

# Perceptions of Postsecondary Education and Training in Rural Areas

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Tom Keily and Meghan McCann

In 2018, the World Economic Forum found that [54%](#) of workers will need significant work-related education by 2022. This reality coincides with an economy that is moving toward one where higher wage jobs become more technical, requiring training beyond high school. As the type of employment opportunities and industries located in rural communities has shifted to [more technical fields](#), rural populations face [high unemployment](#) and require additional skills, training and education.

Aside from the need for additional education, challenges connected to access have created opportunity and participation gaps in education programs. Barriers stemming from familial commitments and child care to cost and the lack of resources or support needed to identify educational paths to higher wage jobs can all stymie the pursuit of education and training. Longstanding limits and barriers to [broadband access](#) further contribute to challenges residents of nonmetro areas face in accessing education and work. The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated these challenges. Addressing these barriers to promote higher educational attainment and better access to education can provide economic opportunity and help to [address skill shortages within labor markets](#), especially in rural communities.

In 2020, Strada Education Network and Gallup administered another in a series of surveys aimed at understanding people's opinions of the value of

## Key Takeaways

In analyzing the survey responses from rural residents, key takeaways include:

- Rural respondents were most motivated to pursue education and training for skills development, job advancement and financial benefits.
- Rural respondents indicated agreement with the value they have received from their prior education and training, and saw education and training as beneficial in the eyes of their employers.
- Rural respondents cited many challenges to pursuing additional education, including cost, balancing school with other life responsibilities, the uncertainty of the job market and COVID-19.
- While most rural respondents felt that their own education had been worthwhile, many were skeptical when asked whether higher education in general was worth the cost.
- More than two-thirds of rural respondents answered that the pandemic had affected or disrupted their life. However, this disruption does not appear to have impacted their employment or plans for further education and training for most rural respondents. About one in four stated that the pandemic had made them less likely to enroll in education or training.
- Most rural respondents indicated they are not likely to enroll in higher education and training in the next five years.

education and reasons for participating in postsecondary education and training. This survey was administered broadly and included specific questions about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and workforce participation. Education Commission of the States analyzed the responses from rural residents, specifically, to understand education, training and workforce participation in rural areas, as well as the perceived value of and motivations for participating in postsecondary education and training.

It should be noted that rural communities are not a monolith. Policymakers understanding the diverse viewpoints and perspectives of rural residents is imperative to inform solutions and supports unique to rural communities. The people who face these challenges most directly can offer important perspectives on them. This Special Report explores rural respondents' perceptions of postsecondary education and its relevance to jobs and careers. To focus on rural residents' perspectives, comparison of responses from rural respondents with responses from residents from other geographies will not be made.

In general, rural respondents answered favorably when asked about motivations for past and future education and indicated perceived value in pursuit of education and training. However, barriers were identified, including COVID-19, the cost of education and uncertainty in education and career pathways. For these reasons and others, most respondents indicated they would not pursue additional education and training in the next five years.

## Definitions of Rural

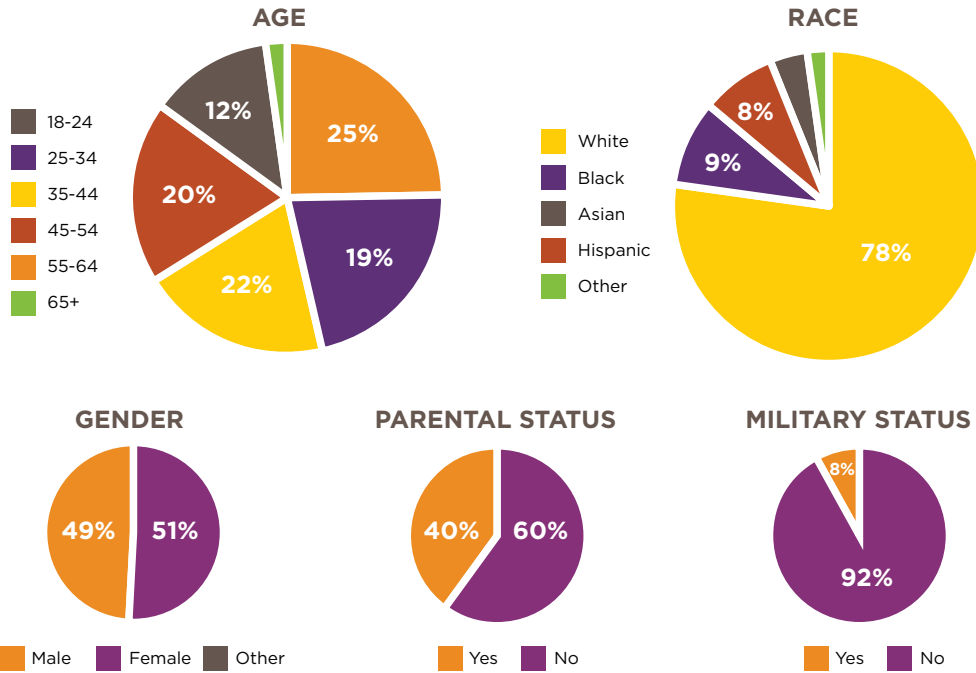
The federal government uses various definitions of “rural” across and within its various agencies. In addition, each state has its own definition of “rural” specific to its own circumstances. For most federal statistical analyses, the definition of rural is associated with the U.S. Office of Management and Budget’s definition of [Metropolitan Statistical Area](#) (MSA):

*“Metropolitan statistical areas consist of the county or counties (or equivalent entities) associated with at least one urbanized area of at least 50,000 population, plus adjacent counties having a high degree of social and economic integration with the core as measured through commuting ties.”*

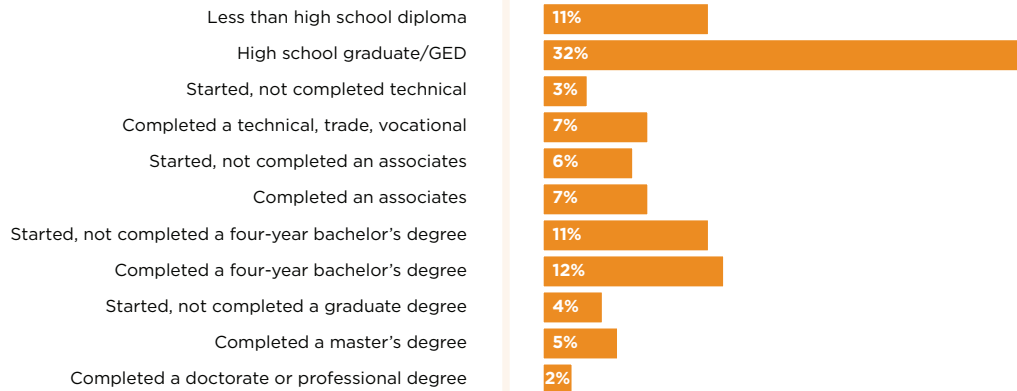
Everything outside of the MSA, referred to as non-MSA, is considered rural for purposes of federal statistical agencies. This definition treats the core city within an MSA as urban, other areas within the MSA as suburban, and everything outside the MSA as rural. This analysis of the Strada-Gallup survey focuses on rural respondents only.

# Demographics of Rural Survey Respondents

Nearly 14,000 people responded to the national Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey in 2020. Of those, 1,618 are residents of rural areas. Below is the demographic breakdown of rural survey respondents.



## EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT



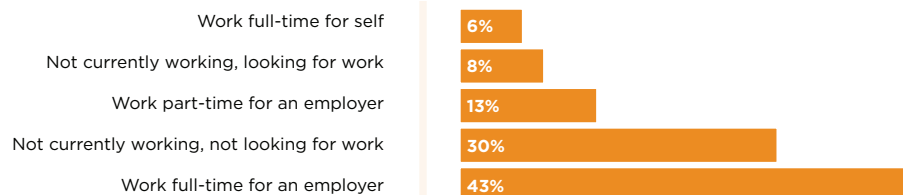
### Top 3 Fields of Study of Professional Certificate Holders

1. Health care
2. Education
3. Mechanic or Repair Technologies

### Top 3 Fields of Study of Bachelor's Degree Holders

1. Business
2. Health Professions and Related Clinical Sciences
3. Liberal Arts and Sciences, General Studies and Humanities

## EMPLOYMENT STATUS



Samples were weighted to correct for unequal selection probability and nonresponse. Demographic weighting targets are based on the 2018 American Community Survey figures for respondents ages 18 to 65. The data were weighted to match national demographics of age, education, gender, race, ethnicity, region, labor force participation and population density.

# Motivations for Education

The survey posed questions that explored respondents' perceptions and views related to their satisfaction with education and life as well as motivations for pursuing past education and possible future education. Generally, rural respondents had a positive view of their highest level of education, and they were motivated by the prospects of career growth, skill development and potential financial benefits in pursuing education.

## Satisfaction With Education, Work and Life

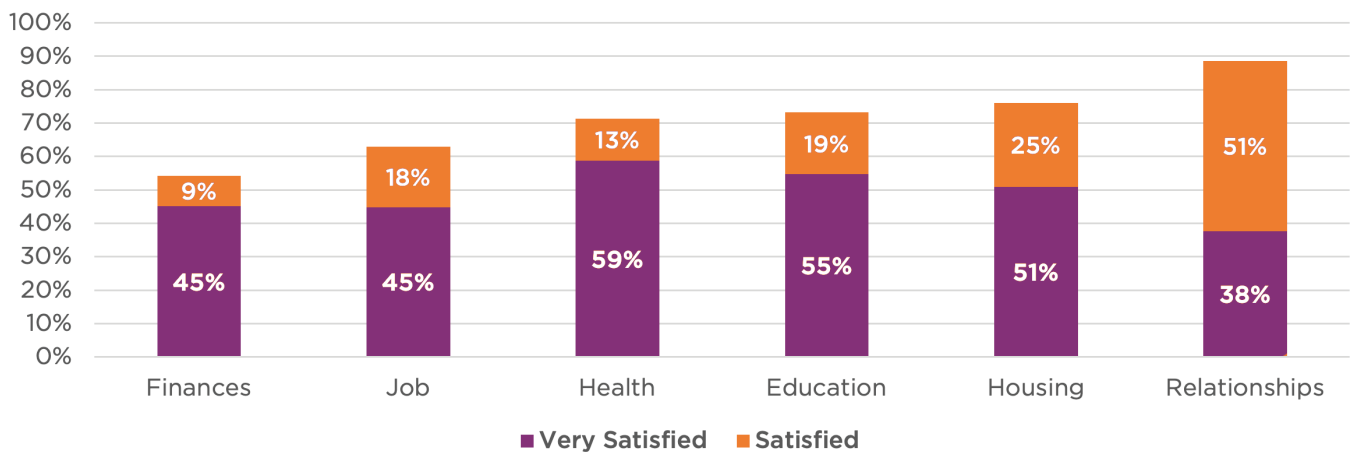
Prior to examining individuals' motivations for pursuing education, it is important to note their general level of satisfaction with education and other aspects of their life. When asked about their satisfaction with different aspects of their life, rural respondents generally had a positive view of their finances, job, health, education, housing and relationships with loved ones. Of those aspects of life, rural respondents were most satisfied with their education, housing and relationships with loved ones.



### OBSERVATIONS:

- Nearly three quarters (73%) of rural respondents reported satisfaction with their level of education.
- Rural respondents indicated general satisfaction (63%) with their job.

**Thinking about the area where you live, how satisfied are you with each of the following?**



# Reasons for Pursuing Their Highest Level of Education

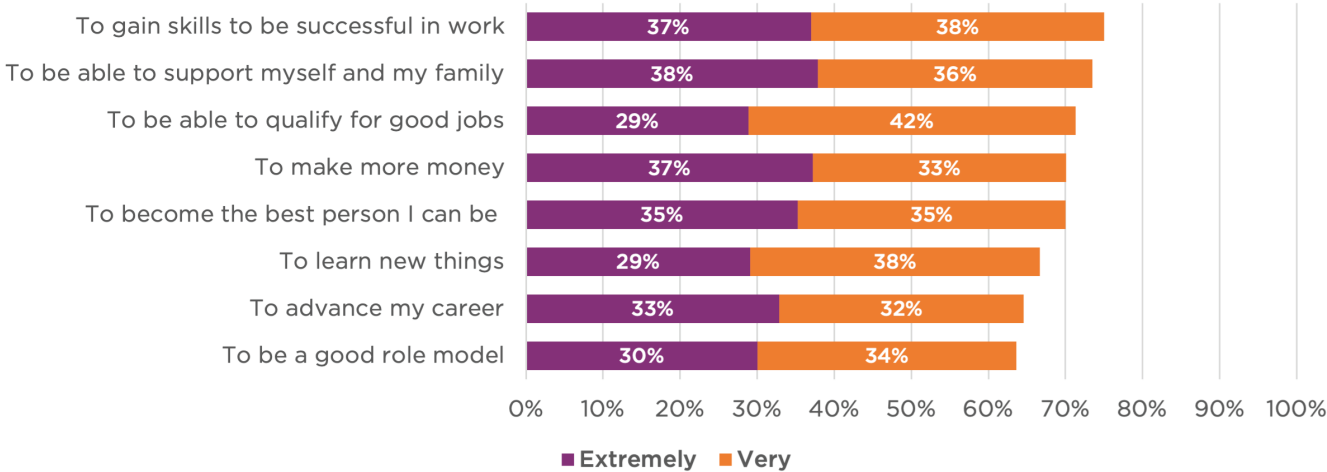
In general, rural respondents expressed high levels of personal and professional motivation for pursuing their highest level of education. Rural respondents indicated that they were most motivated to pursue their highest level of education to qualify for a good job, make more money and gain skills to be successful in work. While career and earnings were important reasons for pursuing their highest level of education, nearly two-thirds indicated they were also motivated by personal and social reasons, such as being a good role model or being the best person they could be.



## OBSERVATIONS:

- Three out of four (75%) rural respondents felt strongly that gaining skills to be successful in work was an important factor in deciding to pursue their highest level of education.
- Rural respondents reported that earning more money (70%) and being able to support themselves and their families (74%) were reasons for pursuing their highest level of education.

### How important were each of the following reasons for you personally in deciding to pursue your education?



## Motivations for Future Education and Training

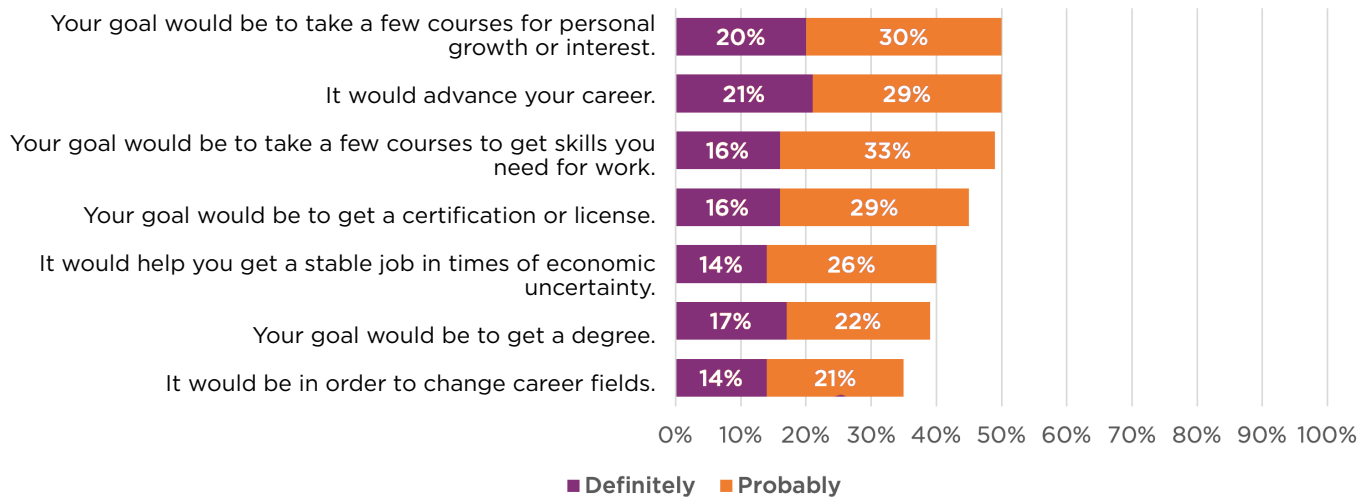
When asked about pursuing additional education or training, rural respondents indicated that they would be primarily motivated by the desire for personal growth or career advancement. Rural respondents were more interested in taking courses for personal interest than they were in earning a degree. Further, rural respondents reported that earning a degree or pursuing education to change careers were not primary goals.



### OBSERVATIONS:

- Half of rural respondents believe additional education would advance their career. A similar percentage of respondents (49%) indicated they would take a few courses to get skills they need for work.
- Less than half (40%) of the rural respondents saw enrolling in education as a means to get a stable job in times of economic uncertainty.
- Of rural respondents, 39% indicated that their goal would be to seek a degree if they went for additional education. By comparison, 44% indicated they would likely pursue a certificate/certification/license.

### If you were to go on for additional education...



# Challenges to Pursuing Additional Education and Training

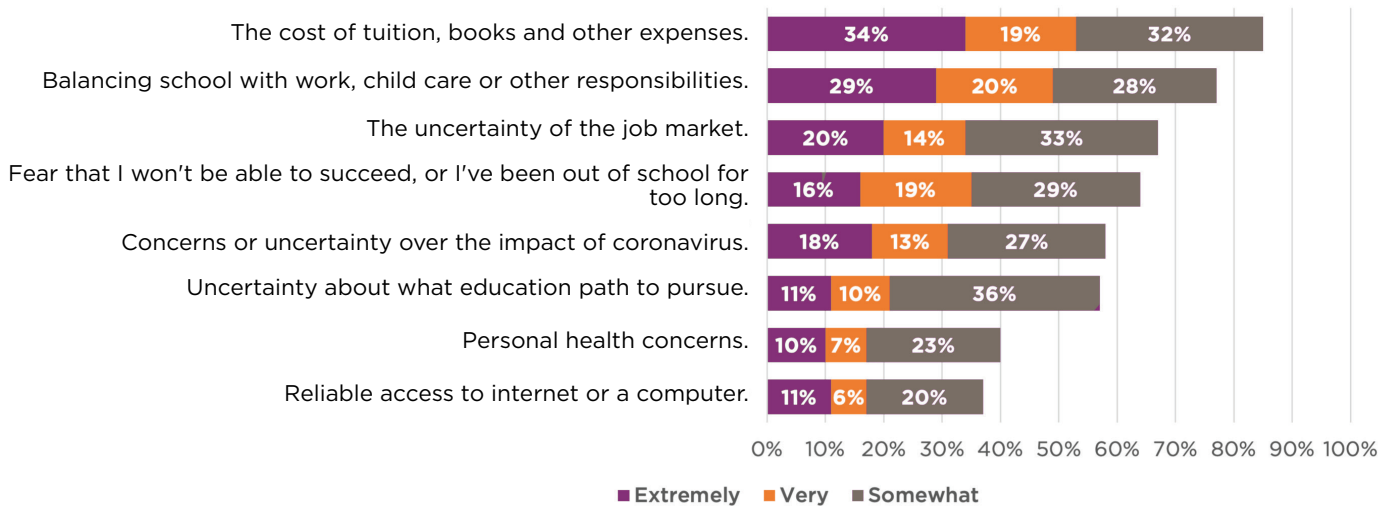
When considering a list of possible challenges to pursuing future education, rural respondents were most concerned about costs (85%), balancing school with other responsibilities (77%), the uncertainty of the job market (67%) and their ability to succeed (64%).



## OBSERVATIONS:

- Of rural respondents, 77% stated that balancing work, child care or other responsibilities would be a challenge. However, when considering the possibility of engaging in future education, 54% felt they would be able to balance responsibilities at school, work and home.
- A little over half (57%) of rural respondents expressed uncertainty or concern about what education path they would pursue.
- Reliable access to internet or a computer was identified as a concern for just over a third of rural respondents (37%).

### How challenging would each of the following be for you, personally, in pursuing education and training?



## Likelihood of Pursuing Future Education and Training

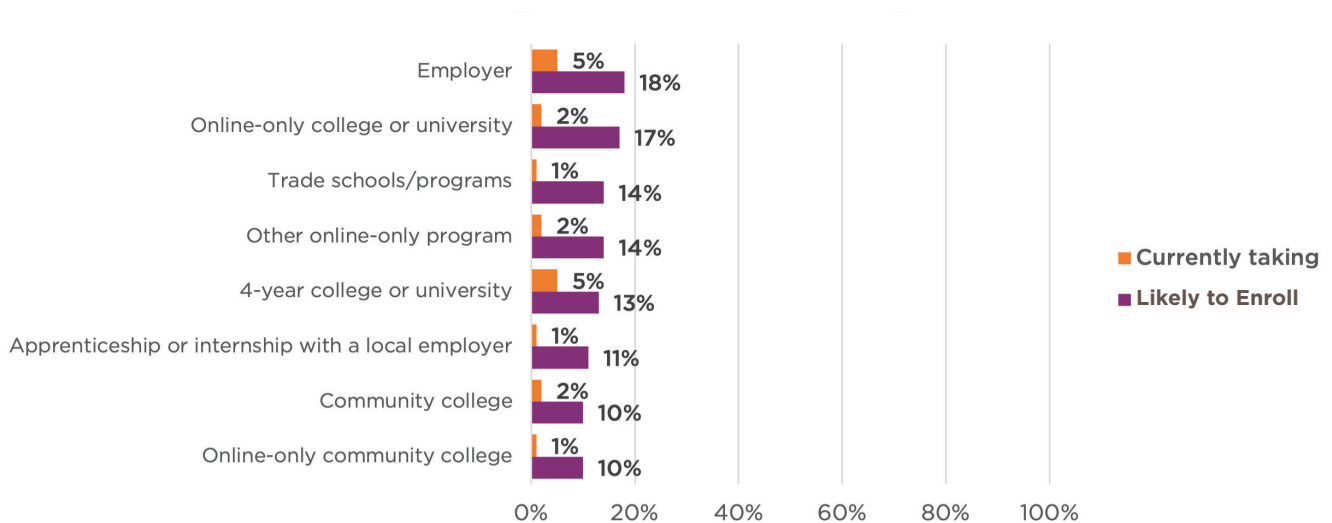
Despite reporting that they are motivated by career prospects and earning potential associated with education, just over a third of rural respondents anticipated they would enroll in education or training in the next five years. When looking across different education types, the likelihood of enrolling in a particular type of education in the next five years is more variable. Further, very few rural respondents across all education types said they were currently taking classes.



### OBSERVATIONS:

- Of rural respondents currently enrolled in education and training, the highest percentage were engaged in employer-based training (5%) or at four-year colleges and universities (5%).
- Rural respondents reported that they were least likely to enroll in online community colleges, community colleges and apprenticeship/internships with local employers.
- Rural respondents were most likely to enroll in education and training provided by employers or online-only colleges and universities.
- Overall, 39% of rural residents say they are likely to enroll in some form of education and training within the next five years.

### Likelihood of enrolling in courses and training in next 5 years



Regardless of their motivations for seeking additional education and training, most rural respondents indicated that cost, personal and work responsibilities, and uncertainty in the labor market are barriers to pursuing additional education or training.



# Value of Education

In addition to questions about motivations for past and future education and training, the survey asked respondents to reflect on how well their education developed important skills, what they see as important to employers and whether their highest level of education was worth the cost. Generally, rural respondents agreed that their prior education and training was valuable and that employers attach value to specific sets of skills and experience. Even so, rural respondents were split on whether higher education was worth the cost.

## Value of Prior Education

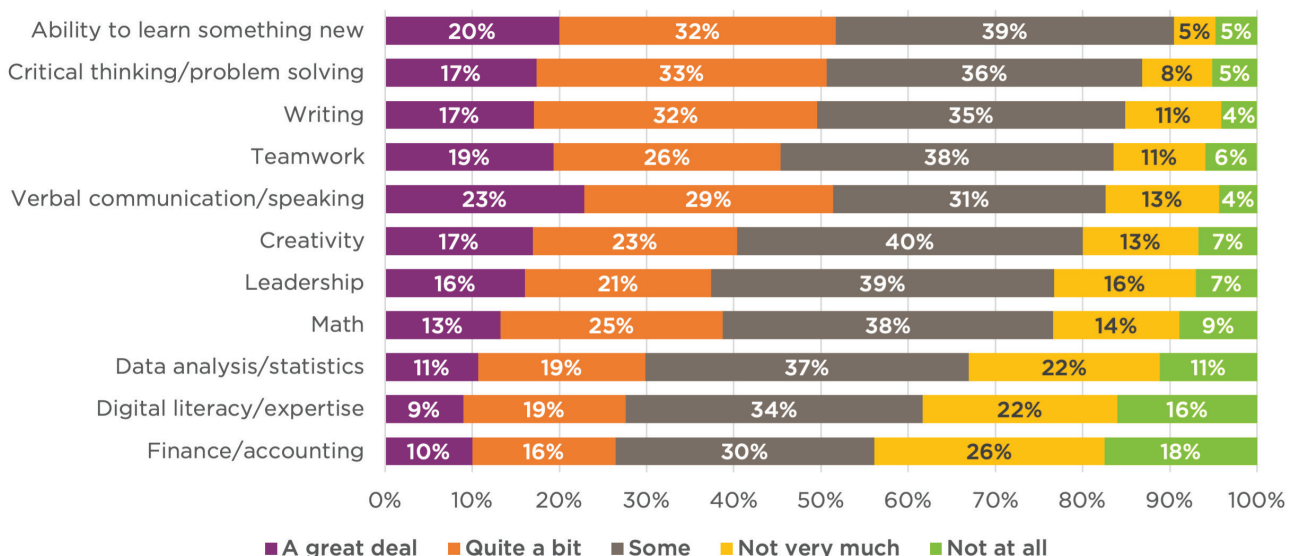
The survey asked respondents to reflect on their past education and training to determine if they benefited from those experiences. As discussed above, nearly half of rural respondents indicated that they were motivated to pursue prior and future education and training to gain skills applicable to their job. When asked about the skills they gained from prior education and training, most rural respondents felt that their education helped them develop skills from critical thinking and problem solving to data analysis and digital literacy.



### OBSERVATION:

- More than 90% of rural respondents felt their education developed their ability to learn something new, while just over 50% indicated they developed more specialized finance and accounting skills.

### How much did your education help you develop the following skills?



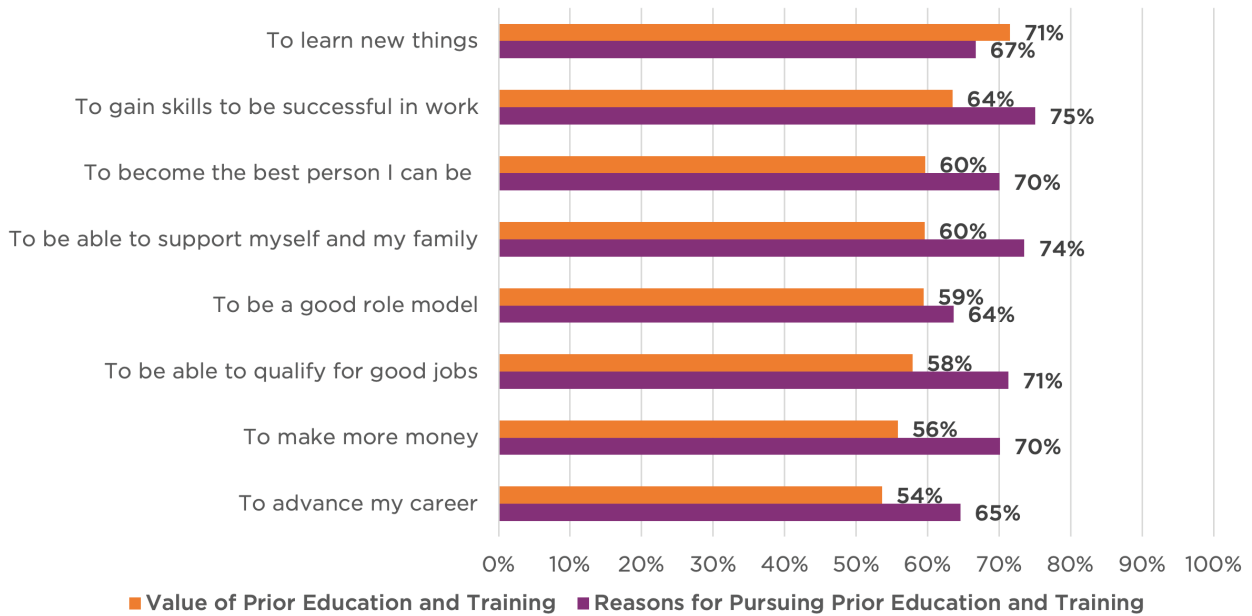
The survey also asked respondents to identify, looking back, whether their highest level of education met their expectations. In general, there is a gap between what motivated respondents to pursue education and the value they felt was gained.



### OBSERVATIONS:

- While about three-quarters (74%) were motivated to pursue education to be able to support themselves and their families, only 60% felt that their education had helped them to achieve this goal. Similarly, 70% were motivated by the desire to earn more money, but only 56% felt that their education had helped them to do so.
- While two-thirds (66%) of rural respondents indicated they pursued education and training to advance their career, just over half of respondents (54%) felt they gained that value.

### Perceived value gained by prior education



## Employees' Perceptions of Skills Their Employers Value

Rural respondents felt that employers tend to value skills and work experience over specific educational experience when it comes to hiring, promotion or pay raises. Most rural respondents felt that employers attached value to prior work experience, and technical and interpersonal skills.

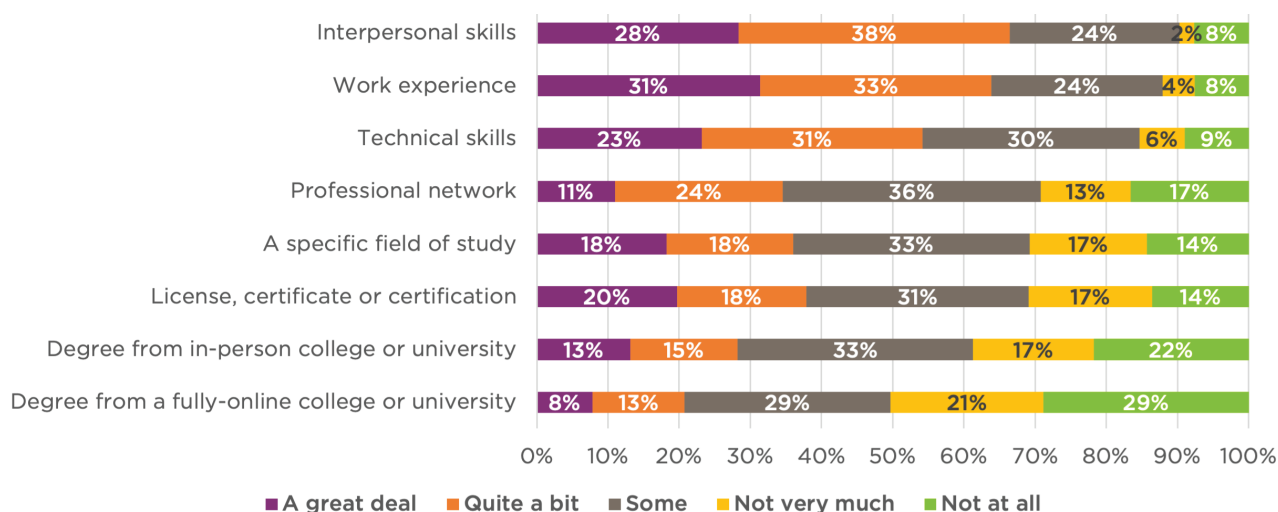
By contrast, rural respondents indicated that their employers placed the least value on degrees from colleges and universities, whether in-person or online.



**OBSERVATIONS:**

- Between 80% to 90% of rural respondents felt that employers attached at least some value to prior work experience, and technical and interpersonal skills.
- By contrast, 50% of rural respondents indicated their employer valued degrees from an online-only college or university, and 61% agreed that their employer placed at least some value on degrees from an in-person college or university.

**When it comes to getting hired, promoted or a raise in pay, how much does your employer value the following:**



**Cost of Education and Training**

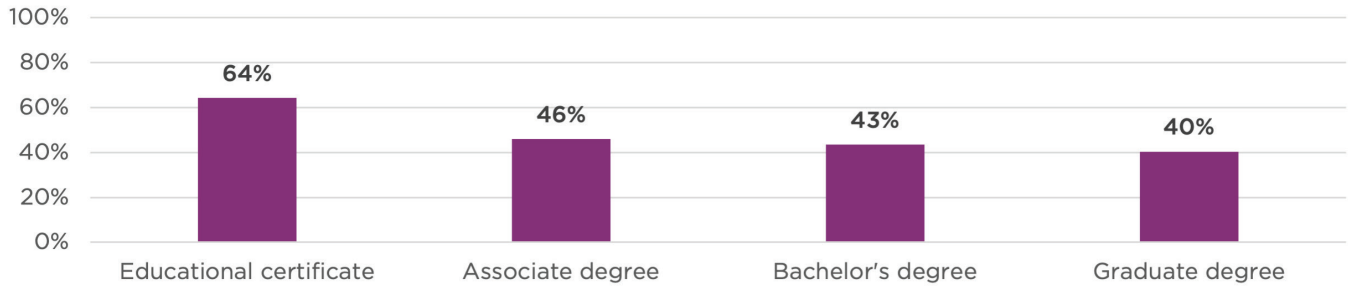
Rural respondents generally felt that higher levels of education offered less value for the money. Rural respondents also indicated that they were either not sure or did not think that pursuing future education would be worth the cost.



**OBSERVATION:**

- When asked to indicate generally whether a specific type of education was worth the cost, rural respondents' perceptions of cost effectiveness decline precipitously the higher the level of education.

### Getting a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ is worth the cost.



## Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on every corner of the world. While the pandemic may have influenced respondents' answers to every survey question, the survey also included questions specific to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on life, employment, and plans for future higher education and training.

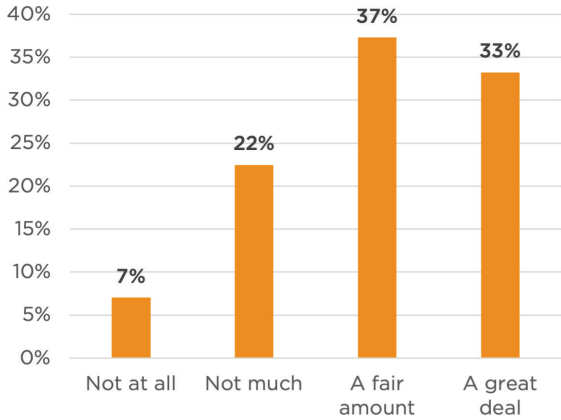
Not surprisingly, more than two-thirds of rural respondents answered that the pandemic had affected or disrupted their lives. However, this disruption does not appear to have affected employment or plans for further education and training for most rural respondents.



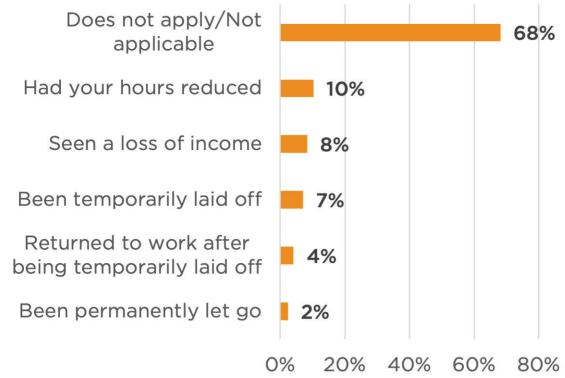
### OBSERVATIONS:

- Just over 30% of rural respondents indicated that they had seen changes to their employment because of the pandemic.
- About 30% of rural respondents said that the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on their plans to enroll in education and training programs in the future. About 25% of rural respondents said that the COVID-19 pandemic had made them less likely to enroll in education and training, while only 5% said that the pandemic had made them more likely to enroll.
- Just over half (58%) of rural respondents indicated that concerns and uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic would be a challenge to future education or training.

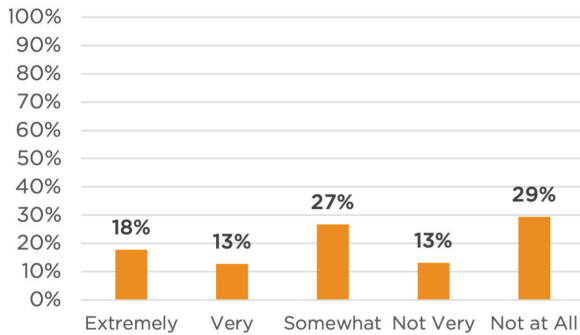
**To what extent has your own life been affected or disrupted by the coronavirus (COVID-19) situation?**



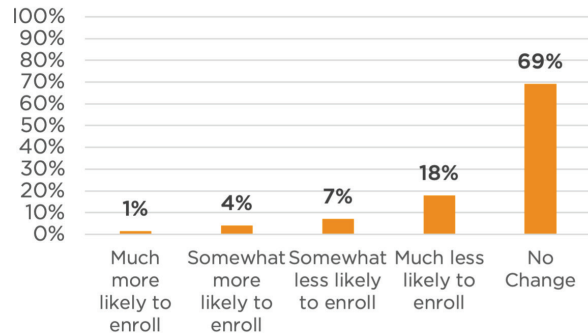
**Have you experienced any of the following changes to your employment as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19)?**



**How challenging would concerns or uncertainty over the impact of COVID-19 be for you, personally, in pursuing education and training?**



**How has COVID-19 affected your interest in enrolling in an education or training program? Would you say you are:**



## Final Thoughts

The 2020 Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey demonstrates that rural respondents are motivated to pursue postsecondary education and training and see value in those endeavors. Most rural respondents indicated that, while there were significant challenges in pursuing additional education and training, most were not insurmountable with one exception. Many rural respondents indicated that the cost of education and training was a barrier to their future pursuit of postsecondary education and training. They were less likely than non-rural respondents to feel that bachelor’s degrees and graduate degrees would be worth the cost.

However, rural areas are not monolithic, and each community has a unique experience that requires its own approach. Understanding those unique motivations and challenges will be imperative to

identifying the best solutions and supports. Based on the survey findings, some considerations for policymakers in rural areas include:

- Identifying opportunities to reduce financial barriers to education and training and make financial pathways more accessible to students to meet both personal and workforce needs.
- Encouraging collaboration among local employers, K-12 education, postsecondary education and training providers to create incentives for education, training and participation in the workforce that align with local needs and student expectations.
- Providing support and guidance to help potential students identify education and careers pathways.

This survey provides critical point in time information for policymakers and is one part of a larger landscape of perspectives in rural communities. Further considerations for policymakers as they seek to address education and training in rural areas include:

- Bear in mind the unique needs and perspectives of people across increasingly diverse communities in the state.
- Supporting rural service institutions in addressing the unique needs of rural communities.
- Identifying specific systemic barriers to participation in postsecondary education and training for rural residents, including affordable housing, child care, transportation or other wraparound supports.
- Defining “rural” in ways that best guide the state’s response to specific needs in rural communities.

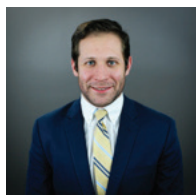
## Resources

- [Principles of Policy Design for Connecting Education to Work](#) (Education Commission of the States)
- [The Need for Upskilling and Reskilling in a Time of Crisis](#) (Education Commission of the States )
- [Workforce Development Blog Series](#) (Education Commission of the States)
- [The Future of Jobs Report 2018](#) (World Economic Forum)
- [Job Growth and Education Requirements Through 2020](#) (Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce)
- [Skills Mismatch Fact Sheet](#) (National Skills Coalition)

# About the Authors

## Tom Keily

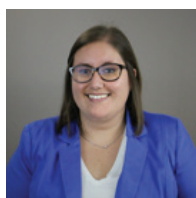
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As a senior policy analyst, Tom works on topics relating to connections between education and workforce development, among other P-20 education policy topics. Prior to joining Education Commission of the States, Tom worked in financial service policy in New York State and taught middle school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Tom is dedicated to providing state policymakers with quality research that supports them in making a positive impact on students' lives. Contact Tom at [tkeily@ecs.org](mailto:tkeily@ecs.org).

## Meghan McCann

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As a senior policy analyst, Meghan works on K-12 accountability and early childhood education, among other P-20 education policy topics. Prior to joining Education Commission of the States, Meghan spent six years at the National Conference of State Legislatures, focusing on human services policy, and earlier, at the Colorado General Assembly as a legislative aide. Meghan believes that education has a tremendous impact on, and is greatly influenced by, other governmental systems, including child welfare, public assistance, housing and health. Contact Meghan at [mmccann@ecs.org](mailto:mmccann@ecs.org).

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