

Hanover Research Survey Reveals Shifting Priorities Among Prospective College Students in 2026

New findings show strong interest in college alongside expectations for value, flexibility, career readiness, and AI.

ARLINGTON, VA, UNITED STATES, October 15, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Hanover Research (Hanover), a leading provider of data and insights to colleges and universities, has released its [2026 National Prospective Student Survey](#). Based on a July 2026 survey of 1,000 U.S. high school students ages 16–19, the report examines how prospective students are thinking about college, from the programs and learning formats they prefer to the support they expect and the ways they research institutions.



"Students' preferences are not limited to where they want to study. They're also considering factors like affordability, career outcomes, support systems, and flexible pathways. Just as importantly, AI is changing the ways that they make those decisions," says Paul Gibson, senior managing director at Hanover Research. "Our survey findings give higher education leaders a clear look at these decisions so they can evaluate how well their recruitment and admissions strategies align with what prospective students need."

The key findings include:

- Cost remains a leading concern: 36% of respondents say they are worried about being able to pay for their education.
- Interest in credentials is shifting: 66% are interested in a bachelor's degree, compared with 79% in 2025, while interest in associate degrees rose from 36% to 45%.

- Online learning is gaining appeal: 35% prefer fully online courses, up from 14% in 2025.
- AI is shaping skill priorities: 25% have become more interested in developing human-centered skills in response to recent AI developments.
- The college search starts early: 38% say they began researching colleges during or before sophomore year of high school.

“Students are showing greater interest in options beyond the traditional full-time, on-campus experience,” says Sid Phillips, chief growth officer at Hanover Research. “Interest in associate degrees rose from 36% to 45% year over year, while preference for fully online courses increased from 14% to 35%. These are just two of the many findings uncovered in the full survey that can help institutions understand how prospective students are thinking about college in 2026 and their potential shift in interests in 2027.”

To access the full 2026 National Prospective Student Survey, [click here](#).

About Hanover Research

Founded in 2003, Hanover Research is a global research and analytics firm that delivers market intelligence through a unique, fixed-fee model to more than 1,000 clients. Headquartered in Arlington, Virginia, Hanover employs high-caliber market researchers, analysts, and account executives to provide a service that is revolutionary in its combination of flexibility and affordability. Hanover has been named a Top 50 Market Research firm by the American Marketing Association and the Insights Association. To learn more about Hanover Research, visit www.hanoverresearch.com.

Media Contact

Hanover Research

+1 202-559-0050

info@hanoverresearch.com

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