

**Simpson
Scarborough**

The Higher Ed CMO Study 2025-26

Chapter 2: Growth Ambitions



Your Crew for Today



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February 26

Chapter 1: Budgets & Staffing

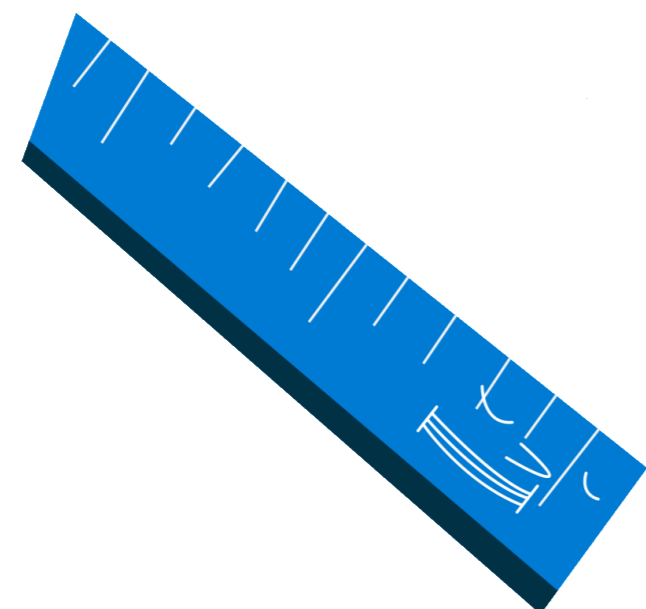
The Fragmented Foundation of the Alignment Gap



March 26

Chapter 2: Growth Ambitions

A Misaligned Agenda



April 23

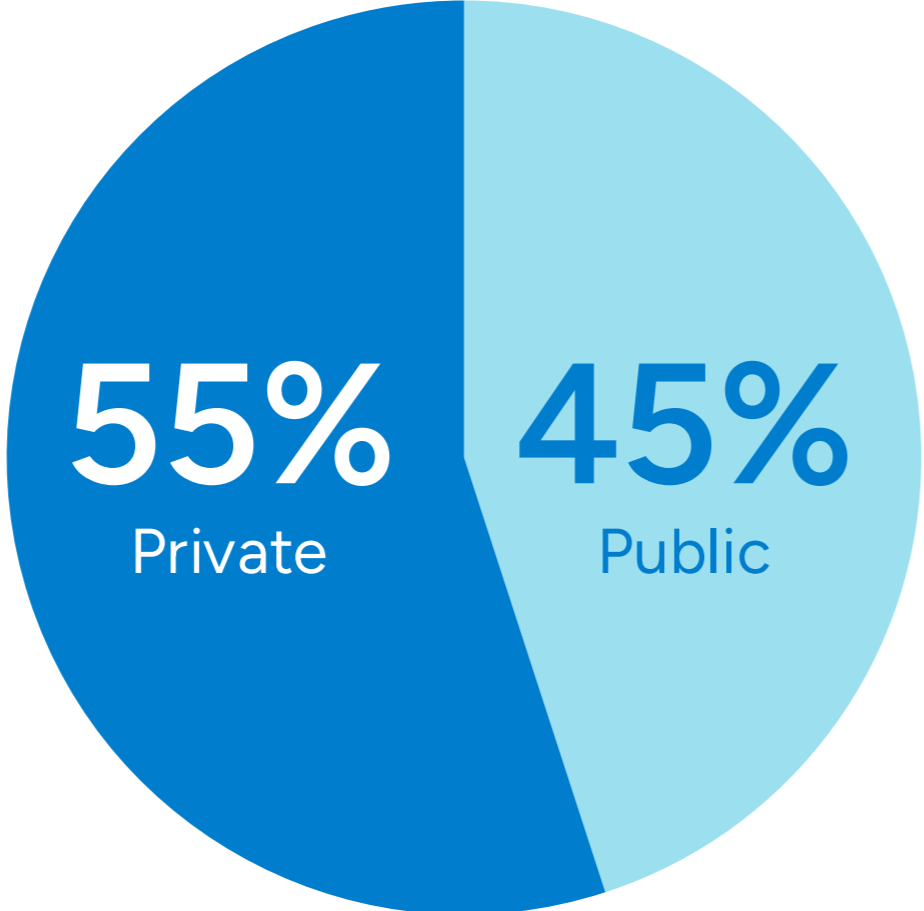
Chapter 3: Measurement

Where the Alignment Gap Becomes Visible

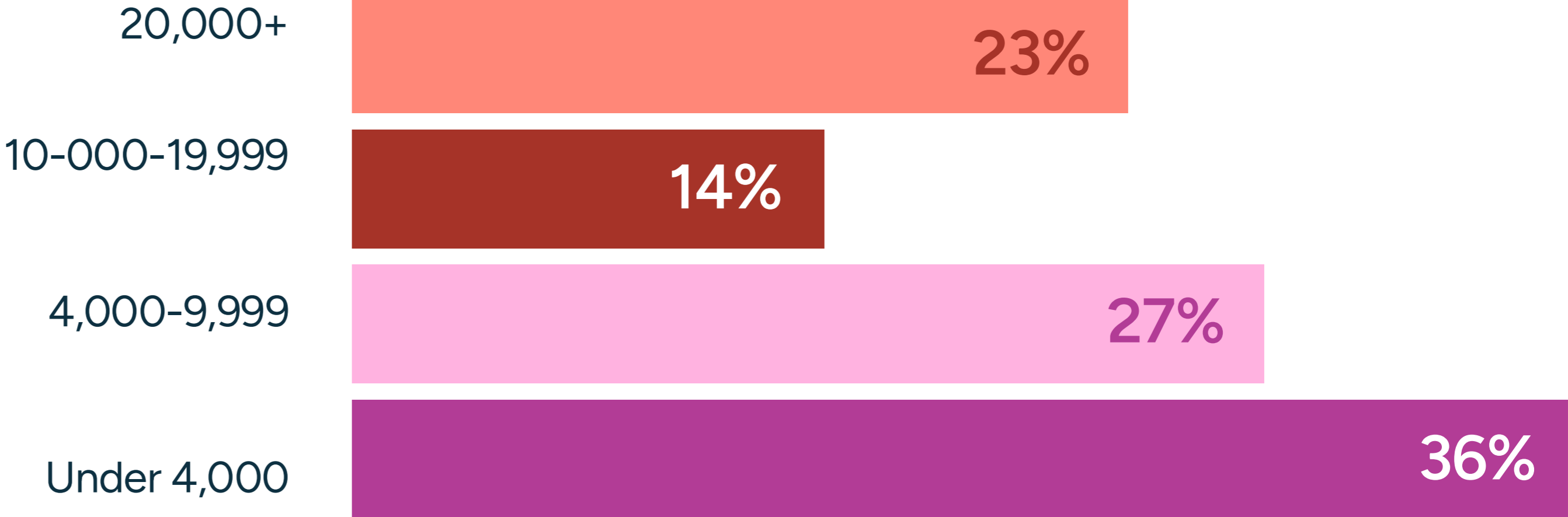
Sector

100%

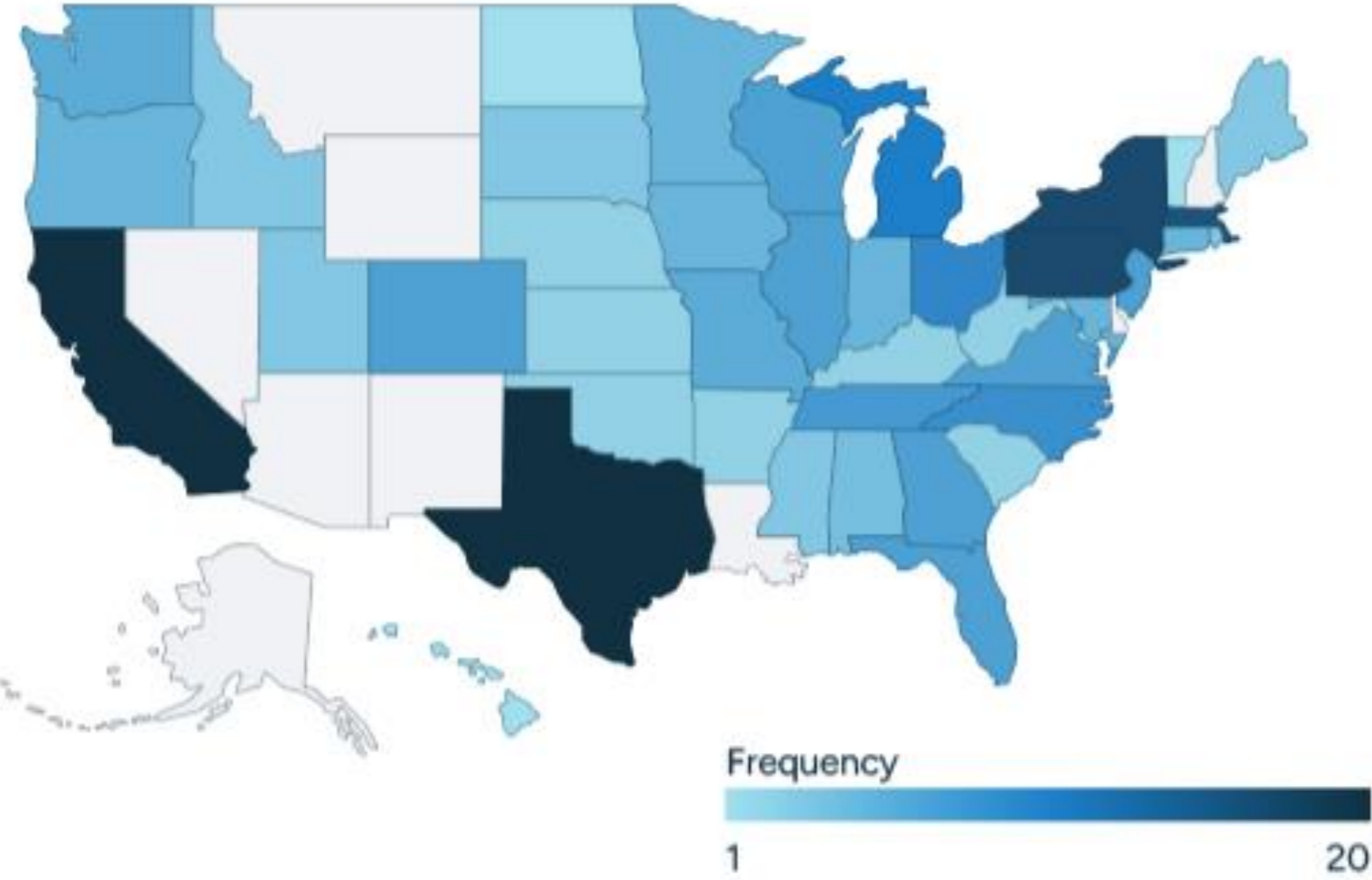
are 4+ year & not-for-profit institutions



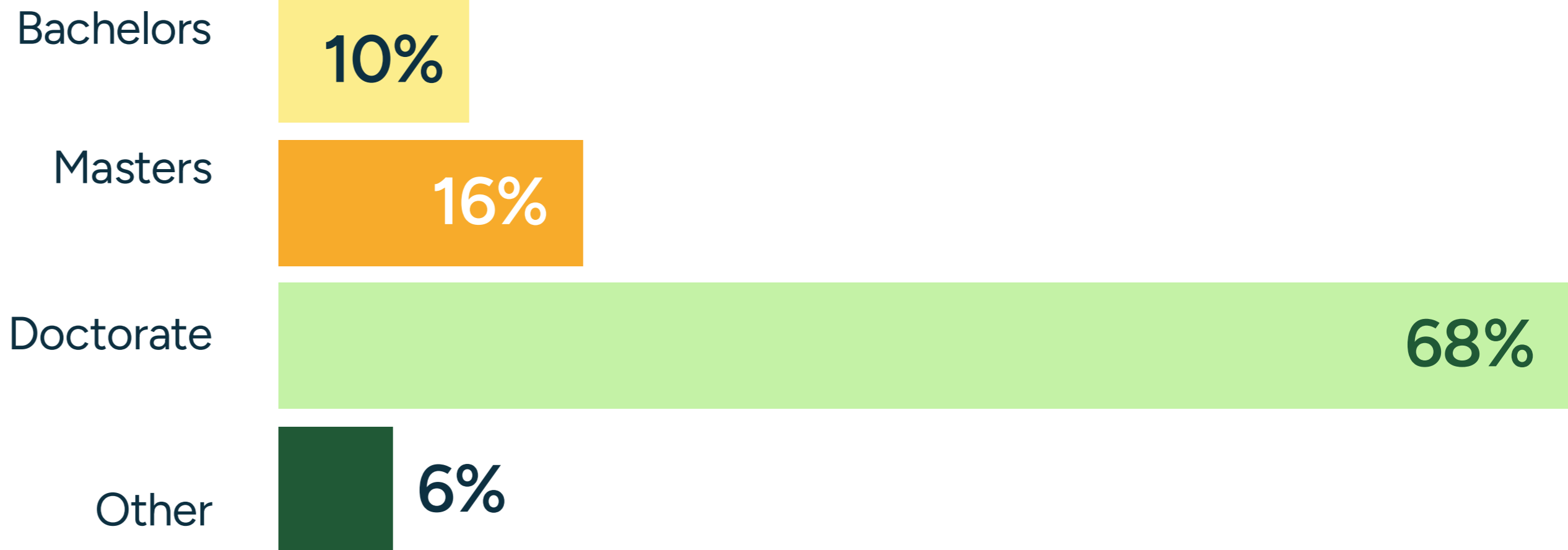
Total Enrollment



Geographic Distribution

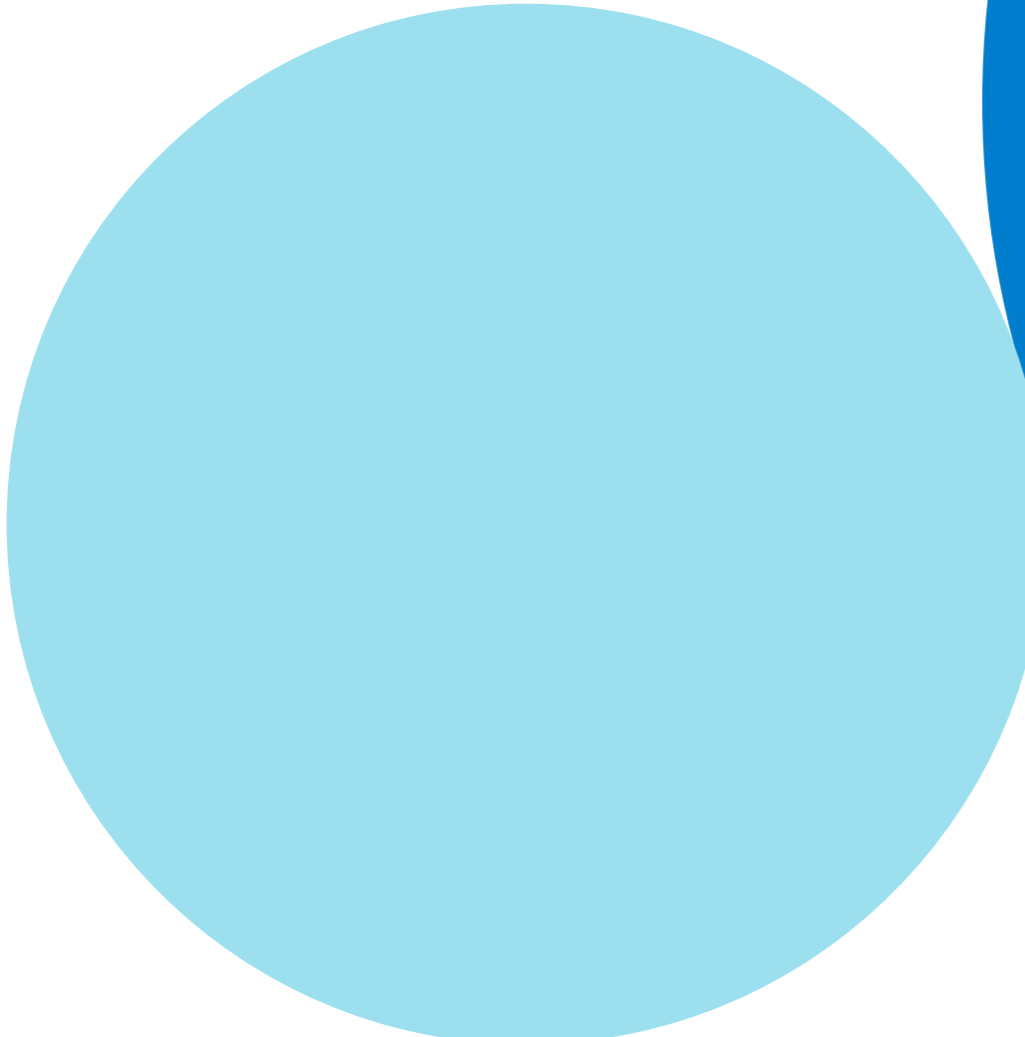


Highest Level of Offering

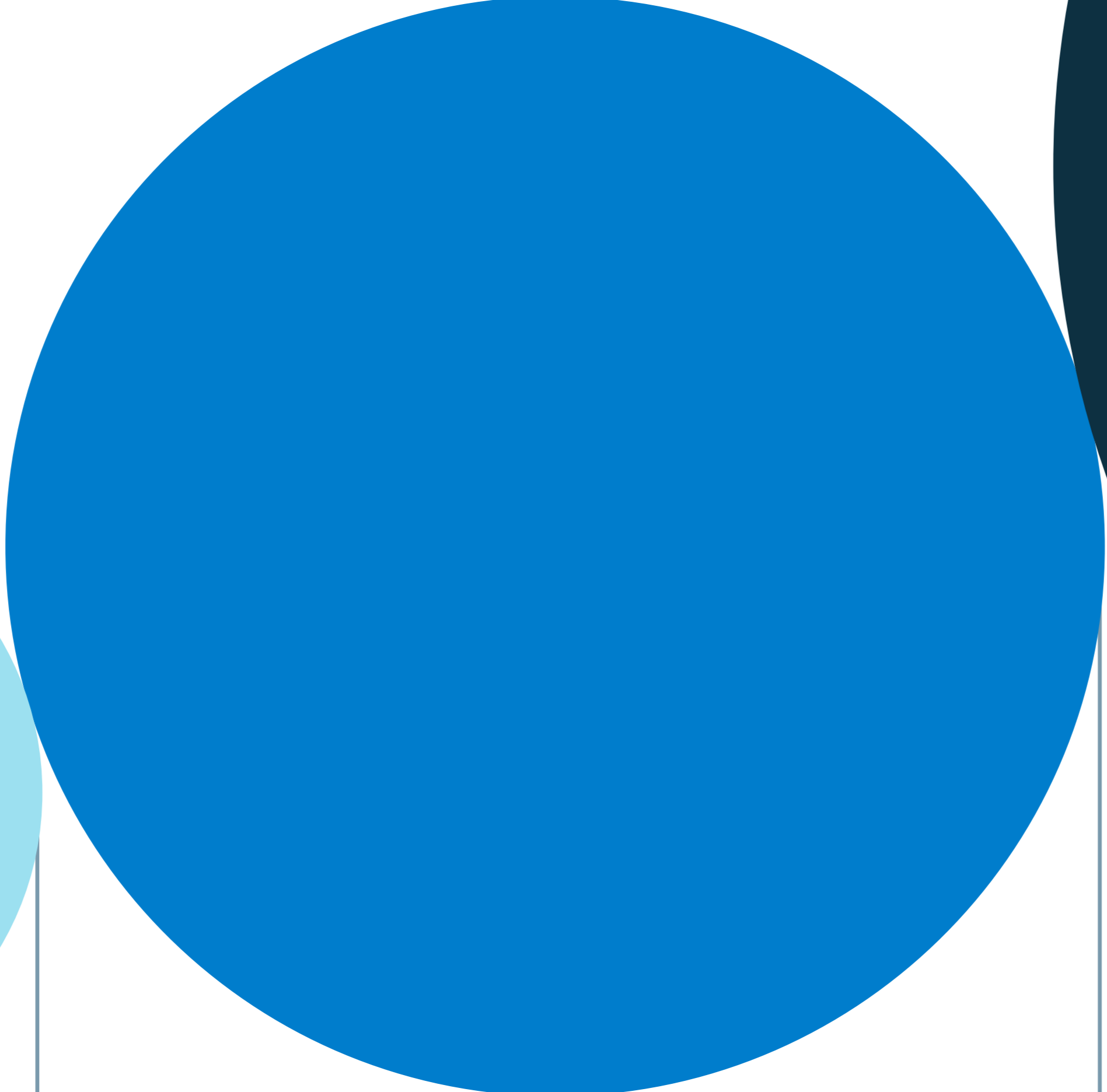


Size Definitions

Full time equivalent enrolled.



Small Schools
< 3,999
FTE Students



Medium Schools
4,000-19,999
FTE Students



Large Schools
20,000+
FTE Students

A Misaligned Agenda



Who owns your growth strategy?

50%

of registrants from
this webinar answered
“No clear owner” or “Shared”

A Misaligned

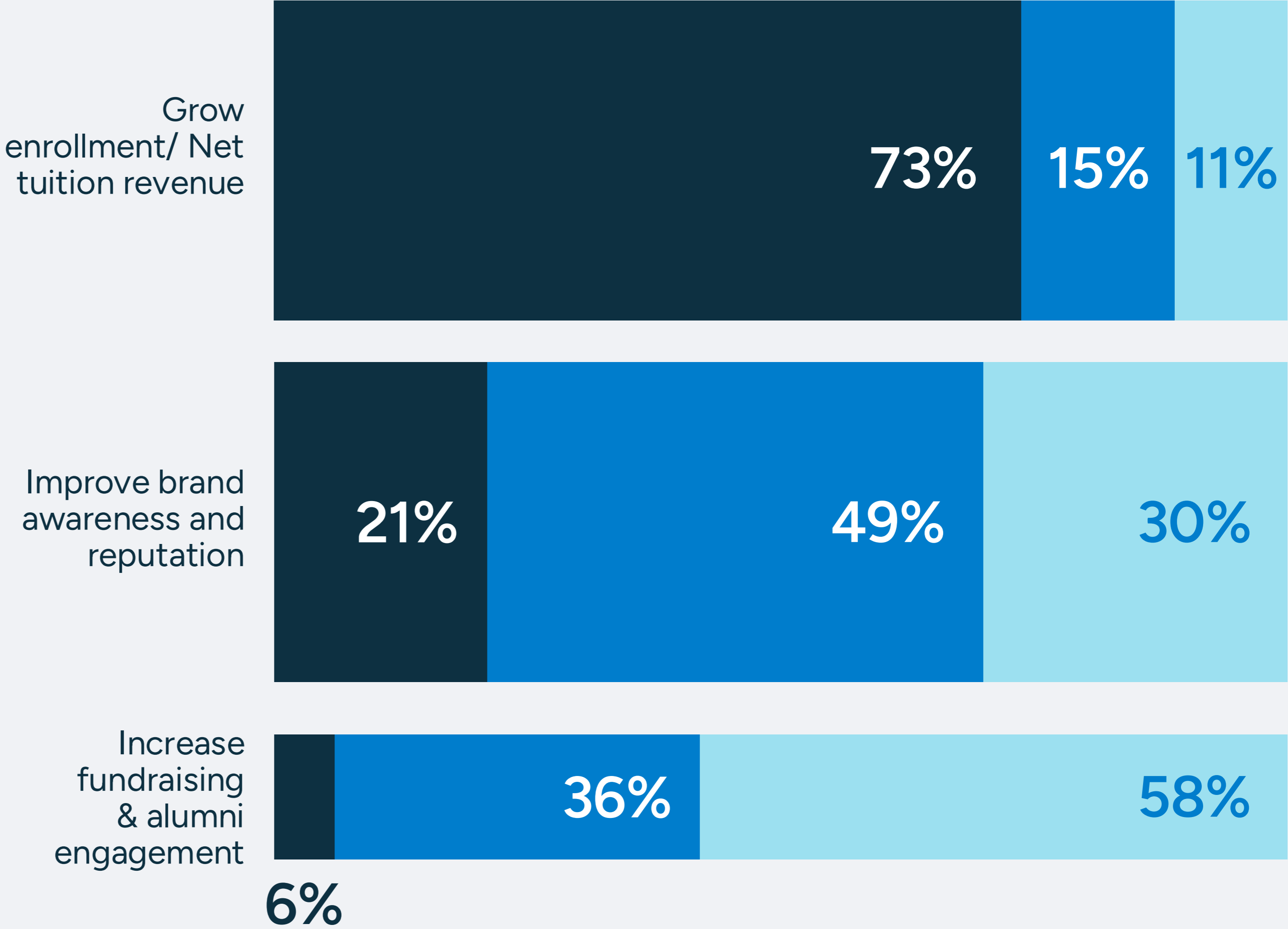
Agenda



When it comes to growth ambitions, there is a clear "top two."

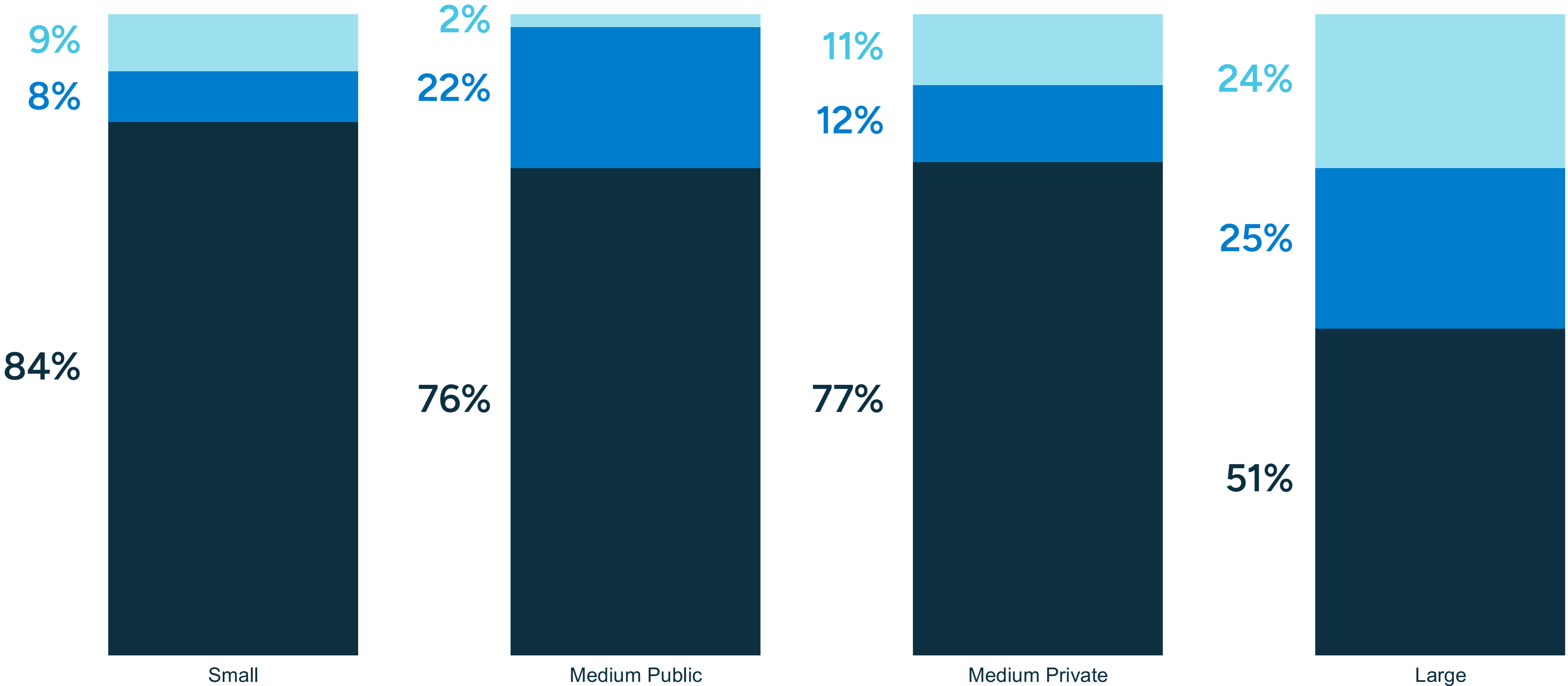
How would you rank the following priorities for your institution?

Rank 1 Rank 2 Rank 3



How institutions rank growing enrollment/net tuition revenue as a priority

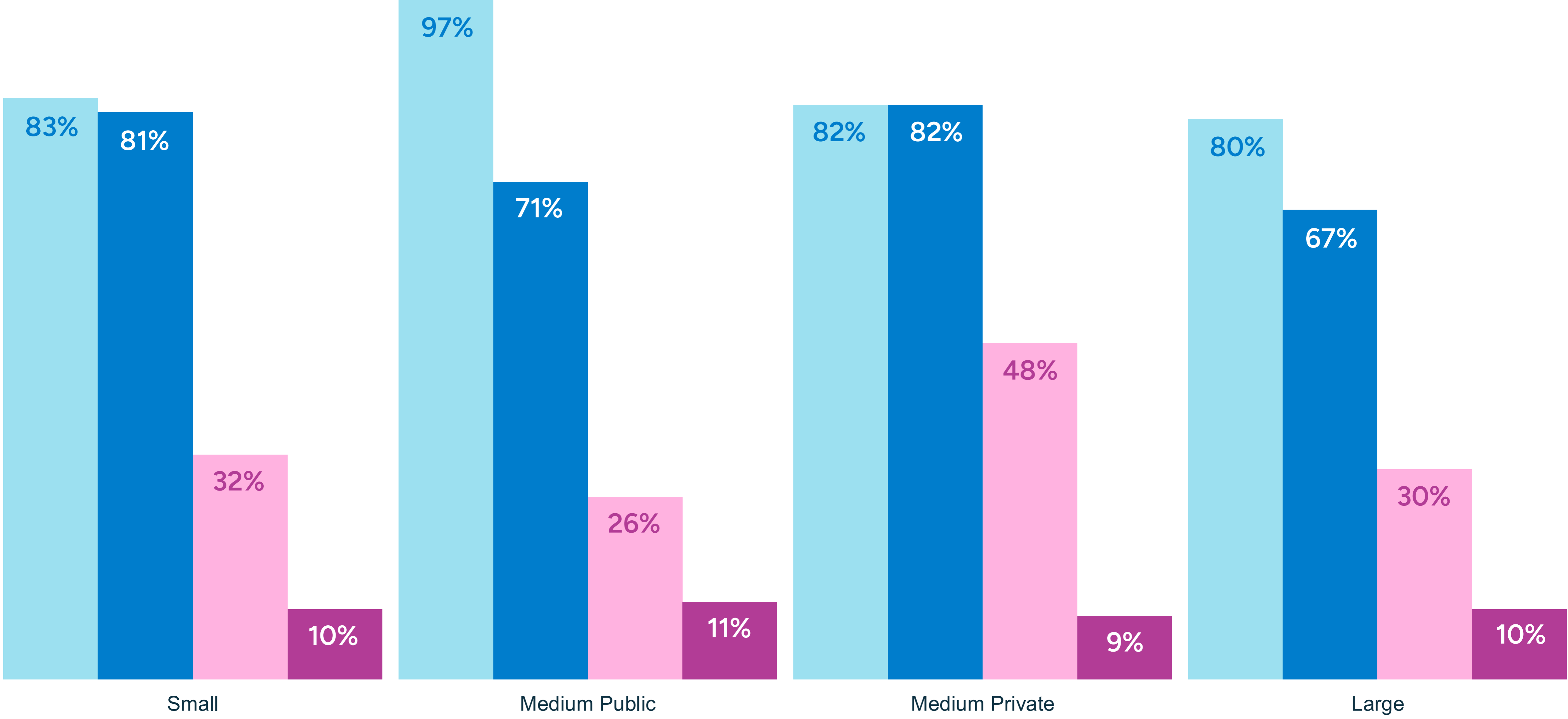
Rank 1 Rank 2 Rank 3



The priority
is *universal*.
So is the playbook.

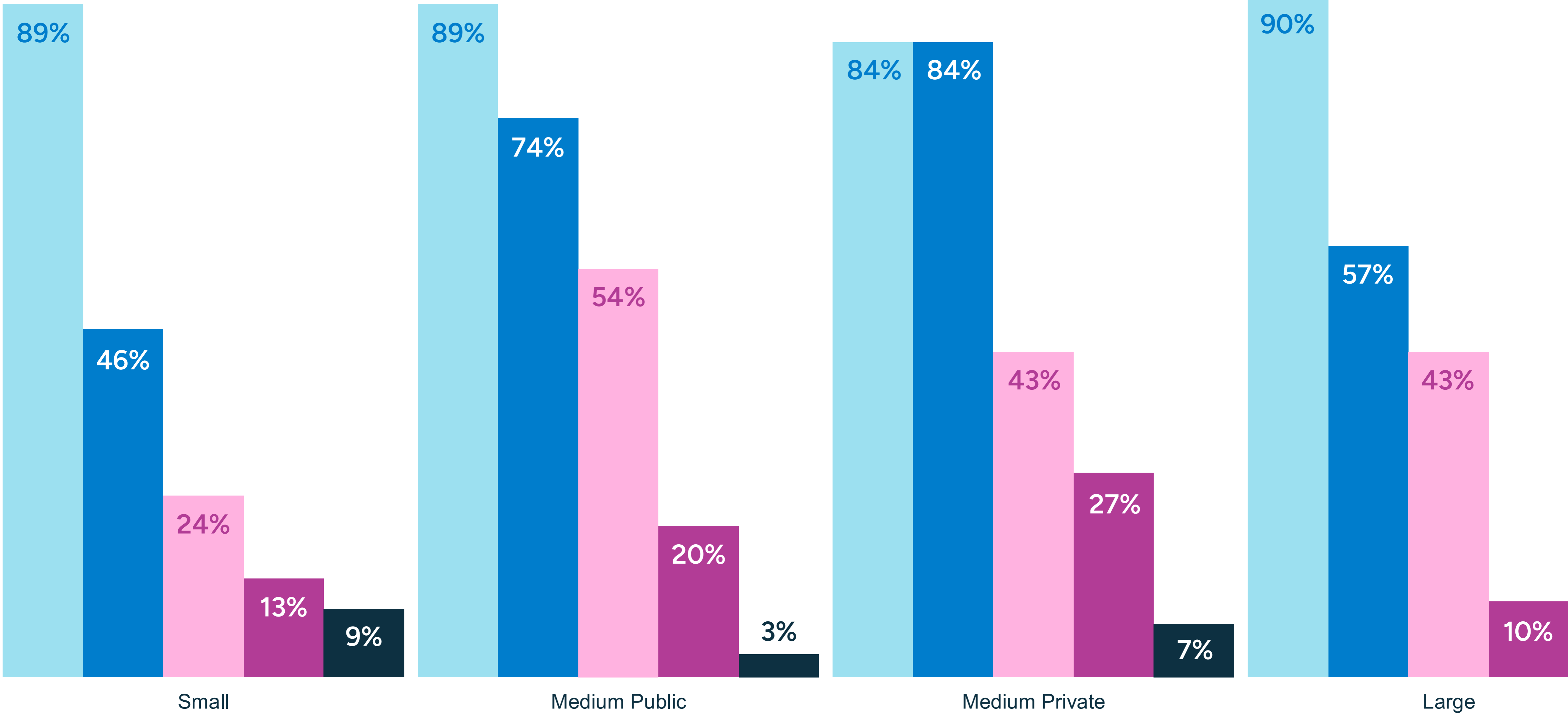
Regionally, where are you trying to grow enrollment numbers? (select all that apply)

- Attracting more in-state students
- Attracting more out-of-state students
- Attracting more international students
- Other



What enrollment areas are you most focused on growing? (select all that apply)

- Undergraduates
- Online
- Other
- Graduates
- Certificates



There are two issues
at play here.

1

While enrollment growth is a near universal priority, so is the growth priority within that category, leading to a zero-sum game.

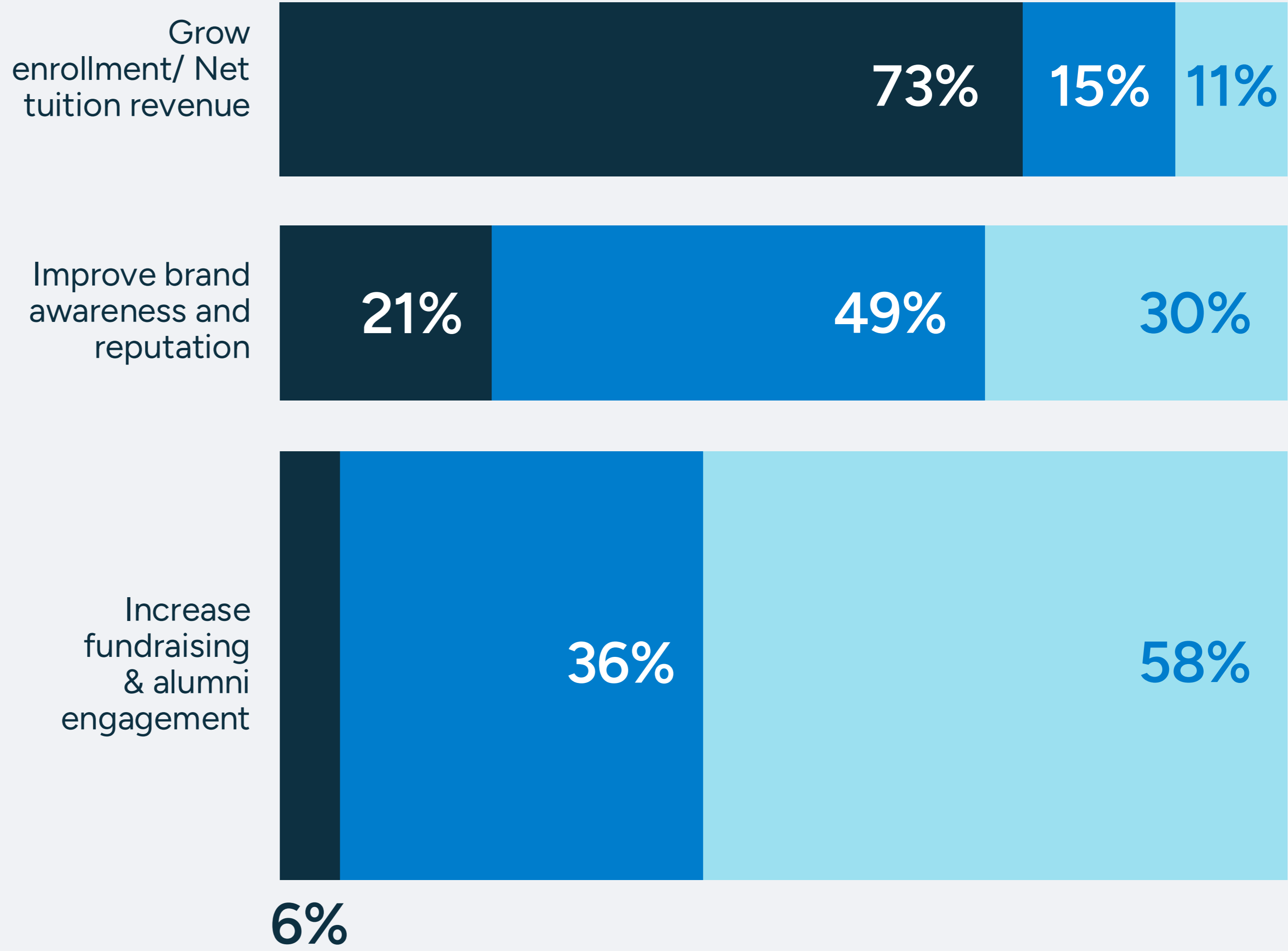
2

Enrollment growth is one type of growth. And that's limiting additional revenue streams.

Fundraising lags behind other growth priorities.

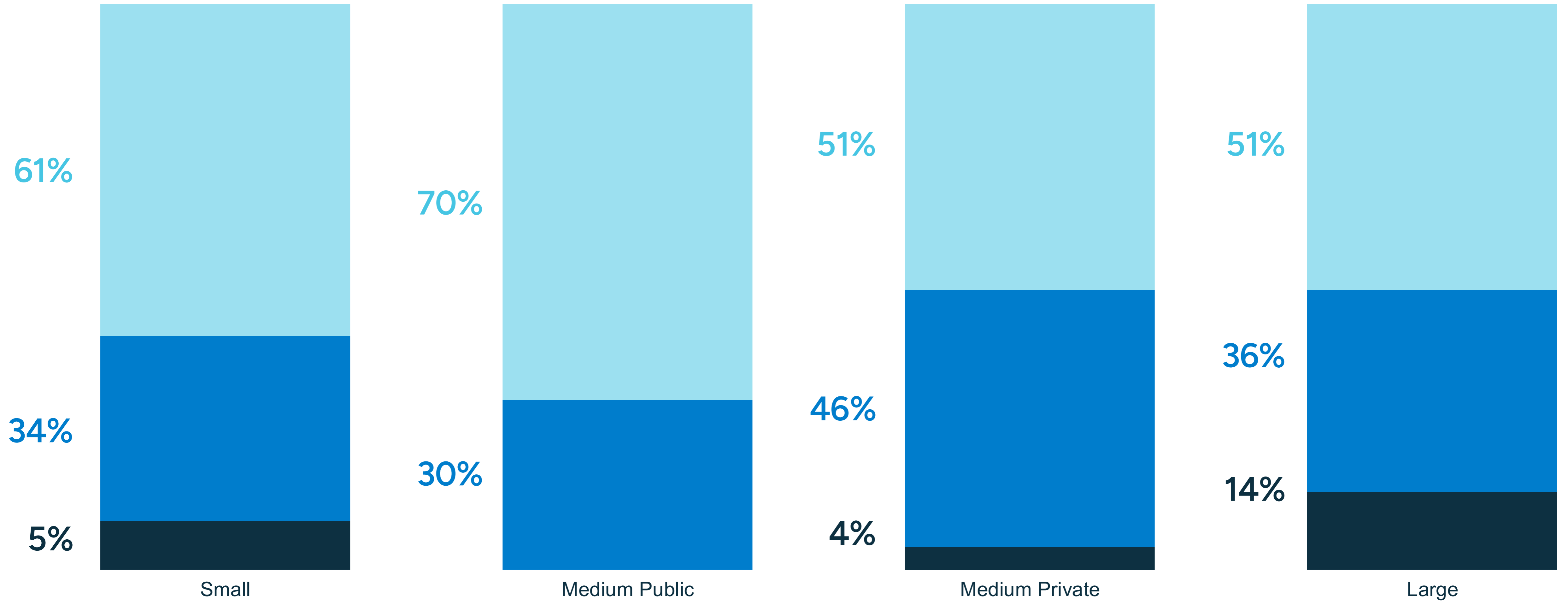
How would you rank the following priorities for your institution?

Rank 1 Rank 2 Rank 3



Regardless of size, fundraising is the third wheel of growth.

Rank 1 Rank 2 Rank 3



How institutions rank fundraising & alumni engagement as a priority

Alignment Gap *noun*

uh-LINE-mint gap

The space between what leadership intends, what central teams design, and what actually happens day to day across decentralized units.



What is the biggest barrier to achieving your growth ambitions?

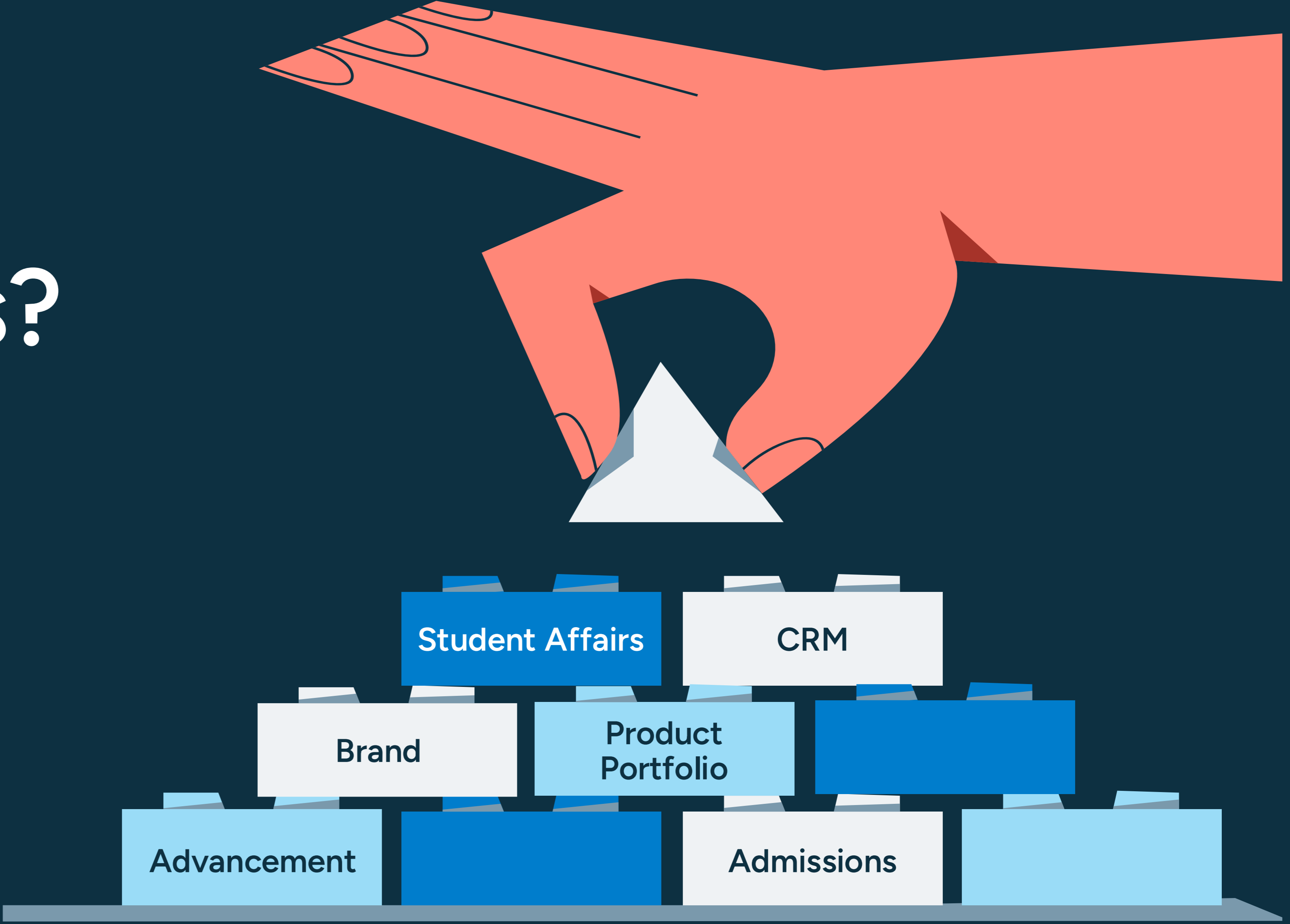
26%

of registrants from this webinar answered "silos, fragmentation, and misalignment"

25%

of registrants from this webinar answered "budget, resources, and staffing"

Is your system designed to convert effort into outcomes?



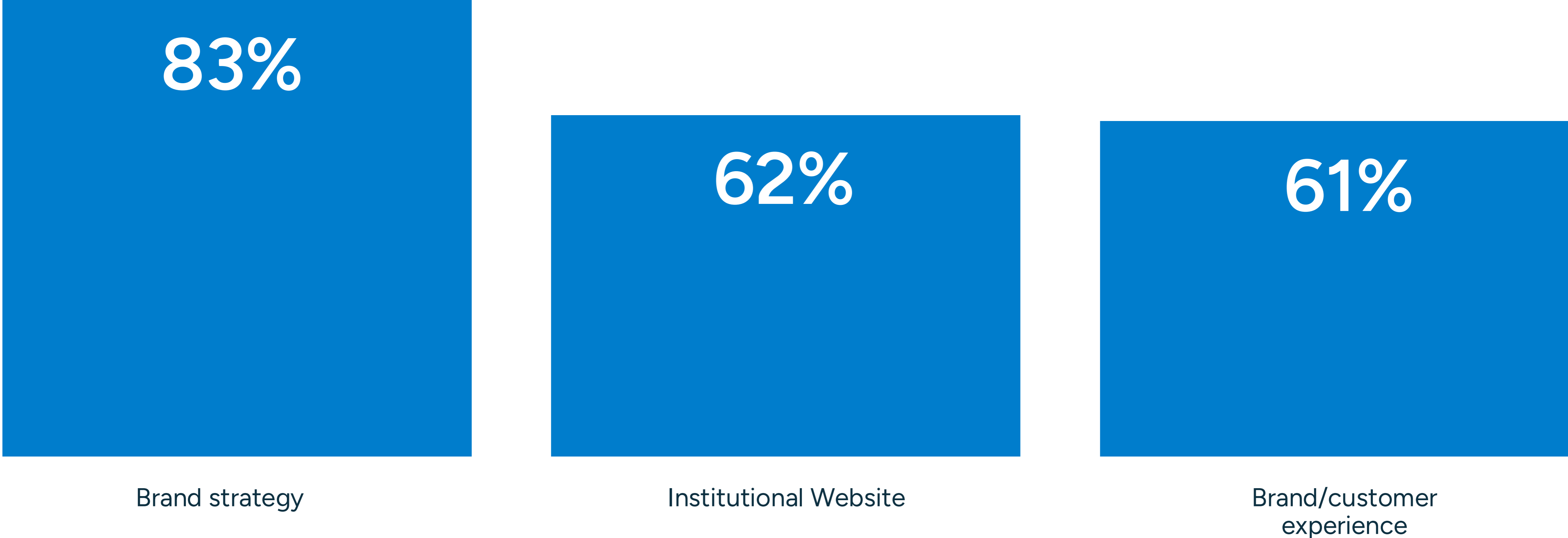
**Alignment doesn't
come from control.**

**It comes from clarity,
confidence and
*shared understanding.***



The groundwork for growth strategy is present.

Top Marcom Priority Rankings
(Net ranked 1-3 of 6 priorities)



Brand
builds *trust.*



Experience reinforces it.

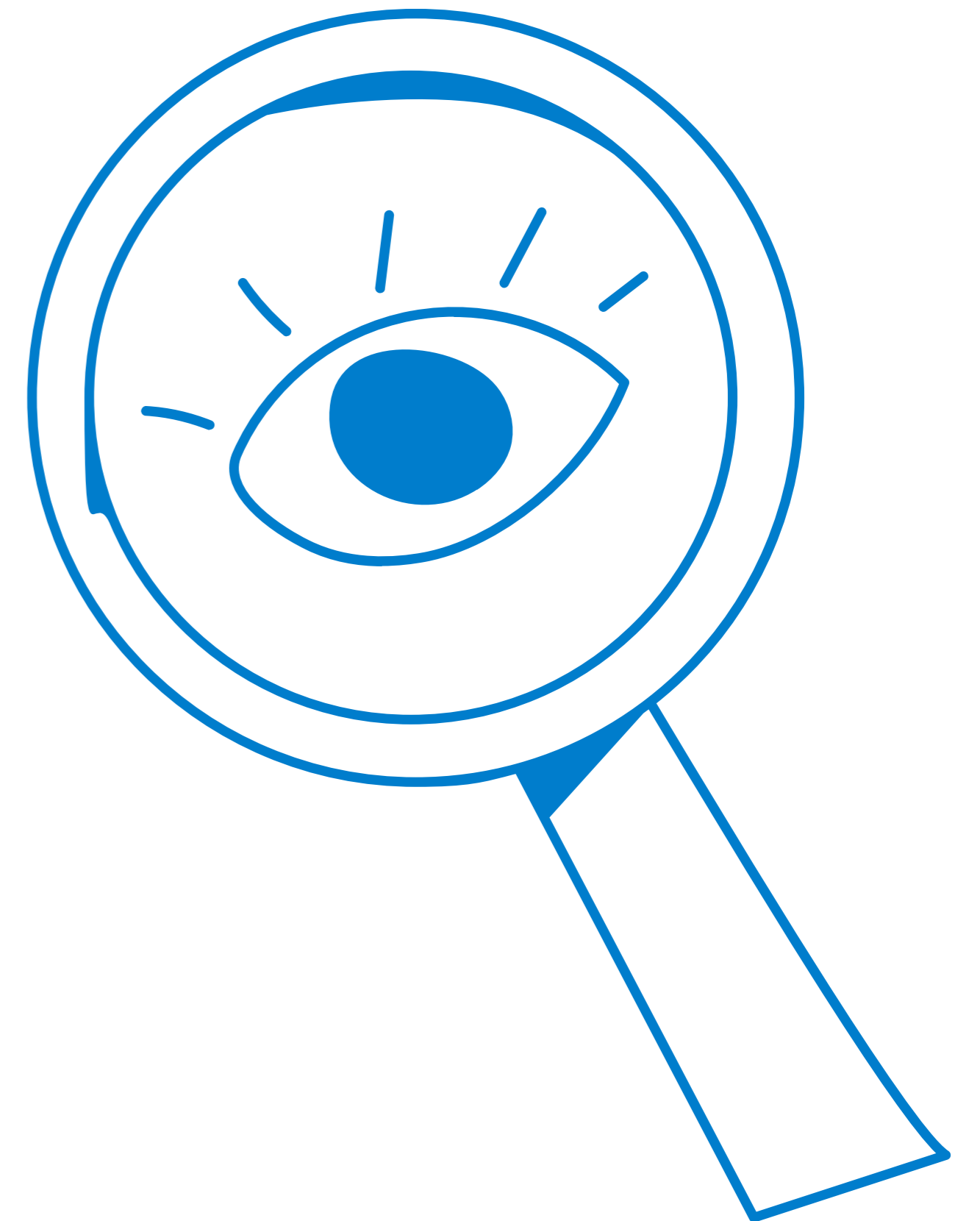


Advancement campaigns
expose whether the
growth foundation is *real*.







Growth Focus: Advancement campaigns expose whether the growth foundation is real.

Why?

- Clear value propositions
- Strong brand articulation
- Alumni segmentation
- CRM rigor

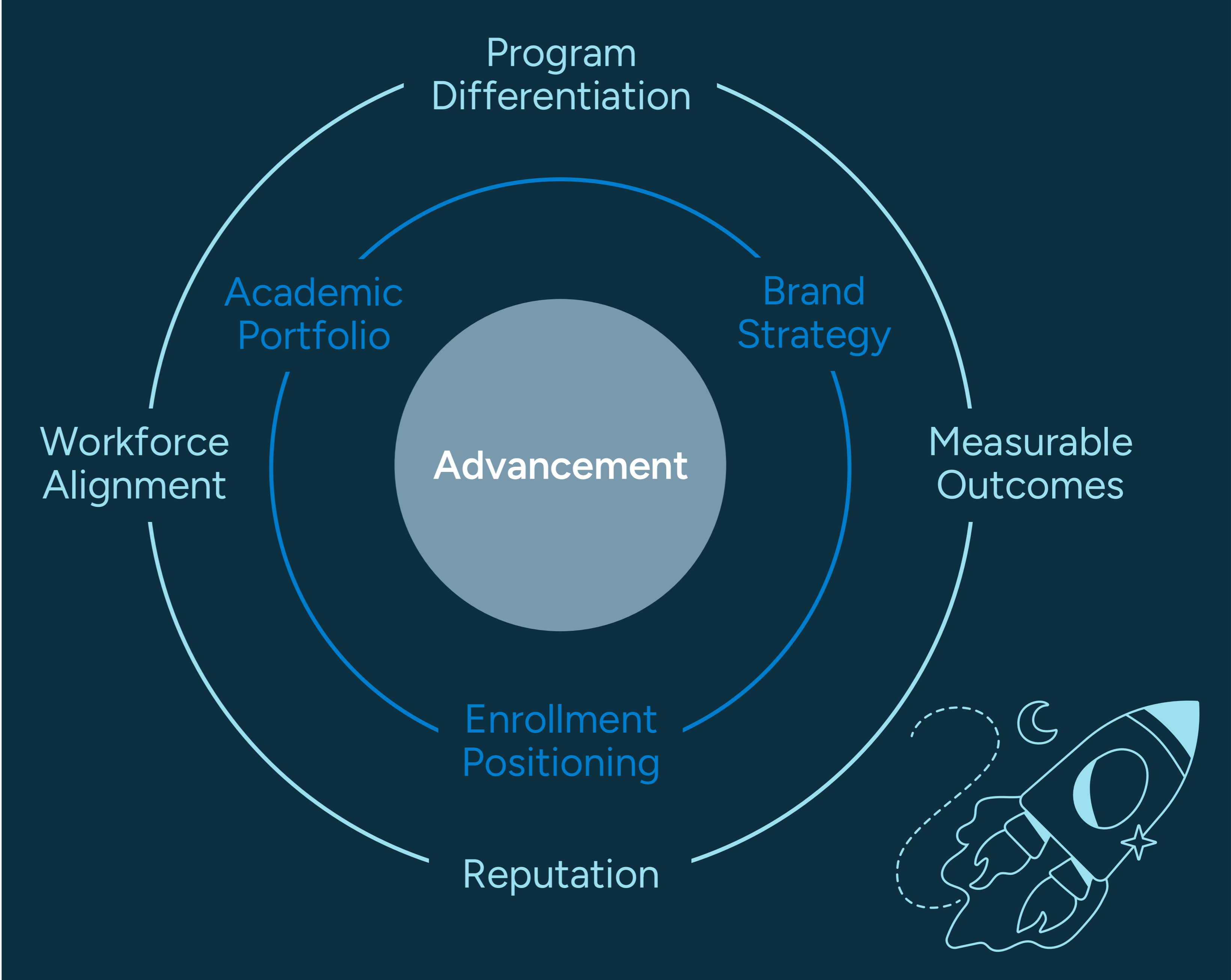


Higher ed fundraising is becoming increasingly reliant on fewer, high-capacity donors.

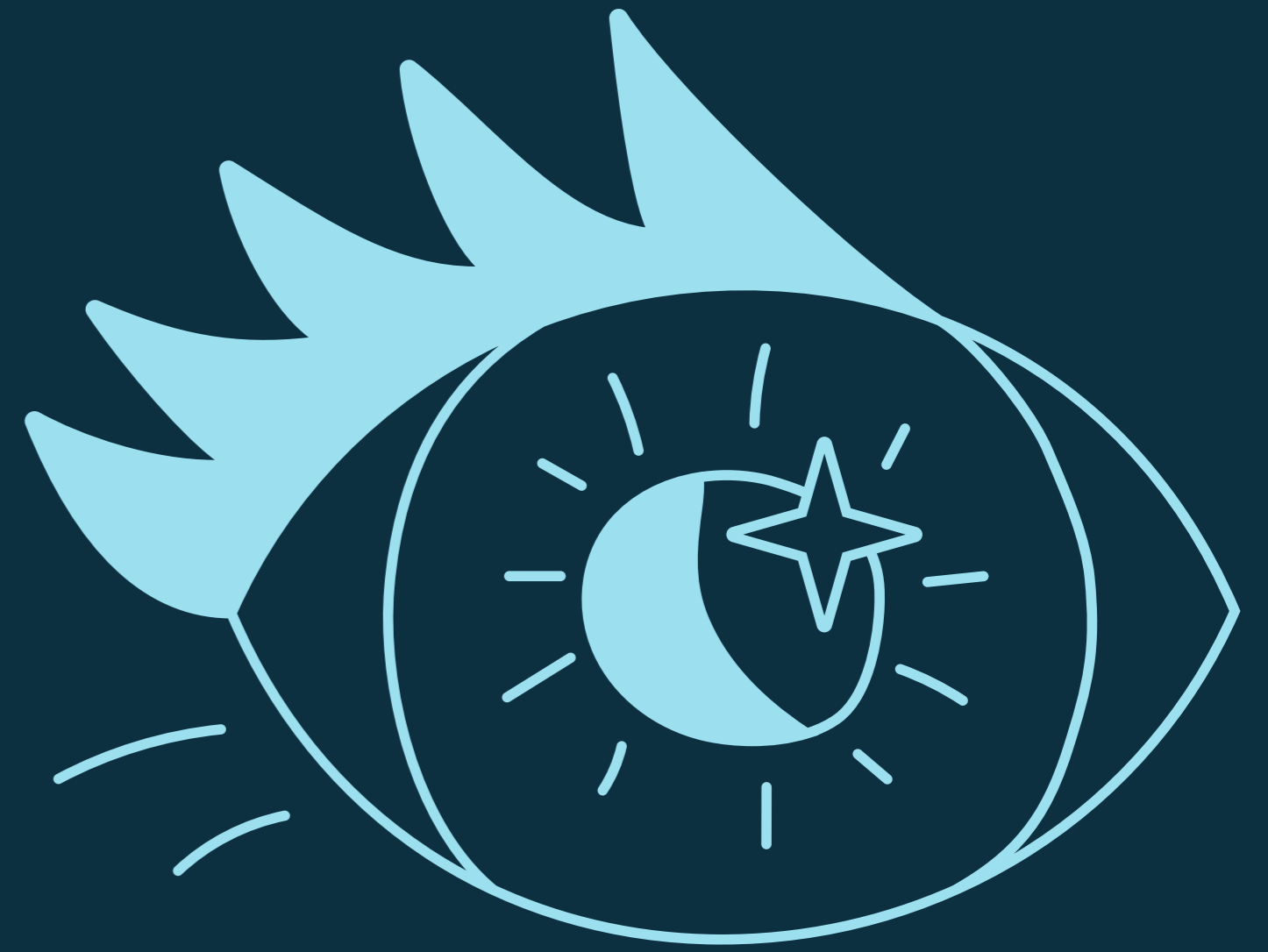
Source	Percent Change 2023 to 2024	Inflation Adjustment
 Alumni	7.5	4.7
 Non-alumni individuals	4.7	2.0
 Corporations	-7.3	-9.7
 Donor—advised funds	12.1	9.2
 Foundations	13.3	10.4
 Other organizations	-5.5	-7.9

Source: CASE Insights on Voluntary Support of Education Key Findings

A connected advancement strategy elevates & expands brand, reputation, and enrollment priorities.



What does this
look like within
an institution?



Campus Stories



Megan Horton
Associate Vice President, Brand Management
Oklahoma State University



Binti Harvey
VP of External Relations and Institutional Advancement
Scripps College

What's one piece of advice you would offer to a CMO who is trying to navigate

how to connect people, tools, and strategies to strengthen their institutional output or ROI?

Own your relationship with your advancement leader.

Don't wait to be invited — make yourself indispensable by bringing insights they can't ignore, until they're advocating for your seat at every key table.

Be the connector.

Build a trusted inner circle across MarCom, admissions, alumni relations, athletics, and the foundation — and make that group your institution's superpower.

Megan Horton

Embrace friction.

Change is difficult, but culture change is excruciating!

Partner, plan, and pilot.

Choose your co-conspirator carefully, have the hard conversations up front, and adopt an attitude of experimentation.

Binti Harvey

05 What's *next*?

The first step toward a growth system is knowing *where you stand.*



This assessment benchmarks your institution's performance across:

- narrative alignment
- strategy integration
- data infrastructure
- campaign readiness, and
- growth planning.



The Institutional Growth Ambitions Check is a structured self-assessment designed to benchmark where your institution stands across the five core conditions of a functioning growth system.

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June 2-4, 2026
The Limelight
Boulder, CO



Read all of Chapter 2
now & sign up for the
upcoming webinar

