

University of Tennessee System 2026 Pulse Survey Findings

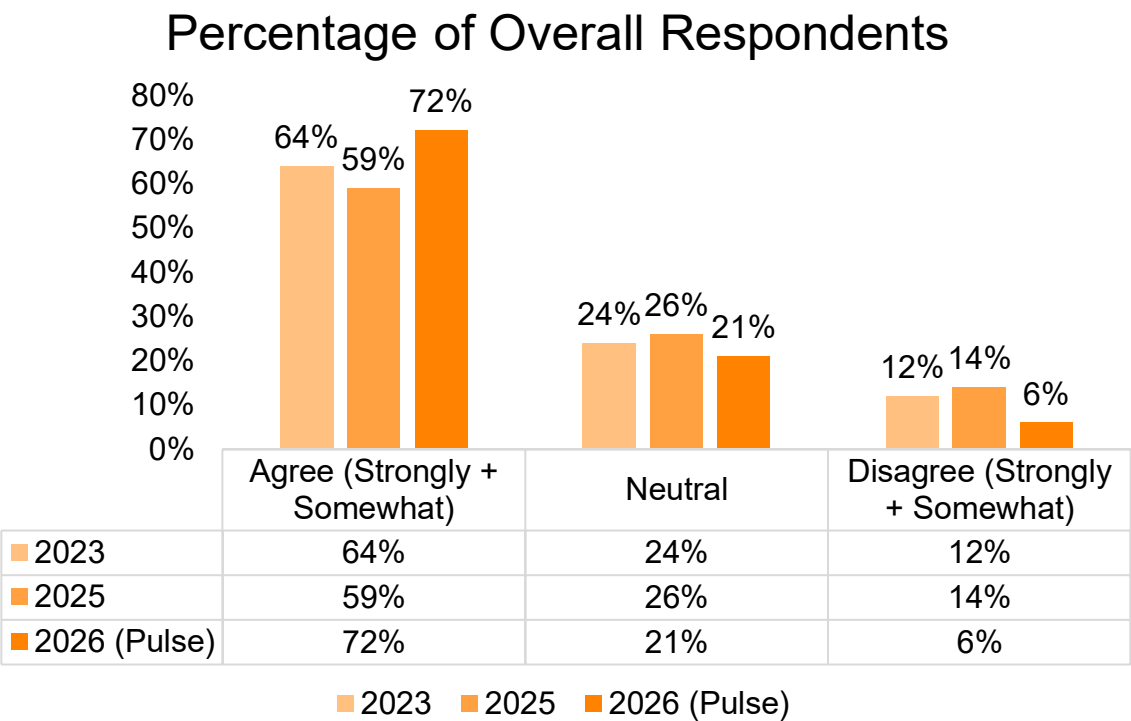
About:

The University of Tennessee System Division of Communication and Marketing regularly conducts research to learn about Tennessee residents’ attitudes towards the statewide UT System, and findings are used to inform the work of the division. The 2026 pulse survey was conducted in partnership with MP+F and Brand Beacon, with Opinion Route providing the survey sample. Below is a summary of top-line findings from the survey, which was in market July 15 through Aug. 4, 2026. Respondents totaled 1,237. Margin of Error: +/- 3% (Note: Because this survey used a panel sample, respondents opted in to participate. As a result, the margin of error should be viewed as directional rather than applied in the same way as it would be for a fully random sample.)

Summary:

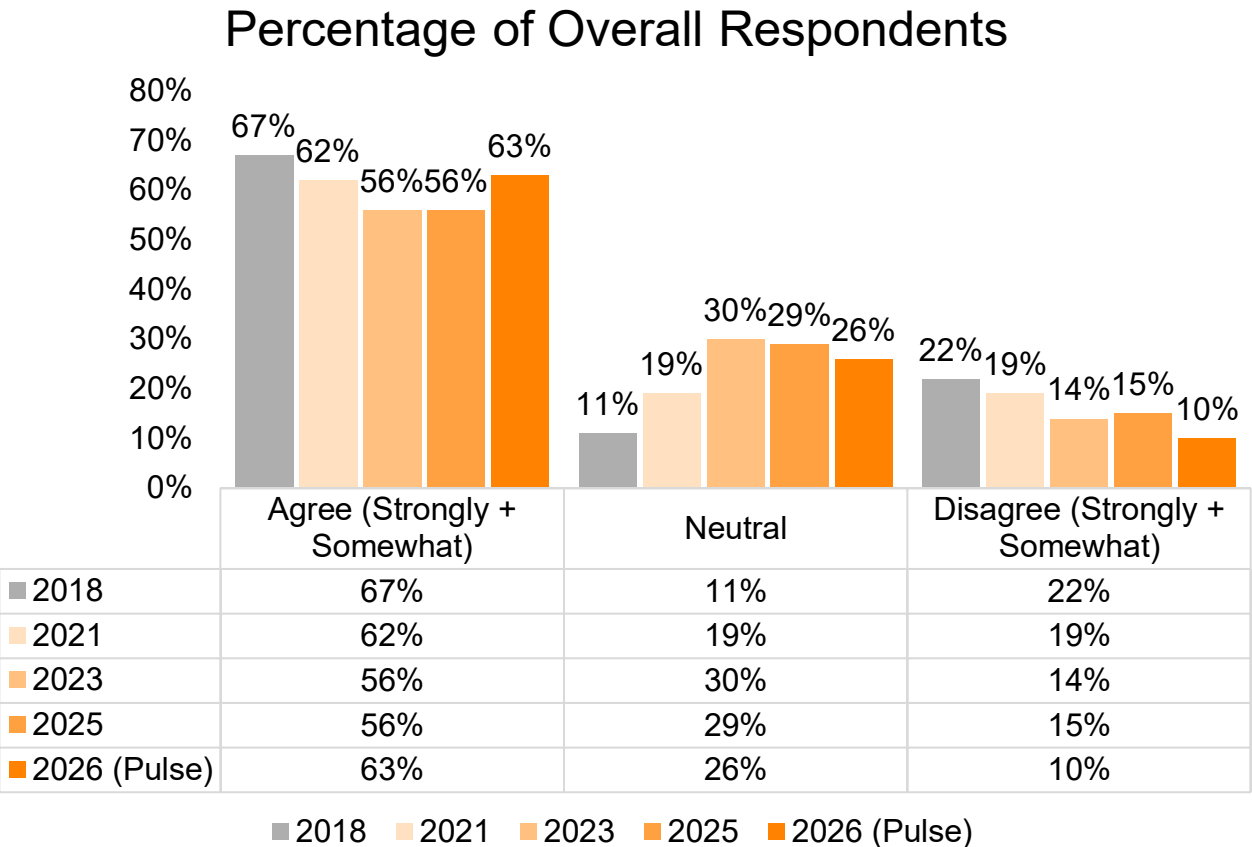
Across core measures, perceptions of the UT System **improved meaningfully** from 2025, with gains driven by higher agreement and lower neutrality/negative sentiment.

Agree/Disagree: A four-year degree from a Tennessee public college or university is worth the investment in terms of the cost.



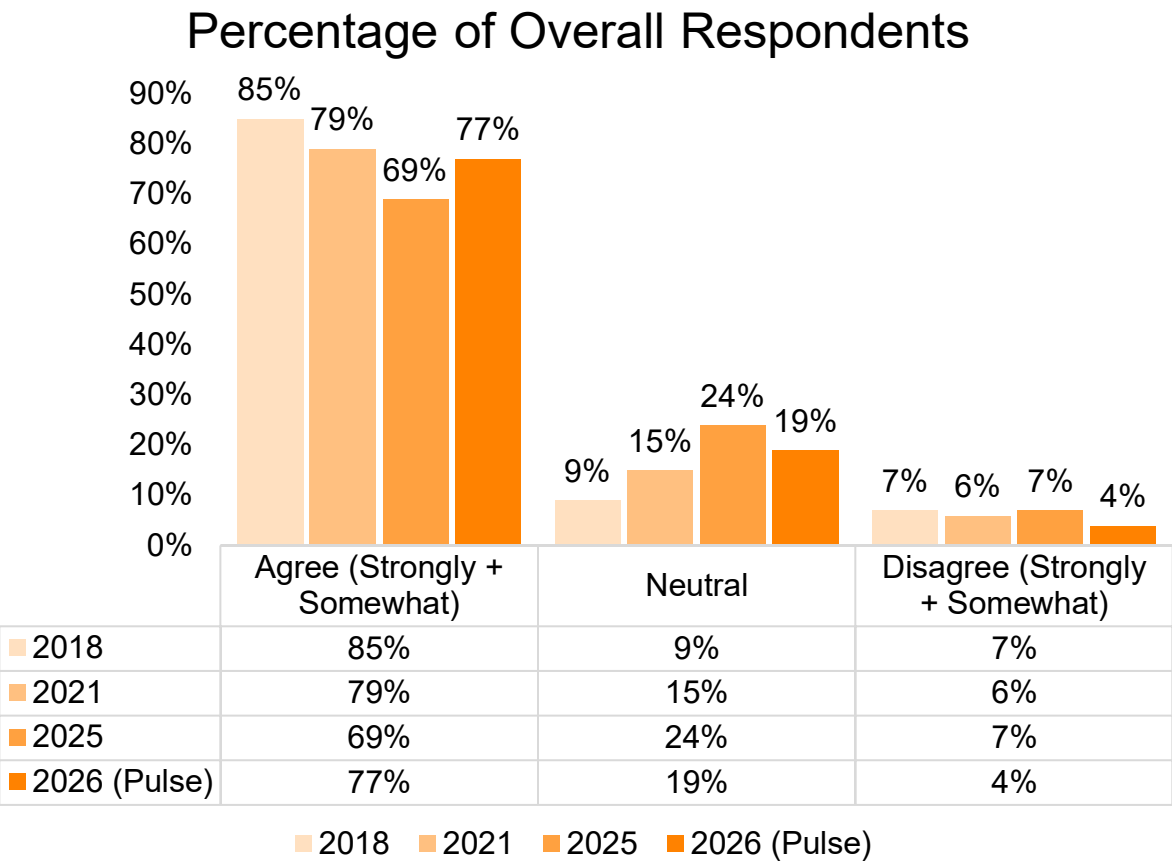
Takeaways: We see a strong jump year over year by 13 percentage points for this question and with a 5-point drop in neutrals and an 8-point drop in those who disagree, this data would seem to suggest that we are converting not only neutrals but also those who are more negative. This is the highest we’ve seen agreement over the last three surveys, which also signals the awareness and overall media/campaign strategy is working.

Agree/Disagree: The UT System includes campuses that are affordable for people who want a four-year degree.



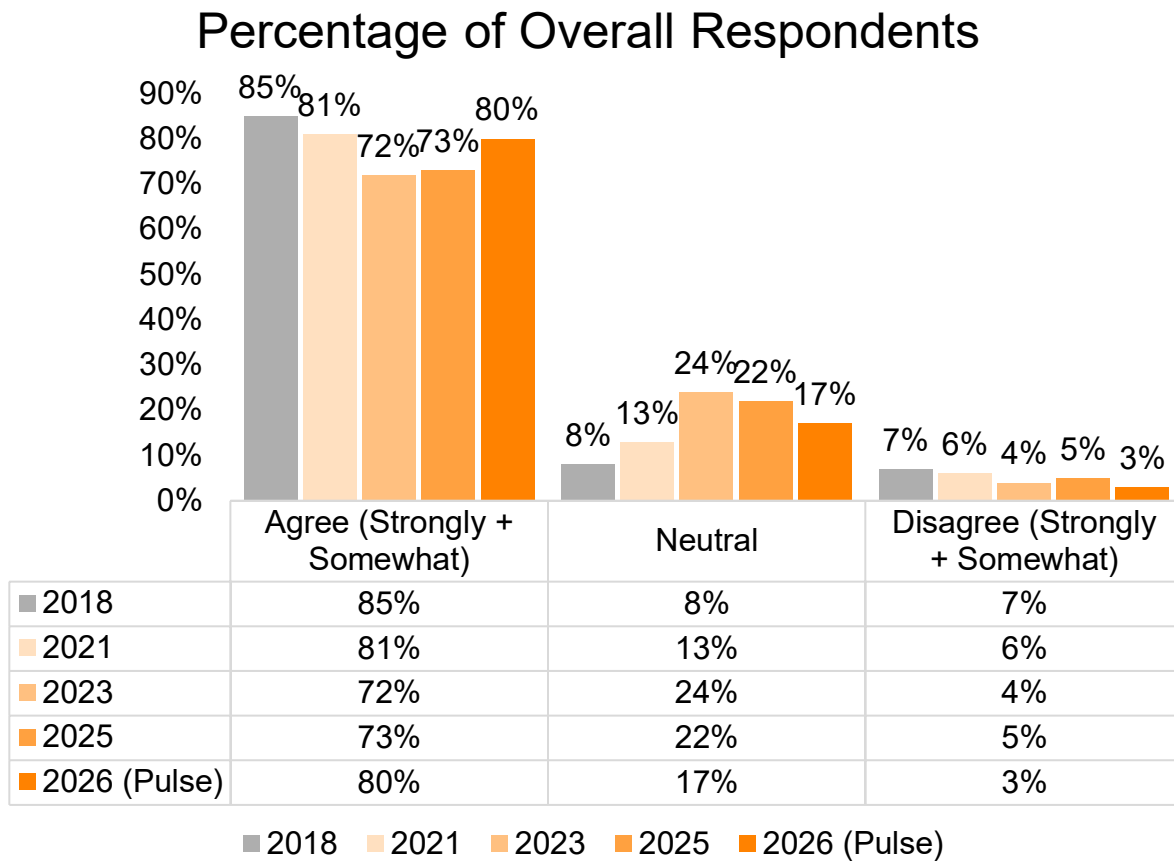
Takeaways: Again, we see substantial growth in positive sentiment related to perceptions around affordability. This time, we were up 7 points compared to last year, and we’re now closer to what perceptions looked like five years ago. Neutrals declined by 3 points, suggesting movement has been accomplished with that group, and those who disagree are down by 5 points from the last survey.

Agree/Disagree: The UT System prepares its graduates to succeed in the workplace.



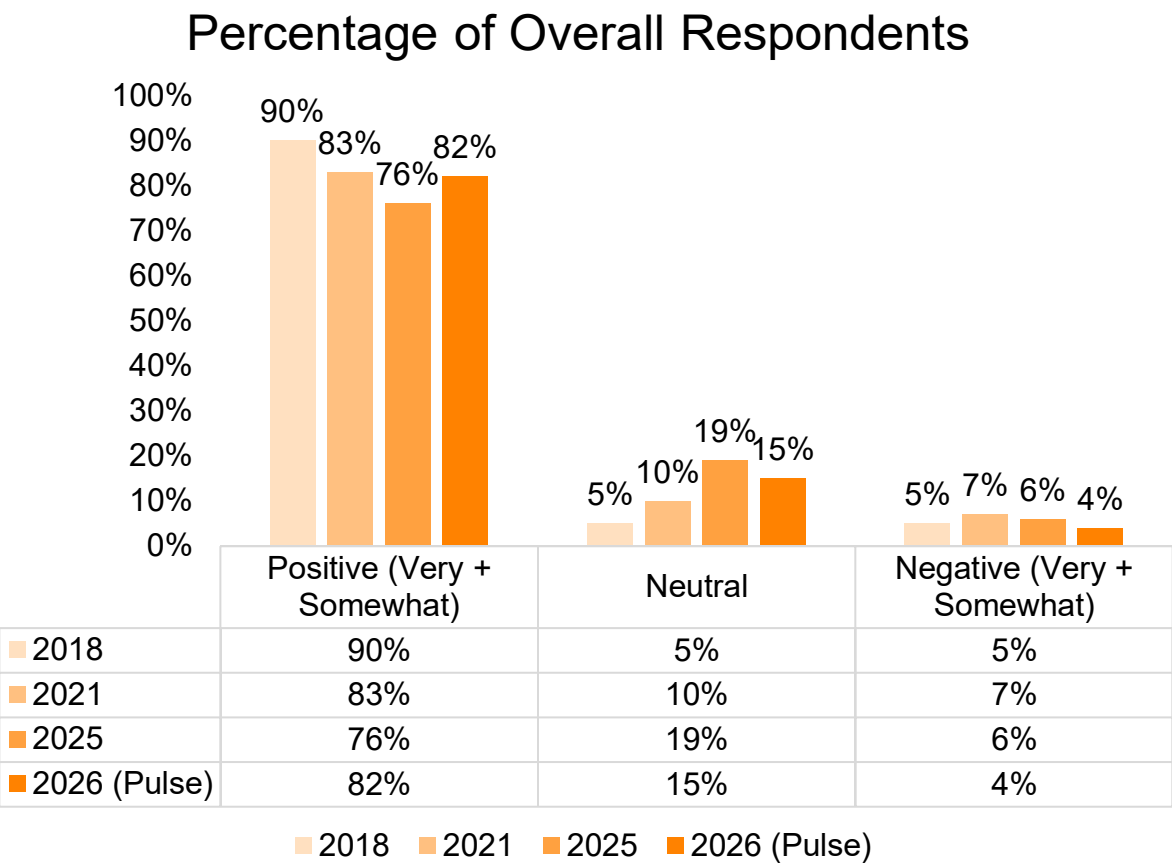
Takeaways: Workplace preparedness perceptions followed the same trend with an increase of 8 percentage points from 2025 among those who agree that the UT System prepares graduates to succeed in the workplace. This percentage is now similar to what was seen in 2021. Neutrals decreased by 5 points, suggesting movements are happening there, and those who disagreed dropped by 3 points.

Agree/Disagree: The UT Campuses offer high-quality education for their students.



Takeaways: Perceptions around quality of education followed suit with the rest of the data and rose by 7 percentage points compared to 2025 results. Yet again, we're seeing a return to what we saw five years ago in the 2021 survey results. Neutrals declined by 4 points, and those who disagree dropped by 2 points.

Overall, what is your opinion of the University of Tennessee as a statewide system of higher education?



Takeaways: Overall positive sentiment rose by 6 points from the previous survey in 2025. This also seems to look similar to sentiment found in the 2021 survey from five years ago. Neutrals declined by 4 points, and those with negative opinions fell by 2 points.

Messaging–Perception Impacts

How much do the following messages impact your perception of the University of Tennessee System?

Message	Top 2	Significantly Increases	Slightly Increases	No Change	Decreases	No Answer
“86% employed or in grad school within six months of graduation.”	70%	33%	37%	26%	3%	<1%
“\$1.5 million more in lifetime earnings for grads.”	64%	28%	36%	33%	3%	<1%
“More than 60% of Tennessee students qualify for last-dollar financial assistance through the UT Promise scholarship program.”	70%	32%	38%	27%	3%	-

Note: “Top 2” is the combination of “Significantly Increases” and “Slightly Increases.”

Takeaways: The employment and UT Promise messages seem to be tied regarding respondents stating those statements would increase their perceptions. However, it is worth noting that the employment messaging, while marginally higher (1 percentage point), did see a larger percentage stating it would significantly increase their perceptions. Earnings had the largest percentage stating no change. It should be noted, however, that nearly two-thirds of respondents did state it would increase their perception of the University of Tennessee System.

Messaging–Opinion Influence

Please rank the statements by how much they influence your opinion of the UT System's affordability and value for the investment. A rank of 1 means most compelling, and a rank of 4 means least compelling. You may use each ranking only once.

1-Most Compelling	2	3	4-Least Compelling
UT Promise (32%)	Employment/Grad School (29%)	Employment/Grad School (27%)	Earnings (41%)
Employment/Grad School (26%)	Debt Free (27%)	Debt Free (27%)	Debt Free (21%)
Debt Free (25%)	UT Promise (25%)	Earnings (23%)	UT Promise (21%)
Earnings (17%)	Earnings (19%)	UT Promise (23%)	Employment/Grad School (18%)

Messaging Key

Debt Free: *A degree is more affordable than many Tennesseans realize. More than half of University of Tennessee System students graduate completely debt free.*

Employment/Grad School: *86% of University of Tennessee System graduates are employed or in graduate school within six months of graduation.*

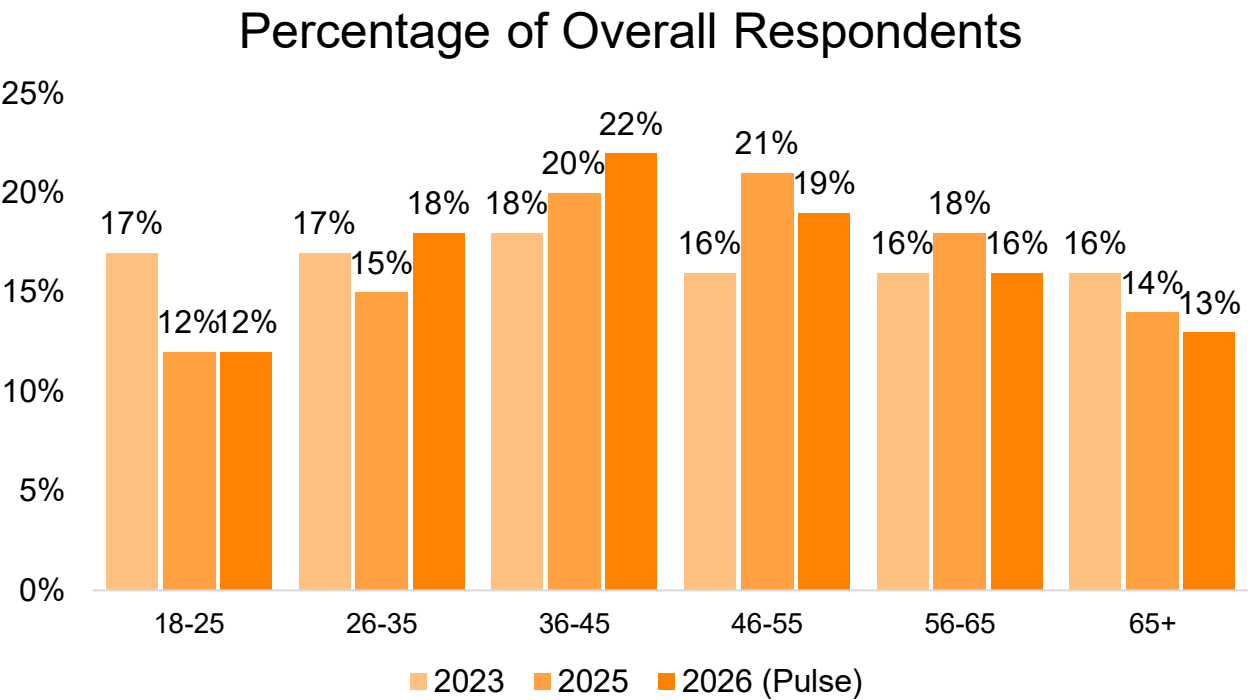
Earnings: *On average, U.S. bachelor's degree holders make \$1.5 million more in lifetime earnings than high school graduates.*

UT Promise: *The UT Promise scholarship is available to eligible students from families earning \$75,000 or less and helps cover remaining tuition and mandatory fees after other aid is applied. More than 60% of Tennesseans meet the household income requirement.*

Takeaways: The largest percentage of respondents found the UT Promise messaging the most compelling, with nearly a third choosing it, while the lifetime earnings messaging was the least compelling, with 41% of respondents stating that. The employment/graduate school message seems to edge out the debt free messaging, putting debt free in third place.

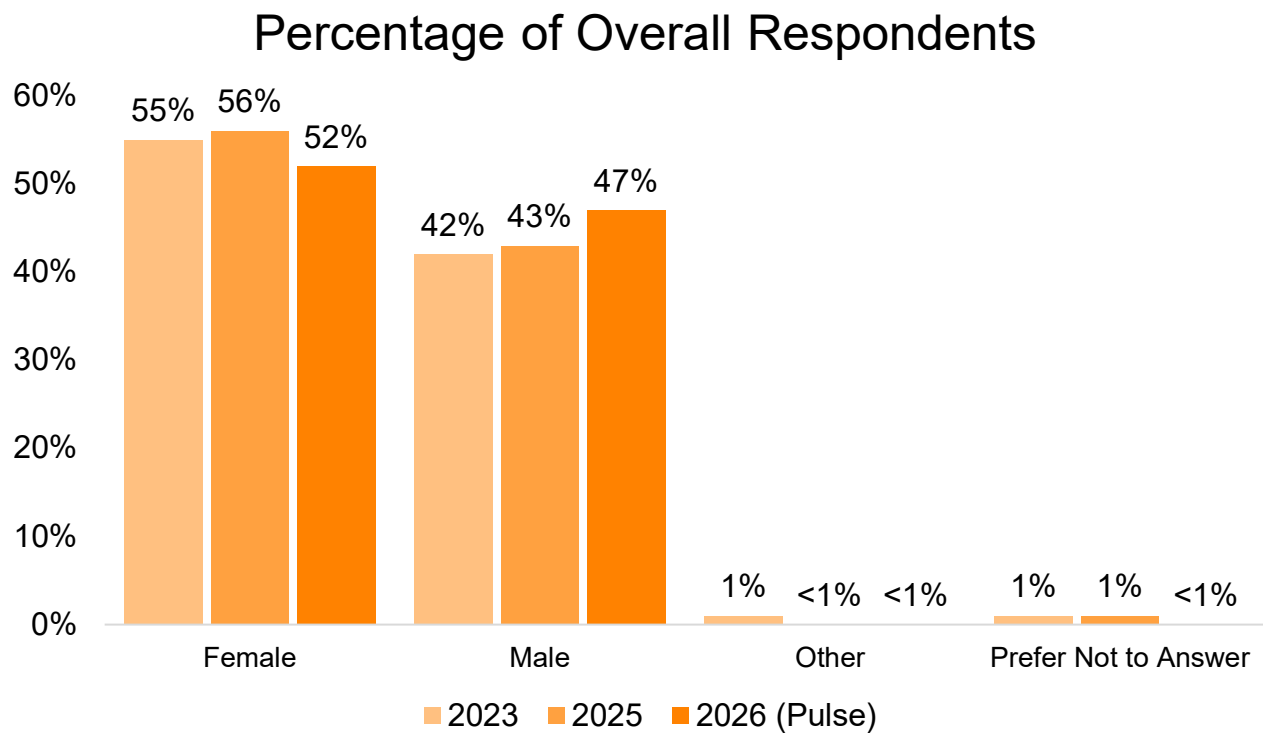
Did the demographics shift in any meaningful way?

Age



Takeaways: The largest audience shift from 2025 to 2026 was 3 percentage points among 26- to 35-year-olds, which is not large enough to suggest a meaningful change in the respondent profile on its own.

Gender

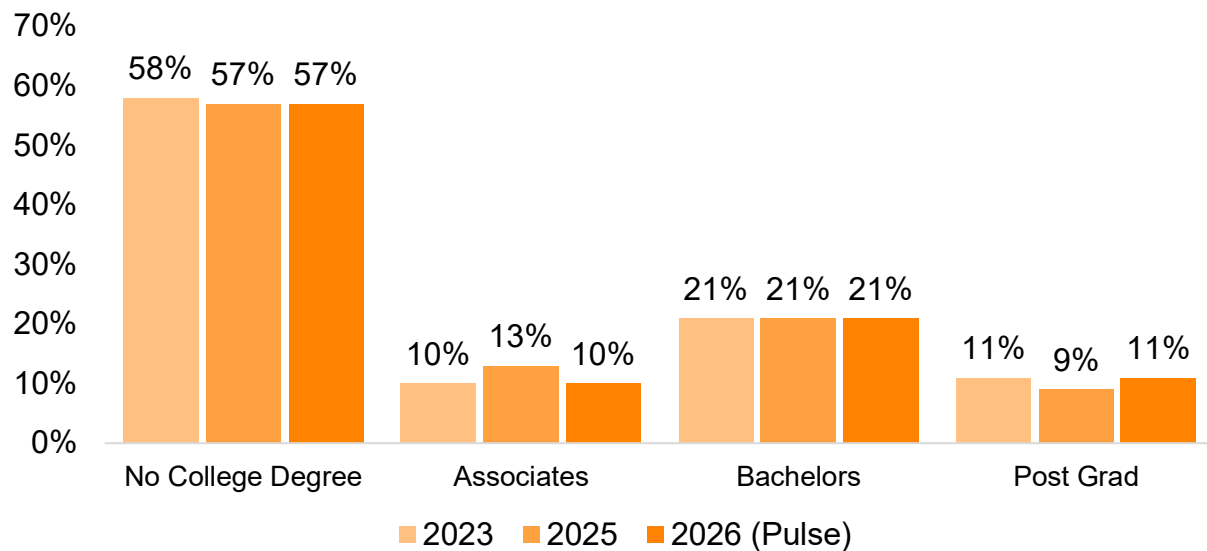


Takeaways: Male representation within the survey went up by 4 percentage points from 2025. This is notable, but not drastic. We wouldn't expect this to be the cause of any significant shifts in perception/sentiment.

Education Level

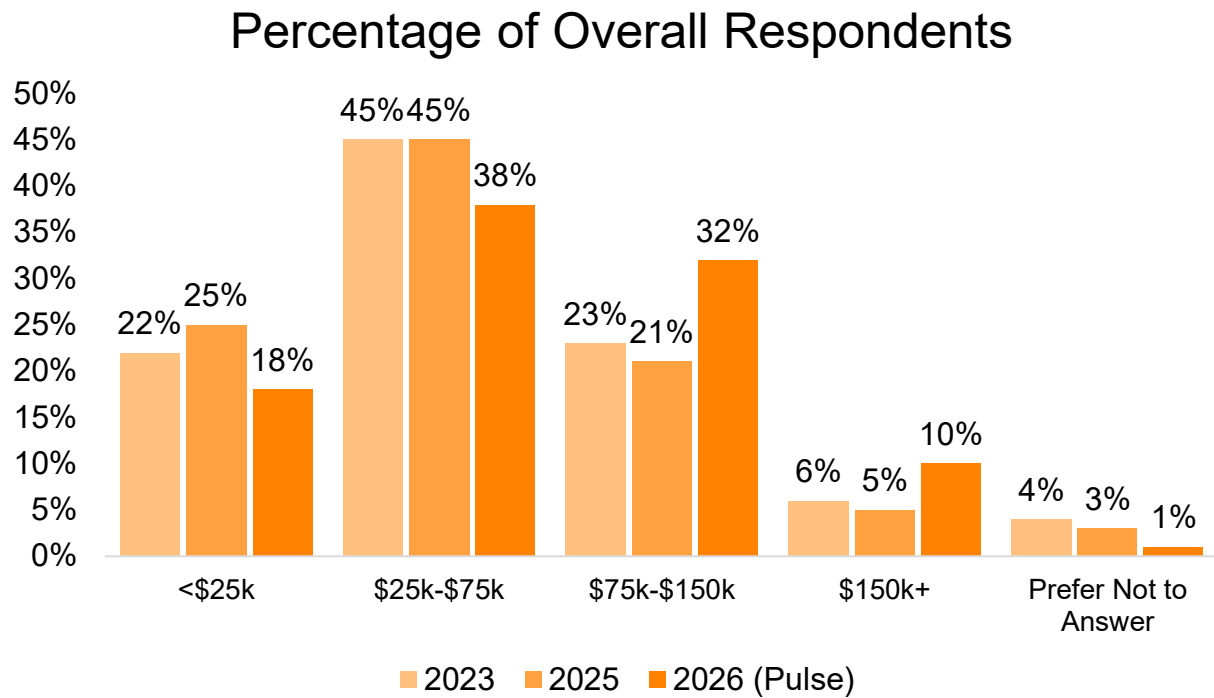
Note: For this group, we had different options in 2023, 2025 and 2026. The 2026 Pulse Survey was closer to the 2023 survey regarding those options. For the purposes of this chart, those labeled “No College Degree” include high school grads, certifications/trade, some high school and some college.

Percentage of Overall Respondents



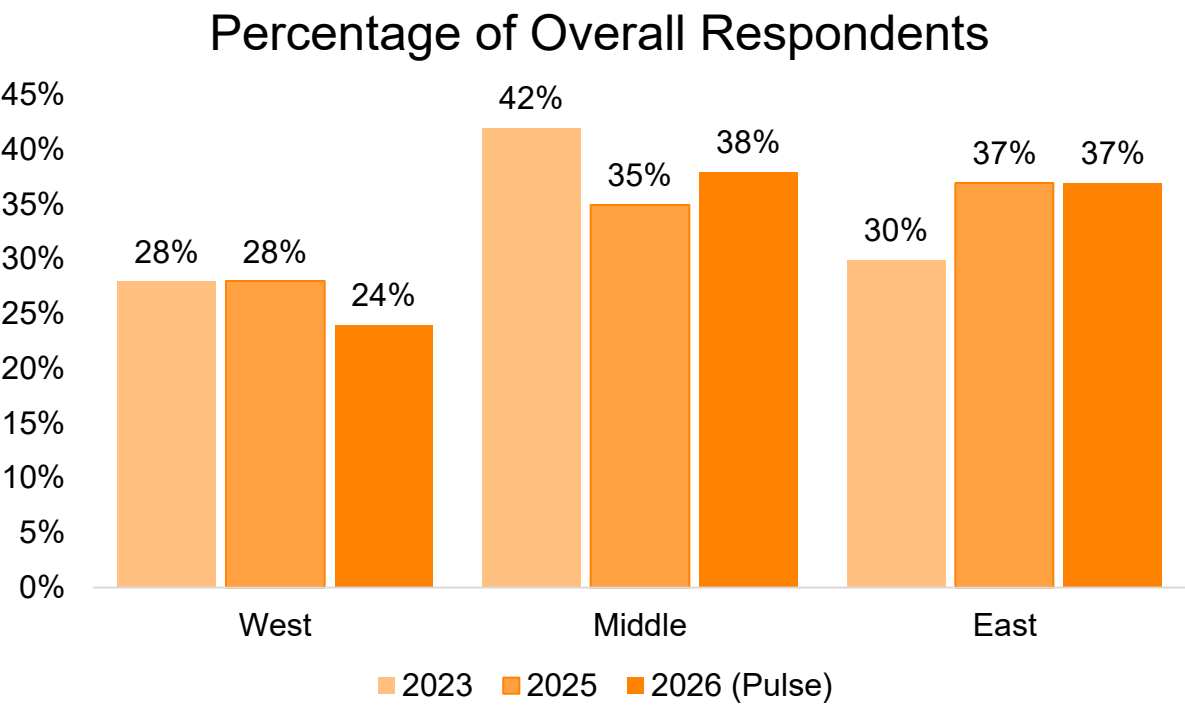
Takeaways: While the 2023 and 2026 surveys had additional options that included “less than high school” and “some college, no degree,” the overall distribution of our respondents remained roughly the same from survey to survey.

Household Income



Takeaways: While there were decreases in the overall percentage of respondents who make less than \$75K, positivity rose across all income groups, signaling that the change we see in perception/opinion is not due to the change in demographic representation. If anything, that shift had only a marginal impact. This is real sentiment movement.

Grand Division



Takeaways: Percentage of overall respondents by grand division didn't shift too much from the 2025 survey and wouldn't have impacted the outcome of sentiment drastically in any way. If anything, it would have had only marginal impacts. Again, the shift in sentiment is real movement and not caused by respondent distribution.