

Unveiling the Employer's View: An Employer-Centric Approach to Higher Education Partnerships

Addressing Employer Barriers to Engaging with Institutions



Bruce Etter
Senior Director of Research & Consulting
UPCEA, Center for Research and Strategy

James Fong
Chief Research Officer
UPCEA, Center for Research and Strategy

Deja Sullberg
Data Analyst
UPCEA, Center for Research and Strategy

Kristine Wang
Research Assistant
UPCEA, Center for Research and Strategy



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January 2024

Table of Contents

Foreword.....	3
Overview.....	4
Introduction to Survey Results.....	9
Qualifying Questions and Demographics.....	10
Questions for Qualified Respondents.....	14
Partnerships with Colleges and Universities.....	19
Partnerships with Community Colleges, Companies, and Associations.....	26
Barriers to Working with Higher Education.....	29
Strategies to Secure or Improve Partnerships.....	35
Demographics.....	39
Key Findings.....	40
Impact on Higher Education.....	41
About.....	43
Further Reading on Microcredentials.....	44
Sources.....	45

Foreword

The headwinds facing higher education present opportunities to rethink academic programming, delivery modalities, business models, and partnership ecosystems. The recent trend of declining enrollment and revenue from traditional student populations will continue. In an attempt to diversify enrollments and revenue, many institutions have expanded academic portfolios to include non-degree credentials, upskilling, and reskilling offerings. However, few have realized success. Collegis Education, in partnership with UPCEA, seeks to better understand how institutions can succeed.

Forming partnerships with employers is key for successfully generating meaningful enrollment and revenue from non-degree credentials. Enrollments for non-degree credentials may span a few weeks to a few months and, therefore, generate only a fraction of the revenue gained from degree programs. As a result, achieving measurable revenue requires substantially more volume than traditional programs and a level of scalability that's difficult to reach via recruitment of individual learners. Developing partnerships with employers, however, can help higher ed institutions realize enrollments at scale while supporting the upskilling and reskilling needs of the workforce.

The 2023 report from Collegis and UPCEA, "[The Effect of Employer Understanding and Engagement on Non-Degree Credentials](#)," reveals employers have a strong interest in partnering with colleges and universities to design and deliver non-degree programs. However, over 45% have never been approached to do so. Additionally, employers report that proof of program effectiveness (65%) and having an active role in curriculum development (53%) would incentivize their organizations to partner with a college or university. To better understand how institutions can work with employers to form strong partnerships, Collegis and UPCEA again joined forces to survey employers.

When creating a professional development program, our newest survey results show companies are considering partnering with not only higher education institutions, but also professional associations and technology providers, such as LinkedIn Learning and Coursera. **The number of employers partnering with external organizations increased 26% from 2022 to 2023.** In some cases, colleges and universities are losing new opportunities to private providers. However, almost all employers (98%) who currently work with a higher education partner plan to continue the partnership, due to the school meeting the employer's needs (77%), positive employee feedback (71%), and improved job performance (68%). In other words, higher education can develop successful employer partnerships, but doing so requires rethinking business models.

So, how do schools approach employers and form mutually beneficial partnerships? Employers starting new programs must move quickly to meet staffing needs, and they'll look elsewhere if higher ed can't deliver. Year two of our research series represents an extension of our initial survey to further explore employers' perceptions of working with four-year colleges and universities. The following report and analysis will help higher ed institutions tailor their approach to increase their likelihood of securing lucrative employer partnerships.



Tracy A. Chapman, Ph.D.

Chief Academic Officer

Collegis Education

Overview

The Evolution of Microcredentials

While microcredentials are not necessarily new, their adoption is expected to grow significantly through stackable credit courses, intensive bootcamps, noncredit training programs and other programs. As our society creeps into a more automated future, **non-degree credentials will replace degree requirements for some jobs** as well as provide avenues for upskilling and reskilling. This presents an opportunity for higher education to become less reliant on degree-based education while diversifying its enrollment and revenues through microcredential offerings. Realizing success in this emerging market, however, requires rethinking processes and practices.

As the workforce demand for non-degree credentials increases, it's incumbent upon higher education to partner with employers to not only define curricular needs, but also to adopt a service-minded approach. The alternative credential arena includes many non-academic providers. To effectively compete with these providers, higher education institutions must develop sustainable and meaningful partnerships with employers.

The 2024 UPCEA-Collegis report reveals opportunities for institutions of higher education to position themselves as preferred providers in the microcredential market by changing their approach to forming strong collaborative relationships, adopting proven business practices, and demonstrating the ability to keep pace with the changing economy.

Engaging Employers to Advance Higher Education

To work effectively together, it's imperative that institutions of higher education embrace employers' input, as organizations do have options. They can go to the private sector for assistance or develop programming in-house. The research shows that employers see value in working with colleges and universities and are likely to work with education partners on pricing, assuming that programs are applicable, meet their needs, and are delivered with the learner and employer in mind.

For colleges and universities to offset unfavorable demographics and increased competition, employers and learners are going to need a seat at the table.

Partnerships as Innovation Drivers

Partnerships between higher education institutions and employers have proven to provide long-term benefits to both parties. These collaborations are considered critical drivers of innovation in the education industry as well as the general corporate environment, allowing for further research and development in the workplace.



James Fong
Chief Research Officer, UPCEA
Center for Research and Strategy

Colleges and universities have become essential stakeholders in creating and fostering innovative ecosystems. One example of this in recent years is the Upskill Together technology partnership between companies like Salesforce, Amazon Web Service, Pega, and university partners such as Florida International University, Jacksonville University, University of Tampa, and more. This partnership was created to bring women, veterans, and other demographics into tech fields with a one-to-one match program. Students are provided the opportunity to complete a training program in high-demand fields such as cloud computing, CRM, and automation.¹

Upskill Together’s partners hope that the experience will accelerate economic opportunity for people from all backgrounds and give them the skills to succeed in the technology industry.

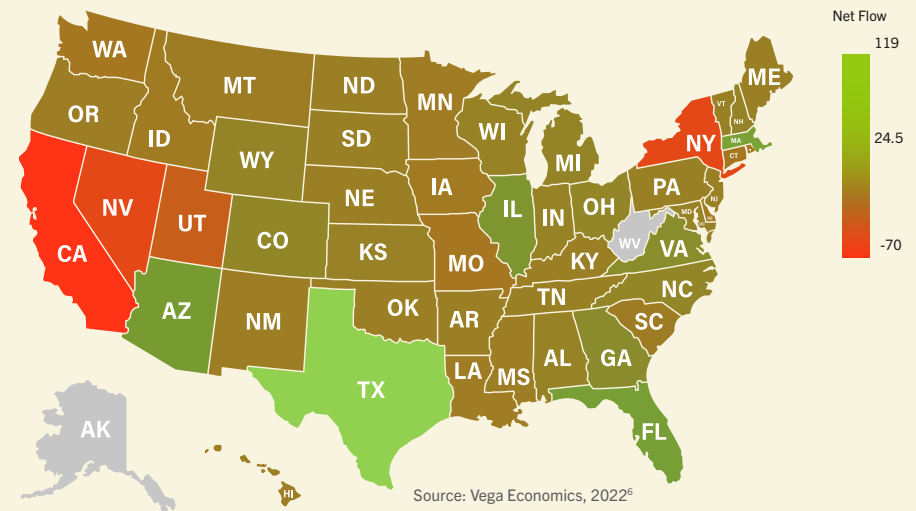
Research Partnerships

Research collaboration between employers and universities has increased over the last decade.² These external partnerships offer invaluable benefits to both parties as companies turn to universities for early-stage research and recruitment, and universities look to develop attractive corporate relationships. According to Harvard Business Review, many university and company partnerships have long known the advantages of having a research and development presence in industry clusters near major research universities. For example, within the booming Silicon Valley, Stanford University and the University of California, Berkeley have positioned themselves as innovation ecosystems and hubs for top talent. In the Midwest, the University of Minnesota’s Earl E. Bakken Medical Devices Center is helping to propel the Twin Cities area into one of the most prominent medical-technology clusters in the world.³

Over the last decade, education hubs such as Greater Boston, which is home to 55 institutions of higher learning, have uniquely attracted a great number of companies in healthcare, technology, and other industries. Highlighted in Figure 1, Vega Economics found that as headquarter relocations moved away from California, Texas gained 117 more headquarters during this period, followed by Massachusetts (36), Florida (30), and Arizona (24).⁴ Pfizer established one of its largest research centers in Boston in 2014 while Philips Healthcare moved its U.S. R&D headquarters to Cambridge in 2015.⁵

Tech giants that originated on the West Coast have also established East Coast headquarters over the years. Facebook, Twitter, and Amazon have all opened new HQs and R&D offices across the institution-heavy East Coast. These partnerships highlight the importance of direct employer collaboration to produce successful long-term relationships and opportunities for four-year colleges and universities.

Figure 1: Cumulative Net Change of Corporate Headquarters by State (2009-2021)



Reciprocal Benefits of External Partnerships for Companies and Institutions

External partnerships provide advantages for both the companies involved and their institutional partners. By working directly with universities, companies across all industries can provide students with real-world experience while fostering knowledge exchanges, workforce development, and social and economic impact. Examples of potential programs include experiential and work-integrated learning, co-op programs, and internships.⁷ Practical, hands-on experiences for university students are a crucial aspect of every educational journey as they allow students to gain deeper industry insight and valuable knowledge that will enhance their professional skills.

By establishing external partnerships with four-year colleges or universities, companies can play a pivotal role in shaping the emerging workforce. This mutual involvement allows companies to engage directly with college or university students, which in turn helps students build their professional résumés, gain practical skills, and boost their confidence working in their respective industries.

These experiences not only create positive impacts for students, but also for their employers. By directly collaborating with colleges and universities, organizations can access novel knowledge, new perspectives, and innovative strategies to combat industry-wide issues. This employer–institution relationship allows organizations to enhance their talent pool for future jobs by having direct involvement in the professional development of students, ensuring these students are equipped to step into the workforce.

Employers and External Partnerships for Professional Development

As institutions look to create and retain partnerships with employers, examining the reasons why employers have decided to end relationships, or not partake at all, will be of keen interest. Colleges and universities have a unique advantage in their ability to not only shape the workforce through their own student population, but also through employee professional development. Forming strong and sustainable partnerships with employers allows universities to extend their services beyond degree-seeking student populations to the larger audience of working adults.

UPCEA found that the percentage of employers partnering with external entities to provide employee training/professional development increased from 54% in 2022 to 68% in 2023.⁸ However, four-year colleges and universities are losing ground to private providers.

Figure 2: Employer-University Collaboration Map



*The logos have been scaled to represent whether the startup is roughly small, medium or large in terms of relative valuation and customer base

Source: LinkedIn, 2020⁹

According to Training Magazine’s 2021 Training Industry Report, companies in the U.S. spent an average of \$1,071 per employee on training costs in 2021, a \$40 per person decrease from 2020.¹⁰

Some of this decline can be attributed to the economic and workforce impact of COVID-19 with companies focusing on persevering through the aftermath. Other identified issues include content that lacks real-world application (25%), a slow turnaround time to deliver desired content (22%), inconsistent content quality (22%), and content not being offered frequently enough (22%).¹¹

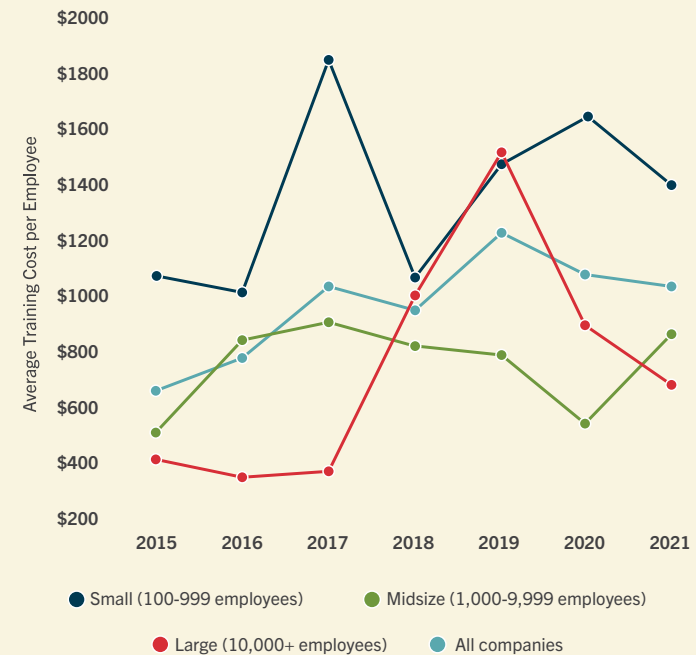
Barriers of Employer-Higher Education Partnerships

Employers responding to the survey identified 12 key barriers to forming partnerships with higher education institutions for professional development programs, including:

<i>Cost</i>	<i>No single point of contact at school</i>
<i>Lack of real-world application</i>	<i>Unclear offerings and capabilities</i>
<i>Cumbersome business processes</i>	<i>Lack of course credit</i>
<i>Slow turnaround time to deliver desired content</i>	<i>Unsure how to initiate partnership</i>
<i>Content is inconsistent in quality</i>	<i>Poor employee feedback</i>
<i>Content is infrequently offered</i>	<i>Other</i>

A standard cut-and-paste professional development program will no longer suffice in this high-demand market. In some cases, technology can help institutions efficiently and effectively cater to their varying employer markets. For example, leveraging student information systems to more effectively isolate and communicate skills learned, using AI-powered tools to match students with work-integrated learning opportunities, and utilizing customer relationship management (CRM) systems to manage learning partnerships with employers are all examples of how institutions can elevate their professional development partnerships.¹³ In this uncertain time for higher education, creating programs catered to employer needs can position institutions to realize the increased enrollments and revenue they hope to achieve.

Figure 3: Average Cost of Employee Training, 2015-2021



Source: Zippia, 2023¹²

How Can Institutions Overcome These Barriers with Employers?

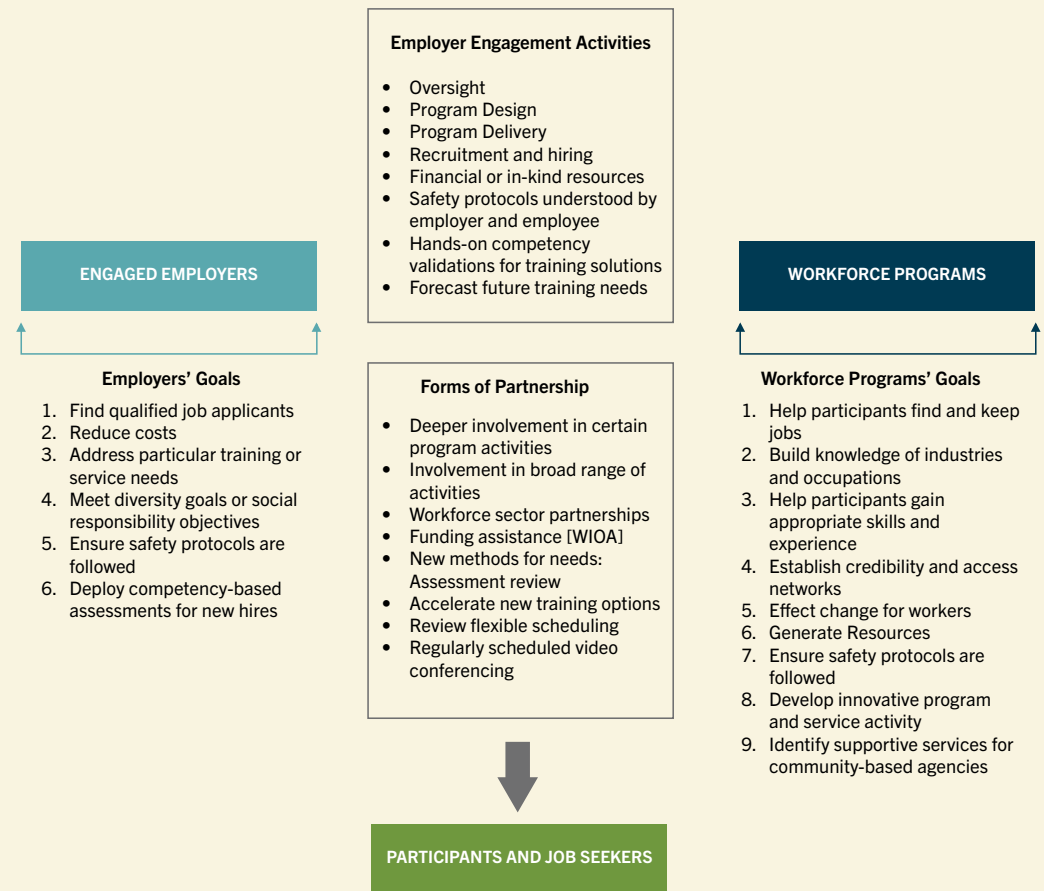
While having clear benefits, higher ed-employer partnerships can be difficult to implement and sustain. When addressing these issues, the overarching message was the importance of clarity in processes and communication and a tight focus on learner-centered programming. Fifteen percent of employers said the most important thing a four-year institution could do to strengthen the partnership with their company is improve communication. Most importantly, communication between both parties needs to center on the perspectives of students, which can include job opportunities, desired academic programs, and financial decisions.¹⁴

According to a Boston Consulting Group 2020 survey of business leaders, 70% thought that higher ed providers should be more involved in job training, and 81% believed that better aligning educational curricula with job openings and skill gaps could resolve many of the skill mismatches that employers face.¹⁵ How institutions rise to the professional development occasion will shape much of their success in maintaining and gaining employer relationships.

Among employers that do partner with four-year institutions, UPCEA and Collegis found that **98% strongly agree (58%) or agree (40%) that their organization plans to continue those partnerships to provide training or professional development opportunities for their employees for the foreseeable future.** For companies that continued their partnerships, 77% said the institution was meeting the employer's needs, while 17% cited positive employee feedback, and 68% cited improved job performance as contributing factors.¹⁶ Through strong collaboration and communication, both parties can work together to forecast talent baselines, identify hard and soft skills, codesign curricula, appoint program faculty, and target graduates for recruitment.

The overwhelming satisfaction of employers in external partnerships demonstrates that institutions can attract and retain employer partners. This UPCEA and Collegis report provides guidance for how institutions can best position themselves for success with employer partnerships.

Figure 4: Employer Engagement and Partnership with Workforce Programs Post COVID-19



The EvOLLution, 2023¹⁷

Introduction to Survey Results

Higher education institutions are experiencing a sustained enrollment decline in traditional student populations. Therefore, they're naturally seeking new sources of enrollment and revenue, including attempting to partner with employers to offer training and professional development. Strategies for building partnerships are of keen interest to both higher education and employers.

As the economy and higher education markets evolve, employers have reevaluated their relationships with their employees to help them grow and stay engaged. Partnerships with third-party training providers are becoming crucial for retaining valued employees and upskilling the workforce to keep pace with ever-changing technologies and consumer demand. Employers have partnered with traditional four-year institutions, as well as private organizations such as LinkedIn Learning, Coursera, and Khan Academy, among others.

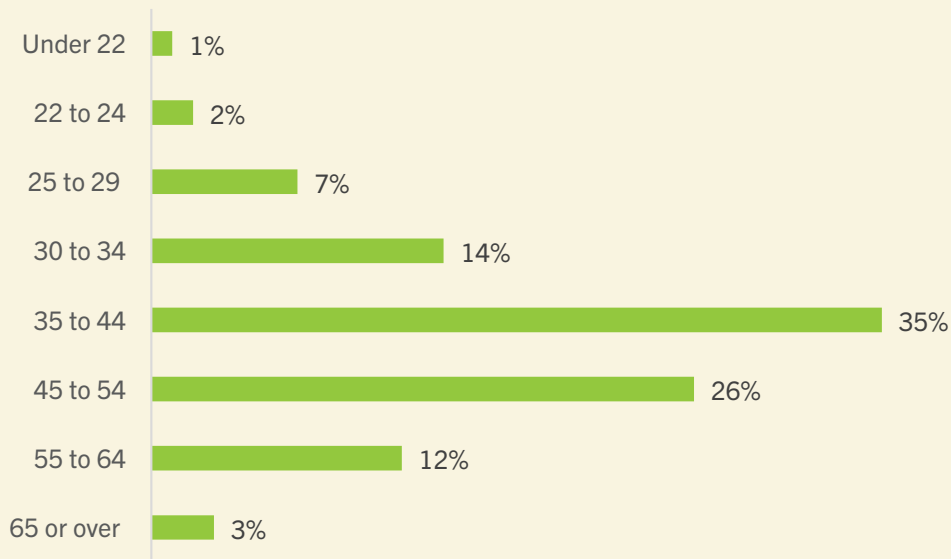
This paper provides findings from the second year of research by UPCEA and Collegis to better understand employers' perceptions of partnering with four-year institutions to provide employee professional development. Responses from 507 hiring professionals have been analyzed to identify key barriers to employer-higher education partners and strategies for addressing these barriers.

Qualifying Questions and Demographics

650 individuals were invited to respond to an internet-delivered survey. Demographic items addressing age, employment status, job level, and job responsibilities were used to identify those qualified to participate in the study.

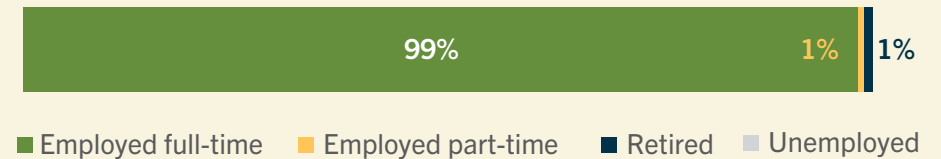
Of the initial 650 respondents, 35% are 35 for 44 years or old and 26% are 45 to 54. Those under 22 were terminated from the study.

Figure 5: Age Group (n=650)



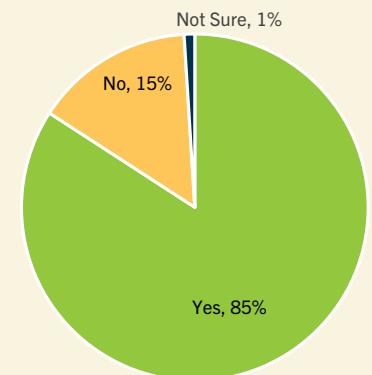
Ninety-nine percent are employed full-time, 1% employed part-time, and 1% are retired. Those who retired were terminated from the study.

Figure 6: Current Employment Status (n=645)



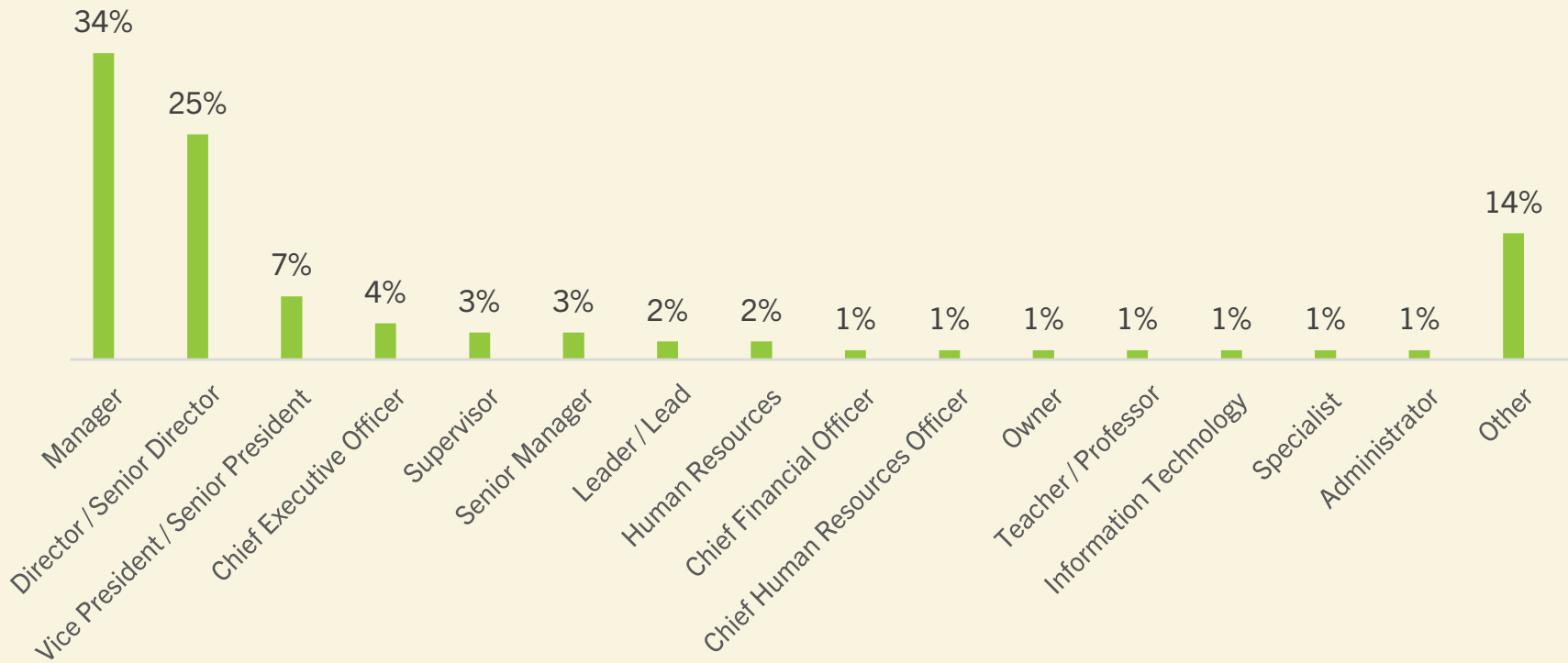
Eighty-five percent of respondents are responsible for hiring, training, or the development of other employees within their organization. Those who are not, or were not sure, were terminated from the study.

Figure 7: Are you responsible for, or in charge of, the hiring, training, or development of other employees within your organization? (n=639)



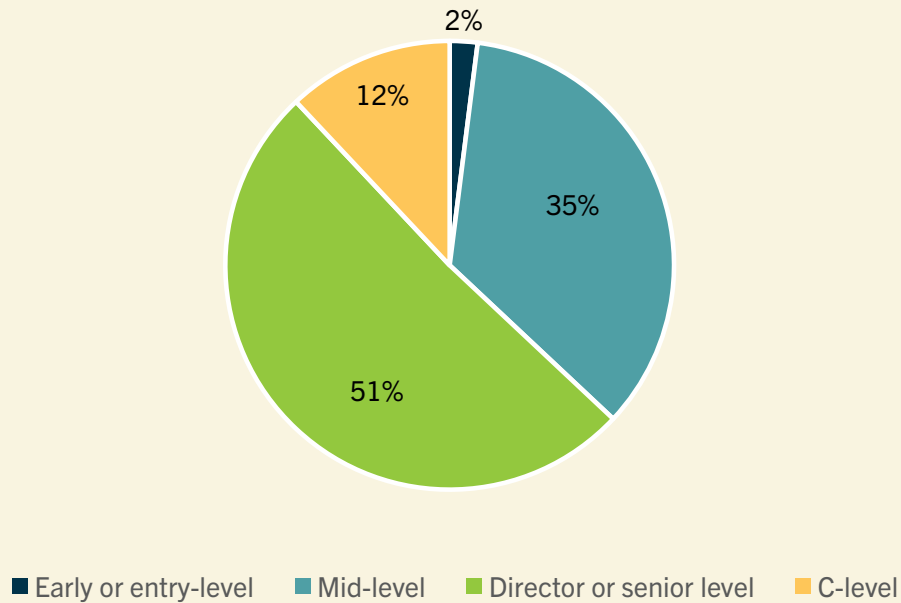
The most common job titles of employed respondents are manager (34%) and director/senior director (25%). Job titles mentioned less than five times were placed in the “Other” category, which included recruiter, physician, and principal, among others.

Figure 8: Job Title (n=542)



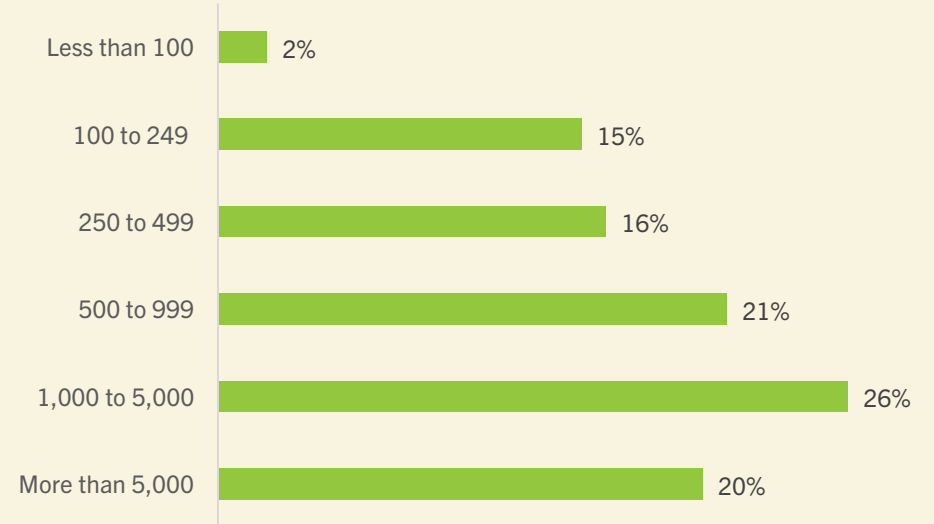
Over half (51%) of respondents are currently at a director or senior-level in their career, 35% are mid-level, and 12% C-level. The 2% who are entry-level in their career were terminated from the study.

Figure 9: Point in Career (n=542)



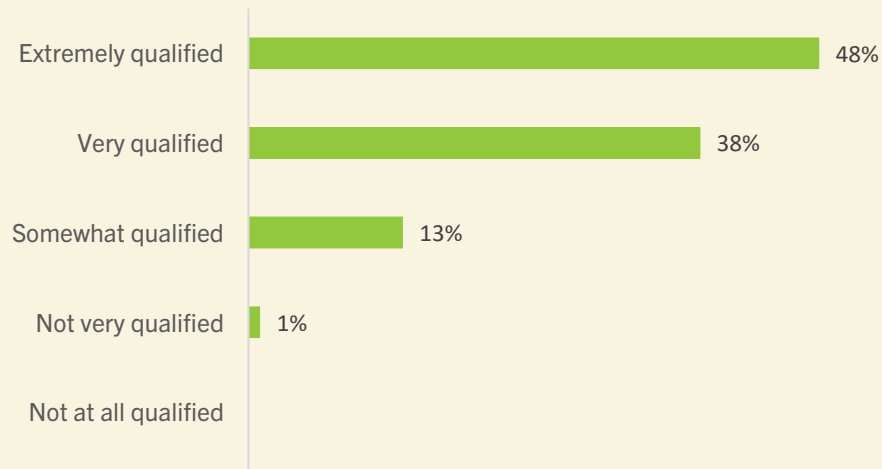
Over a quarter (26%) are in organizations that employ 1,000 to 5,000 individuals in the US, 21% employ between 500 to 999, and 20% employ more than 5,000. The 2% of individuals who come from organizations that employ fewer than 100 people were terminated from the study.

Figure 10: Including yourself, how many individuals in the United States does your organization employ? (n=531)



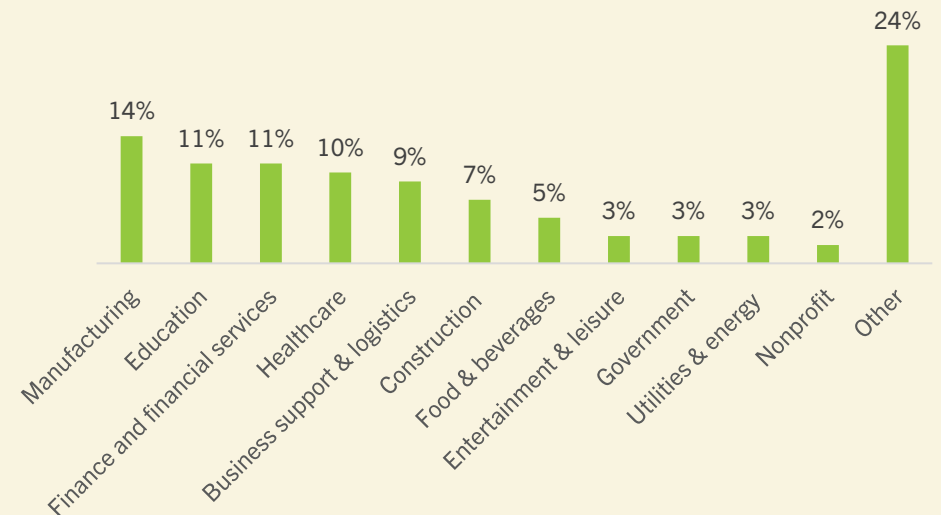
Eighty-six percent of respondents said they are extremely (48%) or very (38%) qualified to speak about their organization’s training and professional development needs and 13% said they are somewhat qualified. The 1% of respondents who said they were not very qualified were terminated from the study.

Figure 11: How qualified are you to speak about your organization’s training and professional development needs? (n=522)



When asked about their current industry of employment, 14% cited manufacturing, 11% education, 11% finance and financial services, and 10% healthcare.

Figure 12: Industry of Employment (n=516)

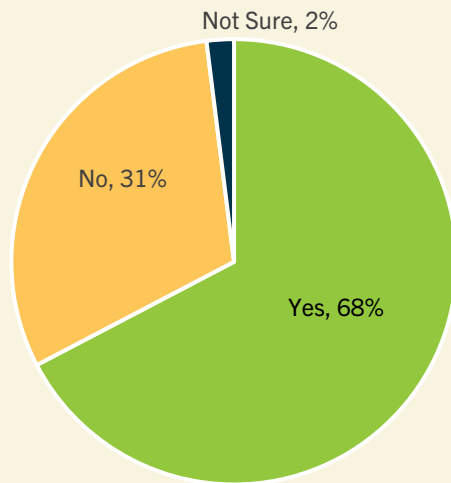


Questions for Qualified Respondents

Qualified respondents were presented with survey items ranging from describing training and professional development providers, challenges encountered when working with higher education for training and professional development, and strategies for successful higher education-employer partnerships.

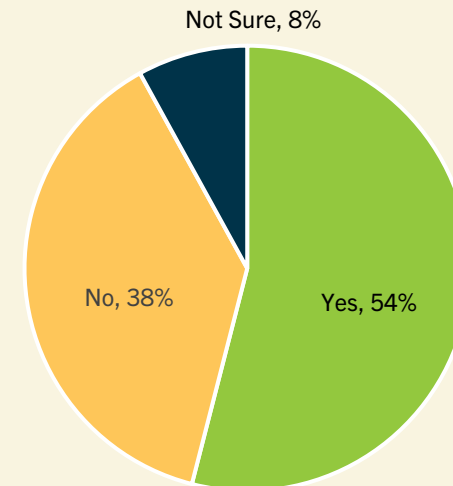
Over two-thirds (68%) of respondents have existing external partnerships with organizations or institutions that provide training or professional development opportunities to their employees while 31% do not and 2% were unsure.

Figure 13 (Results from 2023 Study): Do you have any existing external partnerships or relationships with organizations or institutions that provide training or professional development opportunities to your employees? (n=516)



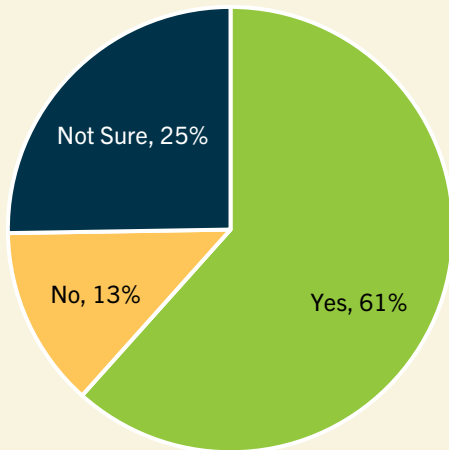
Overall, the number of respondents whose companies have existing external partnerships with organizations or institutions **increased from 54% in 2022 to 68% in 2023**.

Figure 14 (Results from 2022 Study): Do you have any existing external partnerships or relationships with organizations or institutions that provide training or learning opportunities to your employees? (n=511)



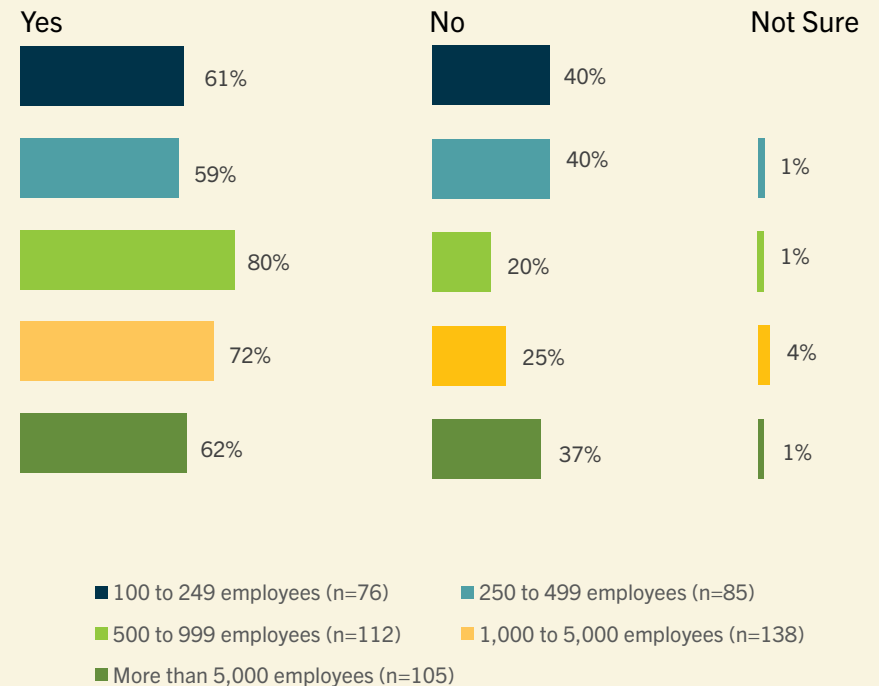
Among those who do not have existing relationships or were unsure, **61% said their company would be interested** in developing these partnerships, 25% were not sure, and 13% said their company would not be interested.

Figure 15: Would your company have any interest in developing external partnerships or relationships with organizations or institutions that provide training or professional development opportunities to your employees? (n=166)



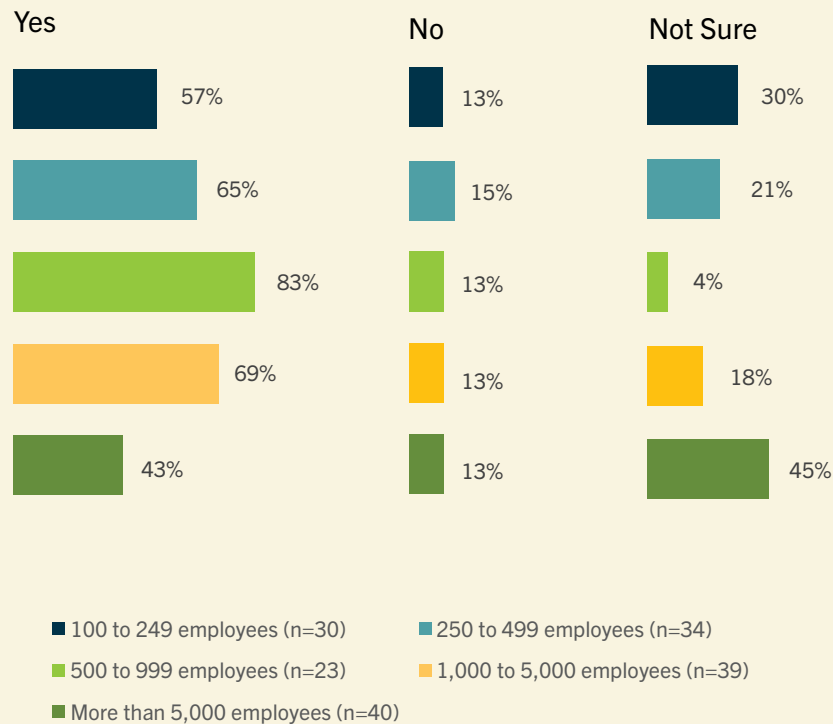
Respondents from companies with 500 to 999 employees were most likely to have existing external partnerships (80%), while companies with 250 to 499 employees were least likely (59%).

Figure 16: Do you have any existing external partnerships or relationships with organizations or institutions that provide training or professional development opportunities to your employees?



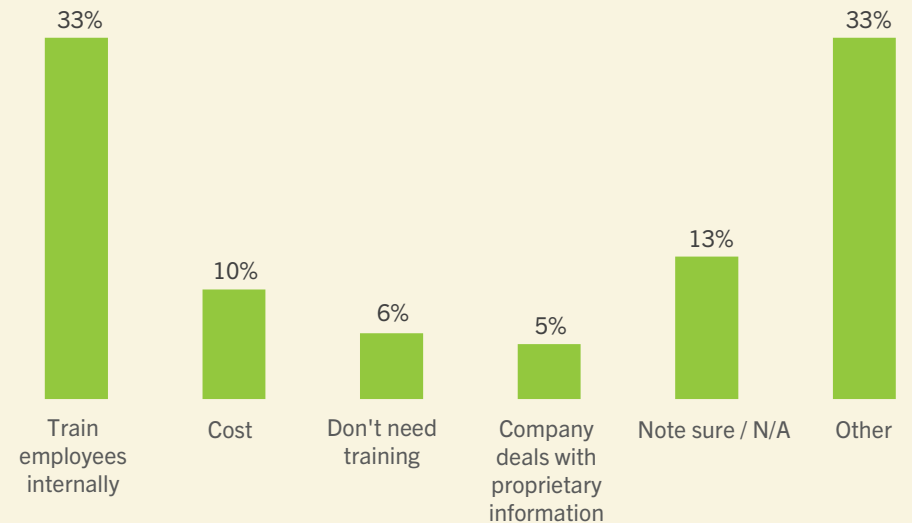
For companies that currently don't have external partnerships, **those with 500 to 999 employees would be most interested** in developing these partnerships (83%), followed by 1,000 to 5,000 employees (69%), and 250 to 499 employees (65%).

Figure 17: Would your company have any interest in developing external partnerships or relationships with organizations or institutions that provide training or professional development opportunities to your employees?



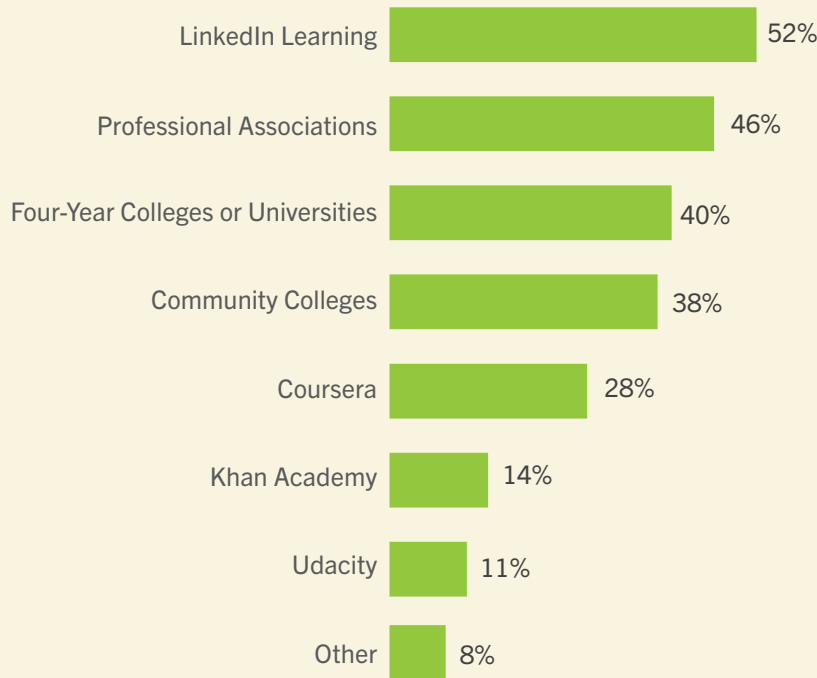
Participants who were unsure or said that their companies would not be interested in developing external partnerships were asked why. One third (33%) said their company trains employees internally, 10% cited the cost, 6% said they don't need training, and 5% said that their company deals with proprietary information. Responses mentioned fewer than three times were placed in the "Other" category and included having a strict hiring process, having no experience with external partnerships, and these matters being above their pay grade, among others.

Figure 18: Why do you believe your company would not have any interest in developing external partnerships or relationships with organizations or institutions that provide training or professional development opportunities to your employees? (n=63)



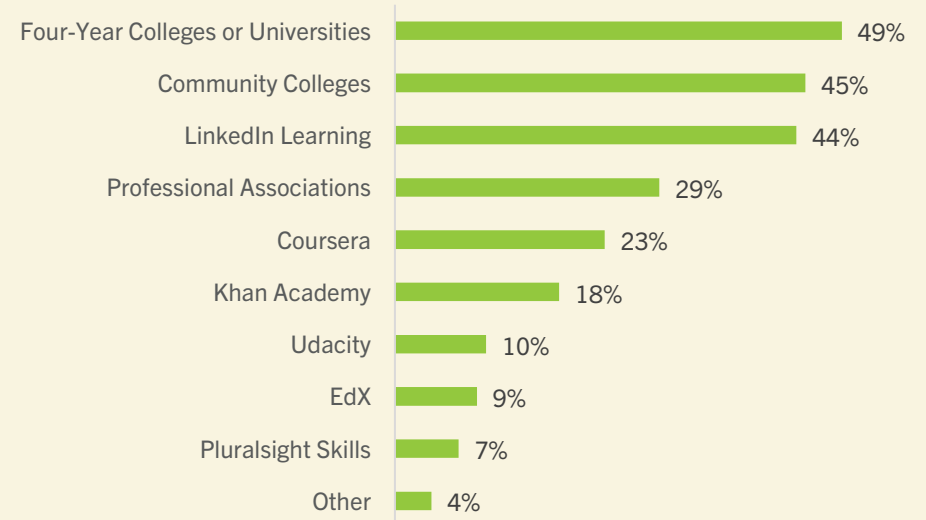
Of those whose companies do have existing external partnerships, 52% have relationships with LinkedIn Learning, 46% professional associations, 40% four-year colleges or universities, and 38% community colleges.

Figure 19 (Results from 2023 Study): Which of the following organizations or institutions do you have partnerships or relationships with to provide training or professional development opportunities for your employees? Please select all that apply (n=349)



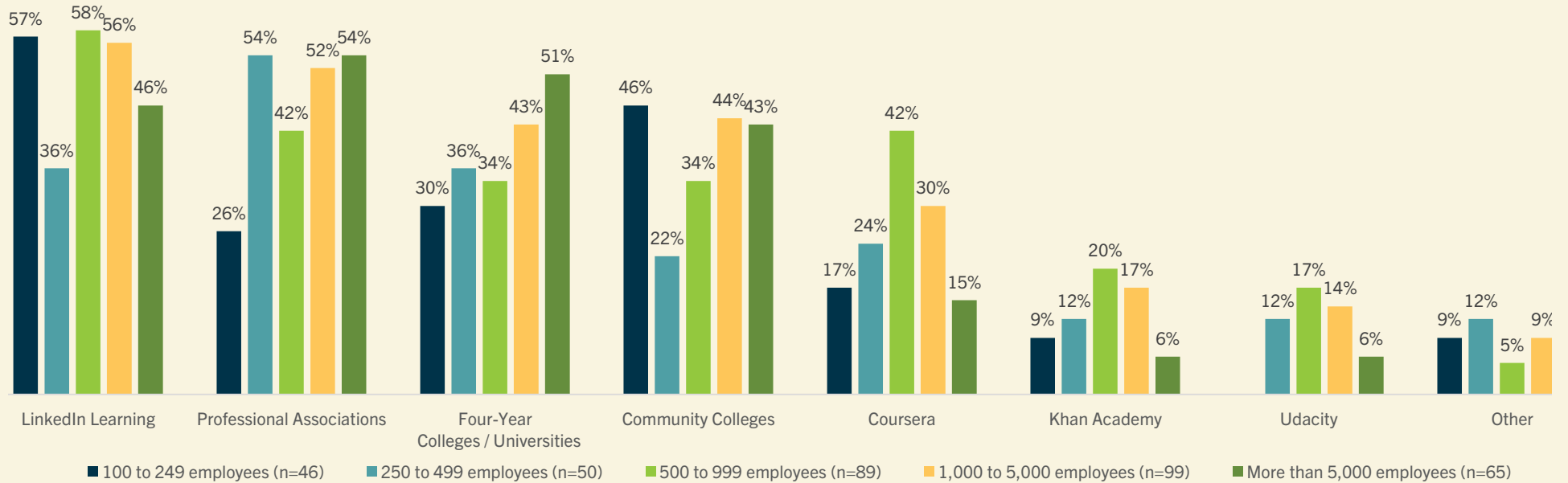
In the 2022 study, 49% of organizations had partnerships or relationships with four-year colleges and universities. This dropped to 40% in 2023. Community colleges also saw a decrease from 45% to 38%. LinkedIn Learning rose from 44% to 52%, and professional associations from 29% to 46%.

Figure 20 (Results from 2022 Study): Which of the following organizations or institutions do you have partnerships or relationships with? (n=277)



Companies with more than 5,000 employees are the most likely to have partnerships with four-year colleges or universities (51%). When grouped by the number of employees a company has, four out of five of the ranges have significant partnerships with professional associations and LinkedIn Learning.

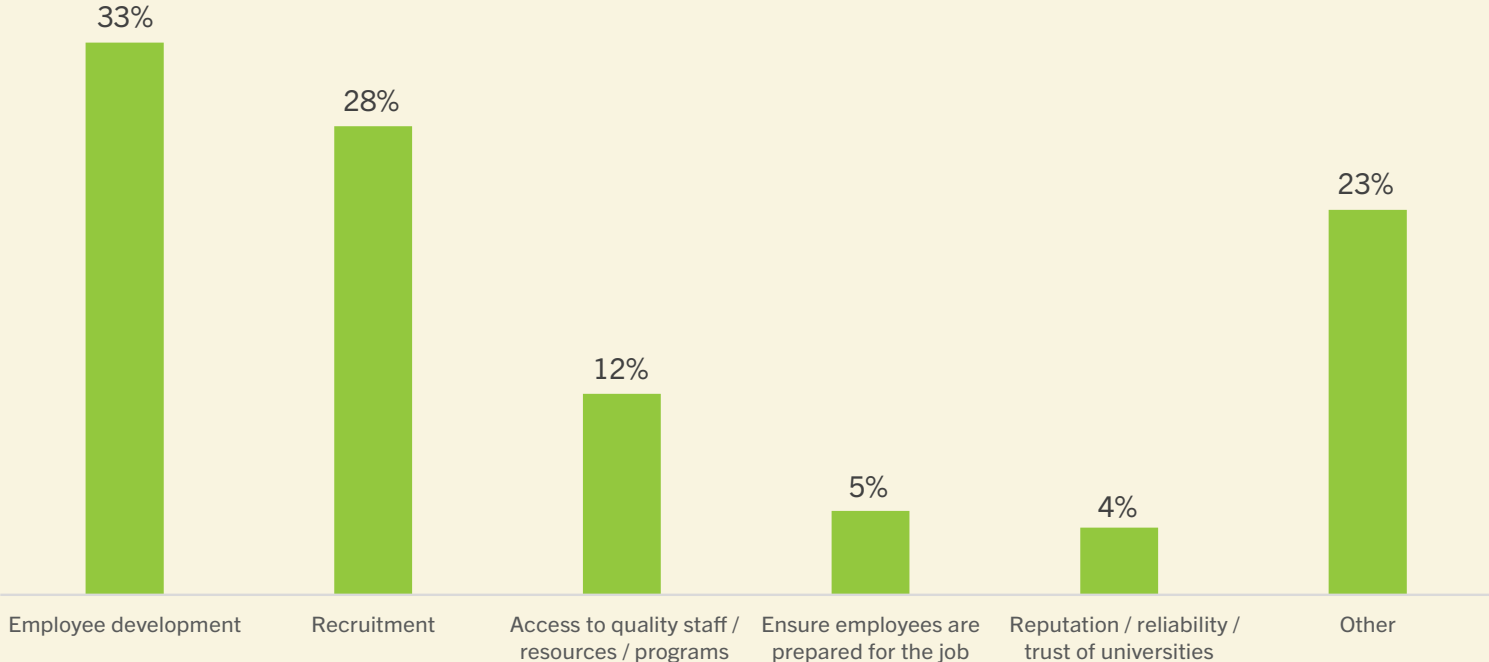
Figure 21: Which of the following organizations or institutions do you have partnerships or relationships with to provide training or professional development opportunities for your employees? Please select all that apply.



Partnerships with Colleges and Universities

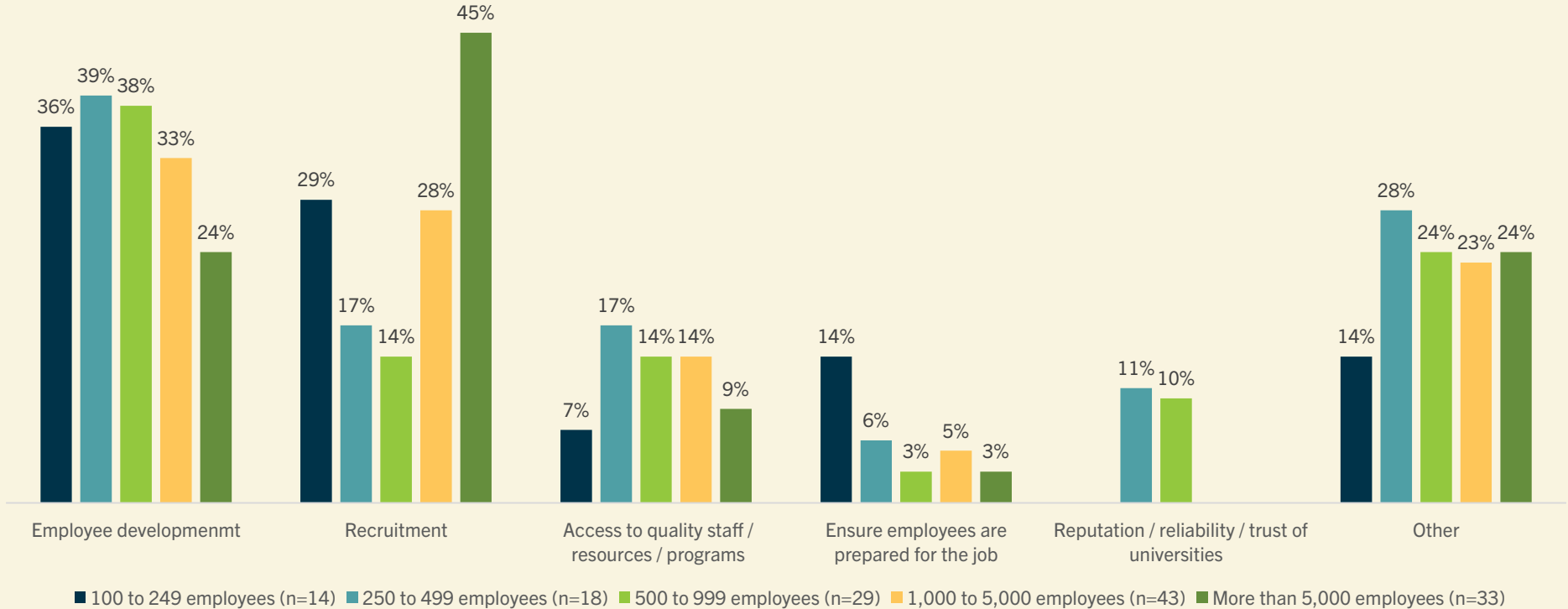
Of respondents from companies that partner with four-year colleges or universities, 33% said the main reason is for employee development, 28% said recruitment, and 12% cited access to quality staff/resources/programs. Responses mentioned fewer than four times were placed in the “Other” category and include student rotations, cost effectiveness, and to help the community and educate students, among others. (Multiple responses were allowed.)

Figure 22: What is the main reason your company chooses to have partnerships or relationships with four-year colleges or universities to provide training or professional development opportunities for your employees? (n=137)



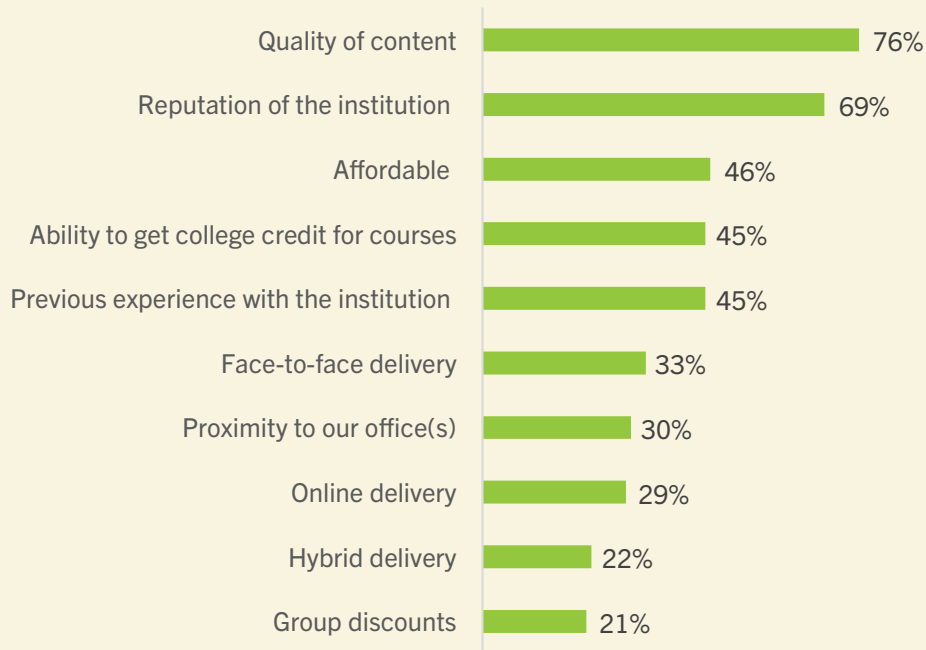
Companies with more than 5,000 employees are most likely to give recruitment (45%) as the main reason to have partnerships with colleges or universities, while employee development is the main reason (33% to 39%) for companies with 5,000 or fewer employees. (Multiple responses were allowed.)

Figure 23: What is the main reason your company chooses to have partnerships or relationships with four-year colleges or universities to provide training or professional development opportunities for your employees?



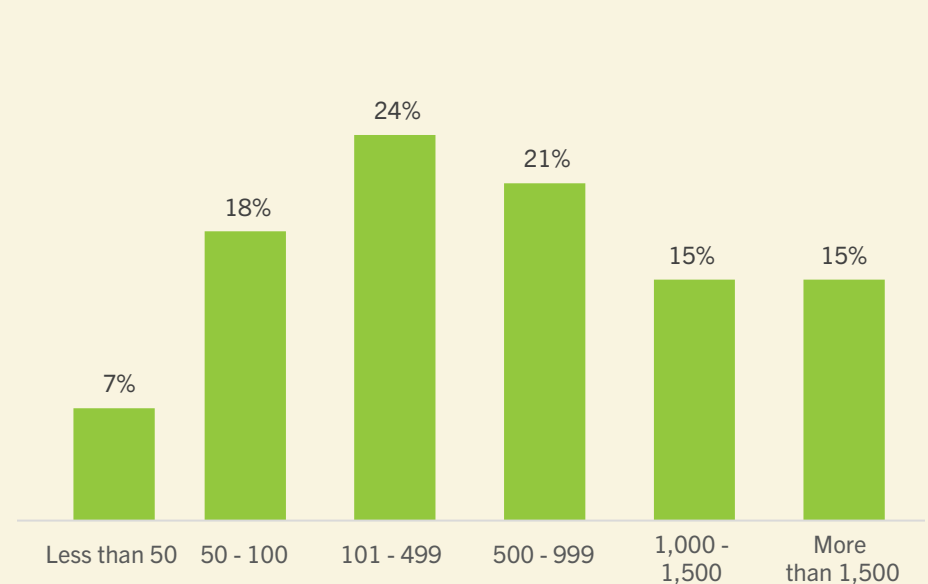
When participants were given a list of reasons for companies to partner with a college or university for professional development **76% cited the quality of content**, 69% the reputation of the institution, 46% affordability, 45% the ability to get college credit for courses, and 45% having previous experience with the institution. (Multiple responses were allowed.)

Figure 24: Which of the following are reasons your company chooses to have partnerships or relationships with four-year colleges or universities to provide training or professional development opportunities for your employees? Please select all that apply (n=137)



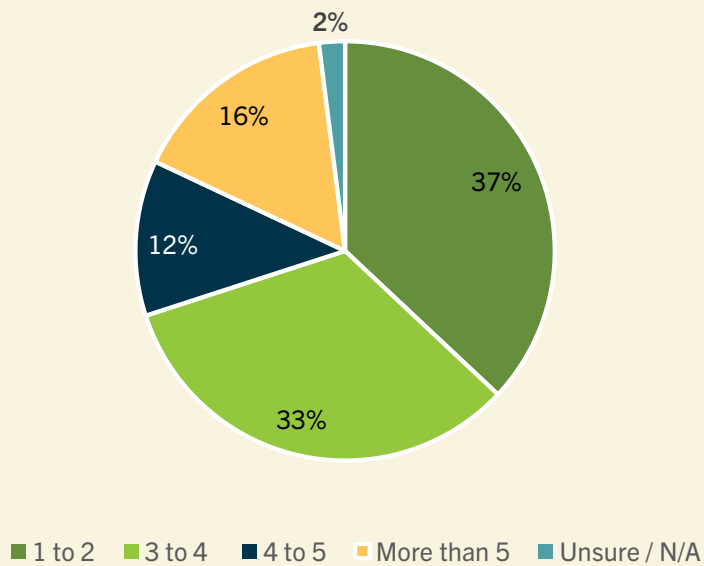
Twenty-four percent of respondents said that in one calendar year, between 101 and 499 employees in their organizations go through training or professional development programs offered by colleges or universities, 21% said between 500 and 999 employees use these programs, and 18% said between 50 and 100 employees.

Figure 25: On average, how many employees in the United States go through training or professional development programs offered by an individual partner four-year college or university in a calendar year? (n=137)



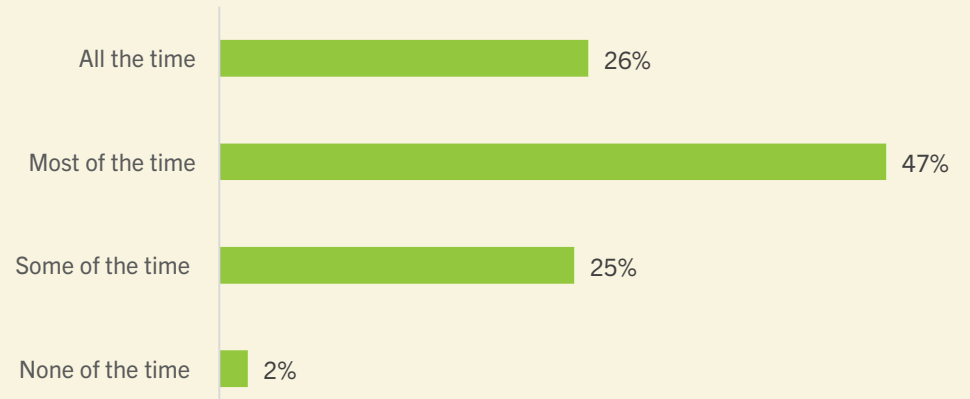
Thirty-seven percent of respondents have company partnerships with 1 to 2 colleges or universities, 33% partner with 3 to 4, and 16% partner with more than 5. On average, companies partner with 5 different colleges or universities with a median of 3.

Figure 26: How many different four-year colleges or universities do you have partnerships with to provide training or professional development opportunities for your employees in a given calendar year? (n=137)



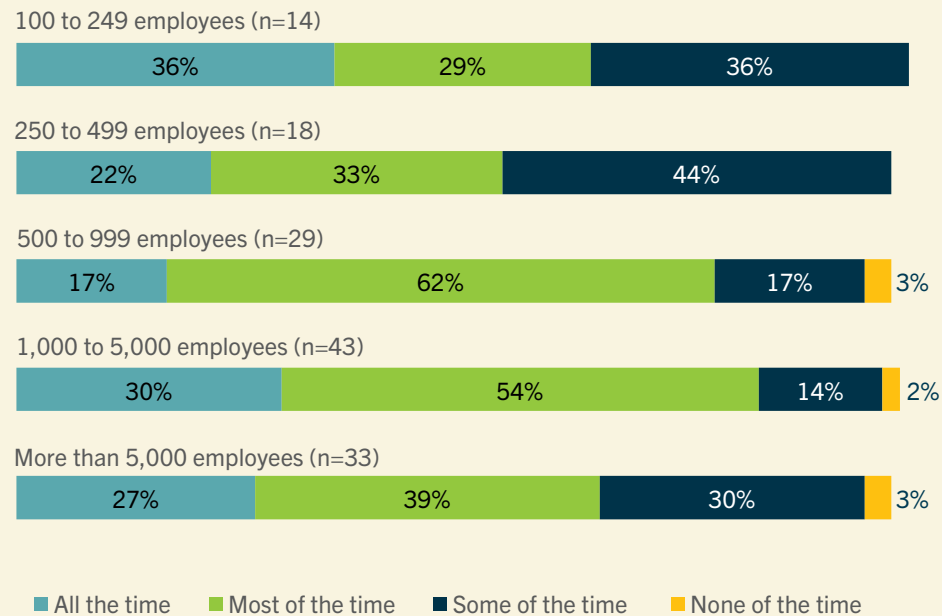
Seventy-three percent of respondents said their partner colleges or universities create custom programming for their organizations, either most of the time (47%) or all the time (26%), while 25% said custom programming is created some of the time.

Figure 27: How often do partner four-year colleges or universities create custom programming for your organization? (n=137)



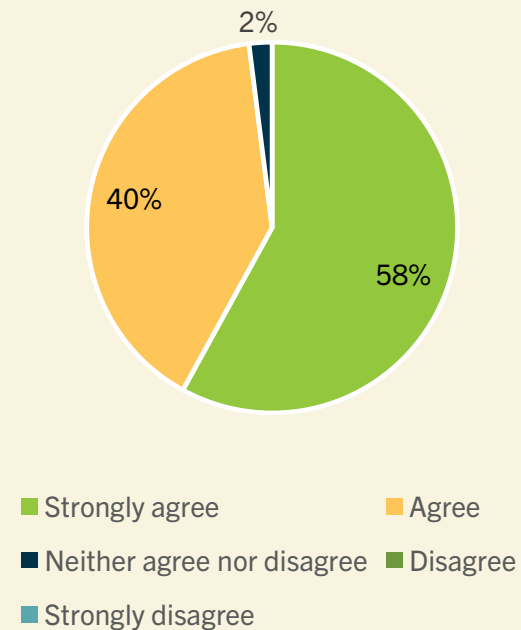
Respondents from **companies with 1,000 to 5,000 employees were most likely** to say their partner colleges or universities create custom programming for their organizations most of the time (54%) or all the time (30%).

Figure 28: How often do partner four-year colleges or universities create custom programming for your organization?



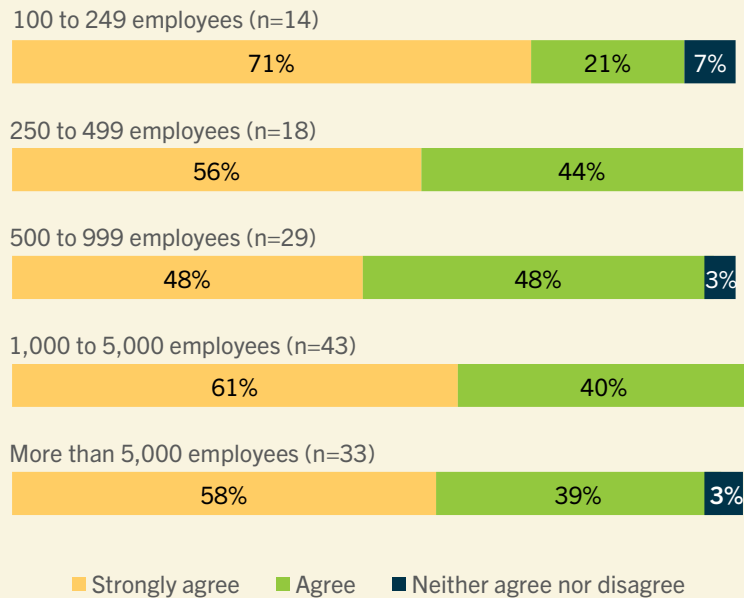
Representatives of organizations that partner with colleges and universities strongly agree (58%) or agree (40%) that for the foreseeable future, they plan to continue to do so to provide training or professional development opportunities for employees.

Figure 29: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement: for the foreseeable future, my organization plans to continue to partner with four-year colleges and universities to provide training or professional development opportunities for our employees (n=137)



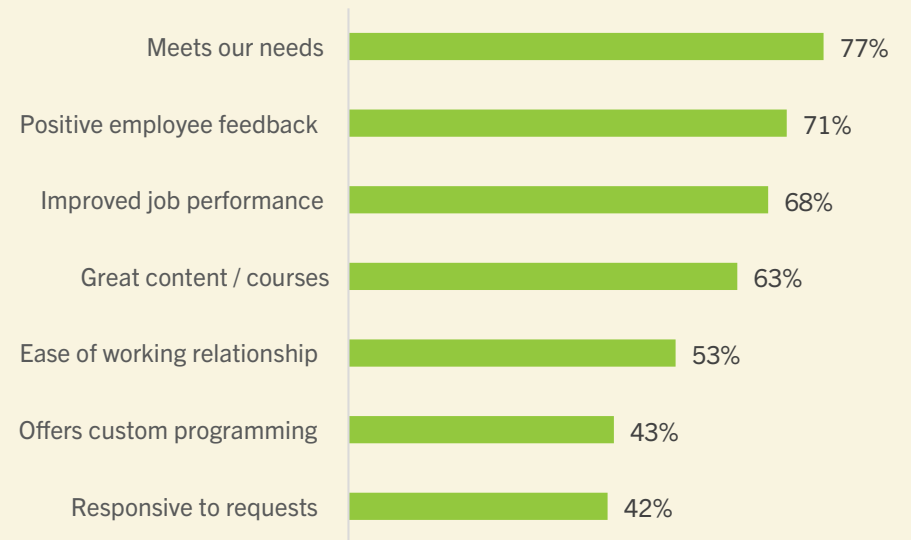
Respondents from the smallest companies (100 to 249 employees) were most likely to strongly agree (71%) that their organizations plan to continue to partner with colleges and universities for the foreseeable future.

Figure 30: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement: for the foreseeable future, my organization plans to continue to partner with four-year colleges and universities to provide training or professional development opportunities for our employees.



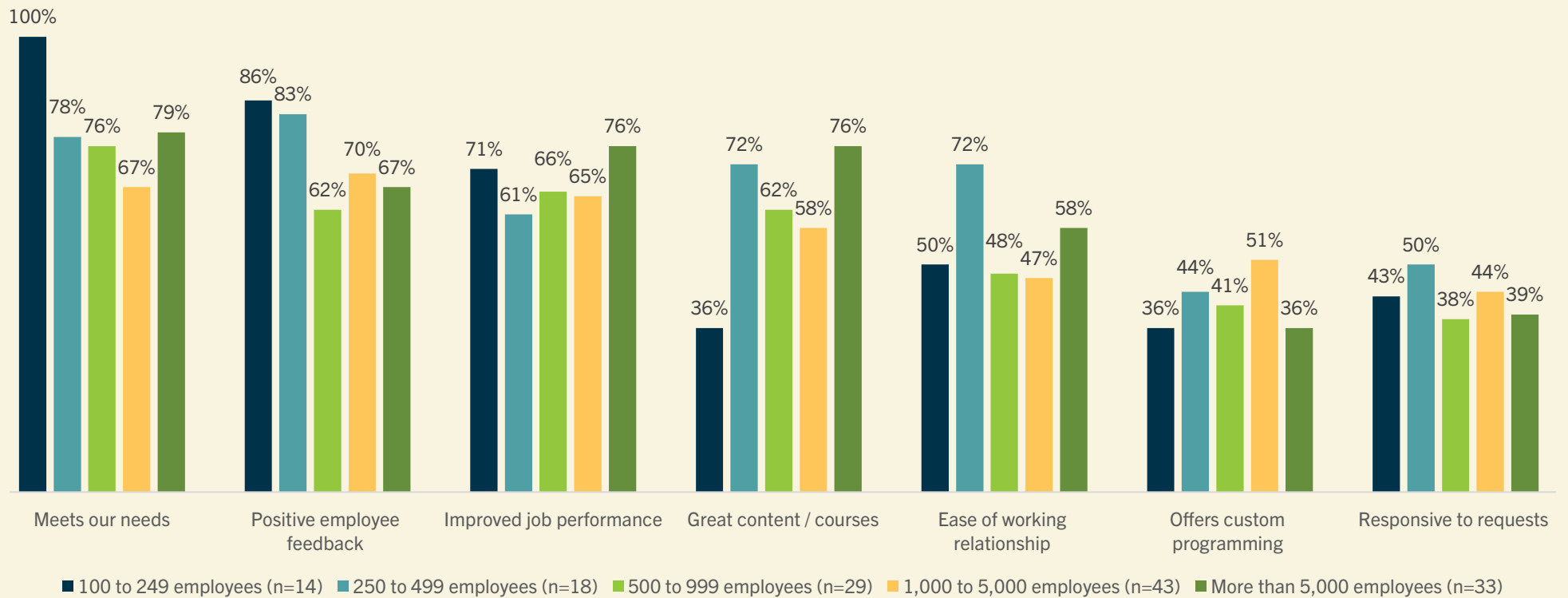
When asked why their organizations would want to continue partnerships with colleges and universities, **77% of respondents said** these institutions meet their needs, 71% said they have positive employee feedback, and 68% said they have seen improved job performance.

Figure 31: Which of the following reasons detail why your organization would want to continue partnerships with four-year colleges and universities? Please select all that apply. (n=137)



Respondents from all company sizes listed meets our needs, positive employee feedback, and improved job performance as the main reasons why their organizations would want to continue partnerships with colleges and universities.

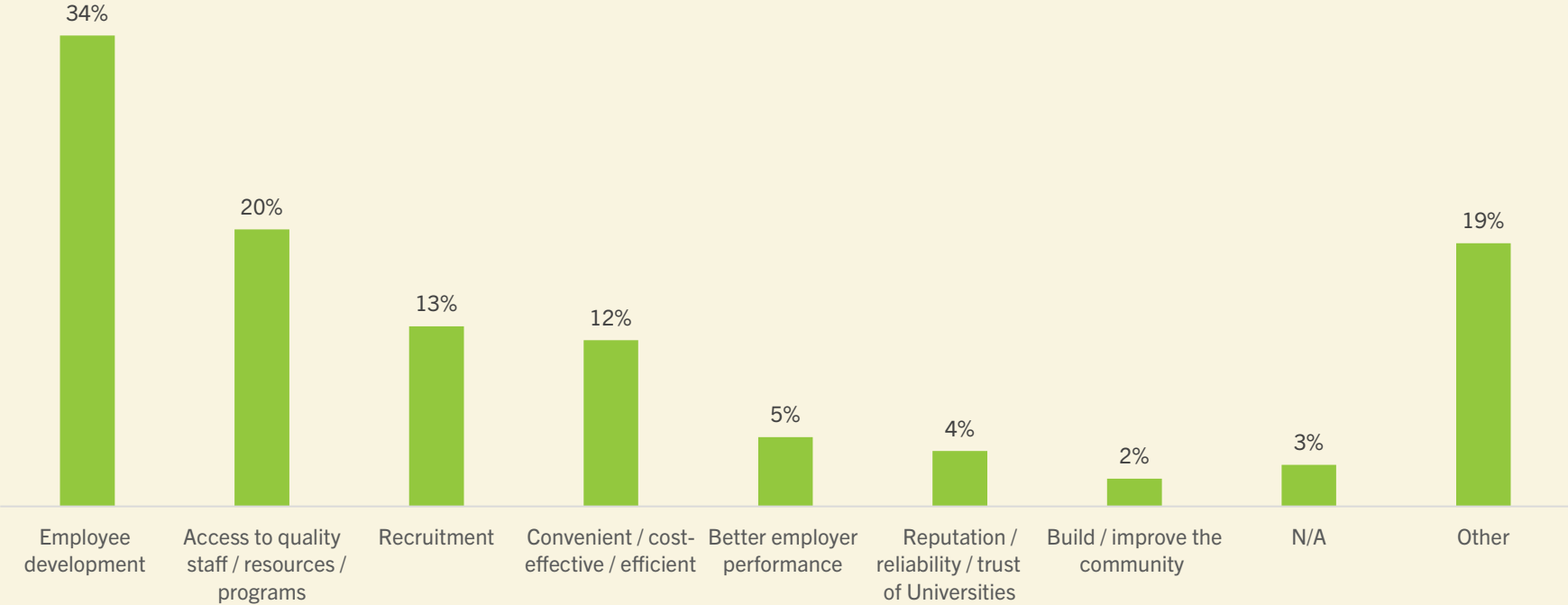
Figure 32: Which of the following reasons detail why your organization would want to continue partnerships with four-year colleges and universities? Please select all that apply.



Partnerships with Community Colleges, Companies, and Associations

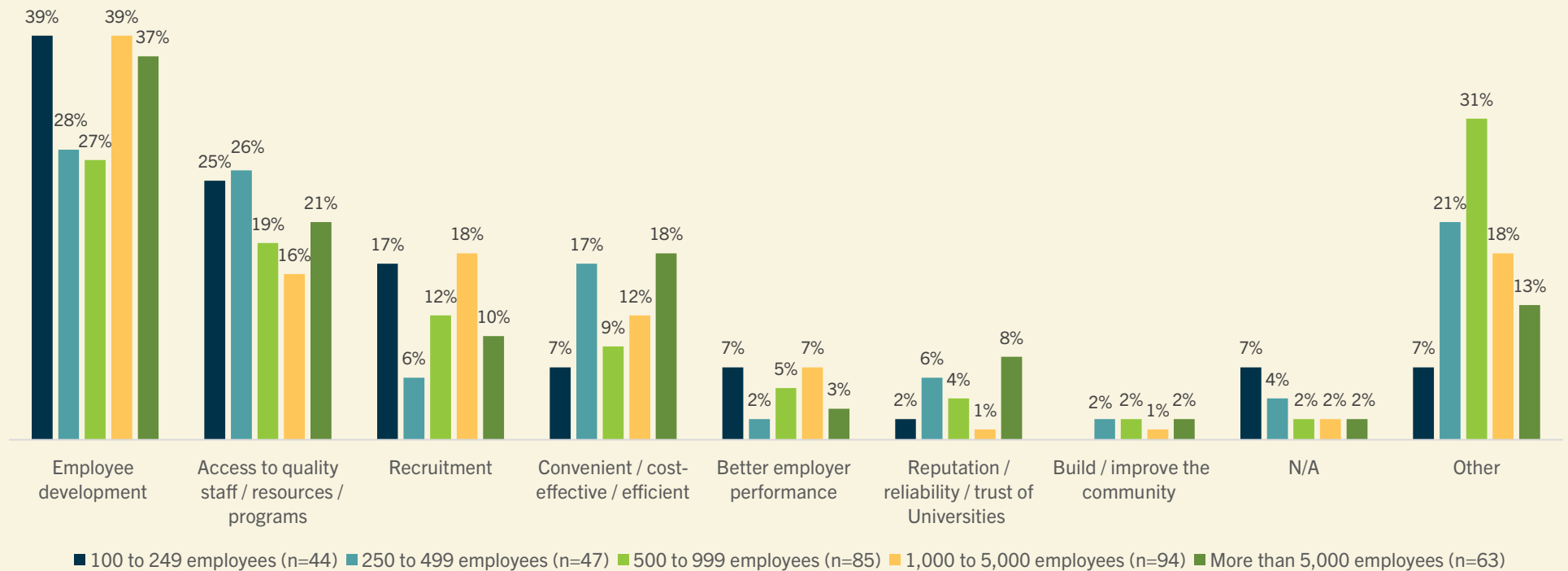
Among respondents who said their companies have partnerships with community colleges, companies, or professional associations, 34% said the **main reason this relationship exists is for employee development**, 20% cited access to quality staff/resources/programs, and 13% said recruitment. Responses mentioned fewer than five times were placed in the “Other” category, which included cutting-edge research, hybrid delivery option, and a mutually beneficial relationship, among others. (Multiple responses were allowed.)

Figure 33: What is the main reason your company chooses to have partnerships or relationships with community colleges, companies, or associations that provide training or professional development opportunities for your employees? (n=333)



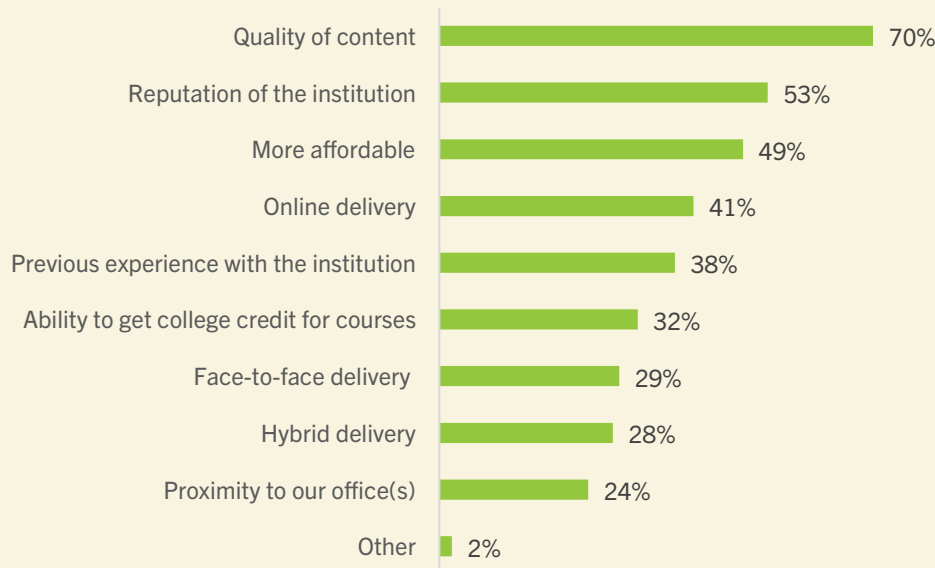
For nearly all company sizes, the two reasons companies choose to have partnerships with community colleges, companies, or associations is for employee development and access to quality staff/resources/programs. (Multiple responses were allowed.)

Figure 34: What is the main reason your company chooses to have partnerships or relationships with community colleges, companies, or associations that provide training or professional development opportunities for your employees?



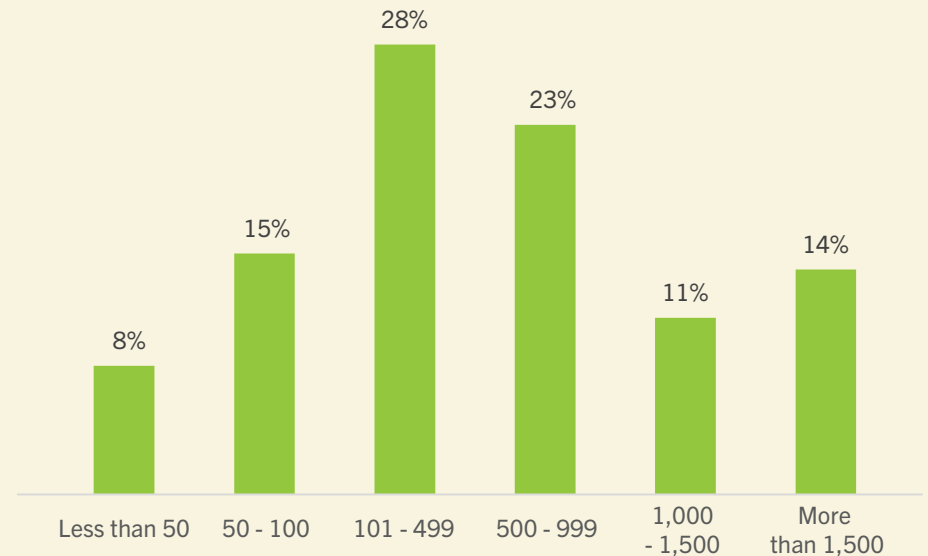
When given a list of reasons why their companies might choose to have partnerships with community colleges, companies, or professional associations, **70% of respondents cited the quality of content**, 53% said the reputation of the institution, and 49% said these relationships are more affordable.

Figure 35: Which of the following are reasons your company chooses to have partnerships or relationships with community colleges, companies, or associations that provide training or professional development opportunities for your employees? Please select all that apply.



Twenty-eight percent of respondents said that in one calendar year, between 101 and 499 employees in their organizations go through training or professional development programs offered by community colleges, companies, or professional associations, 23% said between 500 and 999 employees use these programs, and 15% said between 50 and 100 employees.

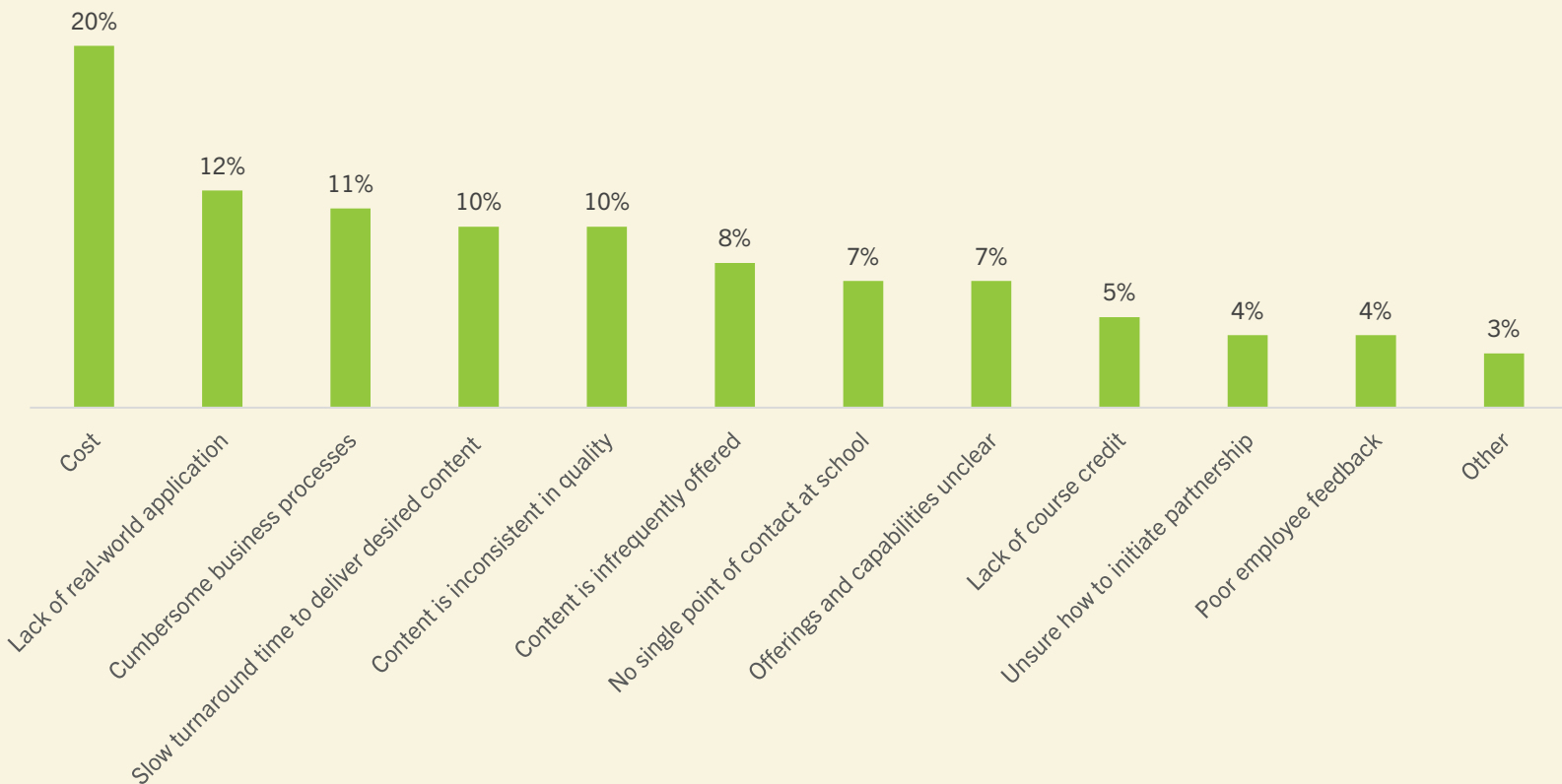
Figure 36: On average, how many employees in the United States go through training or professional development programs offered by an individual partner community college, company, or association in a calendar year? (n=334)



Barriers to Working with Higher Education

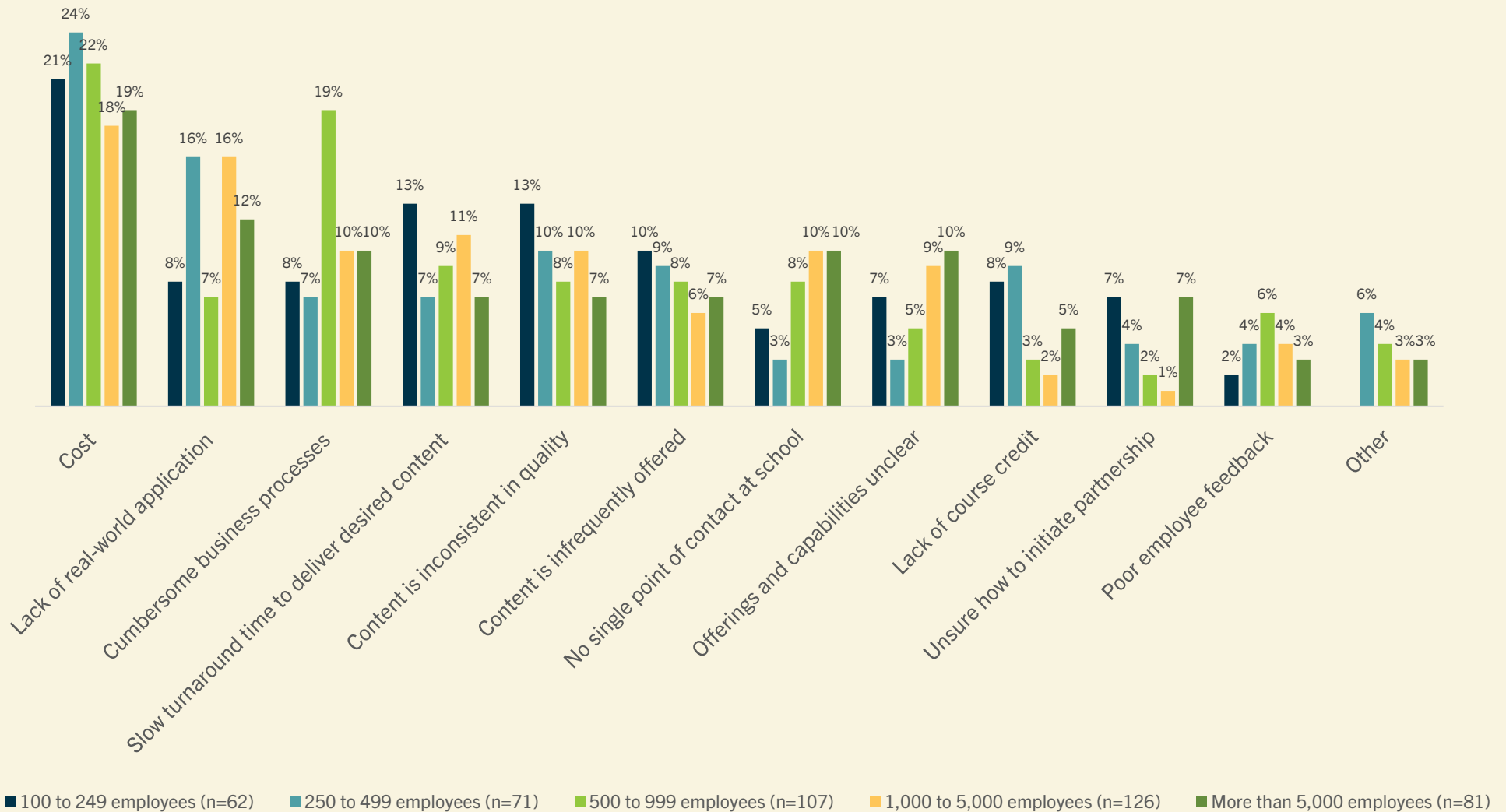
When asked about the **biggest challenge or barrier to partnering with colleges and universities**, 20% of respondents said it is too expensive, 12% cited a lack of real-world application, and 11% said the business processes are too cumbersome.

Figure 37: When thinking about training or professional development opportunities for your employees, what is the biggest challenge or barrier to working with four-year colleges and universities? (n=447)



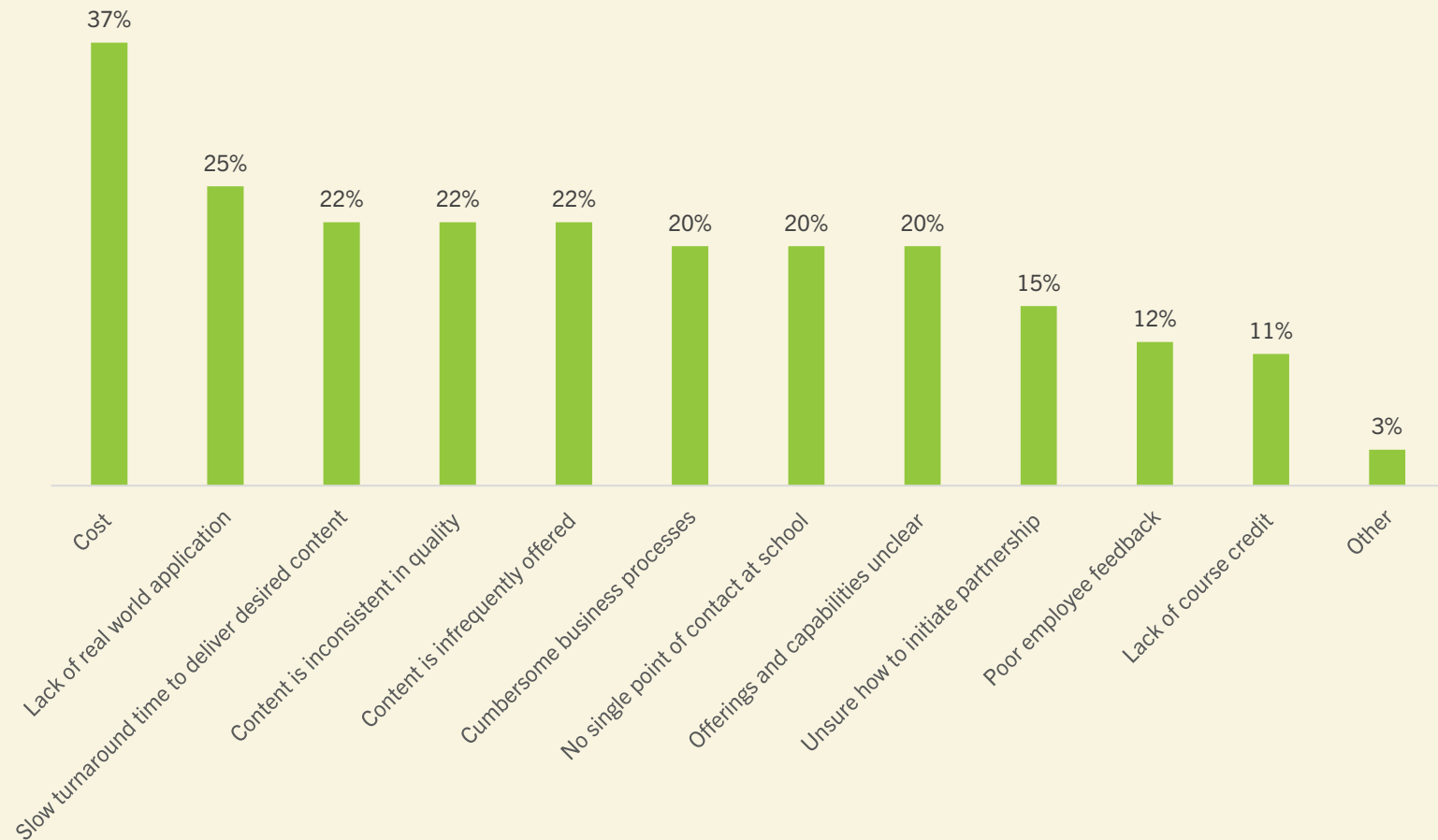
Respondents from all company sizes were most likely to say the biggest challenge or barrier working with colleges or universities is that it is too expensive.

Figure 38: When thinking about training or professional development opportunities for your employees, what is the biggest challenge or barrier to working with four-year colleges and universities?



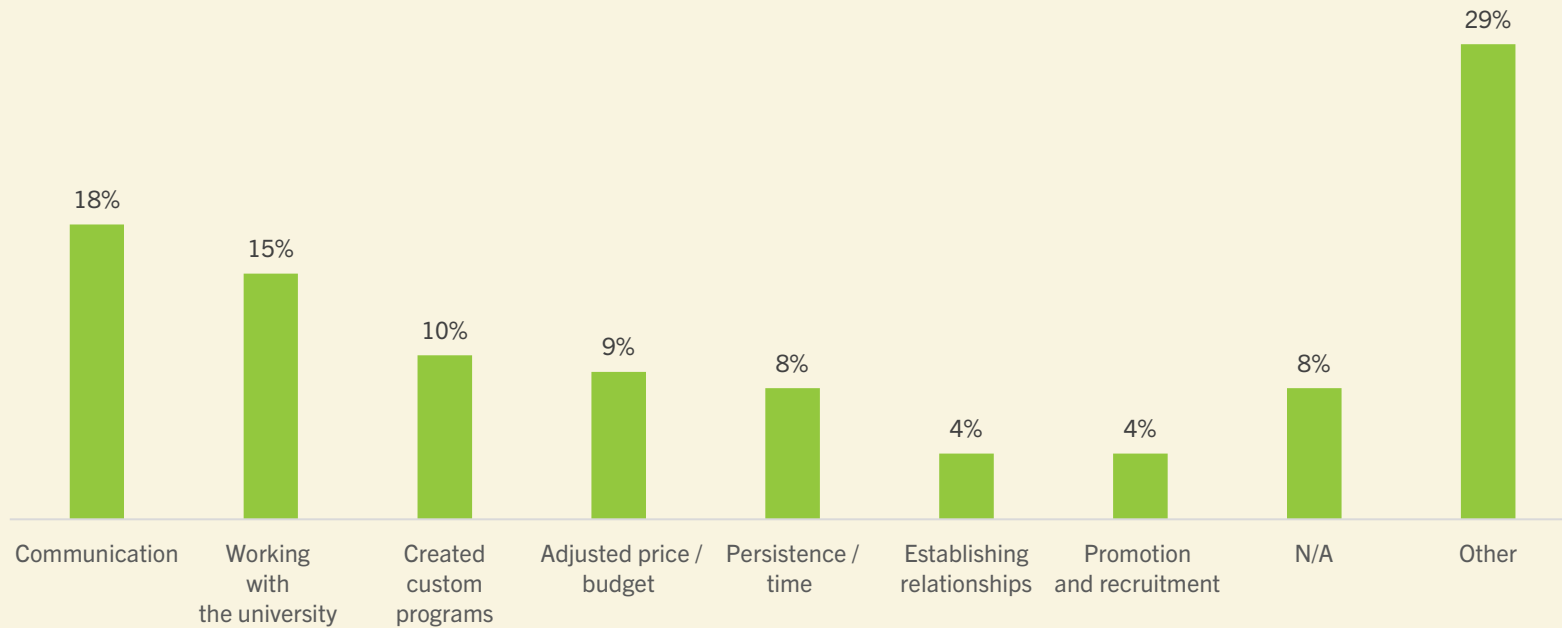
When participants were given a list of potential challenges or barriers that might prevent companies from working with colleges and universities, 37% said these partnerships are too expensive, 25% said a lack of real-world application, 22% said there is a slow turnaround time to deliver desired content, 22% said the content is inconsistent in quality, and 22% said the content is not offered frequently enough.

Figure 39: In your experience, which of the following challenges or barriers prevent companies from working with four-year colleges and universities to provide training or professional development opportunities to your employees? Please select all that apply (n=447)



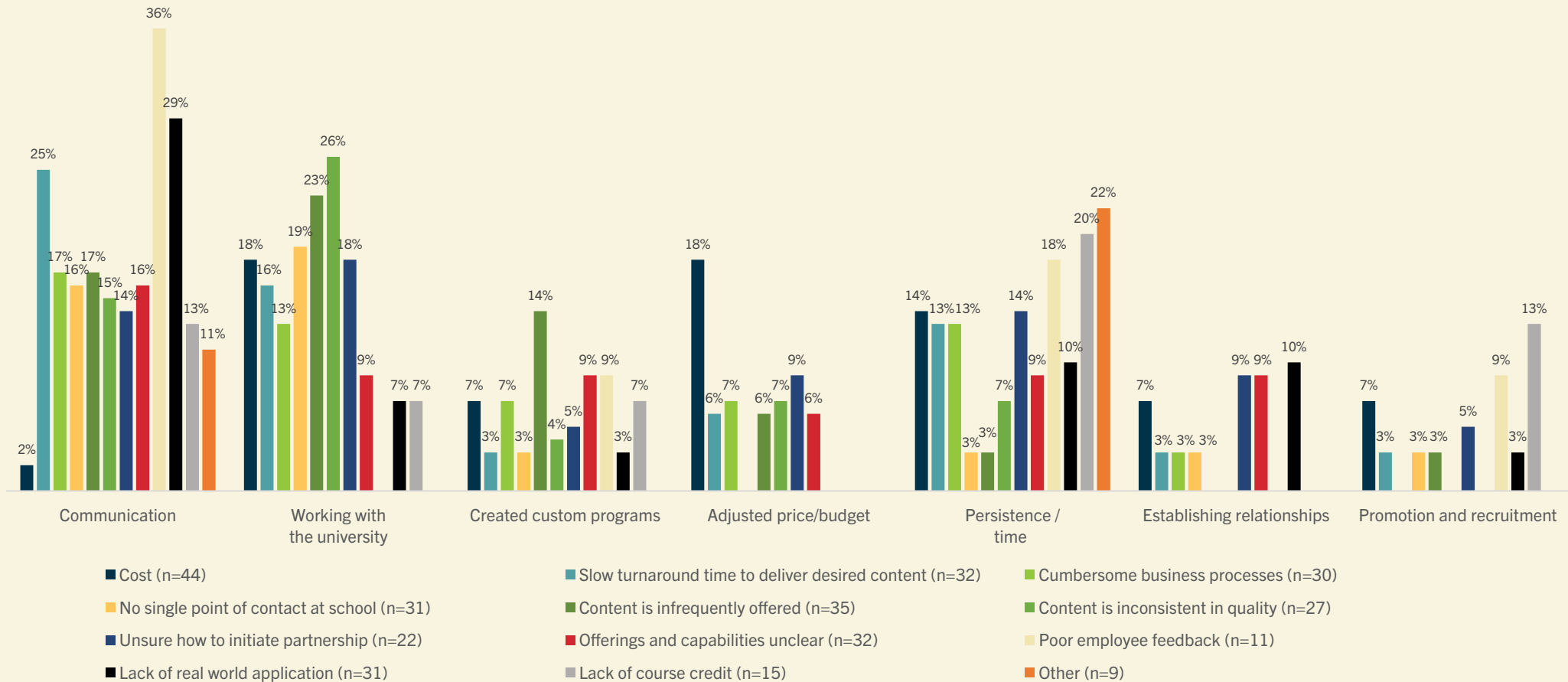
Of respondents whose companies have existing relationships with colleges and universities, 18% said they overcame barriers through communication, 15% by working with the university, and 10% by creating custom programs. Responses mentioned fewer than five times were placed in the “Other” category, which include mapping out a working schedule, adopting better technology, and incentivizing employees, among others. (Multiple responses were allowed.)

Figure 40: How did you overcome these barriers when working with a four-year college or university? (n=136)



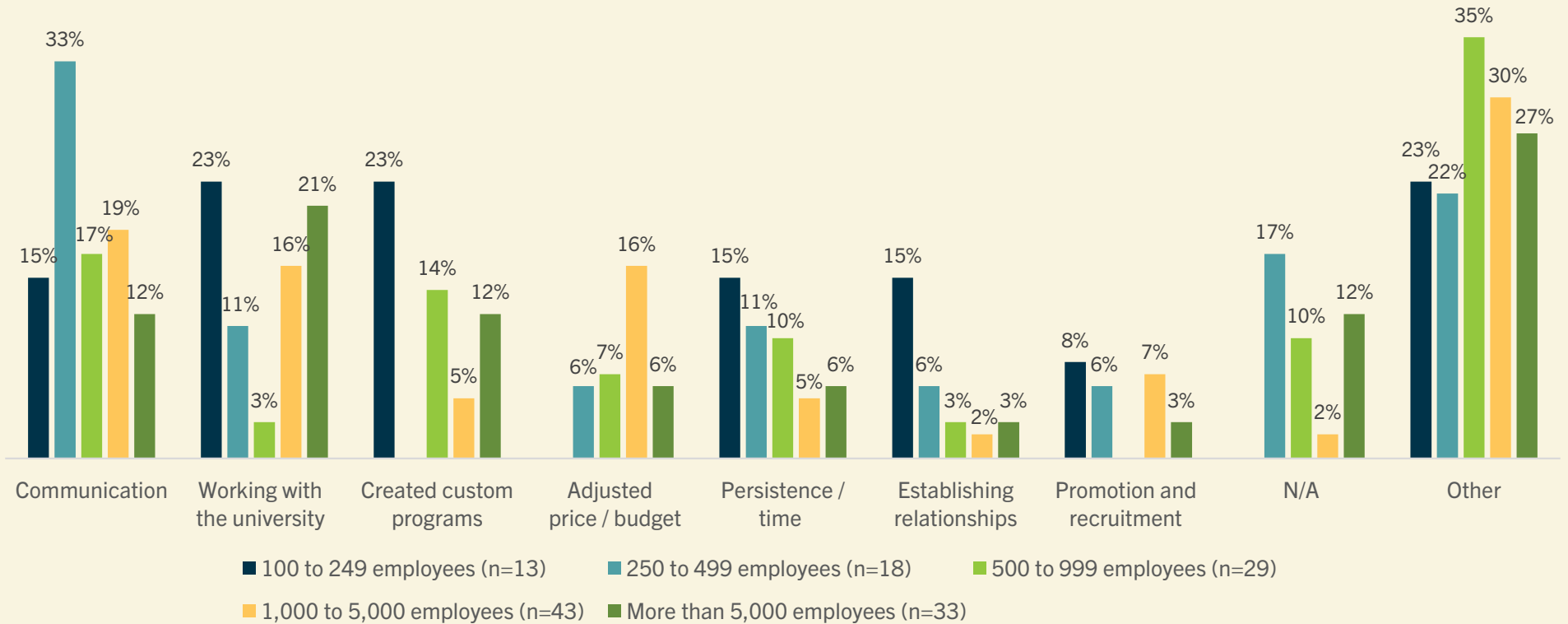
Eighteen percent of respondents who cited expensive pricing as a barrier that prevents companies from working with colleges and universities said that working with the university was a strategy that helped their company overcome this financial barrier, and 18% found adjusting the price/budget to be effective. Twenty-nine percent who cited lacking real-world application as a barrier said this was overcome through communication. (Multiple responses were allowed.)

Figure 41: How did you overcome these barriers when working with a four-year college or university?



When asked how companies overcame barriers when working with colleges and universities, working with the university was the most common response for companies with more than 5,000 employees and it tied with custom-created programming (23%) as the most common response for companies with 100 to 249 employees. Communication was highest for 250 to 499 employee companies (33%). (Multiple responses were allowed.)

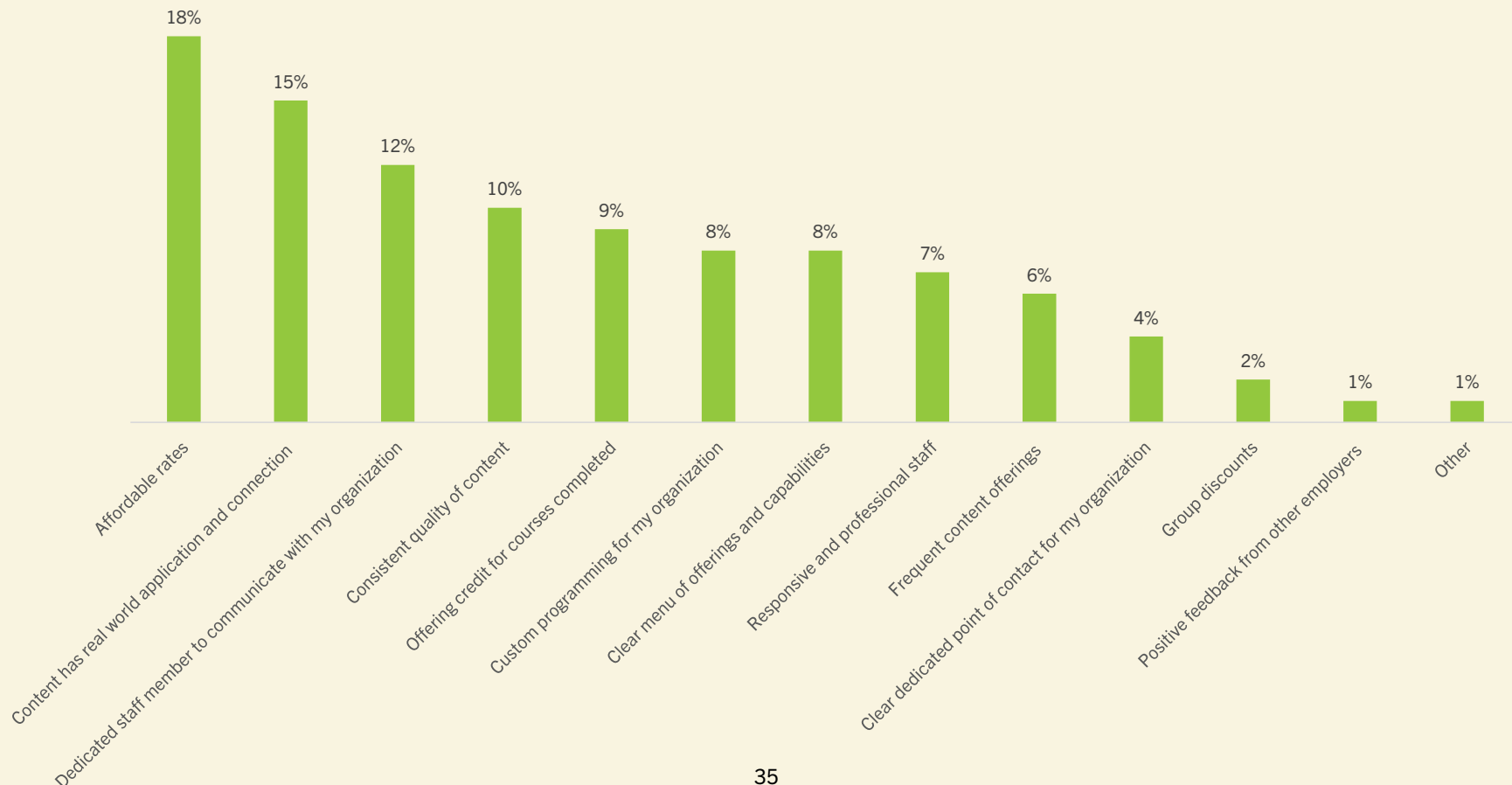
Figure 42: How did you overcome these barriers when working with a four-year college or university?



Strategies to Secure or Improve Partnerships

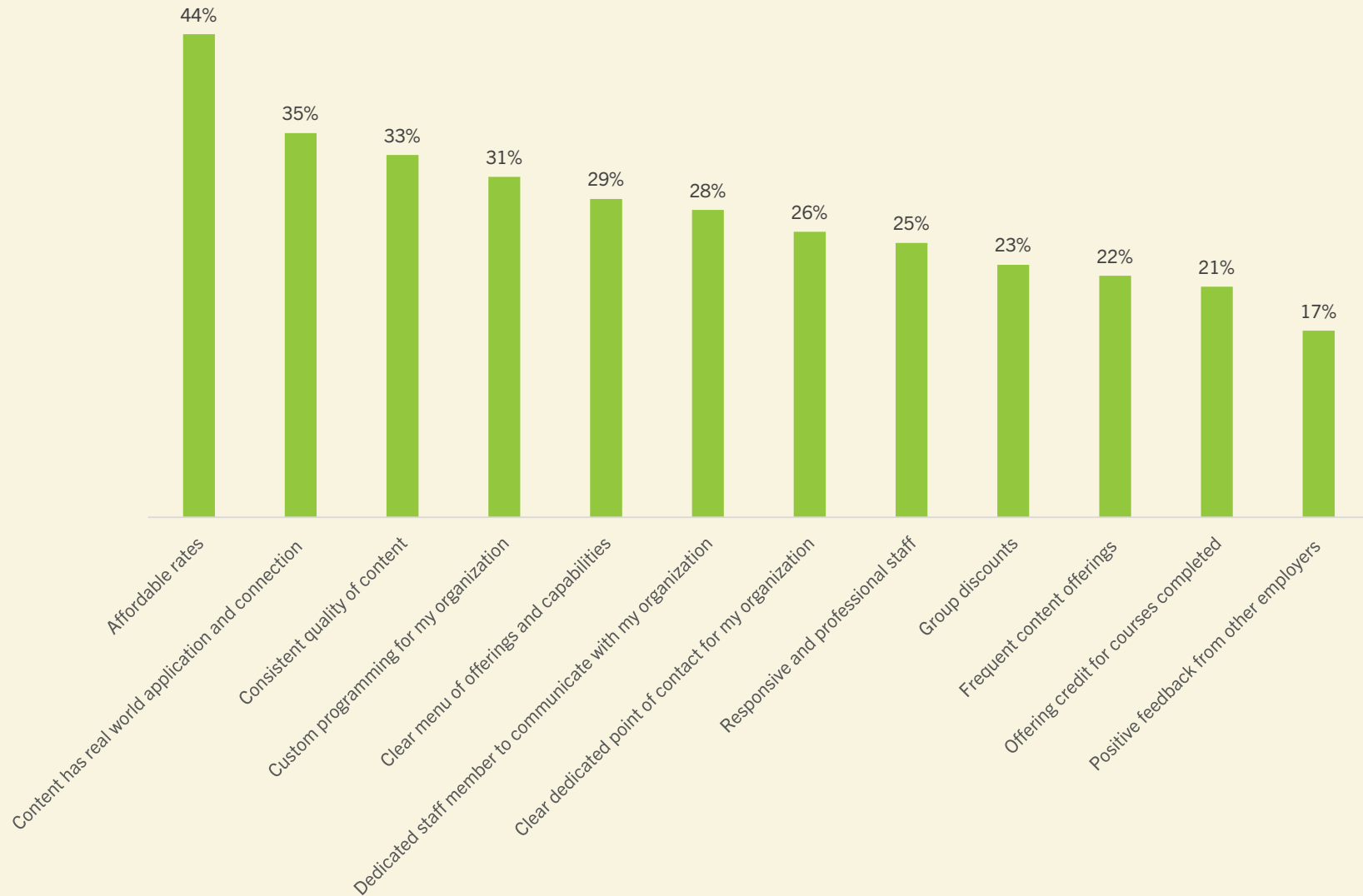
Of those whose companies don't currently partner with colleges or universities, 18% said affordable rates are the most important thing to make their companies more likely to partner with them, 15% said content that has real-world application and connection, 12% said a dedicated staff member to communicate with their organization, and 10% said consistent quality of content.

Figure 43: What is the most important thing four-year colleges or universities can offer or provide to make your company more likely to partner with them? (n=308)



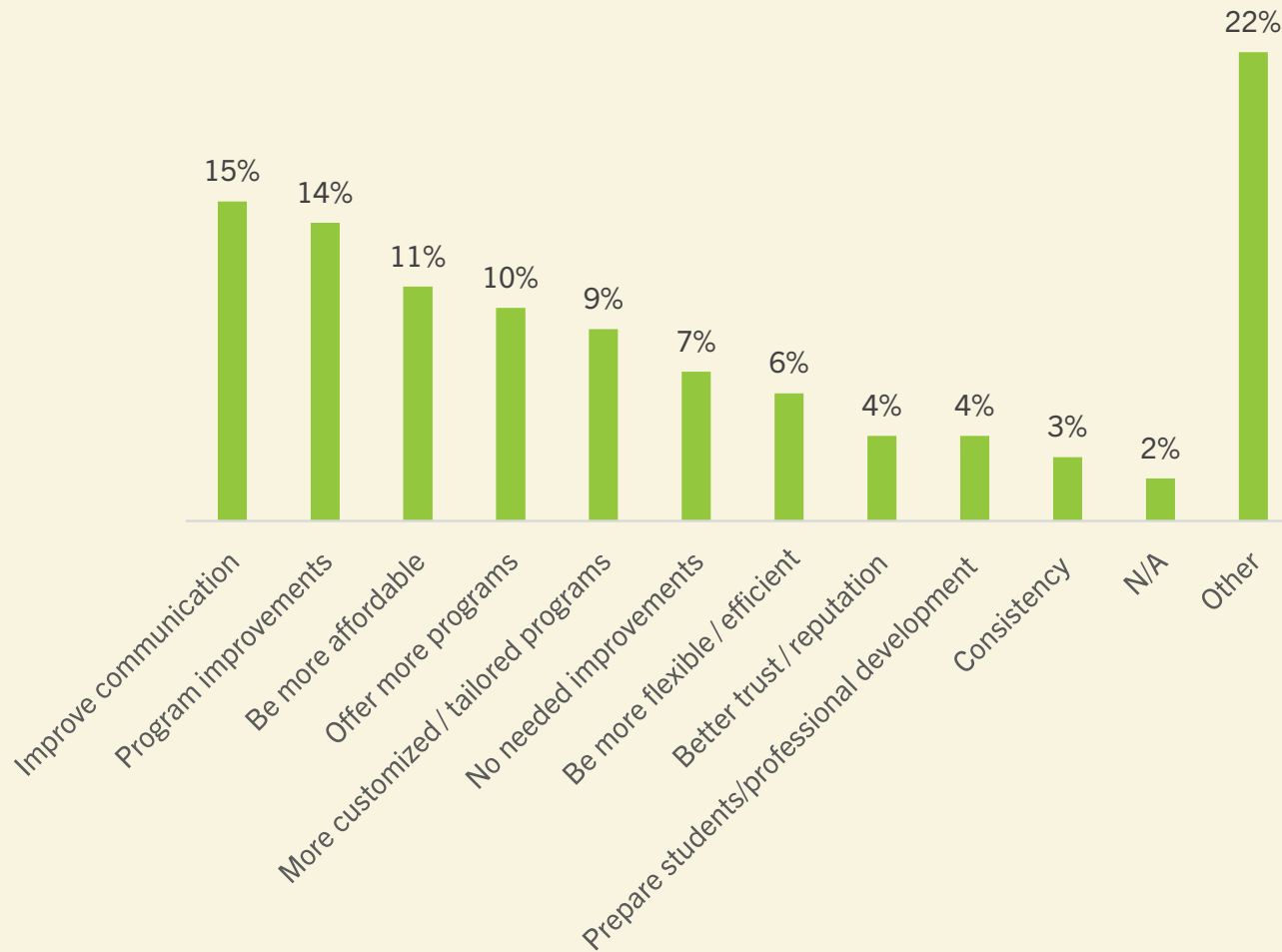
When participants were given a list of potential strategies that could make a company more likely to partner with colleges or universities, 44% chose affordable rates, 35% content that has real-world application and connection, 33% consistent quality of content, and 31% custom programming for their organization

Figure 44: Which of the following would be important for four-year colleges or universities to offer to make your company more likely to partner with them? Please select all that apply (n=308)



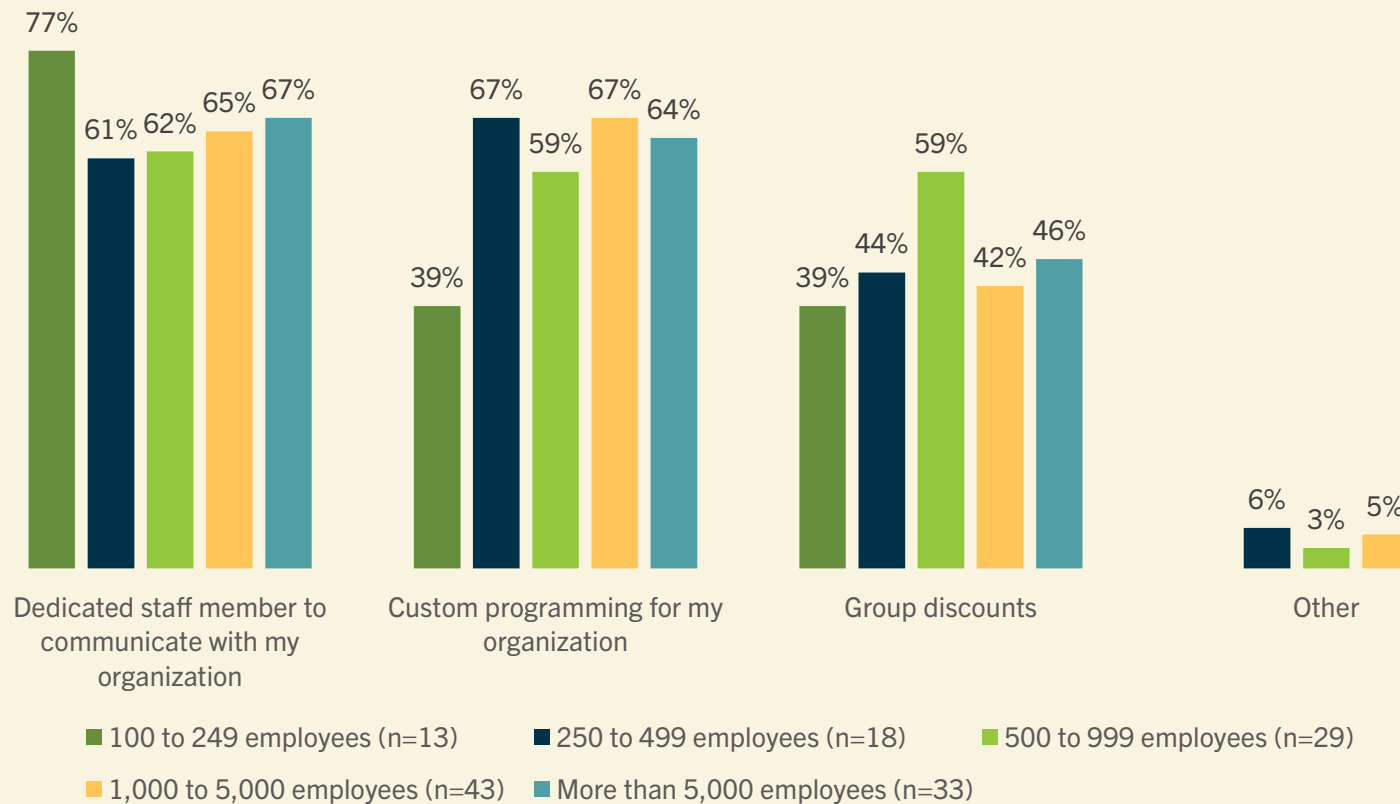
When participants were asked to give **the most important thing a college or university could do to improve its partnership with their companies**, 15% said improving communication, 14% said program improvements, 11% said more affordability, and 10% said offering more programs. Responses mentioned fewer than four times were placed in the “Other” category which include high success ratings, increased marketing efforts, and on the job training, among others. (Multiple responses were allowed).

Figure 45: What is the most important thing a four-year college or university can do to improve its partnership with your company? (n=135)



When participants were asked about **strategies colleges or universities could implement to improve their partnerships**, those from companies with 100 to 249 employees were more likely to want a dedicated staff member to communicate with their organization (77%) than larger company sizes and much less likely to consider custom programming for their organizations (39%).

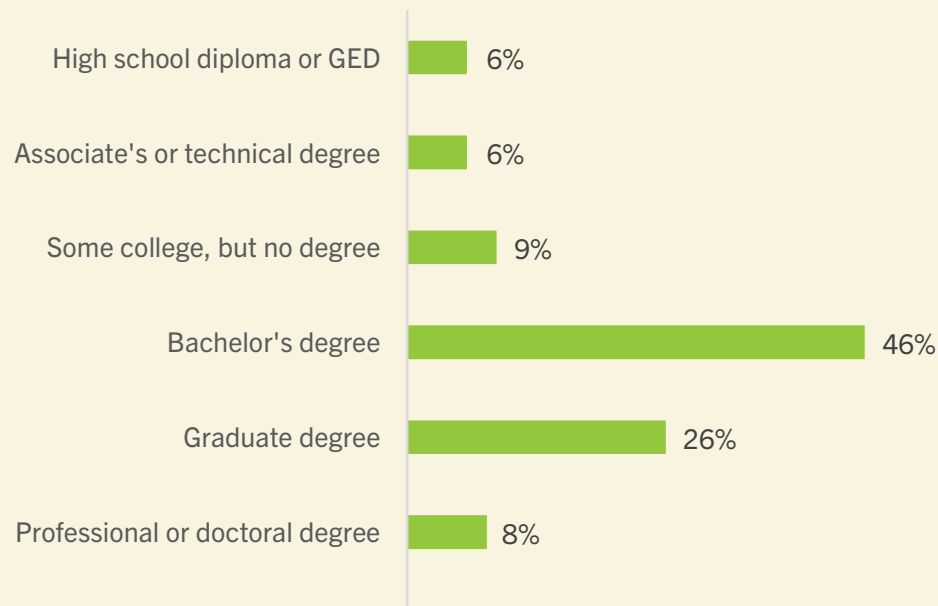
Figure 46: Which of the following can a four-year college or university do to improve its partnerships with your company? Please select all that apply.



Demographics

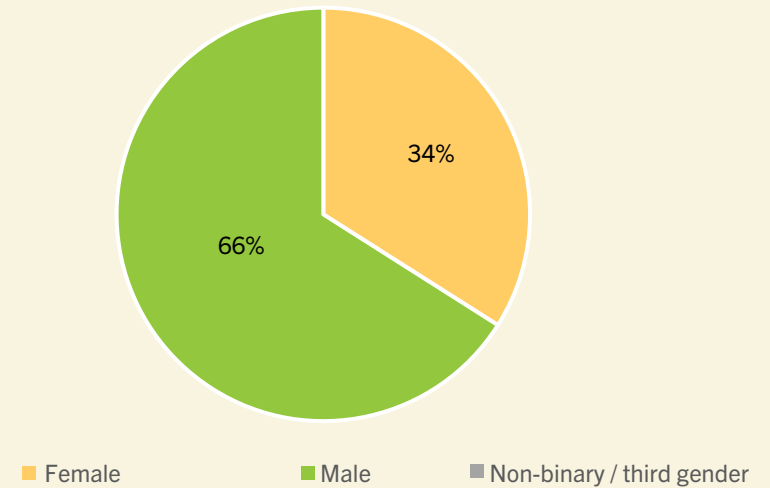
Forty-six percent of qualifying respondents' highest level of completed education is a bachelor's degree, 26% hold a graduate degree, and 9% have some college experience, but no degree.

Figure 47: What is the highest level of education that you have completed? (n=507)



Sixty-six percent are male and 34% female.

Figure 48: Gender (n=507)



Key Findings

Companies with external partnerships that provide employee training or professional development increased from 54% in 2022 to 68% in 2023. Among those without existing relationships or who were unsure, 61% said their company would be interested in developing these partnerships.

Four-year institutions are losing ground to private providers. In the 2022 study with Collegis, UPCEA found that 49% of organizations had partnerships or relationships with four-year colleges and universities to provide training and professional development opportunities for their employees. This dropped to 40% in 2023. Community colleges also saw a decrease from 45% to 38%. LinkedIn Learning rose from 44% to 52%, and professional associations from 29% to 46%.

Partner colleges and universities create custom programming a majority of the time. Seventy-three percent of respondents said their partner institutions create custom programming for their organizations, either most of the time (47%) or all the time (26%), while 25% said custom programming is created some of the time.

Companies choose to partner with four-year colleges and universities mainly for employee development and recruitment. Of respondents from companies that partner with institutions, 33% said the main reason is for employee development, 28% said recruitment, and 12% cited access to quality staff/resources/programs.

Employers most often cited partnerships as too expensive when asked about the challenges or barriers that prevent companies from working with colleges and universities. Thirty-seven percent of respondents said these partnerships are too expensive and 25% cited a lack of real-world application. Slow turnaround time to deliver desired content, content inconsistent in quality, and content is not offered frequently enough were all listed by 22% of respondents.

Affordable rates and applicable content are most important to companies. Among respondents whose companies don't currently partner with colleges or universities, affordable rates (18%) and content with real-world application (15%) are the two most important factors four-year institutions could offer to make their companies more likely to partner with them.

Communication was cited as the biggest strategy to overcome barriers when working with four-year institutions. Of respondents whose companies have existing relationships with colleges and universities, 18% said they overcame barriers through communication, 15% by working with the university, and 10% by creating custom programs.

68%

of companies have an existing external partnership for providing professional development to employees.

61%

of companies not using external training partners are interested in developing these partnerships.

73%

of respondents said their partner institutions create custom programming for their organizations.

Impact on Higher Education

The landscape of external partnerships between institutions of higher education and employers is experiencing a shift, requiring swift and decisive action from institutions to maintain their relevance in this field. This study found the percentage of employers that have external partnerships or relationships with organizations or institutions to provide training or learning opportunities for their employees increased from 54% in 2022 to 68% in 2023. However, four-year colleges and universities are losing ground to private providers. In 2022, 49% of organizations had partnerships or relationships with four-year colleges or universities, but in 2023, this number dropped to 40%.

The decline in employer-institution partnerships demonstrates that colleges and universities are not just competing against each other, but also private providers that have established themselves as formidable competitors for these partnerships. It is crucial for colleges and universities to reassess their methods in cultivating these partnerships, refine their offerings, improve their communication, and enhance their marketing strategies. To accomplish this, it is essential for institutions to first take a deeper look into the specific barriers cited by employers that deter their organizations from pursuing these relationships, and then produce viable solutions to not only forge new external partnerships, but also create a mutually beneficial experiences for all parties involved.

Although the data revealed a downward trend in the number of external partnerships with four-year colleges and universities, it is important to highlight that employers who do have existing external relationships are satisfied and are likely to continue in these agreements for the foreseeable future. UPCEA found that among those who do currently partner with four-year institutions, 98% strongly agree (58%) or agree (40%) that their organization plans to continue to partner with them to provide training or professional development opportunities for their employees. This significant degree of employer satisfaction implies that once institutions successfully establish an initial connection with employers, they should be able to retain these partnerships over time, though communication between the institution and employer can continue to improve in some cases.

98%

of organizations working with a higher ed institution plan to continue the partnerships.

40%

of organizations had partnerships or relationships with four-year schools in 2023, down from 49% in 2022.

37%

of respondents cite expense as the main barrier to partnering with higher ed.

The primary challenge inhibiting institutions from securing these partnerships revolves around the initial hurdle of capturing an organization's attention and engagement due to a variety of factors. The main barriers or challenges to working with four-year institutions are that they are perceived as too expensive (37%) or lack real-world application (25%); a short turnaround time to deliver desired content, inconsistent content quality, and content not being offered frequently enough were all listed by 22%. While the pricing of these partnerships may vary across institutions, one way colleges and universities can substantiate their price points is by offering customizable professional development programs tailored to each individual employer's needs. This approach ensures that employers understand the rigor and curriculum of the program, which should help guide expectations in terms of quality, application, and timing, as these offerings will require thorough and consistent communication between both parties.

By getting direct insight into employer opinions of external partnerships with colleges and universities, institutions have the opportunity to effectively address the needs and preferences of employers. While some of these challenges are easier to solve than others, communication is vital. In fact, UPCEA's research found that employers most commonly felt that the most important thing a four-year institution could do to strengthen the partnership with their company is to improve communication, which was the most common answer. By engaging in comprehensive communication, institutions can effectively market their partnership offerings, highlight the practical use of these programs, and offer guidance and support through the partnership journey.



About

About UPCEA

UPCEA is the leading association for professional, continuing and online education. Founded in 1915, UPCEA now serves most of the leading public and private colleges and universities in North America. With innovative conferences and specialty seminars, research and benchmarking information, professional networking opportunities and timely publications, UPCEA supports its members' service of contemporary learners and commitment to quality online education and student success. Based in Washington, D.C., UPCEA builds greater awareness of the vital link between adult learners and public policy issues. Visit www.upcea.edu for more information.

About Collegis Education

At Collegis Education, we're higher ed's innovation enabler, empowering institutions with a better vision of how they fit into learners' lives and what's possible when they do. As an industry pioneer for the last 10 years, we help schools leverage their data, tech and talent to pursue better student experiences and future-ready enrollment growth. As thought partners and tactical pros, we provide both the know-how and the show-how. We can manage discrete day-to-day operations, leverage institutional data, build in-house capabilities, and defy expectations. Learn more at CollegisEducation.com

About the Report

Purpose: UPCEA conducted a survey of employers to better understand how they perceive external partnerships with four-year higher education institutions and associations.

Methodology: Potential participants were identified using a nationwide online research panel and were invited, through a panel, to complete an online survey instrument. Survey respondents were not incentivized for their participation. Study qualifications included being employed and 22 or older; responsible for hiring, training, or the development of employees; mid-level or higher; have at least 100 employees at the organization; and qualified at some level to speak about their organization's training and professional development needs. Participants were sent a 31-question survey via their work email address. The survey included a mix of multiple response items, single response items, and open response items. A total of 650 individuals agreed to participate, with 516 meeting all study qualifications, and 507 completing the entire survey. The survey took place July 18 and July 19, 2023. Responses were analyzed by UPCEA's Research and Consulting team using frequencies, cross-tabs, and two-step cluster analyses to analyze the data. The research was underwritten by Collegis Education, a provider of comprehensive enrollment, data, and technology services for higher education.

Further Reading on Microcredentials

Infographics

[Securing Microcredential Partnerships: What Employers Want](#)

[Higher Ed: It's Your Turn on Microcredentials](#)

Report

[The Effect of Employer Understanding and Engagement on Non-Degree Credentials \(2023 Microcredentials Report\)](#)

Webinars

[The Effect of Employer Understanding and Engagement on Non-Degree Credentials](#)

[Unveiling the Employer's View: An Employer-Centric Approach to Higher Education Partnerships](#)

Additional Resources

[The Future of Higher Education: Microcredentials](#)

How to Cite This Research

Etter, B., Fong, J., Sullberg, D., & Wang, K. (2024). (rep.). *Unveiling the Employer's View: An Employer-Centric Approach to Higher Education Partnerships*. UPCEA & Collegis Education.

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- ⁴ [Relocation of Corporate Headquarters Across U.S.: 2009-2021](#), *Vega Economics*, 29 Aug. 2022.
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- ⁶ [Relocation of Corporate Headquarters Across U.S.: 2009-2021](#), *Vega Economics*, 29 Aug. 2022.
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- ⁸ [The Effect of Employer Understanding and Engagement on Non-Degree Credentials](#), Collegis Education.
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