

CAEL, CollegeAPP Study Places Millions of Adults in 'Intent To Enroll' Pipeline

Analysis outlines proactive enrollment strategies for meeting higher ed's most critical demographic where they are

PITTSBURGH, PA, PA, UNITED STATES, June 9, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- [A new report](#) from the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning ([CAEL](#)) and [CollegeAPP](#) shows that just over one-quarter (27%) of adults (ages 25-64) intend to enroll in education or training within the next two years. This represents approximately 41.7 million adults across the country. When extrapolated to the broader adult population ages 18 and up, this intent rate represents more than 65 million adults with intent to enroll.

Findings are derived from nationwide CollegeAPP online surveys administered to samples of respondents throughout the United States between 2019 and 2025. Survey data were weighted for ages 25-64 to reveal detailed trends about adult learner intent to enroll in college, their reasons for harboring such intent, and obstacles impeding it. In addition to motivational variables, responses captured information on key demographics, providing the segmented insight critical to developing policies and practices that expand college access and success for all adult learners and workers.

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Earl Buford, President - CAEL

Motivations for Enrollment

While enrollment aspirations are widespread among adult learners, they are more pronounced in certain subpopulations. Intent is notably higher among Black (43%), Hispanic (40%), and female (30%) respondents as well as individuals with lower household incomes (35%), younger adults (41% for ages 25-34), and those with some college experience but no degree (33%).



65 Million Reasons Why Intent Matters Most:
Adding On to the Largest National Survey of Prospective Adult Students

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The Adult Prospect Pipeline

Report Reveals Key Insights for Adult Learner Recruitment for Higher Education

A substantial majority of adults who aspire to enroll attribute that motivation to career- or workforce-related aspirations. When asked for the primary driver of enrollment plans, 43% indicated a wish to gain skills relevant to their current career, while 21% reported a desire to change careers.

Although a substantial share (35%) of respondents linked their enrollment plans to a more general purpose of learning/self-improvement, data suggest that this category reflects a hybrid motivator spanning personal and professional needs. For example, adults with a high school degree or less were most likely (49%) to report this motivation, suggesting that this subpopulation includes adults interested in pursuing foundational skills and first degrees.

Barriers and the Intersection of High-Intent and High-Need

The subpopulations of adult learners most likely to harbor enrollment intentions are also those most likely to report obstacles impeding those aspirations, the report found. Respondents with lower income levels were more likely (35%) to have enrollment intent than middle (27%) and higher (20%) income respondents. Individuals who were unemployed or anticipated a career transition also demonstrated a significantly higher propensity to express intent to enroll.

By a wide margin, respondents were most likely to report cost as the greatest threat to enrollment aspirations; 81% cited it as a barrier. Time constraints were the leading non-cost barrier (67%).

Implications for Higher Ed

“The report makes it clear that intent to enroll is prevalent but also divergent,” said Earl Buford, CAEL president. “The implications are also clear: Enrollment strategies, which traditionally consigned adult learners to a monolithic “nontraditional” student category, must continue to evolve. While there have been appreciable strides in engaging learners with some college and no degree, they are by no means the only significant segment of the tens of millions with intent to enroll.”

Demographic trends add to the urgency around recruiting adult learners, said CollegeAPP founder and CEO Jack MacKenzie. “As if we needed more reasons to focus on adult learners, we have reached the long-anticipated demographic cliff. If communities, regions and states are going to meet the demands of a rapidly changing labor market, adults are going to have to play a major role. And the good news, based on these surveys, millions are ready to do just that.”

AI and other tech-driven turmoil is increasing the number of workers facing skills gaps that limit their participation in the knowledge-based economy. Amid the ongoing debate over the ROI of a college degree, greater attention in both policy and practice is turning to career-oriented training, short-term credentials, and upskilling. In fact, the report confirmed that combined demand for shorter-term, workforce-aligned pathways (vocational/technical college and community college, totaling 52%) exceeds the preference for four-year institutions (48%).

"Each of these factors points to an undeniable need for increased resources in support of adult enrollment, from certificate programs to advanced degrees," said Dr. Beth Doyle, chief of higher education strategy and impact at CAEL. "Educators and trainers must commit to an intimate understanding of not just what motivates adult learners to enroll, but what may be thwarting them from translating aspiration into action. With a holistic perspective of the recruiting pipeline, administrators can direct resources where they will matter the most, whether in affordability and navigation support, flexible, skills-focused approaches, or integrated solutions addressing time and financial scarcities resulting from work, caregiving, and other non-academic responsibilities."

The report draws on the full spectrum of survey data to offer tailored strategies transforming reactive enrollment tactics into proactive strategies informed by evidence-based intent trends. Findings and recommendations also cover learning modality and program preferences, changes in motivation over previous survey samples, and factors associated with a lack of enrollment intent. 65 Million Reasons Why Intent Matters Most: Adding On to the Largest National Survey of Prospective Adult Students is available at intentmattersmost.com.

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About CAEL

Recognizing that adult learners are the backbone of the U.S. economy, CAEL helps forge a clear, viable connection between education and career success, providing solutions that promote sustainable and equitable economic growth. CAEL opens doors to opportunity in collaboration with workforce and economic developers; postsecondary educators and trainers; employers and industry groups; and foundations and other mission-aligned organizations, engaging with these stakeholders to foster a culture of innovative, lifelong learning that helps individuals, and their communities, thrive.

About CollegeAPP

CollegeAPP, a data analytics service, helps higher education identify and recruit potential adult students. By leveraging proprietary predictive analytics and person-level data, CollegeAPP provides colleges and universities with the insights needed to find adults who have the intent and capacity to return to school, making education more accessible to workforce-ready populations.

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