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# The American Climate Corps and the Green Workforce Are Broadly Favored by Young Americans – Once They Learn About Them

September 2024

# The American Climate Corps and the Green Workforce Are Broadly Favored by Young Americans – Once They Learn About Them

In September 2023, the Biden-Harris administration launched the American Climate Corps (ACC), a federally supported workforce training and service initiative that employs thousands of young Americans to tackle the climate crisis and its impacts.

This past summer, the White House [swore in the first ACC class](#), with an estimated enrollment of over 9,000 members. The program eventually aims to expand to 20,000 people, with ACC members placed in key positions across nonprofits, local and state government agencies, Tribal communities, higher education institutions, and faith-based institutions nationwide.

ACC members engage in a variety of projects, [including](#) managing forests to prevent wildfires, helping communities rebuild after extreme weather disasters, deploying clean energy infrastructure, and more. The program places young people in good-paying jobs with opportunities for job training, education benefits, and pathways to federal service.

However, despite the benefits that service year programs can bring to those just starting their careers, young people have limited awareness of the ACC, service year programs, and the green sector in general. To understand what knowledge gaps exist around the ACC and green sector programs, and to learn what aspects of the green workforce could appeal to young people, Data for Progress and Service Year Alliance conducted a mixed-methods research project, consisting of a national [survey](#) of adults ages 18-26 and three national focus groups, with a focus on the perspectives of young adults in BIPOC communities.

## Key Takeaways:

- Young people have **heard little thus far** about the green sector, the ACC, and registered apprenticeships, and may not understand what these career pathways and sectors entail.
  - Additional education can fill this knowledge gap and ensure young people are aware of the **breadth of job options, benefits, and working conditions** they could expect working in the green sector.
- The ACC and jobs in the green sector can offer a variety of **work settings and job opportunities**. Effective messaging about the ACC and green jobs will need to be **specific** with target audiences, including information on whether a job would require in-person or remote work and how long a position with the ACC would last.
  - Firsthand accounts from **ACC program alumni that share details on the day-to-day experiences of an ACC member**, as well as detailed information about ACC **compensation and benefits**, can help supplement strong messaging by focusing on themes — like pay and benefits — that resonate with young people.
- Outside of their economic priorities, young people want to **make a difference** in their communities and to be **in community** with others, with the most successful ACC messages tested in focus groups touching on those themes. Survey respondents also indicate community building is one of the most important factors when considering service in the ACC.
  - ACC recruitment efforts should emphasize these community-focused **values**, along with specific expectations about the **career growth** young people can achieve in the green sector.

# Survey Results

Data for Progress and Service Year Alliance started this research with a [survey](#) of national adults ages 18 to 26 from August 2 to 4, 2024. The survey included oversamples of Black and Latino adults ages 18 to 26 (with around 100 additional interviews of respondents in each of these groups, respectively) in order to enhance confidence in the results for young adults in these demographic groups.

## Young Adults' Perceptions of the Green Workforce

After reading a description of green jobs, three-quarters of 18- to 26-year-olds say they have a favorable view of these opportunities, including a third who consider these jobs very favorable. Favorability is similarly high across demographic groups, with strong support for green jobs across race, gender, and education levels.

However, despite high favorability after reading a definition of the term, only 38% of young adults say they are at least “somewhat familiar” with green jobs and career opportunities, indicating the green sector has low salience among young adults.

Even though respondents are not strongly familiar with careers in the green sector, young people are worried about the impacts of climate change, and think that not enough is being done to combat it. They agree most strongly that “climate change poses a serious threat to our

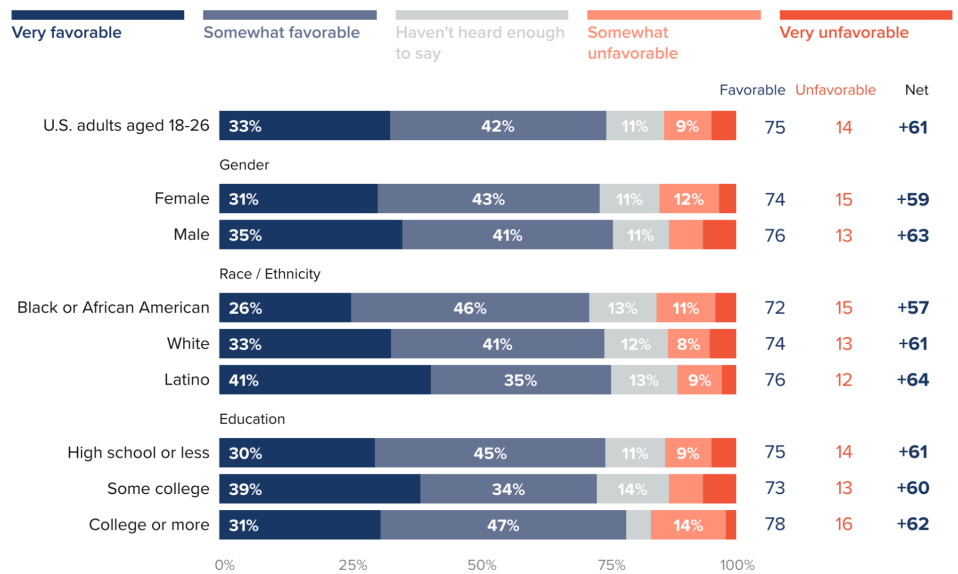
### Young Adults View Green Jobs Favorably After Reading a Description of Them

Green jobs make up a growing segment of the overall workforce. The Bureau of Labor Statistics defines two categories of **green jobs and careers**:

- Jobs in businesses that produce goods or provide services that benefit the environment or conserve natural resources; and,
- Jobs in which workers' duties involve making their company's processes more environmentally friendly or use fewer natural resources.

Workers can enter green careers through multiple pathways, including traditional pathways like higher education and internships, as well as less traditional pathways including national service programs, registered apprenticeships, and entrepreneurship.

Knowing what you just read, do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of **green jobs and careers**?



August 2–4, 2024 survey of 659 U.S. adults ages 18-26

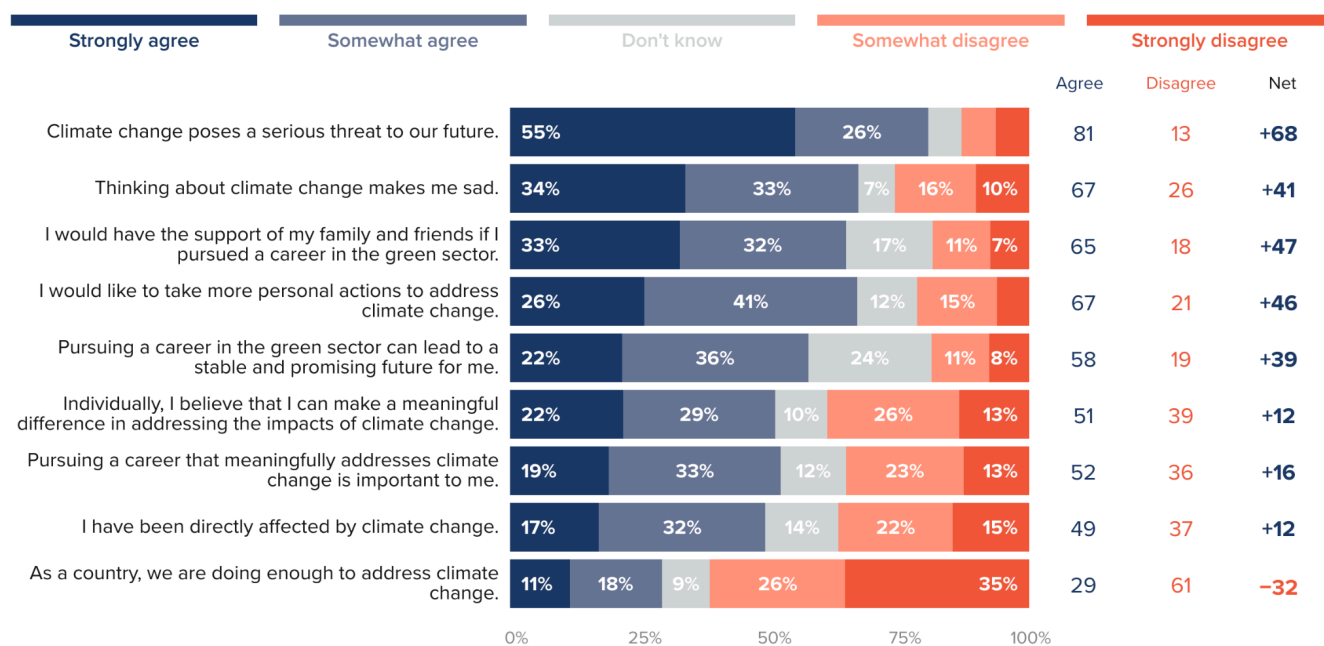


future” (81% agree). A majority of young adults also agree that they want to do more to address climate change and feel that they can make a meaningful difference in doing so. Fifty-eight percent of young adults say that a career in the green sector can lead to a “stable and promising future.”

Even still, young adults don’t think the U.S. has done enough on a climate. By a -32-point margin, young adults disagree with a statement saying that our country is doing enough to address climate change.

## Young Adults View Climate Change as a Serious Threat and Do Not Believe We Are Doing Enough to Address It

To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:



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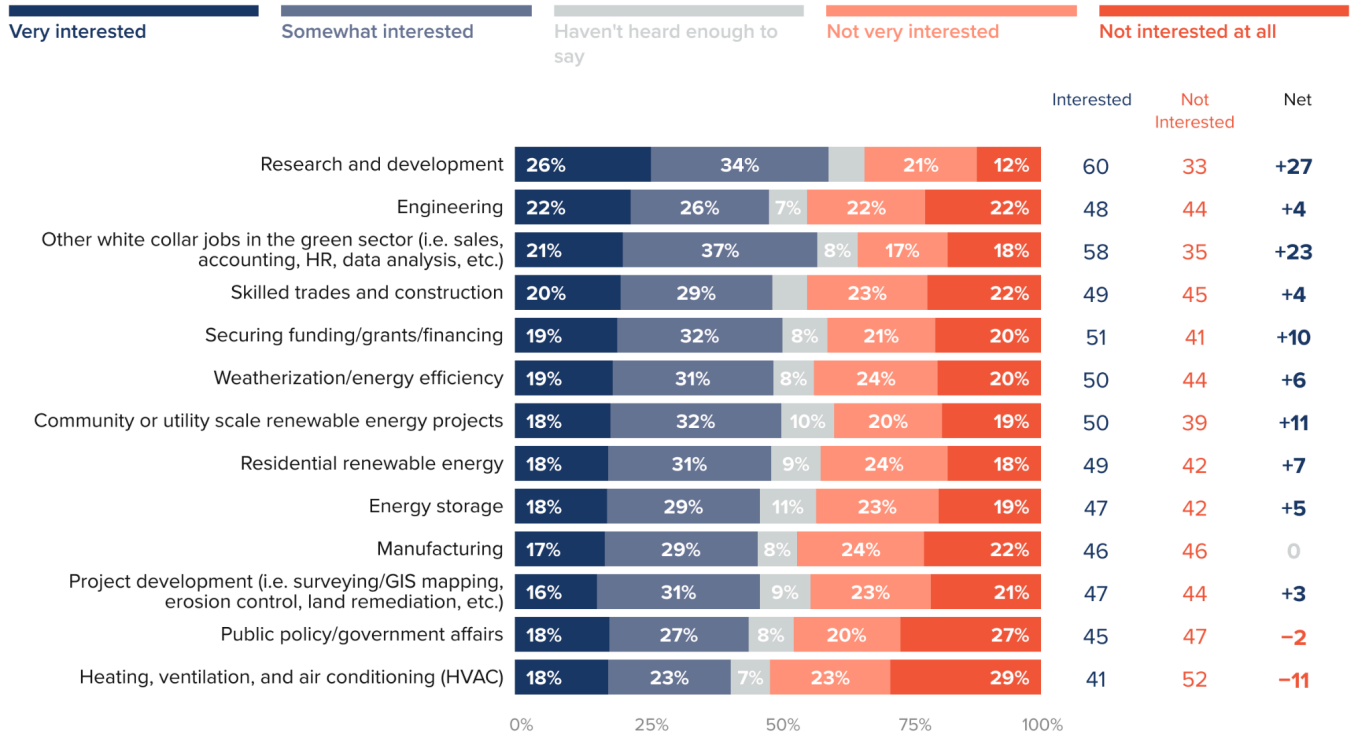
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Next, young adults were shown a list of career fields within the green sector and asked to evaluate their interest in each. White-collar jobs — including research and development, sales and accounting, and securing funding, grants, or financing — receive higher interest than other fields listed.

Young adults express the least interest in HVAC work, followed by public policy and government affairs positions.

# Young People Are Most Interested in R&D, Engineering, and Other White-Collar Jobs in the Green Sector

Please indicate how interested, if at all, you might be in pursuing a career related to the following fields:



August 2-4, 2024 survey of 659 U.S. adults ages 18-26



## Young Adults' Perceptions of the American Climate Corps

After reading a description of the ACC, nearly three-quarters (73%) say they have a favorable opinion of the program, including 26% who view the ACC “very” favorably. Latino young adults, in particular, demonstrate a high margin of favorability for the ACC (+68 points), along with young adults who only have some college experience (+65 points), though all demographic groups express strongly net-favorable views.

However, nearly 3-in-4 (73%) young adults say they had not heard of the American Climate Corps prior to taking this survey.

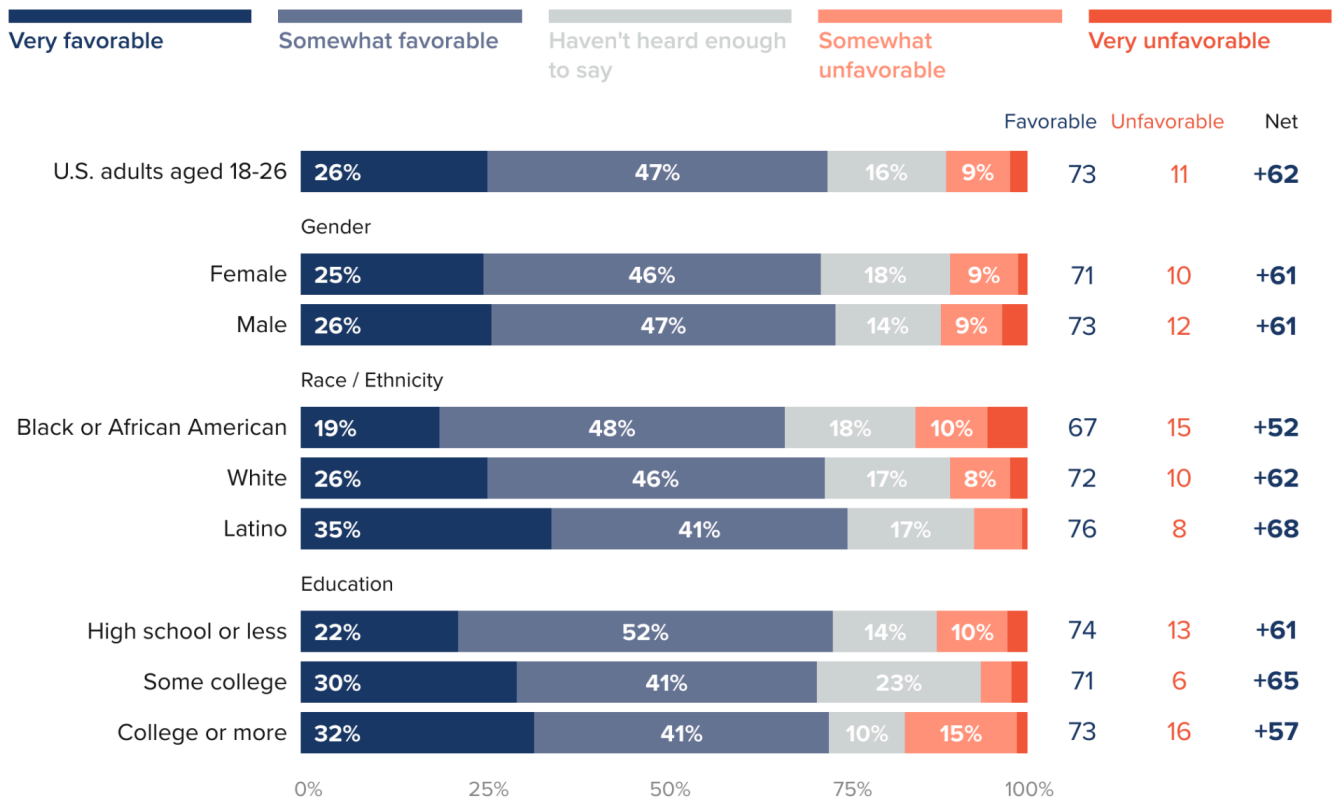
# A Strong Majority of Young Adults View the American Climate Corps Favorably After Learning About It

The **American Climate Corps (ACC)** is a workforce training and service initiative that will engage tens of thousands of young Americans in service fighting the impacts of climate change today while training tomorrow's clean energy and climate-resilience workforce.

ACC positions are hosted by a variety of organizations, including nonprofits, local and state government agencies, tribal communities, institutions of higher education, and faith-based institutions nationwide.

Participants in the ACC typically serve for a few months to a full year and commonly receive a modest living allowance or stipend, along with an end-of-term education award. This award can be utilized to cover future educational expenses or assist in paying down student loans.

Knowing what you just read, do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of the American Climate Corps (ACC)?



August 2–4, 2024 survey of 659 U.S. adults ages 18-26



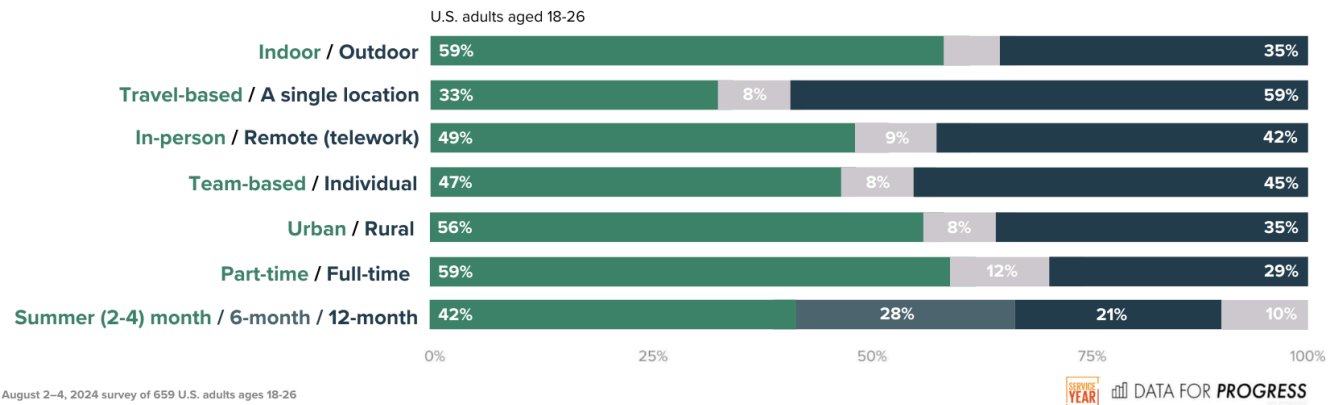
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In a series of questions, respondents were asked to select which types of positions would appeal to them most if they were to serve in the ACC. A majority of young people prefer part-time (59%), urban (56%), indoor (59%), and single-location (59%) programs, while they are more split on their preferences for in-person (49%) vs. remote (42%) work and team-based (47%) vs. individual (45%) work.

# Preferences for Types of ACC Positions

If you were to serve in the American Climate Corps, which of the following [characteristics] would you be most interested in?



Next, respondents were given a list of potential reasons why someone might join the ACC, ranging from addressing climate injustice to deferring payment on student loans. Respondents then indicated whether that reason would be important in deciding whether to join the ACC.

While all of the listed rationales perform well among respondents, some of the top-performing reasons include:

- Gaining general work experience (89% say this would be important);
- Earning a living wage (87% say this would be important);
- Protecting our planet for future generations (86% say this would be important); and
- Helping protect nature and wildlife (86% say this would be important).

When selecting the reasons that would be most important personally for joining the ACC, young adults attribute greater importance to reasons related to the economic benefits and positive impact on the environment generally than they do to reasons more specifically linked to climate change and green jobs.

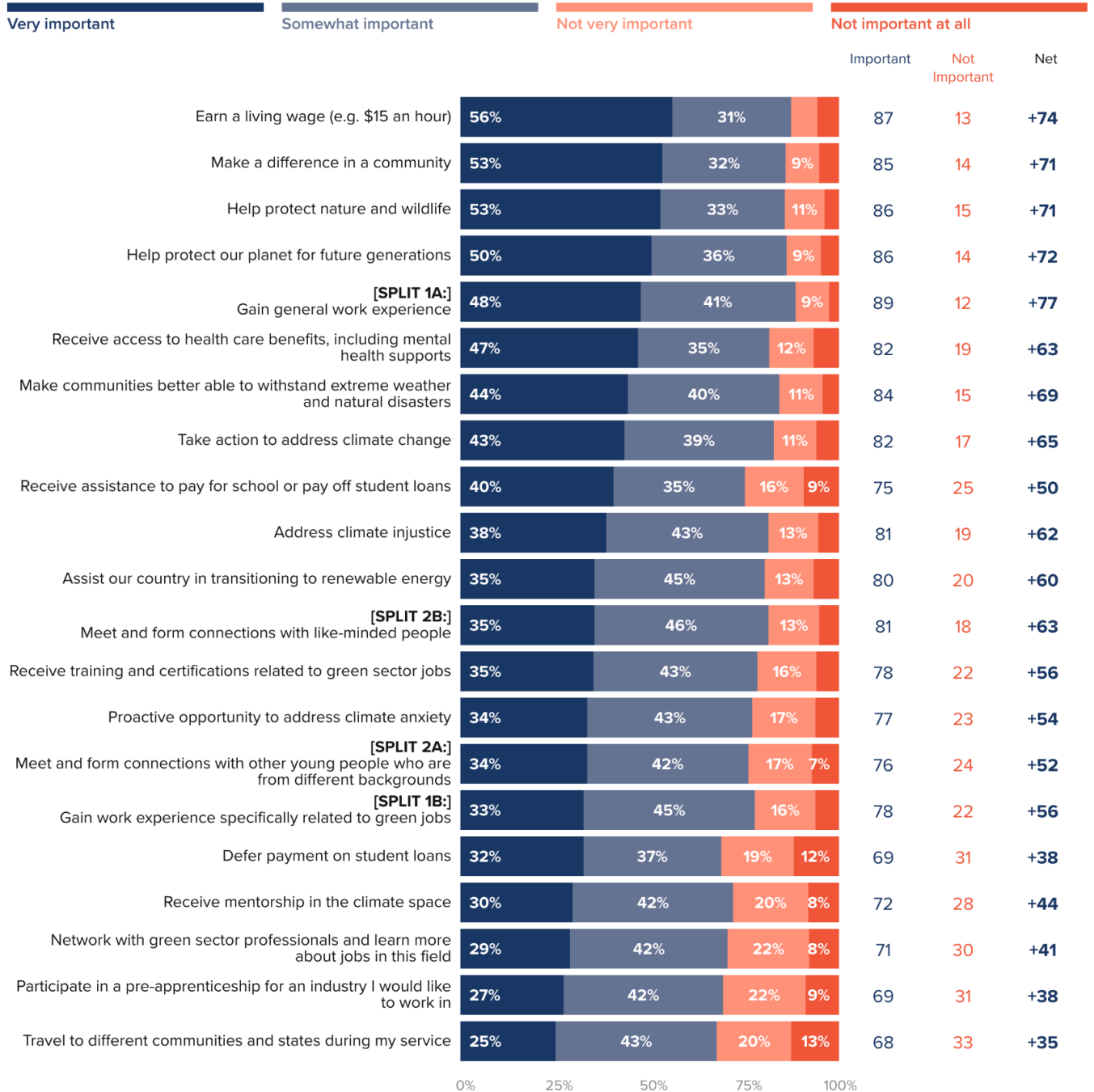
In a split test, half of the respondents were asked to evaluate the importance of gaining work experience generally, while the other half were asked to evaluate the importance of gaining work experience “specifically related to green jobs.” Eighty-nine percent of young people say that gaining general work experience is important, while only 78% say the same about experience in the green sector, showing that young adults view it as somewhat more important for the ACC to offer general career development and skill growth.



# Earning a Living Wage and Making a Difference Are the Most Important Reasons for Joining the ACC

Below are different reasons why people might consider joining the American Climate Corps.

For each, please indicate how **important** that reason would be to you in **considering joining** the American Climate Corps.



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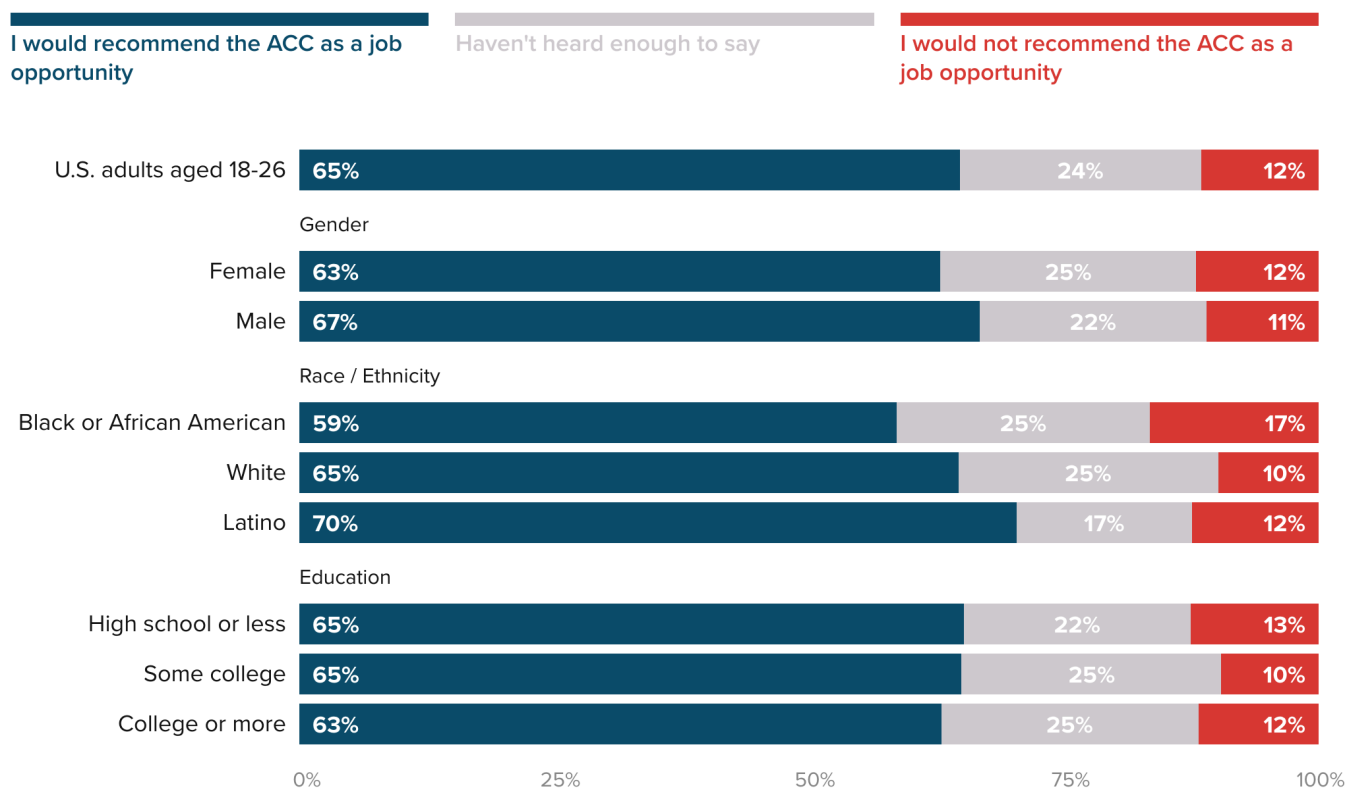
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After reading information throughout the survey regarding the ACC, including questions on potential ACC benefits and jobs, a strong majority of young adults (84%) say they support the ACC.

Expressed interest in serving in the ACC is also quite high at the end of the survey, with 69% of 18- to 26-year-olds saying they are at least “somewhat interested,” including 22% who are “very interested.” Furthermore, after reading and learning more about the ACC, 65% of respondents say that they would recommend the ACC as a job opportunity to a friend or family member.

## Young Adults Say They Would Recommend the American Climate Corps to Others

Based on what you have read, would you recommend the American Climate Corps as a job opportunity to a family member or friend?



August 2–4, 2024 survey of 659 U.S. adults ages 18-26



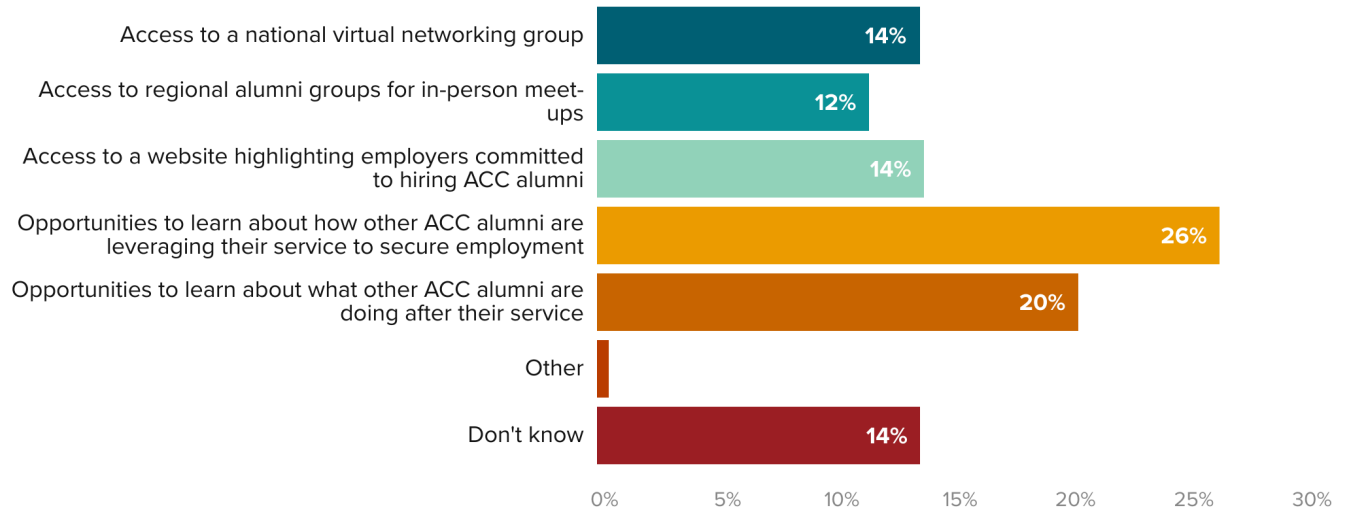
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Young adults say that, if they were to serve in the ACC, they would, as alumni, most like to receive “opportunities to learn about how other ACC alumni are leveraging their service to secure employment.” Younger, less educated respondents, as well as respondents with student debt, are particularly in favor of this form of support.

# Potential ACC Members Want to Learn About Alumni Career Pathways

If you were to serve in the American Climate Corps, please say which of the following options for alumni support you would **most** like to have after your term of service:



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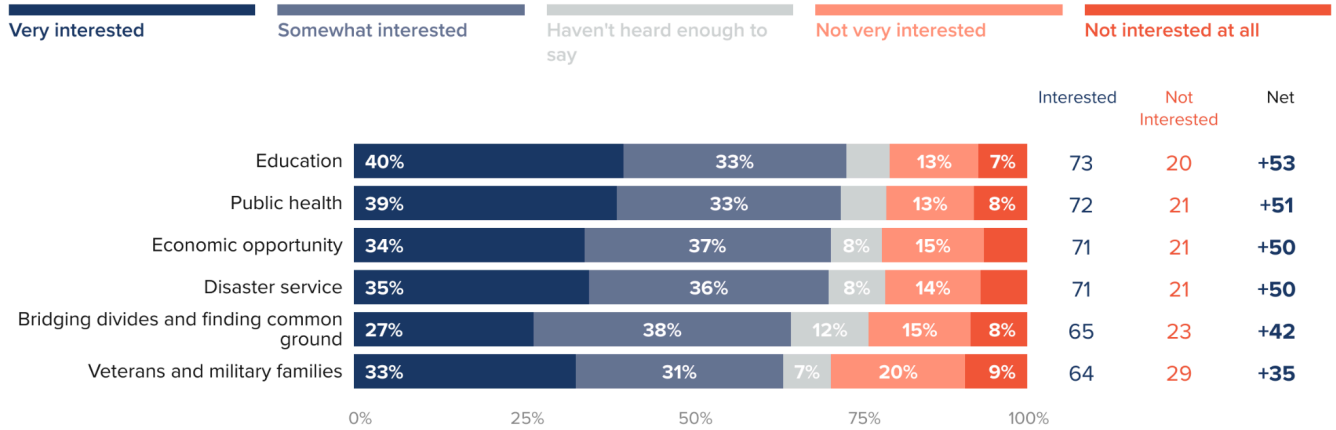


Beyond the ACC, there are a variety of service year opportunities available related to other specific fields. Among a list of additional service opportunities, respondents are most interested in education and public health, when ranked by the proportion of respondents who say they are “very interested.” Overall, a similar proportion of young adults say they are at least “somewhat interested” in service opportunities in education, public health, economic opportunity, and disaster relief service.

## Young Americans Are Also Interested in Education and Public Health Service Year Opportunities

In addition to the American Climate Corps, there are many other types of service year opportunities, where people can join a program to engage in public service across a range of fields and sectors.

Please indicate your level of interest in participating in a service year opportunity that would fall within any of the following focus areas:



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## Young Adults' Perceptions of Registered Apprenticeships

After reading a brief description of registered apprenticeships, including information on how these apprenticeships can serve as a paid career development pathway to future employment, 74% of young adults report having a favorable opinion of them.

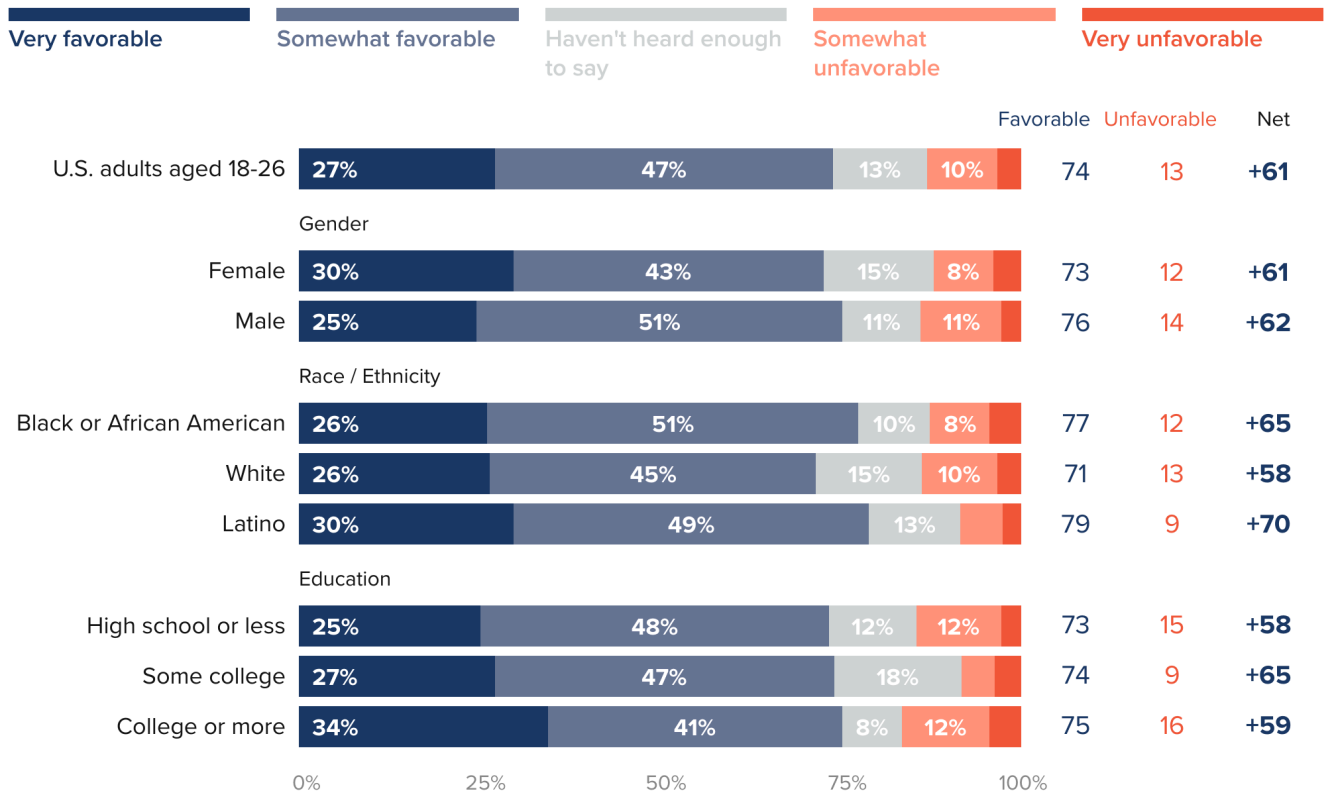
However, respondents are largely unfamiliar with registered apprenticeships, with only 35% of young adults reporting that they are at least “somewhat familiar” with them.

# Young Adults Find Registered Apprenticeships Favorable After Reading About Them

Registered apprenticeships are a career development pathway that enables individuals to earn progressive wage increases as they advance through training that prepares them for a job in an in-demand occupation.

These programs combine structured and supervised on-the-job training with related classroom instruction, which can often include obtaining nationally-recognized skill certification credentials. Apprenticeships usually take between 1 to 5 years to complete, and can serve as a comparable career entry pathway to obtaining a college degree in a specific field of study.

Knowing what you just read, do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of **registered apprenticeships**?



August 2–4, 2024 survey of 659 U.S. adults ages 18-26



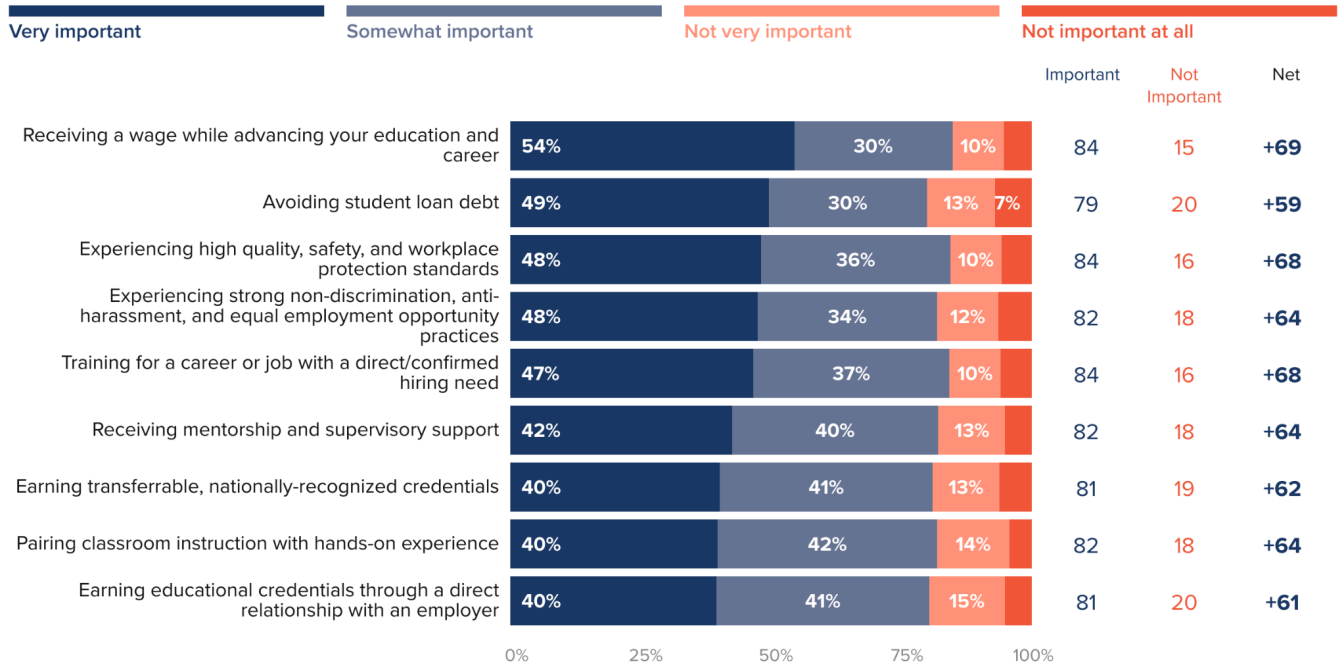
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In considering reasons to complete a registered apprenticeship, respondents rank the working conditions and financial benefits they can expect from such an apprenticeship as the most important.

## Financial and Career Aspects Are the Most Important Considerations for Completing a Registered Apprenticeship

Below are different reasons why people might consider completing a registered apprenticeship.

For each, please indicate how **important** that reason would be to you in **considering completing** a registered apprenticeship:



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## Young Adults' Perceptions of Green Entrepreneurship

The final section of the survey focused on attitudes toward green entrepreneurship. Before introducing green entrepreneurship, the survey first asked respondents about their interest in entrepreneurship generally. A majority of young adults (64%) say they are at least somewhat interested in pursuing entrepreneurship or small business ownership as a career path.

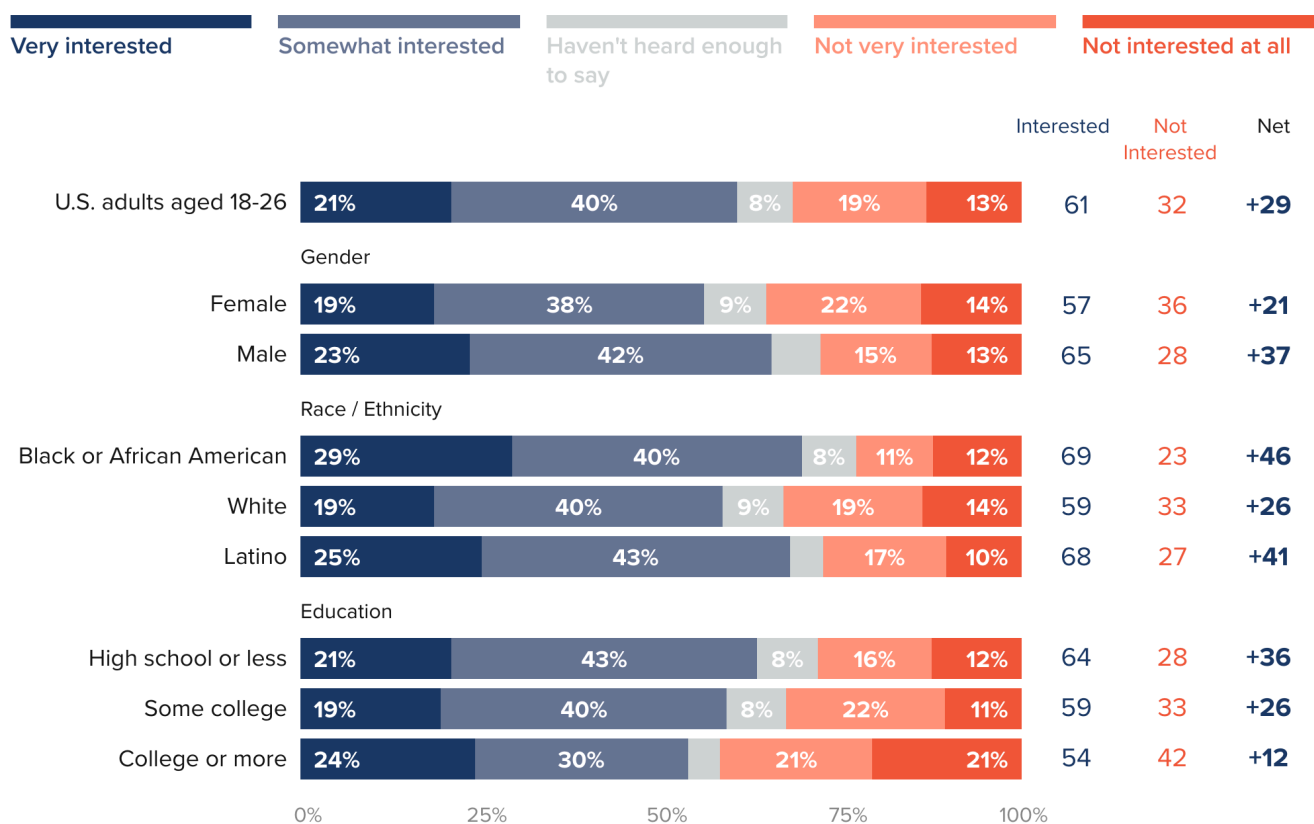
After reading a short introduction about new business growth and entrepreneurship in the green sector, respondents were then asked about their interest in *green entrepreneurship*. A majority of respondents (61%) say they are at least “somewhat interested” in pursuing entrepreneurship or small business ownership in the green sector specifically. This finding is within the margin of error of the interest expressed in entrepreneurship as a whole, but within demographic groups, there is some dropoff in interest in green entrepreneurship among 18- to 22-year-olds (from 65% at least “somewhat interested” to 56%, a 9-point drop).

# A Majority of Young Adults Express Interest in Green Sector Entrepreneurship

New business startups account for an important and growing segment of our economy. About 10% of workers in the U.S. are self-employed, and new business startups are 40% higher compared to pre-pandemic levels.

Green sector businesses are a meaningful contributor to this growth, and the supply of new green businesses is in part driven by demand from consumers. For example, a recent survey found that 50% of consumers say sustainability is one of their top four criteria when purchasing products or services.

How interested are you, if at all, in pursuing entrepreneurship or small business ownership in a green sector industry as a career path?



August 2-4, 2024 survey of 659 U.S. adults ages 18-26

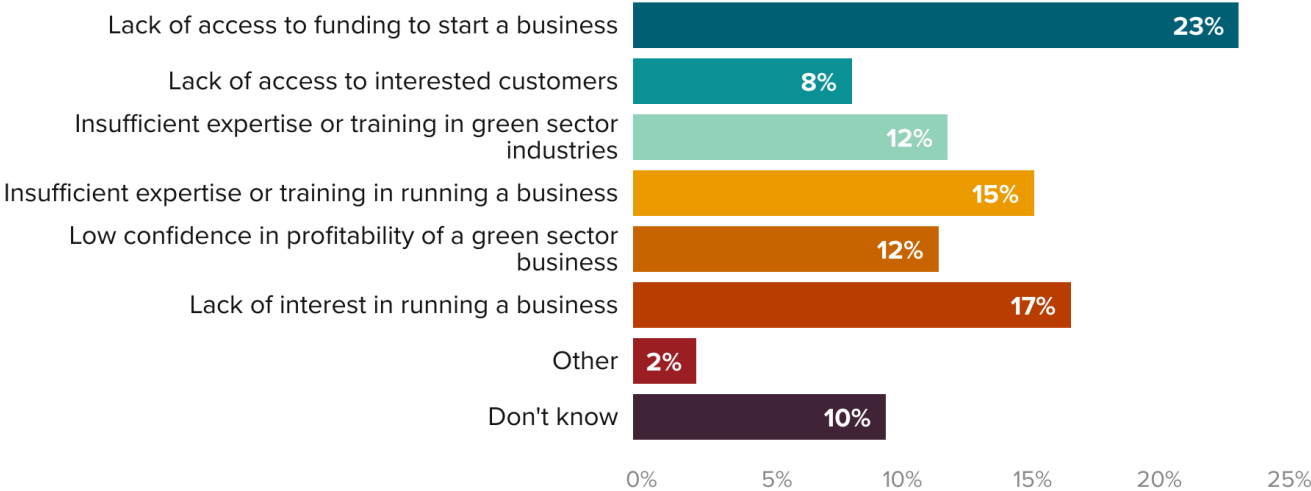


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Finally, young adults were asked about potential barriers to pursuing green entrepreneurship. The greatest barrier identified by respondents is a lack of funding to start a business. Respondents who attained a bachelor's degree or higher also indicate lower confidence in the profitability of a green sector business as a barrier.

# Young Adults Think the Main Barrier to Green Entrepreneurship Is Funding

From the items listed below, please select which you think is the **greatest barrier** that would prevent you from pursuing entrepreneurship or small business ownership in a green sector industry?



August 2–4, 2024 survey of 659 U.S. adults ages 18-26



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## Focus Groups

After conducting this national survey, Data for Progress and Service Year Alliance carried out national focus groups to further assess sentiments toward these topics, with a particular focus on the perspectives of BIPOC young adults. Data for Progress hosted three national focus groups in August 2024 to investigate sentiments surrounding green sector jobs and the ACC. A total of 16 individuals between ages 18-29 participated across the three groups, with 14 participants from BIPOC communities, including two Indigenous participants. The focus groups followed a common discussion guide written by Data for Progress and Service Year Alliance, and were facilitated by a trained DFP moderator. Each focus group ran for 90 minutes and was recorded using Zoom and transcribed using Rev.

## Participants Report Low Familiarity With the ACC and the Green Sector

Across all three focus groups, participants had little to no knowledge of the green workforce, or of the ACC. Despite the low salience of these concepts, participants were pleasantly surprised by the breadth of jobs — particularly white-collar jobs — available in the green sector after being presented with additional information. In fact, several participants described that their biggest



takeaway from the focus group was that they learned more about the range of job opportunities in the green sector, with one saying:

*This focus group has shown me that green sector jobs are just more than blue-collar jobs. They can actually be white-collar jobs. They actually do have more or they can be able to have more opportunities with regards to networking, skills, and just building your career as a young grad.*

Another shared that learning more information about the green sector caused a perspective shift, saying that, “I don't know why, but I feel like I had a wrong perspective of it beforehand where it's kind of like this idea of planting trees and being in dirt, being outside, and I kind of did forget that there are different kinds of jobs within that same industry.” Low levels of baseline knowledge of the green workforce and the ACC present an educational opportunity that, if addressed, can drive interest in the green sector. On the ACC in particular, participants consistently requested more information, indicating that any education materials and messaging about the program should contain specific details about the job opportunities, benefits, and working conditions within the ACC to bridge this knowledge gap.

### **Participants Are Worried That Green Jobs Are Not Well-Paying, But Optimistic That They Could Offer Future Job Security**

Participants across all groups said that pay and benefits were the top qualities that help them determine whether or not a job is considered good. As a result, many shared that pay and benefits would be a major factor in determining whether they would pursue a career in the green sector, or a position in the ACC. What's more, many participants assumed that jobs in the green sector would not pay well, given existing perceptions that jobs with nonprofits and service year organizations — which they associated with the green sector and ACC — do not pay well. One participant said:

*Since they're emphasizing a community-helping opportunity, a part of me is skeptical that it must not pay well. If they're not going to be able to mention, 'Oh, we'd be able to provide enough for our employees,' it makes me wonder if they're making you volunteer your time to do green work, but it's not going to be good pay.*

Given these preconceptions, successful messages on the ACC, registered apprenticeships, or other green job opportunities should include **specifics on compensation**. Moreover, successful messaging on compensation needs to be clear and avoid relying too heavily on nonspecific phrases, like “living wage,” “stipend,” or “education award,” which left participants confused

about the quality of ACC compensation and did not counter assumptions about low pay in the green sector.

Notably, a number of participants expressed reservations about a “modest living allowance” providing sufficient compensation, especially without being provided additional information on the dollar amount or structure of this pay.

Some participants specifically singled out “modest” in the phrase “modest living allowance” as the source of their concern. The term “education award” also led to confusion, with some participants wondering if this phrase meant participants would receive a certificate for completing the ACC program, or if this type of financial award would only be offered to participants who completed an additional application on top of applying for the ACC.

In addition to concerns that green jobs would be low-paying, participants also expressed concern that green jobs that require workers to labor outside would have potentially unsafe working conditions. Participants across all three groups raised concerns about [exposure to extreme heat](#) in regards to outdoor jobs, with several stressing that extreme heat led them to rule out outdoor jobs altogether. Some participants noted that the availability of summer positions in the ACC would make them worried about facing extreme heat daily in the workplace. Participants also pointed out how outdoor jobs can be inaccessible to certain groups, like people with disabilities, as with the following respondent’s takeaway: “Remote [work] has to be a part of it because if you don't include any of that, you're removing almost all disabled people from the opportunity to participate in this, because that would be the only way that I could possibly participate in this.”

Given these concerns, participants expressed interest in remote and indoor jobs, with some sharing interest in jobs that include a mix of indoor and outdoor work. Ultimately, successful messaging on outdoor green jobs should include specifics on what physical safety protections are available to workers and the amount of time required to be spent in person, remote, indoors, or outdoors for a given job.

However, participants felt that green jobs could offer job security, perceiving that the industry is future-oriented and growing. Across all three groups, participants expressed concern about job security and a desire for opportunities with strong potential for career growth, with one participant noting: “I feel like society is moving towards green ways of alternative, green alternatives. So I feel like my job would be more secure if I were to get a job in the green sector. That'd be a plus for me.”

Though all three groups identified the growing nature of the green sector as a benefit of seeking a green job, some participants worried that startup companies — which they felt abounded in the green sector — may not be well-established or able to sustain long-term jobs and benefits. In addition, participants also raised concerns that ACC members may learn skills that would be quickly outdated, and thus felt that ACC participants would need to engage in continued learning to keep up with the pace of the green sector's growth. Positive messaging on strong labor protections associated with an ACC position or a registered apprenticeship helped to assuage these concerns.

### **Recent Graduates and Students Are Most Drawn to the ACC**

Focus group participants perceived the ACC to be targeted to high school and college students, especially after learning that ACC opportunities were often short-term and accompanied by education awards, with one saying:

*[The ACC] definitely seems super temporary. It specifies a few months to a full year, but it definitely seems something more appropriate for a younger person who just got out of college or is in college or who just got out of high school.*

Participants were enthusiastic about the opportunity the ACC presented for students or recent graduates, with a current student saying, “Because I'm a college student, in the summers I basically don't have much to do. So if there was a nice part-time job or internship available in the summer, I'd definitely be interested in that.” Several participants said that they might have been interested in the ACC or a registered apprenticeship program earlier in their education or career, but felt they were now too established in their careers to be part of the target audience (despite all participants being 29 or younger). However, some participants noted that the ACC could be an attractive opportunity for older individuals seeking a career change or trying to break into the green sector without having to go back to school. To attract older or more mid-career participants, messaging on the ACC should aim to not only appeal to current students or recent graduates.

### **Community-Building Aspects of the ACC Are Attractive to Potential Participants**

Across focus groups, participants imagined that community building would be a strong benefit of participating in the ACC. Participants saw community building as making a difference in their community, meeting and working alongside others, and offering opportunities to network within the green sector.

In particular, networking and building a community in the green industry struck participants as a tangible benefit of potentially opting for a lower-paying early-career opportunity in the ACC, with one participant saying: “I think the biggest benefit would be connections or networking. So, becoming more familiar with people who are in the field that you want to work with and working with them directly, that’s always beneficial to know people.”

Multiple participants, particularly Indigenous ones, were interested in opportunities to work with Tribal communities as part of the ACC, and wanted to ensure that Tribal communities shaped ACC services and programs that impacted them. Overall, ACC messaging that used community-centered language garnered more support for the ACC than language referencing the environment, climate change, or America’s natural beauty. However, participants still felt they needed to hear more details and specifics about the ACC to be interested in applying for it, even after hearing more community-centered messages.

### **ACC Alumni Are Seen as the Best Messengers to Promote the ACC**

Across all three groups, participants said that if they were to do their own research on the ACC, they’d want a centralized website that addressed their questions about the specifics of the program. Throughout the groups, participants struggled to imagine what specific positions within the ACC might look like, given the breadth of options available. Unprompted, participants across all three groups said they would look to ACC alumni to learn more about the program, and wanted to hear first-person perspectives from alumni on their ACC experience, with one saying: “I definitely want to hear from the first batch of people who went through this whole process. That’s really important.”

Participants also shared that they would look for ACC alumni perspectives in an alumni Facebook group, a Reddit thread, or in YouTube or TikTok videos, with one saying: “TikTok is a less than five-minute way to just quickly get a first-person perspective of someone’s experience.” Participants thought video content on the ACC could best describe the many different jobs that may fall under the umbrella of the ACC, and give prospective ACC members a better sense of the program. When asked if influencers could be helpful in promoting the ACC, participants said they would be open to hearing from influencers who were already passionate about environmental issues, but would not trust an influencer whose connection to the green sector was not apparent.

## Conclusion

Across the national survey and focus groups, young Americans clearly indicate that they do not yet have a broad understanding of the green sector or the American Climate Corps. With low awareness of the program, many young people lack a concrete idea of what a position in the ACC might look like, and express concern that they could face low pay and potentially dangerous outdoor working conditions in the green sector.

However, this research highlights the potential for education and messaging around the ACC to help dispel misconceptions and encourage young people to pursue careers in the green sector. Young people overwhelmingly say that climate change is a concern for them, and that they want to take personal action — including in their careers — to protect our planet for future generations. They also see the green industry as an industry of the future, where early-career service programs can provide the skills and training needed to pursue secure, long-term careers in this growing sector.

After receiving information on these topics throughout the focus groups and survey, participants came away with a strongly positive view of the ACC once they learned about its potential benefits for participants and the types of jobs available through the program. Participants also expressed that they were enthusiastic about the information they learned about the green sector as a whole.

Overall, these results indicate that lack of awareness remains one of the largest barriers for successfully recruiting an influx of diverse young people to join the ACC and enter the green sector. Effective messaging on the ACC should include specific salary figures, details on the availability of a range of white-collar and blue-collar job opportunities, and information on the potential for long-term career pathways.

## Survey Methodology

From August 2 to 4, 2024, Data for Progress conducted a [survey](#) of 659 U.S. adults ages 18-26 nationally using web panel respondents. The sample was weighted to be representative of U.S. adults ages 18-26 by age, gender, education, race, and geography and included ~100n oversamples of Black and Latino adults aged 18-26 which were weighted to their appropriate proportions of U.S. adults ages 18-26. The survey was conducted in English. The margin of error associated with the sample size is  $\pm 4$  percentage points. Results for subgroups of the sample are subject to increased margins of error. For more information please visit [dataforprogress.org/our-methodology](https://dataforprogress.org/our-methodology).

