RNL®

2023 Graduate Student Recruitment Report

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

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Introduction

Graduate Education Remains a Path to Growth and Stability

In a strange divergence from the rest of the higher education sector, the last three years have been a remarkably good period for American graduate education. Since fall 2020, the National Student Clearinghouse reported year-over-year growth for every semester until fall 2022. While fall 2022 reported the first contraction, graduate enrollment remains well ahead of pre-pandemic levels.

### Figure A: Graduate fall enrollment trends 2017-2022
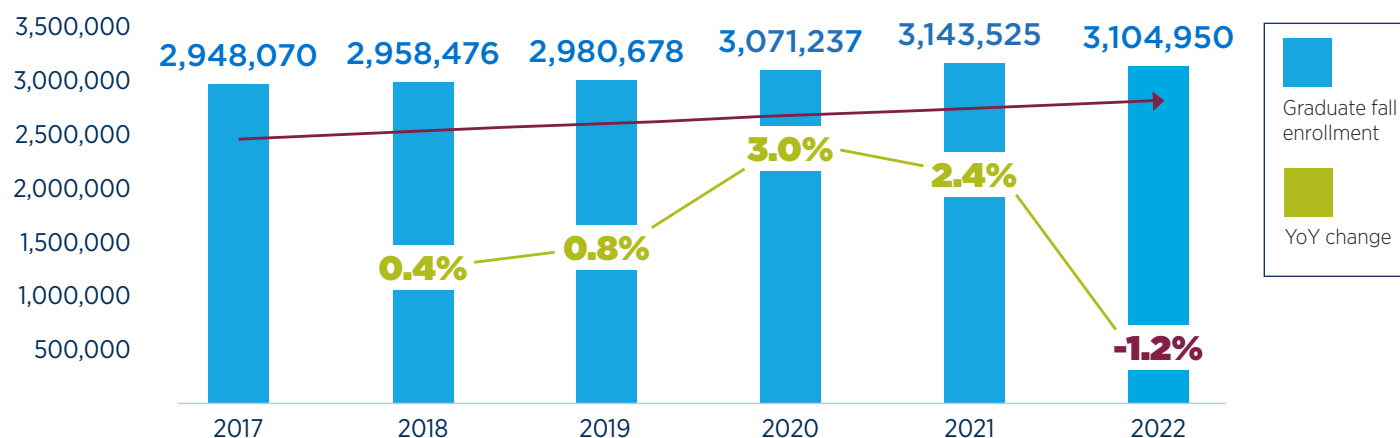
Source: National Student Clearinghouse, CTEE, Fall 2022

RNL's graduate consultants are frequently asked what they think will be the long-term impact of the pandemic on graduate education. There have been myriad changes brought on by the pandemic, but the acceleration of change in graduate student instructional format preferences is likely to be among the most important.

Online graduate education is an even stronger path

Figure B shows graduate student enrollment trajectories by the instructional format with both the pandemic accounted for (solid lines) and without the pandemic (dotted lines). Projected data (all numbers beyond 2021) use pre-pandemic average annual rates of growth (CARG) by format. Without the pandemic, fully online students would have overtaken fully classroom students in 2025, whereas due to the pandemic, this occurred in 2021. Therefore, working on the premise that pre-pandemic format preferences will continue into the future, online dominance was pushed forward by four years.

Figure B: Graduate fall enrollment by format, projected to 2026 with and without pandemic
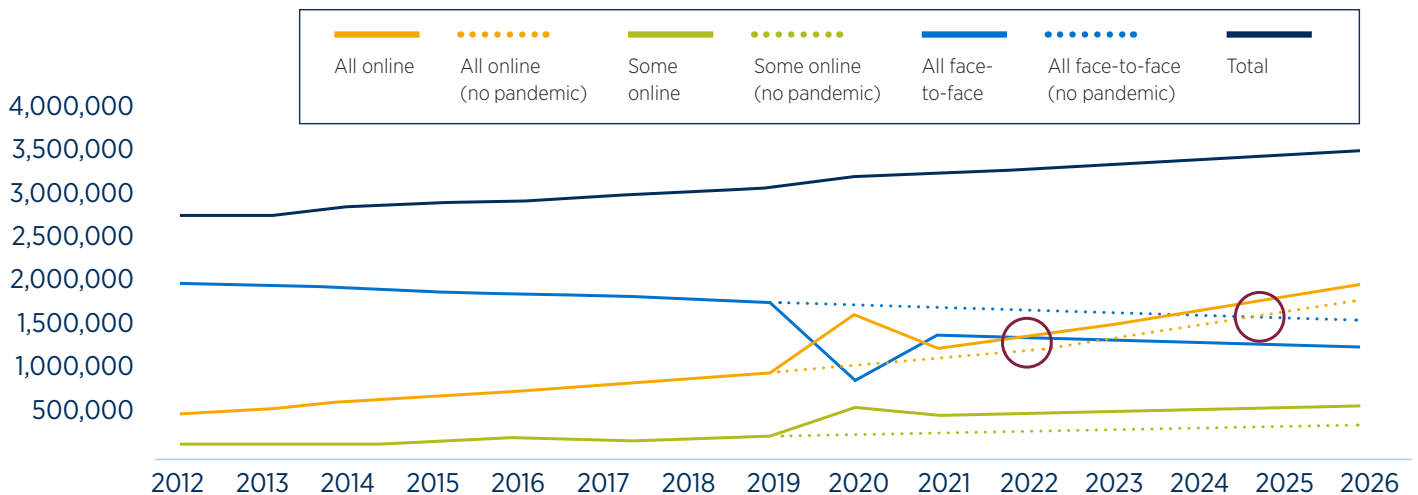
Source: RNL Analysis of IPEDS Fall Enrollment data. Retrieved, May, 2023

RNL's 2021 and 2023 survey work among prospective and enrolled graduate students provides additional insight into these changes. Figure C displays data on instructional format choices among survey respondents. In 2021, 32 percent of the 1,500 prospective graduate students indicated that they planned to enroll in all online courses. In 2023, 39 percent of our combined sample of prospective and enrolled graduate students indicated that they had enrolled or will enroll in all online courses, while even fewer indicated that they had enrolled or will enroll in all classroom courses.

Figure C: Graduate student intended format choice

Classroom
20% 2021
18% 2023

Online
32% 2021
39% 2023

Hybrid
48% 2021
43% 2023
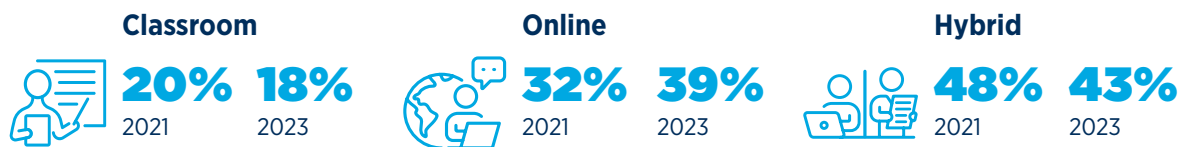
Source: RNL 2021 Graduate Student Recruitment Report

The data make it clear that institutions seeking to attract greater shares of the graduate market will likely have to embrace online education even more than they currently are. But this is not the whole story. This report presents many of the key things that savvy institutions need to keep in mind as they recruit graduate students.

Success relies on meeting expectations, most notably in timely response

One thing that is NOT presented in this report, but remains of vital importance, is "the need for speed." In three recent consecutive studies (of prospective graduate, undergraduate online, and online graduate students), we have consistently found that timely response and admission are crucial factors in successfully enrolling students. Therefore, we did not repeat the 2021 questions on the likelihood of students enrolling at the first institution to respond to their inquiry (61 percent) or admit them (81 percent).

It is with all these data in mind that we present our *2023 Graduate Student Recruitment Report*.

About RNL's Second National Study of the Graduate Education Market

25 findings across 8 subject areas

1,502 respondents represent current, recent, and future graduate students

In 2021, RNL published its first *Graduate Student Recruitment Report*, which presented findings among 1,500 prospective graduate students—individuals who indicated that they were planning to enroll in a credit-bearing graduate program within the next two years. In that study, our focus was on their search patterns, enrollment decision making priorities, expectations of institutions and programs during their search, and core program preferences.

This **2023 Graduate Student Recruitment Report** does not repeat that study, but rather addresses many new questions in order to advance your understanding of today's graduate students. This study profiles both prospective and enrolled graduate students (either currently enrolled or enrolled within the last two years).

The new topics included in the *2023 Graduate Student Recruitment Report* allow us to get to know today's graduate student better by learning more about:

1. Motivations for graduate study

2. Distance of furthest programs applied to

3. First step and subsequent steps taken in search

4. Why they interact—and do not interact—with digital marketing content

5. Preferred person to respond to inquiries and focus of questions

6. Effect and interpretation of a slow response from programs of interest

7. Most effective ways institutions can personalize content

8. How they pay for their studies and the impact of cost on their decision making

These new topics are added to our deepening understanding of:

- Formats of instruction chosen by graduate students
- Subjects of focus in graduate credentials
- Expected response times from programs of interest
- Most important factors in enrollment decisions

Report format

You will see data presented for 25 of the questions asked of our graduate student respondents, along with an **"Implications for Graduate Programs"** written by RNL colleagues. These experienced colleagues work with dozens of client institutions each year and in almost all cases spent many years leading institutional enrollment, marketing, or academic operations as deans, vice presidents, and other enrollment leadership positions. As the title implies, they were asked to write a comment on the selected table from the point of view of "What would you say to a client or colleague with whom you were talking about these data?"

Motivation and Enrollment Factors

What are the most common reasons driving individuals to enroll in graduate study? Many studies make this a complicated question with myriad answer choices. But when answer choices are sifted and sorted, most studies indicate that the bulk of graduate students enroll for career-related reasons. When studies do not indicate this, it is often because they are surveying individuals who are a significant distance from enrolling.

This study includes only those who are within 12 months of enrolling (38 percent), are enrolled now (28 percent), or have been enrolled within the last three years (34 percent).

When one is considering graduate study, reasons such as "setting an example for my family" and "personal fulfillment" seem like strong reasons for enrolling. But enrolling in and finishing a graduate program is a big undertaking, and this is why, when focusing on the population that is doing it (or most likely to do it), career-related reasons dominate primary motivations for enrolling in a graduate program.

As institutions develop marketing messaging, cultivation strategy, and more, motivation is only one of the important components of decision making that savvy institutions and programs need to understand. The most important aspects in the enrollment decision are also of critical importance. With that in mind, we asked respondents to rate the importance of nine factors when making their decision to enroll in a graduate program. These criteria match a question that is asked of thousands of graduate students each year in RNL's Adult Student Priorities Survey. In a subsequent report we will compare the findings in this report, which studies prospective and newly enrolled students, with those from the Adult Student Priorities Survey, which questions those further into or at the end of their graduate program.

What do the data say?

1) Graduate students are motivated to enroll in order to advance their careers.

Primary Motivation for Enrolling in Graduate Study

76%
To advance my career

8%
Personal reasons

16%
To change careers
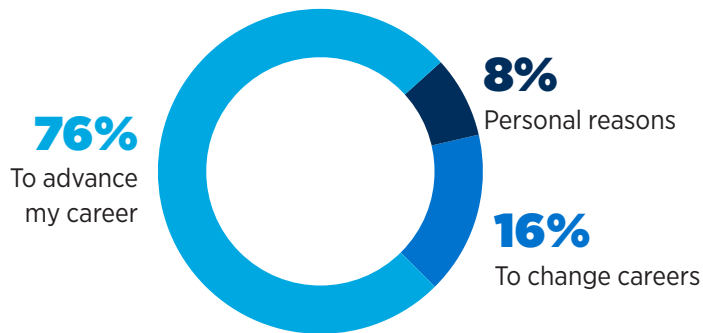
Motivation by age

MOTIVATION	20-24	25-29	30-39	40-49	50+
To change careers	9%	18%	19%	20%	14%
To advance my career	85%	75%	73%	67%	54%
Personal reasons	7%	7%	8%	13%	32%

Implications for graduate programs

The motivation to pursue a graduate education is fundamental to understanding how to reach potential graduate students. With these results we have a clear sense that advancing a career is by far the most common driver for education across all age groups—even among those age 30-49, who in past studies indicated greater proportions of those who were changing careers. This finding provides the foundation for the creation of marketing personas for most graduate programs and should also inform how to build your graduate level curriculum and program formats and schedules.

—Nate Mouttet, Vice President, Graduate and Online Partnerships

Read more about RNL's graduate and online experts on pages 41-42.

2) Cost of tuition and fees is most frequently the most important factor in graduate student enrollment decisions, closely followed by an array of factors.

(Answers are presented by student enrollment status.)

IMPORTANCE OF FACTORS IN ENROLLMENT DECISIONS	NOT IMPORTANT (NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT, AND NOT VERY IMPORTANT)		NEUTRAL (SOMEWHAT UNIMPORTANT, NEUTRAL, SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT)		IMPORTANT (IMPORTANT AND VERY IMPORTANT)	
	NOT YET ENROLLED	ENROLLED	NOT YET ENROLLED	ENROLLED	NOT YET ENROLLED	ENROLLED
Cost	3%	3%	20%	25%	77%	72%
Future employment opportunities	4%	6%	26%	24%	70%	70%
Flexible course options (online, evening, weekend, etc.)	3%	7%	25%	30%	72%	63%
Financial aid/scholarship opportunities	3%	5%	28%	29%	69%	68%
Academic reputation	3%	3%	31%	29%	66%	69%
Campus location (close to work/home)	8%	13%	38%	35%	54%	53%
Personalized attention prior to enrollment	8%	9%	53%	50%	39%	41%
Recommendations from family/friends/employer	10%	12%	57%	54%	33%	36%
Size of institution	22%	18%	57%	54%	22%	28%

Implications for graduate programs

Intuition might lead you to expect differences in the importance of various enrollment factors between graduate students who have already enrolled and those who have not yet done so. However, survey results indicate extraordinary consistency between both groups. In this case, cost and financial aid issues are the most important factors. These are closely followed by outcomes as described by "future employment opportunities," which can be interpreted as an "ROI" issue linked to the cost issues.

Not to be missed are academic factors like flexibility of programs and academic reputation. The one factor in which there is a substantial difference between enrolled and not-yet-enrolled graduate students is on the question of flexible course options. This reveals that when looking for schools and programs, the availability of flexible course offerings is of even greater importance than it proves to be when the decisions are made. The question this raises may be: To what extent are enrolled graduate students "settling" for less flexible options due to what is available?

—Nate Mouttet, Vice President, Graduate and Online Partnerships

Selecting an Institution

How many and how far away? As institutions develop their marketing, recruitment, and cultivation strategies, it is important that they understand if they are competing primarily with inertia or with other programs. From the 1980s through the early 2000s, the bulk of graduate programs—those serving working professionals 25+ years of age—were often the only program considered because they often were the only flexible program designed for students juggling multiple work/life responsibilities. Therefore, such programs were often only competing with everything that was going on in the lives of their inquirers and applicants. The strategies that bred success in such situations are quite different from those needed when you are actively competing with other programs for the student.

Distance from the prospective student's home has taken on new meaning as hybrid and online programs have taken hold. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, institutions seeking to serve adult working professionals ("time-bound/place-bound students" in many reports) found that their "addressable market" was within easy driving distance of the campus. Forward-leaning institutions opened off-campus locations (near highway intersections, in strip malls, in office parks) to increase the convenience of their programs. The earliest incarnations of online and hybrid programs extended the reach of graduate programs by reducing the number of times that students needed to drive to the campus. As the population has become more comfortable with all things online, these instructional formats have increasingly taken the place of the off-campus location as the way programs can deliver "convenience" to their students.

What are the implications of both of these developments on graduate student practices and patterns?

3) Graduate students, irrespective of age or modality, apply to more than one program.

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

33% 1   **40%** 2   **17%** 3   **10%** 4 or more

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%

Implications for graduate programs

These data may be surprising for schools that believe that students are seeking only their program and are willing to wait for an admissions decision before moving on apply to another college's program. Nearly half of graduate students apply to at least two programs, and many apply to three or more programs. This is true across online, hybrid, and even classroom programs, and it is also happening among older students. The implications affect operations, academics, and marketing strategies.

Operationally, admissions decision processes should be streamlined and, if possible, consolidated into a unit held accountable for meeting enrollment targets. Many graduate schools are decentralized, with a hand-off between admissions and academic leaders to make final decisions. When the academic team does not have responsibility for hitting enrollment goals, this part of the admissions process becomes murky and often slows considerably. Also, admitting students just once per year likely needs adjustment, as competitor programs move toward three to six admit cycles per year.

Academically, program designers must consider the factors that students find important in program selection because competition has clearly increased. We often see that cost and time to completion are the top two considerations of prospective graduate students. This may mean offering prior learning credit and eliminating prerequisites or unnecessary courses (based on programmatic accreditation) for a faster and more affordable pathway to completion. Students typically want online coursework to be asynchronous, so investing in instructional design is important as well.

From a marketing perspective, this reinforces the importance of focuses on program promotion, not just branding or overall college promotion. Pay attention to academic program pages on your website and optimize these pages for Google searches using program-specific keywords. Develop an investment strategy at the program level by prioritizing growth in certain key programs and using digital advertising to drive leads to these programs. When we know that students are evaluating many colleges in their quest to attend graduate school, focusing on these competitive factors is even more critical.

—Holly Tapper, Vice President, Graduate and Online Partnerships

4) Online graduate students are more likely than classroom graduate students to apply to programs close to home (within 25 miles).

How far from where you reside (or resided at the time) was the furthest school/ program you considered?

38%	**27%**	**11%**	**6%**	**17%**
Within 25 miles	25-50 miles	51-75 miles	75-100 miles	More than 100 miles

Distance from home by format

DISTANCE	ALL ONLINE	PARTIALLY ONLINE	ALL CLASSROOM
Within 25 miles	40%	37%	34%
25-50 miles	25%	31%	26%
51-75 miles	11%	14%	8%
75-100 miles	6%	6%	6%
More than 100 miles	19%	12%	25%

Implications for graduate programs

Many graduate programs believe that once their program moves online, it becomes "global" or at least "national." While this is technically true, student behavior shows that familiarity matters. Online students would prefer to enroll in an institution they know, which often means it is nearby. This shows that using an integrated marketing approach for lead generation is important, because the expense of developing a digital campaign and attempting to attract a nationwide audience will not result in a positive return on investment for a typical graduate program. These data support including traditional marketing methods like billboards, corporate partnerships, and alumni referrals to build awareness and classes with a more well-rounded approach since you are likely attracting a regional audience.

We are hearing from more campus-based programs that they would like to move online but cannot do so due to necessary lab experiences or field work. Many are exploring the idea of offering the majority of the coursework online, with a small on-campus component, like a week-long summer residency or a monthly lab. These findings showing even online students are likely to live relatively close to campus provides opportunities for programs like engineering or healthcare to expand online offerings.

—Holly Tapper, Vice President, Graduate and Online Partnerships

The fact that online graduate students are more likely than classroom graduate students to apply to programs close to home is striking. It suggests they want the option to engage with the campus community, even if it is not required for their studies. Knowing that online graduate students are most attracted to nearby institutions opens possibilities when it comes to designing impactful online programs and courses. Institutions can leverage relationships with local school districts, employers, and organizations to both attract students and provide opportunities for applied learning, such as internships or practicums. Faculty can draw upon the nuances of the surrounding area to develop relevant course projects and case studies. And because many online students live within driving distance of campus, programs can highlight unique campus-based activities and resources to build community and enhance the student experience.

—Emily Wood, Vice President, Instructional Design

Program Preferences

The graduate market continues to shift and change as the market grows and student preferences evolve. Many of the most profound changes began to take hold as the millennial generation started to overtake Generation X as the primary target of the graduate market. Those changes have accelerated in many ways as Generation Z comprises an increasing proportion of today's graduate market. Why? Because unlike even Gen X, these generations have never known a world that did not include the internet, do not remember a world that was not "connected" at all times, and have rarely had to wait in a line or not have a personalized experience in so many aspects of their lives.

The rising skepticism of the cost and value of education has also played a role in the rise of both non-degree (but credit-bearing) credentials and the ever-increasing dominance of areas of study that can be directly linked to a job—and often a well-paying job. Institutions ignore these sensitivities at their peril. This, at least partially, accounts for the rise of the credit-bearing certificate (a less expensive and more career-focused credential); the rise of enrollment in health professions and computer science (well-paying and ample jobs); the decline in enrollment for education programs (less well-paying); and the general rise in both fully online and hybrid programs (often more affordable and easier to both work and study at the same time).

How do these factors play out among today's graduate students?

5) Master's degrees continue to dominate graduate demand, with credit-bearing certificates growing in popularity among younger students.

Which type of program did/will you consider or enroll in? (Select one)

9% Doctoral degree

12% Post-baccalaureate certificate

66% Master's degree

13% Graduate certificate
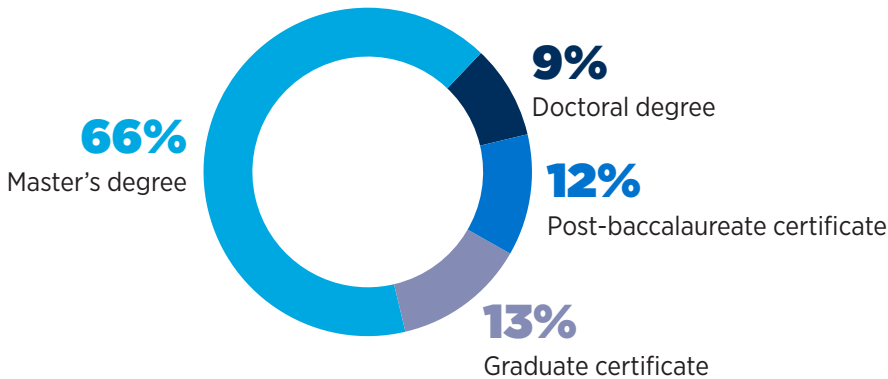
Type of program by age

PROGRAM	20-24	25-29	30-39	40-49	50+
Post-baccalaureate certificate	13%	11%	12%	16%	14%
Graduate certificate	19%	13%	11%	0%	0%
Master's degree	58%	69%	68%	76%	68%
Doctoral degree	10%	7%	9%	7%	18%

Implications for graduate programs

Graduate demand continues to focus at the master's level, with even greater demand than was documented in RNL's 2021 study. When considered alongside subsequent data on the disciplines in highest demand, this is likely due to graduate students continuing to think that a master's degree is one of the best ways to advance their career. Institutions need to ensure that the master's degrees they rely on for growth are career-focused and in career areas on the rise. Interestingly, classroom students were more likely to enroll in a doctoral program or a graduate certificate, and less likely to select a master's program. Younger students were also less likely to enroll in a master's program and more likely to enroll in a graduate certificate.

This study documents a slight rise in graduate student demand for credit-bearing graduate level certificates—particularly among the youngest graduate students. The rise of certificates is fueled by the demands of professionals seeking to demonstrate skills, knowledge, and abilities to both current and prospective employers, and possibly a rising concern over the costs associated with earning a full degree. For employers, the notion of upskilling or reskilling is fast emerging as the workforce faces staffing shortages and the need to skill up their workforce. From an employee perspective, gaining new skills offered through certificates offers a tangible way to demonstrate in-demand skills and get a leg up either in a current role or while seeking to advance one's career.

—Andrea Carroll-Glover, Vice President and Senior Consultant, Graduate and Online

6) Business, health professions, and computer and information science programs continue to dominate the graduate market, with education slipping further down the list since 2021.

WHAT IS THE BROAD SUBJECT OF YOUR GRADUATE STUDY?	ALL
Business	24%
Health Professions	13%
Computer/Information Science	11%
Education	9%
Counseling/Psychology	7%
Arts and Humanities	6%
Social Work/Public Administration	5%
Engineering	5%
Biological/Physical/Earth Sciences	5%
Communications	4%
Criminal Justice/Law/Homeland Security	4%
Social Sciences	3%
Other	5%

Subject by level of program

SUBJECT	POST-BACCALAUREATE CERTIFICATE	GRADUATE CERTIFICATE	MASTER'S DEGREE	DOCTORAL DEGREE
Business	22%	24%	27%	8%
Health Professions	16%	11%	11%	30%
Computer/Information Science	12%	13%	10%	8%
Education	7%	8%	9%	10%
Counseling/Psychology	9%	6%	7%	11%
Arts and Humanities	5%	6%	6%	2%
Social Work/Public Administration	3%	4%	5%	2%
Engineering	7%	6%	5%	4%
Biological/Physical/Earth Sciences	3%	3%	5%	8%
Communications	3%	6%	4%	3%
Criminal Justice/Law/Homeland Security	3%	4%	4%	7%
Social Sciences	3%	2%	4%	2%
Other	8%	7%	4%	7%

Implications for graduate programs

Demand for graduate-level business programs has led nearly every study of the graduate market over the last two decades. However, while interest in business topics has not subsided in any meaningful way, as a percent of all graduate enrollments it has shrunk as interest in and availability of graduate programs in other disciplines has grown. This is best illustrated among programs in health professions and computer/information science. This is largely due to advancements in technology and the demand for specialized, skilled professionals in these professions. As technology continues to drive innovation, business models become more complex, and the healthcare industry evolves to meet the changing needs of patients, advanced education has become a necessity for professionals looking to advance their careers and contribute to their industries. The consistency of high-demand subjects among both degree and non-degree seekers is a new development in RNL's research.

Many other professionals have also recognized the need to obtain advanced degrees in their fields in order to remain competitive in the job market and to have better career prospects. This accounts for increasing demand in topics as diverse as engineering and counseling. Similar factors have contributed to the decline in demand for graduate level credentials in education. Whereas in the past many states either required or incentivized educators to earn a master's degree and then also to earn additional graduate credits, fewer are requiring these things, and the incentives to do so often do not even pay the costs of tuition. The results of these types of public policies are reflected in the data. Finally, other areas of public policy have depressed interest in becoming a teacher, and this has resulted in fewer undergraduate students earning a degree in the education discipline. A 2018 study of the graduate market indicated double the demand for education credentials as is reported here.

—Andrea Carroll-Glover, Vice President and Senior Consultant, Graduate and Online

7) Graduate students are enrolling in both fully online and partially online programs at more than twice the rate of classroom programs.

In which instructional format did/will you enroll in graduate classes?

39% All online   **43%** Partially online   **18%** All classroom

Chosen instructional format by age

FORMAT	20-24	25-29	30-39	40-49	50+
All online	30%	39%	48%	54%	50%
Partially online	40%	42%	40%	40%	43%
All classroom	30%	19%	13%	6%	7%

Implications for graduate programs

These data, which show the ever-increasing growth in demand for hybrid and fully online programs, make it clear to institutions that these instructional formats are no longer on the fringe of higher education but rather are in the forefront of student demand. They therefore need to be at the core of graduate offerings at institutions seeking to capitalize on the graduate market for institutional growth. It is interesting that the greatest level of demand for fully online programs comes from older rather than younger graduate students (who grew up in a digital world). What accounts for younger student interest in classroom programs? The familiarity of this format given the recency of their undergraduate experiences is likely the answer.

These data make it clear that graduate programs need to ensure (and then demonstrate) equivalent academic outcomes from their traditional, face-to-face, and online programs given that graduate students continue to seek online program options that offer them the necessary flexibility to pursue their academic goals. When provided a choice, today's graduate students continue to choose flexible online and hybrid learning options over a traditional in-person experience.

—Andrea Carroll-Glover, Vice President and Senior Consultant, Graduate and Online
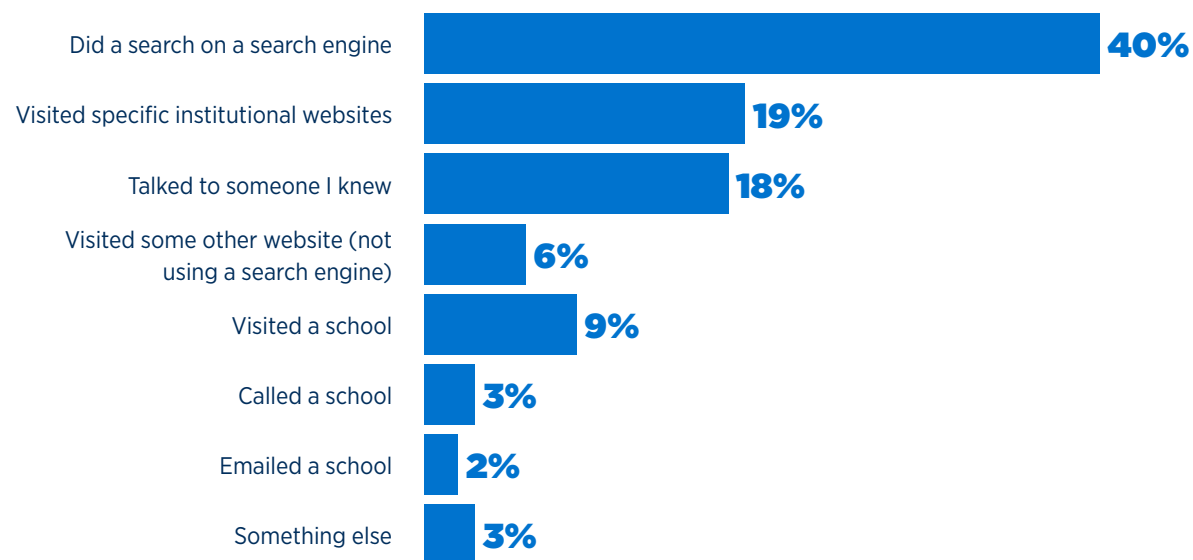
Search Practices and Patterns

Graduate students are considering multiple programs, and after three years of unprecedented growth, institutions may be confronting a "market correction" that will still see growth, but less than in recent years. Institutions need to find people searching for a graduate program where they looking, catch their attention, and ensure that their materials resonate with the needs and aspirations of students.

In the opening section of this report, we outlined motivations and decision-making criteria. Here we outline how prospective students start their search for programs of interest, how they continue that search, the extent to which they actually interact with digital marketing, and why they do so. Within these data are the foundations of an integrated marketing strategy. These questions were not asked in RNL's 2021 study, but the combination of these findings and those contained in that report provide the road map that graduate programs need to ensure that every marketing dollar has the maximum impact on enrollment.

What do the data tell us about how graduate programs should set up their marketing plans?

8) Graduate students are twice as likely to start their search for a graduate program on a search engine than any other source or method.

What was/will be the first step in your search for a graduate program?

Did a search on a search engine	40%
Visited specific institutional websites	19%
Talked to someone I knew	18%
Visited some other website (not using a search engine)	6%
Visited a school	9%
Called a school	3%
Emailed a school	2%
Something else	3%

Search first step by age

SEARCH FIRST STEP	20-24	25-29	30-39	40-49	50+
Did a search on a search engine	33%	42%	42%	40%	43%
Visited specific institutional websites	18%	17%	21%	23%	25%
Talked to someone I knew	19%	18%	18%	16%	14%
Visited some other website (not using a search engine)	6%	6%	5%	7%	4%
Visited a school	15%	8%	7%	6%	4%
Called a school	4%	2%	3%	2%	4%
Emailed a school	4%	3%	2%	1%	0%
Something else	2%	3%	2%	4%	7%

Search first step by format

SEARCH FIRST STEP	ALL ONLINE	PARTIALLY ONLINE	ALL CLASSROOM
Did a search on a search engine	46%	37%	31%
Visited specific institutional websites	20%	18%	21%
Talked to someone I knew	17%	19%	17%
Visited some other website (not using a search engine)	5%	7%	5%
Visited a school	4%	10%	17%
Called a school	3%	4%	1%
Emailed a school	2%	2%	3%
Something else	3%	2%	4%

Implications for graduate programs

No matter how you parse the data, paid and organic search need to be at the core of the marketing strategies of graduate programs today, given the patterns in how prospective students start their search for a graduate program. Considering all that we know in our work with RNL's numerous partner institutions, if students conduct a search for a program and you are not among the listings in the first "window," they are likely to go on to the next program of interest. Being at the top of search results is your chance to meet prospects at their moment of need. You do this by developing strategic search campaigns to ensure you have the right keywords and budget to compete in the paid space, as well as having an optimized website to make sure you have the best organic presence possible. You often don't get a second chance to make a first impression online.

Interestingly, this does not change when we look at the age of the student prospect. Regardless of age, users are savvy. They want to do their due diligence and research first. Whether they are doing a search or going to a specific website, it's imperative that you have the ability to meet them where they are at because your competitors are.

When reviewing the data by the chosen instructional format of the graduate student, online students are—unsurprisingly—more likely to begin online, and classroom students are more likely to take an analog approach, but it is important to remember that classroom students only account for 18 percent of all graduate students in this study.

—Erin Minsart, Vice President, Integrated Marketing

9) When graduate students don't start on a search engine, almost all then use a search engine as a "next step."

WHAT WERE YOUR OTHER EARLY SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT GRADUATE PROGRAMS?	ALL
Search engines	52%
Institutional websites	49%
Printed materials from institutions	23%
Ads on social media sites	21%
Other websites	21%
Videos on YouTube or elsewhere	19%
Ads on websites	17%
Printed rankings guides	17%
Ads on streaming TV	13%
Ads on broadcast or cable TV	10%
Ads in newspapers, magazines, etc.	8%
Ads on streaming radio	7%
Ads on billboards, buses, other outdoor	7%
Ads on local broadcast radio	6%

Other early search methods by format

OTHER EARLY SEARCH METHODS	ALL ONLINE	PARTIALLY ONLINE	ALL CLASSROOM
Search engines	52%	54%	48%
Institutional websites	47%	52%	50%
Printed materials from institutions	16%	27%	29%
Ads on social media sites	21%	22%	17%
Other websites	21%	23%	18%
Videos on YouTube or elsewhere	17%	21%	17%
Ads on websites	17%	17%	13%
Printed rankings guides	13%	19%	24%
Ads on streaming TV	14%	13%	9%
Ads on broadcast or cable TV	10%	11%	7%
Ads in newspapers, magazines, etc.	7%	8%	7%
Ads on streaming radio	7%	8%	4%
Ads on billboards, buses, other outdoor	6%	8%	8%
Ads on local broadcast radio	6%	6%	6%

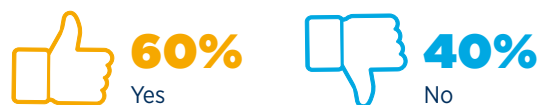## Implications for graduate programs

Nearly all graduate students who did not indicate that using a search engine was their first step still said it was among their next steps—with almost no differentiation by the age of the student or the intended program format. Whether search engines are the first or second step does not make it any less important because the principle is the same. A strategic paid search campaign coupled with great SEO will make sure that your institution is there, at the moment of need, to help guide your prospective student through their decision journey.

The key is to make sure you have a consistent presence across digital channels, because they all work together to tell your story and lead your prospects to enrollment. As users, we all have so many choices at our fingertips that marketing can no longer be a way to push out broad message to a large audience. With savvy users and data everywhere, it's important that we give prospects personalized experience and the information they need to make the most informed decision. What do they need to go from awareness to consideration? What questions do they need answered to go from consideration to decision? If you can make sure your online efforts move users through the funnel with relevant content, then you are on the right path to enrollment success.

—Erin Minsart, Vice President, Integrated Marketing

10) Graduate students click on digital ads, with older students even more likely to do so than younger students.

Did/will you click on digital ads for graduate schools/programs during your search?

👍 **60%** Yes   👎 **40%** No

Will click/have clicked on digital ads

YES

👍 **60%** 20-24   **57%** 25-29   **64%** 30-39   **64%** 40-49   **57%** 50 and older

NO

👎 **40%** 20-24   **43%** 25-29   **36%** 30-39   **36%** 40-49   **43%** 50 and older

Implications for graduate programs

A common misperception at many institutions is that prospective graduate students do not click on digital ads. These data indicate that 60 percent of prospective graduate students do click on digital ads during their search. We also saw similar patterns among all age groups. In fact, older students (ages 40-49, as well as 30-39) are most likely to click on ads. However, these data reflect an almost 10 percent (negative) difference from RNL's 2021 study of the graduate market. Why might fewer graduate students be clicking on ads than just two years ago? This is an important issue for graduate marketers to consider, and one we ponder below.

A key issue is how graduate schools can create ads that drive the prospective student to specific calls to action. How do schools take advantage of the initial intent of prospective students and provide them with content and messaging that moves them to become a lead, and beyond? It is evident that a majority of students respond to ads, but are schools savvy and sophisticated enough to capture the attention of a prospect? Therefore, the question is not are students clicking on ads, but rather if graduate schools provide compelling enough content and creative to attract and convert students into their funnel.

—Charles Ramos, Vice President, Graduate and Online Partnerships

11) Graduate students do not click on ads because the "copy" was interesting or intriguing (and this is a problem), while older students find ads even less targeted to their interests than younger students.

WHY DID/WILL YOU CLICK ON ADS?	ALL
It was for a school I am interested in and the ad reminded me that I needed to take the next step.	35%
I'm aware of this school but didn't know anything about their programs.	25%
I didn't know about the school and I wanted to learn more.	24%
The ad "copy" was intriguing to me and made me want to click.	15%

Why students click on ads by age

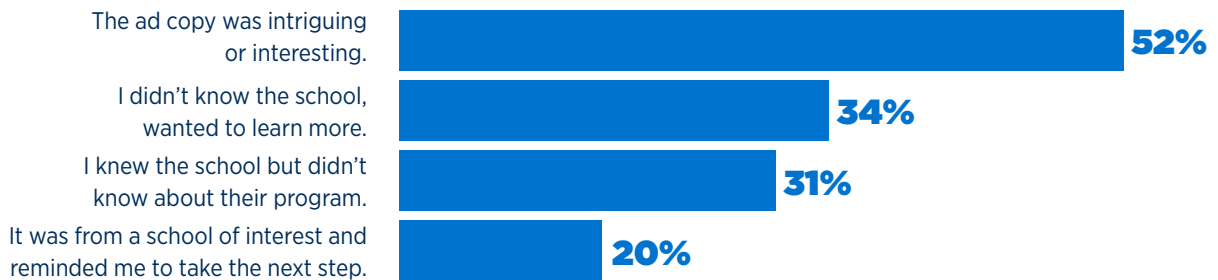| WHY CLICKED ON ADS	20-24	25-29	30-39	40-49	50+
It was for a school I am interested in and the ad reminded me that I needed to take the next step.	34%	33%	37%	38%	25%
I'm aware of this school but didn't know anything about their programs.	28%	27%	20%	27%	31%
I didn't know about the school and I wanted to learn more.	25%	23%	25%	22%	31%
The ad "copy" was intriguing to me and made me want to click.	14%	16%	17%	13%	13%

Implications for graduate programs

Graduate students most frequently click on an ad because it was from a school of interest and reminded them to take the next step, and not because anything about the ad drew them in. There was little differentiation when reviewing the data by age or any other prism. This should send a jarring message to graduate enrollment and marketing professionals.

Could it be that graduate students are not as easily influenced by eye-catching creative and compelling messages from unfamiliar schools? Are graduate programs solely reliant on organic (or somewhat organic) lead generation to drive funnel health and potential? I honestly do not believe this to be the case. Why? The answer goes back to RNL's 2022 survey of online students, which documented that online students MOST frequently click on ads because the content was interesting and intriguing. These data are important because online and graduate students share many similar traits, preferences, influencers, and expectations.

Most compelling reason online students click on a digital ad

Reason	Percentage
The ad copy was intriguing or interesting.	52%
I didn't know the school, wanted to learn more.	34%
I knew the school but didn't know about their program.	31%
It was from a school of interest and reminded me to take the next step.	20%

Source: *2022 Online Student Recruitment Report*

How is there such a difference between the results of the two surveys? I believe a key reason may be that many online programs have invested considerable resources in the development of a sophisticated approach and strategy for lead generation—including multi persona-based strategies per program that drive more "personalized" ad placement, creative, and messaging that resonates with the key markets being targeted. On the graduate side, this level of marketing sophistication has often not yet taken hold. This may be because many graduate programs/schools continue to assume that past enrollment success can continue without savvier marketing techniques, or it may be because institutional leaders are concentrating more resources on undergraduate enrollment. Whatever the reason, as institutions lean more and more on graduate growth to make up for either current or future undergraduate contraction, a more sophisticated, persona-based, and data-informed, strategy is required for success in an increasingly sophisticated market.

—Charles Ramos, Vice President, Graduate and Online Partnerships

Inquiring/Contacting Programs

How does the momentum of market-driven programs—with great messaging and cutting-edge marketing/outreach—stop in its tracks? The answer is when institutions do not meet the expectations of graduate students regarding timely response and personalization of content. We have documented that the great majority of graduate students are considering more than one program, and savvy graduate programs should assume that at least one of the other programs being considered by their prospects is exactly "on point" in their recruitment process.

How is being "on point" defined? It is not only responding in the amount of time expected by the prospective student, but also doing so on the right channel, by the right person, with the right information. For the first time, RNL also investigated how graduate students interpret a slow response and what impact it has on their willingness to consider a program.

What are these expectations and attitudes?

12) Graduate students are more likely to want to interact with a recruiter or counselor than a faculty member during their search.

Who would you prefer to respond to your early inquiries/questions during your search?

36%
Faculty member/program staff (in program of interest)

64%
Admissions counselor/program recruiter
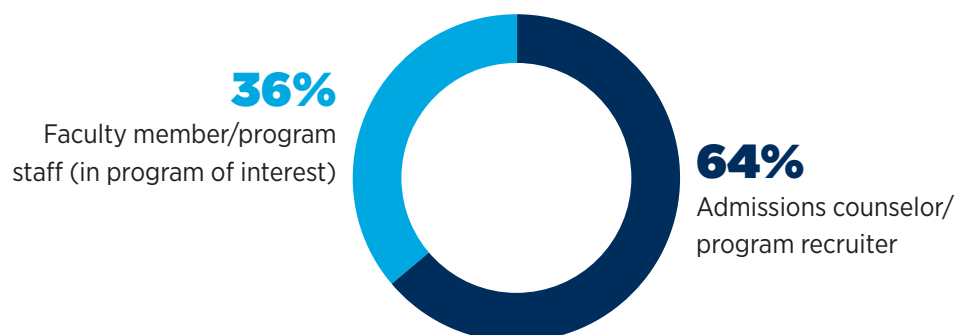
Preferred responder by program level

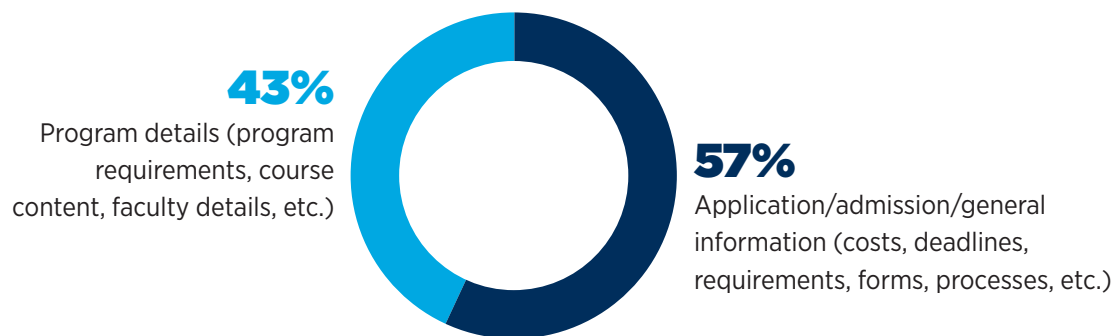| PREFERRED RESPONDER	POST-BACCALAUREATE CERTIFICATE	GRADUATE CERTIFICATE	MASTER'S DEGREE	DOCTORAL DEGREE
Admissions counselor/program recruiter	71%	65%	64%	53%
Faculty member/program staff (in program of interest)	29%	35%	36%	47%

💬 Implications for graduate programs

Understanding the preferences and needs of prospective graduate students is crucial for institutions to effectively engage and attract new learners. The majority of students (64 percent) prefer to have their initial inquiries and questions answered by admissions counselors or recruiters instead of faculty members or staff within their program of interest. This finding highlights the importance of timely, personalized interactions and guidance during the early stages of the search process and conveys a need to focus on building strong and knowledgeable admissions teams.

Early communication preferences, however, can vary based on level of education. For instance, doctoral degree respondents show more balanced inclinations, with nearly half (47 percent) favoring first interactions from faculty members or program staff. While not necessarily crucial to serve as the opening interaction, programs should foster strong connections between faculty members and prospective students. This can be achieved by organizing program-specific information sessions, encouraging faculty involvement in recruitment events, and facilitating direct communication channels between students and members within the program of study, itself.

—Shane Pruitt, EdD, Executive Consultant, Enrollment Consulting Services

13) Graduate students seek both application/admissions information and program details, so recruiters *and* counselors need to be prepared to talk about both.

What are you more likely to be looking for when reaching out to programs of interest before submitting your application?

43%
Program details (program requirements, course content, faculty details, etc.)

57%
Application/admission/general information (costs, deadlines, requirements, forms, processes, etc.)

Information students want by type of person responding

INFORMATION NEEDED	ADMISSIONS COUNSELOR/ PROGRAM RECRUITER	FACULTY MEMBER/PROGRAM STAFF (IN PROGRAM OF INTEREST)
Application/admission/general information (costs, deadlines, requirements, forms, processes, etc.)	68%	32%
Program details (program requirements, course content, faculty details, etc.)	59%	41%

Implications for graduate programs

Prospects are only slightly more likely to be searching for general admissions information (57 percent) than specific program details (43 percent) when initially reaching out to graduate programs of interest. Institutions should offer a balanced communications approach that combines information on costs, application deadlines, and the admissions process as well as specific program details such as requirements, course curriculum, and faculty profiles.

While faculty and program staff are not always expected to be as involved in sharing enrollment information—only one-third (32 percent) of respondents expect that—admissions counselors and program recruiters should be well-versed in all topics. There must be a focus to ensure that counselors and recruiters are well-trained and equipped to address the various inquiries and concerns of prospective students. As such, fostering collaboration and seamless communication between the group and individual program faculty and staff can ensure a cohesive and well-rounded approach, where both parties can address the unique queries and interests of students effectively.

—Shane Pruitt, EdD, Executive Consultant, Enrollment Consulting Services

14) Graduate students prefer to communicate with programs of interest via email, but graduate programs need to ensure that they are using multiple channels in order to maximize conversion.

How do you prefer schools/programs respond to you?

71% Email   **14%** Phone calls   **9%** Text message   **3%** Social media platform   **3%** Mail

Preferred contact method by program format

| PREFERRED CONTACT METHOD	ALL ONLINE	PARTIALLY ONLINE	ALL CLASSROOM
Email	73%	68%	76%
Phone calls	13%	16%	13%
Text message	9%	9%	7%
Social media platform	3%	3%	3%
Mail	2%	4%	2%

Implications for graduate programs

When it comes to preferred methods of communication from programs, nearly three-quarters (71 percent) of individuals prefer to receive responses via email. Although text messages and phone calls may be preferred less overall, they still hold significance in certain contexts. For example, text messages can be effective for delivering quick reminders or short updates, while phone calls can offer a more personal touch when addressing complex inquiries or providing individualized support. To maximize enrollment conversion rates, graduate programs should utilize multiple channels of communication by supplementing their email message flows with other modes to effectively engage all possible prospects.

Shane Pruitt, EdD, Executive Consultant, Enrollment Consulting Services

15) Graduate students expect a timely response—with 86 percent expecting to hear from programs of interest within 24 hours.

After how long do you expect a response to an inquiry or question in the preferred channel you cited above?

49%
Within 24 hours

14%
More than 24 hours

37%
Within 3 hours
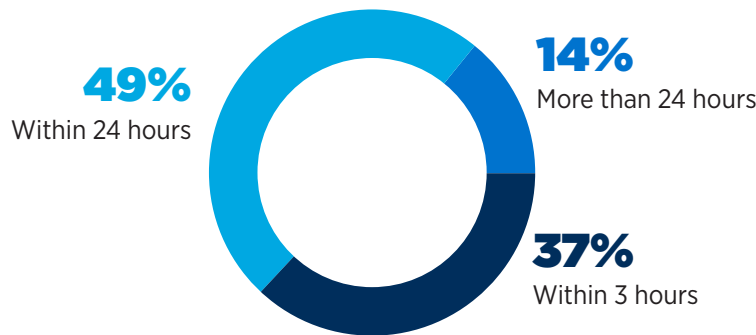
Expected response time by age of student

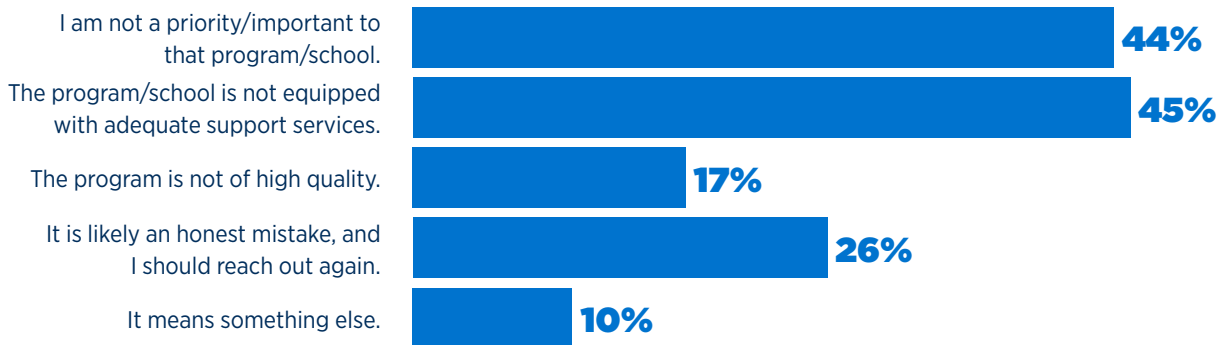| EXPECTED RESPONSE TIME	20-24	25-29	30-39	40-49	50+
Within 3 hours	34%	33%	41%	36%	28%
Within 24 hours	53%	54%	47%	48%	54%
More than 24 hours	13%	14%	13%	16%	18%

Implications for graduate programs

Higher education enrollment operations must consider the critical components of student expectations, many of which are related to the degree to which students continue to interact with programs of interest as consumers. According to the survey results, 86 percent of graduate students believe waiting more than 24 hours for a response to their inquiry is unsuitable. Interestingly, these expectations do not change with the age of the student, with older students sharing the same expectations as the younger students.

Institutions must also consider that omnichannel communications maintain relevance and preference in accordance with response times. A student's outlook on immediacy includes respective contact modalities such as email, text messages, and phone calls. Today, market differentiation and competitive advantage attributes surpass fast response times and multichannel outreach. Graduate programs seeking to increase or simply maintain market share face challenges in employing creative solutions to undertake these expectations.

Chelsea D. Hoffman, Vice President, Graduate and Online Partnerships

16) Graduate students are likely to think that they are not important or a priority to programs that respond slowly to inquiries and questions.

What does a slow response signify to you?

Response	Percentage
I am not a priority/important to that program/school.	44%
The program/school is not equipped with adequate support services.	45%
The program is not of high quality.	17%
It is likely an honest mistake, and I should reach out again.	26%
It means something else.	10%

Interpretation of slow response by program level

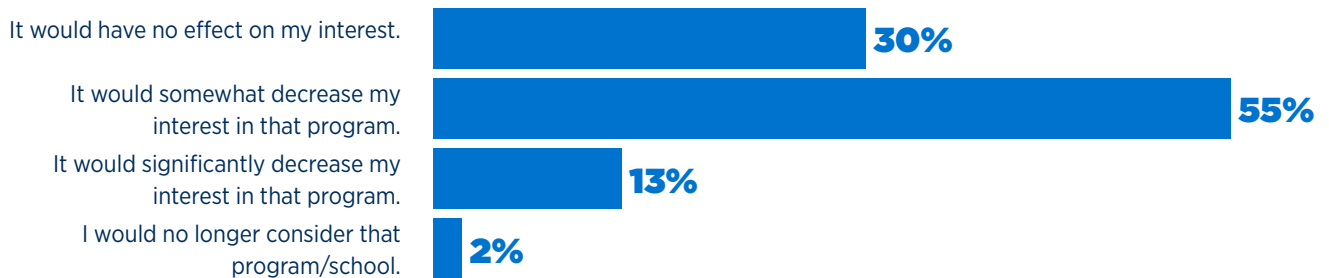| INTERPRETATION OF SLOW RESPONSE	POST-BACCALAUREATE CERTIFICATE	GRADUATE CERTIFICATE	MASTER'S DEGREE	DOCTORAL DEGREE
I am not a priority/important to that program/school.	42%	42%	44%	46%
The program/school is not equipped with adequate support services.	39%	40%	47%	47%
The program is not of high quality.	16%	21%	16%	17%
It is likely an honest mistake, and I should reach out again.	25%	27%	26%	24%
It means something else.	8%	7%	10%	16%

Implications for graduate programs

The data above indicate that failing to meet student response expectations is not only undesirable, but will also likely make graduate students feel they are insignificant/unimportant and that the program is not equipped to provide good support services. Neither of these interpretations bodes well for continuing interest from the student. The data below indicate that graduate student interpretations of slow response times can directly correlate to a student's continued (or discontinued) interest in a graduate program. In fact, more than 70 percent of all graduate students surveyed would have decreased interest in programs that have slow response times. All of these findings also hold true regardless of either the level of study, the age of the student, or the format in which they enroll. There are not exceptions to student expectations.

Graduate leaders may want to think of this as the intersection of consumer behavior and human behavior. Individuals inherently possess the desire to feel wanted. Students are no exception, especially when making life-changing decisions to invest both their personal and financial resources to continue their education. Graduate programs can control the inferences of their processes by establishing a means for timely responses and transparent communications that positively convey student prominence.

—Chelsea D. Hoffman, Vice President, Graduate and Online Partnerships

17) More than two-thirds of graduate students will become less interested in a program that does not respond to them in a timely manner.

To what extent did/would a slow response affect your willingness to consider a particular program?

Response	Percentage
It would have no effect on my interest.	30%
It would somewhat decrease my interest in that program.	55%
It would significantly decrease my interest in that program.	13%
I would no longer consider that program/school.	2%

Effect of slow response from institution by age of student

EFFECT OF SLOW RESPONSE	20-24	25-29	30-39	40-49	50+
It would have no effect on my interest.	30%	30%	29%	34%	46%
It would somewhat decrease my interest in that program.	54%	57%	55%	49%	46%
It would significantly decrease my interest in that program.	15%	11%	14%	14%	7%
I would no longer consider that program/school.	1%	2%	3%	2%	0%

Personalized Response

Today's graduate school population experiences personalization in almost everything they do—and in most of the things they do online. They get personalized recommendations on Amazon, they are greeted by name when they pick up the order that they made on the Starbucks app, and they get content in their social media feeds that aligns with their interests. How do these lived experiences affect their expectations of the graduate programs in which they are interested? These experiences have transformed their attitudes about personalized communications from the graduate programs in which they are interested, but the manner in which graduate programs can meet these expectations may be more straightforward than would be expected—and yet in line with all their other digital experiences.

What do the data say?

18) Personalized communication and attention during the recruitment process is an important element in successfully attracting students.

IMPORTANCE OF PERSONALIZED COMMUNICATION	ALL
Very important	15%
Important	49%
Neutral	18%
Not very important	15%
Not at all important	2%

ACCEPTABLE AND PREFERRED RESPONSE METHOD	ACCEPTABLE	PREFERRED
Personalized email	95%	57%
Non-personalized email	67%	7%
Some other method	N/A	37%

Source: *2021 Graduate Student Recruitment Report*

Implications for graduate programs

The data make it clear that personalized communication and contact are important to graduate students, with fewer than 20 percent saying this is not important. They have come to anticipate and expect this throughout the program recruitment process. Furthermore, students prefer customized communications within their first interactions, continuing throughout their educational experience. Findings from RNL's *2021 Graduate Student Recruitment Report* reinforce the preference of personalized email. While 67 percent of indicated that non-personalized email was acceptable, only 7 percent preferred this—and fully one-third of graduate students did not find it acceptable.

Personalization in communications allows graduate programs to deploy an experience that cultivates relationship-building between the student and the program's brand. Additionally, timely and attentive interactions generate trust while conveying the importance of the student's wants and needs. These efforts provide immediate realizations during the recruitment process while affirmatively influencing downstream student behaviors such as loyalty and engagement.

—Chelsea D. Hoffman, Vice President, Graduate and Online Partnerships

19) Personalizing communication with graduate students need not be overly complicated. Using first names in emails and texts and providing information on the program of interest are the best ways to do so.

HOW CAN SCHOOLS/ PROGRAMS BEST PERSONALIZE THEIR RESPONSE?	RANKING					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Use my first name in emails/texts	51%	18%	13%	9%	6%	3%
Send me information specific to my program of interest	26%	30%	26%	9%	6%	3%
Appear to know me and my situation when I make contact	10%	16%	20%	16%	28%	9%
Send me videos in which my name is used	6%	20%	11%	14%	23%	26%
Call me regularly to check in on my needs and questions	4%	8%	13%	16%	17%	43%
Share information reflecting/related to my demographic (age, background, etc.)	3%	8%	17%	35%	20%	16%

💬 Implications for graduate programs

Graduate program leaders must consider personalized communications; however, the data suggest that simple approaches adequately satisfy expectations. Students expressed that the best methods of incorporating personalization include using their first name in emails and texts and providing program-relevant information.

Programs capable of incorporating additional sophistication with outreach practices can present a competitive advantage but are not obligatory for meetings student expectations. Added benefits for personalized communications include personalized videos, demographic-specific information sharing, and regular contact with situational knowledge of the student's perspectives and circumstances.

The key here is to humanize interactions between the student and the program. Communications intending to prompt student response should be open-ended and brief, including the student's name and a call to action. Messages should remain short and informal, allowing the recipient to consume and respond easily. Lastly, messages should remain free of mistakes such as name misspellings or incorrect program information, to avoid adverse impacts.

—Chelsea D. Hoffman, Vice President, Graduate and Online Partnerships

Paying for Graduate Study

Throughout the decade following the "Great Recession" (2010-2019), unprecedented proportions of the graduate student market indicated that the cost of tuition and fees was the most important factor in their enrollment decisions.[1] In RNL's 2021 study of prospective graduate students, respondents indicated that "the match between interests and program content" was the most often cited factor, with tuition costs being third (behind "the availability of online/hybrid courses"). Was this an anomaly or the beginning of a trend away from the importance of cost?

Earlier in this report, the cost of tuition and fees was most frequently cited as being important or very important in the enrollment decisions of graduate students among nine factors. In what follows, RNL presents the responses to a series of questions that seek to help graduate programs better understand the issues associated with cost, which include:

• the proportions that rely on personal funds versus other methods of payment;

• the impact of posted tuition that is higher than they think they can afford;

• the prevalence of limiting their number of credits in order to control out-of-pocket expenses; and

• the impact of small monetary awards on enrollment choices.

What do the data say about graduate student consideration of cost issues?

[1] These insights come from Aslanian Market Research proprietary market analyses conducted by this researcher (Scott Jeffe).

20) Graduate students are most likely to use personal funds and student loans to pay for their graduate studies, and fewer than ever are leveraging tuition reimbursement.

How do/did/will you pay for your graduate studies?

50%	**50%**	**31%**	**26%**	**11%**	**30%**
Personal funds	Student loans	Private grants and scholarships	Employer tuition reimbursement	Other loans	Government grants

Methods of payment by age of student

| METHODS OF PAYMENT	20-24	25-29	30-39	40-49	50+
Personal funds	48%	52%	47%	55%	64%
Student loans	53%	53%	50%	36%	36%
Other loans	13%	12%	9%	6%	4%
Employer tuition reimbursement	23%	23%	30%	34%	21%
Private grants and scholarships	27%	34%	32%	29%	25%
Government grants	29%	30%	33%	23%	25%

Implications for graduate programs

This finding suggests less than one-third of respondents use private grants and/or scholarships to pay for their graduate study. The largest shares indicate that they pay their graduate tuition with out-of-pocket funds or student loans. Younger students were slightly more likely to indicate student loans over personal funds, while older students were slightly more likely to use personal funds. These findings suggest campuses must be intentional about how they present both sticker price and net price if they are to win in the competitive marketplace.

The most successful campuses are clear about their value proposition. They clearly answer questions about the distinctive aspects of their programs and communicate that value proposition throughout the recruitment process. Later in the admit-to-enroll stage, it is imperative that campuses go out of their way to showcase the affordability of their program and/or how students make that investment with mostly out-of-pocket funds. Consider creating case studies that describe how anonymized students have paid for their program of study using a mix of sources and strategies. The case studies highlight how the sticker price can be reduced through scholarships, grants, and monthly savings from working full-time/part-time, as well as what a monthly loan payment would be for a student in that program. This real-life approach helps prospective students visualize a path forward to pay for their education.

—Aaron Mahl, Senior Vice President, Graduate and Online Partnerships

21) Almost all graduate students are at least somewhat likely to remove a program from consideration if posted tuition seems too high.

How likely would you be to remove a graduate program from your search if the posted tuition costs were higher than you thought you could afford?

6% Not at all likely to remove

23% Somewhat likely to remove

28% Likely to remove

25% Very likely to remove

18% Definitely will remove
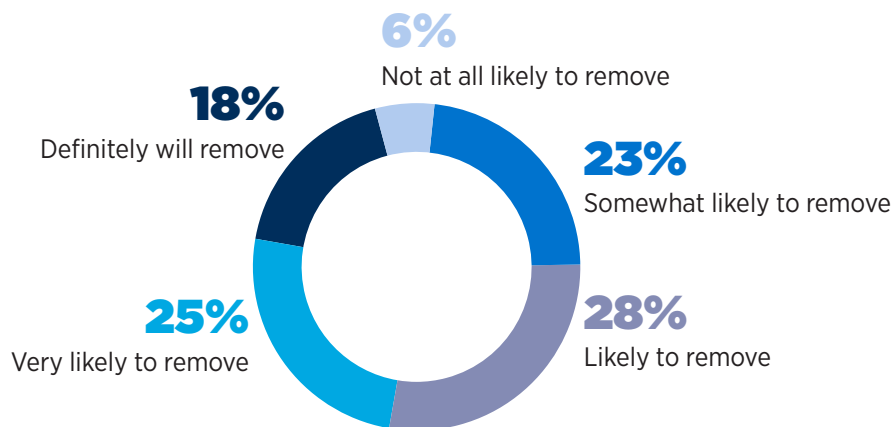
Effect of high sticker price by program level

| EFFECT	POST-BACCALAUREATE CERTIFICATE	GRADUATE CERTIFICATE	MASTER'S DEGREE	DOCTORAL DEGREE
Not at all likely to remove	9%	7%	4%	13%
Somewhat likely to remove	20%	27%	22%	20%
Likely to remove	27%	34%	27%	26%
Very likely to remove	24%	22%	27%	21%
Definitely will remove	19%	11%	20%	21%

Implications for graduate programs

Among those surveyed, a significant majority are likely to remove a graduate program from their consideration set based on sticker price. Perhaps most interesting is that there is little difference by level or type of credential. This finding is not unlike previous RNL studies for traditional undergraduate students who express a similar behavior. Given this reality and coupled with the increased competition for students, institutions must be aggressive in communicating their value proposition and the affordability pathways that exist for their programs.

One can reasonably assume that a prospective student may eliminate an institution from consideration because of their inability to understand how they, at a very personal level, can afford that particular institution. This reality provides an opportunity for institutions to not only market their value proposition—their best ideas on why their price is "worth it"—but to also personalize the cost and investment conversation. Two best-practice examples include:

1. **Income profiles**: Income profiles of current graduate students in their programs allow prospects to financially see themselves in the graduate program. The figure below is one way to communicate, "we have students in our program who are just like you."

13%
$250,000+

13%
$180,000-249,000

25%
$120,000-179,000

22%
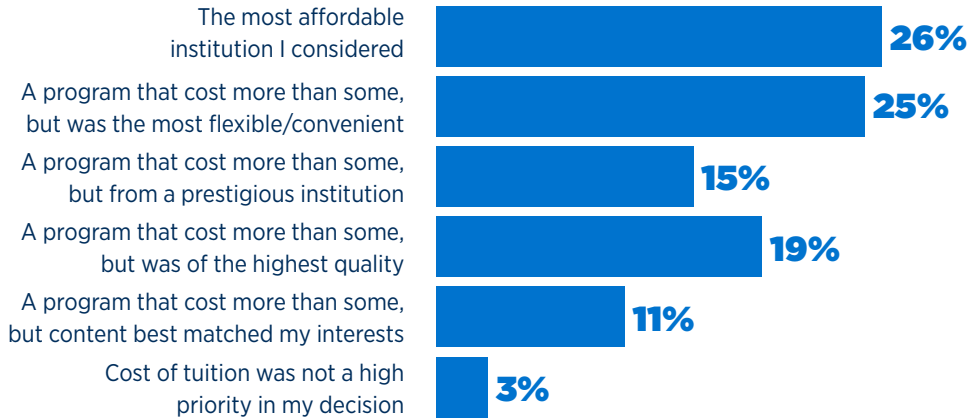$0-59,000

27%
$60,000-119,999
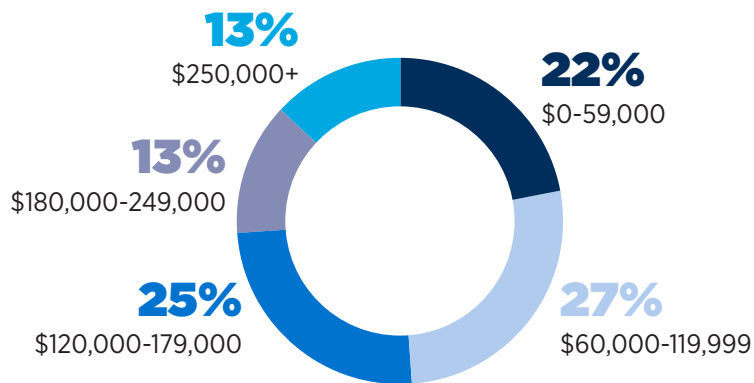
2. **Case studies**: Case studies take it a step further. With case studies, institutions present anonymized real-student data and stories that show how those students are able to afford the program. The best case studies show sticker prices; deduct grants, scholarships, ans corporate partnerships; and even show a monthly loan payment where appropriate. Be creative and thoughtful about how you present these student stories and then tie them back to outcomes. Finish with stories of students who benefited from your program, grew personally, financially, and gave back.

The purpose of both of these marketing pieces is to help the student make the transition from sticker price to the more realistic net price.

—Aaron Mahl, Senior Vice President, Graduate and Online Partnerships

22) As important as cost is, only one in four enroll at the lowest priced program they considered.

Balancing cost with other factors

Factor	Percentage
The most affordable institution I considered	26%
A program that cost more than some, but was the most flexible/convenient	25%
A program that cost more than some, but from a prestigious institution	15%
A program that cost more than some, but was of the highest quality	19%
A program that cost more than some, but content best matched my interests	11%
Cost of tuition was not a high priority in my decision	3%

Balancing cost with other factors by student enrollment status

FACTOR/CONSIDERATION	NOT ENROLLED	ENROLLED NOW/ ENROLLED RECENTLY
The most affordable institution I considered	29%	23%
A program that cost more than some, but was the most flexible/convenient	26%	25%
A program that cost more than some, but from a prestigious institution	13%	20%
A program that cost more than some, but was of the highest quality	20%	17%
A program that cost more than some, but content best matched my interests	10%	12%
Cost of tuition was not a high priority in my decision	3%	4%

💬 Implications for graduate programs

For more than a decade, starting in the aftermath of the "Great Recession," increasing numbers of graduate students have indicated that cost factors are among the most important factors in their enrollment decision. While national reports by organizations such as Aslanian Market Research had never before documented cost among the top three factors, a 2018 report[2] indicates that the cost of tuition was the most frequently selected factor in the enrollment decisions of graduate students. Then in 2021, RNL's graduate student research indicated that cost was the third most frequently cited factor (behind the match of content to interests and the availability of flexible formats). Was our 2021 finding the beginning of a new trend, or was it an anomaly? Data included in this report indicate that cost issues are back on top as the most frequently cited important enrollment decision factors.

Institutions need to understand if this means that significant numbers of graduate students therefore enroll in the most affordable program they considered (since the vast majority do apply to more than one program). If they do not enroll in the most affordable program, which institutional and/or program characteristics are most important in enrolling in a more expensive program?

Online students are most likely to enroll in the most affordable program they considered, while both classroom and hybrid students are most likely to enroll in a program that may cost more, but is the most flexible and/or convenient. One could argue that online students by the very nature of the format are only considering flexible and convenient programs and are therefore freed from this consideration.

—Scott Jeffe, Vice President, Research, Graduate and Online

23) Graduate students almost always limit the number of credits in which they enroll in order to manage their out of pocket costs.

How frequently did/will you limit the number of credits in which you enroll in order to manage your "out of pocket" expenses?

40% Regularly

11% Almost always

14% Never

35% Rarely

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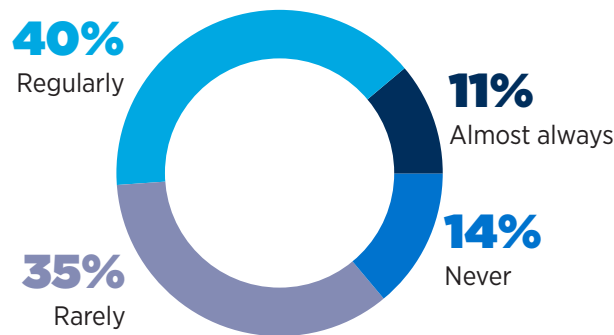
[2] Aslanian, Carol & Scott Jeffe, Post-Traditional Graduate Students: Insights for Program Development and Marketing, Aslanian Market Research, 2018.

Limiting credits by household income

HOW OFTEN LIMITED CREDITS	UNDER $25,000	$25,000–$49,999	$50,000–$74,999	$75,000–$99,999	$100,000–$124,999	$125,000–$149,999	$150,000 OR MORE
Never	15%	15%	12%	12%	15%	13%	22%
Rarely	35%	38%	37%	34%	34%	28%	36%
Regularly	38%	38%	41%	43%	38%	45%	35%
Almost always	12%	10%	10%	11%	14%	14%	7%

Implications for graduate programs

One of the many things that campuses contending with enrollment shortfalls often consider is a strategy to encourage enrolled students to take more credits each term or semester. While this may seem to make sense in revenue-driven programs designed for people who are not enrolling full time, the reality is that this is quite unlikely to be a workable strategy.

The reality is that nearly all students do limit the number of credits in which they enroll in order to manage their out-of-pocket costs. Classroom students, albeit the smallest student group in this study, are least likely to do this, and online students are most likely to do this, and perhaps even more interestingly, there are not significant differences in these patterns by total household income. It appears that irrespective of income, graduate students only want to spend a certain amount on their studies at any one time.

The takeaway for institutions is that a strategy that seeks to build revenue by encouraging enrolled students to take (and pay for) more credits is unlikely to be a highly successful strategy.

—Scott Jeffe, Vice President, Research, Graduate and Online

24) Graduate students are quite likely to choose a program that offers a small, one-time award as an enrollment incentive.

Would a one-time scholarship or award of $1,000 make you select one program of interest over others you were considering?

ALL

👍 **72%**
Yes

👎 **28%**
No

Would a one-time scholarship of $1,500 make you select one program over others?

ANSWER FROM THE 28% WHO SAID "NO" ABOVE

👍 **16%**
Yes

👎 **84%**
No

Would a one-time scholarship of $2,000 make you select one program over others?

ANSWER FROM THE 84% WHO SAID "NO" ABOVE

👍 **34%**
Yes

👎 **66%**
No

Implications for graduate programs

Graduate programs can help students make the transition from sticker price to net price by transparently marketing any types of awards offered. Given the previous responses indicating that students would eliminate an institution due to sticker price, it is not surprising that even a small, one-time award of $1,000 would influence student choice—after all, 55 percent of graduate students use personal funds to pay their graduate tuition. For those respondents, a $1,000 award is $1,000 fewer dollars out of their pockets or on their loans.

Among the 28 percent who said that the $1,000 award would not influence their enrollment decision, only 16 percent indicated that an award of $1,500 would make them select one program over another. This finding suggests that although students are price sensitive, there are other factors at play among these students and therefore a larger award may have diminishing returns for campuses, both in terms of yield increases and net tuition revenue (NTR) gains.

These findings suggest the importance of a data-driven awarding strategy. For campuses with larger admit pools, financial aid modeling and planning is a necessity. Price sensitivities vary by program, income level, and academic profile. Given these complexities, campuses cannot afford (both literally and figuratively) to deploy an award strategy without modeling the impact of increased or decreased discounts. Considering the challenges in the market and student expectations, investing in an awarding strategy is at worst an insurance policy (ensuring the funds deployed are strategic) and at best a route to growing NTR and enrollment.

—Aaron Mahl, Senior Vice President, Graduate and Online Partnerships

Personas

This study revealed that today's graduate students are not highly likely to click on digital ads because they found the "copy" to be interesting or compelling. This stands in contrast to RNL's *2022 Online Student Recruitment Report* in which online students were highly likely to find ads interesting and compelling. Is this because online programs are (often) engaging in more sophisticated digital marketing strategies? We know that the bulk of RNL's digital marketing clients are online (albeit online graduate) programs, and we also know that among the institutions we talk with regularly, they are working toward more sophisticated methods of connecting with the graduate audience.

With this in mind, we present a final observation focused on just one of the many subject area disciplines in this study to showcase that even within a discipline there are at least two—if not more—student demographics ("personas") that marketers should align strategies and messaging with. We will discuss these strategies and messages in a subsequent report, but below we discuss the high-level personas within the **business** discipline.

25) Within every discipline, there are likely to be more than one "persona" to which marketing, outreach, and cultivation strategies should be aligned.

Characteristics that make up personas for students in business

MOTIVATION

15%	79%	6%
To change careers	To advance my career	Personal reasons

LEVEL OF CREDENTIAL

11%	14%	72%	3%
Post-baccalaureate certificate	Graduate certificate	Master's degree	Doctoral degree

AGE

18%	35%	30%	15%	2%
20-24	25-29	30-39	40-49	50 or older

INSTRUCTIONAL FORMAT

45%	42%	13%
All online	Partially online	All classroom

FREQUENCY OF LIMITING CREDITS TO MANAGE EXPENSES

14%	37%	37%	12%
Never	Rarely	Regularly	Almost always

GENDER

56%	43%	1%	0%
Female	Male	Non-binary/ gender fluid	Something else

HOUSEHOLD INCOME

9%	18%	24%	19%	13%	7%	10%
Under $25,000	$25,000–$49,999	$50,000-$74,999	$75,000-$99,999	$100,000-$124,999	$125,000-$149,999	$150,000 or more

EMPLOYED AT TIME APPLIED TO GRADUATE STUDY

86%	14%
Yes	No

The demographics of graduate business students make it clear that there is more than one student persona for which content, messaging, and a marketing strategy should be developed. Because the vast majority of these students enroll in master's programs, for the sake of this exercise, we will assume that the majority seeking a degree are looking to attain an MBA.

Marketers and recruiters may think that the best course of action is to heavily focus on blanketed, general, MBA-specific messages to the masses in order to attract as many students as possible. However, although an MBA is a single program, the interested population is not homogeneous. They have differing buying power, influencers, needs, expectations, and are in different places in life. Consider the following:

- **Different points of view**: About one in five is 20-25 in age, indicating a group most likely moving to graduate school immediately following graduation (or shortly thereafter). This group is drastically different from the 35 percent in the 25-29 age group (or even older). These are prospects who have work experience, make a living, and potentially have a young family. The life demands for these two groups alone contrast greatly—and how a program is communicated to each could be the difference between meeting or falling short of enrollment goals.

- **Differing life situations**: While almost all business students enroll in order to advance their career, this means different things to younger students than older students, and different things to students of higher incomes than those of lower incomes (of which there are two distinct "bands.") This is another element in persona development that affects messaging and positioning in the market.

- **Different programmatic needs**: Two-thirds are between the ages of 25 and 39, more than half (56 percent) are female, and 86 percent are employed. These factors almost always combine to indicate a group keenly interested in modality (leaning toward online delivery), while the younger (because they are closer to their undergraduate studies) and possibly the older (because it is what they know) may lean more toward classroom and hybrid delivery.

- **Different messaging and positioning**: Those students who are working professionals or are older and returning to the classroom for career change or advancement, or of higher incomes, are also highly likely to be sensitive to a school's ability to differentiate marketing, channel, creative, messaging, and website/social media placement strategies to their specific persona. Many programs realize the need to personalize for the young people—because they grew up with a personalized experience—but fewer may realize that other student demographics also expect it. Effectively conveying the benefits of different modalities to distinct persona-types could also significantly improve lead generation efforts.

These data are only meant to begin a discussion about the creation of content, messaging, and marketing strategy. They are also at the discipline level, while the most effective personas are developed at the program level. This example also uses national data instead of regional. While there is a higher level of consistency across regions in these types of factors than many program stakeholders may think, ensuring a regional perspective is also highly likely to contribute to your success and contribute to greater numbers of your prospective students opening a future digital ad that you spend good money placing because it was "of interest to them or intriguing to them."

—Charles Ramos, Vice President, Graduate and Online Partnerships

Final Takeaways

💬 **Implications to graduate recruitment from the perspective of marketing planning**

The data shared in this report serves to guide and inform a wide range of strategies that institutions will develop regarding their graduate marketing, recruitment, and enrollment efforts. In addition to the set of specific implications shared by RNL experts in this report, there were a number of things that span multiple tables and charts that those responsible for the development of graduate marketing plans should be sure to include as underpinnings to next year's annual marketing plans:

- Referral is underestimated as a potential marketing tool and strategy. Referral can happen in many realms: alumni, current students, faculty, advisors, and other sources.

- Marketing close to the institution's home location (even for online programs) is likely to be a good investment.

- Cost, future career opportunities, and financial aid opportunities are important to emphasize in your messaging, and quality attributes about the institution should be framed around each of these items.

- Both application and enrollment process information and more detailed program information should be presented as clearly as possible and should be made easy to access.

- Look at the data on the program areas with the greatest and weakest demand in order to make the case for developing new programs or sunsetting others.

Finally, do not do anything until you have thoroughly examined your own internal data via a robust and honest situation analysis. RNL stands ready to assist you in many capacities to help you interpret, use, and leverage this information as you plan strategies to ensure your graduate programs are well positioned for the future of the institution you serve.

—Reena Lichtenfeld, Ed.D., Vice President, Consulting Services

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Methodology

The survey that underpins this report was administered by electronic survey in March 2023. The survey was completed by 1,502 individuals who met the following criteria:

1. Being recently enrolled in graduate study (last three years), currently enrolled in graduate study, or planning to enroll in graduate (within the next two years).

2. Enrolled in (or planning to enroll in) a master's or doctoral degree program or a credit-bearing post-baccalaureate or graduate level certificate program.

3. Being at least 20 years of age.

All respondents were offered a small incentive for their participation in this survey and methodologies were in place to ensure that multiple responses were not offered by the same IP address.

About the RNL Contributors

Scott Jeffe: Scott Jeffe is the principal researcher for this report. He is vice president of graduate and online research at RNL. For more than 25 years, Scott has worked with more than 300 institutions in 40+ states to apply market data to strategic decision making in relation to graduate, adult undergraduate, and online programs. In these experiences, he has developed expertise in how institutions can align with student demand while upholding institutional mission and values. He is a co-author of RNL's Strategic Enrollment Planning: A Dynamic Collaboration (3rd Edition), as well as being the principal researcher for RNL's 2022 Online Student Recruitment Report, RNL's 2022 Online Program Marketing and Recruitment Practices Report, the 2021 RNL Graduate Marketing and Recruitment Practices Report, the 2021 RNL Graduate Student Recruitment Report, and dozens of RNL blogs and articles.

Andrea Carroll-Glover: Andrea Carroll-Glover brings nearly 30 years of experience to her role as vice president and senior consultant at RNL. She works with RNL partners to solve challenges by leveraging market insights and analytics. Andrea's expertise draws from a depth of understanding of the adult and online higher education sector. Her marketing and enrollment management knowledge enable her to come alongside institutions to enhance lead generation, marketing, recruitment, and enhance teaching and learning. Andrea was previously vice provost for online strategy and programs/chief online officer at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota.

Chelsea Hoffman: Chelsea Hoffman is an experienced enrollment leader and an expert in enrollment strategies that harness technology. She works with institutions to propel the success of their graduate and online programs, optimize their recruitment efforts, assess the enrollment potential of academic programs, and achieve their enrollment goals more efficiently. In multiple leadership roles over her 14 years at Columbia Southern University, she directed major shifts that led to transformational success. This included optimizing program and course offerings, engaging faculty, and integrating systems to streamline enrollment and student support.

Reena Lichtenfeld, EdD: Dr. Reena Lichtenfeld brings more than 20 years of experience in higher education administration to RNL as vice president for consulting services. Her areas of expertise include graduate, undergraduate, and online admissions; strategic recruitment and enrollment management/planning; and policy, accreditation, governance, and compliance. Reena is a results-driven passionate higher education professional who brings a broad spectrum of proven tools and strategies to the table. Prior to joining RNL, she served as assistant dean for enrollment management at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College of Education and Human Development.

Aaron Mahl, PhD: Dr. Aaron Mahl joined RNL in 2013 delivering enrollment management consulting and strategic financial aid solutions to RNL partners. Aaron has worked with dozens of campuses to optimize their enrollment practices and financial aid policies. Before joining RNL, Aaron served as chief admissions officer at Trinity International University (IL) where he championed a collaborative and data-driven approach to student recruitment. Aaron's work at Trinity included developing and executing a strategic recruitment plan and revolutionizing the campus visit and event strategy. Aaron currently consults and serves RNL's graduate and online partners throughout the Midwest.

Erin Minsart: Erin Minsart is the vice president of integrated marketing at RNL, leading a team of digital strategists to ensure campaign success for our college and university clients. She also oversees the development of lead generation strategy, implementation, and ongoing management of campaigns. Erin offers more than 20 years of marketing and leadership expertise from the healthcare, nonprofit, consumer services, manufacturing, and telecommunications sectors. As a former higher education instructor, she is passionate about education and ready to apply her broad marketing knowledge within higher education.

Nate Mouttet: A career higher education enrollment leader, Nate helps RNL providers adopt growth and scale solutions to stabilize or expand their graduate and online programs. Nate is an expert in graduate and online program marketing and program development and delivery as part of larger strategic enrollment planning. He helps RNL partner institutions adopt new technology, data-driven strategy, and key services to enhance the entire student lifecycle and maximize success. Nate served as vice president for enrollment management and marketing at Seattle Pacific University from 2014 to 2022 and as vice president at North Park University from 2010 to2014.

Shane Pruitt: Dr. Shane Pruitt brings 15 years of recruitment and enrollment experience to his role as the executive consultant in RNL's Enrollment Consulting Services. Dr. Pruitt has a proven track record of successfully implementing data-informed enrollment strategy as an on-campus administrator, EdTech consultant, and higher education subject matter expert for a leading management consulting firm. His areas of expertise include undergraduate, graduate, and professional programming; enrollment data analysis and interpretation; and external partnership-building and pipeline development. He previously served as director of student recruitment and advising at University of Georgia.

Charles Ramos: Charles Ramos offers 25 years of experience as an enrollment professional and consultant. He has effected positive change that has equated to increased enrollment and sustainable revenue growth in the undergraduate, graduate, online, and non-traditional markets for over 100 institutions across the United States and Canada. He started his career at Saint Louis University, where he began building his enrollment management expertise. Through time spent at RNL and ACT, Inc., he has been deeply immersed in consulting in the areas of recruitment, retention, and strategic enrollment management.

Holly Tapper: Holly Tapper offers a strong background as a university administrator leading successful graduate programs, with extensive experience in online learning for nearly 15 years. Prior to coming to RNL, she was director of online operations at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, where she had a track record of success. Under her leadership, more than 20 online programs brought in $15M/year. Previously, Holly also served as dean of graduate programs at Globe University/Minnesota School of Business, overseeing programs across 30 campuses that generated $14M/year.

Emily Wood, Ed.D.: Emily is an experienced higher education professional who helps institutions set strategic vision for instructional design and program development as they bring key academic programs online. As vice president of instructional design, she leads RNL's team of instructional design experts to provide high-performing service to students and higher education leaders to amplify program success. Previously, Emily held a leadership role at Helix Education, now part of the RNL family. She was also the founding director of the Center for Engagement and Learning at Pierce College in Washington and a tenured associate professor.

About the Research Sponsors

RNL (Ruffalo Noel Levitz) is the leading provider of solutions for traditional college enrollment, graduate and online enrollment, college student success, and higher education and nonprofit fundraising. The firm serves more than 1,500 institutions through data-driven solutions focused on helping them meet their enrollment goals, guide more students toward completing their degrees, and increase giving back to those institutions. With a deep knowledge of the industry and a large roster of experienced experts, RNL provides institutions the ability to scale their efforts by tapping into a community of support and resources.

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