

Rethinking Return of Investment: Assessing Perceptions of Education Quality Among Recent Graduates

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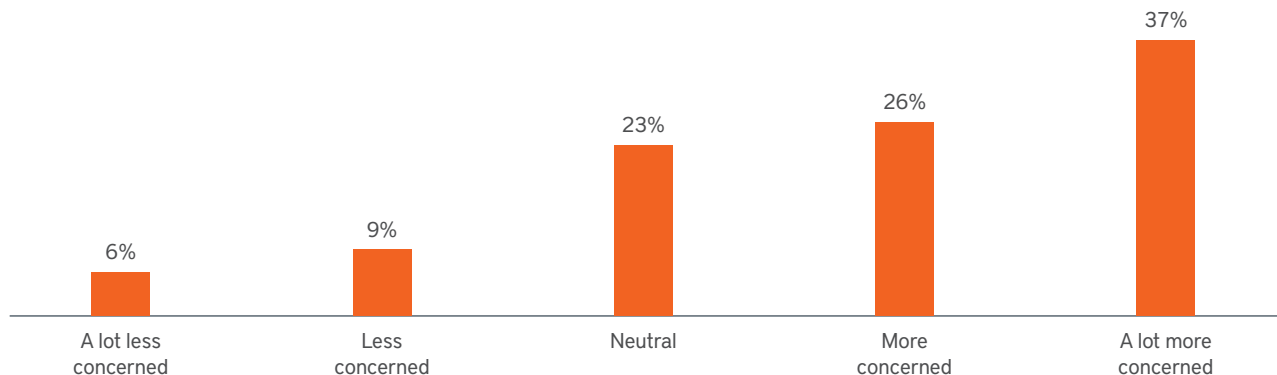
Introduction

The alignment between education and workforce opportunities continues to be a central concern for students and institutions alike, particularly as graduates navigate an increasingly uncertain labor market. This brief examines perceptions of educational quality, preparedness, and outcomes among individuals who graduated between fall 2024 and summer 2025. The analysis uses data from Trellis Strategies' Modern Learner Voices, a follow-up survey administered to Modern Learner Network respondents who completed the 2024 Student Financial Wellness Survey. Despite generally positive assessments of their educational experiences, job market anxiety is a prominent stressor shaping how graduates may evaluate the quality of their degrees. Sixty-three percent of respondents reported being more concerned about the job market than they were a year earlier, signaling heightened uncertainty as students transition from education to employment. As labor market conditions continue to evolve quickly, higher education institutions face increasing pressure to update curricula and expand learning



Sixty-three percent of respondents reported being more concerned about the job market than they were a year earlier.

Q13: Are you more or less concerned about the job market today than you were 12 months ago?

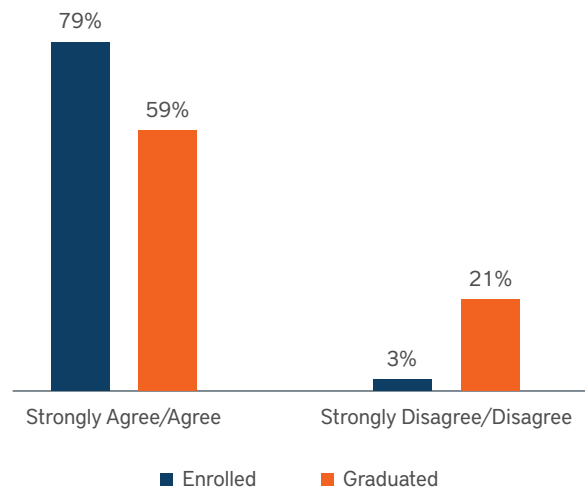


opportunities that develop flexible, transferable skill sets, enabling graduates to position themselves competitively amid an unpredictable workforce landscape.

Perceptions of Educational Value and Quality of Life

Against this backdrop of labor market stress, graduates continue to view their education as a worthwhile investment, though perceived economic and life outcomes are more muted. Before graduation, 70 percent of respondents felt that the cost of college was a good investment for their financial future, and 79 percent felt that a college degree would help to provide them with a higher quality of life. After graduation, 73 percent of the same respondents agreed or strongly agreed that college was a good investment, while only 59 percent felt their degree had resulted in a higher quality of life. This shift reflects that students generally project long-term gains from their degree, but the immediate realities of an uncertain job market and early career challenges fall short of the post-graduation outcomes they expected while enrolled. Findings show that employment outcomes are strongly associated with both perceived financial return on college and quality of life. Graduated respondents who were employed either full-time or part-time, were more likely than those not employed to say the cost of college was a good investment (84 percent vs. 47 percent), and more likely to say a college degree has provided a higher quality of life (70 percent vs. 26 percent).

A college degree will/has provided me with a higher quality of life



Conclusion

Experiential learning emerges as a key factor supporting perceived educational value in a volatile job market. Among graduates who participated in any work-based learning experiences while enrolled, 77 percent agreed that the cost of college was a good investment, compared with 67 percent of those who did not participate in such experiences. Perceptions of educational quality and value are increasingly tied to career relevance, adaptability, and continued learning opportunities. Overall, these findings underscore the role of external labor markets in shaping perceptions of quality and point to opportunities for institutions to continue strengthening employer partnerships, expand career placement support, and better align curricula with evolving workforce demands.

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Cornett, A. (2026, February). Invisible on Campus: The Student Loneliness Crisis. Trellis Strategies.
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