



Who Profits? Students' Experiences at For-Profit Colleges

By Rebecca Silliman and David Schleifer

2023

 PUBLIC AGENDA

Executive Summary

For-profit colleges' have generated [regulatory scrutiny](#) and [litigation](#) because of their recruitment tactics, graduation rates, costs and loan default rates. Compared to public higher education institutions, for-profit colleges have been criticized for being [more expensive](#) with [similar or worse job market outcomes](#) for graduates, who tend to be left with [higher debt](#). They enroll [relatively high proportions of Black and Latino students](#), but too often leave those students in debt and without degrees.

This research explores the experiences and perspectives of for-profit college attendees based on a representative survey of 595 alumni, currently enrolled students, and non-completers fielded from March 17 to May 31, 2022, and focus groups with those populations. The research includes a comparison sample of 406 students currently enrolled at public community colleges, which tend to serve populations similar to those of for-profit colleges.

Findings in Brief

Just one-third of for-profit college attendees prioritized affordability when choosing a college, yet few of them believe that cost is an indicator of quality in higher education. Only 23 percent of for-profit college attendees believe that more expensive colleges provide a better education. Yet fewer for-profit attendees (58 percent) than community college students (74 percent) say they paid a great deal of attention to information about affordability when considering college. And only 32 percent of them prioritized affordability when deciding where to enroll, compared to 59 percent of community college students.

Few for-profit attendees applied to more than one college. Just over half say they learned about college through sources provided by or controlled by colleges themselves, such as advertisements or college websites. Those who spoke to recruiters gave mixed reviews. Eighty-three percent of for-profit college attendees say they did not apply to or seriously consider more than one college. Nineteen percent of them used interactive websites that allowed them to rank and compare colleges. But at least 60 percent of them say they learned about colleges from sources provided by or controlled by colleges themselves, including advertising, colleges' websites, or recruiters. Among the 29 percent of for-profit attendees who spoke with a recruiter, reviews were mixed. Thirty-nine percent say the recruiter helped them understand how to apply to college, but 40 percent also say recruiters pressured them to enroll.

Most for-profit college attendees express satisfaction with their college overall. But alumni and non-completers express criticism when asked about specifics such as academics, work experience, and student services. Current students are less critical. Most for-profit attendees (83 percent) are generally satisfied with their college. But when asked about specifics—such as academics, work experience, and student services—about 40 percent or more for-profit alumni and non-completers say their school fell short on making tutors available, providing internships and work experience, career services or job placement, and health services. A smaller percentage of current students say their college falls short on these or other attributes.

Compared to community college students, more for-profit college attendees rely on loans to pay for college. Fewer use savings or earnings. Most for-profit alumni and non-completers with loans say that making payments is difficult. But fewer current students with loans anticipate difficulty paying. Sixty percent of for-profit attendees report relying on student loans to pay for college, compared to only 28 percent of community college students. Fewer for-profit attendees (26 percent) than community college students (48 percent) rely on savings or earnings. Among for-profit attendees who have loans, 63 percent of alumni and 78 percent of non-completers say that making payments is difficult. But only 44 percent of current for-profit students with loans expect making payments to be difficult, indicating they may be underestimating their future debt or overestimating their future earnings.

Few for-profit alumni believe that getting their degree was worth the cost. Half of alumni believe their college prioritized profits over students, although only about one-third of current students and non-completers believe so. Prior to enrolling in their college, 66 percent of for-profit alumni were confident that it would greatly improve their job prospects. But only 38 percent of for-profit alumni say their degree was worth the cost, while 37 percent say it was not and the rest say it remains to be seen. Although 53 percent of for-profit alumni feel their college cared more about making money than educating students, only 33 percent of current for-profit students and 30 percent of non-completers feel that way.

People who started but did not complete degrees at for-profits—and never subsequently completed degrees elsewhere—largely say they stopped attending for personal reasons rather than blaming the college itself. Most say that not completing has affected them negatively. Few plan to pursue degrees in the near future. Most for-profit non-completers (62 percent) say they stopped attending because of personal or family responsibilities and 30 percent because of job responsibilities. Another 27 percent say they stopped attending because they could not afford it. But 12 percent say that the college shut down and 6 percent say that it lost accreditation. Only 5 percent left because their college was not providing a good education. Seventy-one percent of for-profit non-completers experienced at least one negative effect of not finishing. For example, 41 percent say that not completing has made them depressed or anxious, 33 percent say it made them feel discouraged about enrolling elsewhere, and 30 percent say it has made it more difficult to afford enrolling. Only 16 percent of non-completers say they will definitely enroll in a degree or certificate program again in the next two years.

Few for-profit attendees support punishing schools with low graduation rates, high debt loads, or poor career outcomes. Instead, they support requiring those colleges to improve and do more to support students. When asked about higher education in general, 70 percent of for-profit attendees express strong concern about high debt loads, while 41 percent express strong concern about poor career outcomes and 35 percent express strong concern about low completion rates. When asked how to address colleges that have consistently high debt loads, poor career outcomes, and low graduation rates, few for-profit attendees believe that federal financial aid should be withheld or that colleges should be closed or lose accreditation. More favor requiring those colleges to publicly report outcomes, make plans to improve, and provide students with counseling and other forms of support.

To learn more about these findings, go to <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/for-profit-colleges-2023/>

This research is supported by Arnold Ventures.



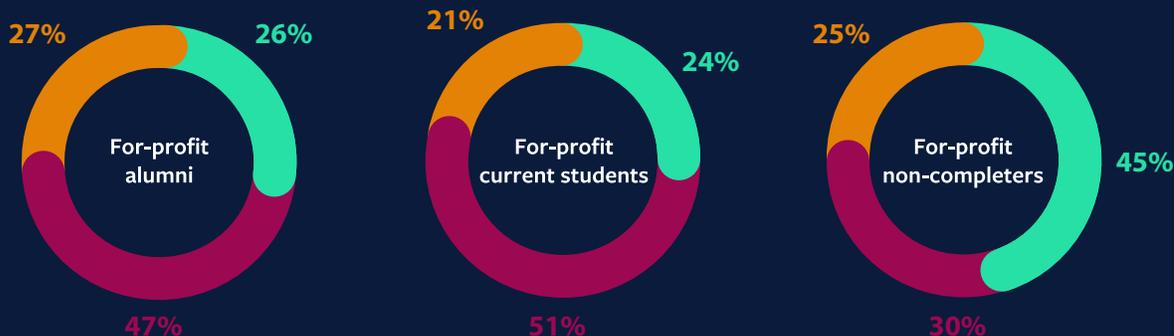
Copyright ©2023 Public Agenda

A snapshot of for-profit college attendees



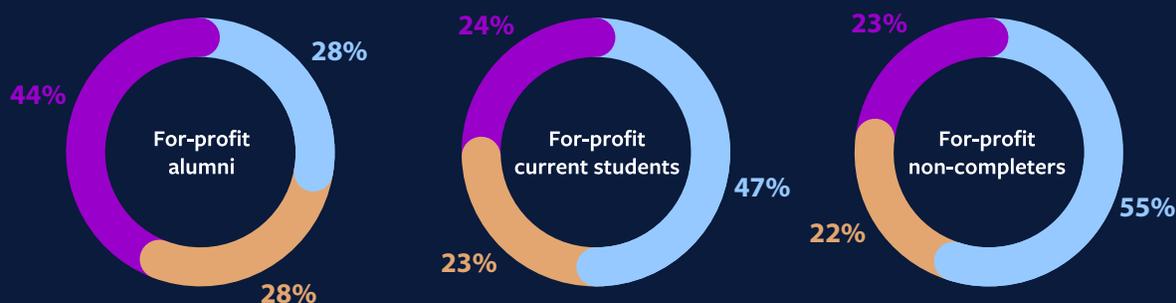
Motivations to enroll

■ Get ahead in current job
 ■ Get a different kind of job altogether
 ■ Get a good education and learn about the world



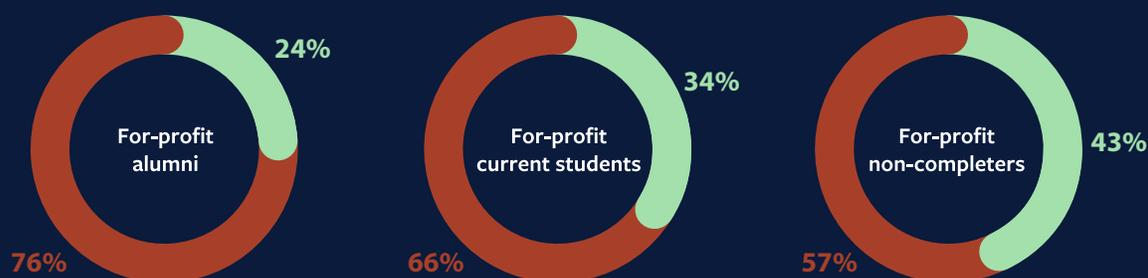
Goals of enrolling

■ Certificate
 ■ Associate's degree
 ■ Bachelor's degree



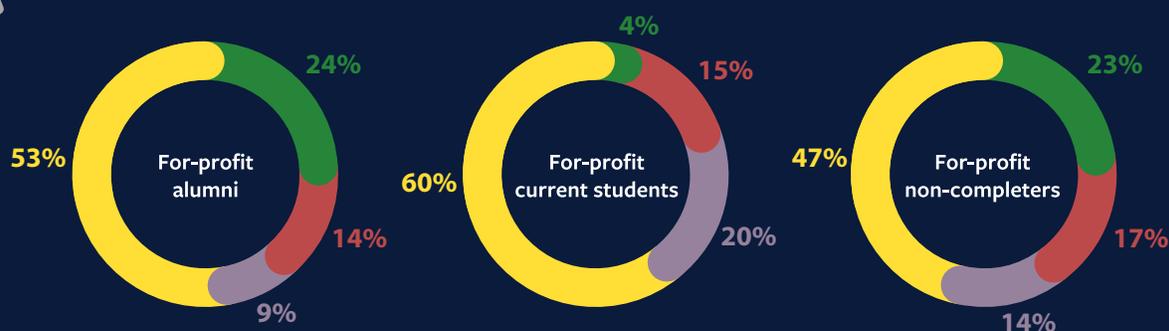
Enrollment status

■ Full-time
 ■ Part-time



Mode of coursework

■ All online
 ■ Most online
 ■ Some online
 ■ No courses online



Base: For-profit alumni, N=272; For-profit current students, N=235; For-profit non-completers, N=88

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding and those who refused or had other responses to the questions and are not represented in the figure.

Learning about and applying to colleges

Eighty-three percent of for-profit college attendees—including alumni, current students, and non-completers—say they did not apply to or even seriously consider more than one college. Only 8 percent applied to or seriously considered three or more. Similarly, among current community college students, 84 percent applied to or considered only one college.

“

I had a newborn baby, I was working full time, and I had a business too. I Googled online schools and a couple popped up and that’s how I wound up choosing.¹

—For-profit alum focus group participant, white, in her 50s

”

“

I didn’t even care about the cost. I just cared about how companies and how people view that school.

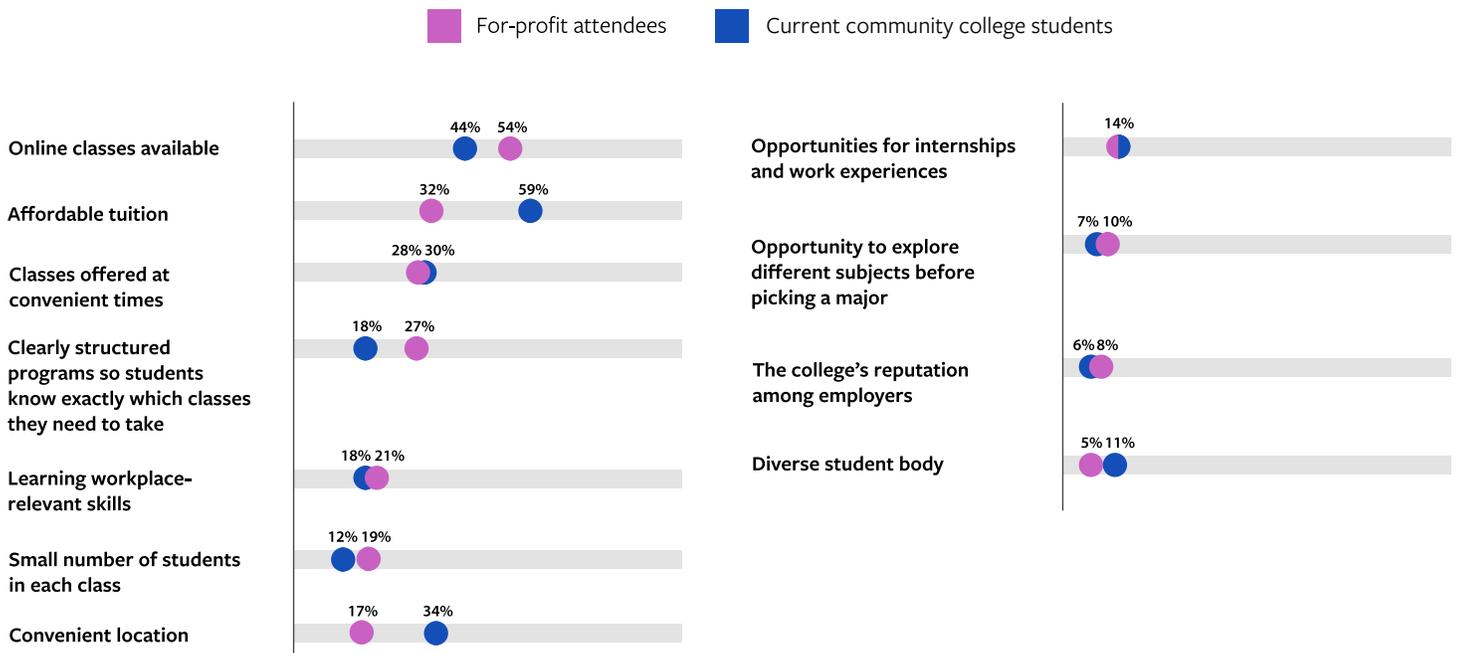
—For-profit non-completer focus group participant, Black, in her 30s

”

For-profit attendees differ from community college students in what they prioritized and paid attention to before enrolling. Fifty-four percent of for-profit college attendees prioritized the availability of online classes when choosing a college and only 32 percent prioritized affordable tuition. Among community college students, 59 percent prioritized affordability and 44 percent prioritized the availability of online classes; see Figure 1.

In choosing a college, online classes were the top priority for for-profit college attendees. Affordability was the top priority for community college students.

Figure 1. Percent who say the following was one of their three most important factors in choosing a college:



Base: All for-profit attendees, N=595; current community college students, N=406

¹ Quotations have been minimally edited for clarity.

For-profit colleges can cost more than public institutions and more than some private nonprofit institutions. But while fewer for-profit attendees prioritize affordability, they do not necessarily believe cost is an indicator of quality. Sixty percent of for-profit attendees say that a more expensive college does not typically provide a higher-quality education. Only 23 percent say it does, and 17 percent do not know. By the same token, 70 percent say that a less expensive college does not typically provide a lower-quality education. Only 13 percent say it does and 17 percent do not know.

Nonetheless, fewer for-profit attendees (58 percent) than community college students (74 percent) say they paid a great deal of attention to affordability when deciding which school to attend. However, 70 percent of for-profit attendees and a similar percentage of community college students believe prospective students should pay a great deal of attention to it before enrolling; see Figure 2.

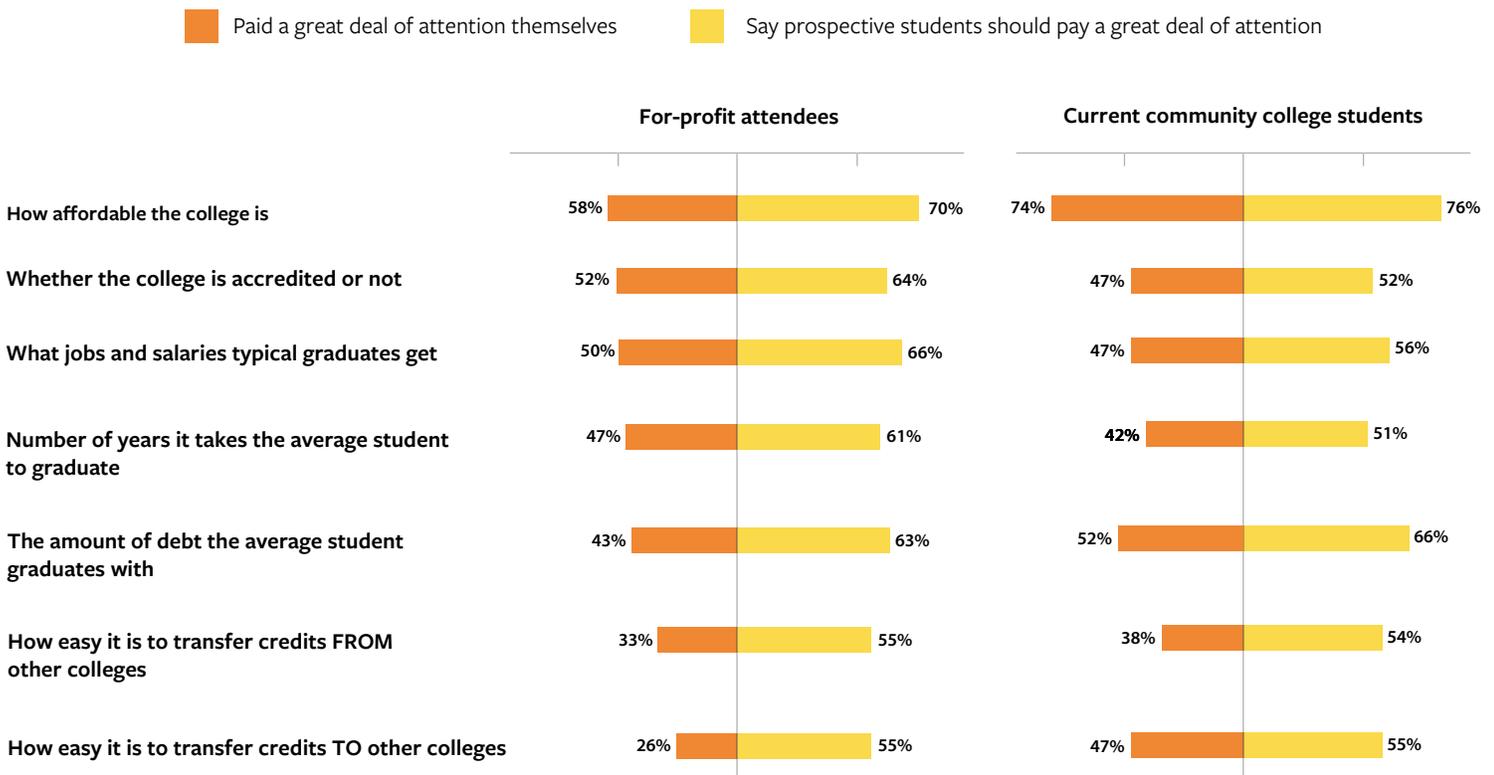
“Costs have gone up, but did they really need to go up as much as they have? It costs the same for the teacher to teach and the school to run. It’s not twice or three times or four times as much.”

—For-profit non-completer focus group participant, Asian-American, in his 30s

Similarly, fewer for-profit attendees than community college students paid a great deal of attention to the amount of debt the average student graduated with; see Figure 2. Again, similar percentages of for-profit attendees and community college students say prospective students should pay a great deal of attention to debt loads; students graduate with.

Most for-profit attendees believe prospective students should pay attention to affordability and debt before enrolling. Yet fewer for-profit attendees than community college students paid attention to those factors before enrolling themselves.

Figure 2. Percent who say they paid a great deal of attention and who say prospective students should pay a great deal of attention to each of the following before deciding which school to attend:



Base: All for-profit attendees, N=595; Current community college students, N=406

Most for-profit attendees (72 percent) say that when they were trying to learn about colleges, they had the right amount of information, with only 20 percent saying they had too little. Eighty percent of for-profit attendees also say it was easy to understand the information that they had, with only 20 percent saying it was difficult.

Friends, family and colleagues are the most cited single source of information about colleges for for-profit attendees and community college students alike. Beyond those informal sources, at least 60 percent of for-profit attendees and nearly as many community college students say they learned about colleges through sources provided by or controlled by colleges themselves, including advertising, colleges' own websites, or recruiters. Only 17 percent of for-profit attendees say they learned about colleges from a high school guidance counselor, compared to

33 percent of community college students. Despite investments in college comparison websites, only 19 percent of for-profit attendees indicate using one; see Figure 3.

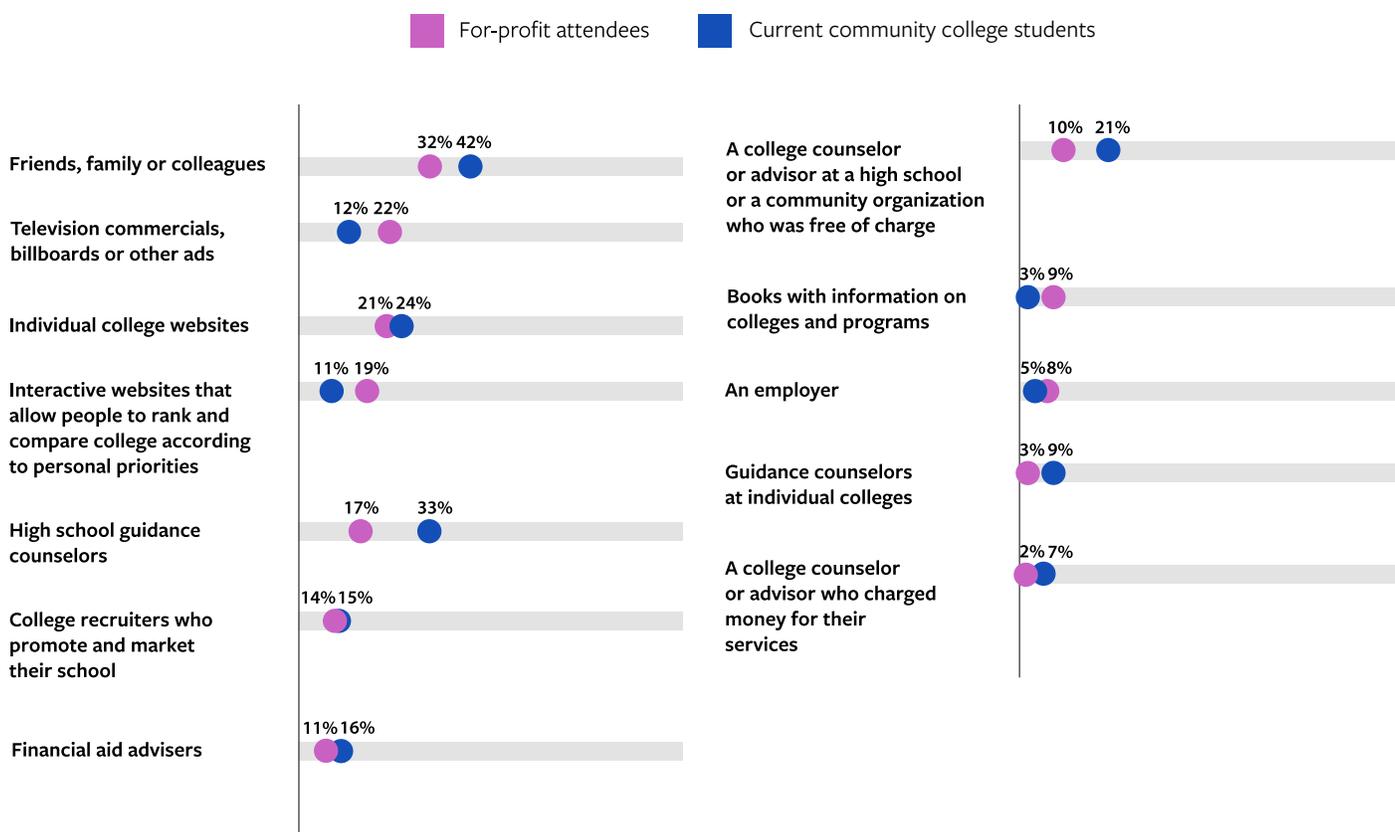
“ I learned about the school from commercials on TV. It appealed to me because I was working three jobs trying to make ends meet and taking 18 hours of courses, so being able to go to class once a week was so much easier for my employers to work with.

—For-profit non-completer survey respondent, white, in her 30s

”

Compared to community college students, for-profit attendees are more likely to have learned about college from advertisements and less likely to have learned from high school guidance counselors.

Figure 3. Percent who say they learned about colleges and programs from each of the following before enrolling:



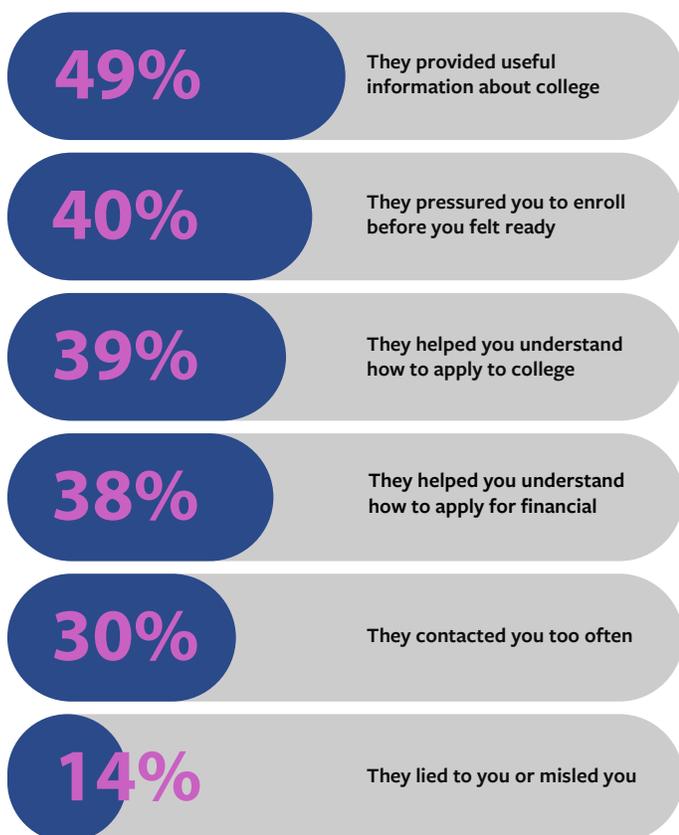
Base: All for-profit attendees, N=595; current community college students, N=406

For-profit colleges have been criticized for aggressive recruiting tactics. Although only 14 percent of for-profit attendees say they learned about colleges from recruiters, nearly twice as many (29 percent) say they spoke to a recruiter at some point. Similar percentages of community college students (35 percent) also say they spoke to a recruiter.

For-profit attendees who spoke to recruiters give mixed reviews. About half say the recruiter provided useful information and about four in ten say they helped them understand how to apply to college. But about as many say that the recruiter pressured them to enroll, and 30 percent say the recruiter contacted them too often; see Figure 4. Current community college students who spoke to a recruiter report similar experiences.

For-profit attendees who spoke to recruiters give them mixed reviews.

Figure 4. Percent of for-profit attendees who spoke to a college recruiter who say each of the following describes their experience:



Base: All for-profit attendees who spoke to a recruiter, N=226

“ The conversations were definitely helpful, but they try to get you. ‘Oh, come here, come here, come here, come here.’ That’s what a recruiter is going to do. They’re going to push you. I got three or four phone calls within a week and got some emails as well.

—For-profit alum focus group participant, white, in his 30s ”

“ I felt rushed. I wanted to take my time and not only choose which school, but decide what I wanted to do, what I wanted to go for. And they were just too pushy.

—For-profit non-completer focus group participant, Black, in her 40s ”

“ The internet is a crazy thing because you don’t think you’re going to get bombarded with all of these schools calling you. If you put a phone number in there, you get text messages. I started seeing little ads [online] and they had television ads run at the same time. I just couldn’t shake it.

—For-profit alum focus group participant, Black, in his 50s ”

How for-profit attendees rate their colleges

A slim majority of for-profit attendees (55 percent) believe that their college prioritized the education of its students, but 45 percent believe it prioritized making money. Just over half of alumni but about one-third of current students and non-completers believe their college prioritized making money; see Figure 5.

“

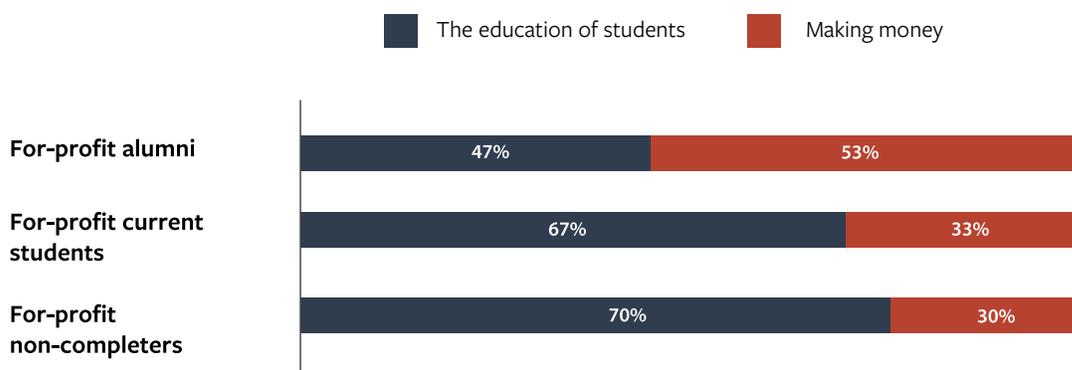
I didn't know that the school was under federal investigation when I enrolled. Everyone that attended that school, our papers were no good because the school got shut down. And I still to this day owe money for going to that school. False promises and just looking at us as a paycheck. You just have to be careful.

—For-profit non-completer focus group participant, Black, in her 40s

”

More for-profit alumni than current students or non-completers think their college prioritized making money over educating students.

Figure 5. Percent who say their school cares or cared more about:



Base: All for-profit attendees, N=595; for-profit alumni, N=272; for-profit current students, N=235; for-profit non-completers, N=88

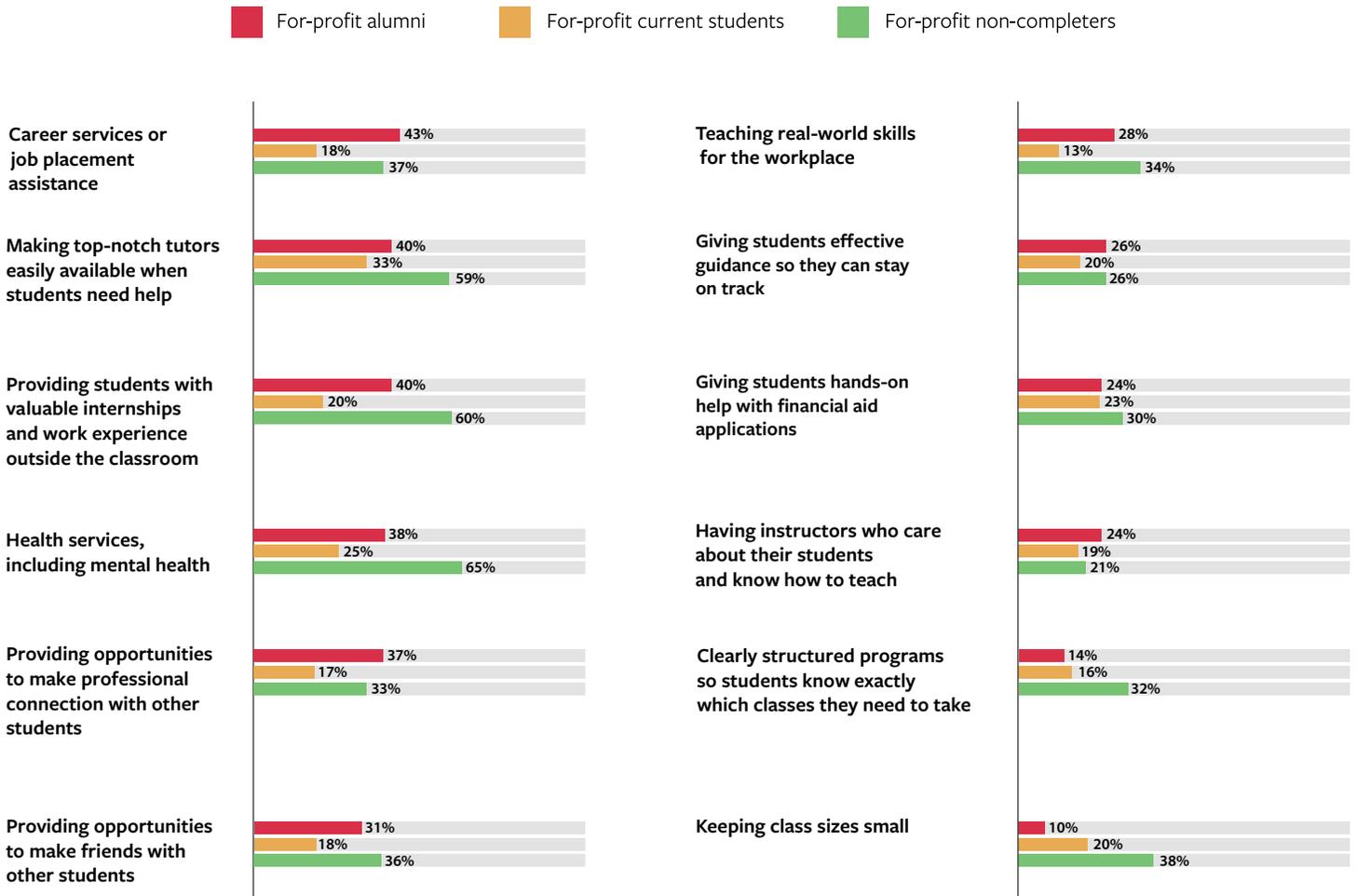
In general, most for-profit attendees (83 percent) are satisfied with their school, including 85 percent of alumni, 87 percent of current students and fewer—but still a 64 percent majority—of non-completers. Ninety-two percent of community college students are satisfied with their school.

But when asked about specific attributes of their college, such as academics, work experience, and student services, 47 percent of for-profit alumni and 64 percent of non-completers indicate that their college fell short on four or more of the 11 attributes that the survey asked about. Far fewer current for-profit students (28 percent) say their college is falling short on four or more of the 11 attributes.

For example, significantly fewer current students than alumni or non-completers indicate that their school is falling short at providing internships, career services or job placement, creating opportunities to make professional connections with other students, and teaching real-world skills for the workplace; see Figure 6.

For-profit alumni and non-completers express criticism of their colleges when asked about specifics such as academics, work experience, and student services. Current students are less critical.

Figure 6. Percent who say that their school is falling short or fell short on each of the following:



Base: For-profit alumni, N=272; for-profit current students, N=235; for-profit non-completers, N=88

“ The woman who was teaching us, she would study from the book at the same time we were. She was like, ‘I don’t know this stuff. I’m learning at the same time you guys are learning.’

—For-profit non-completer focus group participant, Black, in her 40s ”

“ You have to call long distance to try to get a hold of this teacher to help you. The teacher is not responding and you’re struggling. By the time you finally are able to communicate, you realize, ‘Hey, I gotta take a step back and maybe take some tutoring so that I can pass this class.’ But if you drop it, you got this huge bill. But you can’t go on to the next one and can’t get any more financial aid. And you work two jobs.

—For-profit non-completer focus group participant, white, in her 50s ”

“ I think my college is providing me with the right skills and putting me on the right path. Everything feels good and normal while learning skills to participate in real situations. I think my school is doing enough to prepare me for success.

—For-profit current student survey respondent, Black, in his 20s ”

“ I was worried about enrolling into my school due to the fact I haven’t always heard good things as they are a for-profit school—as well as hearing some stories from people in my circles who have gone here who have experienced issues with their teachers, which I haven’t had this issue yet. But I am still worried.

—Current for-profit student survey respondent, mixed race, in her 20s ”

When asked about the sector in general rather than about their college in particular, 54 percent of for-profit enrollees say they would recommend a for-profit college to a friend or family member. Perhaps unsurprisingly, far fewer non-completers (23 percent) than alumni (52 percent) and current students (73 percent) would recommend a for-profit college.

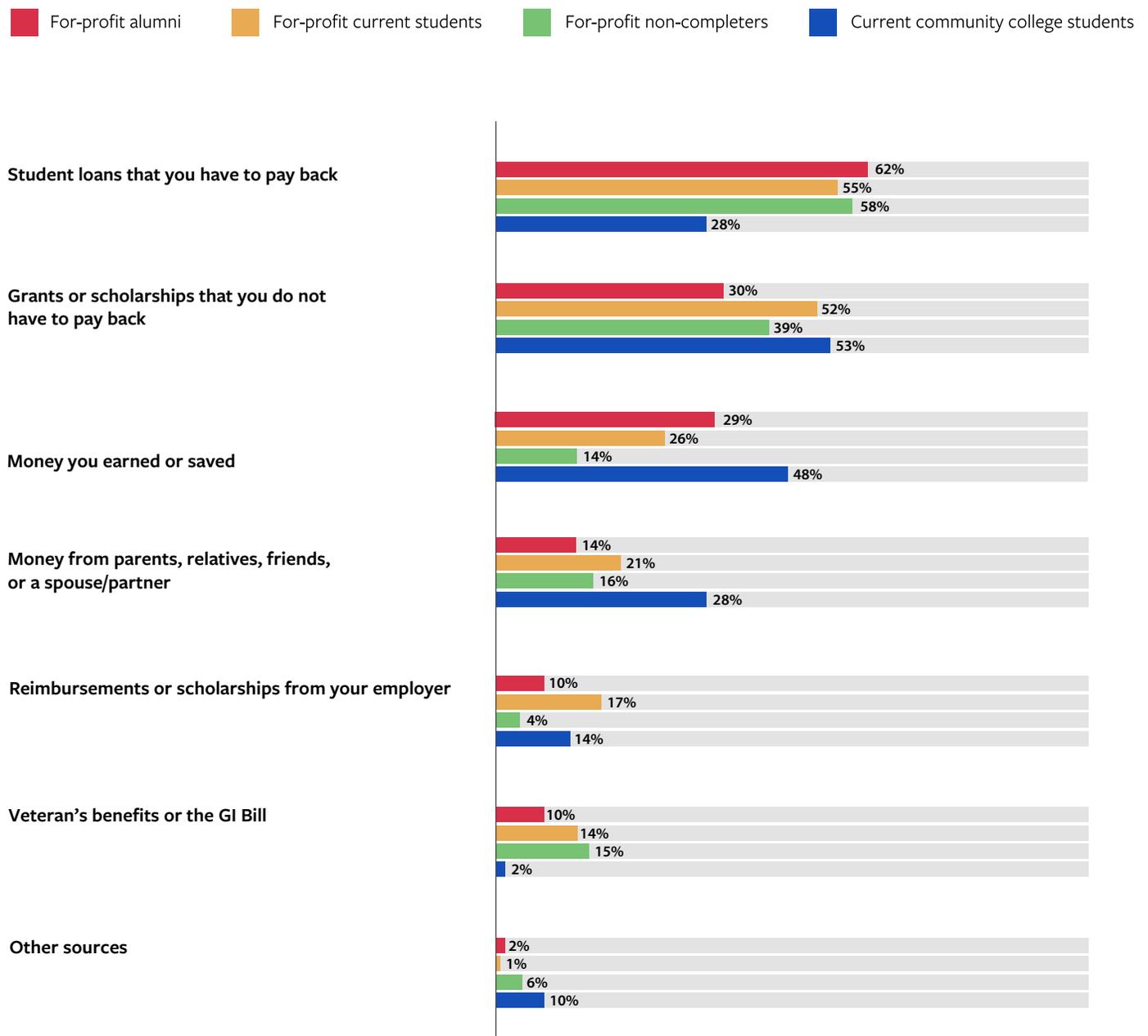
Fifty percent of for-profit enrollees have neutral impressions of for-profit colleges, 27 percent have mostly positive impressions and 23 percent have mostly negative. Again, more non-completers (34 percent) have negative impressions than alumni (25 percent) or current students (14 percent).

Paying for college and student debt

Student loans are the most common way for-profit alumni, current students and non-completers pay for college. Compared to community college students, fewer pay with their own savings or money from parents, relatives, friends, spouses, or partners. More of them report using veterans benefits or the GI Bill; see Figure 7.

For-profit attendees are more likely to pay for college using student loans, while community college students are more likely to pay using money they earned or saved.

Figure 7. Percent who indicate they are using or used each of the following to pay for college:



Base: All for-profit attendees, N=595; for-profit alumni, N=272; for-profit current students, N=235; for-profit non-completers, N=88; current community college students, N=406

“ I don’t think I’ll live long enough to pay off my debt. I didn’t realize that if you didn’t have so many credits in a semester, they don’t pick up any financial aid. I wound up dropping classes because something personal came up and I wound up having to pay that out of pocket. If I had to do it over again, no way would I choose the college that I went to, not one chance. It’s very, very expensive.

—For-profit alum focus group participant, white, in her 50s ”

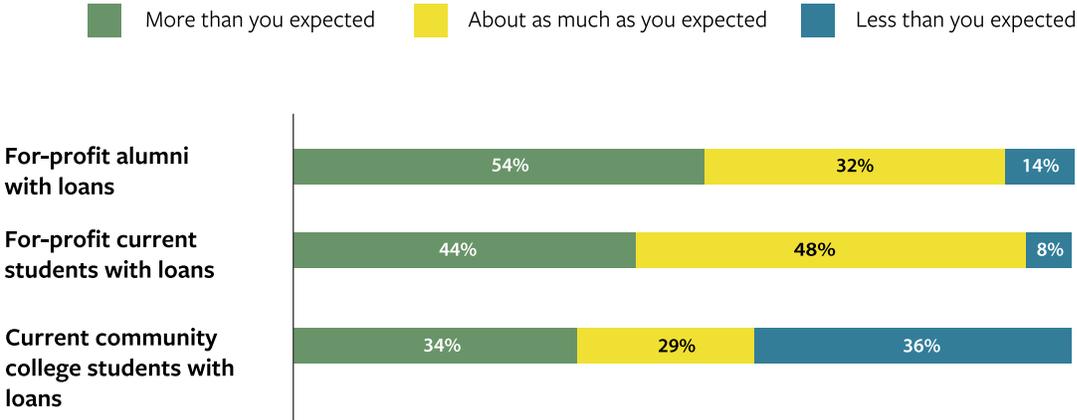
“ Some of them are for-profit and they’re more likely to push private loans. I went to school for massage therapy and I left it because their accreditation was kind of shifty and then I didn’t like that they pushed private loans. They didn’t file my financial aid properly to try and force me into taking a private loan. It took me forever to finish paying.

—Current for-profit student focus group participant, Black, in her 50s ”

Not only are for-profit attendees more likely than community college students to take out loans, but those who have loans are also more likely to say they will have more debt than expected upon graduation; see Figure 8.

Among those who took out loans to pay for a for-profit college, half say their debt will be more than expected.

Figure 8. Percent with loans who say their debt is or will be:



Base: Asked of total qualified respondents who were using or used student loans to pay for college: alumni for-profit, N=155; current for-profit, N=130; current community college students, N=128

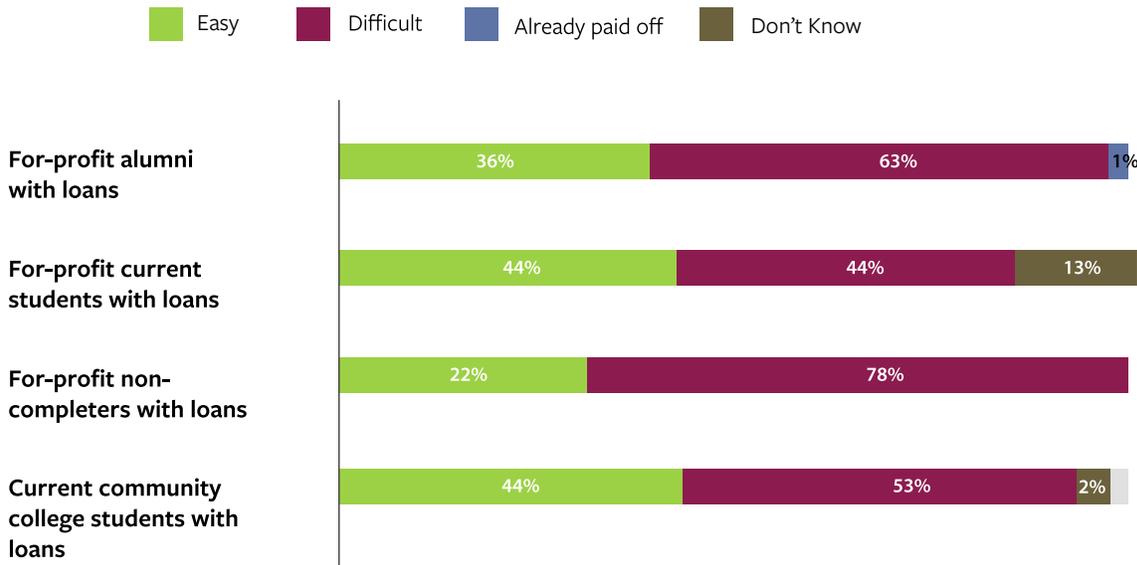
Additionally, among for-profit alumni and non-completers who have loans, most say it is difficult to make payments. Fewer current for-profit students who took out loans anticipate repaying will be difficult, indicating they may be underestimating their debt burden or overestimating their future earnings; see Figure 9.

“
Unfortunately, I did take out student loans. I’ve never liked the idea, and I still cringe at the very thought. I never graduated, unfortunately. There’s always concerns. Mainly how it impacts my credit score.
—For-profit non-completer survey respondent, white, in her 30s
 ”

“
I had to take out a student loan and I feel comfortable with the process. I will definitely be able to repay them because I feel guaranteed success.
—Current for-profit student survey respondent, Black, in his 30s
 ”

Most for-profit alumni and non-completers with student loans say it is difficult to make payments. Fewer current for-profit students anticipate difficulty paying.

Figure 9. Percent with loans who say it is or will be easy or difficult to make payments:



Base: Asked of total qualified respondents who were using or used student loans to pay for college: alumni for-profit, N=155; current for-profit, N=130; for-profit non-completers, N=53; current community college students, N=128

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding.

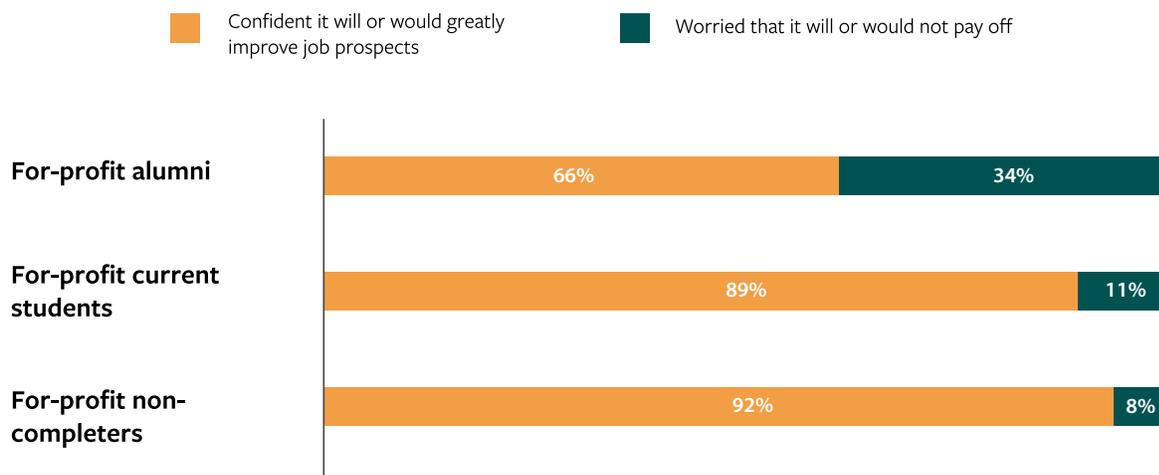
Outcomes and value of a for-profit college degree

Prior to enrolling in their school, most for-profit attendees were confident that their degree would improve their job prospects. However, only 38 percent of for-profit alumni believe that getting their degree was worth it, with larger shares either saying it was not worth it or it remains to be seen; see Figures 10.

Before enrolling, most for-profit college attendees were confident their degree would improve their job prospects. In retrospect, few alumni say it was worth it;

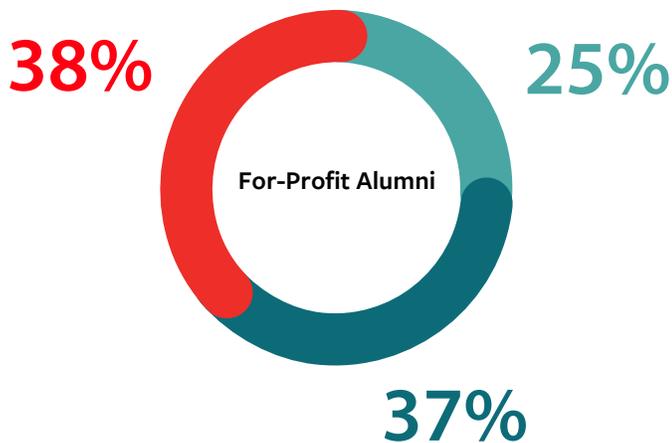
Figure 10. Percent who say each of the following:

Prior to enrolling at their school, they were



Comparing all the costs to all the benefits, getting a degree or certificate was

Well worth it Wasn't really worth it Remains to be seen



Base: For-profit alumni, N=272; for-profit current students, N=235; for-profit non-completers, N=88

Not only are few for-profit alumni convinced that the benefits of their degree are worth the cost, but they are also less likely than current students to think that a college degree in general is necessary or to think that all high school students should try to attend college; see Figures 11. Alumni and non-completers are less likely than current students to see the value of a degree, which may mean that experience at a higher education institution retrospectively weakens people’s belief in the value of a college education, regardless of whether or not they graduate.

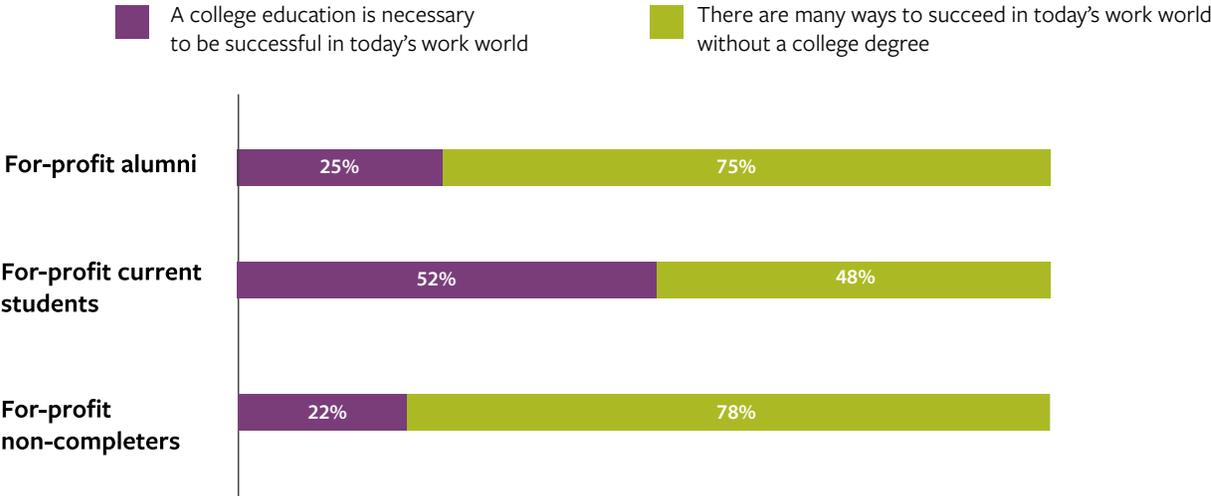
“ I don’t think it was really worth it. Though I had an idea of what I wanted to do post-high school, I fell into that notion that college was the next step to be done. Had I some of the knowledge or know what I do now, I could probably have made my own way without school.

—For-profit alum survey respondent, white, in his 20s

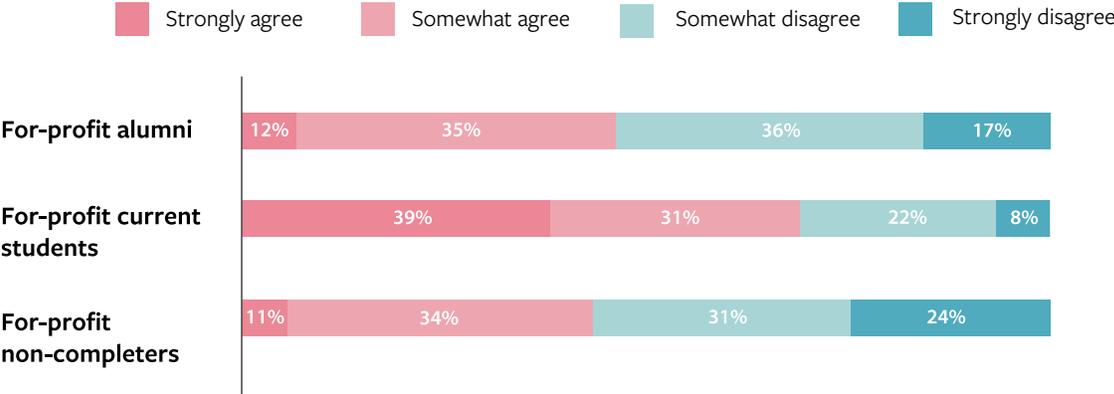
”

More current for-profit students than alumni or non-completers see the value of college.

Figure 11: Percent who say which of the following describes their views:



Percent who agree or disagree that everyone who graduates from high school should try to go to college



Base: For-profit alumni, N=272; for-profit current students, N=235; for-profit non-completers, N=88

Why people do not complete for-profit college degrees and how it affects them

Most for-profit non-completers realized fairly quickly that attending their for-profit college was not working for them. Nearly half (46 percent) of them were enrolled for less than one year, 24 percent were enrolled between one to two years, and 30 percent were enrolled two years or more.

When asked why they did not complete their degree, far more non-completers cite personal reasons rather than lay any blame on the college itself; see Figure 12.

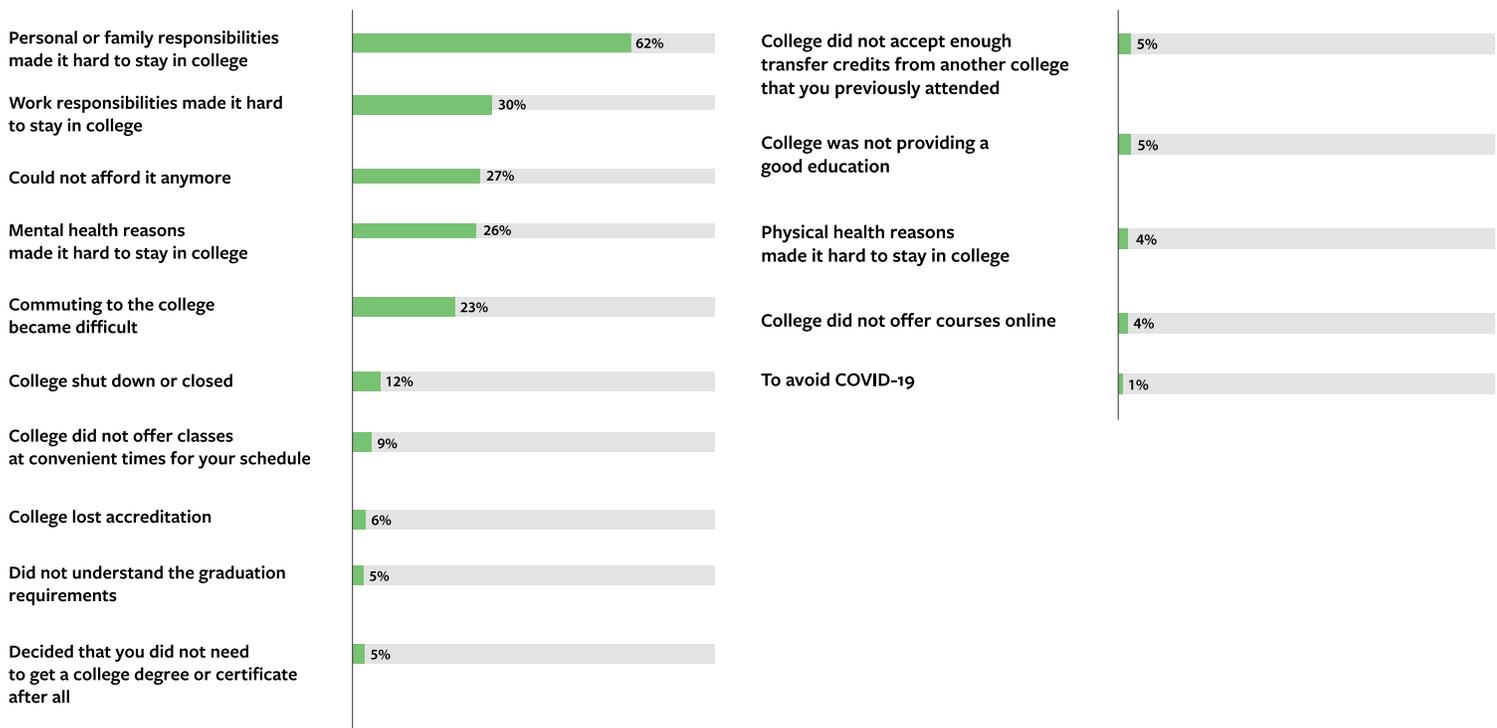
For example, 62 percent of non-completers from for-profits say that personal or family responsibilities made it hard to stay in college. Only 5 percent cite the quality of education and only 5 percent cite unclear graduation requirements. Twelve percent say that the college they attended shut down and 6 percent report that it lost accreditation.

“ I couldn’t finish my degree because I wasn’t being challenged and wasn’t learning anything new. The classes were only five weeks, so the teachers weren’t able to really learn their students. ”

—For-profit non-completer survey respondent, white, in her 30s

Most for-profit non-completers say they did not continue their education because of personal or family responsibilities.

Figure 12: Percent who say they did not continue their education at their for-profit college for the following reasons:



Base: For-profit non-completers, N=88

Seventy-one percent of for-profit non-completers experienced at least one negative effect of not finishing their degree. Among the impacts that non-completers report feeling depressed or anxious, discouraged about enrolling in another college, and unable to afford college; see Figure 13. Fifty-six percent of non-completers indicate they probably will not enroll in a college again in the next two years. Only 16 percent indicate that they definitely will re-enroll and 25 percent probably will re-enroll in the next two years.

“ At the time, taking out student loans was a no-brainer. I didn’t know anyone who was going to be able to pay for school up-front. Today, I wish I had done more research on student loans and maybe reconsidered furthering my education. I don’t think I’ll pursue another degree at this time. I don’t have the money to pay out-of-pocket, my student loans were maxed out, and my schedule doesn’t have room for classes or studying right now.

—For-profit non-completer survey respondent, white, in her 30s

”

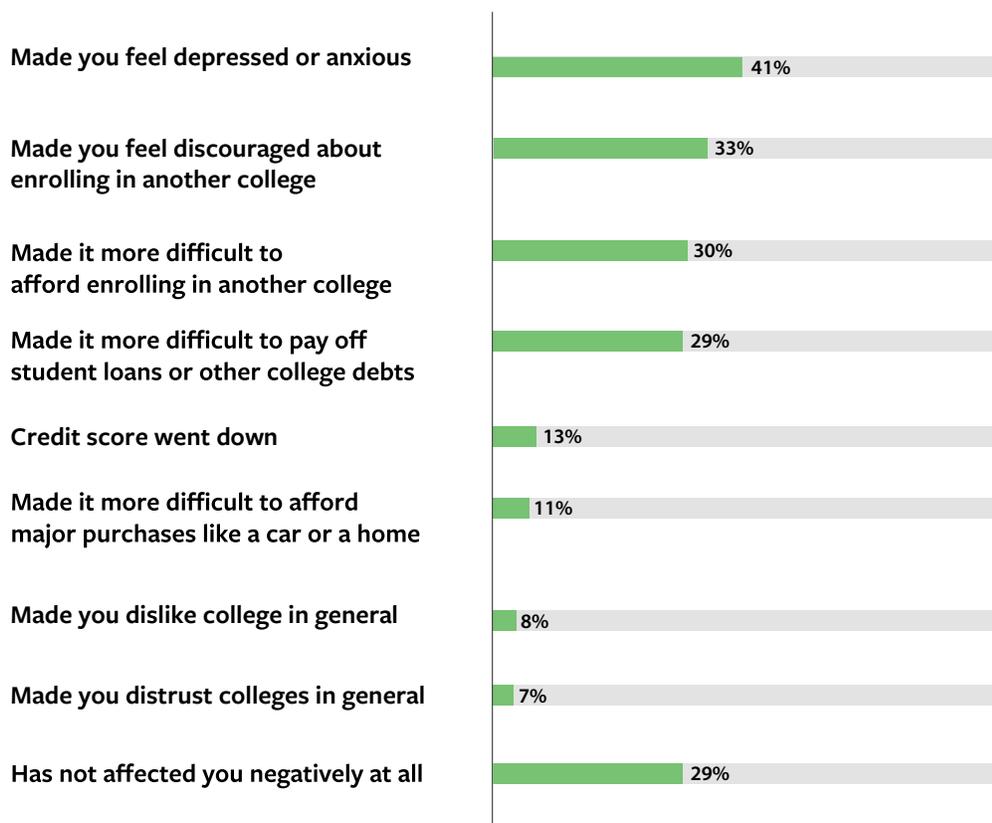
“ Being educated on that financial aspect of how school works would have helped me. Because when you get into a financial struggle or battle, that does start to discourage you from continuing your education.

—For-profit non-completer focus group participant, Black, in her 30s

”

Most for-profit non-completers have experienced some negative effect of not finishing their degree.

Figure 13: Percent who say that as a result of not completing their degree or certificate, they have been affected in the following ways:



Base: For-profit non-completers, N=88

Holding colleges accountable

More non-completers cite personal reasons for not finishing their degree rather than blaming the college itself. But when asked about low completion rates in general, for-profit attendees largely think that colleges and students share responsibility. Specifically, 60 percent of for-profit attendees say that when a college has a lot of students

who do not successfully complete their degrees or certificates, it is both the college’s fault and the students’ fault. Only 20 percent think it is primarily the college’s fault and 21 percent think it is primarily students’ fault.

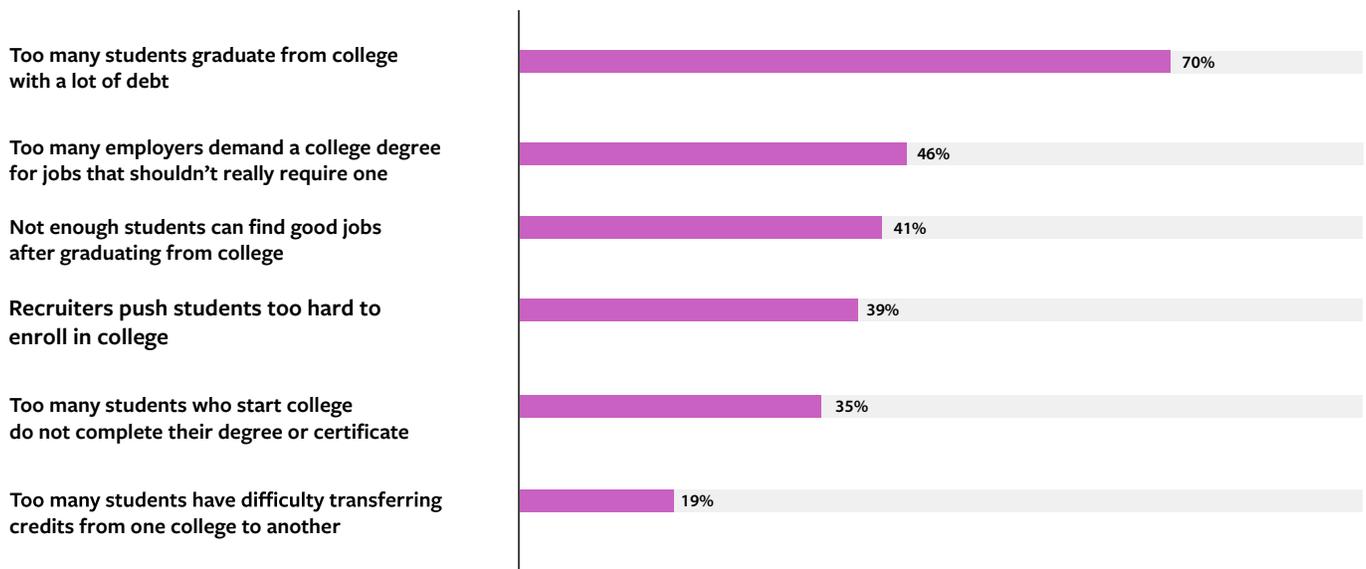
Furthermore, far more for-profit attendees are concerned about high debt loads than about low-completion rates. Somewhat more are concerned about employers unnecessarily demanding degrees for jobs that do not really require them; see Figure 14.

“
A lot of us really got screwed over with the so-called certificates that we earned. You might as well call it just a blank piece of paper because it’s no good anywhere and you still have that debt, too.
—For-profit non-completer focus group participant, Black, in her 40s
 ”

“
At the end of the day, are you a finisher or are you not? I understand that things happen and there’s things that you can’t control. But if you’re going to finish it, you’re going to finish it.
—For-profit non-completer focus group participant, Asian-American, in his 30s
 ”

Far more for-profit college attendees express concern about student debt than about completion rates or career outcomes.

Figure 14: Percent of for-profit college attendees who strongly agree with the following statements:



Base: All for-profit attendees, N=595

Few for-profit attendees express support for punishing colleges with low graduation rates, high debt loads, or poor career outcomes, perhaps because they believe that punishing a school could have a negative impact on those who are or were enrolled. More support requiring those colleges to improve and to do more to support students. For example, when asked about colleges that consistently graduate too many students with a lot of debt, support was highest for forgiving loans, providing financial counseling, and requiring colleges to make plans to improve. Support was lowest for closing colleges and was also low for revoking accreditation.

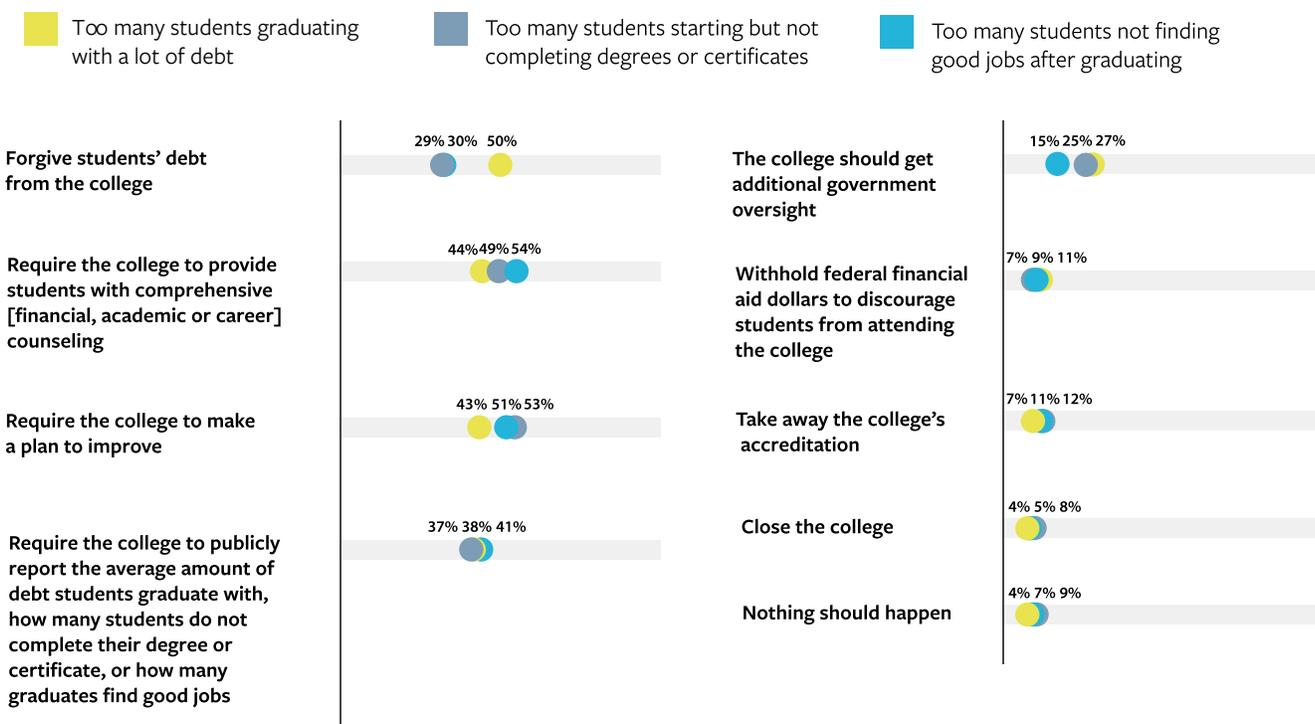
Similarly, for colleges that have low graduation rates or too many students failing to find good jobs after graduation, a greater proportion of for-profit attendees support requiring colleges to make plans to improve, provide students with counseling and advising, and to publicly report outcomes. Fewer support closures, revoking accreditation, or withholding federal financial aid to discourage students from attending; see Figure 15.

“ They can’t acknowledge or verify that I graduated from there because it doesn’t exist anymore. You can’t find out anything anywhere about them. I paid \$30,000. It makes me really mad because I can’t even use it on my resume.
 —For-profit non-completer focus group participant, white, in her 50s, Black, in her 40s

“ We are giving them this money in exchange for an education, and if they’re not holding up to their end of it, then they shouldn’t get the funding or the student shouldn’t have to pay that back if they are not able to use that education.
 —Current for-profit student focus group participant, white, in her 30s

Few for-profit attendees support punishing schools with poor track records. More support requiring them to improve and to do more to support students.

Figure 15: Require the college to publicly report the average amount of debt students graduate with, how many students do not complete their degree or certificate, or how many graduates find good jobs



Methodology in Brief

This report summarizes survey findings from representative samples of 595 adult Americans 18 years and older for-profit college attendees and 406 adults enrolled in community college. The for-profit attendees sample includes representative subsamples of alumni who completed their degrees or certificates at for-profit colleges within fifteen years of survey fielding (N=272); students currently enrolled at for-profit colleges at the time of fielding (N=235); and non-completers i.e., people who started a degree or certificate at a for-profit college within fifteen years of fielding, did not complete their degree or certificate at that college and never subsequently completed elsewhere (N=88). A separate report summarizes findings from a representative survey of 217 alumni of online degree programs at public and private nonprofit colleges. The survey was designed by Public Agenda and fielded March 17 to May 31, 2022, by SSRS. Respondents completed the survey online in English and Spanish.

To confirm the type of higher education institution that respondents were attending or had attended, Public Agenda used IPEDS data from 2014 to 2020 to build a list of private for-profit institutions, public four-year institutions, public two-year institutions (community colleges), and private non-profit institutions. This list was programmed into the online survey instrument. Respondents chose the institution they had attended or were attending from the list and were counted toward the appropriate sample quota. Respondents who did not choose any of the institutions on the list had the option to enter an open-ended response and answer survey questions; Public Agenda then reviewed and categorized the institution they had named so that SSRS could assign them to the appropriate sample or remove their data.

The margin of error for the 595 for-profit enrollees is ± 7.3 percentage points. The margin of error for the 406 current community college students is ± 8.1 percentage points. Margins of error for subgroups are larger.

The sample was randomly drawn from SSRS's online probability panel and from online non-probability panels. SSRS weighted the probability completes using standard base weight adjustments and raking to external demographic benchmarks and then used hybrid calibration procedures to blend the probability and non-probability samples.

Before designing the survey, Public Agenda conducted three demographically diverse online focus groups in October 2021 with for-profit alumni, current students, and non-completers. Focus group recruiters confirmed that participants were attending or had attended a for-profit college based on a list of institutions built by Public Agenda from IPEDS data.

When referencing this report, cite Public Agenda. This research is supported by Arnold Ventures. For a complete methodology and topline with full question wording, go to <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/for-profit-colleges-2023/> or email research@publicagenda.org.

Public Agenda is a research-to-action nonprofit organization dedicated to creating and sustaining a stronger democracy. Through research, public engagement, and communications, we amplify public voice in institutional and government decision-making. The organization was founded in 1975 by the social scientist and public opinion research pioneer Dan Yankelovich and former secretary of state Cyrus Vance.



Arnold Ventures, founded by Laura and John Arnold, is a philanthropy dedicated to tackling some of the most pressing problems in the United States. We invest in sustainable change, building it from the ground up based on research, deep thinking, and a strong foundation of evidence. We drive public conversation, craft policy, and inspire action through education and advocacy. We are a team of more than 100 subject-matter experts headquartered in Houston with offices in New York and Washington, D.C. We work in four key issue areas: Criminal Justice, Education, Health, and Public Finance. Our work is guided by Evidence-Based Policy, Research, and Advocacy.





Twitter
<https://twitter.com/PublicAgenda>



Facebook
<https://www.facebook.com/PublicAgenda>