

TOP HAT FIELD REPORT

Uncertainty and Opportunity in Higher Ed





Fall 2021: Another Year of Uncertainty and Opportunity in Higher Ed

In the leadup to the Fall 2021 academic year, the majority of higher ed students had been looking forward to getting back to campus. That is until the COVID-19 Delta variant began making waves, throwing plans for a broad return to in-person learning into disarray.

How will this state of uncertainty impact learning in the new academic year? And how can we support students concerned about their mental health, learning loss, and the ability to afford their education?

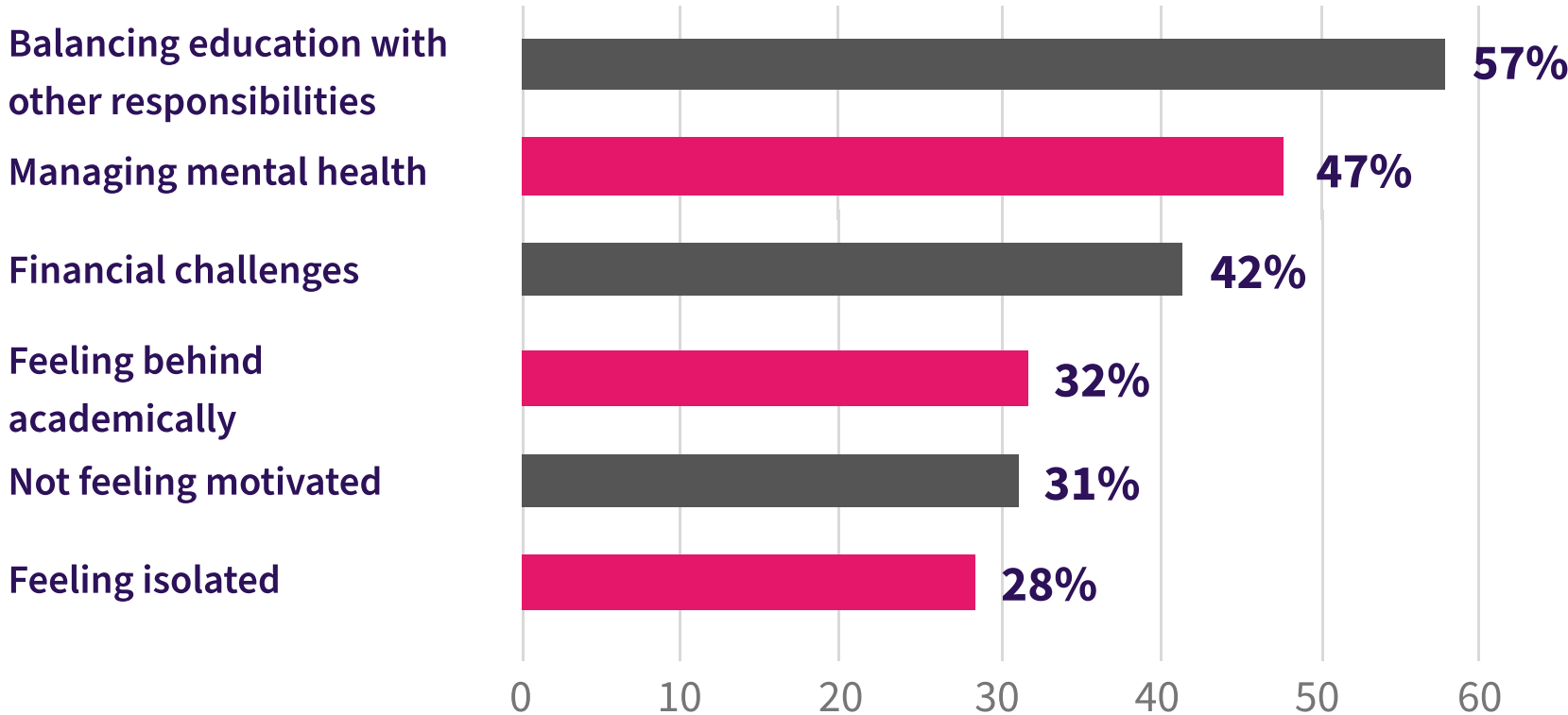
The *Top Hat Field Report: Uncertainty and Opportunity in Higher Ed* survey of 1,524 students in the United States and Canada, conducted in July, 2021, shines a light on **how the pandemic has shaped student needs and expectations**. Unsurprisingly, after so much time spent learning remotely, students are prioritizing the importance of connection and belonging. They're also placing greater emphasis on the role of the instructor, education technology, and the value of what happens inside the classroom.

This report provides insights to help educators **set the table for success by focusing on engagement, flexibility, community, and instilling student confidence**.

The Student State of Mind

Students have experienced heightened stress throughout the pandemic. Economic, social, and academic upheaval have sapped the confidence of many. Challenges with mental health, conflicting obligations, motivation, loneliness, finances, and learning loss pose significant risks to keeping students engaged and on track.

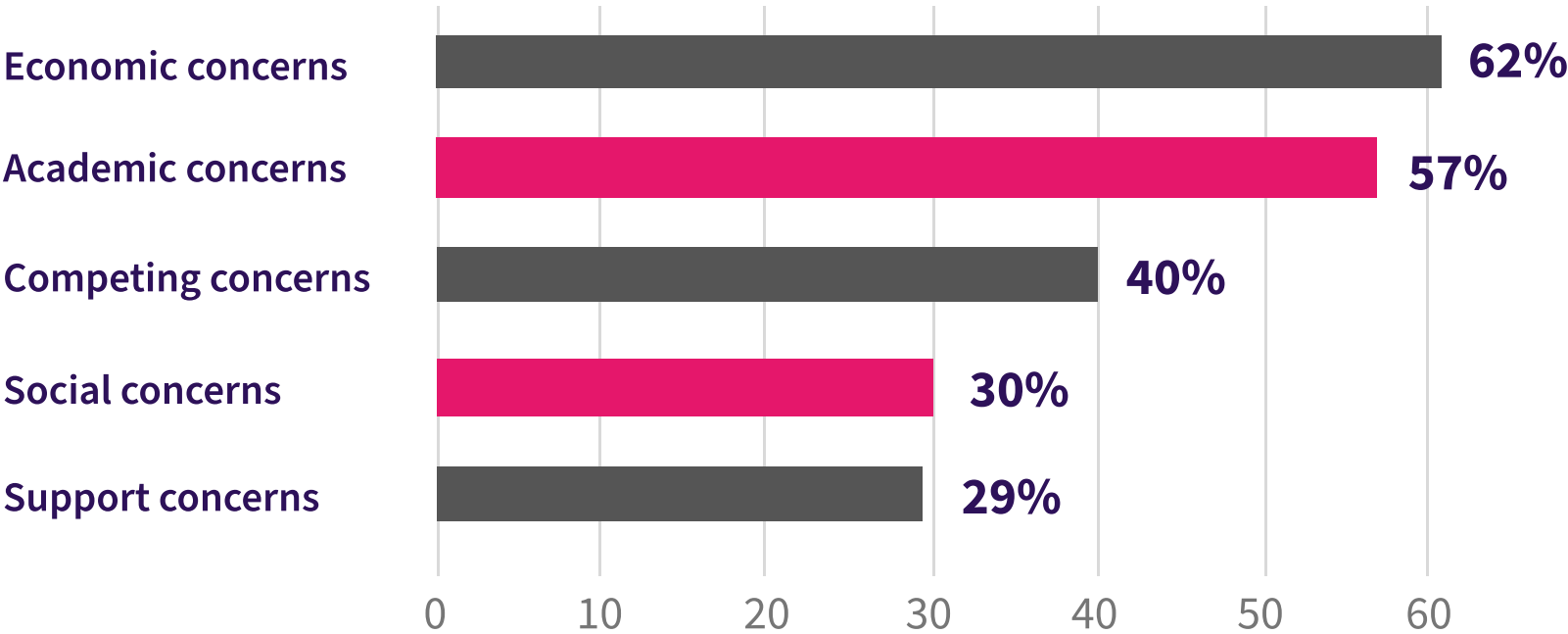
What are your biggest concerns about your ability to succeed in the coming academic year?



Barriers to Success

When students were asked about potential roadblocks to successfully completing the upcoming term, economic challenges topped the list, followed closely by academic concerns and managing competing obligations on top of their education.

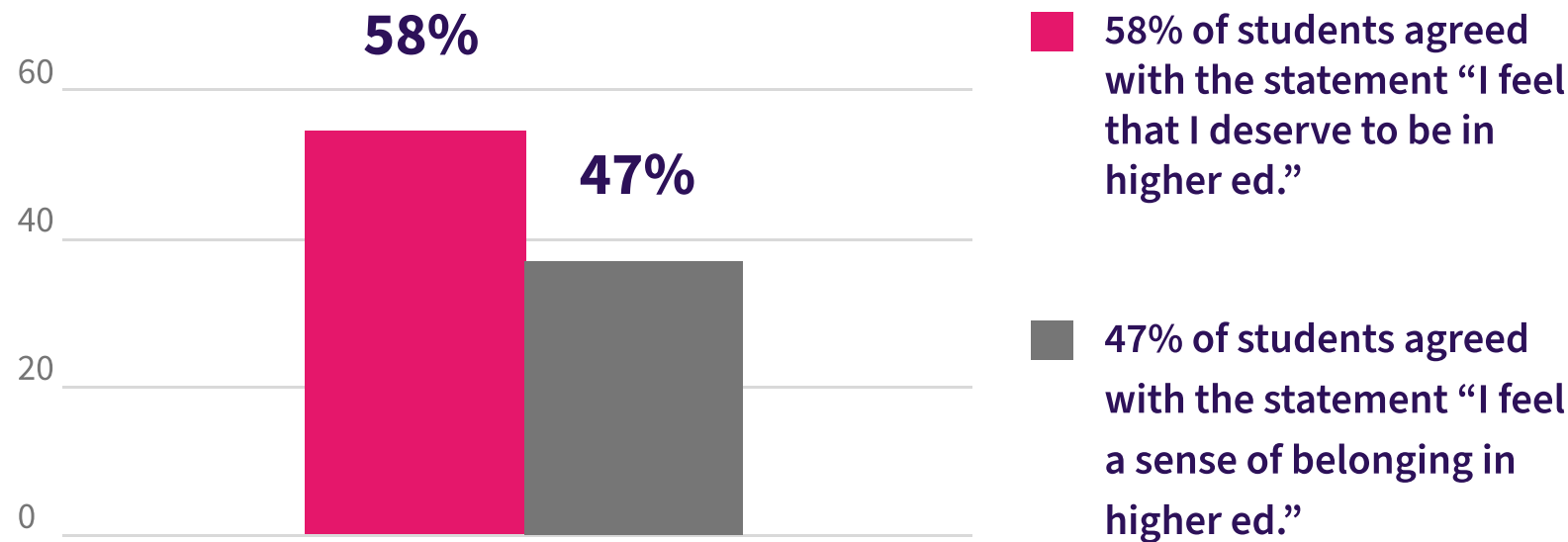
What might affect your ability or willingness to persist through higher education?



On the Issue of Student Confidence

While it is common for students to doubt their skills and abilities, the choppy and often isolating experience of learning remotely has not exactly been a boon to student confidence. Only about half of students agreed that they feel they deserve to be in higher education, and less than half feel a sense of belonging.

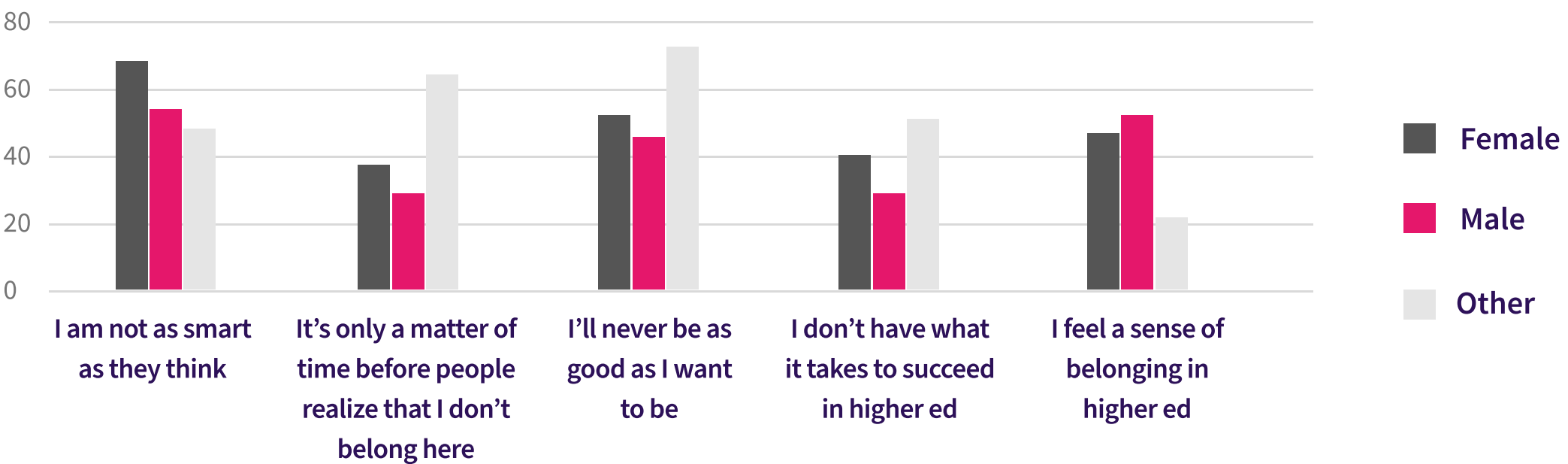
How much do you agree with the following statements?



Not All Students Feel They've Earned the Right

This lack of confidence is more pronounced among students who identify as female. Female students are less likely to feel a sense of belonging or to say they have what it takes to succeed in higher education. And although the sample size is small, students who do not identify as either male or female are even more likely to struggle with a sense of belonging.

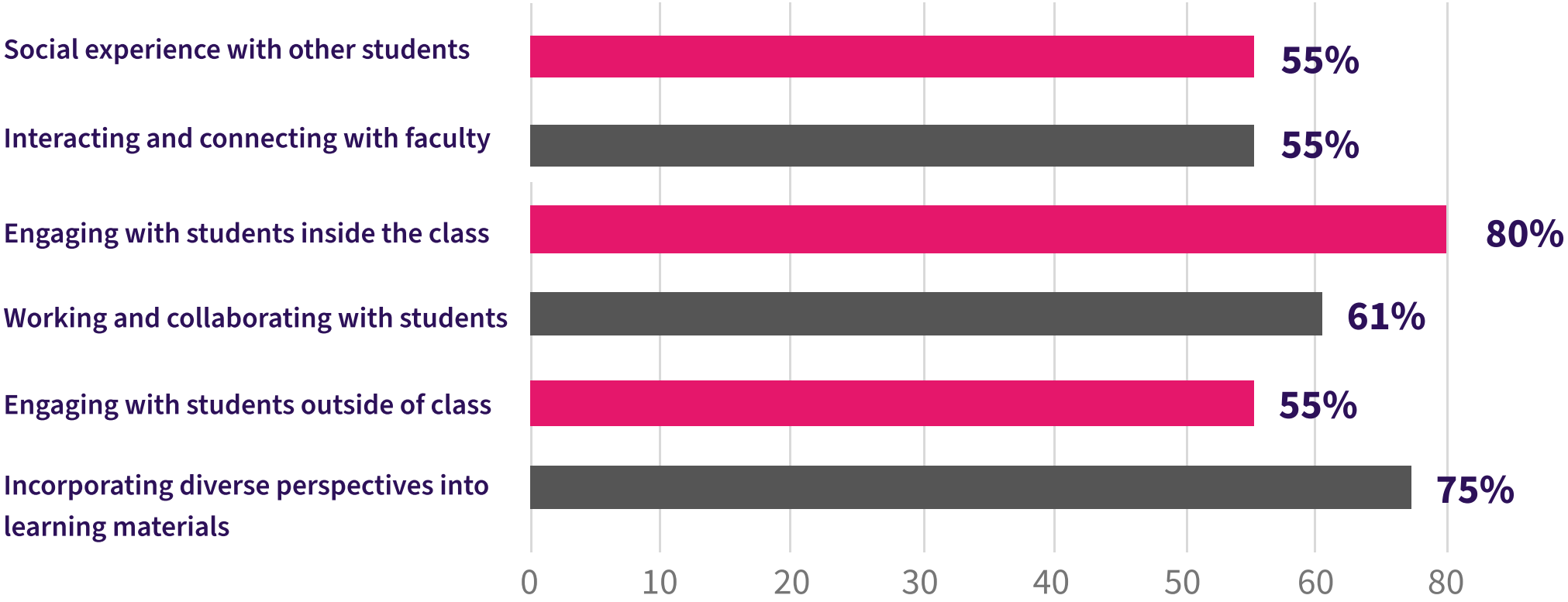
Have any of the following thoughts ever crossed your mind?



Prioritizing Community in the Classroom

Feeling part of a community is critical to the student learning experience. Students want to connect with their peers inside and outside the classroom, collaborate with each other, and interact with faculty. Belonging also means appealing to diverse learners. The majority of students want instructors to incorporate diversity into their learning materials to create a more inclusive learning community and course curriculum.

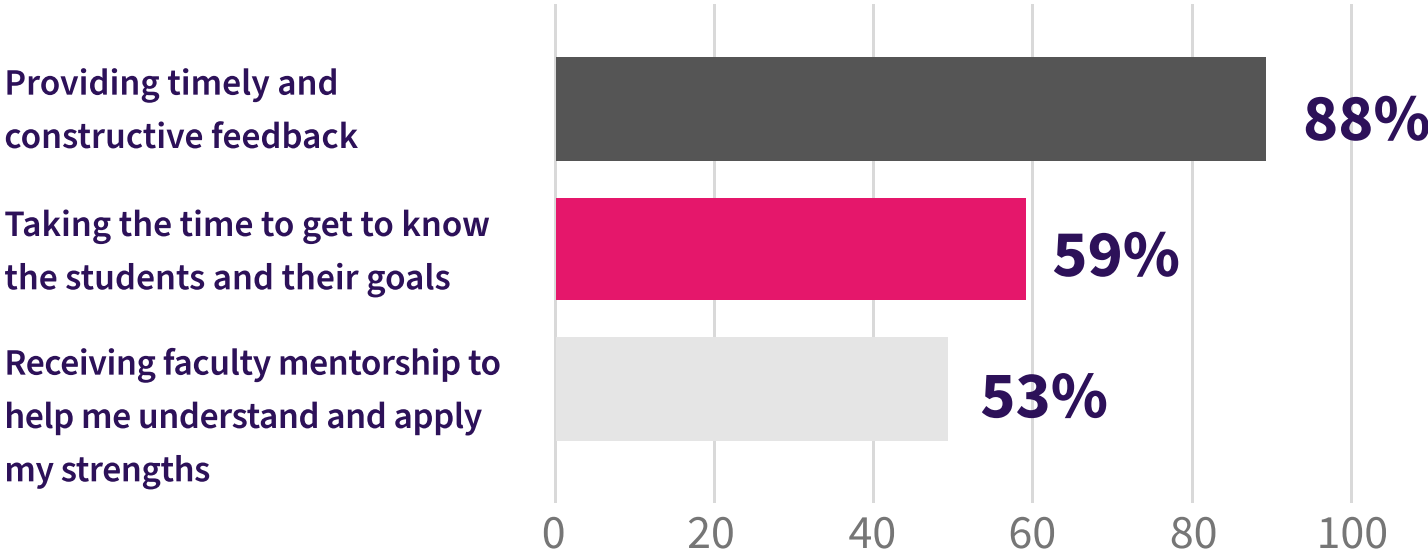
What excites you about the upcoming school year?



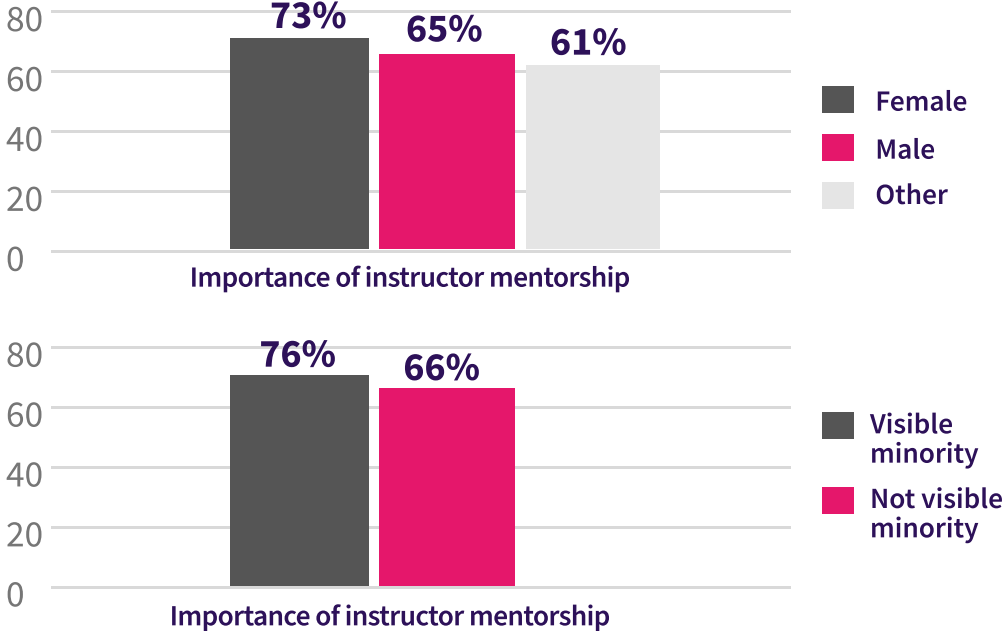
Cultivating Connection

Instructors can also foster community and belonging by taking time to get to know students and their goals, providing timely, constructive feedback, and offering mentorship to help them understand and apply their strengths. While mentorship is important to most, it is particularly important to students who identify as female and those who identify as visible minorities.

Thinking about the role of your instructor in supporting your success, how important are the following?



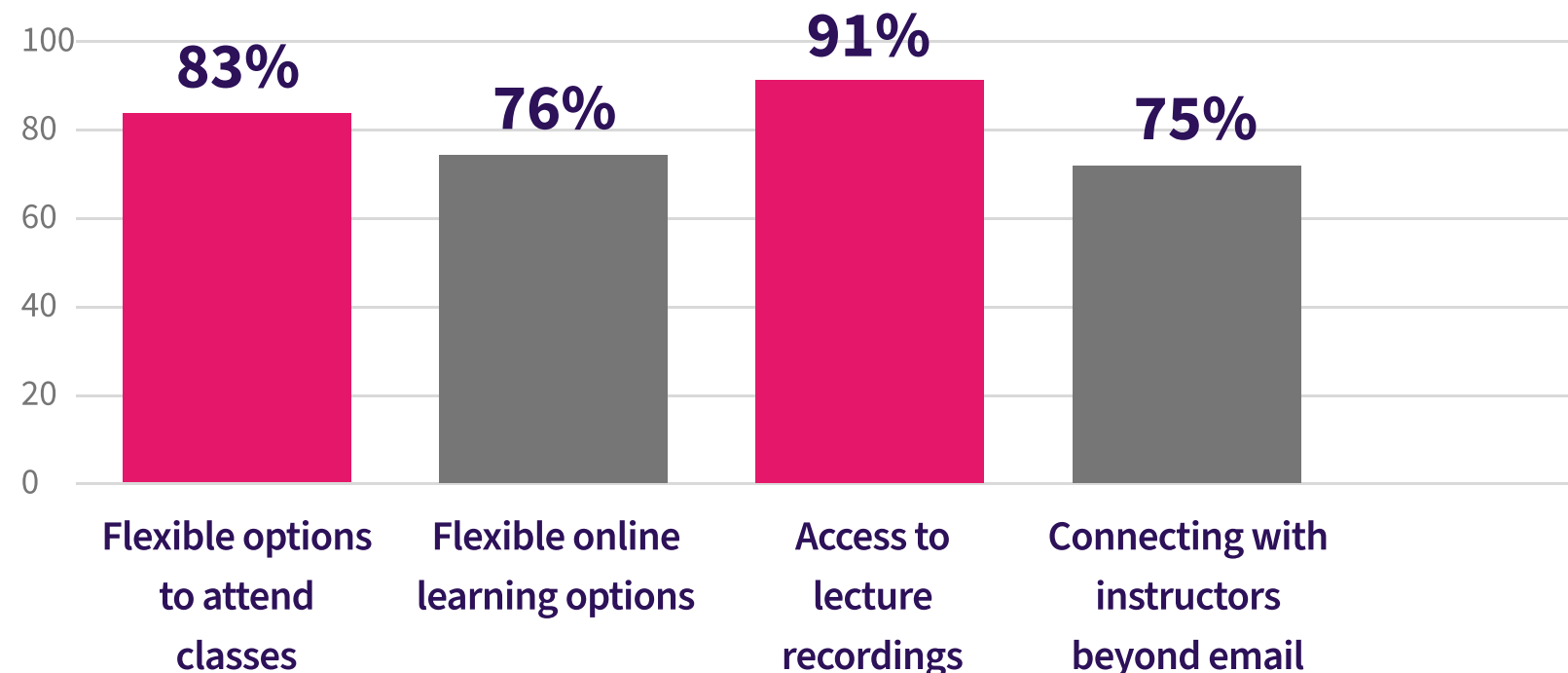
How important are the following to ensuring your success?



Must Haves: Flexibility and Engagement

Offering flexible learning options is critical to students juggling work, family, and other obligations. While in-person learning is still the preferred option, the vast majority of students say they would like to retain some element of online learning. This includes being able to view lecture recordings and providing options to connect with instructors beyond email.

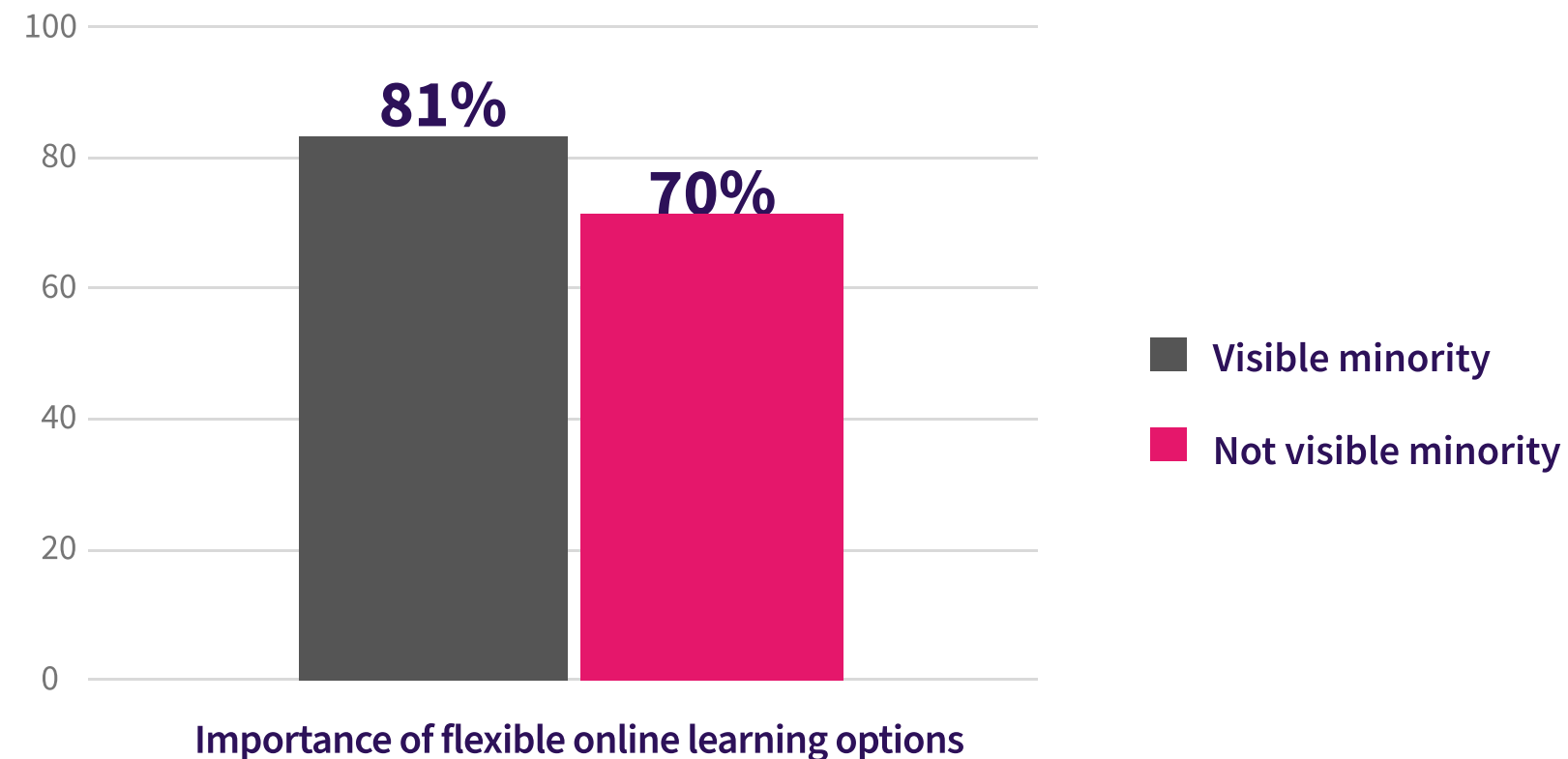
Thinking about the role of technology in your education, how important are the following:



Supporting Minority Students

Flexibility is even more important to students who identify as visible minorities, with most of these students agreeing that online learning options are important to their success.

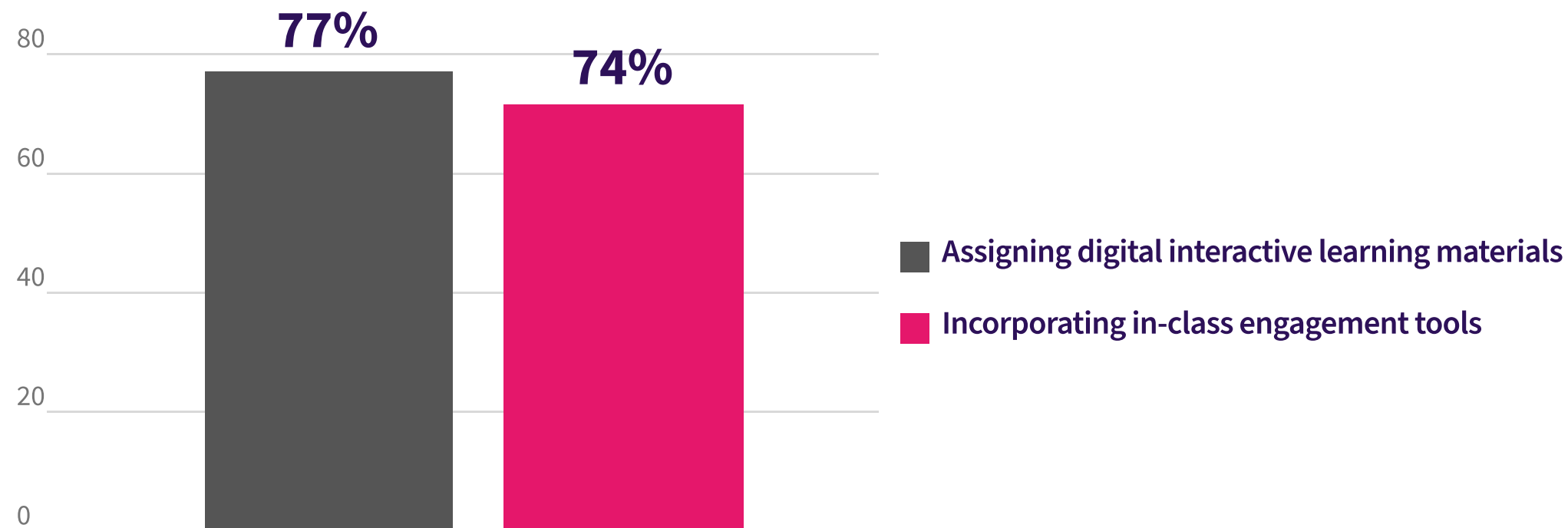
Thinking about the role of technology in your education, how important are the following:



Engagement is the Expectation

Along with flexibility comes expectations for engaging learning experiences. Approximately three out of four students want educators to incorporate in-class engagement tools and to use digital learning materials to make learning more interactive.

Thinking about the role of technology in your education, how important are the following:



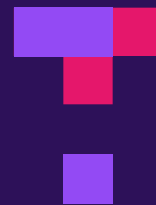
Supporting Students Amid Uncertainty

1. Create opportunities for small wins to build student confidence.
2. Design opportunities for students to work together inside and outside of class.
3. Commit to investing the time to get to know students and offer regular feedback.
4. Incorporate diverse perspectives into learning materials and course curriculums.
5. Build flexibility into course design by enabling students to attend and participate in classes in multiple ways.
6. Leverage in-class engagement tools to create interactive learning experiences.
7. Assign digital interactive learning materials that allow students to self-assess learning as they go.

About Top Hat

Top Hat is the only all-in-one teaching and learning platform that enables active learning — a proven student-centred teaching pedagogy that promotes deep understanding, critical thinking, and subject mastery — with interactive content, tools, and activities. Millions of students at 750 leading North American colleges and universities use Top Hat to teach and engage with students before, during, and after class, in both in-person and online education.

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