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Community College Student Trends

Research Brief

Exploration of student pathways, outcomes and career readiness
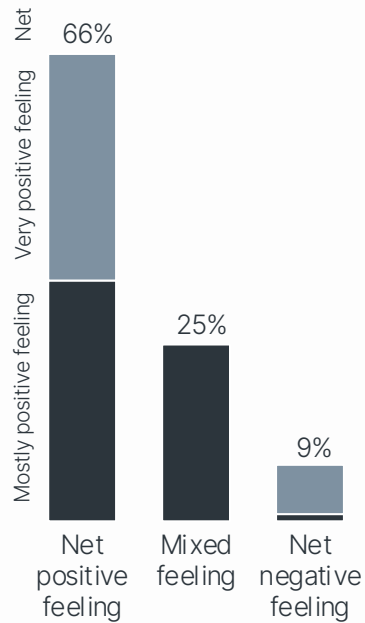
February 2025 release

Key Points

66%   Percent of community college students feeling generally optimistic about the jobs market post-graduation; although 44% also report a degree of anxiety around the economy

51%   Half of students report concern with identifying and navigating career path options in their chosen field; 30% have concerns about potential gaps in their academic program leaving them short of career ready

49%   Twenty-four percent of students report their academic program has an embedded requirement to earn an industry-recognized certification; another 24% report certification is recommended (for a net 49% required or recommended; due to rounding)

83%   Percent of community college students (net) indicating industry-recognized certifications validate skills are relevant and up to date

81%   Percent of community college students (net) indicating industry-recognized certifications provide a stepping stone to career advancement

96%   Among students earning an industry-recognized certification as part of their academic program, nearly all (96%) report advancing at least one step ahead in their career readiness progression (46% report advancing several steps ahead)

82%   Percent of community college students rating digital fluency skills as important (net) to just about any occupation field across careers; others include leadership and team skills (88%), data and analytics skills (79%)

70%   Percent of community college students (net) taking some action to improve their AI career readiness, such as practicing with gen AI tools (40%), learning via YouTube and other free sources (30%) or taking a training course or other learning (18%)

Students report feeling generally positive about the job market post-graduation

Net 66%

Net positive feeling: 66%
Mixed feeling: 25%
Net negative feeling: 9%

(Bar axis labels: Very positive feeling, Mostly positive feeling)

The data suggests students in the 30+ age range feel slightly more positive about the job market than younger student demographics. This may be a function of older students having more work experience and a stronger resume to build upon through additional education.

Student concerns in transitioning to the jobs market

1 Where or how to get started in career / finding right career path [51%]

2 Lack of starting level jobs / employers expecting more work experience [49%]

3 Lack of employment opportunities in city / region [38%]

4 Lack of employment opportunities in field of study [31%]

5 Gaps in academic program / missing skills needed for job market [30%]

The data is generally consistent across demographic and related segmentations

Student rating	Career resources / support	Alignment of academic program to jobs market / employer needs
Net Positive	63%	60%
Very positive	29%	23%
Mostly positive	34%	37%
Some positive, some negative	25%	28%
Mostly negative	5%	5%
Very negative	2%	2%
Unsure/NA	5%	6%

Indication of concern among segment of students

44%
Economic anxiety

Percent of students citing general economic anxiety and concerns over economic uncertainty as they transition from student to job seeker

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Role of industry-recognized certifications in academic programs

A net 49% of students report their college requiring or recommending industry-recognized certifications

Require 24%
Recommend 24%
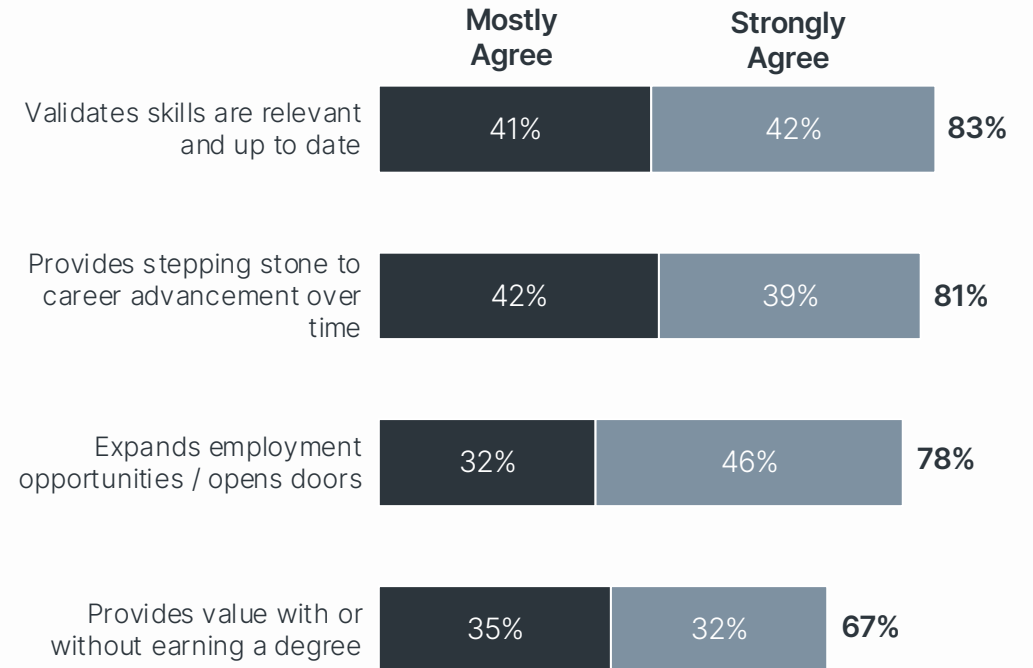No 18%
Don't know / Unsure 33%
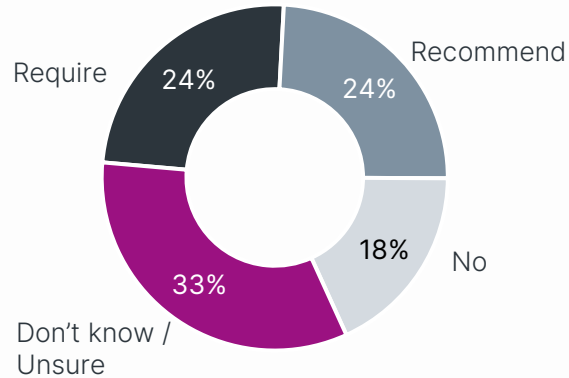
1 in 5

Percent of students that report earning an industry-recognized certification in their academic program. Another 52% indicate they are working towards it.
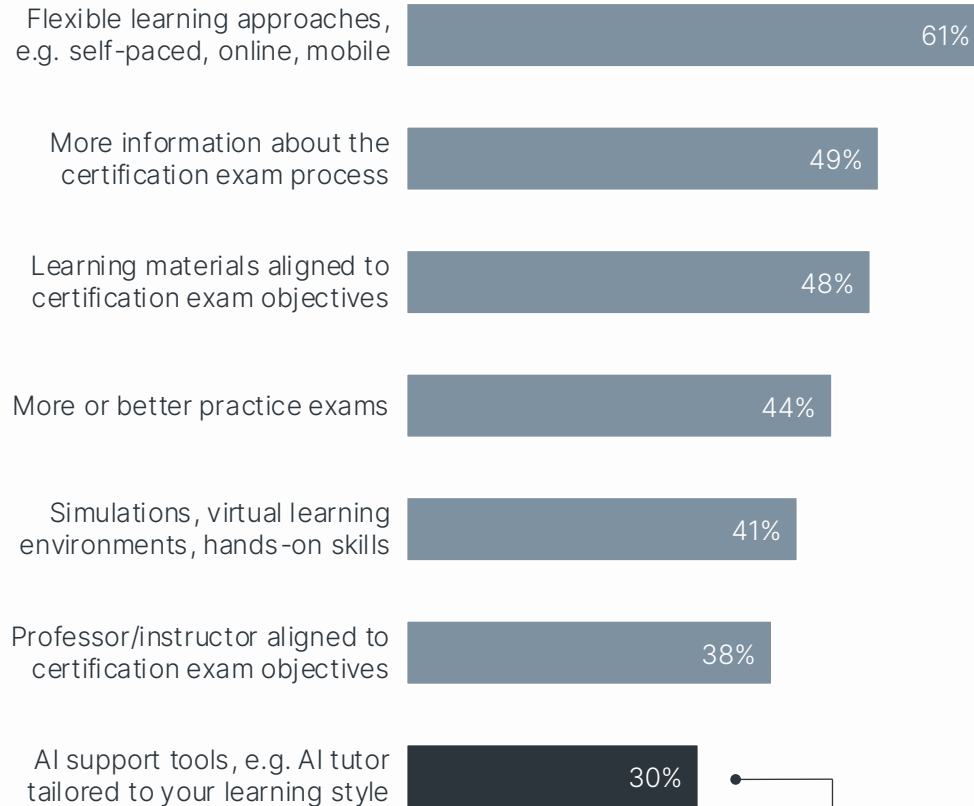

Perceptions of industry-recognized certifications that are required or recommended within academic programs

	Mostly Agree	Strongly Agree	
Validates skills are relevant and up to date	41%	42%	83%
Provides stepping stone to career advancement over time	42%	39%	81%
Expands employment opportunities / opens doors	32%	46%	78%
Provides value with or without earning a degree	35%	32%	67%

The great majority of community college students believe that industry-recognized certifications provide some value such as validating skills are relevant and current, provide a stepping stone to career advancement, and expand employment opportunities / open doors with hiring employers. Students who are 25 years of age or older tend to mostly or strongly agree with these statements at greater rates compared to their younger counterparts.

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Approaches to improving certification exam success rates
From perspective of community college students

Approach	Percentage
Flexible learning approaches, e.g. self-paced, online, mobile	61%
More information about the certification exam process	49%
Learning materials aligned to certification exam objectives	48%
More or better practice exams	44%
Simulations, virtual learning environments, hands-on skills	41%
Professor/instructor aligned to certification exam objectives	38%
AI support tools, e.g. AI tutor tailored to your learning style	30%

A notably greater proportion of students who pay for their education themselves suggest AI tools compared to students who don't use their own money to pay tuition via e.g. scholarships / grants, loans (41% vs. 23%, respectively).
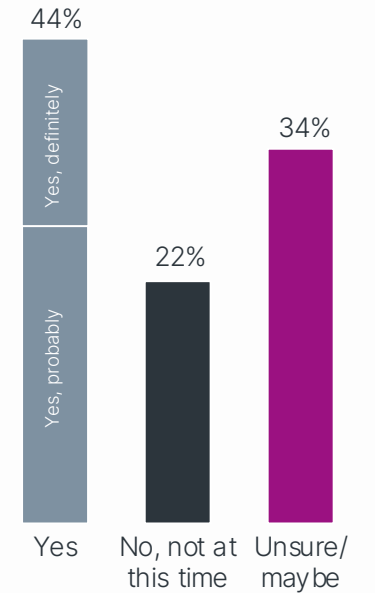

96%
Progressed a step ahead with certification

Community college students report near universal recognition in the value of industry-recognized certification.

Forty-six percent report advancing several steps ahead, which includes both knowledge and skill development, as well as career readiness. Another 49% report advancing at least one step ahead, with only 4% saying no steps ahead.

Students express interest in schools providing more information about certifications
From perspective of community college students where certifications are not required or recommended by their school

Category	Percentage
Yes (Yes, definitely 44% / Yes, probably)	44%
No, not at this time	22%
Unsure/ maybe	34%

Consider that nearly 1 in 5 would definitely like more certification information while over a quarter probably would (for 44% net would), and another third aren't sure but are open to it (34%).

"If there are certifications to boost specialization in my college, it'd help in my career field a lot."

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Student rating of importance in general of digital skills across all career fields

44%
High degree of importance (net)

36%
Mid degree of importance

19%
Low degree of importance

Regardless of occupation field, more than 4 in 10 community college students consider general digital skills important.
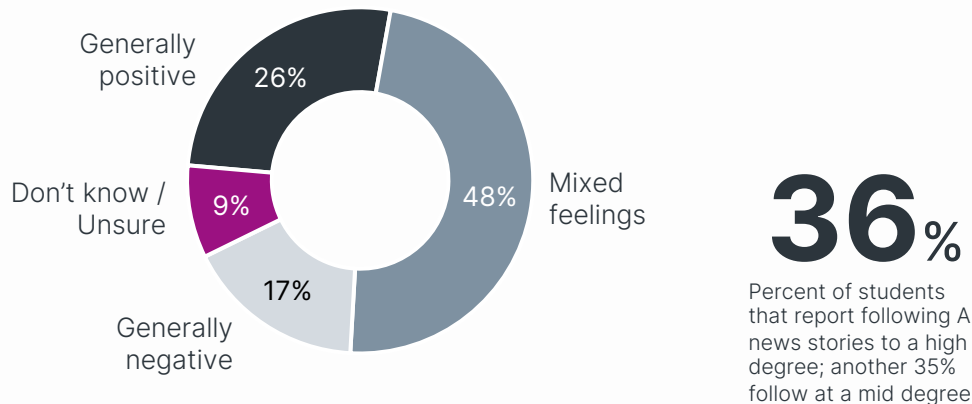
In addition, most students recognize more specific skills to be important such as leadership / team skills, digital fluency, data / analytics, and project management / operations.

Student rating of skill domain importance across all career fields
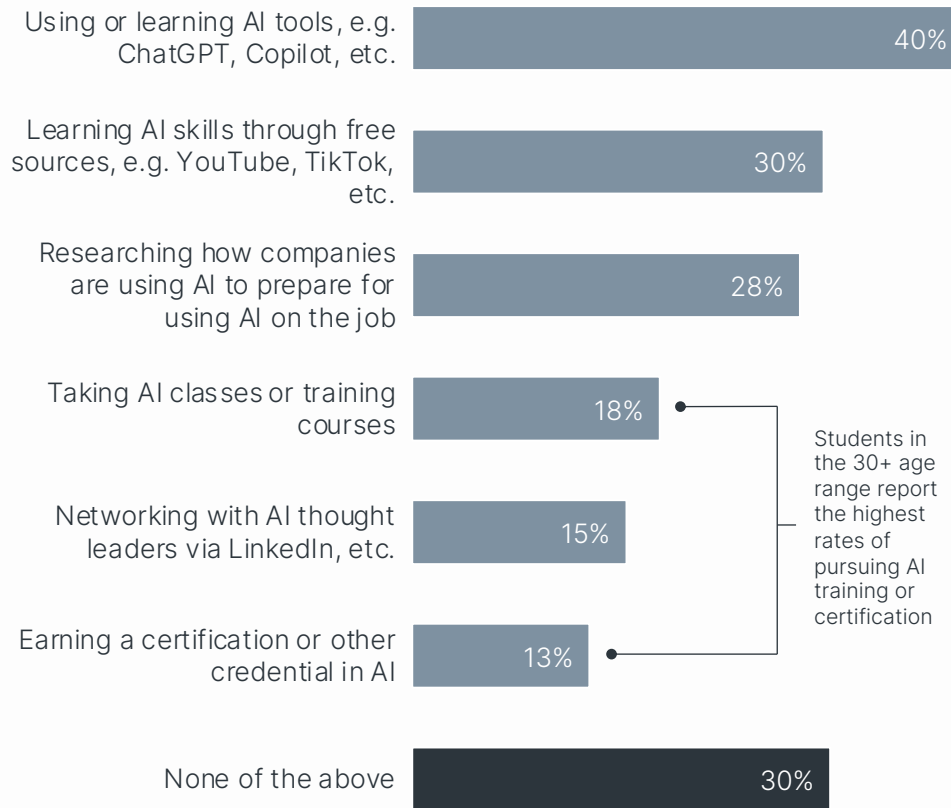
Skill domain	Somewhat important	Very important	Net
Leadership, team, communications	29%	59%	88%
Digital fluency	40%	41%	82%
Data and analytics	39%	40%	79%
Project management, operations	37%	41%	77%
Financial, accounting	36%	33%	68%
IT, cloud, cybersecurity	35%	31%	67%
Creative, content creation, video	28%	38%	65%
Coding, software development	29%	26%	55%
Artificial intelligence (AI)	28%	24%	52%

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Community college students express a continuum of opinions toward AI and its potential impact to their job prospects/career
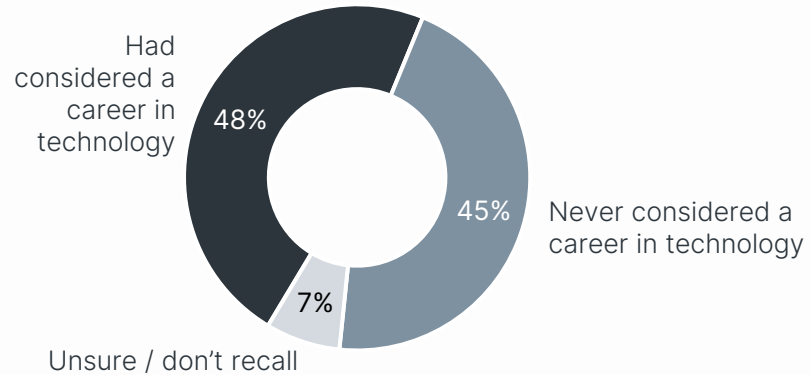

- Generally positive: **26%**
- Mixed feelings: **48%**
- Generally negative: **17%**
- Don't know / Unsure: **9%**

36%

Percent of students that report following AI news stories to a high degree; another 35% follow at a mid degree

How community college students are learning about and preparing for AI in anticipation of entering the workforce

Using or learning AI tools, e.g. ChatGPT, Copilot, etc.	40%
Learning AI skills through free sources, e.g. YouTube, TikTok, etc.	30%
Researching how companies are using AI to prepare for using AI on the job	28%
Taking AI classes or training courses	18%
Networking with AI thought leaders via LinkedIn, etc.	15%
Earning a certification or other credential in AI	13%
None of the above	30%

Students in the 30+ age range report the highest rates of pursuing AI training or certification

Prior consideration for pursuing a career in a technology field

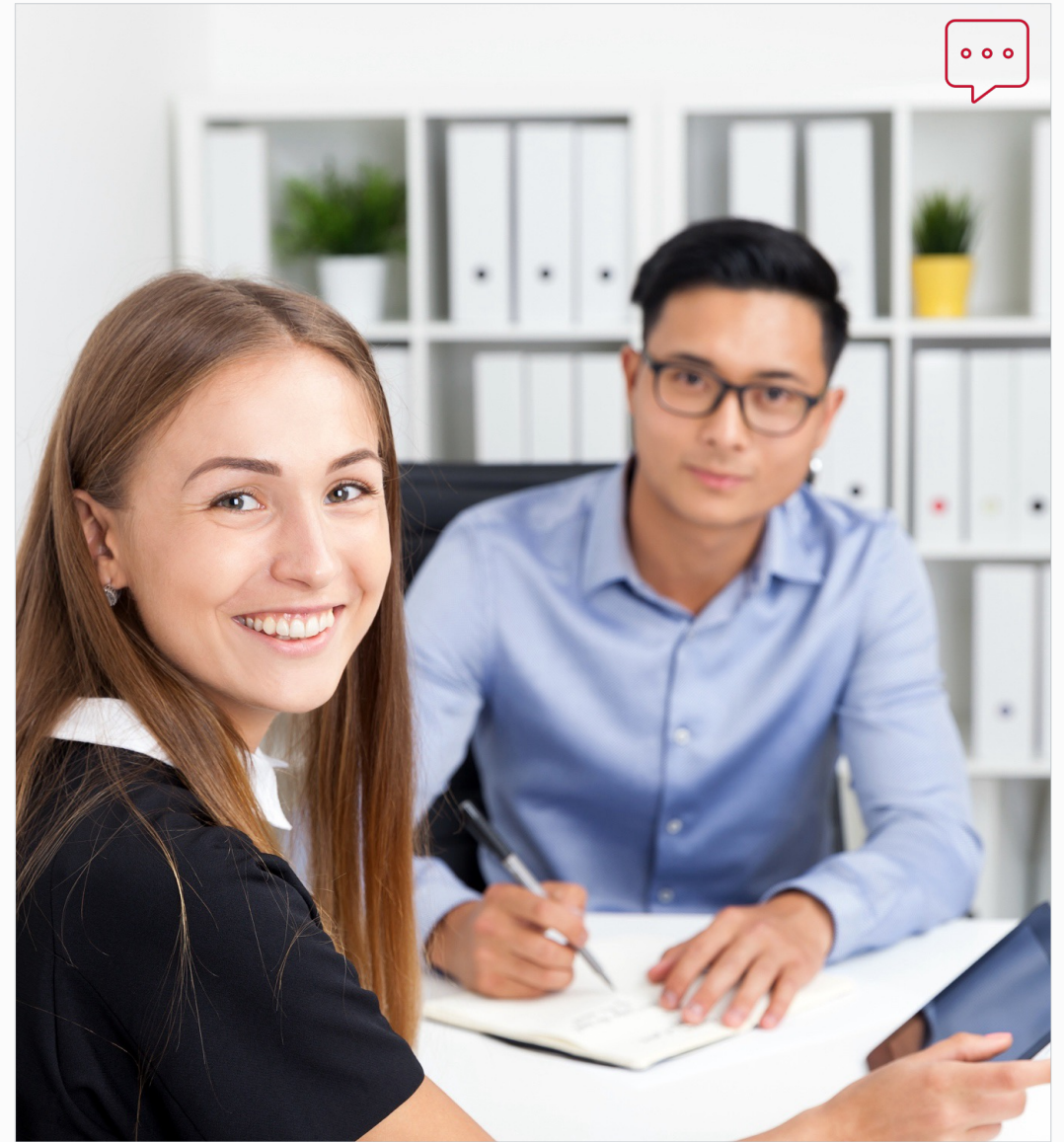Among community college students not currently studying a technology field

Had considered a career in technology **48%**

Never considered a career in technology **45%**

Unsure / don't recall **7%**

Confidence gap concerns inhibit some from considering tech

1 Concerns around insufficient math or science skills

2 Concerns about the length or difficulty of pursuing a career in technology

3 Concerns about finding a job in a tech field

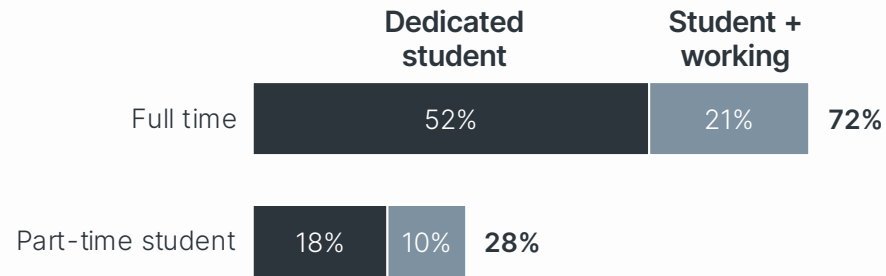**4** Concerns about working in tech / negative perception of "tech culture"

35%

Percent of students reporting they simply do not have an interest in technology or considering a career in technology

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Survey respondent student profiling

	Dedicated student	Student + working	
Full time	52%	21%	**72%**
Part-time student	18%	10%	**28%**

Field of study among student survey participants

Health, Medical & Dental	21%
Business	18%
Engineering, Science or Math	13%
Art, Music, or Theater	11%
Information Technology, Cybersecurity, Software or Data Science	10%
Behavioral or Social Sciences	10%
Liberal Arts	7%
Public Safety or Law	5%
Communications or Media	4%
Teaching & Education	4%
Hospitality, Hotel, Food or Travel	3%
Automotive, Machining or HVAC	3%
Other	10%
Undecided	6%

Survey respondent student profiling continued

Academic program type	Overall	Full-time students	Part-time students
Online	30%	27%	36%
Classroom (in-person)	35%	36%	32%
Hybrid – mix of online classes and in-person classroom	36%	37%	32%

Funding source(s)

Self-funded with own income/savings	40%
Parents/family financial support	30%
Scholarships or grants	55%
Student loans	32%
Military or veteran education assistance	4%
Employer education assistance	2%
Public assistance	8%
Other tuition assistance / financial aid	23%

	18 to 19 years	20 to 24 years	25 to 29 years	30 to 39 years	40+ years
Student age distribution	26%	39%	14%	20%	1%

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Methodology

CompTIA's Community College Student Trends study was conducted via a quantitative survey fielded online during late-December 2024 to mid-January 2025. A total of 462 two-year / community college students in the U.S. completed the survey, yielding an overall margin of sampling error at 95% confidence of +/- 4.6 percentage points.

As with any survey, sampling error is present and will be higher for subsegments of the dataset. While non-sampling error cannot be accurately calculated, precautionary steps were taken in all phases of the survey design, collection and processing of the data to minimize its influence.

Note that other postsecondary students enrolled in a vocational / technical / trade school, four-year college / university, or postgraduate program are not included in this study.

CompTIA, Inc. is a member of the market research industry's Insights Association and adheres to its internationally respected Code of Standards. Any questions regarding the study should be directed to CompTIA Research and Market Intelligence staff at research@comptia.org.