

2021

Alternative Education Pathways Report

Exploring job training and career development through the perceptions of the general public and business leaders in the U.S.





2021 Alternative Education Pathways Report

Melissa A. Venable, Ph.D.

This report is the result of a collaborative effort of BestColleges contributors. The team included: Kelsie Brown, Reece Johnson, Andrew Rice, Jordan Stewart-Rozema, Quinn Tomlin, and Liz Zvereva.

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Executive Summary

Making decisions about jobs and careers means choosing a path for training and education. While most high school graduates choose to attend college every year, there are other options (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). In September 2021, we collected feedback from 2,410 adults belonging to the general public and 1,000 business leaders in the U.S. This report presents our findings related to their perceptions of multiple paths to employment training and preparation — such as technical and vocational programs, apprenticeships, bootcamps, and college — in the context of employment and career development.

KEY FINDINGS

Education and Training Choices

- A majority of U.S. adults, including those with college experience, agreed that alternative education pathways provide a good return on investment.
- Roughly two-thirds (66%) of Americans with work experience believed their educational path has been valuable.
- However, 61% of Americans with work experience said they would choose a different education and training path if they could go back and do it again.

Employee Skill Development

- The primary source for education and training for those without college experience is their employer (45%).
- Less than half (43%) of business leaders said that their company or organization provides on-the-job training and training programs for people new to the work. And roughly 1 in 5 or less are involved in activities such as providing internships (21%), sponsoring apprenticeships (16%), or partnering with colleges (13%) or technical schools (14%).
- Only 40% of business leaders said that college graduates are prepared to succeed in their first job after graduation; however, 60% said a college degree is important for long-term career success.

The Future of Workforce Training and Education

- Eighty-one percent of business leaders and 55% of the general public agreed that alternative education pathways will play a pivotal role in future workforce training.
- Eighty-five percent of business leaders agreed that alternative education pathways could play a role in resolving current workforce gaps.
- Eighty-five percent of business leaders thought that alternative education pathways are a viable alternative to college, and 64% said employers should remove some current college degree hiring requirements.

Introduction

Concerns about the rising costs of a college education have existed for years, and were perhaps intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic as students moved to remote learning for an extended period. Enrollments decreased and conversations turned to other options for job-related training and education (Moody, 2020; Nadworney, 2021). But how are these options perceived as alternatives to a college degree? Our research includes feedback from the general public and business leaders across the U.S.

PROJECT GOALS

This report presents BestColleges' inaugural research on alternative education pathways. It is part of our [broader initiative](#) to identify and share trends related to higher education and career planning. Our goal with this project was to explore three primary questions related to the perception of non-college paths to employment in the U.S.

- What is the general public's acceptance of alternatives to pursuing a four-year college degree?
- How do potential employers value a college degree and alternative education and training in 2021?
- What are potential employers' preferences for job applicant preparation in 2021?

Our findings provide insights about the perceptions of a variety of education and training formats, which may prove useful to prospective students, school and college career advisors, and employers alike.

METHODOLOGY

BestColleges commissioned YouGov PLC to conduct two online surveys. The first survey was conducted Sept. 1-3, 2021, and included 2,410 adult respondents 18 years of age and older from among the general U.S. public. The second survey gathered input from 1,000 business leaders (i.e., heads of teams, groups, or small organizations and above) in the U.S. from Sept. 2-7, 2021. All participants in the business leader survey represented private, for-profit companies. All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov PLC. Both datasets have been weighted and are representative of their respective populations.

DEFINITIONS

For the purposes of this study, *alternative education pathways* were defined as *employment-related skill development opportunities that prepare a learner for work, but do not require or result in a college degree. Examples include, but are not limited to, certificate and certification programs, technical training, apprenticeships, and on-the-job training.*

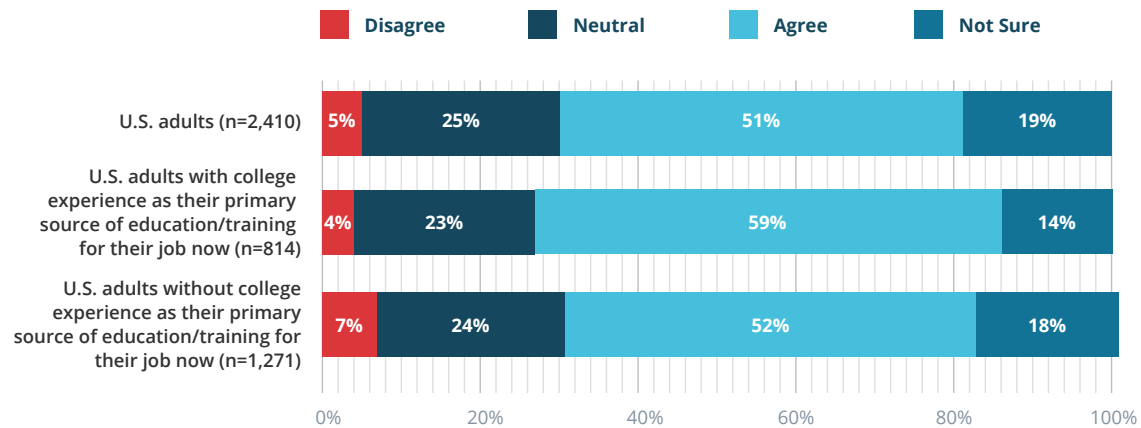
Education and Training Choices



RETURN ON INVESTMENT

The question of return on investment is an important one as prospective students consider their education and training options, most of which require an investment of time, energy, and money. While it's generally accepted that higher education levels lead to higher incomes (Torpey, 2018), a majority of Americans participating in this study agreed that alternative education pathways provide a good return on investment.

Alternative Education Pathways Provide a Good Return on Investment for Learners — General Public

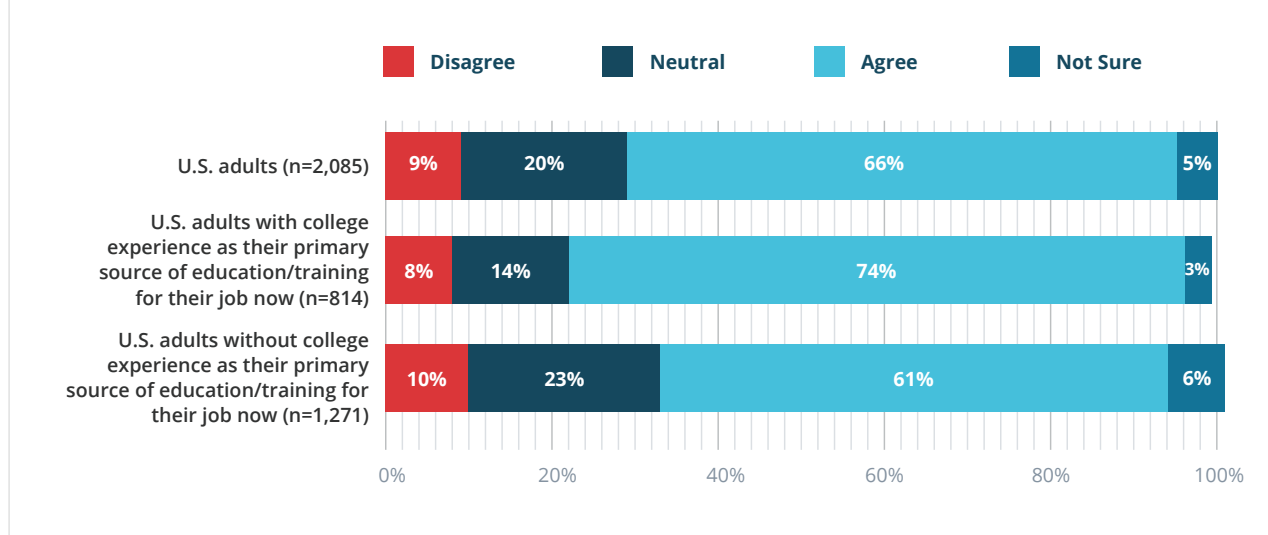


REFLECTION ON PERSONAL PATH

When asked about their own choices, roughly two-thirds (66%) of U.S. adults who have ever been a part of the workforce agreed that their path has been valuable, and a similar number (63%) agreed that the path they took helped them develop skills they currently use or used in their most recent job.

College-experienced adults (74%) were more likely than those without college experience as their primary source of education/training for their job now (61%) to say that their path was valuable. This group was also more likely to say that their path helped them find a job and/or build a career (69% vs. 53%), and that it helped them develop skills they currently use on the job (70% vs. 59%).

My Path to Job Skill Development and Employment Was Valuable — General Public With Work Experience



Additionally, of the U.S. adults who have held a job (n=2,085), the higher their education level the more likely they were to agree that their path to job skill development and employment was valuable, helped them find a job or build a career, and led to skills they currently use or have used on the job.

Perceived Value of Chosen Path by Highest Education Level — General Public With Work Experience

	No High School Diploma / High School Diploma (n=673)	Some College/ 2-Year College Degree (n=695)	4-Year College Degree (n=448)	Postgraduate Degree (n=269)	U.S. Adults With Work Experience (n=2,085)
I agree — my path to job skill development and employment was valuable	56%	65%	71%	88%	66%
I agree — my path to job skill development and employment helped me find a job and/or build a career	48%	58%	67%	82%	59%
I agree — my path led to the development of skills I currently use on-the-job, or used on my last job (if not currently employed)	54%	62%	67%	84%	63%

While a majority of Americans with work experience shared some level of satisfaction or success with their chosen education and training path, many also shared that they might choose another path if they could do it all over again in their current or most recent field of work. The most popular response was that they would choose to participate in a technical or vocational program (19%), followed by pursuing a four-year college degree (16%). Less than half of the U.S. adults who have held a job (39%) said they wouldn't do anything differently.

What Adults in the U.S. Would Do Differently — General Public With Work Experience

	U.S. Adults With Work Experience (n=2,085)	U.S. Adults With College Experience as Their Primary Source of Education/Training for Their Job Now (n=814)	U.S. Adults Without College Experience as Their Primary Source of Education/Training for Their Job Now (n=1,271)
Earn a four-year degree (i.e., bachelor's) or advanced degree (i.e., master's, doctorate, professional)	16%	9%	21%
Earn a two-year degree (i.e., associate)	10%	5%	13%
Pursue technical or vocational training (e.g., EMT, radiation tech, culinary arts, construction, real estate, finance specialist, pilot license, etc.)	19%	19%	19%
Participate in a formal apprenticeship and/or journeyman program	14%	13%	15%
Attend a technical bootcamp training program (e.g., software development, cybersecurity, etc.)	13%	12%	13%
Rely on employers for skill development (e.g., on-the-job training, employer-led training programs, etc.)	10%	12%	9%
Participate in a self-paced online program (e.g., microdegrees or microcredentials from providers like Coursera, Udacity, LinkedIn Learning, etc.)	13%	13%	13%
Join the military	6%	6%	6%
Become an entrepreneur	7%	9%	6%
Other	3%	3%	3%
Not applicable — I wouldn't do anything differently	39%	44%	36%

Note: Participants could select more than one response, excluding "Not applicable — I wouldn't do anything differently."

Additional findings include:

- Older adults in the U.S., ages 55 and older (46%) and ages 35-54 (38%), were more likely than younger adults, ages 18-34 (29%), to say they wouldn't do anything differently.
- White adults in the U.S. (45%) were more likely than Hispanic (26%) and Black (24%) adults to say they wouldn't do anything differently.
- Americans whose highest level of education was some college or a two-year degree seemed the least satisfied with their path — only 28% said they wouldn't do anything differently, compared to 38% of those who attended or graduated from high school as their highest level of education and 62% of those with a postgraduate degree.



BESTCOLLEGES INSIGHT

Broaden Awareness of Alternative Education Pathways: Awareness and Acceptance of Different Options May Lead to Different Choices

Given the opportunity to go back and choose a different education or training path, most people said they would do so. Developing an awareness of and openness to a wider variety of learning opportunities throughout one's career may result in more informed decision-making about how to not only prepare for the job market, but also remain relevant.

Employee Skill Development



ROLE OF EMPLOYERS

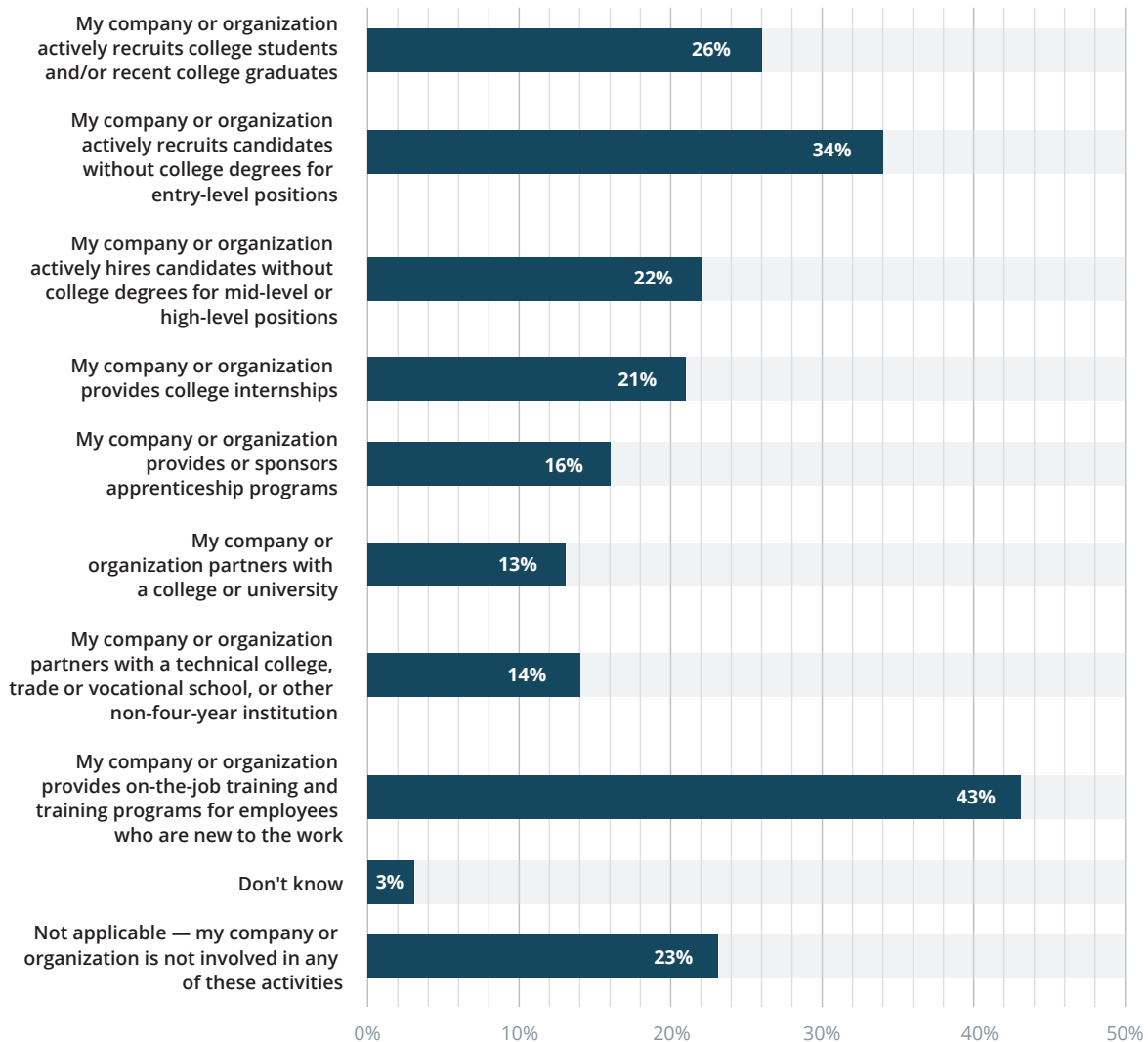
It's fairly common for employers to offer some kind of skill development opportunity to employees, whether it's on-the-job training or more formal professional and continuing development offerings. This study found that many people relied heavily on their employer as the primary source of training for their current job, including 24% of all U.S. adults and 45% of those without college experience.

Primary Source of Education/Training for Current or Most Recent Job — General Public

	(n=2,410)
Four-year (i.e., bachelor's) or advanced degree (i.e., master's, doctorate, professional)	25%
Two-year degree (i.e., associate)	8%
Technical or vocational training program (e.g., EMT, radiation tech, culinary arts, construction, real estate, finance specialist, golf course maintenance, pilot license, wind turbine technician, etc.)	10%
Apprenticeship and/or journeyman program	3%
Bootcamp technical training program (e.g., software development, cybersecurity, etc.)	2%
Training provided by my employer (e.g., on-the-job training, employer-led training programs, etc.)	24%
Self-paced online learning programs (e.g., microdegrees, microcredentials from providers like Coursera, Udacity, LinkedIn Learning, etc.)	2%
Military service	3%
Becoming an entrepreneur	3%
Other	7%
Not applicable — I have never had a job	14%

Forty-three percent of business leaders said that *their company or organization provides on-the-job training and training programs for employees who are new to the work*. Additionally, nearly 1 in 4 (23%) shared that their organization wasn't directly involved in any of the hiring, partnership, or training scenarios we provided in the survey.

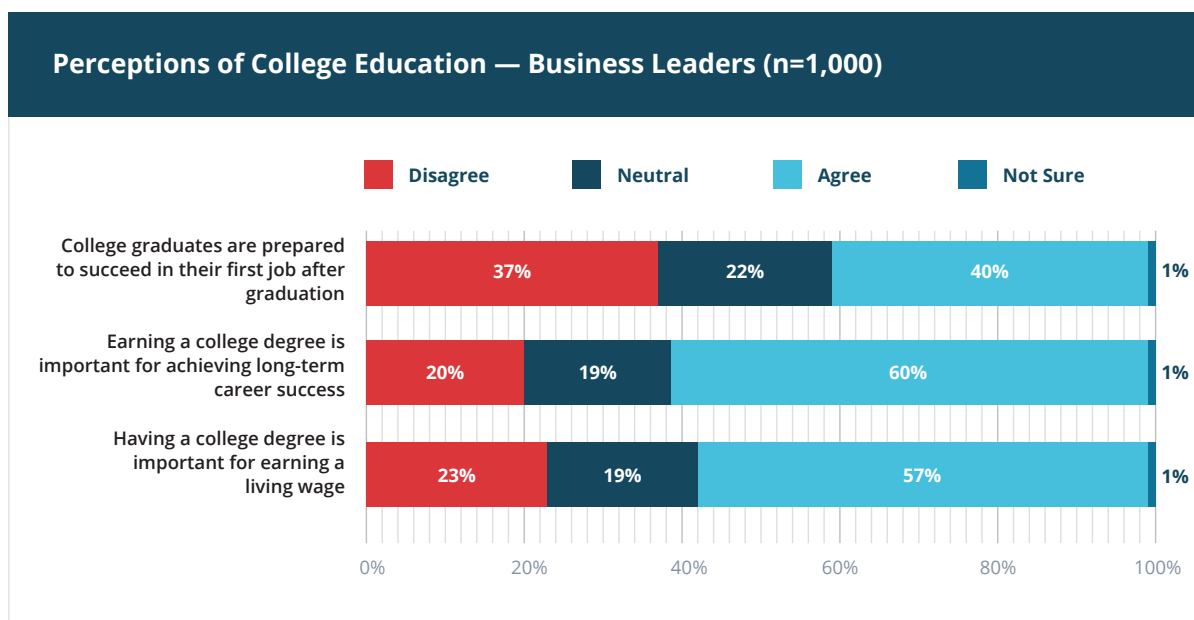
Hiring and Training Practices — Business Leaders (n=1,000)



Note: Participants could select more than one response, excluding "Not applicable — my company or organization is not involved in any of these activities."

COMPARING COLLEGE AND ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PATHWAYS

While there is ongoing debate about the purpose of college (Lederman, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2016), most students enroll with career and employment goals in mind (BestColleges, 2020). Does college prepare students for work? We asked business leaders to share their perceptions about how well college prepares students for the workforce. Opinions were mixed. Only 40% agreed that *college graduates are prepared to succeed in their first job after graduation*, while 37% disagreed.



Business leaders in our survey regarded college positively where career success and income are concerned. More than half (57%) said that *having a college degree is important for earning a living wage*. And 60% said that *earning a college degree is important for achieving long-term career success*. It's important to note that of the 1,000 business leaders surveyed, most (n=972) shared that they had at least some college experience.

ADVICE FOR JOB SEEKERS

When asked what advice participants would give to someone looking for work in their current field, business leaders were more likely than the general public to recommend pursuing a four-year degree (54% vs. 38%). Perhaps not surprisingly, U.S. adults with college experience as their primary source of education/training for their job now were the most likely to recommend earning a four-year or advanced degree.

Advice for Someone Pursuing Employment in Your Field

	U.S. Adults With Work Experience (n=2,085)	U.S. Adults With College Experience as Their Primary Source of Education/ Training for Their Job Now (n=814)	U.S. Adults Without College Experience as Their Primary Source of Education/ Training for Their Job Now (n=1,271)	Business Leaders (n=1,000)
Earn a four-year degree (i.e., bachelor's) or advanced degree (i.e., master's, doctorate, professional)	38%	70%	19%	54%
Earn a two-year degree (i.e., associate)	19%	22%	17%	21%
Pursue technical or vocational training (e.g., EMT, radiation tech, culinary arts, construction, real estate, finance specialist, pilot license, etc.)	38%	29%	43%	37%
Participate in a formal apprenticeship and/or journeyman program	27%	23%	29%	30%
Attend a technical bootcamp training program (e.g., software development, cybersecurity, etc.)	12%	12%	13%	15%
Rely on employers for skill development (e.g., on-the-job training, employer-led training programs, etc.)	38%	26%	45%	30%
Participate in a self-paced online program (e.g., microdegrees, microcredentials from providers like Coursera, Udacity, LinkedIn Learning, etc.)	16%	15%	17%	15%
Join the military	9%	7%	11%	9%
Become an entrepreneur	10%	8%	11%	12%
Other	5%	3%	6%	2%

Note: Participants could select up to three responses.

Among the adults in the U.S. who have held a job, the top three responses were varied, but recommended by a similar percentage of participants. Earning a four-year or advanced degree, pursuing technical training, and relying on employer-led training were each advised by 38% of respondents.



BESTCOLLEGES INSIGHT

Embed Career Development in Education, Training, and Employment: Closer Connections and Coordination Needed

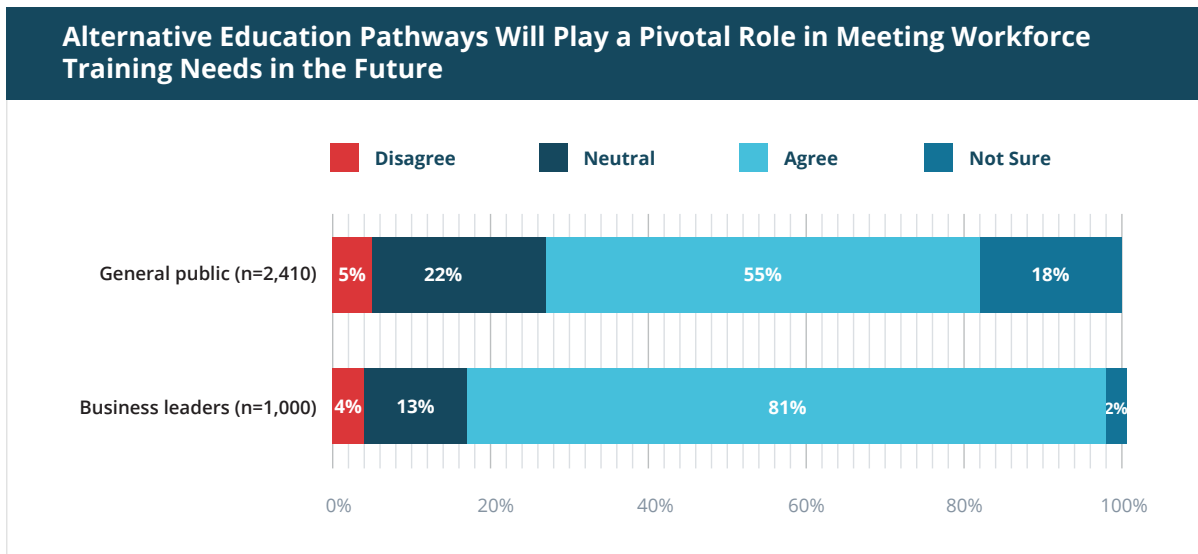
Many business leaders continue to view college degrees as valuable. However, they also see potential benefits in other types of education and training. Although only 40% of business leaders agreed that college graduates are prepared to be successful in their first job after graduation, less than half (43%) reported that their organizations provide on-the-job training and training programs for employees who are new to the work. Investments and collaboration in these kinds of activities, from both businesses and education/training providers, could lead to better-prepared graduates at all levels.

The Future of Workforce Training and Education



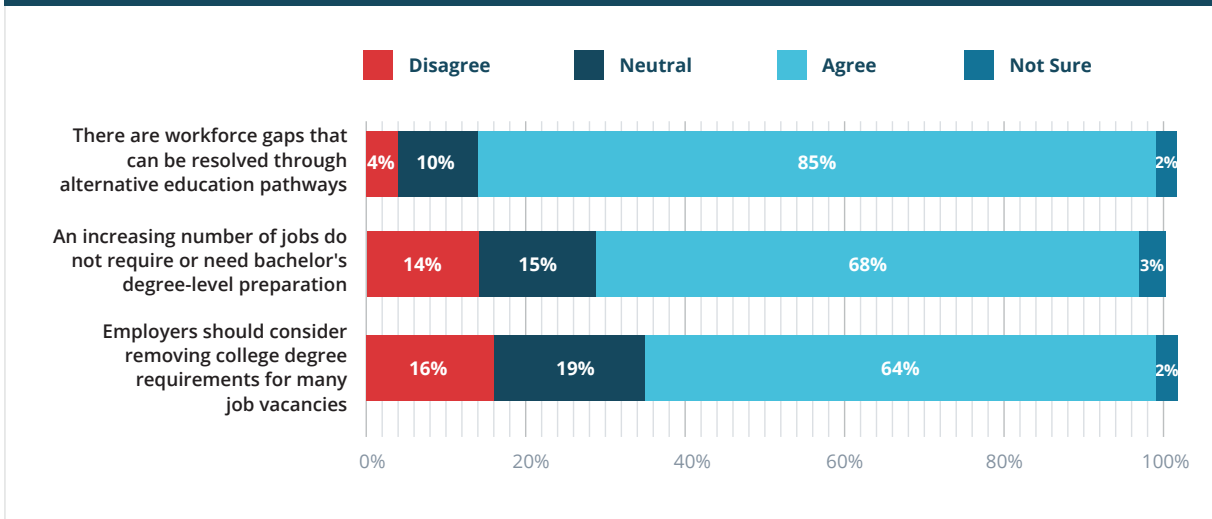
VIABILITY OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PATHWAYS

We asked all survey participants — business leaders and the general public — about the future of workforce training. A majority of both groups agreed that *alternative education pathways will play a pivotal role in meeting workforce training needs in the future*. This included 81% of business leaders. While a majority (55%) of the general public also agreed, they were more likely than business leaders to be unsure (18%).



An overwhelming majority of business leaders (85%) also agreed that *there are workforce skill gaps that can be resolved through alternative education pathways*. And 68% agreed that *an increasing number of jobs do not require or need bachelor's degree-level preparation*. Taking it a step further, more than half (64%) said that *employers should consider removing college degree requirements for many job vacancies*.

Perceptions of Workforce and Hiring Needs — Business Leaders (n=1,000)

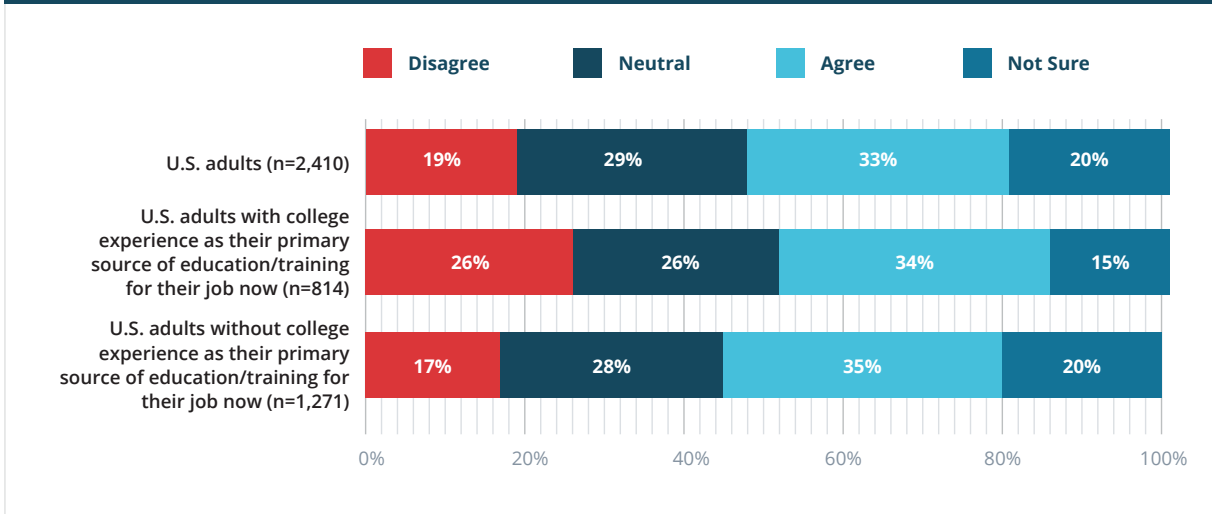


PERCEPTION OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PATHWAYS

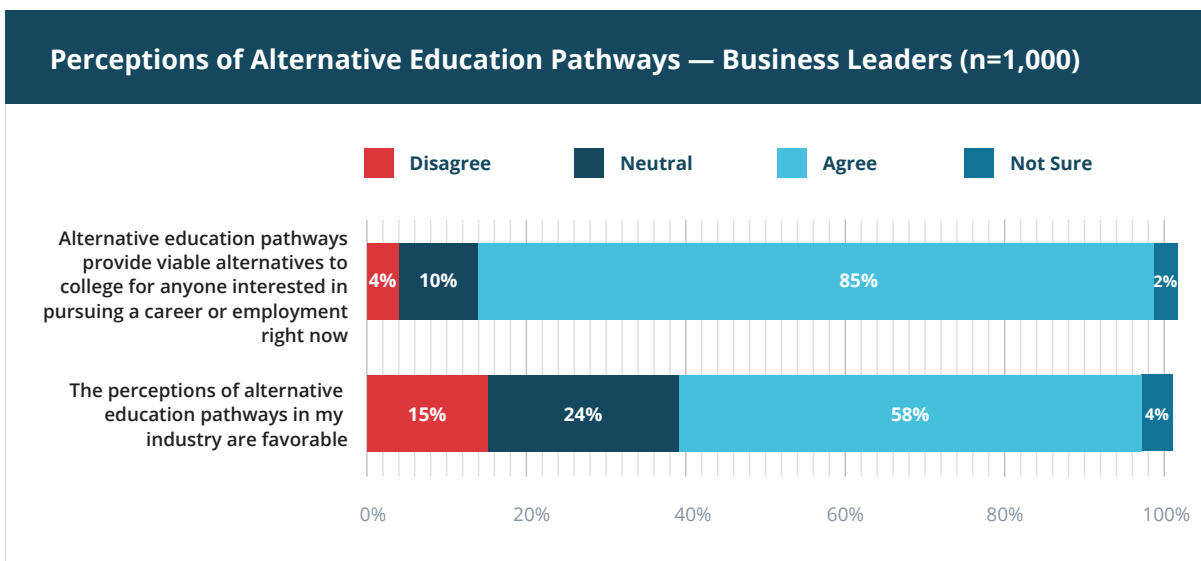
When asked about the general perception of alternative education pathways, the response was split. Only 33% of Americans agreed that the overall perception in the U.S. is favorable. The responses were similar for those with and without college experience as their primary source of education/training for their job now.

Interestingly, these responses somewhat contradict the personal perceptions reported by this group. A majority (51%) said that these pathways have a good return on investment, and many also shared they would consider these pathways if they had it to do over again.

General Perception of Alternative Education Pathways in the U.S. Is Favorable — General Public



Business leaders shared a more encouraging view regarding the perception of alternative education pathways. An overwhelming majority (85%) agreed that they are a viable alternative to college, although only 58% said their industry viewed these alternatives favorably.



For both the general public and business leaders, there is some indication that while the overall reputation of alternative education pathways is somewhat negative, respondents do view them favorably in their own personal and professional contexts.



BESTCOLLEGES INSIGHT

Training First, College Second? Successful Careers Are the Result of a Mix of Education and Training Experiences

While the prevailing advice remains “go to college,” we’re seeing some acceptance of other paths to successful employment and career development. Shorter programs may provide cost and time savings that allow people to enter the workforce more quickly and develop their skills with on-the-job training and employer support. It’s likely that a combination of training and education experiences across a career is ideal, with the timing and sources dependent on the industry. In some scenarios, college degrees could help build careers already in progress, such as those begun through alternative education pathways; returning to school to earn a degree may allow for advancement and increased earning potential.

Conclusion

Overall, alternative education pathways are considered favorably by the general public and business leaders alike, and business leaders overwhelmingly agree that these pathways will be important resources for future workforce training needs.

Our findings may signal the emergence of changes in the ways alternative education pathways are perceived and accepted as they compare to college degrees. This perception could also have an impact on future hiring practices related to education and training requirements for applicants. Additional research should be conducted to establish possible trends and explore differences across industries and job types.

Broaden Awareness of Alternative Education Pathways: Awareness and Acceptance of Different Options May Lead to Different Choices

Given the opportunity to go back and choose a different education or training path, most people said they would do so. Developing an awareness of and openness to a wider variety of learning opportunities throughout one's career may result in more informed decision-making about how to not only prepare for the job market, but also remain relevant.

Embed Career Development in Education, Training, and Employment: Closer Connections and Coordination Needed

Many business leaders continue to view college degrees as valuable. However, they also see potential benefits in other types of education and training. Although only 40% of business leaders agreed that college graduates are prepared to be successful in their first job after graduation, less than half (43%) reported that their organizations provide on-the-job training and training programs for employees who are new to the work. Investments and collaboration in these kinds of activities, from both businesses and education/training providers, could lead to better-prepared graduates at all levels.

Training First, College Second? Successful Careers Are the Result of a Mix of Education and Training Experiences

While the prevailing advice remains “go to college,” we’re seeing some acceptance of other paths to successful employment and career development. Shorter programs may provide cost and time savings that allow people to enter the workforce more quickly and develop their skills with on-the-job training and employer support. It’s likely that a combination of training and education experiences across a career is ideal, with the timing and sources dependent on the industry. In some scenarios, college degrees could help build careers already in progress, such as those begun through alternative education pathways; returning to school to earn a degree may allow for advancement and increased earning potential.



Contributors

About Melissa Venable

Melissa A. Venable, Ph.D., is an education advisor for BestColleges. In this role, she leads an annual survey research initiative reporting trends in online education, student demographics, and college student career planning. Melissa is an adjunct faculty member and course designer at Saint Leo University and a certified career coach with a background in career development services. She earned her doctorate in instructional technology at the University of South Florida where her research interests focused on distance education and career services for online students.



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Data Notes

1. Percentages reported in this document have been rounded, resulting in some totals adding up to just under or over 100.
2. Several charts and descriptions present results for questions in which more than one response could be selected.
3. Data are self-reported.

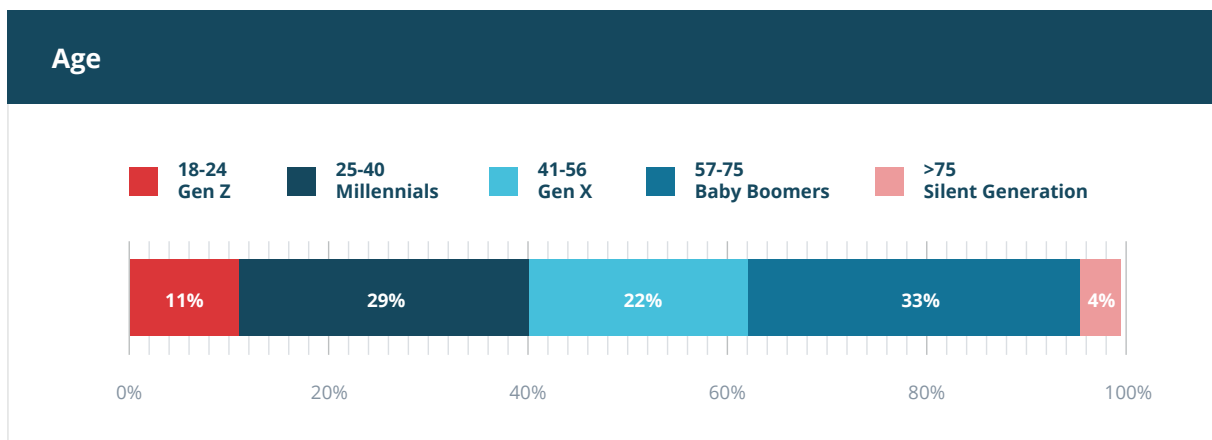
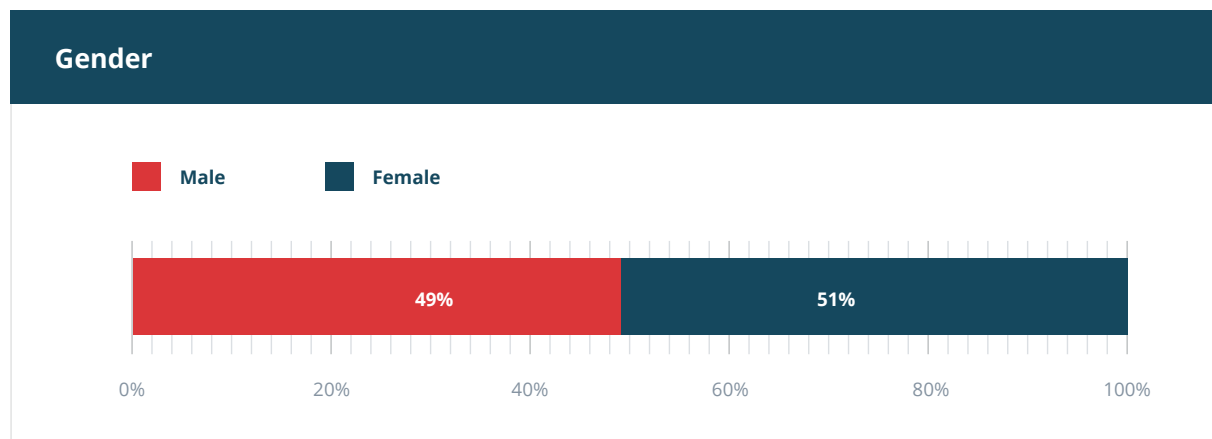
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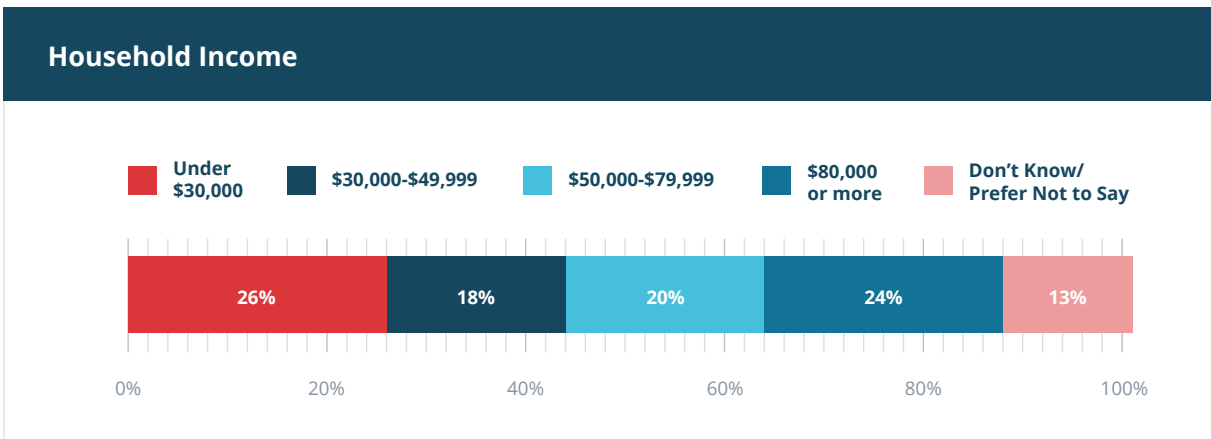
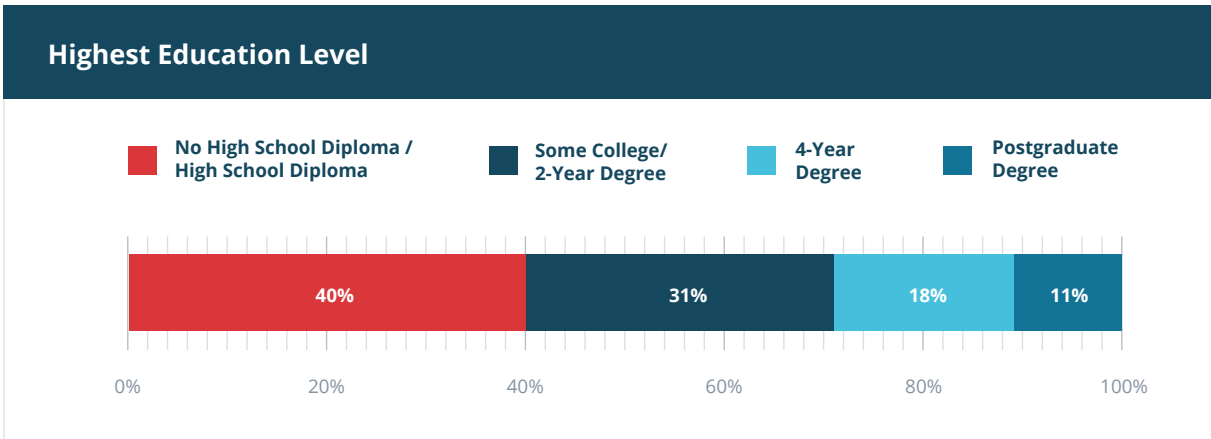
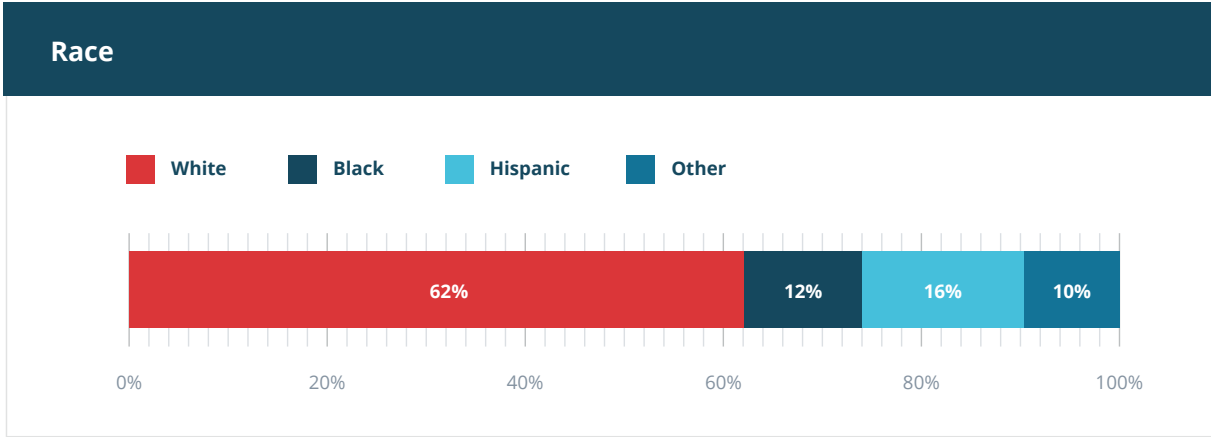
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Appendix: Participant Demographics



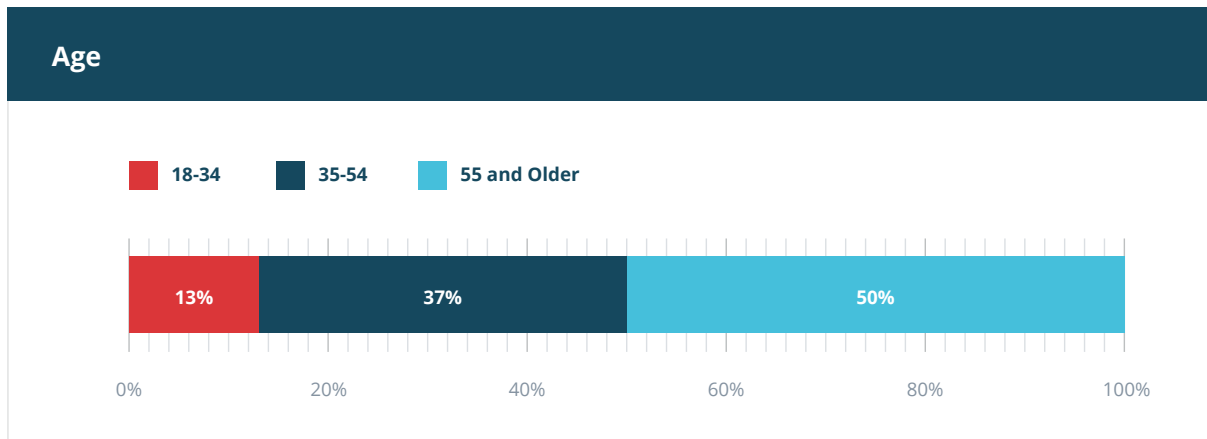
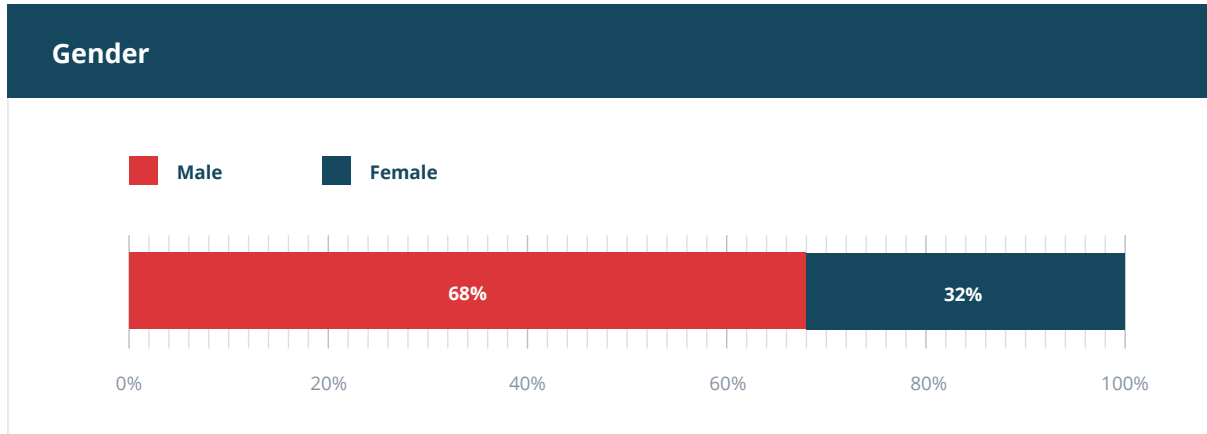
General U.S. Population (n=2,410)
Data Collection — YouGov PLC, September 2021



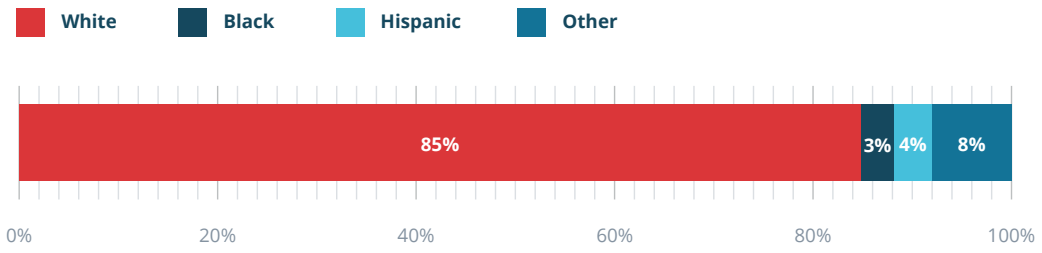


Business Leaders (n=1,000)

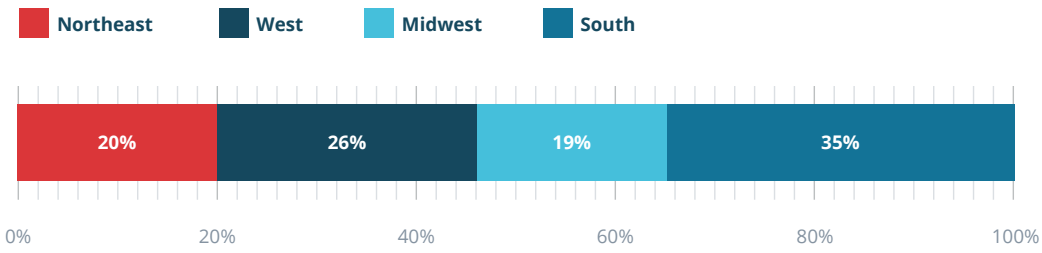
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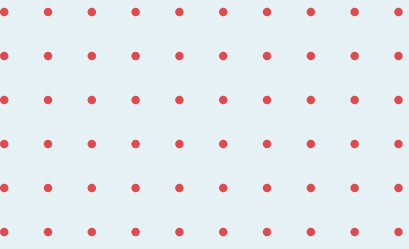


Race



Region








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