

2026 PCPR Spring Symposium

Valued but Out of Reach

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By 2040, 75 percent of adults in the U.S. labor force will have college degrees or other credentials of value leading to economic prosperity.

LEADERSHIP > EDUCATION

Gallup: Public Perception Of A C Hits A 15-Year Low

By Michael T. Nietzel, Senior Contributor. © Michael Nietzel, former college pr...

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TODAY'S INSTITUTIONS

**We can't ignore a crisis of confidence
in American higher education**

Is a College Education Still Worth It?

Is College Worth It?

*As economic outcomes for young
degrees have improved, American
value of college*

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EDUCATION NEWS

Why Americans stopped believing in higher education

From rising costs to policy failures, the roots of distrust stretch back

GALLUP®



THE STATE OF HIGHER EDUCATION 2026

Valued but Out of Reach

The Reality of Higher
Education Today



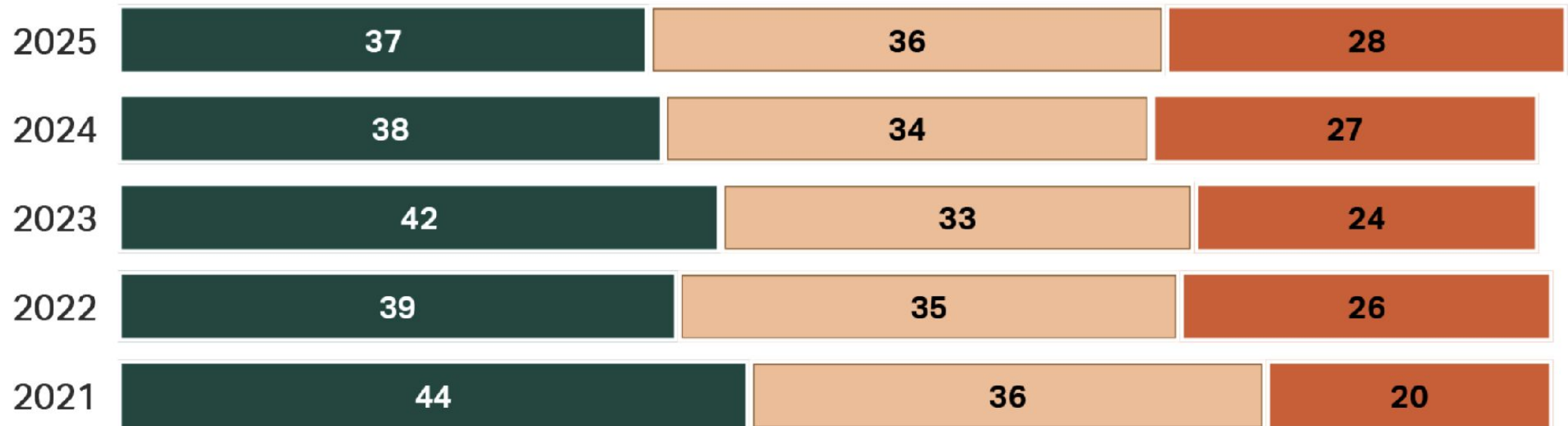
LUMINA FOUNDATION

GOAL 2040

Myth #1: US adults no longer believe in higher education.

■ % More important ■ % Equally important ■ % Less important

ADULTS WITHOUT A DEGREE OR CREDENTIAL

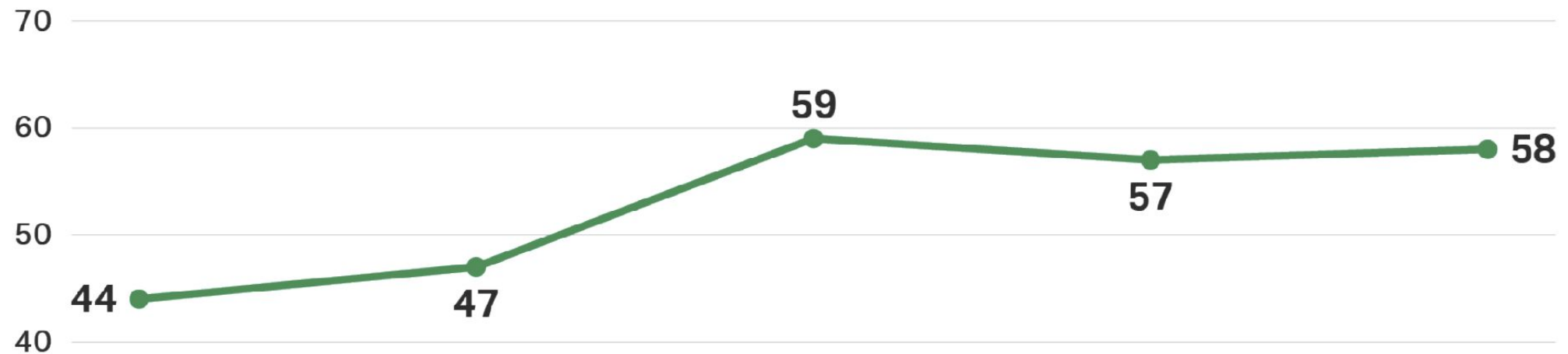


Myth #2: Interest in pursuing postsecondary education is declining.

Interest in Higher Education, 2021-2025

Among adults not enrolled in a certificate, certification, associate or bachelor's degree program

— % Have considered pursuing at least one program in past two years



Instead, many intend to enroll within the next five years.

Please indicate how likely you are in the next five years to enroll in a program for any of the following. [Type of degree program or credential]

■ % Very likely ■ % Likely

Overall

21

28

49

ENROLLMENT STATUS

Stopped out

26

32

58

Never enrolled

15

22

37

Myth #3: Students think higher education is worthless.

Which of the following best describes the quality of the education you are currently receiving in your program?

■ % Excellent ■ % Very good ■ % Good ■ % Fair ■ % Poor



DEGREE TYPE



Myth #4: Students don't think college leads to meaningful career outcomes.

% Very confident + Confident

■ Teach you skills you need to get the type of job you want ■ Help you get a job when you graduate

All currently enrolled college students

93

88

DEGREE TYPE

Associate degree

90

85

Bachelor's degree

94

90

PROGRAM OF STUDY

Fact #1: Only 25% of US adults believe all or most Americans have access to a quality, affordable postsecondary education.

■ % All ■ % Most ■ % About half ■ % Not too many/None



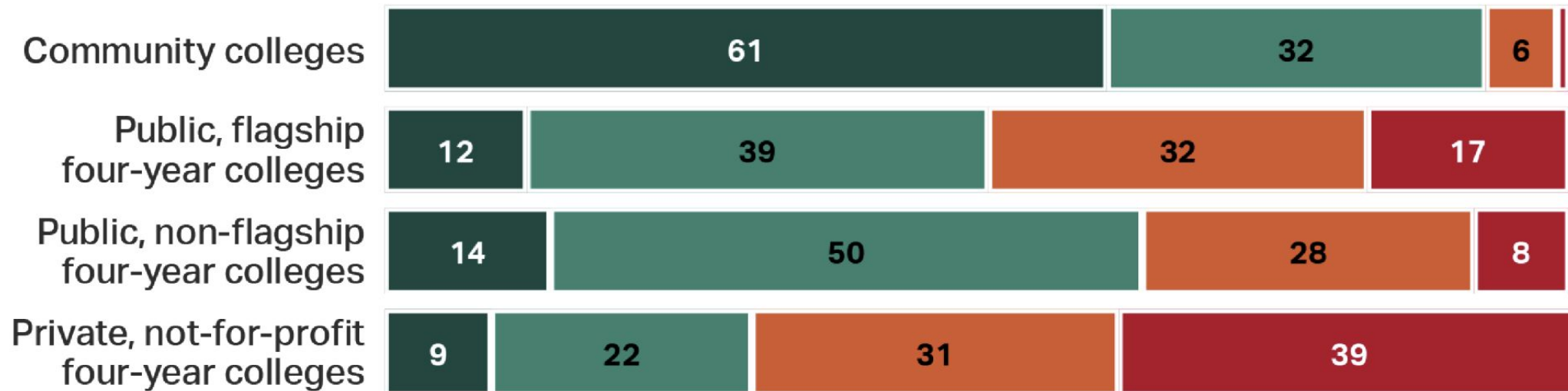
Perceptions of access vary widely.



Fact: Current students share similar perceptions of affordability.

How affordable do you think each of the following institutions or programs are?

■ % Very affordable ■ % Somewhat affordable ■ % Somewhat unaffordable ■ % Very unaffordable

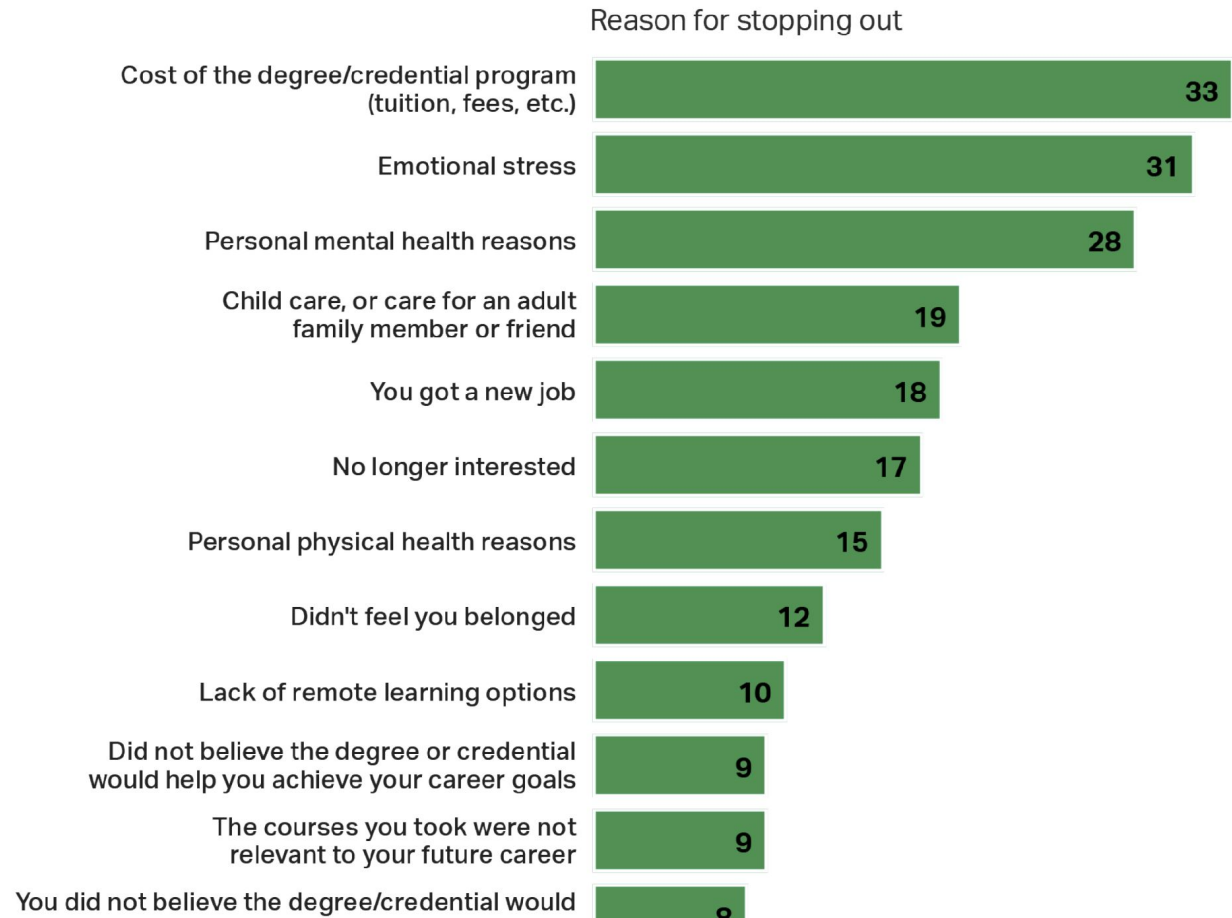


Note: Percentages under 3% are not displayed. Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100%.

Fact: Students' biggest barriers to completion aren't academic—they're financial, emotional, and personal.

Which of the following describes why you stopped your coursework? *Select all that apply.*

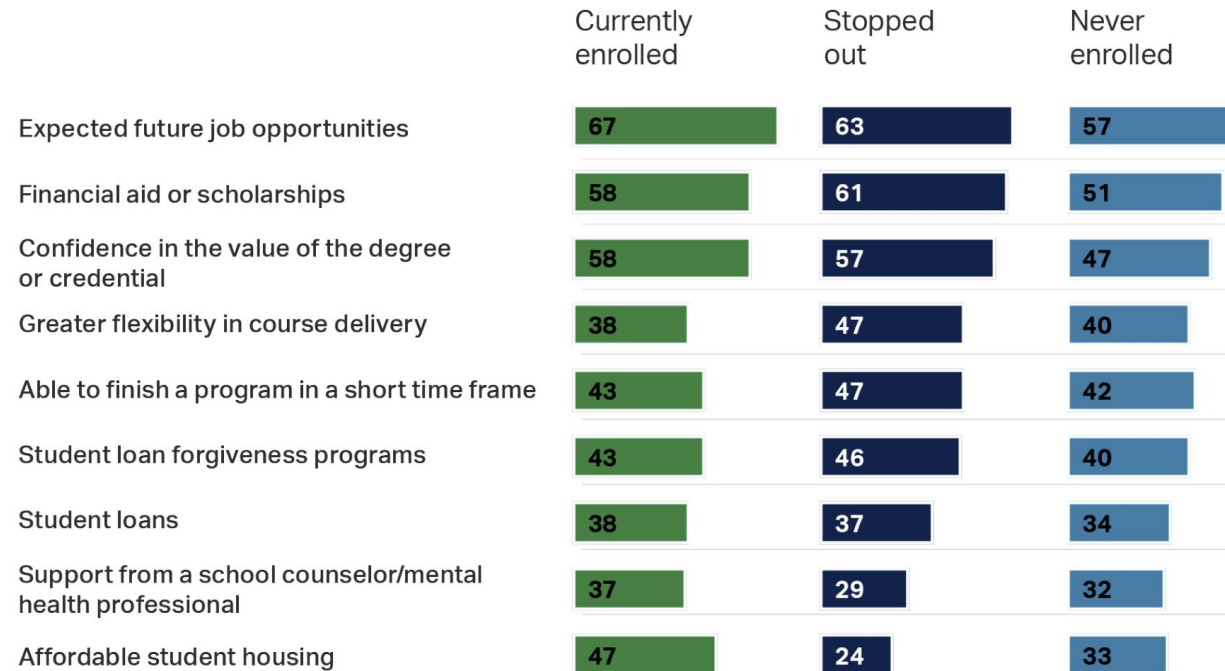
% Selected



Fact #2: Career outcomes are the primary motivator for postsecondary decisions.

How important [are/would] each of the following [be] in [your being able to remain enrolled/ getting you to enroll] in [your/a] program [in the next 12 months]?

% Very important



A new question is emerging

Can I get into
college?



Which pathway
will help me build
the future I
want?

College access work is evolving *from* helping students **get into college** *toward* helping students **access opportunity and economic mobility.**

How are states responding?

Across the country, states are building:

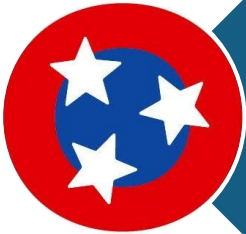
- Creating value-aligned attainment goals
- Better workforce data systems
- Postsecondary outcomes tools
- Credential value frameworks
- Connections between K-12, higher ed, & workforce

But information is not enough. Data ≠ decisions.

What we're learning



Students & families want clearer information about outcomes.



Making data available is not the same as making it usable.



Local partnerships matter.



Young people see college as a path to greater control over their lives—linked to income but not defined by it.

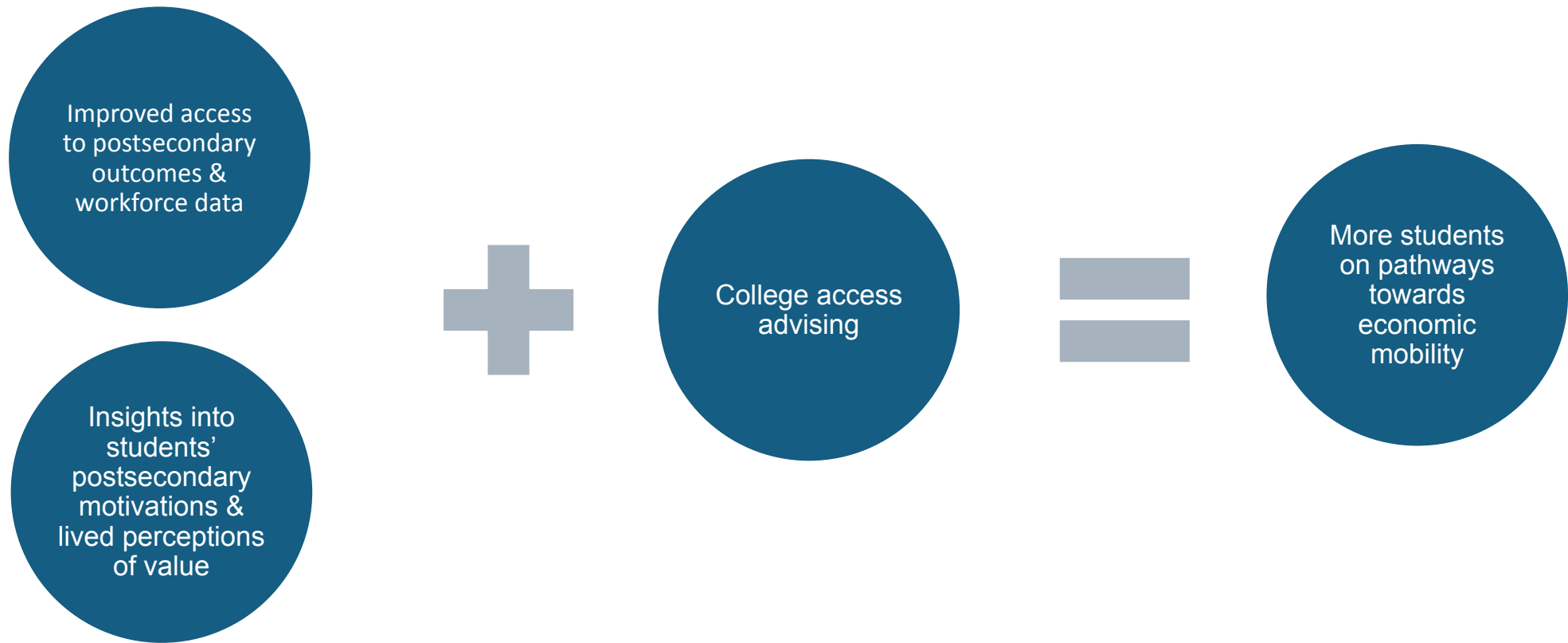
Because of the pressures they face, low-income students make postsecondary choices based on immediate realities rather than long-term ROI.

Instead of more tools, young people want guidance from trusted adults—a need that has only grown as information sources have multiplied.



Source: "Is College Worth It – For Me? Young People's Lived Understandings of Postsecondary Value"
College Access: Research & Action, 2026

The Opportunity



Ideas for practitioners who want to engage now

1. Start paying attention to outcomes, not just access
2. Get curious about your state's workforce and outcomes tools
3. Bring the student perspective into the conversation
4. Help ensure "value" stays student-centered
5. Participate in pilot efforts when opportunities arise

Higher Education Is Still Valued.

**Our Challenge Is Making It
Reachable.**