



BARRY DARNELL

“It’s a little stressful when I think of it...”

Results of a national survey and interviews with never-enrolled adults on the factors that drive them to consider postsecondary education and the barriers to enrollment

cael.org



Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
Introduction.....	4
Key Findings	5
Financial Considerations.....	5
Time and Flexibility.....	9
Confidence in Ability to Succeed....	11
Online Processes and Content.....	12
Recommendations.....	16
Conclusion	18
Acknowledgments	18
Methodology	18
About CAEL	18

Executive Summary

There are currently more than 62 million American adults whose highest educational attainment is a high school diploma or its equivalent (U.S. Census Current Population Survey, 2021). Many of these adults have considered postsecondary education, and some even applied for a program. Yet, for various reasons, these adults never began a program of study. CAEL conducted a national survey and individual interviews to understand these adults' perspectives of postsecondary education. These research endeavors explored the process by which these adults explored postsecondary options and revealed what most factored into their decisions not to apply or enroll. This report details the research findings and offers recommendations to address enrollment barriers for adults without prior postsecondary education.

Key Findings

- **Financial considerations** are the most significant factor when adults decide whether to apply, enroll, or begin a program of study. In addition to price and cost, the opportunity to earn more money is the one of the most common reasons adults consider postsecondary education.
- **Time** is a barrier for never-enrolled adults: both having the time to fit education into their busy schedules and how long a program takes to complete. Adults often search for flexibly-scheduled programs and online options.
- Never-enrolled adults often cited a **lack of confidence** in their decisions not to pursue postsecondary education. Faced with too little—or too much—information, they reported difficulty matching a program to their desired future goals.
- Never-enrolled adults **rely primarily on online sources for information** as they research educational options, underscoring how important it is for postsecondary educators to provide online information that prospective adult learners find most helpful for decision-making.

Results of a national survey
and interviews with
never-enrolled adults

cael.org

Recommendations

The following recommendations address how institutions can more effectively engage with prospective adult learners:

1. **Addressing Affordability:** Resolve cost barriers through scholarships and grants, align cost with concepts of value (e.g., career opportunities; opportunities for further study) and promote methods for affording education over the sticker price for a semester or degree.
2. **Improving Communication:** Prioritize navigation and personalization when building content designed to guide prospective adult learners through the enrollment process.
3. **Easing Processes of Enrollment:** Make applications easy to locate, simple to complete, and affordable to submit.
4. **Clarifying Academic Pathways:** Provide pathways to program completion that consider traditional, part-time, and accelerated schedules.
5. **Using Storytelling:** When promoting programs and services to prospective adult learners, include stories that show how a diverse group of adult learners have successfully navigated programs at your institution.
6. **Focusing on Flexibility:** Where possible, provide course content through multiple modes and at different times of the day and week.
7. **Personalizing Outreach:** Personalized engagement at each touchpoint of the research, application, and enrollment journey supports adults when they most need it.
8. **Enlisting Strategy:** Understanding the above priorities, institutional leadership should ensure that the people involved with the outreach and engagement process for prospective adult learners have the resources needed to personalize engagement with them.

Some surveyed and interviewed adults periodically revisit the decision to pursue postsecondary education. Adult-friendly programming and marketing may help re-engage those who previously stopped out of the enrollment process. By mitigating common barriers that prospective adult learners face, institutions can focus efforts on the guidance, content, and support they need to enroll successfully.

Results of a national survey
and interviews with
never-enrolled adults

cael.org

Introduction

There are currently more than 62 million American adults whose highest educational attainment is a high school diploma or its equivalent (U.S. Census Current Population Survey, 2021). Many of these adults have considered postsecondary education, and some even applied for a program. Yet, for various reasons, these adults never began a program of study. This report focuses on these individuals' perceptions of postsecondary education, what factors they found most important as they explored options, and what factored into their decisions not to apply or enroll.

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) partnered with Hanover Research to conduct in-depth interviews with 29 adults who have never enrolled in a postsecondary program. Based on insights from these interviews, CAEL and Hanover Research conducted a national survey of 2,013 never-enrolled adults. Survey participants had a high school diploma or equivalency but no further education beyond on-the-job training. To be eligible to participate in the survey, respondents must have had at least slight familiarity with postsecondary education, have considered applying to a program within the last two years, and never have begun a program of study.

Note that a small sample of these individuals submitted applications to a postsecondary institution and may have been accepted into a postsecondary institution. For various reasons, none of them chose to begin their program. For this report, we refer to the population of interviewed and surveyed adults as "never-enrolled."

Guiding the study were the following objectives:

1. Uncover the factors that lead to a student's decision to pursue education.
2. Understand how prospective students research and choose different programs.
3. Identify the reasons why participants do not follow through with the application process.

The vast majority of the surveyed adults (82%) indicated they had considered applying but did not submit an application; of those who did apply and were accepted, 28% said they did not enroll and 65% said that they did go as far as enrolling, but did not begin their first course (Figures 1 and 2).

FIGURE 1

Application submission for never-enrolled adults who considered applying (n=2,013)

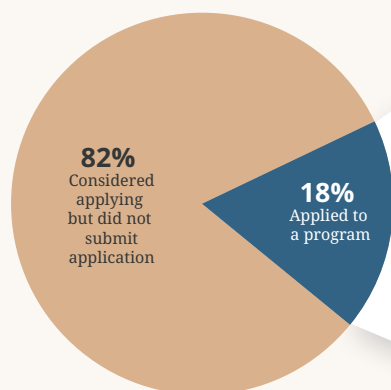
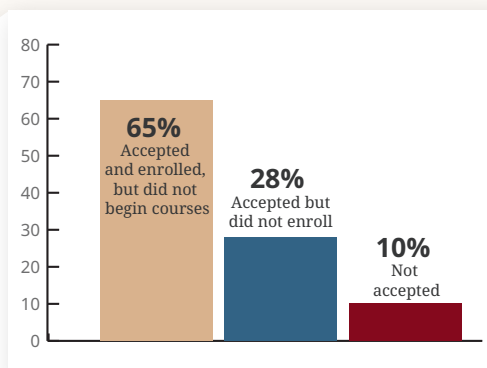


FIGURE 2

Application and enrollment outcomes for never-enrolled adults who submitted an application (n=361)



**IT'S A LITTLE STRESSFUL
WHEN I THINK OF IT...**

Results of a national survey
and interviews with
never-enrolled adults

cael.org

This report summarizes the findings and insights from the research efforts. In response to these findings and insights, this report offers recommendations for postsecondary institutions and adult learner advocates, particularly regarding the application process, enrollment, and program design. These recommendations address financial considerations, time, confidence, and navigating online information.

Key Findings

Barriers to application, enrollment, and taking courses are influenced and ultimately determined by the following factors: financial considerations, time, confidence, and online research experiences.

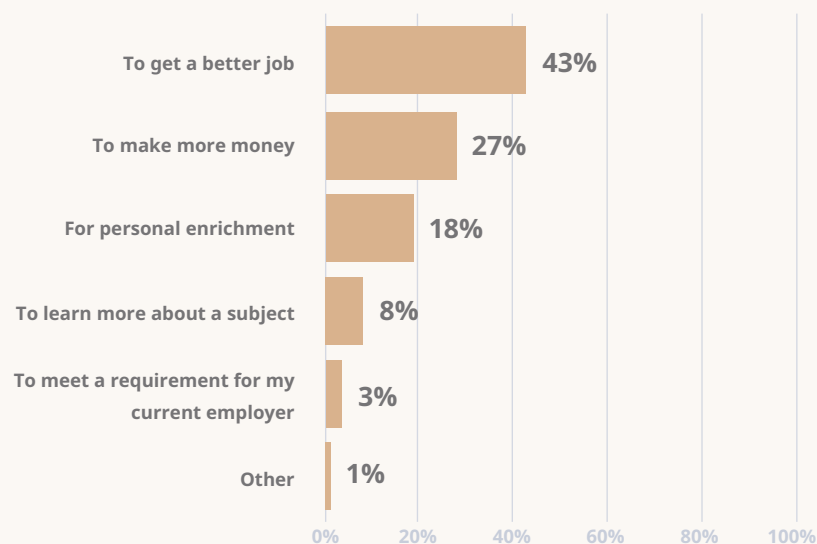
Financial Considerations

Interviewees and survey respondents agreed that financial considerations matter at every stage of the decision-making process. These considerations include application fees, enrollment costs, and the increased earnings they often associate with postsecondary completion. The upfront out-of-pocket costs for the application and enrollment process dissuade many adults from pursuing the programs they see as stepping stones to career advancements.

Most of the surveyed adults (70%) reported that their primary reason for considering a postsecondary program was financial: to get a better job (43%) or to make more money (27%) (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3

Main reason for never-enrolled adults to consider enrollment (n=2,013)



IT'S A LITTLE STRESSFUL WHEN I THINK OF IT...

Results of a national survey and interviews with never-enrolled adults

cael.org

Several interviewed adults expressed that they perceive postsecondary education as a pathway to improve their circumstances:

“I see that the jobs are better when you have college education. When you have degrees, you get paid better.”

— Occupation: Access Specialist, Did Not Apply

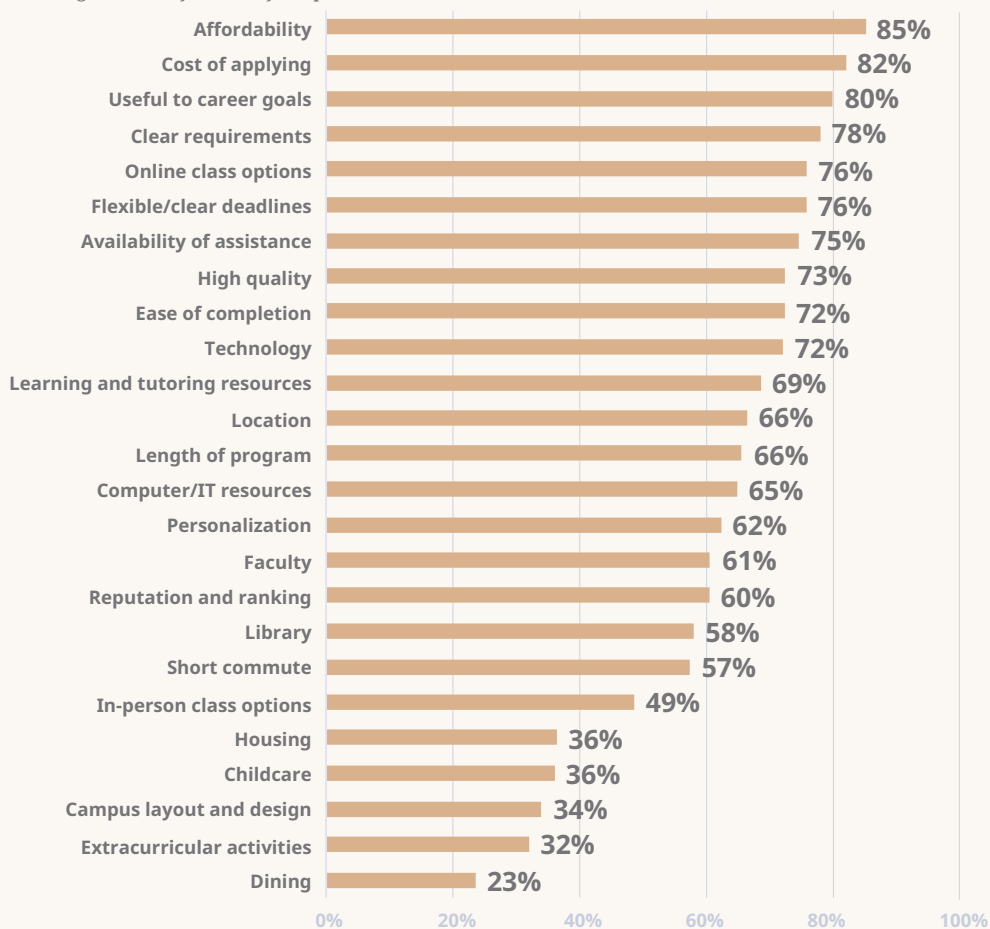
“The value that I see in attending college or university is to gain skills and learn things that I can use to better my opportunities for a better job, for a better career.”

— Occupation: Retail Worker, Applied but Did Not Enroll

The surveyed adults shared the considerations they found important to them while researching a postsecondary program. The top two factors in terms of importance are the affordability of their program (85%) and the cost of the application itself (82%). Aligning with the prior point about career relevance, 80% of survey respondents pinpointed the usefulness of the program to career goals as a “very” or “extremely” important attribute (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4

Importance of various factors when considering postsecondary education, percent of never-enrolled adults indicating “extremely” or “very” important (n=2,013)



**IT'S A LITTLE STRESSFUL
WHEN I THINK OF IT...**

Results of a national survey and interviews with never-enrolled adults

cael.org

Half of the survey respondents (50%) indicated that they did not apply to a program because they could not afford the program cost; 29% indicated that they could not afford the price of the application (Figure 5). Among those who applied but chose not to begin a program of study, one-third (33%) reported that they did not have enough financial aid, and 23% reported that the program was too expensive (Figure 6).

FIGURE 5

Reasons for not applying among never-enrolled adults who did not apply (n=1,652)

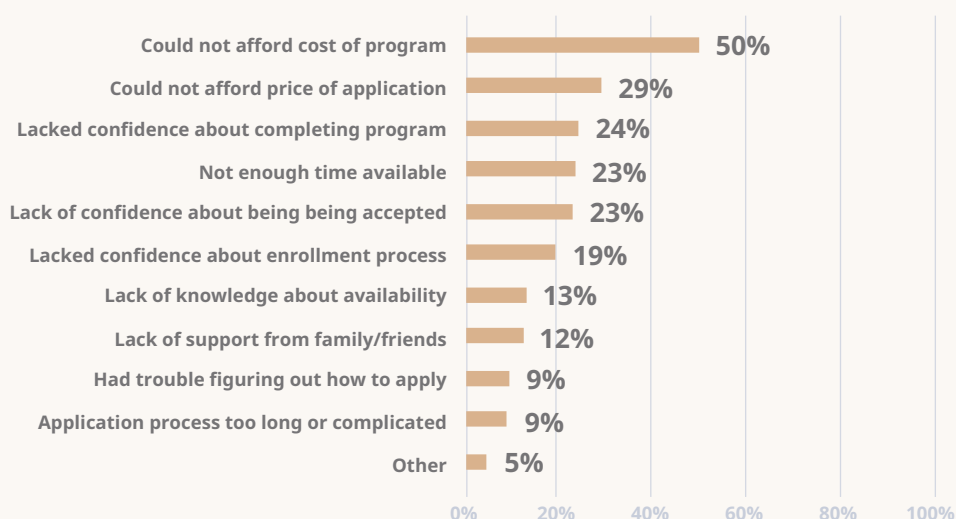
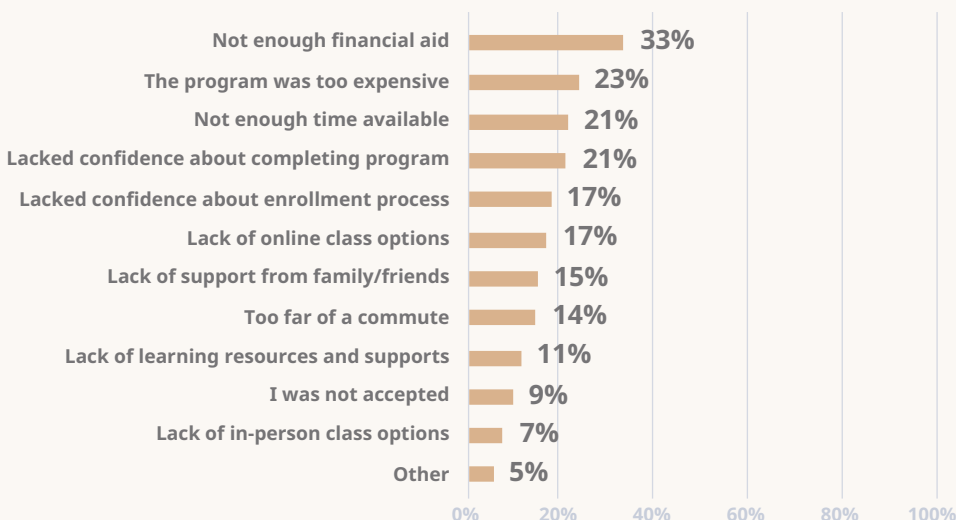


FIGURE 6

Reasons for not enrolling, among never-enrolled adults who did apply (n=361)



IT'S A LITTLE STRESSFUL WHEN I THINK OF IT...

Results of a national survey and interviews with never-enrolled adults

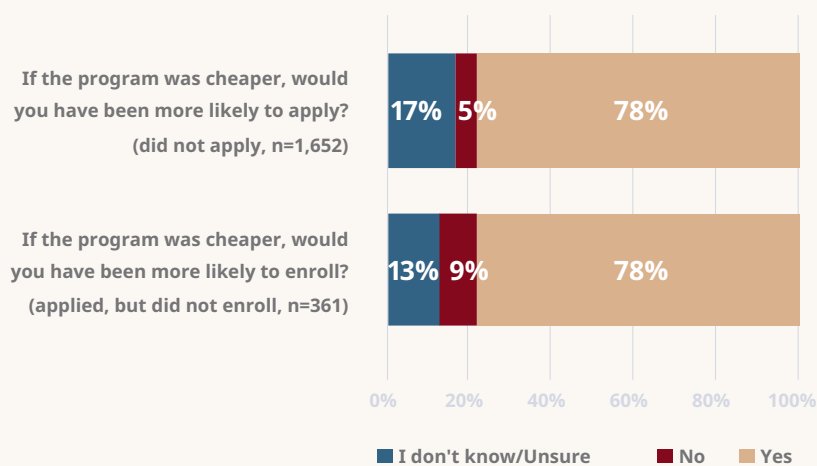
cael.org

Additionally, 78% of non-applicants said they would have been more likely to apply to a program if it had been cheaper; similarly, 78% of those who applied but did not enroll said they would have been more likely to enroll if the program had been cheaper (Figure 7). Notably, 73% of the never-enrolled adults said that lower costs would make them more likely to enroll in the future (Figure 8).

These data show that upfront costs are the most common barrier adults face when considering enrollment. From the application process to enrollment and registration, prospective adult learners assess whether they can afford the cost of each step. Thus, adults continuously encounter financial barriers in their attempts to enroll in postsecondary programs, which leads to reconsidering and, at times, abandoning the process after being accepted by their institution.

FIGURE 7

Likelihood of applying or enrolling, if program was cheaper, among never-enrolled adults



**IT'S A LITTLE STRESSFUL
WHEN I THINK OF IT...**

Results of a national survey
and interviews with
never-enrolled adults

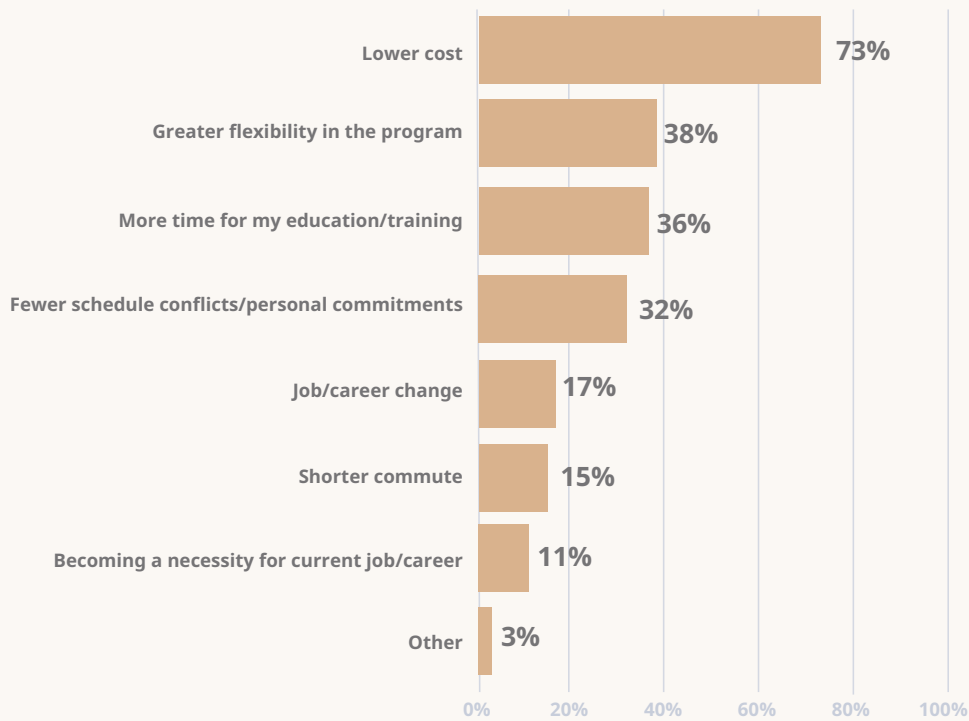
cael.org

Time and Flexibility

Time management emerged as another common issue identified by survey participants: 38% of respondents said that greater flexibility in the program would make them more likely to enroll in the future, and 36% said they would be more likely to enroll if they had more time for their education and training (Figure 8).

FIGURE 8

Factors that would make future enrollment more likely, among never-enrolled adults (n=2,013)



IT'S A LITTLE STRESSFUL WHEN I THINK OF IT...

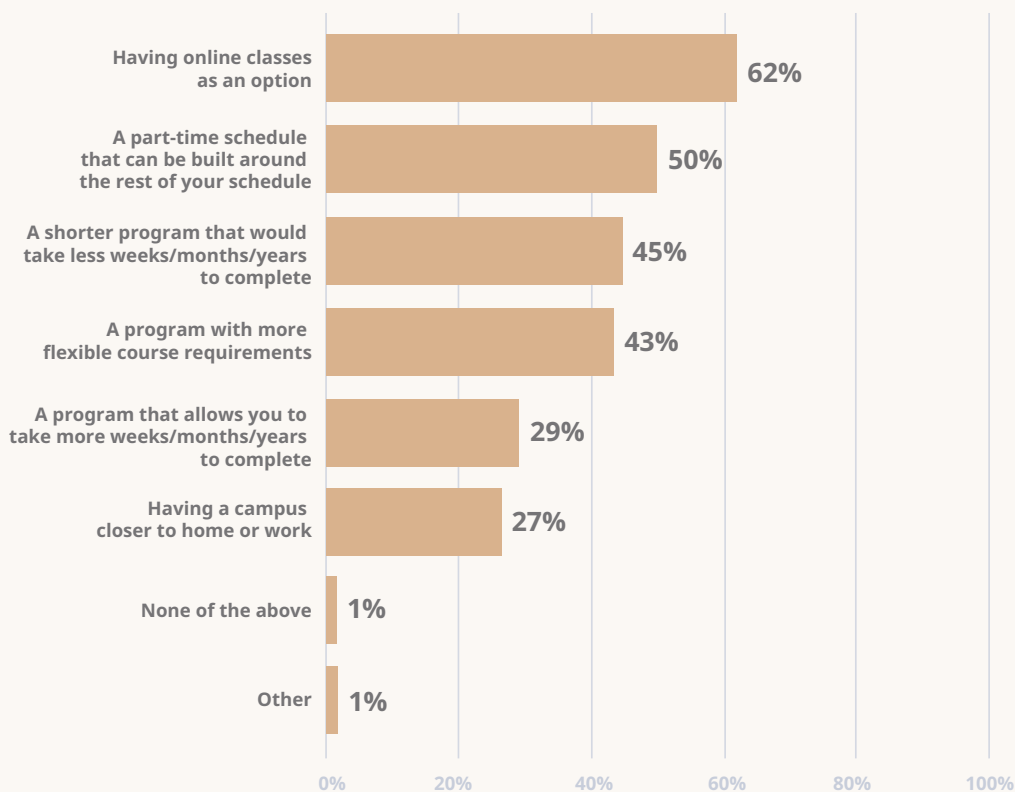
Results of a national survey and interviews with never-enrolled adults

cael.org

Respondents reported concern with how long their studies could take to complete and how to integrate their education into their busy lives. The scheduling and flexibility attributes most important to the survey respondents include the availability of online courses (62%), part-time and flexible programs (50%), and shorter time to completion (45%) (Figure 9).

FIGURE 9

Scheduling and flexibility options that would make you more likely to enroll, among never-enrolled adults (n=1,449)



One interviewed adult who did not apply for a program said:

“It would be nice if they had an accelerated pace so you could get it done in a shorter amount of time. Also, the opposite of that, which would be a slower pace that you could do on your own time.”

— Occupation: Household Manager, Did Not Apply

These adults anticipate obstacles related to time management and the flexibility of available programs/courses. Early enrollment coaching and advising should include strategies for navigating common barriers that adults face, especially those related to managing education alongside work and family commitments for the duration of a program.

IT'S A LITTLE STRESSFUL WHEN I THINK OF IT...

Results of a national survey and interviews with never-enrolled adults

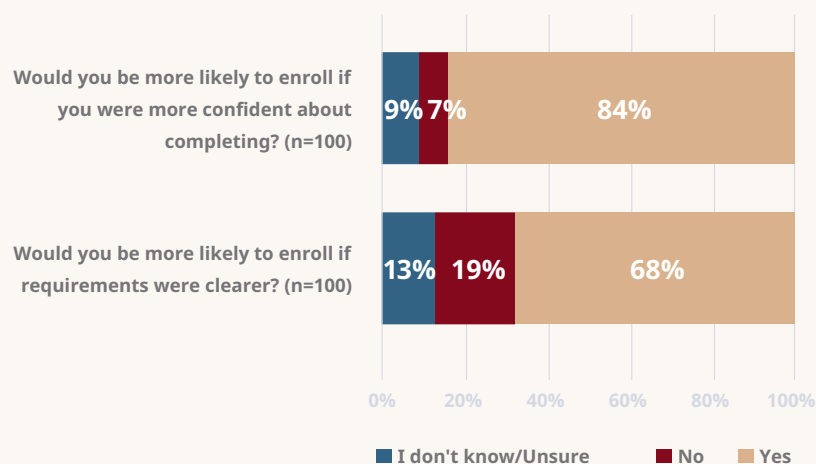
cael.org

Confidence in Ability to Succeed

Many adults who have never enrolled in postsecondary education lack confidence in their ability to complete a program of study. Of those who abandoned the enrollment process, 84% reported that they would have been more likely to enroll had they felt more confident in completing their program. Further, 68% of those adults would have been more likely to enroll if the requirements were clearer (Figure 10).

FIGURE 10

Factors that would make never-enrolled adults more likely to enroll



As interviewees researched the enrollment process, cost, and requirements for postsecondary programs, their confidence in their ability to succeed diminished. One adult who applied, but ultimately did not enroll, stated:

“Passing a test, getting grades, doing a lot of study. To me, it’s a little stressful when I think of it.”

Occupation: Retail Worker, Applied but Did Not Enroll

**IT'S A LITTLE STRESSFUL
WHEN I THINK OF IT...**

Results of a national survey
and interviews with
never-enrolled adults

cael.org

Another interviewee indicated that while trying to identify a best-fit program of study:

“It’s quite overwhelming when there are so many options, and you get decision paralysis.”

—Occupation: Sushi Chef, Applied but Did Not Enroll

Prospective adult learners would benefit from a straightforward process, guidance and support throughout applying and enrolling, and positive reinforcement through contact with admissions staff.

Adults also look for examples of people like them succeeding in postsecondary education. One interviewed adult said they would like to see such examples while researching programs:

“Show some examples of some older people — not older, but you know what I mean — adults getting their degrees.”

—Occupation: Warehouse Worker, Did Not Apply

Such examples demonstrate to prospective adult learners that the program accommodates students like them, and students like them go on to be successful.

Online Processes and Content

Adult learner-serving postsecondary institutions face the challenge of a short window of time to capture the attention of a prospective student. Most (87%) never-enrolled adults researched programs online, with 73% of that group using search engines and 67% visiting institutional websites (Figures 11 and 12). Only 24% knew exactly which degree or program they were interested in pursuing, with more than half (57%) having just a general idea (Figure 13). The three most common pieces of information that they are looking for in their research are price (71%), online class options (64%), and financial aid (63%) (Figure 14). More than half (60%) said that they spent two weeks or less conducting research (Figure 15).

“It’s quite overwhelming when there are so many options, and you get decision paralysis.”

Occupation:
Sushi Chef, Applied but
Did Not Enroll

IT'S A LITTLE STRESSFUL WHEN I THINK OF IT...

Results of a national survey and interviews with never-enrolled adults

cael.org

FIGURE 11

Sources consulted during research on postsecondary programs by never-enrolled adults (n=1,891)

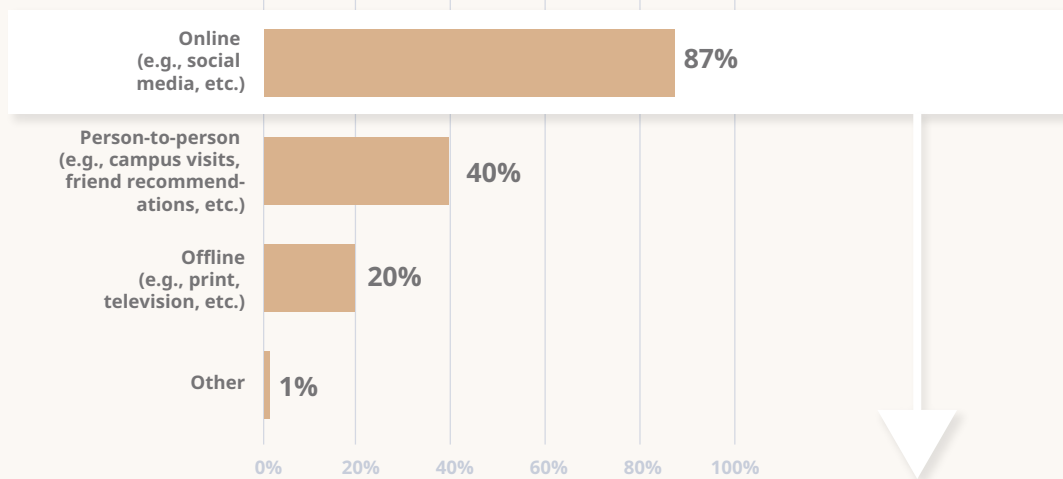
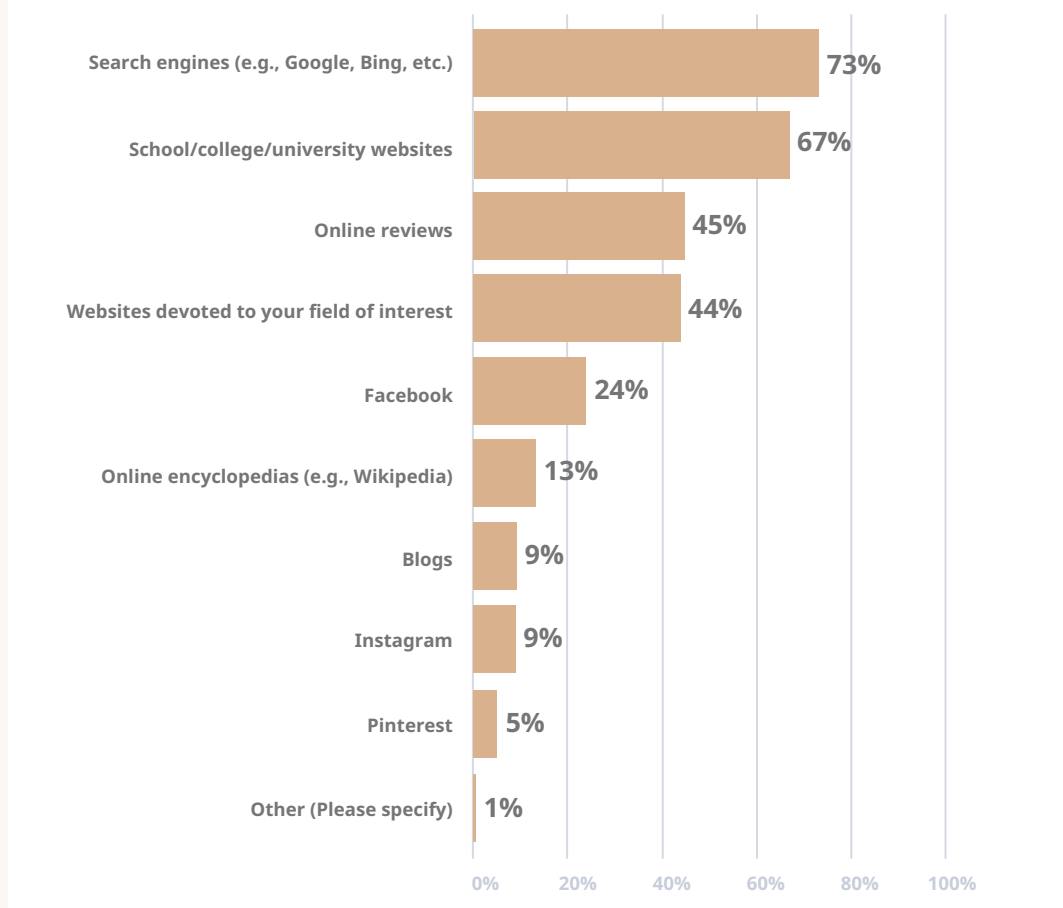


FIGURE 12

Online resources consulted during research on postsecondary programs by never-enrolled adults (n=1,649)



IT'S A LITTLE STRESSFUL WHEN I THINK OF IT...

Results of a national survey and interviews with never-enrolled adults

cael.org

FIGURE 13

Extent to which never-enrolled adults know what degree/program they want to pursue, prior to beginning research (n=2,013)

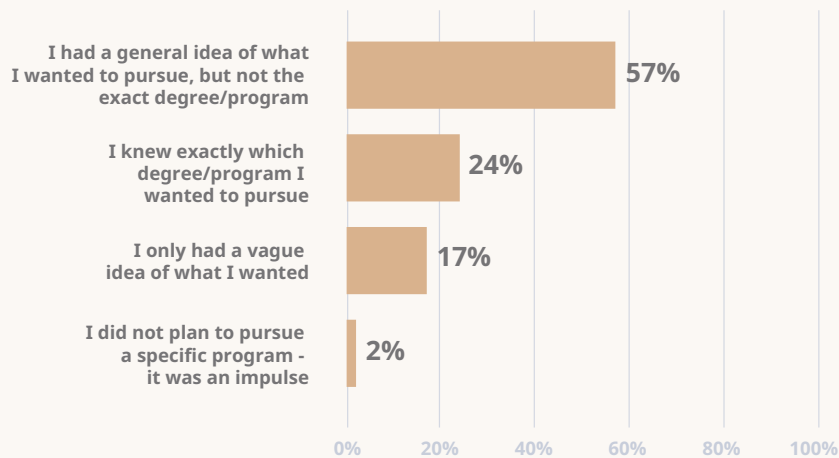
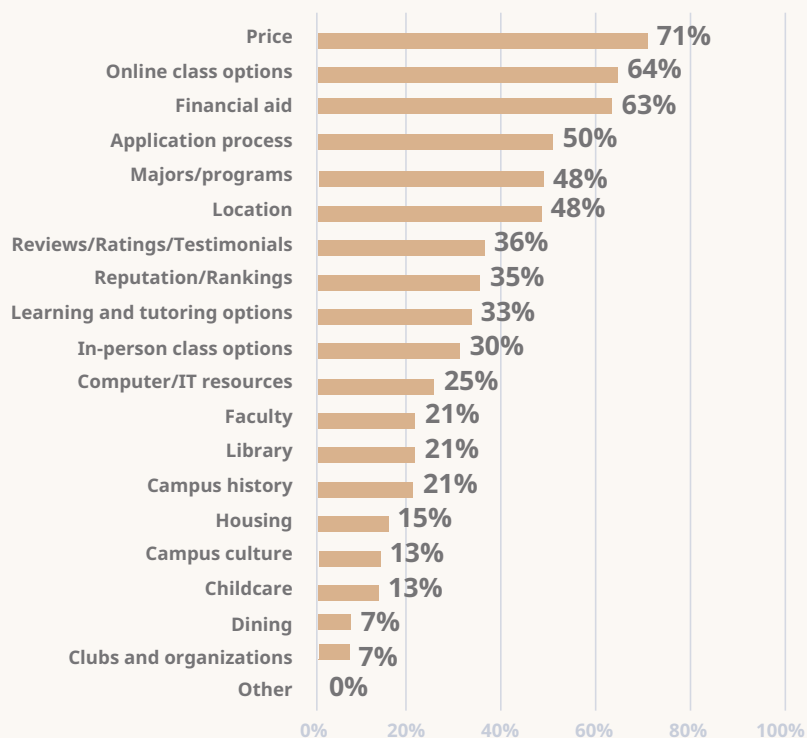


FIGURE 14

Information that never-enrolled adults look for when researching postsecondary institutions (n=1,891)



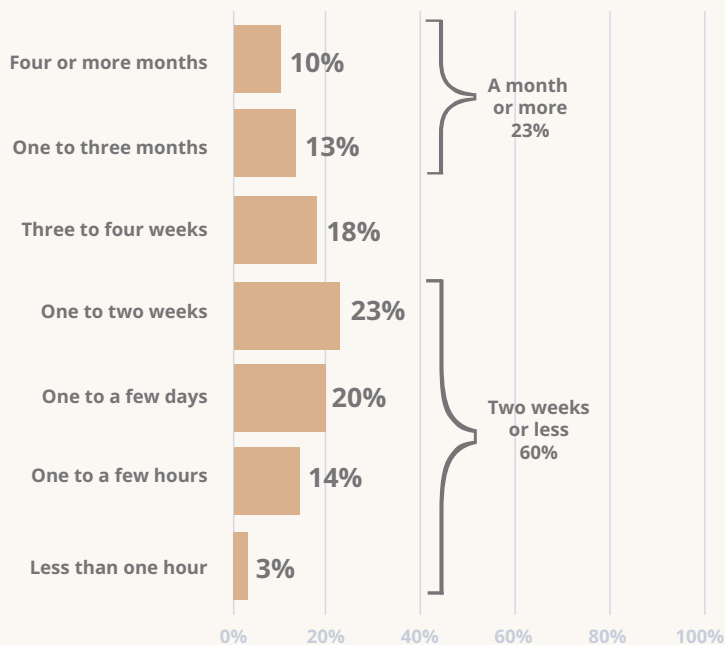
IT'S A LITTLE STRESSFUL
WHEN I THINK OF IT...

Results of a national survey
and interviews with
never-enrolled adults

cael.org

FIGURE 15

Time spent doing research on postsecondary programs by never-enrolled adults (n=1,891)



Several interviewees suggested design considerations that could enhance the user experience. These suggestions included information about how programs lead to employment opportunities and the availability of real-time assistance from a college representative, whether through live chat, webcam, or by phone. One participant suggested that they would benefit from additional interaction with an institution while researching programs:

“A virtual tour would do it. If I could just go online and just look it up, any school, and have them walk me through everything in the classrooms, the process, then that would be better. It’d be motivational.”

— Occupation: Warehouse Worker, Did Not Apply

An interactive online presence with built-in guidance and support connects potential adult learners with the information needed to make decisions regarding the next step of the enrollment process.

**IT'S A LITTLE STRESSFUL
WHEN I THINK OF IT...**

Results of a national survey
and interviews with
never-enrolled adults

cael.org

Recommendations

This research reveals several significant factors that impact adults' decisions to enroll, or not enroll, into a postsecondary program. The primary factors include financial considerations, time management, self-confidence, and the ease and convenience of accessing necessary information to make decisions. Most of the surveyed adults are open to reconsidering enrolling if the institution addresses these factors.

Institutions can engage prospective adult learners by aligning practices with these recommendations:

- 1. Addressing Affordability: Resolve cost barriers through scholarships and grants, align cost with concepts of value (e.g., career opportunities; opportunities for further study), and promote methods for affording education over the sticker price for a semester or degree.** Cost considerations are top of mind at every stage of adults' decision-making process, and adults pursue this information while researching prospective programs of study. Institutions should:

 - Examine whether and how to mitigate upfront costs for applications
 - Prioritize access to scholarships and grants, and offer flexible payment plans
 - Find ways to keep prices low through credit for prior learning/prior learning assessment, accelerated models, or competency-based programs
 - Make financial aid and grants and other ways to pay easy to find, understand, and access
 - Personalize messaging that demonstrates the value of the programs for their future employment.
- 2. Improving Communication: Prioritize navigation and personalization when building content designed to guide prospective adult learners through the enrollment process.** More than half of the respondents indicated that they spent two weeks or less researching educational options. Prospective adult learners would benefit from knowing how to access personalized assistance, whether through live chat or by phone. Critical information for prospective adult learners includes the time and requirements needed to complete a program of study. Providing straightforward processes, videos that show prospective adult learners how to navigate online information, and just-in-time advising help this population navigate options at postsecondary institutions.
- 3. Easing Processes of Enrollment: Make applications easy to locate, simple to complete, and affordable to submit.** Institutions should make additional help available as well as examples or clickable guided solutions for filling out the application. Consider rethinking the application process to include simple, early steps that trigger touchpoints or additional support. Examine whether the institution can mitigate the cost of submitting an application by waiving or reducing application fees.

“Passing a test,
getting grades,
doing a lot of study.
To me, it's a little
stressful when
I think of it.”

Occupation:
Retail Worker, Applied
but Did Not Enroll

**IT'S A LITTLE STRESSFUL
WHEN I THINK OF IT...**

Results of a national survey
and interviews with
never-enrolled adults

cael.org

4. **Clarifying Academic Pathways: Provide pathways to program completion that consider traditional, part-time, and accelerated schedules.** Adult learner-friendly academic pathways show program requirements as sequences rather than an outline of suggested courses per full-time semester. This clarity helps both part-time students and their advisors quickly assess academic progress and make decisions for the next best steps.
5. **Using Storytelling: When promoting programs and services to prospective adult learners, include stories that show how a diverse group of adult learners have successfully navigated postsecondary education at your institution.** To normalize returning to school long after their prior experiences in secondary education, adults need multiple examples and images of those who have successfully navigated this journey. Success stories help prospective adult learners envision themselves as “college material.” Case studies, testimonials, images of adults, and videos of other adult learners are all good places to start. These can help make clear the point that adult learners are welcome—and belong—in a postsecondary and/or academic environment.
6. **Focusing on Flexibility: Where possible, provide course content through multiple modes and at different times of the day and week.** Adults are not all on the same schedule; some may work evenings and prefer to attend class on-campus during the day, while others may prefer to attend strictly online. In programs where adult learners predominantly enroll, providing a variety of schedules and modalities allows all learners to progress through their program of study at their pace.
7. **Personalizing Outreach: Personalized engagement at each touchpoint of the research, application, and enrollment journey supports adults when they most need help.** Employing a variety of outreach methods helps prospective adult learners connect with critical information needed to successfully apply to a program of study. Institutions should investigate the process by which prospective adult learners successfully apply—or do not—and build in additional support at points where data show these adults stop out of the process.
8. **Enlisting Strategy: Understanding the above priorities, institutional leadership should ensure that the people involved with the outreach process for prospective adult learners have the resources needed to personalize engagement.** Institutions often struggle to match staff capacity with the resources needed to effectively recruit and enroll adult learners. Institutional investment into resources that address those points where adults are often confused by, or stop out of, the process may help to mitigate some of the need for just-in-time staff support. Strategic goals around adult learner enrollment will help to provide an impetus for institution-wide support for the faculty and staff who serve adult learners. Where needed, faculty and staff professional development can help individuals better support prospective and currently-enrolled adult learners.

**IT'S A LITTLE STRESSFUL
WHEN I THINK OF IT...**

Results of a national survey
and interviews with
never-enrolled adults

cael.org

Conclusion

When adults consider postsecondary education, the primary barriers they encounter include cost, time management, confidence in completing a program, and the ease and convenience of accessing the information needed to proceed with enrollment. Even so, most of the adults surveyed for this research study reported that they would reconsider postsecondary education if it were more accessible to them. By enacting the strategies provided in this report and proactively reaching out to adults who stopped out of the process, institutions can address many of those primary barriers. More adult-friendly communication and transparent information will help them navigate available academic options, methods for affording their education, and the application process. Further, by showing adults that they are “college material,” institutions can drive adult learner enrollment—whether they have experienced postsecondary education before or seek to finish what they started long ago.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CAEL gratefully acknowledges the support received from the Charles Koch Foundation in funding this research study. CAEL thanks Hanover Research for its significant contributions to this research. We also acknowledge the 29 adults who participated in the qualitative component of the study and the 2,013 adults who completed the questionnaire based on those interviews. We wish each of our participating adults the very best in their future education, career, and life endeavors.

METHODOLOGY

CAEL contracted with Hanover Research on this study of adults who have never enrolled in postsecondary education. Hanover interviewed 29 individuals, of whom 14 had never begun the process of enrolling at a postsecondary institution, and of whom 15 had begun the process and applied, but never began their program of study. The interview covered: the individual's motivation for considering postsecondary education at this point in their life; what they were looking for in a program; why did they abandon the process and not apply; what barriers they encountered; what an institution could do differently should the individual reenter the application process.

Based upon feedback from the interviewed adults in the prior phase, CAEL and Hanover Research designed a survey instrument to explore the questions answered by the adults in those interviews. Our primary research questions were: the factors that drive adults who have never enrolled in postsecondary education to consider pursuing education; the factors driving prospective adult learners to enroll in a specific program or institution; and the factors that ultimately led prospective adult learners to not enroll. Hanover Research distributed the survey online in November 2021 and received 2,013 eligible responses.



Link Learning and Work

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