

Education Reimagined:

Rising Appeal of Education Pathways

A **New** Understanding of People's Awareness, Attitudes, and Experiences with Education Pathways



Introduction



The relationship between people and their jobs is changing rapidly. There are robust and ongoing debates on issues both philosophical and practical, from the role of public education to the value of a college degree to how we can help create a workforce that can meet the evolving needs of our society and make entry into meaningful work more equitable, inclusive, and widespread.

There is broad agreement that everyone should have the training, education, and skills that lead to thriving careers and economic mobility. But while the energy and enthusiasm are palpable, the path forward can be confusing and unclear. What are the benefits of different education pathways programs, and how can people navigate the process of finding the right ones for them? How do we talk about such approaches in ways that are meaningful and actionable for the wide group of audiences who need to be engaged on these issues, from learners and their families to educators and employers?

To address these issues, a group of national education-to-workforce pathways funders—the **Pathways and Workforce Funders Group (PWF)**—came together to pool resources, share learning with each other and their grantees, and recommend new approaches that will help learners obtain the credentials, agency, professional skills, and social capital to thrive in a career earning a family-sustaining wage.

PWF focuses on creating diverse educational pathways and ecosystems that connect learners to education and, ultimately, career opportunities. Its work spans a variety of issues that touch education pathways, including K–12 education, postsecondary education, and workforce development. The group is made up of several foundations and nonprofit organizations, including Bloomberg Philanthropies, Stand Together, and Walton Family Foundation.

Since fall 2023, Hattaway Communications has been conducting research on behalf of PWF to better understand awareness of, attitudes toward, and experiences with education pathways in order to help create better communication with parents, learners, and employers. That work has uncovered major opportunities and challenges and identified numerous communications opportunities for organizations that are advancing educational pathways and programs. This report summarizes the key findings from that research.

Less Stigma, More Openness:

Despite the assumption that people believe college is the best option, this research found broad support for a wide range of non-degree educational programs.

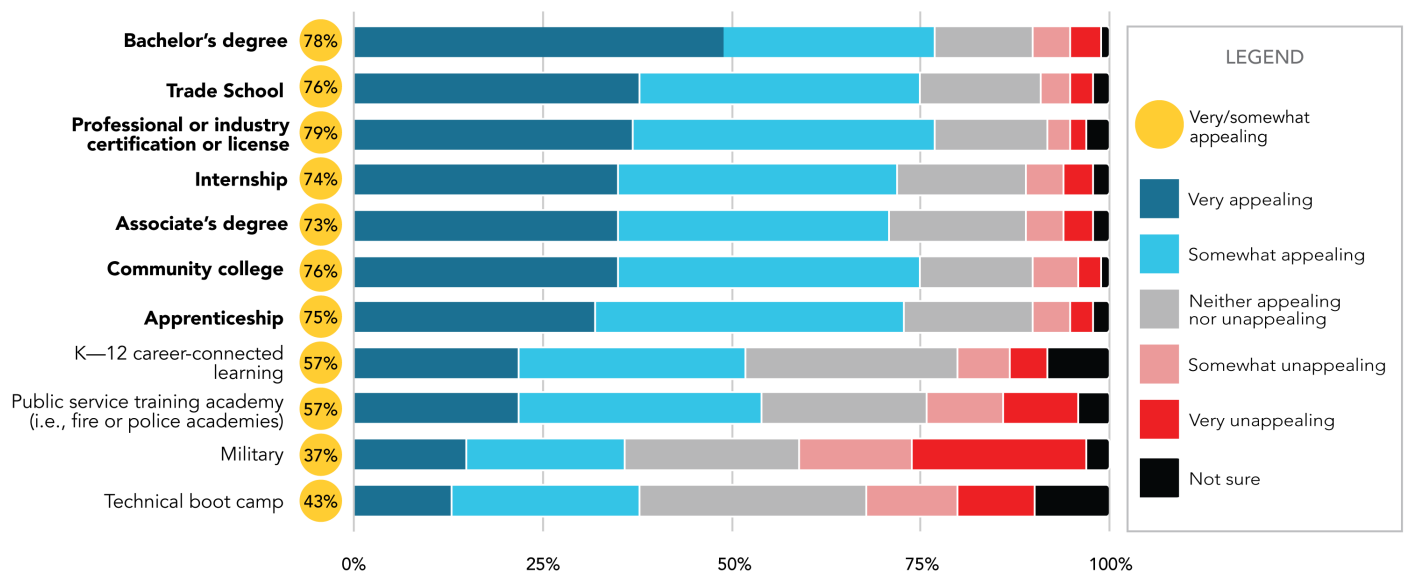


While a prevailing narrative suggests that college is widely seen as the preferred path to higher education, this survey presents a different perspective: college is no longer universally regarded as the best option. This research found that people view a range of non-degree educational programs as attractive options alongside college.

In a nationally representative survey of the American public (methodology described below), respondents were asked about a range of education options, including bachelor's degrees as well as trade school, professional or industry certification, and apprenticeships. Around three-fourths of respondents said all of these options were "somewhat" or "very" appealing.

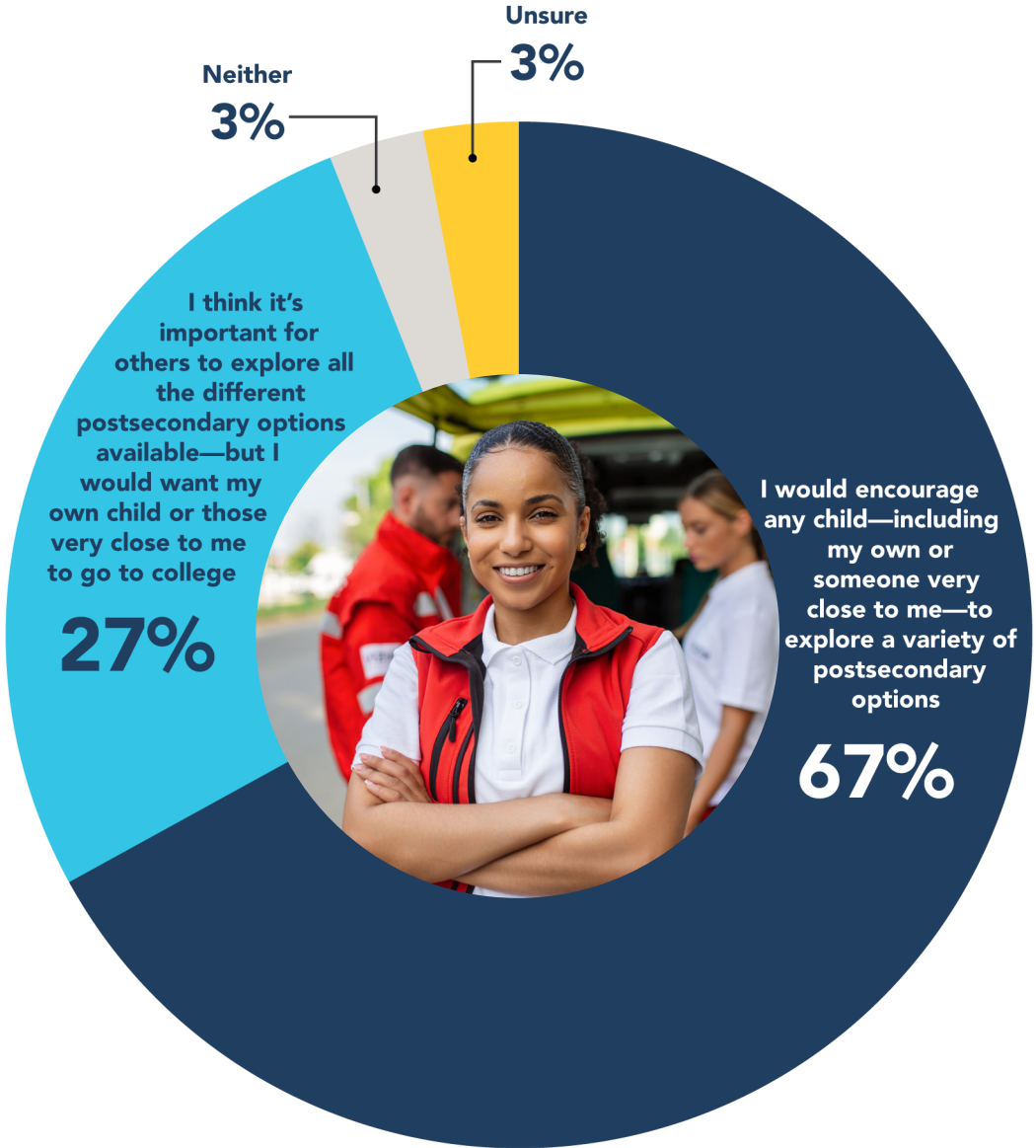
While bachelor's degrees were most likely to be ranked "very appealing" (about 10 points higher than other options), support was not overwhelming, with just under 50% of respondents calling a bachelor's degree very appealing.

How appealing or unappealing do you find each of the following education options for yourself, your child, or another close family member?



Furthermore, two-thirds of the respondents would encourage any child, including their own, to pursue alternative educational pathways, which were defined as follows: **“any career training and education that does not result in a bachelor’s degree. This could include things like apprenticeships, career education in K–12 such as agricultural or engineering training, internships, industry certifications and licenses, online courses to gain new skills, and community college.”** Only 27% said they would prefer that their child attend college.

Which of the following statements is more closely in line with your personal view?



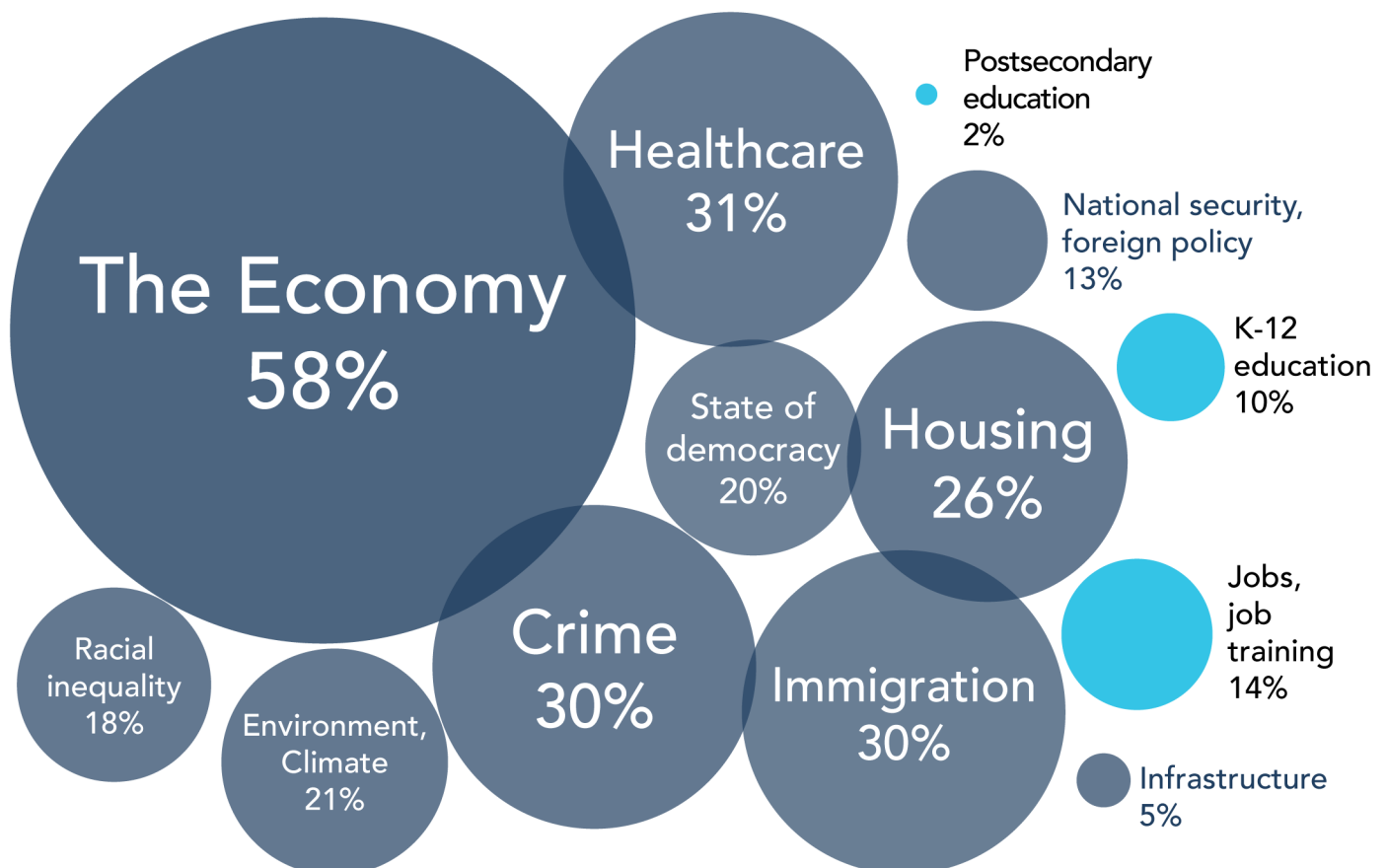
Important But Not Urgent:

Although people are generally in favor of pathways programs, they do not see the issues such programs address as being as critical as other issues we face as a country.



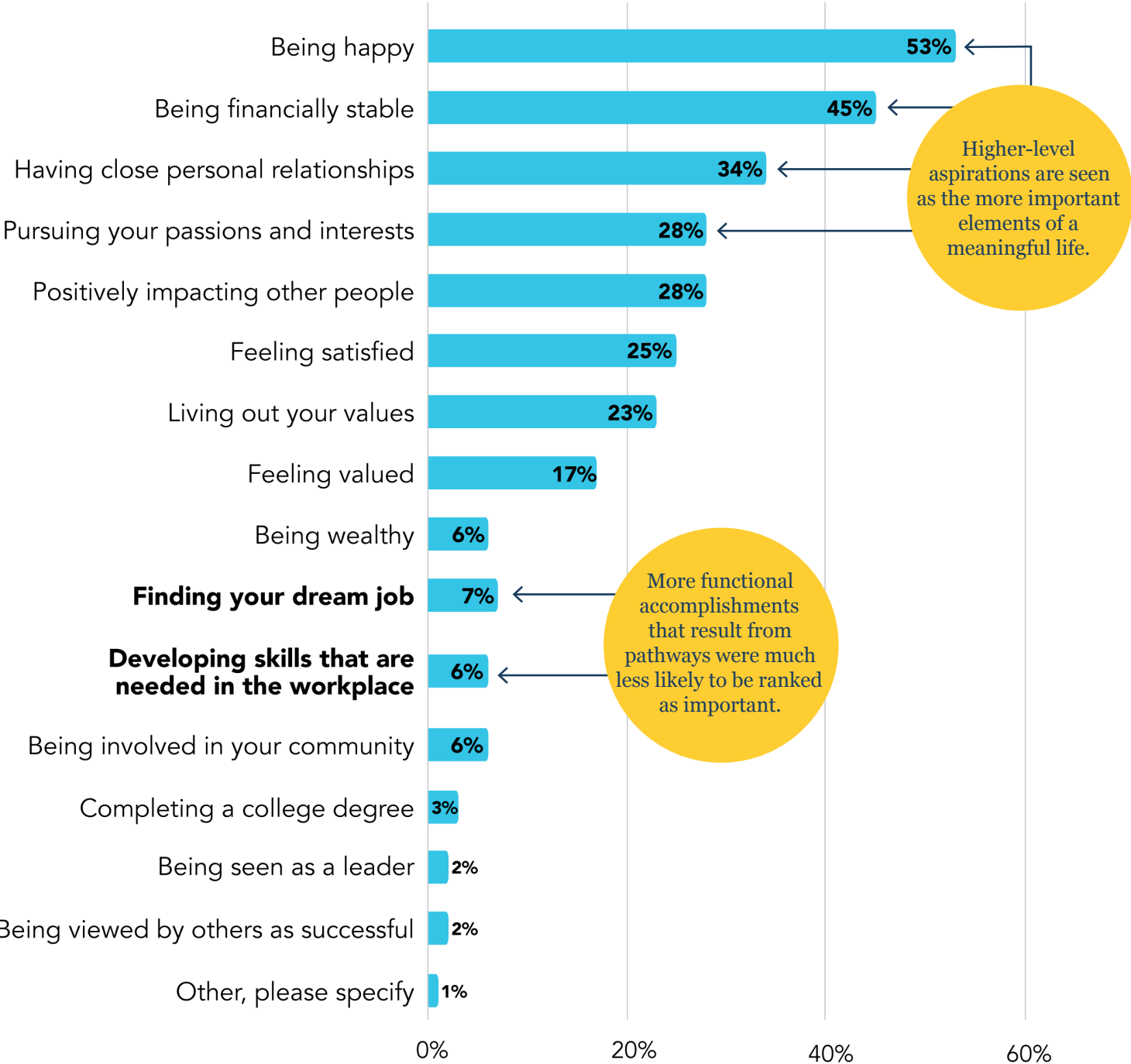
Although support for pathways programs is high, only a small minority of people think that education and workforce-related issues—such as job training, K–12 education, and postsecondary education—are among the most pressing concerns for Americans today.

What do you believe are the most important issues facing people in the United States right now? *Select up to three.*



Additionally, the most obvious, tangible benefits education pathways provide are not among the top elements of what respondents said contributed toward a meaningful life. Higher-level aspirations such as being happy (53%), being financially stable (45%), having close relationships (34%), and pursuing one’s passions (28%) are seen as the more important elements of a meaningful life. More functional accomplishments that result from pathways, like finding your dream job (7%) and developing the skills needed in the workplace (6%), were much less likely to be ranked as important.

In your opinion, which of the following elements are MOST important to living a “meaningful life”? Select up to three.



The Story Isn't Straight:

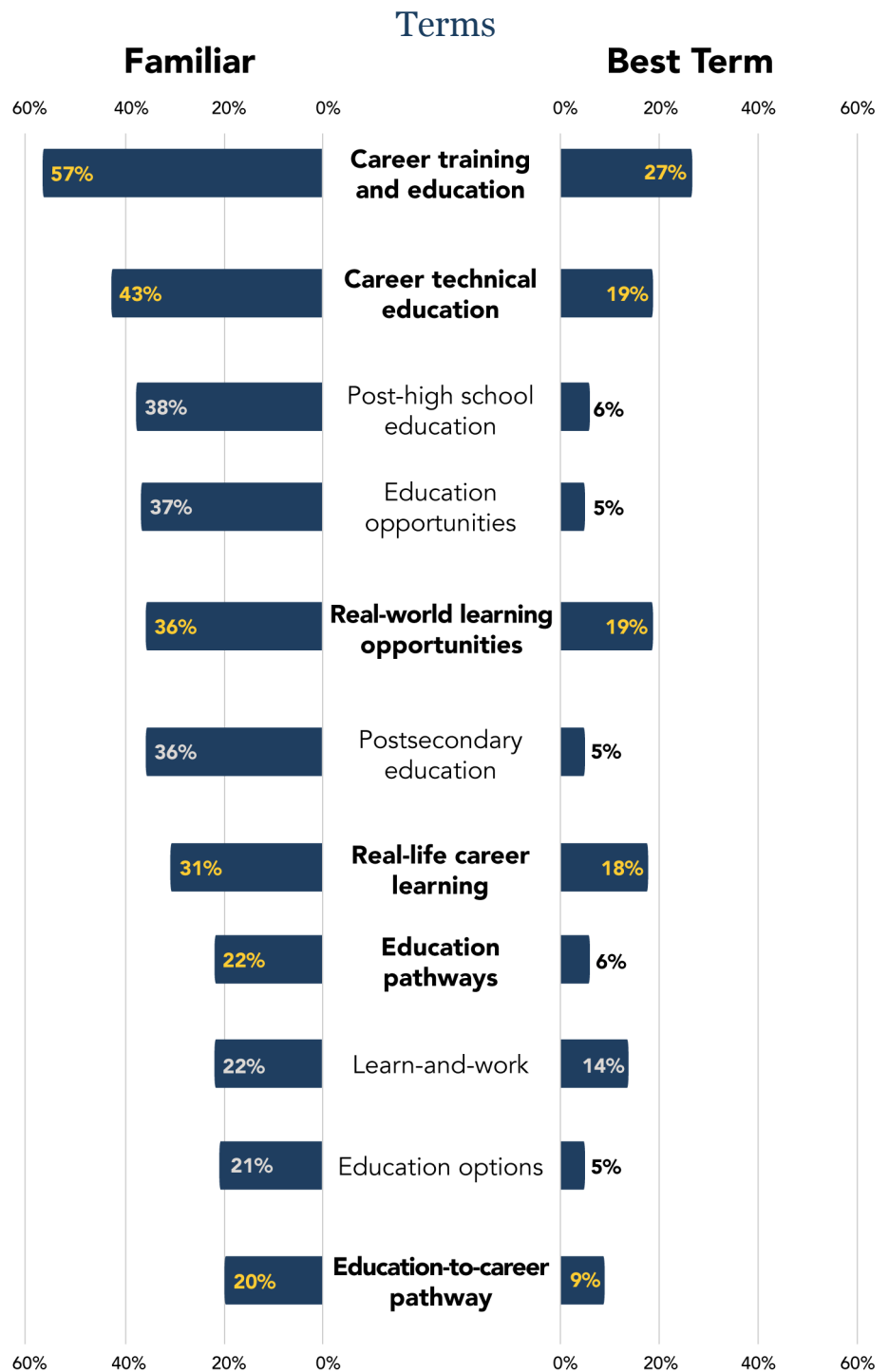
There is no shared narrative or set of terms about what education pathways programs are or what they can help people achieve.

There is a diverse pool of people working on education pathways issues, from politicians to think tanks to educators to workforce development organizations to corporations. There are many different voices with different goals and priorities, saying many different things. But this cacophony is hard for people to make sense of.

The survey found that the broad range of language being used is not widely familiar or meaningful to audiences.

Of the many terms tested, only one phrase (career training and education) was familiar to more than 50% of respondents.

In addition, only a small plurality of respondents considered any of the terms as the best way to describe these programs. Twenty-seven percent selected "career training and education" as the best term, while only 6% chose "education pathways" as the best term.



Survey respondents themselves suggested using straightforward, descriptive language and common, everyday terms—such as “skills,” “online classes,” or “training.”

Appealing But Out of Reach:

Though people find many pathways programs appealing, they don't think they are easily accessible or available in their own communities.

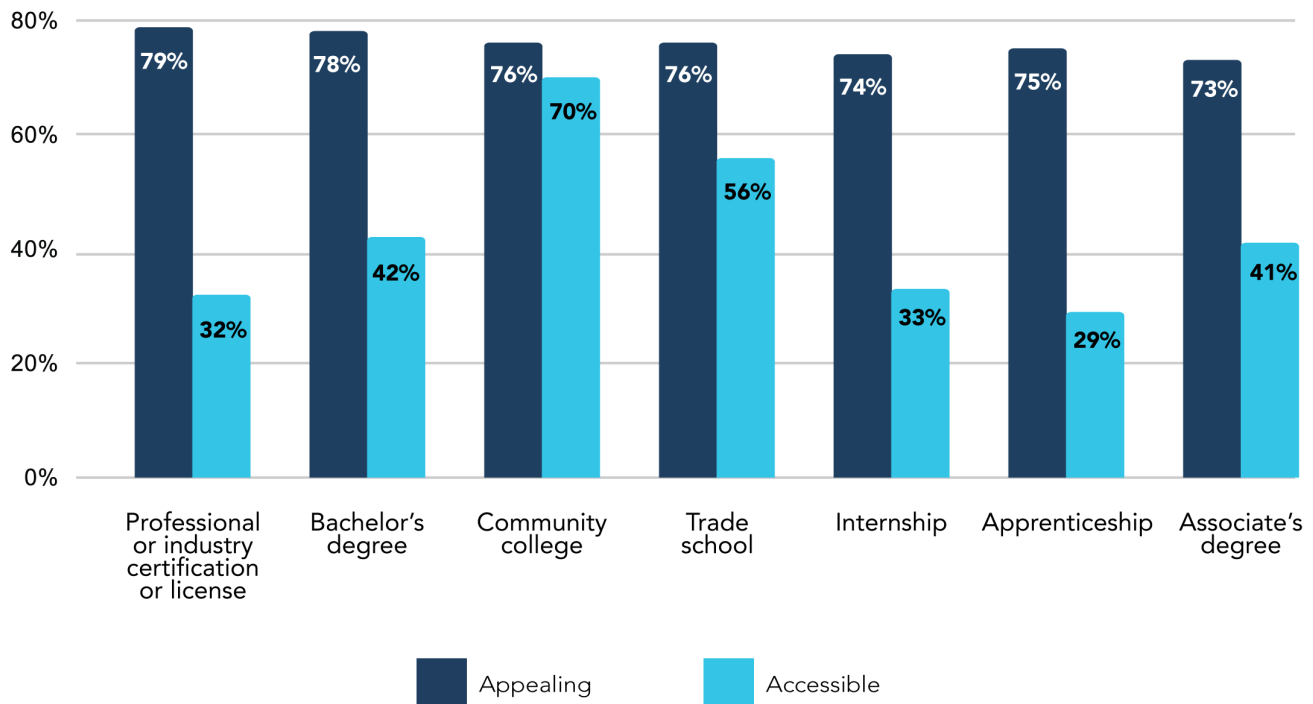


Whereas nearly 80% of people found top educational options appealing, only about a third thought they were easily available to them.

Black, Latino, urban, and low-income learners were generally less likely to perceive pathways programs as available to them: only about 20% of these learners felt that some popular options were easily available.

How appealing or unappealing do you find each of the following education options for yourself, your child, or another close family member?

Which of the following education options do you think are easily available and accessible to you, your child, or another close family member?



Whether the gap between what is considered appealing and what is available is real or perceived, people express a strong demand for resources within their local communities rather than traveling elsewhere for the training. When asked what more they would need to know to take steps to explore non-degree programs, respondents frequently pointed to the need to know more about what was available in their area.

Learning That Works:

Pathway graduates report high levels of satisfaction.

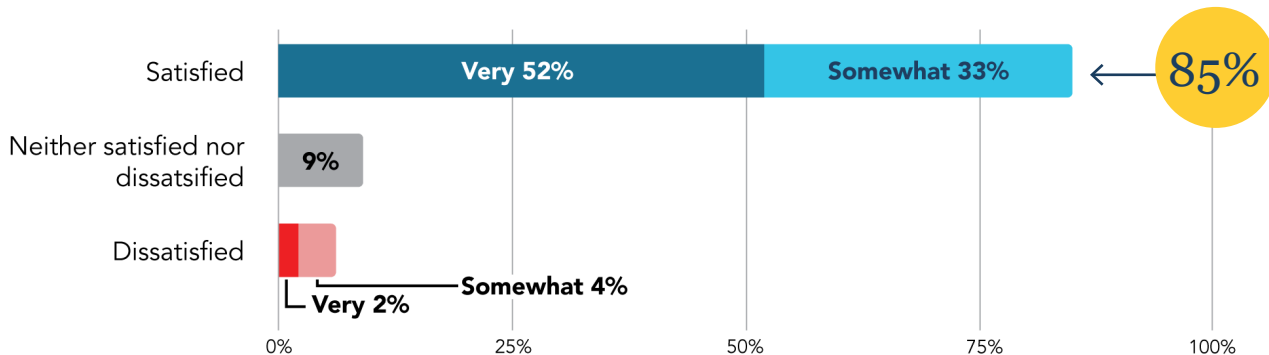


Despite limited national-level data about the outcomes of many education pathways programs, people who have completed a program are personally very satisfied with their own outcomes.

Among people who had completed an education or training program other than college, nearly all (85%) expressed satisfaction, with more than half (52%) saying they were very satisfied with the outcome of their program.

How satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the outcome of the program you attended?

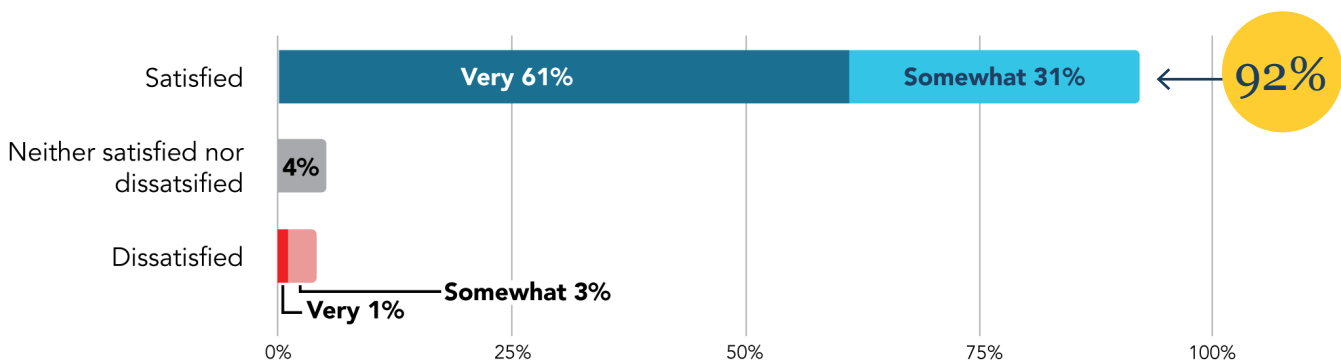
(An education or training program other than college)



Of people who had completed a program which led to a license, certification, or credential, 92% felt somewhat or very satisfied with the outcome, and 61% were very satisfied with it.

How satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the outcome of the program you attended?

(A program which resulted in a license, certification, or credential)



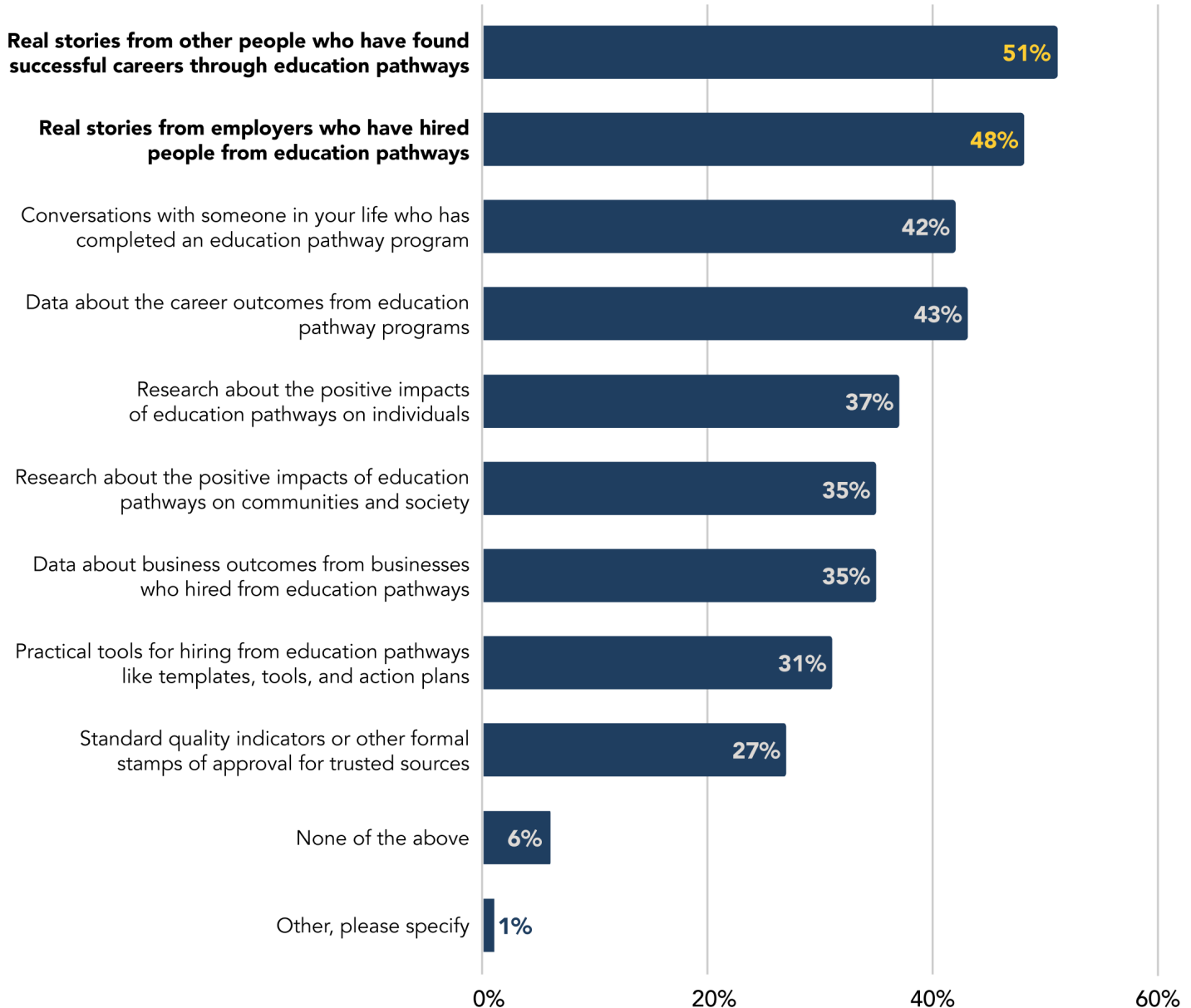
Powerful Voices:

People are motivated by hearing real stories from real people about pathways programs.



Highlighting testimonials and success stories—especially from graduates who have earned credentials—is one way to increase the relevance of these programs among a wider audience. Over half of the survey respondents said that hearing real stories—both from others who have found successful careers through education pathways or from employers who have hired people from pathways programs—would make them feel more confident that pathways can provide real benefits to people, businesses, and society.

What would you need to see or hear to feel confident that education pathways could provide real benefits to people, businesses, and society? *Select all that apply.*



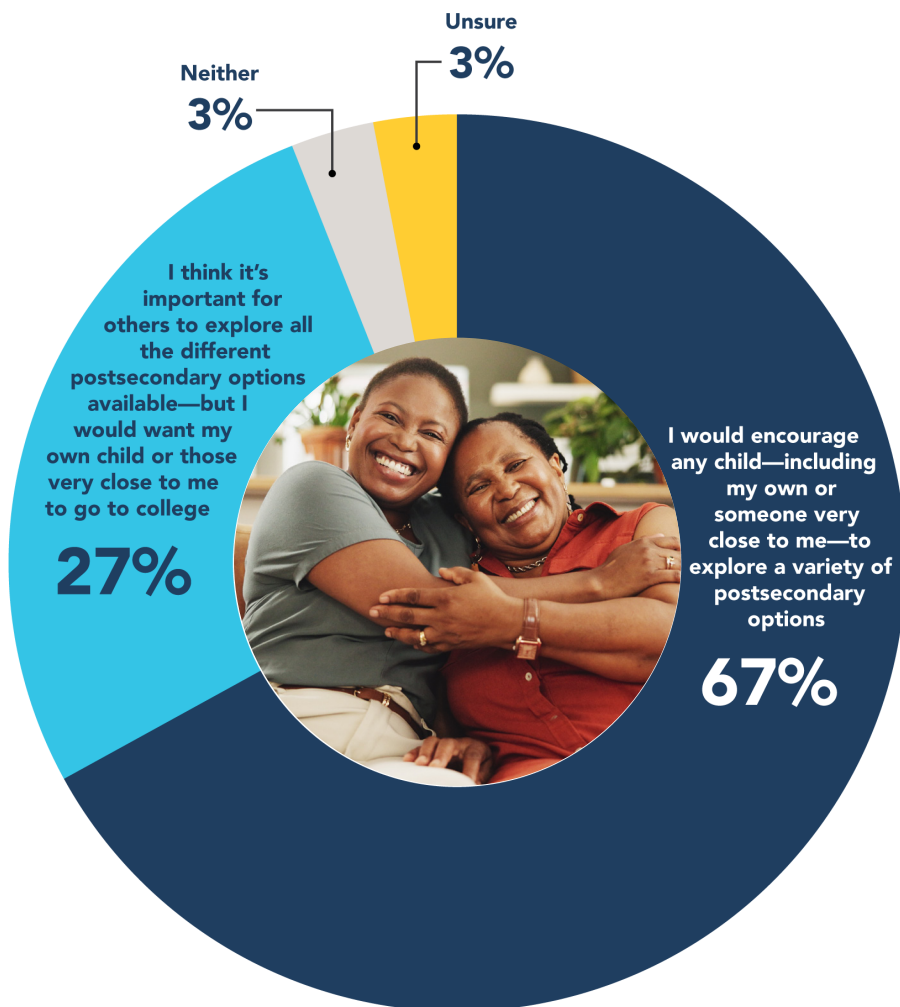
If You're Happy, I'm Happy:

Parents' motivations closely mirror those of their children.



Contrary to the belief that many parents pressure their children to pursue traditional college paths, this survey reveals that parents want their children to pursue the path that gives them the best life possible.

Which of the following statements is more closely in line with your personal view?



Mirroring the attitudes of the general population, two-thirds of parents said they would encourage any child, including their own, to pursue educational pathways programs, and only 27% said that they preferred that their child attend college.

This attitude holds true among parents across demographics, including race, educational attainment, and income level.

Furthermore, we asked both young learners (respondents ages 14–24) and parents about their motivations for pursuing education other than college and found that there are significant shared motivations.

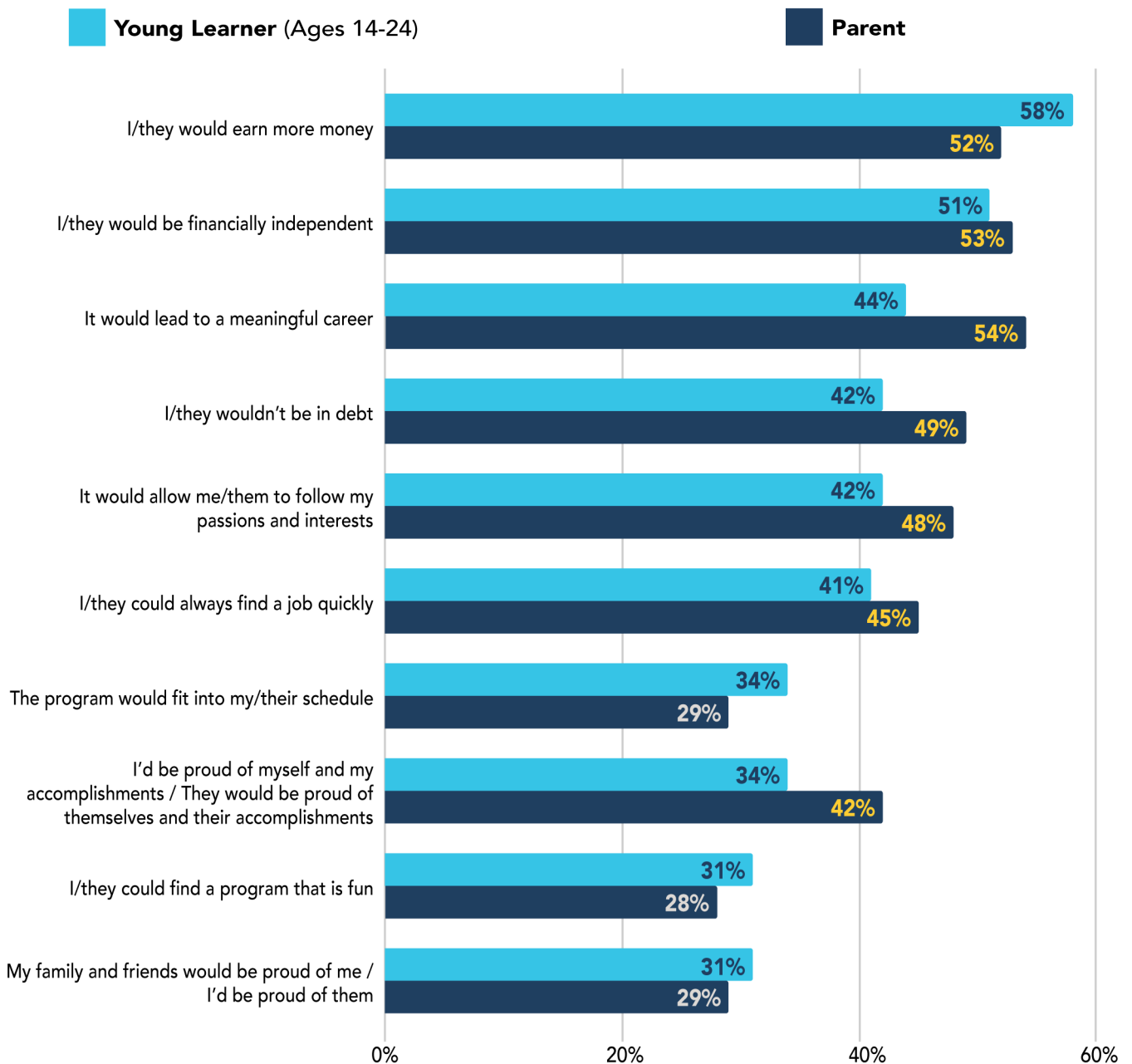
Both learners and parents want learners to achieve a stable future and a meaningful life. This includes having financial independence, the ability to pursue meaningful careers, personal passions, and interests, and experiencing pride and contentment in their accomplishments.

Top 10 motivators for learners ages 14–24

Please select each of the following that is true for you, personally:

I would be more likely to explore pursuing career education and training programs other than college for myself if I knew . . .

I would be more likely to encourage my child to explore career education and training programs other than college if I knew . . .





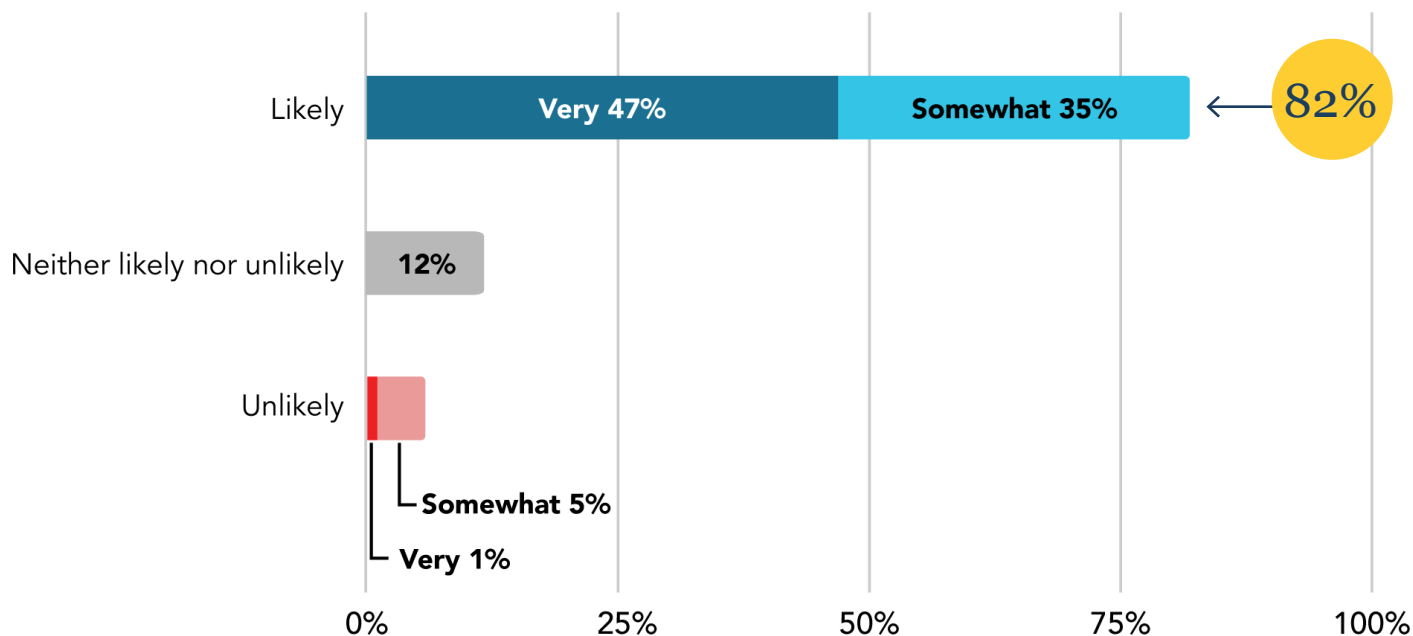
The Future of Hiring:

Hiring managers are open to skills-based recruitment.

Though some companies' hiring policies still require screening candidates for degrees, many other companies and individual hiring managers are shifting to a skills-based hiring approach.

Many hiring managers are highly supportive of non-degree programs: 82% of hiring managers would be likely to adopt this approach if their companies were to remove degree requirements.

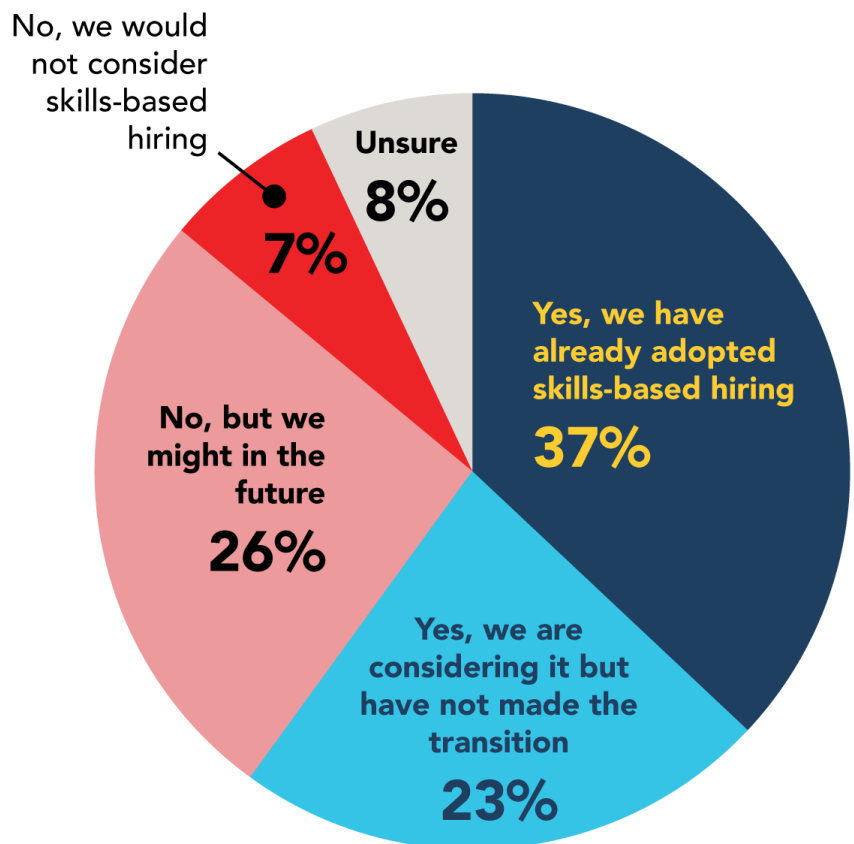
How likely or unlikely are you to hire a candidate without a college degree based on their proven skills for a job that does not require specific skills or licenses acquired through a bachelor's or advanced degree?



More than a third of white-collar hiring managers said that their company had already adopted skills-based hiring, another quarter said they were considering making the transition, and an additional quarter said they might make the transition in the future.

Some companies have chosen to move towards “skills-based hiring.” This means they are removing bachelor’s degree requirements for some jobs that do not require specific skills or licenses that can only be acquired through bachelor’s or advanced degrees (i.e., doctor or chemical engineer) and instead hiring based on the candidate’s proven skills. These could be for jobs like office managers, nurses, or salespeople.

Have you or your company considered adopting a skills-based hiring approach for some jobs that require or used to require a college degree?



Notably, up to 53% of hiring managers have attended education pathways programs themselves, so they know firsthand the benefits of these programs and the skills that are developed in them.

Takeaways and Recommendations



This research reveals strong support for non-degree education programs among learners, parents, and employers, refuting a long-held belief that college was universally considered the best option for a successful future.

This survey was fielded in May of 2024; many of the themes that we saw then forecast the kinds of issues that drove voter behavior in the 2024 elections.

Issues such as the primacy of day-to-day concerns, skepticism about the value of elite education, and lack of clear messaging that everyday people can understand all came through in this work, and have had reverberations on a national scale.

The high levels of support for Pathways programs identified in this data suggests that this is an opportune time for Pathways programs and funders to connect with learners, parents, and institutions to help them understand, explore, and enroll in these programs.

This widespread support indicates that addressing stigma may be less necessary than once thought. Instead, practitioners can emphasize such programs' value within a diverse educational ecosystem and make it easier to learn about and navigate such programs, particularly in learners' local communities.

Practitioners can also promote the programs as fulfilling paths to meaningful lives and can bolster the case with stories of pathways alumni who felt satisfied with and achieved their goals through their programs.

That said, despite broad support, several challenges still exist, many of which can be solved through improved communication.

1

First, pathway programs (or education and job training, more generally) are not at the top of most Americans' minds. Highlighting the links between these programs and issues people care about, either on a societal level or personal level (like the economy, healthcare, or the climate), will help make pathways programs seem more relevant and urgent to people.

2

Second, there is a big gap between how appealing people find such programs and how accessible they think they are. To close this "accessibility gap," potential learners would benefit from stronger connections to organizations and resources to help them explore and navigate their local options.

3

Third, clearer communication is needed. Current terminology is unfamiliar and unclear to most potential learners.

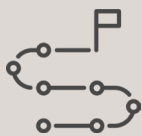
To drive greater engagement, the field should strive to:



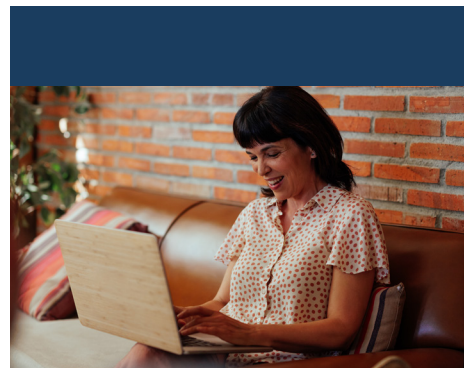
Use clear and consistent language that describes these programs and their benefits



Share stories and outcome data from those who have completed pathways programs and/or hired from them to help build confidence and model positive outcomes for learners



Provide concrete calls to action for learners who are interested in learning more, connecting them with further resources or organizations to explore the next steps



PARENTS

Additional communications outreach for parents would also be beneficial. Parents strongly influence their children's educational choices. They want what's best for them, and they support pathway programs.

PRACTITIONERS

To further engage parents and boost their confidence in helping their children navigate their options, practitioners should:

Provide resources that showcase pathways to participants' financial stability and personal fulfillment

Share success stories and practical outcomes of these programs

Connect them with organizations and resources that can help identify the best programs for their children



EMPLOYERS

When it comes to employers, though many individual hiring managers are interested in hiring candidates for their skills rather than for degrees alone, some companies haven't yet updated their policies. The field can help hiring managers interested in skills-based hiring make the case to their companies for implementing this approach by sharing stories from companies who have seen great results from skills-based hiring and providing data about outcomes and return on investment.

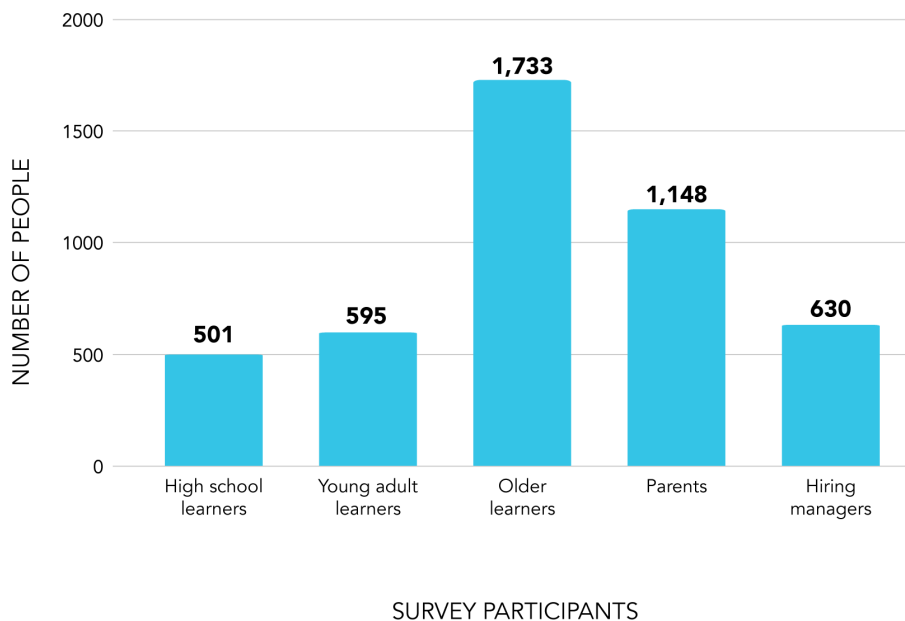
FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research will probe how to make narratives about educational pathways more understandable, urgent, actionable, and relevant to people's lives. It will also identify success stories and outcomes from learners and employers who have pursued these programs, helping to make the case for others to consider them.



Methodology

From May 13 to May 24, 2024, Hattaway Communications conducted a national survey to study people's awareness of, attitude toward, and experience with non-degree education programs. The survey has a representative sample of 1,500 American adults, with additional oversamples of 500 high school learners (ages 14–17), 400 young adult learners (ages 18–24), 400 parents, and 400 hiring managers. The survey reached 3,200 people in total. Totals for each key audience are as follows:



To ensure the survey results accurately represent the demographic composition of the target population, we applied statistical weighting to the data. Weighting adjusts the survey responses so that groups that were under- or overrepresented in the sample match their actual proportions in the population.

For this survey, we weighted responses by key demographic factors, including age and race/ethnicity. These adjustments ensure that the findings are representative of the population as a whole and reflect the diverse experiences and opinions of different demographic groups.

The weighted data help to correct any sampling imbalances and provide a more accurate portrayal of the population's views on non-degree education programs.

The survey has a margin of error of 1.73%.



High school learners include teenagers ages 14 to 17.



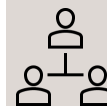
Young adult learners include all respondents ages 18 to 24.



Older learners include respondents who are above 25 years old and show some interest in pursuing pathway programs.



Parents include respondents who are a parent(s) of a child under 25.



Hiring managers include respondents who are employed in white-collar jobs and make hiring decisions.