

# PRESIDENTS AND BOARD CHAIRS:

Navigating the Future of  
Education Together



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*Presidents and Board Chairs: Navigating the Future of Education Together* is based on a survey conducted by Maguire Associates, Inc., was written by Tom Regan, contributing writer of The Chronicle of Higher Education, and is sponsored by Oracle. The Chronicle is fully responsible for the report's editorial content. Copyright ©2016.

# Executive Summary

**W**hen a campus crisis occurs, it's critical that the president and the board are in close communication and have built a sense of trust.

As the several recent examples below show, when the relationship doesn't work, it can be quite traumatic for both parties and their institution.

- Former Suffolk University president Margaret McKenna's alleged struggles with several members of her board led to her being fired in July 2016 after only a year on the job.
- Neil D. Theobald, president of Temple University, only lasted three-and-a-half years before the university's board of trustees voted to dismiss him in July 2016 for problems that came to a head over his firing of a popular provost. Theobald reached an agreement with the board to resign on August 1.
- At the University of Akron, the growing debate over whether schools should provide job training or a broad general education was one reason behind the June 2016 resignation of Scott L. Scarborough less than two years after his appointment as president.
- If a university system's president or board members are suddenly replaced as a result of a change of the political party at the head of state government, as recently happened in North Carolina or Kentucky, it can create chaos and uncertainty.

To better understand the nature and dynamic of this key relationship, The Chronicle of Higher Education collaborated with Maguire Associates on a survey of presidents and board chairs across the United States, at two-year and four-year institutions, in June 2016.

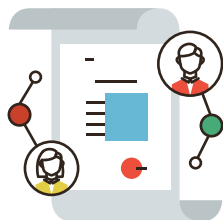
The survey delved into the state of affairs between boards and presidents, the approach both sides are taking to succession planning, and the qualities next-generation presidents and boards should possess to bring about change within their institutions.

The survey found that while presidents and board chairs reported strong relationships and respect for each other, as well as the need for a shared vision for their colleges, there were disagreements in important areas. The two groups disagreed over the need for more programs directed towards giving students specific skills that would help them find jobs, and reported that their discussions around part-time students and online learning were not as productive as perhaps desired.

Succession is "always" on the mind of both groups, as one president says. Continuity is the top factor in picking a new board chair, while a new president needs a deep understanding of the current educational environment.

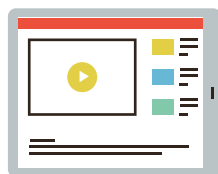
Going forward, the working relationship of presidents and board chairs will only grow in importance as they navigate their way through the issues facing higher education.

## HIGHLIGHTS



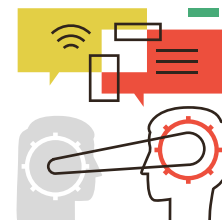
### BOARD CHAIRS AND PRESIDENTS SHARE A SENSE OF PESSIMISM ABOUT THE STATE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

A solid majority of both groups (77 percent) say that the financial stability of higher education is moving in the wrong direction, with only 17 percent expressing optimism about the overall funding situation. Perhaps even more daunting, only 54 percent of presidents and board chairs say they believe the U.S. education system will rank as one of the best in the world 10 years from now. This may stem from the fact that both groups say they believe the higher education system is doing a poor job at providing value for the money students and parents spend on getting a post-secondary education.



### THEY DISAGREE ON WHETHER THEIR INSTITUTIONS ARE PREPARING STUDENTS FOR TODAY'S ECONOMY

Board chairs are more critical of the job that the higher education system is doing in terms of providing students with the skills they need for today's economy, with 24 percent saying that their institutions are only doing a poor or fair job at this task. College presidents were much more optimistic, with 50 percent of those surveyed saying they were doing a good job at providing students with these important skills. Despite their pessimism about providing students with what they need to find positions in today's workforce, board chairs tend to be overall more optimistic about the financial prospects of their institution.

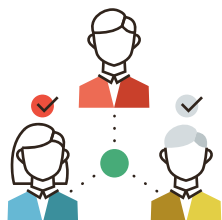


### COMMUNICATION IS SEEN AS KEY, BUT EACH GROUP DIFFERS IN HOW TO ACHIEVE THAT GOAL

For presidents, email remains the best way to stay in touch, while board chairs like a combination of email, phone, and face-to-face meetings. Despite the presidents' preference for email, board chairs seem more in touch with much of today's online technology, liking communication tools such as web conferences and social media.

The topics president and board chairs discussed most often were related to finance—with their institution's budget and all aspects of fundraising mentioned most frequently in the survey. Enrollment management and strategic planning were also discussed on a regular basis.

## HIGHLIGHTS



### PRESIDENTS AND BOARD CHAIRS SAY THEIR RELATIONSHIPS ARE STRONG

The good news is that both board chairs and presidents had very positive things to say about each other, with 94 percent of those surveyed describing their relationships as good or excellent.

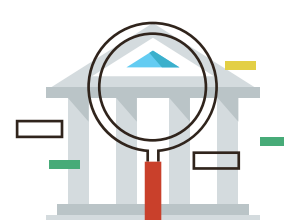
Both groups said that spending more time together would improve their relationship. Board chairs indicated that their relationship would be improved by more regular and open communication on the president's part, while presidents hoped for more openness from board chairs.



### PRESIDENTS AND BOARD CHAIRS DEFINED SUCCESS IN THEIR ROLES AS ENSURING A SHARED VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF THEIR INSTITUTION

For presidents and board chairs, working out a common vision of the future of their institution was the most important way to define success in their respective roles. Having a balanced budget and improving retention and graduation rates were also important.

Presidents, however, saw ensuring that their institution has a strong faculty and staff morale as more important, while board chairs saw establishing productive relationships between senior administration and the board as an important way to find success in their positions.



### NEITHER VIEW SUCCESSION PLANNING AS A TOP ISSUE, BUT EACH SIDE SEES IT AS AN IMPORTANT ONE

When looking for a new board chair, continuity is the most important factor according to several board chairs interviewed. Most new board chairs tend to come from current board members who are familiar with the issues facing their institutions.

A deep understanding of the current educational environment and the challenges facing higher education are seen as the qualities most sought after when looking for a new president.

# Introduction

It may be the most important working relationship at any institution of higher education: the college president and the chair of the board of trustees.

The issues facing higher education can seem overwhelming: declining enrollment, the changing backgrounds and needs of students, the decrease in available state funds paired with pressures on tuition revenue, the need to fine-tune the programs offered to students to help them find careers in today's economy, and the questions of succession and how to find the “next” right person for the job of president or board chair.

When the relationship works, it becomes a building block for an institution's growth.

For Richard Dunsworth, the president of University of the Ozarks in Arkansas, one way to deal with this onslaught of issues is time—the time that the president and board chair work on shaping a shared vision for their institution.

“Every meeting between the board and the president should include time spent talking about the mission of the institution—the overall strategic plan to deal with the seemingly never-ending list of worries and pressures,” Dunsworth says. “It's not just something pretty that goes on the wall.”

The Chronicle of Higher Education's 2016 survey of presidents and board chairs show that most of these relationships are strong and working. Presidents and board chairs have very positive things to say about each other and share the belief that their most important roles are to create a shared vision for the future of their institutions. They both share concern

about the direction that the financial stability of higher education and worry that 10 years from now, higher education in the United States will not be regarded as highly as it is currently.

Even with so many areas of agreement, there are some issues on which they part. While both groups agree that the financial stability of higher education is going in the wrong direction, board chairs are more optimistic than presidents about the future of their institutions. Presidents' main concern remains declining enrollment, while board chairs see the issue of competition for students as a priority.

On the other hand, presidents tended to believe more than board chairs that today's higher education system is doing a good job at providing the education that students need to meet the needs of today's economy, although presidents are increasingly seeing the need to be “nimble” and current in looking at student needs.

College presidents who took part in the survey were primarily white (86 percent) and male (71 percent), with the largest age groups being between 50 and 59 (38 percent) and 60-65 (35 percent). Board chairs were also predominately white (95 percent) and male (74 percent) with the largest age group being over 65 (around 38 percent).

As for their work histories, board chairs predominately come from business and construction and manufacturing backgrounds, with a solid representation from the education sector.

# Shared Pessimism over the Value of Higher Education

“Thirty-one percent of presidents and board chairs...said the higher education system is only doing a poor to fair job at providing value for the money.”





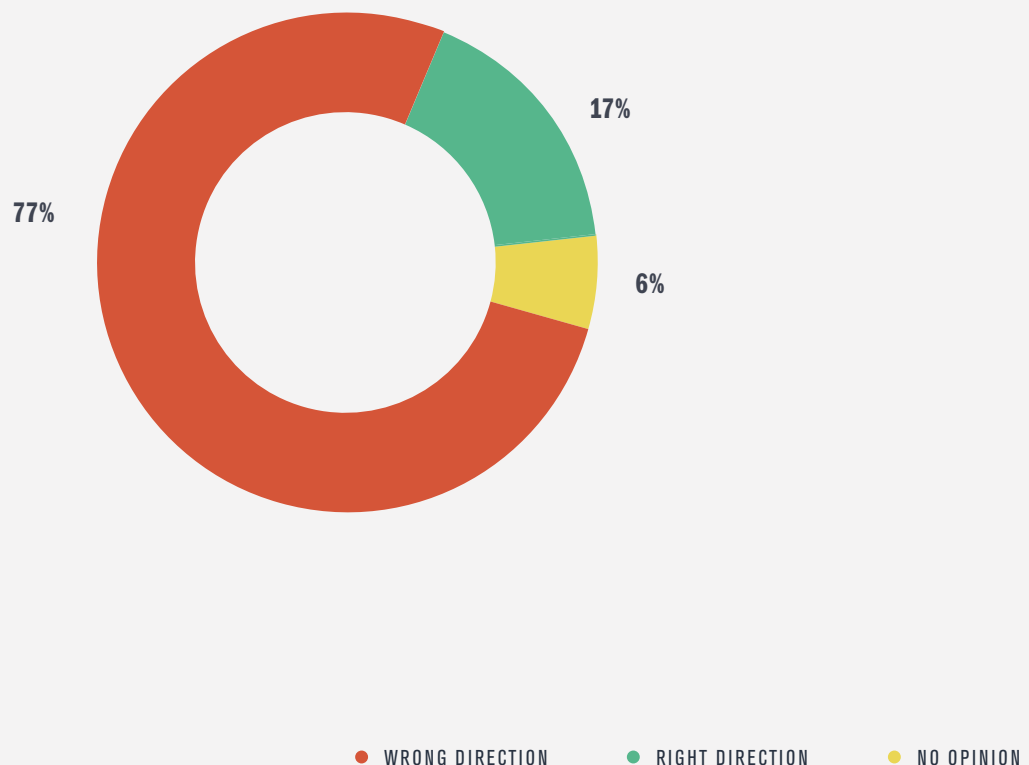
College and board presidents agreed that the financial stability of higher education in the United States is going in the wrong direction. (See **Figure 1**). As the graph shows, only 17 percent said that the higher education system was in a positive financial position.

This finding mirrors results from the 2016 survey “Reinventing the Academic Enterprise: College Leaders Consider the Challenges of the New Era,” conducted for The Chronicle of Higher Education by Maguire Associates of top college officials, which found 79 percent of those surveyed felt “gloomy” about the financial health of postsecondary education.

Richard Vurdien, president of Pasadena City College, said if finances are bad, often colleges have no one to blame but themselves.

“Finances are going in the wrong direction because we make them go in the wrong direction,” he says. “If they’re going in the wrong direction, it’s because we do not have a planning process in the institution that we follow.”

**FIGURE 1**  
**THE DIRECTION COLLEGE AND BOARD LEADERS SAY THE FINANCIAL STABILITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION IS HEADING**

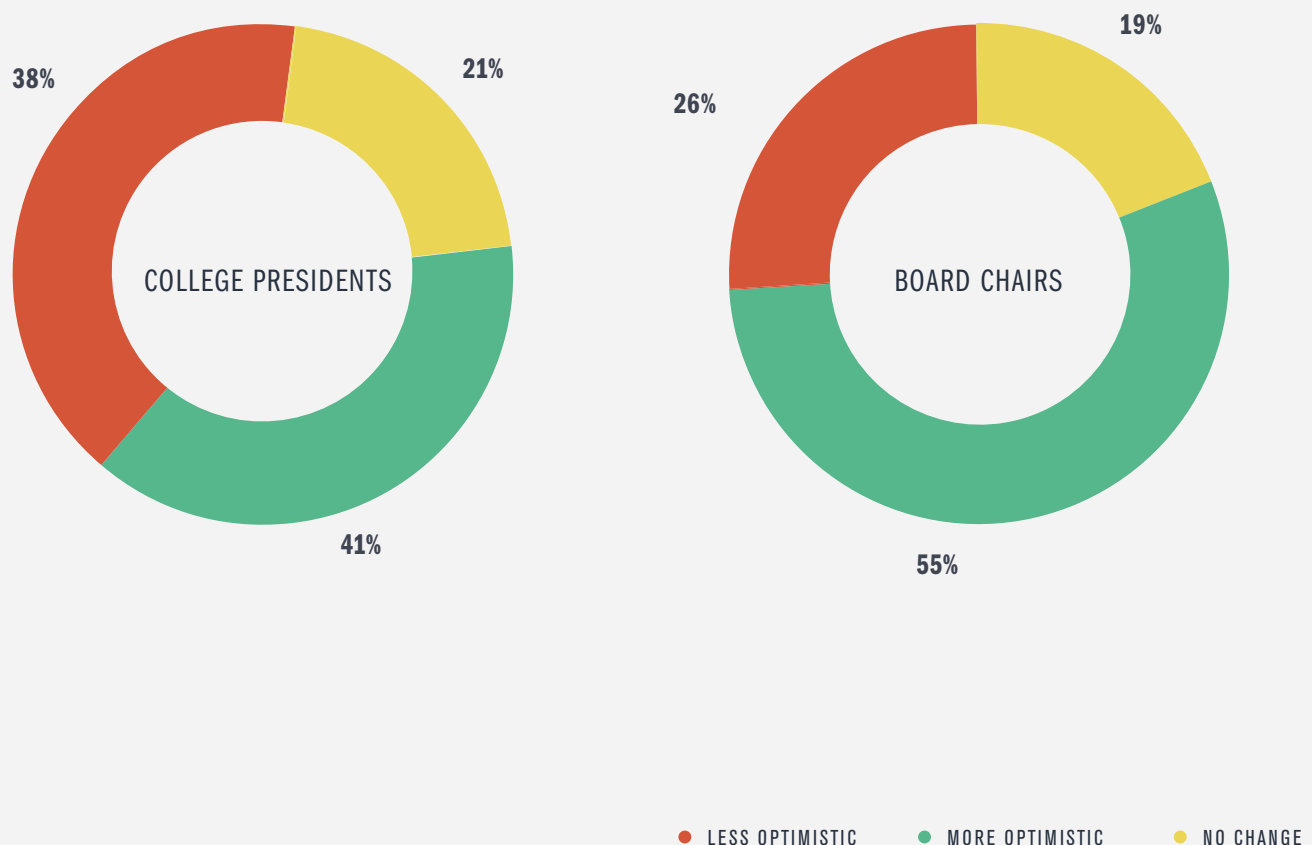


More than half of the board chairs reported feeling optimistic about the financial prospects of their institution, while college presidents were slightly less optimistic. (See **Figure 2**).

Ed Stock, the recently retired board chairman of Reading Community College in Pennsylvania, and a lawyer by profession, says this might be due to board members spending more time in the broader local community.

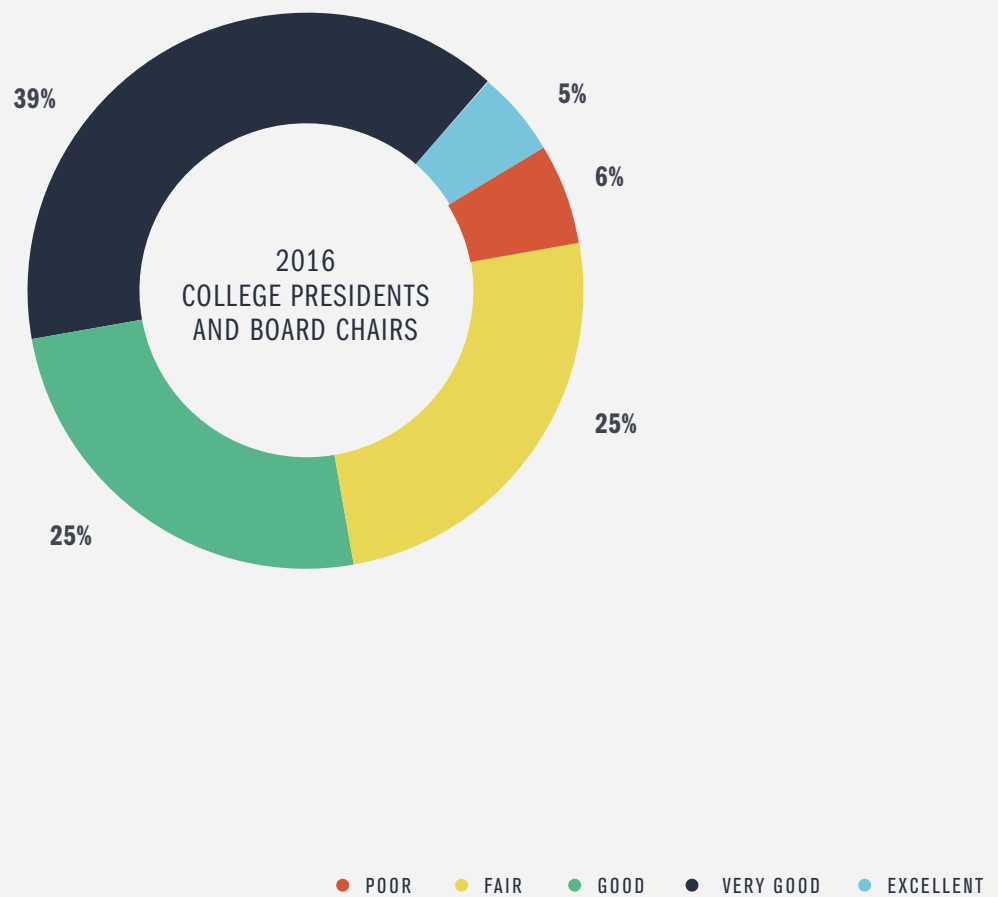
“Given what I do for a living, I’m exposed to a pretty wide cross-section of private companies and other governmental entities,” Stock says. “In many respects we’re in better shape than many other institutions. So I guess that would give me reason to be more optimistic.”

**FIGURE 2**  
**PRESIDENTS AND BOARD CHAIRS’ CURRENT OPTIMISM ABOUT FINANCIAL PROSPECTS**  
**AS COMPARED TO ONE YEAR AGO**



In another perhaps surprising finding, 31% of presidents and board chairs surveyed in 2016 said the higher education system is only doing a poor to fair job at providing value for the money. (See **Figure 3**).

**FIGURE 3**  
**HOW PRESIDENTS AND BOARD CHAIRS SAY HIGHER EDUCATION IS DOING AT PROVIDING VALUE FOR MONEY SPENT**



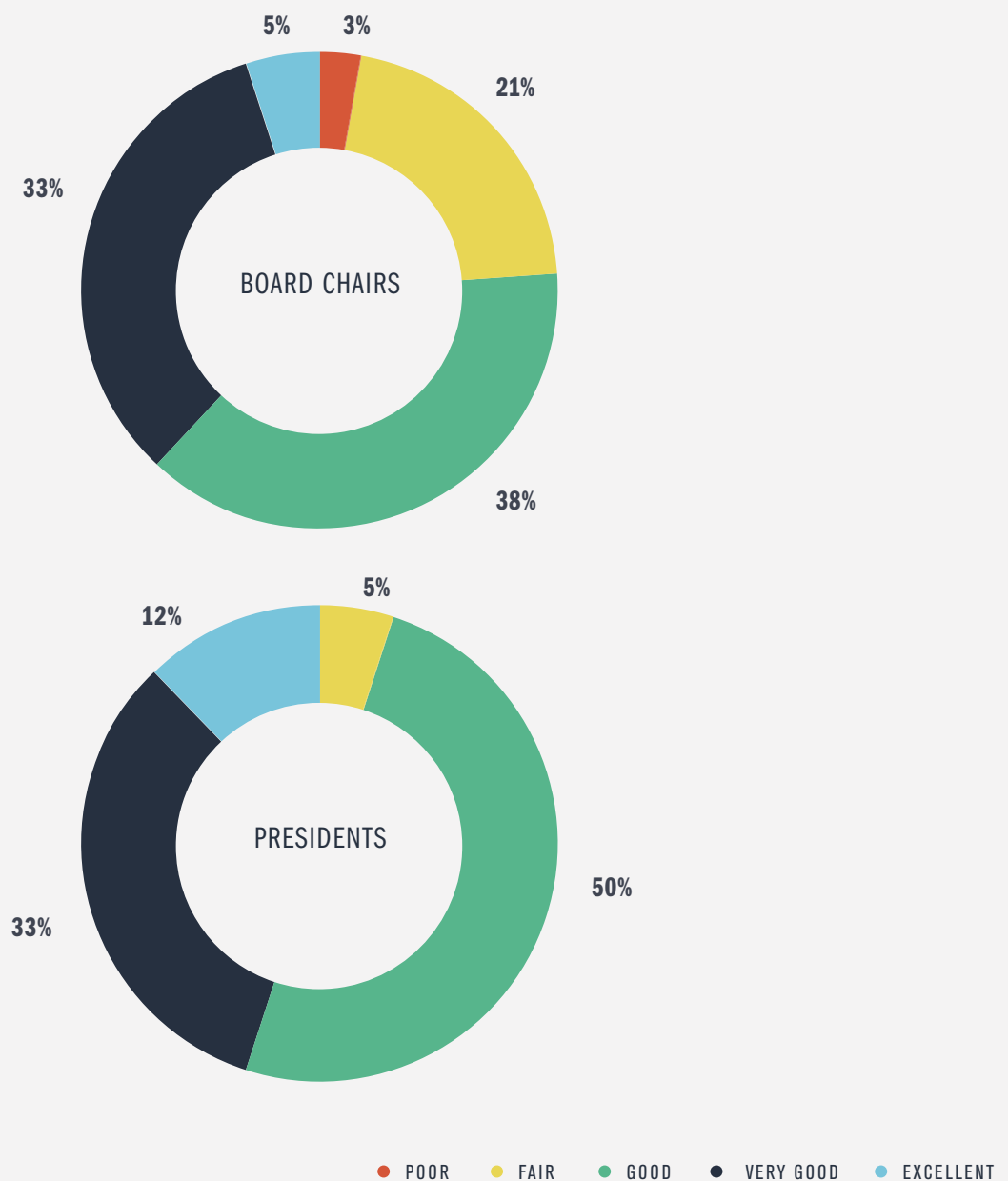
# Preparing Students for Today's Economy

“College presidents had  
a much more favorable  
view of the U.S. higher  
education system’s ability  
to provide academic  
programs that meet the  
needs of today’s economy.”



College presidents had a much more favorable view of the U.S. higher education system’s ability to provide academic programs that meet the needs of today’s economy, with 83 percent rating the job the current system is doing as good or very good. On the other hand, 24 percent of board chairs rated it as poor or fair. (See **Figure 4**).

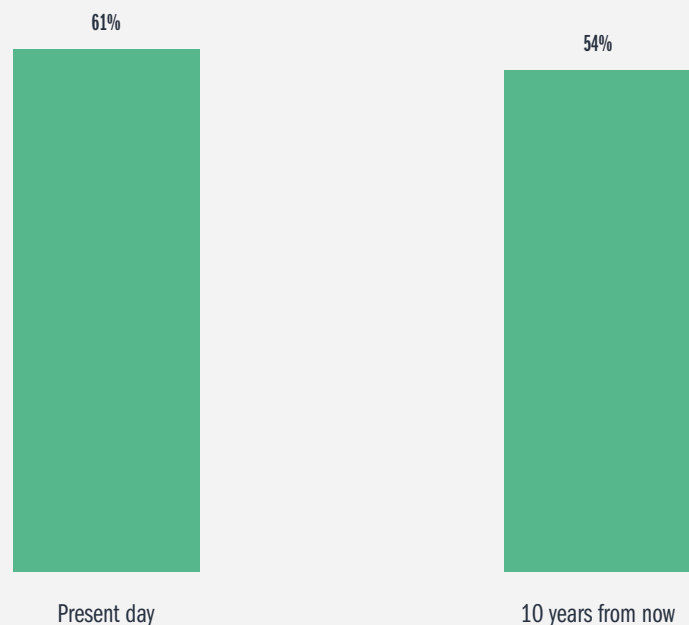
**FIGURE 4**  
**WHAT PRESIDENTS AND BOARD CHAIRS SAY ABOUT HIGHER EDUCATION’S ABILITY TO PROVIDE ACADEMIC PROGRAMS THAT MEET THE NEEDS OF TODAY’S ECONOMY**



Stock, the former board chairman, says this issue is actually one that he and his president talked about quite a bit and that they have been, “taking a hard look at different programs and making decisions on whether we should continue to offer those programs, or whether we should start phasing some of them out and look to replacing them with programs that would better serve the students.”

In perhaps another sign that college presidents and board chairs are worried about the higher education system’s ability to do a good job providing the academic challenges that students need, only 61% of presidents and board chairs said the current U.S. education system was the best or one of the best in the world. Projected 10 years into the future, the numbers look even bleaker. (See **Figure 5**).

**FIGURE 5**  
**HOW COLLEGE PRESIDENTS AND BOARD CHAIRS RATE THE U.S. HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM AS ONE OF THE BEST IN THE WORLD**



● 2016 - PRESIDENTS AND BOARD CHAIRS

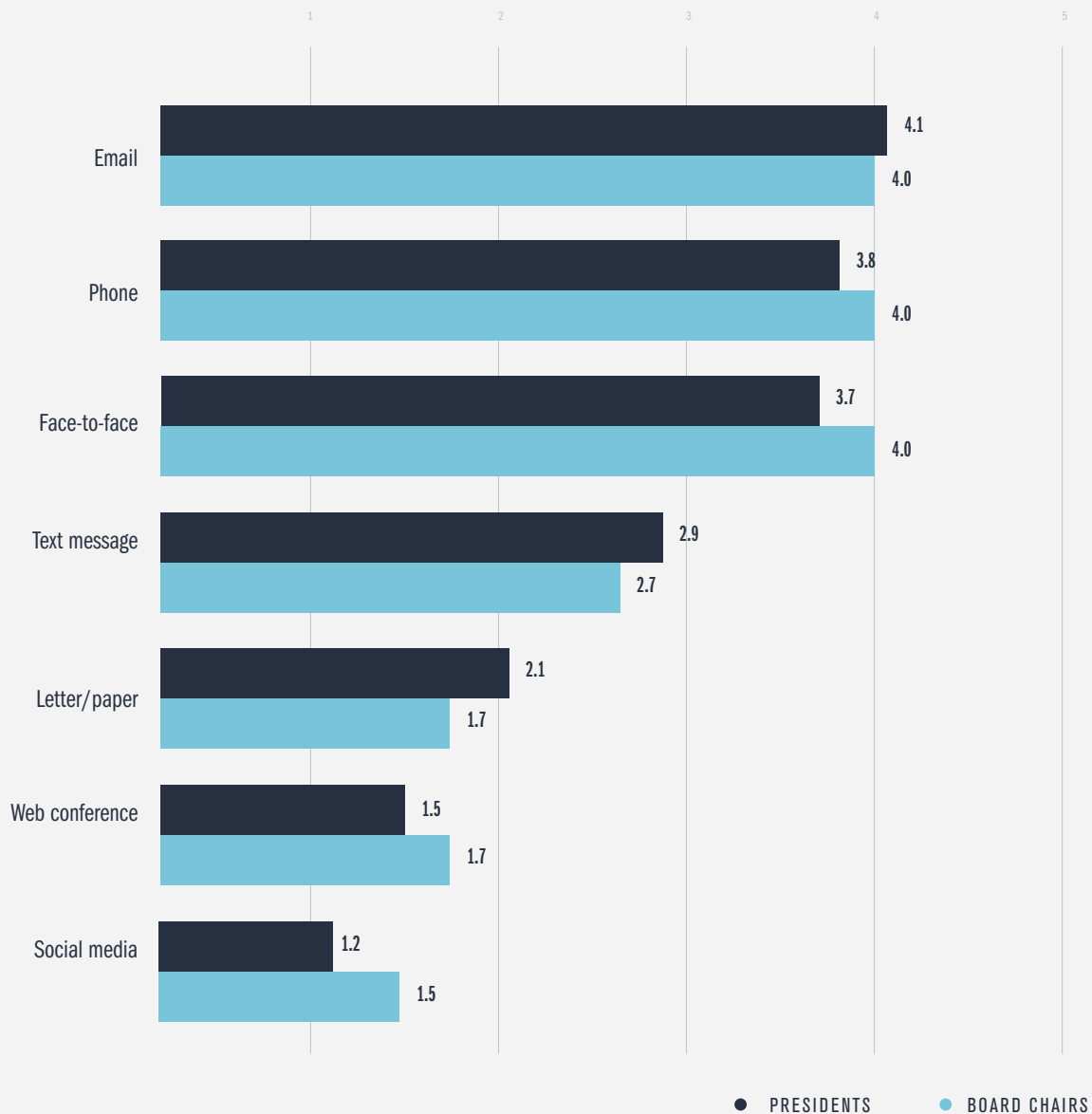
# Communication In and Outside of Board Meetings

“Communications are heavily tilted towards money matters like budget and finance or fundraising, but strategic and institutional planning is also important.”



Both sides agree that communication is key. Their favorite methods of communication seem to mirror their respective backgrounds. As Figure 6 shows, both groups prefer to use email as their main form of communication, although board members are just as happy to use the phone or to talk face-to-face. And they prefer different forms of more modern communication: presidents like text messaging, while board chairs have a stronger preference for web conferences than president do, which again reflects a tool used more widely in a business environment. (See **Figure 6**).

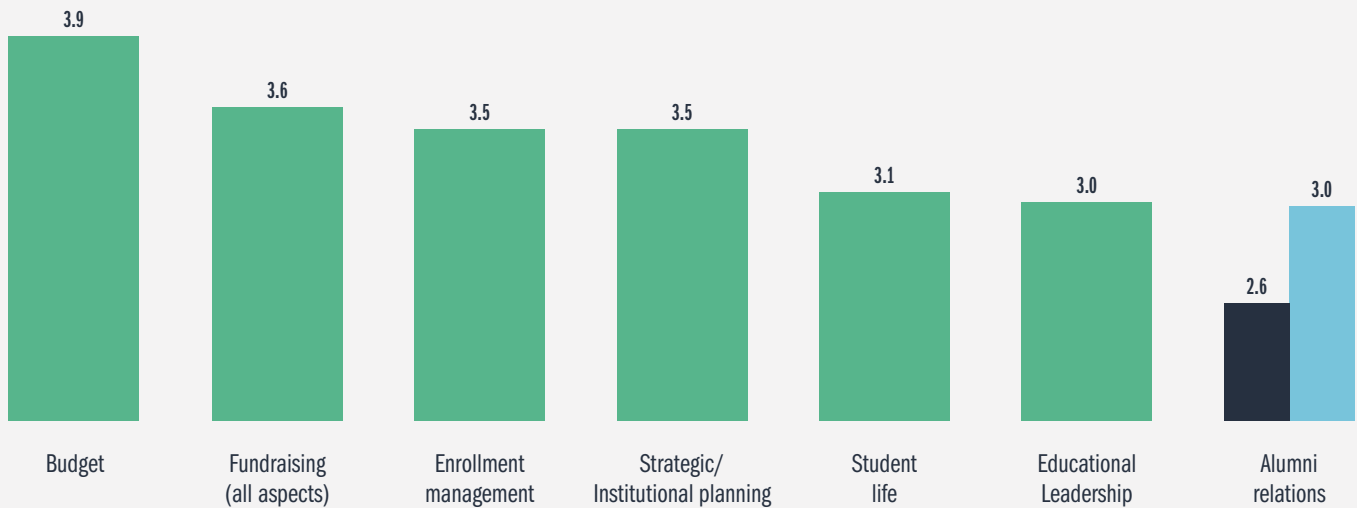
**FIGURE 6**  
**PREFERRED MODES OF COMMUNICATION FOR PRESIDENTS AND BOARD CHAIRS**



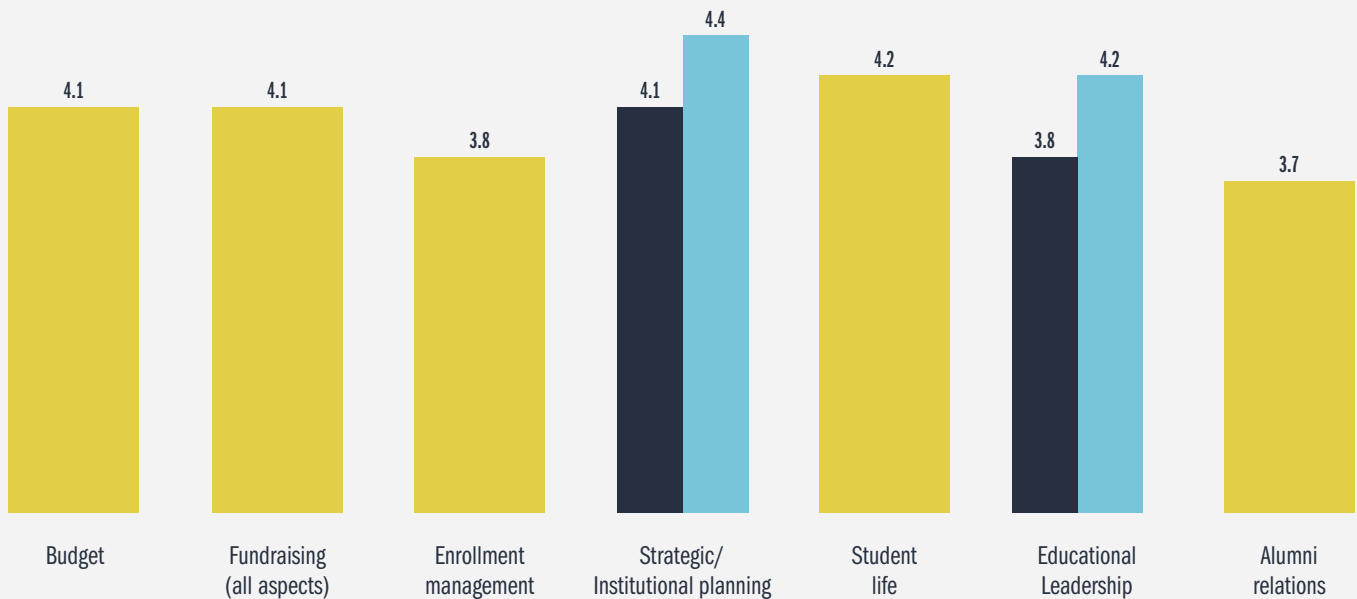


Communications are heavily tilted towards money matters like budget and finance or fundraising, but strategic and institutional planning is also important. (See **Figure 7**).

**FIGURE 7**  
**HOW PRESIDENTS AND BOARD CHAIRS RATE THE FREQUENCY AND QUALITY OF DISCUSSION**



1 = NEVER OR LESS THAN ONCE PER YEAR, 5 = WEEKLY

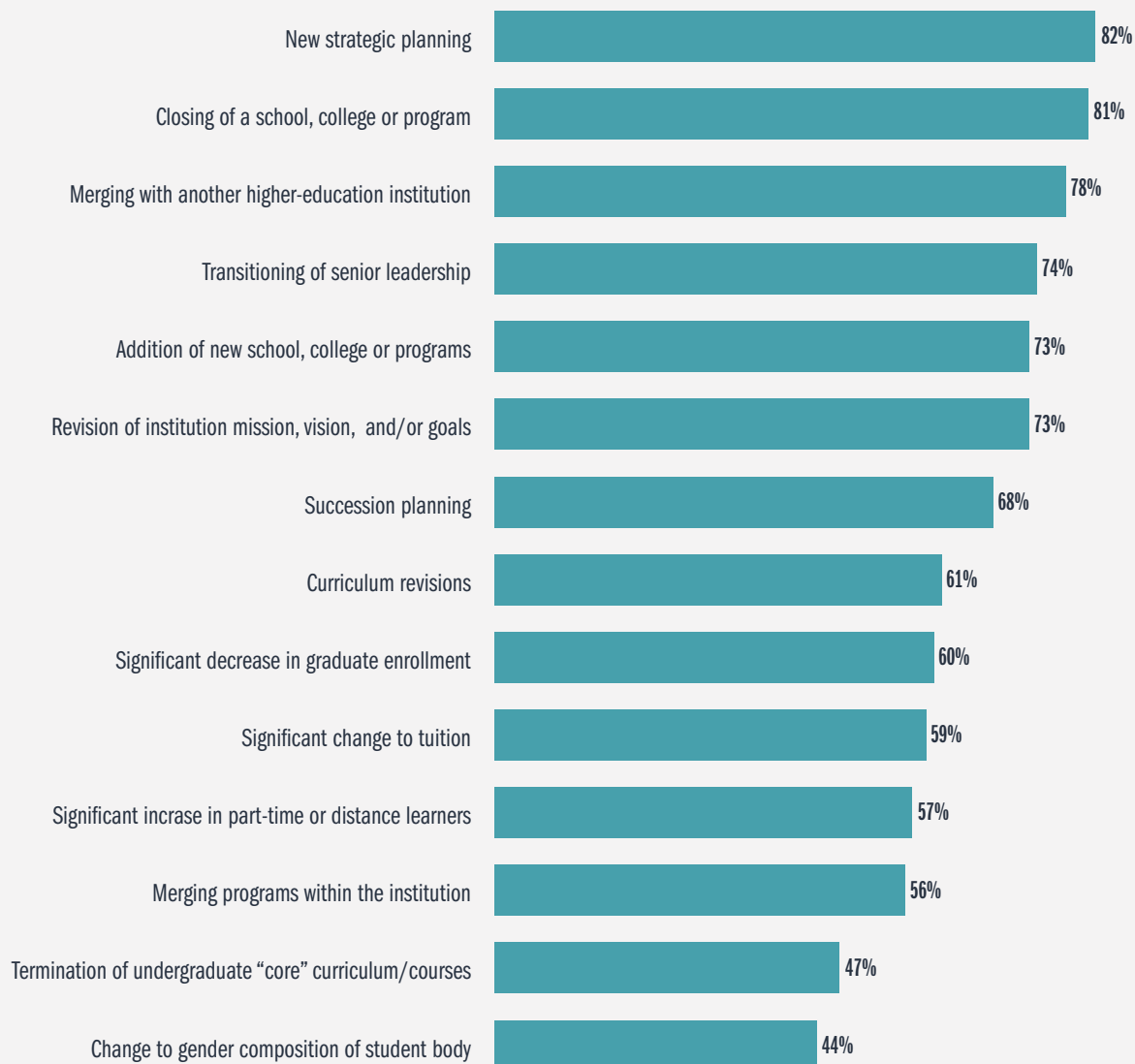


1 = POOR, 5 = EXCELLENT

● FREQUENCY ● QUALITY ● COLLEGE PRESIDENTS ● BOARD CHAIRS

Board chairs and presidents surveyed said that these discussions around strategic planning were very good or excellent (82 percent), while the often serious discussions that take place around the issue of closing a school, college or program were also of a high quality. As Figure 8 shows, however, talks around the increasingly important subject of part-time or online studies were not as productive, which could reflect the disagreement around the topic of workforce preparation versus general education. (See **Figure 8**).

**FIGURE 8**  
**DISCUSSIONS BOARD CHAIRS AND PRESIDENTS RANK AS VERY GOOD OR EXCELLENT**



# Relationships

“The words used most often by board chairs to describe their presidents were ‘open and trusting,’ while presidents most often described board chairs as ‘collaborative or supportive.’”



The words used most often by board chairs to describe their presidents were “open and trusting,” while presidents most often described board chairs as “collaborative or supportive.”

Judy Boreham, the board chairwoman at University of the Ozarks, said a good relationship with a president is key to the board doing a good job.

“Right now, in my relationship with our current president, I’d say yes, we get all the information we need, not more,” she adds. “I think that the information is very, very good and we each pretty much understand our responsibilities.”

When it comes to changes that would improve the relationship, presidents said more time together and openness would be important, while board chairs also cited time together as well as increased openness. (See **Figure 9**).

In other areas, presidents would like board chairs to learn about higher education so assumptions are not made on limited understanding, while board chairs are interesting in providing more community context and real world experiential knowledge for their institutions.

The survey did show one area where the two groups differed. Board chairs indicated they would like to have more accurate financial reporting, while presidents actually wanted to spend less time talking about financial issues.

**FIGURE 9**  
**THE ONE THING WOULD IMPROVE RELATIONSHIPS**

#### BOARD CHAIRS

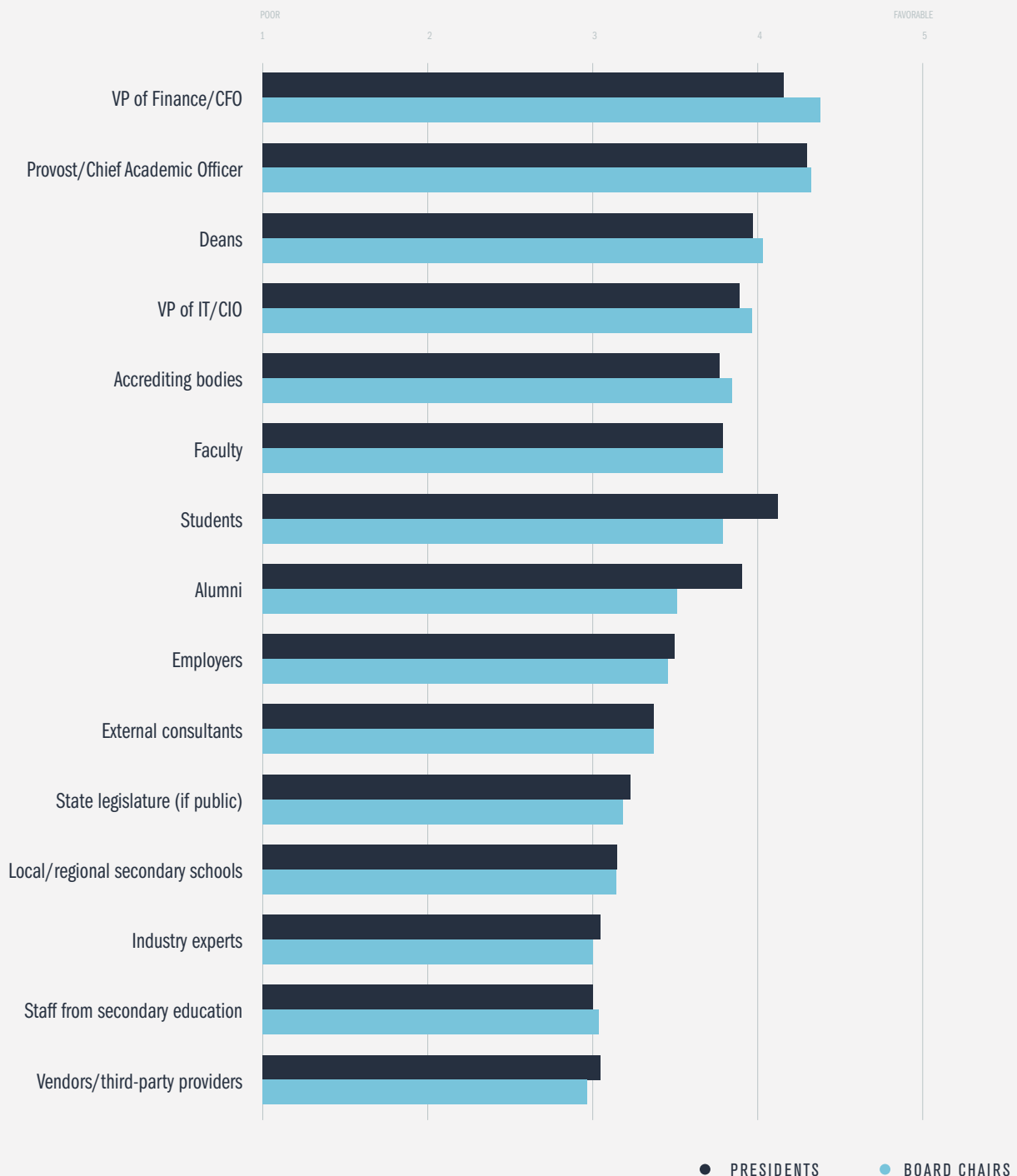
- More transparency
- More social time together
- More face-to-face meetings
- Living closer to one another/campus
- More accurate financial reporting
- Having more time to devote to the school
- Greater sense of urgency from the president around the trustees’ priorities
- Improving value the trustee has in providing community context and connection, real-world experiential knowledge and long-term institutional understanding
- Greater value from the president placed on the fundraising role

#### COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

- Time
- Openness
- More patience
- Meeting more often
- Less financial discussions
- Increased open communication
- Clearly express expectations and keep president informed of the board’s evaluation of president
- Increase effort to learn about higher education so assumptions are not made based on limited understanding
- Have a chief-of-staff to help manage board members
- Have chair observe best practices regarding trustee role in management

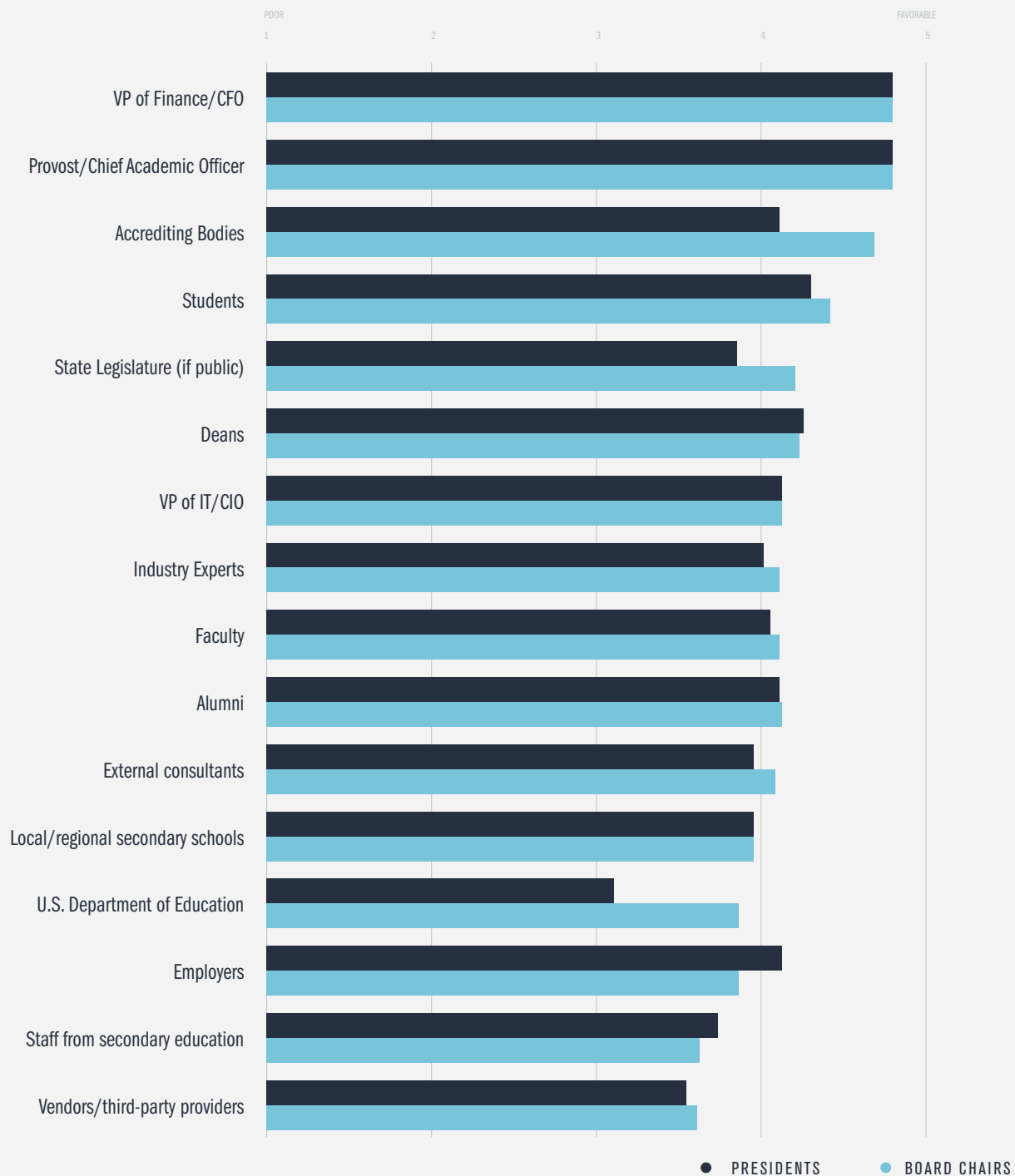
While college presidents and board chairs generally agreed about the strength of the relationship between their boards and the constituents of their colleges, presidents perceived a better relationship between students and the Board of Trustees than the board chairs did. (See **Figure 10**).

**FIGURE 10**  
**COLLEGE PRESIDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN BOARD CHAIRS AND CONSTITUENTS**



On the other hand, board chairs perceived a better relationship between accrediting bodies and presidents, and between presidents and the state legislature, than the college presidents did themselves. (See Figure 11).

**FIGURE 11**  
**BOARD CHAIRS' PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN COLLEGE PRESIDENTS AND CONSTITUENTS**



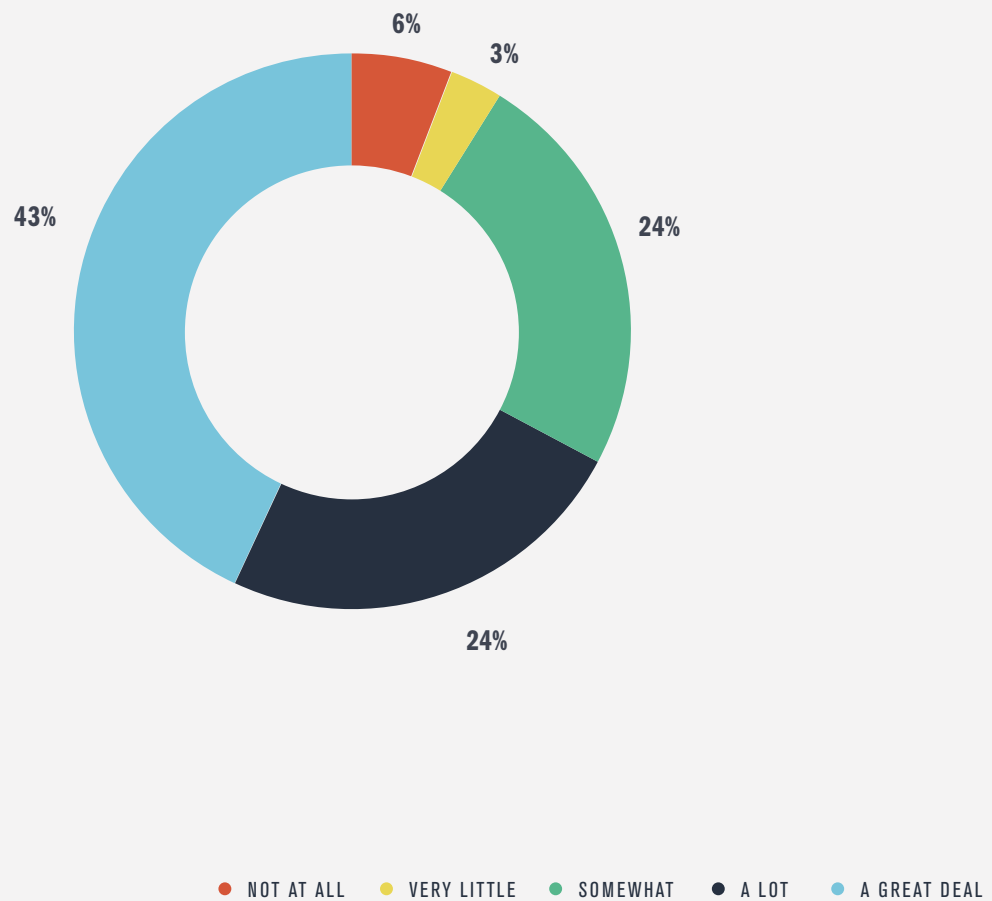
# Roles

“Thirty-three percent of college board presidents said it was important to ensure strong faculty and staff morale, while only 12 percent of board chairs agreed; whereas 33 percent of board chairs said that establishing productive relationships between senior administration and the board was a key to success; only 12 percent of presidents felt similarly.”



Board chairs and college presidents say they felt they had a significant influence on the selection/appointment of new members of the Board of Trustees. As Figure 12 shows, this was expressed strongly by both sides with a total of two-thirds saying that they have a great deal of influence in this area. (See **Figure 12**). This is perhaps a reflection of the earlier result that showed board chairs and presidents have a good relationship and strong communication with each other.

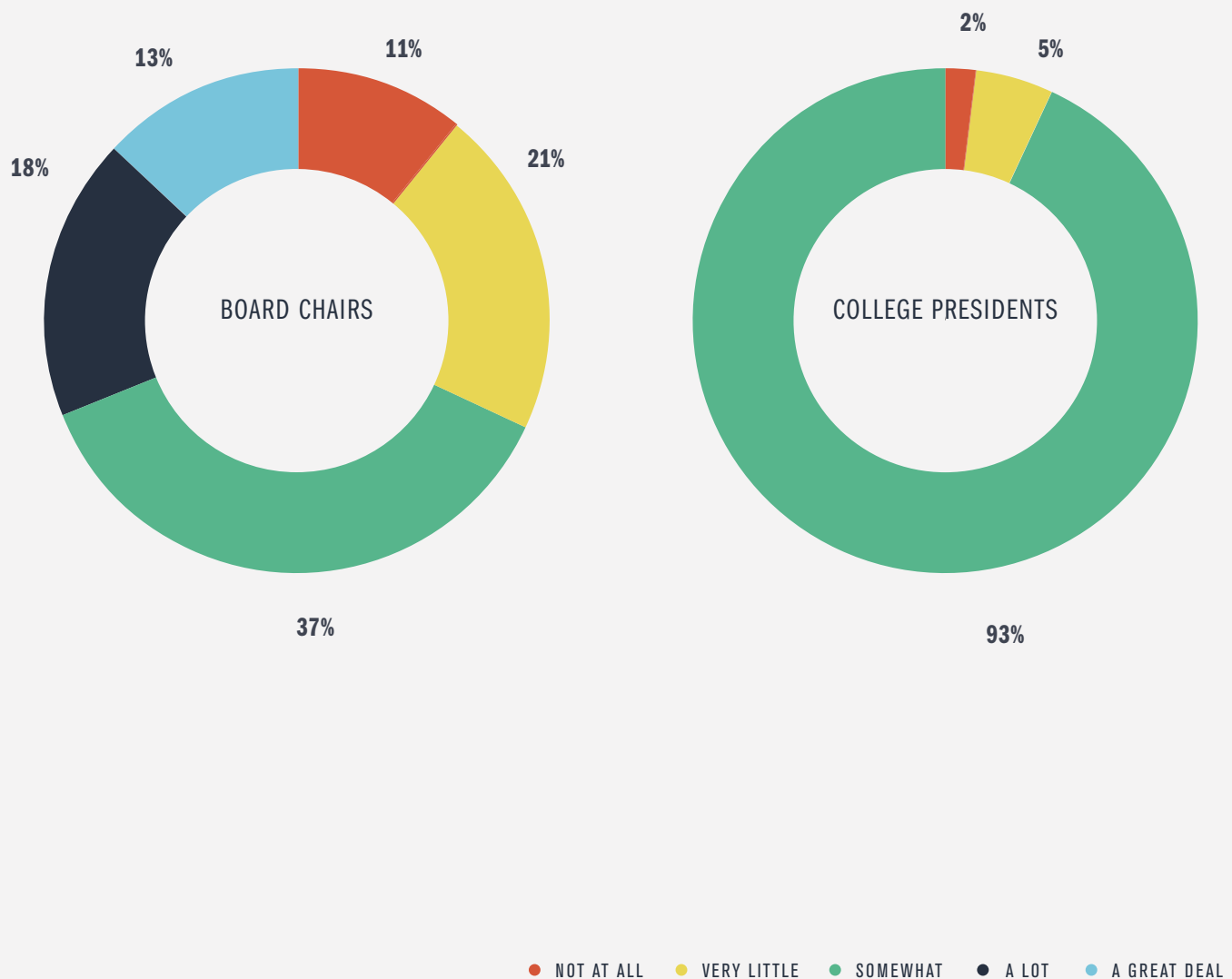
**FIGURE 12**  
**WHAT PRESIDENTS AND BOARD CHAIRS SAY ABOUT HOW MUCH INFLUENCE THEY HAVE IN SELECTING NEW MEMBERS FOR THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES**





However, when asked about their influence on the selection of new hires to senior administration, 93 percent of college presidents reported having a great deal of influence. On the other hand, board members seem more out of the loop, with 58 percent saying they were able to influence new hires to the senior administration very little or only somewhat. This may be a reflection that the two groups “understand our responsibilities” as Judy Boreham of University of the Ozarks said previously. (See Figure 13).

**FIGURE 13**  
**WHAT PRESIDENTS AND BOARD CHAIRS SAY ABOUT HOW MUCH INFLUENCE THEY HAVE IN SELECTING NEW HIRES FOR THE SENIOR ADMINISTRATION**



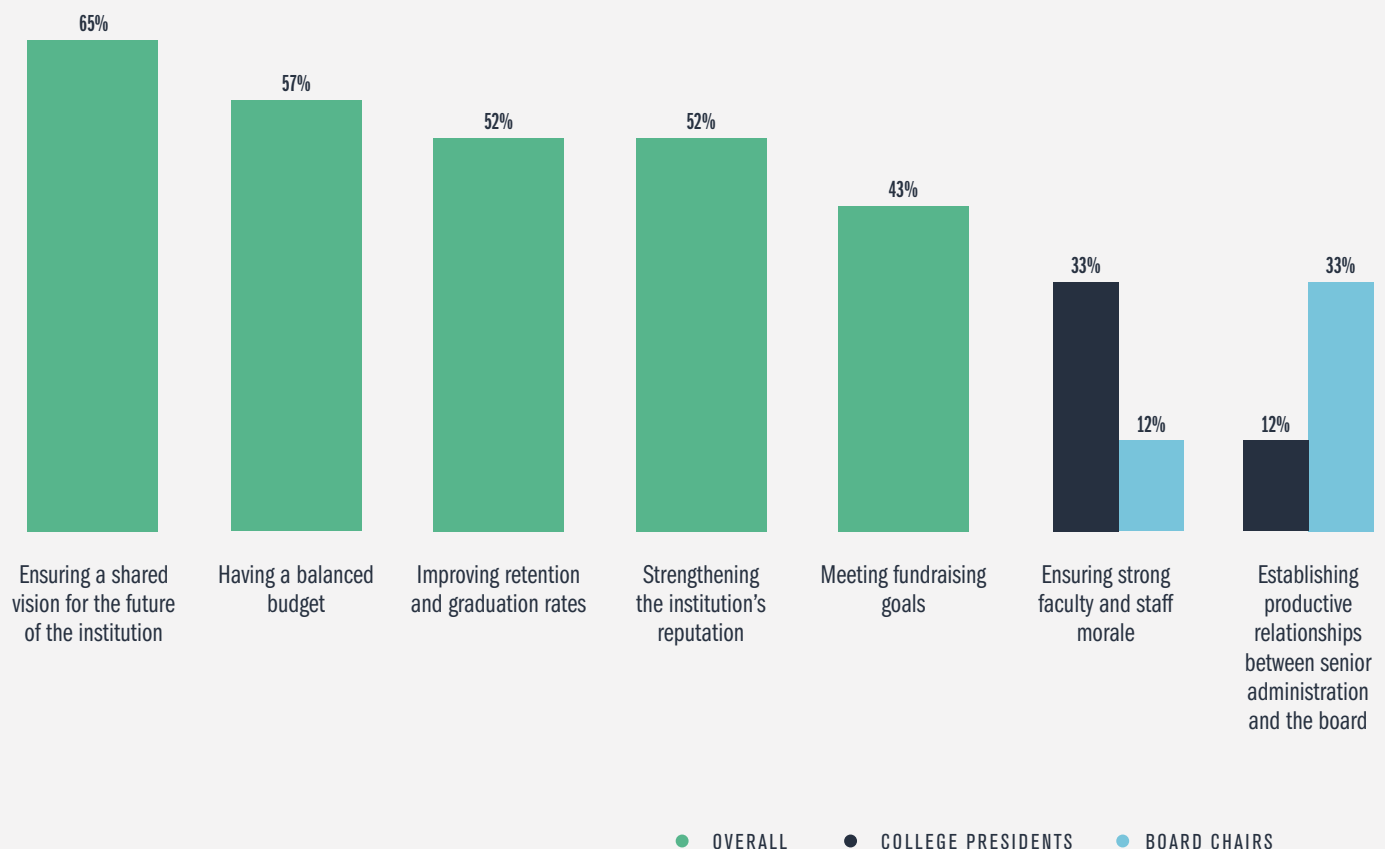
For both groups, ensuring a shared vision of the future of their institution is seen as the way to define success (65 percent). The next most important way to define success was producing a balanced budget at 57 percent.

Patricia Gentile, the president of Northshore Community College, said creating that shared vision is critically important.

“We were fortunate that, when our new board chair came on board, we were just starting down the road of our college’s strategic planning process,” she says. “And so we were really in a good place to build that vision together.”

There were two areas where defining success in their roles differed: 33 percent of college board presidents said it was important to ensure strong faculty and staff morale, while only 12 percent of board chairs agreed; on the other hand, 33 percent of board chairs said that establishing productive relationships between senior administration and the board was a key to success, while only 12 percent of college presidents say they felt this way. (See **Figure 14**).

**FIGURE 14**  
**HOW COLLEGE PRESIDENTS AND BOARD CHAIRS DEFINE SUCCESS**



# Planning for the Future

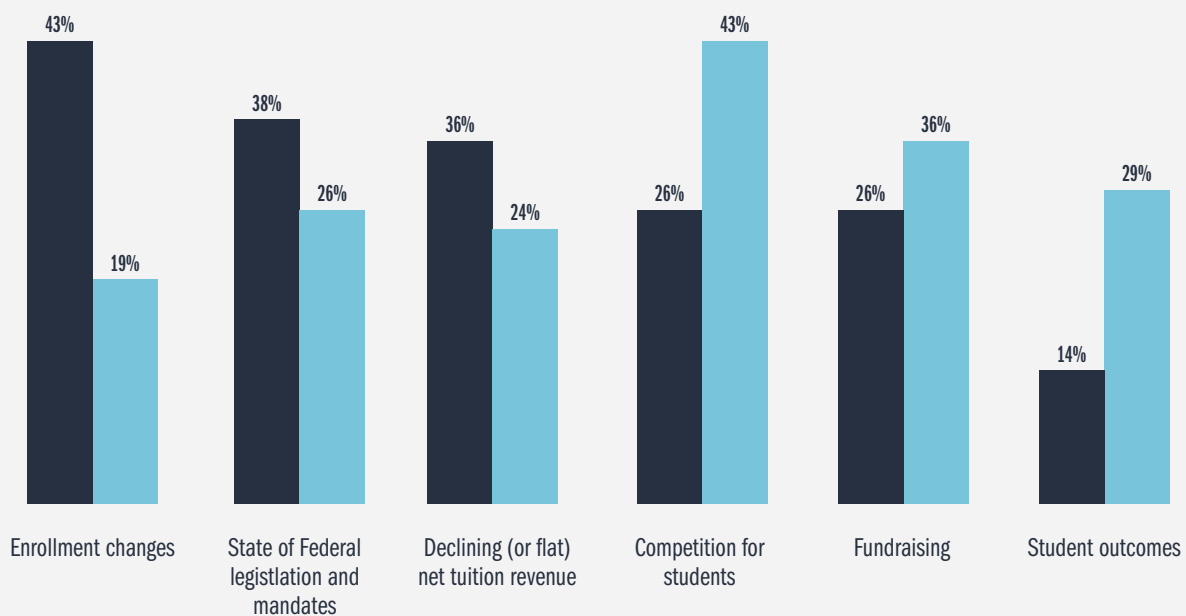
“Board chairs saw it as more important for colleges to develop technical skills in graduates than college presidents did.”



As institutions look to future challenges, presidents and boards have a somewhat different view. Presidents are much more concerned about declining enrollment (43 percent to 19 percent) while board chairs see competition for students as their top concern (43 percent to 26 percent). (See **Figure 15**).

In Dunsworth's case, he was hired at University of the Ozarks specifically to deal with declining enrollment, based on his 12 years as vice president of enrollment at Milliken College in Decatur, Ill.

**FIGURE 15**  
**PRESIDENTS AND BOARD CHAIRS' TOP WORRIES**

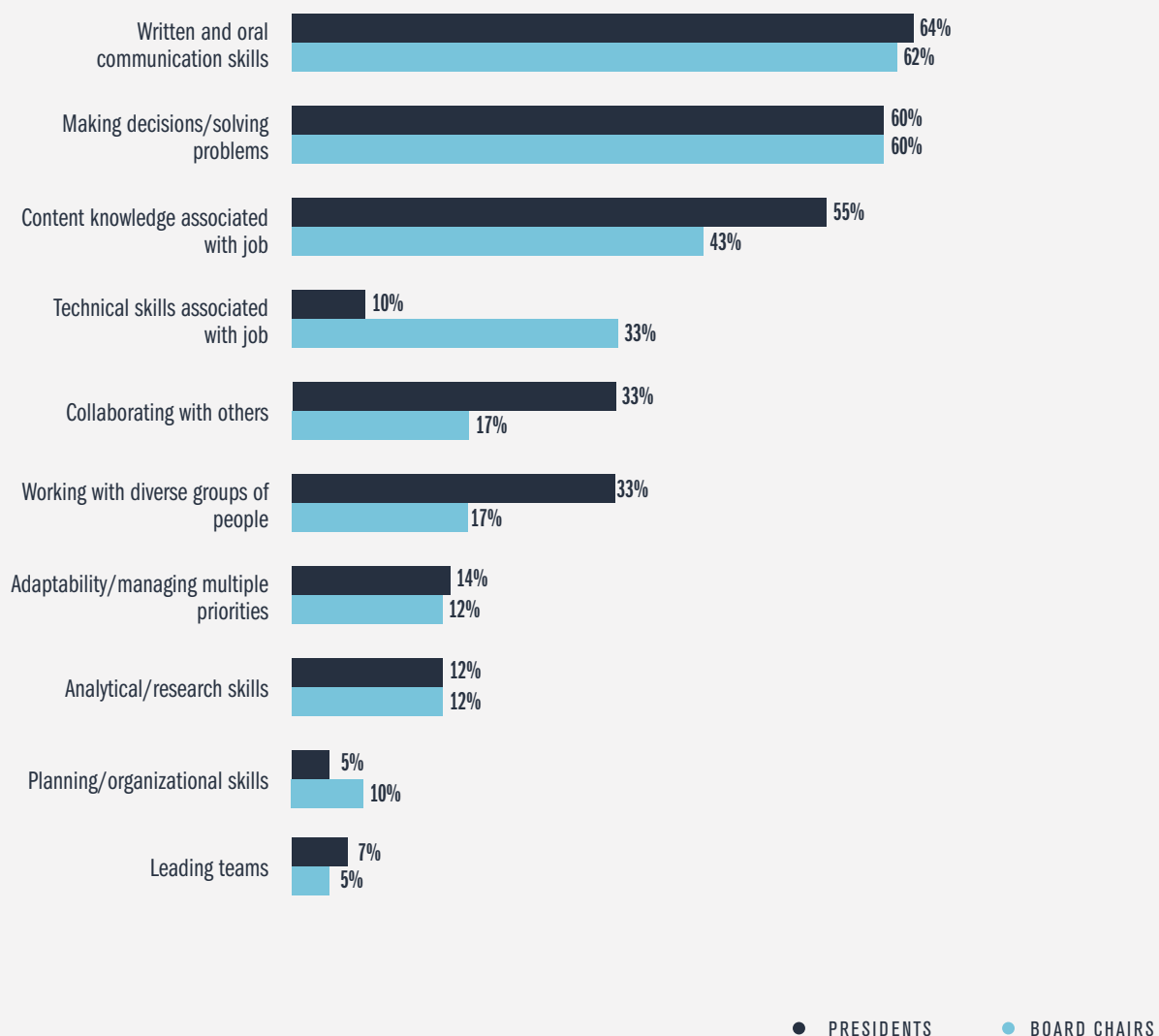


● COLLEGE PRESIDENTS ● BOARD CHAIRS

“We have been able to increase enrollment, and much of that is also attributed to our board and board leadership,” he says.

In general, presidents and board chairs agree on the top skills needed for today’s economy: written and oral communication, problem-solving skills and content knowledge associated with jobs. One area where they do disagree is on the importance of developing technical skills in graduates. Board chairs saw this as a much more important issue. (See **Figure 16**).

**FIGURE 16**  
**WHAT PRESIDENTS AND BOARD CHAIRS SAY ARE THE TOP SKILL AREAS THAT INSTITUTIONS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR DEVELOPING IN THEIR GRADUATES**



Vurdien, who is wary of “boutique” programs, sums up the position taken by a majority of college presidents.

“The primary focus of the institution is to look at the greater good,” he says. “We should not be creating an expert in a very specific field, and then once that field disappears, they won’t be able to do anything else.”

J.D. LaRock, who is both the board chair of the Northshore Community College and an administration official at Northeastern University in Boston, advocates taking a “both/and” approach rather than an “either/or.”

“I always say that it’s important that community colleges in particular look at that as a both/and,” he says. “When we talk to employers, we know that many of the high-level cognitive skills that they say today’s employees need to have come through a more general liberal education.”

# Succession

“Sixty-eight percent of presidents and board chairs characterize their discussions around succession planning as very good.”



Another important area of discussion was succession planning, with 68 percent of presidents and board chairs saying they had very good discussions around this topic.

Richard Dunsworth says the most important quality when looking for a new board chair is the ability to continually learn.

“A willingness to read and engage information,” said he says. “A willingness to stand strong on board-related issues. A board, at least here, does not manage the institution. But they think about and wonder out loud what our future is.”

For Stock, the former board chair, this is a timely issue as it is likely that his president will be stepping down sometime in the next two years. For him, the most important attribute for a new president is an understanding of the current state of higher education and where it’s headed.

“We have a changing work environment, or employment environment, so any president today has to be cognizant of the environment they’re in now, and I think any candidate that we consider going forward as the next president is going to have to have those attributes.”



# Conclusion

While presidents and board chairs say that they have strong working relationships built on good communication, enjoy working with each other and share concerns over the financial stability of the current education system and where it will be in the future, they have somewhat different visions of the most important skills that a college education should provide.

Guiding their colleges and universities successfully into the next decade will not only require a shared vision of their institutions' future, but also coming to agreement on what that future looks like. Is it one that looks to provide students with a general education that helps them learn important skills like how to write and communicate their ideas effectively and solve problems, or one that focuses more on skills needed for specific industries, skills that are more likely to guarantee employment once a student graduates? Could it be that, as J.D. LaRock put it, you “have to hold two ideas in your head at the same time?”

The key, the survey suggests, is keeping the channels of communication open, and adaptability when dealing with the numerous current and future challenges faced by higher education. As long as president and board chairs keep talking to each other and sharing important information that each side needs to make important decisions, then their institutions will continue to prosper despite a difficult environment.

# Methodology

The report is based on a survey conducted by The Chronicle of Higher Education and Maguire Associates in June 2016 of college presidents and board chairs. It also draws from expert opinions, Chronicle reporting, and previous studies to discuss and further amplify the opinions and survey results presented here.

This report includes results from 42 matched pairs of college presidents and board chairs, as well as from 348 presidents who completed the survey. Results are combined when no statistically significant difference was found within the pairs. Significant differences are indicated, and reported separately. The matched pairs are most representative of smaller, private, four-year institutions, although they were geographically spread across the country. Analyses of responses from presidents who were matched did not differ, meaningfully, from those who did not provide valid contact information for the chair or for which the chair did not respond.



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