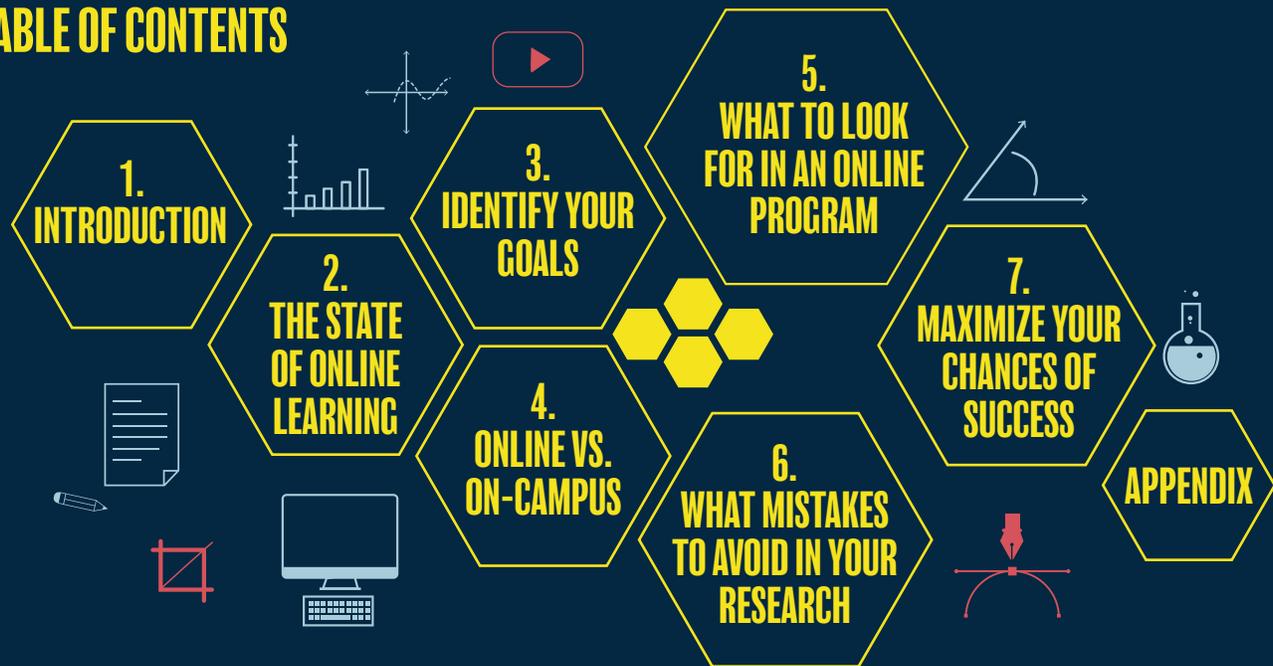




2017 STUDENT GUIDE TO ONLINE EDUCATION

How and why to choose an online degree

TABLE OF CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION

Choosing an online college program can feel overwhelming. BestColleges.com wants to help.

We've compiled the latest academic research on online education with the results of our most recent survey to bring you our 2017 Student Guide to Online Education. This exclusive report uses the feedback we received from more than 300 schools and 1,500 students to help you accomplish three things:

- 1. Decide if online education is right for you**
- 2. Understand what to expect as an online student**
- 3. Choose the best online program**

In October 2016 we conducted two surveys. The first was sent to administrators at public and private not-for-profit colleges and universities. We asked them about the challenges they face with new programs, as well as their plans for future online education offerings. The second study asked current, prospective, and past online students about their learning experiences and advice for future students. Using this data in tandem with the research from other industry leaders and academics, we have created this easy-to-understand guide to help you in your decision-making journey.

Our report will provide you with the information needed to compare multiple options - and if you've started researching online education, you know that there are more options than ever before. Ready to get started? Read on to begin an effective search focused on your individual goals and needs.

THE STATE OF ONLINE LEARNING

Online learning has come a long way since the first completely online program was offered in 1994 (StraighterLine, 2014). Online programs are no longer offered in a one-size-fits-all manner. Students now have choices to make about how they will interact with classmates, instructors, and class materials. According to the Babson Group, online enrollment increased again last year, with the majority of online students attending public colleges and universities (Babson, 2015). As more efficient technologies emerge, and more effective instructional strategies are identified, the online learning environment will continue to change and improve.

Before we start looking at your individual online learning objectives, we need to look at the current state of online education.

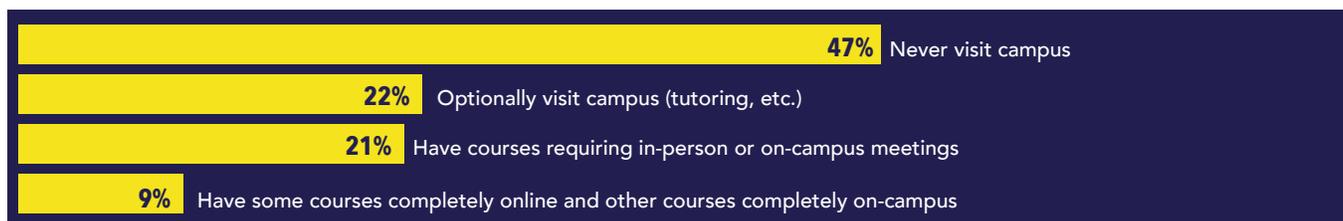
BLENDING AND HYBRID PROGRAMS

Blended learning environments, comprised of online and in-person components, are on the rise.

The New Media Consortium (2016) reports that several schools offer flexible options for students - allowing them to choose to attend lectures online or in the classroom. Others offer most class materials online, while supporting small study groups that meet face-to-face.

Students responding to our survey reflect the growing number of learners experiencing a mix of formats. Of those who are currently enrolled in a degree or certificate program, approximately half visit campus either by choice or because there is an in-person requirement in their courses.

PERCENTAGE OF ONLINE STUDENTS THAT VISIT CAMPUS



BESTCOLLEGES PREDICTION:

Hybrid courses are not new, but the trend is expanding. Students are experiencing blended programs, with a mix of online and on-campus courses. Other hybrid learning environments include online courses and on-campus support services. As institutions explore strategies to meet student preferences and needs, more opportunities will be available to choose where and how learning takes place.

REAL-TIME VS. ON YOUR OWN TIME

Technology is making in-class experiences easier to replicate in the comfort of your own home.

Of the students currently enrolled in online or blended degree or certificate programs, 44% said their class requirements were asynchronous (i.e., no live class meetings via chat or virtual classroom software), while 56% said they have some synchronous component to their courses (i.e., must attend live, scheduled class meetings). Of those who are in “completely online” programs, requiring no campus attendance, the percentage (56%) of students who have scheduled, synchronous events in their classes was the same.

BESTCOLLEGES PREDICTION:

Synchronous communication tools, such as Collaborate and Zoom, are becoming easier to use and embed in online course management systems. With a variety of features (e.g., two-way video and audio, text chat, whiteboards), they bridge the distance through instant reactions and feedback for participants. Online and blended courses will continue to maximize these tools as a way to increase engagement in activities that range from required class presentations, to small group study sessions, to optional faculty office hours.

MORE MOBILE ACCESS

Will the classroom of the future be on your phone?

Online education is often described as “any time, any place” learning, but not all courses are mobile-ready. This is changing. EDUCAUSE, a professional association for college IT professionals, recently issued its list of top issues and trends in campus computing. Among the trends affecting teaching and learning are the development of mobile apps, incorporating smartphones and tablets in the teaching and learning process, and accessing courses from mobile devices (EDUCAUSE, 2016).

BESTCOLLEGES PREDICTION:

According to the Pew Research Center (2015), almost two-thirds of Americans own smartphones, which is an increase from 35% in 2011. They are becoming important devices for not only communicating, but also for primary access to the internet. As mobile apps for course access get more advanced, and smartphone technologies continue to improve, mobile learning opportunities will become easier to participate in and more widespread across institutions.

TAKE ACTION: Where, when, and how do you want to participate in your online courses and programs? **Don't assume that all online courses are self-paced.** You have many options available: completely online, both online and in person, or primarily online with on-campus support; and some schools offer a choice, while others provide courses in a single format. Ask about access issues that are important to you, including things like mobile apps to attend class on your phone, and requirements for scheduled meetings in person or online. **Develop your list of expectations** and research how the programs you are interested in match up. **Check out our top online schools page for more information.**

IDENTIFY YOUR GOALS

The majority of today's online students enrolled with career-related goals in mind. The Learning House has found this trend to be ongoing in their annual Online College Students report. In 2016, more than 75% of online students said they had career motives for enrolling in their programs, such as "wanted a career in a new field" and "needed more education to get a new job" (The Learning House, 2016).

A report from The Parthenon Group identifies six categories, or "segments," of college students, which get beyond the age-based labels of traditional and non-traditional (Ladd, Reynolds, & Selingo, n.d.). Three of these categories focus on career readiness.



IDENTIFY YOUR GOALS



Based on Ladd, Reynolds, & Selingo (n.d.)

ASPIRING ACADEMICS

Students in this category are usually 18-24 years old and focused on academic studies and earning top grades.

Ask Yourself:

Are you a recent high school graduate who is motivated by academic success? If so, you may already be thinking about a double major or going on to graduate school.



COMING OF AGE

Students in this category are usually 18-24 years old, interested in academics, but also want a full college experience that includes coursework and the campus culture.



Ask Yourself:

Are you a recent high school graduate who wants to go to college, but aren't sure what to study? If so, you may be planning to take a wide range of classes while you decide on a major. You are probably also interested in exploring social college activities, such as student clubs and athletics.

ACADEMIC WANDERERS

These students are typically adults, and may have already attended college in the past. Some are unemployed, while others are likely working while taking classes.

Ask Yourself:

Do you believe a college degree will help you get ahead, but don't have clear education or career goals? If so, you may be more focused on the degree than what you will study. You may also question your ability to complete a program.

STUDENT: ANNIE DRY
CURRENT CREDITS
BACHELOR OF SCIENCE



CAREER STARTERS

Students in this category represent a wider age range, but many are 18-24. They are interested in college as a path to a specific career and are cost-conscious in comparing options.



Ask Yourself:

Do you want to get a college degree because you feel it will lead to a specific job opportunity? If so, you may be most interested in researching placement rates and alumni salaries as you compare possible colleges and programs.

CAREER ACCELERATORS

These students are usually older students who come to their programs with previous college and work experience. They may also be working full-time while taking classes.

Ask Yourself:

Are you interested in going to college as a way to move forward or get promoted in your current field of work? If so, you may be focused on transfer credits as well as getting academic credit for your past work experience.



INDUSTRY SWITCHERS

These students tend to be older students, and have some previous college and job experience. They have a wide range of reasons for wanting to switch to something completely new, such as they are in a declining industry or have been laid off.

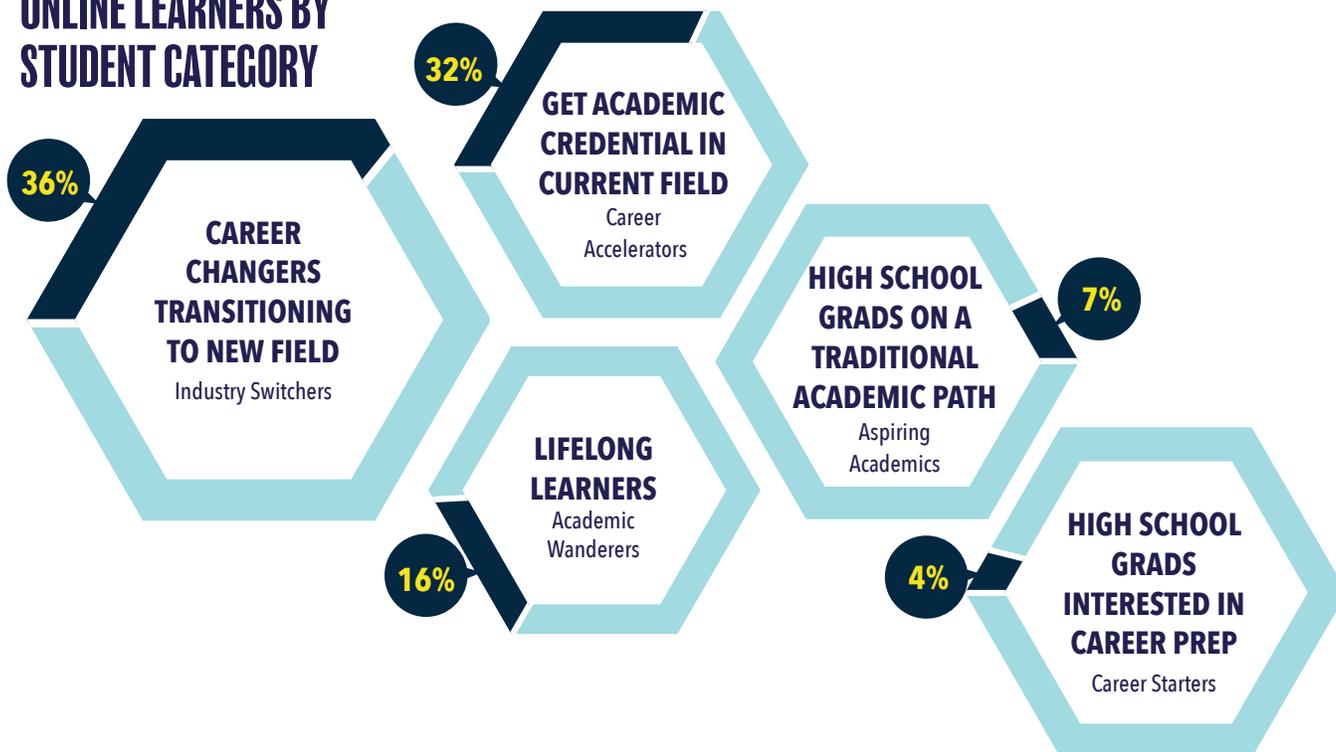


Ask Yourself:

Are you thinking about "going back to school" so that you can transition into a career field or path that is different from what you are doing now? If so, you may want to find out how the schools and programs you are interested in are actively connected with alumni and networking with potential employers.

We used these categories to organize our research, asking current, past, and prospective students to share the reasons they were interested in online learning. 72% were motivated by career-related goals, such as changing to a new field or advancing in their current fields. More than one-third (36%) of online students are interested in switching to a new career.

ONLINE LEARNERS BY STUDENT CATEGORY



TAKE ACTION: Can you relate to one (or perhaps two) of the student descriptions in this section? Take some time early in your decision-making process to **explore your own goals**. Writing them down helps. Try using the **SMART** approach:

SPECIFIC: Be as specific as you can right now about why you want to be a student, and the kind of job you would like to have in the future if your goals are career-related.

MEASURABLE: How will you know you've reached your goals? Describe what success will be like for you.

ACHIEVABLE: How will a college degree or certificate program help you reach your goals?

RELEVANT: Are your goals realistic given the programs you are interested in and the resources you have available?

TIME-BASED: When do you want to reach your goals and is this possible in the time frame you have available? Identify one small step you can accomplish today to get the process moving forward.

For more information check out our guides on **choosing a major** and **transferring schools**.

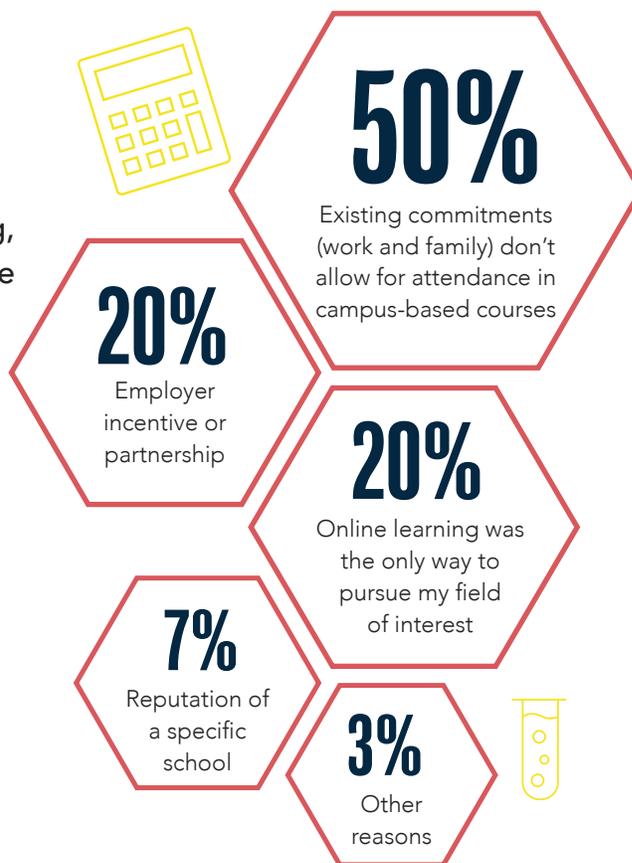
ONLINE VS. ON-CAMPUS

There are pros and cons to both on-campus and online college programs. While on-campus students may find that support services and activities are more readily available (e.g. advising, health and wellness), online students usually have more flexibility, scheduling coursework around employer and family commitments. A study from Pearson found that 79% of adults who are thinking about a college degree see “availability of classes at times that fit my schedule” as an important barrier to getting enrolled (Pearson, 2016).

For many students (50%) in our recent survey, online is seen as the only option for scheduling reasons. For others (20%), online learning is the only way to access the areas they want to study. Online can also be an option that becomes available to students after they start taking campus-based classes.

Our survey found additional reasons students choose online learning, related to researching and choosing an online program. These narrowed their options even before they began to think about academics and other important factors of online learning.

REASONS FOR STUDYING ONLINE



REASON	DESCRIPTION
Moving from On Campus to Online	Students who already attend a traditional, campus-based college, may try online courses as they become available.
Alumni Going Back for More	Students who have already graduated from of an institution that now offers online programs, and who want to continue their studies may choose their alma mater's online options for advanced degrees and additional training.
Making the Most of Employment Connections	Students may choose to study online at the recommendation of their employer, because they work for a university that offers online programs, or if their employer is involved in a partnership with a school that offers online classes.

The focus on employment-related decision factors was evident in several areas of our study. When asked why they chose online or blended learning over on-campus programs, 20% said that an employer incentive or partnership was the primary reason they chose to learn online.

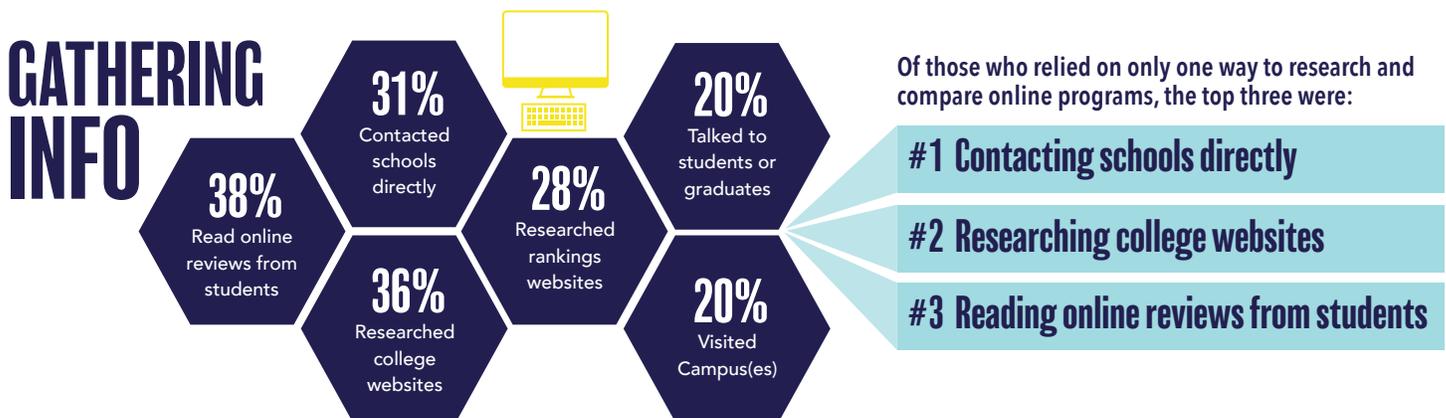
TAKE ACTION: Explore education and training incentives that may be offered by your employer.

This could include a range of tasks, from searching the company’s public websites and internal notification systems for formal programs and partnerships, to having an informal discussion with colleagues and supervisors to get input on what learning options would be beneficial for you. Look for, and ask about, connections between your workplace, or the work setting you’d like to enter, and existing online programs. **See our workforce development page for more information.**

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN AN ONLINE PROGRAM

Even if you identified closely with one of the student categories we presented in Section 3: Identify Your Goals, you will still have a unique combination of needs and preferences. When it comes to online education, there are more choices available than ever before. Which programs are the best fit for your needs? What are the best methods to research the options?

There are many ways to gather information about a range of academic, learning support, financial, and other important college questions. Our survey results include feedback from current, past, and prospective students about what they did before choosing a program. Many students relied on multiple sources, but the most frequently selected options were reading online reviews from students and researching college websites.



TAKE ACTION: Use multiple resources to compare the programs you are interested in. Then take the initiative to **contact schools that don't openly provide the information you need to make a decision.** Reviews can also be helpful, just like they are when you're looking for information about an online purchase. **Look for sites that provide student and graduate feedback,** and talk with friends, family, and coworkers to identify others who can give first-hand information about the programs they have attended. **Take a look at our rankings page for the best online programs in over 250 categories!**

STUDENT SUPPORT

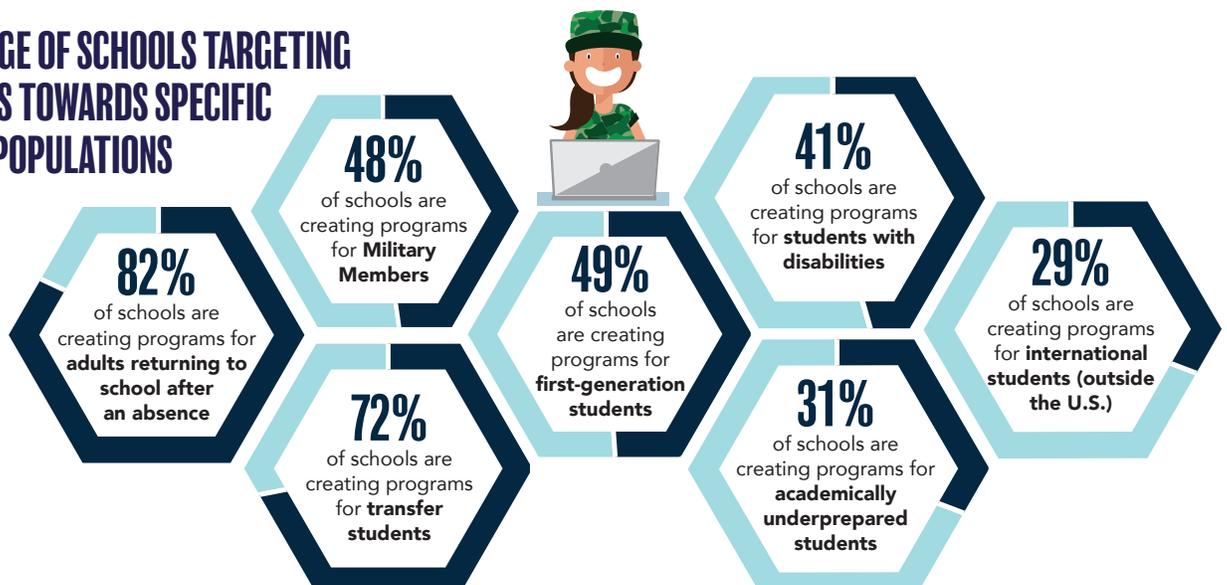
Schools are designing online programs to better serve a wider variety of students than ever before.

Most of today's online programs offer some support services to students, such as career counseling, writing centers, tutoring, and access to academic library databases. Student support is a component of accreditation reviews, and critical in helping enrolled students reach graduation.

Some schools consider different student populations when they decide to create a new online program. This level of attention can mean additional resources are also put into place to assist you as an online learner with specific needs and characteristics. The schools we surveyed shared a long list of student groups they are actively working to serve, including adult students returning to school after an absence (82%), students with transfer credits (72%), first-generation students (49%), and military students (48%).

Emerging areas of focus for online programs are dual enrollment high school students and international students.

PERCENTAGE OF SCHOOLS TARGETING PROGRAMS TOWARDS SPECIFIC STUDENT POPULATIONS



TAKE ACTION: Explore online education options that are already thinking about serving students like you. **Military servicemembers**, in-service teachers, working professionals, **students with disabilities**, and students that need help getting ready for college-level work, are just a few of the groups online programs are thoughtfully and purposely trying to reach. **Look for evidence of special services and courses in your research**, and reach out to contact schools you are interested in to find out more about their efforts to meet your needs and expectations. Veterans and military members have a particularly large amount of online programs that are geared towards their unique needs, **see our top military friendly colleges page for more information.**

STUDENT SUCCESS INFORMATION

Students considering online education want to know if their degrees will pay off.

Each school collects data about student performance. Many schools now provide this information openly so that you can get a better idea of how success is measured and achieved at the institutions you are interested in attending. 77% of schools report that students are asking for “placement/employment” rates, which may come as no surprise given the employment focus of most students’ education goals.

PERCENTAGE OF SCHOOLS REPORTING STUDENT INTEREST IN SUCCESS FACTORS



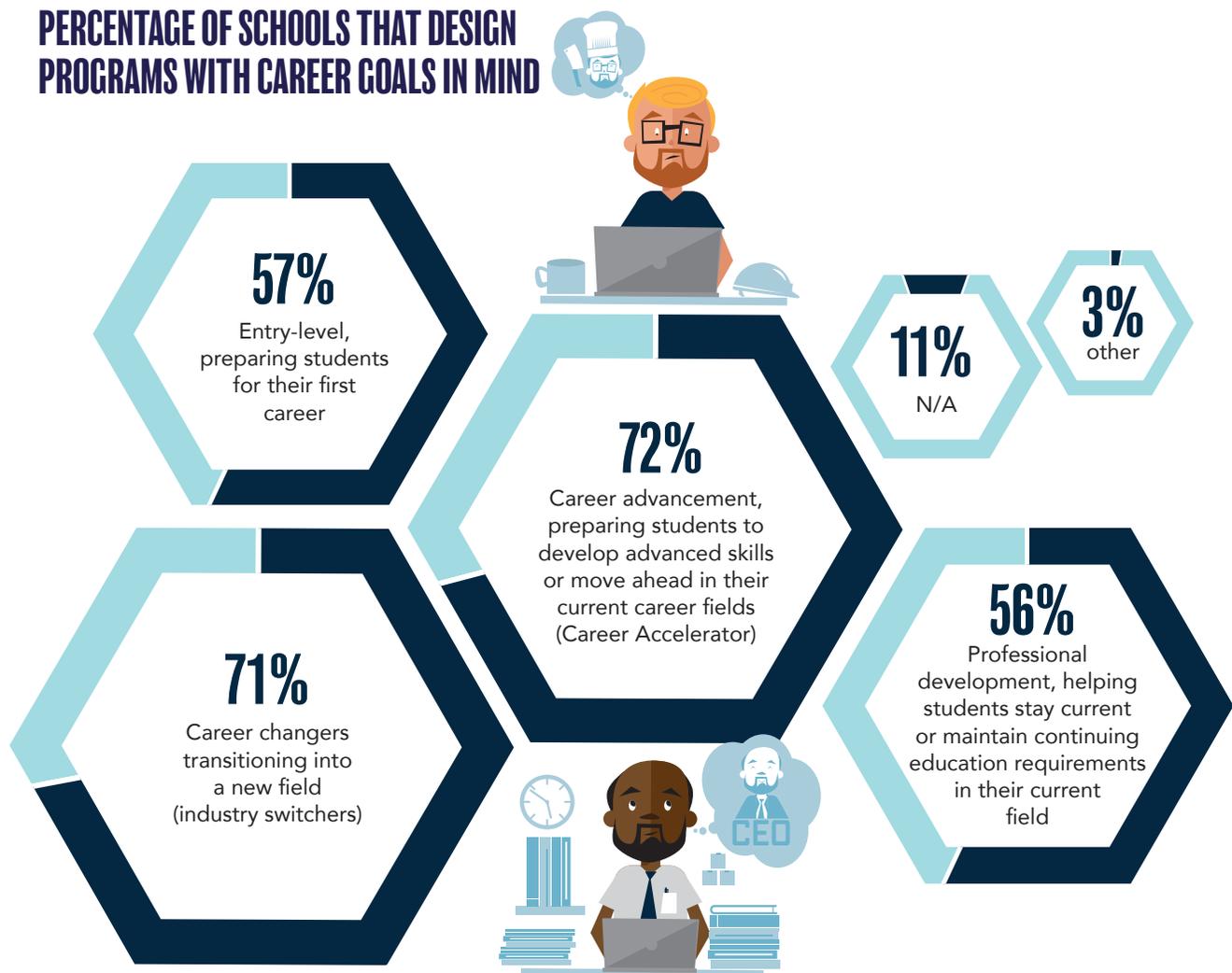
TAKE ACTION: A majority of schools provide student completion rates (83%) and placement/employment rates (53%), but there are other categories of “student success” that you’ll find in your research. **What do you want to know about a school’s students and alumni?** Ask about details related to post-graduation salary, post-graduation job satisfaction, and other questions that are important to your decision. Don’t just focus on the school’s overall numbers - ask for the student outcomes of the specific programs you’re interested in.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Your post-graduation goals should have a big impact on your choice of online program.

According to our school survey results, many online programs are developed with a range of student career goals in mind. Whether you want to prepare to enter your first career or advance in a current field as a working professional, talk with admissions and academic advisors to get more details about how the program you are interested in is designed to fit your career goals.

PERCENTAGE OF SCHOOLS THAT DESIGN PROGRAMS WITH CAREER GOALS IN MIND

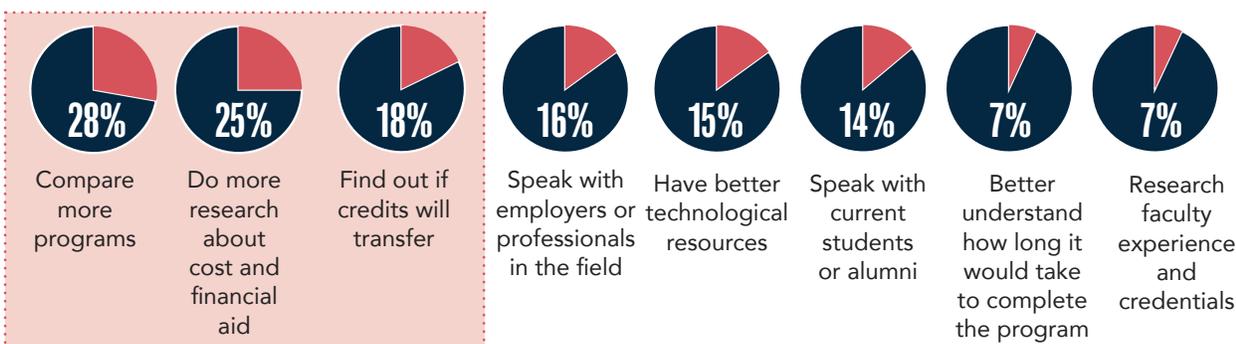


TAKE ACTION: Review your learning and career goals, and then look for online programs that specifically target these objectives. If you are a Career Starter or Industry Switcher, internships may be important to you as a way to get experience in a new field, for example. Career Accelerators may want to know about how courses in a degree or certification program are aligned with employment needs or licensure in a particular industry. **For more information on choosing a major and a career, visit our careers page.**

WHAT MISTAKES TO AVOID IN YOUR RESEARCH

We asked students who have already graduated from an online program to share the lessons they learned. What would they have done differently before enrolling? Their responses reflect regrets about not expanding their initial search and not understanding more about the financial implications of becoming an online student.

WHAT ONLINE STUDENTS WISH THEY HAD DONE BEFORE STARTING THEIR PROGRAM



The Learning House’s (2016) most recent study found that online students consider an average of three online programs, and about 20% only consider one option when making a decision. Decisions about online programs are usually made quickly; however, taking time to explore the details of financial aid, transfer credits, and employment implications of each option will improve your selection process, leading to a better fit and successful goal accomplishment.

Use a school search database to develop a list of potential schools that offer programs in the subject you want to study, and at the level you want to study (i.e. undergraduate, graduate, certification). Search for information related to your needs, and preferences, such as: student support services, design for a specific student population, degree completion and alumni employment rates. Check out our free, customizable database of over 7,000 schools to help power your school search.

TAKE ACTION: Explore all of the possible options for funding your college efforts, including federal financial aid, scholarships and grants, and lastly, student loans (which have to be repaid with interest). The U.S. Department of Education provides **online resources** to help you understand what is available in the federal financial aid system. The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau provides **online comparison tools** that calculate costs, debt at graduation, and monthly payments. Visit our **financial aid page** for hundreds of scholarships targeted at a variety of majors and student populations.

MAXIMIZE YOUR CHANCES OF SUCCESS

The term student success is used widely in higher education, often referring to retention and completion rates - students are successful when they enroll in another academic term and reach graduation. Graduation is important! But how will you get there? What support and resources are available to you as a student? There are other aspects of the online learning experience that impact your satisfaction with the process and accomplishment of your goals

ANTICIPATE AND PREPARE FOR CHALLENGES

Costs and finances continue to be the biggest challenge to completion for online students.

Our student survey revealed some of the top “roadblocks” to completing an online education. Those who reached graduation, ranked paying for courses and having access to required technology or internet connectivity as the biggest challenges faced while they were in their online programs. More academic considerations, such as maintaining a minimum GPA and staying on track to graduate on time were ranked lower. While students generally find themselves academically prepared to succeed, many lack the resources and support needed to fully participate in their courses and cover the costs.

TOP ROADBLOCKS TO COMPLETING AN ONLINE PROGRAM

- 1 Paying for the entire program
- 2 Having access to the required technology or internet connectivity
- 3 Scheduling on-campus visits (testing, orientation, tutoring, etc.)
- 4 Maintaining a minimum GPA
- 5 Not having transfer credits count toward degree requirements
- 6 Staying on track with classes to graduate in the planned timeframe



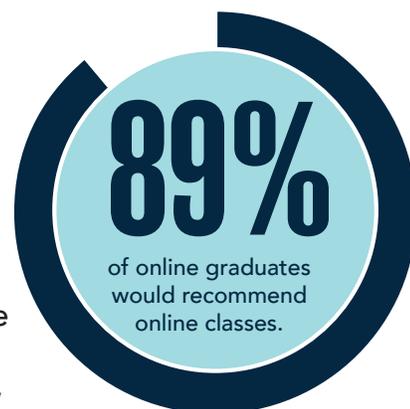
TAKE ACTION: Review the details of all financial aid packages you are offered and get a bottom-line estimate of what you will pay each semester (or course), and what you will owe after graduation (i.e., monthly loan repayment plus interest), before you accept admission and enroll in an online program. Don't forget to include tuition, fees, and other costs such as textbooks and virtual labs, and special equipment that may be required for your field of study. Setting realistic expectations for costs at the beginning can help you overcome this roadblock. **Our overview of financial aid will help you overcome the number one roadblock faced by online students.**

TAKE ACTION: Most schools provide a list of specific technical requirements you'll need to participate. These include hardware and software, as well as other equipment you may need to purchase for your field of study. **Check with the school's bookstore online to find out about educational discounts on laptops, software applications, and more.** Most schools also provide advice about internet speeds. If you don't have internet access at home, talk with your local providers to see if student discounts are available. Having home access is ideal; working on classwork from your employer's office or from public access locations, like libraries, will be challenging and reduce the flexibility you have to study around your work and family schedules. If you're worried about meeting the technology requirements of a program, **check out our list of colleges offering free laptops.**

MAKE THE MOST OF ONLINE ACCESS

Find out why the 89% of online college graduates recommend online education.

Is online education a good choice? Even with all of the challenges and roadblocks our surveyed students identified, an overwhelming majority of online graduates (89%) said they would recommend it. We also asked if they thought their online degrees have been or will be a positive return on their investment in the process and 87% said "Yes."



Why do they recommend being an online student? A wide range of reasons was provided, many of which are related to easy access to classes, and the convenience and flexibility of what has long been described as "any time, any place" learning. Online alumni in our study also appreciated being able to work on their courses at their own pace.

Student Survey Respondents on Why They Recommend Online Education

"Although I do prefer going to classes and have personal communication with others, I do like the courses which are online and learning how to deal with computer skills in this era is a must."

"Being allowed to work at my own pace and at a time that was convenient for me."

"You do your classes on your time. I loved interaction with others with my same interest."

"It meets the need if one can't get to a university. I would be very cautious if a student is not highly organized and self motivated. One does everything on their own."

"It gave me great perspective from my classmates and I was able to learn on my time."

"Ease of access to course material at any time of day"

"If you are self disciplined it is very rewarding to push yourself and work while getting a degree."



CONCLUSION

As you go through the process of choosing an online education, make the most of the opportunity to pursue your goals by reviewing the action items provided throughout this guide to:

- 1. Develop an awareness of the different ways you can learn online, and choose programs that meet your needs and preferences.**
- 2. Identify your goals for pursuing an online program and think about how they may relate to your career and future employment.**
- 3. Explore all of the higher education formats available to you, including online, on-campus, and blended programs, to find a fit for your needs.**
- 4. Research and compare multiple programs in your field of study, using a variety of methods and sources of information.**

We wish you the best of luck with your online program search! If you have any questions or comments regarding this guide, please reach out to contact@bestcolleges.com.



APPENDIX

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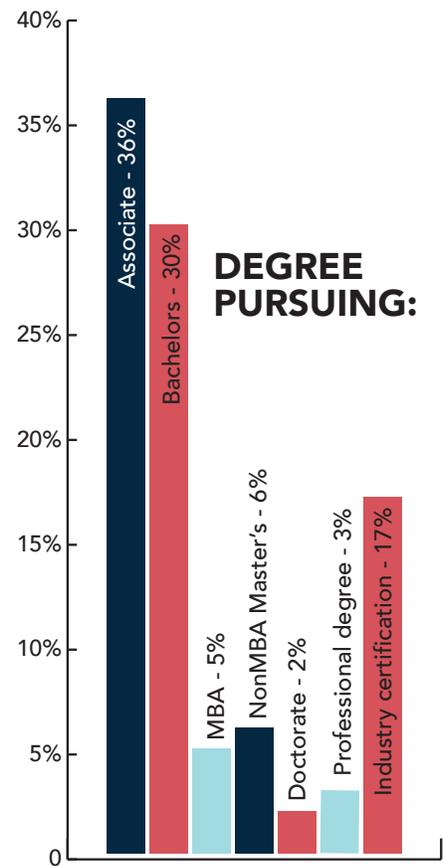
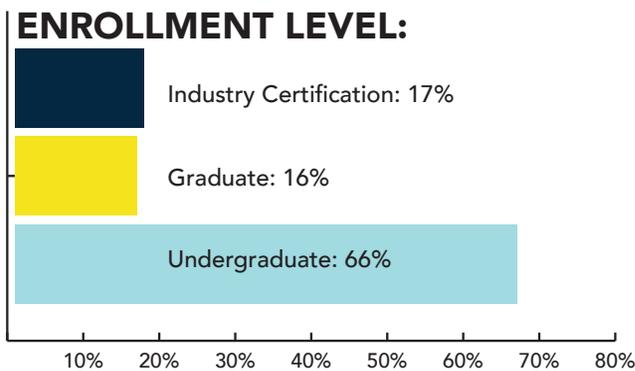
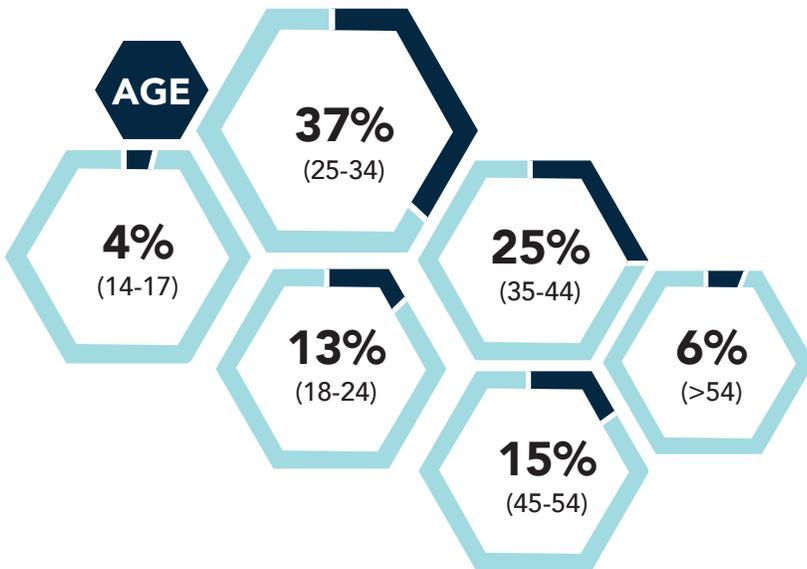
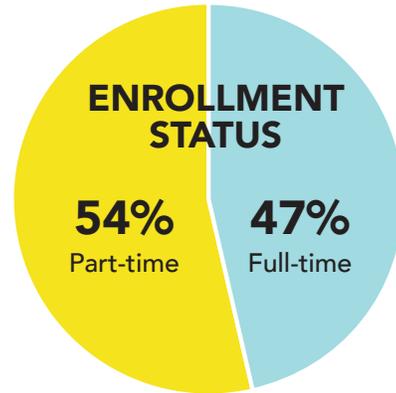
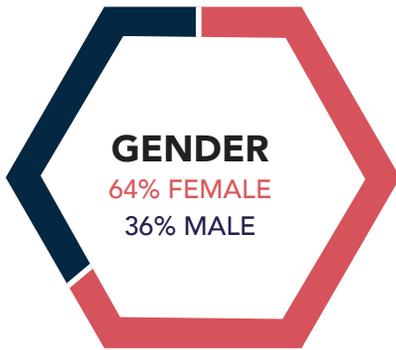
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STUDENT SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS



STUDENT STATUS:

