State Opportunity Index





North Carolina

State Summary 2026

North Carolina at a glance

THE STATE OPPORTUNITY INDEX is a framework for measuring and improving education-to-career outcomes. For each state, the Index reports the percentage of graduates who experience a positive return on investment and summarizes progress in five key areas for improving success beyond completion: Clear Outcomes, Quality Coaching, Affordability, Work-Based Learning, and Employer Alignment. States are grouped into four categories: Leading (at the forefront, demonstrating strong progress); Advanced (substantial progress); Developing (early stages of improvement); and Foundational (just beginning their journey).

North Carolina is among 17 states Leading in Clear Outcomes. Quality Coaching for associate students is Advanced (no states are Leading). The state also is among 35 states and jurisdictions Leading in Affordability at associate degree institutions. To learn more about progress in other states, visit strada.org/state-opportunity-index.

Clear Outcomes		LEADING
Quality Coaching	BACHELOR'S	DEVELOPING
	ASSOCIATE	ADVANCED
Affordability	BACHELOR'S	ADVANCED
	ASSOCIATE	LEADING
Work-Based Learning	BACHELOR'S	DEVELOPING
Employer Alignment		DEVELOPING

State Opportunity Index

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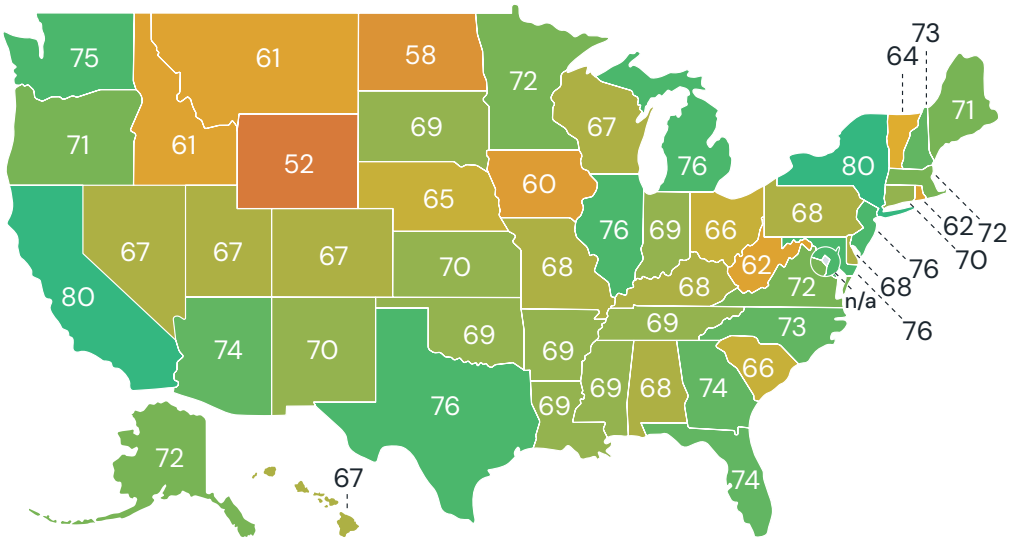
In cases in which the margin of error crosses a category threshold, states are given a combined category.
References for "unavailable" refer to states in which there was insufficient data to assign a rating at this time.

Positive ROI

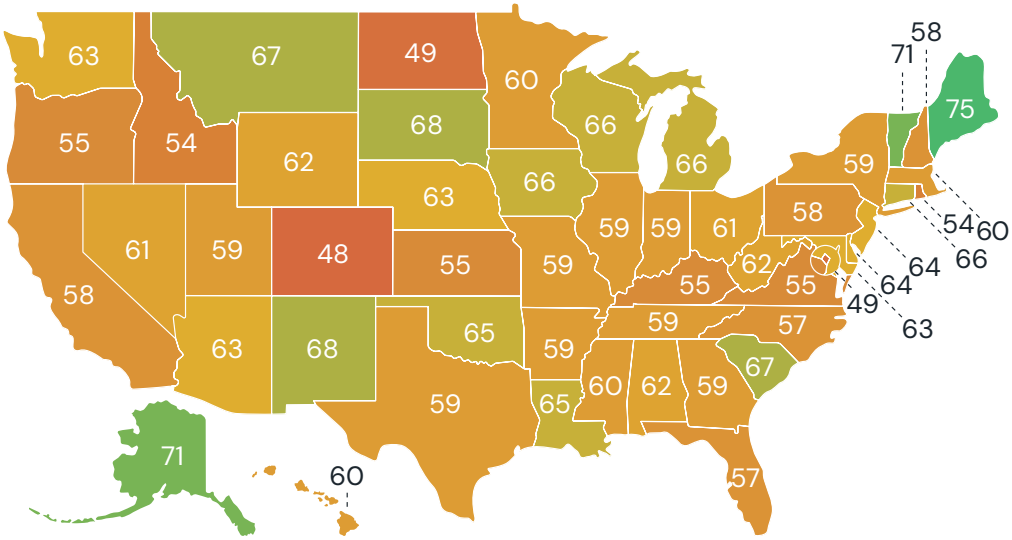
	North Carolina	National
Overall	69%	70%
Bachelor's	73%	73%
Associate	57%	60%

All students who invest their time and money in earning a degree should be financially better off because of it. The Positive ROI value for each state represents the estimated percentage of public college graduates whose earnings premium over high school graduates is enough to repay their total cost of a degree within 10 years.

Percentage of graduates with Positive 10-year ROI by state - bachelor's degrees



Percentage of graduates with Positive 10-year ROI by state - associate degrees



Clear Outcomes

LEADING

Everyone should have access to accurate information on employment outcomes that can help them make informed decisions about education after high school. The Clear Outcomes measure is based on 10 critical elements that contribute to the capacity of state education-to-employment data systems to clarify education pathway outcomes in order to inform personal, public, and private sector investments.

North Carolina improved from Developing to Leading in researcher access (element 8). Enhanced wage records (element 2) and open aggregate data (element 6) also are strengths, and the state is one of nine and 17 states, respectively, that are Leading in these elements.

COLLECT

State data system elements	State description	Category
1. Includes learner-level and program characteristic data for nondegree and noncredit postsecondary education and training programs	North Carolina collects enrollment and completion data from: (i) WIOA-eligible training providers; (ii) occupational licensure; and (iii) other third-party credentials, namely apprenticeships. The state integrates administrative records on employment and earnings to WIOA-eligible training providers.	DEVELOPING
2. Examines earnings by occupation, pay rate, and work location	North Carolina collects occupation (SOC code) and pay rate (hours worked) on a voluntary basis but does not collect work location.	LEADING

INTEGRATE

State data system elements	State description	Category
3. Integrates and delivers information on learners' earnings and employment after postsecondary education and training completion, and over time	North Carolina integrates administrative records on employment and earnings with its (i) public four-year institutions and (ii) community colleges. The North Carolina Community College System publishes an interactive resource featuring community college-to-employment outcomes with disaggregation by age. NC TOWER publishes employment outcomes for both public four-year institutions and community colleges as open datasets and interactive resources with disaggregation by race/ethnicity and gender. The state is in the process of integrating information on employment and earnings from administrative sources with private four-year institutions through the North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities and the North Carolina Longitudinal Data Service.	ADVANCED
4. Integrates and delivers information on learners' earnings and employment after high school completion and over time	North Carolina integrates administrative information on employment and earnings with high school completion records. Through NC TOWER, the state publishes these employment outcomes with disaggregation by race/ethnicity and gender.	LEADING
5. Partners with national and multi-state initiatives to assess education-to-opportunity outcomes for graduates and non-graduates of postsecondary education and training programs who relocate or work outside the state	North Carolina partners with PSEO (25-50% graduate coverage) and the State Wage Interchange System.	ADVANCED

Category Key

Extent to which elements are present in state data infrastructure

- **Foundational** — Not in development
- **Developing** — In development
- **Advanced** — Partially present
- **Leading** — Fully present

Clear Outcomes

LEADING

North Carolina 2026

PROVIDE

State data system elements	State description	Category
6. Provides comprehensive and timely open data files containing anonymized education-to-opportunity statistics that anyone can access, download, and otherwise use	North Carolina has a customizable report builder containing education-to-employment outcomes for public four-year institutions, community colleges, and high schools with disaggregation by race/ethnicity and gender. The state is developing additional open datasets containing education-to-employment outcomes.	LEADING
7. Publishes robust, timely, and easily understandable interactive resources informing education-to-opportunity decision-making by learners, families, and institutions	North Carolina publishes multiple interactive resources containing education-to-employment outcomes for public four-year institutions, community colleges, and high schools with disaggregation by race/ethnicity and gender. Additionally, the North Carolina Community College System publishes a separate interactive resource featuring employment outcomes for community colleges, and the North Carolina Department of Commerce publishes an interactive resource containing employment outcomes for WIOA-eligible training providers.	LEADING
8. Gives researchers access to individual-level matched education-to-opportunity datasets	The North Carolina Longitudinal Data Service provides individual-level matched education-to-opportunity datasets for third-party researcher access. The state clearly documents the request and review process and has published research and policy learning goals.	LEADING

IMPACT

State data system elements	State description	Category
9. Enables learners and earners to access and utilize their own verified data, unlocking opportunities for college and career advancement	As a result of a 2022 legislative mandate, North Carolina is creating a common digital transcript. In parallel, Cape Fear Community College and Randolph Community College are leading a Digital Credential Pilot Program to enable students to receive, control, and share verified transcripts, certificates, and diplomas from a mobile wallet.	DEVELOPING
10. Designates a unit with responsibility and dedicated, full-time capacity for generating education-to-employment insights to inform state policymaking and resource allocation decision-making	The North Carolina Longitudinal Data Service maintains access to integrated E2E data and is developing publicly available resources and other tools for E2E stakeholders. There is clear evidence of sustainable funding, governance, and staffing as well as partnerships with higher education, workforce development, and economic development agencies. Additionally, the North Carolina Common Follow-up System provides information on the educational and employment outcomes of publicly supported educational, employment, and training programs essential for program planning, evaluation, and resource management.	ADVANCED

Category Key

Extent to which elements are present in state data infrastructure

- **Foundational** — Not in development
- **Developing** — In development
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Quality Coaching

North Carolina 2026

BACHELOR'S **DEVELOPING** ASSOCIATE **ADVANCED**

Everyone should have access to coaching that helps them reflect on their talents and interests, choose a career goal, chart a path, and navigate challenges. The Quality Coaching measure is based on the percentage of associate students and bachelor's senior students who reported receiving personalized guidance, timely labor market information, and support to create a plan and overcome barriers.

North Carolina remains Developing in overall Quality Coaching for students at bachelor's degree institutions and Advanced at associate degree institutions. As is the case in most states, the rate of North Carolina's bachelor's students receiving labor market information by the end of their first year increased and is on par with the national average. A bright spot is associate students' experiences with personalized guidance, which are among the highest in the country.

	Bachelor's		Associate	
	State	National	State	National
PERSONALIZED GUIDANCE				
Percentage of students at public institutions who report receiving personalized coaching or guidance to help select the education that will help prepare them for a successful career	DEVELOPING **36%**	**35%**	DEV./ADV. **50%**	**45%**
TIMELY LABOR MARKET INFORMATION				
The average share of students at public institutions who receive timely labor market information, across the various types below, before enrolling or during their first year	DEVELOPING **26%**	**26%**	DEVELOPING **38%**	**35%**
Education-to-career paths that might be a good fit for students' strengths and interests	34%	34%	48%	45%
Job opportunities that a particular education program could lead to	22%	21%	34%	31%
Potential earnings in different careers related to students' education program	31%	30%	44%	40%
Career outcomes of students from their own institution	18%	17%	26%	23%
SUPPORT				
The average share of students at public institutions who receive at least some support in setting goals and in overcoming obstacles	ADV./LEAD. **75%**	**72%**	ADV./LEAD. **74%**	**73%**
Setting education and career goals, and developing a plan to achieve these goals	74%	71%	74%	73%
Identifying and overcoming barriers	76%	73%	74%	73%

Category Key

- **Foundational** <25%
- **Developing** 25% to <50%
- **Advanced** 50% to <75%
- **Leading** ≥75%

Affordability

North Carolina 2026

BACHELOR'S **ADVANCED** ASSOCIATE **LEADING**

A quality postsecondary education should be within everyone's reach, with clear, predictable, and manageable costs. The Affordability measure is based on how many hours a week the average student would need to work to cover the in-state net price (total cost of attendance minus any grants and scholarships), how many hours a student from a low-income family would need to work to cover their typical in-state net price, and the percentage of students that complete their degree on time – a critical factor in the cost of a degree.

North Carolina improved from Developing to Advanced in overall affordability at bachelor's degree institutions, making it one of 15 states categorized as Advanced or Leading. It performs especially strongly in on-time completion, as one of 18 states where at least half of bachelor's students complete their degree on time. The state also performs strongly in Affordability at its associate degree institutions, and is one of 35 states and jurisdictions categorized as Leading overall at this level.

	Bachelor's		Associate	
	State	National	State	National
STUDENT HOURS OF WORK NEEDED				
Average student hours of work needed	DEVELOPING **28 hours per week** Average annual net price: $14,334	**26 hours per week** Average annual net price: $15,270	LEADING **6 hours per week** Average annual net price: $6,827	**8 hours per week** Average annual net price: $8,089
Low-income student hours of work needed	ADVANCED **11 hours per week** Average annual net price for low-income students: $8,636	**12 hours per week** Average annual net price for low-income students: $9,813	LEADING **3 hours per week** Average annual net price for low-income students: $5,587	**4 hours per week** Average annual net price for low-income students: $6,678

Category Key	Foundational	Developing	Advanced	Leading
	≥30 hrs	20 to <30 hrs	10 to <20 hrs	<10 hrs

	Bachelor's	
	State	National
ON-TIME COMPLETION RATE		
	ADVANCED **52%**	**47%**

Category Key	Foundational	Developing	Advanced	Leading
	<35%	35% to <50%	50% to <65%	≥65%

Work-Based Learning

BACHELOR'S **DEVELOPING**

All students should have access to paid, immersive work-based learning experiences that connect education to career. The Work-Based Learning measure is based on the percentage of bachelor's senior students who reported participating in at least one of the following types of paid experiences: paid internship, paid apprenticeship, paid co-op, paid practicum, or paid undergraduate research experience. For students at associate degree institutions, participation is reported when data are available, but states are not categorized.

North Carolina's paid work-based learning participation is categorized as Developing for students at bachelor's degree institutions, a category shared with 32 other states.

	Bachelor's		Associate	
	State	**National**	**State**	**National**
QUALITY WORK-BASED LEARNING				
Percentage of students at public institutions who participated in at least one of the five types of quality paid work-based learning experiences	DEVELOPING **41%**	**43%**	**11%**	**14%**
Paid internship participation	34%	35%	6%	10%
Percentage of students who participated in at least one of the five types of experiences (paid or unpaid)	71%	71%	28%	30%

Category Key

- **Foundational** <25%
- **Developing** 25% to <50%
- **Advanced** 50% to <75%
- **Leading** ≥75%

When the margin of error crosses a category threshold, states are given a combined category.

In addition to student self-reporting of apprenticeship participation, states have other sources of information on participation in registered apprenticeships via the U.S. Department of Labor. In North Carolina, 0.18 percent of the state labor force is made up of active apprentices, for a total of 9,704 apprentices. Across the country, this number ranges from 0.86 percent (Hawaii) to 0.12 percent (Oklahoma). In countries with leading apprenticeship systems, such as Germany, Switzerland, Australia, Canada, and England, apprentices constitute about 2.5-3.0 percent of the labor force, so all states in the U.S. have substantial room for improvement.

Employer Alignment

DEVELOPING

Students should have access to programs that lead to quality jobs and employers should be able to find the talent they need to fill high-wage roles. The Employer Alignment measure is based on the percentage of terminal bachelor's degree holders aged 25-34 employed in a college-level job as well as the supply/demand ratio for a set of high-demand, high-wage jobs in each state.

College-level employment in **North Carolina** is 59 percent, compared to 60 percent nationally. North Carolina improved from Foundational to Developing in its overall supply/demand ratio and its ratio for nursing, from Advanced to Leading for engineers and information and cybersecurity, and from Foundational to Leading in the supply/demand ratio for manufacturing/trades technicians and technologists.

COLLEGE-LEVEL EMPLOYMENT			
The percentage of bachelor's degree graduates who are employed in college-level jobs		59%	DEVELOPING
SUPPLY/DEMAND RATIO			
The overall ratio: the average of the entry-level supply/demand ratios for these nine opportunity occupational groups			DEVELOPING
Information technology and business	Data analytics		LEADING
	Finance and accounting professionals		FOUNDATIONAL
	Finance and accounting support		FOUNDATIONAL
	Information and cybersecurity		LEADING
	Software development and engineering		LEADING
Healthcare	Healthcare technicians and technologists		FOUNDATIONAL
	Nursing		DEVELOPING
Manufacturing and engineering	Engineering		LEADING
	Manufacturing/Trades technicians and technologists		LEADING

Category Key

- **Foundational** <50%
- **Developing** 50% to <60%
- **Advanced** 60% to <75%
- **Leading** ≥75%

State Opportunity Index

North Carolina 2026

Appendix

Student Survey Responses

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Appendix // **Survey Data Tables**

The following tables provide student responses for questions included in the 2026 State Opportunity Index survey.

	Bachelor's		Associate	
	State	National	State	National
SAMPLE SIZE				
Respondents, 2026	1,091	36,564	907	17,000
Respondents, 2025–26 combined	2,695	77,803	1,705	32,005
VALUE				
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement, "My education will be worth the cost"?				
Strongly disagree	6%	4%	5%	7%
Somewhat disagree	9%	9%	4%	6%
Neither agree nor disagree	9%	9%	6%	8%
Somewhat agree	38%	38%	21%	28%
Strongly agree	38%	40%	63%	52%
Thinking about how your education supports your career goals, how satisfied are you with how well your institution prepared you for the workforce? *(1: Not at all satisfied … 10: Extremely satisfied)*				
Average (1-10)	7.2	7.2	8.4	7.8
QUALITY COACHING				
Before choosing your major or program of study, how did you receive information on careers, salaries, job opportunities, etc.? *(Select all that apply)*				
One-on-one meeting with faculty or advisor	21%	22%	22%	22%
Career fair, group workshop, orientation session, or in a class	32%	30%	23%	23%
National job boards *(LinkedIn, GlassDoor, Indeed, Idealist)*	28%	28%	28%	25%
College career portal *(Handshake, Symplicity)*	21%	20%	10%	12%
Career assessment tools *(MyMajors, Career Coach)*	17%	14%	19%	14%
Labor market tools *(Lightcast, O*NET, state workforce websites)*	5%	6%	7%	7%
AI-based tools *(ChatGPT, Perplexity, CareerVillage, Roadtrip Nation)*	13%	13%	11%	13%
Conversations with friends and family members	50%	52%	48%	47%
Conversations with alumni, mentoring services, scholarship groups, etc.	21%	18%	12%	13%
Email or newsletter	18%	16%	16%	14%
Other	3%	5%	9%	9%
None of these	7%	9%	13%	12%
I have not yet chosen a program of study.	0%	1%	1%	1%

	Bachelor's		Associate	
	State	National	State	National
WORK-BASED LEARNING				
During your time in college, have you participated in any of the following? *(Select all that apply)*				
Micro-Internship: short-term work experience, typically lasting four weeks or less, on a specific, employer-defined project	26%	23%	5%	7%
Project-Based Learning Activity: real-world, employer-designed projects built as assignments within academic courses	33%	30%	13%	12%
Service Learning: courses that combine academic instruction with community service, addressing a real-world need	28%	24%	13%	12%
Externship: a short-term experience where a student shadows a professional to observe day-to-day duties to learn about a specific career field	23%	21%	11%	10%
During your time in college, have you participated in any of the following? *(Select all that apply) [Paid or unpaid]*				
Internship: fixed-term position lasting longer than four weeks performing entry-level tasks for an employer	51%	47%	9%	11%
Apprenticeship: paid job combining on-the-job training under an experienced mentor with classroom learning	6%	5%	5%	4%
Co-op program: degree program that alternates periods of academic courses with paid work experiences	4%	4%	2%	2%
Student teaching, practicum, clinical hours: closely supervised performance of professional responsibilities in a workplace setting	21%	20%	17%	14%
Undergraduate research: experience outside of a course, typically working directly with a faculty member in a lab, on a project, or on a research team	28%	25%	4%	6%
In-state participation: Student participation in at least one of the five paid experiences in the same state as their institution (paid internship, paid apprenticeship, paid co-op program, paid student teaching, practicum, clinical hours, paid undergraduate research)	34%	32%	9%	10%
Did you get credit or a record on your transcript for any of your experiences? *(Select all that apply) [Shown to those who reported the work-based learning experience in question]*				
Internship: fixed-term position lasting longer than four weeks performing entry-level tasks for an employer	47%	52%	48%	52%
Apprenticeship: paid job combining on-the-job training under an experienced mentor with classroom learning	24%	33%	24%	41%
Co-op program: degree program that alternates periods of academic courses with paid work experiences	52%	47%	12%	47%
Student teaching, practicum, clinical hours: closely supervised performance of professional responsibilities in a workplace setting	65%	62%	62%	65%
Undergraduate research: experience outside of a course, typically working directly with a faculty member in a lab, on a project, or on a research team	56%	56%	42%	38%

	Bachelor's		Associate	
	State	National	State	National
STUDENT WORK				
During the school year, how many hours do you spend in a typical seven-day week working for pay?				
Less than 10 hours per week	17%	16%	6%	7%
10 to 19 hours per week	30%	30%	12%	16%
20 to 29 hours per week	19%	18%	18%	18%
30 hours or more per week	10%	14%	39%	34%
Does not typically work while taking classes	23%	22%	26%	24%
Do you consider yourself a student who works or a worker that goes to school?				
A student who works	67%	65%	38%	44%
A worker who goes to school	9%	13%	36%	32%
Does not work	24%	22%	26%	24%
Did you have an on-campus job at any point during the time you were enrolled in your current program? If so, what type of job(s) have you had? *(Select all that apply)*				
Academic and Research: Research assistant, lab assistant, or teaching assistant (TA) for a professor	14%	13%	2%	3%
Specialized Campus Services: Library assistant, IT help desk technician, or fitness center attendant	9%	9%	3%	3%
Peer-Based Roles: Tutor, Resident Assistant (RA), student government or student club role, peer advisor, or orientation leader	12%	12%	2%	4%
Retail and Customer Service: Bookstore associate, convenience store clerk, or campus apparel shop worker	5%	5%	2%	2%
Food Service and Hospitality: Dining hall staff, campus cafe barista, or catering assistant for university events	7%	7%	1%	2%
Administrative and Office Support: Departmental office assistant, front desk receptionist for an academic building, or admissions office worker	10%	10%	3%	4%
Other	4%	5%	2%	2%
I never had an on-campus job.	56%	57%	91%	86%
Did you have an off-campus job at any point during your time you were enrolled in your current program? If so, what type of job(s) have you had? *(Select all that apply)*				
Administrative and Professional Support: Office assistant at a local business, medical receptionist, or clerical worker	7%	8%	8%	8%
Community and Public Service: Public schools, libraries, government agencies, community-based organizations	8%	11%	8%	8%
Freelance and Gig Economy: Freelance writer, graphic designer, social media manager, rideshare driver	9%	8%	5%	6%
Food Service and Hospitality: Waiter/waitress, bartender, cook, barista, food delivery driver	28%	24%	19%	20%
Healthcare and Social Services: Caregiver for the elderly, home health aide, non-certified medical assistant	10%	10%	21%	15%

	Bachelor's		Associate	
	State	National	State	National
Did you have an off-campus job at any point during your time you were enrolled in your current program? If so, what type of job(s) have you had? *(continued)*				
Personal and Household Services: Babysitter/nanny, pet sitter, dog walker, house cleaner	9%	8%	9%	6%
Retail and Customer Service: Retail sales associate, cashier at a grocery store, customer service representative at a business	24%	21%	20%	21%
Professional Services: Bank teller, clerical assistant at a law firm, office receptionist, administrative assistant	4%	5%	6%	5%
Seasonal or Recreational: Summer camp counselor, ski resort employee, lifeguard at a public pool, tour guide at a local attraction	12%	9%	4%	4%
Skilled Labor and Trades: Warehouse worker, mover, construction laborer, auto detailer, landscaping worker	6%	6%	9%	11%
Other	6%	7%	14%	11%
I never had an off-campus job.	24%	27%	22%	25%
AFFORDABILITY				
Were you granted college credit for courses or work experience before enrolling at your institution? *(Select all that apply)*				
College courses taken while in high school *(Dual Enrollment, Concurrent Enrollment, Dual Credit, Early College Credit)*	38%	36%	18%	19%
Advanced Placement classes or International Baccalaureate program in high school	31%	29%	5%	8%
I transferred from an academic program at a two-year college, and I received transfer credit.	14%	17%	13%	8%
I transferred from an academic program at a four-year college, and I received transfer credit.	8%	10%	11%	12%
I took classes at another college but was not enrolled in a degree or credential program *(continuing education, summer classes, or extramural coursework)*, and I received credit.	10%	9%	10%	7%
College credit for prior work or military experience *(Credit for Prior Learning, Prior Learning Assessment)*	3%	3%	5%	3%
I did not bring any credits into my institution.	19%	21%	47%	50%
POST-GRADUATION PLANS				
Which of the following best represents your plans within six months after graduation?				
I plan to work full time, but have not yet secured a position.	49%	46%	n/a	n/a
I plan to work full time at the job I had while I was enrolled.	7%	8%	n/a	n/a
I have accepted a new full-time job.	10%	11%	n/a	n/a
I plan to work part time.	3%	3%	n/a	n/a
I plan to pursue additional education, but have not yet been admitted.	15%	14%	n/a	n/a
I have been admitted to a program for additional education.	9%	10%	n/a	n/a
I have other plans.	2%	3%	n/a	n/a
I don't know what I plan to do after graduating.	4%	5%	n/a	n/a

	Bachelor's		Associate	
	State	National	State	National
How likely are you to remain in your institution's state after graduation?				
Very unlikely	10%	12%	n/a	n/a
Unlikely	17%	19%	n/a	n/a
Likely	39%	35%	n/a	n/a
Very likely	35%	34%	n/a	n/a
Which of the following best represents your career plans after you complete your current program?				
I plan to continue working for the same employer I have now.	n/a	n/a	23%	21%
I plan to look for work with a new employer but in the same career.	n/a	n/a	20%	23%
I plan to look for work in a new career.	n/a	n/a	57%	56%
NONDEGREE CREDENTIALS				
Have you ever earned, or are you currently earning one of the following credentials relating to career-focused skills? *(Select all that apply)*				
Occupational license issued by a government agency *(teaching license, nursing license, cosmetology license)*	7%	7%	13%	11%
Certificate or badge *(from a postsecondary program)*	14%	13%	21%	17%
Industry-recognized credential *(Healthcare, IT, Skilled Trades and Manufacturing, Business and Professional Services, Hospitality and Culinary, Public Safety and Legal, Creative and Communications)*	8%	8%	13%	13%
Some other type of career-focused credential	3%	3%	4%	4%
I don't know.	18%	18%	15%	18%
None of the above	56%	56%	42%	46%

	State	National
EXTERNAL AFFORDABILITY METRICS		
State appropriations per student FTE, public four-year institutions, FY2025 *(Source: SHEEO SHEF Annual Report)*	$9,248	$11,166
State appropriations per student FTE, public two-year institutions, FY2025 *(Source: SHEEO SHEF Annual Report)*	$7,836	$11,096
FAFSA completion rate, high school class of 2026 (through July 1, 2026) *(Source: NCAN)*	65%	59%
150% completion rate, first-time full-time students, bachelor's degree institutions, 2023-24 *(Source: College Scorecard)*	68%	64%
150% completion rate, first-time full-time Pell recipients, bachelor's degree institutions, 2023-24 *(Source: College Scorecard)*	58%	53%

If we get this right, here's what the future could look like: A young person or adult explores options with a career coach. They have data on jobs and earnings by program. They know costs up front, and public options are affordable and accessible. They engage in paid work-based learning, building skills and clarifying goals. By completion, they don't just hold a credential (or a few).
They have a good job, experience, and momentum toward a better future.

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