

2020

Trends in College Career and Employment Planning

Tracking trends in the career goals of online students, employer perception of online education, and employment recruiting practices with insights from students, administrators, and business leaders.



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Executive Summary

This report is the latest in BestColleges' research series reporting trends in online education. It includes an in-depth look at feedback on career planning and employment goals collected from 1,500 online students and 398 online program administrators in the fall of 2019. We conducted an additional survey in May 2020, after the coronavirus outbreak, to gather input from more than 500 business leaders about their perceptions of online education and current hiring plans and practices. Findings are reported in three primary areas: career goals and online students, employer perceptions of online education, and college recruiting insights.

KEY FINDINGS

Career Goals and Online Students

- More than one-third (35%) of students who want to advance in their current field enrolled online because of an incentive or partnership available through their employer.
- A majority of school administrators identified employer demand (72%) and student demand (71%) as the primary factors for developing an online program in a new subject area.
- Forty-seven percent of business leaders said their organizations have some partnership with schools or vendors to offer online courses or programs to employees.

Employer Perceptions of Online Education

- Sixty percent of online students say their current employers think that online learning is "better than" or "equal to" on-campus options.
- About half (49%) of business leaders from organizations that are actively involved in college recruiting say that online education is "better than" or "equal to" on-campus options.
- Seventy percent of business leaders agree that the overall quality of online education has increased as a result of changes related to the coronavirus.

College Recruiting Insights

- Half (50%) of business leaders from organizations that actively recruit college students said they recruit students and recent graduates from online programs.
- Seventy-one percent of those recruiting college students agree that their organizations screen job applicants to identify whether an individual's degree was earned from an online or in-person program.
- A majority (63%) of business leaders recruiting college students have “slowed” or “halted” college recruiting or hiring practices since the coronavirus outbreak.
- More than two-thirds (68%) of those recruiting college students or recent graduates agree that their company or organization uses different strategies to recruit from online and in-person programs.

Introduction

This new report from BestColleges provides a deeper dive into the annual data collected for the [2020 Online Education Trends Report](#). It explores ideas about career planning and employment in the context of online learning from the perspectives of 1,500 online students and 398 online program administrators. A separate survey of 953 senior business leaders, which included 534 senior business leaders from organizations that actively recruit college students and recent graduates, adds helpful feedback and another important perspective to the topic.

PROJECT GOALS

Our broader research initiative provides long-term tracking and identification of trends related to online learner demographics, online program marketing and recruitment, and new program design and development. This new report extends the focus on online students and online education with an emphasis on career and employment concerns.

Three separate and unique surveys — two conducted prior to the coronavirus outbreak and one conducted during the pandemic — provide insights related to students' career goals, employers' perceptions of online education, and recruiting and hiring practices.

We asked online students about their motivations for pursuing a college degree and why they chose to study online instead of on campus. We wanted to know whether they had done any research about their field of study or the related job market before they enrolled. Online student participants also shared thoughts about their employers' perceptions of online education

We asked online program administrators how they decide to offer new online programs and how those programs might be designed with career development in mind. We also asked these participants to share insights about the employers who recruit online students at their schools.

We asked business leaders about their perceptions of online education as compared to on-campus options, and for information about how they recruit college students and recent graduates. This group also shared information about how their organizations partner with educational institutions and vendors.

The feedback we received from these three groups of participants is reported in three main categories: career goals and online students, employer perceptions of online education, and college recruiting insights.

METHODOLOGY

In October 2019, BestColleges gathered feedback from 1,500 online students using the Pollfish mobile survey platform. Student participants represented those currently enrolled (33%), those thinking about enrolling (40%), and those already graduated from an online program (22%). The remaining 5% of respondents indicated that they were admitted but not yet enrolled. This data is part of the BestColleges [2020 Online Education Trends Report](#), a larger annual project that also collected data from school administrators involved in online education at their institutions.

SurveyMonkey was used to gather insights from 398 administrators primarily representing two-year (32%) and four-year (58%) institutions in December 2019. The student and school administrator surveys covered a variety of topics, which included questions about career planning and the perception of online education. All data was self-reported and collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

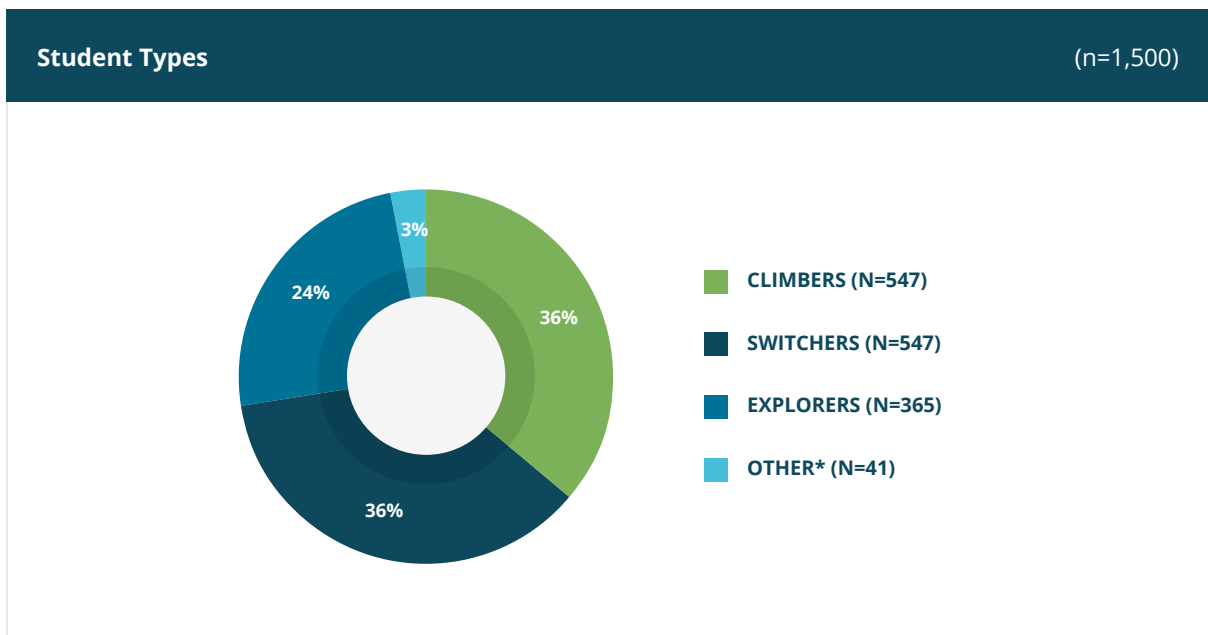
BestColleges commissioned YouGov PLC to conduct an additional survey in May 2020. Survey participants included 953 senior decision-makers, 534 of whom were involved with or working for organizations that directly recruit college students and/or recent college graduates. The vast majority of these business leaders (93%) reported working in the private sector. All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov PLC.

Career Goals and Online Students

What career motivations led students to enroll in online vs. on-campus programs, and how did they learn about their field of study and the job market before enrolling?

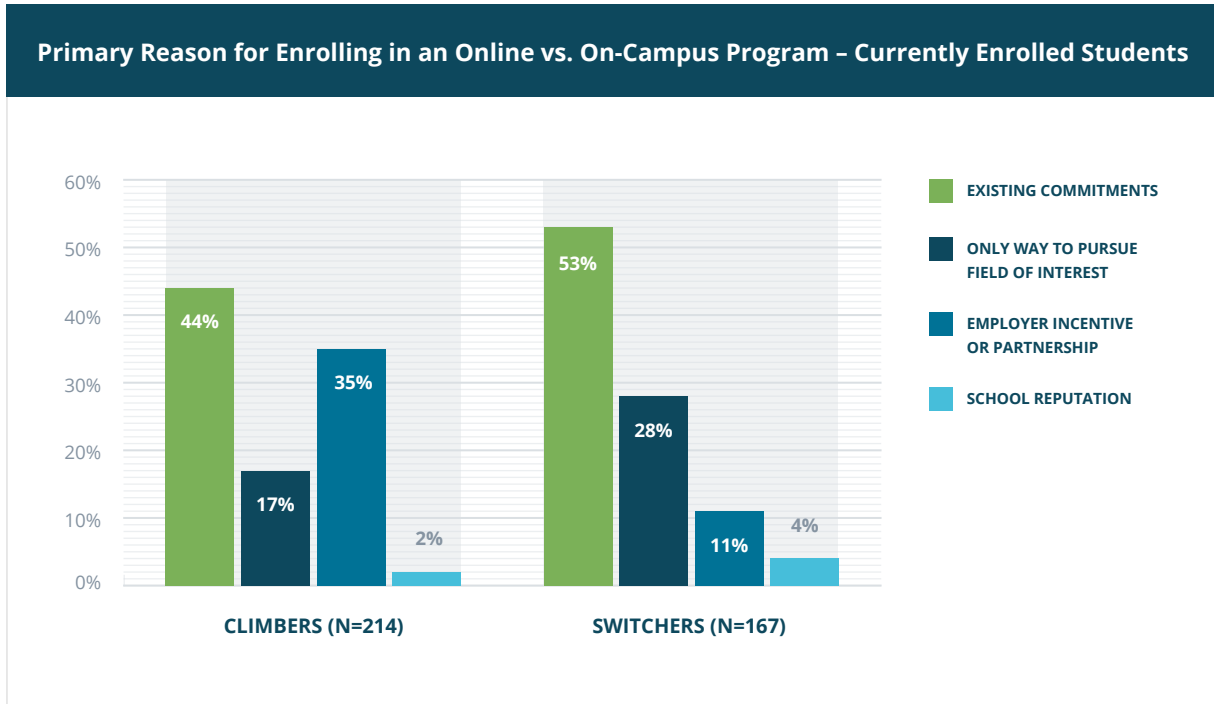
MOTIVATION TO ENROLL ONLINE

It is likely no surprise that the majority of online students enroll with career and employment opportunities in mind. This year, 72% of student participants identified themselves as either “career climbers” (pursuing advancement in their current field) or “career switchers” (enrolled with the goal of transitioning to a new field). Fewer respondents identified themselves as “career explorers,” which includes both lifelong learners and recent high school graduates without clear professional goals.



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

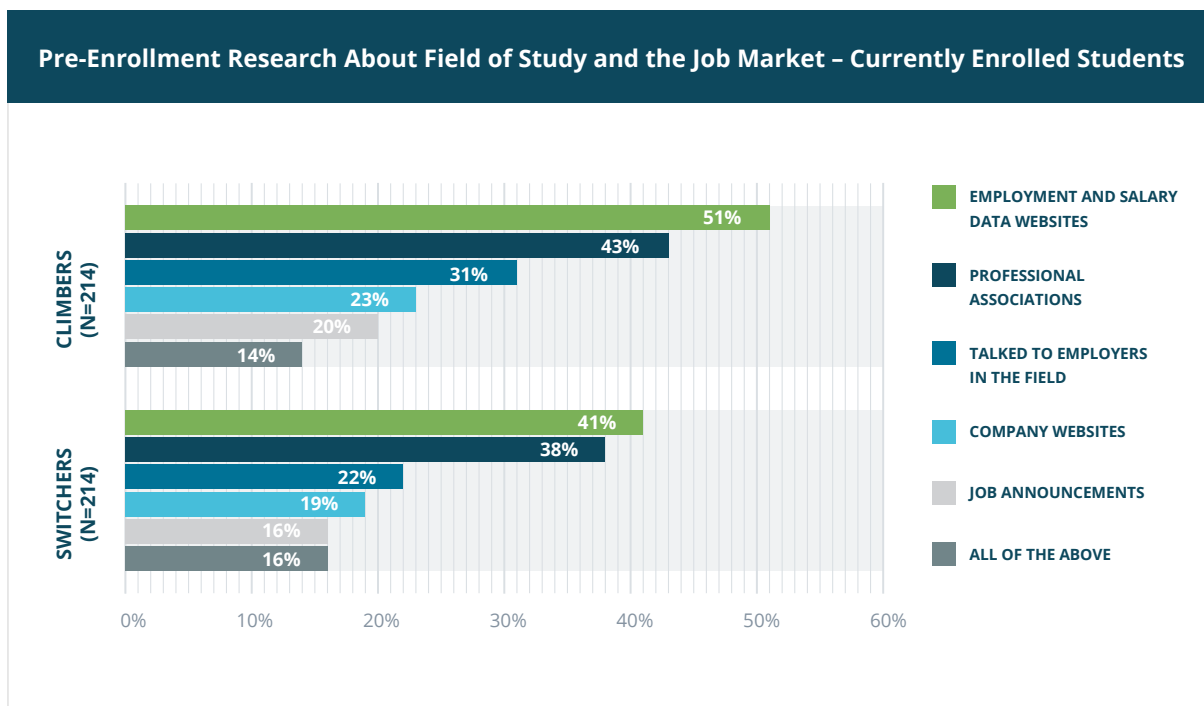
Of the career climbers currently enrolled in an online program, about 1 in every 3 students (35%) was motivated to enroll specifically because their employer had a partnership with a school or because their employer hosted an incentive program that provided support to help cover the cost of an online education.



EXPLORING THE JOB MARKET

Conducting research before enrolling is an important part of a student’s college decision-making process. Almost 60% of prospective students make contact with more than one college or university when making a decision to enroll online (Magda et al., 2020). We found that these students are also conducting research about their field of study or the job market in that field before they enroll (BestColleges, 2020).

About half (51%) of career climbers said they relied primarily on websites that provide employment and salary data (e.g., PayScale, Glassdoor), while 43% of career climbers used professional associations as a resource. Career switchers also relied heavily on these two sources to find information about their field of study and the related job market.



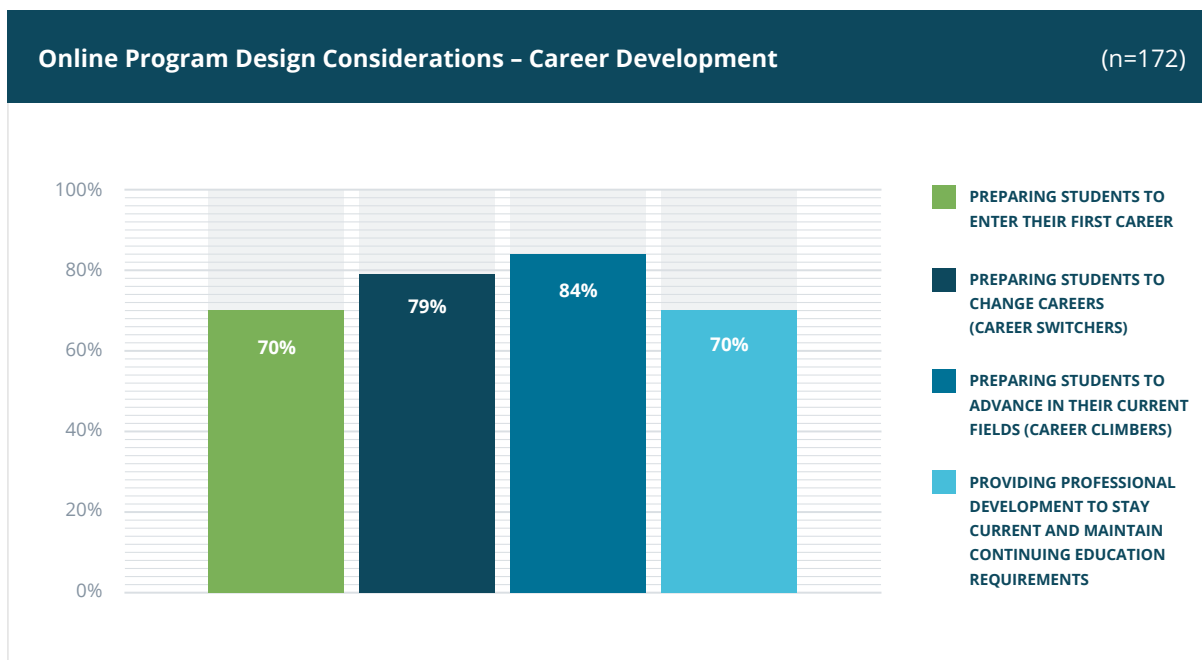
PROGRAM DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

Deciding to launch a new online program is just the beginning of the process. The design of the program and its component courses have an impact on multiple outcomes, including those related to students' career readiness. Our study identified several ways in which design decisions consider these outcomes.

Curriculum Development

When a college or university decides to launch a new online program, its considerations often include demand. This year, the majority of online program administrators surveyed identified employer demand (72%) and student demand (71%) as primary factors for developing an online program in a new subject area (BestColleges, 2020).

We also asked administrators whether new online programs at their institutions were designed with considerations for students' career development goals. We found that a majority of programs consider career development, with 84% designing for career climbers and 79% designing with career switchers in mind.



Strategies that integrate academic and career development might include service and experiential learning opportunities, advising and mentoring, and alumni involvement. Research from EAB (2016) recommends a holistic approach that involves collaboration among multiple student support services, as well as administrators and faculty members.

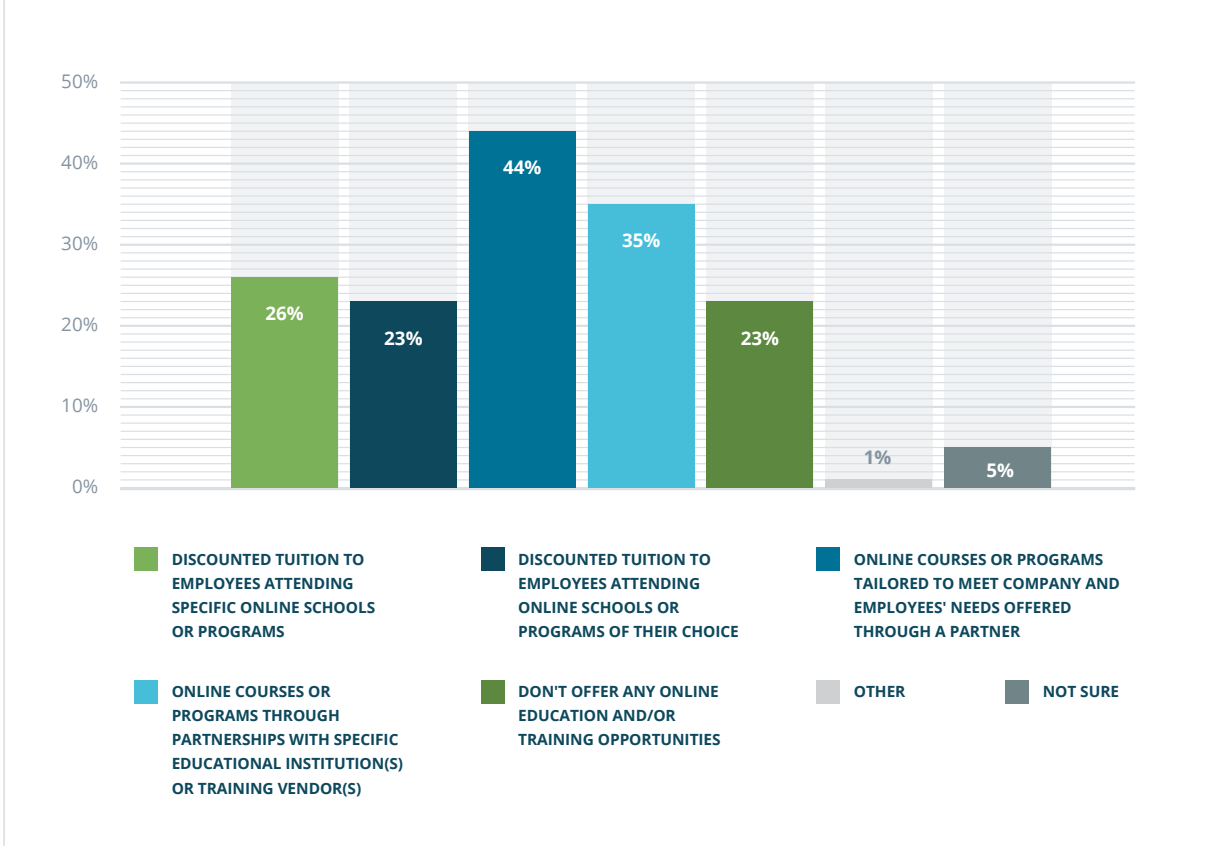
Incentives and Partnerships

Private companies and organizations are also engaged in online education through affiliations with educational providers, such as colleges and universities. In this study, 72% of business leaders whose organizations actively recruit college graduates said their organizations partner with schools or vendors to offer online courses or programs to employees. Only 23% of the business leader participants said that their company or organization does not offer any online education or training opportunities.

Almost a quarter (24%) of respondents shared that their organizations provide some financial assistance with online education to employees through discounted tuition incentives. Among business leaders from organizations that actively recruit college graduates, 39% were from organizations that provide some financial assistance with online education through discounted tuition incentives.

Employer Educational Incentives and Partnerships

(n=534)



Base: business leaders who hire college grads/students



BEST COLLEGES INSIGHT

Students pursuing online education in order to advance in their current careers may be doing so through incentives and partnerships available through their employers. Many companies are working with colleges to create online learning opportunities for employees. This type of collaboration can benefit schools, students, and companies when efforts are coordinated to align the curriculum with current needs.

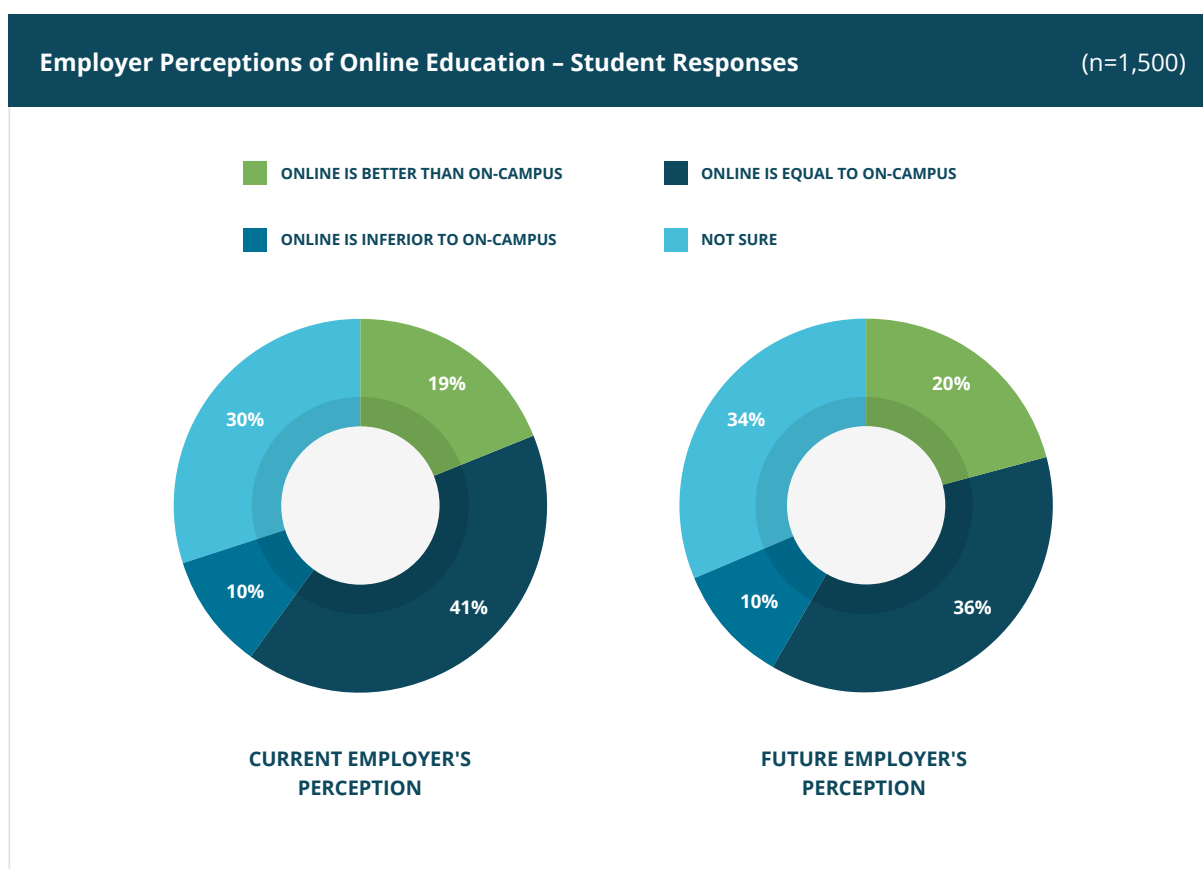
Employer Perceptions of Online Education

Comparisons of the academic quality of online and on-campus college programs have been ongoing for many years. These comparisons have tracked perceptions as well, particularly those of employers. Research published in 2008 found that employers were concerned about a lack of rigor, the potential for cheating, and the legitimacy of online degrees and the institutions offering them (Columbaro & Monaghan).

Prior to the coronavirus outbreak, we asked students and school administrators about employer perceptions of online learning. We also sought feedback from business leaders after the pandemic began as college campuses closed and started offering online courses, in some cases for the first time.

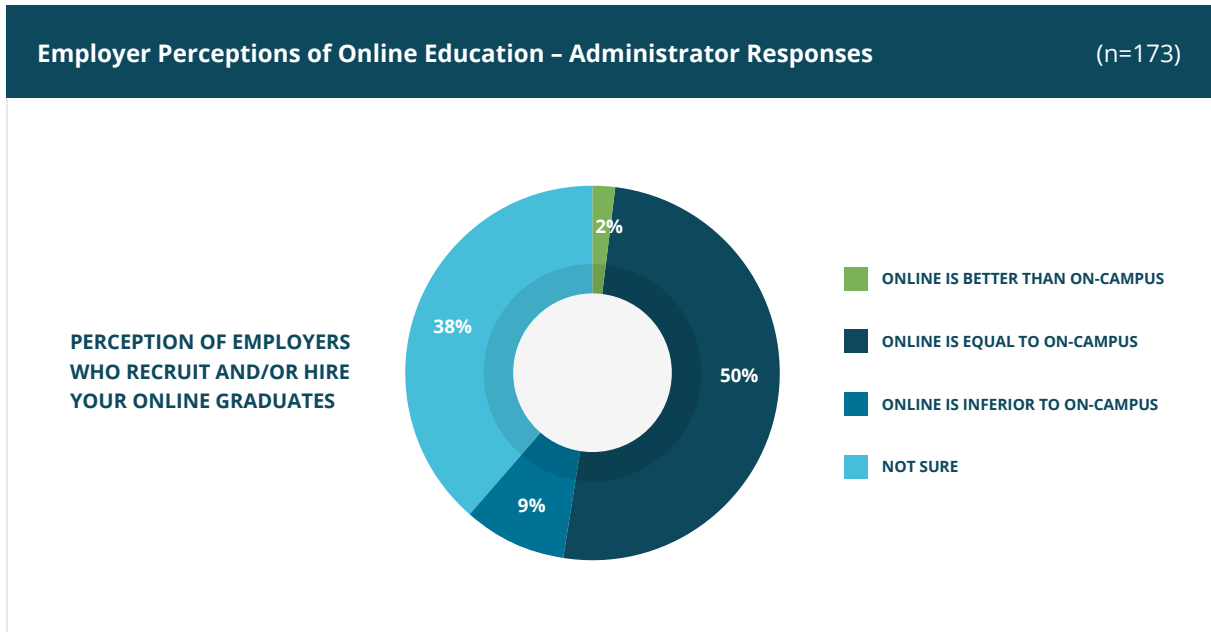
STUDENTS

The majority of online students surveyed were confident that their current/future employers view/would view online education favorably. This year, 60% said that their current employers think online learning is “better than” or “equal to” on-campus options, and 56% expected their future employers to think similarly. However, almost one-third (30%) weren’t sure.



ONLINE PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS

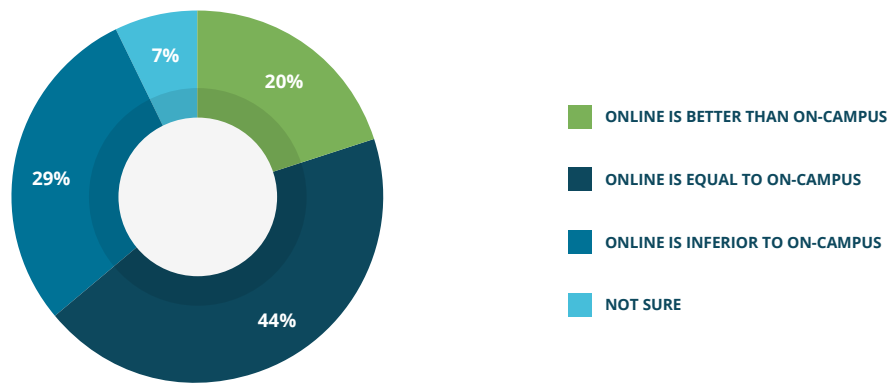
Half (50%) of online program administrators said that the employers recruiting at their institutions think online education is “equal to” on-campus education. While the administrators we surveyed indicated that career development concerns were part of their online program design process, nearly two-fifths (38%) weren’t sure what employers thought of online education in general.



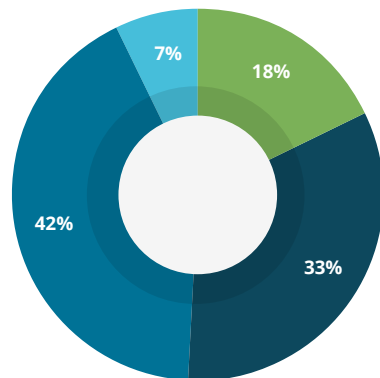
BUSINESS LEADERS

About half (49%) of business leader respondents from organizations that were actively involved in college recruiting at the time of the survey indicated that online education is “better than” or “equal to” on-campus options. Those who said online education is “inferior” were more likely to fall into the two older age groups of respondents: 35-54 years old and 55+ years old.

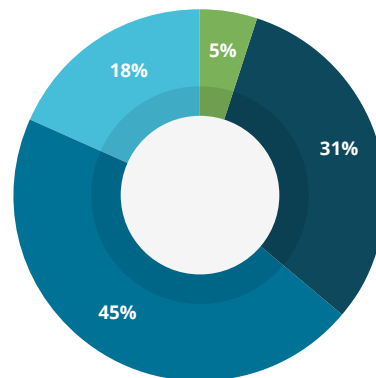
Business Leader Perceptions of Online Education



AGE OF RESPONDENT
18-34 (N=127)



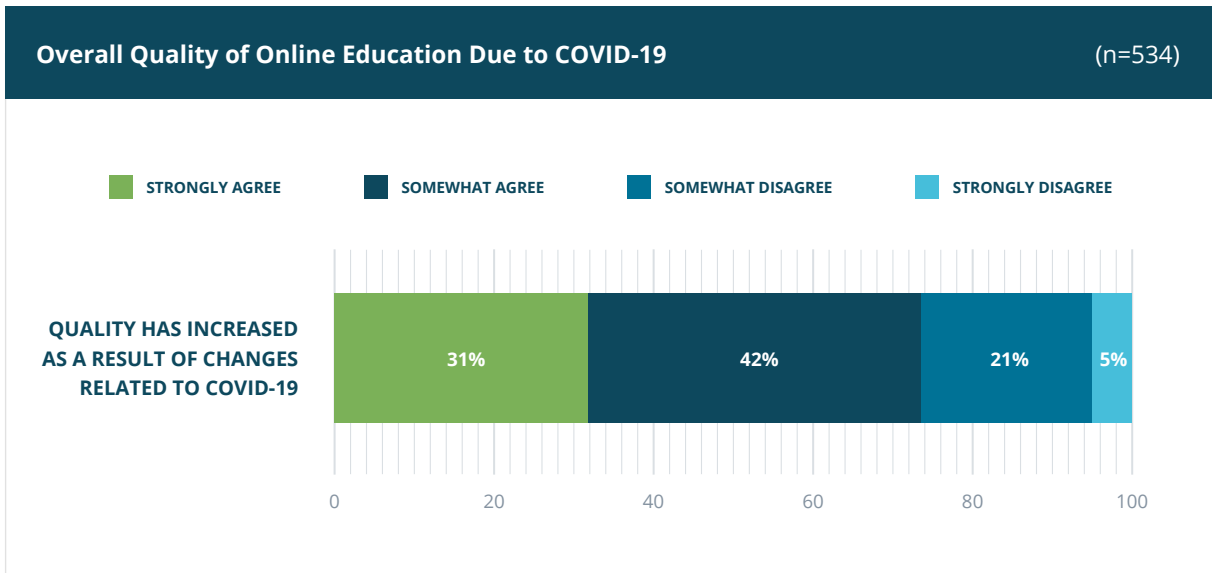
AGE OF RESPONDENT
35-54 (N=234)



AGE OF RESPONDENT
55+ (N=173)

Base: business leaders who hire college grads/students

The COVID-19 outbreak led to sudden college campus closures and unemployment across the country (Kochhar, 2020; Mervosh & Swales, 2020). While it is too soon to identify any long-term effects of this widespread shift to online learning and remote working, 73% of respondents from organizations involved in college recruiting say that the overall quality of online education has increased as a result of changes related to the coronavirus.



Base: business leaders who hire college grads/students



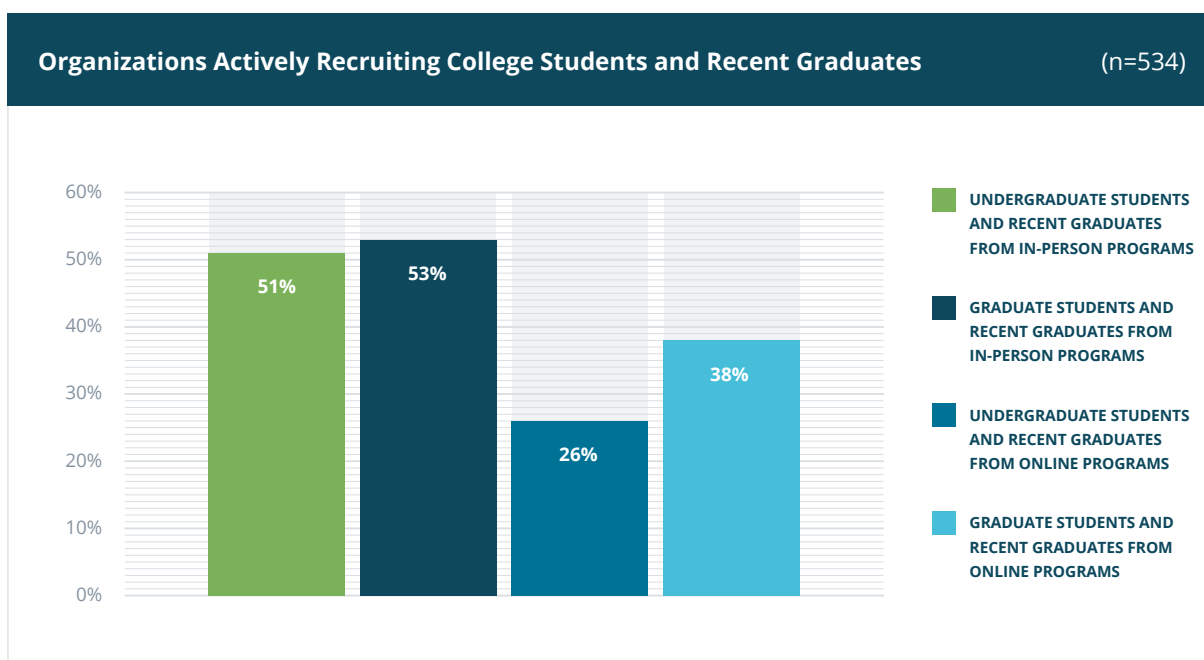
BEST COLLEGES INSIGHT

Employer perceptions of online education may be improving, particularly as more students and employers gain experience with online education in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

Growing acceptance was seen through the online students' lens, even before the outbreak. Business leaders expressed some anticipation that the shift to online programs will improve their quality — and perhaps their relevance — as they prepare students for the workforce.

College Recruiting Insights

Almost half (47%) of senior decision-makers responding to our survey indicated that they were not actively recruiting college students or recent graduates at either the undergraduate or graduate level. Of those who were conducting college recruiting, half (50%) said that they recruited students and recent graduates from online programs.



Base: business leaders who hire college grads/students

INDUSTRIES

The organizations that are actively recruiting from online programs represent a variety of industries. The top three industries indicated in our business leader survey are finance/accounting/consulting/insurance, research/engineering/IT, and manufacturing.

Industries Recruiting Students From Online Programs				(n=269)
Finance/Accounting/Consulting/Insurance	12%	Media/Arts/Entertainment/Recreation	8%	
Research/Engineering/IT-Related	11%	Construction	7%	
Manufacturing	10%	Real Estate/Maintenance/Repair	7%	
Wholesale/Retail Trade	10%	Education	5%	
Personal Care/Healthcare/Social Assistance	9%	Transportation/Warehousing	2%	

Base: business leaders who hire college grads/students

There is some alignment here with the top academic fields pursued by online students in 2019, which included business, management, marketing, accounting, and related services; health professions and related programs; and computer and information sciences and support services (BestColleges, 2020).



BEST COLLEGES INSIGHT

Many companies recruit new hires specifically from online programs. As college career centers develop relationships with these organizations, students can benefit from better connections and greater access to employers. It may be helpful for academic departments to develop these relationships with the specific companies and industry associations that students are contacting while conducting pre-enrollment research about their career field and related job market.

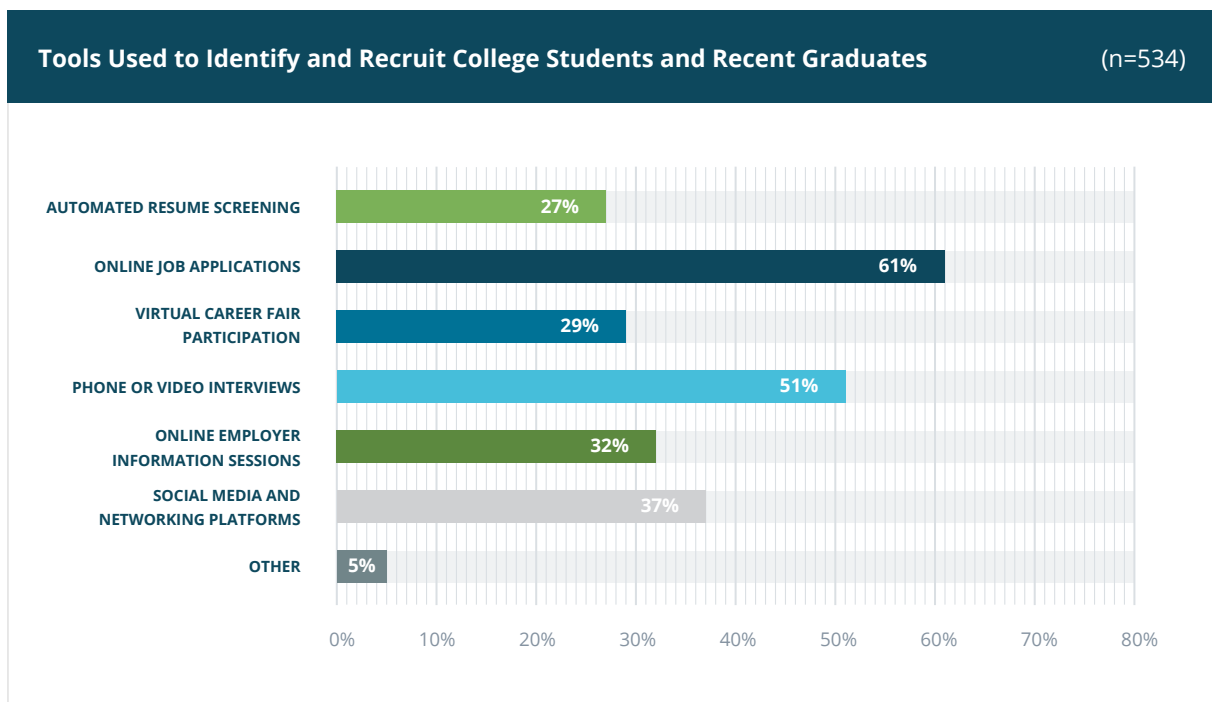
STRATEGIES

Our survey of senior decision-makers included questions related to how their organizations recruit and identify potential college students and recent graduates, as well as how they connect these individuals with available job opportunities. We also inquired about how these strategies might be similar or different as they work with students from online and on-campus programs.

Connecting at a Distance

Many organizations use a variety of technological tools to connect with potential applicants and conduct hiring procedures. A majority of respondents currently use online job applications (61%) and phone or video interviews (51%). Almost one-third participate in online information sessions (32%) and virtual career fairs (29%).

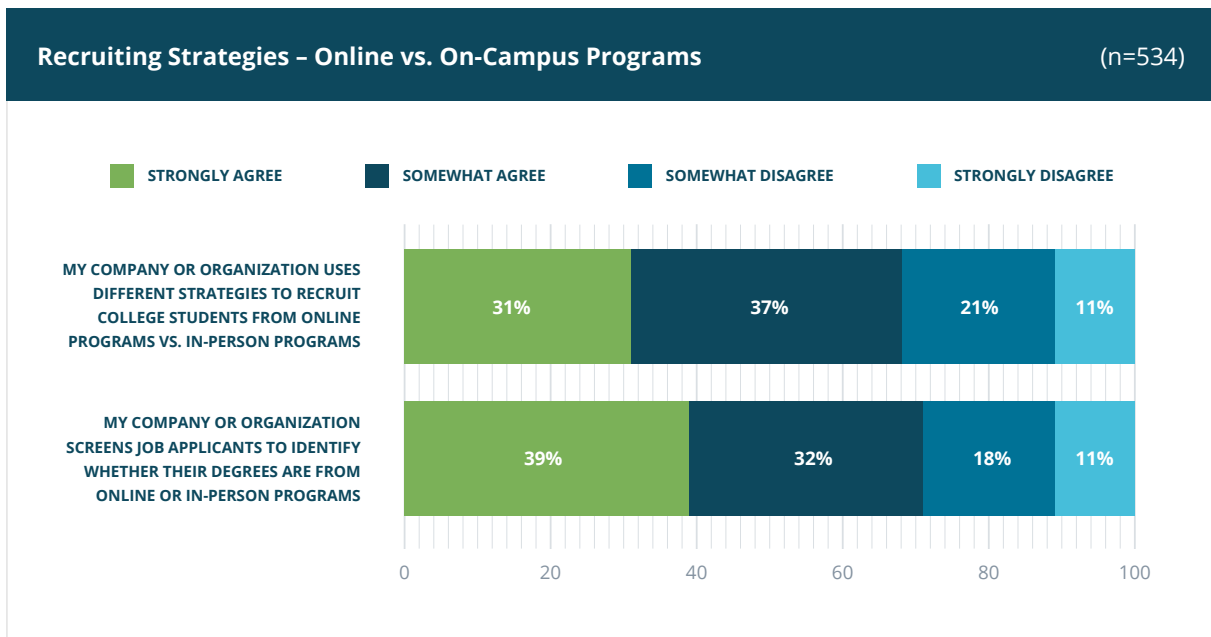
In our survey, 37% of business leaders who hire college students/graduates shared that their organizations use social media tools in the hiring process. Job seekers are also increasingly using social media. Recent research from Jobvite (2020) indicates that social media is “a rising star when it comes to seeking new [professional] opportunities,” with 42% of job seekers using these platforms to find information about openings (p. 10).



Base: business leaders who hire college grads/students

Connecting With Online vs. On-Campus Students

A majority of respondents from organizations recruiting college students and/or recent graduates (68%) agreed that they use different strategies to recruit from online and on-campus programs. In addition, 52% agreed that their organizations screen job applicants to identify whether their degrees were earned through online or in-person programs.



Base: business leaders who hire college grads/students

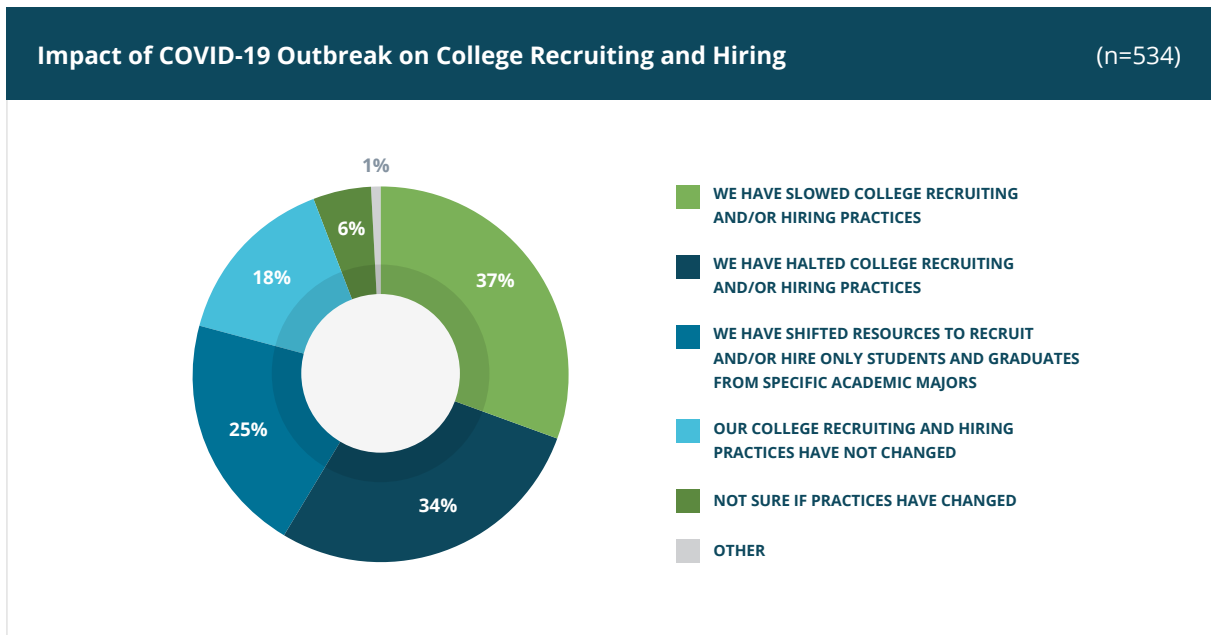


BEST COLLEGES INSIGHT

Students should anticipate some employer interest in where they earned their degree and whether they studied online; however, they should be cautious about assuming that an employer views online education negatively. As more college students take online and hybrid courses due to pandemic-related circumstances, we may see positive changes in perceptions and acceptance of these learning environments.

IMPACT OF COVID-19

The business leaders responding to our survey shared that the coronavirus has impacted their hiring practices, with 63% saying that their organizations have slowed and/or halted recruiting and hiring since the outbreak. Furthermore, 25% indicated that their organizations are shifting resources to concentrate on hiring students from specific majors during this time.



Base: business leaders who hire college grads/students

A series of recent surveys conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2020) tracked employers' plans for college recruiting in the fall of 2020. The group reports that while many employers are delaying these decisions, 39% plan to move forward with their traditional schedule, and 17% are reconfiguring their efforts to target schools in more limited geographic areas. Some decisions are also on hold as college career centers determine their fall schedules.



BEST COLLEGES INSIGHT

The full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and employment remains to be seen. Decisions are continuously being made by both higher education institutions and employers, and these decisions are linked to recruiting activities, such as career fairs and employer information sessions. Students should be aware of the challenges faced by these groups and prepare for an uncertain future.

Conclusion

Pursuing career and employment goals are the reasons why many students decide to enroll in a college program. This is particularly true of online students, the majority of whom want to advance in their current career or transition to a new field. The college-to-career path is critical for these students who often expect their programs to not only prepare them for future work but also help connect them with employment opportunities. Unfortunately, these opportunities are uncertain as schools and companies manage changes in operations caused by the COVID-19 outbreak.

Our insights include a variety of considerations for online program administrators, career services practitioners, and online students.

Students are motivated by educational incentives and partnerships offered by their employers.

- Students pursuing online education in order to advance in their current careers may be doing so through incentives and partnerships available through their employers. Many companies are working with colleges to create online learning opportunities for employees. This type of collaboration can benefit schools, students, and companies when efforts are coordinated to align the curriculum with current needs.

Employer perceptions of online education are improving.

- Employer perceptions of online education may be improving, particularly as more students and employers gain experience with online education in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Growing acceptance was seen through the online students' lens, even before the outbreak. Business leaders expressed some anticipation that the current shift to online programs will improve their quality — and perhaps their relevance — as they prepare students for the workforce.

Collaborations are encouraged among colleges, companies, and professional associations.

- Many companies recruit new hires specifically from online programs. As college career centers develop relationships with these organizations, students can benefit from better connections and greater access to employers. It may be helpful for academic departments to develop these relationships with the specific companies and industry associations that students are contacting while conducting pre-enrollment research about their career field and related job market.

Employers are interested in more than just where a degree was earned.

- Students should anticipate some employer interest in where they earned their degree and whether they studied online; however, they should be cautious about assuming that an employer views online education negatively. As more college students take online and hybrid courses due to pandemic-related circumstances, we may see positive changes in perceptions and acceptance of these learning environments.

The challenges of COVID-19's impact on education and employment continue.

- The full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and employment remains to be seen. Decisions are continuously being made by both higher education institutions and employers, and these decisions are linked to recruiting activities, such as career fairs and employer information sessions. Students should be aware of the challenges faced by these groups and prepare for an uncertain future.

Contributors



About Melissa A. Venable, Ph.D.

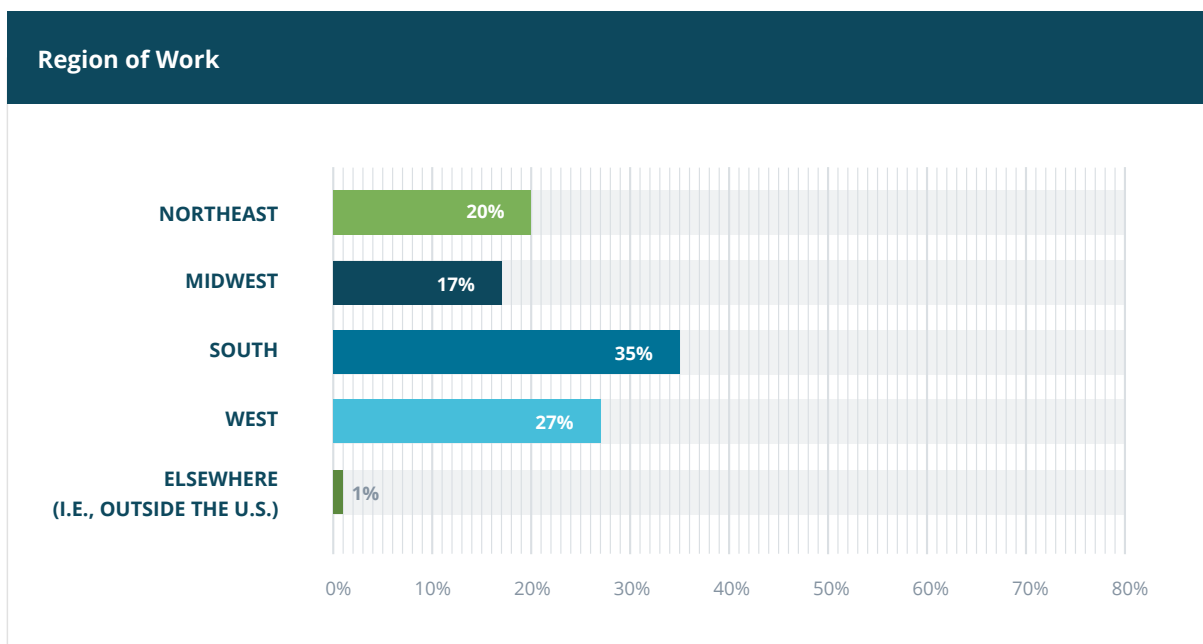
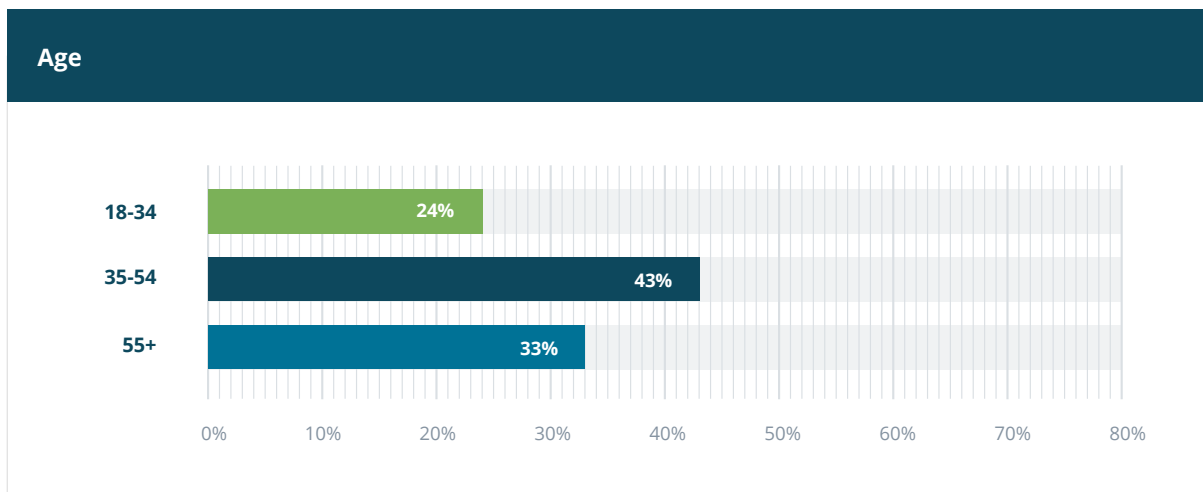
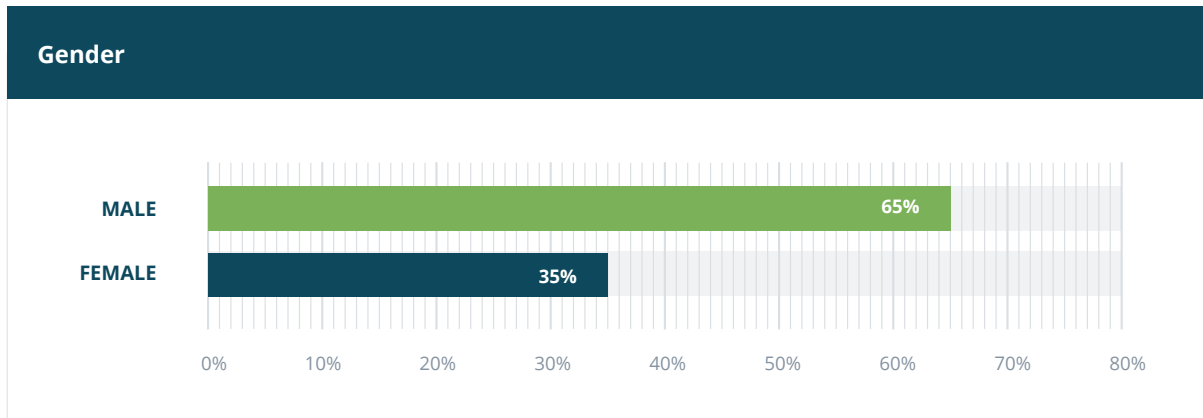
Melissa A. Venable, Ph.D., is an online education advisor for BestColleges. In this role, she leads the annual survey research project reporting online education trends found through student and school administrator feedback. Melissa is an adjunct faculty member and course designer at Saint Leo University 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

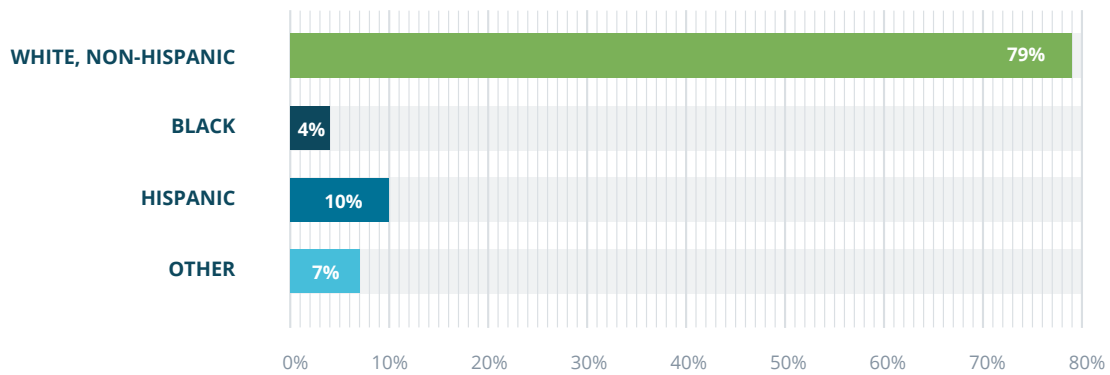
BestColleges empowers students to make smarter educational decisions and find schools that best fit their needs through proprietary research, user-friendly guides, and hundreds of unique college rankings. As a trusted education advisor, BestColleges also provides a wide array of college planning, financial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

APPENDIX A: SENIOR DECISION-MAKER/BUSINESS LEADER DEMOGRAPHICS

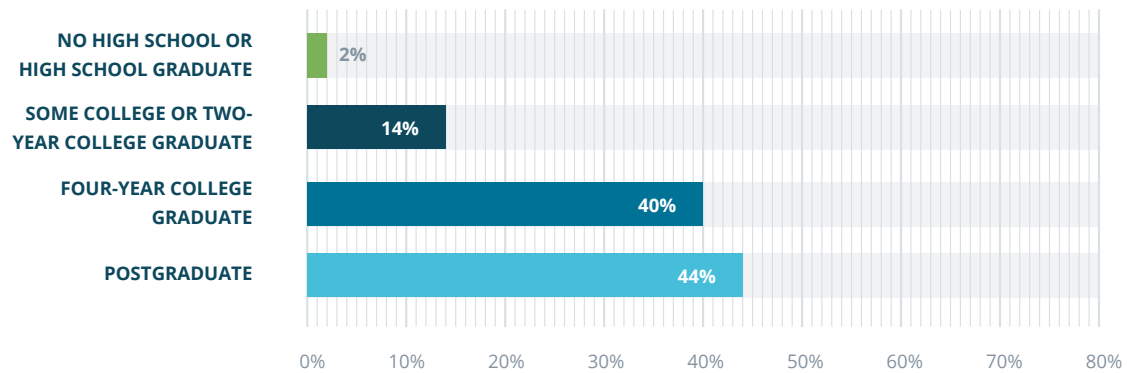
Data collection – YouGov, (n=534)



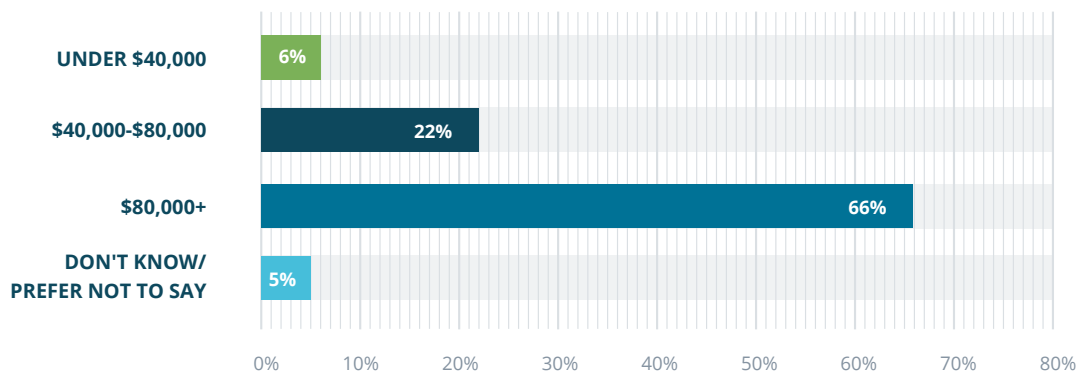
Race/Ethnicity



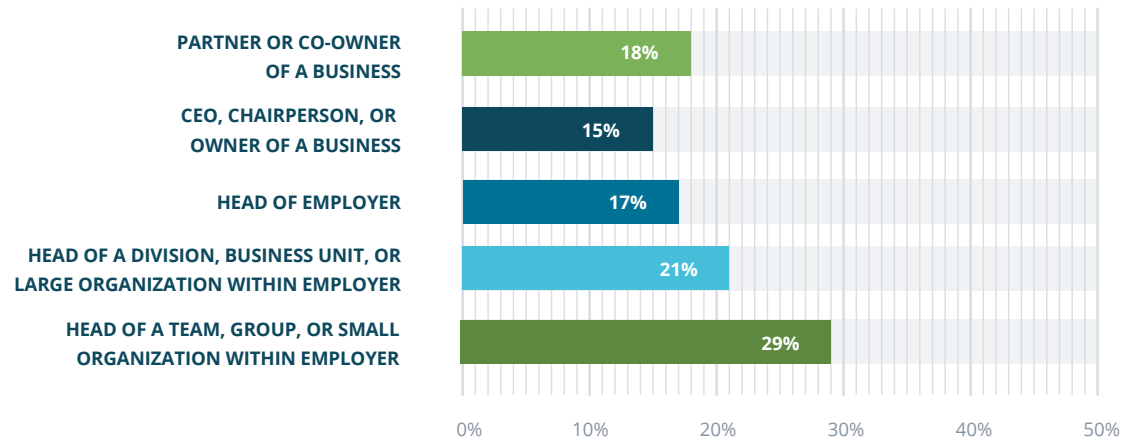
Highest Level of Education



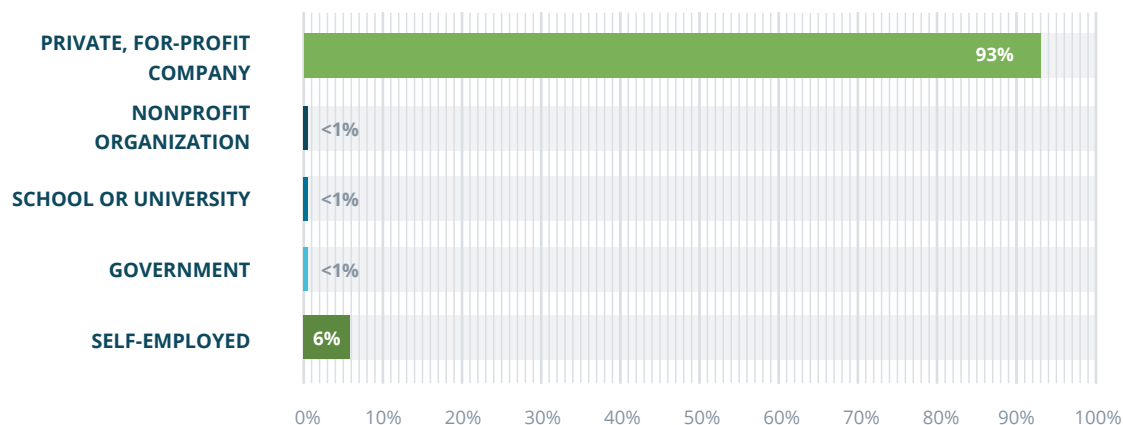
Income



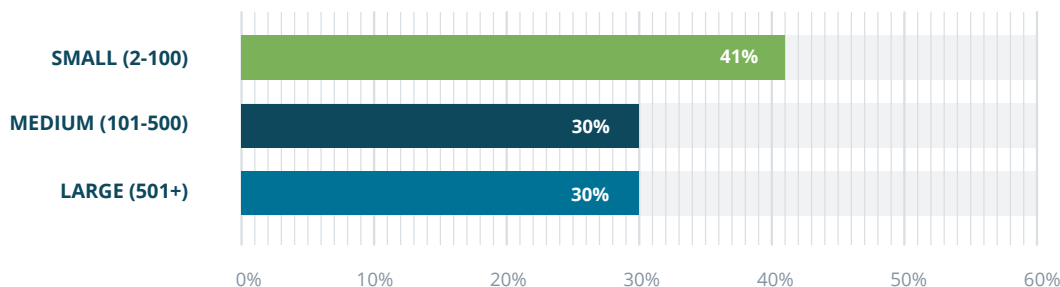
Level of Management



Type of Organization

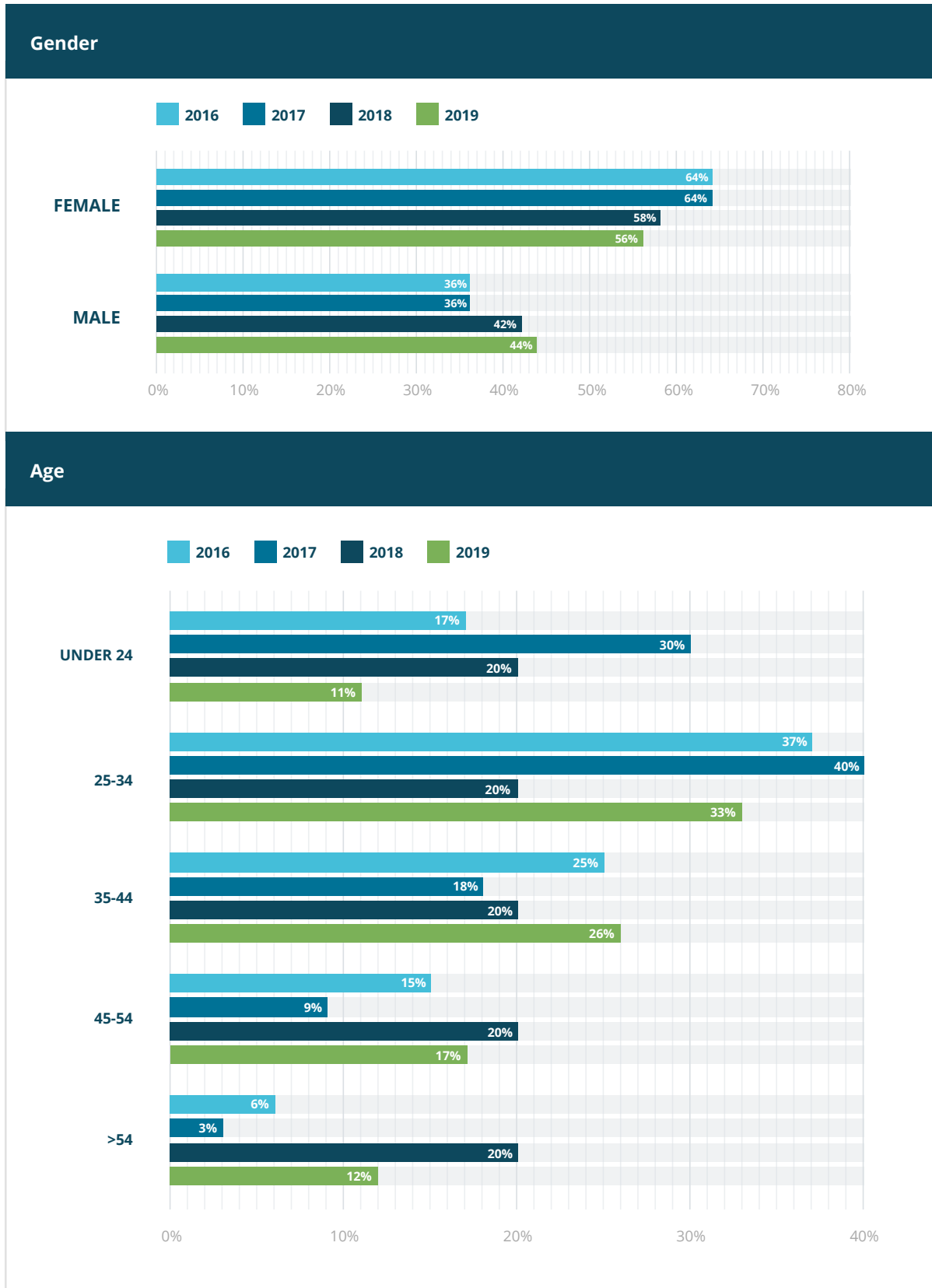


Company Size

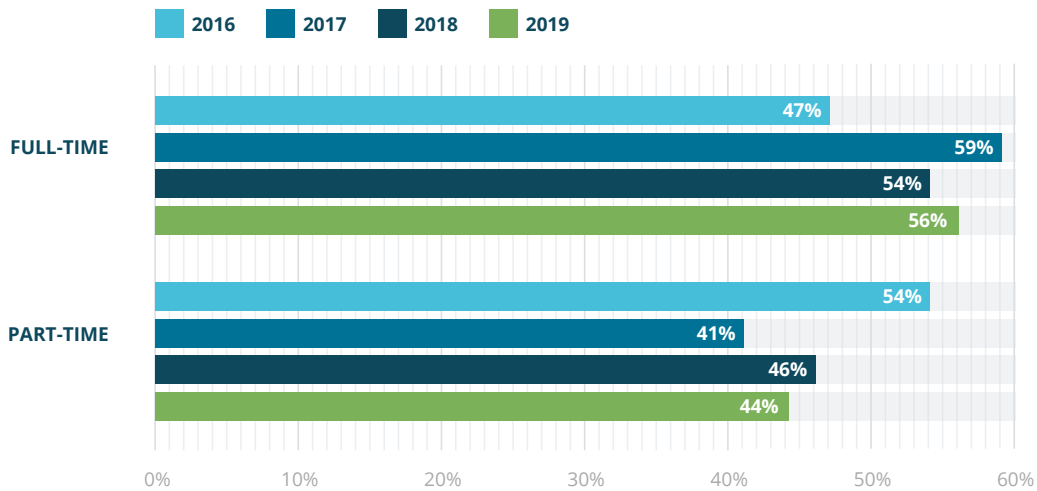


APPENDIX B: ONLINE STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

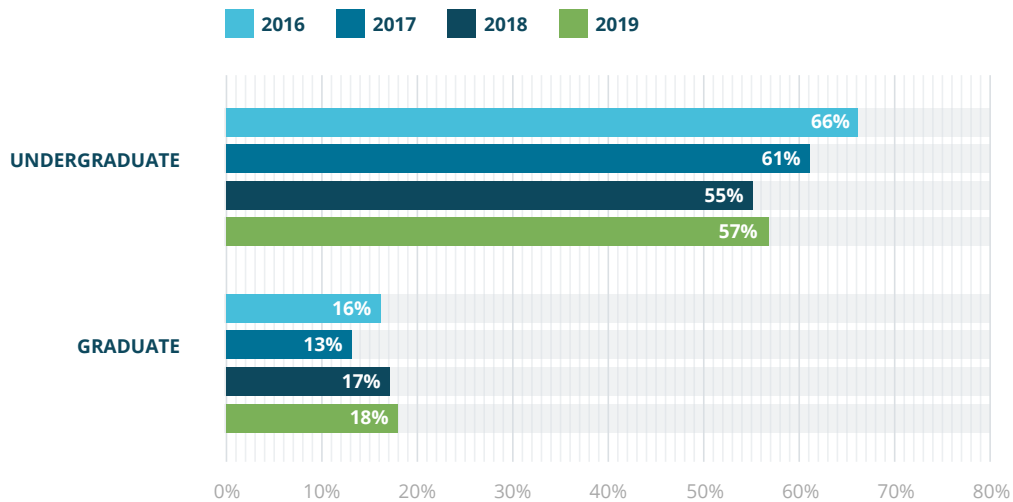
Data collection – Pollfish, (n=1,500)



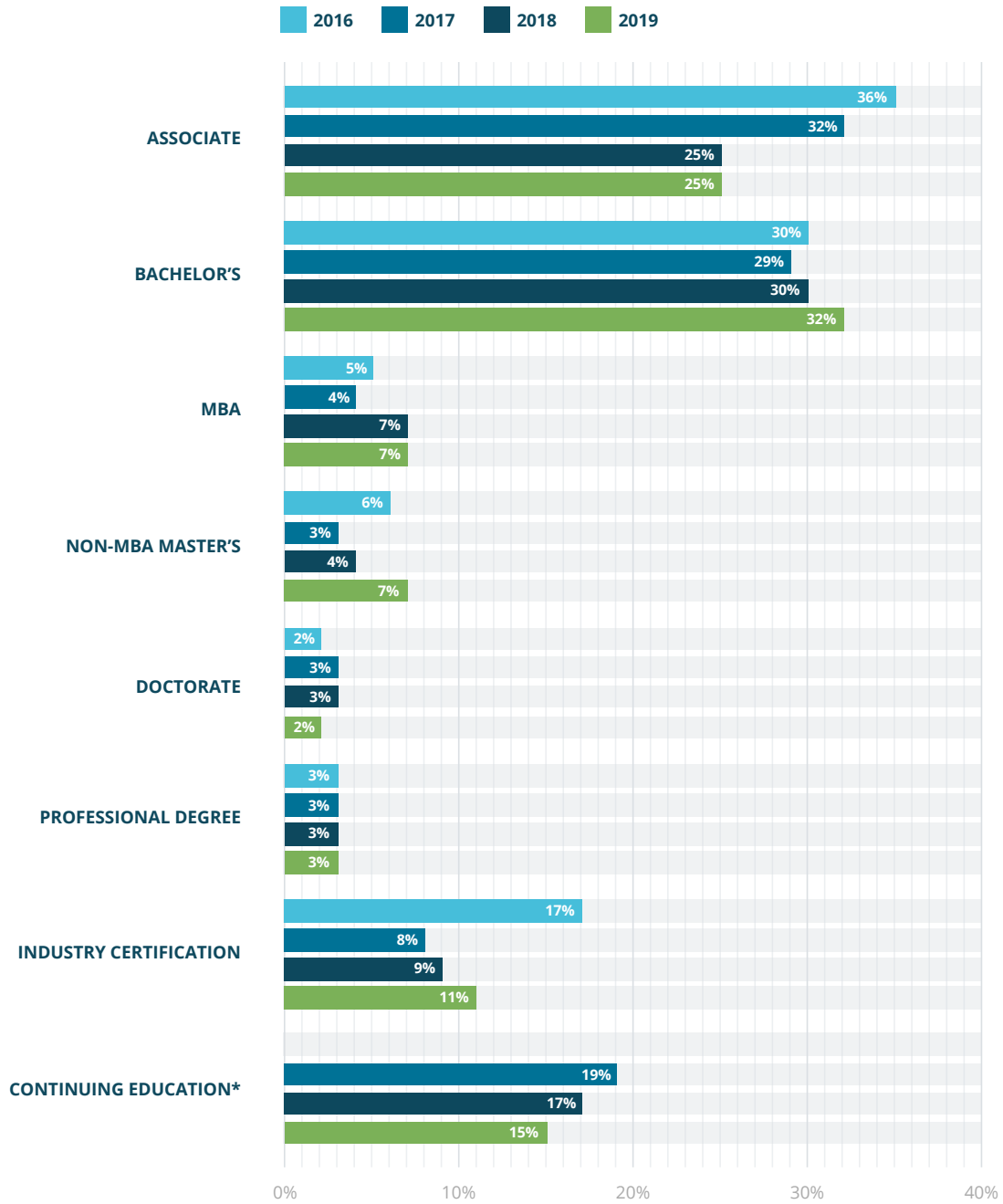
Enrollment Status



Enrollment Level

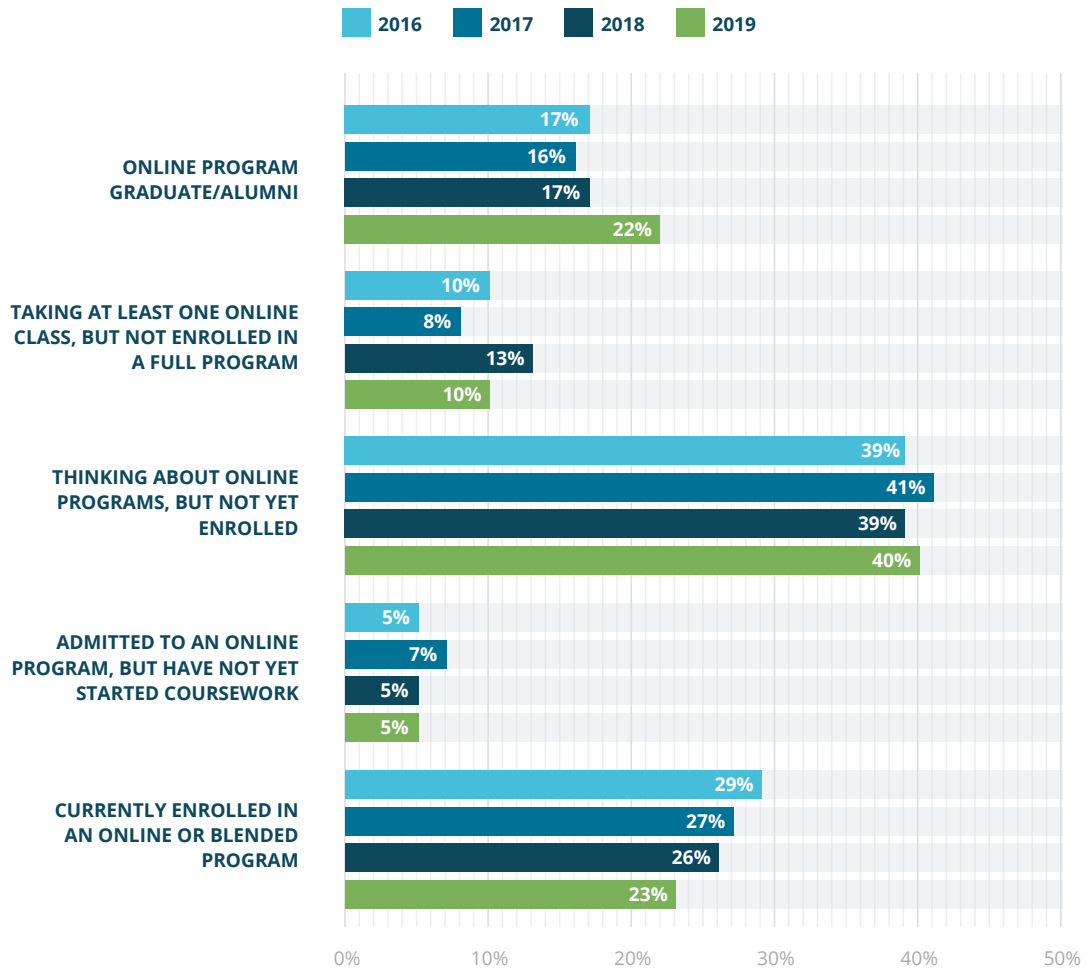


Degree Pursuing

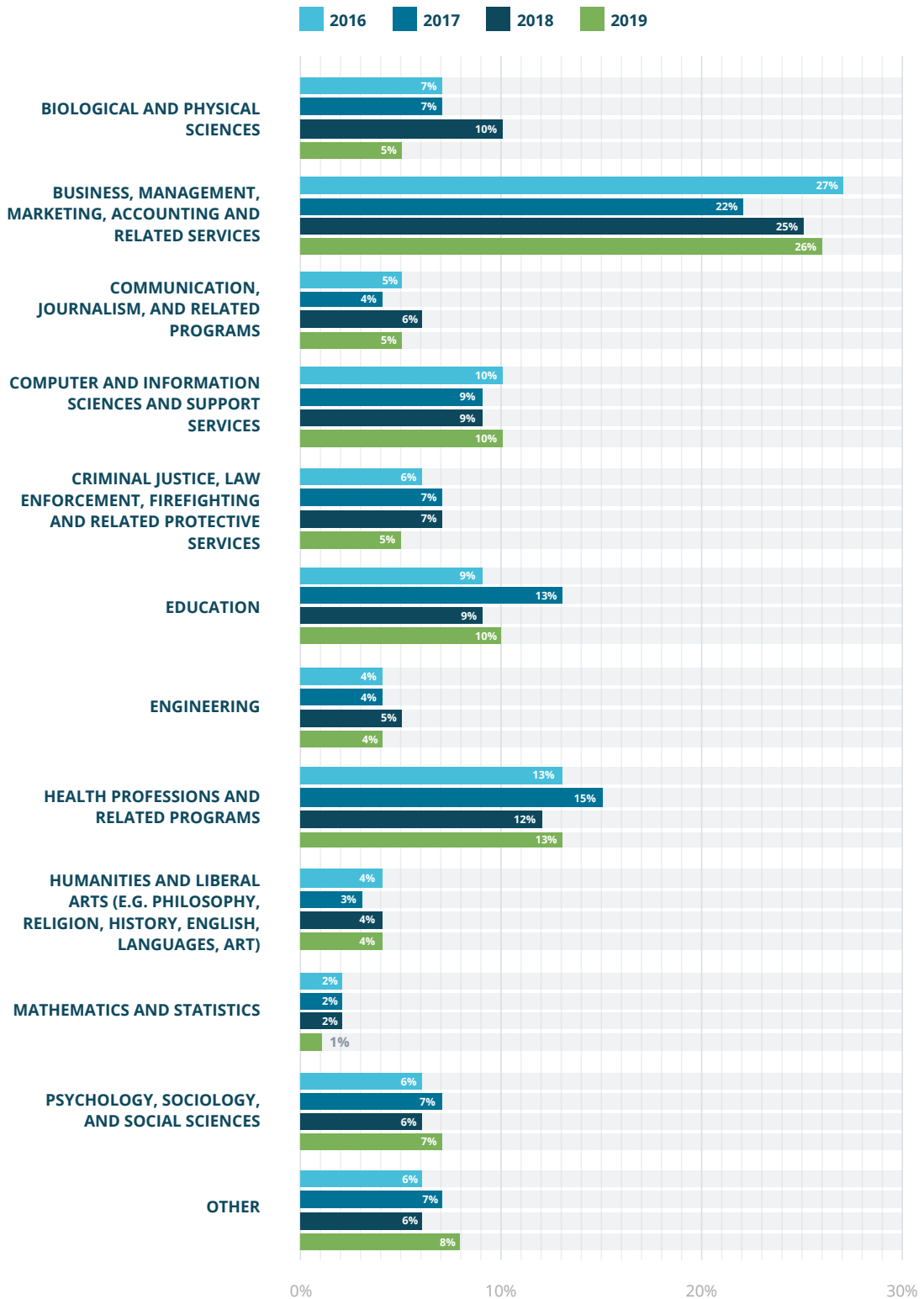


* NEW CATEGORY BEGINNING IN 2017

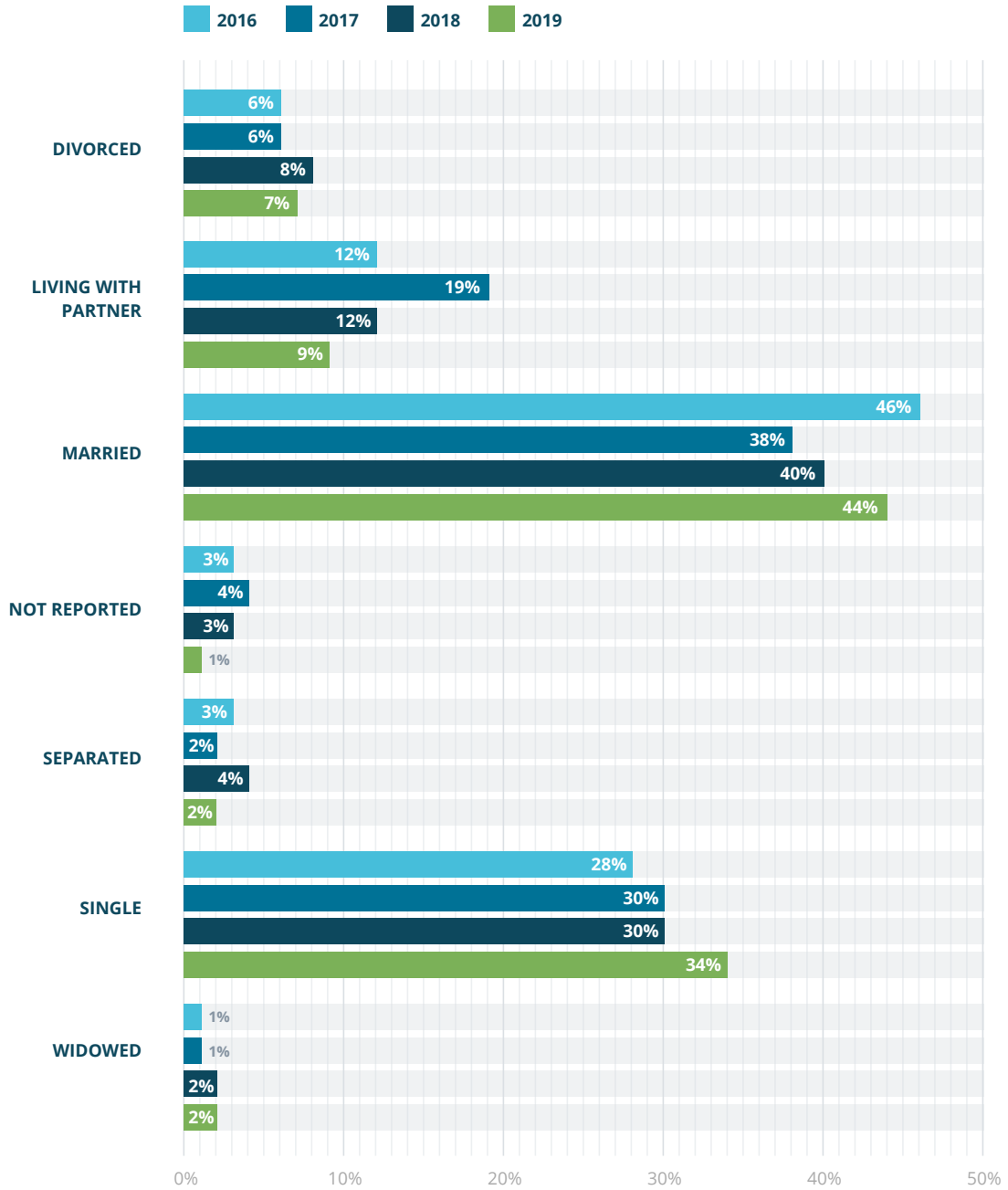
Student Status



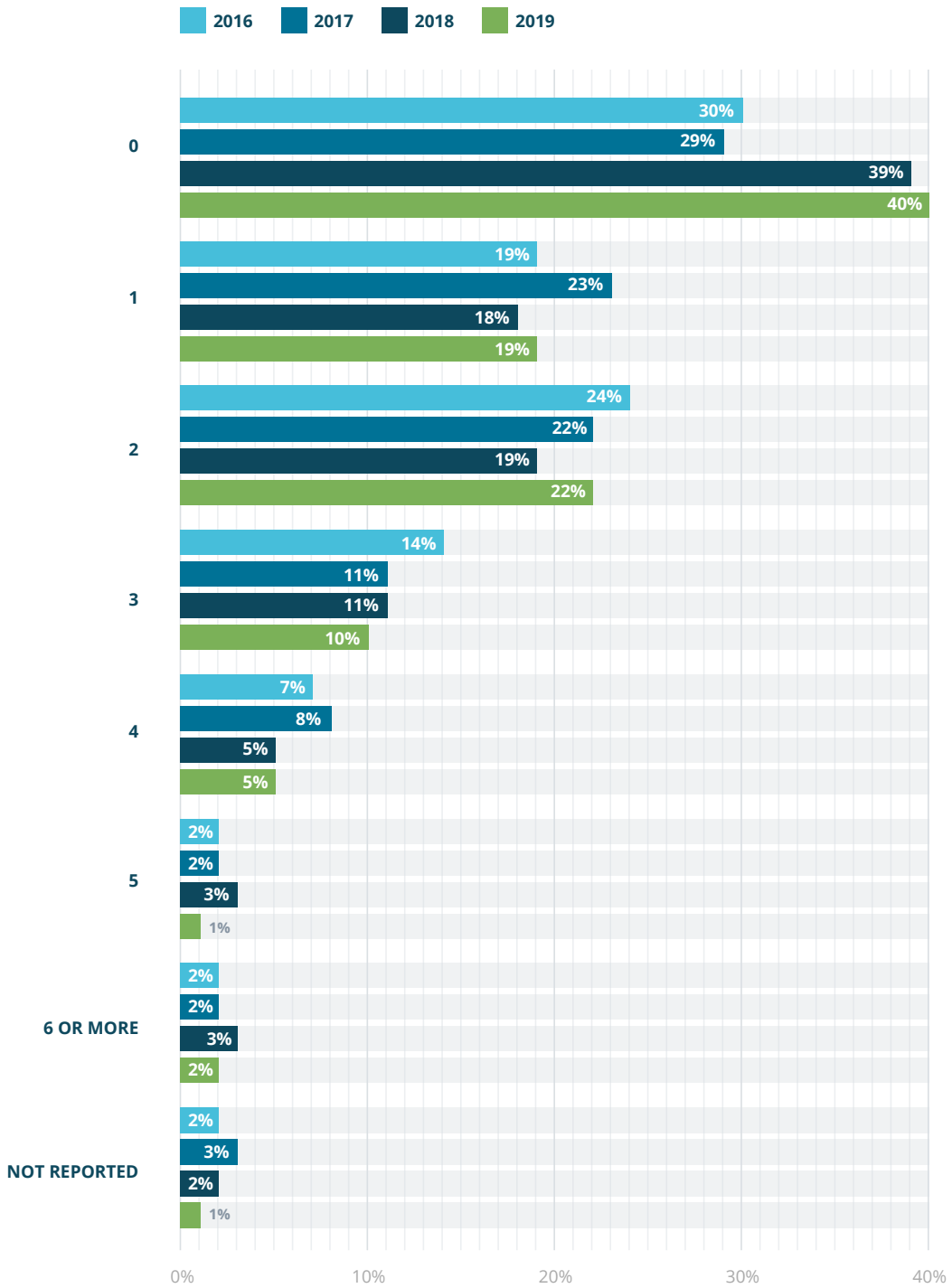
Major / Intended Major



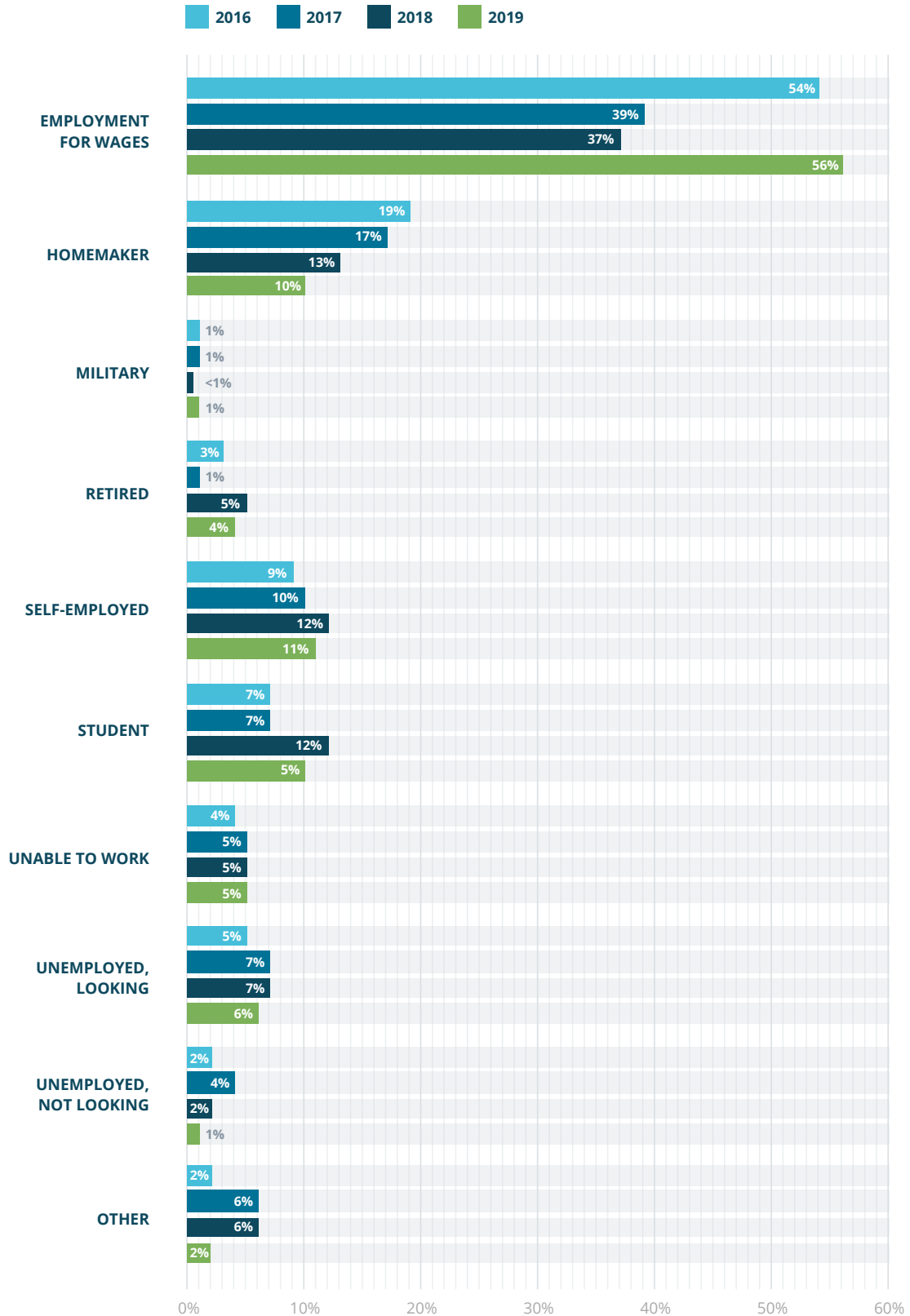
Marital Status

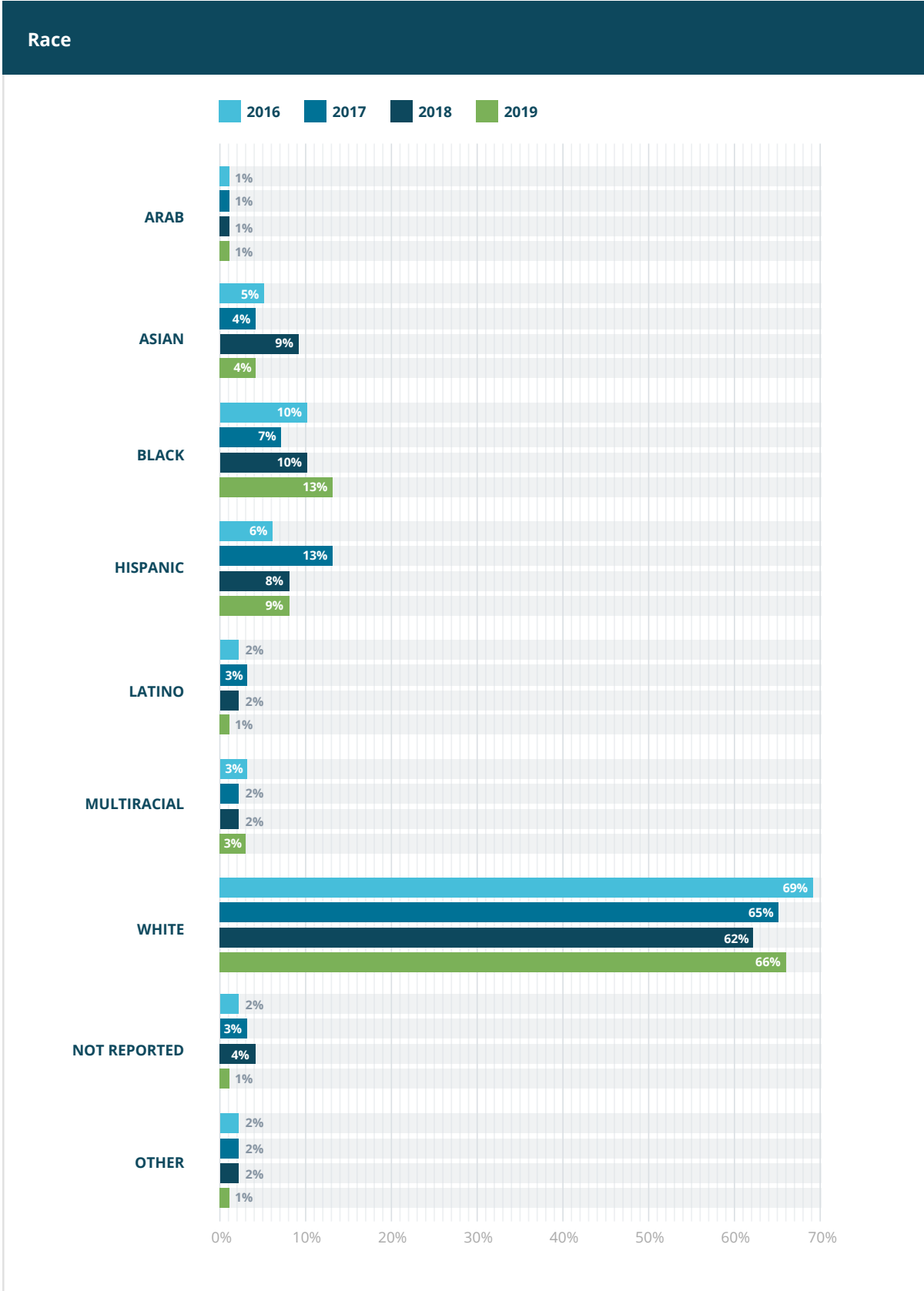


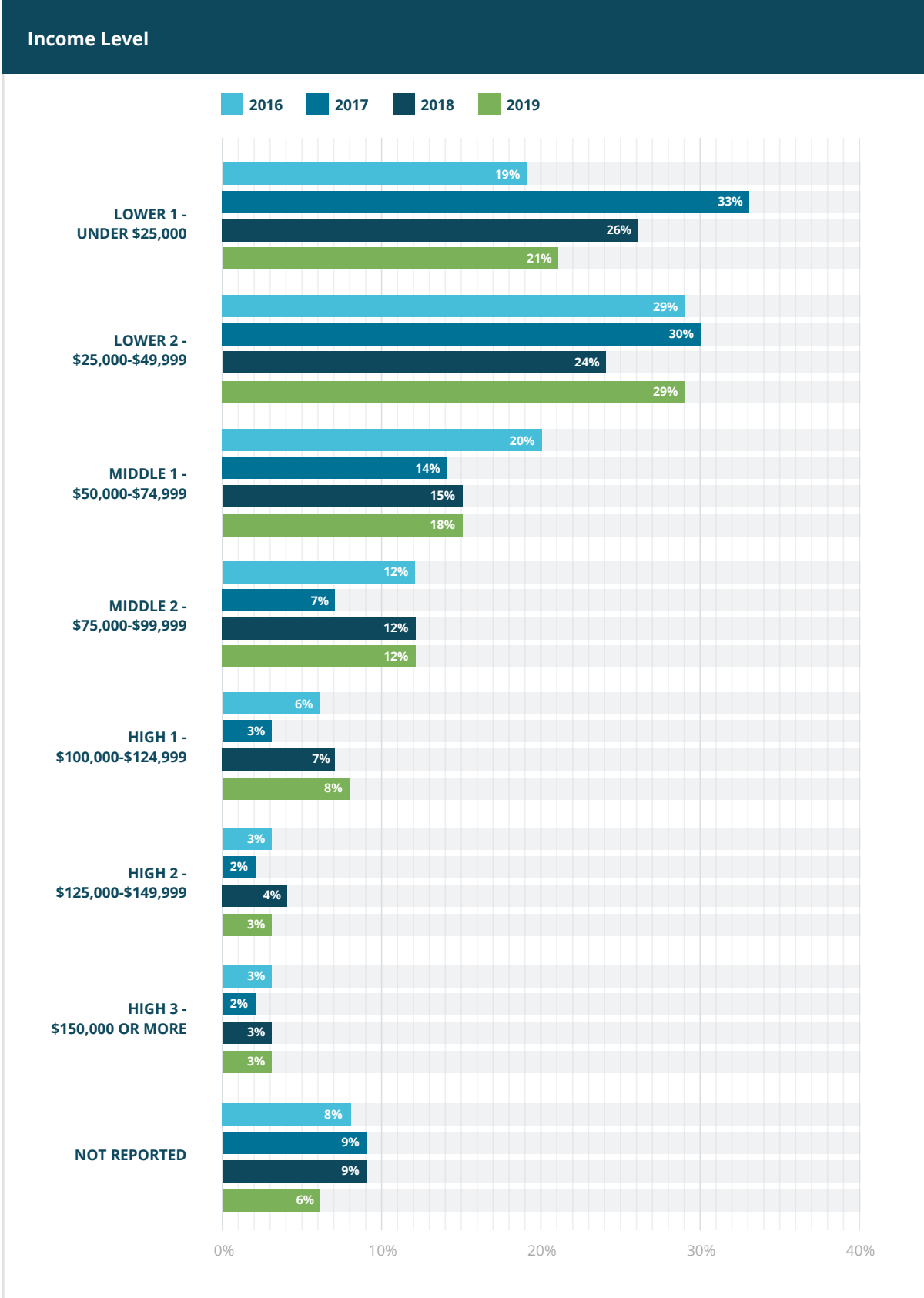
Number of Children



Employment Status

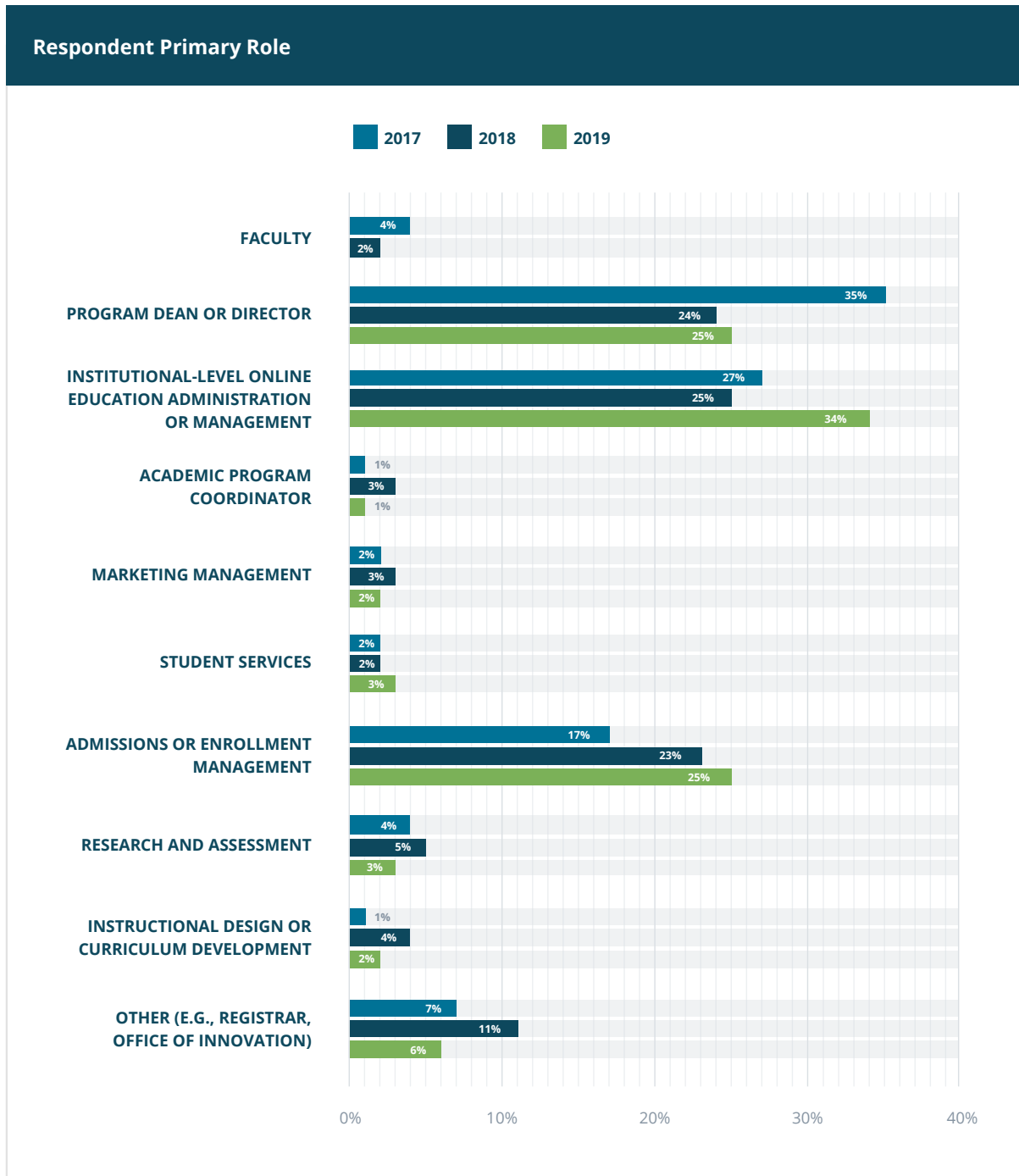




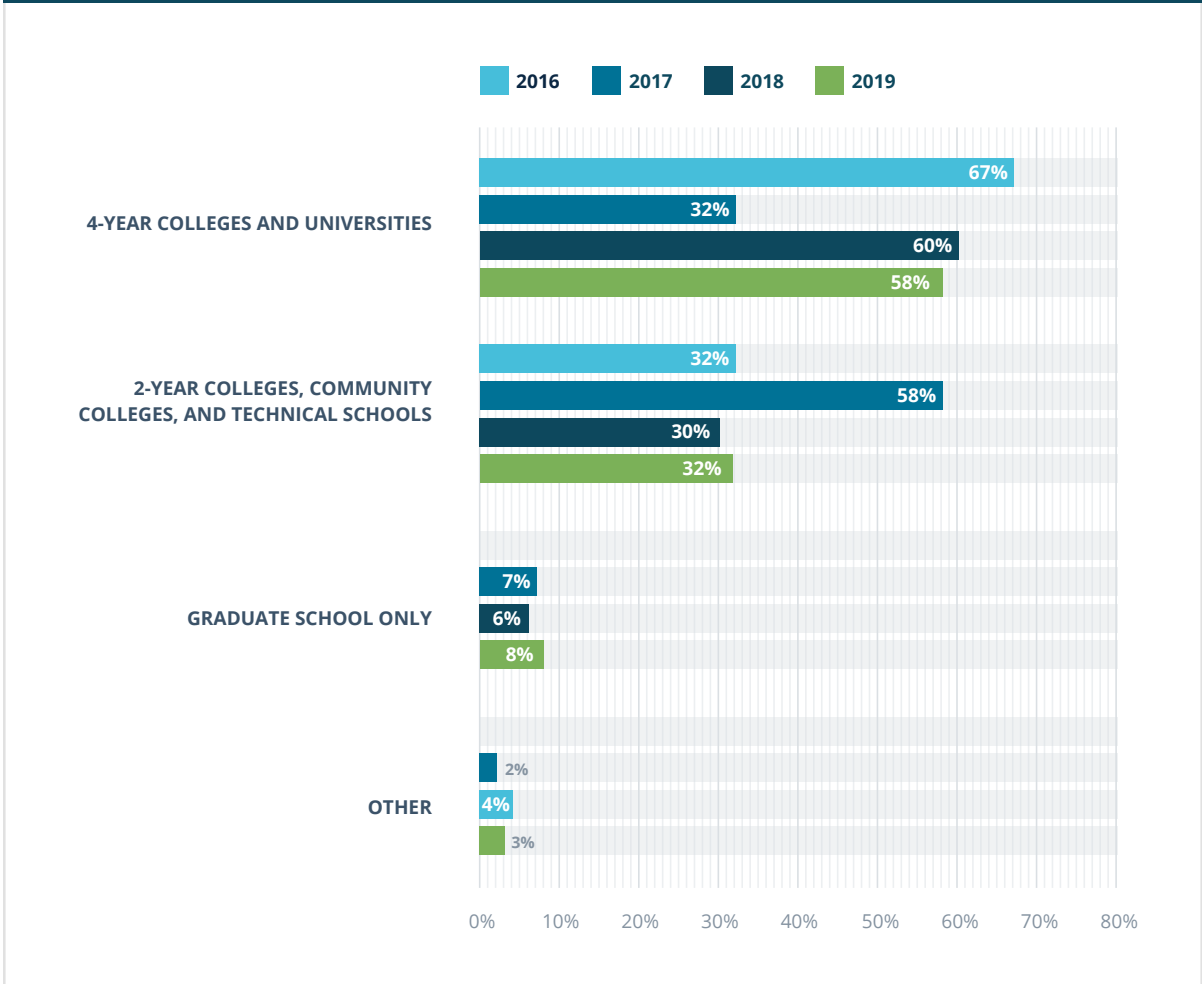


APPENDIX C: SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR DEMOGRAPHICS

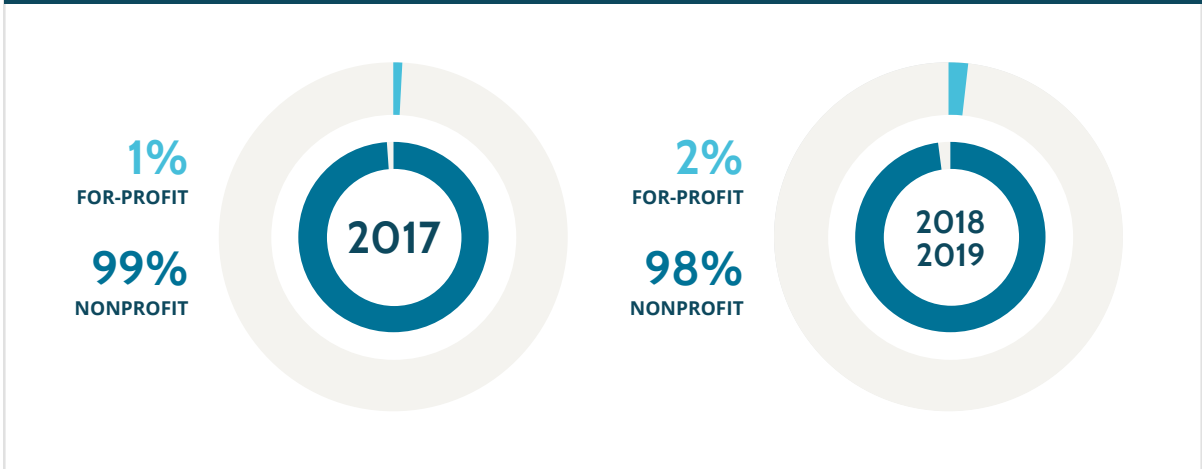
Data collection – SurveyMonkey, (n=398)



Institutional Classification



Institution Type



Number of Programs Offered at Each Degree Level/Percentage of Schools Reporting This Year

		0	1-5	6-10	11 - 25	26 - 50	51 OR >
CERTIFICATE	100% ONLINE	16%	51%	14%	12%	4%	4%
	BLENDED	33%	31%	13%	11%	3%	10%
ASSOCIATE	100% ONLINE	32%	46%	12%	8%	1%	1%
	BLENDED	39%	24%	7%	13%	8%	8%
BACHELOR'S	100% ONLINE	25%	45%	15%	10%	4%	1%
	BLENDED	44%	37%	7%	6%	4%	1%
MASTER'S (NON MBA)	100% ONLINE	23%	49%	14%	12%	1%	-
	BLENDED	36%	55%	6%	1%	-	1%
MBA	100% ONLINE	48%	48%	4%	1%	-	-
	BLENDED	78%	22%	-	-	-	-
PROFESSIONAL (JD, ETC.)	100% ONLINE	88%	12%	-	-	-	-
	BLENDED	76%	24%	-	-	-	-
PHD AND OTHER DOCTORATE (EDD, PSYD, ETC.)	100% ONLINE	58%	42%	-	-	-	-
	BLENDED	63%	37%	-	-	-	-

DATA NOTES

1. Percentages reported in this document have been rounded, resulting in some totals adding up to just under or over 100.
2. In instances in which participants were able to select more than one response, percentages may add up to more than 100.
3. Findings reported from school administrators are based on the number of participants responding to each question; all questions, except a screening question related to the delivery of online programs, were optional.
4. All data is self-reported.

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