

DC Alumni Early Career Outcomes Survey

Understanding alumni employment, finances, and well-being

The Office of Education Through Employment Pathways (ETEP) is committed to supporting DC residents in accessing family-sustaining careers and achieving economic mobility. In pursuit of this goal, ETEP produces actionable research to inform strategies that strengthen DC’s education and workforce systems. To understand the post-high school experience of young people who graduate from the District’s public and public charter school system, ETEP conducted the Alumni Early Career Outcomes Survey, which asked questions about education, employment, and quality-of-life outcomes for recent alumni. The survey focused specifically on alumni five to seven years past high school graduation, meaning that they graduated in the classes of 2017 - 2019.

This work builds on the DC Policy Center’s report on early career outcomes¹ as well as CityWorks DC’s past efforts to conduct the 2023 Alumni Early Career Outcomes Survey² in partnership with Bain & Company who offered their services on a pro-bono basis. In fall 2024, ETEP executed this survey in collaboration with Bain and Company, as a part of a national survey that included more than 2,600 high school alumni from the classes of 2017-2019³.

This survey also aims to be responsive to community feedback. In spring 2024, ETEP hosted engagement sessions with more than 200 students, families, educators, policymakers, and program leaders to gather feedback on office priorities. Community members specifically emphasized the importance of hearing directly from young adults about holistic measures of success, including well-being.⁴ This information provides additional nuance to discussions concerning whether youth and adults are adequately supported throughout their career journey.

This brief is the first in a series of publications focused on understanding insights from alumni responses. It specifically focuses on answering the question: What can we learn about the employment, financial well-being, and overall well-being of survey respondents?

Survey Respondents

Nearly 500 alumni from public high schools across the District responded to the survey in fall 2024. Respondents received a \$15 gift card incentive for their participation in the. To be eligible for the survey, respondents needed to have graduated from a DC public or public charter school in 2017 - 2019 and be employed at least part-time, working 20 hours per week. Full-time advanced degree students who were not currently employed were also eligible to participate.

¹DC Policy Center, DC high school alumni reflections on their early career outcomes. November 2021. Retrieved from [DC high school alumni reflections on their early career outcomes - DC Policy Center](#).

²Charter School Growth Fund & Bain and Company, Alumni Early Career Outcomes Report: CityWorks DC. December 2023.

³Bain and Company, 2024 Alumni Early Career Outcomes Fact Base.

⁴Office of Education Through Employment Pathways, [Community Engagement Findings Report](#).

ETEP partnered with schools, agencies, and community organizations to reach as many alumni as possible for a representative sample of the District’s public school students. In examining the survey findings, it is important to consider the distribution of survey respondents and how they compare to the overall graduating classes. Although the ETEP team conducted outreach with every public and public charter high school in DC, DC Public Schools alumni accounted for most of the respondents, representing 82 percent of the overall survey responses. This means DC Public Schools alumni are overrepresented among respondents, as about 67 percent of graduates in the graduating classes of 2017 – 2019 were from DC Public Schools.⁵ Alumni who pursued a 2-year or 4-year degree were also overrepresented in survey responses. While alumni who pursued post-secondary education accounted for 75 percent of respondents, an average of 41 percent of the graduating classes of 2017 – 2019 pursued post-secondary degrees.

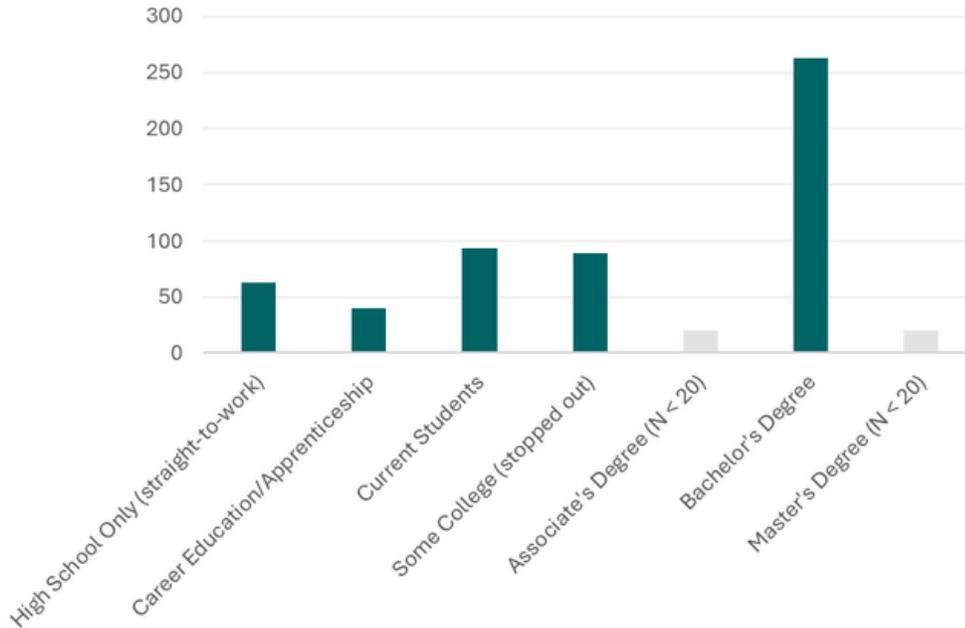
Given the proportion of survey respondents with a bachelor’s degree in comparison to others, it is important to recognize the wide variation across the size of each sub-population of survey respondents categorized by their highest degree attained. While this brief aims to uplift the perspectives and findings of alumni across all sub-groups, understanding the extent to which each group is representative of the larger District population is critical to inform any conclusions that may be drawn about specific pathways. As demonstrated in Figure 1, there were fewer than 50 alumni whose highest degree was career education or apprenticeship compared to more than 250 respondents who attained a bachelor’s degree. While data shows that roughly 60 percent of the average graduating class did not pursue a 2-year or 4-year degree, there is a significant data gap to grasp the full scope of high school graduates who go on to enroll in a career education program or apprenticeship and attain credentials for their long-term career journey.⁶

Similarly, respondents who earned an associate’s degree or others who did not attain a post-secondary degree are also underrepresented in this group of survey respondents. Although these findings cannot be assumed to represent the perspectives of all graduates, the insights shared through this brief help shed light on behavioral patterns among each sub-group of respondents, and how alumni insights and trends may reflect system gaps or areas of opportunity to enhance outcomes.

⁵Office of the State Superintendent of Education. Public SY16-17,17-18, and 18-19 Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates. Retrieved from [High School Graduation Rates | osse](#).

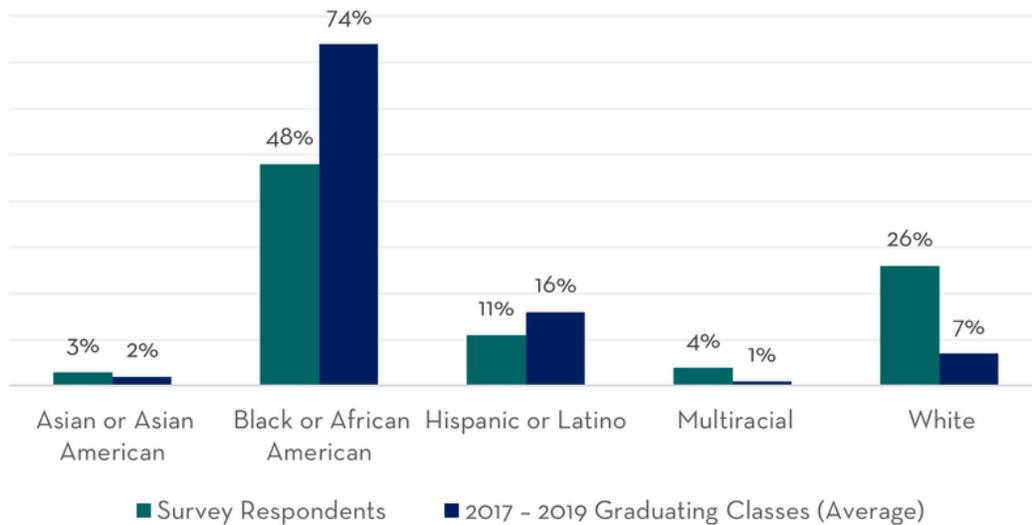
⁶OSSE. 2023. “High school & college milestones: A cohort-based illustration of DC’s trends.” Retrieved from [DC Trends 2011 12 Cohort High School and College Milestones January 2023.pdf](#).

Figure 1. Distribution of survey respondents by highest degree attained



Examining response rates by demographic also reveals that Black, Hispanic, and Latino alumni were underrepresented, while white respondents were overrepresented among survey respondents as indicated in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Distribution of survey respondents by race compared to graduating class average



Across all sub-groups, findings are shared following the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) student privacy and data suppression policy⁷. Any sub-group with 10 or fewer respondents reflected in the data was omitted from the findings highlighted in this brief. The findings also do not reflect outcomes for sub-groups where less than 20 participants provided data, as meaningful insights could not be drawn from this small sample size.

Key Findings

- Employment and financial stability
 - Across measures of financial well-being, there are significant racial disparities in outcomes, with the largest gaps being between white and Black respondents. These gaps persist even within alumni who have all earned a bachelor's degree. For example, Black and white alumni with their bachelor's degrees show nearly identical employment rates, but only 43 percent of Black survey respondents with their bachelor's degree reported earning a living wage compared to 86 percent of white survey respondents with their bachelor's degree.
 - There are also significant disparities in economic outcomes between those who completed a post-secondary degree and those who did not, particularly related to the share of respondents earning a living wage. Whereas 65 percent of respondents with their bachelor's degree report earning a living wage, only 17 percent of respondents with only their high school diploma reported earning a living wage. Consistent with DC Policy Center's findings in their 2021 report on early career outcomes, alumni who attained post-secondary degrees were more likely to report higher incomes⁸.
 - Across racial groups, most respondents report not feeling financially stable in their current role. Black alumni reported the lowest level of financial stability, trailing all other respondents by 10 - 20 percentage points, with only 29 percent of Black respondents reporting they feel financially stable.
 - Alumni with some college experience who stopped out before earning a degree face unique barriers due to the combination of no post-secondary degree and debt. These respondents were less likely to feel financially stable than peers who had earned only a high school diploma and were less likely to feel financially secure than those who earned an associate's, bachelor's or master's degree.
- Overall well-being
 - Across all respondents, DC alumni consistently indicated concerns about their overall well-being. Overall, 47 percent of respondents classified themselves as "struggling" compared to 36 percent of survey respondents who described themselves as currently "thriving."

⁷Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). Student Privacy and Data Suppression Policy. Retrieved from [Student Privacy and Data Suppression Policy At A Glance](#).

⁸DC Policy Center, DC high school alumni reflections on their early career outcomes. November 2021. Retrieved from [DC high school alumni reflections on their early career outcomes - DC Policy Center](#).

- Overall well-being
 - Most respondents reported feeling more positive about their projected future well-being. While approximately 33 percent described their current situation as “thriving,” 62 percent anticipated they would be “thriving” within the next 5 years. Similarly, while 47 percent classified their current situation as “struggling,” 38 percent of respondents reported believing they would be “struggling” or “suffering” in the next 5 years.
 - Traditional education and employment outcomes such as level of education attainment, income, or employment do not seem to align with alumni overall sense of well-being. While white respondents consistently show more favorable financial and employment outcomes, they were among the least likely to indicate having a positive outlook on their sense of well-being. The percentage of Hispanic or Latino, Asian or Asian American, and Black or African American respondents who noted they were thriving ranged between 41 - 54 percent compared to 24 percent of white respondents.

Implications of These Findings:

These findings reinforce that DC public high school alumni face challenges navigating early career and achieving financial stability while managing their overall well-being. Future briefs will dive deeper into why alumni have selected different pathways and the value that they believe they have gained from educational programs.

The survey outcomes raise questions about how the District could ease this transition for alumni and proactively create supports and spaces specifically for youth in early adulthood; as often programs are bifurcated as either for high school-aged youth or adults broadly. The creation of the DCPS Persists program, which supports college-bound students with coaching, workshops, and microgrants, is one such example of how the District has considered the needs of young adults during this transition period. This program launched for the high school class of 2020 and thus would not have been available to the cohort of alumni surveyed.

It is also helpful to note that several career-oriented programs, which have enabled students to build career skills and experience, were significantly expanded in recent years due to mayoral investments dedicated toward reimagining student pathways into high-wage careers. These programs, including internships, Career and Technical Education, and apprenticeships were not available at the same scale when this group of alumni respondents graduated 5 - 7 years ago. According to the DC Policy Center’s report, “Building Career Assets for Lifelong Success,”⁹ higher incomes among DC’s high school alumni had a strong correlation with how many career asset-building opportunities students engaged in before graduation, such as internships, career-focused coursework, or other work-based learning opportunities. This held across all levels of education, and particularly for those who attained associate’s degrees or certifications¹⁰.

⁹DC Policy Center. November 2024. Retrieved from [Building career assets for lifelong success - DC Policy Center](#).

¹⁰DC Policy Center. November 2021. Retrieved from [DC high school alumni reflections on their early career outcomes - DC Policy Center](#).

Understanding how these factors may have influenced the landscape of opportunities available to alumni from the classes of 2017 - 2019 may be helpful to contextualize findings and inform how school leaders, agencies, and community partners may enhance students' exposure to career-oriented programs earlier in their education journey.

In addition, financial challenges for alumni who started but did not complete college emphasize the importance of ensuring alumni have strong supports as they are developing their post-secondary plan, so that students both enter a post-secondary program that is a strong fit for their goals, interests, and experiences, and have the necessary supports to surmount challenges that may arise during their post-secondary journey. Earning a post-secondary degree, and in particular a bachelor's degree, is specifically impactful in DC's labor market because DC is one of the most highly educated labor forces in the country, with 60 percent of the labor force holding at least a bachelor's degree¹¹.

ETEP is focused on working with education ecosystem partners to leverage these findings to best support students. Since the alumni surveyed graduated in 2017 - 2019, the education system has significantly expanded access to college and career preparation activities for high school students, including dual enrollment, Career and Technical Education, and work-based learning to ensure that students better understand the opportunities available to them after graduation. The results of this survey will continue to inform these approaches.

Employment and Financial Stability

Among survey respondents, post-secondary education is a significant driver of income and likelihood of earning a living wage across degree types. In this context, the living wage for each respondent was calculated based on their individually reported zip code. This means that depending on where respondents lived, their living wage threshold ranged between \$37,000 and \$69,000. The 2024 living wage for DC overall was \$56,000 according to MIT's Living Wage Calculator¹². Respondents who obtained their bachelor's degree were most likely to meet or exceed DC's living wage threshold and reported earning the highest wages compared to other respondents.

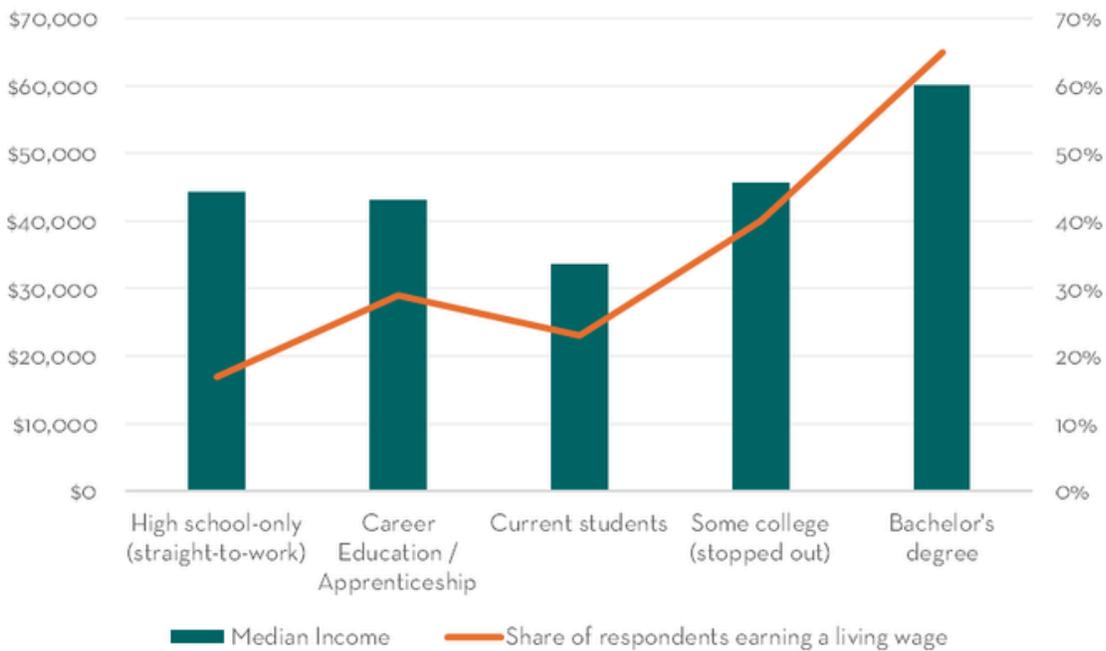
More than half of survey respondents with a bachelor's degree reported earning a living wage, while fewer than half of respondents with other educational backgrounds reported the same. Alumni who obtained their bachelor's degree reportedly earn the highest income, whereas current students reportedly earn the lowest. This is largely because approximately 75 percent of current students work part-time, which was a minimal requirement for all survey participants unless they were pursuing an advanced degree. Since most respondents had to be employed to be eligible for the survey, employment rates were not included in this analysis along with other measures of employment and financial stability.

¹¹DC's Comeback Plan. January 2023. Retrieved from [Home - DC's Comeback Plan – #ObviouslyDC](#).

¹²MIT Living Wage Calculator, <https://livingwage.mit.edu/metros/47900>.

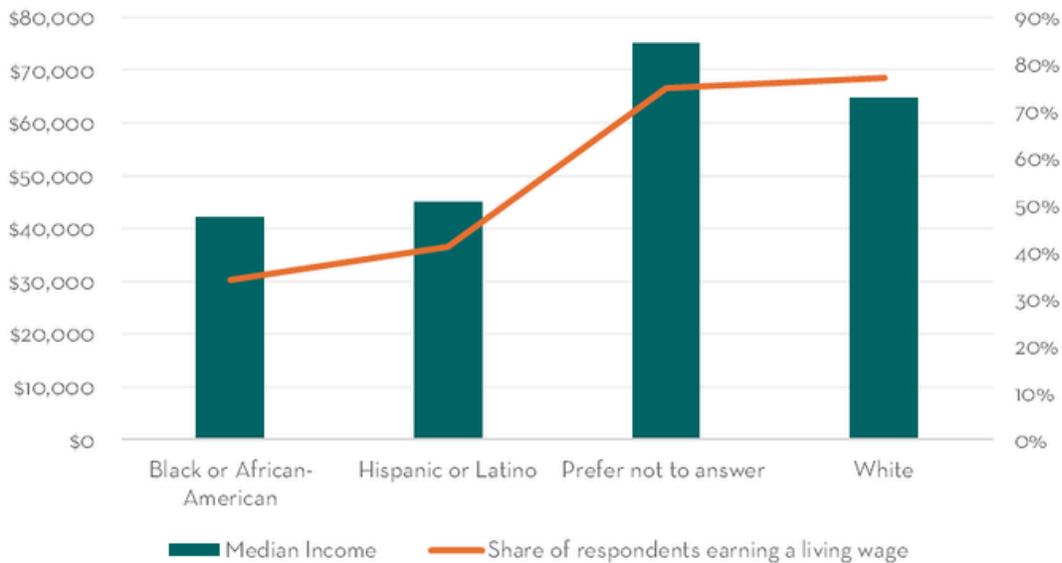
When comparing the share of respondents earning a living wage, 65 percent of those with a bachelor’s degree earn a living wage compared to less than 20 percent of those with only a high school diploma - a nearly 50 percentage point gap. Additionally, when examining respondents without a post-secondary degree, findings indicate that alumni who completed a career education program or apprenticeship were over ten percentage points more likely to earn a living wage than those who only had a high school diploma.

Figure 3. Median income and share of respondents earning a living wage by highest degree attained



The survey also demonstrated significant differences in annual income based on race, as the median income for white respondents was at least \$20,000 higher than respondents of all other racial groups. Across all other racial groups, respondents’ average annual income fell below the 2024 living wage threshold for the region, which is \$56K. The share of respondents earning a living wage is consistent with these findings, showing that 77 percent of white respondents earn a living wage compared to less than half of respondents from all other racial groups. These findings remained consistent when controlling for educational level, as the share of white alumni with a bachelor’s degree earning a living wage surpassed the share of Black alumni respondents with a bachelor’s degree earning a living wage by 43 percentage points.

Figure 4. Median income and share of respondents earning a living wage by race



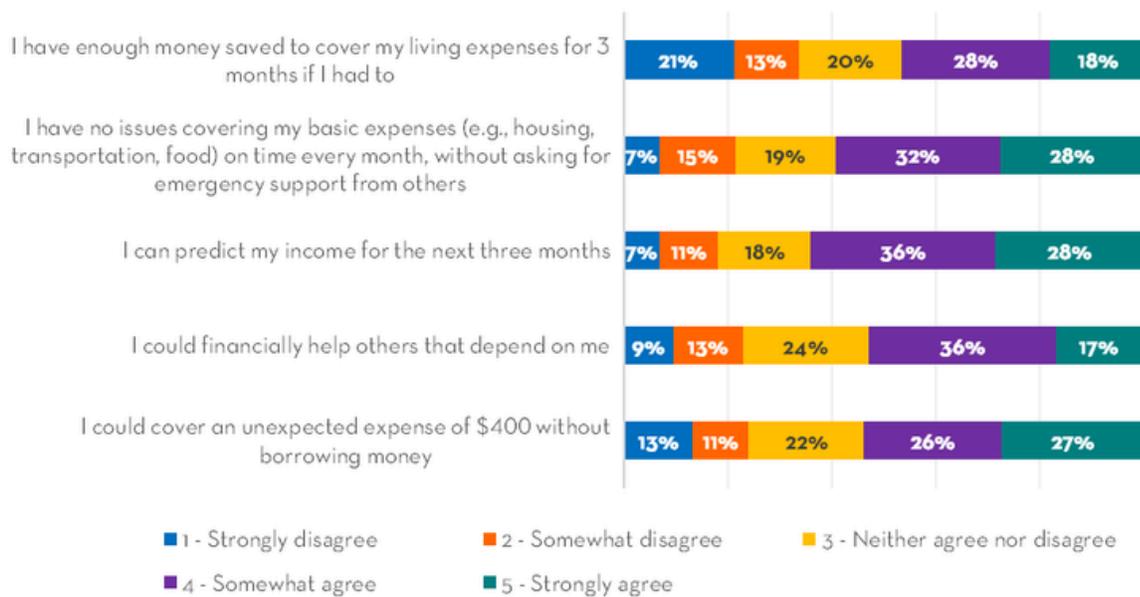
To understand respondents' sense of financial stability, alumni were asked about their ability to cover basic and emergency expenses, support others, predict income, and save. Through a series of prompts aligned with Figure 5, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree on a scale from 1 to 5. A score of 1 would indicate that alumni strongly disagree with the prompt, while a score of 5 would indicate that they strongly agree.

When analyzing responses to these prompts by highest degree attained, findings showed that more than half of alumni with a bachelor's degree agreed that they had sufficient savings to cover three months of living expenses. Consistent with these findings, 73 percent of alumni with a bachelor's degree either somewhat or strongly agreed that they can predict their income for the next three months, which exceeded the response rates for most other respondents by 12 - 35 percentage points. Alumni who completed career education programs or apprenticeships were the exception, with 68 percent overall indicating that they either somewhat or strongly agreed.

Alumni who attained their bachelor's degree were also much more likely to indicate that they could cover an unprecedented \$400 expense, with over 61 percent indicating they somewhat or strongly agreed, compared to everyone else, who trailed by at least 14 percentage points. Alumni respondents with some college education, but no degree, consistently shared differing responses. The proportion of these respondents who indicated they could not cover a \$400 expense exceeded all others by at least 5 percent, with 21 percent of these alumni sharing that this expense would not be feasible. Nearly half (49 percent) of the alumni with some college experience either somewhat or strongly disagreed that they have enough saved to cover expenses for the next three months. Alumni who went straight to work after high school were also most likely to disagree that they could predict their income for the next three months. As many as 21 percent of respondents with only a high school diploma indicated that they strongly disagreed, exceeding all other response rates by at least 13 percentage points.

Response patterns to the financial stability prompts across racial sub-groups reinforce disparities in outcomes between Black and white alumni. This was most apparent when examining responses to the prompt “I have enough money saved to cover my living expenses for three months if I had to.” Black alumni were significantly more likely to strongly disagree than other respondents, with 33 percent reporting they do not have sufficient funds saved. Contrastingly, white alumni were overwhelmingly more likely to indicate that they either agreed or strongly agreed with this prompt. With 73 percent of white alumni reporting that they have enough money saved, the proportion of other alumni who reported the same ranged between 37 - 44 percent.

Figure 5. Alumni responses to financial stability prompts



*Note: Due to data suppression standards, the findings in this graphic depict overall response rates among DC Alumni respondents that are not disaggregated by highest degree attained or by race.

Examining findings across educational backgrounds shows that alumni respondents indicated a lack of overall financial stability early in their careers. As shown in Figure 6, fewer than half of the respondents who earned their bachelor’s degree indicated that they currently feel financially stable. Notably, those who earned only a high school diploma were just under 10 percentage points less likely to feel financially stable than those who had earned a college degree. Those who had started college and stopped out, as well as those who are current college students, were the least likely to feel financially stable.

Similarly, across racial groups, fewer than half of alumni respondents indicated that they currently feel financially stable. However, as shown in Figure 7, racial disparities remain, as white alumni respondents were nearly 10 percentage points more likely to feel financially stable than Hispanic or Latino respondents and nearly 20 percentage points more likely to feel financially stable than Black respondents.

Figure 6. Share of respondents feeling financially stable by highest degree attained

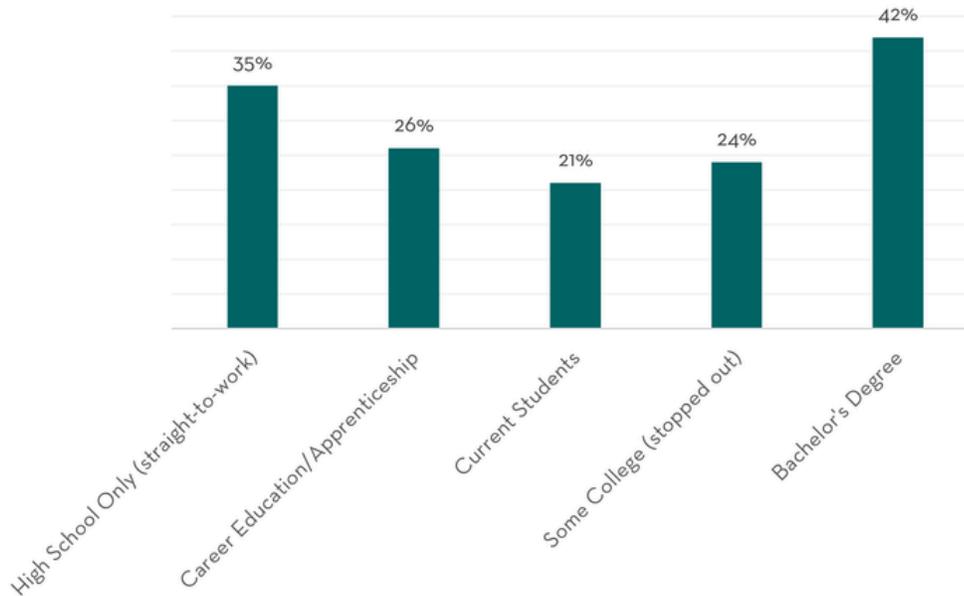
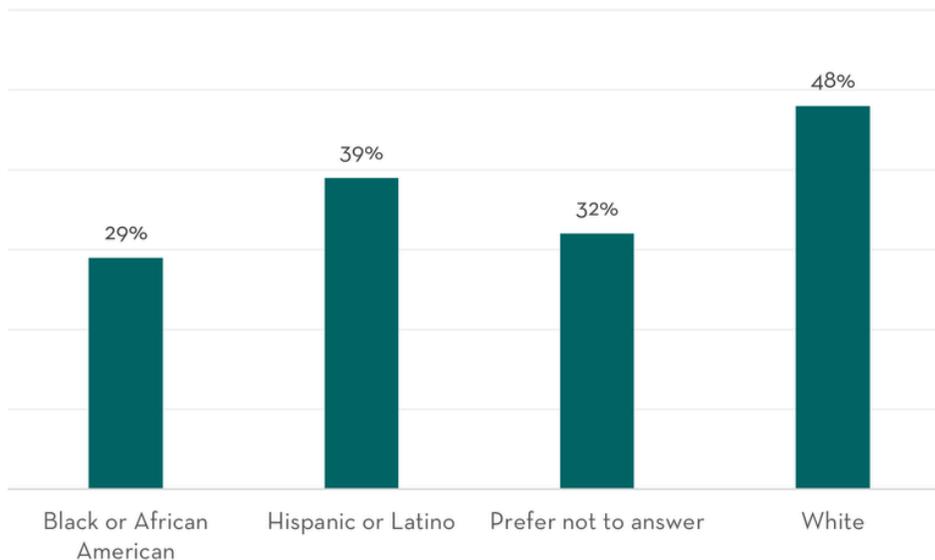


Figure 7. Share of respondents feeling financially stable by race



Though alumni with a bachelor's degree indicated feeling the most financially stable, they were among the respondents with the most debt. This group of respondents' debt was nearly 2 - 3 times the debt of other respondents. Because these respondents graduated from high school 5 - 7 years ago and are likely to have completed their degree very recently, this timing might impact progress toward eliminating debt thus far as well as influence respondents' promising outlook on their ability to maximize earning potential in comparison to other groups.

In addition to the amount of debt respondents carry, they were also asked to share how confident they were that they could eliminate all education-related debt within the next 10 years on a scale from 1 - 5; with 1 being the least confident and 5 being the most confident. To summarize responses, the average rating within each group was captured and is reflected by highest degree attained in Figure 8 and by race in Figure 10 below.

Figure 8. Average debt by highest degree attained

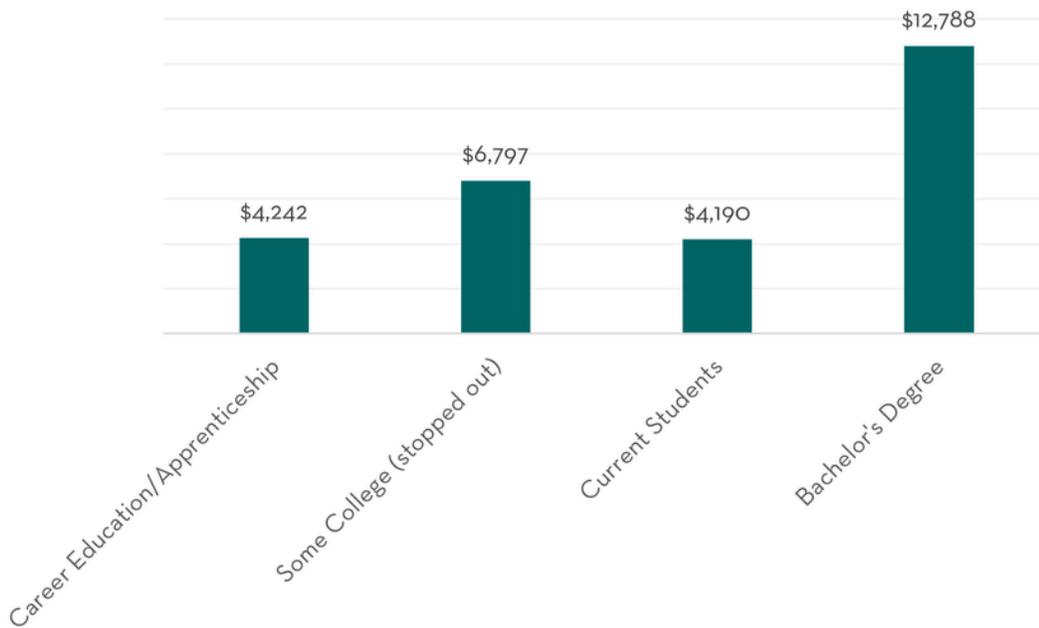


Figure 9. Level of confidence about paying off debt within 10 years by highest degree attained

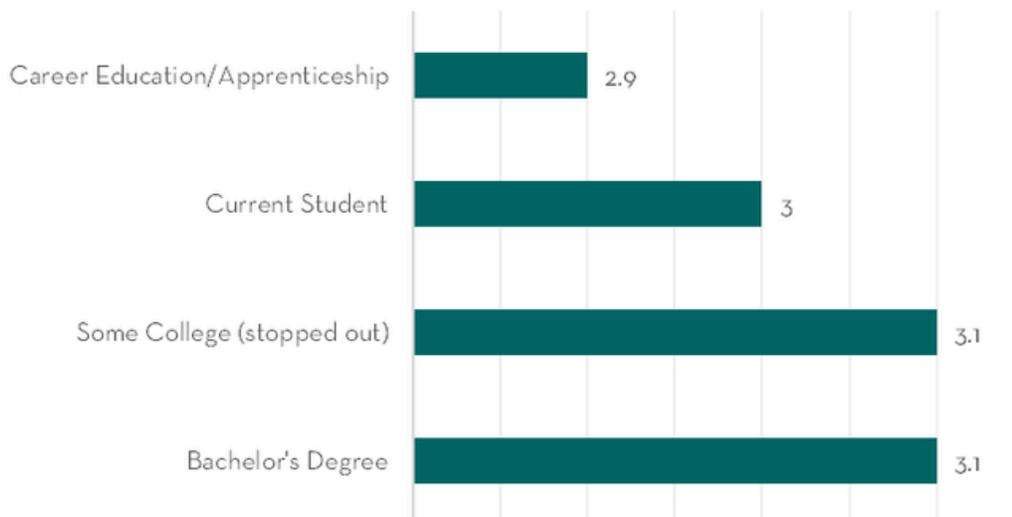
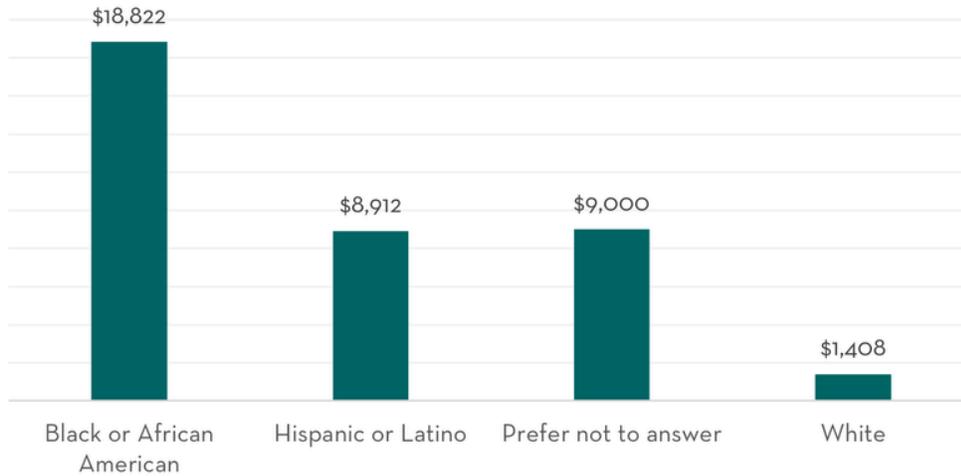
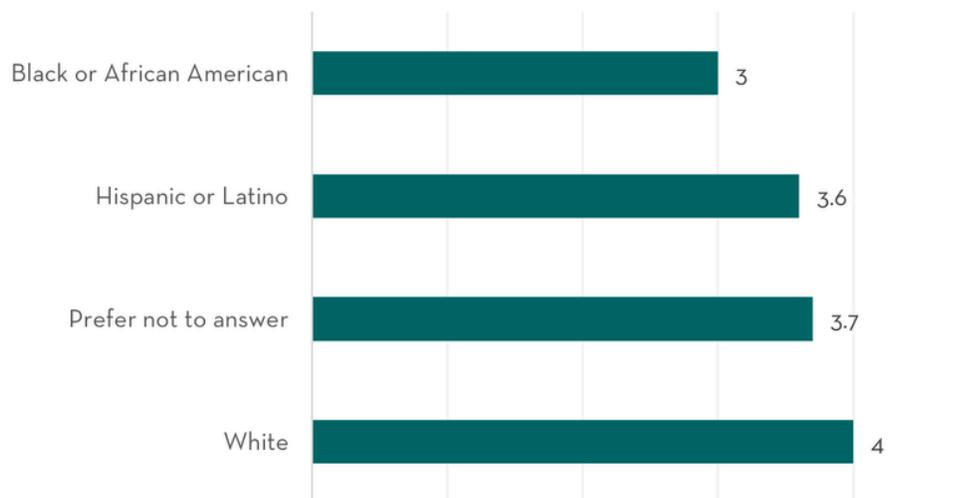


Figure 10. Average debt by highest degree attained



In line with other measures of financial security, there are discrepancies in the average confidence level across respondents based on race. As shown in Figure 11, Black respondents indicated having the least confidence about eliminating their debt in the future, and white respondents expressed having the greatest confidence about prospects for eliminating their debt. This further reinforces the racial disparities across all indicators of financial stability for Black and white respondents.

Figure 11. Level of confidence about paying off debt within 10 years by race

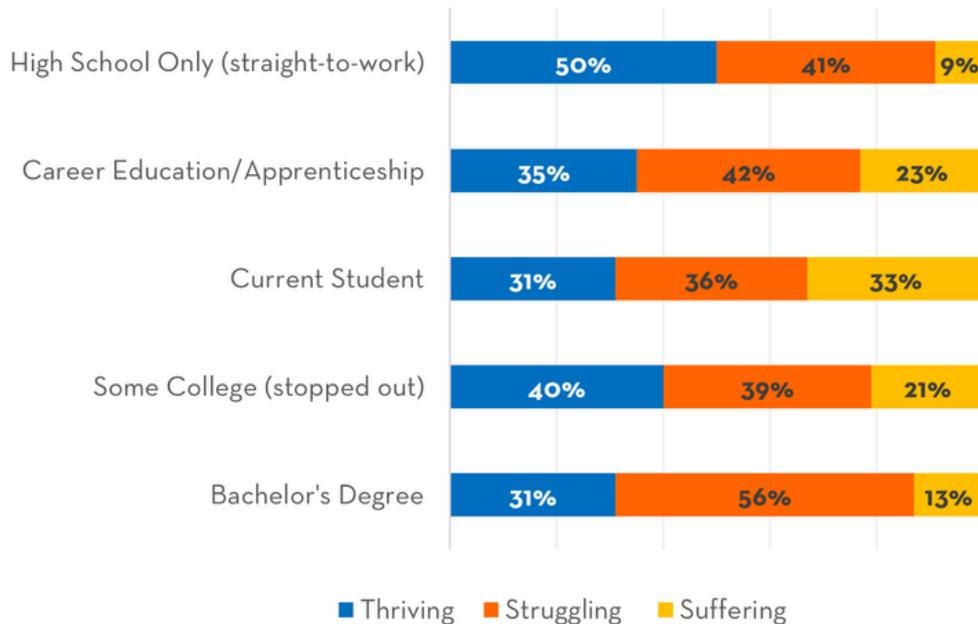


Sense of Well-Being

To measure sense of well-being, respondents were asked to draw on the Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving Scale which asks respondents to “imagine a ladder with steps numbered from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you.”¹³ Respondents then answered based on where they would place themselves currently and 5 years from now. Those who indicated a 7 or higher currently are categorized as thriving today, while those who indicated an 8 or higher 5 years from now are categorized as thriving tomorrow.

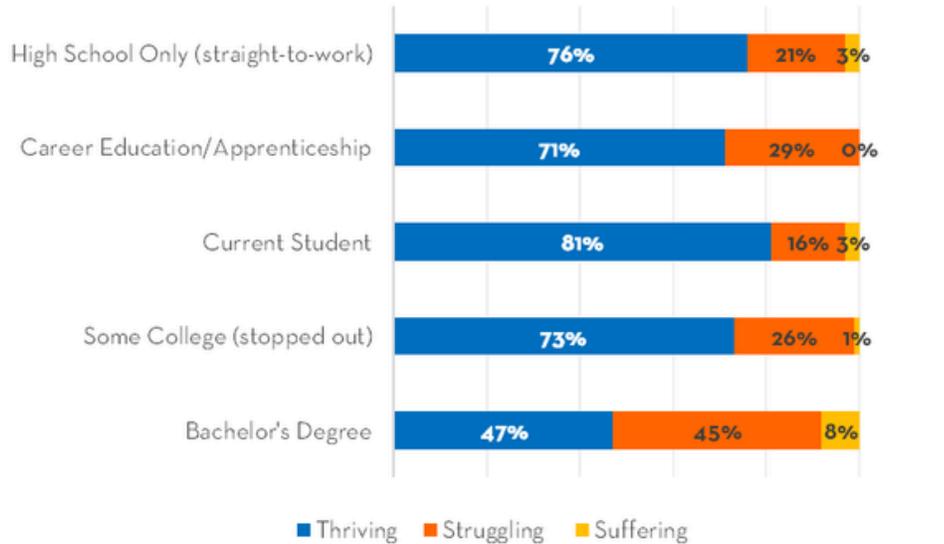
After completing this exercise, 36 percent of survey respondents reported themselves as thriving currently, and 62 percent reported that they believe they will be thriving in the next 5 years. Notably, 50 percent of respondents with only a high school degree indicated that they are “thriving,” a significantly higher percentage than most other respondent categories. In contrast, respondents who obtained their bachelor’s degree or who are currently enrolled in a post-secondary program were the least likely to report having a positive outlook on their well-being, with less than one-third indicating that they are “thriving.”

Figure 12. Share of respondents thriving today by highest degree attained



¹³Gallup-Indicator: Live Evaluation Well-Being Index.

Figure 13. Share of respondents projected to be thriving tomorrow by highest degree attained



Examining responses by race reveals that across racial groups, fewer than half of respondents indicated that they are thriving currently. The percentage of Hispanic, Latino, and Black respondents who indicated that they are thriving was between 41 - 45 percent. In contrast, white respondents were nearly 20 percentage points less likely than any other racial group to express a positive outlook on their well-being through their responses. Overall, 24 percent of white respondents indicated that they are currently thriving and will be thriving 5 years from now. As white respondents consistently yielded stronger employment and financial stability outcomes than their peers, these findings indicate that there is not strong alignment between financial markers of success and personal perceptions of overall well-being.

Figure 14. Share of respondents thriving today by race

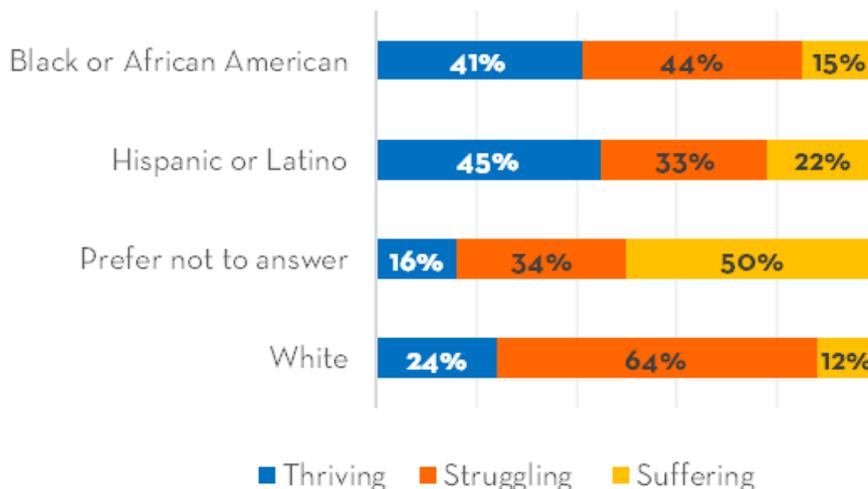
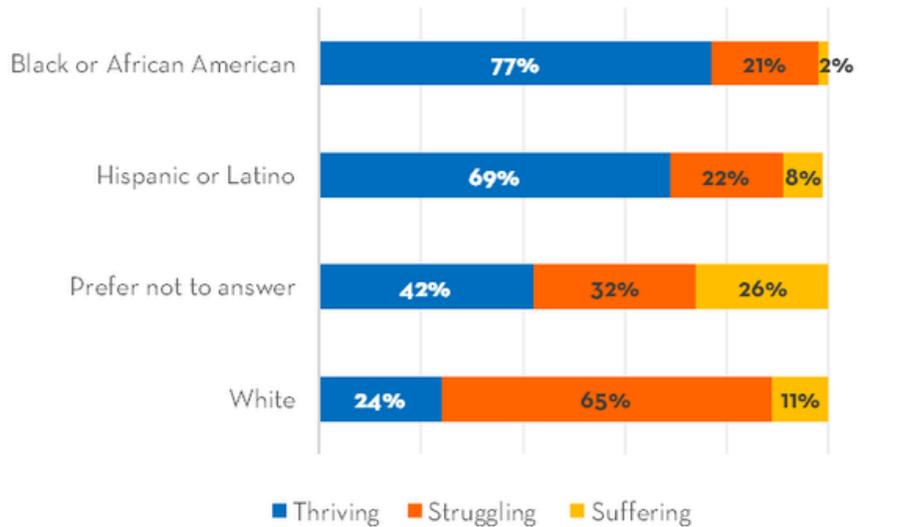


Figure 15. Share of respondents thriving tomorrow by race



Next Steps

In follow-up research briefs, we will build on these findings to share in-depth insights about factors that influenced alumni career pathways, connections between current employment outcomes and level of education attainment, and which college and career-oriented opportunities alumni deemed most impactful throughout their career trajectory thus far as outlined in Figure 16.

Figure 16. Alumni Early Career Outcomes Survey Brief Series Topics



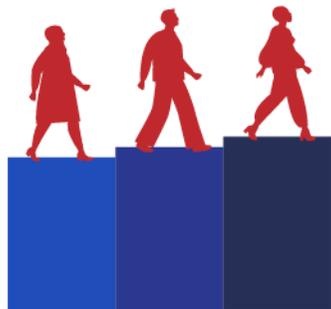
As the Office of Education Through Employment Pathways team continues making progress with partners toward the launch of the ETE Data System in fall 2025, the Office will build on findings from this survey to:

- Engage with students, families, schools, and community partners to share information that encourages informed decision-making.
- Coordinate with agencies to track outcomes and gauge progress toward addressing system gaps with common metrics and actionable data.
- Increase access to information about students facing unique barriers to advancing along their education and career journeys by highlighting the focus populations outlined in the [ETE research agenda](#).

Acknowledgments

This work would not have been possible without the support we received from school leaders and community partners in distributing and publicizing the survey. We would like to provide a special thank you to the partners listed below.

- CityWorksDC
- Department of Employment Services - Office of Youth Programs
- Department of Human Services
- District of Columbia Post-secondary Success Collaborative
- District of Columbia Public Charter Schools
- District of Columbia Public Schools
- Mikva Challenge
- Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE)
- University of the District of Columbia
- Workforce Investment Council



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