2021

Trends in Online Student Demographics

Explore the characteristics of today's online students and their insights on college decision-making and the online learning experience amid the challenges of COVID-19.

Best Colleges

2021 Trends in Online Student Demographics

An Annual Survey of Students and School Administrators

Melissa A. Venable, Ph.D.

This report is the result of a collaborative effort of BestColleges.com contributors. The team included: Kelsie Brown, Fantasha Lawrence, Julie Linton, Kylee Morgan, Hannah Muniz, Kaylynn Olmstead, Andrew Rice, Jordan Stewart-Rozema, and Quinn Tomlin.

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Executive Summary

The 2021 Trends in Online Student Demographics Report — our second annual report on online student demographics — provides a look at data collected from 1,300 online students. The participants in this report represent three enrollment categories: current online students, prospective online students, and graduates of online programs. This group does not include remote learners who experienced virtual learning environments as a result of COVID-19-related campus closures in 2020, although our findings suggest that these closures affected online students as well.

KEY FINDINGS

Choosing an Online Program

- College websites are the information source prospective online students rely on most (31%) when researching and comparing programs, followed by student reviews (21%).
- Financial challenges, such as estimating actual costs, are a major obstacle when choosing a program. However, the top challenge, as identified by 22% of prospective students, is finding an online option that meets a student's needs and interests.

Learner Characteristics

- COVID-19 had an impact on online enrollment, with 15% of students saying that pandemic-related circumstances led them to pursue a new program online.
- Finding balance between education, work, family, and household obligations was the biggest concern for students choosing to study online.

The Online Learning Experience

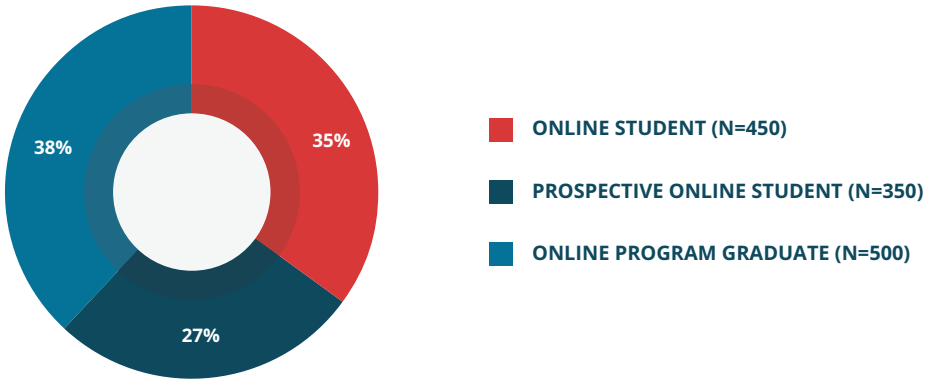
- In 2020, two-thirds (66%) of currently enrolled online students said they never visited campus, compared to just 45% in 2019.
- Both online and on-campus classes relied heavily on live, online class meetings (e.g., meetings hosted via Zoom) in 2020, as reported by 89% of currently enrolled online students. This was up from 58% the previous year.

Introduction

This report focuses on online students and the demographic trends found for this group of learners over the past five years. Our goal is to provide a closer look at the experiences of participants that self-identified as online learners — those who chose or choose to enroll in a program that was designed for online delivery.

BestColleges collected data from 1,300 online students in October 2020. These participants included those enrolled in online programs (35%), those considering enrolling in online programs (27%), and graduates of online programs (38%). All data are self-reported and participants were fielded by Lucid LLC.

Student Types (n=1,300)



The survey data reported here are part of BestColleges' annual survey research initiative, which also collects and reports data from college and university administrators who are involved in online education at their institutions. Additional information about online students, as well as information about the schools and remote learners (i.e., students enrolled in on-campus courses that shifted to virtual learning environments due to COVID-19-related restrictions) who also participated in our annual surveys, can be found in the 2021 Online Education Trends Report.

Choosing an Online Program

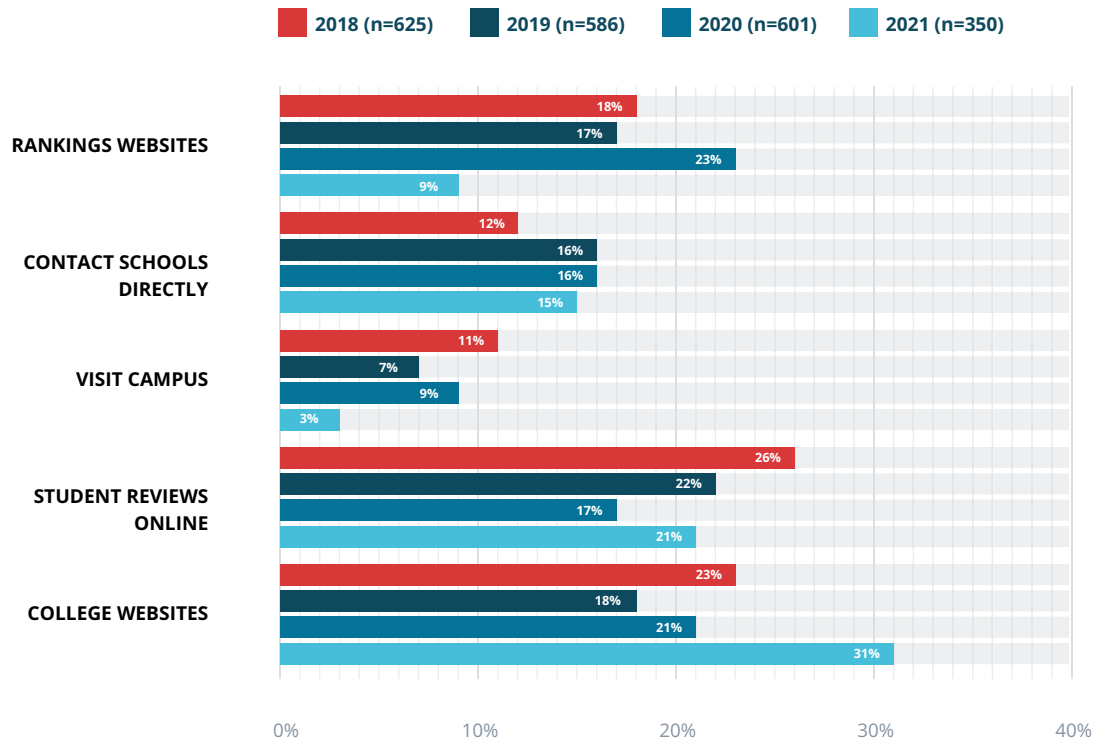
How do students decide to enroll online and what are the biggest challenges they face during this process? Each year we ask our student survey participants to share feedback addressing these questions. Focusing on responses from prospective students, who were thinking about online programs but were not yet enrolled at the time of the survey, provides helpful insights related to marketing and recruitment.

COMPARING THE OPTIONS

Prospective students can choose from a variety of resources when conducting research about online programs and comparing their options. When asked what source of information they relied on most, this year's top responses were *college websites* (31%) and *online student reviews* (21%). Rankings websites, the top response last year, saw a drop in use (23% to 9%). Campus visits also saw a decline (9% to 3%), which was expected due to the widespread campus closures that occurred in 2020.

This year, 6% of surveyed prospective students said they weren't comparing programs at all. These responses might be explained by an employer partnership with a specific school or a student's interest in a niche area of study for which there are not many options.

Information Relied On Most When Comparing Online Programs -
Prospective Students by Report Year



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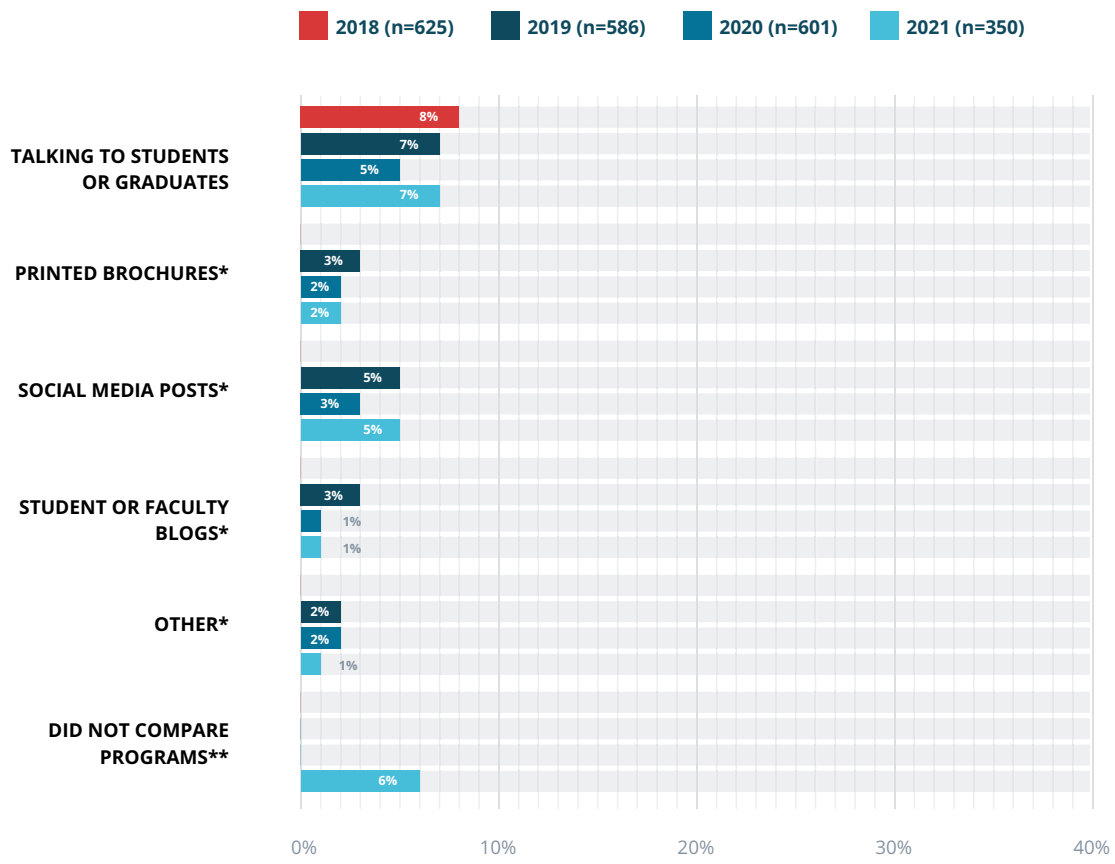
Information Relied On Most When Comparing Online Programs - Prospective Students by Report Year



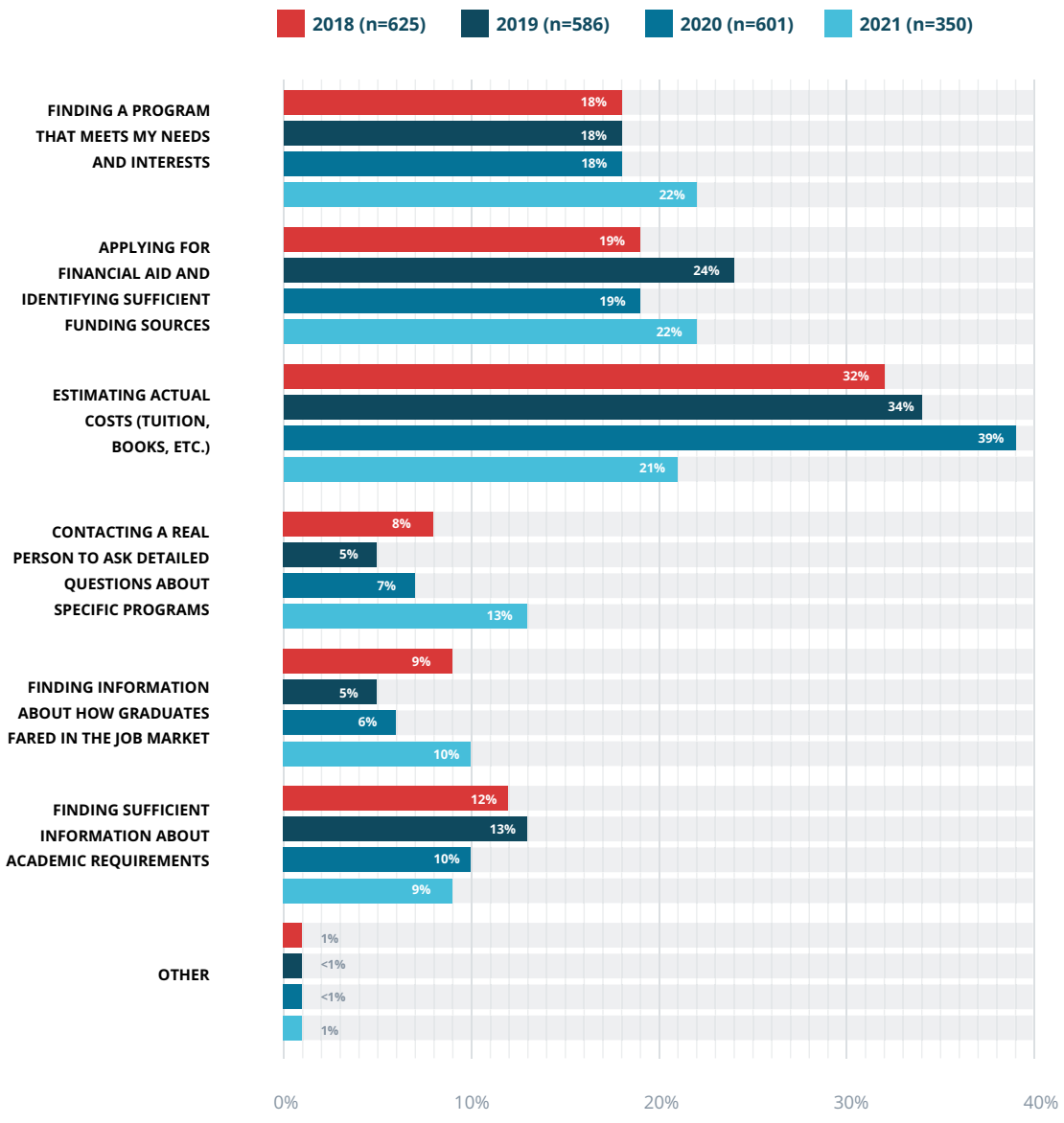
*New response option added in 2019

**New response option added in 2021

DECISION-MAKING CHALLENGES

This year, we saw some changes in the most significant challenges reported by prospective online students. *Estimating actual costs* and *applying for financial aid and identifying sufficient funding sources* remain challenges for this group. However, *finding a program that meets my needs and interests* was the top response this year.

Biggest Challenge Faced While Making Decisions About College -
Prospective Students by Report Year



BESTCOLLEGES INSIGHT

Prospective Online Students Rely On College Websites and Student Reviews

This year we found that prospective online students are relying more heavily on the information posted on college websites and student review sites than in previous years. These students also reported more challenges finding a fit with their needs and interests. How are prospective students connecting with information about your online programs, and what do they find when they visit your website? Explore ways to meet students where they are looking by providing the details they need to make a decision about enrolling.

Learner Characteristics

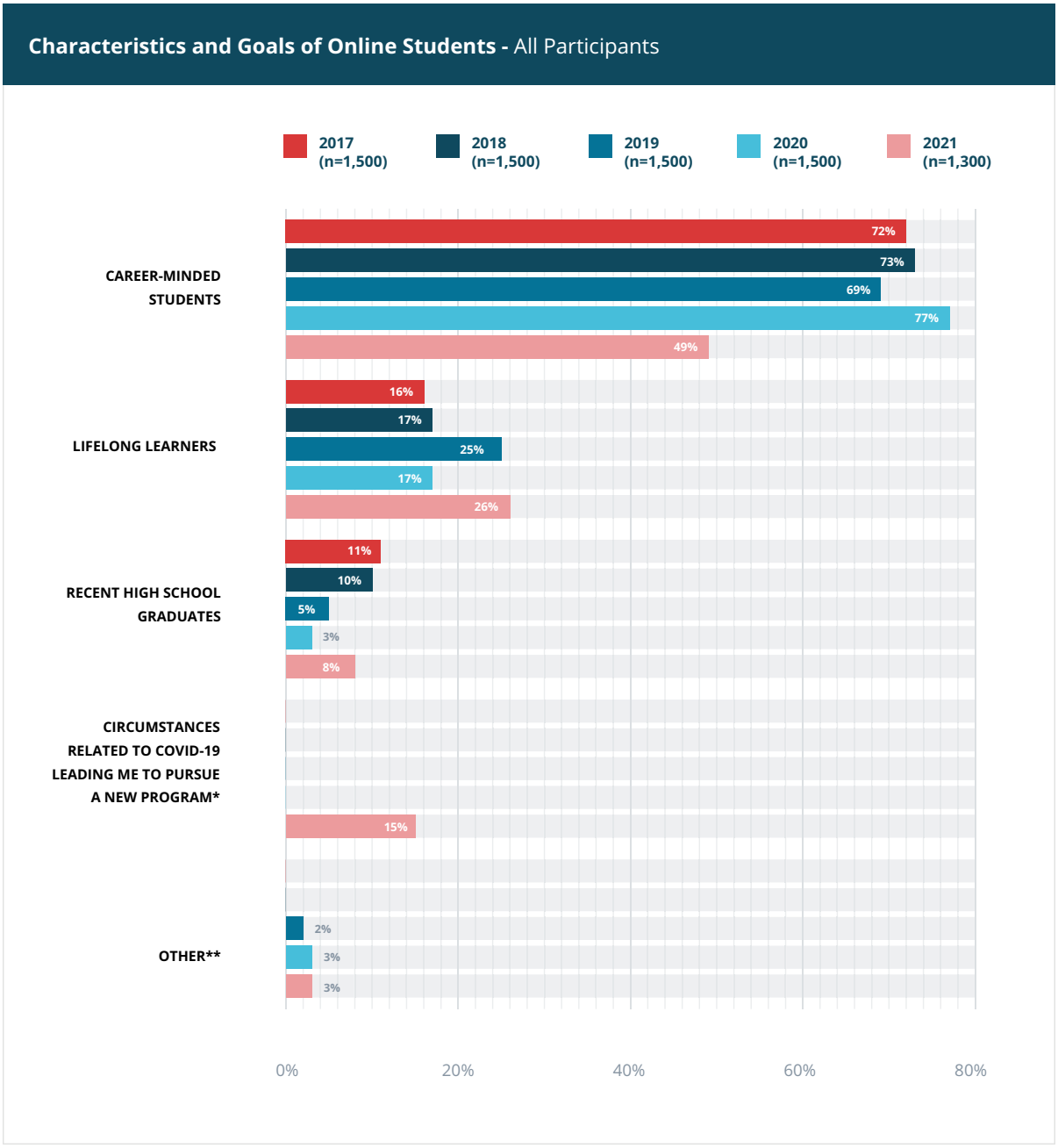
This year we found that online students are motivated to choose distance learning programs for a variety of reasons. They also shared several concerns about their decisions. School administrators provided feedback about the demographic trends they are seeing in their online programs as well.

While the characteristics of a "typical" online student are getting harder to define, the participants in our survey this year can be described as predominantly: male (53%), between the ages of 25 and 44 (61%), studying at the undergraduate level (46%), married or living with a partner (65%), a parent (61%), white (68%), employed full time (57%), and enrolled full time in their courses (78%).

MOTIVATION TO ENROLL

The work of Ladd, Reynolds, and Selingo (n.d.) provides a framework to describe learner characteristics that moves beyond "traditional" and "nontraditional" labels based on age. Our annual student survey asks participants to identify their primary motivation for enrolling in an online program by choosing from among this framework's student segments: aspiring academics, coming of age, academic wanderers, career starters, career accelerators, and industry switchers. These six segments are then collapsed into three student types: recent high school graduates, career-minded students, and lifelong learners.

This year, 49% of respondents fell into career-minded categories (i.e., industry switchers, career accelerators, and career starters). This is almost half of all participants, but the lowest percentage in the history of this report, representing a decrease of 28 percentage points from the previous year.



*New response option added in 2021

**New response option added in 2019

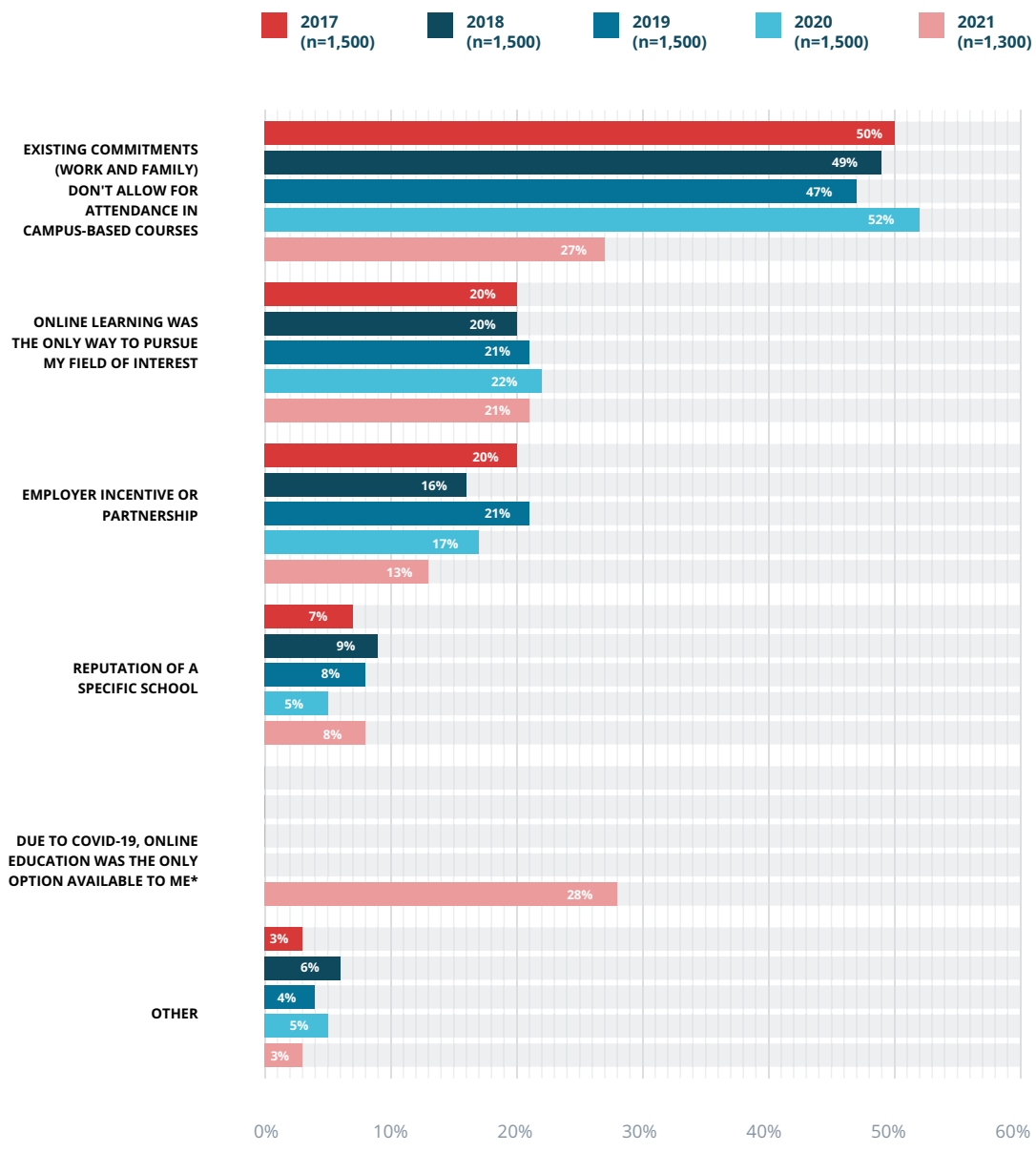
A similar percentage of career-minded students identified themselves as career accelerators, i.e., those interested in earning an academic credential in a field where they already work or have practical experience (19%), and industry switchers, i.e., those interested in changing their careers and entering a new field (20%).

In this year's survey, 15% of online students said they were motivated to enroll or consider enrolling online because *circumstances related to COVID-19 [led them] to pursue a new program.*

ONLINE VS. ON CAMPUS

When we asked all of our student participants (i.e., enrolled, prospective, and graduates) why they chose, or planned to choose, online learning instead of a campus-based program, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic drew the largest response (28%). This was followed closely by the convenience and flexibility provided by online programs, which allow students to plan around existing commitments (27%); this response topped the list the past four years.

Reasons for Choosing Online Learning Options - All Participants by Report Year

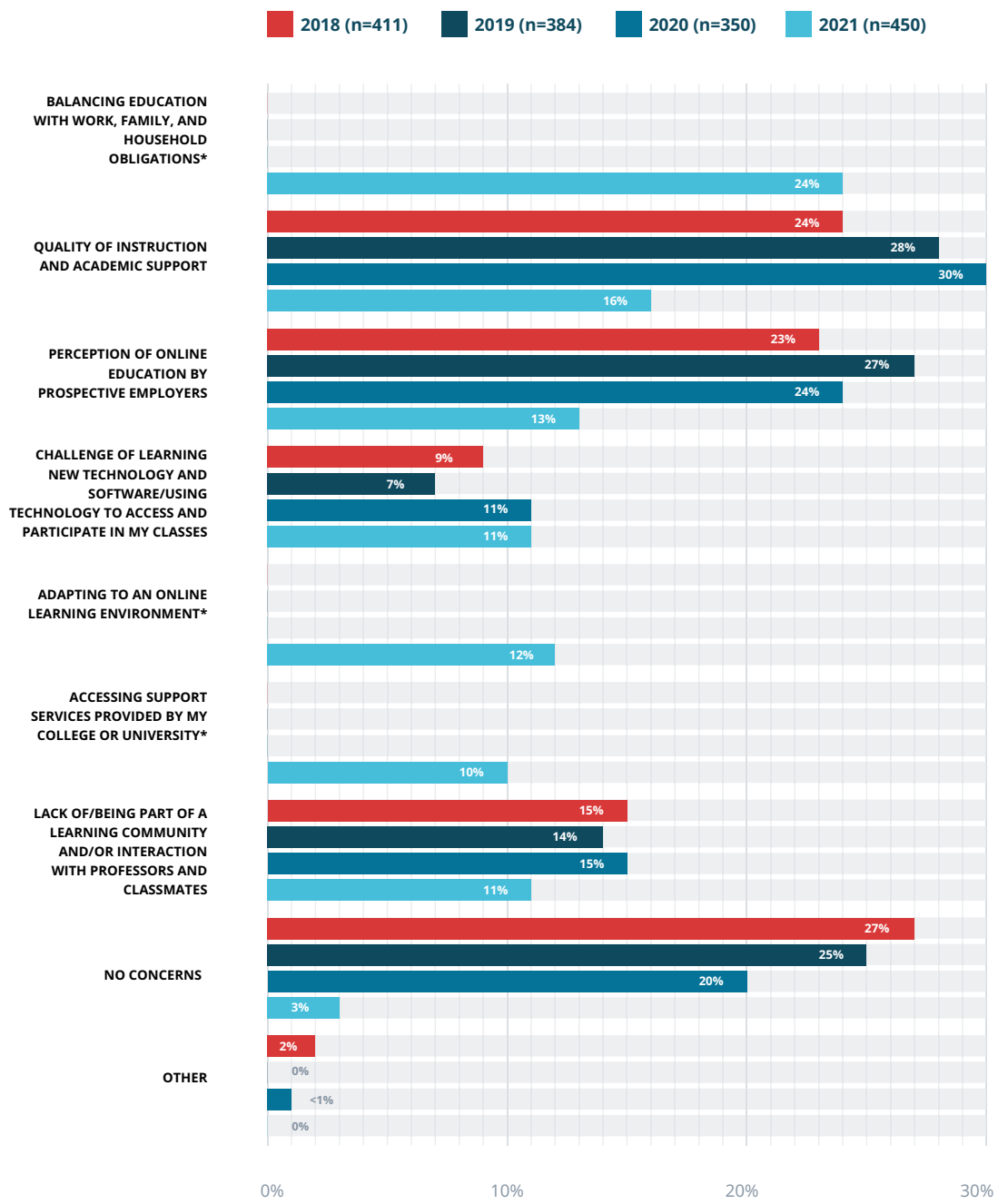


*Response option added in 2021

CONCERNS ABOUT ONLINE LEARNING

Our survey included several changes this year, including the addition of a wider variety of response options to gather more feedback about student concerns related to the online learning experience. These changes had an impact on our findings, broadening the scope of potential issues students face. *Balancing education with work, family, and household obligations* was the top concern identified by students enrolled at the time of this year's survey (24%).

Concerns About Choosing Online vs. On-Campus Education -
Currently Enrolled Participants by Report Year



*Response option added in 2021

Currently enrolled online students also expressed decreased levels of concern this year over the previous year in areas such as *quality of instruction and academic support* (16% vs. 30%) and *perception of online education by employers* (13% vs. 24%).

The percentage of students indicating *no concerns* with online learning dropped from 20% last year to 3% this year, perhaps due in part to the expanded list of response options for the 2021 survey.

ENROLLMENT TRENDS

In our survey of school administrators (n=111), we asked an open-ended question related to the most significant student demographic trend they were seeing in their institutions' online programs. Some emerging themes were similar to those found in previous years, primarily themes related to the age of enrollees, but administrators this year also addressed the demand for online education.

Age

Many school administrators (38%) mentioned age when discussing student demographic trends. While some said their students were getting older, others shared that they were seeing an influx of younger students, particularly through dual-enrollment programs in high school. We have seen this trend emerge for multiple years, with the typical age range for online students expanding in both directions.

Selected responses:

- "Adult learners [are] re- or upskilling."
- "We are consistently having students enroll who are in the 40-50 age bracket."
- "Minority women over 40 pursuing their first bachelor's degree."
- "More traditional students are entering the online arena."
- "Seeing more traditional-aged students as a result of high school dual credit programs and now COVID."
- "In terms of gender and age, our online population is becoming more in line with our general student population."

Demand

In a departure from survey findings in previous years, some administrators (18%) mentioned trends related to changes in the demand for online education. These include increases and decreases among specific student populations, such as transfer students, degree completion students, and campus-based students.

Selected responses:

- "Despite the economic impact of COVID-19 our enrollment has increased. The demand for online learning has increased."
- "[More] undergraduate, first-time students."
- "Degree completion — students coming back to finish up a degree they started with us."
- "We serve many students who are enrolled at other on-campus institutions, but take one online class from us each term."
- "More on-campus residential students are completing online courses in addition to their on-campus courses."
- "Opposition to online learning."

BESTCOLLEGES INSIGHT

COVID-19 Adds to Complexities and Challenges of Choosing Online Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on higher education added to the complexity of issues faced by many online students. For example, one of the most significant challenges mentioned by students was finding life-work-study balance. Online students may have been forced to deal with a variety of issues simultaneously, such as a switch to remote work, unemployment, and/or virtual school for their children at home. To improve student support services, find out what challenges your online students faced last year and examine possible revisions to systems and policies.

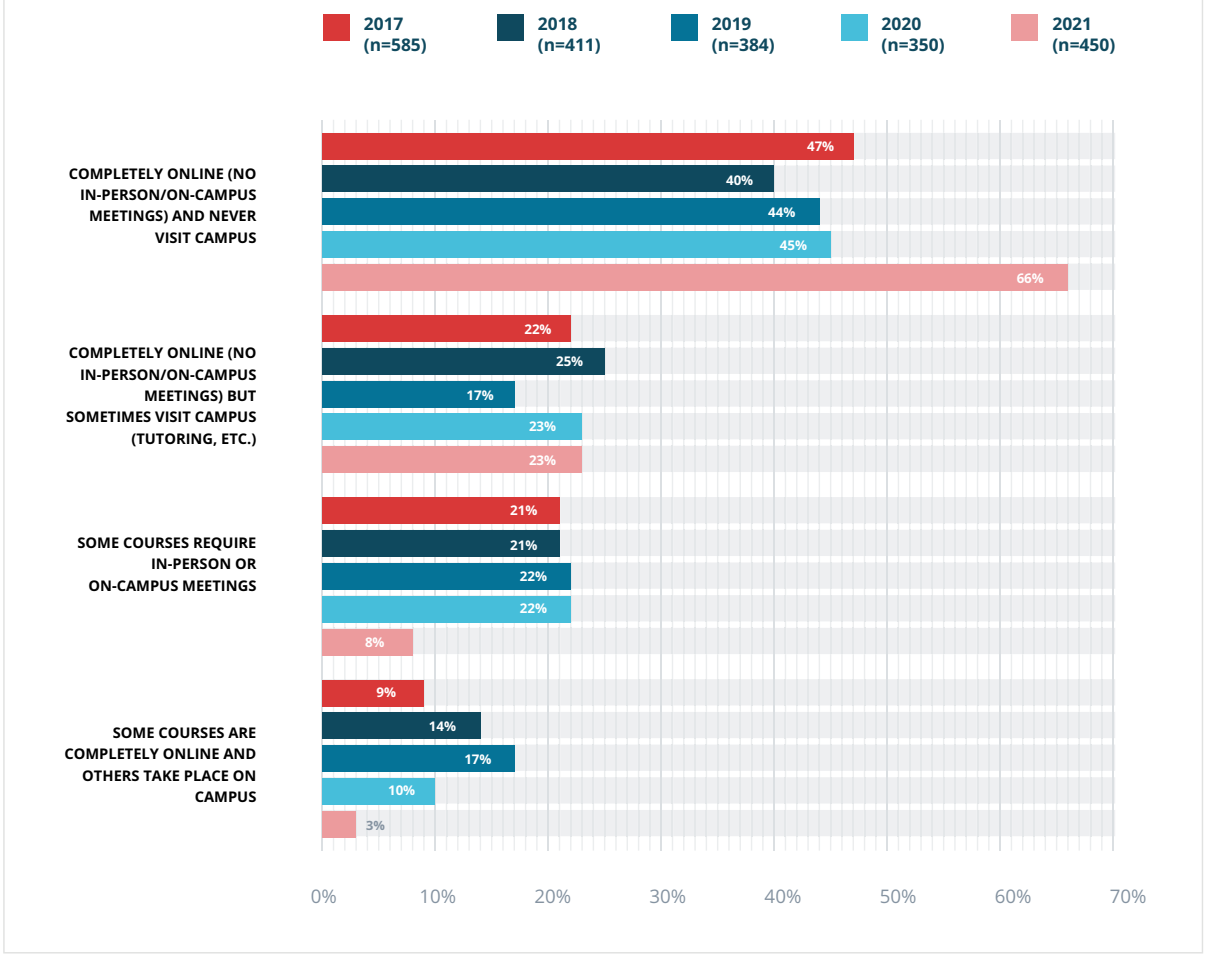
The Online Learning Experience

For the last five years, we've collected data about how online students interact within their online courses and programs. We've tracked their feedback related to visiting campus and enrollment in different course delivery formats, as well as their participation in synchronous (i.e., live, scheduled) online class sessions. Findings this year indicate a decrease in campus visits and an increase in synchronous class sessions.

CAMPUS VISITS

This year, fewer current online students reported that their online classes had on-campus requirements than in the previous year (8% vs. 22%) or that they were enrolled in both online and on-campus courses at the same time (3% vs. 10%). This perhaps comes as no surprise since many campuses were closed completely or operating with limited offices open in 2020 due to the coronavirus outbreak. Similarly, there was an increase in the percentage of online students who said they never visited campus (66% vs. 45%).

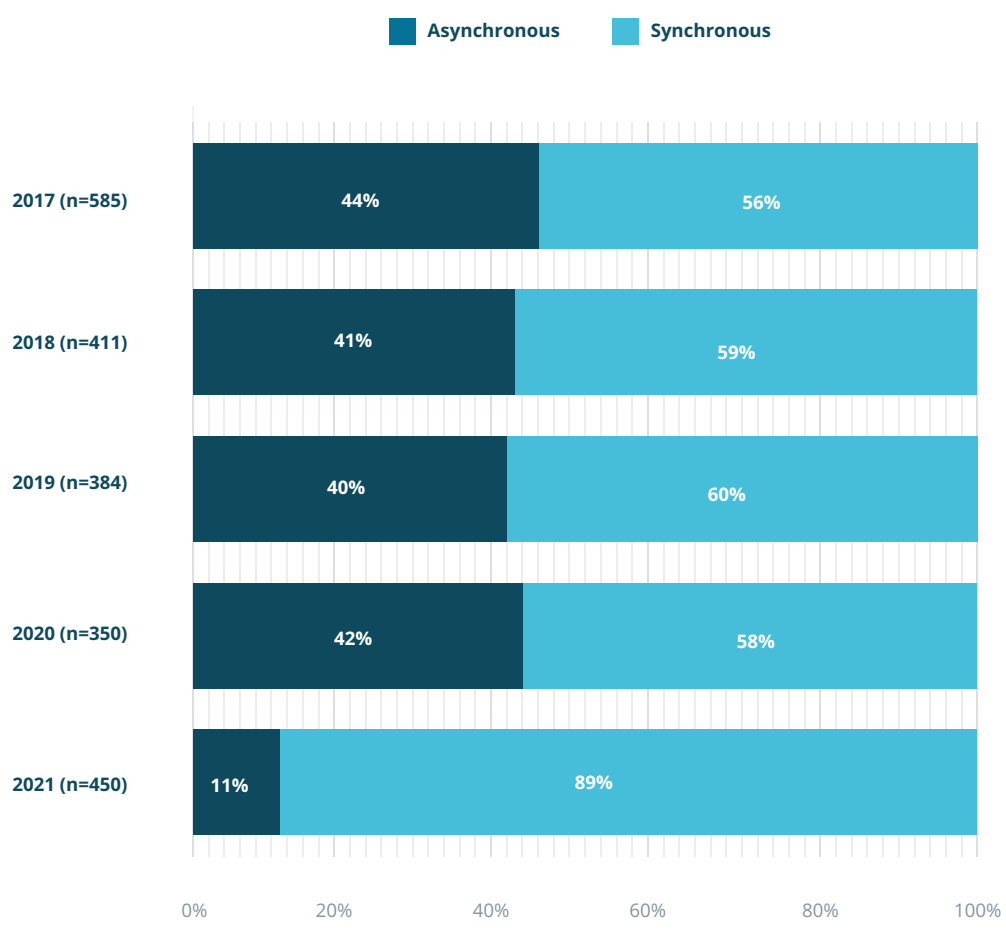
Campus Visits - Currently Enrolled Online Students by Report Year



SYNCHRONOUS CLASS SESSIONS

This year we saw an increase, from 49% to 89%, in the percentage of currently enrolled online students reporting synchronous components in their online courses (i.e., live, scheduled class meetings). Online courses that were predominantly asynchronous before the COVID-19 pandemic may have shifted to use more synchronous communication, matching the type of schedule typically followed by in-person courses, as professors and students managed new life challenges in 2020, including the effects of social isolation.

Course Format - Currently Enrolled Online Students by Report Year



BESTCOLLEGES INSIGHT

Campus Closures and Course Format Changes Affect Online Students, Too

There's no denying that 2020 was an unusual year in higher education. Many students who choose online programs still take advantage of services and resources provided by their schools' campuses. However, closures last year made these visits more difficult, if not impossible. The increased use of synchronous online class meetings may indicate an adjustment to campus schedules or a purposeful decision to increase live interaction and engagement. Consider how your institution may have made changes to online courses last year and explore lessons learned through student, faculty, and administrative perspectives.

Conclusion

The past year saw a great deal of upheaval in higher education, including in online education. The economic and societal changes experienced in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak affected not only student decisions about enrollment, but also their experiences learning in online classes — even among those who actively chose to pursue online programs.

Whether the circumstances surrounding the pandemic simply lead to short-term anomalies or result in long-term changes will be worth tracking as COVID-19 restrictions are lifted and campuses return to normal operations. Takeaways for institutions include:

Prospective Online Students Rely On College Websites and Student Reviews

This year we found that prospective online students are relying more heavily on the information posted on college websites and student review sites than in previous years. These students also reported more challenges finding a fit with their needs and interests. How are prospective students connecting with information about your online programs, and what do they find when they visit your website? Explore ways to meet students where they are looking by providing the details they need to make a decision about enrolling.

COVID-19 Adds to Complexities and Challenges of Choosing Online Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on higher education added to the complexity of issues faced by many online students. For example, one of the most significant challenges mentioned by students was finding life-work-study balance. Online students may have been forced to deal with a variety of issues simultaneously, such as a switch to remote work, unemployment, and/or virtual school for their children at home. To improve student support services, find out what challenges your online students faced last year and examine possible revisions to systems and policies.

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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 a certified career coach with a background in career development services. She earned her doctorate in instructional technology at the University of South Florida where her research interests focused on 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.

Data Notes

1. Percentages reported in this document have been rounded, resulting in some totals adding up to just under or over 100.
2. Several charts and descriptions present results for questions in which survey participants could select more than one response.
3. Data are self-reported.

References

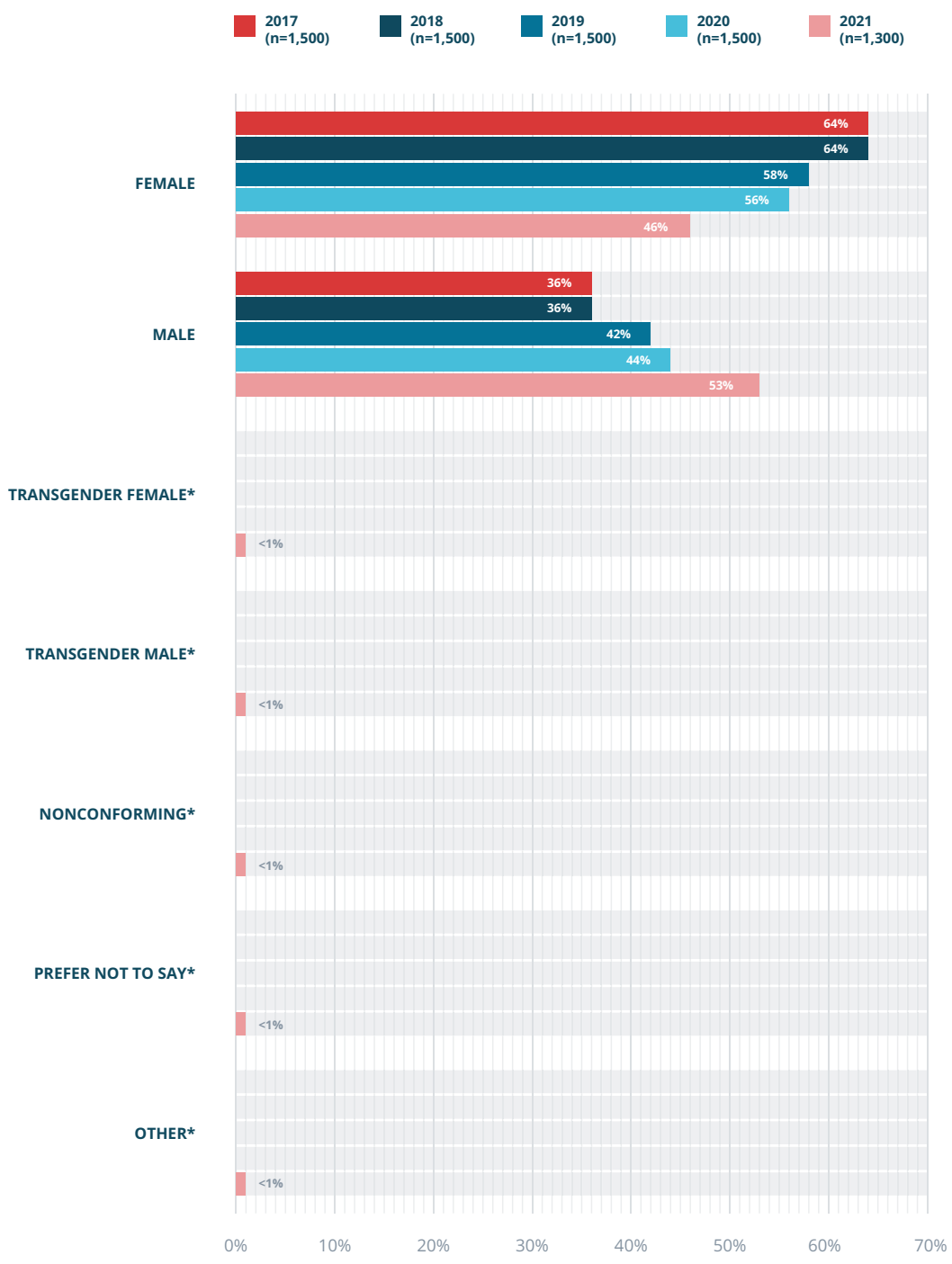
BestColleges. (2021). *2021 Online Education Trends Report*. BestColleges.com. https://www.bestcolleges.com/research/annual-trends-in-online-education/

Ladd, H., Reynolds, S., & Selingo, J. (n.d.). *The Differentiated University: Recognizing the Diverse Needs of Today's Students*. The Parthenon Group. https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/the-differentiated-university-wp-web-final.pdf

Appendix: Online Student Participants

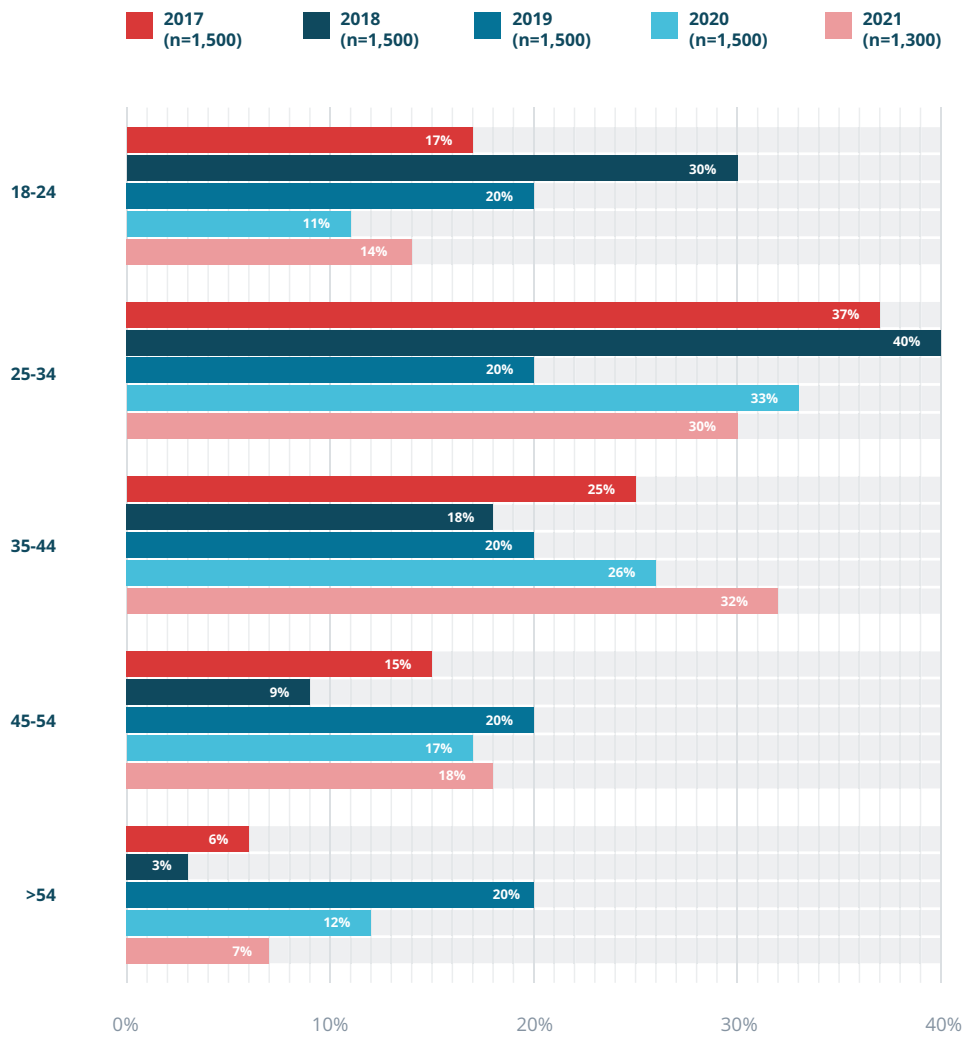
Data collection – Lucid LLC, October 2020

Gender



*New response option added in 2021

Age


2017 (n=1,500)
2018 (n=1,500)
2019 (n=1,500)
2020 (n=1,500)
2021 (n=1,300)
18-24
17%
30%
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14%
25-34
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33%
30%
35-44
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32%
45-54
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9%
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6%
3%
20%
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7%
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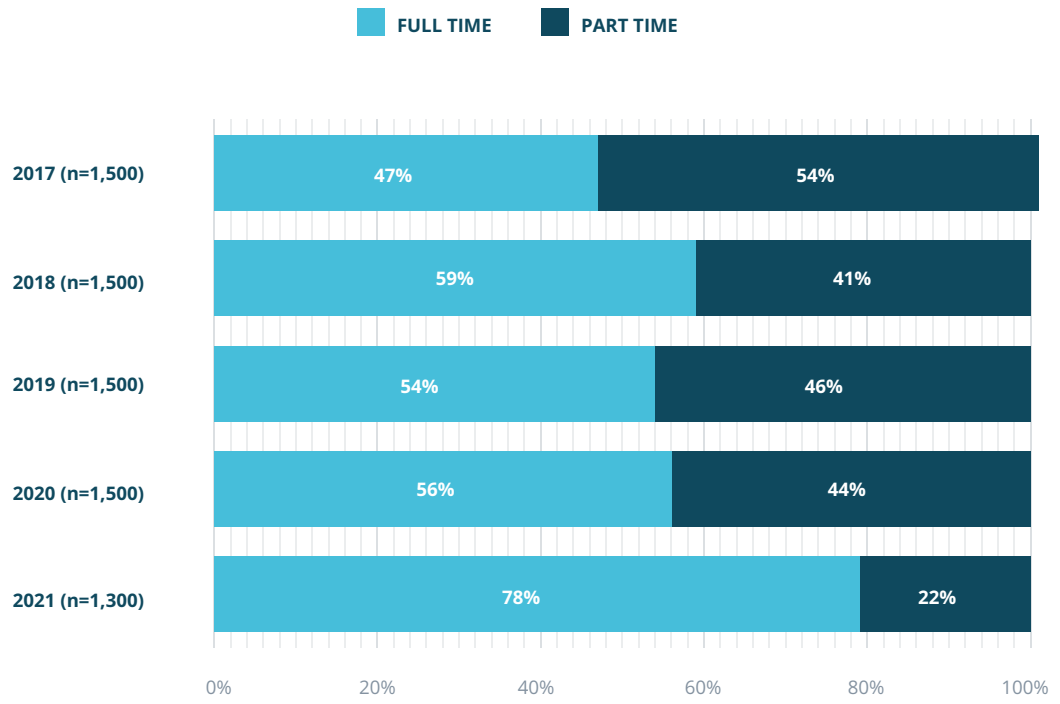
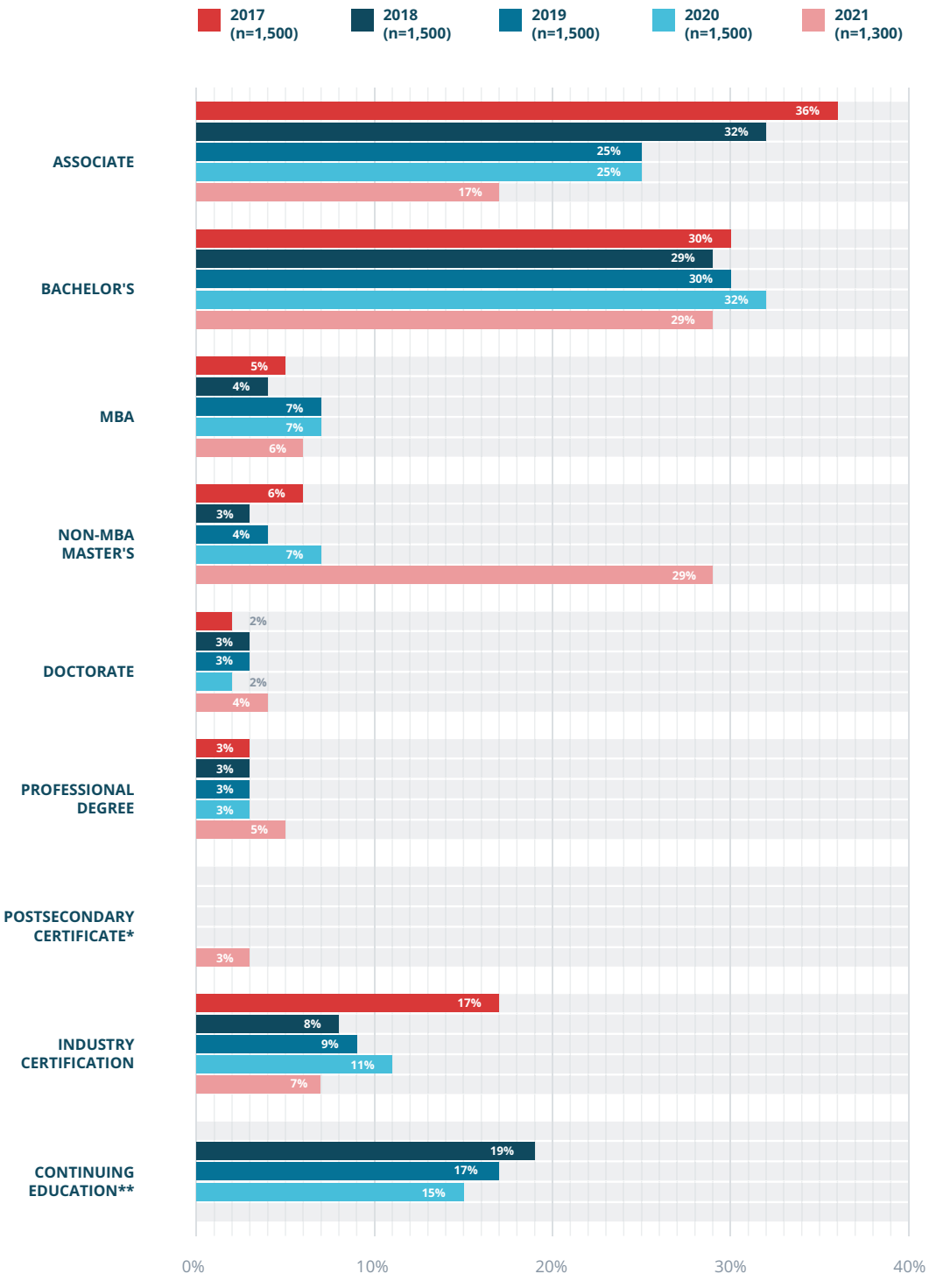
Enrollment Status



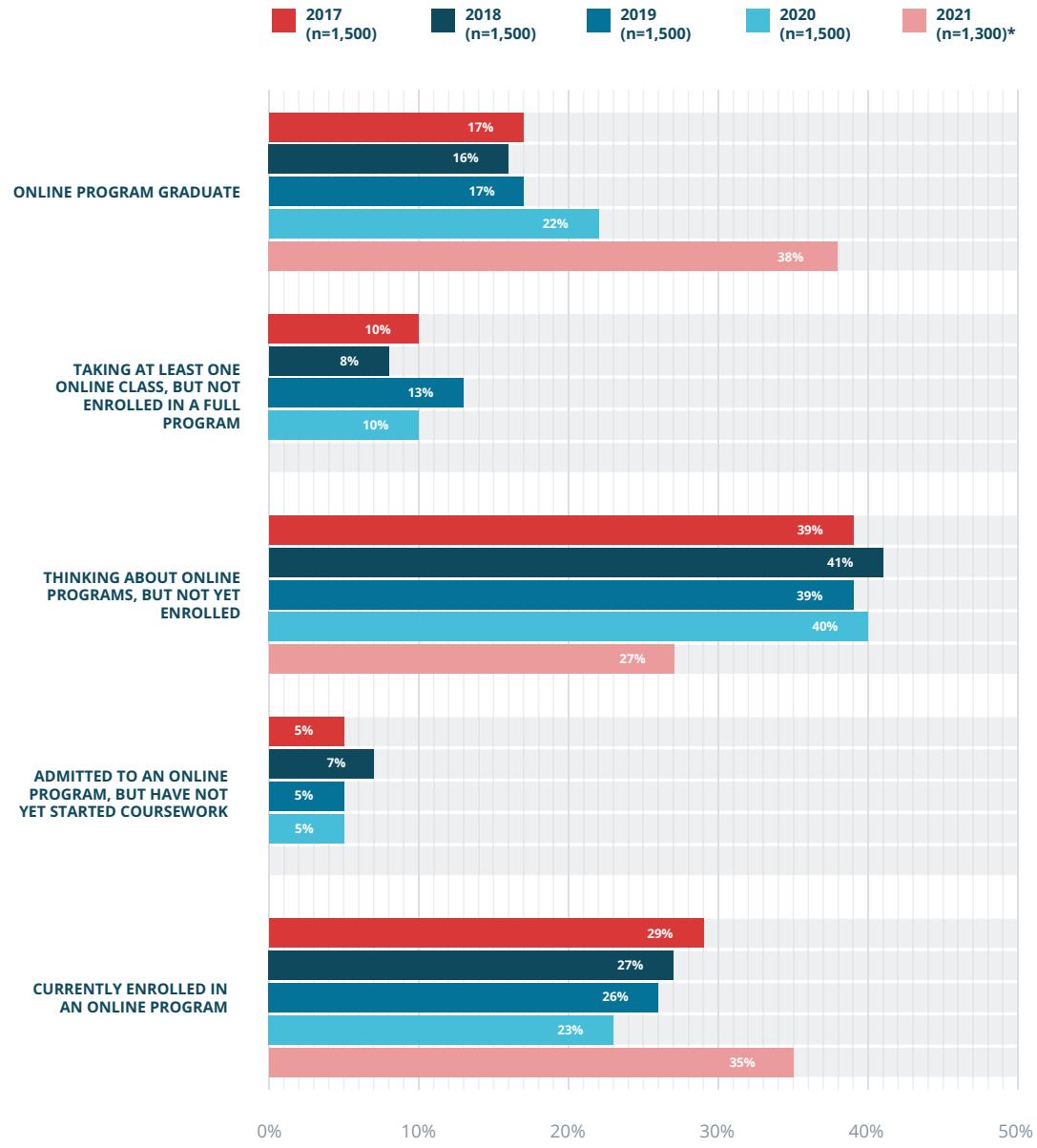
Degree Pursuing



*New response option added in 2021

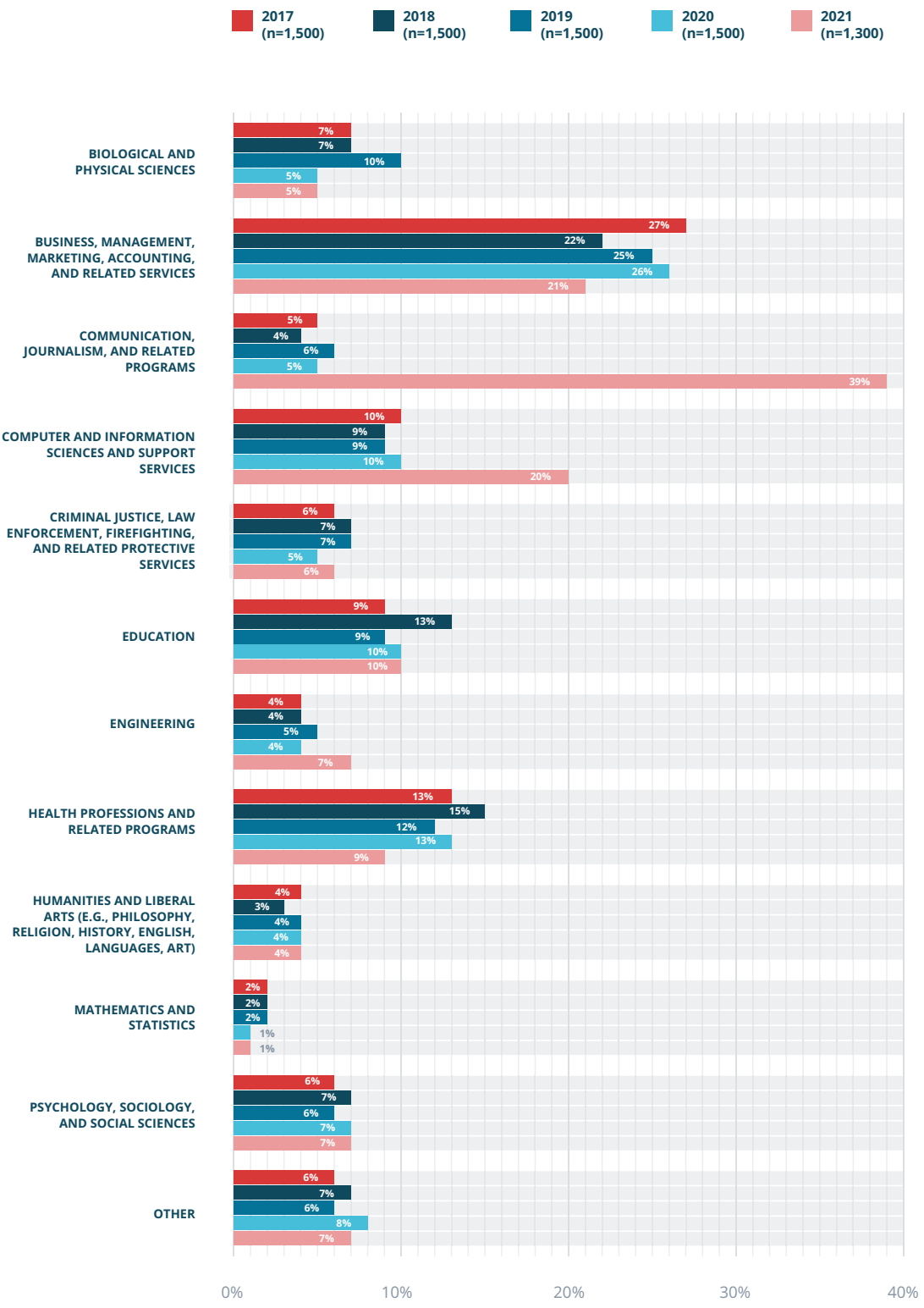
**New response option added in 2018, removed in 2021

Student Status

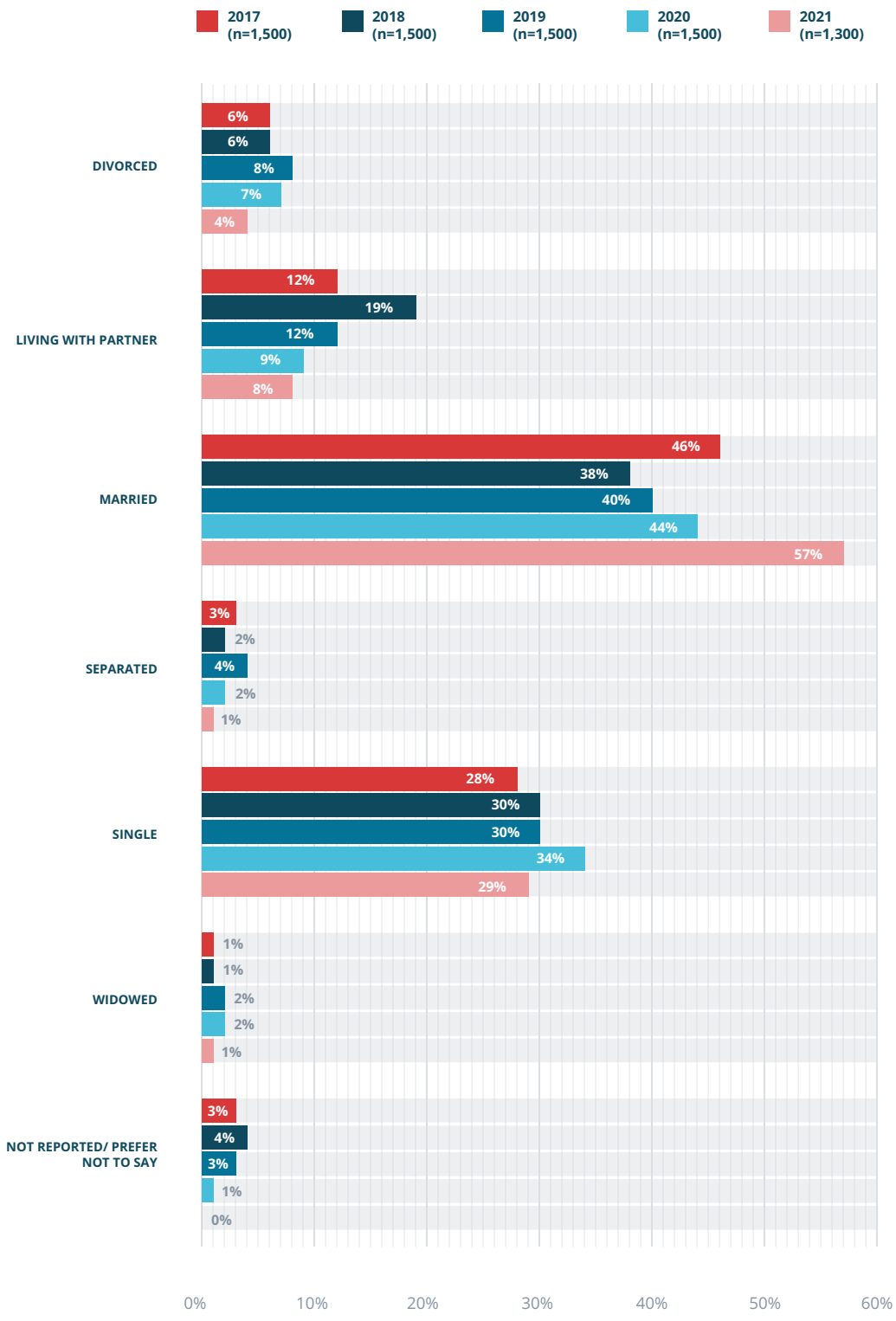


*Response options revised

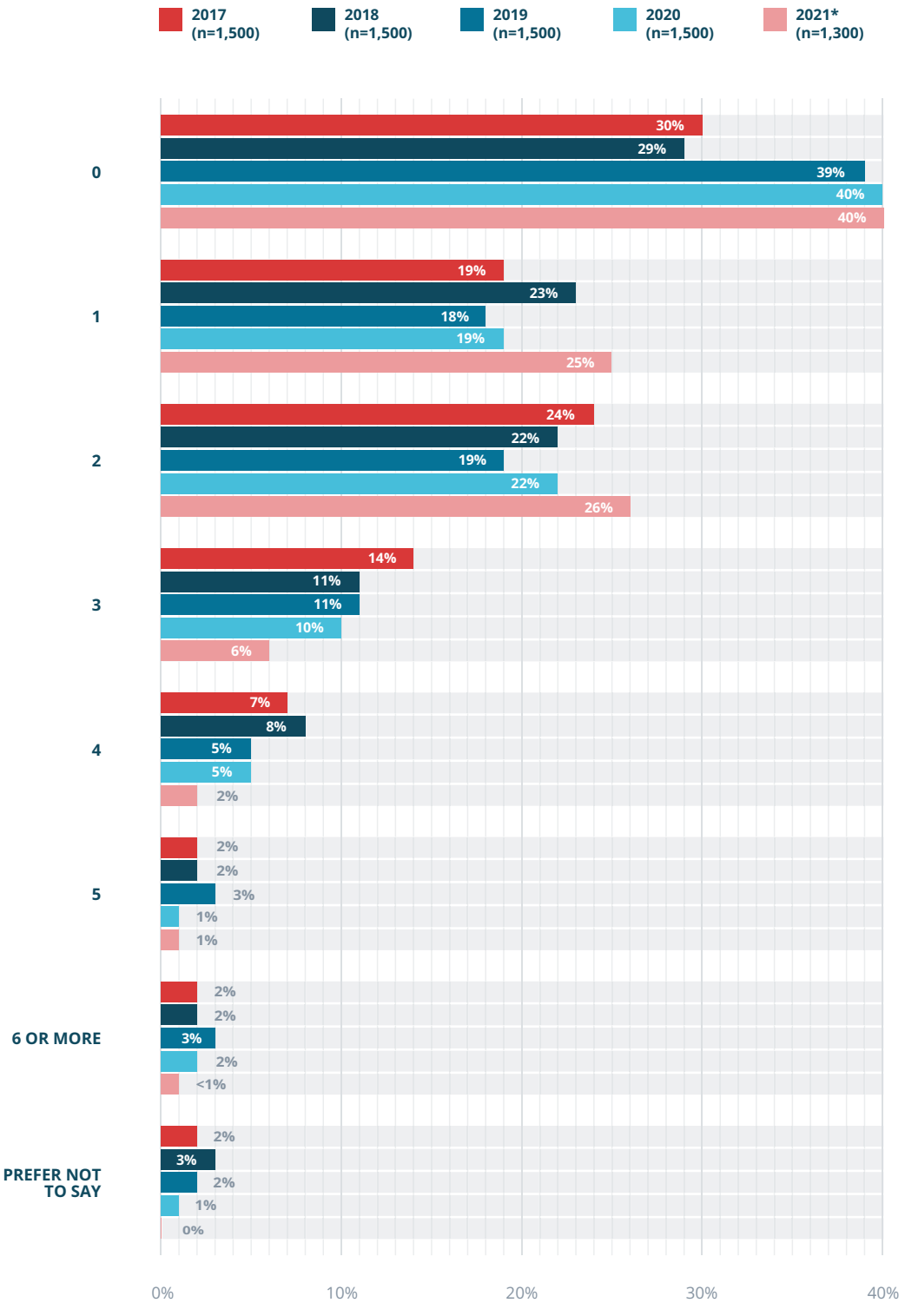
Major/Intended Major



Marital Status

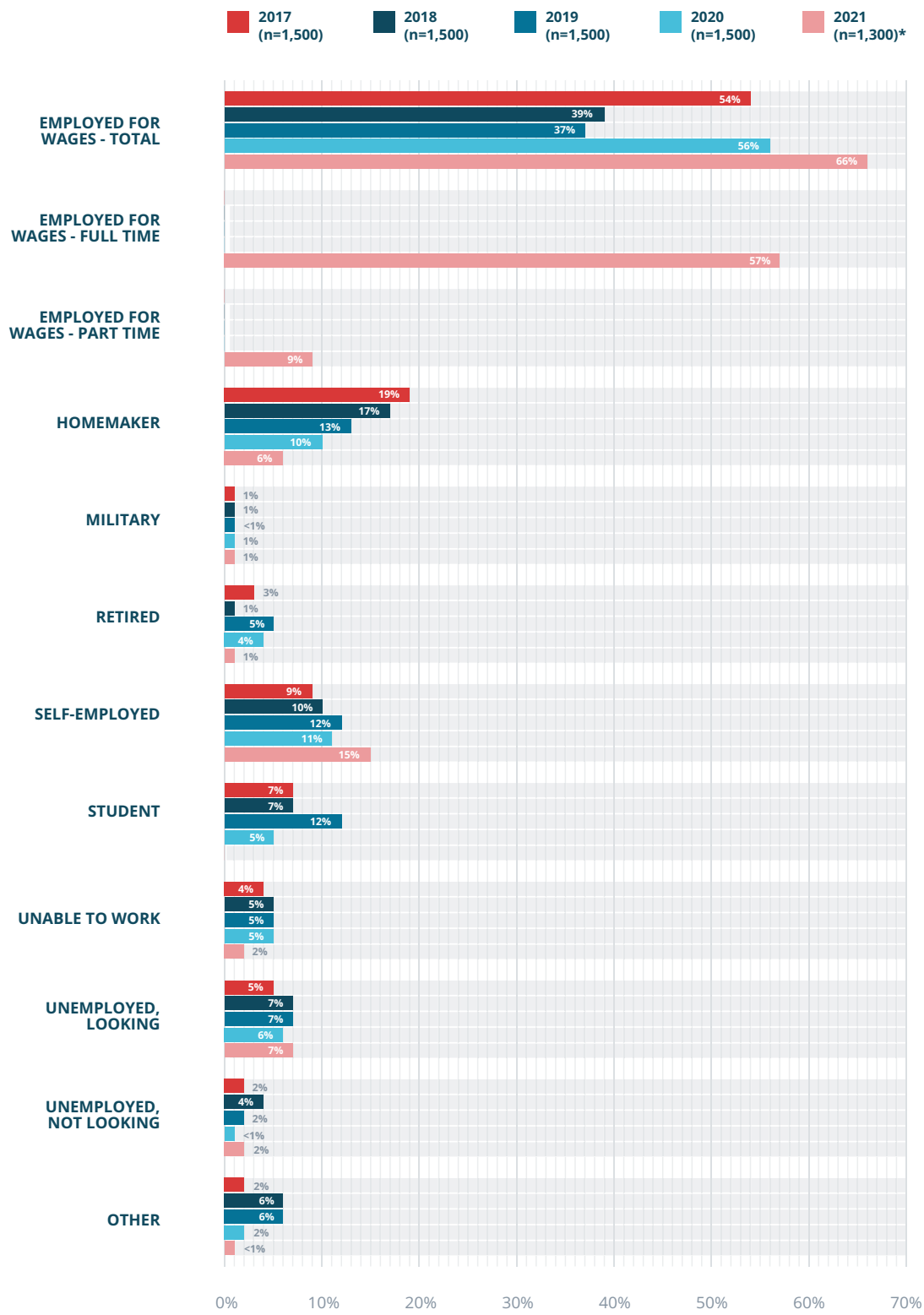


Number of Children



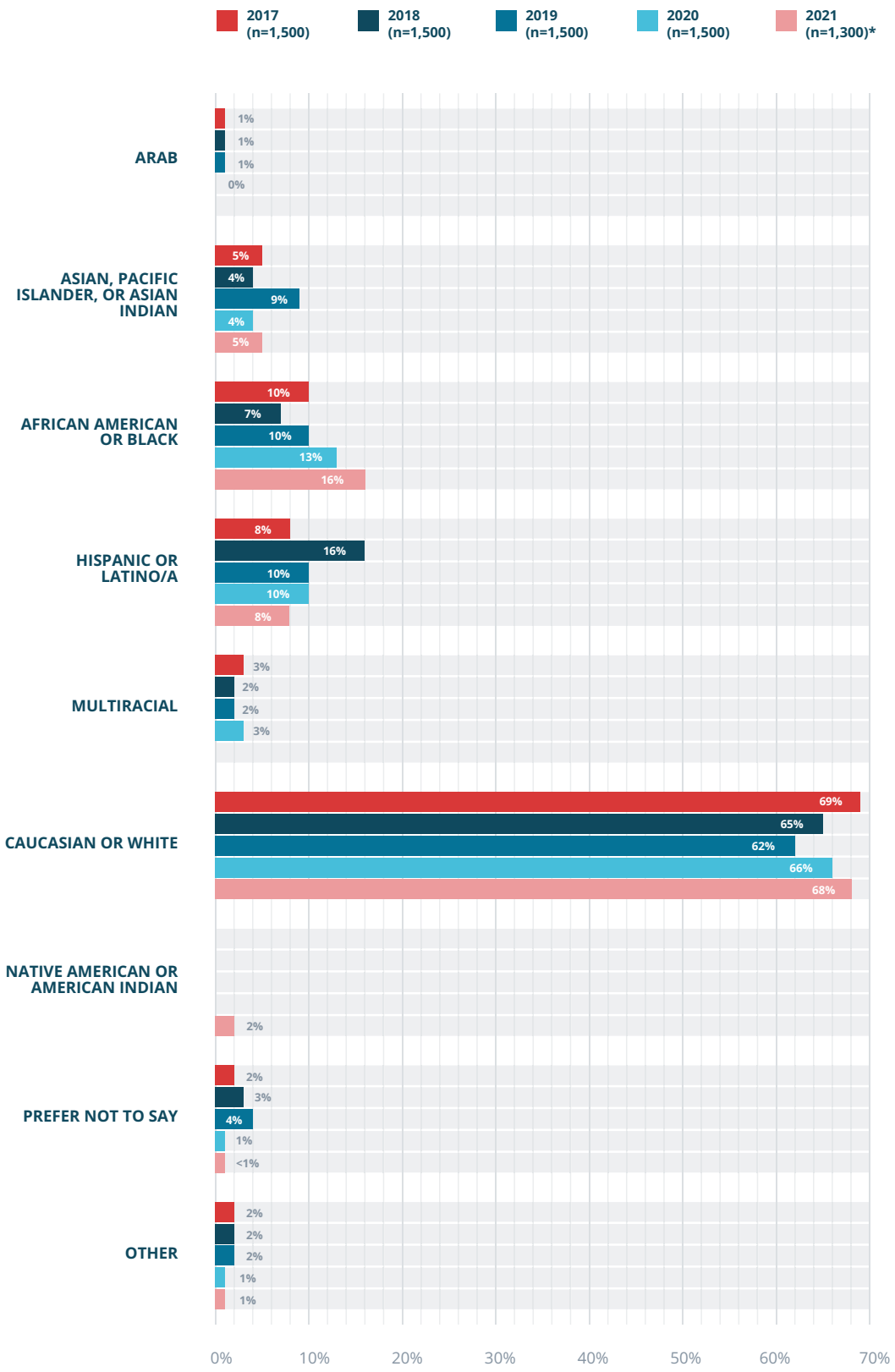
*Item revised in 2021 to reflect number of children under the age of 18 living at home

Employment Status



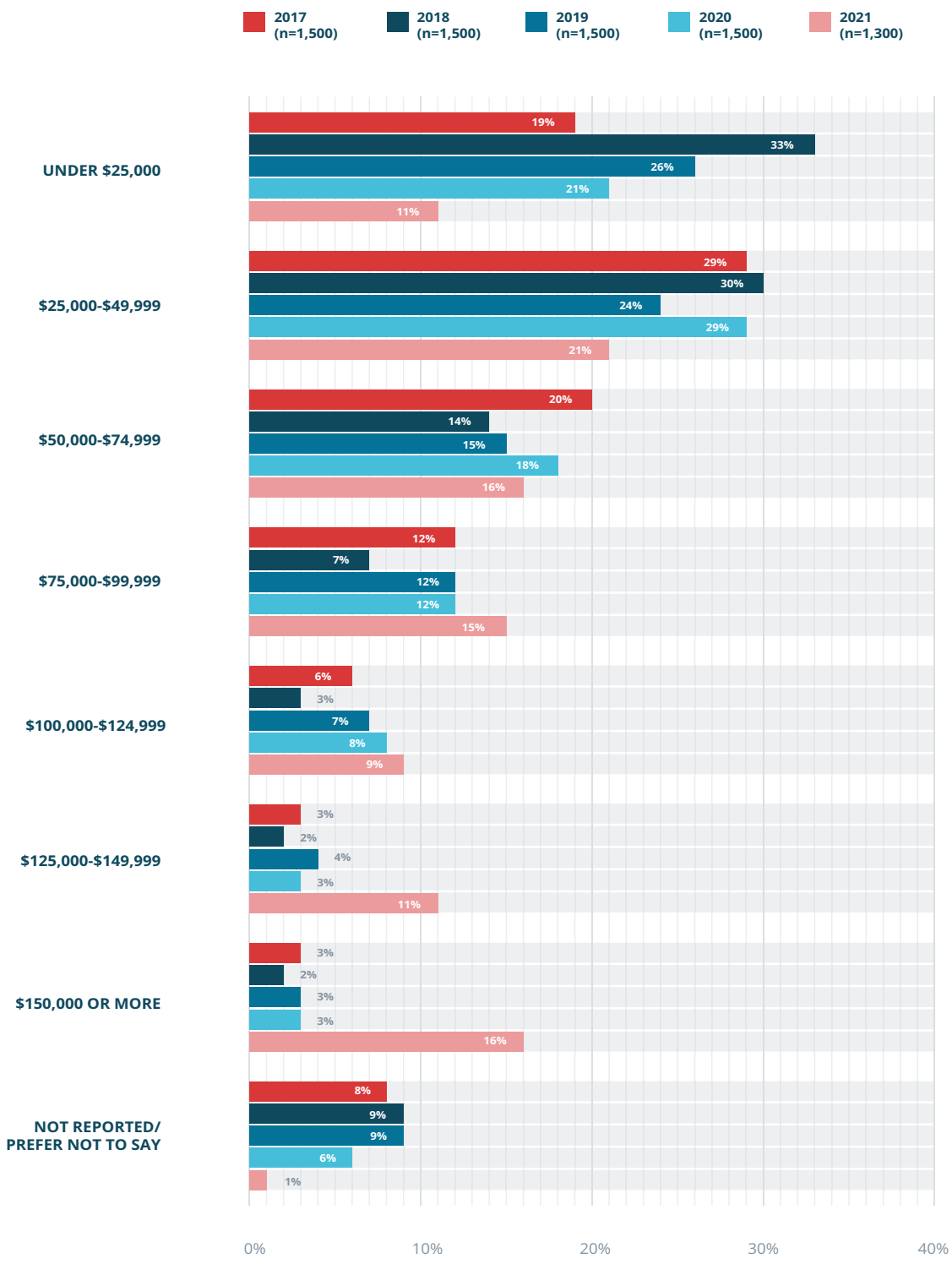
*Response options revised

Ethnic Background or Heritage



*Response options revised

Income Level



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