

# Graduate Programs and Work-Force Needs

How Regional Public Institutions are  
Responding to a Changing Job Market



# Regional Public Universities Identify Ways to Improve Success of Adult Learners

Regional public universities (RPU) play a critical role in the communities and local economies they serve, helping over five million students across the country improve their lives through high-quality, affordable education. Despite ongoing financial pressures, regional universities are both expected and needed to fuel the economy and improve their communities by preparing students and supporting employers to meet our world's rapidly evolving needs.

Risepoint joined together with *The Chronicle of Higher Education* to better understand from RPU leaders their strategies for supporting local work-force development. The results can be found below in **Graduate Programs and Work-Force Needs: How Regional Public Institutions Are Responding to a Changing Job Market** and will be further discussed in an upcoming virtual forum supported by Risepoint. While familiar themes of being undervalued and underfunded emerged, a few key survey findings are worth highlighting:

## Gaps in Preparing Adult Learners for the Job Market

- ▶ Only 19% of respondents agreed their institution does a good job providing graduate programs that help adult learners advance their careers or start new ones.
- ▶ 52% agree their state and institution should invest more resources to prepare graduate students, focusing on collaborating with employers (63%), amplifying program value (61%), and updating curriculum (55%).
- ▶ Yet less than half (48%) of respondents have definite plans to expand work-force-focused programs for graduate students in the near future.

## Meeting Adult Learners Where They Are

- ▶ The overwhelming majority (92%) of respondents agreed some form of online or hybrid learning best serves adult learners who want to enroll in graduate programs.
- ▶ However, only 12% agreed their institution does a good job of recruiting adult learners for graduate programs, and 61% think additional resources should be invested in marketing to emphasize their programs' relevance to the job market.

When looking for opportunities for sustainable growth, RPUs can't rely on the hope of "If we build it, they will come." Institutional leaders need to develop and promote high-value programs that support working adults through a data-centric approach that understands their needs and takes into account labor market demands, regional competition, and collaboration with employers.

At Risepoint, we fundamentally believe RPUs have the opportunity and are uniquely positioned to provide a strong return on investment (ROI) for students. By expanding access to high-quality programs, RPUs can reach a largely untapped student population, grow enrollment, and solve current financial constraints while increasing the impact they have on their communities. Our mission at Risepoint is to help institutions increase access to high-quality, affordable, in-demand online programs for adult learners.

We hope this report will spark discussions on how to demonstrate the value of your institution as an economic engine and a resource for career-advancing education in your community.

Fernando Bleichmar, CEO  
[www.Risepoint.com](http://www.Risepoint.com)



# Graduate Programs and Work-Force Needs

How Regional Public Institutions are  
Responding to a Changing Job Market

By Michael Anft


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Contact [CI@chronicle.com](mailto:CI@chronicle.com) with questions or comments.

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The nation's regional public institutions do a good job of preparing graduate students for the work force, developing programs that can aid adult workers in their careers, and shaping those programs with the help of input from employers, say college officials who responded to a recent *Chronicle* survey.

Yet, as they produce work-ready graduates, the institutions say they face ongoing budget woes and a lack of understanding from politicians and the public about the value they offer.

The survey also found that as many regional public universities (RPUs) look to ramp up graduate programs for adult workers, they face low employee morale and hiring and enrollment challenges.

A wide majority of campus officials say their institution should spend more money on better preparing students for the work world, though a majority also say their institution lacks resources.

Still, officials believe that their faculty members, leaders, and elected state officials can work well together to implement a strategic vision for a changing work force.

*The Chronicle's* survey, conducted with support from Risepoint, took place in February 2025. Four hundred and nine administrators employed by these institutions responded. More than half of those surveyed are department heads or directors. In addition, *The Chronicle* conducted interviews with a dozen experts and university leaders, and included their insights and analysis in the report.





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If higher education were a prizefight, regional public institutions would pile up points for punching above their weight.

Those institutions serve as the stiff, unyielding spine of many communities, offering opportunity to students while developing a work force that fills many of a region's vital occupations — and doing it at a much lower cost than some other types of colleges, including many public ones.

Often called the “workhorses” of the college landscape because of their ability to deliver

readily accessible and affordable education each year to 5 million people, including a large number from underrepresented groups, the nation's 520 regional public institutions award two-thirds of all bachelor's degrees in the United States annually, according to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU).

But they have long gone beyond helping students get in the door of academe or nudging them toward a bachelor's degree. Regional publics have delivered high-quality

graduate education to generations of business leaders, health-care workers, teachers, and other professionals, helping them gain a foothold in the work world.

Many students trained by RPUs remain in the same region after graduation. Their skills [bolster](#) regional economies and fill vital positions, including many in the public sector. RPUs awarded two-thirds of the nation's master's degrees in 2023, per the AASCU.

Now, with economic pressures closing in around providers of undergraduate education, many RPUs are looking to expand upon their strong history in graduate education and other programs that help working adults advance in their careers. Leaders at some RPUs are looking to nontraditional-age learners to fill current revenue gaps — and possibly forestall future shortfalls.

Long-forecast [downturns](#) in younger college enrollees are looming. The closing of academic programs, and [sometimes colleges themselves](#), is on the rise.

At the same time, more members of the public — [rightly or wrongly](#) — are questioning whether RPUs and other institutions are the engines of economic mobility they once were. Federal and state lawmakers have often turned higher education into a political football, with many arguing that colleges, even with the help of taxpayer dollars, still cost too much to be worthy of more financial support. RPUs often bear a higher proportional burden of legislators' scrutiny, some observers say.

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Longstanding financial inequities have long clouded the future of RPUs. They receive around \$1,100 less in state money per full-time student than other public institutions do. Because they perform less research, in most cases, than state flagship universities, [RPUs receive much less federal funding](#), according to the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges.

Meanwhile, enrollment has already been a source of strain for regionals. From 2010 to 2021, enrollment fell 4 percent at RPUs — while growing at a 12-percent clip at public flagships nationwide, according to a *Chronicle* [analysis](#) — though they have seen growth in the past few years.

Given the uncertain economic landscape, RPUs have little choice but to seek out alternate streams of money.

Targeting working adults has been on the minds of college leaders for some time. Results from a *Chronicle* [survey](#) conducted in October 2023 found that nearly two in three officials at RPUs saw expanding graduate programs as one of the best opportunities for growing enrollment and income. Another large majority (69 percent) said the same about expanding online programs, which typically have been used to reach more adult learners.

When asked to choose the best ways to grow their institution's enrollment, officials cited adult students (79 percent), online learners (69 percent), and graduate students (58 percent).

As college leaders now consider their options, they face a world amid epochal change, especially when it comes to tomorrow's technological work force. Some thought leaders in higher education say that now is the time to invest in education that prepares students and adult workers in AI, machine learning, and other emerging high-tech fields—[or helps them create or perform jobs](#) that command those technologies.

Some institutions are developing programs offering adults certificates or other credentials that can help them adapt to a new work world. Others are focused on expanding their success in helping develop degree-seeking graduate students into professionals in traditional fields.

Investing in work-skills-based education comes with risks. Colleges are moving toward such programs at a time when [institutions are reeling](#) from a federal freeze on research programs, which could threaten their graduate-school budgets. To head off financial disaster, some institutions are accepting [fewer students](#) into research-centered graduate-degree programs.

What's more, RPUs often struggle for the kind of attention that would get them the private and public support they need to expand their programs. They often lack the marketing resources or political connections that other types of institutions have, making it hard for them to broadcast stories that [depict](#) them as key to their region's success and their students' upward mobility.

Institutions that offer online-only graduate programs, such as Southern New Hampshire University, University of Maryland Global Campus, and several for-profit colleges, continue to grow, eating up potential market share for regionals.

Experts also note that a tension can exist between the central mission of most RPUs — to help students become well-rounded learners — and a stronger focus on developing more specific skills with work-force relevance.

Finally, colleges that go all in on AI will need to navigate through [faculty skepticism](#) and [widespread concern among the public](#) about the effects of AI in the workplace.





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# Building on a History of Serving Grad Students

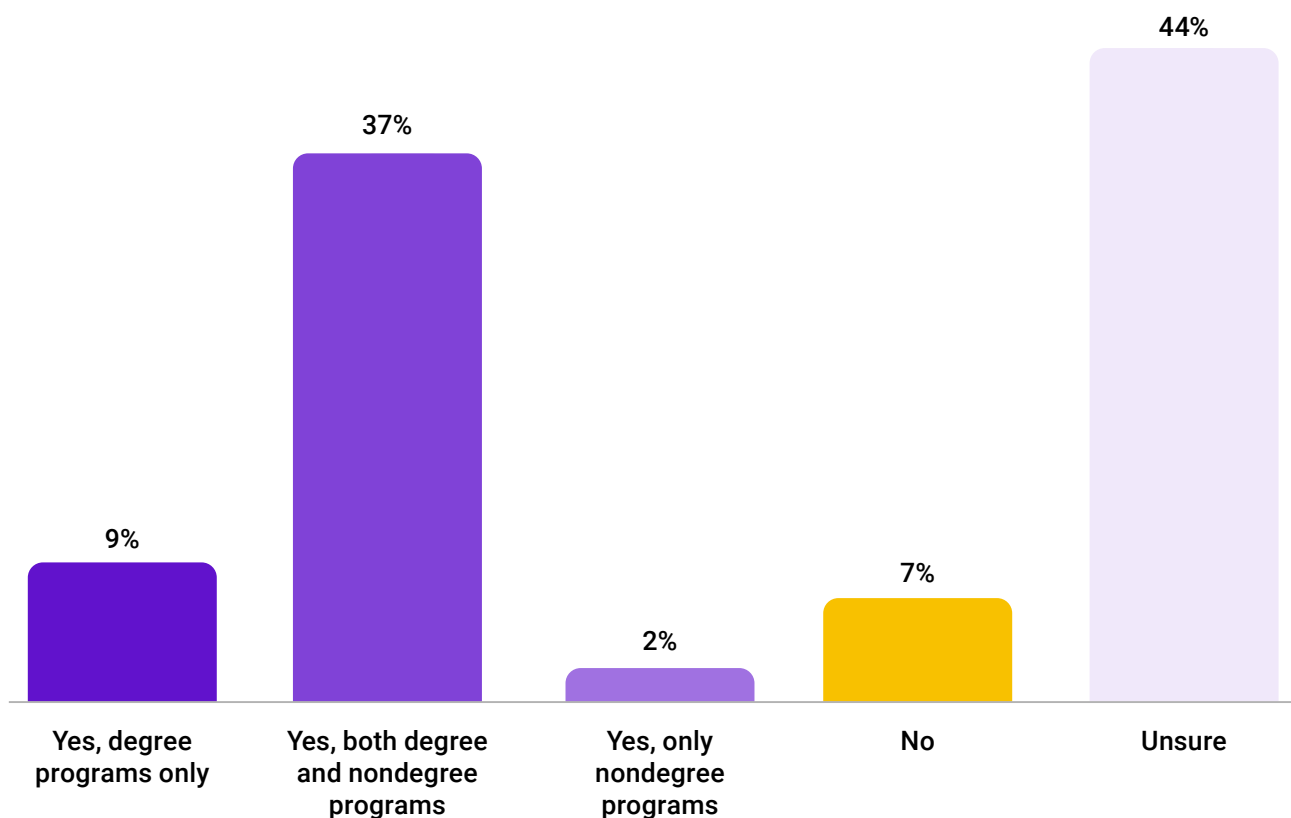
About half of regional public universities are looking to expand graduate education, according to survey respondents. More than one in three college officials say their institution is planning to expand both degree and nondegree work-force programs at the graduate level, while 9 percent will grow only their degree programs. Two

percent have plans to add or expand only non-degree programs.

Still, a considerable number of college officials (44 percent) say they are unsure of their institution's intentions. That may be a sign that colleges are not communicating those plans widely enough throughout their campuses, experts say.

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### Does your institution plan to expand work-force-focused programs for graduate students in the near future?



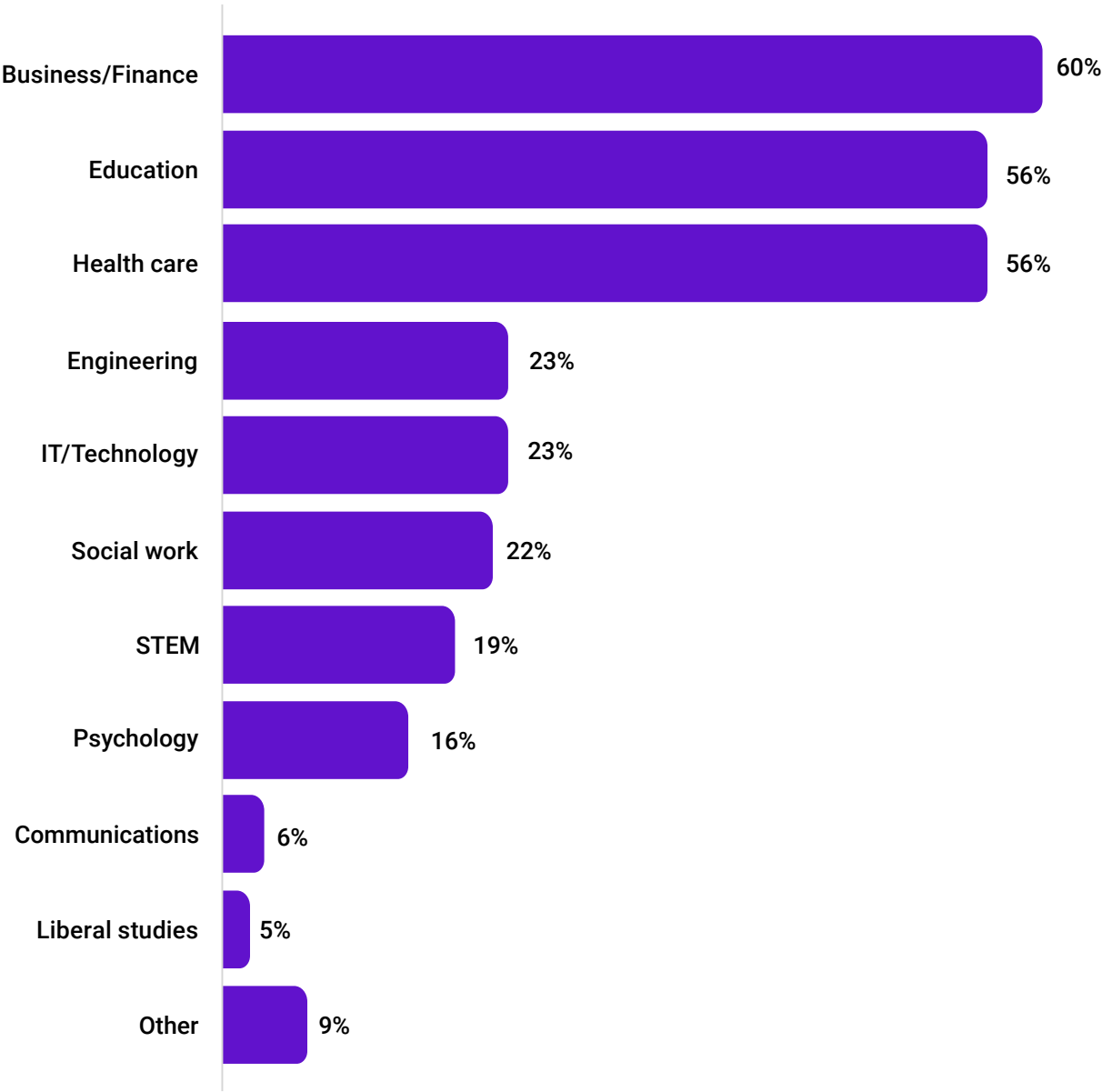
Source: *Chronicle* survey of 409 officials at regional public institutions

Note: Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

Regional public institutions that have developed plans may draw on decades of experience graduating people into the professional ranks. Survey respondents cite graduate pro-

grams in business/finance (60 percent), education (56 percent), and health care (56 percent) as ones that have best prepared students for their careers.

**Which area(s) of graduate degrees offered by your institution do you think have been most successful at preparing students for the work force? Select up to 3.**



Source: Chronicle survey of 409 officials at regional public institutions



Over all, officials at regional public institutions evince confidence in their institutions' ability to build programs that develop workers' career skills. A large majority — 83 percent — say their institution's graduate programs do a good job of readying students for the work force. Those numbers are 6 percentage points higher than those found in results from a similar question in a *Chronicle* [survey](#) conducted 18 months ago.

This year, nearly half of respondents say many of their programs prepare students well, while an additional 35 percent say that all or most programs do so.

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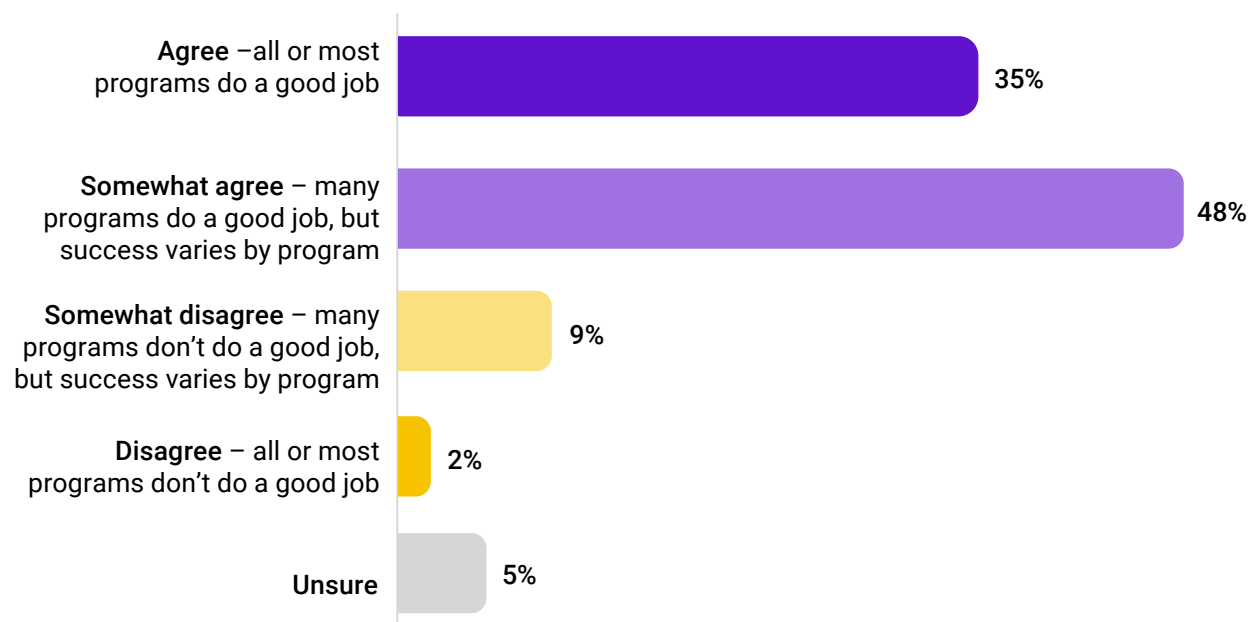
**Over all, officials at regional public institutions evince confidence in their institutions' ability to build programs that develop workers' career skills.**

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To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

**My institution's graduate programs do a good job preparing students for the work force.**



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 409 officials at regional public institutions

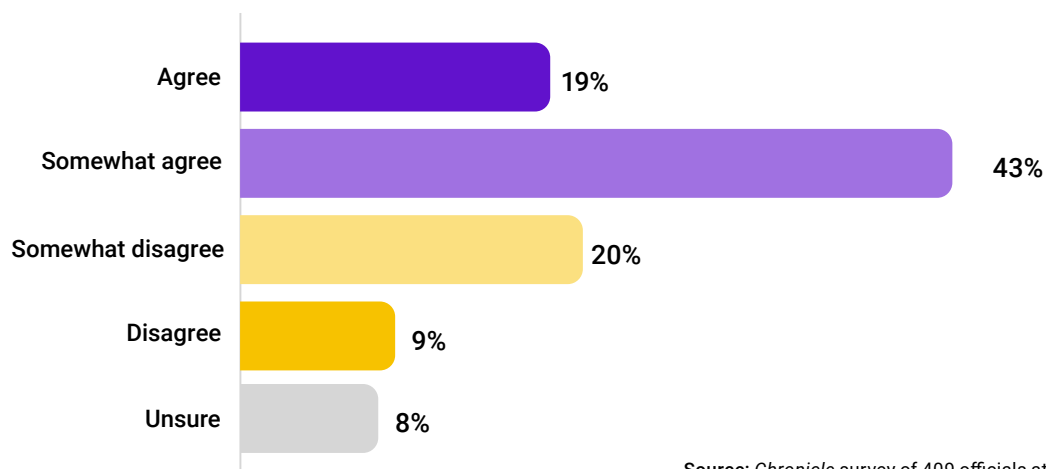
Most officials say their institution provides programs that help adult learners develop skills to advance their careers or start new ones. Most respondents (56 percent) say that their

faculty members and leaders work well together to implement a vision for work-focused graduate programs. The same percentage say state and college leaders work well together, too.

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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 to start new ones.**

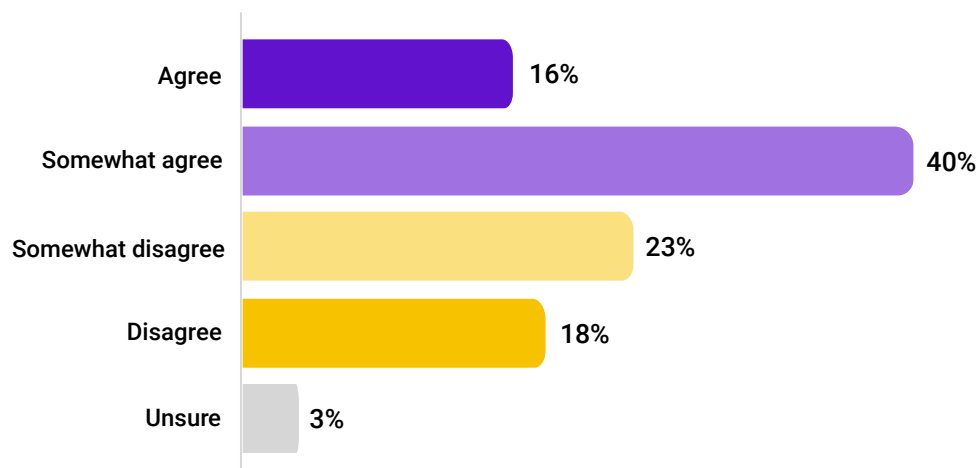


Source: Chronicle survey of 409 officials at regional public institutions

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To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

**My institution's leaders and its faculty members work well together to implement that vision.**



Source: Chronicle survey of 409 officials at regional public institutions  
Note: Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

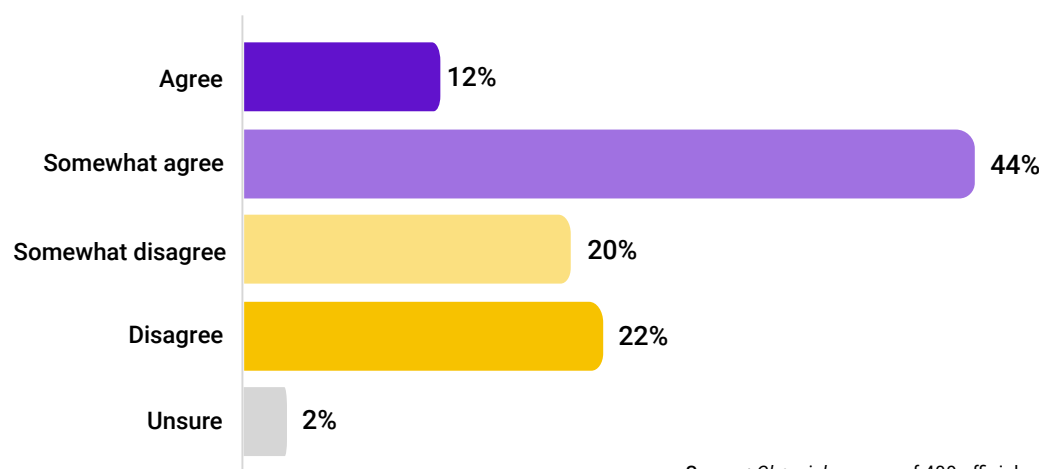
However, college officials rank RPUs' ability to draw in working adults well below their institution's capability, partnerships, or vision in forming and running programs. Less than half of college officials (46 percent) say their institution recruits students well for graduate programs, while 43 percent say their college does not do a good job.

As their graduate programs branch out beyond more traditional ones in business, education, and health care, RPUs would do well to improve communications with prospective adult students, some experts say. They should more clearly lay out the benefits of enrolling.

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To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

**The state's and the institution's leaders have the right strategic vision for my institution to prepare students for the changing work force.**

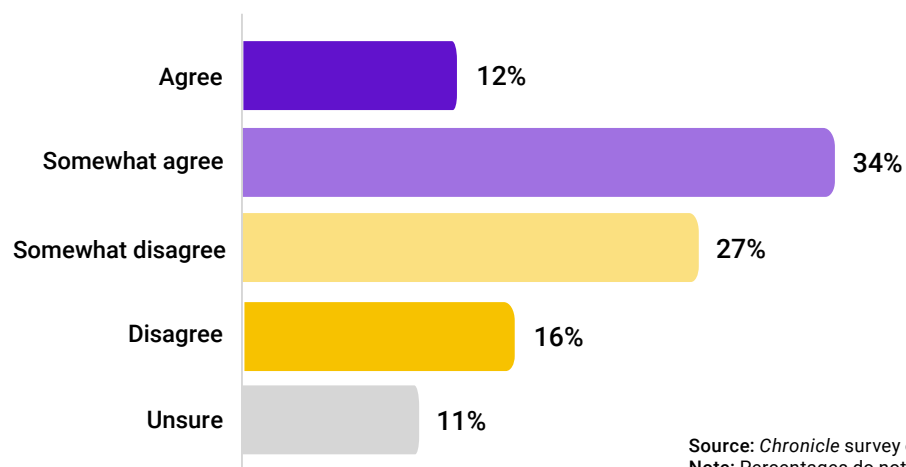


Source: Chronicle survey of 409 officials at regional public institutions

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To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

**My institution does a good job recruiting adult learners for graduate programs.**



Source: Chronicle survey of 409 officials at regional public institutions  
Note: Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.



“People in education or health care who are looking to take that next step in their career might have a clear idea of where to go because those programs have been around for a long while,” says Mary Alice McCarthy, senior director of the Center on Education and Labor at New America, a think tank that studies education. “But in other and newer types of careers,

**“RPU’s need to think about why so many adults have left college, what they can do for them, how to get them back, and how to keep them in the program.”**

those next steps might not be so obvious.” Regional universities have a long record of working with adult students. Night-school classes, parking privileges, and flexible scheduling have all been incentives for students looking to improve their success in the workplace.

But as some colleges consider adding both degree and nondegree programs so a wider group of workers can improve their career skills, they may have to reconsider their recruiting approaches.

“RPU’s need to think about why so many adults have left college, what they can do for them, how to get them back, and how to keep them in the program,” says Cecilia M. Orphan, an

**What do graduate students of your institution lack, resulting in barriers to enrolling in and/or completing programs designed to prepare them for the work force? Choose all that apply.**

Alternate financial resources such as scholarships, grants, childcare programs



Employer support for advanced education



Access to adequate work-based learning opportunities such as clinicals or internships



Accurate and timely data on work-force needs to guide program choice



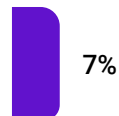
Career guidance from instructors and staff



Adequate support provisions for ESL and disabled learners



Other



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 409 officials at regional public institutions

associate professor of higher education at the University of Denver and director of partnerships for the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges.

Graduate students in work-force-focused programs often lack financial aid or services that could improve their chances of succeeding. Survey respondents, choosing from a selection of obstacles, say that services such as child care or grants and scholarships are the most frequent barriers for adult learners (at 77 percent), followed by employer support for advanced education (51 percent) and access to clinicals, internships, or other work opportunities (39 percent). (See previous chart, [p.14.](#))

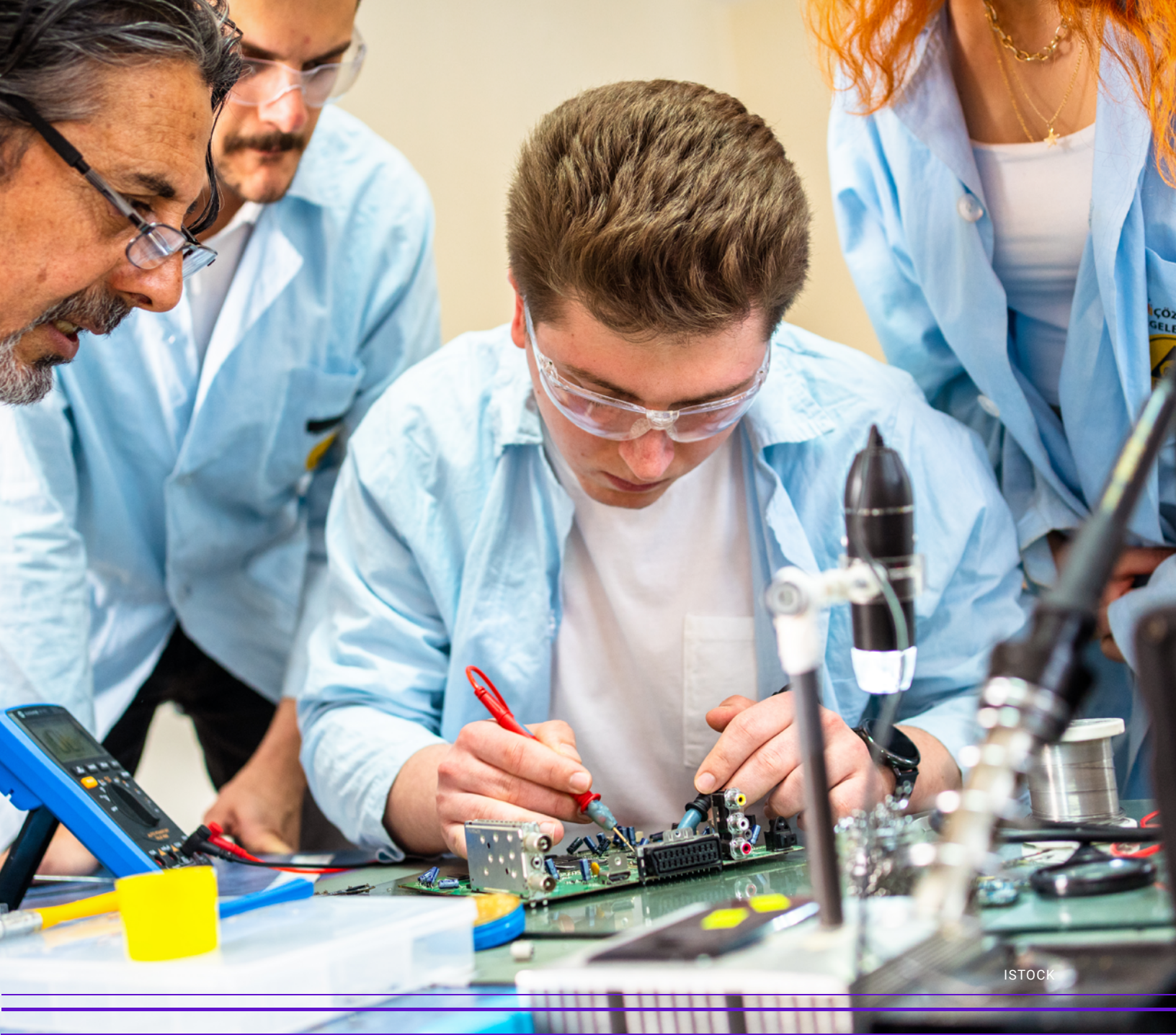
Though cash-strapped institutions or employers may not be able to offer more help, colleges need to be aware that graduate students, often in the middle of family and work life, make

considerable sacrifices to enroll and study.

"There's a lot of appropriate scrutiny around graduate education," says Maureen McCarthy, dean of the College of Sciences and the Humanities at Ball State University. "To ask students, even ones already in the work force, to take on more loans is hard. You need to make sure your program will do what you say it will do."

As RPUs seek out new adult students to increase their own income, they should remain mindful that creating quality programs with the potential to add real value to a student's work life is central to the mission.

"As colleges plan out these graduate programs, they need to have honest conversations about what they want them to accomplish for their students," says Felecia Commodore, an associate professor of higher education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. "It can't just be about enrollment or revenue."



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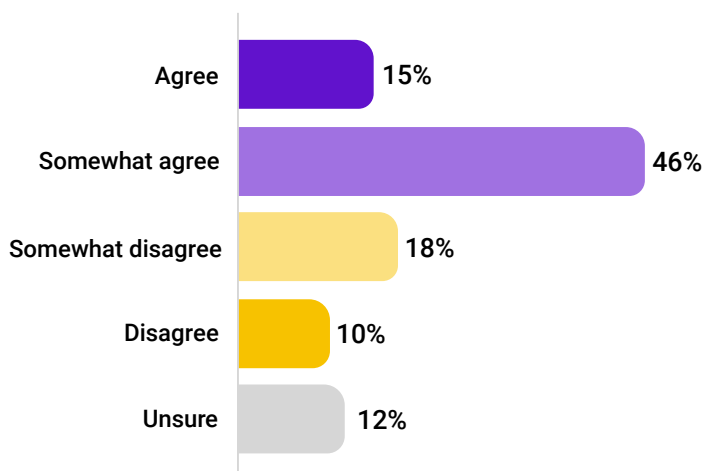
# Expanding Work-Force Training



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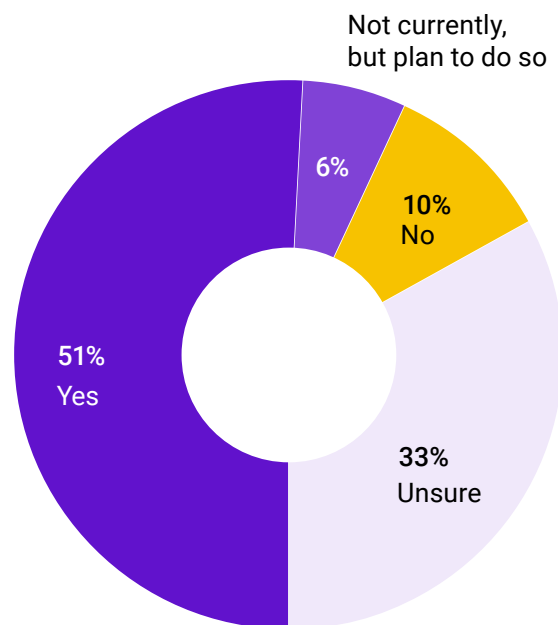
To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

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



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**Does your institution ask for feedback from regional employers regarding how well graduates are prepared for jobs?**



Source: Chronicle survey of 409 officials at regional public institutions

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**A**s they develop new programs or expand existing ones, RPUs plan to do what they have done for decades: partner with regional industries that require graduates with strong workplace skills.

Most institutions are doing a good job of collaborating with employers, per the survey. More than six of ten college officials say their institution and local industry successfully shape graduate programs that align with work-force needs.

Colleges aren't as successful following up with employers about how well institutions have prepared graduates for jobs, with barely half of survey respondents saying their institution asks regional industries for feedback. Another six percent say they plan to begin making calls to employers. One in three say they are unsure whether their institution makes those contacts or not.

Some see those results as a sign of a disconnect within institutions, as well as between colleges and companies.

“The right hand doesn’t know what the left hand is doing,” says Jeff Strohl, director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. “The fact that so many college leaders are unsure means that those ideas aren’t permeating the institution.”

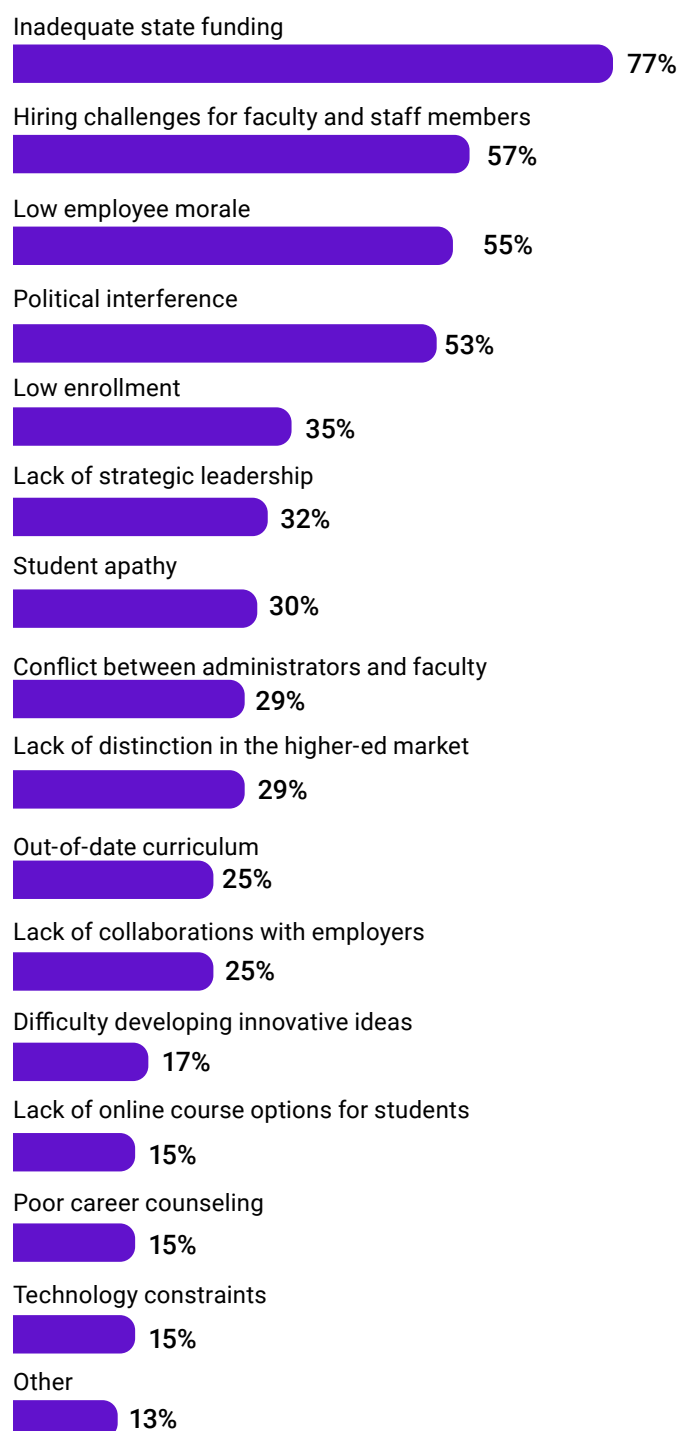
## Communications between employers and institutions are irregular at best, observers say.

Tracking down employers and getting them to respond to queries about what graduates’ workplace skills can tell them about the usefulness of their education isn’t easy. Many colleges don’t have the staff to handle it. Employers are hard to reach. Communications between employers and institutions are irregular at best, observers say.

Though colleges rely on employers to help them frame out graduate programs aimed at adult workers, they often can’t depend on them for much else. Still, only one quarter of respondents cite lack of collaboration with employers as a major challenge for them as they prepare people for jobs.

Ties between colleges and regional industries often aren’t what they could be, says Ball State’s Maureen McCarthy.

### What are the biggest challenges facing your institution related to preparing students for the work force? Choose all that apply.



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 409 officials at regional public institutions

“There’s an unequal relationship between colleges and companies,” adds Kevin R. McClure, an associate professor of higher education at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington and a co-director of the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges. “Institutions have tried to create curricula that develops a strong work force. But we’re often seen as a problem within these partnerships.”

McClure and others say many business leaders often refuse to note colleges’ multifaceted missions. “Businesses and politicians can treat regional institutions solely as work-force developers,” McClure adds. “‘Why bother with teaching history or foreign languages?’ is how the thinking goes.”

There is tension within institutions as well, which reflects a concern that institutions may place too much emphasis on work-force development. Noted one survey respondent in a written response: “The most serious challenge is the idea that we exist primarily to prepare students for the work force. We are not a technical institution. We are here to educate students, which means to advance their intellectual skills and status. If all students want is a job, then pursue a different kind of institution.”

Because RPUs lack notable figures who will stand up for them before lawmakers and the public — in the way that actor Tom Hanks has done for community colleges, for example — they are often seen as the weaker partner, McClure says.

A lack of support from industry or legislatures means that such relationships are rarely robust.

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“We just assume RPUs will meet industry’s work-force needs, yet there’s little investment in it,” adds Orphan.

In the survey, most college leaders — 63 percent — cited collaborating with employers as the best use of additional institutional resources, ahead of eight other categories, including improving the marketing of graduate programs (61 percent) and updating work-force-skills curricula (55 percent).

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Besides degree programs, RPUs and other institutions have, often at the behest of employers, formed programs that offer adult workers skill-competency credentials, such as badges, certificates, certifications, and microcredentials. Colleges should ensure that those nondegree offerings are tied to strong academic programs and well-paying jobs in their region, says Mary Alice McCarthy, from New America.

Institutions should also look to strengthen the relationship between students and the graduate programs that have enrolled them, observers say. More closely monitoring their progress through a program is key, as is making sure their skills will match up with available jobs.

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**In which areas should additional resources be invested to better prepare graduate students for the work force? Choose all that apply.**



**Source:** *Chronicle* survey of 409 officials at regional public institutions

**Note:** Only respondents who selected “agree” or “somewhat agree” to the statement “My state and institution should invest more resources to prepare graduate students for the work force” were presented with this question.

Nearly half of survey respondents say institutions should invest additional resources in career counseling. (See previous chart, [p. 20.](#))

“We need to ask students, How is your experience going? And, what do you need from us?” says Strohl, from Georgetown. “These people are adults. We can’t maintain the same paternalistic attitude we have with undergrads.”

Colleges also face challenges updating their graduate-course offerings, particularly when it comes to preparing students for emerging high-tech jobs.

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**“Employers live in the here and now. They don’t have the ability or focus, often, to project future work-force needs.”**

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While RPUs have thrived as educators of graduate students in business, education, health care, and nursing, officials report they have produced fewer engineers (23 percent), technologists or IT professionals (23 percent), and professionals in other STEM subjects (19 percent). (See previous chart, [p. 10.](#))

Some RPU graduate schools are retooling themselves to accommodate adult workers in high-tech fields, as well as those who may be looking to enter those industries.

At the University of South Carolina at Beaufort, officials are gearing up to create hands-on classes where students can apply lessons in AI. It’s part of a larger effort to update workplace skills while improving students’ “customer experience” using chatbots and other AI tools.

The university is putting federal cybersecurity grants to work to link students with employers who can provide internships with experiential learning in AI.

Because the tech world moves fast, officials in Beaufort have set more pliable guidelines, instead of solid policies, for developing AI on campus, says Eric Skipper, the university’s provost and executive vice chancellor for academic affairs.

RPUs face the challenge of revising programs in computer science, data analysis, and other AI-connected fields.

“AI and internet-language education move much faster than the rate at which we can develop curriculum,” says Strohl. This points up a more widespread challenge to institutions, which often rely on industry for direction, he adds. “Employers live in the here and now. They don’t have the ability or focus, often, to project future work-force needs.”

So far, most institutions are moving incrementally, if at all, on AI-based work-force programs. “We’re a research institution and we’re doing virtually nothing institution-wide, or in any meaningful way, with AI,” says McClure, from UNC Wilmington.

While Ball State and UNC Wilmington have lengthy histories of partnering with industry, and



with pharmaceutical companies in particular, AI-related technologies in those areas have yet to capture the attention of decision-makers. A lack of high-tech faculty, professionals, and companies in a region can slow development of those programs, adds Maureen McCarthy, of Ball State.

When asked how they prefer to teach working adults, college officials found value in several modalities, with slightly more favoring online teaching with synchronous elements (34 percent) over hybrid courses (33 percent). One quarter prefer fully asynchronous online teaching. Only eight percent say that in-person courses best serve adult learners.

The diffuse set of viewpoints reflects different needs among RPUs.

“There’s not one single modality that will meet the needs of adult learners,” says Orphan. Students at rural universities, faced with

technical challenges that might make attending online chancy, or who might benefit from more hands-on experiences with faculty and other students, could do better with a combination of online and in-person learning, she adds.

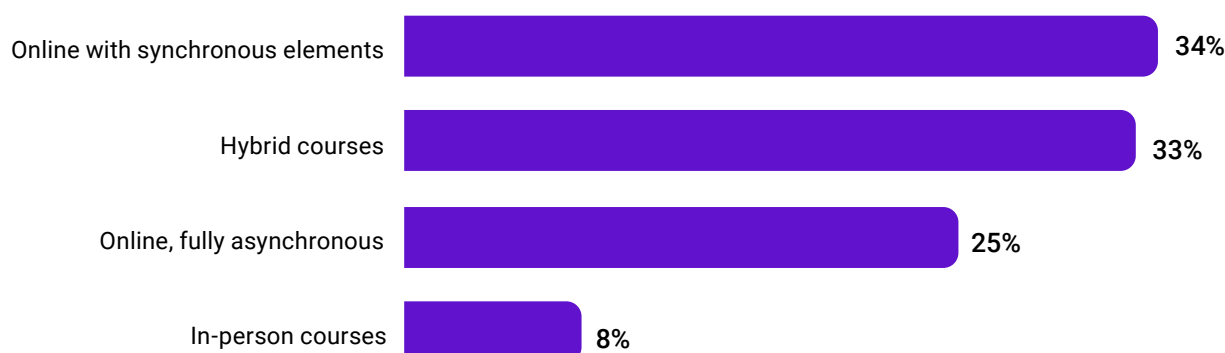
Research from New America and others shows that adult students do best in very structured programs. Being connected to a group of other students makes them more accountable and offers opportunities for peer support.

“Learning is a social thing,” says New America’s Mary Alice McCarthy. “The more in-person opportunities you can provide will help students learn, make their experience stickier. That doesn’t mean you can’t do hybrid.”

Those who run graduate programs need to select modalities that will suit adult workers, particularly those within their region. “Adult learning is the mantra now with the enrollment

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## What modality generally best serves adult learners who want to enroll in graduate programs?



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 409 officials at regional public institutions

cliff looming,” says Skipper. “The 50-mile radius is important. Attracting people nearby with families and jobs who are going to want to stay close will determine how well we do.”

To develop new income streams, other RPUs have — out of necessity, they say — started graduate programs that reach adult workers far beyond that range, targeting online learners from around the nation and the world. New companies have sprung up to help link graduate-level learners to well-crafted asynchronous courses at RPUs. Third-party companies help develop the programs and configure instructional technology.

“That may be one reason why we’re seeing colleges lean more on adult education,” says Robert Maxim, a fellow at the Brookings Institution, a think tank in Washington, D.C. “There’s a remote educational-industrial complex popping up to reach those learners.”

Another reason is simple economics. Regional colleges may need to move beyond their regions to survive.

“RPUs that succeed in bringing in digital students from outside their state are ones that will have a better chance of making it,” says Chris Montagnino, vice president for online operations at Champlain College. “If you’re not agreeing to all-online, fully asynchronous, and accelerated programs for adult learners, you won’t be in position to fulfill the demand.”

Two years ago, Ball State worked with an online-course developer to create master’s programs in computer science and data science. The company and university designed asynchronous online programs that can be finished in 30 credit hours and require no thesis.

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**“There’s not one  
single modality that  
will meet the needs of  
adult learners.”**

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So far, 350 students from around the world have signed on. The university is not linking those global students to regional employers.

If successful, those digital-only programs will stand in contrast to Ball State’s traditional work-force-focused programs. As faculty have reshaped programs to meet ever-changing work-force demands, Ball State’s graduate offerings have sometimes suffered, with seven graduate programs being closed in the last five years.

“I’m not sure there’s all that much of a market for adult and graduate anymore,” says Ball State’s Maureen McCarthy. “We’re seeing declines, except in the new all-online programs.”

# Growing Programs in a Tough Environment

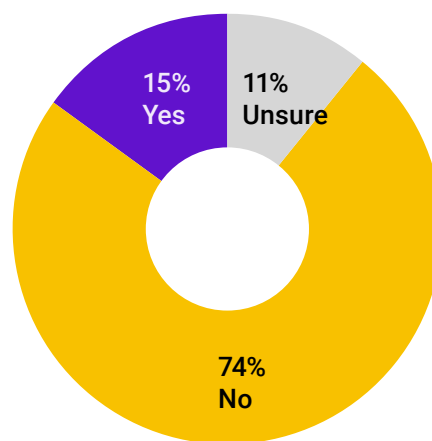


**A**s they attempt to build out learning opportunities for working students, RPUs will rely on funding from governments and the support of the public.

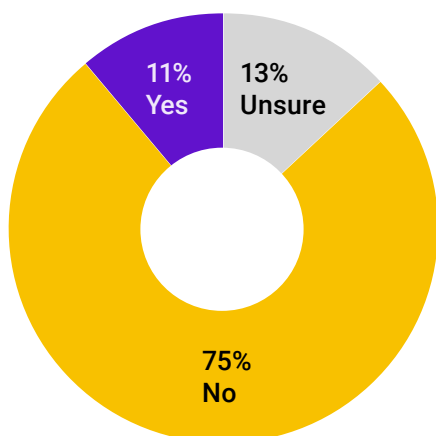
But college officials have doubts about the level of that support. Only 15 percent of respondents said federal and state lawmakers understand the value RPUs have in producing work-force-ready graduates. And only 11 percent said the greater public understands their role.

People in a college's region have a higher awareness of what RPUs can bring to work-force development, four in 10 college officials say. Yet, more of them — 43 percent — say even people within their geographical area do not see the value they add.

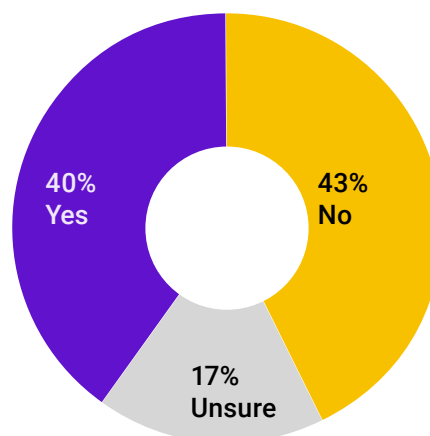
**Do you think federal and state lawmakers understand the value of the country's regional public universities in producing graduates ready for the work force?**



**Do you think the American public understands the value of the country's regional public universities in producing graduates ready for the work force?**



**Do you think that the people in your region understand the value of your institution in producing graduates ready for the work force?**



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 409 officials at regional public institutions  
Note: Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.



Nearly three-quarters of college officials (74 percent) say that legislators lack comprehension of RPUs' role in producing a well-prepared work force (See previous chart, [p. 25.](#)) — 6 percentage points more than in the previously cited *Chronicle* [survey](#) in 2023.

That low level of understanding often translates into fewer public resources for RPUs, experts say.

Only 32 percent of respondents say their institution has the resources to implement a vision for readying graduates for professions. More than twice as many say theirs does not.

Three in four college leaders say inadequate state funding is the biggest challenge they face when it comes to preparing work-force-ready graduates.

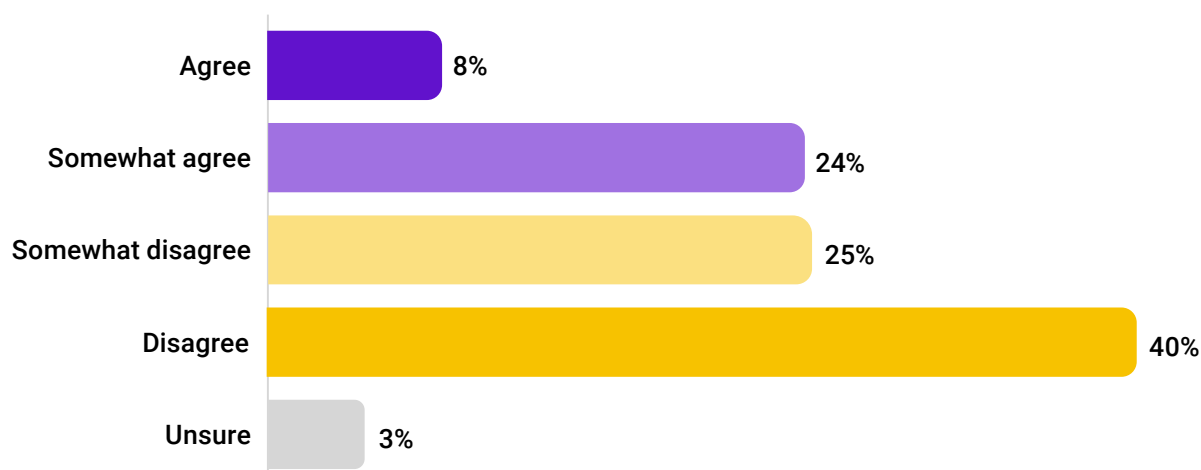
More than half say that hiring faculty and staff is a top challenge, along with low employee morale (55 percent) and political interference (53 percent). (See previous chart, [p. 18.](#))

A lack of resources often means that RPUs can't pay raises or muster enough money to hire top faculty or staff — factors that can damage morale, says McClure, from the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges.

"Finances affect hiring," adds Ball State's Maureen McCarthy. "We often can't afford to hire people in high-demand fields like computer science, where we're trying to meet work-force needs. Even if you have a BS in computer science, you can make a lot of money. Higher education, especially regional publics, can't afford to match industry salaries."

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To what extent do you agree with the following statement?  
**My institution has the resources to implement that vision.**



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 409 officials at regional public institutions

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**To what extent do you agree with the following statement?** My state and institution should invest more resources to prepare graduate students for the work force.



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 409 officials at regional public institutions

Note: Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

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Institutions and state governments should invest more in preparing graduate students for work, say more than half of college officials. RPUs might be able to counter the scarcity of money and understanding by more clearly and widely broadcasting their value to students and regional economies, some experts say. More than six in 10 college officials agree that improving the marketing of graduate programs would be a good thing — if enough resources were available. (See previous chart, [p. 20.](#))

But that money isn't there. "The cost to create visibility now via marketing is so incredibly high," says Montagnino, from Champlain College. "Most RPUs have no line item for it." If they did, they could gain a foothold in the burgeoning online graduate-education world, she adds. "They have a great history of doing graduate education. They'd win every day."

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**"It's important to build third-party champions, especially among industry leaders."**

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Without the budget to make a strong value proposition to the public, regional institutions should work to cultivate friends in high places. Getting others to attest to the benefits they have to offer might go a long way toward changing minds, some observers say.

"It's important to build third-party champions, especially among industry leaders," says Thomas Harnisch, vice president for government relations at the State Higher Education Executive

Officers Association. “If a company leader can go before legislators and say, ‘This institution is important to my business, and here’s why,’ it would be a tremendous help to these universities.”

There is some skepticism around the value of messaging, however. The best-constructed arguments may fall on deaf ears. “If you want to tell a story, you need a receptive audience,” says McClure. “A society that is fed politicized or wrong info through news and social media is a huge problem to overcome.”

Despite their record of success, RPUs — along with other types of institutions — have been blamed for costing taxpayers money and inflating the price of college. Though college leaders can make good arguments against those assertions, they might need to go further to change sentiment.

“There’s a trust problem with the public. We need to own up to the fact that higher education doesn’t always match people’s expectations for return on investment,” says Strohl, from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. “We should just come out and say it.”

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**“If you want to tell a story, you need a receptive audience. A society that is fed politicized or wrong info through news and social media is a huge problem to overcome.”**

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RPUs are often servants to two missions, Strohl adds — teaching marketable skills while delivering a comprehensive college education. But these two aren’t necessarily in opposition. “A liberal education provides the soft skills and critical-thinking ability that industries say they want, even as institutions get people ready for jobs,” he says. “We should broadcast that.”

Despite budget challenges, little understanding from lawmakers and the public, and a cloudy future due to federal actions, officials at the nation's regional public colleges say their institutions are fully able to develop graduate programs that will help adult workers in their careers.

But as always, employers, some politicians, and the public will be asking RPUs to do a lot with less — or at least with too little. Resources remain a prime concern as colleges look to expand their graduate offerings to include more programs aimed at better preparing workers for on-the-job challenges.

RPUs face other challenges, including catching up with the accelerating pace of change and its effect on developing programs in high-tech fields, persuading the public of their value as high-quality educators of the work force, communicating better with adult students, deepening relationships with regional employers, and designing programs with the appropriate learning modalities in mind.

Some institutions have taken the bold step of expanding job-centered graduate programs away from their regions to take advantage of revenue-growing opportunities around the world.

Institutions will need to proceed with a combination of caution and cunning to both build graduate-level programs that can teach new work-force skills and survive during economic and political times that are, to say the least, uncertain.



*The Chronicle* asked college officials at regional public institutions to answer a survey on enrollment trends, financial stability, work-force preparation, and the views lawmakers and politicians have of their efforts to educate graduate-level workers.

The survey was fielded between February 6 and 15, 2025, and garnered 409 respondents, all of whom are employees at regional public institutions in the United States.

Respondents included directors (37 percent), deans (21 percent), department heads (21 percent), vice presidents (9 percent), provosts (7 percent), and presidents or chancellors (3 percent).



