



DeVry University

Keller Graduate School
of Management

Beyond flexibility

What today's learners expect from
competency-based education





Executive summary

Higher education is at an inflection point, as rapid technological change, enrollment pressures, and talent shortages reshape the future of teaching and learning. Amid this shifting landscape, DeVry University commissioned national research among prospective undergraduate and graduate learners to better understand how they perceive competency-based education (CBE) and what they value in a potential CBE experience. The findings suggest that while flexibility remains central to CBE's appeal, prospective learners are looking for more than a self-paced model: they value clear milestones, instructor support, recognition of existing knowledge and experience, and strong connections between learning and career-relevant skills.

The research also surfaced notable differences across learner populations. Older adults, parents and full-time workers showed particularly strong interest in CBE, while men were more likely than women to say the availability of CBE could influence them to pursue a degree they had not previously planned to earn. At the same time, learners expressed caution about over-reliance on AI, suggesting that technology may be most effective when it augments rather than replaces human-led learning and support.

Among the survey findings:

- 31% of undergraduate and 40% of graduate prospects said they would only enroll if a CBE option were available.
- Although 86% of graduate prospects said they could manage their time effectively without strict deadlines, 49% said they need structured deadlines to stay on track and 58% preferred structured, instructor-led weekly classes.
- 59% of undergraduate and 66% of graduate prospects preferred messaging that emphasized a supported rather than self-guided program experience.
- 63% of prospects age 50 and older said they would be more likely to pursue a degree if their desired program were offered in a CBE format.
- 48% of men said a CBE option would make them more likely to pursue a degree they had not previously planned to earn, compared with 36% of women. Women were more likely to say they would choose CBE for a degree they already planned to pursue (51% vs. 42% of men).
- Approximately 76% of parents rated CBE “very appealing,” compared with 62% of non-parents, a 14-percentage-point difference.
- 29% of undergraduate and 27% of graduate prospects cited reliance on AI tools as a potential enrollment concern.



Acknowledgments

This report is based on research originally commissioned by DeVry University to understand prospective learners' perceptions of competency-based education. The findings presented here draw on further analysis of that research to explore differences across learner populations and their implications for postsecondary access and attainment. DeVry University thanks MGT for their contributions to the research.

This report was written by Natalie Berkey with editing and support from Lenore Goldberg, Veronica Calderon, Hessa Fernandez de Cueto and Michaela Feldmann, valuable insights from Abby Shouse and Chris Nugent, and executive leadership from Dave Barnett and Jason Horne.

About DeVry University

DeVry University strives to close society's opportunity gap and address emerging talent needs by preparing learners to thrive in careers shaped by continuous technological change. Founded in 1931, the university offers undergraduate and graduate programs onsite and online in Business, Healthcare and Technology. DeVry University is accredited by The Higher Learning Commission (HLC, www.hlcommission.org/). The university's Keller Graduate School of Management is included in this accreditation. To learn more, visit DeVry.edu.

About MGT

MGT is a national technology and advisory solutions leader serving state, local government, and education (SLED) clients. Our specialized solutions solve the most critical issues at the top of our clients' leadership agenda. Our advisory and technology domains are foundational elements in our approach to helping state, local, and education agencies innovate, transform, and manage efficiently. We partner to help clients strengthen their foundations, implement systematic changes, and build resilience for the future. MGT is committed to impacting communities for good. For more information, visit us at mgt.us.

MGT conducted research and analysis in support of this project. This publication was prepared by DeVry University, which is responsible for the presentation of the findings.



Introduction

As the world of work changes, Americans are increasingly questioning whether postsecondary education is keeping pace. Confidence in its value has declined, including questions about how well higher education prepares learners for jobs and builds relevant skills. Yet education beyond high school remains linked with higher earnings, lower unemployment and greater career mobility. For many adults, the question may be less about whether education matters and more about whether today's educational models fit what they need from it.

Employers are confronting a related challenge as persistent talent shortages, widening skills gaps and artificial intelligence reshape the capabilities needed in the workplace. Many organizations are responding by adopting skills-based hiring and placing greater emphasis on demonstrated capabilities. According to [NACE's Job Outlook 2026](#) survey, 70% of participating employers use skills-based hiring, and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) found that [78% of HR professionals](#) using skills assessments say the quality of their organization's hires has improved.

Together, these trends create pressure for higher education to better connect how people learn, what they already know and the skills they need in the workforce. [Competency-based education](#), (CBE), while not a new instructional model, offers one potential response. By allowing learners to demonstrate mastery, progress at a flexible pace and receive recognition for prior learning, CBE can create an alternative pathway for learners while strengthening the connection between educational experiences and workforce-relevant skills.

Yet much of what is known about the prospective CBE learner [remains broad](#). Flexibility and self-direction have long been [central to the case for CBE](#), particularly for working adults balancing education with jobs and other responsibilities. In 2023, [nearly one-third of students](#) enrolled in a U.S. postsecondary institution were age 25 or older, and [69% of adult learners](#) were employed either full- or part-time while pursuing their degrees in 2022, underscoring both the size of this population and the competing demands many face. Beyond this general profile, however, there is less visibility into who prospective CBE learners are, how their needs and motivations differ, and what they want from the learning experience. Adult learners are not a monolithic population, and their experiences cannot easily be captured through a single set of characteristics or needs.

Those differences matter as institutions seek to expand postsecondary access and support attainment among adults whose lives may not align with traditional educational models. Age, employment, family responsibilities, prior education and other factors can shape what learners need from higher education and what makes pursuing a degree feel possible or worthwhile. A more nuanced understanding of prospective CBE learners can move the conversation beyond whether adults value flexibility and into which aspects of CBE resonate with different learners, what motivates them to consider the model and what they need from the experience to feel supported.

To build a more detailed picture of this audience, DeVry University commissioned national research among prospective undergraduate and graduate learners. The study examined awareness, appeal and perceptions of CBE across age, gender, race, parental status, employment and other learner characteristics, while also exploring attitudes toward flexibility, instructional support, career outcomes, artificial intelligence and recognition of prior learning. The goal was not simply to understand whether prospective learners find CBE appealing, but to add greater dimension to who prospective CBE learners are and what they value.



Key survey findings:

Finding 1: Competency-based education could expand pathways to postsecondary education if the model is clear

- 31% of undergraduate prospects and 40% of graduate prospects said they would only enroll if a competency-based option were available.
- 95% of respondents found competency-based education appealing, including 70% who described it as “very appealing.”
- Over 1/3 of students expressed concerns about CBE that would impact their decision to enroll, including: clarity on tuition or pricing structure (37%); employers may not respect CBE as much as traditional programs (37%); and learning evaluation method (31%).

Finding 2: Structured flexibility is the new CBE expectation

- While 86% of graduate prospects said they can manage their time effectively without strict deadlines, nearly half (49%) said they need structured deadlines to stay on track, and 58% preferred structured, instructor-led weekly classes.
- 59% of undergraduate and 66% of prospective graduate students valued program messaging around a supported, not completely self-guided, program experience.

Finding 3: Full-time workers and mid-career professionals are the strongest audience for competency-based education

- 71% of full-time workers rated CBE “very appealing,” compared with 58% of part-time workers.
- Appeal was particularly strong among older prospects, including 79% of those ages 46-50 and 88% of those ages 51-55 who rated CBE “very appealing.”
- 63% of prospects age 50 and older said they would be more likely to pursue a degree if their desired program were offered in a CBE format.

Finding 4: For working parents, flexibility is about increasing access, not just convenience

- Parents demonstrated greater enthusiasm for CBE, with approximately 76% of parents rating CBE “very appealing,” compared with 62% of nonparents, a 14-percentage-point difference.
- Approximately 94% of parents said work/study flexibility influences their enrollment decision, compared with 83% of nonparents, an 11-percentage-point difference.

Finding 5: Learners value control and mastery more than the technology behind the experience

- 31% selected “Progress by demonstrating mastery instead of waiting through a fixed schedule” as the message most likely to increase their interest in learning more about a program.
- 27% of undergraduate and 21% of graduate students chose “Earn credit for knowledge and experience you already have” as the message most likely to increase their interest in learning more about a program.
- 29% of undergraduate and 27% of prospective graduate students cited “Reliance on AI tools” as concerns regarding enrollment in a CBE program.

Finding 6: CBE’s value proposition resonates differently across race and gender

- 91% of Black or African American and 96% of Hispanic or Latino respondents highly rated their ability to manage their time effectively without strict deadlines.
- 48% of men said that a CBE option would make them more likely to pursue a degree that they had not previously planned to pursue.
- Women were more likely to say they would choose CBE for a degree they already planned to pursue (51% vs. 42% of men).



Finding 1:

Competency-based education could expand pathways to postsecondary education if the model is clear

Competency-based education has grown steadily over the past decade, with more than **1,000 programs now offered across 128 institutions**, and 82% of institutions expecting the number of CBE programs in the U.S. to increase in the next 5 years. Yet enrollment remains relatively small compared with overall postsecondary enrollment, suggesting significant room for growth. DeVry University's research suggests competency-based education may help expand the higher education market by attracting learners who might not otherwise enroll. However, qualitative findings indicate that many prospective students still lack a clear understanding of how competency-based education works, highlighting an opportunity for institutions to better explain the model and its value.

Survey highlights

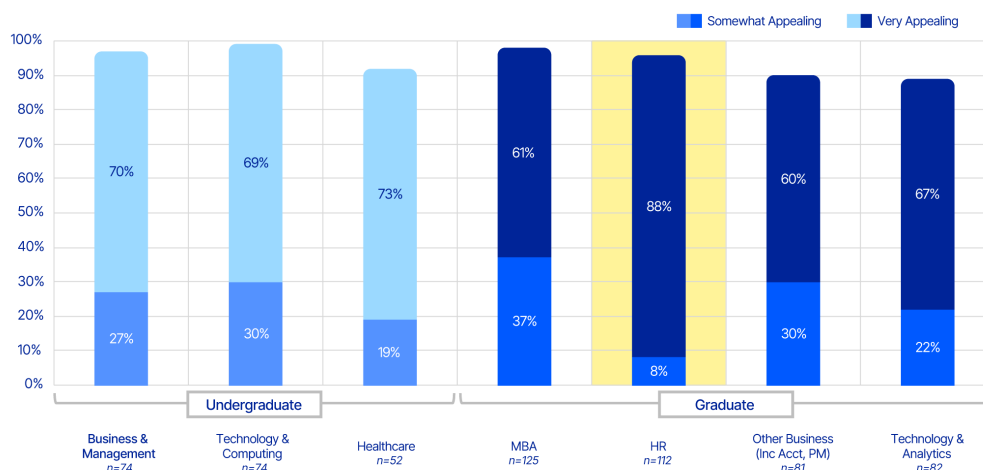
- 95% of respondents found competency-based education appealing, including 70% who described it as “very appealing.”
- 31% of undergraduate prospects and 40% of graduate prospects said they would only enroll if a competency-based option were available.
- 50% of undergraduate and 39% of prospective graduate students would be more likely to pursue a degree than previously planned if a CBE format was offered.
- 36% of undergraduate and 52% of prospective graduate students who were already planning to pursue a degree would choose CBE over traditional formats if available in their program of choice.
- While most students are familiar with self-paced learning, many struggle to understand how progression, pacing, and competency evaluation work within CBE programs.
- Over 1/3 of students expressed concerns about CBE that would impact their decision to enroll, including clarity on tuition or pricing structure (37%); employers may not respect CBE as much as traditional programs (37%); and learning evaluation method (31%).



DeVry University's research found broad interest in competency-based education across prospective undergraduate and graduate students. Appeal was particularly strong among learners considering MBA, technology and human resources programs, mirroring many of the disciplines where competency-based education has gained traction nationally.

Market Opportunity and Incrementality | CBE appeal is consistently high across programs and areas, with particularly strong intensity among HR, MBA, and undergraduate technology prospects.

Appeal of CBE Programs (4 or 5 Rating on 5-Point Scale)

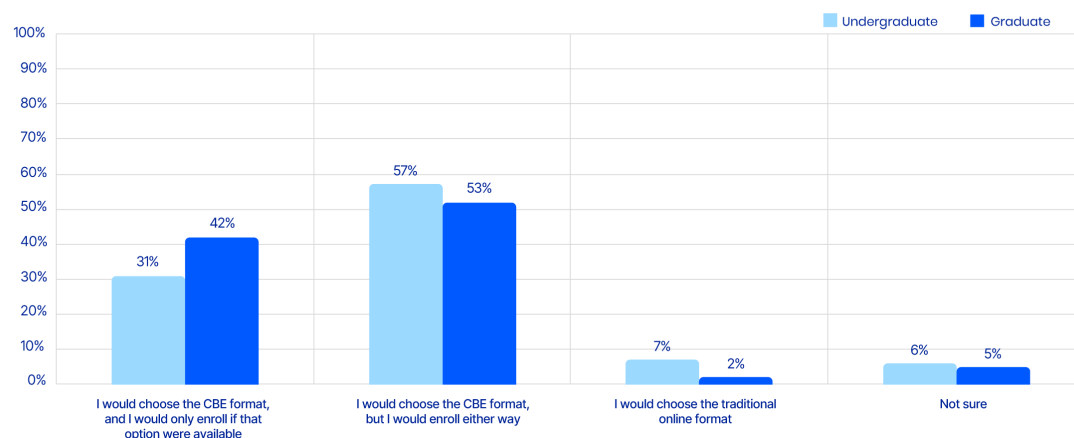


Most notably, a meaningful share of respondents (30% of undergraduates and 40% of graduates) indicated they would pursue higher education only if a competency-based option were available. A potential CBE offering also increased the likelihood of both prospective undergraduate (50%) and graduate students (39%) who had not previously planned to earn a degree. Of those who had already planned to pursue a degree, 36% of undergraduate and 52% of prospective graduate students would choose a CBE option over a traditional program if available.

Market Opportunity and Incrementality | 31% of undergraduate and 40% of graduate prospects would enroll only if CBE were available, indicating meaningful net-new enrollment potential.

Preference for CBE vs. Traditional Education Structure (Single-select)

n=600 (200 Undergrad / 400 Grad)

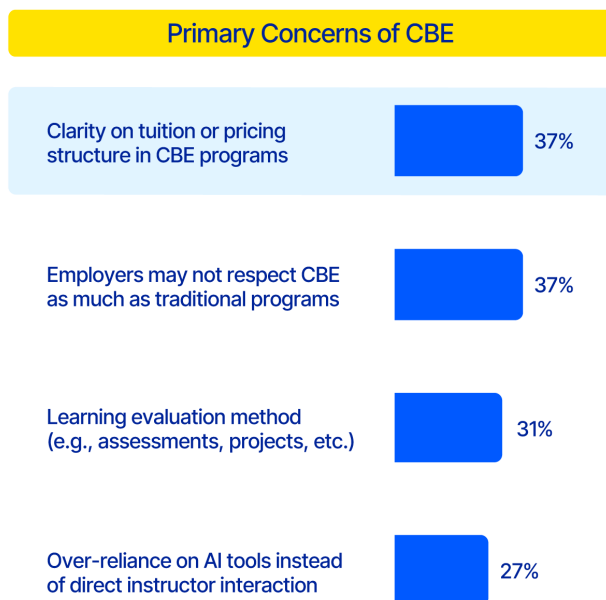


Finding 1: Competency-based education could expand pathways to postsecondary education if the model is clear

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Despite this interest, qualitative interviews revealed that many prospective students do not fully understand how competency-based education works. While students are generally familiar with self-paced learning formats, ambiguity around pricing, structure, and evaluation creates hesitation around CBE programs. In both the survey responses and qualitative interviews, many were uncertain about how students demonstrate mastery, how progress is measured and how tuition is structured. Concerns also emerged around employer recognition and the credibility of competency-based degrees, suggesting institutions have an opportunity to better communicate the rigor and value of the model.



Insights and implications

The findings suggest competency-based education may represent more than an alternative instructional model. It may also expand participation in higher education by reaching learners who would not otherwise pursue a degree. Strong interest among respondents, particularly those who said they would enroll only if a competency-based option were available, suggests that flexible, skills-focused pathways may appeal to adults who have not found traditional higher education models to fit their needs or circumstances.

At the same time, interest alone may not translate into enrollment. Qualitative findings suggest many prospective students remain uncertain about how competency-based education works, including how mastery is demonstrated, tuition is structured, and employers perceive competency-based degrees. As institutions continue to expand CBE offerings, clearly communicating the rigor, transparency and value of the model may be just as important as the programs themselves in converting awareness into enrollment.



Finding 2:

Structured flexibility is the new CBE expectation

According to JEE, “For many students, [CBE] flexibility is one of the most attractive and important features.” To date, many institutions with CBE offerings have traditionally emphasized self-paced flexibility and learner-controlled progress, with messaging that focuses on helping students balance education with work and life responsibilities. DeVry University’s research indicates that flexibility messaging has become table stakes across the CBE market, and that learner expectations around the learning experience may be evolving to include structured support within self-paced models.

Survey highlights

- Nearly 9 in 10 prospective undergraduate (89%) and graduate (88%) students said work-life flexibility was a top factor influencing where they choose to enroll, regardless of instructional format.
- 80% of prospective undergraduate and 86% of graduate prospects said they can manage their time without strict deadlines.
- However, 38% of undergraduate and nearly half (49%) of graduate respondents said they need structured deadlines to stay on track, and 38% of undergraduate and 58% of graduate prospects preferred structured, instructor-led weekly classes.
- 59% of undergraduate and 66% of prospective graduate students valued program messaging that emphasized a supported, not self-guided, program experience.
- 25% of undergraduate and 21% of prospective graduate students selected “Move at your own pace while staying on track with structured milestones” as the top statement that would increase their interest in learning more about a CBE program.

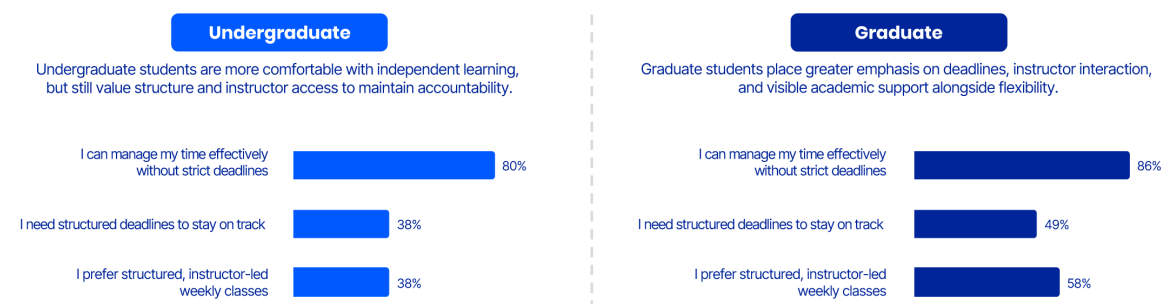
Based on the survey results, respondents consistently described a preference for what might be called structured flexibility: the ability to move at their own pace while still having checkpoints, milestones and reminders that help them maintain momentum. Rather than rejecting structure, prospective learners demonstrated a preference for guidance and support to make self-paced learning feel manageable.



DeVry University's research found broad interest in competency-based education across prospective undergraduate and graduate students. Appeal was particularly strong among learners considering MBA, technology and human resources programs, mirroring many of the disciplines where competency-based education has gained traction nationally.

CBE Messaging | Structure and support expectations remain critical to CBE enrollment.

Students want flexibility – but not complete independence.



Concerns about pure self-pacing surfaced repeatedly in qualitative interviews. Some participants worried that without deadlines or a clear routine, they would procrastinate or fall behind. A model that paired flexible pacing with regular milestones, instructor engagement or other forms of support was viewed as more desirable.



I'm one of those people that I feel I need to be in a scheduled program compared to a self-paced program. I am a procrastinator."

Focus group participant

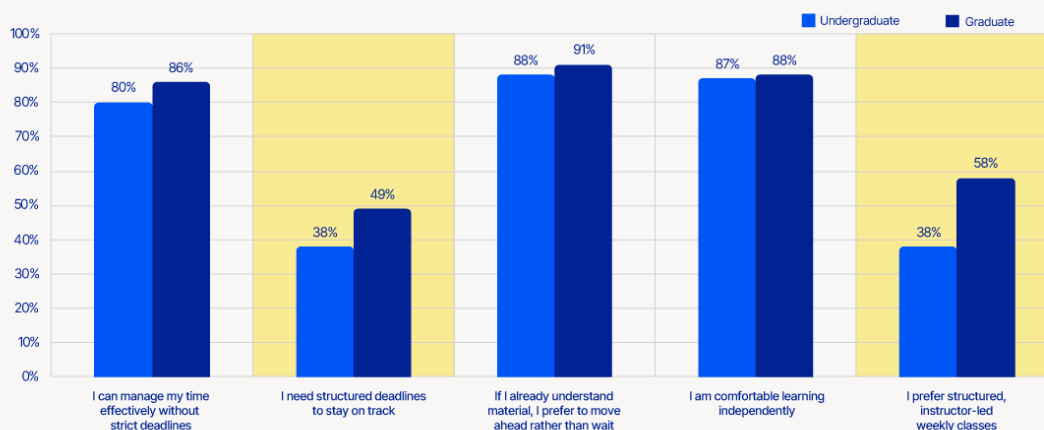


This preference was especially pronounced among prospective graduate students, who expressed greater interest than undergraduate audiences in structured deadlines and instructor-led interaction. Their responses suggest that even highly motivated, experienced learners may not equate independence with the absence of support.

Target Audience | Graduate prospects value structure, preferring structured deadlines and instructor-led weekly classes at higher rate than their undergraduate peers.

Independently Learning Attributes (4 or 5 Rating on 5-Point Scale)

n=600 (200 Undergrad / 400 Grad)



Insights and implications:

For years, competency-based education has been associated with highly independent learners who prefer to progress through coursework with minimal structure. DeVry University's findings suggest today's prospective learners want a different balance.

While flexibility remains one of CBE's greatest strengths, many survey respondents, particularly graduate students and experienced professionals, also placed a high value on structured deadlines, instructor engagement and regular accountability. Rather than viewing flexibility and structure as competing priorities, the findings suggest they increasingly expect both. They want programs that fit around work and family responsibilities while providing the guidance and momentum needed to stay on track.

This finding may also reflect a broader shift in adult learning. As flexibility becomes an expectation rather than a differentiator, institutions may be better positioned to serve today's learners by pairing flexible pacing with intentional support, including faculty interaction, coaching and clear milestones. Rather than asking learners to choose between rigid, instructor-led programs and fully self-directed models, competency-based education has the potential to combine the best of both approaches through structured flexibility.



Finding 3:

Full-time workers and mid-career professionals are the strongest audience for competency-based education

Competency-based education has long been associated with adult learners. Nationally, nearly 90% of undergraduate CBE students are age 25 or older, with the largest share between the ages of 35 and 49. DeVry University's findings reinforce this trend while offering deeper insight into the specific age ranges and motivations of this audience. Overall, the data suggest that the strongest interest in competency-based education comes from experienced professionals seeking educational models that fit established careers, recognize prior knowledge and support continued career advancement.

Survey highlights

- 71% of full-time workers rated CBE “very appealing,” compared with 58% of part-time workers.
- More than 70% of working adults with prior education who are seeking to advance or change careers also rated CBE “very appealing,” among the highest levels across learner personas.
- Appeal was particularly strong among older prospects, including 79% of those ages 46-50 and 88% of those ages 51-55 who rated CBE “very appealing.”
- 63% of prospects age 50 and older said they would be more likely to pursue a degree if their desired program were offered in a CBE format.
- Age differences were especially pronounced around flexible pacing and recognition of prior learning. Flexible pacing appealed to 82%-83% of prospects ages 20-30, compared with 90%-97% of those 31 and older, while prior learning recognition appealed to 73%-81% of those ages 20-30, compared with 89%-94% of those 31 and older.

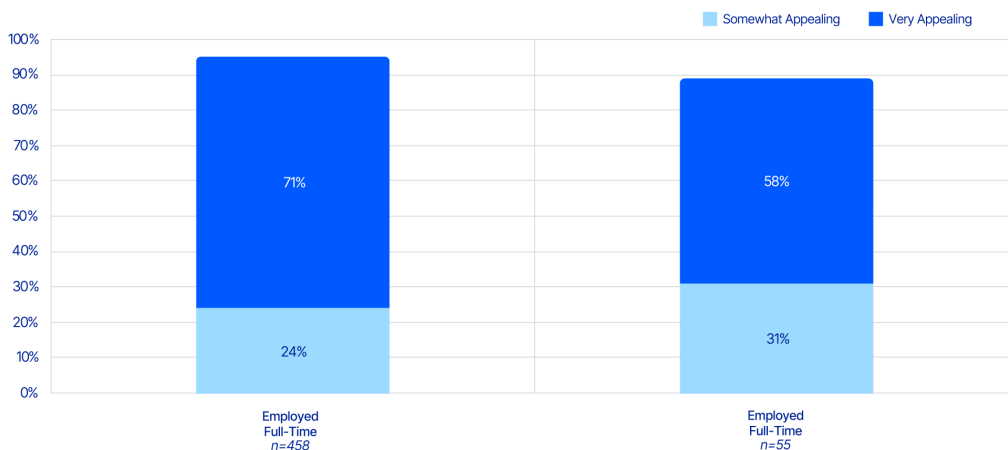


Full-time workers emerged as a particularly receptive audience for CBE, especially those looking for an educational model that can accommodate the demands of work. The survey found strong appeal among full-time workers and among working adults with prior education, with the greatest appeal (77%) for career switchers with education.

Target Audience | CBE appeal is high across employment groups, with strongest appeal among full-time workers.

CBE Appeal – Employment Status (4 or 5 Rating on 5-Point Scale)

n=600



Qualitative interviews help explain that appeal, with participants describing self-paced learning as a way to continue their education around work schedules that do not always align with traditional class times.



Self-paced is better for me because I work from home and everything, but I work late. So, I can't always attend classes... I need to do things on my own time."

Focus group participant

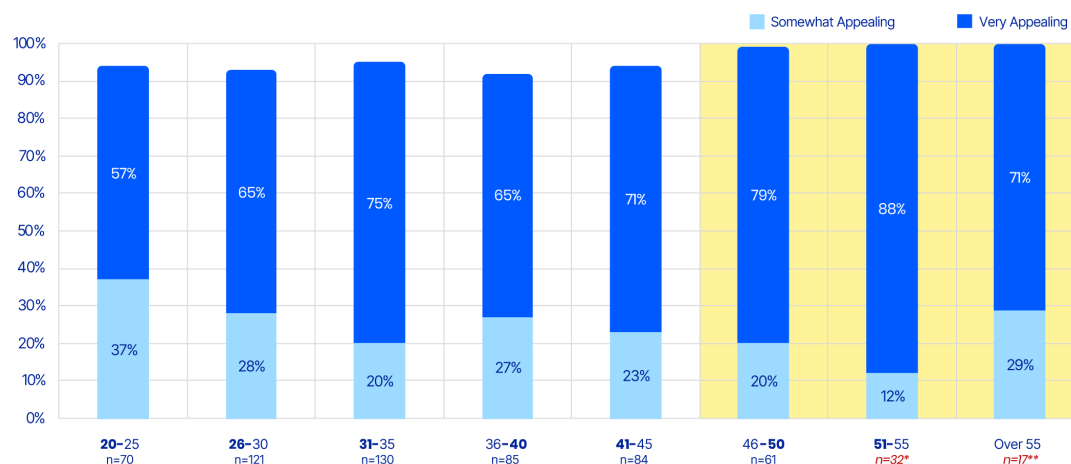


Age adds another dimension to this finding. CBE generated particularly strong enthusiasm among prospects in their late 40s and 50s, with 71% to 88% rating CBE as very appealing. Beyond appeal, based on the survey findings, CBE may help re-engage adults who have delayed or previously ruled out higher education. For learners aged 50 and older, 63% of prospects said they would be more likely to pursue a degree if their desired program were offered in a CBE format.

Tagret Audience | CBE appeal is high across age groups, with strongest appeal among prospects aged 45+.

CBE Appeal - Age (4 or 5 Rating on 5-Point Scale)

n=600



The self-paced [program] is better for me now because I can self-motivate better than I could when I was younger.”

Focus group participant

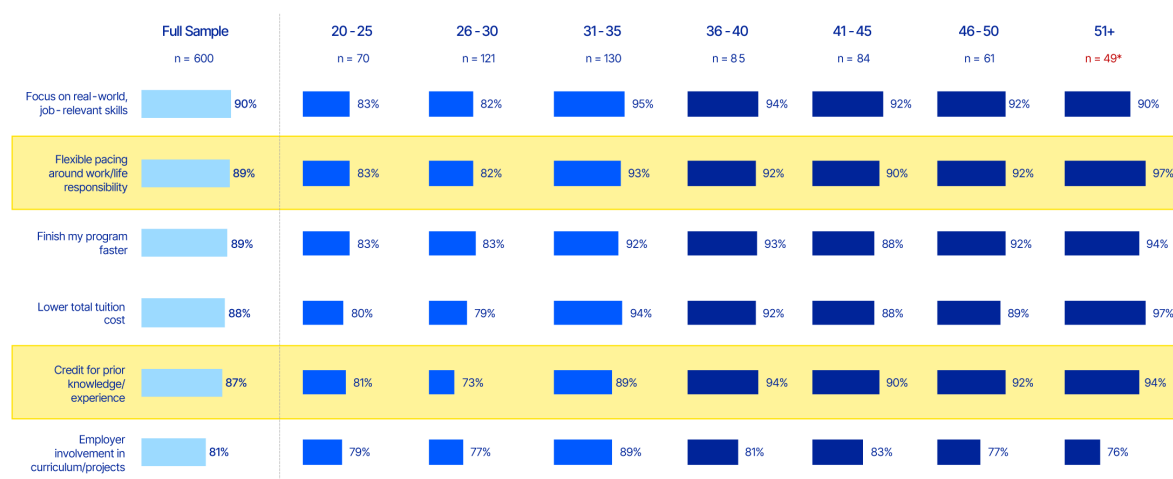


The survey also suggests that what learners value about CBE changes with age. Program features focused on flexible pacing around work/life responsibility appealed to 90%-97% of those 31 and older compared with 82%-83% of prospects ages 20-30, suggesting that flexibility increases in importance as individuals age. Recognition of prior knowledge and experience showed an even wider difference, appealing to 89%-94% of those 31 and older compared with 73%-81% of prospects ages 20-30.

Age – CBE Feature Appeal | Older prospects indicate higher comfort with and appeal for flexible pacing and prior learning recognition.

CBE Feature Appeal (4 or 5 Rating on 5-Point Scale)

n=600 (200 Undergrad / 400 Grad)



* - Small sample size

Faster completion followed a similar, though less pronounced, pattern, with prospects aged 31 and older also consistently rating it highly (88%-94%), compared with 83% across both groups aged 20-30.

Insights and implications:

CBE may be particularly relevant at points in adulthood when learners have more experience to bring to their education and less flexibility in the rest of their lives. Recognition of prior learning can give value to knowledge accumulated through work and experience, while flexible pacing can give learners greater control over how education fits alongside established careers and responsibilities.

That combination could make CBE more than an alternative instructional format for experienced workers. With 63% of prospects aged 50 and older saying a CBE option would make them more likely to pursue a degree, the findings suggest the model could offer another pathway into postsecondary education for adults who may value continued education but find traditional structures difficult to reconcile with their current lives.



Finding 4:

For working parents, flexibility is about increasing access, not just convenience

More than four million college students in the United States are raising children while pursuing a degree, representing one in five undergraduate students and one in four graduate students, according to the Urban Institute. Yet student parents continue to face disproportionately high barriers to enrollment and completion as they balance coursework with employment, caregiving and household responsibilities. DeVry University's findings suggest competency-based education may be particularly well aligned with the needs of this growing learner population.

Survey highlights

- Parents demonstrated greater enthusiasm for CBE, with approximately 76% of parents rating CBE “very appealing,” compared with 62% of nonparents, a 14-percentage-point difference.
- Approximately 94% of parents said work/study flexibility influences their enrollment decision, compared with 83% of nonparents, an 11-percentage-point difference.
- The ability to graduate more quickly also carried greater weight among parents, with approximately 86% citing it as an influence on enrollment compared with 81% of nonparents.
- Qualitative interviews reinforced the importance of flexibility, with parents describing the ability to complete coursework around work schedules and family obligations as important to making education feasible.

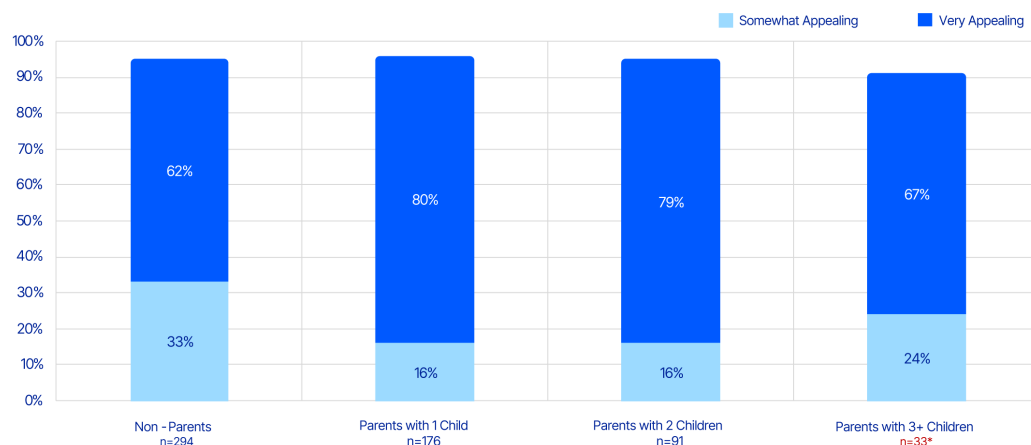


According to DeVry University's survey, parents, particularly those with multiple children, consistently emerged as one of the audiences most receptive to competency-based education models. Parents expressed greater enthusiasm for CBE than nonparents, with approximately 76% rating the model "very appealing," compared with 62% of nonparents.

Parenthood – CBE Appeal | Parents consistently demonstrate higher appeal for Competency-Based Education than those without children.

CBE Appeal (4 or 5 Rating on 5-Point Scale)

n=600

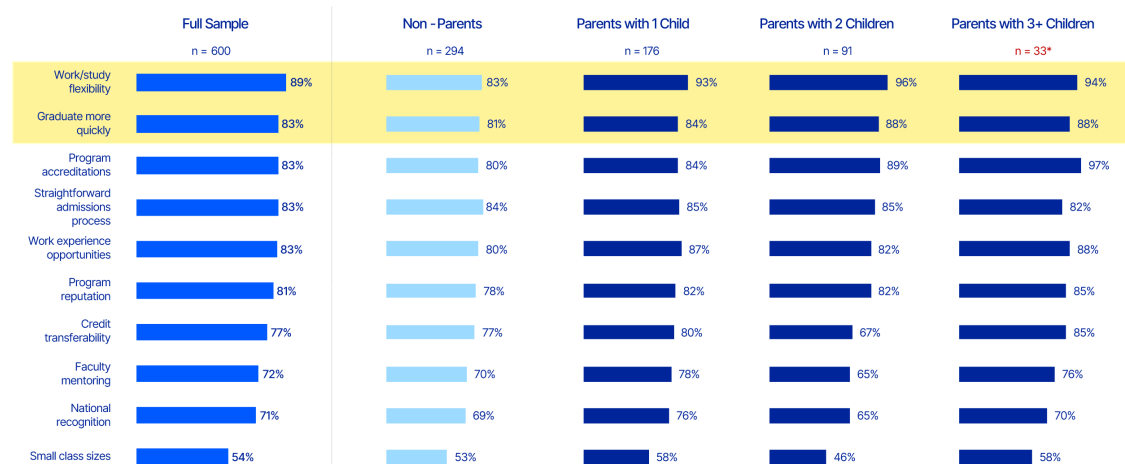


* - Small sample size

The difference becomes even clearer when looking at what influences enrollment decisions: Approximately 94% of parents said work/study flexibility was important, compared with 83% of nonparents. The ability to graduate more quickly also carried somewhat greater weight among parents (86% vs. 81%). Appeal increased alongside parenting responsibilities, with parents of two or more children expressing the greatest confidence in succeeding within a self-directed learning environment. Qualitative interviews reinforced these findings, with parents frequently describing flexibility as essential to balancing coursework with unpredictable work schedules and family obligations.

Parenthood – Importance of Flexibility | Parents indicate that work/study flexibility and ability to graduate more quickly have greater influence on enrollment than peers with no children.

Importance of Flexibility (4 or 5 Rating on 5-Point Scale)



* - Small sample size

Finding 4: Working parents, flexibility is about increasing access, not just convenience

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These findings reflect broader national trends. A study of more than 3,000 undergraduate students in New Mexico found that parenting students are significantly more likely than non-parents to enroll part-time while balancing work and caregiving responsibilities. The study also found that 58% of parenting students work at least 30 hours per week, compared with 40% of non-parenting students, and nearly three-quarters preferred programs with online asynchronous or hybrid learning options. These additional obligations can create challenges for students when the learning experience lacks flexibility.

Research shows that student parents who stop out most often cite financial pressures and conflicts between work and school.



I am a working mother of four children, so I need a program that I can do at my own pace... I can't go to a regular traditional class setting."

Focus group participant

The need for flexible learning pathways extends beyond students currently enrolled to those who could be reengaged. According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, more than one-third of the 40.4 million adults with some college but no credential has children under age 18.

Insights and implications:

DeVry's survey findings suggest that for working parents, the value of flexibility may be less about convenience than access. For this group, the ability to adjust when and how learning happens can help resolve a fundamental tension between the fixed structures of higher education and the variable demands of work and family life. CBE may be particularly relevant because flexibility is built into how learners progress, rather than added around the edges of a traditional academic model.

That distinction has implications beyond currently enrolled student parents. Adults with some college but no credential represent a substantial population, and many are also raising children and participating in the workforce. While flexibility alone cannot address the financial, caregiving and other barriers these learners face, DeVry's findings suggest that educational models designed around adult responsibilities could remove one important source of friction and make returning to complete a degree more feasible.



Finding 5:

Learners value control and mastery more than the technology behind the experience

As adult learners balance education with work, family and other responsibilities, competency-based education (CBE) offers a different approach to how learning happens. Rather than progressing primarily according to time spent in a course, CBE can give learners greater control over their progression, with opportunities to demonstrate mastery, build on knowledge and experience they already have, and move forward at a pace that works for them.

As institutions explore models like CBE, technology, including AI, is creating additional possibilities for how learning and support can be delivered. But outside research suggests students are discerning about where and how they want AI incorporated into their education, particularly when it comes to experiences where they value human interaction and support. Against this backdrop, DeVry University's research explored what prospective students value most about the CBE experience and which aspects of the model are most likely to drive interest.

Survey highlights

- When asked which statements would most increase interest in learning more about a program:
 - 31% of all prospects selected “Progress by demonstrating mastery instead of waiting through a fixed schedule.”
 - 27% of undergraduate and 21% of graduate students chose “Earn credit for knowledge and experience you already have.”
 - 22% chose “Move at your own pace while staying on track with structured milestones.”
 - Only 1% of respondents selected AI-powered guidance.
- 29% of undergraduate and 27% of prospective graduate students cited “Reliance on AI tools” as concerns regarding enrollment in a CBE program.

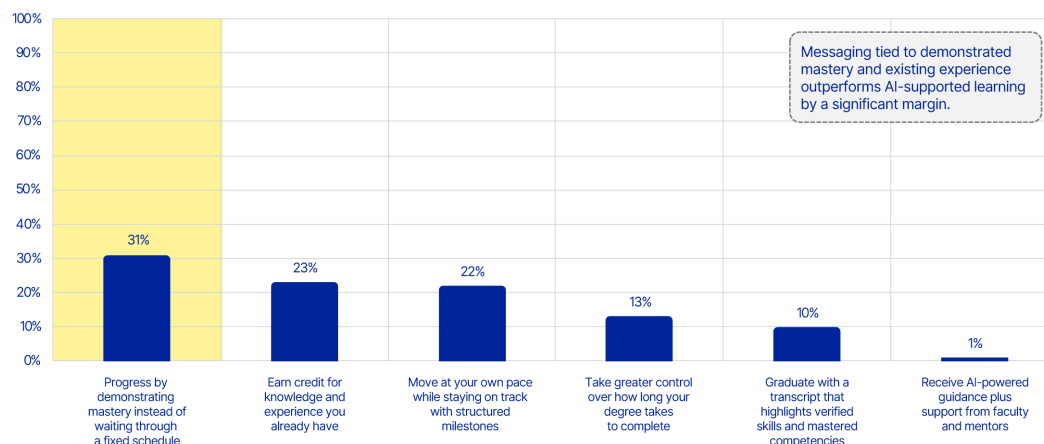


While the specific messages that resonate vary somewhat by audience, the broader pattern is consistent: Prospective students respond more strongly to the outcomes and control CBE can provide than to the technology behind the experience. Across undergraduate and graduate student audiences, the top messages that would increase interesting in learning more about a CBE offering included “Progress by demonstrating mastery instead of waiting through a fixed schedule” (31%), “Earn credit for knowledge and experience you already have” (23%), and “Move at your own pace while staying on track with structured milestones” (22%).

CBE Messaging | Outcome-oriented messaging centered on mastery, prior experience, and structured flexibility generates the strongest engagement.

Program Messaging that Prompts Further Research (Single-select)

n=600

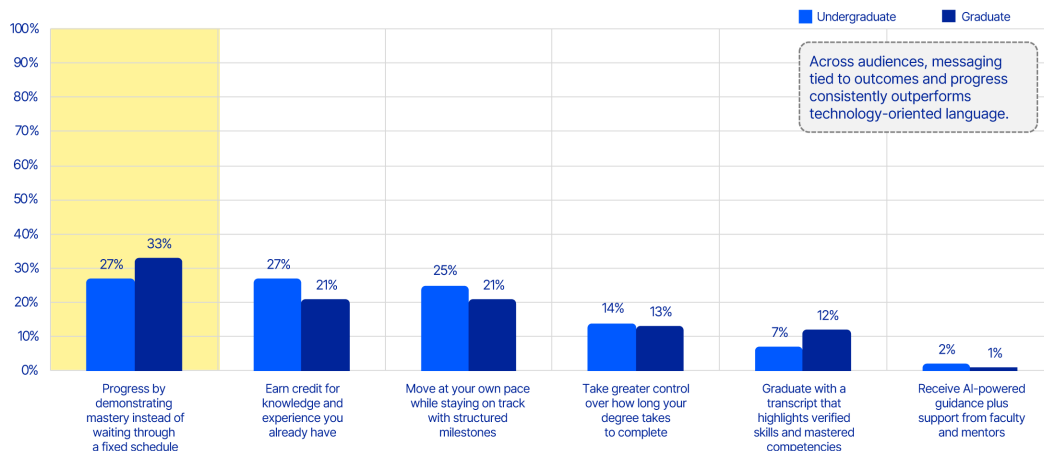


This insight holds true across both undergraduate and graduate student audiences, with minimal variation between the two response groups. Demonstrating mastery lead among graduate prospects (33%) and tied for the top message among undergraduate prospects (27%), while undergraduate interest was also strong for recognition of prior knowledge (27%) and structured flexibility (25%).

CBE Messaging | Graduate audiences respond most to mastery and verified skills, while undergraduates place greater value on prior credit and structured flexibility

Program Messaging that Prompts Further Research (Single-select)

n=600 (200 Undergrad / 400 Grad)



Finding 5: Learners value control and mastery more than the technology behind the experience

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While mastery-based messaging resonated with both undergraduate and graduate prospects, messaging centered on artificial intelligence generated significantly less enthusiasm. Only 1% of respondents selected AI-powered guidance as the message most likely to increase their interest in learning more about a program, even when positively framed as a component of faculty and mentor support.

In fact, many prospective learners viewed AI with caution. Twenty-seven percent identified overreliance on AI as a concern when considering competency-based education, including 29% of prospective undergraduate students and 27% of prospective graduate students.

CBE Messaging | AI-forward positioning creates measurable resistance across audiences, particularly among undergraduate healthcare prospects.

AI Concerns in Quantitative Research



Concern

27% of students worry CBE will over-rely on AI instead of instructors. Among Healthcare undergrads that number nearly doubles to 52%.



Messaging

The AI-forward message scored 64% compelling, 16 to 19 points below every other message tested and the only message to score statistically significantly lower than the rest.



Motivation

Only 1% of students selected AI-powered guidance as the statement that would most increase their interest in CBE, the lowest selection rate of any option across every segment tested.



Segments

The concern is consistent across all segments. Tech students, the most receptive group, show 26% concern and an AI message scored well below all other messages tested.

Insights and implications:

DeVry University's survey found that prospective students responded most strongly to the opportunities CBE gives them to shape their learning experience. Messages focused on demonstrating mastery, receiving recognition for knowledge and experience they already have, and progressing at a pace that works for them were among the strongest drivers of interest in learning more about the model. These findings suggest that the value of CBE lies primarily in what the model enables learners to do.

Technology, by contrast, appears to be less important to CBE's appeal. In the same question about messages that drive interest, only 1% of respondents chose AI-powered additional support as the message most likely to increase their interest. In a separate question, more than 1 in 4 undergraduate and graduate prospects identified reliance on AI tools as a potential concern when considering enrollment in a CBE program.

Taken together, these findings do not suggest that learners reject AI in education. Rather, they reinforce previous research suggesting that students are discerning about where and how they want AI incorporated into the learning experience. When viewed alongside students' aforementioned preference for structured flexibility, the findings point to a more nuanced role for technology: AI can augment the learner experience, but it may be more effective as a supporting tool than as the centerpiece of a CBE program or its core value proposition.



Finding 6: CBE's value proposition resonates differently across race and gender

Overall, the racial and gender makeup of those who enroll in CBE programs is similar to national enrollment trends, although it differs in having slightly larger enrollments of Black and female students and underrepresentation of Asian and Hispanic students. Based on DeVry University's findings, within audience subsets there exist interesting differences in the appeal of competency-based offerings and comfort with a self-directed learning format.

Survey highlights

- Appeal for CBE was strong across racial groups, with almost 100% of survey participants ranking competency-based education as somewhat or very appealing.
- 91% of Black or African American and 96% of Hispanic or Latino respondents highly rated their ability to manage their time effectively without strict deadlines.
- Hispanic/Latino audiences indicated a lower preference for structured, instructor-led weekly classes (32%).
- White prospects placed greater emphasis on prior learning recognition (48%) and structured deadlines (50%).
- 48% of men said that a CBE option would make them more likely to pursue a degree that they had not previously planned to pursue.
- 51% of women said that they would choose a CBE option over traditional for a previously planned degree.

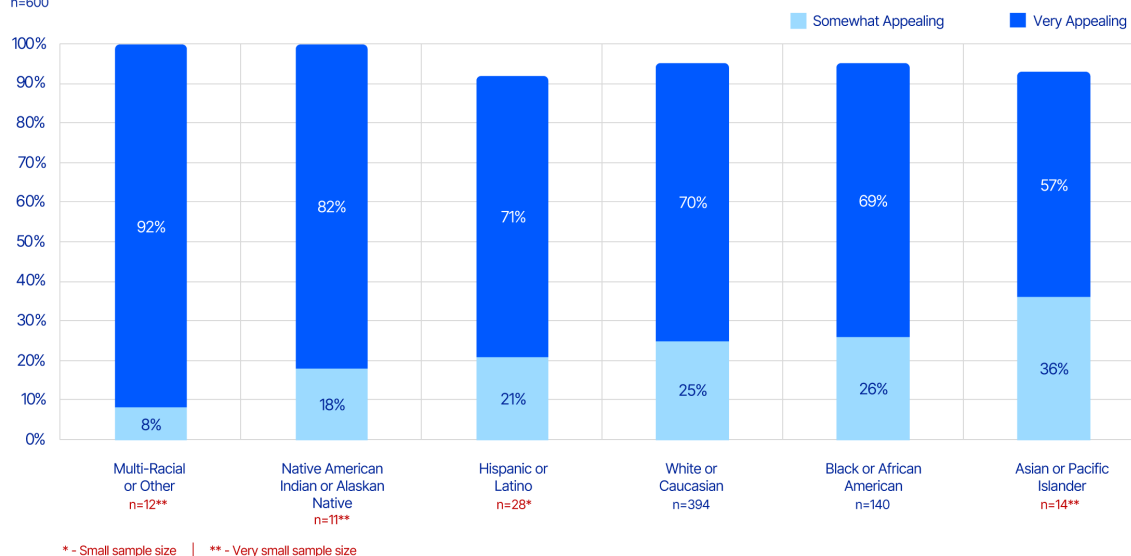


According to DeVry University's survey, CBE appeal is consistently strong across racial groups, though motivations and comfort with less structured learning vary meaningfully. Black and Hispanic/Latino prospects were most responsive to flexible pacing and real-world skill application, while Hispanic/Latino audiences showed greater comfort with less structured learning formats (32%), and white prospects placed greater emphasis on prior learning recognition (48%) and structured deadlines (50%).

Target Audience | CBE appeal is consistently strong across demographics, with minimal variation among larger sample segments.

CBE Appeal – Race & Ethnicity (4 or 5 Rating on 5-Point Scale)

n=600



[Due to my family's income and ethnicity] I didn't even know about college when I was younger. I think if I was a younger teenager and would have known about college or something like this. They would sign up for that easily."

Focus group participant

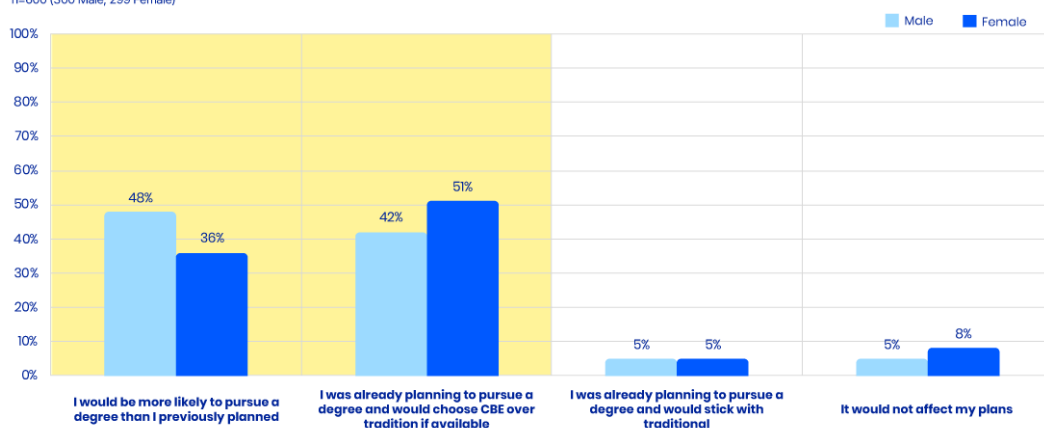


The survey also identified meaningful differences across gender. Men were more likely to view CBE as a new pathway into degree attainment, and more likely to say a CBE option would motivate them to pursue a degree they had not previously planned to pursue. Women, in contrast, were more likely to view it as a more efficient way to complete an already-planned educational journey. In addition, women placed greater emphasis on affordability, tuition transparency, and instructional support and expressed greater concern around AI replacing instructor interactions.

Gender – CBE Impact of Pursuing a Degree | Men are more likely to say CBE would motivate them to pursue a degree they had not previously planned for. Women more often view it as a way to complete an already-planned educational journey.

CBE Impact of Pursuing a Degree (Single-select)

n=600 (300 Male, 299 Female)



Insights and implications:

One of the most notable findings is CBE's potential to engage learners who may not otherwise pursue postsecondary education. Nearly half of men (48%) said a CBE option would make them more likely to pursue a degree they had not previously planned to pursue, compared with 36% of women. This suggests CBE may not simply offer an alternative way to earn a degree but could make postsecondary education worth considering for some who had otherwise opted out. Given that over 60% of men age 25 and older do not hold a bachelor's degree, despite the well-documented earnings premium associated with bachelor's attainment, competency-based education may offer an opportunity to engage this population.

More broadly, CBE's appeal was strong across racial and gender groups, but the aspects of the model that resonated most varied across audiences. Differences in preferences for flexibility, structure, recognition of prior learning, and other attributes indicate that CBE does not have a singularly unifying value proposition. Understanding these distinctions could help institutions design and communicate programs around the needs and motivations different learners bring to their education.

These findings point to CBE's potential as another pathway into postsecondary education, particularly for adults whose needs or circumstances may not align with traditional models. Rather than asking learners to adapt to a single educational experience, CBE may provide an opportunity to create pathways that better adapt to learners, helping more adults build skills and credentials that support economic mobility and workforce participation.



Conclusion

DeVry University's findings largely reinforce what the higher education sector already understands about competency-based education: flexibility, career relevance and recognition of prior learning matter to adult learners. But the research also adds nuance to that picture, particularly around who may be most receptive to CBE and what learners expect from the experience.

Some of the strongest signals came from populations that could be important to expanding postsecondary participation. Older adults showed particularly strong interest in CBE, including indications that its availability could prompt some to consider pursuing a degree they had not otherwise planned to earn. A similar pattern emerged among men, and parents expressed greater enthusiasm for the model than nonparents. Taken together, these findings suggest CBE may be relevant not only for learners already seeking a more flexible route to a degree, but also for some adults who have not seen traditional postsecondary education as a viable or compelling option. The findings do not establish that CBE will increase enrollment or attainment among these populations, but they point to an opportunity worth further exploration as higher education looks for ways to reach adults who have remained outside or stepped away from traditional pathways.

Just as important, the research complicates a long-standing assumption about what flexibility should look like for adult learners. Prospective students valued greater control over when and how they progress, but they also wanted clear milestones, instructor engagement and accountability. In other words, flexibility and structure are not competing priorities. Learners appear to want structured flexibility, with greater agency over how education fits into their lives without sacrificing the support that helps them make progress. The opportunity for CBE may therefore be less about removing structure and more about putting structure in different places, creating pathways that give learners greater control while maintaining clear expectations and human support.

Ultimately, the potential of CBE may extend beyond providing another format for adults already headed to college. DeVry's research suggests it could offer a different point of entry for some learners who have not traditionally seen a degree as a fit for their circumstances, while challenging institutions to think differently about the balance between autonomy and support. That combination of broader reach and structured flexibility may be where CBE has the greatest potential to contribute to postsecondary access and attainment.



Methodology

DeVry University commissioned this research to develop a more nuanced understanding of how prospective learners perceive competency-based education (CBE), what they value in a learning experience, and the factors that shape their higher education decisions. The study explored attitudes toward CBE, flexibility, career outcomes, recognition of prior learning, instructional support, technology and artificial intelligence, with particular attention to how perspectives vary across different learner populations.

The research combined a national quantitative survey with qualitative focus groups, allowing the study to examine both the prevalence of learner attitudes and the experiences and motivations behind them. The findings reflect the perspectives of prospective learners at the time of the study and are intended to contribute to broader conversations about adult learners, postsecondary access and workforce-aligned education.

The research engagement was managed by Ben Aplanalp, John Ruff, Sophie Zachara and Aaron Andersen of MGT. Quantitative sampling and fielding were conducted by Rep Data under the direction of MGT.

Research at a glance

- Sample: 600 prospective students ages 20-59 who planned to enroll or return to school within the next two years
- Geography: United States
- Approach: National online survey supplemented by qualitative focus groups
- Audience: Prospective undergraduate and graduate learners considering postsecondary education
- Topics: Competency-based education, flexibility, career outcomes, recognition of prior learning, instructional support, technology and AI
- Quantitative field dates: March 18 to April 11, 2026
- Qualitative field dates: April 20-23, 2026



Quantitative research

The online survey included 600 prospective learners aged 20-59 who planned to enroll or return to school within the next two years. The sample consisted of 200 prospective undergraduate learners considering an undergraduate certificate, associate degree or bachelor's degree and 400 prospective graduate learners considering a graduate certificate or master's degree. Undergraduate respondents included prospects interested in business, technology and health programs.

Quotas were established to achieve an approximately 50/50 distribution of men and women, while racial, age and geographic distributions were monitored during fielding to limit overrepresentation of particular groups. For the graduate sample, respondents ages 18-19 were excluded and representation among ages 20-21 was intentionally kept to a minimum. Survey data were not weighted.

Qualitative research

Following the survey, qualitative research explored learner motivations, concerns and perceptions in greater depth, providing additional context for interpreting the quantitative findings and understanding the experiences behind them. Eight focus groups with 57 participants were conducted April 20-23, 2026.

Prospective participants met the same general eligibility criteria used for the quantitative research. Current DeVry University students, recruited from university student lists, also participated in the qualitative research.

Limitations and notes

The program names tested during the qualitative phase differed slightly from those tested in the quantitative phase. Findings related specifically to program naming should therefore be interpreted with caution, as comparisons between the qualitative and quantitative results require some inference.

Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Generative AI was used as an editorial tool to help refine author-drafted content and analysis. The author reviewed and approved all final content and remains responsible for the report.



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