

Postsecondary Education in the 21st Century: Students & Institutions

Overview of Results

June 2011



- I. Research Objectives and Methodology
- II. Executive Summary
- III. Respondent Profile
- IV. Results





Research Objectives and Methodology

Research Objectives

This study aims to understand the landscape of postsecondary students and institutions in the 21st century through opinion research on:

- Student profiles, needs, and challenges
- Obstacles facing institutions as they try to meet the needs of students
- Potential solutions to challenges faced by students and institutions

Quantitative Data

More than 100 respondents contributed to the survey during the approximately six weeks it was available: 67 percent from education institutions, 13 percent from think tanks and non-profit organizations, and 12 percent from lobbying/public relations firms.

Qualitative Data

Eleven interviews, each 15 to 20 minutes in length, were conducted by phone to solicit qualitative feedback to the opinions shared in the survey. Interviewees work at and represent both postsecondary and secondary institutions. In addition, within the opinion section of the survey, respondents were offered the opportunity to elaborate on their answers.

The University of Phoenix has commissioned the research division of Atlantic Media Company, Inc. to conduct a study on postsecondary education in the 21st century. (The research division of Atlantic Media Company is not part of The Atlantic's editorial group and the results of this survey will not appear in an editorial feature.) The questions in this survey have been designed in collaboration with the University of Phoenix.

Executive Summary





Executive Summary

STUDENTS WILL CONTINUE TO COME FROM DIVERSE ENVIRONMENTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

According to estimates made by survey takers, a large portion of postsecondary students will do more than just attend classes during their time at a postsecondary institution. On average, respondents believe that more than half of students will be employed part time. They also indicate that a significant portion of postsecondary students will be older (age 25+), be married and/or have children, or have previous postsecondary experience.

CRITICAL THINKING AND ANALYTICAL SKILLS ARE MOST IMPORTANT TO STUDENTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Respondents agree that the most critical skills for postsecondary students to learn in the 21st century involve critical thinking, problem solving, and the ability to analyze and synthesize information. Not surprisingly, providing graduates with the ability to think about and analyze complex problems is by far the most important goal of postsecondary institutions, according to survey takers.

FINANCING & LACK OF SECONDARY PREPARATION ARE THE MOST SIGNIFICANT OBSTACLES FACING POSTSECONDARY STUDENTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In the 21st century, the greatest obstacles for postsecondary students are difficulty financing education and insufficient secondary preparation. Respondents cite the many negative effects of a lack of adequate financing, ranging from students ignoring their studies to work at a part-time job to students not attending an institution at all because it is too expensive. A noticeable gap between the skills students obtain in secondary schools and the skills required to succeed upon entry into a postsecondary institution also causes significant problems, according to survey takers. Often, students who are unprepared are faced with taking remedial classes upon matriculation.

AT INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL, CURRICULUM, FACULTY, AND FINANCIAL AID ARE MOST IN NEED OF REFORM

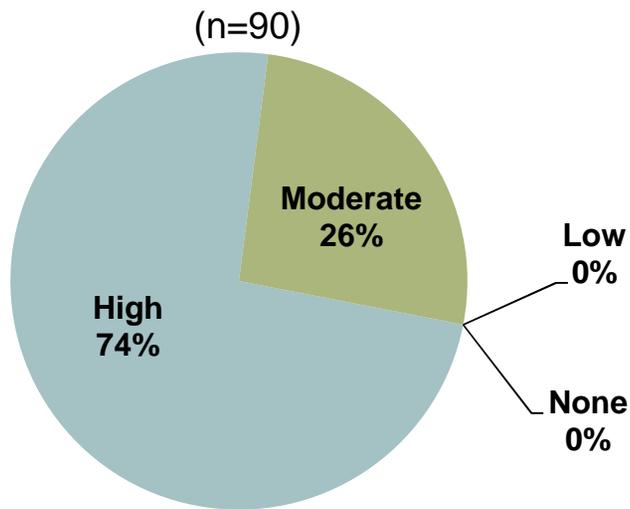
Respondents indicate that the largest areas of change at postsecondary institutions are curriculum, faculty, and financial aid. Specifically, respondents worry about institutions offering appropriate curricula and providing attractive financing to students. Survey takers are optimistic about institutions' abilities to improve curriculum and faculty, but they are less optimistic about reforming financial aid. Specifically, they cite lack of funding and institutional resistance to change as major internal factors limiting the ability to change. Overall, almost all respondents believe a "moderate" to "heavy" lift is required to ensure postsecondary institutions are adequately prepared to educate students in the 21st century.

Respondent Profile

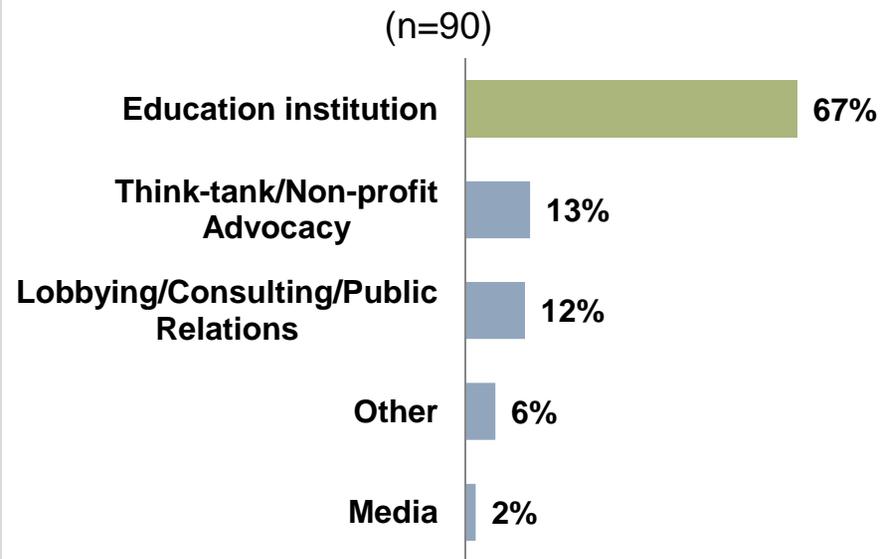


Respondent Profile

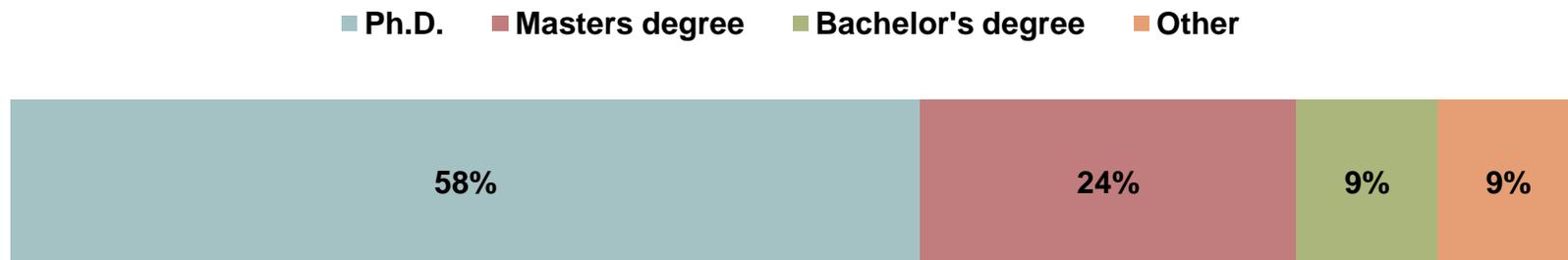
Knowledge of Postsecondary Education (n=90)



Employment of Respondents (n=90)



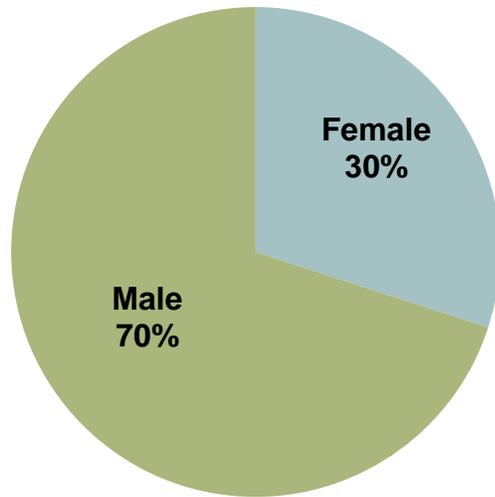
Level of Education*** (n=90)



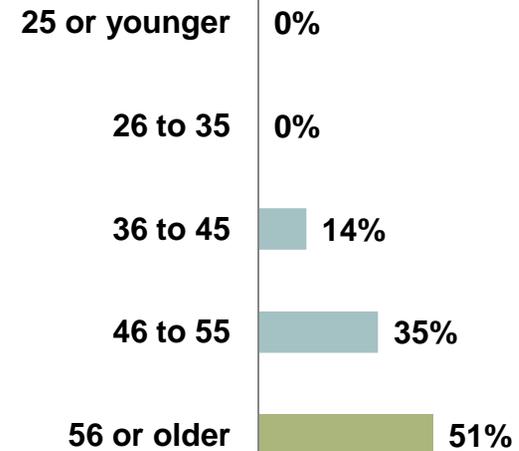
*Are you male or female?
 **In what year were you born?
 ***What is your highest level of education?

Respondent Profile (continued)

Gender*
(n=89)



Age**
(n=90)



Political Views***
(n=90)



*Are you male or female?

**In what year were you born?

***How would you describe your political views?

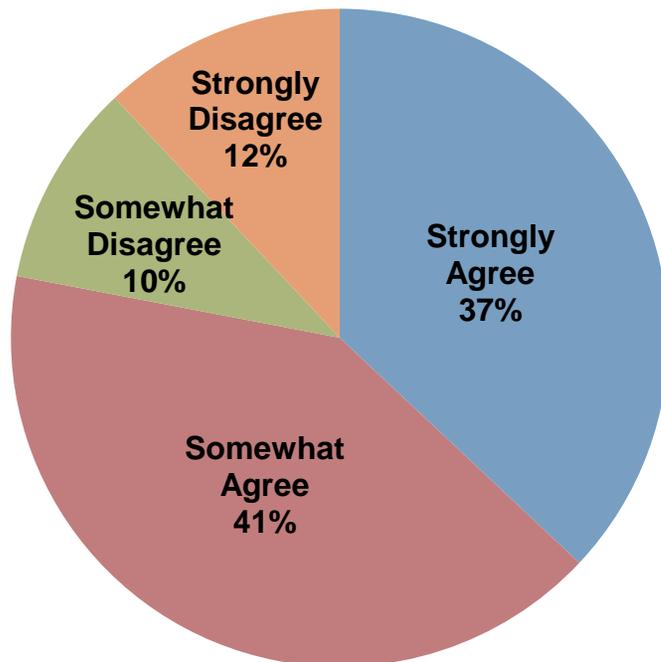
Results



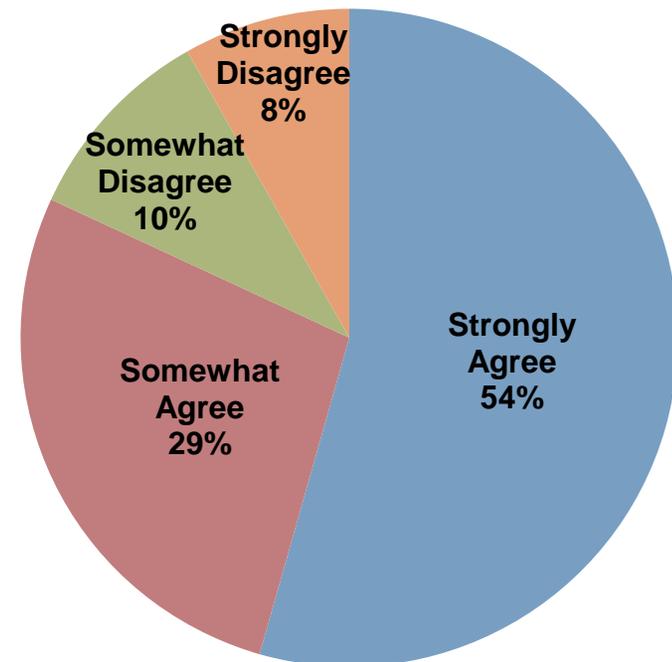
According to Respondents, College Is Not for Everyone, But Everyone Should Have Access to College

- Although respondents agree that “college is not for everyone”, they overwhelmingly support open access to college—that is, “everyone should have the option.”

“College is not for everyone.”*
(n=83)



“Everyone should have the option to go to college.”*
(n=88)

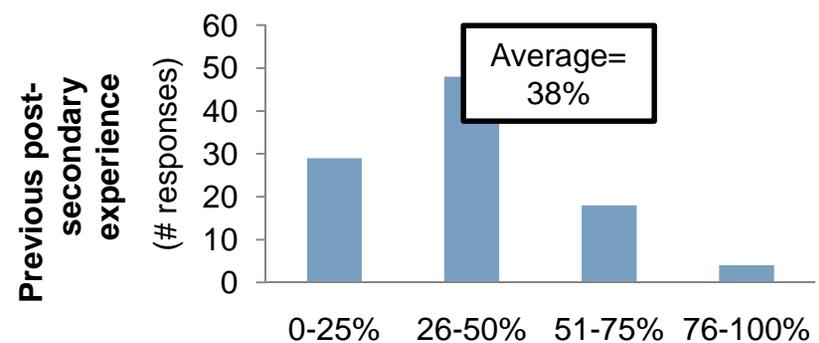
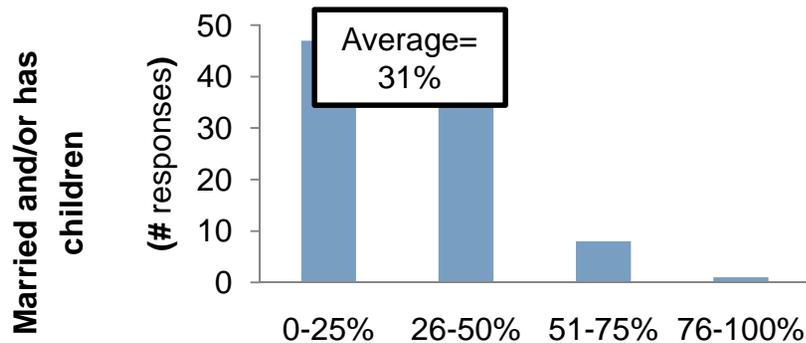
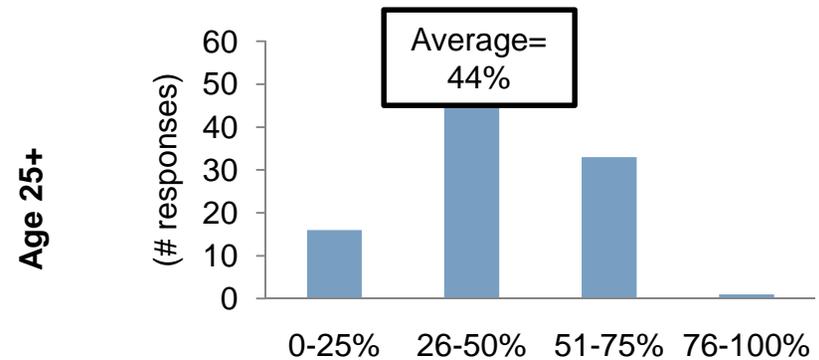
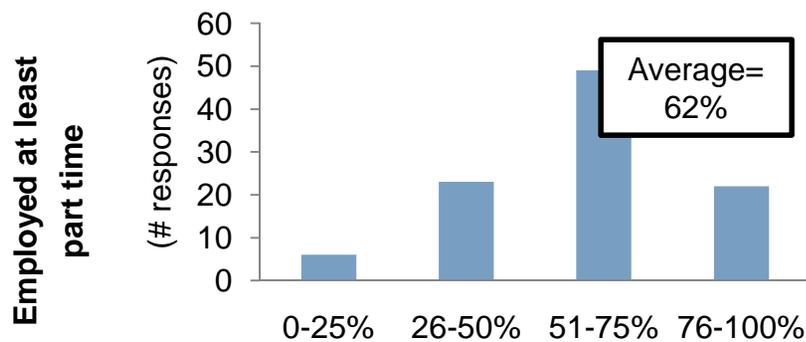


* To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

Survey Takers Believe Students Population Will Continue to Come From Diverse Environments in 21st Century

- According to respondent estimates, a substantial portion of 21st-century postsecondary students will be employed part-time (62 percent), age 25 or older (44 percent), married and/or have children (31 percent), or have previous post-secondary experience (38 percent).

Estimates of 21st Century Student Attributes (n=98)



*In the 21st century, what percentage of postsecondary students do you estimate have each of the following attributes?

Critical Thinking and Analytical Skills Most Important to Postsecondary Students in the 21st Century

- The ability to think critically and analyze information is the most important skill 21st-century postsecondary students should learn, according to respondents.
- Respondents do not indicate that traditionally valued interpersonal skills—such as leadership, productivity, accountability, and collaboration—are as important.

Most Important Student Skills*

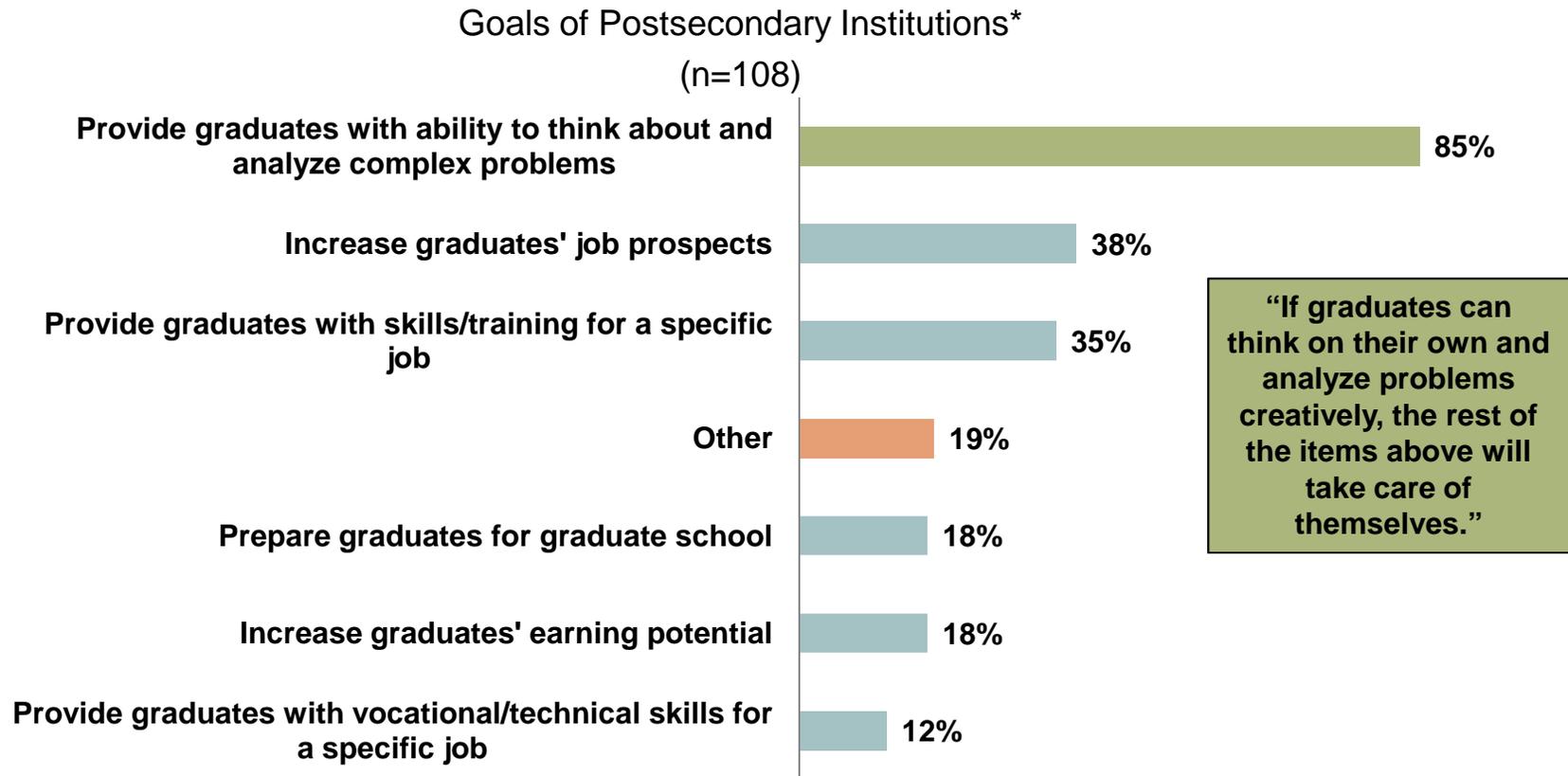
(n=115)



* Which of the following are the most important skills postsecondary students in the 21st century should learn? (Select up to 3)

Provision of Analytical Abilities Is Primary Goal of Postsecondary Institutions

- Respondents overwhelmingly believe that providing graduates with the ability to think and analyze should be a primary goal of postsecondary institutions in the 21st century, thereby aligning institutional mission with the most important skill set identified by respondents (critical thinking and problem solving).
- Other popularly selected goals focus on institutions' ability to prepare students for the job market by increasing graduates job prospects or providing them with skills and training for a specific job (not, however, with vocational or technical skills).



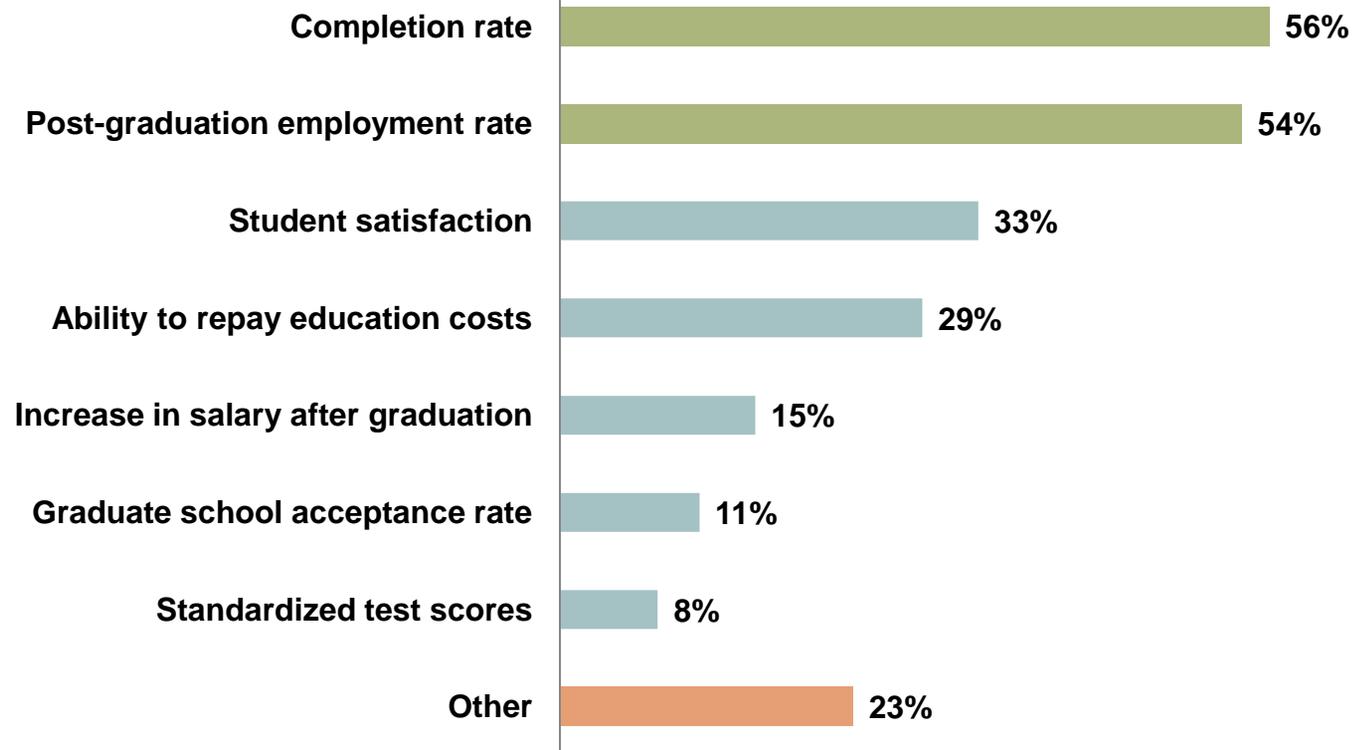
* What should be the goals of the postsecondary institution in the 21st century? (Select up to 3)

Completion Rate and Post-graduation Employment Rate Most Useful Outcome Metrics

- In order to measure the success or failure of institutions in meeting their students' needs in the 21st century, completion rate and post-graduation employment rate are essential metrics, according to more than half of respondents.
- Many respondents suggest additional useful metrics, including civic engagement . They also stress the need to use multiple metrics and refrain from relying on just one measure of student outcome.

Useful Metrics for Postsecondary Student Outcome*

(n=91)

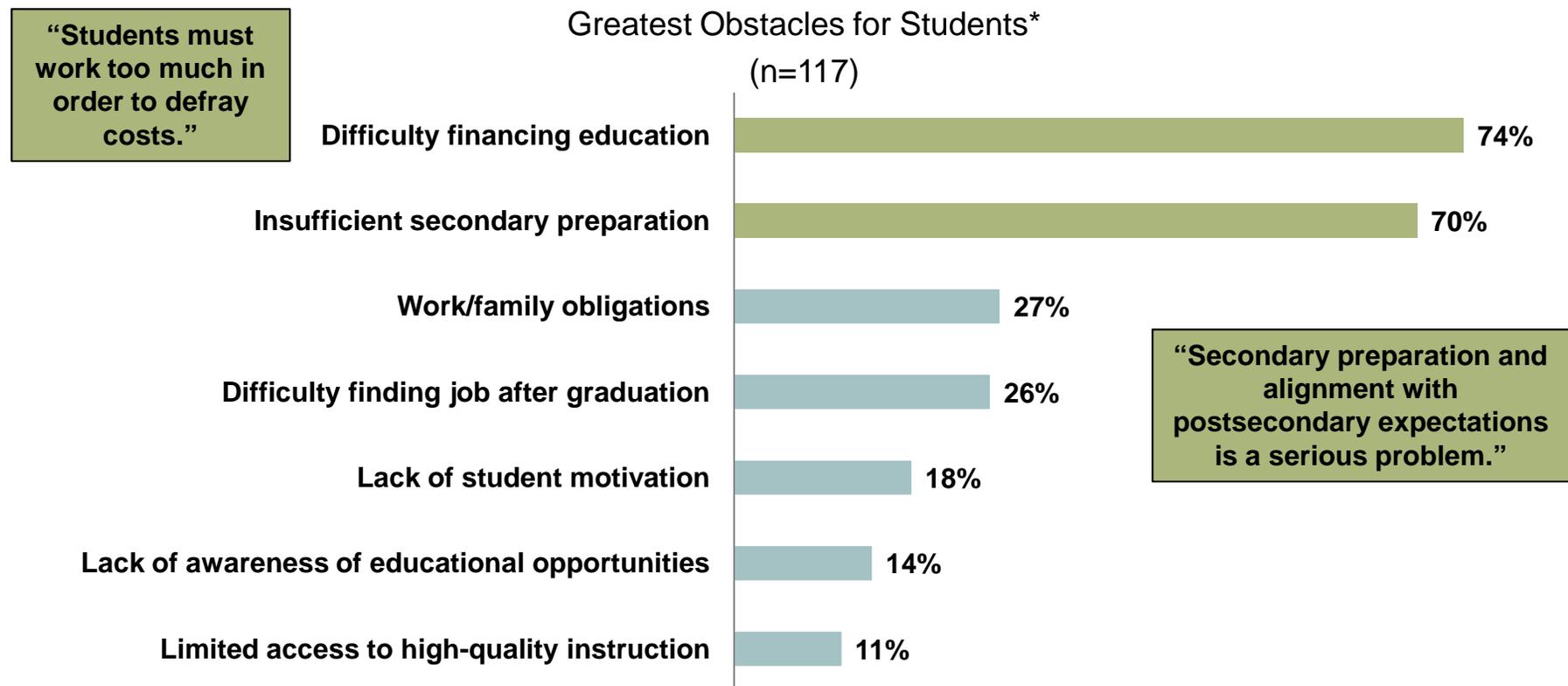


“Standardized test scores are not useful metrics”

* Which of the following are the most useful metrics for postsecondary student outcomes in the 21st century? (Select up to 3)

Financing Difficulty and Lack of Preparation Are Greatest Obstacles Facing Postsecondary Students

- According to respondents, difficulty financing education and insufficient secondary preparation stand out as the most significant obstacles to students in the 21st century.
- More than one-quarter of respondents also identify work/family obligations and difficulty finding a job after graduation as common obstacles students face.



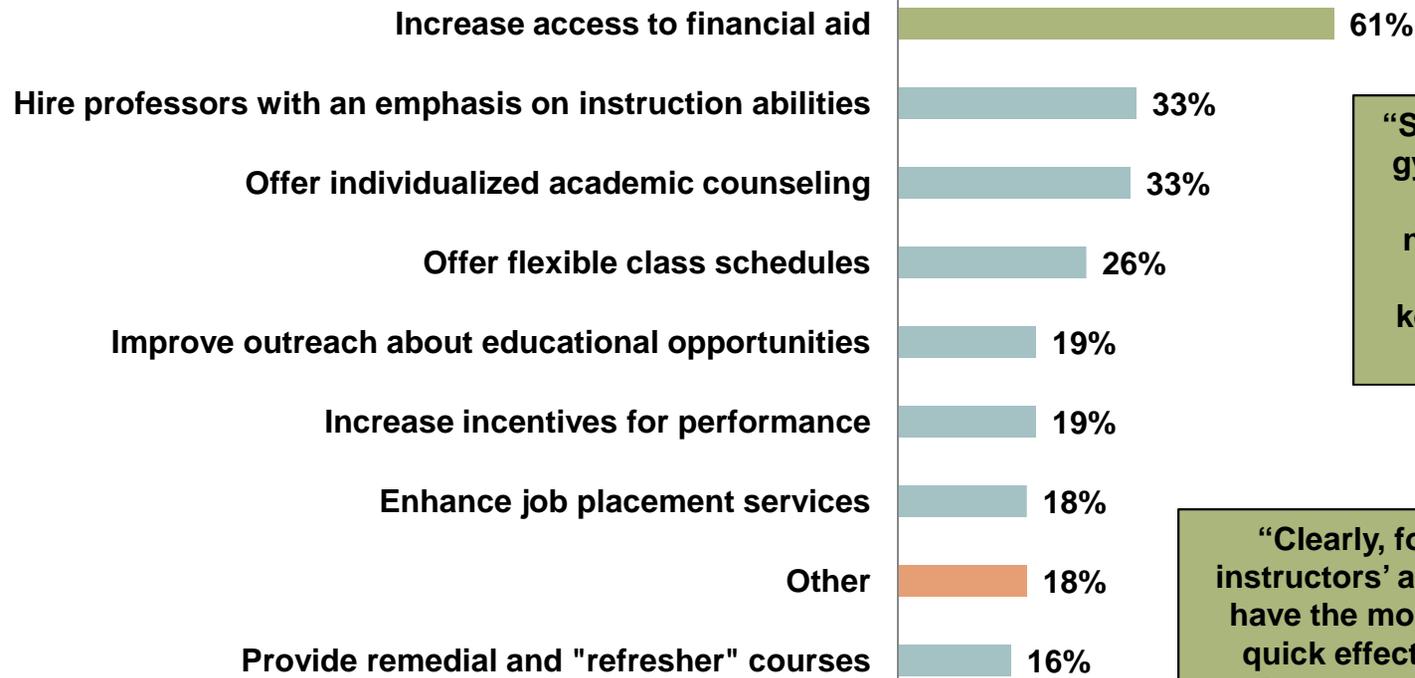
*What are the greatest obstacles facing postsecondary students in the 21st century? (Select up to 3)

Greater Access to Financial Aid, More Individual Counseling, Improved Instruction Are Top Approaches to Helping Students Overcome Obstacles

- Respondents believe increasing access to financial aid is the top way in which postsecondary institutions can address challenges facing their students.
- Given the lack of secondary preparation noted by respondents, it is not surprising that they support hiring professors who are excellent instructors as well as offering individualized counseling as ways to help postsecondary students overcome “educational roadblocks” in the 21st century.

Top Ways of Addressing Obstacles*

(n=114)



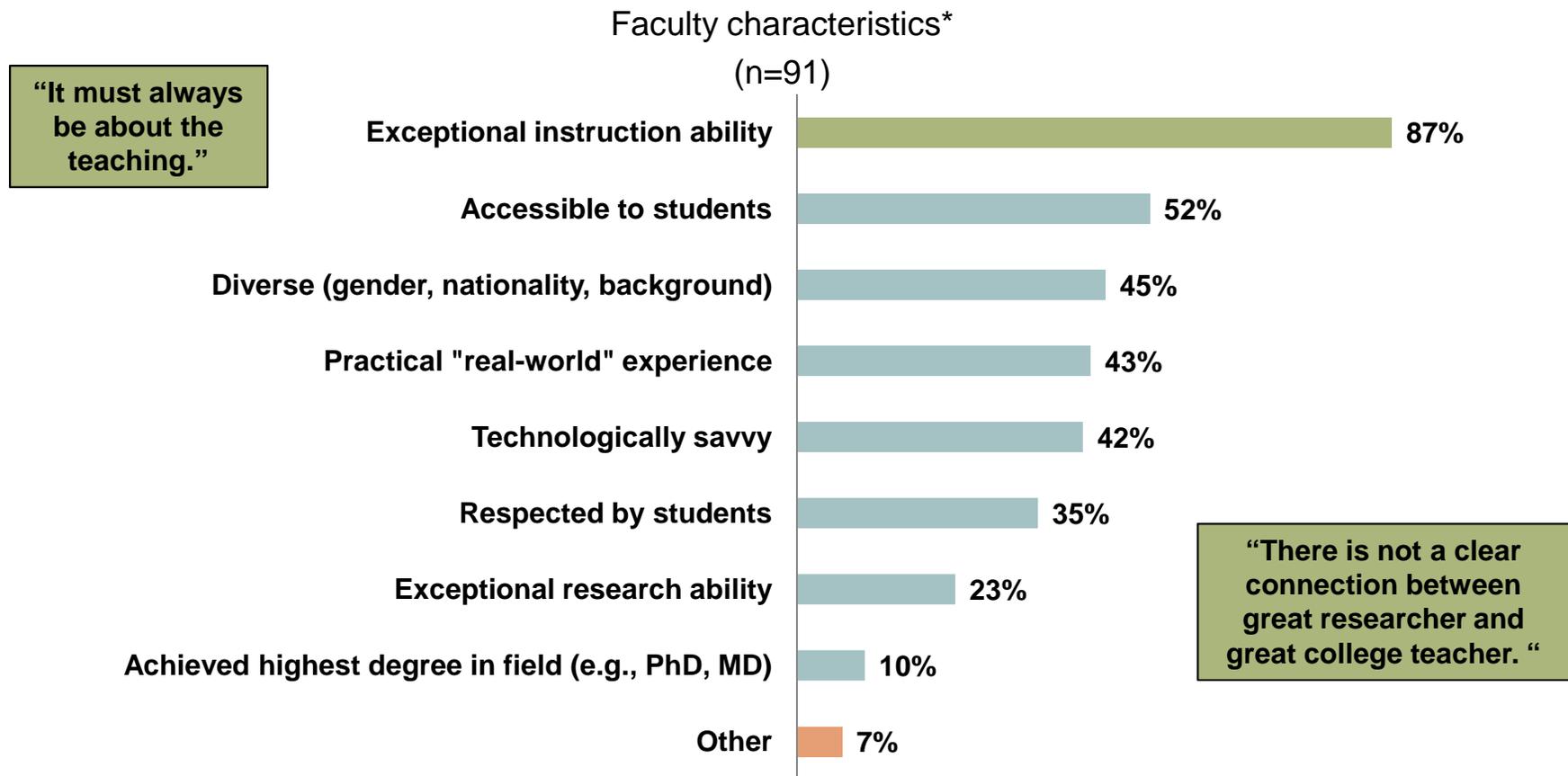
“Stop building new gyms, dorms, and assorted other niceties. Devote resources to keeping tuition in check.”

“Clearly, focusing on instructors’ abilities would have the most direct and quick effect on student learning outcomes.”

*How should postsecondary institutions address the obstacles facing postsecondary students in the 21st century? (Select up to 3)

Exceptional Instruction Ability, Student Accessibility, and Diversity Most Important Characteristics for Faculty

- In order to meet the needs of dynamic and diverse postsecondary students of the 21st century, faculty should have exceptional instruction ability, if nothing else, according to respondents.
- Accessibility, diversity, practical experience, and familiarity with technology are also key characteristics are also critical to ensuring the needs of postsecondary students are met.

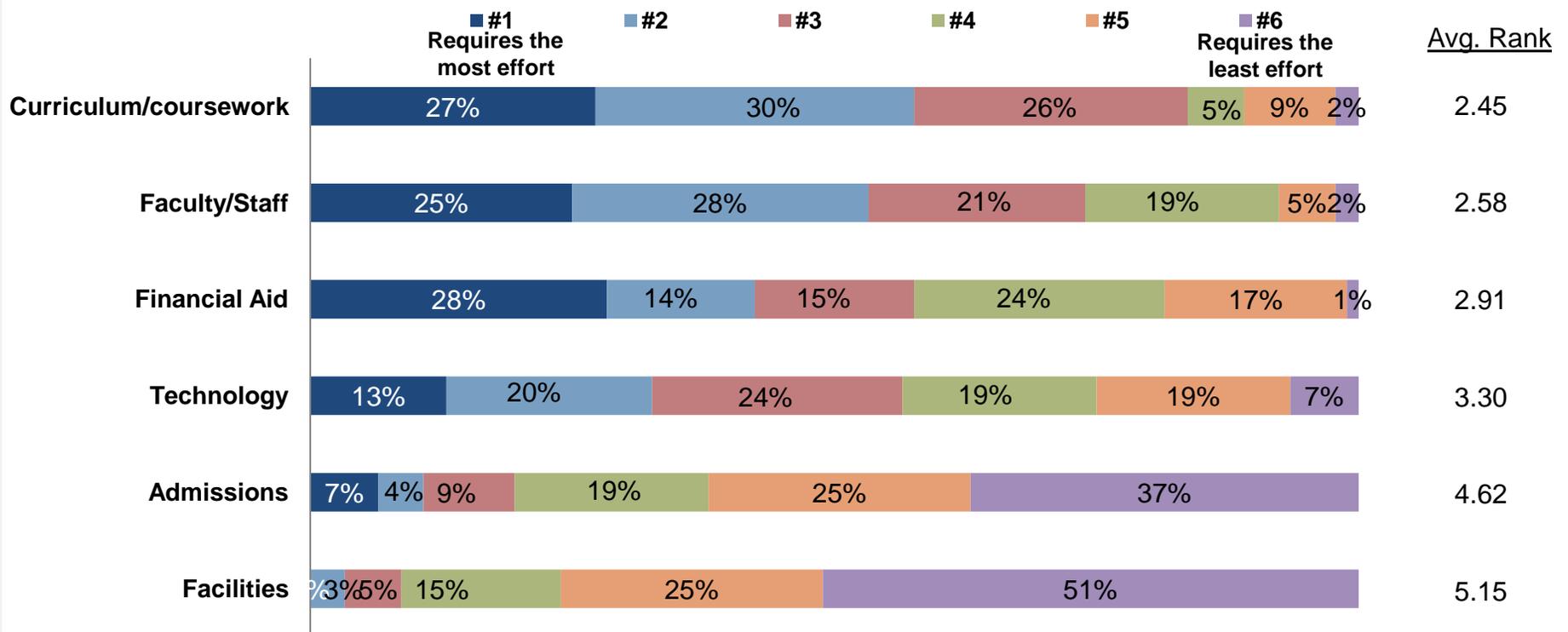


* Which of the following characteristics of postsecondary faculty are critical to meeting the needs of students in the 21st century? (Select all that apply)

In Order to Accommodate Students in 21st Century, Curriculum/Coursework, Faculty/Staff, and Financial Aid In Need of Greatest Reform

- At the macro-level, respondents cite curriculum/coursework, faculty/staff, and financial aid as most in need of change in order to accommodate students in the 21st century.
- Facilities, admissions, and technology ranked lower with respect to change required, often because respondents see them as beneficiaries of an “educational arms race” to have the newest buildings and technology.

Change Required to Accommodate Postsecondary Students*
(n=92)

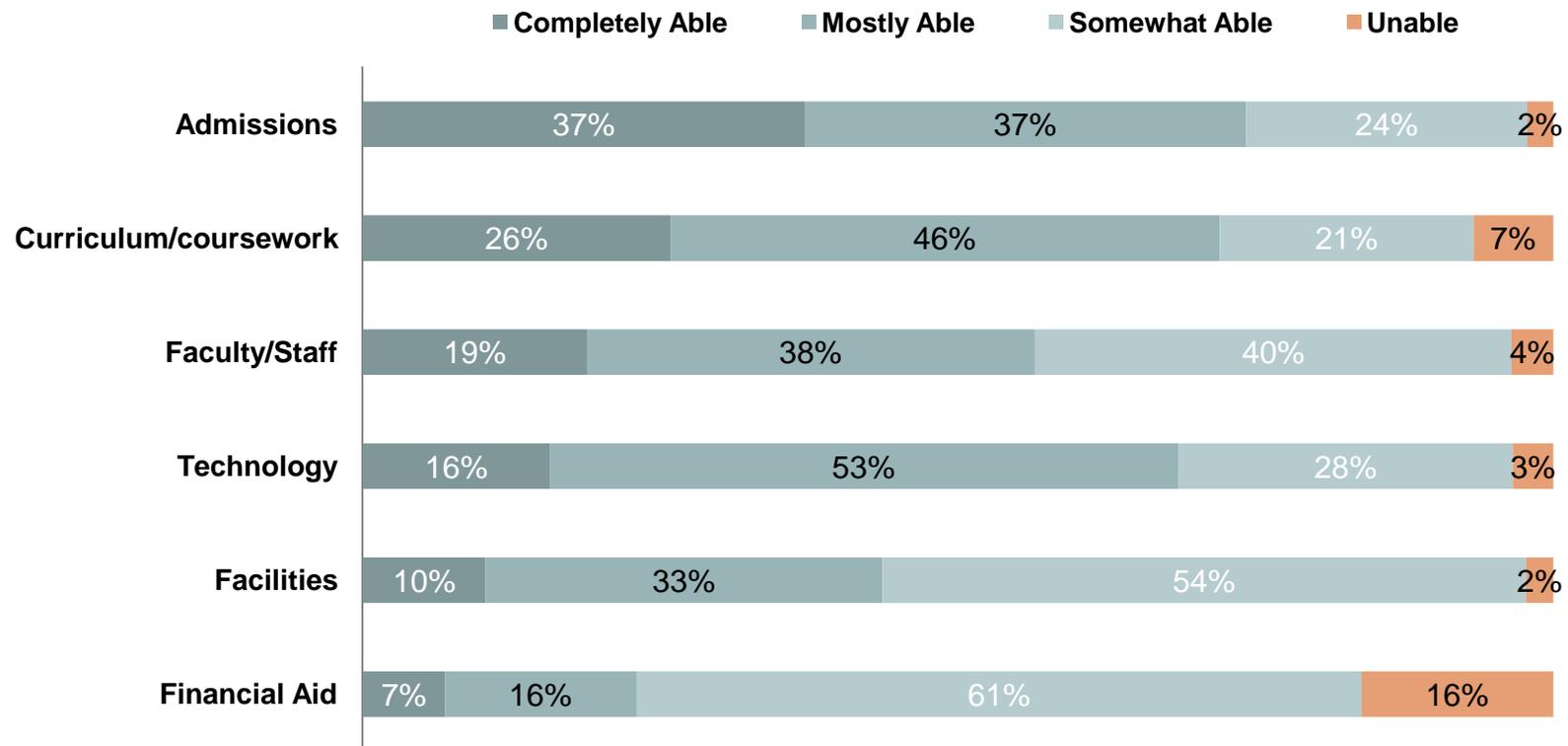


* Please rank the following areas with respect to the amount of change it requires to accommodate postsecondary students in the 21st century. (1=requires the most change, 6=requires the least change)

Although Curriculum/Coursework and Faculty/Staff Can Be Changed, Respondents Not Optimistic About Ability to Change Financial Aid

- Admissions is the easiest area of postsecondary education to change, according to respondents.
- Of the areas most in need of change, more than half of respondents believe that institutions will be “mostly” or “completely” able to change their curriculum/coursework or faculty/staff .
- Although financial aid was most frequently identified as the area most in need of change, it ranks as the area that institutions are least able to do anything about.

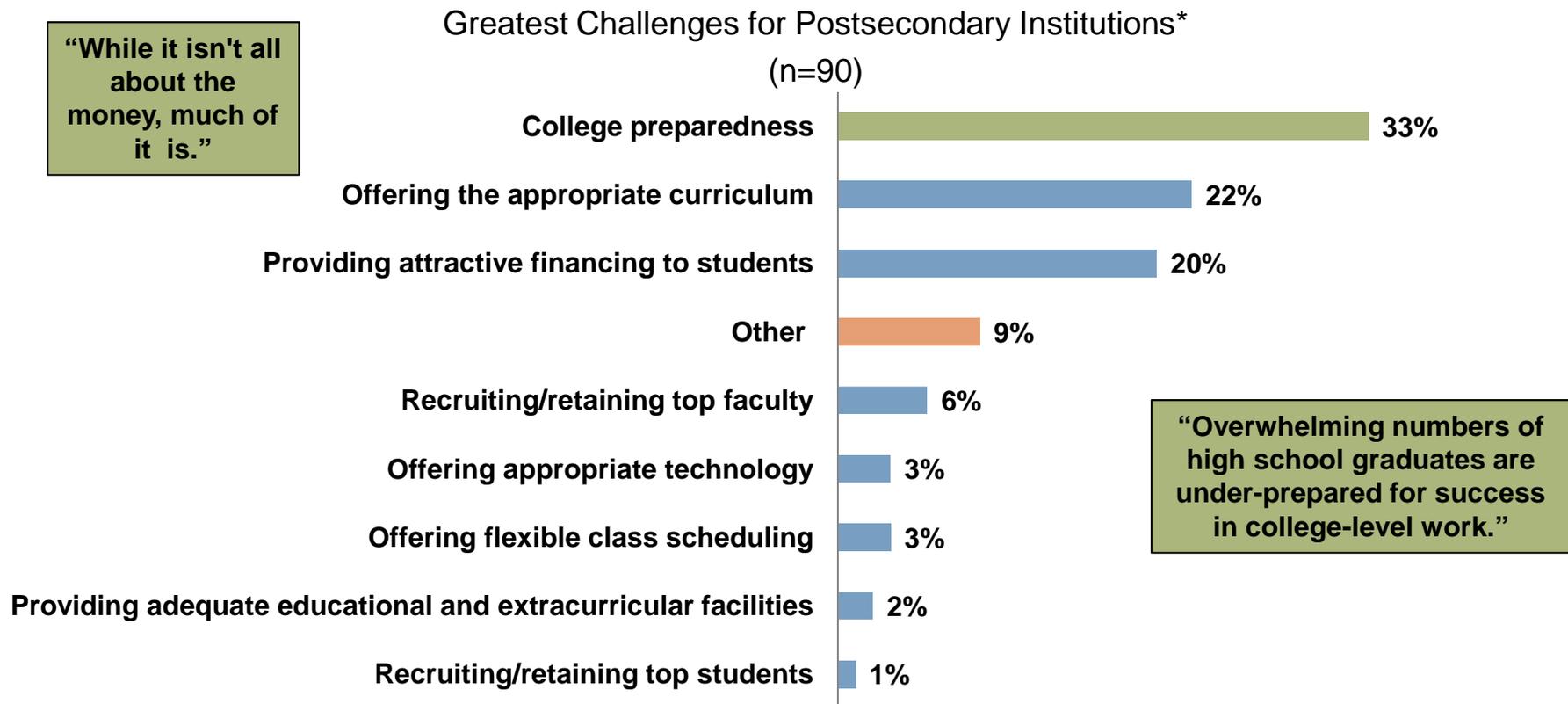
Ability to Change to Accommodate Postsecondary Students*
(n=85)



* With respect to the following areas, to what degree are postsecondary institutions able to make changes necessary to accommodate students in the 21st century?

Specifically, Ensuring College Readiness, Adopting the Correct Curriculum, and Providing Financing Greatest Challenges to Institutions

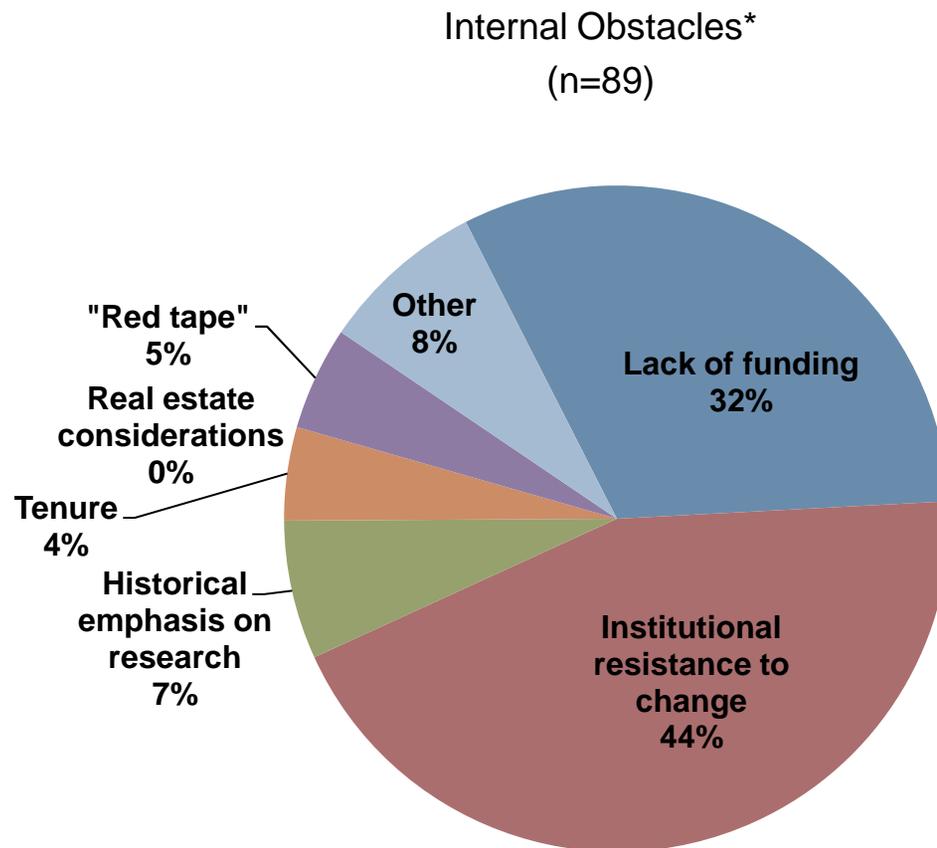
- When asked to identify the single greatest challenge for postsecondary institutions, respondents most frequently cite college preparedness.
- Specific challenges facing postsecondary institutions—including offering the appropriate curriculum and providing attractive financing to students—align with macro-level challenges identified by respondents that are facing the postsecondary industry at large.



* What is the greatest challenge facing postsecondary institutions as they try to meet the needs of students in the 21st century?

Funding Shortages and Internal Resistance to Change Are Greatest Internal Obstacles for Postsecondary Institutions

- When asked to identify the internal obstacle that presents the greatest challenge to meeting the needs of 21st-century students, respondents most often cited “institutional resistance to change” and “lack of funding.”
- Oft-cited roadblocks, such as an “historical emphasis on research” and “tenure,” appear to be less of a challenge to ensuring the success of 21st-century students.

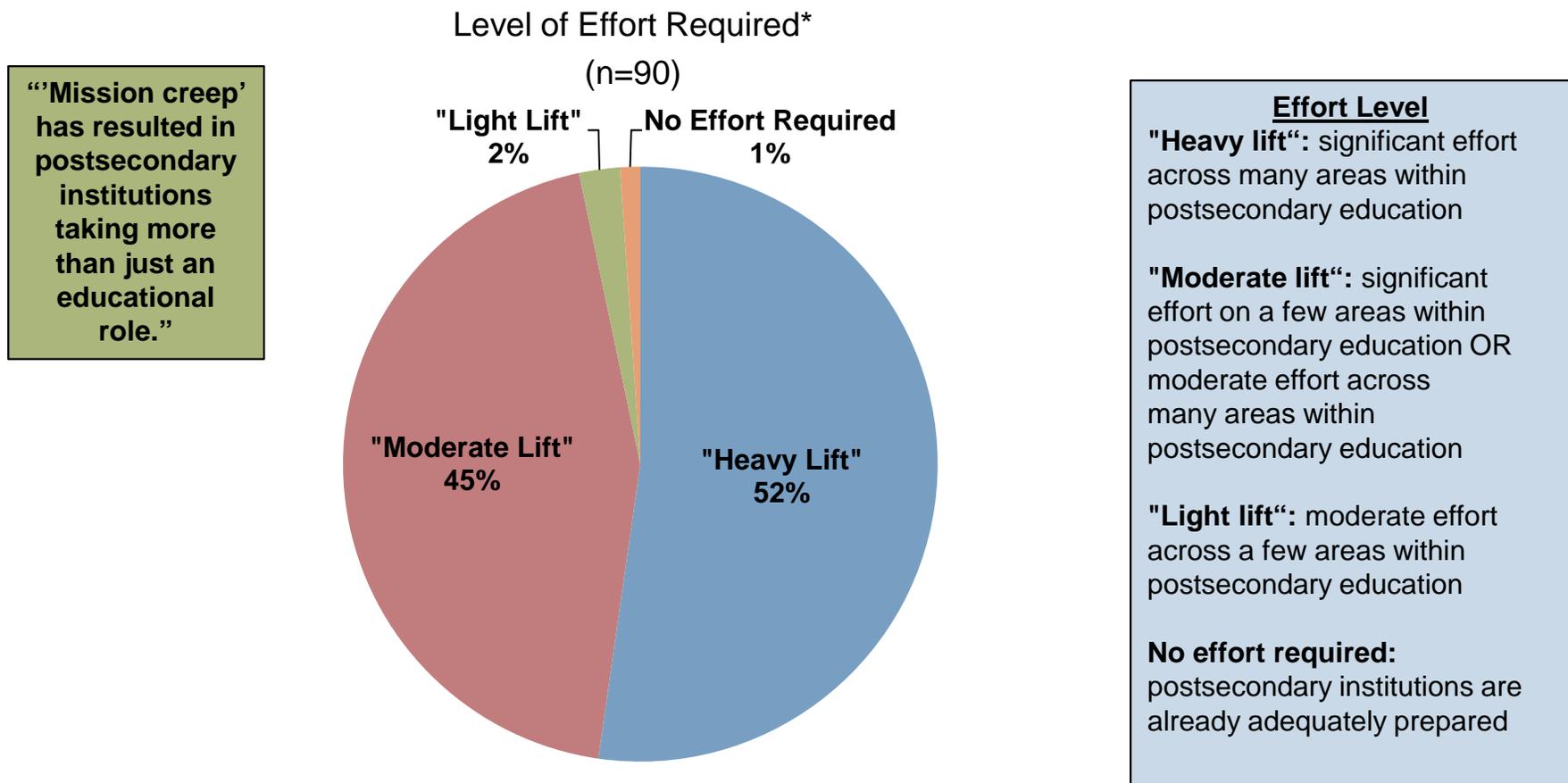


Research universities and liberal arts colleges take a long time to adapt to change.”

*Which of the following internal obstacles presents the greatest challenge to postsecondary institutions' ability to meet the needs of students in the 21st century?

Overall, Heavy Lift Required to Adequately Educate 21st Century Students

- Looking forward, achieving success at educating postsecondary students in the 21st century will be no easy task: nearly 100 percent of respondents believe that at least a “moderate lift” will be required to ensure students are adequately educated.



* What level of effort is required by current postsecondary institutions to ensure they are adequately prepared to educate students in the 21st century?

