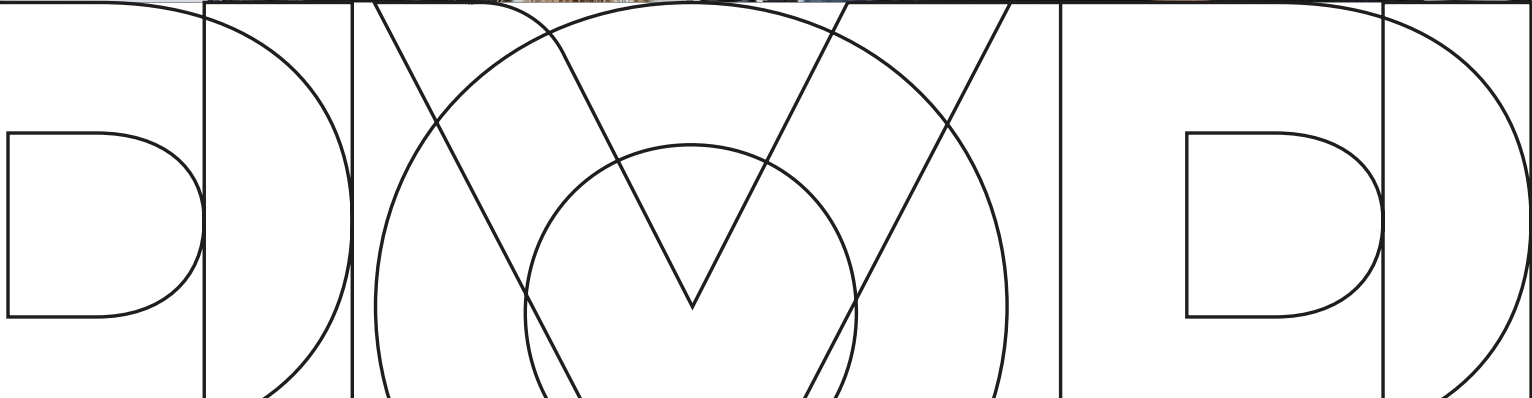


BEAUTY AS A CAREER

2026 – INSIGHTS AND INTEREST FROM CAREER COUNSELORS



©2026 Pivot Point International, Inc.



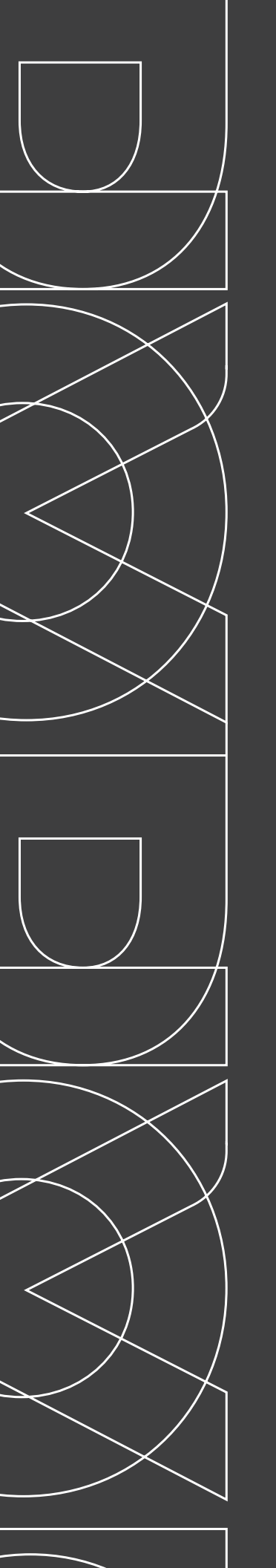


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Summary	3
Methodology	5
Questions	
College vs. Career Education	6
Job Security, Earning Potential, Career Satisfaction	7
Familiarity With Beauty Careers	9
College vs. Beauty Education	10
Information Career Counselors Need	11
Career Counselor Feedback and Verbatim Comments	13
About Beauty Cast Network	15
About Pivot Point International	16
About Pivot Point International Research	17

Questions about student debt, the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on traditional white-collar jobs, the return on investment for a college degree and career satisfaction have fueled the “career vs. college” conversation.

To better understand what was taking place in schools, we conducted research among school career counselors at the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Annual Conference in 2023, 2024, 2025 and again in 2026.

2023

Our initial study combined qualitative and quantitative methods to explore counselors’ perceptions of career pathways, with a focus on the beauty industry. Results revealed that interest in vocational education was growing compared with traditional college routes. Counselors also mentioned a shift in parental attitudes, with more parents supporting skilled-trade careers for their children. While many counselors expressed interest in beauty careers, most lacked detailed knowledge about the industry, including licensing requirements, program options, earning potential and financial aid, limiting their ability to fully support students. [2023 White Paper](#)

2024

In our follow-up study, counselors increasingly viewed vocational pathways—including beauty—as compelling alternatives to college. We also explored how counselors perceived key dimensions such as job security, earning potential and career satisfaction between college and career tracks. More than half of respondents rated career education as equal to or better than college in delivering long-term success and satisfaction. [2024 White Paper](#)

2025

Our 2025 research reaffirmed these trends. Overall perceptions and awareness remained consistent, and the central takeaway was that beauty careers and other skilled trades are now viewed as viable—and increasingly attractive—first-choice alternatives to traditional college pathways. The research also confirmed that the lack of familiarity with the beauty industry and limited awareness of related information resources remain key barriers for counselors helping guide their students. [2025 White Paper](#)

2026

In 2026, a larger share of counselors than in prior years saw little difference between vocational and college pathways in terms of job security, earning potential and career satisfaction. Among those who did perceive a difference, vocational careers continued to hold the advantage. Familiarity with beauty careers also improved, while the percentage of counselors reporting little or no familiarity continued to decline. Even so, only about one-third considered themselves highly familiar with the industry. Interest in beauty education relative to traditional college pathways also continued to grow.

National and Policy-Level Momentum—and Uncertainty—Are Shaping the Trend

Government policy continues to elevate career-focused education and workforce readiness, but the environment remains complex for beauty and wellness programs. Expanded attention to Career and Technical Education, workforce pathways and alternatives to traditional college supports growing interest in skilled careers. At the same time, changes involving Pell Grant eligibility, Gainful Employment requirements and the U.S. Department of Education’s “Do No Harm” provisions have created significant uncertainty for schools and students.

The Department of Education’s one-year reprieve for many hair and skin programs provides temporary relief. Still, it does not resolve the underlying challenges, and some programs—including nails-only education—remain especially vulnerable. Ongoing litigation and the possibility of additional federal policy changes make it increasingly important for the industry to align around credible standards, consistent outcome data and a clear, evidence-based career story.

At the state level, continued expansion of career-pathway planning and CTE offerings in middle and high schools can help increase early awareness of beauty and wellness professions. However, this may be tied to the industry’s ability to demonstrate educational value, workforce demand, career opportunities and measurable student outcomes.

Implications for the Beauty Industry

The consistency of these findings points to both an opportunity and a responsibility for the beauty and wellness industry. Career counselors increasingly recognize these careers as legitimate careers, but many still lack the objective information needed to recommend them confidently.

As interest in career education grows—and policy uncertainty continues—the industry must provide clearer information about the different beauty and wellness programs, financial aid, employment, earning potential and career paths. Schools, employers, associations and other stakeholders must work together to provide outcome data and present a more consistent story about the value of beauty and wellness education. This is especially important because counselors focus first on employability—whether students can gain marketable skills, secure stable work and build successful careers after graduation.

Students are drawn to careers that offer creativity, flexibility, purpose and entrepreneurial opportunity. Continued growth, however, will depend on the industry’s ability to demonstrate reliable employment, sustainable earnings, advancement and long-term professional opportunity. By more clearly communicating and supporting the full career journey—from education and first employment through advancement and entrepreneurship—the industry can help position beauty and wellness careers as respected, sustainable and financially viable first-choice pathways.

This report presents both quantitative data and qualitative insights, offering a look at counselor attitudes toward career education, with a particular focus on the beauty industry.

Pivot Point and Beauty Cast Network conducted research at the 2026 American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Annual Conference, focusing exclusively on insights from career counselors. After excluding responses from school administrators and educators, the final sample included 97 career counselors. Survey findings were supplemented by open-ended survey comments and in-depth conversations conducted on the show floor.

For our research, the beauty industry was defined as including hairdressing, barbering, nails, skin care and massage.

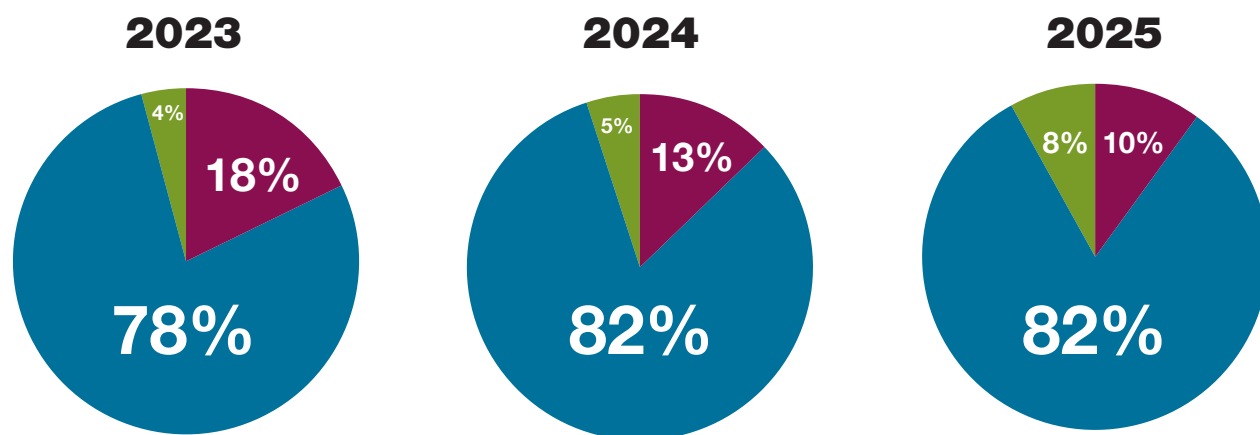
NOTE: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.



The results below are included for historical perspective and demonstrate that, by a significant margin, career counselors view postsecondary education as trending toward vocational pathways.

Given the strong and consistent support for careers reflected in prior years, we did not ask this question in 2026.

Question: In your opinion, what are the future trends of students pursuing vocational education compared to traditional college education?



Percentage

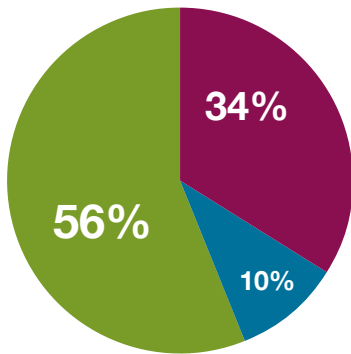
- Upward trend for traditional college education over vocational education
- Upward trend for vocational education over traditional college education
- No change in trend for either type of education



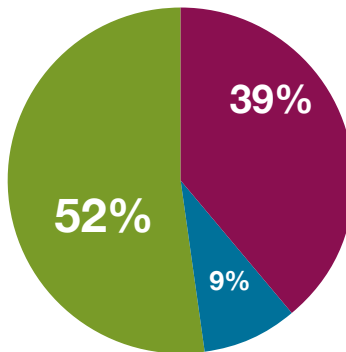


Question: Please consider each statement below and select the type of education you believe best reflects the statement.

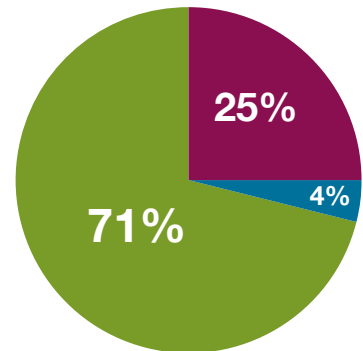
2024



Offers More
Job Security

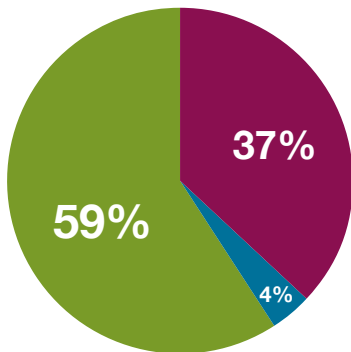


Has Higher
Earning Potential

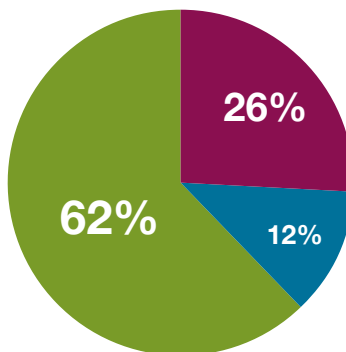


Leads to Greater
Career Satisfaction

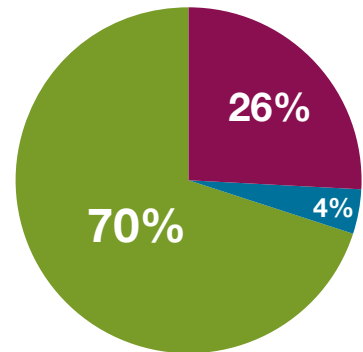
2025



Offers More
Job Security



Has Higher
Earning Potential

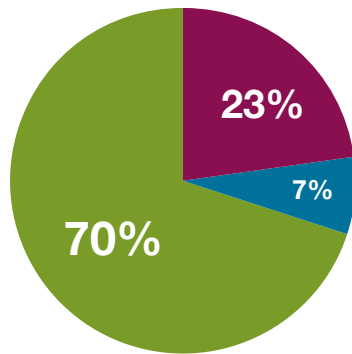


Leads to Greater
Career Satisfaction

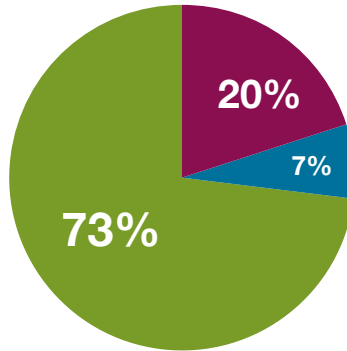
Percentage

■ Vocational education ■ Traditional college education ■ Both equally

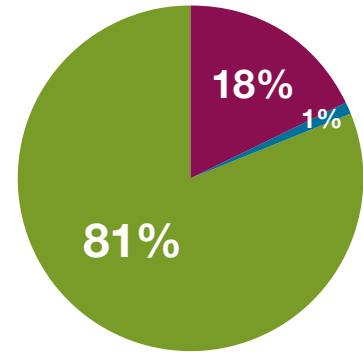
2026



Offers More
Job Security



Has Higher
Earning Potential



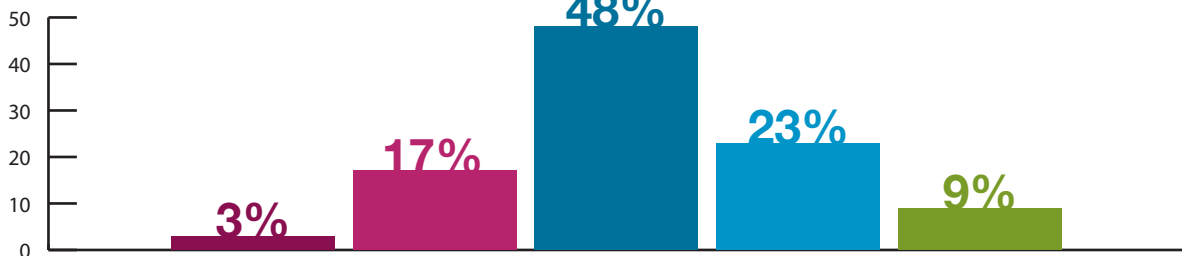
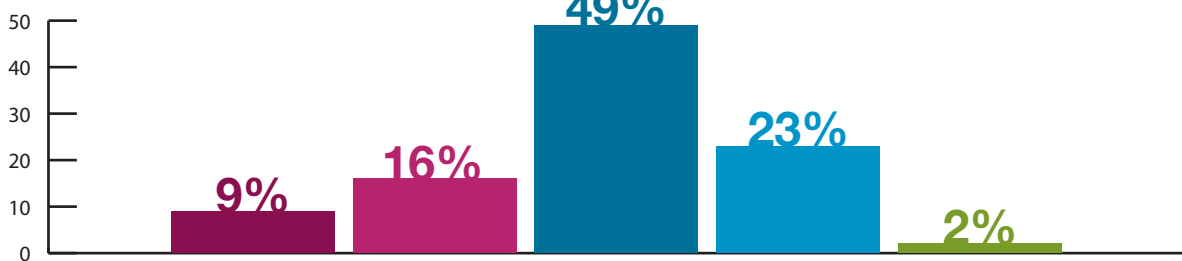
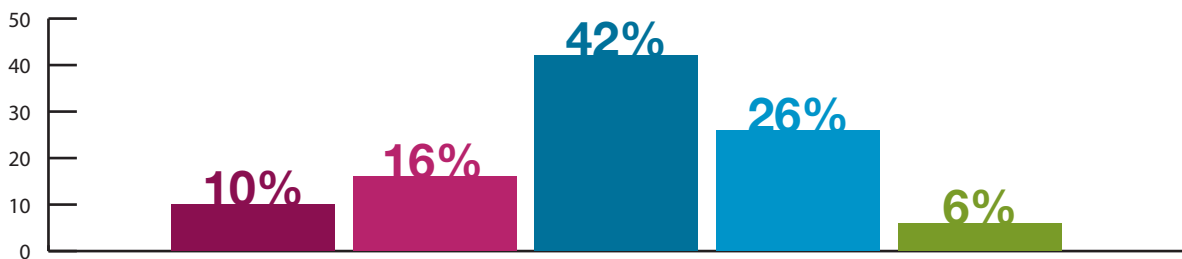
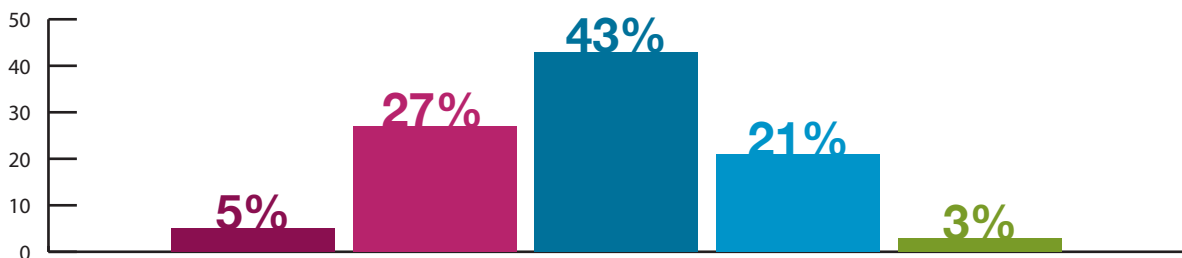
Leads to Greater
Career Satisfaction

Percentage

Vocational education Traditional college education Both equally

A larger share of counselors than in prior years saw little difference between vocational and college pathways in terms of job security, earning potential and career satisfaction. When this question was first introduced, responses appeared to lean more positively toward vocational education for job security and earning potential. The results suggest that the traditional preference for college is fading and that career education is now viewed as an equal option. Among counselors who did perceive a difference, vocational education held a strong advantage. We did not ask this question in our 2023 survey.

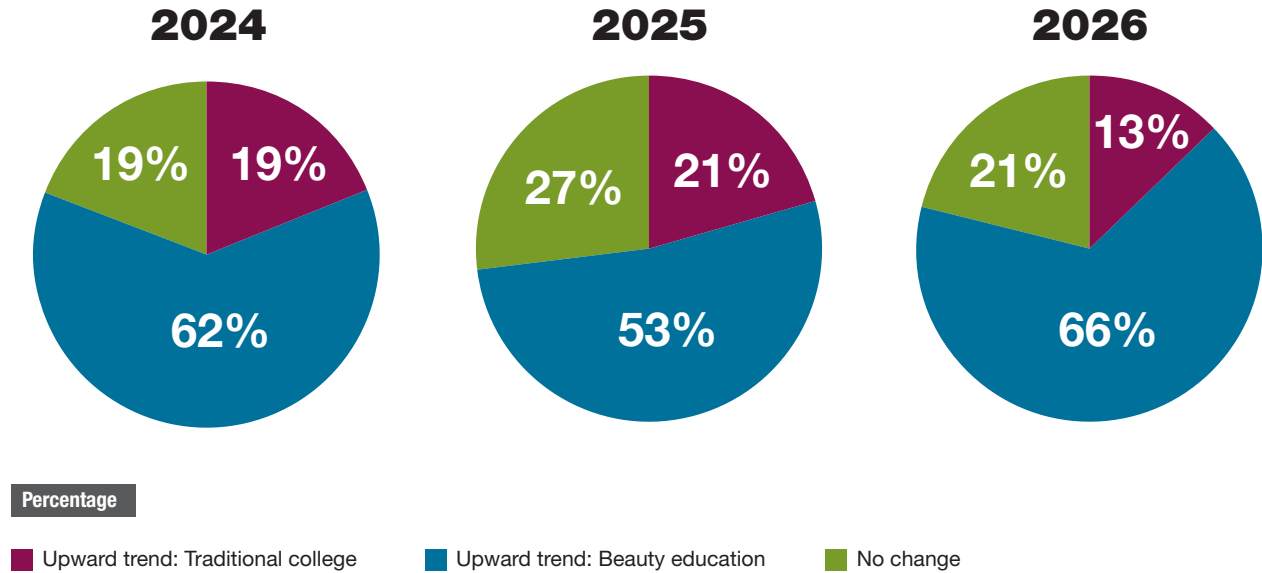
Question: The beauty industry includes hairdressing, barbering, nails, skin care and massage. What is your level of familiarity with career paths in the beauty industry?

2023**2024****2025****2026****Percentage**

Extremely familiar Moderately familiar Not at all familiar
Very familiar Slightly familiar

Familiarity with beauty careers continued to improve in 2026. However, despite these gains, only about one-third of counselors say they are extremely or very familiar with beauty career pathways, indicating that significant opportunity remains to strengthen awareness and understanding.

Question: In your opinion, what are the future trends of students pursuing beauty education compared to traditional college education?



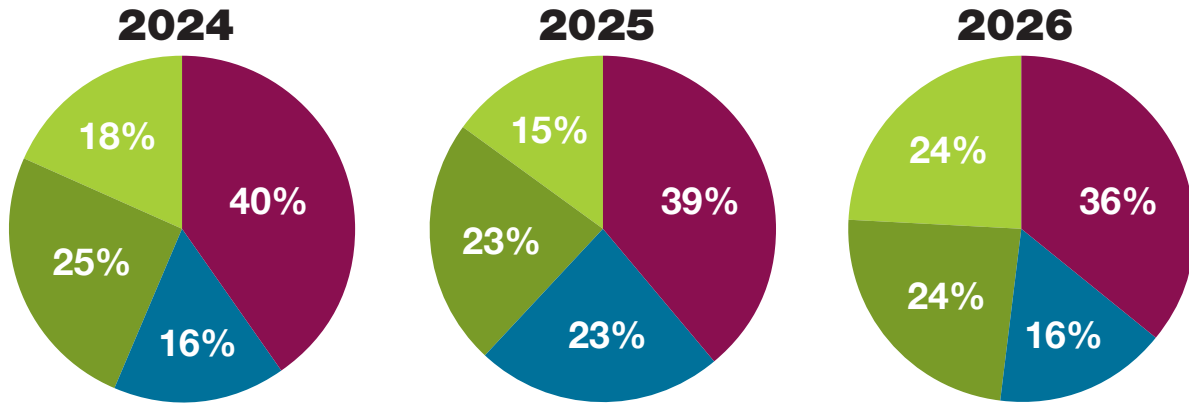
Disclaimer: Due to rounding, the values presented in the above charts may not add up to 100%.

Career counselors continue to see beauty education gaining momentum relative to traditional college pathways. In 2026 this view strengthened, while fewer counselors anticipated greater growth in traditional college education. The findings reinforce the growing acceptance of beauty education as a credible and increasingly attractive postsecondary option. We did not ask this question in our 2023 survey.

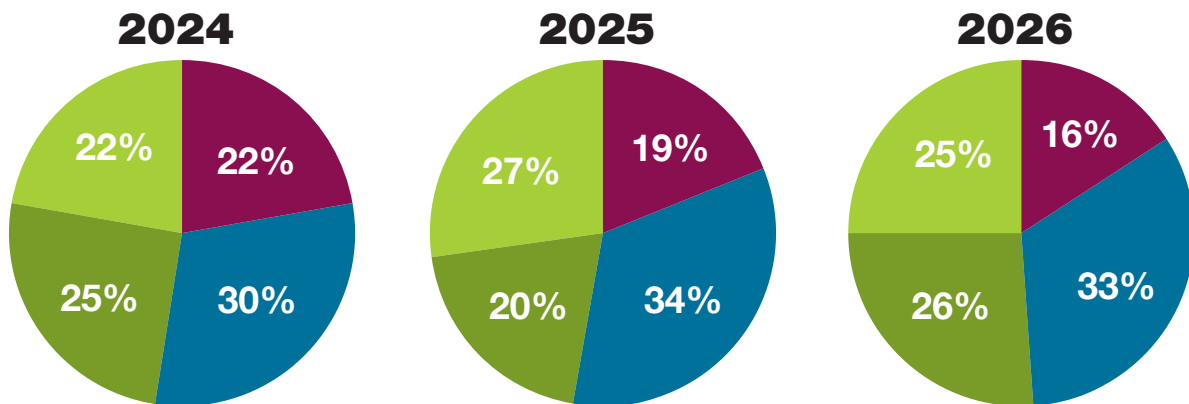




Question: Please rank the following forms of information from most valuable to least valuable for supporting students who want to pursue beauty careers:



Type of Beauty School Programs



Licensing Requirements and Processes

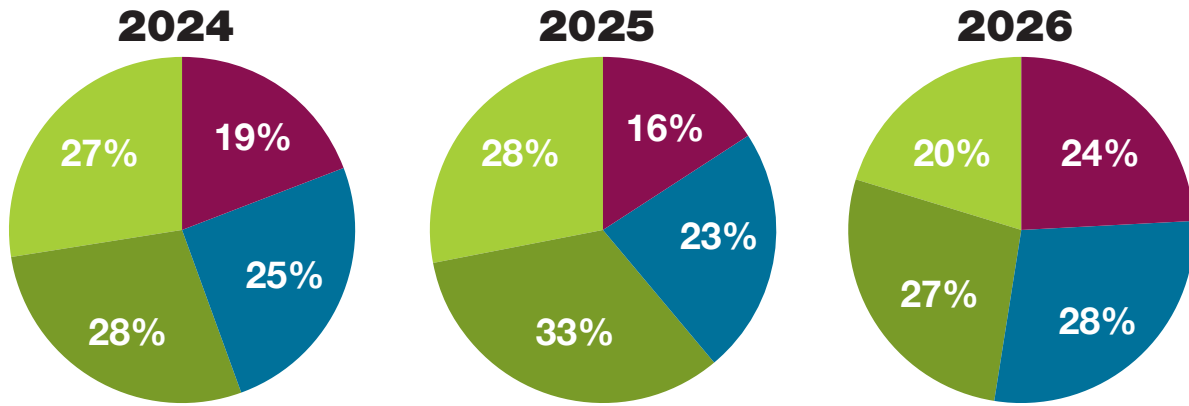
Percentage

Most valuable Very valuable Moderately valuable Least valuable

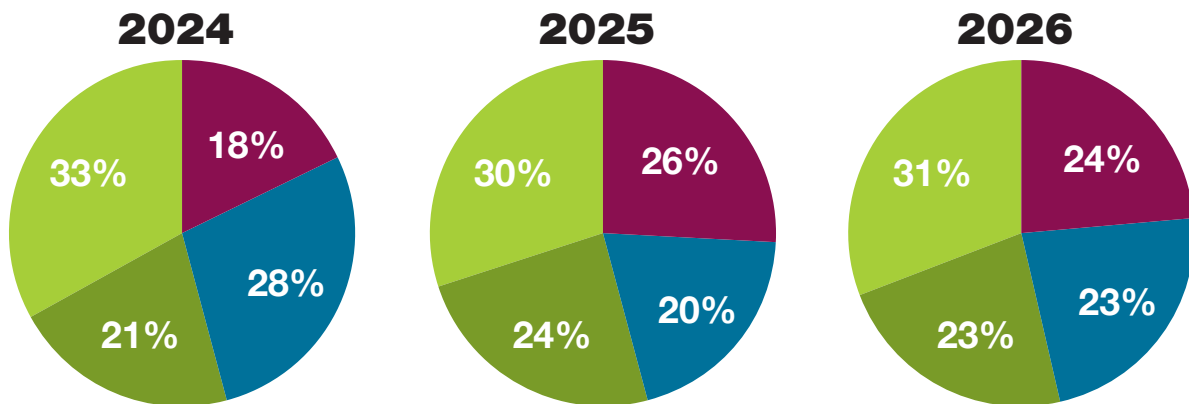
Disclaimer: Due to rounding, the values presented in the above charts may not add up to 100%.



Question: Please rank the following forms of information from most valuable to least valuable for supporting students who want to pursue beauty careers:



Job Prospects and Earning Potential



Financial Aid and Scholarship Opportunities

Percentage

Most valuable Very valuable Moderately valuable Least valuable

Disclaimer: Due to rounding, the values presented in the above charts may not add up to 100%.

Information about the types of beauty school programs remains the counselors' top priority. At the same time, interest in job prospects and earning potential have increased, suggesting that counselors want stronger information about where beauty education can lead and whether it can support a sustainable career. Financial aid and scholarship information also remain important, reflecting the need to help students understand both the opportunity and the cost of pursuing a beauty education.

Beauty, barber and wellness careers are part of a broader shift in how career counselors view college and career education. Increasingly, they see both as equally valid pathways rather than competing choices.

After four years of surveying and speaking with career counselors at the American School Counselor Association Annual Conference, one message is clear: Counselors increasingly recognize beauty, barber and wellness as a legitimate and growing career pathway.

They are looking for careers that offer strong employment opportunities, resilience in an AI-driven economy and meaningful work for students who may not choose—or may not be well-served by—a traditional four-year college path. Beauty and wellness careers align with many of these priorities.

However, many counselors still lack the information needed to confidently guide students toward these careers. They would welcome objective information about career pathways, education and licensing requirements, earning potential, employer demand and long-term opportunities. This uncertainty also affects high school cosmetology programs. Educators report that some promising students ultimately choose college because they are unsure about the industry's long-term earning potential.

Feedback also highlights an important difference in how counselors and the industry often define career success. While the beauty industry frequently emphasizes entrepreneurship, counselors tend to focus first on employability: helping students gain marketable skills, secure stable employment and begin a successful career after graduation. Entrepreneurship remains a strong advantage, but it may be more compelling when presented as part of a longer-term career progression rather than as the starting point.

These findings should shape how the industry communicates with counselors. The first priority is to demonstrate that beauty, barber and wellness careers can provide strong employment outcomes, sustainable earning potential and meaningful long-term growth. Once that foundation is established, entrepreneurship becomes an additional and highly attractive opportunity.

Overall, this project reinforces what we have heard directly from counselors across the country: When they are given credible information, clear career data and practical resources, they become more confident recommending beauty, barber and wellness as a respected, first-choice career pathway. Survey participants were invited to provide additional comments. The key themes from their responses are summarized below.

Awareness, Exposure & Access

- *“Early exposure so that, as soon as kids are interested, they have opportunities to explore.”*
- *“I’d just like to learn more so I can help my students find the right program for them, including location and cost.”*
- *“Access to good schools and local training opportunities.”*
- *“Accredited programs that truly prepare students for the workforce.”*

Perception, Popularity & Career Exploration

- *“Great for students who don’t want the traditional college route.”*
- *“More students are interested in pursuing beauty school.”*
- *“I think it’s a great career.”*
- *“No concerns. I highly encourage vocational careers.”*
- *“Some students think it’s easier than it actually is.”*
- *“The student has to show a genuine interest in the beauty profession.”*
- *“Students should understand that they can build their own business.”*
- *“In our area, many people working in this career path are also entrepreneurs, so this aspect of the profession should be explored and discussed.”*
- *“Being on their feet all day and the physical impact of the work should also be considered.”*

Beauty Career Compensation

- *“The main concern I have about beauty careers is long-term planning, including retirement, short-term disability and other protections that affect a person’s livelihood. The goal should be to create a sustainable life in the beauty industry—not just constant hustle, but the ability to work toward long-term financial security and retirement.”*
- *“Long-term financial stability and income security are important.”*
- *“Students need to know whether they will be able to support themselves financially.”*
- *“Job prospects and the opportunity to own their own business are important considerations.”*

Beauty School Costs/Financial Support

- *“Affordability is a concern.”*
- *“I want to make sure students understand the upfront costs.”*
- *“Financial aid, program costs and the timing of available assistance are important.”*
- *“I would like to better understand the process and cost.”*
- *“My concern is making sure students have a strong support system from the moment they enter the program through completion.”*





Founded in 2013, Beauty Cast Network (BCN) is a beauty and wellness industry career services platform, connecting students, graduates, schools, educators, and employer partners across cosmetology, barbering, esthetics, nail technology, massage therapy, and wellness.

With the launch of Beauty Cast Network 3.0, BCN has evolved beyond career placement into a comprehensive career success community. The platform provides career readiness resources, professional development, networking, scholarships, industry events, employer connections, and an alumni community that helps students successfully transition from the classroom to rewarding, long-term careers.

Founded by beauty education leader Penny Burns, whose experience includes owning and managing nine beauty schools, serving on the Executive Board of the American Association of Cosmetology Schools (AACS), and other leading national workforce development initiatives, Beauty Cast Network was created to strengthen the connection between education and employment. Through strategic partnerships with beauty schools, industry associations, and leading employer brands, BCN continues to advance career awareness, workforce readiness, and successful career placement throughout the beauty and wellness industry.



Penny Burns, Founder
penny@beautycastnetwork.com

901.500.5518 | Support 855.229.3739
beautycastnetwork.com



Pivot Point International is a third-generation, family-owned company dedicated exclusively to the professional beauty, barbering and wellness industry. Our team of licensed professionals brings extensive hands-on experience across beauty schools, salons, spas, barbershops, chains, brands and distributors.

As a founding member of Beauty Changes Lives and producer of the Industry Leader Roundtable, Pivot Point is committed to shaping the future of the beauty industry through charitable initiatives, recognition programs and cause-driven efforts focused on ethics, empowerment, inclusion and sustainability. Our original research explores critical topics affecting schools and professionals, including wellness, generational dynamics, post-pandemic education and the role of perception in industry recruitment and retention.

Pivot Point's education offering includes original and third-party curricula for cosmetology, barbering, nails and esthetics—delivered through a learning platform built specifically for beauty professionals.

Pivot Point also manufactures a diverse range of high-quality mannequins, all produced in our company-owned, SA8000®-certified factory, which supports high ethical and craftsmanship standards. The company offers a complete range of textured-hair mannequins, and its eco-friendly Cap Series mannequins are designed for portability, space efficiency and reduced landfill waste.

www.pivot-point.com

To explore collaboration, contact Steve Reiss at sreiss@pivot-point.com

We understand industry relationships and trends, ensuring your research objectives are met with actionable, real-world insights.

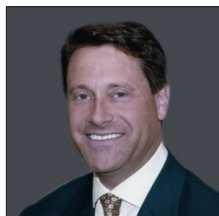
Whether your research is for internal intelligence or to support sales and marketing, we can help you explore all your research options. Knowing that quick turnaround is often a consideration, our industry relationships and experience help us provide you with the most time-effective solution.

We look forward to working with you!

INQUIRY FORM

pivot-point.com/research/

THE PIVOT POINT RESEARCH LEADERSHIP TEAM



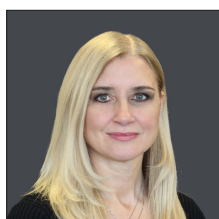
Steve Reiss
*Strategic Marketing &
Business Insights*

15+ years providing custom research solutions to leading beauty industry groups, with a focus on leveraging research insights to create effective strategies supporting business goals.



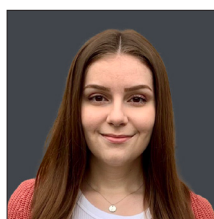
Sabrina Cason
Primary Research

Specializes in consumer-focused market research, leading and designing research methodology, execution and analysis that provides insight to drive business growth.



Vasiliki A. Stavrakis
Secondary Research

Specializes in analyzing and aggregating third-party and government data and regulatory, licensing and accrediting agency requirements to inform business decisions.



Christina Mooshil
Data Visualization

Specializes in combining analysis, design and storytelling to create visual data representations that help people understand and evaluate information more easily.