



2025

Online Education Trends Report

Prepared by BestColleges

BestColleges' 11th annual Online Education Trends Report provides the latest online learning experience data with insights from students and school administrators.



2025 Online Education Trends Report

An Annual Survey of Students and School Administrators

Melissa A. Venable, Ph.D.

This report is the result of a collaborative effort by BestColleges contributors. The team included: Reece Johnson, Lorraine Edwards, Andrew Rice, Raneem Taleb-Agha, Lyss Welding, and Liz Zvereva.

Table of Contents

4 Executive Summary

6 Introduction

Project Goals

Methodology

Respondents

8 Student Demographics

Demographic Trends

11 The Online Learning Experience

Online vs. On-Campus Programs

Challenges to Reaching Graduation

Instructional Strategy Preferences

Alternative Education Pathways and
Practical Experience

17 Marketing and Recruiting

Student Research and Decision-Making

Advice From Online Graduates

22 Online Student Satisfaction

Return on Investment

Recommending Online Education to Others

Perception of Online Education

26 Artificial Intelligence

Perception and Use of AI Tools

Policies and Training

Impact — Admissions to Assessment

30 Planning for the Future

Budget Planning

Preparation for Work After Graduation

32 Conclusion

34 Contributors

35 Data Notes

35 References

36 Appendix

Participant Demographics

- School Administrator Participants
- Student Participants



* Executive Summary

This is the 11th annual BestColleges Online Education Trends Report. It is part of an initiative to track long-term trends in online learning. This is our ninth year of original data collection through two online surveys — this year's respondents include 1,000 online college students and 74 college and university administrators. Findings are presented in six categories: student demographics, the online learning experience, marketing and recruiting, online student satisfaction, artificial intelligence, and planning for the future.

Key Findings

Student Demographics

- This year, more student respondents were interested in, enrolled in, or graduates of online postsecondary certificate programs (7%) or industry certification programs (12%). This is a slight increase from 2024 (6% and 10%) and a significant increase from 2021 (3% and 6%).
- Age continues to be a trending demographic — among the school administrators responding to this question, 35% say that students enrolling in online programs at their institutions are younger, while 58% say that students are older than in past years.

The Online Learning Experience

- 34% of responding students chose to enroll specifically online to allow more flexibility with their time and schedules.
- *Paying for higher education while minimizing student debt and balancing education with work, family, and household obligations* continue to be the biggest challenges and concerns among online students.
- 43% of online students report being able to integrate their current jobs and career exploration into their class assignments.

Marketing and Recruiting

- A majority (57%) of prospective students identified *tuition cost and program fees* as their biggest challenge when choosing an online program.
- Students primarily rely on *college websites* (43%), *online reviews from students* (29%), and *websites or publications that rank schools* (26%) to research and compare the online programs they are considering (or considered).
- While a majority of online program graduates (53%) applied to only one or two programs, 27% wish they had compared more schools.

Online Student Satisfaction

- 90% of online program graduates say their degree has or will have a positive return on investment.
- 98% of all students surveyed — current, prospective, and graduates — say they would recommend online education to others.
- 76% of all students surveyed say that online education is *better than or equal to on-campus learning*.

Artificial Intelligence

- A majority of responding school administrators agree that AI is a beneficial innovation (72%) and can personalize the learning experience for online students (64%).
- 60% of currently enrolled online students have used AI tools to complete assignments or exams, and an equal number say their schools provide guidance about AI use.
- Almost half (47%) of all students surveyed say they would trust colleges to use AI tools to *process and sort through college admission applications*, while 44% said they would trust colleges to use AI tools to *help make college admission decisions*.

Planning for the Future

- Most school administrators (68%) shared that their institutions are either decreasing or not changing their budget for online program development in the coming year.
- 79% of graduates feel that their online programs prepared them well for their first job after graduation.
- About half of all students surveyed, including currently enrolled students (54%) and prospective students (51%), feel that it will be *very important* for them to continue their education beyond their online programs.

* Introduction

Project Goals

This 11th edition of BestColleges' annual report continues the series' efforts to track long-term trends in online education at colleges and universities in the United States. Two surveys were used to collect input from 1,000 online students and 74 school administrators. This report series began collecting data in 2017; however, this edition includes only data collected over the past five years, which allows for some comparison of pandemic-era and post-pandemic responses. Reports published in previous years of the initiative can be found on the [BestColleges research hub](#).

Student respondents were currently enrolled in fully online programs, graduates of fully online programs, or prospective online students (self-identifying as seriously considering, but not yet enrolled) at the time of this year's survey.

Methodology

Data Collection

Two online surveys were conducted between February and April 2025. All data are self-reported.

BestColleges partners with survey providers to reach broader audiences. These partners use screening tools like Relevant ID and manually review data for consistency and accuracy. The first survey was fielded by Pure Spectrum, in partnership with GLG Research, using a quota sampling approach to provide a sample that represented the four continental U.S. geographical regions (i.e., Midwest, Northeast, South, and West). Additional quotas were implemented to encourage sex/gender and ethnic/racial diversity. This survey collected data from 1,000 students (currently enrolled, graduates, and prospective students). Respondents were required to complete all items in this survey.

BestColleges' outreach team fielded the second survey via Qualtrics, which collected feedback from school (i.e., college and university) administrators. A screening question was used to include only administrators working at institutions that currently offer online courses and programs. All items in this survey were optional. This year, 74 administrators representing two- and four-year institutions responded. While findings from this survey are included in this report, there are limitations to interpreting and generalizing these findings due to the small sample size. Respondents were not required to complete all items in this survey.

Administrators responding to our outreach team's survey are not compensated. However, some of our survey partners and their panel and expert networks do compensate participants in different ways.

Definitions

We provided the following definition in both student and school administrator surveys:

Online courses and programs: *courses and programs which were designed to be delivered online and take place predominantly online with no required face-to-face sessions, but may incorporate on-site activities such as residencies, fieldwork, and practicum requirements.*

Respondents

Students

Students responding to the survey selected their status via a screening question. This report presents the findings of those who selected one of the following three response options:

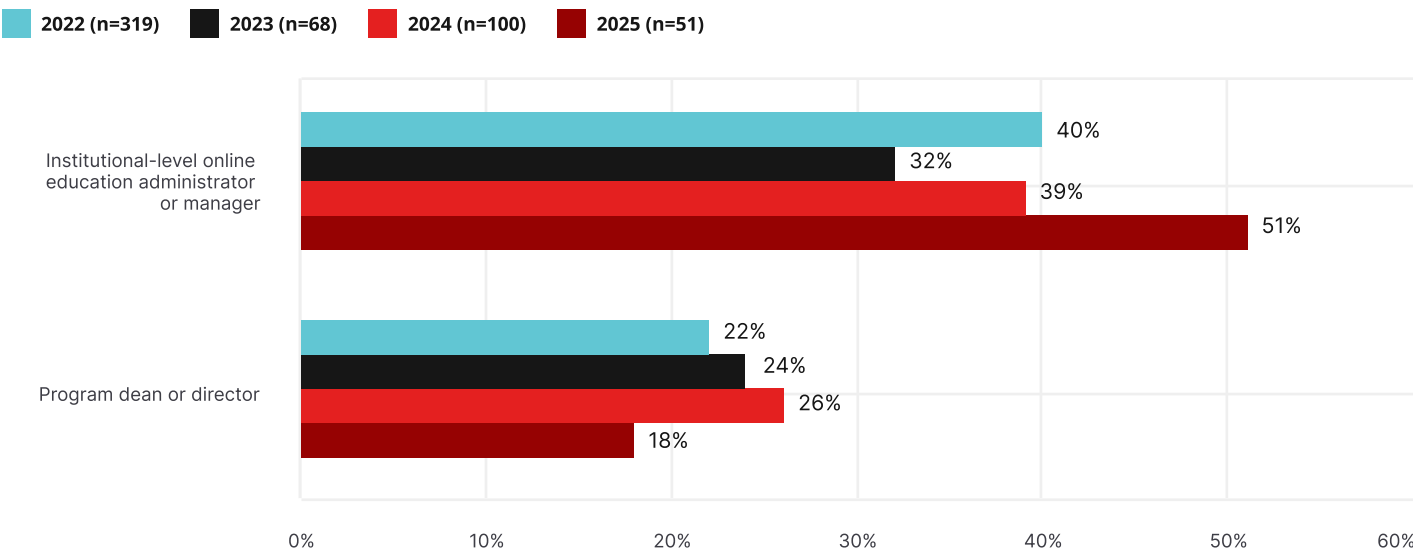
- *I am an online student enrolled in a fully online program designed for online delivery:* 35% (n=350)
- *I graduated from a fully online program:* 30% (n=300)
- *I am seriously considering online programs but have not yet enrolled:* 35% (n=350)

School Administrators

For the third year in a row, our findings rely on a smaller sample size of school administrators (n=74) than in previous years. It is important to acknowledge that this sample does not allow for the generalization of these findings, although it may provide insights that prompt further discussion and future research.

This year, as in previous years, school administrator respondents represented a variety of higher education roles. Of the 51 respondents who voluntarily identified their primary roles, the top two roles were again *institutional-level online education administrator or manager* and *program dean or director*.

School Administrator Participants — Top Two Primary Roles





* Student Demographics

Our survey partner uses quotas to encourage broad representation across sex/gender and race/ethnicity. However, again this year, the majority of the students who responded to the survey identified as white (73%). Other takeaways from this year's student-reported demographics include:

- 75% of currently enrolled online students are enrolled full time.
- 59% of currently enrolled students identify as first-generation students (i.e., the first person in their immediate family to attend college with neither parent having earned a college degree) compared to only 28% of prospective students. Both percentages have decreased slightly since last year.
- Overall, the number of all student respondents saying they were unemployed but looking for work at the time of the survey has decreased slightly from 12% in 2024 to 9% in 2025.
- Almost half (45%) of currently enrolled students report an annual household income of less than \$50,000.
- This year, more student respondents were interested in, enrolled in, or graduates of online postsecondary certificate programs (7%) or industry certification programs (12%). This is a slight increase from 2024 (6% and 10%) and a significant increase from 2021 (3% and 6%).

Demographic Trends

Each year, we ask school administrators: *What is the most significant trend in online student demographics at your institution?* Forty-one administrators responded to this open-ended question. The top three themes, with selected responses, are provided below.

Age

Throughout this research initiative, age has been a common theme in the demographic trends reported by school administrators. This year, 41% responded to this question with input related to student age. Of this group, 58% say their online students are older, nontraditional students, while 35% say they are younger, or traditional students.

- "A mixture of traditional and nontraditional students"
- "There is a significant rise in nontraditional students, including working professionals, parents, and other individuals seeking to advance their careers or acquire new skills."
- "Post-COVID, I'd say it's a decrease in the portion of 'traditional age' students taking a majority of their classes online, but a maintenance of a significantly higher portion of adult students taking online classes compared to pre-pandemic data."

Course Delivery Preferences

This category also appeared as a top demographic trend in our 2024 report. This year, 12% of responding administrators indicated that their students were motivated to enroll in online courses or programs for a variety of reasons, often related to convenience and flexibility. Several of these responses also included references to student age.

- "More traditional students taking more online classes as they desire more flexibility for internships, part-time work, and non-academic university experiences."
- "More than 70% of our student populations take at least one online course each semester."
- "Traditional-aged students opting for fully online degrees"

Support Needs

While only 10% of responding administrators mentioned specific student support needs, others alluded to demographic issues that may require consideration of different types and levels of support provided or coordinated by their colleges and universities. It's worth mentioning these here as potential starting points for further discussion at the institutional level.

- "Lost people ... we are seeing an increase in students who need life direction."
- "More learners with disabilities"
- "Ill-prepared students, lack of technology skills"
- "International students studying in online programs, rather than moving to the U.S."

Our 2024 survey saw the emergence of similar support needs post-pandemic, with a small number of respondents addressing trends concerned with student readiness for academic work and a lack of technology skills.



BestColleges INSIGHT

Students Increasingly Need Both Academic and Non-Academic Support

Online students may require much more support when they enroll than either they or their institutions realize. These students often manage many responsibilities simultaneously and take a leap of faith that they will be able to succeed, even when they aren't sure what the reality of learning online will be like. Take steps to learn more about your online students and the resources you may need to provide to help them reach their goals.

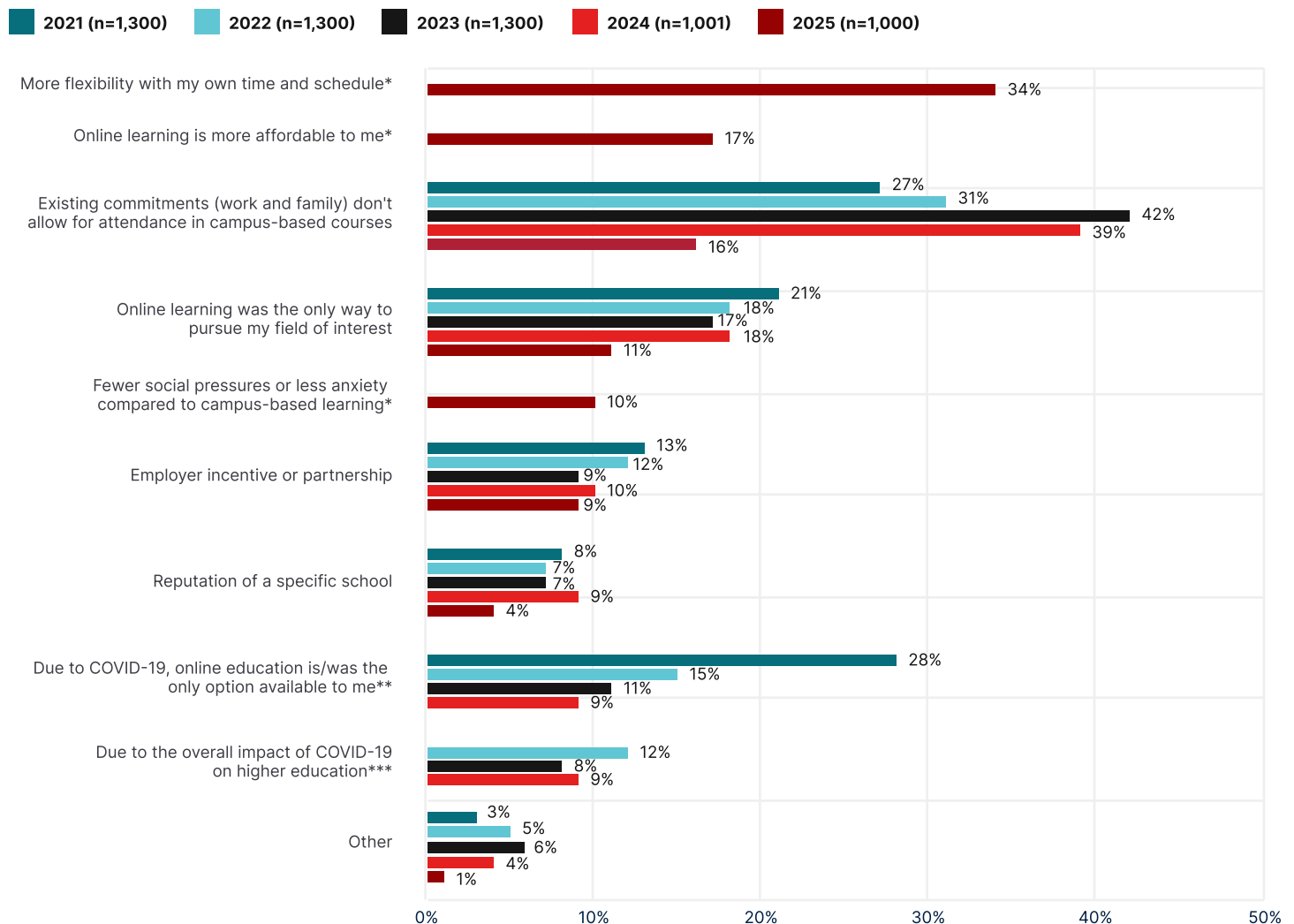
* The Online Learning Experience

Online vs. On-Campus Programs

Online education is widely marketed as a more flexible way to learn. It can offer the convenience of scheduling classes and study time around other activities, such as work and family commitments. This year, we added a more specific response option — *more flexibility with my own time and schedule* — to the question, *What is the primary reason you enrolled in or are considering enrolling in an online education (vs. a traditional campus-based) program?*

In all previous years of this survey, existing work and family commitments were the biggest motivators of online enrollment selected by roughly one-third of respondents annually. This year, that response moved to third (16%), following the new option related to increased flexibility (34%) and a second new response option related to affordability (17%).

Reasons for Choosing Online Over On-Campus Learning Options — By Report Year

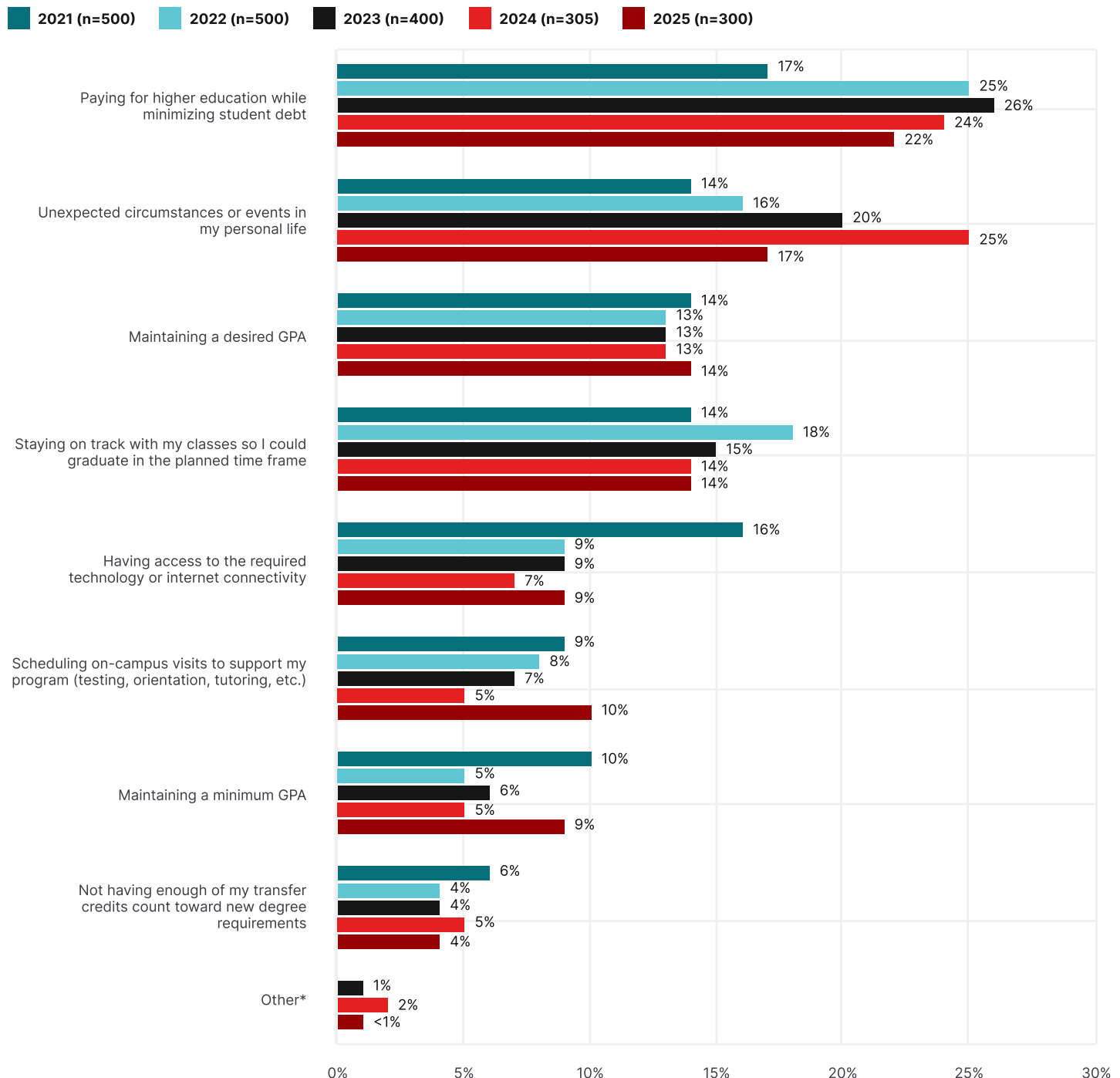


*Response option added in 2025. **Response option added in 2021, removed in 2025. ***Response option added in 2022, removed in 2025.

Challenges to Reaching Graduation

This year, online program graduates shared that their biggest challenge to reaching graduation was *paying for higher education while minimizing student debt* (22%). This was followed by *unexpected circumstances or events in my personal life* (17%). These have been the most frequently selected challenges over the last several years of the report.

Biggest Challenge to Completing an Online Program (Program Graduate Responses Only)

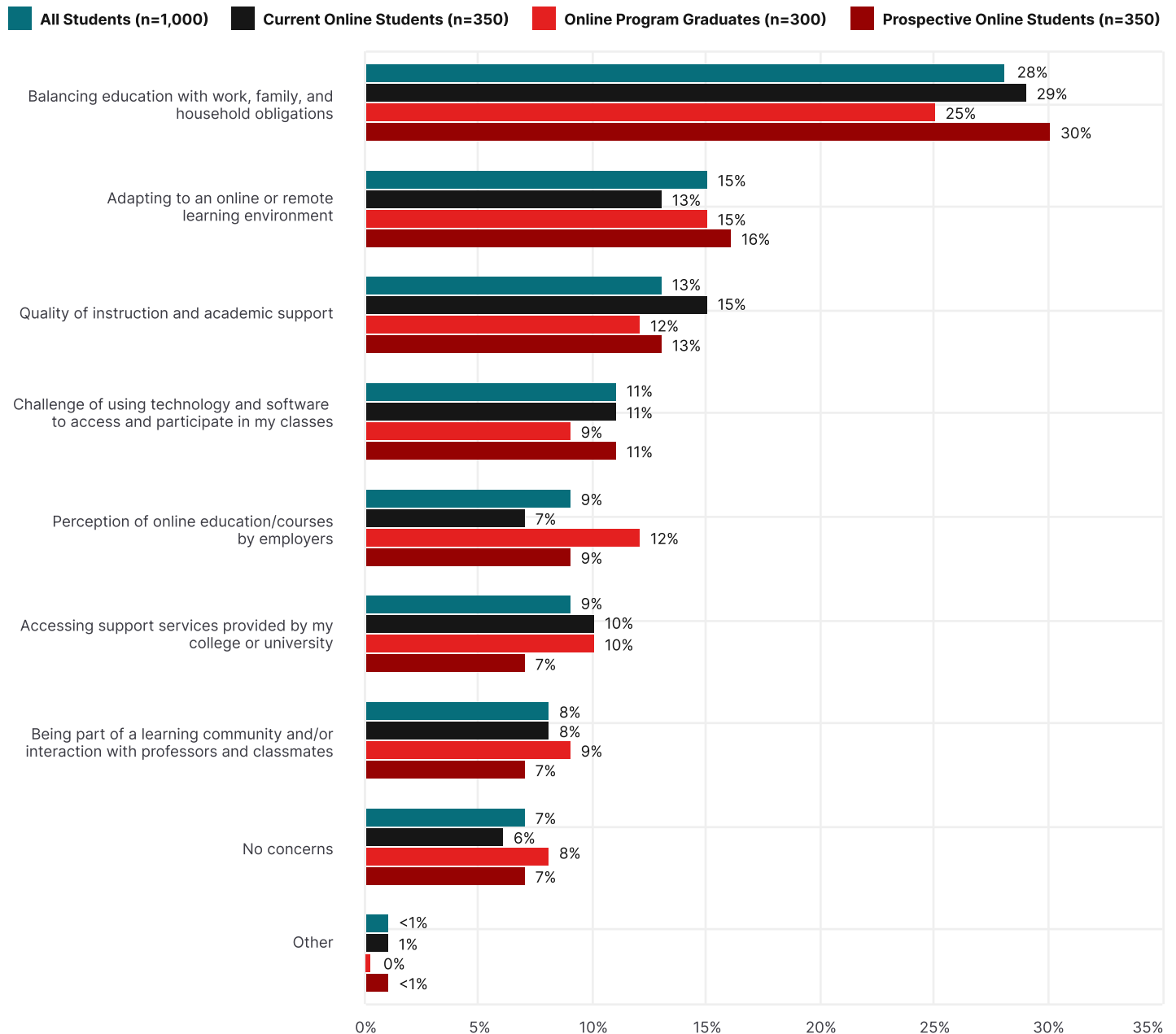


*Response option added in 2023.

While only one online student selected "other," they shared the challenge of *"collaborating with classmates who have very different schedules than me."* This is a compelling response citing an issue that directly impacts the amount of flexibility a student might experience in an online class. This survey project has not addressed the issue in the past, and the nature of this response may warrant further investigation in a follow-up study.

Each year, we also ask students about their concerns related to pursuing a specifically online education. The top response for all student categories was *balancing education with work, family, and household obligations*.

Biggest Concern About the Online Learning Experience (2025)



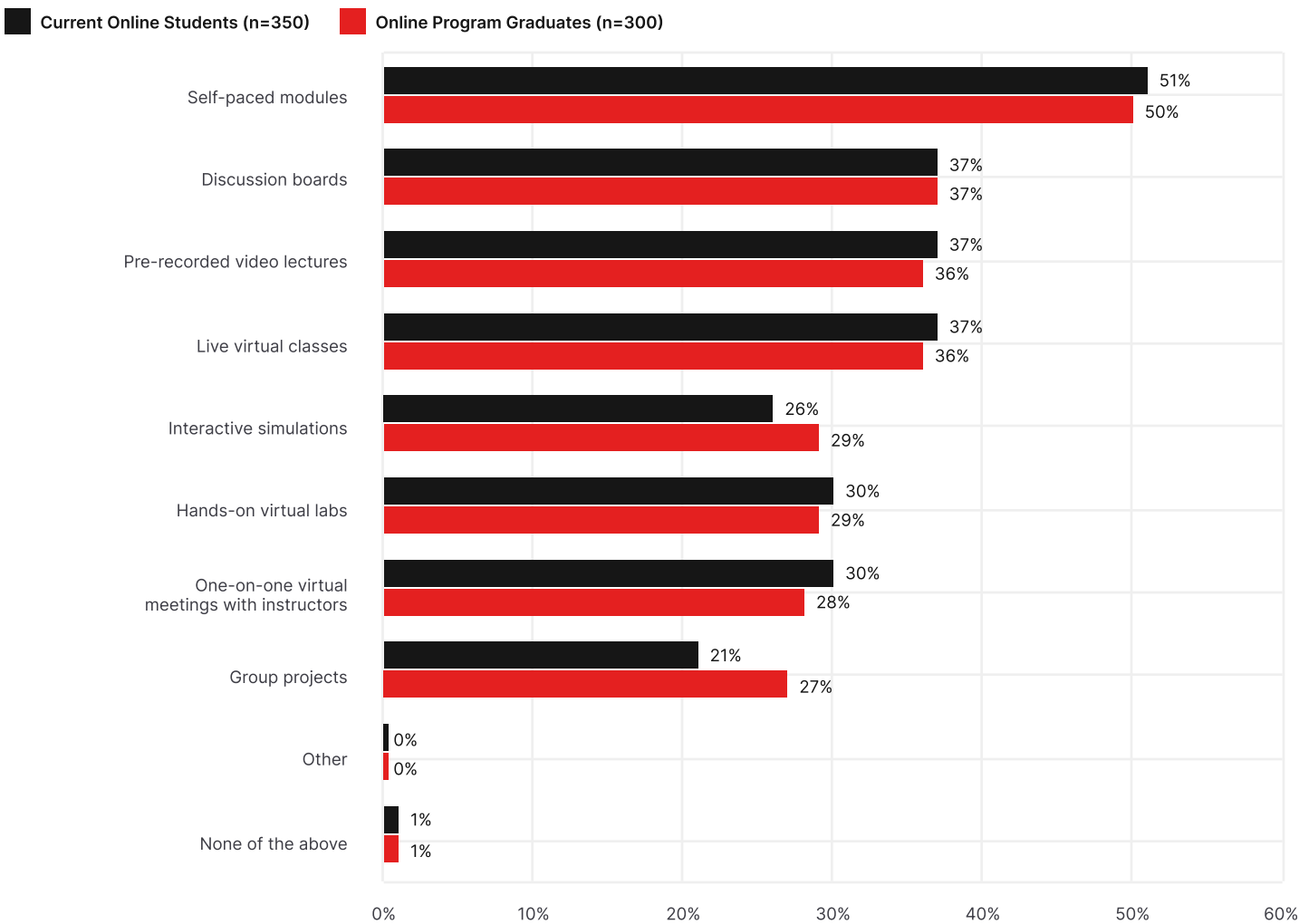
Few participants selected "other" concerns; however, those who did were primarily concerned about making sure what they are learning in their online programs will apply to their work/profession. One prospective online student also shared uncertainty about what to expect as an online student, stating, *"I wasn't sure how much work I could take on."*

Instructional Strategy Preferences

A new question was added to the student survey this year: *Which online learning formats do you or did you find most effective?* Fifty-one percent of currently enrolled students and 50% of graduates indicated *self-paced modules* as the most effective. The popularity of self-paced modules corresponds with other trends we've found related to a desire for flexibility as a motivating factor to enroll in online courses and programs.

The remaining strategies presented were identified as less effective, selected by roughly one-quarter to one-third of students, with no students reporting additional strategies via "other."

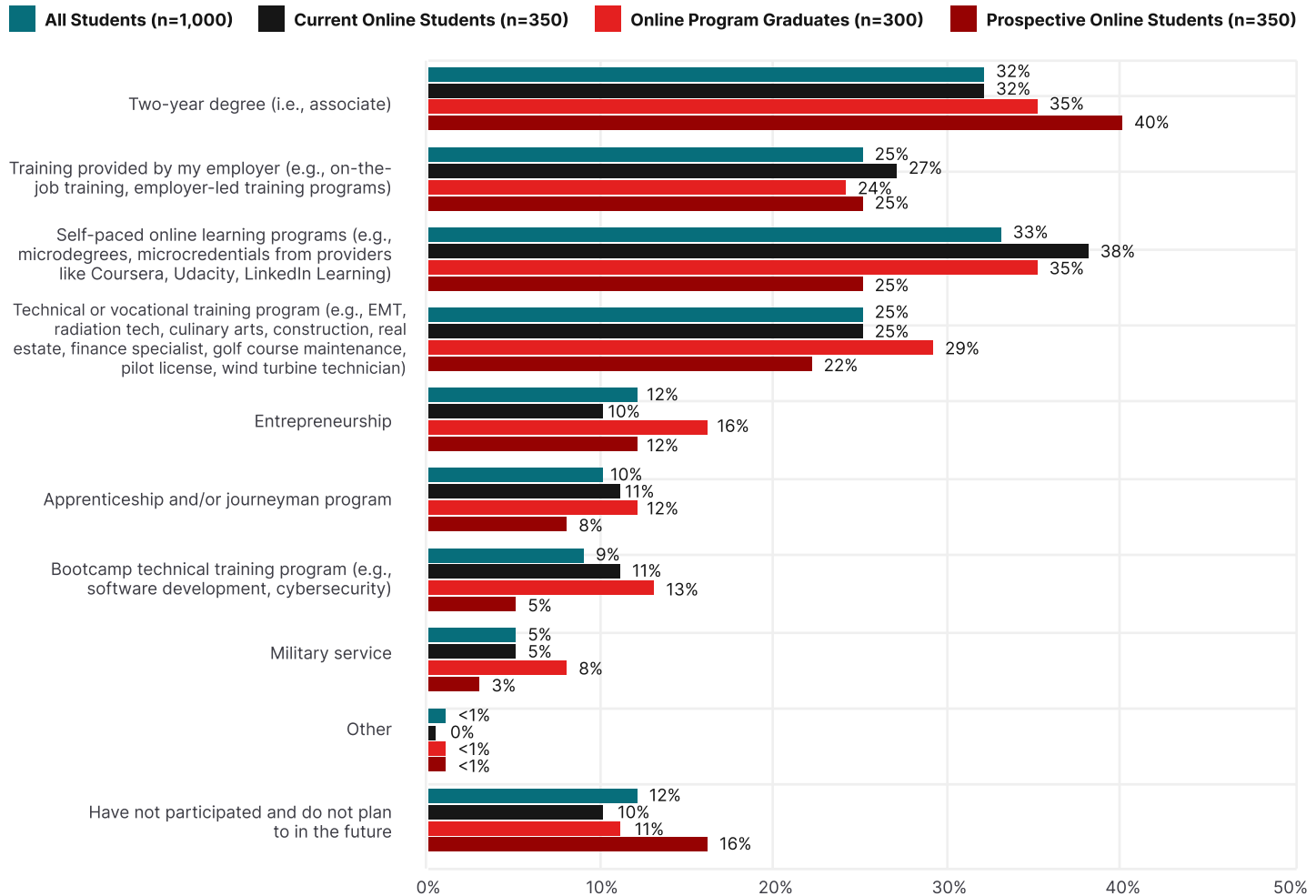
Student Perceptions — Effective Online Learning Formats (2025)



Alternative Education Pathways and Practical Experience

Students are involved in more than one education and/or training endeavor over the course of their lives. In addition to their online program experience, many either plan to pursue or have already completed studies offered in a variety of learning formats. This year, for example, 38% of currently enrolled students are also interested in or actively engaged in self-paced platforms such as LinkedIn Learning.

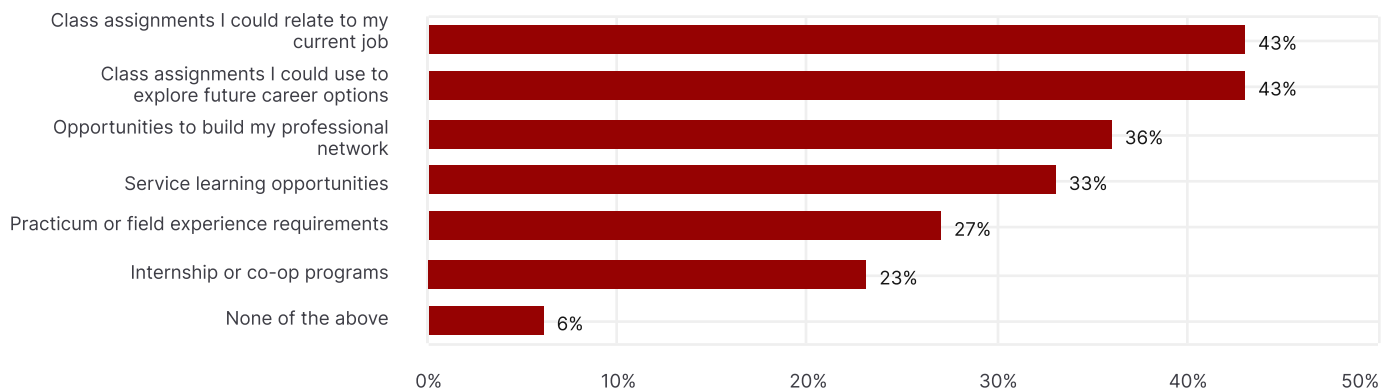
Plans to Pursue or Has Already Completed Alternative Education Pathways (2025)



Many online learners are working and choose to continue their education for career- and employment-related reasons. We asked graduates about the practical learning opportunities they experienced in their online programs. Integrating work with class assignments was a learning experience reported by 43% of these students, who also shared that class assignments encouraged career exploration (43%). Only 6% of online graduates surveyed indicated that their programs did not include any of the practical experience components we presented.

Practical Experience Components of Online Classes and Programs — Graduates (2025)

■ n=300





BestColleges INSIGHT

Flexibility Is Beneficial, but Perhaps Not Without a Cost

Having the flexibility to schedule and complete coursework at convenient times can be important to students in different ways. Year after year, we also find that the financial obligations of enrollment are difficult for many students. Of the currently enrolled students responding this year, 75% were full-time students. Forty-seven percent were also employed full time. While working can help to subsidize the costs of enrollment, it also adds time management challenges. Self-paced formats can be very effective but also require high levels of self-motivation, self-direction, and self-discipline.

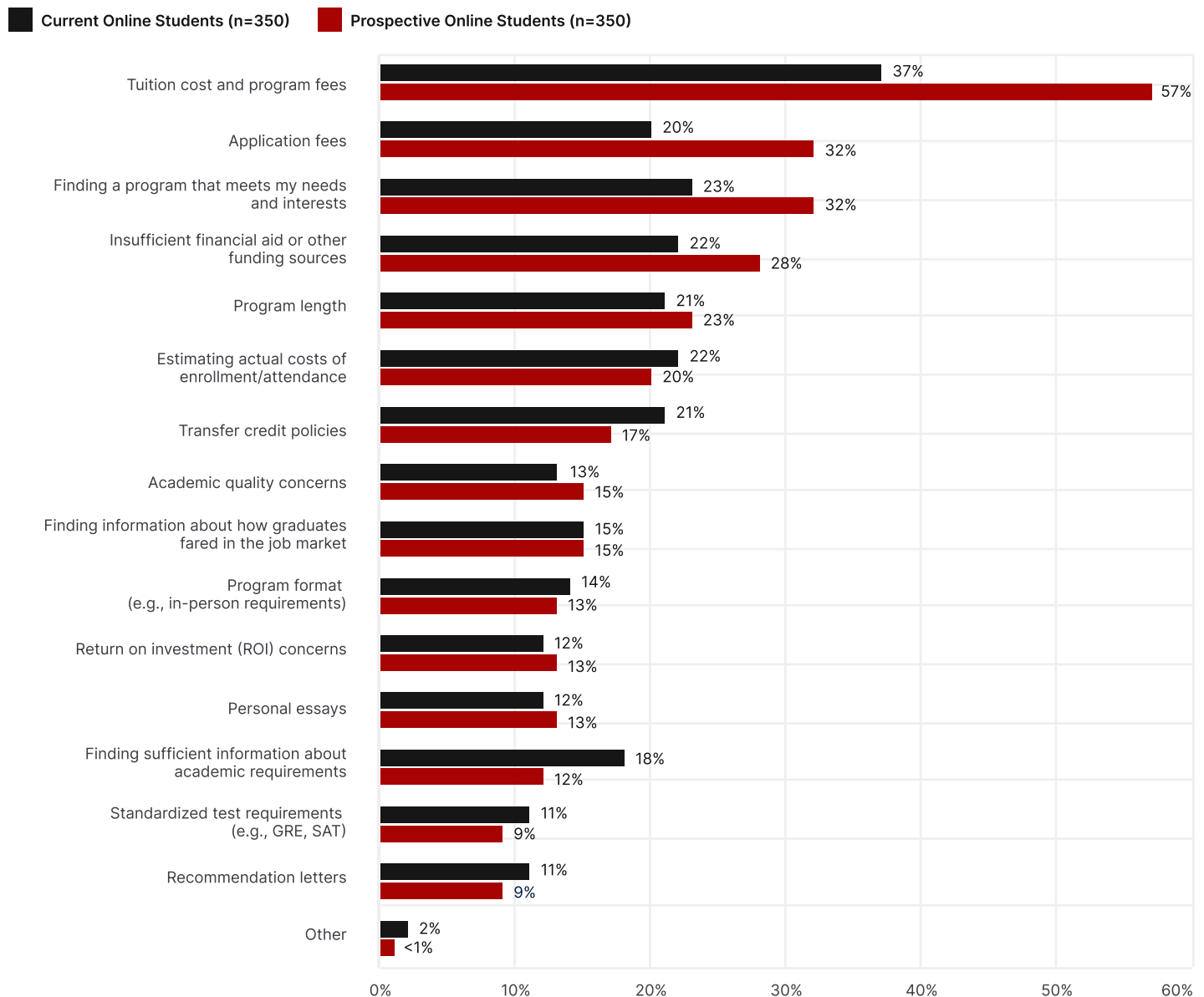
* Marketing and Recruiting

Student Research and Decision-Making

Student respondents were asked to identify their biggest challenges related to making the decision to enroll in an online program. The top challenges have been similar over the previous five years of this report, including multiple concerns related to the financial aspects of enrollment.

The survey was expanded again this year to include a more comprehensive list of potential challenges. Current and prospective students' concerns were similar overall, although prospective students were more concerned about financial challenges (e.g., tuition costs, financial aid, application fees).

Biggest Challenges Students Face When Choosing an Online Program — Current and Prospective Students (2025)



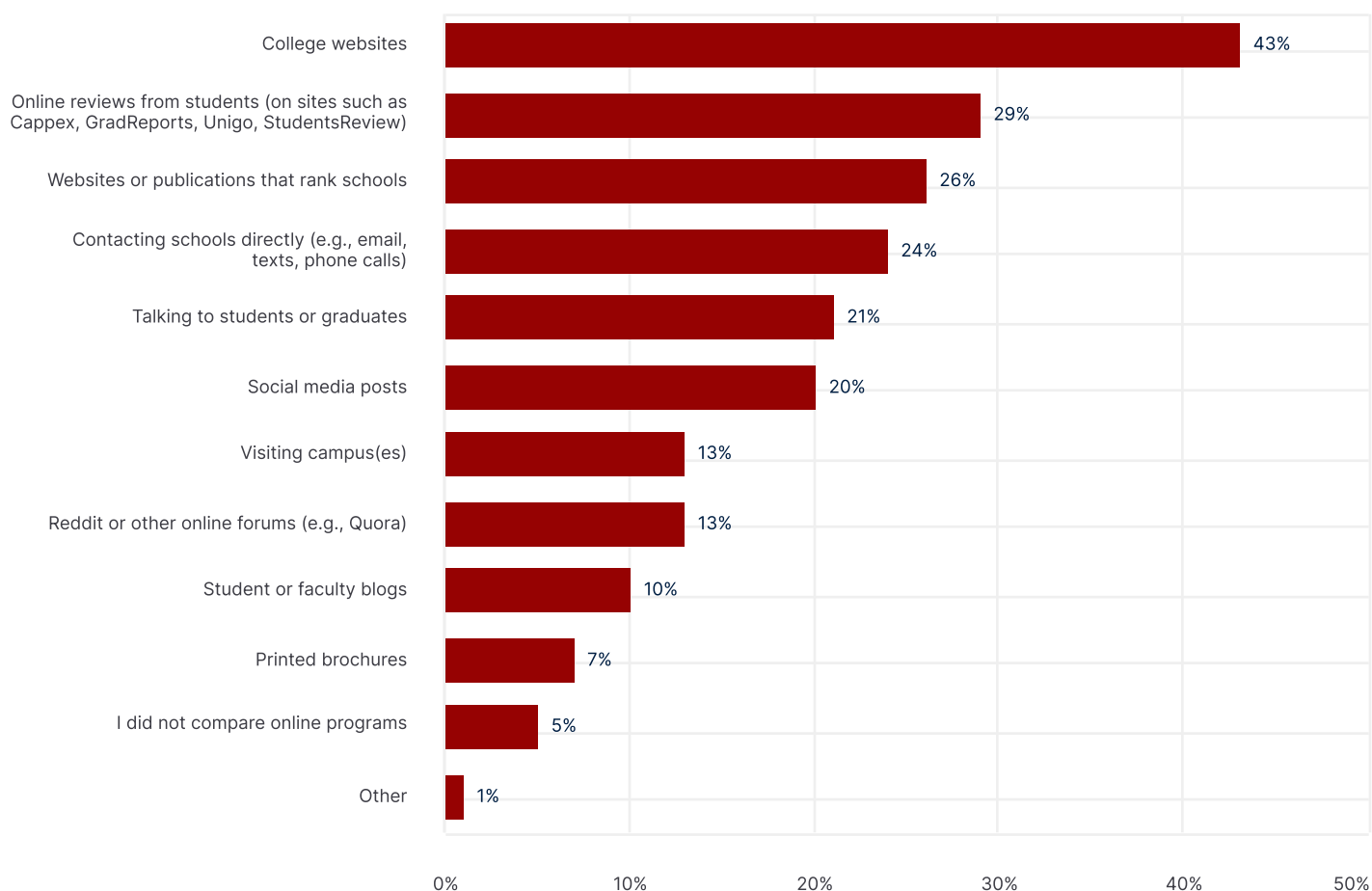
Students reported primarily relying on *college websites* (43%), *online reviews from students* (29%), and *websites or publications that rank schools** (26%) to research and compare the online programs they considered or are considering.

This survey question was expanded with additional response options this year. We also allowed students to choose multiple responses. In previous years, when only one response was allowed, *college websites* and *online reviews* were often the top resources identified. This year, the top responses remained the same, while *websites or publications that rank schools* (9% in 2024 vs. 26% in 2025) and *social media posts* (6% in 2024 vs. 20% in 2025) were selected more frequently.

*BestColleges, the sponsor of this report and research initiative, is a college rankings website.

Sources of Student Research and Program Comparison (2025)

n=1,000



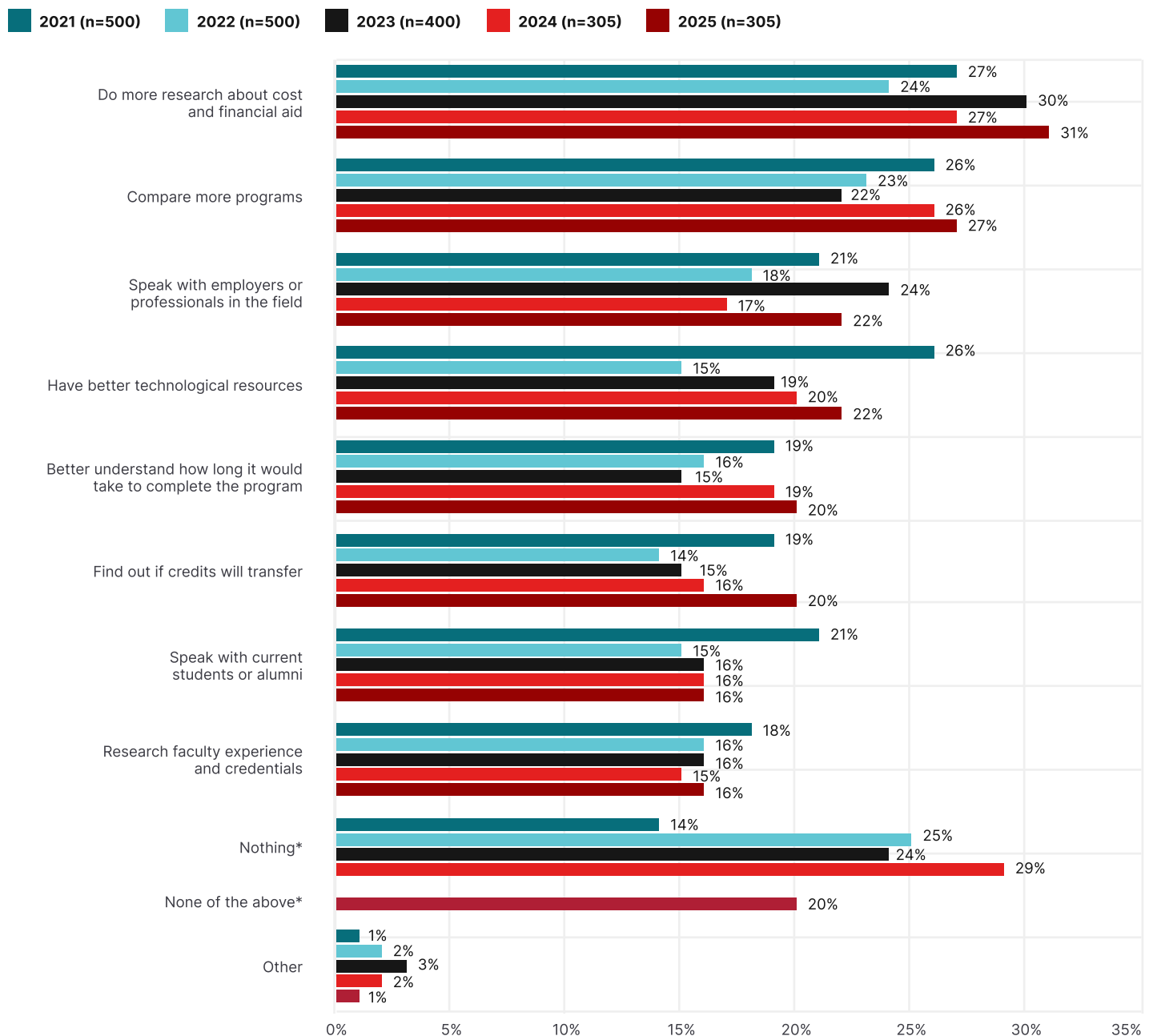
Students identifying "other" resources for researching and comparing colleges cited recommendations (from friends and family, teachers, and employers), having existing familiarity with the institution, and choosing to enroll at the institution providing the most financial aid. The latter response adds yet more emphasis on the importance of financial considerations in college decision-making.

Advice From Online Graduates

Looking back, many online graduates might have done something differently when making decisions about higher education. This year, the top response continues the multi-year trend: graduates wish they could go back and *do more research about cost and financial aid* (31%). This was followed again by *compare more programs* (27%) and *speak with employers or professionals in the field* (22%).

Additionally, 22% wished they had better technological resources when they were online students. In a follow-up item about technology-related challenges, almost one-third (32%) of currently enrolled students and graduates said they experienced internet connectivity issues during their online programs.

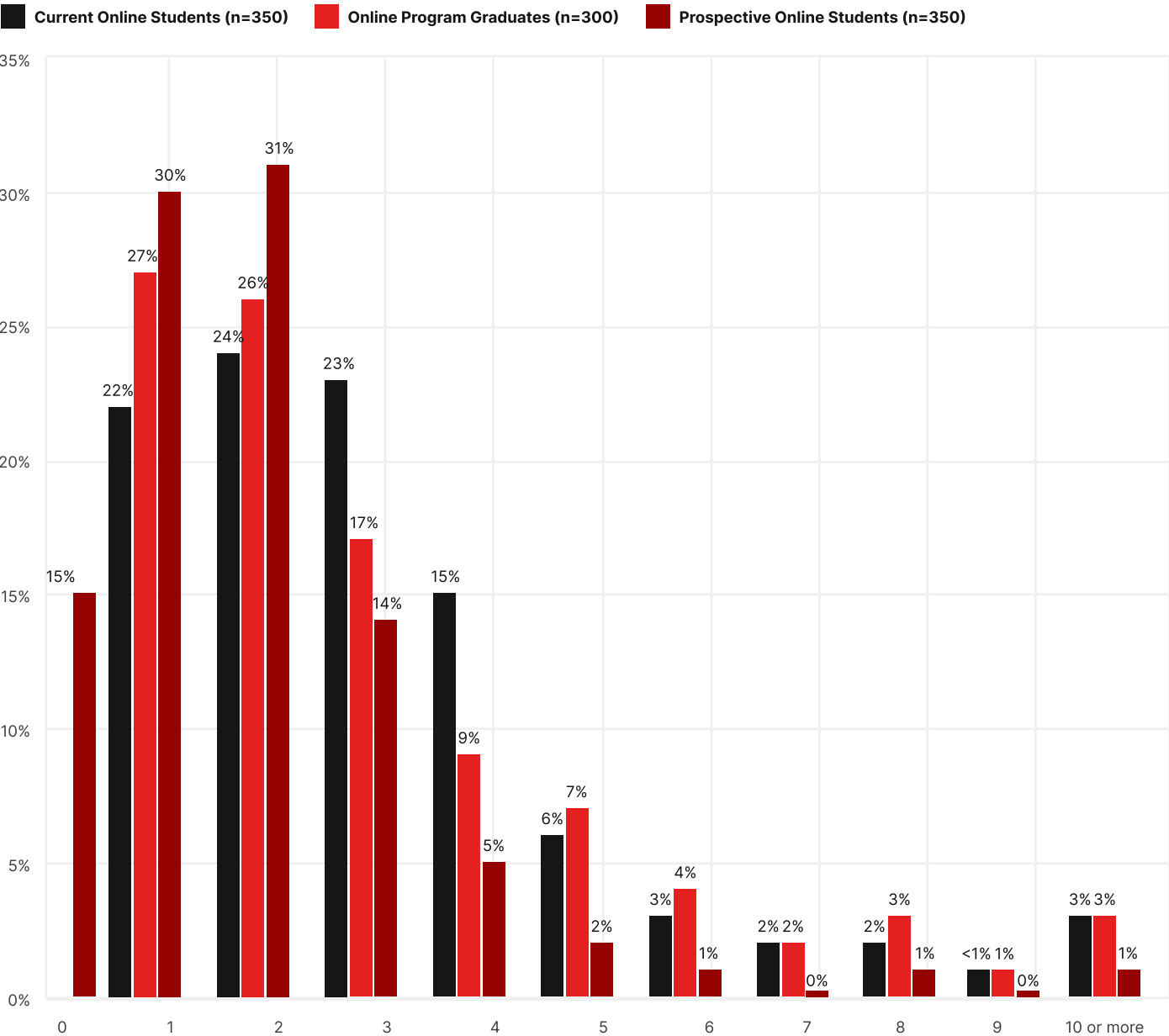
What Online Graduates Would Do Differently When Choosing an Online Program — By Report Year



*Response option revised in 2025.

This year, for the first time, we asked students how many online programs they applied to or plan to apply to. The majority of currently enrolled students (69%) and graduates (70%) shared that they submitted between one and three applications. Prospective students reported an intention to submit a similar number.

Number of Online Program Applications (2025)



While there is not an ideal number of applications that any individual prospective student should submit, the College Board advises that 5-8 schools can be a helpful range for first-year, traditional students applying to competitive undergraduate programs (College Board, n.d.). Online programs, some of which have open enrollment policies, are not typically as competitive as campus-based programs. However, additional comparisons may help online students make better decisions about enrollment.



BestColleges INSIGHT

Finance Models and Funding Opportunities Must Evolve

How can students be successful without an accurate expectation of their financial obligations while enrolled and after graduation? As colleges and universities enter an era of increasing uncertainty about funding overall, students are increasingly worried more about the costs of enrollment than about other important aspects of higher education, including academic quality. New models and resources will be required to continue supporting students and institutions alike.

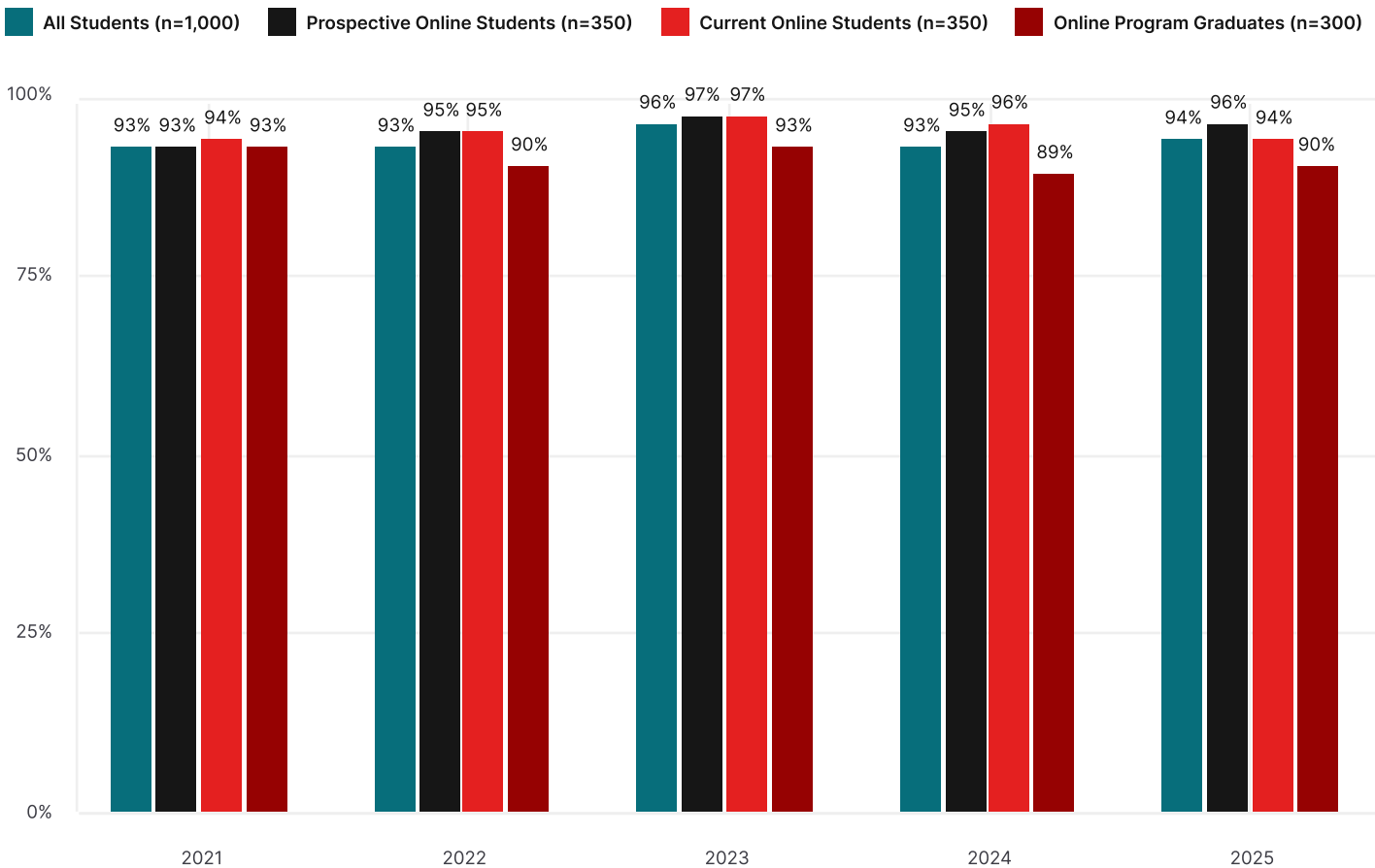
* Online Student Satisfaction

Student satisfaction is a common term in online education. It is one way to determine the quality of the student experience. This initiative asks students to respond to three questions that are meant to indicate overall satisfaction as related to their perceived return on investment (ROI), willingness to recommend online education to others, and perceived comparison of online learning to on-campus learning.

Return on Investment

Student perception of the ROI of their online programs continues to be overwhelmingly positive. This year, 94% of all students surveyed say that their online degree will have or has had a positive ROI.

My Online Degree Has or Will Have a Positive ROI — By Report Year

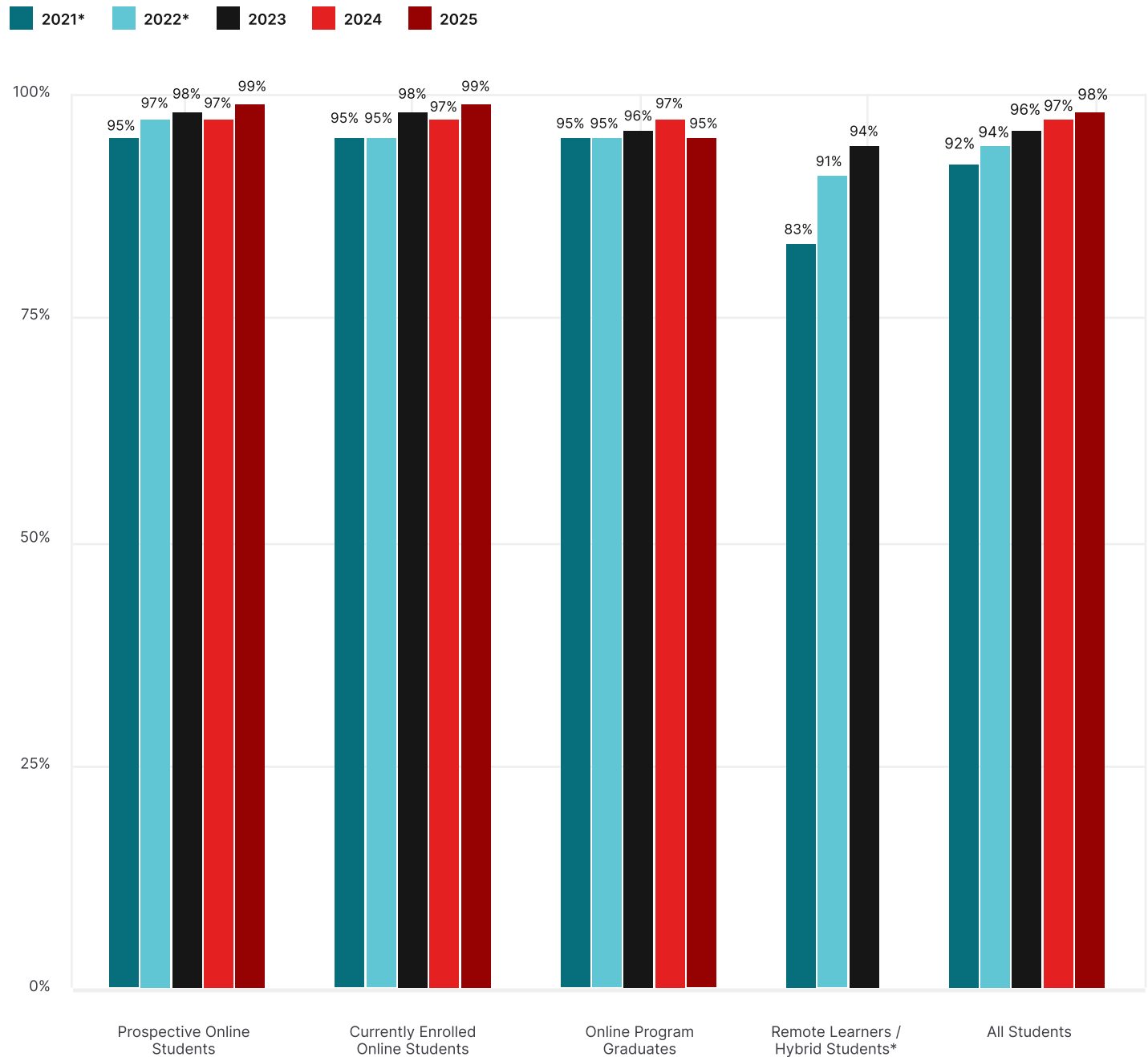


As in previous years of this initiative, online graduates (90%) are slightly less likely than current students (94%) and prospective students (96%) to expect a positive ROI. This group may have a more realistic or pragmatic view from the perspective of having completed their online programs, while the other two groups are still anticipating completion.

Recommending Online Education to Others

Each year, we ask student respondents if they would recommend online education to others. This year, as in all past years of the survey, the student response was overwhelmingly positive. Nearly 100% of prospective and currently enrolled students say they would recommend online education.

Students Who Would Recommend Online Education to Others — By Report Year

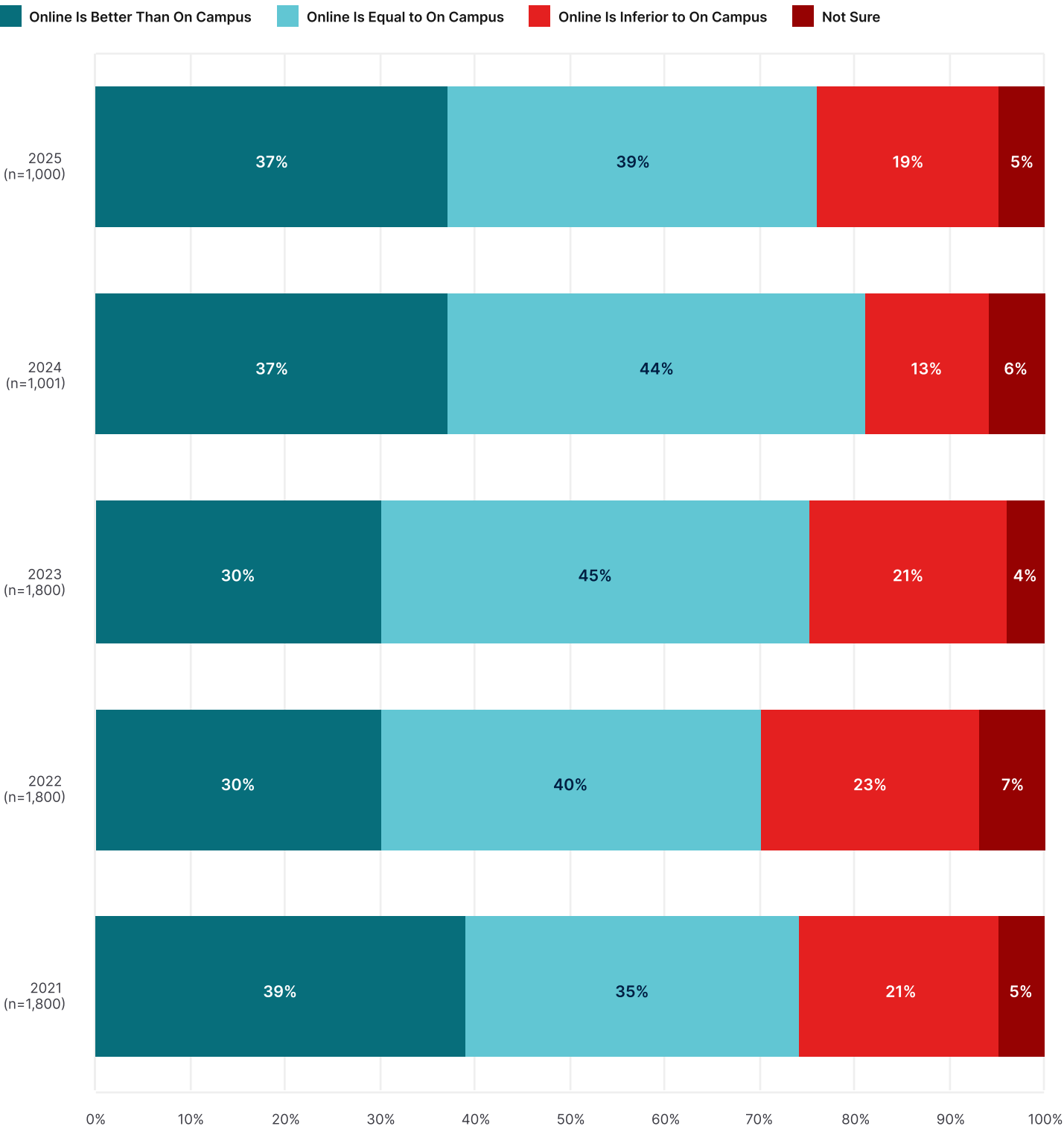


*Remote learners — studying online due to restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic — were included as a separate enrollment category in 2021 and 2022. Hybrid students, taking some classes online and others on campus, were included as a separate category in 2023.

Perception of Online Education

This year, 76% of students say that *online education is better than or equal to on-campus* learning. This continues a trend of positive outlook for online education shared over the past several years.

Perceptions of Online Education, All Student Categories — By Report Year





BestColleges INSIGHT

Online Students' Positive Outlook Persists

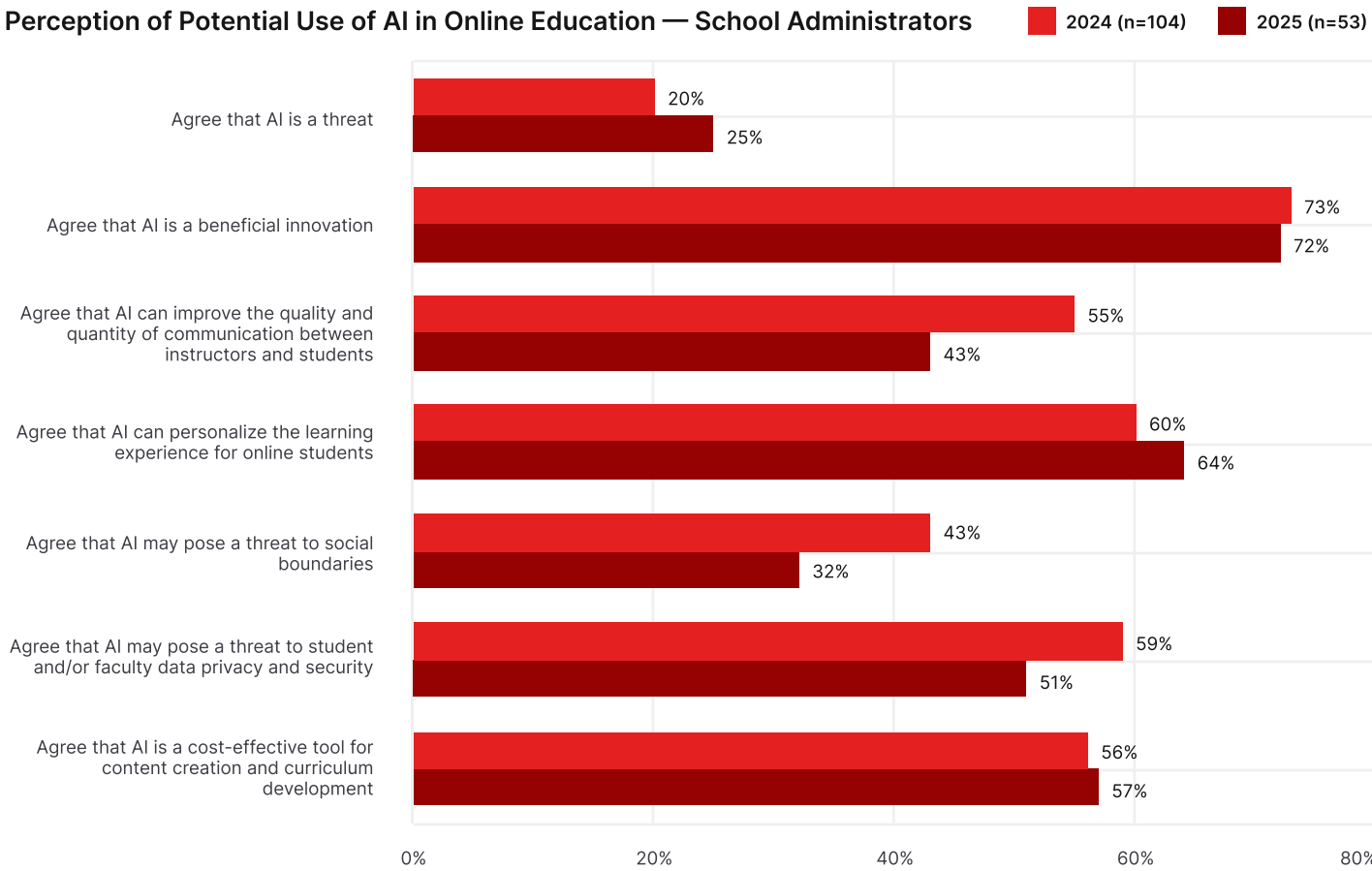
With all of the challenges students identified this year, as in previous years, their positive outlook holds fast across enrollment status, gender, race/ethnicity, and income level. Students seem to maintain confidence in online education and in its ability to help them reach their goals. Institutions making difficult decisions about academic programs, services, and other aspects of online delivery may benefit from looking to alumni and current students for insights and recommendations.

* Artificial Intelligence

Last year, we added questions related to artificial intelligence (AI) to both student and school administrator surveys. AI tools, such as ChatGPT, continue to evolve in both the number of users and the quality of their output (Mucci, 2024; Sidoti et al., 2025). Higher education continues to face challenges and decisions related to AI use in the context of teaching and learning.

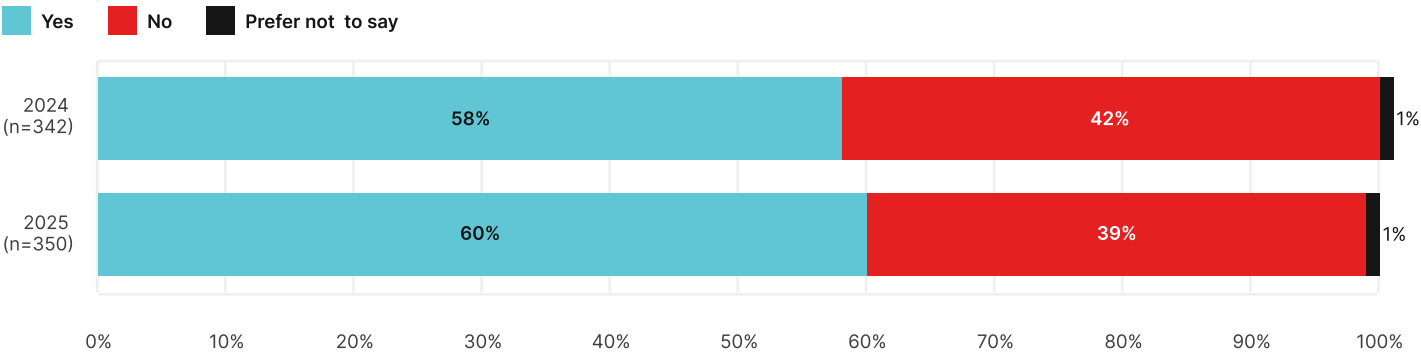
Perception and Use of AI Tools

Administrators' overall perception of AI's potential in online education is positive and mostly unchanged from last year. Seventy-two percent consider it a beneficial intervention, and 57% think it can be a cost-effective way to create content and develop curricula. Concerns about threats to data privacy and security still exist but have decreased slightly over the past year (59% in 2024 vs. 51% in 2025). It is also important to keep in mind the small sample size for the administrator survey in both 2024 and 2025.



When students were asked about the use of AI tools in their courses this year, 60% say they had used these tools to complete assignments or exams. This is a slight increase from 58% last year. Again, this year, men were more likely than women (64% vs. 57%) to say they had used AI tools in their courses, though the gap is narrowing compared to 60% of men vs. 41% of women surveyed in 2024.

Have Used AI Tools Such as ChatGPT to Complete Assignments or Exams — Current Online Students



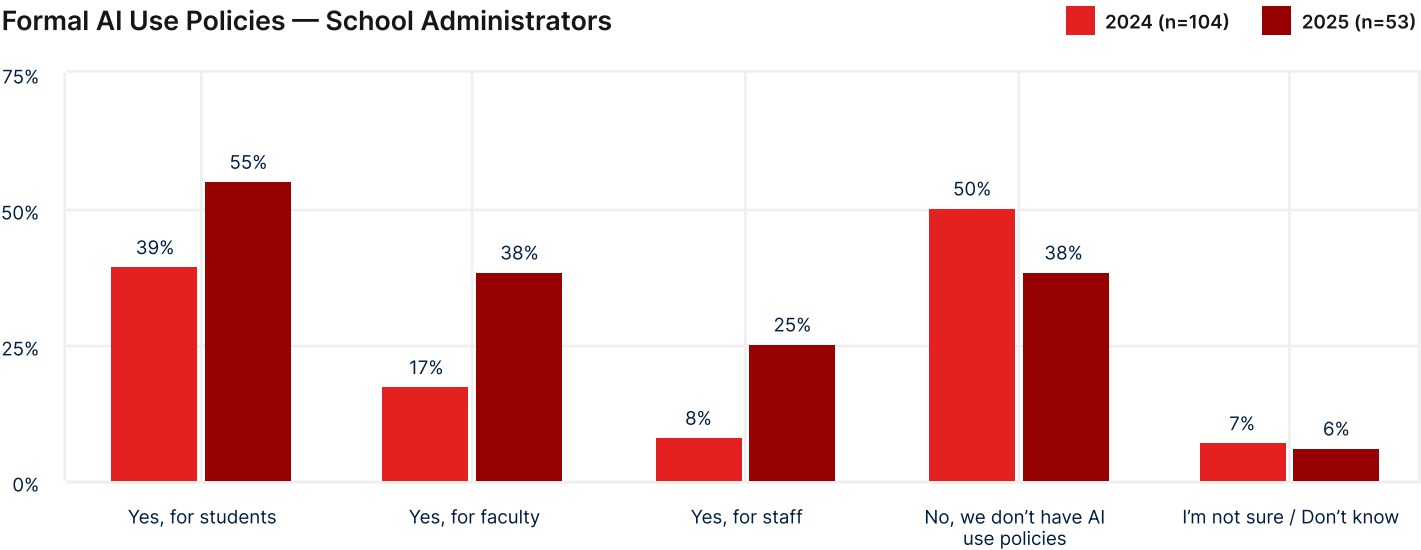
Forty-four percent of currently enrolled students responding to our survey agreed that their schools or professors "generally allow" this, which is similar to last year's findings. Is guidance on AI use provided to students? This year, 60% of student respondents said "yes," compared to 56% in 2024.

Inside Higher Ed's 2024 Student Voice survey also explored student perceptions of AI use in college classes. Its findings were that college students overall don't know if AI use is allowed, with just 16% saying they understood their school's AI policies (Mowreader, 2024).

Policies and Training

While some institutions have published formal AI use policies, they may not yet be in place at every school. In 2024, half (50%) of responding administrators said that their institutions did not have policies, but that number decreased to 39% this year. Those that have policies are more likely to prioritize addressing student use (39%) over faculty (17%) or staff (8%) use.

Formal AI Use Policies — School Administrators



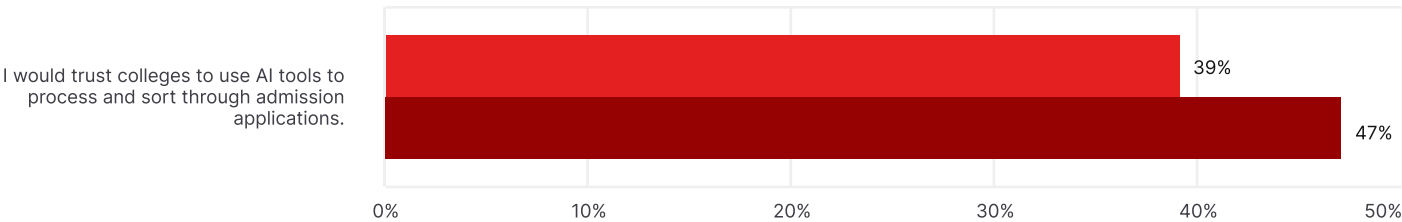
This year, our findings show that establishing formal AI use policies for all user groups — students, faculty, and staff — may be increasing. However, the priority continues to be student use.

Impact — Admissions to Assessment

The use of AI tools is expanding across higher education to include use beyond coursework. We asked students to weigh in on different applications and the potential for use in and out of class. Students are increasingly open to the use of AI in the admissions process, with 47% saying they would trust colleges using these tools to process and sort student applications.

AI Use in the Admissions Process — Current Students

2024 (n=342) 2025 (n=350)

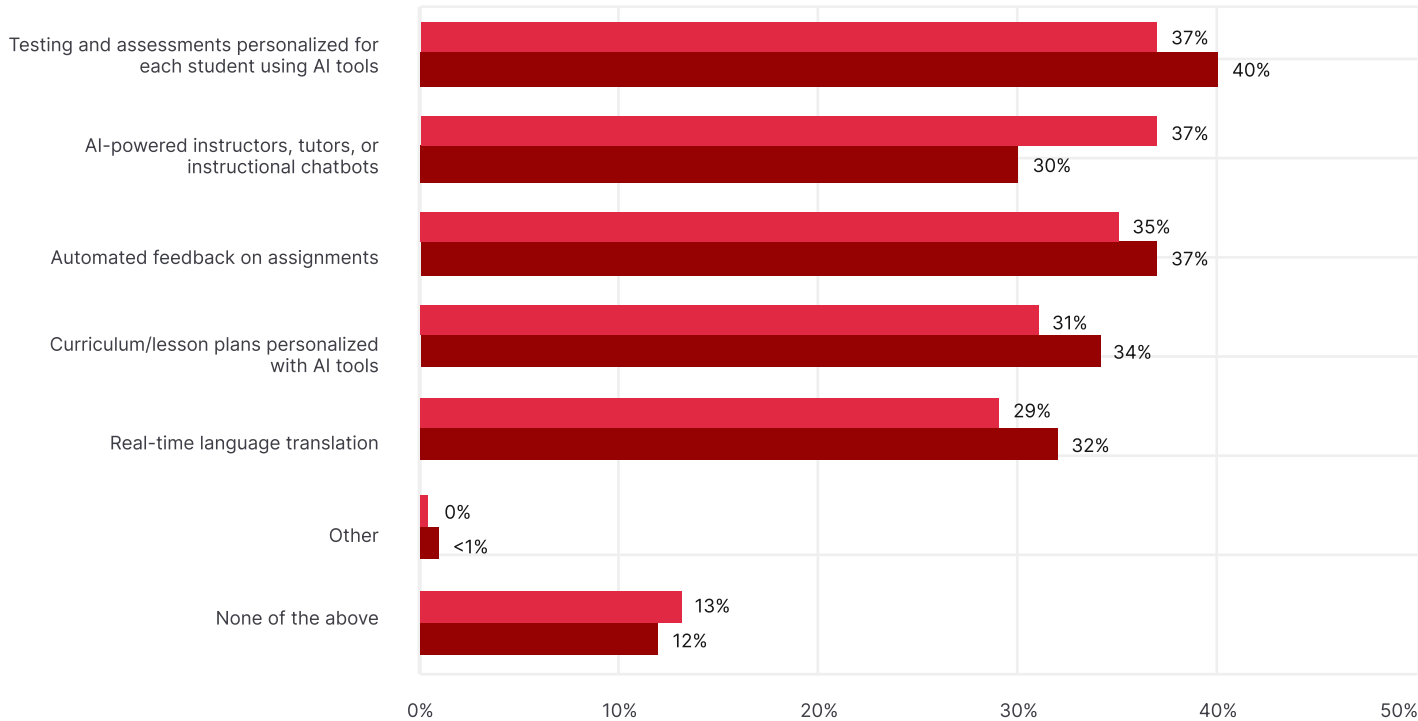


This year, almost half of student respondents (48%) also agree that they would trust colleges to use AI to assist with admissions decisions.

With the advancements in AI tools and the varied potential use of these tools in the context of online education, we added a question for students this year asking which AI features they feel would have improved their learning experience. Current online students and online program graduates alike indicated several ways that AI tools might be applied to assist them in their coursework, with about one-third of each group selecting use in personalized testing, chatbots, assignment feedback, and curriculum planning.

AI Features That Would Improve the Online Learning Experience (2025)

Current Online Students (n=350) Online Program Graduates (n=300)





BestColleges INSIGHT

AI Continues to Transform the Online Education Experience

And it's just the beginning. We can expect both intended and unintended consequences of AI along the way, with impacts that extend beyond individual users and courses. As institutions, faculty, and students embrace these new AI tools, it will be critical to rapidly assess and evaluate their use, establish and share leading practices, and document lessons learned. Working together, avoiding siloed thinking, and taking action will also be required to make the most of AI's potential in higher education at large.

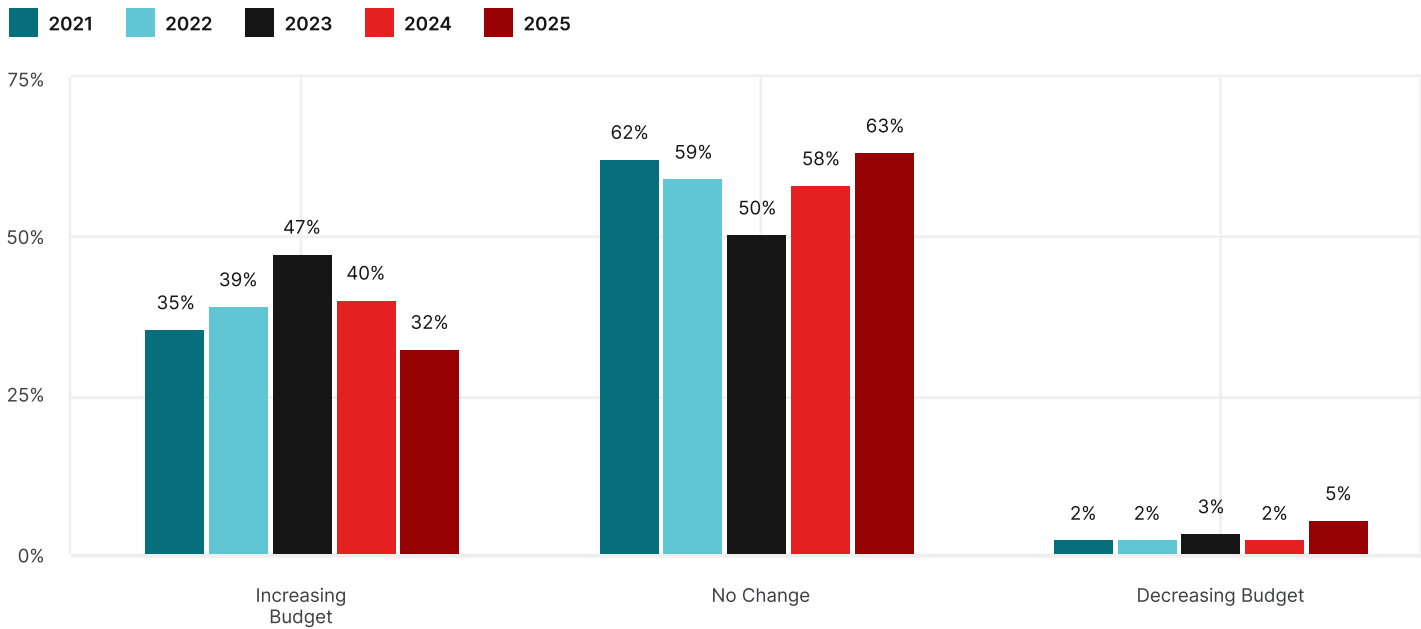
* Planning for the Future

Budget Planning

Higher education institutions have almost always faced budgeting challenges, and college finances continue to be in the headlines as institutions face issues related to federal funding changes and ever-competing priorities (American Council on Education, 2025).

Each year, this initiative asks school administrators about their institution's budget for online program development in the coming year. This year, there was a slight increase in the number of respondents saying their budgets were decreasing (2% in 2024 vs. 5% in 2025), as well as an increase in those reporting no change in their online development budgets (58% in 2024 vs. 63% in 2025).

School Budget Planning for Online Program Development — By Report Year



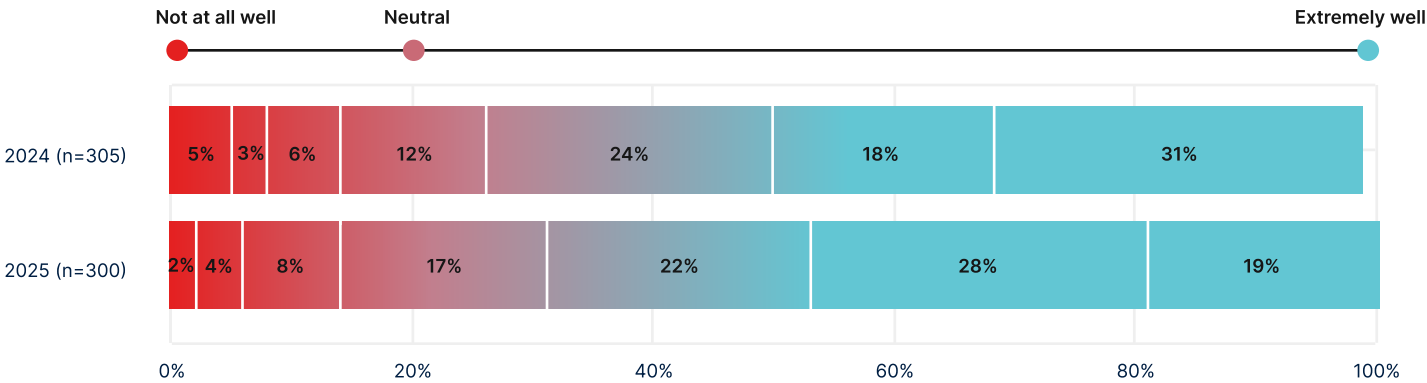
This year, we also asked administrators if their institution's online enrollment for the 2024-2025 school year met their expectations, and 89% shared that it was either *more than* or *about the same as the school forecast/expected*.

Preparation for Work After Graduation

Today's students are also planning for the future. For many, enrolling in college is directly related to their employment or career goals. We asked online program graduates how well their education prepared them for their first job after graduation. In 2024, a majority of students (73%) said it prepared them well, with almost one-third (31%) saying it prepared them *extremely well*. Our 2025 findings are similar, with 69% saying they were prepared well. However, this year, fewer students (19%) report that they were prepared *extremely well*.

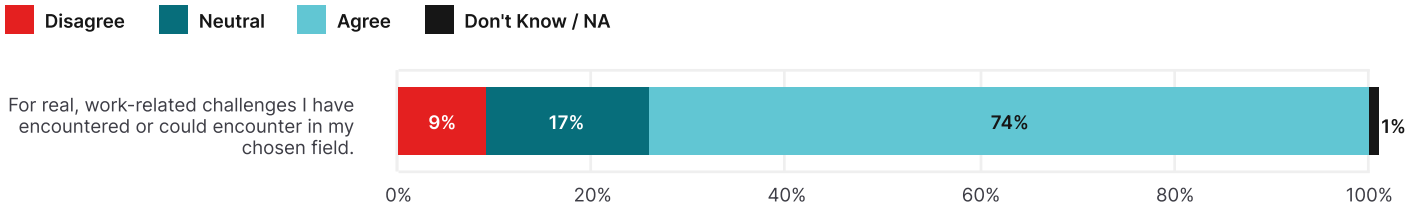
Preparation for First Job After Graduation — Online Program Graduates

n=300



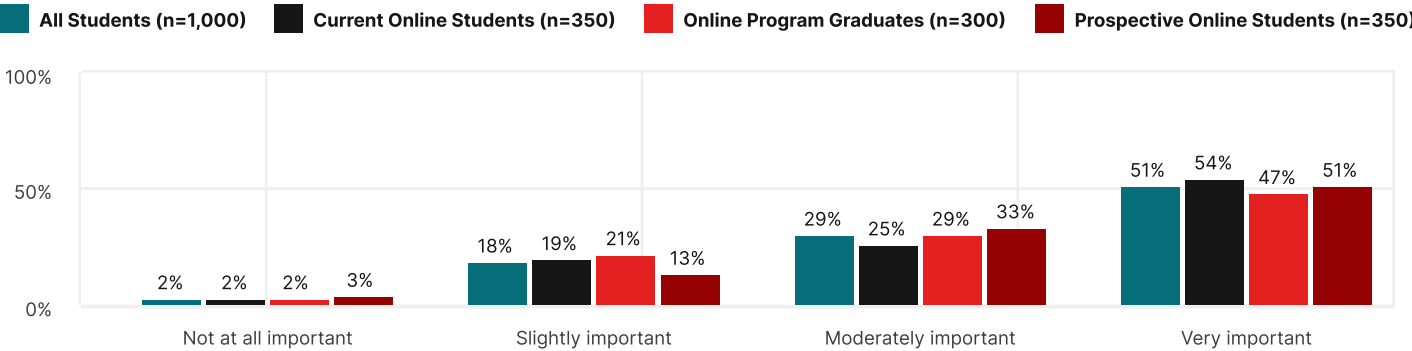
Additionally, when asked if their online programs prepared them for real, work-related challenges encountered on the job, 74% of graduates agreed.

Preparation for Work-Related Challenges After Graduation — Online Program Graduates (2025)



Completing one online program may not be enough, however. About half of all students surveyed, including currently enrolled students (54%) and prospective students (51%), feel that it will be very important for them to continue their education beyond their online programs by pursuing a formal credential such as a certificate, certification, digital badge, or another degree.

Importance of Receiving a Formal Credential After Graduating From an Online Program



The answers here differed depending on the level of online education respondents had completed or were hoping to complete. Of all students surveyed, those involved or interested at the undergraduate level — associate (75%) and bachelor's degree (81%) — found continued education important. But even more students at the graduate levels — non-MBA master's (90%), MBA (96%), and doctoral (88%) — found continued education important.



* Conclusion

Is the promise of online education delivering? This year's student respondents shared encouraging feedback, even as they face more dynamic and complex hiring trends and competitive job markets. But we know that there are strong headwinds facing higher education today, both industry-wide and at individual institutions. The sustained future of online education will rely on leaders' abilities to think strategically.

The insights in this year's report may provide a starting point for discussions among higher education leaders as they are required to make difficult but informed decisions about the future of their programs while maintaining their support of students with diverse needs.

Students Increasingly Need Both Academic and Non-Academic Support

Online students may require much more support when they enroll than either they or their institutions realize. These students often manage many responsibilities simultaneously and take a leap of faith that they will be able to succeed, even when they aren't sure what the reality of learning online will be like. Take steps to learn more about your online students and the resources you may need to provide to help them reach their goals.

Flexibility Is Beneficial, but Perhaps Not Without a Cost

Having the flexibility to schedule and complete coursework at convenient times can be important to students in different ways. Year after year, we also find that the financial obligations of enrollment are difficult for many students. Of the currently enrolled students responding this year, 75% were full-time students. Forty-seven percent were also employed full time. While working can help to subsidize the costs of enrollment, it also adds time management challenges. Self-paced formats can be very effective but also require high levels of self-motivation, self-direction, and self-discipline.

Finance Models and Funding Opportunities Must Evolve

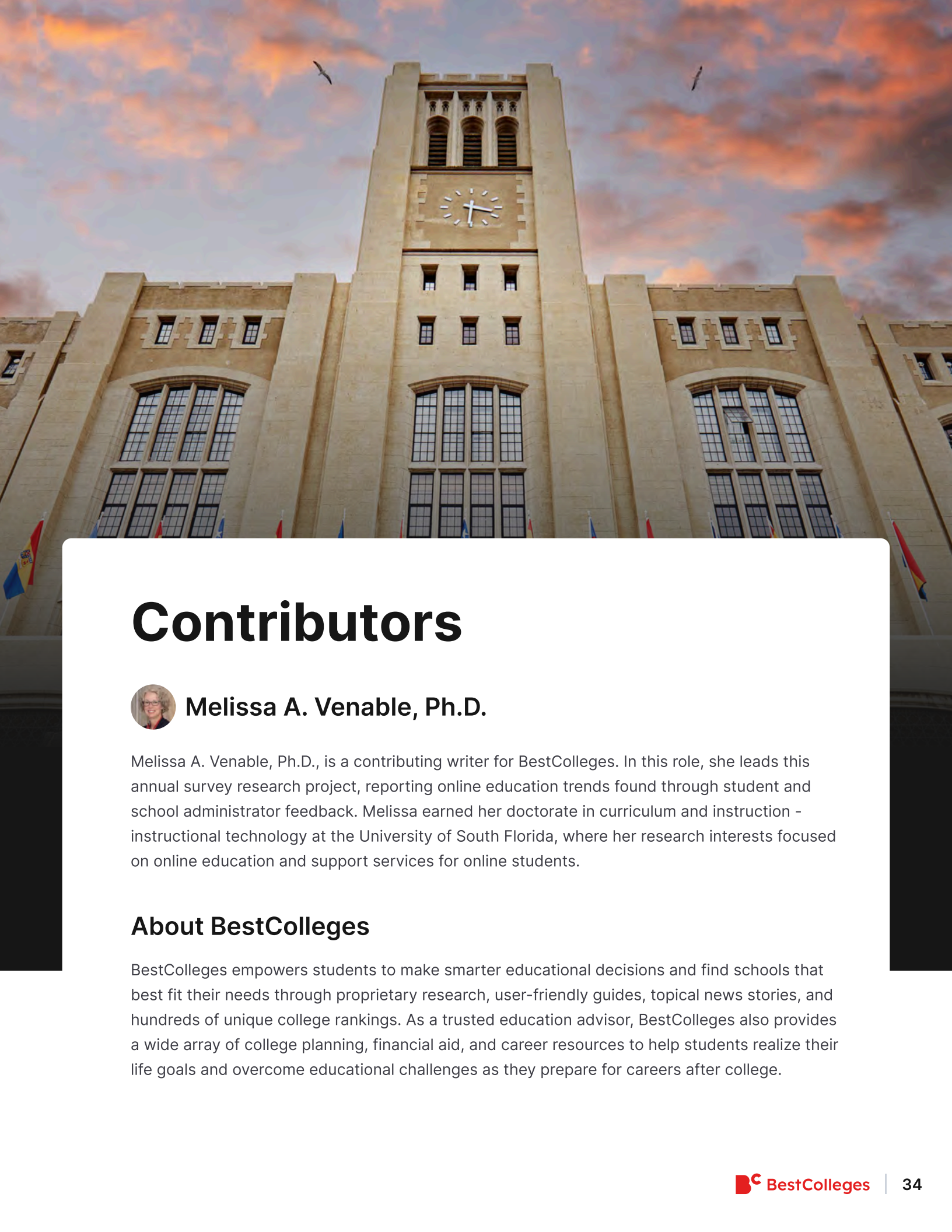
How can students be successful without an accurate expectation of their financial obligations while enrolled and after graduation? As colleges and universities enter an era of increasing uncertainty about funding overall, students are increasingly worried more about the costs of enrollment than about other important aspects of higher education, including academic quality. New models and resources will be required to continue supporting students and institutions alike.

Online Students' Positive Outlook Persists

With all of the challenges students identified this year, as in previous years, their positive outlook holds fast across enrollment status, gender, race/ethnicity, and income level. Students seem to maintain confidence in online education and in its ability to help them reach their goals. Institutions making difficult decisions about academic programs, services, and other aspects of online delivery may benefit from looking to alumni and current students for insights and recommendations.

AI Continues to Transform the Online Education Experience

And it's just the beginning. We can expect both intended and unintended consequences of AI along the way, with impacts that extend beyond individual users and courses. As institutions, faculty, and students embrace these new AI tools, it will be critical to rapidly assess and evaluate their use, establish and share leading practices, and document lessons learned. Working together, avoiding siloed thinking, and taking action will also be required to make the most of AI's potential in higher education at large.



Contributors



Melissa A. Venable, Ph.D.

Melissa A. Venable, Ph.D., is a contributing writer for BestColleges. In this role, she leads this annual survey research project, reporting online education trends found through student and school administrator feedback. Melissa earned her doctorate in curriculum and instruction - instructional technology at the University of South Florida, where her research interests focused on online 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, topical news stories, 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 their 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. 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. Data are self-reported.

* References

American Council on Education. (2025, March 3). *Congress moves to slash higher ed funding in budget showdown*. American Council on Education. <https://www.acenet.edu/News-Room/Pages/Congress-Moves-Slash-Funding-Budget-Showdown.aspx>

College Board. (n.d.). *How many college applications are enough?* College Board - College Advising. <https://counselors.collegeboard.org/college-application/how-many>

Mowreader, A. (2024, September 16). *Survey: When should college students use AI? They're not sure*. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/business/financial-health/2023/12/21/look-back-college-closures-and-mergers-2023>

Mucci, T. (2024, October 11). *The future of AI: Trends shaping the next 10 years*. IBM. <https://www.ibm.com/think/insights/artificial-intelligence-future>

Sidoti, O. & McClain, C. (2025, June 25). *34% of adults have used ChatGPT, about double the share in 2023*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/06/25/34-of-us-adults-have-used-chatgpt-about-double-the-share-in-2023/>

*Appendix

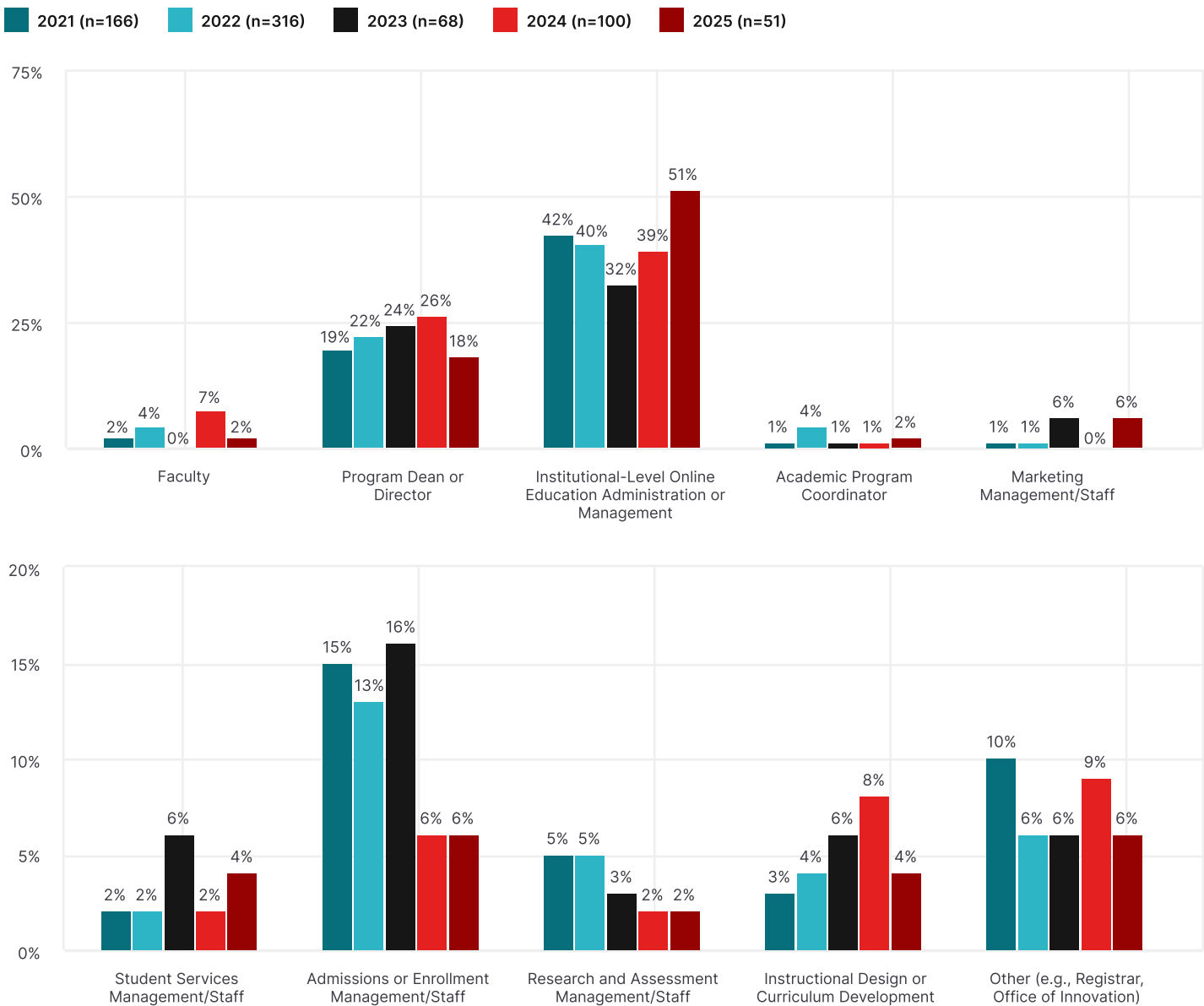
Participant Demographics

While we've collected data for this initiative since 2017, only data from the past five years are included in this report. You can view the data from prior years of the initiative on the [BestColleges research hub](#).

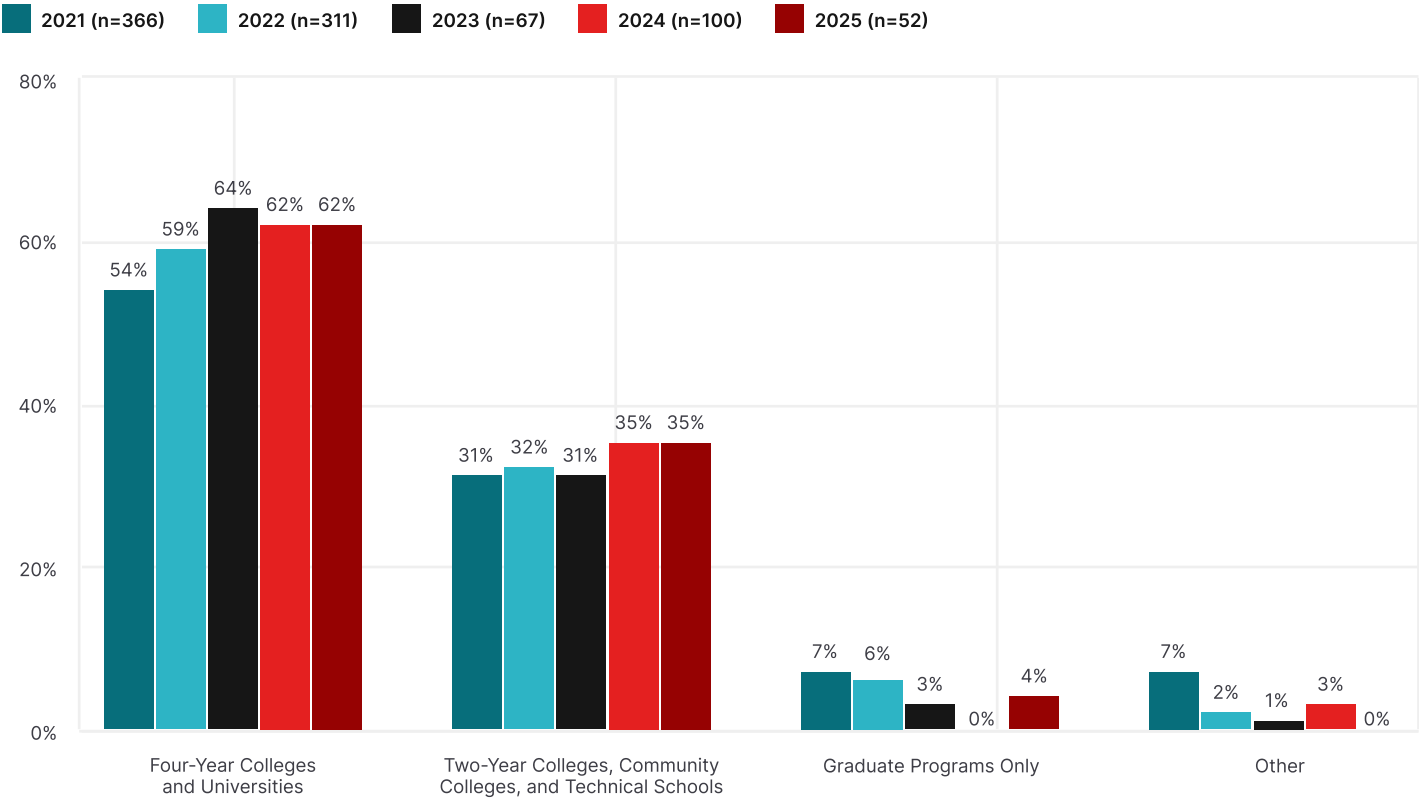
School Administrator Participants

Data Collection — BestColleges, Qualtrics

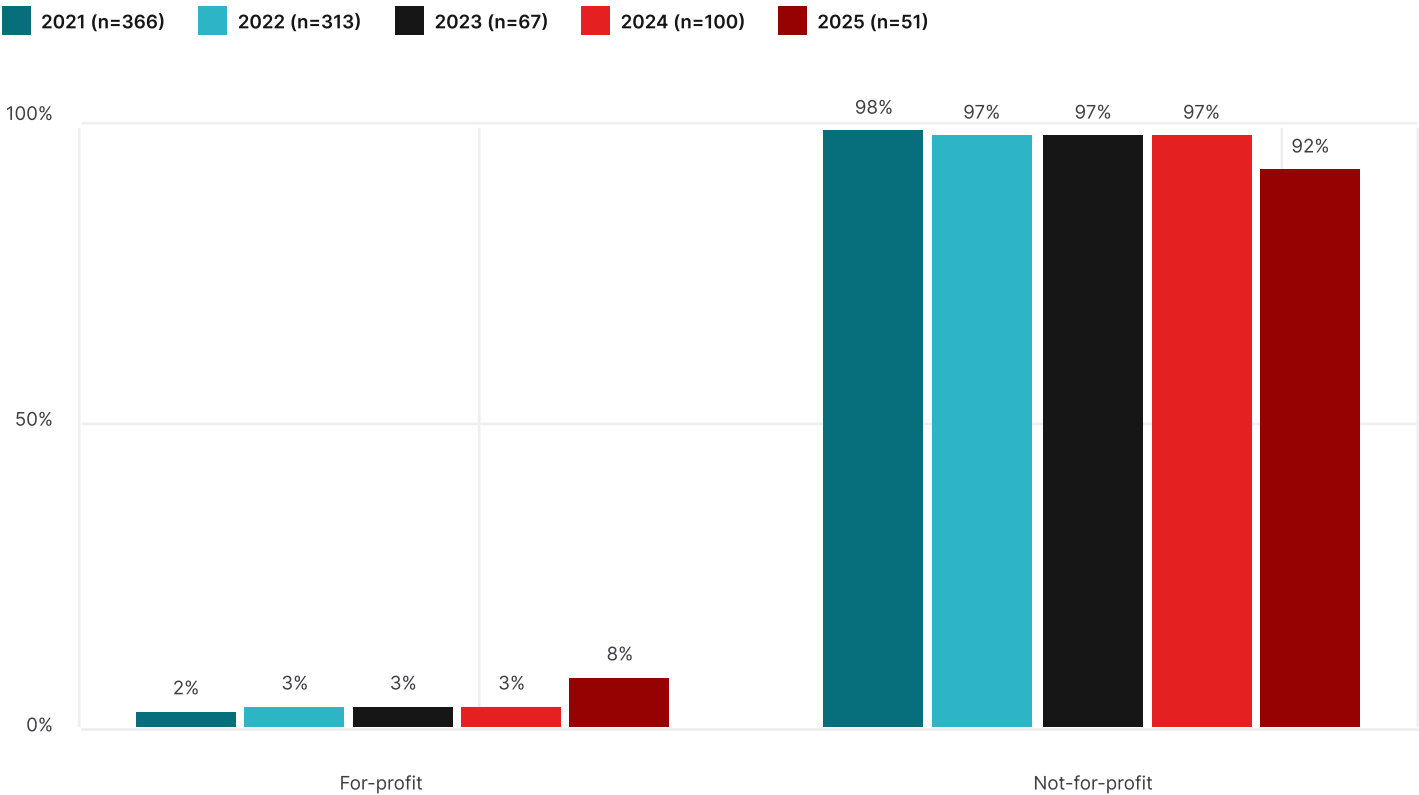
Respondent's Primary Role



Institutional Classification



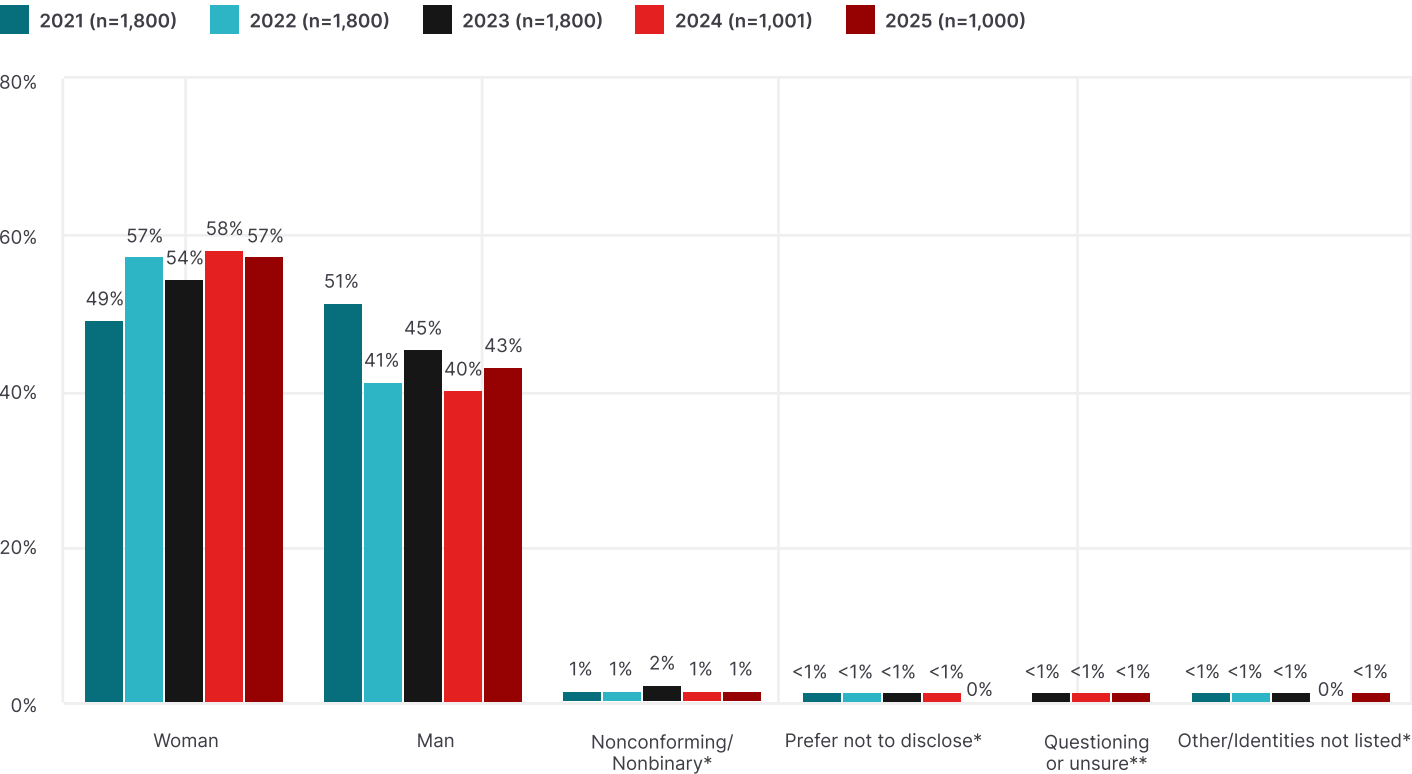
Institution Type



Student Participants

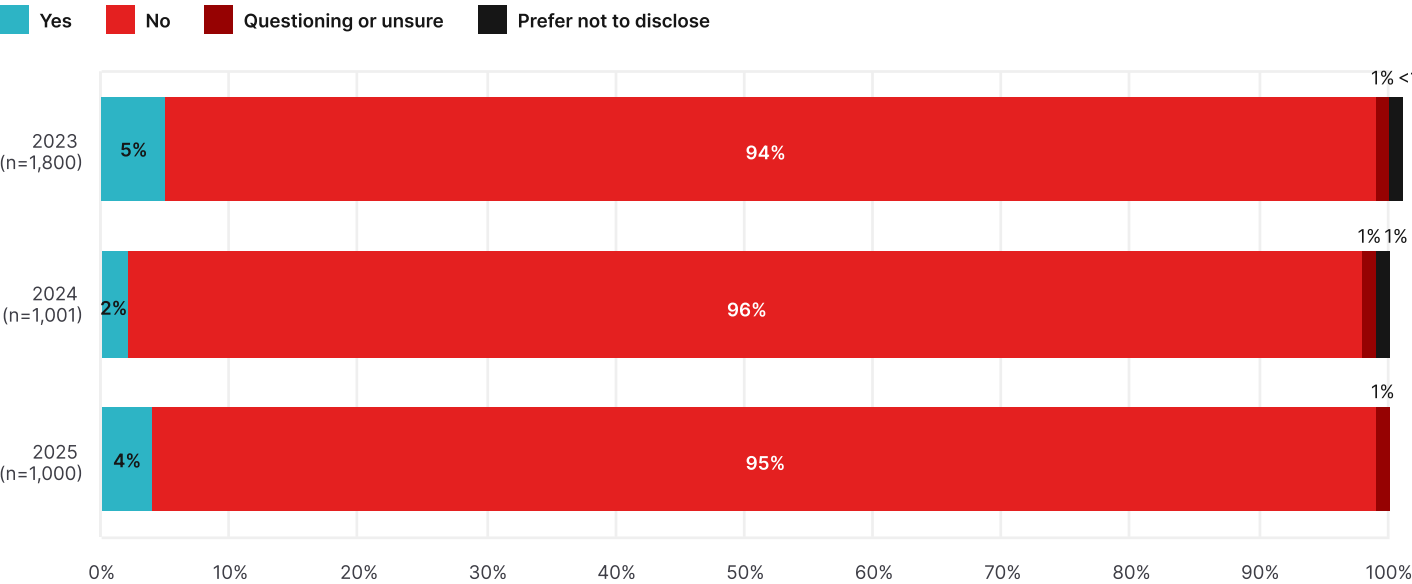
Data Collection — Pure Spectrum

Sex/Gender



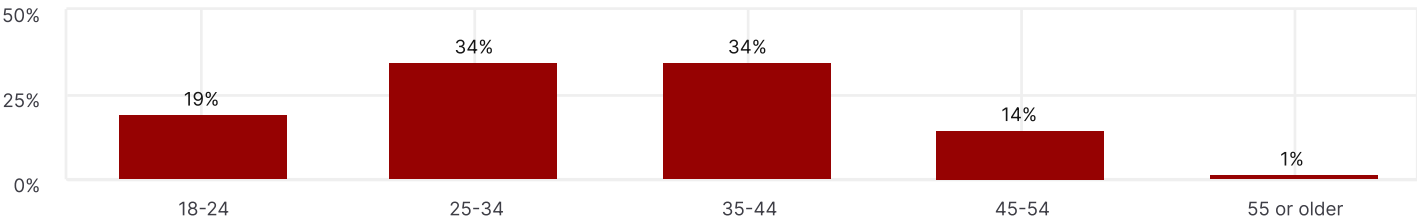
*Response option added in 2021. **Response option added in 2023.
Note: From 2017-2022, "male" and "female" were response options instead of "man" and "woman." In 2023, we revised our survey demographic questions to be more inclusive.

Do you identify as transgender?



Age: 2025 Report*

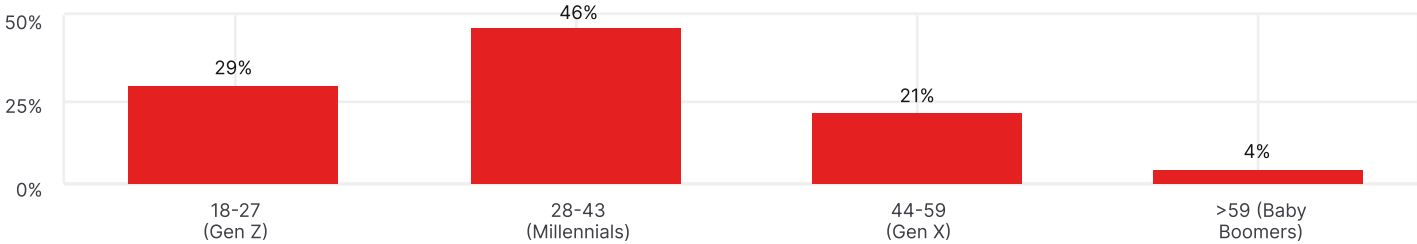
2025 (n=1,000)



*Age categories reconfigured in 2025.

Age: 2024 Report*

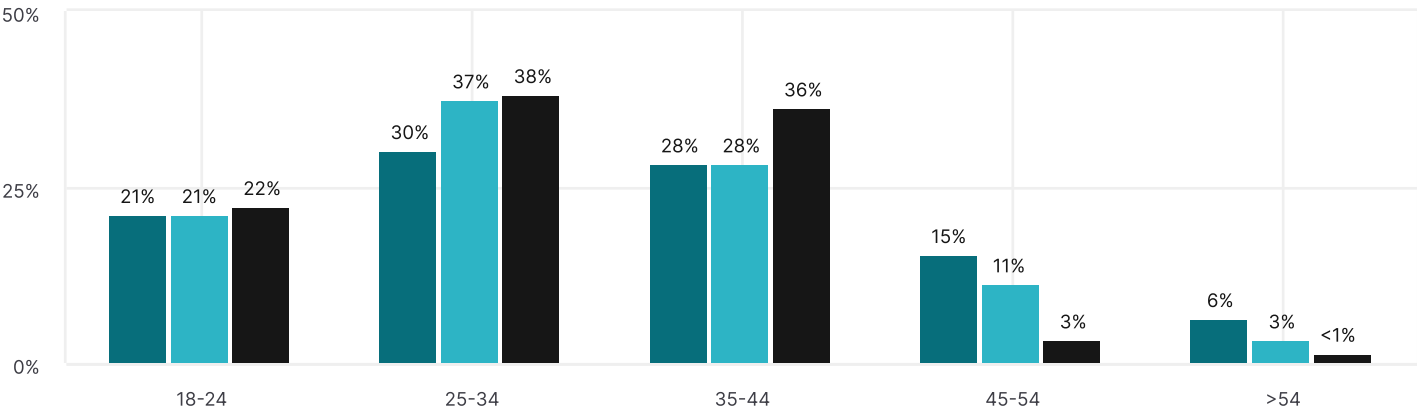
2024 (n=1,001)



*Age categories reconfigured in 2024 to reflect age ranges by generation. Data related to age collected in previous years is presented below.

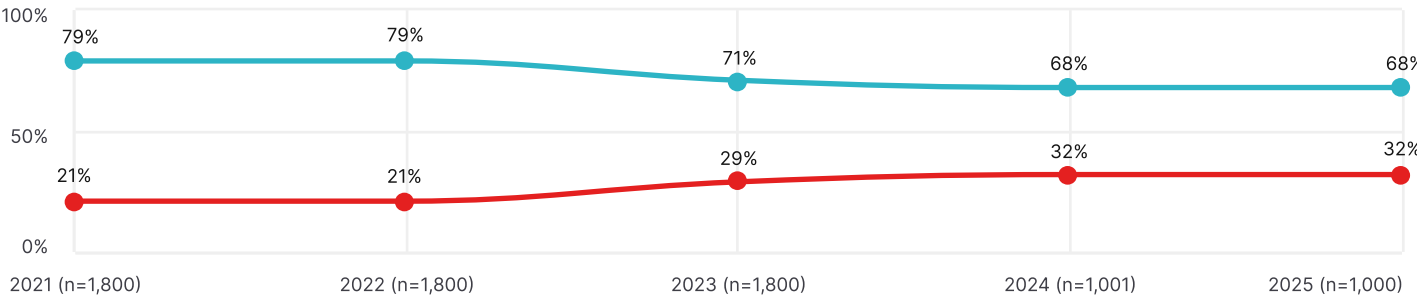
Age: 2021-2023 Reports

2021 (n=1,800) 2022 (n=1,800) 2023 (n=1,800)

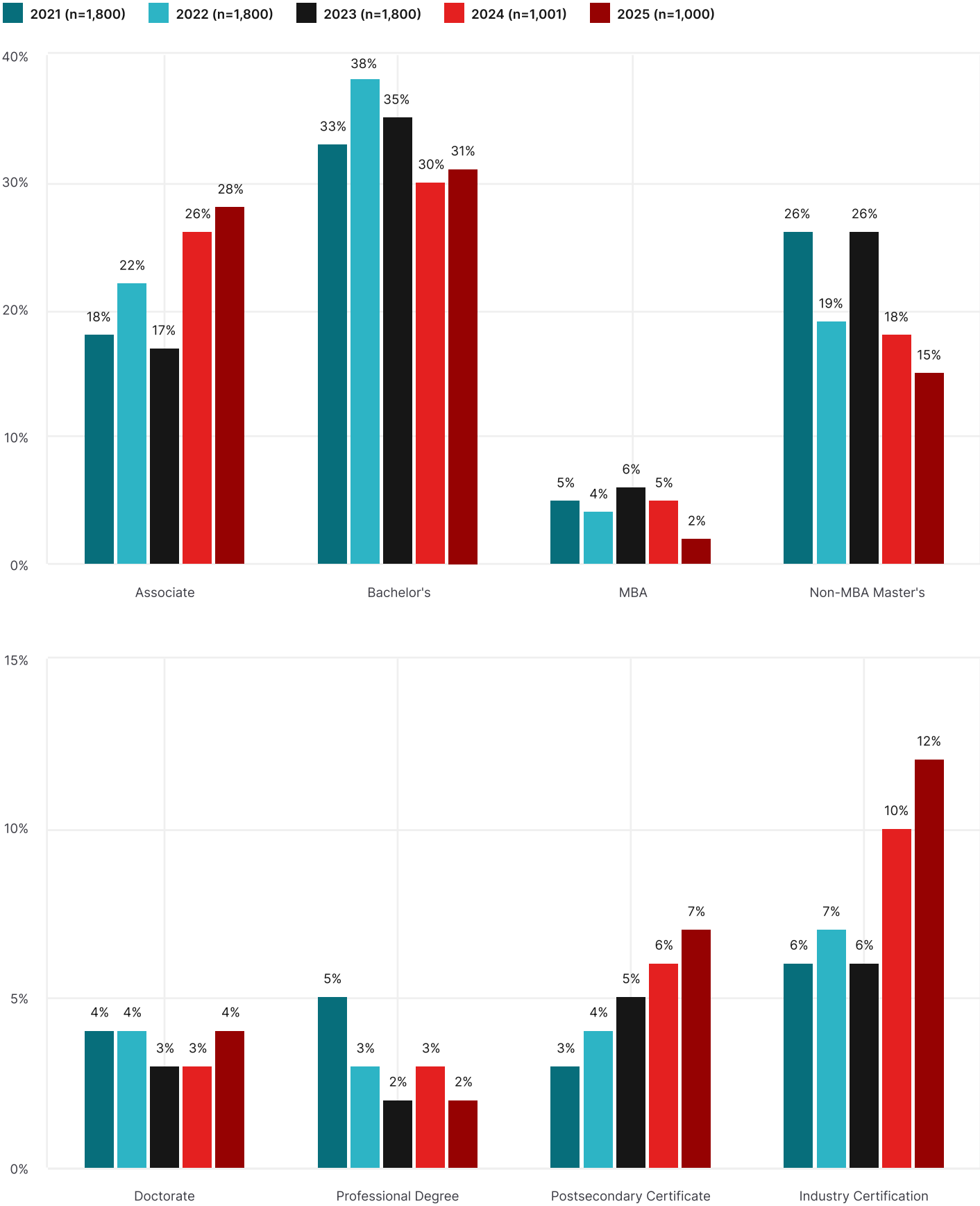


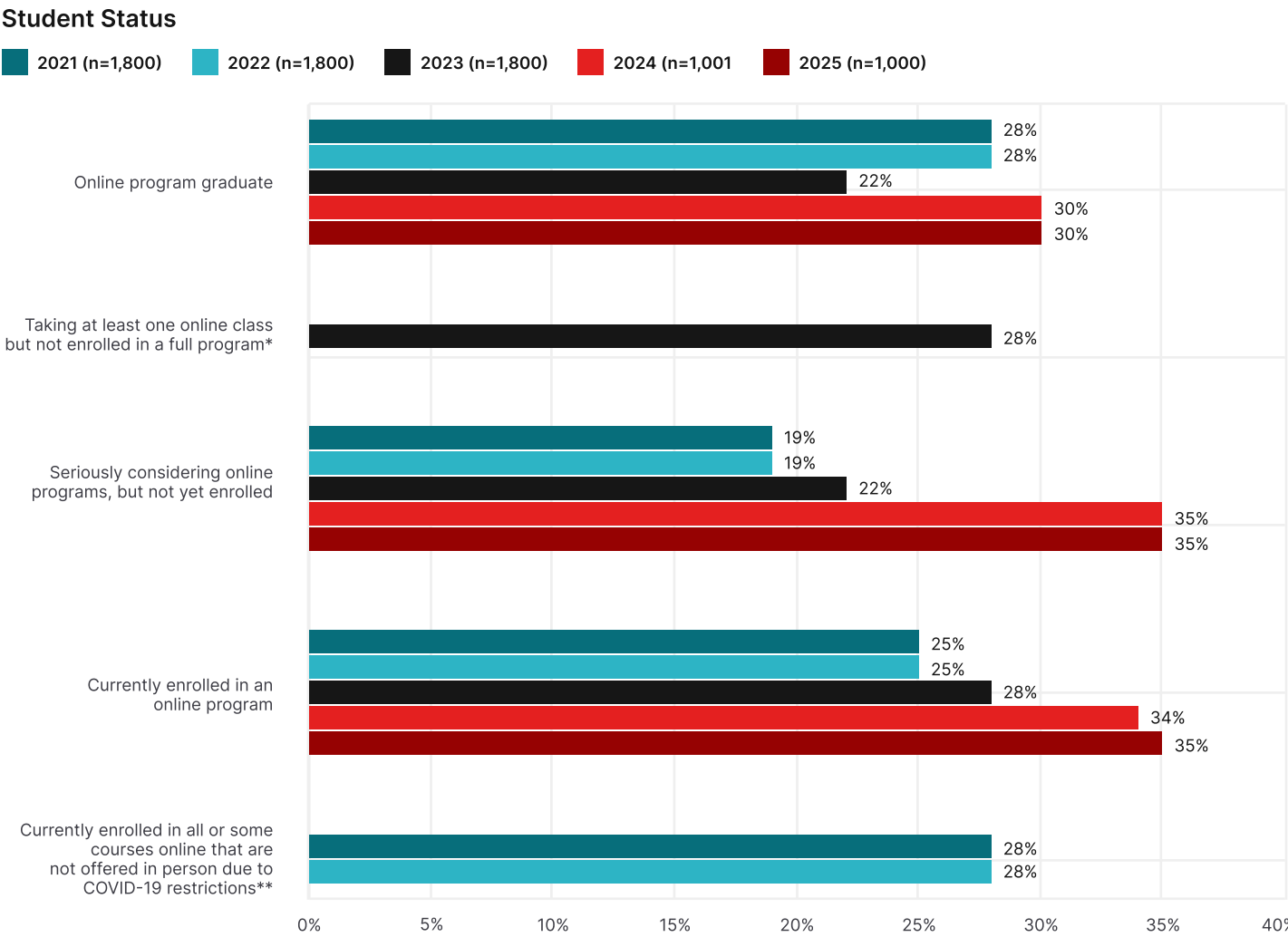
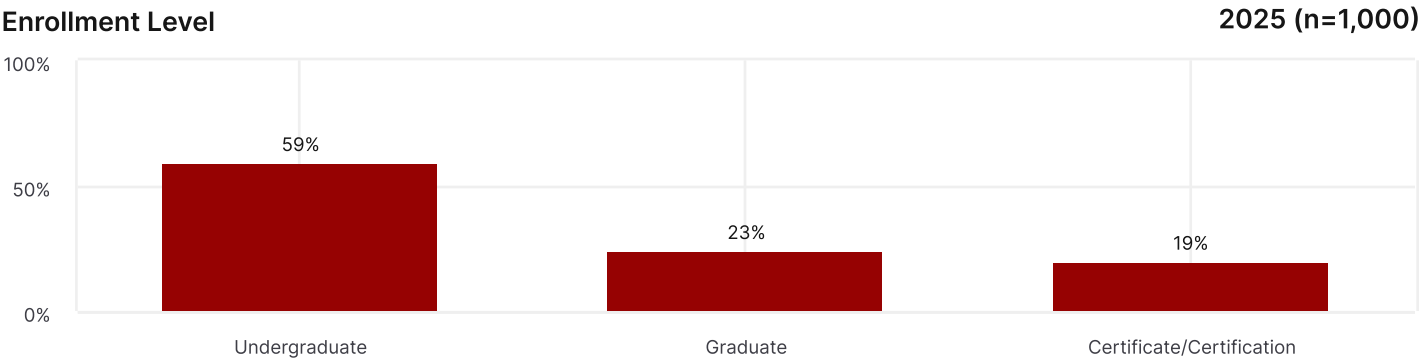
Enrollment Status — All Students Surveyed: Prospective, Currently Enrolled, or Graduated Students

Full Time Part Time



Online Degree Pursuing, Completed, or Interested In

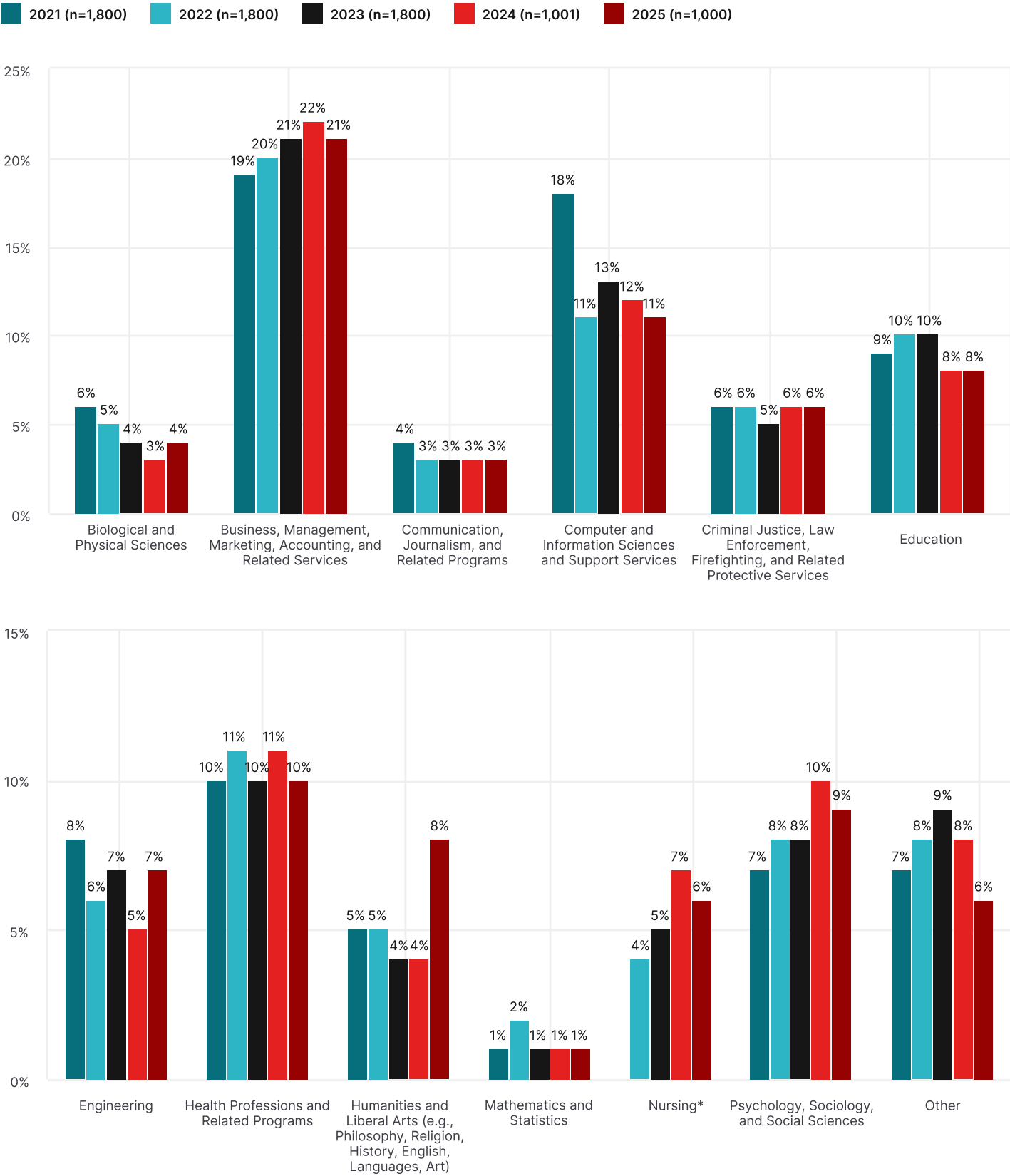




*Response option removed in 2021, returned in 2023, removed in 2024.

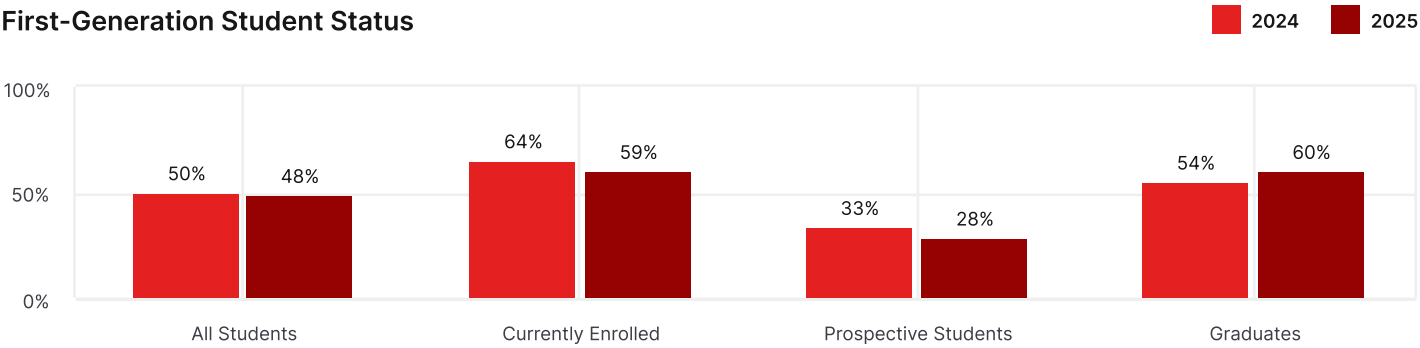
**Response option added in 2021, removed in 2023.

Field of Study/Intended Field of Study

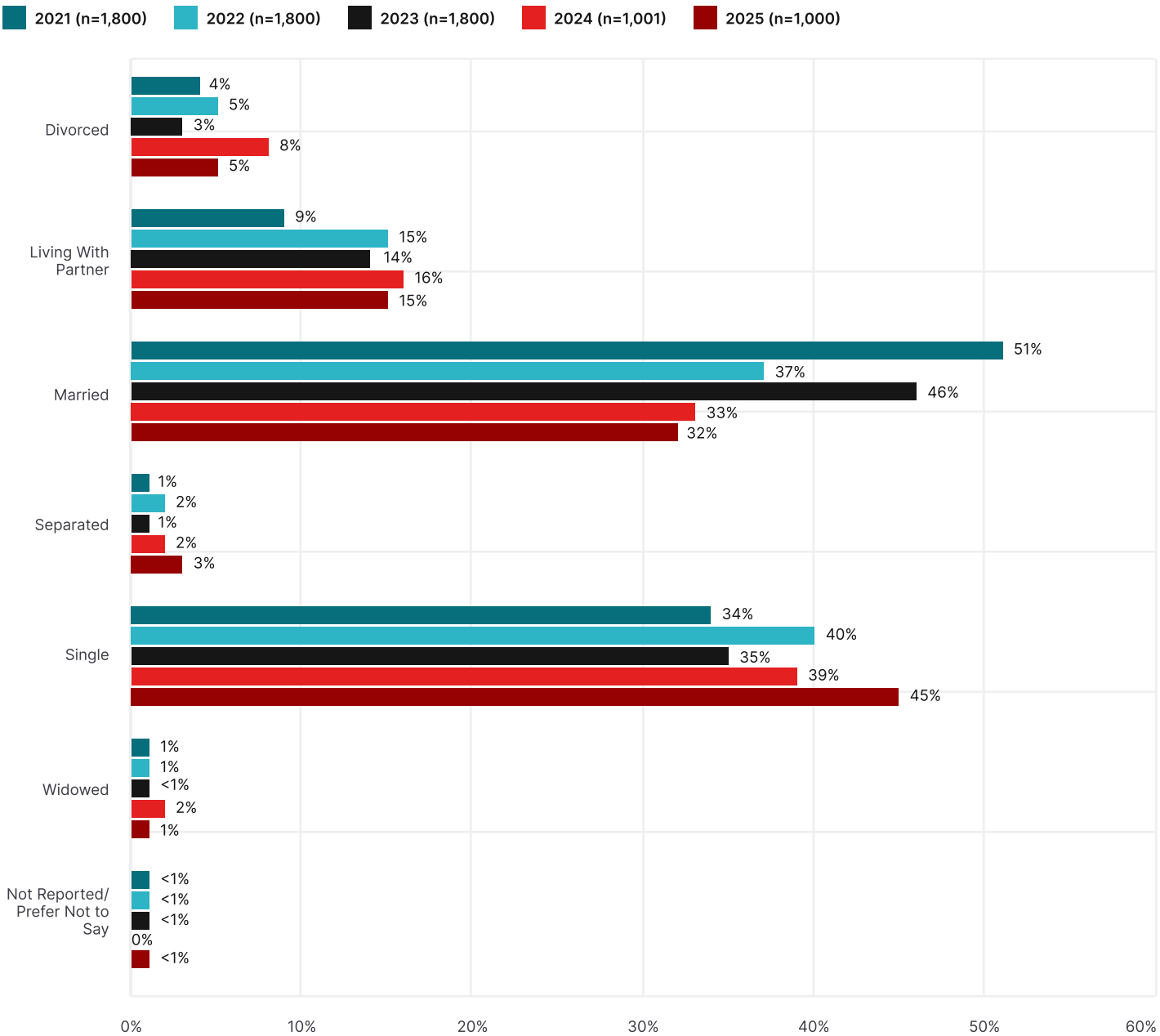


*Response option added in 2022. Prior to 2022, nursing was included in "Health Professions and Related Programs."

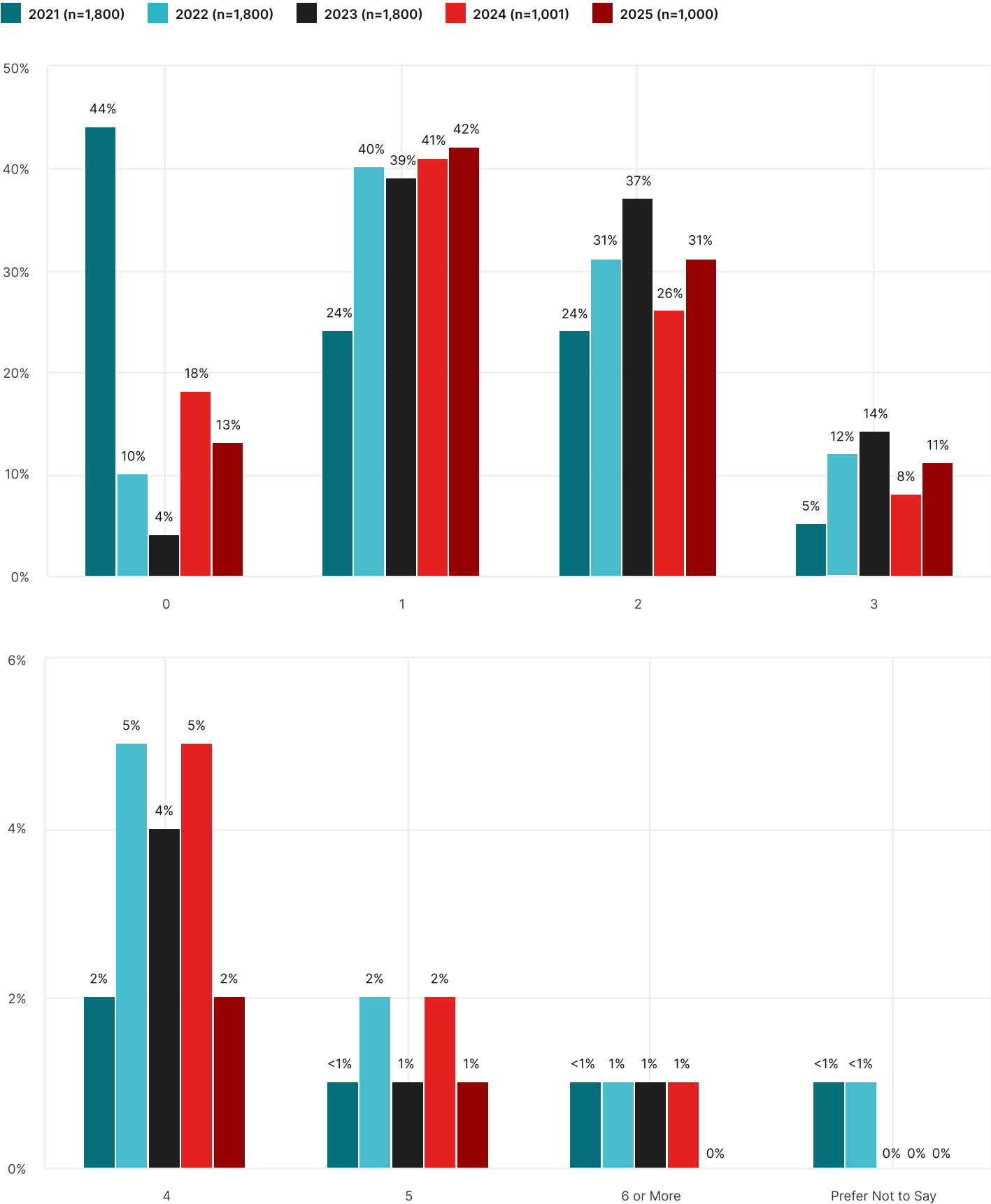
First-Generation Student Status



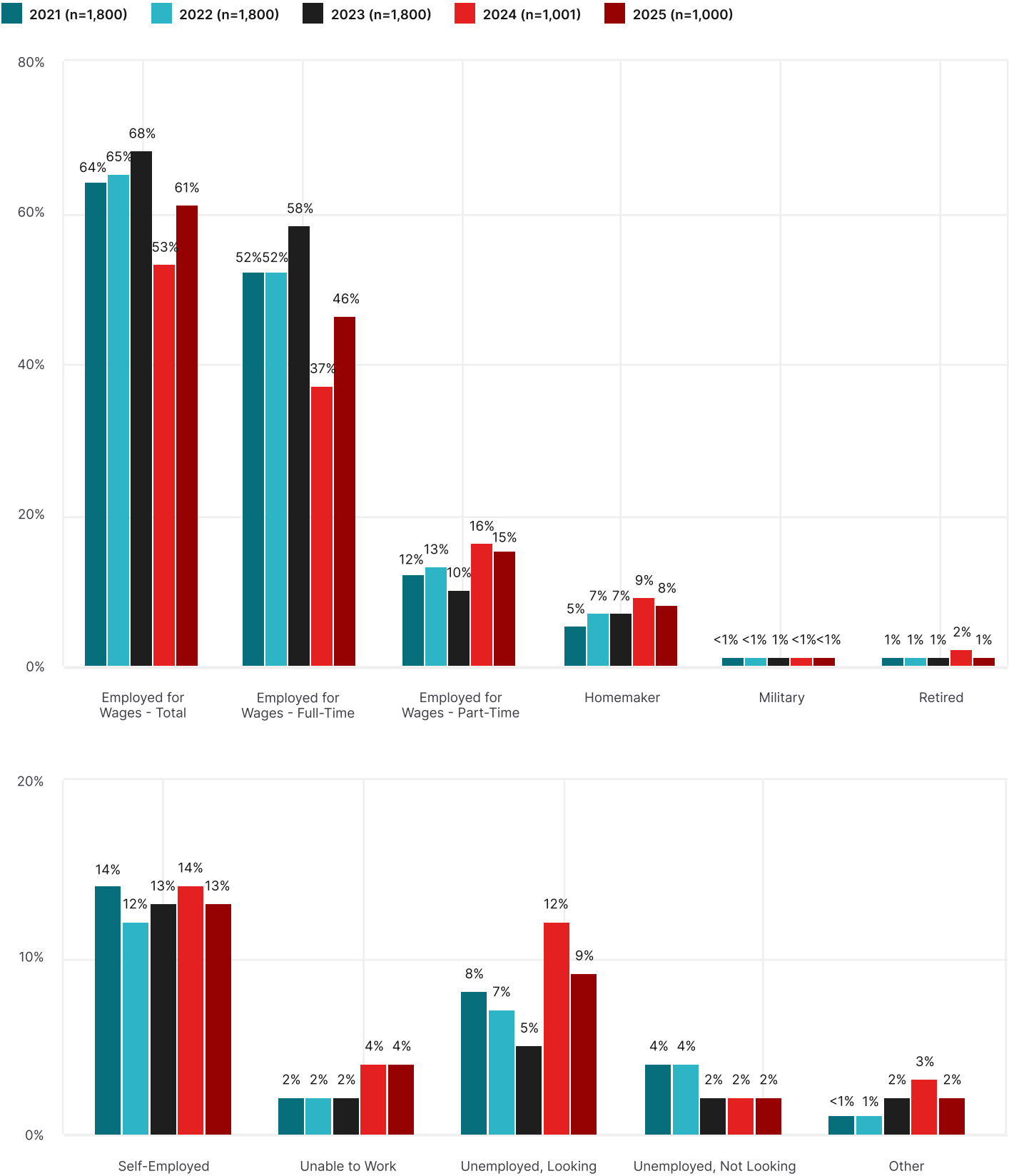
Marital Status



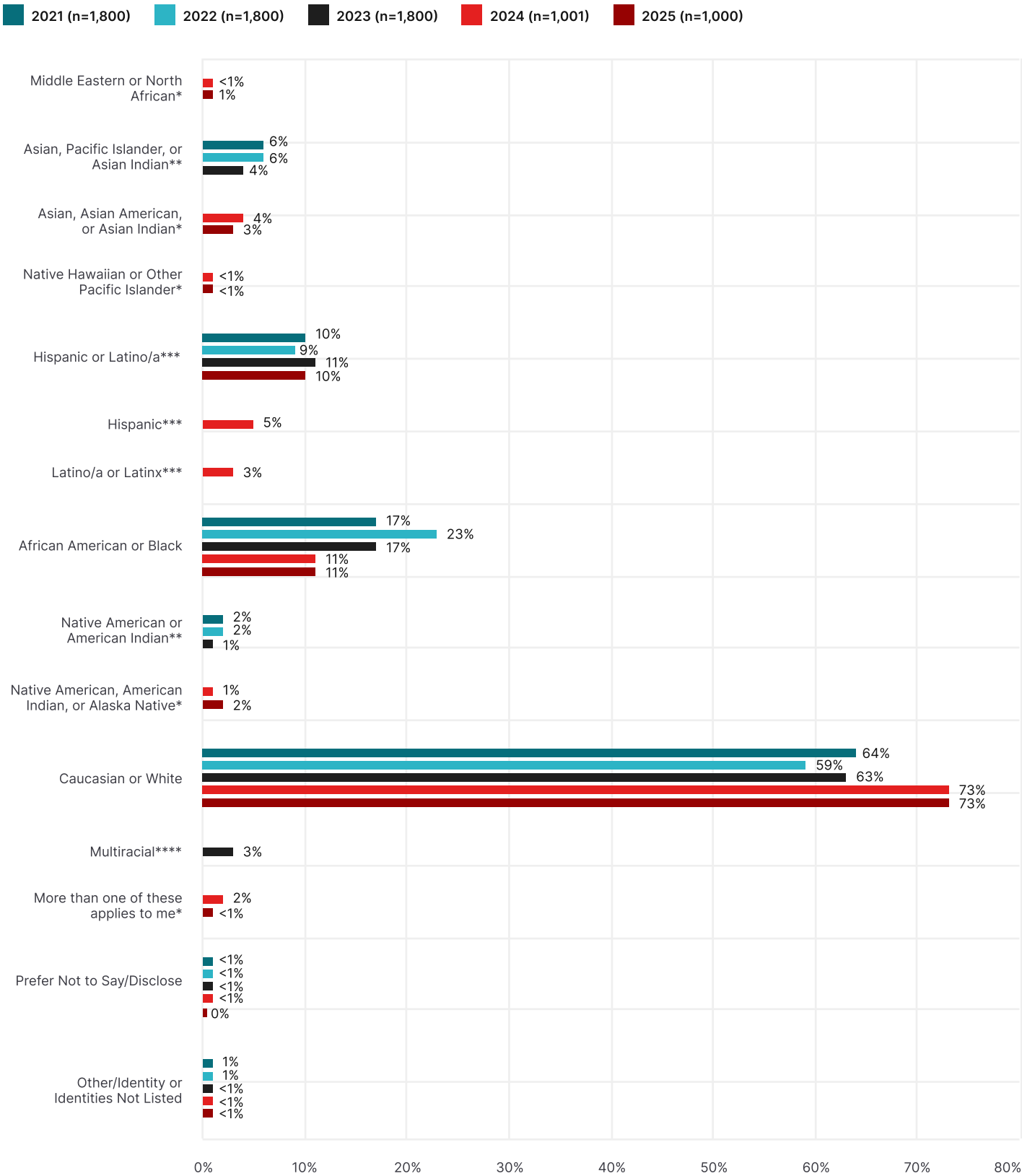
Number of Children (Under 18 Living at Home)



Employment Status

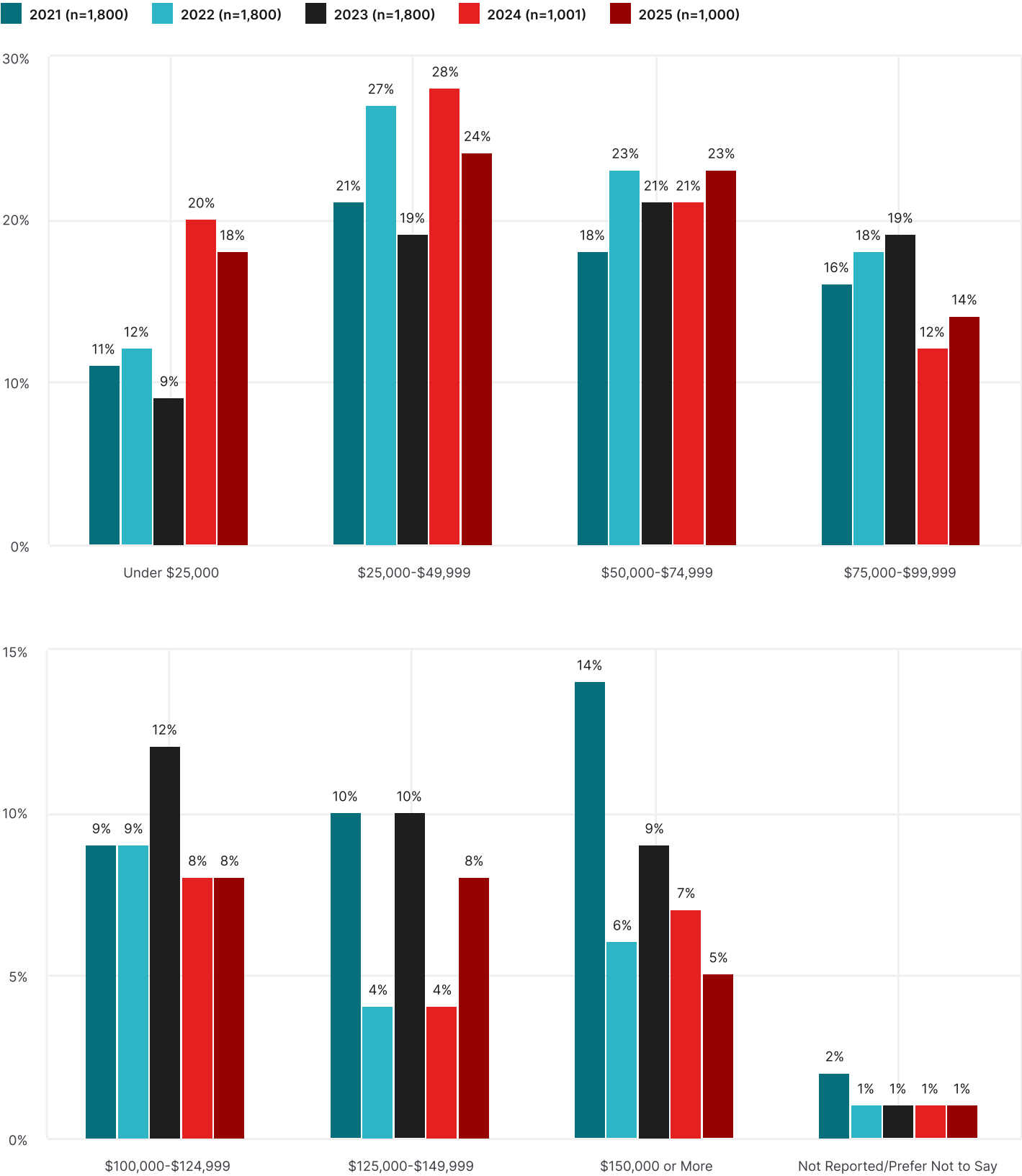


Race/Ethnicity



*Response added in 2024. **Response removed in 2024. ***Responses revised in 2024 and 2025. ****Response added in 2023, removed in 2024.

Annual Household Income





To access additional research reports, visit bestcolleges.com/research/

For additional information, contact: media@bestcolleges.com



[@/BestColleges](https://www.facebook.com/BestColleges)



[@BestColleges](https://www.instagram.com/BestColleges)



[@thebestcolleges](https://www.linkedin.com/company/thebestcolleges)

© 2025 BestColleges.com, a Red Ventures Company

Venable, M. A. (2025). *2025 Online education trends report*. BestColleges.com

<https://www.bestcolleges.com/research/annual-trends-in-online-education/>