

INSIGHT PAPER

Student Priorities and Preferences in a New Era of Graduate and Adult Education

Insights from EAB's Survey of **6,000+** Graduate and Adult Learners



Adult Learner Recruitment

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Executive Overview

Understanding Student Behavior amid Enrollment Challenges



Demographic change and the decline in college-going mean that fewer students are entering the graduate market than in past years. These challenges, coupled with growing competition from university and non-university providers, economic headwinds, and changes to international markets, present leaders of graduate and adult-serving programs with new obstacles to enrollment growth. Students' search trends, application behaviors, and enrollment decisions also continue to evolve—forcing marketing teams to keep pace despite staff and resource shortages.

To help institutions better recruit, enroll, and serve graduate and adult learners, we surveyed 6,000 prospective and current adult students about their preferences, needs, and goals. 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 graduate students and adult degree completers, with key differences in response by student segment noted where applicable.

Read this report for three insights to help you effectively adapt your recruitment strategies to meet shifting student search behavior, application preferences, and enrollment realities.

About the 2024 Adult Learner Survey



6,007

Current and prospective graduate and adult degree completion students surveyed

24

Questions asked

Questions Explored:

- What motivates graduate and adult learners to further their education?
- How do prospective graduate and adult students search for programs, and how has search behavior changed over time?
- What factors are most important in graduate and adult learners' enrollment decisions?

For more details about the survey and participant profile, refer to p. 25 of this report.



Independent Research Remains Central to the Search Process

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Reaching Students in a New Digital Landscape

Shifting Student Search Behavior in a New Era of Privacy

A desire for privacy is at the center of Gen Z's digital interactions, but today's enrollment marketing teams must balance these preferences against students' expectations for personalized content. About half of surveyed graduate and adult learners are open to sharing basic information, such as their email address and program of interest, to receive custom communications. Students under age 25, international students, and prospective graduate students (as opposed to bachelor's degree completers) are most open to sharing their information with schools.

EAB's recent survey of prospective traditional-aged college students offers further insight into this generation's preference for personalized content when making enrollment decisions. Ninety-three percent of students reported that receiving a personalized message from a college or university would encourage them to explore that institution further.¹

A Desire for Custom Content While Maintaining Privacy

48%

are open to **sharing basic information** (e.g., name, email, program of interest) with a school to receive custom content

27%

are open to **sharing information about goals and concerns** to receive customized content

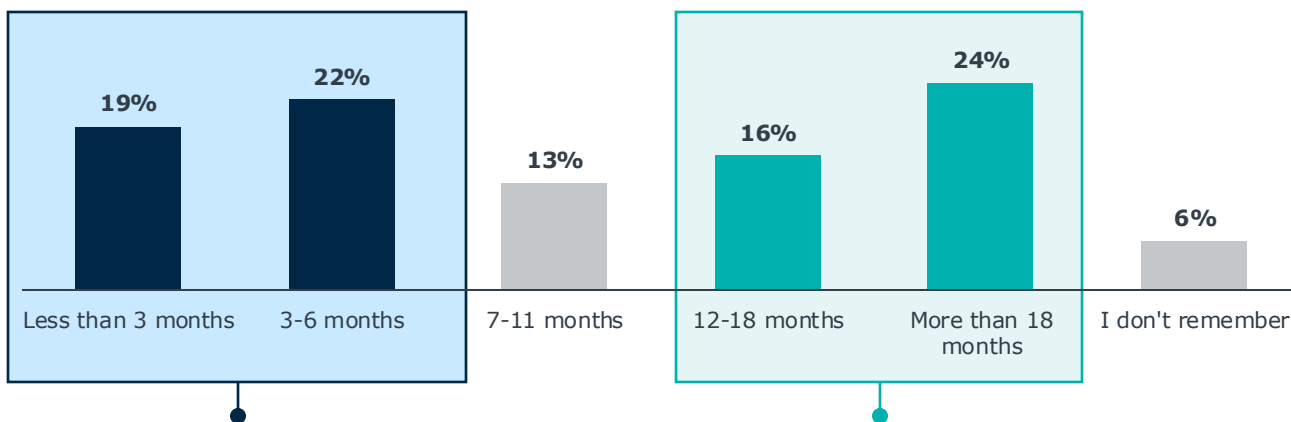
25%

don't want to share any personal information with a school until ready to apply

Search Duration Split by Demographics and Programs of Interest

Our survey revealed that adult learners typically either research programs and reach enrollment decisions quickly or linger for a year or more in the "search" phase. Forty-one percent of students search for information for less than six months, while another 40% spend more than a year in the search process. To engage students who spend significant time exploring program options, continue to market to prospects for at least two years. Notably, adult degree completers often spend less time exploring program options than prospective graduate students. The chart below includes additional differences in search behavior by student demographics.

"How long have you been actively searching for information about furthering your education?"



41% searched for information for **<6 months**. These students are disproportionately:

- Prospective adult degree completers
- Female
- Hispanic
- Living in the United States

40% searched for information for **>1 year**. These students are disproportionately:

- Prospective graduate students
- Working full-time
- Living outside of the United States
- Black/African-American

1) Data from a summer 2024 survey of 1,665 prospective college students.

Searching in Stealth Mode

Students Rely on Digital Channels to Research Programs Independently

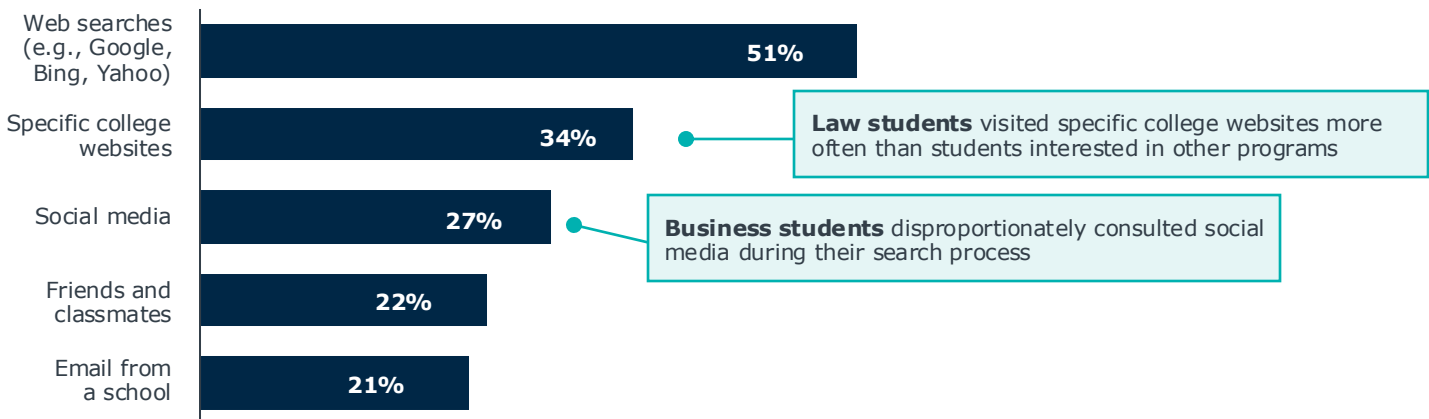
Our interviews with leaders of graduate and adult education programs indicated that an average of 80% of students are “[stealth shoppers](#),” meaning they are unknown to the institution until they apply. This is due, in part, to graduate and adult students’ preference for independent research. Students relied most often on web searches, university webpages, and social media to explore program options.

Notably, less than 7% of students said they considered billboards or transit signage, radio or television advertisements, or phone calls from schools or programs during their search process. If your institution significantly invests in these channels, consider the returns you receive and if possible, reallocate those funds to channels more likely to make an impact on students’ enrollment decisions. Additionally, just 4% of students used AI-powered platforms (e.g., ChatGPT, Gemini) to explore options, a number we expect to increase in the coming years as AI adoption grows.


50%
prefer to research programs on their own before sharing personal information with a school


“What sources of information [did you use/have you used] when exploring options for continuing your education?”

Students could select all that apply; platforms that >20% of surveyed students selected are included below.



The Power of Search Engine Optimization

More than half of respondents used search engines to explore programs, underscoring the need for a competitive approach to search engine optimization (SEO). In today’s AI-driven world, SEO is especially important as it not only enhances visibility and credibility but also ensures that your content stands out in a sea of automated responses and competing information. SEO is also important given “banner blindness,” or the tendency to consciously or unconsciously ignore page elements that appear to be advertisements, including sponsored search results. An effective SEO strategy can ensure your institution appears organically at the top of search results. This is especially important given that most students click only on organic links.


More Than Half of Students Click Only on Organic Search Results

55% Clicked only on organic (non-ad) links	39% Clicked on both organic (non-ad) links and ads/sponsored links	6% Clicked only on ads/sponsored links
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.edu as a Critical Enrollment Engine

Optimizing Your “Digital Front Door”

Prospective students often form important first impressions about your institution as they navigate your .edu site. This year, we saw a notable increase in the percentage of students who said a school’s website helps them decide whether the school is right for them (78% in 2023 compared to 88% in 2024). However, many institutions lack the staff and internal expertise to keep pace with changing digital behaviors. Strategic updates to content on enrollment-critical pages, including your admissions and financial aid pages, can go a long way in making a positive first impression and ensuring students have the information they need to take the next step (submitting a form, applying, or enrolling) at your institution.

The Influence of University Websites on Students’ Enrollment Decisions



94%

Make a point of visiting websites of all the schools they are considering



88%

Said a school’s website helps them decide whether a school is the right fit



73%

Will abandon a school website that is not user-friendly



90%

Said a user-friendly website will improve their opinion of a school



84%

Said a poorly functioning website will negatively affect their opinion of a school



46%

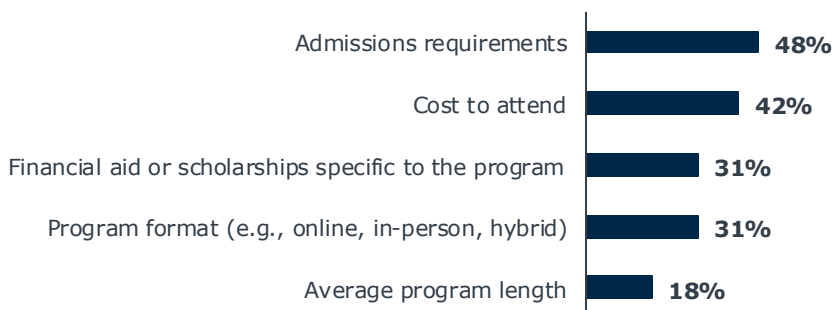
Primarily visit school websites on mobile devices

Ensure Program Pages Are a “One Stop Shop” for Prospective Students

Program landing pages are especially critical for graduate and adult education programs. When visiting these pages, adult learners most often seek information about admissions requirements, costs, and available financial aid and scholarships. However, including this fundamental information clearly on your program pages is just the beginning—ensure pages also include information about program outcomes, student testimonials, and employer partnerships to best convey program value to prospective students.

Students Most Often Seek Info on Admissions Requirements and Cost on Program Pages

Respondents could select three options; top five responses shown



Ensure your website clearly outlines admissions requirements for international students. **Students living outside of the United States disproportionately seek information about admissions requirements,** likely because of the additional barriers they face to application and enrollment.

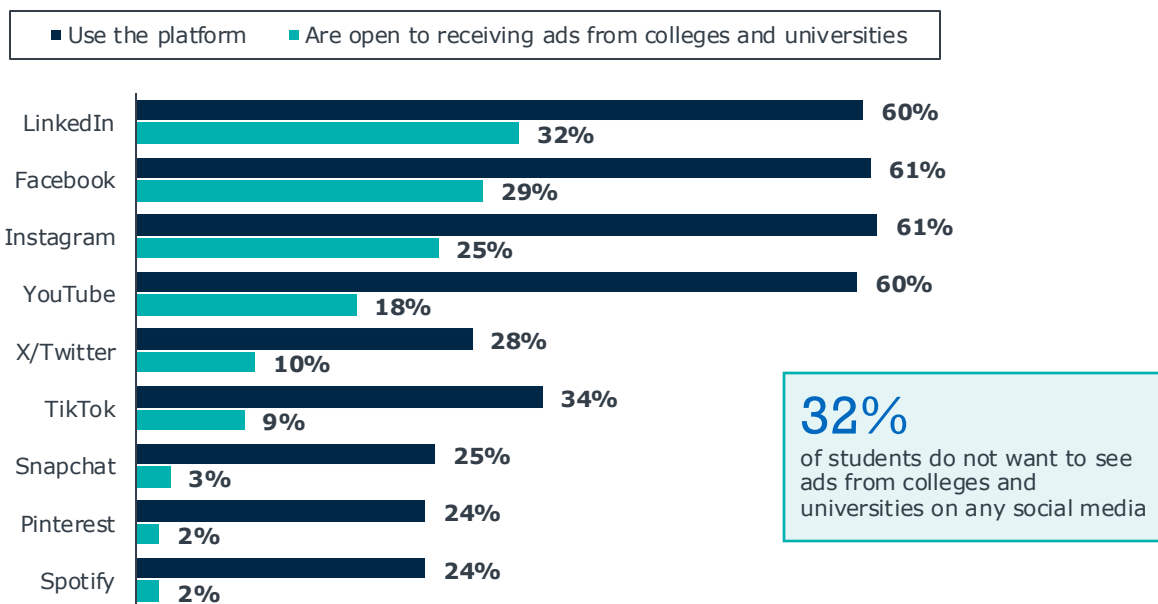
Social Media and Email Remain Tried-and-True

Two-Thirds of Students Are Open to Higher Ed Ads on Social Media

Twenty-seven percent of survey respondents said they use social media to explore options for continuing their education, up from 23% in our 2023 survey. However, in today’s digital environment, in which users prioritize privacy and the authenticity of messages received from organizations and companies of all kinds, it’s not surprising that one-third of students are not open to receiving ads from colleges and universities on social media. Students who *are* open to ads from institutions on social media are most open to ads on LinkedIn and Facebook.

Prioritize Ad Spend on LinkedIn and Facebook

Platforms that >20% of surveyed students use are included below

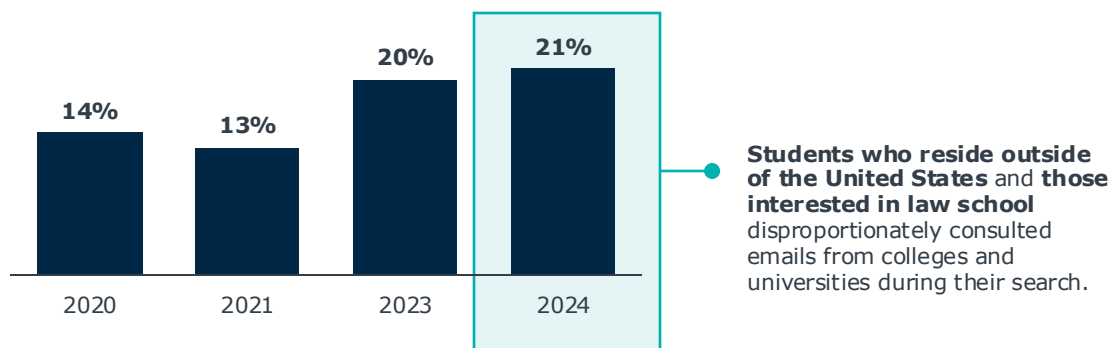


Email Remains a Critical Component of a Multichannel Recruitment Strategy

Email continues to be among the top five sources students consult during their search. The extent to which students refer to emails from colleges and universities continues to grow year over year, as evidenced in the chart below. Email may be especially powerful in reaching international students and students interested in law schools, given these respondents’ propensity to consult recruitment emails during their search.

Percentage of Students Who Consulted Recruitment Emails During Their Search

Adult learner survey findings, 2020–2024²



²) Survey not conducted in 2022.



Application Choices Are Fueled by Pragmatism

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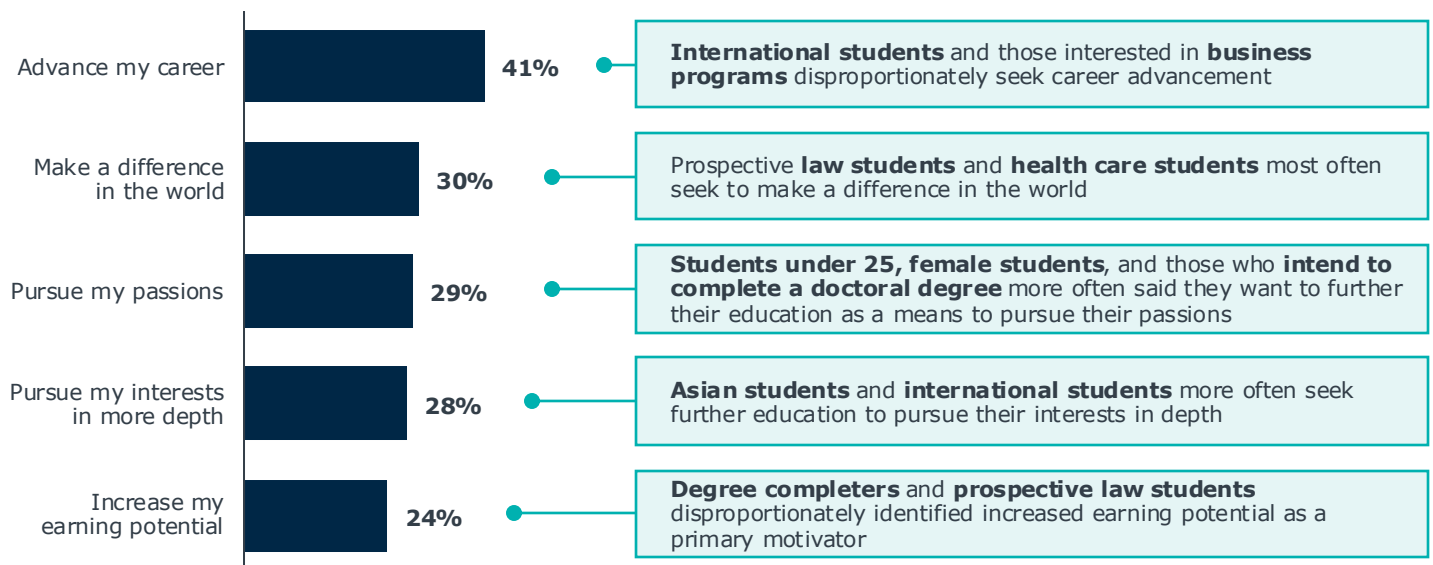
Motivations as Unique as Adult Learners Themselves

Career Advancement and Making a Difference Are the Most Common Motivators

Students most often identified advancing in their careers, making a difference in the world, and pursuing their passions as their primary motivators, consistent with prior surveys. However, key differences exist by gender identity and age, as well as program and field of study, as depicted below. Enrollment marketing teams that factor each student’s individual motivators into their marketing materials are best equipped to cut through the noise. This data can be sourced via prospect micro-surveys or tracking and analysis of students’ digital behaviors. Artificial intelligence can be a useful tool in applying these insights to hyper-personalize recruitment messages at scale.

“What are your primary reasons for furthering your education?”

Students selected up to three responses; top five responses shown



In Their Own Words



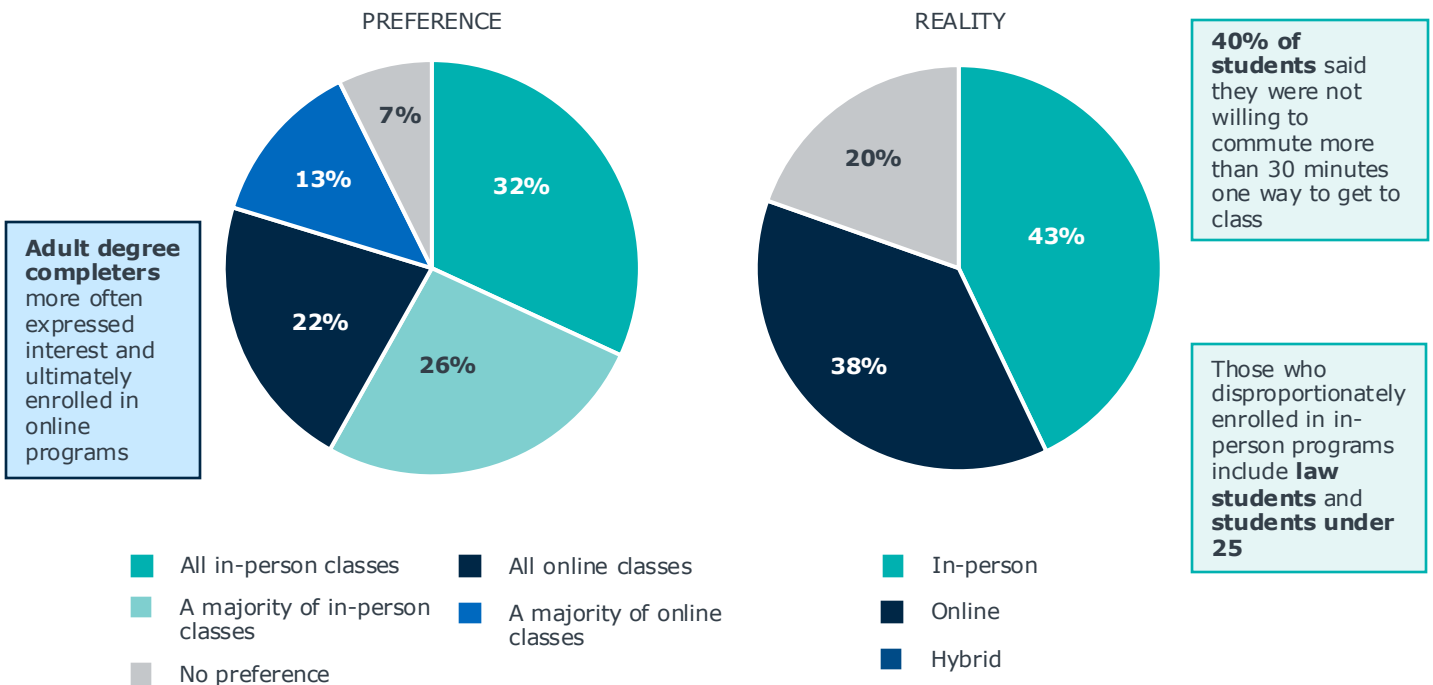
Free responses, “What are your primary reasons for furthering your education?”

- ▶ “Be the example for my children and advance my legacy”
- ▶ “Build my start-up”
- ▶ “Do something practical in my retirement years”
- ▶ “To impact, inspire, and help my community”
- ▶ “Follow my purpose”
- ▶ “Self-gratification and self-satisfaction”
- ▶ “Diversify my portfolio to open up options”
- ▶ “Beat the odds”

Preferences Can Be at Odds with Enrollment Realities

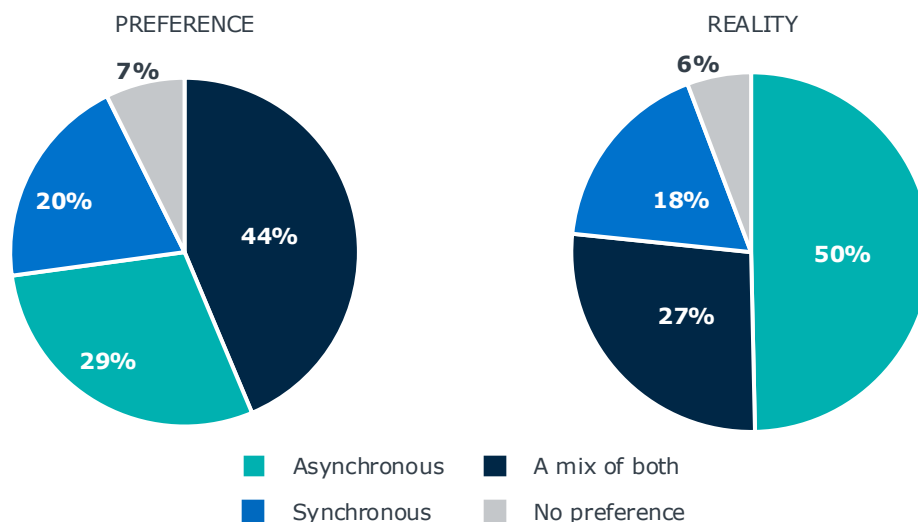
Format Preferences Tied Closely to Student Demographics and Goals

Because adult learners often balance school with work and family obligations, students' reported preferences often differ from their enrollment realities. For example, 58% of respondents indicated a preference for mostly in-person courses, but only 43% enrolled in an in-person program. Consider the components of in-person programming that attract students and how those course components can be replicated in online or hybrid programs. Adult learners who do enroll in in-person programs may also need flexibility later on; consider options that enable students to move back and forth between modalities.



Students Prefer Mixed Modality but Most Often Enroll in Asynchronous Programs

Similarly, 44% of students said they prefer a mix of synchronous and asynchronous coursework. In reality, only 27% of students enrolled in a program that offers both synchronous and asynchronous coursework. Nearly half of students enrolled in fully asynchronous courses.



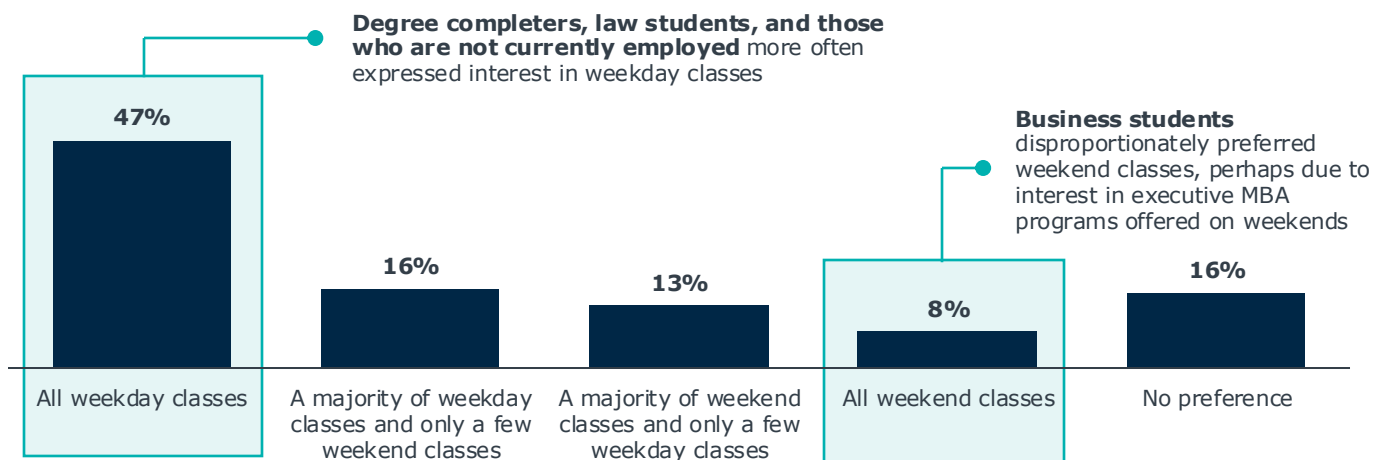
Consider Target Students' Schedule Preferences

Ensure Class Schedules Are Informed by Student Characteristics

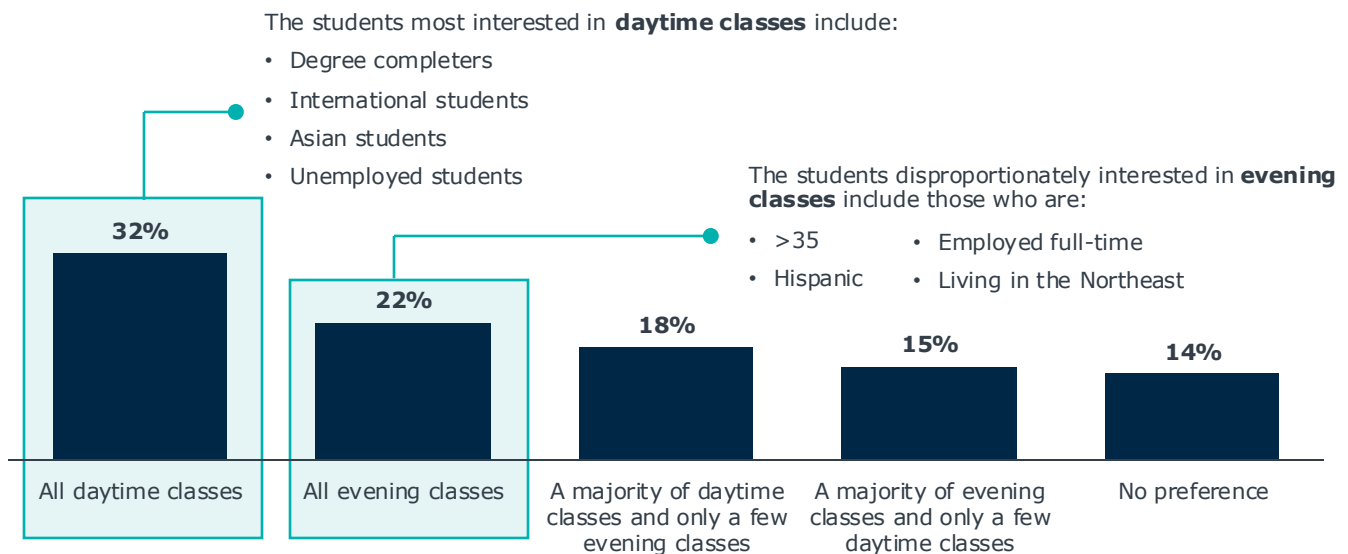
Class schedule preferences vary significantly by students' program of interest and characteristics such as place of residence and age. For example, degree completers and students interested in law school disproportionately express preference for weekday courses, while business students disproportionately seek weekend classes.

As was the case with students' modality preferences, students' class schedule preferences often differ from the schedules that end up working best for them. For example, while 22% of respondents said they prefer all evening classes, 28% ended up in programs that offer all evening classes. Older students and, unsurprisingly, those who work full-time, more often prefer evening classes, while international students and degree completers prefer daytime courses.

Nearly Half of Students Prefer Weekday Classes



Half of Students Prefer All or Most Classes During the Day

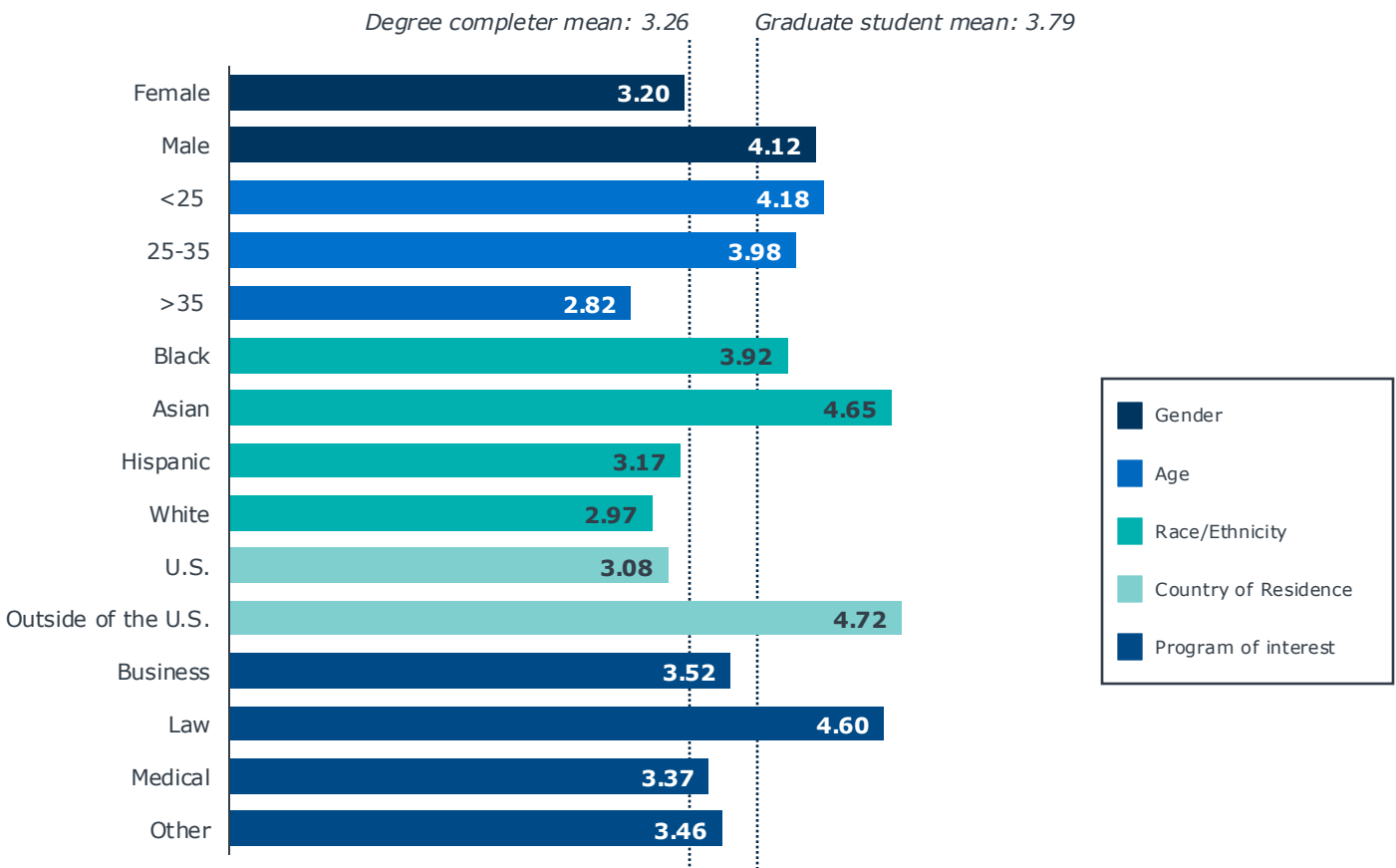


Adult Students' Application Lists Are Short

Adult Learners Apply to Just a Handful of Schools on Average

Although variation exists across demographics and intended area of study, adult learners typically apply to only a handful of schools. Surveyed graduate students applied to 3.79 schools, while adult degree completers applied to just 3.26 schools, on average. Given that students apply to relatively few schools, it's important to deploy a comprehensive lead generation strategy to reach students early in their journey before they have narrowed down their choices. A robust yield strategy is also essential to convert your limited number of admitted students into enrollments.

Variation in Number of Applications Across Demographics



Converting Admits to Enrollments



Offer multiple enrollment or deposit deadlines to drive urgency at different points in the enrollment cycle



Survey admitted students about their intent to enroll to identify and focus outreach on those most likely to convert



Continue to communicate your unique value proposition to admits, especially via student stories



Encourage faculty to connect with admits through admitted student days, emails, or phone calls



Cost-Consciousness Drives Enrollment Decisions

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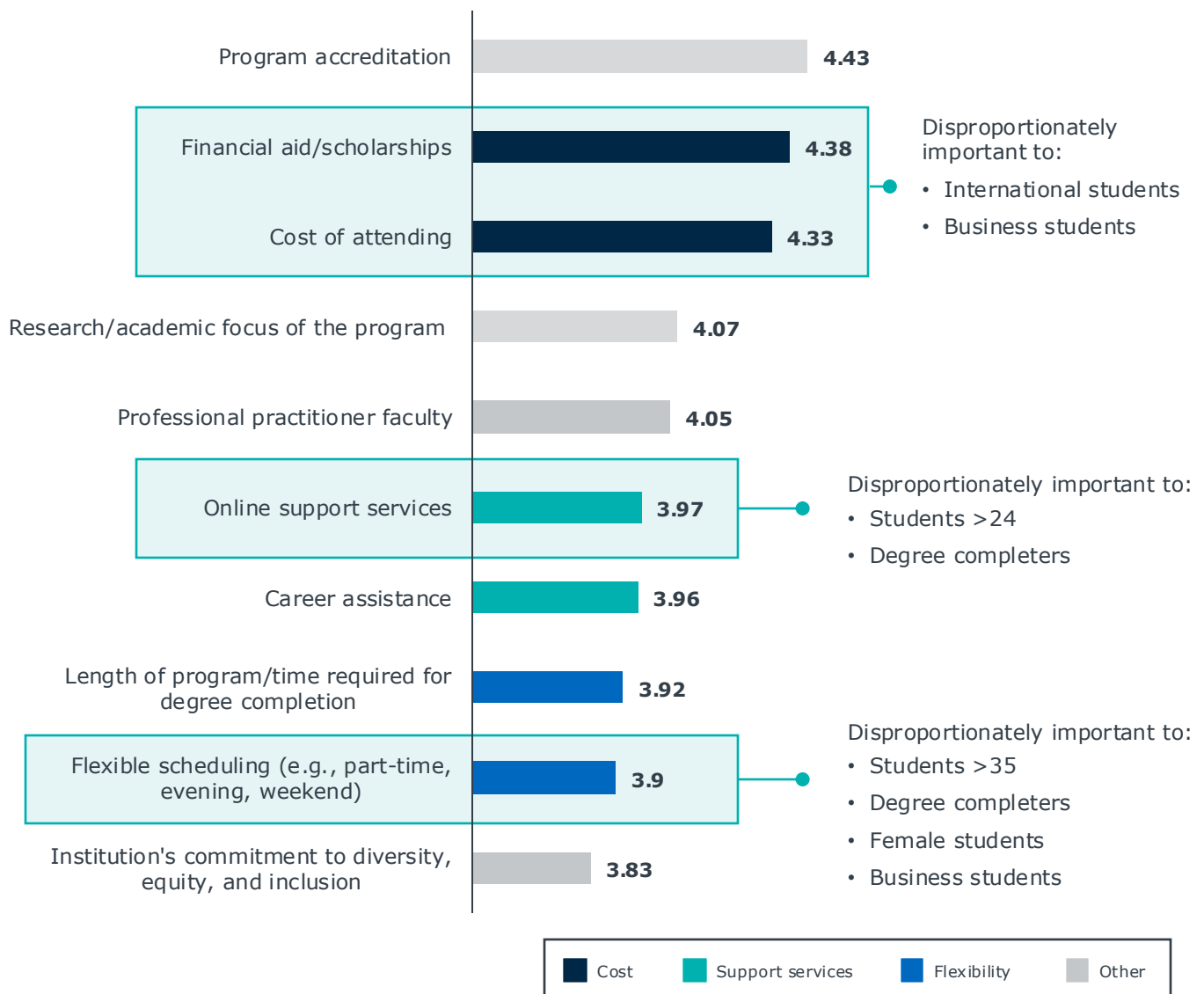
Cost, Support Services, and Flexibility Most Important

Highlight Program Accreditation and Available Financial Aid/Scholarships in Marketing

Our 2024 survey data continues to underscore graduate and adult learners' price sensitivity, desire for support services, and need for flexibility. However, key differences exist across student demographics and the degree or program type they are pursuing. For example, business students put outsized weight on cost and flexibility relative to their peers interested in other fields. Although a school or program's use of AI was ranked low across the board, students interested in business programs disproportionately identified AI adoption as more important (3.09 versus a 2.37 mean).

"In terms of your enrollment decision, indicate the importance of the following factors."

Scale: 1=Not at all important, 2=Slightly important, 3=Moderately important, 4=Very important, 5=Extremely important



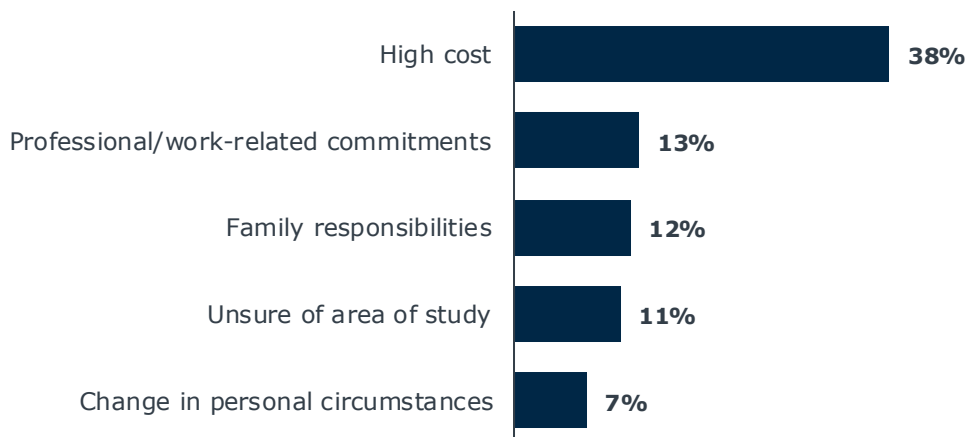
Cost Determining Students' Educational Future

Cost Continues to Be the Top Barrier to Entry for Prospective Students

About 40% of respondents identified high cost as the primary reason they are not pursuing their education at this time, consistent with findings from previous years. High cost is disproportionately an obstacle for international students (50%), compared to 36% of students in the United States.

“What is your primary reason for not pursuing your education at this time?”

Asked of students who do not plan to enroll in the next two years or are undecided at this time; top five responses shown

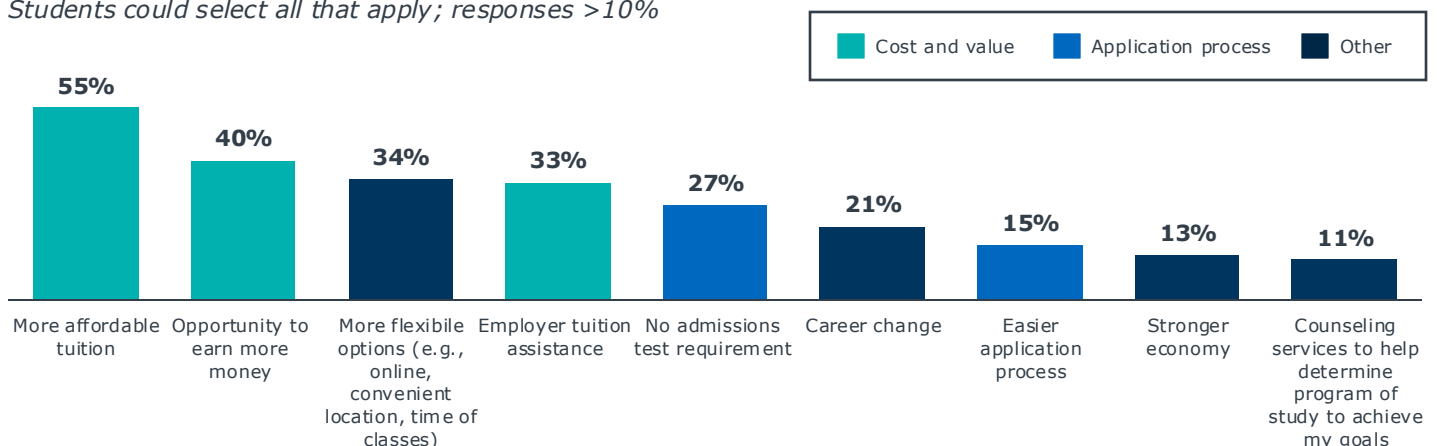


Changes in Cost and Application Process Would Make the Greatest Impact on Students' Plans

Students also identify lower costs—enabled by more affordable tuition and/or tuition assistance from an employer—as factors that would lead them to continue their education in the future. As noted on page 18, few students are aware of employer tuition assistance. Available tuition assistance could make a difference in students' ability to further their education. Thirty-three percent of respondents said tuition assistance from their employer would help persuade them to continue their education.

“What, if anything, would change your plans about continuing your education in the future?”

Students could select all that apply; responses >10%



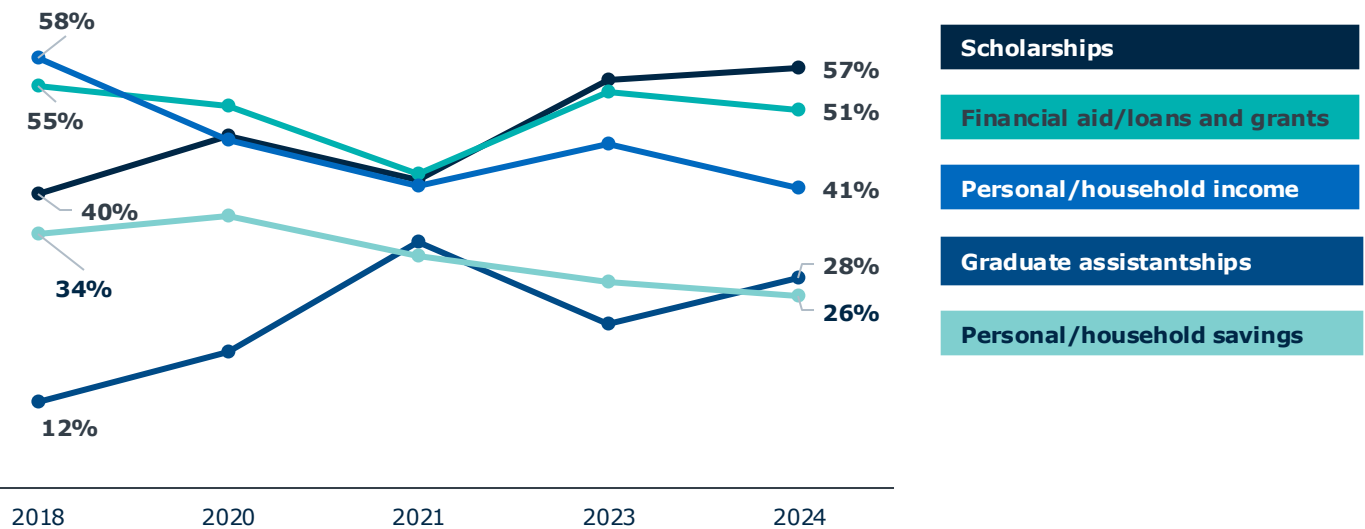
Adult Learners Increasingly Rely on Outside Funding

A Growing Number of Students Are Receiving Scholarships and Graduate Assistantships

More than half of adult learners will have access to scholarships, [financial aid](#), and loans and grants to fund their education. Perhaps most interesting are the changes in financial support available over time. Fifty-seven percent of adult learners indicated they will have access to scholarships, up from 40% in 2018 (the first year of our survey). The percentage of students who will have access to graduate assistantships has followed a similar trend, increasing from 12% in 2018 to 28% in 2024. At the same time, fewer students are relying on personal/household income and savings to pay for school. This growing focus on financial support for adult students mirrors their growing cost-consciousness. Ensure information about scholarships and financial aid is readily available across program pages.

“What sources of financial support will you have for continuing your education?”

Select all that apply; top five responses shown³



Students Are Often Unaware of Tuition Reimbursement Opportunities



13%

of surveyed students said they will have access to tuition reimbursement



93%

of surveyed employers said they offer tuition reimbursement⁴

An Opportunity to Educate Students About Tuition Reimbursement

Ensure financial aid resources highlight the fact that students may also receive tuition reimbursement from their employer. The data at left suggests that more students may have access to tuition reimbursement than they realize.

Tuition reimbursement may also enable students who currently do not plan to pursue further education to go back to school. Thirty-three percent of respondents said tuition assistance from their employer would help persuade them to further their education.

3) Adult Learner Survey not conducted in 2019 or 2022.

4) Seramount 2024 Best Companies Survey (i.e., annual survey of 250 companies).

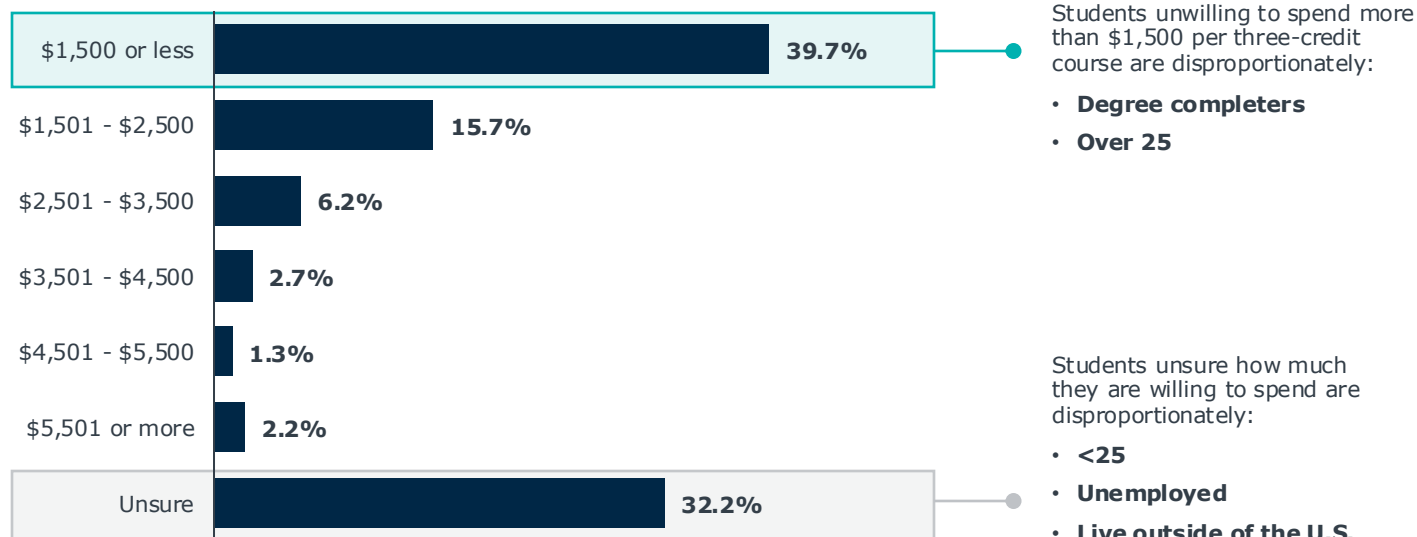
Competitive and Thoughtful Program Pricing Is Key

Forty Percent of Respondents Are Not Willing to Spend More than \$500 per Credit

To better gauge students' price sensitivity, we asked respondents how much they are willing to spend per three-credit course, including both personal finances and outside funding such as loans. Fifty-six percent of respondents are not willing to spend more than \$2,500 per three-credit course (or about \$833 per credit). Forty percent said they will not spend more than \$1,500 per three-credit course (i.e., not more than \$500 per credit).

"What is the most you are willing to spend per 3-credit course for your education, including both loans and personal financial resources?"

Asked of students who plan to enroll in the next two years



Pricing Graduate and Adult-Serving Programs

Setting tuition and fee prices for graduate and adult education programs is difficult given the variety of programs and modalities offered and competition from alternative, low-cost providers. Consider the following factors when pricing your graduate and adult education programs.



Program Costs

Consider costs associated with faculty and staff, physical infrastructure, marketing and recruitment, and curriculum development



Competitor Pricing

Programs priced higher than competitor programs should clearly articulate value and differentiators to justify cost



Program Outcomes

Price programs relative to expected outcomes (e.g., anticipated salary 1–5 years after graduation) to ensure students are receiving a strong return on their investment



Students' Price Sensitivity

Consider the likely student in the program, e.g., if a program is marketed to students without established careers, they may need a lower price point



Additional Resources

Key Takeaways



Independent Research Is at the Heart of Adult Learners' Search Process

Today's graduate students often spend more than a year researching programs, while degree completers typically conduct research more quickly. Despite these varying timelines, adult learners of all types prefer to research programs independently early in the search process. Given students' stealth shopping behavior, it's essential to have a robust lead generation strategy to help identify and engage students early in their journey. Students most often rely on search engines, university websites, and social media to explore options. These channels are hugely influential in forming students' first and sometimes only impression of your institution and programs. Ensure the messages on these channels address students' primary concerns and goals—enabling them to take the next step in learning about your institution.



Application Choices Are Fueled by Pragmatism

Graduate and adult students approach their education with clear goals, most often career advancement and a drive to improve the world around them. Marketing messages that are personalized to student intent and preferences help cut through the noise and best nurture student toward application and enrollment. When students are ready to apply, they approach application decisions with an eye toward which modalities and schedules are most realistic for their busy lives and apply to just a handful of programs. A comprehensive yield strategy can therefore make a significant difference on total enrollment in graduate and adult programs, as students are typically weighing your institution against just a couple of other options.



Cost-Consciousness Drives Enrollment Decisions

Graduate and adult students consistently identify cost and available scholarships and financial aid among the most important factors in deciding where to enroll. High cost also remains the top reason students interested in further education opted not to enroll. Notably, students increasingly express that they plan to fund their education with scholarships, loans, and financial aid as opposed to personal income and savings. For these reasons, a sound financial aid strategy and effective program pricing have been more important to graduate and adult learner enrollment strategy.



Research Overview

About the 2024 Adult Learner Survey

EAB's University Research Partners conducted a survey of current and prospective graduate and adult learners from August 5 to September 4, 2024. The survey asked students about their motivations, modality and schedule preferences, and search behaviors. The findings in this report are based on responses from 6,007 students.

Participant Profile

Age

<25	25%
25-35	34%
>35	41%

Gender

Female	55%
Male	44%
Prefer to self-describe	0.3%
Nonbinary	1%

Race/Ethnicity

African/African American/Black	44%
Asian (Central/South/East/Southeast)	11%
Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander	1%
Hispanic/Latine	9%
Middle Eastern/West Asian	2%
Native American/Alaskan Native	3%
White/Caucasian	38%
Other	1%

Degree Pursuing

Bachelor's	17%
Master's/Doctorate	83%

Employment Status

Full-time	51%
Part-time	21%
No	28%

Caregiver Status

Yes	31%
No	69%

Region

Northeast	22%
Southeast	16%
Midwest	12%
Southwest	11%
West	8%
Outside the United States	32%

A Growing Global Market

National Student Clearinghouse data indicates that domestic graduate enrollment has fallen in the wake of the pandemic, while growth in international enrollment has largely fueled the overall increase in graduate enrollment since the pandemic. **International enrollment has grown most quickly in India, but it is worth keeping an eye on graduate enrollments from Nigeria, Bangladesh, and Ghana**, which all saw rapid growth in graduate enrollment in recent years. More than half of the international students who completed our survey reside in Nigeria or Ghana.

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.

Outperform the Market at Every Stage of the Funnel



Strategize

Identify and build market-ready programs for competitive advantage



Curate

Expand and diversify your pool of right-fit students



Cultivate

Customized campaigns to drive students to application



Convert

Improve yield and retention to maximize enrollment potential

What Makes EAB Different

40+ Years of **Higher Ed Expertise**

Unrivaled Access to New Audiences

Seamless **Marketing Orchestration**

Visibility into Full-Funnel Performance

Proven Results in a Dynamic Landscape

200+

Partner institutions

6:1

Average ROI across multiyear partnership

18%

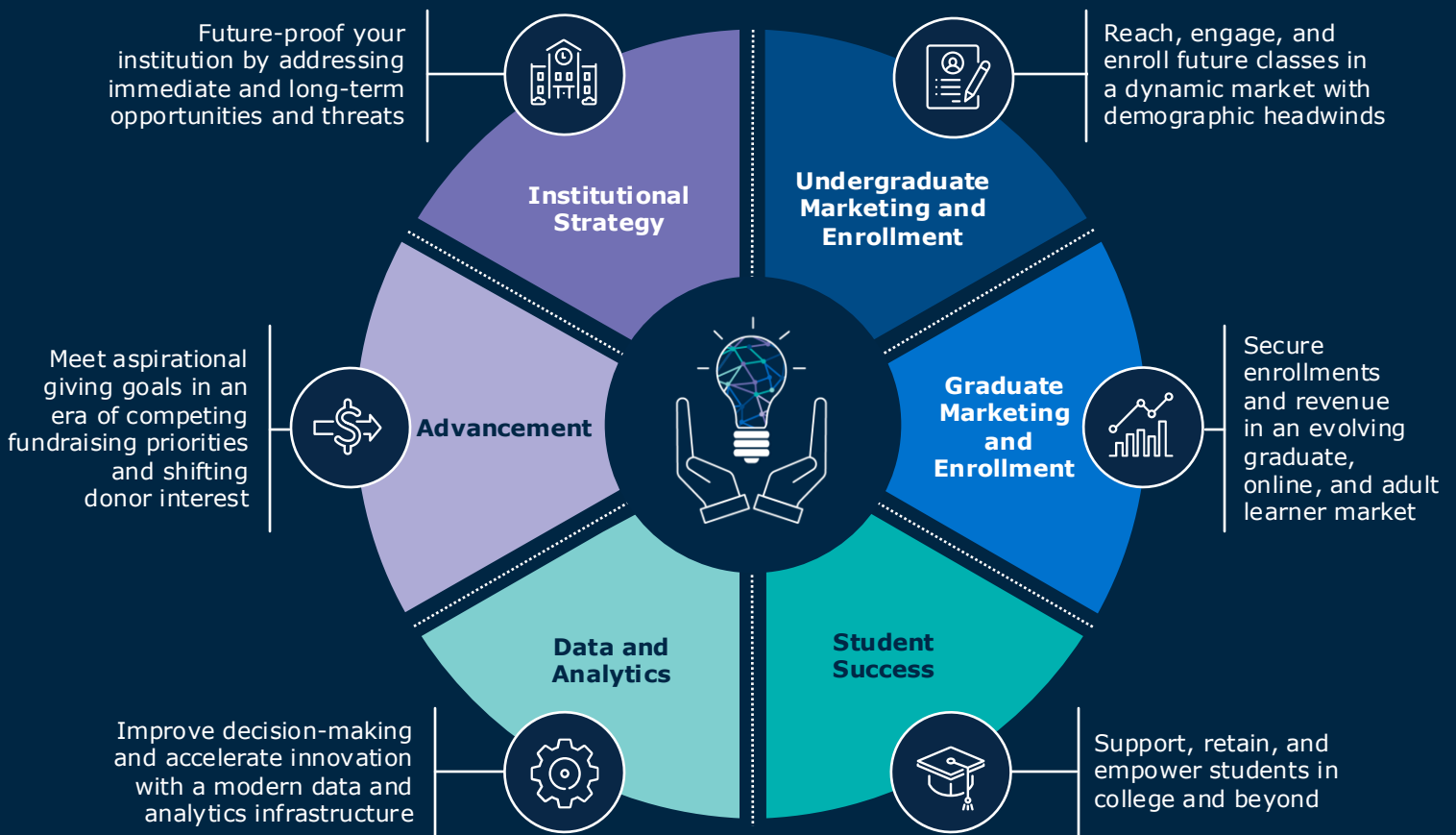
Average graduate enrollment growth

\$2M

Average NTR influenced per partner

To discuss how EAB can help you meet your graduate and adult enrollment goals, email LexRubyHowe@eab.com. Learn more at eab.com/ALR.

**Insight-powered Solutions for Your Top
Priorities and Toughest Challenges**



We partner with **2,800+** institutions to accelerate progress, deliver results, and enable lasting change.

95%+ of our partners return to us year after year because of results we achieve, together.

ABOUT EAB

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.