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EDUCATION UNDER REVIEW

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Education Under Review is based on a survey by Maguire Associates and was written by Robert Kelchan, an assistant professor at Seton Hall University, and edited by Karin Meadows, an assistant editor at The Chronicle of Higher Education, Inc. The report is sponsored by Adobe. The Chronicle is fully responsible for the report's editorial content. Copyright 2016.

Executive Summary

With tuition prices continuing to climb and middle-class America's earnings stagnant for more than a decade, colleges and universities continue to face pressure from government, governing boards, students and their families to provide proof of the value of a bachelor's degree. Students historically have had little more to go on than anecdotal information when it came to the jobs and earnings they could expect upon graduation from a specific college or university.

But the launch of the U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard in the fall of 2015 has changed that, bringing for the first time transparency to the financial cost of getting a degree at thousands of American public and private colleges and universities. Students and families once armed with only college admissions and graduation rates to weigh one of life's biggest financial decisions now have at their fingertips for virtually every two- and four-year institution in the country tuition and housing costs, median student loan debt and repayment rates, and median earnings of former students.

Economics and high unemployment among graduates after the Great Recession of 2008 have led to the onset of a shift in age-old thinking that college is meant to equip students for life, not careers. While academic leaders at many colleges and universities admit that their priorities continue to be academic preparation to ensure success and retention and graduation rates, colleges are adapting their majors and coursework based on employment sector predictions and regional job needs, a strategy with the potential to benefit students while increasing enrollment in a competitive admissions environment.

"I believe postsecondary education is at an inflection point," said Mark Schneider, a vice president and Institute Fellow at the American Institutes for Research and a former National Center for Education Statistics commissioner. "Most of them (colleges and universities) savor much more traditional kinds of things like decision making, analytical skills, communications, but then they engage in all of these activities that are increasingly career oriented. They actually are saying career readiness is very important."

External forces are changing the way colleges and universities are being evaluated by their consumers, bringing on widespread debate about the role of postsecondary institutions in ensuring graduates are not only intellectually well-rounded and armed with critical thinking skills and a love of learning when they get to the finish line, but that they are also employable and on the path to careers even before graduation. In the coming months and years, colleges and universities, in order to stay competitive, plan to gather more information about their graduates' earnings and employment, grow their internship programs, experiential learning and career skills readiness programs, and adjust their curriculums to meet workforce needs.

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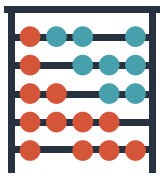
Highlights

In the fall of 2015, The Chronicle of Higher Education conducted a survey of more than 500 senior academic officers at two- and four-year colleges with a focus on the value of a college education, accountability views regarding student outcomes like employment and earnings, and the indicators these leaders believe illustrate proof of their value to students and their families. Among the highlights of the survey:



VALUE OF DEGREE

While 62 percent of respondents stated that their college provides an excellent value for the price students and families pay, only 13 percent say they believe the higher-education system as a whole provides an excellent value. The meaning of the "value" of a degree is changing, with a greater focus on job skills growing at all university types.

ACCOUNTABILITY

About one-half of respondents said their institution should be at least somewhat responsible for the amount of loan debt students incur during their college careers and 35 percent agreed that colleges should be held accountable for their graduates' career success. Just one in four respondents said prospective students should take into account College Scorecard earnings data when choosing a college.

CAREER PREPARATION

Overall, college officials say they believe their students are prepared for a job search, but academic leaders from associate's degree institutions were less confident than their four-year college counterparts. Senior academic leaders named the internship as the number one indicator graduates would land a first job, but many said their institutions need to do more to create internships for students. Institutions frequently are evaluating the workforce needs of various employment sectors, tweaking academic offerings to reflect those needs.

STUDENT DEBT

Most respondents agreed that $20,000 in debt for a bachelor's degree is reasonable, although average debt burden among graduates hovers between $30,000 and $35,000. Although about 40 percent said students should be able to repay their debt within five years, College Scorecard data reveal that 30 percent of students had not paid the first $1 toward student loan principal within seven years of leaving college.

STUDENT OUTCOMES

Pressure to improve student outcomes come from a variety of sources, including students, parents, trustees, legislators and employers. Discussion of the need for increased career services to improve job preparation has risen over the past three years, with the most intense new discussions occurring at private four-year colleges.

Introduction

College Scorecard data — and the proliferation of new college rankings based on earnings — is changing public discussion about what determines the value of a degree.

A college degree is such a large monetary investment that those who help fund the multi-billion-dollar enterprise that is American higher education—students and their families, all levels of government and private donors—are clamoring for more information about how graduates are faring financially and in their career.

In 2015, the U.S. Department of Education, as part of President Obama's efforts to hold colleges accountable for cost, value and quality, gave the public a new tool for comparing key indicators of the cost and value of institutions across the country to help students choose an institution that is well-suited to meet their needs, priced affordably, and is consistent with their educational and career goals.

College Scorecard data and the proliferation of new college rankings based on earnings is changing public discussion about what determines the value of a degree. Yet, a survey by The Chronicle of Higher Education of chief academic officers at two- and four-year colleges reveals these university leaders overwhelmingly do not think prospective students and their families should use salary outcomes data in making their college choices.

University leaders overwhelmingly do not think prospective students and their families should use salary outcomes data in making their college choices.

While the College Scorecard data is interesting, first job salaries are not reflective of how much graduates will earn over the course of their careers, particularly those graduates holding liberal arts degrees, said Colorado State University Provost Rick Miranda. A large body of research shows the price of a college education generally pays off for students in the long run, and the value of a degree in the U.S. is still unparalleled, Miranda said.

"The ability to get a good job, salary rates, the unemployment rate among college graduates when recessions hit all of these speak to the value of a degree. The cost has risen but it is a great investment, the value will continue to grow as the years go by and you get more experience in whatever field you are working in," Miranda said.

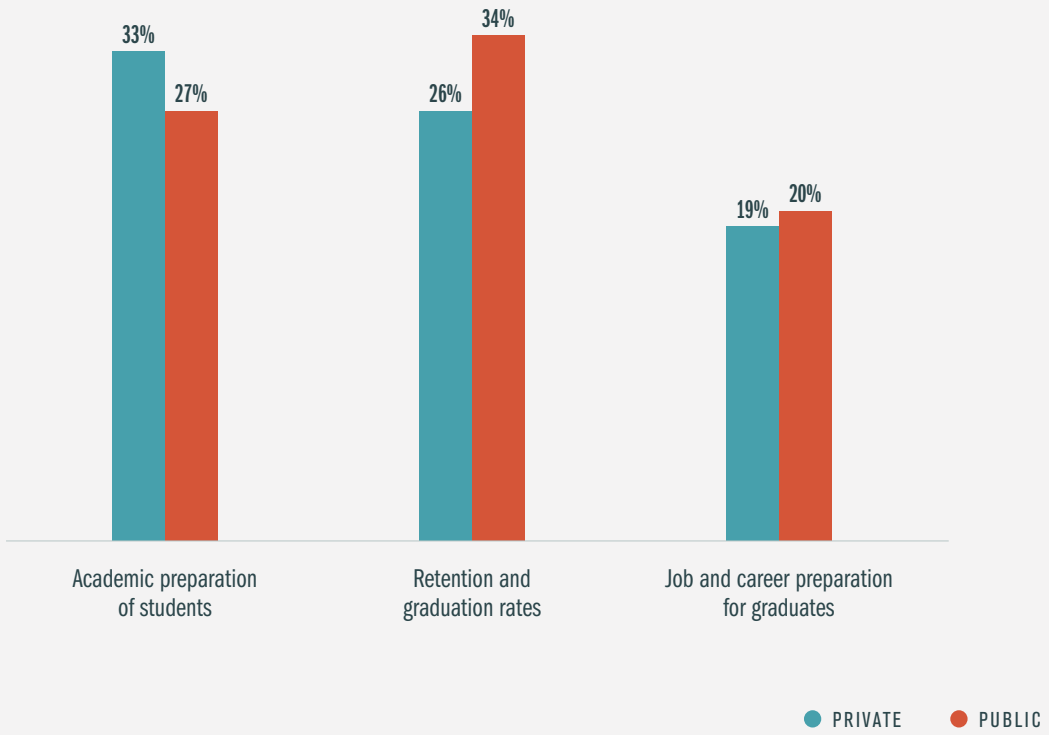
For students and their families, however, the value proposition may have changed in recent years due to rising tuition prices. Since 2005, tuition and fees have increased about 25 percent faster than inflation at four-year colleges and 40 percent faster at two-year colleges. At the same time, student debt has risen to an average of $33,000 per graduate. Because of the increased focus on student debt and earnings, many institutions are being forced to evaluate whether the future success of graduates depends on teaching students specific job skills related to their future professions, providing them with less tangible outcomes like a lifelong love of learning or both.

Two- and four-year colleges are paying close attention to employment projections and industry needs, adding majors in high-demand fields that can prepare students for today's jobs while giving the college a competitive edge in recruiting students. However, academic preparedness to guarantee student success and strengthen or maintain retention and graduation rates continue to be more of a focus than job and career preparation for graduates (See **Figure 1**).

At the country's largest associate's degree-granting institution, Miami-Dade College in Florida, employment rates for graduates, at 89 percent, are soaring. Provost for Academic and Student Affairs Lenore P. Rodicio said the institution, while focused on student academic success, is paying more attention to job skills than four years ago. While 60 percent of the college's more than 160,000 students intend to transfer to a four-year university, the institution has strong workforce programs in its nursing, engineering, education and other professional colleges, including advisory boards made up of potential employers and industry experts who can speak to the needs of Miami-Dade employers. The institution has recently added cyber security and data analytics tracks to its existing IT degree-granting programs, offers baccalaureate degrees to 5 percent of graduates, and provides short-term certificates in multiple areas of study so employees can get quick training.

This report describes the results of a survey of senior level academic officers in American colleges and universities from public and private two- and four-year colleges. The survey, conducted in November 2015, sought respondents' perceptions on the role of higher education in student outcomes, institutional performance in career preparation and the reporting of student outcomes.

FIGURE 1
THE EXTENT TO WHICH STUDENT SUCCESS REMAINS A PRIORITY OVER JOB AND CAREER PREPARATION FOR CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICERS



The Value of a Degree

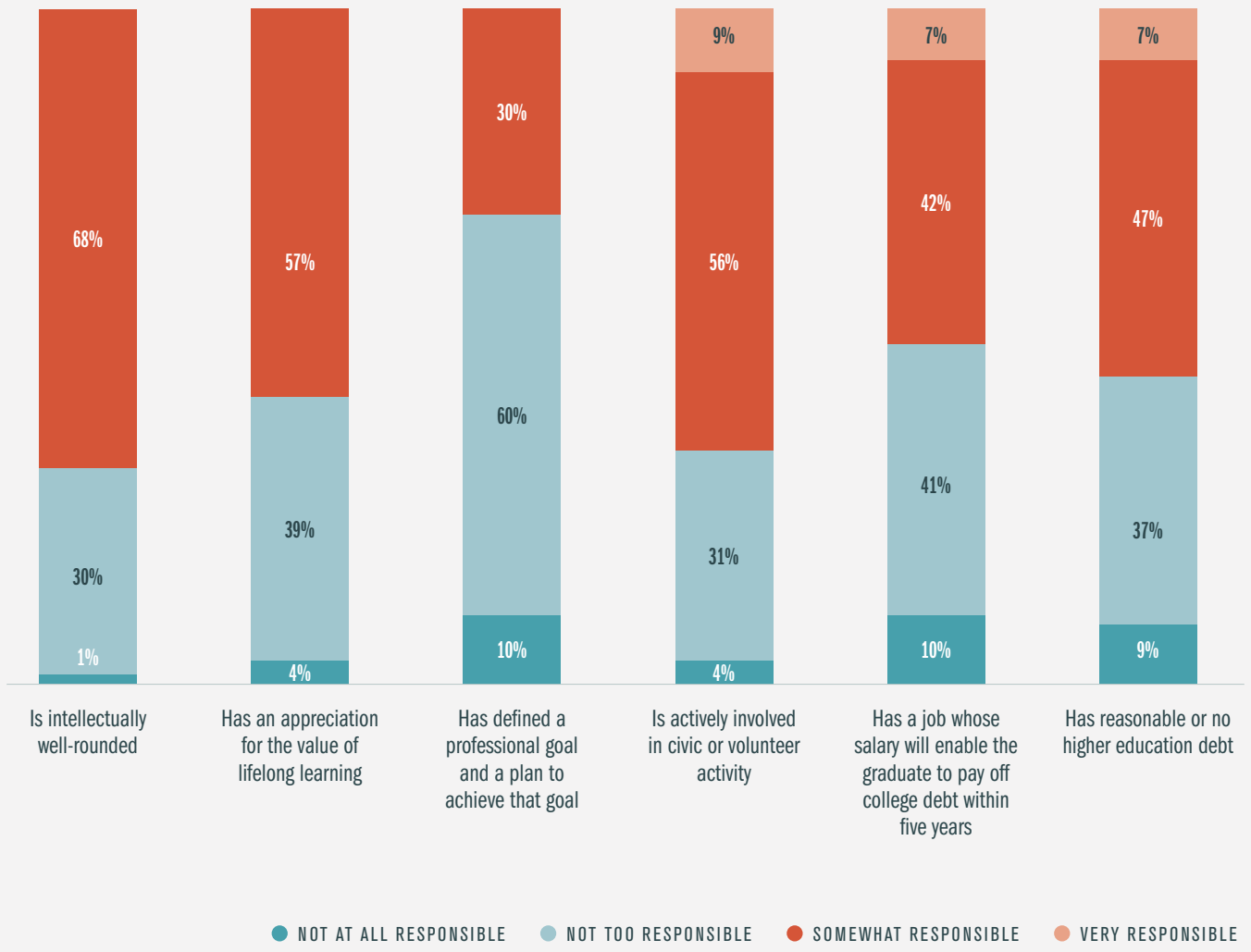
Once a year, the College Board publishes Education Pays, a report that documents the ways "in which both individuals and society as a whole benefit from increased levels of education." Despite its focus on the dual role that higher education often plays in the lives of individuals, the College Board report largely is dominated by the economic returns from higher education.

Median student debt at graduation and how much graduates earn in first jobs are now factors for students and families in deciding which college to attend.

The definition of the value of a college degree is growing. Institutions of higher learning continue to hold on strongly to the belief that their priorities are to arm graduates with strong intellectual and critical thinking skills and a lifetime appreciation for learning (See **Figure 2**). But students and their families are beginning to influence this age-old thinking by taking a close look at median student debt at graduation and how much graduates earn in first jobs to determine which college a student ultimately attends.

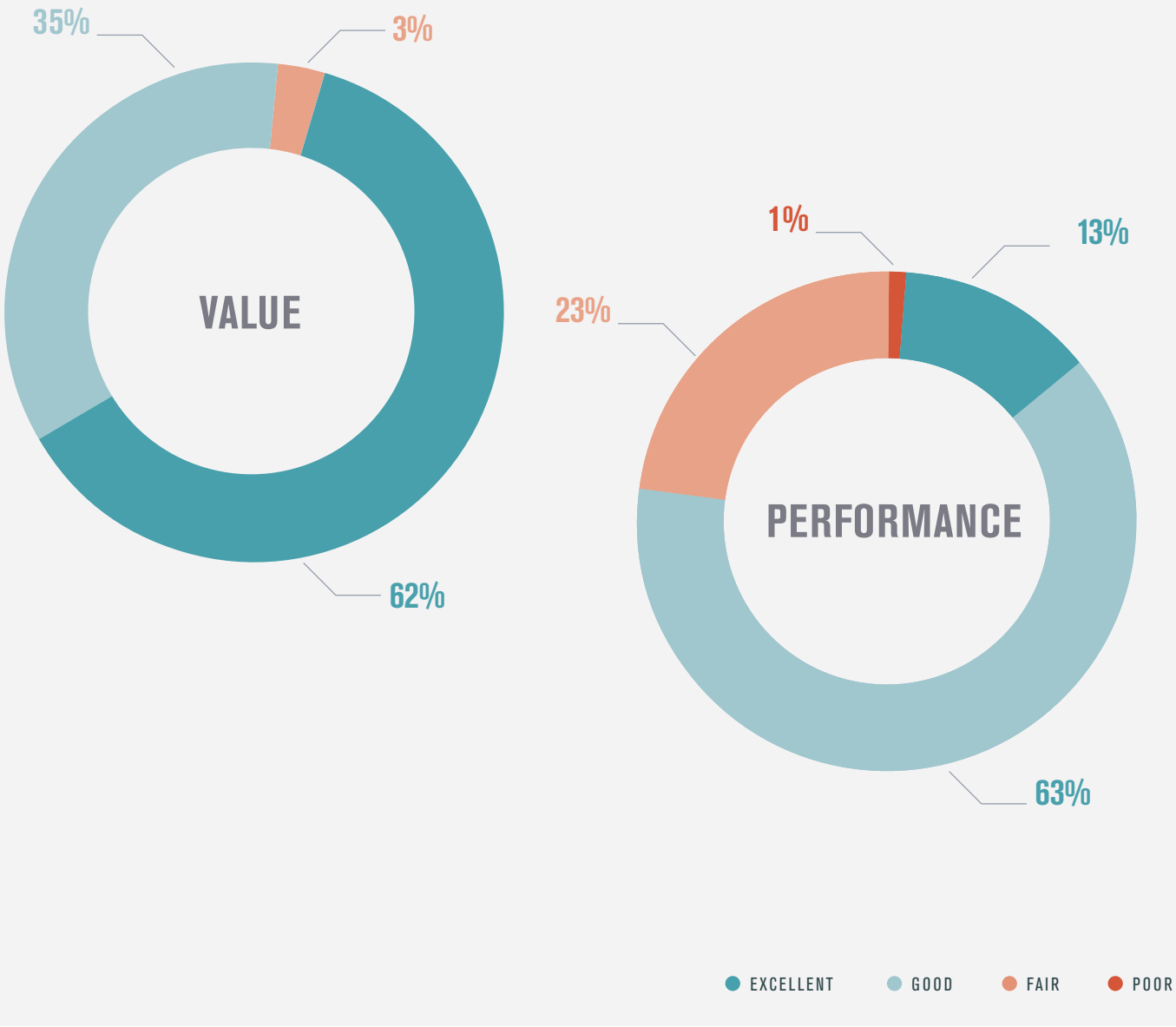
Intellectual well-roundedness and an appreciation for lifelong learning are priorities at colleges and universities over student debt.

FIGURE 2
THE EXTENT TO WHICH COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES SAY THEY ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR ENSURING VARIOUS STUDENT OUTCOMES ARE ACHIEVED



Sixty-two percent of chief academic officers surveyed by The Chronicle rated the value their institution provides to students and their families today as "excellent" and 35 percent rated the value as "good." At the same time, just 13 percent of those from baccalaureate institutions rated the performance of the U.S. higher education system as "excellent," with 63 percent rating the system as "good" and 23 percent as "poor" (See **Figure 3**).

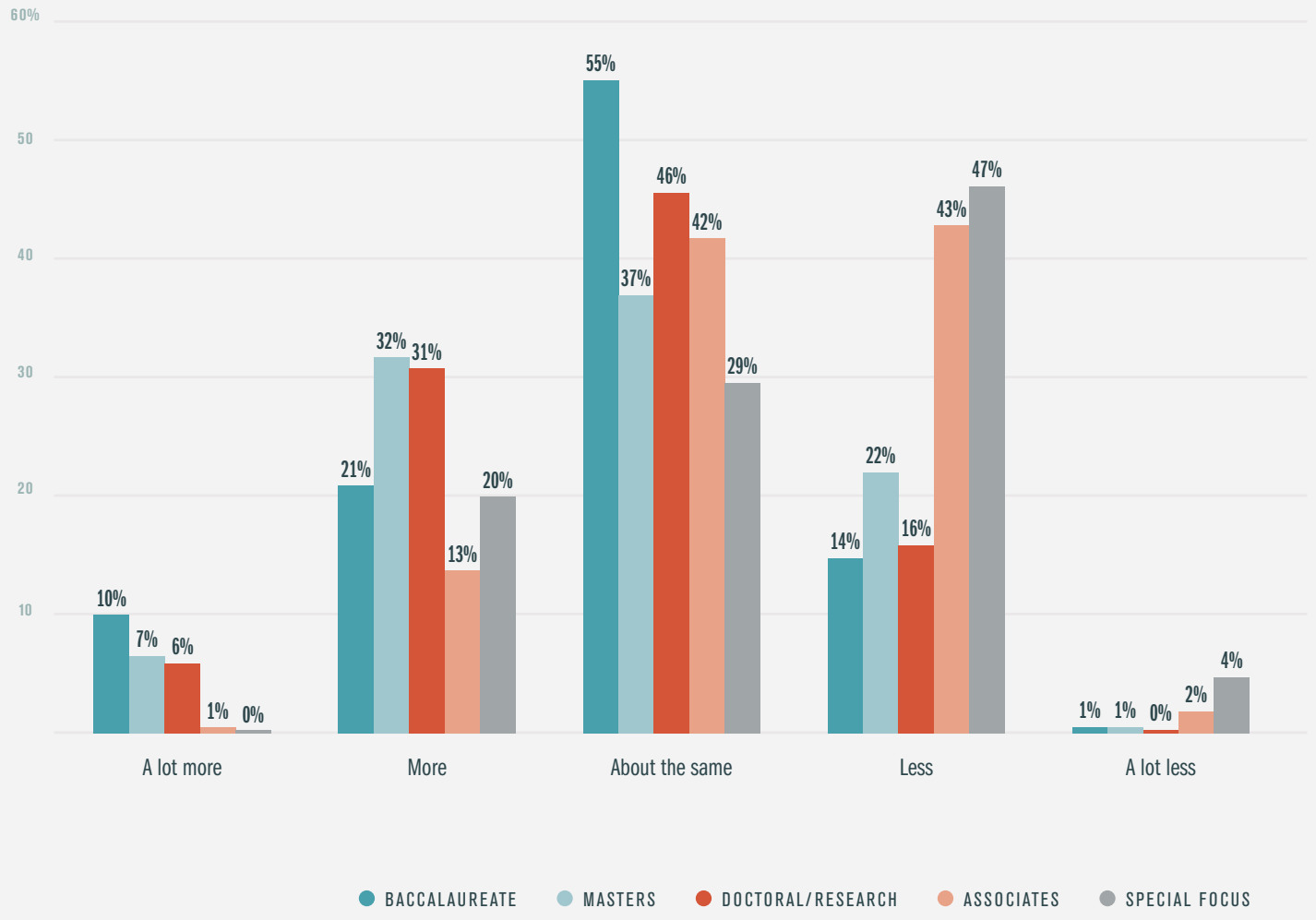
FIGURE 3
THE VALUE INSTITUTION PROVIDES STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES/PERFORMANCE OF U.S. HIGHER EDUCATION



In general, respondents were split as to whether a bachelor's degree is worth more now than five years ago. While more respondents at four-year colleges said that the bachelor's degree had gained value in the past five years, the opposite was true at two-year colleges. Just 14 percent of respondents at two-year colleges were as confident in the value of a bachelor's degree, with 45 percent saying the bachelor's degree has lost value (See **Figure 4**).

Forty-five percent of two-year college chief academic officers say they believe the bachelor's degree has lost value over the past five years.

FIGURE 4
IS THE BACHELOR'S DEGREE WORTH MORE OR LESS IN TODAY'S JOB MARKET VERSUS FIVE YEARS AGO?



Student loan debt

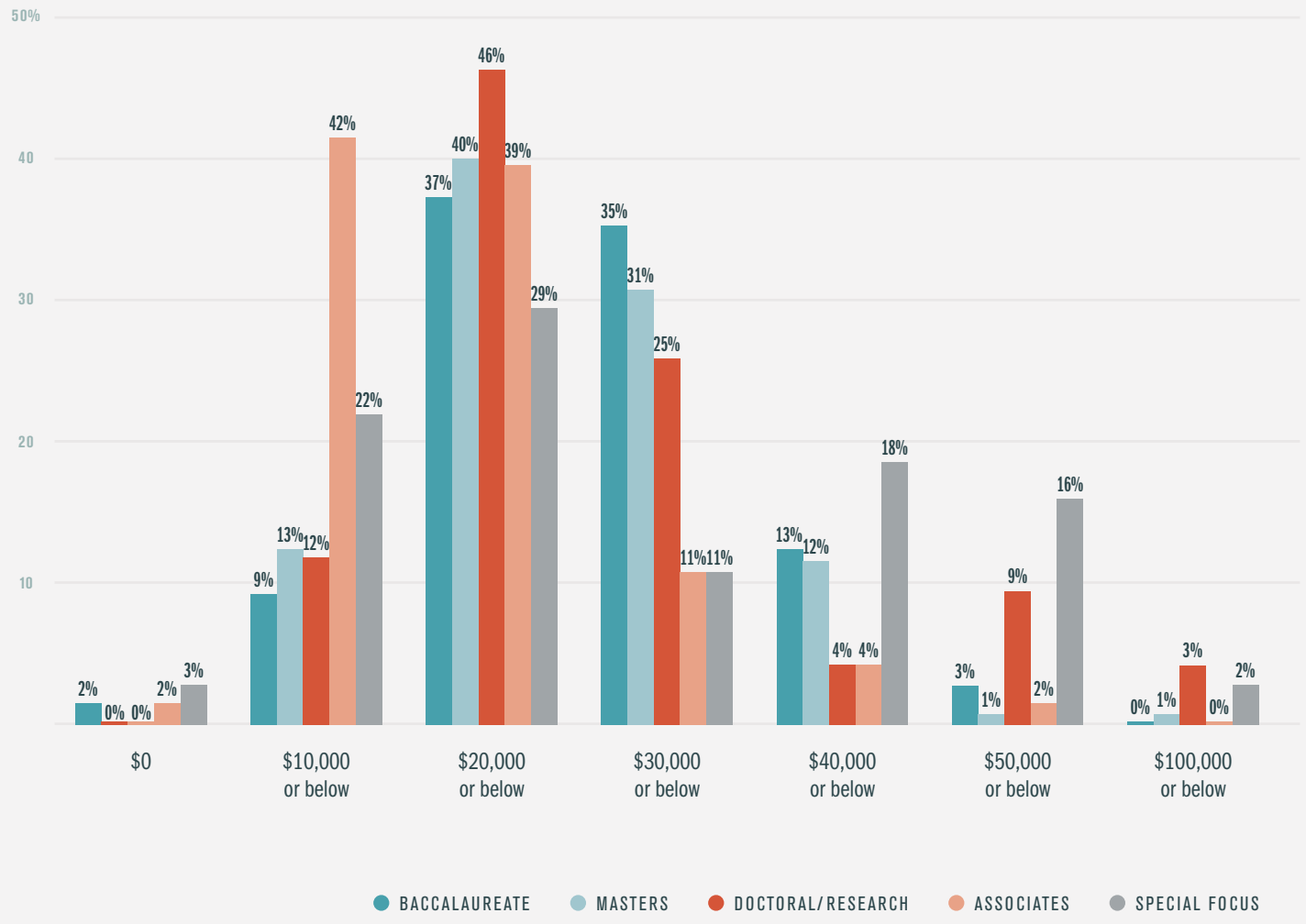
Student loan debt has tripled over the past decade in the U.S. to $1.2 trillion.

One criticism of American higher education is the sharp increase in student loan debt, which has tripled in the past decade to $1.2 trillion. The survey asked chief academic officers what constitutes reasonable debt for new graduates, as well as how long it should take students to repay their debt.

Forty-four percent of public college respondents and 34 percent of those at private colleges said graduates should ideally have $20,000 in student loan debt or less, substantially less than the average $33,000 loan tab the typical bachelor's degree recipient has at graduation. Thirty-one percent of four-year private college chief academic officers said $30,000 or less in student debt is OK (See **Figure 5**). Students who attend private college do tend to have higher average debt burdens.

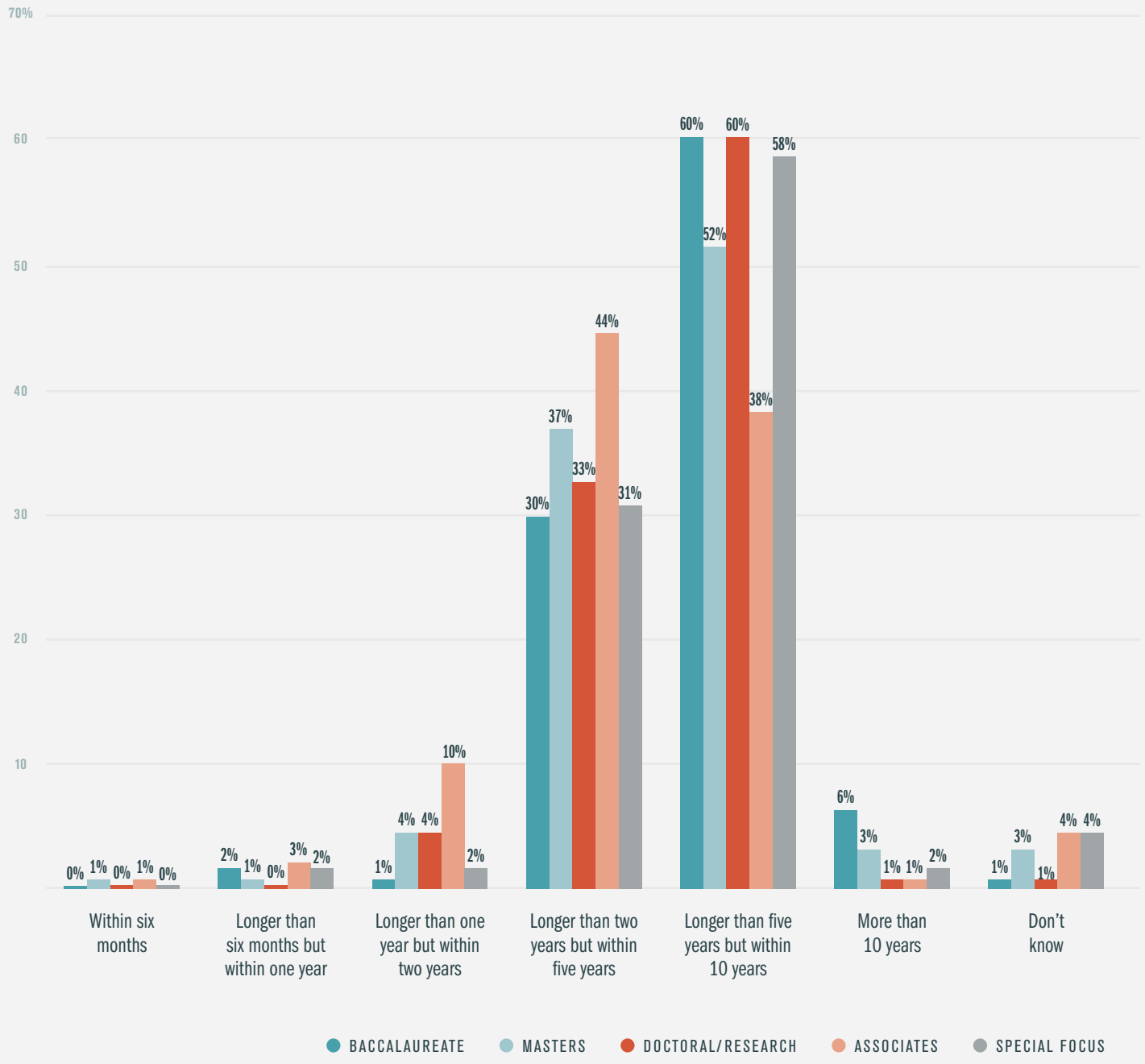
Most polled say students should be able to repay all college loan debt within 10 years.

FIGURE 5
OPINIONS VARY ON WHAT CONSTITUTES REASONABLE STUDENT LOAN DEBT



Nearly all polled say they believe graduates should be able to repay their debt within 10 years of graduation, the standard repayment period for federal student loans (See **Figure 6**). About 30 percent of students have not paid $1 toward their student loan debt principal seven years after leaving college.

FIGURE 6
STUDENT DEBT REPAYMENT TIME EXPECTATIONS BY COLLEGE SECTOR

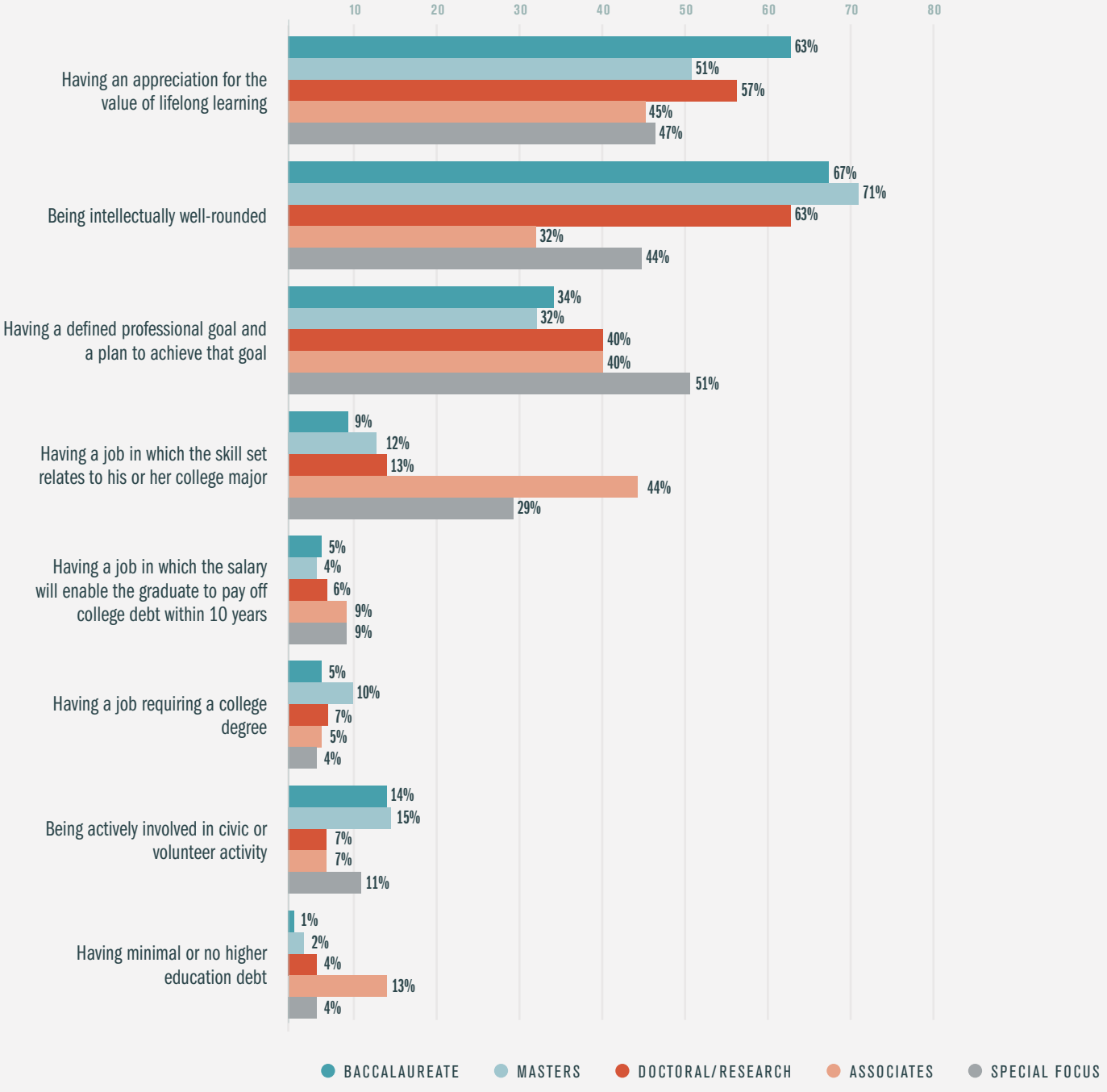


Accountability

Many academic officers are hesitant to place as much importance on student financial outcomes as on academic outcomes.

The College Scorecard provides new ways for colleges to be evaluated, with data from hundreds of colleges and universities on former students' earnings, loan repayment habits, the cost of tuition and more. Yet many academic officers were hesitant to place as much importance on student financial outcomes as academic outcomes, with the majority viewing student intellectual well-roundedness and professional goals as more important than obtaining a job with earnings high enough to pay off student debt within 10 years (See **Figure 7**).

FIGURE 7
MOST IMPORTANT STUDENT OUTCOMES

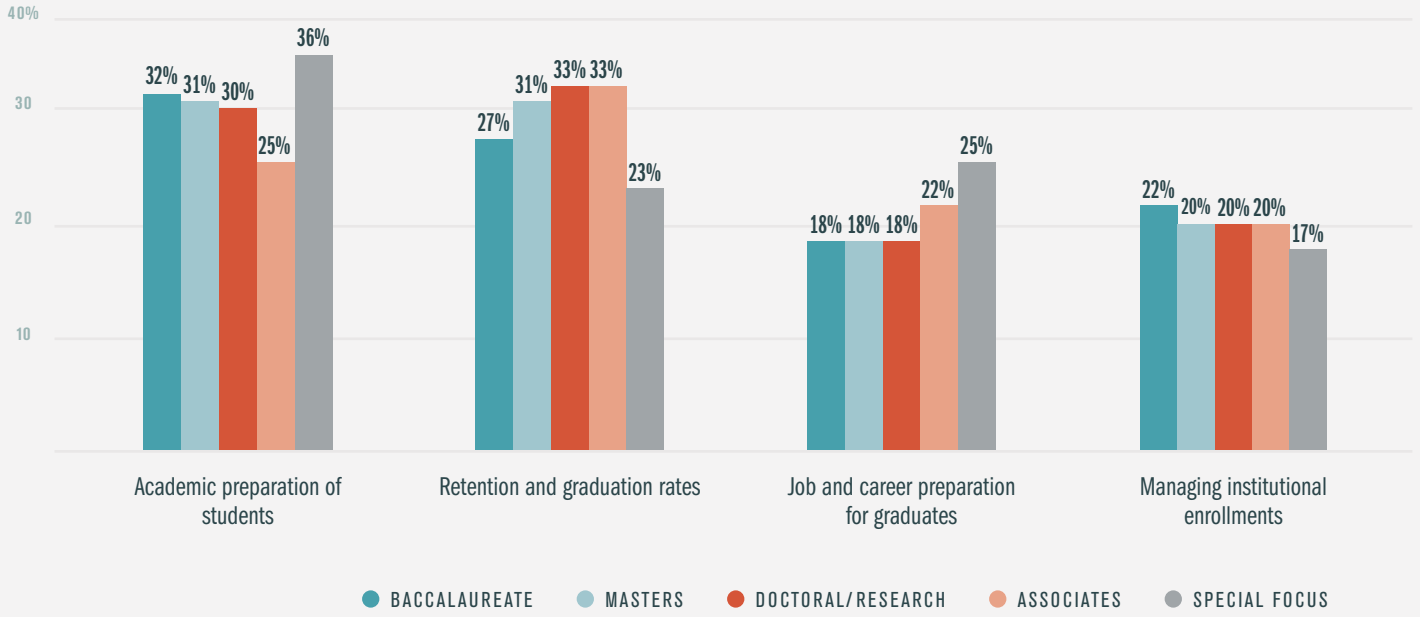


Only about one in four chief academic officers said that students should use salary outcomes data in making college choice decisions (See **Figure 8**). However, a vast majority of respondents stated that both job and graduate institution placement rates are at least a somewhat effective way for the public to assess a college's performance (See **Figure 9**).

Only about one in four chief academic officers said students should use salary outcomes data in making college choice decisions.

FIGURE 8
SHOULD STUDENTS MAKE COLLEGE DECISIONS BASED ON COLLEGE SCORECARD SALARY OUTCOMES?

FIGURE 9
INDICATORS TO USE IN ASSESSING A COLLEGE'S PERFORMANCE



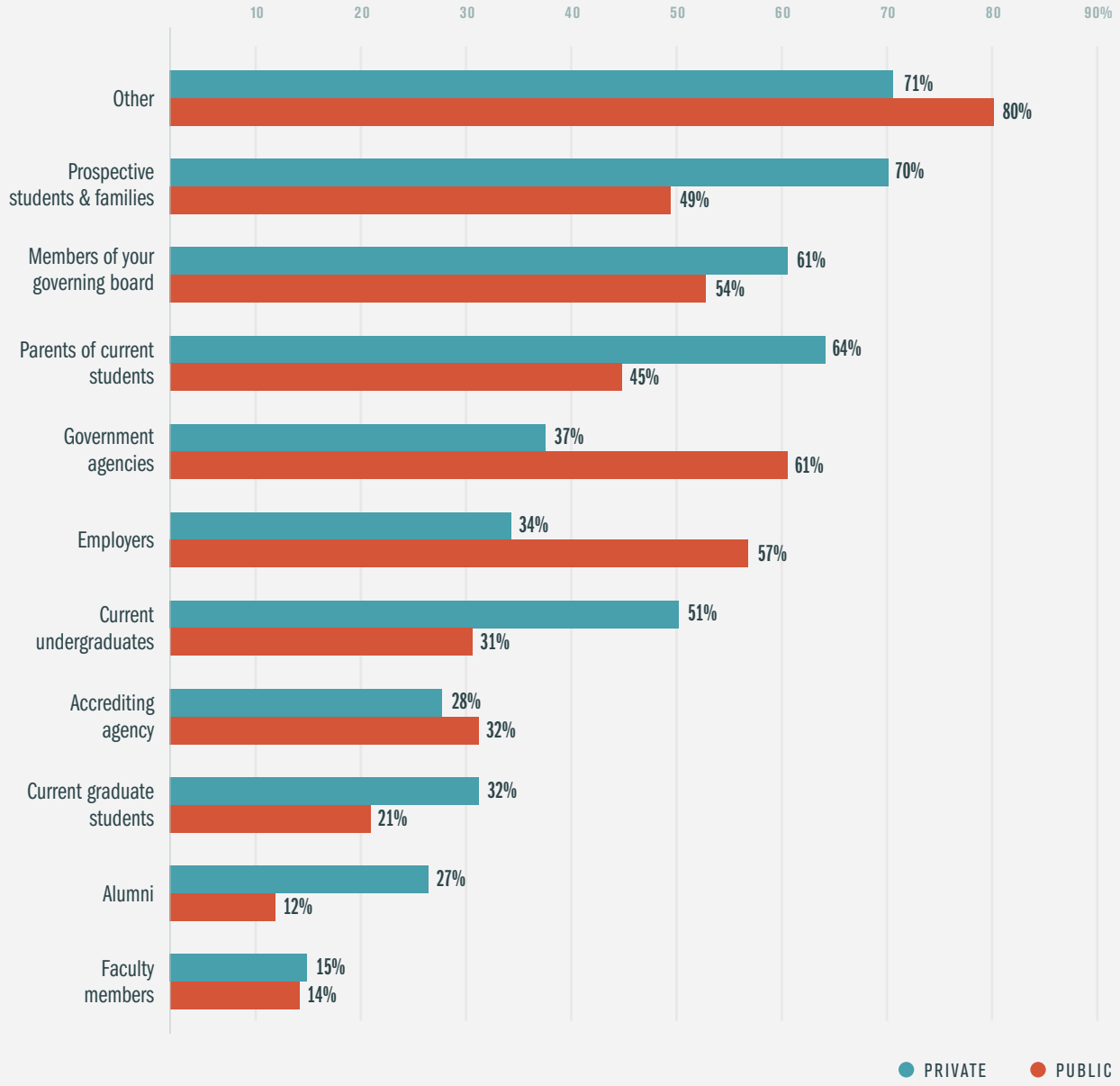
Student Outcomes

Private four-year colleges face more pressure to address career preparation from parents and prospective students, while employers put more pressure on two-year colleges.

Colleges are under duress to address career preparation from a number of sources (See **Figure 10**). Approximately one-half of respondents reported feeling "great" or "very great" pressure from prospective students and families, governing boards, parents, government agencies, employers and current students. The three lowest sources of stress came from accrediting bodies, alumni and faculty. Private four-year colleges faced more pressure from parents and prospective students, while employers put more pressure on two-year colleges.

75 percent of four-year college chief academic officers said their students were at least "prepared" or "well prepared" to look for a job. Those at two-year institutions weren't as confident.

FIGURE 10
COLLEGES FACE VARYING DEGREES OF CAREER PREPARATION PRESSURES FROM STAKEHOLDERS

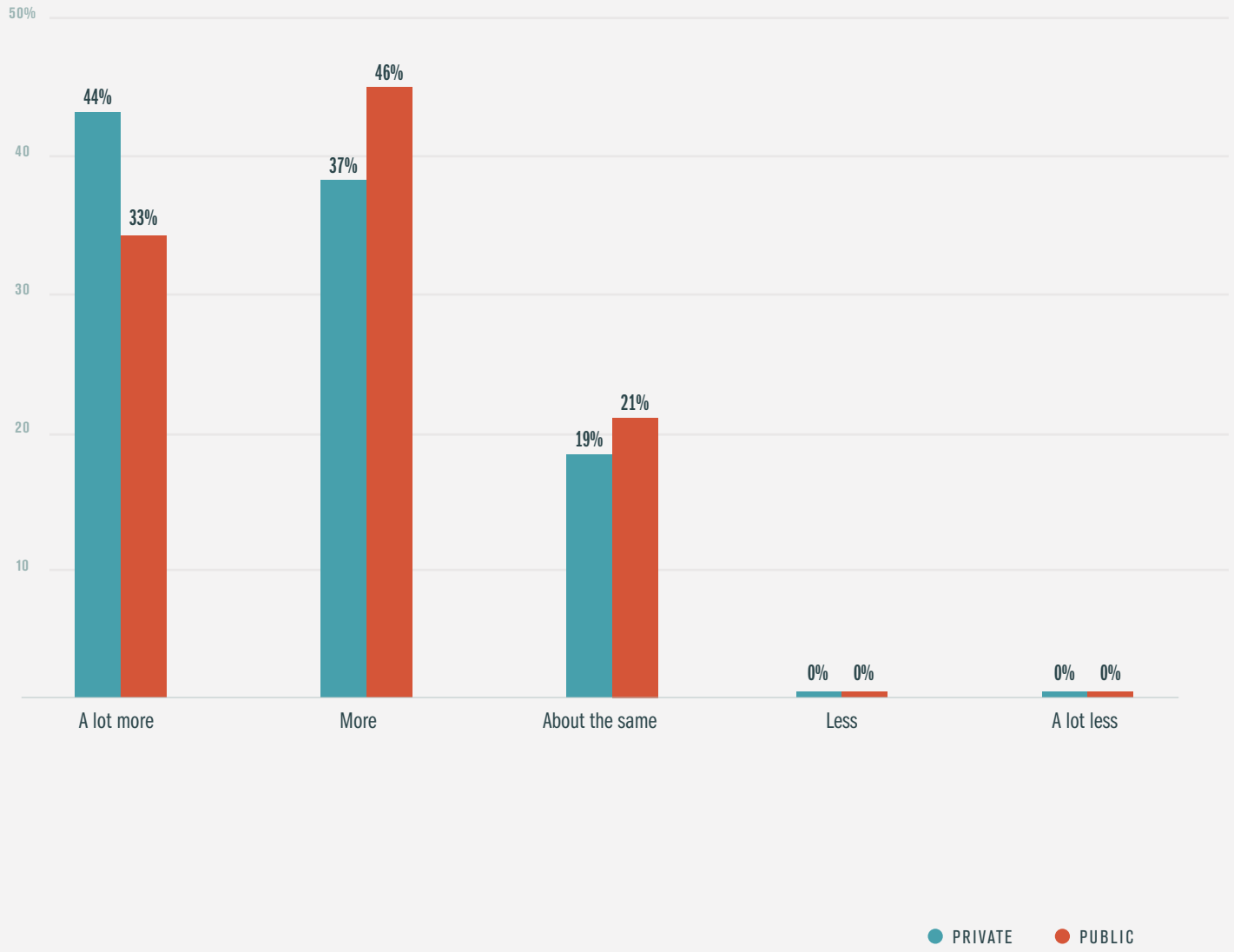


Although colleges may not want to be valued based on their students' employment outcomes (some colleges are now subject to gainful employment regulations), they are paying more attention to career development.

Eighty-one percent of respondents reported their college had "more" or "a lot more" discussion of career development than just three years ago (See **Figure 11**).

The discussion around preparing graduates for jobs has increased over the past three years.

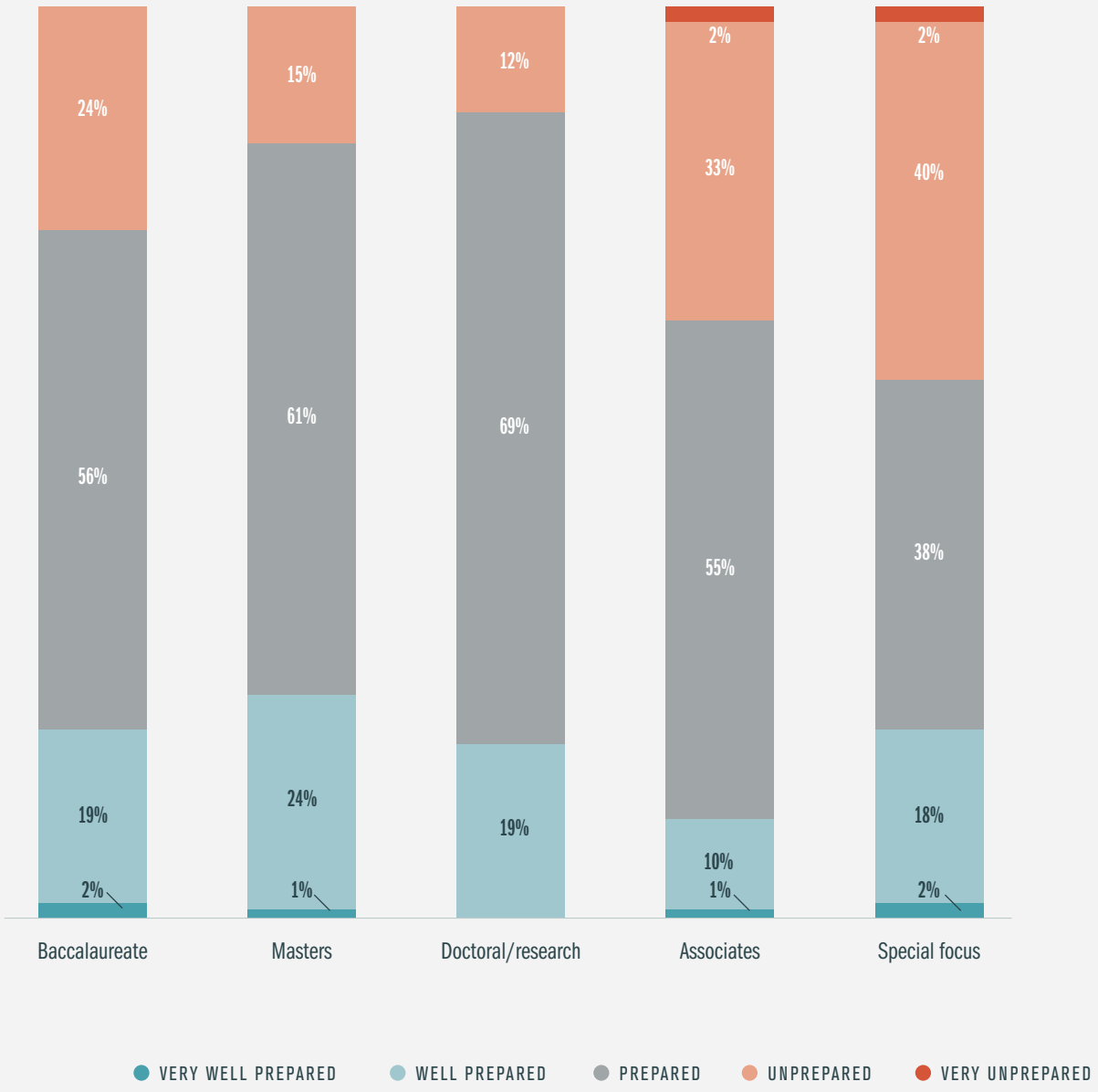
FIGURE 11
COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES ARE DISCUSSING JOB PREP FOR GRADUATIONS MORE THAN THREE YEARS AGO



Many respondents say their students are prepared or well prepared for a job search. At four-year colleges, 75 percent of chief academic officers said their students were at least "prepared" or "well prepared" to look for a job. But those at two-year institutions weren't as confident, with 35 percent saying its students are "unprepared" to "very unprepared" (See **Figure 12**).

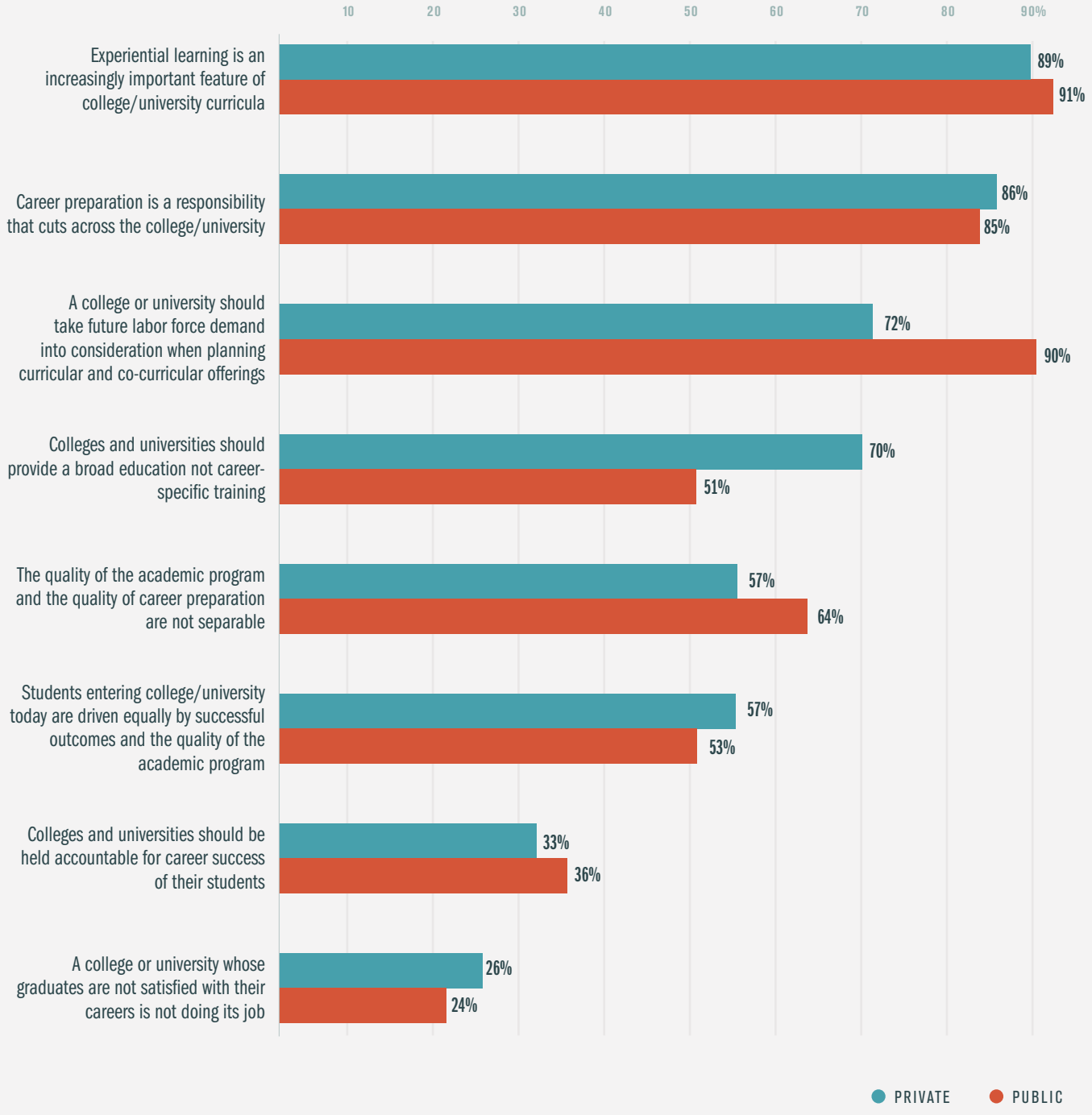
The discussion around preparing graduates for jobs has increased over the past three years.

FIGURE 12
CONFIDENCE THAT GRADUATES ARE PREPARED FOR A JOB SEARCH



While respondents from two-year colleges were evenly split on whether colleges should focus on a broad education compared to job training, an overwhelming percentage of respondents from four-year colleges indicated a focus on broad education is best (See **Figure 13**).

FIGURE 13
ROLE OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES IN CAREER PREPARATION



Career preparation

The internship ranked No. 1 as the most important factor in graduates securing a first job, with relevance of coursework ranking second.

Chief academic officers overwhelmingly identified the internship as the most important factor in new graduates securing a job, far more important across all sectors than coursework, and major or institutional prestige (See **Figure 14**).

However, respondents said they need to do more to develop opportunities for internships and other direct work experience and can do a better job of cultivating relationships with employers (See **Figure 15**).

Colleges and universities need to do more to develop internship and direct work experience opportunities for students.

FIGURE 14
FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO NEW GRADUATES' SUCCESS IN THE JOB MARKET

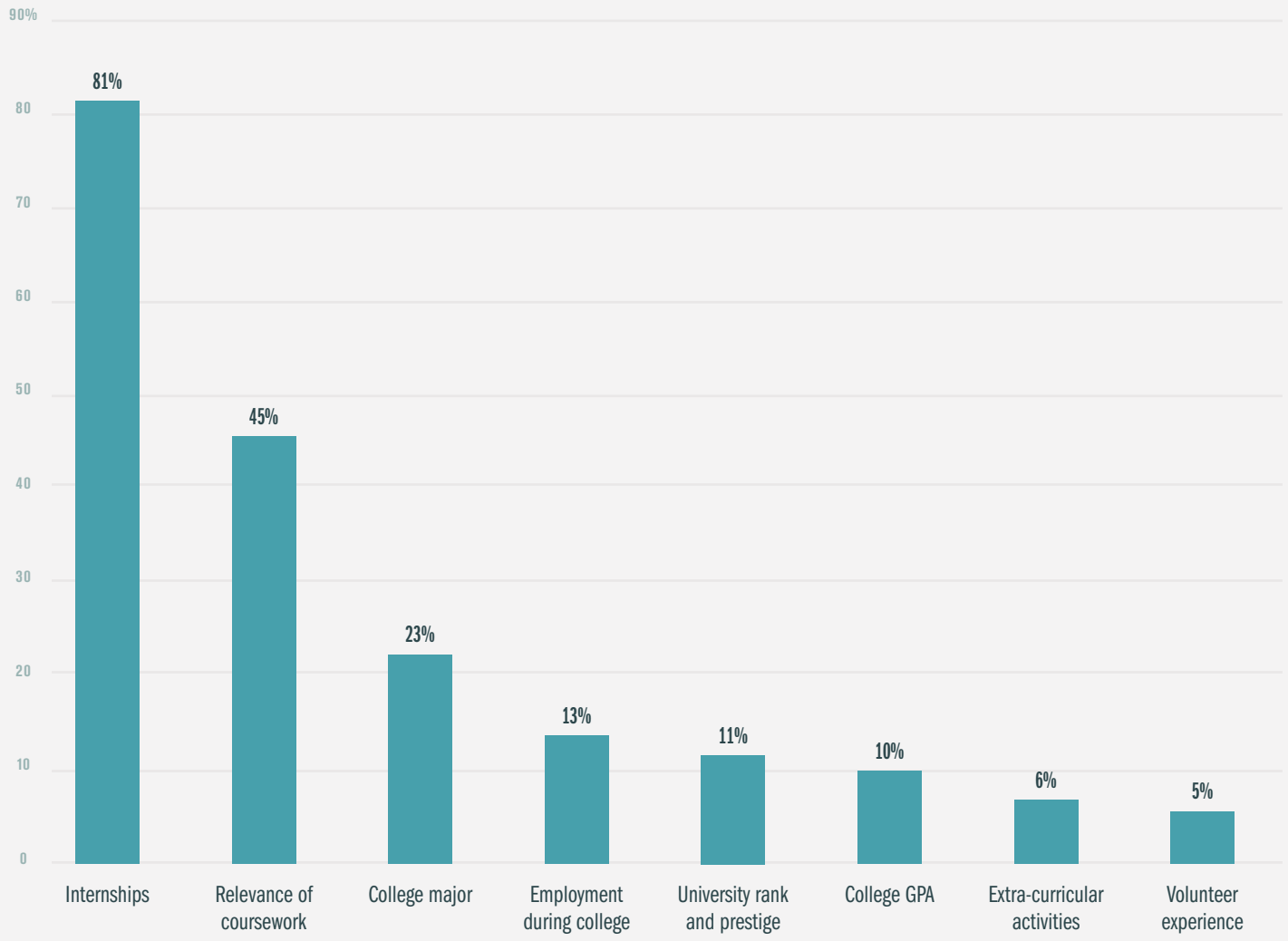
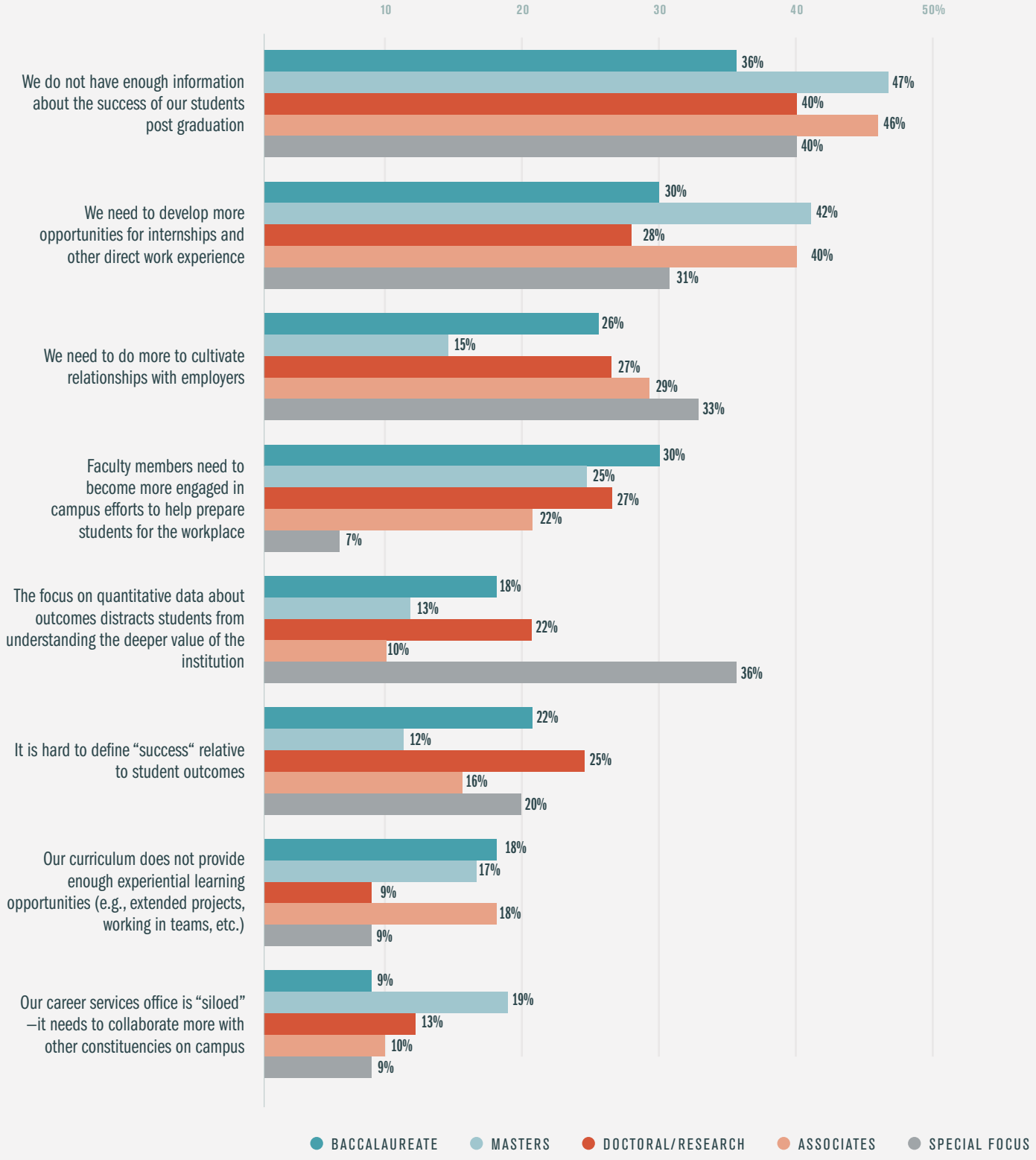
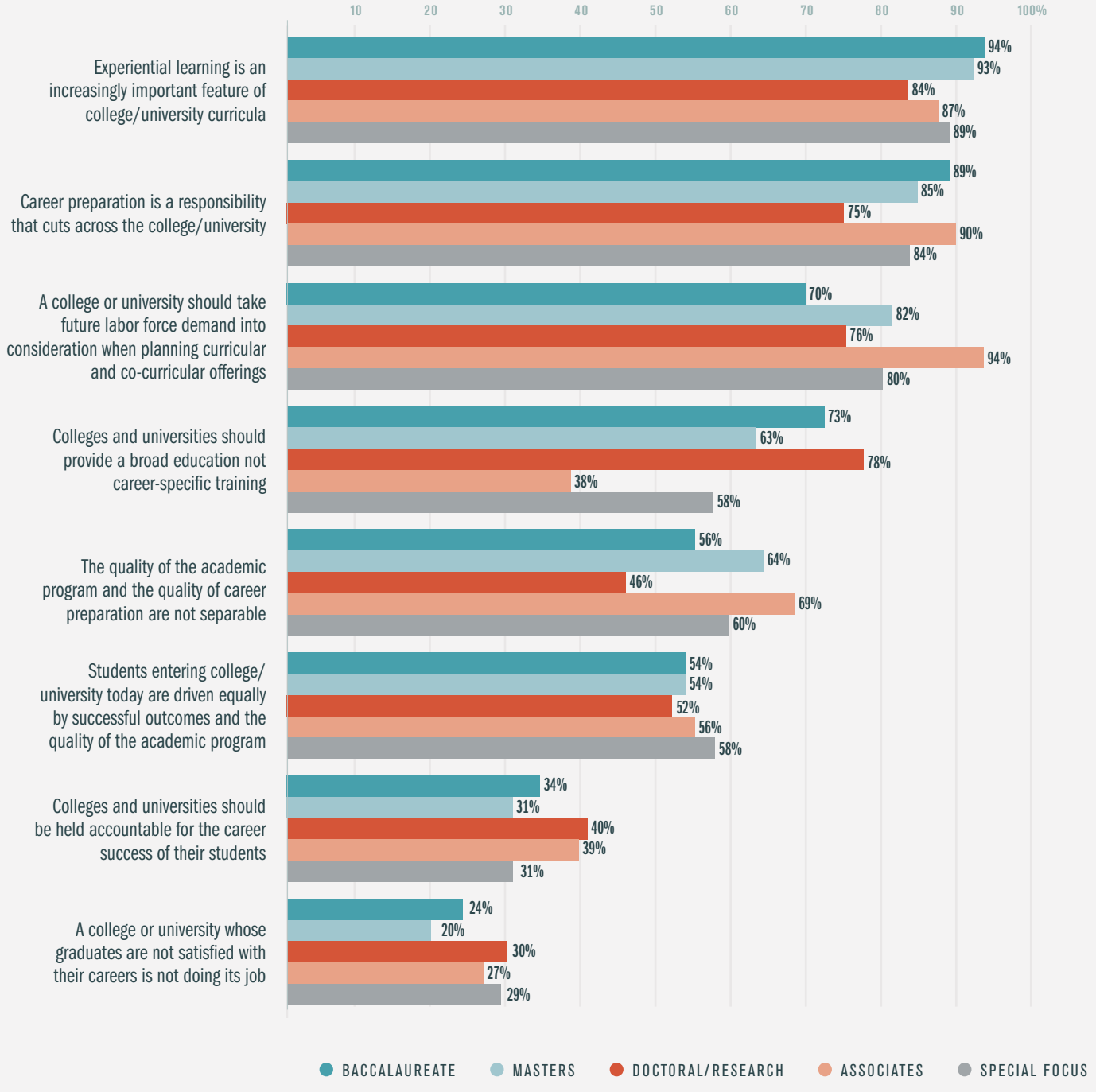


FIGURE 15
BIGGEST CONCERNS ABOUT COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY'S PREPARATION OF STUDENTS FOR CAREERS



Asked how much they agree or disagree with statements about the role of colleges and universities in career development, 95 percent at four-year public colleges said experiential learning is an increasingly important feature of college curricula. Few respondents from all sectors agreed with the statement that a college whose graduates are not satisfied with their careers is not doing its job. Associate's degree-granting institutions and public institutions felt a larger responsibility to align academics to the demands of the labor market (See **Figure 16**).

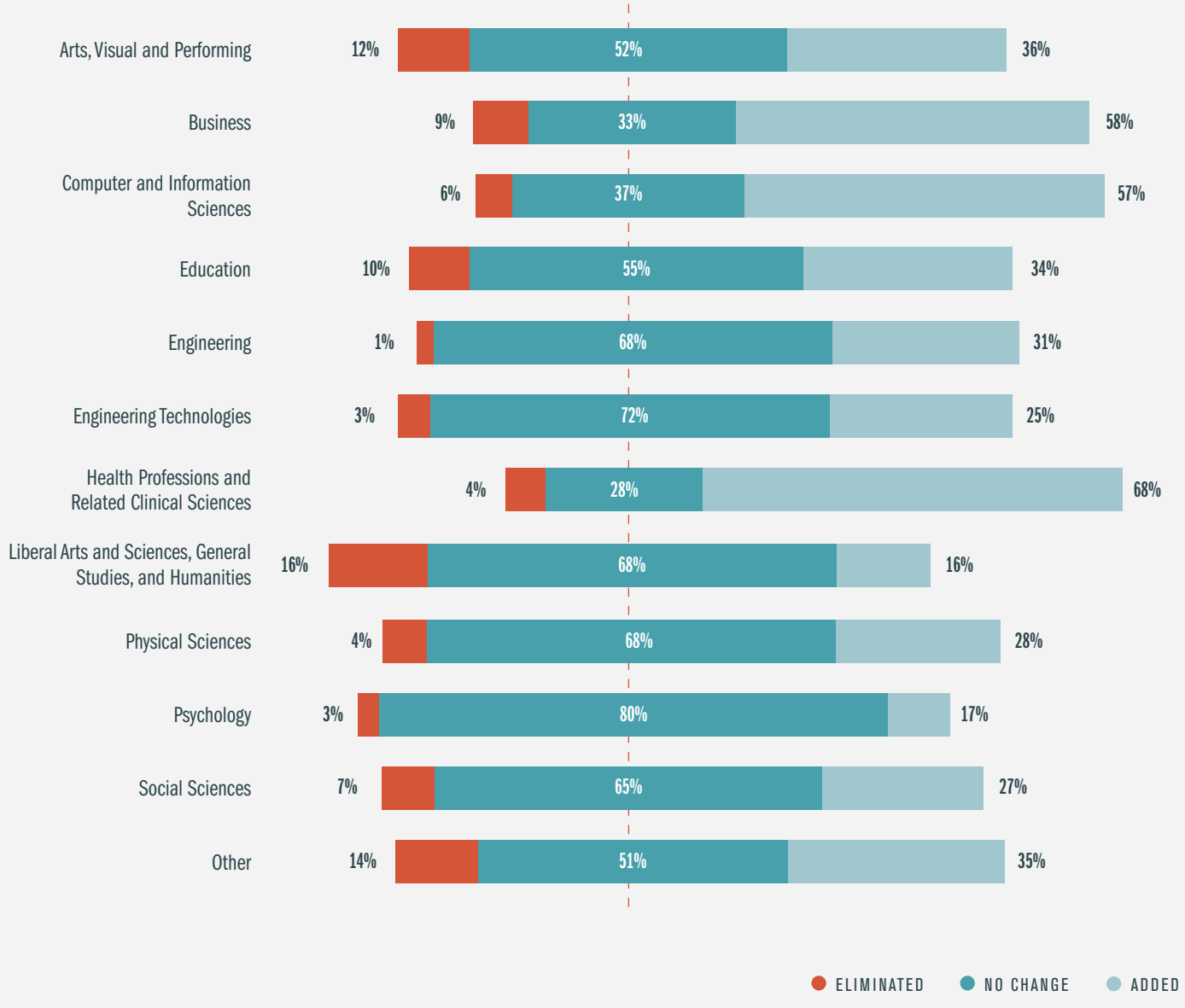
FIGURE 16
THE EXTENT TO WHICH CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICERS AGREE WITH INSTITUTION'S ROLE IN CAREER DEVELOPMENT



Many colleges and universities added or eliminated majors during the past five years based on employment forecasts, with this strategy most common at two-year public colleges and least common at four-year private colleges. A majority added majors in the health professions, business and computer and information sciences. Liberal arts and humanities majors were cut as frequently as they were added. And 36 percent of colleges added majors in the visual and performing arts, compared to just 12 percent of colleges eliminating offerings in this area (See **Figure 17**).

Many colleges and universities are adding or eliminating majors based on employment forecasts, with this strategy most common at two-year public colleges and least common at four-year private colleges.

FIGURE 17
TOP MAJORS ADDED AND ELIMINATED IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS



The vast majority of colleges offer career counseling and internship placement assistance, but there is disparity in the volume of alumni mentoring programs between two- and four-year colleges, with just 9 percent of two-year colleges having a program compared to nearly 50 percent of four-year colleges (See **Figure 18**). A majority of colleges reported having data on alumni outcomes through a combination of alumni surveys, information from career services, and feedback from employers. Alumni surveys were the most common source of information at four-year colleges, while employer feedback was most common at two-year colleges (See **Figure 19**).

FIGURE 18
CAREER PREP OFFERINGS

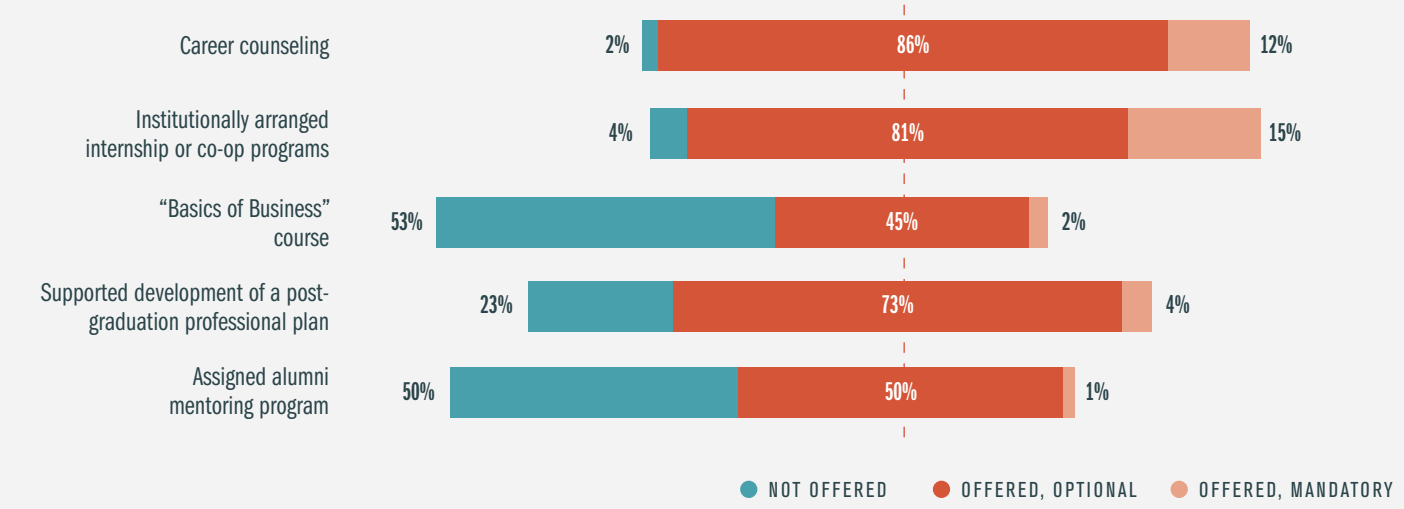
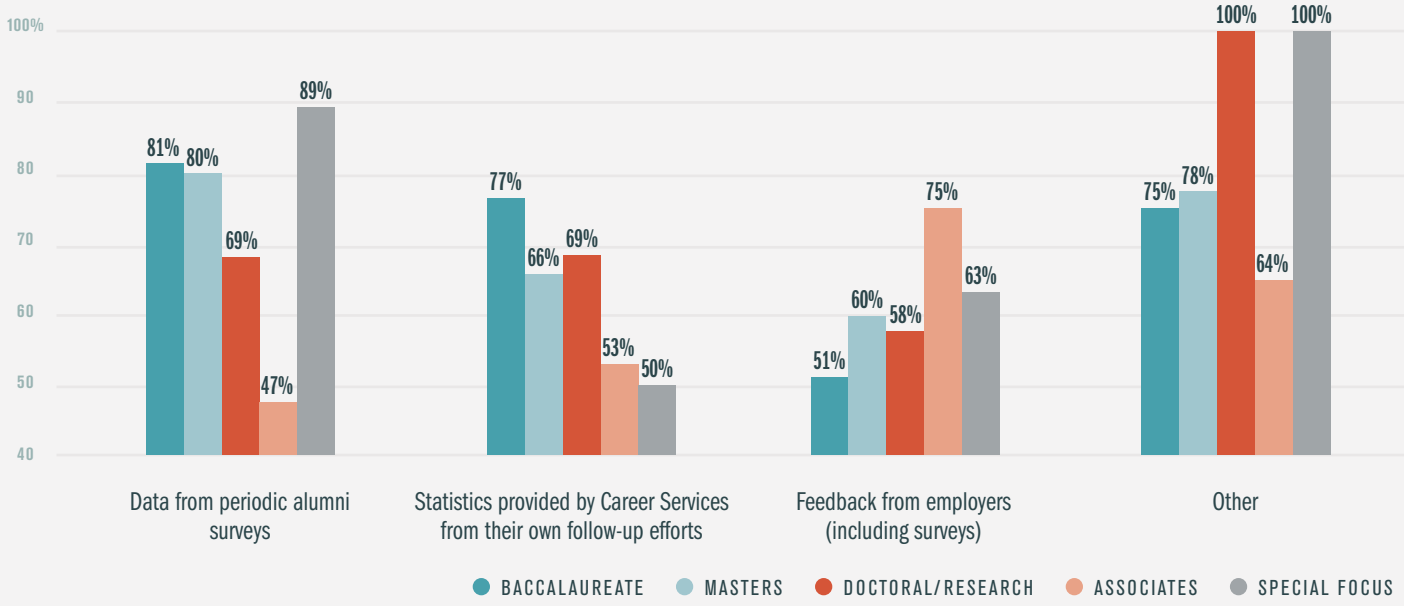


FIGURE 19
ALUMNI EMPLOYMENT IS DATA COLLECTED FROM MULTIPLE SOURCES



Conclusion

Colleges are facing intense pressure to demonstrate their value to students, their families and the public after decades of rising tuition prices. The release of college and university data on earnings and student loan repayment rates has only heightened that pressure, as college costs, graduation outcomes and student debt levels can be compared on a national basis for the first time. Although a majority of academic officials surveyed by The Chronicle did not think students and their families should choose a college based on future earnings of graduates, it is inevitable that colleges will be judged by these employment-related outcomes.

Colleges and universities are caught in a fundamental tension between focusing on general skills that prepare students for any career after college—such as critical thinking and problem solving—and specific skills that are needed for a given job that is in demand today. The survey indicated that four-year colleges have generally chosen to focus on general skills, while two-year colleges tend to focus more on job-specific skills. Yet four-year colleges and universities are increasingly working to provide students with job opportunities in their chosen majors of work through internships and co-op experiences.

Colleges and universities are caught in a fundamental tension between focusing on general skills and job-specific skills.

Colleges are responding to labor market projections by either adding or eliminating majors, with far more colleges adding than eliminating fields of study. Much of the growth in majors has occurred in more vocational fields, such as business, information technology and health care and these programs have the potential to help colleges meet their enrollment and revenue targets.

Most colleges offer career counseling and internship placement assistance, but there is disparity in the volume of alumni mentoring programs between two- and four-year colleges, with just 9 percent of two-year colleges having a program compared to nearly 50 percent of four-year colleges.

Methodology

The results discussed in this report are based on a survey of academic vice presidents, deans, and executive directors at public and private degree-granting colleges and universities in the United States. Of the 5,436 academic officials invited to complete the survey in November 2015, 506 did so—reflecting a 9.3 percent response rate. These 506 individuals reflect responses from 466 colleges, and responses are not weighted to reflect multiple responses from the same institution

MAGUIRE ASSOCIATES

Education Under Review is based on a survey by Maguire Associates and was written by Robert Kelchan, an assistant professor at Seton Hall University, and edited by Karin Meadows, an assistant editor at The Chronicle of Higher Education, Inc. The report is sponsored by Adobe. The Chronicle is fully responsible for the report's editorial content. Copyright 2016.

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