

People Want Information to Improve Their Career Trajectories and Access New Opportunities

STATE LEADERS CAN PROVIDE ACCESS TO DATA THAT HELPS PEOPLE GAIN ADDITIONAL TRAINING AND SKILLS IN A CHANGING JOB MARKET

Adult learners seek certificate, short-term, and noncredit programs—and actionable information about those programs—that will enable them to progress along their workforce pathways.¹

The Data Quality Campaign’s (DQC) national poll of adult learners looking to enhance their careers, administered by The Harris Poll, asked individuals who are, were, or are interested in being enrolled in an accredited certificate program how they have used data to explore and select certificate, short-term, and noncredit programs.² Respondents reported that they value challenging themselves, seeking out skills that allow them to stay employed in a changing job market, and pursuing learning opportunities that offer tangible career and personal benefits.



The workforce landscape is constantly changing and with it the demands on workers to gain new skills and education. States have an opportunity to provide their current and future workforce with valuable information for successfully navigating that pathway. To do so, states must prioritize robust data systems that enable access to information on quality, flexible programs; costs; and return on investment.

Adult learners value the flexibility, relative speed, and ease of upskilling offered by credential, short-term, and noncredit programs.

93% agree that continually upskilling is essential and can increase job security.

91% agree that credential, short-term, and noncredit programs offer focused learning that can quickly enhance their expertise.

85% agree that these programs are just as effective in securing employment as a traditional four-year degree.

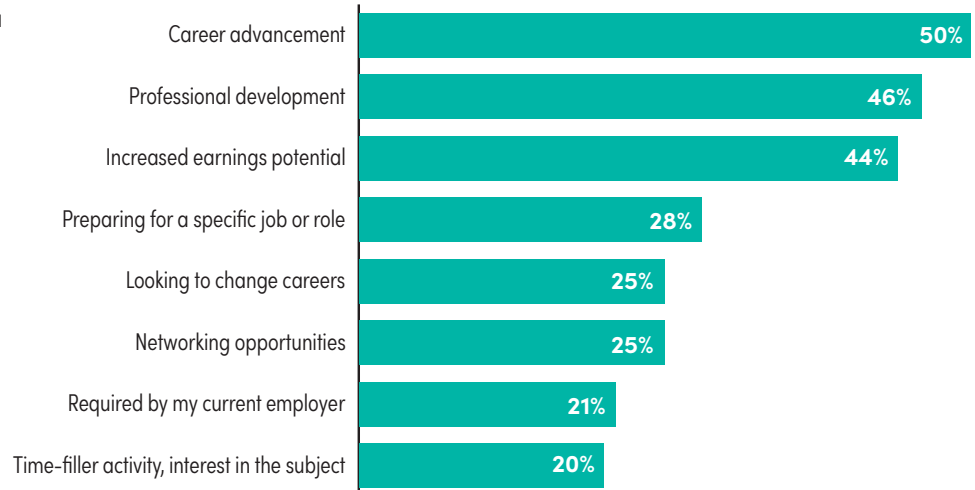
94% agree that certificate programs help them follow, anticipate, and adapt to industry trends.

¹ This report uses the National Center for Education Statistics definition: “Certificates require the equivalent of less than 4 academic years of full-time college-level study. Certificates, as classified by length, can require: (1) less than 1 year of study, (2) at least 1 but less than 2 years of study, or (3) at least 2 but less than 4 years of study.” https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ctes/tables/glossary_college.asp

² This survey was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of the Data Quality Campaign August 5–9, 2024, among 1,510 career enhancers. Out of this total, the survey included three groups: 815 active career enhancers, 536 former career enhancers, and 159 potential career enhancers. A career enhancer was defined as someone who was currently enrolled or previously enrolled in an accredited certificate program to advance their career or someone who was somewhat, very, or extremely interested in enrolling in one.

Adult learners pursue certificate programs for various reasons—most notably, for career advancement, personal development, and increased earnings potential.

Which of the following, if any, are reasons you decided to pursue/are considering pursuing a program and/or credential?



Adult learners need access to state-level, longitudinal data as well as local data to make informed decisions about their futures. Right now, state data systems do not provide sufficient information for career enhancers to navigate their future educational opportunities using trusted, vetted information.

Adult learners can access basic, descriptive information on certificate, short-term, and noncredit programs, but the quality of that information is unclear. Relatively few career enhancers obtain this information from government sources.

58% gathered program information via media or online research, with personal online research representing the most common method.

17% gathered information from a government website.

18% found the information they sought on government websites. Of those:

46% used a local government website.

50% used a state government website.

48% used a federal government website.

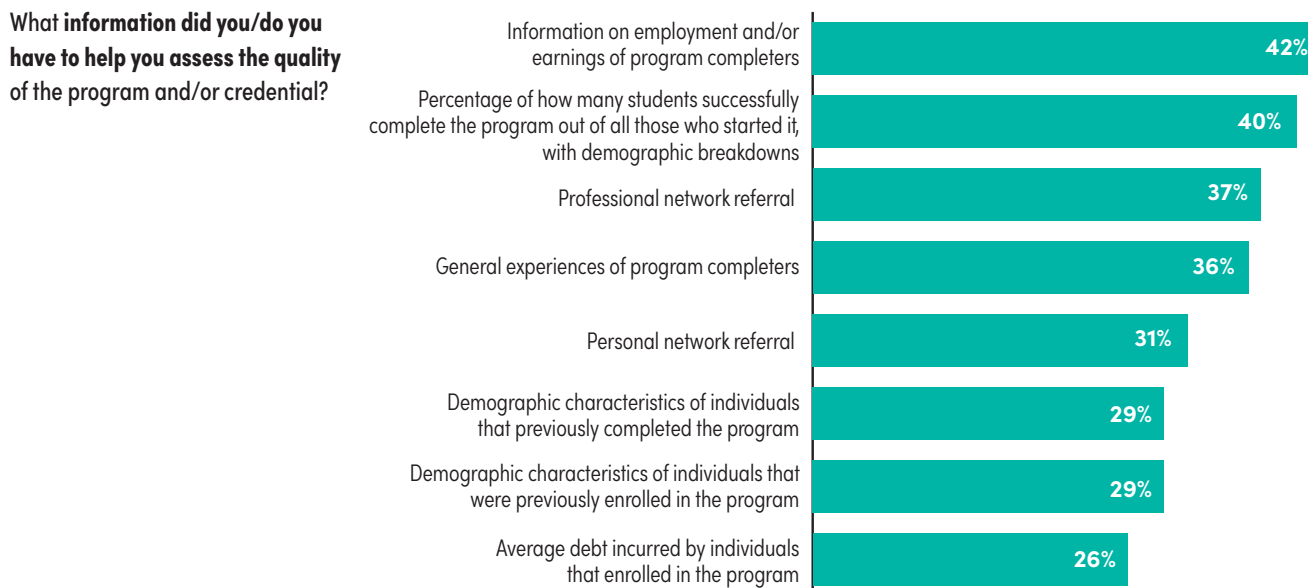
Similar proportions used those respective websites to assess program quality.

Adult learners most commonly use their own research and information publicized by educational institutions themselves to learn about certificate programs.

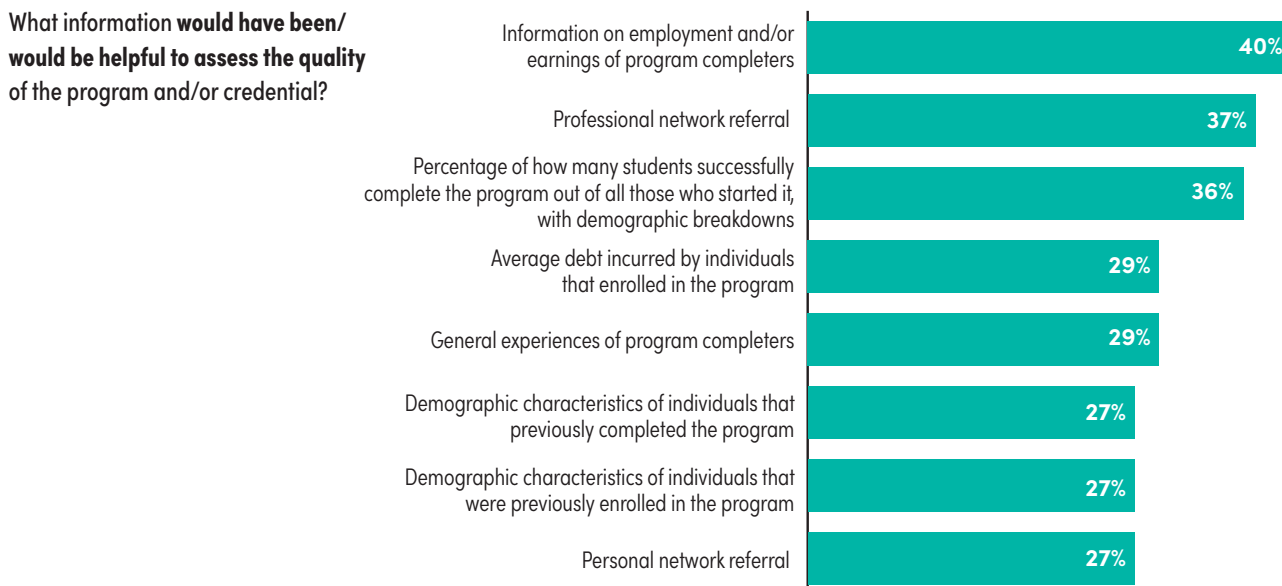
84% received guidance from mentors, friends, or family to make an informed decision about pursuing a certificate program.

80% received guidance from career advisors or counselors, who may or may not have been affiliated with a specific program or educational institution.

Adult learners who did have information on certificate, short-term, and nondegree programs to assess program quality most often had access to demographic data on program completers as well as employment and earnings information.



For those adult learners who could not assess information on certificate, short-term, and nondegree program quality, data on employment outcomes, referrals from professional colleagues, and completion rates would have been particularly helpful.



Adult learners looking to enhance their careers deserve meaningful access to data that will help meet their needs—including understanding industry trends, locating high-quality programs in their area, and assessing the full cost of attendance and return on investment of those programs, among others. Statewide longitudinal data systems (SLDSs) facilitate integrating and disaggregating data on earnings and other workforce training program outcomes—enabling career enhancers and others navigating the workforce to make informed decisions. In an information environment rife with data of unknown origin and quality, states must establish and enhance their SLDSs to provide usable, accessible tools for career enhancers, other job seekers, policymakers, and the public to find vetted data.

DQC envisions state data and data ecosystems that meet the current and future information needs of adult learners looking to enhance their careers and other job seekers.

Read more about this use case, other education and workforce data use cases, and exemplary work from the field [here](#).