

# Prospective and Current Online Student Preferences

*Insights on the Elements That Make  
Online Programs Stand-Out for  
Students*

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# Today's experts



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# Get early access to RNL's upcoming research

RNL's 2024 Online Student Recruitment Report will be published May 1.

Scan this QR code to sign up to get early access to our 2024 online student survey findings.



## 2024 Online Student Recruitment Report

Key insights for enrollment leaders based on a survey of 1,500 prospective graduate students



# Fast Facts

## Online Students Choose Local

- **60%** of undergraduates only considered online programs within a 50-mile radius
- **24%** of all students considered an online program 100+ miles away

## Online Students Are Working

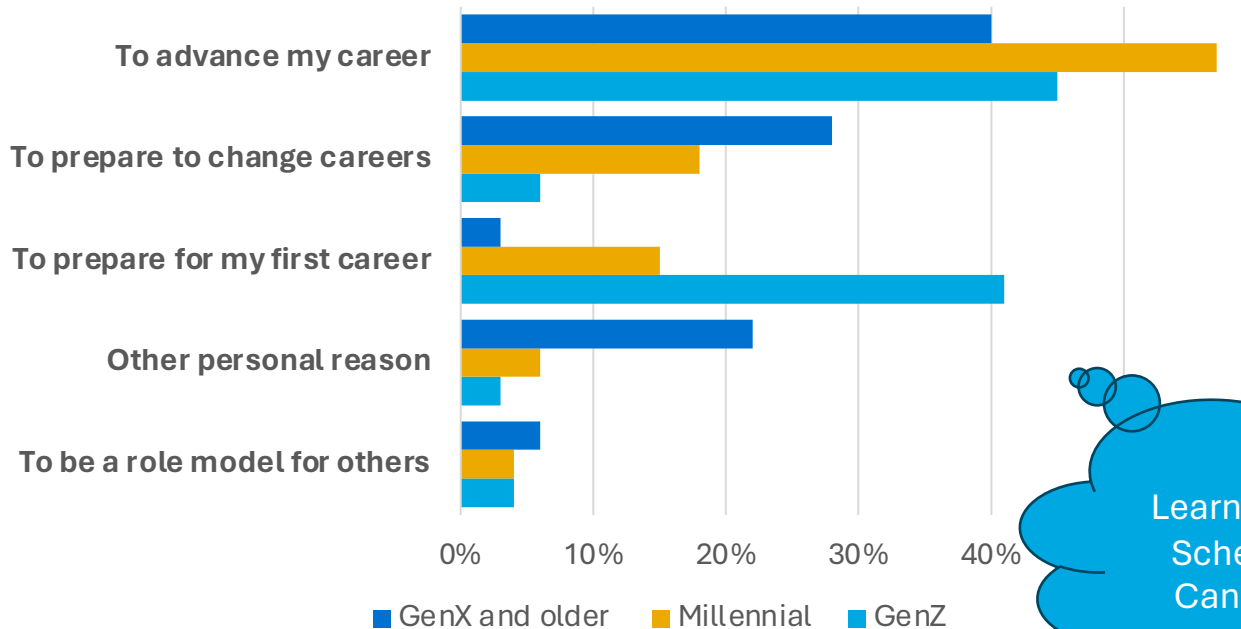
- **81%** of undergraduate students, and
- **88%** of graduate students were employed when they began considering online programs

## (Most) Online Students Consider Multiple Programs

- **65%** of Gen Z students applied to 2+ programs
- **62%** of Gen X students applied to only one program

# Online learners are focused on careers. Be sure online programs provide tangible skills

Why did you decide you wanted to earn a degree?

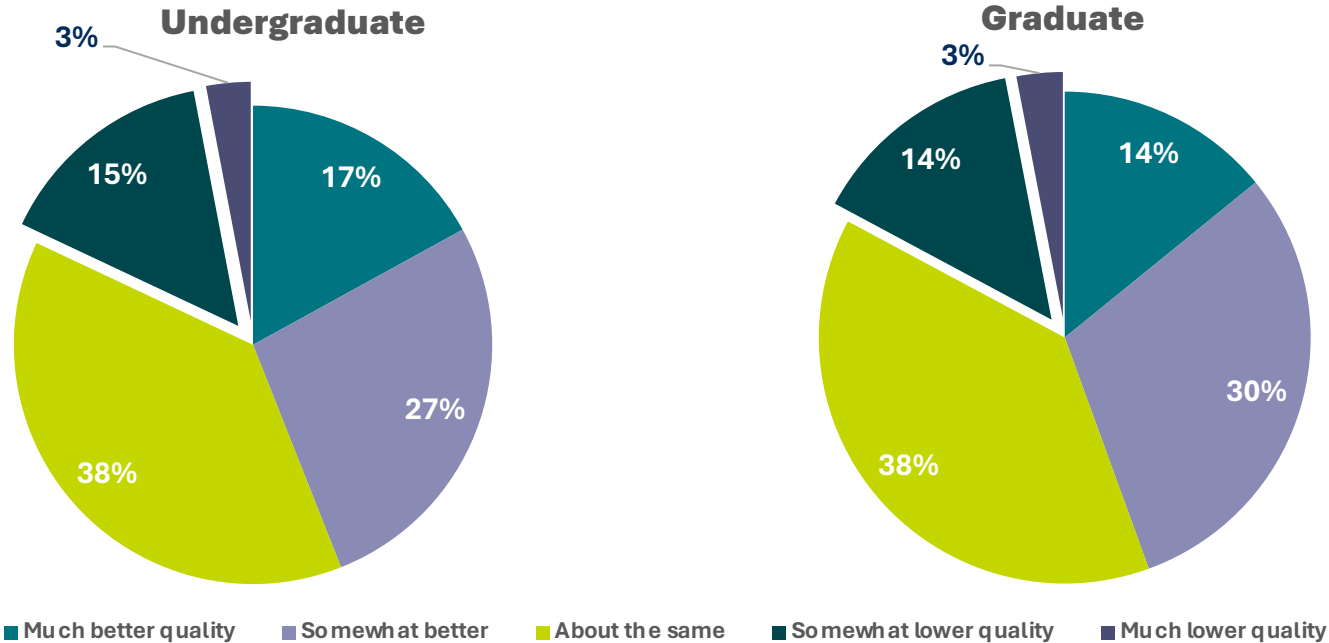


## Why online?

Learn at your own pace: 27%  
Scheduling flexibility: 26%  
Can study anywhere: 19%

# Most online learners think online is just as good as classroom. Be sure your programs measure up

How would you rate the quality of your online education experiences when compared with past classroom study?



# Why is online learning better than past classroom experiences?

- 1.Flexibility:** Online education allows students to complete assignments on their own time, providing more control over their schedules.
- 2.Direct Communication:** Students appreciate the ability to communicate with teachers without the presence of other students, allowing for more focused interactions.
- 3.Reduced Distractions:** Without the distractions of a physical classroom, students find it easier to concentrate and get work done efficiently.
- 4.Personalized Pace:** Online learning enables students to work at their own pace, leading to better comprehension and reduced anxiety.
- 5.Convenience:** The ability to access coursework from anywhere and at any time is seen as a major advantage, especially for those with busy schedules or work commitments.
- 6.Increased Engagement:** Some students find online classes to be more engaging and enjoyable, leading to better outcomes and a greater sense of accomplishment.
- 7.Accessibility:** Online education provides access to resources and materials that may not be readily available in traditional classroom settings, enhancing the learning experience.
- 8.Improved Learning Environment:** Students appreciate the privacy and comfort of learning from their own homes, which contributes to a more positive learning experience.

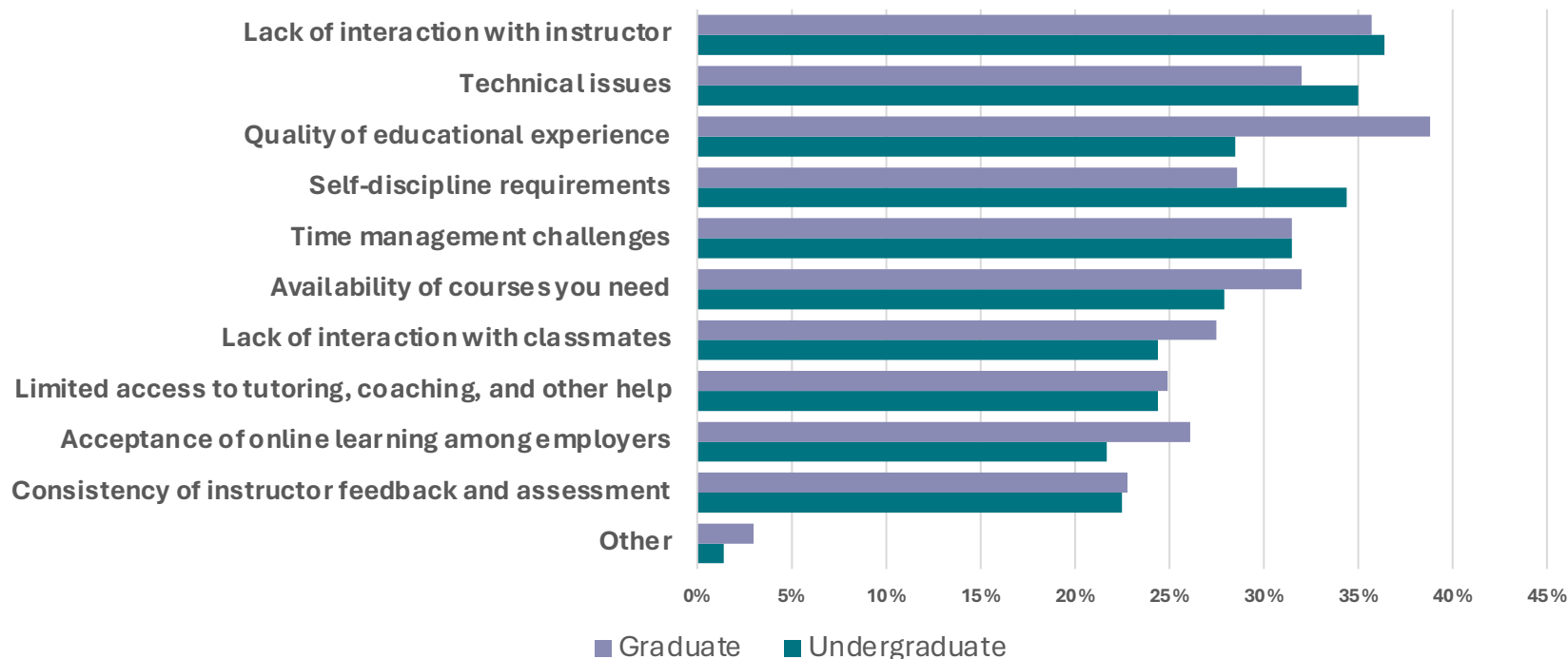
# Why is online learning not as good as past classroom experiences?

- 1.Lack of Personal Interaction:** Online education lacks the personal interaction of classrooms, leading to feelings of isolation and less meaningful connections with instructors and peers.
- 2.Difficulty Getting Help:** Some students find it challenging to get assistance from teachers or classmates when needed, leading to a sense of frustration and decreased learning efficacy.
- 3.Limited Accountability:** Without the structure and accountability provided by in-person classes, some students struggle to stay focused and motivated in online settings.
- 4.Technical Difficulties:** Online education may be hindered by technical issues such as glitchy websites or unreliable internet connections, causing disruptions to the learning process.
- 5.Cheating:** The online environment may make it easier for students to cheat, resulting in decreased learning outcomes and academic integrity.
- 6.Lack of Hands-On Learning:** Certain subjects, such as lab-based or hands-on activities, are difficult to replicate in an online format, leading to a loss of critical learning experiences.
- 7.Difficulty Communicating:** Some students find it challenging to communicate effectively with instructors or classmates in an online setting, hindering their ability to ask questions or participate in discussions.
- 8.Less Effective Learning Experience:** Overall, students may perceive online education as providing a less effective learning experience compared to in-person instruction due to the aforementioned limitations.



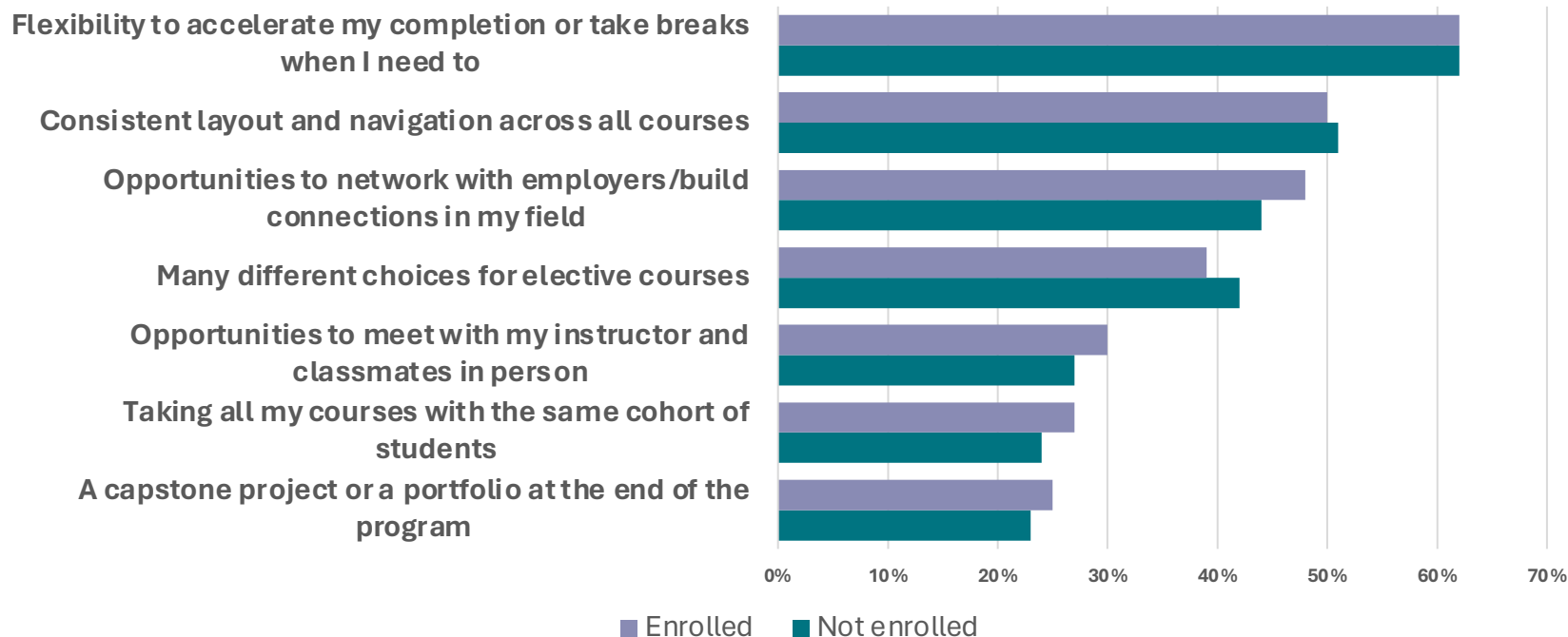
# Concerns focus on interaction and technical issues. Nothing is more important to address

What are your greatest concerns about online study?



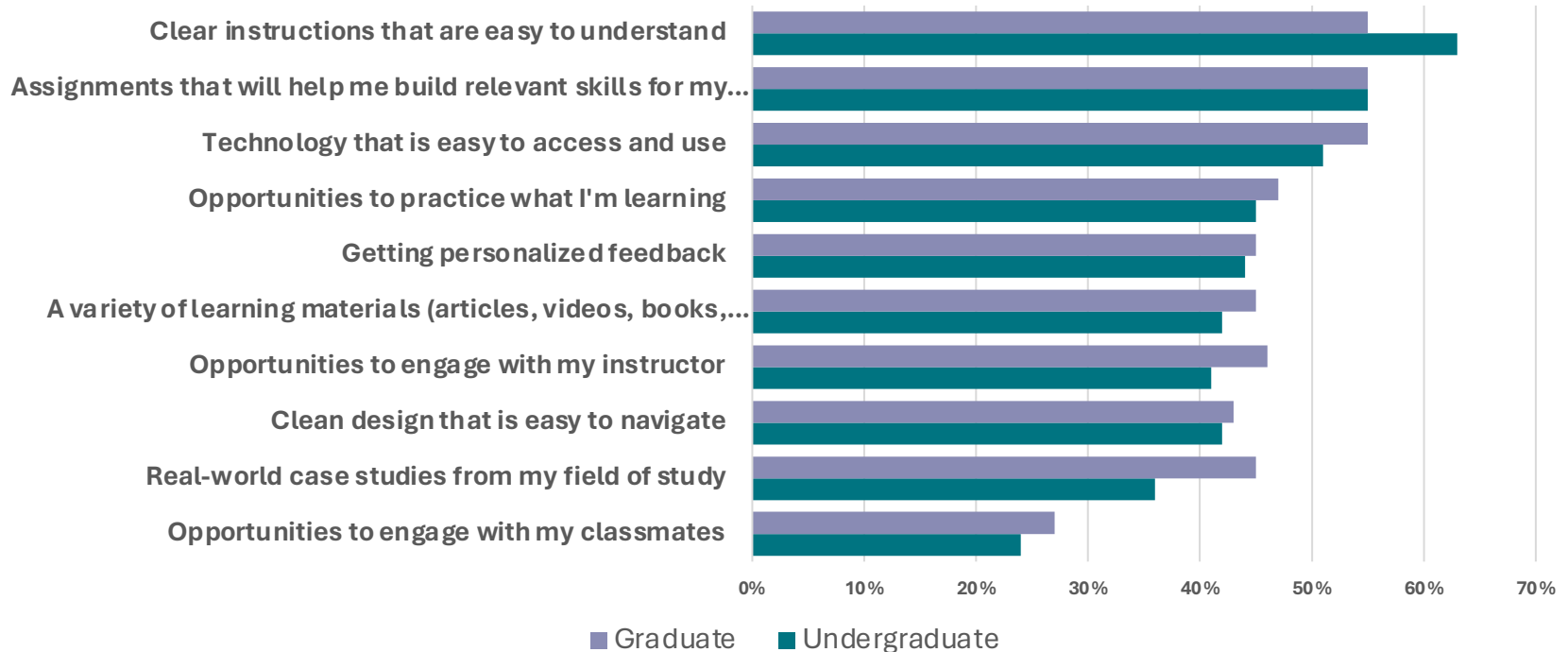
# Online students want flexibility in their progression **BUT** consistency in their courses.

What characteristics do you value most in an online program?



# Online students see clear instructions, career-relevance, and easy to use technology.

What elements are important for you in online courses?



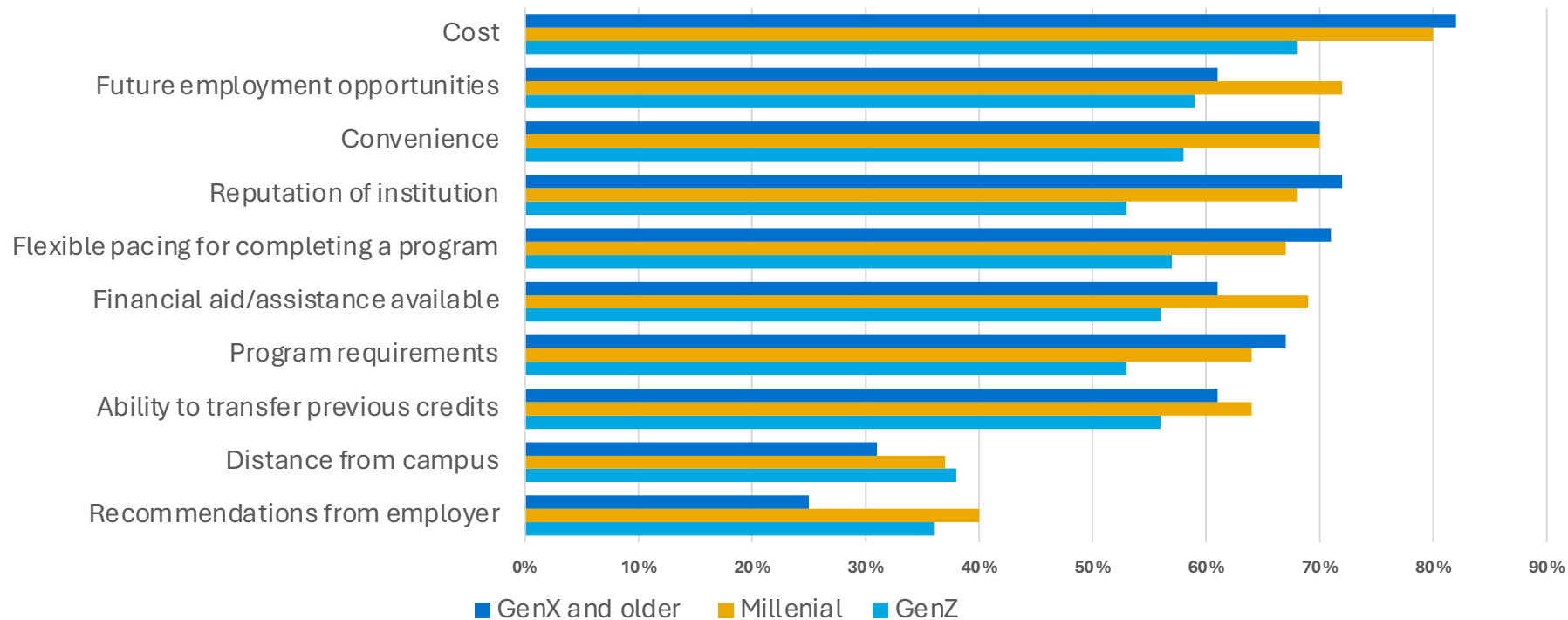
# Access to tech support and career development are more important than academic support

Which of the following support services are most important to know are available in your online program?



# Messaging – and curriculum – should focus on cost, employment, and convenience above all else

How important are each of the following in your enrollment decision?



# Business and computer science/IT programs lead online student demand

What is the subject/major of your online program?

Top 15 Online Bachelor's Majors	
Business Administration	16.0%
Computer Science/Information Science	5.9%
Psychology	5.3%
Accounting	4.5%
Criminal Justice	4.4%
Biology	4.3%
Art	3.9%
Nursing	3.7%
Healthcare Administration	3.2%
Computer Engineering	2.1%
Finance	1.9%
Communications	1.8%
Business Analytics	1.7%
Management	1.7%
Marketing	1.5%
Computer Programming	1.5%
Early Childhood Education	1.5%
Engineering	1.5%

Top 15 Online Master's Majors	
Business Administration	19.3%
Accounting	4.0%
Computer Science/Information Science	3.7%
Educational/Higher Education Administration	3.4%
Psychology	3.3%
Nursing	3.0%
Business Analytics	3.0%
Artificial Intelligence	3.0%
Healthcare Administration	2.7%
Art	2.6%
Social Work	2.6%
Economics	2.4%
Human Resources Management	2.4%
Biology	2.1%
Finance	2.1%

# Online students enroll in programs offering accelerated courses.

Less than 30 percent of undergrads and 20 percent of grad students seek semester-length study. Growth programs must offer accelerated terms – and stackable courses.

TABLE 11: PREFERRED LENGTH OF COURSES

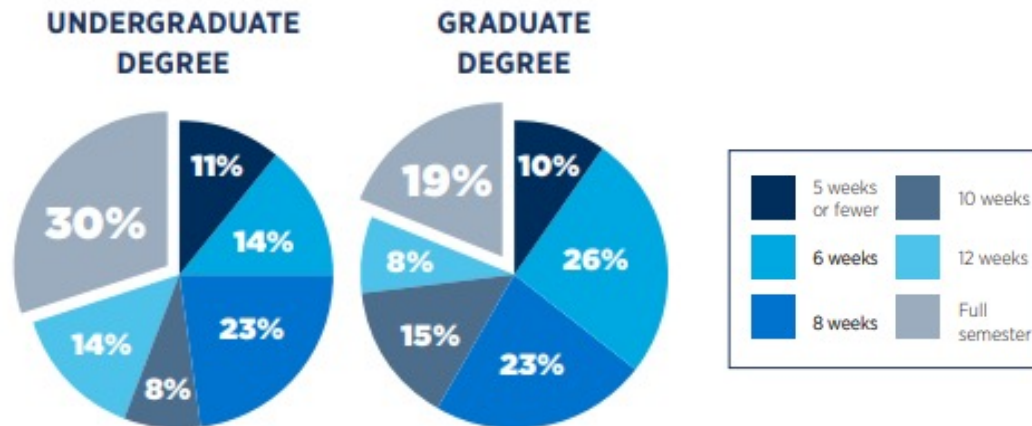
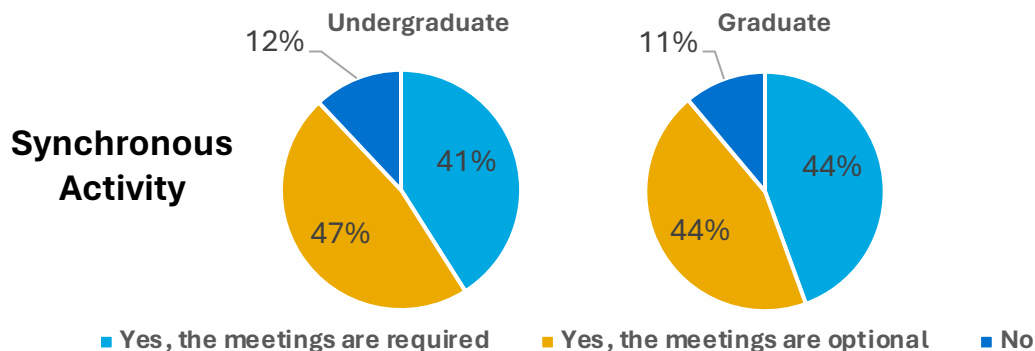
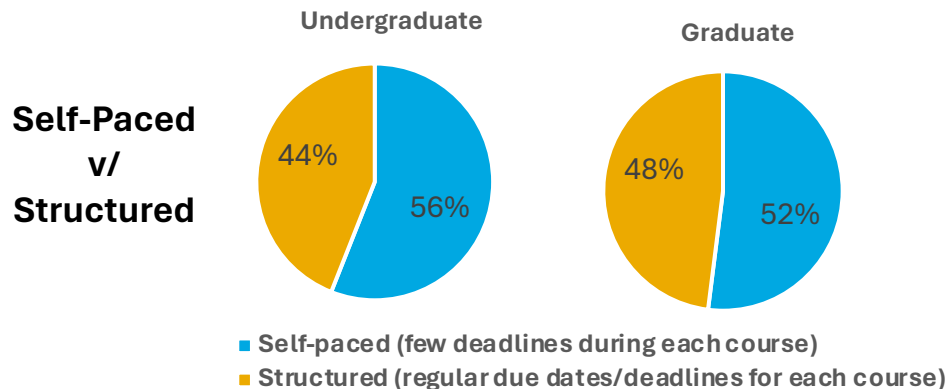


TABLE 12: PREFERRED NUMBER OF COURSES PER SEMESTER/TERM

	UNDER-GRADUATE DEGREE	GRADUATE DEGREE
1	17%	21%
2	44%	41%
3	21%	23%
4 or more	17%	15%

# Online students do not ALWAYS seek self-paced programs, and optional synchronous convenings are likely attractive.

Online students want both self-paced and structured elements, and express interest in synchronous convenings (which should be optional.) The ability to connect synchronously alleviates some concerns about online study, although once enrolled these convenings are rarely accessed.



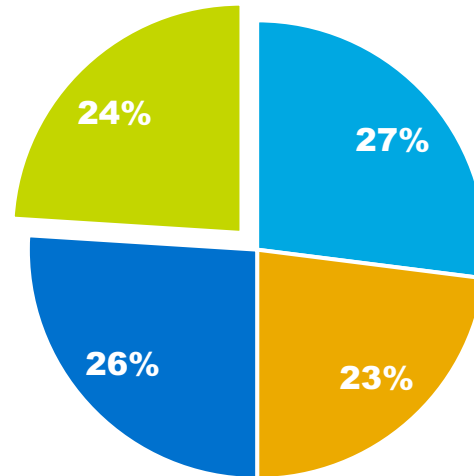


# Online students expect a speedy response both initially and throughout their experience.

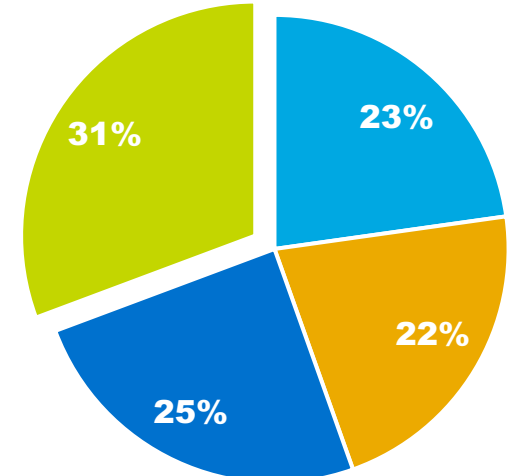
Students (both young or old) expect response times akin to any other service they access. Responding within minutes (or hours) is essential in both satisfying the student AND ensuring they have a positive attitude about your program. This significantly increases the likelihood of enrollment.

## Expected Response Time

Undergraduate



Graduate



■ Immediately

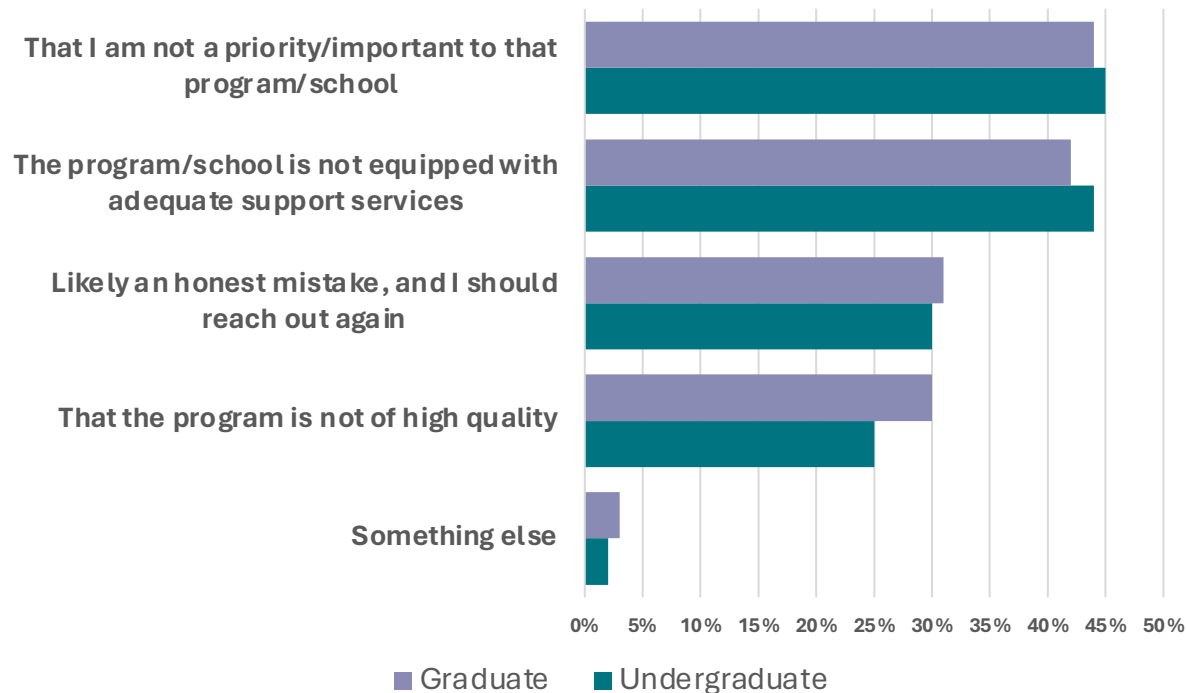
■ Within 3 hours

■ Within 24 hours

■ More than 24 hours

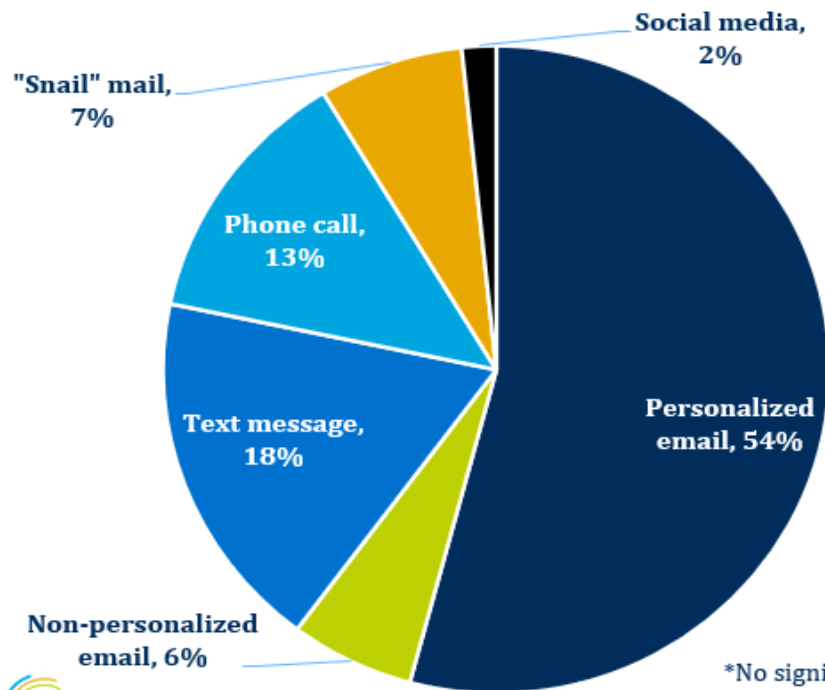
# The best marketing will be stopped in its tracks by ineffective follow up.

Response times that take longer than expectations result in diminished interest and create negative impressions. Only one in three will completely “forgive” a slow response, while nearly half will think you don’t value them.

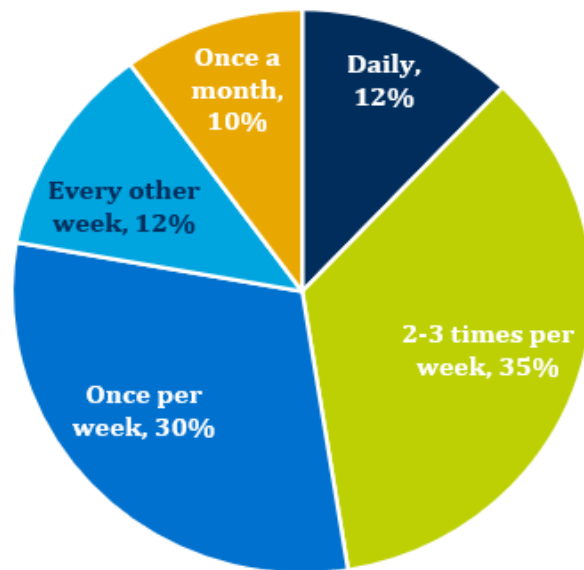


# Online students expect regular contact from the programs and the prefer personalized email.

## Preferred Method of Follow Up\*



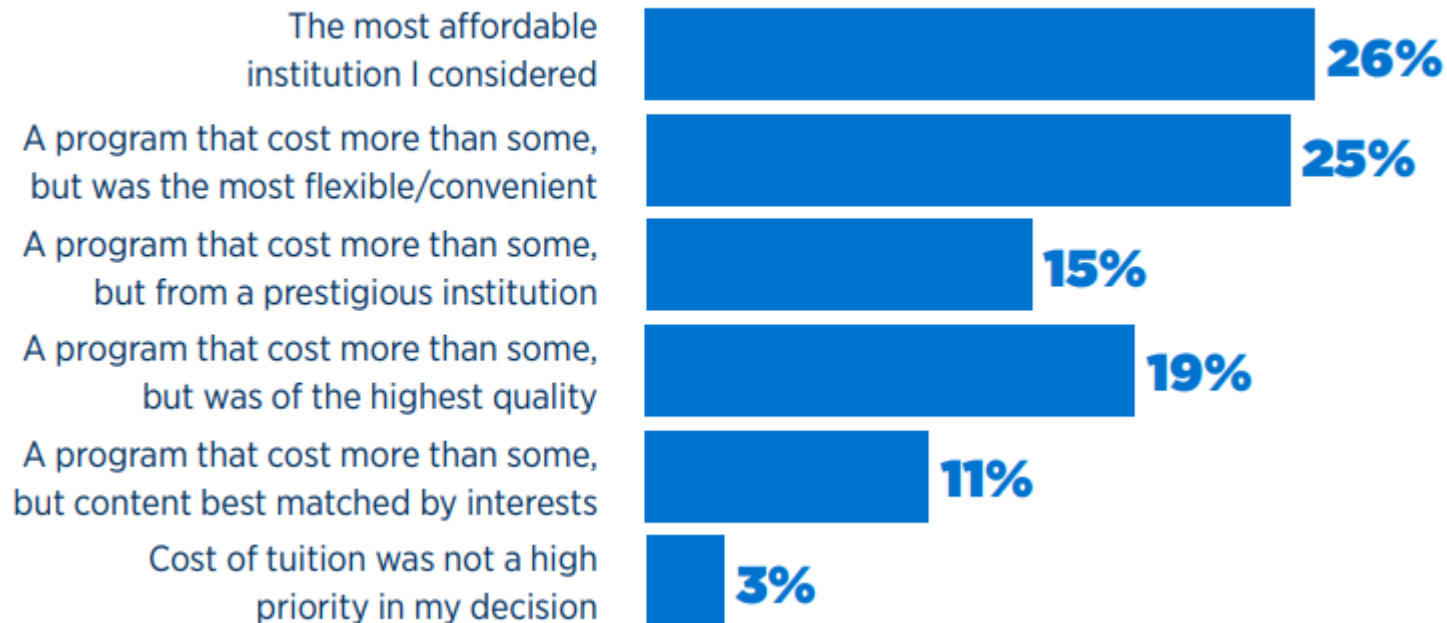
## Preferred Frequency of Follow Up\*



\*No significant difference in preferences by level of study

# Adult students will enroll in more expensive programs, most frequently when they are flexible.

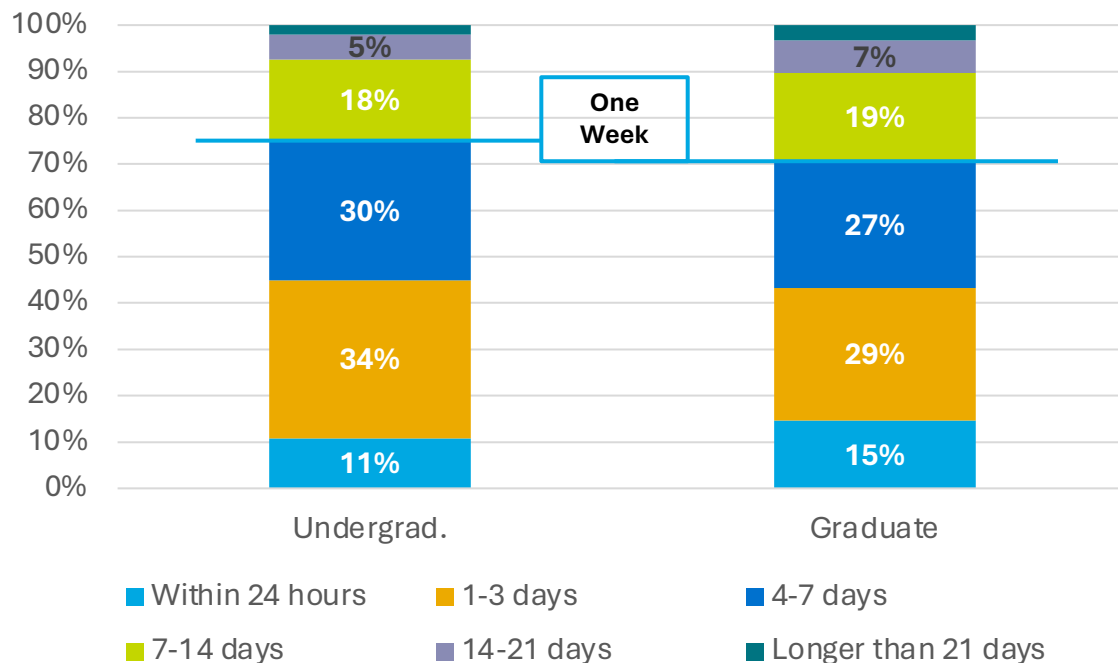
## Balancing cost and other factors



# Online students expect a speedy admissions (and apply to more than 1 program).

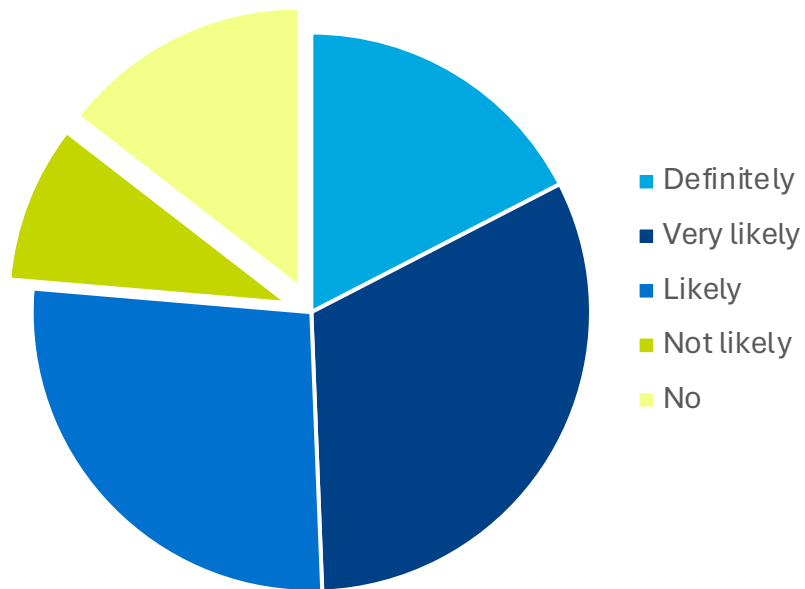
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## Expected Admissions Timeline

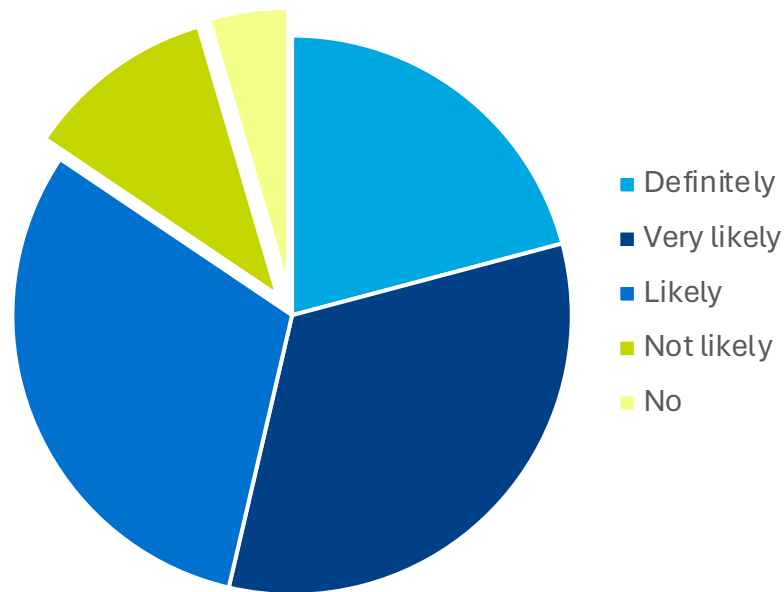


# Why is all of this SO important?

**Likelihood of Enrolling:**  
First Program to Respond



**Likelihood of Enrolling:**  
First Program to Admit



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**Thank You**





## **Additional Data Points**

# Student Expectations have shifted. Are you ready?



**Need for  
speed**



**Rise in  
consumer  
mentalities**



**“Me”centric  
view of the  
world**



**Meaningful  
connections**

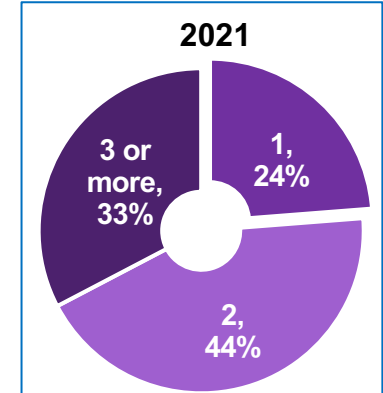
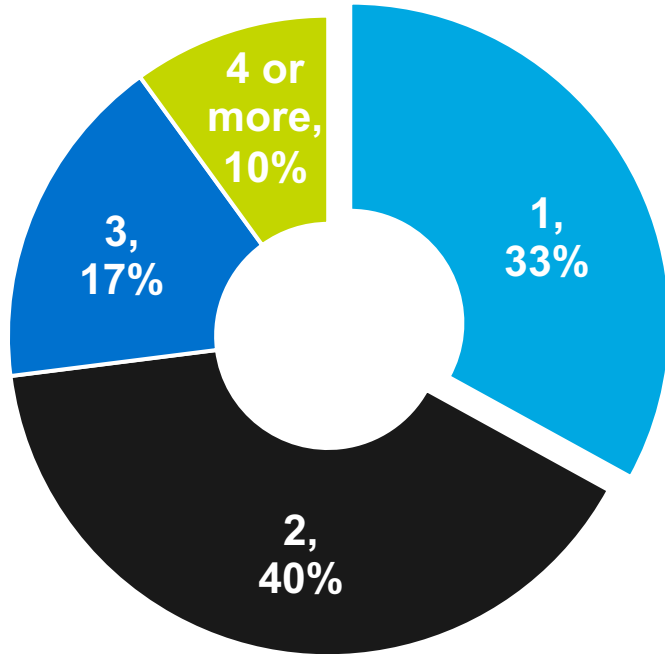
**NETFLIX**



**amazon**

# You are actively competing with more than inertia for graduate students.

## To how many schools/programs did/will you apply?



Number of schools applied to by format

NUMBER OF SCHOOLS	ALL ONLINE	PARTIALLY ONLINE	ALL CLASSROOM
1	27%	40%	32%
2	44%	39%	34%
3	20%	13%	17%
4 or more	9%	7%	17%