident in the value of additional education than they were in a corresponding poll Strada conducted one year before this one, which surveyed respondents this month and in August.

Last year, 77 percent of respondents said additional education would be worth the cost, but that share slipped to 59 percent among the 1,007 respondents in the latest poll. Likewise, 89 percent of respondents in last year's poll said additional education would help them get a job, compared to 64 percent amid the pandemic.

Cautious Interest in College Among Working Adults (cont.)

"People are feeling lost," said Nichole Torpey-Saboe, director of research for Strada's Center for Consumer Insights. "Everyone is feeling a lot more insecure about their job security and prospects."

Lindsey Reichlin Cruse, study director at the Institute for Women's Policy Research, said it makes sense working adults' belief in the value of higher education would be influenced by the pandemic.

"Unemployment is at an all-time high, there are fewer jobs to go around and people's economic security has decreased dramatically," she said via email. "Faith in the benefits of higher ed may be relative to those factors, rather than these results reflecting a truly lessened belief that higher ed is valuable; it's just that the baseline now is so much lower."

Short-Term and Online

The new polling numbers from Strada reinforce previous findings that show a **growing preference** for nondegree and skills training options, including **short-term online alternatives** to the college degree.

Aspiring adult students were more interested in nondegree credentials (68 percent) than they were last year (50 percent), Strada found.

However, that interest may not be leading to enrollment. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center found an 11.7 percent decline in enrollments this summer in undergraduate certificate programs compared to last summer.

One reason aspiring adult students may be hesitating to enroll in shorter-term programs is that, relative to their peers, this group faces more barriers to pursuing postsecondary education. Among respondents in this Strada sample, 90 percent would be first-genera-

tion students.

Roughly half (47 percent) of respondents said they worry a lot about paying the rent or having enough to eat (46 percent), according to the Strada data. This group also is more likely to be struggling with childcare amid disruptions to K-12 schools.

"Feeding one's family, securing safe housing and supporting children's well-being will always come first," said Cruse. "If parents can meet these basic needs and go to school, great. If not, their kids come first and their educational goals often get put on hold."

Yet the Strada polling data show prospective adult students prioritize finding a good job and career even while they struggle with basic needs -- an example that two things can be true at the same time.

And despite the national dip in summer enrollment in undergraduate certificate programs, interest among working adults at Continuum College is trending toward online and short-term options.

Before the pandemic, enrollment in degree programs at the college was up by roughly 2 percent annually, Branon said, compared to 10 to 12 percent for certificates.

"Uncertainty in the overall moment is driving people to look at things that can be completed in shorter time frames," he said, noting that overall enrollment at Continuum for the recently begun fall term eventually may be up compared to last year.

Ability to Benefit

Strada found that fewer than one in three adults without college degrees said they have a good understanding of available career pathways, valuable skills and details about potential education programs -- including how long it

takes to earn credentials, the cost of tuition and books, and how to access financial aid.

The share of those with enough information is even smaller for respondents who are interested in short-term credentials, said Torpey-Saboe.

Part of the problem is that higher education has rapidly diversified its offerings to working adults over the last decade, Branon said. For example, Continuum now offers 24 credential programs with the word "data" in the title, a major shift.

"All of that contributes to the complexity of the environment and decision making for adult students," he said.

Colleges also may not be doing enough to help working adults access federal aid they could receive, said Lauren Walizer, a senior policy analyst at the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP).

For example, she cited financial aid for college students who do not hold a high school diploma or its equivalent, so-called ability-to-benefit students who comprise a large number of aspiring adult learners.

The ability-to-benefit eligibility was nixed during the Obama administration but **restored** before his second term ended with a requirement that qualifying programs be connected to career pathways.

Walizer described ability-to-benefit aid as a form of dual enrollment for adult students, and eligibility requires students to be enrolled in both adult education and postsecondary programs. It also features a seven-part definition for programs that are connected to careers, although Walizer said many college programs would qualify and that the U.S. Department of Education has been supportive of expanding access to aid for ability-to-benefit

Cautious Interest in College Among Working Adults (cont.)

students.

Yet college administrators often don't think their programs will be eligible, she said, in part because they need to get workforce, financial aid and career and technical education officials on the same page. As a result, she said too few potentially eligible college students without high school credentials have been able to access federal aid.

"It's such an important opportunity for students to get engaged in college," Walizer said.

Federal grant aid, such as Pell Grants, can help students avoid some of the risk of going into debt to attend college, a barrier that almost certainly is contributing to growing wariness among working

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We're hearing from a lot of adults with increasingly complex lives. They want at least one certain thing in their lives.

Rovy Branon

Vice provost for the University of Washington's Continuum College

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adults about the value equation of enrolling in college.

"They don't have the extra money

to be betting. They might not have the cash up front," said Torpey-Saboe. ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/09/17/working-adults-increasingly-interested-postsecondary-education-more-skeptical-about>

Opinion: Education and Work Without a Safety Net

Essays and comments on how higher education, employers and policy makers can do more to help students from underserved backgrounds succeed.

By IHE Staff // September 15, 2020

Last month *Inside Higher Ed* wrote about how the pandemic and recession were impacting the education and work of eight students from underserved backgrounds. We followed up later with a virtual event featuring three of the students we profiled.

This collection of essays includes commentary from experts on how higher education and policy makers could better serve students who face similar obstacles on their paths to a well-paying job and satisfying careers. It also features an essay by one of the students we profiled, Joshua Christie, and comments from readers.

-- IHE Staff

Intentionally Serving Latino and Other Post-Traditional Students

By Deborah Santiago and Beth Doyle

As leaders in nonprofit organizations focused on "post-traditional students," specifically Latino and adult students, we saw familiar themes in "Personal Stories From the Pandemic." While the traditional student profile represents less than 20 percent of students, too often it is the dominant profile when discussing higher education. In comparison, the post-traditional student is the majority and more likely to enroll in a two-year college, delay enrollment, be older, need academic support, work 30 hours or more while enrolled, live off campus, be Latino or another student of color, serve as caretaker for children or other family members, be very worried about debt (that influ-

ences college plans) and struggle with having the time and finances to complete a degree.

The health pandemic has revealed more publicly the structural and systemic inequities we knew existed disproportionately for post-traditional students, like those in the stories shared. Excelencia and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning have been working together on a project designed to address some of these inequities as key opportunities for institutional action. Here's what we know: lower completion rates among Latino students, part-time students and adult students are not caused by a deficit in the students. These lower rates are often due to a lack of intentionality in serving Latino students, especially adult Latino students. A college that knows whom they serve

(the strengths and needs of their students) is more likely to adapt its efforts to serve these students well and fulfill the social contract an institution makes when it enrolls a student.

The Latino Adult Student Success (LASS) Academy project provides tools for institutions to examine closely how they are serving their adult Latino students. It also offers support in implementing new policies and practices to improve enrollment, persistence and completion. We have identified four areas in particular that institutions are transforming to more intentionally serve their Latino adult students among the 15 institutions we are working with.

- **Financial support:** In our project, one community college hit hard by the pandemic began doing intentional outreach to their Latino



Intentionally Serving Latino and other Post-Traditional Students

Deborah Santiago & Beth Doyle



Beyond the "Plexiglas Promise": Championing Real Change

Jo Alice Blondin



A Fair Shot at Economic Success and Stability

Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield



The Road to the American Dream: Finding Purpose in the Detours

Joshua Christie



Reader Comments and other Post-Traditional Students

IHE Readers

adult students, and upon learning of the financial need, decided to offer microgrants for students to use as emergency funds to cover expenses beyond tuition. They believe this helped retain many more students.

- **Student coaching:** Several institutions in LASS identified the need to provide coaching through the enrollment and advising process and throughout a student's educational pathway to improve degree completion. They are training enrollment staff and advisers to provide student-centered, adult-friendly, culturally responsive and holistic coaching.
- **Onboarding events:** A community college in LASS decided to build connections based on students' identified profiles. They staffed their onboarding events with their colleagues from financial aid, counseling, technology support and student associations. This allowed staff members who were welcoming the students to offer them holistic support and provide a warm handoff to the department that could help solve their problem.
- **Shifting from the traditional focus of the college:** One of the greatest challenges of serving post-traditional students is shifting the mind-set of an institution that has always served traditional students. One of the public four-year colleges in LASS is conducting outreach and creating cohorts of adult students who have stopped out and is empowering staff to address barriers with more culturally responsive problem solving to increase success.

When a student enrolls in college, they have established a social

contract with the college. Both have a role in helping the student reach their educational goals. Knowing the strengths and needs of the students the college enrolls and providing services to support their educational progression is the "secret sauce" to degree completion.

Deborah Santiago is co-founder and chief executive officer of Excelencia in Education. Beth Doyle is vice president for partner success at the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning.

Beyond the "Plexiglas Promise": Championing Real Change

By Jo Alice Blondin

"The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence -- it is to act with yesterday's logic."

-- Peter Drucker

Our students have faced enormous challenges in the last seven months -- a combination of the COVID pandemic, racial injustice, a mental health and addiction crisis as a result of isolation and despair -- resulting in a collective trauma that higher education must face. Our students, faculty, staff and boards have all been shaped by these experiences in a short time, and to plan for a return to "normal" at some undetermined time in the future is to neglect the new ways that higher education must serve students now and in the future.

We must move beyond the "Plexiglas Promise" -- an invitation and appeal by college leaders to return to a campus that is fundamentally unchanged in its approach to learning and social interaction. Instead, the college has installed Plexiglas and required masks to return students to February 2020, only with these modifications. The Plexiglas Promise wasn't really a

plan as much as an IOU for the status quo. And this approach does a disservice to our students, particularly our most vulnerable populations.

Rather than a return to the past, we must work intentionally and strategically -- with a focus on the future and an equity lens -- to serve students whose needs and expectations have changed. This approach is a tall order in the best of times, but the colleges that focus on positioning and transforming their institutions will fare better in both the short and long terms through the following practices:

- **Transparency should be the focus in all communication and actions.** My first formal communication to Clark State in early March stated, "At times my communication may be incomplete and at other times I will fail in my communication. Please be patient and flexible during these times." With every email, video, push notification, town hall meeting and open-door session for students and employees, the Board of Trustees and I have demonstrated repeatedly to the college that we are listening and working with the best possible information, in good faith.
- **Trauma-informed approaches should be scaled to all aspects of the student experience.** Students, employees and community members alike are experiencing a collective trauma. Are the ways that we have traditionally served our populations exacerbating this trauma? Colleges should inventory every student-facing operation and ask, "Is this helping students complete their goal or hindering them?" Clark State is embarking on an ambitious project to use the Substance Abuse and Mental

Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) concept of trauma and trauma-informed approach framework to overhaul the way we work with students, on both the learning and services sides of our operation.

- **Test new ideas.** Years ago, I banished the phrase “because we have always done it that way” and encouraged our faculty and staff to challenge “the way we have always done it.” Community colleges in particular have built their organizations on the servant leadership of student success. The flexibility and entrepreneurial spirit that we pride ourselves on as we prepare the workforce should translate into unique ways to serve students. A good first step is to gather the data from the student allocation distribution for the federal CARES Act and ask, “Have the needs that students demonstrated from CARES informed current and future practice and services?” Clark State staff made some surprising insights: we assumed most students would request monies for technology, as we thought we were delivering robust wraparound services. It turns out that the majority of our distribution -- nearly 90 percent -- was for the needs we thought we were meeting, such as food, housing, transportation and childcare. We must double down on serving students even more comprehensively in these areas, and have increased collaborations with nonprofits and Ohio Jobs and Family Services during this time.

- **Transform the student experience.** Now is the perfect time to strengthen and make seamless transfer pathways to universi-

ties. Competency-based education must come to scale during this time, and quickly, along with a commitment on the part of every higher education institution to resource prior learning assessments so that students can push deeper into the curriculum and achieve a credential or degree more quickly.

It is also time to address higher education's conception of time, be it the credit hour, semester or time to (two- and four-year) degree. During my 28 years in higher education, I have questioned the coin of our realm: the credit hour. Will a conversation about revisiting the credit hour finally take place? With every college changing, adjusting and modifying their academic calendars, will we substantially rethink the 16-, 12-, 10-, or eight-week semester? Will we offer our classes such that the two- and four-year degree can be compressed?

We have been hearing about disruption in higher education for years, but during COVID times, our response cannot be “in one year, everything will be back to the way it was.” Everything will never be back to the way it was. Our students, faculty, staff, boards, communities and employers have all changed fundamentally in the past seven months, and more changes are in store for us. Perhaps the famous line from L. P. Hartley has never been more relevant to our work in higher education: “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.”

Jo Alice Blondin is president of Clark State Community College.

A Fair Shot at Economic Success and Stability

By Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield

The disproportionate impact that

the pandemic has had on people of color and low-income families is a reminder that we urgently need to advance policies to build an economic recovery that is inclusive and equitable. A recovery where success isn't judged by how much the stock market surges, but is instead determined by how much we invest in those who have been most impacted by this recession and how well we address the structural inequities within our education and workforce policies so that everyone has a fair shot at achieving economic success and stability.

Through the experiences of Charles, Felicia and Heather-Alysia we see the challenges low-income students of color face as they pursue their college dreams. Even before the pandemic, they were swimming upstream in a postsecondary system that has failed to respond to the distinct needs of older students, who are often balancing work, school and family. This unresponsiveness has ramifications. At least **one in five students** is parenting while pursuing postsecondary education, and degree attainment among student parents is low.

A recent HOPE Center survey found that **68 percent** of parenting students were housing insecure in the previous year and 17 percent of parenting students were homeless in 2019. So Charles's experience of living in his car is, unfortunately, not unique.

In their stories we see students who are trying to move up in the labor market to achieve more economic stability. None of them would be surprised to learn that, during the pandemic, workers with a high school degree or less have been displaced at **nearly three times** the rate as those with a bachelor's degree. It's why they continue to pursue certificates and degrees in de-

mand in the labor market despite the challenges laid before them, whether it be homelessness, student debt or familial responsibilities.

Too often, lower-income working students start postsecondary education with great academic aspirations and skills from both work and life experience, but few financial resources. Current postsecondary policies fall short of addressing students' multiple roles as parents, workers and students. Moreover, when existing policies do not place equity front and center, they fail to target the systemic barriers holding back students of color. What these students lack is access to essential supports such as high-quality advising, flexible financial aid, childcare subsidies and career pathways that allow them to stack quality credentials leading to better-paying jobs while on their way to a degree.

Most state financial aid programs do not meet the needs of these students, whether because of their age, circumstances or attendance patterns. States should prioritize low-income students and students of color in a conscious manner by designing debt-free college and free college proposals to focus on these students. Short of that, financial aid policies should be more flexible -- supporting part-time attendance and those who have to stop out and providing aid to those who delay college entry after high school. This will benefit students of color, part-time students, older and returning students, student parents, and immigrants.

Low-income students need supports beyond financial aid, including means-tested public benefits programs like subsidized childcare, food assistance, housing and health insurance. Yet many in-

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Too often,
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Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield

Senior fellow at the National Skills Coalition

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come-support policies have work requirements or restrictions on education and training that limit the combining of resources to cover tuition and fees, childcare, adequate food and stable housing. Both federal and state public benefits policies need to be realigned to support low-income students' postsecondary attendance and completion, so all have more financial resources that offset the need for student loans, and so Charles has stable housing and Heather-Alysia has better support while balancing her and her son's remote schooling.

Employment is front of mind for all three students. All want better jobs and are building valuable skills along their educational pathways. Policies for an inclusive economic recovery arising from the pandemic must incorporate the needs of businesses so that investments in education and training are tied to labor market demand and leverage best practices, like work-based learning, to train workers for skilled positions.

In Felicia's story we see the powerful role large employers can play in supporting students' postsecondary aspirations. The tuition and nontuition supports, like advising, provided by Amazon and Merit

America helped her pay for her IT certificate and hone her career goals to ensure they were aligned with labor market demands so she could land a good job as a software support specialist.

The majority of small and medium-size businesses usually do not have the same resources to invest in employees, so it would be wise for future stimulus legislation to include support for college-employer partnerships that better align education and training offerings to support employment demand and offer the supports students need. We also need institutions and states to align course offerings and accelerate the development of articulation agreements that allow all three students to easily stack their credentials to degrees, even if they change institutions.

Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield is a senior fellow at the National Skills Coalition.

The Road to the American Dream: Finding Purpose in the Detours

By Joshua Christie

"I waited for this moment my whole life," my dad said quiet-

Opinion: Education and Work Without a Safety Net (cont.)

ly while standing in the doorway of the kitchen. He paused for a moment, looked me in the eye and then shook his head.

My twin brother, Jonathan, and I would be first in our family to graduate from college. We were finally going to walk across the stage and receive our diplomas in business management and finance from Rutgers University, Newark -- something my parents had dreamed of since we were little kids.

After all, that's why my parents immigrated here. Originally from Trinidad and Jamaica, they moved to Newark, N.J., in 1991 and 1994 with little but their hopes, dreams and aspirations. Though from different countries, they had so much in common, like many other immigrants.

My parents immigrated here to break the cycle of poverty that ran in their families. They believed they would have more opportunity and hoped to one day achieve the American dream. That meant someday being homeowners. It meant a better life for themselves and the children they hoped to have one day.

For nearly three decades, they have sacrificed so much to make progress towards these dreams. They each worked two jobs to make ends meet. They sacrificed hours upon hours to provide for my brother, sister and me. And last month, one of their dreams -- 21 years in the making -- almost came true.

*"I've had visions, I've had dreams
I've even held them in my hand
But I never knew they would slip
right through like they were only
grains of sand."*

During these uncertain times, I've been reminded of these song lyrics -- they encapsulate our present situation. The visions, the dreams, the aspirations and even the goals I had

for my last semester were at my fingertips, but who would've thought a pandemic would cause them to slip away so quickly?

In March, we moved to online learning because of the pandemic. I missed the dorming experience, meeting new people and spending my last semester with friends.

I also was bummed I didn't get to study abroad like I had planned. The world is a big place, full of endless opportunities. I was looking forward to growing as an individual by experiencing a new culture. As a photographer, I was excited to learn more about myself creatively and explore new ideas.

Most importantly, I envisioned having a job lined up after college. I didn't ever think that I'd graduate into a recession. But I know I'm not alone. So many other graduates also are trying to find jobs during a challenging economy.

Despite certain dreams and visions not playing out as I'd imagined, I'm not losing hope. Hope is the kindling for future dreams and visions, and I keep telling myself that "this too shall pass." The demand for jobs is simply higher than those available right now. Plus, I recognize that I am lucky. I have my own photography business (Purpose Portraits LLC//Joshua Christie Photography) that I can focus on while I seek a full-time creative role in media.

I learned in college -- through a program called Braven -- the importance of combining my passions and my skills to find my future career. It's a life goal of mine to turn my photography side hustle into a full-time endeavor. I've realized that I have what it takes; I just need to work hard to make it a reality. In the meanwhile, I'll continue to refine my skills as I look for job opportunities. I'm currently teach-

ing myself to edit old photo shoots differently.

There's the saying that when life throws you lemons, you should make lemonade. I would take it a step further. Use all the lemons, including the skin. Make a pie. Or in this case, use this opportunity to better yourself. Don't let this chapter be one you skip over. Let it be one you look back on fondly, reminiscing of how much you overcame and grew as a person.

We all have goals we're working toward, and this is just a speed bump in the road. For me, it's carrying the family torch -- the one passed on to me from my parents so their hard work and efforts are not in vain. One day I will grow my business and buy that house my parents have dreamed of for decades.

Joshua Christie is a recent graduate of Rutgers University, Newark.

Reader Comments:

- Instead of focusing on them picking a major then asking "what can I do with this major," have students identify their gifts, skills and knowledge to serve others, asking, "what majors fit best with how I want to serve others?" Help students create educational, experiential, employable and entrepreneurial endeavors based on a specific problem they can solve for others. Provide opportunities for students to develop an entrepreneurial spirit, where they can learn how to create opportunities, instead of just waiting for something (like a job) to come along. Be proactive vs. reactive when it comes to their educational goals. -- *William Johnson*
- Colleges and universities have

Opinion: Education and Work Without a Safety Net (cont.)

not truly appreciated that their collective student populations are not the 'traditional' students of the past. Many institutions with a high percentage of undergraduates still message to the students like all are 17 to 18 years old and live at home. Truly understanding their populations will help them better serve the students who are enrolled. For example, this is especially true for nontraditional students who make up a growing percentage of undergraduates across the country. Their needs (financial and support services related) are different in many cases from the student who is attending college straight from high school. The same is true for the first-gen students who may or not be home and food insecure. Colleges need to do better to communicate and support all students. -- *Patricia Soares*

- It was interesting to hear the sparse level of support the student panelist experienced at their respective universities. I believe Rocque stated that no one in financial services or other areas was helpful to him in his

time of need, and the other panelist made similar comments. The university culture has to be supportive on all levels to assist enrolled students in time of need. It is everyone's responsibility to assist a student at their university, so it hurt me as a student affairs professional to hear the lack of support these students received to be successful from university faculty and staff members. We have to do a better job of helping not one but all students in their academic journey. -- *James Yizar*

- Having academic advisers/mentors who check in on students periodically is critical! This can be done in person/virtually/over text or phone. CBOs that have this as a consistent practice see stronger results in their students. Higher ed needs to do the same if they want to do right by their first-gen, students of color, low-income and nontraditional students. If the ultimate goal is to have students graduate to go on and contribute in their chosen field of study, colleges and universities have to devote people time to students. -- *Vicky Rivera* ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/09/15/essays-how-better-serve-students-lower-income-backgrounds>

COVID-19 and Online Education Decisions

New survey data show pandemic may be disproportionately influencing women to choose online education over in-person options.

By **Lindsay McKenzie** // July 30, 2020



SOURCE: ISTOCK.COM/FILADENDRON

If the world weren't in the grip of a pandemic, the choice to study online, in person or something in between would be roughly the same among men and women, according to recent survey results.

Factoring in COVID-19, however, paints a different picture -- one where women are much less likely than men to choose to study in person, and much more likely to pick a fully online education option.

This gender divide is one of the most striking findings to emerge from a new Strada Education Network study published this week. Since March, Strada has been researching the impact of the pandemic on work and education in the U.S. through weekly or biweekly national surveys.

The latest data release focuses on the value of online learning, with questions indicating how the public

perceives the effectiveness of online education, whether respondents would recommend online programs to their friends and how highly they think online credentials will be valued by future employers.

Diverse Opinions

The [Public Viewpoint: COVID-19 Work and Education](#) survey found that Americans' perceptions of the quality and value of in-person, online or hybrid education vary widely. The majority of respondents, 35 percent, felt that online education offered the best value for money. But online was viewed as the least effective approach for learning, and the least likely to prepare students for success in their job and career. One in 10 survey respondents said they were likely to enroll in an online education or training program in the next six months.

Hybrid education, which mixes

elements of online and in-person education, was a consistently popular option throughout the survey, said Dave Clayton, senior vice president of consumer insights at the Strada Education Network. He doesn't believe respondents were picking hybrid because they couldn't make a decision between online or in person. Rather, he thinks respondents chose this option as they see it as a best-of-both-worlds scenario.

Recent graduates of online programs rated the value of their education higher than graduates of in-person programs. But most Americans (59 percent) believe that in-person education and training is more highly valued by employers than online training -- an interesting result, given that employers wouldn't necessarily know that a credential was completed online unless dis-

COVID-19 and Online Education Decisions

closed by the job candidate. And in recent years an increasing number of major employers have supported workers in obtaining part-time online degrees with subsidized tuition programs.

Preference for online education varied among different demographic groups. People aged 25 to 49 expressed greater enthusiasm for online-only options than people aged 18 to 24, or 50 or older. Black Americans also looked more favorably on online education than Asian, white or Latino respondents, and they had the most confidence in its quality.

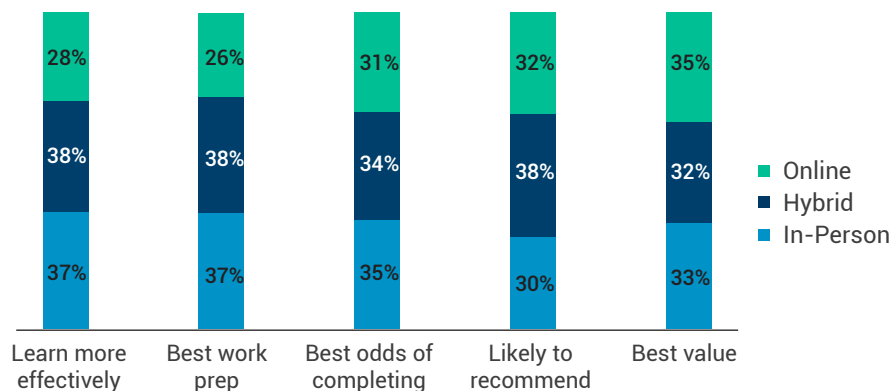
"I can easily see how some Black people would prefer the option of learning from the comfort of their homes, as opposed to sitting physically in classrooms where they are the only or among just a few students who are Black," said Shaun Harper, a professor and executive director of the University of Southern California Race and Equity Center.

"Many Black students frequently experience microaggressions, stereotyping and other acts of racial harm in traditional classrooms," said Harper. "It very well could be that some Black Americans view virtual classrooms as spaces where they might encounter less anti-Blackness."

The preference for online education over in person or hybrid may look different among Black Americans who are considering studying at historically Black colleges and universities, because these institutions "have amassed reputations for being culturally affirming and less racist educational environments for Black students," said Harper.

However, he said Black Americans considering online-only instruction should be wary of predato-

Americans' perceptions of the quality and value of in-person and online education are diverse

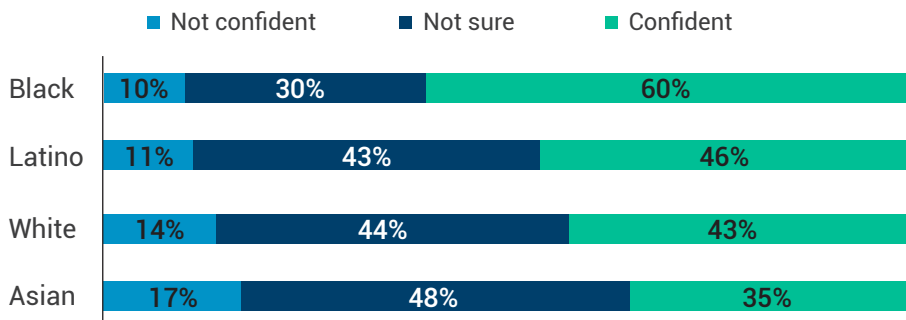


Strada Center for Consumer Insights Public Viewpoint survey, July 8-9. Base: adults 18 and older, n=1,009. Note: percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.



Black Americans have the most confidence in the quality of online education

If you were to go on for additional education ...
You would be confident about the quality of online courses



Strada-Gallup 2020 Education Consumer Survey, Base: Americans ages 18-65, n=10,066.



ry for-profit institutions. "Too many of those institutions prey on low-income Black Americans, particularly Black women who would be returning adult learners. While fully online options might be a convenient and delightful alternative to racist traditional classroom spaces, they could end up costing Black students a lot more money than degrees from those places are ultimately worth."

A Revealing Gender Divide

If COVID-19 were not a threat, roughly three in 10 Americans reported that it would be their prefer-

ence to study online rather than in person or hybrid. Andrew Hanson, director of research at Strada, said this finding indicates an interest in online learning among the public that will endure beyond the pandemic. Before COVID-19, post-high school education was becoming more virtual, said Hanson -- a trend he believes will continue.

While in-person learning was still the preferred modality for respondents who were asked how they would choose to study if COVID-19 was not a concern, both men and women indicated a strong interest

COVID-19 and Online Education Decisions

in hybrid learning. Among women, 41 percent said they would choose in person, 30 percent hybrid and 29 percent fully online. Among men, 42 percent said they would prefer in person, 31 percent hybrid and 27 percent fully online.

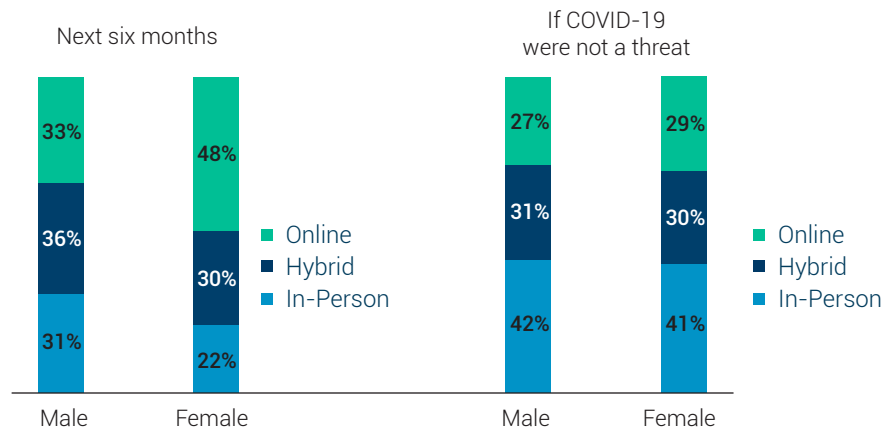
COVID-19 influenced the responses of both men and women when asked what modality they would choose if they enrolled in an education program in the next six months. Men's choices changed slightly, with 33 percent reporting they would choose fully online, 36 percent hybrid and 31 percent in person. But women said they were much more likely to pursue a fully online option, with 48 percent choosing online, 30 percent hybrid and 22 percent in person.

Women have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, and this may be why they feel they cannot pursue in-person education, even if previously this would have been their preference, said C. Nicole Mason, president and CEO of the Institute for Women's Policy Research.

Women are more likely to have lost work because of the pandemic and are more likely to be caring for children or family members at home, making balancing work, education and home life difficult, said Mason.

Currently more women than men

Nearly half of women would choose an exclusively online option if they enrolled in the next six months



Strada Center for Consumer Insights Public Viewpoint survey, July 8-9. Base: adults 18 and older, n=1,009. Note: percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.



are enrolled in higher education programs, but Mason worries that we may see an increase in women, particularly single mothers, dropping out or delaying their education because of insufficient funds and a lack of childcare support.

Both IWPR and the American Association of University Women are pushing for policy makers to introduce more funding for women pursuing higher education during the pandemic. Both organizations are concerned it is exacerbating existing inequalities for women. The IWPR is pushing for student parents to be prioritized in COVID-19 relief funding, among other policy initiatives. Reducing the burden

of student loan debt is among the AAUW's priorities.

Earlier this year, the AAUW published a report that found that women hold nearly two-thirds of the nation's \$1.54 trillion in student loan debt, with Black women holding the most debt when they finish their undergraduate degrees.

"There is an added burden and expectation on women to take care of their families and rearrange their lives because of the pandemic," said Laura Segal, senior vice president of communications and external relations at the AAUW. "When you add to that that students are graduating to record unemployment and a pay gap, it's pretty concerning." ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/07/30/survey-data-reveal-impact-covid-19-perceptions-online-education>

Alternative Credentials on the Rise

Interest is growing in short-term, online credentials amid the pandemic. Will they become viable alternative pathways to well-paying jobs?

By **Paul Fain** // August 27, 2020



SOURCE: ISTOCK.COM/FIZKES

Shorter-term, online alternatives to the college degree are having a moment.

A growing body of evidence has found **strong consumer interest** in recent months in skills-based, online credentials that are clearly tied to careers, particularly among adult learners from diverse and lower-income backgrounds, whom four-year colleges often have struggled to attract and graduate.

The reasons alternative credentials are piquing the interest of more Americans are not new, nor surprising. For years the demographics of higher education **have been shifting away** from traditional-age, full-paying college students while online education has become more sophisticated and accepted.

But a wide range of experts say the unprecedented societal turbu-

lence caused by a pandemic, the worst recession in a century and a national reckoning over racism have accelerated and added urgency to the development of alternative pathways to career and life success.

That has **amplified interest** in recent months among employers, students, workers and policy makers in online certificates, industry certifications, apprenticeships, microcredentials, boot camps and even lower-cost online master's degrees.

For example, 2U, the education technology and online program management company, has seen across-the-board growth in its online offerings, said David Sutphen, the company's chief strategy and engagement officer. That includes its boot camp and short courses,

as well as degree programs offered with college and university partners.

The focus for potential students right now is on career relevance, academic quality and flexible programming, he said. On the short-course side, Sutphen said, the primary draws are courses on disruptive technology (blockchain and financial tech), functional job skills (digital marketing), and soft skills around leadership.

"A combination of these kinds of skills are the things that people are looking for," he said.

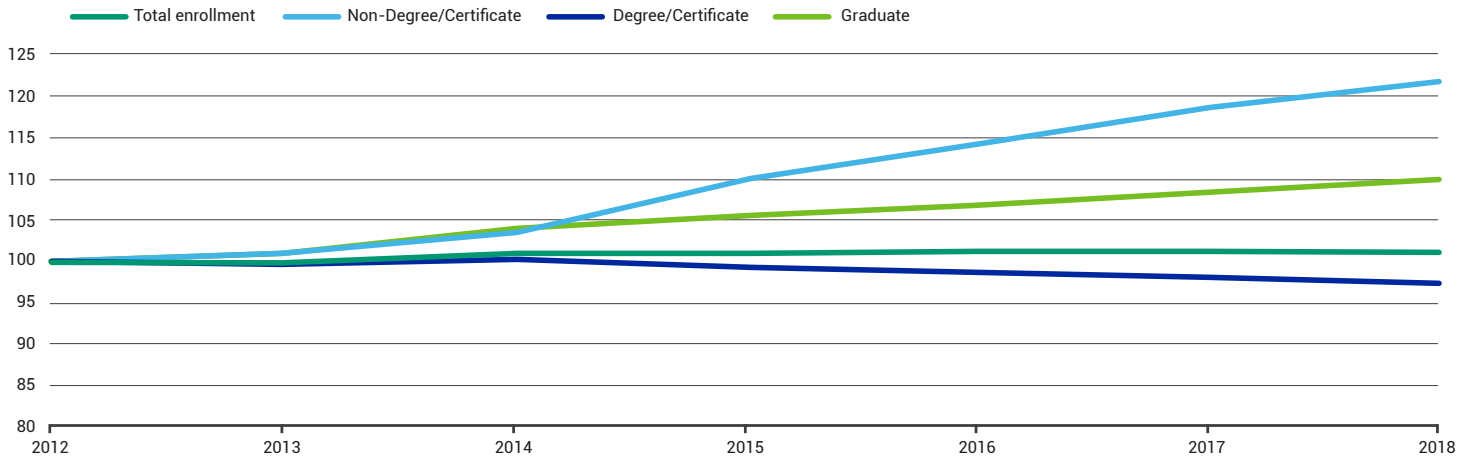
Accelerated Growth

Moody's, the credit ratings firm, on Wednesday said online and nondegree programs are **growing at a rapid pace**.

"The move toward online and hybrid education (a combination

Alternative Credentials on the Rise (cont.)

While still a small share, undergraduate nondegree/certificate programs will likely remain a fast-growing market segment
Index 2012 = 100



SOURCE: Moody's, U.S. Department of Education

of online and on-campus) will accelerate with the pandemic forcing many previously reluctant universities to launch or expand digital capabilities," said Moody's. "The coronavirus will also accelerate growth of nontraditional programs such as undergraduate nondegree/certificate programs, where career-advancement courses can be completed discretely and bundled into a degree."

While short-term credentials accounted for only 10 percent of total enrollment in 2018, Moody's projected they will remain a fast-growing market segment even after the pandemic subsides.

Moody's also said corporate partnerships with higher education on the curriculum design for short-term credentials are projected to expand, as colleges increasingly focus on their "value proposition and making their graduates attractive to potential employers."

The information technology industry continues to lead the way. For example, Google in July announced it soon **will roll out** three new online "career certificate" programs, adding to its **popular** IT

support specialist online certificate, which is offered on Coursera's platform. Coursera also has been booming amid the pandemic.

Google will fund 100,000 need-based scholarships for the certificates, and said it will consider them the "equivalent of a four-year degree" for related roles.

"College degrees are out of reach for many Americans, and you shouldn't need a college diploma to have economic security," Kent Walker, Google's senior vice president of global affairs, said in a statement. "We need new, accessible job-training solutions -- from enhanced vocational programs to online education -- to help America recover and rebuild."

Google isn't alone in this push. **IBM, Facebook, Salesforce** and **Microsoft** are creating their own short-term, skills-based credentials. Several tech companies also are dropping degree requirements for some jobs, as is the **federal government**, while the White House, employers and some higher education groups have collaborated on an **Ad Council campaign** to tout alternatives to the college degree.

Experts point to health care and education as other fields ripe for the expansion of short-term, online credentials, although both sectors include plenty of licensing and other requirements.

"The cloistered four-year college experience was designed to be a luxury good. And that's why it's so expensive," said Paul Freedman, president of the learning marketplace at Guild Education, a growing player in online and work-oriented postsecondary education. "The majority of people who participate in a college experience will do it differently, and they're going to start with something that gets them a job first."

However, the jury is out on labor-market results from short-term education and training, said Freedman.

"The ultimate question is whether the outcome is going to be same," he said. "That's where the data is still unclear."

Few have more experience monitoring alternative credentials and consumer interest in online learning than Sean Gallagher, an executive professor of education policy

Alternative Credentials on the Rise (cont.)

at Northeastern University.

"This looks to be a catalytic moment," said Gallagher, who is the founder and executive director of Northeastern's Center for the Future of Higher Education and Talent Strategy. "Like what's happened with the rapid digitization of so many other areas of our daily lives, we've probably gained in a few months a level of interest and participation in online education that would have steadily played out over years."

Likewise, he says rapid developments with the recession and COVID-19 lockdowns have driven people to look for "what can I do today?" with their education and skills training, and they have moved away from the longer-term investment and multiyear decision making that go into pursuing a college degree.

"Why commit to a long-term investment when your situation and options may change in a month?" Gallagher said via email.

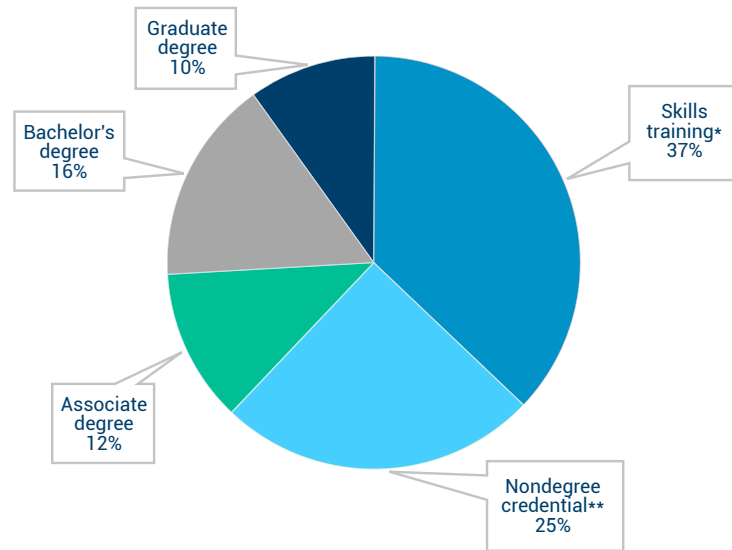
Preference for Nondegree Options

One of the most consistent findings in a nationally representative poll conducted by the Strada Education Network's Center for Consumer Insights over the last five months has been a preference for nondegree and skills training options.

One in five Americans has said they plan to enroll in an education program in the next six months, according to Strada's Public Viewpoint survey on COVID-19's impact on adults' work and education.

Skills training tops the list of preferred education options (37 percent) among respondents if they were to enroll in a program in the next six months, followed by nondegree credentials (25 percent). Rounding out the list were the

Preferred education option for those seeking one within six months



Strada Center for Consumer Insights Public Viewpoint survey, April 15-Aug. 6. Base: adults ages 18 and older, n=5,272.
*Courses for skills training or personal development. **Certificate, certification, or license.

bachelor's degree (16 percent), associate degree (12 percent) and graduate degree (10 percent).

With new data released yesterday, the Public Viewpoint poll asked what's behind the preference for nondegree and skills-based training.

Americans who favor nondegree programs or skills training place more emphasis on value than do those who plan to choose a degree path. Relevance -- whether a credential is required or applicable to work, or a better fit for personal needs -- was the most commonly cited driver by both groups.

Another top finding by Strada's survey so far is that the pandemic has exacerbated inequity in work and postsecondary education, as the crisis has disproportionately harmed Latino, Black and lower-income Americans.

For example, results released in June found that about one-quarter of Black and Latino respondents had been laid off, substantially higher shares than white and Asian Americans. Black and Latino

respondents also were likely to report starting new jobs.

Those who have lost jobs or pay are more likely to say they will pursue more education and training, said Andrew Hanson, director of research for Strada's Consumer Insights. One in five respondents plan to enroll in the next six months, compared to 40 percent of those whose livelihoods have suffered during the pandemic.

"Millions of Americans have had their work disrupted," he said, which "has pushed them to consider a new option."

'Retraining for What?'

Despite growing skepticism about the value of a college degree, it remains the best ticket to a well-paying job and career. And data have shown that college degrees have been a cushion amid the pandemic and recession.

"College workers are not experiencing the same crisis that noncollege workers are," said Mary Alice McCarthy, director of the Center on Education and Skills with the education policy program at New

Alternative Credentials on the Rise (cont.)

America.

While short-term training could help displaced workers re-enter the job market, that question largely remains open.

"Retraining for what?" McCarthy asked. "The real problem is the lack of jobs."

Examples like Google's certificates do have promising historical precedents, she said, pointing to automakers' investment in education and job training after World War II. But employers need to invest in the credential infrastructure to ensure that they feature skills that can be built on, ideally to a future college degree.

The pandemic "has revealed how pervasive inequality is in our labor markets," said McCarthy. "That's the crisis we need to fix."

The new data from Strada show consumers also care about stackability of credentials -- meaning that they would lead to additional education or training in the future. One in 10 respondents cited stackability as a driver of their education preferences.

Perhaps surprisingly, this is particularly true among respondents with a high school education or less, who say stackability is the second most important factor in deciding among degree and non-degree options.

For alternative credentials to truly take off, and to be of durable value to learners, they must

be both stackable and portable, meaning they have value beyond an employer or industry that validates them, said Jane Oates, the president of WorkingNation and a former official at the U.S. Department of Labor during the Obama administration.

"It can't just be for one region or one employer," she said.

Agreeing with Oates on the portability issue was Louis Soares, chief learning and innovation officer for the American Council on Education. Being trained in one company's offerings could leave workers hanging if that technology goes belly up, like when Betamax lost out to VHS videocassettes during the format war of the 1980s.

Additionally, Soares wondered what the minimum amount of embedded skills training will be for a short-term credential to have value in the job market. And the proof, he said, will be in regional labor market results.

But he said short-term credentials are showing initial promise amid severe disruptions to the economy.

"The job prospects for people are increasingly emerging in fields where there are a lot of demonstrable, measurable skills," said Soares. "The labor market is presenting in more granular ways."

Likewise, large employers appear to be remaining committed to subsidizing postsecondary education

and training options -- or creating their own credentials -- despite the recession.

Experts had long speculated that employer interest in alternative credential pathways would wither when low employment rates went away, which they certainly have with the 16.3 million Americans out of work in July and a national unemployment rate of 10.2 percent, according to [federal data](#), which likely understates the pain felt by many Americans.

Yet some big employers, including Amazon, are [paying to retrain workers](#) for jobs outside the company as it restructures. And Guild's employer partners are doubling down on their debt-free, online education programs for workers, said Freedman, who cited Walmart's move in June to [expand the eligibility](#) of its employee tuition benefits.

"It hasn't gone the direction of past recessions," he said.

As IBM, Microsoft and other tech giants create and endorse alternative credentials, it could begin to loosen higher education's long-time "monopoly on signal" in hiring, said Freedman.

"These organizations have credibility. They're putting their name on a product," he said, which in turn helps smaller employers have faith in alternative credentials. "If Google's brand is on it, that gives them credibility to hire the graduates." ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/08/27/interest-spikes-short-term-online-credentials-will-it-be-sustained>

Opinion: Postsecondary Paradox -- Consumer Perspectives on the Value of Higher Education

Colleges and universities have an opportunity to better serve millions of American adults without a postsecondary degree, Dave Clayton writes.

By **Dave Clayton** // Sept. 28, 2020



SOURCE: ISTOCK.COM/PEOPLEIMAGES

When the COVID-19 pandemic upended our economy, sending millions of Americans to the unemployment lines, it was natural to anticipate an influx of displaced workers as newly enrolled students. That is the historical pattern: when economic downturns threaten the stability of workers' lives, they turn to higher education's promise of advancing careers and increasing wages.

Except this time there's a paradox roiling under the surface of enrollment trends.

These countercurrents in decision making are most clearly seen among adults without college degrees considering additional education. They **simultaneously report** increased interest -- up 21 points due to COVID-19 -- and decreased confidence that education or train-

ing will be valuable. In the past year, that confidence has fallen precipitously. The percentage of aspiring adults who strongly believe additional education will be worth the cost has dropped from 37 percent to 18 percent. It's even worse for expectations that additional education will help them get a good job, down from 56 percent a year ago to 24 percent today.

Americans feel a greater need for education's promised upward mobility, but their faith in this promise is shaken.

The pandemic's crucible revealed this paradox, created over time as education consumer sentiments have shifted with the forces of globalization, technological advancement and the labor market. It presents both a challenge and an opportunity for institutions

to learn, adapt and deliver on the value of higher education. Success will come through greater alignment between learners' needs and aspirations and the education and training institutions provide.

It's important to recognize that Americans are not questioning average lifetime earnings premiums from education, or its intrinsic value. Two-thirds of the public agrees that getting more education will be essential to having a good job in a time of economic uncertainty. But they are wondering about their personal decisions to pursue more education or training.

It's analogous to the tension between population health and personalized medicine. The statistical averages say you don't need the referral to the specialist, but something isn't right, and you feel com-

Opinion: Postsecondary Paradox -- Consumer Perspectives on the Value of Higher Education (cont.)

pelled to know why and what to do. It's personal.

Education consumers -- past, present and prospective students -- have identified the touchstone that changes their personal value equation: relevance.

Our nationally representative Strada-Gallup survey of more than 350,000 Americans shows that, more than considerations like income, school ranking or cost of attendance, individual beliefs about the value of their education are **most closely tied to its relevance in their work** and daily lives. Relevance ratings are highly correlated with an individual's belief that their education and training were worth the cost, were high quality and were helpful in finding a job. The same database also shows that pathways, majors and fields of study more closely associated with career preparation receive higher value ratings. Engineering, education and healthcare, for example, fare better than business and the liberal arts if graduates do not pursue postgraduate degrees.

The pandemic's pressure on education's value equation is revealed in two related surveys of learners, completed in September 2019 and 2020. Last year, **more than three-quarters of aspiring adult learners** without degrees believed postsecondary education or training would be worth the cost; nearly 9 in 10 believed it would lead to a good job. Just one year later, the belief it would be worth the cost has dropped 18 points (to 59 percent). The belief that it will

lead them to a good job is down 25 points (to 64 percent).

The lack of clear relevance -- that in a faltering job market, the cost and sacrifice will pay off with meaningful career outcomes -- appears to be deflating aspiring adult learners' confidence that postsecondary education, or at least certain pathways, hold the answer to their hardships.

This need for relevance also shapes the nature of the increased interest in education and training. Immediate financial pressure and uncertainty about the shape of an economic recovery has **led to a preference** for short-term, nondegree (25 percent) or skills-training (37 percent) programs, outpacing bachelor's degree programs (16 percent) by a significant margin.

Looking through the lens of relevance, the interest in these programs is understandable. They have a clearly defined focus with specific skills-development goals, and a line of sight to specific employment opportunities. Alums of these programs are more likely to say their education was relevant to their career goals -- and more *valuable*.

This doesn't mean that the answer is simply to offer more -- or point more people to -- nondegree programs. To do so would be shortsighted and undermine the potential for gains during periods of recovery, when college-educated workers typically capture the lion's share of economic gains. But it does suggest that colleges and universities have an opportunity

to integrate immediate skills and credentials that carry labor market value into degree pathways. Individuals who have succeeded in nondegree programs and had a positive educational experience are more likely to seek more of it in the future. Colleges and universities can meet that interest by connecting with other nondegree providers, or by providing both offerings through their own curriculum. In this way, colleges and universities have the opportunity to be gateways to lifelong learning rather than gatekeepers.

These are especially important considerations for supporting the millions of American adults without a postsecondary degree. And it comes at a time when these individuals -- who disproportionately come from low-income households and communities of color long underserved by the current system -- need it most.

Adult learners' confidence in higher education's promise has eroded over time and collapsed with the pandemic, but data show the formula to rebuild it is not complicated. It starts with including their voices in how we define the value of postsecondary education. When programs demonstrate a clear path to learners' career goals and are responsive to the real and perceived barriers that prevent learners from pursuing them, education programs deliver rational, practical and achievable purpose.

And learners can more clearly understand what they've gained from that journey -- and value it. ■

Bio

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