

Common Objections and FAQs

The real test of this workshop isn't whether a room full of people already steeped in postsecondary work leaves convinced of its value; it's whether you can communicate just as effectively with people who have different priorities, less familiarity with postsecondary education, and even real skepticism about the work you're doing.

Below is a list of common objections and FAQs you're likely to recognize, organized by audience. Use the accompanying worksheet to draft your own responses — either during the Pressure Test exercise in the workshop, or afterward as you adapt these tools for your own context.

Audience: Institution faculty, campus leaders (provost, deans, chancellors), career advisors, and institutional communications practitioners

Mindset: *Committed to preparing every student for in-demand careers and economic mobility, but often can't track students post-graduation or access statewide workforce data; even when outcomes data surfaces, there's often uncertainty about how to measure and communicate ROI from it.*

Guidance: *When engaging with this audience bucket, point to a holistic, multi-threshold view of value that can flex to each institution's own data, priorities and context — and remember that an advisor guiding major selection, a dean reviewing program performance, and a board evaluating institutional effectiveness are asking different versions of the same question, so the answer should match their specific vantage point.*

1. "What's the single most important stat we should be leading with when we talk to prospective students about program value?"
2. "Once a student graduates, our tracking is basically an alumni survey — how do we talk credibly about outcomes when we can't reliably follow students after they leave?"
3. "This program has strong completion rates but modest early-career earnings — how do we defend its value without sounding defensive?"
4. "How do we talk about ROI without letting it collapse into a single earnings number that makes some of our programs look expendable? We have programs — like early childhood education or social work — that we know won't top the earnings charts but are essential to our community. How do we make the case for their value?"
5. "How can we identify potential gaps in outcomes when our ability to disaggregate data is limited?"

Audience: High school career advising staff and school counselors

Mindset: *Direct influencers of students' postsecondary decisions, but often working without reliable, up-to-date outcomes data and without a clear way to confidently advise why a degree is worth it for the specific student in front of them.*

Guidance: *When responding, remember the "is it worth it" conversation is different for every student — ranging from earnings potential to the social value of a career, so lean on outcomes-based evidence broad enough to speak to whichever version of the question that student is actually asking.*

1. "A student asks me point-blank, 'Is college even worth it anymore?' — what do I actually say?"
2. "I don't have access to reliable, local outcomes data — how can I tell a student what a specific degree or program will realistically lead to?"
3. "Parents are telling me trade school or going straight to work pays off faster — how do I compare that fairly to a four-year degree?"

4. "What do I tell a student who cares more about a paycheck next year than earnings potential a decade from now?"
5. "Should I be steering students away from majors with lower average earnings, even when they're genuinely passionate about the field?"

Audience: Current and prospective students

Mindset: *In different ways, this audience is asking, "Will this pathway, program, or degree pay off — and what does 'pay off' mean for me?"*

Guidance: *When responding, ground the answer in outcomes for people like them — same major, same institution, similar background — rather than generic averages, and keep information clear and accessible on cost, opportunity, and career outcomes across pathways, not just "college vs. no college."*

1. "With everything going on, how can anyone know whether a college degree is still worth it?"
2. "Why would I pursue higher education when I can make money without going into significant debt?"
3. "I need to make enough money coming out of college to start paying back my loans while also supporting myself. What major should I choose?"
4. "How do I know if this specific program or degree — not just 'college' in general — will actually pay off for someone like me?"
5. "Everyone talks about average earnings, but how do I know what someone with my background, school, and major actually ends up making?"

Audience: Families

Mindset: *Weighing whether the financial risk of a credential is worth it for their child, wanting to see themselves in the data rather than a generic statewide average.*

Guidance: *When responding, get as close as possible to numbers that reflect their child's specific school, program, and background, and be transparent about cost net of aid, not sticker price. Acknowledge that the financial stakes are real for the family rather than reassuring them the numbers will simply work out.*

1. "I feel like college is financially out of reach for me and my children. Why should I put my child through higher education? How do we know the loans we're taking on as a family will actually be worth it in the long run?"
2. "Are numbers about 'average earnings' even about someone like my child — their school, their major, their background — or just a generic statewide figure?"
3. "Is a four-year degree still worth it compared to trade school, an apprenticeship, or going straight into the workforce?"
4. "College costs keep rising every year — how can we trust that today's 'return on investment' numbers will still hold up by the time my child graduates?"
5. "It used to be that a field like computer science was a safe bet for a good job — now we're hearing AI is wiping out those same jobs. How do we know the fields that look promising today will still be a good bet by the time my child graduates?"

Audience: Policymakers, legislators, and political decision makers

Mindset: *Need to communicate the return on public investment in higher education at scale, and defend that answer to skeptical constituents. In practice, this audience splits in two: elected officials, who want a one-page answer and are often more moved by a single constituent's story than aggregate data, and career bureaucrats and policy staff, who actually draft strategy and statute and can engage with more depth — and who remain in place regardless of who holds office.*

Guidance: When responding to elected officials, lead with one or two data points that carry weight without oversimplifying (like years-to-break-even), pair them with a real example, and hold the language loosely — some states can't use certain equity-related terms, so the substance needs to travel in different words. When responding to policy staff, you can go deeper, and a holistic definition of value (earnings plus social and community impact) is what builds alignment across the aisle.

1. "Constituents keep asking why we're funding degrees that don't lead to jobs — how do I justify continued public investment in higher education?"
2. "How do we balance funding between high-earning technical programs and lower-earning but high-public-benefit fields like early childhood education or social work?"
3. "I don't have time to read a 20-page report — what's the one number I can put in front of my constituents?"
4. "One of my constituents told me their kid's degree didn't pay off. How do I square that story with your statewide data?"
5. "Why should I fund a program with weak earnings data just because you say it has social value?"

Audience: Philanthropies and funders

Mindset: Believers and investors in the power of postsecondary education to drive economic mobility and student success, who need to know how to direct resources toward measurable impact.

Guidance: When responding, offer a holistic understanding of value that's adaptable across different audiences and grantee contexts; the goal is reaching the specific people who benefit most from taking action instead of applying a single universal metric.

1. "How do we know our funding for access and completion programs is producing real economic mobility, not just credential attainment?"
2. "Which outcome metrics should we prioritize when comparing grant proposals across different institutions or states?"
3. "Are we at risk of funding programs that produce credentials without meaningful earnings or mobility gains for the populations we're trying to help?"
4. "Are the programs we fund closing gaps for first-generation and low-income students, or mainly serving students who would have succeeded regardless?"
5. "How should we weigh social and community impact — like teaching or social work — against pure earnings data when deciding where to direct funding?"

Audience: Employers

Mindset: Navigating pressure to adjust degree requirements and adopt skills-based talent strategies, and risking decisions that undermine their own hiring practices without a clear picture of postsecondary value.

Guidance: When responding, give evidence on which credentials reliably produce the competencies, earnings trajectories, and retention they need, rather than treating "the degree" as a stand-in for quality. In high-public-benefit, wage-gapped fields like education and healthcare support, employers can advocate for compensation that reflects real workforce value — and the same data can help identify and close pay gaps for women and workers of color holding the same credential.

1. "We're moving toward skills-based hiring — do degree requirements still make sense, or are we screening out qualified candidates?"
2. "How do we know which credentials reliably predict the competencies and retention we need, versus just a recognizable school name?"
3. "We keep hearing about 'the skills gap' — is that really a shortage of qualified graduates, or a mismatch in what we're asking for in job postings?"
4. "Are there specific credentials or programs in our region that reliably produce graduates who stay and advance in our industry?"
5. "How should we think about pay in roles that require credentials but have historically been lower-wage, like healthcare support or early education?"

Audience: The general public

Mindset: *Facing a high-stakes decision environment shaped by rising costs, student-debt headlines, and growing skepticism about the value of a degree.*

Guidance: *When responding, be direct that not all credentials deliver equal returns — value depends on where someone goes, what they study, and their own background and goals — and broaden the frame beyond earnings to include economic security: the resilience a credential provides against a layoff or career change.*

1. "With everything I read about student debt, is college still worth it at all?"
2. "Why does one news story say degrees pay off and another says they don't — who's actually right?"
3. "Aren't a lot of degrees just a waste of money at this point, given how many graduates are underemployed?"
4. "Is trade school or a certificate program a smarter bet than a four-year degree right now?"
5. "Doesn't it really just come down to which school you go to and what you study — is there even such a thing as 'the value of a degree' in general?"