

COLLEGIS SUMMIT 2025

DISRUPTED

BREAKTHROUGH THINKING. BOLD RESULTS.



Retention as Strategy: Bridging the Gap Between Intention and Impact

September 25, 2025

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BREAKTHROUGH THINKING. BOLD RESULTS.

Presenters



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Key Challenges



Demographic & Enrollment Pressures

- Shrinking pipeline of traditional-aged students
- Declining confidence in degree value
- Limited rebound of international enrollment



Financial & Policy Uncertainty

- Instability in research & grant funding
- Rising inflation and affordability pressures
- Student loan policy uncertainty



Changing Market & Regulatory Landscape

- Workforce-driven program demand
- Competition from online & alternative providers
- Shifts in DEI priorities



Technology & Academic Structures

- AI & automation challenge degree relevance
- Faculty models & tenure under pressure
- Need for digital-first pedagogy & services

Retention

Full-time Retention

81.7% - 4-year institutions

65.1% - 2-year colleges

Graduation

~65% - 6-year rate

43 M - SCNC

IPEDS: Graduation and Retention Rates: What is the full-time retention rate in postsecondary institutions?

In fall 2023, the full-time retention rate in postsecondary institutions was 65.1%. This is based on 1,437 institutions, limited by Level of institution.*

Opportunities

Reinvigorating the Graduate Market

- Align programs with workforce and professional needs
- Offer hybrid, online, and part-time pathways

Diversifying Through Micro-Credentials

- Stackable programs tied to employer needs
- Partnerships blending academic rigor and relevance

Re-Engaging the “Some College, No Credential” Market

- Tens of millions of adults as an untapped pipeline
- Affordable, modular, flexible completion pathways

AI & Tech Integration

- Harness emerging technologies for personalized learning, operational efficiency, and student engagement.

Optimizing Student Retention

The Umbrella Story



Imagine a campus on a rainy day.

The institution is proud—it has invested in building new state-of-the-art walkways with motion-sensor lights, believing students will value safety and aesthetics. Meanwhile, students are just getting drenched on the way to class because what they really needed was umbrellas.

The institution addressed what it thought students valued, but missed the very practical, immediate need that actually kept them from showing up.

Retention works the same way: if we don't ask and listen carefully, we risk investing heavily in solutions that don't solve the problems students say matter most.

UPCEA

UPCEA is the online and professional education association with more than 400 member institutions

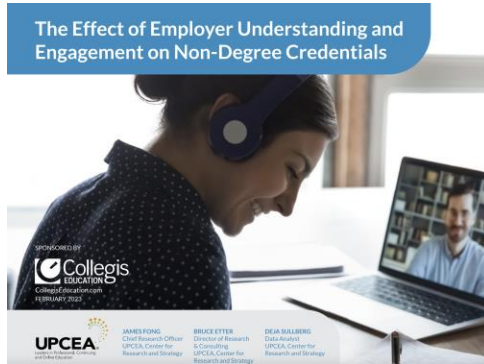
UPCEA is a **non-profit**, membership-based organization focused on online, professional, and continuing education.

We proudly lead and support our members through **cutting edge research, professional development, networking and mentorship, conferences and seminars, and stakeholder advocacy.**

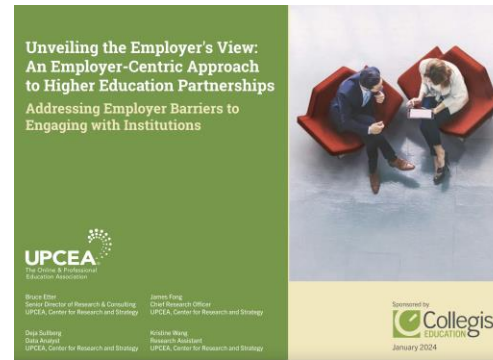
Our collaborative, entrepreneurial community brings together decision makers and influencers in education, industry, research, and policy interested in improving educational access and outcomes.

Recent UPCEA Publications

The Effect of Employer Understanding and Engagement on Non-Degree Credentials



An Employer-Centric Approach to Higher Education Partnerships



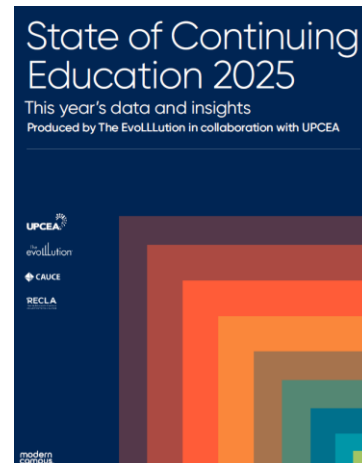
Building a Better Postbaccalaureate Pipeline



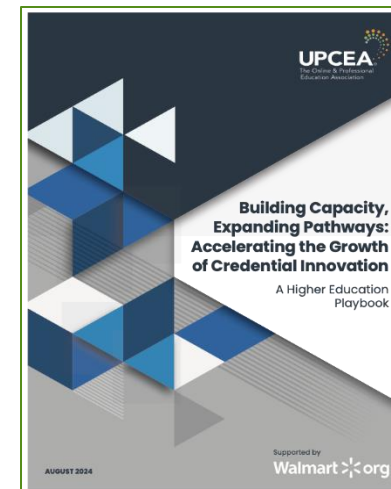
SCNC Learners; Measuring Enrollment Readiness



State of Continuing Education 2025



Accelerating the Growth of Credential Innovation



Benchmarking Online Enterprises Study (BOnES) 2025




Exclusive UPCEA Member Reports

In addition to research conducted with partner organizations, UPCEA also has research available *exclusively* for members

**UPCEA 2024
MARKETING SURVEY
RESULTS**

APRIL 2025



Bruce Etter
Senior Director of Research & Consulting
UPCEA

Deja Sullberg
Data Analyst
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UPCEA
The Online & Professional
Education Association

**2024 SALARY
SURVEY RESULTS**

NOVEMBER 2024




Bruce Etter
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The Online & Professional
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**UPCEA 2024
STAFFING & STRUCTURE
SURVEY RESULTS**

MARCH 2025



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Senior Market Research Analyst
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Deja Sullberg
Data Analyst
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Retention as a Strategy

Better understanding student and institutional perspectives

UPCEA-Collegis Research

- **Objective:** To better identify **meaningful differences between student and institutional perspectives, including various student group perspectives.**
 - Older Millennial, Gen X, and Younger Millennial/Older Gen Z against institutional perspectives and beliefs.
- **Approach:** Gather insights into the **motivations, challenges, and support systems** experienced by online adult learners and higher ed staff, identify gaps. Provide institutions evidence-based insights to align institutional investments and policies with student needs, to position retention as a core strategic lever.

Methodology

Survey of Online Learners

The survey took place from **June 10 to July 1, 2025**. A Dynata internet panel was used for the survey.

Qualifying students are between the ages of 25 and 64, have at least some college experience and can hold up to a doctoral or professional degree. All are currently enrolled in an online bachelor's degree, graduate certificate, or graduate degree.

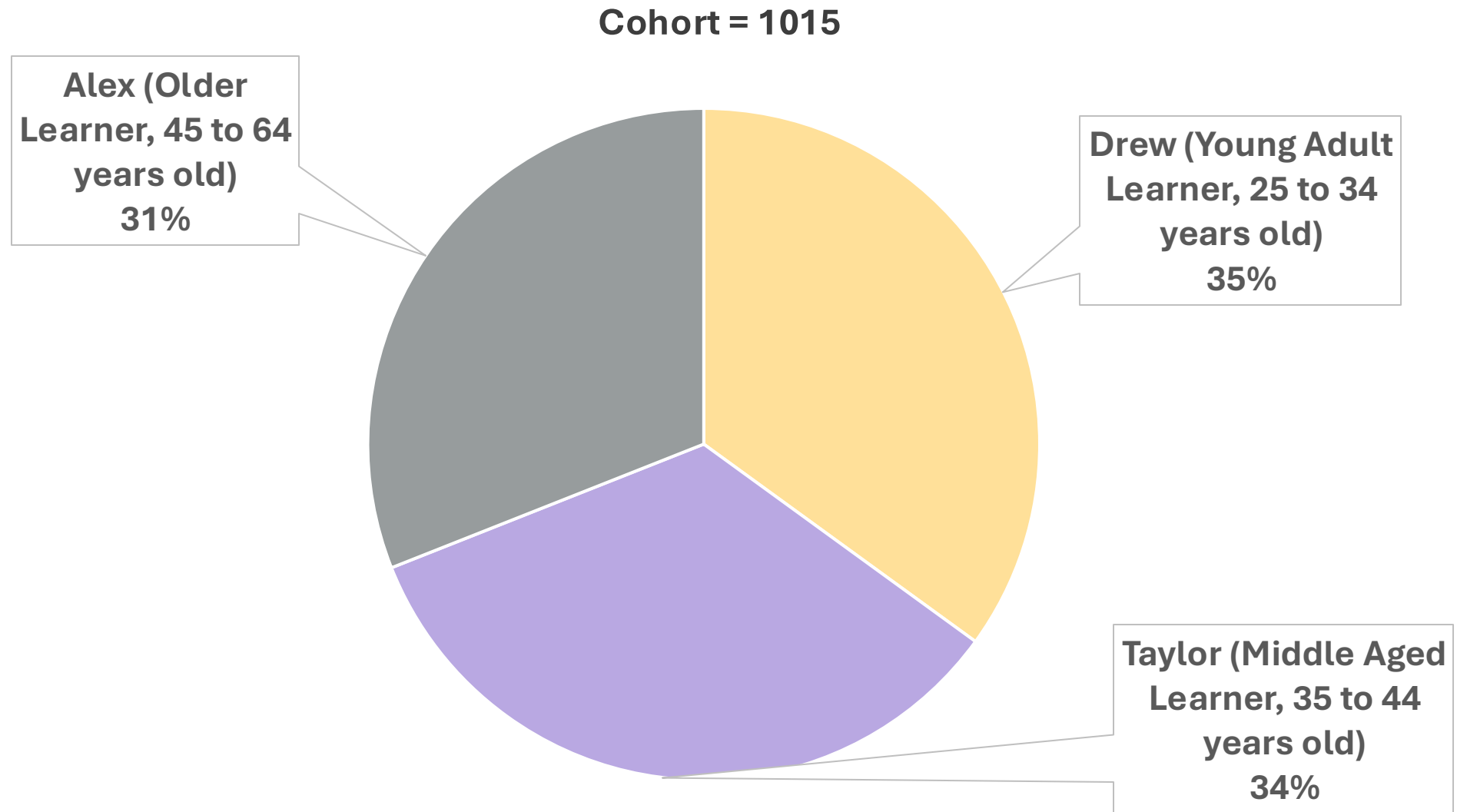
1,015 individuals met all of the qualifications and completed the survey.

Institutional Perspectives Survey

The survey took place from **June 12 to 30, 2025**. A Dynata internet panel was used for the survey.

Overall, **91 individuals participated in the survey, 64 met all qualifications, and 54 completed the survey.**

Student Age Cohorts



Cohort Personas



Drew (Younger Adult Learner)

(25 to 34 years old)

Struggles most with financial pressures and affordability.

Motivated by career advancement and generally feels well supported by their institution, however, still encounters barriers such as inflexible deadlines and rigid policies.

Values dashboards and reminders to track progress in their academic journey and seeks structure.

Requires more proactive, personalized guidance to persist.



Taylor (Middle Aged Learner)

(35 to 44 years old)

Motivated by professional development,

Feels well supported by their institution and finds it easier than many peers to remain enrolled.

Misaligned courses or materials are a barrier, particularly when layered on top of competing work demands.

Values structured, consistent communication from the institution, along with the flexibility needed to balance multiple responsibilities.



Alex (Oldest Learner)

(45 to 64 years old)

Motivated to continue their education both for career advancement and to fulfill a personal goal.

Limited recognition of prior credentials has the greatest negative impact on their experience.

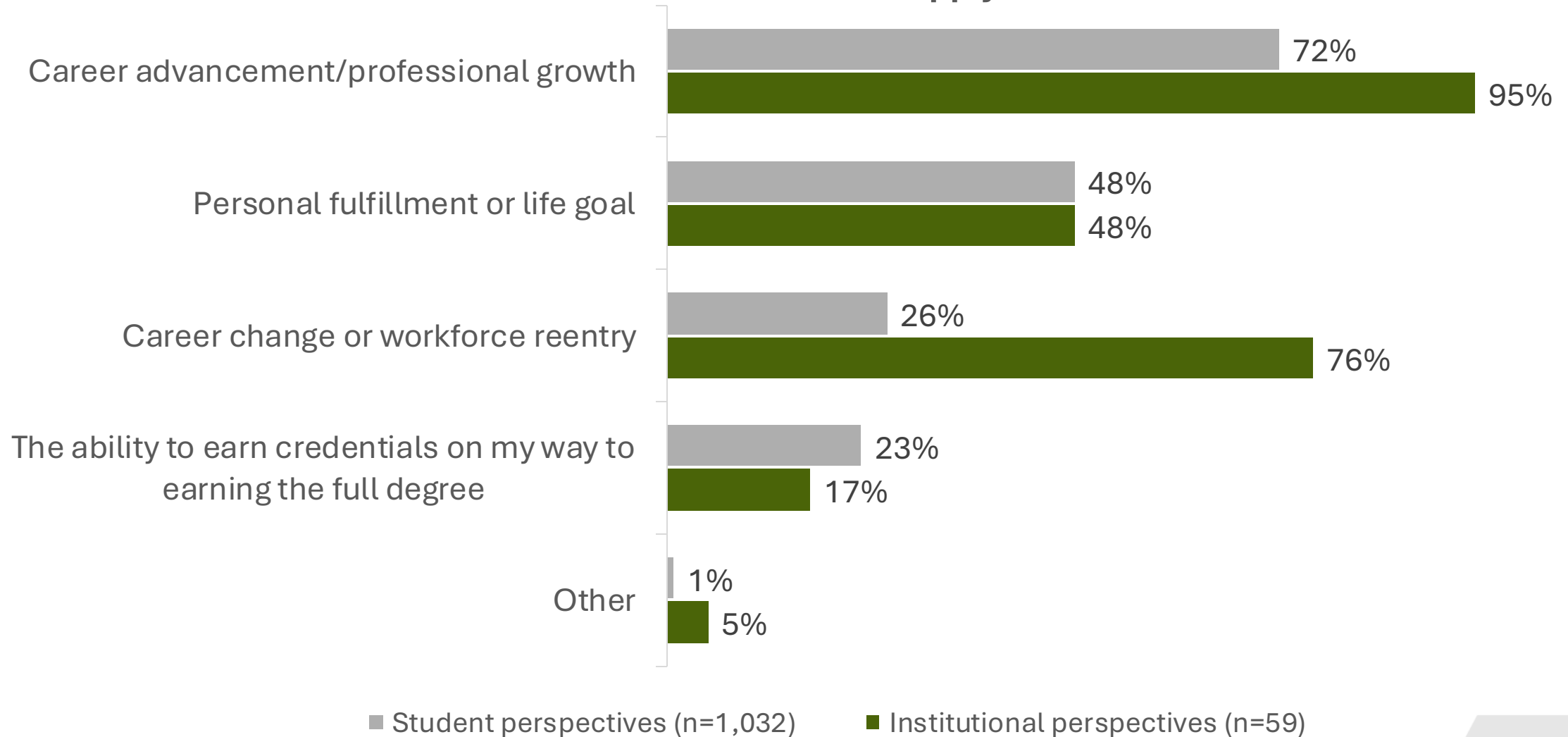
Financial concerns have at times led them to consider leaving.

Values proactive, structured supports such as visual dashboards and instructor check-ins.

Motivations

Motivations for Enrollment

What were your main motivations for enrolling in your online program? Please select all that apply.



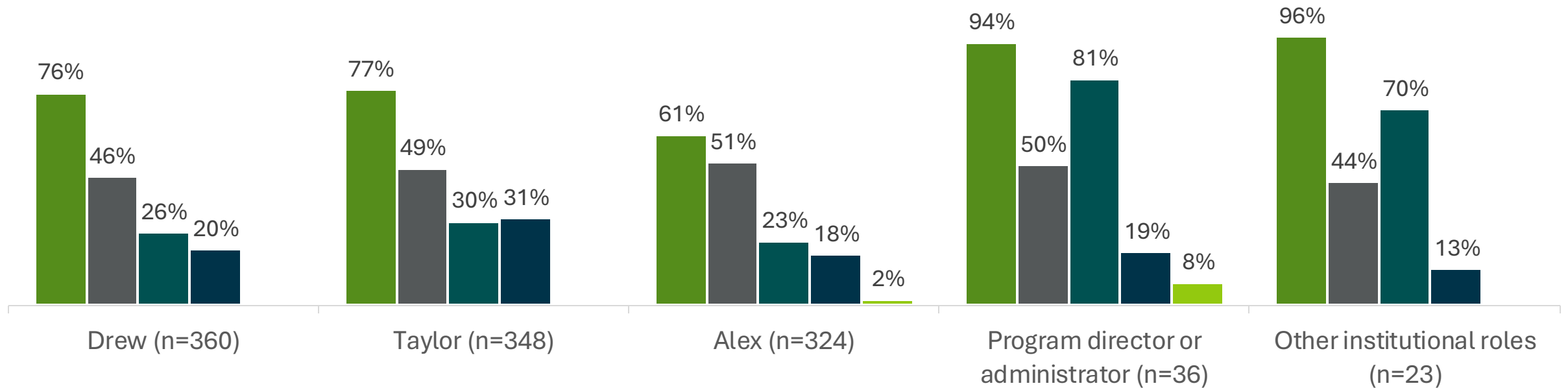
Top 5 Motivations for Enrollment: Students vs. Institutions (Ranking)

Students	
1	Career advancement/ professional growth
2	Personal fulfillment or life goal
3	Career change or workforce reentry
4	Earning credentials on the way to a degree
5	Other

Institutional Representatives	
1	Career advancement/ professional growth
2	Career change or workforce reentry
3	Personal fulfillment or life goal
4	Earning credentials on the way to a degree
5	Other

Motivations for Enrollment - Detailed Results

What were your main motivations for enrolling in your online program? Please select all that apply.



- Career advancement/professional growth
- Personal fulfillment or life goal
- Career change or workforce reentry
- The ability to earn credentials on my way to earning the full degree
- Other

Top 5 Motivations for Enrollment by Persona and Institutional Role



Motivations for Enrollment	Drew (Younger Adult Learner)	Taylor (Middle Aged Learner)	Alex (Older Learner)	Program Director or Administrator	Other Institutional Roles
Career advancement/ Professional growth	1	1	1	1	1
Personal fulfillment or life goal	2	2	2	3	3
Career change or workforce reentry	3	4	3	2	2
The ability to earn credentials on the way to earning the full degree	4	3	4	4	4
Other			5	5	

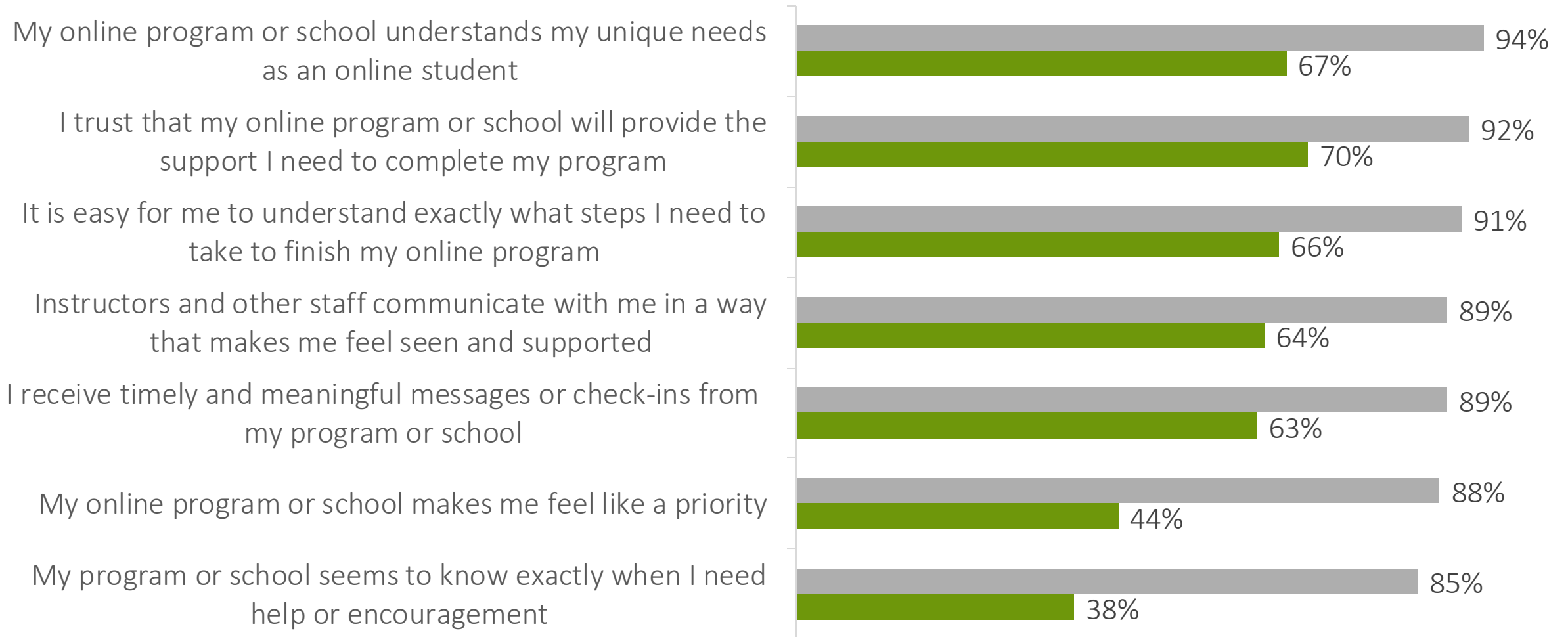




Support and Communications

Support and Communication from Online Program

Please rate how strongly you agree with the following statements (% Strongly Agree or Agree)

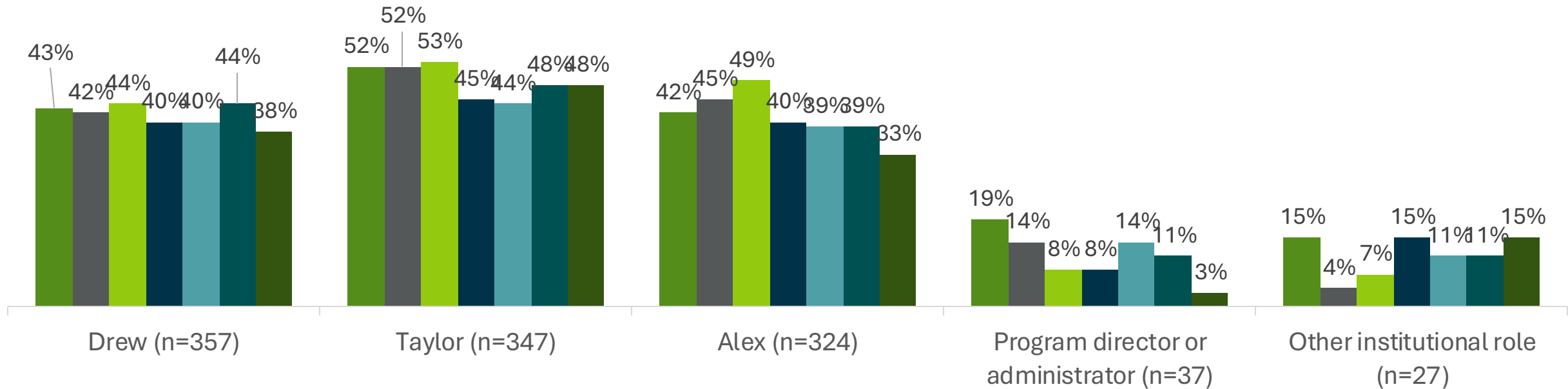


■ Student perspectives (n=1,028)

■ Institutional perspectives (n=64)

Support and Communication from Online Program - Detailed Results

Please rate how strongly you agree with the following statements (% Strongly Agree)



- My online program or school understands my unique needs as an online student
- I trust that my online program or school will provide the support I need to complete my program
- It is easy for me to understand exactly what steps I need to take to finish my online program
- Instructors and other staff communicate with me in a way that makes me feel seen and supported
- I receive timely and meaningful messages or check-ins from my program or school
- My online program or school makes me feel like a priority
- My program or school seems to know exactly when I need help or encouragement

Top 5 Supports and Communication by Persona and Institutional Role

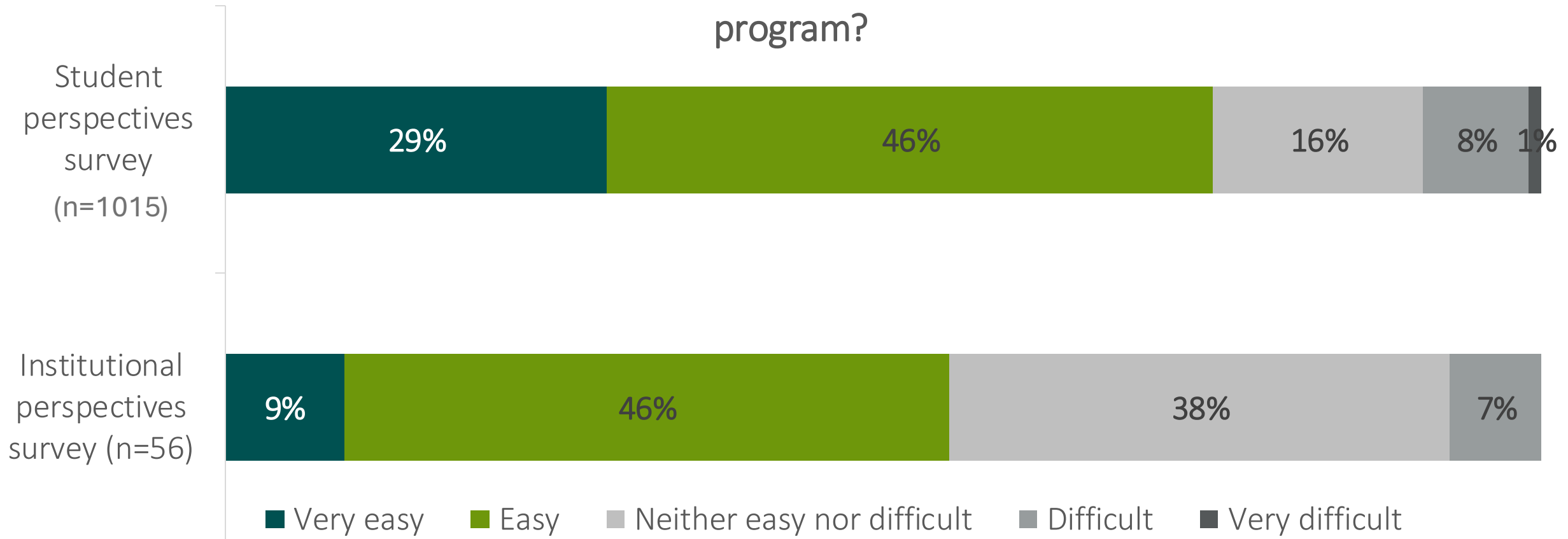
Support & Communication Statements (% Strongly Agree)	Drew (Younger Adult Learner)	Taylor (Middle- aged Learner)	Alex (Older Learner)	Program Director or Administrator	Other Institutional Roles
*My online program or school understands my unique needs as an online student	3	2	3	1	1
*I trust that my online program or school will provide the support I need to complete my program	4	2	2	2	
It is easy for me to understand exactly what steps I need to take to finish my online program	1	1	1	5	
Instructors and other staff communicate with me in a way that makes me feel seen and supported	5		4	5	1
I receive timely and meaningful messages or check-ins from my program or school	5		5	2	4
My online program or school makes me feel like a priority	1	4	5	4	4
*My program or school seems to know exactly when I need help or encouragement		4			1

*indicates statistically significant differences between student personas ($p < .05$)

Benefits and Barriers to Continued Enrollment

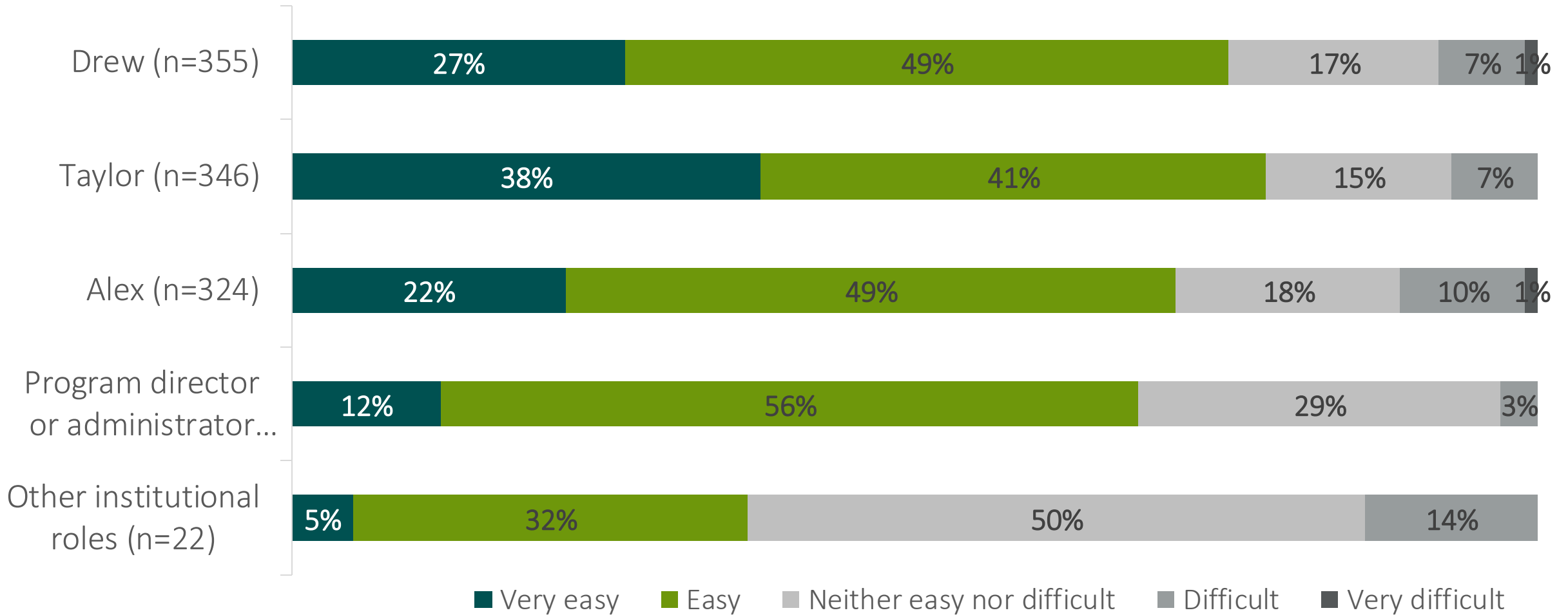
Ease of Staying Enrolled

Thinking about your experience as an online adult learner, how easy or difficult has it been for you to stay enrolled and make progress in your program?



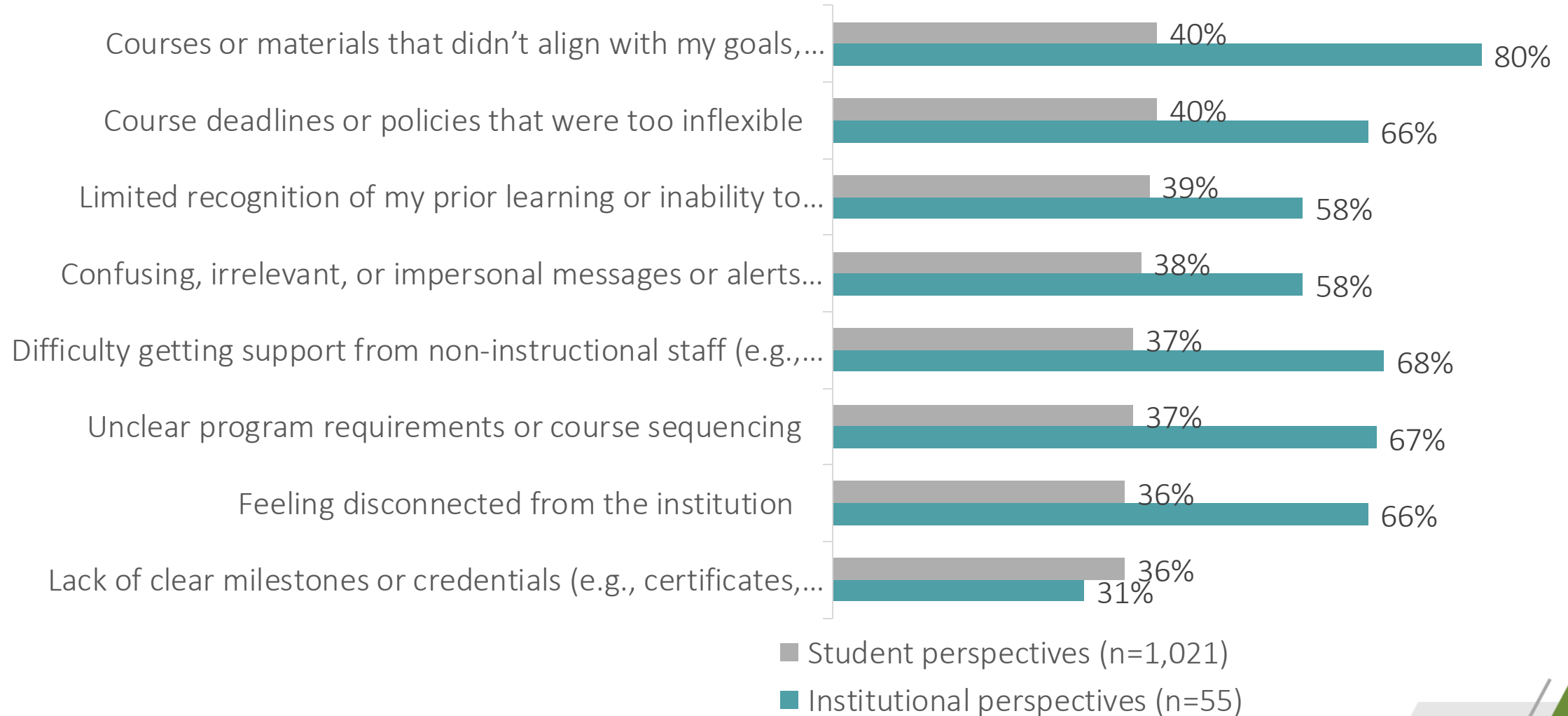
Ease of Staying Enrolled - Detailed Results

Thinking about your experience as an online adult learner, how easy or difficult has it been for you to stay enrolled and make progress in your program?



Challenges Impacting Enrollment

How much did each of the following challenges or barriers negatively impact your ability to stay enrolled or make academic progress in your online program? (% Major or Moderate Impact)

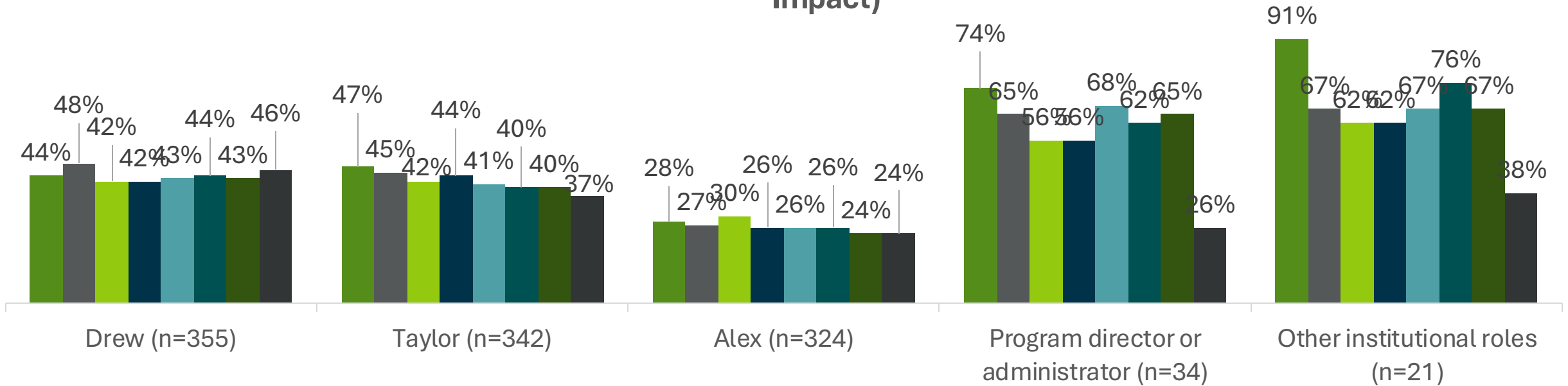


Top 5 Challenges Impacting Enrollment: Students vs Institutions (Ranks)

Students		Institutional Representatives	
1	Courses or materials that don't align with goals/interests	1	Courses or materials that don't align with goals/interests
2	Course deadlines or policies that are too inflexible	2	Difficulty getting support from non-instructional staff
3	Limited recognition of my prior learning or inability to transfer credits	3	Unclear program requirements or course sequencing
4	Confusing, irrelevant, or impersonal messages or alerts	4	Feeling disconnected from the institution
5	Difficulty getting support from non-instructional staff/unclear program requirements or course sequencing	4	Course deadlines or policies that are too inflexible

Challenges Impacting Enrollment - Detailed Results

How much did each of the following challenges or barriers negatively impact your ability to stay enrolled or make academic progress in your online program? (% Major or Moderate Impact)



- Courses or materials that didn't align with my goals, interests, or experience
- Course deadlines or policies that were too inflexible
- Limited recognition of my prior learning or inability to transfer credits
- Confusing, irrelevant, or impersonal messages or alerts (e.g., deadline reminders, grade notifications)
- Difficulty getting support from non-instructional staff (e.g., advisors, tutors, coaches)
- Unclear program requirements or course sequencing
- Feeling disconnected from the institution
- Lack of clear milestones or credentials (e.g., certificates, badges) to mark progress

Top 5 Challenges Impacting Enrollment by Persona and Institutional Role

Challenges Impacting Enrollment (% Major or Moderate Impact)	Drew (Younger Adult Learner)	Taylor (Middle Age Learner)	Alex (Older Learner)	Program Director or Administrator	Other Institutional Roles
*Courses or materials that didn't align with my goals, interests, or experience	3	1	2	1	1
*Course deadlines or policies that were too inflexible	1	2	3	3	3
*Limited recognition of my prior learning or inability to transfer credits		4	1		
*Confusing, irrelevant, or impersonal messages or alerts		3	4		
*Difficulty getting support from non-instructional staff	5	5	4	2	3
*Unclear program requirements or course sequencing	3		4	5	2
*Feeling disconnected from the institution				3	3
*Lack of clear milestones or credentials	2				

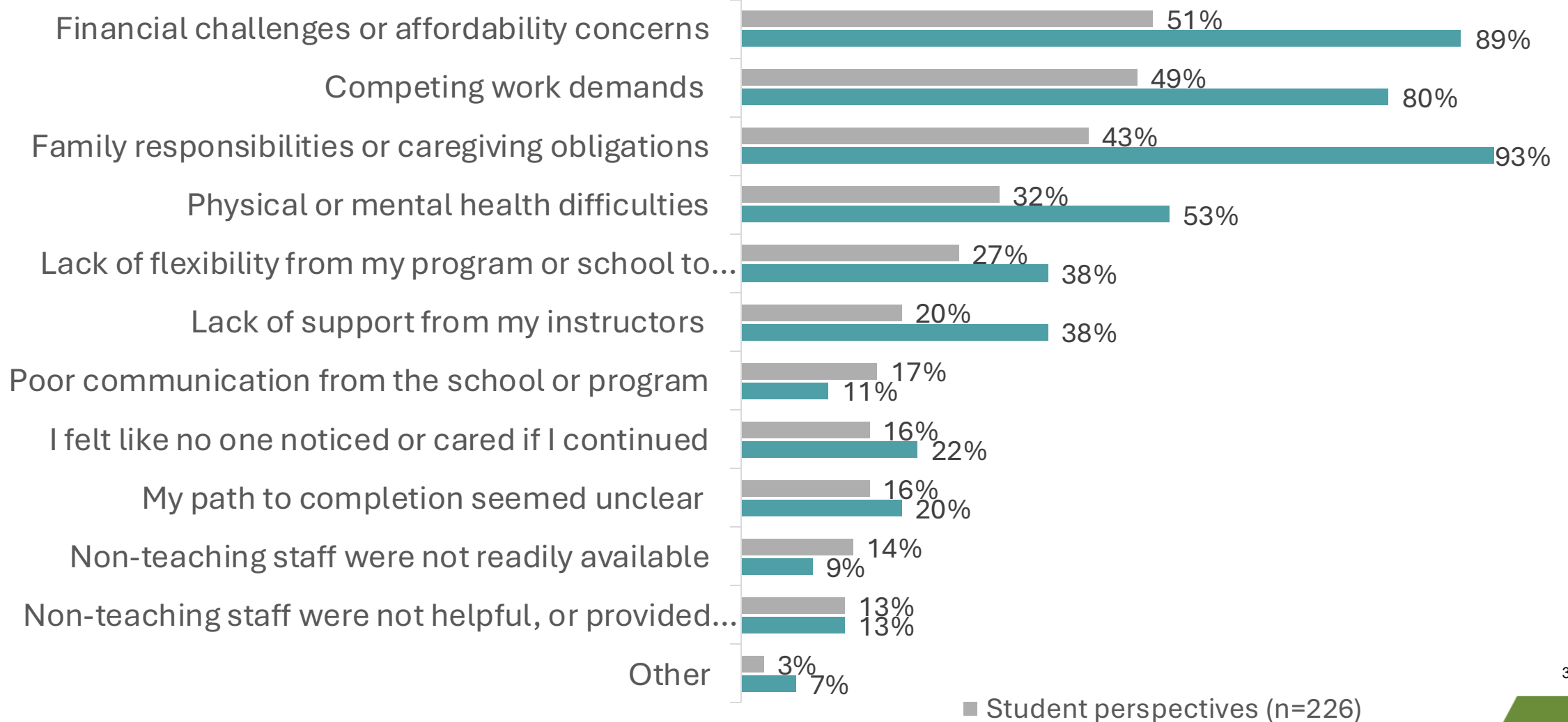
*indicates statistically significant differences between student personas ($p < .05$)

Reasons for Leaving

Reason for Considering Leaving Program

What made you seriously consider stopping out or leaving your current program?

Please select all that apply



Top 5 Reasons for Considering Leaving Program: Student vs Institution

Students		Institutional Representatives	
1	Financial challenges or affordability concerns	1	Family responsibilities or caregiving obligations
2	Competing work demands	2	Financial challenges or affordability concerns
3	Family responsibilities or caregiving obligations	3	Competing work demands
4	Physical or mental health difficulties	4	Physical or mental health difficulties
5	Lack of flexibility from school or program to accommodate adult learner needs	5	Lack of support from instructors/ Lack of flexibility from school or program to accommodate adult learner needs

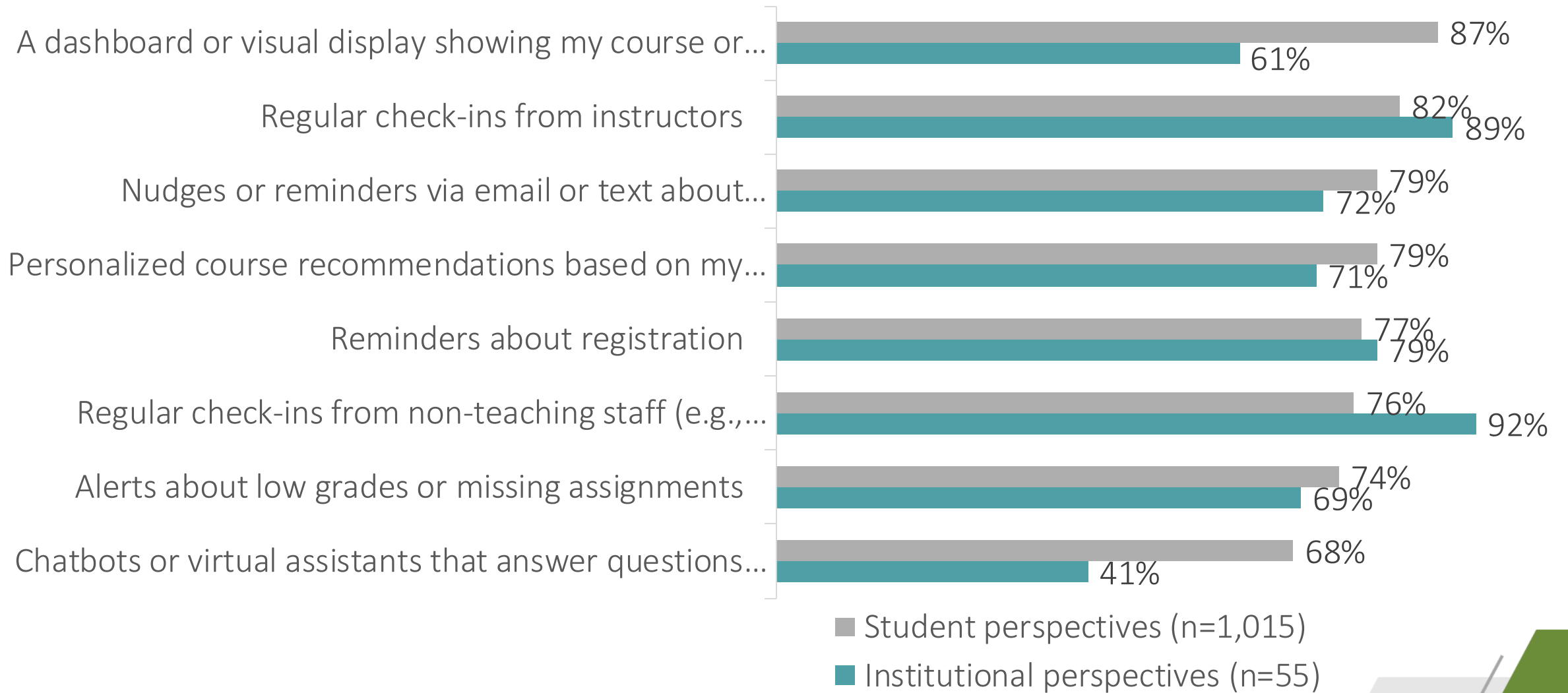
Top 5 Reasons for Considering Leaving by Persona and Institutional Role

Reasons for Consideration of Leaving Program	Drew (Younger Adult Learner)	Taylor (Middle Aged Learner)	Alex (Older Learner)	Program Director or Administrator	Other Institutional Roles
Financial challenges or affordability concerns	1	2	1	2	1
Competing work demands	2	1	2	3	3
Family responsibilities or caregiving obligations	3	3	3	1	1
Physical or mental health difficulties	4	5	4	4	5
Lack of flexibility from my program or school to accommodate adult learner needs	5	4	5		4
Lack of support from my instructors				5	
My path to completion seemed unclear					

Support for Online Program Progression

Helpful Support for Engagement and Progress

How much did each of the following supports help you stay engaged, make academic progress, or remain enrolled in your online program? (% Very or Moderately Helpful)

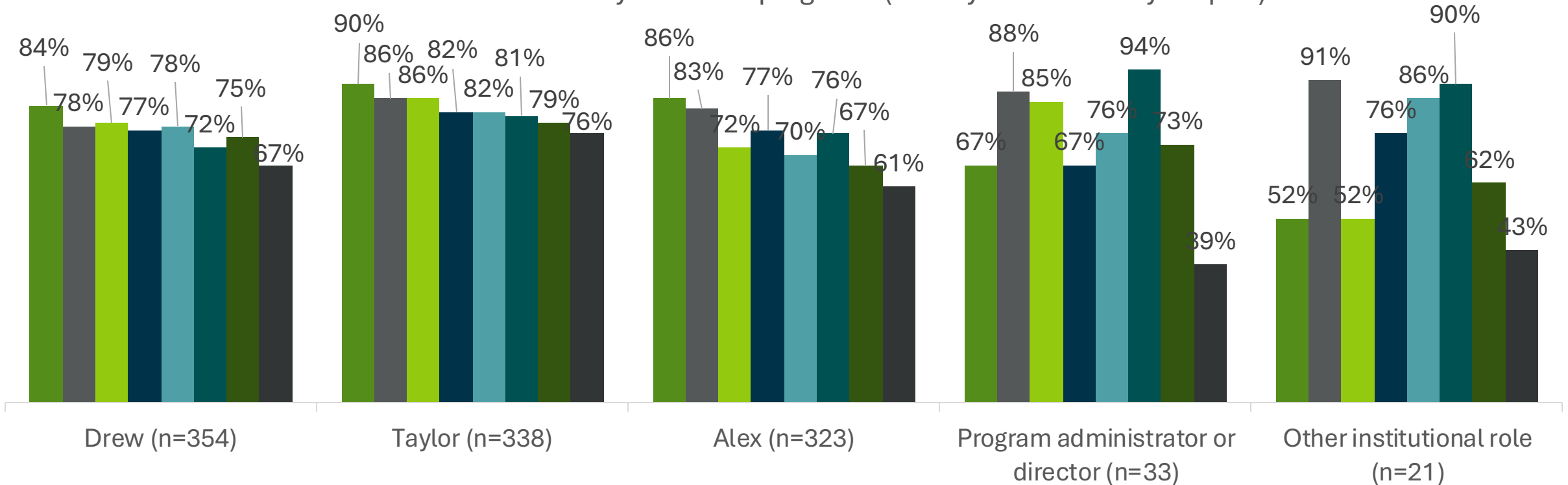


Top 5 Helpful Supports: Students vs Institution

Students		Institutional Representatives	
1	A dashboard or visual display showing my course or program progress	1	Regular check-ins from non-teaching staff
2	Regular check-ins from instructors	2	Regular check-ins from instructors
3	Nudges or reminders via email or text about deadlines or due dates	3	Reminders about registration
3	Personalized course recommendations based on my academic history or degree requirements	4	Nudges or reminders via email or text about deadlines or due dates
5	Reminders about registrations	5	Personalized course recommendations based on my academic history or degree requirements

Helpful Supports - Detailed Results

How much did each of the following supports help you stay engaged, make academic progress, or remain enrolled in your online program? (% Very or Moderately Helpful)



- A dashboard or visual display showing my course or program progress
- Regular check-ins from instructors
- Nudges or reminders via email or text about deadlines or due dates
- Personalized course recommendations based on my academic history or degree requirements
- Reminders about registration
- Regular check-ins from non-teaching staff (e.g., advisors, success coaches)
- Alerts about low grades or missing assignments
- Chatbots or virtual assistants that answer questions at any time

Top 5 Helpful Supports by Persona and Institutional Role

Helpful Supports for Engagement and Progress (% Very or Moderately Helpful)	Drew (Younger Adult Learner)	Taylor (Middle Age Learner)	Alex (Older Learner)	Program Director or Administrator	Other Institutional Roles
*A dashboard or visual display showing my course or program progress	1	1	1		
*Regular check-ins from instructors	3	2	2	2	1
*Nudges or reminders via email or text about deadlines or due dates	2	2	5	3	
*Personalized course recommendations based on my academic history or degree requirements	5	4	3		4
*Reminders about registration	3	4		4	3
*Regular check-ins from non-teaching staff (e.g., advisors, success coaches)			4	1	2
*Alerts about low grades or missing assignments				5	5

*indicates statistically significant differences between student personas ($p < .05$)

Key Take-aways

Retention as a Strategic Imperative

- Make retention as **central as recruitment**
- **Embed** retention in institutional **strategy**, not as an afterthought
- Retention = both **revenue driver** and **student success imperative**
- Involve **academic personnel**
 - Prioritize flexibility in course work, deadlines, course policies, transparent course sequencing
- Engage student support administrators **and** staff

Align Resources

Align supports and investments with **student-identified** priorities

Institutional Assumptions

- Favor scalable, system-level, tech-driven solutions, expanded traditional strategies/access to services
- Primarily driven by enrollment management staff
- Automated alerts, expanded advising pathways, staff check-ins

Student Priorities

- Primary drivers of persistence require more human interaction, less scalable
- Academic Drivers - Program and policy flexibility, course alignment, career alignment/relevance
- Clear, personalized communications
- Financial pressures and affordability top of mind

Tailor Retention Strategies

Consistent, proactive communication is the highest-value lever. Balance tech-enabled personalization (nudges, dashboards, AI-driven support) and human interaction to scale differentiation.

Drew

Younger Adult Learner
25-34 years of age

Needs reminders,
dashboards,
proactive guidance

Taylor

Middle-aged Learner
35-44 years of age

Values structured
communication,
course flexibility

Alex

Older Learner
45-64 years of age

Requires credential
recognition, strong
instructor check-ins

Thank You!

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