



Washington State Quantitative Assessment **Full Report**

October 2026



SECTION I

Methodology & Overview

Washington State quantitative interviews



Objective: Develop a 360-degree understanding of Washington’s school to career pipeline by examining how young adults navigate it and how parents, navigators, and employers shape, support, or constrain those pathways.



Methodology: 2,966 online interviews across audiences; randomly recruited from a qualifying sample.

Young Adults	Parents	Navigators	Employers
Who are they? 16–24-year-olds from Washington State, representative of the real population. Results weighted for: Age, gender, race, region, and mean home value in the area. Approach: • 1,759 online interviews • Margin of error: +/-2.4% 	Who are they? Parents of 16–24-year-olds from Washington State, representative of the real population. Results weighted for: Age, gender, race, income, region, and child’s age and gender. Approach: • 505 online interviews • Margin of error: +/-4.4% 	Who are they? Counselors, educators, and career and workforce development specialists from Washington State who work with young adults for at least 25% of their workweek. Results weighted for: Age, gender, race, region, income. Approach: • 502 online interviews • Margin of error: +/-4.4% 	Who are they? HR workers and hiring managers from Washington State who are involved in the hiring process for entry-level talent Approach: • 200 online interviews • Margin of error: +/-6.9% 



SECTION II

Executive Summary

Washington has built a strong school-to-career ecosystem, but the challenge is helping young people navigate it and turn resources into opportunity.

THE STRENGTH	THE GAP	THE OPPORTUNITY
Washington has many of the right pieces in place, and the system works well for those who reach it. • Young adults give strong marks to access to dual enrollment (79%), financial aid navigation (74%), and alternatives to four-year college (73%). • Employers also view the workforce positively, with 93% saying WA-trained entry-level talent is at least as prepared as the national average. WA-educated young adults are also more likely to use key state pathways, including CTE (30% vs. 15%) and CTE Dual Credit (28% vs. 15%).	The challenge is connecting those pieces into a pathway young adults can actually navigate. • 67% struggle with knowing where to start, 66% with knowing what to trust, 64% with fragmented information, and 61% with understanding eligibility. • The disconnect becomes especially visible after young adults leave school: 88% of those currently in school say their education is preparing them well, compared with just 67% of those no longer in school.	Instead of adding resources the focus should be making the existing ecosystem easier to navigate. • Strengthen the trusted adults young people already turn to. • Make work-based learning easier for employers to provide, with 77% citing limited staff capacity as a barrier to engaging with education • Make opportunities more tangible, including financial aid, where just 47% know the WA College Grant can cover costs beyond tuition. • AI preparation, where only 48% believe education is doing enough.



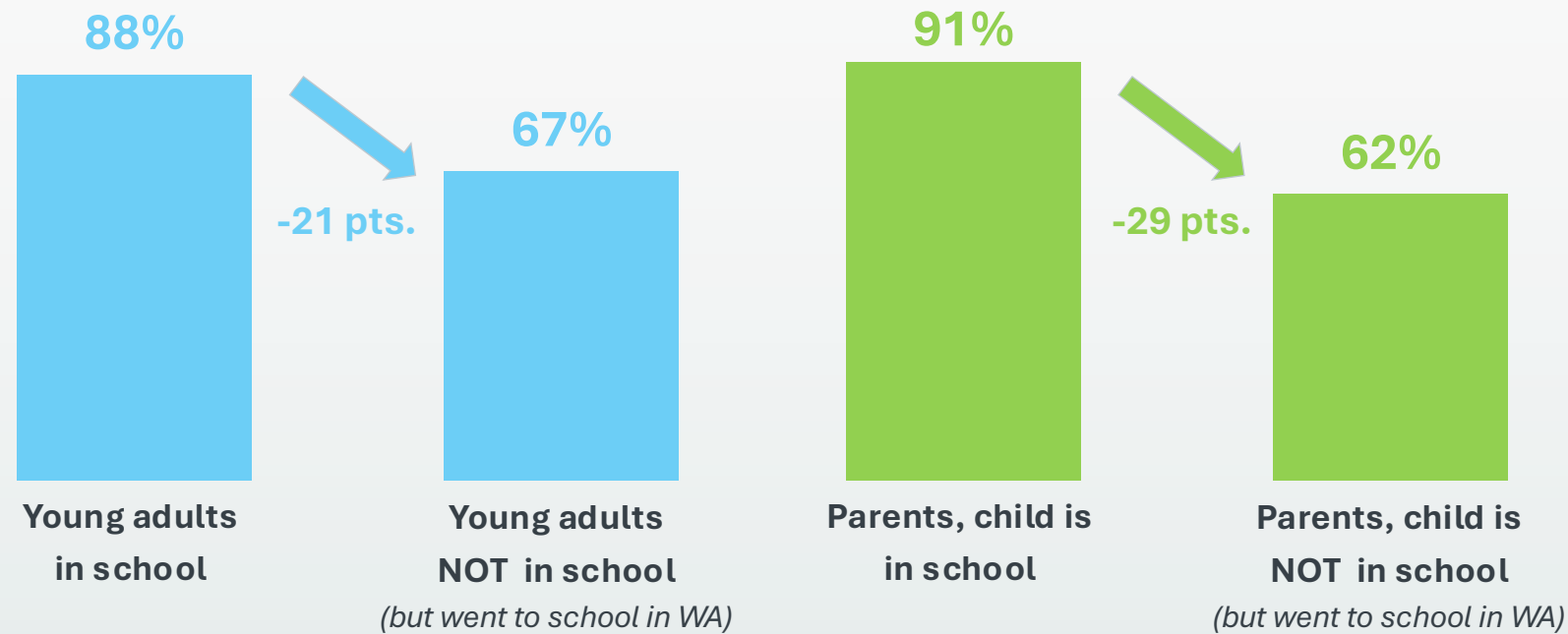
SECTION III

Breakthrough Insights

1

The Post-High School Cliff: The system prepares students for school, but loses them after graduation

Are schools and job training programs preparing young adults well or poorly for their future?
(showing total prepares well: very well + somewhat well)



Post-HS Cliff:

47% of Young Adults overall also feel that they are prepared for the job market over the next 10 years, but perceptions differ by age, with 18–20-year-olds feeling the most pressure:

16-17: 51%

18-20: 40%

21-24: 49%

This highlights a disconnect between feeling prepared in an educational setting and being able to translate that preparation into a clear path through the labor market once out of school.

2

WA has built abundant resources that generate confidence, particularly in dual enrollment programs and financial aid; BUT...

How well or poorly do you think your area or community provides services in each of the following areas?

	Young Adults	Parents	Navigators
Access to dual enrollment programs or college credit courses in high school	79%	80%	85%
Support for navigating financial aid applications (FAFSA/WASFA)	74%	70%	84%
Strong alternatives to traditional 4-year college	73%	71%	84%
Making access to information and resources easy and intuitive	72%	72%	85%
Access to hands-on experiences	69%	64%	84%
Helping parents/guardians understand how to best help	68%	63%	84%
Ongoing support to help ensure completion of job and education training	68%	65%	83%
Access to funding to support living costs or emergency expenses for students	67%	59%	82%
Access to free or affordable postsecondary education and training	66%	61%	84%
Recruiting local talent for jobs versus recruiting from out-of-state	65%	64%	82%
Assistance re-entering a job or education training after dropping out	62%	63%	83%
Connecting young people directly to employers	61%	58%	82%

2

...Young adults and parents aren't using these resources due to confusion, distrust, and access barriers

Extent to which each is viewed as a challenge to using programs, resources, or services

	Young Adults	Parents	Navigators
Knowing where to start looking for them	67%	61%	75%
Knowing which programs or resources are trustworthy	66%	65%	71%
Fragmented or disconnected information across different places	64%	67%	76%
Knowing young adults' interests to know which programs are relevant	63%	41%	72%
Making sense of information spread across many sources	62%	63%	75%
Having enough time or capacity to search for and compare options	61%	59%	76%
Understanding if I/they qualify for programs	61%	57%	76%
Knowing how to apply to them	59%	57%	76%
Worried/embarrassed about being judged	55%	48%	69%
Having someone to guide or help	55%	57%	72%

Parents underestimate the extent to which Young Adults are still figuring out their interests

Young adults who went to high school outside of WA were more likely to report challenges finding someone to guide them, compared to those who went to high school in WA (67% to 53%)

3 Even WA's best-known programs, Running Start, AP programs, CiHS, and HSBP, are not reaching young adults to their potential

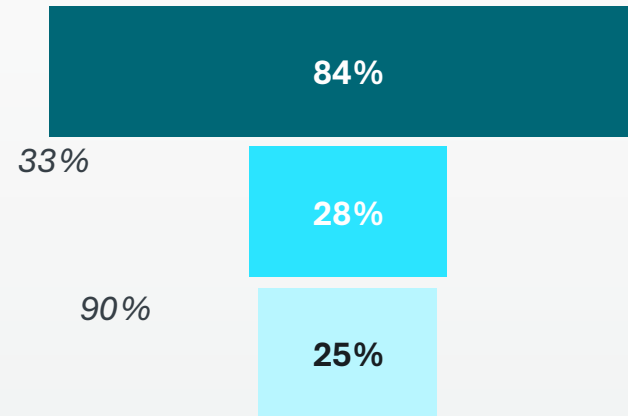
Funnel Analysis: Key



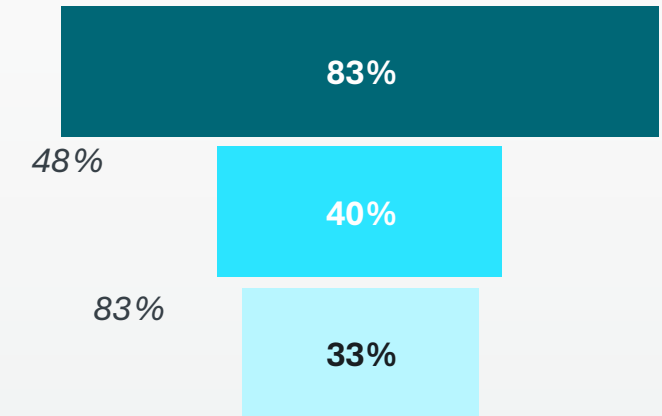
Young adults who went to high school outside WA have **lower awareness and usage** of most programs, but rate them equally as helpful

Hands-on work experiences like internships and apprenticeships have **higher awareness and usage in urban areas**

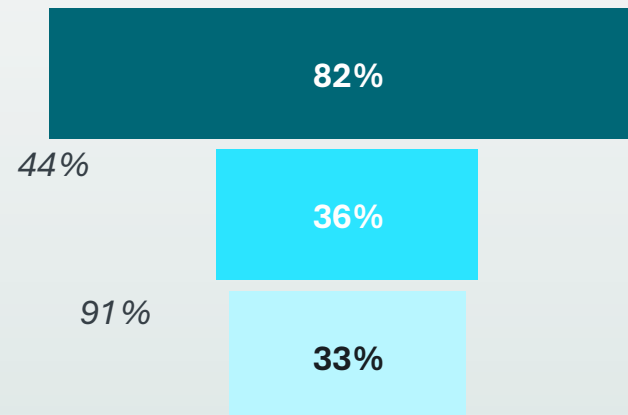
Running Start



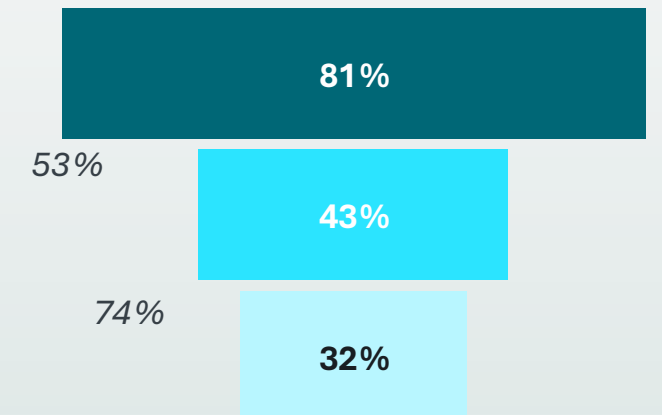
AP/Advanced Placement



College in the High School



High School and Beyond Plan



All metrics shown among all young adults who attended high school in WA

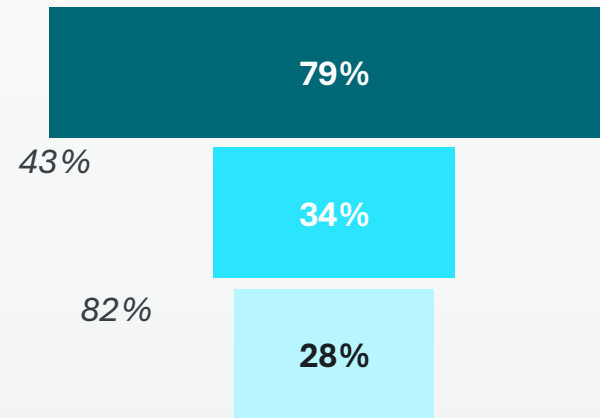
Conversion: The percentage who convert from one funnel stage to the next (use ÷ awareness; helpfulness ÷ use).

3 Career fairs, internships, and CTE programs also have strong awareness and have been helpful, but again most aware of them are not using them

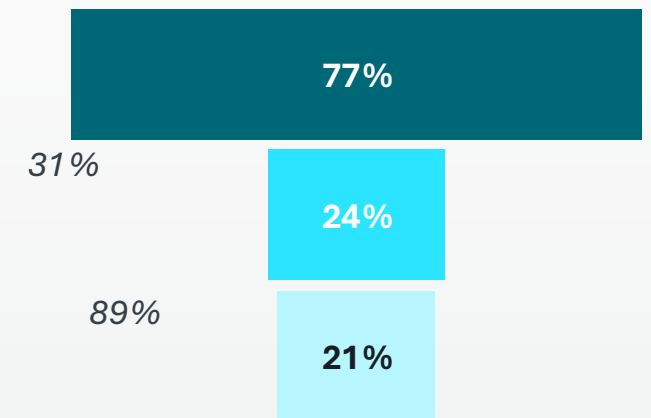
Funnel Analysis: Key



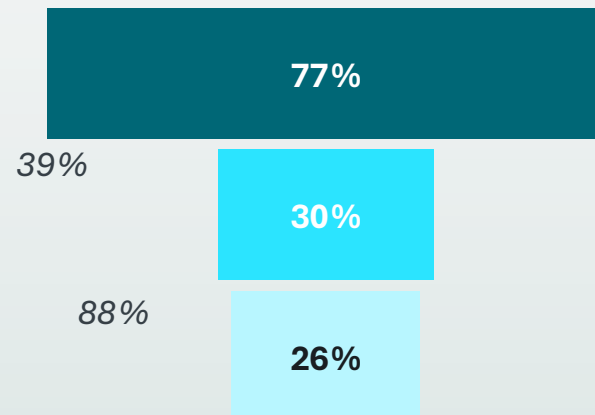
Career fairs in your area



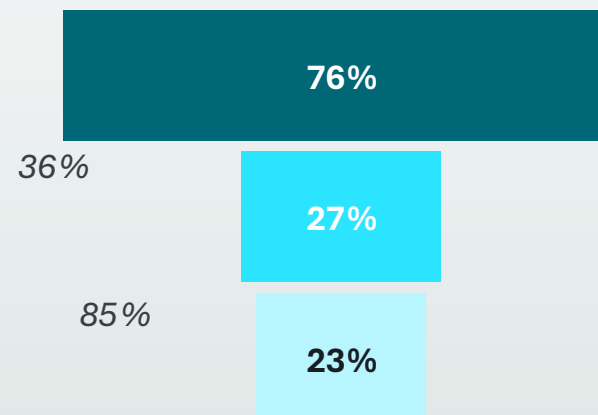
Work-site learning/Internship



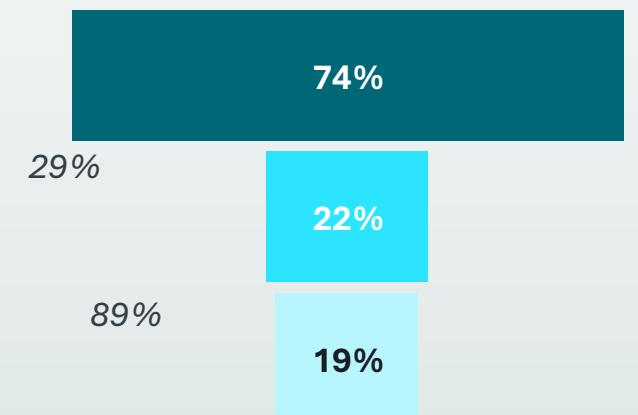
Career Technical Education (CTE)



CTE Dual Credit



Skills centers



All metrics shown among all young adults who attended high school in WA

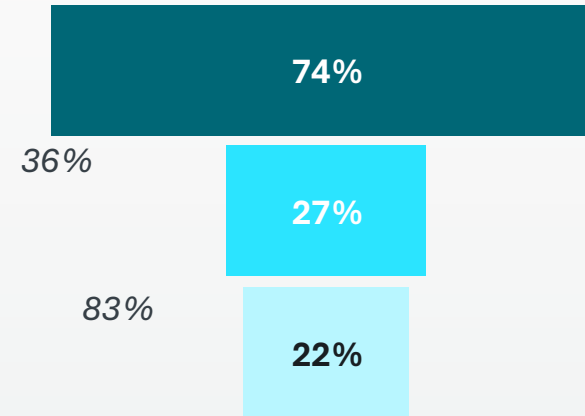
Conversion: The percentage who convert from one funnel stage to the next (use ÷ awareness; helpfulness ÷ use).

3 Career Explore, Career Launch, apprenticeships, and IB have lower awareness and helpfulness, but these metrics are still strong. Usage remains the biggest issue.

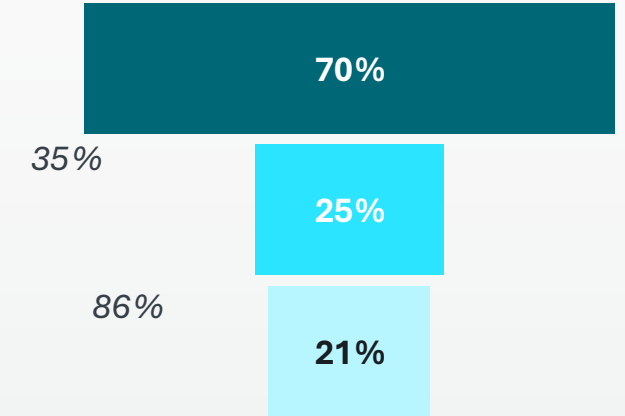
Funnel Analysis: Key



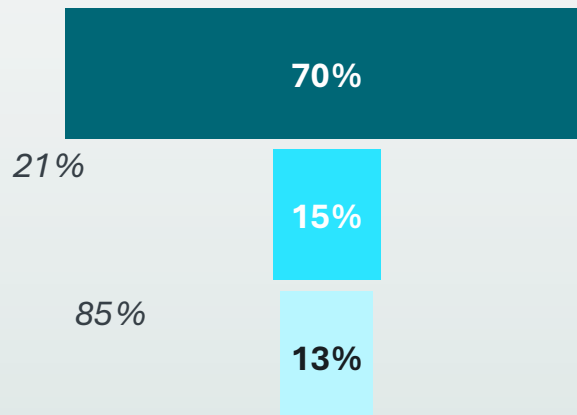
Career Prep (CTE pathways)



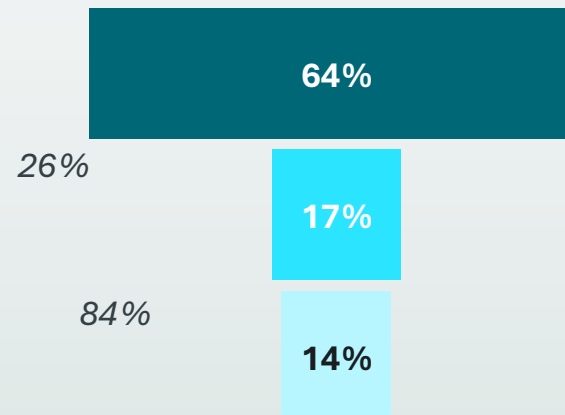
Career Explore



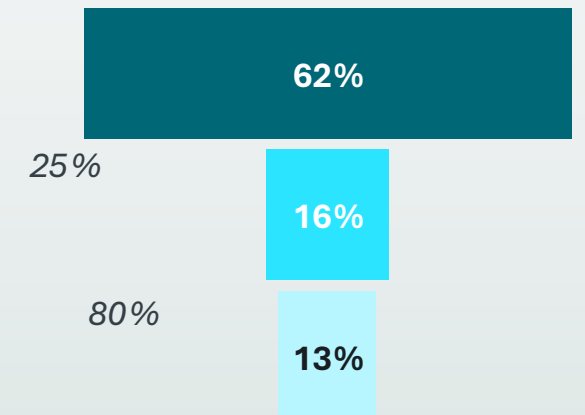
Registered apprenticeship programs



Career Launch



International Baccalaureate (IB)



All metrics shown among all young adults who attended high school in WA

Conversion: The percentage who convert from one funnel stage to the next (use ÷ awareness; helpfulness ÷ use).

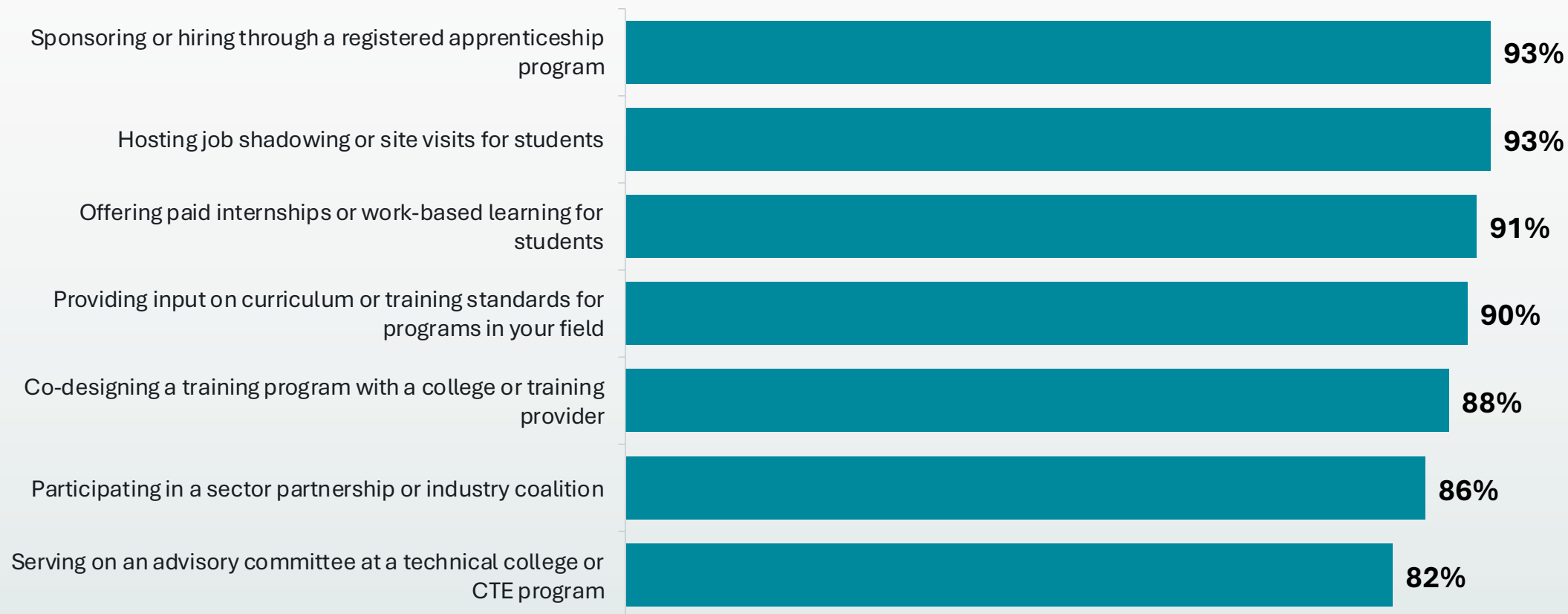
3 Young adults' lack of program use reflects a mix of low perceived relevance, limited understanding, and uncertainty about whether they qualify

Challenges and barriers to using each program (Multiselect)

	Running Start	AP courses	CiHS	HSBP	Career fairs in your area	Work-site learning	CTE programs	CTE Dual Credit	Skills centers	Career Prep	Career Explore	Registered apprenticeship programs	Career Launch	IB
The program is not relevant to me	25%	21%	25%	23%	21%	24%	25%	26%	25%	22%	23%	27%	23%	26%
I did not think the program would help me	23%	20%	20%	23%	23%	19%	21%	20%	22%	18%	22%	20%	20%	20%
I do not qualify for the program	18%	20%	16%	15%	9%	15%	13%	14%	12%	12%	13%	13%	15%	16%
I do not know enough about the program	18%	22%	20%	20%	24%	23%	21%	25%	26%	24%	19%	26%	23%	22%
I didn't really understand how the program works	18%	16%	17%	17%	15%	18%	16%	15%	17%	19%	16%	16%	15%	14%
The application process is too long or confusing	13%	14%	12%	17%	14%	14%	14%	12%	12%	14%	14%	12%	15%	12%
SELECTED AT LEAST ONE OF THE ABOVE BARRIERS	93%	94%	93%	93%	90%	91%	95%	94%	95%	93%	91%	95%	93%	95%

3 Employers show extremely high interest in engaging with schools and training programs in Washington as a way to invest in their talent pipeline

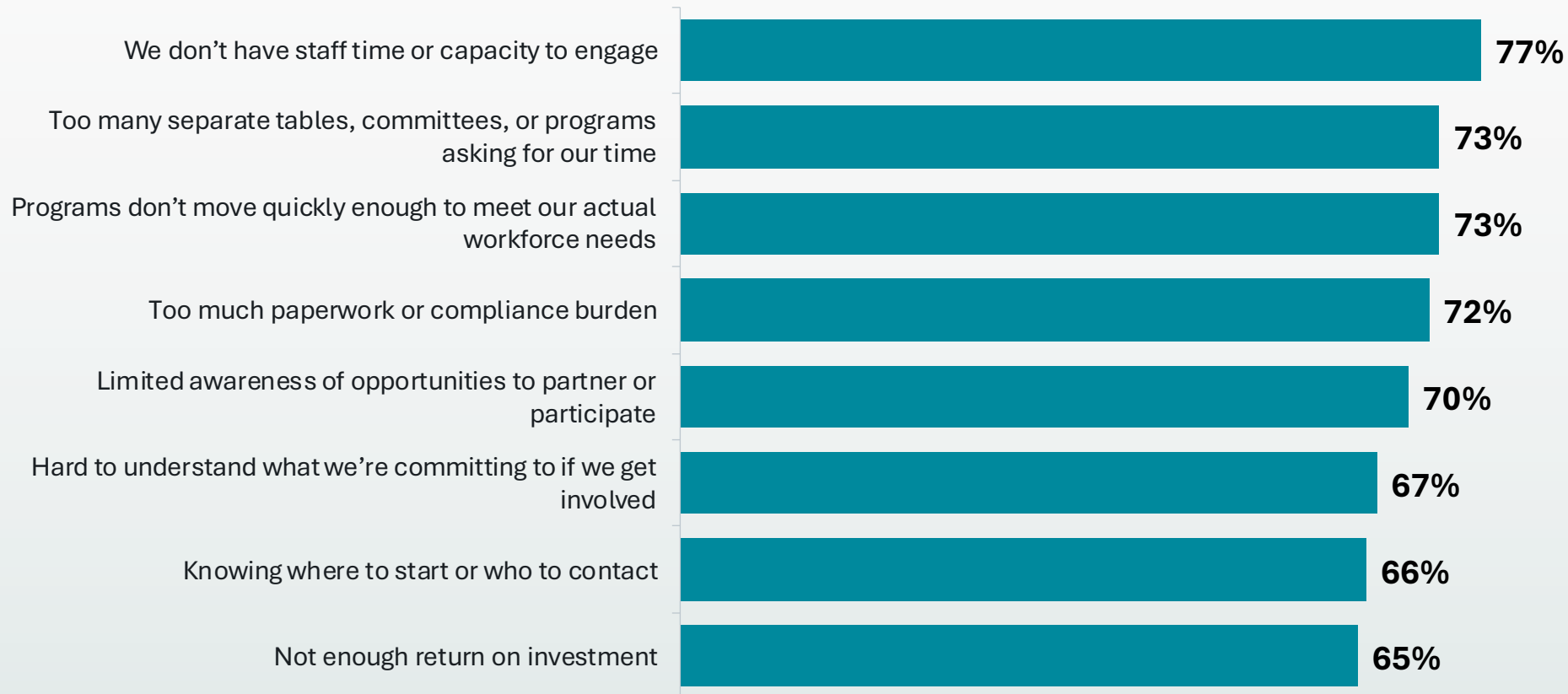
Employers' interest in types of engagement with Washington's schools, colleges, and training programs



3

But employers lack the bandwidth to engage with programs designed to connect them with young adults

Employers' barriers to engaging with Washington's schools, colleges and training programs



3

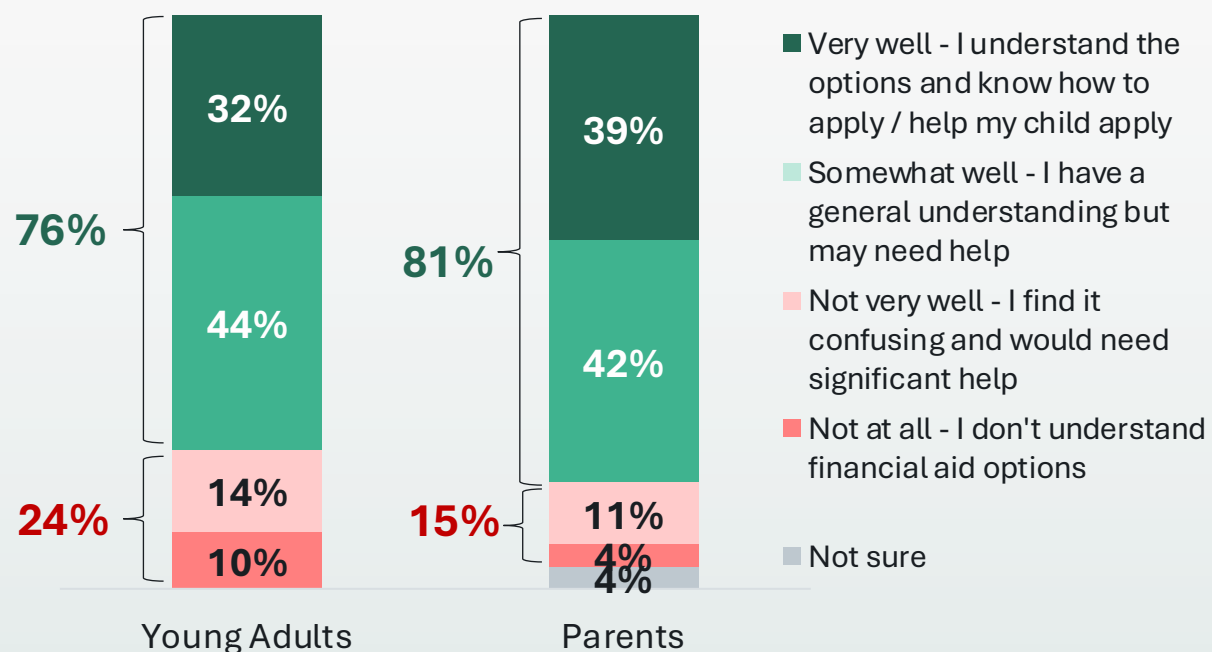
Employers want to simplify the process through single points of contact, direct connections, and clear information are the top ways to encourage employers to engage with schools and programs in the area

Employers' view on what would make it easier for their organization to engage with schools, colleges, or training programs



4 Financial aid is likewise a hugely untapped resource: Young adults and parents say they have a general understanding, but lack specifics of what WA can cover

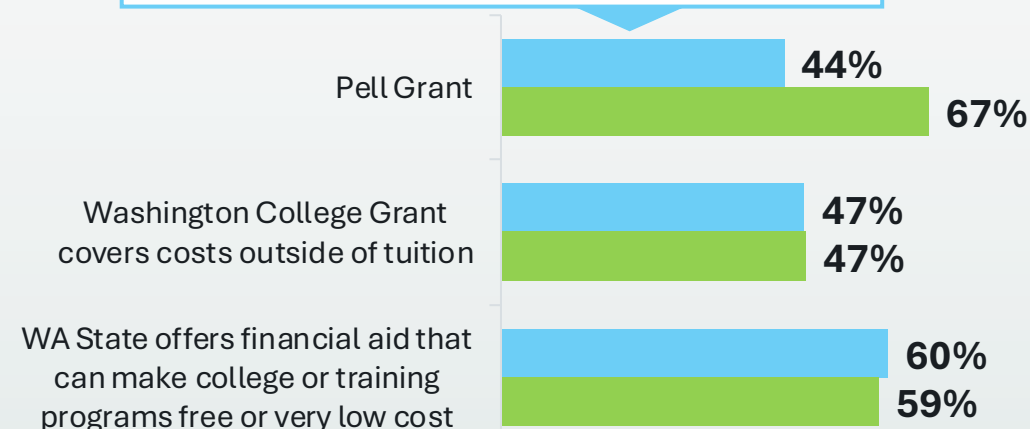
How well do you feel you understand and can navigate financial aid options (such as FAFSA, WASFA, scholarships, or grants)?



Awareness of specific financial aid options

■ Young Adults ■ Parents

Young adults who went to middle and high school in WA are **less aware of the Pell Grant** than those who went to school outside WA
School in WA **43%** | School outside WA **52%**

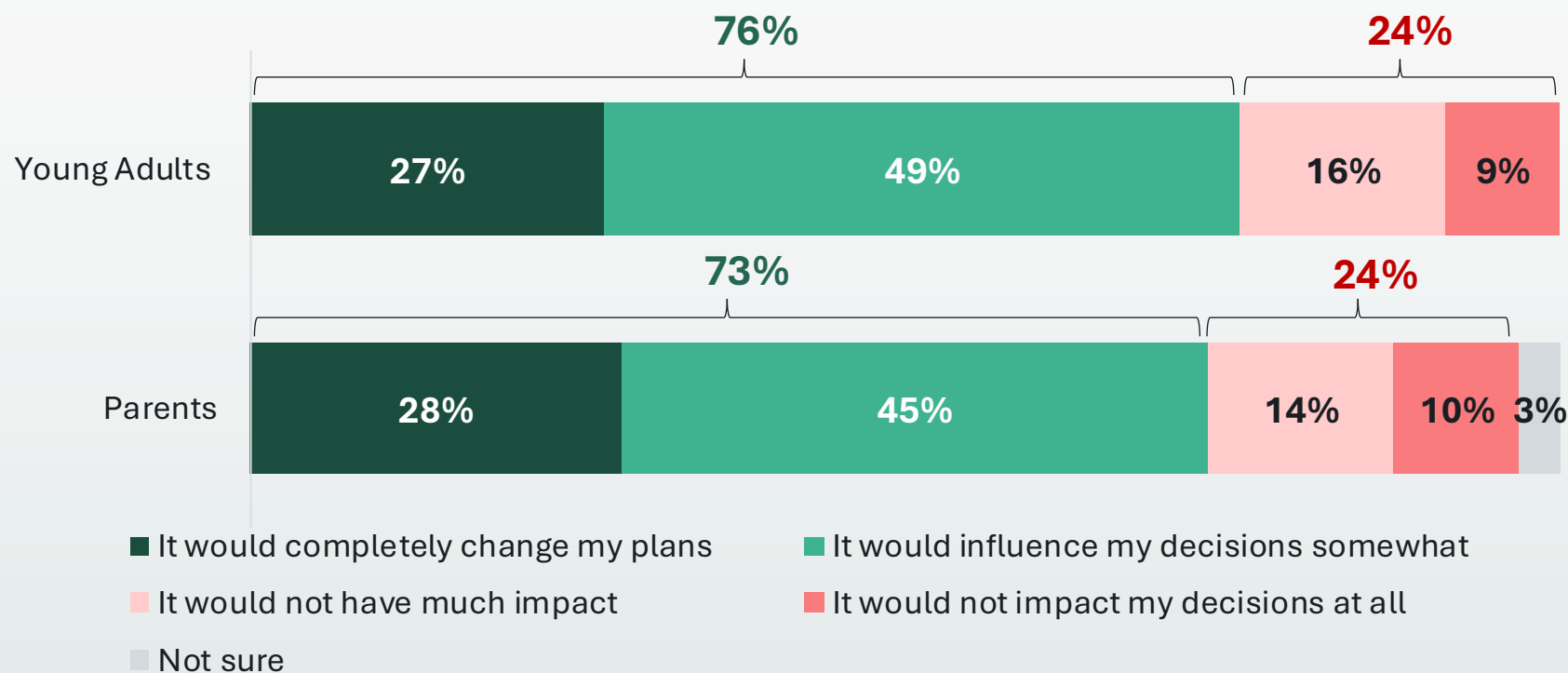


But knowledge of Washington-specific financial aid is lower for students from outside WA
School in WA **61%** | School outside WA **48%**

4

Affordability information could significantly change the direction young adults take

If you knew that college or training could be free or low cost through financial aid, how much would that impact your education or career decisions / the advice you give your child?

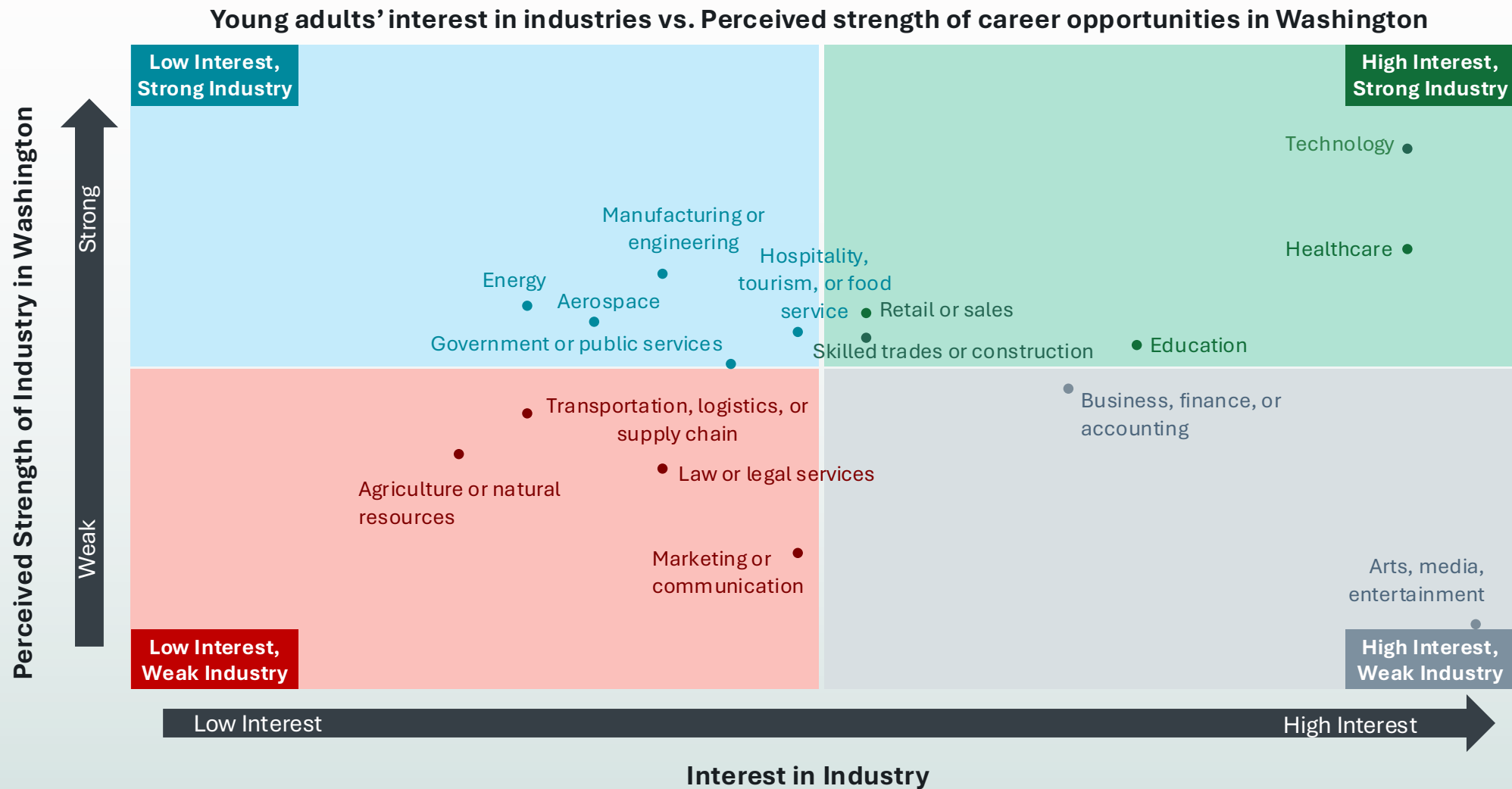


Young adults say the most helpful ways to learn about financial aid would be through...

A school counselor/advisor (32%)
Online tools that show what they qualify for (29%)
Step-by-step online guides/websites (27%)

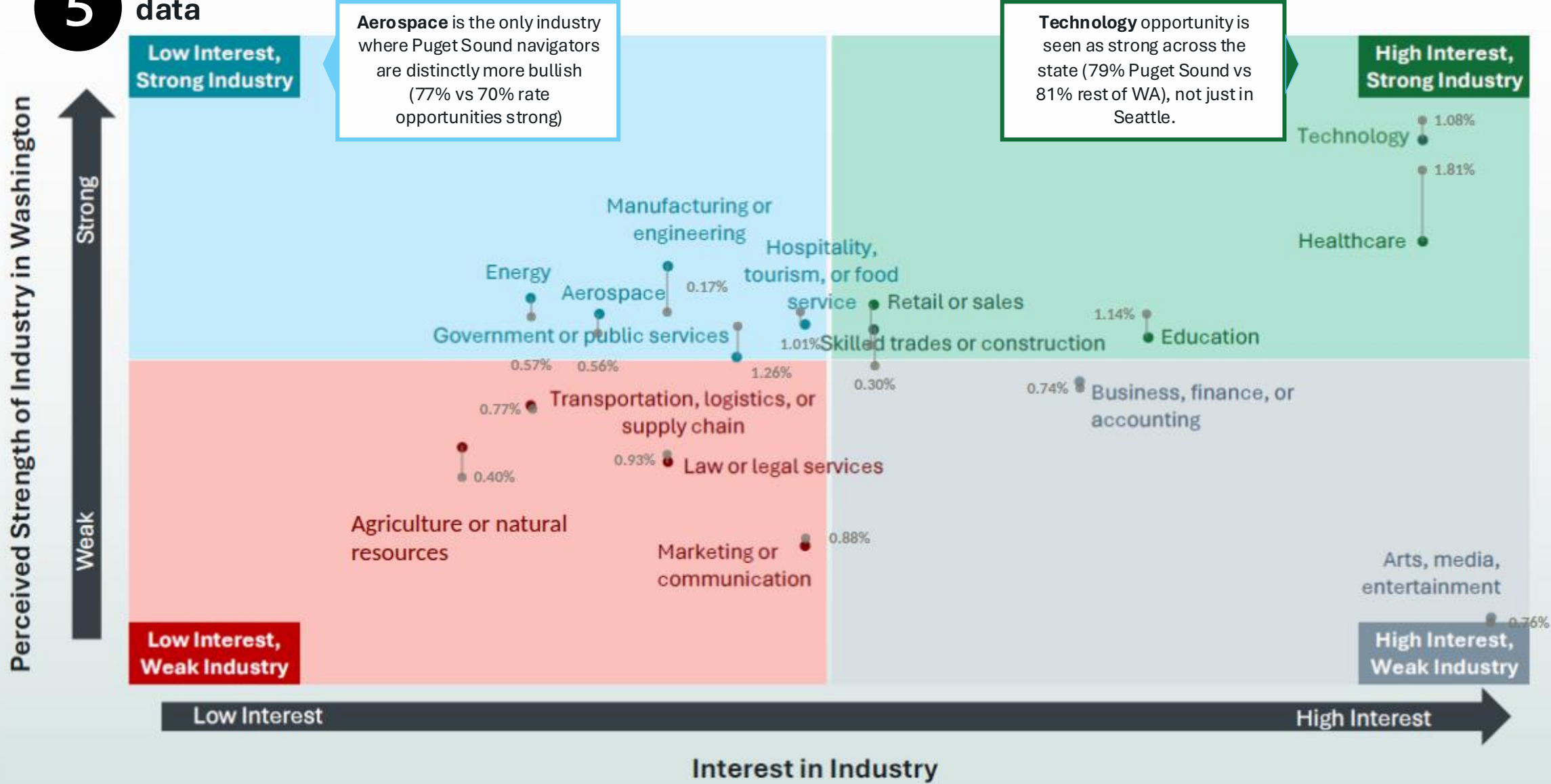
5

Closing Washington’s employment gap will require building interest in high-opportunity industries that young adults may currently overlook, such as manufacturing, aerospace, and hospitality



5

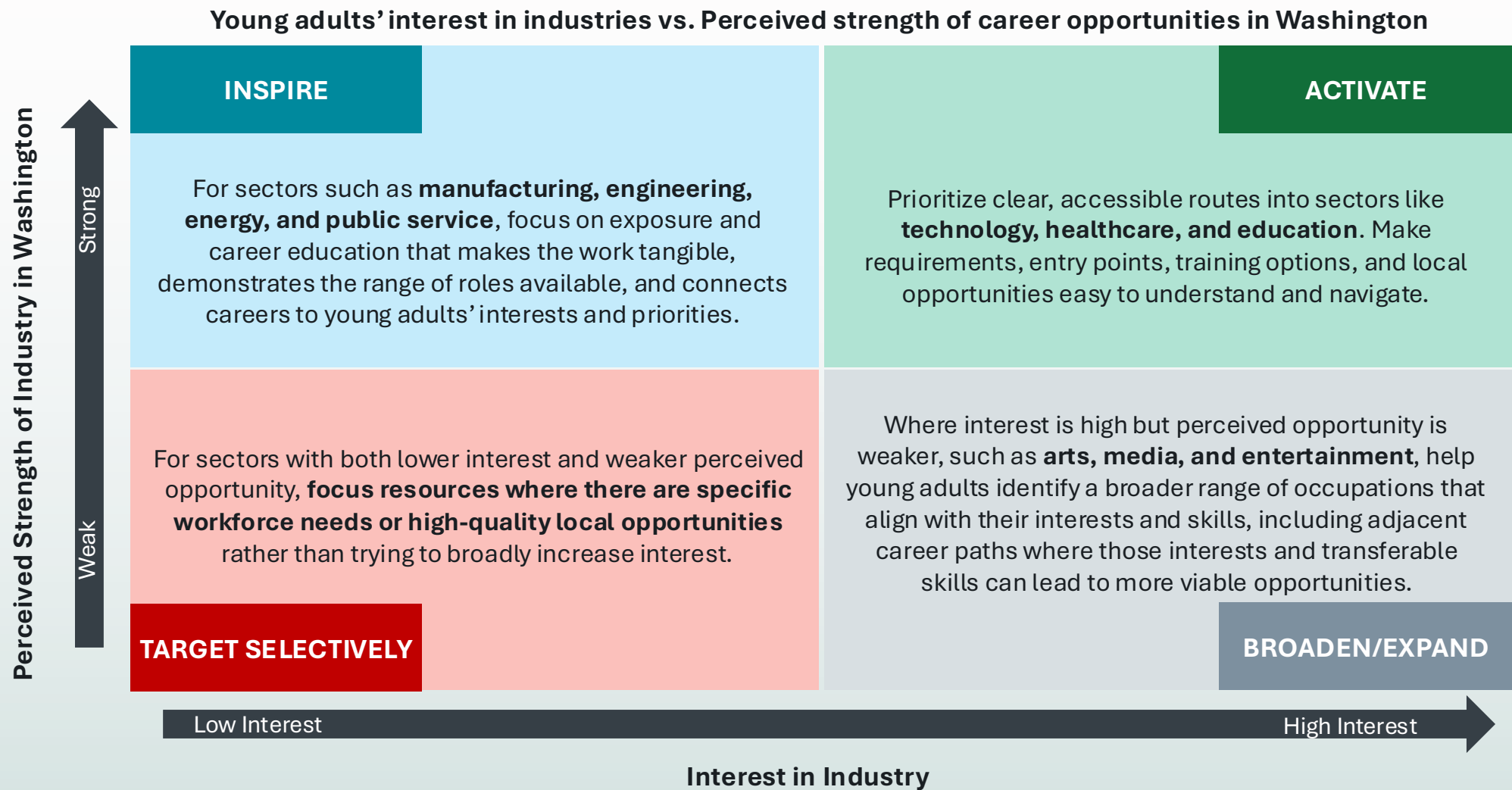
Young Adults' interest in industries vs perceived strength of career opportunities with industry growth data



Gray numbers show the industry growth as a weighted average of projected annual job-growth, relative to the statewide average (+0.83%).

5

Recommendations: Strength x Interest in Industry

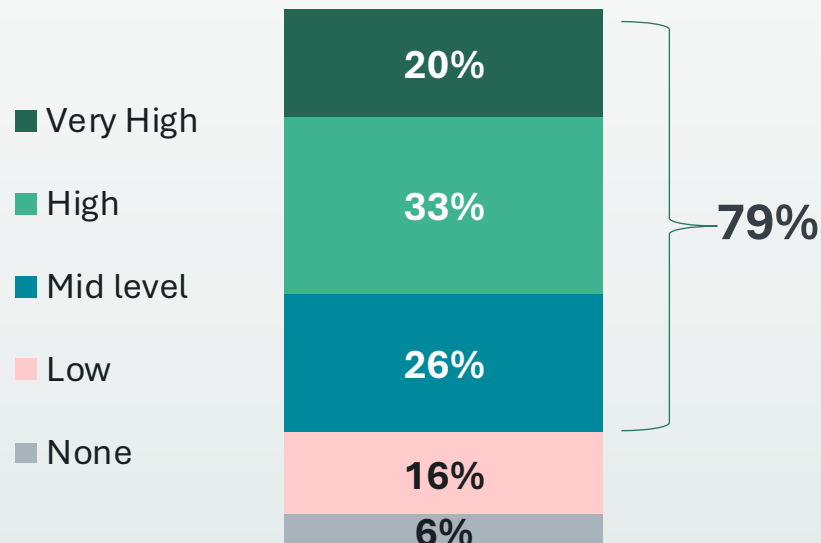


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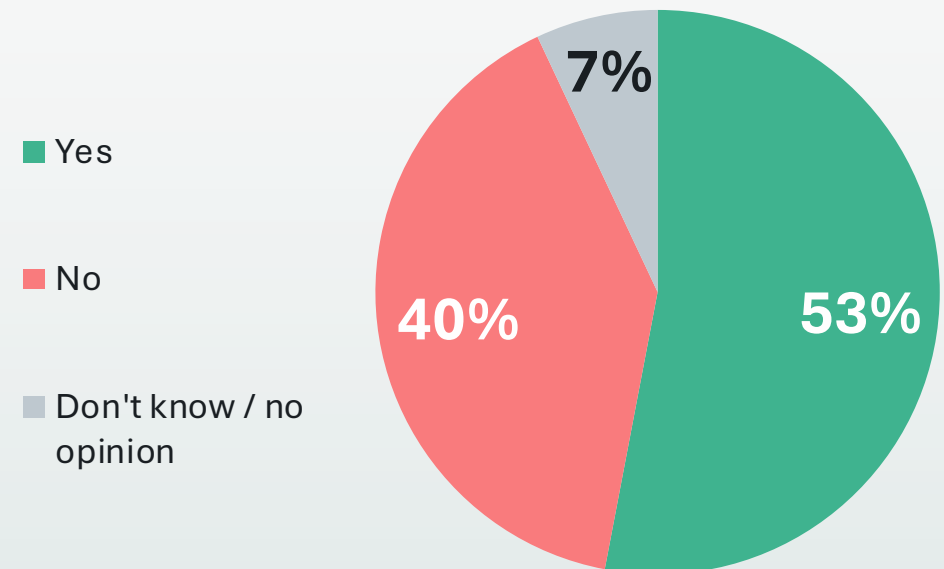
Employers are raising the AI bar faster than education is responding

Employers' view of AI skill requirements and AI/training/education

What degree of AI knowledge and skill does your organization require from entry level hires?



Do you think young adults' education or training is doing enough to help them develop the skills needed to use AI effectively?

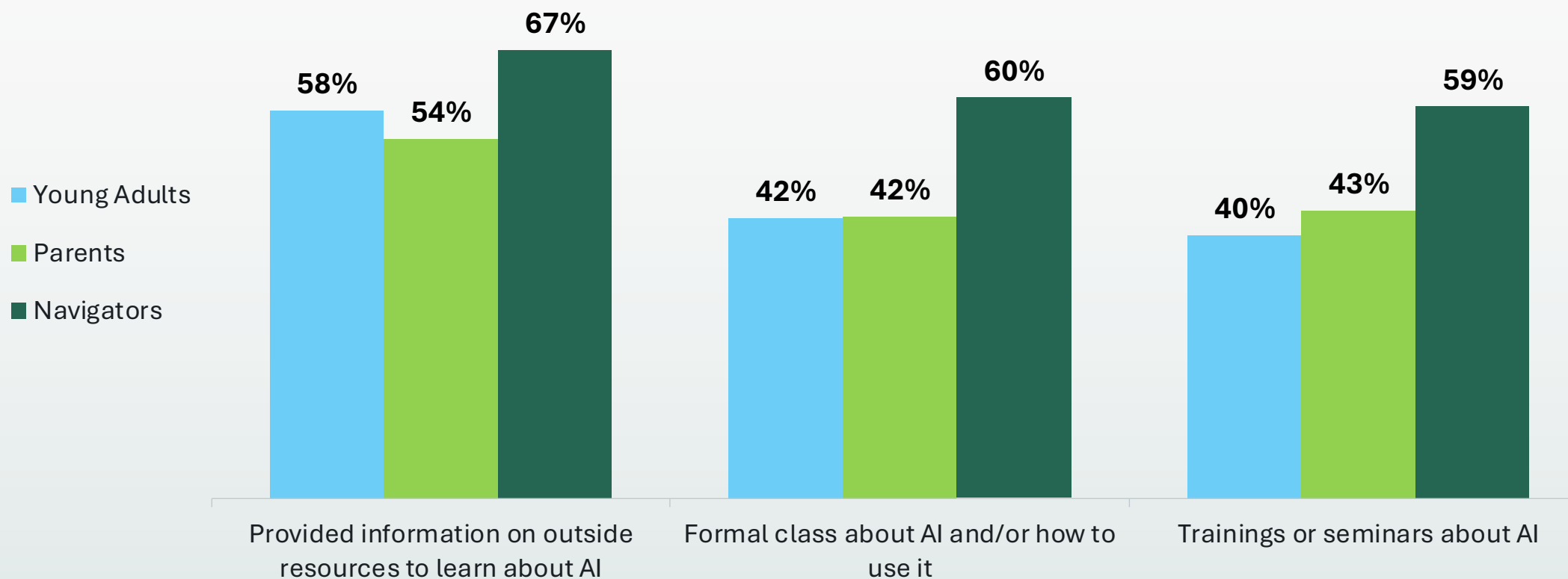


6

AI preparation is still too informal to meet quickly emerging workforce expectations

How education is helping young adults learn to use AI

Showing % of each audience who say each statement describes AI education and training



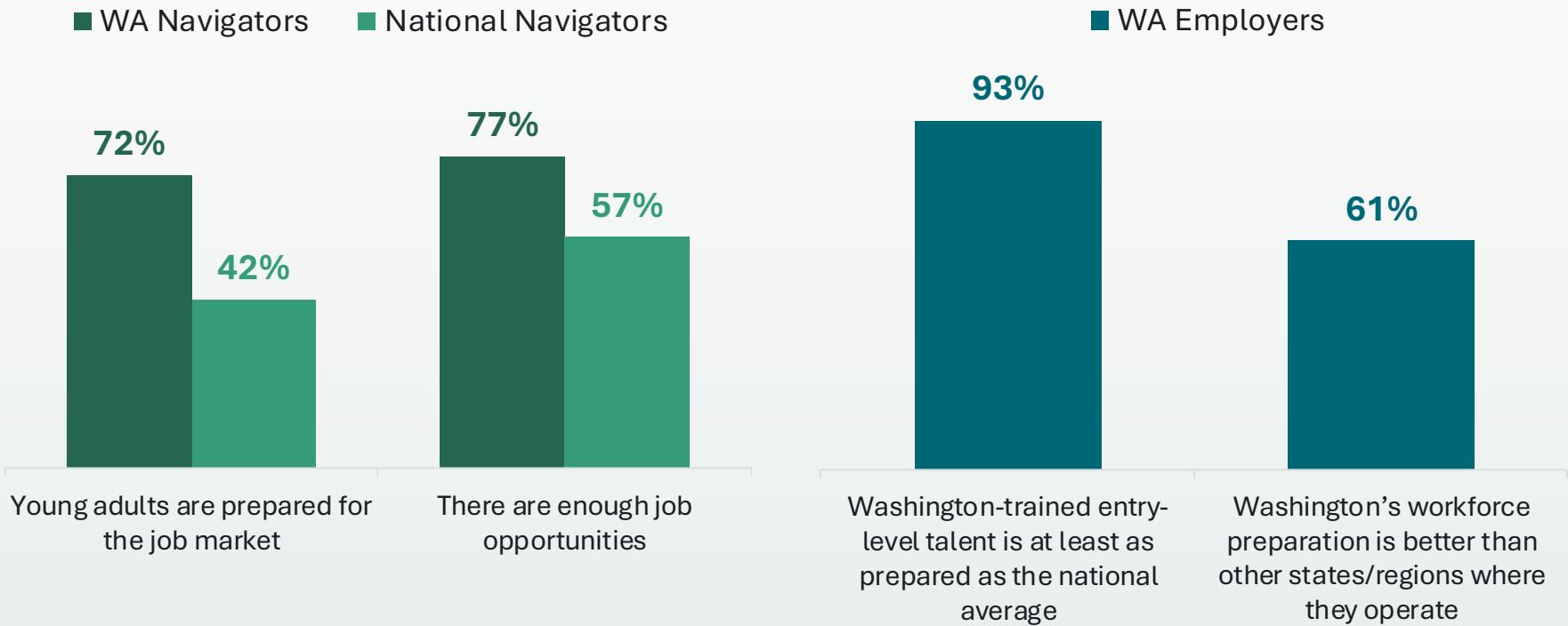


SECTION IV

How WA Compares

This section draws on The Broken Marketplace, a national study commissioned by the Schultz Family Foundation and conducted by HarrisX among more than 5,700 young adults, parents, navigators and educators, and employers. By comparing key themes and conclusions across the two studies, we highlight where Washington faces similar challenges and where its school-to-career ecosystem differs from the broader national landscape.

National Comparison: Washington’s infrastructure is stronger than the national picture, BUT...

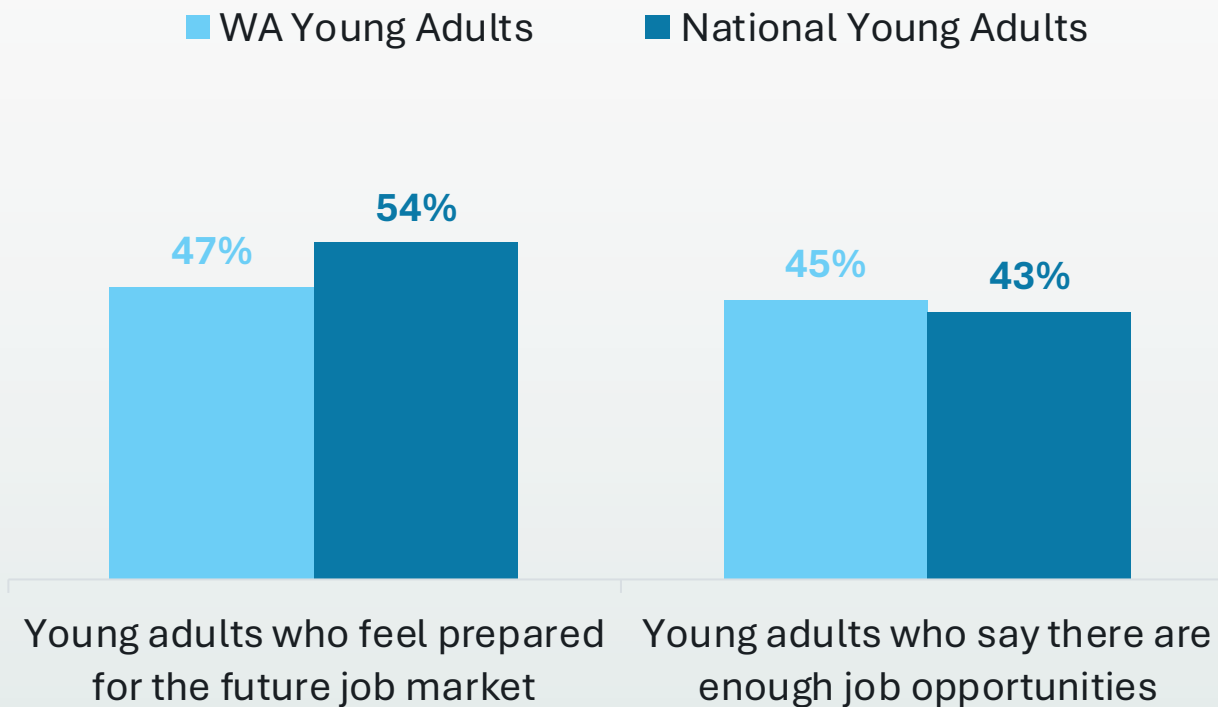


“I feel like Washington’s already kind of ahead of the curve with... these support services and training programs.” – WA Navigator, Career Counselor

“We’ve been having very good success in the Seattle and surrounding areas for recruiting entry level.” – WA Employer, Automotive industry

Takeaway:
Washington does not appear to have the same underlying system-confidence problem seen nationally. The people closest to the infrastructure see a comparatively strong ecosystem.

National Comparison: ...Young adults do not experience Washington's system as better, even when the infrastructure is



“I know that my university has a lot of resources that I can access, and there's lots of stuff online, but... I'm a very busy student with a busy schedule, and it can be hard to access those if I don't know where to go.”

-WA young adult, female, 18, 4-year college student

“There are good resources, but I always kind of missed them or just wasn't paying attention...I feel like most of the focus is on getting you through school...”

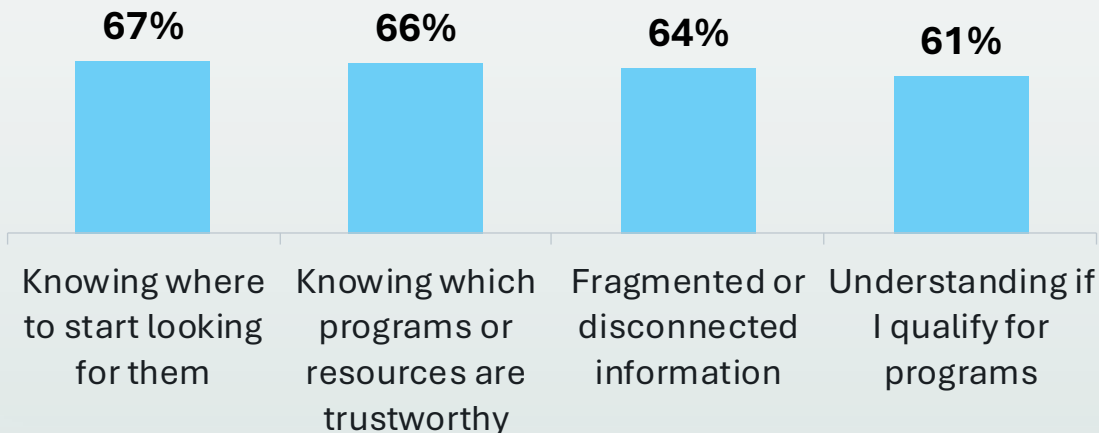
-WA young adult, male, 18, high school graduate

National Comparison: Washington does not need more programs, but needs better connection

Washington's programs and resources are strong:

- Young adults find available resources helpful when they use them
- Navigators say Washington's system is well-coordinated
- Employers rate Washington's young workforce highly compared to national average

But young adults still struggle to navigate the system. Most experiencing the following challenges:



Takeaways:

- Simplify navigation
- Improve resource visibility and personalization
- Strengthen trusted human guidance
- Make eligibility, relevance, and next steps clearer

WASHINGTON STATE ORIGINATORS:

Young adults educated in WA are more connected to local pathways and support than those who went to high school outside the state

Measure	MS and HS in WA	MS and HS outside	Gap
It's a challenge finding someone to guide/help me	53%	60%	-7
Aware of Washington-specific financial aid	61%	48%	+13
Aware of the Pell Grant (federal)	43%	52%	-9
Use CTE programs	30%	15%	+15
Use CTE Dual Credit	28%	15%	+13
Interested in a 4-year program	49%	39%	+10
Feel a 4-year program is encouraged to them	81%	71%	+10
Want clearer info on in-demand local careers	23%	26%	-3

● Leads among WA-educated ● Leads among outside-WA educated

WHAT IT MEANS

Rooted in the WA system

WA-educated young adults are far more likely to use state pathways — CTE (30% vs 15%), Dual Credit (28% vs 15%) — and to be steered toward 4-year programs (81% vs 71% encouraged).

Financial aid splits by system

They know WA-specific aid better (61% vs 48%), but are less aware of the federal Pell Grant (43% vs 52%) — each group knows the system it grew up in.

Outsiders lack a guide

Young adults educated outside WA are 7 pts more likely to struggle to find someone to guide them (60 vs. 53%).



APPENDIX

Detailed Research Findings



Appendix: Section 1

Young Adults' Preparation for the Future

Key findings:

Young adults' preparation for the future

Washington's system earns high marks — but confidence hasn't translated into readiness.

Across all four audiences, schools and job training programs are seen as doing their job: 88% of young adults in school, 92% of navigators, 91% of parents with a child in school, and 84% of employers say Washington is preparing young people well for their future. But that confidence does not hold when it comes to actual job market readiness — young adults, parents, and employers are all more skeptical about whether today's young people are truly prepared for the jobs of the next ten years.

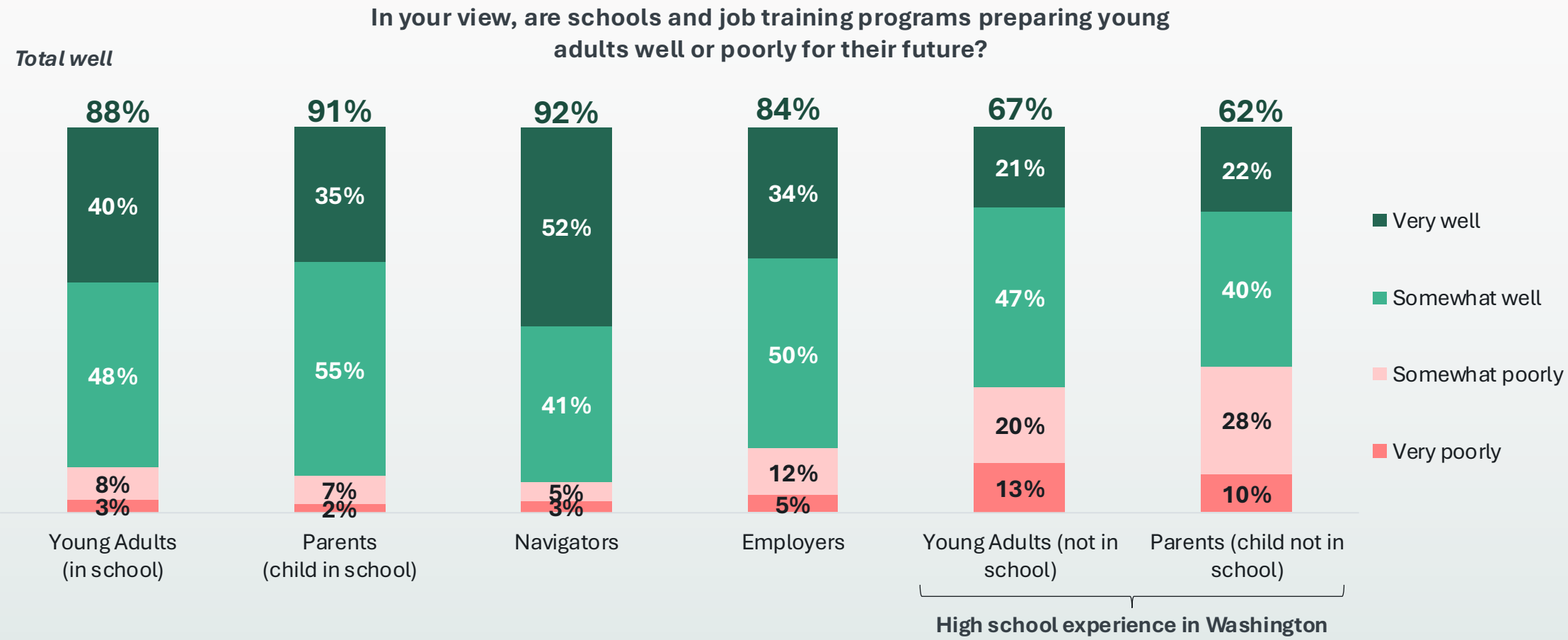
The system provides confidence for those who engage with it, but those outside the system feel insecure.

The gap widens further when young adults who have left school reflect on their high school experience in Washington: only 67% say it prepared them well for employment — a 21-point drop from their in-school peers. And for those who didn't engage with any education or career resource programs, the readiness gap is stark: when looking back on high school in Washington, just 32% say their high school prepared them well for employment, compared to 45% of those who used at least one program.

Access alone isn't enough when local opportunities are scarce.

43% of young adults say their community does not have enough job opportunities for everyone. That figure rises to 53% among suburban young adults and 59% among those in rural areas, compared to just 34% in urban communities. Similarly, half of young adults feel they need to leave their community or area to have great employment opportunities; this rises to 67% among rural young adults. For these young people, the problem is not only that the bridge to employment is hard to find — it's that for many outside Washington's major metros, there may not be enough on the other side.

Current students are confident in schools preparing them for the future, WA young adults entering the workforce are less convinced



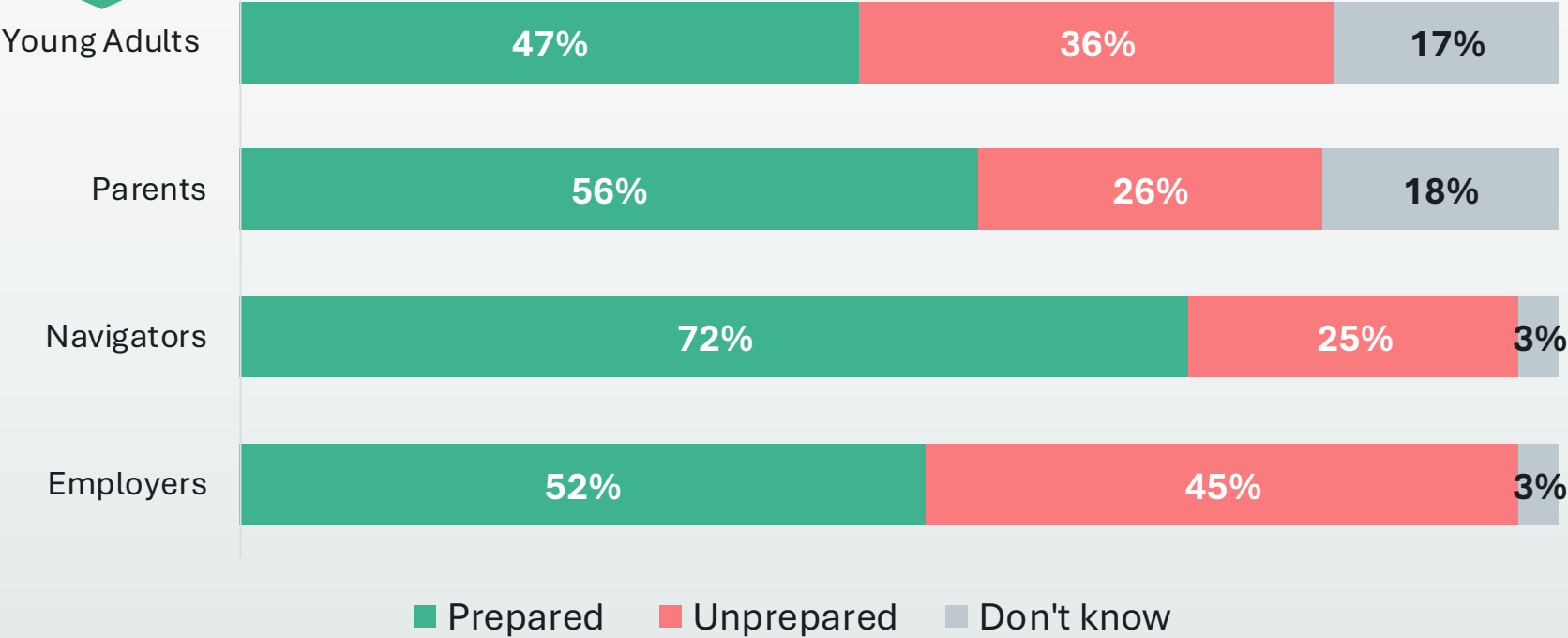
Young Adults in school (n=921) | Parents with child in school (n=338) | Navigators (n=502) | Employers (n=200)
Young Adults not in school but went to high school in WA (n=722) | Parents with child not in school but went to high school in WA (n=144)
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Perceptions of strong preparation don't connect to outcomes: While navigators believe young adults are prepared for the job market, all other audiences are more skeptical

Post-HS Cliff:

Perceptions differ by age among YAs, with 18-20 year olds feeling the most pressure:
16-17 51% | **18-20 40%** | 21-24 49%

Do you mostly feel that young adults are prepared or unprepared for the job market over the next 10 years?



Young adults and employers agree that hands-on, career-focused learning is key to preparing young people for the future

Why do you feel that schools and job training are preparing young adults well / poorly for the future? (open-end summaries)

Young Adults

Employers

“Well”

Young adults who felt well prepared for the future most often credited **hands-on, career-focused learning** that gave them practical experience before entering the workforce. **Internships, technical and career education, supportive teachers**, and opportunities to build **communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills** helped them feel more confident and ready for future education and careers.

Employers who felt young adults are well prepared pointed to **stronger career-focused education** that emphasizes **practical, hands-on learning**. Many highlighted **internships, career and technical education, industry partnerships, and updated technology training** as helping students develop **the technical, problem-solving, communication, and digital skills** needed to transition successfully into the workforce.

“Poorly”

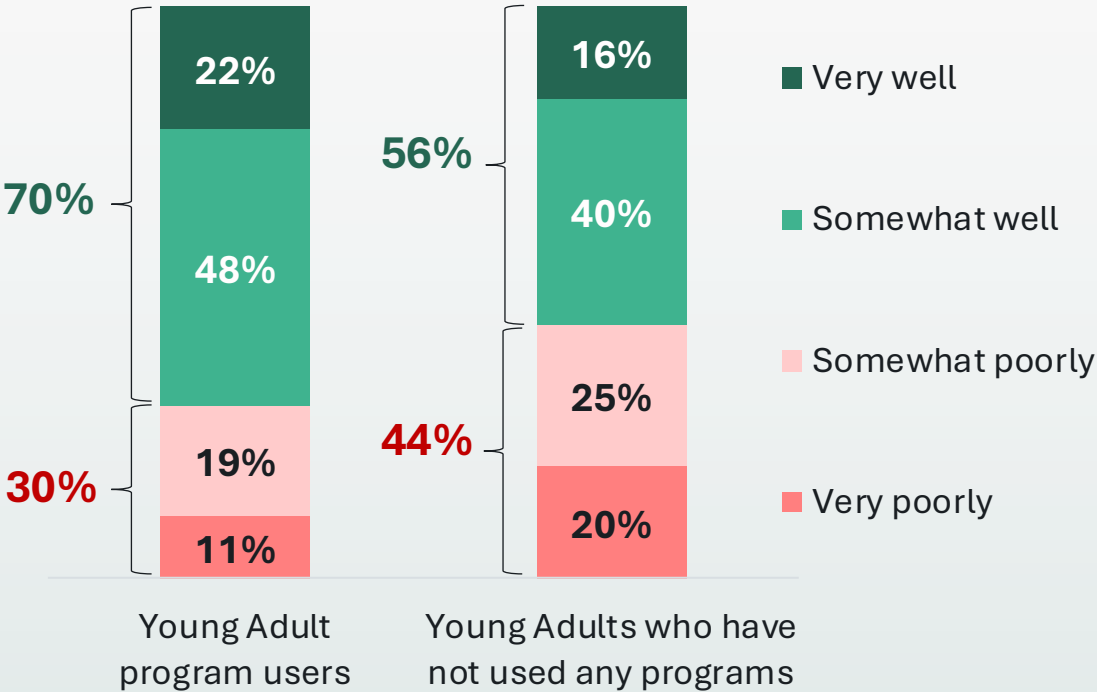
Young adults who felt poorly prepared said their education **focused too heavily on academics** while falling short on **practical life and career preparation**. Many wished they had received more guidance on **career pathways, financial literacy, job searching, and workplace expectations**, as well as more opportunities for **internships, hands-on learning, and real-world experience**.

Employers who felt young adults are poorly prepared said schools remain **too focused on theory and outdated coursework** while providing **too little real-world experience**. Many noted that graduates often **lack practical workplace skills and familiarity with current industry needs**, including AI and emerging technologies. They also emphasized the need for **stronger alignment between education and employer expectations**.

Using at least one career resource program makes young adults feel significantly more prepared for the future

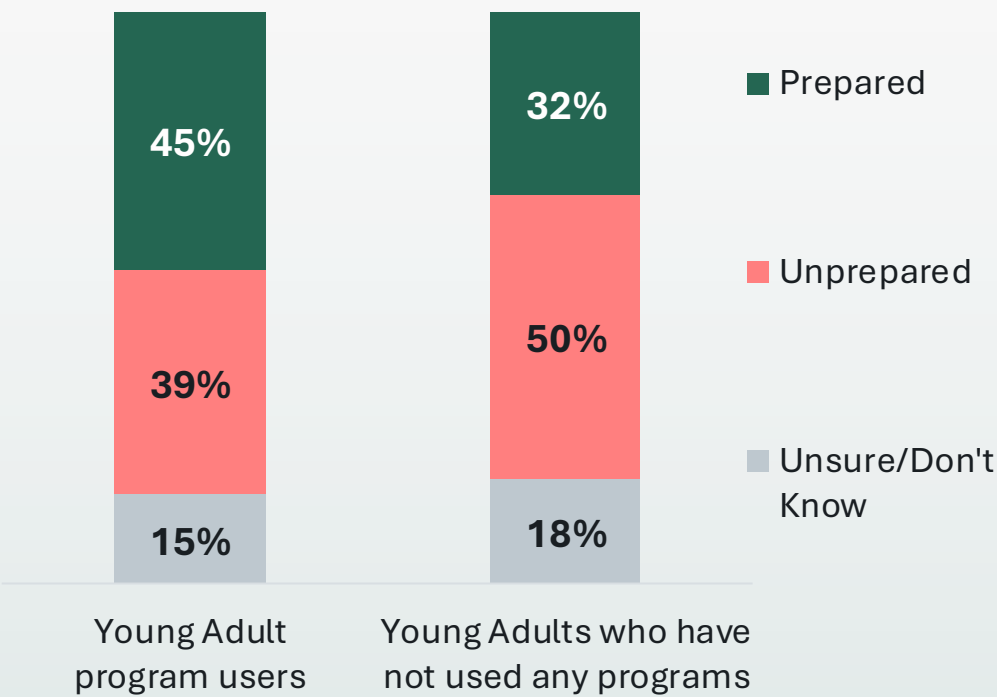
Did your high school experience in Washington prepare you well or badly for employment opportunities?

(Among those not currently in school, but attended high school in Washington)



Do you mostly feel prepared or unprepared for the job market over the next 10 years?

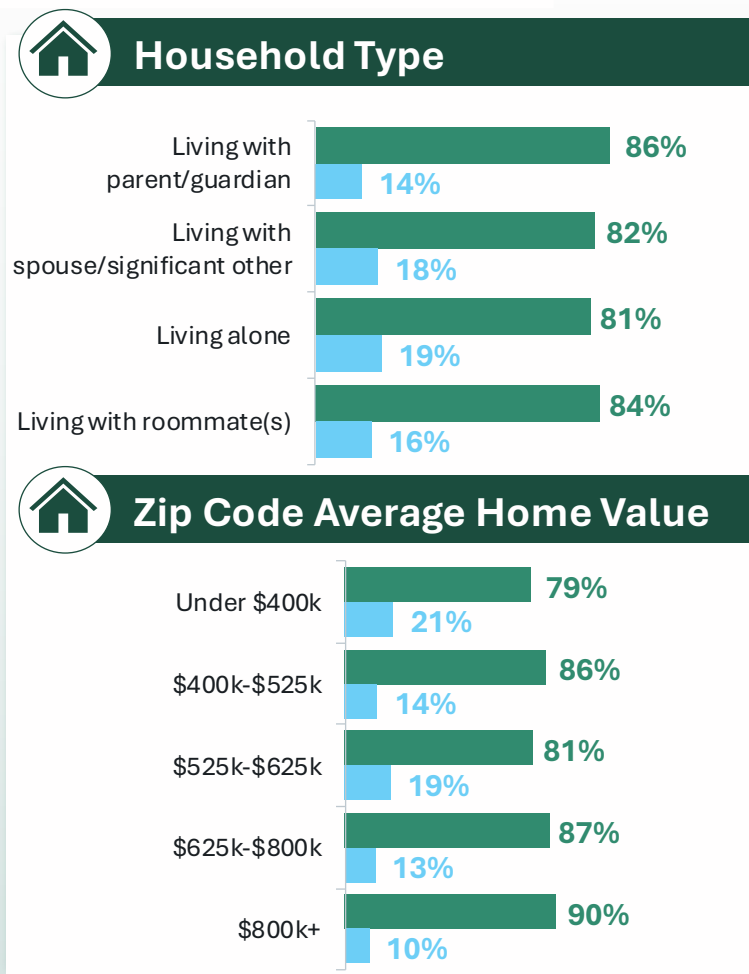
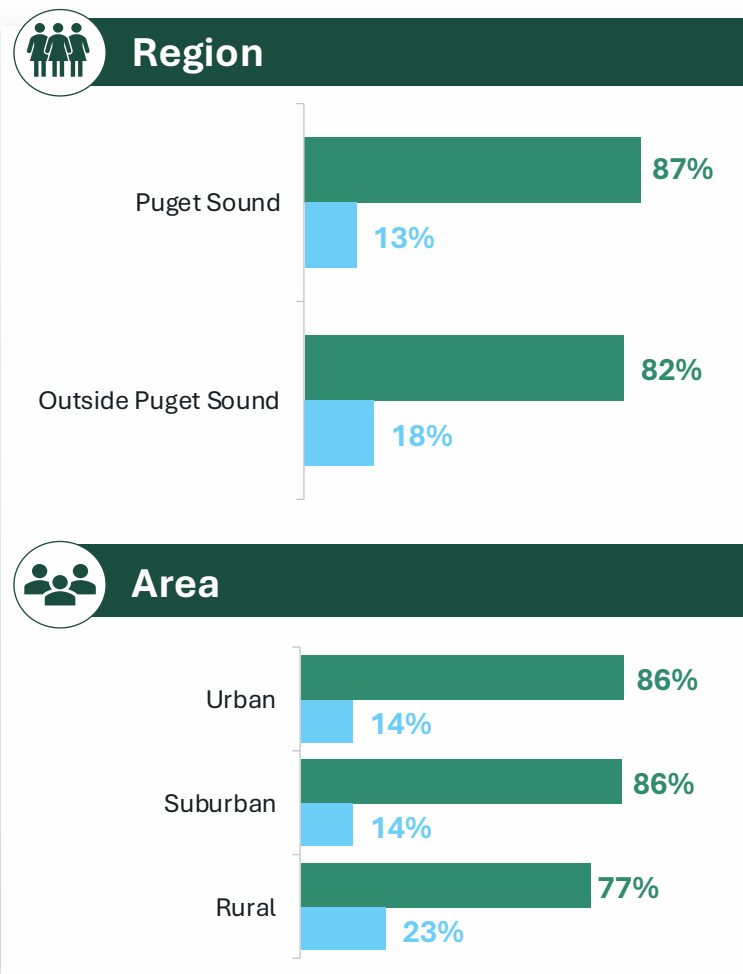
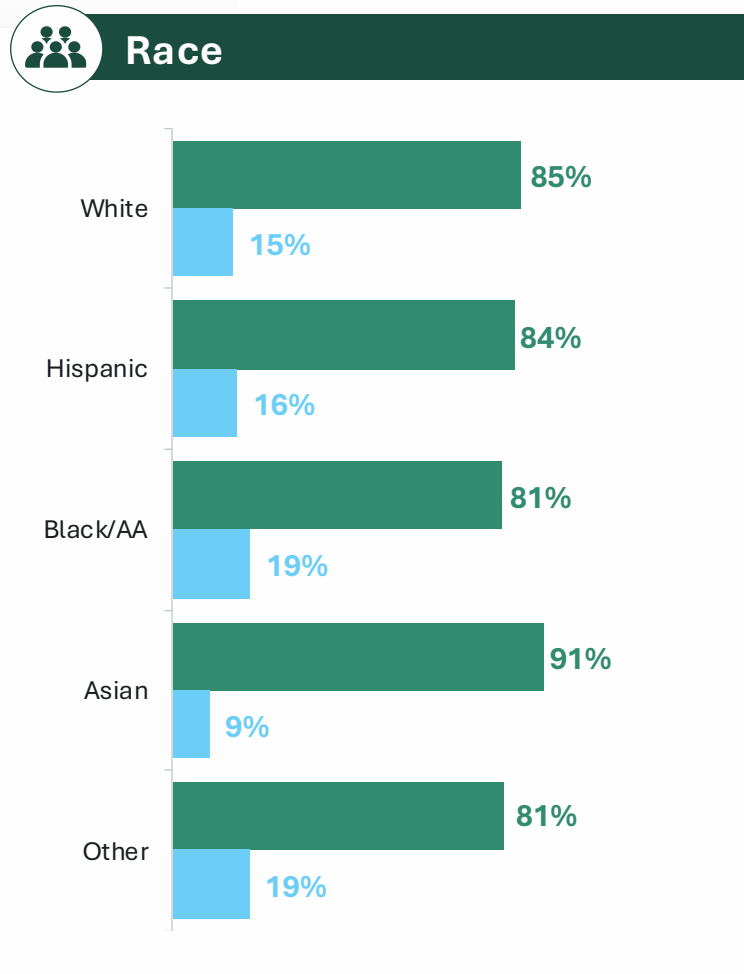
(Among those not currently in school, but attended high school in Washington)



Young adults in the Puget Sound region, urban and suburban areas, and more affluent zip codes are most likely to have used an education or career resource program

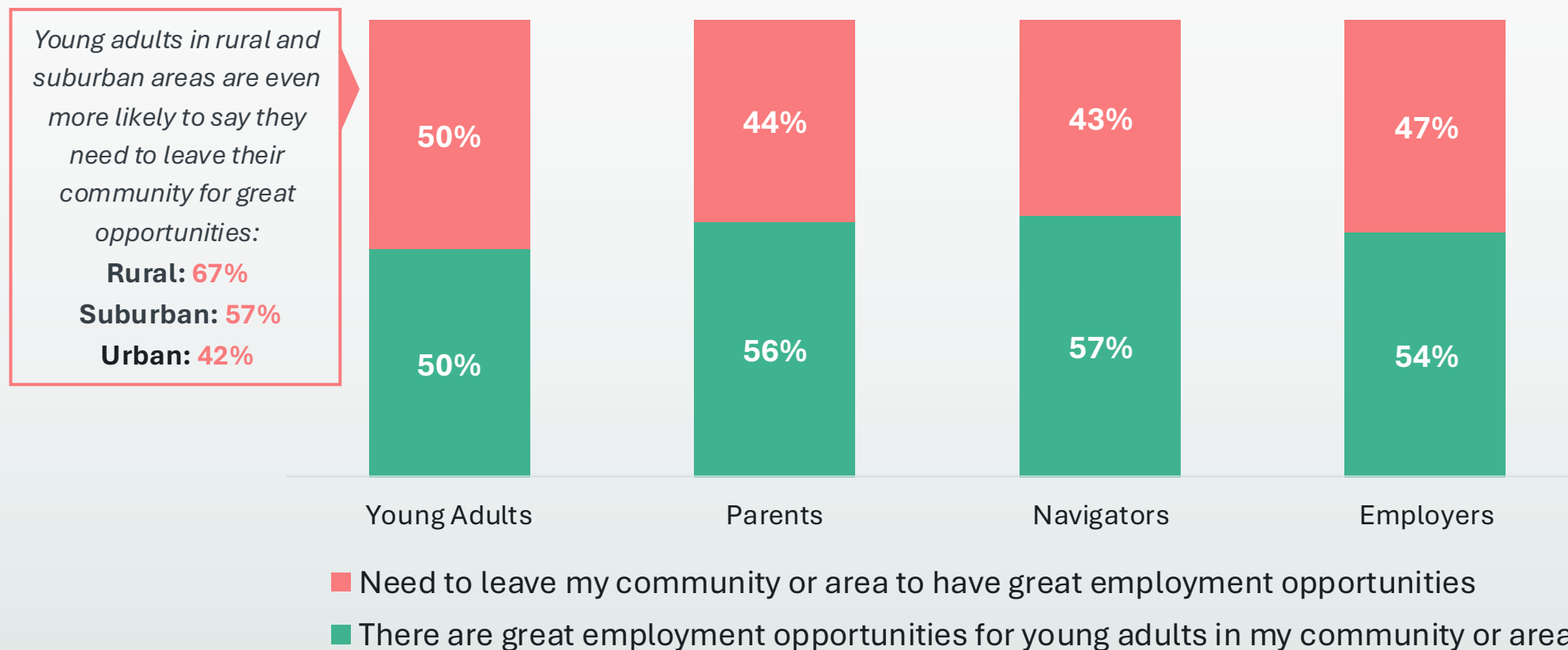
85% of young adults have used at least one education or career resource program

■ Young Adults who have used an education or career resource program ■ Young Adults who have not used a program



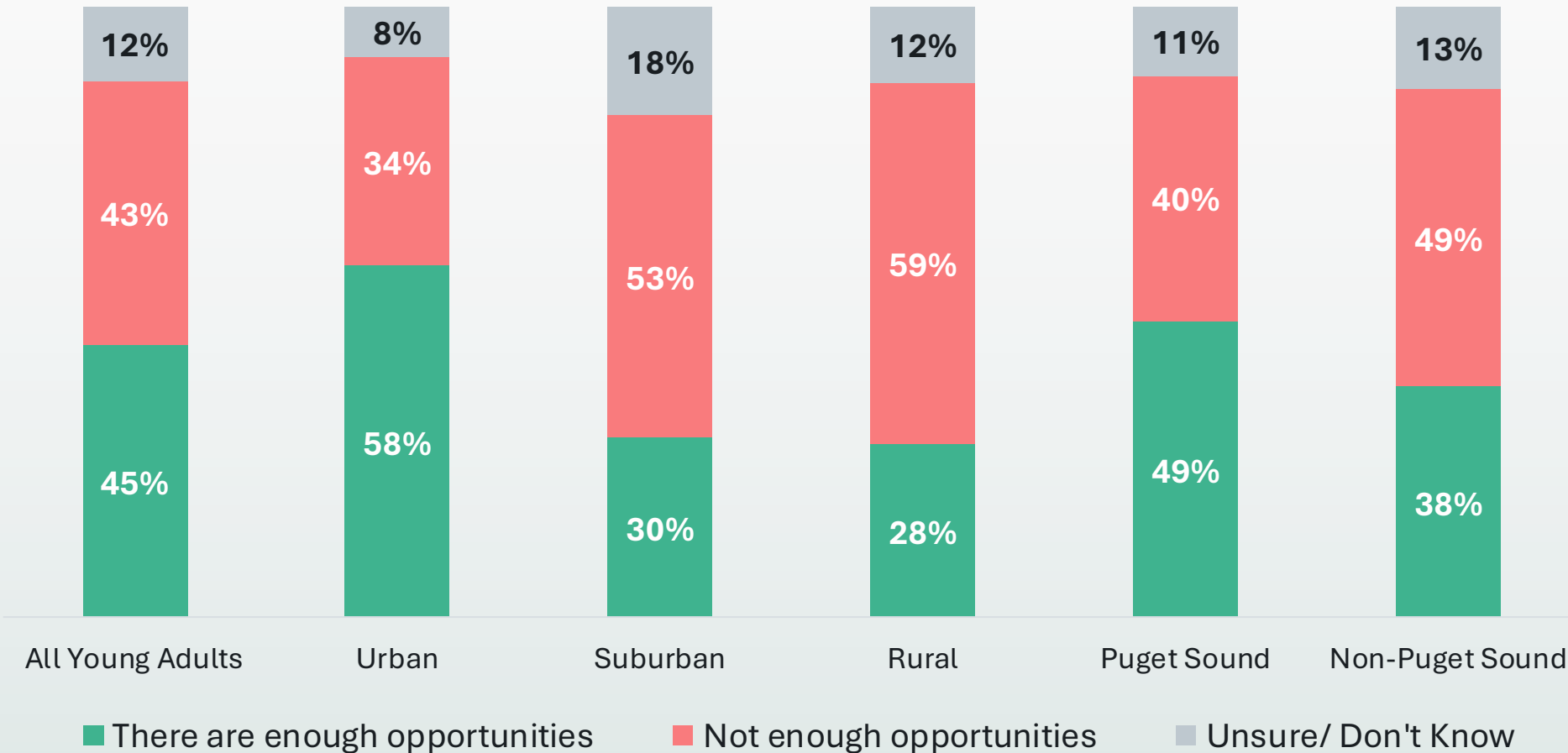
It's a supply problem too: almost half in each audience believe young adults need to leave their community to have great employment opportunities

Perspective of employment opportunities in community



The supply issue is in-part geography-driven: Young adults in rural areas and outside Puget Sound are more pessimistic about there being enough opportunities in their area

Young adults' perspective of job market in their community



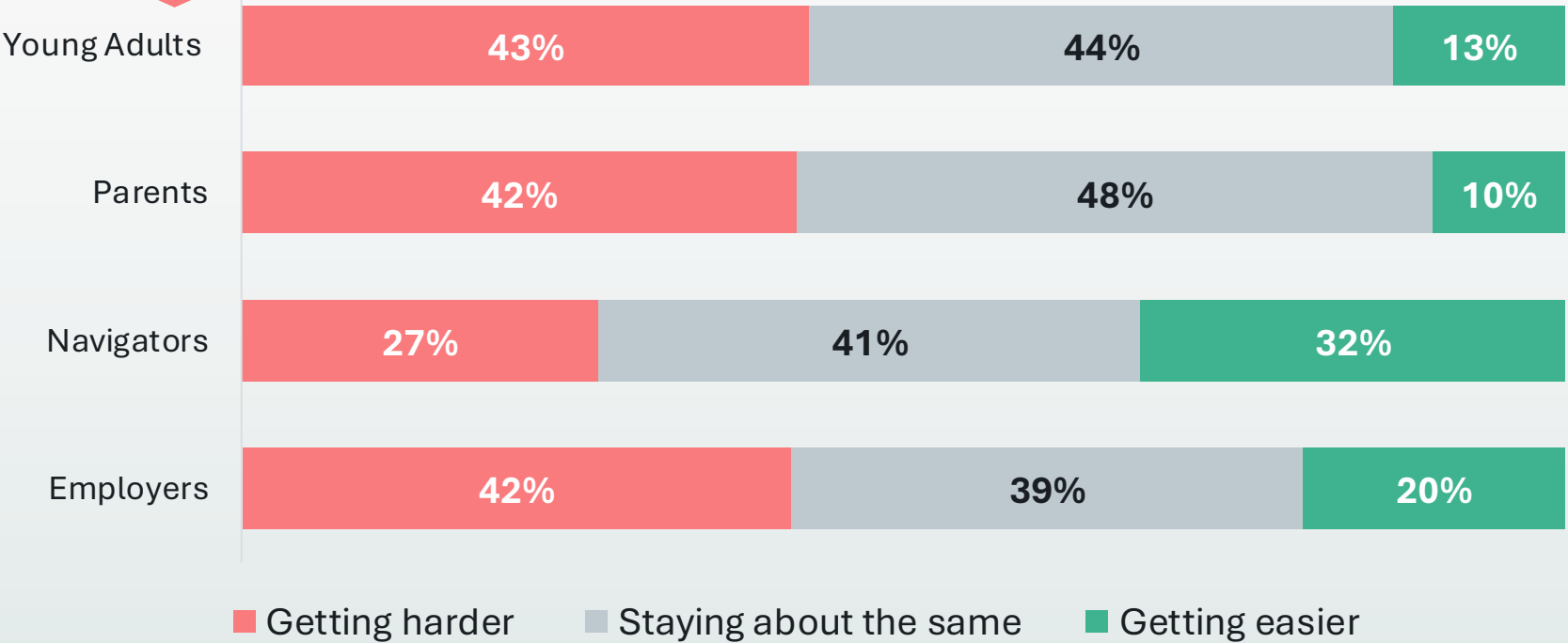
Similarly to young adults, parents in Puget Sound are more optimistic about there being enough opportunities:
Puget Sound: 52%
Non-Puget Sound: 31%

However, navigators both in and outside Puget Sound are optimistic, but this is elevated in Puget Sound
Puget Sound: 79%
Non-Puget Sound: 72%

Aside from navigators, all audiences are much more likely to feel it is getting more difficult rather than easier for young adults to find a good job in their community

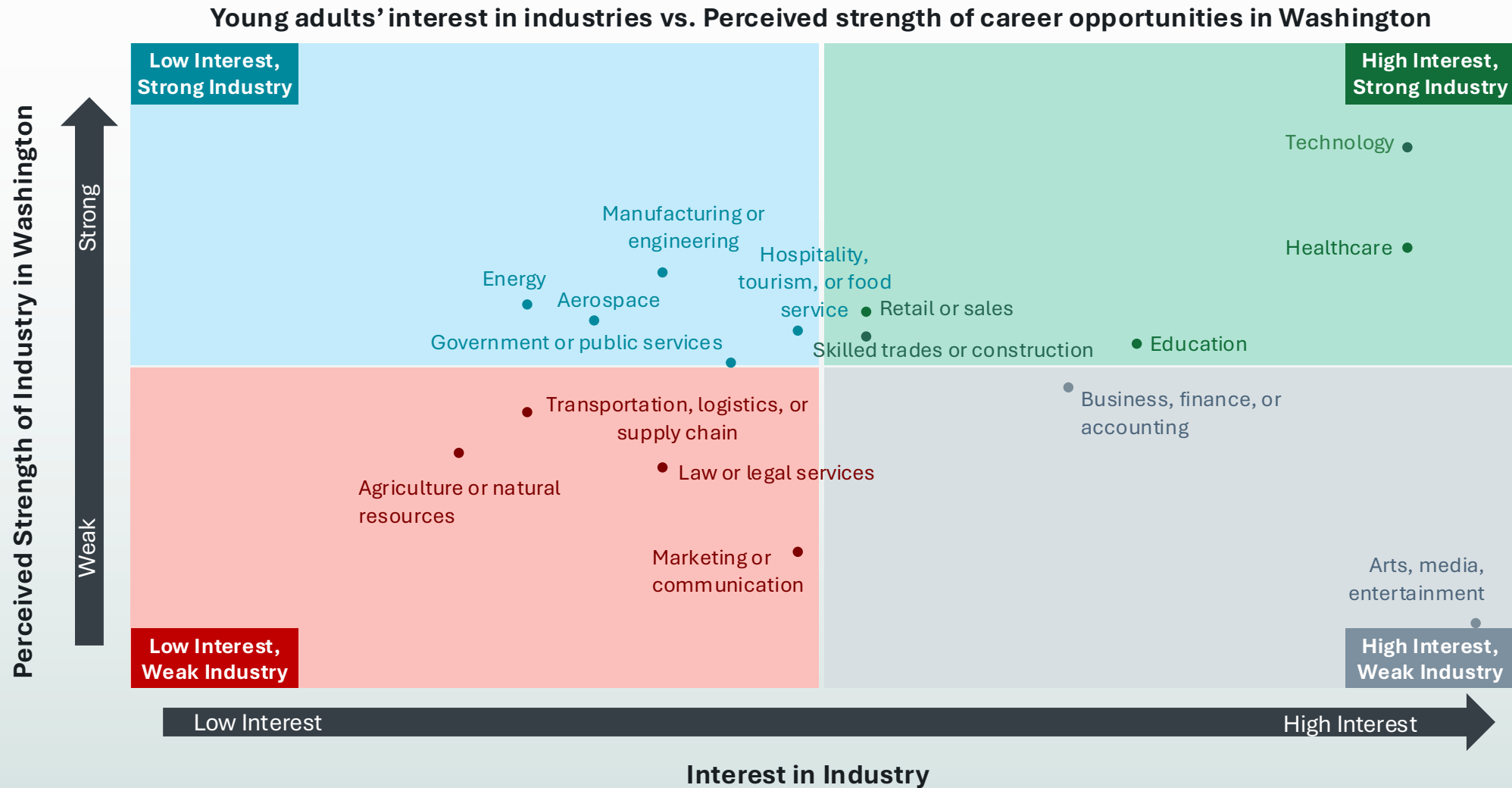
YAs aged 18+ are most likely to feel it is getting harder to get a good job in their area:
16-17 36% | 18-20 47% | 21-24 44%

Do you believe it is getting harder, staying about the same, or getting easier to get a good job in your community or area?



Puget Sound
navigators are more likely to see enough local job opportunities (79% vs 72%) and less likely to say it's getting harder to land a good job (25% vs 31%)

When aligning opportunities with interest the technology, healthcare, and education sectors provide the strongest opportunities for young adults. Business and the arts/media/entertainment also pique interest but are viewed as less reliable industries.





Appendix: Section 2

Where the System is Falling Short

Key findings:

Where the system is falling short

Resources exist, but many don't know how to find them.

Young adults and parents agree that their communities offer solid services — dual enrollment, financial aid navigation, and hands-on experiences receive strong marks for helpfulness among those who have used them. That confidence masks a fragmented reality: roughly one in three young adults and parents find it difficult to locate programs and resources on their own, with the most common barriers being not knowing where to start, not knowing which resources are trustworthy, and fragmented information.

Programs remain underused despite strong awareness results for those who do engage.

Program awareness is strong among young adults for well-established programs like Running Start and AP courses. While awareness of CTE pathways, skills centers, and work-based learning programs is a little behind (particularly among parents, who are often the first point of guidance), most young adults still know about each of these programs. And even where awareness exists, usage falls far short: the most-used programs reach fewer than 4 in 10 young adults, despite being rated helpful by the vast majority of those who use them. The system is broken because most young people never reach these programs, not because they don't work.

Meanwhile, the professionals designed to bridge that gap are stretched too thin

Most navigators say they rely on their own time and personal connections, beyond their paid role, to stay informed about work force trends and career opportunities for the young adults they serve. Employers, meanwhile, cite limited staff capacity as their primary barrier to engaging with schools and training programs despite near universal stated interest in doing so. The bridge-builders on both sides are under-resourced.

Resources are abundant – particularly dual enrollment programs and financial aid – across the board, navigators are over-confident about the resource landscape

How well or poorly do you think your area or community provides services in each of the following areas?

	Young Adults	Parents	Navigators
Access to dual enrollment programs or college credit courses in high school	79%	80%	85%
Support for navigating financial aid applications (FAFSA/WASFA)	74%	70%	84%
Strong alternatives to traditional 4-year college	73%	71%	84%
Making access to information and resources easy and intuitive	72%	72%	85%
Access to hands-on experiences	69%	64%	84%
Helping parents/guardians understand how to best help	68%	63%	84%
Ongoing support to help ensure completion of job and education training	68%	65%	83%
Access to funding to support living costs or emergency expenses for students	67%	59%	82%
Access to free or affordable postsecondary education and training	66%	61%	84%
Recruiting local talent for jobs versus recruiting from out-of-state	65%	64%	82%
Assistance re-entering a job or education training after dropping out	62%	63%	83%
Connecting young people directly to employers	61%	58%	82%

But young adults and parents aren't using them because they aren't sure where to find these resources and determine if they are trustworthy

Extent to which each is viewed as a challenge to using programs, resources, or services

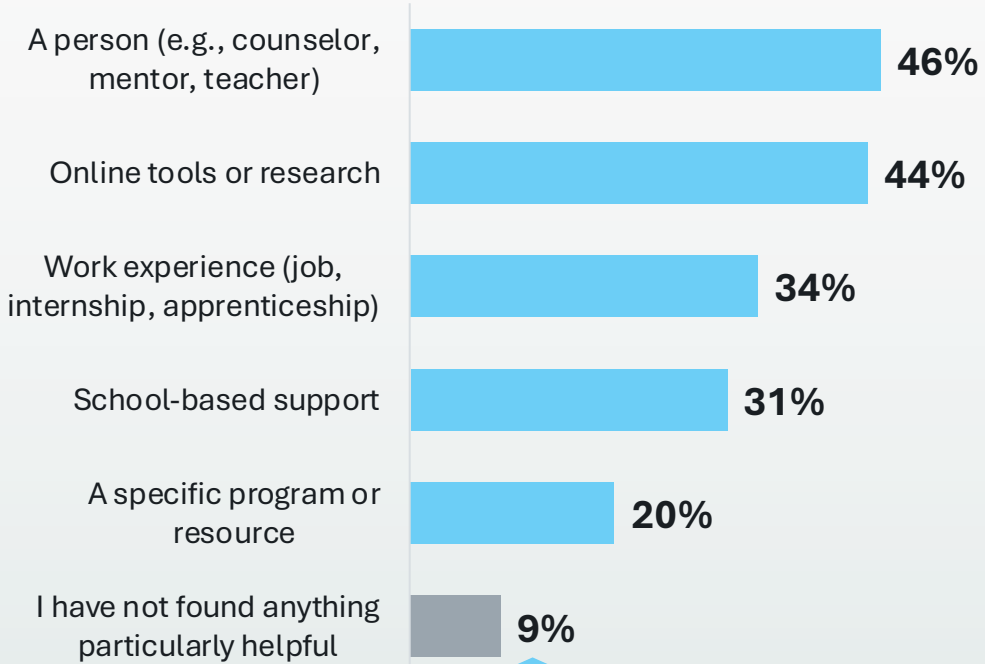
	Young Adults	Parents	Navigators
Knowing where to start looking for them	67%	61%	75%
Knowing which programs or resources are trustworthy	66%	65%	71%
Fragmented or disconnected information across different places	64%	67%	76%
Knowing young adults' interests to know which programs are relevant	63%	41%	72%
Making sense of information spread across many sources	62%	63%	75%
Having enough time or capacity to search for and compare options	61%	59%	76%
Understanding if I/they qualify for programs	61%	57%	76%
Knowing how to apply to them	59%	57%	76%
Worried/embarrassed about being judged	55%	48%	69%
Having someone to guide or help	55%	57%	72%

Parents underestimate the extent to which Young Adults are still figuring out their interests

Young adults who went to high school outside of WA were more likely to report challenges finding someone to guide them, compared to those who went to high school in WA (67% to 53%)

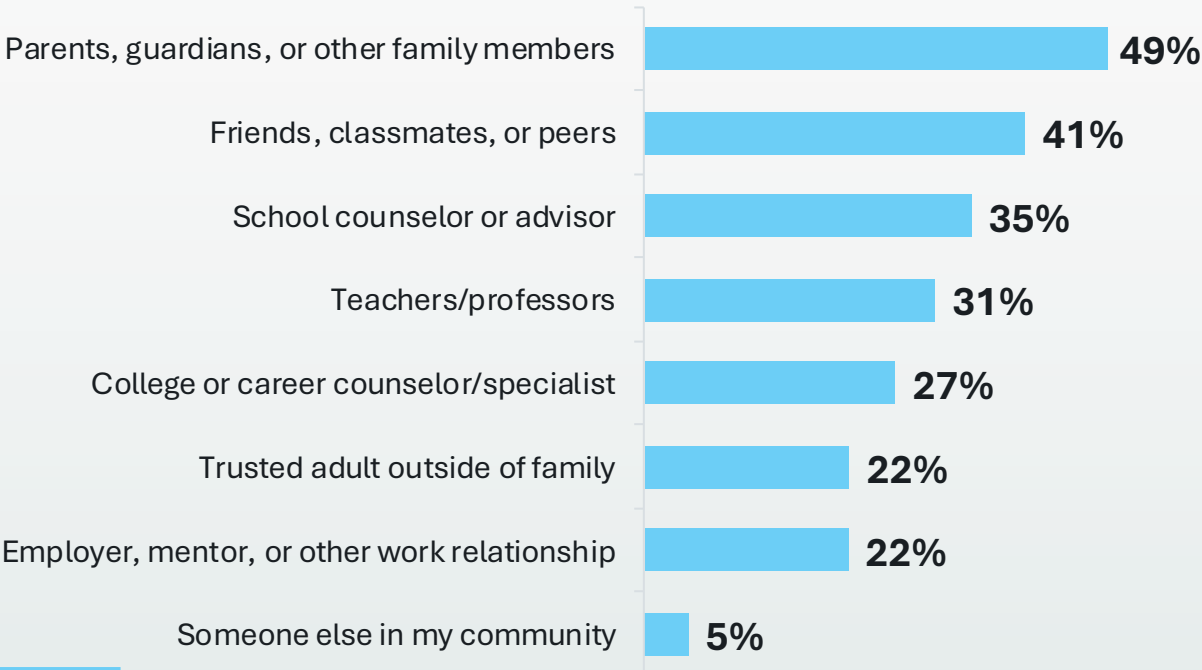
Identifying a person, particularly a parent, friend, or a school counselor, to help them navigate resources is critical

Young adults’ view on what has been most helpful in helping navigate what to do next, either professionally or academically



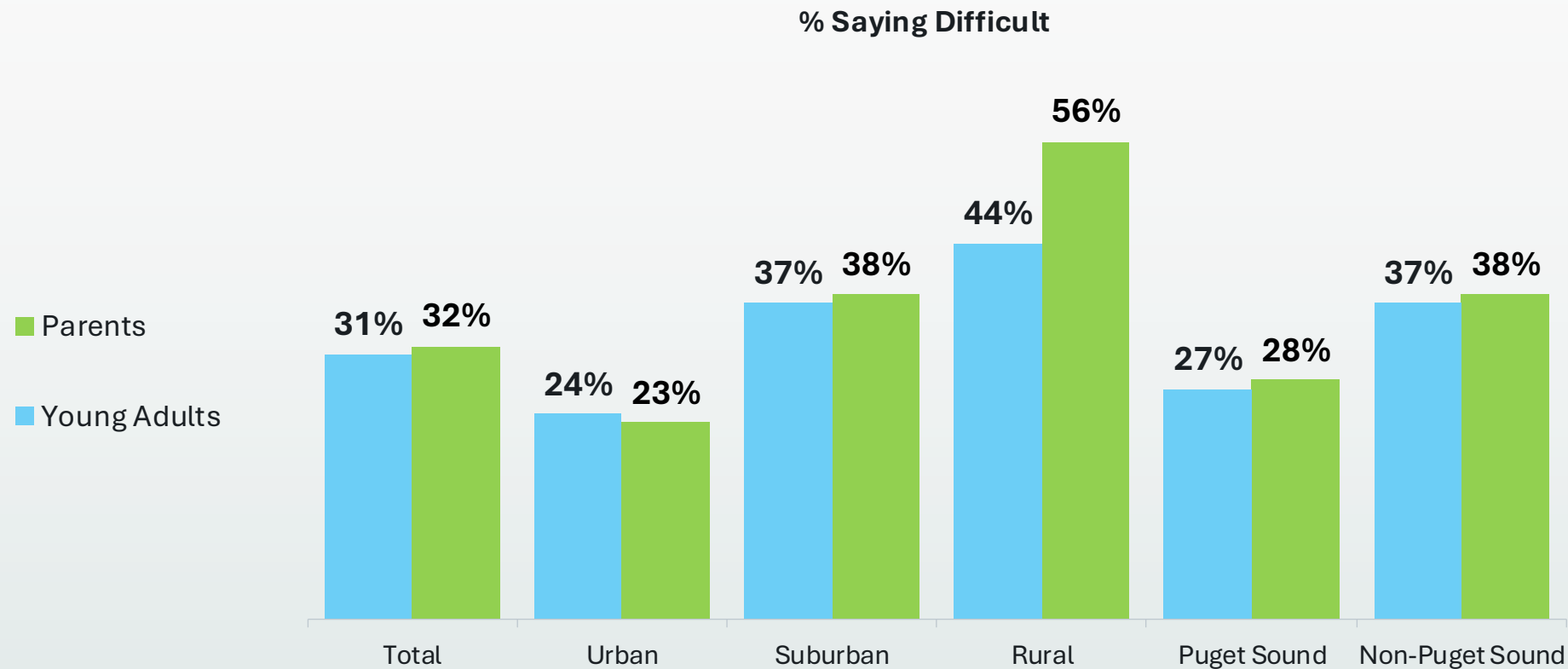
Those who did not find anything particularly helpful are heavily male (61%), Hispanic (30%), unemployed (59%) and more likely to only have a high school degree or less (50%)

Who has been most helpful in helping you navigate what to do next, either professionally or academically?



Despite being the go-to navigation resource, parents are just as overwhelmed as young adults in accessing programs to support their children. In rural areas, difficulties spike for both.

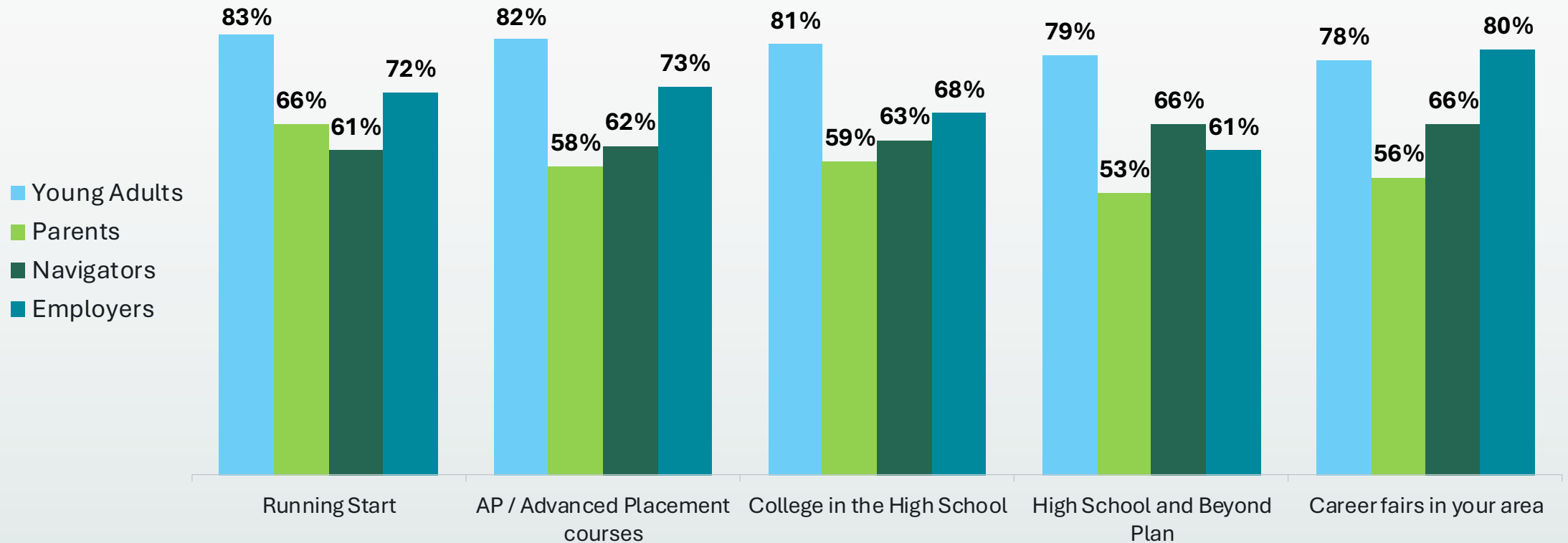
How easy or difficult is it for you to find programs, resources, or services that help you navigate education or career opportunities?



Program awareness is strong, particularly among young adults, but lags among parents and navigators

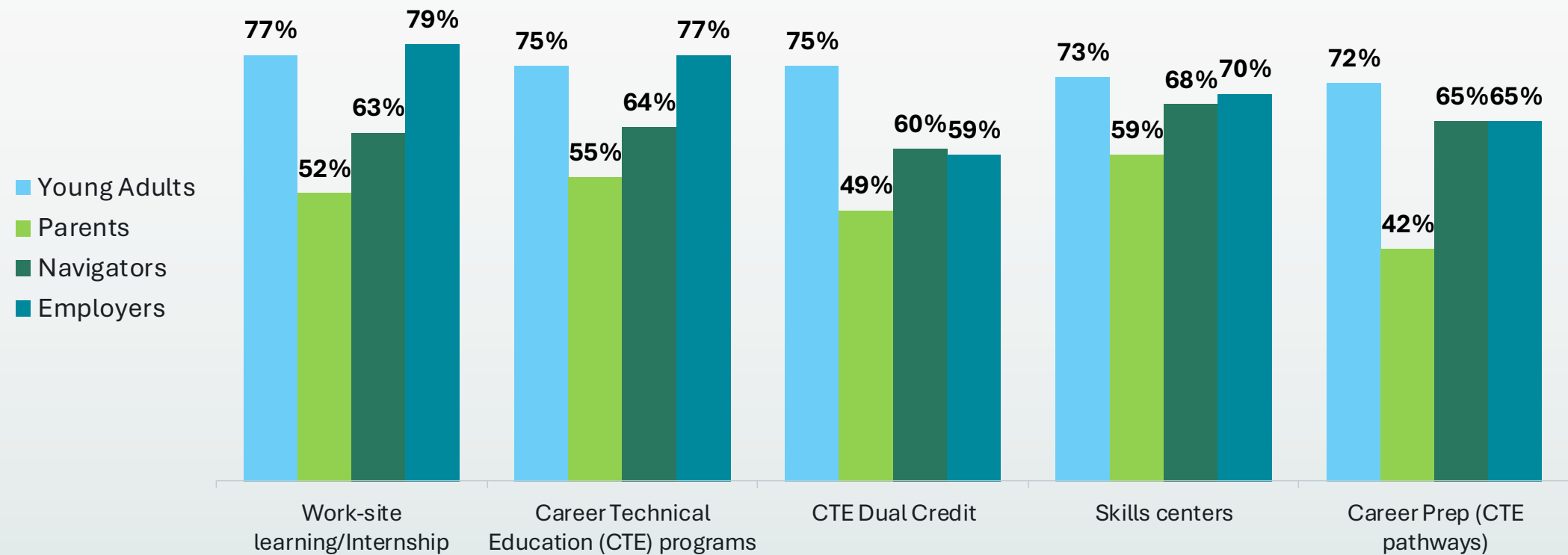
Which of the following education or career resources or programs are you aware of? (Top 5)

*Navigators outside of the
Puget Sound area have
lower program awareness*



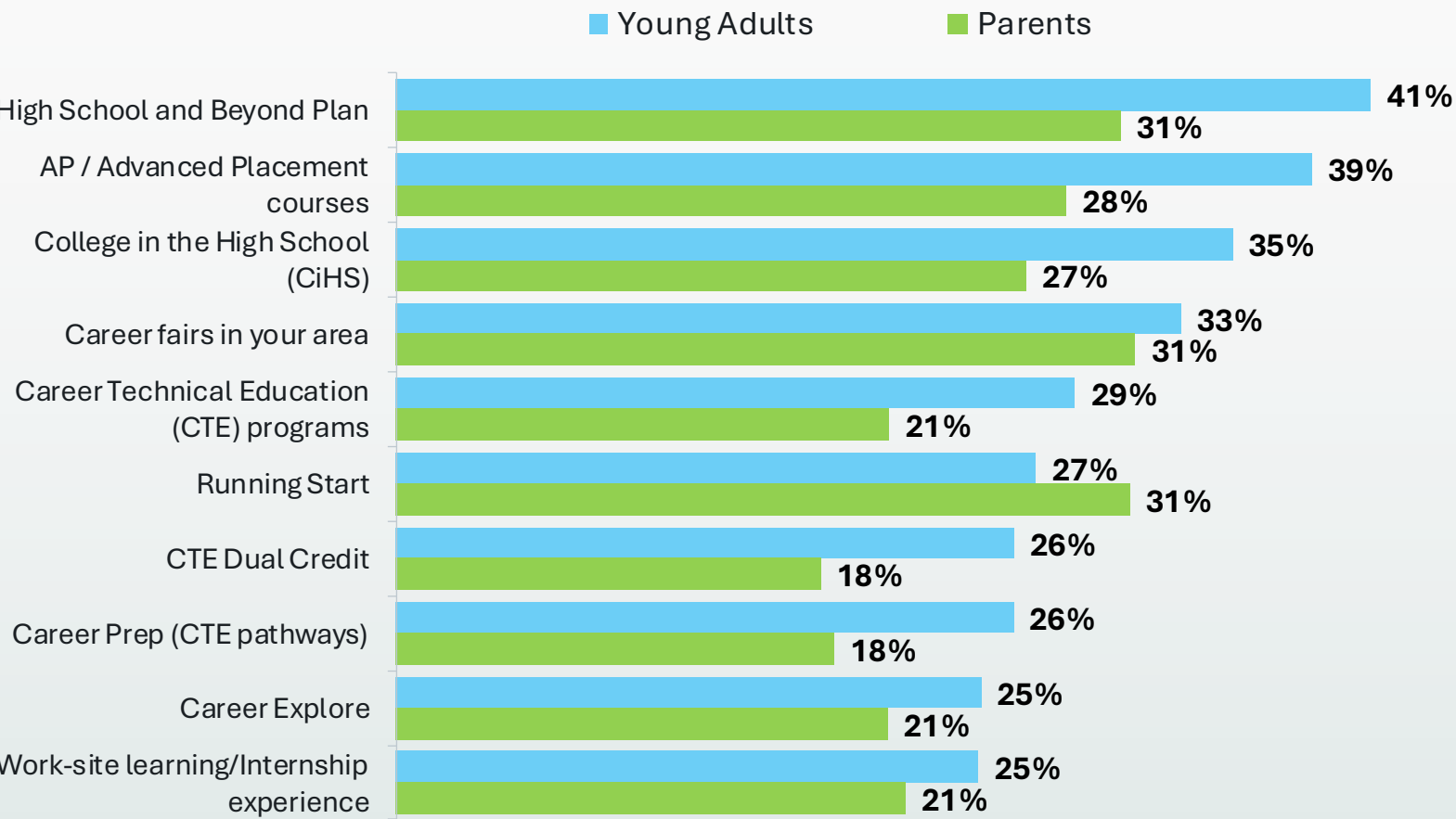
Awareness of career focused resources is lower than education focused, particularly among parents

Which of the following education or career resources or programs are you aware of? (6-10 in awareness)



Parents and young adults are misaligned, parents are often unaware which programs their children use

Which of the following education or career resources or programs have you/young adults/your organization used? (Top 10)

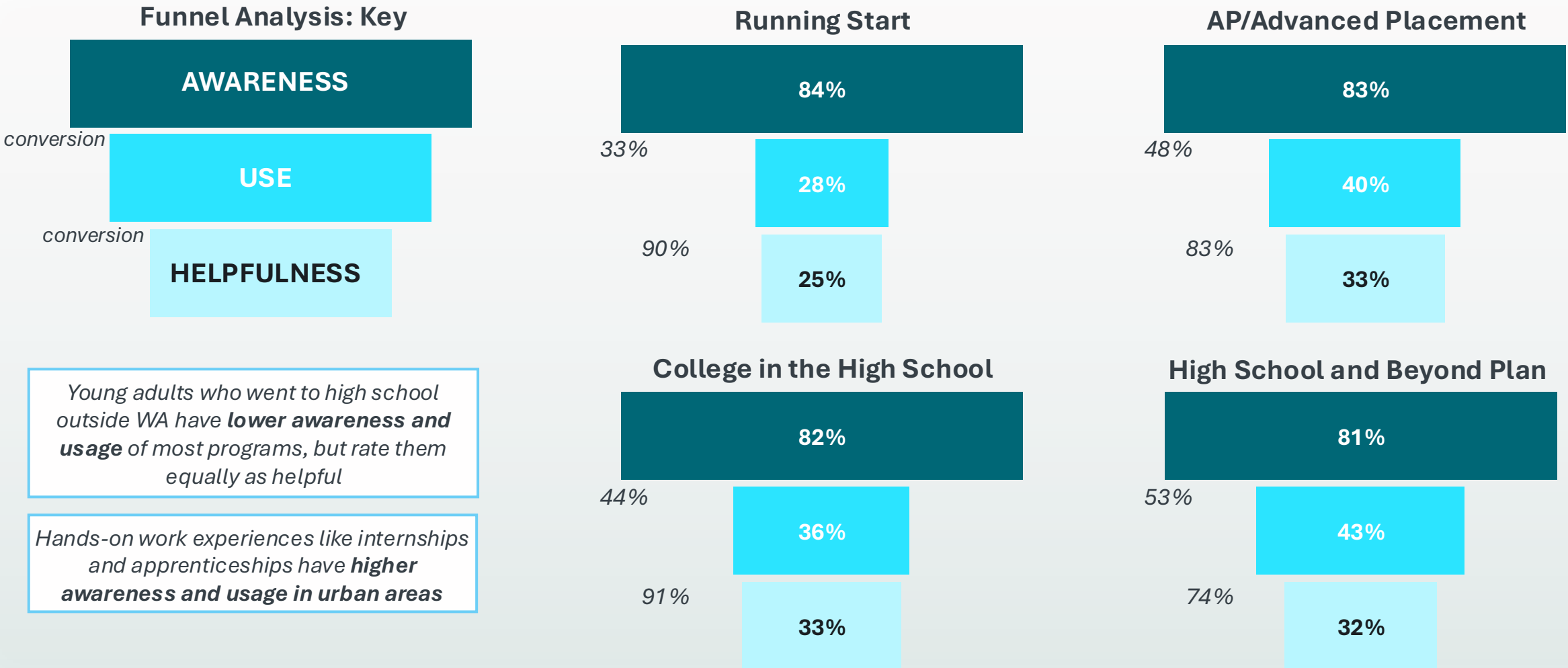


Navigators*	Employers
76%	37%
73%	--
76%	--
76%	56%
78%	41%
73%	--
80%	--
80%	22%
74%	47%
78%	50%

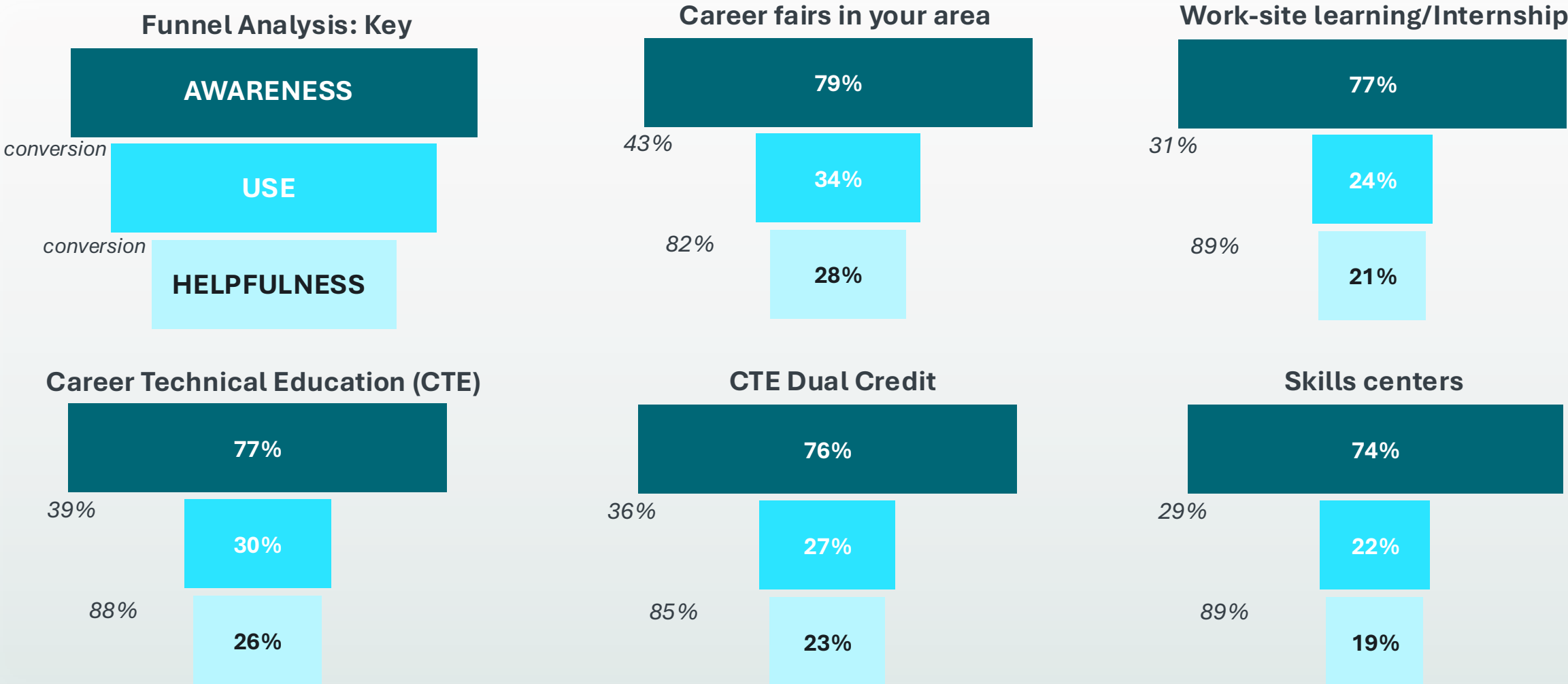
Young adults who went to high school in WA are more likely to use CTE programs (30% to 21%) and CTE Dual Credit (27% to 15%) than YAs who went to school outside WA.

*Navigators: showing % who say at least some young adults use each program

Running Start, AP programs, College in High School, and High School & Beyond lead in awareness and are viewed as helpful by those who have experience with them, but most young adults are not utilizing them

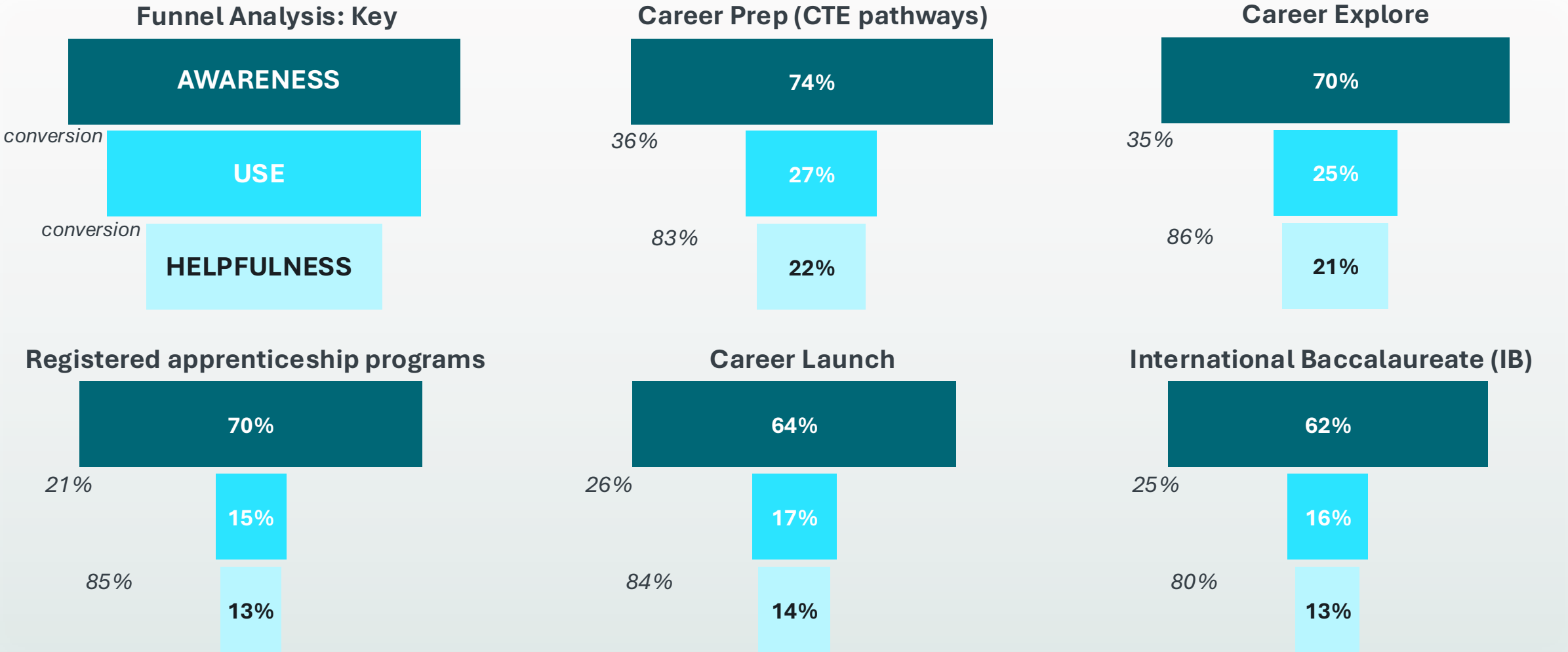


Career Explore, Career Launch, apprenticeships, and IB have lower awareness and helpfulness, but these metrics are still strong. Usage remains the biggest issue.



All metrics shown among all young adults who attended high school in WA
Conversion: The percentage who convert from one funnel stage to the next (use ÷ awareness; helpfulness ÷ use).

Career Explore, Career Launch, apprenticeships, and IB have lower awareness and helpfulness, but these metrics are still strong. Usage remains the biggest issue.



All metrics shown among all young adults who attended high school in WA
Conversion: The percentage who convert from one funnel stage to the next (use ÷ awareness; helpfulness ÷ use).

Summary table: funnel conversions

College in the High School, Running Start, work-site learning, and skills centers earn the strongest conversions on helpfulness for young adults

Sorted by awareness

	Running Start	AP	CIHS	HSBP	Career fairs	Work-site learning	CTE
Conversion Awareness: Use	33%	48%	44%	53%	43%	31%	39%
Conversion Use: Helpfulness	90%	83%	91%	74%	82%	89%	88%

	CTE Dual Credit	Skills Centers	Career Prep	Career Explore	Registered apprenticeships	Career Launch	IB
Conversion Awareness: Use	36%	29%	36%	35%	21%	26%	25%
Conversion Use: Helpfulness	85%	89%	83%	86%	85%	84%	80%

Bolded top 3 conversions

Young adults' lack of program use reflects a mix of low perceived relevance, limited understanding, and uncertainty about whether they qualify

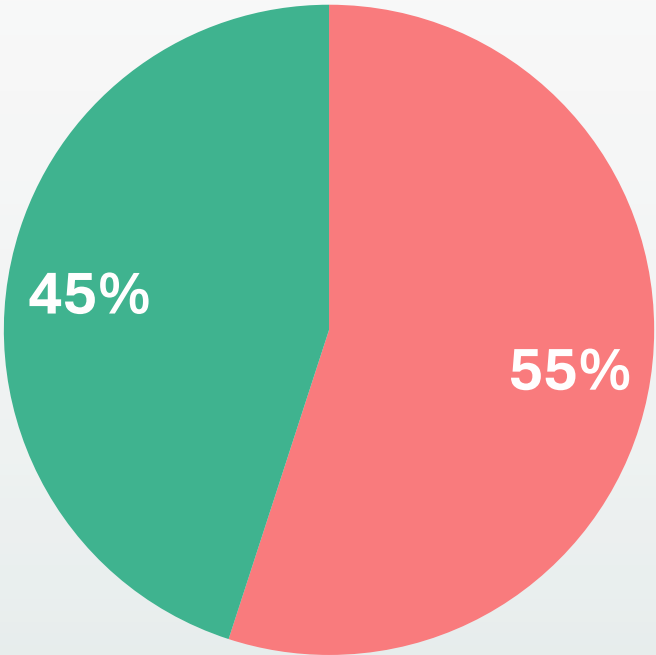
Challenges and barriers to using each program

	Running Start	AP courses	CiHS	HSBP	Career fairs in your area	Work-site learning	CTE programs	CTE Dual Credit	Skills centers	Career Prep	Career Explore	Registered apprenticeship programs	Career Launch	IB
The program is not relevant to me	25%	21%	25%	23%	21%	24%	25%	26%	25%	22%	23%	27%	23%	26%
I did not think the program would help me	23%	20%	20%	23%	23%	19%	21%	20%	22%	18%	22%	20%	20%	20%
I do not qualify for the program	18%	20%	16%	15%	9%	15%	13%	14%	12%	12%	13%	13%	15%	16%
I do not know enough about the program	18%	22%	20%	20%	24%	23%	21%	25%	26%	24%	19%	26%	23%	22%
I didn't really understand how the program works	18%	16%	17%	17%	15%	18%	16%	15%	17%	19%	16%	16%	15%	14%
The application process is too long or confusing	13%	14%	12%	17%	14%	14%	14%	12%	12%	14%	14%	12%	15%	12%
SELECTED AT LEAST ONE OF THE ABOVE BARRIERS	93%	94%	93%	93%	90%	91%	95%	94%	95%	93%	91%	95%	93%	95%

Navigators are stretched thin, with most saying they need to rely on their own time in addition to their job to stay informed about the workforce and career opportunities

Which of the following comes closer to navigators' view, even if neither is exactly right?

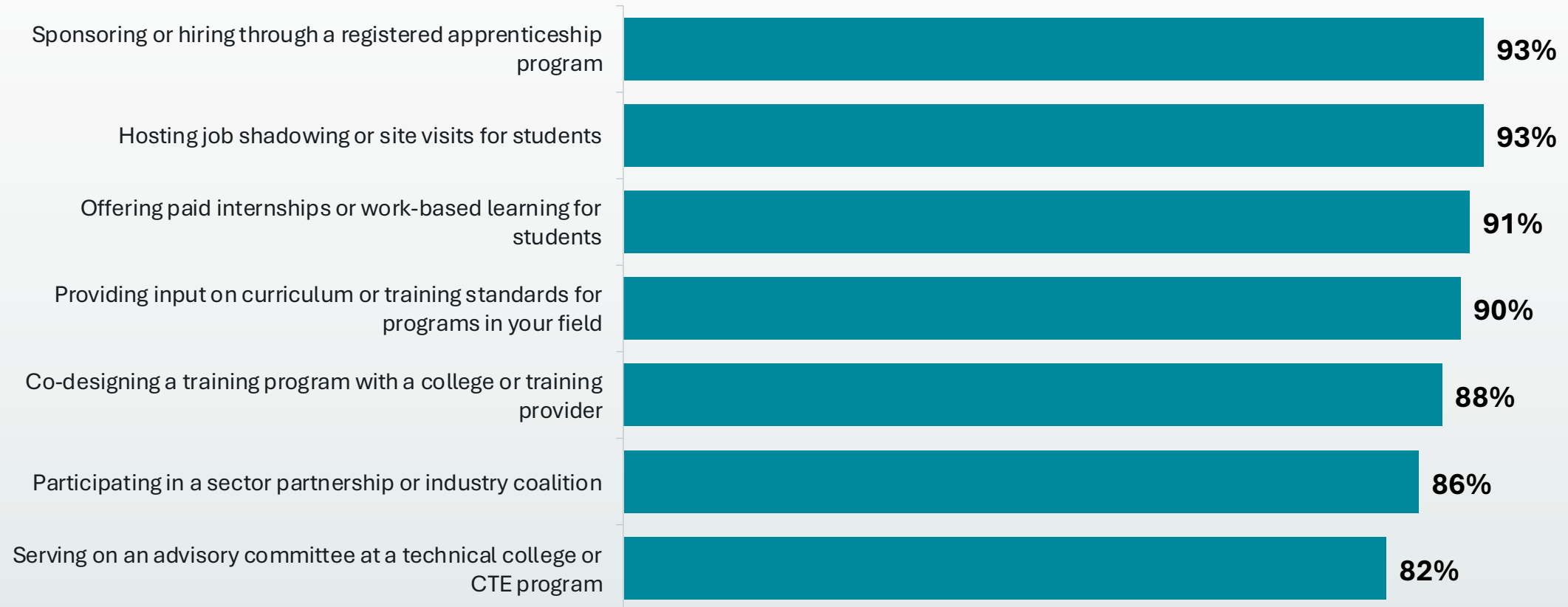
- I often need to rely on my own time, research, or personal connections to stay informed about workforce trends and career opportunities for the young adults I support
- I have the resources and support I need through my work to stay informed about workforce trends and career opportunities for the young adults I support



	Counselors	Educators	Career & Workforce
I often need to rely on my own	64%	49%	68%
I have the resources and support I need	36%	51%	32%

Employers show extremely high interest in engaging with schools and training programs in Washington as a way to invest in their talent pipeline

Employers' interest in types of engagement with Washington's schools, colleges, and training programs



But employers lack the bandwidth to engage with programs designed to connect them with young adults

Employers' barriers to engaging with Washington's schools, colleges and training programs



Employers say strong pipelines drive recruiting success, but skills gaps remain another barrier for many

Why do you say it is easy / difficult for your organization to recruit qualified junior or entry-level talent? (open-end summaries)

Employers

“Easy”

71% of employers say it is easy to recruit qualified entry-level talent

- Employers who say recruiting is easy generally credit a strong pipeline of qualified candidates.
- Many point to partnerships with colleges and vocational schools, as well as internship and apprenticeship programs that provide a steady flow of qualified applicants.
- Others say their strong employer brand, competitive pay and benefits, clear career growth opportunities, and structured training and mentorship programs make them attractive to young workers.
- Employers also note that entry-level positions often require limited prior experience and that they receive a high volume of applications from recent graduates, career changers, and other young job seekers.

“Difficult”

29% of employers say it is difficult to recruit entry-level talent

- Employers who struggle to recruit junior talent most often cite a mismatch between applicants' qualifications and job requirements.
- Many say candidates lack practical experience, technical expertise, communication skills, or the professionalism needed to succeed in the workplace.
- Others report intense competition for qualified talent, particularly in technical fields, and salary expectations that exceed their budgets.
- Employers also describe challenges stemming from limited local talent pools, low interest in certain industries or manual labor roles, and lengthy hiring processes.



Appendix: Section 3

Potential Solutions

Key findings:

Potential Solutions

Hands-on work experience is essential for bridging the gap between education and working-world success.

When asked what would be most helpful to young adults in securing job and career opportunities, parents, navigators, and young adults themselves first and foremost express a desire for internships and other opportunities to gain meaningful work experience. Employers point to the same solution when asked what would be most helpful for hiring entry level talent.

All four audiences say clear information and more direct connections between young people and work is critical.

Young adults most desire clear information about what programs provide or what they qualify for, and a dedicated advisor they can communicate with. Parents and navigators both point to matching tools between young adults and employers in their areas of interest, and most employers identify direct connections to young adults and a single point of contact to navigate education and training systems as ways to better engage with schools, colleges, or training programs.

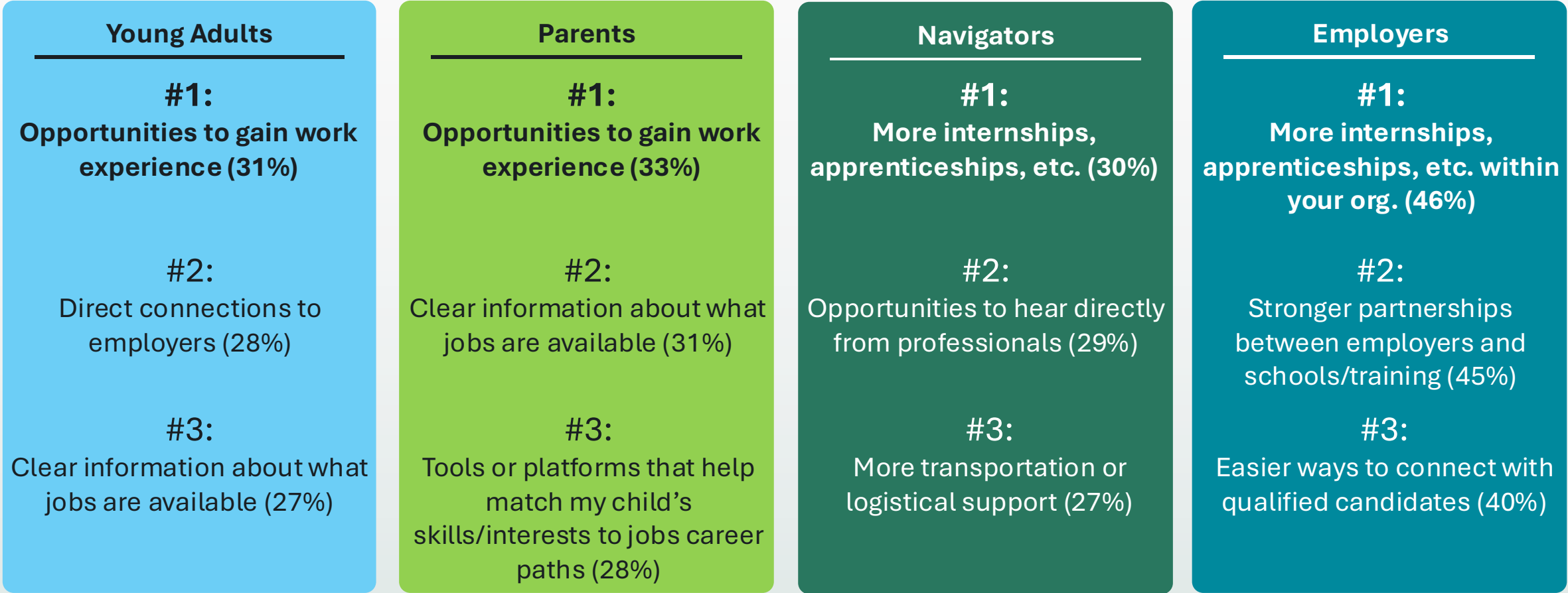
Unlike education and workforce programs, awareness falters when it comes to financial aid programs that would make a substantial difference.

Financial aid is an underleveraged tool: while 76% of young adults and 81% of parents feel confident in their ability to navigate financial aid, many lack knowledge of its specific benefits. Most young adults do not know about Pell Grants, most young adults and their parents are unaware the Washington College Grant covers costs outside of tuition, and 2 in 5 do not know the state offers financial aid that can make college or training programs free or very low cost. Around 3 in 4 young adults and parents say knowledge of this benefit would at least somewhat influence their plans or advice, and many say it would completely change. Washington's financial aid is a gamechanger that many are simply not aware of.

All audiences recognize hands-on work experiences as foundational to preparing young adults for a career and connect them with employers

Most helpful to young adults in securing job and career opportunities

Most helpful to you in recruiting or hiring entry level talent



Young adults most want clear information about each program, and tools that show what they qualify for

Young adults' view who or what would be most helpful in accessing programs or resources to navigate next academic or professional steps



Young adults who went to high school in WA are more likely to want a clearer idea of which career paths are most in demand in their area compared to those who went to high school outside WA (23% to 15%).

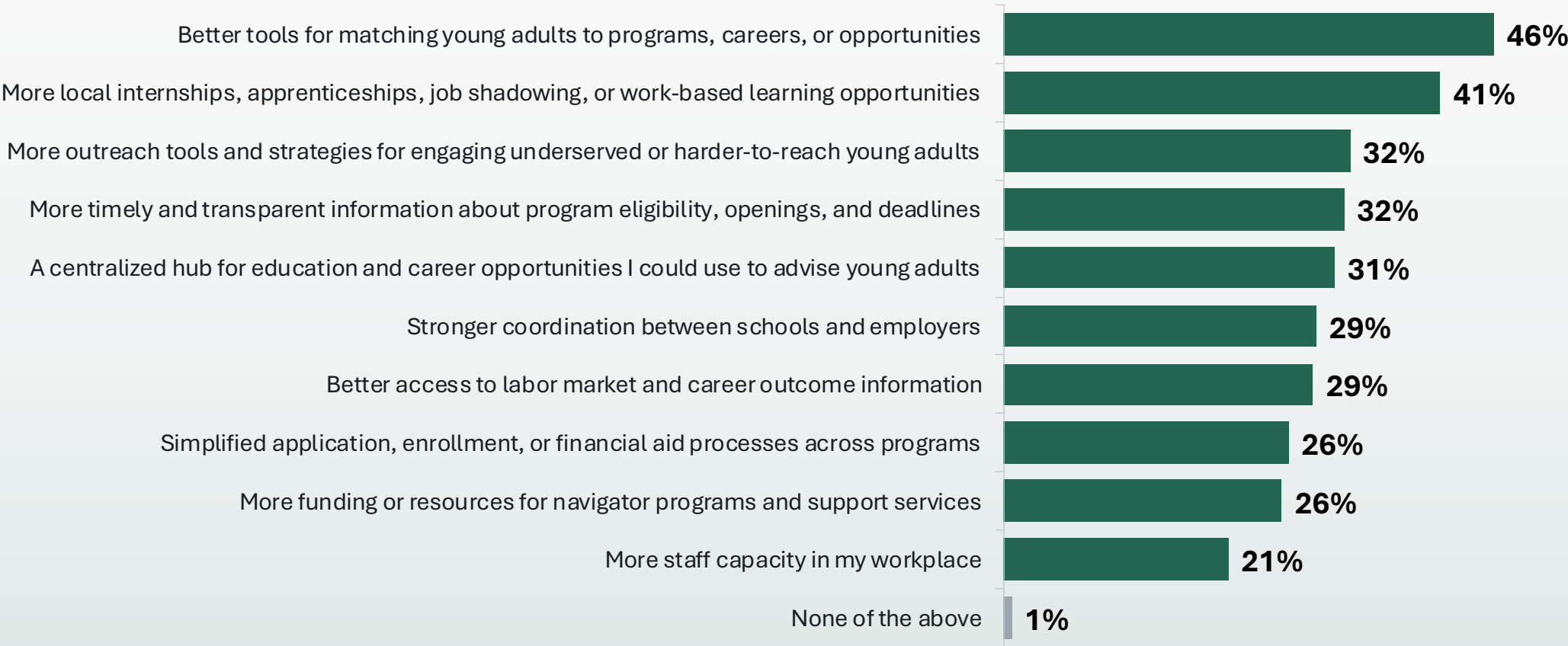
Parents want more work experiences for their child and stronger matching with and connections to potential employers

Parents' view on what would be most helpful in supporting their child finding a job or career opportunity



Navigators want better matching tools, more work opportunities, and more outreach tools

Navigators’ view on what would make the biggest difference in their ability to help young adults navigate education or career pathways



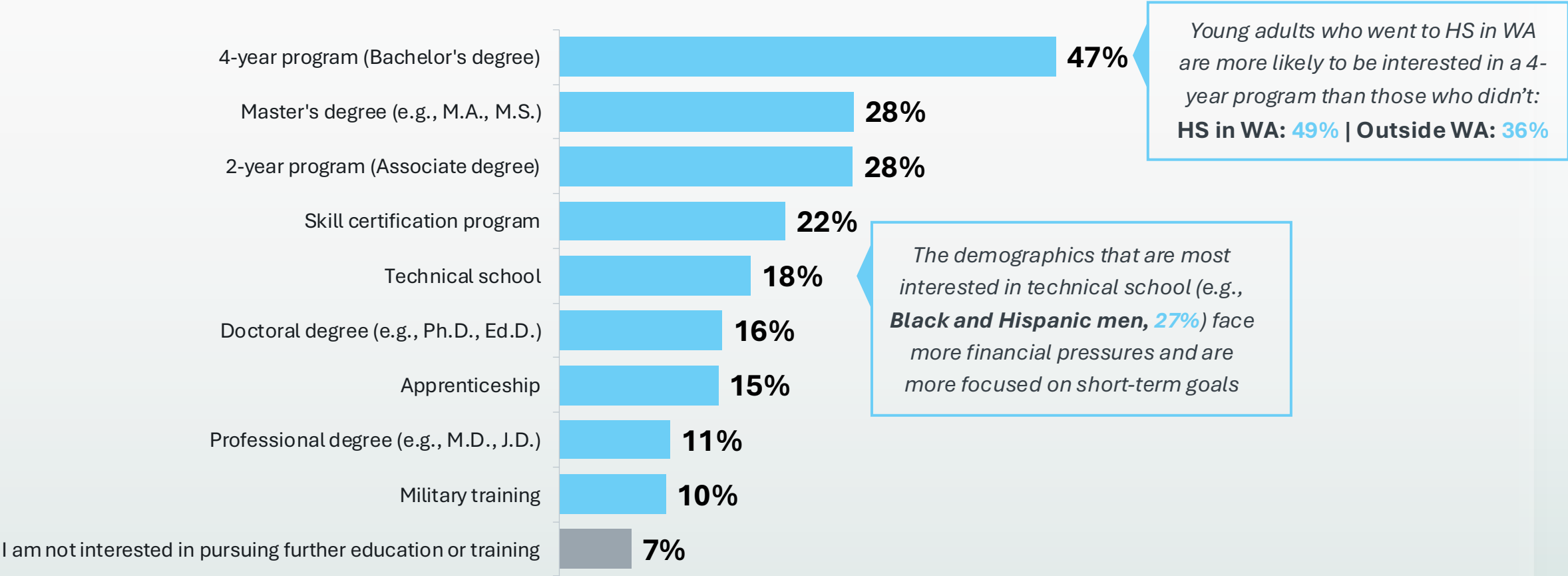
Employers want to simplify the process through single points of contact, direct connections, and clear information are the top ways to encourage employers to engage with schools and programs in the area

Employers’ view on what would make it easier for their organization to engage with schools, colleges, or training programs



Young adults are most interested in pursuing a 4-year program, highlighting that WA appears more college-centric

Young adults' interest in pursuing education



Interest in 4-year college is greater among Puget Sound and WA Originators

Young adults' interest in pursuing education

	16-17	18-20	21-24	Man	Female	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Puget Sound	Outside Puget Sound	MS and HS in WA	MS and HS outside WA
4-year program	58%	50%	40%	44%	51%	48%	46%	42%	52%	50%	44%	49%	39%
Master's degree	26%	27%	30%	25%	31%	26%	19%	28%	39%	30%	25%	29%	27%
2-year program	30%	31%	25%	24%	32%	27%	38%	28%	23%	26%	32%	28%	25%
Skill certification program	17%	20%	25%	24%	19%	21%	32%	23%	20%	22%	21%	21%	25%
Technical school	19%	17%	18%	20%	16%	17%	23%	24%	11%	19%	17%	18%	17%
Doctoral degree	16%	15%	16%	11%	21%	12%	14%	17%	27%	15%	16%	16%	16%
Apprenticeship	13%	14%	17%	15%	15%	14%	17%	14%	13%	15%	15%	16%	17%
Professional degree	12%	11%	10%	10%	12%	9%	15%	11%	19%	11%	9%	10%	14%
Military training	12%	10%	9%	11%	9%	8%	9%	10%	7%	10%	11%	11%	6%
I am not interested in pursuing further education	5%	6%	8%	6%	7%	7%	5%	6%	8%	5%	10%	6%	10%
Other	2%	2%	1%	2%	2%	1%	9%	1%	4%	2%	2%	2%	3%

16-17 (n=124); 18-20 (n=636); 21-24 (n=999); Man (n=855); Female (n=904); White (n=1,028); Black (n=103); Hispanic (n=358); Asian (n=113); Puget Sound (n=1,155); Outside Puget Sound (n=604); MS and HS in WA (n=1,429); MS and HS outside WA (n=139).

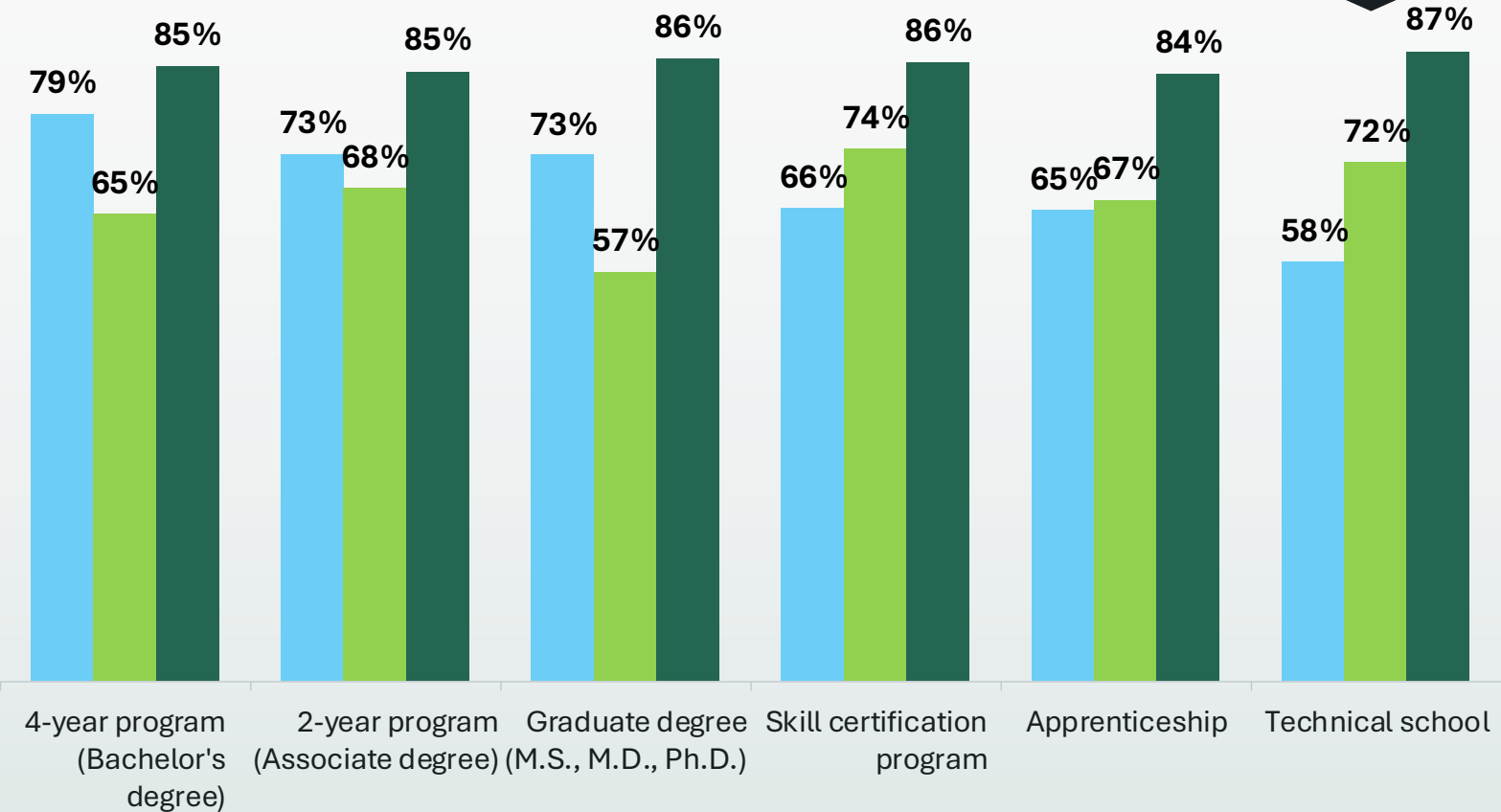
Young adults say they’ve been most strongly encouraged to pursue a 4-year program, but parents and navigators say they’ve also encouraged alternative pathways

Educational pathways encouraged to young adults

- Young Adults
- Parents
- Navigators

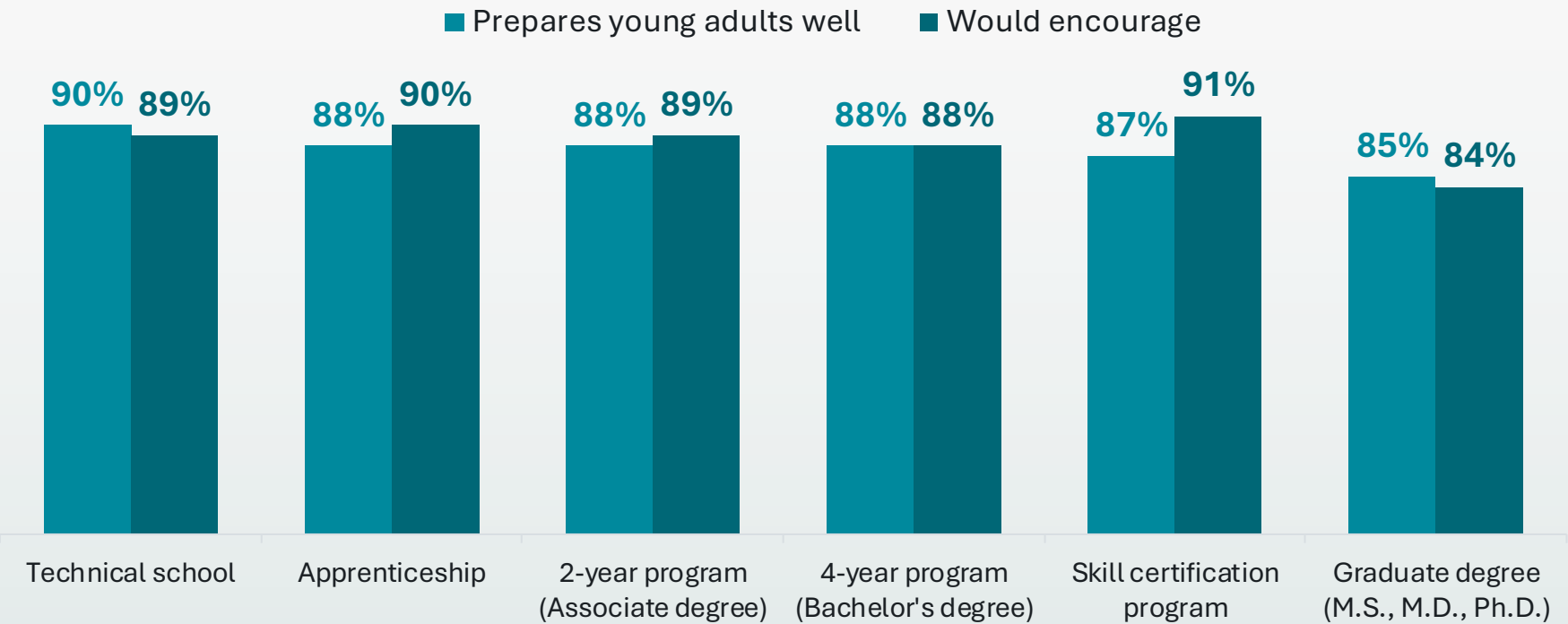
Technical school is among the most encouraged path by parents and navigators, but young adults don’t see it that way

4-year program are more encouraged to young adults who went to high school in WA than those who went to school outside WA
School in WA 81% |
School outside WA 67%



And while many employers say they prioritize skills over degrees, they also universally encourage formal education and say it prepares young adults for entry-level positions

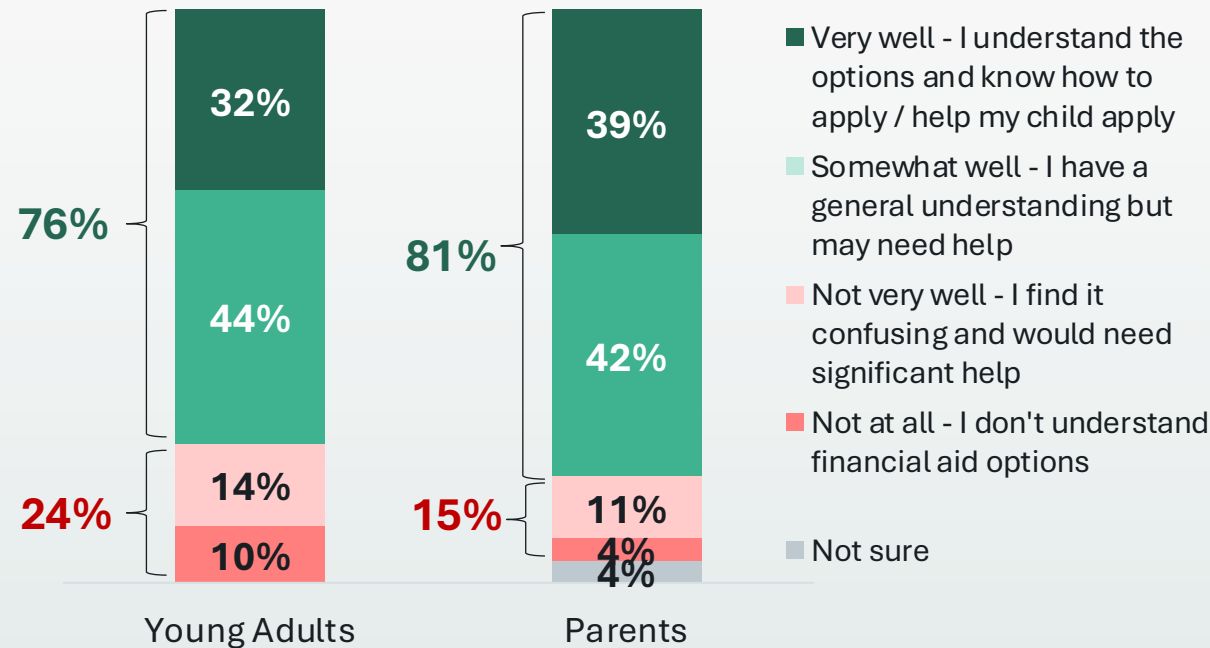
Employers view of how well each prepares young adults for entry-level positions in their industry/organization and how strongly they would encourage them



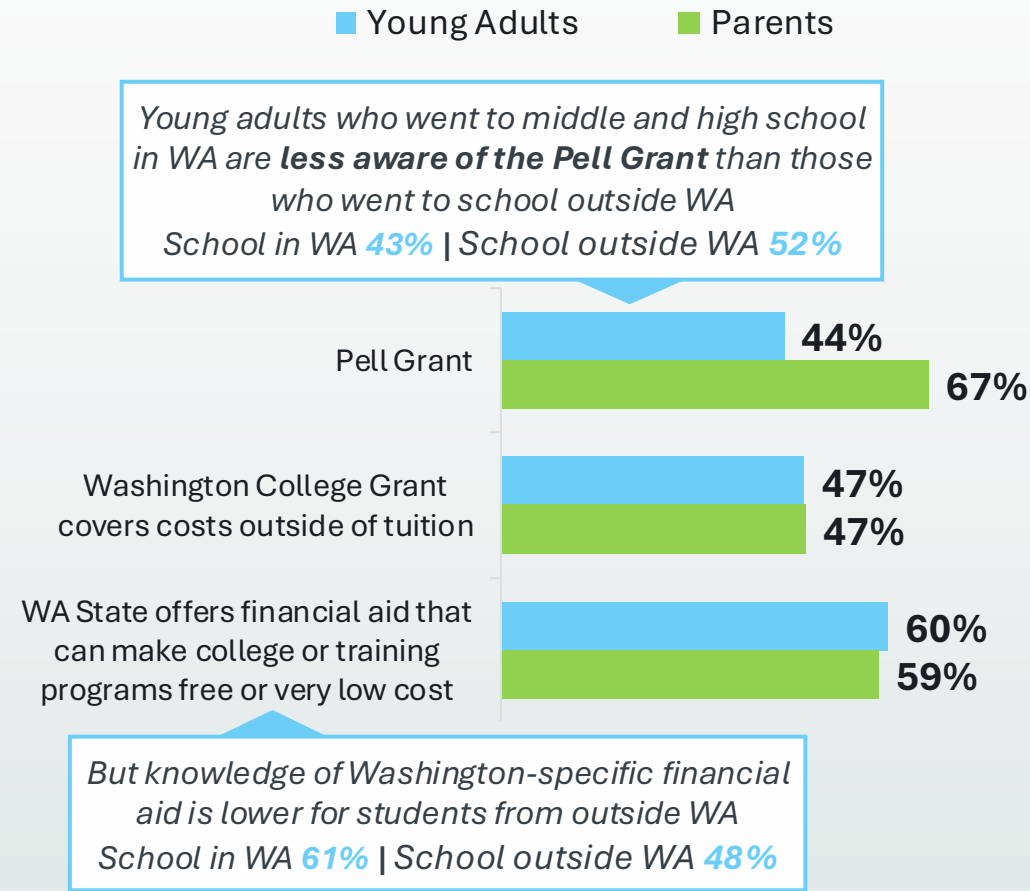
46% of employers say they “prioritize skills and demonstrated abilities over formal degrees or credentials”

Amid the interest in higher education, financial aid is a hugely untapped resource. Young adults and parents say they understand financial aid but are not aware of specifics.

How well do you feel you understand and can navigate financial aid options (such as FAFSA, WASFA, scholarships, or grants)?

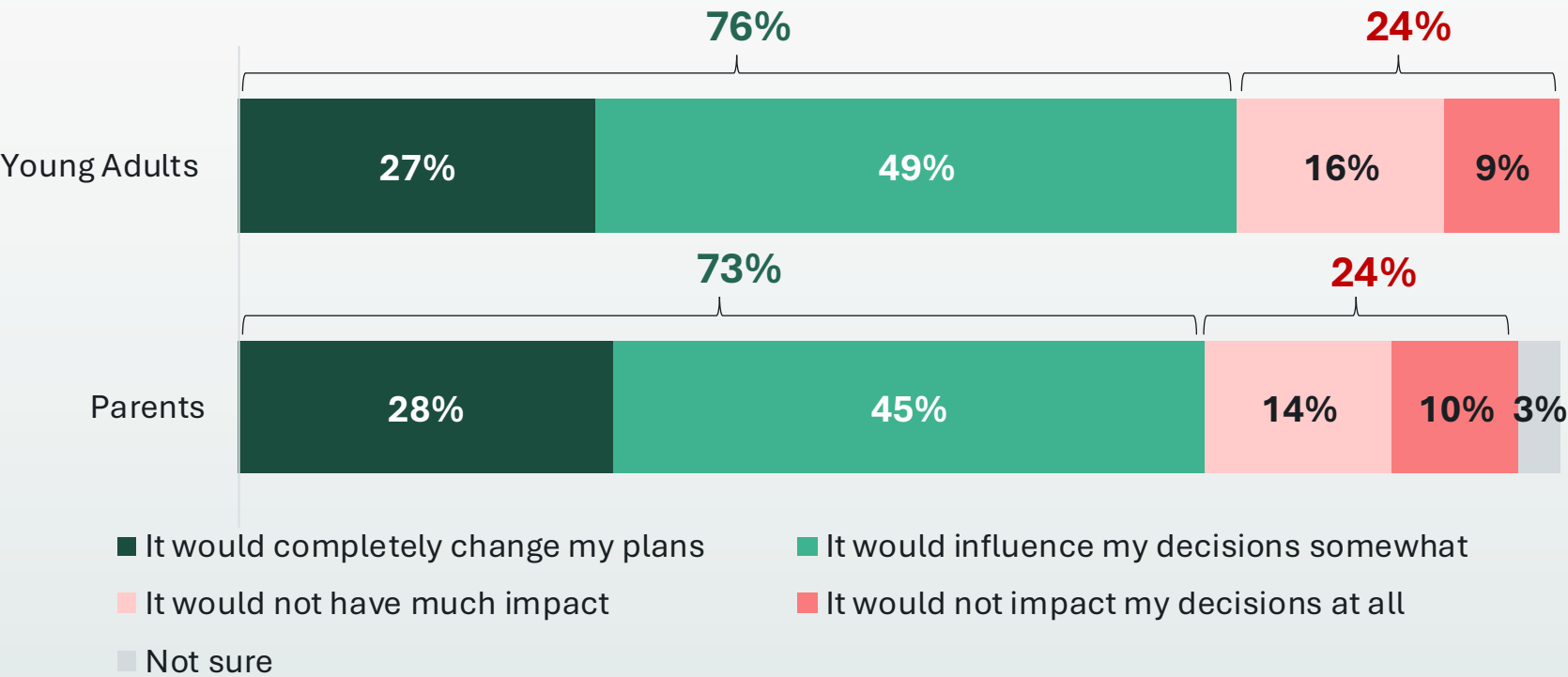


Awareness of specific financial aid options



Young adults and parents say if they knew college or training could be more affordable through available programs, they would alter the advice they give and the paths they take

If you knew that college or training could be free or low cost through financial aid, how much would that impact your education or career decisions / the advice you give your child?



Young adults say the most helpful ways to learn about financial aid would be through...

A school counselor/advisor (32%)
Online tools that show what they qualify for (29%)
Step-by-step online guides/websites (27%)



Appendix: Section 4

Modern Disruptions & Local Impact

Key findings:

Modern Disruptions & Local Impact

AI skills are crucial and many young adults excel, but concerns remain.

4 in 5 employers expect their entry level hires to have at least mid-level AI skills and all four audiences rate young adults' AI proficiency highly. 82–93% of all audiences describe young adults or entry-level hires as at least somewhat strong in this area. However high proficiency ratings coexist with deep concerns about AI in our society, led by misuse and privacy and security risks. Job replacement or fewer work opportunities is also a major concern among each audience.

These skills have developed despite education lagging in teaching AI.

Young adults' proficiency with modern technology does not appear to be a result of their education. Only 34% of young adults say their education helped them learn to use AI — and 36% say it actively discouraged or limited its use. Similarly, only 48% say education is doing enough to prepare them for AI; even those who say it is doing enough have mostly not received formal classes or trainings. Parents are even more skeptical (42% doing enough), and employers are similarly concerned (53% doing enough).

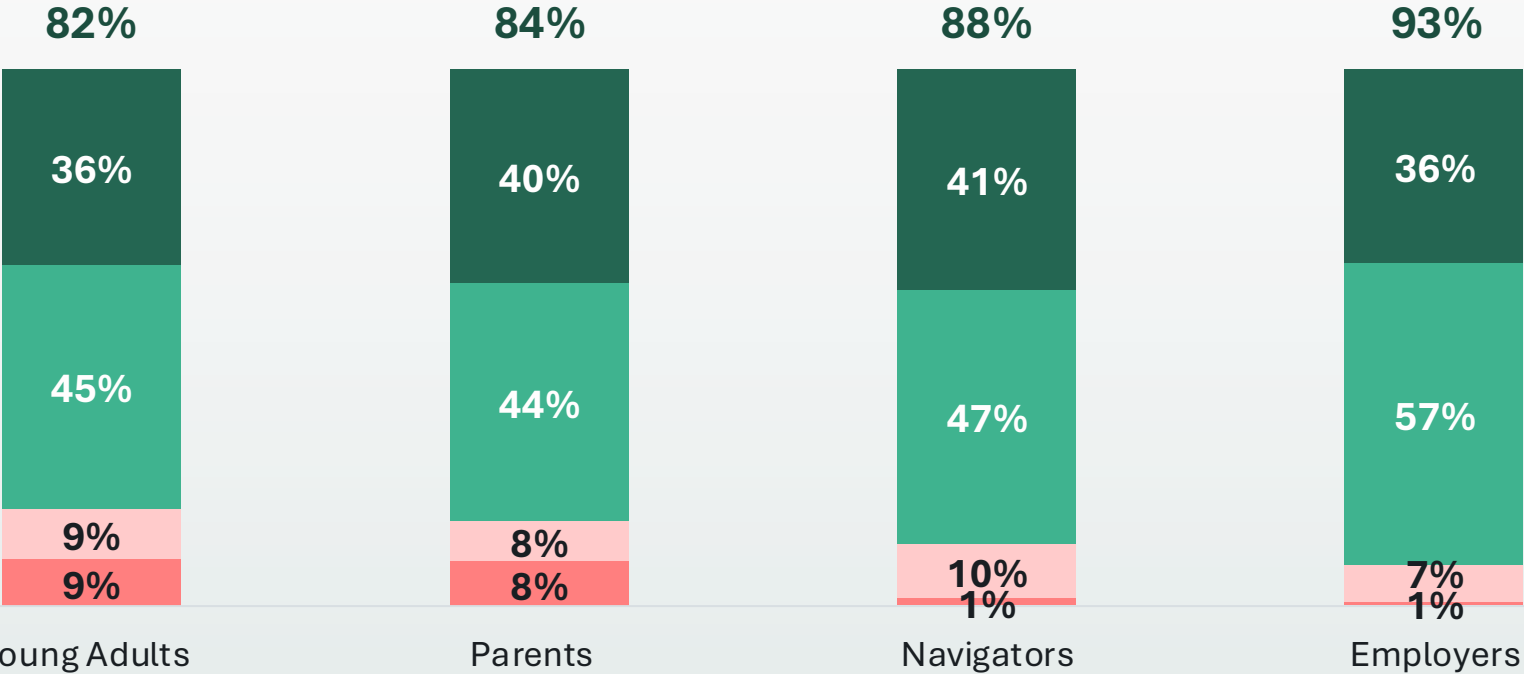
AI is seen as heavily impacting many industries and career plans – education will need to catch up sooner rather than later.

Most believe AI will *heavily* impact industries like technology, art/media/entertainment, education, marketing, and business. These are some of the top industries young adults are interested in, and both they and navigators see the landscape shifting dramatically in the future. 73% of young adults say AI has already impacted their career or education plans, and 58% of parents and 94% of navigators say it has impacted how they advise young adults' plans. The risk is that the state will miss the window to build genuine, consistent AI literacy before it becomes a workforce dividing line.

Audiences universally praise young adults for their AI abilities

Young adult/entry level hire AI abilities

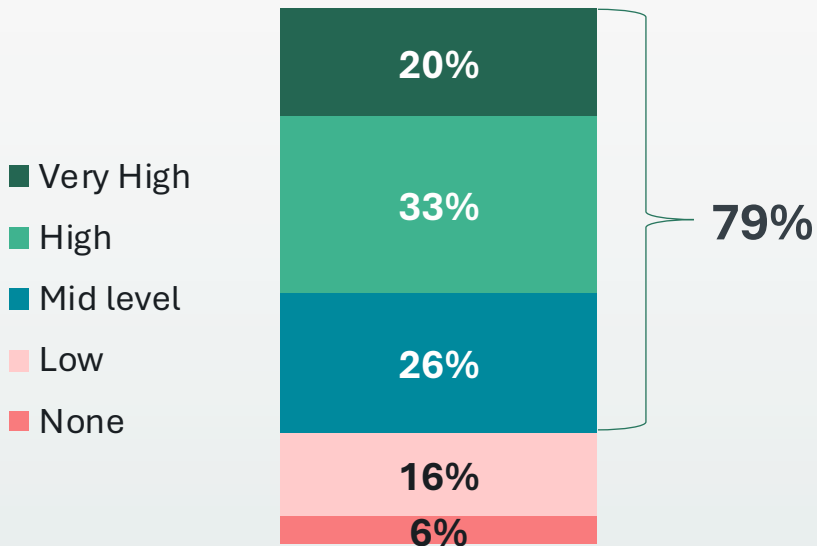
Total strong



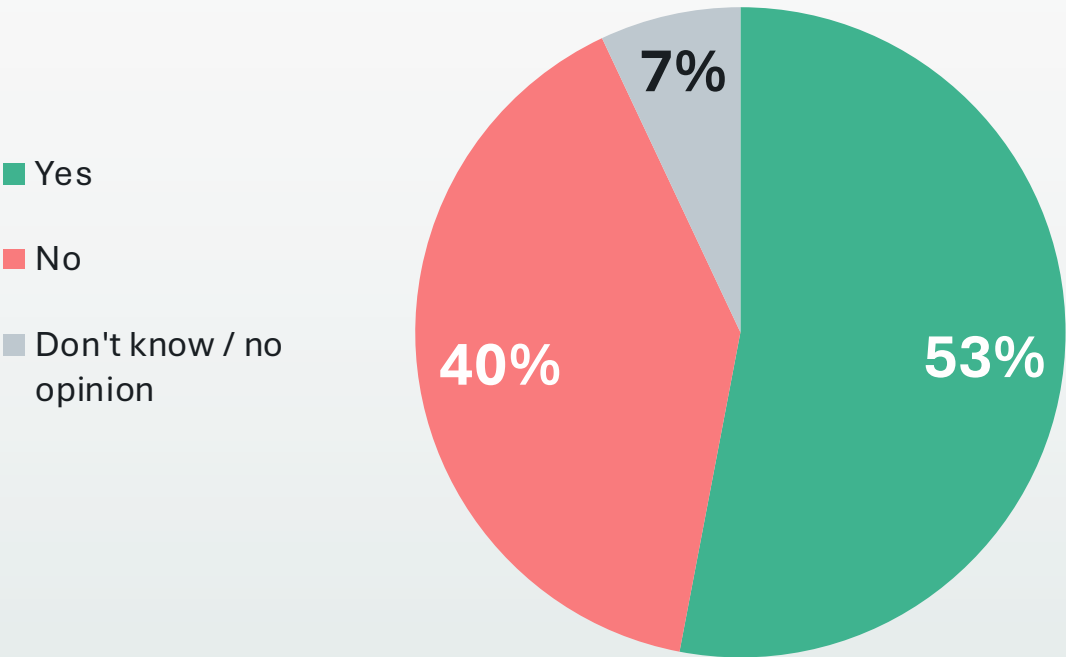
- Very strong - can use AI tools for a wide range of tasks
- Somewhat strong - can use AI tools for basic tasks
- Not very strong - have tried using AI tools but often struggle
- Not strong at all - do not know how to use AI tools

And 4 in 5 employers require at least mid-level AI knowledge from entry level hires, however many feel young adults’ education is not doing enough in this area

Employers view of degree of AI knowledge and skill their organization requires from entry level hires



Employers view on if young adults' education or training is doing enough to help them develop the skills needed to use AI effectively

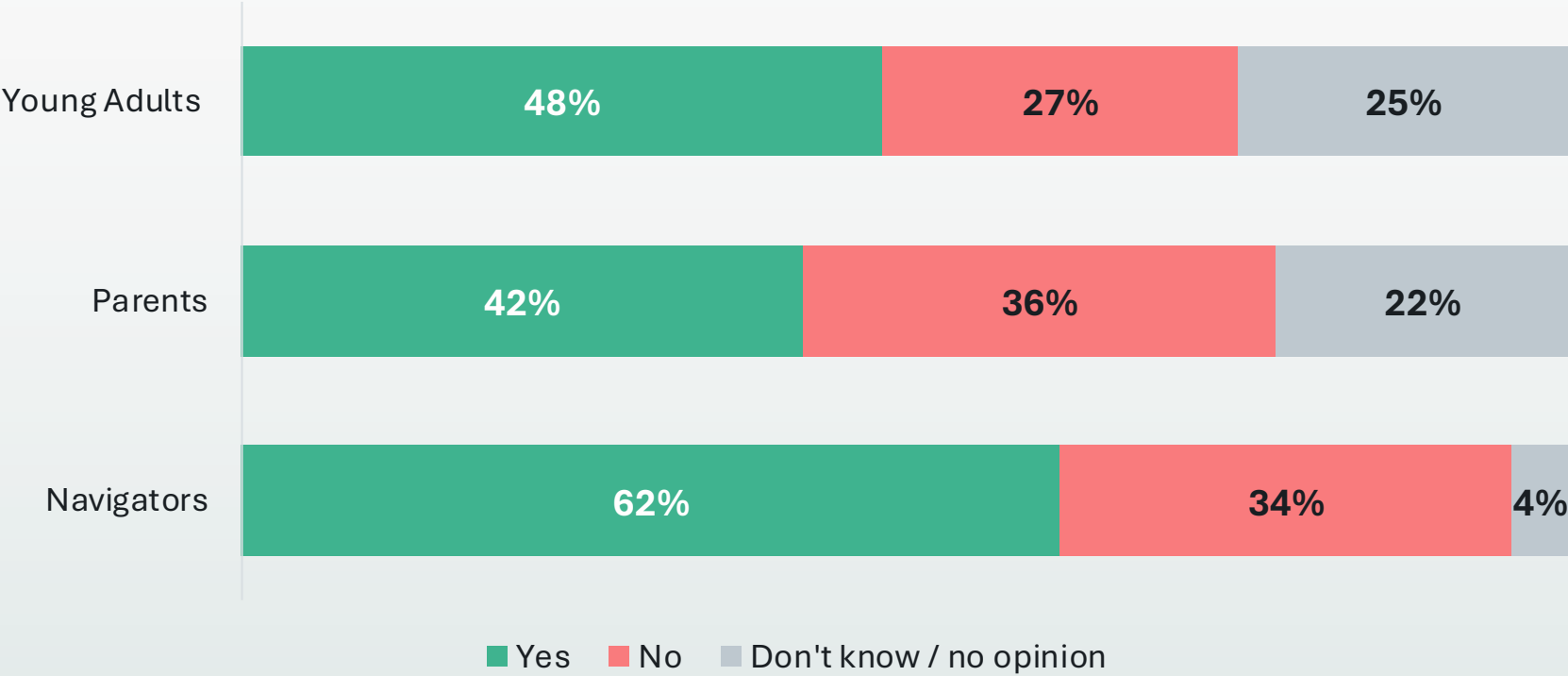


Concern over AI remains high, including regarding job replacement

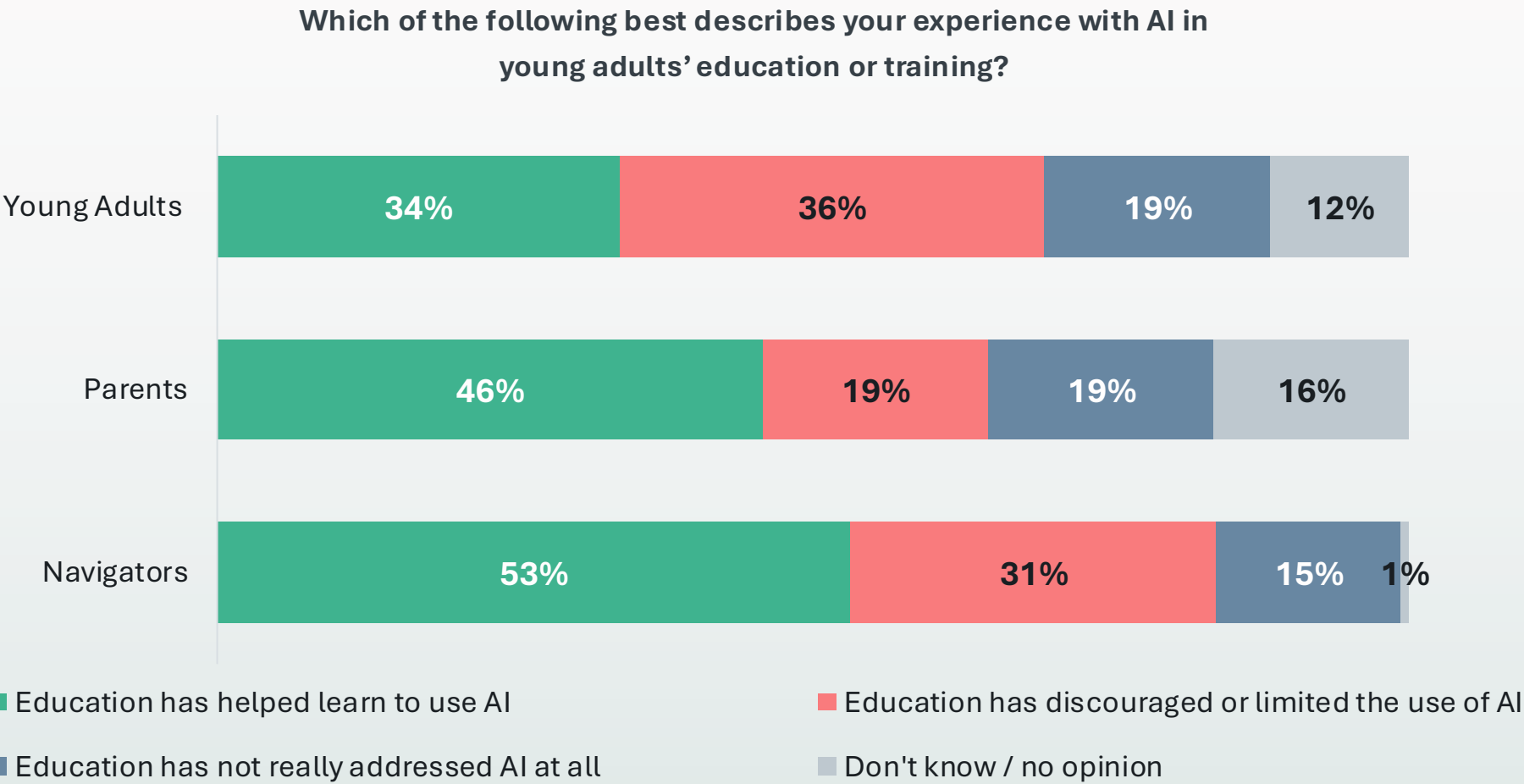
	Concerns about AI			
	% Concerned			
	Young Adults	Parents	Navigators	Employers
Misuse (e.g., deepfakes, scams, misinformation)	76%	83%	87%	83%
Privacy and data security risks	75%	80%	87%	82%
Safety risks (e.g., harmful or incorrect advice)	74%	77%	86%	83%
Environmental impact	73%	67%	83%	63%
Accuracy of information provided by it	72%	75%	84%	80%
Job replacement or fewer job opportunities	72%	77%	86%	79%
Overreliance on AI versus developing my own skills	72%	78%	87%	82%
Bias or unfair outcomes	66%	70%	83%	81%

Most young adults and parents also do not feel education or training is doing enough to help young adults develop AI skills

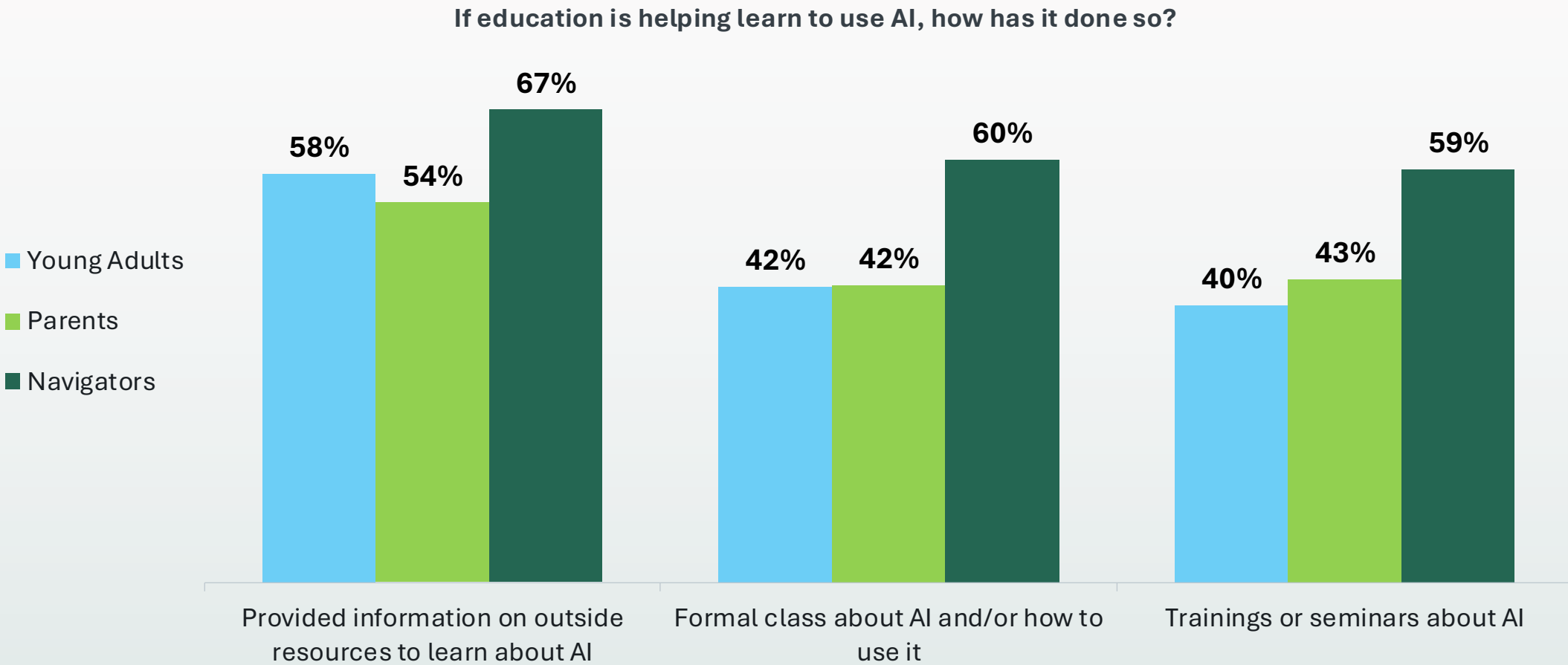
Is young adults' education doing enough to help develop the skills needed to use AI effectively?



Young adults in particular feel their education is discouraging AI usage



Even among young adults who say their education is focusing on AI, most have only received information on outside resources and have not had a formal class or training about AI



Young adults and navigators see many industries being heavily impacted by AI. This is particularly true for industries young adults are interested in like technology, media, and education, but less so in healthcare.

AI Impact on Industries

% Heavily Impacted

	Young Adults	Navigators	Young Adult interest in industry
Technology	55%	48%	21%
Arts, media, or entertainment	45%	42%	22%
Education	45%	38%	17%
Marketing or communication	42%	41%	12%
Business, finance, or accounting	36%	38%	16%
Energy	34%	41%	8%
Manufacturing or engineering	30%	44%	10%
Aerospace	28%	40%	9%
Government or public services	27%	34%	11%
Retail or sales	27%	41%	13%
Healthcare	25%	37%	21%
Agriculture or natural resources	25%	36%	7%
Transportation, logistics, or supply chain	25%	35%	8%
Law or legal services	24%	37%	10%
Hospitality, tourism, or food service	24%	35%	12%
Skilled trades or construction	19%	30%	13%

Across audiences, AI is reshaping career guidance by emphasizing adaptability, AI literacy, and human skills.

Impact of AI on career and education plans / guidance

73% of young adults say AI has already impacted their career or education plans

While some young adults see opportunities to develop AI-related skills and use AI as a learning tool, many are concerned about its impact on job security and the future of their chosen careers. As a result, many emphasize the importance of adaptability, continuous learning, and developing uniquely human skills to remain competitive.

58% of parents say AI has already impacted how they advise their child's career or education plans

Parents place greater emphasis on learning AI and digital skills while also developing critical thinking, creativity, adaptability, and other uniquely human skills. Many are encouraging careers that can work alongside AI or are less vulnerable to automation, while expressing uncertainty about which jobs will remain secure. Parents also stress using AI as a tool—not a replacement for independent thinking.

94% of navigators say AI has already impacted how they advise young adults' career or education plans

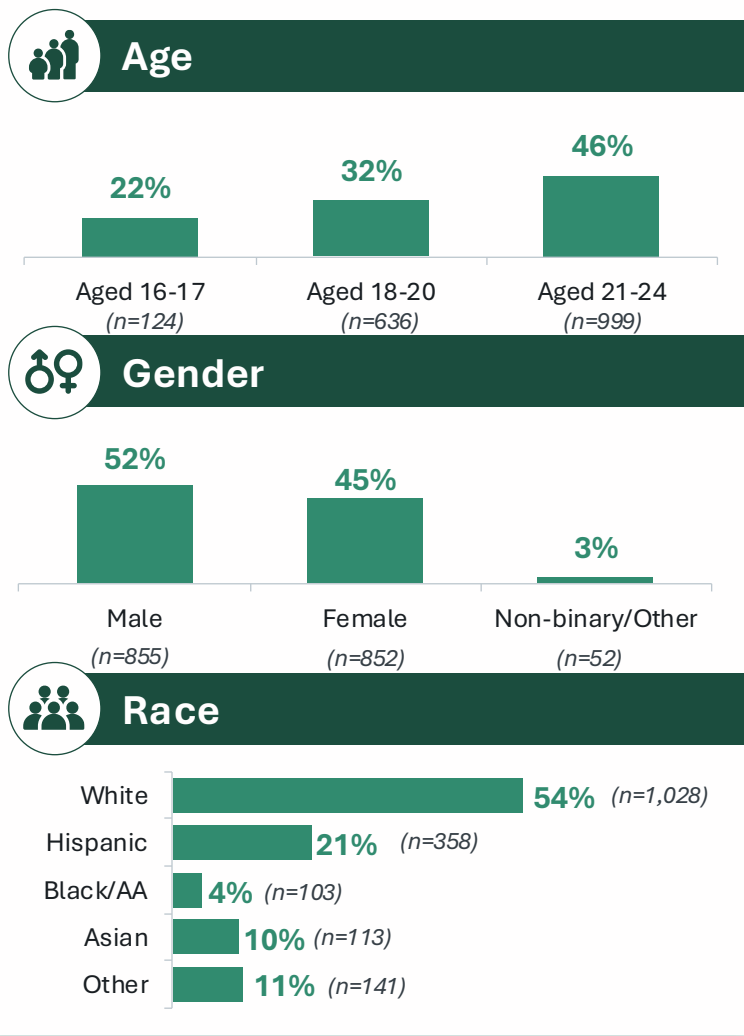
Navigators are shifting the focus from specific career paths to preparing young adults for a rapidly changing workforce. Many encourage students to build AI literacy while strengthening critical thinking, creativity, communication, and problem-solving skills, and to use AI as a tool for learning and career exploration rather than relying on it. They are also helping young adults identify careers that can leverage AI or are less vulnerable to automation.



Appendix: Section 5

Sample Composition

Young Adults Sample Composition:



Gender

Male
(n=855)

Female
(n=852)

Non-binary/Other
(n=52)

52%

45%

3%

Race

White
(n=1,028)

Hispanic
(n=358)

Black/AA
(n=103)

Asian
(n=113)

Other
(n=141)

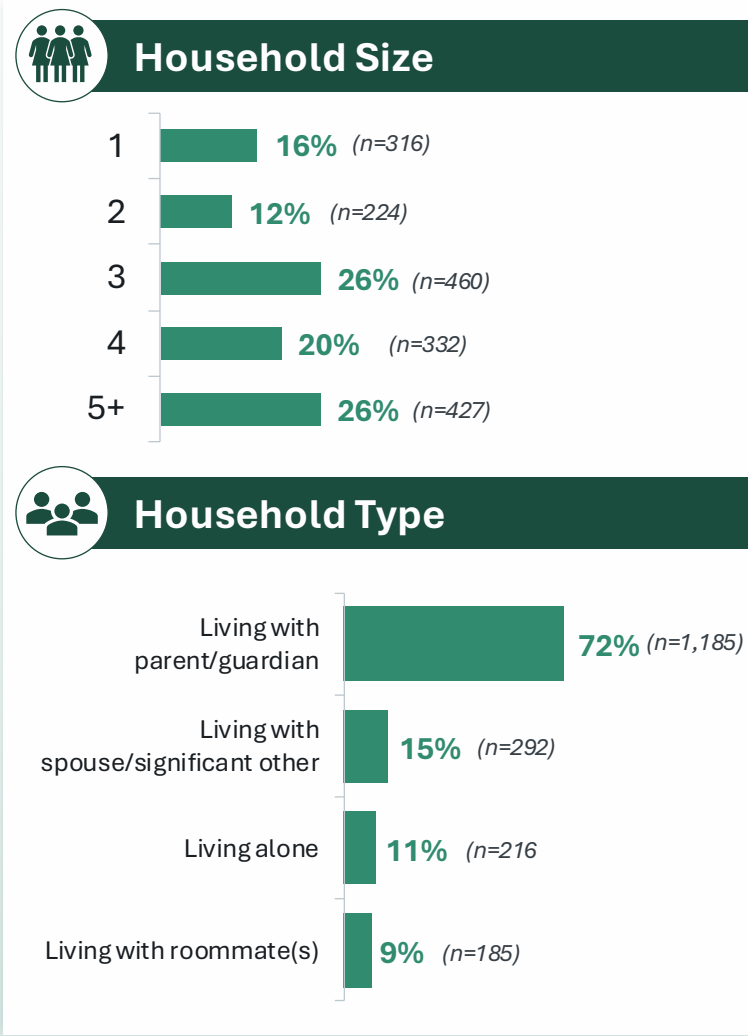
54%

21%

4%

10%

11%



Household Type

Living with parent/guardian

Living with spouse/significant other

Living alone

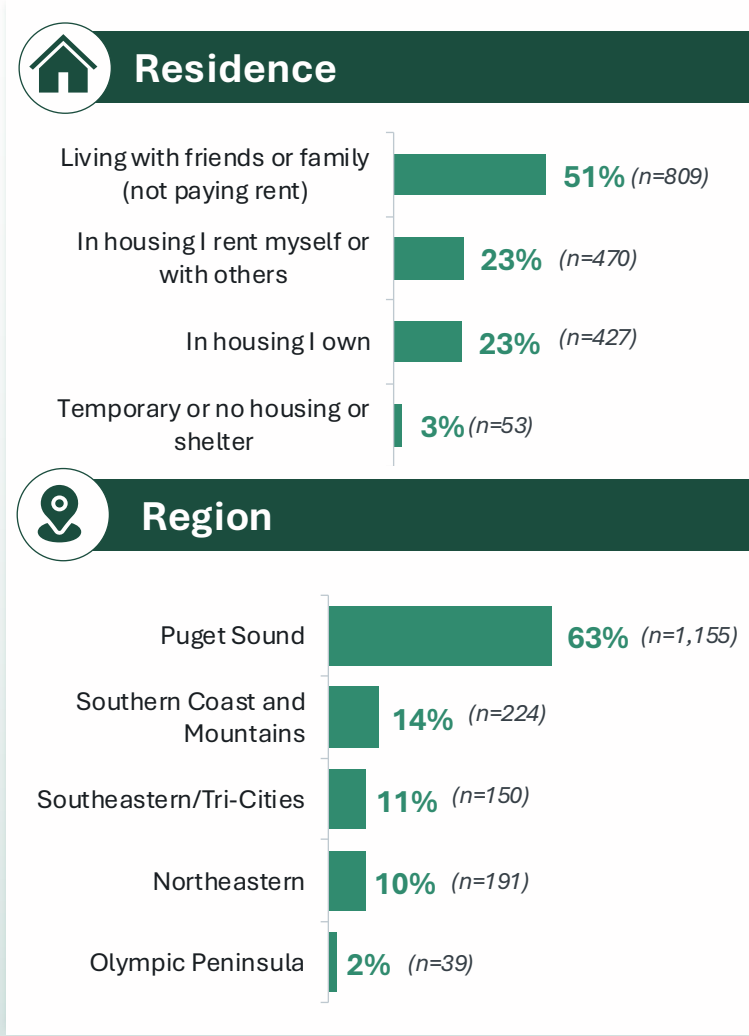
Living with roommate(s)

72% (n=1,185)

15% (n=292)

11% (n=216)

9% (n=185)



Region

Puget Sound

Southern Coast and
Mountains

Southeastern/Tri-Cities

Northeastern

Olympic Peninsula

63% (n=1,155)

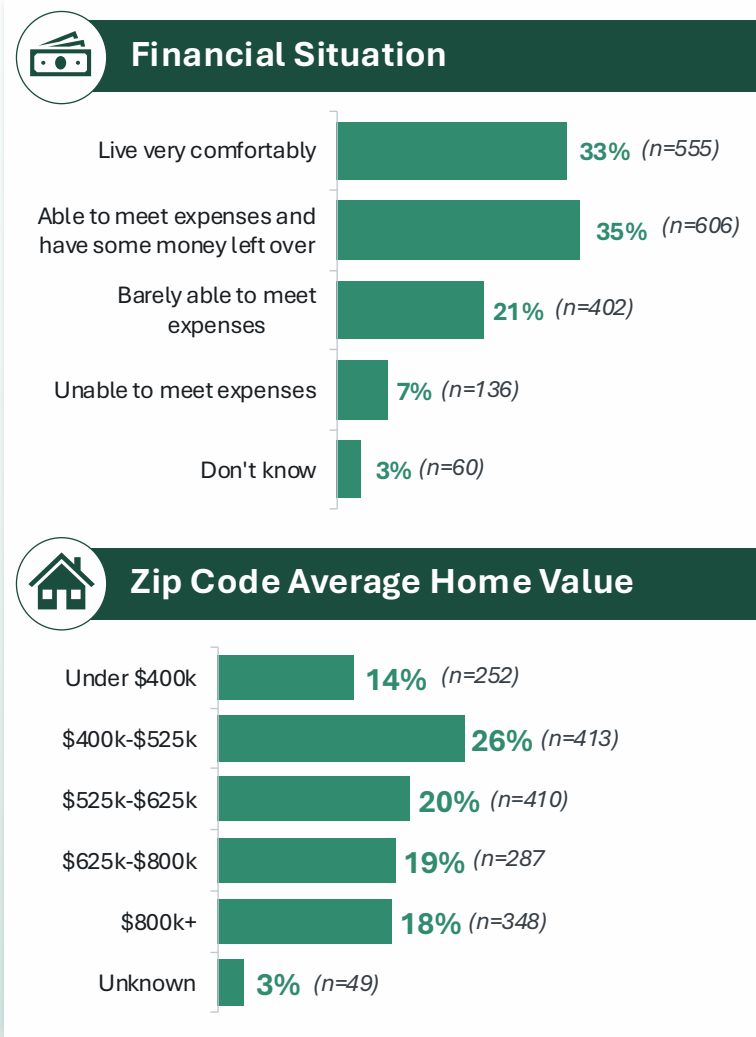
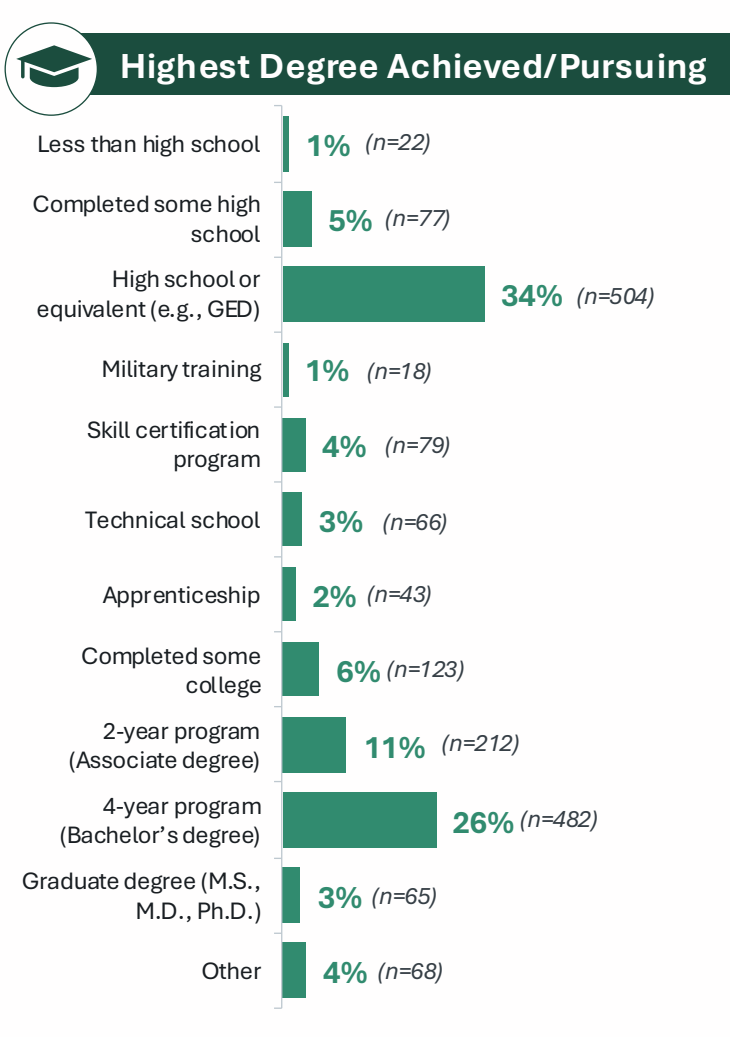
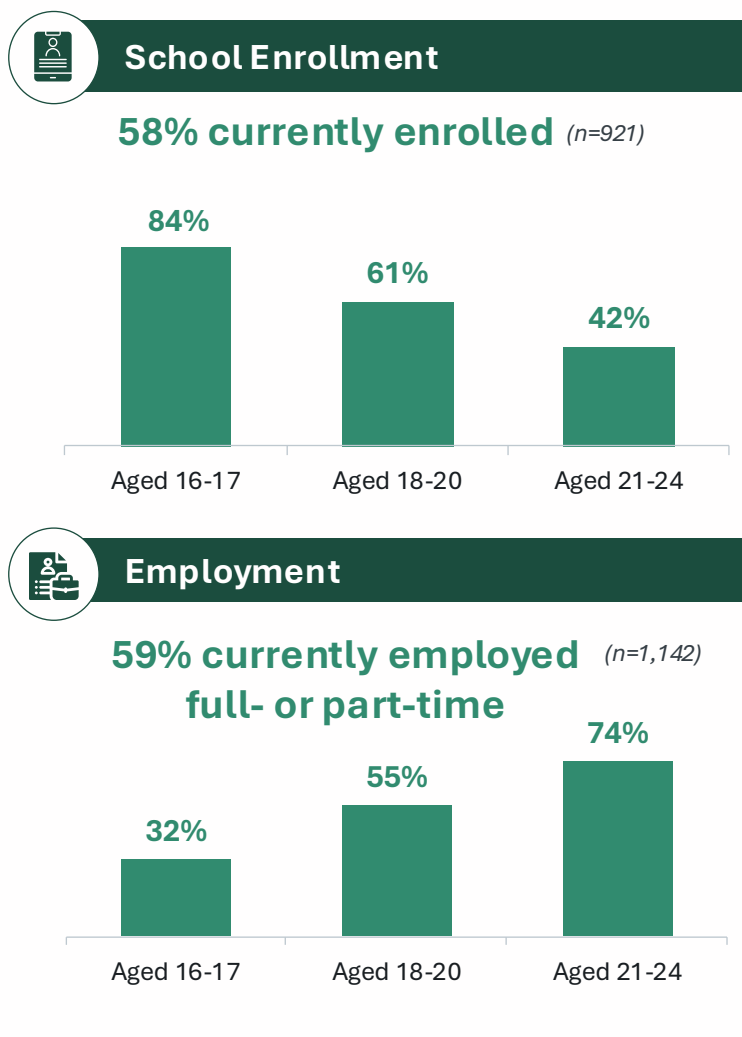
14% (n=224)

11% (n=150)

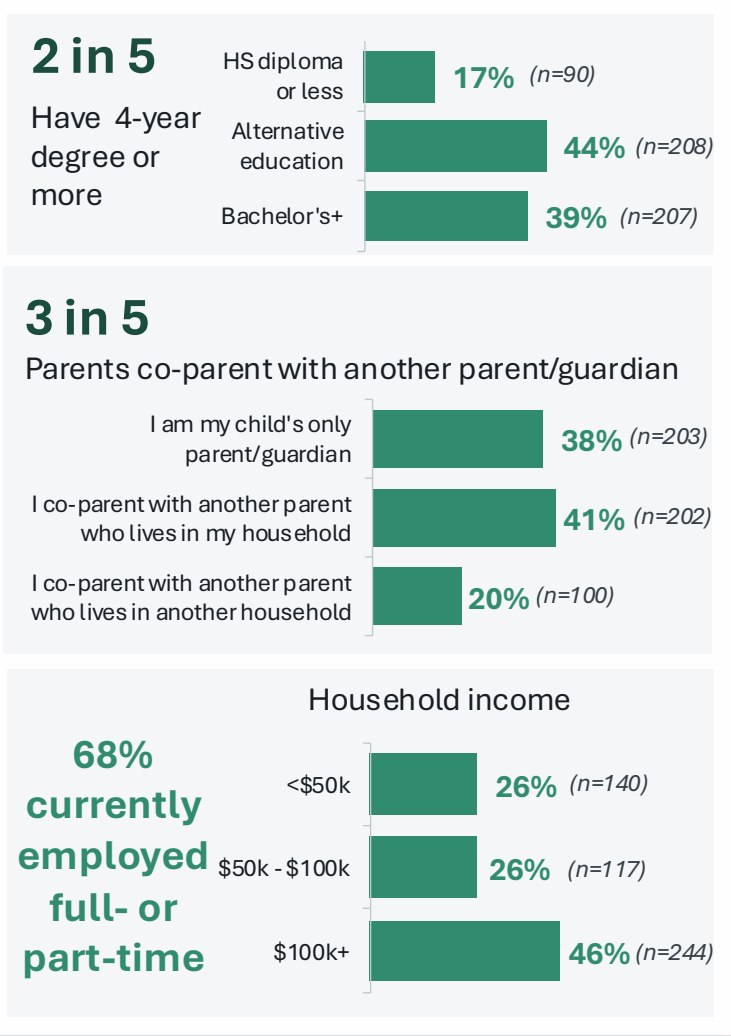
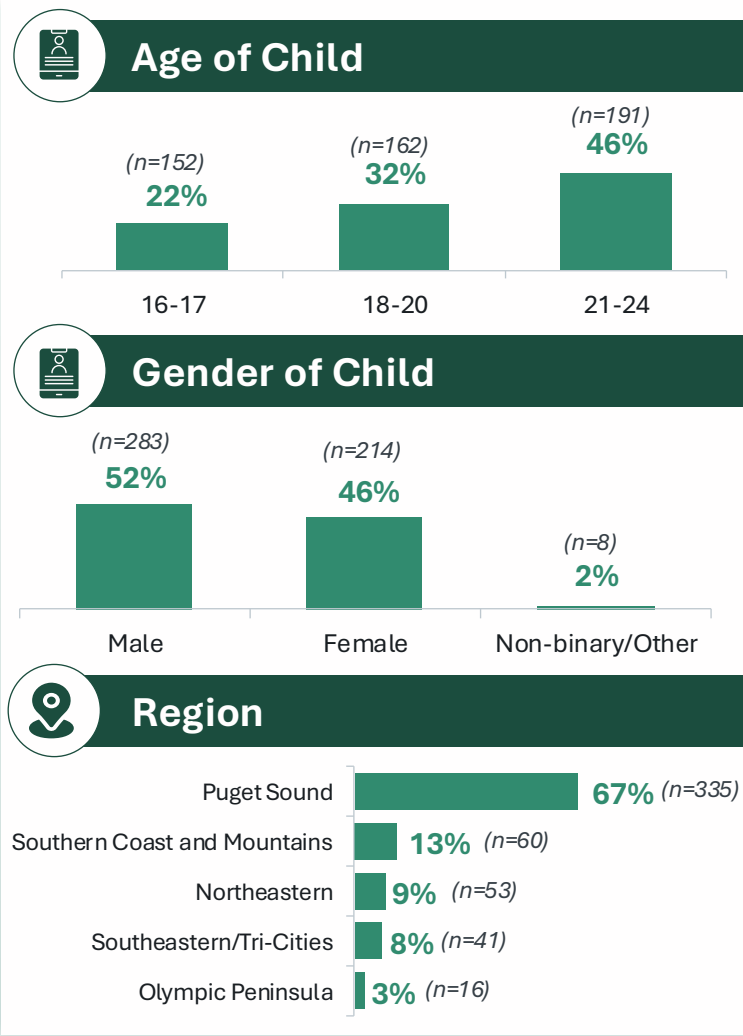
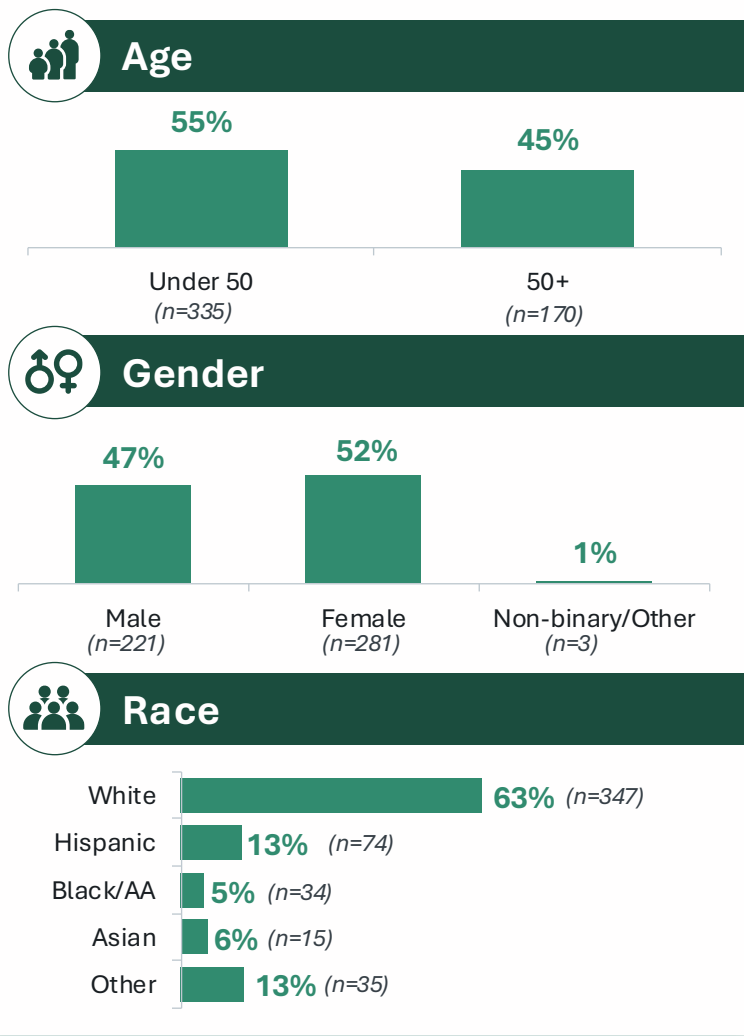
10% (n=191)

2% (n=39)

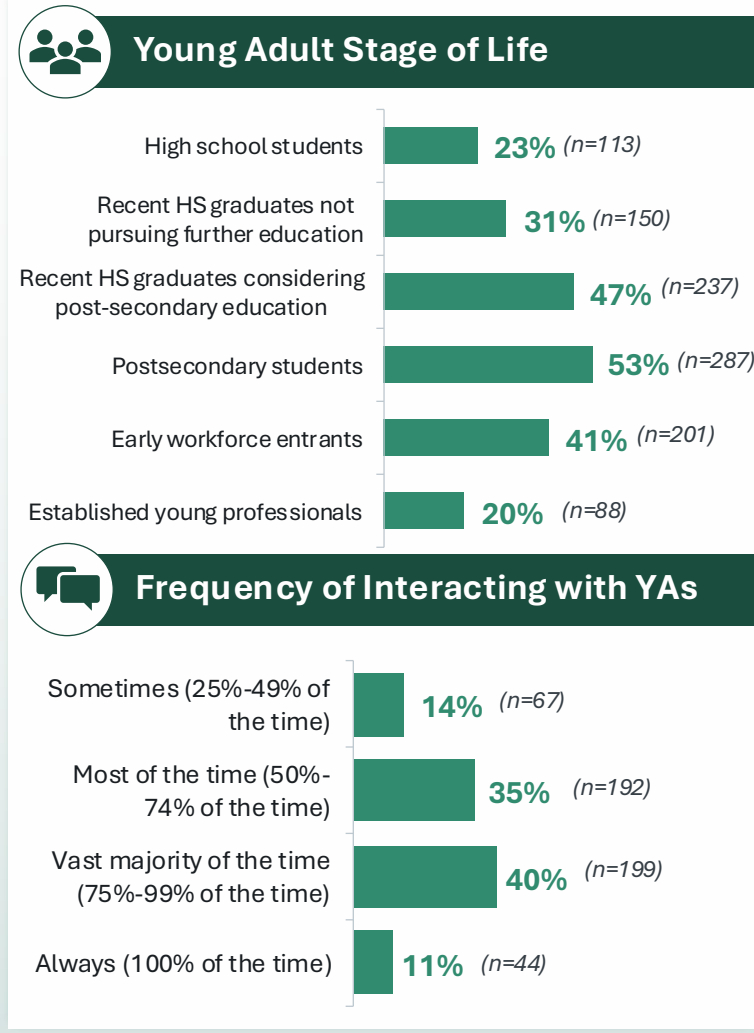
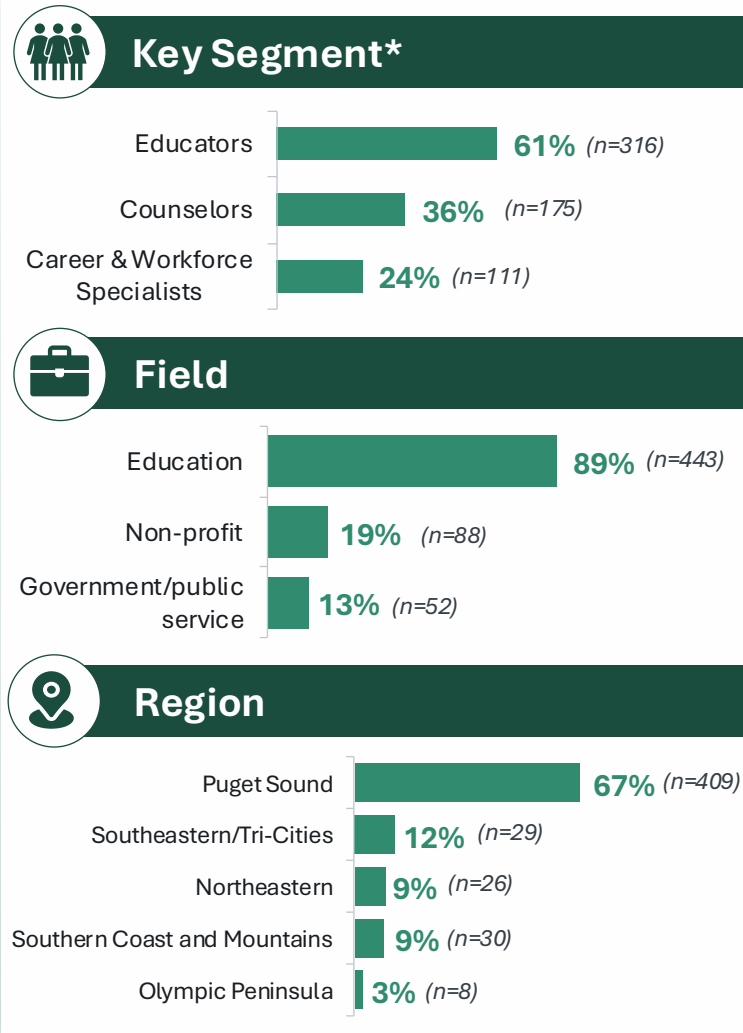
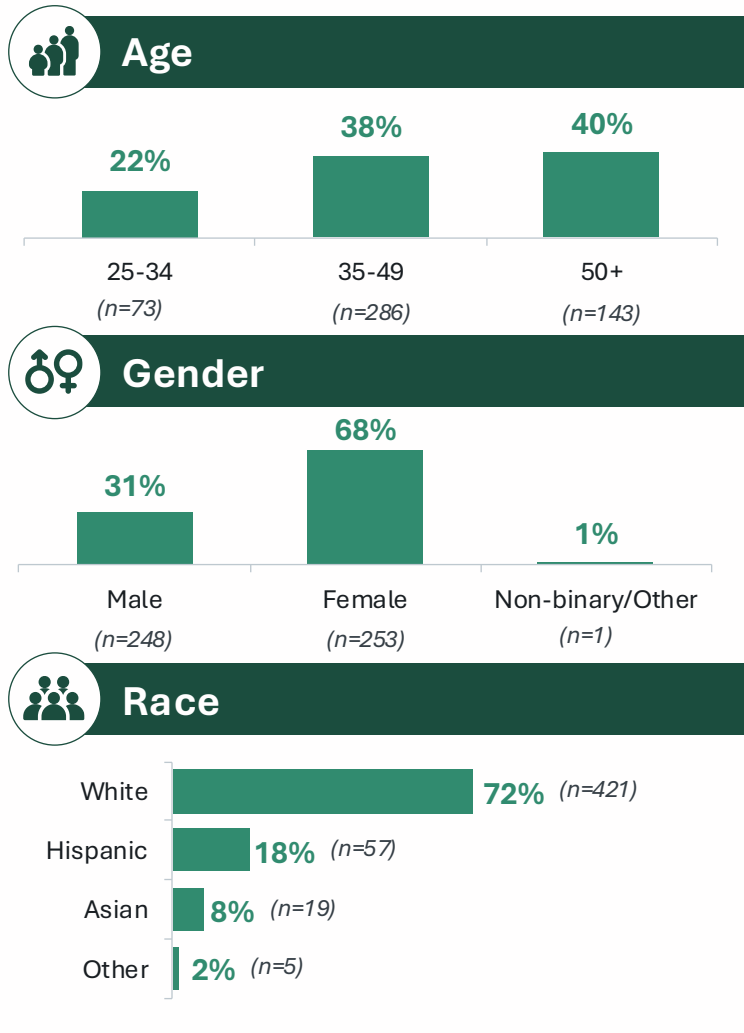
Young Adults Sample Composition:



Parents of 16-24 Year-Olds Sample Composition:



Navigators Sample Composition:



*Note: The proportion of key segments within the total sample has been weighted to reflect the distribution in the actual population based on Census data. Groups are not mutually exclusive.

A closer look at WA State Navigators

WA State Navigators are counselors, educators, and workforce specialists with at least three years of experience who spend at least 25% of their role working with young adults and discussing their futures.

Across most measures, Navigators express greater optimism about how well the education and workforce system is preparing and supporting young people:

- **Job market preparedness:** 72% of Navigators say Young Adults are prepared for the job market, compared to 47% of Young Adults themselves.
- **Community services:** Navigators are more positive about how well their community provides services to support Young Adults.
- **Ease of finding a good job:** 32% of Navigators say it is getting easier for Young Adults to find a good job in their area, compared to 13% of Young Adults.
- **AI skills development:** 62% of Navigators agree that Young Adults' education is doing enough to develop AI skills, compared to 48% of Young Adults themselves.



Possible Sources of Navigator Optimism:

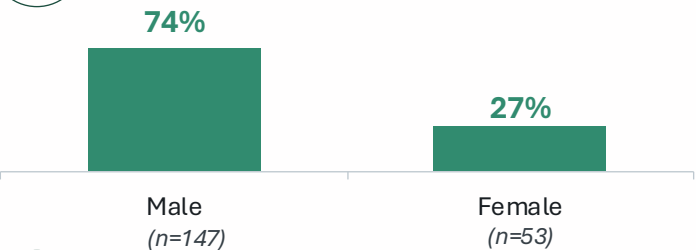
- **Professional familiarity can make the system feel easier to navigate:** Navigators work within education and workforce systems every day, so programs, processes, and terminology may feel more accessible to them than to Young Adults.
- **Navigators may see a more engaged subset of Young Adults:** Those interacting with educators, counselors, and workforce specialists may be more connected to resources, while those who disengage or fall through the cracks are less visible.
- **Navigators may judge what is available, while Young Adults judge what is accessible:** The existence of programs and supports can create confidence in the system even when Young Adults struggle to find, understand, or act on them.
- **Navigators often see only one part of the journey:** With most working in education or career development, they may have deep visibility into their part of the system, but less visibility into the challenges Young Adults face across the full school-to-workforce pathway.

Employers Sample Composition:

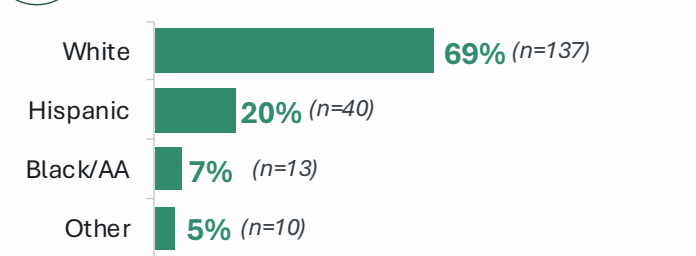
Criteria:

- Employed full-time
- Works in HR or is a Business Decision-Maker
- Share responsibility or are the primary decision maker on recruiting and/or hiring
- Has decision-making authority over recruiting and hiring for entry-level or junior positions

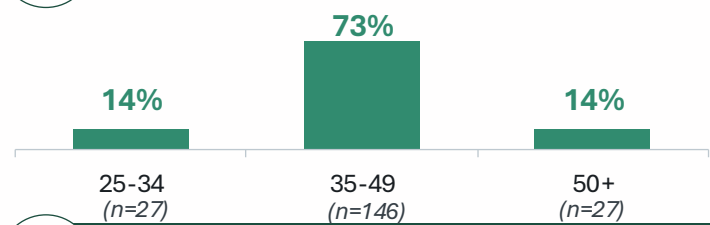
Gender



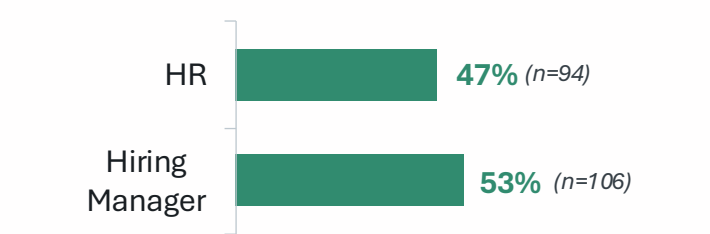
Race



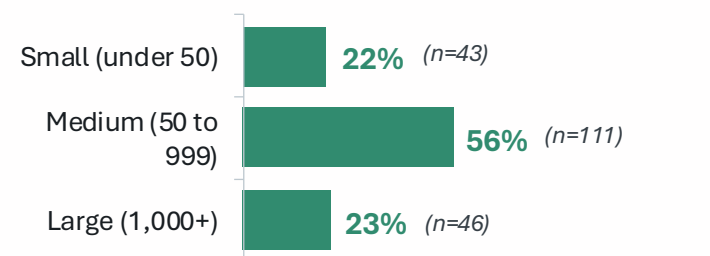
Age



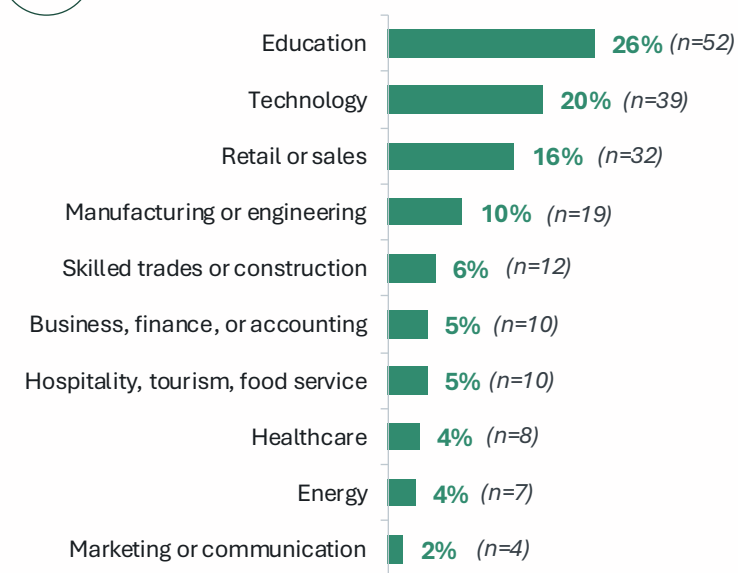
Segment (Exclusive)



Organization Size



Industry (Top 10)



Region

