



2025 Graduate Student Recruitment Report

Looking at graduate student
behavior by primary motivation



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Introduction

The *2025 Graduate Student Recruitment Report* is RNL's third national study of the expectations and preferences of America's graduate students. This report provides graduate program leaders and stakeholders with detailed insights into the motivations, expectations, and behaviors of prospective graduate students during the enrollment process. These insights can drive strategies that will help institutions position their programs more competitively, move graduate students through the enrollment process more quickly, and ultimately drive enrollment growth.

Anticipated demographic shifts in the American populace and a fluid regulatory environment are creating unparalleled levels of uncertainty. At the same time, the expectations and decision-making priorities of today's graduate students have changed dramatically as Millennials and increasing numbers of Gen Z students dominate the graduate education market. This is further complicated by graduate students having more programs and modalities to choose from than ever before.

For decades, students have seen graduate study as a route to career advancement or change, but the incoming generation is even more focused on their career success as the ultimate indicator of the ROI of their studies. With this in mind, we present the data throughout this report by primary motivation: career advancement, career change, and personal reasons/lifelong learning. A fourth motivation—maintaining current careers—did not have sufficient responses to be included in the report, an indicator that, for graduate students, it really is about opportunity for advancement or change.

Recommended Actions and Initiatives

1. Career outcomes are the foundation of program value.

Three-quarters (74%) of graduate students identify career advancement as their primary motivation for enrollment, and over 90% indicate that easy access to career-related information on program pages is essential to their decision-making process.

Recommendation: Institutions should prominently feature current, verifiable career outcomes—such as job placement rates, average starting salaries, and employer partnerships—on all recruitment materials and program webpages. This includes creating dedicated sections or dashboards that detail recent alumni trajectories, industry certifications obtained, and relevant labor market statistics. By showcasing concrete career pathways, institutions will align program value with student expectations and strengthen recruitment for career-focused students.

2. Flexible delivery models are a non-negotiable requirement.

Nearly half of future graduate students surveyed plan to enroll in hybrid (online + in-person formats) and nearly 40% plan to choose fully online study. Only 10-15% of graduate students now enroll in programs that are exclusively offered in the classroom. When considering full academic year enrollment, fully online headcount now exceeds fully in-person enrollment by more than 200,000 students.

Recommendation: To support enrollment growth, institutions should ensure high-demand graduate programs are available in fully online or hybrid modalities. Programs should be designed using instructional design best practices for online delivery (e.g., asynchronous modules, interactive discussion forums, and virtual labs). Marketing and admissions teams must communicate format options clearly and prominently, and academic stakeholders should consider how online and in-person tracks can serve as complementary pathways that can best meet the needs of individual students.

3. Program-specific personalization throughout the recruitment lifecycle.

Graduate students rank program-specific information (e.g., curriculum details, specialization options) as the best way that programs can tailor content. Personalized initial outreach (especially via email) is expected by 90% of graduate students, and 53% indicate that personalized contact is essential or very important in choosing a program. Further, 80% indicate that personalized contact is very important at each stage of the enrollment process.

Recommendation: Institutions must fully leverage their customer relationship management (CRM) systems to automate and customize messaging specific to the academic program. Adding segmentation based on declared program interests, student information, and engagement behaviors is essential. Communications should include templated—but tailored—emails (and text messages, especially after application) that address each student's specific academic goals, highlight relevant faculty research, share program-specific career outcomes, and outline clear next steps. Response times must align with student expectations of receiving a response within hours of submission. Finally, communication flows must extend from first contact to first day of class. There is no point at which the student is impervious to dropping out of the enrollment process.

4. Streamline and support the application processes to reduce barriers.

Nine out of ten graduate students report that at least some types of application requirements could make them discontinue the application process. Letters of recommendation (35%), essays (33%), and application fees (31%) are most onerous requirements. While only 27% view transcript requirements as a potential deterrent, 80% report they would prefer institutions that offer transcript retrieval services.

Recommendation: Graduate schools should integrate transcript retrieval assistance—either through paid services or institutional partnerships with academic record vendors—to alleviate applicant burden. Simultaneously, remove non-essential application components (e.g., optional essays) or replace lengthy personal statements with shorter, targeted prompts that directly relate to career goals. Evaluate the need for letters of recommendation with the understanding that one-third of potential students could decide not to follow through with applying. Throughout the process, clear and consistent communication with students is essential so they understand all enrollment requirements and deadlines.

5. Focus marketing content on career preparation and financial transparency.

Sixty percent of graduate students rank academic program details as the most effective engagement tool during recruitment, with 50% prioritizing financial-aid information, and 49% expecting career data in communications. At the same time, 91% indicate that they enroll for career-related reasons.

Recommendation: Develop modular content assets—such as program brochures, microsites, and interactive cost calculators—that allow applicants to filter and explore information based on career outcomes, specialization tracks, and scholarship opportunities. Leverage dynamic web components (e.g., collapsible sections for financial options or alumni testimonials) to deliver tailored content without overwhelming the user. Ensure that content is localized to each target audience (e.g., domestic vs. international students) while maintaining consistent branding and messaging. Finally, review graduate programs from the lens of career preparation to ensure that programs align with the current needs of related career paths.

6. Emphasize employment outcomes and ROI to differentiate in a crowded market.

Seventy percent of students weigh employment prospects heavily when choosing a program, and 60 percent identify strong outcomes data as a program's most compelling value proposition. Conversely, 48 percent believe program cost correlates with quality.

Recommendation: Position employment outcomes statistics and employer connections as the centerpiece of program marketing and web content. This could include publishing annual employment reports, hosting virtual panel discussions with recent alumni, and creating industry advisory boards to support curriculum development and bring together students with their future employers. Price programs competitively, but anchor cost messaging around tangible ROI such as average alumni salary increases or percentage employed or promoted within six months of graduation.

7. Allow cross enrollment, offer concentrations, and ensure year-round enrollment.

Nearly 85 percent of graduate students prefer programs in which they can take a variety of course types (classroom, online, hybrid), and more than 75 percent view availability of concentrations and year-round enrollment as important or essential.

Recommendation: Implement rolling admissions cycles—such as quarterly, tri-semester, or monthly start dates—to accommodate diverse life responsibilities and allow students to join programs at multiple entry points. Coordinate scheduling so that specializations can be completed incrementally, enabling learners to tailor their education path and facilitating “stop-out” and “re-entry” without penalty.

Report Organization and Survey Participation

This report does not repeat all the areas covered in our 2021 and 2023 graduate student-focused reports, but we begin each section with key data highlights from these past reports that continue to be important for graduate enrollment growth. Find these under the “Things We Know” headers throughout this report.

Finally, in light of the degree to which graduate students enroll for career related reasons, we have organized the data in this year's report by their stated primary motivation: to **change careers**, **advance their career**, and **personal reasons**.



About the participants

1,390

Total respondents

56%

Prospective students

44%

Enrolled/recently enrolled

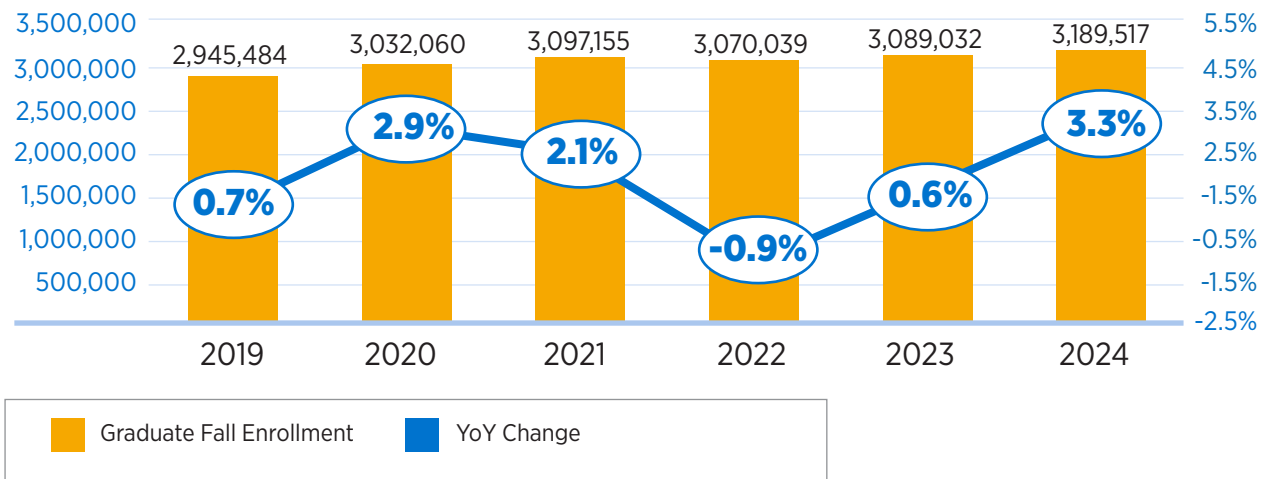
77%

Millennial or Gen Z

The Continued Growth of the Graduate Market

Graduate level enrollment continues to be the strongest growth area in American higher education. After an enrollment dip in fall 2022—which, at the time, many worried represented a “correction” to pre-pandemic rates of growth—graduate enrollment has seen consecutive years of growth bringing it to an all-time high of nearly 3.2 million in the fall of 2024. Specifically, we have seen incremental enrollment growth over this period, resulting in more than 163,000 additional graduate students when comparing 2019 (the last pre-pandemic year) and 2024—representing 8.5% growth for this period.

Fall Graduate Enrollment



SOURCE: Analysis of National Student Clearinghouse CTEE, Fall 2024 using reported YoY percent growth.

Non-degree graduate enrollment has seen spectacular growth over this same period. At 27% in this same 2019-2024 period, non-degree programs have been given considerable attention as institutions seek to be more responsive to graduate students’ wants and needs. While this should be applauded, it is important to note that this growth, when considered numerically, only represents an additional 20,000 graduate students, and total enrollment has risen to just 94,000 (or 4 percent of the master’s total).

Creating, launching, and successfully marketing both graduate degrees and non-degree offerings has become a more complicated and expensive proposition in recent years, primarily due to increased competition. The breadth of choice that is now available to graduate students is greater than at any point in history. This is one of four key challenges that graduate schools and programs will contend with in the next several years.

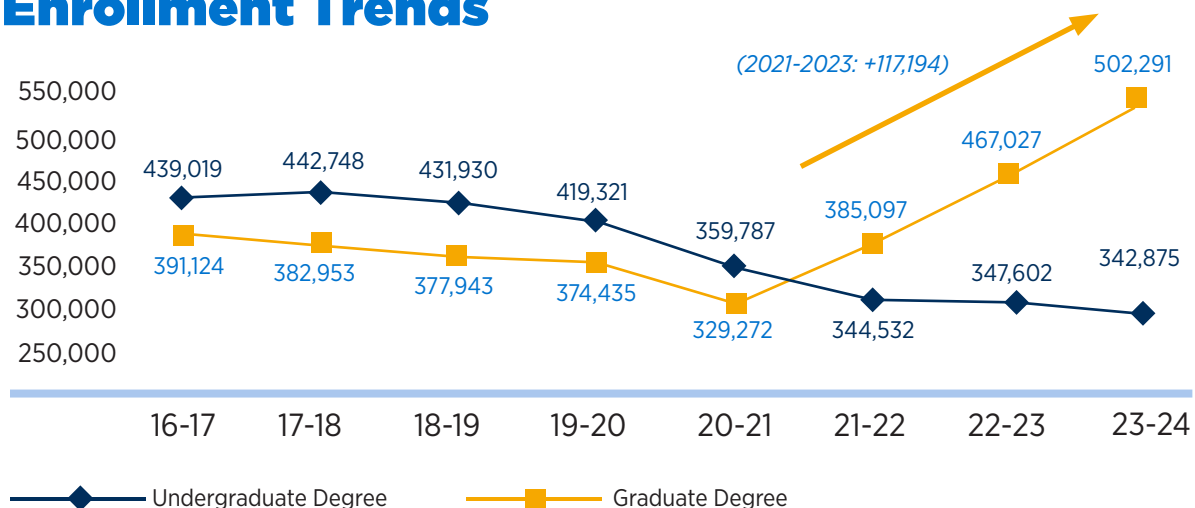
Four Key Challenges for Graduate Enrollment

1. International student decline

The period between 2021 and 2024 saw significant post-pandemic international graduate student enrollment growth. While undergraduate international student enrollment has not yet recovered from the period culminating in the pandemic, tens of thousands of additional international graduate students flocked to American colleges and universities. In fact, during this time international graduate enrollment grew by more than **117,000**, and in the single year between 2020 and 2021 erased the pandemic-era decline.

However, the international student market is in disarray and decline. A May 2025 analysis of Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) student visa data indicates that by late March 2025, international student enrollment had already shrunk by more than 130,000 students. The analysis compared the number of international students in March 2025 with the number in March 2024. Changes to student visa programs in the United States may further impact these trends in the coming years.

International Student Enrollment Trends



SOURCE: *Open Doors 2024, Fast Facts AND Historical Fast Facts 2010-2023*.
Institute of International Education. November 2024.

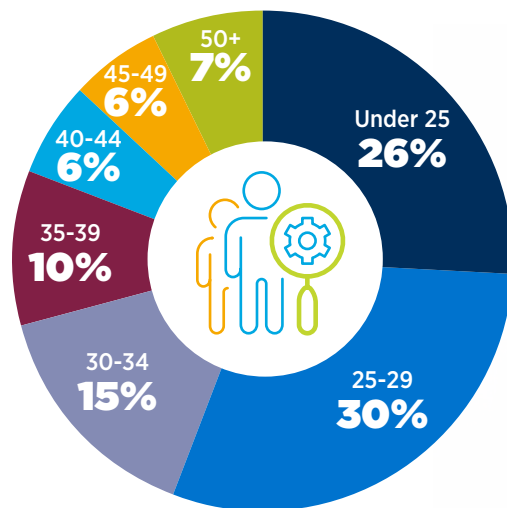
Conclusion: Just as the importance of graduate enrollment growth becomes critical (with a demographic shift projected to begin in late 2025/early 2026), many graduate schools will need to put greater emphasis on domestic student enrollment to make up for lost international students. Programs with large proportions of international students are going to have the most to learn about the population that resides in their “backyard.” They have different motivations, preferences, decision-making priorities, and expectations.

2. Changing student expectations with generational shifts in the graduate student population

The latest federal data for fall 2023 show that Millennials comprised 55% of graduate student enrollment, Gen Z 26%, and Gen X and older students 19%. RNL's *2023 Graduate Student Recruitment Report* focused considerable attention on the shift from the Gen X/Millennial market to the Millennial/Gen Z market that was already in full swing at that point.

The most important thing to consider is that the market will make another shift by January 2027. By that time, with no substantial changes to the patterns of enrollment, more than half of the graduate market will be comprised of Gen Z. Millennials will contract to about one-third and Gen X to about 10%.

Graduate Enrollment by Age Group (Fall 2023)



SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics, *IPEDS Fall 2023 Snapshot* (degree producing institutions)

Conclusion: Millennials have dramatically changed graduate education, bringing new expectations for personalized contact, timely responses, engagement throughout the enrollment journey, greater program alignment with their interests, and significantly greater access to technology-enhanced processes and programs. However, they fundamentally believe in higher education and think it is worth their investment. Gen Z presents a new set of challenges, most profoundly that they demonstrate less belief in the power of higher education and have far less loyalty to using colleges and universities for the education and training they need. Institutions will have to do more convincing, offer clearer demonstrations of their ROI, and further adjust their policies to a truly student-first approach.

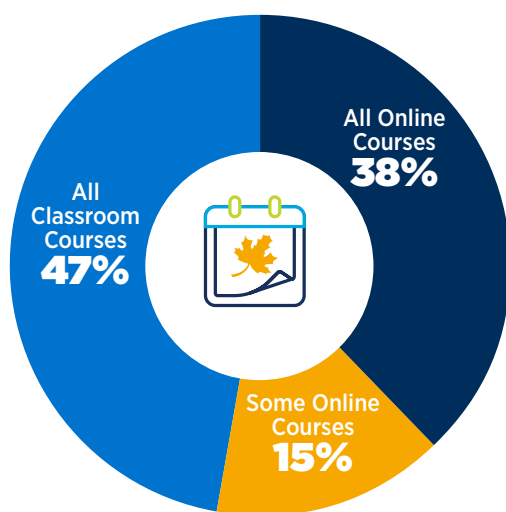
3. Shifts to online formats

RNL has typically reported graduate enrollment by format using *Fall Snapshot* enrollment data from the federal IPEDS. These data capture how many students are enrolled in various types of courses shortly into the fall semester. Over the last several years, these data have shown a convergence between graduate students enrolling in all online study (“All Distance Courses” in IPEDS terminology) and all classroom study (“No Distance Courses”). In 2022, these data showed 47% of graduate students enrolled in classroom study and 38% enrolled in online study.

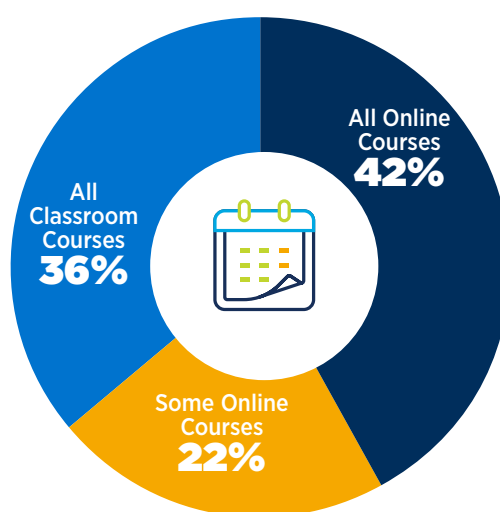
However, online and even partially online students are far less wedded to first enrolling in the fall semester. Many of the largest online programs enroll new students throughout the year. What would a snapshot of the full academic year look like? IPEDS gathers these data (“12-Month Unduplicated Headcount”) and the findings are astounding: **graduate students enrolled in fully online study in 2022-2023 outnumbered those studying in all classroom programs by more than 200,000 students.**

Graduate Enrollment by Format

FALL ENROLLMENT (2022)



ACADEMIC YEAR ENROLLMENT (2022-23)



SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics, *IPEDS Fall Snapshot 2022* (left) and *12-Month Unduplicated Headcount Enrollment 2022-2023* (right).

Conclusion: Institutions seeking graduate enrollment growth must ensure that all of their high demand programs are available in a fully online format. Online and classroom versions of programs need to be seen as complementary rather than competing offerings. Institutions seeking to protect enrollment in classroom programs by not providing an online option will lose students to institutions that align with student modality preference. Concerns of “cannibalization” of classroom enrollment by online programs are eliminated when programs are collaborative and complementary. Consequently, it is also important to design graduate courses for all program formats.

4. More choices for graduate students than ever before

Today’s graduate students have more choices—in total number, in subject, in format—available to them than at any point in history. This is a result of the incredible growth of graduate level offerings over the last 15 years, especially at the master’s level.

In the long term, this has created increased competition for graduate students which may be challenging, particularly among programs that resist aligning with the expectations and needs of graduate students. In April 2024, the higher education researcher Robert Kelchen published a study on the growth of master’s degrees. He documented the addition of nearly 14,000 new master’s degree offerings between 2005 and 2021. This brought the total number of available master’s programs to 33,546. When divided by the entire master’s audience (about 2.1M of a total of 3.2M graduate students) there is a program for every 62 master’s students—demonstrating how much more competitive the graduate space has become.

Growth in Available Graduate Programs

Available Graduate Programs
2005-2006

19,858

Available Graduate Programs
2021-2022

33,546

Number of Additional Programs

13,688

Percent Change

69%

SOURCE: R. Kelchen (April 2024), *Exploring the Growth of Master’s Degree Programs in the United States*, Postsecondary Equity and Economics Research Project.

Conclusion: There has never been more pressure on institutions to ensure that their programs enrollment strategies align with the expectations and needs of today’s graduate students. With dozens of options within driving distance or available online, students will not enroll in a program that does not align with their needs. They want to enroll close to home, at an institution they are familiar with, but they are willing to go further afield if they can’t find what they need. Furthermore, it is critically important that institutions have the right programs aligned to the market so that marketing and recruitment resources are allocated strategically to programs that will have the most beneficial impact on enrollment.

Today's Graduate Students

Over the past five years, three national studies have provided RNL with a clear portrait of today's graduate students. While certain aspects of their experiences have shown some degree of change, other aspects have been so consistent as to not need repeated data collection. To that end, here are things we know:

Two-thirds of graduate students apply to more than one program, and the majority gravitate toward programs in business, healthcare, or computer science disciplines. An overwhelming majority of graduate students also choose programs offering accelerated terms, underscoring the premium they place on flexibility and efficiency.



Things We Know

Over the last five years, graduate students have consistently told RNL the following:

67%

Apply to more than one program.

58%

Enroll in business, healthcare, or computer science programs.

81%

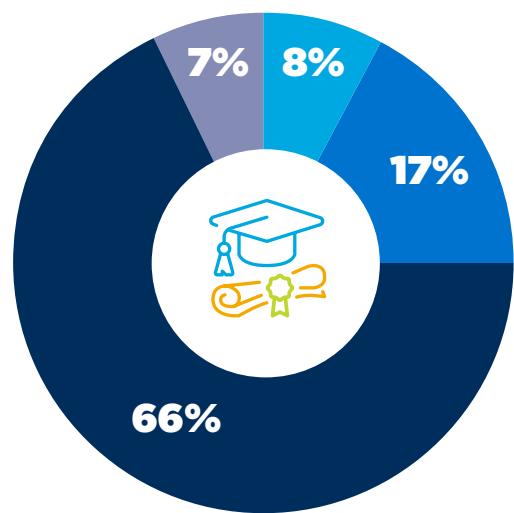
Enroll in programs offering accelerated terms.

*For more findings, see the **2021 Graduate Student Recruitment Report** and the **2023 Graduate Student Recruitment Report**.*

Behind these aggregate figures lies a rich tapestry of motivations and backgrounds. Whether driven by a desire to change careers, advance within their field, or pursue personal enrichment, graduate students are enrolling in the full spectrum of academic credentials—from post-baccalaureate certificates to doctoral degrees. They embrace every modality of delivery, from fully online to fully in-classroom. They enter their programs with widely varying time gaps since undergraduate study and lengths of prior employment, reflecting the diversity of life circumstances that bring them back to school.

In what follows, we present data organized by their stated primary motivation to enroll in graduate study—in recognition of the importance they place on leveraging their graduate study to enhance their careers or career prospects.

Graduate Credential Pursued



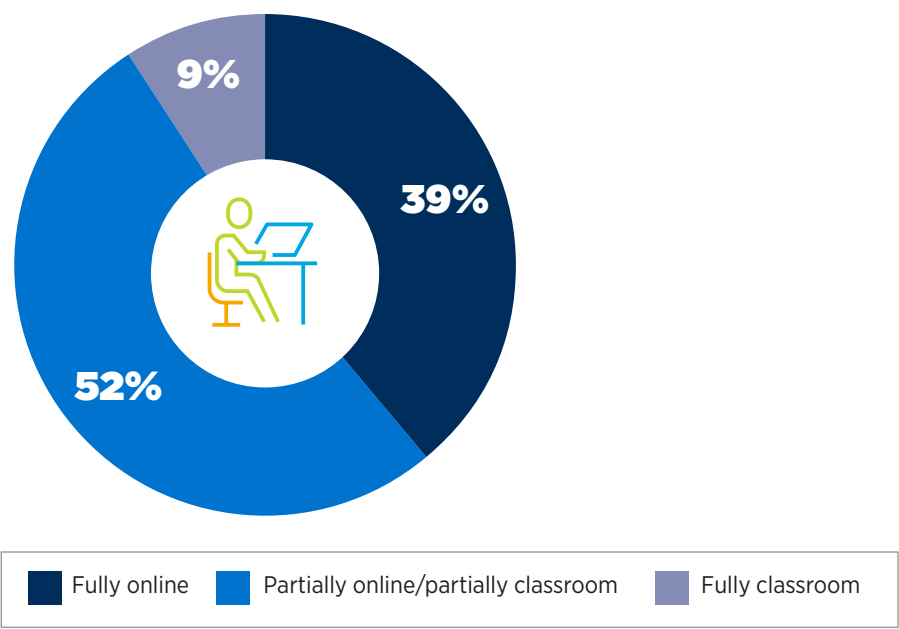
Master's degree	Graduate certificate	Post-baccalaureate certificate	Doctoral degree
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GRADUATE CREDENTIAL BEING PURSUED	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Post-baccalaureate certificate	15%	7%	8%	8%
Graduate certificate	15%	18%	13%	17%
Master's degree	66%	69%	64%	66%
Doctoral degree	5%	6%	15%	7%

Totals equal less than 100% because of rounding.



Graduate Format Pursued



FORMAT OF GRADUATE STUDY	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Fully online	42%	39%	38%	39%
Partially online/partially classroom	48%	52%	51%	52%
Fully classroom	10%	8%	12%	9%

GAP SINCE UNDERGRADUATE STUDY	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Within the last year	13%	8%	10%	9%
1-5 years	33%	46%	24%	42%
6-10 years	26%	31%	27%	30%
11-15 years	15%	8%	17%	10%
16 years or more	13%	7%	23%	9%

LENGTH OF EMPLOYMENT PRIOR TO GRADUATE STUDY	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Fewer than 3 years	27%	25%	14%	24%
3-10 years	34%	52%	35%	47%
More than 10 years	33%	20%	42%	24%
I am/was not employed, but I am/was a student	3%	3%	4%	3%
I am/was not employed	3%	1%	5%	1%

Totals over 100% are due to rounding.

Five Graduate Market Takeaways

1. Master's degrees dominate—but motivations differ. Two-thirds of survey participants (68%) are in or plan to enroll in master's programs, with those advancing their careers slightly more represented (71%) than those studying to change careers (68%) or those studying for personal reasons (65%).

2. Blended formats are the new norm. Just over half of our respondents (52%) prefer a hybrid mix of online and classroom learning, while fully online study attracts 39% and fully in-person formats only 9%, highlighting the continued rise of flexible delivery models. Differences with federal data can be attributed to the fact that many hybrid programs blending classroom and online components continue to be classified as “classroom only.”

3. Mid-career professionals lead the charge. Nearly half (47%) of all current and prospective graduate students surveyed have been employed for three to 10 years prior to enrolling—peaking at 52% among those advancing their careers—whereas those pursuing personal growth skew slightly more toward longer tenures (with 42% employed longer than 10 years).

4. Recent grads and long-timers coexist. While 42% of survey respondents reported returning to grad study within five years of finishing undergrad, 9% waited more than 16 years—suggesting programs must cater both to fresh graduates and to “second-act” learners re-entering academia after extended careers.

5. Certificate study serves career changers. Students motivated to change their careers are most likely to enroll in a non-degree program (30% compared with the overall 25%). Students studying for personal reasons do not prove to be as strong a target for these non-degree credentials, despite the fact that they allow students to learn in smaller “bites” and more targeted topics.



Student Motivations, Influences, and Concerns

RNL's research over the last several years has revealed many consistent trends related to graduate student motivations and concerns. Students have enrolled or want to enroll in a program close to home, with more than half (56%) applying to colleges and universities within a 50-mile radius of home and 51% regularly limiting their number of credit hours to fit within their finances (demonstrating their cost concerns). Their underpinning motivations are very practical, with “earning more money” far outpacing “getting a better title” as a primary motivation.

Beyond these overarching trends, students' motivations, the sources that influence their decisions, and their primary concerns all shed light on the attributes and information they value most when weighing graduate study.



Things We Know

Over the last five years, graduate students have consistently told RNL the following:

56%

Apply to programs within 50 miles from home.

51%

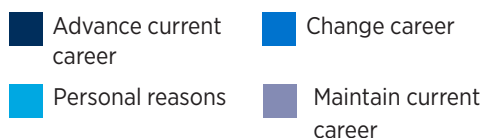
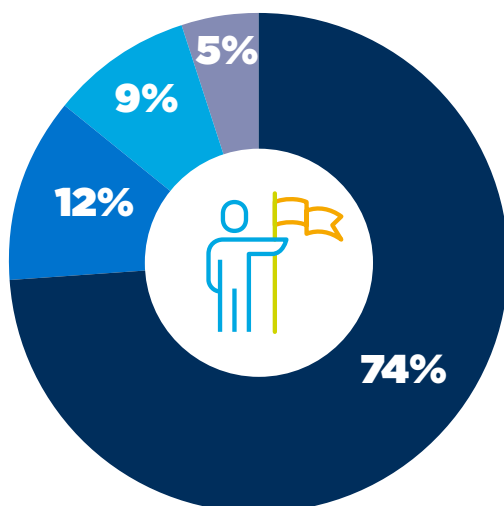
Regularly limit the number of credits in which they enroll to manage out-of-pocket expenses.

66%

Among career advancers, most are driven by an interest in making more money, rather than getting a better title.

*For more findings, see the **2021 Graduate Student Recruitment Report** and the **2023 Graduate Student Recruitment Report**.*

Primary Motivation to Study



Importance of Related Career Information in Program Search*

**Career
Changers
88%**

**Career
Advancers
94%**

**Personal
Reasons
77%**

**All
91%**

**Percent rating "Essential" or "Very Important."*

INFLUENCES ON CONSIDERING GRADUATE STUDY	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Personal reflection	46%	57%	72%	57%
Family or friends	38%	42%	27%	40%
Employer or supervisor	30%	35%	9%	32%
Colleague or mentor	15%	26%	13%	24%
Nobody	8%	4%	12%	5%

CONCERNS ABOUT GRADUATE STUDY	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Cost of graduate programs	66%	60%	65%	60%
Balancing with family responsibilities, career, etc.	51%	48%	54%	49%
Career advancement opportunities	25%	27%	14%	25%
Uncertainty about program value	18%	18%	15%	17%
I had no concerns	24%	23%	24%	22%

IMPORTANT PROGRAM FEATURES*	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Flexibility to take courses in multiple formats	79%	85%	81%	84%
Availability of concentrations/specializations	71%	77%	80%	76%
Terms offered year-round	69%	77%	74%	75%
Courses with shorter durations	59%	65%	50%	63%

**Percent rating "Essential" or "Very Important."*

Seven Takeaways About Student Motivations and Concerns

1. Career advancement is the clear top driver. Overall, 74% of graduate students are motivated to enroll in graduate study to advance their careers. Far smaller proportions are leveraging graduate study to change careers (12%) or for personal reasons or a belief in life-long learning (9%).

2. Related career information is essential. More than 90% of graduate students indicate that it is important or very important that program pages provide easy access to information and data on careers related to their area of study. While both Career Advancers and Career Changers students drive this finding, 77% of Personal Reasons students also indicate that they want to have access to this information.

3. Consideration of graduate study is largely self-motivated, but family and friends exceed employers as influencers. More than half of graduate students indicate that personal reflection had the greatest influence on their decision to pursue enrollment in graduate study. Not surprisingly, Personal Reasons students were even more likely to be self-motivating or to have intrinsic motivation. Interestingly, among all motivation types, family and friends were more frequently cited as important influencers than employers or colleagues.

4. Cost and other life responsibilities top the list of concerns. The expense of graduate programs is the predominant concern as people consider enrolling in a graduate program, with little differentiation by primary motivation. Timing in life closely follows with all types of students indicating some concern about balancing study with other life responsibilities.

5. Graduate students are not concerned about the value of graduate study or the ability to leverage it to advance their career. As the nation debates the value of higher education, graduate students remain confident in its value (only 17% are concerned about its value) and its ability to advance their careers (only 25% have this concern).

6. Program flexibility is essential. A striking 85% of Career Advancers rate the ability to take courses in multiple formats as essential or important, compared with 81% of Personal Reasons and 79% of Career Changers students. This again shows the importance of offering and designing programs for multiple delivery types.

7. Specialization and scheduling extend appeal. Availability of concentrations or specializations and year-round scheduling are “essential” or “important” to more than three-quarters of graduate students. While concentrations may be thought of as most valuable to career-related learning, Personal Reasons students were even more likely (80%) to cite this as important or essential to their decision making.

Search and Research

Each of RNL's recent studies have delved deeply into the search processes used by graduate students to both surface a set of programs of interest and then to research these programs to make decisions on which to pursue. These studies have consistently shown that prospective graduate students overwhelmingly rely on digital channels to discover and evaluate programs.

Search engines dominate as both the most important information source (84%) and the primary method for beginning (40%) and refining (52%) searches. Paid and organic listings, social media and video ads, and emerging AI tools all shape how students gather program details and make decisions. The new research contained in this report's takeaways unpack search behaviors, ad-exposure patterns, and the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the search process—highlighting both overall preferences and generational nuances.



Things We Know

Over the last five years, graduate students have consistently told RNL the following:

84%

Indicate that search engines are their most important information source.

40%

Indicate that conducting a web search was the first thing they did.

52%

Indicate that a web search was among the next steps in their search.

63%

Clicked on digital ads.

35%

Clicked because they already knew the program and wanted more information.

77%

Watched videos as part of their search and research process.

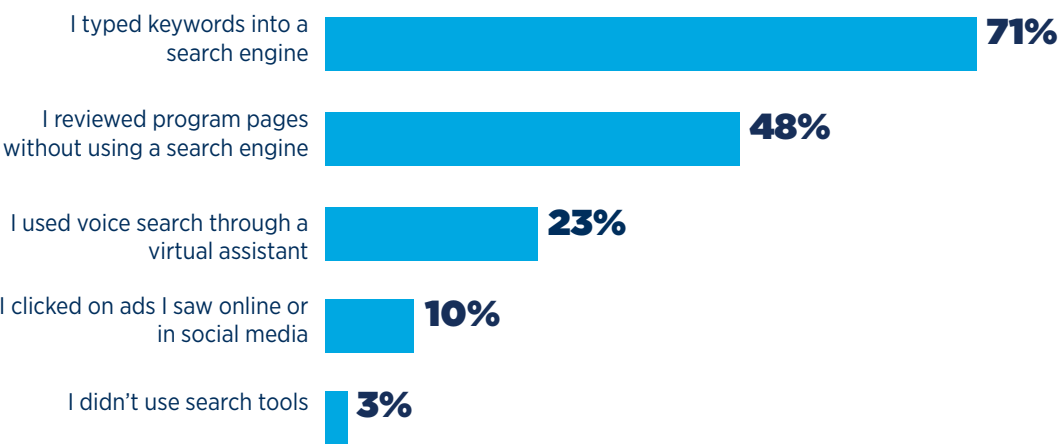
*For more findings, see the **2021 Graduate Student Recruitment Report** and the **2023 Graduate Student Recruitment Report**.*

Talk with our experts about your graduate student recruiting strategies

Contact us for a complimentary consultation at RNL.com/Graduate

Web Search

First Steps Students Take With Web Search



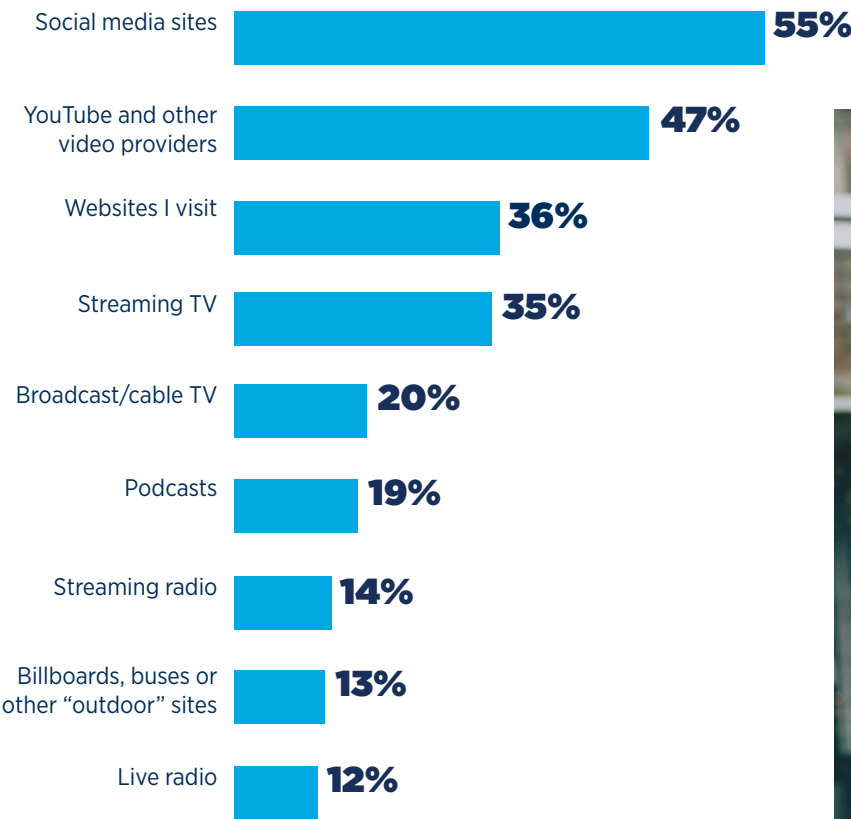
FIRST STEPS IN A WEB SEARCH	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
I typed keywords into a search engine	68%	73%	76%	71%
I reviewed program pages without using a search engine	42%	48%	55%	48%
I used voice search through a virtual assistant	26%	23%	9%	23%
I clicked on ads I saw online or in social media	8%	10%	10%	10%
I didn't use search tools	5%	3%	2%	3%

SEARCH RESULTS CLICKED ON MOST OFTEN USED	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Organic (unpaid) results (not labeled as ads, just below ads at top of page)	52%	55%	51%	54%
Paid ads or sponsored results (labeled as 'Ad' or 'Sponsored' at top of page)	28%	19%	18%	20%
I don't pay attention to which they are	12%	15%	9%	14%
The results in an AI-driven summary at top of the page	8%	11%	21%	11%

REASONS FOR CLICKING SEARCH RESULTS	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
The result best matches what I'm searching for	68%	76%	75%	75%
The institution/program name is familiar to me	47%	36%	25%	36%
The result appears at the top of the page	27%	37%	33%	36%
The result is not labeled as an ad or "sponsored"	13%	16%	19%	16%
The result is labeled as "sponsored" or an ad	1%	1%	5%	2%

Digital Advertising

Where Students Saw Ads for Graduate Programs



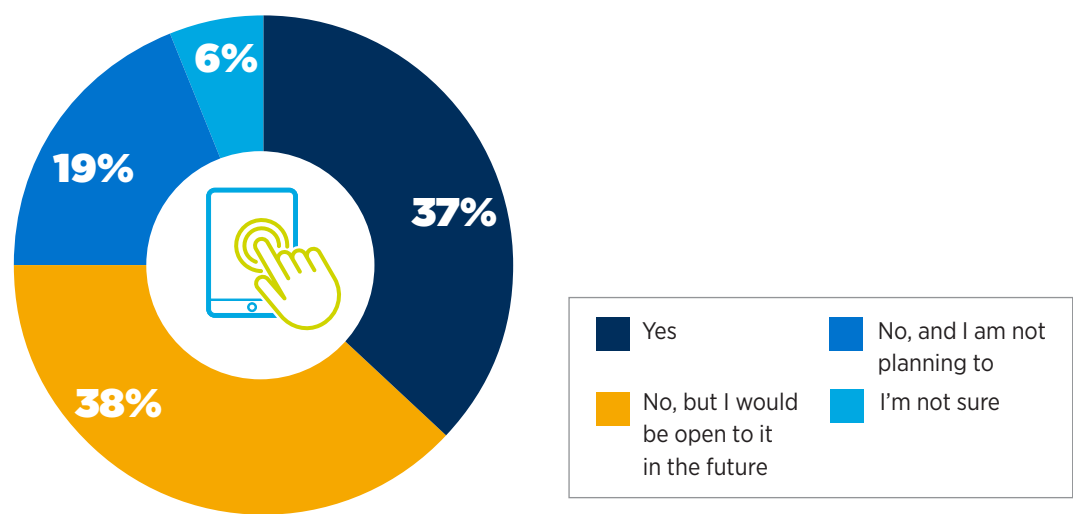
WHERE GRADUATE PROGRAM ADS WERE SEEN	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Social media sites	55%	57%	43%	55%
YouTube and other video providers	41%	48%	43%	47%
Websites I visit	28%	35%	51%	36%
Streaming TV	38%	35%	30%	35%
Broadcast/cable TV	23%	19%	21%	20%
Podcasts	23%	18%	15%	19%
Streaming radio	17%	13%	13%	14%
Billboards, buses or other “outdoor” sites	14%	13%	18%	13%
Live radio	14%	11%	9%	12%

WHERE GRADUATE PROGRAM ADS WERE SEEN ON SOCIAL MEDIA	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Facebook	60%	56%	54%	56%
YouTube	51%	57%	46%	55%
Instagram	45%	50%	35%	48%
LinkedIn	35%	37%	29%	36%
Twitter	30%	27%	13%	26%
TikTok	30%	25%	19%	25%
Reddit	23%	21%	15%	21%
Snapchat	23%	17%	9%	17%
Pinterest	16%	13%	12%	13%
None	6%	4%	12%	5%

MOST EFFECTIVE AD CONTENT	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Clear cost breakdowns	55%	59%	58%	58%
Highlighted program rankings	53%	56%	45%	54%
Student testimonials	49%	41%	34%	41%
Videos showcasing campus/program life	36%	35%	30%	35%
Alumni success stories	34%	33%	26%	32%
I did/will not click on any digital ads	3%	4%	10%	5%

Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Graduate Search

Do Students Use AI in the Search Process?



DO STUDENTS USE AI IN THE SEARCH PROCESS?	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Yes	40%	38%	25%	37%
No, but I would be open to it in the future	33%	38%	42%	38%
No, and I am not planning to	19%	18%	23%	19%
I'm not sure	8%	5%	11%	6%

HOW AI WAS USED IN PROGRAM SEARCH	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Program research	59%	65%	68%	63%
Scholarship research	41%	48%	40%	46%
Career planning	46%	44%	34%	43%
Essay writing	42%	40%	29%	40%
Application assistance	24%	28%	38%	27%

AI-DERIVED PROGRAM INFORMATION IS ACCURATE	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Yes	75%	75%	63%	73%
No	7%	9%	9%	9%
Not sure	19%	16%	28%	18%

Nine Search and Research Takeaways

1. Search initiation is dominated by keyword queries and direct site visits. Nearly three-quarters of all prospective graduate students begin their searches by typing keywords into a search engine. Concurrently, 48% indicate that they also navigate directly to institutional websites without the aid of search engines, most frequently by Personal Reasons students (55%).

2. Voice search is a niche tactic, especially outside personal-reason learners. While 23% of students use virtual-assistant voice search, most frequently by Career Changers (26%) and far less by Personal Reasons students (9%).

3. Organic results overwhelmingly capture clicks, while paid and AI vary by segment. Organic listings are leveraged by 54% of graduate students, while only 20% are most likely to click on paid listings. Career Changers are most likely to click on paid listings (28%). Meanwhile, 21% of Personal Reasons students are most likely to engage with AI-driven summaries—nearly three times the 8% rate among Career Changers students.

4. Relevance matters more than familiarity, though Career Changers value known brands more. Seventy-five percent of all students click results that best match their query, particularly Career Advancers (76%) and Personal Reasons (75%) cohorts, versus 68% of Career Changers. Conversely, 47% of Career Changers select results based on familiar institution names, compared with 36% of Career Advancers and 25% of Personal Reasons learners.

5. Digital ads play a modest role as a first search step. Nearly two-thirds of graduate students click on digital ads during their search, but clicking those ads is not usually their first search step. Ten percent of both Career Advancers and Personal Reasons students click online or social-media ads to begin their search, compared with just 8% of Career Changers students.

6. Social-media and video platforms dominate ad impressions. Fifty-five percent of students see program ads on social media (57% of Career Advancers, 55% of Career Changers, and 43% of Personal Reasons learners). YouTube and similar video providers reach 47% overall, notably 48% of Advancers, 43% of Changers, and 43% of Personal Reasons students.

7. Platform-specific social ads vary by motivation. Across all motivations, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram continue to dominate as effective advertising platforms, with LinkedIn a distant fourth. Career Changers students most often spot ads on Facebook (60%) followed by YouTube (51%); Career Advancers see the highest exposure on YouTube (57%) followed by Facebook (56%). Personal Reasons learners report the lowest social-media ad exposure overall and the highest “none” response (12%).

8. Clear cost breakdowns are universally compelling, but testimonial impact differs. Fifty-eight percent of students cite transparent cost information as the most effective ad content (Career Advancers 59%, Personal Reasons 58%, Career Changers 55%). However, student testimonials resonate most with Career Changers (49%), compared with 41% of Career Advancers and 34% of Personal Reasons students.

9. Career-focused students use and trust AI the most in program searches.

Thirty-seven percent of students have used AI tools—40% of Career Changers and 38% of Career Advancers cohorts, but only 25% of Personal Reasons learners. Among those users, 75% of both Career Changers and Career Advancers judge AI-derived information to be accurate, versus 63% of Personal Reasons students, who also exhibit the greatest uncertainty (28%).

Recruitment and Cultivation

RNL has also conducted extensive research among graduate students on their expectations and preferences during the recruitment and enrollment process. Across dozens of surveys over the last five years, graduate students have demonstrated a clear expectation for a swift, personalized recruitment and enrollment process.

Thirty-seven percent expect an immediate reply and 49% expect a personalized response within 24 hours—and value clear, program-specific communications. In this study, we drill down on their ongoing expectations throughout the process with special attention given to their communications preferences and expectations from first contact to first day of enrollment.



Things We Know

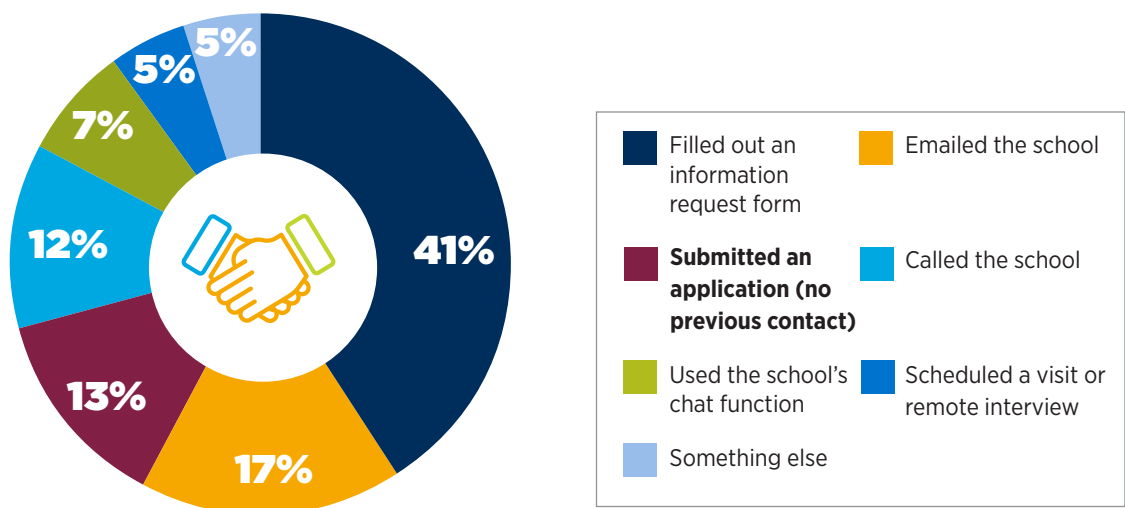
Over the last five years, graduate students have consistently told RNL the following:

37% Expect an immediate response to their inquiry.	49% Expect a personalized response within 24 hours.	14% Will be satisfied with a response taking more than 24 hours.
50% Expect to be admitted within one week of application submission.	78% Will likely or definitely enroll in the first program to respond to their inquiry.	82% Will likely or definitely enroll in the first program to admit them.
64% Prefer to interact with a recruiter rather than faculty or program staff in early stages of search.	57% Indicate that their early contact focuses on general information, not program specifics.	45% Indicate that a slow response signifies that they are not a priority to the program.

*For more findings, see the **2021 Graduate Student Recruitment Report** and the **2023 Graduate Student Recruitment Report**.*

Making First Contact

Method of First Contact



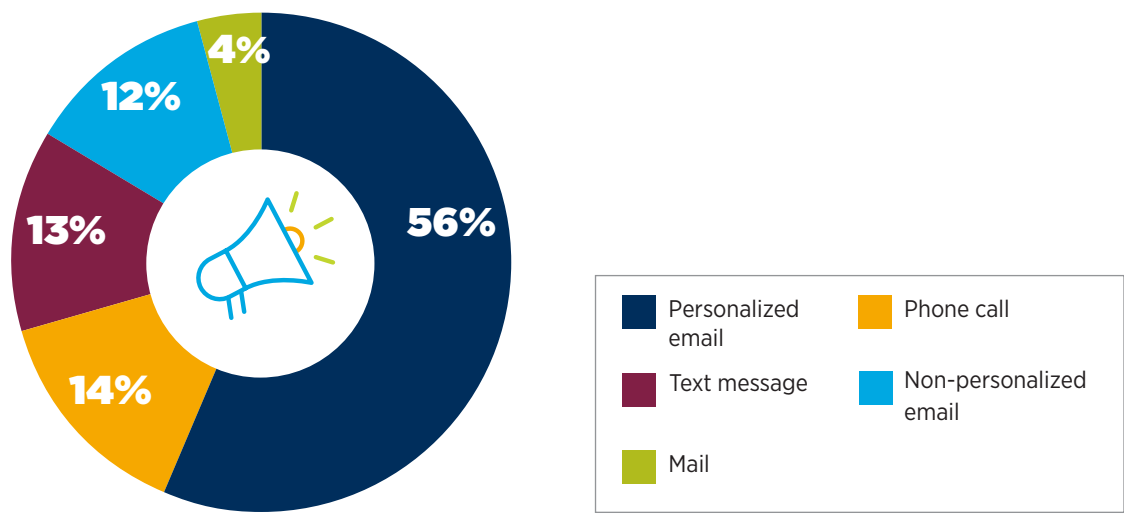
METHOD OF FIRST CONTACT	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Filled out an information request form	44%	42%	40%	41%
Emailed the school	18%	17%	11%	17%
Submitted an application (no previous contact)	10%	12%	19%	13%
Called the school	8%	13%	12%	12%
Used the school's chat function	9%	7%	7%	7%
Scheduled a visit or remote interview	5%	5%	3%	5%
Something else	8%	5%	8%	5%

REASONS NOT TO USE AN RFI FORM	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
They often result in a lot of calls or emails	42%	37%	36%	37%
I don't provide personal information on the internet	28%	23%	32%	25%
I can't usually find them	16%	15%	15%	16%
I don't have any concerns with using RFI forms	22%	32%	29%	30%

Note: Respondents could select more than one answer.

Initial Response

Expected Method for Initial Response



EXPECTED METHOD FOR INITIAL RESPONSE TO INQUIRY (FIRST CONTACT)	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Personalized email	56%	57%	59%	56%
Phone call	12%	15%	11%	14%
Text message	12%	14%	13%	13%
Non-personalized (form) email	15%	11%	10%	12%
Mail	5%	3%	7%	4%

PREFERRED TIME FOR INITIAL RESPONSE	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Early morning (before 9:00 a.m.)	14%	11%	11%	11%
Morning (9:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.)	43%	43%	51%	43%
Afternoon (noon - 5:00 p.m.)	28%	33%	23%	31%
Evening (5:00 p.m. - 10:00 p.m.)	12%	12%	13%	12%
Late evening (after 10 p.m.)	1%	1%	1%	1%
Weekends	2%	1%	2%	1%

Personalized Contact

Importance of Personal Contact in Choosing a Program*



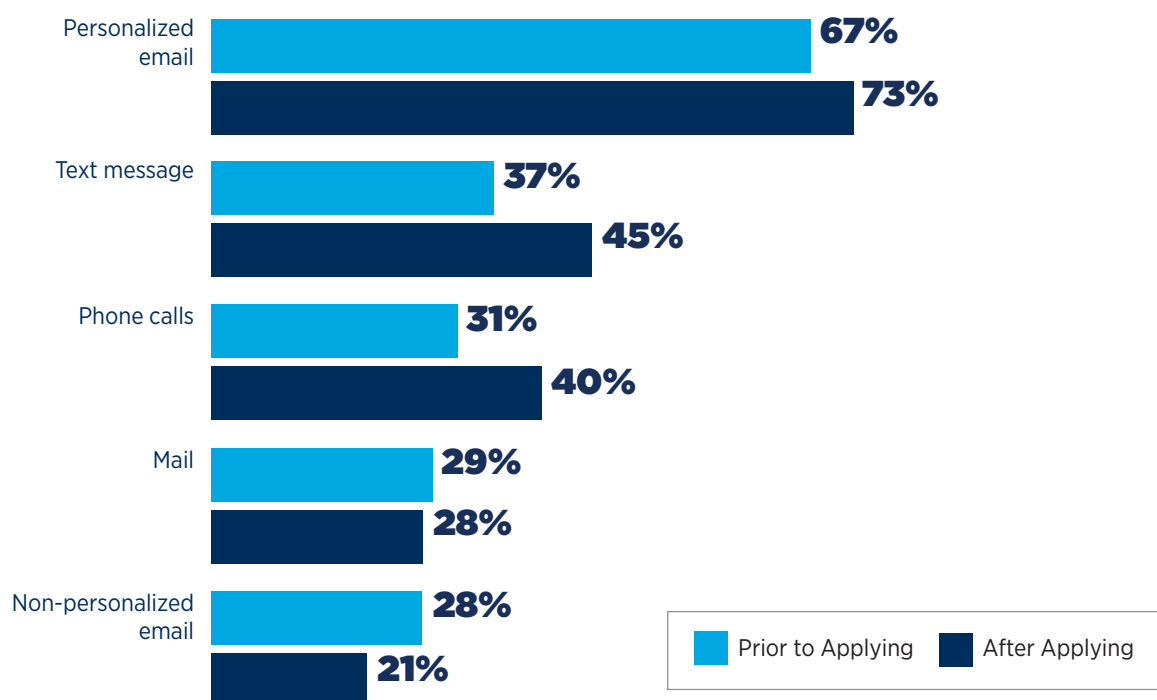
**Percent rating “Essential” or “Very Important.”*

PREFERRED WAYS TO PERSONALIZE COMMUNICATION	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Send information on my program of interest	63%	61%	72%	61%
Answer my questions quickly and accurately	57%	62%	64%	61%
Use my first name in emails and communications	44%	38%	29%	38%
Appear to know me and my situation when I make contact	44%	32%	22%	33%
Use my first language in communications	28%	27%	30%	28%
Share information reflecting/related to my demographic (age, background, etc.)	28%	24%	22%	24%
Call me regularly to check in on my needs and questions	25%	23%	20%	23%
Use my name in customized videos about my program	16%	11%	10%	12%
Use my name in customized videos about financial aid/scholarships	8%	6%	7%	6%

ATTENDANCE AT RECRUITMENT EVENTS	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Attended a virtual event	49%	47%	39%	47%
Attended an in-person event	21%	27%	16%	25%
Did not attend an event	42%	37%	51%	39%

Communication Through to Enrollment

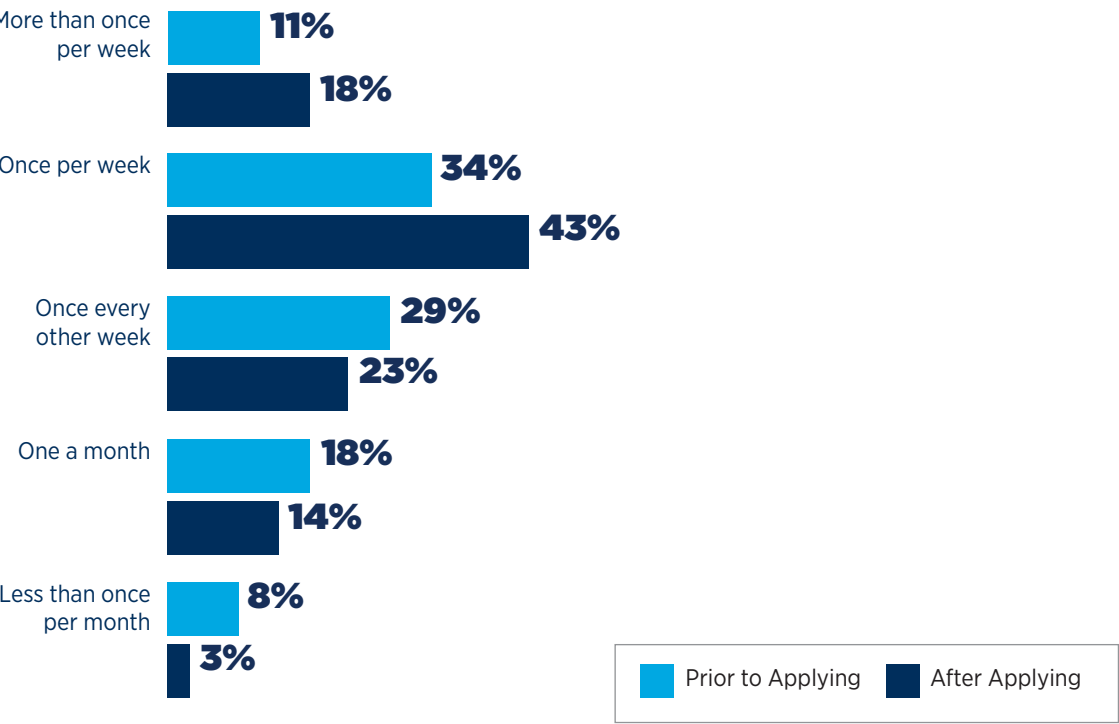
Acceptable Communications Channels Before and After Applying



ACCEPTABLE COMMUNICATIONS METHODS (AFTER APPLYING)	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Personalized email	72%	67%	74%	67%
Text message	40%	37%	31%	37%
Phone calls	33%	32%	24%	31%
Mail	25%	28%	36%	29%
Non-personalized (form) email	27%	28%	33%	28%

ACCEPTABLE COMMUNICATIONS METHODS (AFTER APPLYING)	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Personalized email	73%	75%	78%	73%
Text message	46%	44%	50%	45%
Phone calls	39%	41%	38%	40%
Mail	27%	27%	37%	28%
Non-personalized (form) email	23%	21%	24%	21%

Expected Frequency of Contact



EXPECTED FREQUENCY OF CONTACT (PRIOR TO APPLYING)	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
More than once per week	17%	11%	12%	11%
Once per week	34%	35%	26%	34%
Once every other week	27%	28%	28%	29%
One a month	17%	17%	22%	18%
Less than once per month	6%	8%	12%	8%

ACCEPTABLE COMMUNICATIONS METHODS (PRIOR TO APPLYING)	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
More than once per week	21%	17%	16%	18%
Once per week	38%	44%	39%	43%
Once every other week	22%	24%	22%	23%
One a month	16%	13%	16%	14%
Less than once per month	2%	2%	6%	3%

MOST EFFECTIVE CONTENT FROM PROGRAMS OF INTEREST (THROUGHOUT PROCESS)	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Academic program details	66%	60%	70%	60%
Financial aid and scholarship information	50%	50%	58%	50%
Information on careers related to my program	51%	46%	53%	48%
Application checklists and deadline reminders	43%	46%	53%	47%
Student success stories	39%	39%	28%	38%
General campus information and updates	39%	34%	29%	34%
Faculty bios and messages	31%	24%	24%	25%
Alumni spotlights	27%	24%	10%	22%
Welcome from leadership	24%	20%	18%	21%
Recruitment event invitations	8%	10%	13%	10%

Importance of Regular Contact From Programs of Interest: By Enrollment Stage



REGULAR REMINDERS FROM PROGRAMS IN MOVING TOWARD ENROLLMENT*	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
From inquiry to application	80%	82%	71%	80%
From application submission to acceptance	85%	84%	76%	83%
From acceptance to registering for your classes	87%	85%	85%	85%
From registering for classes to first day	81%	83%	79%	83%

*Percent rating "Very Important" or "Important"

Nine Search and Research Takeaways

1. Information-request forms remain the dominant first contact. Overall, 41% of graduate students begin their search by filling out an online information request (RFI) form, with little differentiation by motivation. When asked why they may not want to complete such a form, the largest proportion (37%) indicated that it was because they often result in too many calls and emails. Career Changers were even more likely to feel this way (42%).

2. Stealth applicants seem to be a diminishing phenomenon. A decade ago, as many as one-third of graduate students made no contact with programs of interest prior to submitting an application. These “stealth applicants” have decreased considerably, with just 13 percent of graduate students indicating this practice, with nearly no differentiation by motivation.

3. Personalized email is the preferred initial response channel. A majority (56%) of all graduate students expect a personalized email reply first, again with little differentiation by motivation. In contrast, only 14% prefer a phone call as the method of first contact by programs of interest, again with little differentiation among student types.

4. Morning responses are preferred—especially by those studying for personal reasons. Across all segments, 43% prefer a reply between 9 a.m. and noon. That preference rises to 51% for Personal Reasons learners. An additional 11% prefer a response before 9 a.m. Meanwhile, 33% of Career Advancers favor afternoon replies versus 28% of Career Changers and 23% of Personal Reasons learners.

5. Program-specific personalization outpaces all other efforts at personalization. Sixty-one percent of all respondents want information tailored to their program interest, with 72% of Personal Reasons students rating it essential—surpassing 63% of Career Changers and 61% of Career Advancers. Of equal importance is quickly and accurately answering specific questions, with little differentiation across motivations.

6. Email and text are the most acceptable communication channels before and after applying, with both becoming more important post-application. Before application, 67% of all students accept personalized emails and 37% accept text messages; after applying, those figures rise to 73% and 45%, respectively. Personal Reasons students exhibit the strongest support, with 74% pre-application and 78% post-application comfortable with personalized emails, and 50% post-application open to text—exceeding both Career Changers (46%) and Career Advancers (44%).

7. Weekly contact is the clear expectation, especially after applying. Overall, 34% expect weekly outreach before applying, growing to 43% after application. Career Advancers lead post-application, with 44% expecting weekly contact—compared to 39% of Personal Reason learners and 38% of Career Changers.

8. Academic program details, financial-aid information, and related career information are top content preferences.

Sixty percent of all students rate academic details as the most effective way for programs of interest to engage them throughout the recruitment process, while 50% prioritize financial aid and scholarship information, and 49% now expect to get information on careers related to their area of study among their communications from programs of interest. While there is little differentiation between the two career-related motivation groups, Personal Reasons learners show the strongest interest in each of these, with 70% valuing program details, 58% emphasizing financial aid, and 53% valuing career information (even though they are not enrolling for career-related reasons).

9. Virtual recruitment events have become primary information resources.

Nearly half of graduate students (47%) attend a virtual event during their search, with little differentiation by motivation. This compares with 25% who attend a face-to-face event, again with little differentiation. Interestingly, nearly 40% attend no such events—with Personal Reasons students being most likely to bypass any recruitment events (51%).

Making Enrollment Decisions

Each of RNL's recent studies of graduate students has focused on different aspects of their enrollment decisions. Previous studies have focused on the most important factors, where cost and flexibility have been joined in the top ranks by employment prospects—another indicator of the importance in the career trajectories of today's graduate students.

We have also focused on the issue of cost: how graduate students pay for their studies, how they balance cost with other factors, how they manage their out-of-pocket expenditure, and their understanding of “sticker price” versus actual cost. From these, we know that students do prioritize cost, but often enroll in programs that are more expensive than the lowest priced program they considered (most frequently in favor of a more flexible program). They also often remove programs that have a sticker price higher than they think they can afford while also limiting their credits to manage their expenses.



Things We Know

Over the last five years, graduate students have consistently told RNL the following:

76%

Prioritize the cost of the program in decision making.

70%

Prioritize employment prospects in decision making.

69%

Prioritize flexible formats in decision making.

26%

Enroll in the most affordable program considered.

50%

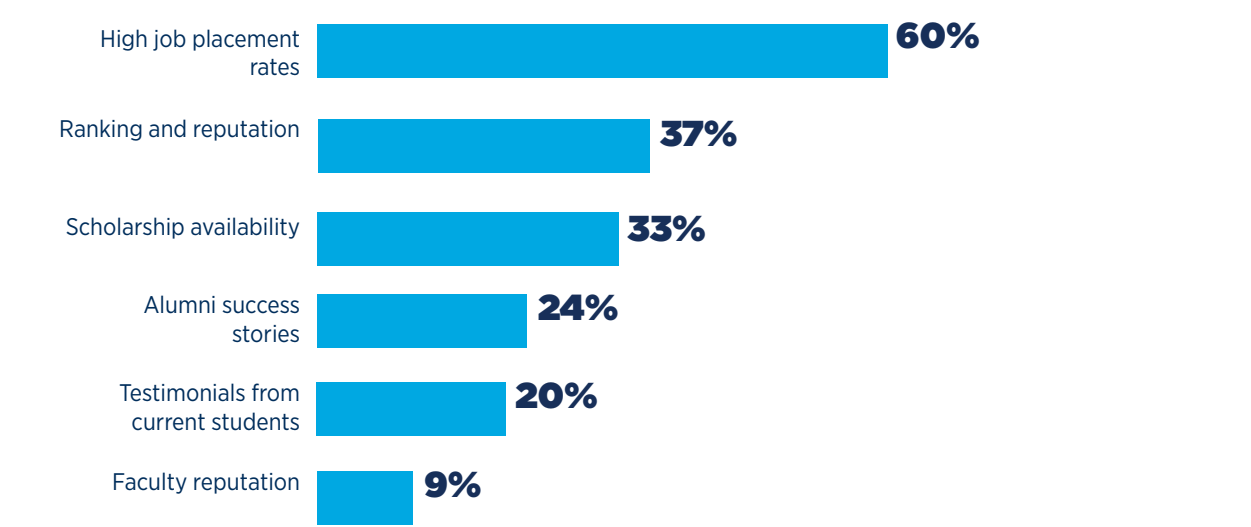
Rely on student loans to pay at least some of their tuition.

71%

Are likely to remove a program from consideration based on sticker price.

*For more findings, see the **2021 Graduate Student Recruitment Report** and the **2023 Graduate Student Recruitment Report**.*

Most Important Program Value Propositions



MOST COMPELLING PROGRAM VALUE PROPOSITIONS	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
High job placement rates	65%	63%	42%	60%
Rankings and reputation	35%	37%	49%	37%
Scholarship availability	31%	33%	32%	33%
Alumni success stories	25%	25%	24%	24%
Testimonials from current students	17%	20%	20%	20%
Faculty reputation	8%	9%	18%	9%

Students Who Believe High Tuition Cost Correlates with a High Quality of Program



INHIBITORS TO APPLYING	CAREER CHANGERS	CAREER ADVANCERS	PERSONAL REASONS	ALL
Letters of recommendation	44%	35%	30%	35%
Essay/personal statement	34%	33%	26%	33%
Application fees	31%	31%	37%	31%
Submitting standardized test scores (GRE, GMAT, LSAT...)	37%	30%	31%	30%
Writing sample	33%	28%	20%	28%
Resume	26%	28%	23%	28%
Transcripts from previous study	34%	27%	24%	27%
Portfolio of work	26%	26%	25%	26%
None of these things	6%	11%	20%	11%

Students Who Will Choose One Program Over Another If One Tracked Down Previous Transcripts

**Career
Changers**
84%

**Career
Advancers**
80%

**Personal
Reasons**
76%

All
80%

Students Who Believe Complicated Application Process Correlates with High Quality Program

**Career
Changers**
44%

**Career
Advancers**
50%

**Personal
Reasons**
44%

All
49%

Eight Enrollment Decision Takeaways

1. Cost, employment prospects, and flexibility top the list—universally. Seventy-six percent of all students prioritize program cost, 70% weigh employment prospects, and 63% value flexible formats—findings that are consistent across Career Changers, Career Advancers, and Personal Reasons groups.

2. High job-placement rates matter most, especially to career-focused students. Sixty percent of all graduate students indicate that strong job placement data is the most powerful value proposition that graduate programs can leverage to make their case for enrollment. Even among Personal Reasons learners, 42% indicate that this is a strong value proposition. The gap between this value proposition and all the others reinforces the importance with which today's graduate students view career success after graduate school.

3. Rankings and reputation carry extra weight for those studying for personal enrichment. Overall, 37% consider institutional reputation important, but this rises to 49% among Personal Reasons students—compared with 37% of Career Advancers and just 35% of Career Changers prospects.

4. Letters of recommendation are the biggest application hurdles—especially for changers, with essays also a challenge. Overall, 35% cite letters of recommendation as a barrier, but 44% of Career Changers cite this as something that could hinder them from applying. One-third of all graduate students are turned off by having to write essays/personal statements, with almost no differentiation among motivation groups.

5. One-third of graduate students are discouraged by application fees and standardized tests. Thirty-one percent of all applicants worry about fees, and 30% say that having to submit standardized test scores might make them consider other programs, each of which has moderate differentiation by motivation. Personal Reasons students resist application fees more (37%) and Career Changers resist tests (37%).

6. Help retrieving transcripts is highly valued. While few graduate students resist having to submit past transcripts (with only 27% indicating that this might prevent them from applying to a program), 80% would be likely to select one program over others if that program was able to collect all past transcript for them, with little differentiation by motivation.

7. Prospective students are divided on whether multiple and complicated application requirements signify program quality. Fewer than half (49%) of all graduate students believe more numerous and complicated requirements signal higher program quality, with both Career Changers and Personal Reasons learners even less likely to see a strong correlation. Graduate programs should consider streamlining admissions requirements with an eye on eliminating all items that do not have a measurable impact on assessing successful completion.

8. Cost is not the indicator of quality in the minds of graduate students that it once was. Throughout past decades, two-thirds to three-quarters of graduate students regularly indicated that the cost of a program was directly correlated—in their minds—to the quality of the program. This did not mean that they always enrolled in an expensive program, but it was a clear finding. Today, fewer than half (48%) continue to make this strong correlation, with Personal Reasons learners being even less likely to make this connection. Programs must increasingly think about pricing in relation to the most important aspects of ROI that students are prioritizing today—their ability to leverage the program to advance or change their career trajectory, hence, the focus on these motivations throughout this report.

About RNL



RNL is the leading provider of higher education enrollment, student success, and fundraising solutions. The firm serves more than 1,500 colleges and universities through data-driven solutions focused on the entire lifecycle of enrollment and fundraising, ensuring students find the right program, graduate on time, secure their first job in their chosen field, and give back to support the next generation. With a deep knowledge of the industry, RNL helps institutions scale their efforts by tapping into a community of support and resources.

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