



PATH TO 70 UPDATE: Why Washingtonians Value Credentials But Aren't Completing Them

Research in 2021 indicated that Washington would add 373,000 net new jobs over five years, at least 70% of which will be filled by workers with a postsecondary credential. It is vitally important—to our state's future and our residents—that more Washingtonians pursue the credentials that fuel our workforce and our economy. Yet, postsecondary enrollment stagnated through much of the last decade and declined markedly during the pandemic.

As a state, we must better understand why more Washingtonians don't pursue and complete the credentials they need to succeed in the job market.

Washington Roundtable and Partnership for Learning, in collaboration with social-impact research and consulting firm Kinetic West, sought to explore the attitudes and beliefs of Washington adults who decided not to pursue postsecondary education or stopped before completing a credential. This research is part of a larger strategic effort exploring how the business community might advocate for increased opportunity, prosperity, and equity for all Washingtonians.



Our research partners surveyed 800 Washington adults, largely under age 35, who have not completed education or training beyond high school.

Research findings indicate these Washingtonians:

1. Recognize the value of postsecondary education and believe they would be better off with a credential.
2. Most frequently cite cost as a barrier to postsecondary attendance.
3. Want access to more hands-on postsecondary learning and opportunities to earn money while they learn.
4. Desire more flexibility in how and when they could access postsecondary education, and want to be able to move through credentialing programs more quickly.
5. Were not dissuaded from postsecondary education by discouragement from others or a belief that they wouldn't be welcome on campus.

The majority (55%) of survey respondents believe they will be better off if they complete a postsecondary credential. Seven in 10 would encourage a friend or family member to attend, and six in 10 believe postsecondary education would be a good investment in their personal future. Only a third say education beyond high school isn't necessary to earn a living wage. Even fewer, 30%, are comfortable with their decision not to continue their education beyond high school.

Only one in 10 say they were worried they would not be welcome or treated well on campus because of their personal identity (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or political ideology). Just 13% say that discouragement from family members, friends, or peers impacted their decisions not to enroll.

What did stop them? More than six in 10 say the cost is too high, and 45% say the stress of applying to and attending postsecondary education on top of other life stressors was too much. A third (35%) didn't know what to study. Nearly three in 10 say that they weren't academically prepared or that postsecondary program offerings were too rigid. More than half (54%) say they learn better in hands-on settings.

Five Profiles of Washington Adults Who Have Not Pursued Postsecondary Education

To better understand what supports and messages would encourage future postsecondary enrollment, researchers conducted a cluster analysis, separating survey respondents into cohesive groups based on psychographic similarities (e.g., attitudes, opinions, values). This analysis highlights five profiles of students who represent the best opportunities for engagement and potential enrollment/re-enrollment in postsecondary education.



DIVERSE & DISENGAGED



ANXIOUSLY EAGER



POSITIVE PARENTS

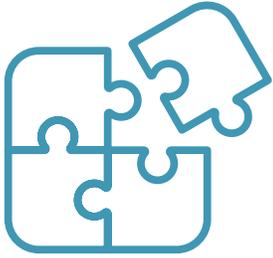


GEN-Z SKEPTICS



ALIENATED AVOIDERS

DIVERSE & DISENGAGED:



52% HAVE A HOUSEHOLD INCOME ≤ \$50,000

41% ARE PEOPLE OF COLOR

42% STARTED A POSTSECONDARY PROGRAM PREVIOUSLY

These Washingtonians offer the greatest opportunity for engagement. They believe in the benefits of a credential. They don't see many obstacles to enrollment and, by far, they are the least concerned about cost (only 12% rated it as a barrier, even though they do not necessarily come from high-income backgrounds).

MAJORITIES BELIEVE POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION IS A GOOD INVESTMENT:

If a friend / family member were considering, I would encourage them to attend

ALL RESPONDENTS	70%
DIVERSE & DISENGAGED	65%

Education or training beyond high school would be a good investment in my future

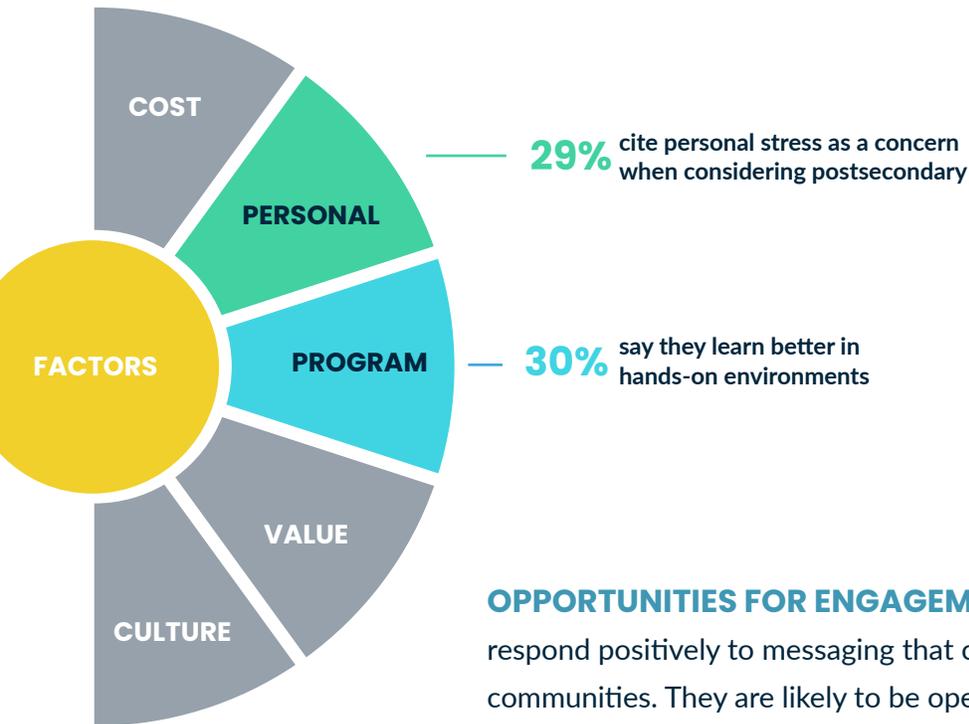
ALL RESPONDENTS	59%
DIVERSE & DISENGAGED	52%

I would like to enroll in the future

ALL RESPONDENTS	55%
DIVERSE & DISENGAGED	45%

■ ALL RESPONDENTS ■ DIVERSE & DISENGAGED

THEY DON'T SEE SIGNIFICANT OBSTACLES TO ENROLLING AND ATTENDING:



OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT: These Washingtonians may respond positively to messaging that connects postsecondary education to their communities. They are likely to be open to practical messages about how to enroll coupled with positive encouragement and support (i.e., streamlined application processes, Guided Pathways, clear examples of career pathways, etc.). They also are likely to be attracted to hands-on and/or cohort-based learning.

ANXIOUSLY EAGER:



70% HAVE A HOUSEHOLD INCOME ≤ \$50,000

29% ARE PEOPLE OF COLOR

48% STARTED A POSTSECONDARY PROGRAM PREVIOUSLY

These Washingtonians believe they would benefit from postsecondary education. They want to complete a credential, and only 20% say they would be comfortable if they didn't. However, cost and emotional stress are significant concerns.

MAJORITIES ARE VERY POSITIVE ABOUT BENEFITS OF EDUCATION AFTER HIGH SCHOOL, FOR THEMSELVES AND OTHERS:

If a friend / family member were considering, I would encourage them to attend



Education or training beyond high school would be a good investment in my future

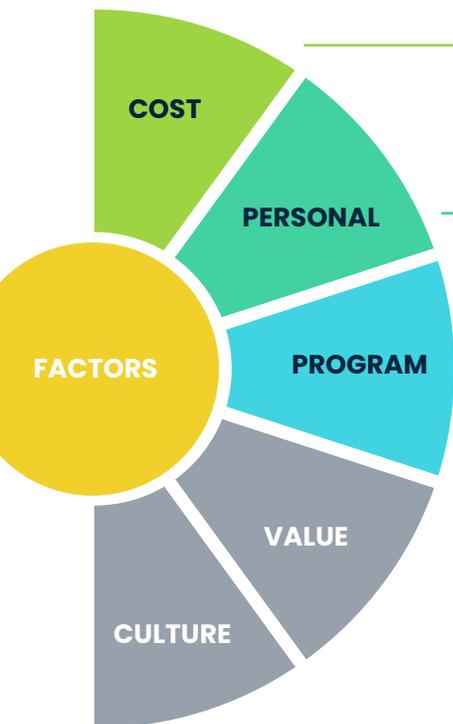


I would like to enroll in the future



■ ALL RESPONDENTS ■ ANXIOUSLY EAGER

CONCERNS ABOUT COST, PERSONAL STRESS, AND PROGRAM OFFERINGS ARE TOP-OF-MIND:



83% say the costs of postsecondary education are too unpredictable

79% cite their aversion to debt as a key reason for not enrolling

78% say they can't afford school plus other needs

64% cite stress as a factor for not enrolling

73% prefer to learn in a hands-on setting

49% say program offerings are too rigid (i.e., inconvenient class times, no remote learning options, pace was too slow/fast)

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT: These Washingtonians are likely to respond better to clear, upfront information on the cost of postsecondary education and the predictability of the total investment required to earn a credential. They may be attracted to cohort-based support structures (i.e., programs for newly admitted students and “life design” programs). Given the external life and family pressures they are experiencing, they also may gravitate toward flexible or asynchronous learning models.

POSITIVE PARENTS:



53% HAVE A HOUSEHOLD INCOME ≤ \$50,000

28% ARE PEOPLE OF COLOR

55% STARTED A POSTSECONDARY PROGRAM PREVIOUSLY

These Washingtonians believe in the power of a credential. Total cost factors dominate as the most significant barrier to enrollment and attendance, including the impact that pursuing a credential would have on their ability to financially support others. Almost half are over age 30 and 75% are women.

MAJORITIES CLEARLY SEE THE VALUE IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING BEYOND HIGH SCHOOL:

If a friend / family member were considering, I would encourage them to attend



Education or training beyond high school would be a good investment in my future

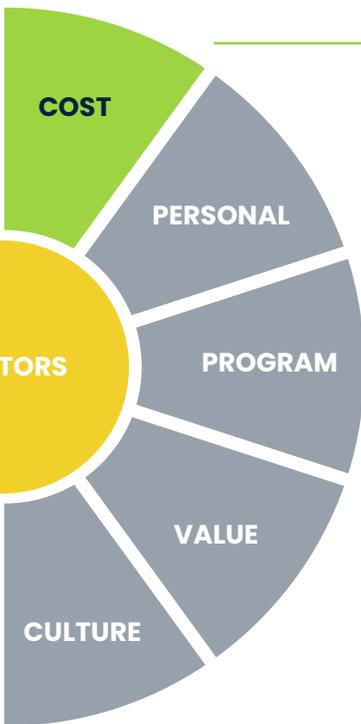


I would like to enroll in the future



■ ALL RESPONDENTS ■ POSITIVE PARENTS

SEE COST AS THE PRIMARY BARRIER:



77% say the total cost is too high

87% say they could not afford education and pay for basic needs like housing and food

66% say the need to financially support other people impacts their ability to pursue postsecondary education

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT: These Washingtonians are motivated to get credentials. They are likely to respond to messages from people who represent them (i.e., other parents pursuing credentials) and learning environments that take into account the needs of the entire family (i.e., flipped classrooms and cohort learning models that allow them to learn alongside similar students). Additionally, they are outcome-focused and likely to respond to programs that feature project-based learning and career experiences.

GEN-Z SKEPTICS:



50% HAVE A HOUSEHOLD INCOME ≤ \$50,000

26% ARE PEOPLE OF COLOR

40% STARTED A POSTSECONDARY PROGRAM PREVIOUSLY

This is the largest profile cluster, skews the youngest (44% are under age 25), and may be among the most challenging to engage. The majority believe they don't need postsecondary education to advance their careers, and they can obtain the necessary knowledge and skills in other ways. They are the most likely to say postsecondary coursework would be too difficult, that they don't know what to study, or that getting a credential would take too long. They are concerned about cost and want to get to work right away.

THEY ARE LEAST LIKELY TO SEE THE PERSONAL BENEFITS OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION:

I do not need an education beyond high school to earn a living wage

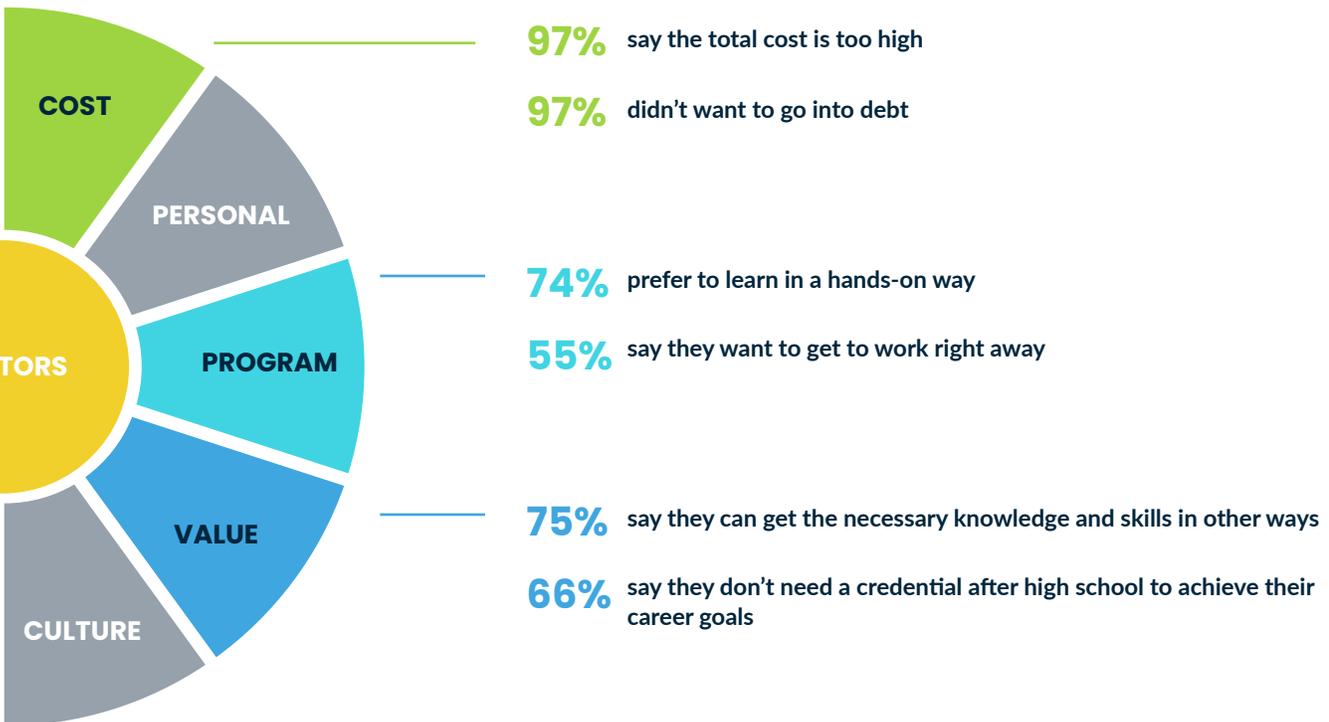
ALL RESPONDENTS	34%
GEN-Z SKEPTICS	53%

I am comfortable with my decision not to continue my education or training beyond high school

ALL RESPONDENTS	30%
GEN-Z SKEPTICS	52%

■ ALL RESPONDENTS ■ GEN-Z SKEPTICS

CONCERNS ABOUT ROI, PROGRAM OFFERINGS, AND COST ARE TOP-OF-MIND:



OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT: There is an opportunity to better market traditional certificate, degree, and credential programs to these Washingtonians. They are likely to be attracted to hands-on learning and opportunities to learn while earning money. They may be more responsive to flexible learning options (i.e., asynchronous, self-paced, and digital learning) and environments that can be tailored to their individual goals.

ALIENATED AVOIDERS:



60% HAVE A HOUSEHOLD INCOME ≤ \$50,000

33% ARE PEOPLE OF COLOR

30% STARTED A POSTSECONDARY PROGRAM BUT DIDN'T FINISH

These Washingtonians are among the least interested in further education. Half say there isn't a program they want to attend. They see more logistical barriers than any other cluster and are more likely to be concerned that they wouldn't be welcome or treated well in postsecondary environments. They are also the most likely to have been discouraged from attending by others.

AMONG THE MOST NEGATIVE TOWARD POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION:

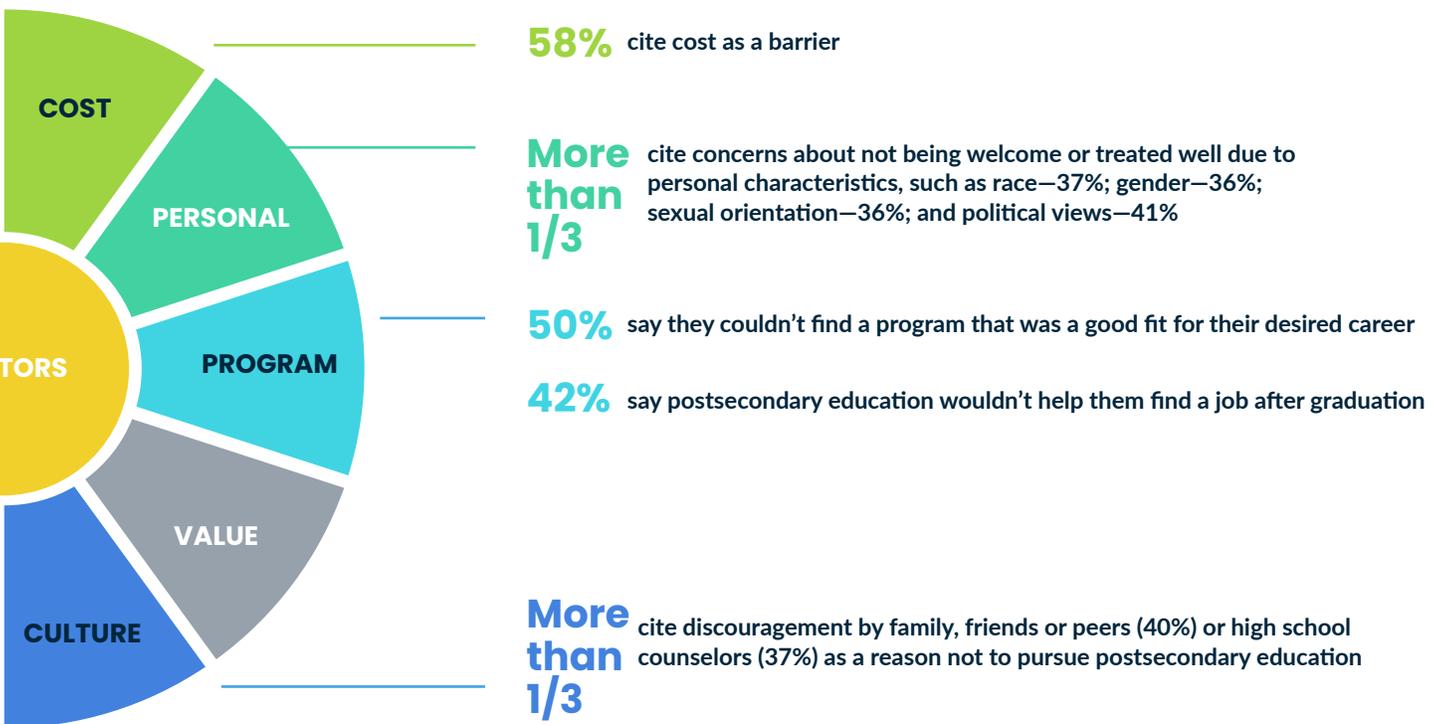
If a friend / family member were considering, I would encourage them to attend **70%**
42%

Education or training beyond high school would be a good investment in my future **59%**
41%

I would like to enroll in the future **55%**
36%

■ ALL RESPONDENTS ■ ALIENATED AVOIDERS

SEE THE MOST BARRIERS TO PURSUING A CREDENTIAL:



OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT: These Washingtonians will be among the most challenging to engage toward a credential. They will want to see tangible examples of how skills/topics covered in the classroom translate to careers. They may be more likely to respond to programs like Guided Pathways or applied learning broken into multiple steps (i.e., progressive project-based learning, layered credentials, and certificate offerings). This is a cost-conscious audience who will likely want to know how to get funding at each step of education. Easy access to financial aid and quick-resource experts (i.e., counselors, teachers, etc.) will be important.

A FUTURE-FOCUSED POSTSECONDARY MODEL THAT MEETS STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE

In seeking to better understand why current Washington adults didn't pursue or complete postsecondary education, there is ample opportunity to consider how to transform Washington's postsecondary system to better serve the state's adult population as well as its future high school graduates. Meeting potential postsecondary students where they are, with flexible and future-focused education and training models that offer support through key transitions, will be vital, as will clear and visible demonstrations of return-on-investment and education-to-career pathways. As business leaders, we have a role to play in supporting transformation of Washington state's postsecondary system and better promoting its benefits to the next generation of workers. We look to the great postsecondary leaders in our state to consider the design of models that are aligned with workforce needs and better encourage enrollment and persistence to credential completion.

