

RESEARCH  
BRIEF

# Regional Public Colleges Face Turbulent Times

Academe's 'workhorses' must draw on strengths and find niches in a challenging era

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THE CHRONICLE  
OF HIGHER EDUCATION.





## Academic Partnerships and Chronicle of Higher Education Release Survey Findings on Outlook for Regional Public Universities

Higher education is at a critical moment, and the importance of regional public universities (RPUs) has never been higher. RPUs play an invaluable role in the communities they serve, helping over five million students across the country improve their lives through high-quality, affordable education. However, in a complex and rapidly changing environment, many regional public universities and small colleges are fighting for their survival.

The critical question is how these essential institutions can cope with their current challenges so they can continue to provide the vital service needed by their communities.

To better understand the scope of these challenges, and the possibilities for positive change, Academic Partnerships (AP) joined together with The Chronicle of Higher Education for a survey, the results of which follow in **Regional Public Universities: Challenging Times, New Opportunities**. This topic will be further discussed in an upcoming virtual forum sponsored by AP.

A few key survey findings include:

- **Concerns About Value Linked to Inadequate Funding**
  - 68% of respondents don't believe the value of the country's regional public universities is understood by the American public, and an equal percentage agreed that federal and state lawmakers don't understand the value that regional universities provide.
  - This is reflected in 83% of respondents ranking inadequate state funding as the top challenge facing regional publics.
- **Opportunities to Grow Enrollment and Revenue**
  - Asked about areas in which they see opportunities to grow revenue at their institution, 69% of respondents named "Expanding online programs" and 65% pointed to "Expanding graduate programs."

At AP, we fundamentally believe that regional public universities have the opportunity and are uniquely positioned to face these challenges head on. By expanding access to their high-quality programs, RPUs can reach more students, grow enrollment, and solve for current financial constraints while increasing the impact they have on their communities. There is significant untapped demand for education across all communities in the U.S. as student education needs evolve. Our mission at AP is to help institutions increase access to high-quality, affordable, and workforce-relevant education for the nontraditional adult learner audience.

We hope that this survey data information will enliven discussions on how to better tell your institution's story in serving your community as an economic engine and source of life-changing education.

**Fernando Bleichmar, CEO**  
[Academic Partnerships](#)

# Regional Public Colleges Face Turbulent Times

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and find niches in a challenging era

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Contact [CI@chronicle.com](mailto:CI@chronicle.com) with questions or comments.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



**R**egional public colleges are frequently described as the “workhorses” of higher education. You’ll find these academic stalwarts in 49 of the 50 states — all but Wisconsin, according to the [Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges](#), or ARRC, which studies and advocates for them — and they’ve long carried some of the heaviest loads when it comes to providing access, affordability, and opportunity to students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students.

Unlike better-known flagship research universities or two-year community colleges rooted in localities, these four-year institutions serve entire geographic regions and clusters of counties, often areas struggling with poverty, low levels of education, and high levels of





unemployment. They typically accept almost all of their applicants, and they improve their regions' economies and cultures.

Yet despite their evident virtues, these workhorses are often seen as an endangered species — struggling even more than other colleges with enrollment and funding challenges, especially with emergency pandemic funds depleting. These institutions also face heightened competition from flagships and private colleges, the possibility — and often the reality — of consolidations, and, of course, the same generalized negative perceptions all of higher education is contending with.

To learn more about the state of regional public colleges, *The Chronicle*, with support from Academic Partnerships, conducted an online survey of administrators employed by these institutions, from October 10 to October 30, 2023. We received 404 responses



from presidents, provosts, chancellors, deans, department heads, and others. The largest group of respondents — 38 percent — were director-level officials. In addition, *The Chronicle* interviewed nearly a dozen people for this report — experts who study, advocate for, or lead these institutions.

Survey respondents conveyed optimism on many fronts. Most expressed at least some confidence that as demographics shift, their college had a good plan to enroll students, that its leaders and faculty members were working well together to implement that plan, and that their state had the right strategic vision to help them thrive. Most also indicated at least some optimism about their institution's future financial and enrollment prospects, suggesting the outlook isn't dire everywhere — and perhaps not even in most places.

Yet a large majority of respondents didn't believe that their institution had the resources to implement its vision for success. More than two-thirds believed there to be a lack of understanding of the value of regional public colleges among state and federal lawmakers as well as Americans more broadly. The survey results also further confirmed the increasing competition these institutions are facing — especially from flagships but also from their fellow regionals.

This report will examine the unique circumstances of regional public colleges within the larger higher-education ecosystem, look at what types of solutions to their problems they're working on, and explore why many leaders and advocates believe that doubling down on their historic advantages — along with finding new niches — may leave them well positioned to navigate change and challenges.



# M

any regional public institutions were founded as “normal schools” to train teachers at the beginning of the 20th century. They evolved to serve a broader group of students over the decades and focused on quality teaching, often with small class sizes. John R. Thelin, a professor emeritus of educational policy studies and evaluation at the University of Kentucky and a historian of American higher education, describes them as “a quiet, local success story.”

“They actually became quite a source of local pride, as a large employer within a county or region,” he says. “Often, they were the jewel in the crown of a state legislator or even, sometimes, a member of Congress who would look favorably on them. They had a benign, optimistic, unpretentious character.” While “population growth and increases in college-going gave them buoyancy,” Thelin adds that “demographic shifts and changes to state funding formulas in the 1970s left them on edge. They’ve had a somewhat precarious state-and-local presence.”

Today, about five million students attend 474 regional public colleges nationwide, making up 47 percent of all students pursuing bachelor’s degrees at public institutions, [according to ARRC](#). These colleges [increase educational attainment and lead to better economic outcomes](#) for residents and strengthen civic life. A third of them are minority-serving; half are rural-serving. Research shows they substantially improve the local economies of small towns and other sparsely populated parts of the country.

Still, data attests to troubling trends in recent years. Between 2010 and 2021, as enrollment at flagships rose 12.3 percent, it fell more than four percent at regionals, according to a recent *Chronicle* [analysis](#). The population is shrinking in many areas that have historically sent students to these colleges, and — with so many institutions of all different kinds scrambling to boost enrollment — regionals are pitted against universities with better-known name brands and wealthier alumni.



Falling enrollment — and the resulting hit on tuition revenue — isn't the only funding challenge regional publics face. ARRC reports that they receive an average of \$1,091 less than non-regional publics in state funding appropriations per full-time equivalent student — and a lot less from federal grants and contractors. Then there are their perception problems: Regionals may be well regarded in their local areas, and understood to be affordable, but often they're not seen as prestigious or academically rigorous, especially compared to their rivals.

Often, they struggle to be seen at all. Experts say regionals are undercovered in the media and understudied by scholars. Partially, that's the inevitable result of their place-based focus and inadequate funds for elevating their national profiles. Yet the lack of visibility undoubtedly contributes to their neglect. (In a recent article, *The Chronicle's* Lee Gardner [described](#) regionals as “the backbone of American higher education and, somehow, also one of its best-kept secrets.”)

If they continue on their current trajectories, some regionals will likely face more cuts, consolidations, and closures. Advocates may argue that these institutions aren't failing but rather being failed — by public officials, public policies, and more fundamentally, by a shrunken sense of the public good — but these realities aren't going to change quickly, and they certainly won't change on their own.

“They have to do something they haven't had to do before,” argues David Strauss, a principal at Art & Science Group, a higher-education consulting firm. Last summer, his firm published [a report](#) on regional public colleges that found them to be at a “significant market disadvantage compared to other institutional types” on a number of key metrics. “Individually, these institutions need to be positioned as more than universities that let you stay relatively close to home” and keep down the cost of your education, Strauss says. “We're now well into an era where the need to do that will become even more intense.”





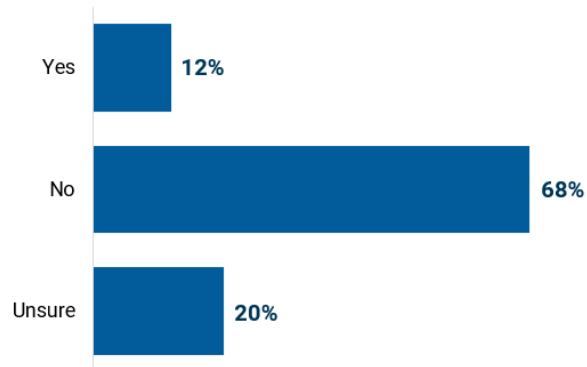


**Undervalued  
and  
Overlooked:  
The Public-  
Perception  
Problem**

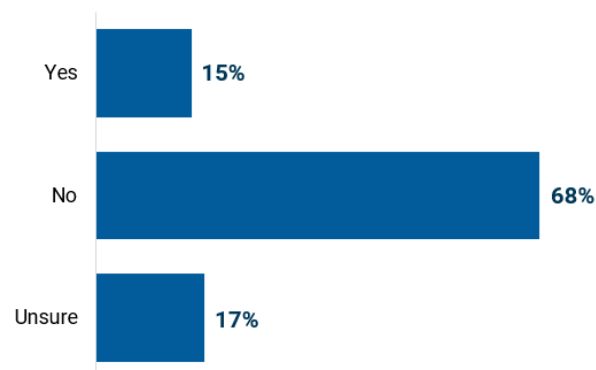
In April 2022, Cecilia M. Orphan stood on a stage in Denver and delivered a TEDx [talk](#) on “What makes a ‘good college’ — and why it matters.” An associate professor of higher education at the University of Denver and ARRC’s director of partnerships, Orphan lamented “our cultural obsession” with a small group of elite institutions that “most of us could never get into” — institutions that intentionally cap the number of students they accept. These colleges are commonly described as “highly selective,” but she drew laughter from the crowd — and even whistles of approval — when she mentioned an alternative term for them coined by the higher-education researcher and advocate Akil Bello: “highly rejective.”

Orphan went on to sing the praises of the colleges she called “the exact opposite of highly rejective” — the regional publics. She described how she’d grown up in poverty — and had lower standardized-test scores because she couldn’t afford expensive test prep — but then had a life-changing experience at Portland State University, where the motto is “Let Knowledge Serve the City.” As the daughter of “a brilliant woman who had an eighth-grade education” who “died when she was just 43 years old of a totally preventable asthma attack, because she lived in a rural, remote

**Do you think the American public understands the value of the country’s regional public colleges?**



**Do you think federal and state lawmakers understand the value of the country’s regional public colleges?**



Source: Chronicle survey of 404 employees of regional public colleges

community and lacked access to health care,” Orphan was the first person in her immediate family to graduate from college. It set her on the path to advocating for regionals and researching “how our perceptions of which colleges are good shape important decisions we make



about which schools to fund, donate to, attend, and send our children to.”

Orphan wasn't surprised by *The Chronicle's* survey results, which experts generally said matched their sense of things. Asked whether they thought the American public understood the value of the country's regional public colleges, 68 percent of respondents said no. The same percentage said federal and state lawmakers didn't understand the worth of these institutions.

Local perceptions appeared to be better, as 45 percent of respondents said people in their region understood the value of their particular institution. But 36 percent said even those close by didn't understand and 19 percent weren't sure.

Where would this fairly negative — or at least, underwhelming — public perception stem from?

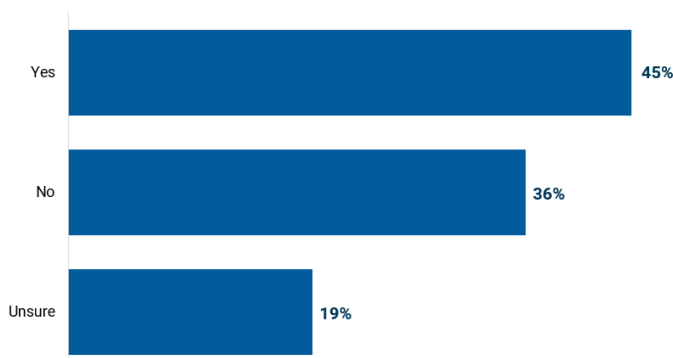
“There's still a lack of widespread understanding,” says Orphan, who

was disappointed that regionals' perceived value wasn't higher among people who live near the institutions. “Regional publics are so under-resourced compared to other types of universities, which means they're not always equipped to tell their stories.” Compare the lobbying power of “a single Ivy League school to the lobbying power of a regional public university,” she notes. The Ivy “is going to have multiple people lobbying the federal government, while flagships are going to have multiple people lobbying the state government. Whereas, a regional public might have one person half-time — maybe. It also takes resources to do marketing locally,” she adds.

According to Orphan, polling shows strong public support for community colleges, but “that same sort of goodwill and positive understanding doesn't often extend to regional publics,” despite similarities between the two types of institutions.

“Regional public universities, by and large, are offering a traditional four- or five-year experience on a residential campus,” says Thelin, the higher-education historian. “In some ways, that's attractive, but it's also confining. At a community college, you can have transfer programs, go full time or part time, go into licensure programs, industrial arts, or air-conditioning repair.”

**Do you think that the people in your region understand the value of your institution?**



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 404 employees of regional public colleges  
Note: Percentages do not total 100 percent due to rounding.

Another factor, as Orphan sees it, is a sense that regional public colleges are “trying to be something they’re not.” Though she sees evidence that only a minority of institutions are making that kind of unsuccessful play for prestige, it may be off-putting.

Most Americans presumably haven’t thought much — or at all — about regional public institutions as a distinct category within higher education, which makes it difficult to separate negative perceptions of these colleges from unfavorable views of academe generally. In total, 88 percent of survey respondents said they were at least somewhat concerned about “the growing politicization of diversity, equity, and inclusion work at public colleges.”

Cultural conflict over DEI work inevitably shapes attitudes toward regional publics, even though they’re not usually where highly publicized wars over “wokeness” are taking place. The national political environment, in which many of academe’s problems are weaponized, also may have contributed to respondents choosing

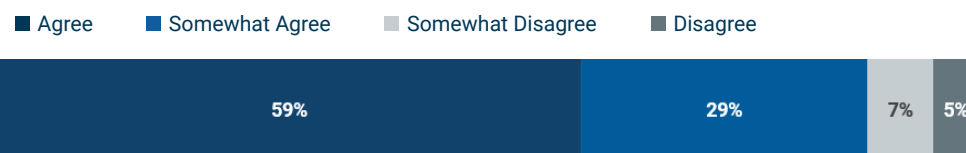
“low employee morale and fatigue” as one of the biggest challenges regional publics face.

“We hear about how higher education is driving up debt, or it’s too focused on degrees that don’t lead to work, or it’s about building all these Taj Mahals and lazy rivers on campuses,” says Charles L. Welch, the incoming president and chief executive of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, or AASCU. “The vast majority of that has nothing to do with regional public universities.” Yet perceptions of elite private colleges and public flagships clearly shape attitudes about the entire sector.

Sometimes negative perceptions come from the ways institutions have evolved. Athens State University has changed a great deal in its more than two centuries of existence, but its interim president, Catherine Wehlburg, says many graduates remember it as a different institution. “Alumni who have the funds to support us will say, ‘Why don’t you have a baseball team anymore?’ or ‘Why can’t you decorate for homecoming?’ Well,

**To what extent do you agree with the following statement?**

**“I am concerned about the growing politicization of diversity, inclusion, and equity work at public colleges.”**



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 404 employees of regional public colleges

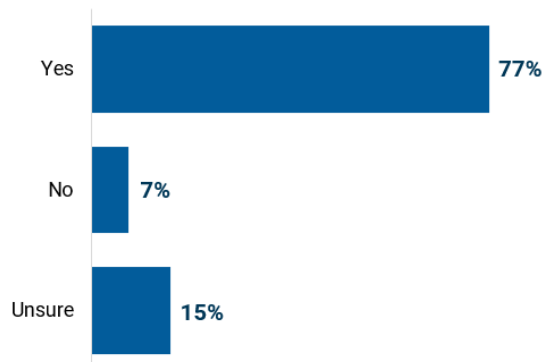


it's because our students aren't on campus. 'Why don't you tell them to come in and decorate?' Well, because homecoming floats really aren't as important to our students as they might have been to you."

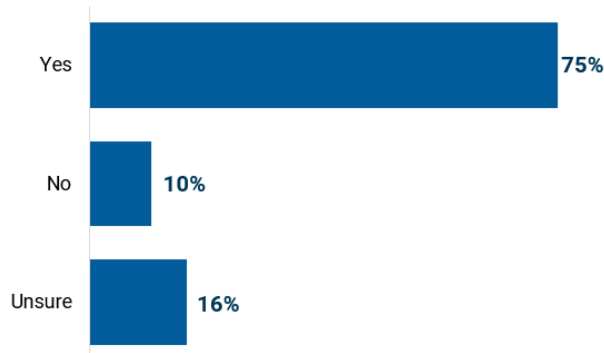
Orphan thinks changing the perception of regional publics would involve changing the attitudes of some of the sector's own leaders. For many of them, she says, "there's almost an internalized sense of inferiority. They've bought into the idea of being second tier or lower status, and they're less emboldened to reject those framings and claim the contributions they make."

Those contributions remain strong. It's not just that regional public colleges are graduating students well prepared for the work force — 77 percent of respondents to *The Chronicle's* survey said their institution was doing so. It's not just that they're engaged in collaborations with regional employers to ensure the relevance of their courses — 75 percent of respondents said their institution was doing so. It's also that they're delivering on many of higher education's highest, most aspirational virtues. As Orphan notes, they "make unparalleled contributions to upward mobility. No other sector can claim that kind of transformative nature."

#### Is your institution graduating students well prepared for the work force?



#### Is your institution engaged in collaborations with regional employers to ensure the relevance of your courses to the work force?



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 404 employees of regional public colleges  
Note: Percentages do not total 100 percent due to rounding.

"What does it look like to have racially diverse, income-diverse institutions where students of lots of different backgrounds come together?" asks Robert Maxim, a senior research associate at the Brookings Institute who has studied regional public colleges in the Great Lakes region. "Well, it looks like regional public universities — a lot more like regional public universities than like Harvard in a lot of cases."





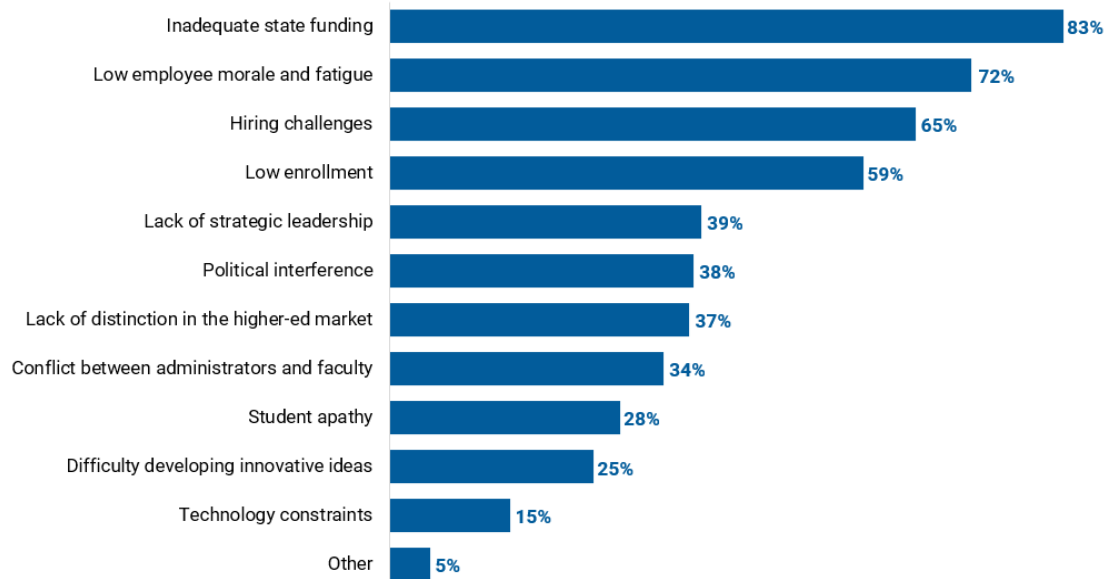


**More  
Competition  
for Fewer  
Students  
and Funds**

**A**sked to identify the biggest challenges facing regional public colleges, large majorities of survey respondents picked low enrollment, hiring challenges, and low employee morale and fatigue. Yet the response chosen the most, by 83 percent of respondents, was inadequate state funding. It makes sense that this would be of particular concern — Thomas L. Harnisch, the vice president for government relations at the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, or SHEEO, notes that he is fond of saying that budget cuts give flagships a cold, but they give regional public colleges pneumonia.

Worry about resources also contrasted sharply with the notable confidence many respondents had about their college’s strategic positioning. Asked whether their institution had a good plan for enrollment as student demographics shifted, 63 percent of respondents said they agreed at least somewhat. At least 60 percent said they agreed at least somewhat that their institution’s leaders were working well with faculty members to implement that vision and that their state had the right strategic vision for their institution to thrive moving forward. But all of that is worth less considering another finding — only 31 percent agreed at least somewhat that their institution had the resources to implement its vision.

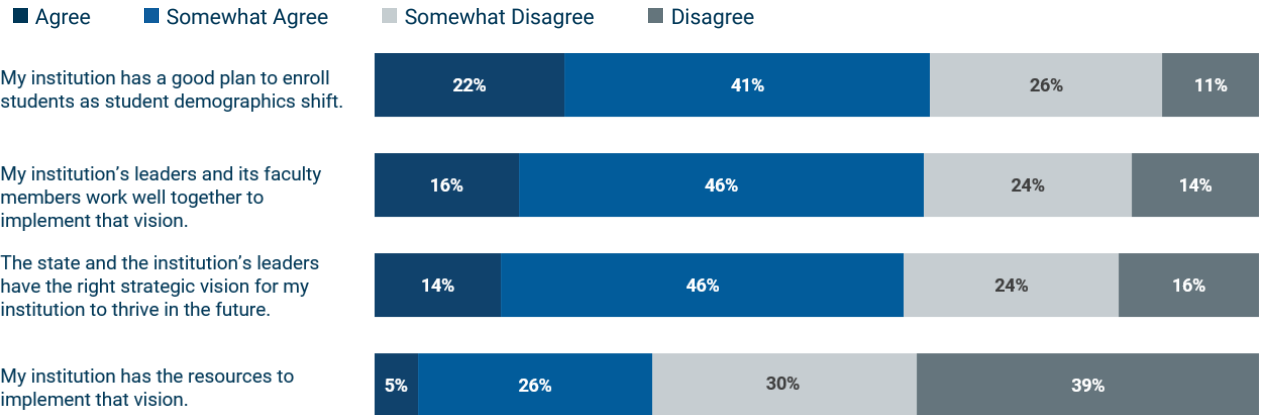
**What are the biggest challenges facing regional public colleges?  
Choose all that apply.**



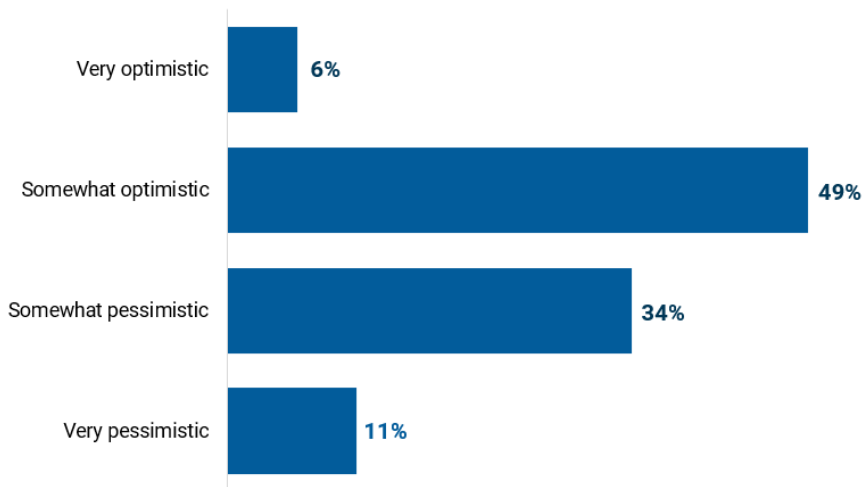
Source: Chronicle survey of 404 employees of regional public colleges



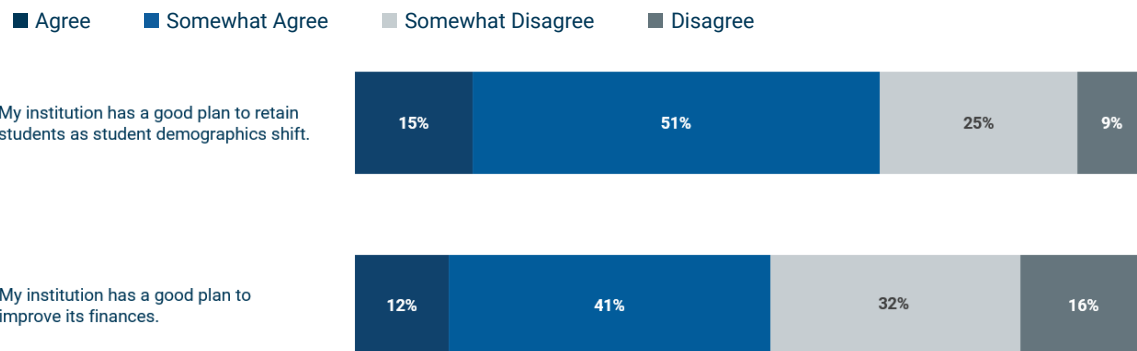
## To what extent do you agree with the following statements?



## How do you feel about the future financial and enrollment prospects of your institution?



## To what extent do you agree with the following statements?



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 404 employees of regional public colleges  
 Note: Percentages may not total 100 percent due to rounding.

“We’ve sort of seen a stabilization of governmental funding and even seen it start to creep up in some instances, but that certainly doesn’t mean we no longer worry,” says Welch of the AASCU.

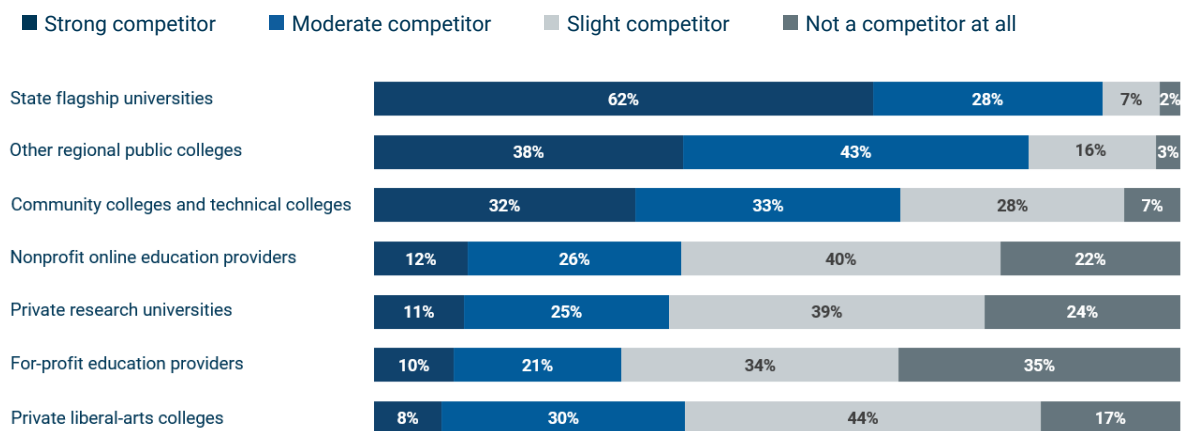
While consensus emerged on other questions, respondents were divided when asked about the future financial and enrollment prospects of their institution — 45 percent were at least somewhat pessimistic; 55 percent were at least somewhat optimistic. Asked whether their institution had a good plan to improve its finances, they were again split — 53 percent said they agreed at least somewhat, while the rest disagreed to some extent.

As they struggle with finances, regional publics also face tougher competition. Asked to identify their strong or moderate competitors, 90 percent of respondents pointed to

flagships, 81 percent pointed to other regional public colleges, and 65 percent pointed to community colleges and technical colleges. The survey results showed that nonprofit on-line-education providers, for-profit education providers, private research universities, and private liberal-arts colleges are also seen as competitors, albeit to a lesser degree.

One of the many ways flagships can draw students is through their athletics programs, which not only strengthen their brands nationally but also foster traditions that help define the cultures — and even the very identities — of their states. Cathy Cox, president of Georgia College & State University, a regional public institution, notes that many children in Georgia are raised from infancy to root for the Georgia Bulldogs football team at the state’s flagship, the University of Georgia, where she herself

### To what extent do you agree with the following descriptions?



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 404 employees of regional public colleges  
 Note: Percentages may not total 100 percent due to rounding.



attended. That desire has been enhanced by the team's national championships over the years.

"In the '70s and '80s, some of the top teams from regionals could actually hold their own," recalls Thelin. "Maybe they could make the NCAA basketball tournament, so there'd be a flurry of pride on campus and among alumni, but that's never quite been sustained over time to help attract students, donors, or other sorts of revenue."

Cox raises another important dynamic echoed by other experts: State policies that have allowed flagships to grow and prosper, while weakening funding for regional publics. "There's healthy rivalry, but then there's competition you just can't deal with," she says, "like if you're fighting a heavily resourced flagship that gets to keep going and directly puts in peril an enrollment stream that might benefit your institution."

Another factor is the federal government, with its absence of action on the behalf of regional publics. "I'd argue that regional public universities are often the most excluded from federal policy," says Maxim of Brookings. "They're basically ignored by the federal government, whereas the flagships — and in many cases the community colleges — aren't. Flagships get federal research funds and some of them are land-grant institutions, which

means they have another source of federal funding." Community colleges may not be well funded, he notes, but they do receive some federal funding through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.

Certain dynamics lead to divergent fates among regional publics. Cox's institution happens to be in a unique position as Georgia's designated public liberal-arts university, which is a bit more selective in its admissions than many other regionals. But this gives her perspective on their struggles. She says many of them "don't have as distinctive a mission as we do to get students in their pipeline to start with."

It's important to recognize that more competition does have its upsides for higher education, though. "On the one hand, I'm glad students are going to have more options," Orphan says. "If they're being intentionally recruited by flagships, that's amazing. The challenge is that a lot of the students who get to those campuses are just little fishes in a giant ocean. There isn't the same kind of support — or even that small-campus feel many students need to be successful — so they'll often leave." This reality has long benefited regionals, including Georgia College & State University — some students simply don't want a big school with big classes and a big football culture.



# Strategies for the Future



**D**aniel Greenstein is used to having difficult conversations. As chancellor of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, he needs bipartisan support for the system's state funding, so he says he's learned to make his case to a range of political constituencies. Sometimes he's shocked by the questions he's asked. Sometimes he's up against enormous cultural divides. But he does a lot of listening and tries to speak strategically, whether to progressives about how not to alienate would-be allies, or to better understand the views of rural, conservative Pennsylvanians.

"I've had conversations with erstwhile friends of mine about diversity, equity, and inclusion, where I've asked, 'Do you want to get stuff done or do you want to be a purist?'" he says. "If I'm a purist, I'm going to start talking about race equity right away. I'm going to sit there, giving public testimony, and pound the table — and I'm going to alienate all the people I need to get a positive budget. Or I could talk about work-force development" and how you serve people who are not currently served by post-secondary education — and who those people are.

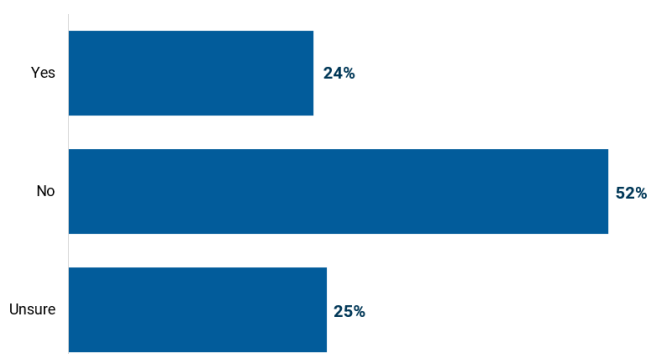
According to Greenstein, "There's a lot we can do, but

it's going to require us getting over ourselves."

Greenstein has made headway in Pennsylvania, both in advancing his institutions' interests and in creating better perceptions of them, and he believes finding the right language is only part of what it takes to succeed. The system has consolidated universities, frozen tuition for years, and aggressively marshaled data to demonstrate their universities' track records, including alumni earnings — all to address the concerns of state officials and the public. Among survey respondents, 24 percent said their state should consider consolidating public institutions to create financial efficiencies, while 52 percent said it shouldn't and 25 percent were unsure.

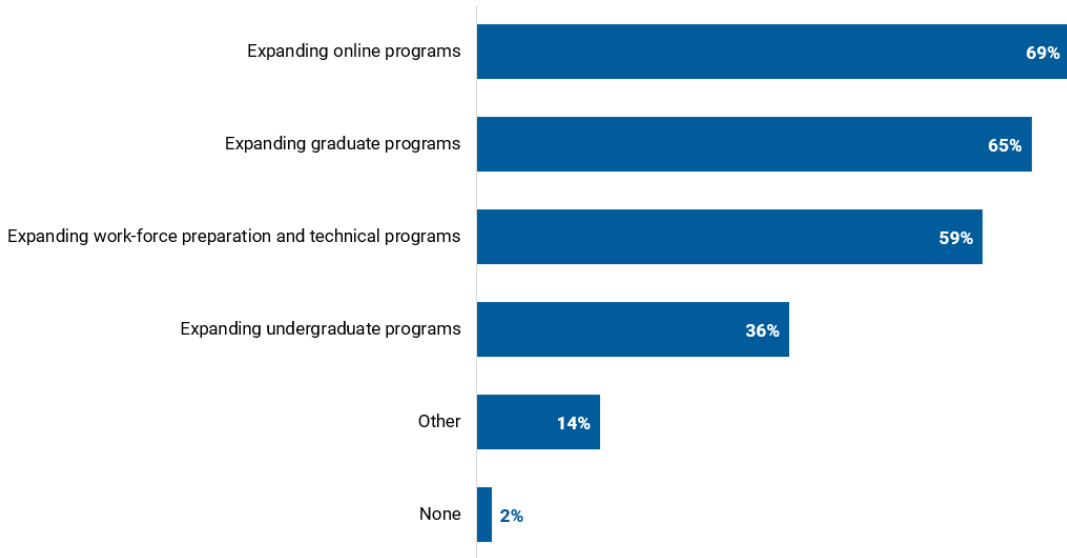
"We do see mergers and talk of closures in some states," Orphan says, "but what's unique about regional publics is they've always been tuned

**Should your state consider consolidating public institutions to create financial efficiencies?**

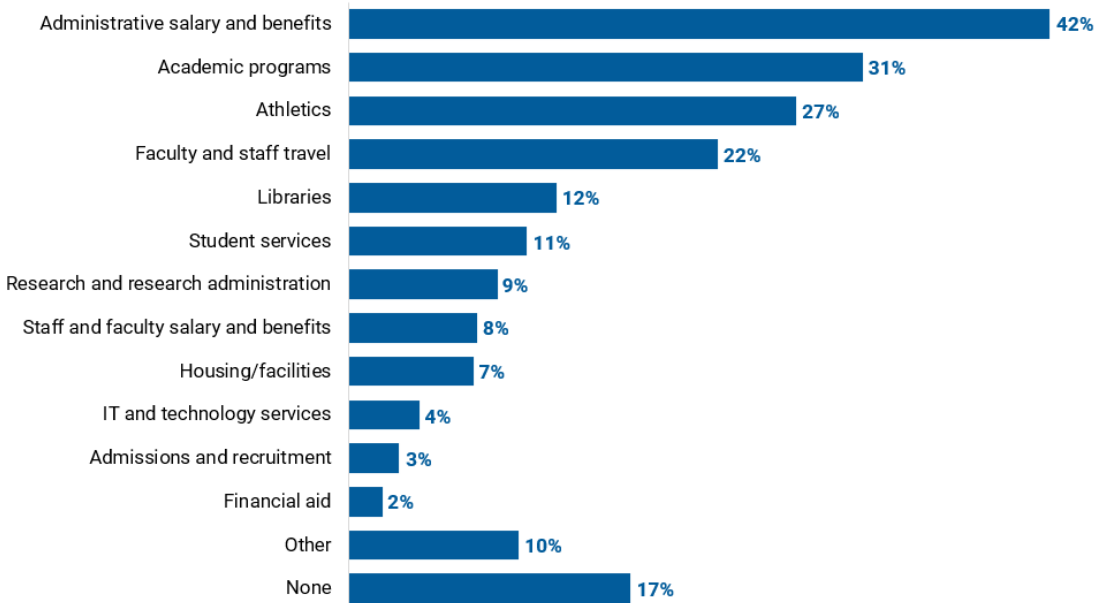


Source: *Chronicle* survey of 404 employees of regional public colleges  
Note: Percentages do not total 100 percent due to rounding.

**In these areas, where do you see opportunities to grow revenue at your institution?  
Choose all that apply.**



**In these areas, where do you see opportunities to trim expenses at your institution?  
Choose all that apply.**



Source: Chronicle survey of 404 employees of regional public colleges

in to the demographics of their regions. I don't think the idea of the demographic cliff was shocking to them — they've been preparing for it for a long time."

Survey respondents also weighed in on opportunities to grow revenue at their institutions. Popular ideas included expanding online programs and graduate programs, both of which were supported by about two-thirds of the respondents. Almost as many, 59 percent, supported expanding work-force preparation and technical programs. Asked about opportunities to trim expenses, the top responses were cutting administrative salaries and benefits, academic programs, athletics, and faculty and staff travel.

"I absolutely would not start with administrative salaries and benefits," says Aims McGuinness, a senior fellow with the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems and an expert on state higher-education policy. He says he'd begin with the areas where most of the expenses are. "You may have to phase out some academic programs, but I'd ask how you could do them in a different way, working with faculty, perhaps through early retirements and buyout plans." He recommends that institutions might want to invest in the "uniqueness and attractiveness of key parts" of their academic programs, and beef up student services, because those help with student retention.

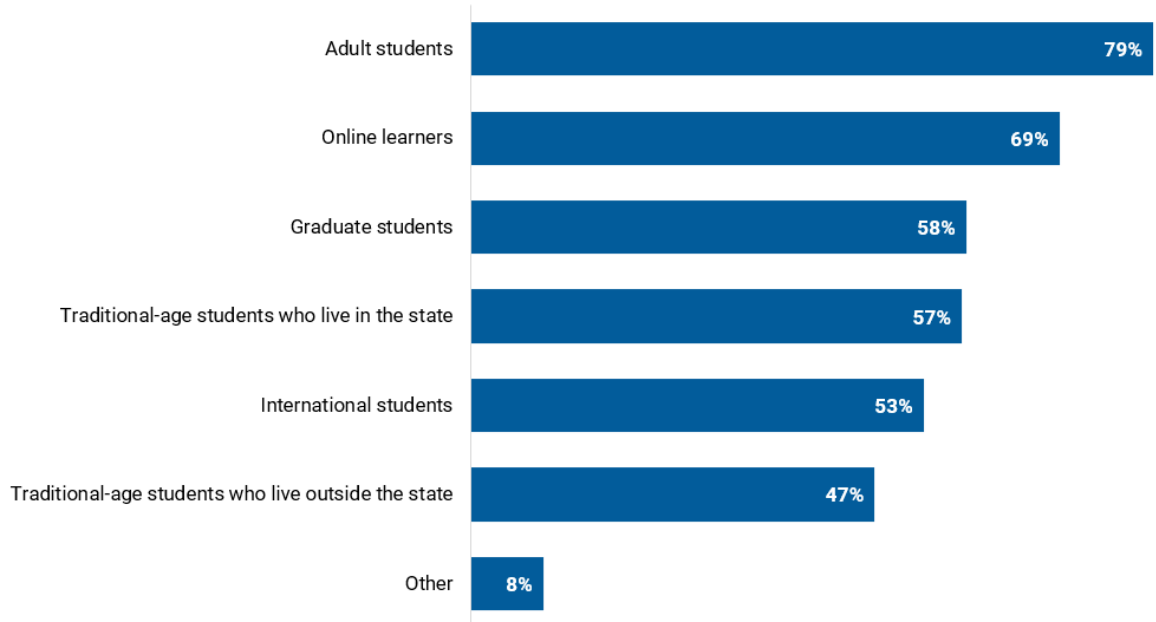
Finding ways to be more efficient — and simply do less — is always difficult, he acknowledges, but he believes it's necessary so that regional publics can redirect money to upskill their employees and improve enrollment management, financial-aid optimization, and other priorities. Greenstein thinks regional public colleges need to focus on where they're thriving and consider expanding or updating their curriculum to offer various non-degree credentials, especially those which regional employers may require, while perhaps scaling back low-enrolled academic programs.

As regional publics move toward new opportunities, they may be able to do it with "more alacrity," he says, "than, say, a private liberal-arts college or a big research flagship," because they're not grounded in a research mission. Regional publics have "always been about work-force development and grounded in general education to prepare students for a lifetime, not just one job." They "have flexibility" in "their Genesis story."

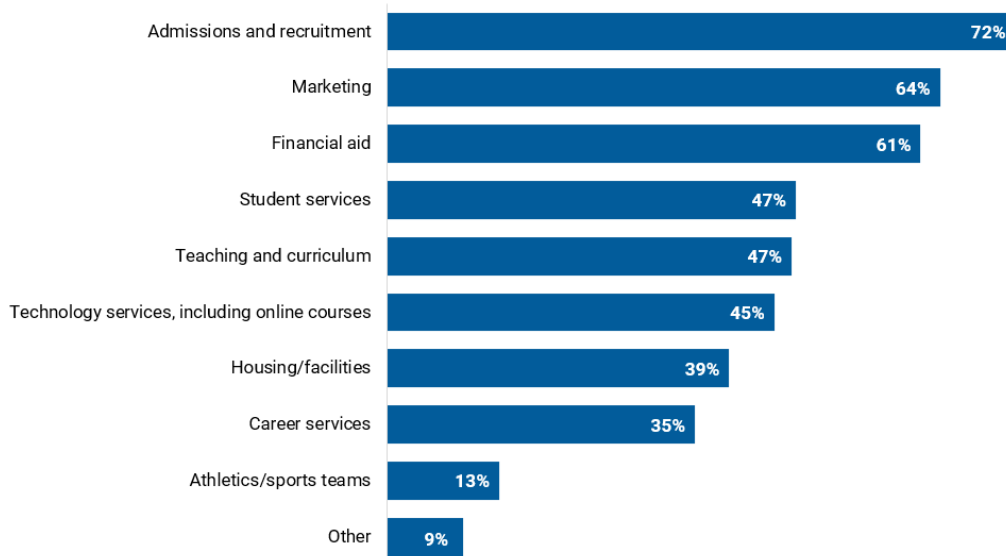
This was a common refrain among experts and leaders — that regionals are well positioned to be flexible and nimble and change as they have throughout their histories — as was the notion that they shouldn't be trying to emulate national institutions. Many also mentioned the need to pursue partnerships with nearby educational institutions, including community colleges, and



**What student populations do you see as opportunities to grow enrollment at your institution?  
Choose all that apply.**



**Where should your institution make improvements to attract more students?  
Choose all that apply.**



Source: *Chronicle* survey of 404 employees of regional public colleges

enlist the help of influential voices to amplify their value.

Harnisch, of SHEEHO, recalls that he wrote his dissertation on business leaders speaking on behalf of higher education — focusing on the former president and chief executive of Domino’s Pizza, J. Patrick Doyle, who spent time walking the halls of the Michigan State Capitol to make the case for Michigan’s public institutions. “He was someone who could deliver a breakthrough message,” Harnisch says. “He wasn’t being paid by a university, but he had a headquarters in Ann Arbor and needed talent.”

Another popular idea — in the survey and among experts — was the opportunity for regional publics to continue pursuing adult students. Asked which student populations would be able to help increase enrollment at their institutions, most respondents — 79 percent — said adults. Other top responses included online learners (69 percent) and graduate students (58 percent).

Asked where their institution should make improvements to attract more students, large majorities of respondents said admissions and recruitment, marketing, and financial aid, while nearly half said student services, teaching and curriculum, and technology services, including online courses. Only 13 percent said athletics or sports.

According to McGuinness, it might make sense to make sports a bit more of a priority, since they’re “helpful not only in recruiting students but also in retaining them.” He says that “if they’re seen as part of the core mission of the institution — not as peripheral — they can contribute to overall completion rates” and the institution’s “financial position.”

Greenstein, the Pennsylvania system chancellor, thinks regional publics can even find a silver lining in the national political polarization, partisanship, and declining trust in institutions, especially in those that seem disconnected from local concerns. With more people clustering together with others like them, colleges can double down on a historic advantage — being part of the identity of a place and serving the specific kind of people who live there.

“I think about how institutions like Liberty University and Grand Canyon University tap into an evangelical Christian niche very powerfully by effectively saying, ‘Come here. Be safe. We’re like you.’ Regional publics can have that appeal,” he says. On the other hand, he notes, there’s a “higher burden on higher education, because we’re increasingly one of the last civic institutions where you can encounter ideas and people you’re unfamiliar with.”

## CONCLUSION

Regional public colleges may have few problems that additional funding and more favorable state policies couldn't solve — or go a long way toward solving. Thelin says state governments should “try to temper the aggressive growth” of flagships. But in the absence of that kind of action, these institutions will have to come to terms with doing less and, yes, perhaps their numbers will decrease.

Still, there's reason to think they'll often be resilient and find new equilibriums. Survey respondents' faith in their institutions' planning for the future, supported by constructive collaboration between faculty and college leaders, combined with optimism about their financial and enrollment prospects, suggest many will find their way.

In the meantime, they'll continue to make their case for more support — striving for the flexibility and agility that is their tradition and a practical necessity. They may not have the money they'd like to tell their stories, but their greatest asset is they have stories worth telling.



## METHODOLOGY

Four hundred and four college leaders responded to *The Chronicle's* online survey, which was conducted between October 10 and 30, 2023. Directors were the largest proportion of respondents (38 percent), followed by deans and department heads (15 percent each), associate, assistant, or vice provosts (9 percent), and associate, assistant, or vice deans (8 percent). Smaller numbers of people in other roles, such as presidents or chancellors, and provosts also responded.



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