
METHODOLOGY

Summary

The findings in “Is College Worth It for Me?” are based on a nationally representative survey of 803 adults who are considering enrolling in college to earn an undergraduate degree or certificate (adult prospective students). Interviews were conducted from February 7 through June 7, 2013, by phone, including cell phones, and online. The survey was designed by Public Agenda, and fielding was carried out by Social Science Research Solutions Inc. (SSRS). In addition, Public Agenda conducted four standard focus groups and four Learning Curve Research (LCR) focus groups (see below for a description of the LCR groups) with adult prospective college students in four major metropolitan areas in the United States.

Defining “adult prospective students”

For the purpose of this study, adult prospective students are Americans who meet the following criteria:

- They are 18 to 55 years old.
- They do not hold an associate’s or bachelor’s degree (but they may have earned a postsecondary diploma or certificate).
- They are not entering college straight out of high school.
- They are not currently enrolled in any kind of higher education institution.
- They are considering enrolling in a certificate or degree program and say that it is likely they will do so within two years.

The survey

Prior to the beginning of the field period, SSRS screened for qualified respondents for 22 weeks in its weekly dual-frame Excel telephone omnibus survey, which targets 60 percent landline numbers and 40 percent cell phone numbers. At the end of the screening period, SSRS attempted to recontact the qualified respondents so they could complete the survey by phone. In addition, SSRS directly interviewed prospective students in the Excel omnibus survey for a period of 12 weeks after the prescreening phase.

The survey was also administered through a web panel. The panel was provided to SSRS by ResearchNow.

Of the 803 interviews, 566 were completed on the phone and 237 were completed online.

The final data were weighted to correct for variance in the likelihood of selection for a given case and to balance the sample to known population parameters in order to correct for systematic under- or overrepresentation of different demographic groups. The weighting procedure utilized an iterative proportional fitting process, or “raking,” and parameter estimates were drawn from data collected in the Excel omnibus survey. To create population targets, data from all of the weeks in which SSRS screened or collected data for the prospective students survey in the omnibus were raked to general population targets based on the 2012 Current Population Survey. SSRS then selected all respondents who screened into the group of adult prospective students and used these weighted data as population targets for weighting data from both the phone and the online surveys.

Adult prospective students were balanced to the following parameters:

- Gender by age
- Gender by region
- Education: high school graduate; some college but no degree
- Race/ethnicity: white; African-American; native-born Hispanic; foreign-born Hispanic; other
- Phone use (for phone respondents): cell phone only; not cell phone only
- Metro status: urban/suburban; rural

The design effect for the survey was 1.53, and the weight-adjusted margin of sampling error was 4.27. The final weights for individual respondents ranged from .03 to 5.70.

As in all surveys, question order effects and other nonsampling sources of error can affect the results. Steps were taken to minimize these issues, including pretesting the survey instrument and randomizing the order in which some questions were asked.

Presurvey focus groups

Prior to the survey, Public Agenda conducted four focus groups with adult prospective college students in Detroit, El Paso, Los Angeles and Philadelphia. Two groups were with people from 18 to 24 years old; the other two groups were with people from 25 to 55 years old. Through these conversations, we explored the processes by which adult prospective students research and decide upon their postsecondary educational plans. This data informed the design of the survey instrument.

Learning Curve Research focus groups

After the fielding of the survey, Public Agenda conducted four Learning Curve Research focus groups in Detroit, El Paso, Los Angeles and Philadelphia. Two of the groups were with people from 18 to 24 years old; the other two were with people from 25 to 55 years old.

LCR focus groups are distinct from standard focus groups in that they are designed to create a deliberative environment in which participants have a chance to express their thoughts and opinions, then confront new information and grapple with its implications.

This project's LCR focus groups sought to examine how adult prospective students react to new information and data about higher education institutions and how their thinking and considerations change after they have a chance to discuss and deliberate about the information and issues presented. In particular, we employed neutral, descriptive language to introduce adult prospective students to the notion of for-profit versus not-for-profit higher education, private and public schools and comparative school performance metrics such as graduation and dropout rates, average student loan rates, loan defaults and graduates' labor market outcomes. These groups also examined participants' reactions to various interactive online college search tools that are designed to help prospective students learn more about their options and compare schools on a wide range of criteria, including performance metrics.

The design of these LCR groups included the following:

- an extended three-hour group with a short break;
- pre- and postgroup surveys to capture participants' prior opinions and any immediate changes in perspective, as well as to contribute to assessments of the LCR method;
- presentation of new information and issues;
- one-on-one follow-up interviews conducted with each participant by telephone a few days after the group.

Quotes from these focus groups and interviews appear throughout this report to illustrate the views quantified in the survey results. A total of 40 adult prospective students participated in this part of the research.

For full survey results go to <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/is-college-worth-it-for-me>