

COMMENTARY

Adults need flexibility, resources to pursue higher education

 BY GUEST COMMENTARY
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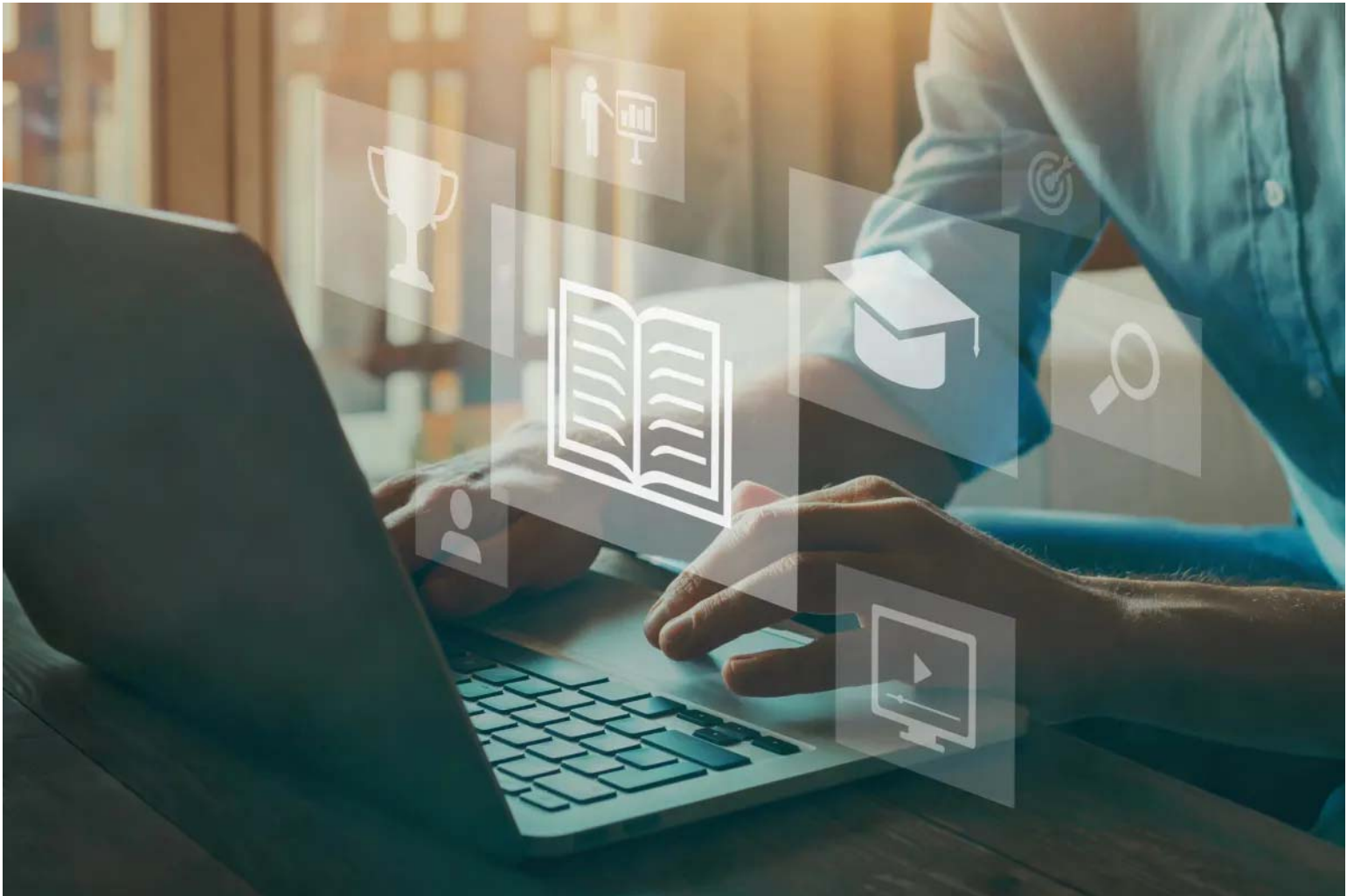


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IN SUMMARY

A company interviewed more than 1,000 adults who were not able to finish college or never got the chance to start. Here's what they found:



By Dee Allsop, Special to CalMatters

Dee Allsop is a founding partner of [Heart + Mind Strategies](#).

There are more than 5 million California adults over 25 years old who have an intention to enroll in higher education [within the next two years](#). Far fewer will be able to do it.

Helping them act on this intention is key to California's future, as the state finds itself in a workforce crisis with [2 million more](#) degrees and certificate holding job candidates needed to meet our workforce demands in crucial fields like teaching and nursing.

Because these Californians are so critical to the state's future, my company was commissioned to conduct a survey to learn who they are and what is preventing them from pursuing the additional career education they need and want. This past summer, we interviewed more than 1,000 California adults over 25 who were not able to finish college or never got the chance to start.

What we found is quite simple. The gap between the desire and ability to pursue adult education is massive. Half (50%) of all California adults would be interested in taking some kind of college or adult career education if their concerns and barriers were removed. Yet less than 1 in 10 (9%) are in a position to do so. So, what are the barriers?

Not surprisingly greater affordability and money would make the biggest impact. Just over half (51%) specifically point to financially related support as the factor that would make the biggest difference for them personally: An affordable program for someone on a tight budget; a scholarship or grant to pay for enrollment, books and fees, or financial aid to help with some of the costs of the education.

Importantly, greater flexibility - something without a price tag - would make it possible for one-third of these adult learners (33%) to get back into career education programs they seek. For most of these adult learners, their personal situation in life simply makes it too hard to balance college or career education with the need to spend time working to support and provide for their family and other responsibilities.

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These Californians simply need flexible course schedules they can take any day of the week or time of day, programs where they can move at their own pace, and programs they can do online so they don't have to travel to a class or campus.

Clearly, online education is a game changer for these adult learners. Nearly two-thirds (62%) report they would "definitely" or "very likely" take a 100% online program "where you can do your class work from home any day of the week or hour of the day and move at your own pace."

The need and opportunity for additional adult education is widely shared across all demographic groups - as mentioned, about half (50%) would get more career education if barriers were removed. Californians formerly in foster care (64%), single fathers (64%) and veterans (58%) are all much more likely to re-enroll given the chance.

COVID-19 has added to the need and desire of many Californians to get more career education. One-third of this group has been negatively impacted by COVID and the large majority of them (71%) would re-enroll if given the chance.

While financial limitations are a major barrier, our research has made it clear: the large number of California adults who didn't finish college or never got the chance to start is matched by their strong desire to re-enroll to get the education they need to help get ahead in life.

Making that dream more affordable and providing flexibility is the key to helping the more than 5 million California adults pursue degrees and certifications in fields California needs - a win-win for everyone.

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