



# What gives?

2023

Alumni  
Philanthropy  
Study



## Jason Simon

CEO, SimpsonScarborough

### Higher education is at a crossroads.

While the declining public perception of higher ed is no secret, the silent majority still believes in the power and value of higher education and its place in our society. Higher ed marketers and advancement leaders now have two choices: continue bemoaning the critics, or devote our attention to better understanding and serving those who believe in our mission.

SimpsonScarborough falls firmly in the latter camp. And our 2023 Alumni Philanthropy study supports this stance.

For this study, we surveyed more than 1,000 college-educated adults across the United States. 43% of the respondents were first-generation graduates; almost 80% make up to \$150,000 per year, and the majority were between 30–50 years old.

We wanted to understand how alumni view higher education, and to what extent they believe in its value. We were also curious to know what compels alumni to donate to higher education and how (or if) institutions could convince more alumni to give back to their alma mater.

Our study arrives at an interesting time. On the one hand, we know that, as recently as the summer of 2022, higher education continues to face declines in public perception. But we also know, via our friends at CASE, that higher education experienced a banner year for fundraising in FY2022.

Ultimately, the apparent contradictions between higher ed fundraising success and the research findings you see in this report left us with more questions than answers. And honestly, that's okay. At SimpsonScarborough, we take pride in our learner's mindset—we don't pretend to have all the answers, and we never have.

But we know asking the right questions leads to meaningful dialogue. That's really what this study is about. This report has layered insights from our primary research data with contextual secondary research findings. We've also shared preliminary takeaways from SimpsonScarborough and our colleagues within the industry, along with questions we're asking about our data. And we've sprinkled in examples of institutions demonstrating best practices in building deeper, more successful relationships with their alumni.

While we may not have all the answers (yet), we're taking the first steps in moving higher ed towards a united future—one where marketing and advancement professionals can work together in building up our industry.





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## Introduction

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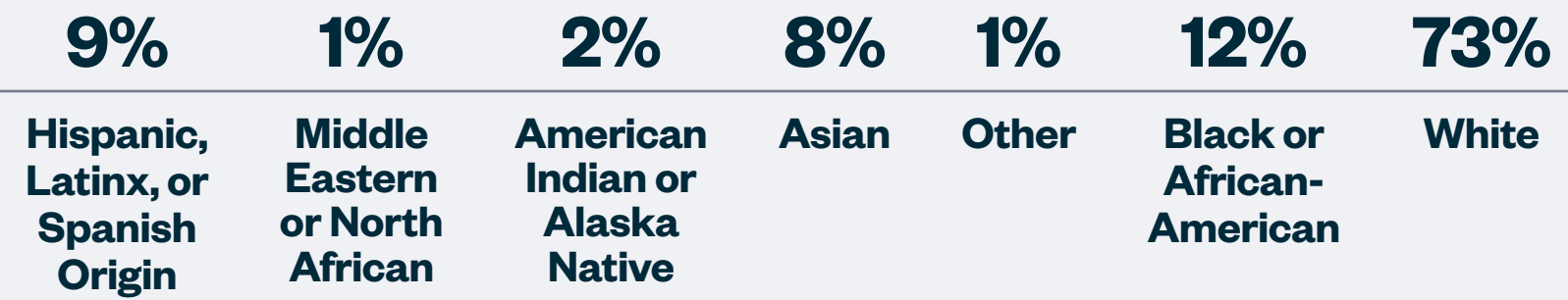
The key to unlocking the next generation of donors is not asking for money. **What Gives?**

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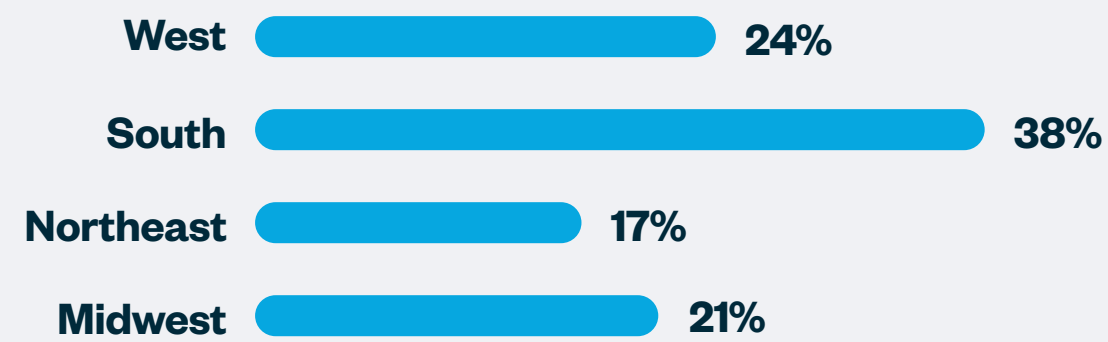
## About this Report

We surveyed 1,016 college-educated adults in the United States for their opinions on giving trends and perceptions of higher ed.

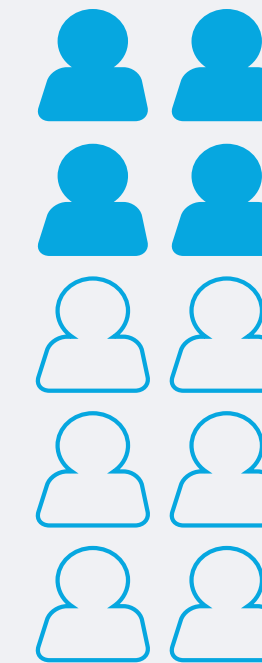
### Ethnicity



### Region

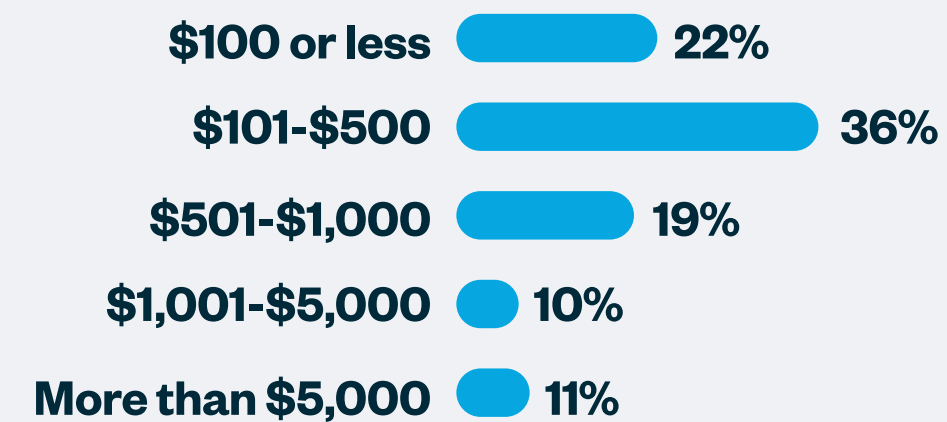


### First-Gen College Student



43%  
First-Gen

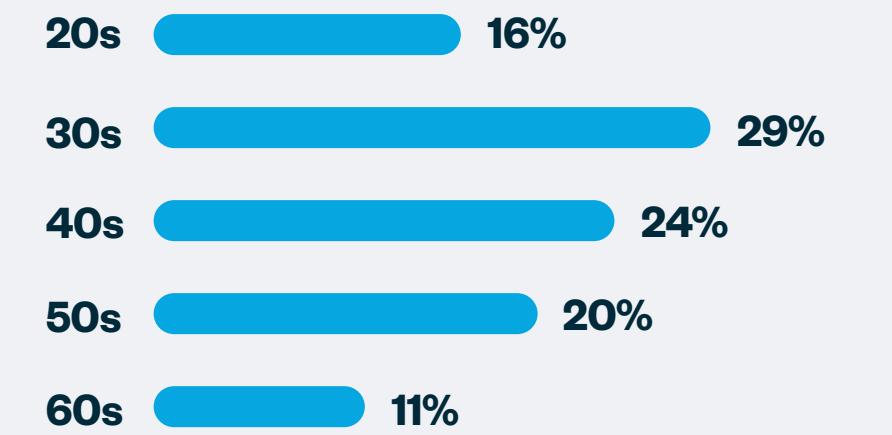
### Last Gift to Alma Mater



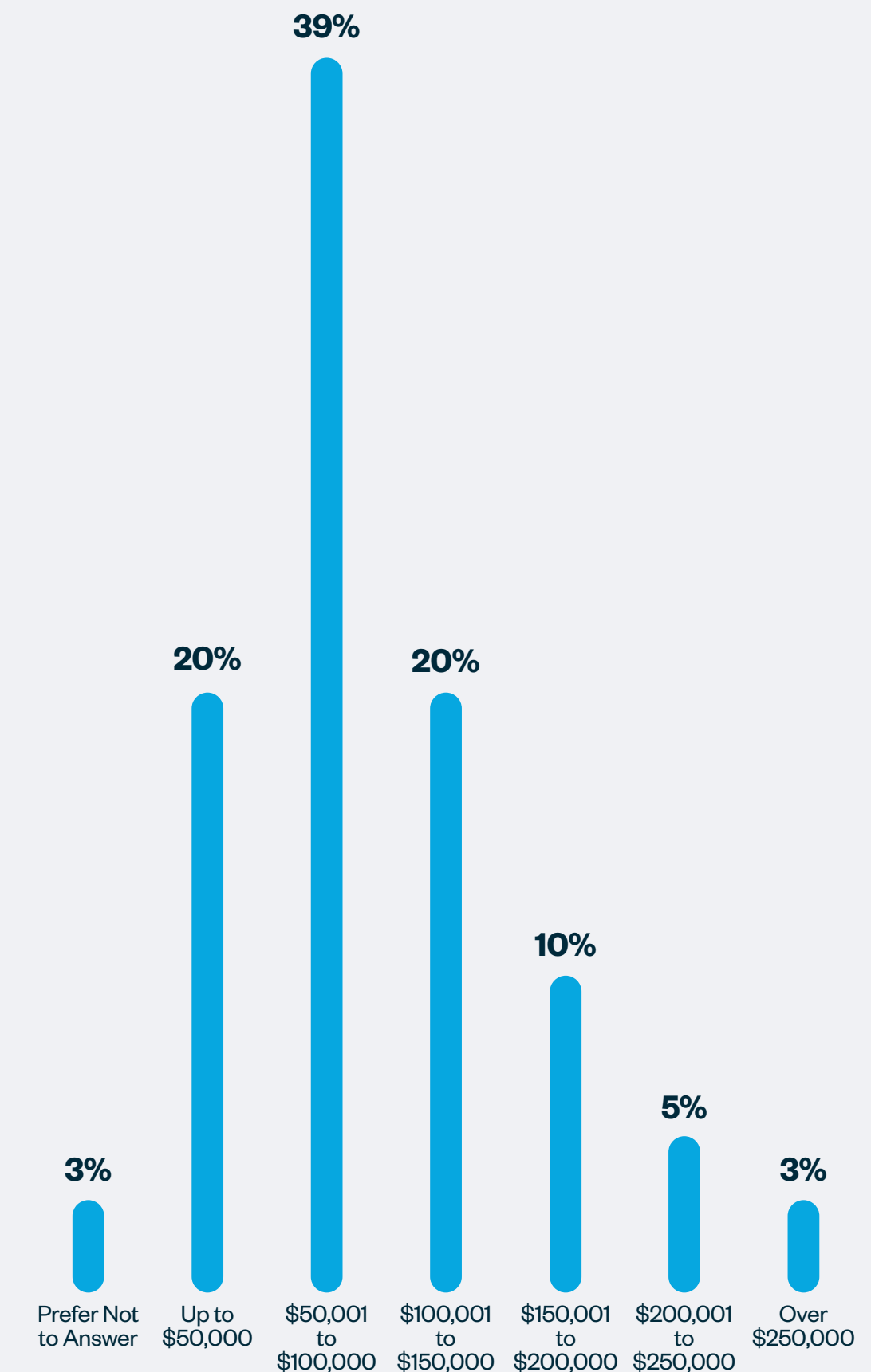
### Gender

60%  
Women  
39%  
Men

### Age



### 2022 Household Income







Finding

01

College-educated adults give, but higher ed is not a priority.

**What Gives?**



**Finding 01** College-educated adults give, but higher ed is not a priority.

**3 in 4** college-educated adults typically give to at least one cause or organization in a year, yet only 1 in 3 have given to their undergraduate alma mater.

It's also rare for non-alumni individuals to give to an institution they or their family did not attend — only 1 in 10 said they have done so.



**What Alumni Say:**

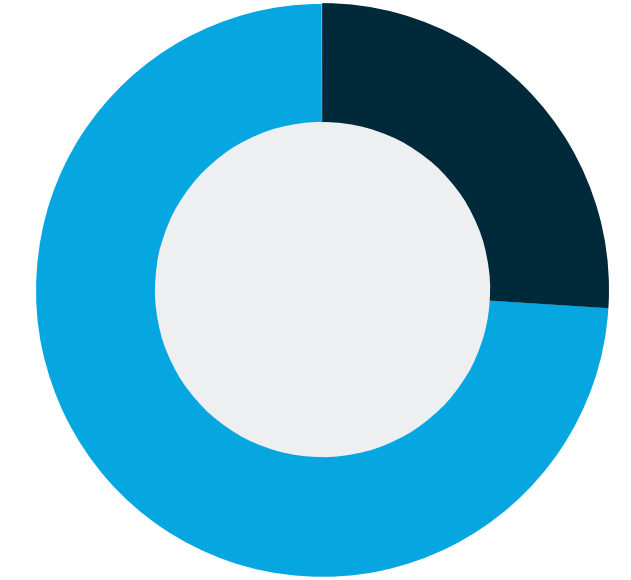
I enjoyed my college experience, felt it was a positive impact (I'm employed), and sure I'd go again. But there's no reason for me to give them money when I've already paid for the four years I was there.

**-Reddit user on r/college**

**Do you typically give to at least one cause or organization in a year?**

**Yes, 74%**

**No, 26%**

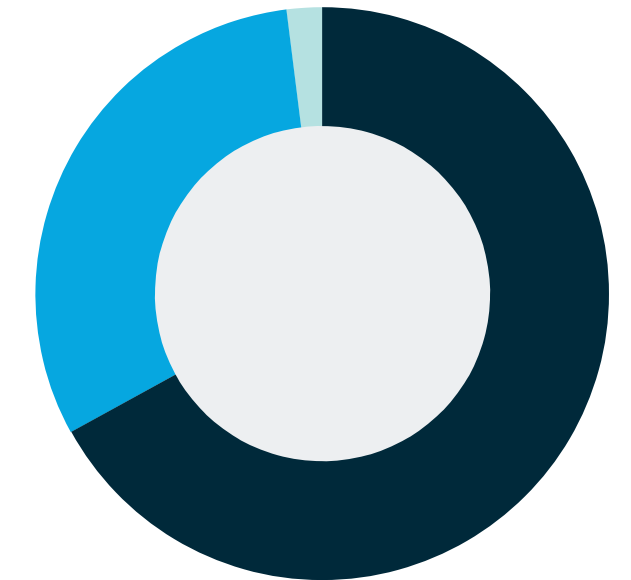


**Have you ever given to your undergraduate alma mater?**

**Yes, 31%**

**No, 67%**

**Don't Know, 2%**

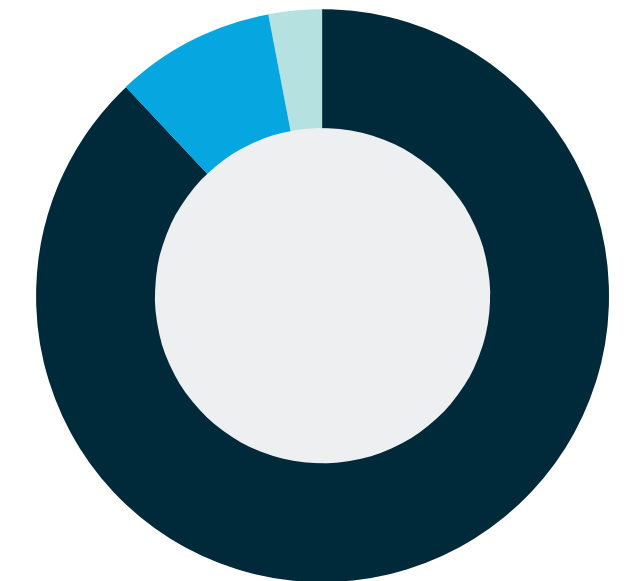


**Have you ever given to a school that you or a member of your family did not attend?**

**Yes, 9%**

**No, 88%**

**Don't Know, 3%**





**Finding 01** College-educated adults give, but higher ed is not a priority.

**So, why aren't alumni giving back to their alma maters?**  
 Among the alumni surveyed, the top hesitations all centered around cost.



**What Alumni Say:**

I appreciate my alma mater, but they are in a decent financial position already. I tend to donate to more desperate causes — feeding the hungry, for example, or taking care of the homeless. Those seem like better impact for my charity dollars than giving to a university that already has a sizable endowment.

-Reddit user on r/college

A 2019 American Public Media Report

found that most Americans believed state spending for public universities and colleges has increased or at least held steady over the last 10 years. In fact, states collectively scaled back their annual higher ed funding by \$9 billion during that time, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reported.

	Alumni who give to their alma mater	Alumni who do not give to their alma mater
I don't have the money	28%	36%
My money has greater impact at other organizations	19%	26%
I already paid enough in tuition	18%	39%
I don't know how my gift will be used	13%	16%
I've received too many solicitations	11%	8%
My alma mater doesn't need the money	10%	18%
I'm still paying off student loans	9%	22%
I don't know how giving to my alma mater would make an impact	9%	11%
I don't feel connected to my alma mater	8%	18%
My taxes support higher education	8%	11%
I don't think my gift will make a difference	8%	9%
I prefer to give to other academic institutions I attended instead	6%	1%
I prefer to give back in non-monetary ways	6%	7%
I don't feel like my alma mater has made an impact on my life	5%	7%
I'm not aware of all the available mechanisms to give	5%	2%
I didn't have a good experience as a student	4%	6%



**Finding 01** College-educated adults give, but higher ed is not a priority.

**But even among college-educated adults who regularly give to their alma mater, higher education is not identified as a giving priority.**

**What are they giving to?** Causes such as animal welfare, poverty and homelessness initiatives, and children’s and family services top the list. These causes are united in the way they elicit emotion. For marketing and advancement leaders, the importance of aligning fundraising pillars to specific causes that elicit a similar sense of emotion, such as campus food pantries to combat food insecurity, can’t be overstated.



Connecting with any audience means making them feel actively involved and emotionally invested. For alumni, that may be as simple as holding up a mirror. Reminding them that they’re evidence of the good their alma mater—and higher ed in general—is doing. And that their volunteerism (or gift) will only amplify the positive change they themselves are making in the world.

– **Mick Sutter**,  
Executive Creative Director, SimpsonScarborough

According to the 2022 CASE Voluntary Support for Education survey,

higher ed institutions reported a record year of charitable giving — \$59.5 billion in FY2022 (a 12.5% increase). Alumni donations make up about 25% of the reported total, and of that, 80% comes from graduates who have been out of college for at least 30 years.

	Alumni who give to their undergraduate Alma Mater	Alumni who do not give to their undergraduate alma mater
<b>Children’s and Family Service</b>	46%	36%
<b>Animal Welfare</b>	40%	43%
<b>Food Pantries</b>	37%	39%
<b>Poverty and Homelessness Initiatives</b>	37%	35%
<b>Disaster Relief</b>	33%	29%
<b>Church/Religious Institutions</b>	30%	27%
<b>Human Rights</b>	26%	23%
<b>Healthcare Organizations</b>	25%	21%
<b>Veterans</b>	24%	21%
<b>Environmental Issues</b>	24%	21%
<b>Women’s Issues</b>	22%	24%
<b>Public Colleges/Universities</b>	19%	6%
<b>Elementary Schools or High Schools</b>	16%	16%
<b>My Children’s School(s)</b>	16%	16%
<b>Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Initiatives</b>	14%	11%
<b>Police/Fire Departments</b>	13%	11%
<b>Political Organizations</b>	11%	4%
<b>Visual and Performing Arts</b>	10%	9%
<b>Private Colleges/Universities</b>	9%	4%
<b>Community Colleges</b>	9%	3%

**Finding 01** College-educated adults give, but higher ed is not a priority.

Another key difference between higher education and the causes that are most likely to receive donations from college-educated adults: the transactional nature of their relationship with higher education.

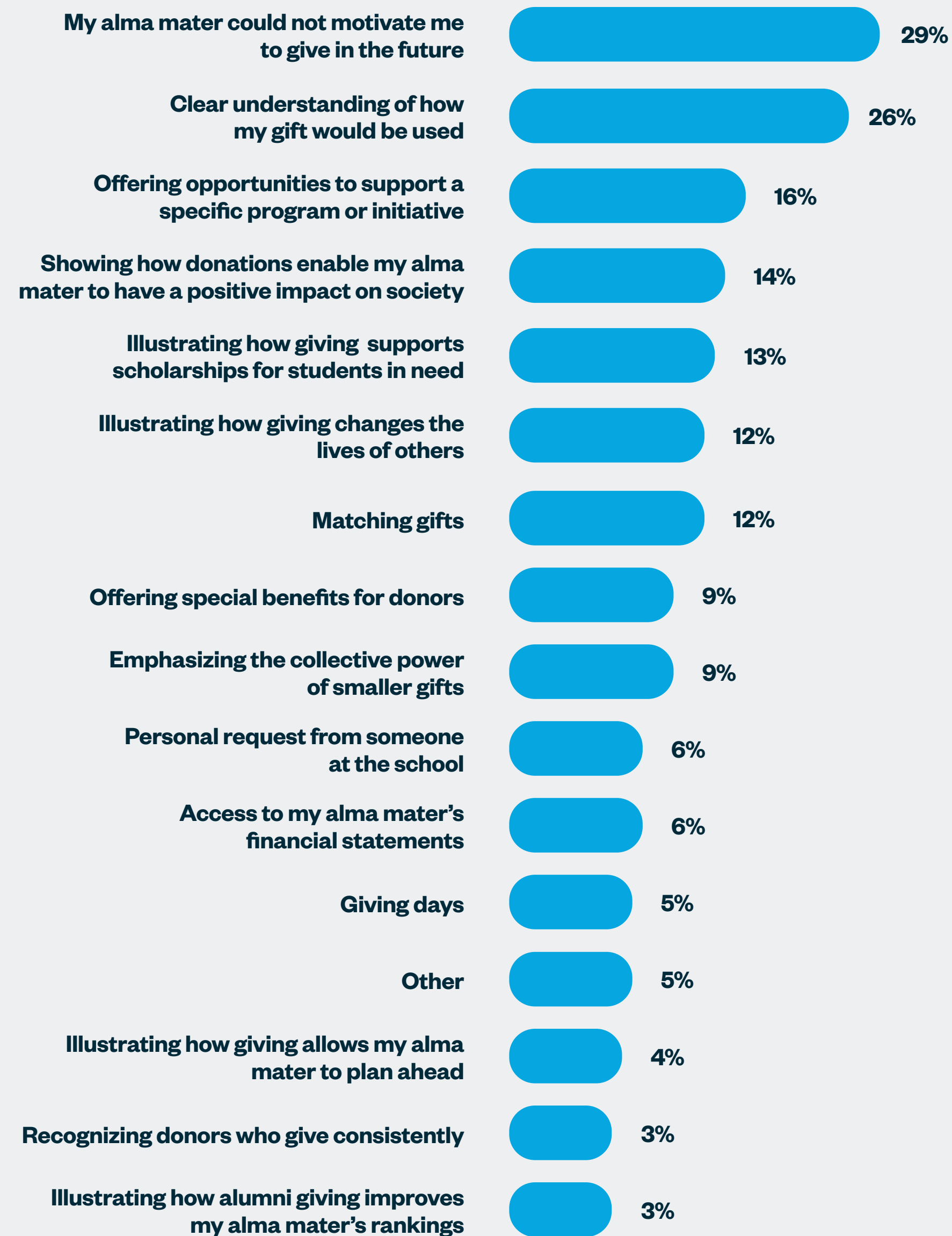
When non-givers were asked what would motivate them to give to their alma mater in the future, the top reason was, “if I had a better understanding of how my gift would be used.”



**What Alumni Say:**

The organizations I donate to provide evidence of exactly where the money we donate goes and how that money is impacting those receiving the help. And, being able to talk to those individuals receiving the help personally to see if it’s really helping them.

-Reddit user on r/college





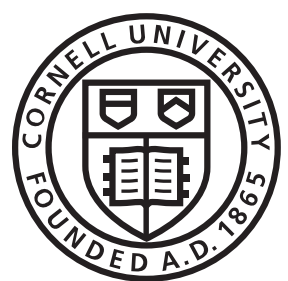
# Cornell University: Doing the Greatest Good

Every marketing professional understands the basic marketing funnel: build awareness, nurture audiences, convert them to customers, and try to retain them.

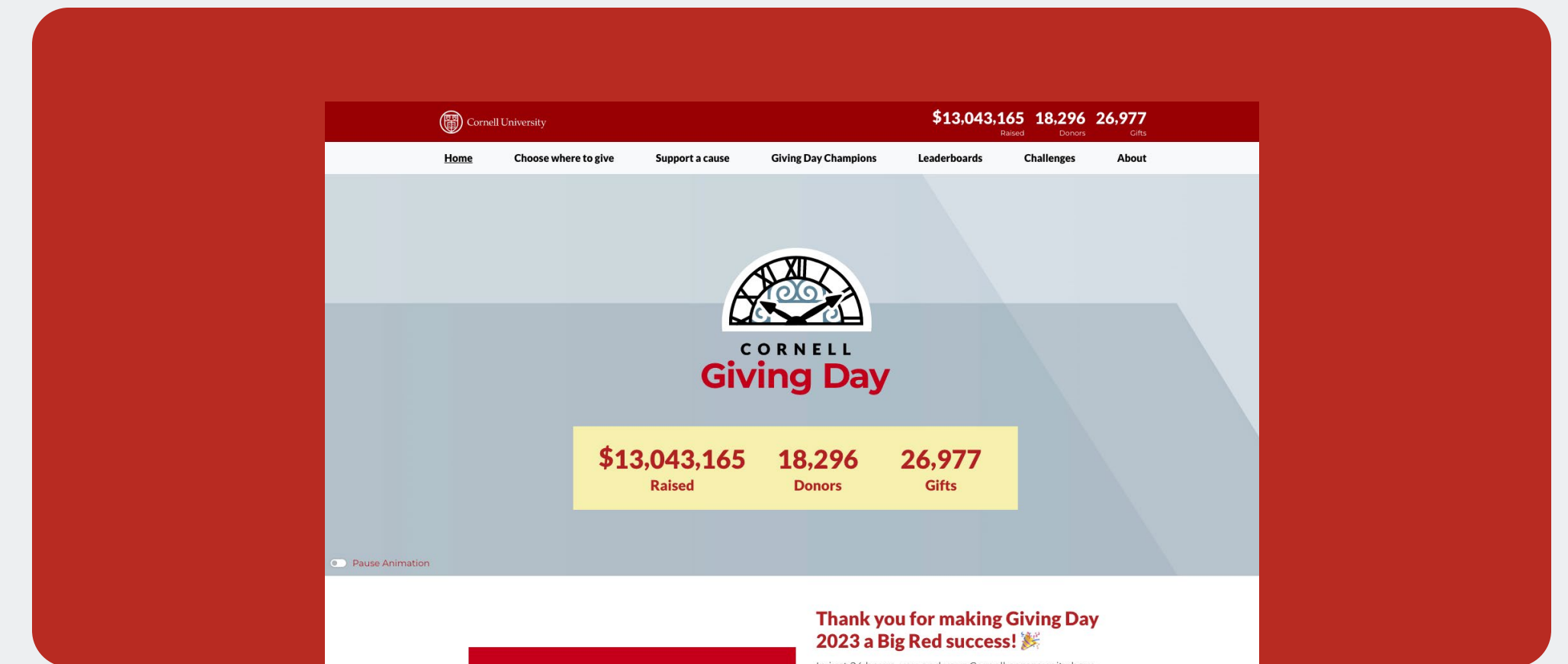
But for Ashley Budd, too many higher ed advancement shops focus solely on the conversion step. “If you think of communication messaging like a pie chart,” Budd says, “too much of the pie is made up of solicitations and other asks. There needs to be a better balance.”

Ashley directs advancement marketing at Cornell University, where that balance is paramount. Cornell is amidst a \$5 billion comprehensive campaign, with an additional target of connecting at least 200,000 Cornell alumni back to their alma mater. It also runs one of the most successful Giving Days in the nation, a day that regularly drives millions of fundraising dollars for the University and doubles as its number-one donor acquisition event.

But even when looking at their own marketing funnel, Budd realized they didn’t have enough content that served the nurture—or “why give”—stage of the funnel. So in January 2023, two months before The University’s Giving Day, her team published a series of “Why Give” content, both in long-form articles and videos. The timing was intentional. Budd says that cultivation messages are most effective during times of the year when giving is slow. So Cornell also emphasizes cultivation messaging in the build-up to giving events to support the following solicitation messages.



Cornell University



From a messaging standpoint, Cornell addressed common questions about the role fundraising plays in Cornell’s operating budget, misconceptions surrounding their endowment, the spending power of current-use gifts of all sizes, and the value of volunteering for alumni without the financial means to give financially.

“People want to know where their gift goes and why every dollar matters,” says Budd, who has long been inspired by Kickstarter and the concept of crowdfunding. “That’s especially true for Millennial donors and younger audiences.”

Cornell’s emphasis on awareness and cultivation helped the University publish a different kind of message in March; one of celebration and gratitude. Giving Day 2023 raised more than \$13 million from 18,000+ donors, smashing records from previous years. Those gifts will support students and researchers across campus and build momentum for the [To Do the Greatest Good campaign](#), a campaign that, while only just past the halfway point, is already 80% of the way toward the goal of engaging 200,000 Cornell alumni.

**That’s crowdfunding at its finest.**

**Finding 01** College-educated adults give, but higher ed is not a priority.

**63% of non-givers and 58% of givers indicate “supporting a mission that is meaningful to me” as the top reason for giving back to any organization (not just higher education).** Additionally, non-givers and givers equally rate “helping address a societal problem/need” as the second highest motivation for giving.

The top reasons for giving are consistent across audiences, but farther down, gaps emerge between those who give to their alma mater and those who don't. These gaps of opinion regarding other motivations include:

- **Giving back to an organization out of gratitude** (45% givers and 38% non-givers)
- **Showing my pride in an organization** (20% givers and 15% non-givers)
- **Supporting innovation or new ideas/initiatives** (20% givers and 12% non-givers)
- **Paying it forward** (39% givers and 35% non-givers)



**What the Experts Say:**

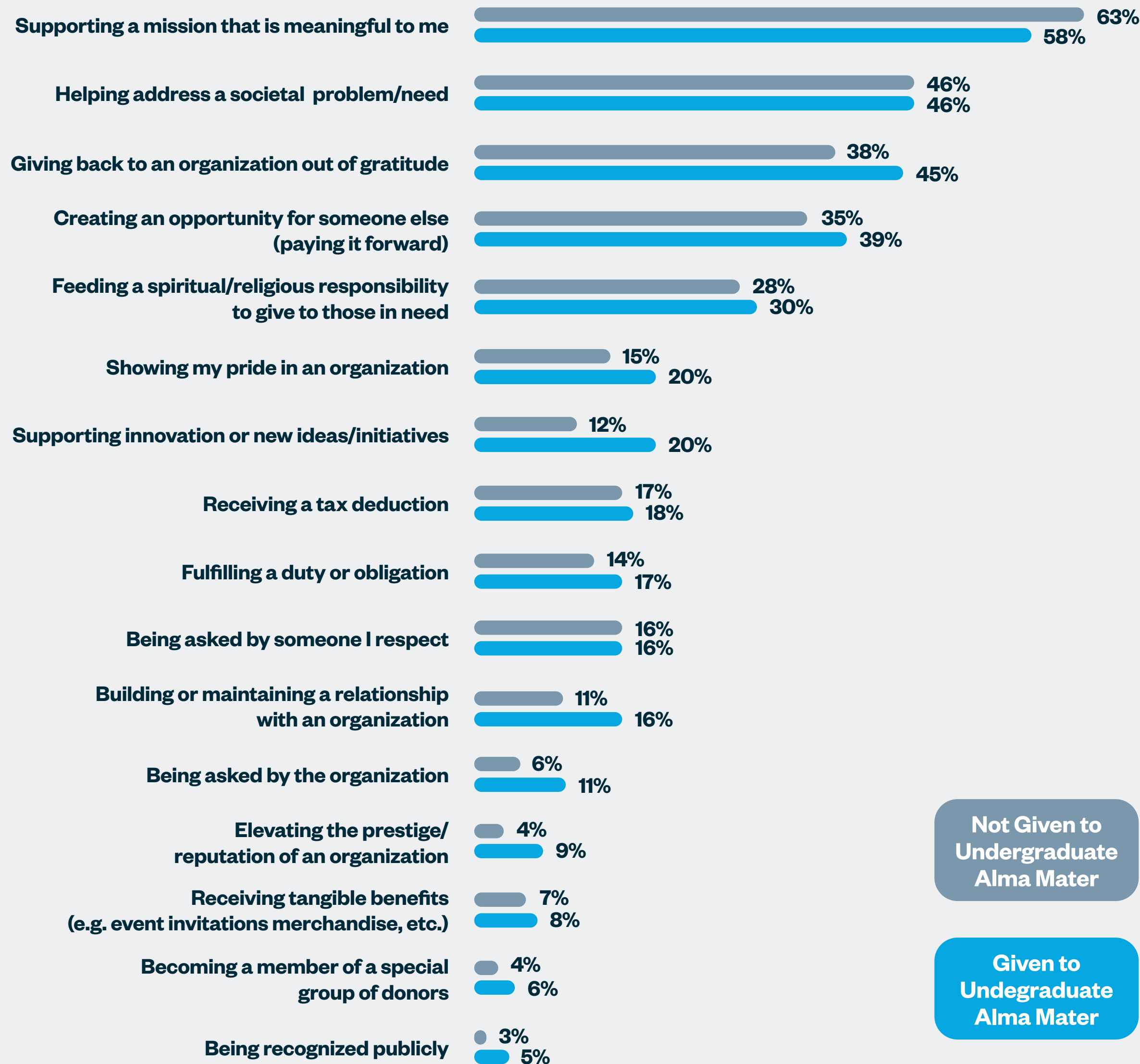
Current trends are underlining what we have long known: that donors, and especially younger donors, give to causes that they are passionate about. It is incumbent upon communications and development teams to collaboratively elevate such causes within our institutions to enable these donors to give through, and not just to, our colleges and universities.

– **Luke Anderson**

Vice President for Communications & Marketing, Emory University

– **Josh Newton**

Senior Vice President for Advancement & Alumni Engagement, Emory University



Not Given to Undergraduate Alma Mater

Given to Undergraduate Alma Mater



# What Gives?

## The Good News:

College-educated adults are **philanthropic**.



**3 in 4** give to at least one cause per year.

They indicate “**supporting a mission that is meaningful to me**” as the top reason to give to any organization.

## The Bad News:

Higher ed is a **low priority** on their list of philanthropic causes.

The reason? Our findings indicate the main hesitations all revolve around cost.

Between the price of tuition and the burden of student loan debt still plaguing many graduates today, many alumni feel like they’ve already paid enough to their alma maters. It’s clear that colleges and universities are not viewed through the same lens as other non-profit organizations, and the cost of attendance and transactional nature of paying tuition for an education likely contributes to this.

It’s also clear that simply communicating the mission and values of our institutions isn’t enough to overcome the perceptions of cost and value, especially for those who do not give. Strategic marketing efforts that elicit emotion, communicate the greatest areas of need, and explain how donations can directly benefit students are a strong first step in overcoming the negative perceptions that cloud institutional fundraising efforts.

## Questions to Consider:

**The national narrative around the cost of a college degree has clear ramifications for alumni philanthropy.**

How is your institution owning the narrative around cost?

Can you frame the topic of cost into a compelling reason to give back for the benefit of current and future students?

**Consider your own individual philanthropic priorities.**

How do the organizations you support communicate their philanthropic needs, and what could your institution learn from them?

How can your institution communicate giving priorities that connect with your alumni’s sense of pride, gratitude, and desire to make an impact on students?

Finding

02



Alumni take pride in their own college experience, but not in the state of higher ed today.

**What Gives?**



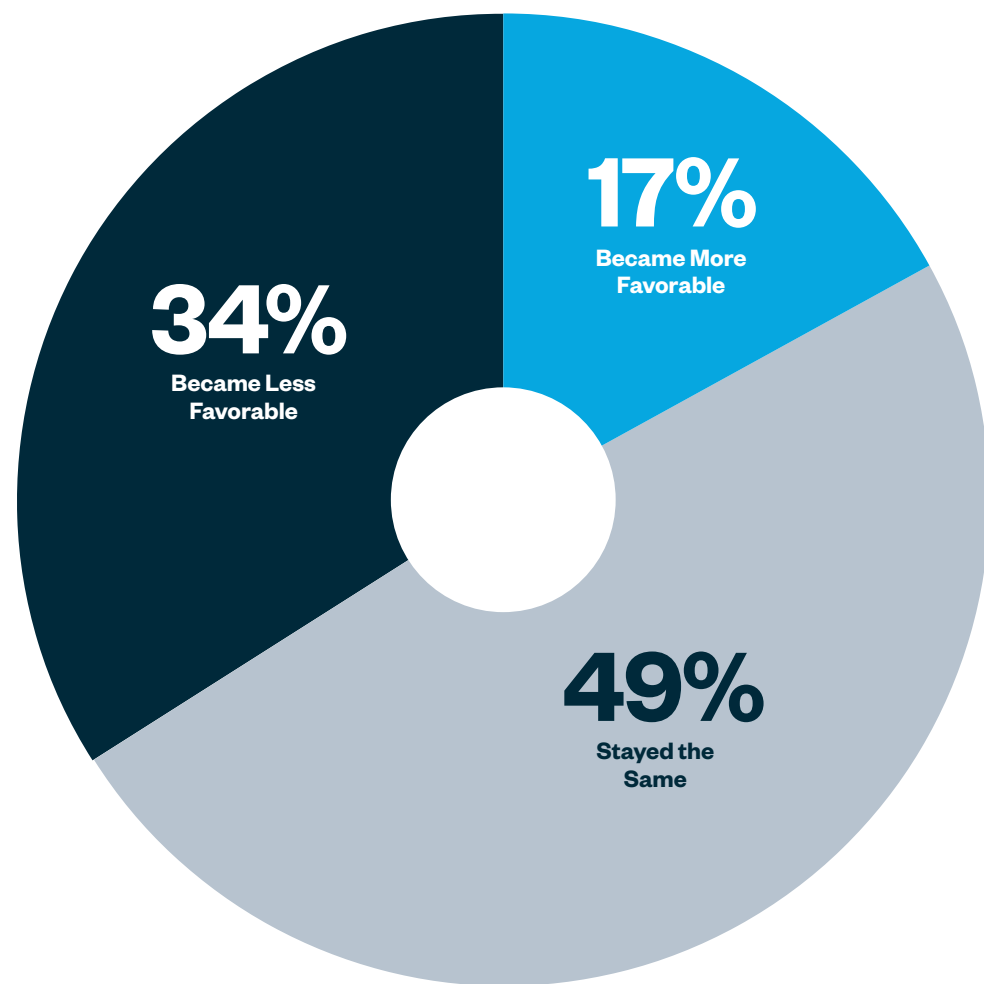
**Finding 02**

Alumni take pride in their own college experiences, but not in the state of higher ed today.

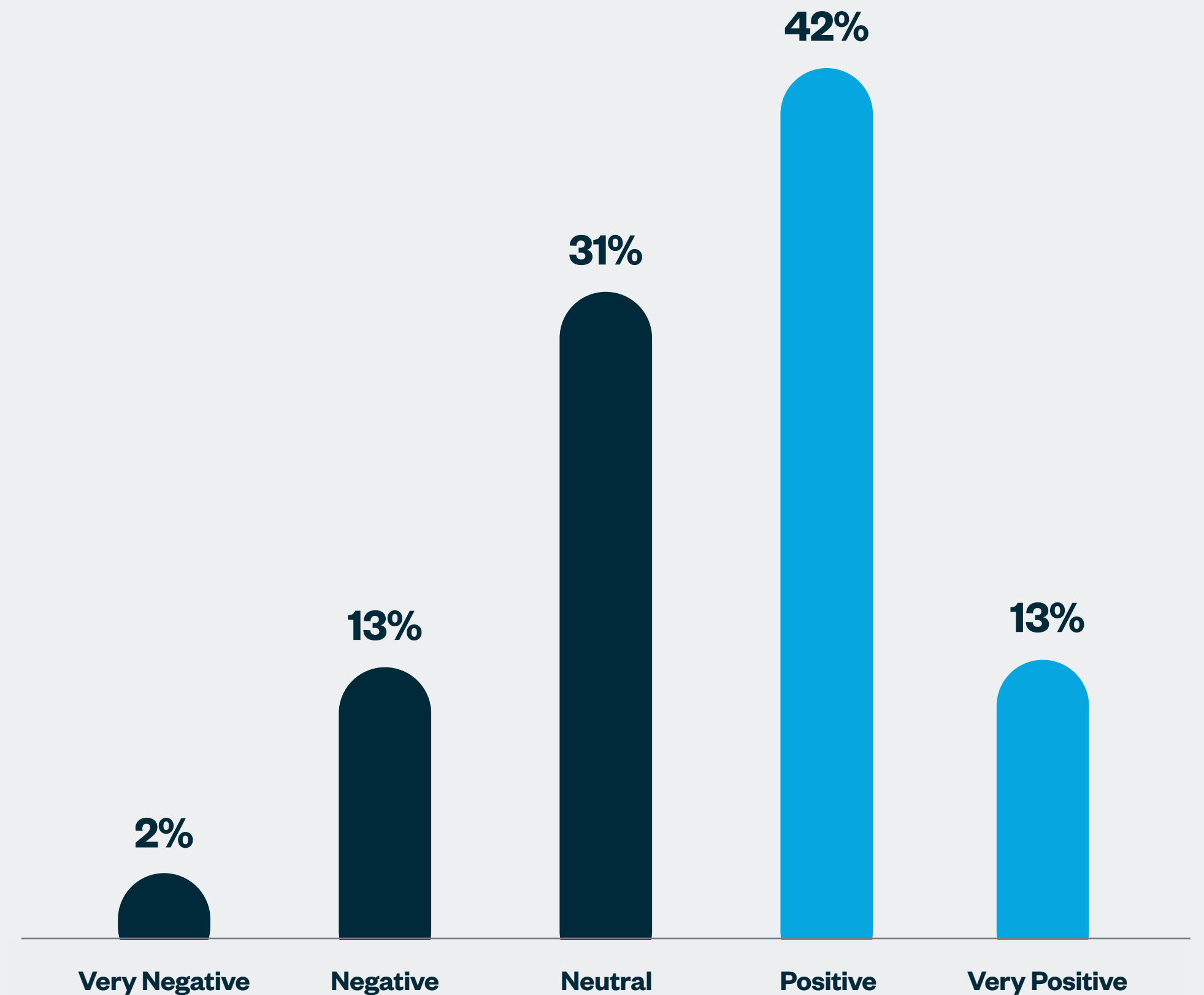
While most college-educated adults have a positive perception of higher ed, there are warning signs within the data. When asked about their opinion of higher ed today, only 1 in 3 college-educated adults say they have a very positive opinion. The same percentage indicate that they have a negative opinion.

More concerning, 34% of alumni say their opinion of higher ed has become less favorable over the past three years — twice the number who say their opinion has become more favorable.

In the last three years, has your opinion of colleges and universities become more favorable, less favorable, or stayed the same?



How would you describe your current opinion of college and universities in the U.S.?



**Finding 02**

Alumni take pride in their own college experiences, but not in the state of higher ed today.

When asked about their opinions on the impact of higher education on the U.S. today, only 9% of alumni surveyed say that the industry has a very positive effect. While that figure is low, it's worth noting that only 5% believe that higher ed has a very negative effect on the country.

SimpsonScarborough's 2022 National Prospective Student Survey

showed that high school seniors still value a college education.

87% of high school seniors plan to enroll in college

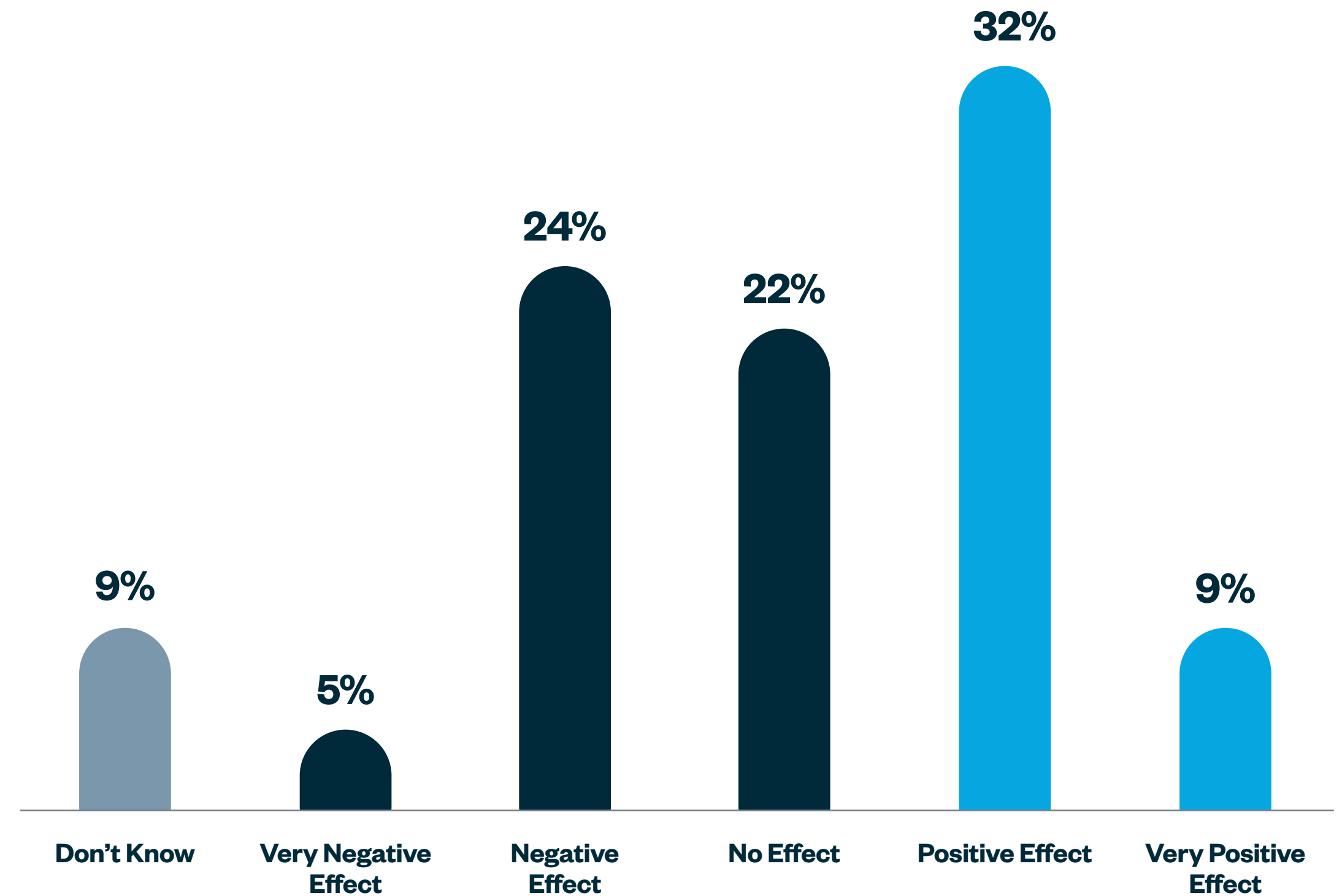
82% said they think that getting a college degree is definitely/probably worth it (considering the money and time involved in getting a college degree).

68% said a college decision is "very important" today.

67% said they have confidence that a college degree is worth the cost.

65% said they believe a college degree is necessary for most good jobs..

In your opinion, are colleges and universities having a positive or negative effect on the way things are going in the country these days?





**Finding 02**

Alumni take pride in their own college experiences, but not in the state of higher ed today.

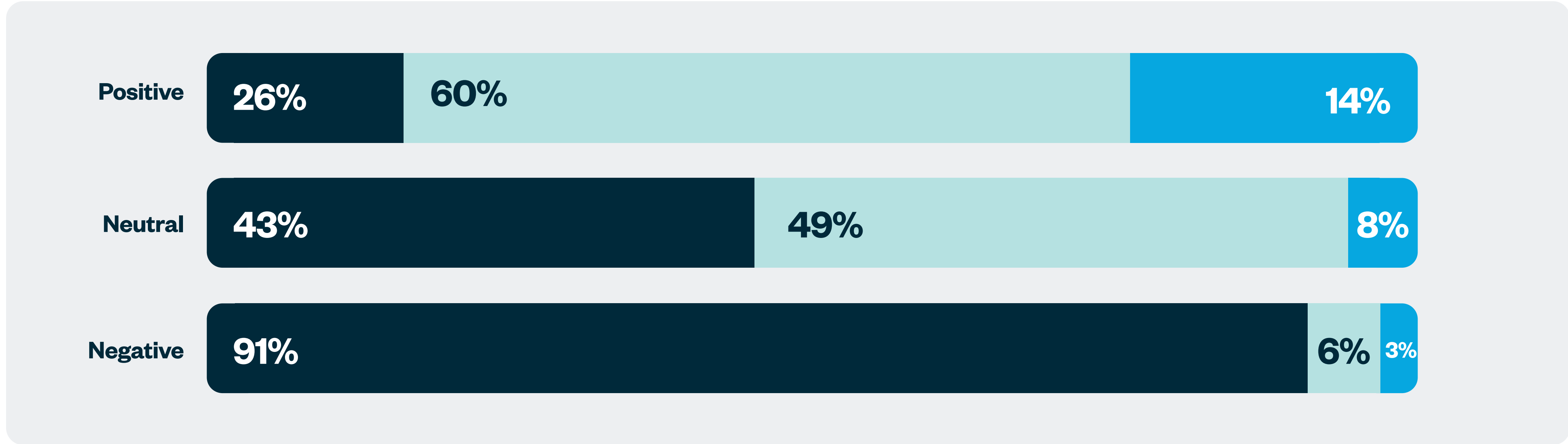
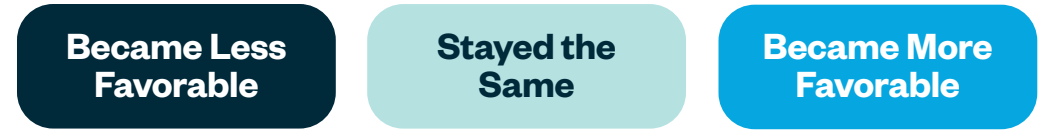
**College-educated adults are more likely to have a positive opinion of higher education and its impact on the U.S. today, but sentiments about higher education are evolving — and not in the right direction.**

Even those with mostly positive opinions about higher ed have a declining perception of the industry; 26% who say their current opinion is positive also say it has become less favorable over the last three years.

Of those with a neutral opinion about higher ed, only 8% say their perceptions have become more favorable, compared to 43% who say that their opinion has become less favorable.

We've already lost trust from a small section of college-educated adults. And yes, it's critical that we boldly and authentically communicate the value of higher education, but that message is unlikely to come from national media outlets, and we cannot rely on official campus entities alone. Instead, we must deepen our relationships with those alumni whose support is strong and build a groundswell of positive messaging that can spread through smaller networks of peers.

A 2021 Study by Campus Sonar  
found that national news coverage of higher education largely focused on DEI, Title IX, and freedom of speech. 30% of overall news coverage sentiment was negative, while only 3% was positive. Coverage of the three main topics skewed more negatively.

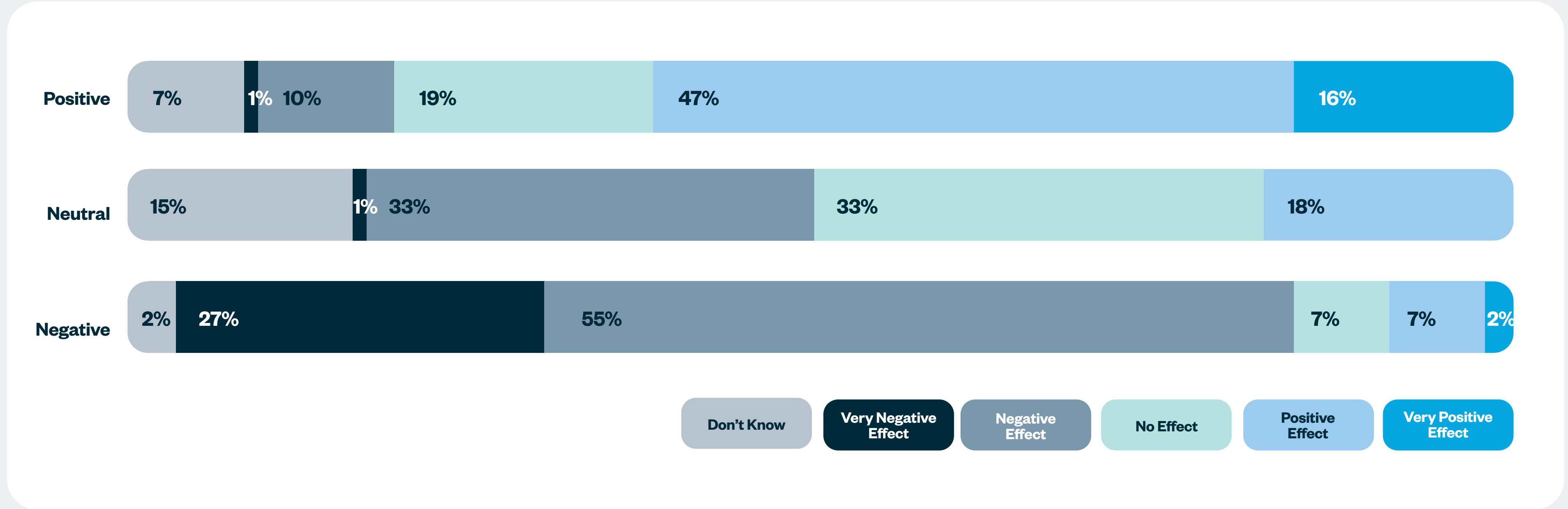


**Finding 02** Alumni take pride in their own college experiences, but not in the state of higher ed today.

**Our findings show that declining current opinions also affect perceptions of the impact of higher ed today.**

Of those who currently have negative opinions of higher ed, 82% say that the industry has a negative effect on the country today. In addition, 34% of college-educated adults with a neutral opinion of higher ed believe the same, compared to 18% who believe that higher ed has a positive effect.

A 2022 Survey on Higher Education by the think tank New America found a similar sentiment of the decline of impact. They reported that the share of Americans who believe colleges and universities positively impact the country has dropped by 14 percentage points since 2020 — largely due to economic challenges.





**Finding 02** Alumni take pride in their own college experiences, but not in the state of higher ed today.

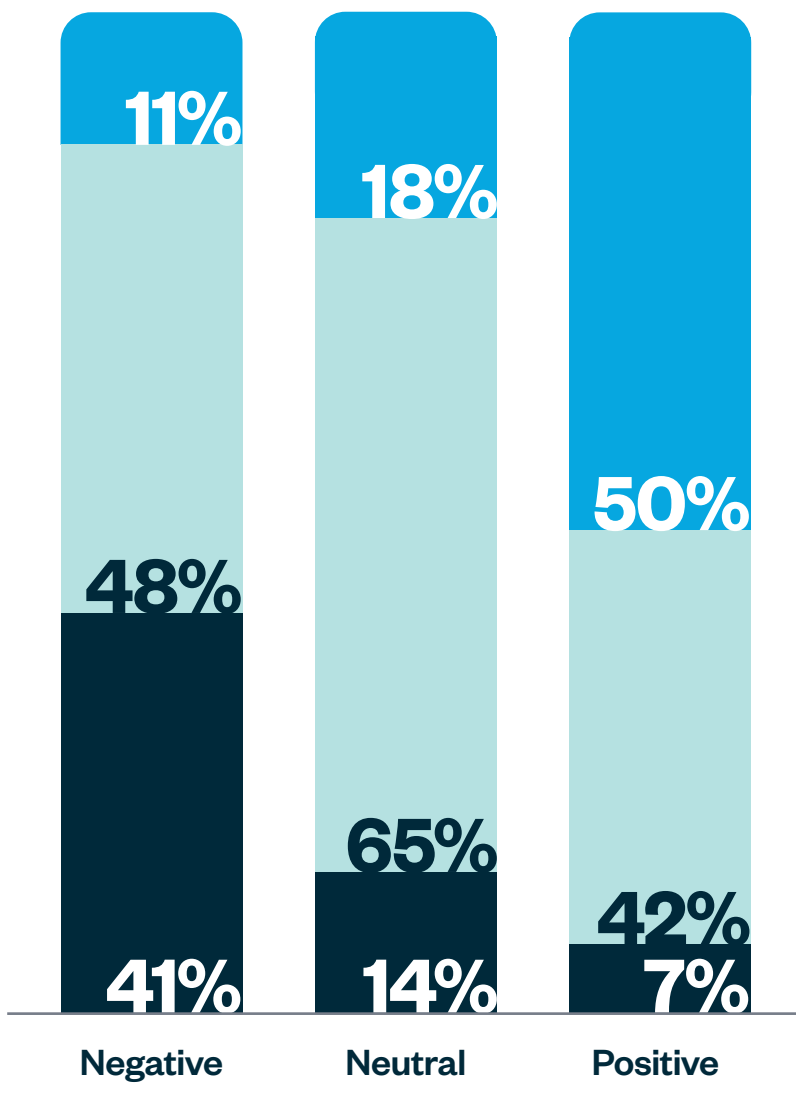
The data also shows that trust in colleges and universities is low, even among alumni with a positive or very positive opinion of higher ed. 50% rate a high level of trust in public institutions; only about 40% feel the same level of trust in private institutions.

Alumni who choose not to give to their alma mater rate lower trust in both public and private institutions. The top reasons they hesitate to give are all centered around cost.

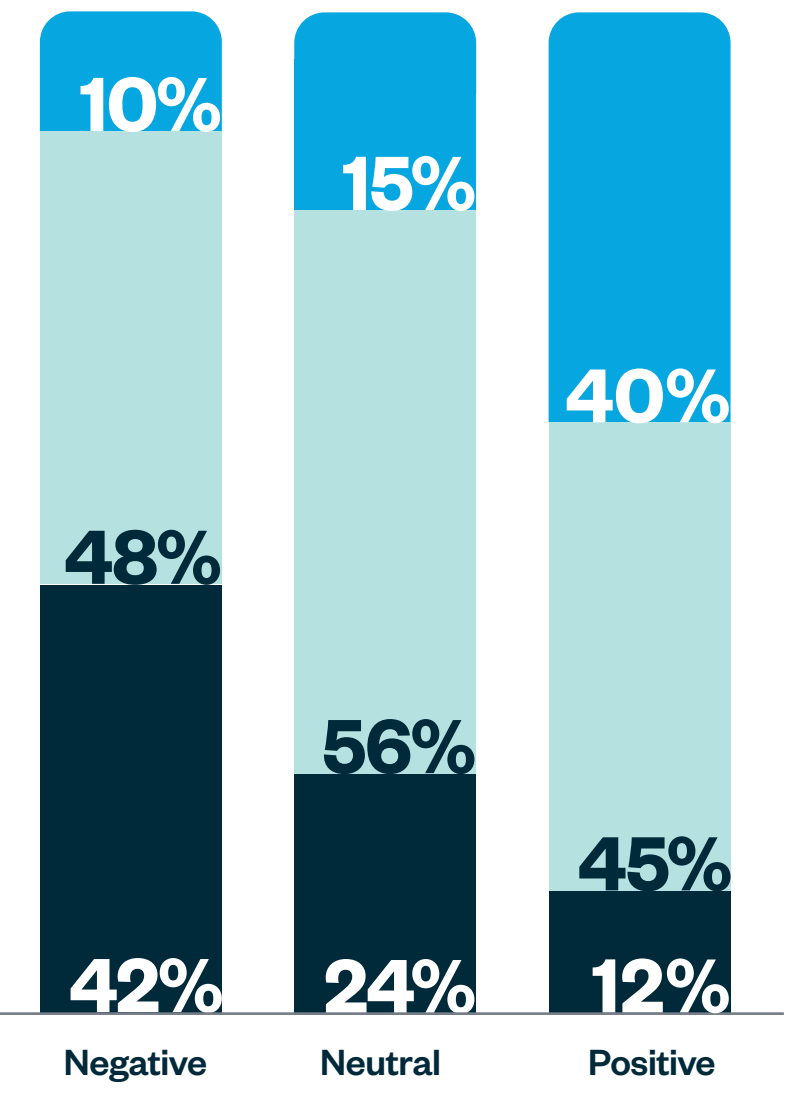
**What Alumni Say:**  
 I distrust where my alma mater would spend my money. I don't want to fund sports, or the ballooning bureaucracy. In my opinion, funding priorities should be the students and the academics, but they rarely are.  
 -Reddit user on r/college

In 2018, a Gallup survey found that 48% had a great deal/quite a lot of confidence in higher education. This still compared favorably with their confidence in other institutions — only the military (74%), small business (67%), and the police (54%) ranked higher.

**Trust Rating: Public Colleges & Universities**



**Trust Rating: Private Colleges & Universities**

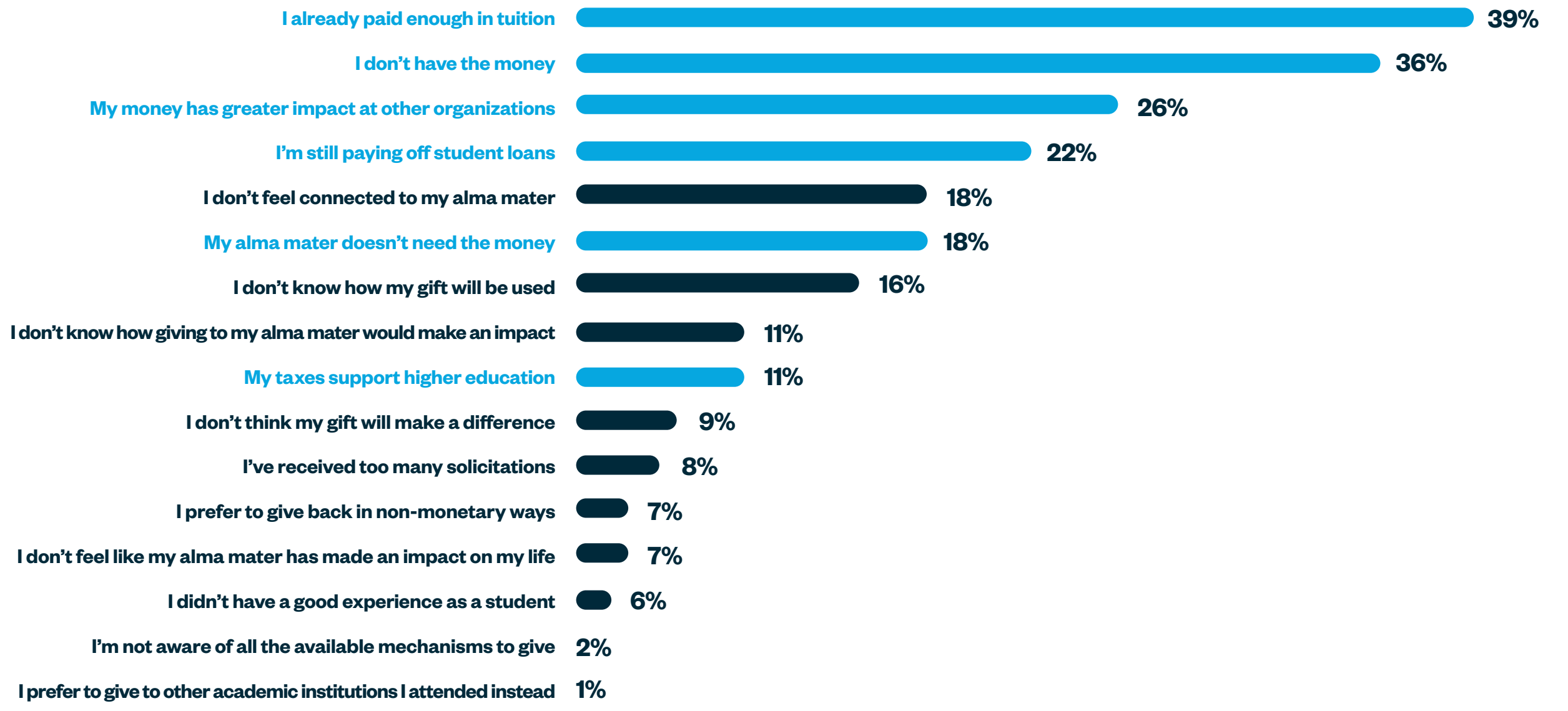


Top 3 Box (8 to 10)

Rated 4 to 7

Bottom 3 Box (1 to 3)

**Hesitations to Give to Alma Mater**



**Finding 02**

Alumni take pride in their own college experiences, but not in the state of higher ed today.

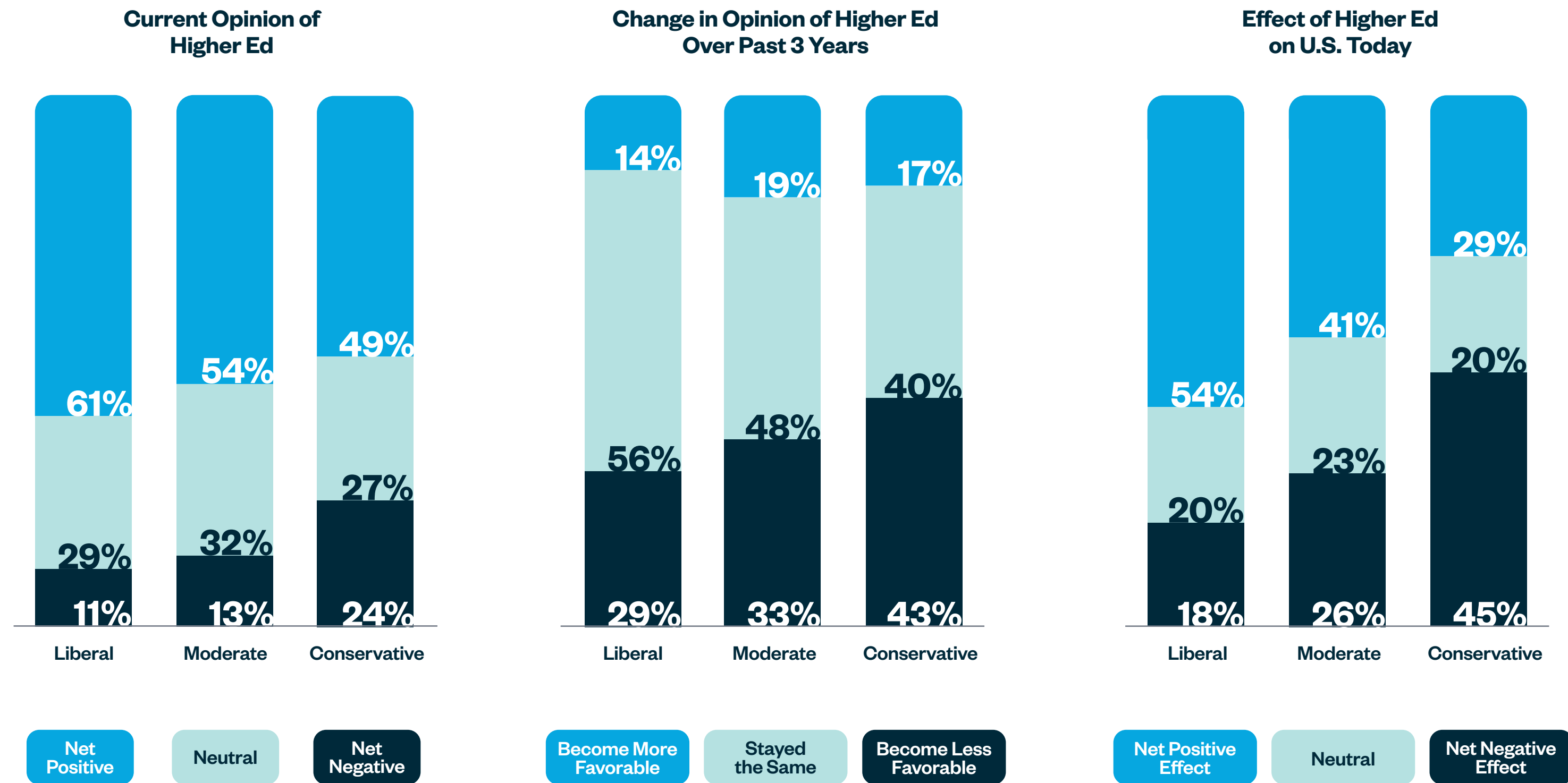
**What's driving the increasingly negative perception of higher education?** Most studies point to political influence, but our study, focused solely on college-educated adults, doesn't see the same gap as exists in the country overall. In fact, current alumni opinion of higher education trends largely positive across political divides.

The majority of conservatives, moderates, and liberals alike say:

- They are proud to have attended their alma mater.
- They feel a strong sense of connection to their alma mater.
- They would choose to attend their alma mater again.
- Their undergraduate alma mater had a positive impact on their lives.

A 2019 Pew Research Center survey found

that 38% of American adults said colleges and universities had a negative impact on the country — up from 26% in 2012. They also reported that the increase in negative views came almost entirely from Republicans and independents who lean Republican. In contrast, the views of Democrats and independents who lean Democratic had remained largely stable and overwhelmingly positive.





**Finding 02**

Alumni take pride in their own college experiences, but not in the state of higher ed today.

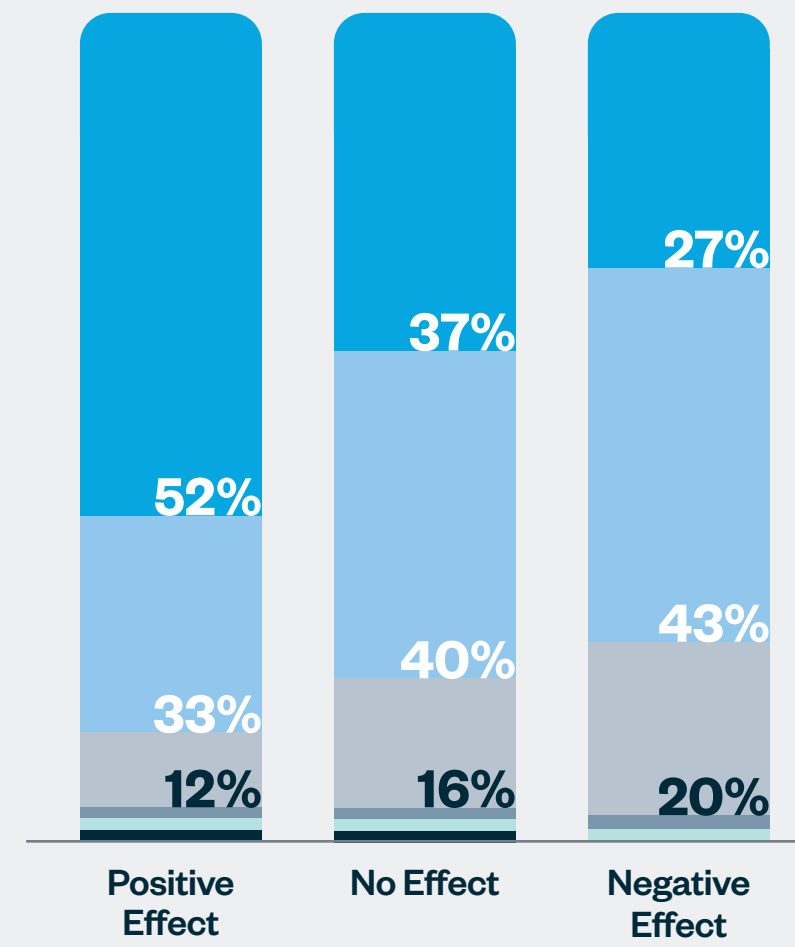
Interestingly, we found that current opinions of higher ed don't align with lived experiences. In fact, the majority of respondents who say higher education has a negative effect on the state of the country today say their own undergraduate alma mater experiences were largely positive:

- 64% of alumni who believe higher ed has a negative effect on the state of the country also say their undergraduate alma mater had a positive impact on their life.
- 61% of the same demographic also say that if they had to do it all over again, they would still choose to attend their undergraduate alma mater.
- 69% say they are proud to have attended their undergraduate alma mater.

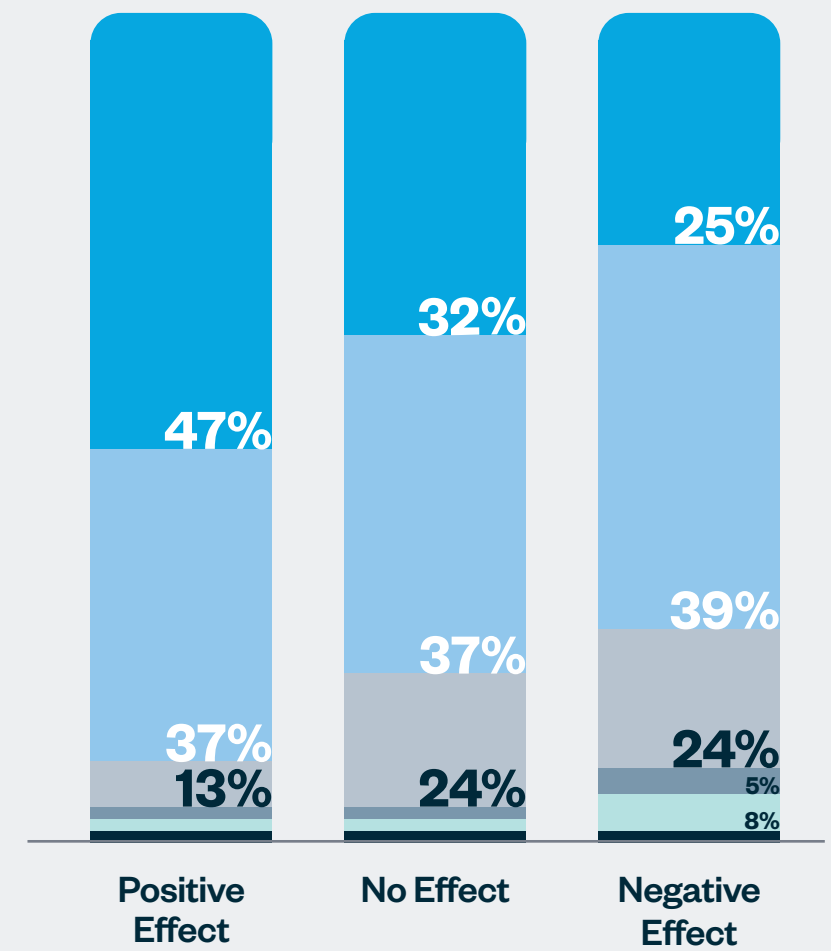
The National Center for Education Statistics' Report on the Condition of Education 2022 shows that individuals with a college degree continue to enjoy both better employment prospects and greater annual earnings than those with lesser levels of education.

**Rate your agreement with the following statements:**

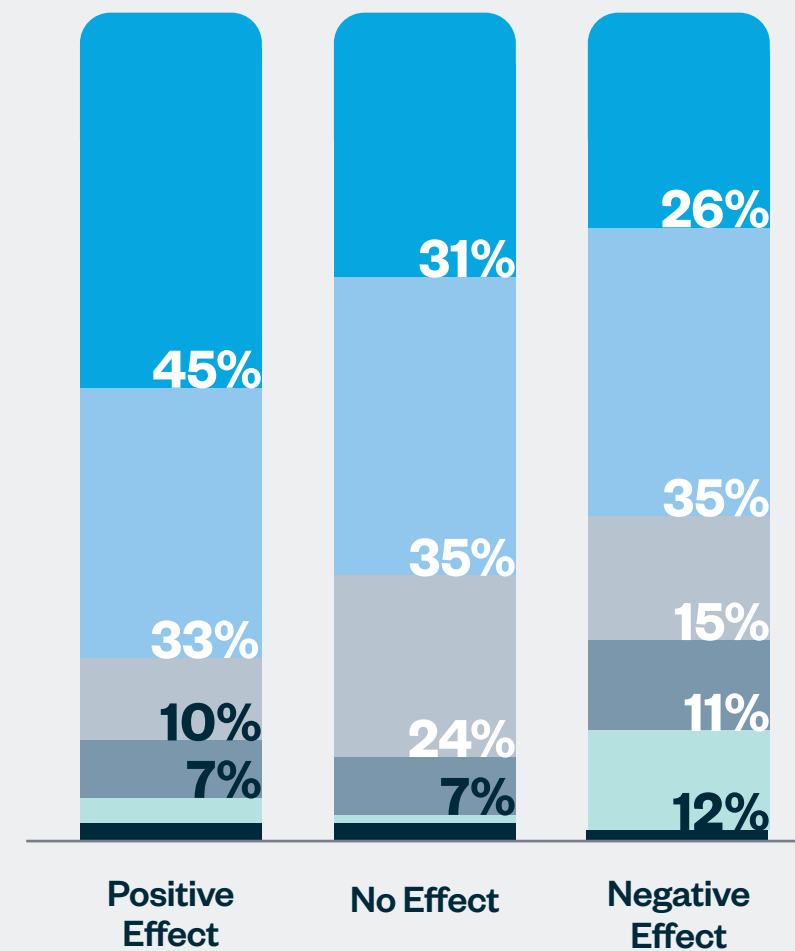
I am proud to have attended my alma mater.



My undergraduate alma mater has had a positive impact on my life.



If I had to do it over again, I would still choose my alma mater again.



- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Don't Know

**Finding 02**

Alumni take pride in their own college experiences, but not in the state of higher ed today.

**If political party lines aren't the perception differentiator, what is? The answer seems almost too obvious: it's their sense of connection.**

Only 42% of alumni who think higher education has a negative effect on the state of the country today say they have a strong sense of connection to their undergraduate alma mater.

Conversely, an overwhelming 73% of alumni who say that higher education has a positive effect on the state of the country today feel a strong sense of connection to their alma mater.

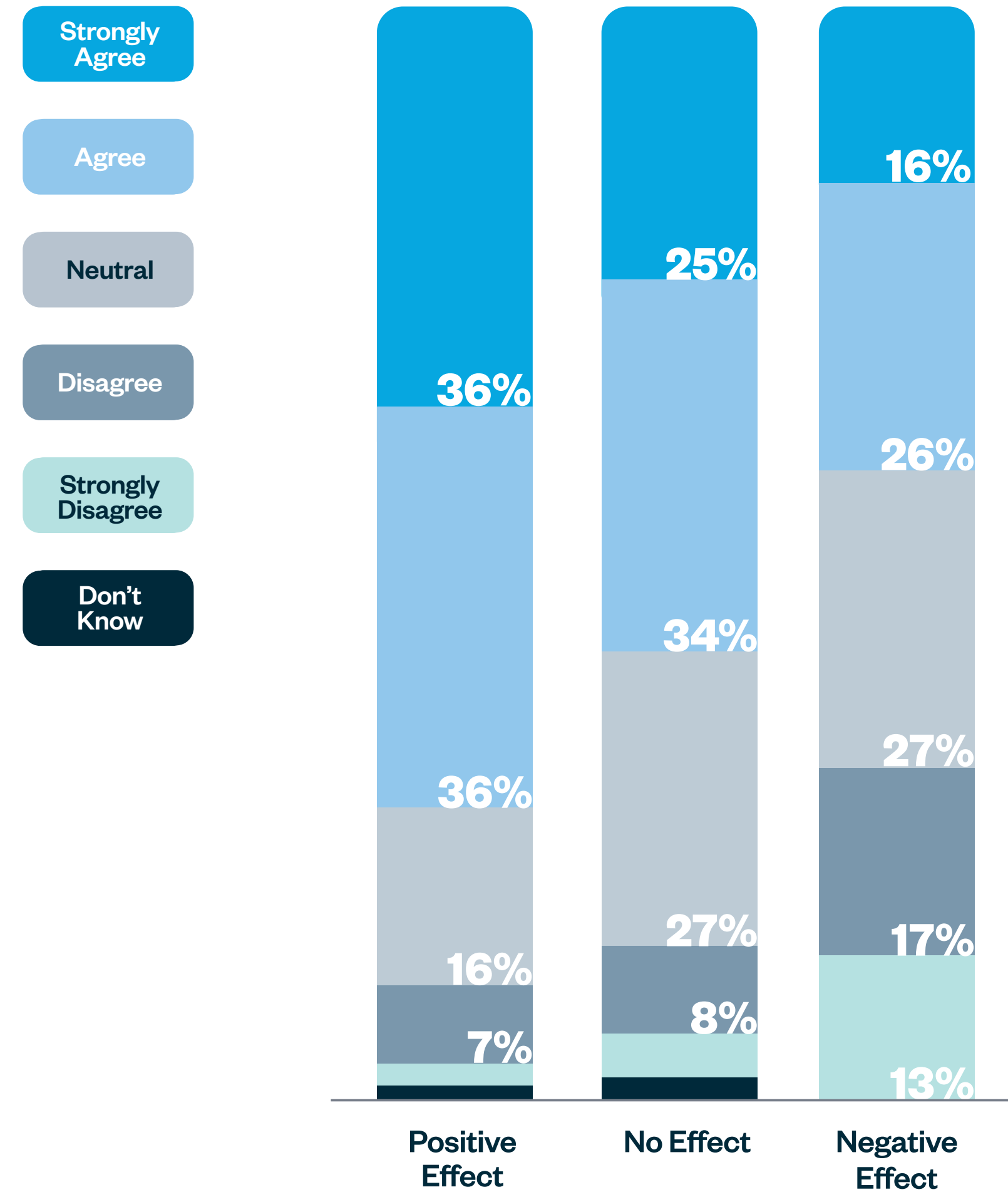


Not only does the saying “without involvement, there is no investment” apply to likelihood to donate, it speaks to advertising as well. Advertising works by reinforcing the positive product experience. Paid media plays a critical role in an advancement communications plan by reminding potential givers how their experience shaped them, and how their outcome remains connected to the institutions’s current mission and priorities. Without that reinforcement - or that priming effect - a solicitation is far more likely to fail.

- **Chris Huebner**,  
Director of Activation

### Strong Sense of Connection

I feel a sense of connection to my undergraduate alma mater.





**Finding 02**

Alumni take pride in their own college experiences, but not in the state of higher ed today.

**When asked to explain why they believe colleges and universities have a negative effect on the state of the country, college-educated adults largely focused on cost.**

And while our data shows positive opinions trend similarly across party lines, there is still an undercurrent of political perception associated with higher education. The largest words in this cloud are mostly about cost, but conservative-leaning respondents were particularly likely to also use words like “liberal,” “woke,” “agenda,” and “indoctrination.”



**Finding 02**

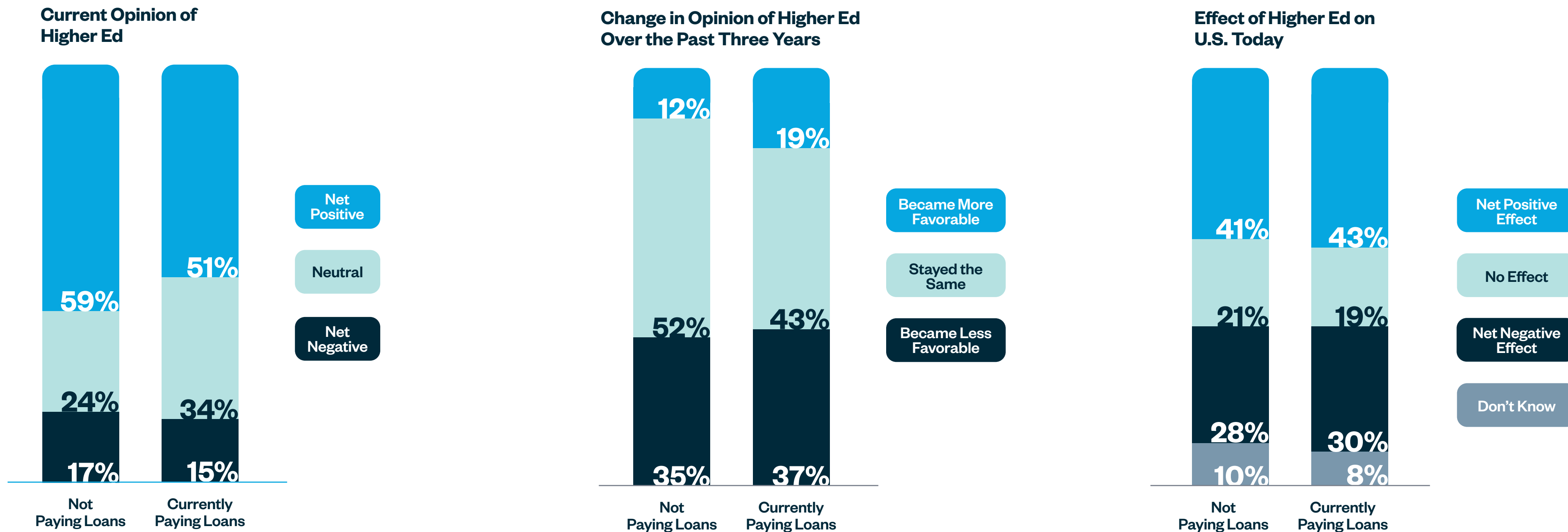
Alumni take pride in their own college experiences, but not in the state of higher ed today.

Interestingly, the data does not reflect what the majority of open-ended responses seem to suggest: that debt is the main driver of negative opinions toward higher education.

Alumni currently paying student loans, taking any loans for school, or taking out higher loan amounts do not perceive higher ed more negatively than other respondents. In fact, the opposite is true—alumni currently paying student loans were more likely to say their opinion has become more favorable in the last three years than alumni not paying loans.

A 2023 Finmasters report on student loans

found that approximately 1 in 7 Americans (13.5%) have student loans, and the average federal student loan debt per borrower is \$37,667.





# Hope College: Transforming the Transaction of Higher Ed

Criticisms about the cost of a college education are aplenty. But it's rare to see that critique come directly from any individual college. And that's what makes Hope College worth talking about.

**“It’s way more than a financial model...it’s generosity at its purest form. I am receiving something I never thought I would be able to receive. But now that I have it, I can’t wait to give it to other students who may be in the same shoes I am.” —Hope Forward Student**

Launched in 2021, Hope College’s Hope Forward Initiative doesn’t just acknowledge that college is too expensive; it uses that notion as its rallying cry. But rather than approach the problem through a traditional scholarship model, Hope Forward introduces a new affinity-based model of funding a student’s education based on three foundational pillars: accessibility, generosity, and community.

The initiative provides a cohort of students with fully funded tuition paid for with gifts from others. Those students then graduate from Hope committed to “paying it forward,” giving every year after graduation so future students can experience the same transformative gift. Crucially, however, no set amount or percentage of income is required. Rather, it is a philanthropic gift given out of generosity.

Hope Forward’s innovative “paying it forward” model is a direct challenge to the often dire conversations surrounding the cost of higher education. Donors to the program are part of an innovative solution and feel a direct connection to their impact on a student’s journey through their philanthropic efforts.

**“Rather than require students to pay for their education in advance, through what is too often a transactional relationship, we are working toward a funding model based on the Gospel message of grace (Matthew 10:8). Once it’s implemented, students will receive a transformational education, for which others have paid.”  
— Hope College President Matthew A. Scogin**

While the program is in its infancy — the program currently includes 58 students, with the first cohort of students wrapping up their sophomore year — Hope College is already seeing success in cultivating a community built on connection and philanthropy within its campus: students in the program take part in supplemental learning opportunities built on the three foundational pillars and participate in campus-wide traditions like One Big Weekend, Time to Serve, and Day of Giving.

The initiative is turning heads and starting conversations, too: best-selling author Malcolm Gladwell recently visited the campus to meet the students and deliver a keynote presentation at Hope College exploring the topic of improving access to a college education, inspired by the Hope Forward Initiative. “It’s a gamble, but it’s a great gamble,” said Gladwell. “And I am just over the moon that somebody is finally trying to address these deep structural problems in higher education.”

**HOPE**   
**FORWARD**





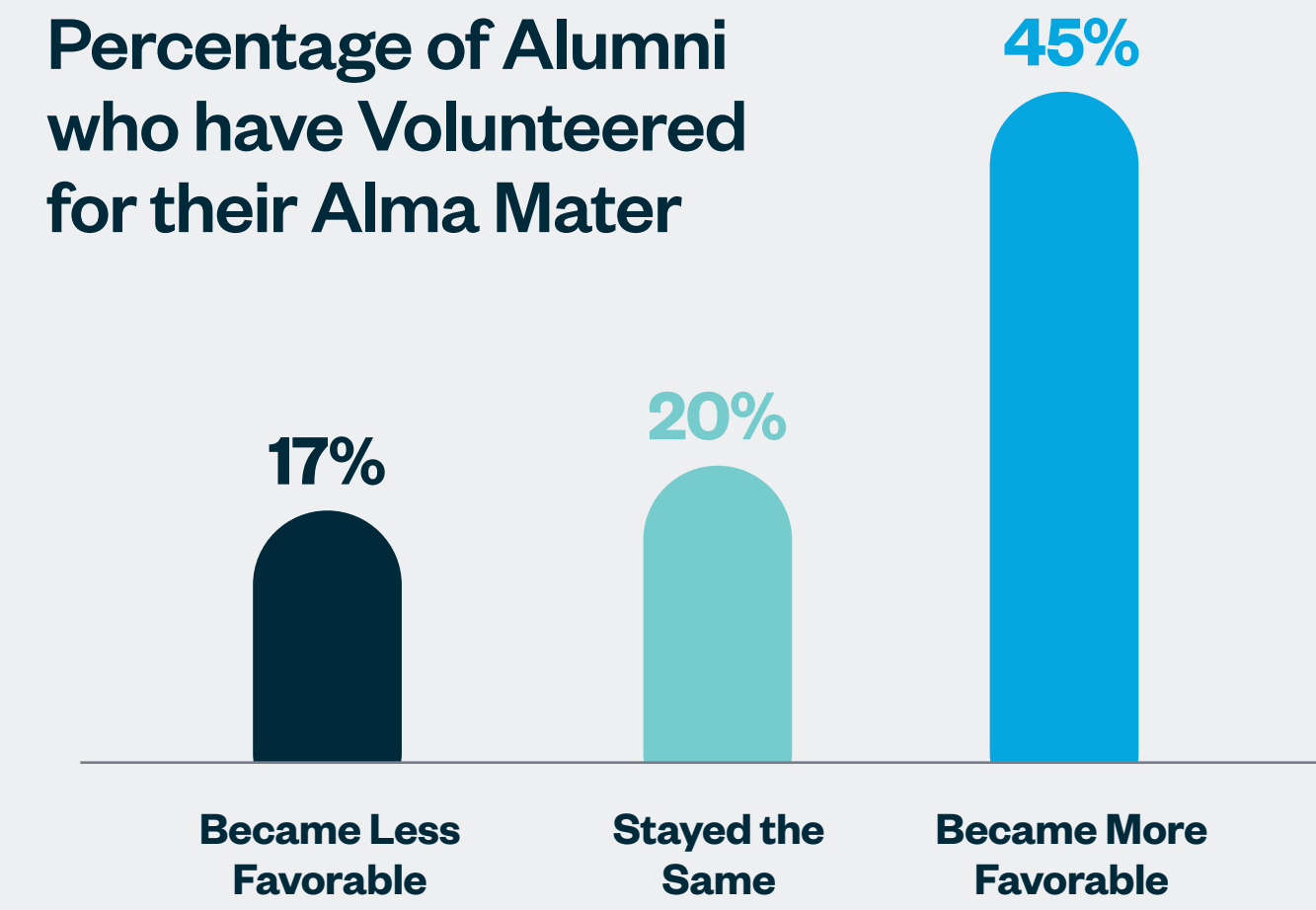
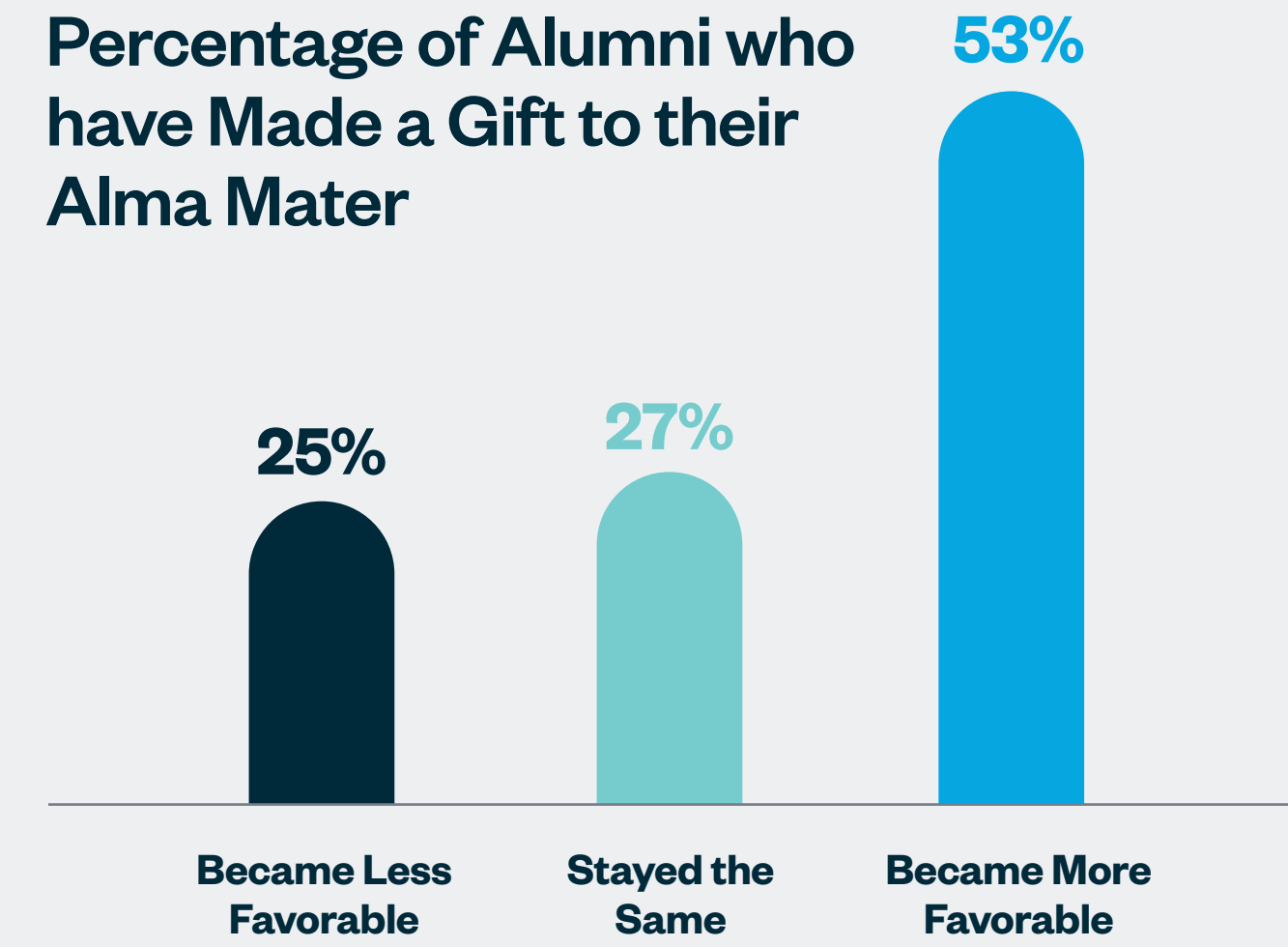
**Finding 02**

Alumni take pride in their own college experiences, but not in the state of higher ed today.

**How do these perceptions affect giving?**

Alumni who say their opinion of higher education has become less favorable or stayed the same over the last three years are less likely to have given to any higher ed institution (including their own).

They are also less likely to have volunteered to support their undergraduate alma mater.



# What Gives?

## Alumni take pride in their own college experiences. So why doesn't this pride translate to the broader industry?

The top reasons for giving back are consistent across audiences, but gaps emerge between those who give to their alma mater and those who don't. These gaps of opinion regarding other motivations include:

- An overall decline in perception, though college-educated opinions are more positive than the general public.
- Alumni who say they currently have negative perceptions who report an overall positive experience in their own college experience.
- A decrease in the likelihood of giving back or volunteering due to negative perceptions, though most alumni say they had a positive experience with their own education.

**The fact that sentiments continue to trend in the wrong direction amongst college-educated adults is alarming. In particular, those with neutral opinions are trending negatively, and our data shows that once those opinions fall, they don't recover. Alumni become less likely to engage or give back to any higher ed institution.**

While higher ed institutions have little control over the national narrative around perception, trust, and cost, our data shows that there is an opportunity to address these concerns closer to campus. Marketing and Advancement offices that provide ample and meaningful engagement opportunities, clear and consistent messaging on funding priorities, how individual gifts make a difference, as well as the impact an institution has on its local community, state, and society at large, can be successful in combating this worrisome narrative and building a long term and strategic pipeline of philanthropy.

## Questions to Consider:

**There is a disconnect between alumni's lived experiences and their sentiments on higher education today.**

How can your institution address these concerns to build trust and connection?

**Higher ed is frequently used as a pawn in today's political polarization.**

Understanding that national media coverage of higher education is rarely positive, how can you build closer relationships with journalists at local and regional press outlets to amplify the positive social and economic impact on your local community?

Are you investing in an ongoing, brand-focused paid media strategy to reinforce your value and impact in a way that can support this layer of outreach and earned media?

**Our 2021 Higher Ed CMO Study showed that only half of higher ed lead marketers report having measures in place to track brand strength over time.**

How can your Marketing and Advancement teams collaborate to measure long-term brand health and dedicate resources to improving and maintaining stakeholder perceptions?



Finding  
**03**

The key to unlocking the next generation of donors is not asking for money.

**What Gives?**



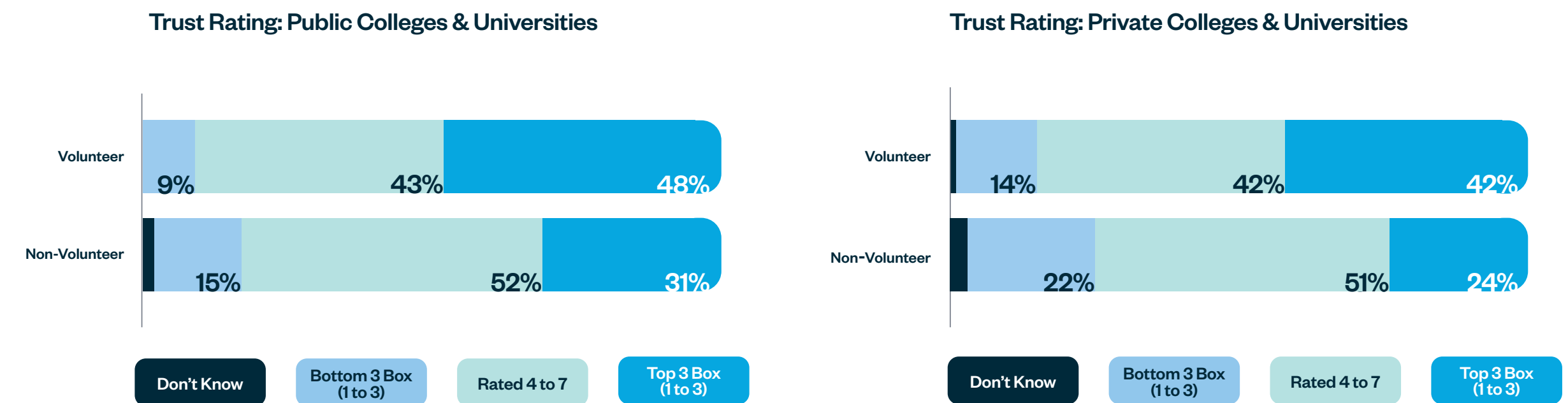
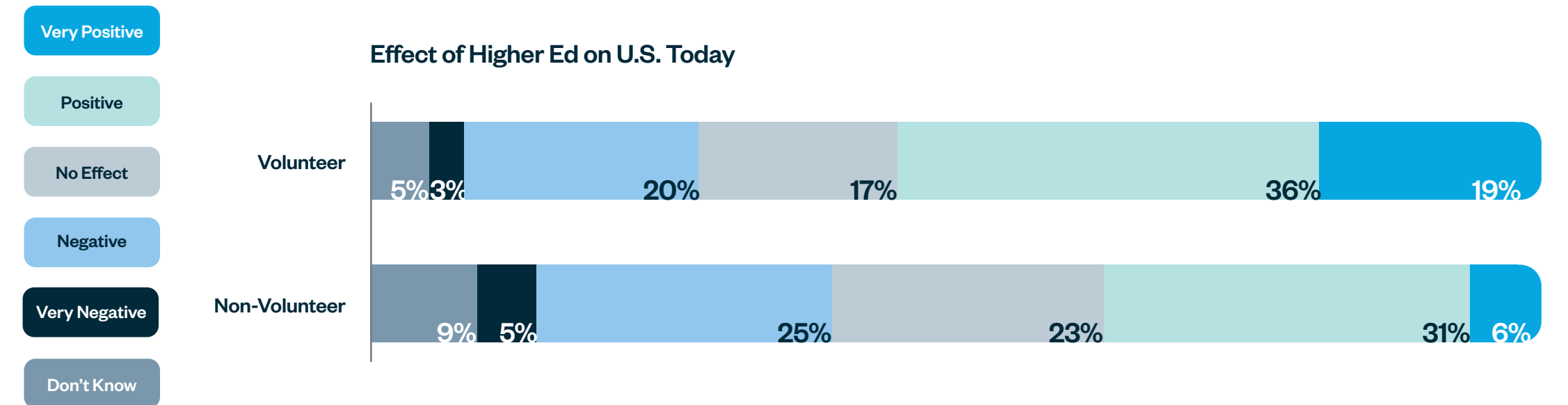
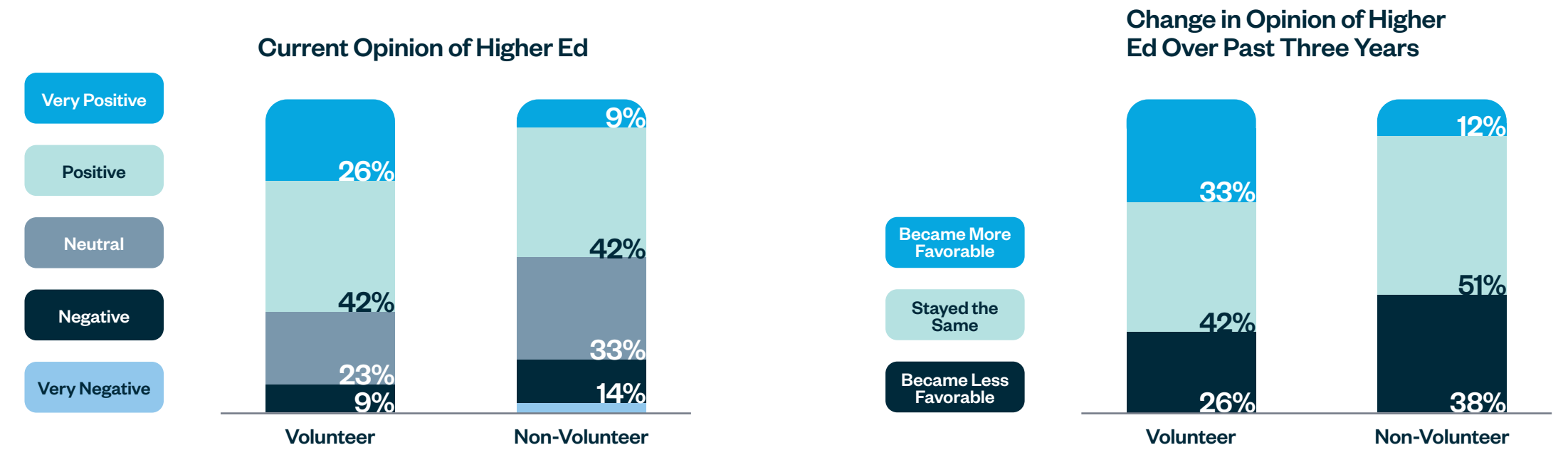
**Finding 03** The key to unlocking the next generation of donors is not asking for money.

**Our study shows that a sense of connection, not politics, is the main influence on a college-educated adult's perception of higher education. 73% of alumni who say that higher education has a positive effect on the state of the country today feel a strong sense of connection to their alma mater.**

For many, the act of volunteering is the highest expression of connection. We found that alumni who volunteer at their alma mater have more positive receptions of higher ed than non-volunteers.

- **1 in 4** volunteers has a very positive opinion of higher ed, compared to 1 in 10 non-volunteers.
- **1 in 3** volunteers say their opinion of higher ed has become more favorable over the past three years, compared to 1 in 10 non-volunteers.
- **1 in 5** volunteers say colleges and universities very positively affect the country's state today, compared to 1 in 20 non-volunteers.

Alumni volunteers also have higher trust in colleges and universities overall and prioritize giving to public and private colleges/universities more than non-volunteers.



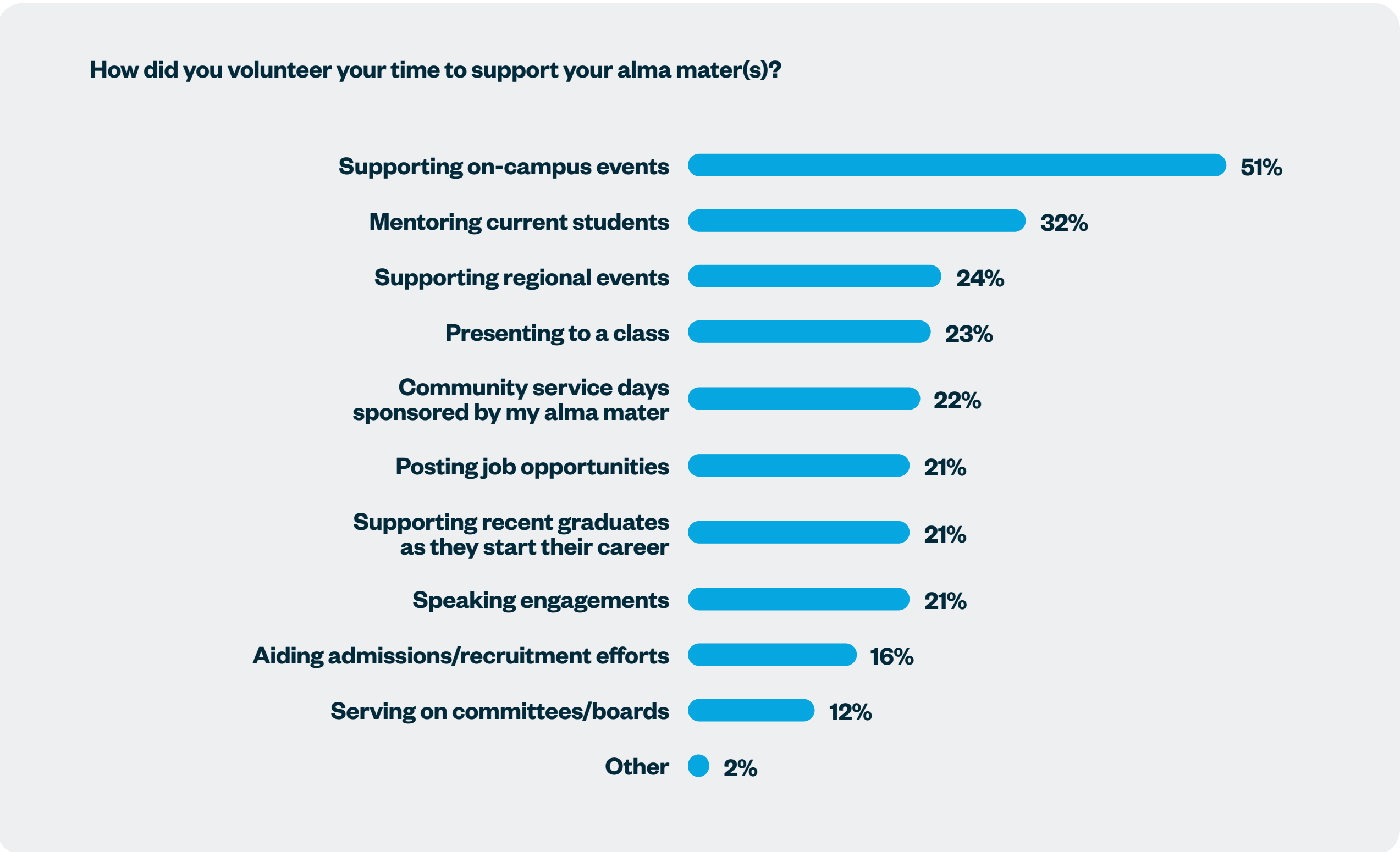
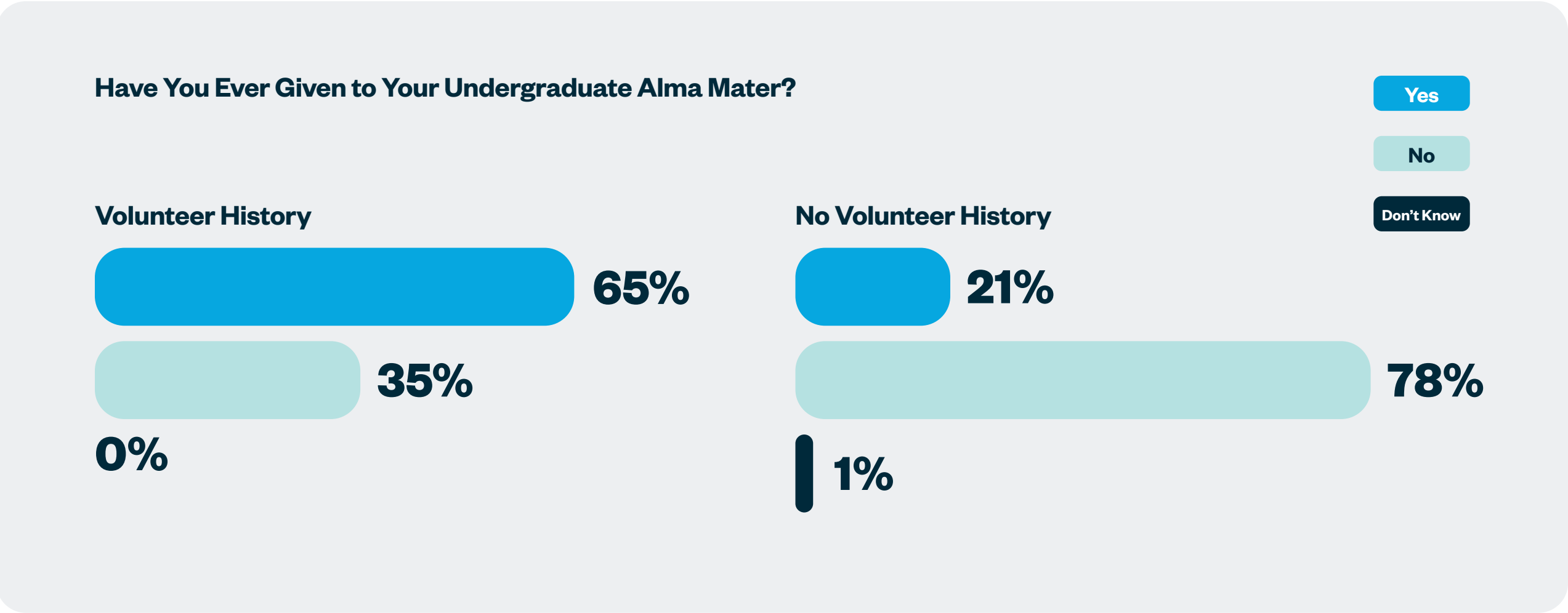
**Finding 03** The key to unlocking the next generation of donors is not asking for money.

**More importantly, our research shows a high correlation between volunteering and giving.**

Alumni who have volunteered their time for their undergraduate alma mater are more likely to say they have given financially; they also give more regularly and in higher amounts.

The types of volunteering opportunities that alumni participate in actively build a sense of community and connection with their institutions.

A 2017 Graduate and Professional School Alumni Engagement Survey from Columbia University found that a sense of belonging is significant in predicting donation patterns (behaviors) and philanthropic attitudes. Further, a sense of belonging is positively associated with other forms of alumni engagement and participation, including volunteering.



**Finding 03**

The key to unlocking the next generation of donors is not asking for money.

**Alumni who volunteer at their alma mater are more motivated to give based on that sense of community. They feel more connected, proud, and supported because of their experiences, and want to give back for similar reasons.**

Conversely, alumni who have not volunteered are more motivated by tangible causes. They are more interested in supporting student scholarships, student access to education, individual units, physical improvements on campus, and attracting and retaining high-quality faculty.

The types of volunteering opportunities that alumni participate in actively build a sense of community and connection with their institutions. On the other hand, non-volunteers indicate a lack of connection to their alma mater as a top reason they do not give.



The sense of community and connection that alumni feel towards their institutions is a powerful and emotional motivator that compels us to donate our time, talents, and treasures to our alma maters. Personally, I am proud to be part of a community of alumni who are committed to making a positive impact and building a strong, supportive network that will endure for years to come.

– Eryka Wallace  
Brand Strategist

## Motivations to Give to Alma Mater



Non - Volunteer

Volunteer



**Finding 03**

The key to unlocking the next generation of donors is not asking for money.

**Conversations about alumni volunteering are often focused on young alumni.** And our findings do show that young alumni are more apt to volunteer than older generations and seem eager to volunteer with their alma mater.

However, the subtext of that focus on volunteering for young alumni seems to be that young alumni don't give financially. And our data does not warrant that perspective. Instead, we found that young alumni do give financially, just not necessarily to their undergraduate alma mater. However, college-educated adults in their 20s are among the most likely to give to their **graduate** alma mater, and they are the **most likely** age group to give to a school they did not attend.

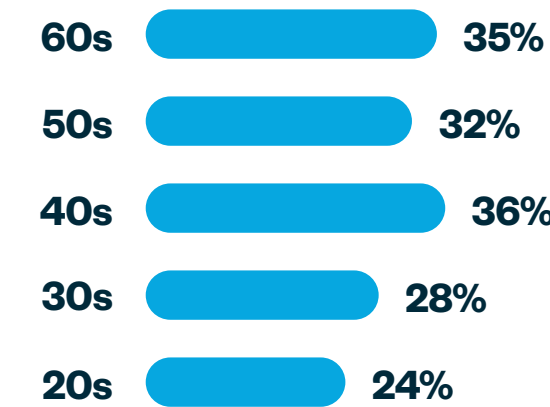
According to the Zelle September 2020 Consumer Payment Behaviors Report

“Nearly 3 out of 4 millennials (defined here as those ages 25 to 34) have sent some kind of financial aid to family or friends or donated to a nonprofit since the Covid-19 pandemic began...that’s the highest rate among any of the generations polled. Gen Z (ages 18 to 24) had the second highest giving rate at 66%.”

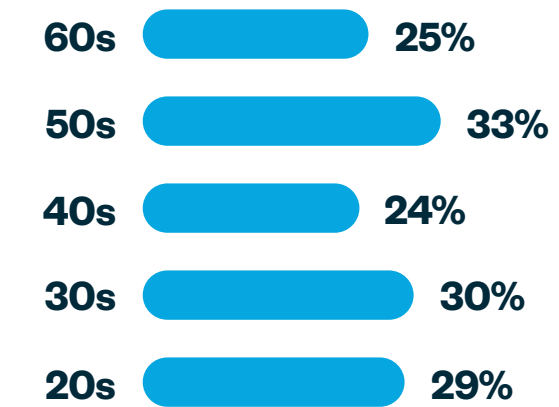
Giving to Any Cause



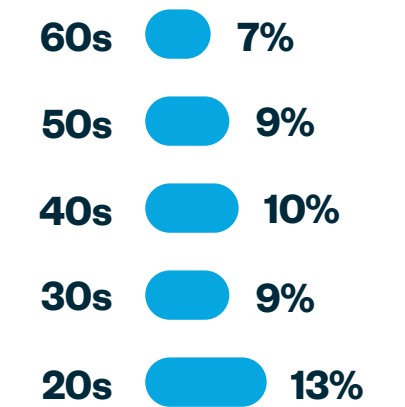
Giving to their Undergraduate Alma Mater



Giving to their Grad Alma Mater



Giving to a School That They Did Not Attend



	20s	30s	40s	50s	60s
<b>Volunteered Time to Any Cause/Org in Last Five Years</b>	72%	59%	58%	59%	45%
<b>Ever Volunteered Time to Undergraduate Alma Mater</b>	27%	27%	24%	19%	15%

	20s	30s	40s	50s	60s
<b>Give at Least One Cause Annually</b>	70%	71%	77%	76%	77%
<b>Don't Give At All</b>	30%	29%	23%	24%	23%

	20s	30s	40s	50s	60s
<b>Ever Given to Undergraduate Alma Mater</b>	24%	28%	36%	32%	35%

**Finding 03**

The key to unlocking the next generation of donors is not asking for money.

While some generalizations about young alumni are accurate — the top hesitations to give all surround cost and money — there is reason for optimism. 1 in 3 young alumni plan to give to their alma mater within the next 3 years. That number jumps to 58% when those young alumni are volunteers at their alma mater.

To tap into this emerging funding source, messaging is everything. Like all non-givers, young alumni are most likely to be motivated by a clear understanding of how their gift would be used. Young alumni are also more likely to say they give due to a sense of gratitude (51% vs. 45% all givers to undergraduate alma mater) and to help address a societal need (50% vs. 46%) than all givers to undergraduate alma mater.

**Alumni in Their 20s Give:**

**1. To support a mission that is meaningful 57%**

**2. Out of gratitude 51%**

**3. To help address societal need 50%**



# Boise State University: A BOLD Outlook on Young Alumni Engagement

**“We take pride in building a program that leans into who we are — innovative and trailblazing.”**  
– Sydney Montgomery '16, '21, Director of Student and Recent Graduate Programs at Boise State University

With 40% of their alumni graduating in the past ten years, Boise State University needed to take a fearless and confident approach to young alumni engagement. The Boise State Alumni Association's desire to reengage this blossoming population with meaningful and valuable programming led to the creation of the Boise State BOLD program.

The BOLD (Broncos of the Last Decade) program aims to provide a platform for alumni to connect with each other and the university through various social, professional, and community events. It has now transformed into a thriving community of young alumni intent on building connections that last far beyond graduation. One unique aspect of BOLD is how the programming is created. The BOLD alumni advisory committee — a volunteer group of graduates of the last decade — informs the events with their particular insights as young alums themselves. These leaders dedicate their time, energy, and passion to building Boise's young alumni network and celebrating new Bronco graduates yearly.

BOLD philanthropic efforts exclusively support the BOLD Scholarship. Created specifically to help Broncos return to Boise State for additional degrees, the BOLD scholarship gives young alumni a singular cause to support their peers at their alma mater while making education more accessible. Along with the BOLD committee's ownership in deciding the funds' recipients, the scholarship's clear impact has created a successful avenue for philanthropic support from recent graduates.



In addition to encouraging participation in Boise State alumni events, Boise's BOLD programming offers unique opportunities for young alumni to engage with the university and the surrounding Treasure Valley, helping to create a sense of connection beyond the campus. Examples include:

- **The BOLD Bundle:** A package that includes an alumni association membership, a donation to the BOLD scholarship, and discounted event tickets for young alumni, making it easy to engage and give back at a low price. This bundle also helped Boise State expand partnerships with ExtraMile Arena, Boise State Athletics, and the Morrison Center to build unique experiential and ticket opportunities for BOLD graduates.
- **Skip a Sip:** a campus event that encourages BOLD graduates to donate the price of their daily cup of coffee to the BOLD Scholarship fund.
- **BOLD's Bridge to the Community:** this program connects young alumni with resources and service opportunities within the Treasure Valley. Recent events include a seminar on home buying and service projects partnered with other local university young alumni chapters to encourage networking opportunities.

The success of the BOLD program lies in creating a sense of ownership and investment with recent graduates and allowing their support of Boise State to mirror where they are in their journey after college. In addition, the immediate understanding of the impact of their philanthropy and support of higher education from the beginning of their alumni journey helps foster crucial and long-lasting relationships with Boise State.

## BOLD Program Results:

- **Since its creation, the BOLD program fostered significant growth in young alumni engagement and participation.**
- **In less than a year, BOLD alumni contributed over \$25,000 to the endowment of the BOLD Scholarship.**
- **8+ new campus and community partnerships increased recent graduates' access to local experiential opportunities.**





The key to unlocking the next generation of donors is not asking for money.

## What Gives?

**Our findings show a high correlation between alumni volunteering and the propensity to donate. Furthermore, alumni who do give back are motivated by feelings of connection to their alma mater.**

Young alumni DO give back: they are more apt to volunteer and are more likely to give financially if they volunteer.

**1 in 3 young alumni plans to give to the alma mater within the next 3 years. That number increases to 58% when they volunteer at their alma mater.**

We've heard the saying, "without involvement, there is no investment," and our data supports that sentiment. Without opportunities to engage, alumni do not have ways to build authentic and emotional connections with higher education. And without those authentic and emotional connections (coupled with a lack of concise communication around philanthropy), they are less likely to prioritize giving back to those institutions.

There is hope for the future of philanthropy in higher education. The key? Building robust and engaging young alumni programs to amplify the strong sense of community that many experience right around graduation.

### Questions to Consider:

Young alumni—millennials and gen z—have some of the highest giving rates since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

How have your own giving patterns changed in the past three years? Have you experienced an increase in gifts from young alumni? How are you maintaining those relationships and building momentum towards continued giving with that audience?

**What do your young alumni engagement programs look like?**

Have you conducted research to understand what programming would most appeal to (or turn off) alumni? How can your institution reimagine engagement programs based on that information?

**We have all become more comfortable with using virtual meeting spaces such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Google Meet.**

Have you learned from increased virtual programming, and how can you maintain that element of your programming to offer a continued level of volunteer and engagement opportunities for a wider range of alumni?



# Conclusion



## Conclusion

Here's what we're confident about:

**College-educated adults give, but higher education isn't a giving priority.** 3 in 4 alumni say that they give to at least one cause a year, but only 1 in 3 say they give to their alma mater.

**Alumni take pride in their own college experiences, but not in the state of higher ed today.** Of those who said they have a negative opinion of higher ed's impact on the U.S. today, 70% say they are proud to have attended their alma mater.

**Volunteering is critical to ensuring a future pipeline of donors.** Alumni are more apt to give to their alma mater when they are engaged as volunteers.

## So, What Gives? Well, that depends, doesn't it?

There are more than 4,000 colleges and universities in higher education. And each individual campus represents a slightly unique position within the market. Naturally, then, how you interpret this data depends on the environment in which you operate.

You may, for example, interpret this data as evidence of a gradual, unavoidable decline in alumni perceptions and giving. That may lead you to emphasize your national brand and reputation, creating and growing an advancement marketing team to generate more transformational gifts from foundations, grants, corporations, and non-alumni donors.

For others, that may not be a realistic strategy. You may work within an institution with a more regional footprint, and/or a lean advancement team. Perhaps this data brings you a needed level of clarity around focusing your strategic efforts on areas with the highest, most immediate returns on investment, like programming and outreach to alumni with an established track record of giving, volunteering, and engaging.

For others, this data may empower you to lean into long-term planning in the form of young alumni programming and student philanthropy. Building relationships with this audience in the short term can increase the likelihood of giving in the future, ensuring that a culture of philanthropy on your campus stands the test of time.

None of those conclusions are necessarily wrong. Or the singular right next step. But there is one area where we do have a higher sense of clarity.

Due to the changing business model for higher education— stagnating or decreasing state appropriations and increased dependence on net tuition revenue against the backdrop of stronger competition — there is a heightened need for strategic fundraising that can impact long-term institutional health. And in this tenuous moment, advancement communications must be closely aligned with institutional branding to strengthen the belief, trust, and value of giving back to higher ed institutions.

Thank you.

**SimpsonScarborough is a full-service research, branding, and marketing agency, and higher education's premier data-driven partner.**

As champions and stewards of colleges and universities, we give higher ed brands the confidence to make informed decisions about their futures — a confidence that stems from our fully integrated approach. The cornerstone of our work is in-depth research that's rigorous and comprehensive, leading to insightful strategy, inspired creative, and human-centered digital. The trusting relationships we've formed and the campus communities we've brought together are among our most valuable assets.

Individually, we've held nearly every job in the industry. As a fully remote agency, we hail from (and represent) almost every part of the country. Most of all, we're proud, professional students — curious by nature and compassionate by choice, constantly putting in the hard and smart work to shape the industry we love and the brands that shape our world.



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