



# Why Higher Ed?

Top Reasons U.S. Consumers Choose Their Educational Pathways

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A photograph of three men in a modern office environment. One man in a grey long-sleeved shirt and glasses is shaking hands with a man in a light blue shirt. A third man in a light blue shirt stands behind them. They are in a room with large windows, a whiteboard, and bookshelves filled with books. A laptop is open on a table in the foreground.

# Why Higher Ed?

**Higher education is under attack. From policymakers and parents to students themselves, challenges to higher education’s value, purpose and return on investment are on the rise.**

Yet, Americans continue to pursue postsecondary education in increasing numbers as more and more jobs require advanced credentials. While much has been studied and written about the factors motivating students to pursue postsecondary education, it is important to examine the fundamental question, “Why higher ed?” Together, Strada Education Network and Gallup are doing just that as we assemble the nation’s largest database of insights on higher education, with the ultimate goal of elevating the voice of consumers to improve college-to-career outcomes.

This report features consumers’ answers in their own words. The 62% of U.S. adults aged 18 to 65 who have ever enrolled in higher education gave us their main reasons for doing so. From the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute’s CIRP Freshman Survey, we already know that among freshmen entering four-year colleges and universities, getting a better job is a critical factor. However, this is only one of many postsecondary pathways.

*Are the motivating factors different for those who choose vocational, technical, two-year or postgraduate credentials? How do the motivations of our growing nontraditional or post-traditional learner population compare with traditional learners? Are there differences between people who complete their pathways and those who start but don’t finish?*

By better understanding why education consumers choose the pathways they do, perhaps we can help more students complete their postsecondary education with purpose and successfully launch their careers. Starting with why is a foundation for innovation and disruption across most industries — as is listening to consumers. So, we start our 2018 consumer insights agenda with this question. Ideally, with better information, we can more effectively meet the needs of our students and support them through a transformative learning experience.

# Key Findings



The Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey is a nationally representative survey asking 350 U.S. adults daily about their educational experiences and perceptions. Since June 2016, we have interviewed almost 200,000 adults from more than 3,000 postsecondary institutions.

To discover the motivations of students from all walks of life, we asked over 86,000 education consumers between January and December 2017 to tell us **in their own words** why they chose their postsecondary pathway and school. With experiences at over 3,000 postsecondary institutions, they provided responses to these two questions:

**What was the MAIN reason you decided to pursue your highest level of education?**

**What was the MAIN reason you decided to enroll in the school or college where you completed your highest level of education?**

From their verbatim responses, the research team identified themes and coded the self-reported consumer motivations. *Below are some of the key findings:*

**1** Work outcomes are the main reason most people choose higher education, more than double the percentage representing the next most prevalent motivation.

Fifty-eight percent of education consumers say getting a good job is their primary motivation, compared with 23% who report a general motivation to learn more and gain knowledge without linking it to work or career aspirations.

**2** Work outcomes are the primary motivation across all higher education pathways, not just four-year colleges and universities.

Fully 72% of those with postgraduate educational experiences say getting a good job is their top motivation, as do 60% of those on a technical or vocational educational pathway. Four-year degree holders (55%), two-year degree holders (53%) and noncompleting students (50%) are also most likely to identify work and career motivations.

## Key Findings

### 3 Work motivations are strikingly similar across demographic subgroups.

For example, women (59%) and men (56%), those whose parents have bachelor's degrees (57%) and those whose parents do not (58%), people across the spectrum of current income levels (57% to 60%), and individuals of various races and ethnicities (56% to 59%) all cite career motivations for their chosen educational pathways at similarly high rates.

### 4 Those who start a higher education pathway and fail to complete it are more likely than those who complete theirs to report general aspirations for learning and knowledge as their top motivation.

The 31% of noncompleters who name these general learning goals as their top reason for pursuing their educational pathways far exceeds the percentages among students who complete vocational/technical training (14%), postgraduate work/degrees (18%), four-year degrees (20%) or two-year degrees (25%). In a recent Strada-Gallup report, noncompleting students were also the most likely to say they would study a different major if they had to do it all over again. Students' clarity of purpose and focus is emerging as an important construct to understand for all who seek to increase completion.

### 5 While the choice to pursue higher education is largely driven by career aspirations, institution choice is primarily driven by constraints.

Location (28%) and access/affordability (22%) are the most common *main reasons* that consumers give for where they choose to enroll.

While many factors may influence students' decisions to pursue education beyond high school, these results clearly show that work and career outcomes are what primarily drive Americans — from all backgrounds and across a variety of postsecondary education options.

## Main Reason Consumers Choose Their Highest Level of Education



Overall, nearly six in 10 education consumers cite job and career-related motivations as the main reason they pursued their chosen levels of postsecondary education, such as technical/vocational credentials or associate, bachelor's or postgraduate degrees. Career motivations double the next-highest reason for choosing higher education pathways, with less than a quarter of individuals saying they chose their educational pathways to advance their general knowledge.

### Main Reason for Choosing Level of Education

Good job or career	<b>58%</b>
Learning and knowledge	<b>23%</b>
Family or social expectations	<b>12%</b>
Access/Affordability	<b>6%</b>
Other	<b>2%</b>

# Main Reason Consumers Choose Their Highest Level of Education

Few education consumers (12%) cite family or social expectations, such as family influence or enrolling in the same institution as a friend. Only 6% of education consumers say they chose to pursue a particular level of education based on access — such as the opportunity to complete courses online — or affordability.

## Consumer Verbatims: Main Reason for Choosing Educational Pathway

### Good job or career

“To improve my employment opportunities and to make more money.”

“To have a better salary and more economic stability.”

“You just can’t find a good job without a college degree.”

### Learning and knowledge

“I wanted to keep my mind going. I wanted to learn more.”

“For knowledge and personal growth.”

“Expand worldview and stop closed-minded bubble I have.”

### Family or social expectations

“Just one of those things that everyone is supposed to do — everyone is supposed to go to college after high school.”

“It was just what you did after high school, you know? My parents wanted me to.”

“Everybody else was doing it.”

### Access/ Affordability

“I was able to take quite a few classes during night school, and I could continue working during the day and still get my degree.”

“It was faster to get to my end point.”

“It was an inexpensive way to get a degree.”

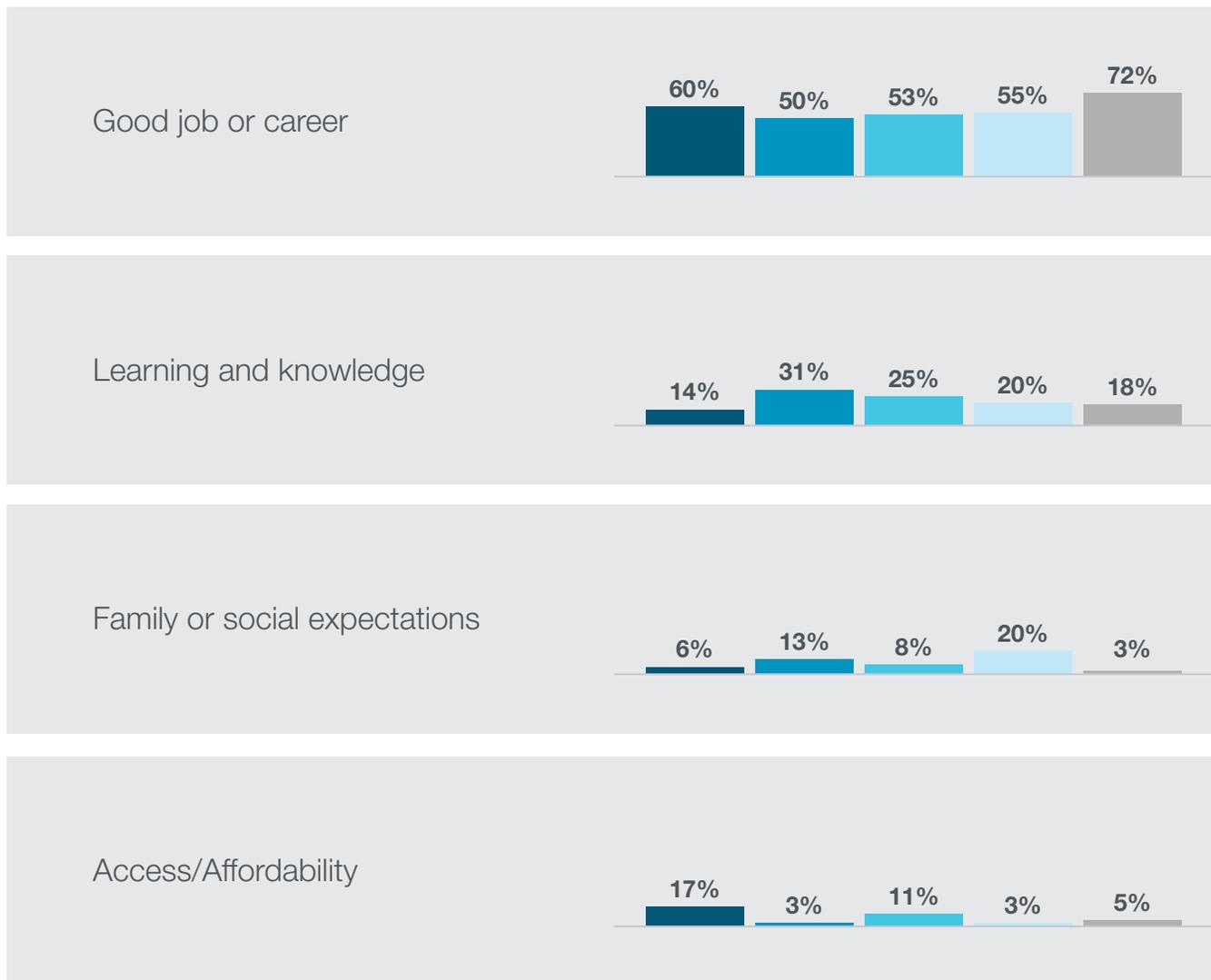
# Main Reason Consumers Choose Their Highest Level of Education

## Choosing an Educational Pathway, by Highest Level of Education

For all educational levels, career motivations represent, by far, the most commonly cited reason for choosing a postsecondary pathway. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of those with some postgraduate work or a postgraduate degree say they chose that pathway for career-related reasons — the highest percentage among all educational levels — followed by 60% of those with a technical or vocational credential. Importantly, at least half of consumers at all educational levels name career motivations as the main reason for their chosen pathways.

## Main Reason for Choosing Level of Education, by Highest Level of Education

■ Technical/Vocational credential    
 ■ Some college, no degree    
 ■ Two-year degree    
 ■ Four-year degree    
 ■ Postgraduate work/degree



As we think about creating a more skilled, technical workforce and targeting those with some college and no degree to retool for the future of our information economy, it likely will not be enough to simply invite these consumers back into an educational pathway. The pathway will need to be the right one — one with enough clarity, purpose and relevance to the prospective students' working lives. Understanding consumers' connections to purpose and focus is vital for institutions, foundations, policymakers and education reformers as they seek to increase postsecondary completion.



## Main Reason Consumers Choose Their Highest Level of Education

Though other reasons for choosing an educational pathway fall far behind career motivations for consumers at all levels, some other notable trends do emerge. For example, nearly a third of those who started college but did not complete a degree program were primarily motivated by the pursuit of learning and knowledge — the highest percentage among all educational levels. What we are learning, however, is that general, broad-based motivations such as the “pursuit of knowledge” are not strong enough motivating factors when it comes to persistence. We know, for instance, from our previous **Education Consumer Survey study** that individuals with some college but no degree are the most likely to say they would study a different major if they had to do it all over again.

Additionally, one-fifth (20%) of education consumers whose highest education is a bachelor’s degree and 13% of those who started but did not finish college say they pursued that degree due to family or social expectations. By comparison, fewer than one in 10 adults with a technical/vocational credential, associate degree or postgraduate work/degree say their main motivation came from family or social expectations.

The 17% of education consumers with a technical/vocational credential who name access or affordability as their main motivation for choosing their educational pathways more than triples the percentages of those who pursued four-year or postgraduate degrees for the same reason. Similarly, adults whose highest level of education is an associate degree are nearly four times as likely as those with four-year degrees and more than twice as likely as those who pursued postgraduate degrees to cite access or affordability as the main reason for choosing their degree level.

### Demographic Similarities

Education consumers across demographic groups are strikingly similar in their motivations for pursuing postsecondary education. Career considerations top the list of reasons that individuals pursue higher education, regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, current income and parents’ education.

*Percentage citing career motivations for pursuing postsecondary education level:*

Men (**56%**) and women (**59%**)

Whites (**58%**), blacks (**57%**), Asians (**59%**) and Hispanics (**56%**)

**Current personal income:**

Less than \$60,000 (**57%**), \$60,000-\$99,999 (**60%**) and \$100,000+ (**60%**)

**Parents’ education:**

Less than a bachelor’s degree (**58%**) and at least a bachelor’s degree (**57%**)

## Main Reason Consumers Choose Their Postsecondary Institution



When asked to name the main reason for choosing their postsecondary institution, education consumers most frequently cite location considerations (28%). However, another 22% mention the access or affordability of their chosen school as the top reason — including the availability of online courses, flexible programs and financial aid. One in five education consumers choose their institution based on reputation and fit, taking into consideration the school's size, mission or athletic programs.

### Main Reason for Choosing Institution

Location	28%
Access/Affordability	22%
School reputation and fit	20%
Good job or career	19%
Learning and knowledge	5%
Family or social expectations	4%
Other	1%

# Main Reason Consumers Choose Their Postsecondary Institution

Additionally, 19% of consumers base their institution choice primarily on job motivations, including the availability of a particular program that would help them achieve their career goals. Few people, overall, say they chose their school because they were interested in advancing their general knowledge (5%) or due to family or social expectations (4%).

## Consumer Verbatims: Main Reason for Choosing Postsecondary Institution

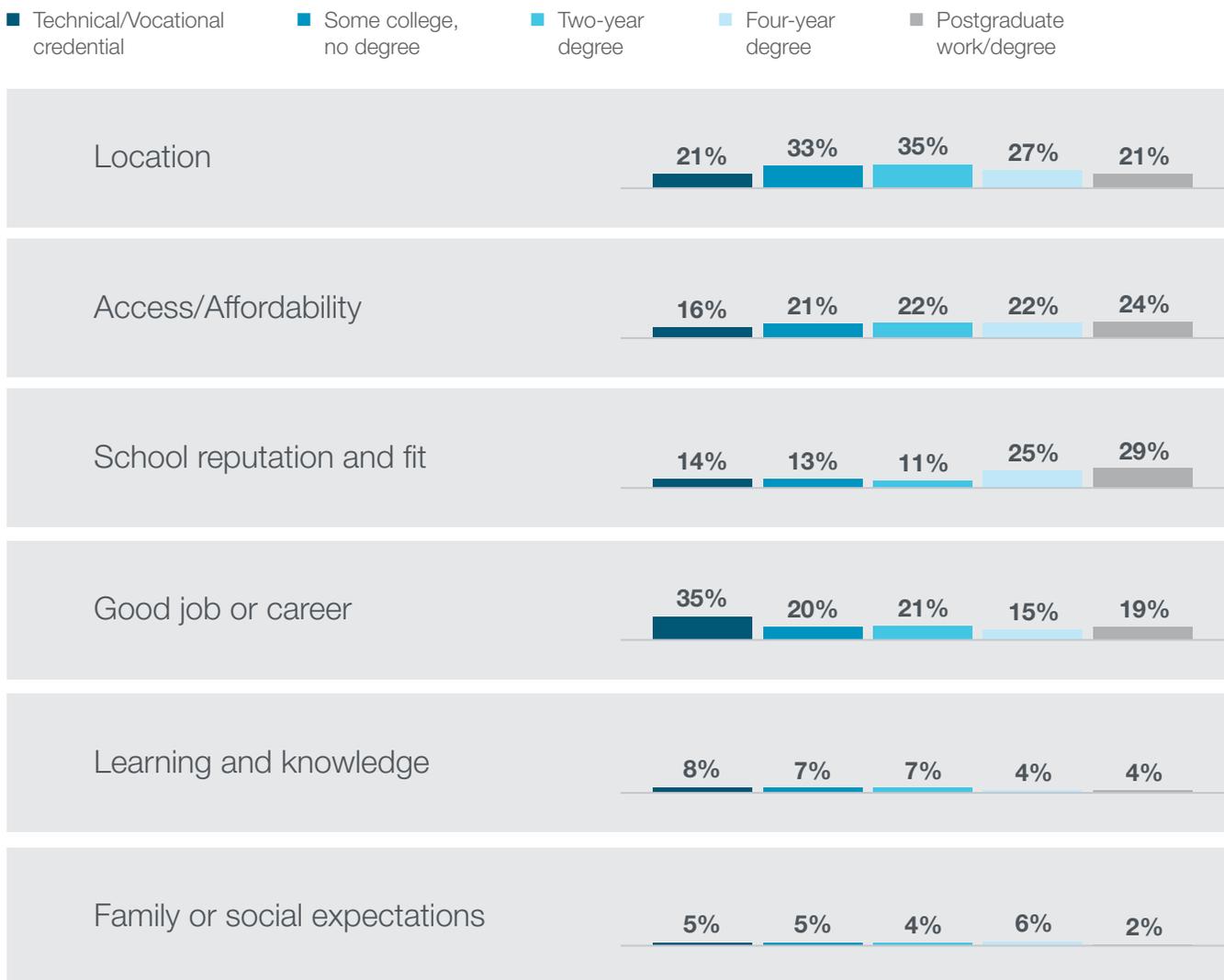
Location	<p>“It was in my hometown. So it was close and convenient.”</p> <p>“Because I wanted to leave Michigan, get out of the state and away from my parents.”</p> <p>“It was in-state and far enough away that I didn't need to stay at home.”</p>
Access/ Affordability	<p>“It was fairly convenient and they had a program set up for working professionals.”</p> <p>“I have a full-ride scholarship here.”</p> <p>“It was online and convenient.”</p>
School reputation and fit	<p>“It was the right size. It had the right programs. It was the right fit.”</p> <p>“For being prestigious and having better educational capacity.”</p> <p>“It's a good school with very good teachers who can guide you better.”</p>
Good job or career	<p>“I thought the contacts in the alumni network would be helpful in my career.”</p> <p>“I thought it would help me become more competitive in the job market.”</p> <p>“They offered the classes that I need to get the job.”</p>
Learning and knowledge	<p>“I knew it would challenge me and allow me to fulfill my greatest potential.”</p> <p>“To improve my analytical and thinking skills.”</p> <p>“Just because I wanted to continue to educate myself.”</p>
Family or social expectations	<p>“It's basically what we did — it's a family tradition.”</p> <p>“That was the college that my parents preferred.”</p> <p>“My father worked there.”</p>

# Main Reason Consumers Choose Their Postsecondary Institution

## Choosing a Postsecondary Institution, by Highest Level of Education

Unlike their reasons for choosing degree types or credentials, which career motivations dominate at all levels, consumers' reasons for choosing their institution vary considerably by educational level. Individuals who sought technical/vocational credentials most frequently say they chose their institution for career-related reasons, followed by location considerations. Meanwhile, consumers who pursued a postgraduate education are most likely to say they based their choice on the school's reputation and fit.

### Main Reason for Choosing Institution, by Highest Level of Education



Those with an associate degree most frequently say they chose their institution based on location, as do people who started but did not finish a college degree program. Consumers whose highest education is a bachelor's degree say they based their choice of institution primarily on the school's location (27%) followed closely by the school's fit (25%), including considerations such as reputation, size, mission or athletics.

We are seeing that large numbers of people who decide to pursue technical credentials or two-year degrees are doing so because of issues of affordability or access, whereas comparatively fewer of those who pursue four-year or postgraduate degrees base their decisions on those considerations. These data show us the importance of linking these pathways to the socioeconomic (SES) status of these decision-makers. What was the individual's or family's financial situation when they were making their decision to pursue a postsecondary education? Although we have an understanding of interviewees' current income levels, we do not have access to their SES data prior to their pursuit of higher education. Nevertheless, the four-year and postgraduate interviewees do not seem to be constrained financially in the same way as other education consumers. They can pursue pathways that have roots in our collegiate model dating back to the 1870s — when Charles Eliot, Harvard University president, insisted that students pursue their passions in college and then learn specialized vocational or technical skills in graduate school. Those who find themselves under greater financial constraints simply do not have the luxury of a longer and less direct pathway to a meaningful career. How much of a “choice” is this?

## Implications



Understanding education consumers' motivations for choosing their educational pathways can help higher education leaders learn how to best support prospective students. In weighing which credentials or degrees to pursue, a majority of consumers say they were motivated to bolster their careers — whether that means landing a good job or advancing in a current one. These motivations are driving consumers across all educational levels — majorities of those with technical/vocational credentials and with associate, bachelor's or postgraduate degrees all cite career-related objectives as the main reason for having chosen their specific pathway.

Those who did not complete their credential or degree program are more likely to say they were motivated primarily by a general desire to learn — furthermore, this group is likely to regret their chosen field of study. We need to better understand the experiences and needs of these education consumers. Nurturing a clear, work-related motivation before they decide on an educational pathway could help boost their completion rate.

In terms of selecting an institution, the considerations are more diverse. Location, school fit and access/affordability are among the top reasons for choosing a school. And these reasons are often driven by the educational pathway itself — location is a major consideration for those with an associate or bachelor's degree, whereas school reputation and fit weigh more heavily on those pursuing a postgraduate degree.

Strada and Gallup are committed to discovering more about postsecondary education consumers and to elevating their voices in ongoing discussions about the future of learning and work. As we continue in this endeavor, we do so with great curiosity and humility. We recognize that these consumer insights represent one approach to the highly complicated decision-making process of pursuing a degree or credential. In the coming year, we look forward to learning from all of you and continuing to relay what consumers tell us about their educational motivations and experiences.

## Appendix



### Study Design

Results for the Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey are based on telephone surveys conducted Jan. 2-Dec. 23, 2017, with a random sample of 86,935 respondents aged 18 to 65, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia.

The sample includes national adults with a minimum quota of 70% cellphone respondents and 30% landline respondents, with additional minimum quotas by time zone within region. Landline and cellular telephone numbers are selected using random-digit-dial methods. Landline respondents are chosen at random within each household based on which member will have the next birthday.

Interviews are conducted in English and Spanish. Samples are weighted to correct for unequal selection probability and nonresponse. The data are weighted to match national demographics of gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education and region. Demographic weighting targets are based on the most recent current population survey figures for the population aged 18 to 65.

All reported margins of sampling error include the computed design effects for weighting. For results based on 86,935 respondents, the margin of sampling error is  $\pm 0.3$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

# Appendix

## Classification of Categories

### Main Reason for Choosing Level of Education — Category Classifications

Good job or career	58%
<b>Get good job/Make money/Better pay</b>	<b>28.4%</b>
<b>Advance career</b>	<b>13.8%</b>
<b>School offered programs they were interested in</b>	<b>13.5%</b>
<b>Change in career</b>	<b>1.8%</b>
Learning and knowledge	23%
<b>Advance knowledge/Like to learn</b>	<b>18.7%</b>
<b>What I wanted to do/Something to do</b>	<b>4.1%</b>
Family or social expectations	12%
<b>What is expected/Thing to do</b>	<b>6.6%</b>
<b>Family influence</b>	<b>4.5%</b>
<b>Received recommendation from trusted source</b>	<b>0.4%</b>
<b>Family/Friends go there</b>	<b>0.3%</b>
Access/Affordability	6%
<b>Price (program was affordable)</b>	<b>2.2%</b>
<b>Received scholarship/financial aid</b>	<b>1.5%</b>
<b>Program offered online options/night classes</b>	<b>0.7%</b>
<b>Didn't like college/Quit college early/Lost interest</b>	<b>0.4%</b>
<b>Program was a good fit/Just liked the program</b>	<b>0.4%</b>
<b>Convenience (general, nonspecific)</b>	<b>0.2%</b>
<b>Applied/Accepted/Recruited</b>	<b>0.2%</b>

# Appendix

## Main Reason for Choosing Institution — Category Classifications

<b>Location</b>	<b>28%</b>
<b>Location (close to home)</b>	<b>20.4%</b>
<b>Location (general)</b>	<b>7.4%</b>
<b>Location (far from home)</b>	<b>0.5%</b>
<b>Access/Affordability</b>	<b>22%</b>
<b>Price (school was affordable)</b>	<b>7.5%</b>
<b>Received scholarship/financial aid</b>	<b>5.3%</b>
<b>Convenience (general, nonspecific)</b>	<b>4.1%</b>
<b>School offered online options/night classes/flexible programs</b>	<b>3.0%</b>
<b>Applied/Accepted/Recruited</b>	<b>2.0%</b>
<b>School reputation and fit</b>	<b>20%</b>
<b>Good reputation of school or program</b>	<b>12.3%</b>
<b>School was a good fit/Just liked the school</b>	<b>3.3%</b>
<b>Received recommendation from trusted source</b>	<b>1.5%</b>
<b>Liked athletics/extracurricular programs</b>	<b>0.8%</b>
<b>Liked mission of the school</b>	<b>0.7%</b>
<b>Liked size of the school</b>	<b>0.6%</b>
<b>Liked the students/faculty/staff at school</b>	<b>0.5%</b>
<b>Good job or career</b>	<b>19%</b>
<b>School offered programs they were interested in</b>	<b>12.0%</b>
<b>Get a good job/Make money/Better pay</b>	<b>4.3%</b>
<b>Advance career</b>	<b>2.7%</b>
<b>Change in career</b>	<b>0.4%</b>

## Appendix

Learning and knowledge	5%
<b>Advance knowledge/Like to learn</b>	<b>4.5%</b>
<b>What I wanted to do/Something to do</b>	<b>0.9%</b>
Family or social expectations	4%
<b>Friends/Family go there</b>	<b>2.1%</b>
<b>Family influence</b>	<b>1.6%</b>
<b>What is expected/Thing to do</b>	<b>0.7%</b>



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