

THE PRICE TRANSPARENCY IMPERATIVE

# Price, Trust, and Action

---

# Strada Education Foundation

**strada**

At Strada Education Foundation, we're focused on one goal: helping clear the path between education and work, especially for those with the most standing in their way.

As a 501 nonprofit Foundation, and to accomplish this goal, Strada supports five important focus areas:

- **Clear outcomes** information to help make informed decisions
- **Quality education-to-career coaching**
- **Affordability** so a quality education is within everyone's reach
- **Work-based learning** experiences that connect education to career aspirations
- **Employer aligned programs** that lead to quality jobs and mobility



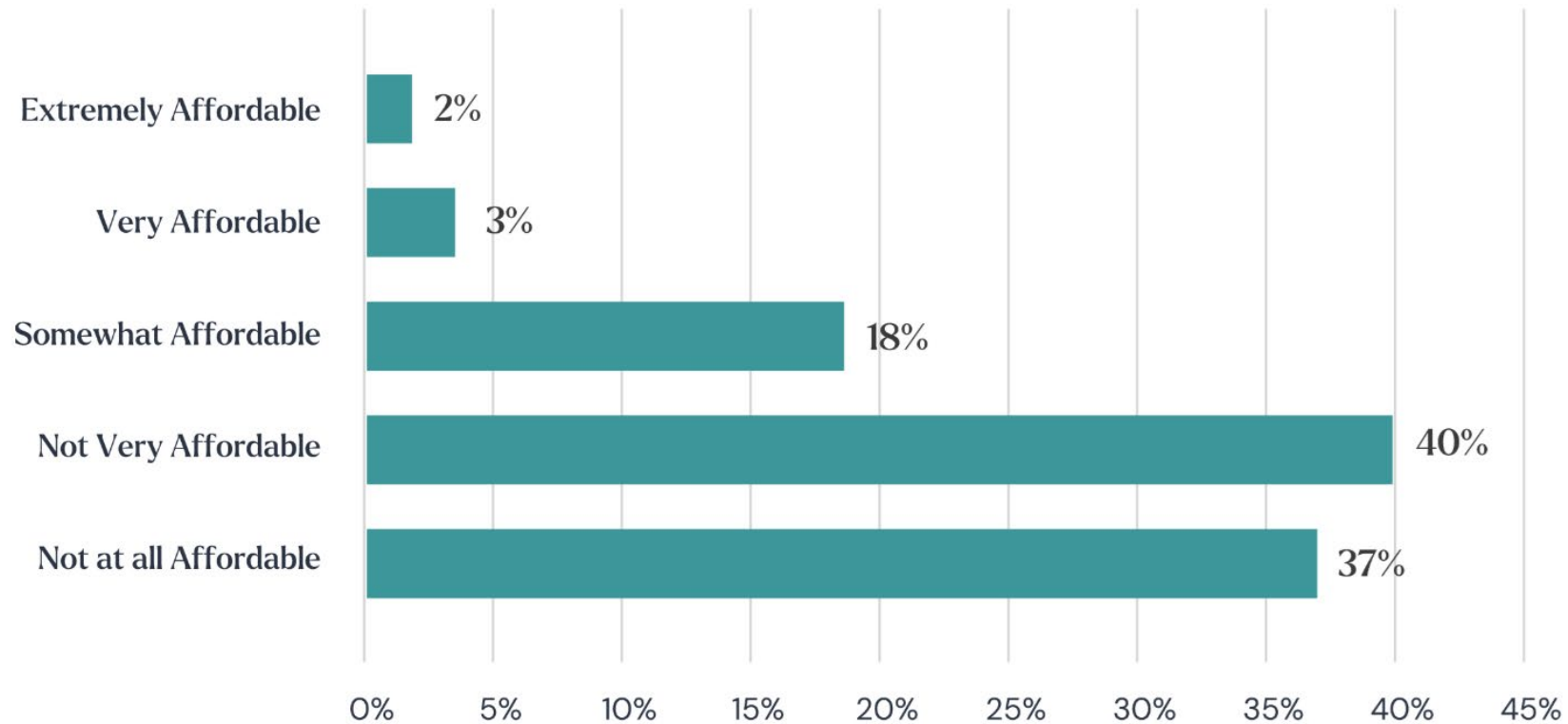
Is college in the United States affordable?

A. Yes

B. No

# The Perception Gap

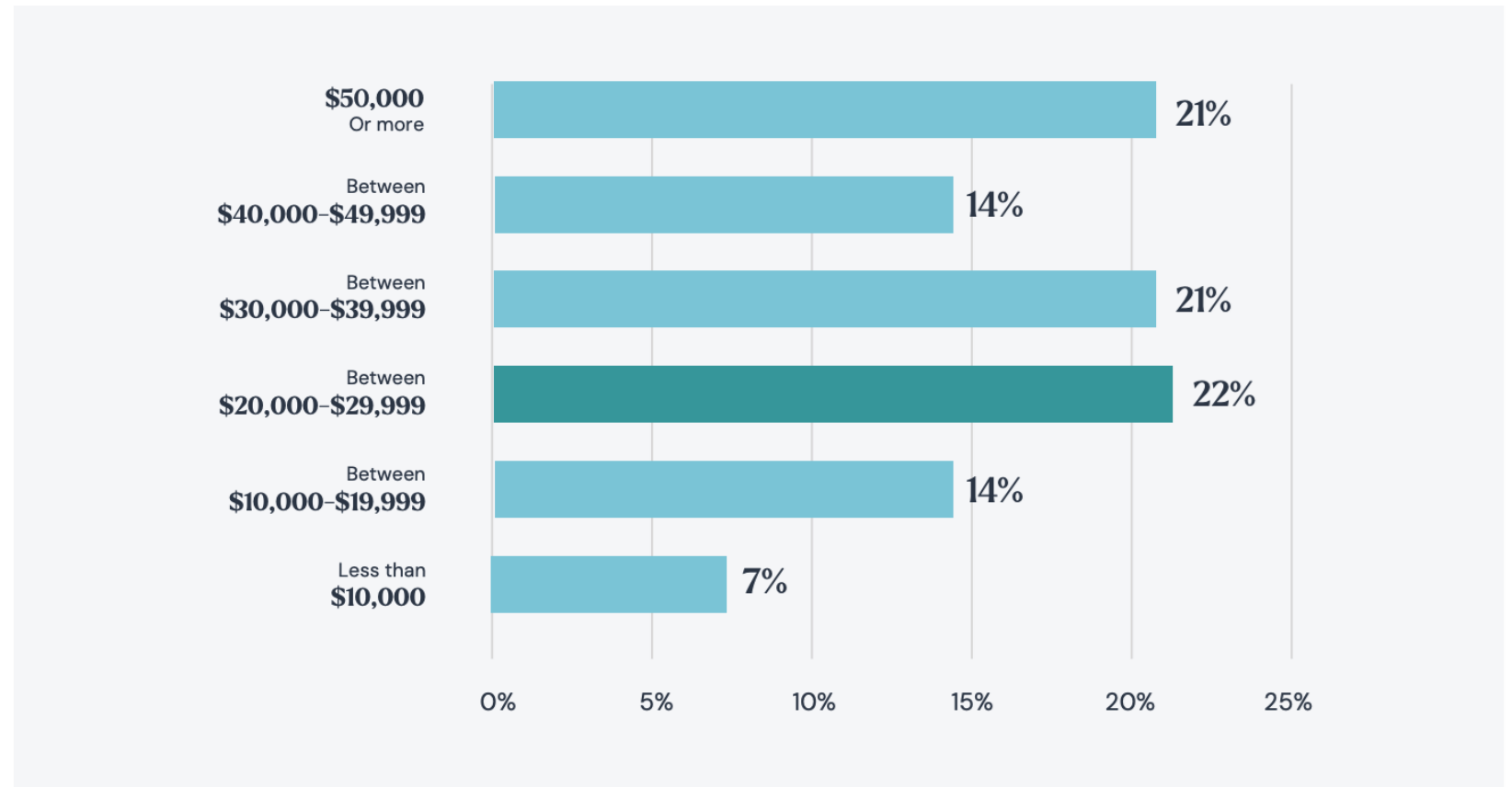
Figure 1: How affordable is it to attend college?



## Students and Families Dramatically Overestimate the Cost of Public Four-Year Colleges

*How much do students and families think it costs to attend a 4-year public institution per year?*

**Figure 4:** Including tuition, books, fees, meals, housing, and related costs, how much do you think the average student who lives on campus pays per year to attend a public university or college (a “four-year” college)?



Source: *Cost Confusion: Americans' Misperceptions of College Costs* (Strada Education Foundation)



# What's happening with college costs?

## The Secret That Colleges Should Stop Keeping

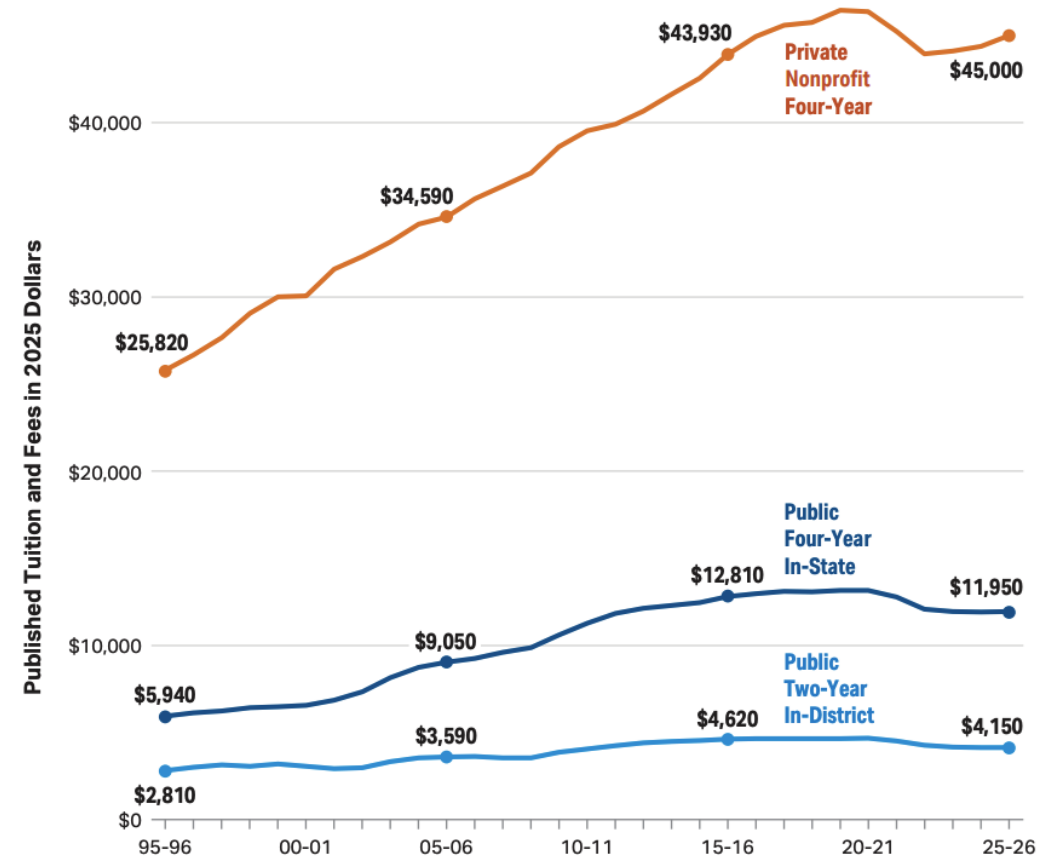
Despite ever-higher sticker prices, the real cost of getting a degree has been going down.

By Rose Horowitz



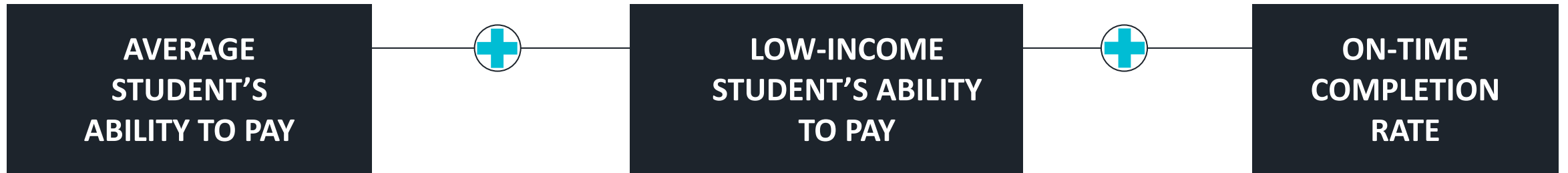
The Atlantic. February 20, 2025

**FIGURE CP-2** Average Published Tuition and Fees (Enrollment-Weighted) in 2025 Dollars by Sector, 1995-96 to 2025-26



College Board, Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid, 2025

# One Definition of Affordability: Strada



The number of hours average state resident students would need to work during the school year\* to cover the annual cost of their education at public two- and four-year institutions.

The number of hours state resident students from the lowest income group (whose families earn no more than \$30,000 per year) would need to work during the school year\* to cover the annual cost of their education at public two- and four-year institutions.

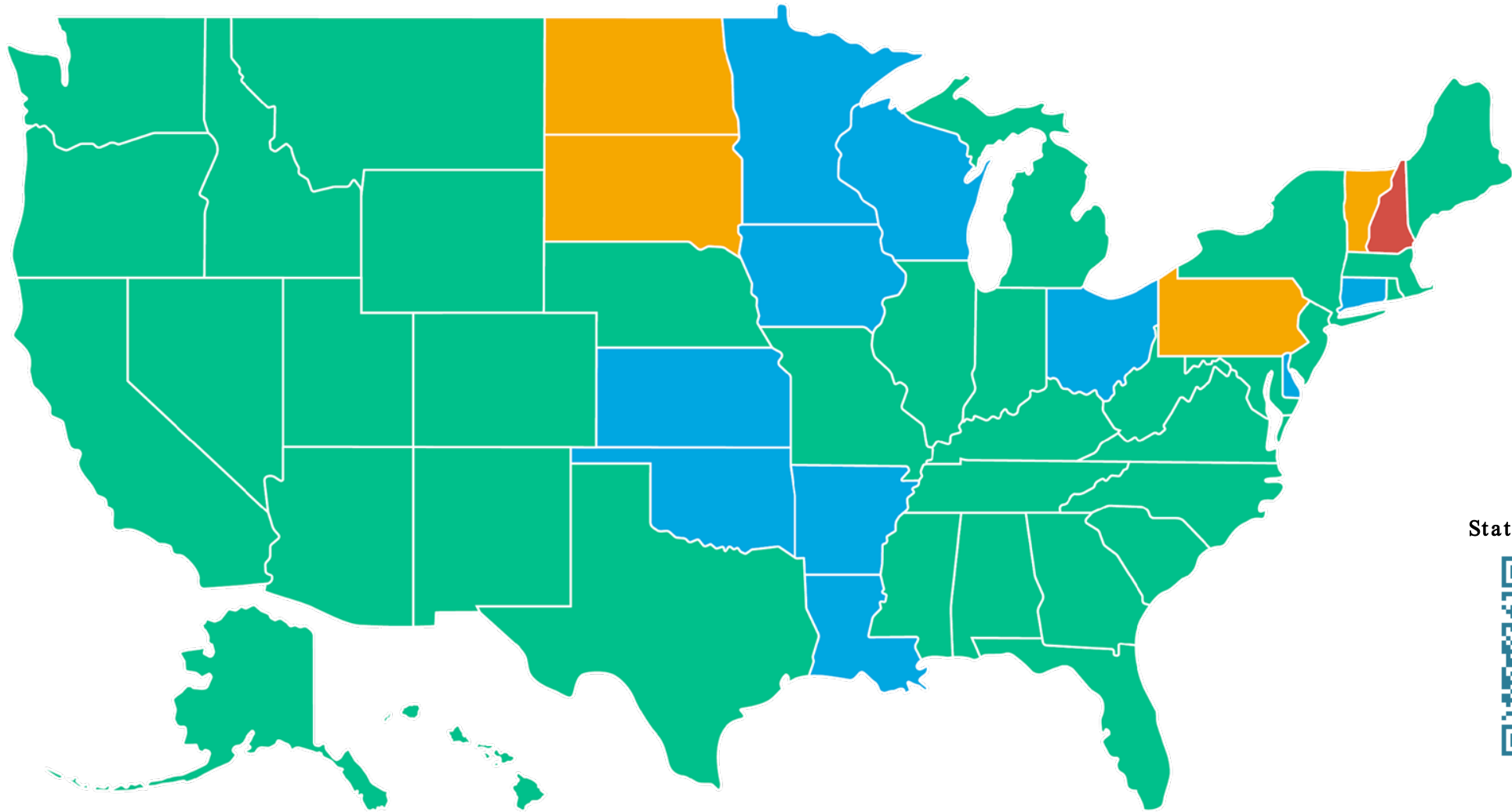
The percentage of students of four-year public institutions who complete their degree within four years.

State Opportunity Index





# SOI Affordability - Two-Year Institutions



State Opportunity Index



Foundational

Developing

Advanced

Leading

# Methodology

**MODE**

Online Survey

**LENGTH**

10-15 minutes

**DATES**

September 17 – November 2, 2025

**AUDIENCES**

US Adults Age 18+ (n=1,000)  
High School Students (n=1,000)  
College Students (n=1,351)

- Public College Students (n=1,000)
- Private College Students (n=351)

Adult Learners (n=1,000)  
High School Parents (n=500)  
College Parents (n=650)

- Public College Parents (n=500)
- Private College Parents (n=150)

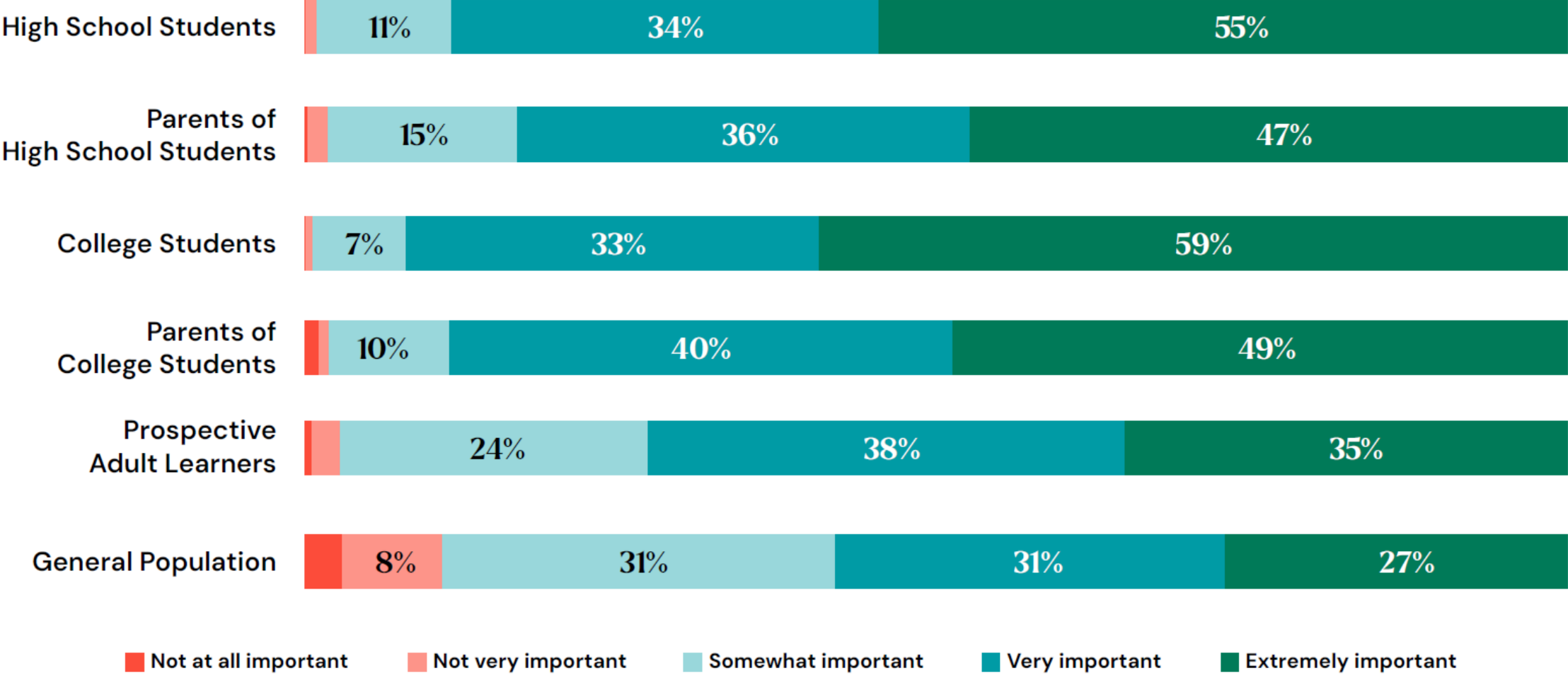
**GEOGRAPHY**

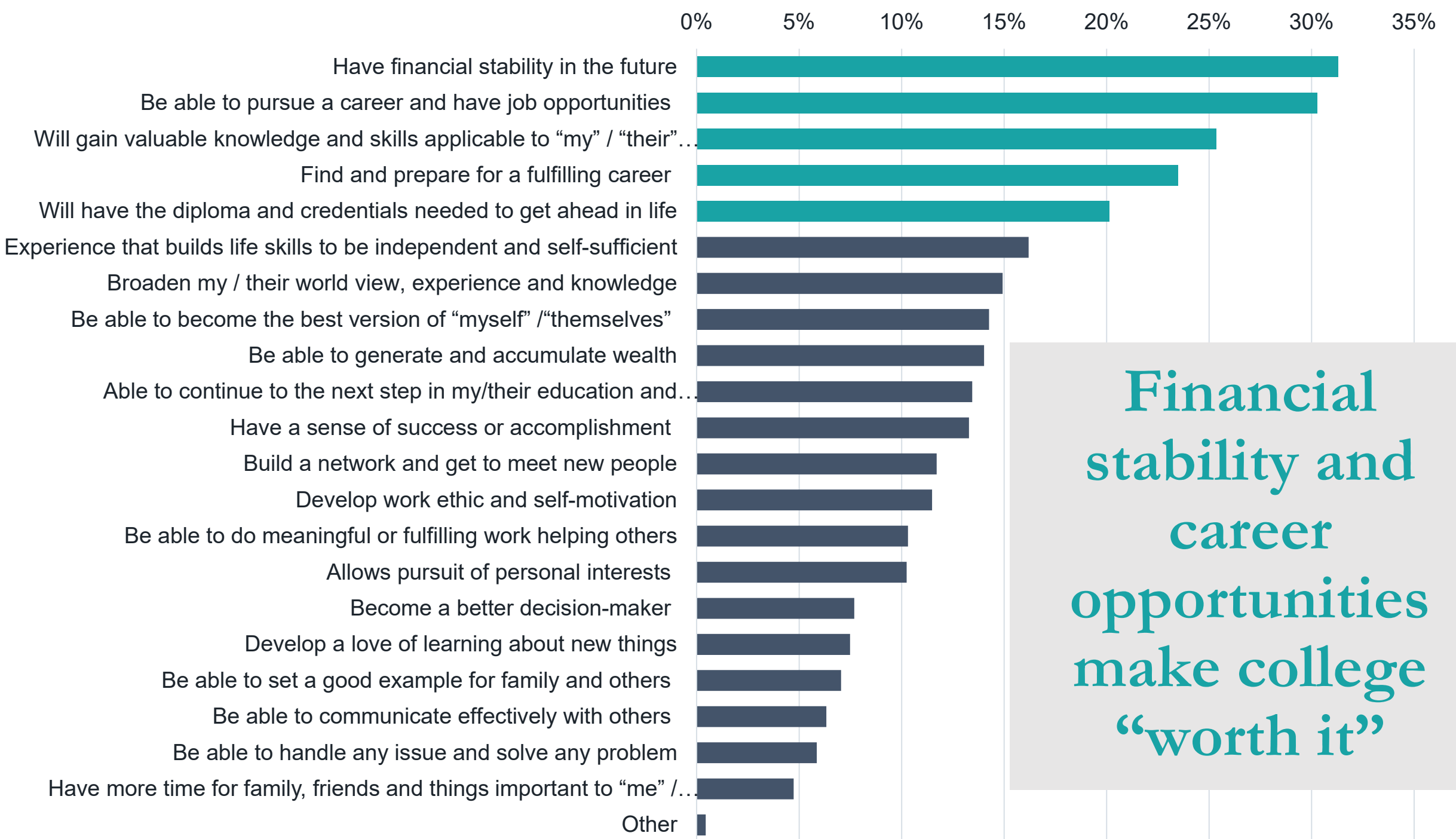
Nationwide

# Audience Definitions + Quotas

US Adults Age 18+ (n=1,000)	High School Students (n=1,000)	Public College Students (n=1,000)	Private College Students (n=351)	Adult Learners (n=1,000)	High School Parents (n=500)	Public College Parents (n=500)	Private College Parents (n=150)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Age, gender, ethnicity and region quotas to ensure representative sample</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Age 14-18</li> <li>Enrolled in high school</li> <li>Would consider attending 4-year college</li> <li>Mix of undecided/decided to enroll in college</li> <li>Quotas to ensure mix of years in school, first gen status, region and ethnicity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Age 18-24</li> <li>Enrolled in bachelor's degree program at public 4-year college or university</li> <li>Quotas to ensure mix of years in school, first gen status, region and ethnicity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Age 18-24</li> <li>Enrolled in bachelor's degree program at private 4-year college or university</li> <li>Quotas to ensure mix of years in school, first gen status, region and ethnicity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Age 25-44</li> <li>Graduated HS, no college degree</li> <li>Interest or active consideration of Bachelor's degree program</li> <li>Quotas to ensure mix of first gen status, region and ethnicity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parent of child in high school age 14-18</li> <li>Child would consider attending 4-year college</li> <li>Mix of undecided/decided to enroll in college</li> <li>Quotas to ensure mix of years in school, first gen status, region and ethnicity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parent of child age 18-24</li> <li>Child is enrolled in 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> year (or later) of bachelor's degree program at public 4-year college or university</li> <li>Quotas to ensure mix of years in school, first gen status, region and ethnicity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parent of child age 18-24</li> <li>Child is enrolled in 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> year (or later) of bachelor's degree program at private 4-year college or university</li> <li>Quotas to ensure mix of years in school, first gen status, region and ethnicity.</li> </ul>

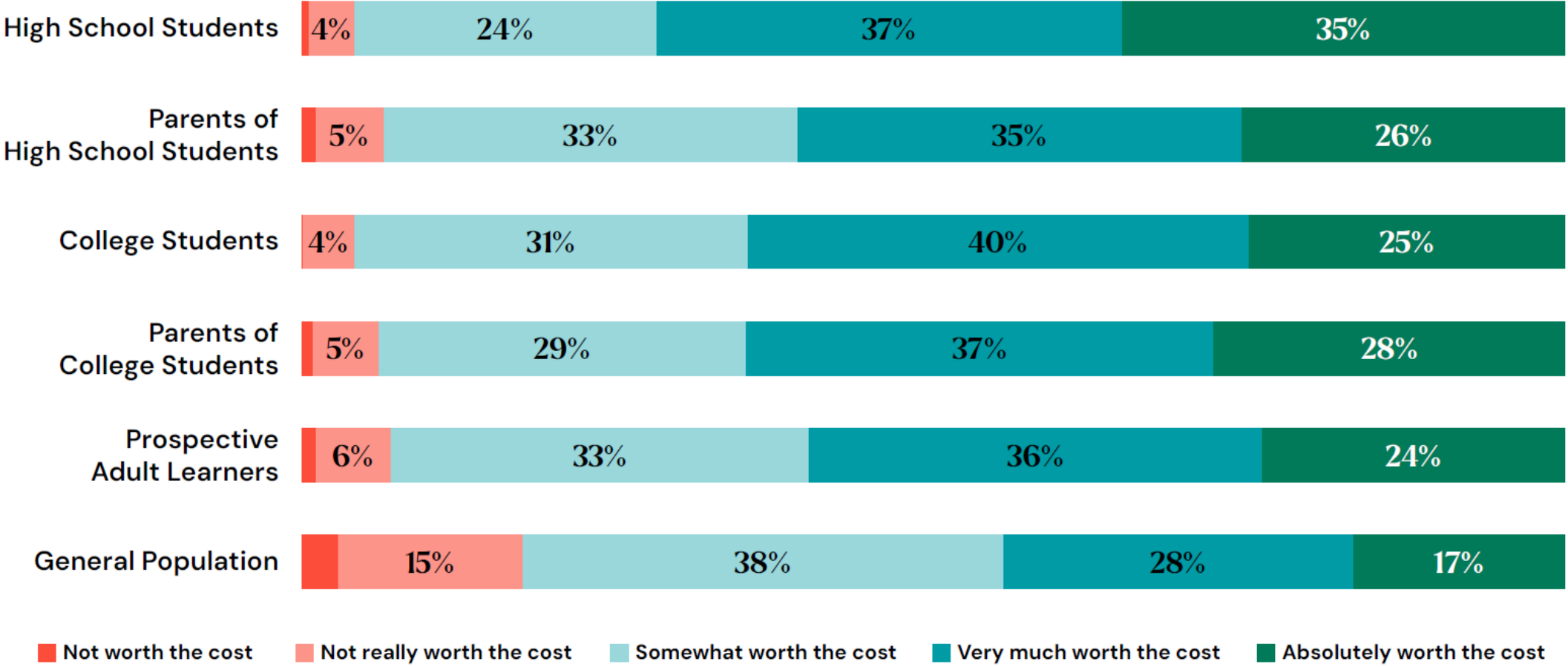
# Students and families think a college education is important for achieving their future career goals

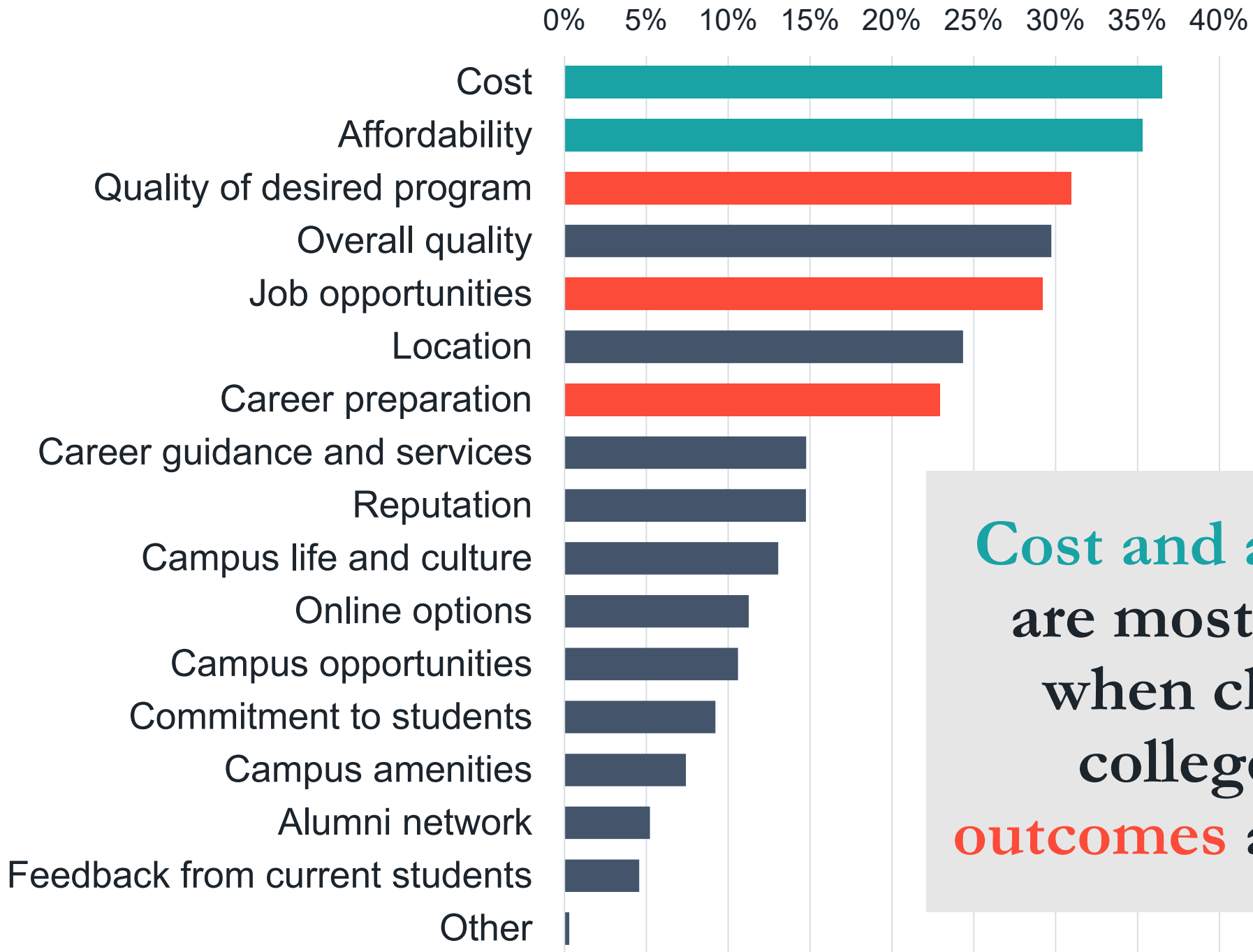




**Financial  
stability and  
career  
opportunities  
make college  
“worth it”**

# Students and families are concerned about costs





**Cost and affordability**  
are most important  
when choosing a  
college; **career**  
**outcomes** are 3 of top 7

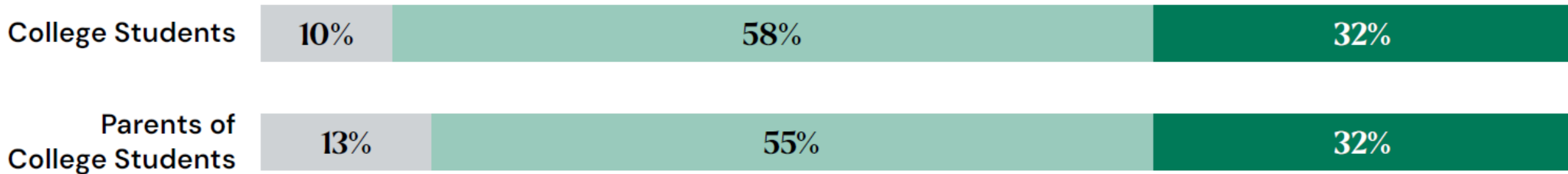
# The financial aid experience is a mixed bag for most, but only 1 in 3 college students and parents found it straightforward

**Parker** found the financial aid experience to be **very confusing**. The information provided by colleges was complicated and it was **hard to understand** exactly what it would cost to attend.

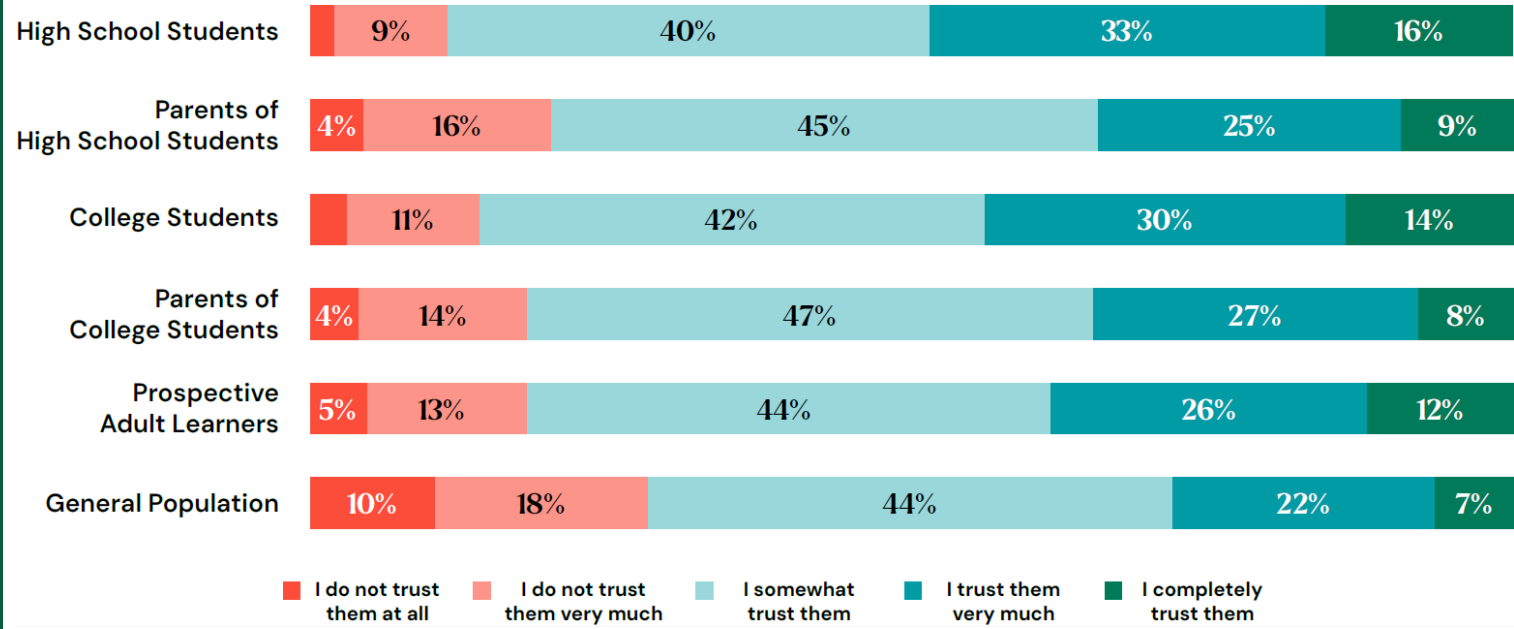
**Johnson** found the financial aid experience to be **mixed** — some things were easy to understand and some things were confusing when trying to determine exactly what it would cost to attend.

**Adams** found the financial aid experience to be **straightforward**. The information provided by colleges was simple and it was **easy to understand** exactly what it would cost to attend.

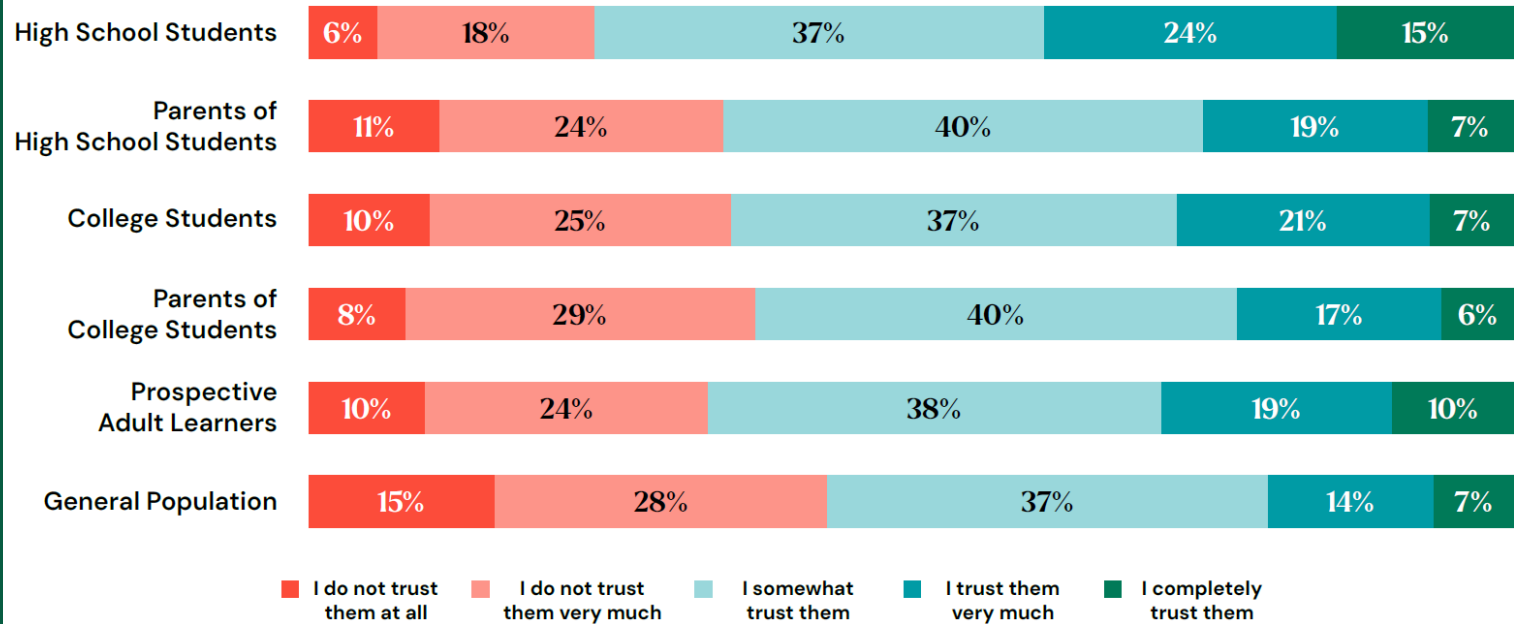
■ Parker ■ Johnson ■ Adams



# Respondents do not trust colleges to charge a fair price



**Public Institutions**

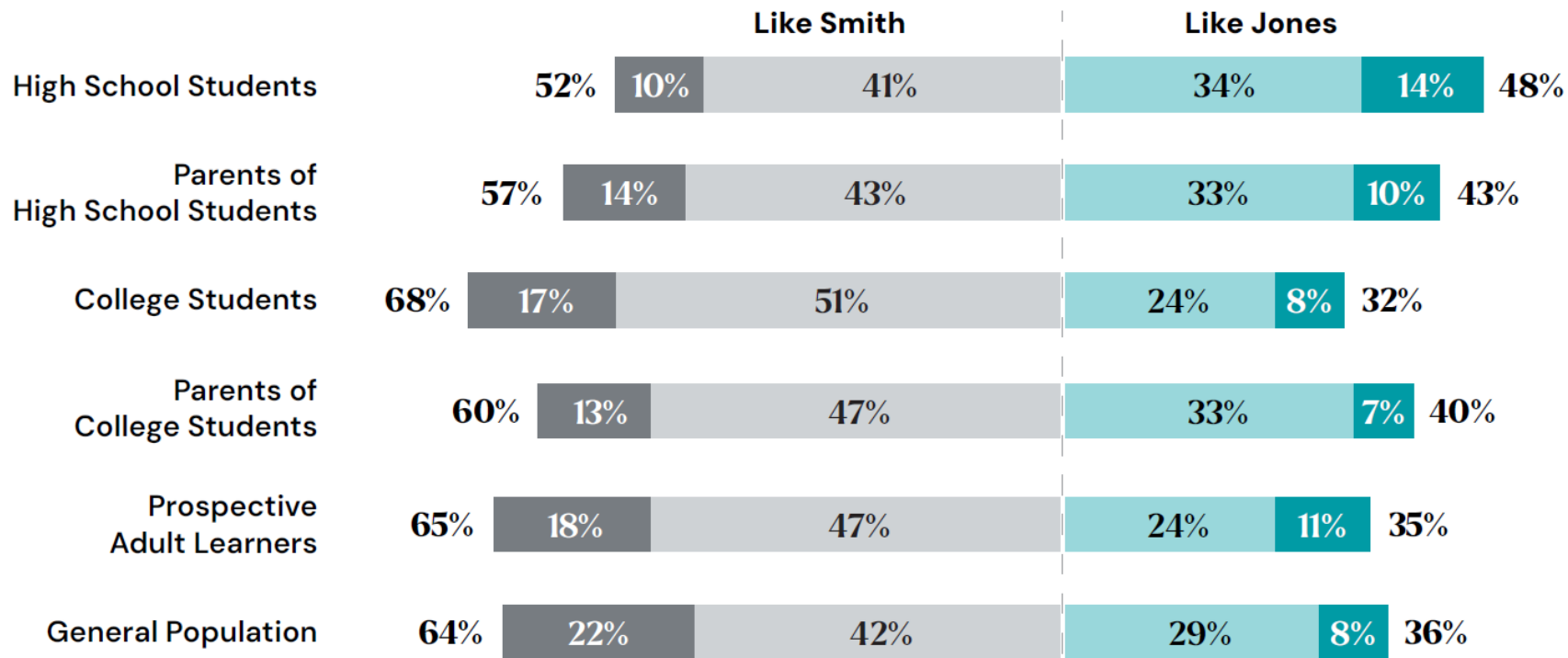


**Private Institutions**

# Most believe colleges care more about making money than educating students

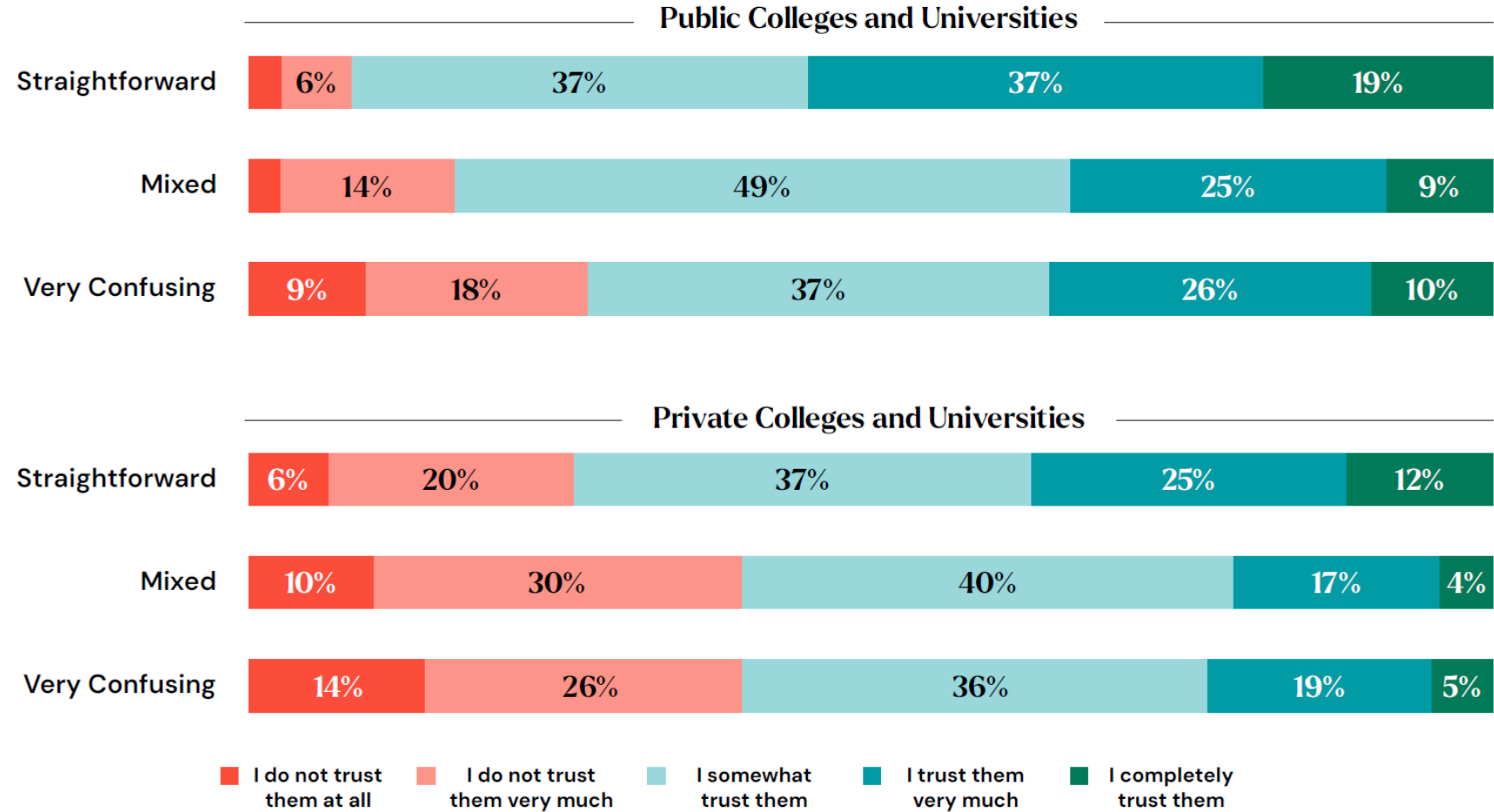
**Smith** believes that colleges and universities **care more about making money** than educating students.

**Jones** believes that colleges and universities **care more about educating students** than making money.



Exactly like Smith
  Somewhat like Smith
  Somewhat like Jones
  Exactly like Jones

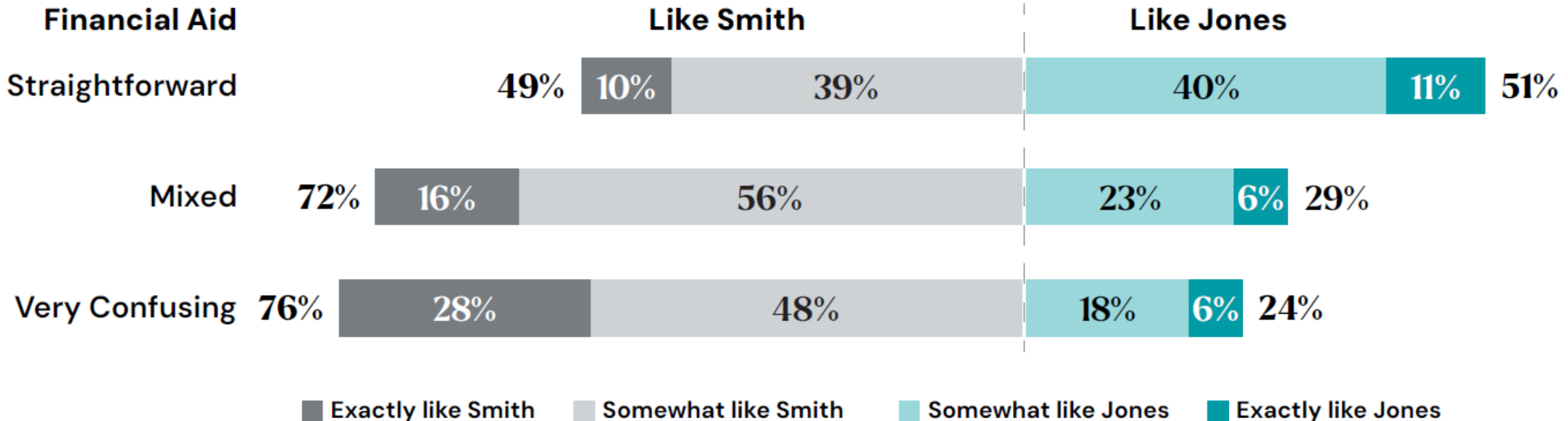
When students and parents are confused by the financial aid process, they are less likely to trust institutions to charge a fair price



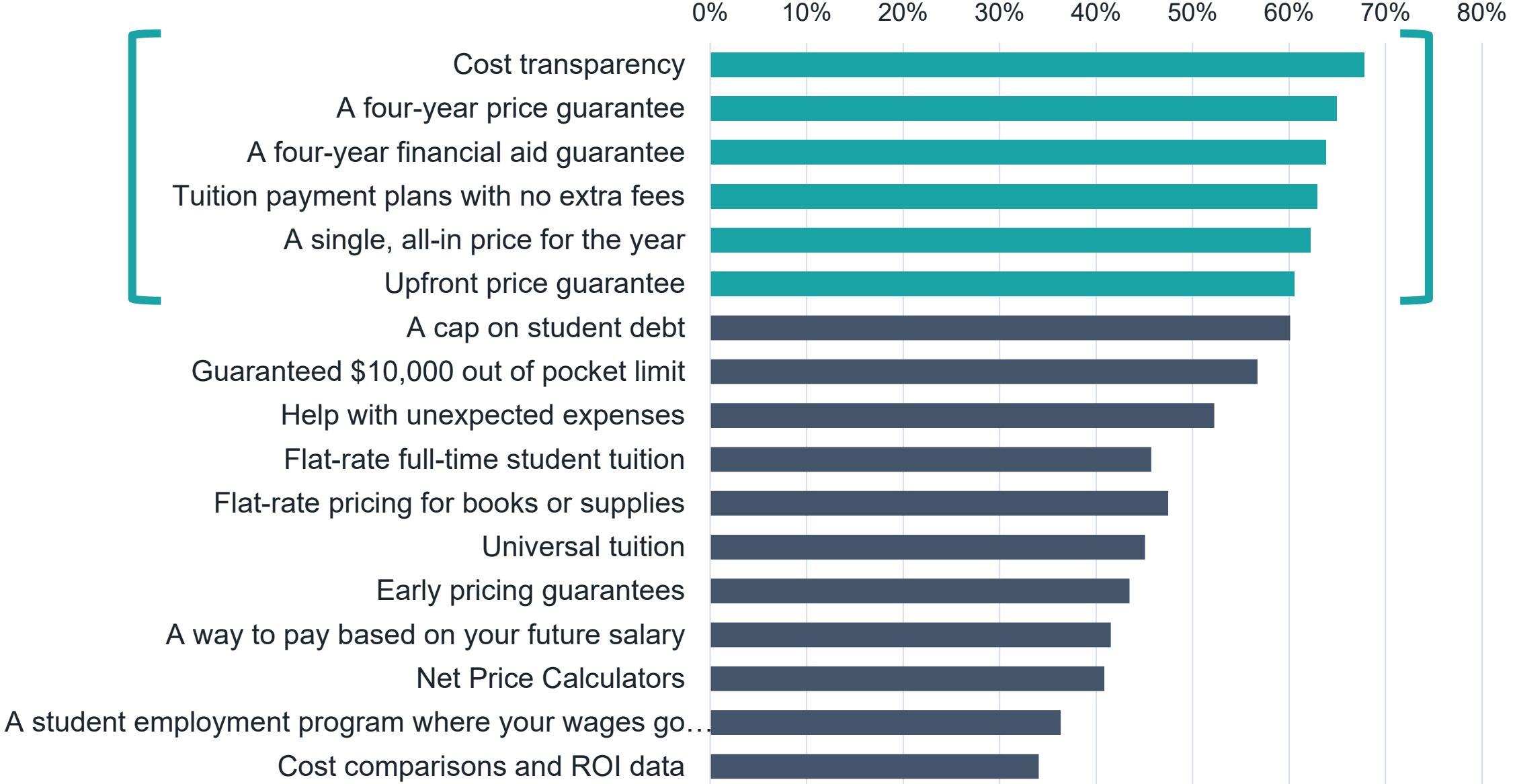
# Confusion is linked to believing colleges care more about making money

**Smith** believes that colleges and universities **care more about making money** than educating students.

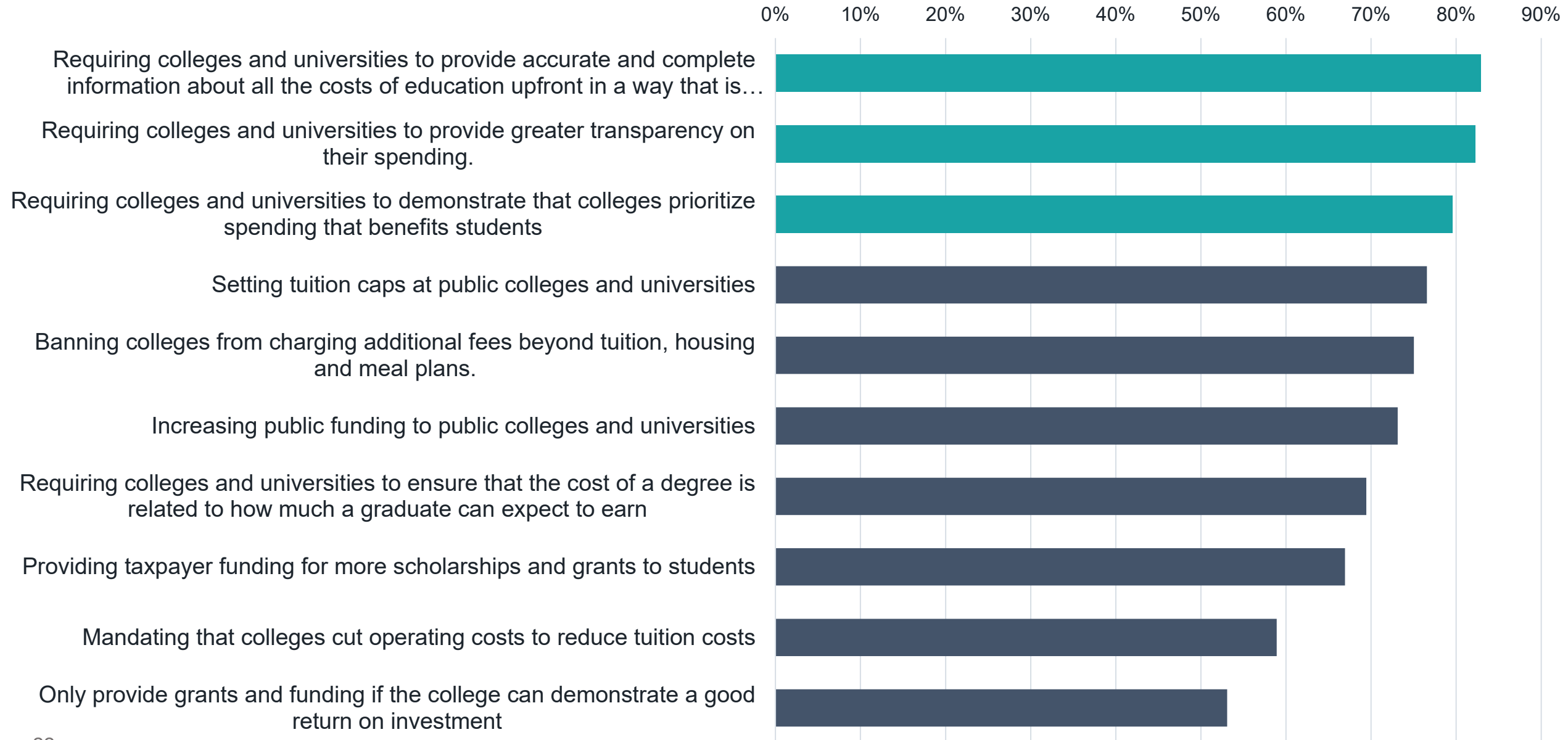
**Jones** believes that colleges and universities **care more about educating students** than making money.



# Students and families want transparency, price guarantees, and tuition payment plans



# About 8 in 10 support government requiring colleges to be more transparent about costs and spending



# Enrollment Management Advisory Members

\* | co-chairs

co-chair



**\*Luisa Havens Gerardo**  
Vice President for  
Enrollment Management  
The University of Texas at  
Arlington

co-chair



**\*John Haller**  
Professor & Enrollment  
Management Consultant  
University of Miami

co-chair



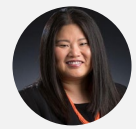
**\*Chuck Kneple**  
Vice President for Enrollment  
Management  
Portland State University



**Daniel Barkowitz**  
AVP, Student Financial  
Assistance & Employment  
University of Miami



**Adele Brumfield**  
Vice Provost for Enrollment  
Management  
University of Michigan



**Karen Chen**  
Vice President of  
Enrollment Management  
Oklahoma State University



**Rachelle Feldman**  
Vice Provost of Enrollment,  
University of North Carolina–  
Chapel Hill



**Rachelle Hernandez**  
Vice Provost for Student  
Affairs  
Johns Hopkins University



**Derek Kindle**  
Vice President for Enrollment  
Management  
University of Oregon



**Stacey Kostell**  
Vice President of Enrollment,  
Northwestern University



**Joseph Montgomery**  
Interim AVP for Enrollment  
Management  
North Carolina A&T



**Mary Parker**  
Vice President for Enrollment  
Management & Associate  
Provost  
University of Florida



**Tony Strode**  
Director Undergraduate  
Recruitment & Outreach,  
University of North Texas



**Forrest Stuart**  
Vice President for Enrollment  
Management  
Lafayette College



**Jessie Brown**  
Senior Vice President  
and Chief of Staff  
American Council on  
Education (ACE)



**Melanie Gottlieb**  
CEO, American Association of  
Collegiate Registrars and  
Admissions Officers  
(AACRAO)



**Melanie Storey**  
CEO, National Association of  
Student Financial Aid  
Administrators (NASFAA)



**Angel Pérez**  
CEO, National Association for  
College Admission Counseling  
(NACAC)

# Student-Centered Enrollment Management Principles

*Drafted by a national advisory group of enrollment leaders. A framework, not a checklist.*

<p><b>Access and affordability</b></p>	<p>All students, especially those with limited financial backgrounds and resources, believe that the door to higher education is open and see expanded pathways of opportunity.</p>
<p><b>Tuition and cost transparency</b></p>	<p>Students receive clear, up-front pricing information before they are asked to commit to an institution.</p>
<p><b>Aid and scholarship lifecycle sustainability</b></p>	<p>Students experience affordability as an ongoing commitment, from recruitment through graduation.</p>
<p><b>Value and strong return on investment</b></p>	<p>Students trust higher education institutions to help them pursue meaningful jobs and careers, supported by clear, straightforward communication about completion rates, postgraduation outcomes, and the broader societal and economic benefits of their education.</p>
<p><b>Use of personal information</b></p>	<p>Students understand what personal information is collected in the recruitment and enrollment process, why it is collected, how it is used, and how long it is kept. Students are informed about whether and how they can review, correct, or remove their personal information.</p>

## A G R O W I N G C O A L I T I O N

# 20+ organizations have endorsed the Principles.

*Spanning publics, privates, community colleges, governance, research, and consumer advocacy.*

- American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO)
- American Association of Community Colleges (AACC)
- American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)
- American Council on Education (ACE)
- Association of American Universities (AAU)
- Association of Governing Boards (AGB)
- Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU)
- Coalition for College
- College Board
- Common App
- Education Trust
- National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC)
- National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA)
- National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS)
- National Student Clearinghouse
- National College Attainment Network (NCAN)
- National Student Legal Defense Network
- State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO)
- The Century Foundation
- The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS)
- Third Way

*Additional endorsements expected. Co-leading associations: ACE, AACRAO, NACAC, NASFAA.*

# Moving the Needle on Transparency, Trust, and Affordability

Baseline (this should already be true):

- **Meet the College Cost Transparency Initiative Standard** (<https://collegeprice.org>)
  - Clear, consistent, upfront pricing and aid information before students are asked to commit. (Floor, not ceiling)

Leadership Moves that Rebuild Trust:

- **Own a single, clear price story:** Can your institution explain what a student like me will actually pay—simply and consistently—before application? Before being asked to commit?
- **Provide early, credible cost estimates:** Early estimators help students decide whether to apply at all. Are your estimates understandable and aligned with eventual aid offers, or do they quietly shift expectations? Sticker price shouldn't shut the door before it even opens.
- **Align enrollment incentives with public commitments:** Do internal pricing and aid strategies reinforce your public work about access, fairness, and affordability?
- **Examine admissions, financial aid, pricing, and enrollment management through the lens of the Student-Centered Enrollment Management Principles.** A framework, not a checklist.



WHERE THIS GOES NEXT

# Three ways to engage.

1

## Stay informed.

Subscribe to Strada's newsletter and follow updates through your member associations.

2

## Become a lighthouse state or institution.

If your campus is doing interesting work on transparent or predictable pricing and financial aid, we want to highlight it. Case studies, articles, national recognition. Get in touch.

3

## Questions, comments, or skepticism?

We want to hear it. Reach out.

---

<https://www.strada.org/reports/the-price-transparency-imperative-rebuilding-confidence-in-higher-education>

Read the full report:



See the Principles:

