

The State of Regional Public Colleges



Reframing value, leading with purpose

Regional public universities (RPU) are entering a transformative era. As engines of opportunity for over five million students, they are uniquely positioned to lead the way in delivering high-ROI, affordable education – even as they navigate shifting learner demographics and expectations.

To better understand the scope of these opportunities and challenges, Risepoint collaborated with *The Chronicle of Higher Education* to survey higher education leaders, the results of which are examined in this report: **The State of Regional Public Colleges**. A few key findings include:

Building Trust and Driving Strategic Impact

- ▶ Despite external pressures, 72% of respondents express trust in their institutional leaders' strategic vision, a strong indicator that RPUs are leading with clarity and purpose.
- ▶ Even as public understanding of RPUs' value continues to decline – with fewer leaders than last year believing their value is recognized – 42% think state lawmakers understand their impact. This presents an opportunity for RPUs to tell their story, deepen partnerships, and advance policies that expand their reach and relevance.

Expanding Access and Diversifying Revenue

- ▶ When asked where they see opportunities to grow revenue at their institution, respondents named these top three areas for expansion:
 - alternative credentials or stackable credentials (72%)
 - online programs (62%)
 - graduate programs (57%)
- ▶ When asked where they see opportunities to grow enrollment, 74% of respondents chose adult students (aged 25+) and 59% chose online learners.

At Risepoint, we're proud to partner with regional public universities to unlock new pathways for career-focused learning with high student ROI. Together, we're helping institutions reframe the value of higher education and expand access for today's learners.

We hope this research sparks new conversations and bold strategies that elevate the role of RPUs as economic engines and community catalysts – driving personal and professional growth for generations to come.

Fernando Bleichmar, CEO

[Risepoint](#) ▶



The State of Regional Public Colleges

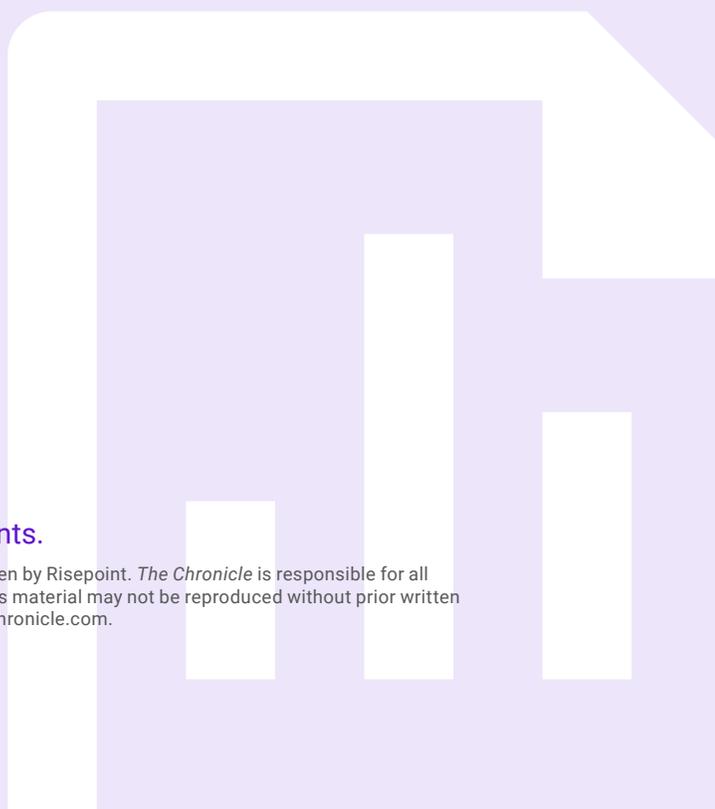
By Graham Vyse

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Regional public colleges don't get the credit they deserve. At least, that's a common sentiment among experts on these four-year institutions, which — unlike local community colleges or flagship public research universities with statewide reach — serve particular geographic regions or clusters of counties.

Though frequently overlooked by national news coverage, these institutions are known as the “workhorses” of academe and educate 70 percent of all students attending four-year public colleges, [according](#) to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). They often accept nearly all their applicants, and they're leaders in providing affordable access to students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students. A third of them are minority-serving and half are rural-serving.

According to the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC), there are 474 of these institutions across the country, educating about five million students.

According to the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC), there are [474](#) of these institutions across the country, educating about five million students. As most students they enroll [come from within a 50-mile radius](#) of campus — and many stay nearby after graduation — these colleges play an invaluable role in supporting regional economies.

Yet when it comes to enrollment and finances, they often struggle even more than other colleges. They also faced a challenging political climate [well before](#) this past January, when the Trump administration initiated a series of policies, pronouncements, and investigations that have had far-reaching effects on higher education.

To learn more about the state of these institutions — and how it's changing in this unusually tumultuous year for colleges — *The Chronicle*, with support from Risepoint, conducted an online survey of administrators at regional public universities between August 8 and August 25, 2025. We received 453 responses from presidents, vice presidents, chancellors, provosts, deans, directors, department heads, and others. The largest group of respondents — 26 percent — were director-level officials. In addition, *The Chronicle* interviewed nine people for this report — experts who study, advocate for, or work as administrators at these institutions.

The survey found a notable diversity of opinion on many questions. Experts were struck by this lack of uniformity, even if the survey's findings mostly didn't surprise them. On the one hand, there was an extremely widespread sense that

regional public universities are undervalued. Most respondents weren't optimistic about their college's enrollment or financial prospects for the future, and — at a moment when politics is shaping higher ed in unprecedented ways — a large majority saw political interference as one of the biggest challenges regional institutions face.

At the same time, respondents were generally positive about a number of issues, including their own college's strategic vision, approach to enrollment and retention, and ability to foster collaboration between administrators and faculty members. Most of those surveyed weren't pessimistic about their college's enrollment and financial outlooks. (They were at least somewhat optimistic or neutral.) A number of questions created substantial divisions among respondents.

“We're looking at a sector with a lot of variation in its challenges and opportunities,” says Cecilia M. Orphan, ARRC's director of partnerships and an associate professor of higher education at the University of Denver. “The survey really showed that we can't say one thing is categorically true about all regional public universities.” Moreover, Orphan argues, the results complicate some dominant narratives about these institutions, adding necessary nuance to the public understanding of them.

This report will examine regional public universities' challenges, including those related to enrollments, finances, and the political climate. It will also explore these institutions' strengths and opportunities, with an eye to how they can continue fulfilling their vital missions in circumstances that are far from ideal.



The history of regional public institutions dates back to the mid-19th century. Over the following hundred years, many were founded as “normal schools” to train teachers, but ultimately expanded their missions to serve a broader group of students, including those seeking degrees in business, communications, and STEM fields.

These institutions serve a significant share of low-income students. A [report](#) co-authored by Orphan and published earlier this year by Third Way, a center-left think tank, noted that 38 percent of their students are eligible for Pell Grants and that these institutions “generate greater upward mobility for Americans than any other type of college or university.” They

frequently have small class sizes and distinguish themselves by prioritizing teaching and the student experience over research.

Orphan’s report also highlighted research findings about the relationship between these universities and their surrounding communities: Children living in regions with one of these colleges “experience better economic and social outcomes than those living in regions without,” because living near one is correlated with “higher high-school and college completion rates.”

Moreover, people who grow up in a county with a regional institution are “more likely to be employed and married and less likely to be

incarcerated,” according to the report, and these outcomes “are most pronounced for low-income children.” Especially in rural areas, these universities often are hubs for cultural events, places where local retirees can take classes for enrichment or to explore new topics, or sites where community organizations can use the facilities, either for free or at a low cost.

Eastern Michigan University’s vice president for enrollment management, Katie Condon-Martin says regional public institutions are among the colleges that represent “the American ideal of what education should be — a highly responsive, long-term investment in places and people, helping them reach their goals and serving as anchors in their regions.”

“We have a different definition of what it means to be excellent,” says Joshua Powers, the provost and senior vice president for academic affairs at William Paterson University of New Jersey. “It’s not who we exclude. It’s who we include. We may not be wealthy or have famous names, but we create social transformation and economic mobility for students.”

Despite these virtues, many regional institutions are struggling with falling enrollments, cuts to their state funding, and growing competition from rival institutions. According to Orphan, one manifestation of this is that better-resourced institutions, like land-grant universities, are recruiting students they never would’ve looked at a dozen years ago. “On the one hand, it’s a good thing, because students should have a wide array of options,” she says, but land-grant institutions aren’t always set up to provide the kind of support and flexibility that a regional college might offer. For instance, they may not be as accommodating of students

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who need to build their course schedules around work outside of attending classes.

There are additional structural challenges for regional institutions, too. They receive less state funding than other types of public colleges — as well as less in federal grants and contracts — and have smaller endowment assets, which can lead to limits on resources for faculty, staff, and other priorities. All of this has meant that some of these institutions have been forced to undergo cuts and consolidations and, in some instances, even closed their doors. As if this weren’t enough, they’ve historically been neglected in national media coverage and scholarship about higher education.

While the Trump administration’s battles with Ivy League and other high-profile institutions have grabbed headlines, its efforts to eliminate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs, shrink the Education Department, which manages student loans, and reduce research funding have also affected many regional public universities. It’s been a difficult time for colleges like Southern Illinois University at

Carbondale, which [sees](#) targeted recruitment of certain fast-growing student populations, such as Latino/a and Hispanic students — a form of DEI work — as vital to their survival. The administration’s immigration crackdown and new restrictions on international students are affecting campuses across the country.

Jennifer Keup — executive director of the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities, which includes many regional public institutions — told [a June forum](#) at the City Club of Cleveland that she had “grave concerns” about changes

“The overall climate of austerity tends to exacerbate fiscal challenges for regional public universities, because higher ed ends up being the balance wheel for state budgets.”

to federal financial-aid and immigration policies, which could disproportionately affect the kind of students regional colleges serve. Another worry raised at the event is the administration’s effort to [cap](#) government reimbursement to colleges for the “indirect costs” of doing research, such as the cost of facilities and administration. That could hurt regional institutions, which rely on these reimbursements to be able to afford their research.

Keup said she worries about what she sees as the administration’s effort “to make the federal footprint smaller and the state footprint larger” with regard to the funding and management of many kinds of government programs. If more federal policies are pushed to the states, she warned, that will mean even tougher competition for state-level resources.

“The overall climate of austerity tends to exacerbate fiscal challenges for regional public universities, because higher ed ends up being the balance wheel for state budgets,” says Robert Maxim, a fellow at the Brookings Institution. He adds that these institutions typically have a lot less financial cushion than research universities — and thus a lot less ability to absorb funding cuts.

Which of these many dynamics are shaping regional public universities the most? And how are colleges handling them? *The Chronicle’s* survey offers insights.



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A Diversity of Experiences

Of all the survey’s findings, these might have been the easiest to predict: The overwhelming majority of respondents, 74 percent, said the American public doesn’t understand the value of regional public universities. An even greater number, 84 percent, believe federal lawmakers don’t appreciate these colleges’ worth.

There may be many overlapping explanations for these perceptions, beginning with the lack

of public confidence in higher education generally, but Orphan suggests that the response about federal lawmakers may stem from the fact that legislators tend not to be personally familiar with regional institutions. She notes that members of Congress — especially U.S. senators — are rarely graduates of these colleges. Their staffers also tend to have been educated at private or flagship public institutions.

This sort of thing can make a difference. Orphan says she saw “very little awareness” about the key issues for regional colleges among congressional aides when she and some colleagues visited Capitol Hill a few years ago: “It was like we were introducing them to an entirely new planet.” Part of the explanation may be that these institutions lack the kind of well-funded federal lobbying operations the wealthiest private colleges have in Washington, D.C., although AASCU advocates on their behalf.

At the same time, if many legislators aren’t well informed on the value of regional public colleges, experts say there’s a real irony to that. “The things policymakers like about higher education — lower-cost institutions focused on their regions, connecting with businesses, and preparing the work force — tend to be found among regional public universities,” says Charles L. Welch, AASCU’s president.

Do you think the American public understands the value of the country's regional public colleges?



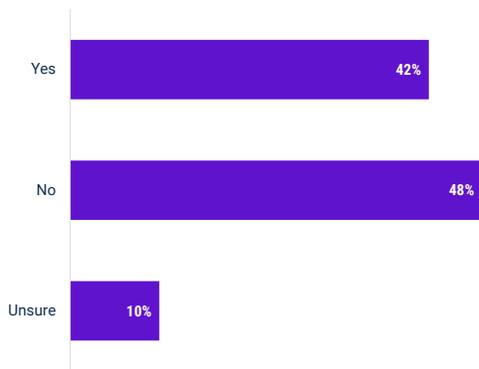
Do you think federal lawmakers understand the value of the country's regional public colleges?



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 453 officials at regional public colleges

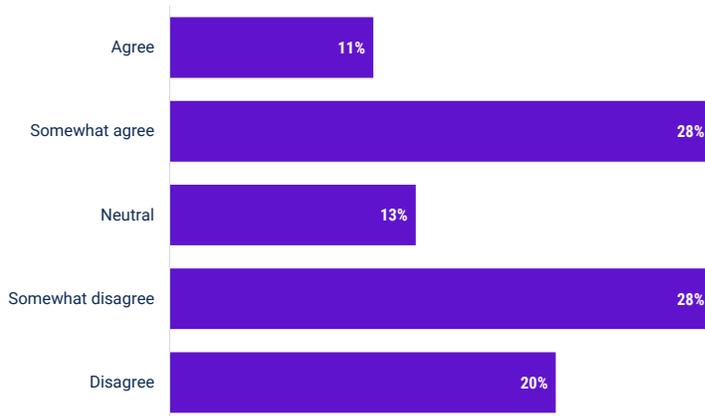
“The things policymakers like about higher education – lower-cost institutions focused on their regions, connecting with businesses, and preparing the work force – tend to be found among regional public universities.”

Do you think state lawmakers understand the value of the country's regional public colleges?



“The things they don’t like — institutions with really high costs, massive endowments, and lots of social unrest — tend not to be.” Also, as Orphan notes, regional colleges “are more likely to serve more conservative-leaning students.” Theoretically, that should make them more sympathetic to critics of academe’s progressive tilt.

To what extent do you agree with the following statement? “My state has the right strategic vision for my institution.”



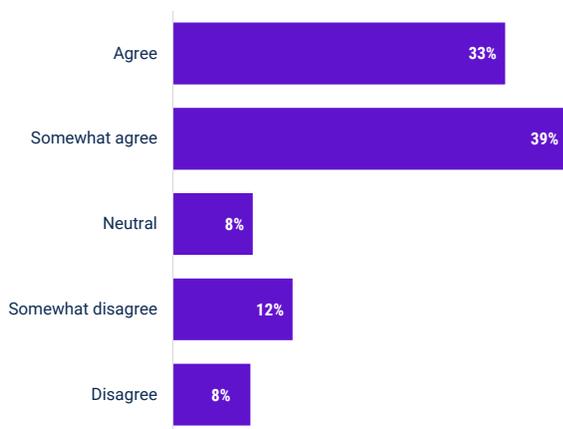
The Chronicle’s survey found more positivity about state lawmakers, with 42 percent of respondents saying those legislators do understand regional colleges’ value. At the same time, 48 percent disagreed with that sentiment and an additional 10 percent was uncertain.

On a related question — whether their states have the right strategic vision for their college — only 39 percent of respondents agreed at least somewhat; 48 percent disagreed.

Source: *Chronicle* survey of 453 officials at regional public colleges

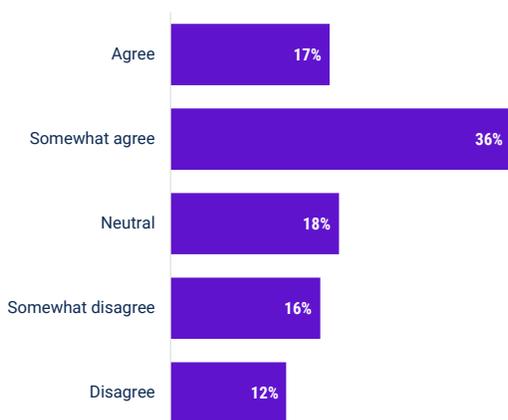
To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

“My institution's leaders have the right strategic vision for my institution to thrive in the future.”



To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

“My institution's leadership and its faculty members work well together to implement that vision.”



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 453 officials at regional public colleges
Note: Figures might not total 100 percent due to rounding.

Part of the context here is the state legislators can see up close the ways these universities are vital to their communities, which are often covered by state and local media as well. For example, Orphan notes that Western Carolina University and Appalachian State University — a pair of rural-serving institutions in North Carolina — operate utilities providing electricity to their surrounding areas: “Can you imagine a more significant contribution to infrastructure?”

Survey respondents were especially positive about the leadership of their colleges. Asked whether their institution's leaders have the right strategic vision, 72 percent agreed, a result Welch calls “very encouraging.” (Orphan notes that this finding might have been different if *The Chronicle* hadn't surveyed administrators exclusively, yet she acknowledged it was encouraging and “shows there's a lot of great leadership in this sector, which I know to be true from my own research.”)

More than half of respondents also expressed confidence that their institution's leaders and faculty members are working well together to implement their strategic vision.

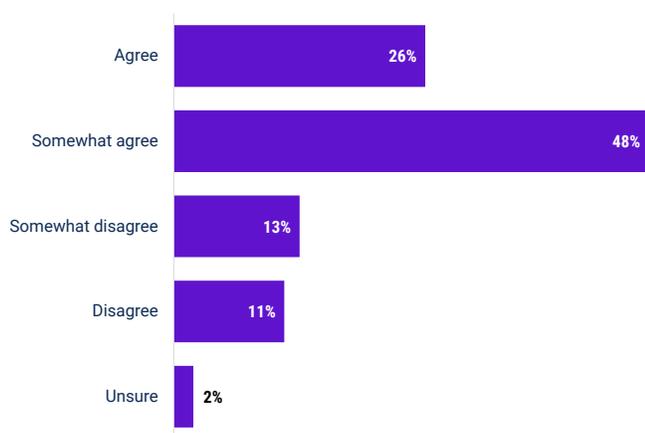
Even when it came to enrollment and finances — two of the most vexing issues colleges face — the survey found a fair amount of optimism mixed in with the pessimism that might be expected. Seventy-four percent of respondents said their institution has a successful strategy to enroll students and about half were optimistic about their college's future enrollment prospects, although 38 percent were pessimistic.

Sixty-eight percent of respondents also expressed confidence that their institution had a successful strategy to retain students, although 52 percent agreed only somewhat with that idea.

Respondents were divided about their institution's future financial prospects — nearly half were pessimistic and only 37 percent expressed optimism — yet the takeaway for experts was that not all regional institutions believe they're

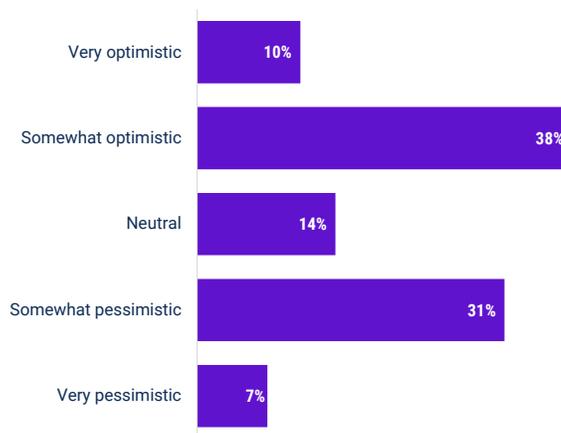
To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

"My institution has a successful strategy to enroll students."



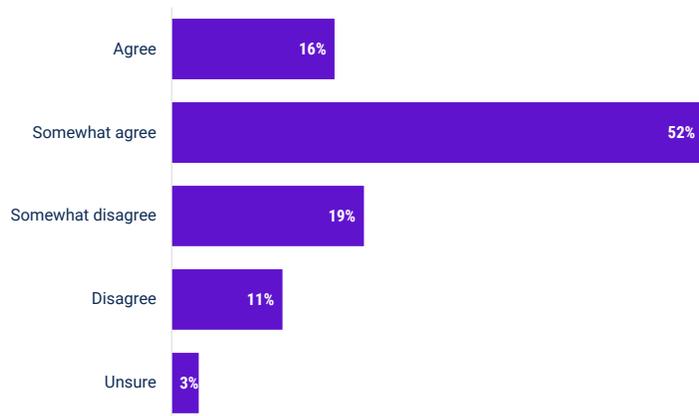
How do you feel about the future financial and enrollment prospects of your institution?

Future enrollment prospects:



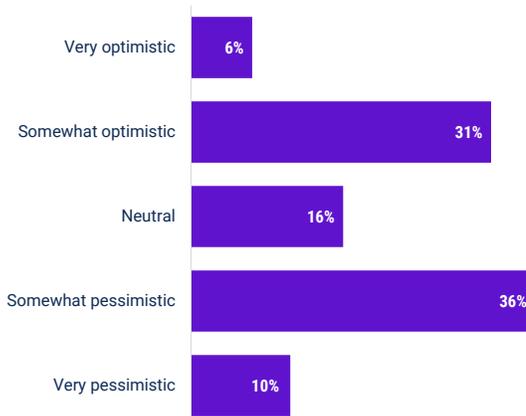
To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

"My institution has a successful strategy to retain students."



How do you feel about the future financial and enrollment prospects of your institution?

Future financial prospects:



Source: Chronicle survey of 453 officials at regional public colleges
 Note: Figures might not total 100 percent due to rounding.

in crisis around these issues. Welch says he was “a bit encouraged” by these responses, which suggest enrollment and financial outlooks are “not great, but not as bad as some would be led to believe.” His summary of the findings: “Concern exists, but it’s not universal, and some respondents feel like their institutions are developing appropriate plans, trying to brace themselves for challenges.”

Orphan says it’s crucial to highlight that some regional colleges are doing relatively well and avoid advancing “a deficit narrative” about them as an entire group, which can contribute to negative perceptions of their importance. Though they’re all subject to national trends, the way they’re affected depends heavily on state and local factors as well as population variances between regions. The impending “[demographic cliff](#),” for instance — a drop in enrollment of

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traditional-age students projected to begin next year — isn’t causing the same kind of concern in the South, where high-school graduation rates are expected to rise.



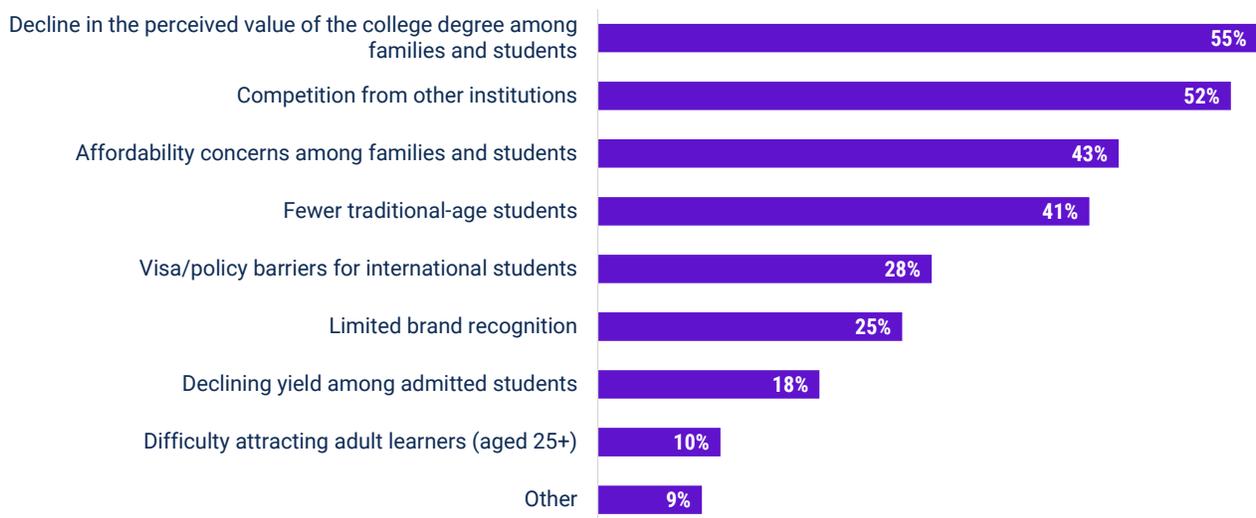
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Changing Challenges

It's useful to understand not only the range of challenges regional colleges face but also which of them are most serious and widespread. When survey respondents were asked to identify their institution's greatest enrollment challenges, the most cited answers were affordability concerns, a decline in the perceived value of the college degree among families and students, competition from other institutions, and fewer traditional-age students. This suggests lack of national notoriety isn't a primary problem for regional institutions; only 25 percent of respondents said limited brand recognition was a big issue.

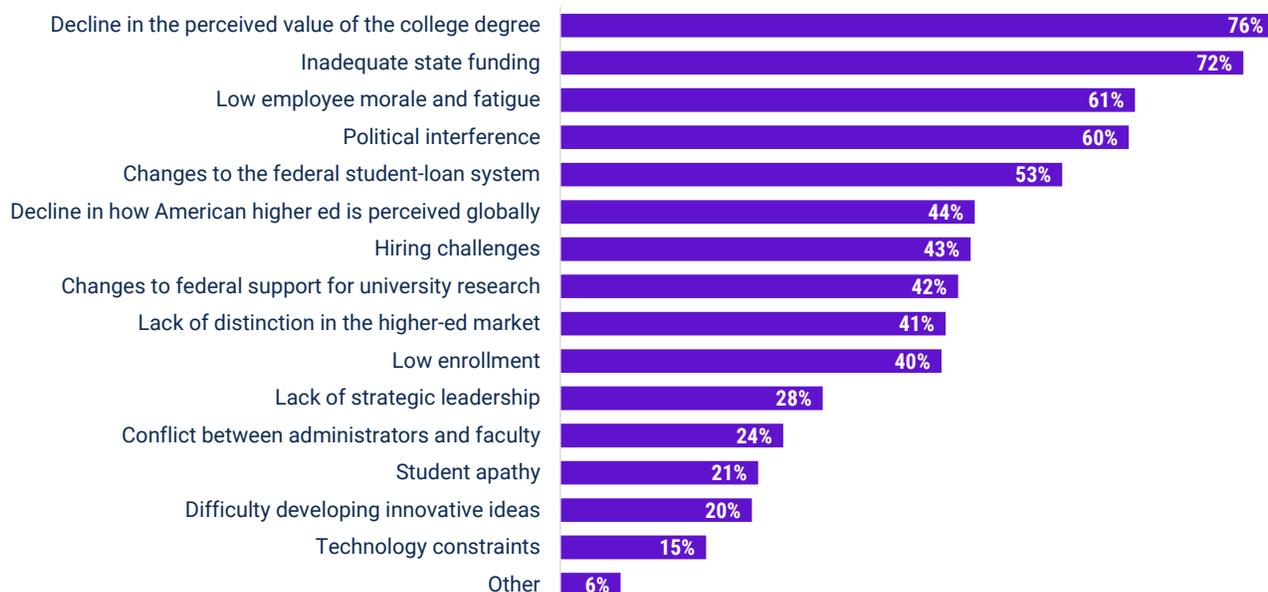
When asked about the biggest challenges facing regional colleges as a sector — not just those related to enrollment struggles at their own institution — more than half of respondents pointed to five issues: a decline in the perceived value of a college degree, inadequate state funding to institutions, political interference, changes to the federal student-loan system, and low employee morale and fatigue. The most cited response to a question about the main factors influencing morale at their institutions — chosen by 58 percent of respondents — was the political climate.

What are your greatest enrollment challenges? Select up to three.

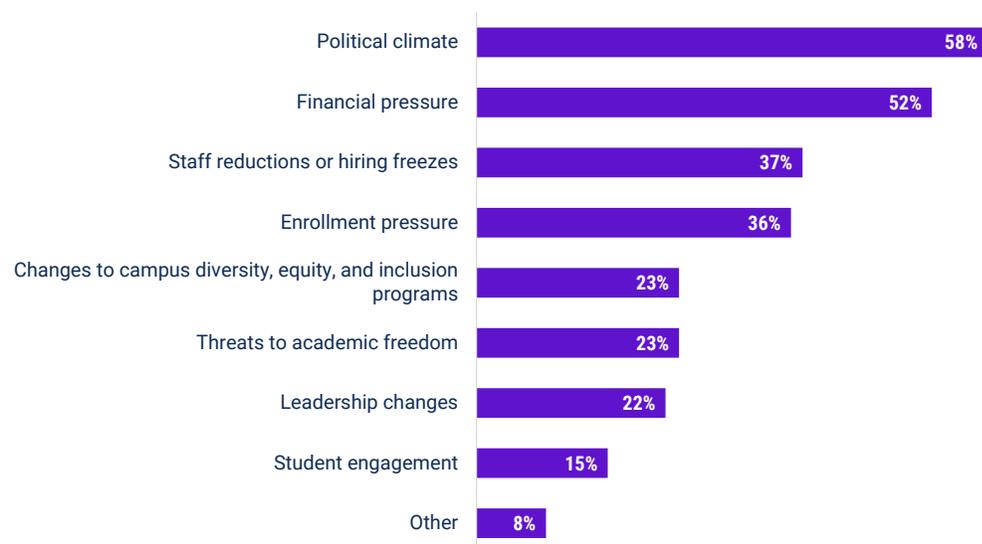


Source: Chronicle survey of 453 officials at regional public colleges

What are the biggest challenges facing regional public institutions?
Choose all that apply.



What do you see as the main factors influencing morale at your institution today?
Select up to three.



Source: Chronicle survey of 453 officials at regional public colleges

The Chronicle spoke to several administrators about how that climate is affecting their institutions. José Ricardo-Osorio, dean of the College of Public Service at the University of Houston-Downtown, reports that he sees a lot of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear about federal immigration policies at his university, where most students are of Hispanic or Latino descent. Many of these students may be concerned about their citizenship status — or that of friends and family members — as well as their ability to access federal funding to support their education.

“Students are very afraid to talk,” Ricardo-Osorio says. “They’re afraid to raise issues.” This comes as the Trump administration has carried out a campaign of immigrant detentions and deportations, [targeting recipients](#) of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and colleges offering them financial assistance. (The Department of Homeland Security has said “DACA does not confer any form of legal status in this country” and urged recipients to leave the United States.)

Many regional colleges are also navigating a loss of international students after the federal government placed [new restrictions](#) on their ability to attain visas. Powers, the provost at William Paterson University of New Jersey, says his institution estimates that “a few hundred” more foreign students would’ve been enrolled there this fall, but they couldn’t get visa interviews as a result of this policy shift. According to experts, the change will add to the competition regional institutions face, as all sorts of colleges now feel the need to recruit students to make up for these new enrollment losses.

The political climate is “really affecting morale in the professoriate” as well, says Orphan, who believes the societal esteem that used to come with being a professor has been greatly diminished as higher education is attacked or more harshly scrutinized. Regional public universities may do less research than other kinds of institutions, but they still do some — and they suffer when funding support for studies disappears. Keith C. Russell, dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Western Washington University, says he has faculty members in fields like psychology, public health, and women’s, gender, and sexuality studies “who’ve had grants basically dry up” since January.

Welch, of AASCU, notes that there’s a lot of opposition in higher ed to the Trump administration’s policies, but says institutions must be careful to not reflexively oppose everything the federal government does. He believes some of the administration’s stated priorities, including the need for various forms of accountability in academe, are forcing difficult conversations that can be healthy for colleges.

In the meantime, he and Orphan say advocates for regional public universities should emphasize how these institutions tend not to be the ones generating high-profile political controversies. Regional college leaders should be clear with state policymakers — those most responsible for their institutions’ funding — that they have “a different type of campus and a different type of student,” Orphan says. They can also do their best to focus on self-improvement, looking for new ways to lean into their institutional strengths.



Strategies for the Future

Condon-Martin, the vice president at Eastern Michigan University, says that if colleges are to build a future where they win back public trust, they must embrace new ideas like being much more open about their outcomes, including the kind of salaries their graduates earn. The goal would be for students to be more clear-eyed about what they can expect if they invest time and money in a degree.

“I have no issue with students pursuing any path that brings them joy and purpose as long as I’ve been transparent,” she explains. “If I know there’s a program in which the likelihood of you graduating, getting a job, and making \$50,000 within five years after graduation is less than 10 percent, it’s my ethical responsibility to share that information with you.”

Condon-Martin also thinks colleges — and especially regional institutions — need to do a better job of identifying the types of students they seek to serve and then do so expertly. In short, she argues, they must learn to “do less better.”

“Of course we should be friendly to every student who shows up at our doors, but we need a strategy for where our resources go,” she says. “We need to try to be the best at some things instead of trying to be mediocre at everything.”

More than one administrator expressed this kind of sentiment to *The Chronicle*, offering ideas for how regional colleges can survive — and even thrive — in the current environment. Catherine Wehlburg, president of Athens State University, in Alabama, says her institution “may have to be making some really difficult decisions as we look at underenrolled programs.” This could involve using faculty retirements to phase out some of the degrees they offer.

“If I know there’s a program in which the likelihood of you graduating, getting a job, and making \$50,000 within five years after graduation is less than 10 percent, it’s my ethical responsibility to share that information with you.”

Wehlburg notes that the university already cut its political-science program a few years ago, because there wasn’t enough interest to sustain it. She adds that, although small class sizes can be beneficial to students, and have historically been seen as a defining feature of regional institutions, colleges “can’t be offering all these classes with four, five, or six students in them and losing money on that.”

“We need to look at some of the sacred cows,” she says, including things as fundamental as how many credits are required for an undergraduate education. “Let’s look at different formats that still provide rigorous, meaningful, bachelor’s degrees.”

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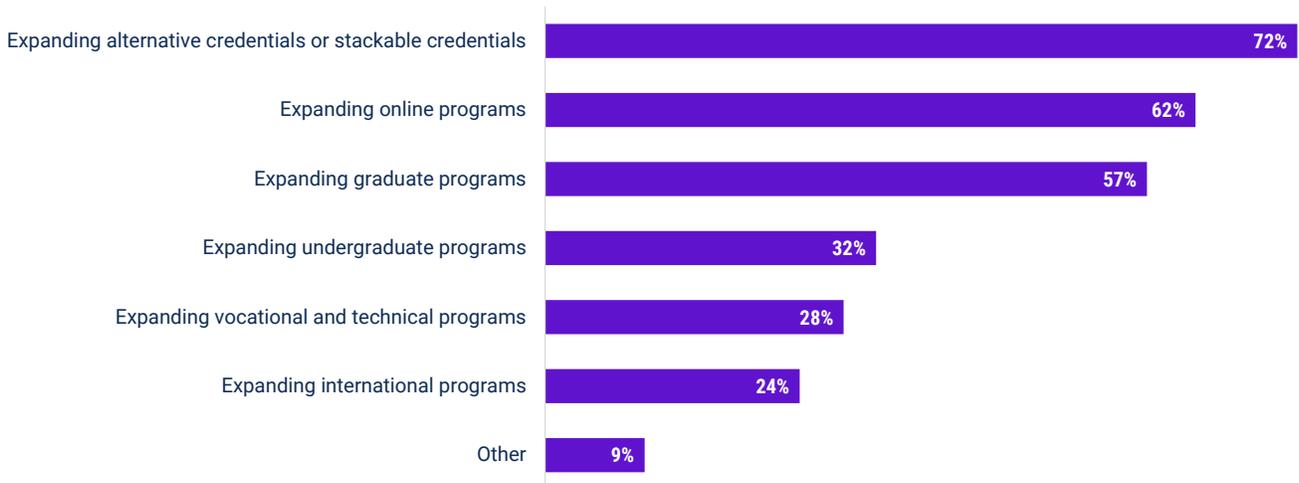
Powers, of William Paterson University of New Jersey, reports that his institution “had around 400 full-time faculty members in 2019 and has about 275 now,” adding that they’re “so much stronger for it now in this new moment

for higher ed” and posted a modest surplus this year. He says the university also adopted a “program vitality” protocol, looking at which offerings needed to be strengthened and which shouldn’t be offered any longer.

The Chronicle’s survey respondents also registered their opinions about how regional colleges can improve themselves. Asked where they saw opportunities to grow revenue at their institutions, 72 percent of respondents said “expanding alternative credentials or stackable credentials,” 62 percent said “expanding online programs,” and 57 percent said “expanding graduate programs.”

Maxim, from the Brookings Institution, thinks findings like these raise an important question for institutions to ponder: “How do you reconcile continuing to have place-based identities with funding cuts and the rise of online and asynchronous education?”

In which areas do you see opportunities to grow revenue at your institution?
Choose all that apply.



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 453 officials at regional public colleges

Asked where they saw opportunities to trim expenses at their institutions, 33 percent of respondents said “administrative salaries and benefits,” 30 percent said “academic programs,” 29 percent said “athletics,” and 25 percent said “faculty and staff travel.” Tellingly, though, 21 percent said “none.”

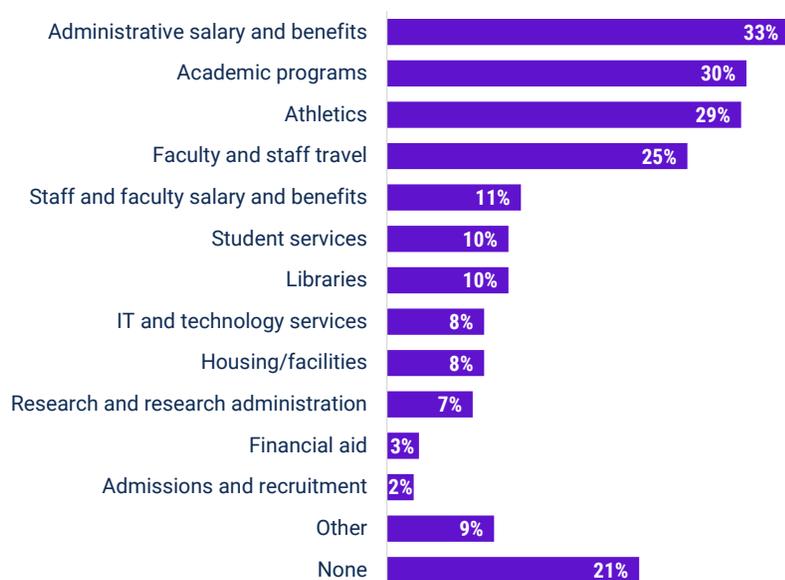
“I’m surprised that number wasn’t higher,” Orphan says. “What do you cut when you’re already so lean? You’re cutting sinew to the bone at this point.” Welch agrees that “the margins are very thin in terms of what can be cut” at most regional colleges: “There’s only so much cutting you can do without impacting the college experience and students’ ability to succeed.”

But if cutting more is difficult, so is spending more. On the question of where their institution

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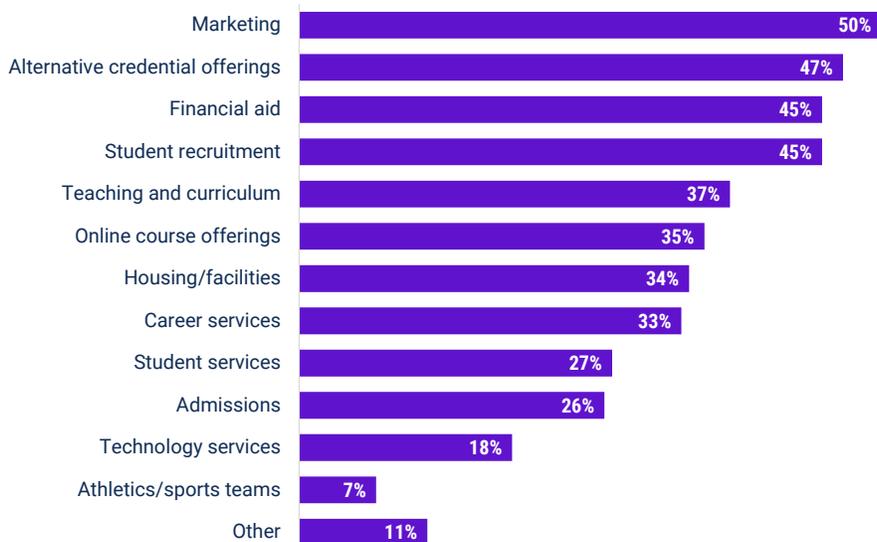
should make improvements to attract students, the most popular response — chosen by half of respondents — was to improve marketing. Other popular answers included alternative credential offerings, financial aid, and student recruitment. The challenge is that all of these improvements often require an additional investment of resources, which can be a luxury for regional public universities.

In which areas do you see opportunities to trim expenses at your institution?
Choose all that apply.



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 453 officials at regional public colleges

Where should your institution make improvements to attract more students?
Choose all that apply.



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 453 officials at regional public colleges

In some cases, new technology may be able to help them find efficiencies. It’s a testament to colleges embracing — or at least accepting — the rise of artificial intelligence that 72 percent of survey respondents agreed that AI tools could help their institutions operate more efficiently and cut costs, although 40 percent were only somewhat enthusiastic about that idea.

Condon-Martin says she’s excited by the notion of using AI to personalize financial aid: “Imagine an individualized walkthrough of your financial-aid package through an AI podcast or video: ‘Here’s why you got this amount of subsidized or unsubsidized loans. Here’s what that means.’”

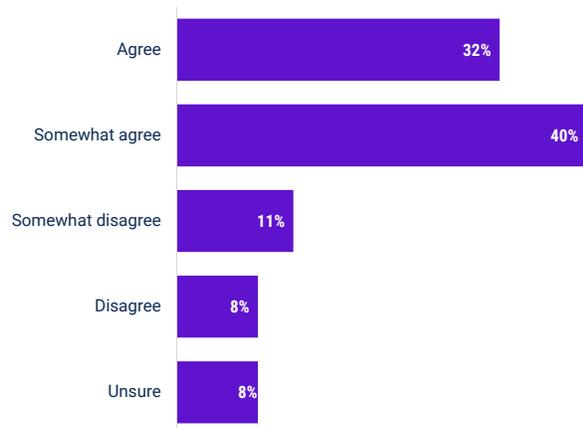
Respondents were most enthusiastic about the idea of growing their enrollments by attracting more “adult students” — those over the age of 24 — as well as online learners, though the

survey also found majority support for focusing on graduate students and traditional-age students from the states where their institutions are located.

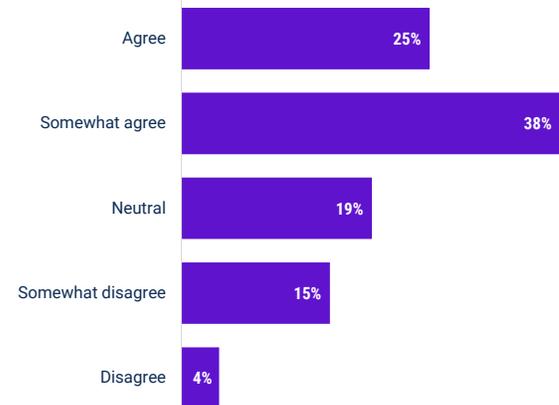
“Some traditional growth avenues — out-of-state and particularly international students — are really being discounted,” Maxim says. Wehlburg reports that focusing on adult learners has been a fairly successful strategy at her university, by doing a lot of “prior learning assessment” and “credit for prior learning.” Most survey respondents said their institution does a good job providing graduate programs that can help adult learners develop career skills; 63 percent agreed at least somewhat with that sentiment.

In addition to doubling down on traditional-age students, a focus on graduate students and veterans might have great potential.

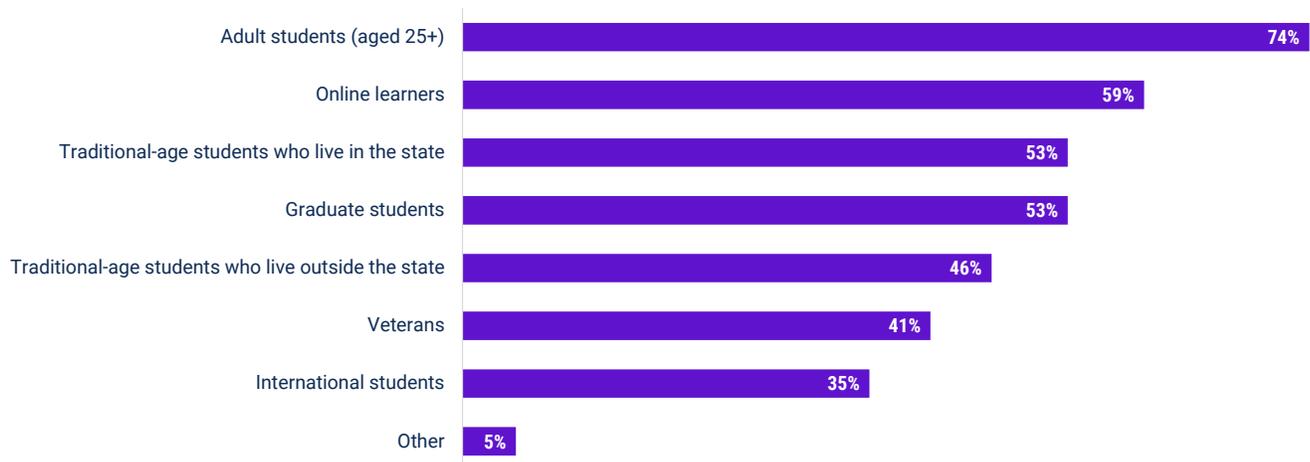
To what extent do you agree with the following statement?
“Artificial-intelligence tools can help my institution operate more efficiently and cut costs.”



To what extent do you agree with the following statement?
“My institution does a good job providing graduate programs that can help adult learners develop skills to advance their careers or start new ones.”



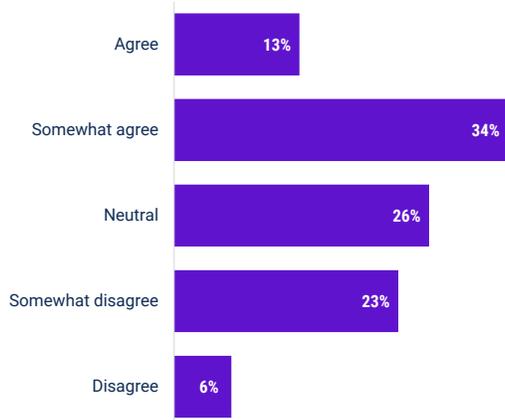
What student populations do you see as opportunities to grow enrollment at your institution?
 Choose all that apply.



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 453 officials at regional public colleges
 Note: Figures might not total 100 percent due to rounding.

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

“My institution does a good job collaborating with employers to help shape graduate programs so they align with work-force needs.”

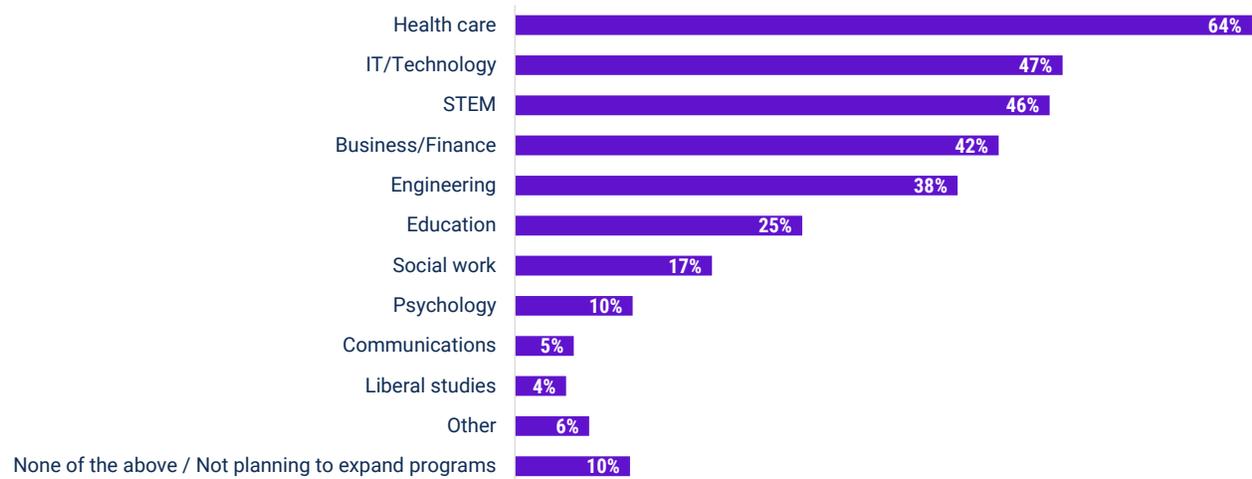


Source: *Chronicle* survey of 453 officials at regional public colleges
 Note: Figures might not total 100 percent due to rounding.

Orphan says regional colleges’ graduate programs are “very practical” and often “designed in tight alignment with jobs that are available,” so earning a master’s degree in teaching or physical therapy is very likely to lead to employment. Respondents tended to agree, though not overwhelmingly. Nearly 50 percent said their institution does a good job collaborating with employers to help shape graduate programs that align with work-force needs, though 29 percent at least somewhat disagreed. Roughly another quarter of respondents were neutral.

Educating veterans has long been important to regional institutions, she adds, and many of these colleges have a track record of understanding and supporting students coming to their campuses after military service.

If your institution is expanding programs, in which work-force areas are you planning to do so? Choose all that apply.



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 453 officials at regional public colleges

“This isn’t to say pursuing more adult and on-line learners isn’t a good idea,” Orphan adds, but she’s more skeptical of those strategies, noting that many other types of colleges — including public flagships — may offer online education at comparable prices. Online classes are also more difficult for rural-serving institutions in areas lacking quality broadband access.

The survey also fleshed out differences between what institutions could do and what they’re already doing. Asked about the work-force areas in which their institutions planned on expanding programs — assuming they anticipated expanding any — almost two-thirds of respondents pointed to health care. Other popular responses, all of which were chosen by at least about 40 percent of respondents, included IT/technology, STEM, business/finance, and engineering. Health care has long been a strength for regional public universities, as they’ve been leaders in the fields of nursing and occupational therapy, so

they have a foundation to continue building on. Upgrading facilities may benefit some campuses with the means to do so. Athens State just completed a \$30-million project, with funding from the state and county, to turn their gymnasium into a civic center: “It’s going to become a profit center,” Wehlburg says. “We’re going to rent it out for weddings, retreats, and community events.” It’s decreased the university’s deferred maintenance costs and become a new way to introduce people to the institution.

Finally, many experts believe that now more than ever, regional institutions need to lean into mutually advantageous business partnerships — whether to recruit students, sponsor scholarships, or simply ensure curriculum is aligned with work-force needs. Wehlburg says her university has created learning partnerships with more than 80 industries in its region, offering tuition discounts to employees and their families.

There are few easy choices for colleges today, but sometimes hard decisions force clarity. Orphan points out that regional public institutions' lack of resources basically leaves them with two options: They can be adaptive, innovative, and nimble, making the best of what they have, or they can allow themselves to shrink and shrivel and risk their

Without these colleges and their mandates to provide affordable, accessible education, many of the students who most need opportunity from academe – and the regions that most need economic and cultural enrichment – would be left behind.

futures. She often argues these colleges are “some of the most creative, innovative, and visionary institutions in the country,” in part because they have the advantage of not being constrained by prestige and tradition.

This quality helps explain why many regional institutions have already made significant changes to improve their enrollments and finances — and why there’s reason to believe more of them can do so. But the stakes here aren’t trivial. Without these colleges and their

mandates to provide affordable, accessible education, many of the students who most need opportunity from academe — and the regions that most need economic and cultural enrichment — would be left behind. “When we look at the challenges they’re facing and the opportunities they have, we should always remind ourselves this is about something bigger than these campuses,” Orphan says. “It’s about advancing communities. It’s about advancing our country.”

Four hundred and fifty-three college leaders responded to *The Chronicle's* online survey, conducted between August 8 and August 25, 2025. The largest proportion of respondents were directors (26 percent), followed by vice presidents (16 percent), deans (15 percent), and department heads (14 percent). Eleven percent of respondents were associate, assistant, or vice deans. Smaller numbers of leaders in other roles, including presidents, chancellors, and provosts, also responded.



