

2020

Trends In Online Student Demographics

Learn more about the characteristics of today's online students. This report provides additional insights related to the motivation for enrolling and perspectives across the student journey.



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Executive Summary

This new online student demographics report provides a deeper dive into the data collected from 1,500 students for the [2020 Online Education Trends Report](#). These students represent three broad enrollment categories (i.e., prospective, current, and alumni), as well as three motivational types (i.e., career climbers, career switchers, and explorers). Whether your institution is new to online learning or has long-established programs, this report contains useful information for decision-making related to student recruiting, retention, and satisfaction.

KEY FINDINGS

Choosing Online Learning

- “Employer partnership/incentive” appears in the top three reasons for enrolling online for all Prospective student types.
- Overall, students of all types reported low use of social media posts (3%), printed materials (2%), and student or faculty blogs (2%) when researching and comparing online programs.

Roadblocks and Regrets

- This year, “staying on track with classes” to graduate on time emerged as a concern across student types and categories.
- Current students wish they had “spoken with employers or professionals in the field” before enrolling, and this was particularly true of Climbers.

Student Satisfaction

- Of the top four majors, those in health professions and related programs reported the highest satisfaction levels with 97% recommending online learning and 97% expecting a positive ROI.
- Education majors reported the lowest perception of quality with only 75% stating that online education is “equal to” or “better than” on-campus learning, compared to 87% of computer science majors.

A NOTE FROM BESTCOLLEGES ON COVID-19 AND THE TRANSITION TO ONLINE EDUCATION

The data reported here was collected shortly before the U.S. coronavirus outbreak in early 2020. The students who participated in this study had already chosen or were planning to take online courses. Their insights into the challenges of becoming successful online students, including lessons learned along the way, help to inform the development of future online programs.

Online student success is driven in part by the support they receive throughout their journey, from making a decision about enrollment to reaching their education and career goals. For more information about supporting students through the transition to online learning, please visit the BestColleges blog.

Introduction

PROJECT GOALS

Who are today's online students? How do they make decisions about enrolling online? And what are their biggest roadblocks to graduation after they enroll? As colleges and universities begin expanding course catalogs to include new online programs, there is a lot to consider in terms of both program development and marketing. Information about and feedback from online students can help inform this process.

This report provides a closer look at student demographic data collected through the BestColleges [2020 Online Education Trends Report](#). In this expanded analysis of the data, we grouped students into three student types (i.e., career climbers, career switchers, and explorers) and three student categories (i.e., prospective, current, and alumni) to learn more about their characteristics, why and how they choose online education, and how they find success in their online programs.

THE SURVEY

During October 2019, BestColleges collected data from 1,500 students using a mobile survey on the Pollfish platform. Among the participants, approximately 33% were current online students, 40% were prospective students, and 22% were students who had graduated from an online program. All data was self-reported. This survey is part of a broader annual project -- the Online Education Trends Report -- which also collects and reports data from college and university administrators who are involved in online education at their institutions.

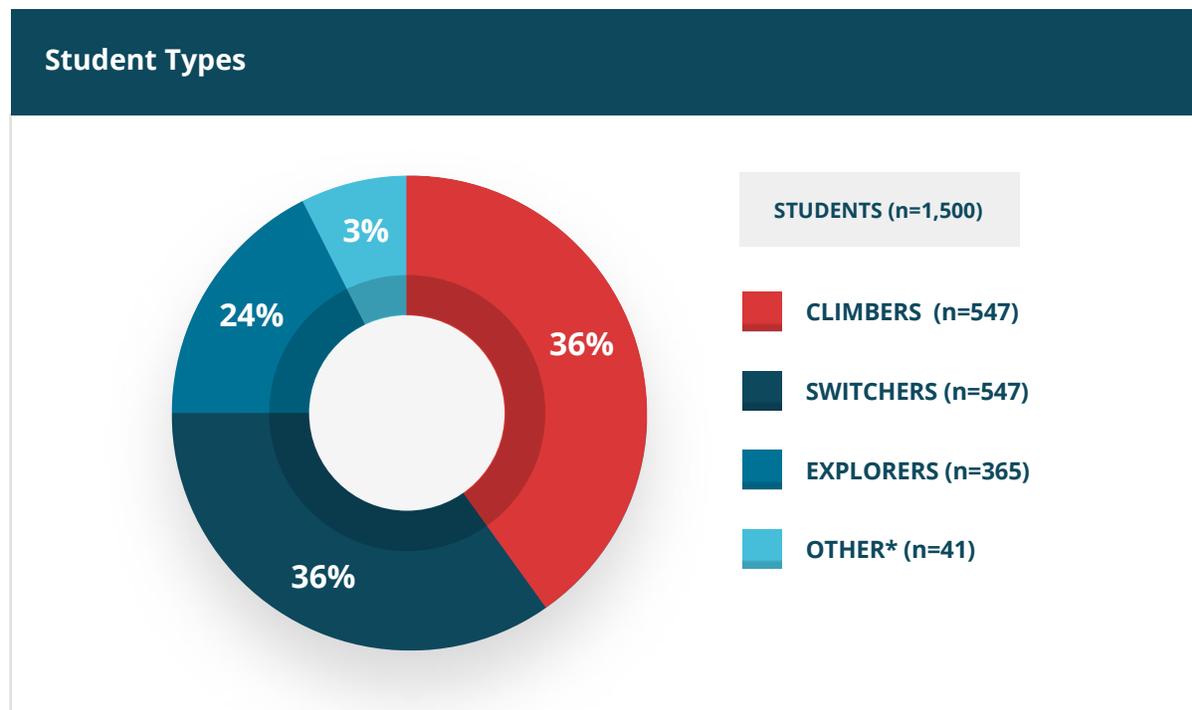
THE STUDENTS

In developing the survey, we considered six student segments identified by Ladd, Reynolds, and Selingo (n.d.): aspiring academics, coming of age, academic wanderers, career starters, career accelerators, and industry switchers. This work moves the conversation around student demographics away from age-only categorizations and instead describes students based on a combination of their characteristics and motivations for pursuing a college education.

Survey participants answered questions about what motivated them to enroll in an online program and where they were in the decision-making process about online education. From these responses, we grouped participants into three student types and three student categories, as described below.

Student Types

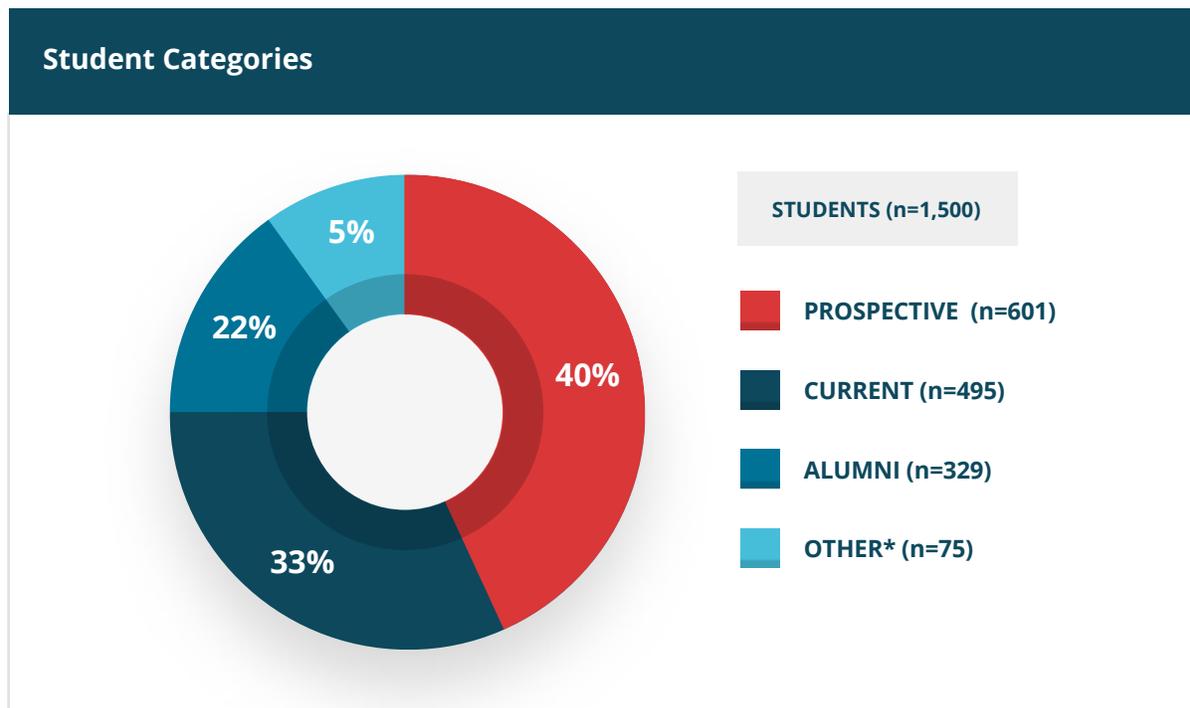
- Climbers:** Climbers are usually older students who may have some previous college experience, but they also have work experience in a field in which they would like to advance. These students are probably working while they are in school and may have employer support through financial assistance and/or school/program partnerships. Climbers may enroll in an online program to develop more advanced skills and knowledge or increased specialization within their fields.
- Switchers:** Switchers are usually older students who have had some professional success in a specific field; however, these individuals now want to move into another field or industry. Earning an academic degree, certificate, or certification online is seen as a way to transition from one career to another.
- Explorers:** Explorers represent a wider age range, which includes recent high school graduates entering college for the first time -- perhaps without clear career goals -- and older "lifelong learners" who may have some previous college experience and want to enroll in academic courses and programs online to further a personal interest. Some Explorers may be working, while others are unemployed.



* Participants whose responses were not aligned with the three defined types

Student Categories

- **Prospective:** Prospective students are those who responded that they were considering online programs at the time of the survey, but were not yet enrolled.
- **Current:** Current students are those who were enrolled in an online program at the time of the survey.
- **Alumni:** Alumni describes participants who responded that they were not currently enrolled at the time of the survey, but had graduated from an online program in the past.



*Participants who identified themselves as "admitted to an online program, but not yet enrolled"

Student Count by Type and Category

STUDENTS (n=1,385)	CLIMBERS	SWITCHERS	EXPLORERS
PROSPECTIVE	192	254	139
CURRENT	214	167	104
ALUMNI	117	99	99

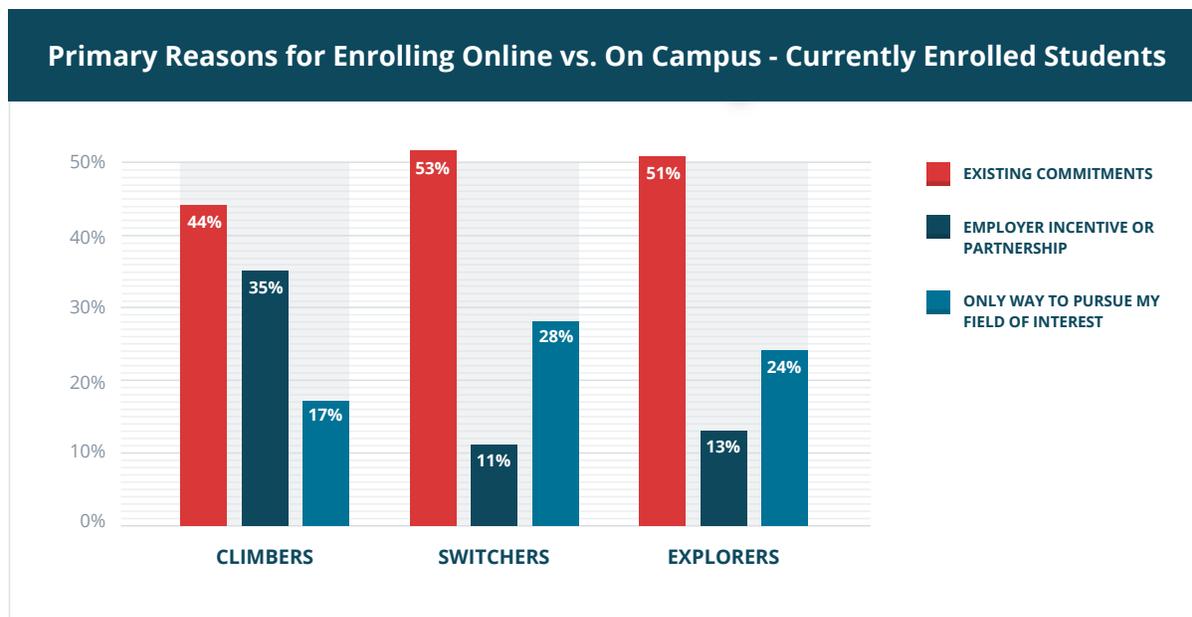
Choosing Online Learning

In our 2020 trends report, 71% of participating school administrators said they decided to offer a new online program as a response to student demand, while 65% shared that “marketing and meeting recruitment goals” was their top concern when launching new programs (BestColleges 2020). To gain insight around the issue of recruitment, we asked students about their priorities and processes related to choosing online programs.

ONLINE VS ON CAMPUS

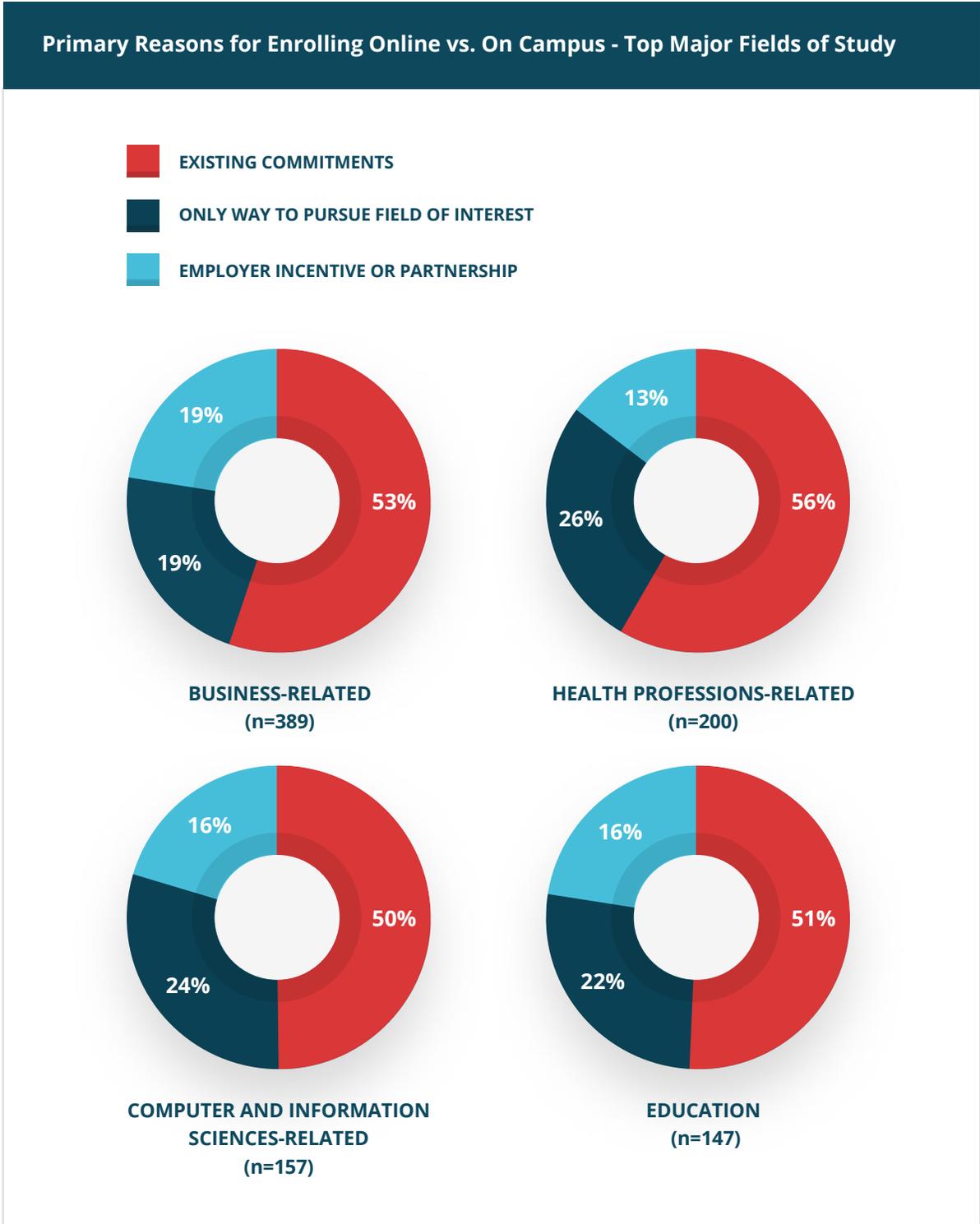
Scheduling flexibility and convenience are primary motivators for students who choose to study online instead of in a traditional campus setting. “Existing commitments” was cited as the top reason for enrolling online across all student types, student categories, student levels (i.e., undergraduate and graduate), and enrollment statuses (i.e., part time and full time).

An employer’s academic partnerships and incentives also play a role, however. “Employer partnership/incentive” emerged as a top-three response for all student types in the Current student category, ranking number two among Current-Climbers. Employer incentives are also listed in the top three reasons for enrolling online for all Prospective student types, as well as for Alumni-Climbers and Alumni-Switchers.



Online education is also known for increasing access to education. In our study, 22% of students reported that enrolling online was the “only way to pursue my field of interest.” This reason appears in the top three responses across all student types and categories. Alumni-Explorers is the only group to have “reputation of a specific school” enter their top three reasons for having enrolled online.

When we look at the top four academic majors among students in our survey, we see similar results in the motivation to enroll online vs. on campus.





BEST COLLEGES INSIGHT

Developing relationships between academic programs and employers may be an effective way to reach students who are interested in and encouraged to pursue online education. Professional associations may also be helpful as a resource for identifying not only potential employers, but also current trends in hiring practices and demand for specific education and training opportunities. In our survey, 35% of all responding students shared that professional associations were their primary resource for learning more about their fields of study and/or related job markets before enrolling, while 25% said their primary resource was talking to employers in their field of interest, including their own employer.

RESEARCHING THE OPTIONS

With an awareness of why students choose online learning opportunities, we can further assess how they look for specific programs. When asked which methods they relied on the most to research and compare programs, responses varied by student type. The top resource for Climbers overall was “rankings websites,” while Switchers reported relying on “college websites” and “online reviews from students” on sites like Cappex, Unigo, and GradReports. Explorers reported that they rely on “contacting schools directly.”

Top Resources for Researching and Comparing Online Programs			
	CLIMBERS	SWITCHERS	EXPLORERS
1.	Rankings websites (25%)	TIE - Online reviews from students (20%) and college websites (20%)	Contact school directly (20%)
2.	Contacted schools directly (20%)	TIE - Contact schools directly (17%) and rankings websites (17%)	College websites (18%)
3.	Only way to pursue my field of interest (17%)	Visited Campus(es) (12%)	Online reviews from students (16%)

What are students not using to research online education? Overall, students of all types reported low use of social media posts (3%), printed materials (2%), and student or faculty blogs (2%).



BEST COLLEGES INSIGHT

Students who are at different stages in their careers have different motivations for enrolling online, and they use the available resources for researching online education programs differently. If your online program is designed with a specific population in mind, you can tailor outreach efforts to meet those students where they are seeking information. Update school and program websites frequently, think about a prospective student's experience when contacting your university directly (e.g., how and where), and monitor student review websites to understand how your institution and programs are being reviewed by current and past students.

DEGREES AND MAJORS

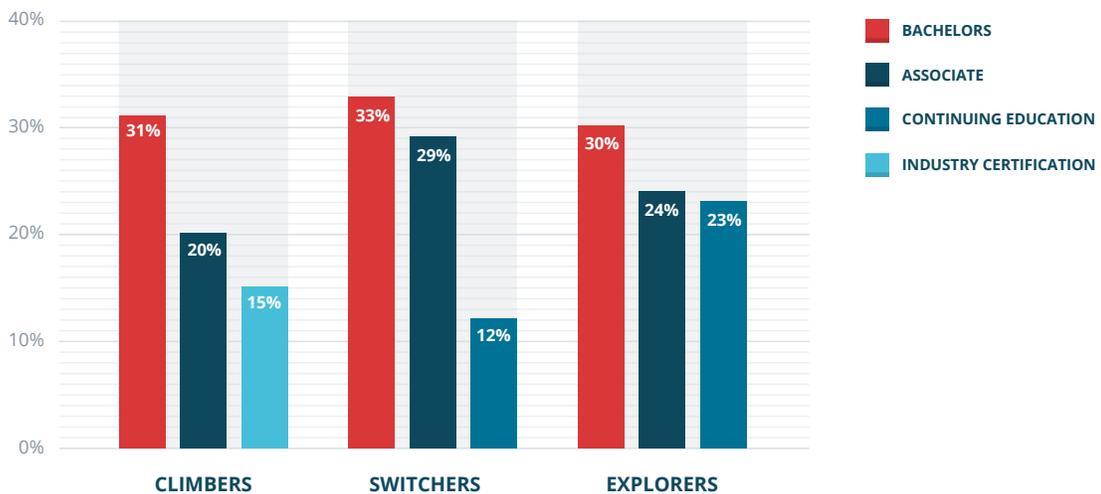
Which degree programs are today's online students most interested in pursuing? From continuing education and industry certification to undergraduate and graduate degrees, it depends on an individual's motivations for enrolling and their field of study. The majority of students in our survey this year were undergraduates (57%), and 63% of these students said their majors were in one of five general areas of study: business (31%), health professions (13%), computer and information sciences (11%), psychology and other social sciences (8%), and education (7%).

Enrollment Trends

The level at which students choose to learn online may be related to their motivations for pursuing higher education. We found several interesting trends among survey respondents.

- **Climbers are more likely to be interested in industry certification programs.** While bachelor's and associate programs were the top two pursued by Climbers in our study, this group was the only one to list industry certification in the top three (15%).
- **Switchers are looking for associate degrees.** Overall, 25% of participating students said they were pursuing or interested in pursuing associate degrees. Of that group, 43% were Switchers, choosing online education to help them transition into new career fields.
- **Explorers are interested in continuing education programs.** Explorers had the highest percentage of students pursuing online learning for continuing education purposes (23%). When we look across student types and categories, Prospective-Explorers are pursuing continuing education the most actively (32%).

Programs Pursued by Student Type (Across All Categories)





BEST COLLEGES INSIGHT

Again, students at different stages of their careers have unique motivations for enrolling online and pursuing different programs. If your online program is designed with a specific career goal in mind (e.g., career advancement, career change, or lifelong learning), outreach to future students may benefit from including information about that program's goals with those groups.

More About Majors

It may come as no surprise that the top fields of study reported by all participating online students were business-related, followed by health professions, computer science, and education subjects. When we compared responses of students across these majors, we found a few differences worth noting in the context of new program development.

- Education majors (n=147) trended a little older than students in other majors with 43% in the 45 and over age brackets.
- Health professions majors (n=200) were the only group to list they wish they “had better technological resources” as one of the top three things they would do differently if they were to enroll in online education again.
- More computer and information sciences majors identified themselves as Switchers (43%) than Climbers (29%) or Explorers (27%), while the other majors had larger percentages of Climbers.

WHAT ABOUT GRADUATE STUDENTS?

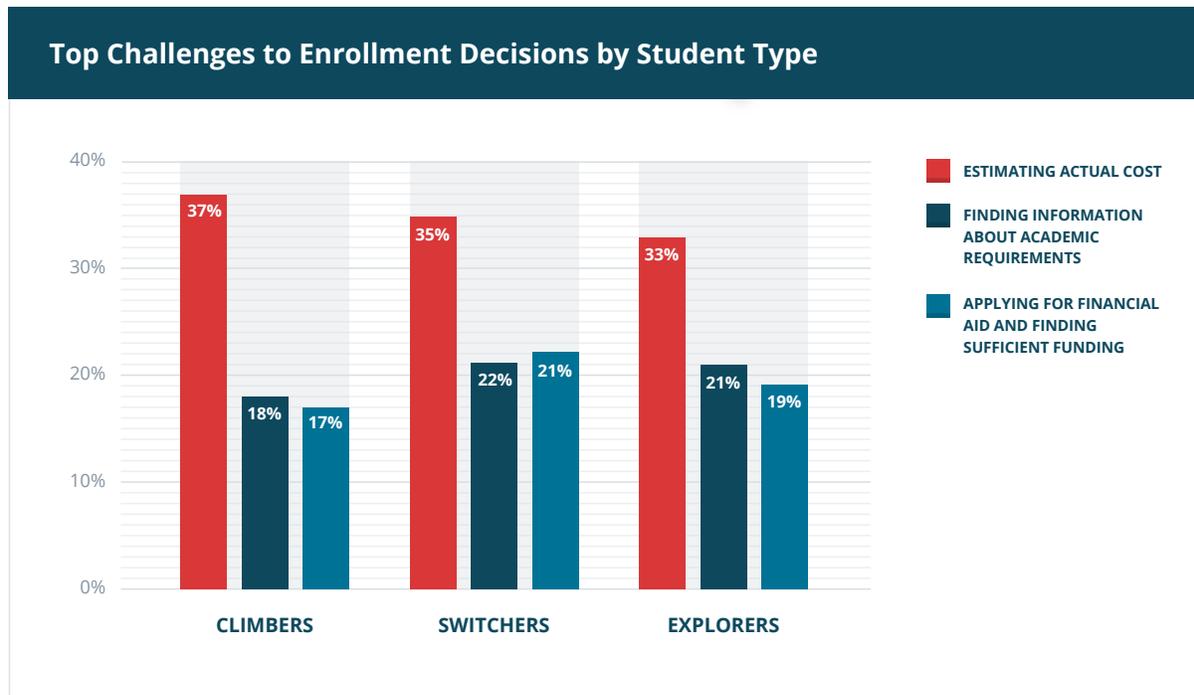
Participants identifying themselves as graduate students (i.e., pursuing a master's, professional degree, or doctorate) were a small percentage of our overall sample this year. Only 18% of our student survey participants were already enrolled in or considering enrollment in graduate programs. Of this group, almost half (45%) identified themselves as Climbers, 40% of whom were enrolled in or interested in pursuing non-MBA master's programs and 37% of whom were enrolled in or interested in pursuing MBA programs.

Roadblocks and Regrets

What challenges do online students face when making college decisions? What about after they are enrolled? Students responding to our survey cited financial concerns across the board. Other roadblocks, such as maintaining a satisfactory GPA and transferring credits, vary by student type and category. We also asked Alumni to share their lessons learned, which can provide insight for future students and the schools supporting them.

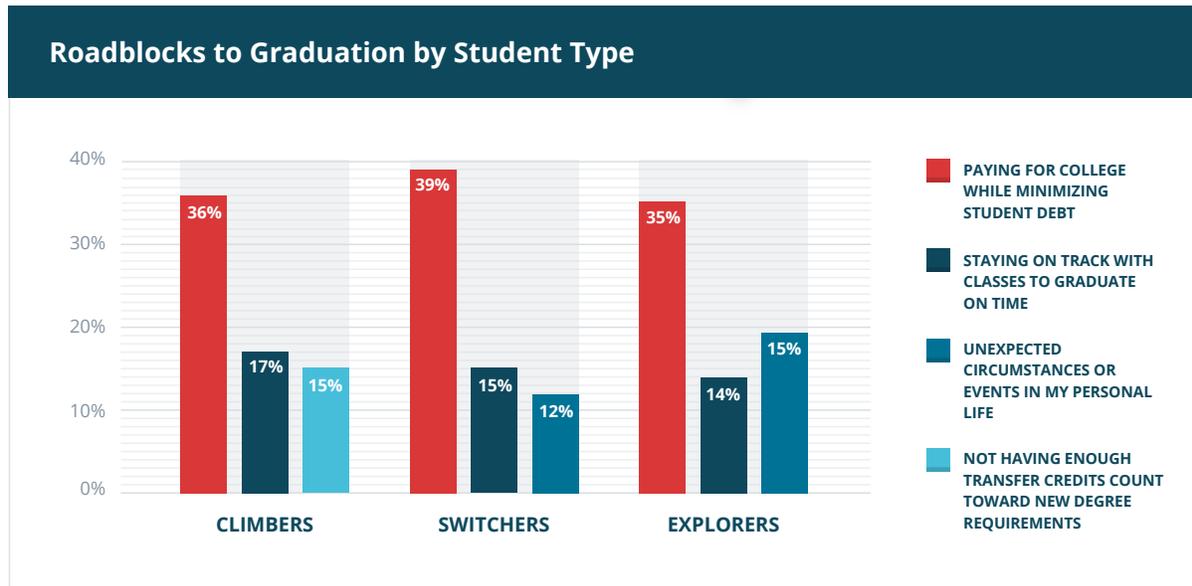
FINANCIAL CONCERNS

The challenges students face related to paying for a college education are clear. Individuals belonging to all student types and categories reported that the top challenge when making a decision about enrolling in college is “estimating actual cost.” This has been the top concern in all four years of our original data collection. Net calculators and other resources are often available on college websites, but anticipating all of the variables involved in estimating the total cost of a degree continues to be a problem for students.



REACHING GRADUATION

The biggest roadblock to reaching graduation is “paying for college while minimizing student debt.” This response is consistent across all student types and categories.



Finances are an ongoing concern for students, but they are not the only challenge to success. Individuals belonging to different student types and categories report several subtle yet compelling differences among their roadblocks to graduation.

- **Transfer Credit:** Climbers -- particularly those in the Current student category -- were more likely to cite concerns about not having enough transfer credits count toward their new degree plans.
- **Graduating on Time:** This year, “staying on track with classes” emerged as a concern across student types and categories.
- **Life Happens:** Overall, “unexpected circumstances or events in my personal life” was listed as the top roadblock by 15% of students in our study. However, this response was identified by 20% of Alumni students, compared to 15% of Prospective students and 11% of Current students.



BEST COLLEGES INSIGHT

Resources that support students -- academically and non-academically -- include a wide variety of professional services. Advisors in these roles can help students achieve success. Bolstering assistance in the financial aspects of attending an online program across the student journey can help alleviate student worry. Monitoring student progress and providing support throughout can have a positive impact on retention and graduation rates.

LESSONS LEARNED

What do online students wish they had done differently before enrolling in their online programs? We asked the Current and Alumni students in our survey to share their thoughts. Overall responses have been consistent over the years of this survey project: students would have “compared more programs” and “done more research about costs and financial aid.” When we look at more specific groups of students, several other lessons stand out.

Current Students

Current students wish they had “spoken with employers or professionals in the field” before enrolling. This is particularly true of Climbers (27%) who wish they had taken this step in their research. Additionally, 29% of Current-Climbers wish they had “spoken with current students or alumni” before enrolling.

Alumni

Alumni -- who are perhaps in the best position to share lessons learned -- had financial concerns, but they also had regrets related to their research. Among Alumni-Switchers, 21% said they would “speak with employers and professionals in the field” and 17% of Alumni-Explorers would “speak with current students or alumni.” Alumni-Explorers (24%) also wished they “had better technological resources” before enrolling as online students.



BEST COLLEGES INSIGHT

How can you better connect prospective students with current and alumni students in your programs? What about connections with employers and working professionals? Finding ways to help students communicate with these groups may positively impact the decisions prospective students make about their pursuit of career and education goals at your institution. Learning more about student expectations and their access to technology is also recommended.

Student Satisfaction

Our annual Online Education Trends Report looks at student satisfaction through three questions:

1. Would they be willing to recommend online education to others?
2. Do they think their degrees have had or will have a positive return on investment (ROI)?
3. How do they compare online and on-campus learning in terms of perceived quality?

Overall, online student satisfaction is overwhelmingly high. As reported in the 2020 Online Education Trends Report, 95% of all students would recommend online education to others; this is up from 89% the previous year (BestColleges, 2020). In addition, 94% see or expect a positive ROI (up from 88%). Additionally, 80% said that online learning is “equal to” or “better than” on-campus options, which is in line with the previous year (80%). However, as we look closer at student types, categories, and majors, we do find some differences in these results.

- The percentages of those seeing or expecting a positive ROI drop slightly across the student journey from Prospective (95%) and Current (95%) students to Alumni (89%).
- Climbers were slightly more likely to say they would recommend online education to others (96%) than Switchers (95%) or Explorers (93%).
- Of the top four majors, those in health professions and related programs reported the highest satisfaction levels with 97% recommending online learning and 97% expecting a positive ROI. Education majors reported the lowest perception of quality with only 75% stating that online education is “equal to” or “better than” on-campus learning, compared to 87% of computer science majors.



BEST COLLEGES INSIGHT

While satisfaction is high among online students overall, schools and programs may want to track perceptions among specific populations in specific programs, with the understanding that an individual's motivation for enrolling and their academic major may impact their perception. Where students are in the process -- whether they're thinking about enrolling or they're already completing a degree -- may also impact how they perceive components of satisfaction.

Conclusion

The available data about today's online students show that there is no one-size-fits-all approach for reaching or supporting distance learners. There are many variables to consider, including where students are in their careers and education journeys, that can have implications for marketing and recruiting, program design and development, and student support services. There are a few major takeaways for institutions, however:

- **Offer professional connections.** Find ways to connect prospective and current students with each other and alumni for all student categories. Explore ways to encourage networking with employers and professional associations specifically related to students' fields of interest.
- **Monitor program information and communication.** Keep school and program websites current. Provide the details students in your target audience are seeking, such as clear tuition and fee information and details about the transfer process. Periodically check student review sites to see how students are responding to your programs.
- **Develop short-term learning opportunities.** Students across segments are choosing options with shorter durations than traditional degree programs. Certificate, certification, and continuing education opportunities are popular and can be effective ways to help students reach their goals and become familiar with your school and programs.
- **Integrate support services and resources.** What support services are readily available for online students at your institution, many of whom are working, have children, and/or are in a low-income bracket? Work with resource leaders and faculty to provide assistance for online students that helps them meet the academic and financial requirements of higher education.
- **Know who your students are.** Find out where they are in their careers and education journeys and seek out information about their satisfaction with their experiences. Tweaking your approach on a program-by-program level to meet the needs of different student types, categories, and majors may help you improve student outcomes.

Contributors



About Melissa A. Venable Ph.D.

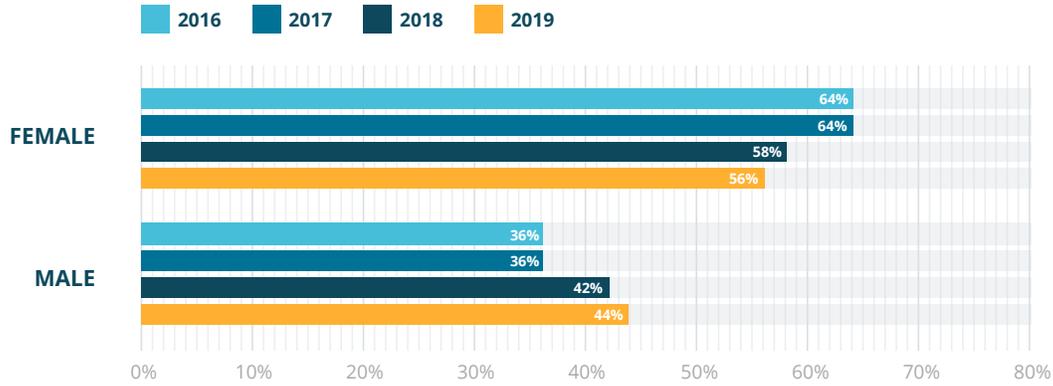
Melissa A. Venable, Ph.D. is an online education advisor for BestColleges. In this role, she leads this annual survey research project reporting online education trends found through student and school administrator feedback. Melissa is an adjunct faculty member and course designer at Saint Leo University and the University of South Florida and a certified career coach with a background in career development services. She earned her doctorate in instructional technology at the University of South Florida with research interests in distance education and support services for online students.

ABOUT BESTCOLLEGES

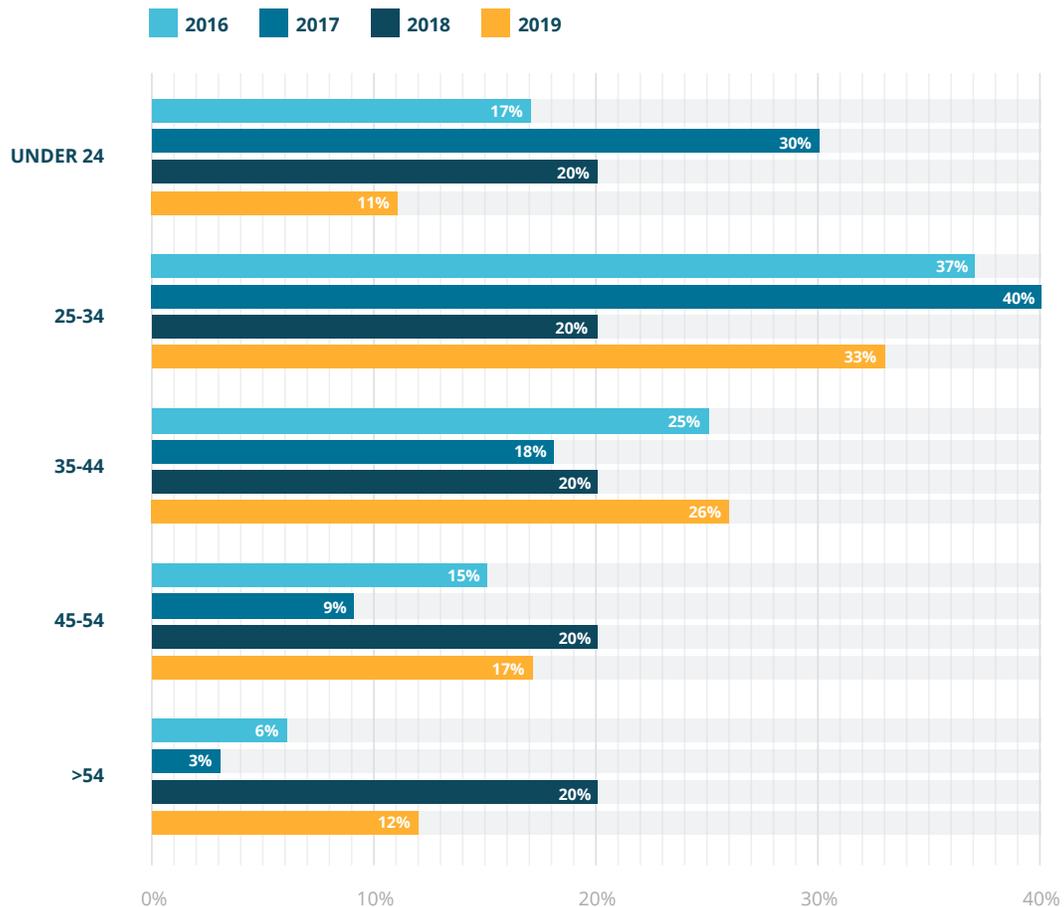
BestColleges empowers students to make smarter educational decisions and find schools that best fit their needs through proprietary research, user-friendly guides, and hundreds of unique college rankings. As a trusted education advisor, BestColleges also provides a wide array of college planning, financial aid, and career resources to help students realize life goals and overcome educational challenges as they prepare for careers after college.

2020 ONLINE EDUCATION TRENDS REPORT, STUDENT PARTICIPANTS, (N=1500)

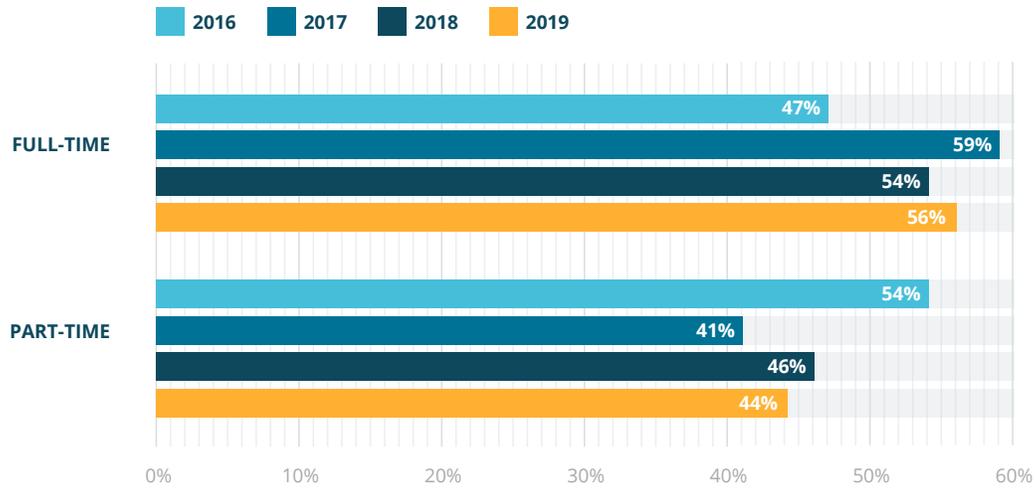
Gender



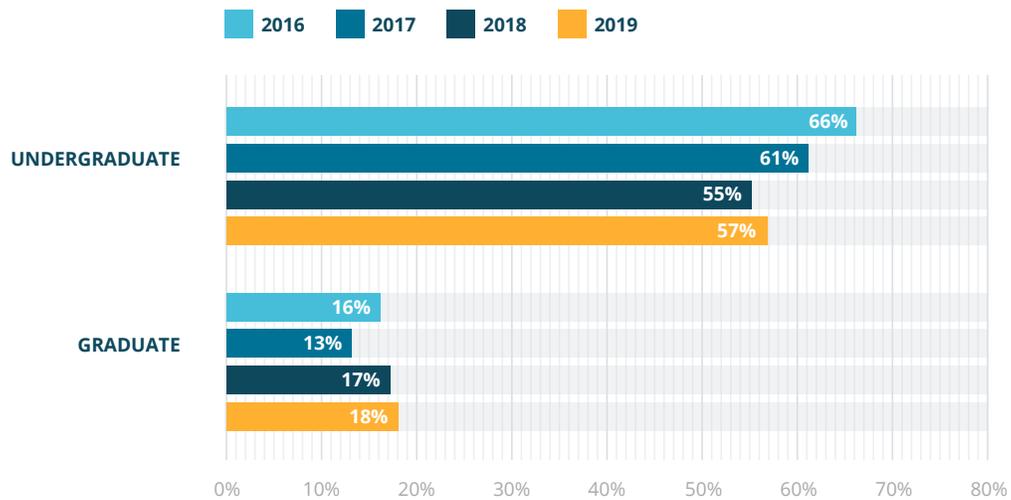
Age



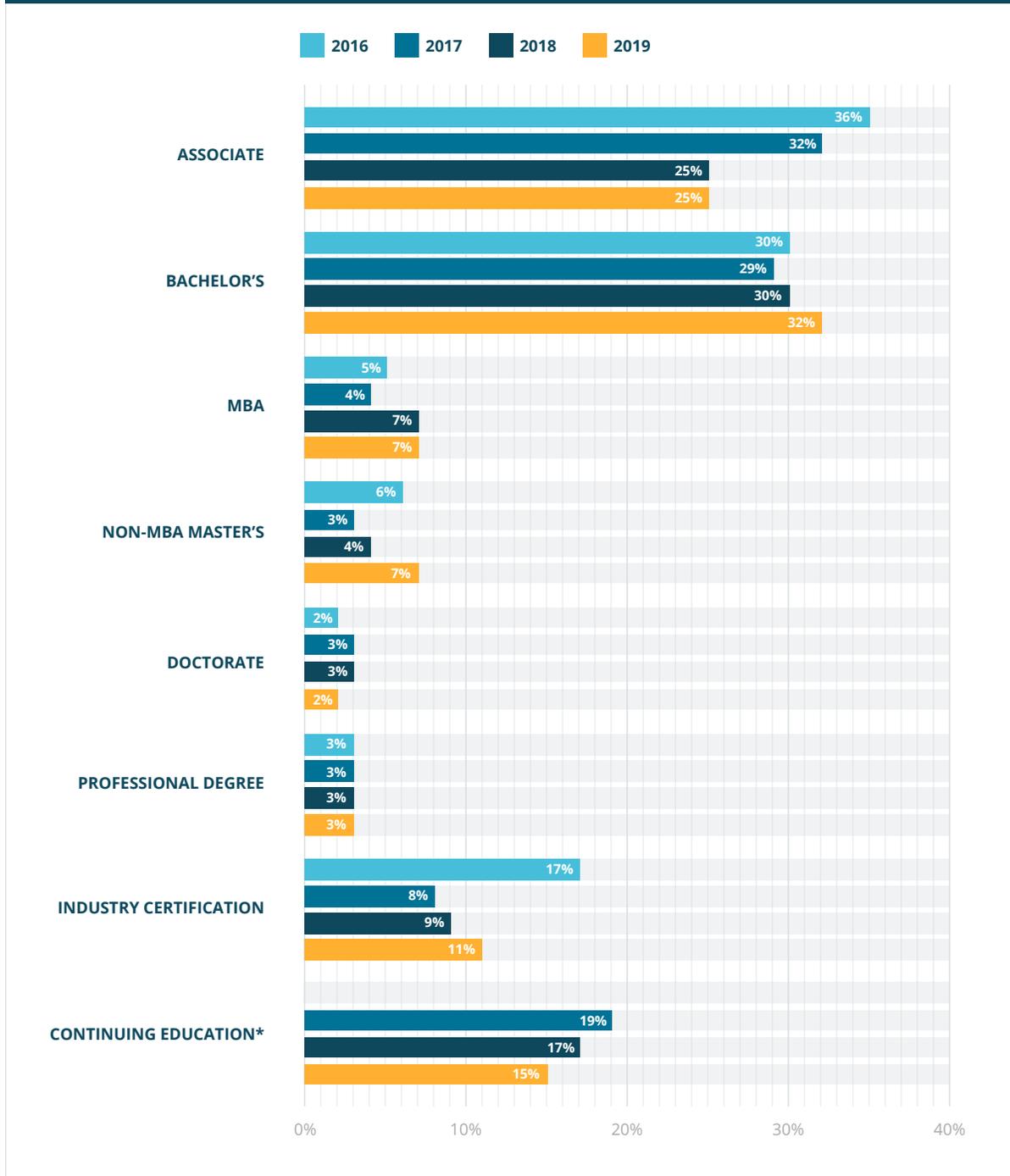
Enrollment Status



Enrollment Level

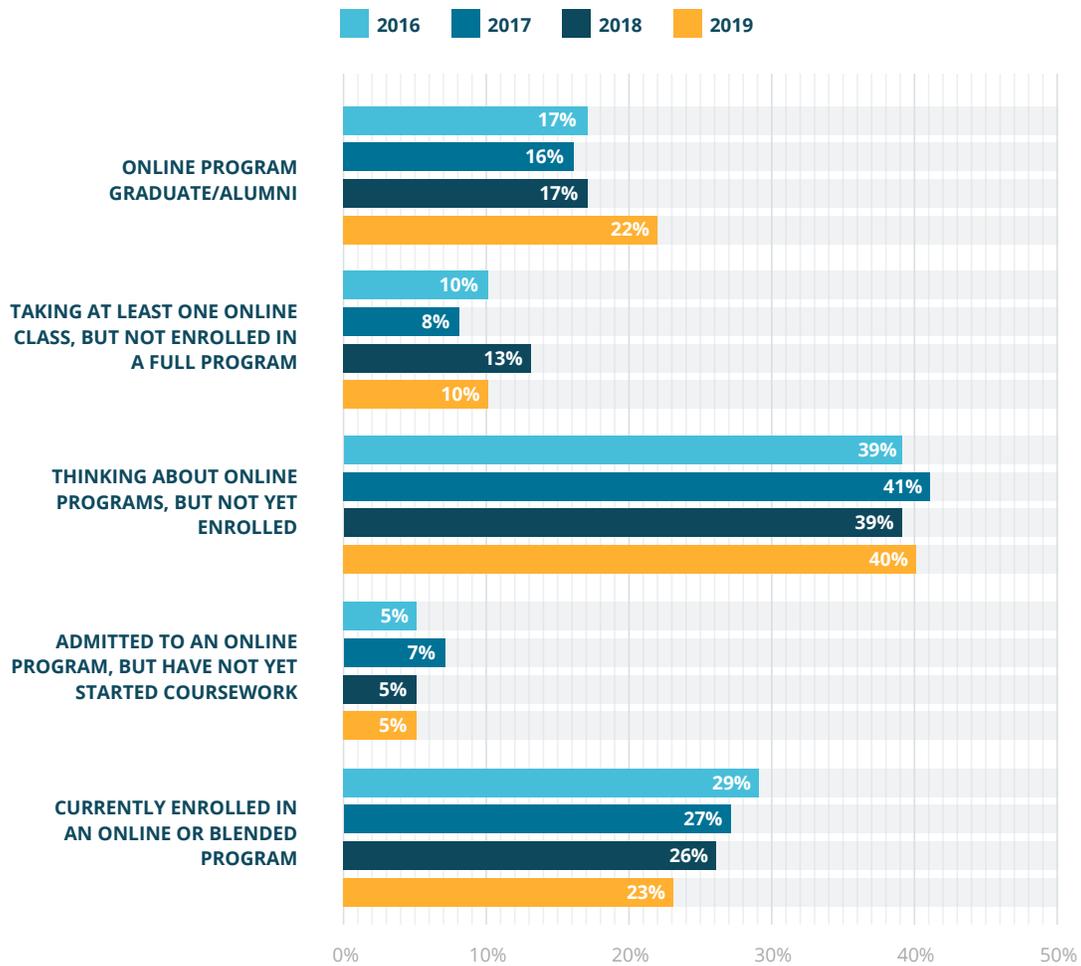


Degree Pursuing

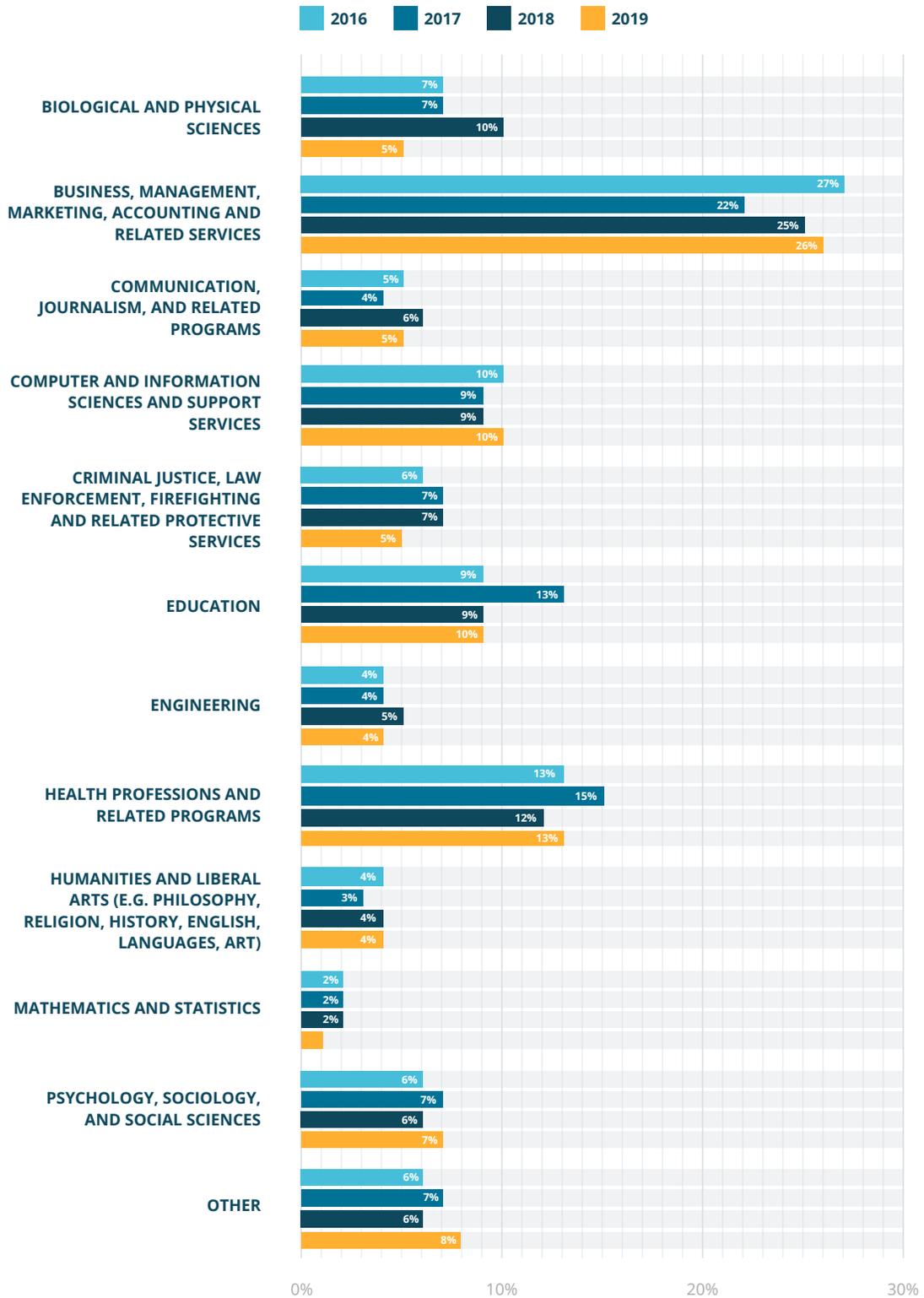


* NEW CATEGORY BEGINNING IN 2017

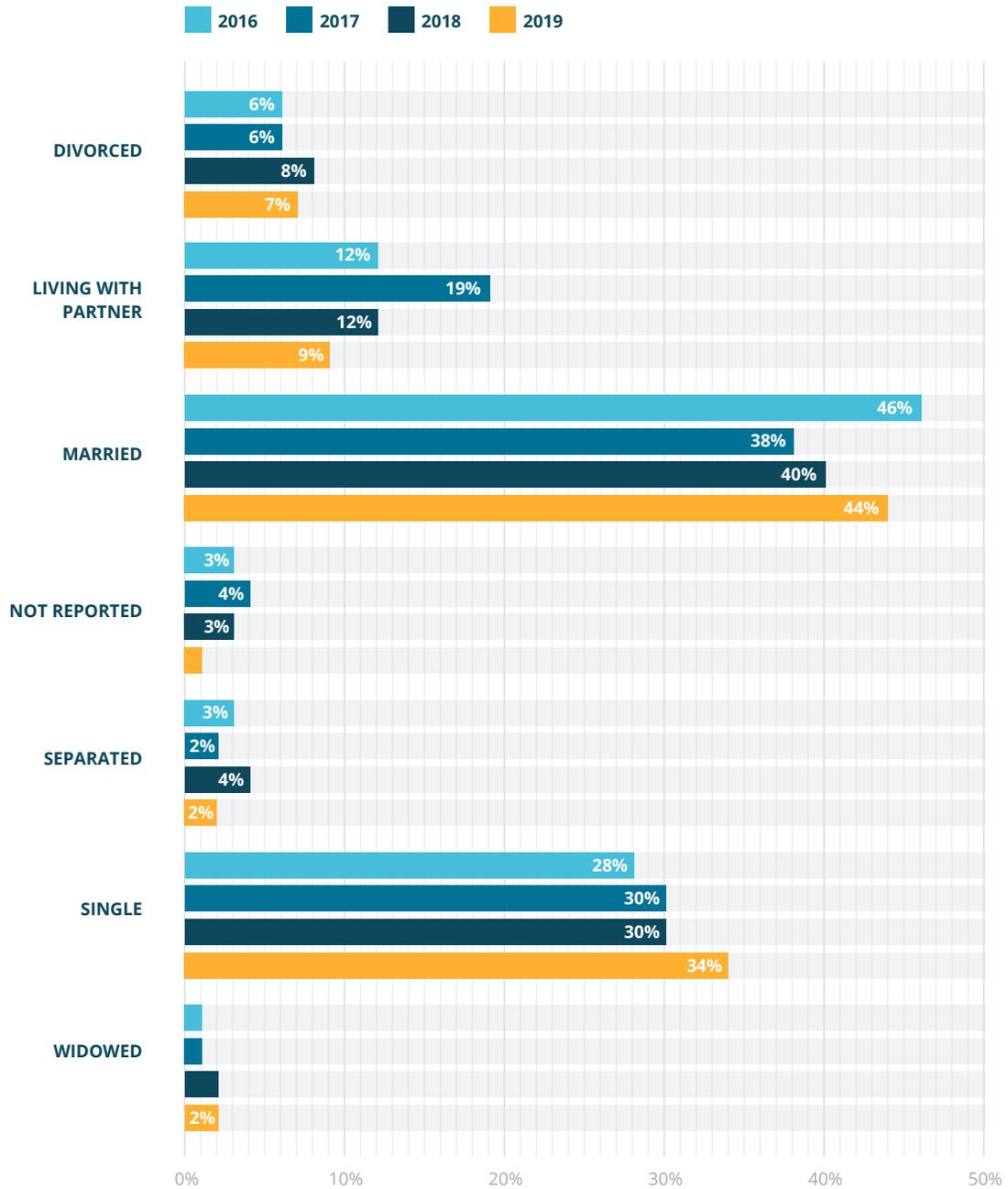
Student Status



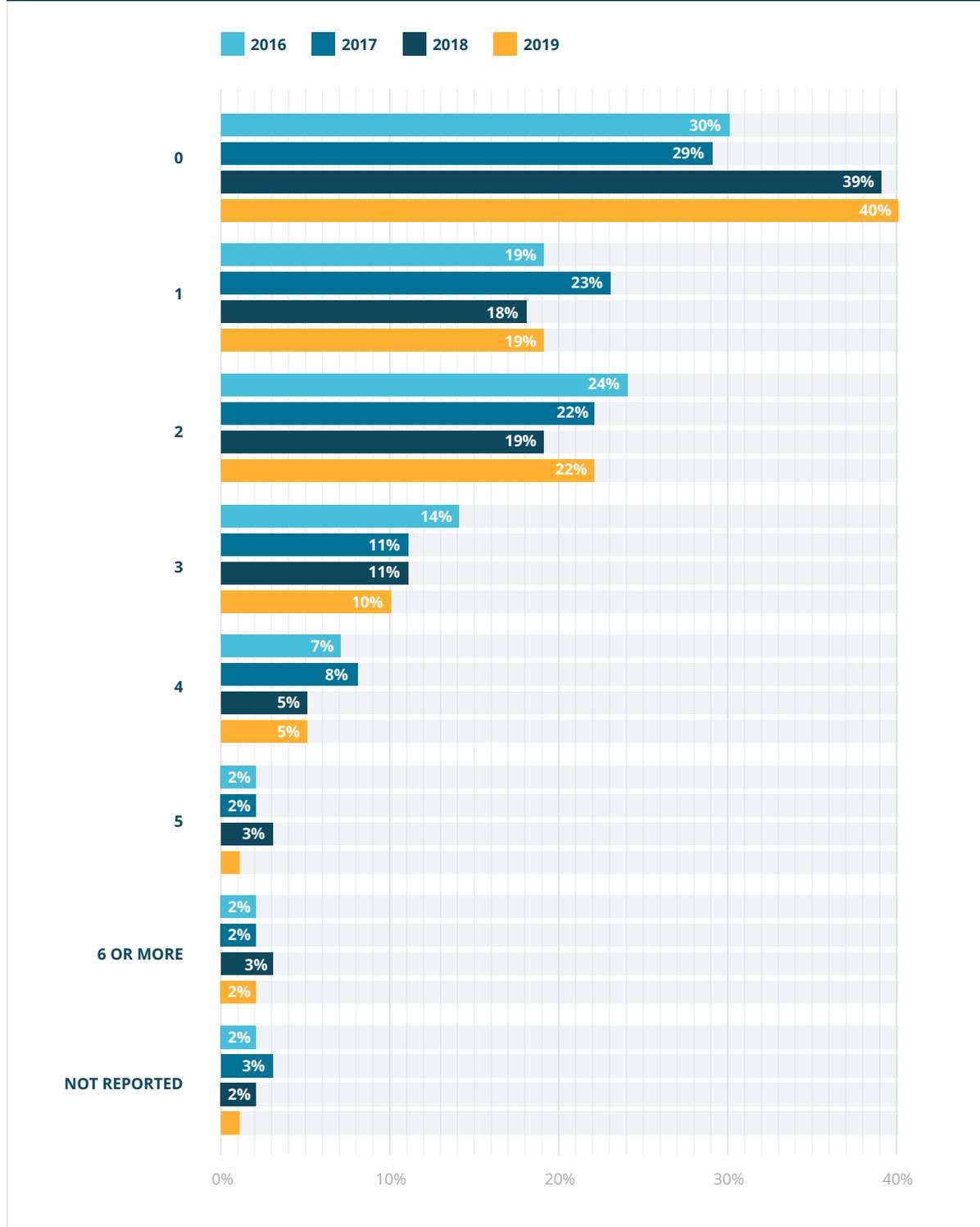
Major / Intended Major



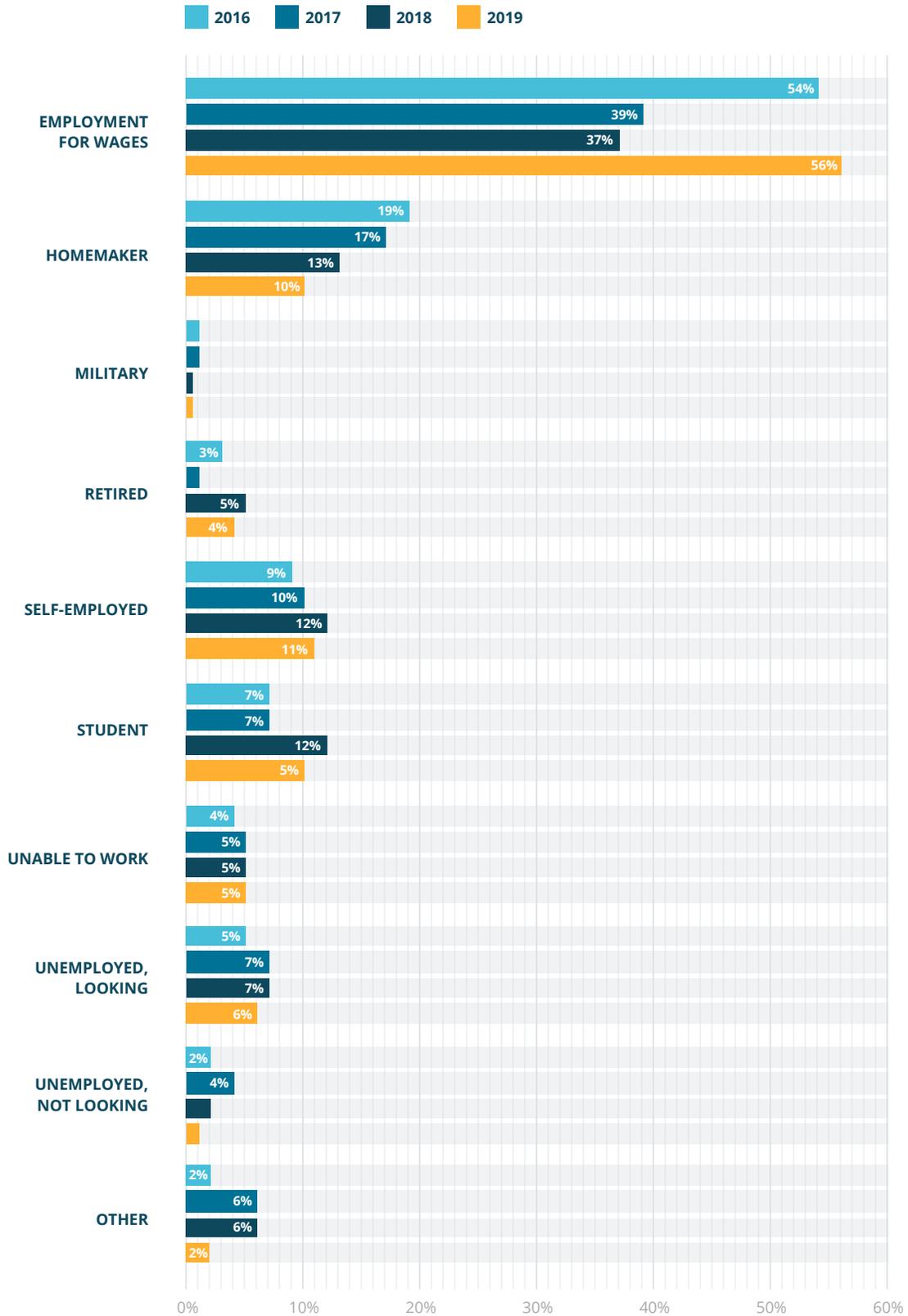
Marital Status



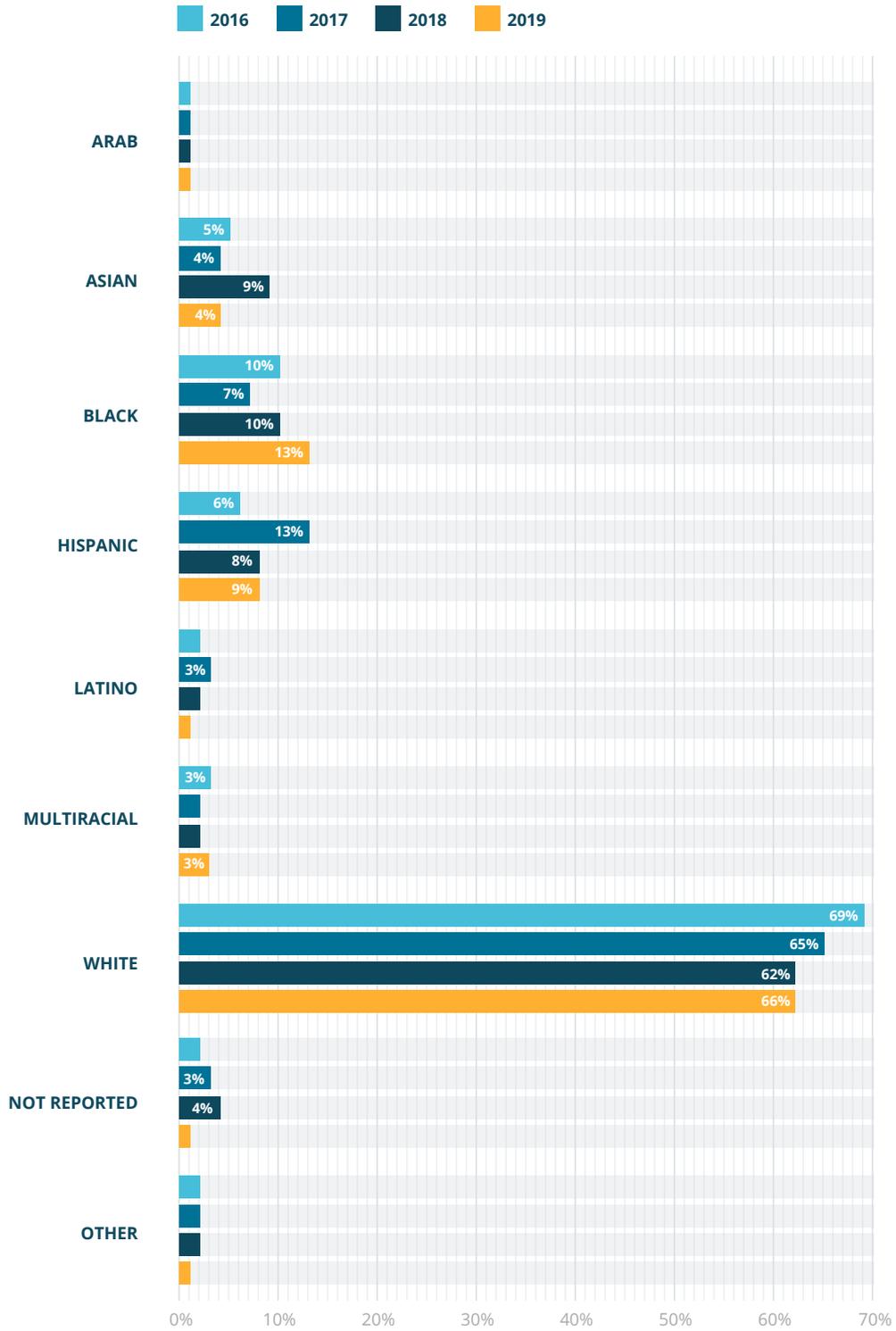
Number of Children



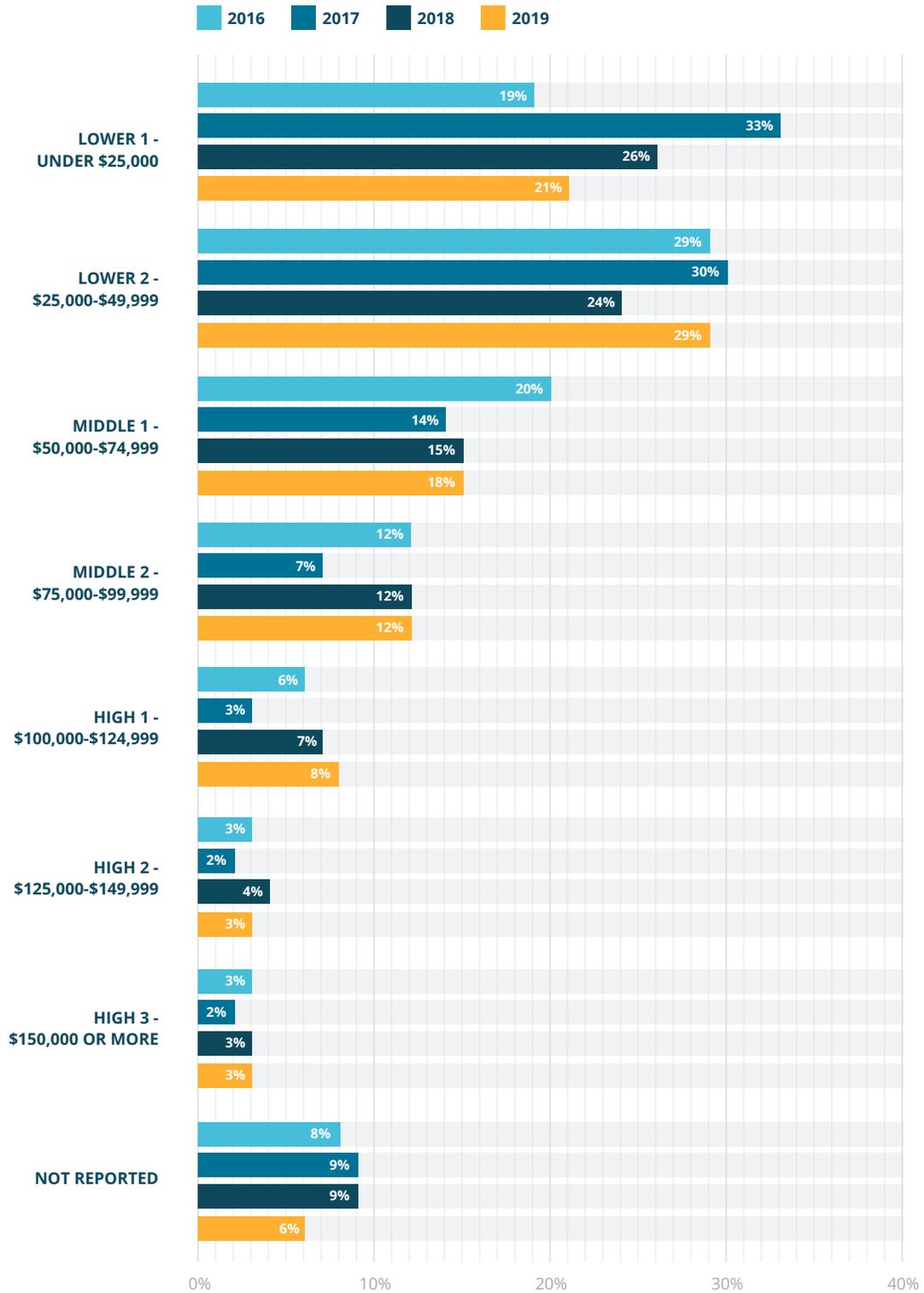
Employment Status



Race



Income Level



DATA NOTES

1. Percentages reported in this document have been rounded, resulting in some totals adding up to just under or over 100.

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901 5th Avenue, Suite 3220
Seattle, WA 98164
www.bestcolleges.com
contact@bestcolleges.com