

Degrees of Opportunity

Adults' views on the value and feasibility
of returning to school

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About the Degrees of Opportunity study

This study was conducted for Capella University by independent research firm TNS NFO, the world’s largest custom research group, from a nationally representative sample of 1,129 U.S. adults age 25 to 60. The purpose of the survey was to gain a statistically sound understanding of the views of American adults about the value and feasibility of pursuing higher education in adult life. The survey was conducted online from May 2 through May 15, 2006. Respondents included those with no college degree, as well as those with bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees. The quotes used throughout the study are responses to two open-ended questions asked of all survey respondents: “What advice would you give to someone who wants to get more education, but just hasn’t taken the leap?” and “What difference do you think getting more education would make in your life?”

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Degrees of opportunity: Adults' views on the value and feasibility of returning to school

“Education is the one tangible product that the whole world respects. Once achieved, it can never be taken away. It opens more doors, and offers more opportunities than any other single achievement.”

— *Degrees of Opportunity survey respondent*

In the 19th century, Horace Mann said, “Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer.” The new nationwide Degrees of Opportunity study shows that 21st-century Americans overwhelmingly agree that education is a powerful means of advancement, both personally and professionally.

Access to this “great equalizer” has evolved considerably since Horace Mann’s day, when higher education was largely the province of affluent young white men. Throughout the 20th century, higher education became far more accessible to women and people of all races and socioeconomic conditions.

But the face of higher education is changing still. Today, the typical college student is no longer an 18- to 22-year-old living and studying full-time on a college campus. Only about 16 percent of those pursuing higher education in the United States now fit that mold.¹ A larger — and growing — number are adults age 25 and older. Since 1970, the number of adults age 25 and older enrolled in college has nearly tripled — from 2.4 million to an estimated 6.7 million,² accounting for about 38 percent of the 17.6 million students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities in 2006.³

Adults face considerable obstacles when returning to school. These include balancing commitments to work, family, and community while attending school, and providing for their families while covering the cost of education, which has increased by more than 200 percent since 1980, compared to an 80 increase in the Consumer Price Index⁴. Still, millions of American adults make these sacrifices every year because they believe in the value of education and feel confident in the return on their investment, whether it be in the form of better jobs, higher pay, more fulfilling work, or a sense of personal accomplishment.

The Degrees of Opportunity study gives new insight into the views of Americans age 25 and older on the value, motivation, and feasibility of pursuing higher education as adults. It was sponsored by Capella University as part of its mission to increase access to higher education for adults and to offer high-quality degree programs that meet the needs of adult students.

Results in brief

Despite challenges, adults believe advanced education is an investment that pays off.

“Education is not just about money, it is about overcoming and doing something that you did not think was possible. It is about giving back to other people once you have completed your education. The rewards are well worth the investment.”
— Degrees of Opportunity survey respondent

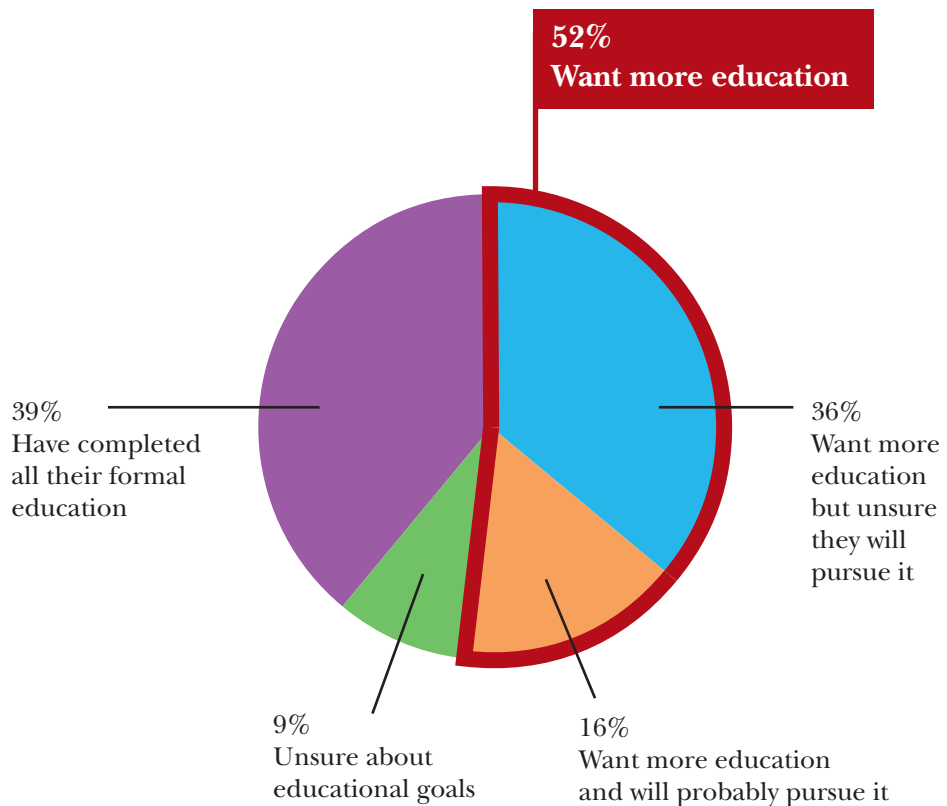
Going back to school

More than half of all adults want more education.

Just over half the respondents indicated they would like to pursue additional education — the equivalent of more than 70 million Americans age 25 to 60. And the time to pursue education, say most adults, is now — if not sooner.

- 57% of those who have gone back to school say they wish they had done it sooner.
- 42% said the timing was about right.
- Less than 1% said they wish they’d waited longer.

**More than half of adults want to go back to school;
fewer think they actually can**



Benefits

Most American adults believe the benefits of education are worth the investment — and they see many ways that more education would enrich their own lives.

Even at a time when the cost of higher education is rising sharply — more than 200 percent in the last two decades⁵ — the survey found that American adults overwhelmingly believe that advanced learning is an investment that pays.

- Nine out of 10 adults believe higher education is worth the time, energy, and money it requires. Sixty percent said that the benefits outweigh the investment, and 29 percent said the benefits equal the investment.
- The top benefits that U.S. adults say they would gain from additional education reveal a rich mix of pragmatic, personal, and altruistic motivations:
 - Personal sense of accomplishment.
 - Developing talents/pursuing interests.
 - Earning a higher income.
 - Changing careers/industries.
 - Becoming expert in their field.
 - Being a good role model for their children.

Barriers

Adults returning to school face — and in many cases, overcome — obstacles different from those facing younger students.

Despite the value placed on higher education and the desire of many adults to pursue it, the logistical challenges present significant hurdles. Adults worry most about juggling school with their family and work responsibilities. They are much less concerned about their ability to make the grade in the actual coursework.

- Only one-third of those who would like more education said that they would “probably pursue this.”
- The top two barriers to pursuing higher education were:
 - Finding the time for school amidst work, family, and other commitments.
 - Finding the money for school, including the need to provide for themselves and their family while attending school.

However, these same barriers also posed the top challenges to adults who had already gone back to school. And of those who had gone back to school, most had overcome or were overcoming the obstacles to completing their educational goal.

- Nearly three out of four adults who returned to school after the age of 25 said they have either completed their educational program or are still actively working on it.
- Only 1 in 5 said they do not plan to complete their program.

Influences

Immediate family members have the greatest influence on decisions about higher education.

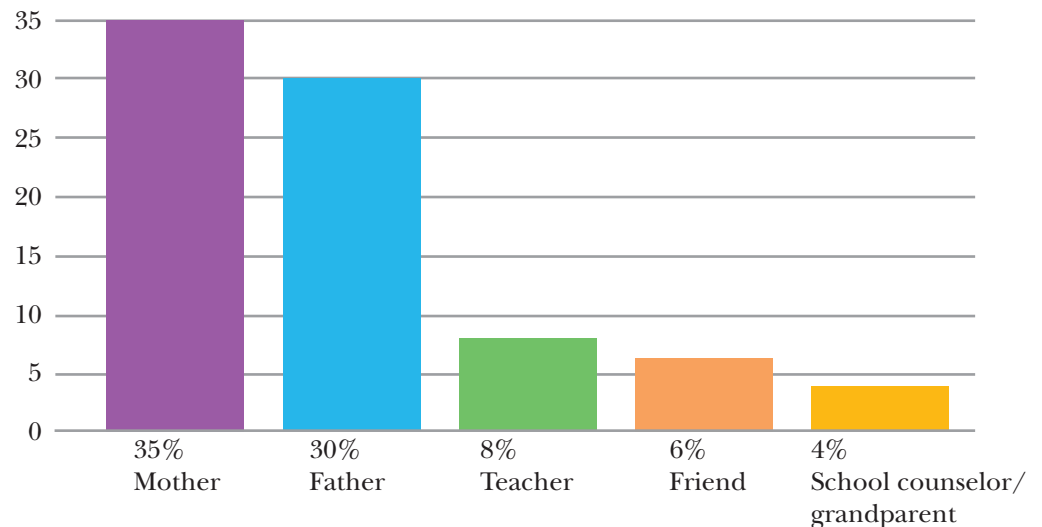
Family members have the greatest influence on whether or not a person pursues higher education. The family influence starts in childhood but continues to be decisive in adult life.

- Looking back at their growing-up years, adults most often point to their mother (70%) or their father (61%) as someone who substantially influenced whether they pursued higher education. Next are teachers (32%), followed by friends, siblings, grandparents, and school counselors (all around 20%).

See graph below for who had the greatest influence.

- In adult life, immediate family continues to hold the greatest influence over education decisions: for 51 percent of adults, their spouse or partner has the single greatest influence; for 9 percent, their children have the greatest influence. Notably, although career goals are often a motivation for seeking more education, only 4 percent of adults say their boss has the most influence on whether or not they go back to school.

Growing up, who had the greatest influence on your decision to get more education:



Reflection

Ample evidence supports the financial, personal, family, and societal benefits of advanced education. Yet working adults approach higher education with a very different set of challenges and assets than those who enter college directly after high school.

Adults are typically juggling much greater demands on their time, energy, and money. They also tend to learn differently than the 18- to 22-year-olds who are moving from late adolescence into early adulthood. They bring to their education deeper and broader experiences with work, learning, and life in general. They tend to be more attuned to the practical, real-world applications of their learning.

Educational institutions serving adult students could help address these challenges and assets by offering flexible classroom schedules that address the greater time management challenges of adult students, by ensuring that students are aware of, and can easily apply for, financial aid, and by designing coursework that students can put to work in their jobs.

Results in depth

Going back to school

Most adults want more education.

“Education is the one thing they can’t take away from you. I have never heard anyone say they wish they hadn’t gotten that degree.”

— *Degrees of Opportunity survey respondent*

Nearly half of adults (47%) have returned to school after the age of 25. Their educational goals included:

- Master’s or doctoral degrees (25%).
- Professional licensure or certification, or other job training (24%).
- Other — additional learning, GED, etc. (24%).
- Bachelor’s degrees (15%).
- Associate’s degrees (12%).

More than half of adults age 25-60 (52%) would like additional education. This is the equivalent of more than 70 million Americans.

- Of those who want additional education, 27% are considering a post-graduate degree program.
- Those with post-graduate degrees are most likely to say they have completed all their formal education.

The time is now — if not sooner.

- 57% of those who have gone back to school say they wish they had done it sooner.
- 42% say the timing was about right.
- Less than 1% say they wish they’d waited longer.

Reflection

Traditional brick-and-mortar universities, typically designed for the 18- to 21-year-old student attending college immediately after high school, do not have the space or infrastructure to meet the growing demand for higher education by adults over the age of 25. Higher education responded by developing new delivery modes designed to accommodate the different sets of challenges and assets that adult students bring to the pursuit of higher education.

The growth in evening and weekend colleges in the 1980s and 1990s addressed some of the needs of working adults by offering classes outside of normal business hours and by adding content that helped adult students more directly apply their education to their work. During the late 1990s, the increasing sophistication and accessibility of the World Wide Web led to the creation of online universities and courses, which is greatly expanding the opportunities for working adults to go back to school by providing students with much greater control over the time and place of learning.

Enrollment in purely online education programs has grown at an average rate of 35 percent each year from 2002 to 2005, growing from less than 500,000 students in 2002 to an estimated 1.2 million in 2005⁶. With a large number of adults wanting to go back to school while working and raising a family, online educational opportunities are likely to play an increasing role in higher education.

Benefits

Most American adults believe the benefits of education are worth the investment — and they see many ways that more education would enrich their own lives.

“You can never have enough education. It costs money but the lost opportunities are greater than the money invested.”

— *Degrees of Opportunity survey respondent*

American adults, whether or not they have returned to school, overwhelmingly agree that the benefits of education are worth the investment.

- 60 percent of adults who have returned to school after age 25 say that the benefits of higher education outweigh the time, money, and energy invested.
- 29 percent say the benefits are equal to the investment.

“I would be able to advance to a higher position and would be on a higher playing field with others who have completed college.”

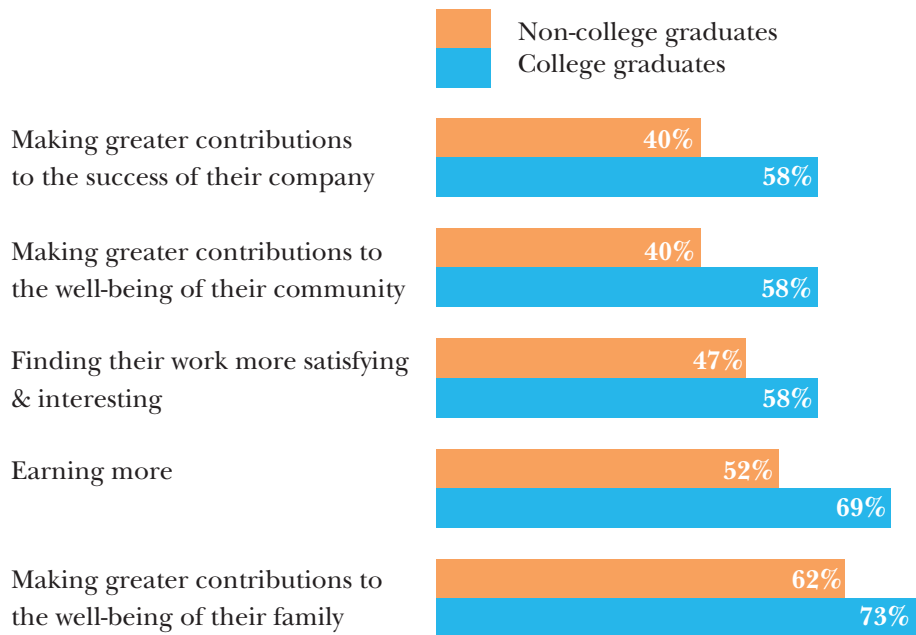
— *Degrees of Opportunity survey respondent*

The top educational benefits identified by U.S. adults reveal a rich mix of pragmatic, personal, and altruistic motivations. They said that getting more education would help them:

- Gain a personal sense of accomplishment (81%).
- Learn about things that interest them (78%).
- Earn a higher income (71%).
- Change to a different career/industry (65%).
- Become an expert in their field (59%).
- Be a better role model for their children or other youth (58%).
- Do their job better (55%).
- Gain respect at their job (49%).
- Overcome disadvantages they have experienced in life (49%).
- Gain respect from family and friends (48%).
- Advance within their company (48%).
- Start or expand their own company (41%).
- Have a greater positive influence in their community (39%).

College graduates are more optimistic about their future

Looking ahead five years, U.S. adults expect to be:



Related findings:

- More than half of adults believe that their lives would be better if they had more education.
- 75% agree that the education they have received has made a positive impact in their lives. Those with degrees are even more likely to agree — 89% of those with bachelor's degrees and 94% of those with post-graduate degrees.
- Those with a bachelor's degree or higher are more likely than those without degrees to say that, compared to five years ago, they are earning more, making greater contributions to their companies, families and communities, and finding more job satisfaction.
- Those with a bachelor's degree or higher are also more optimistic that the next five years will find them earning more, making greater contributions, and more satisfied with their jobs.

Reflection

The well-documented advantages associated with bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees include higher earnings, lower unemployment, better health and retirement benefits, and greater job stability.⁷

Yet, in light of increases in the cost of higher education (202% since 1980)⁸, economists have taken a hard look at the assumption that higher education is still a wise investment in purely economic terms. Finding a 10.9 percent rate of return (in terms of hourly earnings) for each additional year of education, economists Lisa Barrow and Cecilia Elena Rouse conclude: "College is definitely still worth the investment. In fact, there are no signs that the value of a college education has peaked or is on a downward trend."⁹

The Degrees of Opportunity study shows that it's not just economists who see the value in education. According to the survey, 90 percent of U.S. adults agree that the benefits of education are greater than or equal to the investment. Given the cost of education, however, what may be more surprising is that many adults were returning to school for reasons beyond career advancement and increased income. In fact, the two most often cited benefits of education among survey respondents was "a personal sense of accomplishment" and "develop talents/pursue interests." Clearly, American adults see both tangible and intangible benefits to pursuing additional education.

Barriers

Adults returning to school must overcome a different set of educational obstacles than younger students face.

“There will never be a ‘right time’ in your life to take the plunge. You simply have to put your head down and charge through the obstacles, do your best to balance the activities, and let your family be your best cheerleaders.”

— Degrees of Opportunity survey respondent

Although more than half of adults would like more education, only one-third of that group said they would “probably pursue this.”

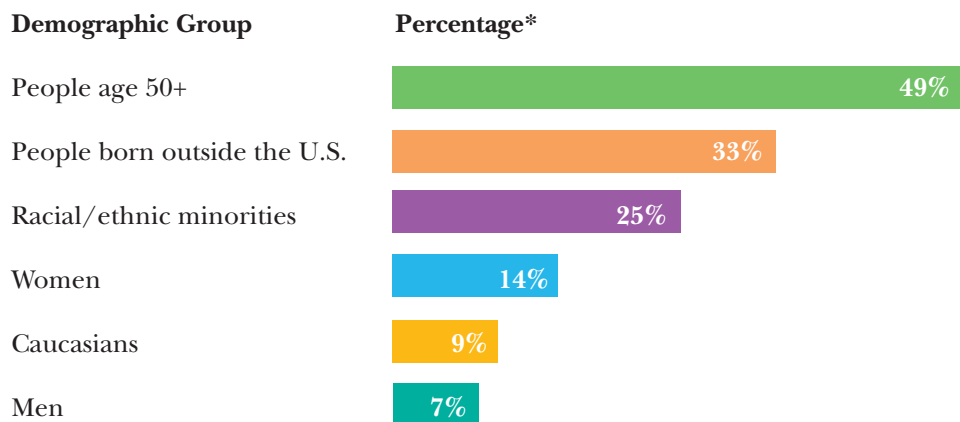
Among adults who want more education, the top five challenges/barriers to pursuing higher education relate to time and money:

- Managing all of my other commitments and still finding time for school (perceived as a barrier by 73% of respondents).
- Finding the money to pay for school (70%).
- Providing for myself/family while in school (62%).
- Making a commitment for the length of time it takes to complete a degree (61%).
- Attending classes regularly (50%).

Adults are less worried by the concerns we typically associate with prospective college students fresh out of high school, such as:

- Finding a school or program that matches my needs and interests (perceived as a barrier to pursuing additional education by 34% of adults).
- Overcoming the fear of taking a risk and maybe not succeeding (33%).
- Deciding what subject to study or what degree to pursue (28%).
- Being able to learn the material and do well in class (26%).

Perceptions: Who’s at a disadvantage in higher education?



*Percent of U.S. adults who identified this demographic group as being at a disadvantage in terms of being able to successfully complete a college degree.

Adults who had already gone back to school confirm that time and money were indeed the greatest obstacles, but in general, the levels of concern are lower than for those who have not had the experience of going back to school.

- Managing all of my other commitments and still finding time for school (considered “somewhat” or “very” difficult by 63 percent of those who have gone back to school).
- Finding the money to pay for school (58%).
- Providing for myself/family while in school (53%).

Of those who had gone back to school, most had overcome or were overcoming any obstacles to completing their educational goal.

- Nearly three out of four adults who returned to school have either completed their educational program or are still actively working to do so.
- Only 1 in 5 does not plan to complete their program.

Among those who would like additional education, those with college and post-graduate degrees are most confident in their ability to navigate the college admissions process.

- Applying for financial aid is the area of lowest confidence for would-be adult students.

Although many people want to go back to school, the thought of returning to school generates very mixed emotions — hopeful, nervous, excited, worried, confident, determined, energized.

- Those without a bachelor’s degree are significantly more likely to feel nervous (41%) when they think about going back to school.

Reflection

In general, the issues adults face when returning to school are different from those faced by students enrolling soon after high school. Doubts about choosing the right school and selecting the right degree program and doing well in college — concerns we would typically associate with younger students — rank relatively low among adults, who are more concerned about finding time for school amidst work, family and other commitments, and finding the money for school while also providing for themselves and their families.

Adults who want to return to school seem to have a realistic picture of the obstacles they will likely face. Their top-ranked barriers to getting more education are the same as those who have already returned to school as an adult — time and money.

For adults who want to return to school, it is important to recognize that while time management and financial obstacles do exist, these barriers are surmountable. Strategies include choosing an educational program geared to the time management needs of adult students, and pursuing the numerous financial aid options available to adults.

Influences

In childhood and adult life, the most important conversations about higher education happen at home.

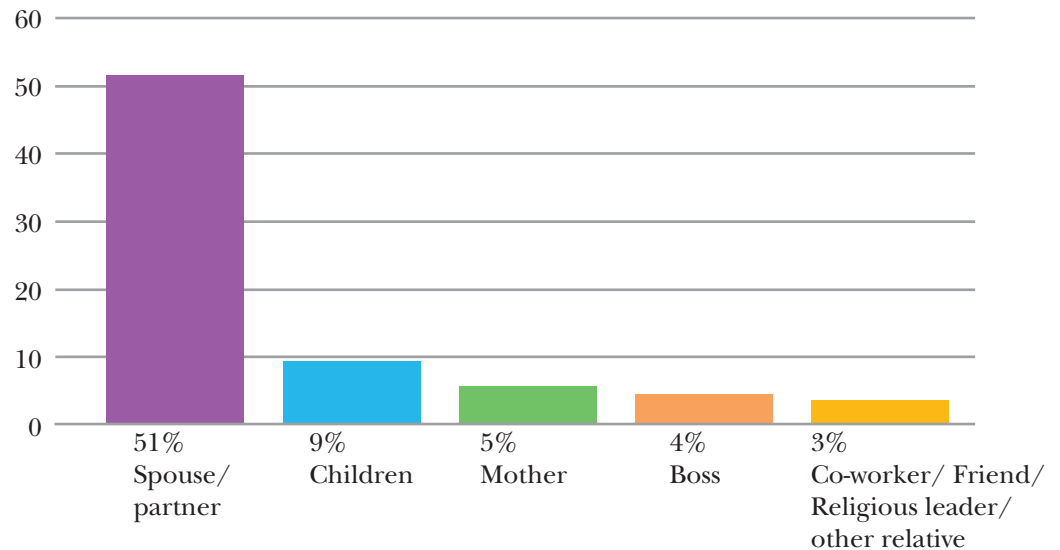
“I was taught by my mother to learn for learning’s sake. My husband believes in college degrees and both my adult sons have degrees. Being more educated always has personal rewards.”

— *Degrees of Opportunity* survey respondent

Looking back at their growing-up years, adults most often point to their parents’ influence as a factor in whether they pursued higher education.

- 70% say their mother was a major influence.
- 61% say their father was a major influence.
- Teachers were the third most likely to be a major influence, but to a much lesser degree; 32 percent say teachers influenced their decision.
- Only 18% say school counselors were a major influence — very similar to the influence of friends, siblings, and grandparents.

For adults, who has the greatest influence on the decision to get more education?



Expectations and encouragement at home and school are associated with higher education levels.

- Those with a bachelor’s degree or higher are more than three times as likely as those without degrees to say they received encouragement at home and at school to continue their education after high school.
- Non-college graduates were more likely than those with a bachelor’s degree to have received the message that they weren’t “college material.”

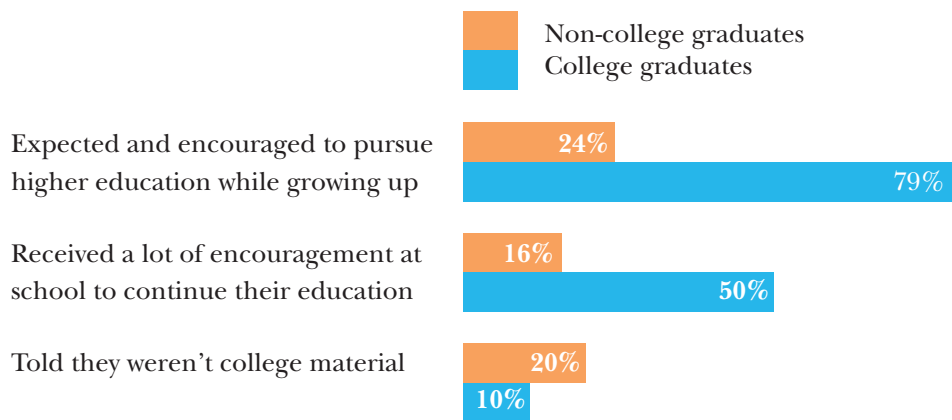
In adult life, the immediate family continues to have the greatest influence on whether to go back to school.

- 51% say their spouse or partner has the single greatest influence.
- The second greatest influence is their children, but to a much lesser degree (9% say their children have the greatest influence).
- Only 4% list their boss as their greatest influence.

Reflection

Family members have the greatest influence on whether or not a person pursues higher education — even as an adult. For adults, going back to school is a decision that will affect the whole family. They will share the challenges of having a spouse or parent in school; they also have the greatest potential to share the benefits.

Educational achievement: Expectations and encouragement make a big difference



Distinctive findings within demographic groups

This survey revealed some interesting differences and similarities among certain demographic groups. The following pages highlight some distinctive findings for men, women, African American women, and adults age 50 to 60.

Men and women

In general, men and women have similar attitudes toward education, but are influenced by different people when it comes to making decisions about education, had different levels of encouragement growing up, and cite some different obstacles that can make returning to school difficult.

Their attitudes toward education are similar.

- Men and women are just as likely to have returned to school as adults (49% vs. 45%) and just as likely to be currently considering getting additional education (59% vs. 55%).
- Men and women are equally likely to say that education has made a positive impact on their lives (77% each).
- Men and women are equally likely to say the benefits of education are greater than or equal to the investment (88% vs. 90%).
- However, men are more likely (62% vs. 52%) to wish they had returned to school sooner.

Each thinks the other has more educational advantages.

- Men are more likely than women to think women have an advantage when it comes to being able to successfully complete a college degree (37% vs. 23%) while women are more likely than men to think men have an advantage (48% vs. 31%).

Men generally received more encouragement to continue their education.

- Men are more likely to say they were expected and encouraged to pursue higher education when growing up (56% vs. 42%).
- Women are more likely to have received no encouragement at school to continue their education (26% vs. 16%).

Their educational decisions are influenced by different family members.

- Women are more likely to say their mothers had the greatest influence during their childhood (41% vs. 29%) while men are more likely to say that their fathers were most influential (35% vs. 27%).
- As adults, women are more likely than men to say their spouse or partner (60% vs. 40%) or children (12% vs. 5%) have the greatest influence on whether or not they get additional education.

Some barriers to education differ between men and women.

- Both cited time management and financial issues most often as barriers they faced when returning to school or considering returning to school.
- Among those who have returned to school:
 - Men are more likely than women (37% vs. 25%) to say that learning the material and doing well in class were difficult obstacles to overcome.
 - Women are more likely than men (19% vs. 11%) to say that family support and encouragement were difficult obstacles to overcome.
- Among those considering a return to school:
 - Men are more likely than women (56% vs. 46%) to say attending classes regularly would be an obstacle.
 - Women are more concerned than men about family responsibilities, including the ability to spend time with family and friends (61% vs. 51%) and taking care of their children (41% vs. 22%).

African American women

Compared to the general population of U.S. adults, African American women place more value on education, have a wider range of people influencing their educational decisions, and have more positive feelings about education, their contributions to their family, and their future prospects.

They have a strong belief in the value of more education.

Compared to other adults, they are:

- More likely to have returned to school after age 25 (59% vs. 47% of all U.S. adults).
- More likely to be currently considering pursuing more education (74% vs. 56%) and more than twice as likely to say they probably will pursue additional education (38% vs. 16%).
- More likely to cite a wide range of benefits from additional education.
- About equally likely to say their education has made a positive impact on their lives (77% vs. 75%).

They have a wider range of people influencing their educational decisions.

Compared to other adults, they are:

- More likely to cite extended family members (grandparents, aunts/uncles, siblings) and teachers as influencing their educational decisions.
- More likely to name their mother as their single greatest influence in childhood (50% vs. 35% of all adults).
- More likely to say their children currently influence their decision whether to pursue higher education (24% vs. 9%).
- Are just as likely to have been expected and encouraged at home to pursue higher education (68% vs. 67%).
- More likely to have received “much” encouragement at school to pursue higher education (42% vs. 32%), but also more likely to have been told that they weren’t “college material” (23% vs. 16%).

They have more positive feelings about school, their family contributions, and their future.

Compared to other adults, they are:

- More likely to have positive feelings about returning to school and overcoming barriers to achieving additional education.
 - Less likely to be concerned about time management issues related to returning to school (55% vs. 73%).
 - Equally likely to be concerned about financial issues (73% vs. 70%), but more confident about their ability to apply for financial aid (51% vs. 41%).
 - More likely to express positive emotions about returning to school, such as hopeful (44% vs. 28%), excited (35% vs. 22%), determined (38% vs. 17%) and confident (35% vs. 21%).
- More likely to say they are making greater contributions to the well-being of their families than five years ago. (74% vs. 64%).
- More likely to anticipate that in five years, they will be earning more money (72% vs. 59%), finding their work more satisfying (70% vs. 53%), making greater contributions to the well-being of their community (61% vs. 48%), and making greater contributions to the well-being of their family (84% vs. 68%).

Adults age 50–60

One of the most striking findings about adults age 50 and older in this study is the widespread view that they are at a significant disadvantage in successfully completing a college education. In fact, survey participants more often named age as an educational disadvantage than race, ethnicity, country of origin, or gender.

Yet compared with younger adults, people age 50 to 60 are just as interested in getting more education, although they have different reasons for pursuing additional education, and rank the potential obstacles a bit differently.

Adults in their 50s see value in getting more education.

Compared to other adults, they are:

- About as likely as average to be currently considering pursuing additional education (52% vs. 56% of all adults).
- Just as likely to agree that education has made a positive difference in their lives (77% vs. 75%) and to believe their lives would be better if they had more education (53% vs. 56%).
- More likely to feel the benefits of an education are greater than the investment (65% vs. 60%).

They have different motivations for returning to school.

Compared to other adults they are:

- More likely than average to be pursuing additional education for the sake of learning rather than a particular degree (38% vs. 25%).
- Less likely to feel more education would help them do their job better (48% vs. 55%), earn a higher income (63% vs. 71%), advance within their company (38% vs. 48%), become an expert in their field (54% vs. 59%), or gain greater respect from their families (43% vs. 48%) or on the job (43% vs. 49%).

They are equally concerned about funding their education, but less concerned about family and time management challenges

Compared to other adults, they are:

- Equally concerned about finding the money to pay for school (70%).
- Less likely to be concerned about providing for themselves or their families while attending school (54% vs. 62%).
- Less likely to be concerned about working full-time while attending school (35% vs. 28% said it was not a concern).
- Less concerned about taking care of their children while attending school (78% vs. 61% said it was not a concern) or spending time with family and friends (45% vs. 32% said it was not a concern).
- More likely to have no children 18 or younger at home (77% vs. 53%).

They are less confident in their general ability to do well in class, but more confident in some skills, such as class discussions.

Compared to other adults, they are:

- Less likely to feel it would be easy to learn the material and do well in classes (38% vs. 50%).
- Less likely to think they need coaching to achieve their educational goals (16% vs. 20%).
- Less likely to say they have a hard time finishing something once they get started. (14% vs. 20%).
- More likely to feel confident in their verbal abilities and to enjoy discussions and classroom debates. (57% vs. 51%)

They have relatively similar educational influences.

Compared to other adults, they are:

- About as likely to list their mothers (73% vs. 70%) and fathers (64% vs. 62%) as major educational influences when they were growing up.
- Equally likely to list their spouse or partner as the person who currently has the greatest influence on whether they return to school (49% vs. 51%).
- Just as likely to have received the message that they weren't college material (17% vs. 16%), but more likely to have received the message at school when they were growing up (70% vs. 56%).

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Dr. Mbilinyi works full time directing a federally funded domestic abuse intervention trial at the University of Washington's School of Social Work. Her research background focuses on intimate partner violence and the intersections of race, class, and gender among social and health issues. A native of Tanzania, Dr. Mbilinyi also has a keen interest in immigrant issues in the U.S.

She has published and presented at local and national conferences on domestic violence, race relations, and immigrant issues. She served on various mainstream and culturally-specific boards in Minnesota, where she lived for 15 years before relocating to Seattle, Wash., in 2005.

The Degrees of Opportunity study was sponsored by Capella University.
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