Shaping the Future of Loan Repayment: Participation and Repayment Progress in Federal Student Loan Plans

Appendix A. Borrower Interview Protocol

March 9, 2026

REVISED: June 30,2026

Contents

Shaping the Future of Loan Repayment Study: Borrower Interview Protocol

Information for Reviewers

The study team for the *Shaping the Future of Loan Repayment Study* will administer this interview protocol to collect data about

- federal student loan borrowers' awareness and understanding of available repayment plans and their features; and
- reasons borrowers' report for selecting or switching repayment plans.

The interview will focus on the borrower's repayment plan.

Interviewer coding of responses: Although many items are open-ended, the interview protocol lists potential responses that the interviewer will use to classify responses into preexisting categories of anticipated answers. These preexisting responses are **not** the only responses permitted. Instead, each open-ended item also allows the interviewer to capture responses that do not fall into one of the preexisting categories listed.

Automated skip patterns: Interviewers will use an online interface that automates skip patterns on the basis of the borrower's repayment plan and responses.

Respondent Sample and Interview Timing

The study team will conduct up to 60 interviews with borrowers who

1. entered repayment for a Direct or Perkins loan between 2013 and 2025, **and**
2. enrolled or switched enrollment in a federal loan repayment plan between July 2025 and December 2025.

Criterion (b) helps ensure that respondents will have sufficient recall of their enrollment into the repayment plan.

The interviews will take place remotely by video conferencing (telephone/audio-only as a last resort) and will last approximately **30 minutes**.

Formatting Guide

This document uses the following conventions:

[BRACKETS]	Indicate interviewer instructions that will not be read aloud to respondents.
<ARROWS>	Indicate borrower-specific information that the interviewer will prefill, using an initial setup screen in the online interface.
Italics	Indicate directions for the interviewer to "probe" and "listen for."
(parentheses)	Indicate supplemental information/guidance for the interviewer.

Introduction

My name is <NAME/AFFILIATION> and this is my colleague <NAME/AFFILIATION>, and we are here today to learn about your experiences choosing your federal student loan repayment plan. Questions we'll ask include what you knew about various loan repayment options and reasons you chose your repayment plan. We'll also ask about your income and other debt you may have had when you chose a repayment plan.

We appreciate your taking the time to speak with us today. We expect today's conversation will last approximately 30 minutes.

During our meeting, we will record your responses in an electronic database. This database does not include your name or other information that could be used to personally identify you. Instead, we have assigned you a unique ID number for this study.

With your permission, we'd like to audio record part of this conversation so that we can make sure our notes accurately capture today's conversation. We will use an AI agent to transcribe the audio. After the interview we will review the transcription and remove all information that could identify you as an individual. If you allow us to audio record the conversation, we will not share the recording or the raw transcript with the Office of Federal Student Aid, the Department of Education, your loan servicer, or anyone else outside our study team. We will securely store the audio recording and raw transcript, and we will erase them after we complete the study.

To protect your privacy, we use research best practices to secure the information you provide and follow all federal privacy laws and regulations. We will only share the information you provide with our study team members at [Activate and our partner, AIR | AIR and our partner, Activate Research]. We may include information you provide in study reports and a datafile shared with other researchers, but reports and data files will not contain any information that could identify you as an individual. However, as with any study involving data collection, there is a minimal possibility of breach of these security procedures.

Your participation in the interview is completely voluntary. You do not have to answer any question you don't want to and you can end the interview at any time. We sent you additional information on your rights as a study participant in the FAQ document included in our initial mailing. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Is it OK if we record our conversation?

Interview respondent: ________________________________Yes ___ No___

[IF CONSENT HAS BEEN GRANTED, BEGIN RECORDING.]

[IF NO: Alright, we will take notes but will not record today's conversation.]

Now that we have begun recording, can you please restate your consent to be recorded? You can say something like “I give you permission to record this conversation and to record my responses.”

Thank you; now let’s get started.

Section A. Identifying the Borrower's Repayment Plan

Today, we'll be asking you questions about your federal student loans and your repayment plan. We realize you may have more than one plan, so we'll be focusing on the repayment plan you entered in 2025.

First, we would like to gather a little bit of background information on your repayment plan.

Question
A.1. Our records indicate that you are enrolled in or switched a repayment plan in 2025. Is this correct? ❑ Yes, and I am still in that plan ❑ Yes, but I am no longer in that plan ❑ No Respondent's REPAYMENT PLAN: ___(BWR_REPORTED_PLAN)____ ❑ Don't know *If "no" or "don't know," probe to see if respondent can recollect their most recent enrollment in a repayment plan.* *[IF RESPONDENT CHOOSES "Yes, but I am no longer in that plan" , "No" or "Don't know"]: I see. For the rest of our interview, please speak about your most recent repayment plan when we ask you about your repayment plan.*
A.1.a. Is your plan an income-driven repayment plan? INTERVIEWER DISPLAYS THE LIST OF REPAYMENT PLANS USING SCREEN-SHARING: ❑ Yes ❑ No ❑ Don't know *If "no" or "don't know," clarify that an income-driven plan is a plan with the lowest monthly payment based on your income. A borrower must verify their income to be on one of these plans.* *If respondent is unsure: "Ok, well, let's do our best to go ahead with the questions."*
A.2. Which of the following statements best describes how you came to be enrolled in your repayment plan? 1. I chose my repayment plan from plans available. 2. [IF REPAYMENT PLAN = NON-Income-Driven Repayment (IDR) PLAN, READ THIS OPTION, OR ELSE DO NOT READ.] I knew I *could choose* a repayment plan but decided to let them [Department of Education, FSA, loan servicer] place me in the default Standard repayment plan. 3. [IF REPAYMENT PLAN = IDR, OR ELSE DO NOT READ.] I knew I *could choose* a repayment plan but decided to let them [Department of Education/FSA/loan servicer] place me an income-driven repayment plan with the lowest monthly payment. 4. I did not know I could choose a repayment plan *Probe: Did you know that other plans were available—perhaps not for you but for other borrowers?* a. If YES, answer remains (4)

b. If NO, mark answer (5)

5. I did not know other repayment plans existed.

[IF RESPONDENT CHOOSES 1 (CHOSE PLAN), GO TO SECTION B.1.]
[IF RESPONDENT CHOOSES 2 (AWARE, BUT LET "THEM "PLACE), GO TO SECTION B.2.]
[IF RESPONDENT CHOOSES 3 (AWARE, BUT REQUESTED PLACEMENT IN IDR), GO TO SECTION B.3.]
[IF RESPONDENT CHOOSES 4.a (NOT AWARE THEY HAD CHOICE, BUT AWARE THAT OTHERS DO), GO TO SECTION D.]
[IF RESPONDENT CHOOSES 4.b (NOT AWARE CHOICES WERE AVAILABLE), GO TO SECTION D.]
[IF RESPONDENT CHOOSES 5 (NOT AWARE OTHER PLANS EXISTED), GO TO SECTION E.]

Section B. Borrower Reasons for Choosing a Plan

[SECTION B.1. QUESTIONS FOR BORROWERS WHO CHOSE A PLAN (A.2 = 1)]

Question

B.1.a. Borrowers have a variety of reasons for why they might choose one repayment plan over another. What would you say were the ***most important reasons*** why you chose your repayment plan?

Listen/probe for the reasons and check all that apply. Continue to probe until the respondent provides at least two reasons (if possible) for selecting repayment plan. Before moving to next question, ask, "Any other reasons?" until respondent says, "No/None/Don't know."

- ❑ My previous plan was no longer an option (SAVE or other) *Probe for two other reasons because needing to switch doesn't help explain what about the new plan influenced the respondent's decision to select it.*
- ❑ My loan servicer recommended it.
- ❑ My family member/ friend/ loan counselor recommended it.
- ❑ A friend/family member had a positive/negative experience with their plan(s) (*Probe for other plan(s):* ____________________________________).
- ❑ I wanted [a low | the lowest possible] monthly payment.
- ❑ I wanted my monthly payment to change based on my income.
- ❑ I wanted to be eligible for PSLF/TLF.
- ❑ I wanted my monthly payment to stay the same each month.
- ❑ I wanted to repay my loan quickly/in the shortest period of time possible.
- ❑ I wanted a longer time | more than 10 years to repay loan.
- ❑ I did not want to recertify my income every year.
- ❑ My income was low at the time, but I thought it would increase over time.
- ❑ I wanted my loan balance to decrease monthly.
- ❑ I wanted a plan that would let me keep up with interest/I wanted my monthly payment to cover all interest due.
- ❑ I felt obligated to repay my loan in full without relying on loan forgiveness.

Question

- ❑ I wanted a plan that offered loan forgiveness.
- ❑ I wanted to avoid IDR plans because I would owe taxes on any loan amount forgiven.
- ❑ I wanted to avoid IDR plans because I file a married joint return and that makes my income high/I'd pay off the loan before forgiveness anyway.
- ❑ Other ___________________________________

[IF THE RESPONDENT PROVIDES **MORE THAN TWO** REASONS, GO TO B.1.b.]

B.1.b. Out of all the reasons you've shared with me, what would you say were **the two most important** reasons you selected your repayment plan?

[SECTION B.2. QUESTIONS FOR BORROWERS WHO KNEW THEY COULD CHOOSE A PLAN BUT LET SERVICER PLACE THEM IN THE DEFAULT STANDARD PLAN (A.2 = 2)]

Question

B.2.a. Borrowers have a variety of reasons why they might choose one repayment plan over another. You noted earlier that you let **[Department of Education/FSA/loan servicer]** place you in the Standard plan. What would you say were the **most important reasons** you went with the Standard repayment plan?

Listen/probe for the reasons and check all that apply. Continue to probe until the respondent provides <u>*at least two*</u> *reasons (if possible) for selecting repayment plan. Before moving to next question, ask, "Any other reasons?" until respondent says, "No/None/Don't know."*

- ❑ My previous plan was no longer an option (SAVE or other). *Probe for two other reasons because needing to switch doesn't help explain what about the new plan influenced the respondent's decision to select it.*
- ❑ My loan servicer recommended it.
- ❑ My family member/friend/loan counselor recommended it.
- ❑ A friend/family member had a positive/negative experience with Standard plan/other plan (*Probe for other plan(s)*: ______________________________).
- ❑ I wanted [a low | the lowest possible] monthly payment.
- ❑ I wanted my monthly payment to change based on my income.
- ❑ I wanted to repay loan quickly/in the shortest period of time possible.
- ❑ I wanted a long time | more than 10 years to repay loan.
- ❑ I did not want to recertify my income every year.
- ❑ My income was low at the time, but I thought it would increase over time.
- ❑ I wanted my loan balance to decrease monthly.
- ❑ I wanted a plan that would let me keep up with interest/I wanted monthly payment to cover all interest due.

- ❑ I felt obligated to repay my loan in full without relying on loan forgiveness.
- ❑ I wanted a plan that offered loan forgiveness.
- ❑ Other ___________________________________

[IF THE RESPONDENT PROVIDES **MORE THAN TWO** REASONS, GO TO B.2.b.]

B.2.b. Out of all the reasons you've shared with me, what would you say were **the two most important** reasons you went with the Standard repayment plan?

[SECTION B.3. QUESTIONS FOR BORROWERS WHO KNEW THEY COULD CHOOSE A PLAN BUT REQUESTED ED/FSA/LOAN SERVICER PLACE THEM IN AN IDR PLAN (A.2 = 3)]

Question

B.3.a. Borrowers have a variety of reasons for why they might choose one repayment plan over another. You noted earlier that you let the **[Department of Education/FSA/loan servicer]** place you in an income-driven repayment plan. What would you say were the **most important reasons** you went with an income-driven repayment plan?

Listen/probe for the reasons and check all that apply. Continue to probe until the respondent provides *__at least two__* *reasons (if possible) for selecting repayment plan. Before moving to next question, ask, "Any other reasons?" until respondent says, "No/None/Don't know."*

- ❑ My previous plan was no longer an option (SAVE or other). *Probe for two other reasons because needing to switch doesn't help explain what about the new plan influenced the respondent's decision to select it.*
- ❑ My loan servicer recommended it.
- ❑ My family member/friend/loan counselor recommended it.
- ❑ A friend/family member had a positive/negative experience with their plan(s) (*Probe for other plan(s)*: ______________________).
- ❑ I wanted [a low | the lowest possible] monthly payment.
- ❑ I wanted my monthly payment to change based on my income.
- ❑ I wanted to be eligible for PSLF/TLF.
- ❑ I wanted my monthly payment to stay the same each month.
- ❑ I wanted to repay my loan quickly/in the shortest period of time possible.
- ❑ I wanted a longer time | more than 10 years to repay loan.
- ❑ I did not want to recertify my income every year.
- ❑ My income was low at the time, but I thought it would increase over time.
- ❑ I wanted my loan balance to decrease monthly.
- ❑ I wanted a plan that would let me keep up with interest/I wanted my monthly payment to cover all interest due.
- ❑ I felt obligated to repay my loan in full without relying on loan forgiveness.
- ❑ I wanted a plan that offered loan forgiveness.
- ❑ I wanted to avoid IDR plans because I would owe taxes on any loan amount forgiven.
- ❑ I wanted to avoid IDR plans because I file a married joint return and that makes my income high/I'd pay off the loan before forgiveness anyway.
- ❑ Other ________________________________

[IF THE RESPONDENT PROVIDES **MORE THAN TWO** REASONS, GO TO B.3.b.]

B.3.b. Out of all the reasons you've shared with me, what would you say were **the two most important** reasons you let **[Department of Education/FSA/loan servicer]** choose your repayment plan?

Section C. Most Important Feature When Choosing a Repayment Plan

[SECTION C.1. QUESTIONS FOR BORROWERS WHO KNEW BORROWERS COULD CHOOSE A PLAN (A.2 = 1, 2, or 3)]

Question

C.1. Now, I'm going to read a list of major features of repayment plans and ask you to tell me which feature was the **most important to you** when you

- [IF A.2 = a]: chose the plan.
- [IF A.2 = b]: let yourself be placed in this plan.

Some features are complicated and some borrowers are not familiar with the terms. If you aren't familiar with any of the terms in the questions, it is totally fine to say "I am not familiar with this one" or "Let's skip this one."

INTERVIEWER READS ALOUD AND DISPLAYS THE LIST OF FEATURES USING SCREEN-SHARING:

[IF REPAYMENT PLAN = Non-IDR Plan THEN READ/DISPLAY **BOTH 1 AND 2.]**
[IF REPAYMENT PLAN = IDR plan display all 6.**]**

1. Your monthly payment amount.
2. How long you would be repaying your loan.
3. Forgiveness of any unpaid amount after you made the required number of monthly payments offered by the repayment plan (not by PSLF or TLF).
4. The temporary interest subsidy that pays the interest due when your monthly payment amount is not high enough to cover all of the interest due.
5. The payment cap that keeps your monthly payment from going above a certain limit, even if the payment amount increases based on your income would be higher than that limit.
6. The feature that prevents your loan balance from increasing even if the monthly payment is never high enough to cover all of the interest due.

[IF RESPONDENT CHOOSES 1 (MONTHLY AMOUNT), GO TO C.1.a.]
[IF RESPONDENT CHOOSES 2 (DURATION), GO TO C.1.b.]
[IF RESPONDENT CHOOSES 3 (FORGIVENESS), GO TO C.1.c.]
[IF RESPONDENT CHOOSES 4 (INTEREST SUBSIDY), GO TO C.1.d.]
[IF RESPONDENT CHOOSES 5 (PAYMENT CAP), GO TO C.1.e.]
[IF RESPONDENT CHOOSES 6 (SAVE PLAN FEATURE), GO TO C.1.f.]

Question
C.1.a Can you tell me why the **monthly payment amount** was the most important feature for you when you chose your repayment plan?

Listen for the following and select all that apply:

- ❑ I wanted a monthly payment that took my [family] income into account.
- ❑ I wanted the lowest possible monthly payment.
- ❑ I knew my monthly payment would be $0/month due to my income.
- ❑ I wanted the payment to stay the same each month.
- ❑ My income was low at the time, but I thought it would increase over time.
- ❑ I did not want to recertify my income each year.
- ❑ The monthly amount was affordable when I chose this plan.
- ❑ I was willing to pay a little more each month to pay off my loan faster.
- ❑ Other, specify____

C.1.b. Can you tell me why the **length of time** you would be repaying your loan was the most important feature for you when you chose your repayment plan?

Listen for the following and select all that apply:

- ❑ I wanted to pay back my loans quickly/have the shortest possible repayment period.
- ❑ I wanted a shorter repayment period because I would pay back less interest.
- ❑ I wanted to spread repayment over a long period of time to keep the monthly amount low/affordable.
- ❑ Other, specify____

C.1.c. Can you tell me why the potential for **loan forgiveness** was the most important feature for you when you chose your repayment plan?

Listen for the following and select all that apply:

- ❑ My [family's] total loan balance is too high for me to ever pay off completely.
- ❑ People should not have to go into debt to get a degree/the government should subsidize education.
- ❑ I wanted some assurance that I would be free of student loan debt someday.
- ❑ Someday, I want to be able to [buy a house, start a family, start a business, go back to school, afford my children's college, other financial goals].
- ❑ My profession/career is low paying.
- ❑ I work in a profession that is eligible for loan forgiveness.
- ❑ Other, specify____

Question

C.1.d. Can you tell me why the **interest subsidy** was the most important feature for you when you chose your repayment plan?

Listen for the following and select all that apply:

- ❑ It prevents my loan balance from getting bigger over time/It helps ensure that my loan balance decreases over time.
- ❑ I think the government should help people afford college/graduate school.
- ❑ If I can't pay the entire monthly payment due, the interest subsidy helps me repay my loan.
- ❑ Other, specify____

C.1.e. Can you tell me why the **payment cap** was the most important feature for you when you chose your repayment plan?

Listen for the following and select all that apply:

- ❑ If my income increases, I don't want the monthly payment to keep increasing without a limit.
- ❑ I want to keep more of the income I earn as I get a raise/promotion/better job rather than apply it toward a larger loan payment.
- ❑ Without the payment cap, I couldn't get ahead/save for the future/pay off other debts/ keep up with inflation.
- ❑ It sets a maximum amount after which I don't have to pay any more. *Probe "Do you mean a maximum monthly payment amount or a maximum total loan payoff amount?*
  - ❑ *Maximum monthly payment*
  - ❑ *Maximum total loan payoff*
- ❑ Other, specify____

C.1.f. Can you tell me why having a plan that prevents the loan balance from growing was the most important feature for you when you chose your repayment plan?

Listen for the following and select all that apply:

- ❑ I heard from others that on some plans you pay monthly but your loan balance goes up.
- ❑ It would be discouraging/upsetting to see my balance increase if I were paying monthly.
- ❑ At the end of the repayment period, I wanted forgiveness on as low an amount as possible.
- ❑ I worried about taxes on the amount forgiven at the end of the repayment period.
- ❑ It would mean I only had to pay back the amount I borrowed, not interest.
- ❑ Other, specify____

[IF BORROWER'S REPAYMENT PLAN IS AN NON-IDR PLAN, GO TO D.1.]
[IF BORROWER'S REPAYMENT PLAN IS AN IDR PLAN, GO TO D.2.]

Section D. Borrower Awareness of Plan Features

Note to reviewers*: Each item in Section D lists potential responses that the interviewer will use to classify responses into preexisting categories of anticipated answers. These preexisting responses are not the only responses permitted, but they capture evidence or potential evidence that the respondent is aware of a particular feature of a repayment plan. The interviewer probes are selectively based on the kinds of responses given.*

D.1. IF <REPAYMENT PLAN> is **an NON-IDR plan:** When you chose your repayment plan, what other plans were you aware of and how did they differ from your plan?

Listen/probe for awareness of IDR plans and at least one way IDR plans differ.

	Potential responses **Bold blue = Respondent has identified ONE IDR plan feature.** **PROBE for respondent awareness of ANY OTHER IDR plan features.**	**Specific probes**
q	**Other plan(s) offered forgiveness.**	*If respondent names one IDR feature, probe once to see if respondent is aware of at least one more IDR feature.*
q	**Other plan(s) required income certification.**	
q	**Monthly payment/plan based on income/family size**	
q	**Other plan(s) offered/did not offer interest subsidy.**	
q	**Other plan(s) offered/did not offer payment cap.**	
q	**Other plan(s) where the loan balance may increase if the monthly payment doesn't cover interest/the loan balance would never increase even if monthly payment too low to cover interest**	
Responses below include those that could be a result of an IDR plan feature. Use additional probing to determine borrower awareness.		
q	**Other plan(s) have a higher/lower monthly payment amount.**	What made the monthly payment higher/lower? *If respondent names one IDR feature, probe once to see if respondent is aware of at least one more IDR feature:* ❑ Monthly payment based on income/family size
q	**Other plan(s) have a longer repayment period.**	How else was this plan different from your current plan? *If respondent names one IDR feature, probe once to see if respondent is aware of at least one more IDR feature:* ❑ Monthly payment based on income/family size ❑ Loan forgiveness ❑ Payment cap ❑ Interest subsidy
Other possible responses that do not indicate awareness of IDR plans or IDR features:		
q	Monthly payments that increased over time	Anything else you can tell me about repayment plan options?
q	"Graduated plan" OR "Extended Plan"	
q	Other plan(s) for consolidated loans	

D.2. IF <REPAYMENT PLAN> IS AN **IDR PLAN**: When you chose your plan, what other income-driven plans were you aware of and how did they differ from your plan?

Listen/probe for awareness of IDR plans and at least one way IDR plans differ.

	Potential responses Bold blue = Respondent has identified ONE IDR plan feature. PROBE for respondent awareness of ANY OTHER IDR plan features.	Specific probes
q	**Other plan(s) offered/did not offer interest subsidy.**	*If respondent names one IDR feature, probe once to see if respondent is aware of at least one more IDR feature.*
q	**Other plan(s) offered/did not offer payment cap.**	
q	**Other plan(s) where the loan balance may increase if the monthly payment doesn't cover interest/the loan balance would never increase even if monthly payment too low to cover interest**	
q	**Other plan(s) had payment based on income.**	Can you tell me more about this other plan? How [else] was this plan different from your plan?
q	**Other plan(s) had a higher/lower monthly payment amount.**	What made the monthly payment higher/lower? *Listen for* ❑ **Percentage of income paid monthly was different** ❑ **How my income was determined/calculated**
q	**Other plan(s) had a shorter/longer repayment period.**	How else was this plan different from your current plan? *Listen for* ❑ **Percentage of income paid monthly was different** ❑ **How my income was determined/calculated** ❑ **Time to forgiveness in other plan was shorter/longer**
	Other possible responses that do not indicate awareness of IDR plans or IDR features:	
q	Monthly payments that increased over time	Anything else you can tell me about repayment plan options?
q	"Graduated plan" OR "Extended Plan"	
q	Standard Plan, "10-year" plan, "default" plan	
q	Other plan(s) did not offer loan forgiveness	
q	Other plan(s) did not require income certification	
q	Other plan(s) for consolidated loans	

Section E. Borrower Understanding of How Repayment Plan Features Impact Progress in Paying Back Loans

One of the goals of our study is to learn what borrowers understand about repayment plans. We'd like to ask you some questions about some of the major features of loan repayment plans and how they might affect things like how much a borrower pays each month or how long a borrower might be repaying their student loan. Some of these questions might be difficult or not have one singe correct answer, so just do your best. We are interested in hearing how you think about answering these questions. If you don't know the correct answer, feel free to see "I don't know". Your responses will help us determine what kinds of additional information about repayment plans could be useful to future borrowers.

Question	
E.1 How does a borrower's monthly payment amount change over time under an income-driven repayment plan? **ACCURATE AND COMPLETE RESPONSES** (*Do not probe.*) ❑ It goes up as income goes up. ❑ It goes down as income goes down.	
INCOMPLETE responses (*If respondent provides an incomplete response, prompt once: "Can you say more about that?" or "Can you give me an example of how that works"?*) ❑ It depends on the borrower's income. ❑ It depends on whether there is a payment cap. ❑ It depends on whether the borrower is in deferment or forbearance. *Tell R to assume no deferment/forbearance.* ❑ It depends on whether the borrower qualifies for forgiveness. ❑ Not sure/Don't know ❑ Other (specify): *Probe any other uncodable/indeterminate response once.*	INACCURATE responses (*Do not probe.*) ❑ It doesn't change over time. ❑ It always goes up over time OR it increases every X years. ❑ Other (specify):

Question	
E.2. Under the Standard repayment plan, borrowers have 10 years to repay their loan. What determines the monthly payment amount under the Standard plan? **ACCURATE AND COMPLETE RESPONSES** (*Do not probe.*) ❑ The monthly payment is fixed/same amount/equals the total loan amount plus interest divided into monthly payments for 10 years or 120 months. ❑ The monthly payment depends on the size of loan (and the interest rate on the loan).	
INCOMPLETE responses (*If respondent provides an incomplete response, prompt once: "Can you say more about that?" or "Can you give me an example of how that works"?)* ❑ It depends on whether the borrower is in deferment or forbearance. *Tell R to assume no deferment/forbearance.* ❑ It depends on whether the borrower qualifies for forgiveness. ❑ Not sure/Don't know ❑ Other (specify): *Probe any other uncodable/indeterminate response once.*	INACCURATE responses (*Do not probe*) ❑ It depends on the borrower's income/family size. ❑ It increases over time/decreases over time. ❑ Other (specify):

Question

E.3. Income-driven repayment plans offer loan forgiveness after a borrower has made all required monthly payments during the repayment period. A Standard plan does not offer loan forgiveness. Compared with the Standard plan, would a borrower pay back less money in total on an income-driven repayment plan?

ACCURATE AND COMPLETE RESPONSES (*Do not probe.*)

- ❑ It depends on the size of the borrower's monthly payment and whether the borrower receives forgiveness.
- ❑ If the borrower has a low income and a high loan balance, they might reach the end of the repayment period and have a large outstanding balance forgiven.
- ❑ It depends on the size of the borrower's monthly payment and whether the borrower has an interest subsidy.
- ❑ If borrower has a high income and no payment cap, then they could end up paying more total on an IDR plan.

INCOMPLETE responses (*If respondent provides an incomplete response, prompt once: "Can you say more about that?" or "Can you give me an example of how that works"?*)	INCORRECT responses (*Do not probe.*)
❑ Yes/maybe ❑ Not sure/Don't know ❑ Other (specify): *Probe any other uncodable/indeterminate response once.*	❑ No, the borrower **always pays more** in an IDR plan than in the Standard plan. ❑ The borrower **always pays less** in an IDR plan than in the Standard Plan. ❑ Other (specify):

Question
E.4. Jessica enrolled in an income-driven repayment plan in which she will make monthly payments based on her income for **a maximum of** 20 years. Under this plan, how could Jessica finish making monthly payments in **less than** 20 years? **ACCURATE AND COMPLETE RESPONSES** (*Do not probe.*) ❑ If she pays more than the minimum monthly payment amount (sometimes, always, occasionally), she could pay off her loan in less than 20 years. ❑ If she is a [teacher | in the military | a veteran | a nurse | government worker | nonprofit employee | any other career] and qualifies for forgiveness/loan cancellation, she could finish paying back her loan in less than 20 years.

INCOMPLETE responses	INACCURATE responses
INCOMPLETE responses (*If respondent provides an incomplete response, prompt once: "Can you say more about that?" or "Can you give me an example of how that works"?*) ❑ Jessica goes into deferment or forbearance for an extended period. *Tell R to assume no deferment/forbearance.* ❑ If she pays back what she owes faster than in 20 years, she can stop making monthly payments. ❑ If she dies/is injured or is permanently disabled, her loans could be cancelled. *Tell R that neither of these applies to Jessica.* ❑ If her university went out of business/was deceptive/broke laws, her loans could be cancelled. *Tell R that neither of these applies to Jessica.* ❑ Not sure/Don't know ❑ OTHER (specify): *Probe any other uncodable/indeterminate response once.*	INACCURATE responses (*Do not probe.*) ❑ She only has to pay back the total amount she would pay under the Standard plan. After that she no longer has to make monthly payments. ❑ If her income is too low, she can stop paying before 20 years. ❑ OTHER (specify):

Question
E.5. Some income-driven repayment plans include a "payment cap." How would a borrower potentially benefit from a repayment plan with a payment cap?

ACCURATE AND COMPLETE RESPONSES (*Do not probe.*)

- ❑ With a monthly payment cap, a borrower's monthly payment will not be higher than what they would pay monthly under a Standard plan, even if their income increases.

INCOMPLETE responses (*If respondent provides an incomplete response, prompt once: "Can you say more about that?" or "Can you give me an example of how that works"?*)	INACCURATE responses (*Do not probe.*)
❑ Amount paid would not go higher than a maximum cap. ❑ The monthly payment is capped. ❑ Your payment doesn't go higher than you can afford. ❑ Not sure/Don't know ❑ OTHER (specify): *Probe any other uncodable/indeterminate response once.*	❑ Borrowers with lower incomes pay less <u>total</u> (over the length of the repayment period) than they would in a plan without a payment cap/Standard plan. ❑ Borrowers with lower incomes pay less <u>monthly</u> than they would in a plan without a payment cap/Standard plan. ❑ The total amount repaid is capped at a maximum amount. ❑ OTHER (specify):

Question

E.6. Arthur has never missed a monthly student loan payment on his income-driven repayment plan. A few years ago, Arthur was laid off and took a different job with a lower salary. Because his income declined, the amount of Arthur's monthly student loan payment also decreased. But each month, Arthur's loan balance keeps getting larger, not smaller, even though he's making every required payment. In January, he owed $12,075 in student loan debt. He paid the usual $75 monthly amount. In February, his loan statement said that his new loan balance was $12,100. Why is Arthur's loan balance getting larger?

ACCURATE AND COMPLETE RESPONSES (*Do not probe*)

- ❑ If his payment doesn't cover the interest owed each month, it's added to his total balance due.
- ❑ Negative amortization of unpaid interest owed each month.
- ❑ Interest he owes is getting added to his loan amount every month.

INCOMPLETE responses (*If respondent provides an incomplete response, prompt once: "Can you say more about that?" or "Can you give me an example of how that works"?)*	INACCURATE responses (*Do not probe.*)
❑ Negative interest ❑ Amortization ❑ He's not paying off the interest. ❑ Not paying enough ❑ He needs an interest subsidy/help paying interest. ❑ He needs to pay more each month; then his balance will get smaller. *Probe any other un-codable/indeterminate response once.*	❑ Loan servicer error ❑ This happens to everyone on an IDR plan. ❑ If your monthly payment is lower than what you'd pay on the Standard plan, your balance gets larger. ❑ Because IDR payments never cover interest

Question	
E.7. Some income-driven repayment plans include an "interest subsidy." How would a borrower potentially benefit from a repayment plan with an interest subsidy? **ACCURATE AND COMPLETE RESPONSES** (*Do not probe*) ❑ The borrower will get help paying the interest if their monthly payment is too small. ❑ If a borrower's monthly payment is too low to cover the interest, the government will pay or waive the unpaid interest so the loan balance doesn't grow. ❑ The borrower's loan balance doesn't grow because the government covers unpaid interest when monthly payments are too low. ❑ The borrower pays less interest over time, making the loan more affordable even if payments are small.	
INCOMPLETE responses (*If Respondent provides an incomplete response, prompt once: "Can you say more about that?" or "Can you give me an example of how that works"?)* ❑ The borrower will pay /owe less ❑ The amount owed will go down each month ❑ The borrower will only have to pay back the amount borrowed, not any of the interest ❑ The government will pay all of the interest for the borrower ❑ It helps if the borrower can't afford the monthly payment ❑ Not sure/Don't know *Probe any other un-codable/indeterminate response once*	INACCURATE responses (*Do not probe*) ❑ The interest rate will be lower than it would be without the subsidy

Section F. Borrower Background Information

Next, we would like to ask you some questions about your personal and your financial circumstances at the time you entered your repayment plan. We will use your responses to the next questions to better understand how borrowers repayment plan choices and understandings of plan features differ by different groups of borrowers.

Question
F.1. At the time you entered your plan, what was the highest degree you had earned? ❑ High school diploma ❑ Undergraduate certificate/diploma ❑ Associate's degree ❑ Bachelor's degree ❑ Master's degree ❑ Doctoral degree/Professional
F.2. At the time you entered your plan, what was your marital status? ❑ Single (never married) ❑ Married ❑ Divorced ❑ Separated ❑ Widowed
F.3. At the time you entered your plan, what was your tax filing status? ❑ Single (*if you're unmarried, divorced, or legally separated*) ❑ Married Filing Jointly (*if you're married or if your spouse passed away during the year*) ❑ Married Filing Separately (*if you're married and don't want to file jointly or find that filing separately lowers your tax; most couples save money by filing jointly*) ❑ Head of Household (*if you're single and you paid more than half of your living expenses for yourself and a qualifying dependent*) ❑ Qualifying Surviving Spouse (*if your spouse died during the past 2 years and you have a dependent child*) ❑ Don't know
F.4. At the time you entered your plan, did you have any children you were supporting financially or were you expecting a child?
F.5. At the time you entered your plan, what was the size of your household? That is, how many people, including your spouse/partner and any children, did your household income support? Please do not include roommates for whom you were not financially responsible. If you were a dependent at the time you entered repayment, only include yourself.
F.6. Did you own or rent the home where you were living at the time you entered your repayment plan?

Question
❑ Own/paying mortgage ❑ Rent ❑ Living with family, not paying rent ❑ Living with family, paying rent ❑ Homeless, in prison, hospitalized
F.7. At the time you entered your repayment plan, were you employed or unemployed? ❑ Employed/self-employed full-time (35+ hours/week) ❑ Employed/self-employed part-time (<35 hours/week) ❑ Unemployed
F.8. At the time you entered your repayment plan, did you apply for a loan forgiveness program like the Public Service Loan Forgiveness or Teacher Loan Forgiveness? ❑ Yes ❑ No ❑ Don't know F.8a. IF <F8> is **No** or **Don't know**: Do you plan on applying for a loan forgiveness program? ❑ Yes ❑ No ❑ Don't know
F.9. At the time you entered your repayment plan, in what state were you living? ❑ <dropdown with state names> ❑ Outside the United States
F.10. At that time, what was your household's total income **before taxes** rounded to the nearest 5,000 dollars? Income includes what [IF F.3.≠Married Filing Jointly: you IF F.3. = Married Filing Jointly: you and your spouse] make from employment or self-employment, investment income, rental income, royalties, child support or alimony, retirement, and Social Security. If you were a dependent at the time you entered repayment, do not include your parents' income. *Probe for a "best guess" if the respondent says he/she doesn't know.*
F.11. There are multiple government-funded programs designed to help individuals and families meet their basic needs, such as food and income support. Next, we'd like to know if you were a participant in any of the following public benefits programs at the time you entered your repayment plan: Were you or someone in your household enrolled in: [CHECK ALL THAT APPLY.] ❑ SNAP, also sometimes called Food Stamps? ❑ WIC, the supplemental nutritional program for women, infants, and children? ❑ TANF, also sometimes called cash assistance, public assistance, or welfare? ❑ Medicaid, also called [FILL NAME OF MEDICAID PROGRAM BASED ON NAME OF STATE FROM F9.]

Question

F_DEBT_INTRO. Next, we'd like to ask you about any debt [IF F.3.≠Married: you IF F.3. = Married: you and your spouse] might have had.

In 2025, a typical household owed $80,220 in debt including federal and private student loans. This amount is sometimes called "consumer debt." Consumer debt does not include business loans or loans from a family member or friend.

F.12.a. Thinking about your own consumer debt, about how much did [IF F.3.≠Married: you IF F.3. = Married: you and your spouse] owe when you entered your repayment plan?

Consider the following types of consumer debt:

INTERVIEWER DISPLAYS THE LIST OF FEATURES USING SCREEN-SHARING:

- Homeowner's mortgage
- Automobile/other vehicle loans
- Other bank loans, but not commercial loans
- Unpaid credit card debt
- Unpaid medical bills
- Unpaid taxes
- Student loans
- Payday loans

Please give your best answer and round to the nearest $1,000.

[If respondent is not sure, go to F.12.b.]

F.12.a. Would you say your total amount of consumer debt was:

- ☐ About $80,220
- ☐ More than $80,220
- ☐ Less than $80,220

Wrap-Up

Those are all our questions. Is there anything you would like us to know about your loan or your repayment plan that we haven't discussed?

We want to make sure that you receive your electronic gift card as soon as possible. Should we send it to <EMAIL ADDRESS ON FILE>, or would you prefer that we send it to another email address. [IF YES] What is that email address? In our email to you, we will also share a document with the correct responses to the questions we asked you on some of the major features of loan repayment plans and how they might affect things like how much a borrower pays each month.

Thank you, again, for taking the time to speak with us. We greatly appreciate your help in supporting the study.

About the American Institutes for Research®

Established in 1946, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit institution that conducts behavioral and social science research and delivers technical assistance both domestically and internationally in the areas of health, education, and the workforce. With headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, AIR has offices across the U.S. and abroad. For more information, visit AIR.ORG.

AIR Headquarters
1400 Crystal Drive, 10th Floor
Arlington, VA 22202-3289
+1.202.403.5000 | **AIR.ORG**

29425_12/25r