Disengaged Learners & Return Paths to Higher Education

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Executive Summary

UPCEA and StraighterLine partnered to develop a survey to better understand the experiences and perspectives of the some college, no credential population, as well as gauging their interest in potential return paths to higher education. As institutions face considerable demographic and financial headwinds, they will need to move beyond traditional student audiences alone and prioritize the immense potential of degree completion students. The results of this study focus on reasons for disengaging with institutions, interest in pursuing degree completion programs, and important factors in selecting a degree completion program. For the purpose of this research, degree completion programs are defined as an undergraduate program that is intentionally designed for individuals that have some college credit but have not yet completed a four-year degree. The study also examined the effects of value-add strategies such as offering credit for prior learning, microcredentials, and stackable credentials on program interest. While the data yielded a number of insights, the study population was further segmented into four personas to highlight the differences in perspectives among the survey respondents. Results below illustrate key study findings.

- **Respondents who feel stuck or lack the opportunity to advance in their current career are more likely to pursue an undergraduate degree through a degree completion program.** Twenty-nine percent said they would be extremely (12%) or very likely (17%) to pursue an undergraduate degree through a degree completion program, while nearly a third (32%) would be somewhat likely. Among respondents who strongly agree that they feel stuck in their career, 39% would be extremely or very likely to pursue an undergraduate degree through a degree completion program.

- **Individuals are most interested in obtaining a degree to increase their earnings.** When given a list of potential motivating factors for enrolling in a degree completion program, nearly half (48%) cited improving their salary, 44% said it is a personal goal, 32% chose career advancement, and 29% said a career change.

- **The cost and speed of degree completion are the most important factors when considering a degree completion program.** When asked which factors would be important when making a decision about a potential degree completion program, over two-thirds (68%) said the tuition or cost of the degree, while 56% said the speed at which they can complete their degree.

- **Individuals are most often disengaging due to financial reasons, followed by family commitments.** When given a list of possible reasons for leaving their previous institution, 41% cited financial reasons, 37% family reasons or commitments, and 21% said it was not the right fit for them. Younger age groups were slightly more likely to cite financial reasons while those older were slightly more likely to cite family reasons or commitments.

- **Learners desire additional layers of value, such as prior learning assessment (PLA), microcredentials, and stackability within degree completion programs.** Over three-quarters of respondents (78%) said credit for prior learning would greatly increase

(36%) or increase (42%) their interest in pursuing an undergraduate degree. A similar percentage (76%) said microcredentials that indicate knowledge or skills and can stack toward larger credentials would greatly increase (32%) or increase (44%) their interest in pursuing an undergraduate degree.

Overview

Some College, No Credential Population Continues to Grow While Reengagement Rates Decline

The some college, no credential (SCNC) population in the United States reached 40.4 million as of July 2021.[1] While the pandemic undoubtedly was a major factor in this increase, so too is the lack of reenrollment among the SCNC population, particularly those who recently disengaged from higher education. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, over 864,000 SCNC students reenrolled in higher education in the 2021-2022 academic year, which is approximately 80,000 less than the year before, a decline of 8.4%.[2] It is imperative that institutions have a sense of urgency when trying to engage with the SCNC learner. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center report found that recent stop-outs, those who last enrolled at some point in 2019 with no further enrollment at any time between January 2020 and July 2021, were more likely to reenroll than other populations.[3]

Existing Economic Conditions Could Encourage Reengagement

Current economic conditions could prompt many adult learners to return to college. Inflation is rising, pushing up the cost of living. Monthly inflation peaked at an annualized rate of 9.1% in July 2022, the highest since the 1970's.[4] As a result, the cost of living has increased sharply as has the price of basic commodities like food and gas. To adapt to this increasingly challenging economic landscape, adults may be returning to school, hoping to learn new skills or credentials that can increase their earning potential. A 2021 analysis by Forbes found that median earnings for individuals with some college, no degree was $47,500 annually, $22,500 less than that for bachelor's degrees holders ($70,000).[5]

Adding Flexibility and Value to Drive Reengagement

As institutions cope with the forecast of decreasing traditional undergraduate students, many are turning to degree completion programs to help mitigate losses. These programs are often offered online in a self-paced environment which provides learners with the flexibility they require to continue working and maintain family responsibilities, among other commitments. This audience is also particularly price sensitive, having previously invested in their education yet having to disengage without a credential to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. With this in mind, institutions are looking to offer multiple layers of value to degree completion students. One way would be to provide credit for prior learning (CPL) or through prior learning assessment (PLA). PLA has been shown to play an integral role in enabling adults to return to school. In a survey of 1,200 college students in 2020, one-fourth of those who earned PLA credit

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[1] https://nscresearchcenter.org/some-college-no-credential/

[2] Ibid

[3] Ibid

[4] https://www.forbes.com/advisor/investing/inflation-cost-of-living/#:~:text=After%20spending%20more%20than%20two,to%206.5%25%2C%20in%202022.

[5] https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaeltnietzel/2021/10/11/new-study-college-degree-carries-big-earnings-premium-but-other-factors-matter-too/?sh=5a6f7e2b35cd

said those credits "made it possible to complete a degree/program they otherwise would not have."[6]

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[6] https://www.luminafoundation.org/news-and-views/prior-learning-credits-help-students-cross-the-finish-line-to-earn-degrees/

Disengaged Learners and Return to Paths to Higher Education, 2023

Survey Methodology and Objective

The survey was conducted by UPCEA and StraighterLine to better understand the experiences, perspectives, and motivations of disengaged learners to help determine how colleges and universities can encourage and aid adult learners in a return to higher education. The survey took place between June 21 and June 26, 2023. An internet panel was used for the study. In total, 2,384 individuals participated in the study, of which 1,106 met all study qualifications and 1,070 completed the entire survey.

Unique Learner Segments

While the study yielded several findings, UPCEA found four unique segments utilizing the two-step cluster analysis. This was performed multiple times, producing from 3 to 7 different segments. It also generated a list of variables that were the most distinguishing, uniquely separating the segments from one another. To best represent and understand the differences in the survey's disengaged learner respondents, four personas representing the four segments were created and tracked to demonstrate how disengaged learners have different perceptions, experiences, and opinions around disengagement and potential future enrollment.
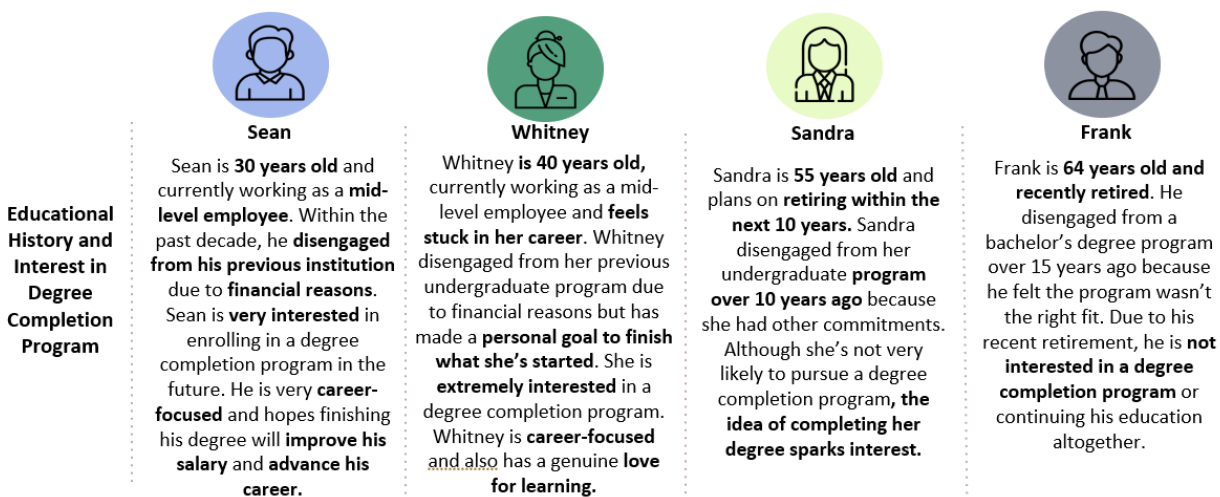
Figure 1: Disengaged Learner Profiles

	Sean	**Whitney**	**Sandra**	**Frank**
Educational History and Interest in Degree Completion Program	Sean is **30 years old** and currently working as a **mid-level employee**. Within the past decade, he **disengaged from his previous institution** due to **financial reasons**. Sean is **very interested** in enrolling in a degree completion program in the future. He is very **career-focused** and hopes finishing his degree will **improve his salary** and **advance his career**.	Whitney **is 40 years old,** currently working as a mid-level employee and **feels stuck in her career**. Whitney disengaged from her previous undergraduate program due to financial reasons but has made a **personal goal to finish what she's started**. She is **extremely interested** in a degree completion program. Whitney is **career-focused and also** has a genuine **love for learning**.	Sandra is **55 years old** and plans on **retiring within the next 10 years.** Sandra disengaged from her undergraduate **program over 10 years ago** because she had other commitments. Although she's not very likely to pursue a degree completion program, **the idea of completing her degree sparks interest.**	Frank is **64 years old and recently retired**. He disengaged from a bachelor's degree program over 15 years ago because he felt the program wasn't the right fit. Due to his recent retirement, he is **not interested in a degree completion program** or continuing his education altogether.

Figure 2: Characteristics of the Personas

|	Sean (n=305)	Whitney (n=372)	Sandra (n=336)	Frank (n=57)
Top Reason for Program Disengagement	Financial reasons (37%)	Financial reasons (58%)	Family reasons or commitments (41%)	Wasn't the right fit (28%)
Reached a Point in Career Where They Feel Stuck (Strongly Agree/Agree)	50%	**54%**	38%	**32%**
Likelihood to Pursue an Undergraduate Degree Through Degree Completion Program (Extremely/Very Likely)	35%	**50%**	7%	**0%**
Top Motivating Factor to Enroll in a Degree Completion Program	Improve salary (38%)	Improve salary (73%)	Personal goal (39%)	Love for learning (23%)
Effect of Credits for Prior Learning on Interest in Pursuing Undergraduate Degree (Greatly Increase/Increase Interest)	76%	**96%**	71%	**20%**
Effect of Stackable Microcredentials on Interest in Pursuing Undergraduate Degree (Greatly Increase/Increase Interest)	78%	**94%**	66%	**14%**

Qualifying Questions

Of the initial 2,384 respondents, nearly a quarter (23%) are between 18 to 22 years old while 17% are 23 to 26 years old. Those under 18 or over 64 were terminated from the study.

Figure 3: Age Range (n=2,384)

| Age Range	Percentage
Under 18	1%
18 to 22	23%
23 to 26	17%
27 to 29	5%
30 to 34	10%
35 to 40	10%
41 to 45	7%
46 to 54	13%
55 to 64	13%
65 or over	2%
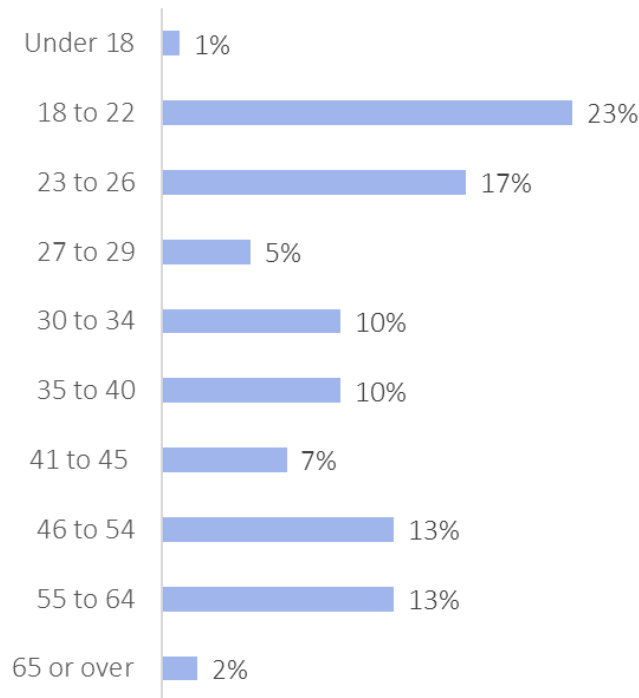
Sixty-three percent are not currently enrolled in a college or university. Those who are current students were also eliminated.

Figure 4: College Enrollment Status (n=2,321)
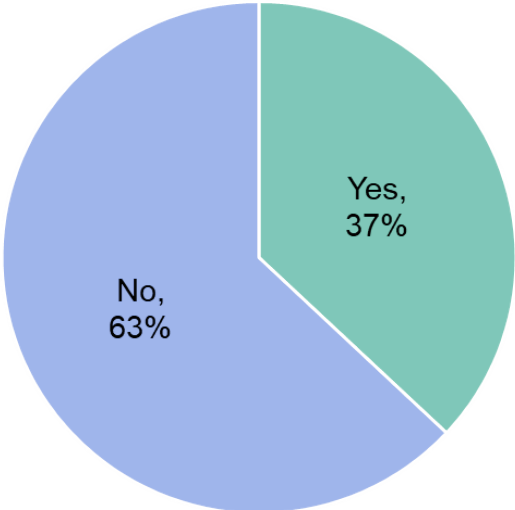
Over three-quarters (78%) of respondents have completed some college, but no degree. Those whose highest level of education completed is less than high school, a high school diploma or GED, an associate's or technical degree, a bachelor's degree, a graduate degree, or a professional or doctoral degree were terminated from the study.
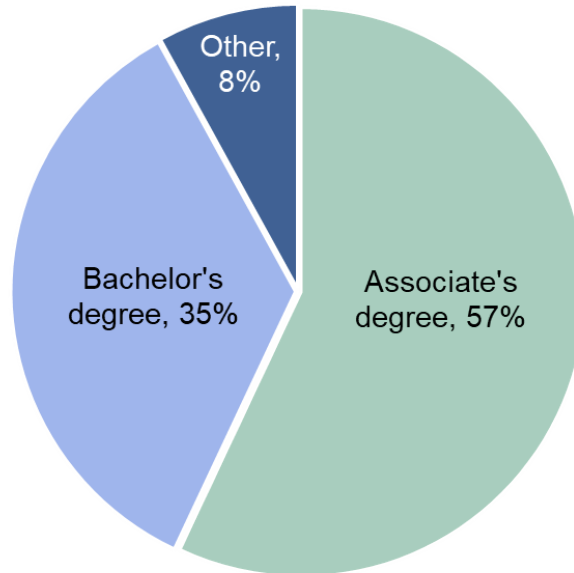
Figure 5: Highest Level of Education Completed (n=1,457)
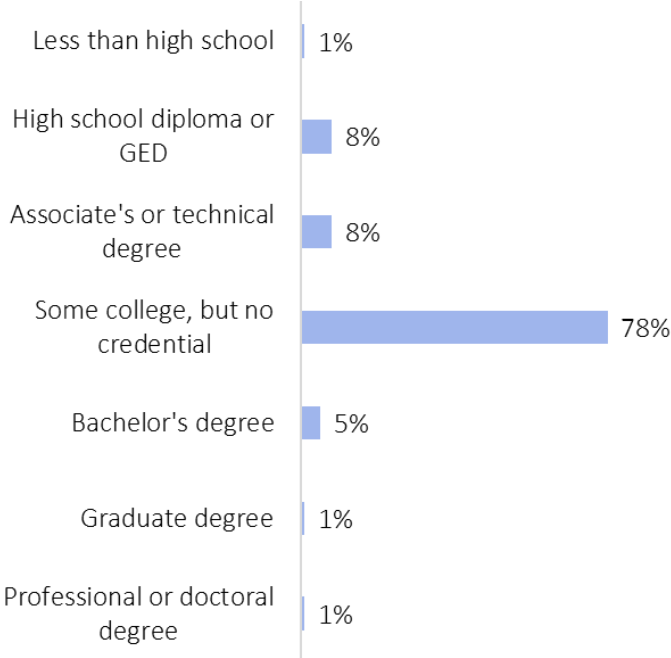
Qualified Respondents

Of all qualified respondents, over half (57%) were pursuing an associate degree and 35% were pursuing a bachelor's degree when they were last enrolled in a college or university.

Figure 6: Prior Enrollment (n=1,106)

Nearly half (48%) of the respondents were last enrolled in a college or university before 2010.

Figure 7: Last Year Enrolled in College or University (n=1,106)

Year	Percent
Before 2010	48%
2010	5%
2011	2%
2012	4%
2013	3%
2014	3%
2015	3%
2016	3%
2017	5%
2018	5%
2019	5%
2020	4%
2021	4%
2022	4%
2023	1%
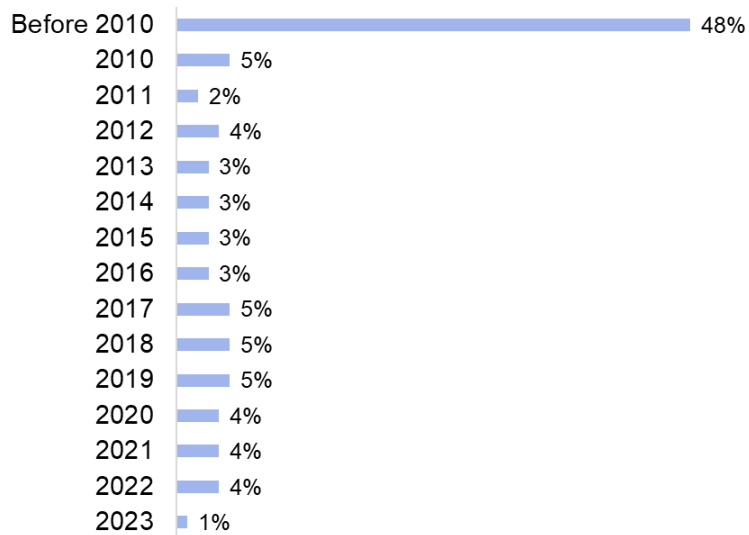
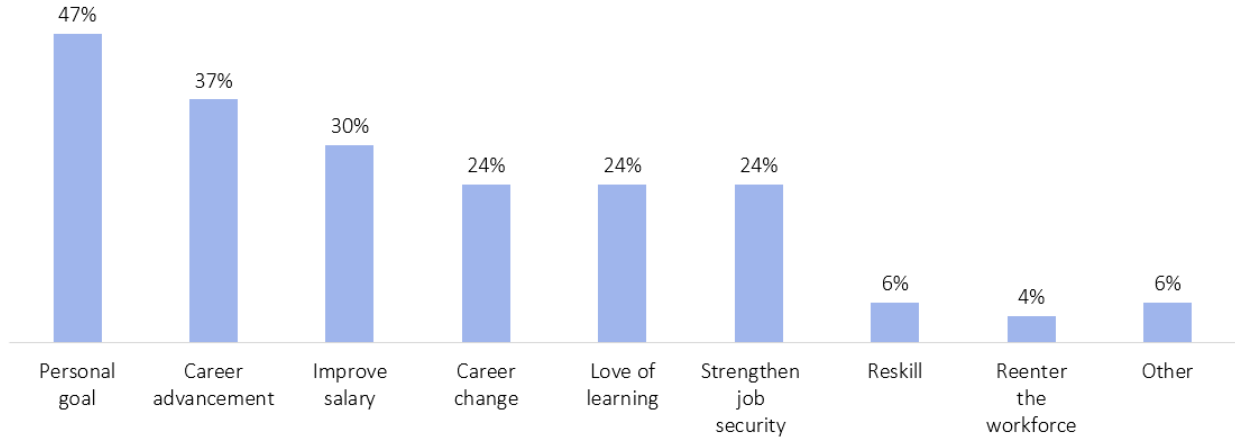When given a list of potential motivating factors for prior degree program enrollment, 47% said it was a personal goal, 37% cited career advancement, and 30% said to improve their salary.

Figure 8: Motivating Factors for Enrollment (n=1,106)

For nearly all age groups, having a personal goal was the most common motivating factor when they initially decided to enroll in a degree program. However, for 35-to 40-year-olds, the major motivating factor was career advancement.

Figure 9: Motivating Factors for Enrollment by Age
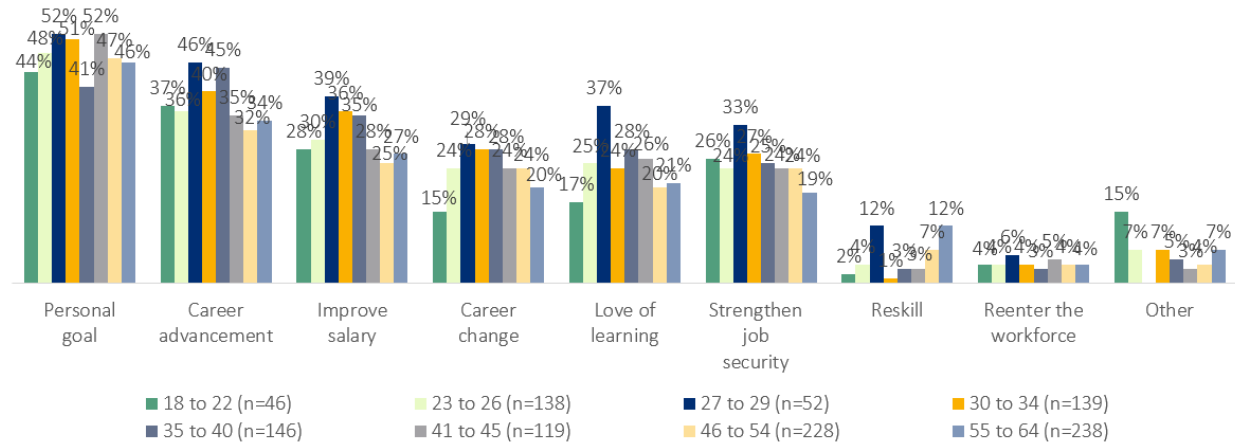
Twenty-nine percent of respondents were about halfway through with their degree program when they had to disengage from their institution, 26% were about a quarter of the way through, and 17% had just started. However, another 28% were about three quarters of the way through or nearly done with the program (each 14%) when they withdrew.
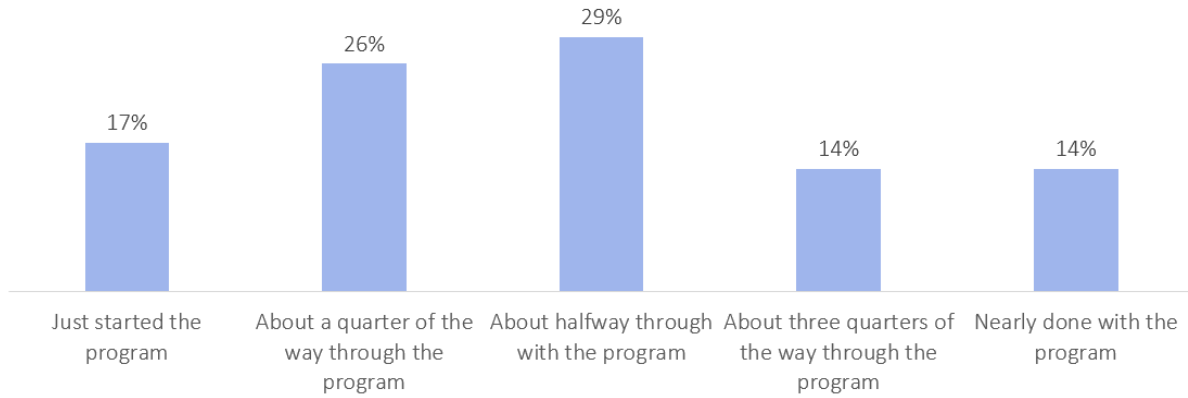
Figure 10: Progress in Degree Program (n=1,106)

Sean was between a quarter and halfway through his degree program (29%) when he had to disengage, Whitney was about halfway through (34%), Sandra was also about halfway through (27%), and Frank was nearly done with the program (37%).

Figure 11: Progress in Degree Program by Persona

■ Sean (n=305) ■ Whitney (n=372) ■ Sandra (n=336) ■ Frank (n=57)
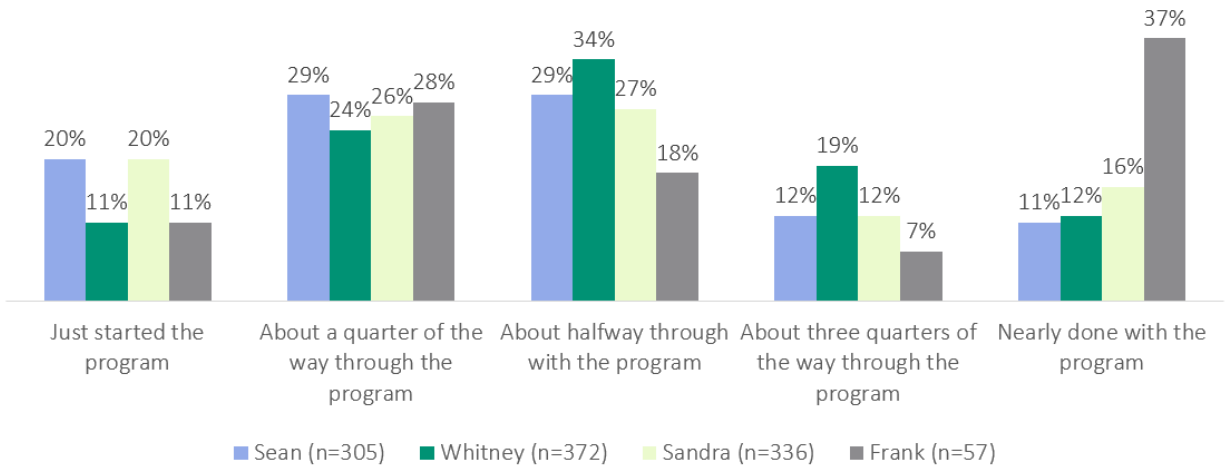
For nearly all age groups, most respondents were between about a quarter and halfway through their degree program when they had to disengage from their institution. Younger age groups were more likely to say they had just started the program when they disengaged, while older age groups are more likely to say they were nearly done with the program.

Figure 12: Progress in Degree Program by Age

Legend:
- 18 to 22 (n=46)
- 23 to 26 (n=138)
- 27 to 29 (n=52)
- 30 to 34 (n=139)
- 35 to 40 (n=146)
- 41 to 45 (n=119)
- 46 to 54 (n=228)
- 55 to 64 (n=238)
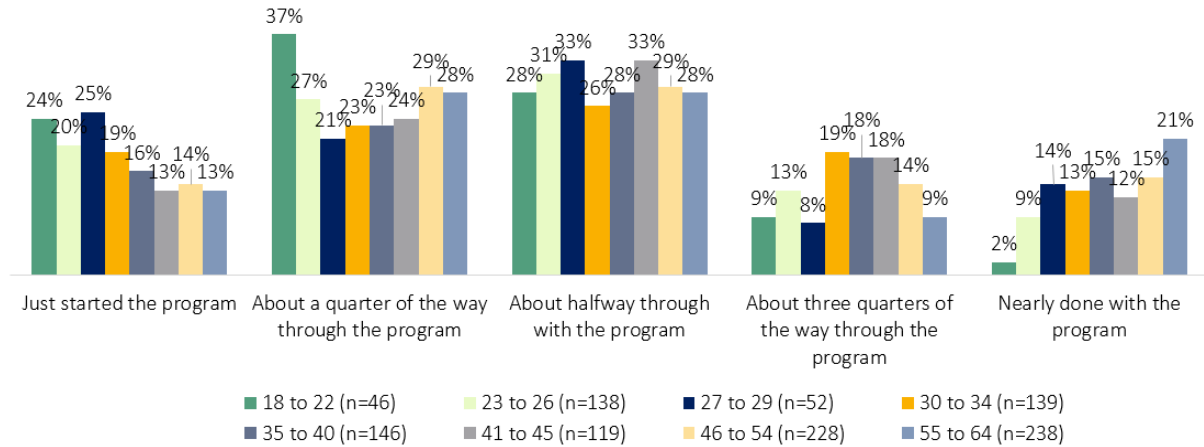
When asked what field or subject area they previously studied, nearly a quarter (24%) said business, 11% healthcare, 9% computer science and mathematics, and 7% education.

Figure 13: Field of Study (n=1,106)
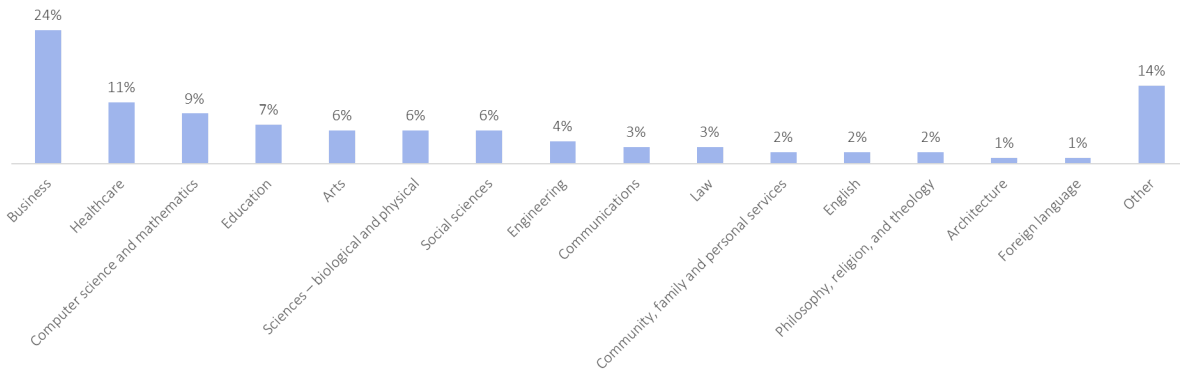
When given a list of possible reasons for leaving their previous institution, 41% cited financial reasons, 37% family reasons or commitments, 21% said it was not the right fit for them, and 19% said it was because of a lack of time.

Figure 14: Reasons for Disengagement (n=1,100)

Chart showing reasons for disengagement (overall): Financial reasons 41%, Family reasons or commitments 37%, Not the right fit for me 21%, Lack of time 19%, Health reasons 15%, Loss of job or change in employment 8%, Program delivery not what I signed up for (i.e., program...) 5%, Other 10%
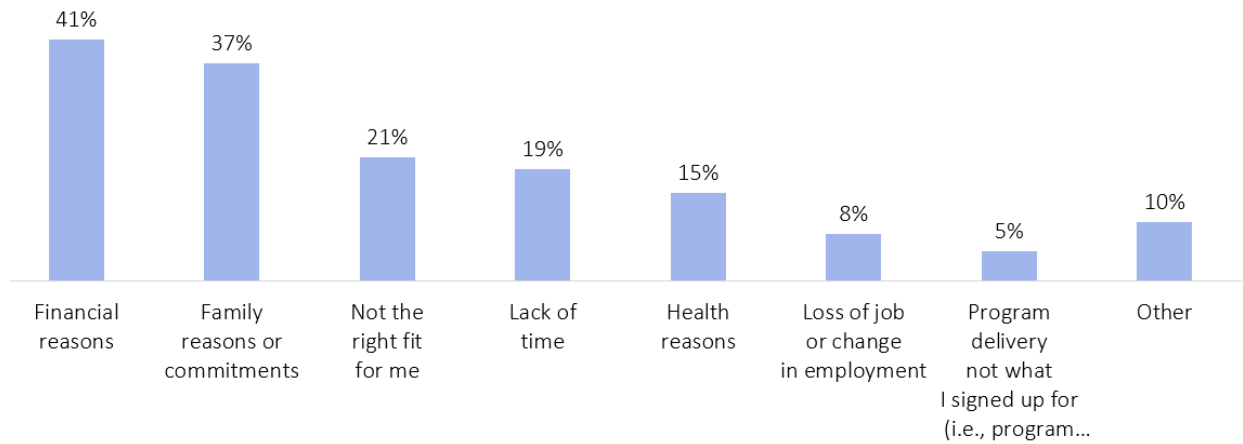
Frank's main reason for disengaging from his previous institution was that it wasn't the right fit for him (28%), Sandra's was family reasons or commitments (41%), and Sean's (37%) and Whitney's (58%) were financial reasons.

Figure 15: Reasons for Disengagement by Persona

	Financial reasons	Family reasons or commitments	Not the right fit for me	Lack of time	Health reasons	Loss of job or change in employment	Program delivery not what I signed up for	Other
Sean (n=305)	37%	25%	28%	17%	13%	10%	6%	4%
Whitney (n=372)	58%	44%	17%	29%	15%	11%	5%	9%
Sandra (n=336)	31%	41%	17%	15%	15%	6%	3%	11%
Frank (n=57)	14%	18%	28%	2%	14%		5%	33%
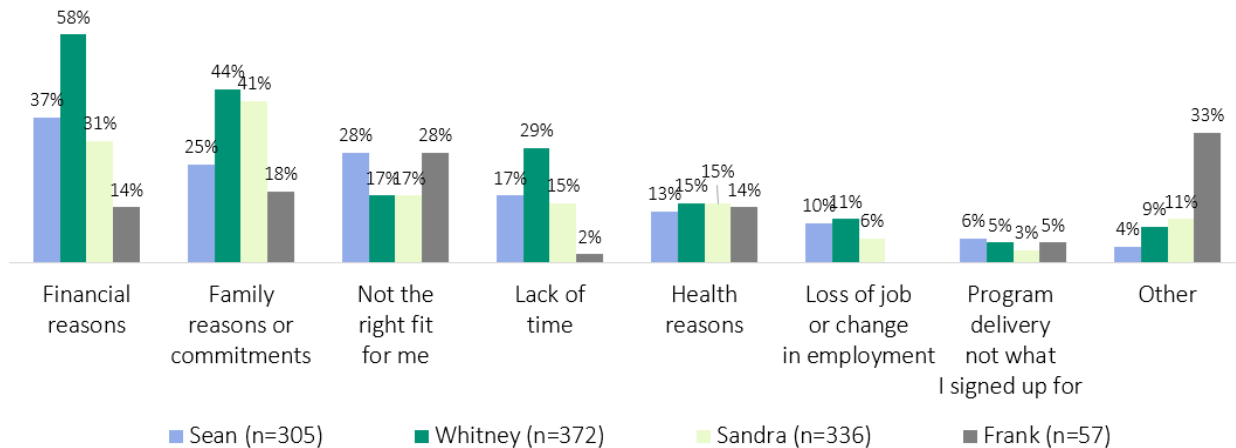
In every "progress in degree program" category, respondents most often cited financial reasons as a major reason they disengaged from their institution. Twenty-two percent who were nearly done with their program gave reasons in the "Other" category including personal problems, moving locations, and issues with credits, among others.

Figure 16: Reasons for Disengagement by Progress in Degree Program
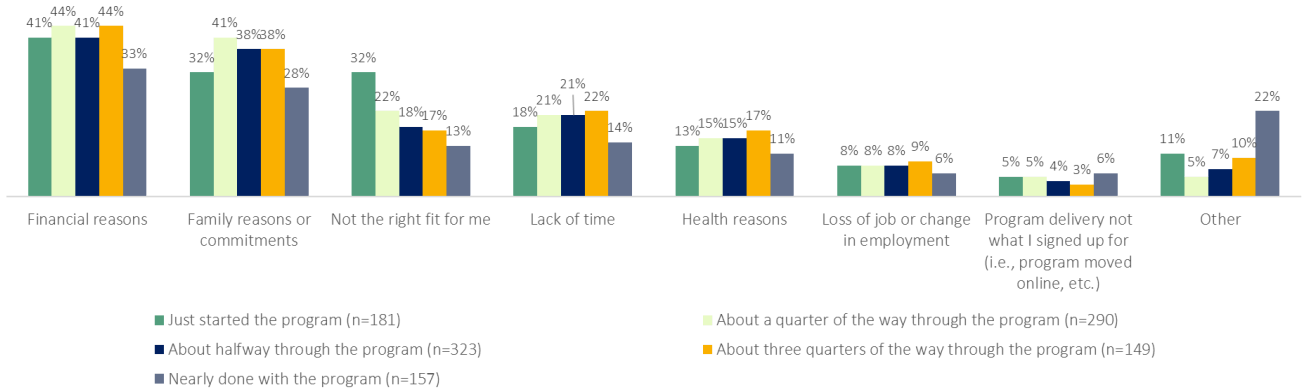
Younger age groups were slightly more likely to cite financial reasons as a reason for leaving their previous institution while those older were slightly more likely to cite family reasons or commitments.

Figure 17: Reasons for Disengagement by Age
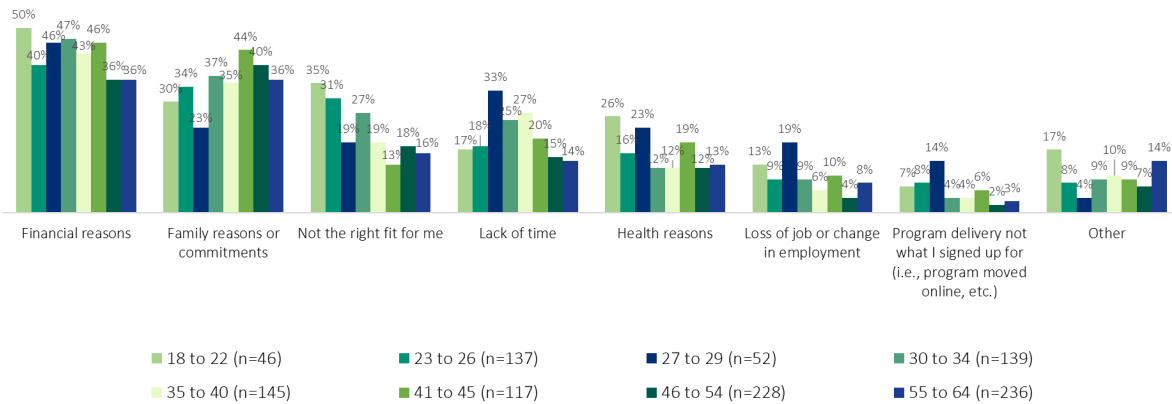
Career-Related Information

Nearly half of respondents are currently mid-level in their career, 39% are early or entry-level, 8% director or senior level, and 4% are C-level.

Figure 18: Career Level (n=1,100)

- Early or entry-level
- Mid-level
- Director or senior level
- C-level
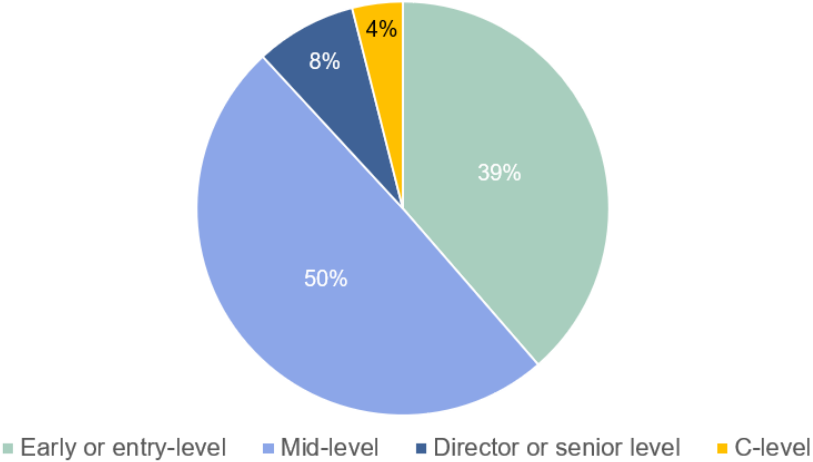
Twenty-nine percent of respondents neither agree nor disagree that they've reached a point in their career where they feel stuck, while 26% agree, 20% strongly agree, 16% disagree, and 9% strongly disagree.

Figure 19: Career Stagnation (n=1,100)

| 20% | 26% | 29% | 16% | 9% |

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
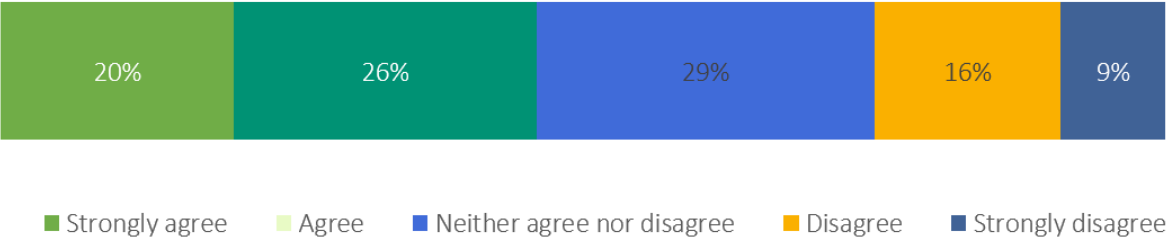
Whitney is the most likely to agree or strongly agree that she's reached a point in her career where she feels stuck (54%), followed by Sean (50%), Sandra (38%), and Frank (32%).

Figure 20: Career Stagnation by Persona

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Overall (n=1,100)	20%	26%	29%	16%	9%
Sean (n=305)	20%	30%	30%	15%	6%
Whitney (n=372)	26%	28%	22%	16%	9%
Sandra (n=336)	16%	22%	33%	19%	10%
Frank (n=57)	11%	21%	37%	11%	21%

■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly disagree
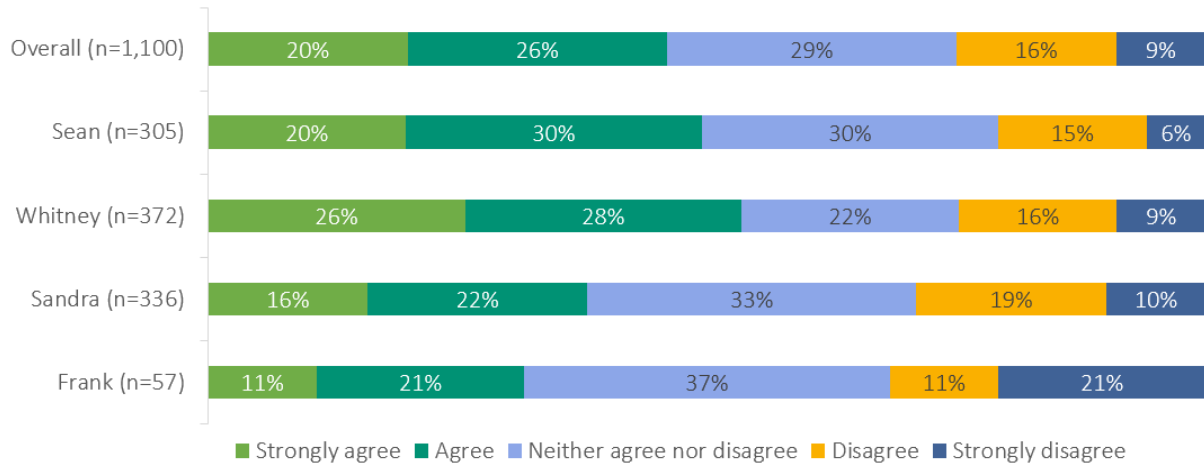
Degree Completion Programs

Nearly a third (32%) of all respondents would be somewhat likely to pursue an undergraduate degree through a degree completion program, 17% are very likely, and 12% extremely likely while 23% are not very likely and 17% not at all likely.

Figure 21: Likelihood of Pursuing a Degree Completion Program (n=1,097)

Extremely likely	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Not very likely	Not at all likely
12%	17%	32%	23%	17%

■ Extremely likely ■ Very likely ■ Somewhat likely ■ Not very likely ■ Not at all likely
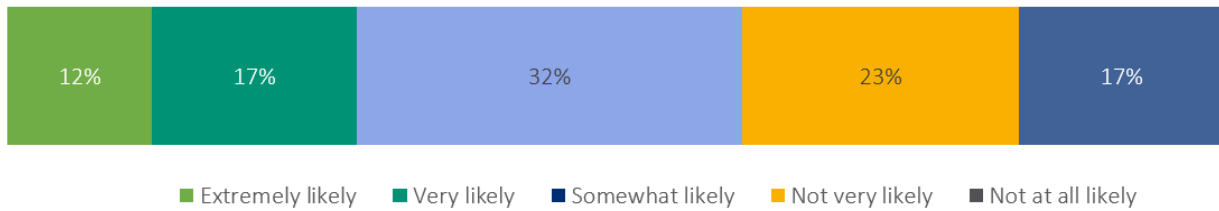
Whitney is most likely to pursue an undergraduate degree through a degree completion program (50% extremely or very likely), followed by Sean (35%), and Sandra (7%). Frank is the least likely (75% not at all likely).

Figure 22: Likelihood of Pursuing a Degree Completion Program by Persona
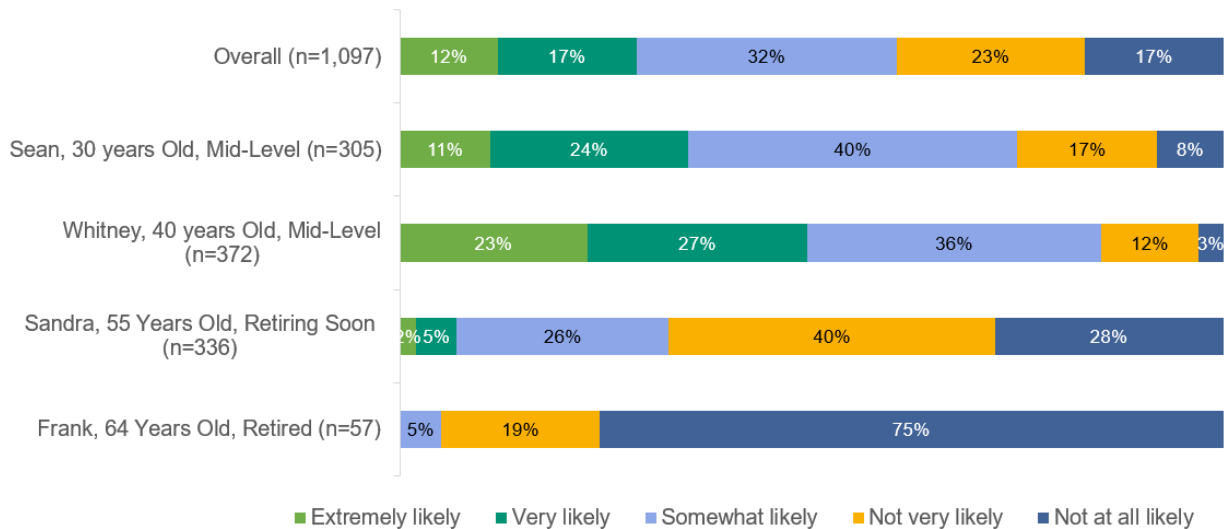
	Extremely likely	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Not very likely	Not at all likely
Overall (n=1,097)	12%	17%	32%	23%	17%
Sean, 30 years Old, Mid-Level (n=305)	11%	24%	40%	17%	8%
Whitney, 40 years Old, Mid-Level (n=372)	23%	27%	36%	12%	3%
Sandra, 55 Years Old, Retiring Soon (n=336)	2%	5%	26%	40%	28%
Frank, 64 Years Old, Retired (n=57)			5%	19%	75%

■ Extremely likely ■ Very likely ■ Somewhat likely ■ Not very likely ■ Not at all likely

Among those who strongly agree that they feel stuck in their career, 39% would be extremely or very likely to pursue an undergraduate degree through a degree completion program.

Figure 23: Likelihood of Pursuing a Degree Completion Program by Career Stagnation

	Extremely likely	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Not very likely	Not at all likely
Overall (n=1,097)	12%	17%	32%	23%	17%
Strongly agree (n=221)	24%	15%	29%	13%	18%
Agree (n=283)	10%	25%	34%	22%	10%
Neither agree nor disagree (n=314)	5%	12%	40%	24%	19%
Disagree (n=178)	6%	22%	27%	33%	12%
Strongly disagree (n=101)	15%	11%	17%	24%	34%

I've reached a point in my career where I feel as though I'm stuck

- ■ Extremely likely
- ■ Very likely
- ■ Somewhat likely
- ■ Not very likely
- ■ Not at all likely
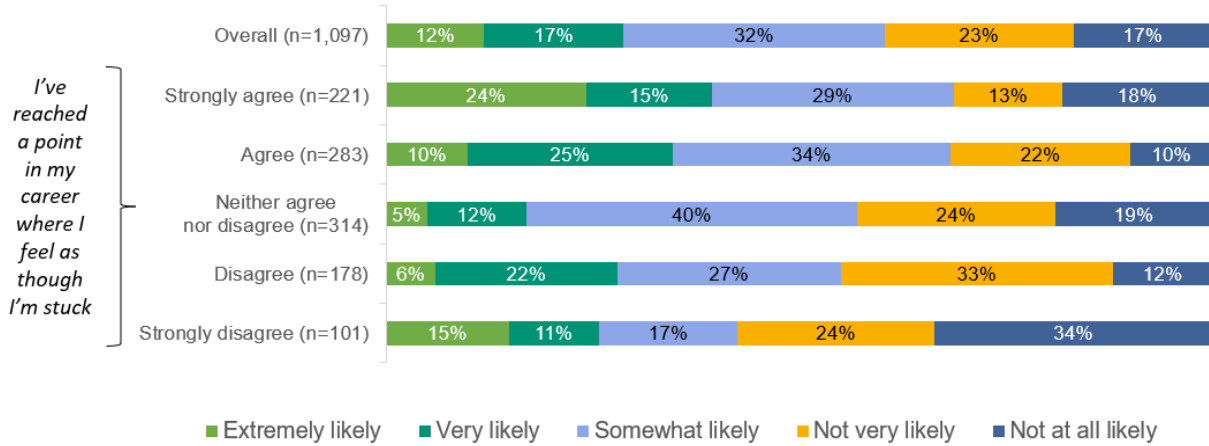
Individuals that disengaged from their institution within the last nine years (2015 and beyond) were more likely to consider pursuing a degree completion program than those that disengaged a decade or more ago.

Figure 24: Likelihood of Pursuing a Degree Completion Program by Year of Last Enrollment

	Extremely likely	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Not very likely	Not at all likely
Before 2015 (n=705)	8%	13%	31%	27%	21%
2015 and after (n=392)	18%	25%	33%	15%	9%

- ■ Extremely likely
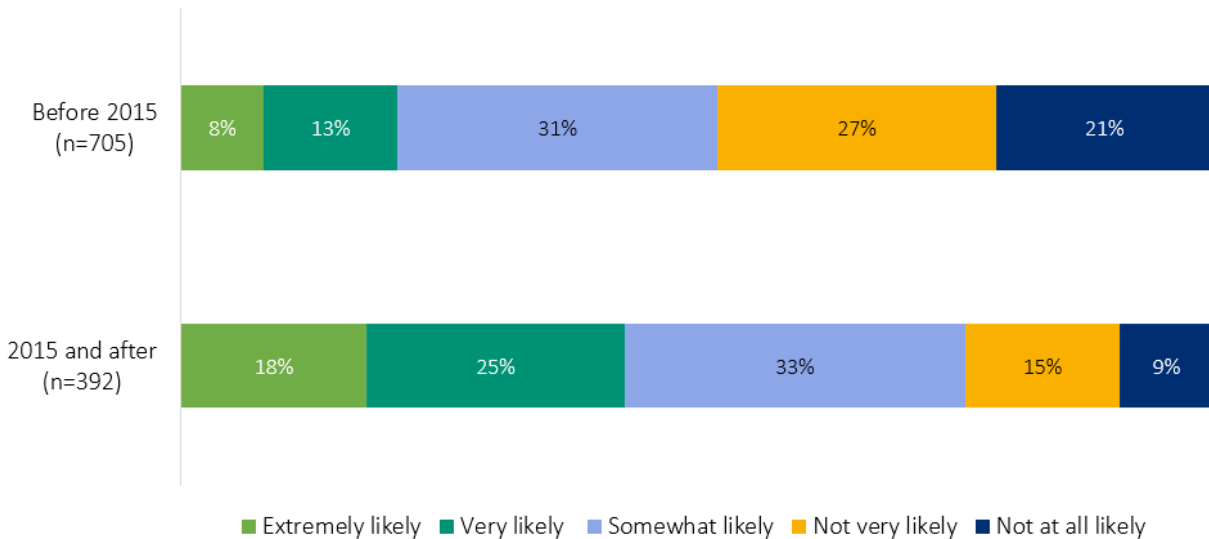- ■ Very likely
- ■ Somewhat likely
- ■ Not very likely
- ■ Not at all likely

Among respondents who said they were very likely to pursue an undergraduate degree through a degree completion program, 34% want to finish what they started/get a degree and 23% want to advance or change their career. Among those who said they are not very likely, 19% said it is because of their age and 15% said it is because they don't have enough money.

18

Figure 25: Reason for Likelihood of Pursuing a Degree Completion Program

Why did you give that response?
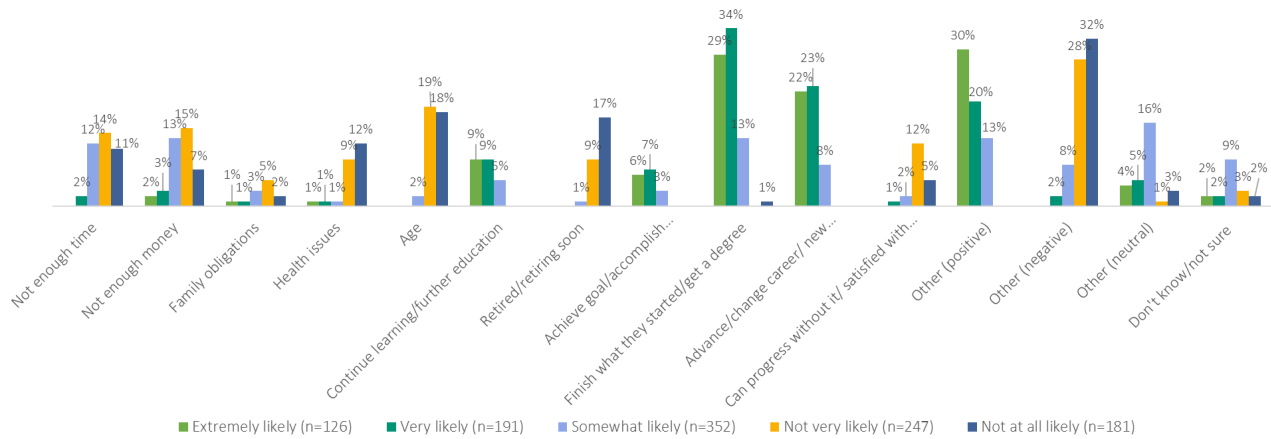
■ Extremely likely (n=126) ■ Very likely (n=191) ■ Somewhat likely (n=352) ■ Not very likely (n=247) ■ Not at all likely (n=181)

When given a list of potential motivating factors for enrolling in a degree completion program, nearly half (48%) cited improving their salary, 44% said it is a personal goal, 32% said career advancement, and 29% said a career change.

Figure 26: Motivating Factors for a Degree Completion Program (n=1,086)
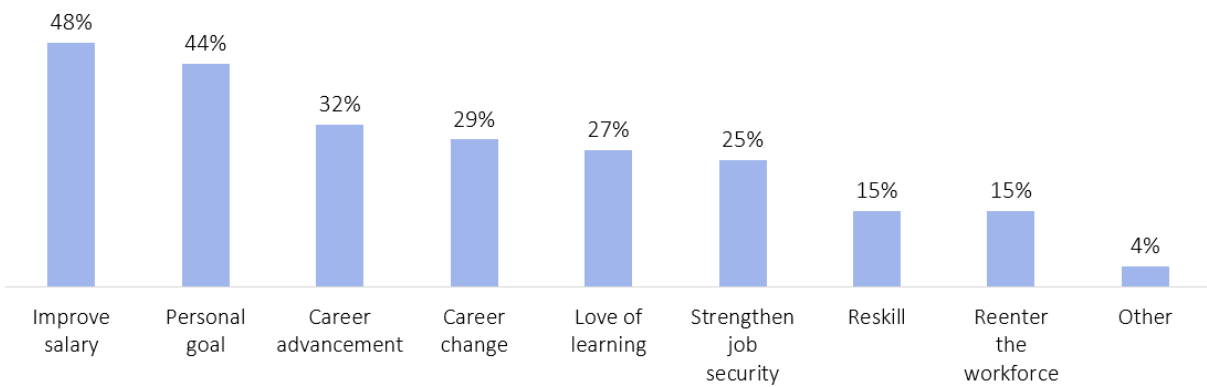
Frank's biggest motivating factor for potentially enrolling in a degree completion program is a love for learning (23%). For Sandra, these would be a personal goal (39%) and improving her salary (36%), while for Sean, improving his salary (38%) and changing his career (36%) are important. Whitney's main motivating factors are improving her salary (73%) and having a personal goal (72%).

Figure 27: Motivating Factors for a Degree Completion by Persona

19

Chart data:

Category	Sean (n=305)	Whitney (n=372)	Sandra (n=336)	Frank (n=57)
Improve salary	38%	73%	36%	11%
Personal goal	26%	72%	39%	5%
Career advancement	36%	53%	10%	9%
Career change	34%	40%	17%	9%
Love of learning	14%	46%	18%	23%
Strengthen job security	15%	45%	14%	9%
Reskill	9%	24%	11%	4%
Reenter the workforce	5%	23%	18%	4%
Other		2%	5%	35%

■ Sean (n=305) ■ Whitney (n=372) ■ Sandra (n=336) ■ Frank (n=57)
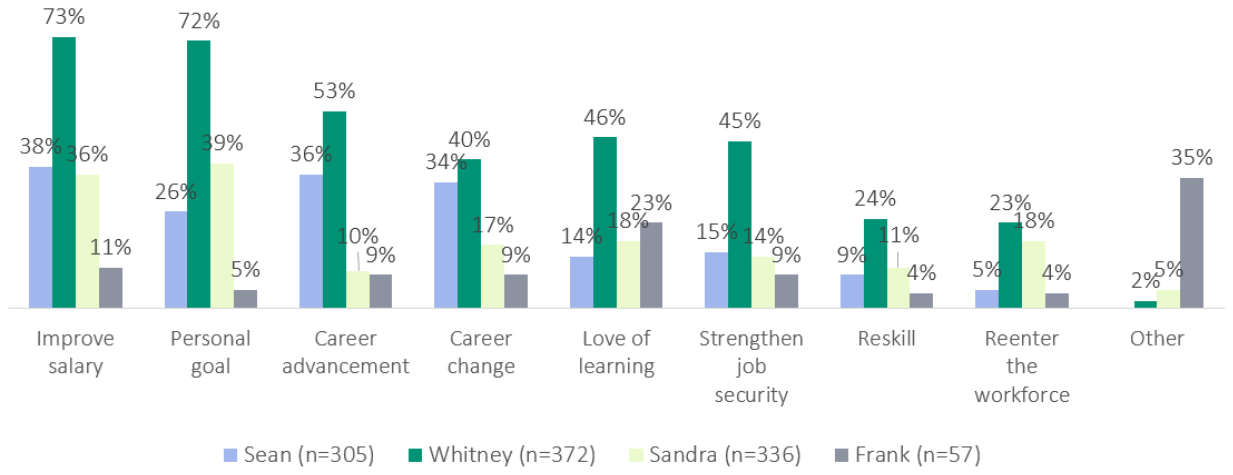
Among those who strongly agree that they feel stuck in their career, over half (55%) cited an improvement in their salary as a motivating factor to enroll in a degree completion program, half (50%) said it's a personal goal, and 44% said they want a career change.

Figure 28: Motivating Factors for a Degree Completion Program by Career Stagnation

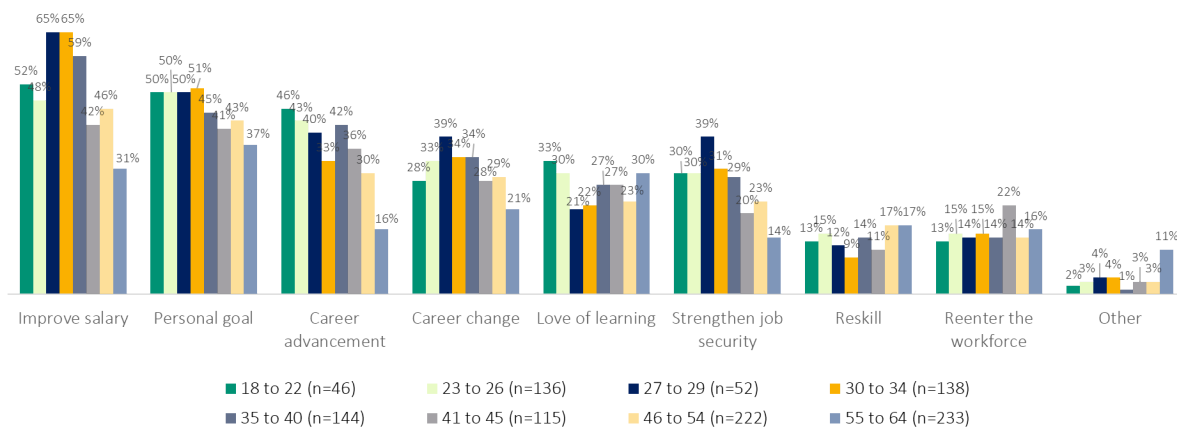Strongly agree (n=220) • Agree (n=281) • Neither agree nor disagree (n=310) • Disagree (n=178) • Strongly disagree (n=97)
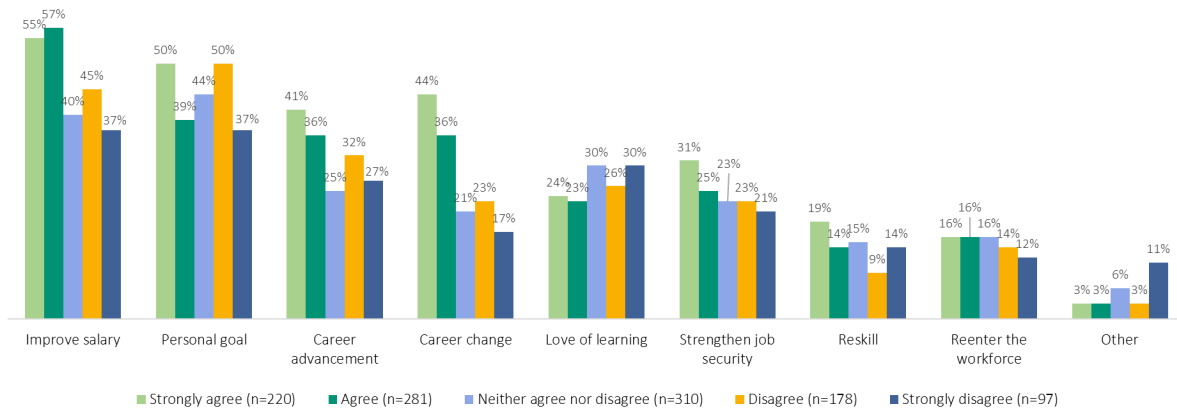
For all age groups, improving salary and a personal goal were the top two motivating factors to potentially enroll in a degree completion program. Personal goals were slightly more of a motivation for 55- to 64-year-olds than other factors, while nearly all other age groups were more motivated by a potential increase in salary.

Figure 29: Motivating Factors for a Degree Completion Program by Age

18 to 22 (n=46) • 23 to 26 (n=136) • 27 to 29 (n=52) • 30 to 34 (n=138)
35 to 40 (n=144) • 41 to 45 (n=115) • 46 to 54 (n=222) • 55 to 64 (n=233)

Early or entry-level and mid-level employees are significantly more likely than higher-level employees to be motivated by salary improvement if they were to enroll in a degree completion program, while director or senior level and C-level employees are more likely to be motivated by a love for learning compared to lower-level employees.

Figure 30: Motivating Factors for a Degree Completion by Career Level

Legend: Early or entry-level (n=417) | Mid-level (n=539) | Director or senior level (n=87) | C-level (n=43)
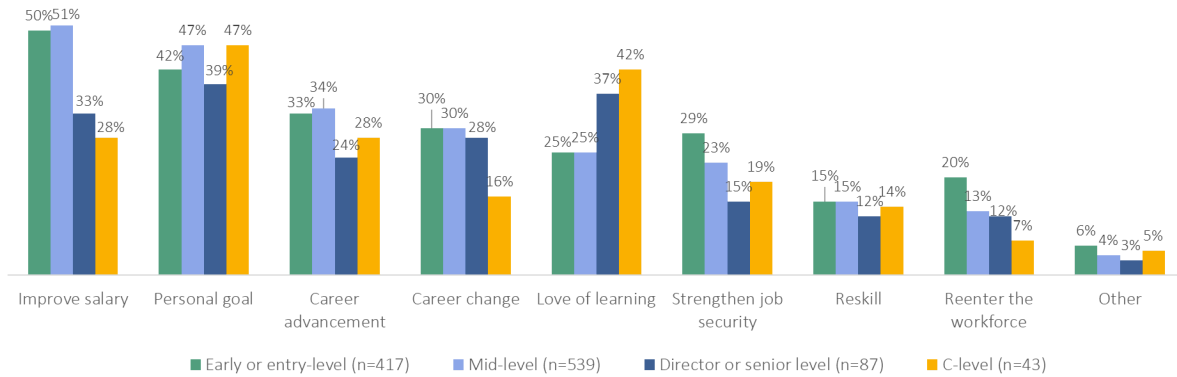
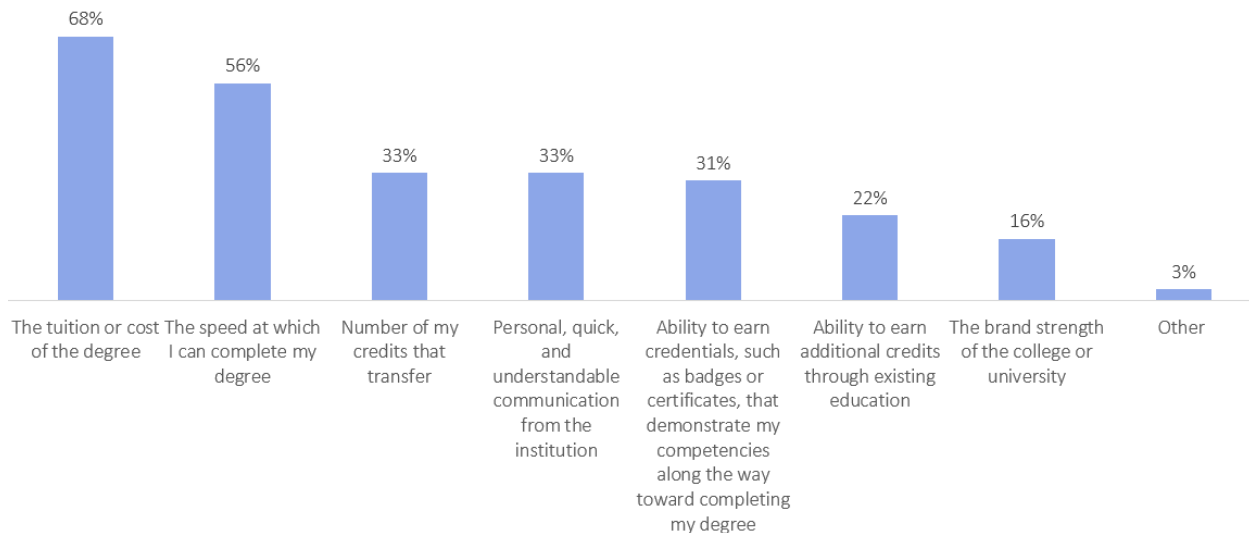When asked which factors would be important when deciding about a potential degree completion program, over two-thirds (68%) said the tuition or cost of the degree, 56% said the speed at which they can complete their degree, 33% said the number of their credits that would transfer, and 33% said personal, quick, and understandable communication from the institution.

Figure 31: Important Factors for a Degree Completion Program (n=1,086)

All persona segments cited the tuition or cost of the degree as the most important factor when deciding about a potential degree completion program.

Figure 32: Important Factors for a Degree Completion Program by Persona
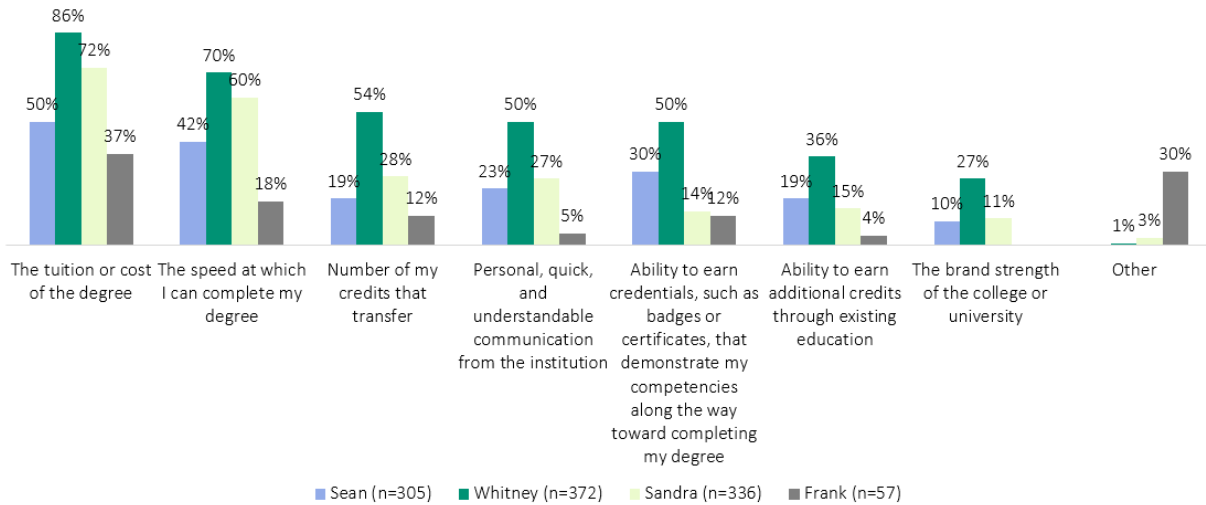
Among all age groups, the tuition or cost of the degree and the speed at which they can complete their degree were most often considered as important when deciding about a potential program.

Figure 33: Important Factors for a Degree Completion Program by Age
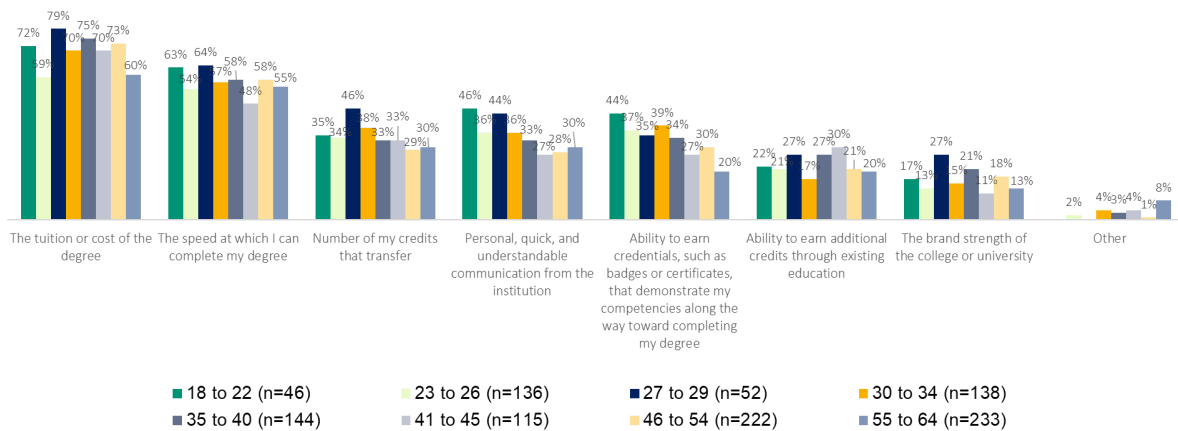
Among all career levels, the tuition or cost of the degree and the speed at which a degree can be completed were most cited as important factors when deciding about a potential program. Early or entry-level employees were slightly more likely to cite the cost of the degree than higher level employees, while C-level respondents were slightly more likely to cite the degree completion speed than lower-level employees.

Figure 34: Important Factors for a Degree Completion Program by Career Level

Early or entry-level (n=417)   Mid-level (n=539)   Director or senior level (n=87)   C-level (n=43)
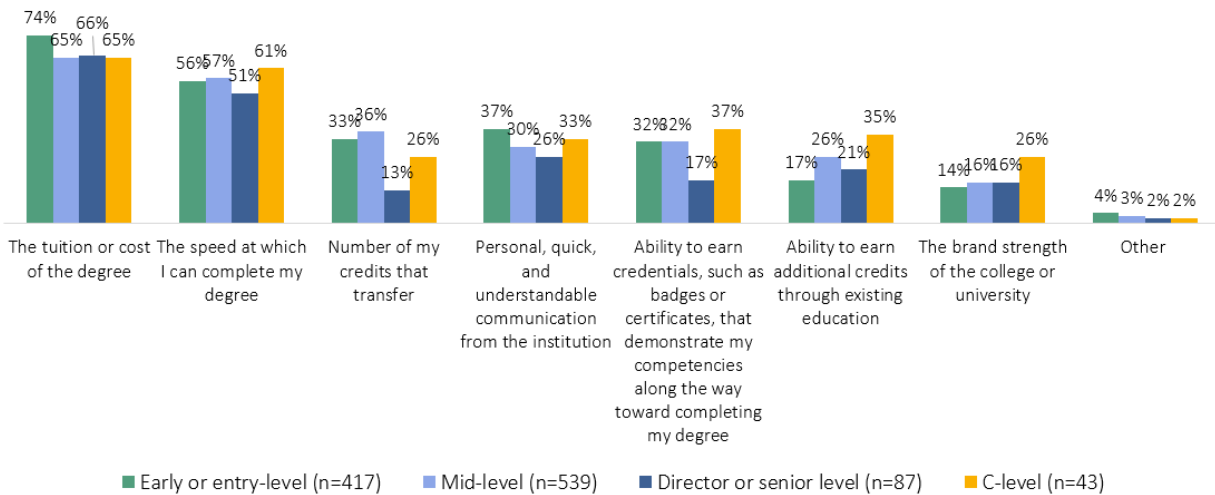
When thinking short term, 37% said the tuition or cost of the degree would be the most valuable decision-making factor, while over a quarter (26%) said the speed at which they can complete their degree; 10% said the ability to earn credentials, such as badges or certificates, that demonstrate their competencies along the way toward their degree; and 10% said the number of their credits that would transfer.

Figure 35: Short-Term Important Factors (n=1,086)
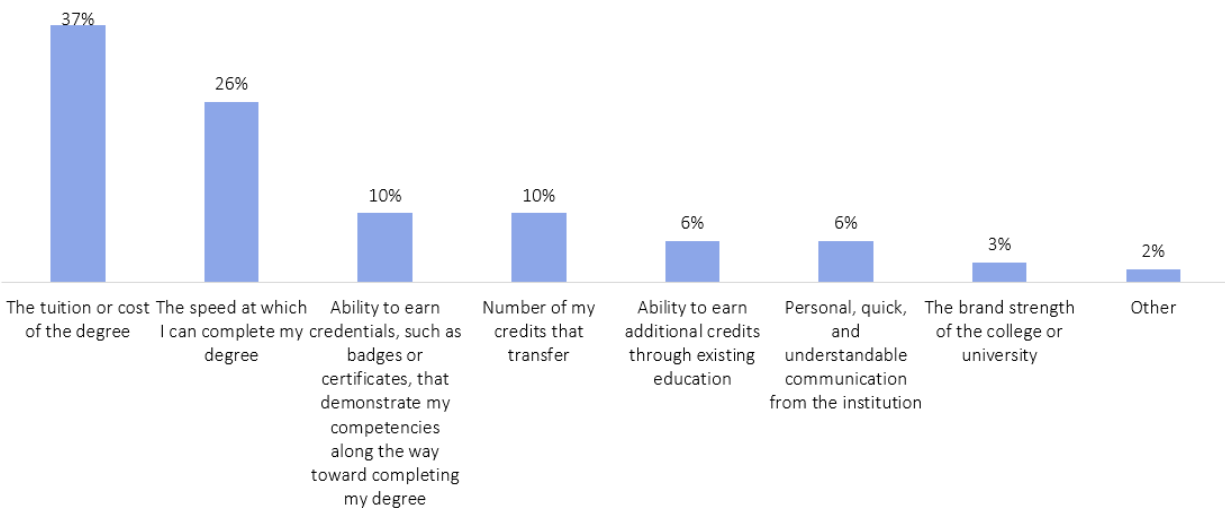
When thinking long term, the highest number of respondents (34%) also cited the tuition or cost of the degree as the most valuable decision-making factor. Nearly a quarter (23%) said the speed at which they can complete their degree and 14% said the ability to earn credentials such as badges or certificates.

Figure 36: Long-Term Important Factors (n=1,086)

The tuition or cost of the degree — 34%
The speed at which I can complete my degree — 23%
Ability to earn credentials, such as badges or certificates, that demonstrate my competencies along the way toward completing my degree — 14%
Ability to earn additional credits through existing education — 8%
Number of my credits that transfer — 7%
Personal, quick, and understandable communication from the institution — 7%
The brand strength of the college or university — 5%
Other — 3%

Strategies for Enrollment

Forty-one percent of respondents agree that providing credit for their life or work experiences would be an extremely effective strategy to reengage them as a student, while 33% agree that providing a certificate for credits previously earned would be extremely effective, and 29% agree that providing them with a subsection of courses that they could take at a lower price would be extremely effective.

Figure 37: Strategy Effectiveness (n=1,074)

Strategy	Extremely effective	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not very effective	Not at all effective
Provide credit for your life or work experiences	41%	32%	20%	3%	4%
Provide a certificate for credits previously earned	33%	34%	24%	5%	4%
Provide the ability to earn certificates that can count or stack toward a larger degree or…	28%	37%	27%	4%	4%
Provide you with a subsection of courses that you could take at a lower price	29%	35%	29%	3%	5%
Provide workshops to address your struggles as a student	25%	30%	29%	11%	6%
Providing advising services	21%	33%	32%	8%	6%
Provide a concierge service that would help you	20%	30%	33%	11%	6%

If an institution offered credit for prior learning, 42% of respondents said that would increase their interest in pursuing an undergraduate degree and 36% said it would greatly increase their interest, while 19% said it would have no effect on their interest, 2% said it would decrease interest, and 1% said greatly decrease interest.

Figure 38: Credit for Prior Learning (n=1,074)

Greatly increase interest	Increase interest	No effect on interest	Decrease interest	Greatly decrease interest
36%	42%	19%	2%	1%
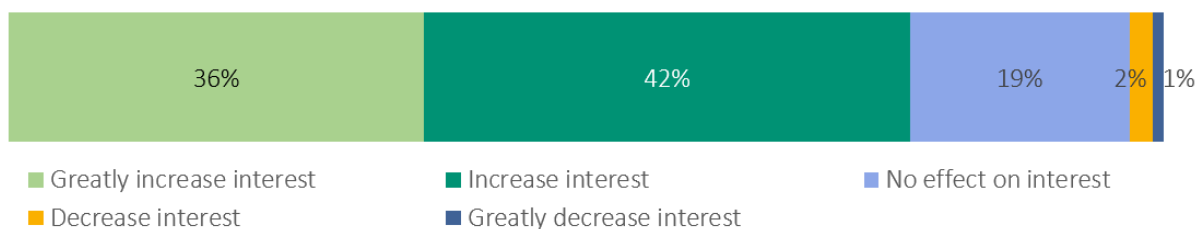
If an institution offered credit for prior learning, Whitney is the most likely to say this would greatly increase or increase her interest in pursuing an undergraduate degree (96%), followed by Sean (76%), Sandra (71%), and Frank (20%)

Figure 39: Credit for Prior Learning by Persona

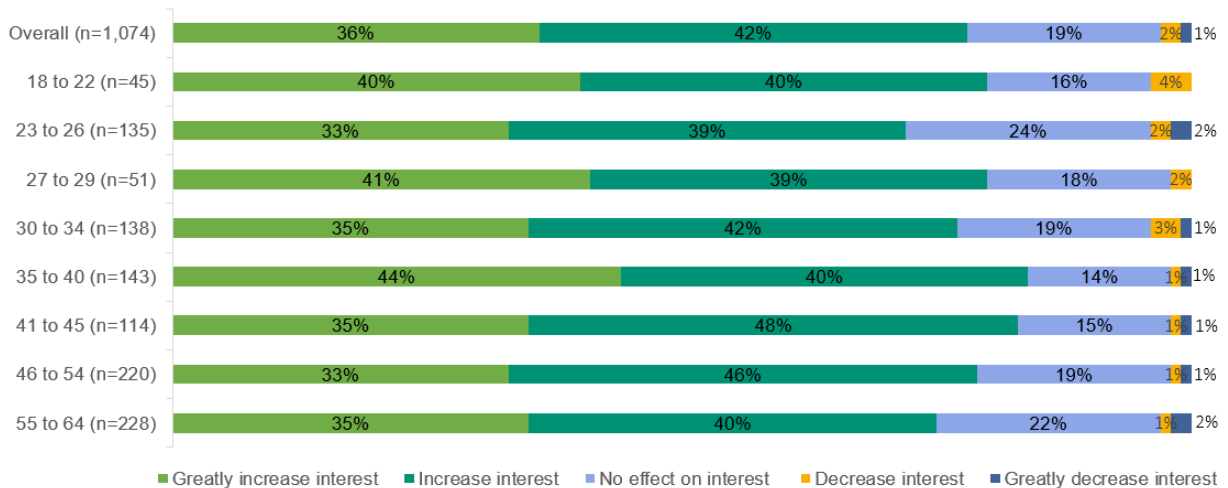| Persona	Greatly increase interest	Increase interest	No effect on interest	Decrease interest	Greatly decrease interest
Overall (n=1,074)	36%	42%	19%	2%	1%
Sean (n=305)	31%	45%	19%	3%	1%
Whitney (n=372)	56%	40%	4%		
Sandra (n=336)	23%	48%	28%	2%	
Frank (n=57)	4%	16%	61%	4%	16%
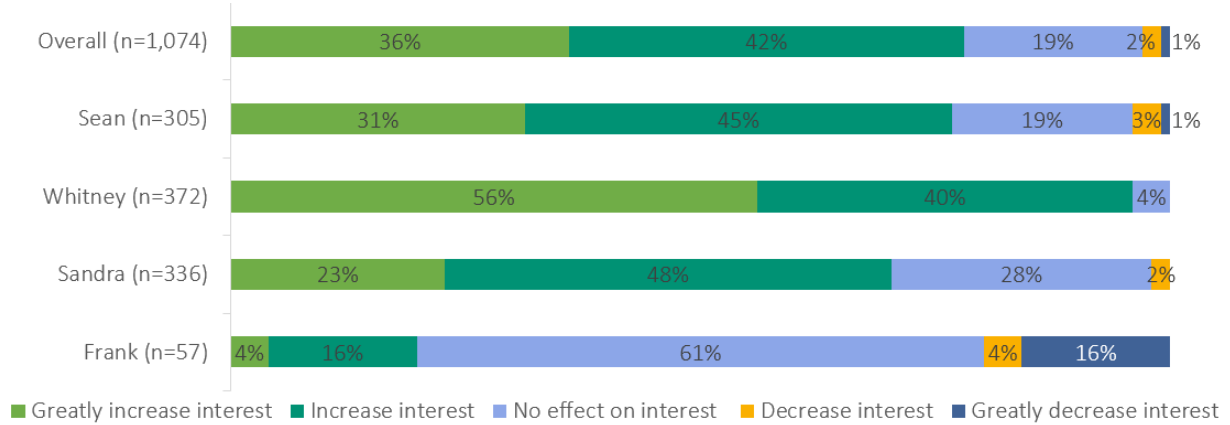
If an institution offered credit for prior learning, 84% of 35-to-40-year-old said their interest in pursuing an undergraduate degree would increase or greatly increase, followed by 83% of 41- to 45-year-olds, and 80% of those 18 to 22 and 27 to 29.

Figure 40: Credit for Prior Learning by Age

Age	Greatly increase interest	Increase interest	No effect on interest	Decrease interest	Greatly decrease interest
Overall (n=1,074)	36%	42%	19%	2%	1%
18 to 22 (n=45)	40%	40%	16%	4%	
23 to 26 (n=135)	33%	39%	24%	2%	2%
27 to 29 (n=51)	41%	39%	18%	2%	
30 to 34 (n=138)	35%	42%	19%	3%	1%
35 to 40 (n=143)	44%	40%	14%	1%	1%
41 to 45 (n=114)	35%	48%	15%	1%	1%
46 to 54 (n=220)	33%	46%	19%	1%	1%
55 to 64 (n=228)	35%	40%	22%	1%	2%

An institution's offering credit for prior learning would have the greatest impact on C-level respondents, with 91% saying it would increase or greatly increase their interest in pursuing an undergraduate degree. Overall, respondents who are at higher levels in their career are more likely to say credit for prior learning would have a positive effect on their interest.

Figure 41: Credit for Prior Learning by Career Level

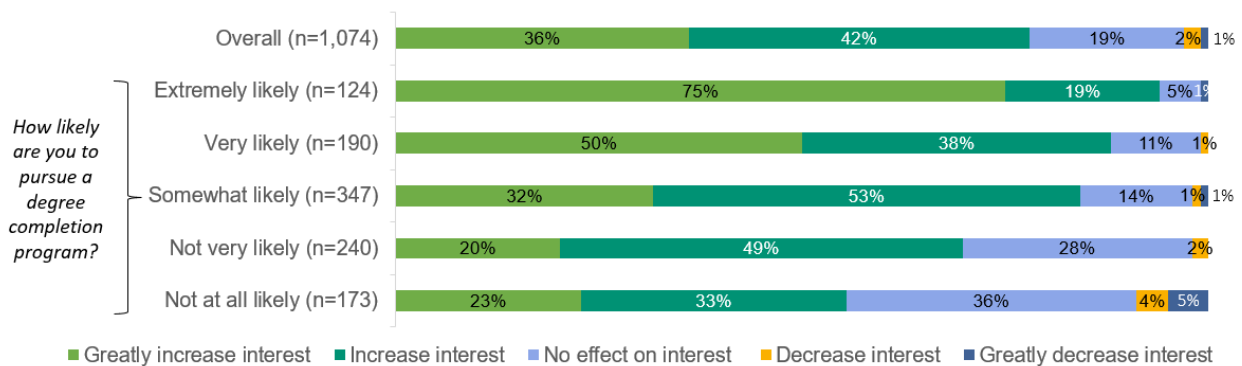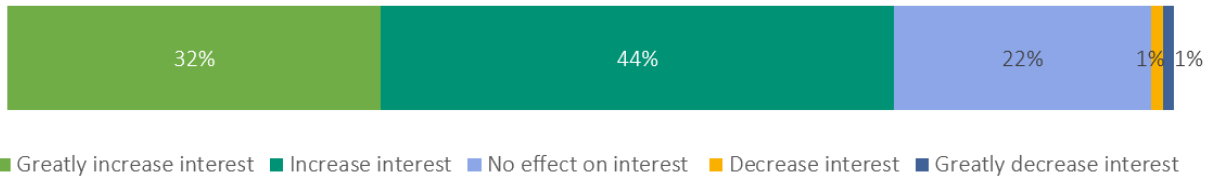|	Greatly increase interest	Increase interest	No effect on interest	Decrease interest	Greatly decrease interest
Overall (n=1,074)	36%	42%	19%	2%	1%
Early or entry-level (n=409)	33%	40%	24%	2%	2%
Mid-level (n=536)	36%	45%	18%	2%	1%
Director or senior level (n=86)	47%	37%	13%	4%	
C-level (n=43)	44%	47%	7%	2%	
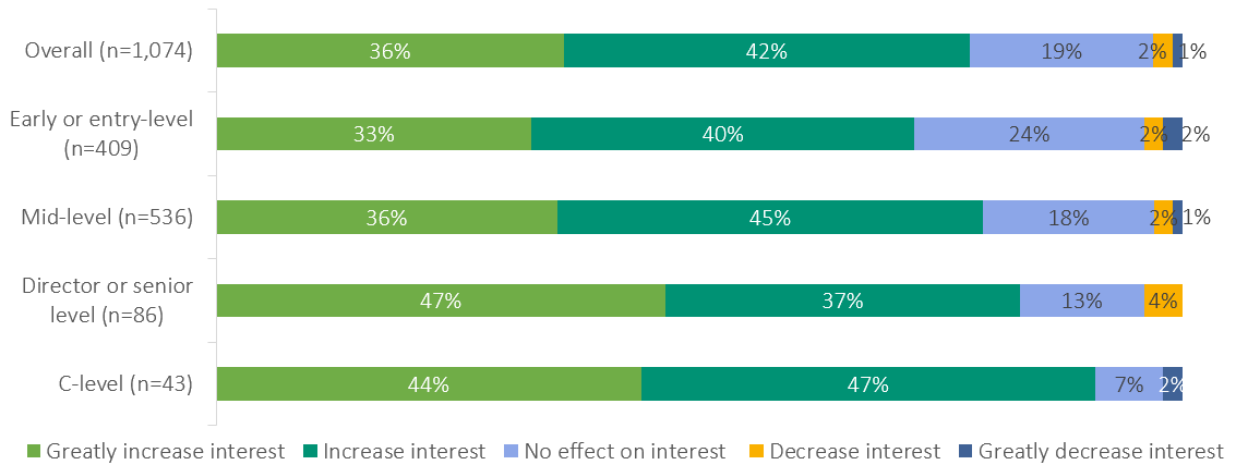
Among those who are extremely likely to pursue a degree completion program, the vast majority (94%) said credits for prior learning would greatly increase or increase their interest in pursuing an undergraduate degree.

Figure 42: Credit for Prior Learning by Likelihood in Pursuing a Degree Completion Program

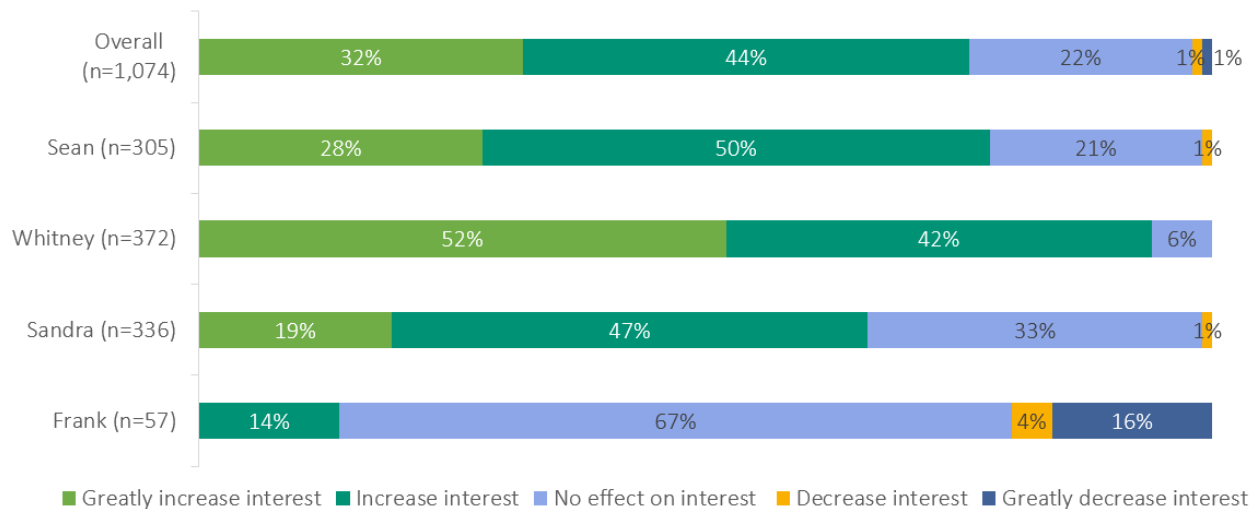|		Greatly increase interest	Increase interest	No effect on interest	Decrease interest	Greatly decrease interest
	Overall (n=1,074)	36%	42%	19%	2%	1%
How likely are you to pursue a degree completion program?	Extremely likely (n=124)	75%	19%	5%	1%	
	Very likely (n=190)	50%	38%	11%	1%	
	Somewhat likely (n=347)	32%	53%	14%	1%	1%
	Not very likely (n=240)	20%	49%	28%	2%	
	Not at all likely (n=173)	23%	33%	36%	4%	5%

If an institution offered alternative or microcredentials that were stackable, 44% of respondents said that would increase their interest in pursuing an undergraduate degree, nearly a third (32%) said it would greatly increase their interest, and 22% said it would have no effect on their interest.

Figure 43: Stackable Microcredentials (n=1,074)

Greatly increase interest	Increase interest	No effect on interest	Decrease interest	Greatly decrease interest
32%	44%	22%	1%	1%

■ Greatly increase interest ■ Increase interest ■ No effect on interest ■ Decrease interest ■ Greatly decrease interest
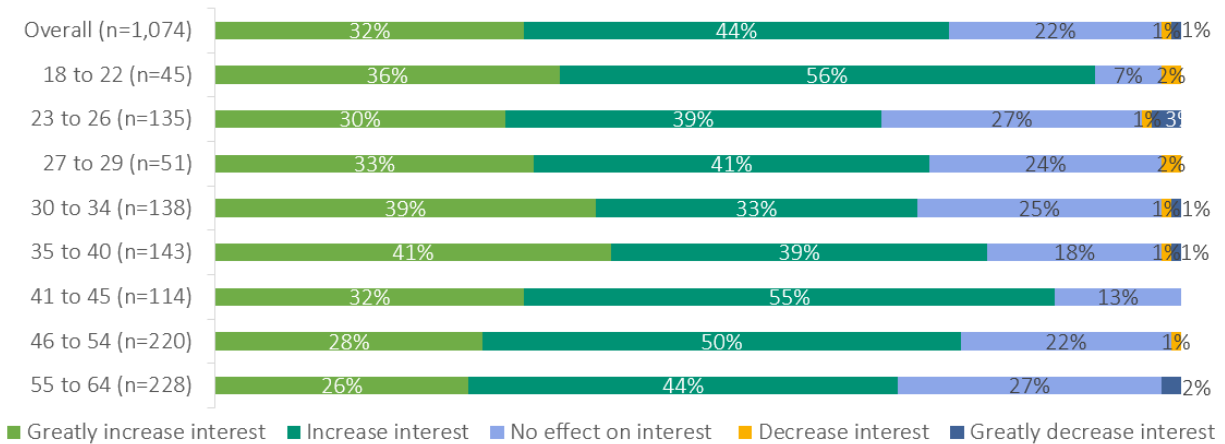
If an institution offered alternative or microcredentials that were stackable, Whitney is the most likely to say that this would greatly increase or increase her interest in pursuing an undergraduate degree (94%), followed by Sean (78%), and Sandra (66%). For Frank, this would increase his interest only 14%.

Figure 44: Stackable Microcredentials by Persona

Persona	Greatly increase interest	Increase interest	No effect on interest	Decrease interest	Greatly decrease interest
Overall (n=1,074)	32%	44%	22%	1%	1%
Sean (n=305)	28%	50%	21%	1%	
Whitney (n=372)	52%	42%	6%		
Sandra (n=336)	19%	47%	33%	1%	
Frank (n=57)		14%	67%	4%	16%

■ Greatly increase interest ■ Increase interest ■ No effect on interest ■ Decrease interest ■ Greatly decrease interest
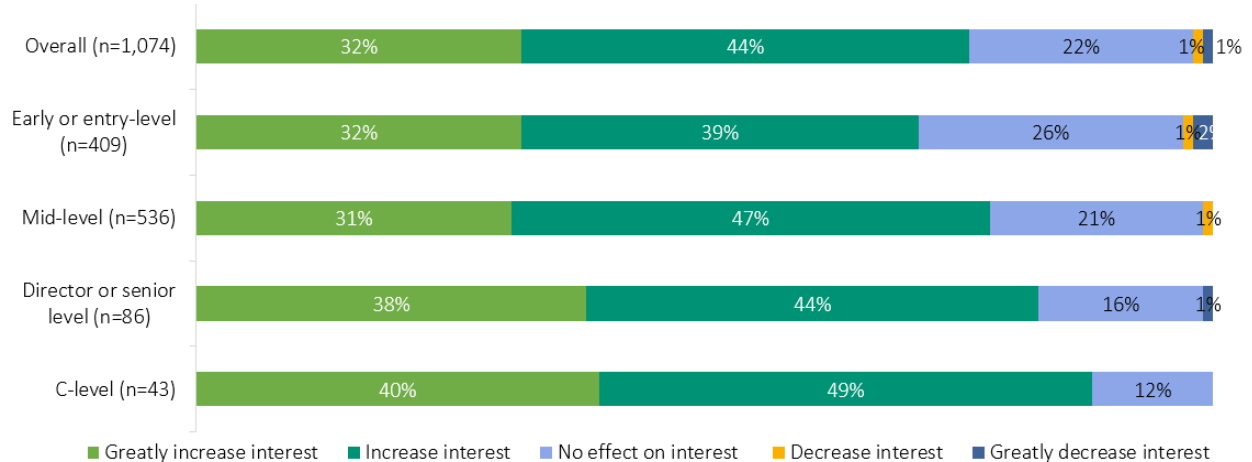
If an institution offered alternative or microcredentials that were stackable, 92% of 18- to 22-year-olds agreed that this would increase or greatly increase their interest in pursuing an undergraduate degree, followed by 87% of those 41 to 45, and 80% of those 35 to 40.

Figure 45: Stackable Microcredentials by Age

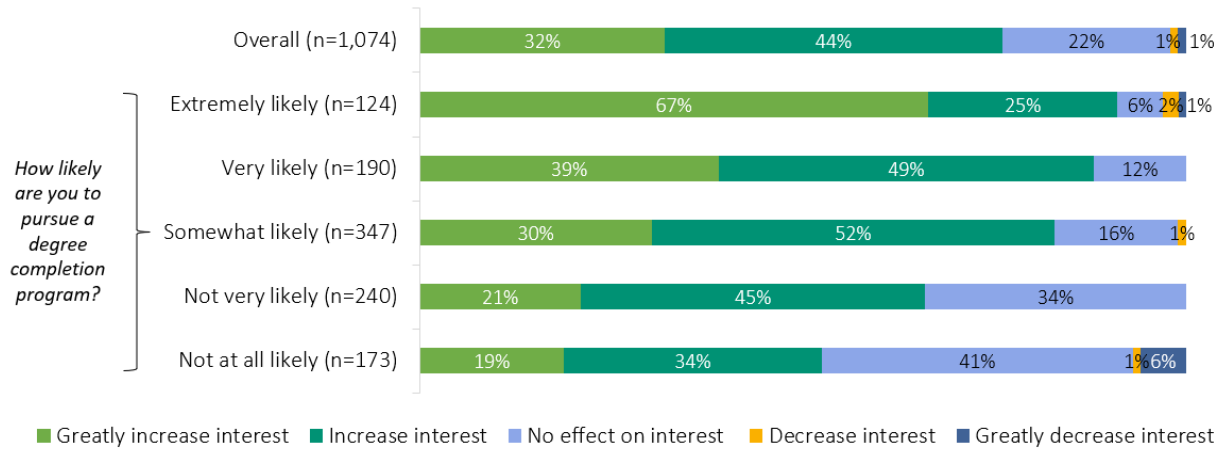| Age	Greatly increase interest	Increase interest	No effect on interest	Decrease interest	Greatly decrease interest
Overall (n=1,074)	32%	44%	22%	1%	1%
18 to 22 (n=45)	36%	56%	7%	2%	
23 to 26 (n=135)	30%	39%	27%	1%	3%
27 to 29 (n=51)	33%	41%	24%	2%	
30 to 34 (n=138)	39%	33%	25%	1%	1%
35 to 40 (n=143)	41%	39%	18%	1%	1%
41 to 45 (n=114)	32%	55%	13%		
46 to 54 (n=220)	28%	50%	22%	1%	
55 to 64 (n=228)	26%	44%	27%		2%

Overall, respondents who are at a higher level in their career are more likely to say that their interest in pursuing an undergraduate degree would increase or greatly increase if an institution offered alternative or microcredentials that were stackable.

Figure 46: Stackable Microcredentials by Career Level

Career Level	Greatly increase interest	Increase interest	No effect on interest	Decrease interest	Greatly decrease interest
Overall (n=1,074)	32%	44%	22%	1%	1%
Early or entry-level (n=409)	32%	39%	26%	1%	2%
Mid-level (n=536)	31%	47%	21%	1%	
Director or senior level (n=86)	38%	44%	16%	1%	
C-level (n=43)	40%	49%	12%		

Among those who are extremely likely to pursue a degree completion program, 67% said stackable microcredentials would greatly increase or increase (25%) their interest in pursuing an undergraduate degree.

Figure 47: Stackable Microcredentials by Likelihood of Pursuing Degree Completion Program

	Greatly increase interest	Increase interest	No effect on interest	Decrease interest	Greatly decrease interest
Overall (n=1,074)	32%	44%	22%	1%	1%
Extremely likely (n=124)	67%	25%	6%	2%	1%
Very likely (n=190)	39%	49%	12%		
Somewhat likely (n=347)	30%	52%	16%	1%	
Not very likely (n=240)	21%	45%	34%		
Not at all likely (n=173)	19%	34%	41%	1%	6%

How likely are you to pursue a degree completion program?

■ Greatly increase interest ■ Increase interest ■ No effect on interest ■ Decrease interest ■ Greatly decrease interest
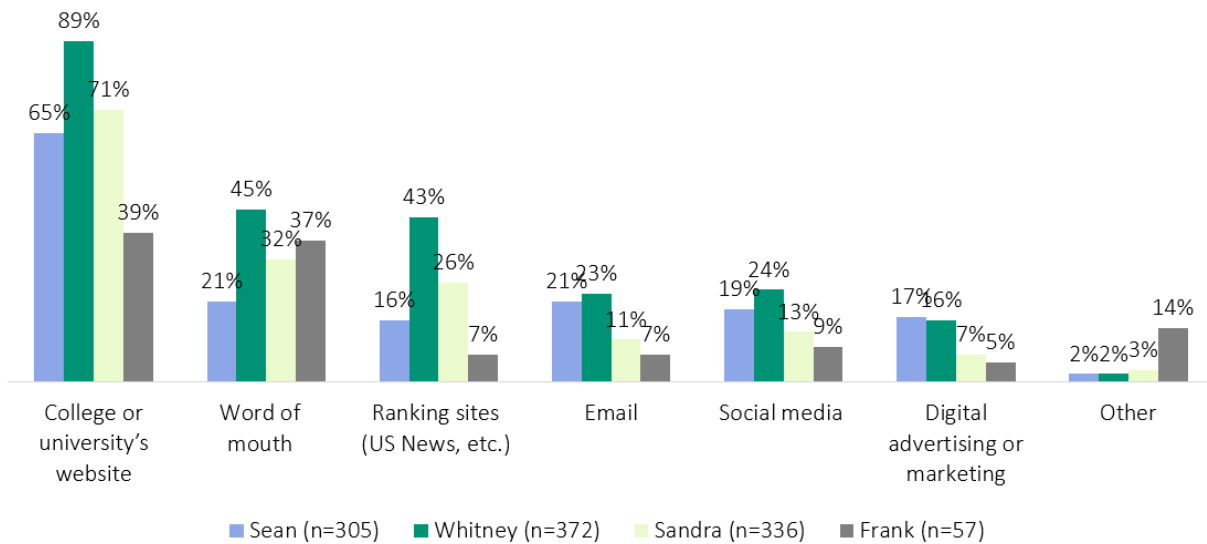
Social Media Engagement

Nearly three-quarters (74%) of respondents cited a colleges or university's website as the most trusted media source when looking for information about degree or certificate programs, followed by word of mouth (34%), ranking sites (28%), email (18%), social media (18%), and digital advertising or marketing (13%).

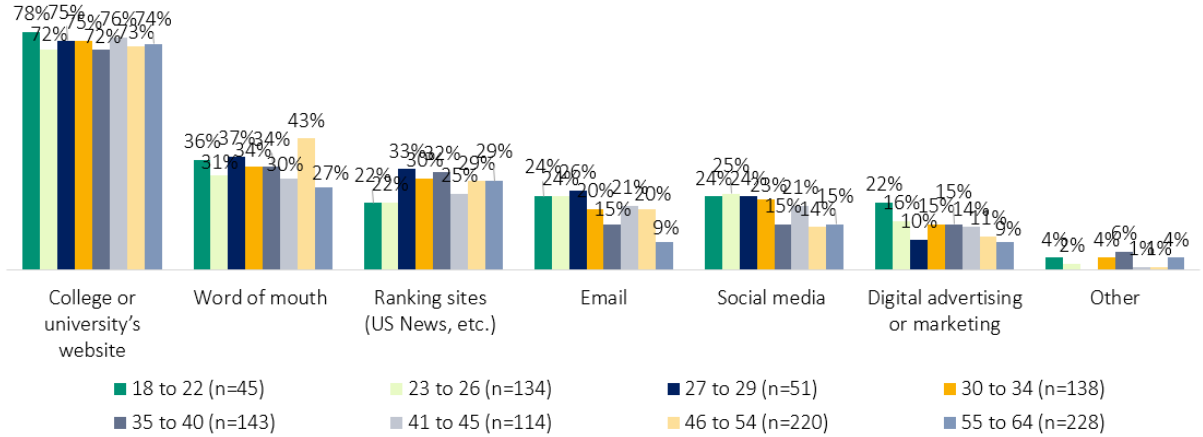**Figure 48: Most Trusted Media Sources (n=1,073)**
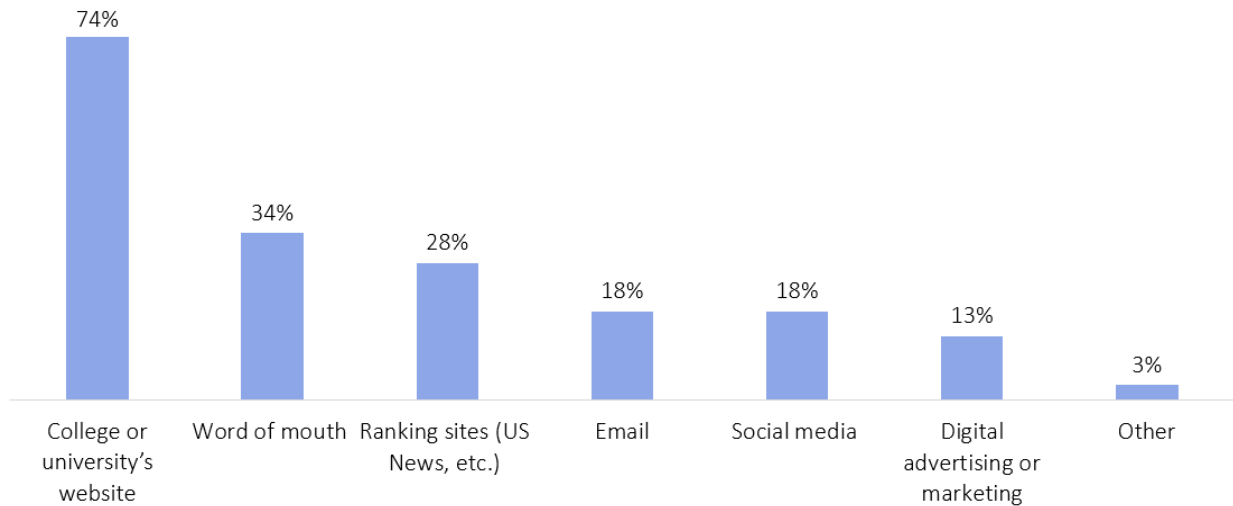
All persona segments agree that the most trusted media source when looking for information about a credentialing program is a college or university's website.

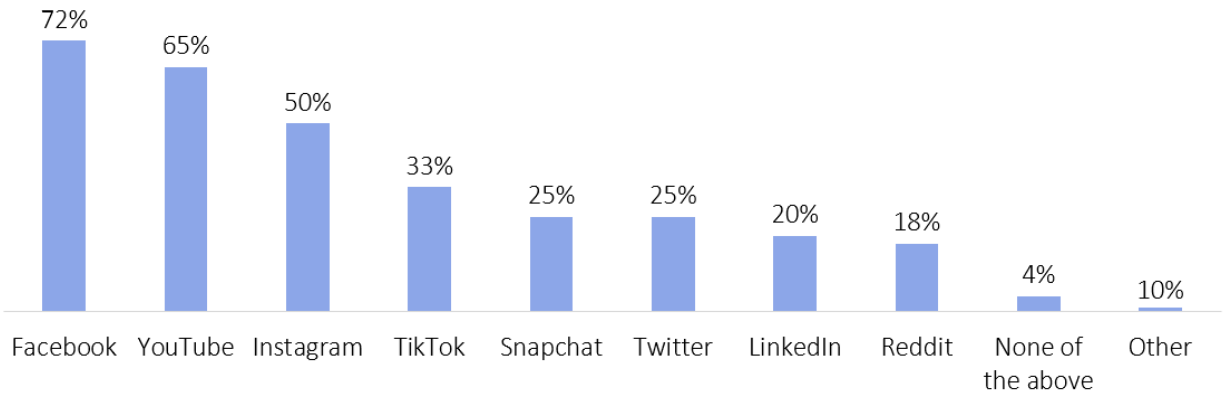**Figure 49: Most Trusted Media Sources by Persona**

All age groups are significantly most likely to cite a college's or university's website as the most trusted media source when looking for information about a credentialing program.

Figure 50: Most Trusted Media Sources by Age

Legend:
- 18 to 22 (n=45)
- 23 to 26 (n=134)
- 27 to 29 (n=51)
- 30 to 34 (n=138)
- 35 to 40 (n=143)
- 41 to 45 (n=114)
- 46 to 54 (n=220)
- 55 to 64 (n=228)

When asked which social media platforms they engage with on a regular basis, nearly three-quarters (72%) of respondents cited Facebook, followed by YouTube (65%), Instagram (50%), and TikTok (33%).

Figure 51: Engagement with Social Media Platforms (n=1,073)

| Facebook	YouTube	Instagram	TikTok	Snapchat	Twitter	LinkedIn	Reddit	None of the above	Other
72%	65%	50%	33%	25%	25%	20%	18%	4%	10%

Frank (79%), Sandra (73%), and Sean (63%) are most likely to engage with Facebook on a regular basis. Whitney is more likely than the others to engage with all the listed programs, especially YouTube (83%) and Facebook (79%).

Figure 52: Engagement with Social Media Platforms by Persona
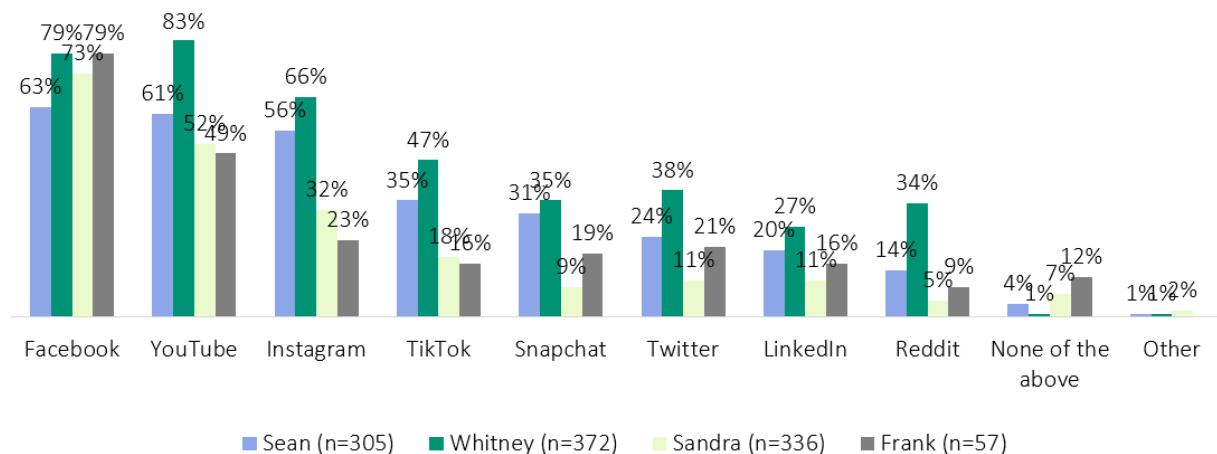

When asked which social media platforms they engage with regularly, older age groups are more likely to cite Facebook and YouTube, while younger age groups also use YouTube but also cite Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and Twitter.

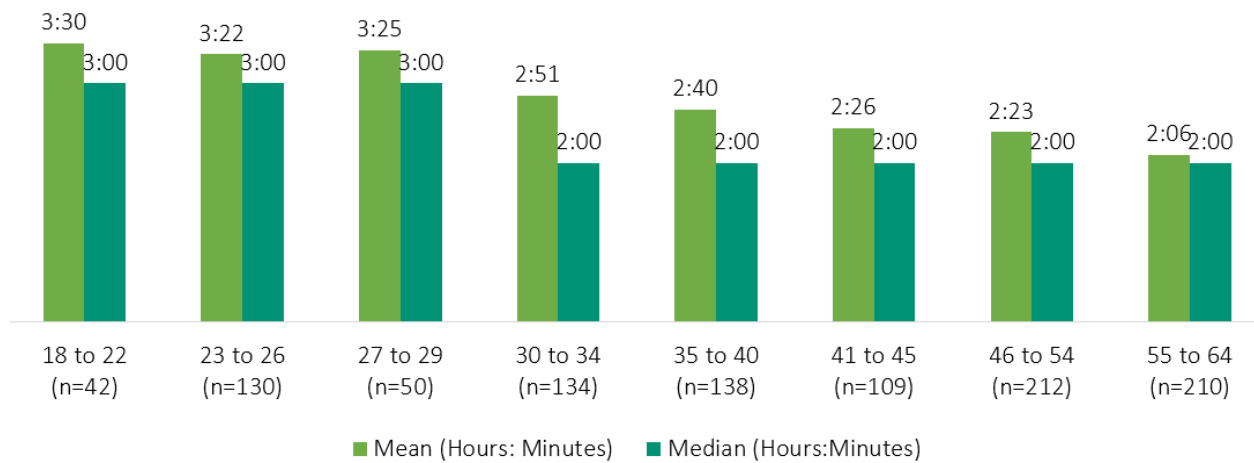**Figure 53: Engagement with Social Media Platform by Age**
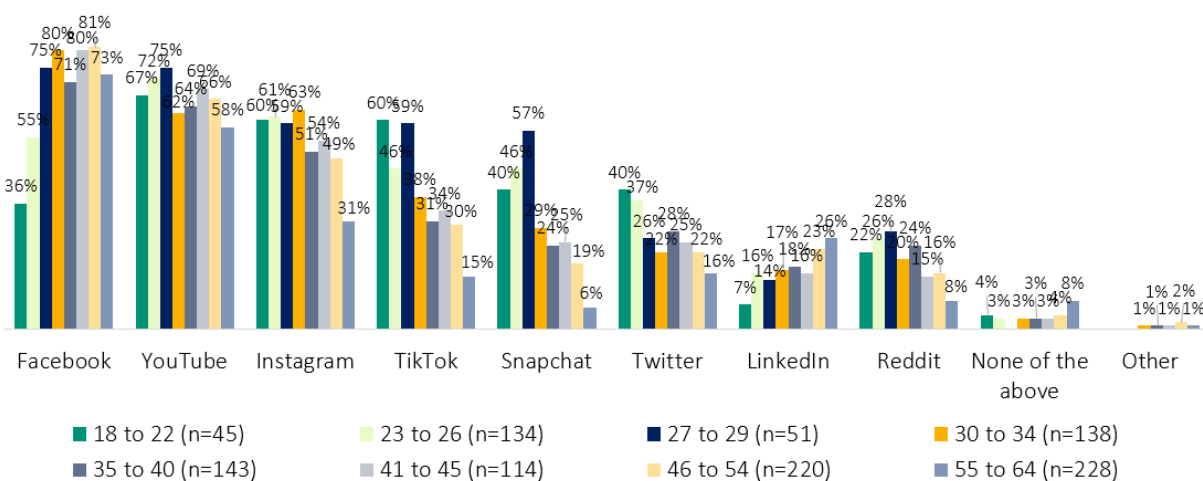
On average, 46% of respondents spend 1 to 2 hours on social media per day, 16% spend 2 to 3 hours, and an additional 16% spend over 4 hours. Overall, an average of 2 hours and 39 minutes is devoted to social media daily, with a median of 2 hours.

Figure 54: Engagement with Social Media Platforms (n=1,025)

13%	46%	16%	9%	16%

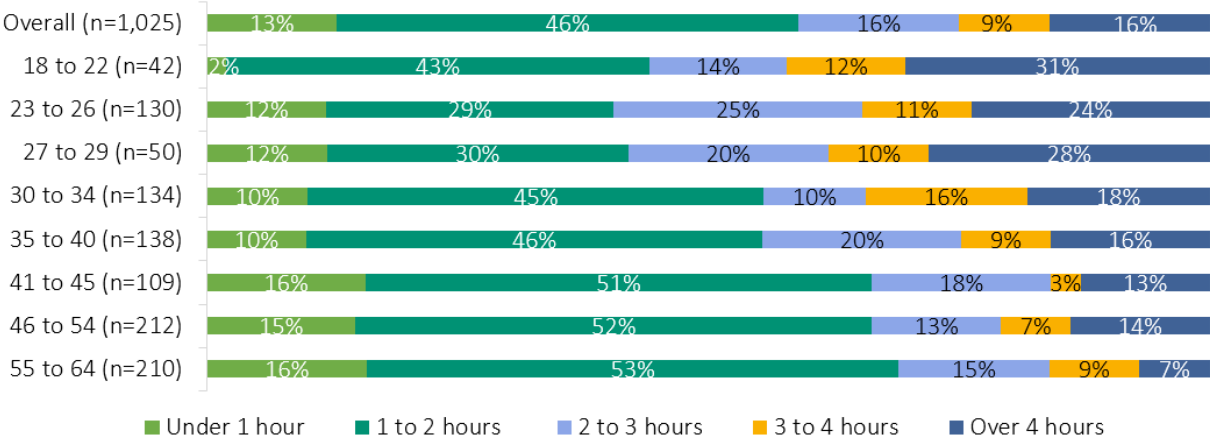■ Under 1 hour   ■ 1 to 2 hours   ■ 2 to 3 hours   ■ 3 to 4 hours   ■ Over 4 hours
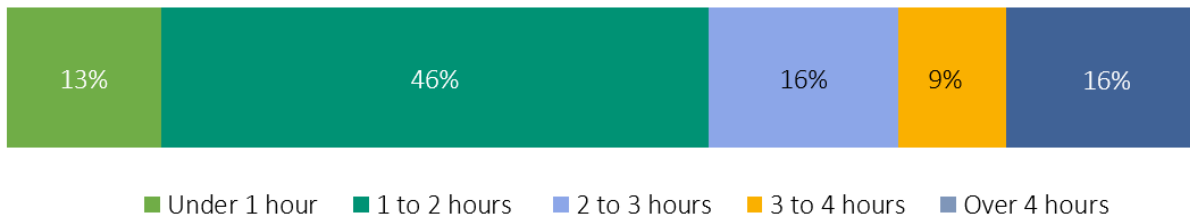
On average, 18- to 22-year-olds spend the most time per day on social media, averaging 3 hours and 30 minutes with a median of 3 hours, just slightly more than those 23 to 29. The least daily social media time was reported by the oldest age group (55 to 64), 2 hours and 6 minutes with a median of 2 hours.

Figure 55: Engagement with Social Media Platforms by Age (n=1,025)

Age Group	Mean (Hours: Minutes)	Median (Hours:Minutes)
18 to 22 (n=42)	3:30	3:00
23 to 26 (n=130)	3:22	3:00
27 to 29 (n=50)	3:25	3:00
30 to 34 (n=134)	2:51	2:00
35 to 40 (n=138)	2:40	2:00
41 to 45 (n=109)	2:26	2:00
46 to 54 (n=212)	2:23	2:00
55 to 64 (n=210)	2:06	2:00

■ Mean (Hours: Minutes)   ■ Median (Hours:Minutes)

Overall, 46% of all respondents spend 1 to 2 hours per day on social media. The age group with the highest average usage (18 to 22) spends 1 to 2 hours (43%) but also the most over 4 hours. (31%). Over 4 hours of usage is also high for those 27 to 29 (28%) and 23 to 26 (24%). The oldest age group (55 to 64) spends the least, 69% 2 hours or less.

Figure 56: Engagement with Social Media Platforms by Age

	Under 1 hour	1 to 2 hours	2 to 3 hours	3 to 4 hours	Over 4 hours
Overall (n=1,025)	13%	46%	16%	9%	16%
18 to 22 (n=42)	2%	43%	14%	12%	31%
23 to 26 (n=130)	12%	29%	25%	11%	24%
27 to 29 (n=50)	12%	30%	20%	10%	28%
30 to 34 (n=134)	10%	45%	10%	16%	18%
35 to 40 (n=138)	10%	46%	20%	9%	16%
41 to 45 (n=109)	16%	51%	18%	3%	13%
46 to 54 (n=212)	15%	52%	13%	7%	14%
55 to 64 (n=210)	16%	53%	15%	9%	7%

Demographics

Almost half (47%) of respondents are currently employed full-time, 17% are part-time, 16% are unemployed, but currently seeking employment, 12% are unemployed, and not seeking employment, and 8% are retired.
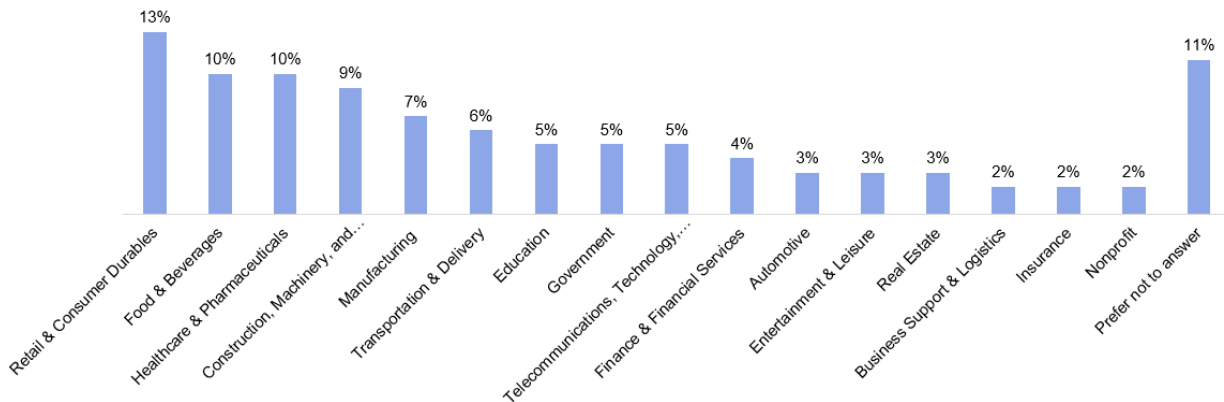
Figure 57: Employment Status (n=1,072)

47%	17%	8%	16%	12%
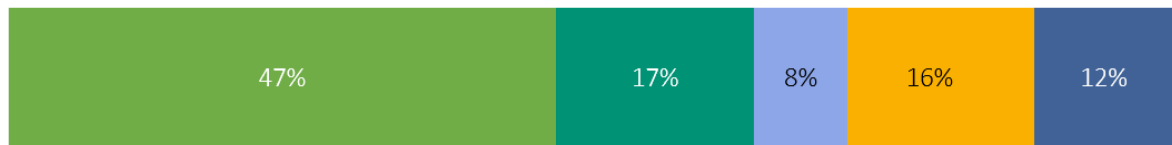
- 🟩 Employed full-time
- 🟩 Employed part-time
- 🟦 Retired
- 🟧 Unemployed, but currently seeking employment
- 🟦 Unemployed, and not seeking employment

Among those who are employed, 13% are in retail and consumer durables, 10% in food and beverages, 10% in healthcare and pharmaceuticals, and 9% in construction, machinery, and homes. Categories that did not account for at least 2% of the sample were included in the other category.

Figure 58: Industry of Employment (n=687)

| Category	%
Retail & Consumer Durables	13%
Food & Beverages	10%
Healthcare & Pharmaceuticals	10%
Construction, Machinery, and…	9%
Manufacturing	7%
Transportation & Delivery	6%
Education	5%
Government	5%
Telecommunications, Technology,…	5%
Finance & Financial Services	4%
Automotive	3%
Entertainment & Leisure	3%
Real Estate	3%
Business Support & Logistics	2%
Insurance	2%
Nonprofit	2%
Prefer not to answer	11%

When asked to list their current or most recent job title, 10% of respondents cited being a manager, and 5% each an associate/analyst, an assistant, and a homemaker/parent/caregiver. Job titles that were mentioned fewer than 8 times were included in the "Other" category. Examples in this category include electrician, bartender, janitor, and security guard, among others.

Figure 59: Job Titles (n=1,070)
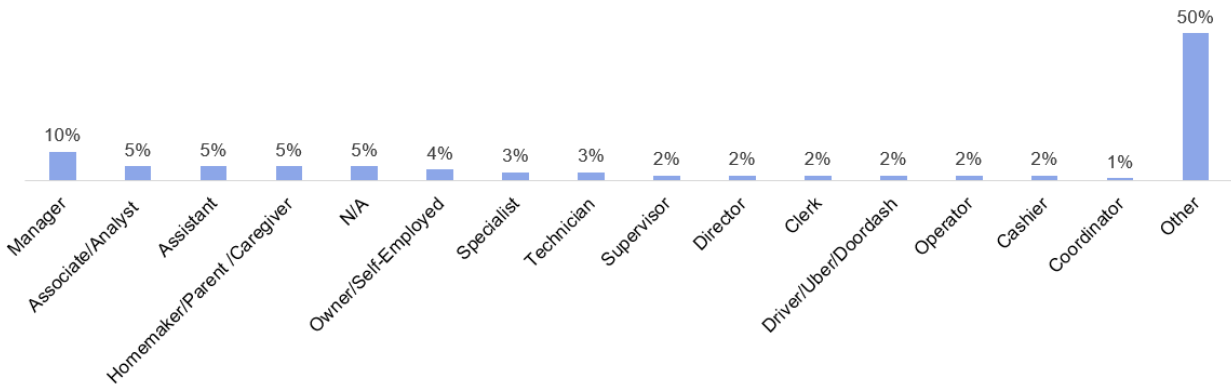
Half (50%) of respondents are female, 48% are male, 1% are non-binary/third gender, 1% prefer not to answer, and 1% prefer to self-describe.

Figure 60: Respondent Gender (n=1,070)
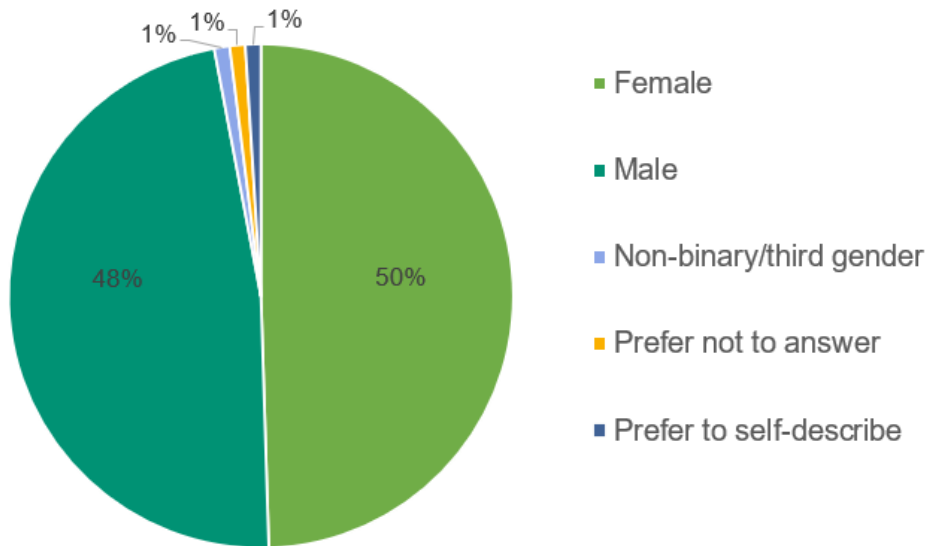
Impact on Higher Education

While the number of individuals enrolling in traditional undergraduate programs is declining, the number of Americans with some college, no credential is ballooning. The convergence of these two populations will undoubtedly force higher education into rethinking its long-held value equation. As we venture deeper into the disrupting waters of the new economy, and Americans continue to feel the sting of inflation, individuals are looking at avenues for improving their earning potential. Those with some college, no credential face a difficult choice. Should they remain in a career in which they feel stuck, or should they return to a system that provided a questionable return on their previous investment?

This research found that while 46% of respondents feel as though they've reached a point in their career where they are stuck or don't have the opportunity to advance, only 29% were extremely (12%) or very likely (17%) to pursue a degree completion program. Clearly, the traditional degree completion program alone is not enough to entice many learners to return to higher education. However, new models that offer increased value through stackable microcredentials could help solve this imbalance. When respondents were asked what effect stackable microcredentials would have on their interest in pursuing an undergraduate degree, 76% said it would increase (44%) or greatly increase (32%) their interest.

While stackable microcredentials increase interest and mitigate risk for students, they may not come at a reduced cost, which was seen as the most important factor when making a decision about a degree completion program (68%). It is important to emphasize that these individuals have already spent considerable sums of money without receiving any credential that demonstrates the knowledge, skills, or competencies they've learned. Understandably, they're wary of making another investment.

To allay these concerns, institutions must consider recognizing learning that takes place beyond their rigid educational borders. Respondents identified providing credit for life or work experience as the most effective tactic to reengage them as students, with nearly three-quarters (73%) saying it would be extremely (41%) or very (32%) effective. Also, 78% said an institution's offering credit for prior learning would increase (42%) or greatly increase (36%) their interest in pursuing an undergraduate degree.

The findings of this study reinforce the reality that institutions need to rethink their degree completion offerings and increase value to attract the some college, no credential learner. Microcredentials, stackable pathways, and credit for life or work experience all offer considerable benefits that increase learner interest and mitigate their risk. Institutions that are able to develop and communicate these layers of value will see the greatest success in the years to come.

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