



Policies and Laws:

How they're impacting college enrollment





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Background & Key Findings

Since 2020, Lumina Foundation has partnered with Gallup to conduct the Lumina Foundation-Gallup State of Higher Education study, a research effort designed to quantify the experiences of U.S. adults currently enrolled in postsecondary education, those who have previously enrolled but have not completed and those who have never enrolled in any education after high school. The findings shed light on the challenges these different constituencies face in completing or enrolling in a degree, certificate or certification program and provide administrators and policymakers the insights they need to help current and prospective students overcome these barriers.

Past iterations of the State of Higher Education study have shown that the decision whether and where to pursue a college degree involves several often-competing considerations, and the importance placed on each factor varies across individuals. Some prospective students may prioritize cost and affordability over the prestige of a university; others may prefer — or need — to select a college close to home or one that offers flexibility to accommodate their job or caretaking responsibilities.

Layered upon these highly individualized decisions are state-level policies that impact students' on-campus experience. Based on responses from roughly 14,000 U.S. adults without a college degree — including nearly 7,000 adults who are considering or currently pursuing a two- or four-year degree — the 2024 State of Higher Education study reveals that while these legislative considerations are generally less influential than those related to cost, flexibility and quality of education, they are an important factor for most current and prospective students. Between 70% and 80% of adults who are considering or currently pursuing a two- or four-year degree say policies related to reproductive healthcare, guns and restrictions of curriculum are at least somewhat important to their decision whether to enroll or remain enrolled in a program.

Additionally, nearly half of adults who have considered pursuing a bachelor's degree in the last two years say recent updates to race-based affirmative action in college admissions will affect their decision to enroll in a degree program.

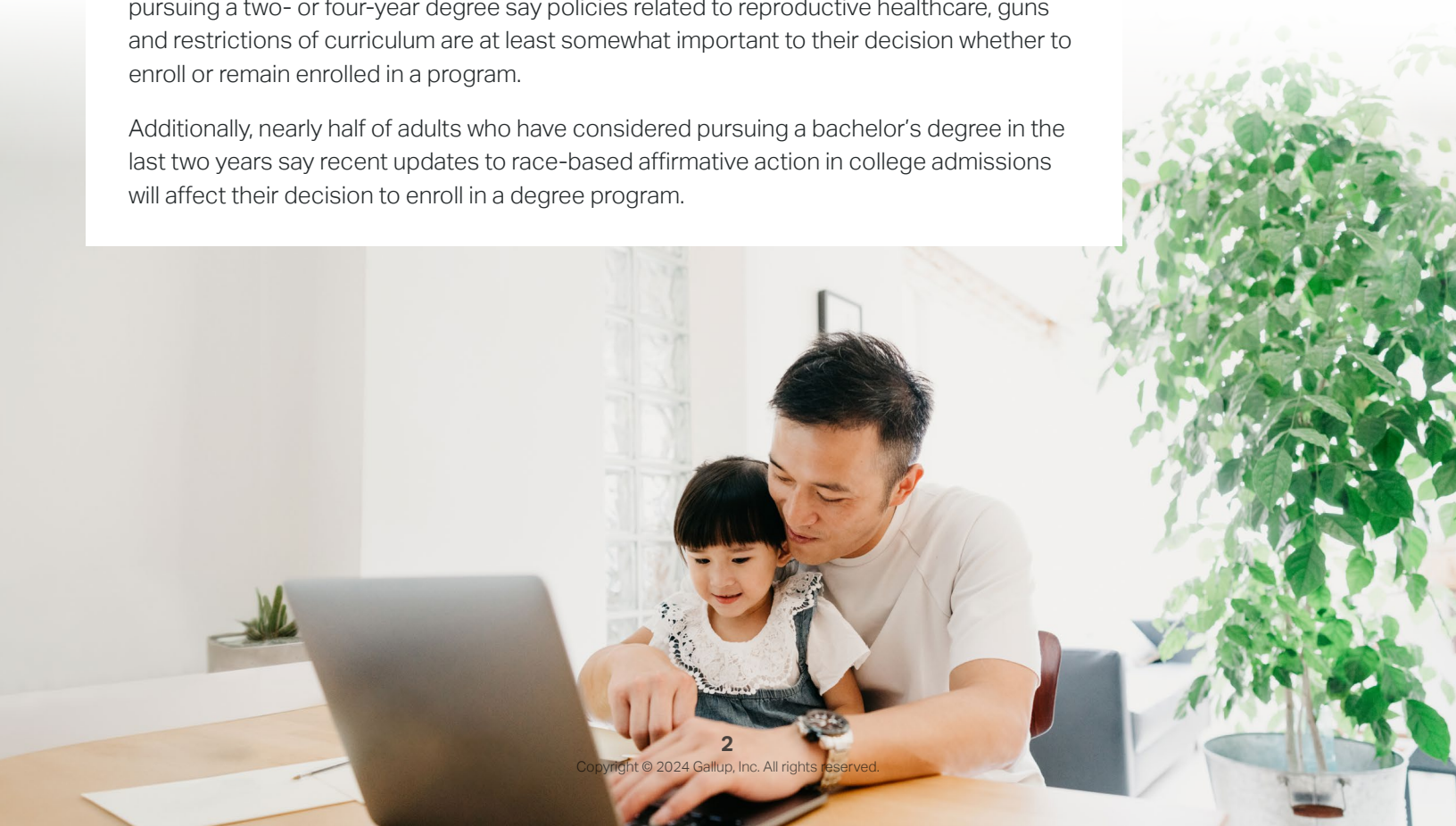
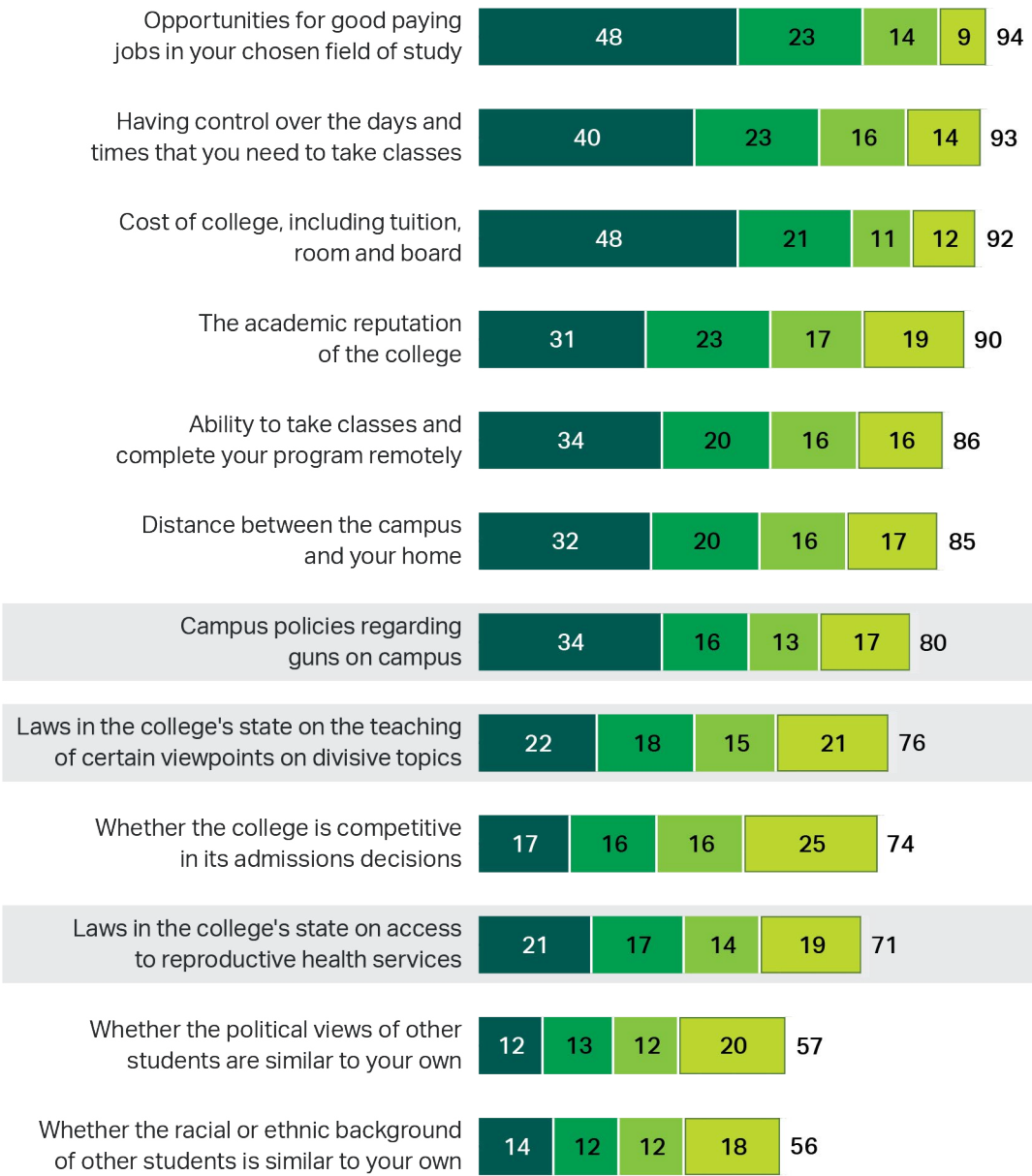


CHART 1

How important are/would each of the following characteristics of [your/a] college [be] in your decision to [stay enrolled/enroll]?

% Among those currently enrolled or considering enrolling in an associate or bachelor's degree program

7 - Extremely important 6 5 4 - Somewhat important

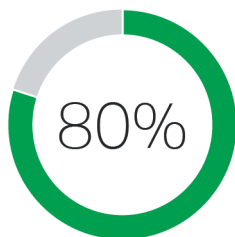


Note: Due to rounding, percentages may sum to $\pm 1\%$.

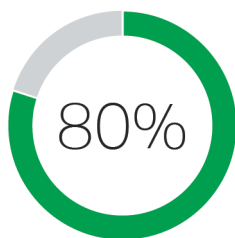
Since 2021, these considerations have been at the center of national policy conversations due in part to three landmark decisions from the Supreme Court and concerted efforts to restrict the teaching of certain topics on college campuses.



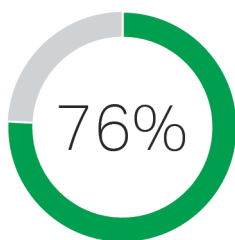
The Lumina-Gallup State of Higher Education survey sheds light not only on how these four major policy shifts factor into students' enrollment decisions but also on whether students would prefer to attend college in a state with more or less restrictive policies in each of these areas. Among the most important findings are the following:



Eight in 10 current and prospective students say **campus gun regulations are at least somewhat important to their enrollment decision**, the highest percentage of any public policy in the survey. Eighty-four percent of those for whom gun policies are important prefer their campus to restrict firearms.



Of the 71% of current and prospective students who say reproductive healthcare policies are important to their enrollment, eight in 10 would **prefer to attend college in a state with fewer restrictions**. This preference is especially strongly held by women, Black and Hispanic adults, and those aged 35 or younger.



About three-quarters of current and prospective students say state policies that **restrict the discussion of race, gender and other "divisive topics" in the classroom are important to their enrollment decision**, with a majority of this group preferring colleges that are not subjected to these restrictions.



Three-quarters of Asian adults and more than half of Black adults who are considering pursuing a bachelor's degree say **the Supreme Court's decision to ban affirmative action will have "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of influence on their decision to pursue a degree**.

While partisan differences exist across all three policy issues, most current and prospective students of all political parties who say these issues are important to their enrollment prefer **more restrictive gun policies, less restrictive reproductive healthcare laws and fewer regulations on their curricula**.

Campus Gun Policies

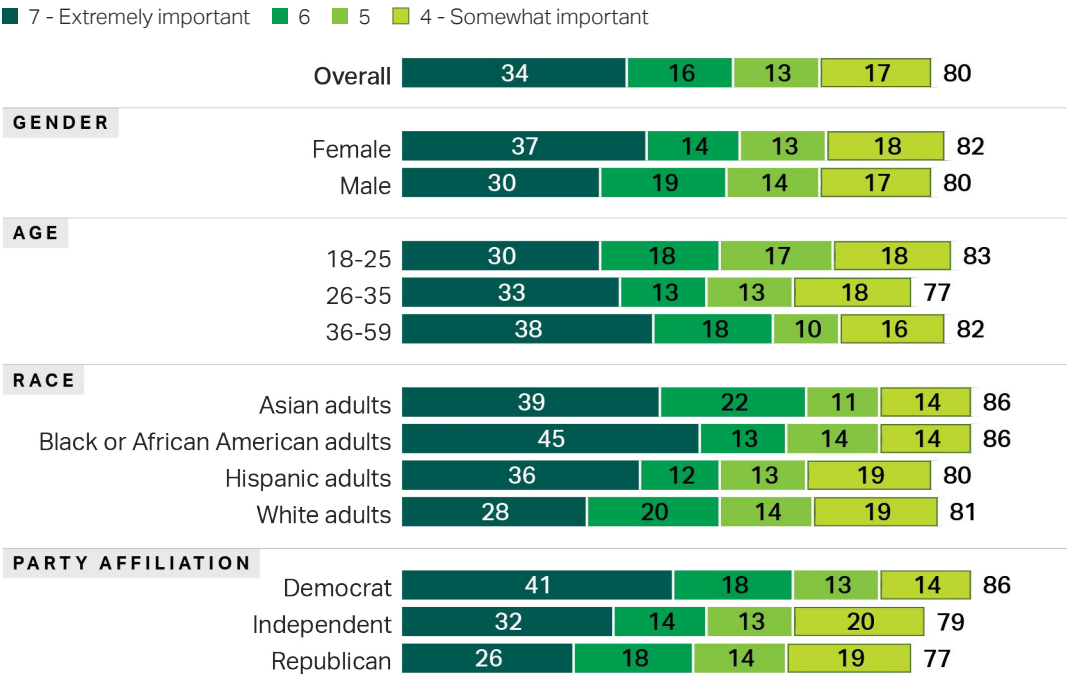
In June 2022, the Supreme Court handed down its decision in a major Second Amendment case, *New York State Rifle and Pistol Association, Inc. v. Bruen*. In its decision, the Court held that New York’s requirement that applicants provide justification for their request to carry a concealed firearm violated the Constitution. Beyond expanding access to firearms in New York — and potentially other states with similar policies — the *Bruen* decision may have ramifications for pending cases related to the ability of colleges and universities to restrict firearms on their campuses. In addition, a number of shootings have recently occurred on college campuses, including the University of Virginia, Michigan State University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.



According to the 2024 Lumina Foundation-Gallup State of Higher Education survey, 38% of currently enrolled students who attend at least half of their courses in person say they worry “a great deal” or “a fair amount” about gun violence at their college or university, and eight in 10 current and prospective students say campus gun policies are important to their enrollment decision, with about one in three indicating they are “extremely important.”

CHART 2
Importance of Campus Gun Policies in Enrollment Decision

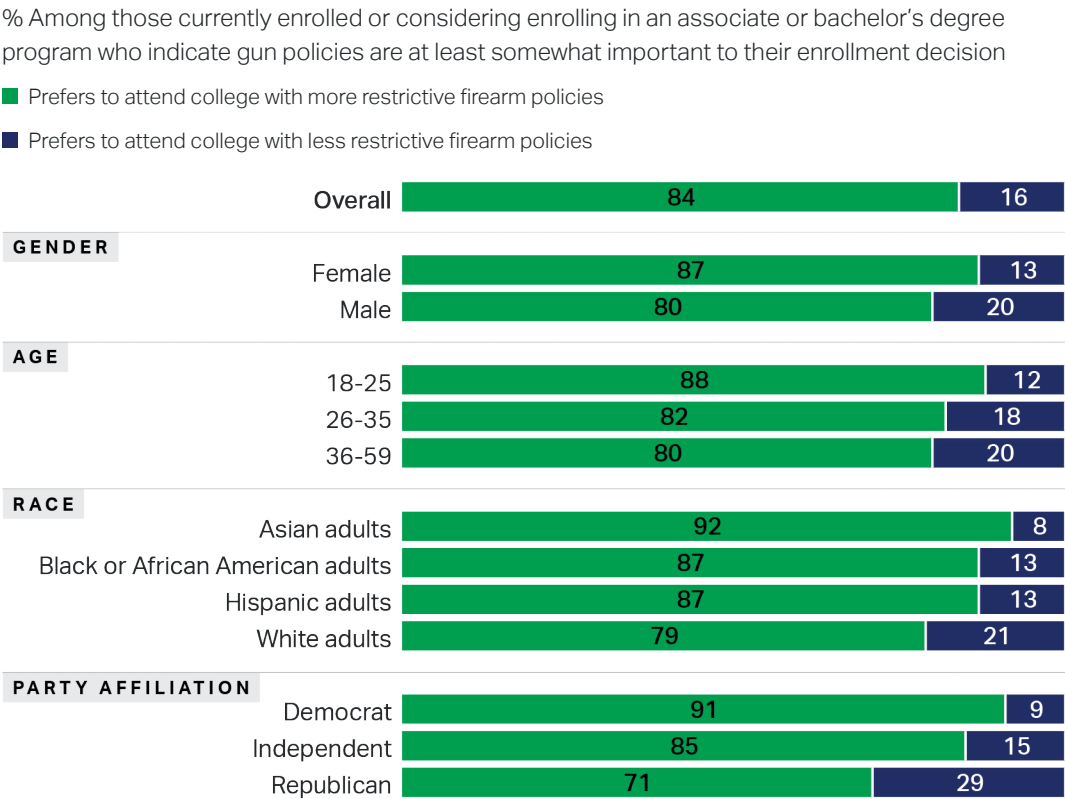
% Among those currently enrolled or considering enrolling in an associate or bachelor’s degree program



Note: Due to rounding, percentages may sum to ±1%.

In addition to being the most influential policy consideration, gun policies also prompt the widest gap in preference: Among current and prospective students who say gun policies are important to their enrollment decision, those who want their college to restrict guns on campus outnumber those who prefer looser regulations of firearms by a more than five-to-one margin. This preference is held especially strongly by 18- to 25-year-olds (88%), Asian and Black adults (92% and 87%, respectively), women (87%) and Democrats (91%). Still, a majority of current and prospective students of all genders, races and political party affiliations favor campuses that restrict firearms over those that have fewer regulations.

CHART 3
Preference for More or Less Restrictive Campus Gun Policies



Reproductive Healthcare Legislation

Just one day after its decision in *Bruen*, the Supreme Court held in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* that there is no constitutional right to abortion, overruling *Roe v. Wade* and reinstating the right of states to impose restrictions on the procedure before the second trimester of pregnancy.¹ Following the ruling, 14 states have banned abortion in nearly all circumstances, and an additional seven states have banned the procedure starting between six and 18 weeks.²

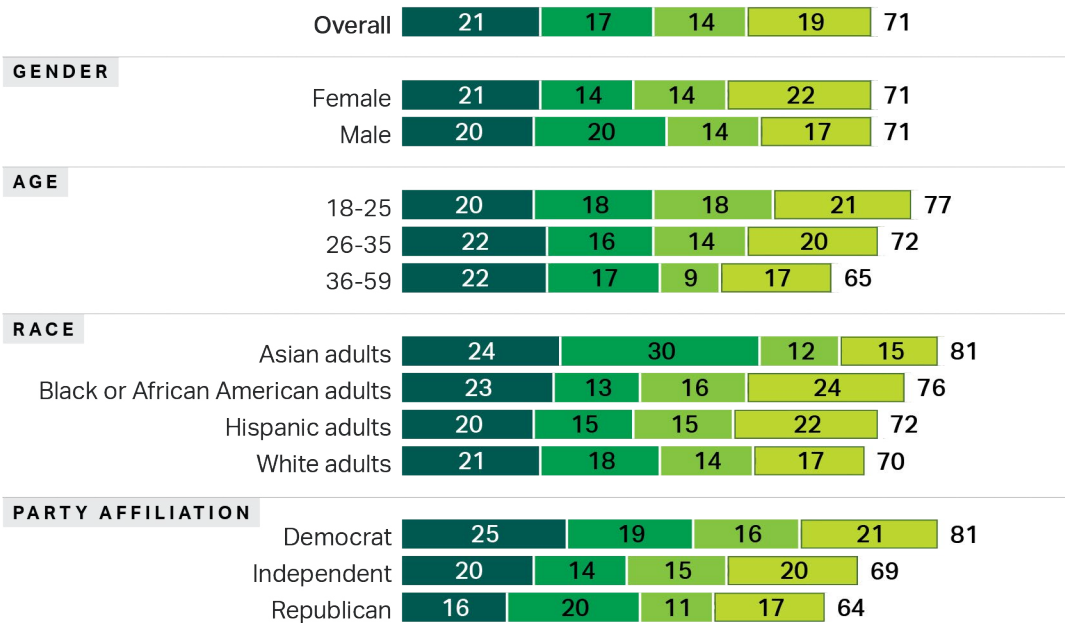


While somewhat less important to enrollment decisions than gun policies, about seven in 10 current and prospective students indicate policies regarding abortion in the state where their college is or would be located are at least “somewhat important,” with 21% saying these policies are “extremely important.” These policies are especially important for 18- to 25-year-old adults.

CHART 4
Importance of State Reproductive Healthcare Policies in Enrollment Decision

% Among those currently enrolled or considering enrolling in an associate or bachelor's degree program

■ 7 - Extremely important ■ 6 ■ 5 ■ 4 - Somewhat important



Note: Due to rounding, percentages may sum to $\pm 1\%$.

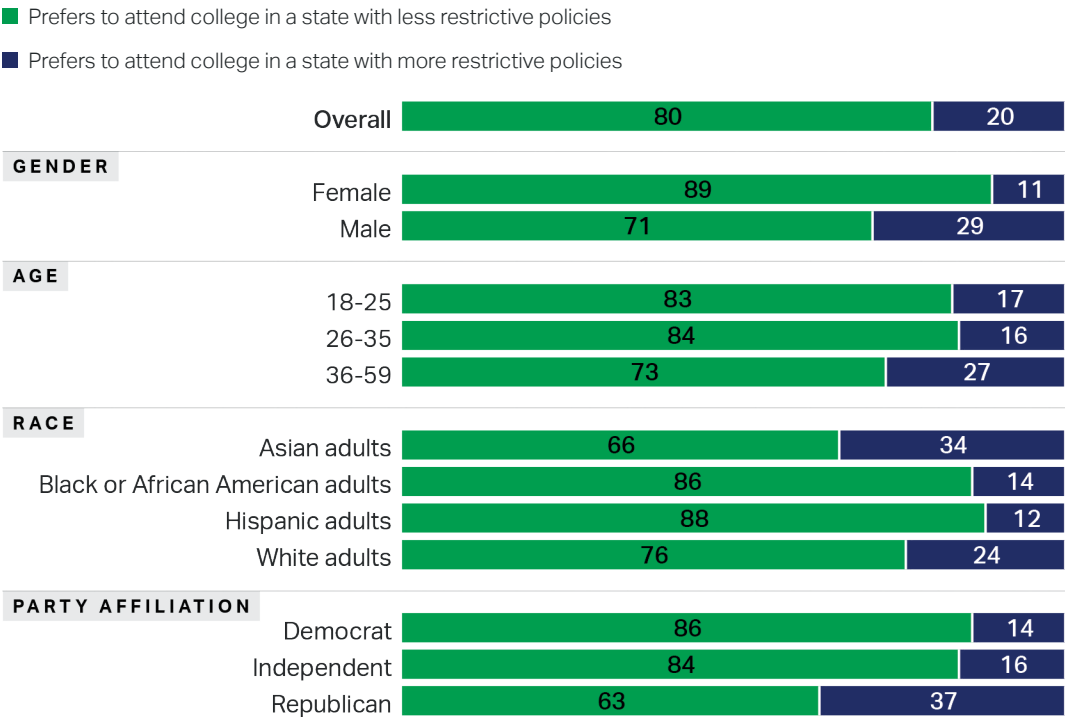
1 Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization. (n.d.). Oyez. Retrieved February 27, 2024, from <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2021/19-1392>

2 Haines, J. (2024, January 31). Where state abortion laws stand without Roe. *U.S. News and World Report*. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/a-guide-to-abortion-laws-by-state>

Moreover, 80% of respondents who say reproductive healthcare access is important to their enrollment decision would prefer to attend college in a state with less restrictive abortion policies, compared to 20% who prefer states with more restrictive policies. Interestingly, while the issue is no more influential in women’s enrollment decisions than men’s, men and women express clear differences in *which* policies they prefer: Women are 18 points more likely than men to prefer colleges in states with fewer restrictions on abortion. In addition to women, adults who are Black, Hispanic and under the age of 36 are more likely to prefer less restrictive policies.

CHART 5
Preference for More or Less Restrictive Reproductive Healthcare Policies

% Among those currently enrolled or considering enrolling in an associate or bachelor’s degree program who indicate state reproductive healthcare policies are at least somewhat important to their enrollment decision



As one might expect based on national attitudes about abortion and the *Dobbs* decision, a partisan examination of preferences reveals that current and prospective Democrat students are far more likely than their Republican peers to prefer to attend college in a state with less restrictive abortion policies; however, nearly two-thirds of Republicans prefer colleges in less restrictive states.

Divisive Concepts

In September 2020, President Donald Trump issued Executive Order 13950, which stated that the following topics, among others, were examples of “divisive concepts” and could not be discussed during training or programming for federal employees:



- The United States is fundamentally racist or sexist.
- An individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex.
- Meritocracy or traits such as a hard work ethic are racist or sexist or were created by a particular race to oppress another race.³

In the wake of Executive Order 13950, 33 states attempted to replicate this policy in public colleges and universities, restricting or banning discussion of these “divisive topics” in the classroom or employee hiring and training activities. To date, eight states have passed at least one such law.⁴

About three-quarters of current and prospective students say these types of policies are at least somewhat important to their decision to enroll or remain enrolled; however, despite the prevalence of divisive concepts bills in state houses across the country, most of the students for whom these policies are important would prefer their colleges not be subjected to them.

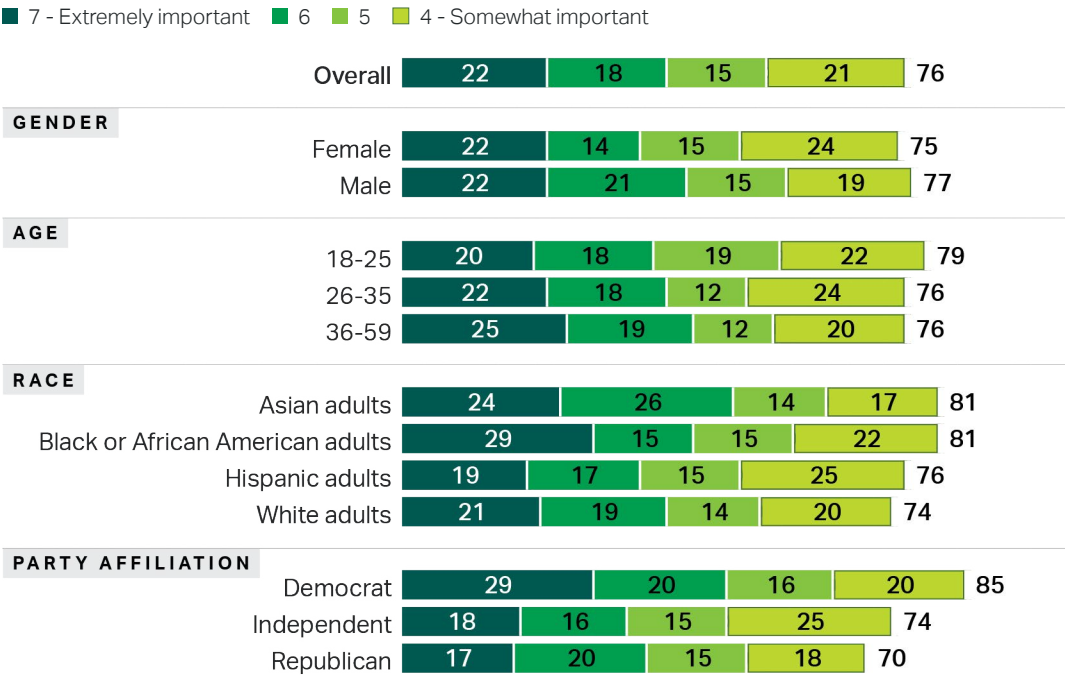
3 *Combating race and sex stereotyping*. (2020, September 28). Federal Register. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/09/28/2020-21534/combating-race-and-sex-stereotyping>

4 *PEN America index of educational gag orders*. (n.d.). Airtable. Retrieved February 27, 2024, from <https://airtable.com/appg59iDuPhILPPFp/shrtwubfBUo2tuHyO/tbl49yod7l01o0TCk/viw6VOxb6SUYd5nXM?blocks=hide>

CHART 6

Importance of Divisive Concepts Legislation in Enrollment Decision

% Among those currently enrolled or considering enrolling in an associate or bachelor's degree program



Note: Due to rounding, percentages may sum to ±1%.

Of the 76% of current and prospective students whose enrollment decision is influenced by divisive concepts legislation, just over three-quarters say they would prefer to attend a college that did not restrict classroom instruction related to “divisive topics,” compared to 24% who prefer their college limit discussion of these concepts.

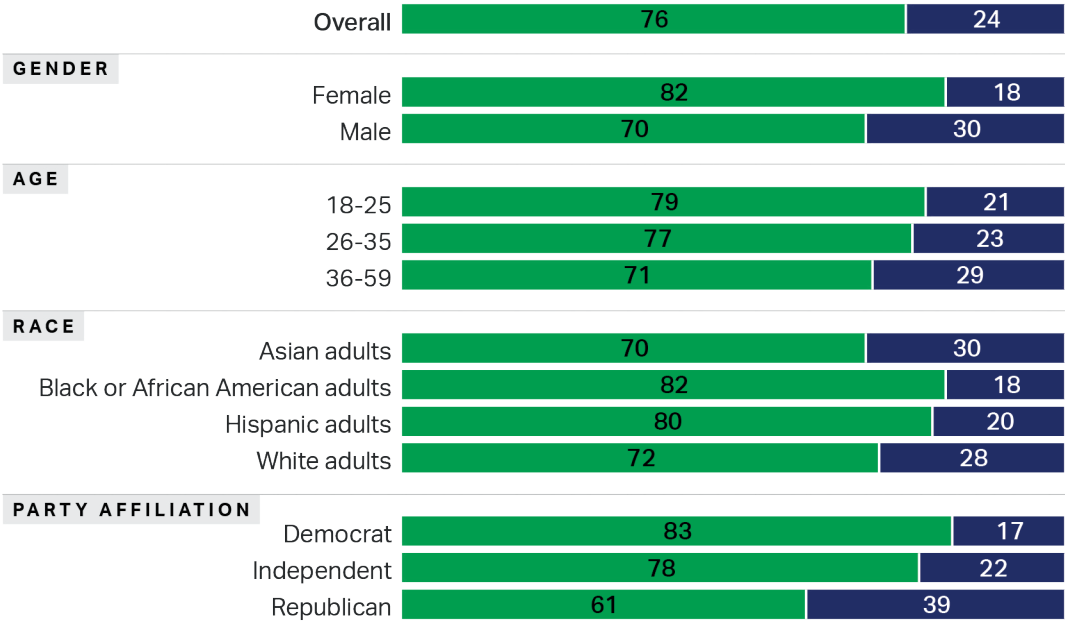


CHART 7

Preference for Divisive Concepts Legislation

% Among those currently enrolled or considering enrolling in an associate or bachelor's degree program who indicate divisive concepts legislation is at least somewhat important to their enrollment decision

- Prefers to attend college in a state that does not restrict instruction on topics related to race and gender
- Prefers to attend college in a state that restricts instruction on topics related to race and gender



These laws are especially unpopular among women and Black respondents, perhaps not coincidentally, because the restricted topics often relate to debates about whether women and African Americans have historically been subjected to systemic discrimination. However, across all genders, ages and races, most adults say they would prefer to attend college on a campus that **does not restrict discussing “divisive topics” in the classroom**. Republican respondents are the least likely to prefer unconstrained campuses; even so, current and prospective Republican students are 22 points more likely to prefer to attend a college that does not restrict instruction of these topics over those that prohibit such discussions.

Affirmative Action

The Supreme Court decision that most recently — and most directly — disrupted the world of higher education is the June 2023 ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, which held that colleges and universities may not consider race in their admissions decisions.⁵



On its face, the decision should have a relatively limited impact on admissions. A recent analysis conducted by the Brookings Institution suggests “affirmative action was used mostly at a relatively small number of selective universities” and estimated that “less than 15% ... of four-year college students from historically excluded racial backgrounds attended colleges that practiced affirmative action prior to the Court’s ruling.”⁶ That is to say, the overwhelming majority of students who once stood to benefit from affirmative action likely never actually received those benefits.

But while few, if any, students will be denied access to higher education due to *Students for Fair Admissions*, the details of the ruling may not be well-understood by the general public, resulting in much broader practical consequences.

Because the Supreme Court’s decision effectively outlawed affirmative action in college admissions, Lumina and Gallup did not ask prospective students about the extent to which consideration of race in admissions criteria would influence their decision to enroll in a specific college. Instead, respondents were asked to indicate whether the ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions* would impact their decision whether to enroll in college at all and whether it would affect the list of schools they would consider applying to.

These data suggest the effects of the ruling will indeed be broader than its nominal implications: Among adults who have considered enrolling in a bachelor’s degree program in the last two years, nearly half (45%) say the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions* will impact their decision to pursue a degree “a great deal” or “a fair amount.”

5 *Students for Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*. (n.d.). Oyez. Retrieved February 27, 2024, from <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2022/20-1199>

6 Reber, S., Goodman, G., & Nagashima, R. (2023, November 7). *Admissions at most colleges will be unaffected by Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action*. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/admissions-at-most-colleges-will-be-unaffected-by-supreme-court-ruling-on-affirmative-action/>

CHART 8

Supreme Court Ruling's Impacts

How much will the Supreme Court ruling [in *Students for Fair Admissions*] impact your decision to pursue a degree or credential?

% Among those who have considered enrolling in a bachelor's degree program in the last two years

■ Don't know ■ Not at all ■ Not much ■ A fair amount ■ A great deal

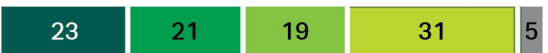


Overall

How much will the Supreme Court ruling [in *Students for Fair Admissions*] impact your decision about which colleges you might apply to?

% Among those who have considered enrolling in a bachelor's degree program in the last two years

■ A great deal ■ A fair amount ■ Not much ■ Not at all ■ Don't know



GENDER



Female



Male



AGE



18-25



26-35



36-59



RACE



Asian adults



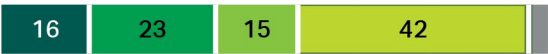
Black or African American adults



Hispanic adults



White adults



PARTY AFFILIATION



Democrat



Independent



Republican



Note: Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100%; numerical values shown when 5% or higher.

Notably, the percentage of respondents who say the Court's ruling will impact their decision to apply to any college is nearly the same as those who say it will affect the specific schools they would consider applying to — even though most students attend universities that accept more than three-quarters of applicants and those schools likely did not consider race as a factor in admissions before the ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions*.⁷ This reinforces the notion that for many adults, the implications of this ruling and the college admissions process as a whole are opaque and poorly understood.

The two groups of prospective students most likely to say this ruling affects their enrollment decision are Asian and Black adults. However, it is important to note that respondents did not indicate whether the impact of the ruling would make them more or less likely to pursue a bachelor's degree. Therefore, Asian respondents may be more likely to apply to college after *Students for Fair Admissions*, while Black respondents may be less likely to apply. This is supported by separate reporting from Gallup's Center on Black Voices, which finds that more than half of Black adults (52%) believe the Court's ruling will make it more difficult for Black applicants to attend college, compared to 23% of Asian adults who believe it will make it more difficult for Asian applicants to attend college.⁸

Curiously, men are nearly twice as likely as women to say the Court's ruling will impact their decision to pursue a degree (56% vs. 30%), even though the ruling has no bearing on the consideration of gender in the admissions process. Moreover, some colleges report adopting affirmative action policies in *favor* of men as a means of combatting an increasing gender skew toward women on campus.⁹



- 7 Arum, R., Stevens, M. L., & Bui, O. (2023, July 3). Opinion | For most college students, affirmative action was never enough. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/07/03/opinion/for-most-college-students-affirmative-action-was-not-enough.html>
- 8 McCarthy, J. (2024, January 16). *Post-affirmative action, views on admissions differ by race*. Gallup News. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/548528/post-affirmative-action-views-admissions-differ-race.aspx>
- 9 Dominus, S. (2023, September 8). 'There was definitely a thumb on the scale to get boys.' *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/08/magazine/men-college-enrollment.html>

Implications

While the enrollment challenge facing U.S. colleges and universities has been exacerbated by recent events — particularly the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as debates about the rising cost of college and student loan debt — this issue spans at least a decade. According to the National Student Clearinghouse, total enrollment in two-year public, four-year public and four-year private, not-for-profit colleges and universities was just over 18 million in fall 2013.¹⁰ By the fall of 2023, that number had been reduced by 1.8 million students — a 10% decline.¹¹

This decline is largely fueled by the steep drop in two-year college enrollment, which is down roughly 30% from 2013 levels. At the same time, enrollment in four-year public and four-year private, not-for-profit institutions has remained stagnant. As colleges across the country compete for this shrinking population of prospective students, it would behoove Deans of Admissions to understand the factors that wield the greatest influence over students' decisions about whether and where to pursue a college degree.

Many of the most important factors, such as cost, selectivity, curriculum quality and coursework flexibility, are largely within universities' span of control. However, for many students, the overall environment a school exists within — and the state laws and policies they would be subjected to as students on campus — are only slightly less influential.

Moreover, their preferences are clear: By margins between 52 and 68 percentage points, current and prospective students say they would prefer to attend college in states that are less restrictive of reproductive healthcare, more restrictive of guns on campus and less restrictive of the topics that can be discussed on campus.

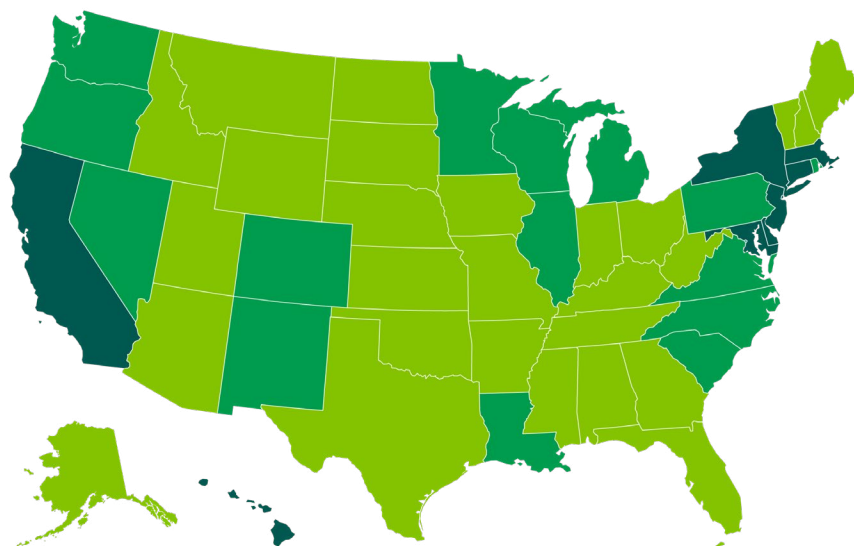
While the margins may vary, this remains true across students of all ages, genders, races and political party affiliations. Further, these preferences hold even among those living in states that have already implemented less-favorable policies.

While many students do not enjoy the luxury of attending college in any state they choose due to financial, employment or caretaking limitations, these policies may be the deciding factor for some students who are deciding between universities that are otherwise similar in cost, quality and prestige. As a result, colleges and universities in states with less popular policies may risk seeing otherwise-interested students opt to pursue their degrees in a neighboring state whose policies match their preferences and may find it difficult to attract out-of-state students to fill the void.

10 National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2013). *Current term enrollment estimates: Fall 2013*. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CurrentTermEnrollment-Fall2013.pdf>

11 National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2024, January 24). *Current term enrollment estimates: Fall 2023 expanded edition*. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates>

States' Concealed Carry License Policies



Importance of and Preference for Campus Firearms Policies in Enrollment Decision, Based on State-Level Concealed Carry License Policies

	Permitless Concealed Carry or "Constitutional Carry"	"Shall Issue" Policy (No law enforcement discretion to issue license)	"May Issue" Policy (Law enforcement has discretion to issue license)
Prefers to attend college with less restrictive firearm policies	18	16	14
Prefers to attend college with more restrictive firearm policies	82	84	86

CHART 11

States’ Policies Restricting Teaching or Training Related to “Divisive Concepts” on College Campuses

- State has passed legislation restricting teaching or training related to certain concepts on college campuses
- State legislature is actively considering at least one piece of divisive concepts legislation
- State is not considering and has not passed any legislation that would restrict teaching or training related to certain concepts on college campuses

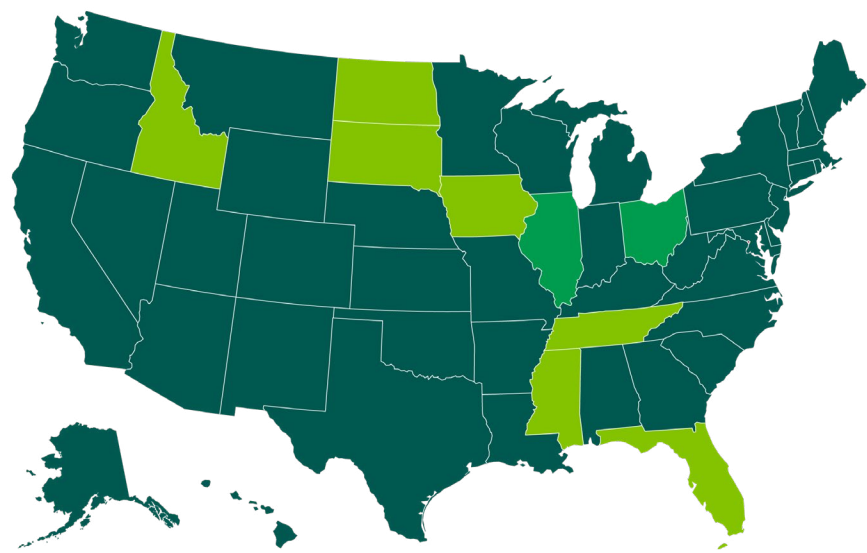


TABLE 3

Importance of and Preference for Divisive Topic Legislation in Enrollment Decision, Based on State Policies Related to Divisive Concepts

% Among those currently enrolled or considering enrolling in an associate or bachelor’s degree program who indicate divisive concepts legislation is at least somewhat important to their enrollment decision

	State has passed legislation restricting teaching certain concepts on college campuses	Divisive concepts legislation currently under consideration in state legislature	No laws restricting teaching of divisive concepts on college campuses
Prefers to attend college in a state that does not restrict instruction on topics related to race and gender	71	82	76
Prefers to attend college in a state that restricts instruction on topics related to race and gender	29	18	24

Methodology

Results for the Lumina-Gallup State of Higher Education study are based on web surveys conducted from Oct. 9-Nov.16, 2023, with samples of 6,015 students who are currently enrolled in a postsecondary education program (certificate, associate or bachelor's degree), 5,012 adults who were previously enrolled in a postsecondary education program but had not completed an associate or bachelor's degree, and 2,943 adults who had never enrolled in a postsecondary education program.

All respondents were between the ages of 18 and 59 and had a high school diploma or equivalent but not an associate or bachelor's degree.

For analysis conducted in the Public Policy report, the population of respondents was limited to the 6,934 adults currently enrolled in an associate or bachelor's degree program or who have considered pursuing either an associate or bachelor's degree within the past two years. Of these respondents, 2,532 are enrolled in a bachelor's degree program, 1,636 are enrolled in an associate degree program, 1,456 have considered a bachelor's degree program, and 1,968 have considered an associate degree program; respondents may be included in multiple categories.

Respondents were interviewed via Dynata's non-probability web-based panel.

The data are weighted to match national demographics of gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education, and region for the population of U.S. adults aged 18 to 59 with a high school diploma but without a college degree. Demographic weighting targets are based on the most recent American Community Survey figures.



About Gallup

Gallup delivers analytics and advice to help leaders and organizations solve their most pressing problems. Combining more than 80 years of experience with its global reach, Gallup knows more about the attitudes and behaviors of employees, customers, students and citizens than any other organization in the world. Gallup has served more than 1,000 education organizations with advice and analytics based on over 85 years of research, including nearly half a million interviews with education leaders and their teams about their workplace experiences and the perspectives of more than 6 million students and alumni captured by the Gallup Student Poll and Gallup Alumni Survey. Gallup assists districts, schools, universities and institutions nationwide with research-based strategies to provide a culture shift in education to help students on their path toward great careers and great lives.

About Lumina Foundation

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. We envision a system that is easy to navigate, delivers fair results, and meets the nation's need for talent through a broad range of credentials. Lumina Foundation works with governmental, nonprofit, and private-sector organizations to bring about change. We rely on communications outreach, meetings and events that engage and mobilize people, state and federal policy outreach, investments in proven and promising practices, and targeted efforts to measure and evaluate progress.

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