CLOSING THE NATION’S SKILLS GAP:
Making Higher Education Achievable
ABOUT THE STUDY

“Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable” is based on a survey conducted by Bellevue University (www.bellevue.edu). For this research, 1,642 interviews were fielded among nationally-representative Americans aged 18 and older, using an email invitation and an online survey. Quotas were set to ensure reliable and accurate representation of the total U.S. population ages 18 and older.
“Closing this gap will require us to increase access and success in higher education across the board. Two strategies will be especially critical: increasing the rate at which students complete college, and providing ways for adults in the workforce to return to college to complete degrees.”

— A “Stronger Nation Through Higher Ed” report by the Lumina Foundation for Education
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Introduction ................................................................ 5
Women and Higher Education: Lost Opportunities ......................... 8
Men and Higher Education: Falling Behind ................................ 10
Fear at Every Age ................................................................ 12
Finding Relief through Education: 
A Regional Snapshot at Stress Levels in the U.S. ....................... 15
  The Northeast ................................................................ 16
  The Midwest ................................................................ 19
  The South ................................................................ 22
  The West ................................................................ 25
Campaigning for Success ................................................................. 29
About Bellevue University ......................................................... 30
Work, the economy and money. All are factors that can greatly increase stress in millions of people across the United States. In fact, according to “Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable,” 55 percent of Americans report some stress in their lives, with 18 percent citing their jobs as the biggest source of stress. Studies have proven that increased stress leads to decreased energy, meaning that millions of Americans are left feeling exhausted—and perhaps even hopeless—in their pursuit of a happiness. Thoughts of reaching their career or educational potential drifts further and further away with every bill received in the mail, and with every year that passes by. Most feel that in order to achieve their highest goals, they need time and money—and plenty of both.
According to “Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable,” 40 percent of the U.S. population surveyed said they’re not where they want to be in life, with 32 percent having thought they would have achieved more by now. That means almost half the number of people surveyed may be working jobs they don’t enjoy, wanting more education, or just craving change in general.

Right now, 20 percent of the U.S. population is looking to make a job change to achieve their life goals, but feel they lack the education needed to do so. And, though education is the answer to their success, many feel it’s much too late to start now. According to “Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable,” 30 percent of working adults who want to change careers say education and experience are holding them back, yet only 15 percent are working toward a higher degree.

Part of the problem, some are saying, is that their career doesn’t allow them the time to take classes, which is counterproductive, as this coursework may make them more valuable and successful in their current position. Most of the population feels so encumbered with work from their existing job, that adding even one college class would be overwhelming. “Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable” found that 37 percent of American adults aren’t on a path toward success because their place of employment refuses to offer any time off or reimbursement for higher education. And 1 in 3 adults across the nation admit they don’t currently have—or don’t know if they have—the level of education and skills required to achieve their goals.
“America is home to the best colleges and universities in the world—and increasing college attainment has never been more important to our economic competitiveness—yet tuition and fees have skyrocketed over the past decade, making it more difficult for American families to invest in a higher education for their future.”

— www.whitehouse.gov
WOMEN AND HIGHER EDUCATION: LOST OPPORTUNITIES

There are many reasons for returning to school as an adult—perhaps to finish an undergraduate degree to better compete in the job market or to obtain a graduate degree to move up the ladder in a current career. According to the U.S. Department of Education, in 2002, roughly 75 percent of U.S. college students were nontraditional. This implies they were one or more of the following: older than age 25, married and/or had children, entering college after taking a break directly out of high school, employed full-time, or attending college part-time. Women were the majority, accounting for 60 percent of all students over the age of 29.
“Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable” found that 53 percent of women said they believe getting a college degree would make them more competitive in the marketplace, still 42 percent haven’t given any thought to going back to school. Thirty-six percent of the women surveyed said that between work, family, and other commitments, they just don’t have time to get everything done.

According to “Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable,” 31 percent of the women surveyed said they thought they would have achieved more in their life by now, but another 31 percent said they aren’t working a job that will allow them to achieve those life goals. Unfortunately, 13 percent also said they don’t have any sort of plan in place to head back to school, and 14 percent cited lack of motivation as the number one reason.

Currently, according to “Closing the Nation’s Skills
MEN AND HIGHER EDUCATION: FALLING BEHIND

According to “Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable,” 32 percent of men said they thought they would have accomplished more by now, but 26 percent said they feel they don’t currently have the education and necessary skills required to enable them to achieve those goals. And though these men are feeling unsuccessful, 12 percent said they still don’t have a plan in place that will enable achievement, and 17 percent said it’s because of lack of motivation and procrastination.
Unfortunately, this lack of motivation is leading to a serious gender gap in higher-education enrollment. A report published in 2010 by the U.S. Department of Education projects that by 2019, women will account for 59 percent of total undergraduate enrollment and 61 percent of total post-baccalaureate enrollment. Since the late 1990s, women have accounted for roughly three-fourths of the increase in the number of master’s degrees awarded in the U.S. and nearly all of the growth in the number of professional degrees. “Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable” found that 54 percent of men agree that obtaining a college degree would make them more competitive in the workplace, yet 41 percent still haven’t given any thought to going back to school.

According to the “Women in America: Indicators of Social and Economic Well-Being” report prepared by the U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration, “Women’s gains in educational attainment have significantly outpaced those of men over the last 40 years. Today, younger women are more likely to graduate from college than are men and are more likely to hold a graduate school degree. Higher percentages of women than men have at least a high school education, and higher percentages of women than men participate in adult education.”

“Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable” found that one-third of the men surveyed (35 percent) said that between work and family life, they don’t have time to fit college into their busy lives. And 21 percent said they don’t see themselves being able to afford the tuition and fees. Men and women both face many obstacles—both internally and externally—that prevent them from furthering their education. Colleges and universities must both empower and enable these adults who understand how essential a higher education can be, and provide them with the tools and inspiration to put their hopes into motion.
FEAR AT EVERY AGE

Aside from the issues of money and time, there is a widespread, more unspoken hesitation when it comes to taking the leap and either returning to, or starting the process of completing, higher education. According to “Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable,” 60 percent of the population can’t put a finger on exactly what is holding them back from achieving their goals. They procrastinate, make excuses and put off what could possibly lead to a successful future and positive well-being. In some cases, procrastination is a direct side effect of fear.
“Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable” found that fear holds as much as one-quarter of the U.S. population back from achieving their goals. One out of 10 people say they are afraid to step out of their comfort zone, and another 10 percent fear they don’t have what it takes to succeed at the next level. Intriguingly, the study also found that as a person’s educational attainment increased, fear of stepping out of their comfort zone decreased—with 11 percent of those without a degree, 9 percent of those with an associate’s degree and 7 percent of those with a bachelor’s degree indicating that they are afraid to step outside of their comfort zone, respectively. This suggests that obtaining higher education has psychological effects on those that complete their degree by empowering them to step outside of their comfort zone and take on new challenges in their lives.

Like most decisions, age plays an enormous role when determining if starting or finishing higher education is feasible. For most teenage college students, going to class and attending collegiate extracurricular activities is their full-time job. Many times these young adults are still covered under their parents’ insurance and possibly living on loans. “Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable” found that those aged 18-24 reported low amounts of stress and fear, with only 3 percent reporting ‘stress’ as the leading factor for what’s holding them back from reaching their career potential.

As people age, most times they acquire more responsibility at work and at home. Jobs become careers, relationships become marriages, and the flexibility to make decisions based on personal ambitions instead of family priorities becomes rare. Adding continuing education to this list is daunting and requires taking a leap outside of a comfort zone.

According to “Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable,” those aged 25–44 reported the highest amount of fear in terms of stepping outside of their comfort zone (10 percent), with those 45–54 coming in at a close second (9 percent). Twenty-one percent of both age groups felt they don’t have the necessary connections to advance in their careers. Six percent of the 25–44 age group and 8 percent of the 45–54 age group questioned whether they have what it takes to succeed.

AS A PERSON’S EDUCATIONAL OBTAINMENT INCREASED, FEAR OF STEPPING OUT OF THEIR COMFORT ZONE DECREASED:

- **11%** WITHOUT A DEGREE
- **9%** WITH AN ASSOCIATE’S DEGREE
- **7%** WITH A BACHELOR’S DEGREE

10% FEAR STEPPING OUTSIDE THEIR COMFORT ZONE.

21% FEEL THEY DON’T HAVE THE NECESSARY CONNECTIONS TO ADVANCE IN THEIR CAREERS.

6% QUESTIONED WHETHER THEY HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO SUCCEED.

9% FEAR STEPPING OUTSIDE THEIR COMFORT ZONE.

21% FEEL THEY DON’T HAVE THE NECESSARY CONNECTIONS TO ADVANCE IN THEIR CAREERS.

8% QUESTIONED WHETHER THEY HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO SUCCEED.
“We all have different definitions of failure, simply because we all have different benchmarks, values, and belief systems. A failure to one person might simply be a great learning experience for someone else. Many of us are afraid of failing, at least some of the time. But fear of failure is when we allow that fear to stop us doing the things that can move us forward to achieve our goals.”

— “Overcoming Fear of Failure,” www.mindtools.com
FINDING RELIEF THROUGH EDUCATION:

A REGIONAL SNAPSHOT OF STRESS LEVELS IN THE U.S.
THE NORTHEAST

Home to many of the nation’s oldest and most prestigious institutions, the Northeast is one region of the country that’s known for being well-educated.
A study performed in 2008 by the U.S. Census Bureau evaluated what percentage of people 25 years old and over have a bachelor’s degree or higher educational attainment level and found that the Northeast is leading the way, holding four of the top five spots on a state-by-state analysis. Massachusetts came in first with 38 percent, Colorado and Connecticut held the second and third spots, both at 37 percent, and Maryland (35 percent) and New Jersey (34 percent) closed out the top five. It may come as no surprise then to learn that, according to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2012, four of the top five highest average, annual household incomes by state were located in the Northeast: Maryland grabbed the number 1 spot with $70,000 annually, Alaska and New Jersey were both at $67,000, Connecticut was fourth at $65,000, and District of Columbia was fifth at $63,000.

Research shows that greater rates of higher education are leading to increased overall income, thus lowered stress and even greater job satisfaction. According to “Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable,,” only 17 percent (the lowest amount recorded) in the Northeast reported their job as their biggest stressor, and only 10 percent said they feel like they need more experience to obtain job advancement.

Much like the Midwest, those in the Northeast without a bachelor’s degree risk putting themselves at an even bigger disadvantage in the job market in this well-educated region. This is especially true for those in the 25-34 age bracket, as five of the 10 most educated states, in regards to those age 25-34 with a bachelor’s degree or higher, are located in the Northeast—Massachusetts, New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, and New Hampshire—as of the 2010 U.S. Census. Massachusetts leads the nation in this age bracket with 53.4 percent holding a bachelor’s degree, and the other four are all near 50 percent. When this is compared with the national average of 37.8 percent, it’s made clear just how important a college education is in the Northeast.

Not surprising given these statistics and given the correlation between education level and career advancement as well as income level and stress, according to “Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable,” 55 percent of Northeasterners reported experiencing consistent stress, with 11 percent saying that their stress is difficult to manage. Compounding the issue, is the fact that 10 percent of respondents stated that they are afraid to step outside of their comfort zone, possibly largely because 22 percent of all respondents indicated that they don’t have the connections to secure a promotion or better job. With research suggesting that a degree is a pathway to increased income and decreased stress, and thus more happiness, it is up to colleges and universities to find ways to draw people out of their comfort zones by offering them the skills and networking connections necessary to improve their career prospects.
55% of Northeasterners reported experiencing consistent stress.

11% of those in the Northeast said their stress level is extreme and difficult to manage.

30% of those in the Northeast said that income loss and increased amounts of personal debt are their biggest stressors.

17% of those in the Northeast said their job is their biggest stressor.

10% of Northeasterners said they are afraid to step out of their comfort zone and pursue job advancement.

22% of those in the Northeast said they don’t have the connections to secure a promotion or better job.

10% of those in the Northeast said they’d prefer to have more experience before moving up the career ladder.
THE MIDWEST

“Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable” found that those living in the Midwest reported the highest amounts of consistent stress (60 percent), and 11 percent reported extreme cases of stress.
Eighteen percent in the Midwest reported their job as their biggest stressor. With Kansas, Nebraska and Iowa currently ranked in the mid-twenties for annual income, and even in the mid-thirties for states with adults over the age of 25 with a bachelor’s degree or higher, the search for how to lower stress levels may perhaps be a degree away.

According to a study published by BMC Health, higher education has been directly related to lower blood pressure, and a study published in 2006 by the Carnegie Mellon University Psychology department found that those with college degrees have lower levels of a stress hormone known as cortisol, compared with people with less education. A study performed by the National Academy of Sciences and Stanford University also shows that the more a person feels a sense of control, the less anxiety they report. When a person is given more control, the study showed, such as a higher ranking job title or a leadership position, their stress levels decreased, and they reported a lower level of cortisol. To move up the ladder at a current position may call for higher education, but studies are proving that the outcome may mean a more relaxing way of life.

The argument that career advancement or promotion, obtained with the help of higher education, could reduce stress and increase happiness is further supported by “Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable,” which found that 35 percent of Midwest residents reported that income loss and increasing debt are their biggest stressor. Given the well-documented research that shows that increased education results in increased earnings, those in the Midwest without a bachelor’s degree would likely find a happier lifestyle should they pursue more education.

Furthermore, statistics from the US. Census Bureau suggest that those in the Midwestern states who do not already hold a bachelor’s degree may be at a further disadvantage in the workforce because the Midwest is home to a relatively well-educated population in comparison with many parts of the country. In fact, four of the Top 10 states in regard to those ages 25-34 with a bachelor’s degree or higher level of education are in the Midwest—North Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, and Nebraska. In many of these states, nearly half of those ages 25-34 have a college degree, well above the national average of 37.8 percent. Residents in this region without a bachelor’s degree would do well to further their education in order to make themselves more competitive with their well-educated counterparts while increasing their job prospects and income potential. However, with 11 percent of respondents indicating that they are afraid to step outside of their comfort zone in order to pursue career advancement, and 27 percent stating that they don’t have the connections to secure a promotion or better job, according to “Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable,” colleges and universities in this region will have to convince potential students of the benefits of higher education as well as empower them to step outside of their comfort zone in order to encourage them to enroll.
60% of those in the Midwest reported experiencing consistent stress.

10% of Midwesterners said their stress level is extreme and difficult to manage.

35% of those in the Midwest said that income loss and increased amounts of personal debt are their biggest stressors.

18% of those in the Midwest said their job is their biggest stressor.

11% of Midwesterners said they are afraid to step out of their comfort zone and pursue job advancement.

27% of those in the Midwest said they don’t have the connections to secure a promotion or better job.

13% of those in the Midwest said they’d prefer to have more experience before moving up the career ladder.
THE SOUTH

Often stereotyped as a region where life moves more slowly and people have a more relaxing approach to both work and play than other parts of the country, the South may be thought of as a less stressful place to live when compared with other regions.
However, according to the findings of “Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable,” residents of the South did not report being significantly less stressed than other parts of the country. In fact, 52 percent of respondents reported experiencing consistent stress, with 8 percent indicating that their stress levels were hard to manage.

At 13 percent, the Southern region of the U.S. reported the highest rate of those who feel they need more experience before moving up the ladder in their current position, according to “Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable.” Perhaps those in the South desire further experience as they are currently ranked the lowest in terms of overall college graduation rates in the U.S. According to a 2009 study performed by NCHEMS Information Center for Higher Education Policy making and Analysis, Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, Kentucky, Georgia, Florida, and Arkansas were all ranked in the 30s and 40s in a list of graduation rates for all 50 states. Louisiana scored the lowest with a ranking of 47 and a graduation rate of only 41 percent. Not surprisingly given the above college graduation rates, 17 percent of residents in the South reported that their job was their biggest stressor, and 16 percent felt that they don’t have the connections to secure a promotion or better job.

According to a 2011 Current Population Survey by Northeastern University researchers, the Western and Southern regions were found to have the highest number of young college graduates jobless or underemployed. Some of the worst-ranked states included Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi and Tennessee. “Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable” found that with 31 percent of those in the South reporting debt as their biggest stressor, a lack of skills necessary to obtain a higher-paying career may be keeping the South static in undesirable rankings. Amplifying this problem is the fact that 9 percent of Southerners are afraid to step outside of their comfort zone to pursue career advancement.

Interestingly, three of the 10 states with the largest total number of colleges or universities are in the South—Texas, North Carolina, and Florida—according to U.S. Census data. However, this region is also home to a number of states with the lowest percentage of college degree holders among those ages 25-34, according to 2010 Census data. Arkansas, Texas, Tennessee, and Mississippi all ranked in the bottom 10 states in terms of those with a bachelor’s degree or higher. This would suggest that the residents of the South do have access to the education that would result in higher-paying jobs, and subsequently less stress and increased happiness, but the colleges or universities in the South are charged with doing a better job of making their institutions more appealing to the younger segments of the population. These potential students are likely busy with full-time jobs and on a tight budget, so more flexibility regarding class schedule and format—as well as increased affordability—might be the key to getting them to enroll in higher education.
52% of those in the South reported experiencing consistent stress.

8% of Southerners said their stress level is extreme and difficult to manage.

31% of those in the South said that income loss and increased amounts of personal debt are their biggest stressors.

17% of those in the South said their job is their biggest stressor.

9% of Southerners said they are afraid to step out of their comfort zone and pursue job advancement.

16% of those in the South said they don’t have the connections to secure a promotion or better job.

13% of those in the South said they’d prefer to have more experience before moving up the career ladder.
“Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable,” revealed that at least one-third of those surveyed in all regions (Northeast, West, South and Midwest) said that income loss and increased amounts of personal debt are the top reasons they’re feeling stressed, with the Midwest (35 percent) and those living in Western states (32 percent) reporting the highest numbers.
That signifies possibly 1 out of every 3 people across the U.S. could benefit from a career change or advancement. The fact that 51 percent of those in the West reported experiencing consistent stress, with 11 percent indicating that their stress level was difficult to manage and 19 percent stating that their job was their biggest stressor, further supports the assertion that residents of this region could use the benefits of higher education in order to advance their careers.

Unfortunately, there are a large number of people who feel they don’t have the necessary connections to secure a promotion or better job. Twenty-one percent of those in the Western region of the U.S. reported feeling stressed about not having the connections to help them reach their goals. Having “connections” and/or possessing high-quality references plays an enormous role when pursuing career advancement or change. Colleges and universities can assist students in building and maintaining those relationships through career counseling, internships and staff assistance.

What may be alarming for residents of the Western region is that, despite the reputation of prestigious institutions along its coast, the West is not home to nearly as many younger graduates of colleges and universities as other parts of the country. In fact, the region has no states in the Top 10 in relation to those ages 25-34 with a bachelor’s degree or higher educational obtainment. Contrast this with both the Northeast and the Midwest, both of which have multiple states in the Top 10, and a regional skills gap is revealed. And, much like the South, this skills gap is not because of lack of availability of higher education, as California was home to 310 institutions—the second most in the U.S.—as of the 2000 Census. However, the findings of “Closing the Nation’s Skills Gap: Making Higher Education Achievable,” indicated that encouraging Western residents to pursue higher education and/or career advancement may not be an easy task, given that 8 percent of respondents stated that they were afraid to step outside of their comfort zone and that 10 percent indicated that would prefer to gain more experience before moving up the career ladder.
51% of those in Western states reported experiencing consistent stress.

11% of Westerners said their stress level is extreme and difficult to manage.

32% of those in the West said that income loss and increased amounts of personal debt are their biggest stressors.

19% of those in the Western US said their job is their biggest stressor.

8% of Westerners said they are afraid to step out of their comfort zone and pursue job advancement.

21% of those in the West said they don’t have the necessary connections to secure a promotion or better job.

10% of those in the West said they’d prefer to have more experience before moving up the career ladder.
The process of furthering education can make life more difficult and cause increased amounts of stress in the short-term, but research is showing that increased income and higher rates of job advancement are directly related to the obtainment of higher education. And increased income and job satisfaction are linked to lowered amounts of stress. So, by simple formula, more education equals less stress, and less stress equals a much more enjoyable way of life.
The future of American prosperity relies on a better-educated workforce, according to the current White House Administration. With this in mind, Bellevue University has launched a nationwide campaign — *Make It Happen Now* — designed to help the United States achieve the ambitious goal of once again having the world’s highest percentage of adults with a college degree by 2025. *Make it Happen Now* will work to remove the barriers for obtaining a college degree so the country can once again benefit from the world’s most educated workforce.

With the United States’ recent drop from first place to 12th in global graduation rates for young adults, *Make it Happen Now* will accelerate efforts addressing the nation’s education deficit and facilitate personal commitments from people across that nation to help achieve the national objective of producing eight (8) million more college graduates over the next decade in order to compete globally and keep up with other countries that are developing high-tech, high-skill jobs.

To help achieve the national goal, *Make it Happen Now* aims to engage those from a pool of 38 million who have some college credits and are thinking about returning to school to finish a degree. The campaign will help these individuals organize their personal goals, think through the steps they need to take to achieve their goals, and solidify their commitment to themselves and their future.

Working adults and business leaders who wish to learn more about this higher-education movement may visit Bellevue University’s new online destination website [www.makeithappennow.org](http://www.makeithappennow.org). The site provides helpful tips to motivate and support people who want to advance their education and live better lives, step-by-step strategies for overcoming personal challenges that get in the way of going back to school, and regular news updates.
ABOUT BELLEVUE UNIVERSITY

Bellevue University is a recognized national leader in providing post-secondary education opportunities for working adults. A private, non-profit institution, Bellevue University serves students at learning sites in three states, as well as worldwide through its award-winning online learning platform. Bellevue University is accredited by The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. For more information, visit www.bellevue.edu.