



Washington State Quantitative Assessment

October 2026



SECTION I

Methodology & Overview

Washington State quantitative interviews



Objective: Develop a 360-degree understanding of Washington’s school to career pipeline by examining how young adults navigate it and how parents, navigators, and employers shape, support, or constrain those pathways.



Methodology: 2,966 online interviews across audiences; randomly recruited from a qualifying sample.

Young Adults

Who are they?

16–24-year-olds from Washington State, representative of the real population.

Results weighted for:

Age, gender, race, region, and mean home value in the area.

Approach:

- 1,759 online interviews
- Margin of error: +/-2.4%



Parents

Who are they?

Parents of 16–24-year-olds from Washington State, representative of the real population.

Results weighted for:

Age, gender, race, income, region, and child’s age and gender.

Approach:

- 505 online interviews
- Margin of error: +/-4.4%



Navigators

Who are they?

Counselors, educators, and career and workforce development specialists from Washington State who work with young adults for at least 25% of their workweek.

Results weighted for:

Age, gender, race, region, income.

Approach:

- 502 online interviews
- Margin of error: +/-4.4%



Employers

Who are they?

HR workers and hiring managers from Washington State who are involved in the hiring process for entry-level talent

Approach:

- 200 online interviews
- Margin of error: +/-6.9%





SECTION II

Executive Summary

Washington has built a strong school-to-career ecosystem, but the challenge is helping young people navigate it and turn resources into opportunity.

THE STRENGTH	THE GAP	THE OPPORTUNITY
Washington has many of the right pieces in place, and the system works well for those who reach it. • Young adults give strong marks to access to dual enrollment (79%), financial aid navigation (74%), and alternatives to four-year college (73%). • Employers also view the workforce positively, with 93% saying WA-trained entry-level talent is at least as prepared as the national average. WA-educated young adults are also more likely to use key state pathways, including CTE (30% vs. 15%) and CTE Dual Credit (28% vs. 15%).	The challenge is connecting those pieces into a pathway young adults can actually navigate. • 67% struggle with knowing where to start, 66% with knowing what to trust, 64% with fragmented information, and 61% with understanding eligibility. • The disconnect becomes especially visible after young adults leave school: 88% of those currently in school say their education is preparing them well, compared with just 67% of those no longer in school.	Instead of adding resources the focus should be making the existing ecosystem easier to navigate. • Strengthen the trusted adults young people already turn to. • Make work-based learning easier for employers to provide, with 77% citing limited staff capacity as a barrier to engaging with education • Make opportunities more tangible, including financial aid, where just 47% know the WA College Grant can cover costs beyond tuition. • AI preparation, where only 48% believe education is doing enough.



SECTION III

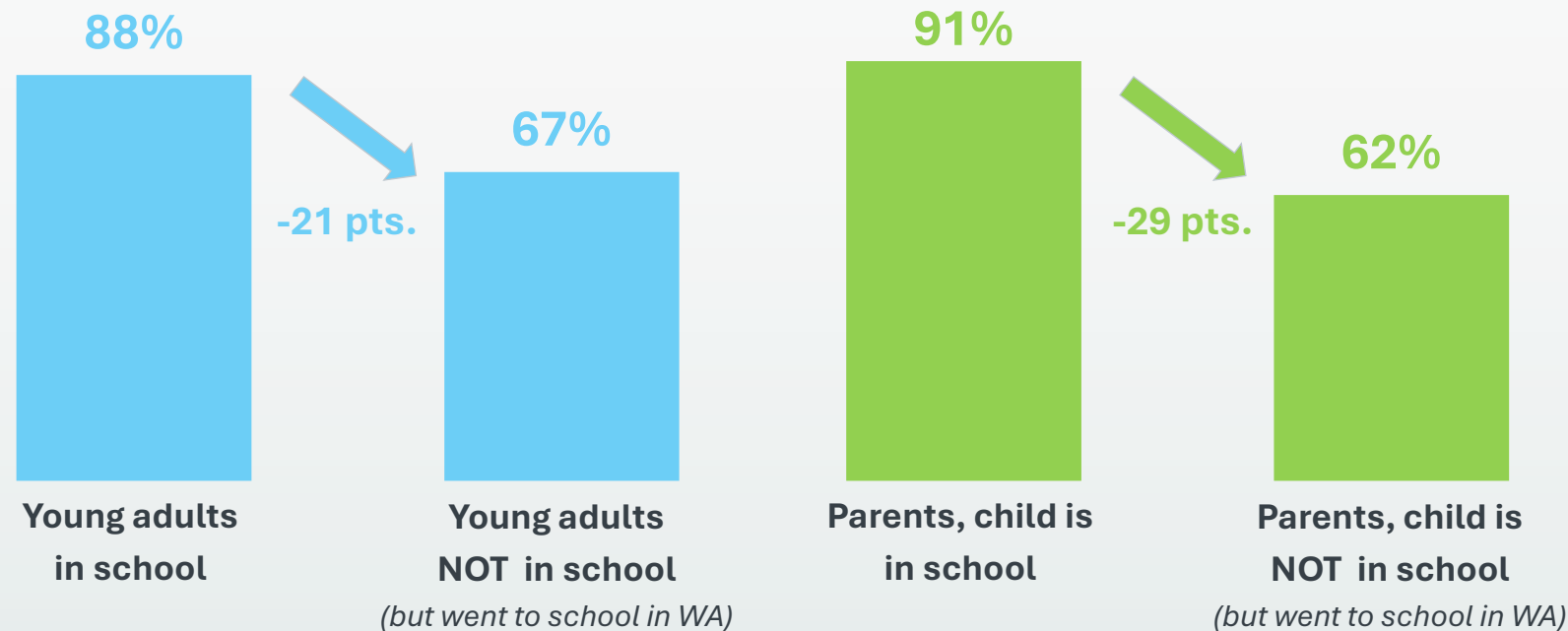
Breakthrough Insights

1

The Post-High School Cliff: The system prepares students for school, but loses them after graduation

Are schools and job training programs preparing young adults well or poorly for their future?

(showing total prepares well: very well + somewhat well)



Post-HS Cliff:

47% of Young Adults overall also feel that they are prepared for the job market over the next 10 years, but perceptions differ by age, with 18–20-year-olds feeling the most pressure:

16-17: 51%

18-20: 40%

21-24: 49%

This highlights a disconnect between feeling prepared in an educational setting and being able to translate that preparation into a clear path through the labor market once out of school.

Callout box: Young Adults (n=1,759)

Charts: Young Adults in school (n=921) | Parents with child in school (n=338) | Young Adults not in school but went to high school in WA (n=722) | Parents with child not in school but went to high school in WA (n=144)

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2

WA has built abundant resources that generate confidence, particularly in dual enrollment programs and financial aid; BUT...

How well or poorly do you think your area or community provides services in each of the following areas?

	Young Adults	Parents	Navigators
Access to dual enrollment programs or college credit courses in high school	79%	80%	85%
Support for navigating financial aid applications (FAFSA/WASFA)	74%	70%	84%
Strong alternatives to traditional 4-year college	73%	71%	84%
Making access to information and resources easy and intuitive	72%	72%	85%
Access to hands-on experiences	69%	64%	84%
Helping parents/guardians understand how to best help	68%	63%	84%
Ongoing support to help ensure completion of job and education training	68%	65%	83%
Access to funding to support living costs or emergency expenses for students	67%	59%	82%
Access to free or affordable postsecondary education and training	66%	61%	84%
Recruiting local talent for jobs versus recruiting from out-of-state	65%	64%	82%
Assistance re-entering a job or education training after dropping out	62%	63%	83%
Connecting young people directly to employers	61%	58%	82%

2 ...Young adults and parents aren't using these resources due to confusion, distrust, and access barriers

Extent to which each is viewed as a challenge to using programs, resources, or services

	Young Adults	Parents	Navigators
Knowing where to start looking for them	67%	61%	75%
Knowing which programs or resources are trustworthy	66%	65%	71%
Fragmented or disconnected information across different places	64%	67%	76%
Knowing young adults' interests to know which programs are relevant	63%	41%	72%
Making sense of information spread across many sources	62%	63%	75%
Having enough time or capacity to search for and compare options	61%	59%	76%
Understanding if I/they qualify for programs	61%	57%	76%
Knowing how to apply to them	59%	57%	76%
Worried/embarrassed about being judged	55%	48%	69%
Having someone to guide or help	55%	57%	72%

Parents underestimate the extent to which Young Adults are still figuring out their interests

Young adults who went to high school outside of WA were more likely to report challenges finding someone to guide them, compared to those who went to high school in WA (67% to 53%)

What this Means: Strategic Priorities for Strengthening Washington's School-to-Career Ecosystem

Strategic Priority #1: Accountability for navigation indicators & outcomes

What the Data Say:

- Programs are generally well-known and highly rated once used, but usage lags.
- Young adults struggle with where to start (67%), what to trust (66%), fragmented information (64%), eligibility (61%), and how to apply (59%).

Recommendation:

- Shift the focus from creating more resources to making existing resources easier to find, understand, and act on.

Practical Solutions:

- Accountability and measurement of student outcomes.
- Dedicated WA Resident Outcomes dashboard & educational presentations.
- HSBP leading and lagging data; student interest --> courses --> experiences --> action and PS outcomes.

What this Means: Strategic Priorities for Strengthening Washington's School-to-Career Ecosystem

Strategic Priority #2: Improve the knowledge, awareness, and training of ALL adults

What the Data Say:

- Young adults cite other people, especially parents, peers, and counselors, as the most common source of helpful navigation.
- Yet parents are nearly as likely as young adults to struggle to find resources, while 55% of navigators say they rely on their own time, research, or connections to stay informed.

Recommendation:

- Invest in the people young adults already trust rather than expecting young adults to navigate the ecosystem alone. Give parents, navigators, and other trusted adults simpler, current, and actionable information they can confidently pass along.

Practical Solutions:

- Ensure USE of HSBP student aspiration and interest data.
- College and Career Clock hours.
- OSPI launch postsecondary class recommendation.
- SCALE best practices for addressing adult mindset, family and community knowledge, and whole- school advising.
- Embed navigation skills into career readiness programming.

3

Even WA's best-known programs, Running Start, AP programs, CiHS, and HSBP, are not reaching young adults to their potential

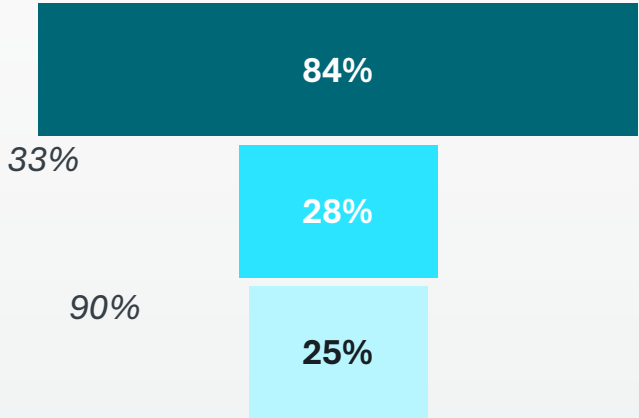
Funnel Analysis: Key



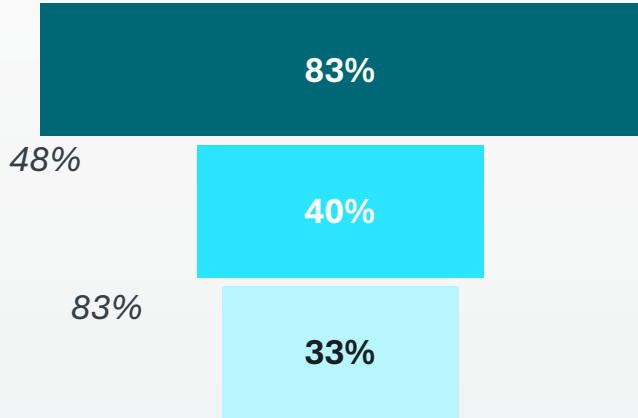
Young adults who went to high school outside WA have **lower awareness and usage** of most programs, but rate them equally as helpful

Hands-on work experiences like internships and apprenticeships have **higher awareness and usage in urban areas**

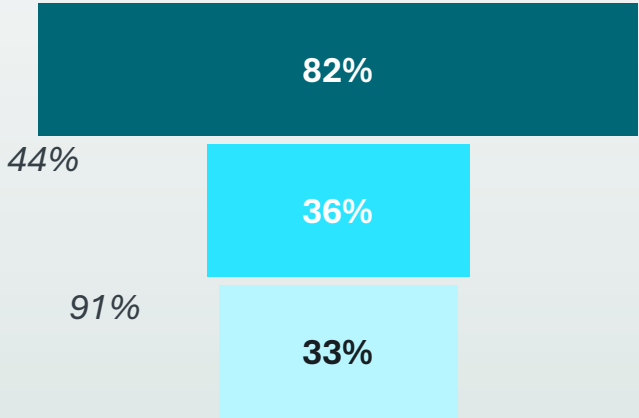
Running Start



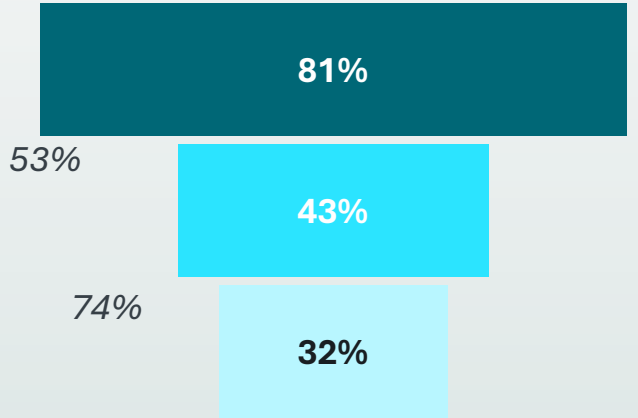
AP/Advanced Placement



College in the High School



High School and Beyond Plan



All metrics shown among all young adults who attended high school in WA
Conversion: The percentage who convert from one funnel stage to the next (use ÷ awareness; helpfulness ÷ use).

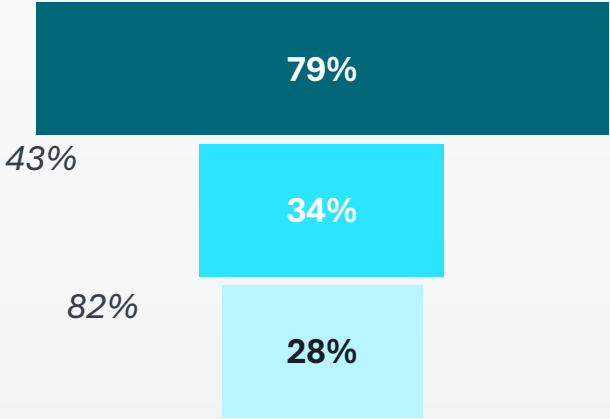
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Career fairs, internships, and CTE programs also have strong awareness and have been helpful, but again most aware of them are not using them

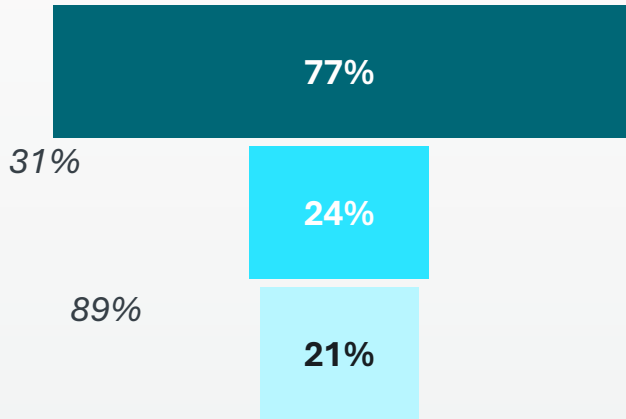
Funnel Analysis: Key



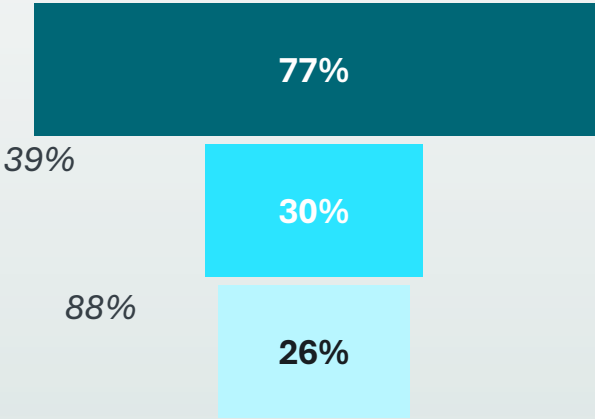
Career fairs in your area



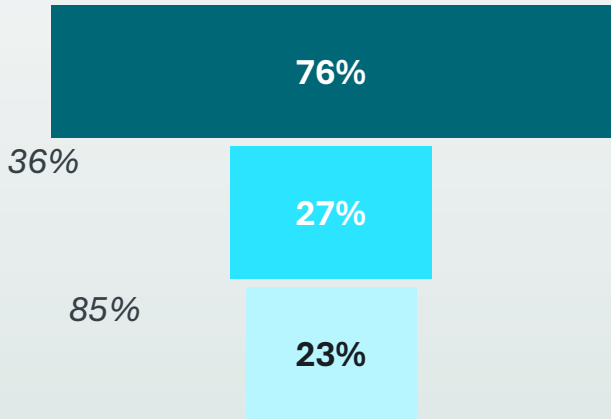
Work-site learning/Internship



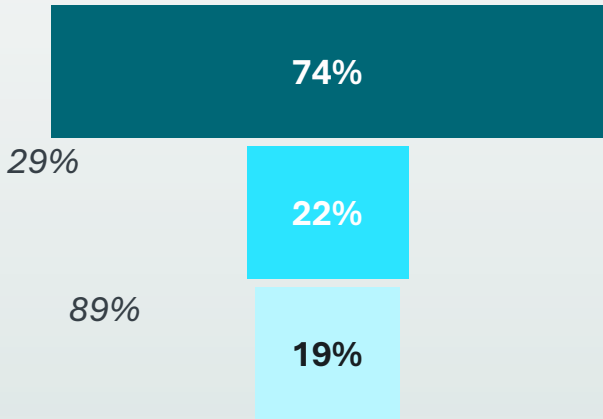
Career Technical Education (CTE)



CTE Dual Credit



Skills centers



All metrics shown among all young adults who attended high school in WA
Conversion: The percentage who convert from one funnel stage to the next (use ÷ awareness; helpfulness ÷ use).

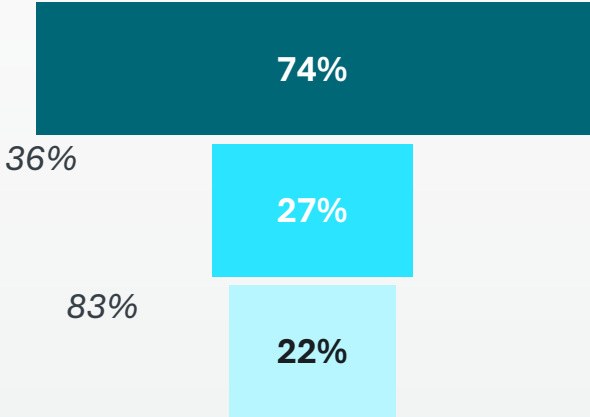
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Career Explore, Career Launch, apprenticeships, and IB have lower awareness and helpfulness, but these metrics are still strong. Usage remains the biggest issue.

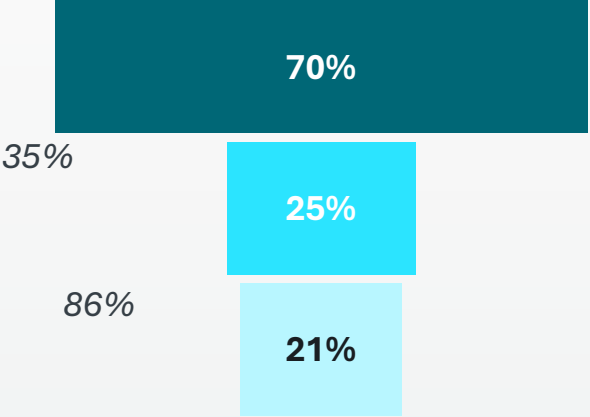
Funnel Analysis: Key



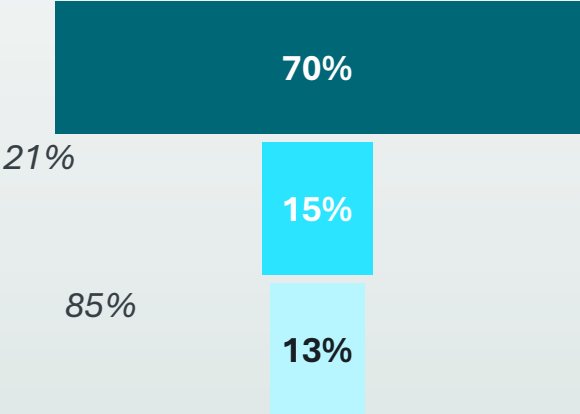
Career Prep (CTE pathways)



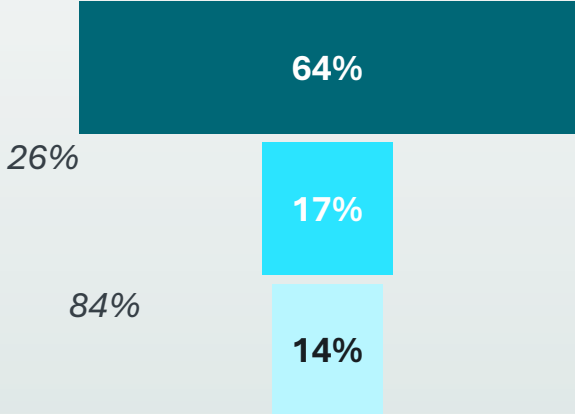
Career Explore



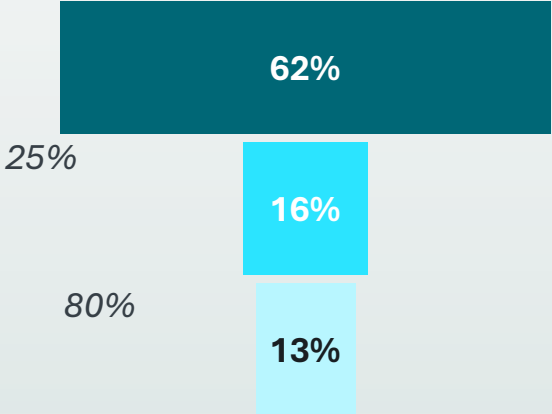
Registered apprenticeship programs



Career Launch



International Baccalaureate (IB)



All metrics shown among all young adults who attended high school in WA
Conversion: The percentage who convert from one funnel stage to the next (use ÷ awareness; helpfulness ÷ use).

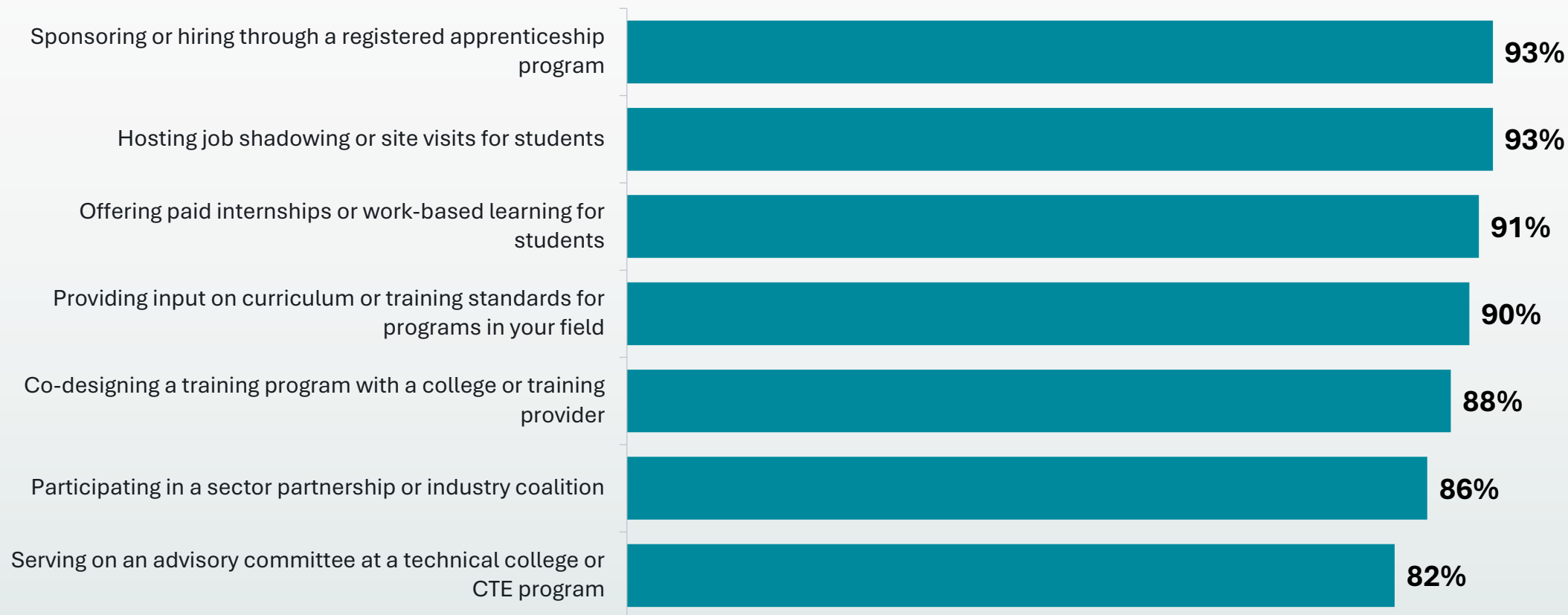
3 Young adults' lack of program use reflects a mix of low perceived relevance, limited understanding, and uncertainty about whether they qualify

Challenges and barriers to using each program (Multiselect)

	Running Start	AP courses	CiHS	HSBP	Career fairs in your area	Work-site learning	CTE programs	CTE Dual Credit	Skills centers	Career Prep	Career Explore	Registered apprenticeship programs	Career Launch	IB
The program is not relevant to me	25%	21%	25%	23%	21%	24%	25%	26%	25%	22%	23%	27%	23%	26%
I did not think the program would help me	23%	20%	20%	23%	23%	19%	21%	20%	22%	18%	22%	20%	20%	20%
I do not qualify for the program	18%	20%	16%	15%	9%	15%	13%	14%	12%	12%	13%	13%	15%	16%
I do not know enough about the program	18%	22%	20%	20%	24%	23%	21%	25%	26%	24%	19%	26%	23%	22%
I didn't really understand how the program works	18%	16%	17%	17%	15%	18%	16%	15%	17%	19%	16%	16%	15%	14%
The application process is too long or confusing	13%	14%	12%	17%	14%	14%	14%	12%	12%	14%	14%	12%	15%	12%
SELECTED AT LEAST ONE OF THE ABOVE BARRIERS	93%	94%	93%	93%	90%	91%	95%	94%	95%	93%	91%	95%	93%	95%

3 Employers show extremely high interest in engaging with schools and training programs in Washington as a way to invest in their talent pipeline

Employers' interest in types of engagement with Washington's schools, colleges, and training programs



3 But employers lack the bandwidth to engage with programs designed to connect them with young adults

Employers' barriers to engaging with Washington's schools, colleges and training programs



3 Employers want to simplify the process through single points of contact, direct connections, and clear information are the top ways to encourage employers to engage with schools and programs in the area

Employers' view on what would make it easier for their organization to engage with schools, colleges, or training programs



What this Means: Strategic Priorities for Strengthening Washington's School-to-Career Ecosystem

Strategic Priority #3: Build stronger bridges from school to work

What the Data Say:

- Hands-on experience emerges across audiences as a priority. Employers show very high interest in internships, apprenticeships, job shadowing, and school partnerships, but 77% cite lack of staff capacity and 73% cite too many separate asks as barriers to engagement.

Recommendation:

- Make work-based learning a core part of the school-to-career pathway, while reducing the burden on employers to participate.
- The opportunity is not simply convincing employers to engage, but making engagement easier and strengthening value for them.

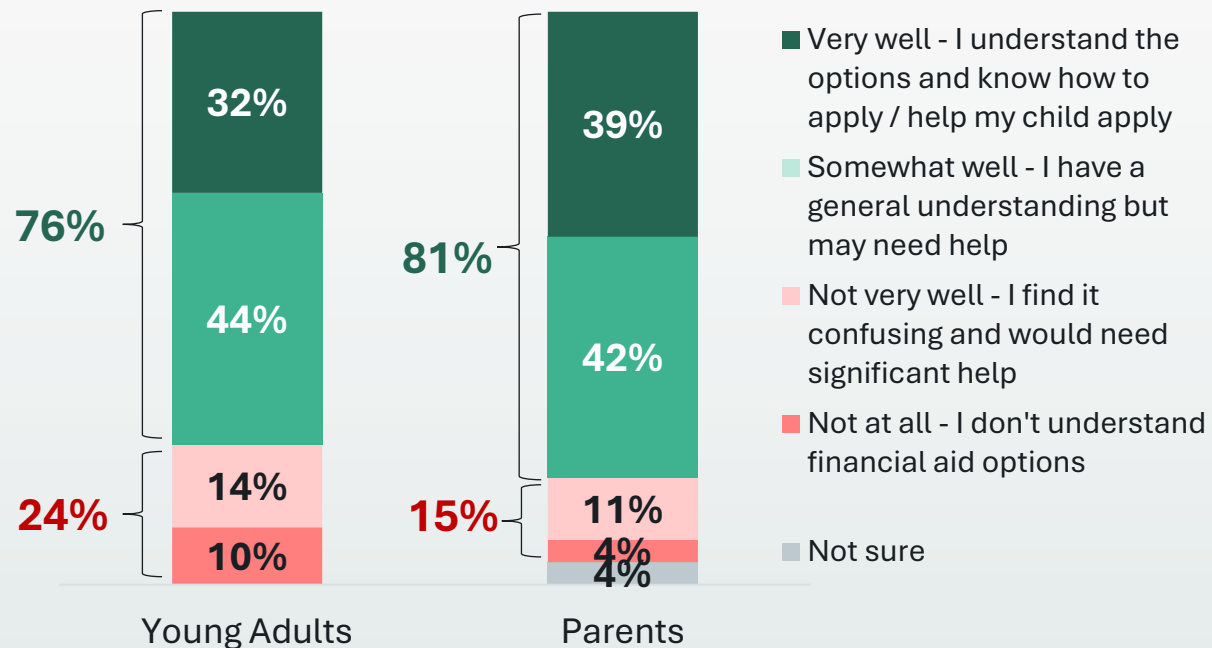
Practical Solutions:

- Employer-Designed and Sector-Led programming, curriculum, and experiences.
- Regionally-facilitated pathway co-design, building from assets and filling in pathway gaps; using common accountability outcomes.

4

Financial aid is likewise a hugely untapped resource: Young adults and parents say they have a general understanding, but lack specifics of what WA can cover

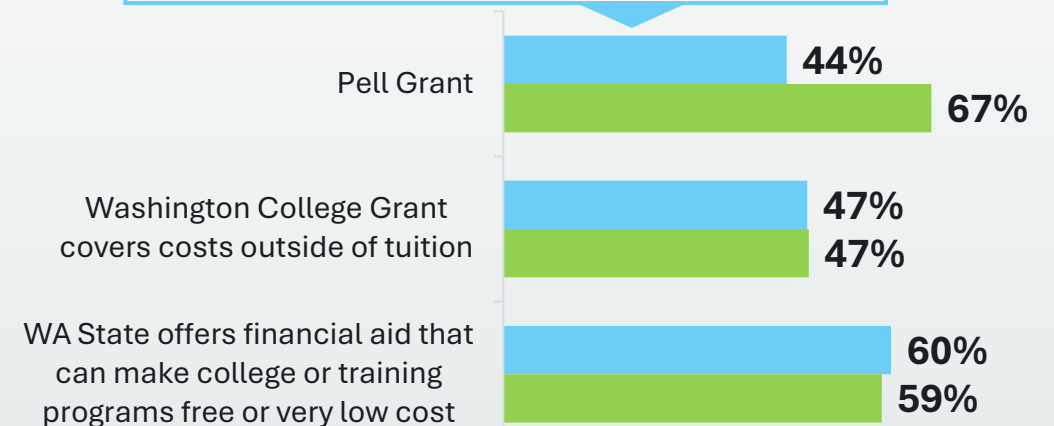
How well do you feel you understand and can navigate financial aid options (such as FAFSA, WASFA, scholarships, or grants)?



Awareness of specific financial aid options

■ Young Adults ■ Parents

Young adults who went to middle and high school in WA are **less aware of the Pell Grant** than those who went to school outside WA
School in WA 43% | School outside WA 52%

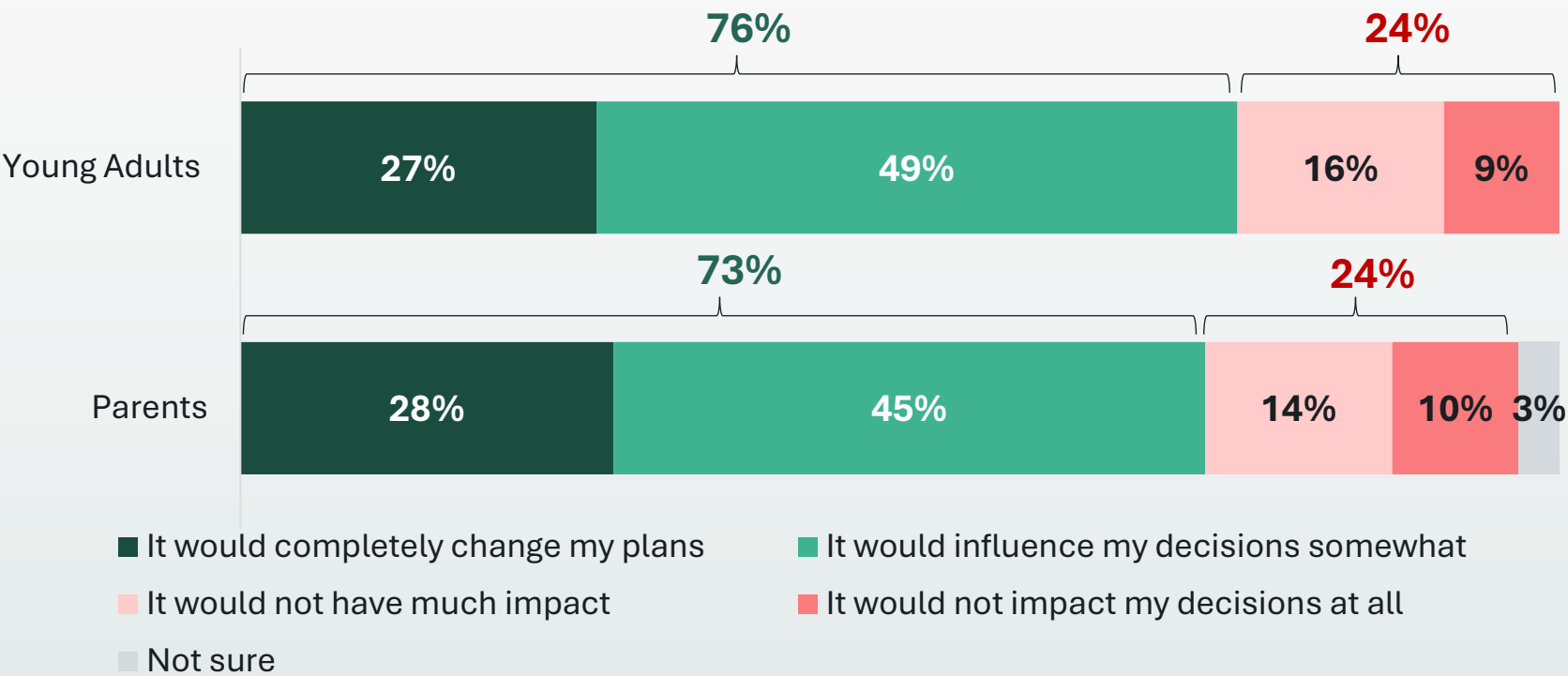


But knowledge of Washington-specific financial aid is lower for students from outside WA
School in WA 61% | School outside WA 48%

4

Affordability information could significantly change the direction young adults take

If you knew that college or training could be free or low cost through financial aid, how much would that impact your education or career decisions / the advice you give your child?



Young adults say the most helpful ways to learn about financial aid would be through...

A school counselor/advisor (32%)
 Online tools that show what they qualify for (29%)
 Step-by-step online guides/websites (27%)

What this Means: Strategic Priorities for Strengthening Washington's School-to-Career Ecosystem

Strategic Priority #4: Build understanding of WA State's financial aid resources

What the Data Say:

- 76% of young adults say they understand financial aid at least somewhat well, yet only 47% know the Washington College Grant can cover costs beyond tuition and 60% know WA aid can make college or training free or very low cost.
- If they knew this, 76% say it would influence their decisions.

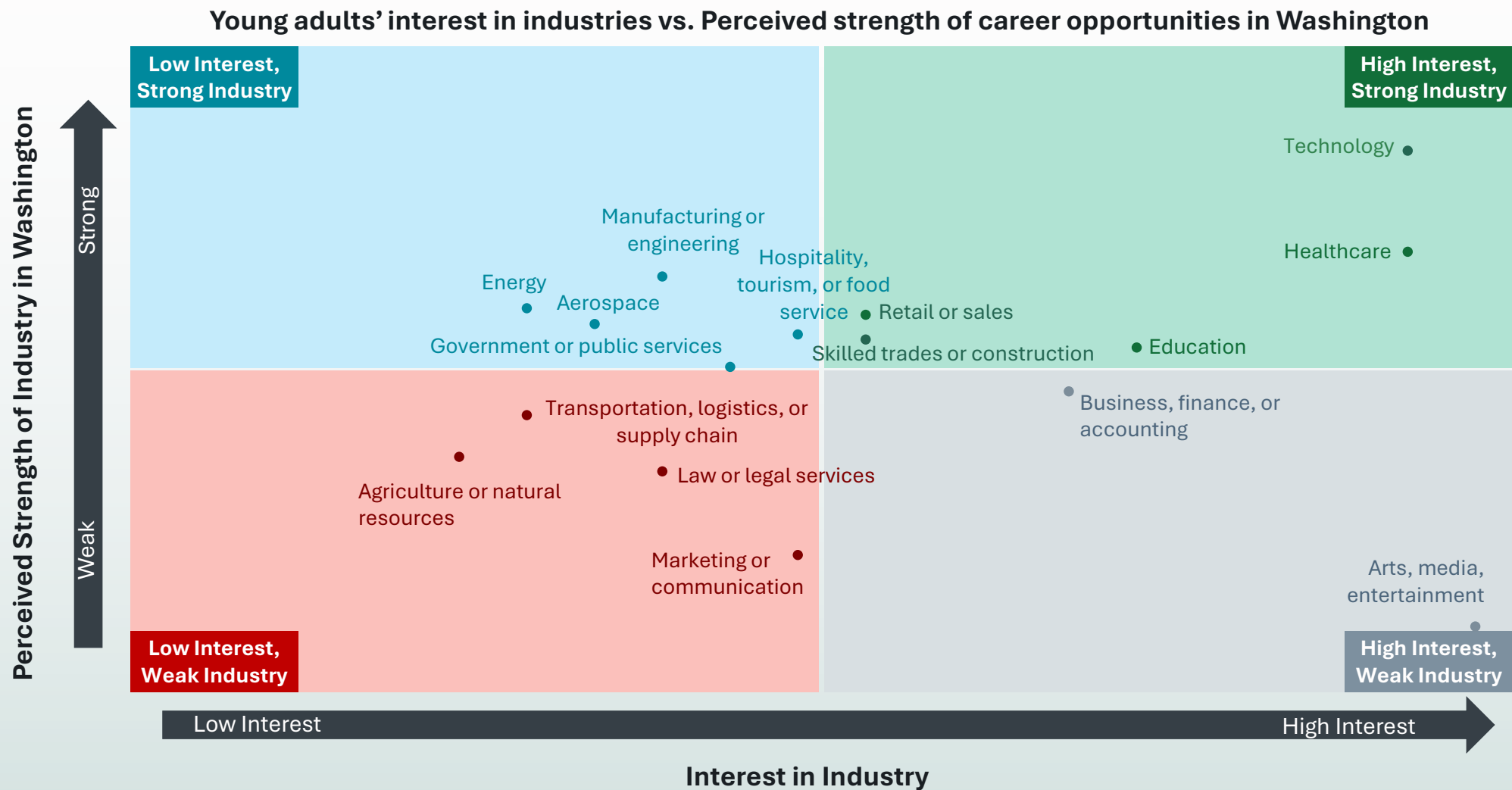
Recommendation:

- Reframe financial aid communication around “what this means for you,” rather than simply awareness of programs.
- Make affordability concrete before young adults rule pathways in or out.

Practical Solutions:

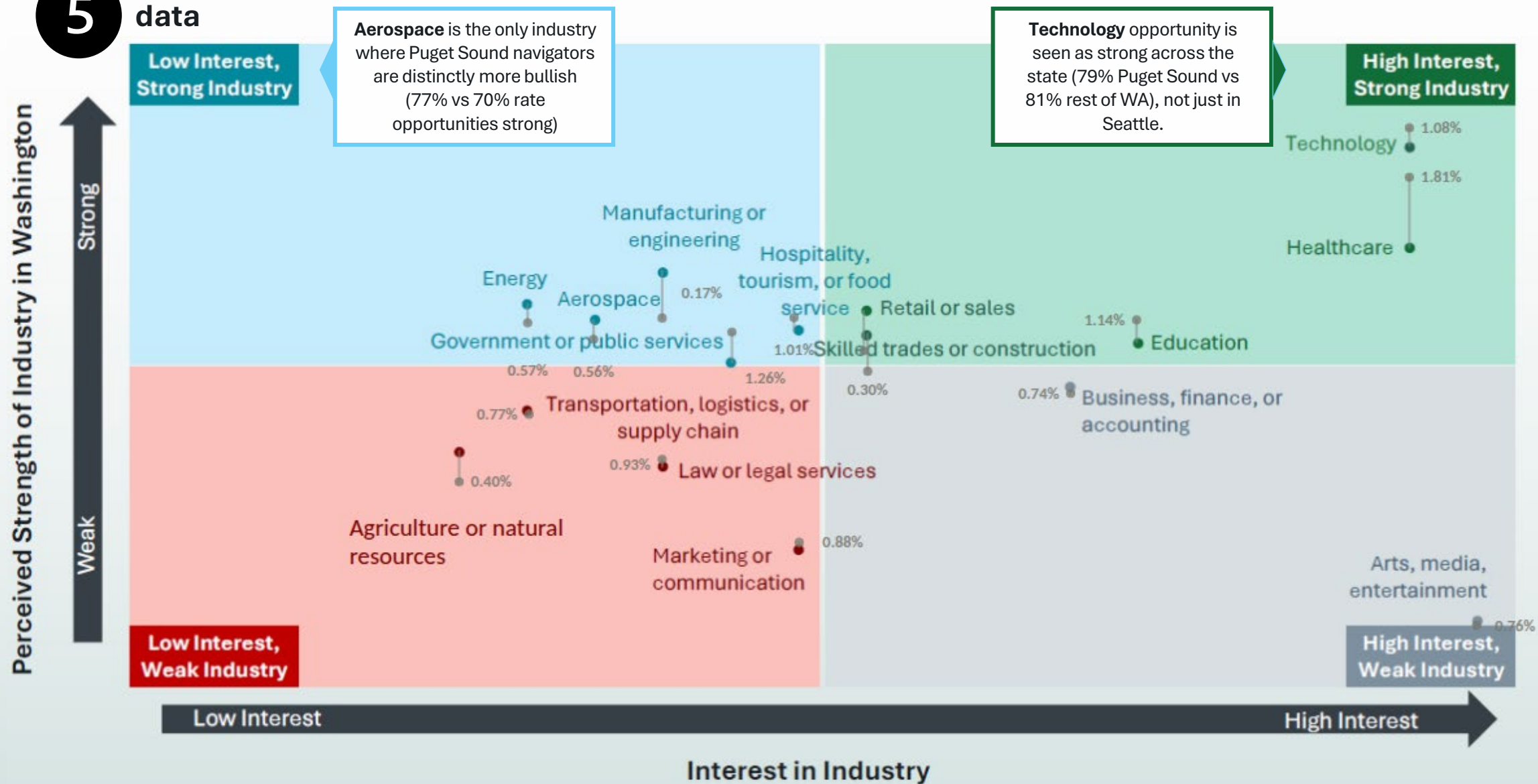
- Governor's Financial Aid Bill (making financial aid completion required for HS graduation).
- Ensure USE of HSBP student aspirations to connect to fin. aid use.
- SCALE best practices for addressing adult bias, family and community knowledge, and whole- school advising.

5 Closing Washington’s employment gap will require building interest in high-opportunity industries that young adults may currently overlook, such as manufacturing, aerospace, and hospitality



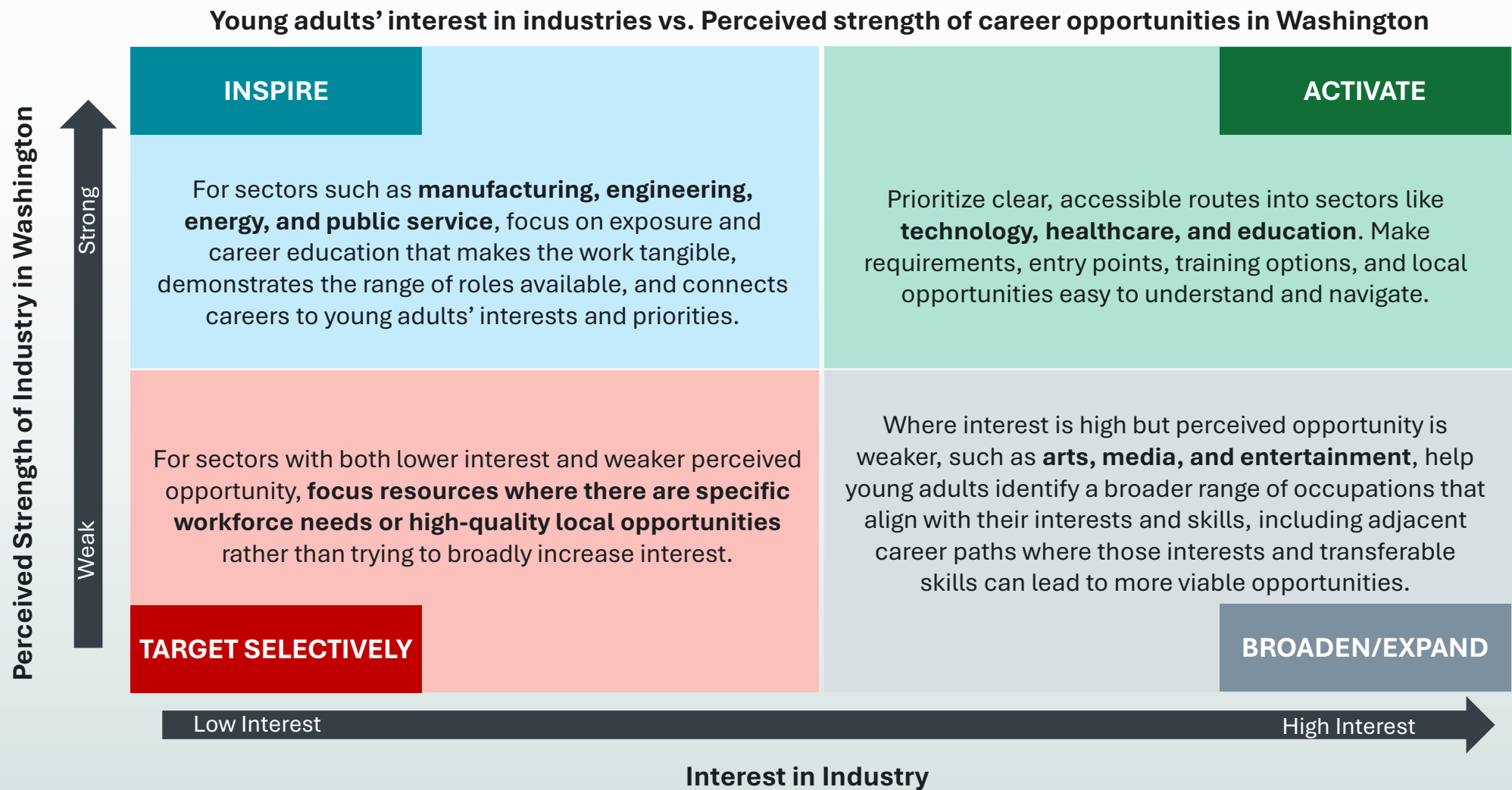
5

Young Adults' interest in industries vs perceived strength of career opportunities with industry growth data



Gray numbers show the industry growth as a weighted average of projected annual job-growth, relative to the statewide average (+0.83%).

5 Recommendations: Strength x Interest in Industry



What this Means: Strategic Priorities for Strengthening Washington's School-to-Career Ecosystem

Strategic Priority #5: Align aspirations with Washington's opportunity landscape

What the Data Say:

- Technology, healthcare, and education combine relatively high interest with strong perceived opportunities, while industries including manufacturing, engineering, energy, aerospace, and public service have stronger perceived & real opportunities but lower interest.
- Arts/media/entertainment attracts interest despite weaker perceived & real opportunity.

Recommendation:

- Do not simply steer young adults toward “high-demand” sectors. Broaden their understanding of and experience with jobs & careers within those sectors and connect opportunities to the interests and skills they already have.

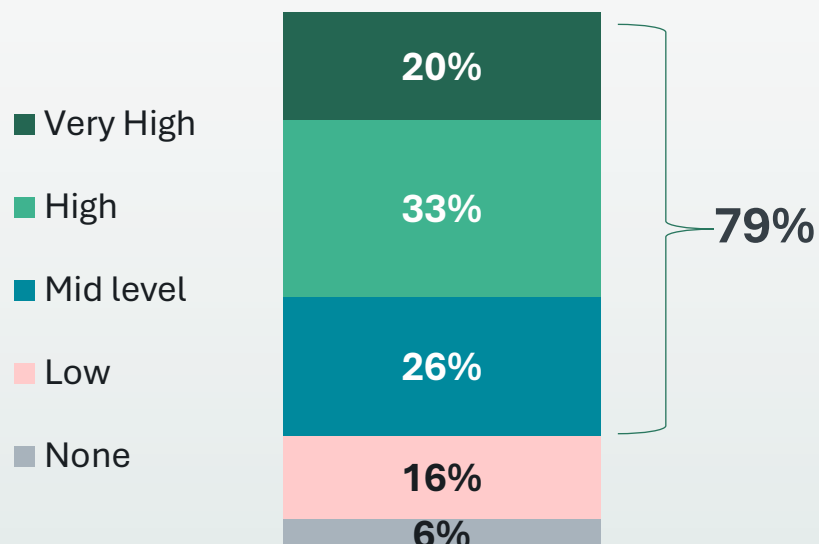
Practical Solutions:

- Ensure USE of HSBP student aspirations to connect to work-based experiences & pathway mapping.
- Regional coordination of employer-led pathway building to ensure students are exposed to new and burgeoning jobs & careers.

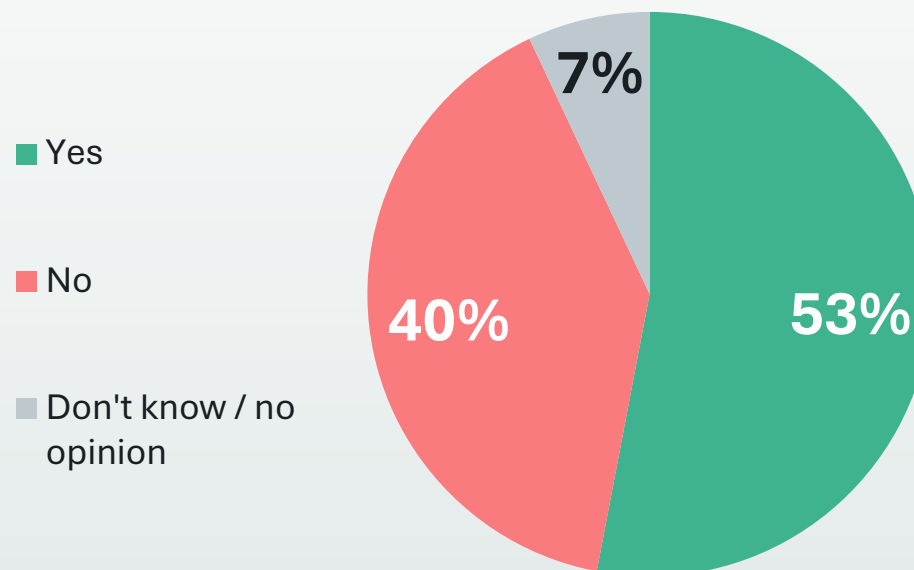
6 Employers are raising the AI bar faster than education is responding

Employers' view of AI skill requirements and AI/training/education

What degree of AI knowledge and skill does your organization require from entry level hires?



Do you think young adults' education or training is doing enough to help them develop the skills needed to use AI effectively?

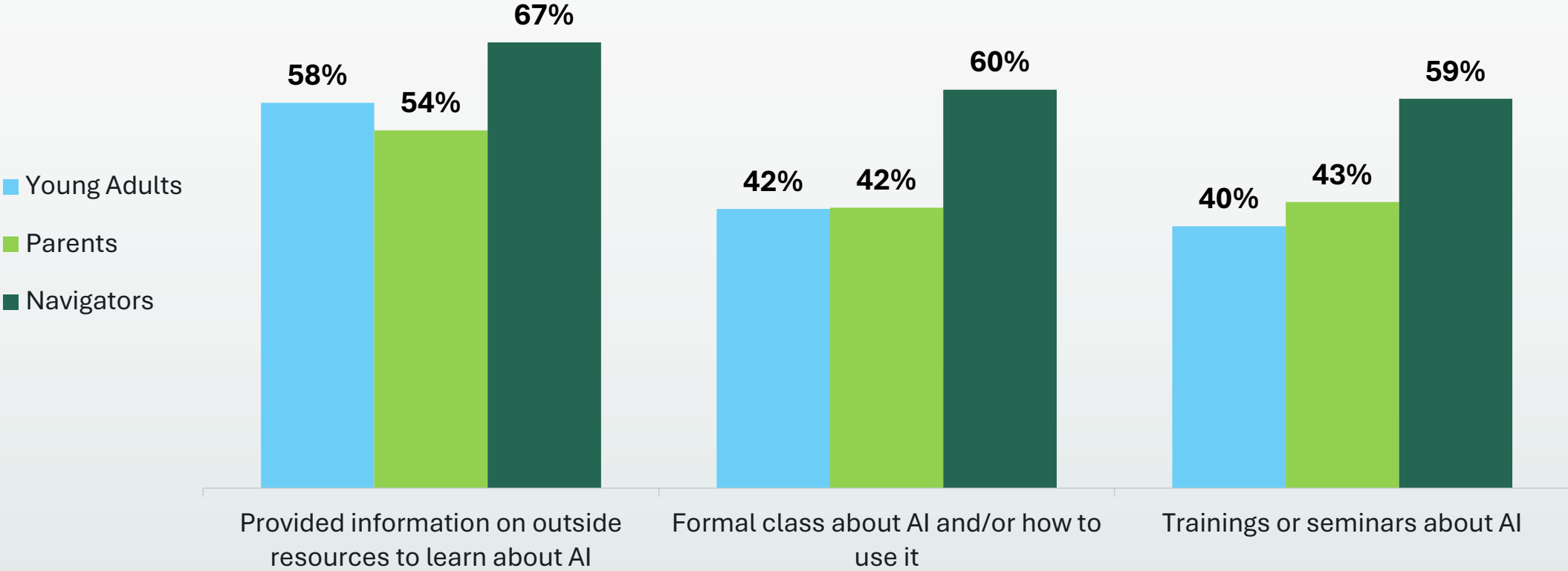


6

AI preparation is still too informal to meet quickly emerging workforce expectations

How education is helping young adults learn to use AI

Showing % of each audience who say each statement describes AI education and training



What this Means: Strategic Priorities for Strengthening Washington's School-to-Career Ecosystem

Strategic Priority #6: Close the emerging AI preparation gap

What the Data Say:

- 82% of young adults rate themselves as strong AI users and 79% of employers require at least mid-level AI skills, yet only 48% of young adults believe education is doing enough to prepare them.
- More young adults say education has discouraged or limited AI use (36%) than say it has helped them learn to use it (34%).

Recommendation:

- Move from restricting AI to building responsible, applied AI literacy.
- Young adults need to understand not only how to use AI tools, but how to use them critically, safely, and effectively in real workplace contexts.

Practical Solutions:

- Landscape analysis (underway) + recommendation (forthcoming) of K12 AI use and best practices.
- Drive recommendations for guidance and safety so people can move towards innovative solutions.

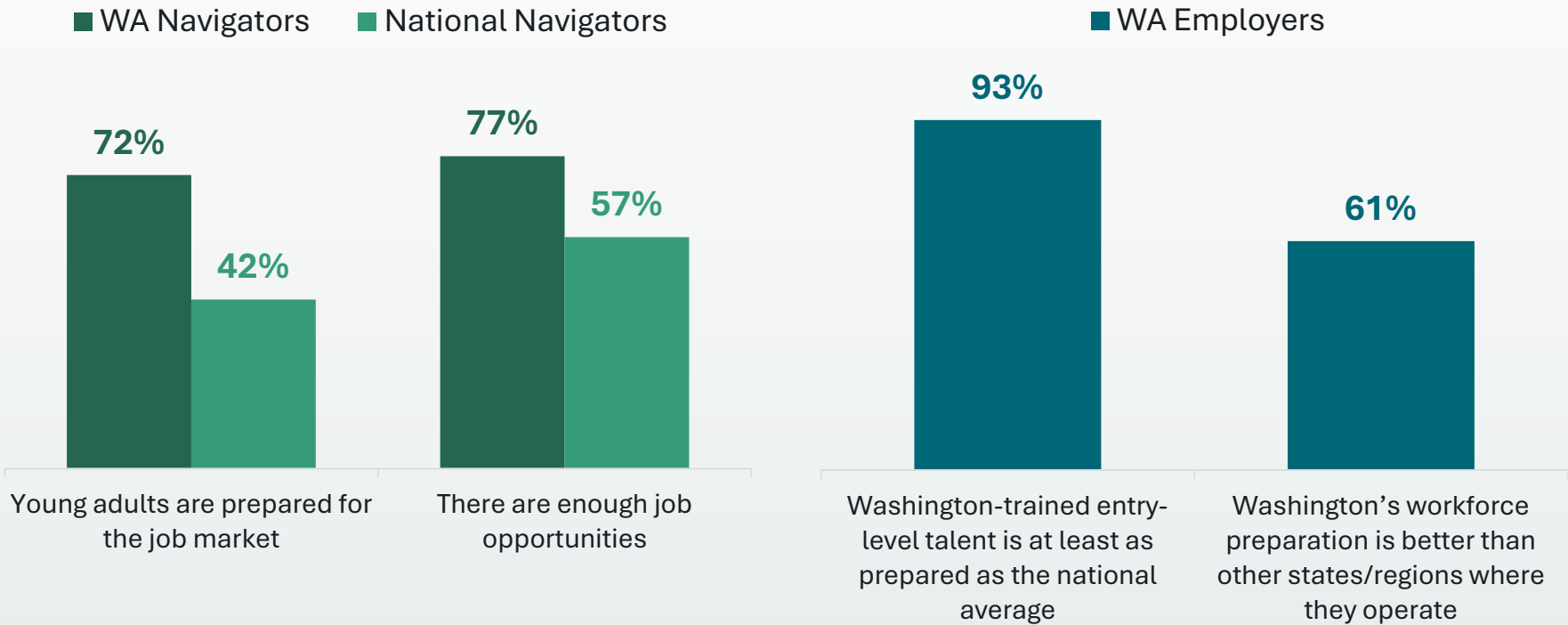


SECTION IV

How WA Compares

This section draws on The Broken Marketplace, a national study commissioned by the Schultz Family Foundation and conducted by HarrisX among more than 5,700 young adults, parents, navigators and educators, and employers. By comparing key themes and conclusions across the two studies, we highlight where Washington faces similar challenges and where its school-to-career ecosystem differs from the broader national landscape.

National Comparison: Washington’s infrastructure is stronger than the national picture, BUT...

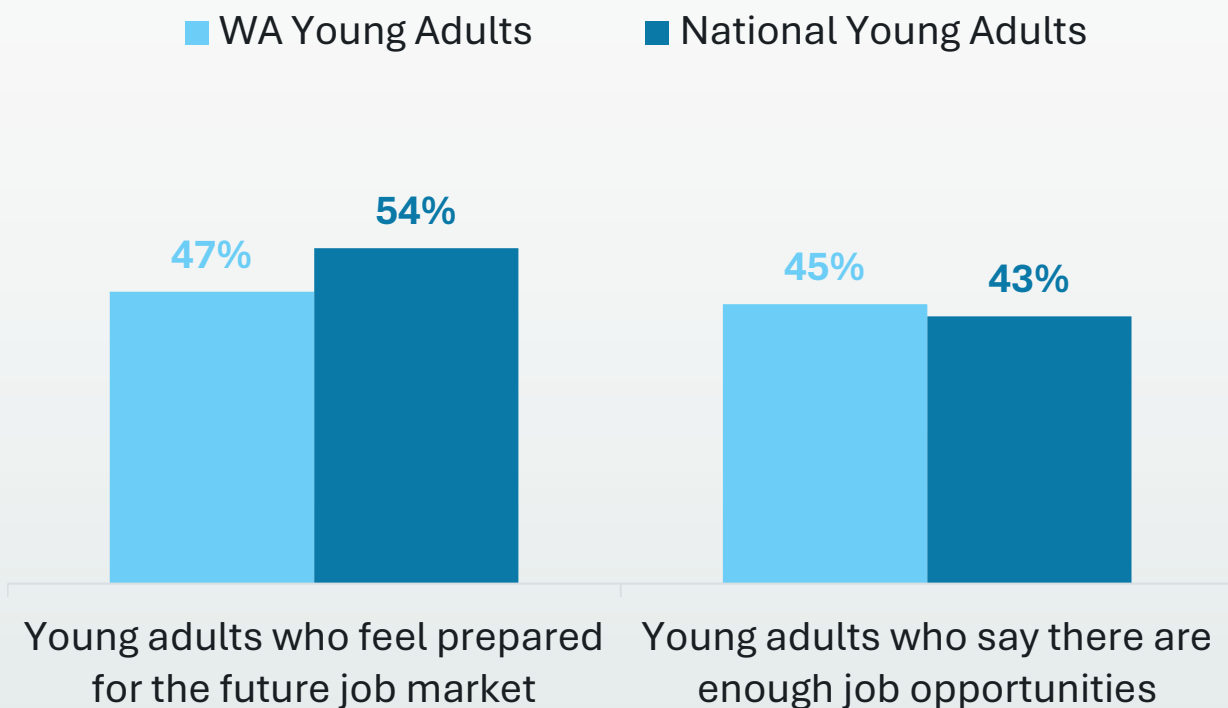


“I feel like Washington’s already kind of ahead of the curve with... these support services and training programs.” – WA Navigator, Career Counselor

“We've been having very good success in the Seattle and surrounding areas for recruiting entry level.” – WA Employer, Automotive industry

Takeaway:
Washington does not appear to have the same underlying system-confidence problem seen nationally. The people closest to the infrastructure see a comparatively strong ecosystem.

National Comparison: ...Young adults do not experience Washington's system as better, even when the infrastructure is



“I know that my university has a lot of resources that I can access, and there's lots of stuff online, but... I'm a very busy student with a busy schedule, and it can be hard to access those if I don't know where to go.”

-WA young adult, female, 18, 4-year college student

“There are good resources, but I always kind of missed them or just wasn't paying attention...I feel like most of the focus is on getting you through school...”

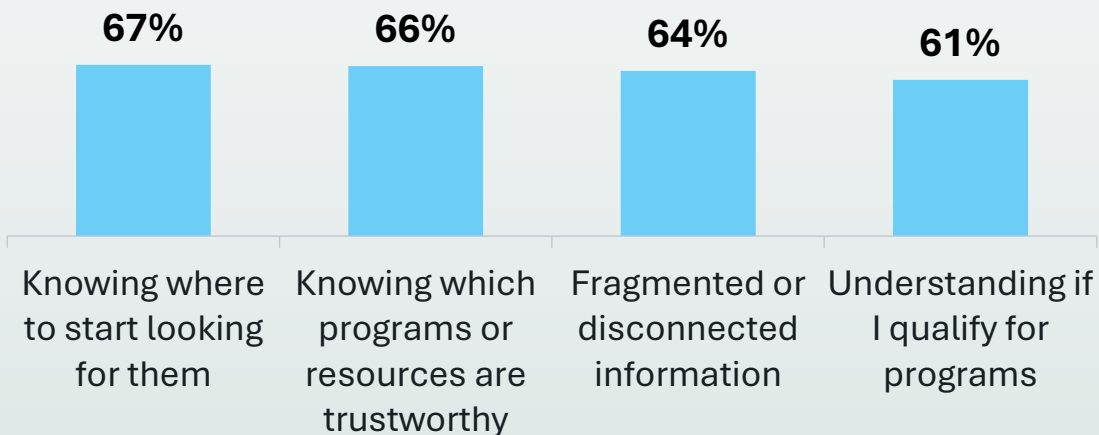
-WA young adult, male, 18, high school graduate

National Comparison: Washington does not need more programs, but needs better connection

Washington's programs and resources are strong:

- Young adults find available resources helpful when they use them
- Navigators say Washington's system is well-coordinated
- Employers rate Washington's young workforce highly compared to national average

But young adults still struggle to navigate the system. Most experiencing the following challenges:



Takeaways:

- Simplify navigation
- Improve resource visibility and personalization
- Strengthen trusted human guidance
- Make eligibility, relevance, and next steps clearer

WASHINGTON STATE ORIGINATORS:

Young adults educated in WA are more connected to local pathways and support than those who went to high school outside the state

Measure	MS and HS in WA	MS and HS outside	Gap
It's a challenge finding someone to guide/help me	53%	60%	-7
Aware of Washington-specific financial aid	61%	48%	+13
Aware of the Pell Grant (federal)	43%	52%	-9
Use CTE programs	30%	15%	+15
Use CTE Dual Credit	28%	15%	+13
Interested in a 4-year program	49%	39%	+10
Feel a 4-year program is encouraged to them	81%	71%	+10
Want clearer info on in-demand local careers	23%	26%	-3

● Leads among WA-educated ● Leads among outside-WA educated

WHAT IT MEANS

Rooted in the WA system

WA-educated young adults are far more likely to use state pathways — CTE (30% vs 15%), Dual Credit (28% vs 15%) — and to be steered toward 4-year programs (81% vs 71% encouraged).

Financial aid splits by system

They know WA-specific aid better (61% vs 48%), but are less aware of the federal Pell Grant (43% vs 52%) — each group knows the system it grew up in.

Outsiders lack a guide

Young adults educated outside WA are 7 pts more likely to struggle to find someone to guide them (60 vs. 53%).