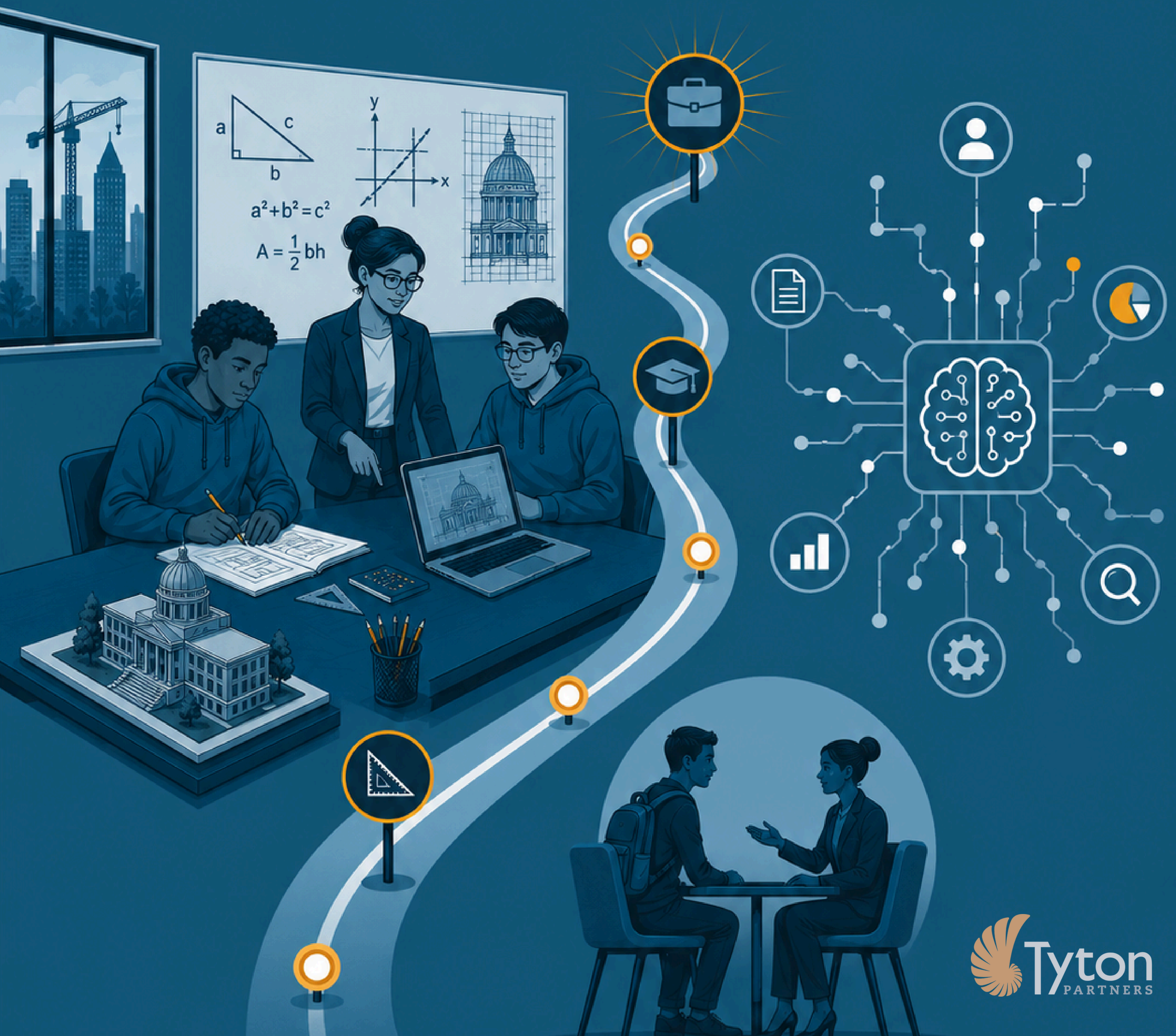


DRIVING

TOWARD A DEGREE

2026

STUDENT SUPPORTS REINVENTED FOR ROI AND AI



OUR PARTNERS

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STATEMENT OF INDEPENDENCE

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INTRODUCTION

The "sage on the stage" model, a lecture tradition that goes all the way back to Plato's Academy, has been losing ground for decades. Higher education is finally catching up with what it has long known: a lecture alone was never enough to prepare students for work. And the pressures on today's institutions are making that truth harder to ignore than ever.

Students, advisors, and administrators agree: career readiness is the clearest link between higher education and the ROI question facing every degree and credential. The critical question is not if career readiness is the critical outcome, it's how it should be achieved in a complex and rapidly evolving world of work. Increasingly, career readiness is built through work-integrated learning, not the classroom alone. Institutional stakeholders continue to rank durable skills, such as critical thinking, among their most valued outcomes, yet the internships and employer partnerships that help develop those skills remain largely ad hoc. Coordinated, centrally organized employer partnerships are implemented by only 5% of institutions surveyed (see Figure 7).

That gap is becoming more consequential as employers adopt AI faster than campuses and increasingly expect graduates to enter the workforce AI-literate. Some of the most important components of AI literacy are also among higher education's most enduring goals: critical thinking and judgment. Learners need these skills to decide when, how, and whether to trust AI outputs. For now, institutions are developing them as much by necessity as by design.

“*The true creator is necessity, who is the mother of our invention.*”
– Socrates, in Plato's Republic, Book II

More than two thousand years ago, Socrates argued that people don't build new things out of comfort; they build them because they must. That same logic is playing out today across higher education's student support functions. Roughly two-thirds of student support departments report a staffing problem this year and caseload size has been the top-cited advising barrier for six years running (see Figure 8). The academic advisors absorbing that pressure aren't waiting for a perfect solution to arrive: about one in five are already using AI daily (see Figure 17), not because the technology is fully proven or the policies are fully written, but because the alternative, doing nothing, isn't an option. This paper looks at what that necessity is producing: where AI-augmented human support can make the most of limited meeting time, where it's still a workaround for advisors running out of time, and what it will take for institutions to turn that early, scattered momentum into something built to last.

Ten years after its first publication, *Driving Toward a Degree 2026* is set in a higher education landscape that looks little like the one it launched into, and a definition of student success that has evolved just as much. This year's study describes the reinvention underway in student supports as institutions confront the twin pressures of proving their return on investment and putting AI to work without losing human judgment. We invite you to consider how these forces are shaping your own work and to share what you are learning. Moving the sector forward is a necessity that requires contributions from a wide variety of stakeholders. Below is a quick guide on how to navigate the key findings based on role.

NAVIGATION GUIDANCE

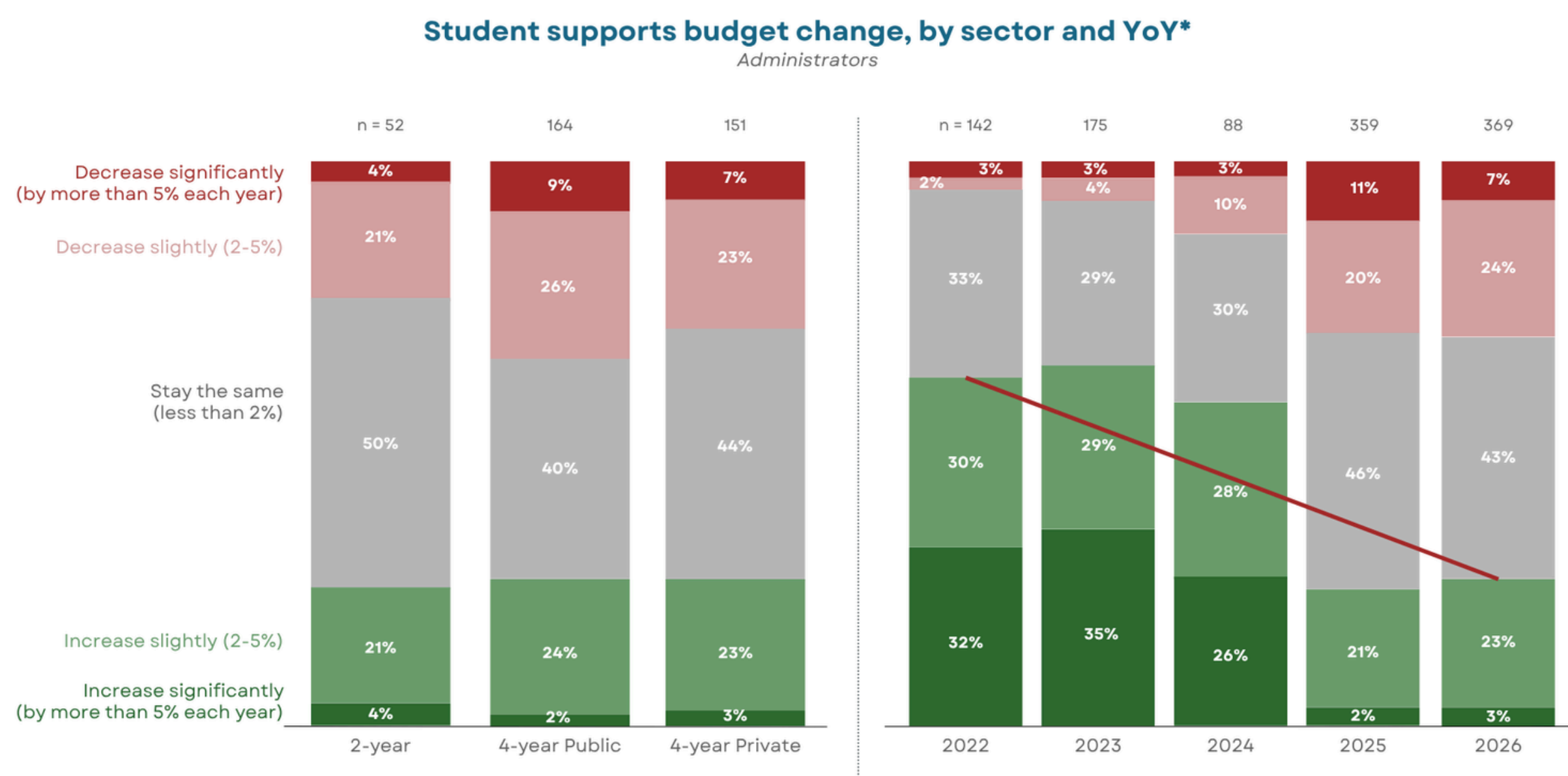
Paper section	What it covers	Most relevant for...				
		Institutional leaders	Academic advisors	Career advisors	Solution providers	Funders
<u>Section 1: Necessity, Inside and Out</u>	Flat budgets and record-high caseloads squeeze institutions on two fronts at once.	✓				✓
<u>Section 2: Career Readiness, Work-Integrated Learning, and the ROI Equation</u>	Career readiness is the clearest link to a degree's ROI, built through work-integrated learning. AI literacy is now an employer expectation.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<u>Section 3: Where Necessity Is Already Producing Answers: AI-Augmented Support</u>	As caseloads climb, advisors reach fewer students and high-impact practices go under-used. In response, the most strained advisors are already using AI daily, and preference is consolidating on a blended human and AI model.	✓	✓	✓	✓	
<u>Section 4: Building a Lasting Foundation</u>	Practical AI use cases in student support, and the data-quality foundation, policy, and trust needed to make them work.	✓		✓	✓	✓
<u>Section 5: Moving Forward on Student Success</u>	Calls to action by audience.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

SECTION 1: NECESSITY, INSIDE AND OUT

For decades, the model of a single expert at the front of the room, transmitting knowledge to rows of listening students, has been losing its hold. The lecture hall was built to transmit knowledge, but knowledge delivered from the front of a room was never enough on its own to prepare students for work. Employers want graduates who can think critically and apply what they know to real situations, capacities built as much through experience as through instruction. Higher education has understood this for a long time. What has changed is that the pressures bearing down on institutions today leave no room to ignore the gap between what a classroom delivers on its own and what students need to be ready for work. Higher education's promise of social mobility holds only when learning translates into workforce outcomes, not credentials alone.

The structural pressure begins with resource necessity. For the second straight year, few institutions expect their student support budgets¹ to grow (see Figure 1). Only about a quarter of institutions anticipate any increase at all, with the increase trending downward over the last five years. Four-year public institutions, which enroll the largest share of the nation's degree-seeking students, are the most likely to brace for a cut, with 35% expecting their support budget to shrink. The picture the data paints is the one the field already feels: institutions are being asked, once again, to "do more with less." When the budget does not grow, the capacity to add advisors, extend service hours, or stand up new support services is limited.

Figure 1



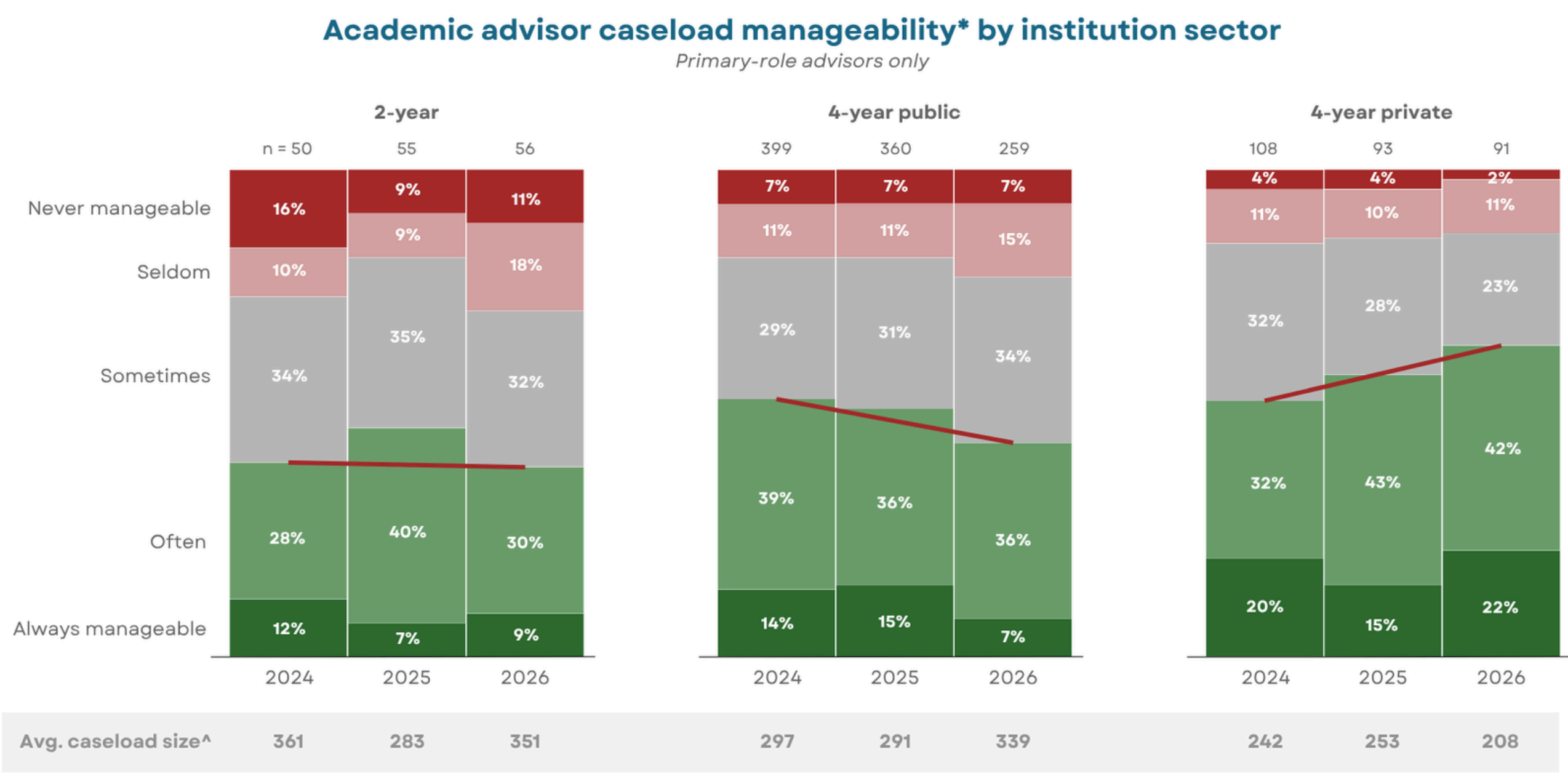
Notes: *Survey question: "Using your best estimate, how do you expect your institution's budget for student support services will change over the next three academic years?"
Sources: Driving Toward a Degree 2022-2026, Tyton Partners analysis

Those constrained budgets must still meet significant student support needs. For primary-role advisors, the staff whose core job is advising students, average caseloads run into the hundreds in every sector. In 2026, caseload for an advisor is 351 students at two-year

1. Budget for student support services" is defined broadly to include all associated costs (e.g., staffing, technology, consulting); the survey did not specify budget sub-categories

institutions, 339 at four-year publics, and 208 at four-year privates (see Figure 2). Four-year public advisors have seen the steepest climb, from 297 in 2024 to a three-year high of 339. In addition, the share of four-year public advisors who find their caseloads always manageable fell from 14% in 2024 to 7% in 2026.

Figure 2



Notes: *Survey question: "Is your caseload size manageable to effectively meet the needs of your students?"; Between 2024 and 2025, the average caseload size for primary-role advisors is statistically significant among four-year public and private institutions ($p < 0.05$)
Sources: Driving Toward a Degree 2023-2026, Tyton Partners analysis

Taken together, the pedagogical challenge of workforce readiness and structural budget pressures compound. Institutions are being asked to do more of the deliberate, experience-based work that the classroom alone never delivered, at the very moment when the dollars to fund that work (both in and outside the classroom) are flat. This falls hardest on four-year public institutions, which is the sector that serves the most students and where the people carrying this work are managing more students than they have in years. Necessity, in other words, is creating pressure inside and out at once.

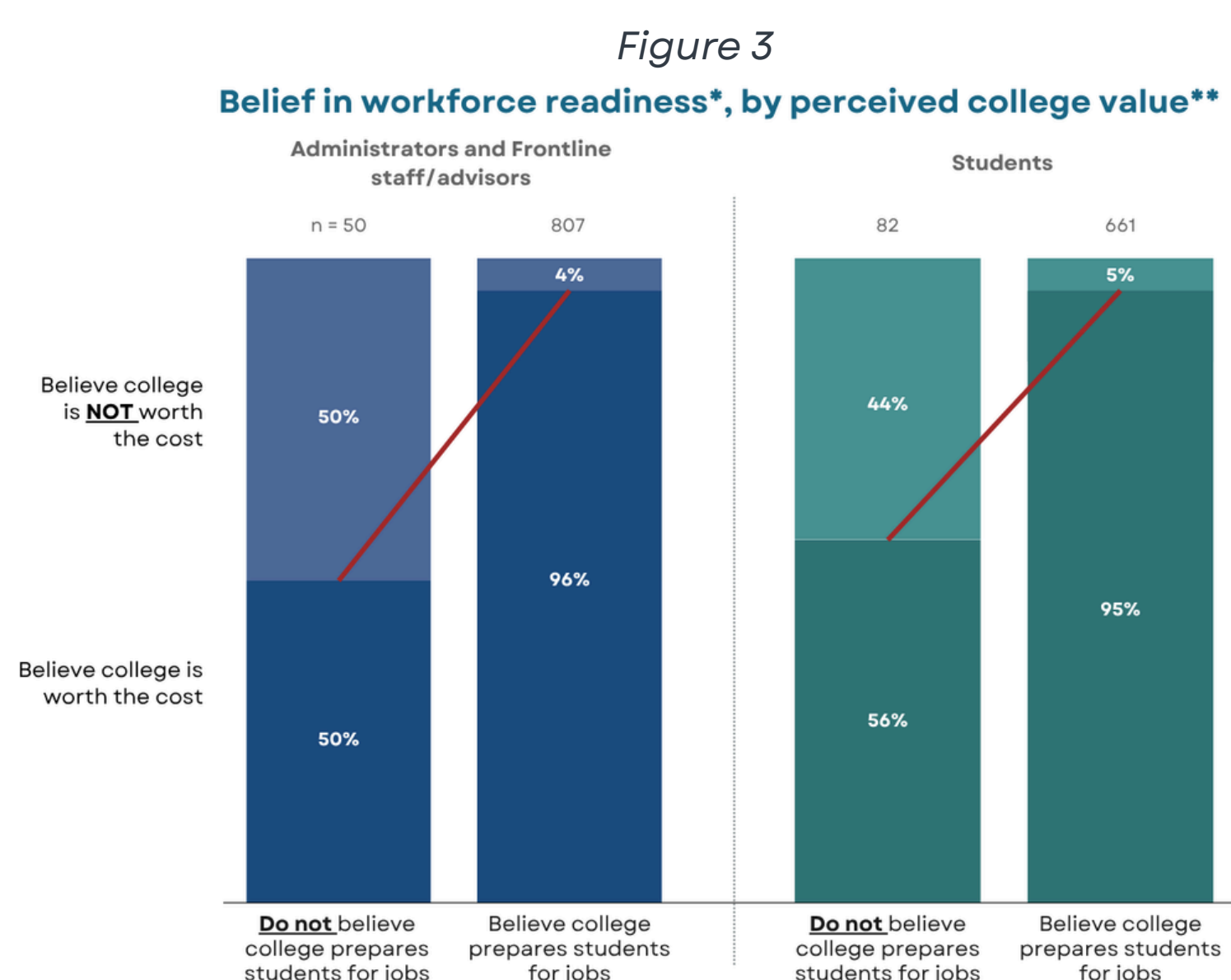
The sections that follow trace what that necessity is producing:

- First, the case that **career readiness has become the clearest link to a degree's return on investment**, and then
- Second, the early uneven ways **institutions are turning to AI to make the limited human capacity of academic advisors and other support providers go further**

SECTION 2: CAREER READINESS, WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING, AND THE ROI EQUATION

As scrutiny of the return on investment (ROI) of a degree intensifies, the clearest link between a college education and its perceived value is career readiness. For many students and stakeholders, the question of whether a degree is worth the cost is increasingly tied to whether it creates a meaningful path to employment and economic opportunity. Our *Driving Toward a Degree 2026* data make that link concrete. Among administrators and frontline staff who believe their institution is worth the cost, 96% also believe it prepares students well for jobs and careers; among students, the figure is 95% (see Figure 3). The relationship holds in the other direction too: stakeholders who doubt their institution is worth the cost split roughly evenly on whether it prepares students for work, and students who doubt the cost are more likely than not to say it does not. The pattern is unchanged between 2025 and 2026, which is exactly what makes career readiness a reliable lever rather than a passing sentiment.

That view is widely shared across the field. Strada's State Opportunity Index gauges the strength of the education-to-opportunity link by how consistently graduates end up financially better off for having gone to college². Similarly, in New America's 2025 Varying Degrees survey, about nine in ten Americans said it is important for colleges to equip students with the skills and knowledge to succeed in their chosen fields, a view held almost equally by Democrats (97%) and Republicans (98%)³. Employers echo this in a Lumina Foundation and Gallup study which found that three-quarters of employers expect degrees to remain central to hiring⁴. These sources establish that the public wants education to pay off. What *Driving Toward a Degree* adds is the mechanism inside the institution: belief in career preparation and belief in a degree's value move together, which makes career readiness the most direct lever institutions have to defend their ROI.



Notes: *Survey question: "How much do you agree or disagree with the following?"; Statement "College prepares students/ me well for jobs/careers" and "Education at my college/university is worth the cost", responses to each cross-tabulated; **Segments for agreement are those that "Agree" or "Strongly agree", segments for disagreement are "Disagree" and "Strongly disagree" ("Neutral" excluded from analysis)
Sources: *Driving Toward a Degree 2026*, *Listening to Learners 2026*, Tyton Partners analysis

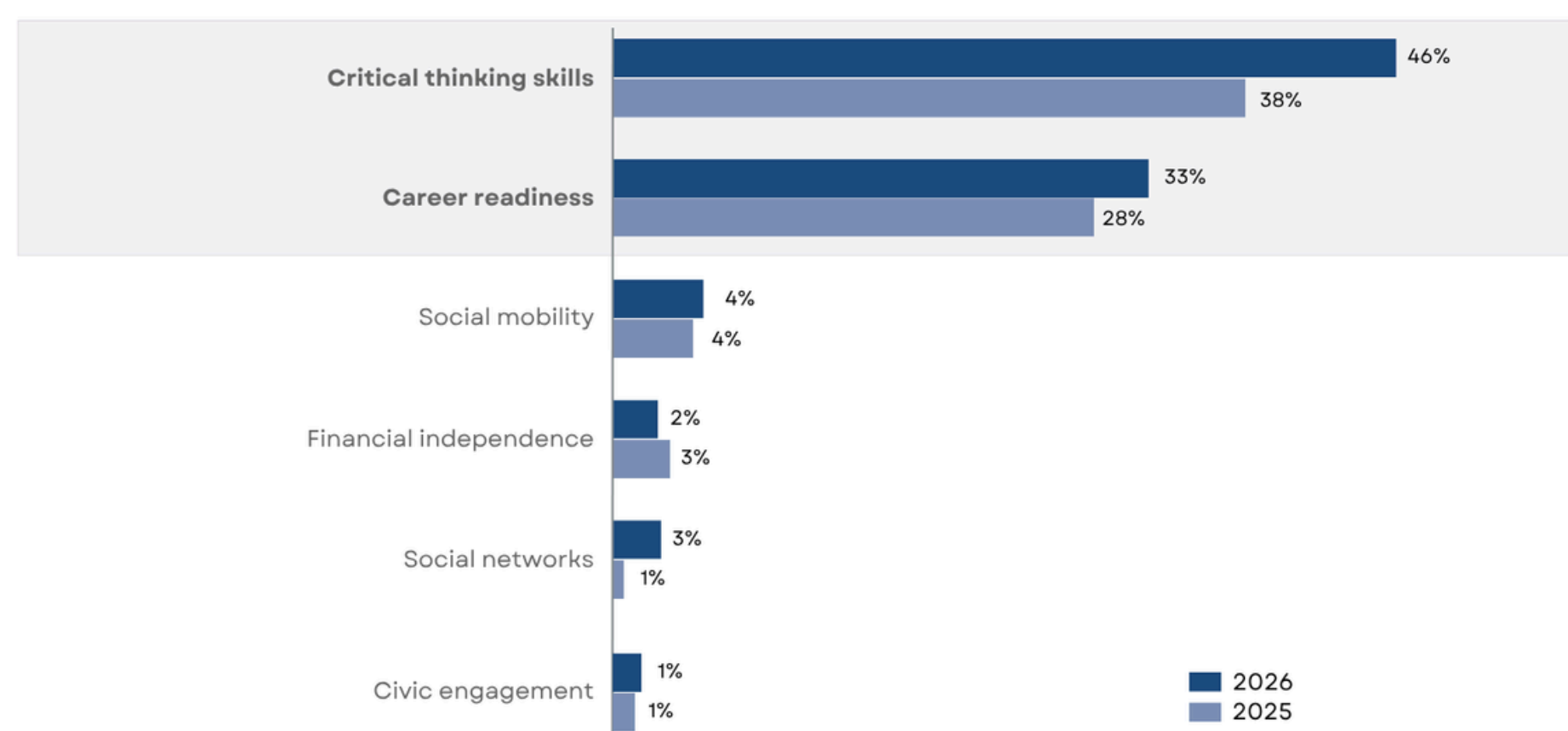
2. Strada Education Foundation, "State Opportunity Index." <https://www.strada.org/2024-state-opportunity-index>

3. New America, "Varying Degrees 2025: Americans Find Common Ground in Higher Education" (2025). <https://www.newamerica.org/insights/varying-degrees-2025-americans-find-common-ground-in-higher-education/executive-summary/>

4. Lumina Foundation and Gallup, "Aligning Education and Work: What Employers Say Higher Education Must Deliver" (2026). <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/644939/state-of-higher-education.aspx>

Asked to name the most important outcome of college beyond the credential itself, administrators and frontline staff point to two things above all: critical thinking (46%) and career readiness (33%), and both have risen since 2025 (see Figure 4). That balance mirrors what the public wants. New America's 2025 Varying Degrees survey finds broad, bipartisan agreement that job training should not be a degree's only outcome. Strong majorities also rate writing and communication (97% of Democrats and 92% of Republicans) and thinking and reasoning (97% and 92%) as important markers of a quality education³. Critical thinking is increasingly what makes graduates ready for an AI-shaped workplace. The core of AI literacy is judgment: deciding when, how, and whether to trust what a model produces, which is critical thinking applied to a new class of tools⁵. The skills institutions have always prized are becoming the foundation of the newest expectation placed on them. Where stakeholders differ is emphasis. Administrators weight career readiness more heavily (38%) than faculty (29%) or advisors (30%), while faculty and advisors prioritize critical thinking (51% and 49%) more than administrators do (41%).

Figure 4
Top college outcome beyond a degree*
Administrators and frontline staff/advisors



Notes: *Survey question: "In your view, what is the most important outcome students should gain from their college experience beyond a degree credential?", 2026 n = 1,260, 2025 n = 1,568; **Differences are statistically significant (p<0.01)
Sources: Driving Toward a Degree 2025-2026, Tyton Partners analysis

The newest expectation of AI fluency is arriving fast. More than three-quarters of institutional stakeholders agree that students will need to know how to use AI tools for their future jobs and careers (77%), while just 6% disagree. Employers are adopting AI more quickly than campuses, and they increasingly expect graduates to enter the workforce already able to use it. In NACE's Spring 2026 Job Outlook update, more than one-third of entry-level jobs required AI skills, nearly triple the share employers reported just six months earlier⁶. In other words, students will need AI fluency for their first jobs after college, not their fifth. The labor market sets that expectation; our research shows how ready institutions are to meet it, and recognition is running well ahead of readiness.

Given career readiness is in demand, institutions have two problems: they struggle to measure it, and they are not investing in the most impactful ways to build it.

5. EDUCAUSE. (2024, October 17). "AI Literacy in Teaching and Learning." EDUCAUSE.

<https://www.educause.edu/content/2024/ai-literacy-in-teaching-and-learning/executive-summary> (Frames AI literacy around understanding AI fundamentals and critically evaluating AI applications and outputs, with "evaluative skills" a core focus area.)

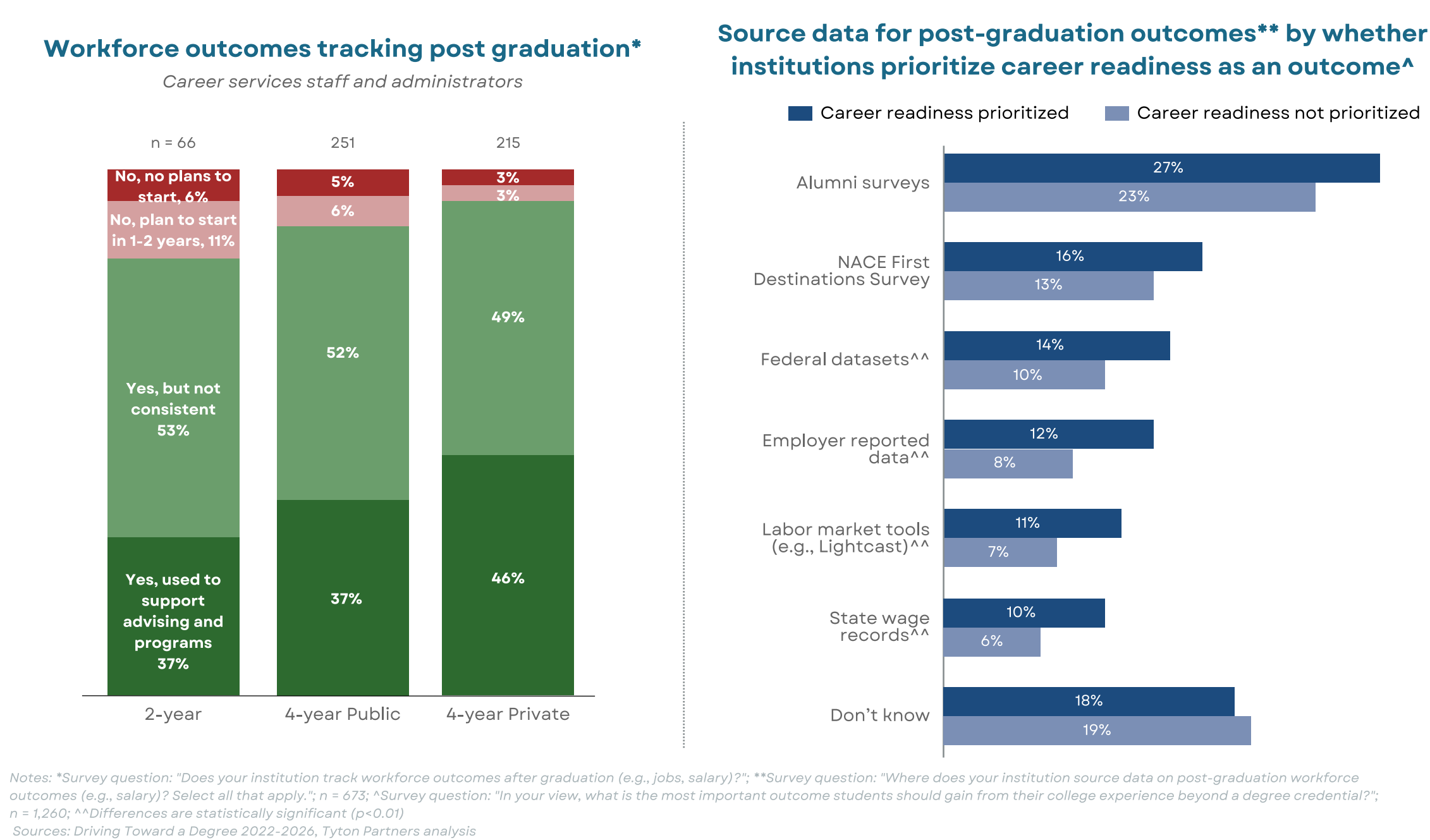
6. NACE, "Ready or Reluctant? Employer Expectations for AI Skills Meet Student Skepticism" (2026, July 22).

<https://www.nacweb.org/about-us/press/2026/ready-or-reluctant-employer-expectations-for-ai-skills-meet-student-skepticism>

Fewer than half of institutions track workforce outcomes in a way that informs advising and programs, while roughly another half of institutions track workforce outcomes but not consistently (see Figure 5). When they do source outcomes data, they lean on self-reported alumni surveys more than any other source, and four-year private institutions lean hardest of all (37%, compared with 19% of four-year public and 16% of two-year institutions). Self-reported outcomes can introduce selection bias⁷: employed graduates are more likely to respond to alumni surveys, potentially overstating employment outcomes, while “first destination”⁸ surveys limited to graduates may exclude students who stop out altogether.

Prioritization, though, changes the outcome measurement source data mix for the better. Institutions that treat career readiness as a priority outcome are more likely to triangulate beyond self-report, drawing more often on objective, external sources such as federal datasets, employer-reported data, and labor market tools like Lightcast and the Secure Query System⁹. The direction is encouraging, even if the base rates stay low. Taking career readiness seriously requires raising the bar on how it is measured. The field increasingly treats clear, verifiable outcomes data as the backbone of the ROI case, the emphasis at the center of Strada's work on measurable post-college outcomes¹⁰.

Figure 5



A closer look at the practices that drive employment success reveals a gap between their perceived impact and their adoption. Career readiness is developed through experience,

7. Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry, Improvement, and Impact (2025) <https://journals.indianapolis.iu.edu/index.php/jsaiii/article/download/28290/26116/60553>

8. UC Berkeley's First Destination Survey, "Every year, UC Berkeley's Career Center conducts a survey of the initial postgraduate activities of Bachelor's degree recipients, including plans for employment and graduate school attendance." <https://opa.berkeley.edu/campus-surveys/survey-results-reporting-analysis/first-destination-survey>

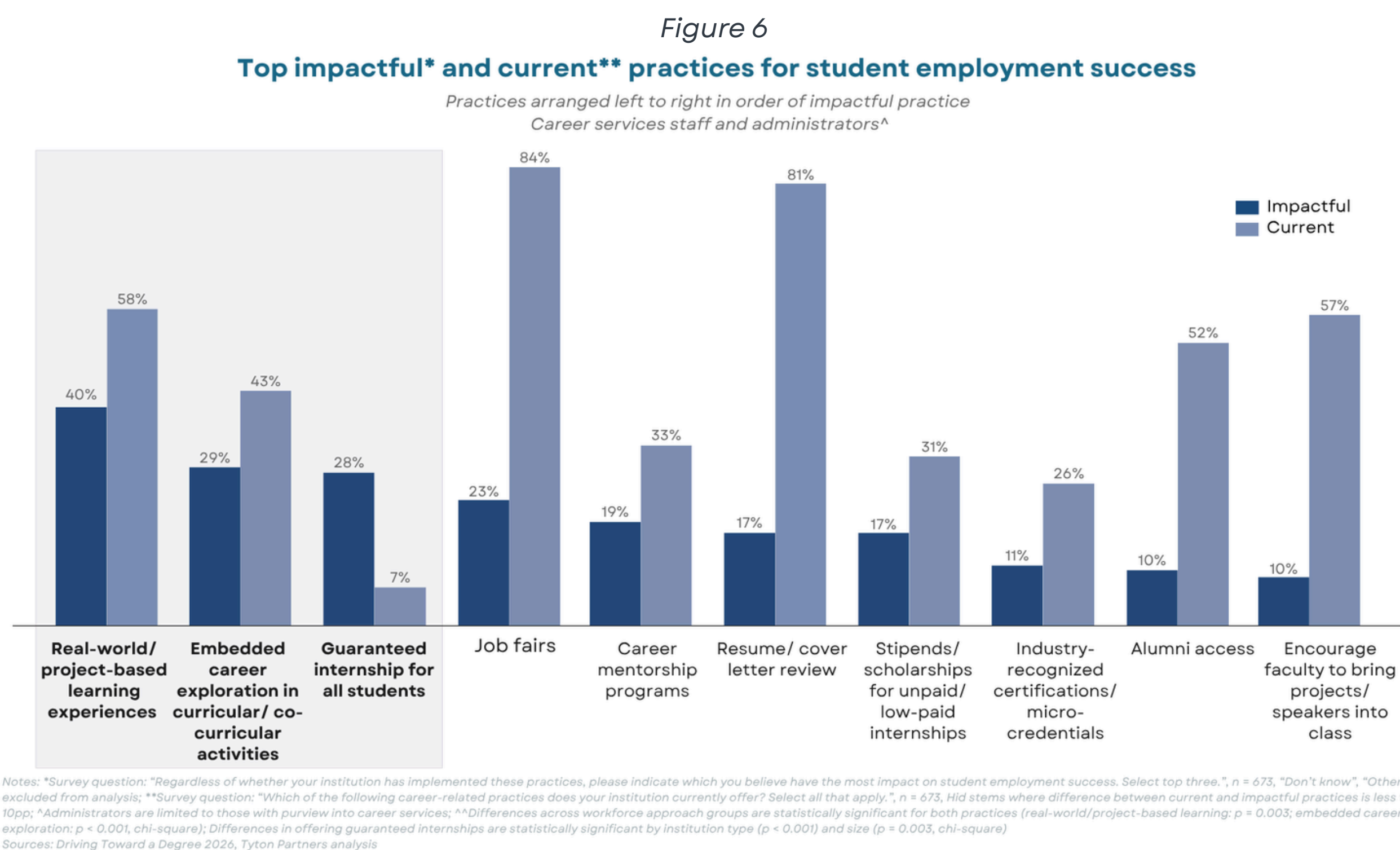
9. The Secure Query System (SQS) is an IRS-run tool (with Georgetown and Yale as intermediaries) that provides institutions aggregate, tax-based earnings data on their graduates, a more objective measure than self-reported alumni surveys. It entered testing in 2025 and requires a data-use agreement to access. See Association for Institutional Research (2026), "A Guide to Higher Education Federal Earnings Data," https://www.airweb.org/docs/default-source/documents-for-pages/reports-and-publications/air_federal_earnings_brief_2026.pdf.

10. Strada Education Foundation, "Clear Outcomes." <https://www.strada.org/focus-areas/clear-outcomes>

yet institutions concentrate their current effort on the lower-impact practices. Job fairs are offered by 84% of institutions, which is more than 3.5 times the 23% who rate them among the most impactful practices for student employment success. Resume/ cover letter reviews show an even wider gap: offered by 81% of institutions, yet rated as high-impact by just 17%, showing a nearly 5x difference (see Figure 6). Real-world, project-based learning and guaranteed internships for all students sit at the top of the impact ranking. Both are forms of work-integrated learning in which students gain real workplace experience without pausing their studies. Implementation of these practices is sector dependent:

- Project-based learning is far more common at four-year institutions (61%) than two-year institutions (33%), so current practice (58%) largely reflects the four-year-heavy composition of the sample.
- Guaranteed internships are offered at 7% of institutions and skews specifically toward private four-year institutions (11%), well above public institutions (2%-5%).

Strada finds that graduates who complete a paid internship are far more likely to land a first job that requires their degree, 73%, compared with 44% of those who did not¹¹. Institutions are, in effect, doubling down on the visible and inexpensive, while the high-touch, work-integrated practices that move the needle lag.

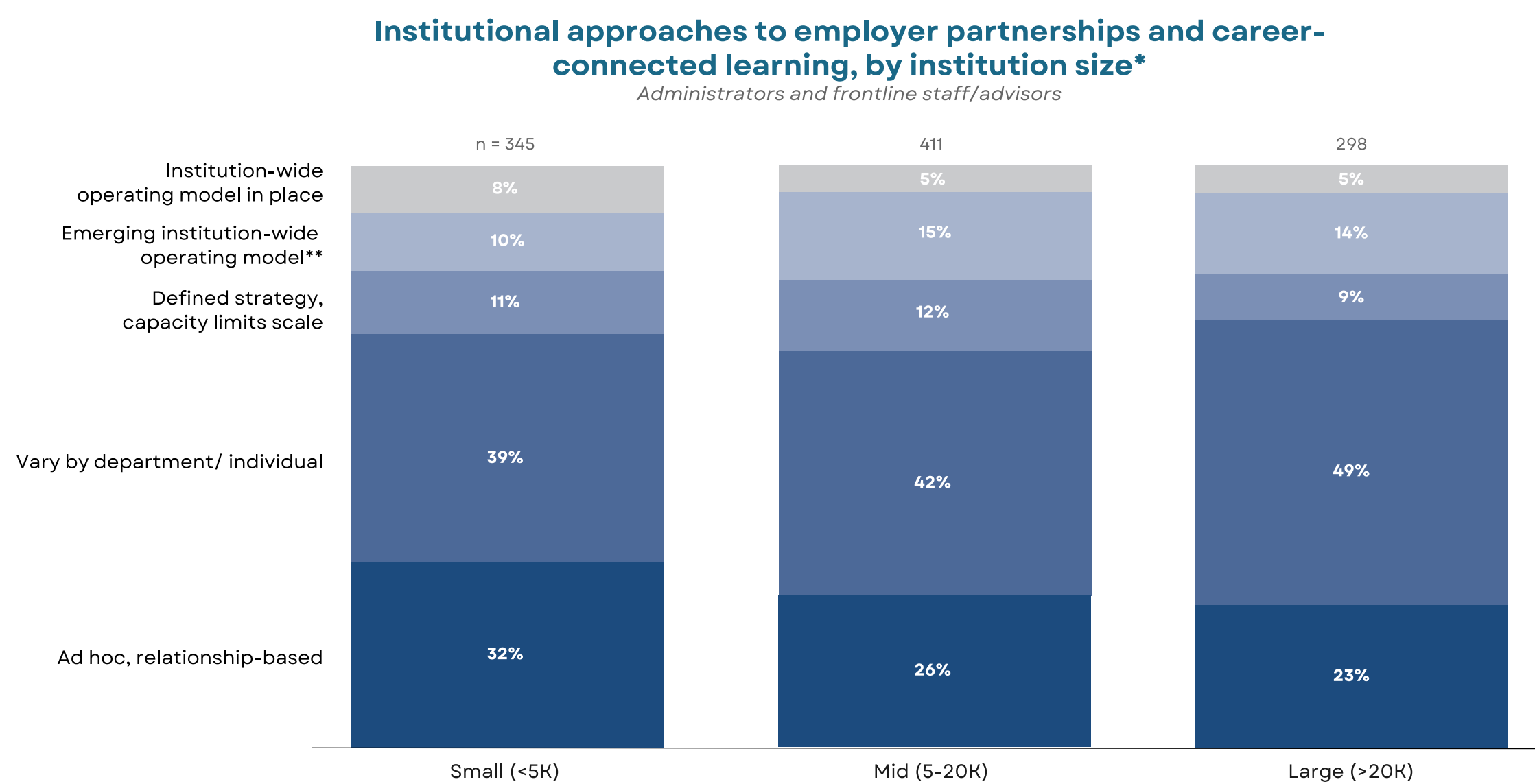


Those high-impact practices depend on employers, and employer partnerships remain the least developed piece of the picture. Regardless of size, only about one in five institutions have an institution-wide or emerging institution-wide model for employer partnerships and career-connected learning (see Figure 7). The rest vary by department or individual, or run on ad hoc, relationship-based arrangements. The cost of that informality is concrete: institutions with an institution-wide or emerging model are twice as likely to consistently

11. Strada Education Foundation, "Work-Based Learning." <https://www.strada.org/focus-areas/work-based-learning> (73% versus 44%)

track career outcomes (33% versus 13%), closing part of the measurement gap identified above in Figure 5. Institutions need both a centralized and coordinated approach to employer partnerships as well as stronger data to measure workforce outcomes.

Figure 7



Notes: *Survey question: "Institutions vary in how they structure employer partnerships and career-connected learning. Which best describes your institution's current approach?" n varies by segment; **Aligns with answer option "We have designated owners, clear employer engagement, and some tracking of outcomes across owners", as compared to "We have an institution-wide operating model for employer-connected learning, including defined ownership, employer engagement workflows, curricular integration, quality tracking, and outcome measurement" for an institution-wide model in place; ^Differences are statistically significant (p<0.01)
Sources: Driving Towards a Degree 2026, Tyton Partners analysis

Crucially, what holds institutions back is capacity, not conviction. The top barriers to scaling work-integrated learning are limited internal staff capacity (~45%), limited faculty incentives and time, and lack of funding, with fragmented ownership across departments compounding the strain rather than any shortage of intent. This is the same capacity ceiling Section 1 described, now showing up specifically on the career-readiness side of the ledger. It also marks a clear opening for solution providers: the work is wanted, the will is present, and the missing ingredients are exactly the ones that external partners and better tooling can help supply.

Career readiness is the clearest path to defending a degree's ROI, and it is built through work-integrated learning and durable skills like critical thinking that double as the foundation of AI literacy. But institutions cannot measure those outcomes well, invest disproportionately in low-impact activities, and lack the staff, funding, and coordinated employer partnerships to scale the practices that work. The blocker, again, is capacity.

The takeaway for institutions is a call to reallocate, not simply to spend more. Three moves offer the highest return:

- Shift effort away from low-impact activities like job fairs toward the work-integrated learning that improves employment outcomes
- Move employer partnerships from informal arrangements to an institution-wide operating model
- Broaden outcomes measurement beyond alumni self-reported data toward the more complete sources that make the ROI case credible

For solution providers, those same gaps in capacity, coordination, and data are the clearest place to add value.

SECTION 3: WHERE NECESSITY IS ALREADY PRODUCING ANSWERS: AI-AUGMENTED SUPPORT

Sections 1 and 2 described a capacity ceiling: flat budgets, rising caseloads, and a career-readiness mandate that outruns the staff and structures available to meet student needs. This section shows what institutions are doing about it. The answer is not arriving as a tidy strategy handed down from the top. It is emerging from the front lines, where advisors under real pressure are already reaching for new tools. That response only makes sense against the pressure that produced it.

SECTION 3.1: THE CASELOAD REALITY

If any single finding captures the pressure on student support infrastructure, it is this: for six consecutive years, high caseloads have ranked as the top barrier to improving advising (see Figure 8). Cited by 37% of advisors and administrators in 2021, the barrier has held first place every year since. It has outlasted budget cycles, leadership turnover, and the arrival of new technology. In 2026, limited budget rose to second (34%), a direct echo of the structural squeeze in Section 1, and the two top barriers now point at the same thing: too many students, too few resources to serve them well¹².

Figure 8
Top advising barriers for all students*
Administrators and frontline staff/advisors

2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
Caseloads for advisors are too high (37%)	Caseloads for advisors are too high (41%)	Caseloads for advisors are too high (47%)	Caseloads for advisors are too high (43%)	Caseloads for advisors are too high (42%)	Caseloads for advisors are too high (40%)
Limited budget (28%)	Lack of coordination across departments (30%)	Low student engagement with resources (35%)	Retention of advisors / turnover (37%)	Lack of coordination across departments (32%)	Limited budget (34%)
Lack of coordination across departments (27%)	Limited budget (25%)	Lack of coordination across departments (30%)	Lack of coordination across departments (36%)	Retention of advisors / turnover (31%)	Low student engagement with resources (31%)
Faculty resistance to change (22%)	Poor accountability for advising outcomes (24%)	Retention of advisors / turnover (28%)	Low student engagement with resources (33%)	Low student engagement with resources (30%)	Lack of coordination across departments (30%)
Low student engagement with resources (21%)	Low student engagement with resources (23%)	Advisors are too overburdened with admin tasks (26%)	Limited budget (27%)	Limited budget (28%)	Retention of advisors / turnover (28%)
Advisors are too overburdened with admin tasks (18%)	Ineffective onboarding / Lack of training for faculty advisors (17%)	Ineffective onboarding / Lack of training for faculty as advisors (24%)	Advisors are too overburdened with admin tasks (27%)	Advisors are too overburdened with admin tasks (25%)	Advisors are too overburdened with admin tasks (23%)
Poor accountability for advising outcomes (17%)	Advisors are too overburdened with admin tasks (16%)	Limited budget (23%)	Ineffective onboarding / Lack of training for faculty as advisors (21%)	Advising tech is outdated / underutilized (16%)	Advising tech is outdated / underutilized (17%)
Ineffective onboarding / Lack of training for faculty as advisors (17%)	Retention of advisors / turnover (15%)	Poor accountability for advising outcomes (15%)	Uncertainty about how best to reach students (17%)	Uncertainty about how to reach students (15%)	Uncertainty about how to reach students (16%)

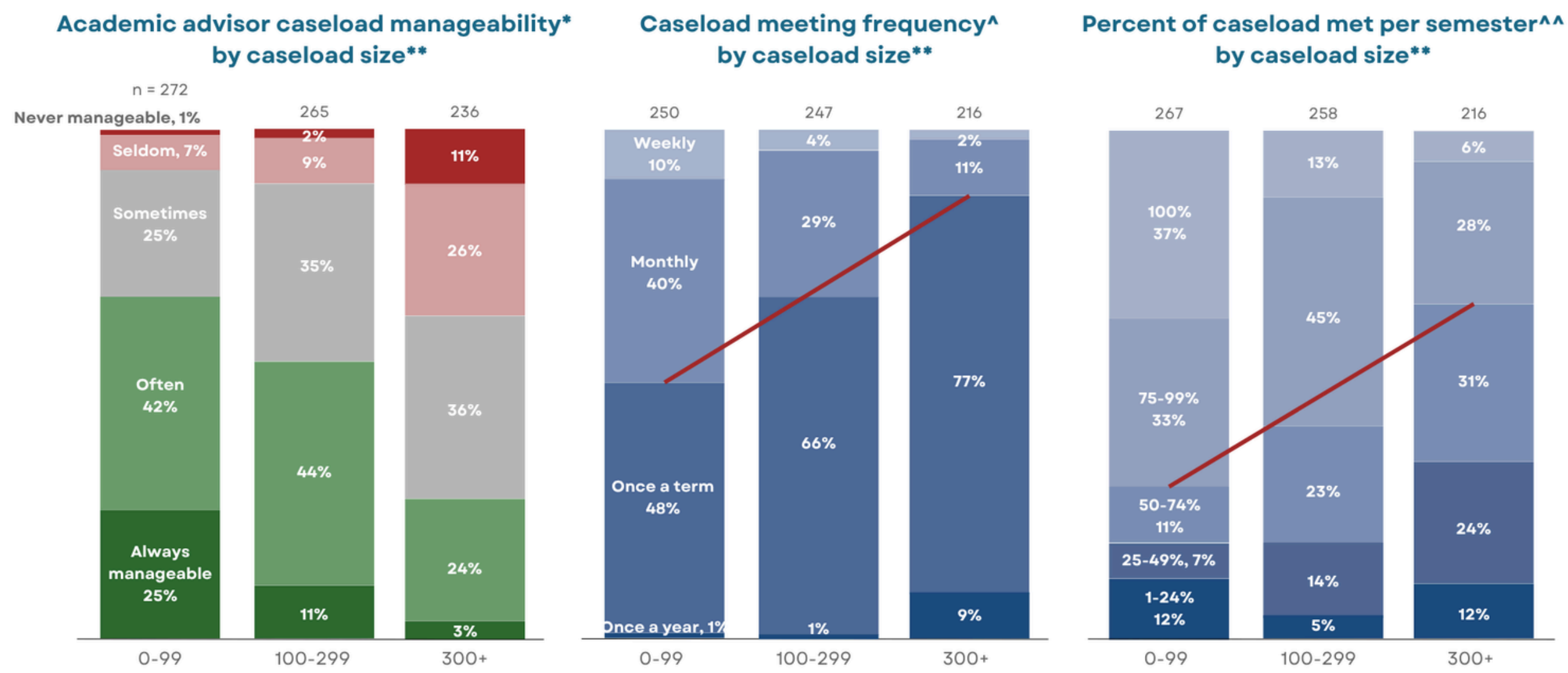
Note: *Survey question: "What are the top three barriers to improving academic advising for all students at your institution? Select top three." (2021 n = 1,310), (2022 n = 685), (2023 n = 1,756), (2024 n = 942), (2025 n = 932), (2026 n = 788); **Academic advisors include primary role and faculty advisors, Administrators only include those with academic advising purview
Sources: Driving Toward a Degree 2021-2026, Tyton Partners analysis

The consequences scale directly with the load. As caseloads grow, advisors meet students less often and reach fewer of them (see Figure 9). Among advisors carrying fewer than 100 students, 67% find their caseloads manageable most or all of the time; among those carrying 300 or more, only 27% do. Meeting frequency falls in step: half of light-caseload advisors meet students monthly or more, while 86% of those with 300 or more students see

12. Institutions with a centralized advising structure fare somewhat better on the coordination that compounds this strain (24% cite it as a barrier, versus 31% of decentralized institutions).

each advisee only once a term or less. And the share of students reached collapses. Advisors with the heaviest loads meet all their students just 6% of the time, and more than a third reach fewer than half. This is not a matter of advisors rushing through appointments to cope; average meeting length holds steady across caseload sizes. A bigger caseload simply means fewer students seen.

Figure 9

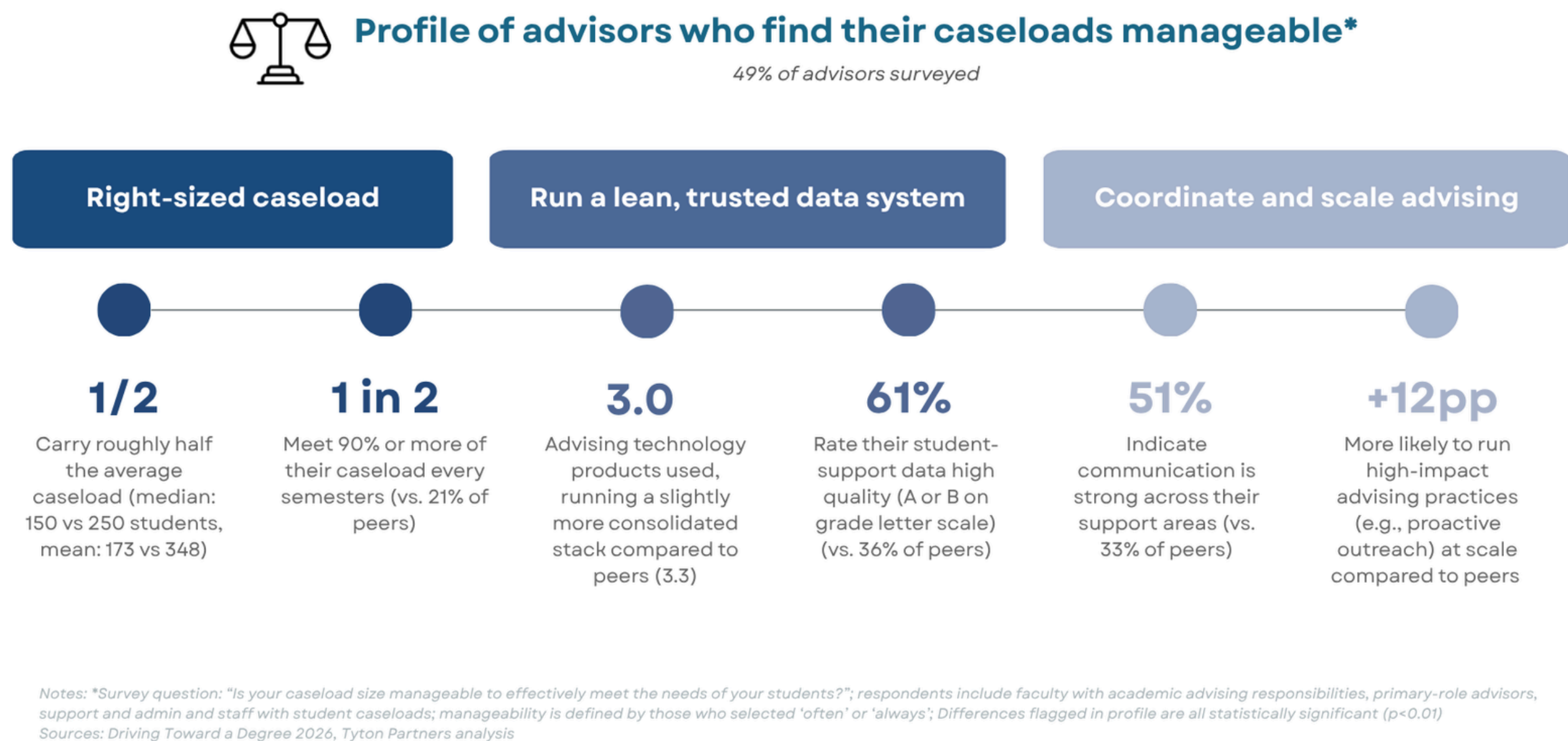


Notes: *Survey question: "Is your caseload size manageable to effectively meet the needs of your students?"; respondents include faculty with academic advising responsibilities, primary-role advisors, support and admin and staff with student caseloads; **Survey question: "What is the size of your advising student caseload for this spring term?"; ^Survey question: "For the students in your caseload you engage with, how often do you speak with each student on average?"; ^^Survey question: "What percentage of your caseload do you speak with every semester?"
Sources: Driving Toward a Degree 2026, Tyton Partners analysis

Advisors who find their caseloads manageable carry about 165 students on average, against roughly 385 for those who do not, a difference of more than two to one. The collective experiences of these advisors with manageable caseloads share a sense of what a sustainable path forward might be for advising (see Figure 10). Right-sizing the caseload is the enabling condition; trusted data and scalable practice are what a manageable load makes possible. For institutions, that profile reads as a blueprint to deliberately right-size caseloads, whether through group advising, redistributed assignments, or targeted capacity, then equip advisors with consolidated data systems to utilize best communication and advising practices. The model is reproducible, and the real question is not whether it works but how to fund the headroom that sets it in motion¹³.

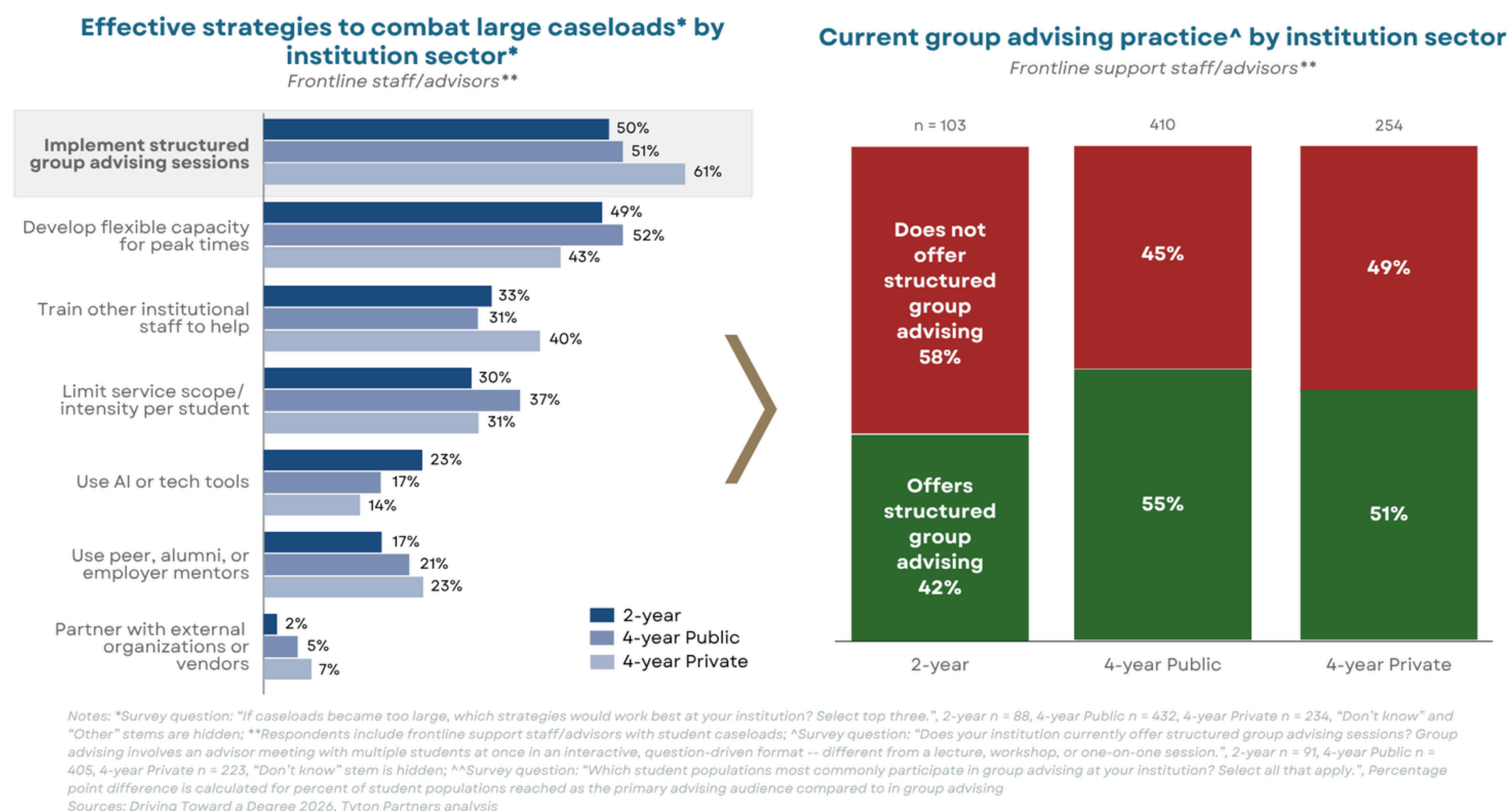
13. About 70% of advisors who find their caseloads manageable are at public institutions. 4-year private institutional caseloads while lower on average, are not driving these results.

Figure 10



Advisors also know what would help most when caseloads are too large. While every student should have access to 1-1 time with an advisor, structured group advising is rated the single most effective strategy for managing large caseloads, chosen by frontline staff across sectors. Yet, only about half of institutions offer it (see Figure 11). That is a clear belief-to-practice gap. Where group advising does exist, it also extends reach to specific populations, helping four-year institutions serve student athletes and two-year institutions reach dually enrolled students. It complements rather than replaces the standard 1:1 advising relationship¹⁴.

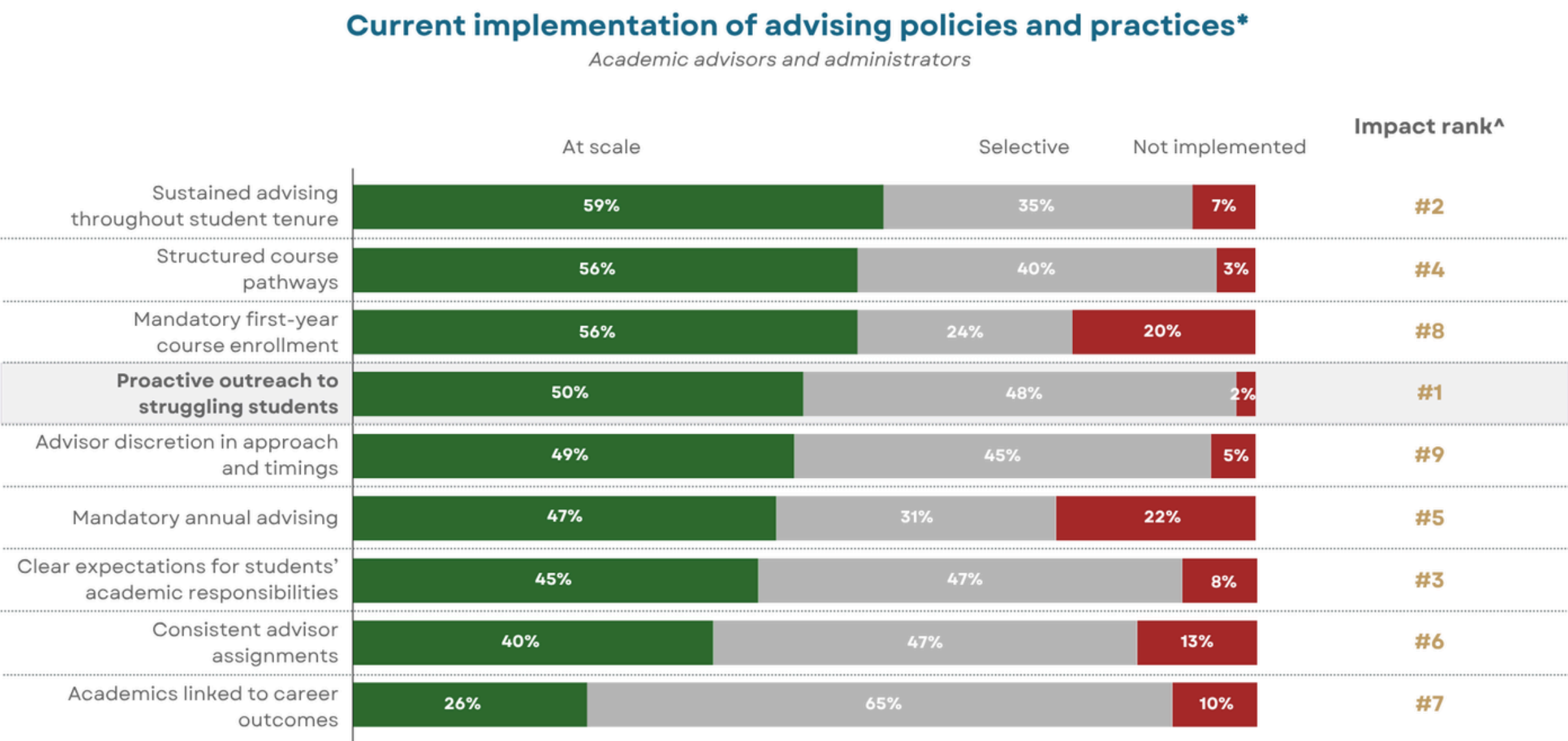
Figure 11



14. NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising. (2026, May 1). NACADA Definition of and Scope of Practice for Academic Advising. <https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Pillars/Definition-and-Scope>

Data on advising practices show other gaps between what institutions believe are impactful practices and what practices they are implementing. Proactive outreach to struggling students is rated the most impactful practice for improving student academic outcomes, but only 50% of institutions run it at scale, with another 48% doing it selectively (see Figure 12). Other high-impact practices lag in the same way: mandatory annual advising, rated fifth for impact, is at scale at 47% of institutions. Some are limited by caseload capacity. Mandatory advising is hard to guarantee when advisors are stretched thin. Proactive outreach, notably, has no relationship to caseload size in our analysis, so institutions should be able to run it at scale regardless of how many students each advisor carries. That makes its implementation gap especially striking: the barrier is prioritization and systems, not capacity. What they share is the gap itself: the practices rated most impactful are among the least likely to be delivered at scale.

Figure 12



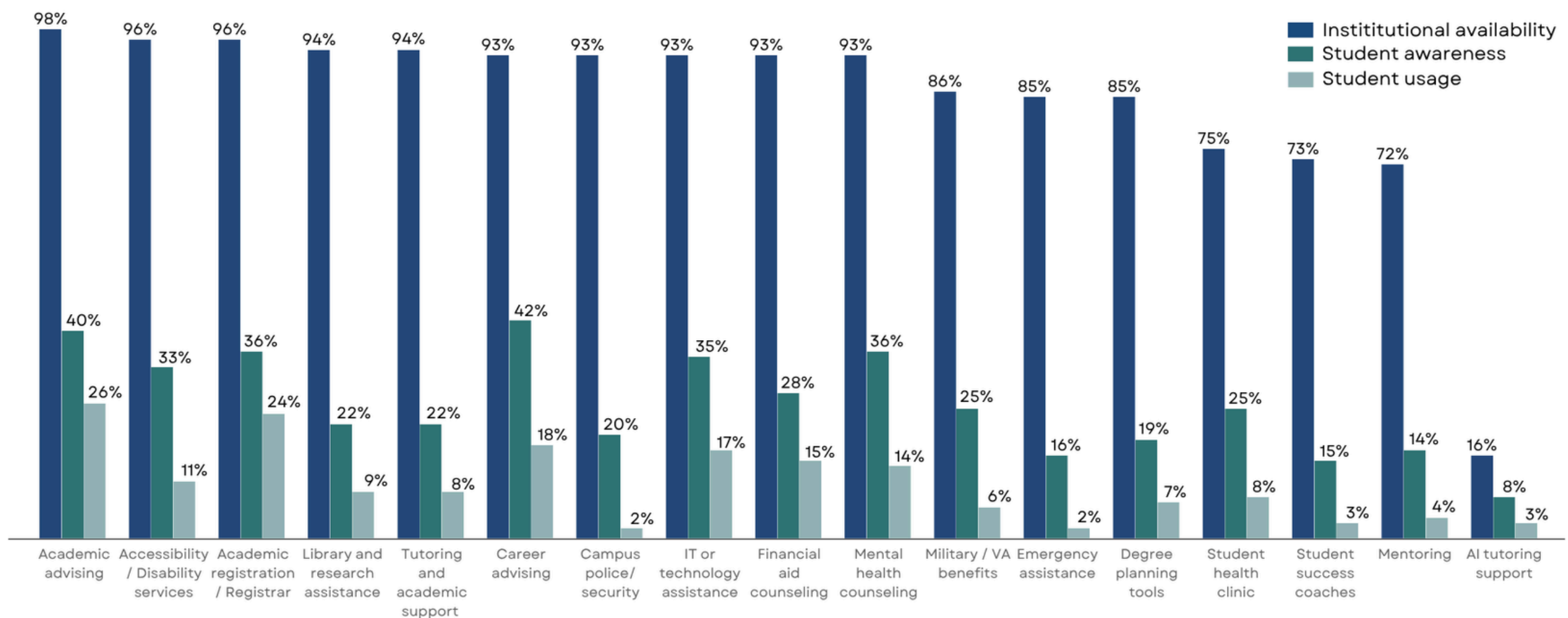
Notes: *Survey question: "Please assess the degree to which your institution implements these academic advising policies and practices. Not implemented: Not in use Selective: Implementing in some departments/ for some students At scale: Implemented for all students", n = 609-698, "Connecting academic choices to career goals" and "Advisors who reflect student body demographics" hidden as scaled adoption is <30%; **Academic advisors include primary role and faculty advisors, Administrators only include those with academic advising purview; ^Survey question: "Regardless of whether your institution has implemented these practices, which practices do you believe have the most impact on student academic outcomes. Select top three.", n = 788
Sources: Driving Toward a Degree 2026, Tyton Partners analysis

Seen from the student side, the strain shows up as a disconnect between what institutions offer and what students actually know about and use (see Figure 13). Academic advising is available at 98% of institutions, yet only 40% of students are aware it exists and 26% have ever used it. The pattern repeats across every service: career advising is available at 93% of institutions but reaches 42% awareness and 18% usage; mental health counseling, 93% available, 36% aware, 14% used. Near-universal availability, middling awareness, and single-digit to low usage is the rule, not the exception. This is a double-barreled problem: thin capacity limits how proactively advisors can reach out, and low awareness means students do not come find the help that already exists.

Figure 13

Institutional availability,* student awareness,** student use^ of support services

Administrators, frontline staff/advisors, and students



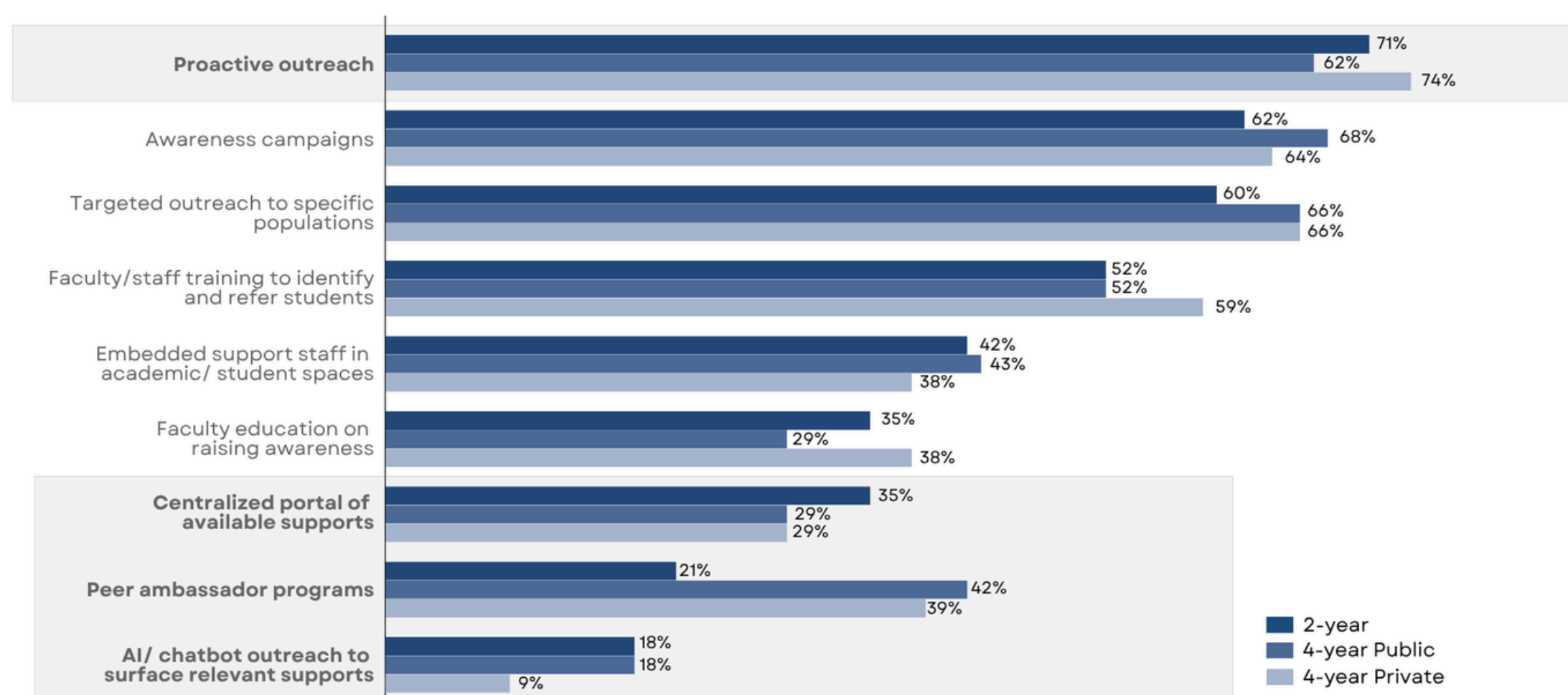
Notes: *Survey question: "Which of the following student support services are available to students at your institution? Select all that apply.", n = 1,260; **Survey question: "Which of the following support services are available to you at your college/university? Select all that apply.", n = 1,809; ^Survey question: "Which of the following support providers have you ever personally interacted with at your current college/university? Select all that apply.", n=1,690; ^ How many times a year do you meet with your academic advisor? n = 406
Sources: Driving Toward a Degree 2026, Listening to Learners 2026, Tyton Partners analysis

Closing that awareness gap, in advisors' view, is best accomplished via proactive outreach. Proactive outreach, already the top-rated advising practice for improving student outcomes, is also the top-rated strategy for raising student awareness of supports (see Figure 14). Centralized portals that surface available supports, and AI or chatbot outreach that tailors them to the individual student, are seen as part of the answer but sit lower on the list today, with AI or chatbot outreach cited by just 9% to 18% and four-year private institutions least likely to reach for it.

Figure 14

Top strategies to improve student awareness of supports*

Administrators and frontline staff/advisors

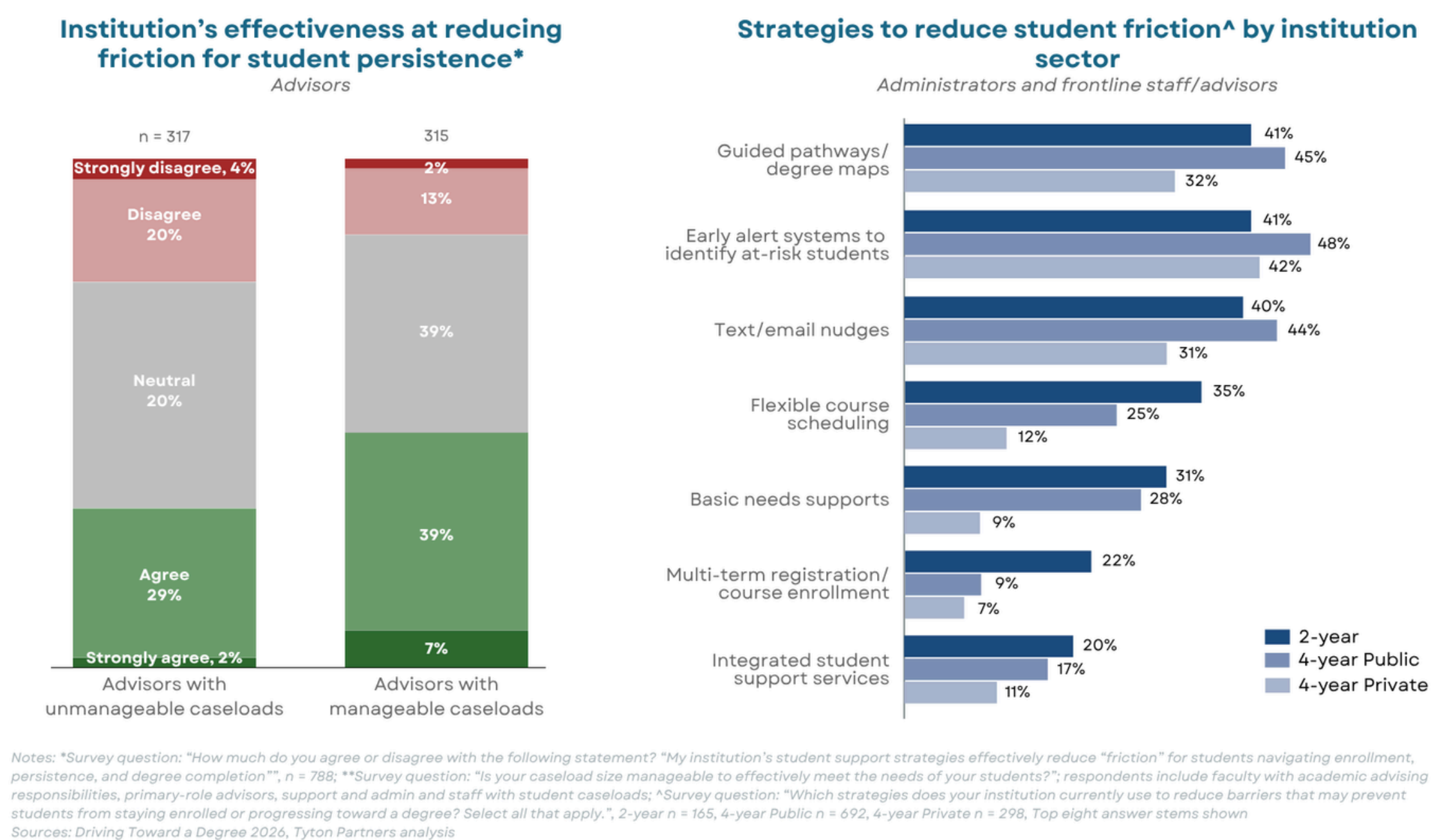


Notes: *Survey question: "Which strategies does your institution actively use to increase student awareness of available student supports? Select all that apply.", n = 1,260, answer choices "Other, please specify" and "Don't know" excluded from analysis
Sources: Driving Toward a Degree 2026, Tyton Partners analysis

Finally, manageable caseloads do not just ease the advisor's day; they convert into student outcomes (see Figure 15). Advisors with manageable caseloads are markedly more likely to say their institution effectively reduces the friction students face in navigating enrollment,

persistence, and progress toward a degree. The strategies they lean on to reduce that friction include guided pathways and degree maps, early-alert systems for at-risk students, and text and email nudges. All these solutions are scalable, and technology-enabled. Caseload headroom, in other words, is not a comfort. It is what lets advisors deploy the practices that support student persistence.

Figure 15



That is the crux of the caseload reality: the highest-impact practices are known, and under-deployed. With flat budgets and hiring constrained, institutions cannot buy their way to headroom, so they must design their way there, right-sizing caseloads, scaling the practices advisors already believe in, and reaching for tools that extend the hours they have. It is this necessity that is now driving advisors and their institutions toward AI.

SECTION 3.2: THE AI RESPONSE

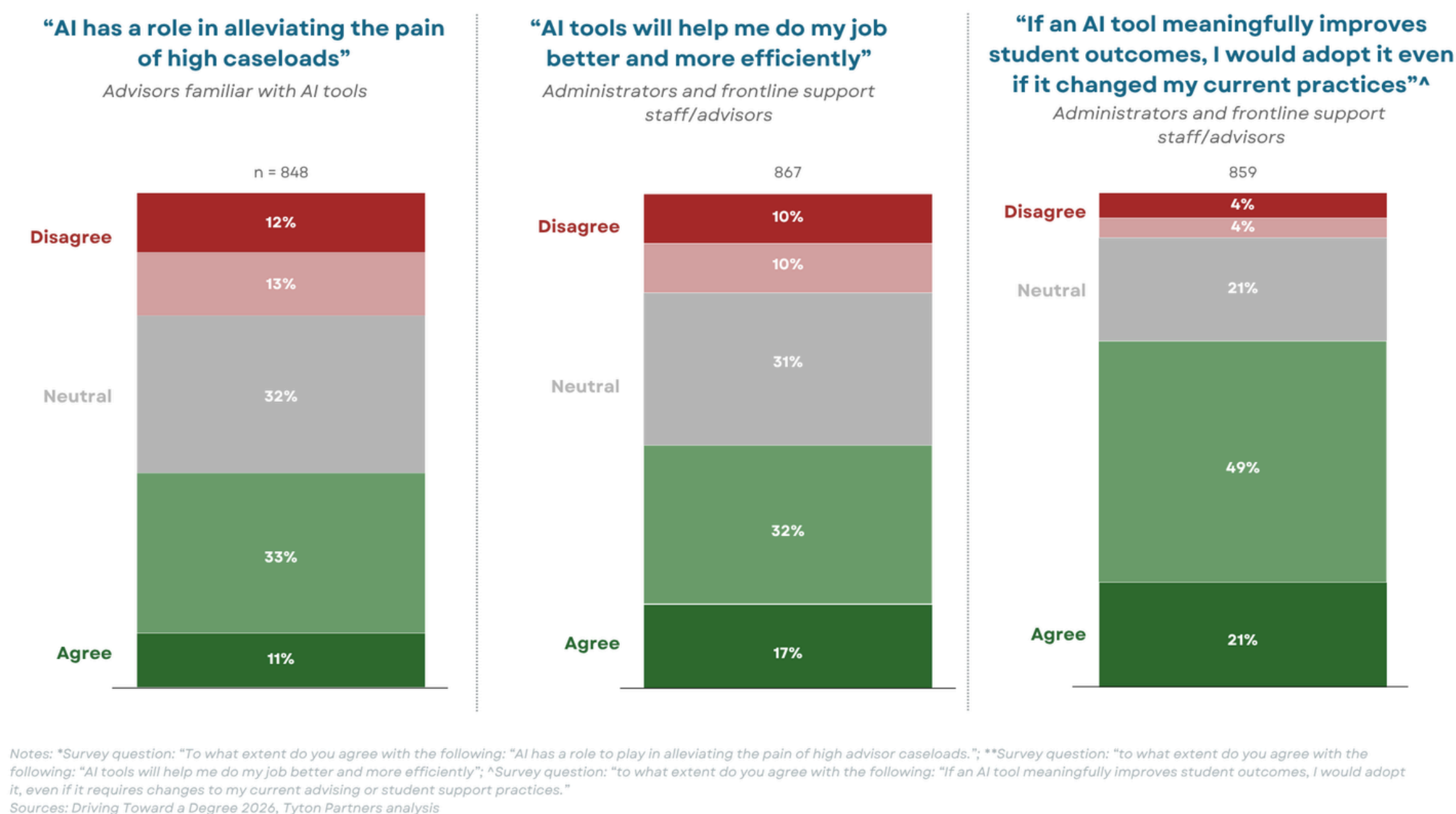
That turn toward AI in student support services is already underway. It is early and uneven, but four findings give it shape:

- Academic advisors see a real role for AI and are willing to change how they work to capture it
- Administrators, not just students, are now among the most active generative AI users
- The barrier is no longer getting access to AI, it is switching on what institutions already own
- The preferred role of AI in student supports is settling on a blended model that keeps a human in the loop

Academic advisors and other frontline support providers are not just curious about AI; they are willing to reorganize their own work around it. Of the three measures in Figure 16, the one drawing the most agreement is also the most demanding. Seven in ten say that if an AI tool meaningfully improved student outcomes, they would adopt it even if it changed their current practices, and only 8% disagree. Nearly half also agree AI already helps them do their jobs better and more efficiently.

This appetite is not unique to this survey. In an EDUCAUSE¹⁵ national study of higher education staff, 94% had used AI for work in the prior six months and 86% wanted to keep using it, even though only 11% were required to. Those figures capture use. Our data captures what sits underneath it: willingness. Staff are ready to change how they work not because policy compels them, but because they believe it will improve student outcomes. Willingness, not requirement, is what turns scattered use into lasting practice.

Figure 16



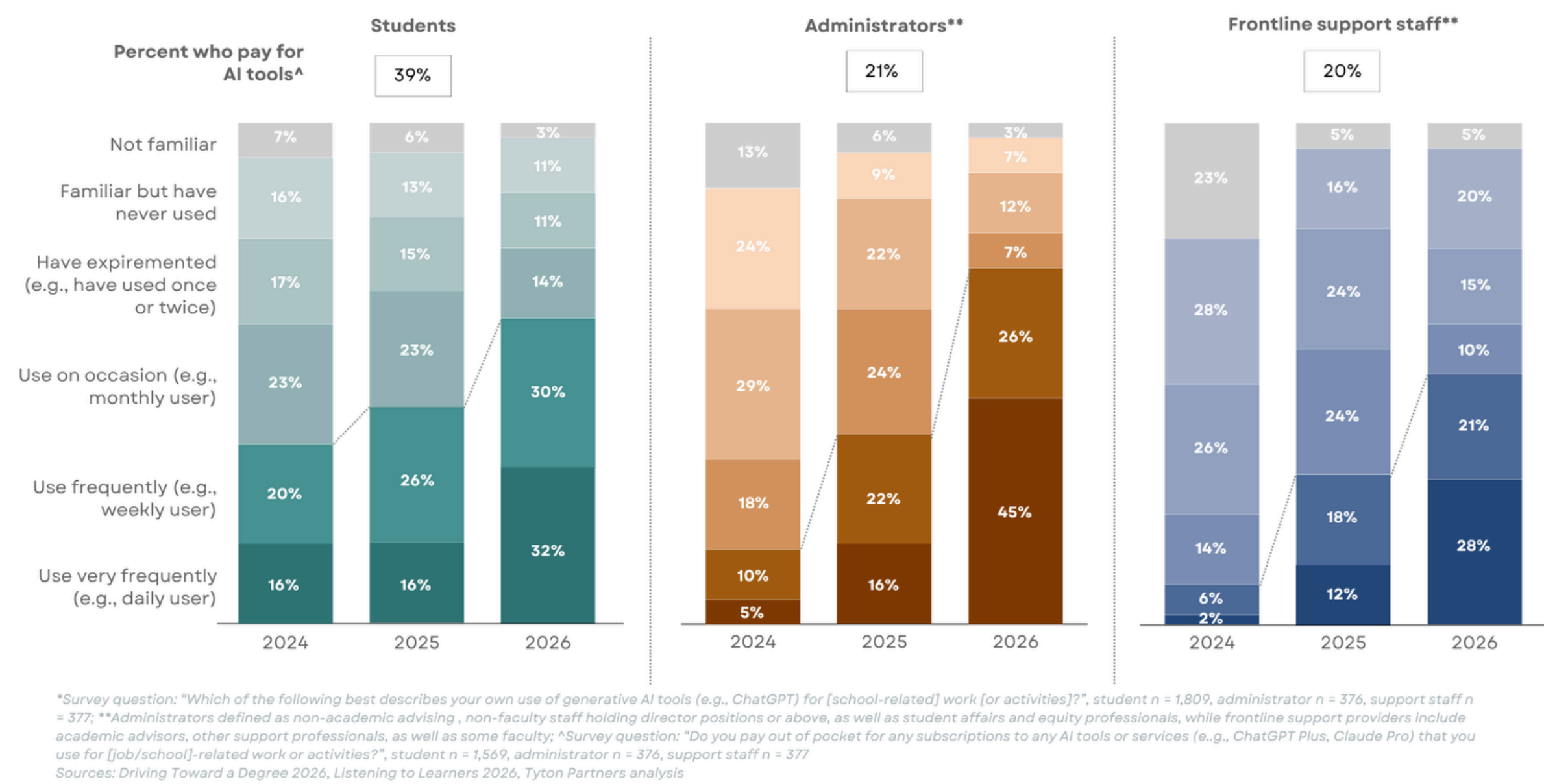
For years, students were the heaviest AI users on campus. In 2026 that changed (see Figure 17). Administrators are now among the most active daily users of AI for work, the first year that has been true since *Driving Toward a Degree* started tracking AI awareness and usage. Students still show a higher willingness to pay for such tools. The shift is not that students slowed down. It is that AI has moved into the daily work of running an institution.

This opens a narrow window. Staff are adopting AI faster than institutions are governing it. Among students, Gallup and Lumina Foundation found a similar gap developing those skills: ~60% use AI at least weekly, yet half say their school discourages or prohibits it and only 42% say it is encouraged¹⁶. Policy is trailing practice. The cost of waiting is that day-to-day norms get set by default. This is the moment to set policy and practice aligned to institutional belief.

15. EDUCAUSE. (2026, January 12). "The Impact of AI on Work in Higher Education." EDUCAUSE.
<https://www.educause.edu/research/2026/the-impact-of-ai-on-work-in-higher-education>

16. Gallup and Lumina Foundation. (2026, April 1). "AI Is Routine for College Students, Despite Campus Limits." Gallup.
<https://news.gallup.com/poll/704090/routine-college-students-despite-campus-limits.aspx>

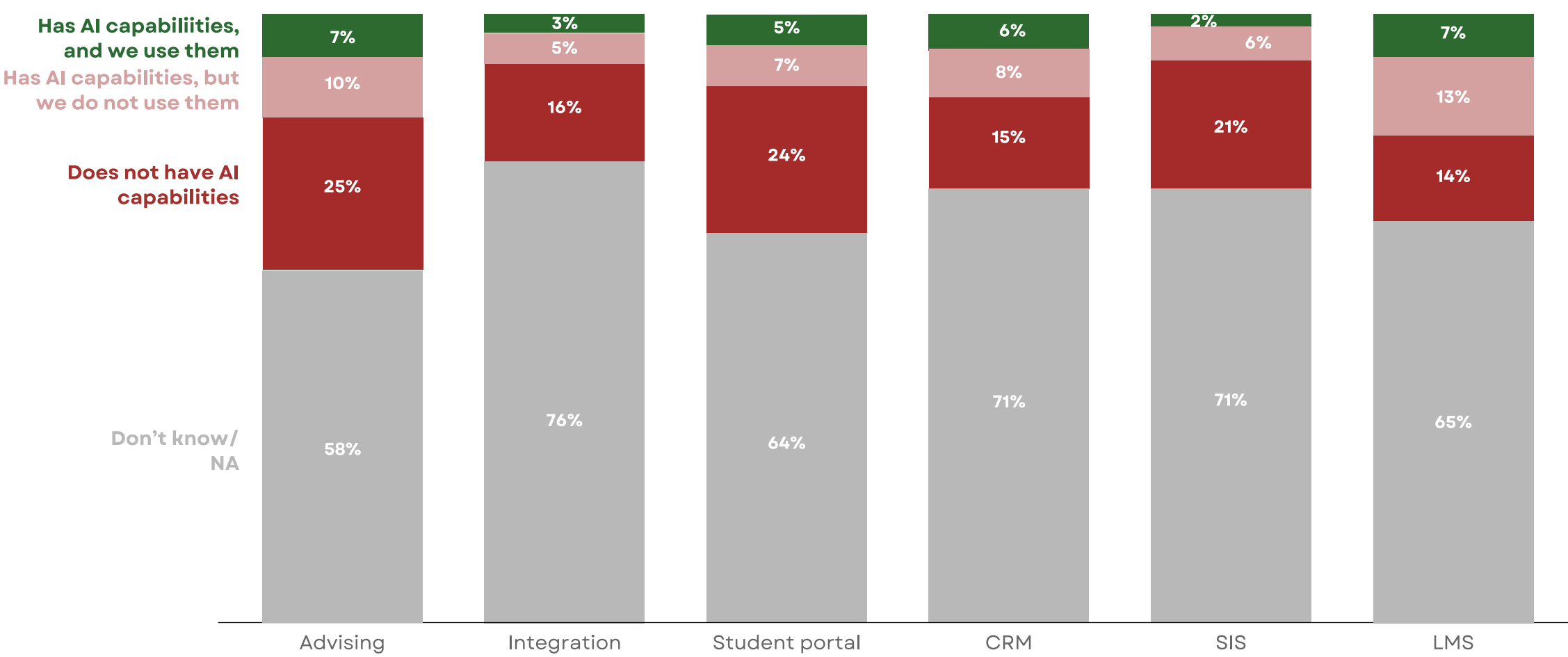
Figure 17
Historical usage and awareness of AI tools*



Access to AI is not the real problem. Most institutions already have it, built into software they own and pay for. The gap is between the AI an institution owns and the AI it uses, and it opens in two stages. First is awareness: most institutions do not know the AI is there. Second is activation: even when they know, they often do not use it.

Across six core student success technologies (advising tools, integration tools, the student portal, the CRM, the SIS, and the LMS), we asked administrators and frontline staff what AI each system has and whether they use it (see Figure 18). Awareness fails first: Depending on the technology, 58% to 76% of respondents do not know whether the system even has AI capabilities. Even where AI is present and recognized, use remains at 2-7%.

Figure 18
Presence and usage of AI across institutional technologies*
Administrators and frontline support staff/advisors



Note: *Survey question: "For each of the following technologies, please indicate the extent to which your institution leverages any AI capabilities", n = 897
Sources: Driving Toward a Degree 2025-2026, Tyton Partners analysis

Incumbent edtech solutions in core student success product categories have invested in embedding AI into their systems but have been slow to make that functionality part of users' daily workflow, as shown in Figure 18. This leaves solution providers exposed to risk from general-purpose AI assistants such as Claude, Copilot, and ChatGPT, which end users and administrators alike may turn to instead for insight and analytics. Tyton Partners believes the extent of this risk depends on how familiar end users and decision makers are with deploying AI tools on top of existing systems. As our data in Figure 17 shows, decision makers are at an interesting point on the AI adoption curve, and if solution providers do not proactively bring their users along on their AI-enabled functionality, they risk becoming a commodity.

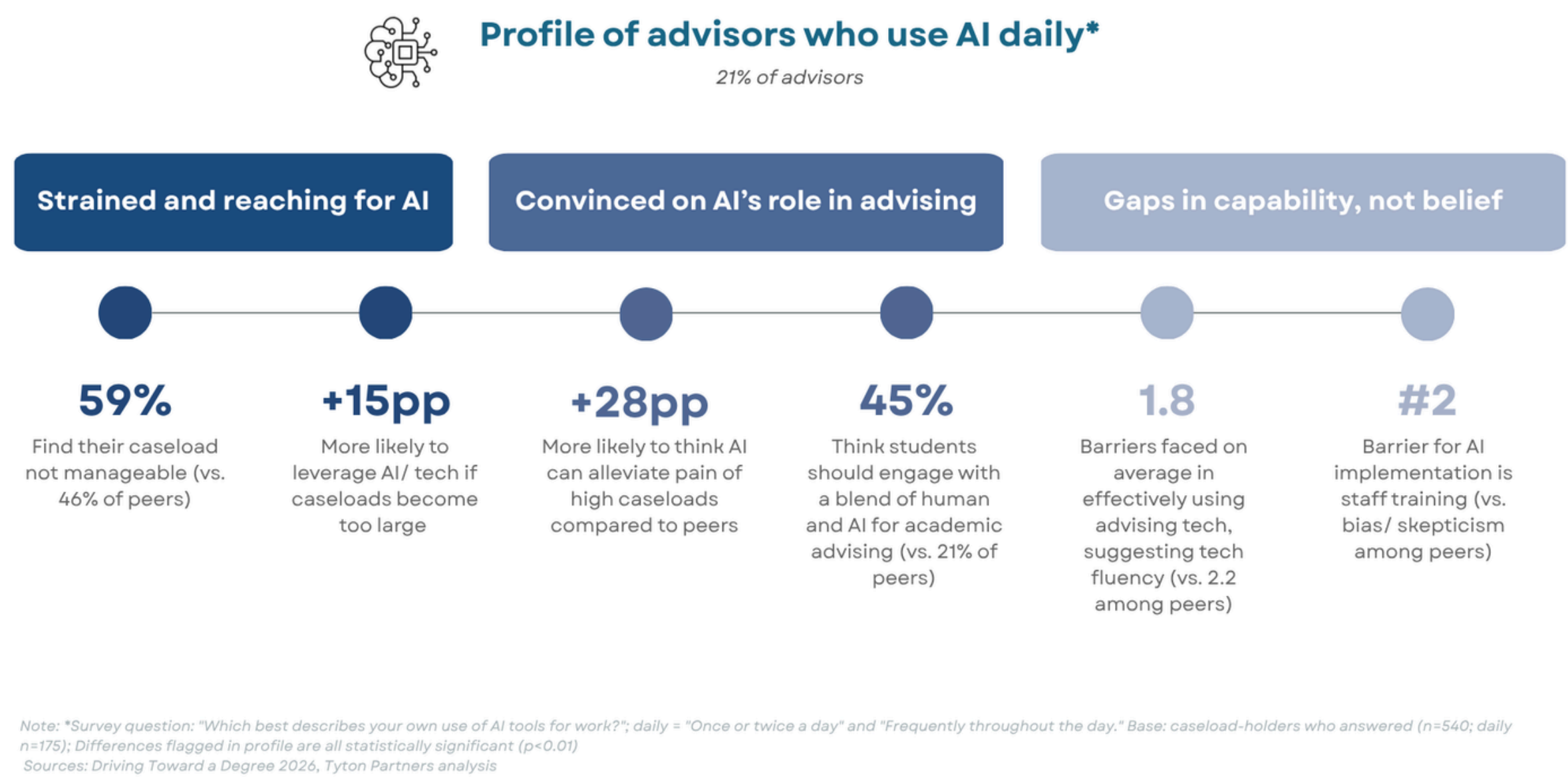
This same awareness gap is also a clear opening for solution providers, whose products already hold much of the unused capability. The highest-leverage move is not to ship more features, but to surface the ones already there: raise awareness of the AI embedded in their tools, be transparent about its risks, limits, and cost, and invite user feedback based on pilots, then act on it. Transparency on cost matters, since some AI features carry usage-based fees that rise as more staff adopt them. A sound practice for institutions is to ask providers up front how usage and cost scale before switching these features on. Done that way, surfacing capability an institution already owns still costs less than building it new.

The academic advisors using AI every day are not the skeptics who were won over. They are the ones under the most pressure from unmanageable caseloads. About one in five advisors (21%) now use AI daily, and they share a clear, three-part profile (see Figure 19):

- **Strained, and reaching for AI:** These are the advisors carrying the heaviest loads, and they are 15 points more likely to say they would turn to AI or technology if caseloads grew heavier still. They are not chasing novelty; they are overloaded and looking for relief.
- **Convinced AI belongs in advising:** They are more likely than their peers to think AI can ease the pain of high caseloads, and nearly half want students to get a blend of human and AI support for academic advising, more than double the share of their peers.
- **Held back by capability, not belief:** What separates them from everyone else is skill, not conviction. They hit fewer barriers using advising technology well, and their top obstacle to AI is staff training, not the bias or skepticism that ranks higher for the rest.

The three traits point the same way, and the direction is encouraging for institutions. The advisors leading on AI are not risk-takers with unusual faith in it. They are the most burdened staff, reaching for relief, and held back only by know-how. Because the constraint is capability rather than conviction, it can be trained, which means institutions can deliberately grow this group instead of waiting for it to grow on its own.

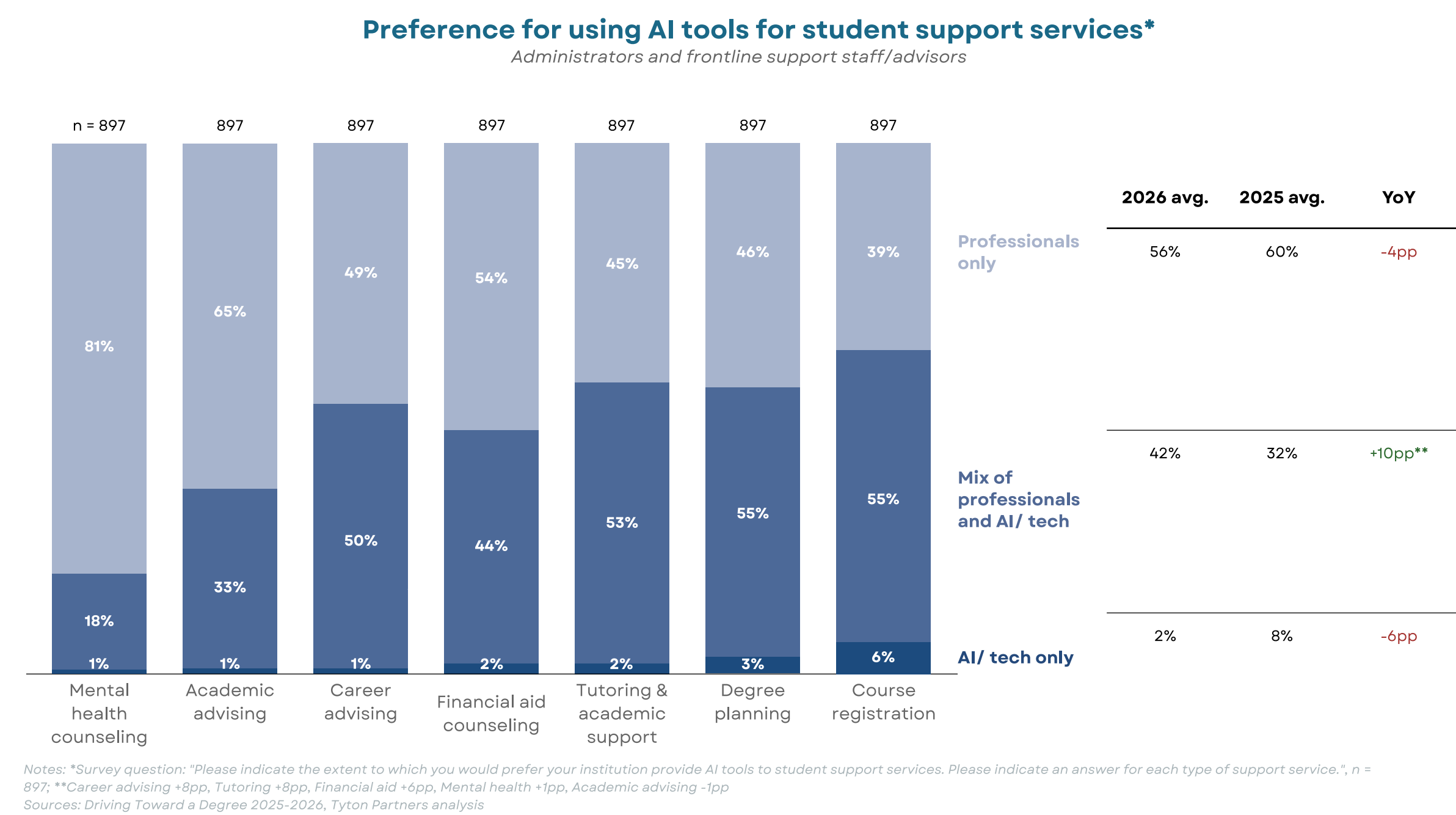
Figure 19



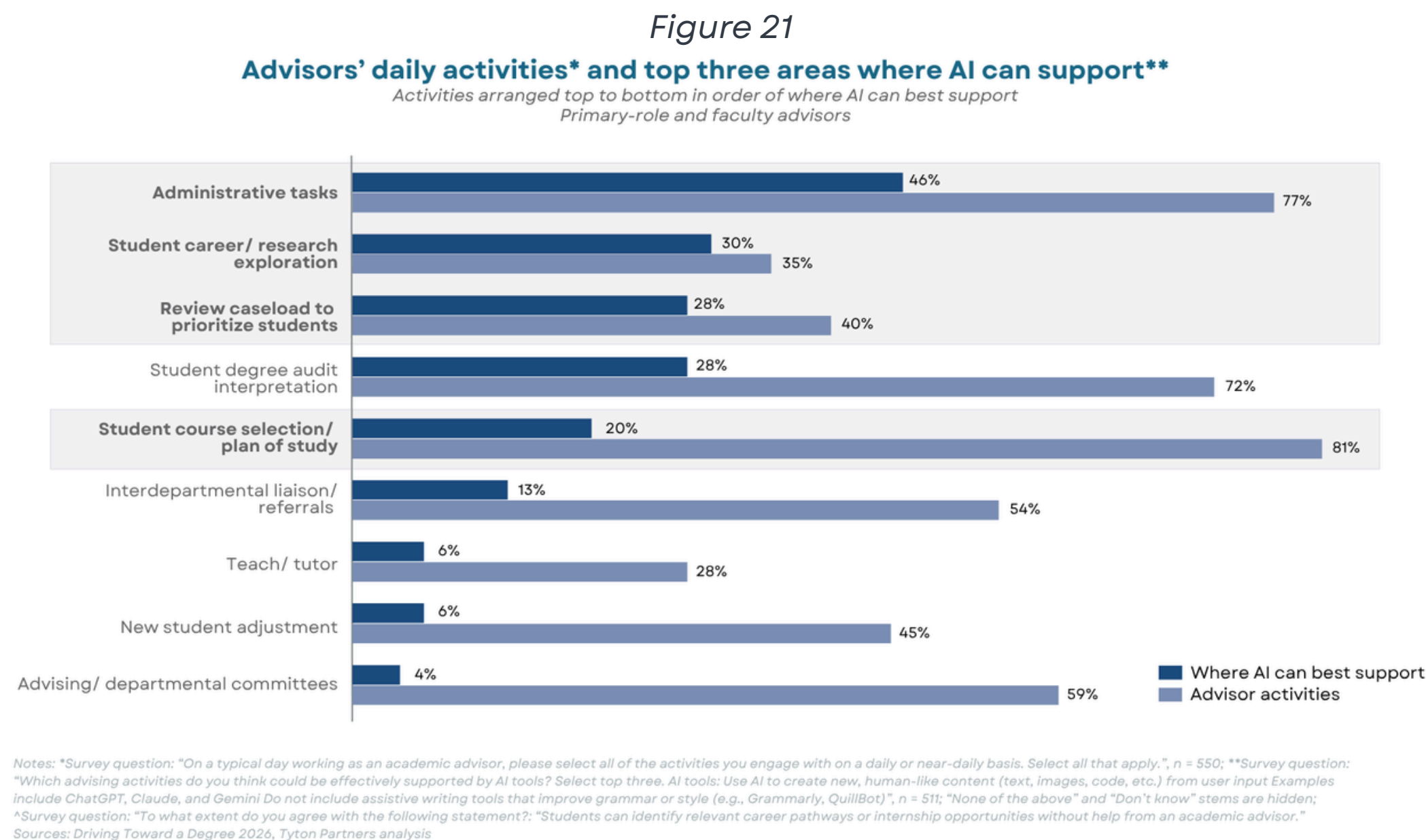
On how they want AI delivered, administrators and frontline support providers show a clear preference. It is not full automation via technology and AI, and it is not people working alone. It is a blend, and it is gaining ground from both sides at once (see Figure 20). The blended model rose to a 42% average preference in 2026, up 10 percentage points from 32% in 2025. It grew by drawing from both professionals-only and AI/ technology-only extremes. In other words, people are leaving both ends and meeting in the middle. Where support providers draw the line depends on how personal the service is.

The most human services stay human. For mental health counseling, 81% prefer professionals only. For academic advising, 65% do. The most transactional services are the most open to a blended service delivery model. For example, in course registration, 55% want a mix, and 6% would accept AI alone, the highest for any service.

Figure 20



If the blended delivery of support is the model, advisors' own responses indicate a natural starting point for AI adoption (see Figure 21). The figure compares how advisors currently allocate their time with where they believe AI could add the most value. The clearest fit is administrative work, such as answering routine questions and scheduling, which is the single biggest use of advisors' time (77% do it daily) and the top-rated place for AI to help (46%).



Other opportunities sit just past it, in two areas advisors currently under-serve their advisees:

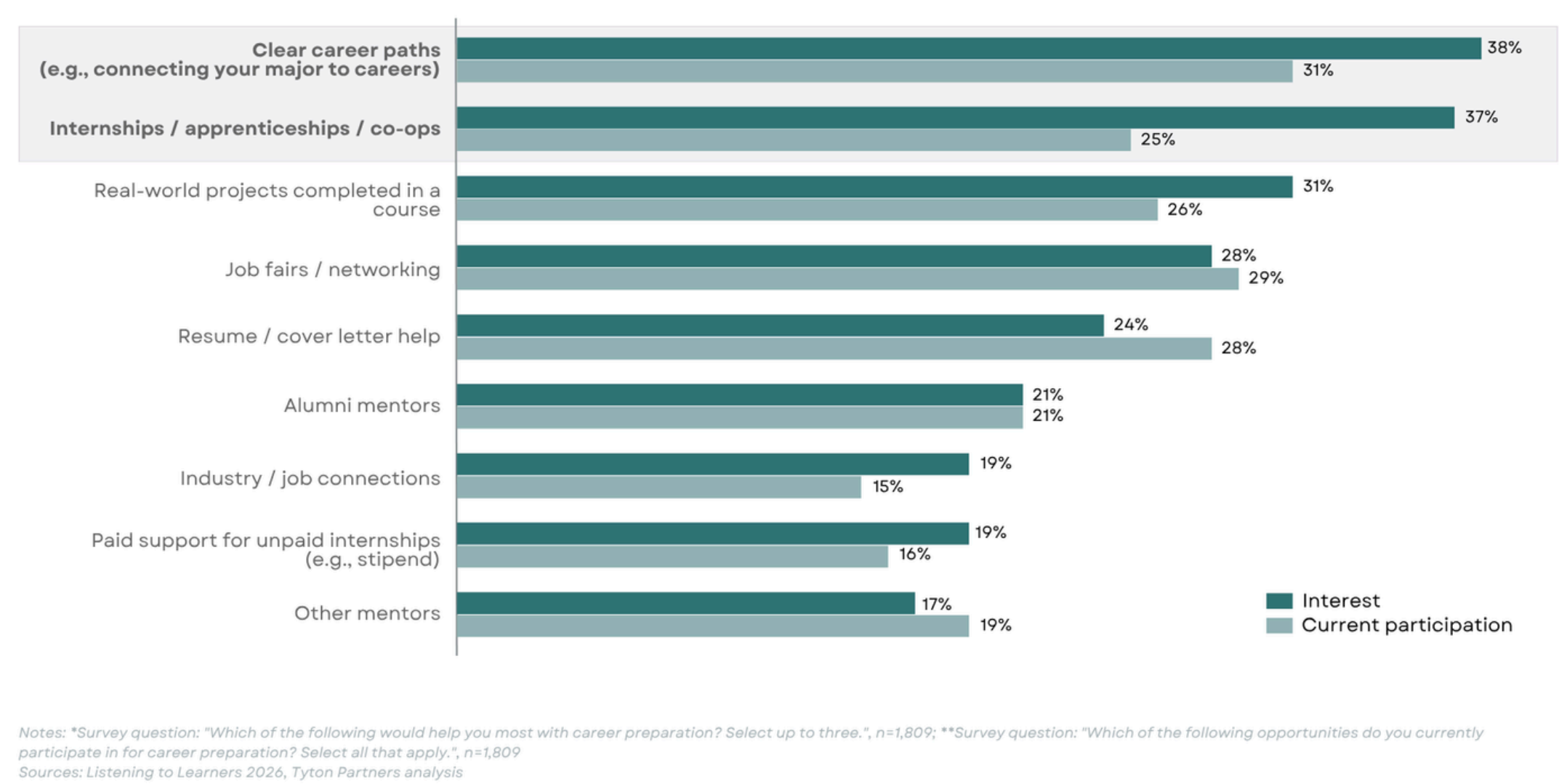
- Career and research exploration: It anchors the career-readiness case from Section 2, the clearest link to a degree's ROI. It is also what students are asking for: in Tyton Partners' *Listening to Learners 2026*, a clear path from their major to a career is students' top career-preparation ask, yet only 31% feel able to make that connection themselves (see Figure 22). Advisors see the same limit, with just 27% believing students can identify relevant career paths on their own. Yet only 35% of advisors work on career exploration daily. AI can surface options and pathways with an advisor still in the loop, a fit 30% of advisors already recognize.
- Caseload triage: 40% review their caseload to prioritize students, and 28% see AI helping them do it, so the students who benefit from advising get proactive outreach instead of waiting to ask.

Planning students' courses/ study pathway stands out as a different kind of opportunity. It's the activity advisors spend the most time on daily (81%), yet only one in five see AI as well-suited to support it. Precisely because it commands so much of advisors' time, it is worth solution providers exploring where AI could help. The goal is not to automate advising, but to use AI to handle routine tasks and surface options based on institutional policies, degree pathways, and graduation requirements, so advisors can focus their limited time on decisions that require human judgment. Advising practitioners describe a similar approach. NACADA explains strategically embracing AI to automate the necessary yet repetitive parts of advisors' jobs to allow them to adopt more thoughtful human-facing care approaches¹⁷.

17. Jones, B. (2025, December 22). "Making Space for Mentorship: How AI Frees Advisors for Deeper Connections." NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising, *Academic Advising Today*. <https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Academic-Advising-Today/View-Articles/Making-Space-for-Mentorship-How-AI-Frees-Advisors-for-Deeper-Connections>

Figure 22

Students' interest* and current participation in career-related activities



An advisor’s work with a student can be divided into three phases: before the meeting, the meeting itself, and after the meeting. Of these, **meeting time is the scarcest resource**. Appointments average just 30 minutes, regardless of caseload size. Mapping AI use cases across these phases reveals a clear pattern: nearly all support the work before or after a meeting, preserving limited face-to-face time for the human judgment and connection that matter most (see Figure 23).

AI can play a role on either side of the appointment and stays out of the meeting. Before the meeting, it does the preparation that makes 30-minute meetings most efficient, such as triaging who needs outreach. After the meeting, it handles the follow-through, from referrals to case notes. The 30 minutes of human contact stays intact, and it arrives more focused because the logistics are already handled. AI does not shrink the meeting. It clears everything around it so the meeting could be about the student and their needs, providing advisors the time to help their advisees solve problems. In our *Listening to Learners* this year, students share that workload anxiety is their top concern inside classrooms. Outside the classroom, mental health and wellness leads at 37%, with financial stress close behind at 33%. These are the pressures a student works through in conversation with someone who knows them, and time with a trusted advisor is one of the few levers that reaches them.

Figure 23

	Pre-Meeting	Post-Meeting
Advisors	- Triage caseload for proactive outreach - Streamline communication (prompts to write outreach) - Prepare for day with summary of students to see, including what majors they are in (if advising across multiple majors) and relevant data unique to majors	- Create a follow-up actions list and email to student - Automate referrals to other support services - Summarize non-sensitive case notes - Track student progress against follow-up items
Learners	- Identify courses that need to be taken - Build and adjust course schedules around requirements, prerequisites, and personal constraints (work, athletics, ...) - Understand financial aid, billing, or registration policies written in dense institutional language and make sure to ask advisor to clarify items as needed	- Conduct first pass research on scholarships, internships, or other programs that advisors may have recommended - Tracking deadlines for registration and financial aid
Both	Schedule meetings	Send / receive reminders for follow-up tasks

Sources: NACADA, UERU, Driving Toward a Degree 2026, Tyton Partners analysis

This is where necessity has led. The caseload crisis is real, the highest-impact practices are known and underused, and AI has arrived as the most practical way to buy back the capacity to deliver them. The call to institutions is not to automate advising, and not to read AI's time savings as room to add more students to an advisor's caseload. It is to use AI deliberately.

Academic advisors can:

- Share their most helpful prompts with peers
- Clear the routine work that crowds out time with students
- Increase awareness and utilization of AI capabilities already sitting in the systems institutions own
- Pour the recovered time back into human relationships that help students work through workload and anxiety challenges

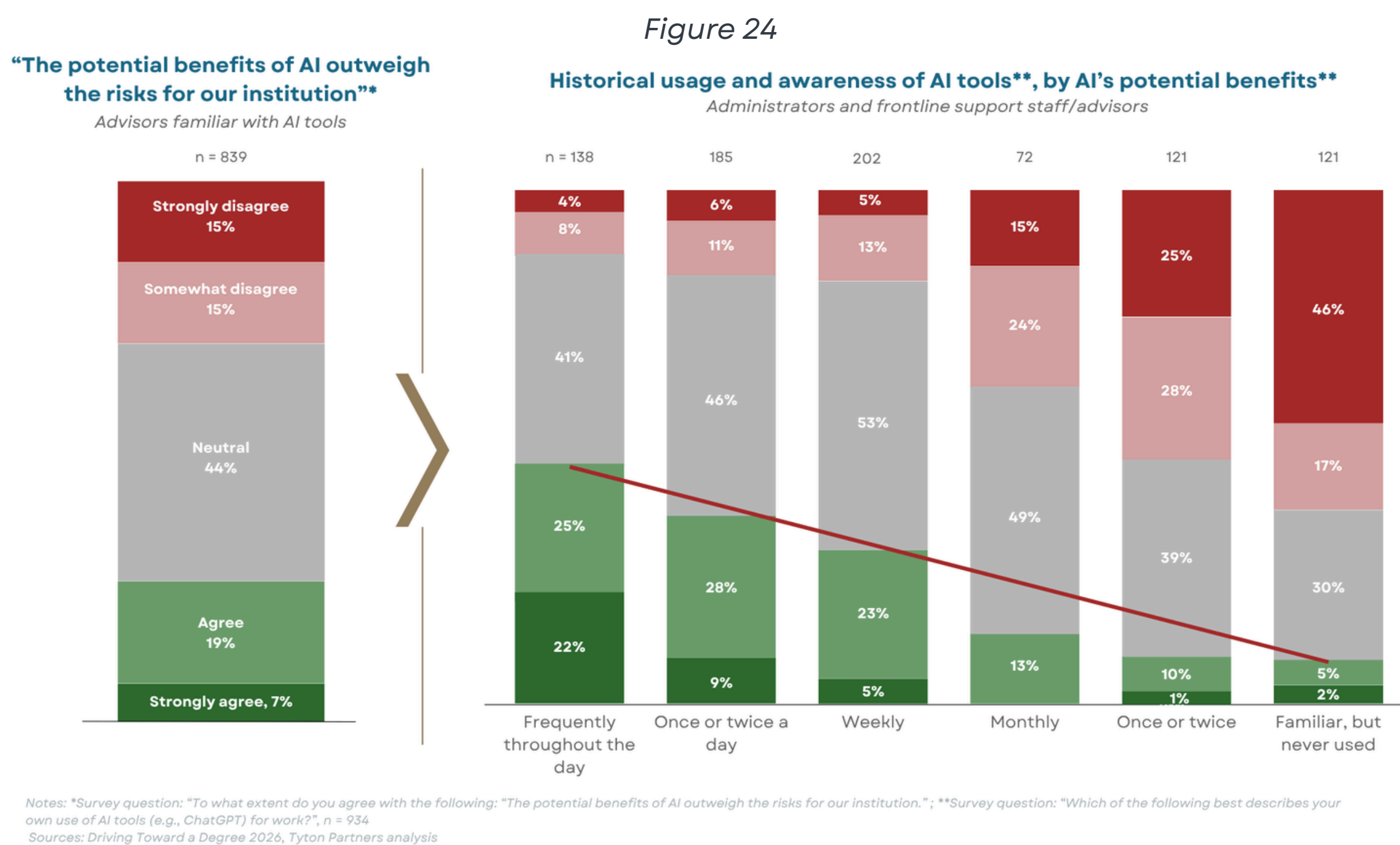
Necessity has produced the opening. Whether it becomes a lasting foundation, rather than a scattered set of front-line workarounds, now rests on how deliberately institutions choose to build on it.

SECTION 4: BUILDING A LASTING FOUNDATION

The academic advisors reaching for AI are moving faster than the institutions around them, and early, individual use does not harden into durable practice on its own. For that to happen, institutions must catch up to their own staff on the questions individuals cannot settle alone: whether AI can be trusted, what the rules are, who gets a say, and whether the data underneath is sound. On each one, our research finds intent running well ahead of action.

Whether AI's benefits outweigh its risks is not a settled question. Among advisors familiar with AI tools, 26% agree the benefits outweigh the risks for their institution, 30% disagree, and the largest group of all, 44%, sits on the fence (see Figure 24). That is less a story of resistance than of genuine uncertainty.

What tips an individual toward yes is having used AI more frequently. Belief tracks exposure closely. Trust here is gained through experimentation and personal use, not argument: people who work with AI come to see its value, while those who have only heard about it default to caution. For institutions, the takeaway is that trust is built by structured exposure. Giving staff safe, guided ways to use AI is itself a trust strategy.



The barriers to using AI are moving. The ones that dominated a year ago, simply not knowing what AI is or what it can do, have dropped sharply. Fewer institutions now cite a general unfamiliarity with AI, being unaware of solutions that fit their needs, or answer "don't know" at all (see Figure 25). Institutions have learned a great deal in a single year.

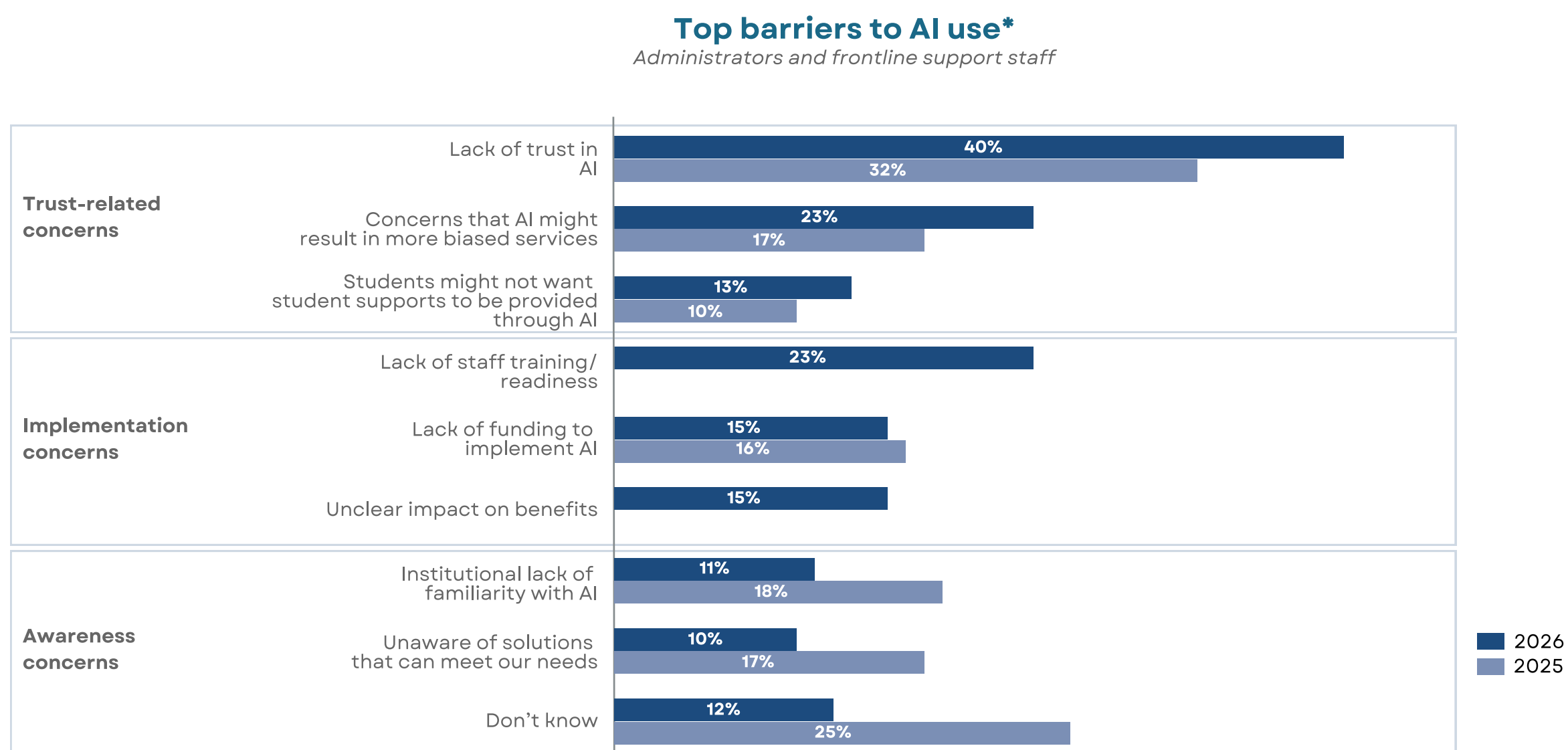
As those awareness barriers fade, two harder ones move to the front:

- **Trust:** Lack of trust in AI did not fade with familiarity. It rose, from 32% to 40%, and it is now the single most-cited barrier of all. It is also universal, named at similar rates by daily and non-daily users.

- **Implementation quality:** A lack of staff training and readiness now ranks among the top barriers. Knowing about AI is not the same as being ready to use it well.

The work ahead is no longer explaining what AI is. It is providing pathways to show stakeholders that a given tool can be safe, accurate, and worth relying on.

Figure 25

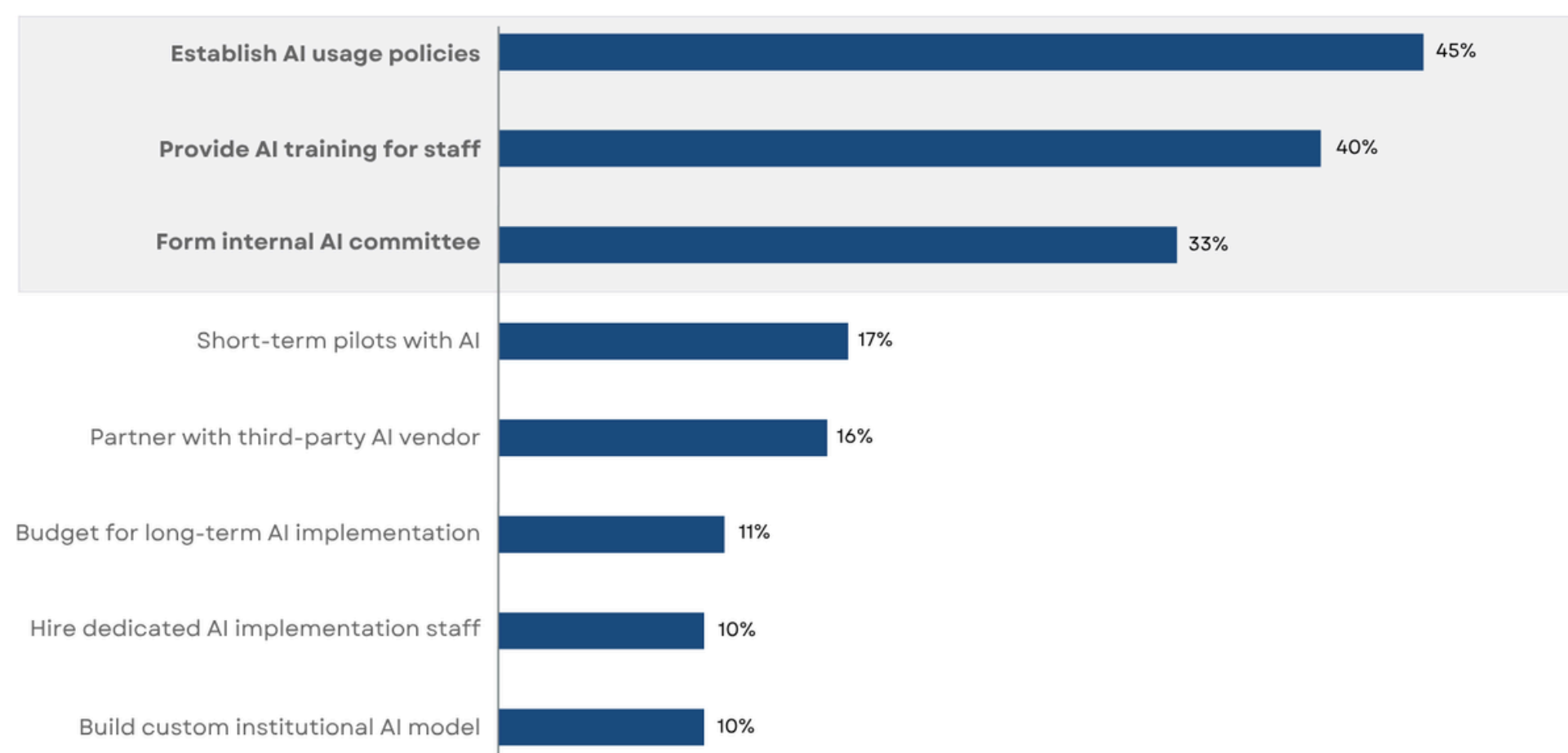


Note: *Survey question: "What are the top barriers to greater use of AI in student supports at your institution? Select top two.", 2026 n = 897, 2025 n = 1,102., "Lack of interest from myself/ colleagues", "Don't know", "NA", "Not allowed by my department/ institution" stems are hidden
Sources: Driving Toward a Degree 2025-2026, Tyton Partners analysis

Institutions are responding, and so far, the most common moves are governance-related: writing AI usage policies, training staff, and forming an internal AI committee (see Figure 26). The steps that cost real money and people, long-term budgets, dedicated hires, vendor partnerships, and custom builds, are still emerging. The institutions that pull ahead will pair their new policies with the budget, staffing, and pilots to act on them.

One example that turns individual experimentation into a shared asset without a major investment is a library of advisor-approved prompts. Rather than have each advisor reinvent sensitive, time-consuming communication, an institution can vet and share prompts for common tasks. A prompt library is cheap to build, keeps a human in the loop, and spreads a proven individual workaround across the whole team. For example, "Write a compassionate note to a student who did poorly on a midterm exam and invite them to schedule an appointment." Advising practitioners writing for NACADA describe exactly this move, curating vetted prompts so advisors can reclaim time for mentorship instead of starting every message from scratch¹⁷.

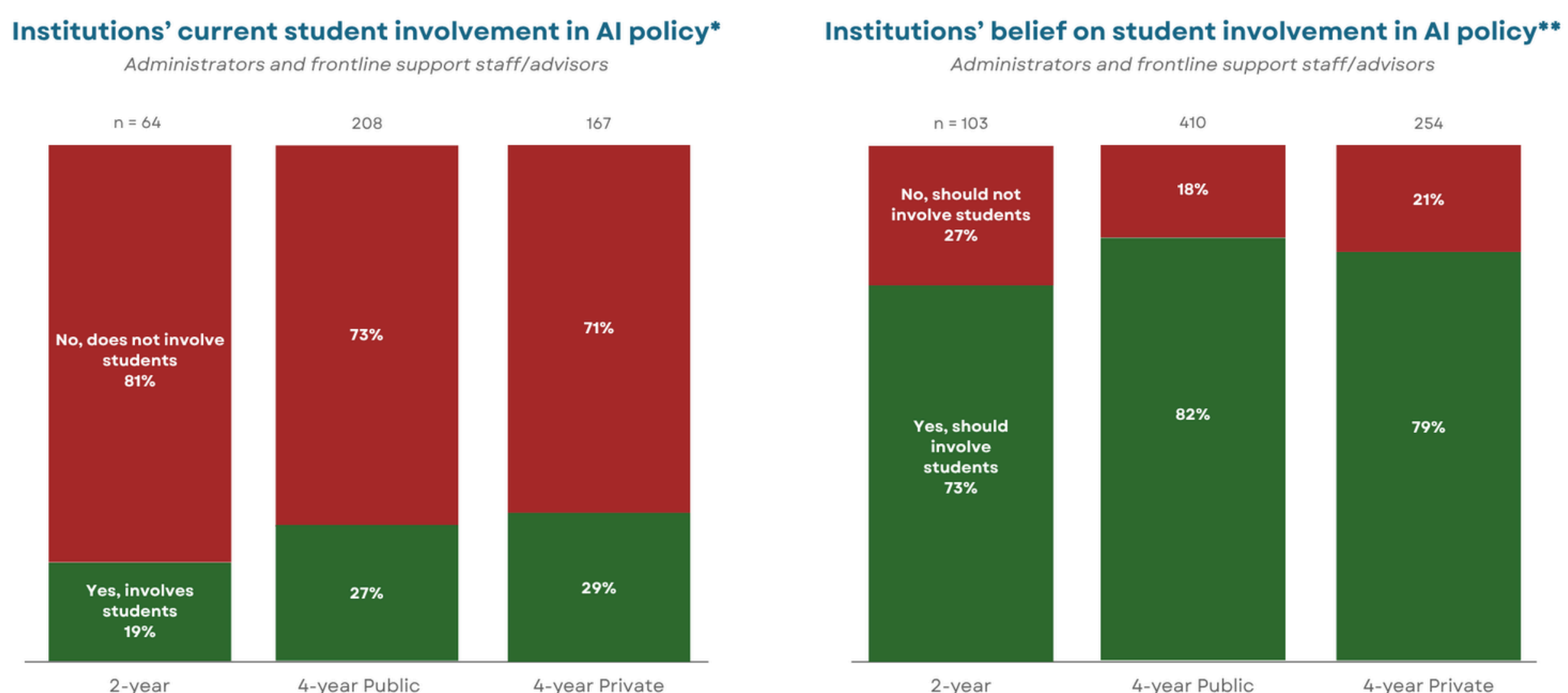
Figure 26
Steps taken to support AI usage*
Administrators and frontline staff/advisors



Notes: *Survey question: "Which of the following has your institution done/ will do to implement AI in student supports? Select all that apply," n = 839
Sources: Driving Toward a Degree 2026, Tyton Partners analysis

Double clicking on the policy piece, institutions are remarkably united that students should help shape the AI policies that affect them (see Figure 27). However, almost none act on it. There is roughly a 50-point gap across all institutional sectors in terms of actually involving students in setting AI policy today. Institutions agree students belong at the table, then set the table without them. Closing this gap is low-cost and high-signal: bringing students into AI policy is one of the few foundation-building moves that asks for goodwill more than budget.

Figure 27



Notes: *Survey question: "Does your institution currently involve students in setting AI policy?"; **Survey question: "In your opinion, should students have a voice in setting institutional AI policy?", "Don't know" stem hidden
Sources: Driving Toward a Degree 2026, Tyton Partners analysis

Finally, an AI tool is only as good as the data it runs on, and that is where its effectiveness is won or lost. An early-alert flag or a recommended next course is only as reliable as the grade, enrollment, and progress records feeding it. Give a capable model incomplete or inconsistent data and it will produce confident, wrong answers.

Confidence in that underlying data is only lukewarm today: institutions grade their own student-support data a B or a C far more often than an A, and about one in seven give it a D or an F. The administrators who rate their data highest are also the ones most convinced of AI's benefits, a sign that data readiness and AI payoff rise together. Data-hygiene work is unglamorous, but it is the precondition for AI that works, and no policy or training repairs a recommendation built on bad data. It is also where effectiveness meets trust. Lack of trust in AI is already the largest barrier to using it, and low-quality data feeds that distrust directly: every confident, wrong answer an AI produces from incomplete records deepens the doubt. Cleaning the data, then, is the most direct way to earn back the trust that adoption depends on.

Across all of these, the pattern is the same. Institutions believe in AI's promise, and their staff are already acting on it, but belief and early use have outrun current institutional practices. The foundation is missing because the deliberate, less exciting work of building it, proving the tools, cleaning the data, and sharing real authority with students, has yet to scale.

SECTION 5: MOVING FORWARD ON STUDENT SUCCESS

This report opened with necessity. Flat or declining budgets, rising caseloads, and a hardening demand to prove the return on a degree left institutions no room to wait on doing more to support student success. The advisors closest to students began reaching for AI, not because it was proven, but because doing nothing was no longer an option. That instinct was sound. AI-augmented human support is the most practical answer the field has produced to a capacity problem it cannot hire its way out of.

However, capacity was only one of the two fronts necessity opened. The other was value. Career readiness has become the clearest link to a degree's return on investment, and it is built through work-integrated learning: internships, real-world projects, and employer partnerships, not the lecture hall alone. The AI wave raises those stakes, it does not ease them. Employers now expect graduates to arrive AI-literate, and AI literacy rests on the durable skills, critical thinking and judgment, that hands-on experience builds best. Preparing students for an AI-shaped workforce and drawing a clear line from a major to a career turn out to be the same work.

It is a partial answer, though, not a complete one. AI can clear routine work, surface options, and protect the scarce minutes advisors spend with students. What it cannot do is lower a caseload, refill a budget, or repair the trust and data problems underneath. Treating AI adoption as self-executing is the surest way to squander the opening necessity has created.

For the resolution to hold, deliberate work must follow the early experimentation. That means writing clear institutional AI policy and pairing it with role-specific training, not one without the other. It means celebrating the exemplars who show what good looks like. And it means bringing students to the table on the policies that shape their experience. None of this is glamorous, and none of it happens by default. It is the difference between a burst of front-line invention and a system students can count on.

SECTION 5.1: CALLS TO ACTION, BY AUDIENCE

ADMINISTRATORS

- **Make career readiness holistic and employer-connected:** Build career preparation into the experience inside and outside the classroom. For example, embed career exploration and real-world projects inside the classroom, and internships, apprenticeships, and work-based learning beyond it. Move employer partnerships from informal, department-by-department arrangements to a centralized, institution-wide model, and back the effort with objective outcomes data rather than alumni self-report alone.
- **Create a vetted prompt library so advisors are not reinventing sensitive communication from scratch:** A shared set of approved prompts, for example, a supportive note to a student after a poor midterm grade, turns a proven individual workaround into a shared institutional resource and keeps a human in the loop.

- **Audit caseload data before investing in new tools:** A right-sized caseload is what separates institutions that successfully adopt high-impact advising practices from those that do not, so the data audit comes before the tool purchase.
- **Fund data-quality and policy work as a precondition for AI, not an afterthought:** AI is only as effective as the records feeding it and only as safe as the policy around it, so both belong in the budget from the start rather than as things to fix later.
- **Build AI usage policy with students at the table:** Institutions already agree students should have a voice; acting on that belief is a low-cost, high-trust way to close the roughly 50-point gap between what they believe and what they do.

ADVISORS

- **Treat proactive outreach as the highest-leverage practice available, even when under-resourced:** It is the single practice advisors identified as having the most impact on student outcomes and the top-rated way to raise student awareness of the supports that already exist.
- **Make career conversations core to advising, and advocate for centralized resources to support them:** Given students want to discuss potential career pathways, advisors should treat those conversations as central, not an add-on. They can also push for centralized career and employer-partnership resources that make exploration possible at scale.
- **Push back on the idea that a manageable caseload is a nice-to-have:** Institutions whose advisors have room see it convert directly into reduced friction and persistence gains, which makes caseload headroom a key lever.
- **Get involved early in AI tool selection and policy conversations:** The advisors who use AI daily are the most fluent and the most convinced of its value. Their adoption patterns should shape the institutional rollout rather than simply follow it.
- **Share proven AI prompts and build new ones together:** Advisors should exchange prompts that work and collaborate to improve them, building on what peers have already validated rather than reinventing the wheel.

SOLUTION PROVIDERS

- **Enable the major-to-career connection students are asking for:** Students' top career ask is a clear line from their major to a career, yet degree-planning and career-pathway tools are among the least used even though they rank among the highest-return investments for retention. Make those pathways visible, usable, and linked to advising, and share cross-institution best practices and outcome evidence so the field can see what moves the needle.
- **Build decision-maker familiarity with your AI-enabled analytics and decision support features before habits form elsewhere:** Decision makers who are unfamiliar with how AI can be deployed within existing systems are the ones most likely to default to general-purpose tools like Claude, Copilot, or ChatGPT for the same insight and analytics work, so prioritize closing that familiarity gap now, before usage habits harden around outside tools and the incumbent products risk being reduced to a commodity.

- **Design for AI awareness and activation with end-users, not just access:** Institutions already have AI-enabled features and functionality within existing technologies that sit idle. Encourage your users to pilot AI-enabled features, develop use cases that support their workflows, and share successful case studies. Educating the end-users around how AI supports their day-to-day actions will make your platforms stickier.
- **Build for the blended model explicitly:** Preference is consolidating on support that combines professionals with technology and AI, and tools that sideline the advisor will lose out.
- **Educate institutional stakeholders on AI tools to build trust:** Trust is the top barrier to AI use, so tools need to be clear about how they work and honest about their limitations. One way to build trust is to encourage pilots and experimentation before a full rollout. It opens a conversation around concerns of data ownership and privacy.

APPENDIX

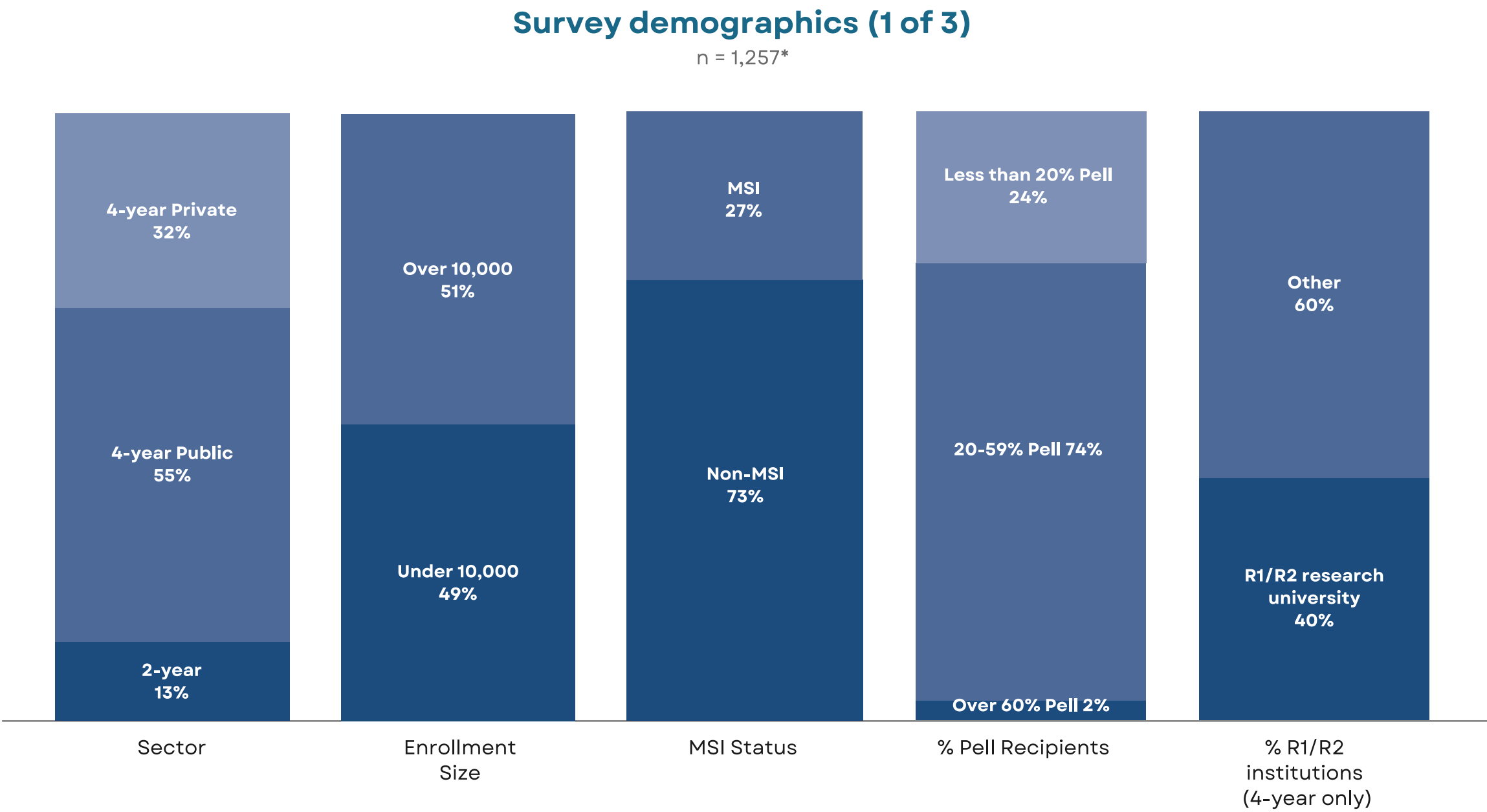
METHODOLOGY AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Driving Toward a Degree is a series of national, longitudinal surveys of over 3,000 higher-education students, advisors, faculty, and administrators. The surveys are designed to evaluate the state of student support services, academic advising in particular, at higher-education institutions across the United States and identify barriers to access and success for all students.

For this year’s study, Tyton Partners conducted two national surveys of higher-education stakeholders. For *Driving Toward a Degree*, we collected responses from approximately 1,300 institutional stakeholders (administrators, support providers, and faculty) at over 750 unique postsecondary institutions and for *Listening to Learners* about 1,800 students from both two- and four-year private and public institutions.

Survey topics cover current structures and practices across student support offices, challenges faced by support professionals, and usage of technology, including generative AI. Respondents represent a range of perspectives across the institutional student support landscape (see Figures 28-30). Responses also reflect a nationally representative set of advisors, administrators and faculty nationwide in terms of region, age, race, gender, and other demographic information collected.

Figure 28

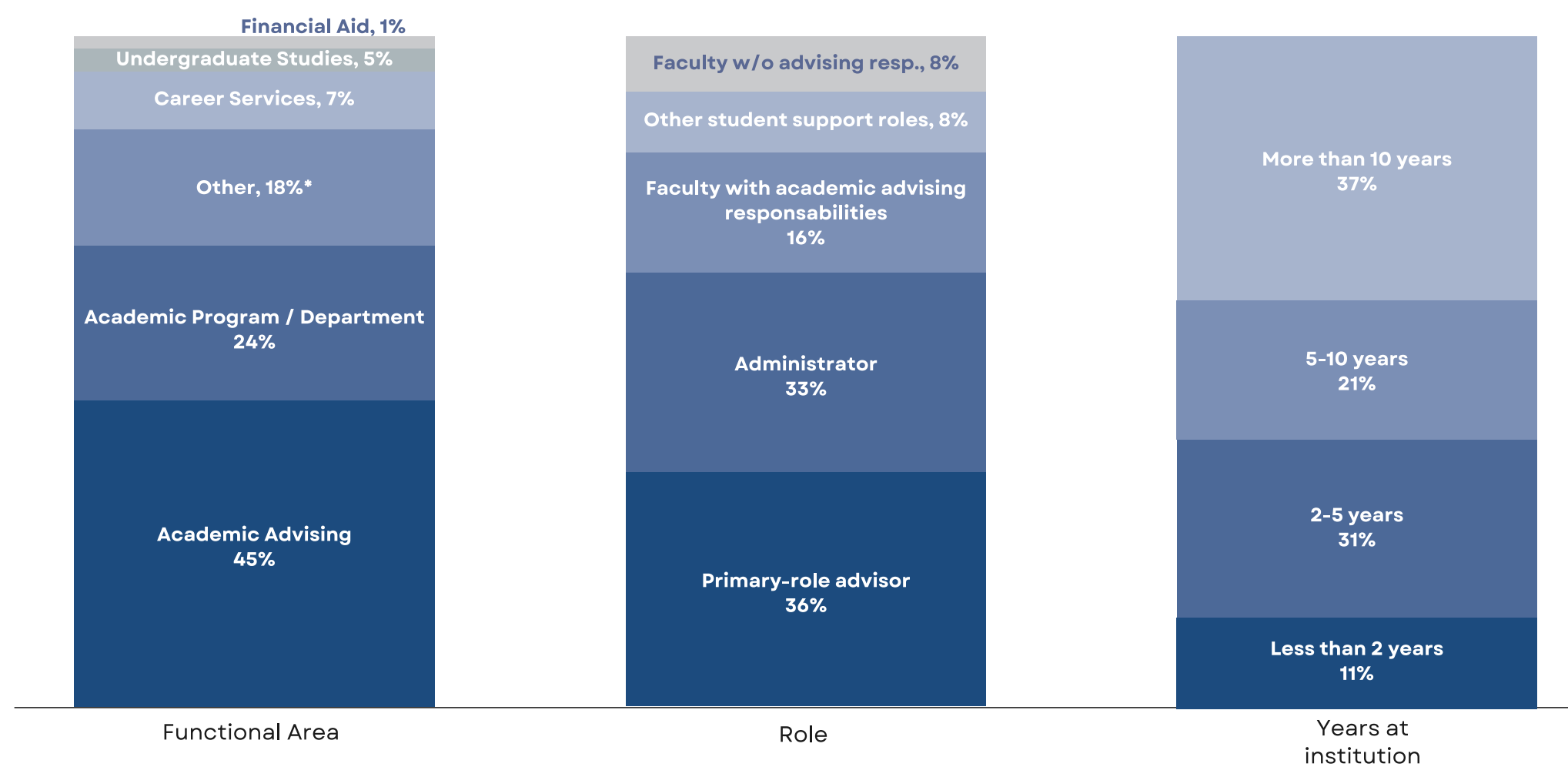


Note: **“Other” includes Admissions (1%), Academic support / Tutoring (2%), Mental health services / counseling (2%), Enrollment management / recruiting (2%), Information technology (2%), Institutional research (2%), Student affairs (2%), and Other (6%)
Sources: *Driving Toward a Degree* 2026, Tyton Partners analysis

Figure 29

Survey demographics (2 of 3)

n=1,257

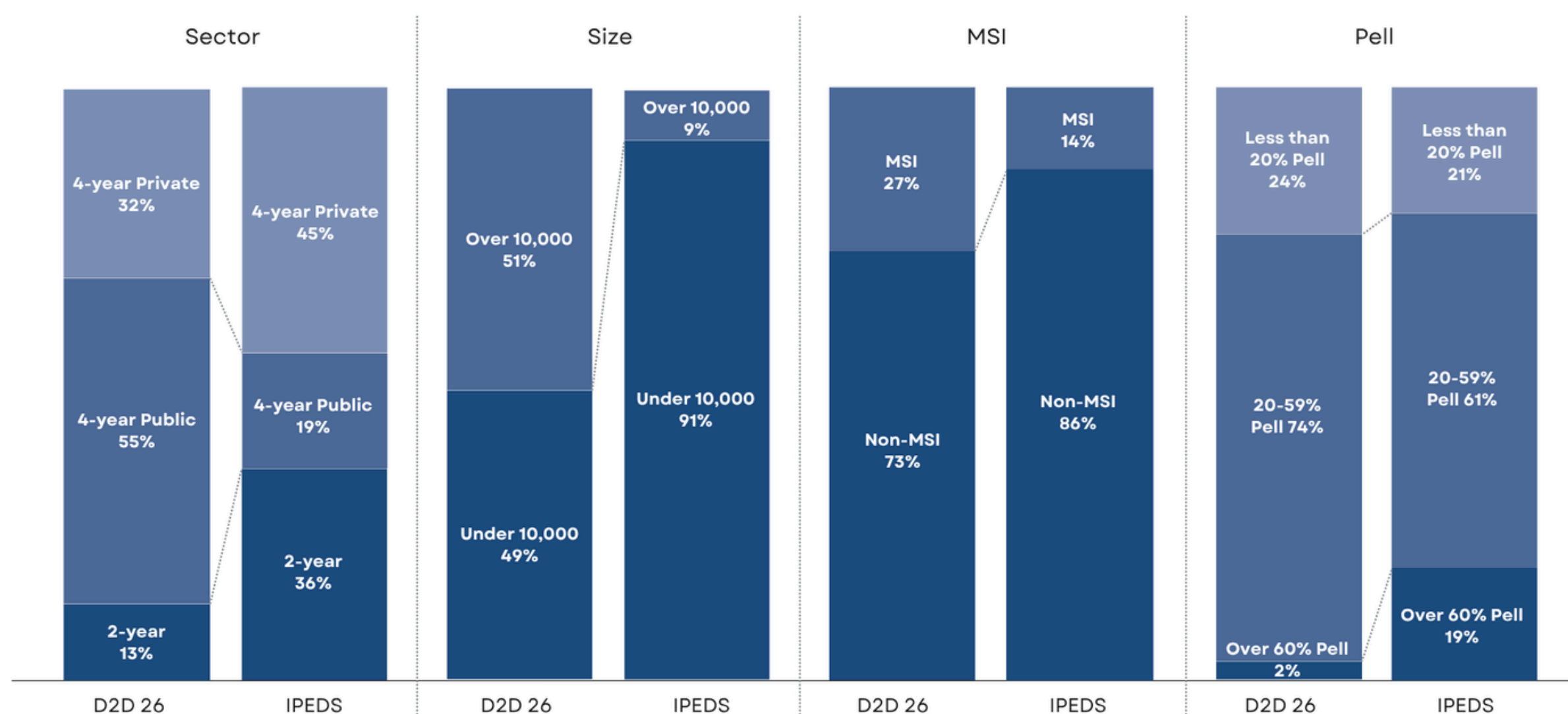


Note: **Other" includes Admissions (1%), Academic support / Tutoring (2%), Mental health services / counseling (2%), Enrollment management / recruiting (2%), Information technology (2%), Institutional research (2%), Student affairs (2%), and Other (6%)
Sources: Driving Toward a Degree 2026, Tyton Partners analysis

Figure 30

Survey demographics (3 of 3)

n=1,257



Notes: *2-year includes private and public institutions (skewing primarily public institutions)
Sources: NCES, Driving Toward a Degree 2026, Tyton Partners analysis

Because not all questions were presented to every respondent, response numbers vary by segment. Due to rounding, percentages may sum to slightly more or less than 100%. Based on the entire response set, the 95% confidence interval is +/- 2% for questions asked of support administrators and professionals. Questions addressed to a smaller subset because of skip logic have wider confidence intervals. As with all large-scale surveys, *Driving Toward a Degree* has the potential for bias. It is possible that respondents willing to take the time to discuss their own experiences with advising have stronger opinions than those who choose not to participate.

Claude (Anthropic, 2026), a large language model-based AI assistant, was used to support manuscript preparation. Specifically, Claude assisted with editing for clarity and grammar and generating supporting graphics and design elements.

Cover graphics were developed by the authors with the assistance of OpenAI's ChatGPT for image generation.

All AI-assisted output was reviewed and approved by the author(s) before inclusion, and final responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the content rests with the author(s).

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In addition, we'd like to thank Veridata for supporting our student survey outreach.

Examples are not endorsements: This document includes examples and resources for the reader's reference. The presence of these materials is not an endorsement of any expressed views, products, or services. The materials feature opinions and recommendations from different experts, along with hyperlinks and websites that belong to other public and private organizations.

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Tyton Partners is the leading provider of strategy consulting and investment banking services to the global knowledge and information services sector. With offices in Boston and New York City, the firm has an experienced team of bankers and consultants who deliver a unique spectrum of services from mergers and acquisitions and capital markets access to strategy development that helps companies, organizations, and investors navigate the complexities of the education, media, and information markets. Tyton Partners leverages a deep foundation of transactional and advisory experience and an unparalleled level of global relationships to make its clients' aspirations a reality and to catalyze innovation in the sector.

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