Millions of Americans are aspiring adult learners — individuals without college degrees who are seriously considering enrolling in additional education. Looking specifically at adults ages 25 to 44, we see their interest in enrolling has increased since the onset of COVID-19. Our new findings, however, reveal they are also less confident about the value of additional education than they were a year ago, they face critical barriers to enrollment, and they do not clearly understand how to connect their education to careers. Comparing their perspectives from a year ago with the present, we can see what has — and hasn’t — changed for aspiring adult learners and what they care about most in their education.

The nationally representative Public Viewpoint survey, with more than 17,000 responses collected between March 25 and Sept. 3, is intended to provide insights to the education and training providers, policymakers, employers, and individual Americans who are navigating the COVID-19 crisis. This week’s analysis integrates additional data from the Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey from spring 2020 as well as the Aspiring Adult Learners Survey conducted in fall 2019.

For adults without degrees, worries about finding a satisfying career ranks nearly as high as worries about needs such as having enough to eat or paying rent.