

THE ERA OF INTENTIONAL ENROLLMENT

A Guide to Understanding
The Skilled Path Learner

 **ADVANCE** EDUCATION

How adults are not just
going back to school.

**They are going back
with purpose.**



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THE ERA OF INTENTIONAL ENROLLMENT

We've entered the Era of Intentional Enrollment, a time when adult learners have stopped dreaming and started calculating. No longer is education viewed as a hopeful "maybe this MBA will change everything" or a distant "I should probably get that degree someday." Instead, decisions sound more like: "Will this fit my Tuesday nights?" "Can I measure the ROI?" "Does this solve my actual problem?" The prestige play is over. **Whether choosing an MBA or a welding certificate, the process now looks the same—research, compare, decide, fast.** Education is no longer treated like a lottery ticket but like a tool. The schools that understand this shift are the ones winning: they compete on flexibility, not tradition; on outcomes, not promises; on your schedule, not theirs. This is intentional enrollment—where adults don't just go back to school, they go back with purpose.

Methodology

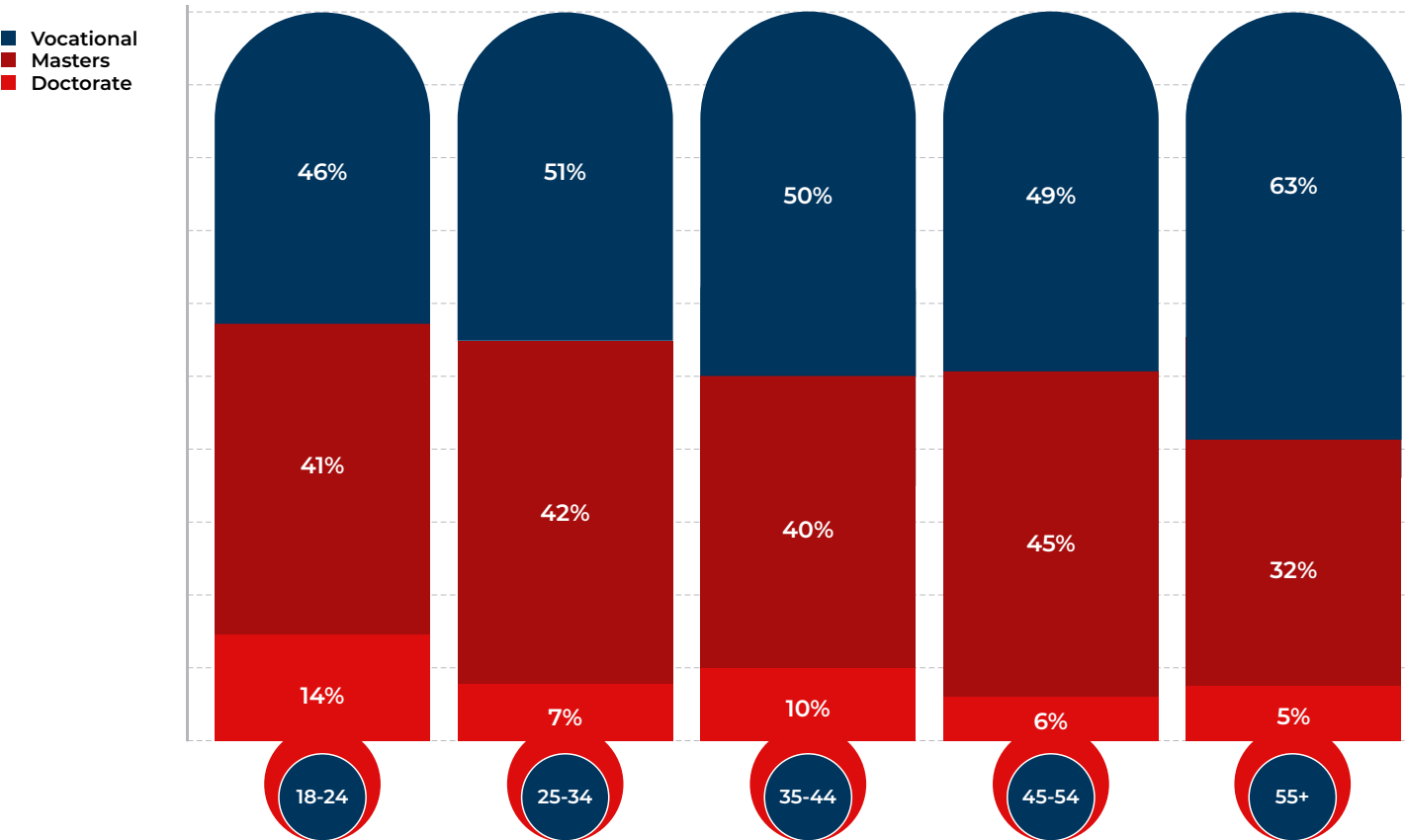
To better understand how adults are approaching education today, Advance Education conducted a national survey of nearly 1,000 adult learners exploring their interest in either postgraduate or vocational education. Respondents shared how they search for programs, what stops them from enrolling, who influences their decisions, and how quickly they plan to take the next step.

Because this study captures two distinct learner profiles, this whitepaper focuses exclusively on the **Skilled Path Learner**—adults pursuing certificate, trade, and technical programs designed to deliver tangible,

employable outcomes. **A companion whitepaper, The Graduate Learner in the Era of Intentional Enrollment**, explores findings from the postgraduate audience.

Despite all the disruption in higher education, the data tell a consistent story: adult learners represent one of the most dynamic opportunities for institutions that can meet them where they are balancing ambition, flexibility, and value.

WHAT DEGREE WILL YOU PURSUE?

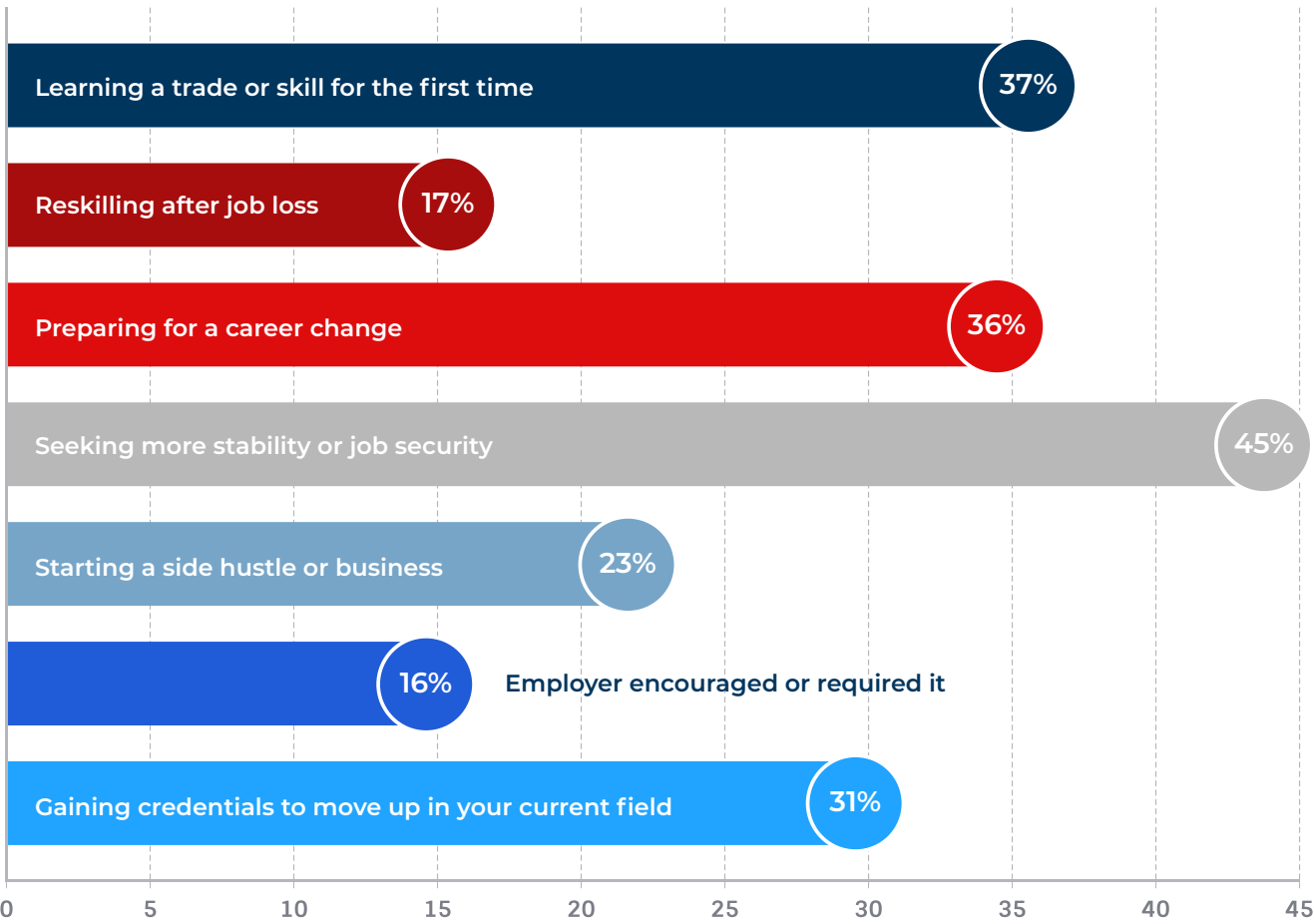


Skilled Path Learners in the Era of Intentional Enrollment

Within today’s adult education landscape, one group stands out for its focus and practicality: adults pursuing professional certificate, vocational, or technical programs. **They are seeking to build or strengthen skills that connect directly to career advancement, stability, or transition.**

We refer to this group as Skilled Path Learners, adults who are intentional about pursuing education that leads to tangible, employable outcomes. They value learning that can be applied immediately, not theory for theory’s sake.

WHY ARE YOU PURSUING A VOCATIONAL CERTIFICATE OR PROGRAM?



Starting a side hustle or business

It's interesting to note a spike in the 25-34 and 35-45 age groups as entrepreneurs. Beyond touting specific degree programs, vocational schools can connect to 25-44 year olds with **aspirations of owning their own business, whether it's full time or a way to make extra income.**

27% of twenty-five
to thirty-four
year olds



25% of thirty-five
to forty-four
year olds



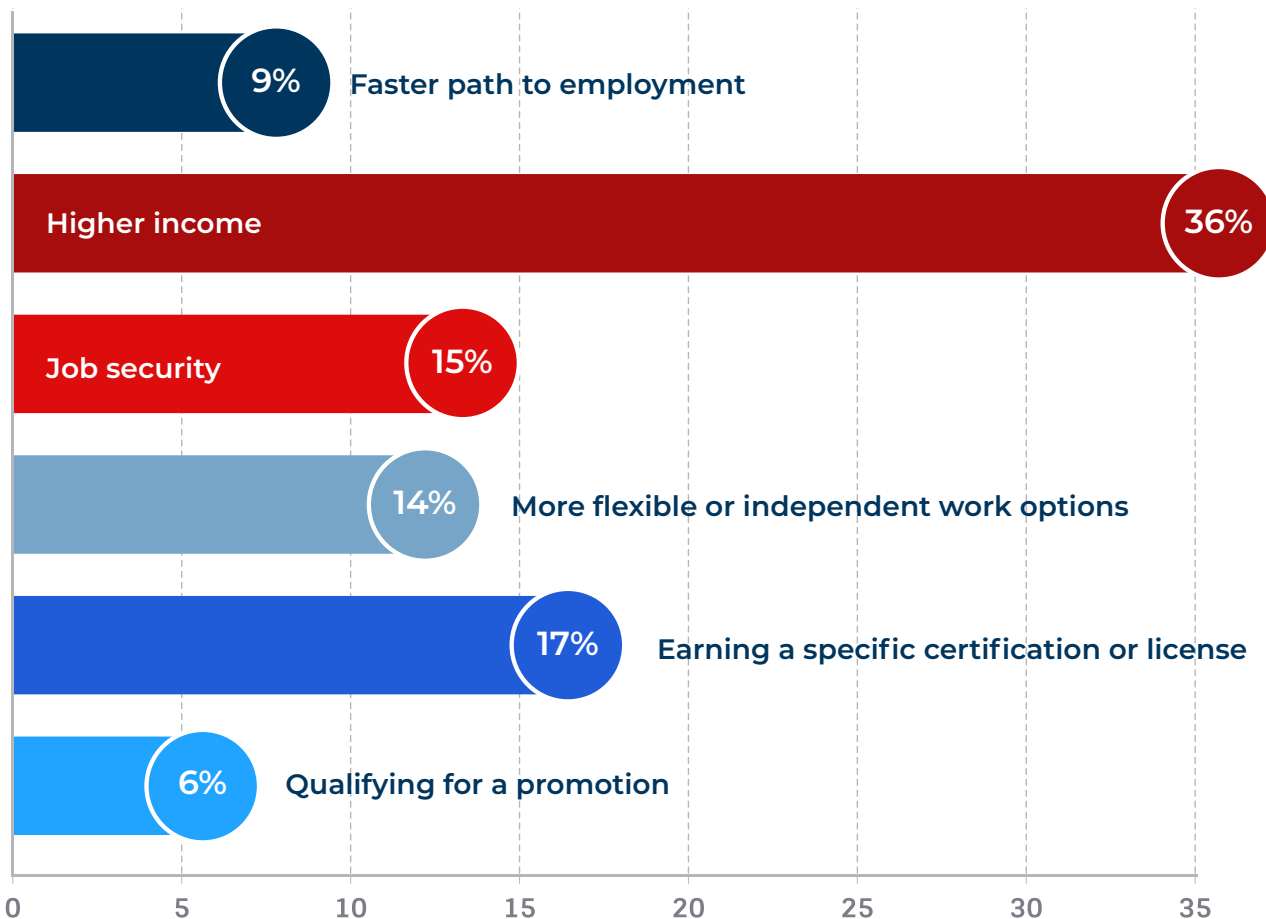
What outcome are you hoping for?

Skilled Path Learners are a force in education, driven by a need for practical skills and career mobility. This trend reflects a larger global shift. [According to Mordor Intelligence](#), the global vocational training market, valued at over \$321 billion in 2025, is projected to reach \$454.06 billion by 2030, underscoring the growing demand for programs that deliver real-world, employable skills.

This momentum is echoed in Advance Education's "[Beyond Degrees: The Era of Skills-Based Learning](#)" whitepaper,

which shows how certificate and vocational pathways are accelerating as alternatives to degree programs.

For many of these adults, returning to school is not a dream or a second chance, but a calculated decision to invest in something tangible and achievable. They are guided by clarity, focused on outcomes, and driven by the belief that new skills can open doors to lasting opportunity.

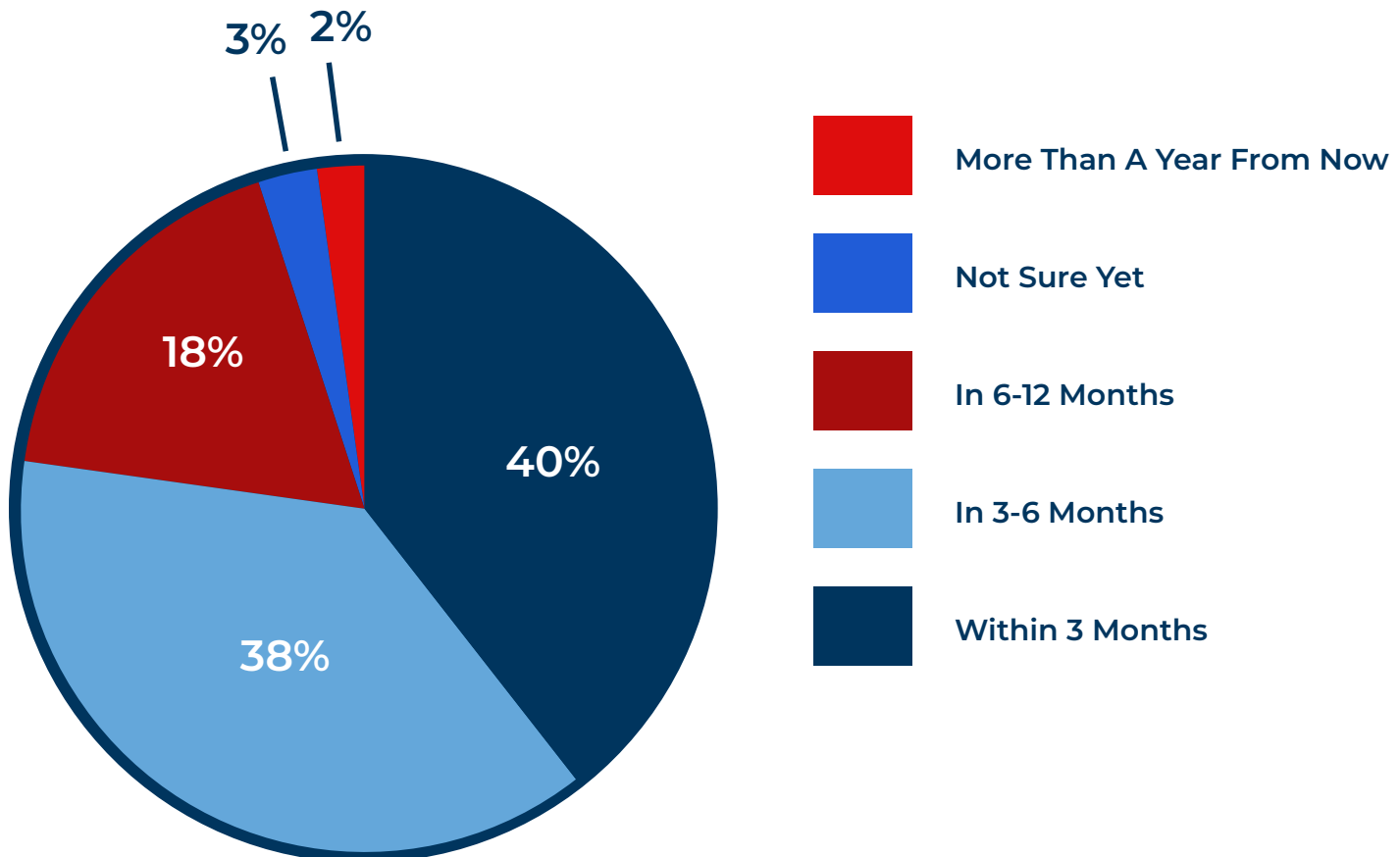


ENROLLMENT DRIVERS AND DECISION SPEED

How soon are you hoping to start?

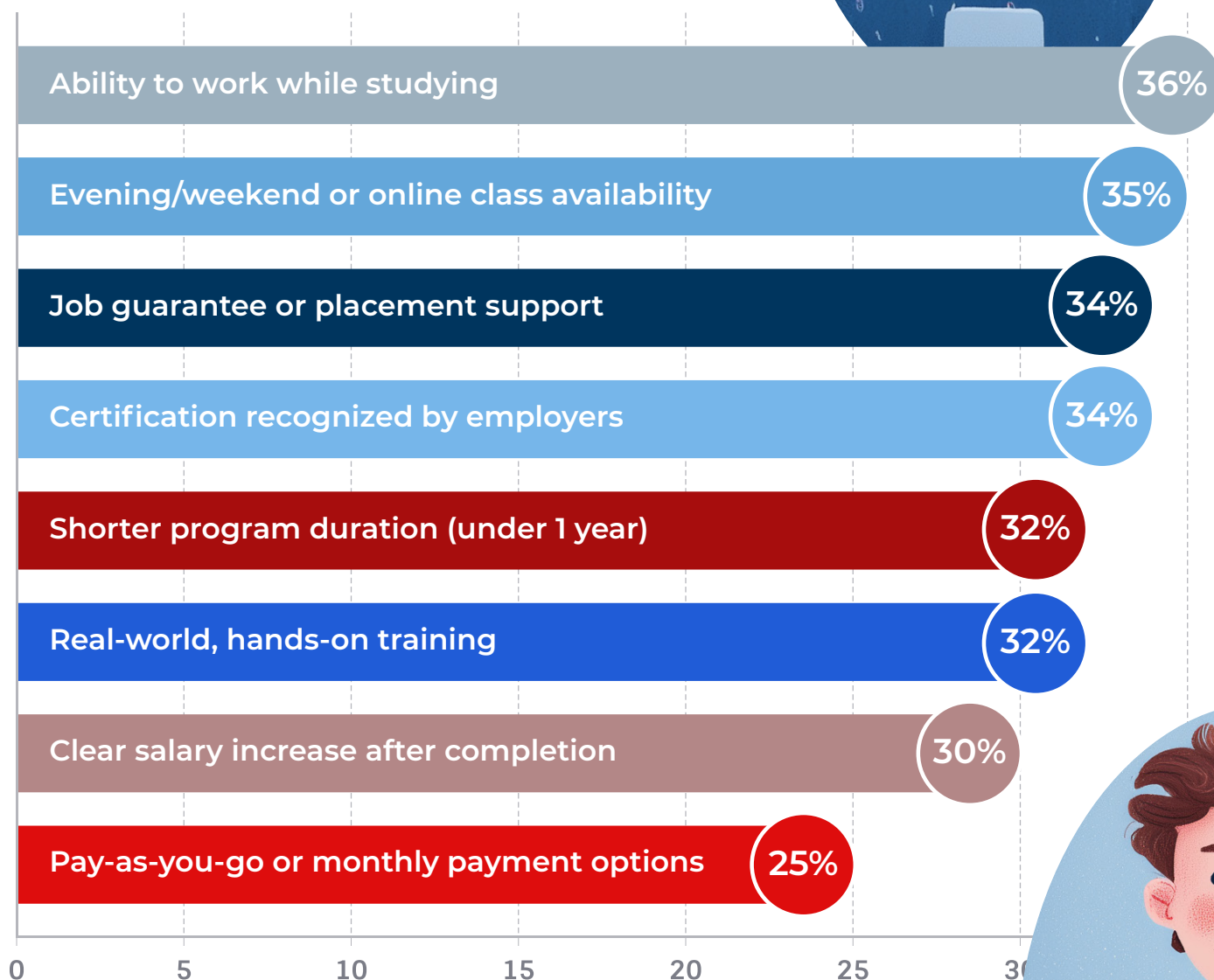
Skilled Path Learners move quickly from consideration to enrollment. **Nearly four out of five (78%) plan to begin a program within the next six months**, showing that their decision window is short and highly motivated by readiness rather than exploration.

78% plan to begin in the next 6 months



What would make you more likely to enroll?

These are not long-term planners mapping out multi-year commitments. **They are professionals seeking to upskill now, often while maintaining employment or family responsibilities.** The opportunity cost of waiting is too high, and the benefit of moving forward is immediate.

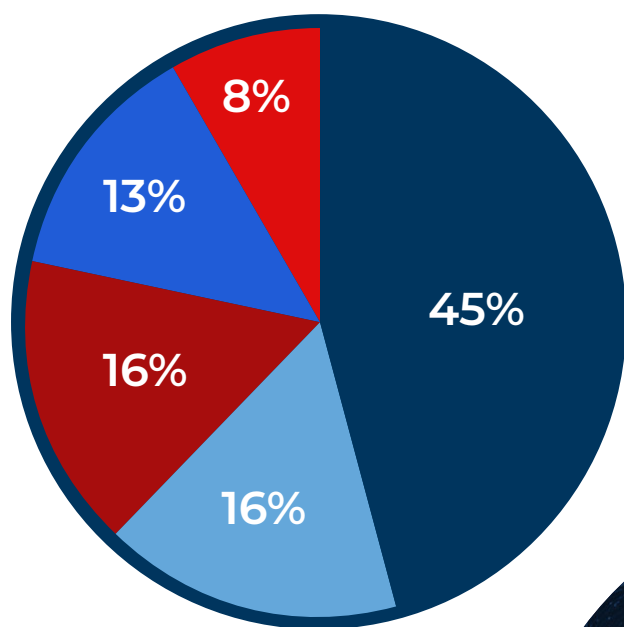


How did you first hear about the program(s) you're considering

45%

discovered the program through online searches

The survey found that **45% of Skilled Path Learners** first discovered the programs they are considering through online searches, emphasizing that the path to enrollment often begins with a search bar, not a campus visit. For institutions, that means visibility and relevance in digital search matter more than ever. For a deeper look at how AI is reshaping search and discovery for adult learners, see our [AI for Education whitepaper](#).



MARKETING LESSON: **BUILD FOR MOMENTUM**

When adults are ready to take the next step, they expect clear information and quick ways to act. Digital campaigns should make it easy for them to move from interest to inquiry without delay.

That means streamlining calls to action, shortening lead forms, and providing clear details about start dates, scheduling, and outcomes. **Campaigns that anticipate intent, powered by automation and AI-driven personalization, can keep prospective students engaged until they commit.**

Small moments of clarity, such as an immediate response to an inquiry or a helpful chatbot interaction, can turn curiosity into confidence.

BARRIERS AND TRADEOFFS

Even the most motivated adults face barriers that shape whether they ultimately enroll

The three biggest worries for adults pursuing certificates and technical programs are:

26% Affording the Program

22% Balancing Family, Work, and School

20% Whether It Will Be Worth It

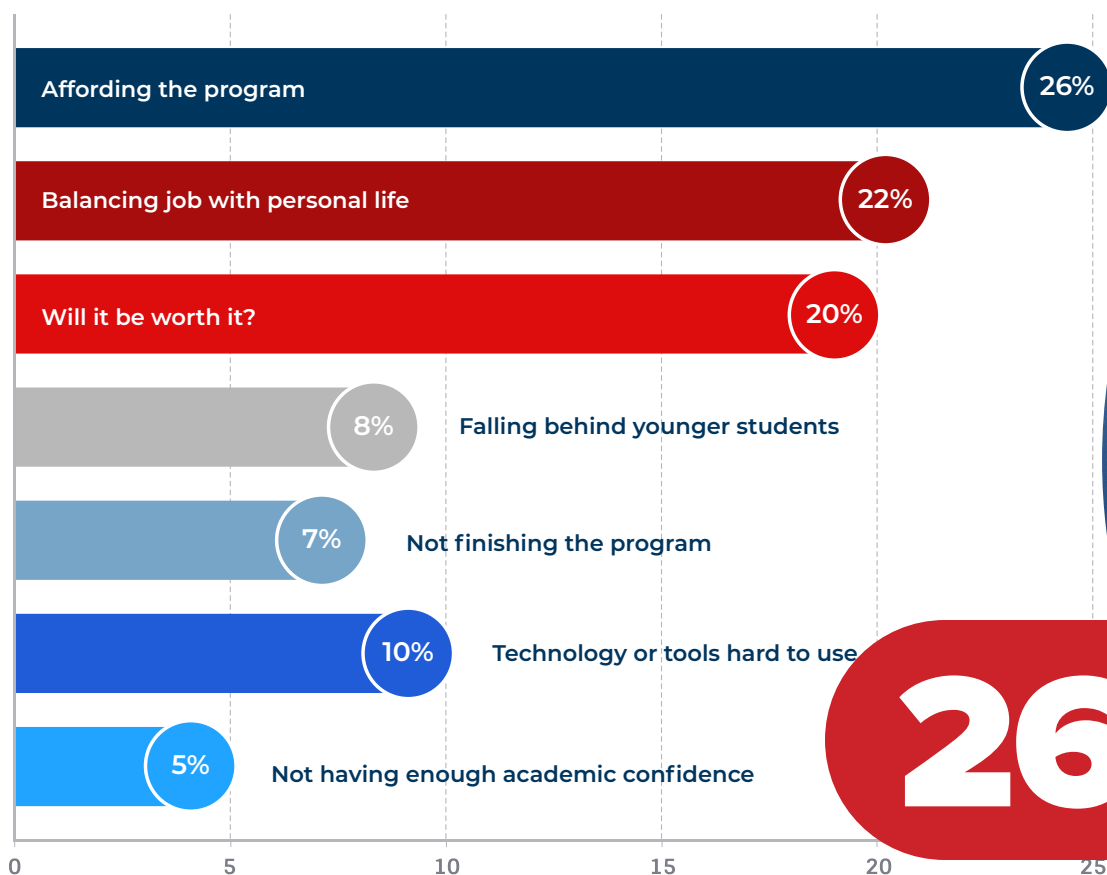
What worries you most about going back to school?

These concerns are not about desire or ability; they are about capacity. Skilled Path Learners often balance multiple responsibilities, and each one competes with their time, attention, and financial flexibility.

Cost is the most common obstacle, but it is closely linked to confidence. **While 26% of Skilled Path Learners worry about affording their program, another 20% question whether it will be worth the investment or if they will have enough support to succeed once enrolled.** This emotional calculus is what determines whether an interested adult becomes an enrolled student.

For Skilled Path Learners, the decision to enroll is not impulsive. It is a risk-benefit analysis shaped by finances, time, and belief in the program's promise. Transparency about cost, outcomes, and flexibility can make that calculation feel less risky and more achievable.

Schools that acknowledge these realities and proactively address them will stand apart. When an institution communicates clearly about tuition, timelines, and the real-world outcomes of its programs, it replaces uncertainty with confidence.



26% worry about affording the program

MARKETING LESSON: **MARKET TO REAL LIFE, NOT THE IDEAL ONE**

Adults want honesty more than hype, and marketing content should meet them where they are, balancing busy lives filled with tradeoffs and competing priorities. That means addressing affordability with transparent tuition and financial aid information, showing how programs fit into a real schedule rather than a perfect one, and featuring testimonials from students who have successfully balanced family, work, and school.

Institutions should also create tools that help prospects visualize success—like cost calculators or “day-in-the-life” stories—and build systems to regularly capture and share student success stories throughout the year. When schools remove uncertainty and present education as achievable within a real-world context, hesitation turns into confidence. **Clarity builds trust, and trust drives enrollment.**

TRUST AND PROOF

For adult learners, trust is everything. They are skeptical of big promises and polished marketing language and instead want to see proof that education will pay off. Their decisions are based on evidence, not persuasion.

The survey revealed the top types of content that build trust and influence enrollment decisions:

45% Success Stories
From Past Students

38% Employer Partnerships
or Endorsements

35% Transparent Job
Placement Statistics

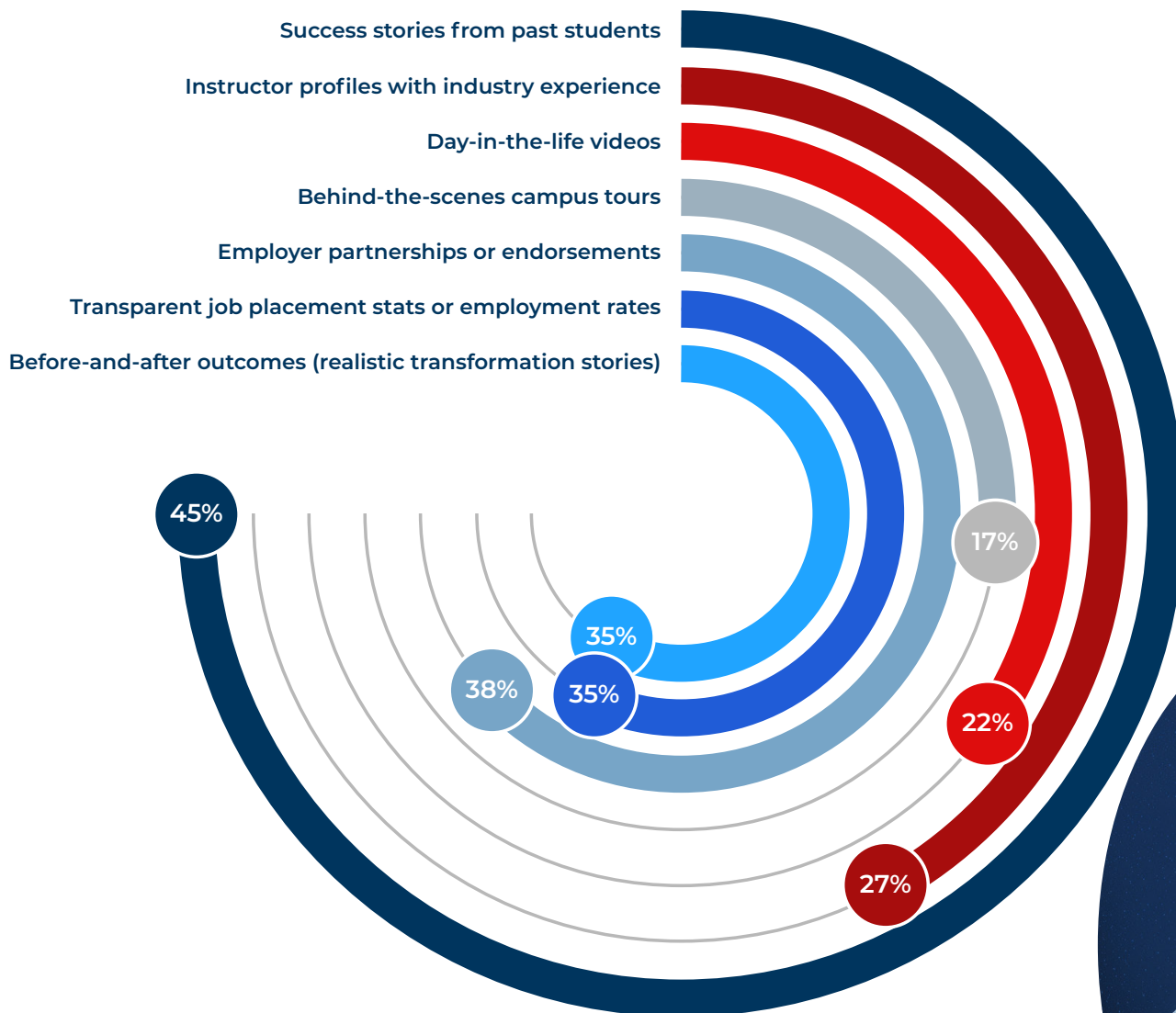
35% Before-and-After
Transformation Stories

What types of stories or examples would make you trust a school more?

Skilled Path Learners want to know that people like them have already succeeded in similar programs. They are drawn to authentic voices, realistic stories, and clear data that show how education translates to outcomes. Institutions that treat student storytelling as a measurable strategy, capturing and publishing a goal of 100 short success features each year, build a deeper foundation of trust and social proof.

The right storytelling can do both: build credibility and motivate action. **A well-placed graduate quote, a short video testimonial, or a clear snapshot of job placement rates can make a program feel more tangible and trustworthy.**

Institutions that invest in transparent content at scale and show how education delivers results will attract not only attention, but confidence.



MARKETING LESSON: **LET EVIDENCE DO THE TALKING**

The strongest marketing strategies are built on transparency. Instead of telling prospective students how valuable a program is, show them.

That means:

- **Featuring alumni success stories and graduate spotlights** across digital channels
- **Sharing outcome statistics and employer endorsements** through social media campaigns
- **Using short-form video or student testimonials** to make content more personal and relatable
- **Highlighting before-and-after stories** on websites, landing pages, and in email nurturing campaigns

When institutions consistently share authentic, result-driven content, they position themselves as credible, student-centered partners in career growth.

DISCOVERY AND THE ROLE OF DIGITAL

The path to enrollment has become almost entirely digital. Nearly half of respondents (45%) said they first discovered the programs they are considering through online searches, and an overwhelming 94% recalled recently seeing ads or content from schools.

Nearly every prospective learner is encountering education-related marketing online through search engines, social media, and streaming platforms. Awareness is high, but competition for attention is even higher. **Standing out now depends on relevance, not repetition.** Schools that focus on clear messaging, authentic storytelling, and timely engagement are the ones that turn visibility into real interest.

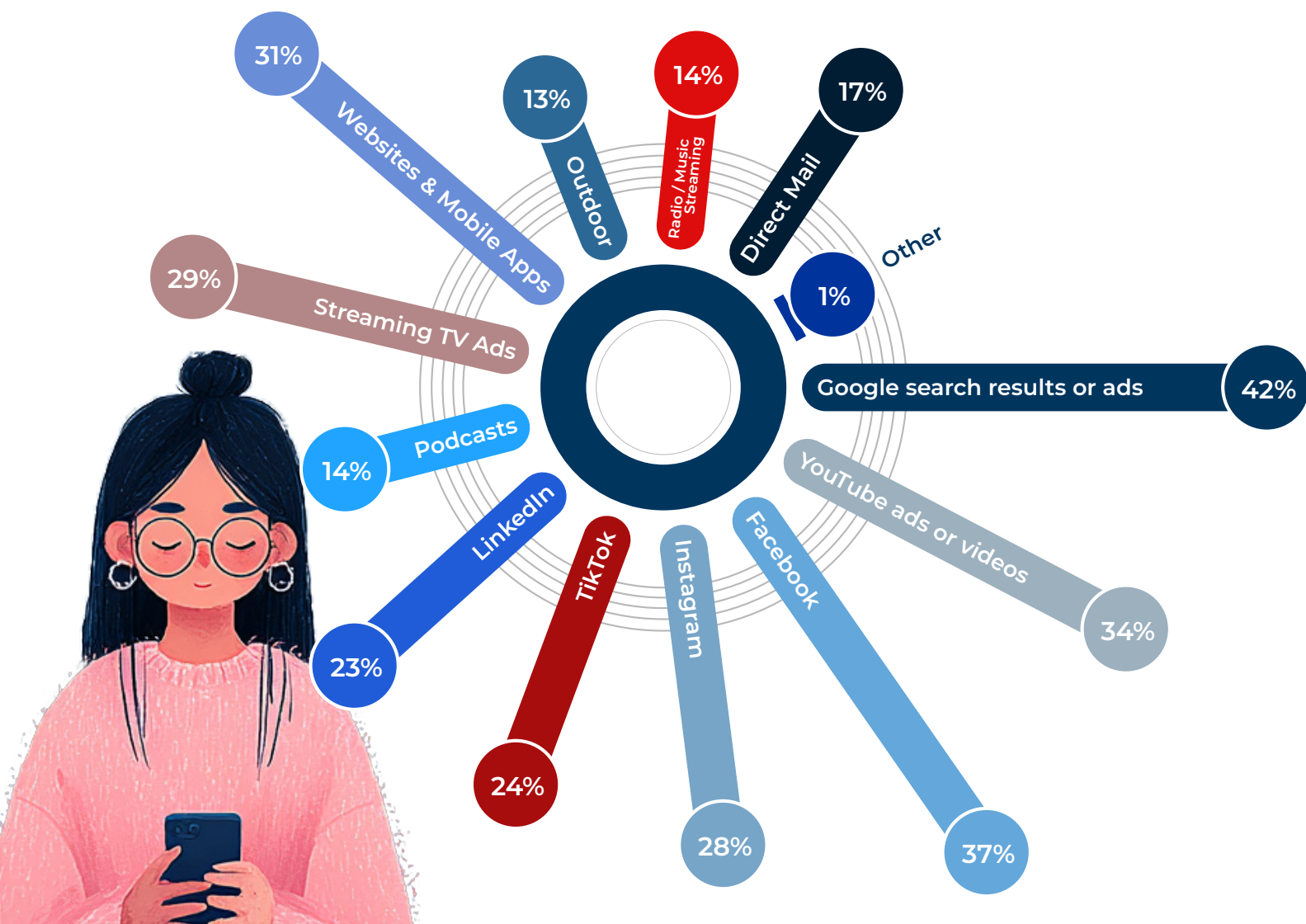
Where have you recently seen or noticed ads or content from schools or programs?

Google search results and digital ads were cited most often (42%) as where prospective students encountered a program, followed by social media and video content. **For Skilled Path Learners, the discovery journey is not linear; it is a mix of search, social, and storytelling that unfolds across multiple devices and moments.**

They scroll, click, compare, and validate.

A single prospective student might first encounter a school through a YouTube video, be reminded of it through a LinkedIn ad, and finally convert through a remarketing campaign after reading a graduate success story.

This behavior highlights how critical it is for institutions to maintain an active, consistent, and credible presence across platforms. Visibility is not enough. Credibility must follow every click.



MARKETING LESSON: **BE WHERE THEY SEARCH AND SCROLL**

Enrollment marketing succeeds when content meets intent. That means showing up where prospective students are searching and delivering value at the moment they're most receptive. Effective strategies include ensuring programs are visible in search results through optimized, up-to-date pages; using social media storytelling to highlight real student experiences and program benefits; maintaining consistent branding and messaging across all digital channels; and retargeting website visitors with helpful reminders instead of hard sales. When these elements work together, a coordinated digital presence does more than generate clicks—it **builds familiarity, reinforces credibility, and keeps your institution top of mind from the first search to the final decision.**

HOW AI IS RESHAPING DISCOVERY

Artificial intelligence is changing how adult learners search for education. Search behavior that once depended solely on traditional engines now includes AI tools that summarize, compare, and recommend programs. ([See our AI for Education whitepaper](#))

From Google's AI-generated search results to chat-based tools like ChatGPT, adults are using conversational search to find tuition details, program comparisons, and career outcomes before ever visiting a school's website. For Skilled Path Learners, these AI tools serve as shortcuts to clarity, surfacing programs that are clearly described, transparent about cost, and aligned with career goals.

This shift means institutions are no longer just marketing to people but to algorithms that influence visibility. The quality, clarity, and structure of an institution's content determines whether it appears in AI-assisted search results.

Schools that adapt early will reach learners faster and more effectively than those relying on traditional SEO alone. AI is not replacing the human decision-making process. It is guiding it.

Question

AI
Summary

Website

Enrollment

MARKETING LESSON: **OPTIMIZE FOR HUMANS AND ALGORITHMS**

AI-driven search is quickly becoming the first stop for prospective students, giving institutions with clear, structured, and current content a distinct advantage when AI tools recommend programs. This means publishing accurate, up-to-date information about cost, completion time, and outcomes; using natural language and question-based phrasing that reflects how learners actually search; and organizing program pages so AI can easily summarize and cite them through tools like schema.org.

Just as important, schools should continue pairing AI optimization with human connection through responsive chat support or personal outreach. When institutions make their value clear to both humans and machines, they expand visibility and build trust at the same time.

THE ERA OF APPLIED LEARNING

Skilled Path Learners represent one of the most opportunity-rich audiences in higher education today. They are intentional, career-focused, and ready to act. They are not looking for prestige or theory. They are looking for progress, they can measure new skills, better stability, and faster pathways to employment.

The institutions that will succeed with this audience are those that:

- **Remove friction from the enrollment process**
- **Communicate clearly and transparently about cost, scheduling, and outcomes**
- **Build credibility through real results and authentic storytelling**
- **Maintain a strong and consistent presence across digital channels and AI-influenced search**

Advance Education helps colleges, universities, and vocational schools turn these insights into action. Through research-driven strategy, digital marketing expertise, and proven enrollment solutions, we help institutions connect with adult learners who are ready to start now.

This whitepaper builds on Advance Education's ongoing research into the future of adult and skills-based learning, as explored in ["Beyond Degrees: The Era of Skills-Based Learning."](#)

Together, these findings point to one clear truth: the next wave of enrollment growth will not come from prestige; it will come from purpose.

The Skilled Path Learner has redefined what "going back to school" means. For institutions that are willing to meet them with transparency, flexibility, and proof of outcomes, the opportunity is not just to enroll more students, but to empower a new generation of skilled professionals who are ready to shape the workforce of tomorrow.



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