

# Meet Your New Graduate and Adult Learner

Insights on Changing Student Behaviors and Preferences,  
Based On a Survey of 3,800+ Graduate and Adult Learners





# Executive Summary

## Navigating Headwinds in the Graduate, Online, and Adult Learner Markets

After nearly a decade of growth, graduate and adult enrollment declined for the first time in nearly a decade in 2022. In this shifting market, leaders of graduate, online, and adult education programs find themselves tasked with growing enrollment while also facing staff and resource shortages, mounting competition, and rising marketing costs. At the same time, the demographics of the graduate and adult learner market are changing. Gen Z accounts for a growing slice of the graduate and adult landscape, and with this change comes new expectations for marketing and program offerings. Enrollment teams will need to be nimble to develop marketing messages and strategies that will appeal to a new generation of graduate and adult learners and combat the ongoing headwinds.

Ultimately, these forces combine to create an uncertain future for many graduate, online, and adult programs—and an uncertain financial future for many institutions. The colleges and universities best positioned for success are those with a clear understanding of student mindset and behaviors—and an enrollment strategy designed with these trends in mind.

## Understanding the New Graduate and Adult Learner Mindset

To help our partners recruit, enroll, and serve graduate and adult learners, **EAB surveyed more than 3,800 prospective and current “adult”<sup>2</sup> students about their preferences, needs, and behaviors.** This report includes findings from that survey, along with insights from prior EAB Adult Learner Surveys to understand trends over time. Unless otherwise noted, the findings in this report include insights from both prospective graduate students and adult degree completers, with key differences in response by student segment noted where applicable. Additionally, this report includes research from EAB’s Professional and Adult Advisory Services and findings from EAB’s recent survey of current high school students to shed light on the behaviors and mindsets of future adult learners.

**This report explores four insights into graduate and adult learners’ behaviors, preferences, and priorities:**



Student search behavior and priorities are shifting.



Students are increasingly making enrollment decisions based on cost.



Students spend time researching, not applying.



Students seek a variety of modality and schedule options.

### Key Challenges Facing Graduate and Adult Enrollment

# 50%

Only half of surveyed graduate enrollment leaders met their headcount goals in 2022<sup>1</sup>

# 1.1%

Projected annual growth in graduate enrollment from 2021–2031, down from 3.2% average annual growth from 1990–2021

1. Findings from EAB’s survey of 240 graduate enrollment leaders conducted in Fall 2022.  
2. Here “adult” means anyone 19yrs and older enrolled in or seeking non-traditional degrees, certificates, and programs

Source: NCES Digest of Education Statistics Table 318.10, EAB interviews and analysis.

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INSIGHT #1

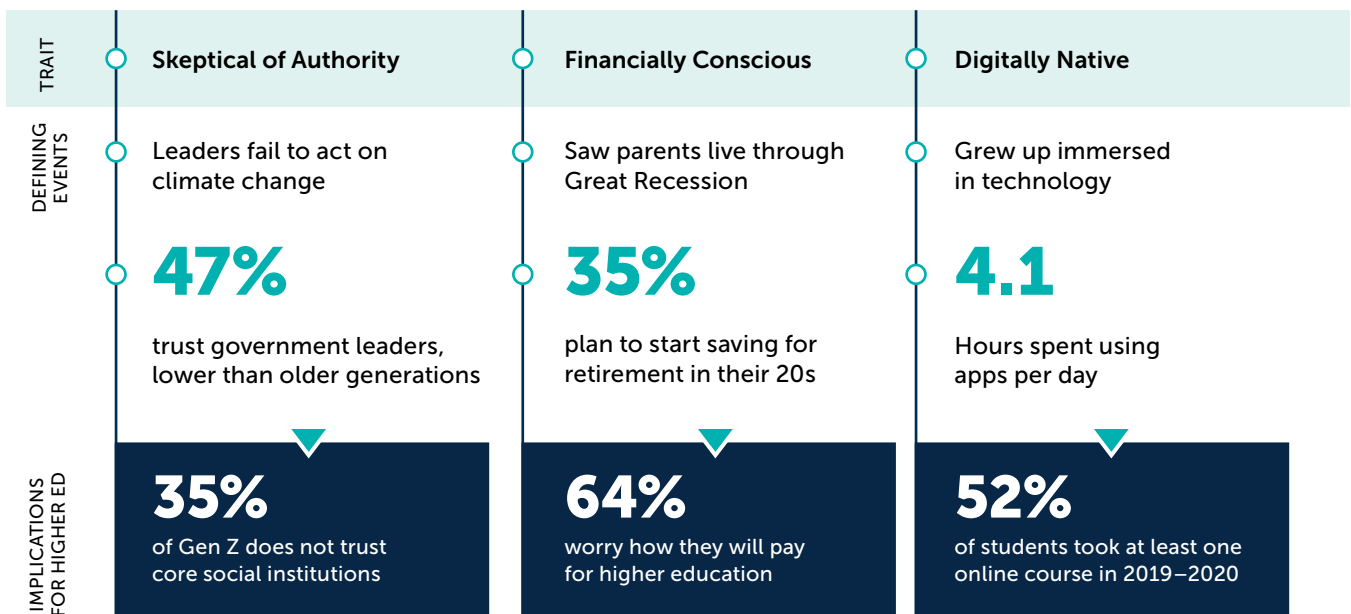
# Student Search Behavior and Priorities Are Shifting

# Recruitment Marketing For a New Adult Learner

## Gen Z Has Entered the Chat

As demographics shift, so too must marketing and enrollment strategy. The proportion of adult learners from Gen Z is expected to double in the coming years, from 31 percent of the adult learner population in 2024 to 60 percent of adult learners in 2031. As Gen Z begins to dominate the graduate and adult learner market, university leaders will need to adapt their marketing strategies to address this population's goals, needs, and preferences.

## A Closer Look at Gen Z

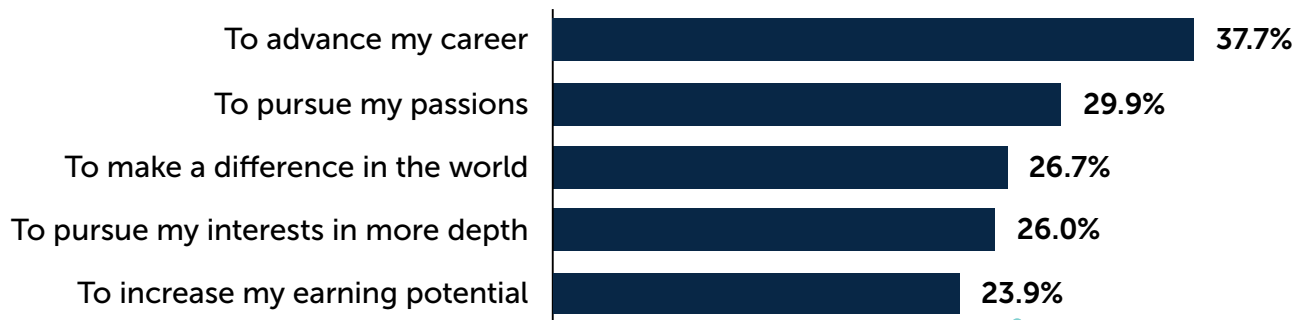


## Use Student Intent to Inform Marketing Messaging and Strategy

Unsurprisingly, survey respondents most often cited career advancement as the top motivator for furthering their education. However, a growing proportion of students identified “to pursue my passions” and “to make a difference in the world” as top reasons they plan to further their education. Consider ways you can ensure your marketing responds to each student’s unique motivations. Surveying prospects can help shed light on what individual students seek from their education and can allow marketing teams to adjust messaging accordingly.

### “What Are Your Primary Reasons For Furthering Your Education?”

*Asked of students who are currently enrolled or planning to enroll in the next two years. Top five responses.*



Note: Among students who seek to complete their bachelor’s degree, “increasing my earning potential” was the top motivator.

Source: Blue Shield of California, “Youth Climate Survey 2022,” 2022; Desjardins, J., “Why Generation Z Has a Totally Different Approach to Money,” We Forum, November 2018; “The Ultimate Guide to Gen Z in The Workplace,” Inside Out Development, 2019; Skopec, C, “How Gen Z College Students Are Changing Higher Ed,” Collegis Education, January 2021; Smalley, S., “Half of All College Students Take Online Courses,” Insight Higher Ed, October 2021; Sakal, V., “Why Gen Z Isn’t Interested in Your Statements, Promises, and Commitments—Yet,” Morning Consult, June 2020; Kott, K., “Gen Z’s Distrust in Higher Ed a ‘Red Flag,’” Inside Higher Ed, August 2022; “Gen Z: The Rise of Digital Natives,” CUInsight, January 2022; Edelman, “The Sensible Generation: Gen Z and Trust,” 2021; EAB interviews and analysis

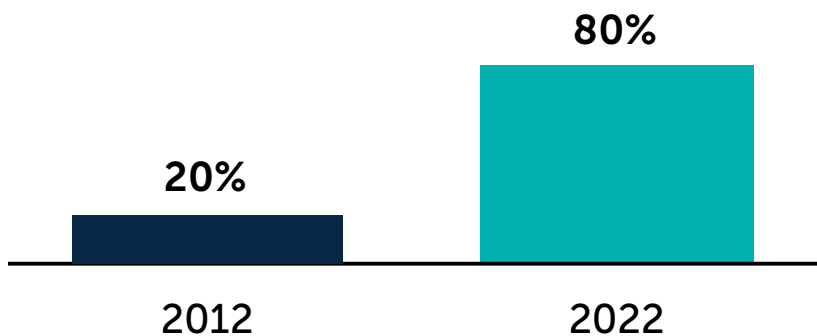
# Students Are Searching For Schools in Stealth Mode

## It's More Difficult Than Ever to Identify Prospective Students

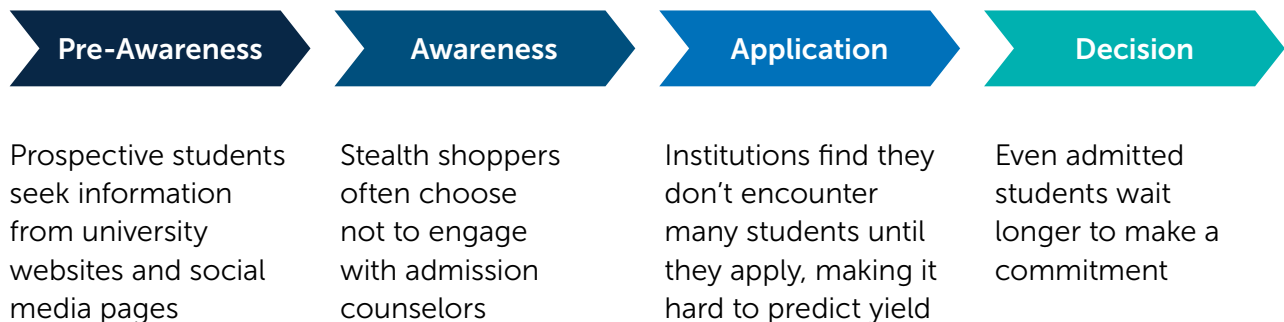
Graduate and adult learners often research institutions, compare programs, and make decisions about their right-fit option before engaging with an institution directly. These “stealth shoppers” may therefore be unknown to a college or university until they apply. While this is not a new phenomenon, the pervasiveness of stealth shopping across program types and disciplines has reached new heights. Research interviews with heads of graduate, online, and professional programs indicate 80 percent of applicants are “stealth,” on average. It is clear we have entered an era of “mega-stealth shopping.”

## Mega-Stealth Shopping Is Here

*Stealth Shopping Rates for PCO<sup>3</sup> Units<sup>4</sup>*



## How Mega-Stealth Shopping Manifests Throughout Recruitment Funnel



3. Professional, continuing, and online education  
4. Based on research interviews conducted by EAB

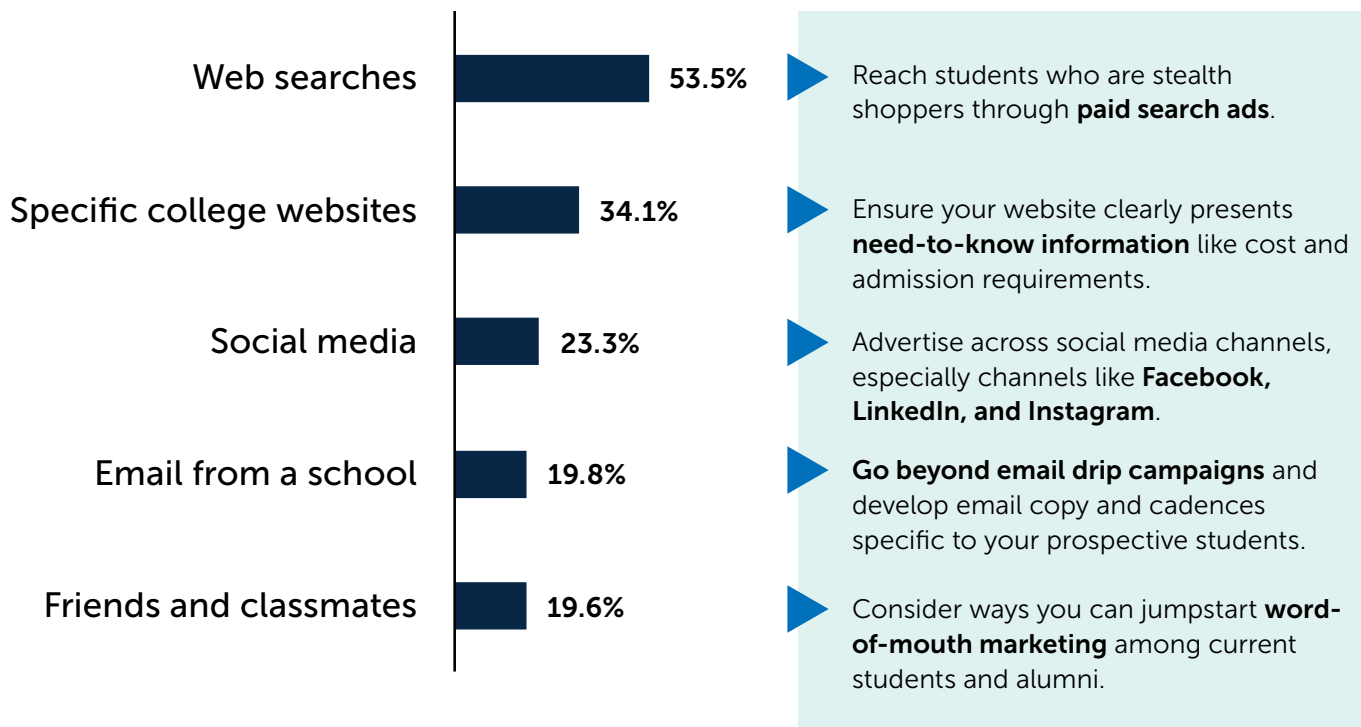


## Optimize Paid Search and SEO Efforts to Reach Students Relying on Search Engines

Students most often use web searches to learn more about program options, with more than half of students using Google or other search engines to research institutions and programs. Prospective graduate students are especially likely to rely on web searches, as compared to prospective degree completers. Especially for graduate programs, ensure paid search and SEO efforts are part of your multi-channel marketing strategy.

### “Which sources of information [did you use/have you used] in your search?”

*Top five responses.*



Source: EAB survey research and analysis.

# A Well-Designed, Informative Website Is Table Stakes

## Ensure Your Website is Helping, Not Hurting, Your Recruitment Efforts

From unclear navigation to burdensome request for information (RFI) forms, missing program information, and design inconsistencies, many university webpages have room for improvement. Updating webpages can be a lengthy, resource-intensive process that requires cross-campus coordination and buy-in. However, the rise of stealth shopping means that university webpages have never been more important. Nine in ten students said they visit websites of all institutions they are considering. Students also expressed the importance of a well-designed website in forming their opinion of a college or university, as illustrated in the box below.

## Students Have High Expectations for Your Website

*Students who used specific college websites in their search*



**93.4%**

visit websites of all schools they are considering



**89.3%**

said a well-designed website improves their opinion of a school



**83.8%**

said a poorly-designed website will negatively affect their opinion of a school

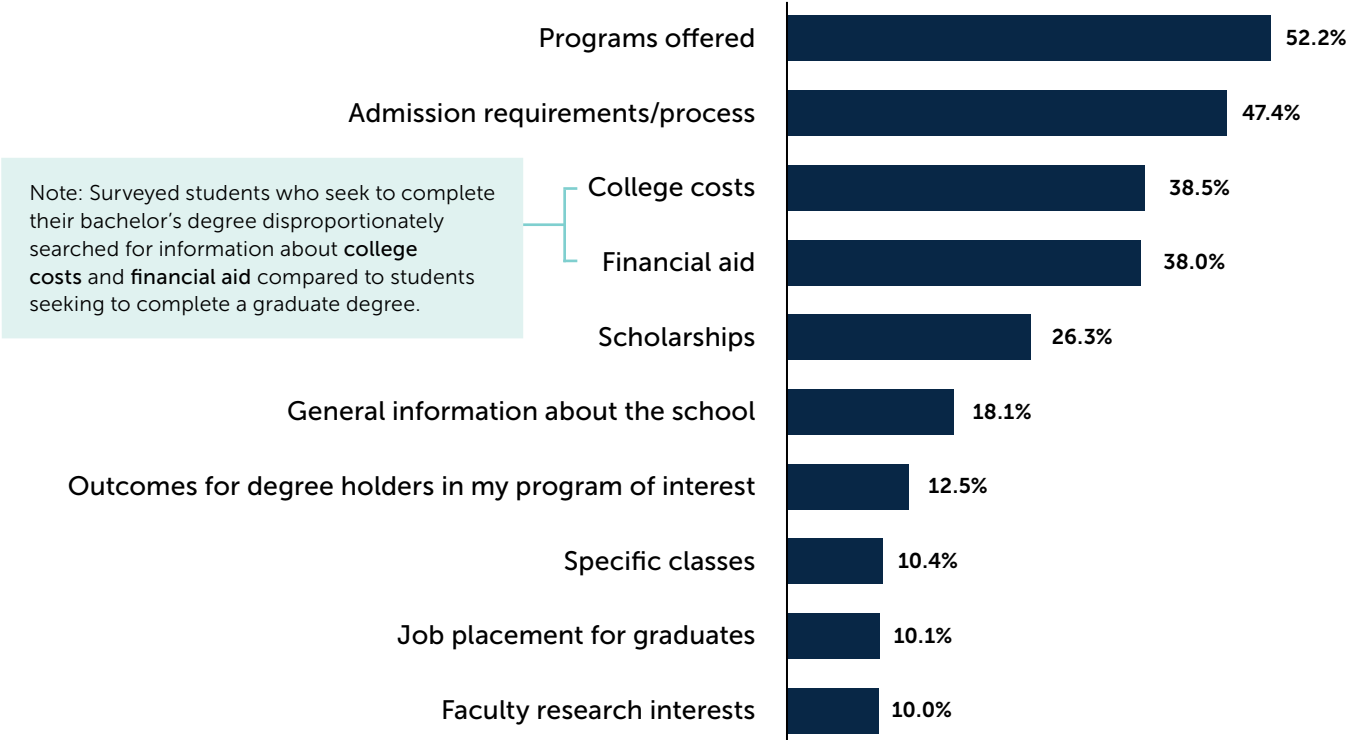
## Feature Admission Requirements, Cost, and Aid Information Prominently on Webpages

Students most often arrived at university websites looking for a list of programs offered, suggesting that students typically search by college or university rather than by program type. For this reason, ensure your marketing materials prioritize information about the institution as a whole, rather than a specific program. Additionally, ensure students can easily navigate to a full list of programs offered at your institution from any page on your website.

It is also important that information about tuition and fees is readily available on program webpages. Nearly 40 percent of surveyed students reported looking for information about costs when browsing university webpages. Students also frequently seek information about financial aid and scholarships.

### “What Information Were You Most Often Trying to Find When Searching School Websites?”

*Asked of students who used specific college websites in their search*



Source: EAB survey research and analysis.

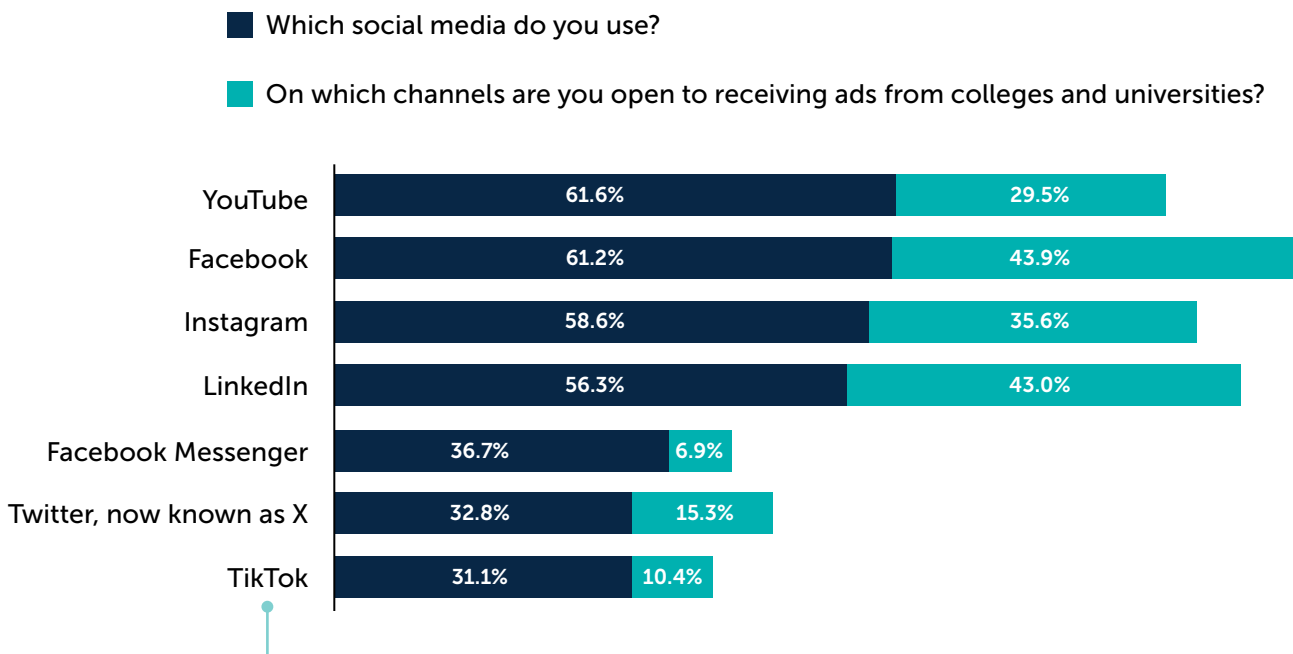
# Social Media and Email Remain Important Channels

## Students Are Open to Receiving University Ads on Social Media

Twenty-three percent of surveyed students said they used social media to research institutions and programs. Additionally, all students in our survey who use social media say they are open to receiving ads from colleges and universities on at least some social media platforms. Students are especially willing to receive ads on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram.

## Students Have High Expectations for Your Website

*Platforms which >30% of surveyed students use are included below*



### A CLOSER LOOK AT TIKTOK

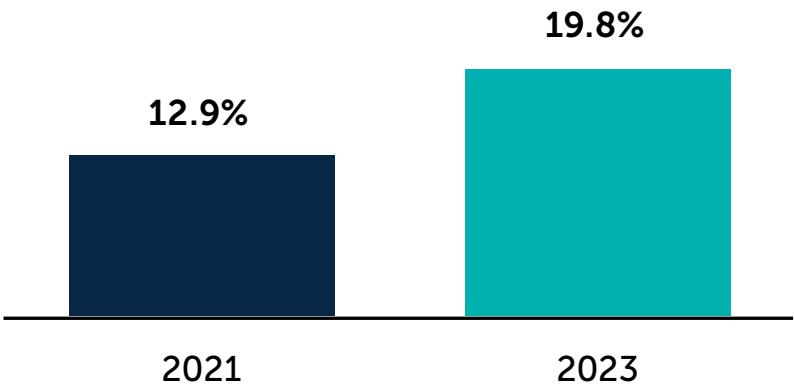
About one-third of all students surveyed report using TikTok to learn more about continuing their education. TikTok is most popular among surveyed students 25 and younger, 46 percent of whom use TikTok to explore higher education options. If your institution has a TikTok presence, consider re-posting existing social media content from adult learners. This approach ensures you are sharing authentic student experiences with prospective graduate and adult learners and may be a lower lift than creating your own content. However, many institutions are now banned from using TikTok. If this is the case at your institution, consider other opportunities to leverage short-form video content to reach Gen Z (e.g., Instagram Reels).

## Students Increasingly Rely on Recruitment Emails to Learn More About Program Options

While it's important to keep an eye on new and emerging social media channels, tried-and-true channels like email continue to be an important way to reach students. Nearly 20% of students said they consulted emails from institutions during their research, up from 13% in our 2021 survey.

Email will continue to be an important recruitment channel as Gen Z matriculates into graduate and adult-serving programs. Surveyed students under age 26 disproportionately relied on emails from colleges and universities to explore program options. Additionally, EAB's 2023 survey of high school students indicates more than three-quarters of students want to hear from colleges and universities via email, a testament to the importance of email in recruiting the next generation of graduate and adult students.

### Percentage of Students Who Consulted Recruitment Emails



Source: "Recruiting Gen P," EAB 2023; EAB survey research and analysis.

# Key Takeaways

## 1 Make Sure Marketing Messages Speak to Student Intent

As graduate and adult learner demographics shift, ensure marketing messages are speaking to changing student preferences. Gen Z, which will account for 60 percent of the adult learner population by 2031, is especially cost-conscious and skeptical of higher education's value. In addition to considering macro-level insights into student preferences, consider surveying individual prospects to ensure marketing messages speak to each student's motivations for enrollment. Surveyed students continue to identify "career advancement" as the primary reason they seek to further their education. However, students increasingly identify "to pursue my passions" and "to make a difference in the world" as top motivators.

## 2 Ensure Your Website Enables Efficient and Stealth Exploration

Research interviews with leaders of graduate, professional, and online units indicate 80 percent of prospective students are stealth shoppers, or unknown to an institution until they apply. To learn more about program options, these stealth shoppers rely primarily on search engines and specific university websites. For these reasons, make sure to optimize paid search and SEO efforts. Additionally, ensure university webpages are easy to navigate and include the information students need to make enrollment decisions (e.g., list of programs offered, admission requirements, cost and financial aid information). Nine in ten surveyed students said a well-designed website can improve their opinion of a college or university.

## 3 Optimize Your Social Media Strategy to Reach Right-Fit Students on the Right Channels

As enrollment leaders know, social media is another important channel to reach and recruit prospective students. Twenty-three percent of surveyed students seek out college and university social media accounts to explore options. All surveyed students who use social media indicate they are open to receiving ads from higher education institutions on at least some platforms, especially Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram. Enrollment leaders should also keep an eye on newer and emerging social media channels such as TikTok to ensure they are meeting students on the channels they use most.

## 4 Email Remains a Tried-and-True Channel for Student Recruitment

Twenty percent of students used emails from colleges and universities as they explored institution and program options, as compared to 13 percent in our 2021 survey. Email is likely to become an increasingly important channel, given younger students' interest in engaging with emails from colleges and universities. Surveyed students aged 25 and under disproportionately relied on email to explore options for going back to school. Further, most high school students in a related EAB survey indicated they want to hear from institutions via email.

Source: "Recruiting Gen P," EAB 2023;  
EAB survey research and analysis.



INSIGHT #2

# Students Spend Time Researching, Not Applying

# Adult Learners Ultimately Apply to Very Few Programs

## Adult Learners Linger in the “Search” Phase

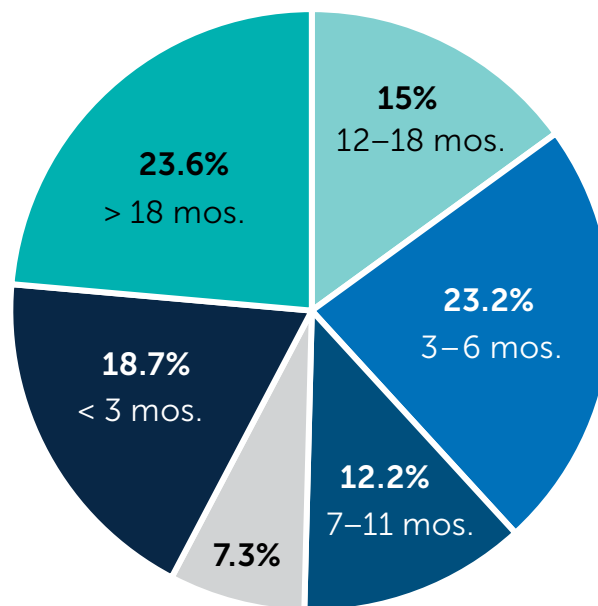
Nearly 40 percent of surveyed students search for information about going back to school for more than a year. Students interested in legal education programs, as well as international students, most often take more than 18 months to explore programs, perhaps due to the additional admission requirements in place for these students (e.g., LSAT, TOEFL). By contrast, 51 percent of prospective adult degree completers spend six months or less searching for information about going back to school.

The time students spend exploring academic programs and weighing options suggests that enrollment teams should continue to reach out to students who have not engaged with marketing recently. Those students may still be researching ways to further their education, whether passively or via active exploration of your website or other means of “stealth shopping.” EAB’s Adult Learner Recruitment experts recommend deploying nurture campaigns across a 25-month period to ensure institutions do not overlook students who may be interested but are prolonging their search.

## “How long have you been actively searching/did you search for information about furthering your education?”

**38.6%**

of respondents searched for information about going back to school for at least 12 months



I don't remember



## Adult Learners Linger in the “Search” Phase

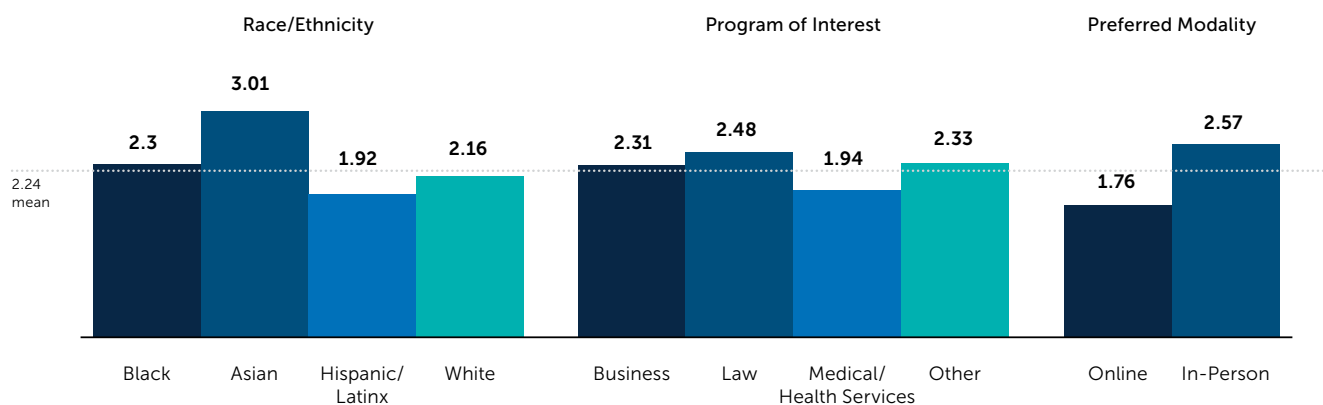
While students are spending significant time researching program options, surveyed students ended up applying to very few programs. On average, surveyed students applied to just 2.24 programs. Prospective degree completers apply to slightly fewer programs than prospective graduate students, on average (i.e., 2 vs. 2.43 programs). The chart below illustrates variation in the number of programs respondents applied to by other key student segments.

# 2.24

Mean number of programs to which surveyed students applied

The limited number of programs students apply to underscores the need for an effective yield strategy. Prospects may be weighing your institution against just one or two other options. To increase yield, consider offering multiple enrollment deadlines. Set one early enrollment deadline and a second deadline on the true, final date by which an admitted student can enroll. Where possible, offer an incentive for students to enroll at the first deadline, such as first pick of courses for the upcoming term.

### “To how many different programs did you apply?”



Source: EAB survey research and analysis.

# Students Increasingly Opting Out of Admission Tests

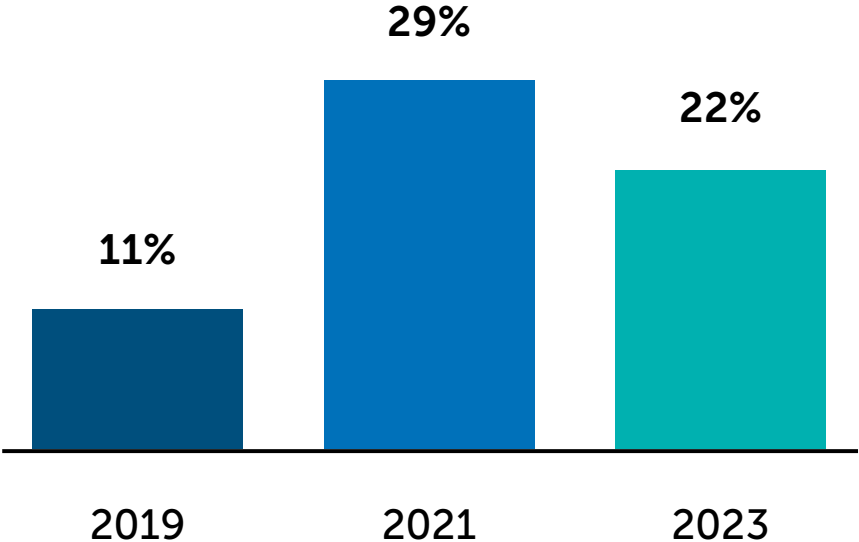
## Re-Evaluate Admission Requirements Regularly, Including Test Scores

Our survey indicates prospective graduate students continued to opt out of graduate admission tests where possible. This year, 22 percent of students indicated they do not plan to take a graduate admission test. This number is lower than the percentage of students who indicated they did not plan to take a test in 2021 (29 percent). However, the number of students who did not take an admission test in 2021 was likely inflated, as many institutions waived or dropped testing requirements due to the pandemic. The number of students who do not plan to take an admission test this year remains much higher than pre-pandemic levels (22 percent compared to 11 percent in 2019).

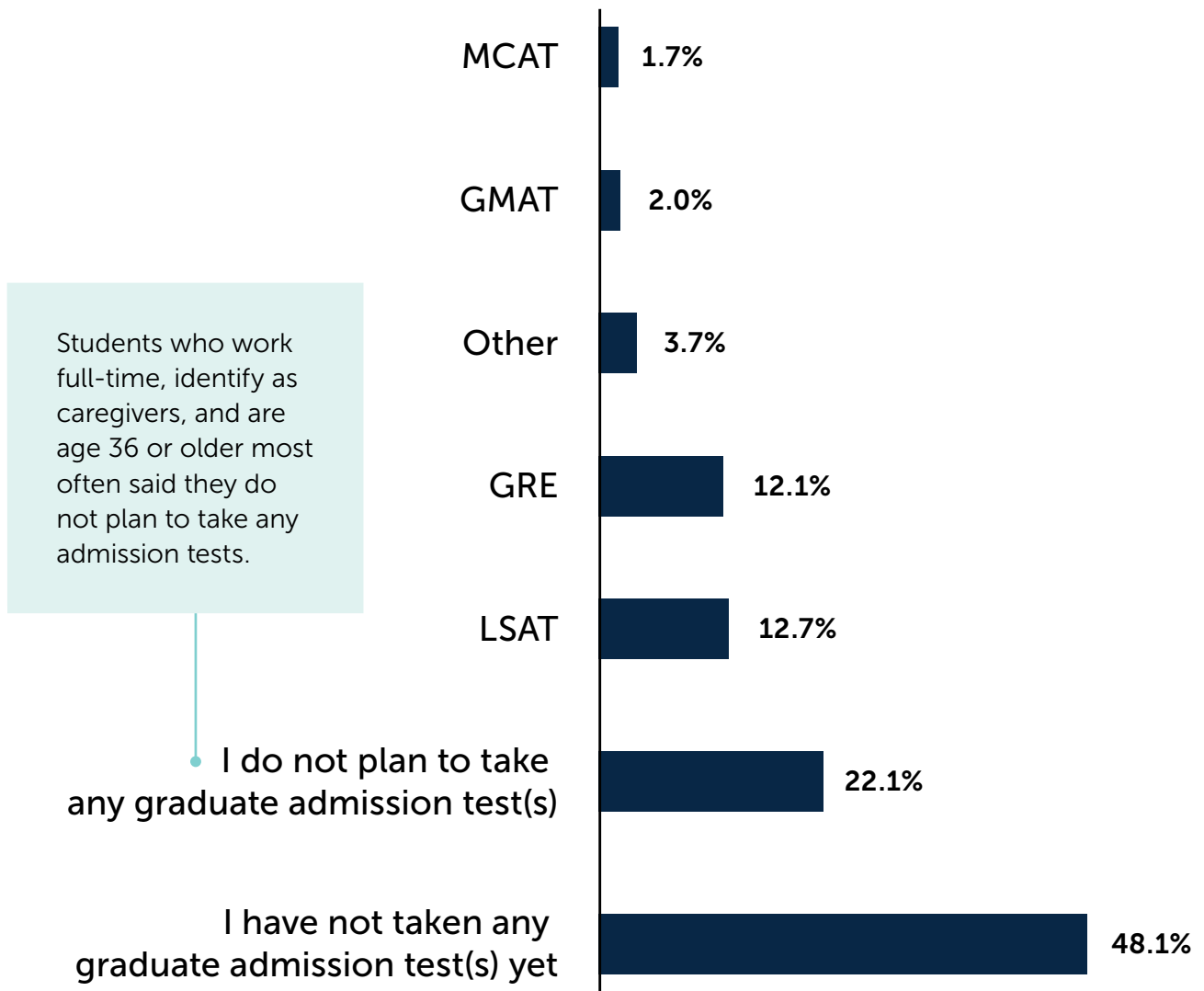
Students who took admission tests may have done so because a specific program(s) of interest required test scores. Of respondents who completed an admission test, 61 percent knew to which institutions they were applying prior to taking the admission test. University leaders should continue to evaluate whether test scores provide value during the admission process—and whether test score requirements are worth the number of students who may be choosing not to apply because of test score requirements.

### “I do not plan to take a graduate admission test”

*EAB Adult Learner Surveys, 2019–2023*



## “Which graduate admission test(s) have you taken, if any?”



Source: EAB survey research and analysis.

# Key Takeaways

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## **1** Continue Outreach to Prospective Students Who Have Not Engaged With Marketing Recently

Given competing commitments (e.g., work, family) and the sheer number of program options available, prospective graduate and adult learners often spend prolonged periods searching for information about going back to school. Nearly one-quarter of students spend more than 18 months researching options. This suggests that enrollment teams should continue to reach out to students who have not engaged in marketing in the last six to 12 months, as those students may still be exploring options.

## **2** Double Down on Yield Strategy

Because graduate and adult learners apply to so few programs, there is a high likelihood of converting admitted students to enrollments. Surveyed graduate and adult learners applied to 2.24 programs on average. This number is even lower for students who work full-time and/or serve in caregiver roles. To improve yield rates, consider offering multiple enrollment and/or registration deadlines. Offering at least two deadlines creates additional points of urgency in the enrollment cycle and drives earlier enrollments and deposits.

## **3** Evaluate the Role of Test Scores in the Admission Process

Consider the value test scores provide during the admission process—and whether test score requirements are worth the number of students who may be choosing not to apply because schools require them to test. Twenty-two percent of surveyed students indicated they do not plan to take a graduate admission test. Students who are taking admission tests most often completed the LSAT or GRE, likely because test scores are required by a specific program(s) of interest. Of respondents who took an admission test, 61 percent knew to which institutions they were applying prior to taking the admission test.

Source: EAB survey research and analysis.



INSIGHT #3

# Students Are Increasingly Making Enrollment Decisions Based on Cost

# A Growing Cost-Consciousness

## Financial Aid and Cost of Attendance Among the Top Criteria Students Consider


Affordability has long been a factor graduate and adult learners prioritize when going back to school. But for the first time, students in this year’s survey identified financial aid and scholarships as the most important factor in their enrollment decision. Surveyed students also increasingly pointed to cost of attendance as a top consideration.

Concerns about affordability also raise questions about diversity, equity, and inclusion. Historically underrepresented students, including Black, Asian, and Hispanic students, disproportionately identified scholarships and cost as top factors in their enrollment decisions. Female students and those who identify as caregivers also disproportionately raised concerns about affordability. Across all student populations, this trend towards cost-consciousness is unlikely to dissipate. A 2023 survey of high school students—future adult learners—similarly identified affordable tuition as the top priority when choosing a college.

### “In terms of your enrollment decision, please indicate the importance of the following.”

*Respondents ranked the factors on a scale of 1–5, with 5 as “extremely important.” Top five responses.*

	2021	2023
<b>Financial aid/scholarships</b>	4.08	4.41
Program accreditation	4.37	4.40
<b>Cost of attending</b>	4.13	4.35
Research/academic focus of the program	4.06	4.02
<b>Online support services</b> (application for admission, payments, class registration)	3.70	4.00



Financial aid, cost of attendance, and availability of online support services of increasing importance to students’ enrollment decision

## More Than Half of Respondents Have Scholarships, Loans, or Grants to Fund Their Education

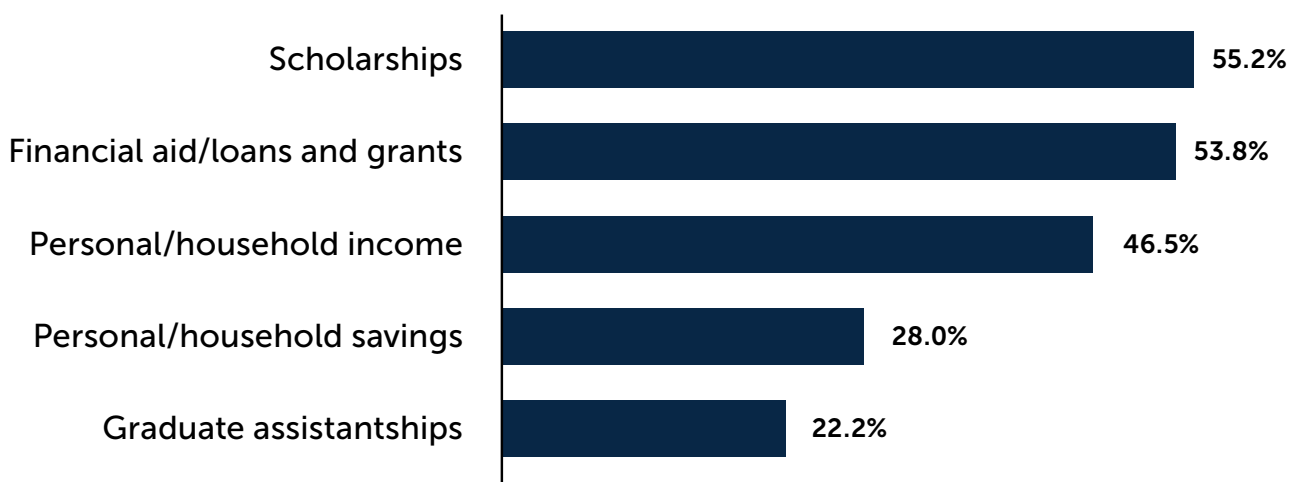
Surveyed graduate and adult learners are increasingly relying on scholarships and financial aid to fund their education. Fifty-five percent of respondents said they will have scholarships, compared to 42 percent in our 2021 survey. Still, students remain reluctant or unable to spend tens of thousands of dollars to further their education. Nearly 50 percent of respondents said they are unwilling to spend more than \$15,000 annually to finance their education, including loans and personal financial resources. Adult degree completers indicated they are especially unlikely to spend more than \$15,000 annually. Ensure information about program costs, scholarship opportunities, and financial aid is readily accessible from program pages to address students' concerns about affordability.

**49.5%**

of surveyed students are willing to **spend no more than \$15,000** annually on their education

## "What sources of financial support will you have for continuing your education?"

*Top five responses.<sup>5</sup>*



5. Although not included in the top five responses, it is notable that 14.6 percent of respondents indicated they have access to employer/tuition reimbursement.

Source: "Recruiting Gen P," EAB 2023; EAB survey research and analysis.

# Students Use Career Potential and Cost to Evaluate ROI

## Students Seek Information About Careers and Program Costs to Determine ROI

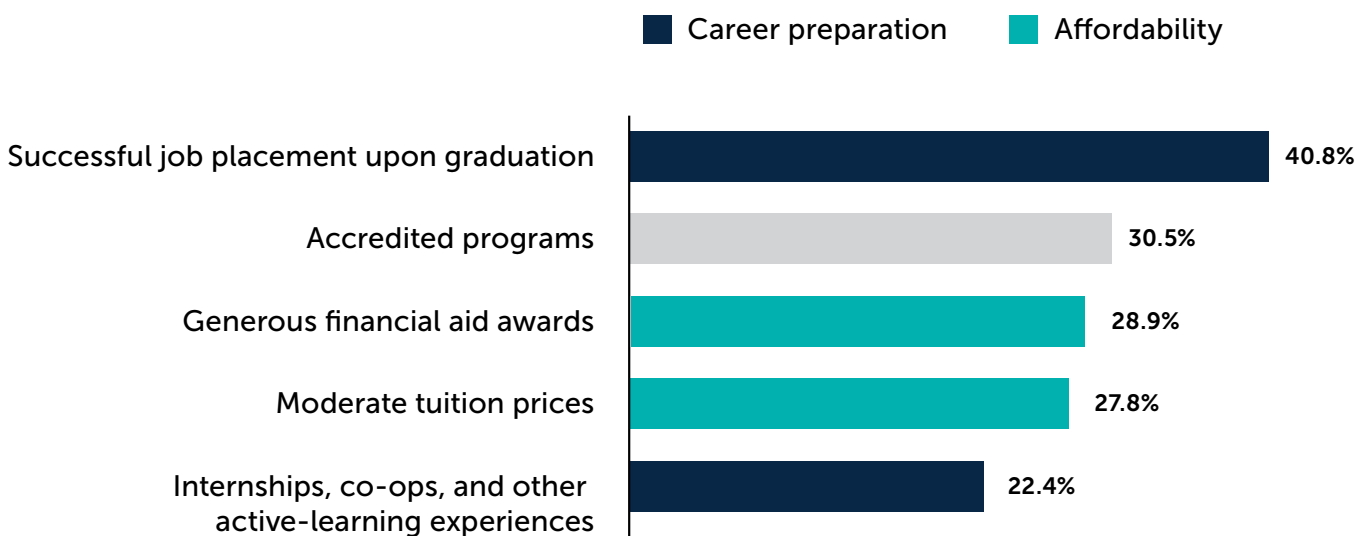
As students continue to question college costs and make enrollment decisions based on affordability, it's critical marketing messages articulate the value of further education. Surveyed students said institutions can best communicate value by highlighting alumni job placements. However, information about affordability can also convey the value of further education. Students identified generous financial aid awards and moderate tuition prices as signals of program value and the potential return on investment they could reap from enrollment.

## What Makes Going Back to School "Worth It?"

- ▶ "It is 'worth' the cost if the school is willing to help me through the college journey, advising me accordingly, and trying to help me succeed."
- ▶ "For graduate programs, it's network, name recognition, and rankings."
- ▶ "Being able to effect change in the immediate environment."
- ▶ "Proximity to the community I am looking to be a part of."

## "What characteristics best represent the value of education?"

*Top five responses.*





## A Chance to Win Back Stop-Outs

Evaluating program tuition, fees, and financial aid strategy may also help attract students who have some college credit but did not complete their undergraduate degree. Students who stopped out most often cited cost of attendance as the reason they discontinued their education. Nearly 60% of these students said that more affordable tuition would lead them to reconsider pursuing their education. Eliminating application fees, waiving bursar holds, and considering debt forgiveness minimize financial obstacles to re-enrollment at your institution.

**38.4%**

of degree completers re-enroll at the same institution they stopped out from

### “What was your primary reason for discontinuing your studies?”

*Asked of students who were enrolled at one time but are no longer enrolled.*

*Top five responses.*

	2021	2023
High cost	23%	30.4%
Change in personal circumstances	6.6%	16.7%
Other <sup>6</sup>	21.3%	15.7%
Professional/work-related commitments	8.2%	12.7%
Family responsibilities <sup>7</sup>	23.0%	8.8%



Students increasingly discontinued their studies due to high cost

6. “Other” includes changes in benefits and/or financial aid, mental health, and poor program fit.

7. The decrease in the percentage of students indicating “family responsibilities” led them to discontinue their education is likely due to the additional family responsibilities many students faced during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-21.

Source: EAB survey research and analysis; EAB analysis of Some College, No Credential (NCES, 2023).

# Key Takeaways

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## 1 Students Are Increasingly Making Enrollment Decisions Based on Affordability

Even more so than in previous years, survey respondents identified financial aid, scholarships, and cost of attendance as the most important criteria they consider when deciding where to enroll. Students from historically underrepresented groups were especially likely to name affordability as a top consideration. A sound financial aid strategy can therefore help further diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, in addition to achieving enrollment targets.

## 2 Ensure Information About Cost, Scholarships, and Aid is Readily Available to Prospects

Prospective graduate students and adult learners increasingly rely on scholarships and financial aid to fund their education. More than half of survey respondents expected they will have scholarships and/or loans and grants to support further education. However, even with access to financial aid resources, 50 percent of students expressed concern about paying more than \$15,000 annually toward their education. Clear, easy-to-find information about program costs, scholarships, and financial aid can help ensure students have the information they need about enrolling at your institution. Survey respondents said information about financial aid and cost of attendance helps signal the value of furthering their education.

## 3 Minimize Financial Barriers to Re-Enrollment to Win Back Stop-Outs

For many colleges and universities, recruiting stop-outs represents a chance to fulfill institutional mission, including supporting local degree attainment and closing racial and socioeconomic attainment gaps. Recruiting stop-outs may also help capture additional tuition revenue. To support re-enrollment of stop-outs, consider waiving application fees and bursar holds. One-third of surveyed stop-outs said they left their program due to high costs. Re-evaluating tuition, fees, scholarships, and financial aid opportunities for these students may also help facilitate re-enrollment. Students who stopped out most often identified more affordable tuition as the thing that would most likely encourage them to continue their education.

Source: EAB survey research and analysis.



INSIGHT #4

# Students Seek a Variety of Modality and Schedule Options

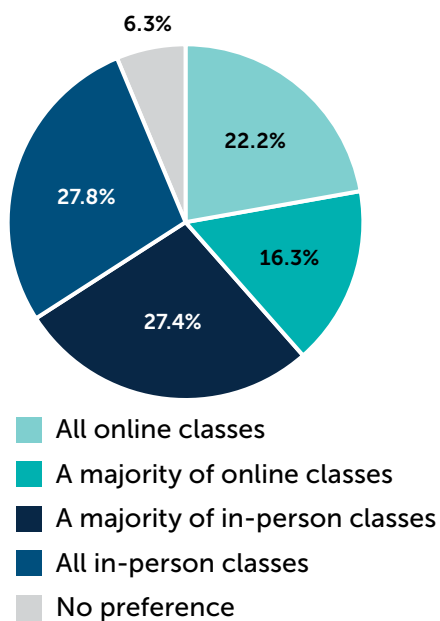
# Students Use Career Potential and Cost to Evaluate ROI

## Offer Multiple Modality Options Where Possible

Even before the pandemic, enrollment in exclusively online graduate programs was growing more quickly than enrollment in face-to-face programs. Now, late in the pandemic, we continue to see more online graduate enrollments and fewer face-to-face enrollments than pre-pandemic. However, surveyed students remain split in their interest in online offerings. Surveyed degree completers most often seek all online classes (31 percent), while only 17 percent of prospective graduate students seek a fully online program. By contrast, most graduate students prefer all in-person classes (32 percent), compared to just 24 percent of degree completers.

When offering online courses, consider delivering some classes synchronously and others asynchronously. Forty-two percent of students interested in online courses seek a balance of synchronous and asynchronous courses.

## “Which of the following course formats do you prefer?”

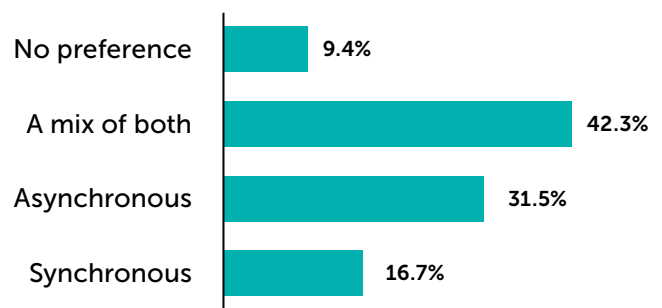


## Respondents Who Most Often Express Interest in Online Courses

- ▶ Prospective adult degree completers
- ▶ Age 36 or older
- ▶ White or Hispanic
- ▶ Female
- ▶ Full-time workers
- ▶ Caregivers
- ▶ Interested in business programs

## Offer a Mix of Synchronous and Asynchronous Courses

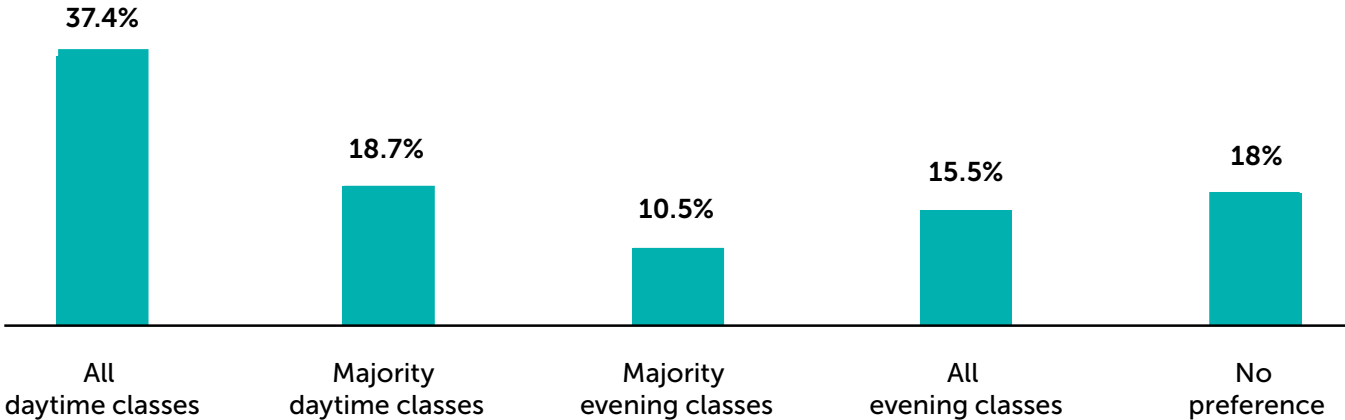
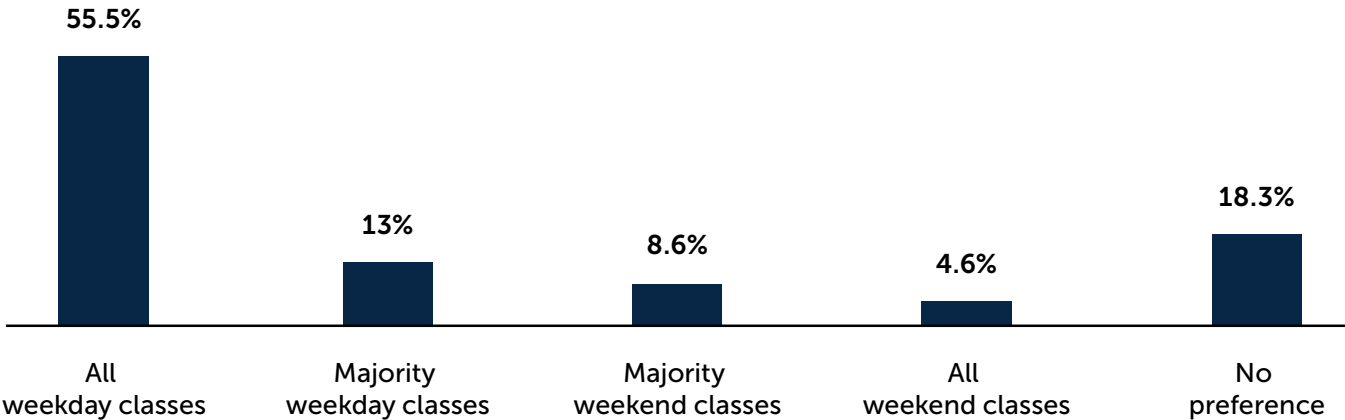
“For online classes, which modality do you prefer?”



# Surveyed Students Prefer Weekday and Daytime Classes, But Multiple Schedule Options Can Expand Programs' Appeal

Prioritize offering weekday classes, as 55 percent of surveyed students prefer all weekday classes. Additionally, most respondents prefer daytime classes. However, consider other scheduling options to accommodate students who require additional flexibility, such as students who work full-time and those who serve in caregiver roles.

## “Which of the following class schedules do you prefer?”



Source: EAB survey research and analysis.

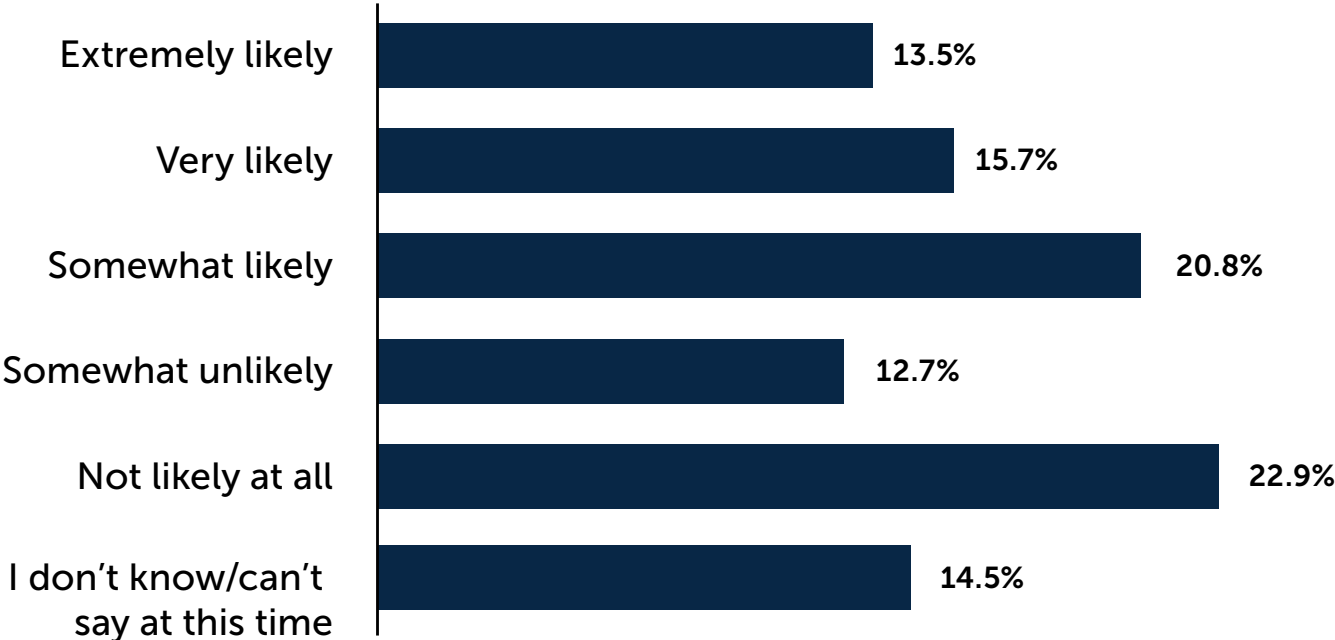
# Students Express Mixed Interest in Certificates

## Certificates and Other Microcredentials Often Fail to Live Up to Enrollment Expectations

Surveyed students remain split in their interest to pursue a certificate instead of a master’s degree. About 30 percent of students said they are very or extremely likely to pursue a certificate or microcredential in lieu of a master’s degree, while 36 percent of students surveyed said they are somewhat unlikely or not likely to consider a certificate.

### “How likely are you to consider a different credential (e.g., certificate, microcredential) instead of a master’s degree?”

*Asked of students who are pursuing/considering master’s degrees*

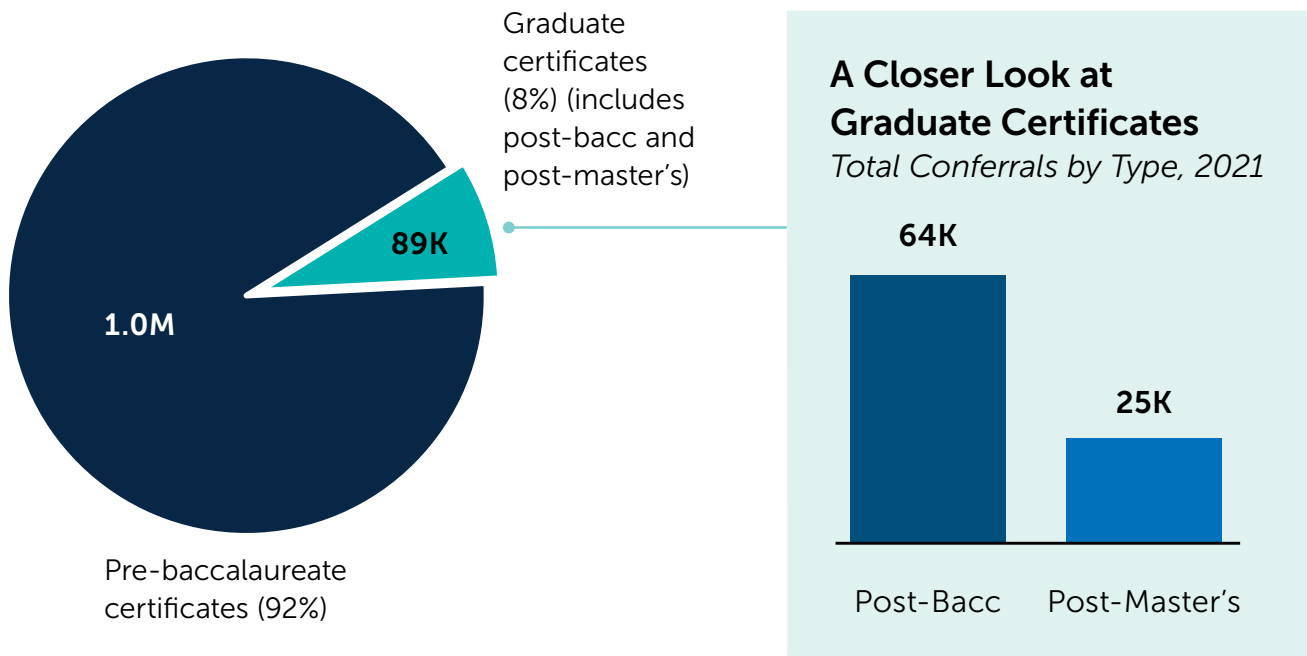


## The Graduate Certificate Market Remains Small

Conferrals data suggests student interest in graduate certificates is lukewarm. Graduate certificates accounted for just eight percent of all for-credit certificates conferred in 2021,<sup>8</sup> as illustrated in the pie chart below. Additionally, almost half of graduate certificate programs reported zero completions in 2021, and those that do report completions report a median of five completions annually. Should administrators seek to launch or expand certificates, ensure these programs meet three sets of needs: the topics students are most interested in, the skills employers seek most from prospective employees, and what is profitable for the institution.

## Pre-Baccalaureate Certificates Account for the Majority of For-Credit Certificate Conferrals

*n= 1,105,547 certificate conferrals, 2021*



8. 2021 represents the most recent year of conferrals data at the time of this report.

Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), National Center for Education Statistics, accessed April 4, 2023, EAB survey research and analysis.

# Key Takeaways

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## 1 Student Interest in Online Programs Remains Split

Although enrollment in online graduate programs was growing pre-pandemic and now continues to outpace enrollment in face-to-face programs, the majority of surveyed students still prefer face-to-face programs. About 55 percent of students indicated they were more likely to enroll in a mostly or completely face-to-face program, compared to 39 percent of students who prefer mostly or all online courses. When developing online programs, offer a mix of synchronous and asynchronous coursework to appeal to as many students as possible. Forty-two percent of students who expressed interest in online options seek programs with both synchronous and asynchronous courses.

## 2 Where Possible, Offer Multiple Course Schedule Options to Expand Program Appeal

Prioritize offering classes during the week. Surveyed students across all demographic groups expressed a preference for all weekday classes. However, consider offering both daytime and evening courses to attract key student populations. For example, many students who identify as caregivers or who are currently employed full- or part-time often seek at least some evening class options. Students who are interested in all or mostly online courses also expressed a preference for all evening courses.

## 3 The Certificate Market Is Small and Programs Often Don't Meet Enrollment Expectations

Many leaders of graduate and adult-serving programs view certificate and other microcredentials as ways to fulfill institutional mission, offset decline in revenue from traditional programs, and maintain a competitive program portfolio. However, our survey—and conferrals data—indicates that student interest may not live up to enrollment expectations. Only eight percent of all certificate conferrals in 2021 were at the graduate level, and almost half of these graduate certificate programs reported zero completions in 2021. In our survey, 14 percent of students indicate they are extremely likely to pursue a certificate or microcredential in lieu of a master's degree, while 23 percent said they are not at all likely to complete a certificate or microcredential.

Source: EAB survey research and analysis.





# Additional Resources



# Research Overview

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## About This Research

This report includes data and insights from EAB's Adult Learner Recruitment and Research divisions, coupled with findings from a survey conducted by EAB's University Research Partners. EAB collected responses from current and prospective degree completers and graduate students (i.e., students interested in master's and/or doctorate programs) in May and June of 2023 to learn about students' preferred communication sources, research behaviors, and priorities when choosing an adult degree completion, online, graduate, or professional program. The reported results include responses from 3,853 graduate and adult learners.

## Survey Participant Profile

Age	
Under 20	1.4%
20–25	24.3%
26–30	21.8%
31–35	13.5%
36–40	10.9%
41–55	11.0%
46–50	6.3%
Over 50	10.8%

Gender	
Female	59.9%
Male	37.3%
Prefer to self-describe	0.7%
Non-binary	2.0%

Highest level of education completed	
High school	3.9%
Some college	11.2%
Associate degree	7.4%
Bachelor's degree	42.9%
Some graduate studies	5.6%
Master's degree	21.3%
Doctoral degree	3.5%
Other professional credential	4.2%

Race/Ethnicity	
African/African American/Black	35.6%
Asian (Central/South/East/Southeast)	10.1%
Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander	0.7%
Hispanic or Latinx	12.8%
Middle Eastern/West Asian	1.5%
Native American/Alaskan Native	3.0%
White/Caucasian	44.4%
Other	1.3%

Employment Status	
Full-time	15%
Part-time	32%
No	53%

Caregiver Status	
Yes	32.3%
No	67.7%

Region	
Northeast	19.9%
Southeast	14.4%
Midwest	11.0%
Southwest	18.0%
West	15.4%
Outside the United States	21.2%

## Further Reading

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Scan the QR code below to access related resources and additional reading.



# EAB's Adult Learner Recruitment

Adult Learner Recruitment is a true enrollment partner for graduate, online, professional, and adult degree completion programs. Our next-generation growth strategies help you see around corners in this dynamic market and amplify your results at every stage of the enrollment funnel.

STRATEGIZE > ACQUIRE > ENGAGE > YIELD

180+ Partner Institutions

Always Rooted in Research and Data



## STRATEGIZE

We go beyond OPMs and digital marketing agencies to help you develop a plan to succeed in this dynamic market. Starting with a deep understanding of your institution's needs and goals, our team of experts provides guidance on critical topics such as program and portfolio design, growth opportunities, organizational design, pricing strategy, corporate partnerships, and more.



## ACQUIRE

We generate a large audience from a diverse mix of proprietary sources—including our consumer database and Cappex's student search platform—and other sources including first-party digital targeting lists, test-taker lists, your institution's inquiry pool, recent alumni, and current undergraduates. Our lead generation experts partner with your team to develop a strategy that will meet your enrollment and class-shaping goals.



## ENGAGE

We drive enrollment results with responsive campaigns choreographed across channels and customized to each student's intent and behavior. We engage prospective students at every stage of their journey from awareness to application using micro surveys, responsive landing pages, behavioral campaign flows, data informed creative, and a streamlined application experience.



## YIELD

We deploy a proprietary survey-based approach to help you determine accepted students' intentions, predict which students will enroll, and triage your outreach.

## What Makes EAB Different

Higher Ed  
Expertise



Unrivaled Lead  
Generation



Marketing  
Orchestration



Full-Funnel  
Transparency

To discuss how EAB can help you meet your graduate and adult enrollment goals, email [LexRubyHowe@eab.com](mailto:LexRubyHowe@eab.com).

Learn more at [eab.com/ALR](http://eab.com/ALR).

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At EAB, our mission is to make education smarter and our communities stronger. We work with thousands of institutions to drive transformative change through data-driven insights and best-in-class capabilities. From kindergarten to college to career, EAB partners with leaders and practitioners to accelerate progress and drive results across five major areas: enrollment, student success, institutional strategy, data analytics, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). We work with each partner differently, tailoring our portfolio of research, technology, and marketing and enrollment solutions to meet the unique needs of every leadership team, as well as the students and employees they serve. Learn more at [eab.com](http://eab.com).