

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

RUSH TO COLLEGE MIGHT BE A MISTAKE

Adults with the most student debt have the most qualms about their higher education choices, according to a Gallup poll

By Douglas Belkin
June 1, 2017

U.S. policy-makers have long pushed more high-school students to go to college, citing data showing that college graduates earn more money over their lifetime, pay more taxes, enjoy better health and are more likely to vote.

But in reality, students who rush into college, incur debt and drop out without a degree [can be worse off](#) than those who didn't go at all – fueling an increasing backlash to the one-size-fits all push for students to go straight from high-school to the college quad.

A new Gallup report released Thursday highlights the amount of buyers' remorse many people feel about their college experience.

More than half of 90,000 people surveyed between June 2016 and March 2017, said they would change at least one decision they made about their education if they had to do it all over again: 36 percent would choose a different major, 28 percent would choose a different institution and 12 percent would pursue a different degree.

The people with the [most misgivings](#) are liberal-arts majors who earned bachelor's degrees, 48 percent of them said they would have chosen a different major and 57 percent said they would have made at least one decision differently.

The random-sample survey was funded by the Strada Education Network, a nonprofit in Indiana dedicated to helping young people complete college and launch their careers.

"The voice of the consumer is absent in higher education," said Carol D'Amico, an executive vice president with Strada and a former assistant secretary for adult and vocational education in the George W. Bush administration. "We've gotten the message out that many good paying jobs require credentials after high school, what's less clear is the options open to them to follow their passion."

Perhaps the most profound finding to emerge from the survey is that [going to college](#) to find yourself has become a luxury many Americans can no longer afford. Instead, those who expressed the least regret were best able to align their education with a career.

"If you can afford to go to college, then heading off without a plan is no big deal and it can be a valuable experience. But if you can't afford it, I don't think students should be rushed into going," said Brandon Busteded, executive director of Education and Workforce Development at Gallup. "I think we should encourage students to think about taking a year and working to identify some things they are interested in."

Those who studied a trade or attended graduate school had fewer qualms than those who earned an associate's or undergraduate degree. The people who were most unhappy dropped out of college. And those undergraduates who studied science, technology, engineering or math had fewer misgivings than those who studied liberal arts. People who graduated after the age of 30 were more satisfied with their educational decisions than their younger counterparts.

Less surprising: debt correlates with regret. Also, those who attended for-profit institutions were more remorseful than those who attended either public or private nonprofit schools.

Mike Rowe, the television personality who hosted the show "Dirty Jobs" and has become something of a spokesman for the skilled trades, said he believes there has been a con perpetrated on U.S. families that has convinced them that the most expensive education is the only path to happiness.

"We've managed to marginalize an entire category of jobs," he said. "At the same time, we were sold this idea that if you borrow enough money you will prosper. That's a big lie."

That pitch, which he traces back to a 1970s marketing campaign in the U.S. denigrating the trades and elevating white-collar work, has led to a massive skills gap. He calls the five million unfilled jobs, most of which are blue collar, a national security issue.

Ray Johnson calls it an opportunity. The 21-year-old graduated from high school in Chicago in 2014 then headed to Lincoln College, a private liberal-arts school in downstate Illinois. He dropped out three months later without finishing his first semester.

"I was slacking," he said.

The experience cost him about \$10,000, and he is still getting his finances in order. Last week, he was training to make sandwiches at Potbelly's in downtown Chicago and thinking about how to improve himself.

"I went to college because my mom wanted me to," he said. "I wasn't ready. But now I'm thinking about becoming an athletic trainer."