

Preventing a “Lost Generation”: Understanding Education and Work in a Time of Crisis

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EDUCATION
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Table of Contents

Executive Summary 3

The Value of Education 5

Students Redefine the “Value” of Their Education 6

Enrollment Trends 6

Disrupted Learners..... 7

Soaring Interest in Nondegree Programs 7

The Student Experience 8

Workplace Trends..... 9

First Recession Where Community Colleges Lost Students 9

Race and Ethnicity 11

Conclusion..... 12

About the Author 13

About Strada Education Network..... 13

Executive Summary

In the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic began waging war on people's lives, the health care system, the economy and the nation's collective sense of security. The tumult simultaneously -- and abruptly -- disrupted education and employment. Millions of high school seniors attended their graduations online, and had no idea whether they would be sitting in a college classroom in the fall. The traditional path to the middle class — a college education — was about to be challenged by the pandemic and the students themselves. And today, the historic cycle of college enrollment growing during an economic downturn has yet to play out.

In the earliest days of the historically unprecedented pandemic lockdown, Strada Education Network developed a rigorous, rapid-response research initiative to better understand how the U.S. learning population was being affected.

With its Public Viewpoint research, Strada has sought to equip educators, policymakers and employers with data to identify critical trends to guide them as they navigate the uncertain, fast-changing crisis. The findings reflect data from multiple national surveys of more than 50,000 adults, across generations, race, ethnicity and gender identification. The ongoing research — which has generated 27 reports — provides crucial insight into the plans, attitudes, beliefs and experiences of students driven by real-time surveys that started as the pandemic began shutting down the nation.

"This is a transformational moment in education that we haven't seen since World War II, when the GI Bill expanded access to education for what became known as the Greatest Generation," said Dave Clayton, Strada's senior vice president of research. "Now we're fighting to avoid a lost generation as Americans lose confidence and experience with higher education. As many have lost the momentum of their lives, we need education that will provide them with both the certainty that they will become something and the promise that, as with the Greatest Generation, they can become anything. It's a wakeup call—but the keys to success are very clear from the public's perspective.

Public Viewpoint offers a window into the challenges that today's current and prospective students are facing and insights into what all learning institutions can do to attract and serve students.

It shows they still value education but want more options — and more convenient ones — to pursue education, including tremendous demand for credentials, strong interest in online and hybrid learning approaches, and sustained belief in the quality of in-person learning.

It shows that while millions of learners changed or delayed their education plans during the pandemic — and that they're less likely to reengage if they do — they still want to pursue those opportunities. Providing academic supports, financial assistance, and career advising can help them do that, but they often feel uncertain about

which abilities and skills are valued by employers and their path to turn education into career success.

It shows that learners are considering the “return on investment” on their education and which paths might increase their chance of getting a quality job and expanding their economic opportunities. And when they see their education being closely tied to their career goals, their sense of ROI increases significantly.

It also shows that the pandemic has affected people disproportionately, with communities of color feeling more acute effects. It shows the pandemic's mental strain on students, their frustration with lost career development opportunities, and the personal factors that influenced their education decisions as the pandemic set in.

The episodic research reports provide individual snapshots of a disruptive time. But looked at together, consistent themes emerge with important lessons. ■

The Value of Education

Research from many sources confirms that, on average, a traditional four-year degree remains the surest path for upward economic mobility — especially for first-generation college students, those who struggle financially to pay for college education, and students of color.

Yet today, tension exists between that *reality* and adults' perception of the value of that education.

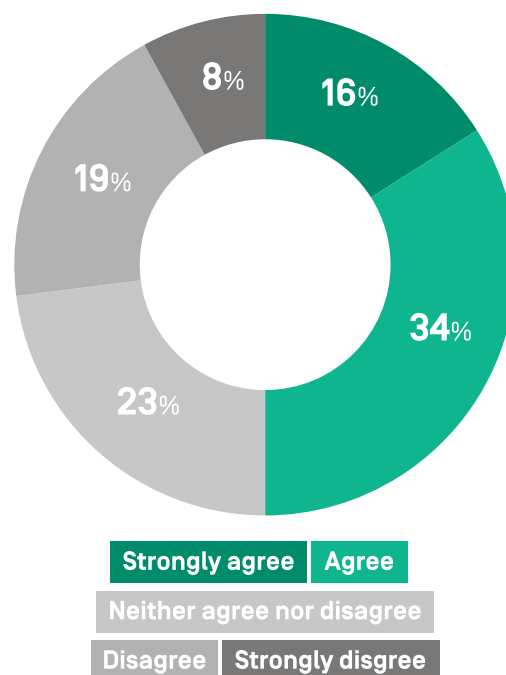
Based on Strada's surveys, students are asking fundamental questions: Will the actual cost of a four-year education result in a good job? Will it help me achieve my goals? Will it be worth the cost — cost that goes beyond the price of enrollment and encompasses the time and effort invested in building a successful and fulfilling life?

In October 2020, as students were adapting to pandemic life on campuses, fewer than 1 in 5 then-current college students surveyed [strongly agreed that their education was going to be worth the cost](#), according to Strada research.

Survey participants expressed skepticism that their degree would lead to the dual prize — job security and job quality, especially amid today's unpredictable COVID environment. Students, like everyone else, have witnessed major shifts in the labor market sparked by the



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Fewer than 1 in 5 college students enrolled in September 2020 strongly agreed their education would be worth the cost.

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global digital transformation and other trends, such as remote work and the gig economy. The pandemic has further deepened skepticism of the status quo.

Students Redefine the “Value” of Their Education

A shift in the perceived value of education occurred during the pandemic.

People who suffered job losses indicated an interest in pursuing more education or training from the early days of the pandemic. But many were also uncertain whether that education would lead to a new or better job.

Disrupted workers and learners began looking beyond traditional education providers for new options, showing an increasing preference for online or hybrid education options and shorter, less time-intensive credential programs.

In addition to the online mega-universities, multinational companies like Google and Amazon, plus smaller educational technology startups, have expanded their online education offerings -- leveraging a global health crisis and a wave of jobless workers interested in obtaining new skills. With nearly a million different educational credentials available, today people have their pick of educational offerings: skills development, bootcamps, certificates, stackable credit, and hybrid or online degrees. For many, postsecondary education has been untethered from time and place.

As the pandemic wore on, even then-current students — particularly those pursuing a bachelor's degree — showed discomfiting signs of skepticism about the value of college. In fact, Strada has found that only 50 percent of alumni who graduated over the last 20 years affirm that their education was worth the cost, helped them achieve their goal, and that they earn more than

\$40,000 annually. Additionally, female, first-generation, and Black students fare significantly worse than their counterparts on those outcomes.

For educational institutions seeking to engage or reengage students, Strada researchers identified three crucial areas where they can improve life for students after graduation or completion:

- **Guidance:** Ensuring coursework is relevant to career paths; hiring faculty and staff with relevant experience; and providing student services and academic advising to help students navigate toward their goals.
- **Education-work connection:** Increasing the relevance of courses and training through career connections in curriculum, experiential learning, course design, and internships; providing mentoring and work-study opportunities; career advising; helping with career exploration and job placement.
- **Social capital:** Providing off-campus community engagement, building alumni networks and professional connections; offering campus leadership and volunteering opportunities.

While implementation of these criteria has always been part of the educational community, the pandemic appears to have created a tipping point where more intentional efforts and explicit communication of improved solutions — and outcomes — will be critical for restoring confidence in the power of education to advance and transform one's life for the better. This is particularly true for the longstanding social inequities that persist in not only access and completion, but extend into outcomes after graduation.

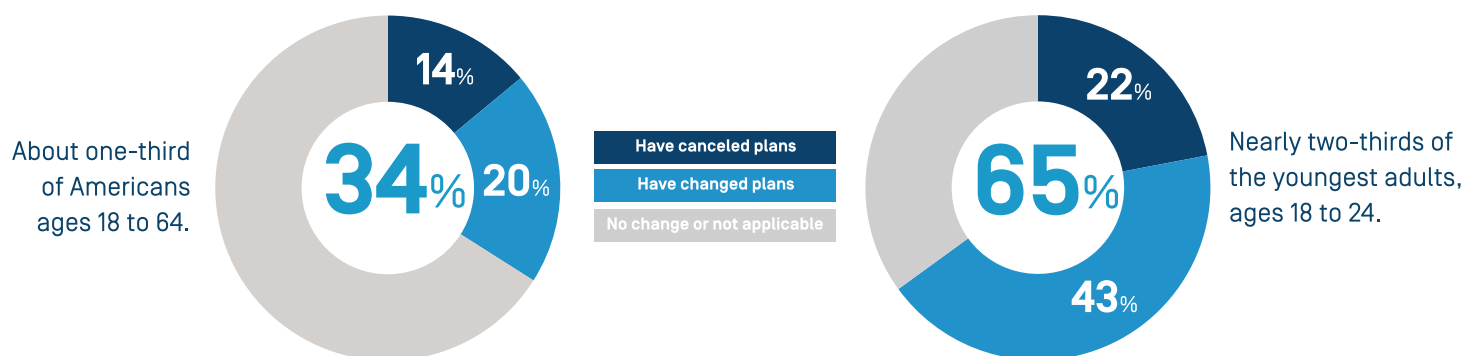
Enrollment Trends

In down economies, Americans have traditionally turned to education as a way to meet the challenge and prepare for the future.

But there is nothing traditional about the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Who has canceled or changed their education plans?



Survey data released in May 2020 foretold the enrollment challenges that would soon confront the postsecondary education community.

It rattled enrollment trends to a degree that hasn't been seen in 50 years, when the workforce and postsecondary education populations were less diverse. With the disruption has come a sea change in how postsecondary education, and the opportunities for economic and social advancement that it's designed to generate, are viewed by learners. For many institutions, the success or failure to meet these challenges is now an existential consideration.

Disrupted Learners

The impact of the pandemic on education plans was felt almost immediately.

By April 2020, a Strada survey showed 7 in 10 students had changed their education plans. The anxiety over education was palpable: While many students saw the connection between a good education and a good job, among those students whose plans were interrupted, 55 percent were unsure about whether the benefits were worth the cost.

Based on survey responses that at the time included more than 8,000 adults, Strada's research in May 2020 revealed that [34 percent of adults ages 18 to 64 had](#)

[canceled or changed their education plans](#) as a result of the pandemic. But that number became even more stark among 18- to 24-year-olds, 64 percent of whom had altered or canceled their plans.

As the pandemic took hold in spring 2020 and unemployment numbers increased, Americans were canceling their education plans citing reasons that included stress, anxiety, self-doubt, financial worries and family caretaking obligations.

Many of those disrupted learners appear to have dropped their education plans altogether. Strada research indicates the percentage of affected learners who are enrolled or intend to enroll in a college or vocational program dropped from 90 percent in spring 2020 to just 68 percent a year later.

Soaring Interest in Nondegree Programs

Those who indicated an interest in enrolling in the next six months showed an increasing preference to enroll

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in short-term, nondegree programs versus degree programs. In April 2020, Strada's research revealed that a majority (62 percent) expressed an interest in those non-degree programs, including certificates, certifications and skills training.

The short duration and career relevance of nondegree programs seemed to fuel that interest. According to an April 2020 Strada study, one-third of adults thinking about enrolling in an education or training program said they wanted to advance in their career field, while another one-third said they wanted to learn new skills to change career fields.

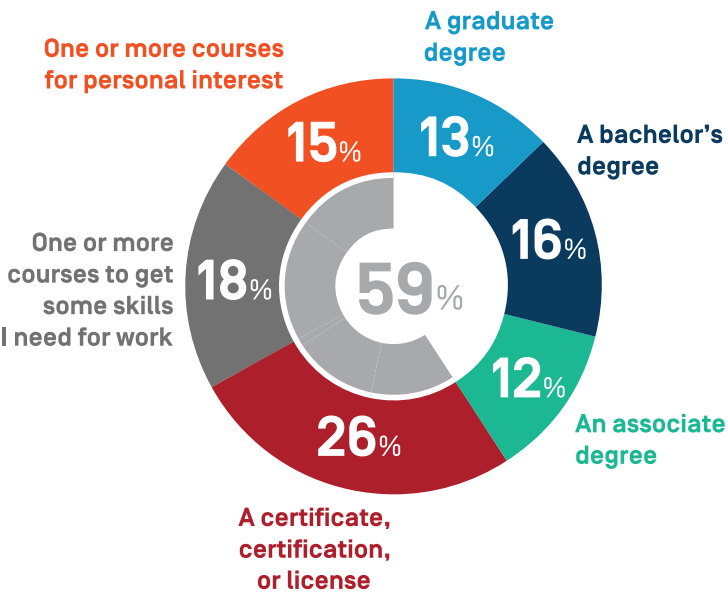
The clear connections to careers that nondegree programs provide appear to meet those wishes. In a Strada report released in [August 2020](#), respondents said their most important factors in choosing an education program were whether it was relevant to their work and benefited their career needs; was fast and convenient, and could lead to additional education and training.

The 62 percent who favored nondegree programs in that report cited three main reasons for their choice: better value, a better fit for their personal needs, and greater benefits to job and career advancement.

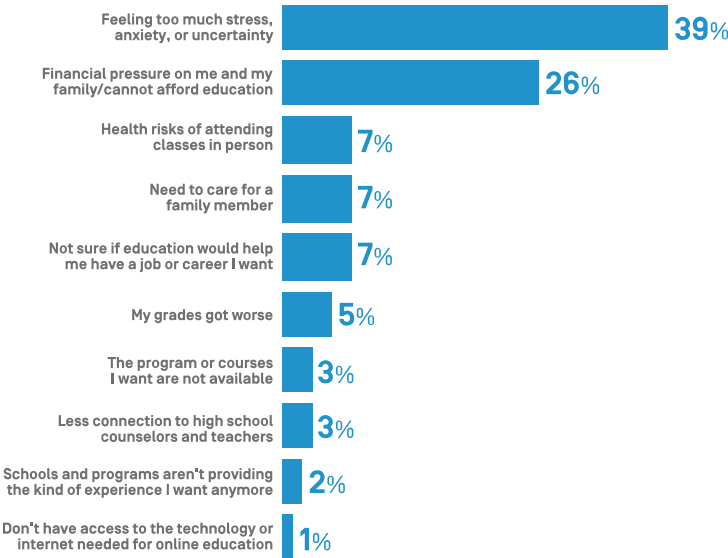
The Student Experience

The pandemic presented numerous challenges in education at all levels, not the least of which was distance learning for students who hadn't signed up for it.

Strada research identified a large segment of learners who put their educational goals on hold or canceled them completely because of the pandemic. These adults identified personal criteria that presented barriers to postsecondary education, including confidence in their ability to succeed as students, confidence in the path that would lead them to an improved employment outcome, and confidence in the ultimate value.



In Spring 2020, survey data showed a majority of adults who were considering enrolling in an education program in the next six months preferred nondegree programs.



Feelings of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty are identified as the primary reason for not pursuing more education now.

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Students who graduated in the [high school classes of 2020 and 2021](#) experienced unprecedented disruption, underscoring concerns about a “lost generation.”

Many either postponed or canceled their plans at around the time they would have expected to enroll. The pandemic disrupted Class of 2021 students earlier in the college preparation process than graduates a year earlier -- 40 percent of 2020 grads had applied and been accepted to college, compared to 23 percent of 2021 graduates.

Students cited stress and anxiety combined with financial pressures such as job losses as the top reasons for changing their plans. They also cited responsibilities to care for family members, which was most prevalent among African American (one-third of those surveyed) and Latino students (28 percent).

Some students delayed their postsecondary plans awaiting in-person environments – yet another factor in their education decisions along with stress and anxiety, affordability and health concerns.

One student told Strada that his frustrations with online learning in high school influenced his decision to enroll in a trade school to become a barber.

“I wanted to just be in-person learning. It’s so much better. I hated online school the whole time. ... You’re not, like, attached to it at all. That’s how I felt because it was on my laptop or iPad. I have a whole other life. I don’t care about this school life at all,” he explained.

To reengage students, educational institutions can help alleviate various anxieties by personalizing their college and career guidance, clearly relaying how it can benefit their careers, and helping remove financial barriers.

Workplace Trends

Not since the 1918 pandemic has the United States experienced the levels of damage and disruption to work and education brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

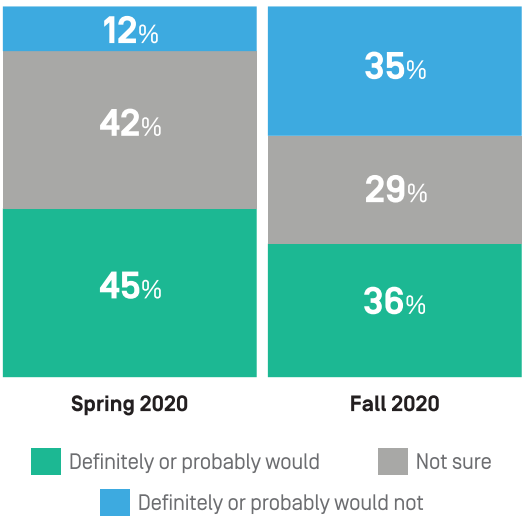
Based on Strada’s research, an astonishing 50 percent of U.S. adults had their work change in some way due to the COVID-19 economic crisis.

“The jobs and skills in demand are changing,” said Andrew Hanson, Strada director of research. “We need to build awareness of where the demand is, cultivate interest in fields where opportunities exist, and align our program offerings with the labor market needs.”

First Recession Where Community Colleges Lost Students

Typically in U.S. recessions, portions of the population “escape” to education seeking a financially sound refuge to weather the storm until the job market rebounds. Community colleges have long been the go-to source for lower-income populations.

Additional education would help you get a job in times of economic uncertainty.

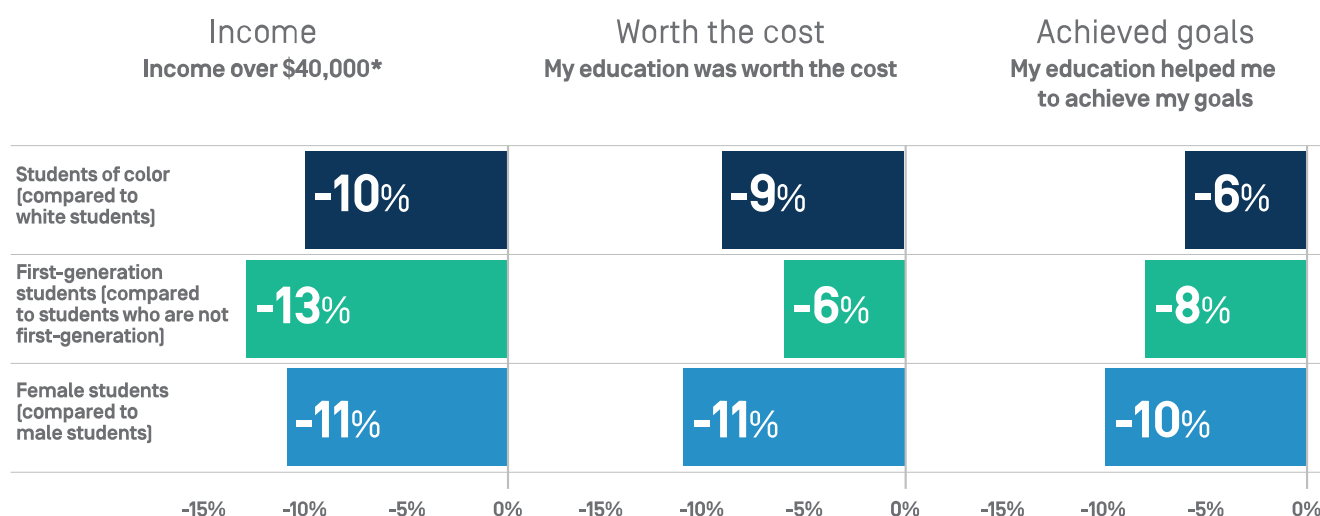


Among Americans without degrees, skepticism about the value of education grew during 2020.

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* among those who chose to answer

Source: 2021 Strada Alumni Survey, bachelor's degree graduates 2001-2020, n=3,309.

2021 survey of alumni who had graduated in the last 20 years showed that outcomes after graduation are not equitable.

That was the prediction back in March 2020 -- especially since community college enrollment had been declining since 2010. But that's not what happened at all.

"This was the first recession in which community college enrollment not only didn't increase, it tripled the annual rate of decline from 3 percent to 9 percent," Hanson said.

The pandemic dramatically changed where opportunities exist, in some cases widening the gap between the opportunities for those without degrees or credentials and what employers seek.

In this pandemic, the leisure and hospitality industries -- such as hotels, theme parks and restaurants -- were hit

the hardest by far while the health care, manufacturing, tech/software and transportation/warehousing industries boomed.

The digital transformation of the workplace accelerated practically overnight. Multiple industries around the globe are now in the midst of that transformation while more and more work is pushed toward the cloud.

But even as the pandemic forever altered so many aspects of daily life, Strada's research shows the profound impact on education has yet to play out. Changes to postsecondary education that the pandemic initiated continue to evolve in unpredictable ways.

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And students are still trying to navigate the turbulent changes.

Race and Ethnicity

Strada's real-time research during the pandemic exposed trends that have the potential to widen existing equity gaps in education, workplaces and wealth on the basis of race or ethnicity.

Barely three months into the global lockdown, the research shed light on early pandemic trends that [showed people of color were more likely to lose work and lose access to education than white Americans](#). It revealed, for instance, that:

- Black Americans and Latinos were more likely to have been laid off than white Americans and Asian Americans.
- People of color were more likely to worry at a time when stress and anxiety were leading indicators of pausing postsecondary education.
- Black and Latino students were more likely than their white peers to have progressed further in the enrollment process before changing their education plans.
- Disrupted Latino students were more likely than others to feel financial pressure, while Black students were more likely than others to be influenced by health risks.

A recent Strada survey of college and university alumni who graduated in the last 20 years, for example, shows that students of color who completed their four-year degree still encountered hurdles and roadblocks to compete for jobs. And alumni of color, first-generation alumni, and female graduates were all less likely to report favorable outcomes than their white counterparts.

To be clear, some alumni surveyed reported experiencing at least one of three outcomes Strada identified as key to an individual's success after graduating with a four-year degree: an earnings benefit, a feeling that their education was worth the cost, or achieving their goals.

But those successful outcomes aren't experienced equitably. In fact, the research found Black alumni are 27 percentage points less likely than white alumni to report achieving all three outcomes.

The research suggests the profound barriers that communities of color face not just to *pursue* postsecondary education programs but to succeed after *graduating* likely won't end just because the pandemic fades. To help drive positive outcomes for all communities, the student's recognition of the connection between their education and the world of work is critical. Across demographic, racial and ethnic differences, graduates are more than four times as likely to report positive outcomes after graduating when they recognize strong education-work connections. ■

Conclusion

As the world continues to recover and evolve after nearly two years of pandemic-driven chaos, the United States' educational institutions will play an important role in helping all students and learners recover and advance.

Through this body of research, current, past and prospective students reveal a deep-seated emotional belief in higher education. Those with a degree remain firm in their belief it was worth the cost.

At the same time, current and prospective students have had their confidence to act shaken. The realities of six- and eight- year graduation rates; the decades-long onslaught of higher costs of attendance; chronic underemployment among graduates; and the increasingly visible realities of student loan debt all result in current and prospective students feeling less certain college will be worth it. For those looking at credentials, the rapid proliferation of choices and uncertainty about how employers view specific credentials when it comes to hiring and promotion undermine their confidence to enroll.

The ability of educators, employers, and policy makers to learn from the pandemic, adapt, and serve learners in new ways at this pivotal moment in history is vital.

That is why postsecondary education's ability to learn from the pandemic, adapt, and serve learners in new ways at this pivotal moment in history is so vital — because it can help the U.S. avert the potential for a Lost Generation. ■

About the Author

Barbara DeLollis is a Washington D.C.-based storyteller, writer and communications strategist. She recently co-founded All Rights Advisors, a global rights-based agency focused on promoting human-centered environmental and social sustainability, following leadership roles at companies such as Marriott International and Signet Jewelers. A contributor for *U.S. News & World Report*, Barbara spent more than 15 years as an award-winning reporter at *USA TODAY*, the *Miami Herald* and other outlets. Her work has also appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*. She holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and studied Italian at the Università per Stranieri di Perugia in Italy.

About Strada Education Network

Strada Education Network is a new kind of nonprofit social impact organization, dedicated to increasing individuals' economic mobility through purposeful connections between education and employment. Our approach combines innovative research, thought leadership, strategic philanthropy and investments, and support for individuals through student coaching, work-based learning, career exploration, and helping adults learn new skills throughout their careers. Together, we work to better serve the millions of Americans seeking to complete postsecondary education and training, gain clear value from those experiences, and build meaningful careers. Learn more at stradaeducation.org.



