Learners Know What They Value: Shaping Choice and Possibility

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COLLEGE FUTURES

PANELISTS

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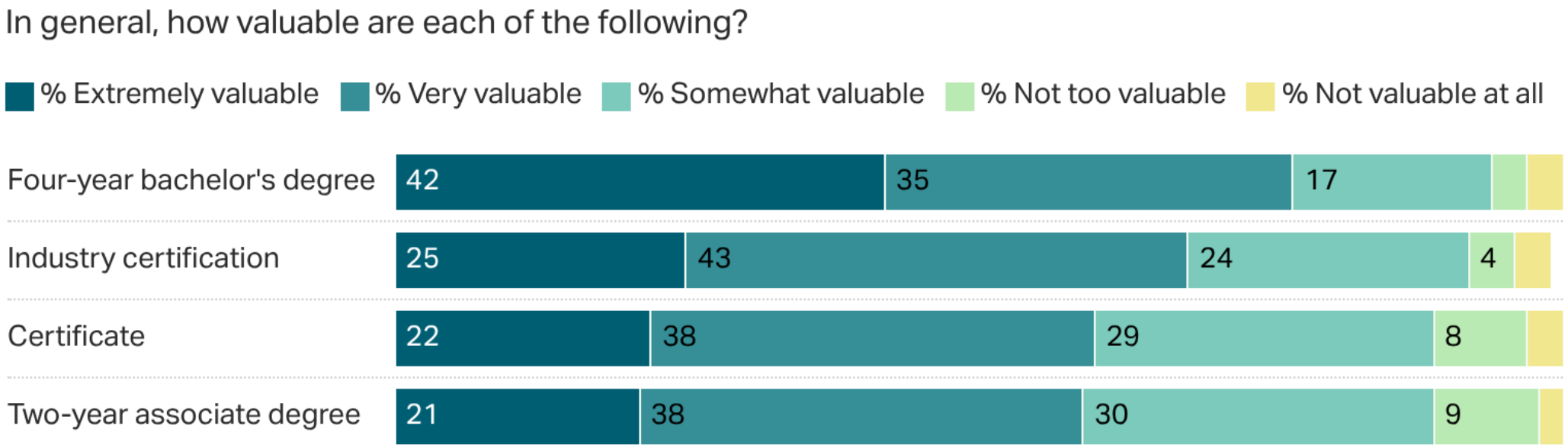
The 2026 State of California Learners

https://www.gallup.com/analytics/694802/state-higher-education-california-research.aspx

90% of Californians without a degree value some kind of postsecondary credential.

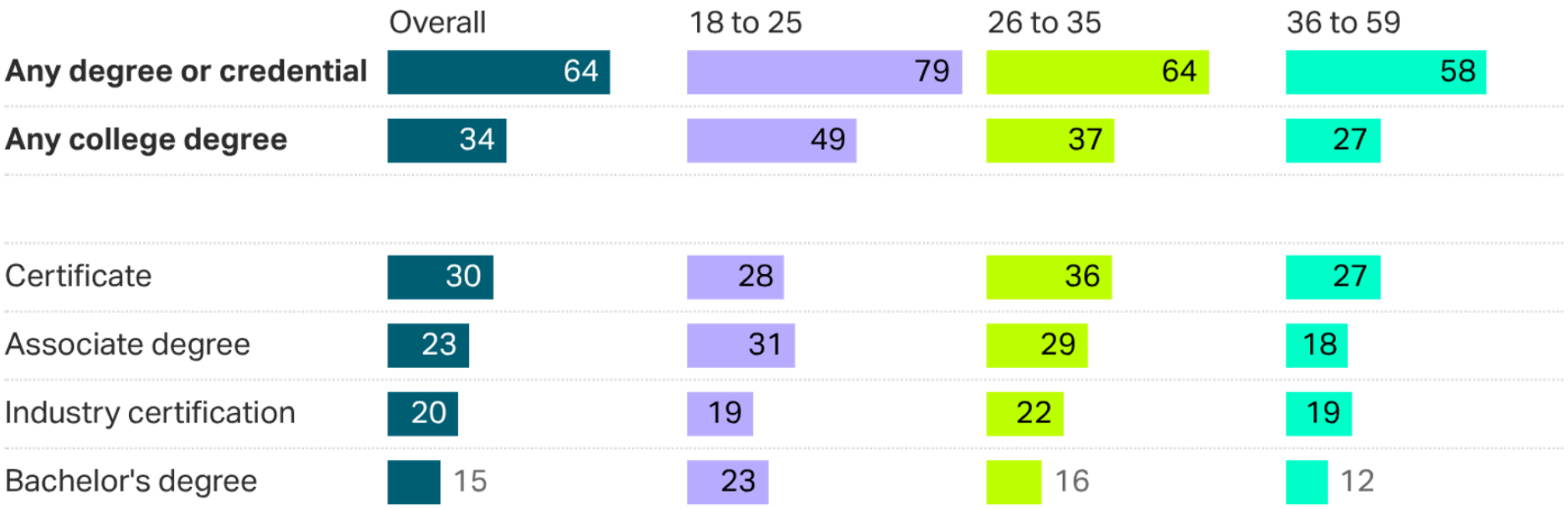


Among California adults without a college degree

Data labels less than 4% are not displayed. Totals of response percentages within bars may sum to 100% ±1 due to rounding.

About six in 10 Californians 26 or older have recently considered enrolling in a program.

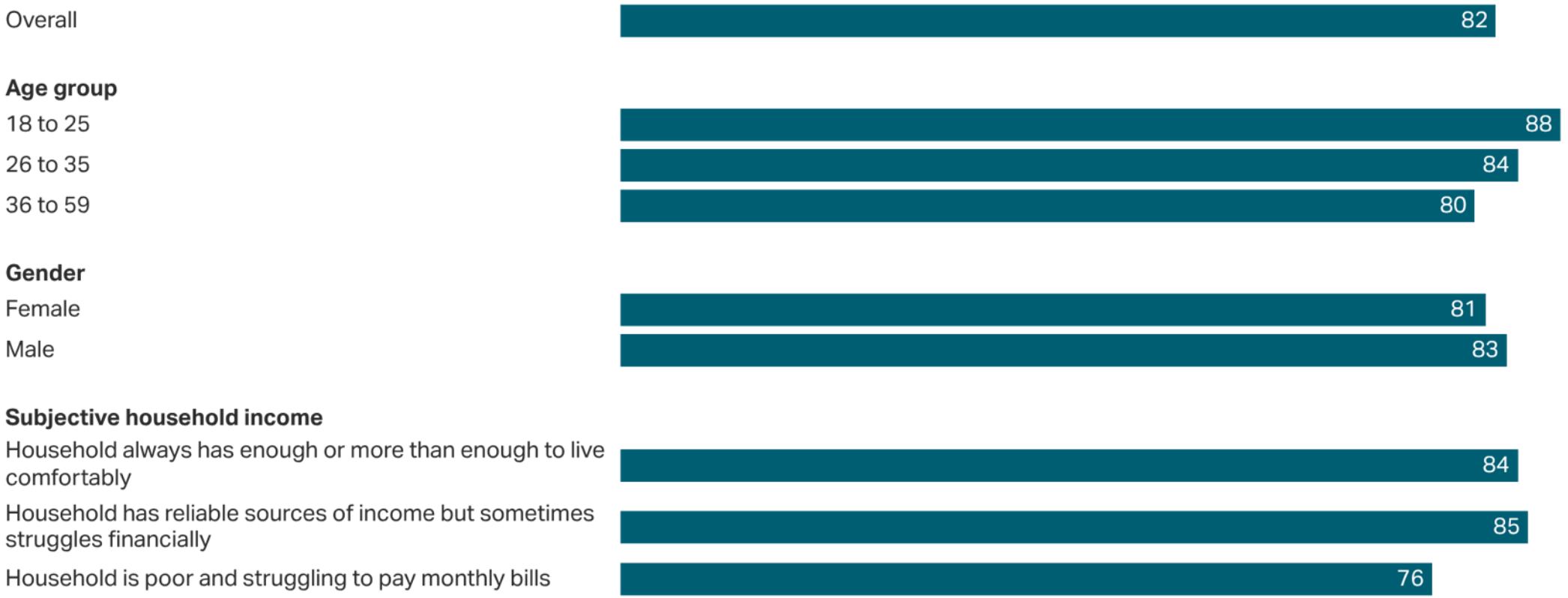
Which of the following, if any, have you considered pursuing in the past two years?
% Selected



Among California adults not currently enrolled in a postsecondary education program

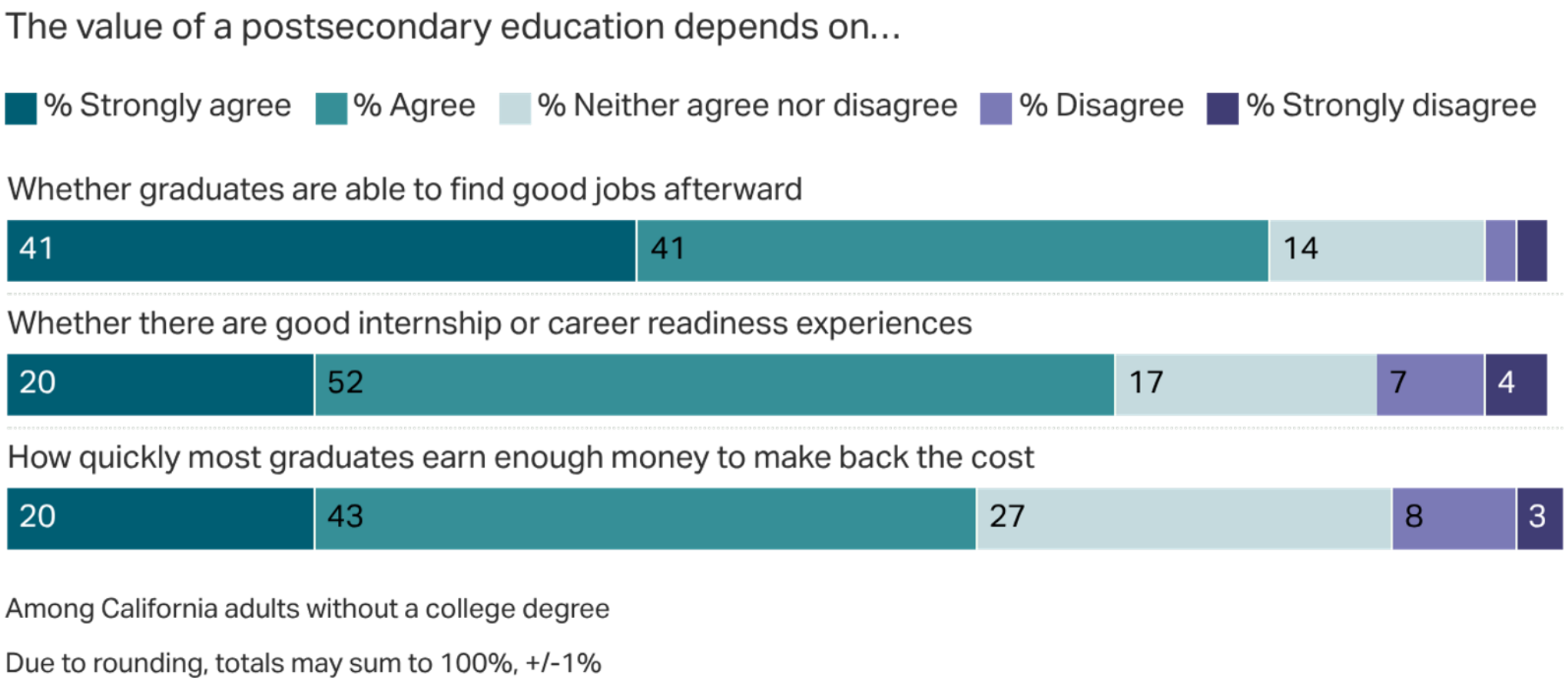
An even higher percentage of these adults agree postsecondary education would be worth the cost.

Generally speaking, do you think the investment you could make in postsecondary education would be worth it for you?
% Yes, worth it

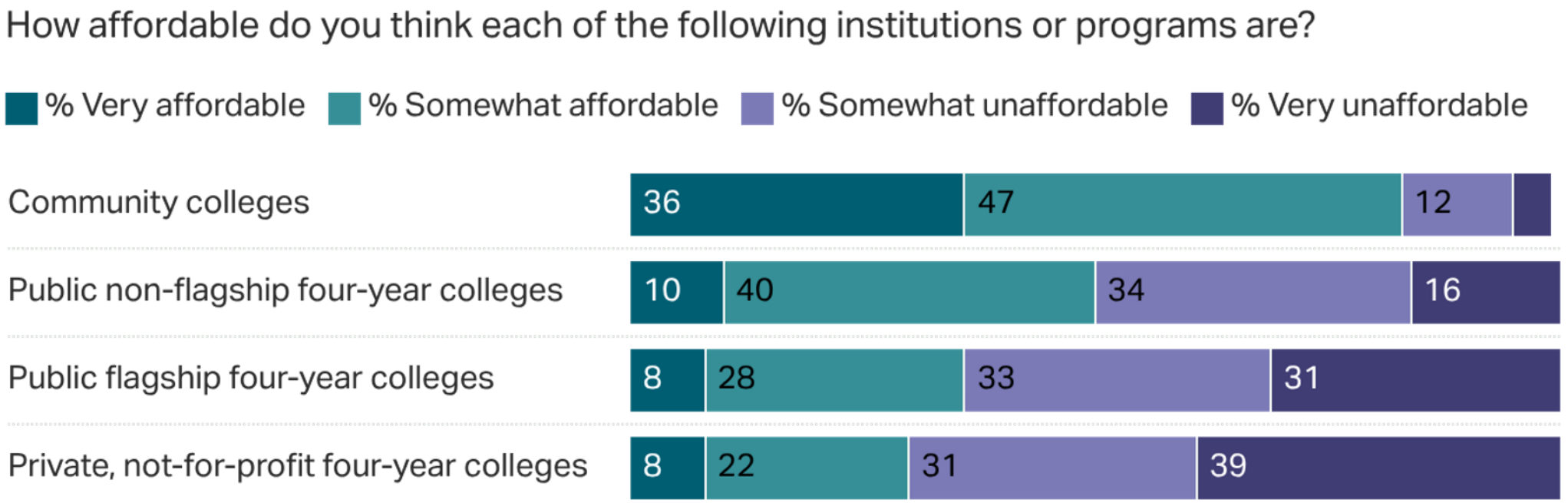


Among California adults not currently enrolled in a postsecondary education program

Value of college is closely related to graduates' career and financial outcomes.



Half or less of adults without a degree think any four-year college is even somewhat affordable.

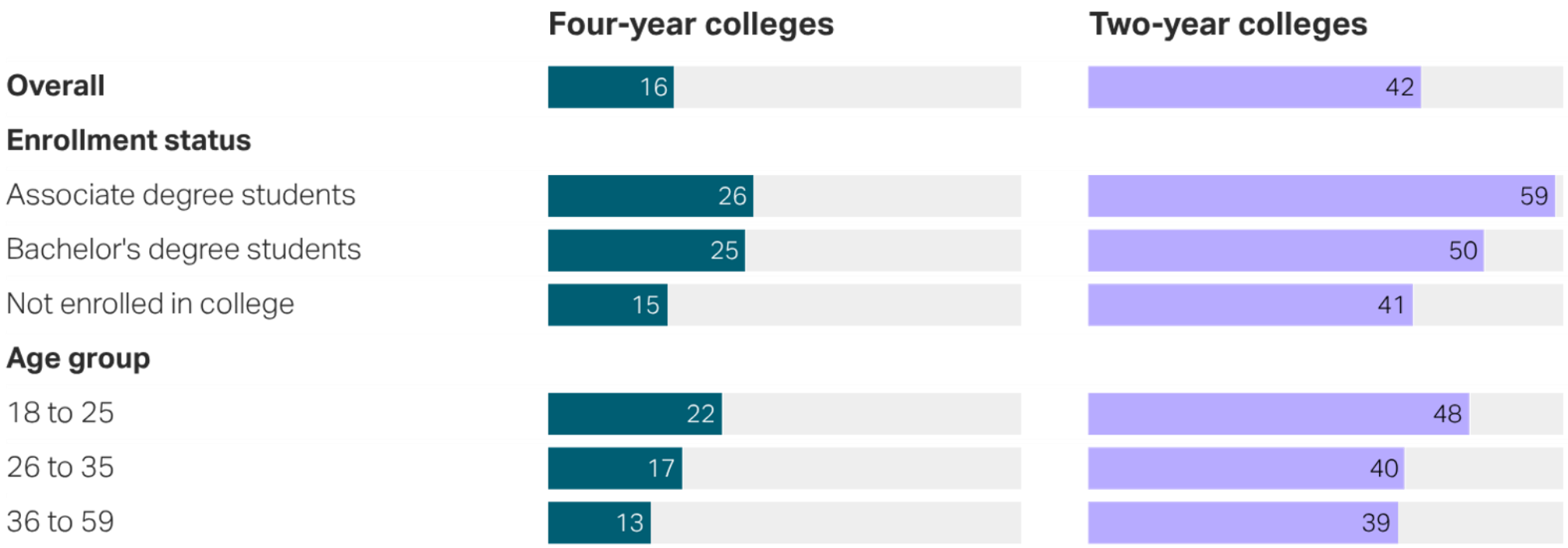


Among 18- to 59-year-olds without a college degree nationally

Due to rounding, totals may sum to 100%, +/-1%

Moreover, these adults overwhelmingly feel these costs are unfair to students and graduates.

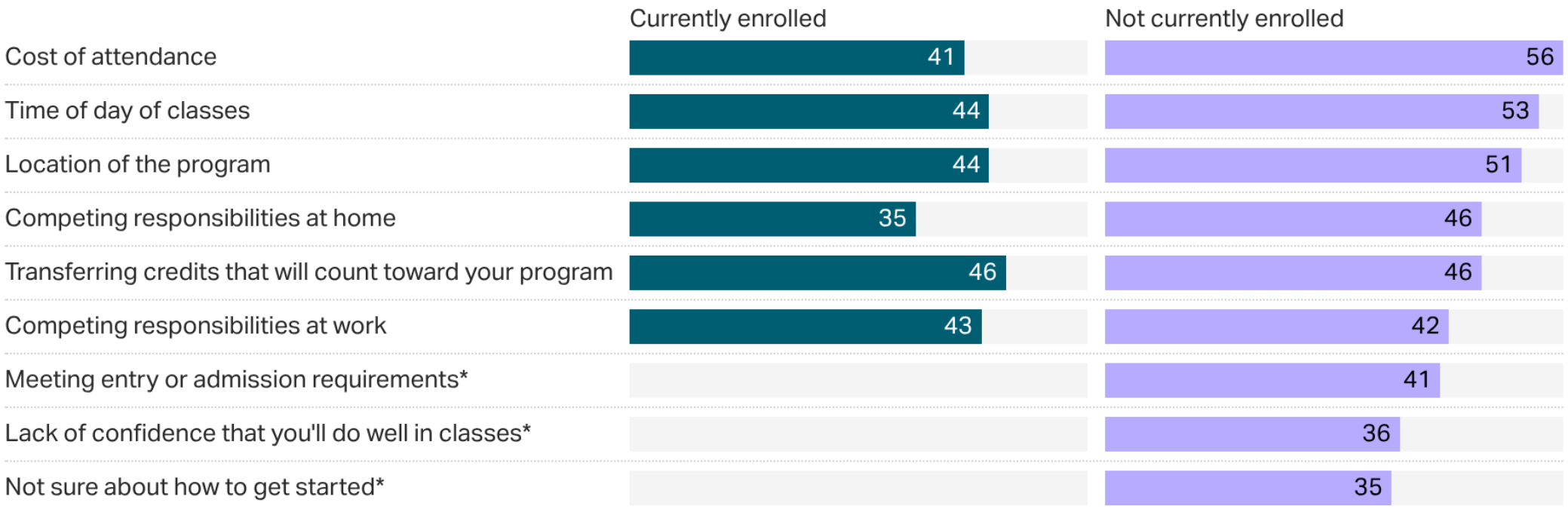
Do you think ____ charge fair prices for what they offer students and graduates?
% Yes



Among 18- to 59-year-olds without a college degree nationally

While cost is a barrier, most prospective students also say program scheduling and location are just as significant.

How significant, if at all, are the following barriers to you [enrolling/staying enrolled] in postsecondary education?
% Very significant



Among California adults without a college degree; respondents who have no interest in enrolling are excluded from these percentages

*Question was asked only of adults who are not currently enrolled

Choosing in the Dark

What Working Adults Need to Make Better Postsecondary Decisions

https://www.ideas42.org/publications/choosing-in-the-dark-report

Knowing what you value isn't the same as being able to get it

TRADITIONAL ROI

- Median earnings
- Employment rates
- Completion rates
- Debt load

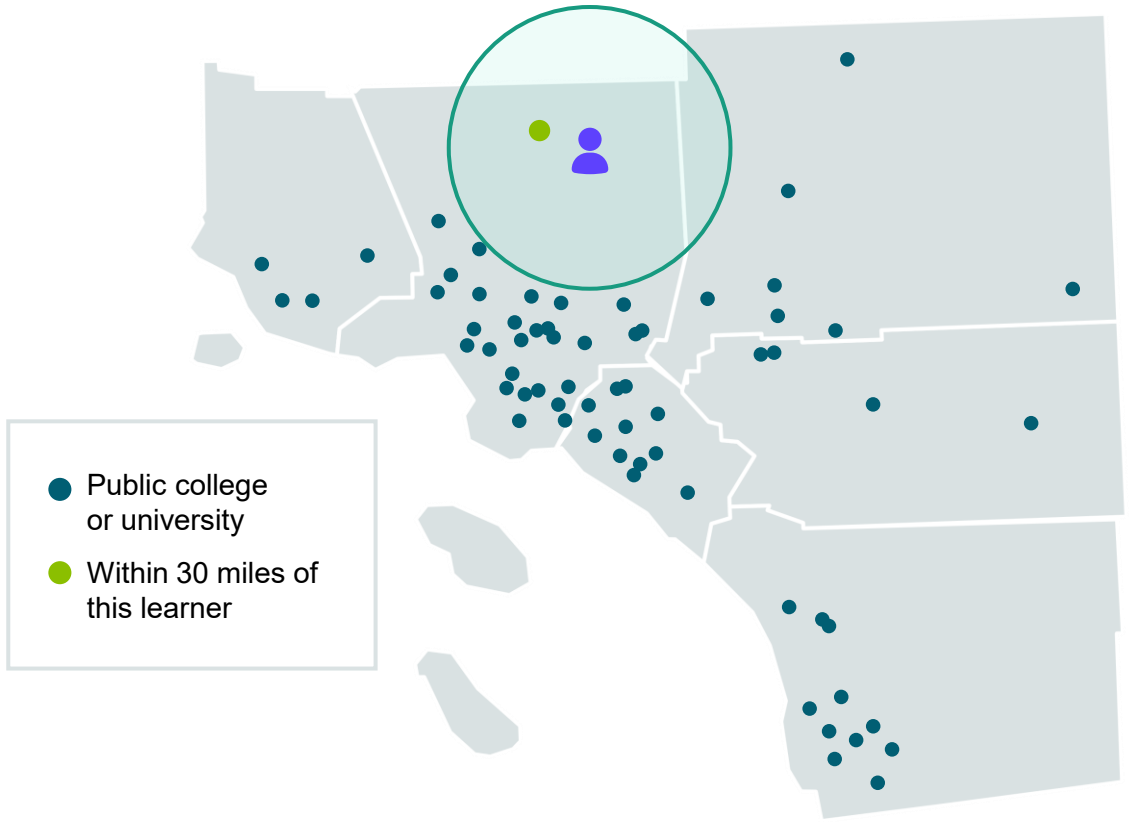
WHAT LEARNERS VALUE

- Higher wages
- Industry recognized credentials
- Skills they can use immediately
- Schedules compatible with their lives

> *"The reason I chose Cybersecurity was because the salary outcome outweighed IT — that's what made my final decision."*
>
> — Prospective adult learner, associate's program

> *"Value is… can I build something from it? Can I get a job opportunity?"*
>
> — Currently enrolled adult learner, associate's program

But constraints decide what's feasible before evaluation can even begin



> *"Cal State LA is almost like a default no-brainer… it's the closest, the easiest to get to, but Cal State Northridge has programs more interesting to me."*
>
> — Prospective adult learner, bachelor's program

Cognitive bandwidth + scarcity

We have a finite mental capacity to process, remember, and act on information, and every task on our plate takes up some of that bandwidth.

Public 2- and 4-year institutions. Sources: California State Geoportal; US Census Bureau TIGERweb. Learner location and radius are illustrative.

Even when they push through, the data to choose well isn't there

> *"There's especially not universal [data about outcomes.] If you know who to ask at the school, they may or may not have it… it's just very high-level percentages, not enough detail that if you were shelling out thousands of dollars to be like, 'Okay, this is the one for me.'"*
>
> — Recently graduated adult learner, certificate program

Choice architecture

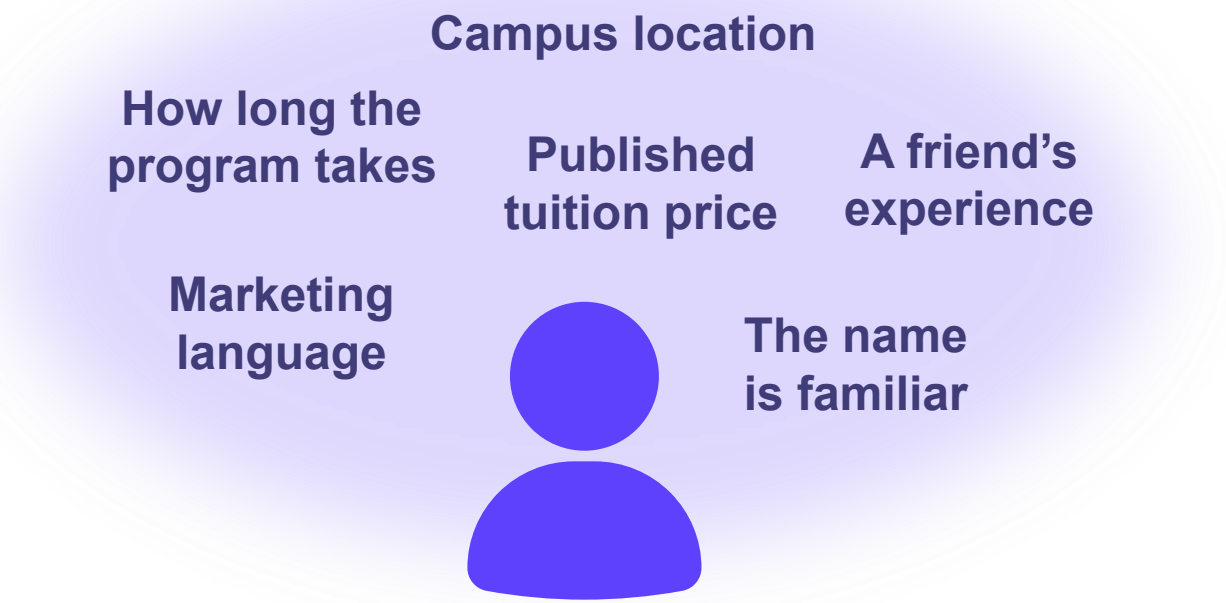
The way in which options and information are presented can influence our ability to make sense of the data and make choices we're confident in.

So adults do the reasonable thing: they fall back on substitutes

What graduates of this program actually earn

What jobs are available on graduation

What it actually costs all-in after financial aid



> *"The forums are always like… those people who leave reviews that are, like, they give zero stars… they used it once and they're like, 'I didn't see results.'"*
>
> — Prospective adult learner, bachelor's program

Availability heuristic

Tendency to judge how common, credible, or likely something is by how easily examples come to mind.

More information is necessary but insufficient

1

LAYER 1 • AT THE CORE
Accurate, complete information

LAYER 2 • SURROUNDING THE DATA
Good choice architecture

LAYER 3 • SURROUNDING THE SYSTEM
The right support at the right time

Screen for feasibility before quality

Identify deal-breakers — schedule, cost, location, time to completion — before adults invest effort in evaluating programs that were never viable.

NOW

Learners filter through many options

Medical Assistant UEI College	Paramedic Academy In-person	Registered Nursing >2 years	Medical Assistant North-West College	Nursing (BSN) Over $10k
Pharmacy Tech SB Valley	Medical Billing >40 miles	Vocational Nursing Riverside City	Dental Hygiene Over $10k	Radiologic Tech >40 miles

INSTEAD

Focus attention on viable programs

Choice overload

Tendency for larger choice sets to make people less likely to choose and less satisfied with their choices.

Cognitive bandwidth

We have a finite mental capacity to process, remember, and act on information.

Programs and constraints are illustrative.

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THANK YOU

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