Navigating the Uncertain Graduate Enrollment Landscape

Research Insights for Graduate Recruitment During the Pandemic

EAB

We help schools **support students** from enrollment to graduation and beyond

⊙ ROOTED IN RESEARCH

7,500+ Peer-tested best practices

500+ Enrollment innovations tested annually

⊙ ADVANTAGE OF SCALE

1,500+ Institutions served

3.7 M+ Students supported by our SSMS

⊙ WE DELIVER RESULTS

95% Of our partners continue with us year after year, reflecting the goals we **achieve together**

› Find and enroll your right-fit students

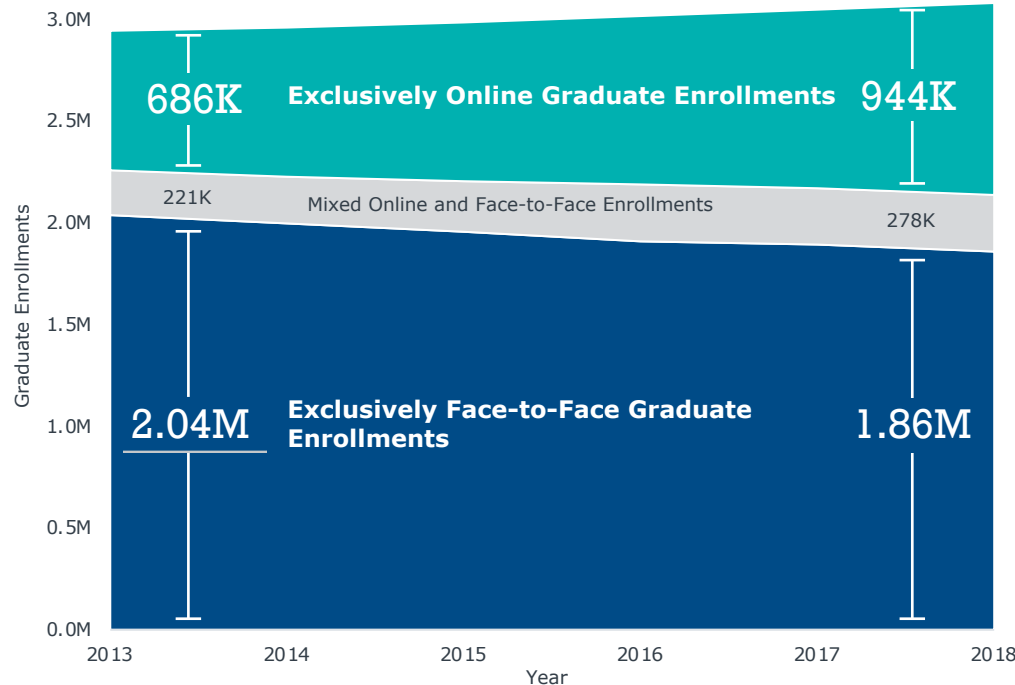› Support and graduate more students

› Prepare your institution for the future

ENROLLMENT SUCCESS

STUDENT SUCCESS

INSTITUTIONAL SUCCESS

INSIGHTS

EXPERTISE

1 **The Shifting Graduate Enrollment Landscape**

2 The Impact of COVID-19 on the Adult Learner Mindset

3 Conclusion and Q&A

Online, Face-to-Face, and Mixed Graduate[1] Enrollments, 2013-2018

Exclusively, Some, and No Online[2] Courses

686K — Exclusively Online Graduate Enrollments — **944K**

221K — Mixed Online and Face-to-Face Enrollments — 278K

2.04M — Exclusively Face-to-Face Graduate Enrollments — **1.86M**

Y-axis: Graduate Enrollments (0.0M – 3.0M)
X-axis: Year (2013–2018)

+258K
Total Increase in Online Graduate Students 2013-2018

+6.6%
Avg. Annual Growth

-179K
Total Decrease in Face-to-Face Graduate Students 2013-2018

-1.8%
Avg. Annual Decline

1) Graduate students include both master's and doctoral students.
2) Recorded as 'Distance Education' in IPEDS data

Source: EAB analysis of distance enrollment data from IPEDS Fall Enrollment Surveys 2012-18, EAB interviews and analysis.

For-Profits Loom Large, But Small Slice of Market

Not the Main Source of Growth Slowdown

Top Master's Degree Producers Either Online Mega-Universities or Among Most Elite

Institutions Conferring the Most Master's Degrees, Online and Face-to-Face, 2018

Online Mega-Universities	Highly Selective
Walden University	New York University
University of Phoenix	USC
Grand Canyon University[1]	Columbia
Liberty University	John's Hopkins
Western Governor's	Boston University

For-profit

▼

44,501
Total conferrals, 2018

▼

37,342
Total conferrals, 2018

Declining For-Profit Conferrals Barely Make a Dent Overall

Total Master's Degree Conferrals by Institutional Sector

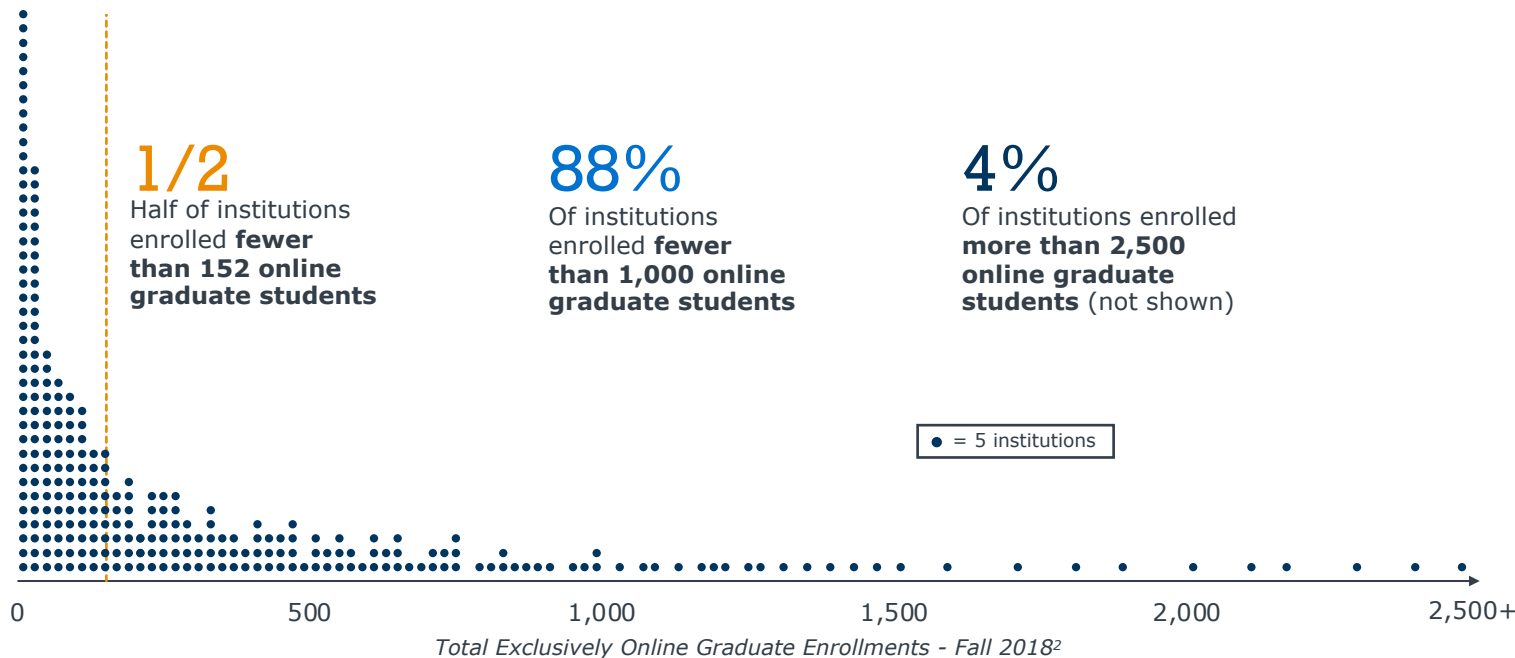|	2013	2018	
Public	348K	387K	
Private, Non-Profit	336K	381K	
For-Profit	73K	69K	

▼
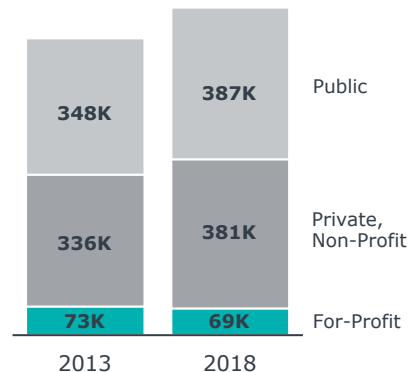
-4,255
Decline in for-profit conferrals

1) The U.S. Department of Education has said it will continue to treat Grand Canyon University as a for-profit institution, despite its status change in 2018.

Source: Rachel Leingang, "Grand Canyon University must follow for-profit rules despite its return to nonprofit status, feds say," The Arizona Republic, November 7, 2019; National Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS); EAB interviews and analysis.

Few Institutions Poised to Become Online Giants (Or Even Online Mediums)

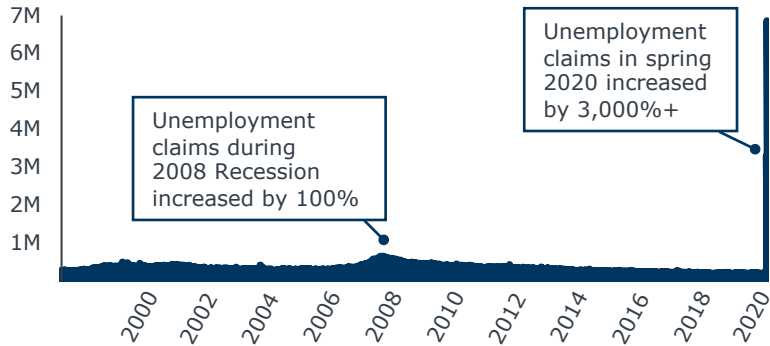Institutions by Total Exclusively Online[1] Graduate Enrollments, Fall 2018

1/2
Half of institutions enrolled **fewer than 152 online graduate students**

88%
Of institutions enrolled **fewer than 1,000 online graduate students**

4%
Of institutions enrolled **more than 2,500 online graduate students** (not shown)

● = 5 institutions

Total Exclusively Online Graduate Enrollments - Fall 2018[2]

0   500   1,000   1,500   2,000   2,500+

1) Recorded by IPEDS as exclusively distance enrollments.
2) Bin widths equal 20 enrollments.

Source: EAB analysis of distance enrollment data from IPEDS Fall Enrollment Surveys 2012-18.

The Limits of the 2008 Playbook

Confronting the "Light Speed" Recession

Unemployment claims during 2008 Recession increased by 100%

Unemployment claims in spring 2020 increased by 3,000%+

Y-axis: 7M, 6M, 5M, 4M, 3M, 2M, 1M

X-axis: 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2020

38M+ Estimated unemployed Americans (May 2020)

28%
Share of newly unemployed with a bachelor's degree vs. 21% during 2008 recession

-3%
Predicted 2020 global economic contraction (vs. -0.1% during Great Recession)

73%
Average likelihood of a second wave of infection predicted by 18 disease modeling experts

A Categorically Different Downturn

⚠ Sudden-onset, external economic trigger

↘ Simultaneous downturns in supply and demand

✛ Unprecedented global supply chain disruption

Source: Initial Claims, FRED Economic Data; Over 33 million Americans lost their job during the pandemic, Washington Post; The Employment Situation, Bureau of Labor Statistics; IMF Blog; Aggregated Expert Predictions on Covid-19, Thomas McAndrew; The Coronavirus Recession is Already Here, Vox; ESPN; EAB interviews and analysis.

Grad Enrollment Increase During Last Recession Low Compared to Sub-Baccalaureate
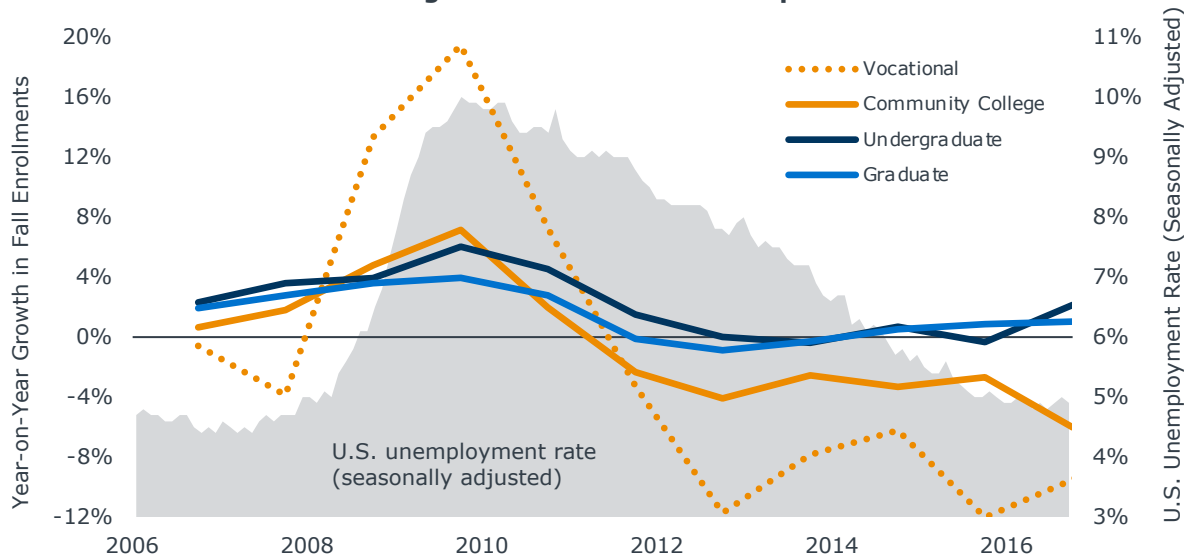
Percentage point growth in enrollment during high unemployment:

| Graduate	Undergraduate	Community College[1]	Vocational[2]
+2.3%	+3.6%	+6.9%	+20.2%

1) Includes all public 2-year institutions.
2) Includes all less-than-2-year institutions and all private nonprofit and for-profit 2-year institutions.

Source: IPEDS fall enrollment data 2005-2018; Bureau of Labor Statistics unemployment data; EAB interviews and analysis.

Countercyclical Boost Uneven Across Fields

Fields Best Positioned to Grow are Mostly Small, Few in STEM

Overall 10-year Growth Trend and Countercyclical Growth in Master's and Professional Doctorate Conferrals
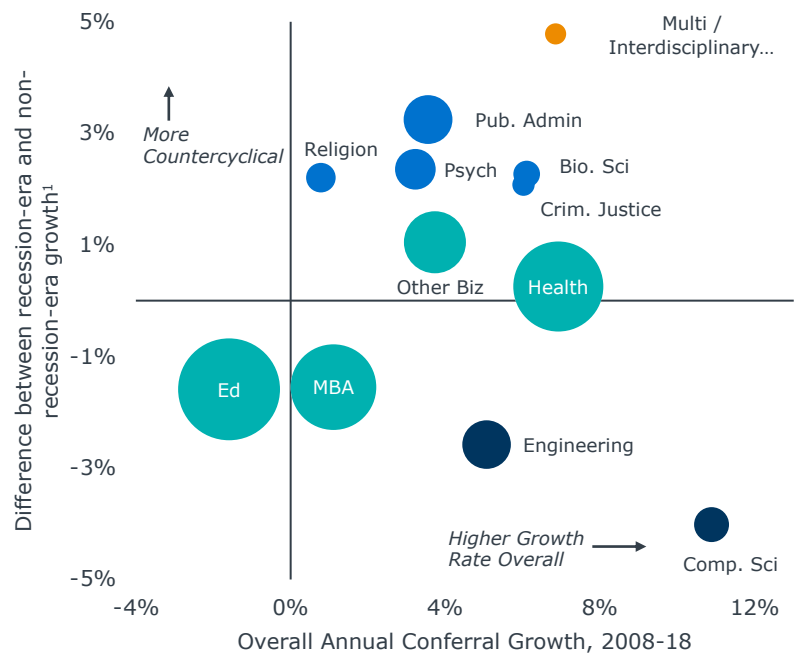
The Multidisciplinary Moment?

Interdisciplinary grad degrees fast-growing and among most countercyclical

A Turn Toward Stable Careers

Growth in fields related to government and nonprofit jobs, but will these remain stable in current crisis?

No Boost for Big Fields

Education, MBA growth slowed. Almost no recession impact on health, non-MBA business.

Slowdown in STEM?

Engineering, computer science fast-growing overall but grew more slowly during 2008 recession

1) Difference in conferral growth rate in 2011-13 (recession-era) and the average of 2008-10 and 2014-2016 (non-recession-era)

Source: IPEDS conferrals 2008-2018; Bureau of Labor Statistics Unemployment Data; EAB interviews and analysis.
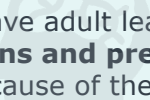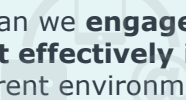
Understanding How Prospects Think and Behave Is Critical to Growing Enrollment During COVID-19
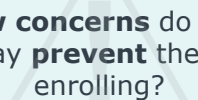
Key Questions for Growing Enrollment in Our "New Normal"

How have adult learners' **motivations and preferences** changed because of the pandemic?

How can we **engage them most effectively** in the current environment?

What **new concerns** do they have that may **prevent** them from enrolling?

How We Defined "Adult Learners"

Current and prospective students of graduate, bachelor's degree completion, online, and certificate programs[1]

Research Methodology

COVID-19 Pulse Survey

Late May 2020
1036 Students and Prospects

+

Adult Learner Mindset Survey

Winter 2020
1077 Students and Prospects[1]

1) Students considering or currently enrolled in graduate programs comprised 67% of all survey respondents.

Key Findings

Four Predictions to Inform Graduate Enrollment Strategy During COVID-19

1 The pandemic will increase the **volatility** of your prospect pool.

2 **Online research** will become even more central to the adult learner journey to enrollment.

3 **Generational differences** will persist in attitudes toward online education.

4 Adult learners will approach the application process even **more pragmatically** than before.
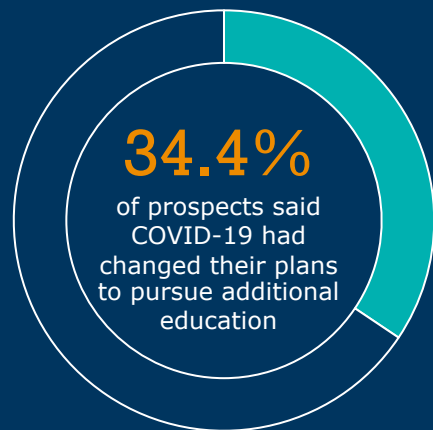
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Prediction #1

The pandemic will increase the volatility of your prospect pool.

COVID-19 Has Impacted Many Prospects' Enrollment Plans
As of May 2020

34.4%
of prospects said COVID-19 had changed their plans to pursue additional education

"What impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on your current job and/or future employment prospects? "
Prospective Students, as of May 2020[1]

Response	Percentage
None to date	28.9%
Increased concerns about job security	26.9%
It will be harder for me to find a job	18.7%
I have lost my job or been furloughed	18.0%
Limited opportunity for advancement	16.7%
I am unsure at this time	13.6%
Other	9.2%
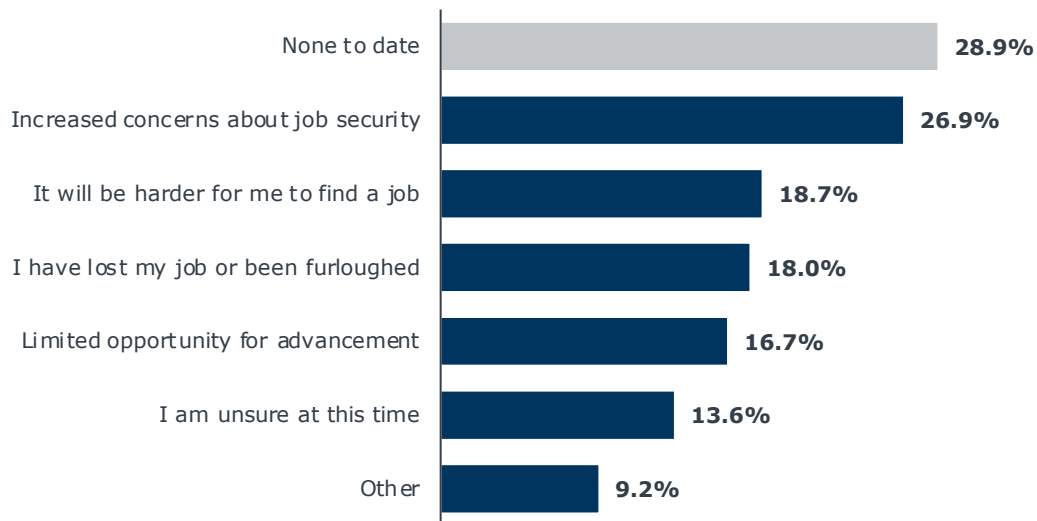
1) Participants could select multiple responses

Hesitators

Mindset and Behaviors

- Will choose to delay enrollment plans
- Some are facing sudden lack of resources to support education due to job loss, furlough, or pay cut
- Others are now motivated to continue working due to new concerns about future financial security

"Will I have enough money to attend school? **Should I reconsider in order to pay for more important bills?**…For those who can't afford school, it becomes a **want over a need**. Education is important, but can I afford it?"

- Survey Participant

Accelerators

Mindset and Behaviors

- Will choose to expedite enrollment plans
- Often seeking to enroll sooner to gain new skills because of newly difficult job market
- May be interested in non-degree or certificate options

"The job market has shrunk, and **education seems like a smart investment** in my future."

- Survey Participant

Managing Turbulence in Your Prospect Pool

Strategy Recommendations

Discover and Respond to Individual Prospect Concerns

Use tactics such as micro-surveys to understand shifting prospect intent as they progress through the student journey

Ensure That Your Marketing Articulates Return on Education

In addition to providing data on career outcomes, showcase career support services that can help graduates in an uncertain economy

Identify Portfolio Vulnerabilities and Opportunities

Analyze industry trends to determine how countercyclical effects might impact program and portfolio enrollment

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Prediction #2

Online research will become even more central to the adult learner journey to enrollment.

"Indicate how important the following contacts and communications have been in your search for information about furthering your education."

Adult Learners Aged 26 and Older, Winter 2020 Survey

Top 5 Most Important Contacts and Communications	Mean
School's responsiveness to my inquiries	4.15
Resources available on the school's website	4.08
Email communications from the school	3.80
Online resources (e.g., search engines, banners, and directories)	3.71
Individual communication with faculty in my program of interest	3.68

Mean scores are based on a 5-point scale, where 5 = extremely important and 1 = not at all important.

Online Research a Pivotal Component of Prospects' Multichannel Journey

71%

of adult learners used the school's website when they began searching for more information

The Type of Student Reaction You Want to Avoid

> We were told we would hear back about the status of our applications within 10 business days. When we did not hear I reached out, and was told I would have to wait for longer.
>
> **It was at least a month before I got a response, and by that time I reached out to say I was no longer interested in attending their school.**
>
> This was due to the fact that I was accepted elsewhere, felt good about that offer, and felt disrespected by the other school. **I did not think this was a good reflection of how they treat students.**

Survey Participant

Recommendations

Ensure Your Website Is Search Engine Optimized

Audit program webpages to confirm they are optimized to appear in top search results, address common crisis-related questions, and include any recent updates to admissions policy.

Optimize Paid Search Efforts

Use paid search campaigns to reach prospects as they research programs. As paid search becomes more competitive, it will become critical to manage campaigns effectively to keep costs manageable.

Leverage a Virtual Tour

For prospects who are interested in the campus experience, virtual tours can help them "visit" campus if they're unable or unwilling to visit in the short term

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Prediction #3

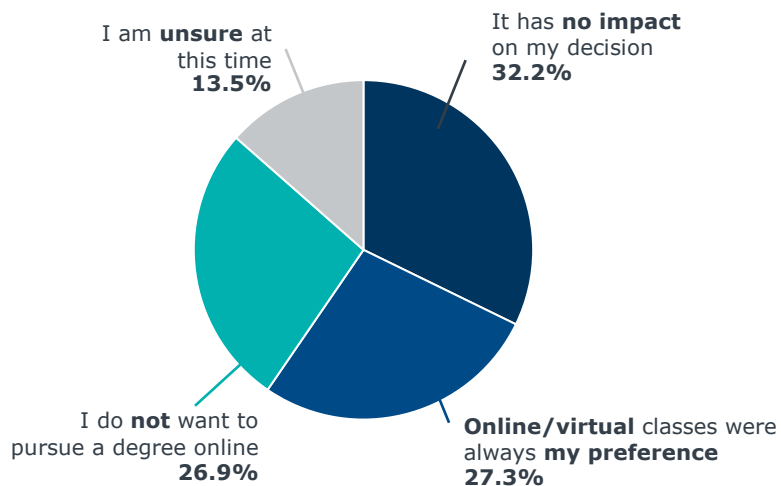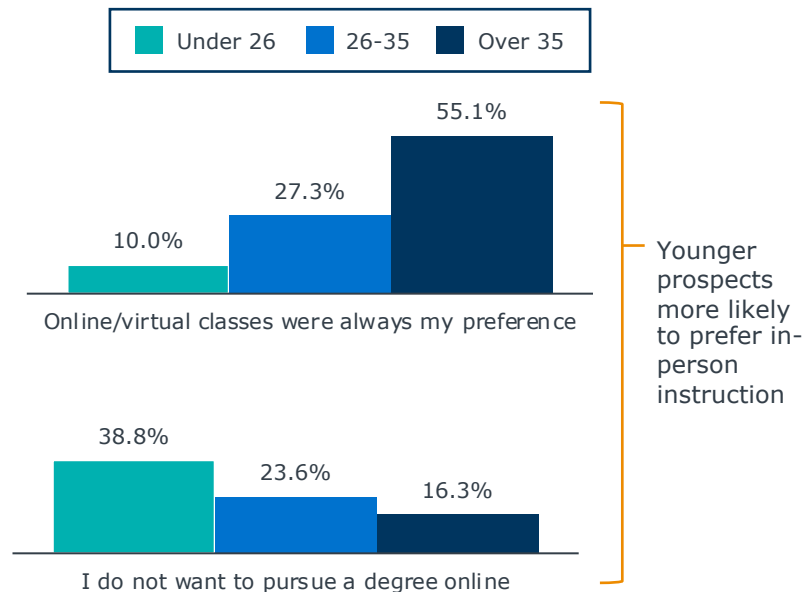# Generational differences will persist in attitudes toward online education.

How Will Online-Only Contingency Plans Impact Prospects' Decision to Enroll?

"Which of the following statements best reflects your preference?"

All Responses

I am **unsure** at this time **13.5%**

It has **no impact** on my decision **32.2%**

I do **not** want to pursue a degree online **26.9%**

Online/virtual classes were always **my preference** **27.3%**

Responses by Age

Under 26 | 26-35 | Over 35

Online/virtual classes were always my preference

- 10.0%
- 27.3%
- 55.1%

I do not want to pursue a degree online

- 38.8%
- 23.6%
- 16.3%

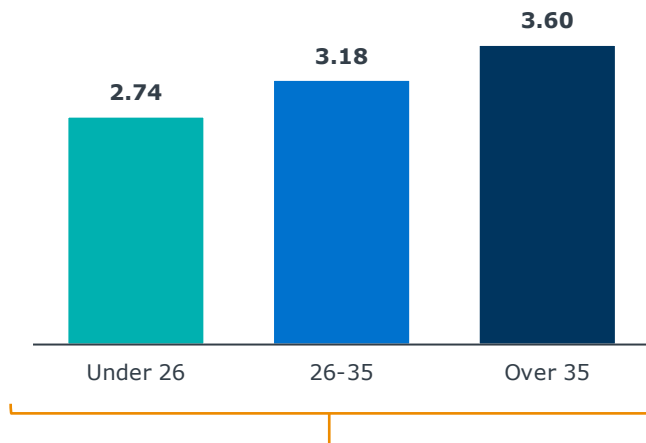Younger prospects more likely to prefer in-person instruction

Perceptions of Quality of Online Options Vary by Age

Older Students Value Flexible, Online Options, While Younger Students Value Campus Environment

Older Students More Likely to View Online Options as Essential

Mean Scores by Age[1]

Level of agreement with the statement "**Online classes are essential** to my ability to obtain a degree"

Younger Students More Likely to Question Return on Online Education During COVID-19

> Online learning deprives me of the same faculty engagement and opportunity I was looking for in a residential graduate program. **I am currently unable to make those personal connections, go to networking and professional development events, and intern in my field.** That is an integral part of my graduate education and **without it, the sky-high cost is not worth it**."
>
> *- Survey Participant*

1) Mean scores are based on a 5-point scale, where 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree.

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Recommendations

Tailor Your Marketing According to Students' Concerns and Preferences

Messaging about flexibility is more likely to appeal to older prospects, while discussions of return on education can help address younger prospects' concerns about quality.

Vet Programs Carefully Before Taking Them Fully Online

Ensure that program learning objectives align to market trends and account for competitive intelligence, historical enrollment, and revenue performance.

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Prediction #4

Adult learners will approach the application process even more pragmatically than before.

Adult Learners Remain Highly Pragmatic

A Tactical Approach to the Application Process
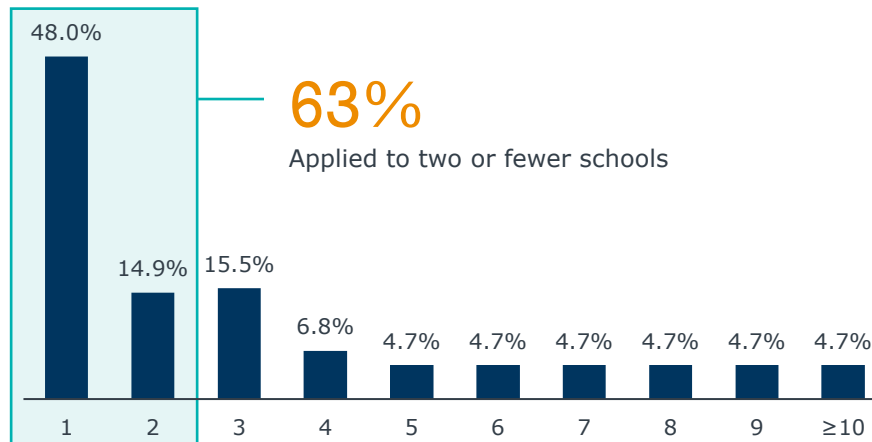
Applying with a Focused Plan

72%

Of respondents knew where they would be applying before they took a graduate admissions test

52%

Enrolled within 6 months of taking a graduate admissions test

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

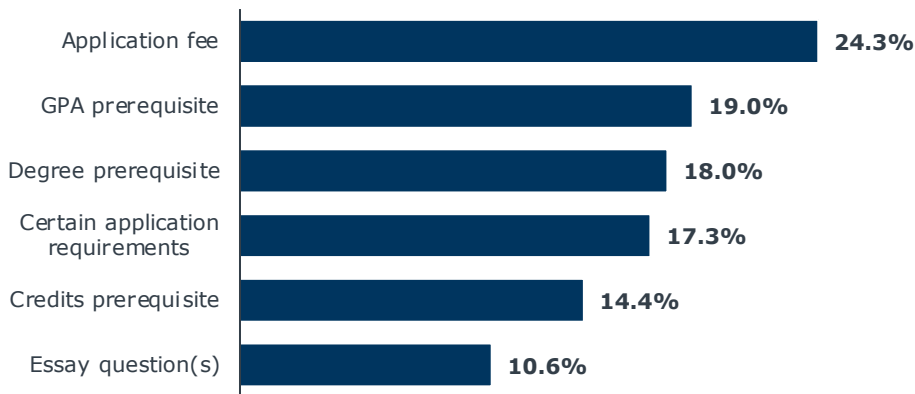*Students Aged 26 and Older, Winter 2020 Survey*

63%

Applied to two or fewer schools

Schools	Percent
1	48.0%
2	14.9%
3	15.5%
4	6.8%
5	4.7%
6	4.7%
7	4.7%
8	4.7%
9	4.7%
≥10	4.7%

"Which application and admissions requirements (if any) influenced your decision not to apply to a specific school or program?"

Students Aged 26 and Older, Winter 2020 Survey

Requirement	Percentage
Application fee	24.3%
GPA prerequisite	19.0%
Degree prerequisite	18.0%
Certain application requirements	17.3%
Credits prerequisite	14.4%
Essay question(s)	10.6%

Limiting Time Spent on the Application Process

1 in 2

Of adult learners completed their application in **2 hours or less**

47%

Of adult learners who plan to enroll or who are currently enrolled said they **had not taken a graduate admissions test**

Assess Application Requirements

Strategies for Streamlining:
- Enable test-optional policy or self-reported scores
- Accept unofficial transcripts
- Waive application fees or requirements for multiple letters of recommendation

Ensure Your Application Is User-Friendly

Application Best Practices:
- Include straightforward instructions and navigation
- Make sure your application is easy to complete on mobile
- Pre-populate student information on landing pages

Audit Program Requirements

Audit Components:
- Critically review all program prerequisites
- Assess requirements against those of competitors

"Initially I wasn't going to pursue a master's degree after graduation. However, many programs are waiving [parts of] the application and the GRE test. Therefore, I am taking the initiative to apply to programs."

- May 2020 COVID-19 Survey Participant

1   The Shifting Graduate Enrollment Landscape

2   The Impact of COVID-19 on the Adult Learner Mindset

3   Conclusion and Q&A

Key Takeaways

1   It will be critical to understand and respond to shifting prospect intent.

2   Website optimization and paid search efforts are more important than ever.

3   The imperative to articulate return on education will become greater.

4   When possible, eliminate obstacles in the application process.

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