

The State of Regional Public Colleges

Survey results and reporting on the challenges and opportunities in 2026



The future of growth for regional universities

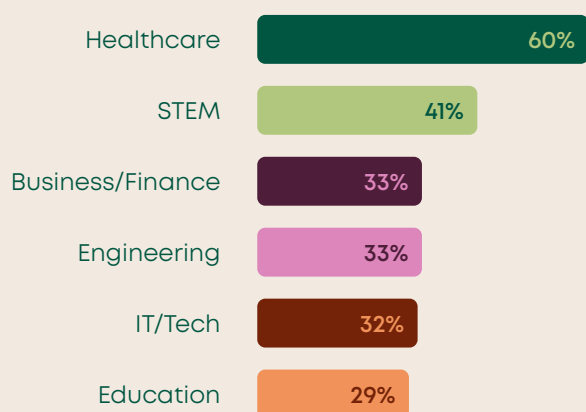
In our third annual survey conducted with *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, many regional public university leaders expressed optimism about their institution's growth prospects. They recognize that increasing enrollment will require new approaches, from attracting new student populations to serving learners in more flexible ways. At the same time, persistent financial pressures are constraining how quickly institutions can adapt and expand.

Where enrollment growth and workforce demand converge

Since 2024, the strongest opportunities for enrollment growth have remained consistent: expanding online offerings, growing graduate programs, and — since its addition in 2025 — offering microcredentials.

Workforce demand continues to be a driving force behind program expansion decisions, with healthcare remaining the priority, outpacing other fields by nearly 20 percentage points. Conversely, technology program expansion plans have declined by 15 percentage points since 2025.

Areas in which respondents indicated their institution was planning to expand offerings:



These growth opportunities underscore the critical role regional public universities play as engines of workforce and economic development. Grounded in the communities they serve, they are uniquely positioned to deliver flexible, career-focused programs that meet evolving labor market needs while creating meaningful opportunities for students.

Turning opportunity into action

The findings reveal multiple avenues for growth (online, graduate, healthcare, and microcredential programs), requiring institutions to balance opportunity with available resources. Budget constraints continue to be the primary barrier to growth and transformation (81%), followed by state and system approval processes (46%), limited faculty and staff buy-in (46%), lengthy program development timelines (43%), and gaps in internal capabilities (32%).

For many institutions, strategic partnerships can help expand impact through access to capital, specialized expertise, and operational support. At Risepoint, we provide these services to help bridge the gap between online strategy and execution, enabling universities to accelerate progress.

Those that successfully combine innovation with execution will be best positioned to expand access, meet workforce demand, and strengthen their impact in the years ahead.

Fernando Bleichmar, CEO
[Risepoint](#) ▶



The State of Regional Public Colleges

**Survey results and reporting on the
challenges and opportunities in 2026**

By Graham Vyse

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Contact CI@chronicle.com with questions or comments.

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Cover image: Courtesy of Western Carolina U.



PHOTO COURTESY OF WESTERN CAROLINA U.

Leaders at Western Carolina University, located in Cullowhee, N.C., say that this fall the university may have the largest incoming freshman class and possibly the highest overall enrollment in its 137-year history. Read more about its story starting on p.16.

When a news story about higher education gets a lot of national attention — whether it's about the high cost of college, another admissions scandal involving the wealthy and well connected, one more high-profile campus thrust into the center of the culture wars — chances are it isn't about a regional public institution.

Often described as the “workhorses” of academe, they educate 70 percent of students attending four-year public colleges. These institutions frequently accept almost all of their applicants and offer degrees at much less expense, providing access and opportunity to many students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students who might otherwise be shut out of higher education. In

fact, they're “the most affordable pathway to a bachelor's or master's degree,” says Cecilia Orphan, an associate professor of higher education at the University of Denver and the founding co-director of the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC).

According to the ARRC, there are 474 regional public colleges across the country, educating roughly five million students. Most of those students come from within a 50-mile radius of campuses, and many stay local after graduation, joining regional work forces. Despite the important role played by these colleges, their accomplishments do not tend to receive serious, iterative coverage from journalists, especially outside their regions. They often struggle — even more than other kinds of institutions — with enrollments and finances.

So how do leaders at these colleges think about their standing, as trust in the broader higher-ed system has decreased? How do they feel about where they're headed, and what it will take to get there? And to what extent have these institutions been affected by the national political battles over academe in recent years?

To explore those questions, *The Chronicle*, with support from Risepoint, conducted an online survey of administrators at regional public colleges between June 22 and July 10, 2026. We received 430 responses from deans, provosts, vice presidents, presidents, and other administrators. Nearly half of those who responded — 45 percent — were vice presidents or director-level officials. *The Chronicle* also interviewed nearly a dozen people for this report — campus leaders and national experts who study, work with, and advocate for these colleges across the country.

The survey found a widespread sense that many Americans don't recognize the value of regional public colleges — and that broader impressions of higher ed, including the politicized scrutiny surrounding Ivy League campuses, have harmed public perceptions of these institutions. It's why respondents overwhelmingly believed regional colleges should better communicate why they're valuable to students and communities — and what they provide that the higher profile, often private colleges at the center of national controversies do not.

Many students clearly continue to appreciate what these colleges offer — more than half of the respondents felt optimistic about their

Respondents overwhelmingly believed regional colleges should better communicate why they're valuable to students and communities.

institution's future enrollment prospects. Yet these administrators also acknowledged challenges to boosting enrollment — declining public confidence in the value of a college degree, concerns about affordability, and competition from other universities among them — while pointing to a range of ideas for attracting more students, growing revenue, and otherwise improving operations. The survey shed light on the most pressing issues facing regional institutions as well as some of the internal campus dynamics that can prevent positive change.

This report will examine these issues and highlight the work of regional colleges in three states: North Carolina, where Western Carolina University has increased its enrollment and retention of students; Kansas, where Fort Hays State University is touting the results of its work-force and economic-development efforts; and Oklahoma, where a new state legislative caucus is hoping to boost government support for regional institutions.

The idea that the public doesn't understand the value of regional colleges is hardly new. In a 2023 *Chronicle* survey of administrators at these institutions, 68 percent of respondents had that perception, as did 74 percent of those *The Chronicle* surveyed last year. In this summer's survey, the number was exactly seven out of 10, suggesting the belief is both widespread and persistent.

Charles L. Welch, president and chief executive of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), argues this is largely the result of negative national perceptions about a small number

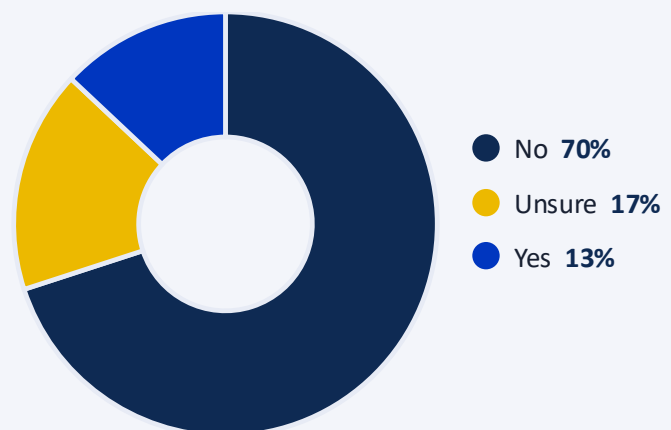
of the country's most high-profile campuses, which aren't regional public colleges. "The vast majority of Americans — ranging from policymakers to members of the media to the general public — view higher education through the lens of about 10 institutions, but those are dramatically different from the majority of institutions," he says. "Policymakers may not like 'higher education,' but they like their local institution."

Orphan sees sour attitudes about colleges as part of a larger trend. "We're in a low-trust moment as a society," she says. "Every social institution in this country is experiencing negative public perceptions."

Do you think the American public understands the value of the country's regional public universities?

70%

say the American public does NOT understand the value of the country's regional public universities.

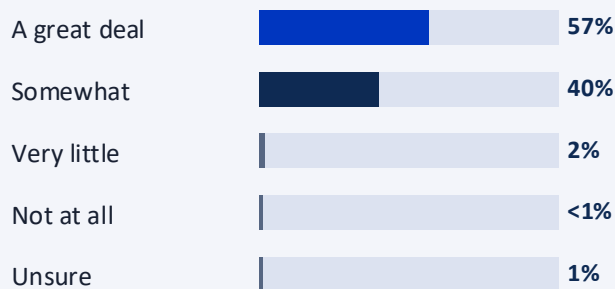


Source: *Chronicle* survey of 430 administrators at regional public colleges

The Chronicle's new survey delved into what may be shaping the public's view of regional colleges, which nearly all respondents thought were "influenced by media coverage of other sectors of higher education." (Fifty-seven percent believed that coverage had "a great deal" of influence.)

Asked specifically about "recent news-media attention and political scrutiny of ideological issues at Ivy League campuses," 84 percent thought it affected public perceptions of regional institutions. Respondents were largely divided over whether the effect was "mostly negative" or "mixed" for their colleges, but few described it as "mostly positive."

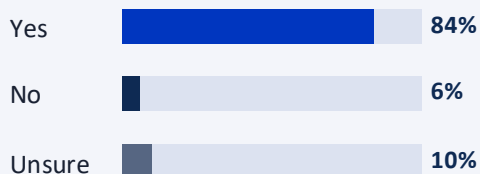
To what extent do you think public perceptions of regional public universities are influenced by media coverage of other sectors of higher education?



97%

say media coverage of **other sectors** of higher education shapes perceptions of regional universities
— 57 percent say "a great deal."

Do you think the recent news-media attention and political scrutiny of ideological issues at Ivy League campuses affect public perceptions of regional public institutions?



84%

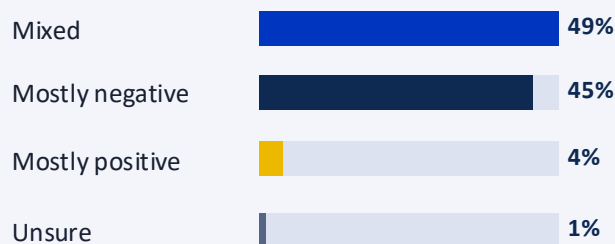
say news-media attention and political scrutiny of ideological issues at Ivy League campuses affect public perceptions of regional public institutions.

Source: *Chronicle* survey of 430 administrators at regional public colleges
Note: Percentages do not equal 100 percent due to rounding.

Orphan notes that “the affordability crisis among private and more elite institutions definitely affects the public discourse about all of higher education,” though she observes that local coverage of regional institutions tends to be “more positive and nuanced,” as those outlets have a better understanding of

the role such colleges play in their communities. Although Americans familiar with their region’s public colleges are unlikely to confuse them with Harvard, Yale, or Princeton, 80 percent of survey respondents said regional institutions need to do a better job explaining how they’re different from the Ivy League.

How would you describe the effect on the public perceptions of regional public institutions?

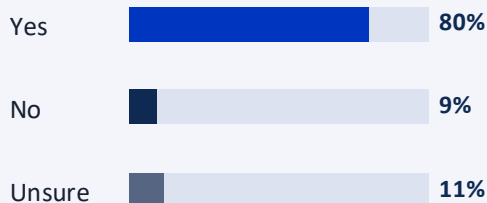


94%

describe the effect on regional public institutions as mostly negative or an unsettled mix — rather than positive.

Only one in 25 leaders sees the effect as positive — the rest see harm or an unsettled mix.

Do you think the country’s regional public universities need to do a better job explaining to the American public how they are different from the Ivy League?



80%

say regional public universities need to do a **better job explaining** how they differ from the Ivy League.

Source: *Chronicle* survey of 430 administrators at regional public colleges

Note: Only those who indicated that recent news-media attention and political scrutiny of ideological issues at Ivy League campuses affect public perceptions of regional public institutions were presented with this question.

Kevin R. McClure, a professor of higher education and department chair at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington and another of the ARRC's co-directors, thinks conveying this distinction is easier said than done. "I'll never see harm in regional colleges trying to better communicate their value," he says, "but I'm not convinced there's any amount of storytelling that's going to be stronger than some of these national narratives."

McClure questions "whether the American public wants to hear a nuanced story" about the state of academe, as he feels that conflict and controversy often drive journalism, including coverage of higher ed. He believes that for regional colleges, the best storytelling is simply for students and their families to have good experiences during their college years and then tell others about them.

This is already happening in many places. A recent national survey of regional college students by the center-left think tank Third Way found 87 percent saying they had at least two close friends on campus and 75 percent feeling a sense of community there. Regional colleges "consistently demonstrate a commitment to access and affordability in higher education, delivering some of the strongest returns on investment and serving as engines of economic and social mobility," Ben Cecil, Third Way's deputy director of higher education policy, wrote in his report on the findings.

In fact, he argued, these institutions "offer a blueprint for moving forward and restoring public trust and value in higher education: fulfilling students' educational goals at an

For regional colleges, the best storytelling is simply for students and their families to have good experiences and then tell others about them.

affordable price, supporting all students from different backgrounds and life experiences well, and providing the ROI that students and taxpayers crave."

Welch, of AASCU, was pleased, though also a little surprised, to learn that *The Chronicle's* survey respondents had a positive attitude about their institution's future enrollment prospects, even if many more were "somewhat optimistic" (43 percent) than "very optimistic" (12 percent).

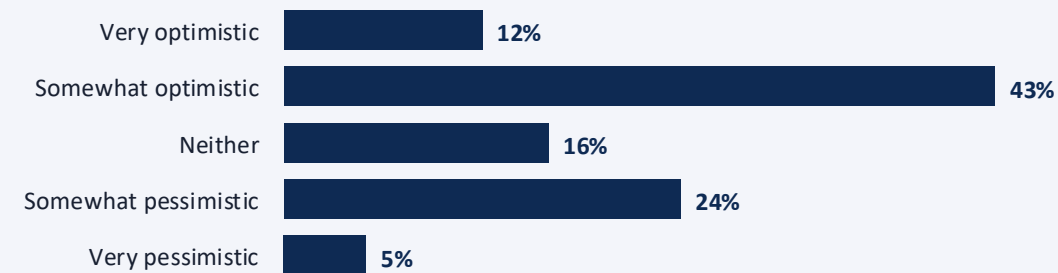
"So many people are constantly saying 'The regional colleges are in trouble' or 'This is the year the regionals go under,'" he says. "That conversation has been going on for 50 years. Are there some in trouble? Absolutely. But, at the end of the day, they're so critically important to those regions and communities. Everything isn't as dire as it might be said to be in some quarters."

"It didn't surprise me," Orphan says of the survey's enrollment optimism. "I know there's a big group of them doing just fine. There's also a segment of them that saw the enrollment cliff coming a long time ago and made the necessary preparations."

Still, a solid 45 percent of survey respondents lacked any degree of optimism on this issue, and about half identified the same three major challenges to enrollment: decline

in the perceived value of a college degree, affordability concerns among families and students, and competition from other institutions.

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



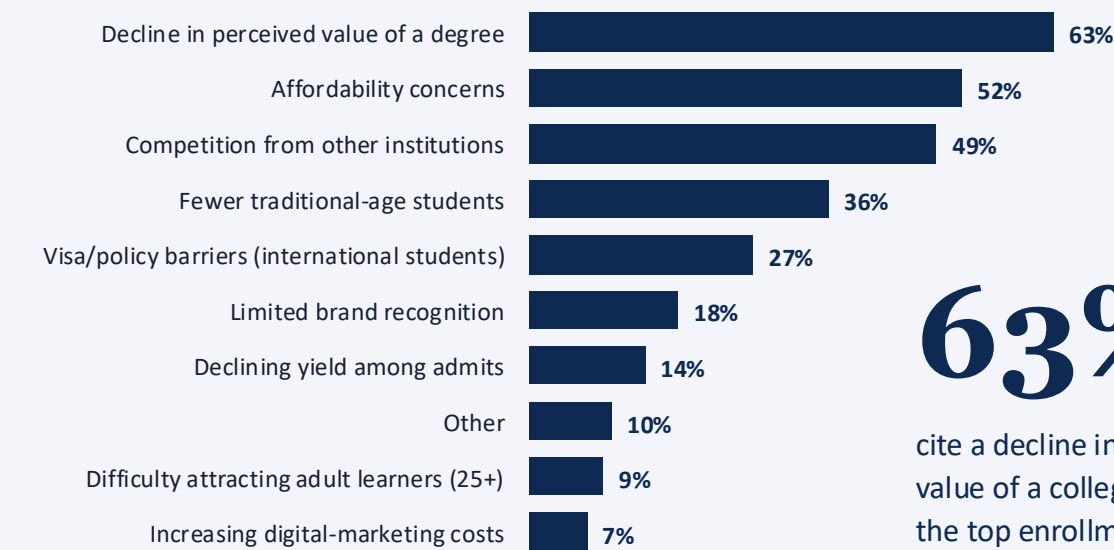
55%
optimistic

16%
neutral

29%
pessimistic

More than half of leaders feel good about future enrollment — but nearly **three in 10** remain pessimistic about their institution’s prospects.

What are your greatest enrollment challenges? Select up to three.



63%

cite a decline in the perceived value of a college degree — the top enrollment challenge.

Source: Chronicle survey of 430 administrators at regional public colleges

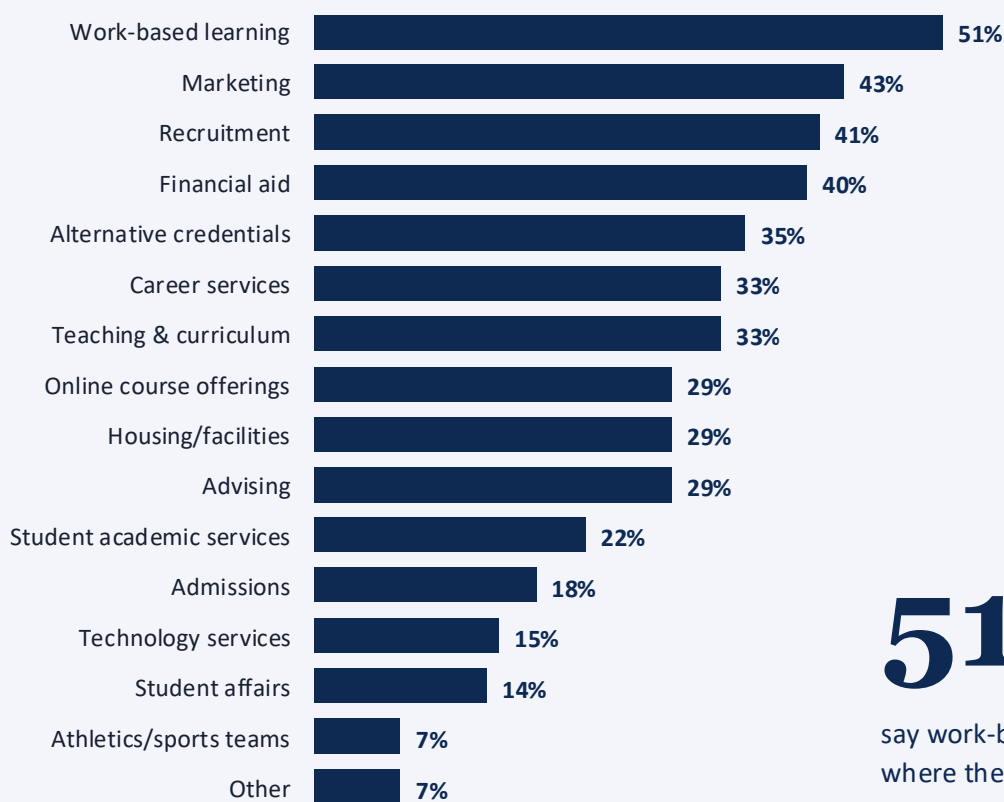
McClure argues some of this may go to respondents' psychology. He believes many college leaders find it difficult to acknowledge the future of their campuses may be worse, with regard to enrollment or otherwise, even in an anonymous survey. "As someone who studies higher education," he says, "it's only been in the past couple years that I've said more openly — to myself and to others — than we're probably in an industry in decline." As he sees it, success will sometimes have to look like maintaining an institution's enrollment as opposed to growing it.

Asked where regional colleges should make improvements to attract more students, respondents were most likely to prioritize work-based learning opportunities, marketing, recruitment, financial aid, and alternative credential offerings. (When you compare regional institutions to other colleges, McClure observes, "Our tuition and costs of attendance generally are lower, but we significantly lag behind in financial aid.")

Most believed that focusing on adult and transfer students — in addition to those

Where should your institution make improvements to attract more students?

Choose all that apply.



51%

say work-based learning is where their institution should improve to attract students.

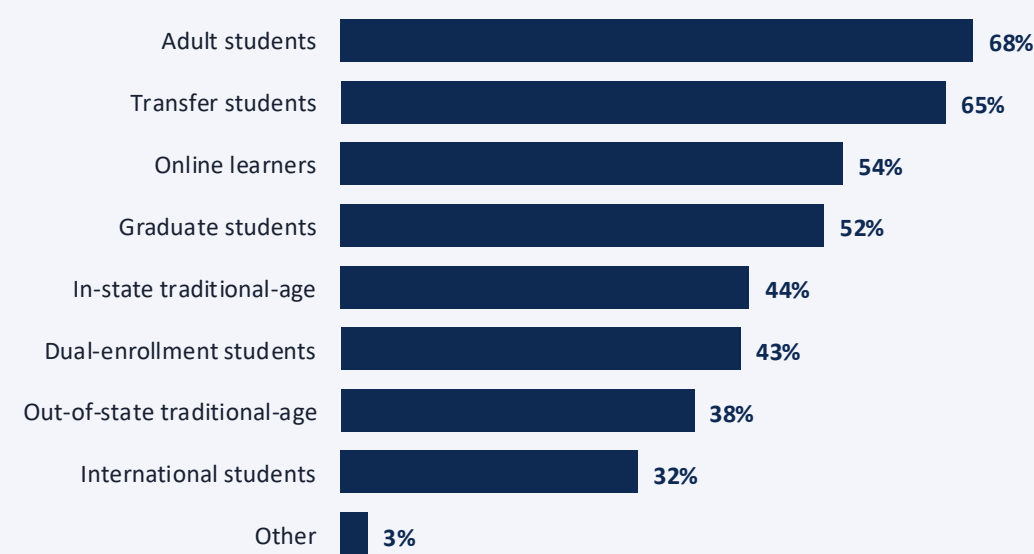
Source: Chronicle survey of 430 administrators at regional public colleges

seeking online and graduate education — would be an opportunity to grow enrollment, but experts stress that there are challenges to doing that well. Successfully targeting adult learners, for example, requires offering wraparound services to support students with children and aging parents as well as those with housing or food insecurity.

“I think transfer is the most promising,” Orphan says. “I could be wrong, but if you don’t have a very robust online-education operation it’s very hard to break into that.” When it comes to adult learners, she warns that colleges need to understand why they left higher education — and possibly left their specific campus — in the first place: “Until you figure out what went wrong and fix it, that’s not going to save you.”

When it comes to adult learners, colleges need to understand why they left higher education — and possibly left their specific campus — in the first place: “Until you figure out what went wrong and fix it, that’s not going to save you.”

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



68%

see adult students as an opportunity to increase enrollment — the top population named.

Source: Chronicle survey of 430 administrators at regional public colleges

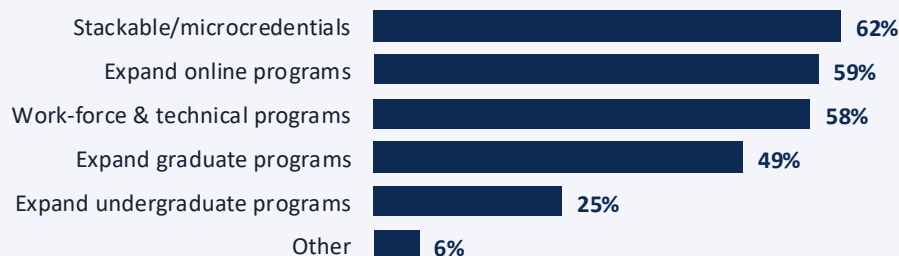
The most popular ideas in the survey for increasing colleges' revenue were expanding stackable credential or microcredential opportunities, online programs, work-force preparation and technical education, and offerings for graduate students. Yet multiple experts voiced skepticism — or at least caution — about leaning into microcredentials. McClure says they're unlikely to yield a lot of revenue, and Orphan asks, "What is happening with the people who get these microcredentials? Are they actually useful in the market? I don't know that we have enough data to

know that." She worries that too much influence on microcredentials, if their value doesn't pan out, could further undermine public trust in higher ed.

Sixty percent of respondents said their institution planned to expand its academic programs in health care, often a fruitful focus for regional institutions. McClure notes that his university plans to open a medical school in the coming years in response to a shortage of doctors and other health-care providers in the area.

In which areas do you see opportunities to increase revenue at your institution?

Choose all that apply.

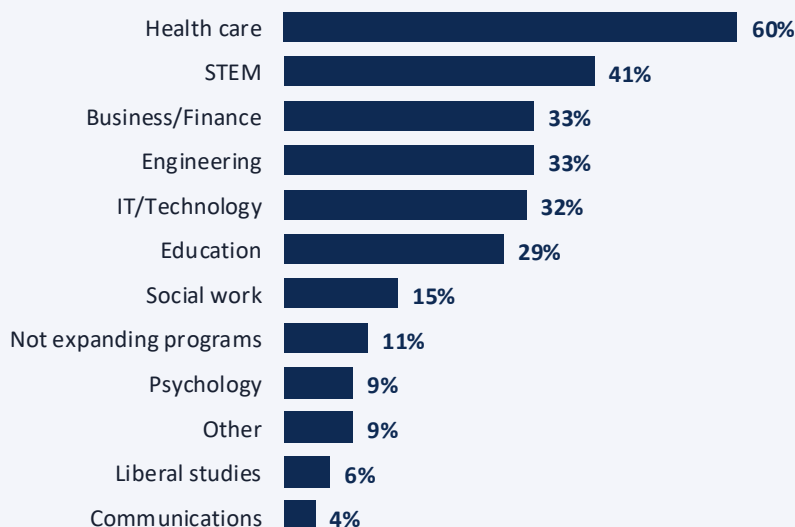


62%

point to stackable and microcredential programs as a revenue opportunity.

In which work-force areas is your institution planning to expand programs?

Choose all that apply.



60%

plan to expand health-care programs — the most common work-force focus.

Source: Chronicle survey of 430 administrators at regional public colleges

When asked to pick the top three most pressing issues at their institutions, a quarter of respondents included political interference, but more emphasized low employee morale and fatigue (37 percent), inadequate state funding (47 percent), and financial

sustainability (47 percent). Those last two concerns were consistent with more than 80 percent of respondents identifying budget constraints as one of “the greatest internal challenges that make growth initiatives and change difficult to implement.”

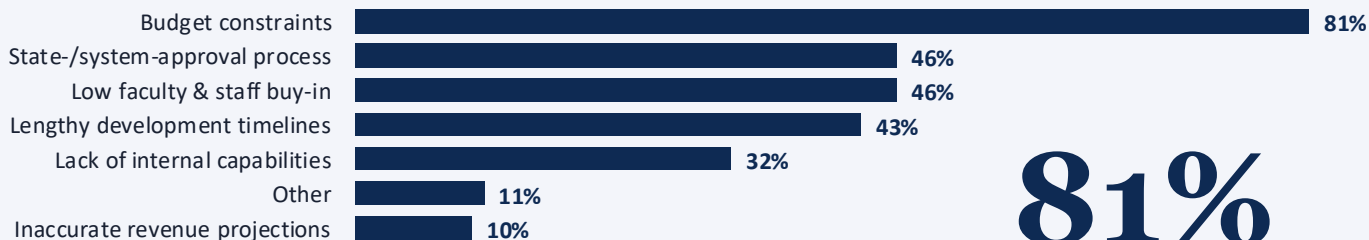
In which areas do you see opportunities to increase revenue at your institution? Choose all that apply.



47%

name financial sustainability and inadequate state funding as top pressures — both tied at the top.

What are the greatest internal challenges that make growth initiatives and change difficult to implement? Choose all that apply.



81%

cite budget constraints as the greatest internal barrier to growth and change.

Source: Chronicle survey of 430 administrators at regional public colleges

That came as no surprise to experts.

“Constantly having to shrink the budget and cut people takes a big bite out of morale,” Orphan says. “In higher ed right now, we’re all just kind of depressed. It’s not a fun time.”

Even so, she believes regional colleges and their supporters have reasons to be hopeful. She notes that these institutions are well positioned to take advantage of Workforce Pell Grants and several of them are modeling excellence other colleges can learn from.

“Constantly having to shrink the budget and cut people takes a big bite out of morale. In higher ed right now, we’re all just kind of depressed.”

PHOTO COURTESY OF WESTERN CAROLINA U.

Western Carolina University is located in a valley along the Tuckasegee River, between the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Great Smoky Mountains.



Spotlight: Western Carolina University

Like many of its regional public peers, Western Carolina University, in Cullowhee, N.C., has faced some significant challenges in the past decade. But it has emerged in a strong position, a firm anchor in its rural community. It played an integral role in times of trouble, providing specialized freezer storage for Covid vaccines and serving as a distribution center for them during the pandemic, as well as offering an array of community-relief efforts after Hurricane Helene hit in 2024. Its local connection is accompanied by a tangible enthusiasm on campus. Orphan notes that whenever she's visited, "everyone has been wearing purple," the college's color. "There's just a lot of school pride."

It also has strong enrollment and retention results. In the pandemic years, the number of enrolled students fell from 12,243 in the fall of 2020 to 11,635 in the fall of 2022. Though new student enrollment dipped following Hurricane Helene, overall growth continued. By last fall, 11,845 students were enrolled.

"The highest enrollment we've ever had was in 2020," says Kelli R. Brown, its chancellor. "It looks like we'll surpass that number this year."

In July, the university announced that its current projections were "pointing to what may be the largest incoming freshman class and possibly the highest overall enrollment in the university's 137-year history."

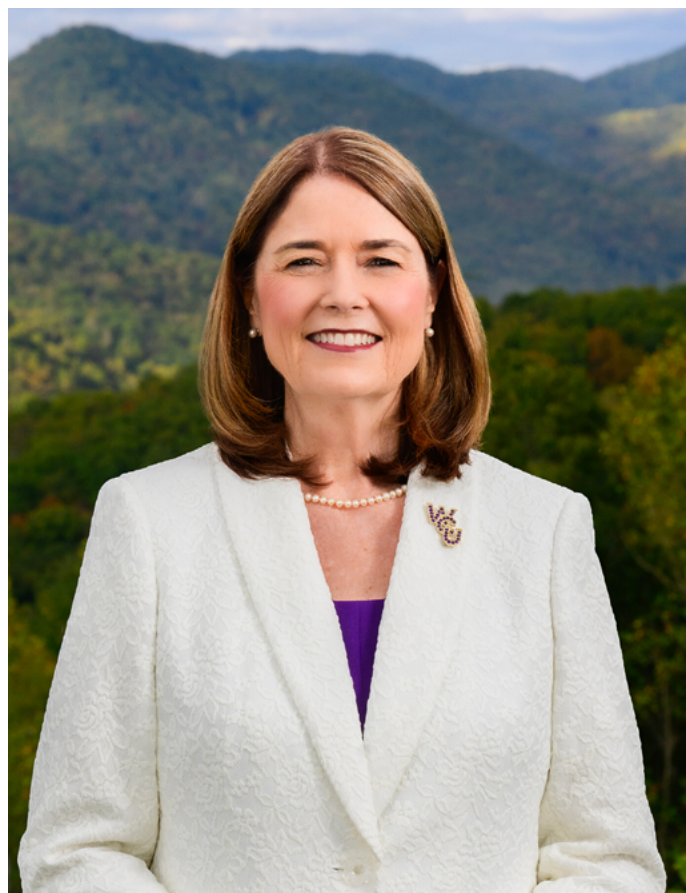


PHOTO COURTESY OF WESTERN CAROLINA U.
Kelli R. Brown, chancellor of Western Carolina U.

Brown says the institution has maintained a high retention rate of about 80 percent for the past couple of years, after a post-pandemic dip, and roughly half of students in this recent period had graduated in four years and left with no student-loan debt. She calls this "unprecedented momentum" for her institution.

Western Carolina certainly may be benefiting from some statewide trends. Matt DeMonbrun, a higher-ed consultant, notes that "North Carolina is one of the few states where the number of graduates is expected to be higher in 2041 than it is today." That means the college is "growing with a demographic tailwind rather than against the kind of headwind many regional public universities are going to be facing for the next 15 years."

Western has taken a series of steps over the past couple of decades that have led to some very good outcomes, Brown says. “It’s part of our overall philosophy,” she says. “We believe, if we accept a student at Western, we have an ethical responsibility to do everything in our power to keep that student in school. That doesn’t mean doing the student’s work or lowering standards. It means trying to array the resources of the institution to ensure that student succeeds.”

That has included embracing best practices on advising, moving from a decentralized system in academic departments to a more centralized approach in which students’ progress in their coursework can be closely monitored and interventions can be made when necessary. Brown says the college increased its number of staff advisers from 12 to 17, but she notes that it wasn’t at a major additional cost: “Did it require internal resources? Yes. But it wasn’t hundreds of thousands of dollars.” (She believes the university has also benefited from having fiscal discipline and not wasting investments on expensive programs, campus amenities, or infrastructure projects that aren’t guaranteed to be beneficial.)

Other key strategies include integrating high-impact practices like common reading and team teaching; targeting resources to support first-gen students, including through a dedicated office; and ensuring that faculty members are committed to focusing on teaching excellence and student success, not just their own research. “When someone comes looking for a position as a faculty member here, if they start to talk about doctoral students and National Institutes of Health grants they want, we let them know we

“We believe, if we accept a student at Western, we have an ethical responsibility to do everything in our power to keep that student in school.”

don’t have a Ph.D. program,” Brown says. “We’ve lost some faculty members over the years — really good faculty members — who have said, ‘This isn’t for me.’”

The kind of professors she prizes, on the other hand, are those like Yue Cai Hillon, who teaches in the College of Business and was able to use her Chinese-language skills to help local economic-development officials recruit Eco King, a manufacturing company from China, to the area. (The manufacturer has since made an \$80-million investment in the region that it says will create hundreds of jobs.)

“Our students learn best when they work not just in the region but with the region,” Hillon says. She’s involved with the Student Business Innovation Hub on campus, which was “designed to inspire and nurture student-driven innovation, business development, and regional collaboration,” according to its

website. “We see ourselves as a university of the mountains, not a university in the mountains,” says Richard D. Starnes, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

Western Carolina has also worked with the organization ReUp Education to help adult learners return to college after having left without graduating. Brown says “the payoff we’ve received has been tremendous.” It’s helped them attract over 700 students, nearly 200 of whom have graduated, she adds. “We’ve had the strongest success rates of using ReUp of any school in our university system.”

“They’ve done a really good job of establishing a transfer pathway” from community colleges, says DeMonbrun, the higher-ed consultant. “That’s one of the most underutilized levers in higher education.”

**“We see ourselves
as a university of
the mountains, not
a university in the
mountains.”**

Starnes makes a point that’s often stressed by regional colleges and their advocates — they won’t succeed by pretending to be something they’re not. “We have no desire to be an R1,” he says. “We have no desire to be an R2. We have a desire to be the best regional comprehensive in America, serving our students and communities.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF WESTERN CAROLINA U.

Richard D. Starnes, dean of Western Carolina's College of Arts and Sciences.



PHOTO COURTESY OF FORT HAYS STATE U.

Fort Hays State University's work-force and economic-development work is seen as vital to the western part of Kansas — an area with an aging population, where worker shortages are common.

Spotlight: Fort Hays State University



PHOTO COURTESY OF FORT HAYS STATE U.

Ben Schears was selected in 2025 to serve as vice president for economic and work-force development at Fort Hays State University.

In June, Fort Hays State University announced that, despite a small tuition increase, it “proudly remains the most affordable university in Kansas.” It’s also been recognized nationally for its online education, which has expanded the college’s reach in its home state, across the country, and beyond.

But Orphan says this isn’t all the college is doing for its students and surrounding communities. The institution’s work-force and economic-development work is seen as vital to the western part of the state — an area with an aging population, where worker shortages are common. “We’ve got a lot more square miles — and cows — than we do people,” says Ben Schears, the college’s vice president for economic and work-force development.

**“We’ve got a lot more
square miles — and cows
— than we do people.”**

According to Orphan, Fort Hays State has forged strong partnerships with businesses and local economic-development officials, and Schears says his role, which was created a year ago, is to provide “the front porch for the university” facing these important stakeholders. “Proximity creates understanding,” he explains. “If we want to understand what our communities need, we have to be in them. I spend more time off campus than on campus.”

The university recently released a report describing itself, “in partnership with affiliates Fort Hays Tech Northwest and Fort Hays Tech North Central,” as “a coordinated regional economic engine for central and western Kansas.” The institution claimed to have created 10 jobs directly in 2025, attracted more than \$8 million in investment, and placed 3,571 graduates into the talent pipeline.

Asked what lessons other colleges could take from his institution, Schears offers this guidance: “Open up campus. It’s way more effective when you move beyond career fairs. If businesses reach out with hiring needs, connect them with faculty members who can give up an hour of classroom time to let them come in and present. Set them up in the student union with

a table where they can recruit. Coach them on how to recruit.”

When interacting with employers and community leaders, he adds, “Nothing replaces a handshake. Most of our businesses and communities don’t need what they’ve historically gotten from higher ed, which is for us to provide a strategic plan for them. They don’t need us to come back with a feasibility study. Most of the time, what they need is for us to engage with them and then provide tangible, practical results.”

As rural communities are struggling with access to health-care workers in particular, Schears says his university has seen “explosive growth” in social work and psychology education to prepare students for employment in the field of mental health. He gave the example of new approaches to supporting counseling for farmers. “They’re generally not going to be driving their flatbed pickup trucks downtown to community mental-health organizations to have a session,” he says. “There’s still a stigma. We’ve been doing some transformative telehealth work and seen that farmers — since they have phones in their tractors and combines — feel way more comfortable sitting out at the edge of a field having a conversation with a counselor.”

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE OKLAHOMA LEGISLATIVE SERVICES BUREAU.

The Oklahoma State Legislature, where a bipartisan group of lawmakers — including State Sen. Kelly Hines — has formed a new caucus advocating for regional public colleges.



Spotlight: The Regional University System of Oklahoma Caucus

Kelly Hines credits his education at a regional public college for preparing him for a three-decade military career that took him to far-flung corners of the world.

He got his start in the Reserve Officer Training Corps at East Central University, in Ada, Okla., where he studied history and — having graduated high school with just 17 other students in his year — appreciated the small class sizes. After serving in the Oklahoma Army National Guard in the late '80s and early '90s, and graduating from college in 1992, he flew helicopters and commanded units in the U.S. Army, deploying to Egypt, Iraq, Afghanistan, and parts of Central and South America. He logged nearly 3,000 flight hours — and earned decorations including Legions of Merit, Bronze Stars, and Meritorious Service Medals — and notes that he was able to do all this without a degree from a college that's got national name-brand recognition.

"I went to flight school with a bunch of officers who'd gone to West Point or Ivy League schools," Hines says, "but after five years in the military, my educational background did me just as well as theirs did them. I got promoted a lot faster than most of them. I made it to being a colonel, and most of them did not."



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE OKLAHOMA LEGISLATIVE SERVICES BUREAU.

State Sen. Kelly Hines is a co-chair and one of the driving forces behind the new caucus. He's a graduate of East Central University, a regional public college in Ada, Okla., which he says set him on a successful path for a three-decade military career.

After leaving active-duty service, Hines moved successfully into politics. Now, as a first-term Republican state senator, he's co-chairing a new, bipartisan legislative caucus aimed at increasing support — and public funding — for the Regional University System of Oklahoma (RUSO), which governs six institutions. Launched in March with 20 GOP lawmakers and three of their Democratic colleagues, the group is casting its efforts as essential for work-force development, emphasizing how 95 percent of RUSO graduates stay and work in Oklahoma after graduation.

"We are the work force," says Lake Carpenter, an alumnus of Southwestern Oklahoma State University who chairs RUSO's board. He's exaggerating for effect, but it's no hyperbole that

60 percent of Oklahoma’s nursing graduates earn their degrees at RUSO colleges. According to Hines, these institutions produced 526 nurses in 2023, whereas the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University produced 354 combined.

“Oklahoma has faced a nursing shortage, and we have one of the premiere nursing programs in the country,” says Todd G. Lamb, who runs the state’s third-largest college as president of the University of Central Oklahoma. He notes that regional institutions are “educating more Oklahomans by percentage than any other system in Oklahoma.”

The goal of the caucus is to tackle a familiar problem for regional colleges — the fact that they often get less attention and affirmation than flagship universities with bigger brands and better-known sports teams. Carpenter says most Oklahomans likely wouldn’t recognize his governing board by its acronym or think of its colleges as a collective to be advocated for. That’s part of what he and Hines hope to change.

If they succeed, they could provide a national model, especially given that their caucus focuses specifically on boosting regional institutions as opposed to higher ed or public colleges more broadly. “Just because something is good policy for a community college, it doesn’t mean it’s good policy for one of our RUSO schools,” Lamb says.

Orphan, of the ARRC, and Welch, of the AASCU, weren’t familiar with the caucus when they spoke to *The Chronicle* in July. They both said it sounded encouraging, though Orphan noted she was troubled by another development in Oklahoma higher education — the Republican

“Just because something is good policy for a community college, it doesn’t mean it’s good policy for one of our RUSO schools.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE U. OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA.

Todd G. Lamb, the president of the University of Central Oklahoma.

governor, Kevin Stitt, signing an executive order earlier this year ending tenure at the state's regional public and community colleges.

The creation of the RUSO Caucus came out of conversations Hines had when he was running for office in 2024. He says he found it “shocking” to learn all the ways they were contributing to Oklahoma while realizing that many of their facilities were in serious need of maintenance. “We’ve got some beautiful, historic buildings,” Carpenter explains, “but some of them are 75 or 100 years old. There’s always something that needs to be repaired or replaced.”

Hines says the caucus needs to do “a holistic study of critical infrastructure at each university and develop a strategic plan to fund it.” Another issue he’s concerned with is making it easier for faculty members to live closer to their campuses, which he believes would benefit their students. “I’d like professors

to be able to be more engaged with — and part of — the local communities, not commuters coming in to teach.” He also wants them to feel like it’s appealing to stay at Oklahoma’s regional colleges for the duration of their careers, not move on to other universities.

To increase the visibility of regional colleges at the State Legislature, Hines is calling for a dedicated day each year when campus leaders and students can show up to make the case for what they need. “That’s a big deal for legislators,” he says. “When a specific group of people comes to your office to talk, you remember it.”

Hines reports that there’s “no overt opposition” to the caucus so far, but he expects some pushback once it starts making specific funding requests, “especially if we’re talking about reallocating funds.” For now, though, he says he’s hopeful its efforts will raise the profile of regional colleges and finally “give them the love” they deserve.

PHOTO COURTESY OF FORT HAYS STATE U.

At Fort Hays State University, in Hays, Kan., a bronze statue of a tiger, the institution's mascot, stands in front of the Memorial Union building.

CONCLUSION



PHOTO COURTESY OF FORT HAYS STATE U.

Taken together, *The Chronicle's* survey and its analysis by higher-ed experts paint a complex picture of how regional public colleges are perceived — and how they ought to be understood. There's a widespread sense that negative national narratives about higher ed shape how regional colleges are seen — and that these narratives can be hard to counter. Yet it also seems clear that individual institutions tend to be valued in their regions and local communities, not easily confused with the small number of high-profile private colleges that disproportionately influence public opinion about academe. And while many regional colleges are struggling with enrollment, many others appear to be optimistic about continuing to attract students.

It may be true, as McClure of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington suggests, that a lot of Americans don't want to hear a nuanced story about the state of colleges today. It's certainly doubtful that they spend much time thinking about regional public colleges as a category, mulling over all the ways these institutions might be similar or different to others. Yet in the efforts of many regional public colleges, along with groups like RUSO and its allies in Oklahoma, associations like the ARRC, AASCU, and think tanks like Third Way — you can see advocates looking for new ways to elevate these institutions, confident that they have good stories to tell and can reach the people who need to hear them.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE U. OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA

Students pose in front of Old North, the oldest building on the campus of the University of Central Oklahoma.

METHODOLOGY



Four hundred and thirty regional public college leaders responded to *The Chronicle's* online survey, conducted between June 22 and July 10, 2026. The largest proportion of respondents were directors (28 percent), followed by vice

presidents (17 percent), deans (15 percent), and department heads (14 percent). Smaller numbers of leaders in other roles – including presidents, chancellors, and associate, assistant, or vice provosts and deans – also responded.

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