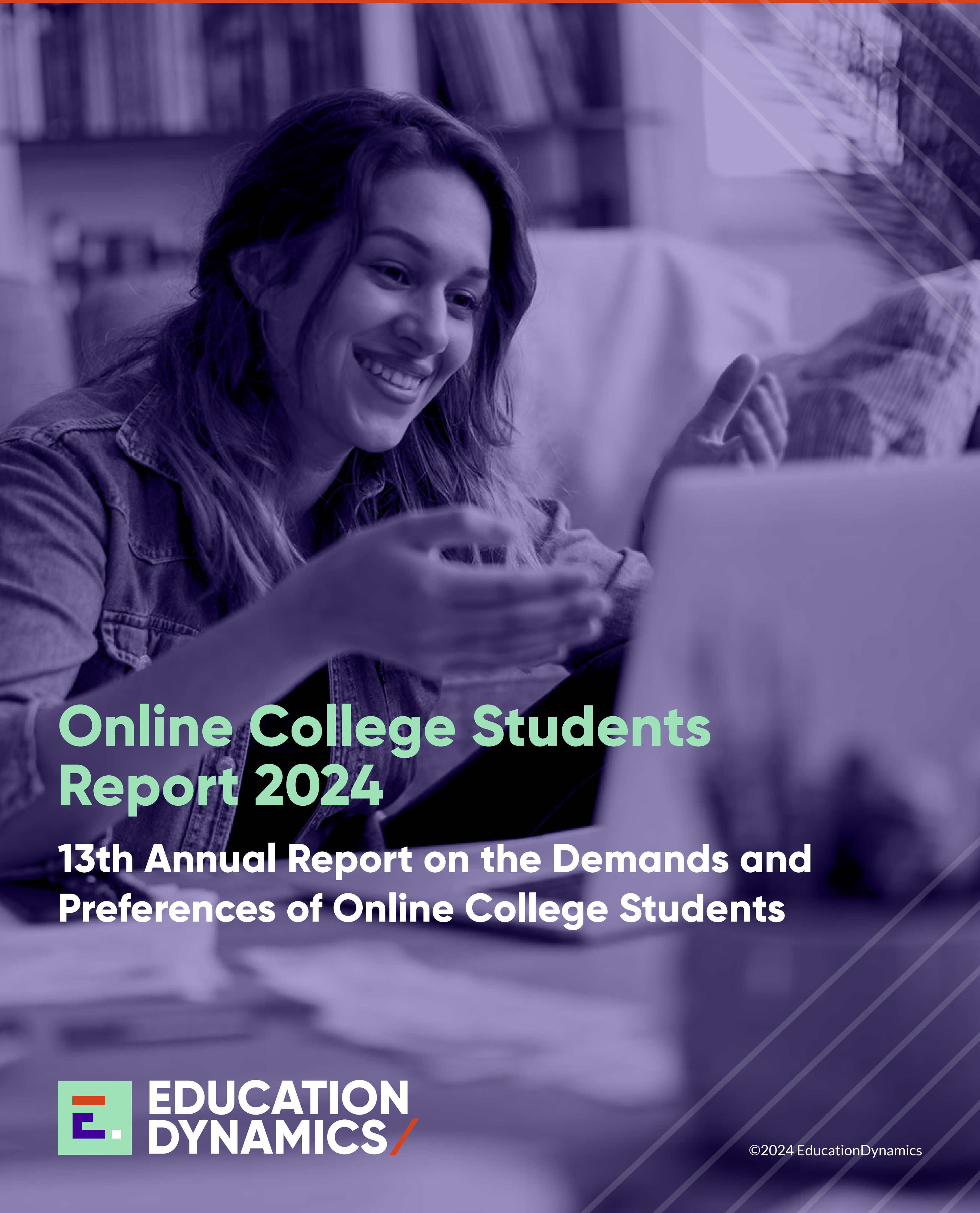

Online College Students Report 2024

13th Annual Report on the Demands and Preferences of Online College Students

EDUCATION DYNAMICS

Online College Students 2024

13th Annual Report on the Demands and Preferences of Online College Students

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Preface

According to the most recent dataset available from NCES — Fall 2022 — about 30 percent of college students study exclusively in a distance format[1]. Recognizing the importance of this population to the higher education community, EducationDynamics has studied this group of students for several years. This is our 13th report on the results of our annual survey of college students who study fully online. It provides insight into learning patterns, demands, and preferences to assist colleges and universities in attracting and serving this population.

Since 2017, enrollment has declined nearly five percent across higher education as a whole[2]. However, online education enrollments have achieved a nearly 90 percent rise over the same period[3]. This can be expected to continue given the public's increasing acceptance of the modality. Based on data in the 2024 Online College Students Report, which follows the trend of previous reports, this increase is the result of several interrelated factors: affordability, flexibility, speed to completion, and the ability to select a distant college if needed to enroll in a specific program of interest. Colleges and universities benefit by providing unique and desirable opportunities to prospective undergraduate and graduate students, even those who may not reside in their immediate communities.

Online education has opened new opportunities for students of all backgrounds, in all parts of the country, and at their convenience. More colleges have entered the online education market and, as the data in this report demonstrate, they have welcomed students of all ages, backgrounds, and education experiences. Additionally, employers have witnessed the benefits to their workforce and have supported employees in applying tuition reimbursement benefits to online study.

This report can help institutions identify how to best serve an online audience and stand out in an increasingly crowded marketplace. Just as programs offered online continue to evolve, incorporating new features that attract and benefit online students, the survey that underpins this report has been refined and tested over time.

We hope that colleges and universities find the following information helpful in better understanding online learners, their needs, and expectations.

We invite you to contact us if you have questions about the findings or need advice on how to apply these recommendations to your operations.

[1]NCES Data Center, Fall 2022 Total Completions and Fully Distance Completions, All Institutions, USA
[2]NCES Data Center, Fall 2002, Fall 2017 Total Completions All Institutions, USA
[2]NCES Data Center, Fall 2002, Fall 2017 Fully Distance Completions, All Institutions, USA

Contents

Introduction and Key Findings

We asked our respondents about the factors that matter most to them, as well as their consideration and enrollment journey. While we continue to see improvement in some areas, many opportunities remain for institutions to improve how they serve students through online programs.

Throughout the report, we see that online college students are career focused and seeking to further themselves through online education. Our respondents see the promise of higher education and are attracted to the idea of the online modality. Their responses shine light on valuable opportunities for colleges and universities to improve their student journey and deliver desired outcomes.

Colleges can successfully turn inquiries into enrollments by providing timely and personalized engagement throughout the enrollment process. Thoughtfully crafted marketing, nurturing and enrollment coaching strategies throughout the enrollment decision process help students make informed decisions on their timeline.

The data in this report, highlighted in the following key findings and recommendations, provide a road map for reaching, attracting and providing full-funnel nurturing and support to online college students.

Among the vital data within this report, the following points represent key findings in our research:

1. **Offer both degree and non-degree options to attract online college students.** Although 73 percent of respondents are pursuing degrees, 27 percent of respondents elected to engage with programs providing credit-bearing certificates or licensure programs. At the graduate level, one-third of the online college students surveyed are enrolled in a credit-bearing certificate or licensure program. As with respondents in degree-granting programs, these students are motivated by cost and timing factors.

   These students are attracted to stackable credential offerings, which may provide both a near-term benefits and long-term opportunities. Two-thirds of non-degree respondents enrolled in a stackable credential program, and nearly 80 percent plan to pursue additional credentials in the same or a related field.

2. **Offer credit for prior experience as a way to attract students.** A full 21 percent of respondents are seeking career growth as their reason for enrolling. Using their prior experience can be a way to fast-track that career growth. This is especially true as 32 percent of respondents indicated that time to completion was an important factor in their enrollment decision-making process.

3. **Pay particular attention to reenrolling students who have stopped out.** More than 90 percent of respondents had stopped out before re-enrolling in an online program. This was true at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Nearly 40 percent of these respondents had been enrolled within the prior year. This includes 70 percent of undergraduate students who have some credit but no credential (with another 11 percent unaware of their credit status).

4. **Include marketing messaging related to career advancement.** Nearly all respondents had a career-focused motivation for their online program. Moreover, 72 percent of online college students had some level of agreement that their online program helped prepare them for their career. Additionally, 26 percent of respondents indicated that programs matching career objectives would attract them to one school over another.

5. **Feature flexible study options within online programs.** Most online college students are employed either full time (58%) or part time (21%). Additionally, many are new to the workforce and may not have the flexibility to adjust their work around their studies. These circumstances affect student engagement, with nearly 60 percent of respondents preferring to enroll in asynchronous study. Flexibility can even overcome cost, with 30 percent of respondents indicating they would enroll at a more expensive institution if the available format, schedule, or location were ideal.

6. **Offer topics in the high-demand areas students are seeking.** Online college student respondents continue to study Business most often. Health, Nursing, and Medicine remained the second-highest demand topic area. This was followed by topics in Computers and IT, Technology. Graduate student respondents are five percent more likely to enroll in Computer and IT, Technology programs than undergraduate students.

7. **Attract students from further away by offering unique or highly relevant programs.** While over 60 percent of respondents prefer to enroll at an institution within an hour of their home or office, two thirds did not consider distance to be of high importance. Nearly 60 percent indicated they would enroll anywhere that had the right program for them.

8. **Contact inquiring students rapidly to match the speed of their decision-making process.** Consideration sets are small, and inquiry sets are even smaller. About 67 percent of respondents only inquired with one or two institutions and 45 percent only applied to one school. Students also make these decisions rapidly, with 55 percent making inquiries within three weeks of identifying schools of interest. Once students decide where they want to apply, 50 percent do so within one week and 80 percent enroll at the school that admits them first.

9. **Offer frequent start dates to meet student expectations.** More than 50 percent of respondents expect courses to begin within one month of when they are admitted, including 15 percent who expect courses to begin within one week.

10. **Make websites user friendly and update them frequently with pertinent information.** School websites, despite being consulted by more than 90% of prospective students, often bury crucial information like programs (44% easily found) and tuition (36% easily found). Simplifying access to this data, especially as 60% prioritize tuition costs, would undoubtedly influence enrollment decisions. Additionally, implementing helpful on-site chat options (utilized by 43%, particularly in graduate programs) could prove beneficial, as 43% of respondents utilized on-site chat features and 90% of users found them valuable.

11. **Optimize college websites for discoverability in search and ease of navigation.** More than 40 percent of respondents began their search using Google and another nearly 40 percent went directly to school websites to start their search. Clearly, schools need to be visible online so they can enter a potential students consideration set early in the process.

12. **Include financial topics in your conversations with prospective students.** Enrollment coaches should be well versed in payment and financing options and be prepared to help students navigate their financial options. Throughout this study, respondents cited the importance of tuition and fees in their enrollment decisions. More than 60 percent of online college students indicated that affordability was important when considering schools, including 37 percent who said it was the most important factor. Cost of tuition and fees was a top enrollment decision factor for 50 percent of respondents. One-third of students who delayed applying did so because they felt they were not ready to shoulder the financial burden of enrollment. Payment plans and scholarships can help mitigate this issue. When choosing between two similar programs, 27 percent of respondents indicated that they would enroll at a school that offered a payment plan and 21 percent would do so if awarded higher tuition and grants. Additionally, one-quarter of respondents cited availability of scholarships, fellowships, and assistantships as important in their enrollment decision. Among respondents, 40 percent did enroll in the lowest cost program, but the other 60 percent took flexibility, programming, and reputational factors into account. However, only 33 percent of students who have completed their program strongly agree that it was worth the tuition they paid.

13. **Engage prospective students from awareness to consideration and beyond using social media.** Nearly all respondents are active on social media, with accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok being the most common. Among those who use social media, 40 percent followed schools that they had an interest in enrolling in and more than 75 percent followed or "liked" schools they were considering. About 10 percent sought information about schools of interest on various social media platforms.

14. **Build awareness using streaming media platforms.** Online college students use YouTube, Spotify, YouTube TV, Netflix, and Hulu daily. These five streaming media platforms are also used by the largest number of online college students. Online college students are increasingly open to streaming media platforms that allow for advertising. About 70 percent of respondents utilize primarily ad-supported streaming services.

Section 1:
Who Are They? Demographics and Attributes of Online College Students

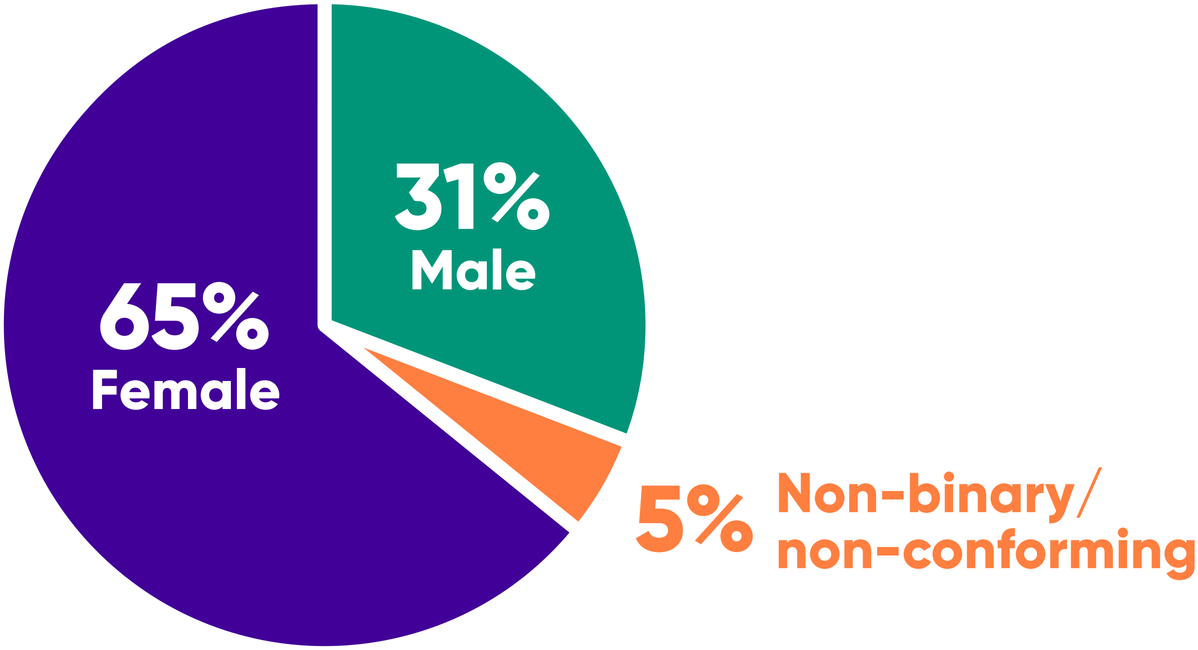
Meeting the needs of online college students starts with understanding who they are. Respondents span a range of income levels and ages, but the majority do share some characteristics. In general, respondents tended to be female, white and employed, with no children living at home. Most are not the first in their family to enroll in college. The majority enroll in their state of residence and tend to live in suburban areas throughout the country.

Undergraduate respondents are most commonly white women with a median age of 29 who are not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin. More than half are single, and 49 percent have no children living at home. About half are employed full time, with the largest proportion working 40 hours per week. They have a median of five to six years of work experience and a median household income of $48,400.

Graduate respondents reported a median age of 32 and a similar racial and ethnic background to undergraduate respondents. Just over half are married or partnered, the majority with at least one child living at home. The largest proportion works 40 hours per week and 65% are employed full time. They have a median of five to six years of work experience and a median household income of $65,350. They are not the first in their family to enroll in college and live in suburban and urban areas throughout the country.

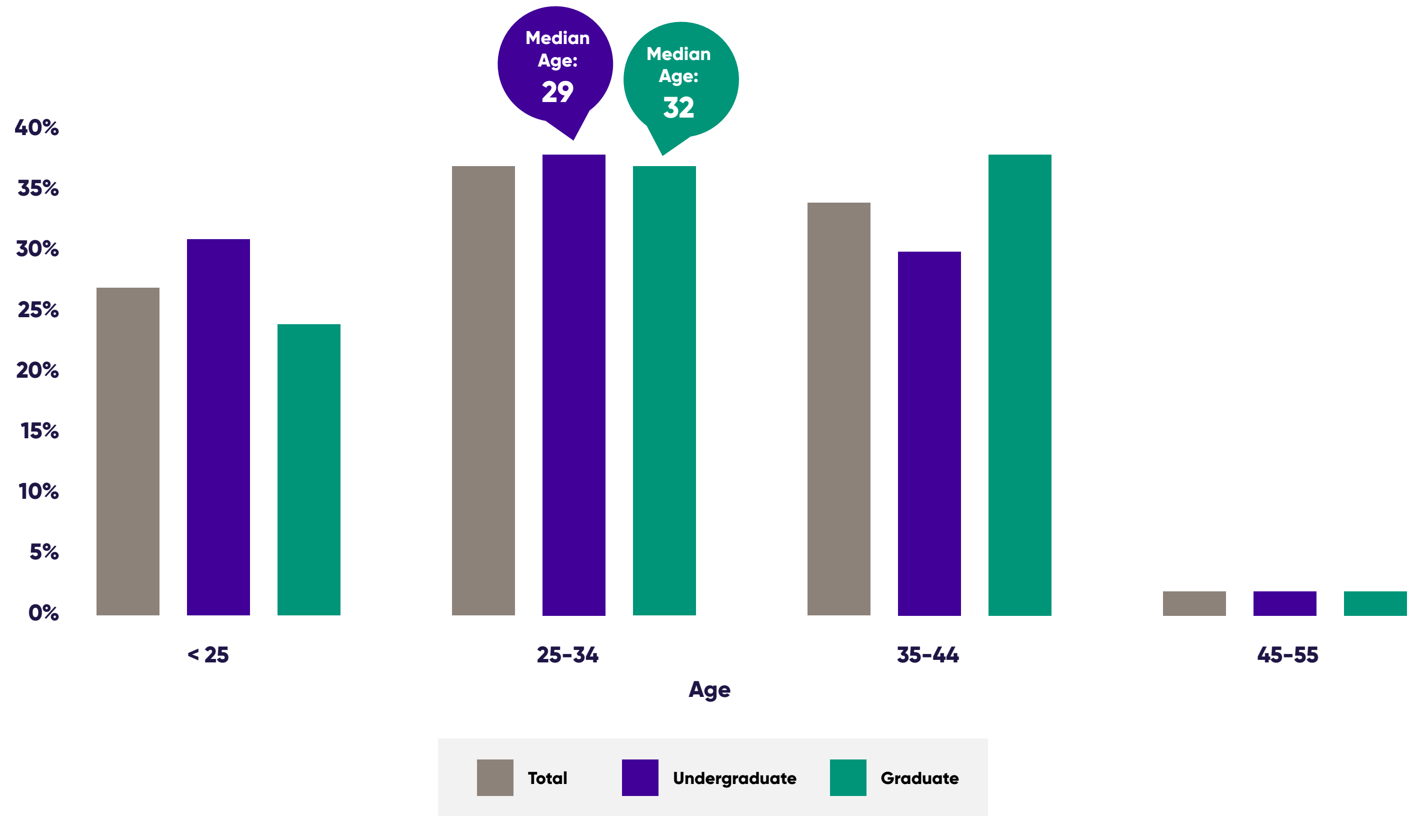
Gender

Women dominate both the undergraduate and graduate online student sample surveyed, making up almost two-thirds of the respondents. Five percent of respondents identify as non-binary/non-confirming. One percent preferred not to answer.



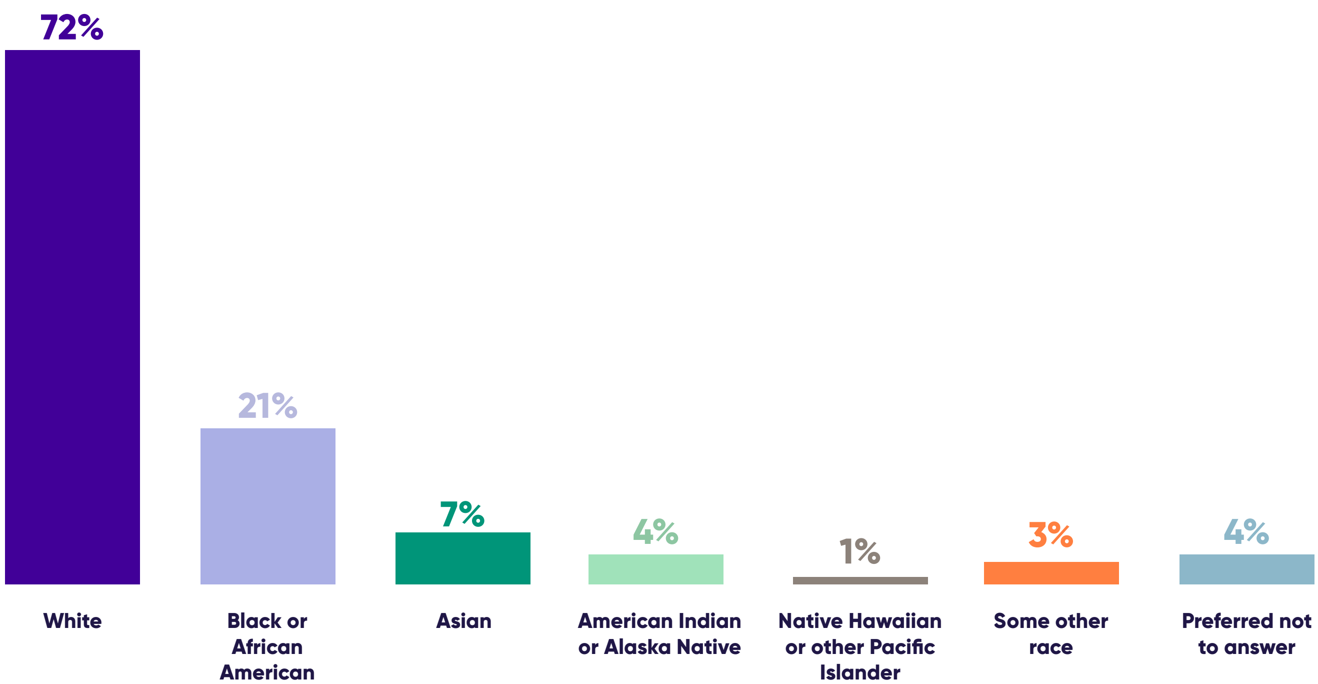
Age

Respondents are 45 years of age or younger. About 31 percent of undergraduate and 24 percent of graduate online students surveyed are under 25 years of age. Both the undergraduate and graduate online student populations are widely distributed by age. However, the median age of undergraduate respondents is 29, and the median age of graduate respondents is 32.

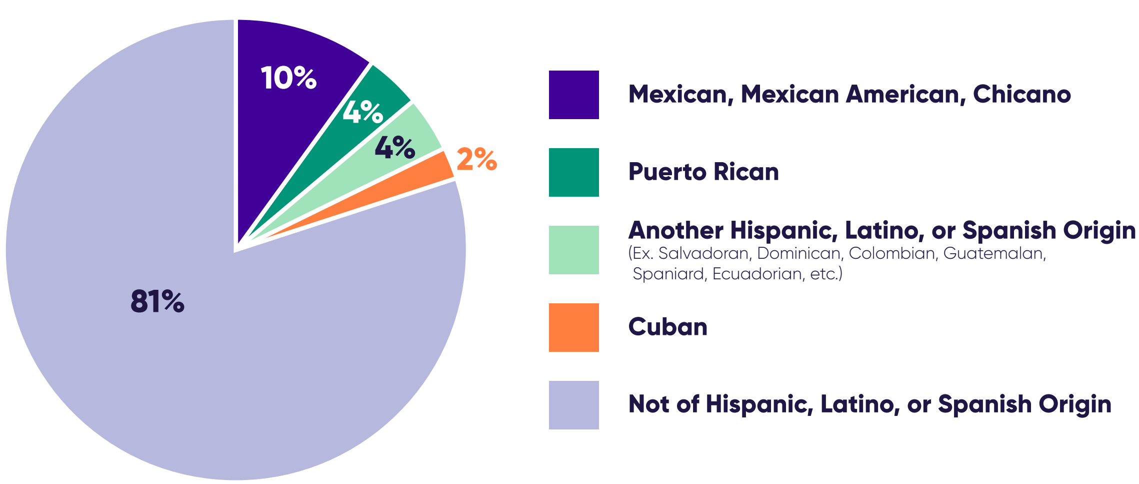


Race and Ethnicity

We asked respondents to identify their race and provided the opportunity to select all that applied. Four percent of survey respondents preferred not to answer. Of those who identified one or more races, 72 percent identify as White, while 21 percent identify as Black or African American. Respondents also identified as Asian (7%), American Indian or Alaska Native (4%), and Native American or other Pacific Islander (1%). Three percent of respondents identified with Some other Race.



Separately, we asked if respondents identified as being of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin. Twenty percent of respondents identified as such. Of those, about half (10% of respondents) identified as Mexican, Mexican American, and/or Chicano.

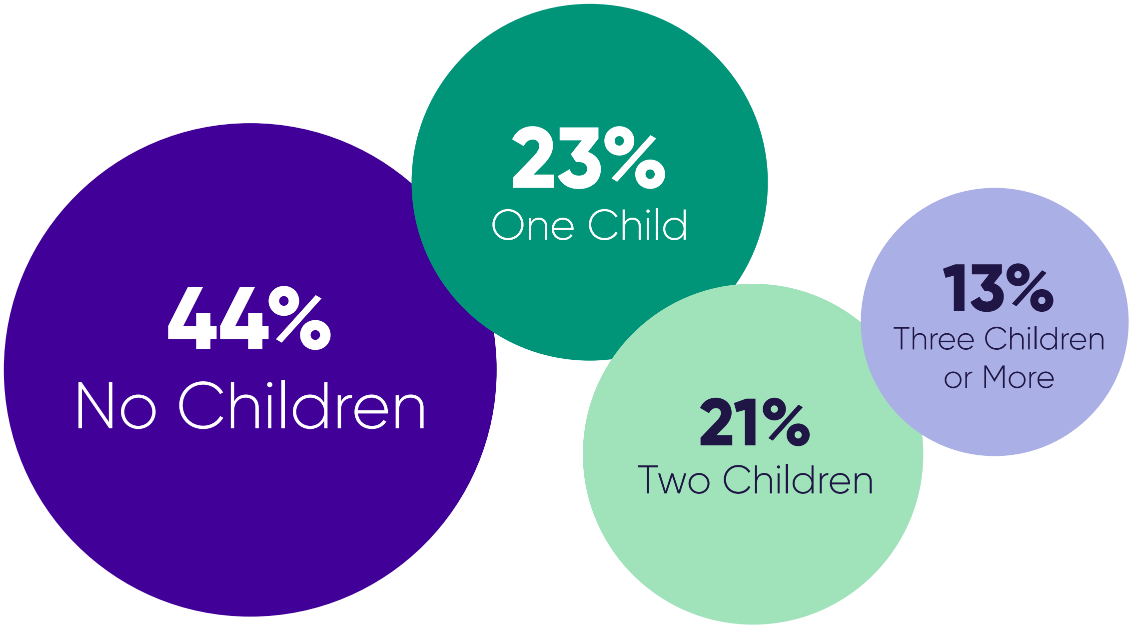


Marital Status

About 60 percent of undergraduate and about 50 percent of graduate online students surveyed are single.

Children Under 18 In Household

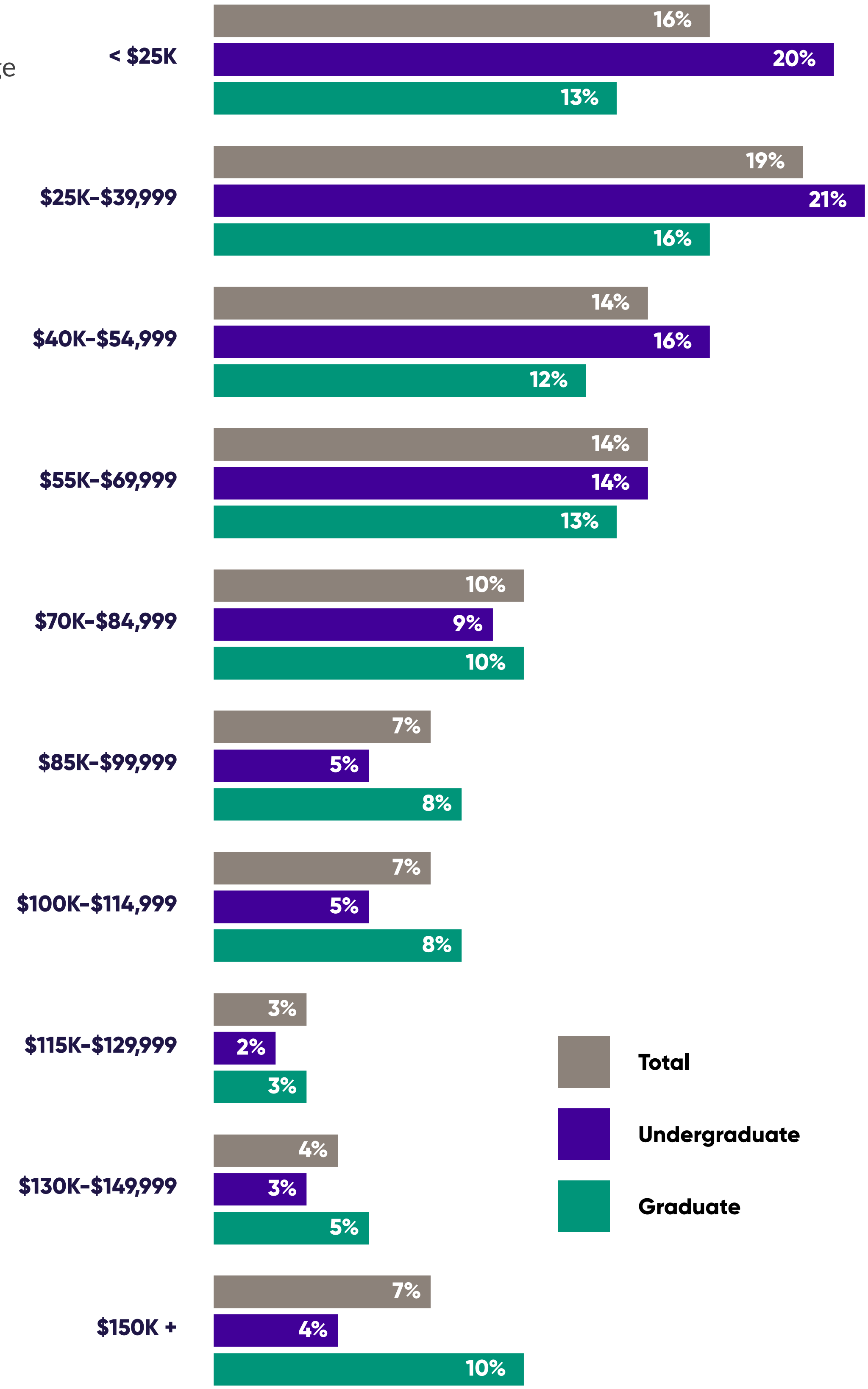
The largest proportion of the respondents do not have children under the age of 18 living at home. Almost 50 percent of undergraduate students and almost 40 percent of graduate students have no children at home. Graduate students are slightly more likely to have at least one child in the home.



Total Household Income

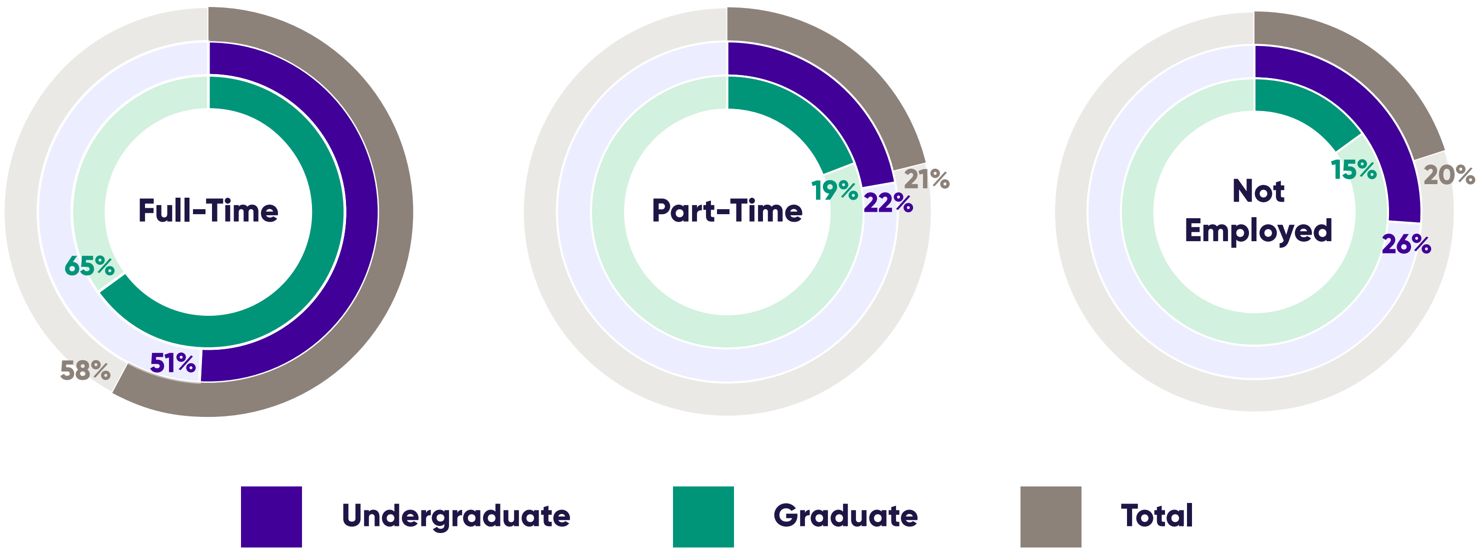
The median household income for online college students surveyed is $56,050.

Among undergraduate students surveyed, the median household income is $48,400, compared to $65,350 among graduate students.



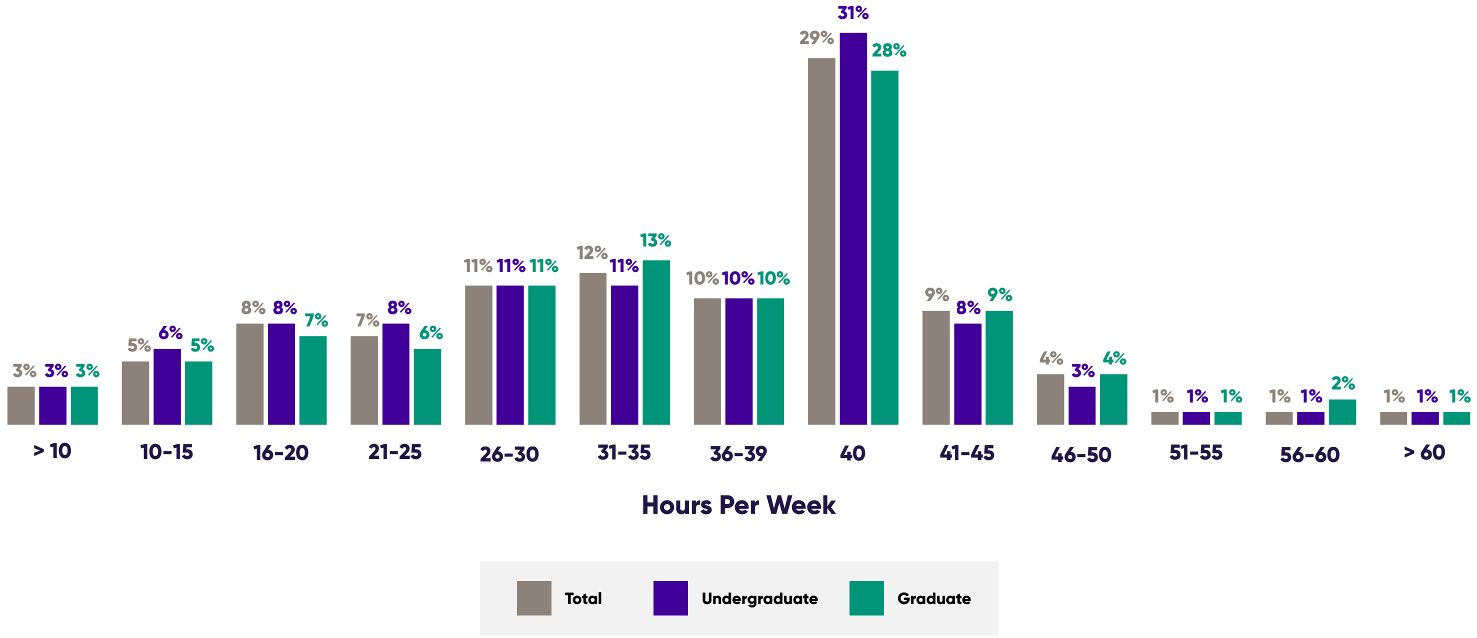
Employment Status

Just under 60 percent of all online college students surveyed are employed full time. Graduate students are more likely to have full-time employment than undergraduate students. About one quarter of undergraduate online student respondents are unemployed compared to just 15% of graduate respondents.



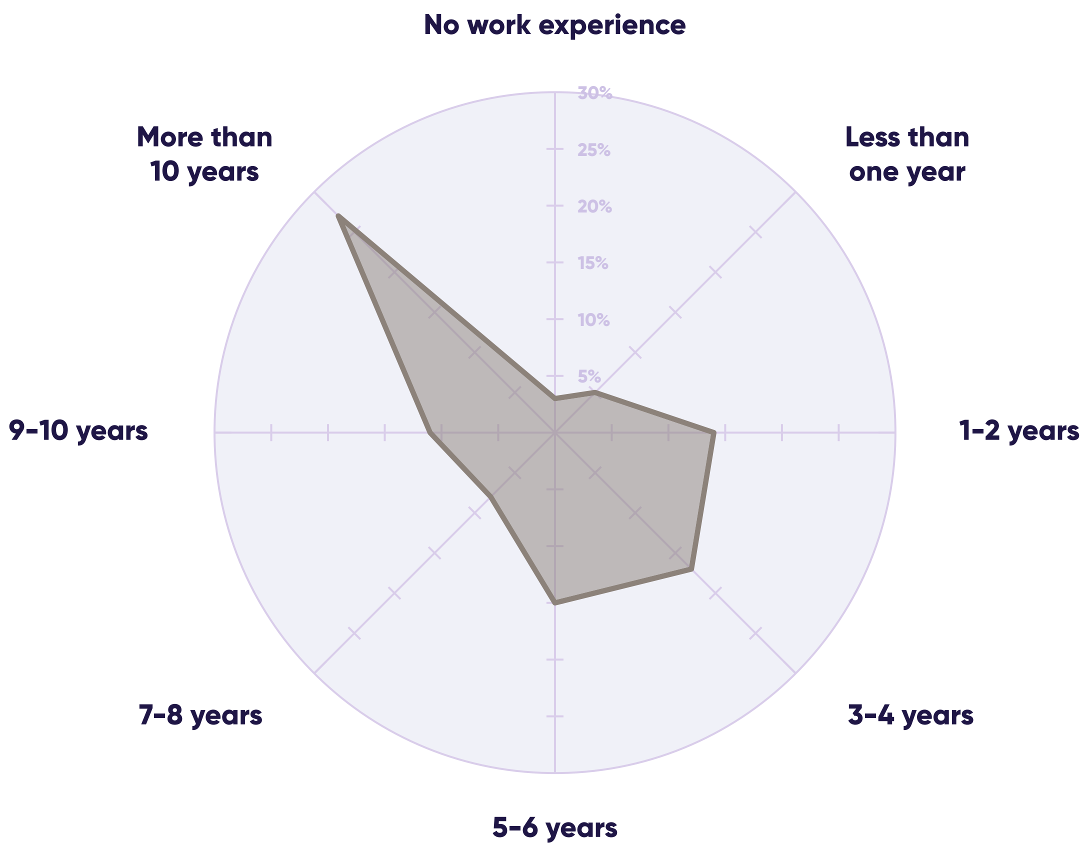
Hours Per Week Spent Working

The largest proportion of respondents who are employed work 40 hours a week. Sixteen percent of employed respondents work more than 40 hours per week in addition to managing their online class load.



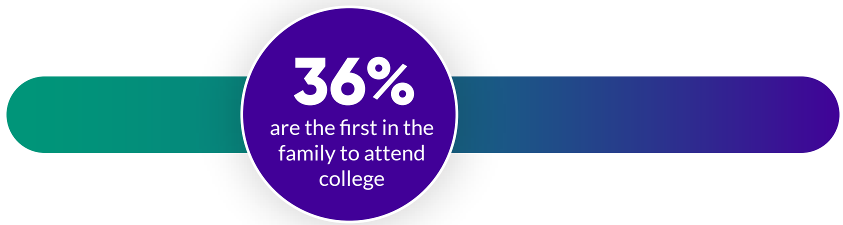
Work Experience

About 80 percent of both undergraduate and graduate students surveyed reported that they have three or more years of work experience, with a median of five or six years. The largest proportion, 27 percent, has more than ten years of work experience. Students who are newer to their careers may not have the same job flexibility as longer tenured professionals enjoy. Online programs can better attract these students by offering flexible programs.



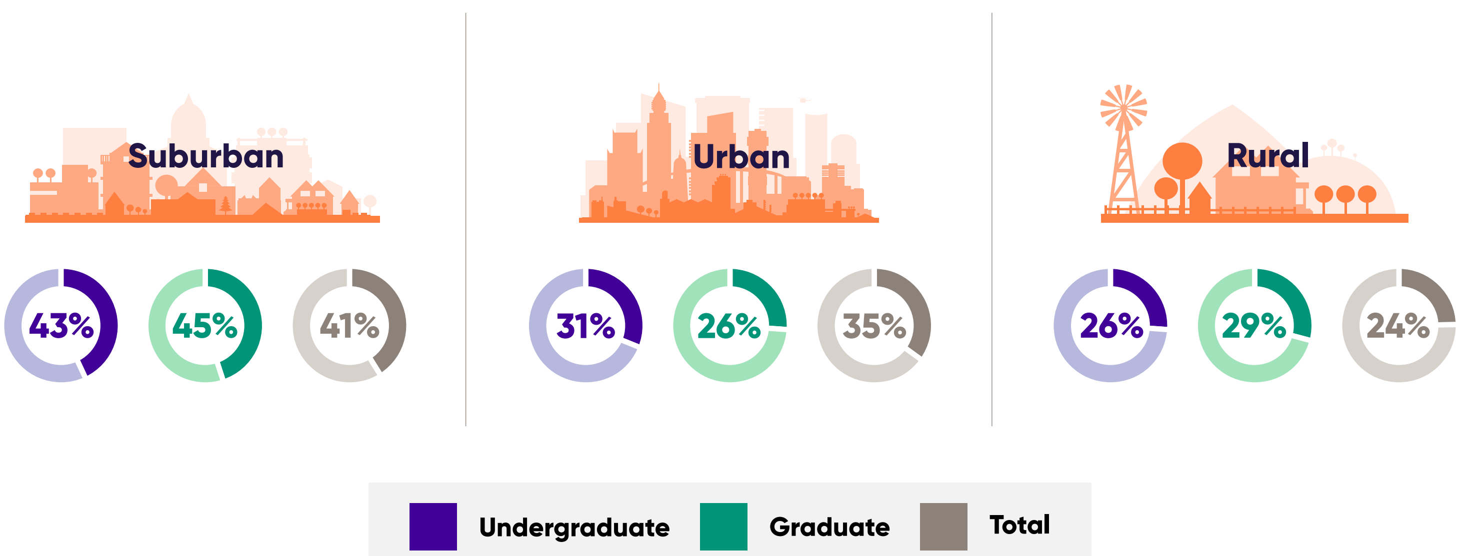
First in Family to Attend College

Most respondents come from families with prior college experience. Almost two thirds of respondents are not the first in their family to attend college.



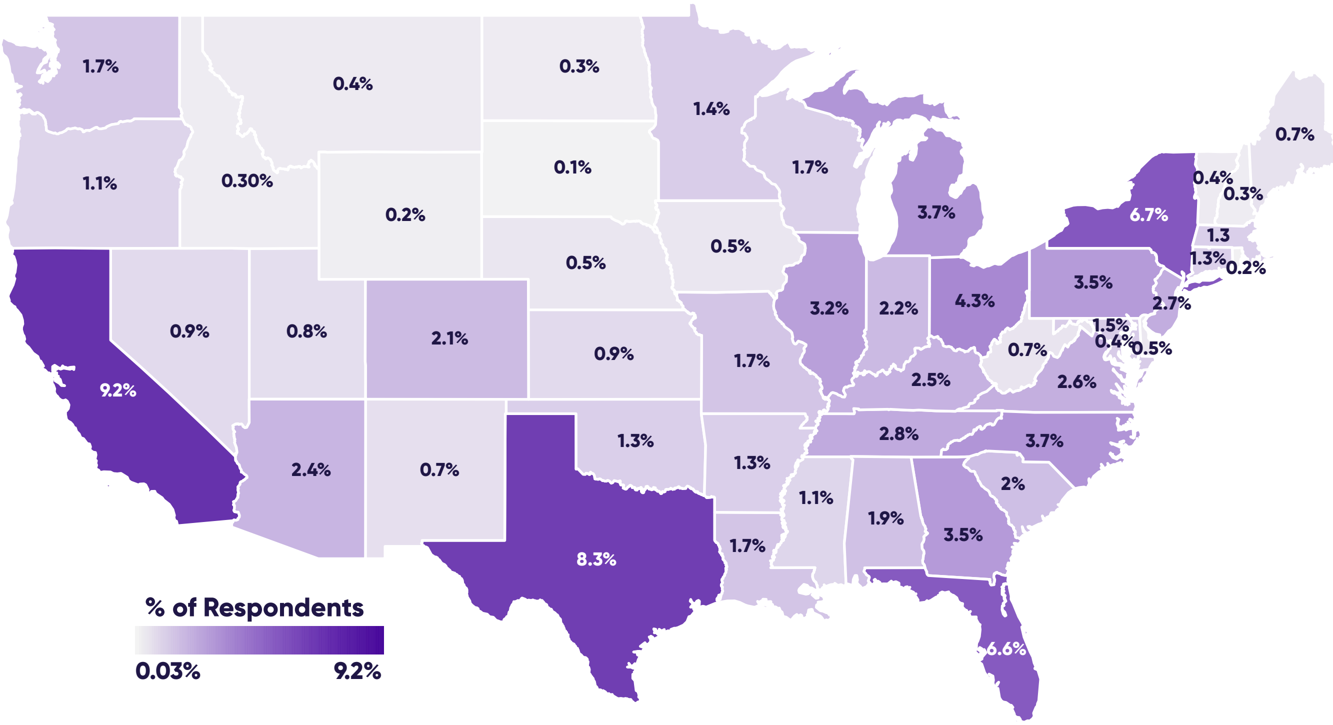
Type of Location of Residence

The largest proportion of online college students surveyed, 43 percent, resides in suburban areas. Among those outside the suburbs, more graduate respondents live in urban areas, while more undergraduates live in rural areas.



State of Residence

The largest proportions of respondents live in California, Texas, Florida and New York. No respondents in this survey live in Alaska, Montana, Washington, D.C. or Vermont.

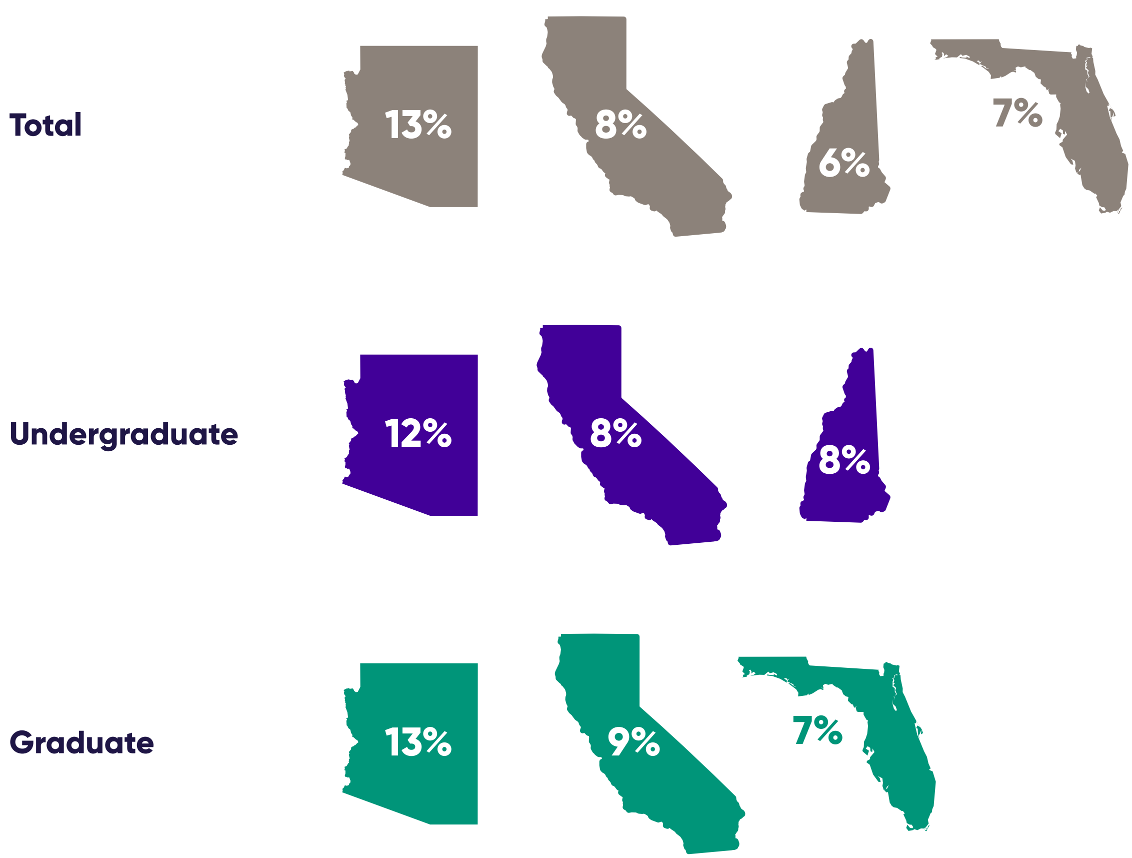


Enrolled in State of Residence

The majority of online college students surveyed enroll in their state of residence.

State of Enrollment

The largest number of students surveyed are enrolled in schools located in Arizona. The next highest-enrollment states are California, Florida, and New Hampshire. This pattern follows the location of some institutions with popular online programs.
These data suggest that institutions based in Arizona and New Hampshire enroll out-of-state students since the largest proportions of respondents live in California, Texas, Florida, and New York.



Section 2:
What, Why & Where Online College Students Study

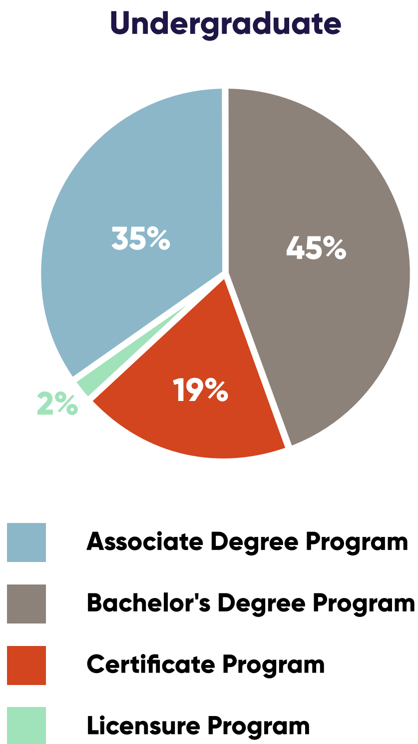
Career Objective

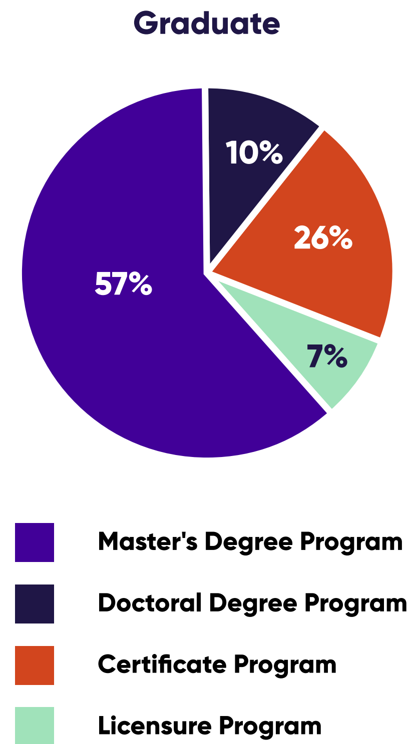
Over 40 percent of online students surveyed enroll primarily to start a new career to earn more money, while another 22 percent enroll to start a new career more aligned with their interests. Undergraduate students are more likely to say they want to get their first professional/salaried job (13%), while graduate students are motivated to get a promotion within their current profession (16%). In total, 98% of respondents indicated that they enrolled for a career-focused reason.

Career Objective	Undergraduate	Graduate	Total
To start a new career to earn more money	45%	40%	42%
To start a new career more aligned with my interests	23%	21%	22%
To get my first professional/salaried job	13%	9%	11%
To get a promotion within my current profession	6%	16%	11%
To increase my salary within my current profession	7%	10%	9%
It is required by my employer /to keep my current job	1%	2%	1%
Something else	2%	1%	1%
I do not have a career objective for this degree	3%	1%	2%

Type of Study

Most online college students are seeking a degree rather than a certificate or licensure. However, graduate online students are more likely to enroll in certificate/licensure study (33%) than their undergraduate counterparts (21%). In total, certificate study comprises close to 30 percent of the total market, indicating an opportunity for schools to further expand online certificate and stackable credential programs.



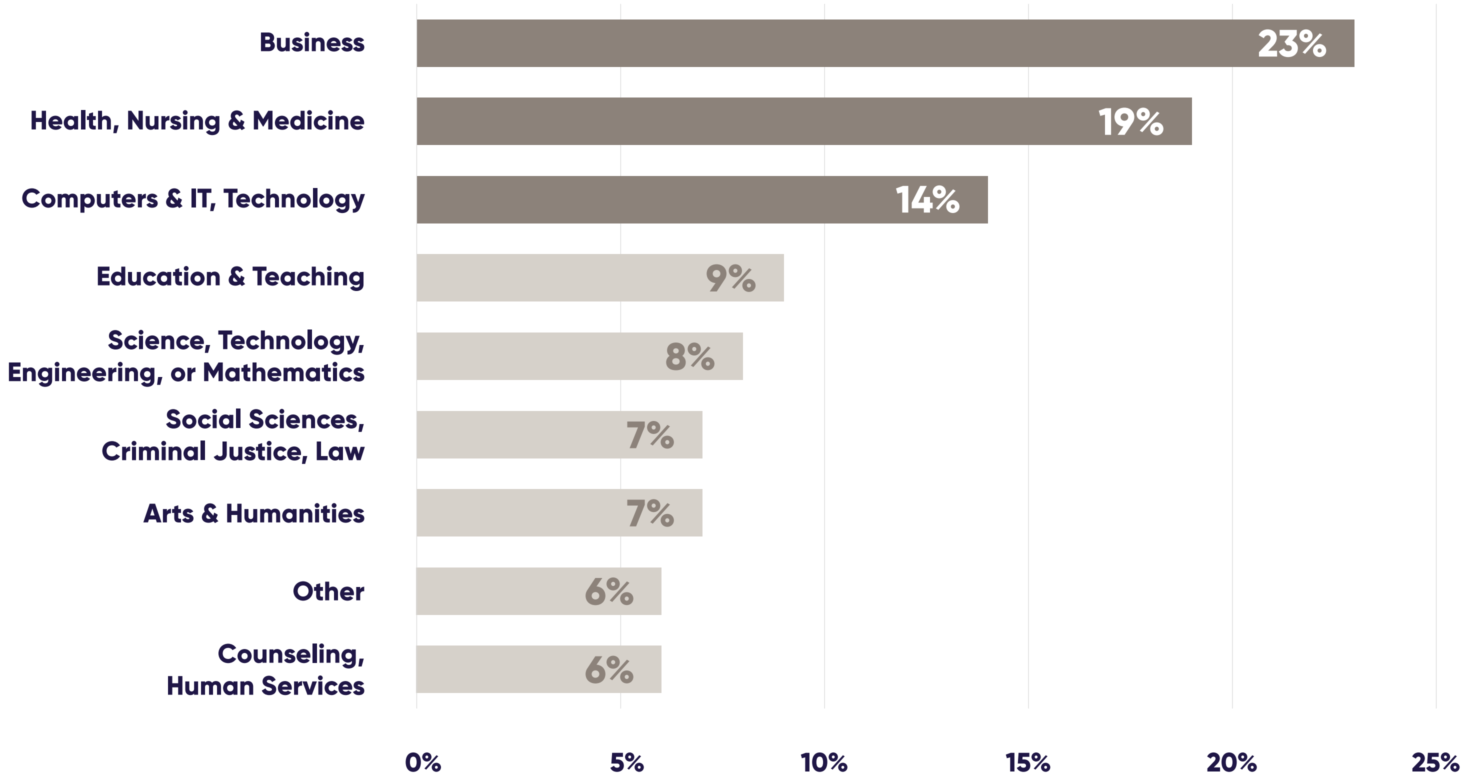


Knew Professional Area/Career Pursuit Before Enrolling: Undergraduate

Undergraduate student respondents generally knew the professional area or career they would pursue before they enrolled or considered enrolling. This, again, speaks to the career motivations of online college students.

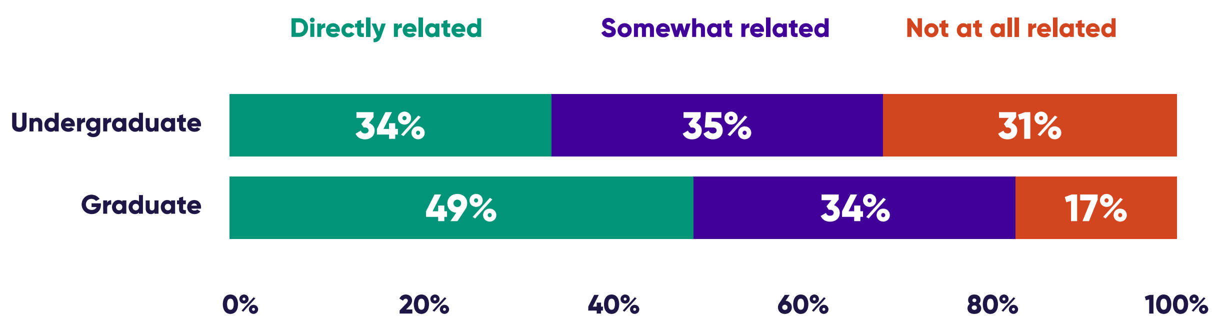
Subject Field of Study

Online college students surveyed most often study Business (23%), followed by Health, Nursing and Medicine (19%), and Computers & IT, Technology (14%). Together, these three fields account for 56 percent of the online college student market.



Subject Field Related to Employment

Approximately 73 percent of surveyed undergraduate students are employed. Among these, nearly equal proportions (31-35% each) are studying a subject field that directly relates, somewhat relates, or doesn't at all relate to their current job. On the other hand, among the 84 percent of graduate students who are employed, about half are studying a subject field that directly relates to their job, while 34 percent are studying a subject field that only somewhat relates to their current job. Students studying in fields not related to their job may be seeking a new career.



Statements of Educational Satisfaction: Total

In general, surveyed online college students who completed their studies indicate that institutions could improve upon several key areas. Using a five-point scale where 1 indicates *strongly disagree* and 5 indicates *strongly agree*, students agreed that their degree/certificate helped them prepare for their career and that they are at least somewhat satisfied with their educational experience. However, only between 30 and 40 percent of respondents had high levels of agreement with statements about their satisfaction with outcomes and value.

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Average Rating
My degree/certificate helped me prepare for my career.	5%	9%	14%	36%	36%	3.9
I am satisfied with my educational experience.	5%	8%	14%	36%	37%	3.9
The degree/certificate I earned helped me get started in my career.	7%	8%	17%	33%	36%	3.8
My degree/certificate is worth the tuition I paid.	7%	12%	17%	31%	33%	3.7
I was prepared to begin my career when I graduated.	6%	11%	17%	35%	31%	3.7

Statements of Educational Satisfaction: Undergraduate

Undergraduate respondents who completed their program are slightly less satisfied with their educational experience than graduate students, with average ratings ranging from 3.5 to 3.8. They agreed most strongly that their degree/certificate helped them prepare for their career and that they are satisfied with their educational experience, statements that both achieved a 3.8 average rating. The lowest rated statement was the value of their education.

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Average Rating
My degree/certificate helped me prepare for my career.	6%	11%	16%	36%	32%	3.8
I am satisfied with my educational experience.	5%	11%	15%	37%	32%	3.8
The degree/certificate I earned helped me get started in my career.	8%	9%	19%	32%	33%	3.7
I was prepared to begin my career when I graduated.	8%	12%	19%	35%	26%	3.6
My degree/certificate is worth the tuition I paid.	8%	15%	19%	32%	27%	3.5

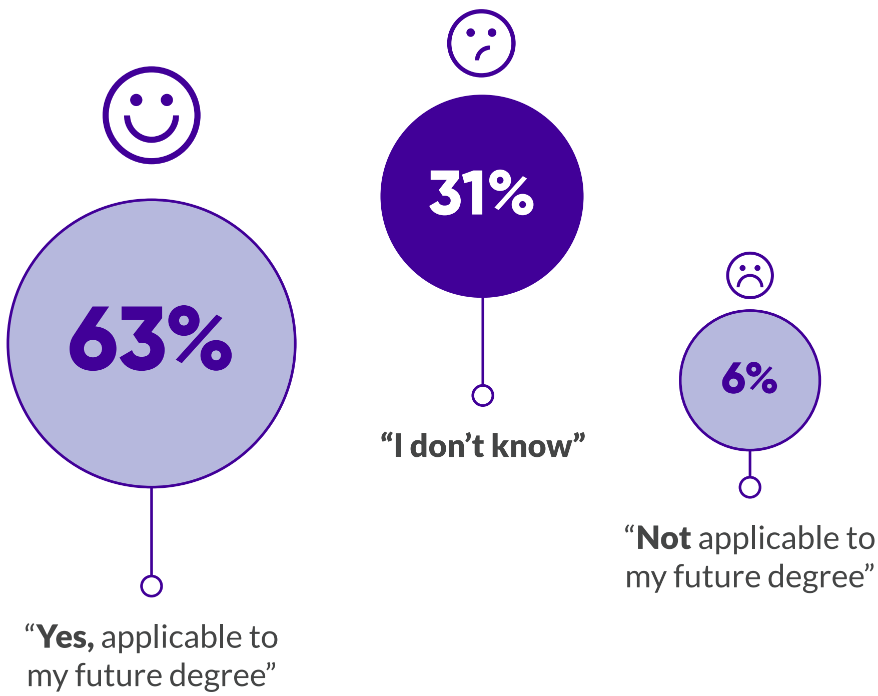
Statements of Educational Satisfaction: Graduates

Statements of satisfaction by surveyed graduate students achieve average ratings ranging from 3.8 to 4.0, higher than their undergraduate counterparts. They agreed most strongly that their degree/certificate helped them prepare for their career, the degree/certificate they earned helped them get started in their career, and they are satisfied with their educational experience. Each of these statements achieved a 4.0 average rating. Again, the lowest rated statement was the value of the degree/certificate.

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Average Rating
My degree/certificate helped me prepare for my career.	4%	8%	12%	36%	41%	4.0
The degree/certificate I earned helped me get started in my career.	5%	6%	15%	34%	39%	4.0
I am satisfied with my educational experience.	5%	6%	12%	36%	42%	4.0
I was prepared to begin my career when I graduated.	5%	9%	15%	35%	37%	3.9
My degree/certificate is worth the tuition I paid.	7%	9%	16%	30%	39%	3.8

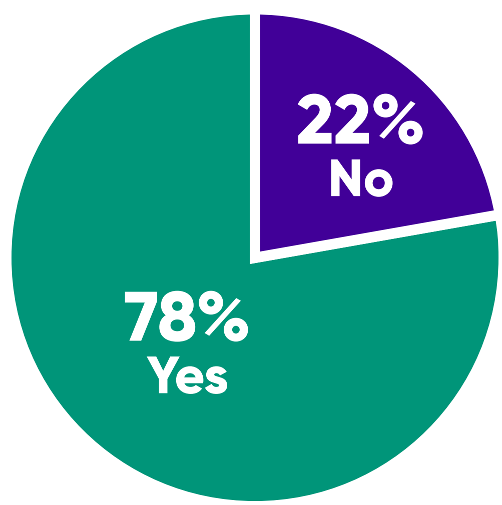
Non-Degree Credential Applicable to Future Degree

The majority of respondents who studied in a certificate or license program reported that they can apply those credits toward a future degree or that their credential is considered "stackable." Concerningly, more than 30 percent of respondents weren't sure whether their credential could be applied to future degree programs. Marketing stackable credential programs to non-degree students may improve enrollment in, and satisfaction with, these programs. It could also encourage students to see the long-term value of credentials that can lead to a degree.



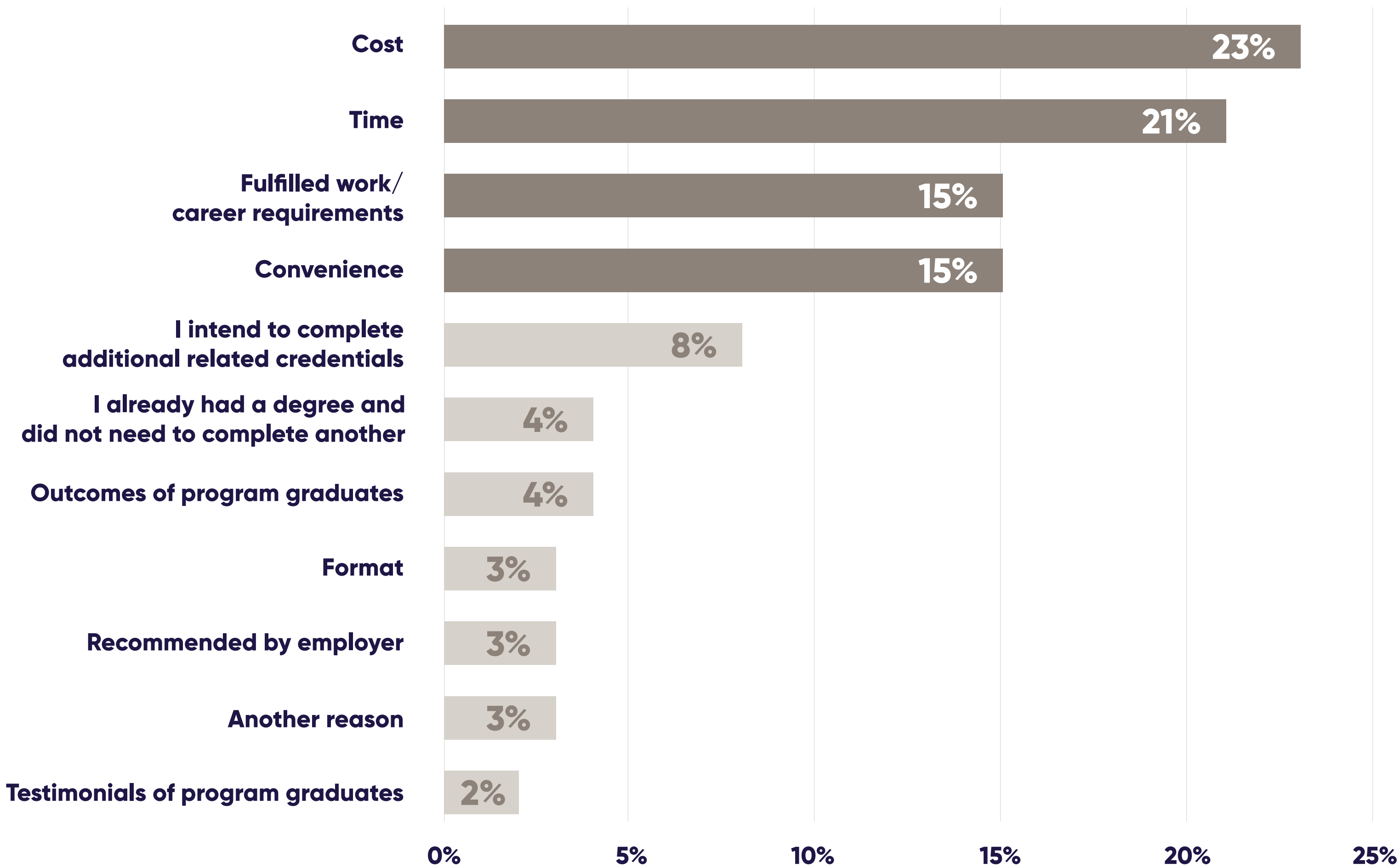
Intend to Pursue Additional Study in Same/Related Field – Non-degree Study

About 80 percent of respondents who were in certificate or license study programs plan to pursue additional credentials or a degree in the same or related field of study. This shows an opportunity for colleges to offer, and market, stackable certificates.



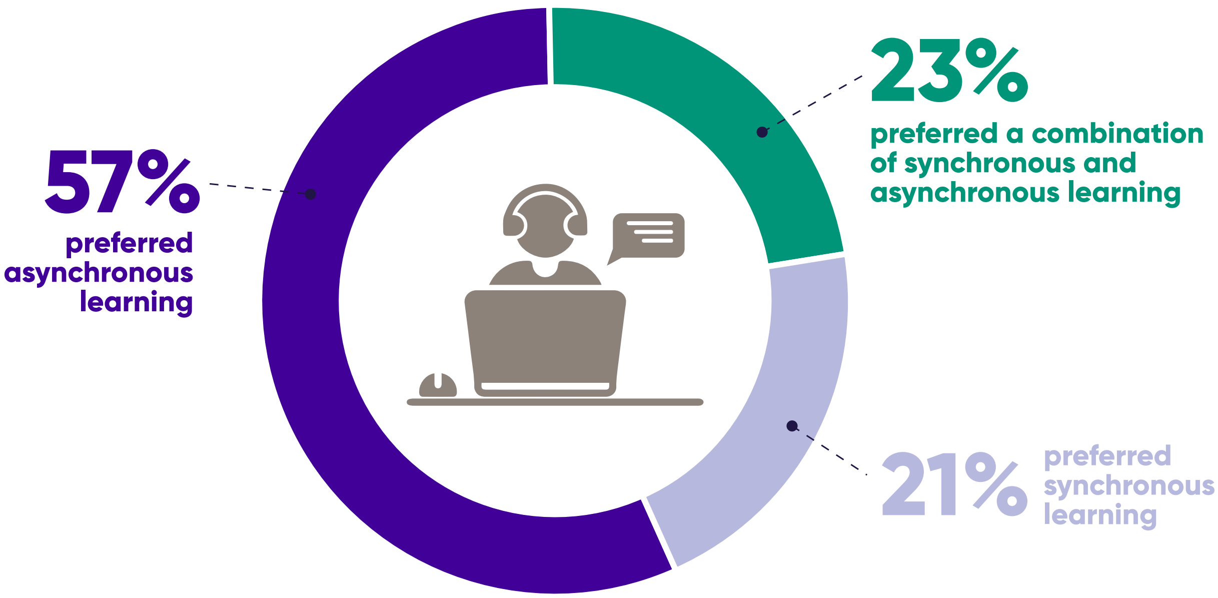
Reason for Choosing Certificate/License Over Degree Program

Respondents who choose certificate or license study decided not to enroll in a degree program for several reasons. Cost (23%) and time (21%) were cited most often. Some chose certificates and licenses to fulfill work or career requirements while others were more focused on the convenience of the program. Positioning non-degree options as lower cost and quicker to complete, while still fulfilling work and career requirements, speaks to the primary motivations of these students.



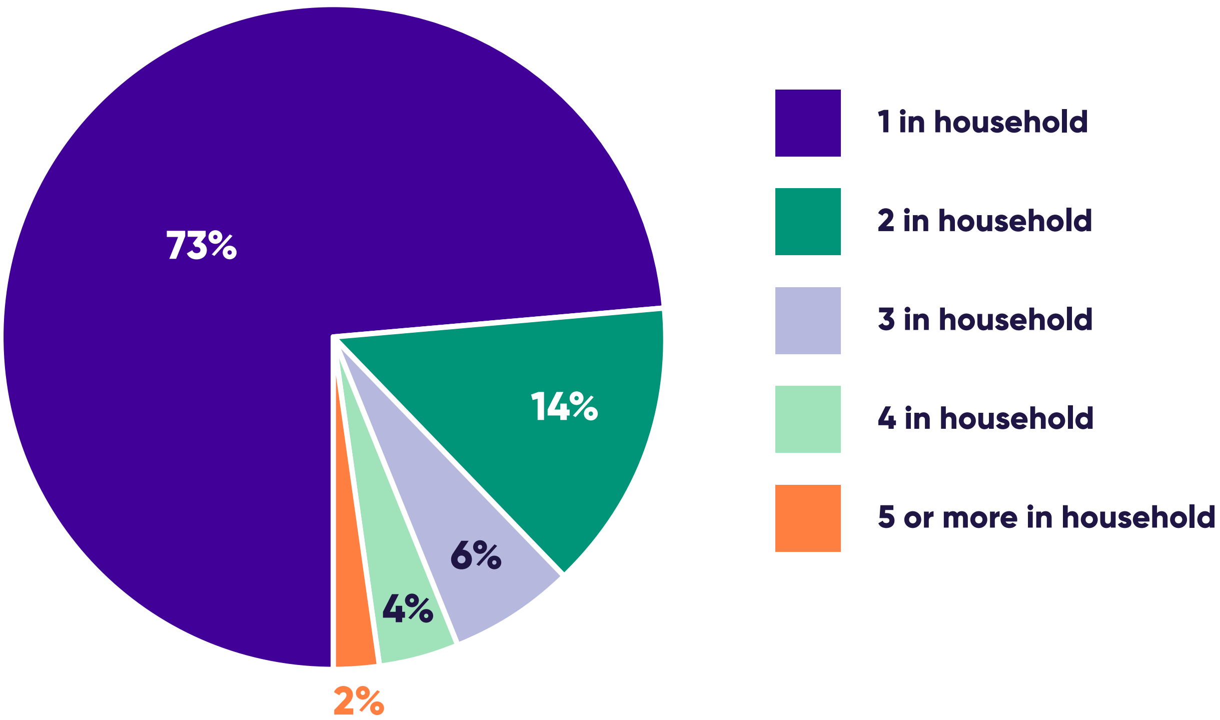
Preferred Delivery of Online Program

A slight majority of respondents (57%) prefer to enroll in asynchronous online courses, which they can access at any time. The remaining respondents are split between a preference for synchronous study (21%) and a combination of asynchronous and synchronous study (23%). Slightly more graduate students than undergraduate students prefer synchronous study, but overall there is not a strong difference.



Number in Household Enrolled in College Program at Time of Enrollment

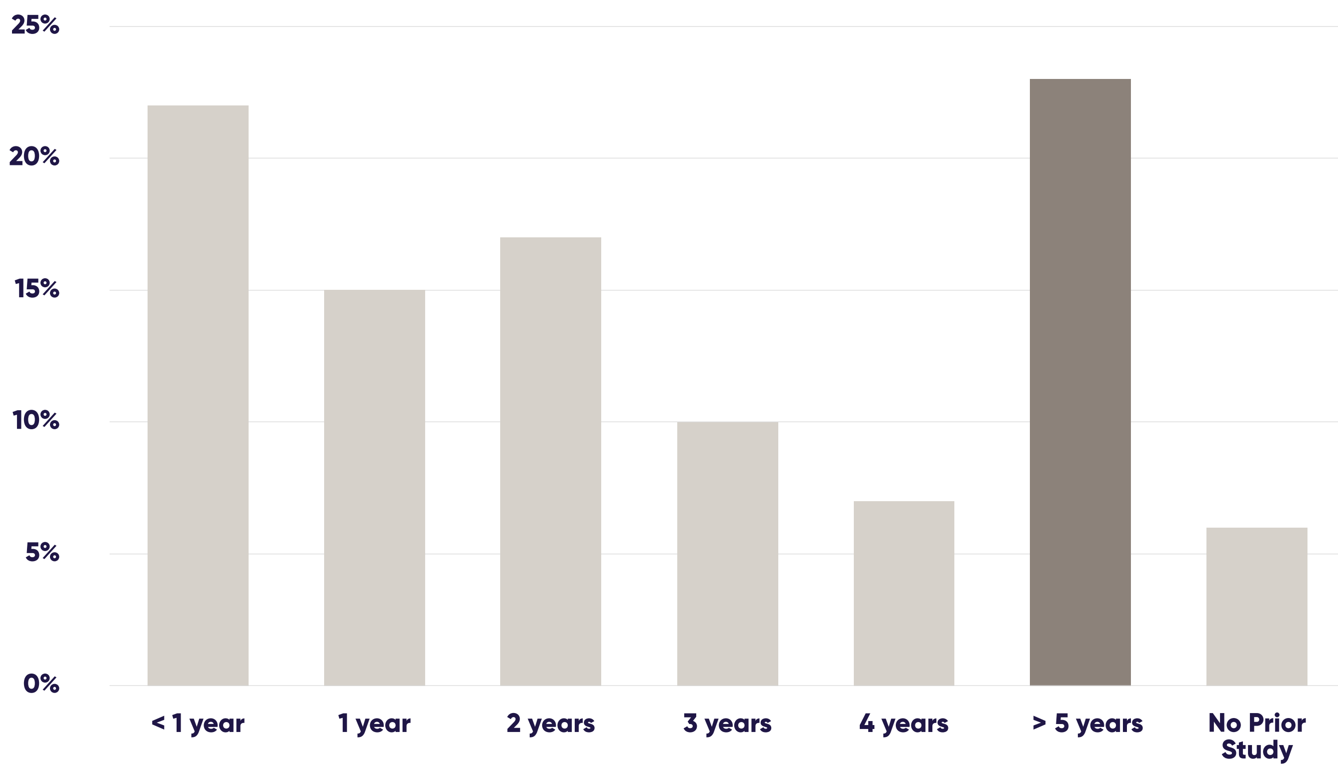
The majority of respondents were the only one in their household currently enrolled in college-level study. In total, more than 25 percent of respondents are in the same household as someone else who is also engaged in studies. This may create complications for students who are relying on the same resources (such as computers) to complete their studies.



PRIOR COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

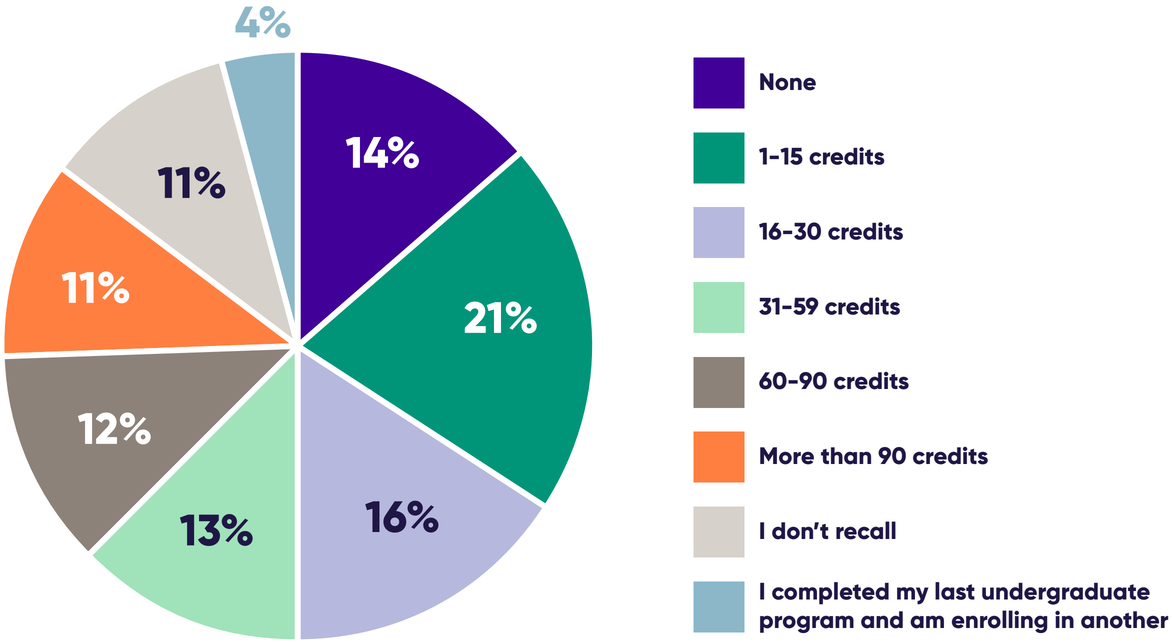
Time Elapsed Since Previous Post-Secondary Study

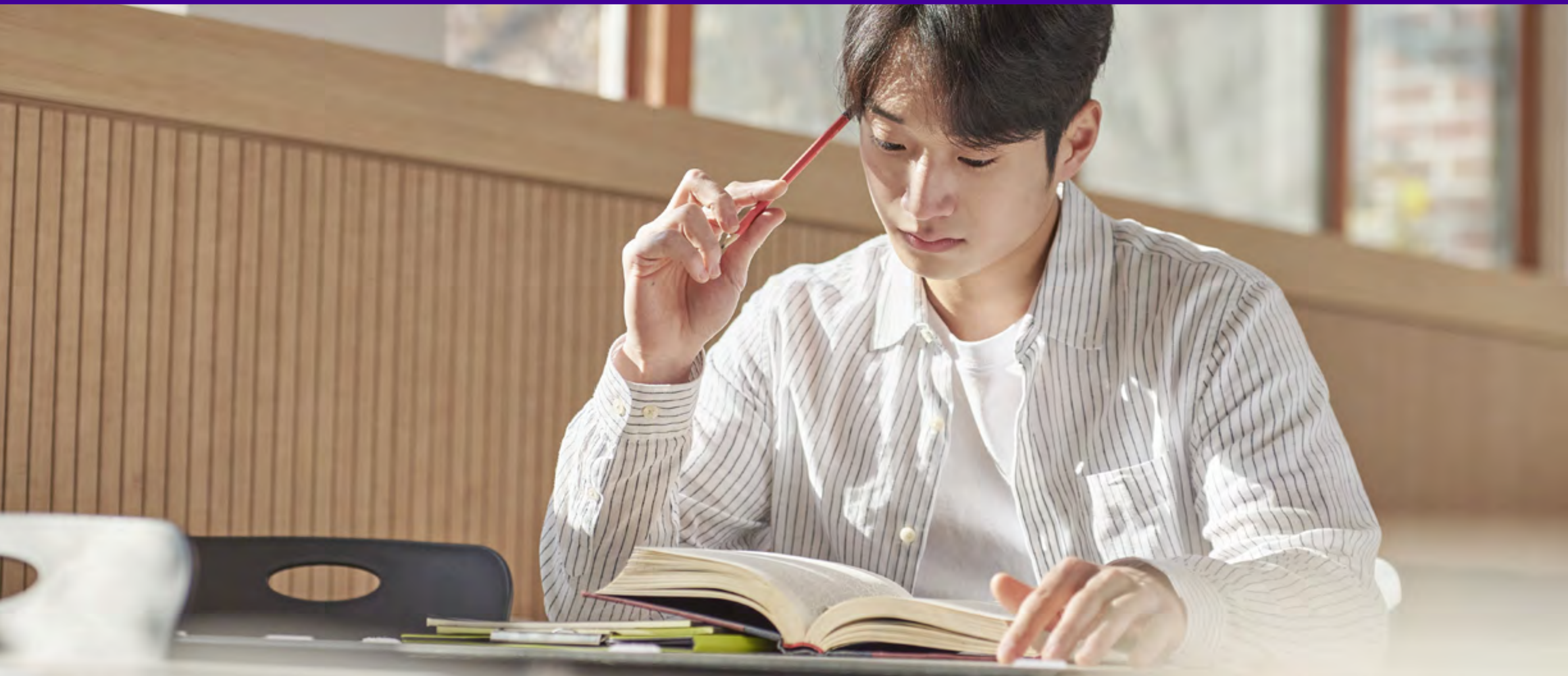
More than 90 percent of respondents have been enrolled in post-secondary study previously. Just over half of respondents (54%) were enrolled within the past two years. However, for a substantial proportion (23%) it's been at least five years since they were last enrolled. There may be a difference in learning attributes among students who were more recently enrolled compared to those who were out of school for longer periods of time.



Number of Undergraduate Credits Earned

Most undergraduate respondents who had previously enrolled in post-secondary study, but did not complete their program, had earned undergraduate credits. The largest proportion (21%) earned 1-15 credits, while an additional 16 percent earned 16-30 credits. This indicates a large some credit, no credential population that schools can reach out to.

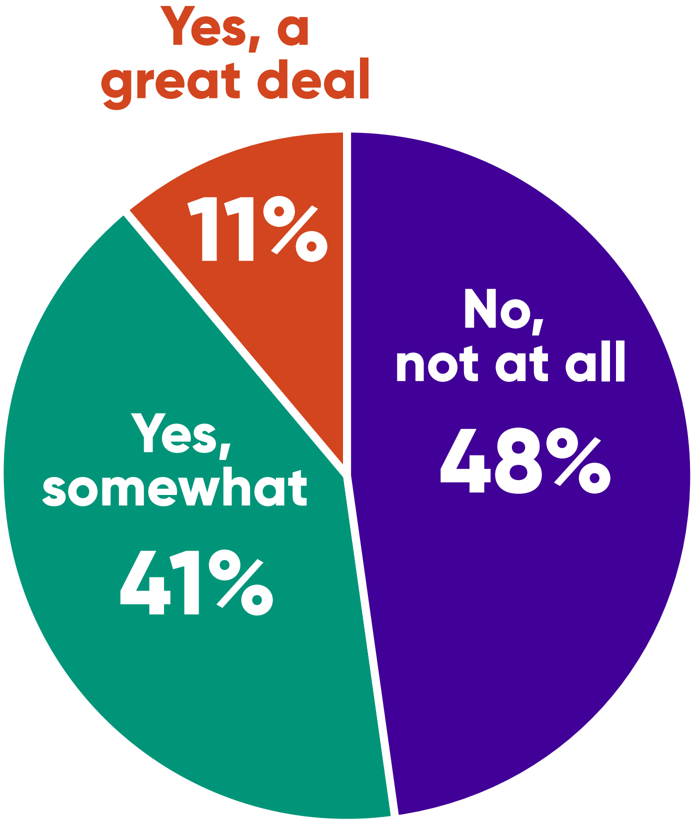




Impact of Previously Earned College Credit on Enrollment Decision

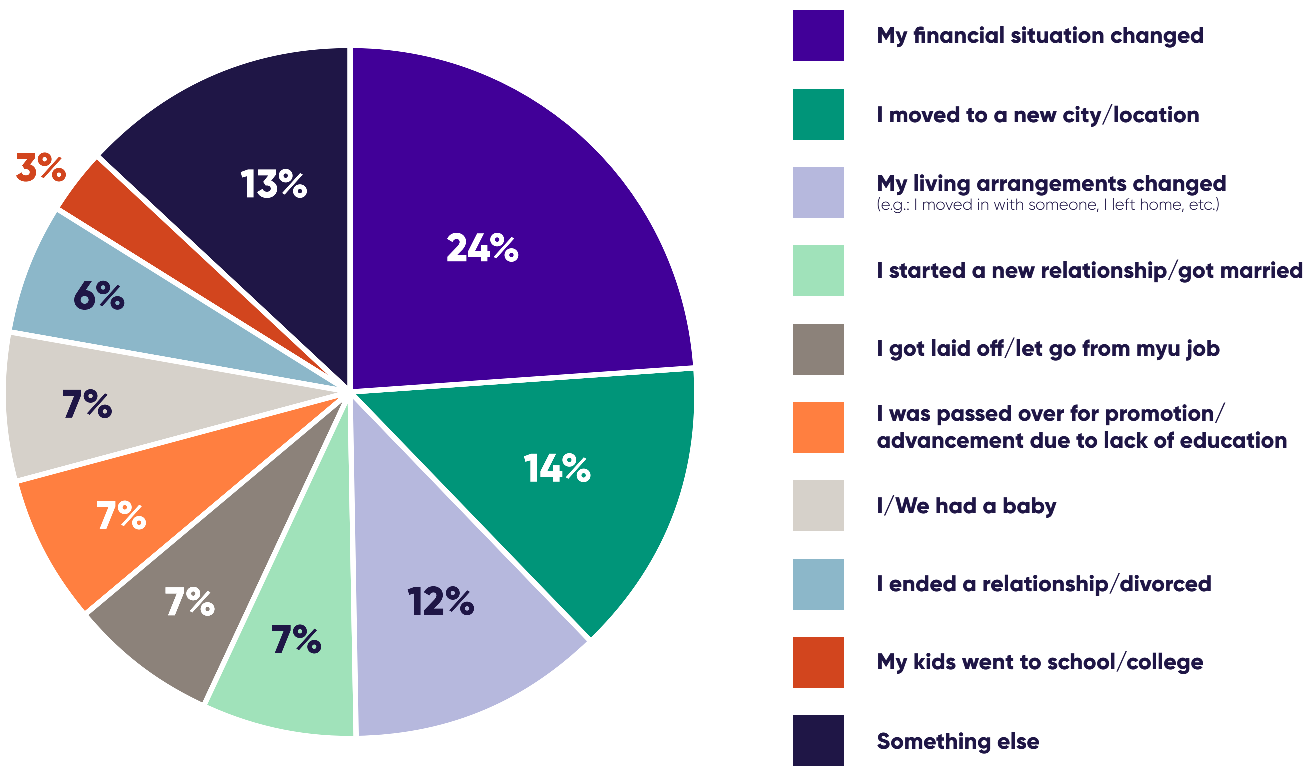
About half of undergraduate respondents reported that the number of credits they previously earned had (or will have) no impact on their enrollment decision.

Approximately 50 percent said previously earned credits had (or will have) some impact on their decision to enroll. Schools can attract these students by maximizing their credit transfer allowance.



Event That Led to Completion of Undergraduate Program

Undergraduate respondents who had previously earned some college credit but no credential were motivated to complete their undergraduate program online because their financial situation changed (24%), their location changed (14%), or their living arrangements changed (12%).

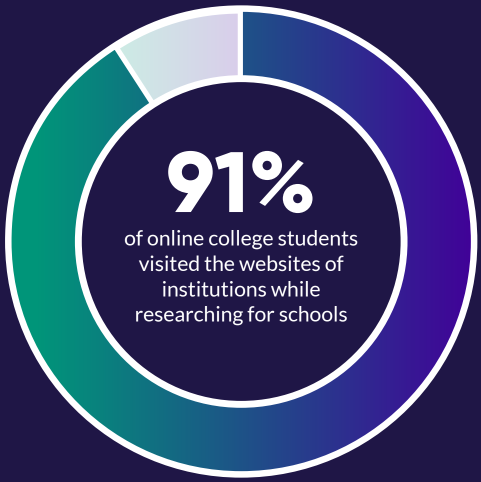


Section 3:

How Do College Students Engage with a School's Website?

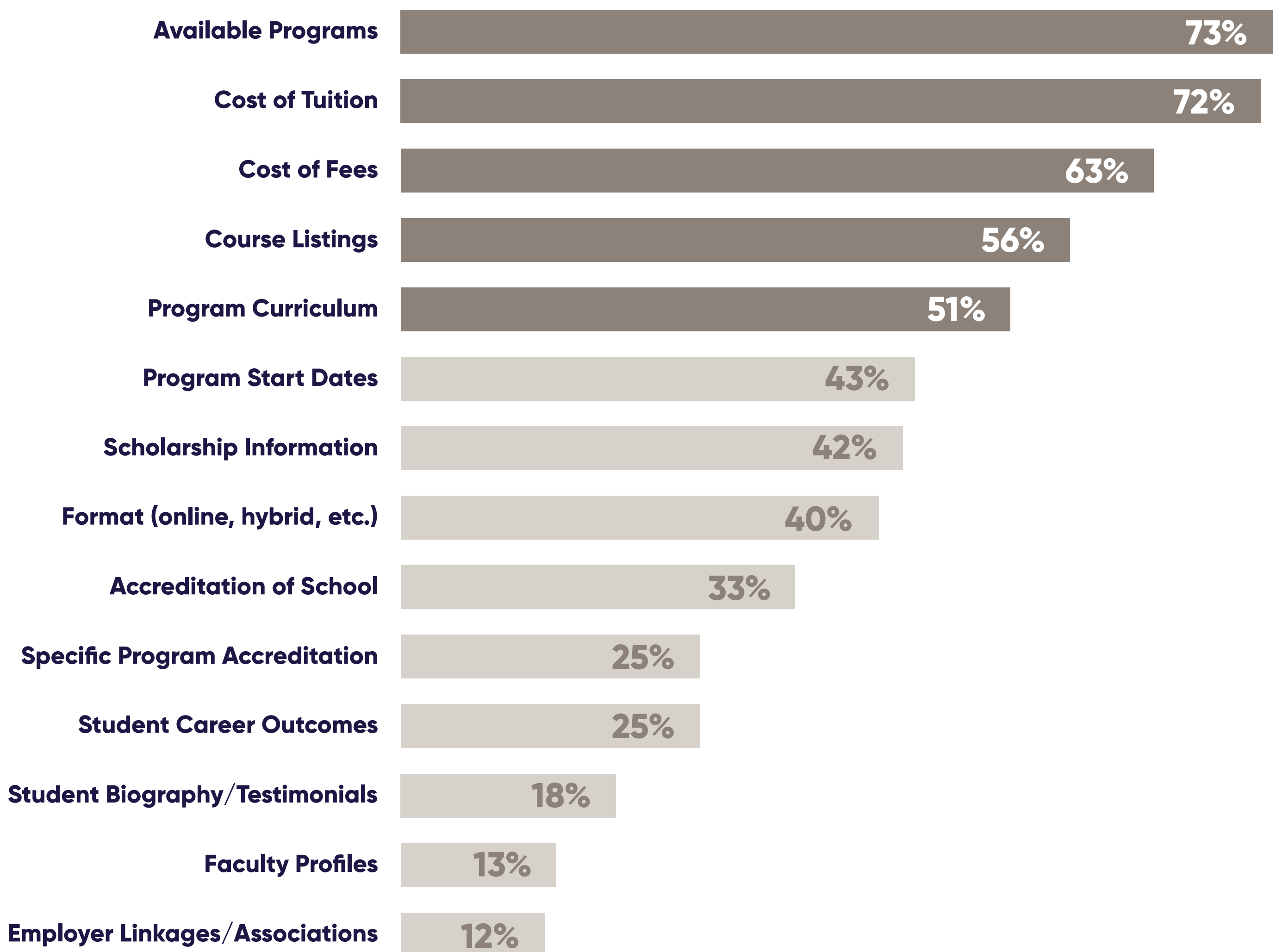
Visited School Website

Majority of online college students (91%) visited the websites of institutions while researching schools for online study.



Information Sought on School Website

Online college students rely heavily on school websites for many different kinds of information. Most respondents sought information associated with the available programs (73%) and the cost of tuition (72%). In addition, most prospective students seek out information about the cost of fees (63%), course listings (56%) and program curriculum (51%). This information should be easy to obtain for online college students visiting school websites.



Website Ease of Use: Total

Continuing a trend from the 2023 Online College Students Report, most students do not find it "very easy" to locate desired information on university websites. For example, the most important information sought on school websites are available programs, cost of tuition, and cost of fees. Yet less than 50 percent of respondents who were searching for this information were able to find it easily. Specifically, only 36 percent easily found tuition information and even fewer were able to find fees easily.

In fact, no information sought by students was reported as "very easy" to find by more than 45 percent of respondents. Making highly sought information readily available can help students make informed decisions about their education.

	Very Difficult	Somewhat Difficult	Neither Difficult or Easy	Somewhat Easy	Very Easy	Average Rating
Program start dates	1%	3%	17%	34%	45%	4.2
Available programs	1%	3%	21%	31%	44%	4.1
Format (online, hybrid, etc.)	1%	4%	21%	30%	44%	4.1
Accreditation of school	1%	6%	18%	32%	44%	4.1
Faculty profiles	2%	5%	20%	33%	40%	4.1
Program curriculum	1%	5%	23%	34%	38%	4.0
Course listings	1%	5%	24%	33%	38%	4.0
Specific program accreditation	1%	6%	21%	33%	39%	4.0
Cost of tuition	2%	8%	22%	31%	36%	3.9
Student biography/testimonials	3%	8%	29%	31%	30%	3.8
Scholarship information	3%	9%	27%	30%	31%	3.8
Cost of fees	4%	10%	26%	27%	33%	3.8
Student career outcomes	2%	10%	26%	30%	31%	3.8
Employer linkages/associations	4%	10%	27%	27%	33%	3.8

Website Ease of Use: Undergraduate

For undergraduate respondents, program start dates, cost of tuition, and cost of fees were rated as the most important information sought on the school's website. Yet these were not easily accessible to students seeking this information. No more than 47 percent of undergraduate respondents thought any information they sought was easily accessible.

	Very Difficult	Somewhat Difficult	Neither Difficult or Easy	Somewhat Easy	Very Easy	Average Rating
Program start dates	1%	4%	17%	31%	47%	4.2
Available programs	1%	3%	22%	29%	45%	4.1
Program curriculum	1%	5%	22%	31%	41%	4.1
Format (online, hybrid, etc.)	1%	4%	22%	28%	46%	4.1
Accreditation of school	1%	6%	19%	31%	43%	4.1
Course listings	1%	5%	24%	32%	39%	4.0
Specific program accreditation	1%	7%	20%	33%	40%	4.0
Faculty profiles	1%	4%	25%	31%	38%	4.0
Cost of tuition	2%	7%	24%	29%	37%	3.9
Student biography/testimonials	3%	8%	32%	27%	31%	3.8
Scholarship information	4%	10%	28%	27%	31%	3.7
Cost of fees	4%	10%	27%	28%	31%	3.7
Student career outcomes	2%	12%	25%	30%	30%	3.7
Employer linkages/associations	3%	10%	33%	23%	31%	3.7

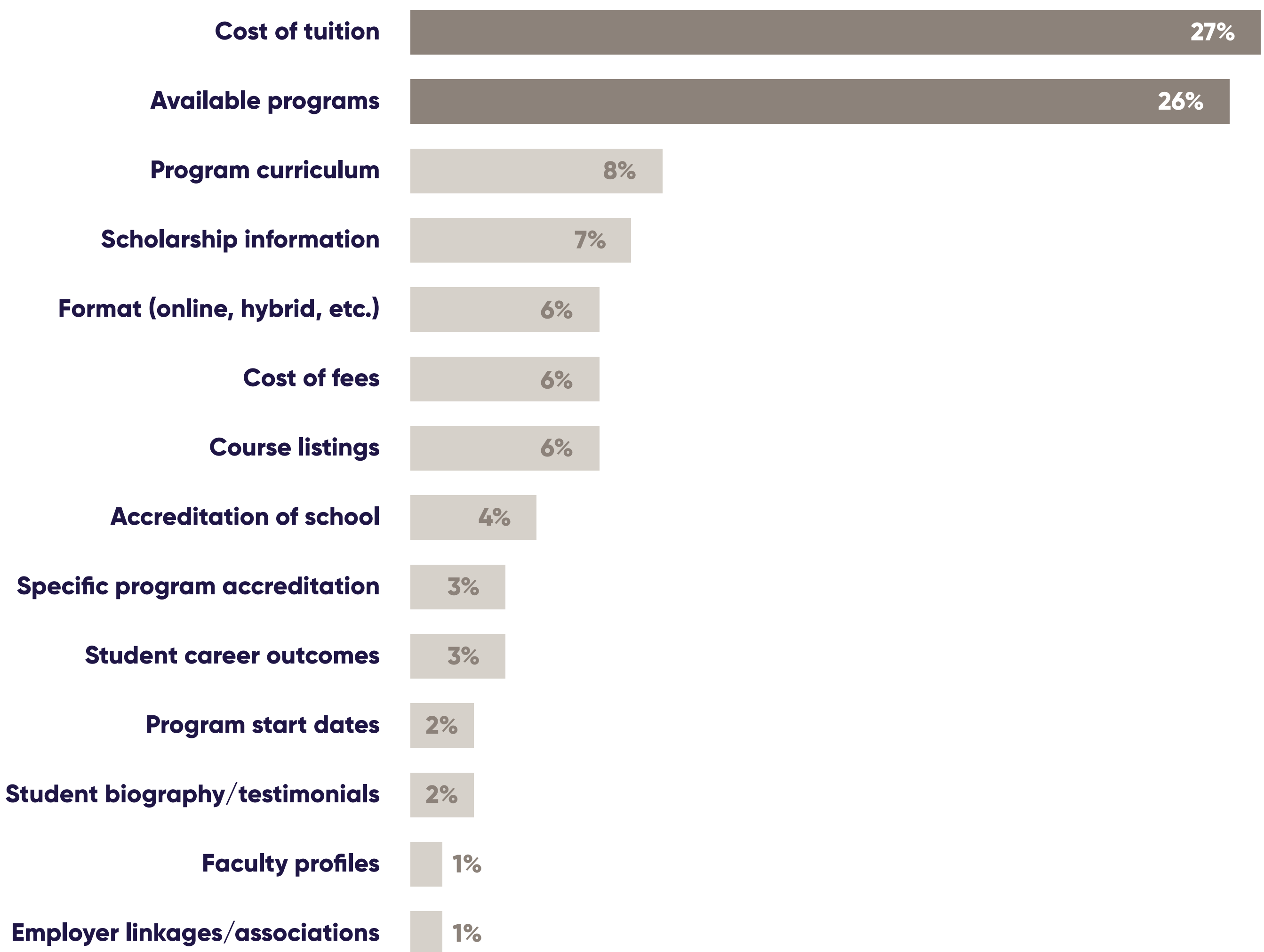
Website Ease of Use: Graduate

Ease of use assessments are even worse among graduate student respondents. No more than 44 percent of respondents were able to easily find the information they were looking for. The cost of tuition and cost of fees were each easily accessible to just 35 percent of respondents. Available programs were only considered very easy to find by 44 percent of graduate respondents, despite this being the most sought-after information by these students.

	Very Difficult	Somewhat Difficult	Neither Difficult or Easy	Somewhat Easy	Very Easy	Average Rating
Available programs	1%	3%	19%	33%	44%	4.2
Program start dates	1%	3%	17%	36%	43%	4.2
Format (online, hybrid, etc.)	1%	5%	19%	33%	43%	4.1
Accreditation of school	2%	5%	16%	32%	44%	4.1
Faculty profiles	2%	6%	16%	35%	42%	4.1
Program curriculum	1%	4%	24%	36%	35%	4.0
Course listings	1%	5%	24%	34%	36%	4.0
Specific program accreditation	1%	6%	22%	34%	38%	4.0
Cost of tuition	3%	9%	20%	34%	35%	3.9
Student biography/testimonials	3%	8%	26%	34%	30%	3.8
Scholarship information	2%	8%	27%	33%	30%	3.8
Cost of fees	4%	9%	25%	27%	35%	3.8
Student career outcomes	2%	8%	27%	31%	33%	3.8
Employer linkages/associations	4%	10%	22%	31%	34%	3.8

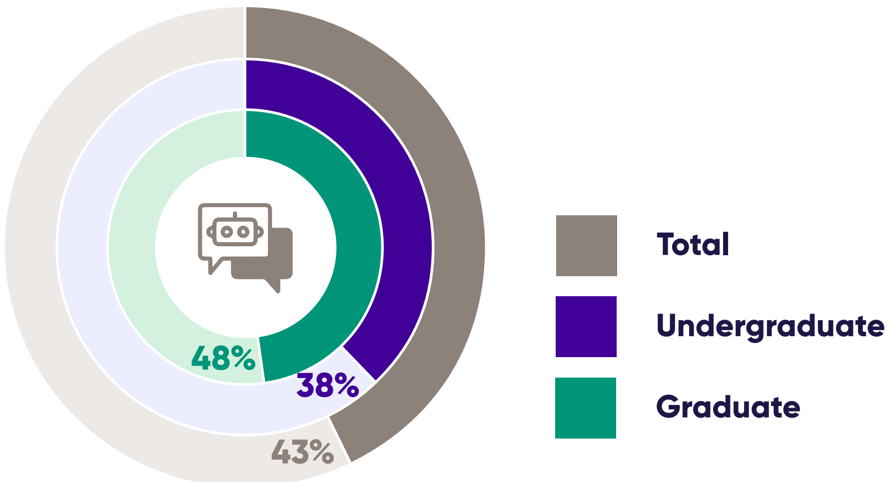
Most Important Information on School Website

When respondents were asked which of the following information was most important to find on a school's website, prospective students cited a desire to find the cost of tuition (27%) and available programs (26%).



Utilization of School Website Chats

Providing chat functionality can help students find information more easily and improve the overall user experience. Over one third (38%) of undergraduate respondents and nearly half (48%) of graduate students reported using website chat features.



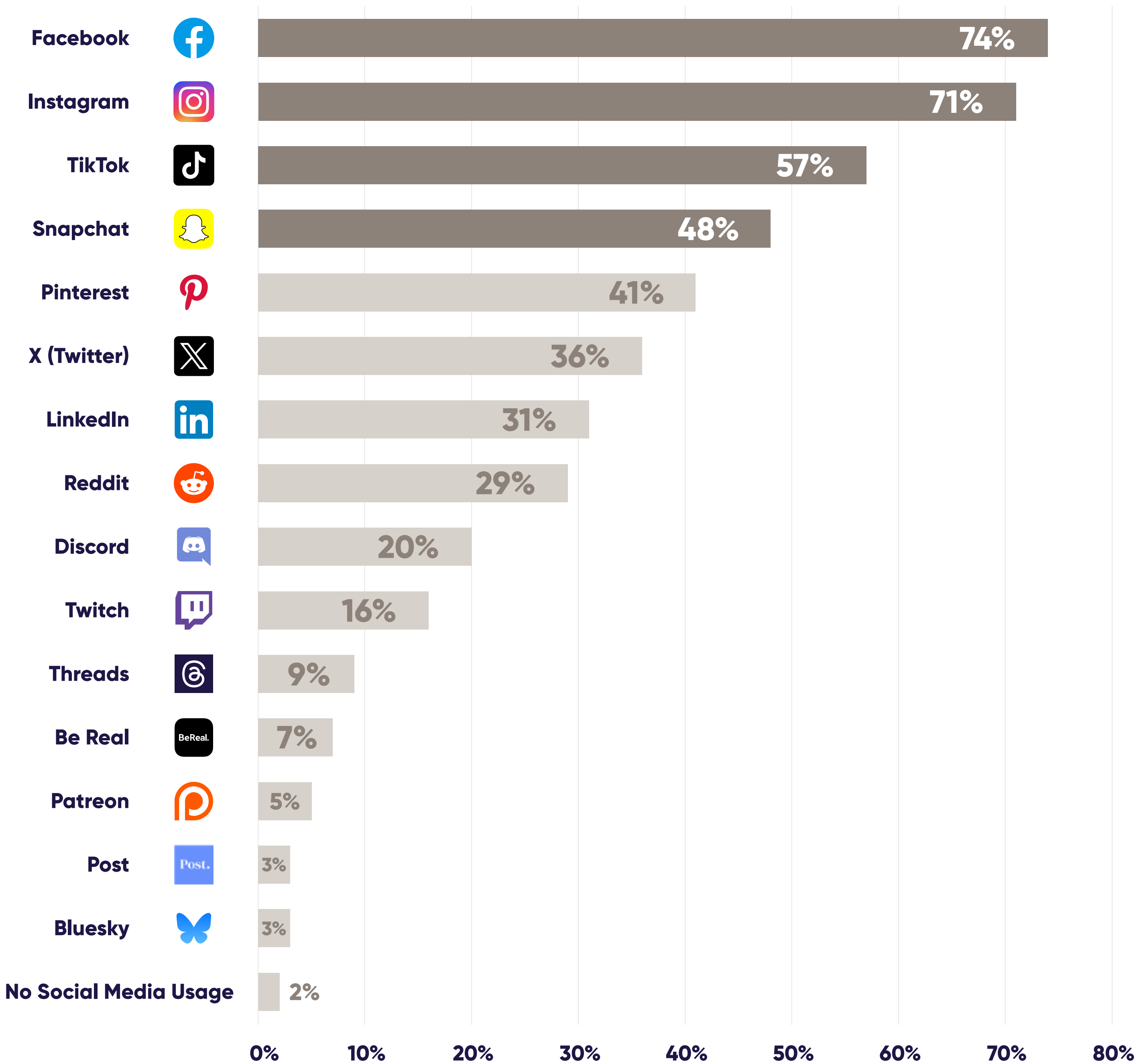
School Website Chats Helpful

The vast majority of those who did utilize school website chats found them helpful. Overall, the schools that offer chat seem to be meeting student expectations with the functionality.

Section 4:
The Impact of Social Media

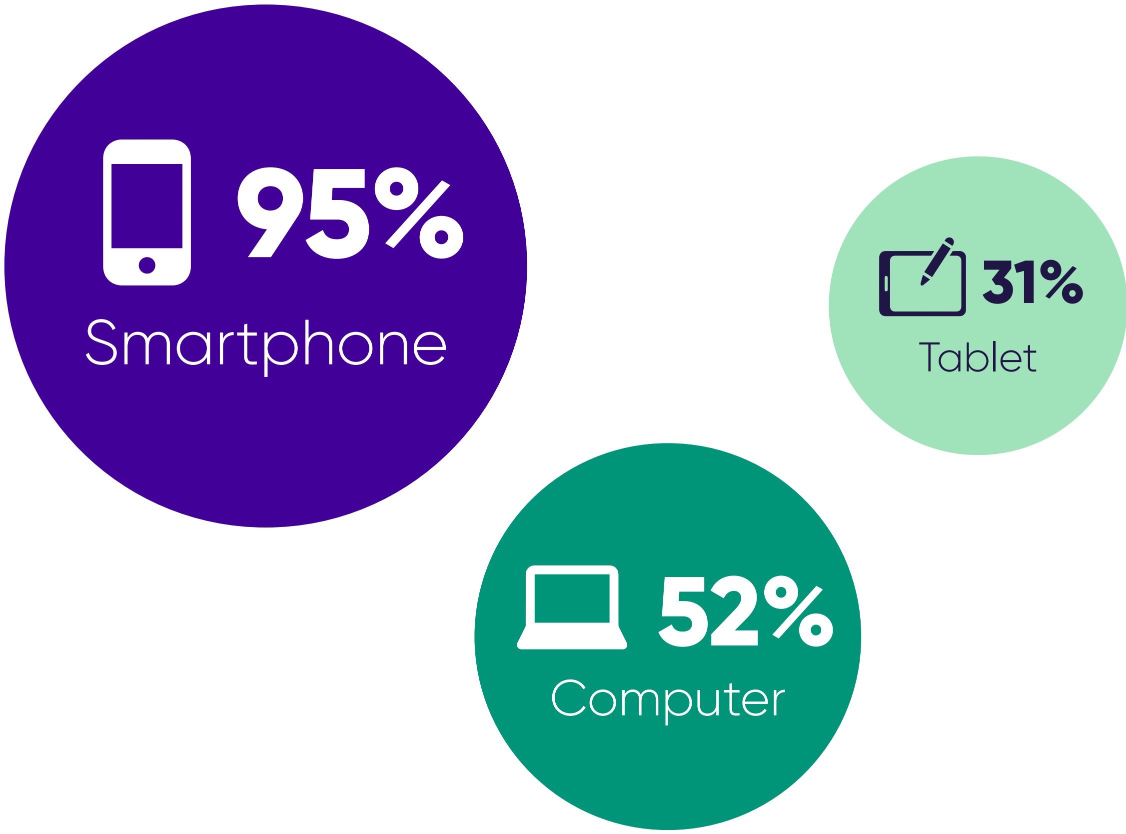
Specific Social Media Platforms Used

Nearly all respondents (98%) use at least one social media platform. About 75 percent use Facebook and about 70 percent use Instagram, indicating that Meta still holds the largest market share in social media, despite newer platforms becoming available in recent years. Another 57 percent use TikTok, and 48 percent use Snapchat. Data are comparable among undergraduate and graduate students.



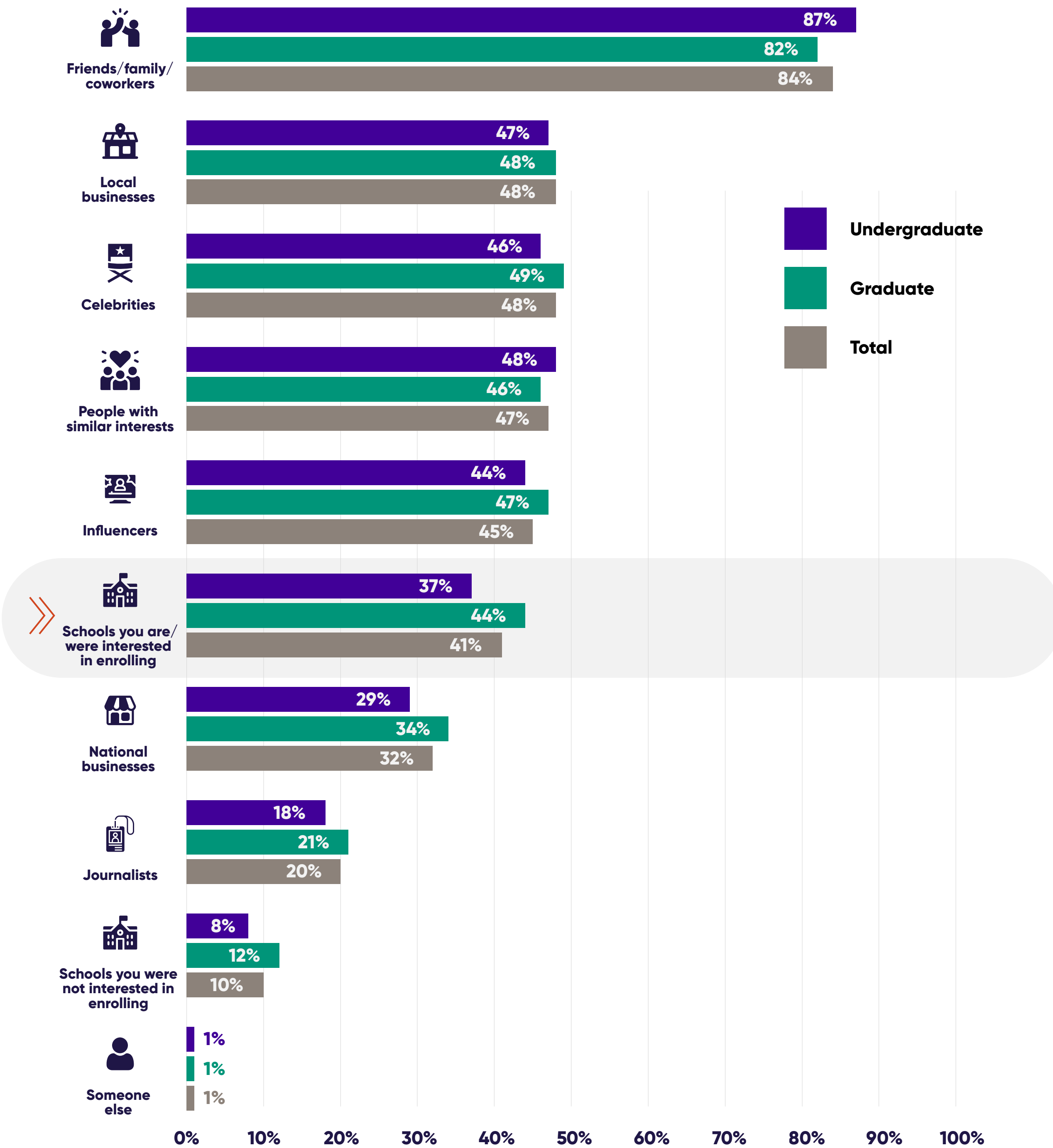
Social Media Access Devices

Almost all respondents who utilize social media platforms do so using their smartphone. About half also access social media platforms on their computer.



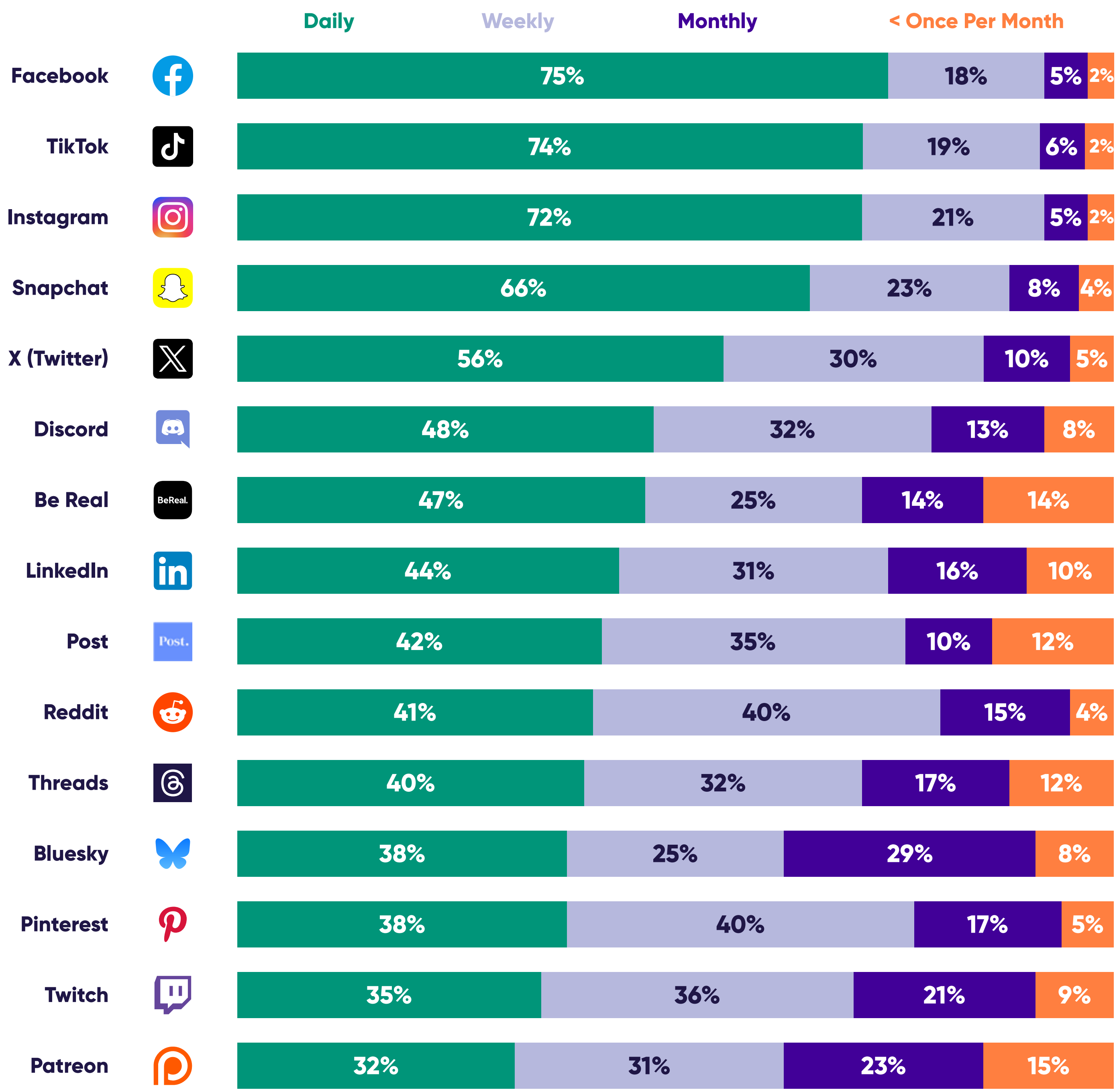
Social Media Follows

Of the respondents who utilize social media, 84 percent use it to maintain personal connections by following friends, family, and coworkers. Additionally, significant proportions follow other pages or people: 48% follow local businesses and an equal proportion follows celebrities. Other groups followed include people with similar interests (47%) and influencers (45%). A significant number, 44 percent of graduate and 37 percent of undergraduate students who use social media, follow schools in which they are interested in enrolling.



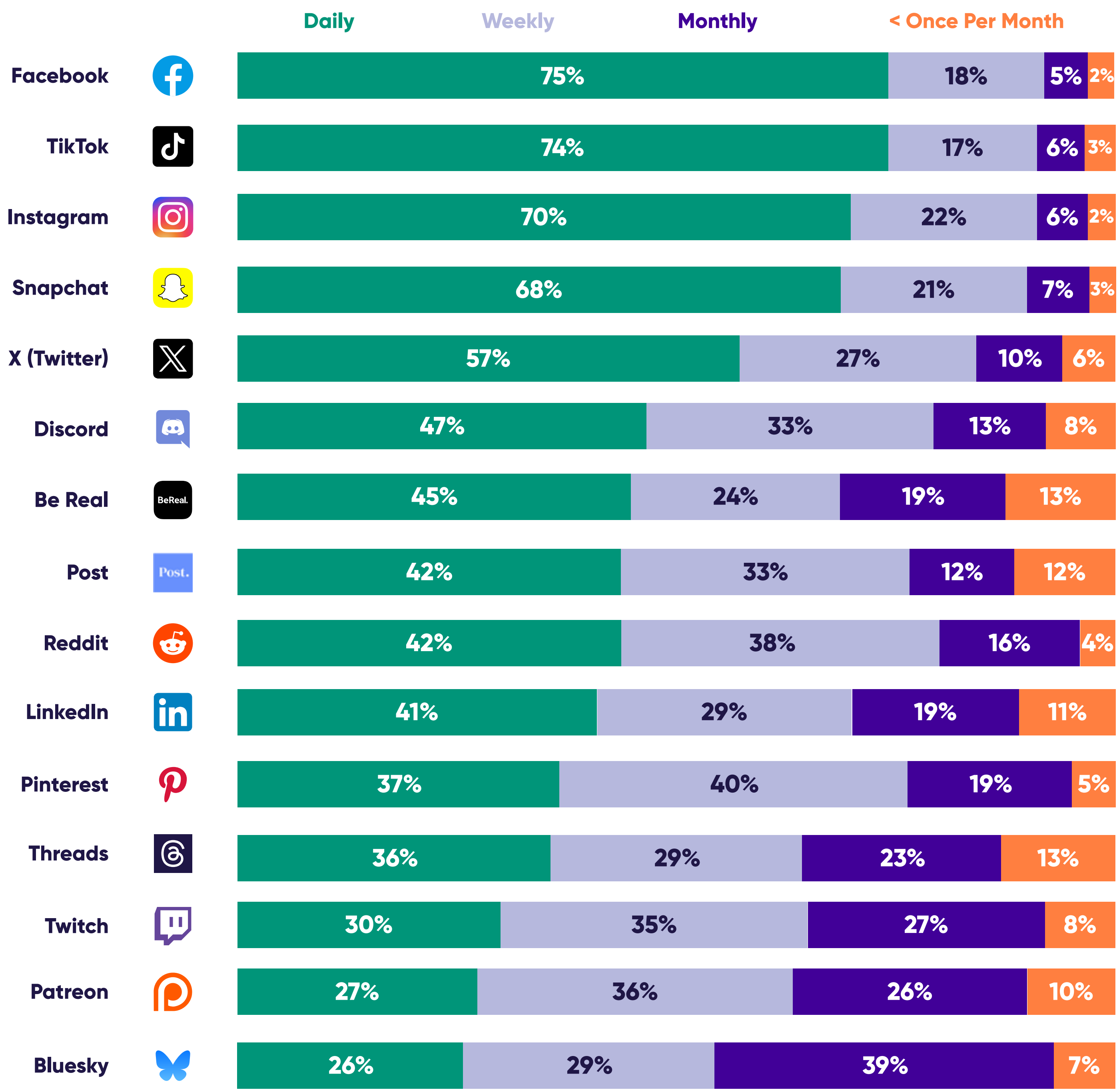
Frequency of Social Media Usage: Total

Respondents who use social media do so quite often. Many users visit their most preferred platforms on a daily basis. Among respondents, Facebook claims the highest number of daily users (75%), followed closely by TikTok (74%) and Instagram (72%).



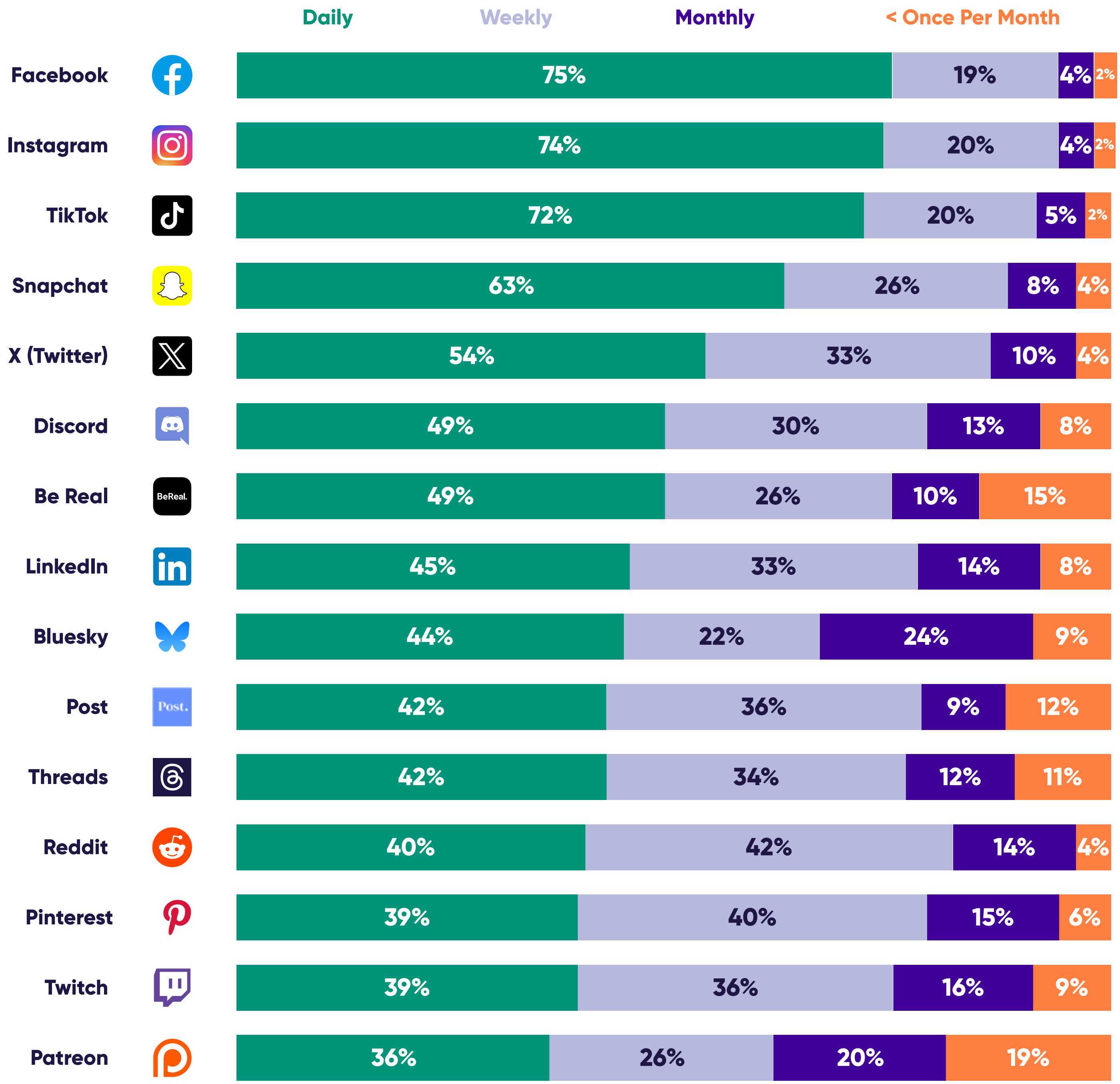
Frequency of Social Media Usage: Undergraduate

Among undergraduate respondents who use Facebook or TikTok about 75% visit these sites daily. Seventy percent of undergraduate Instagram users visit the site daily. Daily visits drop slightly among Snapchat users, with 68% using the app daily. Meanwhile, just 57 percent of undergraduate X (Twitter) users access the platform every day.



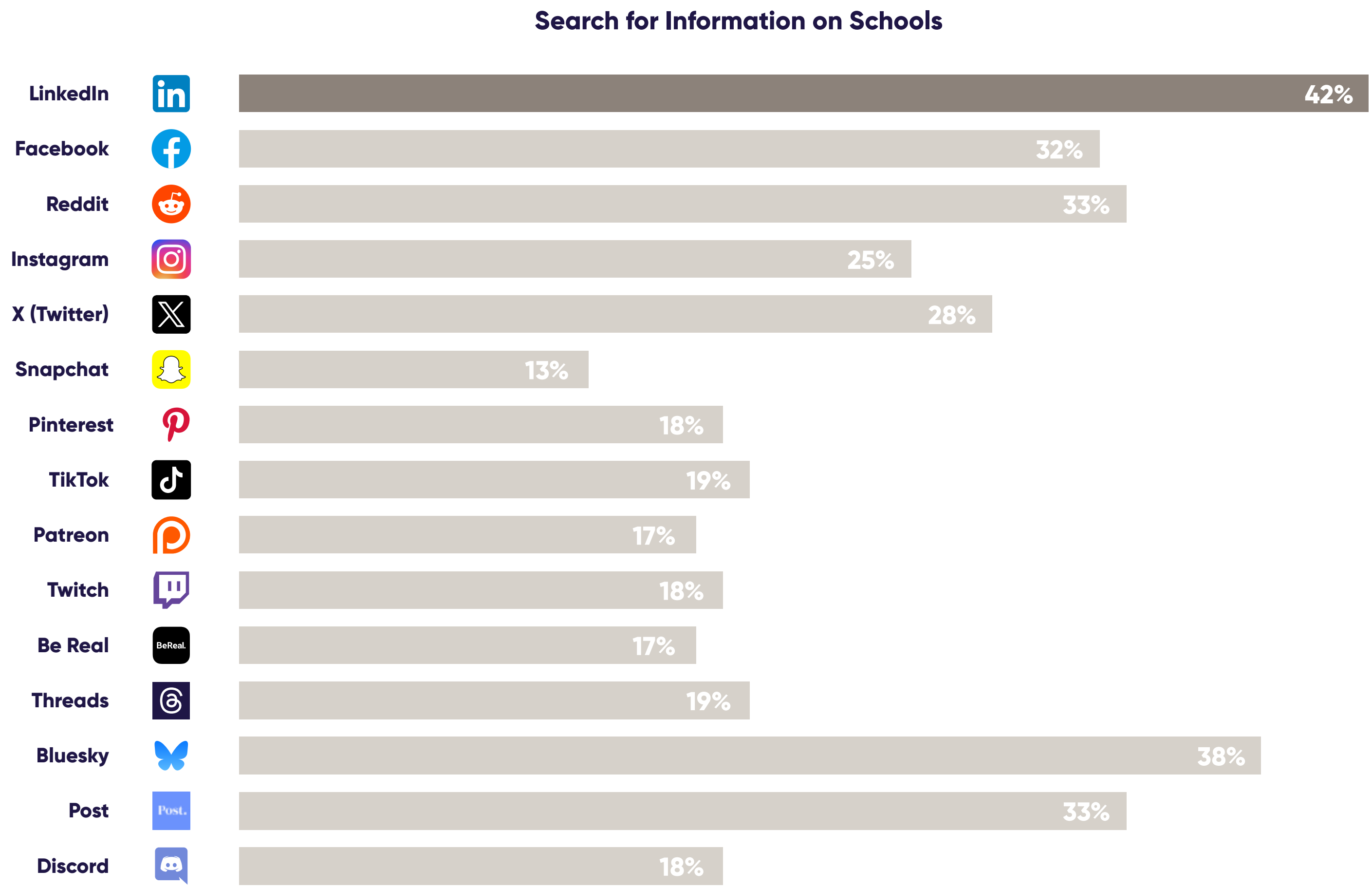
Frequency of Social Media Usage: Graduate

Among graduate student respondents who use Facebook, 75% visit the platform daily. Instagram inches out TikTok for daily use by graduate students; 74% use Instagram daily and 72% use TikTok every day. Graduate students who use Snapchat are slightly less likely to be daily users, with 63% visiting the platform daily. Only 54 percent of X (Twitter) users visit the platform every day.

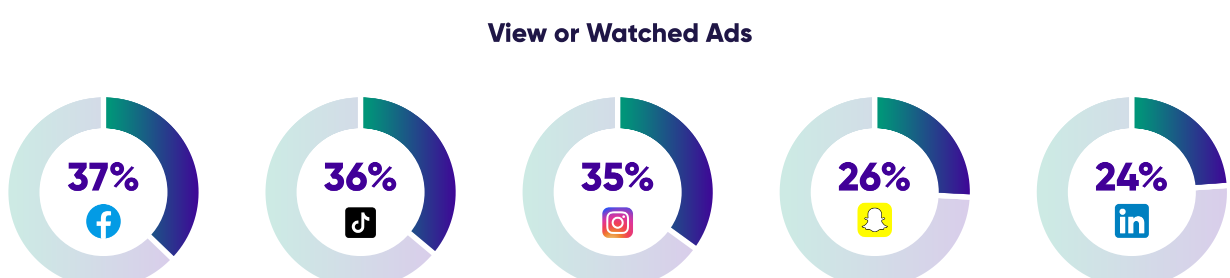


Activity Engagement on Social Media: Total

Among users of specific platforms, LinkedIn was most commonly cited by respondents (42%) as the social media platform they used for finding information about schools. Bluesky (38%), Reddit (33%), Post (33%) and Facebook (32%) were also cited as a source of information for at least 30 percent of reported active users.

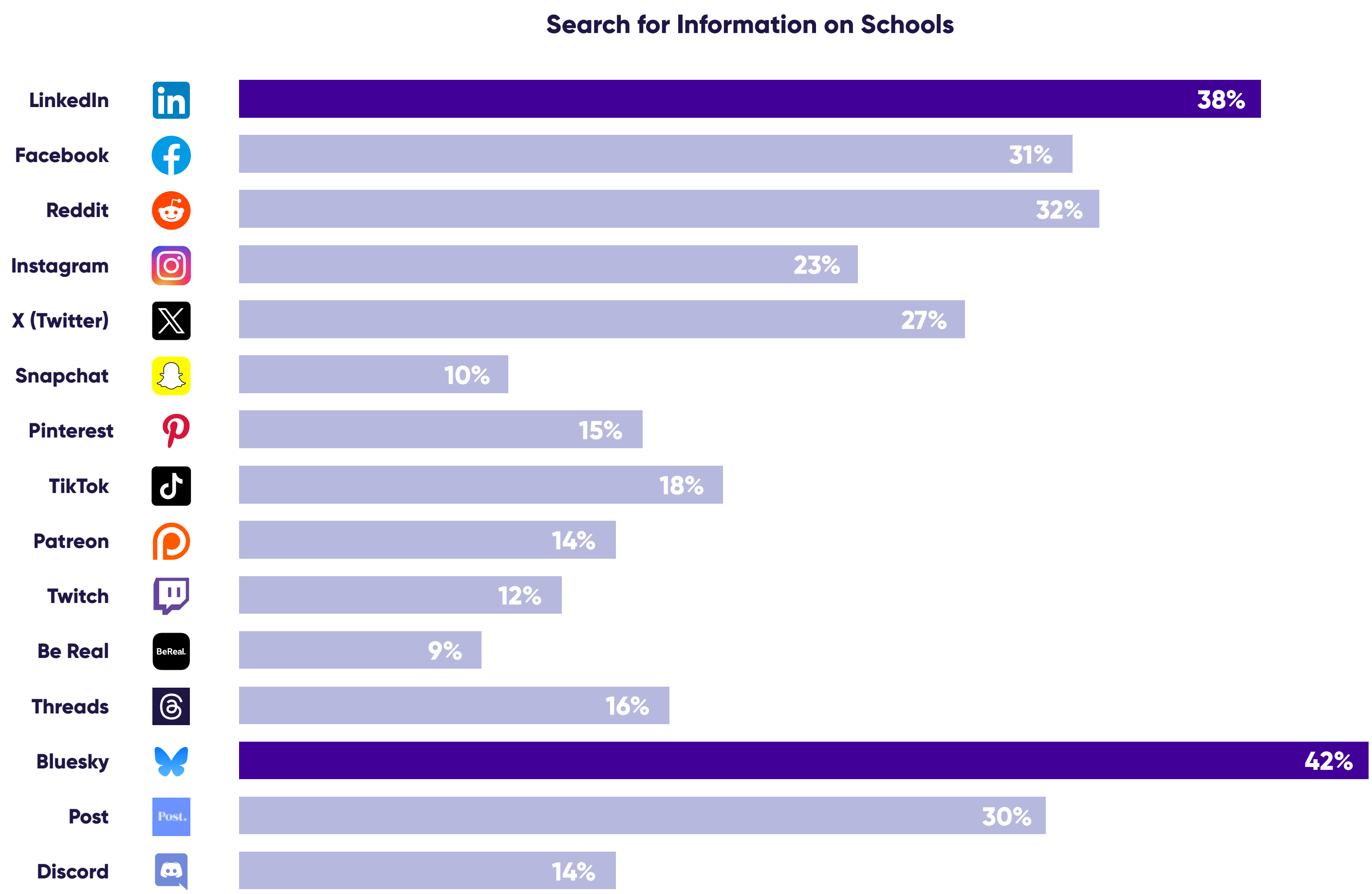


Among social media networks that are utilized by online college students, respondents said they view ads on Facebook (37%), TikTok (36%), Instagram (35%), Snapchat (26%), and LinkedIn (24%) – demonstrating the strength of advertisements placed on these platforms.

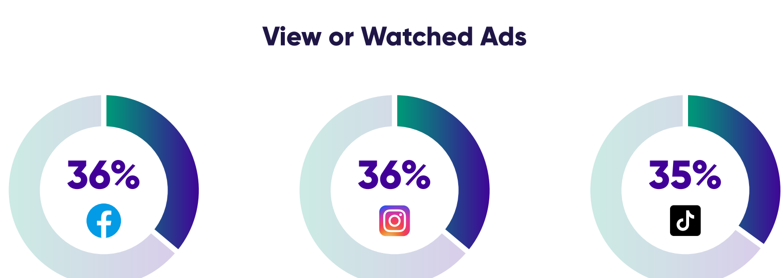


Activity Engagement on Social Media: Undergraduate

Among undergraduate respondents, 38 percent of LinkedIn users reported conducting research on schools via the platform. While Bluesky is less widely used, 42 percent of active users leveraged the platform as a source of information on schools. Reddit (32%), Facebook (31%) and Post (30%) were also cited as a source of information for a significant number of active users.



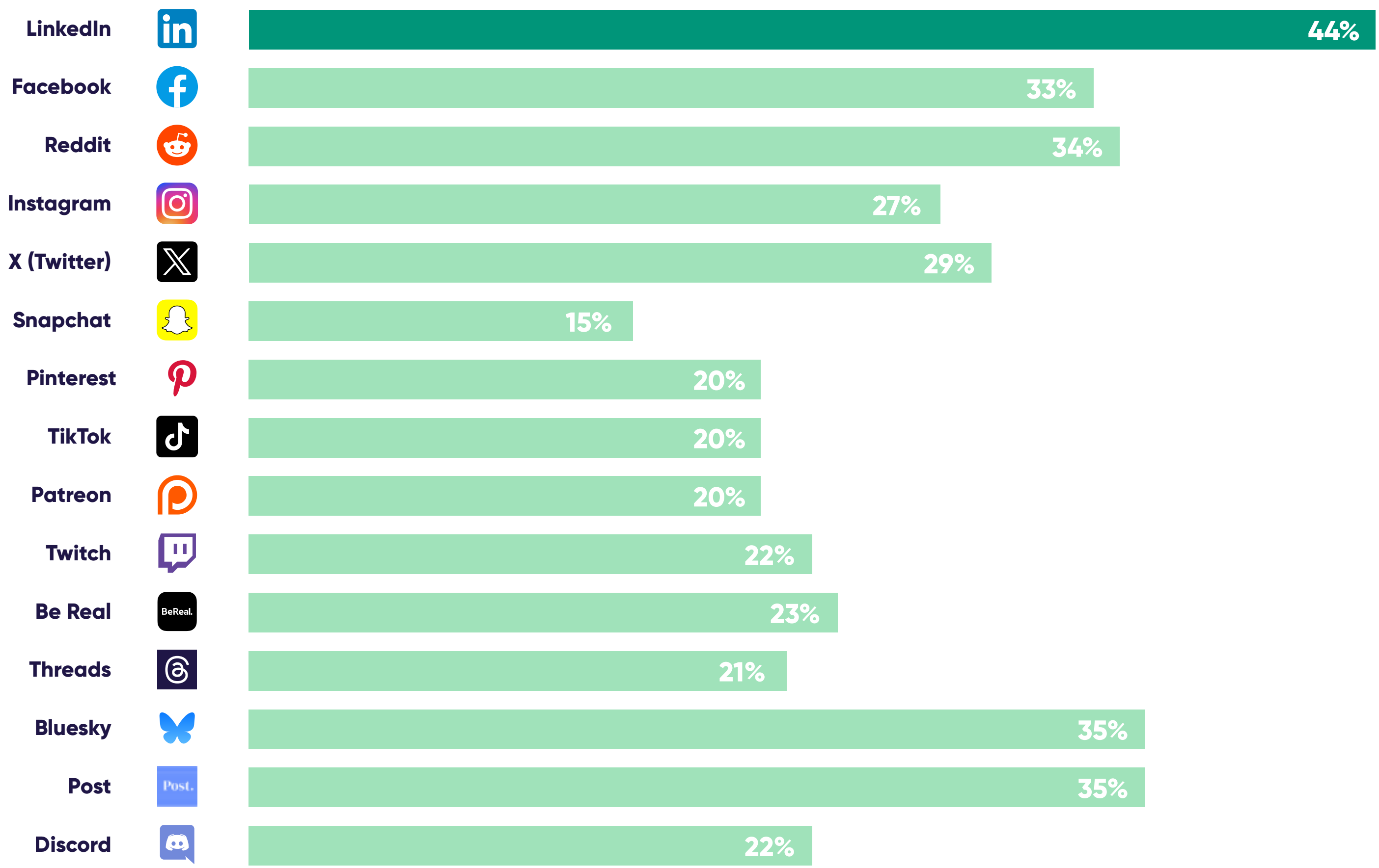
Among Undergraduate respondents, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok users reported the highest viewership of on-platform ads.



Activity Engagement on Social Media: Undergraduate

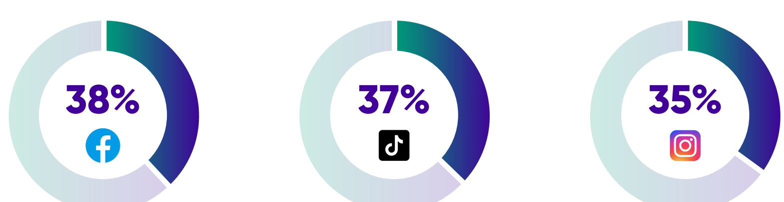
For graduate respondents, LinkedIn users are most likely to conduct school research via the platform (44%). Bluesky (35%), Post (35%), Reddit (34%) and Facebook (33%) were also cited as a source of information for a significant number of active users.

Search for Information on Schools



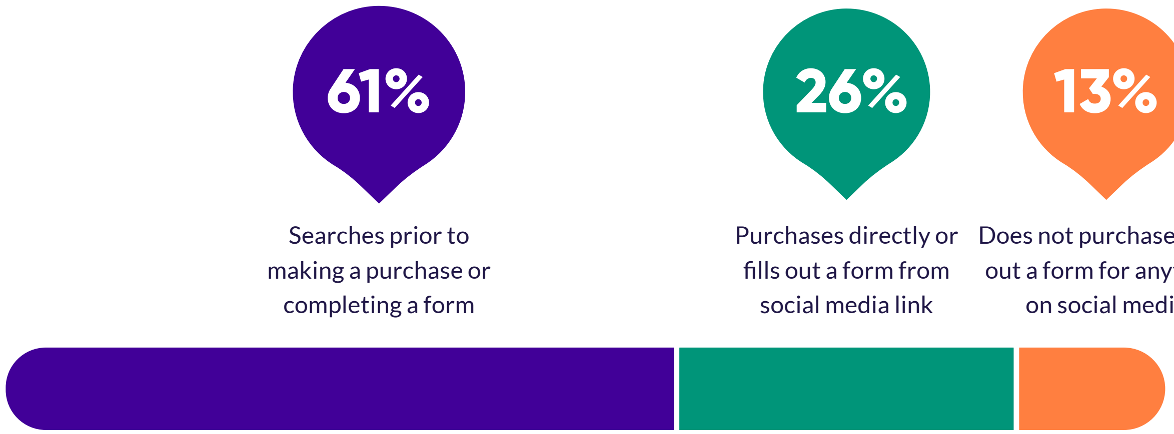
As with undergraduate respondents, graduate respondents reported the highest level of on-platform ad viewership on Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram.

View or Watched Ads



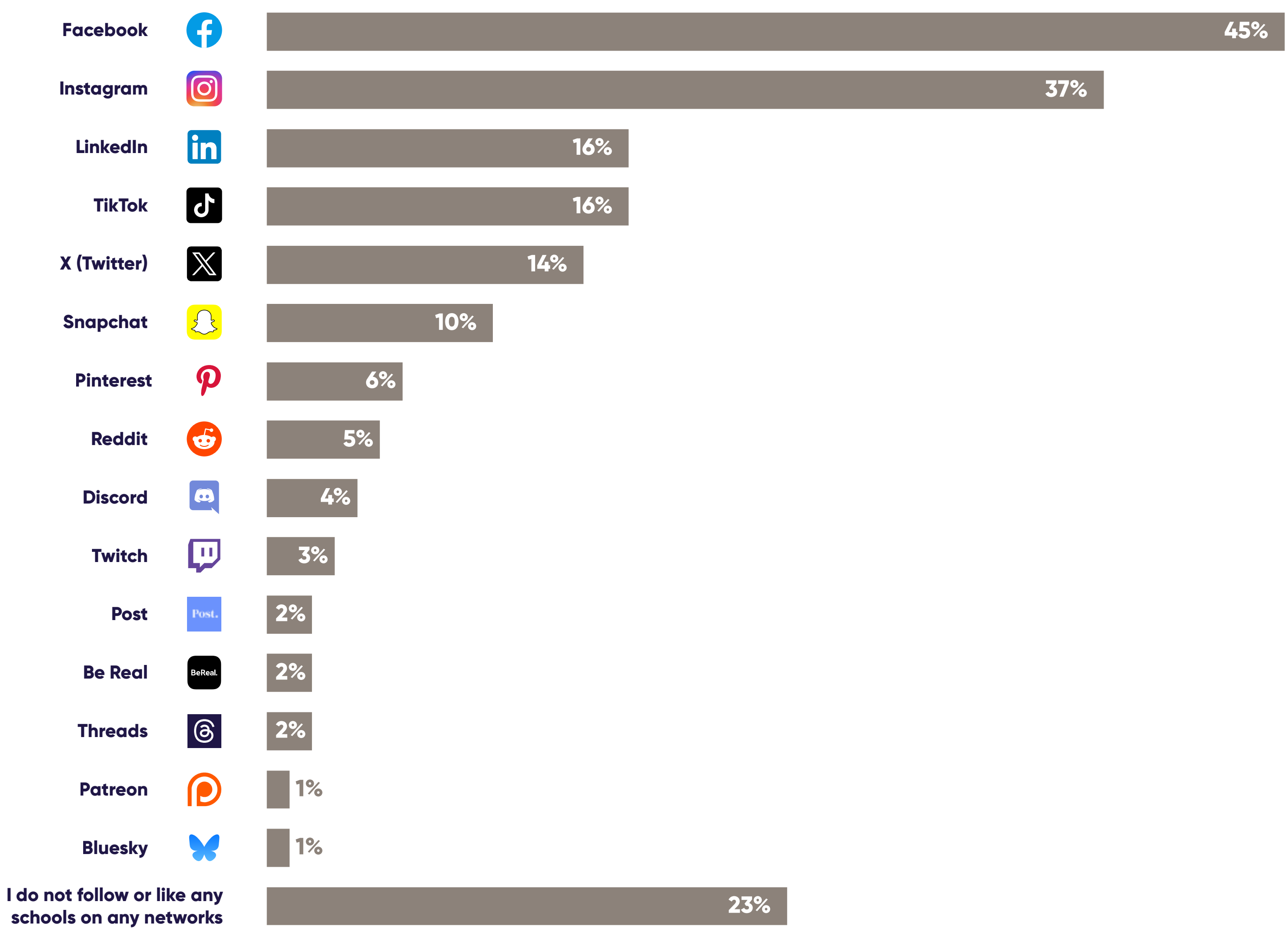
Influence on Purchasing Decisions

Most social media users (87%) report filling out forms and completing purchases as a result of seeing a product or service on social media platforms. While 61 percent of respondents conduct online searches through Google or other search engines before making a purchase or completing forms, 26 percent forgo extra research and make a purchase or fill out a form directly from links within the social media platform. The remaining 13 percent of social media users reported that they do not use social media to make purchases or complete forms.



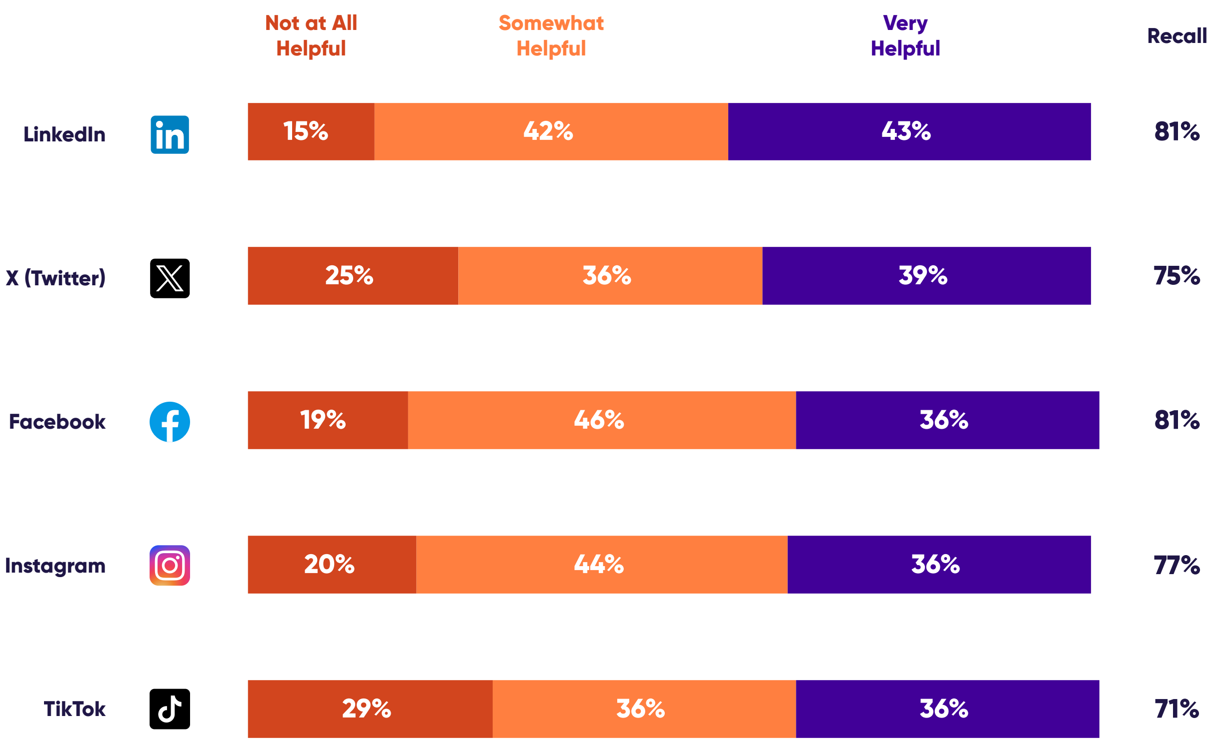
Social Media Platforms on Which Respondents "Like" or Follow Schools

Further proving the influence of Meta's platforms on the school selection process, 45% of respondents who use Facebook "like" or follow schools on the platform. Among Instagram user respondents, 37% follow schools.



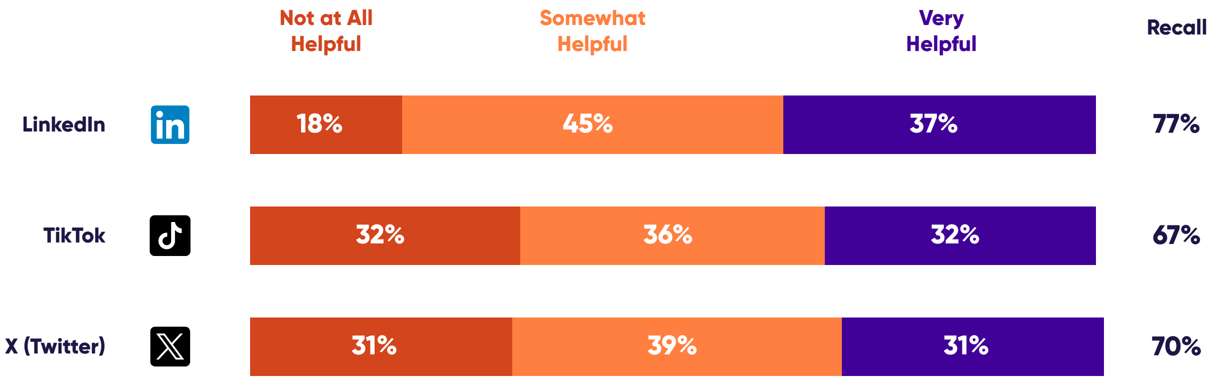
Helpfulness of Social Media Ads in Application/ Enrollment Decision: Total

Respondents reported high levels of ad recall on the social media platforms they use. They generally found ads on social media platforms to be somewhat or very helpful in their application and enrollment decision. Of the most prominently used social media platforms, LinkedIn (43%) and X (39%) ads were most often cited as "Very Helpful." Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok Ads were all cited as very helpful by 36% of platform users.



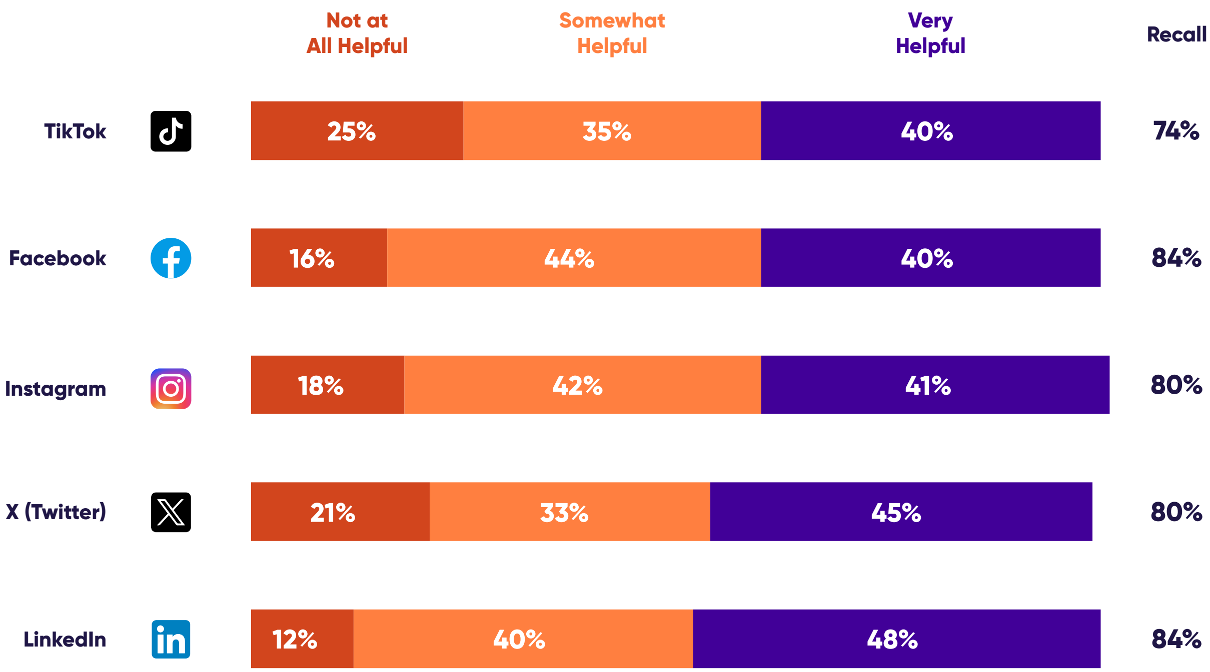
Helpfulness of Social Media Ads in Application/ Enrollment Decision: Undergraduate

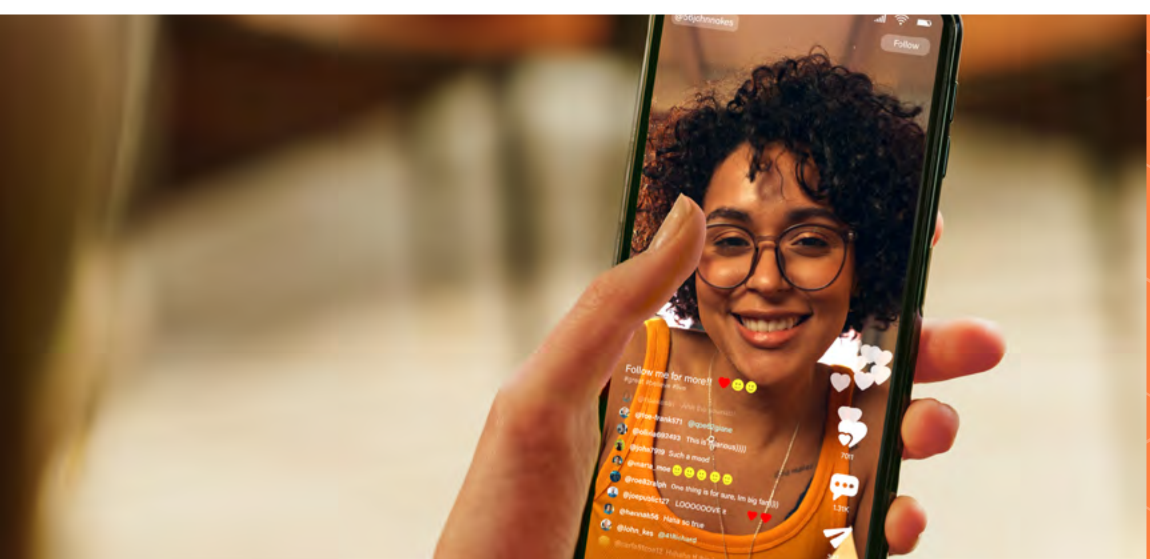
The majority of undergraduate respondents who use specific social media recall seeing ads on the platforms they access. In general, undergraduate respondents were slightly less likely to find the ads on major platforms "Very Helpful" compared to graduate respondents. Of the most popular ad-supported platforms, users reported LinkedIn (37%), TikTok (32%), and X (Twitter) (32%) ads as being "Very Helpful".



Helpfulness of Social Media Ads in Application/ Enrollment Decision: Graduate

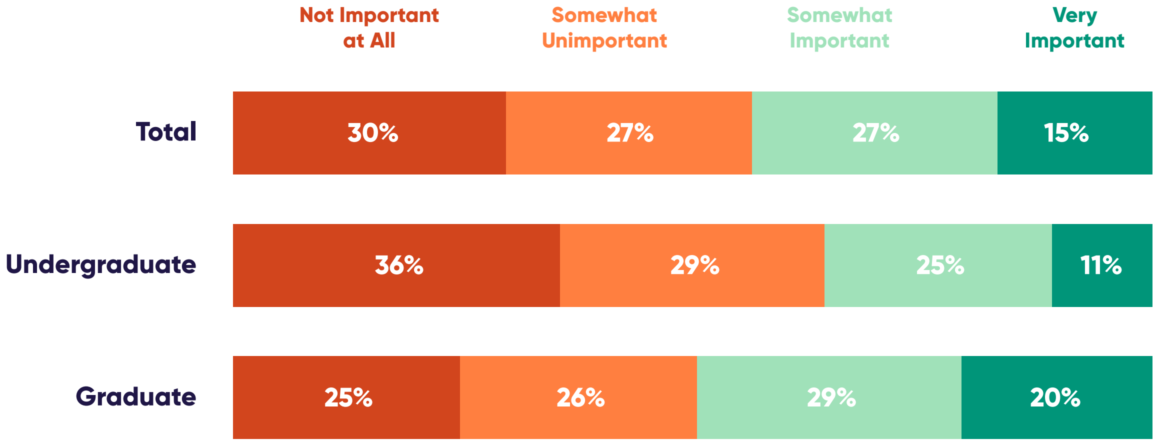
Among graduate respondents, the majority who use social media also recall seeing ads for schools on the specific platforms they use. In general, the largest proportions find those ads very helpful. Nearly half (48%) of graduate students found ads on LinkedIn to be "Very Helpful", followed by X (45%), Instagram (41%), Facebook (40%) and TikTok (40%).





Importance of Social Media Videos

Respondents were split over the value of videos on social media when considering schools. While 30 percent found social media videos “not at all important” and 27 percent found videos “somewhat unimportant”, 42 percent find them “somewhat important” or “very important.” Overall, graduate respondents tended to deem videos more important.



Importance of Online Reviews by Source: Total

Many respondents valued online reviews of the schools they are considering. Reviews found on search engines were more likely to be considered "very important," compared to reviews found on social media, which were rated by 42% of respondents as "somewhat important." The average rating on a 4-point scale was 3.3 for search engine reviews and 3.0 for social media reviews. Regardless of how they rated, nearly all respondents consulted online reviews.

	Not Important at All	Somewhat Unimportant	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Able to Rate	Average Rating
Search engines (Google, Bing, etc.)	5%	9%	34%	52%	96%	3.3
Social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.)	9%	15%	42%	33%	94%	3

Importance of Online Reviews by Source: Undergraduate

Undergraduate respondents saw less value in online reviews than their graduate peers did. In terms of search engine versus social media reviews, undergraduates echoed the overall results rating search engine reviews more valuable.

	Not Important at All	Somewhat Unimportant	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Able to Rate	Average Rating
Search engines (Google, Bing, etc.)	6%	10%	35%	49%	96%	3.3
Social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.)	10%	17%	43%	29%	94%	2.9

Importance of Online Reviews by Source: Graduate

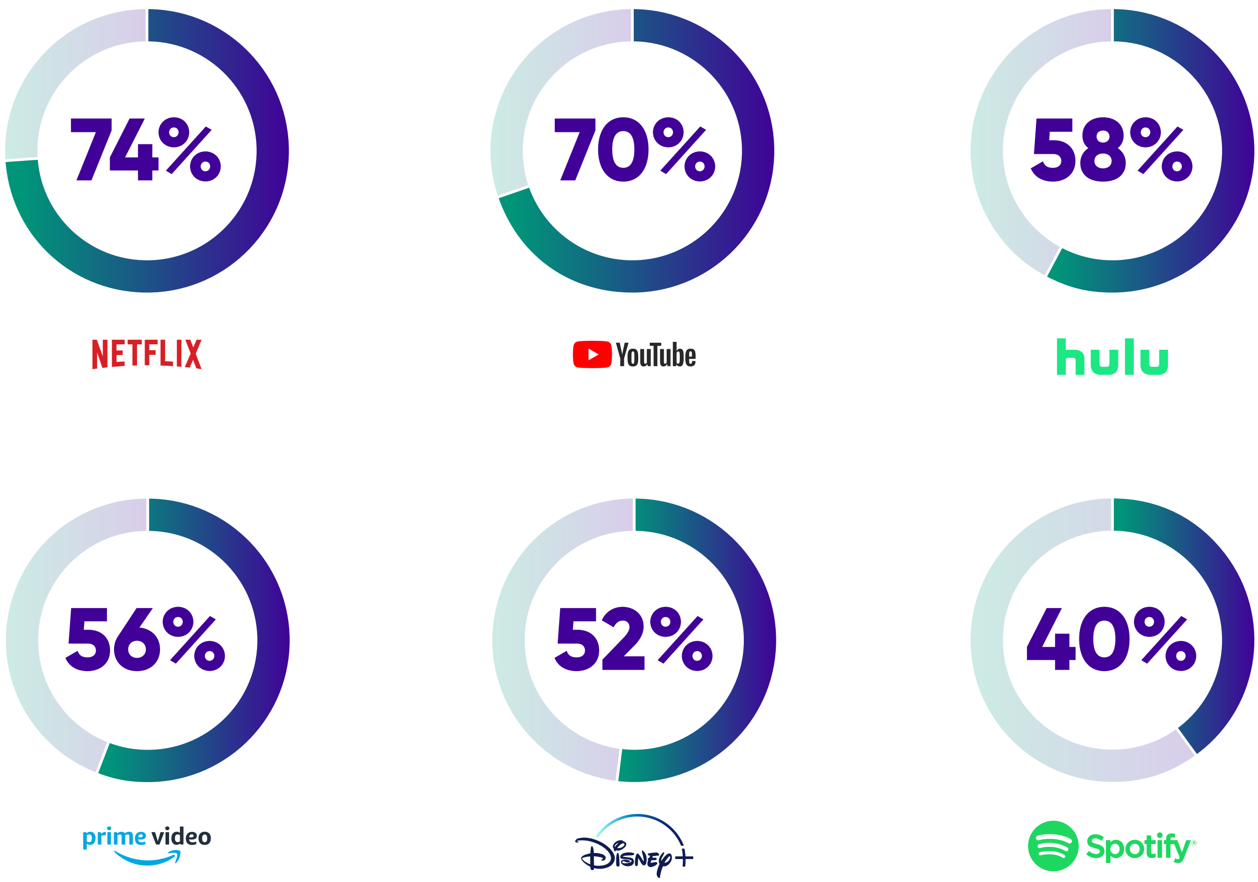
Graduate respondents were more likely to see reviews on both platforms as very important. On average they rated the importance of search engine reviews as 3.4 and social media reviews as 3.1.

	Not Important at All	Somewhat Unimportant	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Able to Rate	Average Rating
Search engines (Google, Bing, etc.)	4%	8%	34%	55%	95%	3.4
Social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.)	8%	14%	41%	37%	94%	3.1

Section 5:
Online College Students and Streaming Media

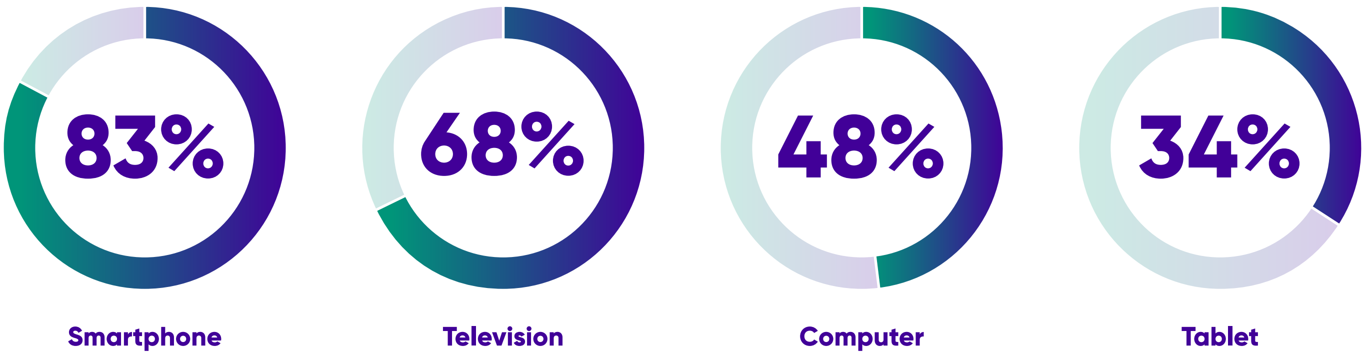
Streaming Media Platform Usage

Nearly all respondents consume content from one or more streaming services. Among the 98 percent who utilized streaming media, respondents are most likely to stream media on Netflix (74%) and YouTube (70%). More than half of survey respondents who use streaming services named Hulu, Amazon Prime Video and Disney+. Spotify was the most commonly cited audio streaming service at 40 percent.



Streaming Media Devices

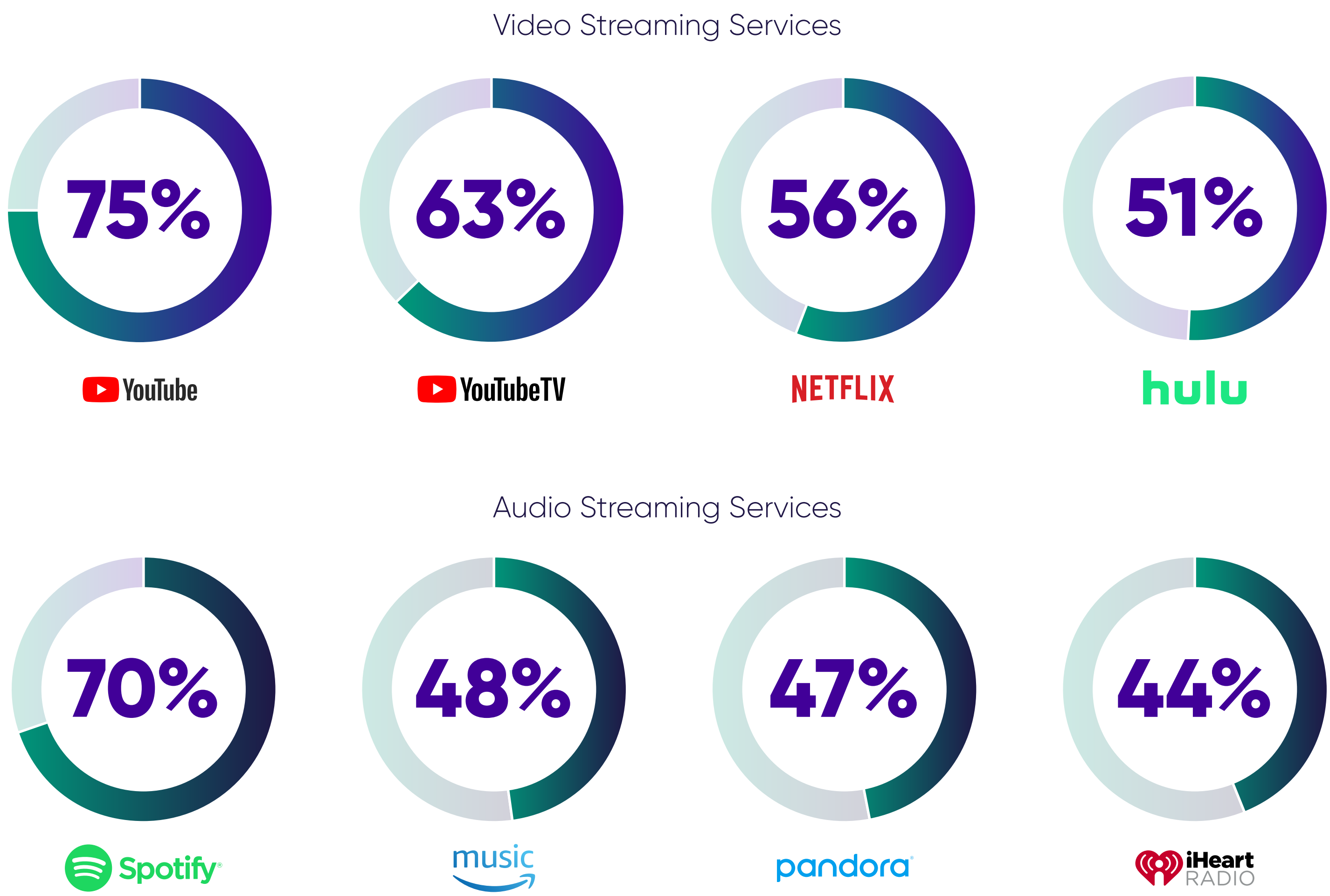
Those who utilize streaming media do so on multiple devices. Of the respondents that stream media, 83 percent use their smartphone and 68 percent use a television. Colleges may benefit from the awareness that smartphones allow for a more interactive experience, while streaming on Connected TV allows for greater reach.



Frequency of Streaming Service Usage: Total

Online college students who use streaming media do so quite often. A substantial percentage stream on multiple platforms daily. Three quarters of survey respondents stream media daily on YouTube, making it the platform with the largest usage among those cited. Another 70 percent stream media every day on Spotify. Other platforms on which more than half stream daily include YouTube TV, Netflix, and Hulu. Daily engagement creates an opportunity for schools to build brand awareness and consideration.

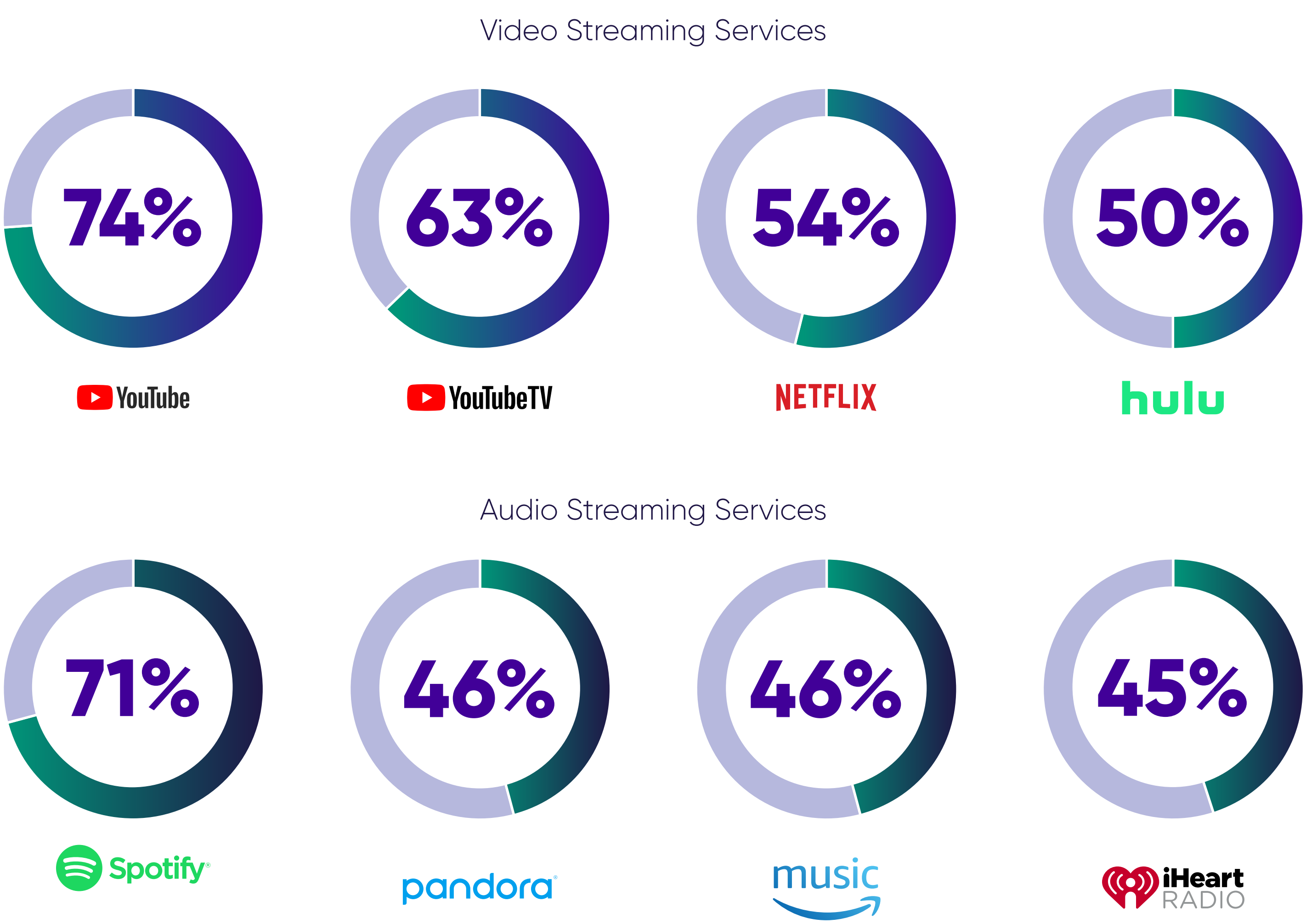
Daily Streamers: Total



Frequency of Streaming Service Usage: Undergraduate

Among undergraduate respondents who use YouTube, 74 percent watch the platform daily. Spotify listeners also tend to be daily users, with 71 percent listening daily. Almost 65 percent of YouTubeTV users stream on the platform every day, compared to about half of Netflix and Hulu users.

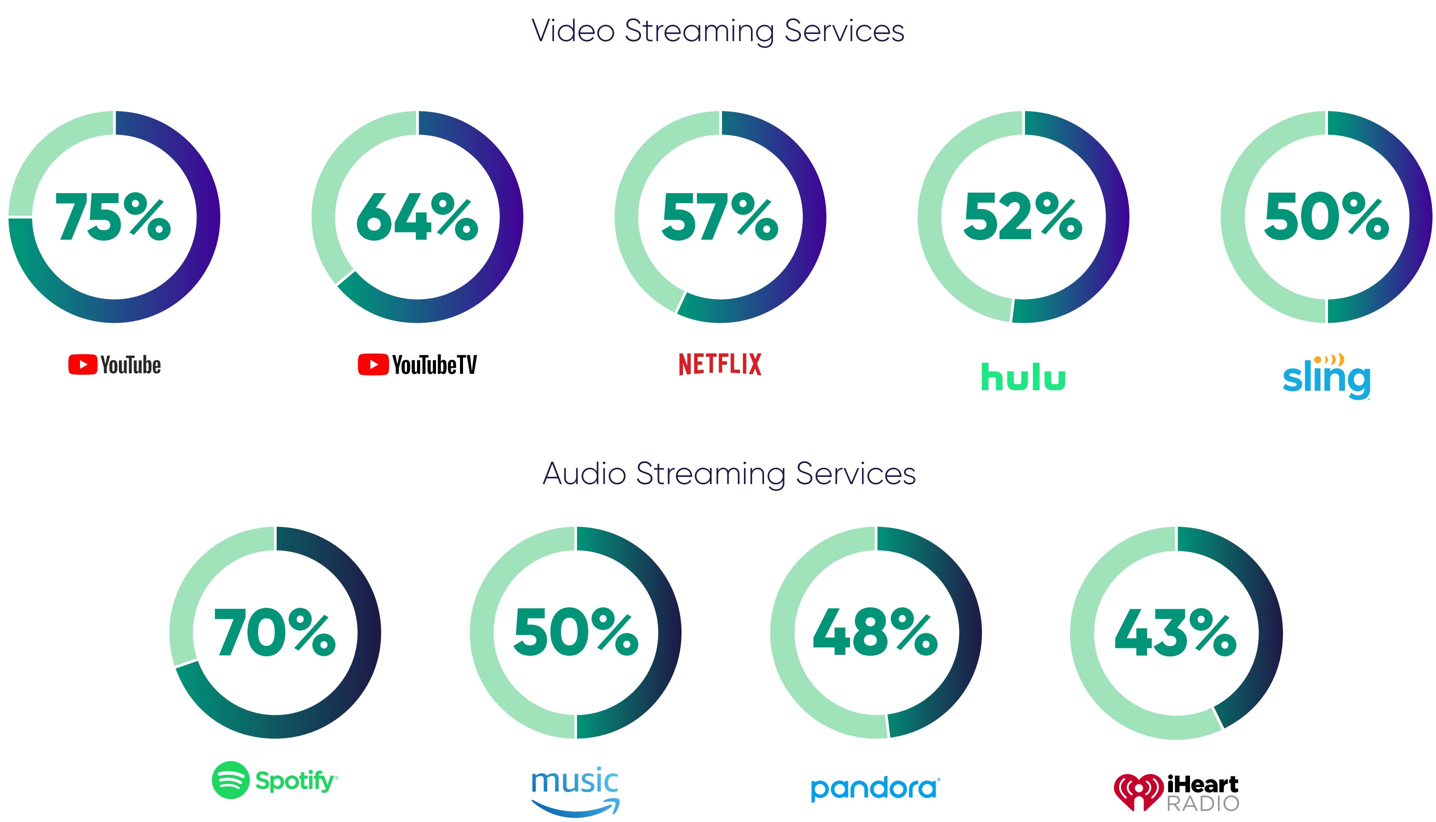
Daily Streamers: Undergraduate



Frequency of Streaming Service Usage: Graduate

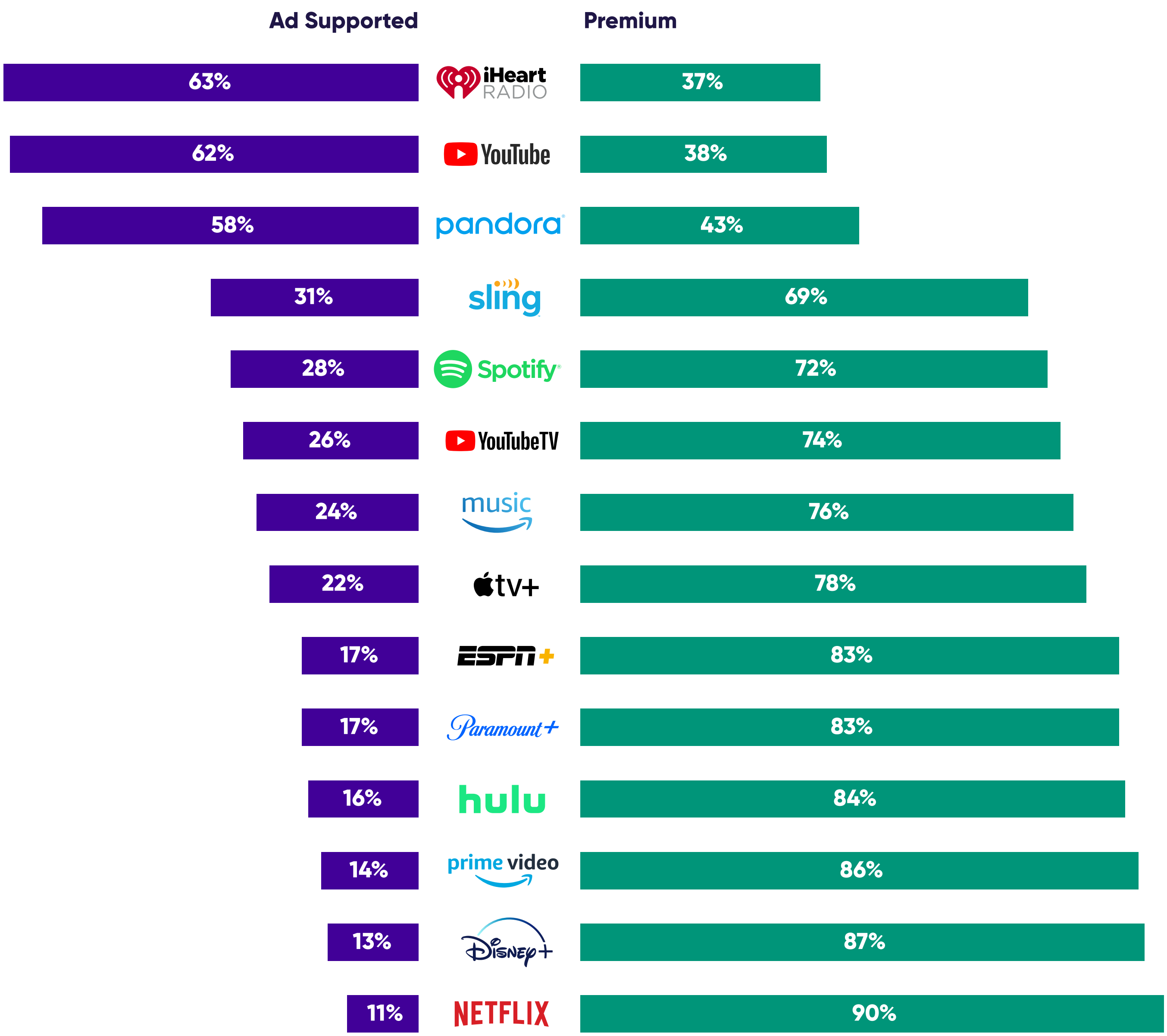
Among graduate respondents who stream media on YouTube, 75 percent use the platform every day. Among those who use Spotify, 70 percent listen daily. Approximately 65 percent of YouTube TV platform users watch daily, compared to 57 percent of Netflix users. About half of those who use Hulu, Amazon Music, Sling and Pandora visit the platforms daily.

Daily Streamers: Graduate



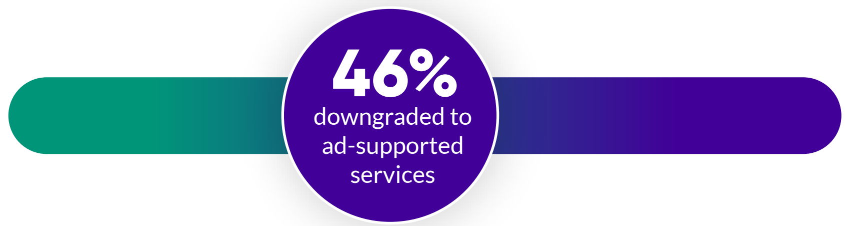
Use of Premium Ad-Free or Ad Supported Streaming Services: Total

Among platforms offering both ad-supported and premium (ad-free) streaming services, respondents overwhelmingly choose premium options. The three exceptions are Pandora, YouTube, and iHeartRadio, where between 58 and 63 percent use the ad-supported options.



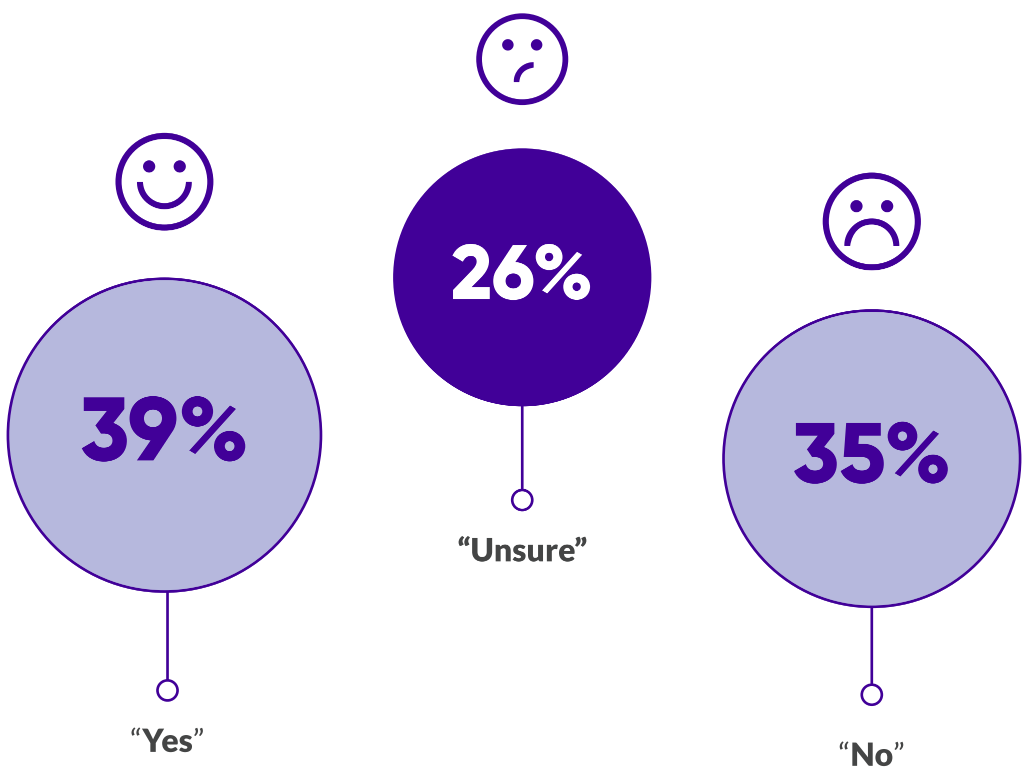
Downgraded to Ad-Supported Streaming Services

In the past year, nearly half of respondents (46%) have downgraded to ad-supported streaming services in exchange for lower monthly subscription costs.



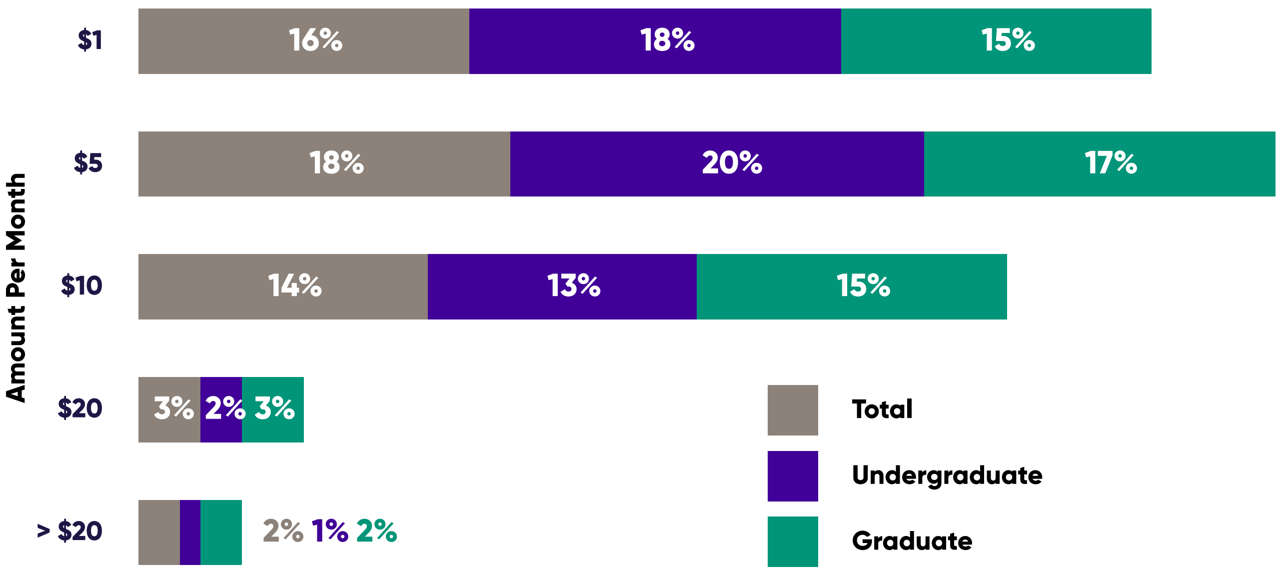
Would Downgrade to Streaming Services with Ads if Less Expensive

Among respondents who had not already downgraded to an ad supported subscription, 39 percent said they would downgrade to a subscription with ads if it cost less than the ad-free subscription. However, 35 percent said they would not. One quarter of respondents are not sure whether they would downgrade to ad-supported streaming if provided the option.



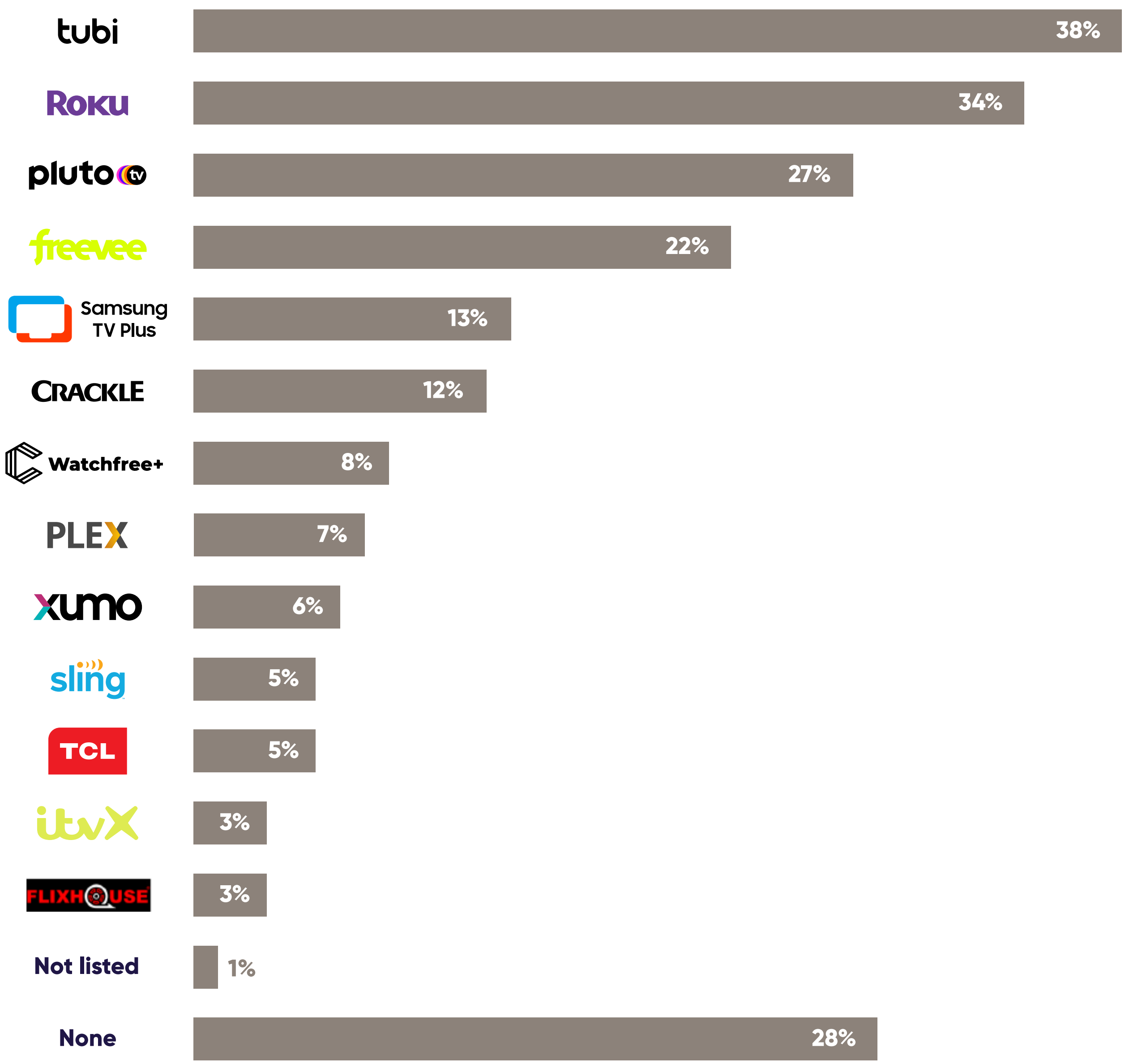
Price Willing to Pay to Upgrade from Free Streaming Service with Ads to Ad-Free Subscription

When asked how much they would be willing to pay to upgrade from ad-supported to ad-free streaming services, a majority were willing to pay only up to $5 per month. On average, more graduate students were willing to pay a higher monthly fee for ad-free streaming, with 19% of graduate students willing to pay more than $10 per month, compared to 12% of undergraduate students.



Use of Ad Free Ad-Supported Streaming Services (FAST)

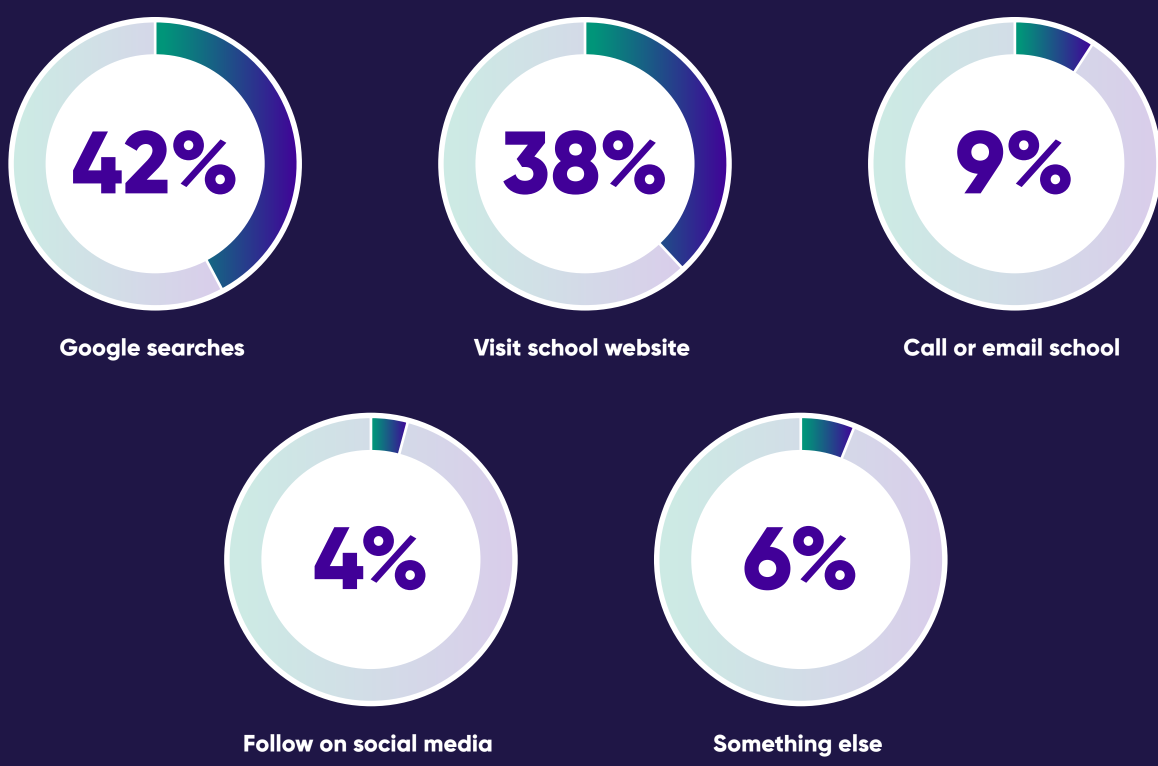
The largest proportion of respondents who subscribe to Free Ad-Supported Streaming Services (FAST) use Tubi (38%), followed by Roku Channel (34%). About 30 percent of online college students do not subscribe to any ad-supported streaming services. Given that 70 percent of respondents do utilize FAST, these services may provide an opportunity for schools to reach more potential students.



Section 6:
The Online College Student's Decision-Making Process

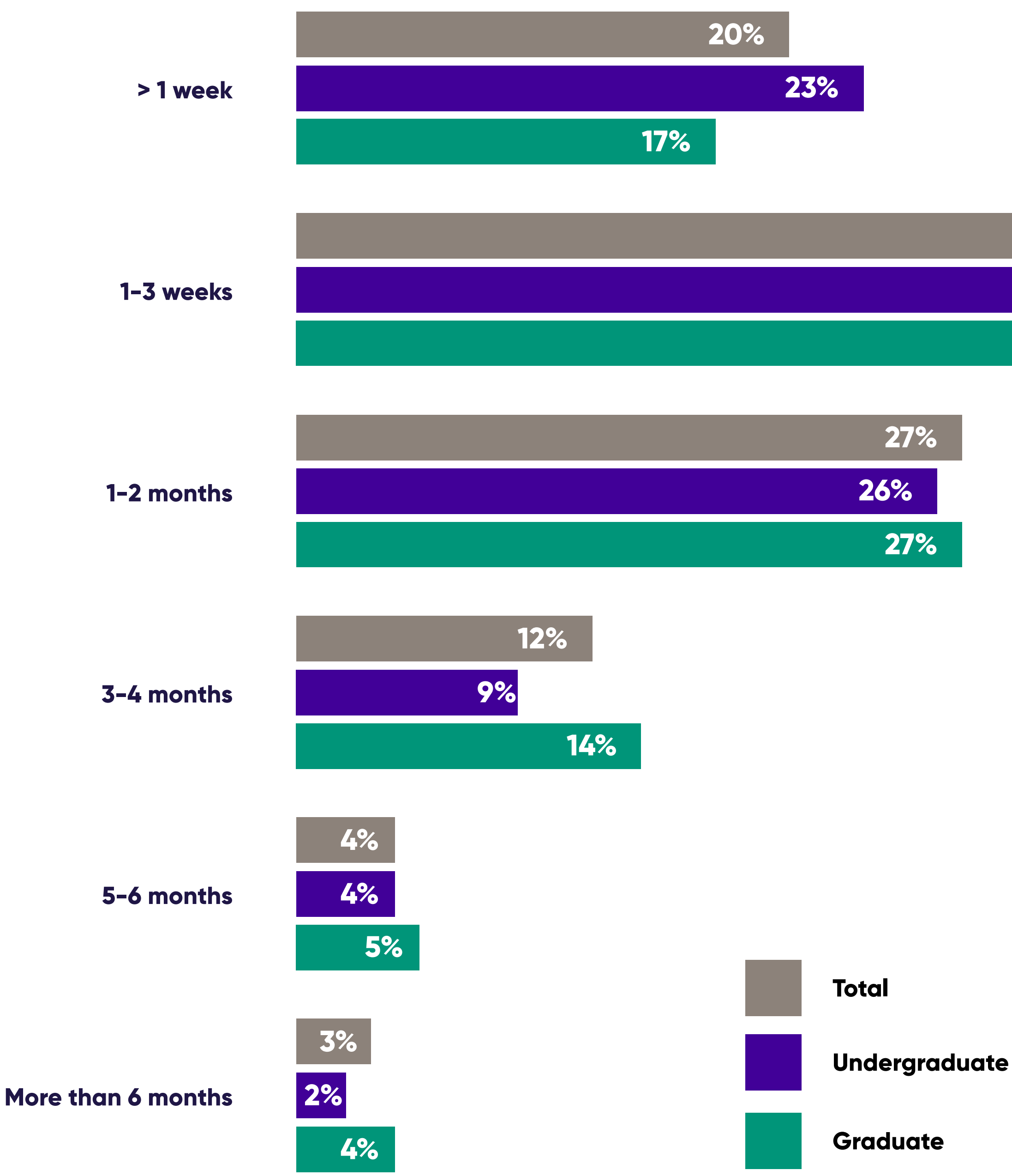
Where School Selection Process Began

Respondents indicated that they most often began school selection research with a search on Google or a visit to a school's website. A general Google search was a slightly more common starting point, with 42% of students beginning there compared to 38% who went directly to a school's website. This speaks to the importance of search engine optimization for schools that want to join students' small consideration sets.



Length of School Selection Process

The amount of time a student spends conducting research varies, but the selection process is typically completed within two months. The largest proportion of online students (35%) took between one and three weeks to select a school. Another 27 percent took between one and two months, and 20 percent selected a school in less than a week. Graduate students tend to take slightly more time than undergraduates deciding where to enroll. Providing rapid contact to inquiring students helps colleges meet student expectations and remain in the consideration set.



Factors Influencing School Selection

When conducting their search for an online program, respondents were most influenced by conversations with staff/advisors (25%). Proximity to school was listed as a factor for 24 percent of respondents. In addition, they were influenced by search engine results (19%), community members (16%), in-person events (15%), or online events (14%).

25%
Conversations with staff/advisors

24%
I live near the school

19%
Search engines
(Google, Bing, Safari, etc.)

16%
Community members
(friends/family/coworkers/academic advisor)

15%
In-person events
(campus tour, class audits, etc.)

14%
Emails from schools

12%
Past association with the school

12%
Online events
(webinars, online tours, online social events, etc.)

11%
Social media
(Facebook, Instagram, etc.)

10%
Online chats with schools

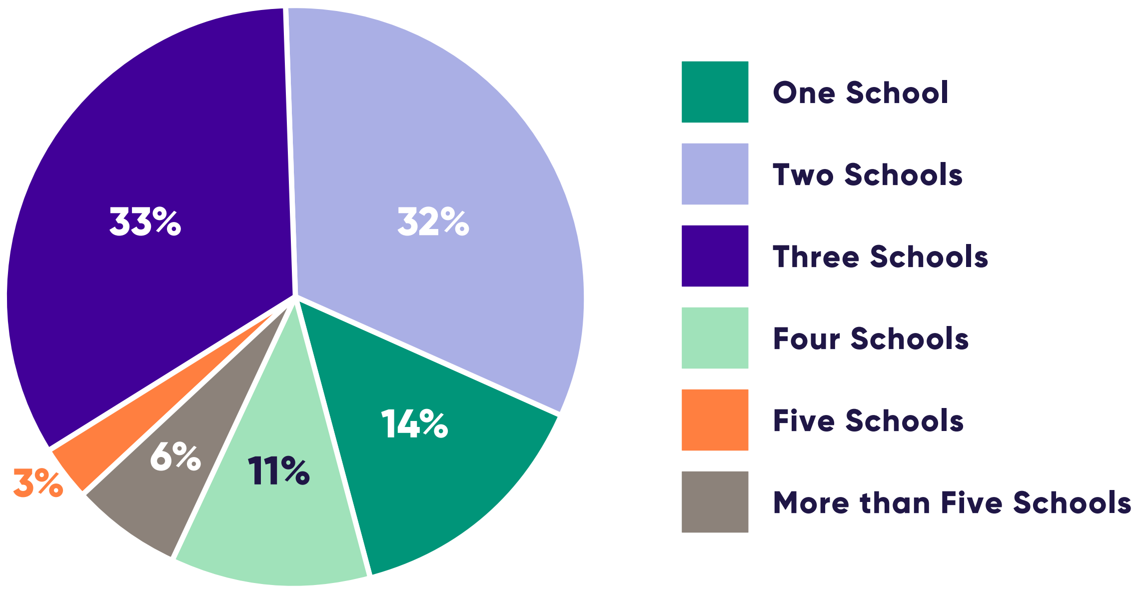
8%
Media awareness
(television, radio, streaming services, magazines, newspapers, billboards, podcasts)

6%
Direct letters and postcards from schools

2%
Something else

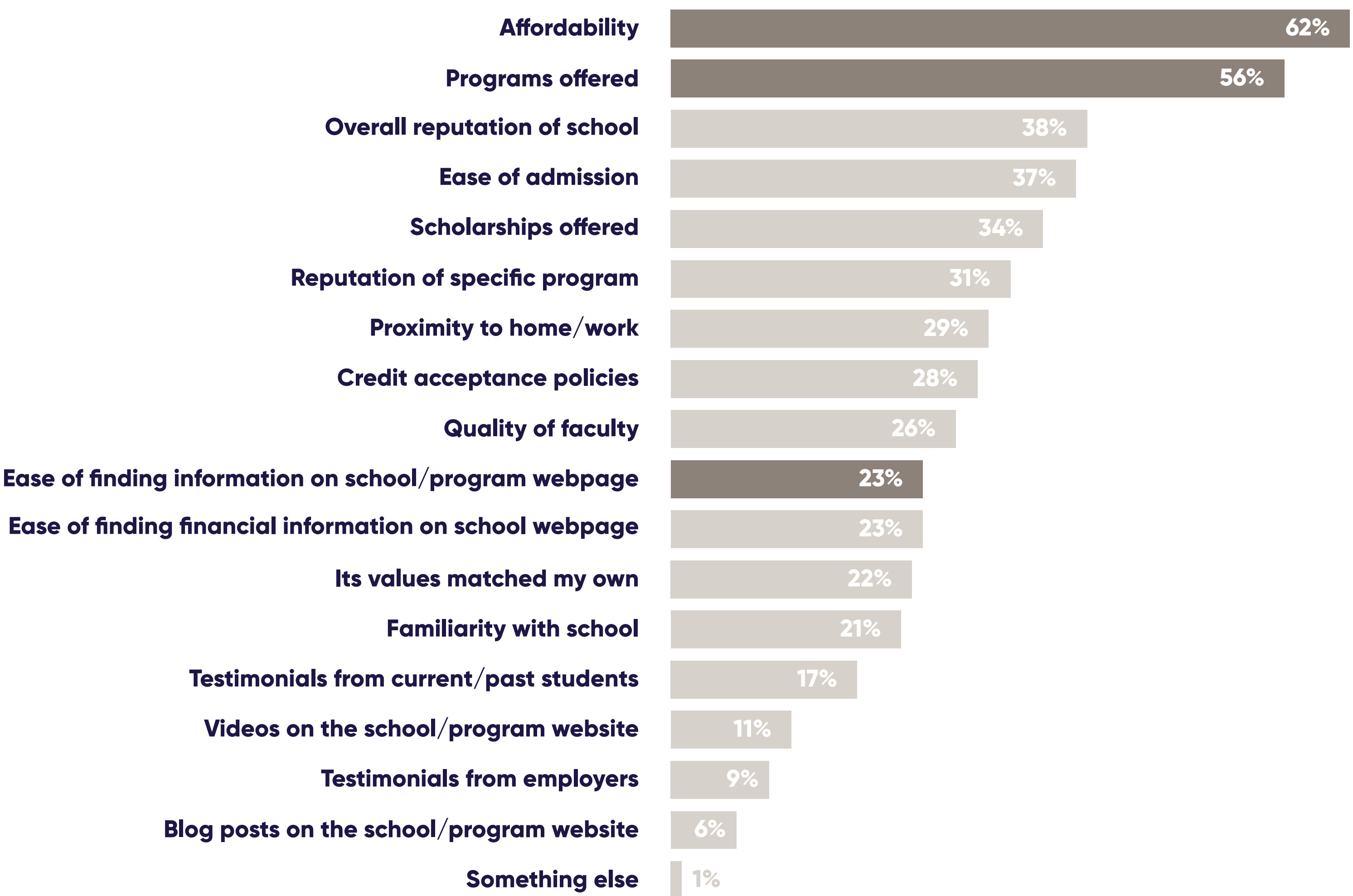
Number of Schools Considered During Initial Search

About two thirds of respondents were considering two or three schools when they initially started their search for online education.



Important Factors That Led to Considering Schools During Search

After respondents began their search for online study, the factors that led them to consider schools was affordability (62%) followed by program offerings (56%). However, a substantial proportion took many other factors into consideration as well. Many of these factors relate to finances, which are of high importance for many online college students. Schools can help students make informed decisions by providing clear information about scholarships and other financial information. In fact, schools benefit when all relevant information is readily accessible since 23 percent of respondents indicated that ease of finding information on the school website was an important consideration factor.



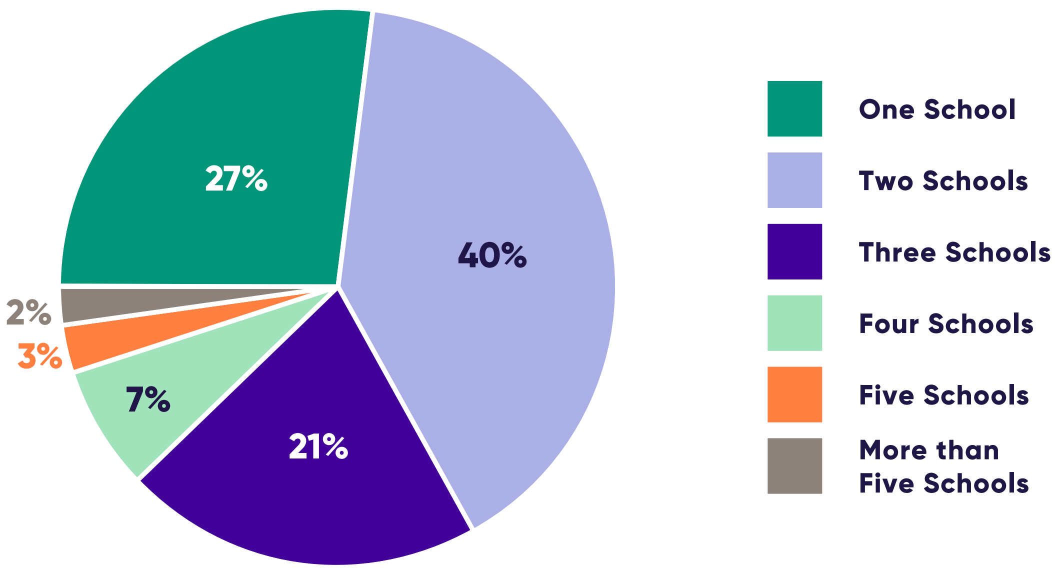
Most Important Factor That Led to Strongly Considering Schools During Search

As respondents continued their search, the most important factor that led them to strongly consider a school was its affordability (37%). Program offerings (16%) were the next most important factor. Program affordability was especially important to undergraduate students (41%). A smaller, but still majority, proportion of graduate students also ranked affordability as the most important factor.

Most Important Factors That Lead to Strongly Considering Schools During Search	Undergraduate	Graduate	Total
Affordability	41%	33%	37%
Programs offered	16%	16%	16%
Scholarships offered	8%	9%	9%
Its values matched my own	3%	6%	5%
Proximity to home/work	5%	4%	4%
Ease of admission	5%	4%	4%
Overall reputation of school	3%	5%	4%
Ease of finding information on school/program webpage	3%	3%	3%
Quality of faculty	3%	4%	3%
Reputation of specific program	2%	4%	3%
Testimonials from current/past students	1%	2%	2%
Familiarity with school	2%	2%	2%
Credit acceptance policies	3%	2%	2%
Ease of finding financial information on school webpage	2%	2%	2%
Testimonials from employers	1%	1%	1%
Blog posts on the school/program website	1%	1%	1%
Videos on the school/program website	2%	1%	1%
Something else	1%	1%	1%

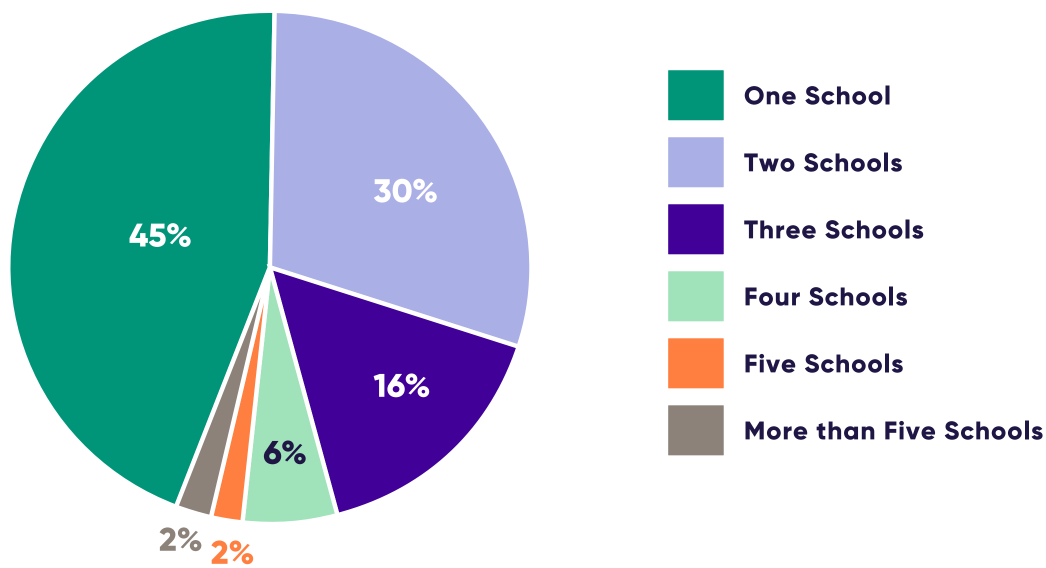
Number of Schools to Which Students Inquired

Of the schools that respondents initially considered during their search for online education, the largest proportion (40%) inquired at two of those schools. Another 27 percent inquired at just one school, and 21 percent inquired at three.



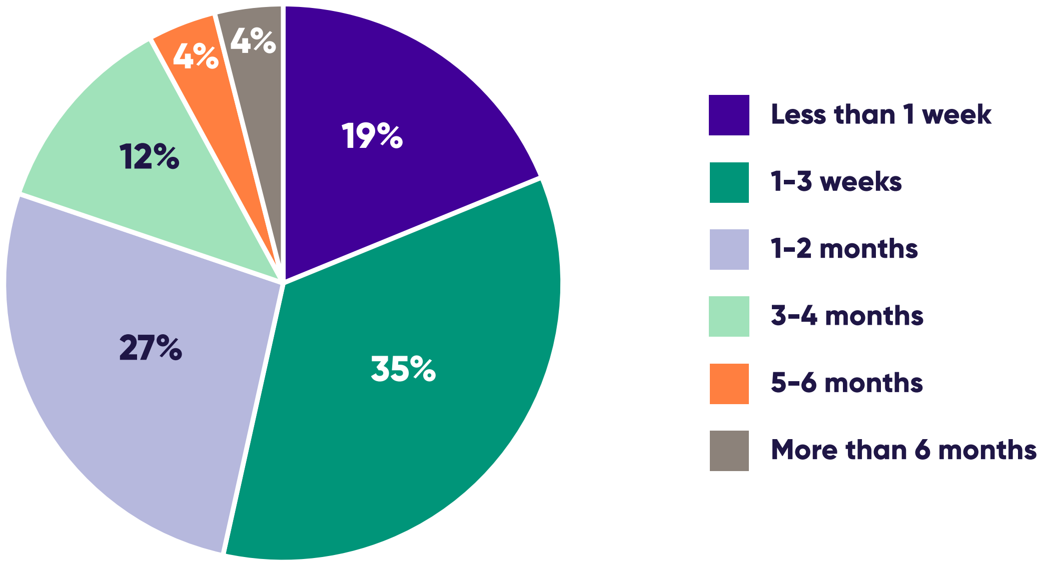
Number of Schools to Which Students Applied

Once they narrowed down their selection with an inquiry, the largest proportion of online students (45%) applied to only one school. Another 30 percent applied to two schools, and 16 percent applied to three schools. As students make their final application decisions, those institutions that reach out with personal contact are more likely to see applications from those students.



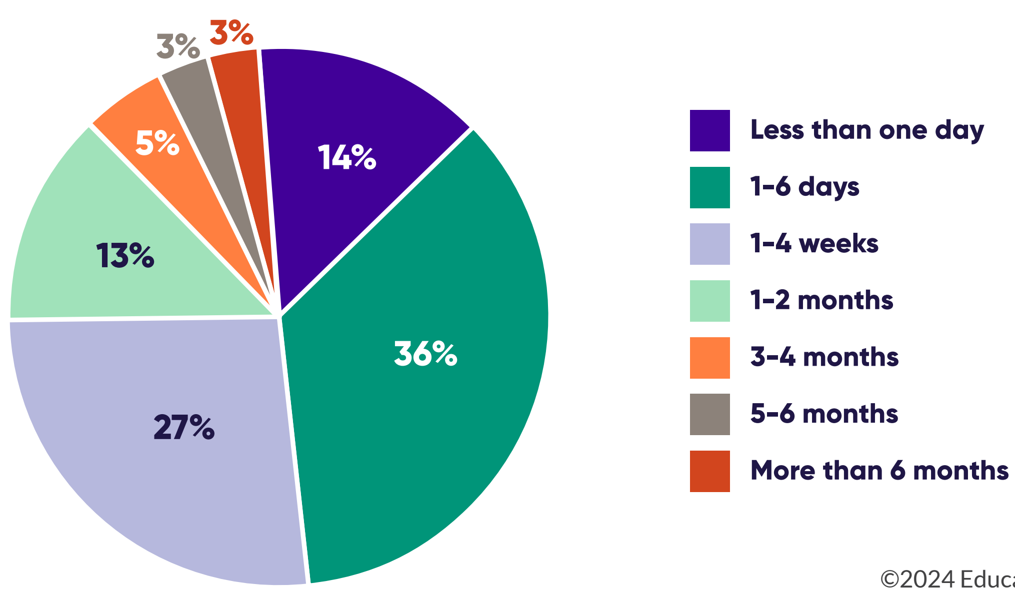
Length of Time to Decide Where to Apply

Most respondents took less than one month when deciding where to apply, with 19 percent deciding within 1 week and another 35 percent deciding in 1-3 weeks.



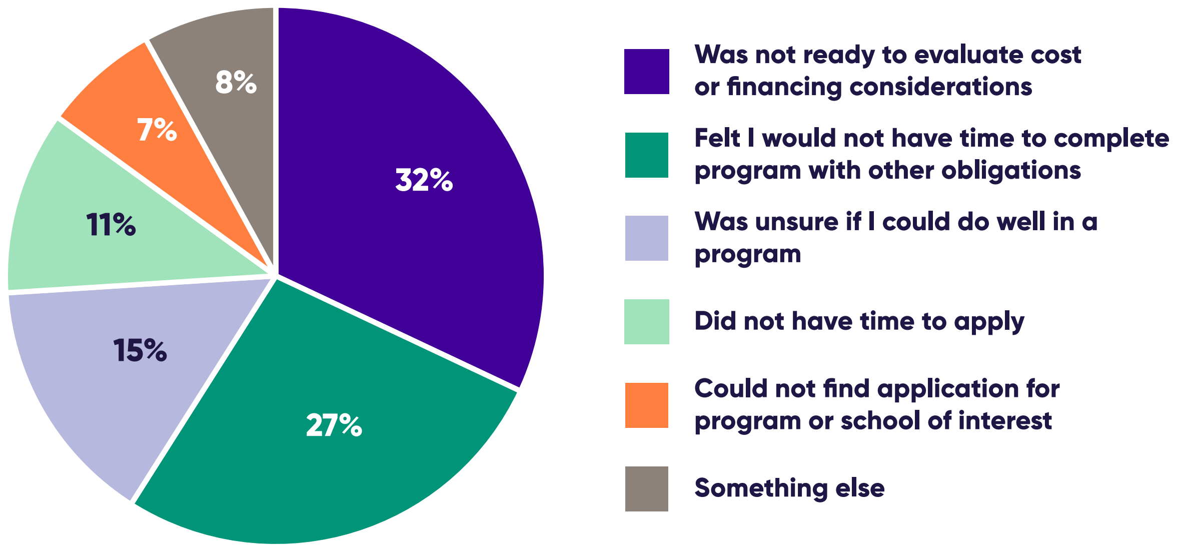
Length of Time to Apply

Respondents took substantially longer to complete the application process than the decision-making process, with only 14% completing the application process in one day. While half of respondents were able to complete the application process in less than 7 days, 24% took more than one month to complete the application. Graduate students are more likely to experience an extended application process of more than one month, with 25% taking more than a month to complete their application.



Factor That Delayed Applying

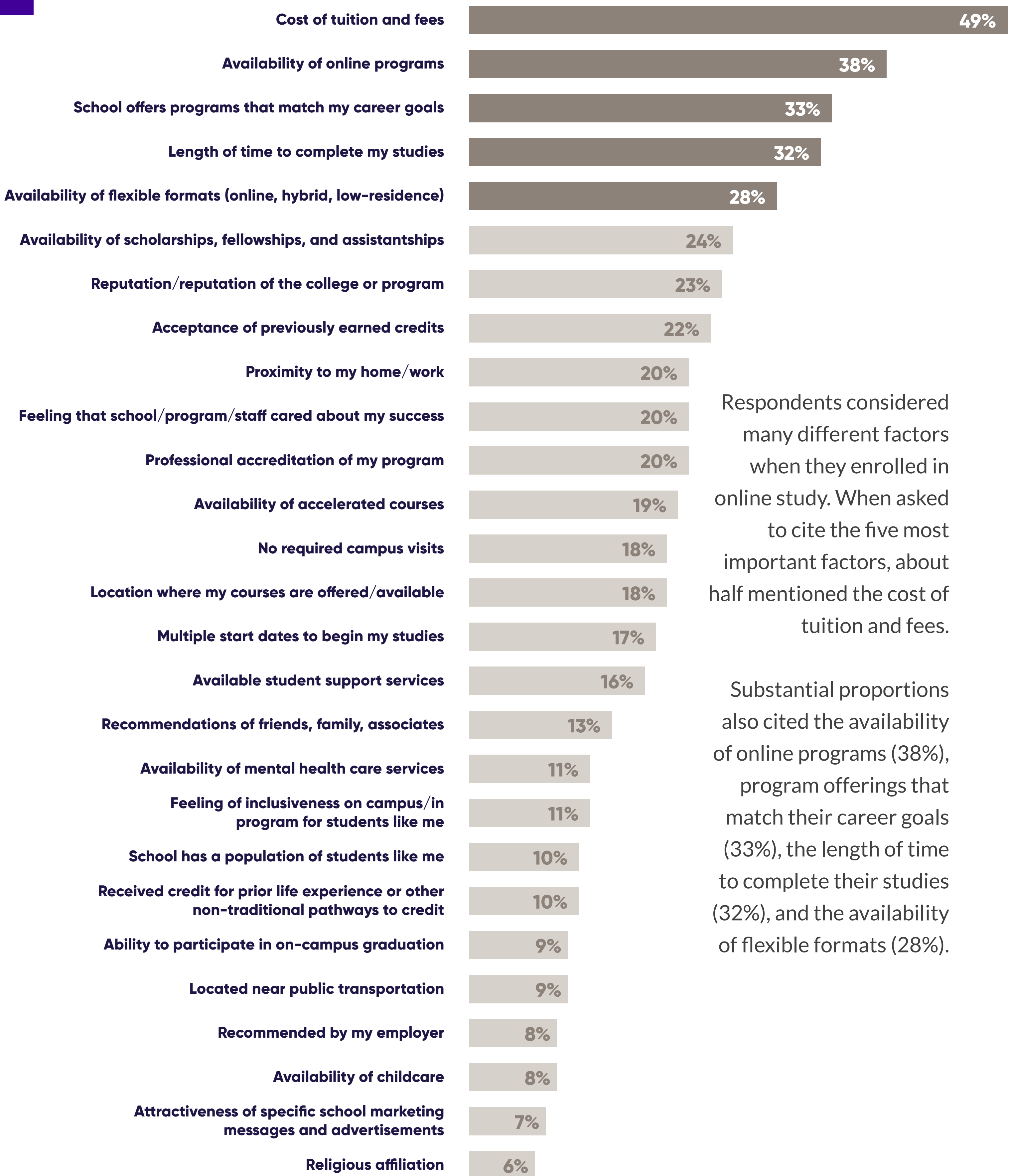
Those who waited three or four months or longer to apply (11%) had various reasons for the delay. While 32 percent were not ready to deal with cost or financial considerations, another 27 percent felt they would not have time to complete the program with other obligations. An additional 15 percent were unsure if they could do well in the program. Comprehensive coaching and support services throughout the application journey, especially around financial considerations, could help allay some of these fears.



Enrolled at School That Admitted Them First

The vast majority of online students (80%) enrolled (or will enroll) at the school that admitted them first, indicating the importance of rapid contact with students once they inquire or apply.

Most Important Factors in Enrollment Decision



Respondents considered many different factors when they enrolled in online study. When asked to cite the five most important factors, about half mentioned the cost of tuition and fees.

Substantial proportions also cited the availability of online programs (38%), program offerings that match their career goals (33%), the length of time to complete their studies (32%), and the availability of flexible formats (28%).

Rating of Important Factors in Enrollment Decision: Total

The most important factor in respondents' enrollment decisions is whether the school or program offers the education they need. This consideration achieved a 4.4 average rating on a five-point scale of 1-*not at all important* to 5-*very important*. However, all of the given factors were very important to the largest proportions of respondents.

	Not At All Important	Somewhat Unimportant	Neutral	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Average Rating
School/program offers education I need	1%	2%	12%	28%	58%	4.4
How completing the online program will impact you and your family	3%	5%	18%	28%	47%	4.1
Length of time to complete online program	2%	4%	19%	32%	43%	4.1
Reputation of the specific online program	2%	5%	19%	34%	41%	4.1
Overall reputation of the school	4%	5%	21%	31%	40%	4.0

Rating of Important Factors in Enrollment Decision: Undergraduate

Among undergraduate respondents, the most important factor in their enrollment decision is the school or program offering the education they need, achieving a 4.4 average rating.

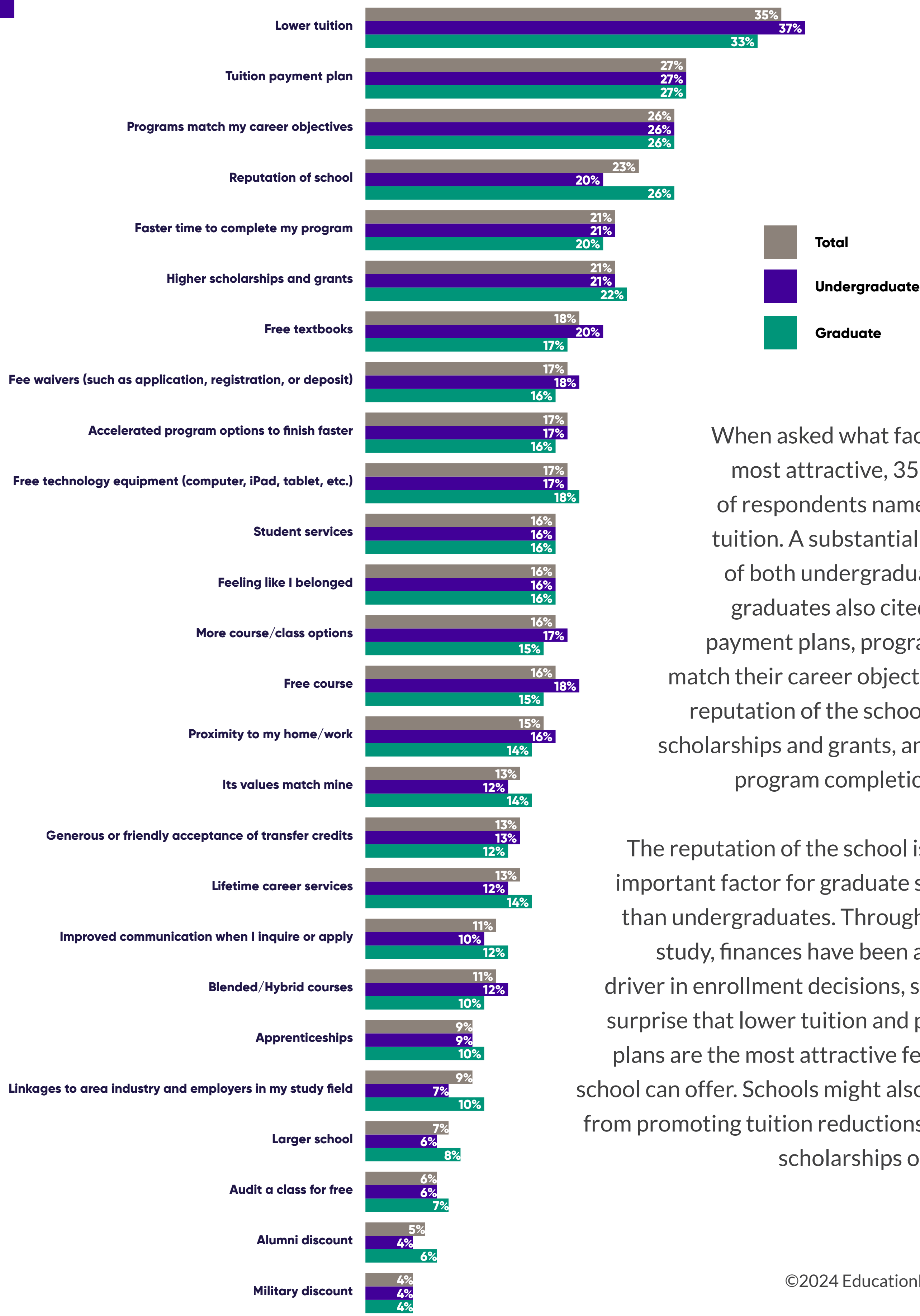
	Not At All Important	Somewhat Unimportant	Neutral	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Average Rating
School/program offers education I need	1%	3%	11%	28%	57%	4.4
How completing the online program will impact you and your family	3%	6%	19%	26%	46%	4.1
Length of time to complete online program	2%	5%	20%	31%	42%	4.1
Reputation of the specific online program	2%	6%	20%	34%	38%	4.0
Overall reputation of the school	4%	5%	23%	33%	36%	3.9

Rating of Important Factors in Enrollment Decision: Graduate

Graduate respondents also named education availability as the top factor in their enrollment decision, giving it a 4.4 average rating. All of the other given factors are slightly more important to graduate students than undergraduate students.

	Not At All Important	Somewhat Unimportant	Neutral	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Average Rating
School/program offers education I need	1%	2%	12%	27%	58%	4.4
How completing the online program will impact you and your family	2%	5%	17%	30%	47%	4.1
Length of time to complete online program	2%	4%	18%	32%	45%	4.1
Reputation of the specific online program	3%	5%	19%	30%	44%	4.1
Overall reputation of the school	2%	4%	17%	34%	43%	4.1

Most Attractive School Features



When asked what factors are most attractive, 35 percent of respondents named lower tuition. A substantial number of both undergraduates and graduates also cited tuition payment plans, programs that match their career objectives, the reputation of the school, higher scholarships and grants, and faster program completion times.

The reputation of the school is a more important factor for graduate students than undergraduates. Throughout this study, finances have been a leading driver in enrollment decisions, so it is no surprise that lower tuition and payment plans are the most attractive features a school can offer. Schools might also benefit from promoting tuition reductions such as scholarships or grants.

SCHOOL LOCATION

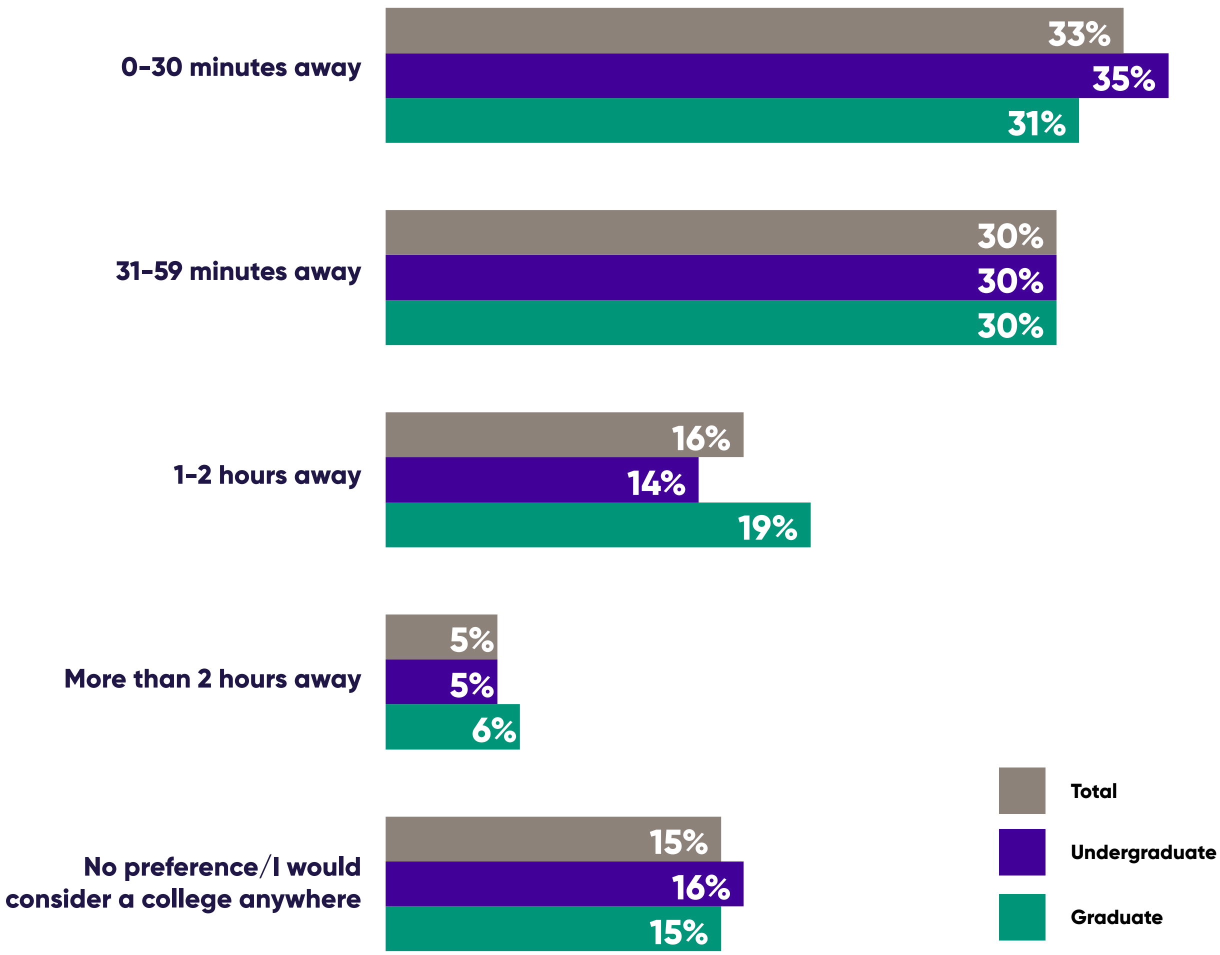
Importance of Distance from Institution

How far an online institution is from an online college students' home or work is extremely important to 34 percent of respondents. On a five-point scale of 1-*not at all important* to 5-*very important*, distance received a 3.6 average rating. For more than half of respondents, location was not very important. Students can be attracted to enrolling at an institution further away if other considerations are met, such as programming meeting needs, flexibility of program, and of course, tuition pricing.

	Not At All Important	Somewhat Unimportant	Neutral	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Average Rating
Importance of Distance from Institution	12%	9%	23%	22%	34%	3.6

Distance from Institution Willing to Consider

Only 15 percent of respondents indicated that they had no preference for an institution's location. The majority of both undergraduate (84%) and graduate (85%) respondents indicated that proximity to an institution was a determining factor. Almost two thirds of all respondents sought a school that is less than an hour driving distance from their home. Of those who indicated a preference for distance, only 5% were willing to consider a school more than 2 hours away, even though programs were delivered online.



Enroll at Farther Institution if Closer Satellite Location

About three quarters of those indicating a distance of 2 hours or less would be willing to enroll in an online program at a school located more than two hours away if the institution had a closer satellite location.

Statements About School Location

About 60 percent of online students would enroll at a school regardless of location, as long as the program met their educational goals, or it was the right program for them. Another 18 percent would enroll anywhere as long as the program has a good reputation. About 15 percent would only enroll at a school that is located close to their home. These data indicate that, while students would prefer to study within one hour of home, schools can attract students who reside further away by offering programming ideal for online college students.

58%

"I would enroll anywhere as long as the program met my **educational goals**/was the right program for me.

18%

"I would enroll anywhere as long as the **program** has a good reputation.

15%

"I would only enroll close to **home**.

9%

"I would enroll anywhere as long as the **school** has a good reputation.

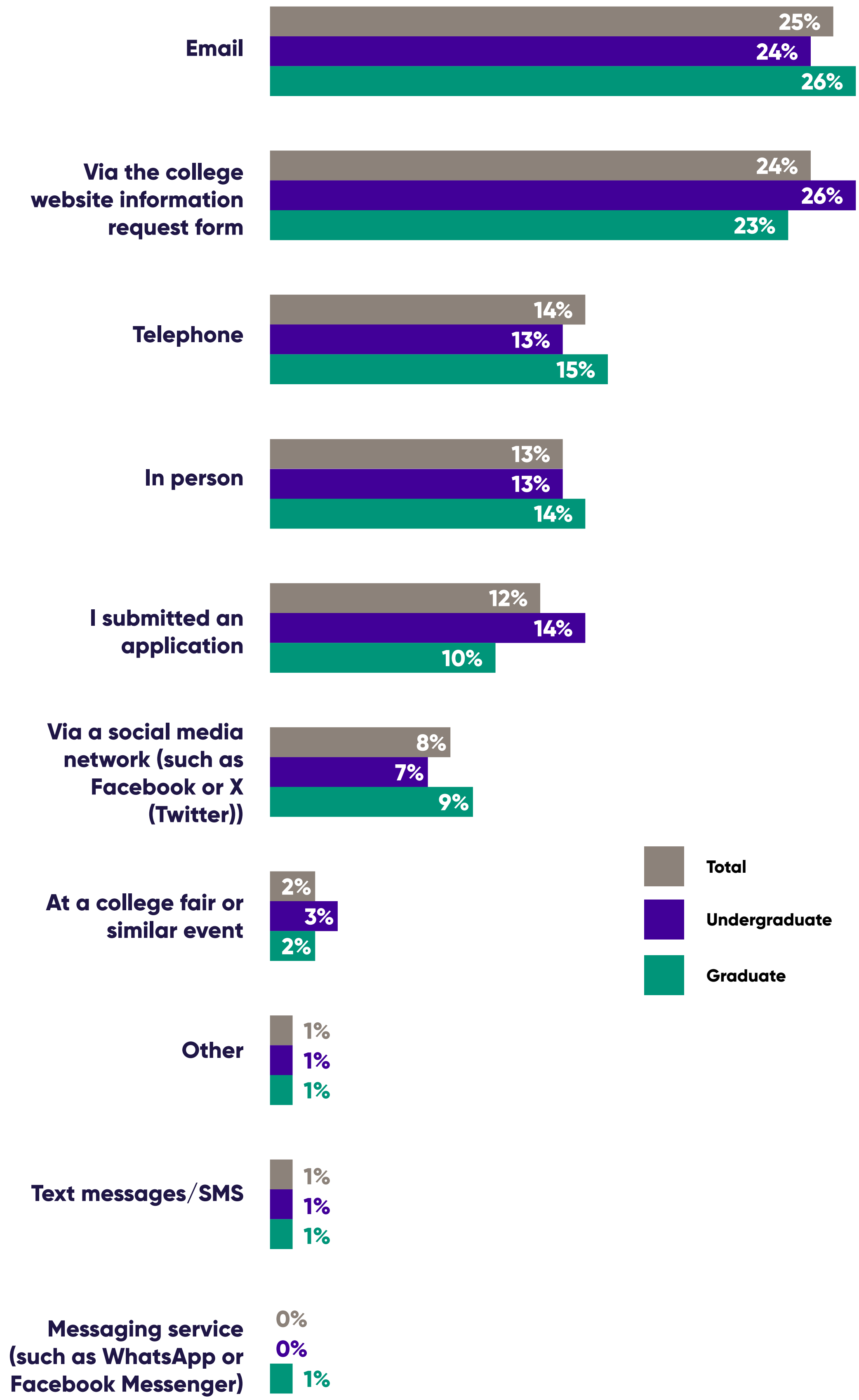
2%

"I would enroll anywhere as long as the school is **well known/famous**.

Initial Inquiry Method

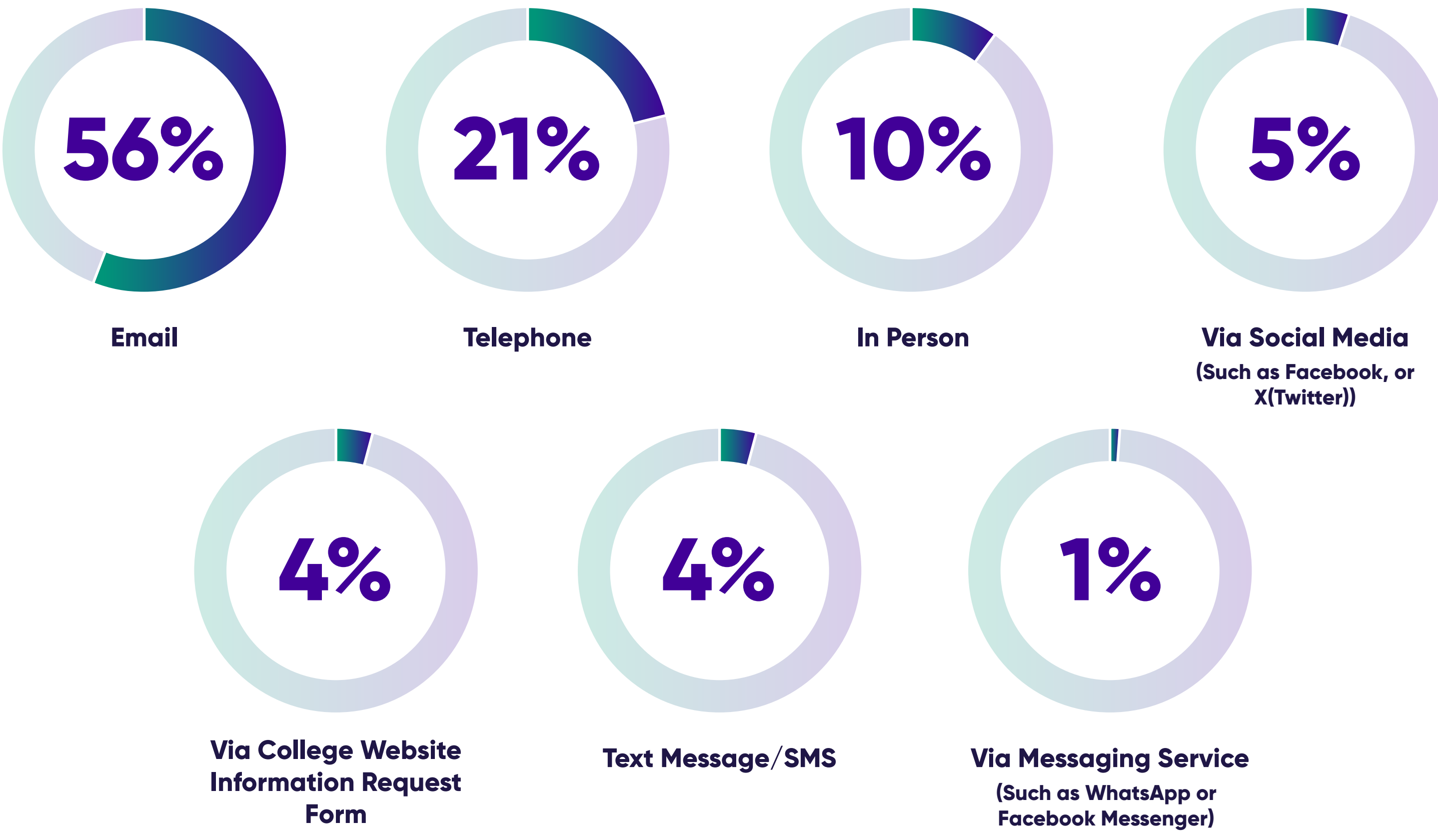
Respondents use a variety of inquiry methods to engage with schools. About one quarter begin their inquiry by emailing the institution, and an equal proportion complete the Request for Information (RFI) form on the college's website. Comparable proportions either call (14%) or visit the college in person (13%).

Perhaps surprisingly, 14 percent of undergraduate students and 10 percent of graduate students don't inquire at all; they simply submit an application based on the information they have. Providing multiple channels for inquiry, and responding quickly, can help schools meet students where they are.



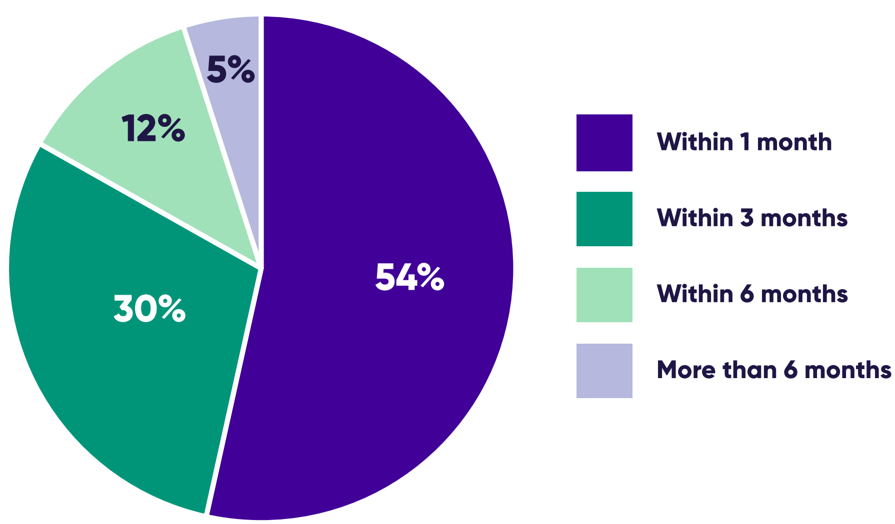
Preferred Contact Method

The largest proportion of respondents (56%) prefer to be contacted by schools via email. Nearly 20 percent prefer telephone contact, while 10 percent prefer to communicate in person.



Expected Time Between Acceptance and Start

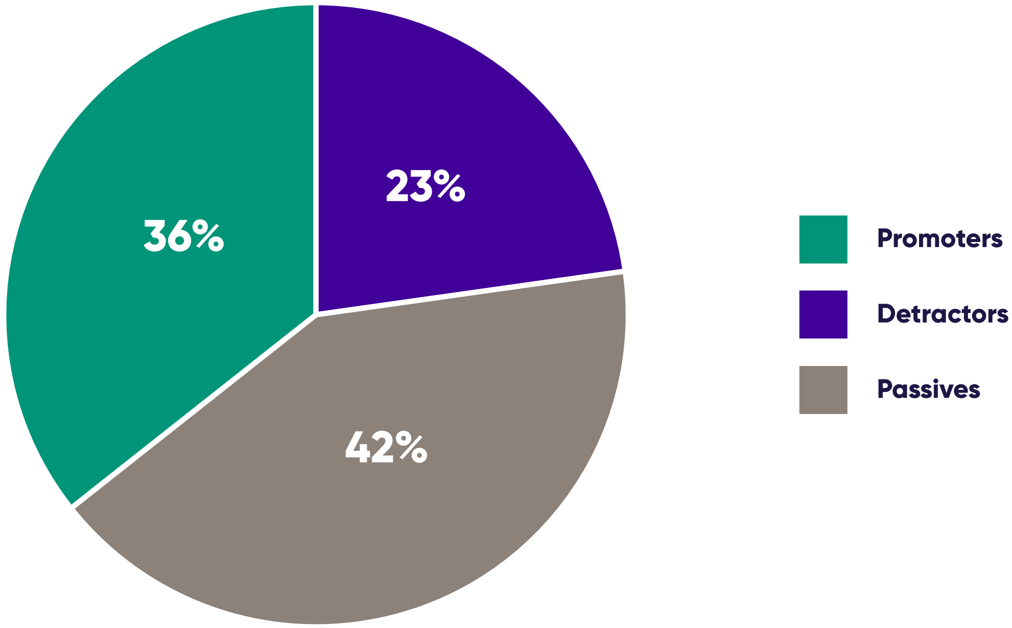
Once accepted into a program, 54 percent of respondents expect to start within one month. An additional 30 percent expect to start within three months. By offering rolling start dates, schools can allow students to enroll and matriculate on a timeline that works around their schedule, reducing the chance of melt.



OPINIONS ABOUT ONLINE EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

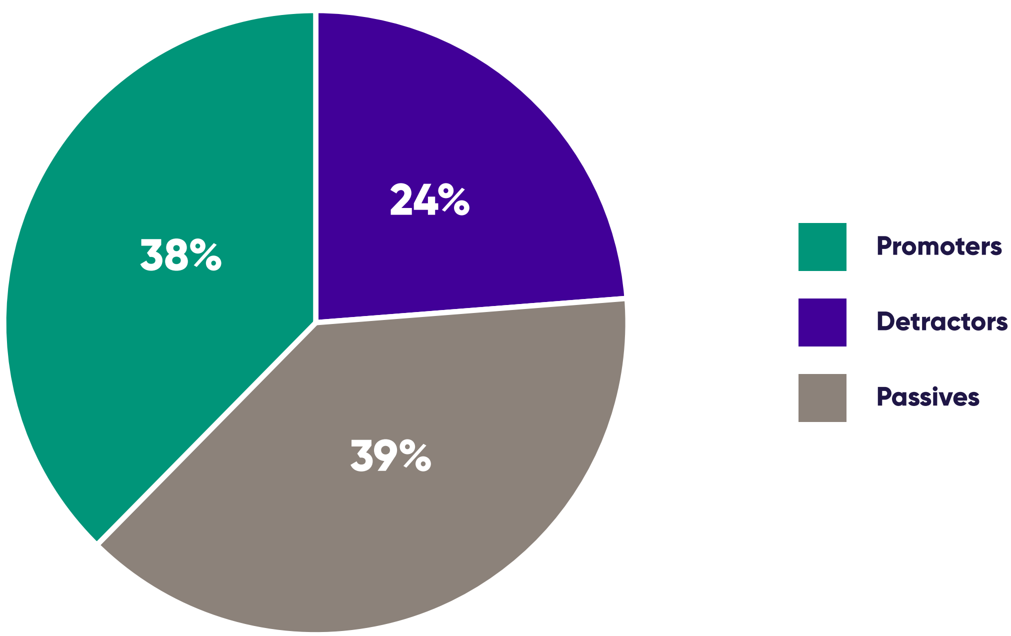
Overall Assessment of Online Education Experience

Respondents who are currently enrolled or were recently enrolled were asked to provide a general assessment of their online education experience. Only 36 percent of these respondents met the criteria to be called “promotors” of online education, while nearly 25 percent are “detractors”.



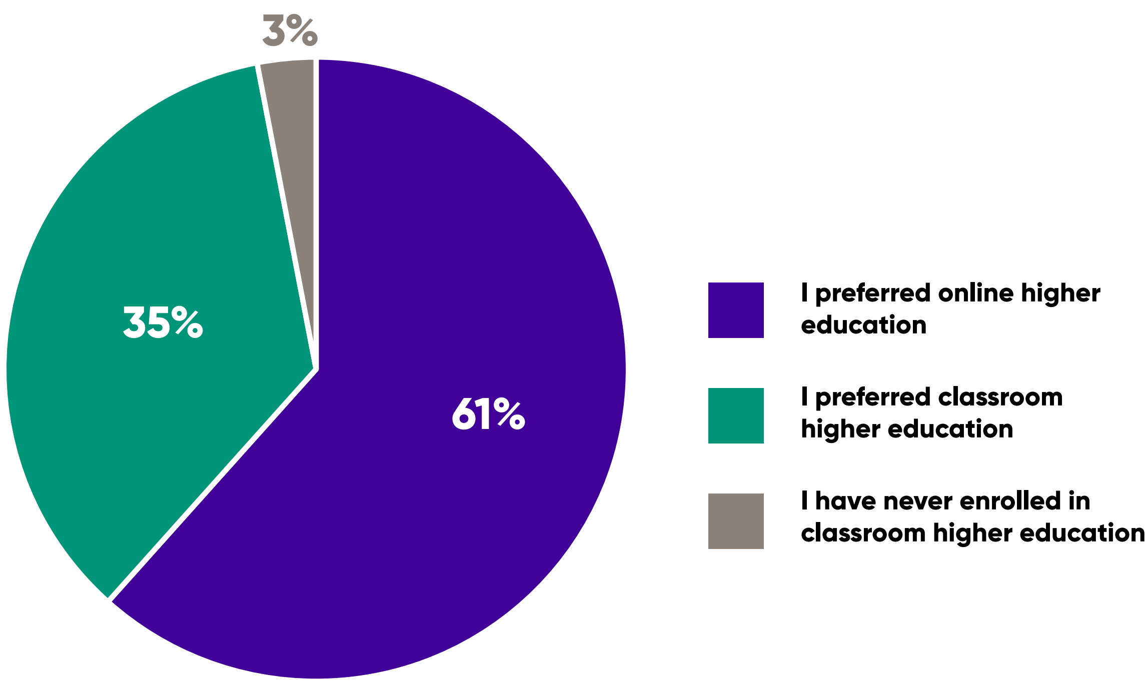
Likelihood of Recommending Online Education

While nearly 40 percent of students who were or are enrolled would recommend online study to others, nearly 25 percent are considered online college study detractors. Another 40 percent would neither recommend nor warn against online study. Schools can turn more students into promoters by making sure that students have the support to achieve their educational and career goals.



Statements Comparing Online and Classroom Education

About 60 percent of online college student respondents prefer learning online to learning in the classroom, while 35 percent prefer learning in the classroom.



Likelihood of Enrolling in Another Online Program at Institution of Enrollment

Online college students are generally likely to enroll in another online program at the institution in which they are currently enrolled. Using a five-point scale of 1-*not at all likely* to 5-*very likely*, yielded an average rating of 3.6.

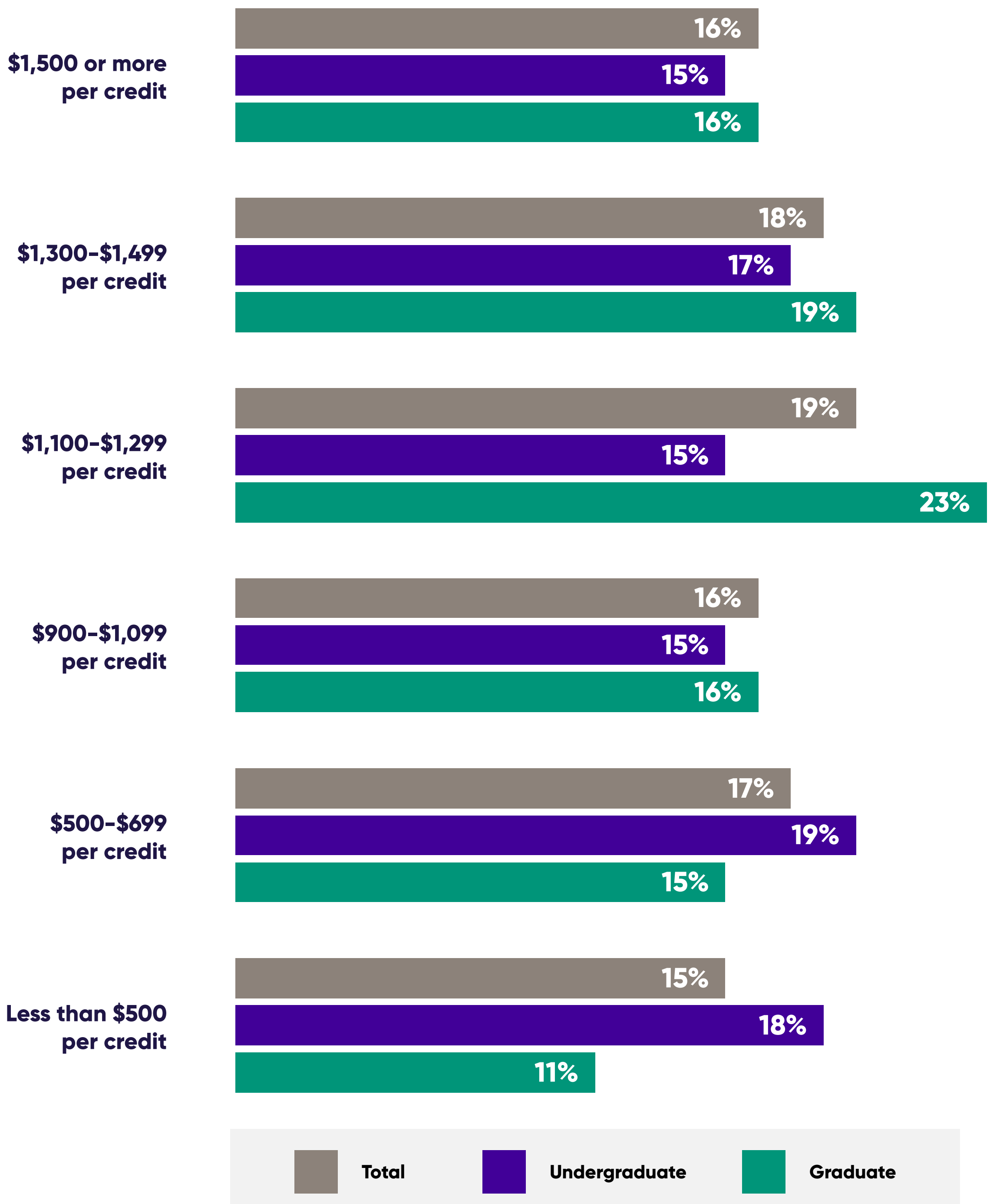
	Not At All Likely	Somewhat Likely	Neutral	Somewhat Likely	Very Likely	Average Rating
Likelihood of Enrollling in Another Online Program at the Institution of Enrollment	7%	9%	28%	26%	29%	3.6

Section 7:
How Do Students Pay for College?

TUITION

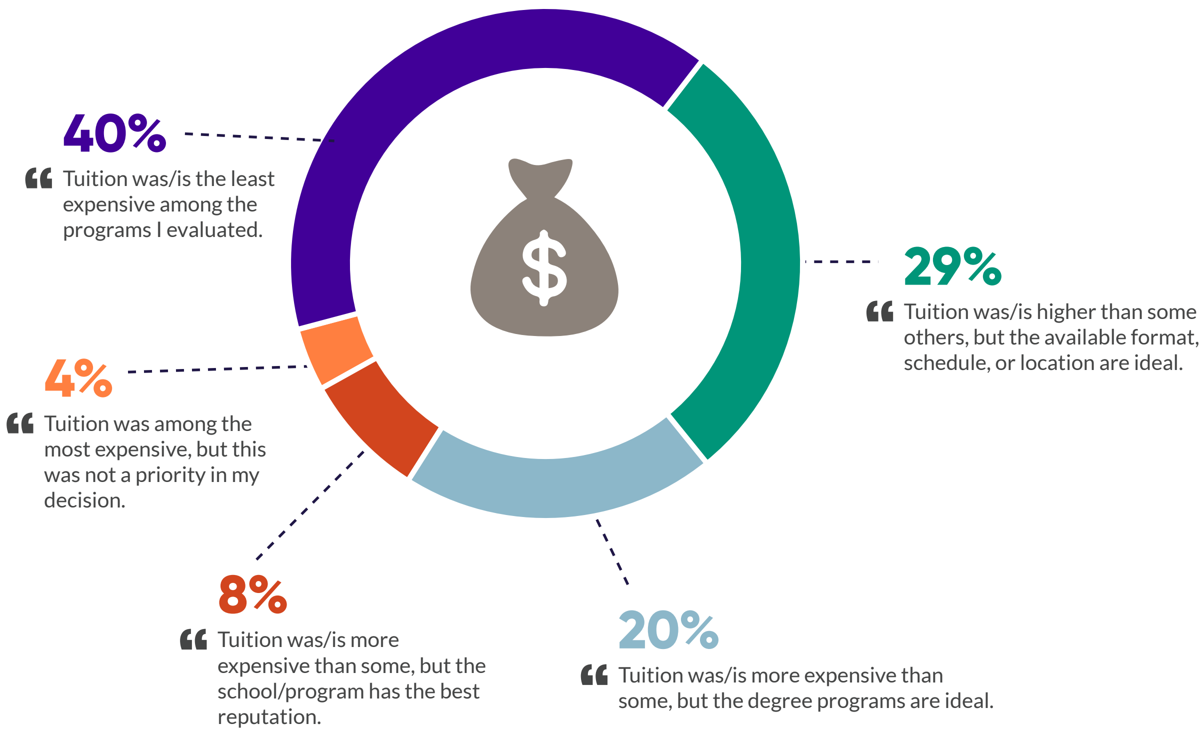
Tuition Costs

The cost of tuition varies widely for online college students. The largest proportion of undergraduate student respondents (19%) pays $500-$699 per credit. The largest proportion of graduate student respondents (23%) pays $1,100-$1,299 per credit.



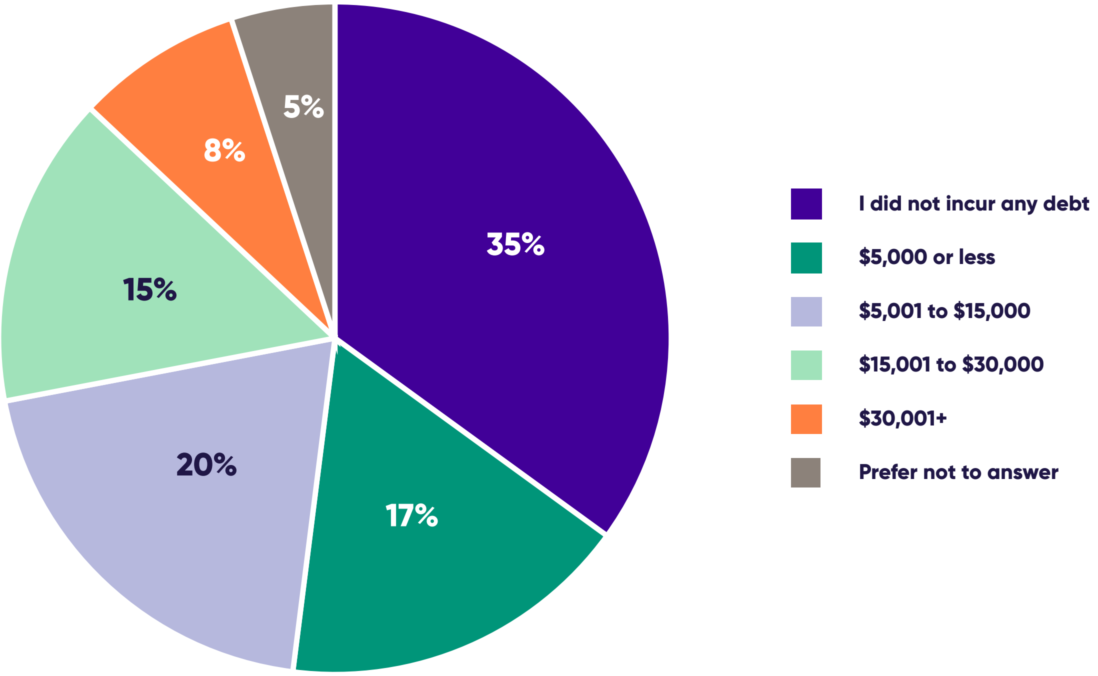
Tuition Consideration

The cost of tuition is an important determining factor for many students. However, it is not always the deciding factor. While 40 percent of all students enrolled at the school with the least expensive tuition among all the institutions they considered, 29 percent enrolled at a school with higher tuition because it has the ideal format, schedule, or location. Another 20 percent enrolled in a more expensive school because the program was ideal. Schools can help allay cost concerns by demonstrating how the program fits the student's needs.



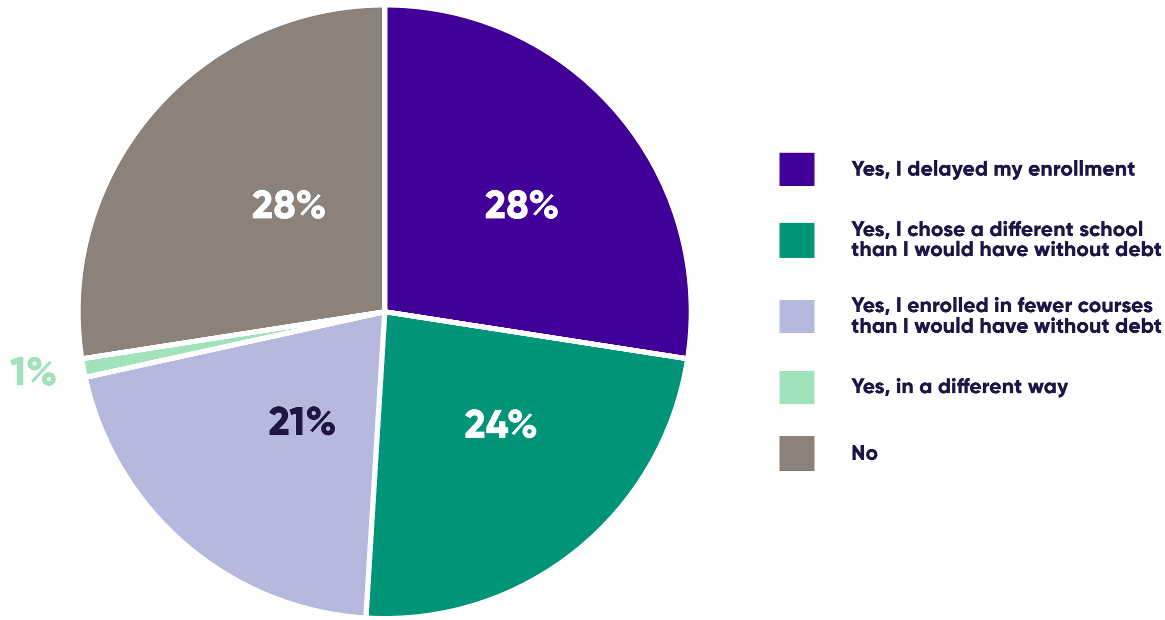
Current Student Loan Debt from Undergraduate Study

The majority of respondents (65%) had incurred debt from prior undergraduate study. The largest proportion who incurred debt (20%) owe between $5,001 and $15,000. Thirty-three percent incurred more than $15,000 in student loan debt due to prior study.



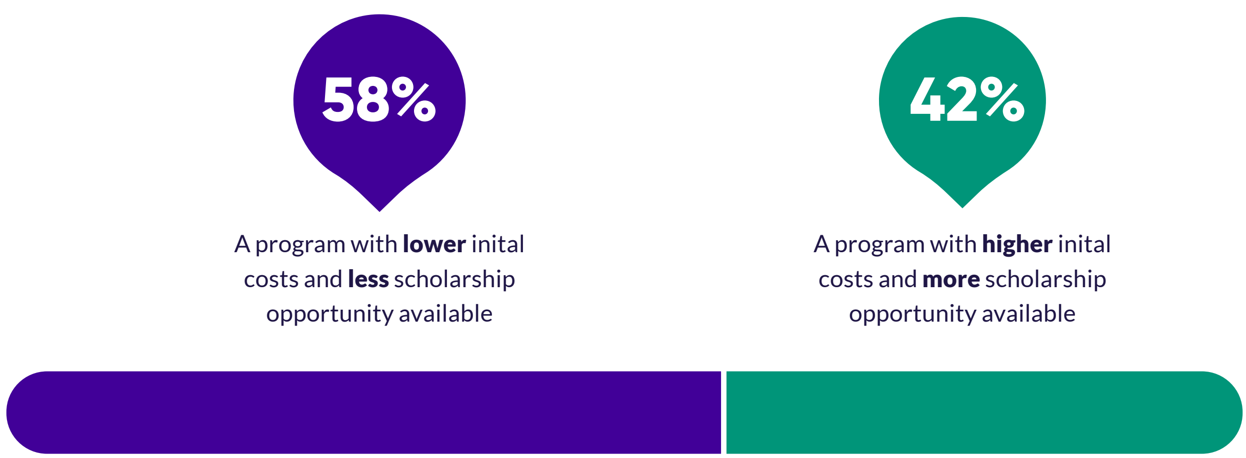
Impact of Student Loan Debt on Enrollment Decision

The majority of those who incurred student loan debt said it impacted their decision to enroll in online study. The largest proportion (28%) delayed their enrollment. Similar proportions chose different school (24%) or enrolled in fewer courses (21%).



Statements About Scholarships

Slightly more respondents would rather enroll in a program with a lower initial cost and fewer scholarship opportunities than a program with a higher initial cost and more scholarship opportunities.



Preferred Time to Learn About Cost

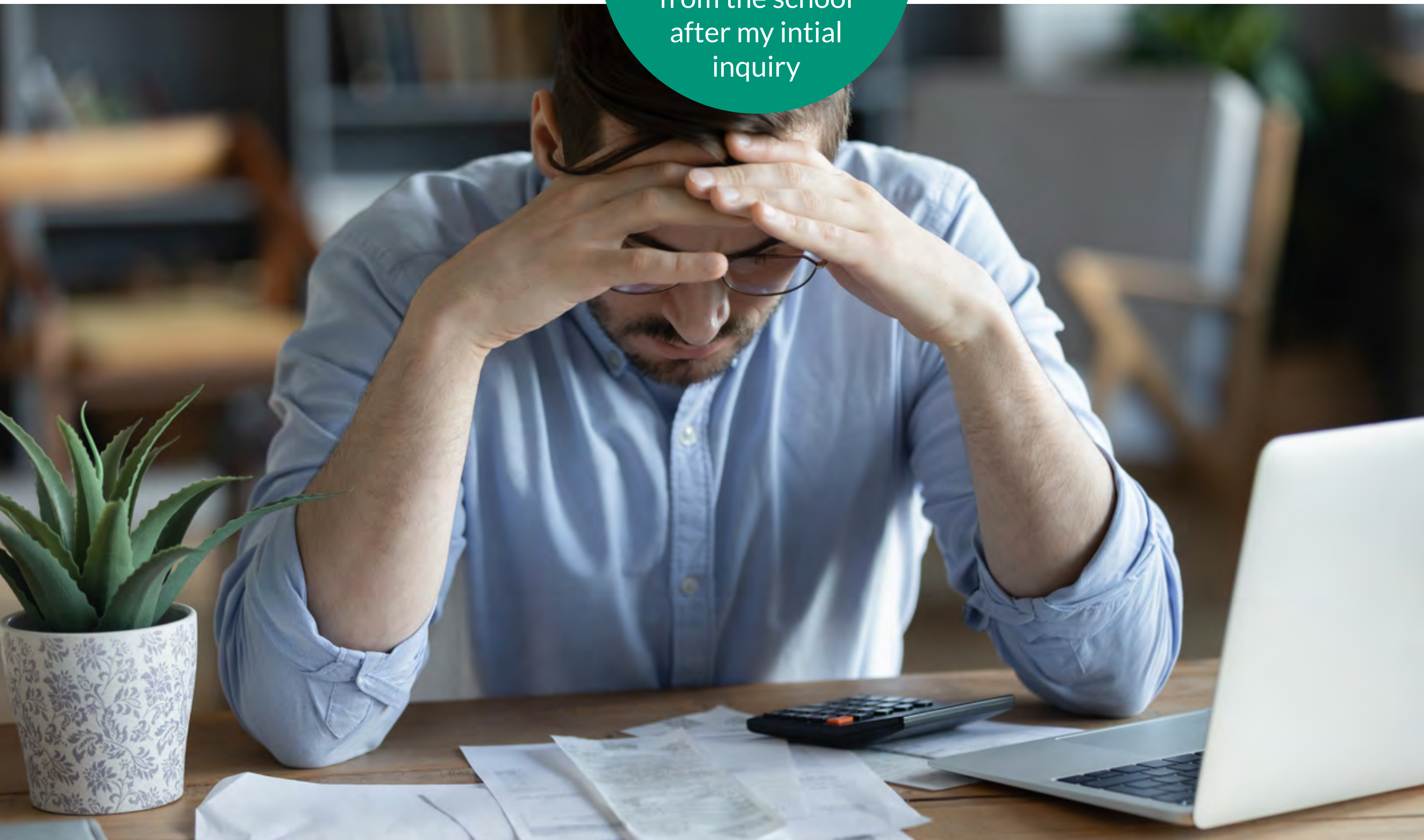
Most online college students, about 60 percent, prefer to learn about the cost of a program when they first visit the website of the school. Another 26 percent prefer to consider cost after they hear back from the school about their initial inquiry. This is yet another indication that schools could benefit from making information about tuition and fees easily accessible on school websites.

58%
When I first visit the website of the school

10%
When I hear back from the school after I submit my application

6%
After I am accepted

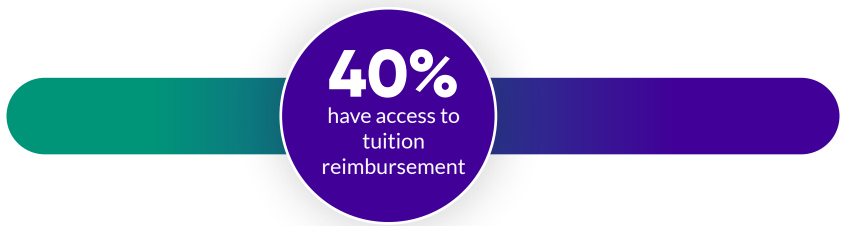
26%
When I hear back from the school after my intial inquiry



TUITION REIMBURSEMENT

Employer Offers Tuition Reimbursement

Tuition reimbursement programs are available but not universal. Forty percent of employed respondents indicate that they have access to tuition reimbursement from their employer. Schools can remind students to ask about tuition reimbursement and can work with employers to help allay cost concerns, mitigate costs, and allow students to enroll in career-oriented study.

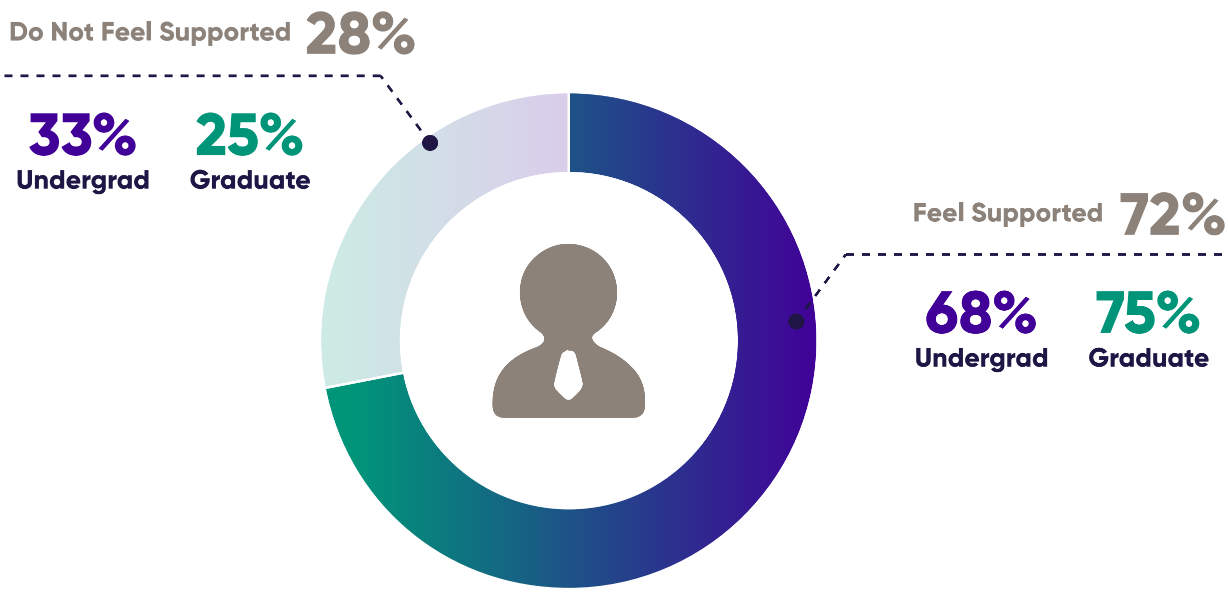


Use Of Employer Tuition Reimbursement

Among those who do have access to tuition reimbursement, the majority have used it: 70 percent of undergraduate online students and 81 percent of graduate online students.

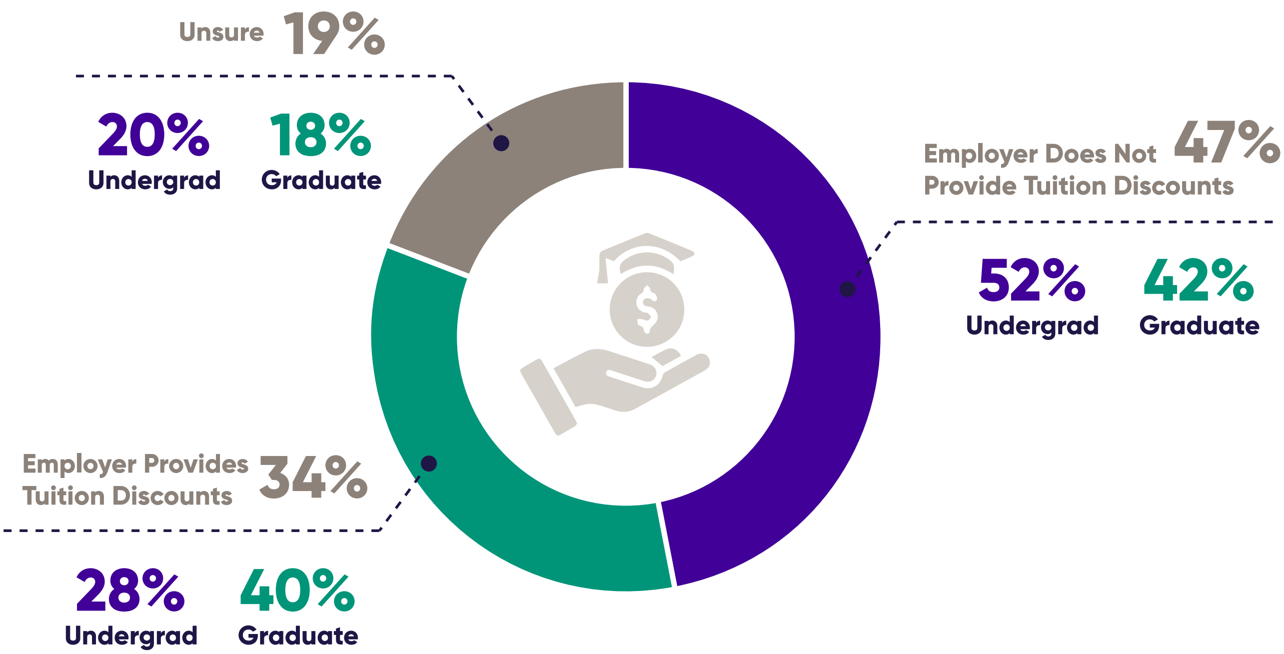
Employer Support

Most employed online students, 68 percent of undergraduate students and 75 percent of graduate students, feel supported by their employer to pursue their education. While this accounts for the majority of online students, almost 25 percent do not feel supported. This figure is higher among undergraduates (33%) than graduates (25%).



Tuition Discounts for Employees

The largest proportion of undergraduate online students (52%) enroll at institutions that do not offer employees at their organization a tuition discount. Among graduate students, the proportions are nearly equal: 42 percent enroll at institutions that do not offer employees at their organization a tuition discount, while 40 percent are offered tuition discounts by their institution. When schools work with area employers to build tuition discount programs they create a mutually beneficial situation. Area organizations get access to a more educated workforce, students get an education that aligns with their career goals, and schools can attract a higher volume of students.



Looking Forward

As we close this 13th edition of the Online College Students report and look back over previous data, some key conclusions become clear.

Firstly, school websites are still not providing the information students need in an easily accessible format. Respondents repeatedly indicated the importance of tuition and fee information. Yet the accessibility of this information is only marginally better than it was last year.

In the 2023 OCS report, 30 percent of respondents said they could easily find tuition and fee information on school websites. This year, this information was easily accessible to 36 percent of respondents. A sparse six percentage point increase does not meet student expectations, and the results for schools can be dire. Potential students who cannot find the information may remove the school from their consideration set. Schools can avoid this undesirable outcome by building user-friendly websites that prioritize the information students come looking for.

Secondly, undergraduate students with some college, no credential form a large part of the market. The difference from last year to this is staggering. Last year, only 39 percent of respondents had some college, no credential. This year more than 72 percent of undergraduate respondents counted among this group.

This massive year-over-year growth is a sign for institutions that it's time to get to know this growing market. Education-related debt, potential transfer credits, and even students' sense of their ability to succeed at college all impact students classified as Some College, No Degree.. The schools that see the best results will be those that can validate the concerns of these students and provide options to help them seamlessly enroll.

Thirdly, the non-degree market is becoming more attractive to students. One-quarter of respondents enrolled in a fully online certificate or licensing program (that awarded credit). Among graduate students, that proportion was even higher with one-third enrolling in a non-degree program.

Stackable credentials are no longer a nice-to-have, they're a significant offering to maximize enrollment and persistence. Students use them to advance their careers, the primary reason most online college students choose to enroll. Marketing programs as stackable allows schools to emphasize cost, time to completion, and convenience factors. These non-degree programs also offer an opportunity to enroll more hesitant students, helping them build familiarity with the school and its programs.

Finally, the demographic make-up of the student population is shifting. Thirty percent of our respondents are aged 25 and younger. Many have family and employment responsibilities. Over one-third identify as non-white and 20 percent identify as being of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin. Awareness of these factors can help schools build marketing messages and programs that meet the needs of all of their students.

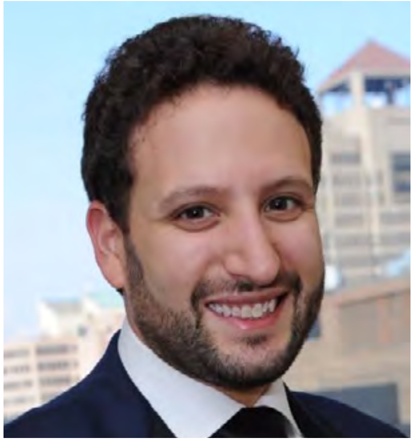
Methodology

Data was gathered among 3,011 online college students who are, were, or will study in a completely online program. These data were collected at the start of the 2023-2024 academic year (fall 2023) between November and December of 2023. The sample was designed to have a near equal number of undergraduate and graduate online students. The group comprised 1,508 undergraduate students and 1,503 graduate students. All respondents had been enrolled, were currently enrolled, or planned to enroll with 12 months in a degree (associate, bachelor's, master's, or doctoral) or for-credit certificate or licensure program. Students who were recently enrolled must have completed their online program. Respondents were required to be 18 years or older. They were invited, though a United States nationwide online research panel, to complete an online survey instrument. Survey respondents were incentivized for their participation. These respondents had no affiliation with EducationDynamics and were invited to participate in the survey from a national panel.

Note: percentages reported in this text may not equal 100 percent due to rounding.

Authors

Carol B. Aslanian is Founder and President of Aslanian Market Research, a Division of EducationDynamics. She is a national authority on the characteristics and learning patterns of adult and online college undergraduate and graduate students. She has made hundreds of presentations to national audiences and has authored numerous articles and reports on the topic. For more than 20 years, she led the College Board's Office of Adult Learning Services. Ms. Aslanian has led market research projects for more than 300 colleges, universities, and educational agencies. She is an alumna of Cornell University and Harvard University.



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