



2016

ONLINE
COLLEGE
STUDENTS

Comprehensive Data on Demands and Preferences



ONLINE COLLEGE STUDENTS 2016:

Comprehensive Data on Demands and Preferences

*A joint project of The Learning House, Inc.
and Aslanian Market Research*

*Dr. David L. Clinefelter
Carol B. Aslanian*

A number of individuals contributed to the project.

Carol B. Aslanian led the Aslanian Market Research team, which included Scott Jeffe and Steven Fischer. Dr. David Clinefelter led the Learning House team, which included Wendy Parrish, Emily Wheeler and Christy Swanberg.

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

With overall higher education enrollments down 1.7% for the fall of 2015¹, higher education enrollments have now remained flat or declined for the past three years. To combat this trend, higher education institutions continue to turn toward online education to attract a segment of students who not only value a flexible learning environment but need this option to be able to enroll in a higher education program.

With an expected 3.5 million² students working toward their degree online in 2016, and with projections for this group of learners to increase to 5 million by 2020³, online education is one of the largest and fastest growing segments of higher education. This population cannot be ignored, and additionally, institutions must understand the unique set of preferences and needs this audience brings to their education experience.

Online education has become mainstream, but many colleges and universities continue to approach the development and delivery of online programs as simply taking what already exists on ground and putting it online. To help institutions better understand how to serve this specific population, The Learning House, Inc., and Aslanian Market Research have been conducting an annual survey of 1,500 online college students since 2012. The survey consists of prospective, current, and recently graduated online college students, at both the undergraduate and graduate level.

It is our hope that the *Online College Students* report, currently in the fifth iteration, will assist those in higher education to better understand not only “who” online college students are, but also the “what” and “why” to their preferences for online learning features, programs, and schools. To access the previous reports, please visit learninghouse.com/resources/research or www.educationdynamics.com/student-acquisition-solutions/industry-insights.

The survey has evolved over time to address new topics and issues in the online higher education marketplace, such as MOOCs, competency-based learning, the role of mobile devices, and more. We also have asked questions across multiple years so we can identify trends over time. These trends are noted in the results.

We hope this information is useful to online leaders in expanding access and improving the quality of their programs. Recommendations for online programs based on survey findings and our collective experiences are presented in ***BOLD italicized text*** at the end of selected sections.

KEY FINDINGS

Below is a summary of some of the key findings.

1. An Increasing Number of Students Prefer Online

Students are deliberately choosing online as their modality of choice. Half of online college students say they definitely would not, probably would not, or are not sure if they would have attended their current program if it were not offered online. Quality and satisfaction remain high; 90% of those surveyed who had also taken on-ground classes feel their experience in an online classroom is better or the same as their experience on campus. Upon graduating, 72% of online students feel it was worth their time, and 69% feel it was worth the investment of their money.

2. Online Students Are Cost Sensitive

For the second year in a row, tuition is the No. 1 factor driving an online college student's school selection. This emphasis on cost comes, in part, because 44% of the students are using personal funds (in addition to grants and loans) to help finance their education, and employer tuition reimbursement benefits have been dramatically reduced over the last five years. Only 36% are receiving scholarships, but scholarships are cited as the most attractive way to help students decide among schools. Nearly nine in 10 students would be at least somewhat swayed to choose one school over another for as little as a \$500 annual scholarship.

3. There Are Many Paths to a Degree

Eighty percent of online undergraduate students are coming to colleges and universities with credits in hand and are seeking for most or all to be accepted. Many would also like to receive credit for their life experiences, helping them to finish their degrees more quickly and for less cost. One-third of students are very familiar with competency-based learning, but fewer than one in five are very familiar with alternative credentials. The idea of alternative credentials holds appeal, however, as respondents say they would be drawn to these paths if they had more knowledge of them. As students become more familiar with these types of credentials and their benefits (i.e., time and cost savings), it is likely that more students will turn toward these options.

4. Mobile Is Widespread Throughout the Admissions and Education Process

Mobile devices, both phones and tablets, are being used during the college selection process and also for “going to class.” More than 95% of online students own a mobile device.

Nearly one-third of students conducted all or almost all of their online college search on a mobile device, and an additional 51% conducted at least some of their research via mobile. Once enrolled, 59% completed at least some of their online courses on their mobile device, with 25% completing all or most of their degree on a mobile device. Among prospective students, 67% wish to complete at least some of their online learning on their mobile device.

5. Students Make Decisions Quickly

Students increasingly make their decisions to attend a school extremely quickly, with 68% percent of online college students choosing a school to apply to in four weeks or less. They only consider between two and three institutions, and half are choosing the school that first responds back to them after an inquiry.

6. Schools Need to Respond Faster

The result of students searching for and selecting a school so quickly is that students are also expecting the same speed from the school. When they submit information (e.g., financial aid, transfer credit), they expect a response equally as quickly. Once they are admitted to a school, they want to begin immediately.

More than one-third of online students expect to hear back about their financial aid decision *before* they submit their application, and an additional quarter expect to hear back within a week of submitting their application. Transfer credit decisions are expected to be even faster, with 44% expecting to hear how much credit will transfer before their application. Students admit that the reality of the situation was far slower than their preferences.

7. The Online Student Demographic Is Changing

The typical online student has been changing over the past five years. Online college students are getting younger as the average age has dropped to 29 for undergraduate online students and to 33 for graduate online students. They are also more likely to be single and have fewer children. The online college student is also earning less, with the percentage of graduate students earning less than \$25,000 more than doubling since 2013.

8. Online Students Prefer a Nearby Campus

Since 2012, the radius from which online college students have been selecting their program has been shrinking, with nearly 75% of students selecting a campus within 100 miles of their home. Students are likely choosing a campus close to home because since 2014, there has been a significant increase in the number of times online students visited their campus.

9. IT Is Becoming a Popular Graduate Field of Study

Business continues to be the most popular major at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, accounting for approximately one-quarter of total online enrollment. There was no change in the percentage of undergraduate students enrolled in various disciplines. However, from 2014 to 2016, there was a significant decrease in the percentage of graduate education students, dropping from 22% to 14%. Computer and IT graduate students increased from 9% to 20%.

SECTION 1:

UNDERSTANDING THE ONLINE COLLEGE STUDENT

TRENDING YOUNGER

Younger students are one of the fastest-growing segments of the online student population, with age decreasing over time at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The mean age of undergraduate online students decreased from 34 years old in 2012 to 29 in 2016. The mean age of graduate online students decreased from 35 years old in 2012 to 33 in 2016. As the number of online programs and providers grows, more students can find the program they want online, leading to more people choosing the modality. The increasing number of institutions offering online programs also helps to increase the reputation of online learning. Consequently, more (and younger) students are choosing online as a first choice for their higher education experience.

Age	Percent of Respondents					
	Undergraduate			Graduate		
	2012	2014	2016	2012	2014	2016
18 to 24	25%	20%	44%	13%	13%	26%
25 to 29	17%	18%	17%	24%	18%	18%
30 to 34	13%	15%	11%	16%	18%	15%
35 to 39	12%	11%	9%	14%	16%	12%
40 to 44	12%	11%	6%	11%	13%	9%
45 to 49	10%	8%	4%	10%	8%	7%
50 to 54	8%	9%	4%	8%	9%	6%
55 and older	4%	8%	5%	4%	7%	6%

Average Age by Year	Undergraduate	Graduate
2012	34	35
2013	35	37
2014	36	37
2015	32	35
2016	29	33

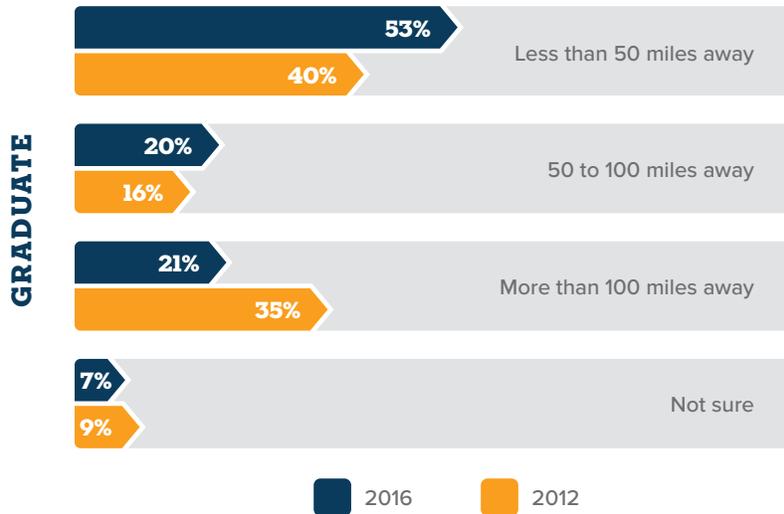
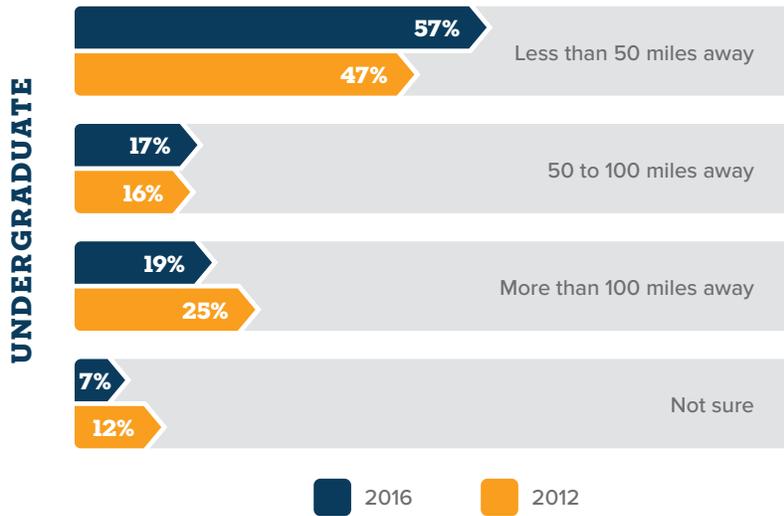
GO LOCAL

A consistent trend over the past five years of conducting the *Online College Students* survey is that online students enroll in institutions with a campus near their home.

Nearly 75% of online college students chose a program offered by a college or university within 100 miles of their home, with 55% choosing one within 50 miles of their home. The increased number of providers has increased access, but also has helped fragment the market and encouraged localization.

One reason people may choose a program close to home is the ability or desire to visit campus, despite studying primarily online. Seventy-five percent of online students visited their campus at least once during the year, with 57% visiting between one and five times. These visits are significantly more frequent compared to 2014, when 62% of online students never visited their campus center and just 32% visited between one and five times. In addition, the name recognition of area schools among nearby employers, friends, and family members may lead prospective online students to enroll in these institutions.

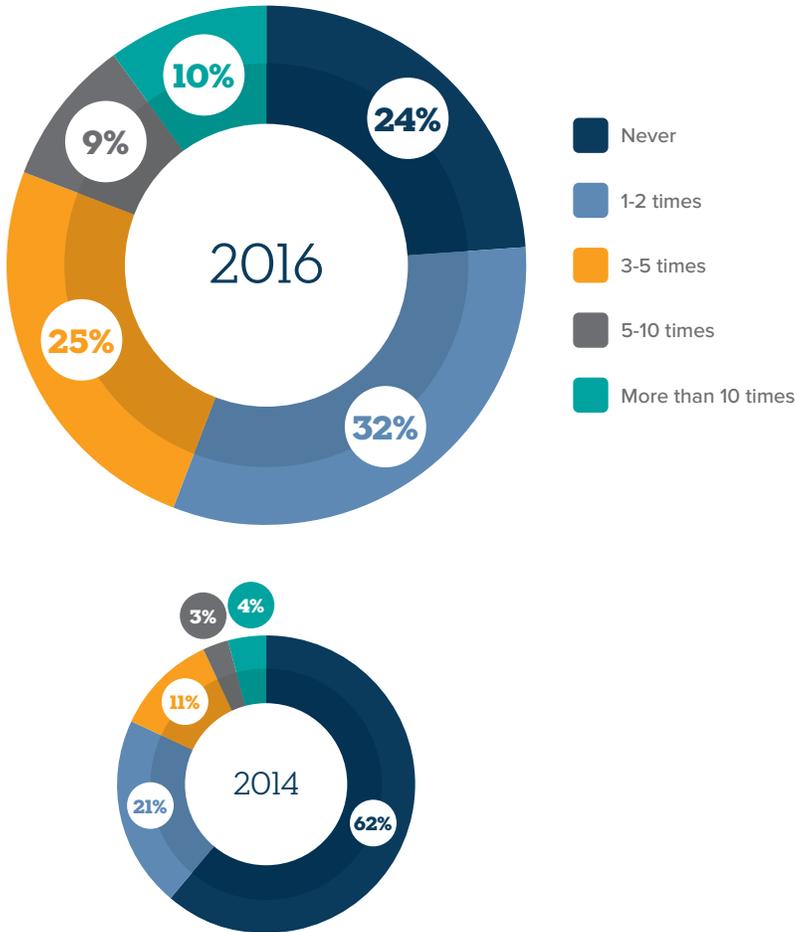
HOW FAR DO YOU LIVE FROM THE CLOSEST CAMPUS/SERVICE CENTER OF THE COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY IN WHICH YOU ENROLLED?



RECOMMENDATION

The greatest asset a school has is its local reputation. Unless your institution offers a niche program with broader appeal, focus marketing efforts within a 100-mile radius.

IN THE COURSE OF A YEAR THAT YOU WERE ENROLLED IN FULLY ONLINE STUDY, HOW OFTEN DID YOU VISIT THE SCHOOL'S CAMPUS/ SERVICE CENTER FOR REASONS THAT PERTAIN TO YOUR STUDIES?



RECOMMENDATION

Students want to feel connected to campus. Fostering these relationships, whether through in-person or virtual events, will help students develop a sense of community.

SATISFIED WITH ONLINE LEARNING

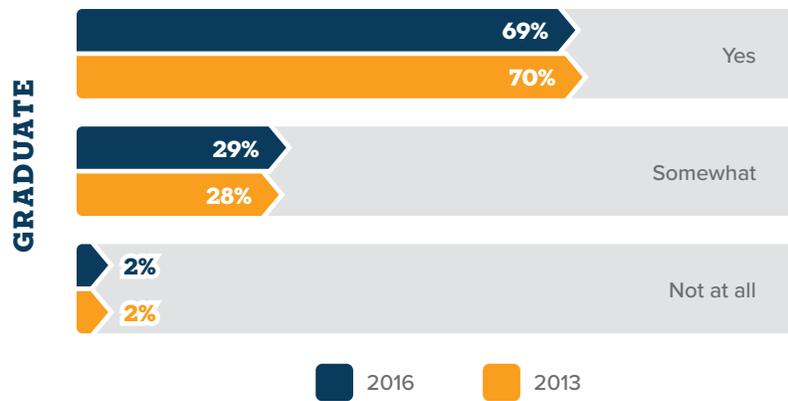
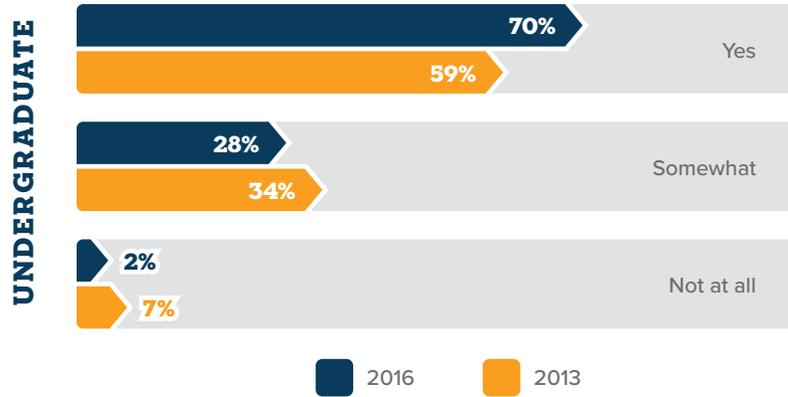
Online education leads to more online education as two-thirds (65%) of online college students have taken a fully online course or completed a fully online program before their most recent online learning experience. Exposure has been trending higher, with 45% of students in 2014 being exposed to online courses as compared to 54% in 2016. Exactly what that exposure consisted of — MOOCs, online training, high school online courses, or higher education courses — is unknown. However, successful past experiences most likely contribute positively to bringing these students back to the online modality as they seek to further or complete their education.

Ninety percent of students feel their online education is “about the same” or “better” than their past classroom experiences. Additionally, more than two-thirds of online students feel their online program was worth the investment of their time (73% undergraduate, 71% graduate) and money (70% undergraduate, 69% graduate). Over time, undergraduates’ satisfaction with their online programs has grown so that it now matches graduate student levels.

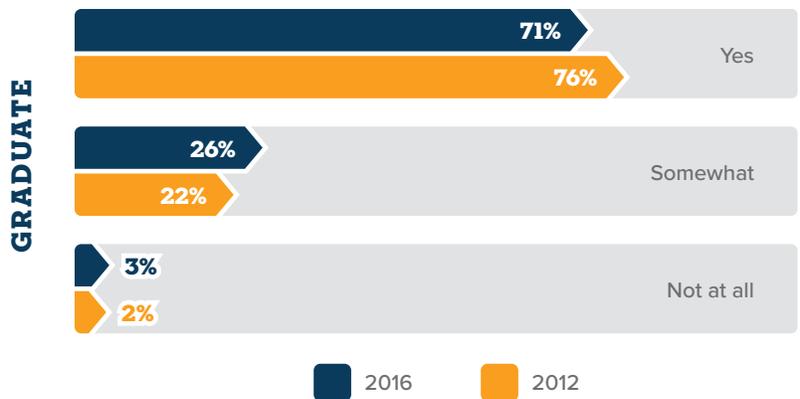
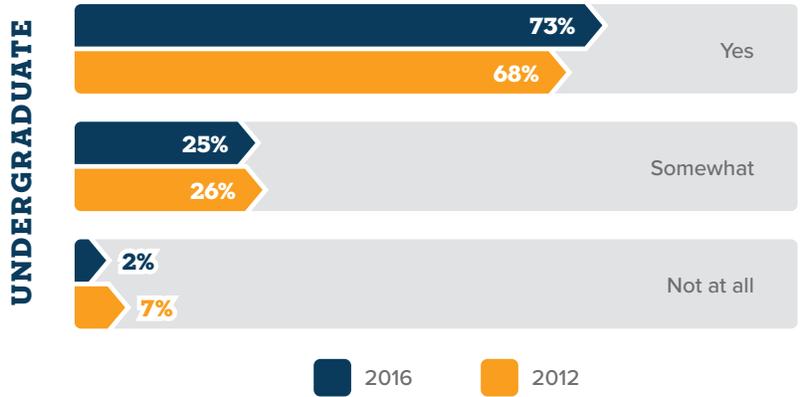
Fifty-seven percent of online students would enroll in another online degree in the future. Those who do not plan on enrolling in further education cite not needing further education as their primary reason, indicating that they do not in all likelihood object to the online modality. Those who say they would enroll in another online degree cite both the need for additional education and the convenience online provides as drivers of their decision.

Prior to your recent online study, had you ever enrolled in any other fully online courses or programs?	Percent of Respondents	
	2013	2016
Yes, I took individual online courses	44%	54%
Yes, I completed another fully online program	11%	11%
No	45%	38%

DO YOU FEEL YOUR ONLINE PROGRAM WAS WORTH THE INVESTMENT OF YOUR MONEY?



DO YOU FEEL YOUR ONLINE PROGRAM WAS WORTH THE INVESTMENT OF YOUR TIME?



RECOMMENDATION

Online success breeds online success, with those who have taken online courses reporting favorable feelings toward the modality. Developing a robust menu of online offerings, from degree programs to MOOCs to executive education, can give schools an opportunity to market to those who have already completed online courses and build brand loyalty.

CREDITS FROM PRIOR STUDY

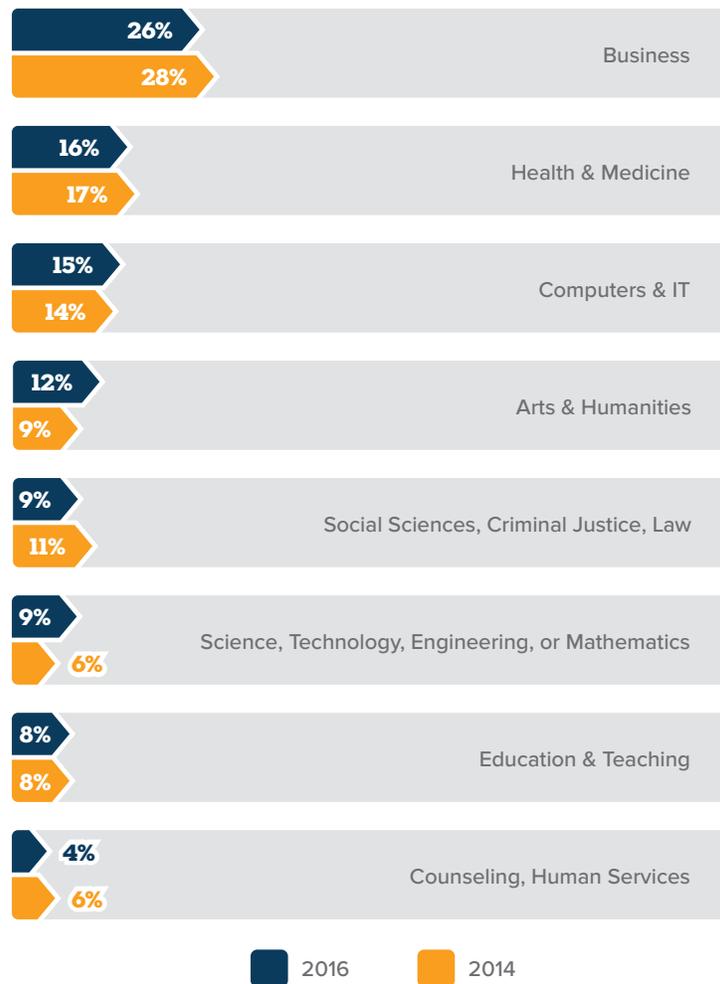
Past surveys have shown that undergraduate students are looking to apply a significant number of past academic credits to their next degree program, and that remains true in 2016. Higher education institutions need to have thorough and well-defined transfer credit policies as millions of students are coming back to finish their degree and want their past credit to count.

How many undergraduate credits had you accumulated prior to your most recent fully online program?	Percent of Respondents	
	2014	2016
None	19%	13%
1 to 15	17%	19%
16 to 30	17%	21%
31 to 59	15%	16%
60 to 90	13%	13%
More than 90 credits	11%	11%
I don't recall	9%	7%

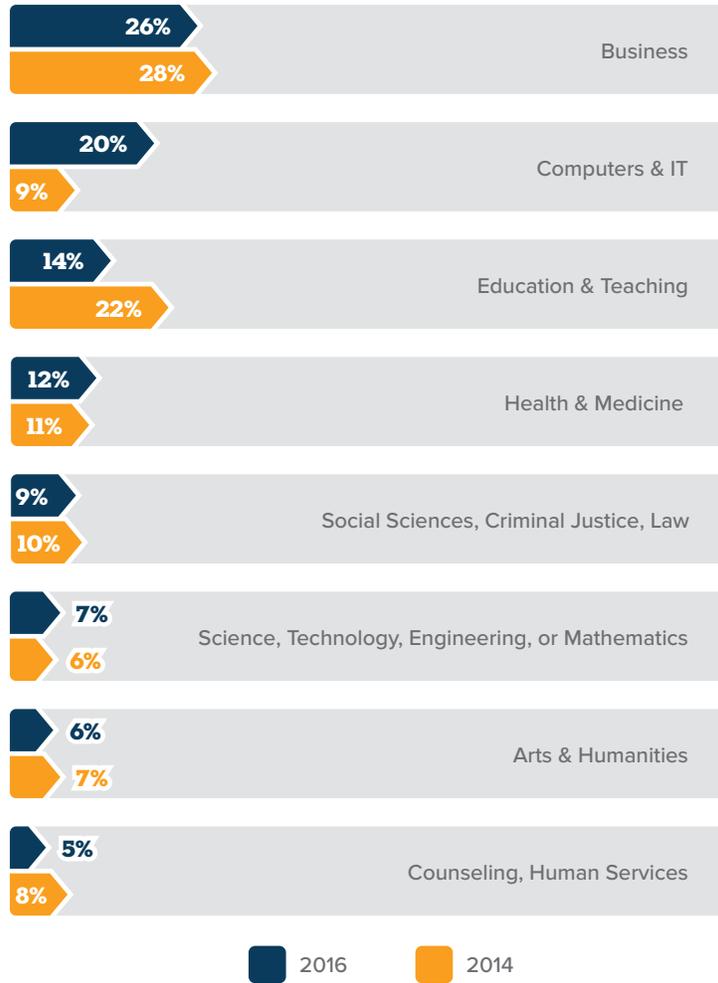
FIELDS OF STUDY

The top fields of study have remained relatively stable at the undergraduate level over the last two years. The same cannot be said for the graduate-level programs, with education programs seeing a sharp decrease over just a two-year span, from 22% to 14%. Graduate computer and IT programs, however, have seen interest more than double in size since 2014, from 9% to 20%.

UNDERGRADUATE FIELDS OF STUDY



GRADUATE FIELDS OF STUDY



Top Undergraduate Majors	2016 Rank
Business Administration	1
Computer Science and Engineering	2
Nursing	3
Engineering	4
Early Childhood Education	5
Information Technology	6
Social Work	6
Graphic Web Design	8
Liberal Arts	9
Health Administration	9
Biology	9
Computer Security	12
Criminal Justice	12
Accounting	14
Communications	15
English	15
Elementary Education	15
Secondary Education	15
Environmental Sciences	15

Top Graduate Majors	2016 Rank
Business Administration	1
Computer Science and Engineering	2
Nursing	3
Information Technology	4
Educational Administration, K-12	5
Computer Security	6
Special Education	6
Psychology	8
Information Management	9
Web Development	9
Adult and Higher Education	9
Software Engineering	12
Technology Management	12
Counseling Psychology/Psychotherapy	12
Elementary Education	12
Secondary Education	12
Law	12

EDUCATION MOTIVATION

For the past five years, the majority of students surveyed were enrolled full time with approximately 60% studying full time in 2015 and 2016⁴. Career aspirations remain the primary driver for online education, with more than three-quarters of online students furthering their education for career-related reasons.

What was your primary motivation for enrolling in further education? <i>(Select one)</i>	Percent of Respondents
I wanted a career in a new field	20%
The satisfaction of completing my undergraduate/graduate education	15%
I wanted to keep up to date with the skills and requirements of my current job	14%
I was unemployed/underemployed and needed more education to get a new job	12%
It was a requirement by my employer/profession	11%
I was seeking a promotion/new position in my field	11%
I was re-entering the job market and needed more education	8%
I had just finished high school/GED	7%
Other personal reasons	8%

RECOMMENDATION

Online students are motivated by career success. Offering comprehensive career services tailored to the online student can help your institution stand out and improve key metrics around job placement.

FINISHING WHAT THEY BEGAN

One-third of online college students (32%) have dropped out of a college-level degree or certificate program in the past. These students are somewhat evenly split between that program being delivered online (39%), face-to-face in a classroom (34%), or partially online (27%). About half dropped out within six months. While students cited a number of reasons for not completing their earlier program, the top two reasons are not surprising: family (34%) and finances (26%). The number of students who do not finish a degree may trend down in the future as the number of ways students can complete a degree grows.

Why didn't you finish that program? <i>(Select one)</i>	Percent of Respondents
My family circumstances changed	34%
Ran out of funds	26%
Did not see the relevance of the program content	17%
I started a new job that required more time	15%
Classes were uninteresting	14%
I started a family and didn't have the time	14%
I relocated and the program wasn't available	10%
Too difficult to get to campus	8%
I became ill	8%
I lost my job	2%
Other	4%

RECOMMENDATION

While students drop out of online program for a number of reasons, not all of those are outside the school's purview. To improve retention, schools should make sure the relevance of program content to real-world skills is clear and tuition and fees are affordable and clearly stated upfront.

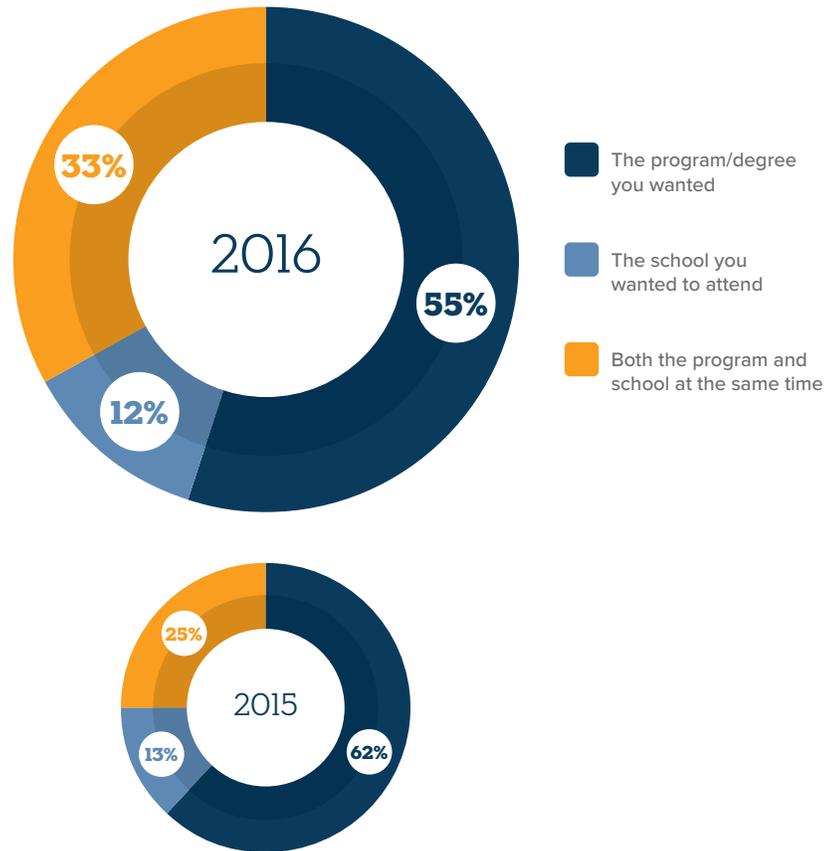
SECTION 2:

RECRUITING THE ONLINE COLLEGE STUDENT

WHICH COMES FIRST: PROGRAM OR SCHOOL?

Prospective online students decide what degree they are looking for and then seek the best match possible. More than half (55%) are deciding what they want to study before looking for an institution that offers that program. While this trend appears to be down, with 62% choosing their program first in 2015, students have become more decisive. Today, they are more likely to decide both their institution and program at the same time (33% in 2016 as compared to 25% in 2015).

WHICH DID YOU DECIDE FIRST?



RECOMMENDATION

Because online students know what field they want to study before they apply, schools that offer a comprehensive suite of online programs have an advantage. If a particular school does not offer the major of interest, the student will look elsewhere. The more programs a school offers, the better the chance of offering the program any given student wants to study, and doing so cost effectively.

FACTORS IN CHOOSING A SCHOOL

When online students were asked to select the three most important factors in choosing a school, tuition, reputation, and the convenience of the program were the top ranked factors. Positive interactions with the institution and recommendations from friends or family and employer were less important.

While reputation of the school continues to be important, in 2015 tuition and fees became the most critical factor in choosing an institution and remained in the top spot in 2016. Affordability, therefore, is a message that should resonate with students.

What were the most important factors in your decision about which school in which to enroll for an online program? <i>Please rank your top three factors.</i>	# 1 Factor	# 2 Factor	# 3 Factor	Not a top three factor	Mean score out of 3.0
Tuition and fees	26%	18%	14%	41%	1.79
Reputation of school	18%	16%	13%	54%	1.89
Convenience - the school offers multiple study formats	12%	13%	14%	62%	2.00
Quality of faculty	11%	13%	15%	62%	2.10
Convenience - the school has a location near where I live or work	10%	12%	10%	67%	2.06
Recommendation of a friend/family member	7%	6%	8%	80%	2.05
Agreement between my employer and the school for adjusted tuition/fees	6%	6%	7%	82%	2.04
Positive interactions with admissions/enrollment personnel prior to enrollment	6%	8%	11%	75%	2.18
Positive interactions with financial aid personnel	5%	7%	10%	77%	2.22

FACTORS IN CHOOSING AN ONLINE PROGRAM

Online college students are selecting online programs for their flexible class schedules, given that they likely cannot attend a program with a set or firm meeting time. However, students are also identifying programs that can help them complete their degree and re-enter the workforce quickly. Messages such as “speed to degree” likely resonate well with this audience as they are seeking the quickest path to completion. Accelerated course offerings, year-round course scheduling, and a generous transfer credit policy can all factor into the length of time required for students to complete their program.

Which of the following factors specifically related to your study was important in your selection of an online program?	Top 10 Respondents
Flexible class schedules	21%
The length of time to complete the program	16%
Content of program (relevance of course descriptions, availability of major or concentration that I want)	15%
Overall reputation of the program within my field of study	14%
Major is important in my career field	14%
Successful career placement of graduates	11%
Recognized in your field as a high quality program	11%
Amount of transfer credits accepted	11%
Number of hours of study required each week	10%
No set class meeting times	9%

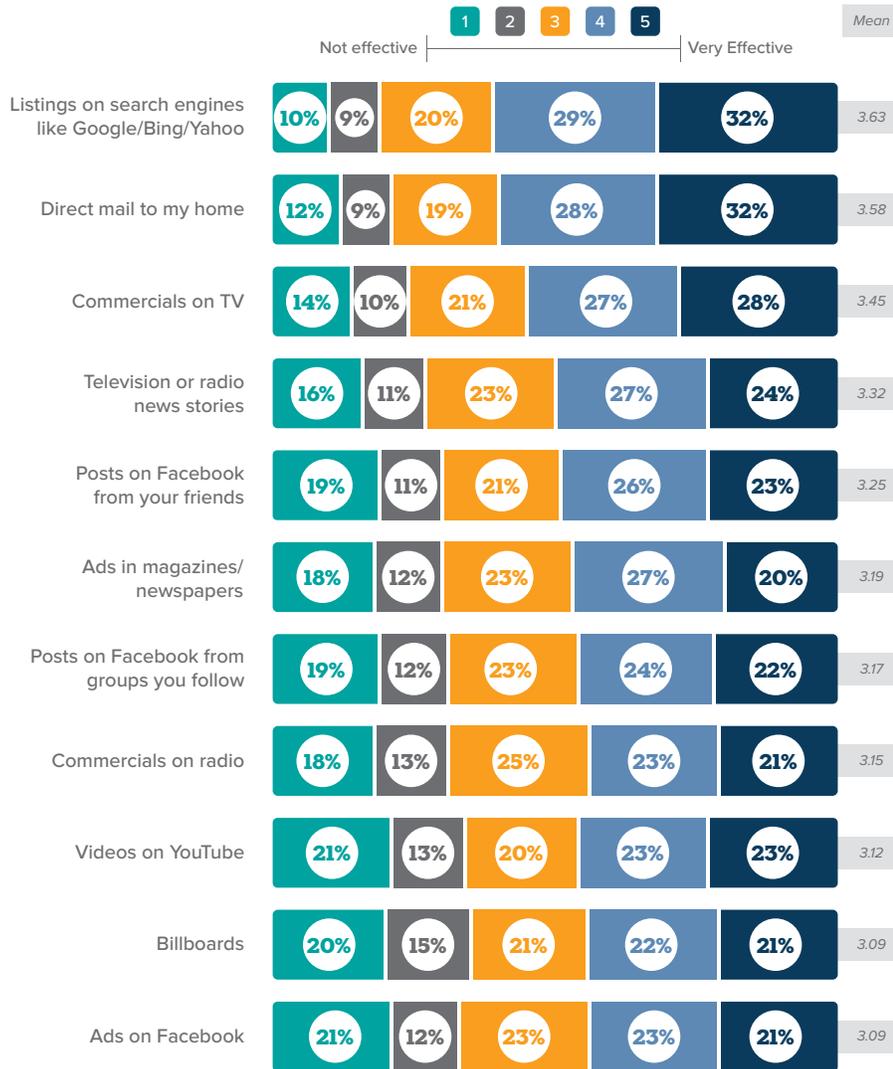
RECOMMENDATION

As online education has grown in terms of the number of students and institutions, the marketing message of “flexibility and convenience” has not changed. Institutions need to evolve their messaging to stand out from the crowd and clearly and specifically demonstrate their value when recruiting students.

MARKETING CHANNELS FOR AWARENESS

Students note that search engines on sites such as Google, Yahoo, and Bing are among the most effective in making them aware of potential institutions offering online programs. When asked to pick the most effective channel for colleges and universities to inform students of online programs from a list of more than a dozen different marketing channels, there was not a clear winner. Some channels, however, did appear to be less effective. Posts and articles on sites such as BuzzFeed and Reddit rank at the bottom of the list, although that may be because more than one-quarter of online students say they never saw such posts or articles during their selection process. Podcasts and posts on social media sites Twitter and Instagram were also rated low for their effectiveness and not seen by at least a quarter of students. When it comes to awareness, traditional channels continue to be the most effective.

HOW EFFECTIVE WERE EACH OF THE FOLLOWING ADVERTISING METHODS IN MAKING YOU AWARE OF POTENTIAL ONLINE PROGRAMS?



INFORMATION GATHERING

Forty-one percent of online students look to the college’s website as the main source for detailed program information, followed by search engines such as Google and Bing. Printed materials are still consulted, but they are far behind the website as a source of detailed information for these online students. Institutions should also know that posting phone numbers, open house dates or virtual open house options, and live chat features are not as critical as a strong website for disseminating information to prospective students.

After identifying schools of interest, what were your primary methods of gathering detailed information? <i>(Select 3)</i>	Percent of Respondents
Direct visits to the websites of the colleges of interest	41%
Internet search engines (Google, Bing, etc.)	35%
Printed college guides and other materials	24%
Phone calls to the institutions	23%
Conversations with friends, family	21%
Attend an open house/other event	18%
College search sites like eLearners.com, ClassesUSA, eLearnPortal.com	14%
Conversations with employer or colleagues	13%
Attend a virtual open house	11%
Social media sites (Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+, etc.)	10%
Live chat on the college website	10%
Other	1%

RECOMMENDATION

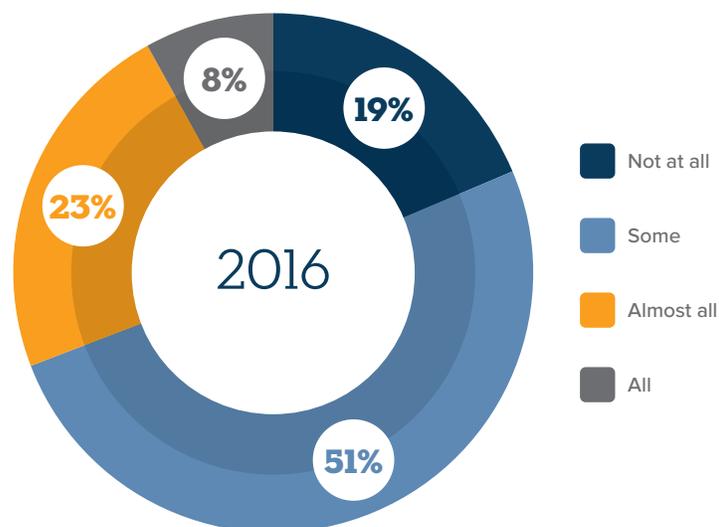
It remains imperative for colleges and universities to ensure their websites are updated regularly as well as easy to navigate for key pieces of information around programs, policies, and procedures.

THE ROLE OF MOBILE IN THE SELECTION PROCESS

Half of online students conducted “some” of their research on which school to apply to on their mobile device, defined as either their phone or tablet. This is in addition to the nearly one-third (31%) who conducted all or almost all of their research about a school on their mobile device. Facebook (21%) and Google (10%) were by far the most popular apps.

Colleges and universities should ensure their websites are mobile-friendly, and for those that may wish to experiment with mobile ads, Facebook appears to be the most commonly used app by online college students.

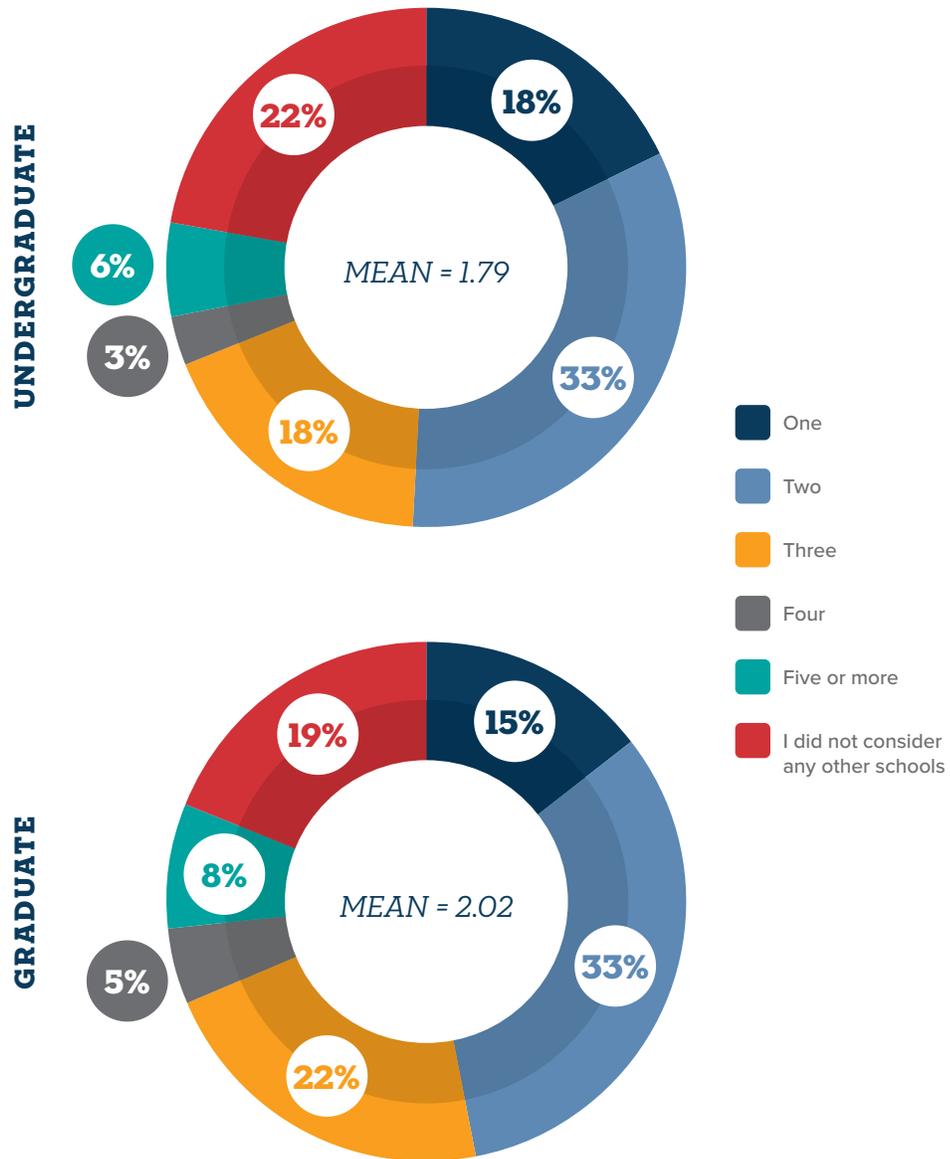
TO WHAT EXTENT DID YOU CONDUCT ANY OF YOUR RESEARCH ABOUT SCHOOLS TO ATTEND ON A MOBILE DEVICE? (TABLET, PHONE, ETC.)



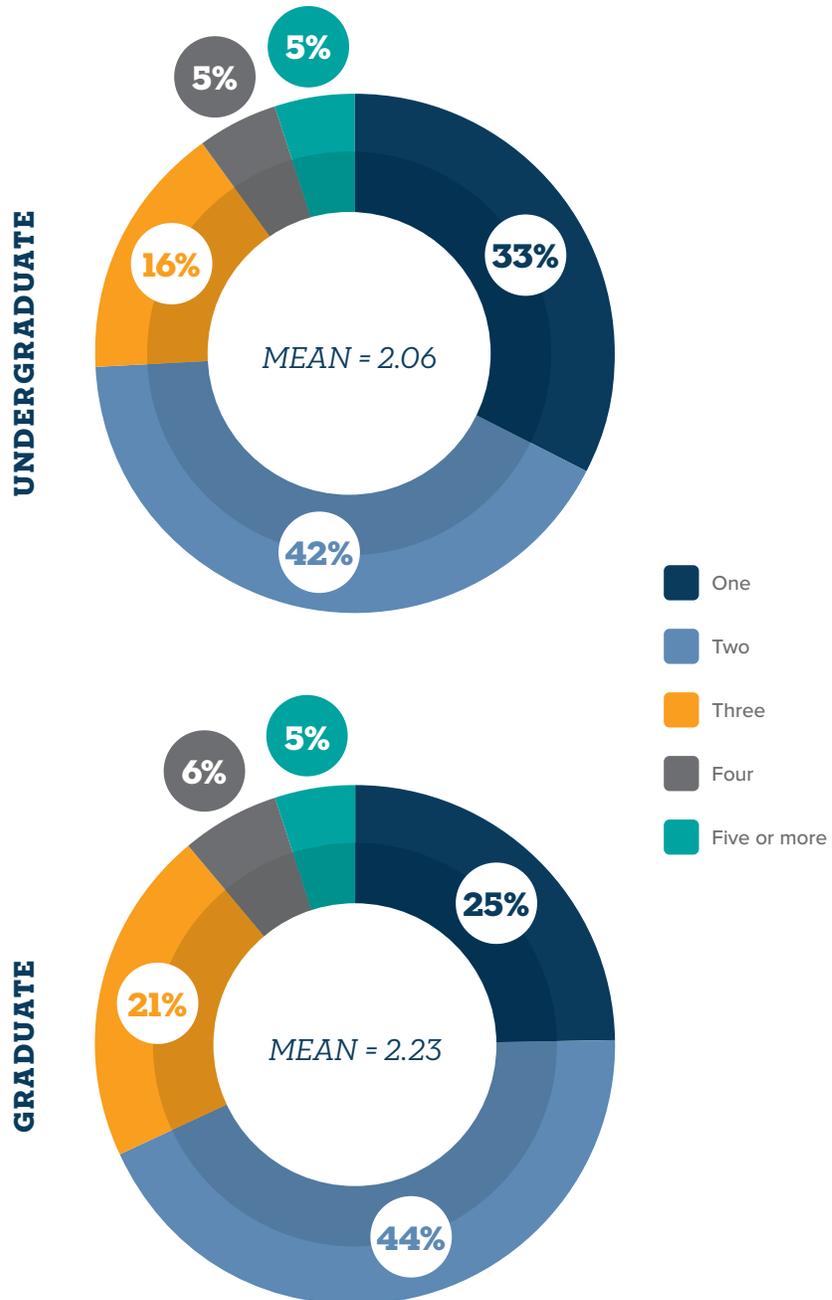
NUMBER OF SCHOOLS CONSIDERED

One way the online college students differ significantly from the traditional-aged college student is in how they choose an institution. Twenty percent of online college students consider only one college or university during their selection process, and half consider just two or three institutions; the average was 2.88 colleges or universities considered (2.79 undergraduate and 3.02 graduate). This indicates either that students do research and narrow down their consideration set before seriously pursuing their education, or they do not have the time to research more institutions and simply reach out to as many as they feel they are able to reach under time constraints.

**BESIDES THE SCHOOL IN WHICH YOU ENROLLED,
HOW MANY OTHER SCHOOLS DID YOU CONSIDER?**



OF THE SCHOOLS YOU CONSIDERED, HOW MANY DID YOU CONTACT OR REQUEST INFORMATION FROM?



SECTION 3:

ENROLLING THE ONLINE COLLEGE STUDENT

SPEED OF DECISION MAKING

Online college students are expecting better and faster customer service. Approximately half (49%) of undergraduate online college students enroll in the first institution to respond back to them after they inquire, and 57% of graduate students do as well — a significant increase from 2015, with 40% of undergraduate and 49% of graduate students enrolling in the first institution to respond back to them.

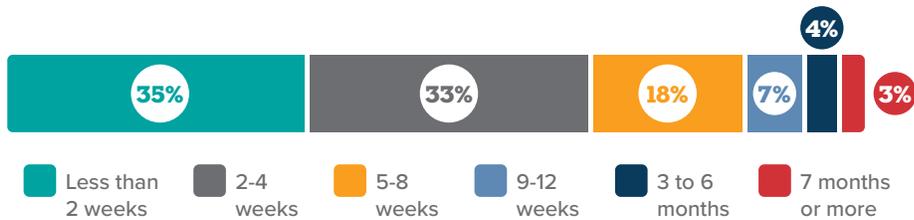
When asked how quickly they would like a school to respond to their inquiry, 94% feel within two days is sufficient. Thirty percent would like a response within 24 hours even if that is on a weekend, and an additional 27% would like a response the next business day. Only 10% are seeking a response within an hour of inquiry. These sentiments appear mostly unchanged from 2012.

What does appear to have changed significantly is the speed at which students are making their decisions. Sixty-eight percent of online college students are submitting their applications within four weeks of starting their search for an online program, up from 40% in 2015. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of current online students note that they enrolled in their first class within four weeks of submitting their application, indicating that the majority of online students went from starting their search to being enrolled in a two- to three-month time span. In 2013, by contrast, 48% of students had a search-to-enrollment time of more than three months.

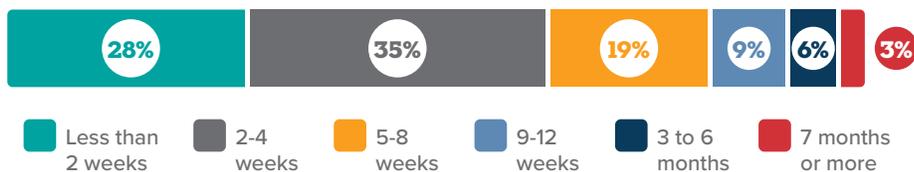
Percent of Respondents

Did you enroll in the school that got back to you first with the information you requested?	Undergraduate		Graduate	
	2015	2016	2015	2016
Yes	40%	49%	49%	57%
No	35%	32%	32%	29%
N/A – I only contacted one school	25%	18%	20%	14%

HOW LONG DID IT TAKE YOU FROM THE TIME YOU FIRST STARTED YOUR SEARCH FOR AN ONLINE PROGRAM TO COMPLETING YOUR APPLICATION?



AFTER SUBMITTING YOUR APPLICATION, HOW LONG DID IT TAKE TO ENROLL IN YOUR FIRST CLASS?

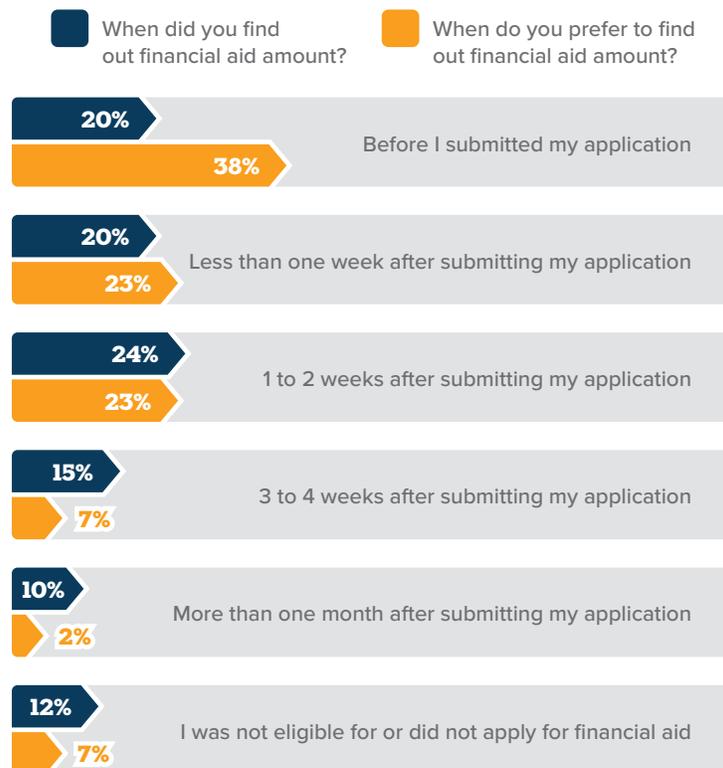


FINANCIAL AID & TRANSFER CREDIT DECISION TIMELINES

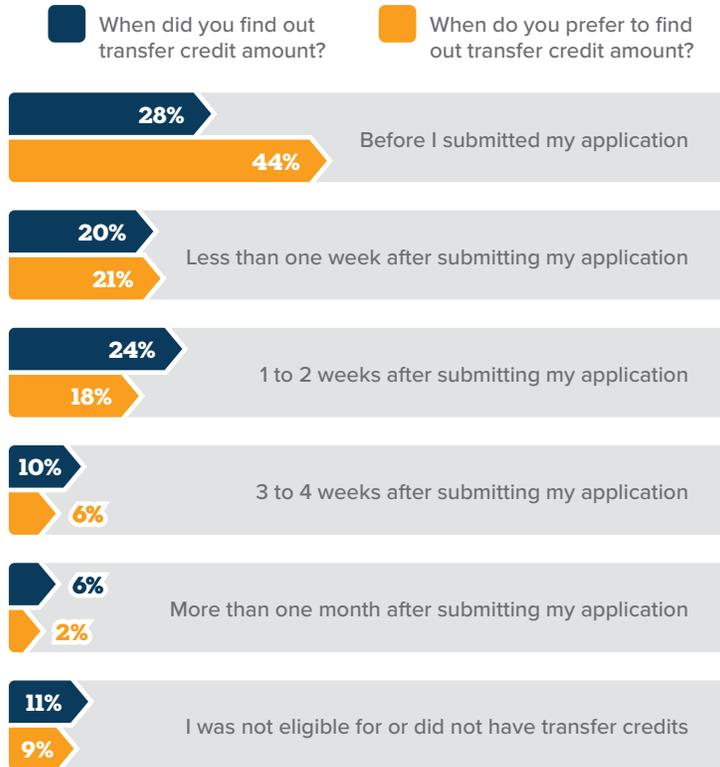
Unsurprisingly, given how quickly prospective online students are searching for and applying to a school, they are looking for “rapid” feedback on financial aid and transfer credit decisions. More than one-third (38%) are looking for a decision on financial aid before they even submit their application, and one-quarter (23%) expect this decision less than a week after submitting their application. For transfer credit decisions, 44% prefer to hear before they submit their application, and an additional 21% expect to hear within a week of submitting their application. Given the number of students who bring transfer credit with them and how significantly this can affect their time to completion, it appears that transfer credit possibilities are even more important than financial aid considerations.

Despite their preference for quick information, these students actually received vastly different service, with just less than half of schools being able to meet these preferred deadlines.

FINANCIAL AID TIMELINE



TRANSFER CREDIT TIMELINE



RECOMMENDATION

Cost and speed to completion are important selection criteria, so it's not surprising that online students want a quick decision on financial aid and transfer credits. Institutions should streamline these processes to better serve the online student and perhaps even gain a competitive advantage.

SECTION 4:

FINANCING ONLINE EDUCATION

PAYING FOR ONLINE PROGRAMS

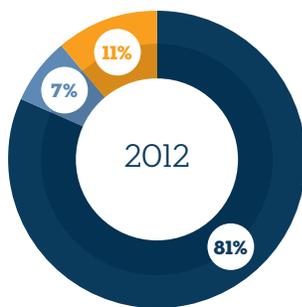
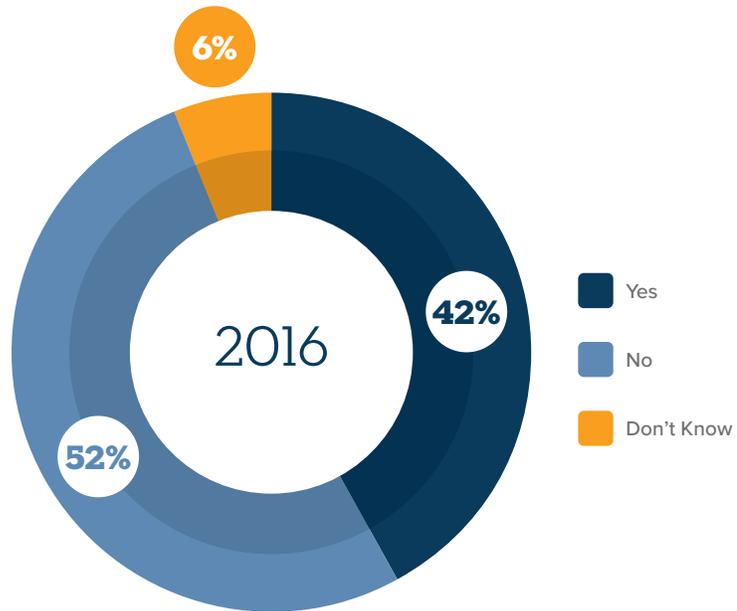
Online students use a variety of methods to pay for their online coursework, including their own personal funds (44%), student loans (38%), and government grants (29%). One in five students (20%) also utilize tuition benefits offered by their employer, although 42% of employers offer the benefit. Although most funding sources appear to be stable over time, the decrease in tuition reimbursement has decreased significantly, with 81% of employers offering the benefit in 2012 compared to 42% in 2016.

Institutions are offering ways to help ease the tuition burden on online students by offering tuition payment plans (41%), scholarships (36%), and tuition rebates (23%). This is slightly out of line with student preferences as students feel scholarships (35%) or a free course (18%) are the most attractive ways to influence their decision on where to attend.

Did you receive any of the following from the school in which you enrolled as part of your tuition package? <i>(Select all)</i>	Percent of Respondents
Tuition payment plan	41%
Scholarships	36%
Tuition rebate	23%
Free textbooks	19%
Free courses	15%
Free technology equipment (computer, iPad, tablet, etc.)	7%

Which would be the most attractive way a school could influence you to select it over another school?	Percent of Respondents
Scholarships	35%
Free course	18%
Tuition rebate	16%
Tuition payment plan	13%
Free textbooks	10%
Free technology equipment (computer, iPad, tablet, etc.)	8%

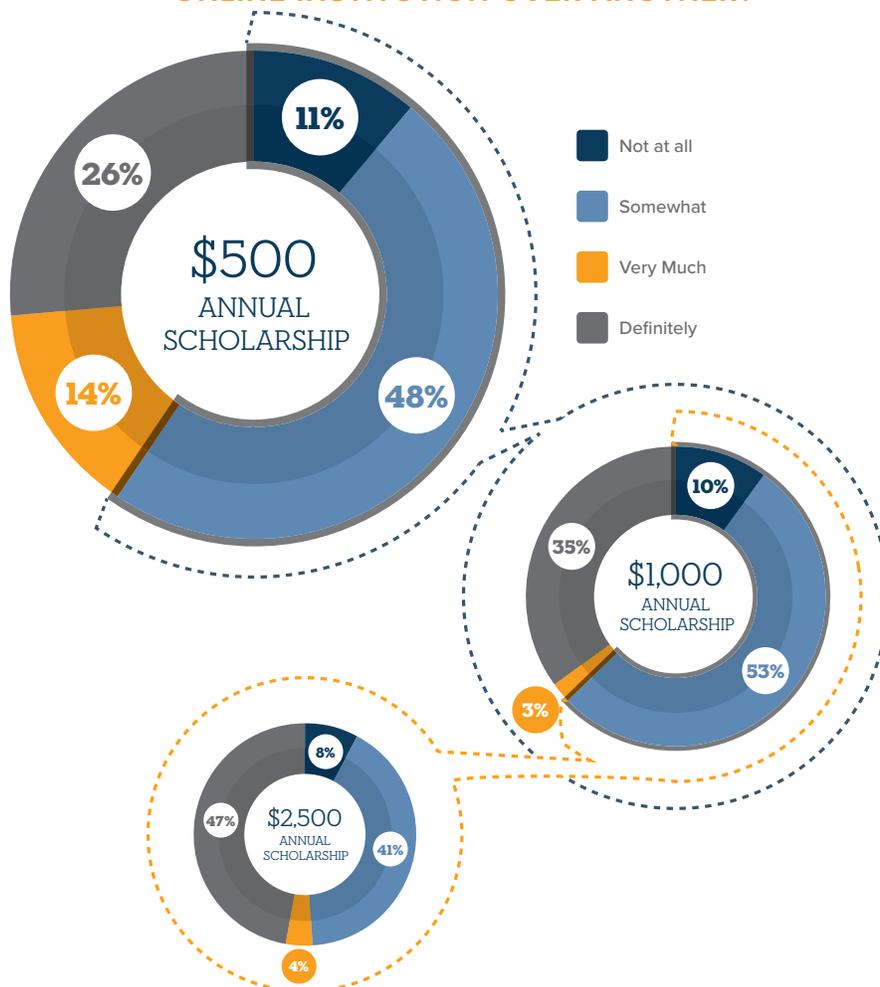
DOES YOUR EMPLOYER OFFER TUITION REIMBURSEMENT?



THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOLARSHIPS

With 44% of students using personal funds to help pay for their online degree program, scholarships can have an impact on student decision-making. Even a relatively small scholarship of \$500 annually would “very much” or “definitely” sway 40% of students to enroll in one college or university over another. Among those who would not be influenced by the \$500 annual scholarship, 38% “very much” or “definitely” would be swayed by a \$1,000 annual scholarship, or 22% of the overall population. Finally, among those who would reject the \$1,000 annual scholarship, 51% “very much” or “definitely” would be swayed by a \$2,500 annual scholarship, or 19% of the overall population. Only 19% of the overall population, therefore, could not be swayed by an annual scholarship of \$2,500 or less to choose one institution over another for their online studies.

TO WHAT EXTENT WOULD A _____ ANNUAL SCHOLARSHIP HAVE SWAYED YOU TO ENROLL IN ONE ONLINE INSTITUTION OVER ANOTHER?



RECOMMENDATION

Because cost is a primary concern of students, schools should seriously consider strategies to manage price, including lowering tuition or eliminating fees. Even nominal tactics to demonstrate savings can have an impact.

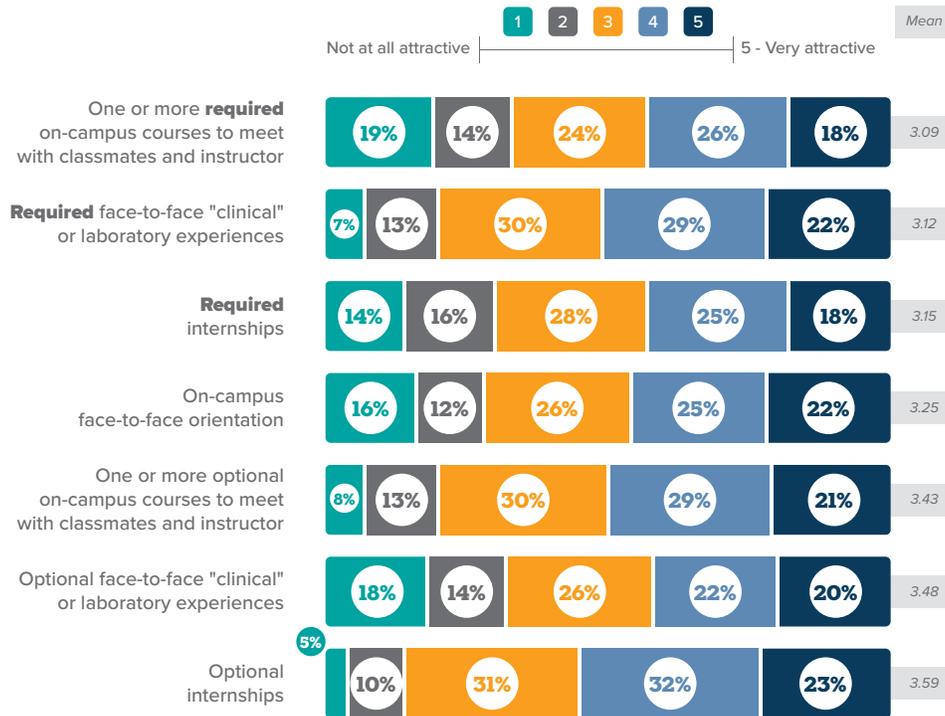
SECTION 5:

TEACHING THE ONLINE COLLEGE STUDENT

FEATURES OF ONLINE PROGRAMS

Although the convenience of learning online is one of the modality's biggest appeals, some online students are attracted to hands-on learning opportunities through internships and clinical experiences. Online students rated seven possible course features on a one-to-five scale based on their attractiveness, with five being the most attractive. Optional internships are seen as the most attractive feature rated, followed closely by optional clinical or lab experiences and optional on-campus courses during their online program. When similar features are made compulsory, they become less attractive to online students.

HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE ATTRACTIVENESS OF THE FOLLOWING FEATURES OF SOME ONLINE PROGRAMS:



FEATURES OF ONLINE CLASSES

Respondents were asked three questions about the features of the most recent online course they completed. Eighty-two percent preferred assignments in written versus audio format, and 78% preferred frequent, short quizzes over less frequent exams. Fifty-nine percent preferred assignments due at the end of the week rather than scattered throughout the week.

ONLINE, ON CAMPUS, OR HYBRID

Online education has undoubtedly expanded access to higher education to populations that could not have previously studied in a traditional classroom setting. Up to 50% of online college students would not have, probably would not have, or are unsure whether they would have attended their current program if the program were not offered online. Of the 3.5 million current online students⁵, that would equate to as many as 1.75 million fewer students in higher education currently. We estimate that if those students did not have access to online higher education, there would be more than 5 million fewer graduates over the past decade.

Hybrid programs remain a strong option for institutions that are unsure if they can commit to developing fully online programs. It is also a viable option in itself. Many schools offer both hybrid and fully online programs to have the greatest appeal to the largest proportion of prospective students. Sixty-three percent of online students possibly would consider or definitely would consider a hybrid version of their program if a fully online version were not offered.

STUDENT-TO-STUDENT INTERACTION

Although taking their courses virtually, engagement with classmates is seen as important or very important to 45% of online college students. When online students were asked about possible ways to stimulate engagement in an online class, message board discussions rose to the top of the list, followed by group projects, and having a “partner;” these findings are not significantly different than those from 2015.

Please rank order the following methods that online courses often use to get students to “engage” with each other as most attractive to you. <i>(With 1 being the most attractive)</i>	Mean score
Posting to online message boards	2.18
Commenting on other posts on message boards	3.02
Doing group projects	3.63
Being assigned a "partner" in your class	4.06
Social media groups (e.g., Facebook group)	4.59
Simulations	5.20
Blogging	5.50
Something else	7.82

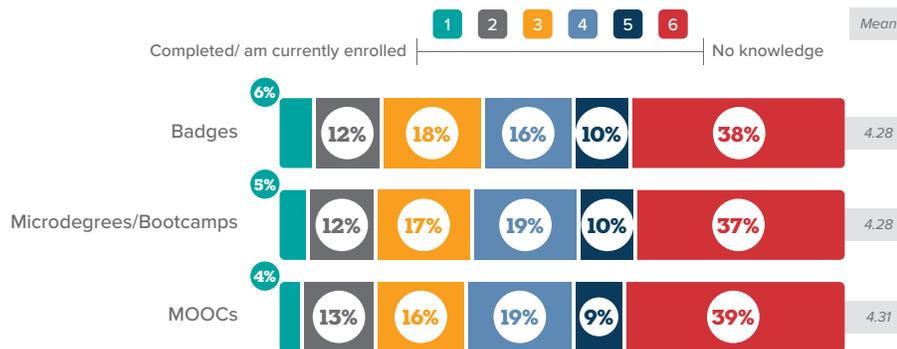
RECOMMENDATION

Without required face-to-face interaction, instructors and course designers need to focus on finding and designing course activities to enable students to engage with each other.

ALTERNATIVE LEARNING PATHS

“Alternative credentials” are a new way for students, either online or face-to-face, to enter or re-enter higher education as they look to address some of the top barriers associated with higher education: time, cost, and access. In this year’s survey, online college students were asked about badges, MOOCs, and microdegrees and bootcamps. Across all three of these alternative credentials, awareness was evenly split into three groups: One-third had no knowledge about these alternatives, one-third had minimal knowledge about them, and one-third were familiar or very familiar with these emerging paths.

HOW FAMILIAR ARE YOU WITH THE FOLLOWING “ALTERNATIVE CREDENTIALS”?



Fifty-five percent of online college students who did have some level of familiarity with these alternative credentials reported that they did not consider them during their most recent search for an online degree program. Lack of information about these emerging pathways to education is the most commonly cited reason for not considering one of these options rather than a degree program, with approximately half of online students reporting that they did not have information about alternative credentials. It appears that lack of information is a barrier that can be overcome; the majority of online students would consider one of these paths in the future, assuming they could research more about these alternative credential options.

RECOMMENDATION

Alternative pathways are becoming an increasingly viable option for students. Because these nascent credentials are not well-known, institutions should consider adopting these programs and then clearly communicating what they are and what value they bring to potential students.

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

Competency-based education (CBE) is also a topic of much conversation among higher education professionals, and that level of conversation has had an impact on online students. More than 90% of online learners say they would definitely consider or maybe consider a CBE program in the future. Unlike alternative credentials, the willingness to consider CBE comes from a larger number of online students possessing some level of familiarity with CBE. Thirty-six percent are either very familiar or currently enrolled in or recently completed a CBE program, with just one in five students (20%) having never heard of CBE. While the questions about awareness were asked slightly differently in 2014, these numbers do show a growing level of familiarity with CBE, as one-third (34%) of online students had never heard of CBE and just 20% were very familiar with it in 2014.

Are you familiar with competency-based learning?	Percent of Respondents
Yes, I enrolled in or completed a competency-based learning program	14%
Yes, I am very familiar with competency-based learning	22%
Yes, I am somewhat familiar with competency-based learning	25%
I have heard of competency-based learning but I am not familiar with it	20%
No, I have not heard of competency-based learning	20%

THE ROLE OF MOBILE IN ONLINE LEARNING

Mobile devices (phone or tablet) are not only used by online students to search for colleges and universities, but many also use these devices as an educational tool. Still, despite the popularity of these devices, they are not predominantly used for coursework. Ninety-eight percent of online students own some form of smartphone or tablet yet just one-quarter of current or former online students completed all or most of their online courses exclusively on a mobile device, with an additional one-third (34%) completing some of their coursework via mobile. Two-thirds (67%) of prospective online students expressed interest in using their mobile device during their online studies. Opportunity for mobile learning is expected to continue growing given that almost all online students own a mobile device.

The tasks for which students most often use their mobile device are to complete required course readings (55%), communicate with their professor (50%), and complete research for their reports (44%). These tasks are all performed at a relatively equal rate and are tasks for which students typically use their devices (reading, email and chat, or internet usage). Significant opportunity exists to develop mobile-ready courses.

For what course-related activities did you use a mobile device? (Select all that apply)	Percent of Respondents
Reading required materials	55%
Communication with professors	50%
Research for reports	44%
Communication with other students	41%
Accessing my college's LMS (such as Blackboard)	40%
Completing assignments	39%
Required lectures	33%
Something else	1%

SECTION 6:

DEMOGRAPHICS

The *Online College Students 2012* report stated that, “online college students are typically Caucasian females about 33 years of age . . . who have a total family income of about \$66,500⁶. They work full time for an employer who offers tuition reimbursement.” In 2016, online college students are typically white females about 31 years of age who have a total family income of about \$55,000. They work full time for an employer that likely is not offering tuition reimbursement. While the broad brushstrokes remain the same, there have been some interesting demographic shifts over the past five years.

The demographic shift amongst online college students is connected to the large shift toward younger students, as noted earlier in this report. Online students are increasingly single, earning less, and have fewer children. These shifts are most pronounced at the undergraduate level.

The following tables present findings from the 2016 survey as well as from the 2012-2013 surveys when we first asked the specific question. There are several instances where these data are significantly different from the past surveys. A difference of 10 percentage points or greater is considered significant. For a detailed explanation of how the significance was determined, see the section below.

Percent of Respondents

What is your gender?	Undergraduate		Graduate	
	2012	2016	2012	2016
Male	26%	30%	34%	34%
Female	74%	69%	66%	66%
Prefer not to say	0%	1%	0%	0%

Percent of Respondents

What is your marital status?	Undergraduate		Graduate	
	2013	2016	2013	2016
Married/partnered	51%	43%	72%	58%
Single	46%	56%	26%	41%
Prefer not to say	3%	1%	2%	1%

Percent of Respondents

How many children under the age of 18 do you have?	Undergraduate		Graduate	
	2013	2016	2013	2016
None	50%	58%	36%	45%
1	21%	22%	20%	26%
2	17%	13%	22%	19%
3 or more	11%	6%	21%	9%
Prefer not to say	1%	1%	1%	1%

What was your total household income?	Percent of Respondents			
	Undergraduate		Graduate	
	2012	2016	2012	2016
Under \$25,000	18%	21%	4%	14%
\$25,000 to \$39,999	20%	21%	8%	12%
\$40,000 to \$54,999	15%	13%	14%	11%
\$55,000 to \$69,999	12%	14%	13%	12%
\$70,000 to \$84,999	10%	10%	13%	14%
\$85,000 to \$99,999	7%	5%	12%	11%
\$100,000 to \$114,999	6%	5%	9%	8%
\$115,000 to \$129,999	2%	1%	5%	4%
\$130,000 to \$149,999	2%	1%	4%	4%
\$150,000 or more	4%	3%	10%	7%
Prefer not to say	5%	5%	8%	4%

At the time you were last enrolled, what was your employment status?	Percent of Respondents			
	Undergraduate		Graduate	
	2012	2016	2012	2016
Employed full time	48%	45%	73%	67%
Employed part time	24%	25%	16%	16%
Not employed	27%	26%	11%	16%
Retired	2%	2%	1%	1%
Prefer not to say	NA	3%	NA	1%

What is your race or ethnicity?	Percent of Respondents			
	Undergraduate		Graduate	
	2012	2016	2012	2016
African American	18%	13%	18%	11%
Asian or Pacific Islander	5%	9%	13%	10%
Hispanic	8%	11%	9%	10%
Native American	1%	1%	0%	1%
White	64%	64%	57%	66%
Other	2%	1%	1%	1%
Prefer not to say	2%	2%	2%	1%

Highest level of education	Percent of Respondents	
	Undergraduate	Graduate
High school diploma/GED	29%	15%
One or two years of college, no degree	23%	8%
Associate degree	18%	9%
Three or four years of college, no degree	8%	4%
Bachelor's degree	16%	39%
Some graduate courses, no degree	3%	4%
Master's degree	2%	18%
Some doctoral courses, no doctorate	0%	1%
Doctorate	1%	3%

Intended credential	Percent of Respondents
Associate degree program	18%
Bachelor's degree program	30%
Master's degree program	26%
Doctoral degree program	5%
Certificate program	18%
Licensure program	3%

METHODOLOGY

In spring 2016, Aslanian Market Research and Learning House conducted surveys with 1,500 individuals nationwide. Respondents were at least 18 years of age; had a minimum of a high school degree or equivalent; and were recently graduated, currently enrolled, or planned to enroll in the next 12 months in a fully online undergraduate or graduate degree, certificate, or licensure program.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, in the fall of 2014, graduate students represented 14% of the total college population but 26% of the online population. The sample for this survey was weighted to include approximately 40% graduate students to ensure a large enough sample for meaningful conclusions. The data are presented for both undergraduate and graduate students combined unless there were noteworthy differences.

Resolution Research of Denver, identified the sample of 1,500 respondents. The organization drew the sample from its actively managed, 100% market-research-only panel that represents the U.S. Census Bureau, which enables the selection of groups that prove difficult to source. Resolution Research has collected up to 250 behavioral and demographic data points on each consumer panelist, which allows it to target respondents for specific research objectives.

To recruit for this study, Resolution Research invited its panel of consumers from across the nation to participate in an online survey through custom email invitations. Invitations were sent randomly across the United States to reflect the basic population distribution targeting persons 18 years of age or older. Panelists were then allowed to participate in the study if they had participated in or were planning to enroll in a fully online degree, certificate, or licensing program.

Respondents hailed from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The states that represent 51% of the nation's population (according to the 2012 U.S. Census) represented 51% of the study's respondents. These states included California, New York, Florida, Colorado, Illinois, Texas, Georgia, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Ohio.

The National Center for Education Statistics IPEDS data show that in 2014, 2.8 million higher education students were enrolled in courses that were exclusively delivered via distance education⁷. Eduventures (2015) estimated the size of the wholly or majority online program market for the fall of 2014 to be 3.4 million students⁸. Based upon these findings, a sample of 1,500 represents approximate sampling error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level.

A similarly small margin of error was achieved in the 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015 survey; therefore, differences between these survey results over 6 percentage points may be significant. We only address differences between the surveys that are at least 10 percentage points to err on the side of caution. The margin of sampling error is greater for subgroups.

TECHNICAL NOTES

All percentages in this report have been rounded; therefore, the total percentage figure in a table may not add up to exactly 100. Further, if the total percentage is substantially more than 100, it is because the question allowed respondents to choose more than one option.

REFERENCES

REFERENCES

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3. Ibid.
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7. U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics.
8. Eduventures. (2015). Online education in 2015: Part one: Market dynamics and growth strategies. *Eduventures Insights: Online and Continuing Education, 1(1)*.

PARTNERS

The Learning House, Inc., through its proprietary cloud-based technology platform, helps colleges and universities create, manage, and grow high-quality online degree programs and courses. Partnering with more than 75 schools, Learning House enables institutions to efficiently and affordably achieve their online education goals. Services include product development and market research, marketing and lead generation, enrollment management, student retention, curriculum development and management, faculty training and professional development, learning management systems, and 24/7 technical support.

EducationDynamics is a proven leader in helping higher education institutions find, enroll, and retain students. The organization maintains its industry leadership through a deeply rooted philosophy of serving our schools best by serving students first. This commitment has been at the heart of its success since it began more than a decade ago, and it continues today as we proudly serve more than 1,200 colleges and universities of all types and sizes.

Aslanian Market Research (the market research unit of EducationDynamics) conducts market demand studies, institutional audits, program and marketing reviews, and professional development seminars and workshops for colleges and universities seeking information and data on how to expand adult and online student enrollments. Throughout the last 25 years, its staff has worked with hundreds of colleges and universities of all types — public, private, large, small, rural, suburban, and urban — in every region of the U.S. Its seminars have provided thousands of college administrators with practical, hands-on tactics that they can implement at their institutions at minimal cost for maximum impact.

REFERENCES

AUTHORS

Carol B. Aslanian is founder and president of Aslanian Market Research. She is a national authority on the characteristics and learning patterns of adult and post-traditional undergraduate and graduate students. She has made hundreds of presentations and has authored numerous articles and reports on the topic. For more than 20 years, she worked at the College Board in support of adult learning services. Ms. Aslanian has led market research projects for more than 300 colleges, universities, and educational agencies.

David L. Clinefelter is chief academic officer of Learning House. Prior to joining Learning House, he served as chief academic officer of for-profit, online universities Walden and Kaplan, and as president of Graceland University, an early innovator in online education.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION, CONTACT:

The Learning House, Inc.

(502) 589-9878

ksavinon@learninghouse.com

www.learninghouse.com

Aslanian Market Research

(201) 377-3321

caslanian@educationdynamics.com

www.aslanianmarketresearch.com

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