2023

Online Education Trends Report

Prepared by BestColleges

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

2023 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 of BestColleges contributors. The team included: Reece Johnson, Nicholas Linden, Rebecca Long, Andrew Rice, Jordan Stewart-Rozema and Liz Zvereva.

Table of Contents

4 Executive Summary

6 Introduction

- Project Goals
- Methodology
- Participants

8 The Learning Experience

- Online vs. On-Campus Programs
- Challenges to Reaching Graduation

13 Marketing and Recruitment

- Student Research and Decision-Making
- Advice From Online Graduates

17 Student Satisfaction

- Recommending Online Education to Others
- Return on Investment
- Perception of Online Education

21 Planning for the Future

- Budget Planning
- Demand Predictions
- Immersive Learning

25 Conclusion

27 Contributors

28 Data Notes

28 References

29 Appendix

- Participant Demographics
  - School Administrator Participants
  - Student Participants

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

BestColleges' ninth annual Online Education Trends Report tracks current trends through data collected from current, former, and prospective students and school administrators. This report represents our seventh year of original data collection via online surveys, with participation from 1,800 students and 131 school administrators. While we've collected data since 2017, we only include data from the past five years in this report. You can view the reports from 2017 and 2018 on the BestColleges research hub.This year's findings are presented in four categories: the learning experience, marketing and recruitment, student satisfaction, and planning for the future.

Key Findings:

The Learning Experience

- The desire for convenience when managing existing commitments continues to be the leading motivator for enrolling in an online program, as indicated by more than one-third (42%) of the online students surveyed this year.
- Parallel online and on-campus degree programs at a given institution may differ in a number of ways, including their tuition and fees, learning objectives, and instructors.
- *Balancing education with work, family, and household obligations* continues to be the top concern for online (27%), hybrid (27%), and prospective (39%) students.

Marketing and Recruitment

- The biggest challenges students face when making the decision to enroll in an online program continue to be *finding a program that meets [their] needs and interests*, *applying for financial aid and identifying sufficient funding sources*, and *estimating actual costs*.
- When students search for information about online programs, they rely most on *college websites* and *online student reviews*.
- For the fifth year in a row, the biggest regret of online program graduates is not *do[ing] more research about cost and financial aid* (30%).

Student Satisfaction

- An overwhelming majority of students surveyed said they would recommend online education to others, including 98% of current online students, 96% of online program graduates, and 94% of hybrid students.
- This year, 96% of all students surveyed said their online degree program has had or will have a positive return on investment, the highest percentage in the history of this report.
- Fewer students reported being unsure about how online education compares to on-campus learning this year, and three-quarters (75%) said that online is better than or equal to on-campus learning.

Planning for the Future

- This year, almost half (47%) of school administrators surveyed said their schools were increasing spending for online programs, up from the previous two years where budgets were largely anticipated to remain steady during the pandemic.
- Health professions (including nursing) and computer and information science programs are expected to see the most enrollment growth online over the next five years.
- A little more than one-third (37%) of school administrators surveyed agreed that their institutions are actively researching the possibilities of immersive technologies (e.g., virtual reality, metaverse) for use in their online courses and programs.

Introduction

Project Goals

Since BestColleges launched this series in 2015, the goal has been to identify and track long-term trends in online education at U.S. colleges and universities. This initiative expanded over the years to include reports focused on bootcamp programs and alternative education pathways, online student demographics, college and career planning, and college student mental health.

This ninth annual Online Education Trends Report includes feedback from online students and school administrators. It presents our seventh year of original data collection from 131 school administrators and 1,800 students. While we've collected data since 2017, we only include data from the past five years in this report. You can view the reports from 2017 and 2018 on the BestColleges research hub. This year's student participants included online students, online program graduates, prospective online students, and, for the first time, hybrid students.

Findings are organized into four areas:

- The Learning Experience
- Marketing and Recruitment
- Student Satisfaction
- Planning for the Future

Methodology

Data Collection

Two online surveys were conducted between November 2022 and March 2023.

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 ensure the sample included sex/gender and ethnic/racial diversity. This survey collected data from 1,800 college students, which included students enrolled in fully online programs (i.e., online students), students taking a blend of online and in-person classes (i.e., hybrid students), students who had graduated from online programs, and students seriously considering enrollment in online programs.

BestColleges' outreach team conducted a second survey of school administrators, contacting past study participants who had volunteered their contact information for future surveys. This year, 131 school administrators representing two- and four-year institutions responded to questions via the Qualtrics platform. We have limited the reporting of findings from this group due to the small sample size and difficulty generalizing the results to the larger population. All items in this survey were optional.

All data are self-reported.

Definitions

We provided the following definitions to survey participants:

- **Online Student:** A student who chooses an online program over an on-campus program, enrolling in a program that was designed for online delivery.
- **Hybrid Student:** A student taking at least one online course, but not enrolled in a fully online program.

Participants

Students

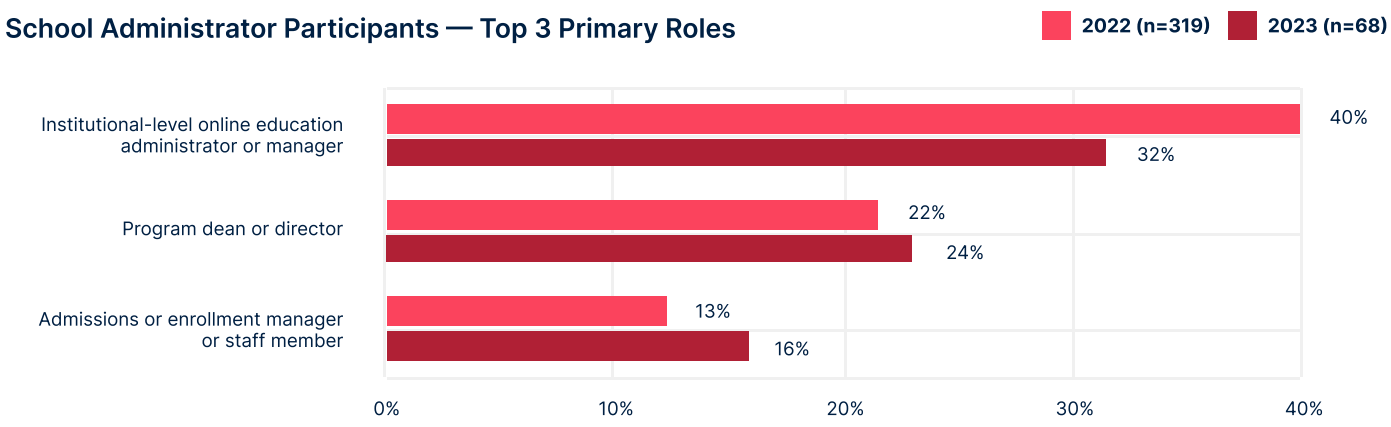
Students responding to the survey selected their status via a screening question. **Four options were provided:** online student, hybrid student, online program graduate, prospective online student.

- Currently an online student — 28% (n=500)
- Currently a hybrid student — 28% (n=500)
- Online program graduate — 22% (n=400)
- Prospective online student — 22% (n=400)

School Administrators

Due to changes in the BestColleges organization this year, the number of participants in our school administrator survey (n=131) is not consistent with previous years. While we included some results of that survey in this report, it is important to understand that the small sample size does not allow for the generalization of these findings.

This year, school administrator participants represented a variety of professional roles, which were similar to those seen in previous years' reports. Sixty-eight participants voluntarily identified their primary role. The top three roles were institutional-level online education administrator or manager, program dean or director, and admissions or enrollment manager or staff member, which is similar to the representation we had in previous years.

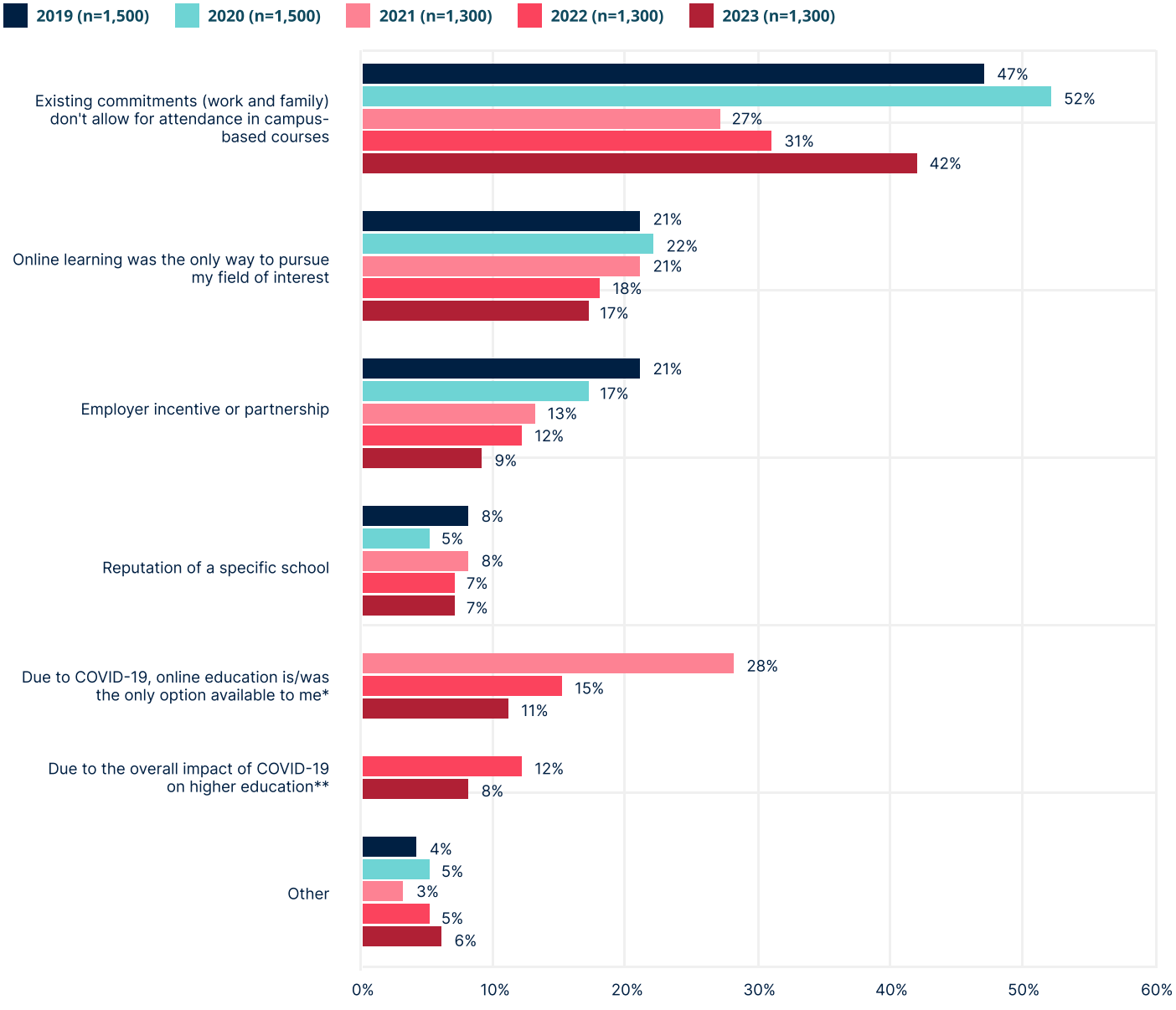


The Learning Experience

Online vs. On-Campus Programs

This year, fewer students chose online education for reasons related to COVID-19. The convenience of studying around existing work and family commitments continued to be the biggest motivator of online enrollment; this option was selected by more than one-third (42%) of the students surveyed.

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



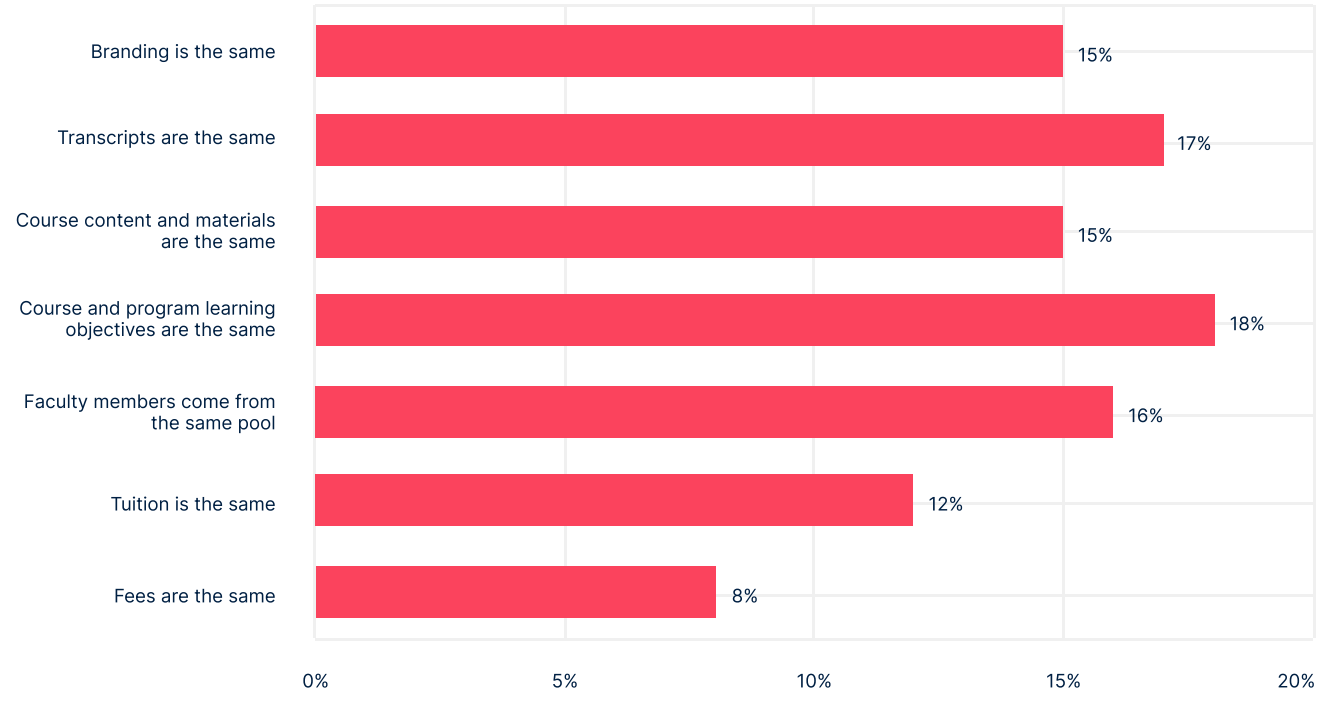
*Response option added in 2021. **Response option added in 2022.

It is also interesting to note that *employer incentive or partnership* as a motivator for online enrollment has steadily decreased over the past five years. Twenty-one percent of students chose this option in our 2019 report, compared to only 9% this year.

School administrators were asked, "Does your institution offer any parallel online and on-campus degree programs (i.e., the same subject and degree levels in both formats)?" A vast majority (89%) said that their institutions did offer parallel programs.

We also asked school administrators to share how the online and on-campus programs at their institutions compare on multiple variables. Somewhat surprisingly, the findings indicate that online and on-campus programs are different in many ways, including tuition and fees, faculty members, course content and objectives, transcripts, and branding.

In What Ways Are Your Parallel Online and On-Campus Programs Similar?



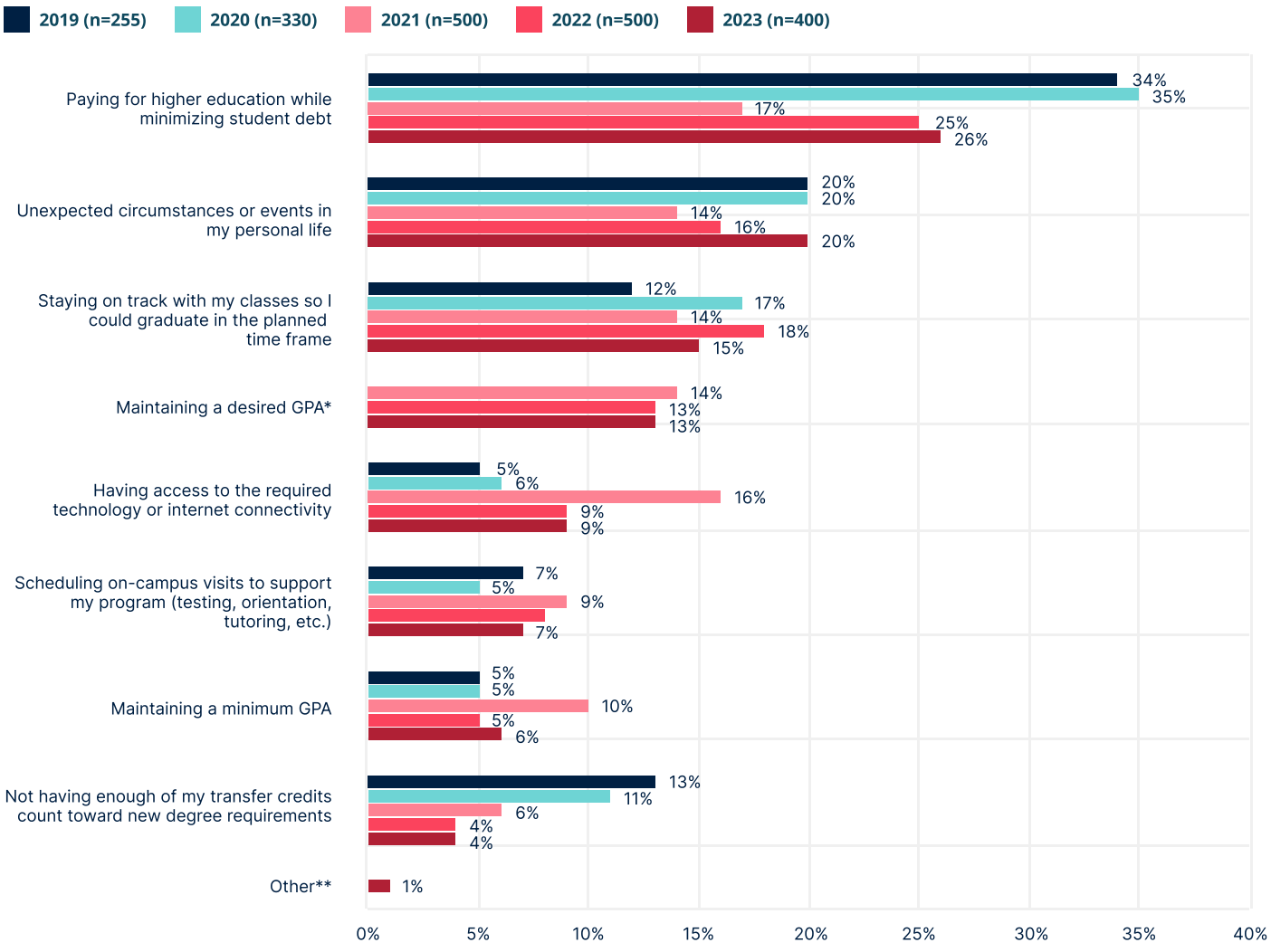
The sample size of school administrator participants who responded to our survey was low, so while this finding may be interesting, more research needs to be done to identify trends in how parallel online and on-campus programs are offered across institutions in the U.S.

Challenges to Reaching Graduation

The perceived convenience of online learning has been a motivator for students throughout the years. When this year's survey was conducted, 80% of currently enrolled online students were enrolled in their programs full time, 67% were employed full time (59%) or part time (8%), and 95% were responsible for children under the age of 18 living at home. Each year, we ask students who successfully completed online programs what their biggest roadblock to graduation was while they were in their academic programs.

For the fifth year in a row, online program graduates identified *paying for higher education while minimizing student debt* (26%) as the biggest challenge to reaching graduation. *Unexpected circumstances or events in my personal life* (20%) was the second largest challenge, followed by *staying on track with my classes so I could graduate in the planned time frame* (15%).

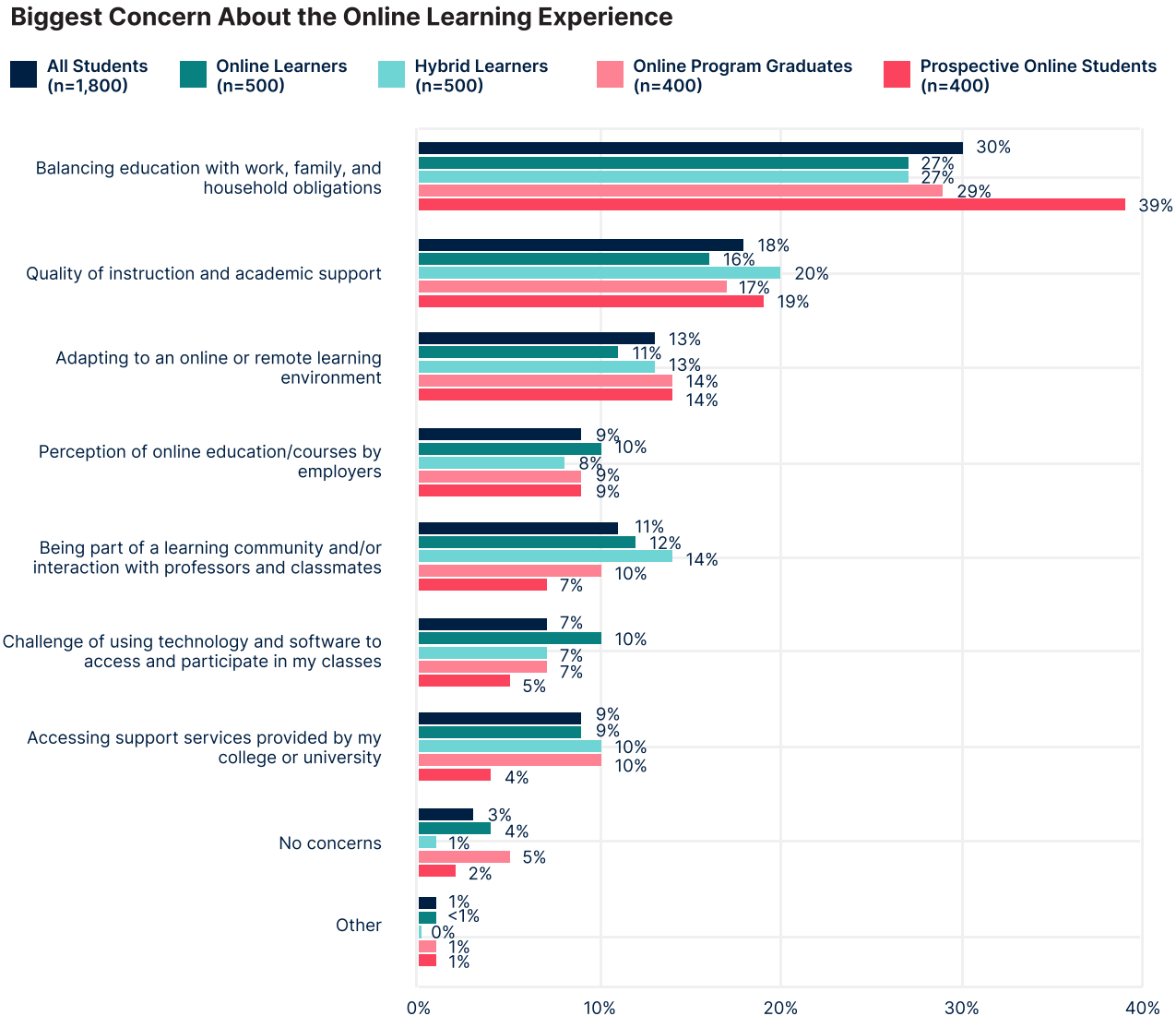
Biggest Challenge to Completing an Online Program (Program Graduate Responses Only)



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

The percentage of students concerned about how many transfer credits can be applied to online degree requirements has decreased over the past five years from 13% in 2019 to 4% this year. This could indicate changes in how transfer credits are accepted by new programs or a shift in student expectations for how many previously earned credits will transfer.

When asked about their biggest concern related to online learning, the top response overall and for each student category was *balancing education with work, family, and household obligations*, followed by *quality of instruction and academic support*. Compared to last year, more students reported balance as a concern, up five percentage points from the 2022 report for all students (Venable, 2022). This figure rose from 30% to 39% for prospective online students.



This was our first year of tracking the perspectives of hybrid learners (n=500), i.e., those enrolled in at least one online course, but not enrolled in a fully online program. Overall, their concerns about online learning were similar to those of their completely online counterparts; however, they were the least likely to say they had *no concerns* at all.

BestColleges INSIGHT

Find Ways to Encourage the Balance of Work, School, and Life to Support Student Success

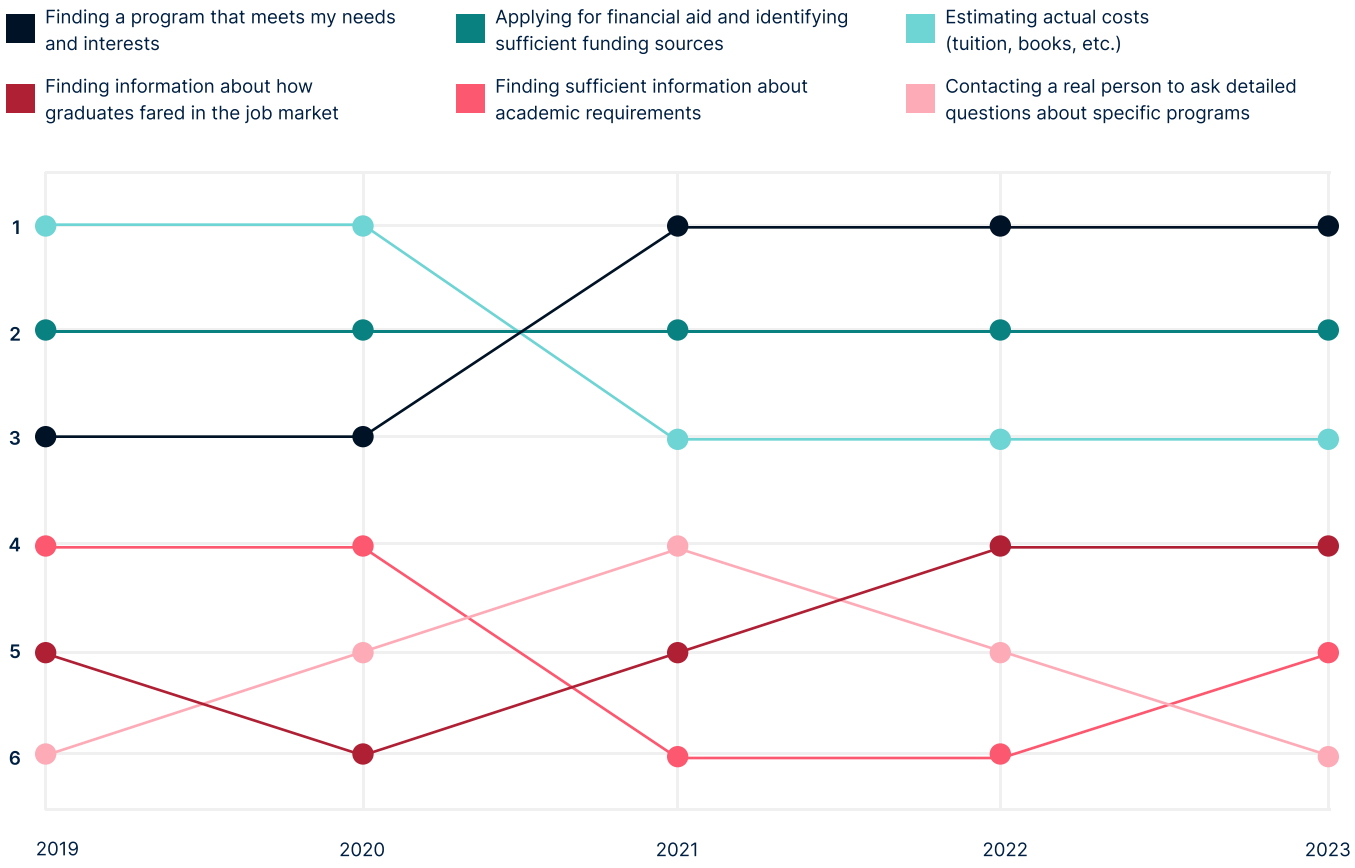
The concept of work-life balance isn't a new one, but online students continue to place it at the top of their list of concerns about studying online. Adding education to their schedule may seem doable for most students who plan to study anytime, anywhere, and fit school in around their other obligations. The reality can be much more challenging than anticipated, however. Prospective students' expectations of the online programs they are considering may be shifting toward a more realistic anticipation of what becoming an online student means and what sacrifices may come with completing an online program.

Marketing and Recruitment

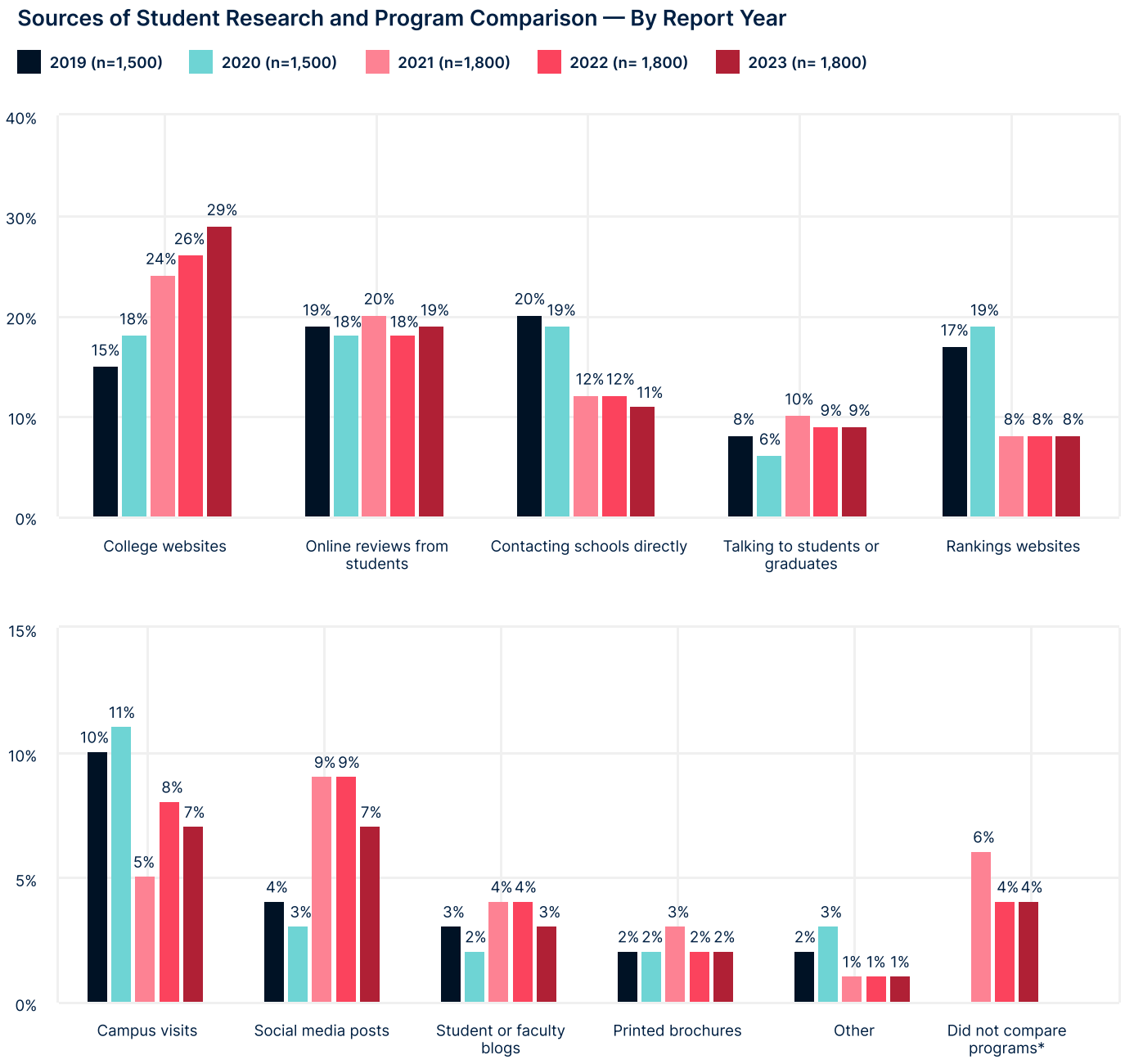
Student Research and Decision-Making

We asked students to share their biggest challenges when making the decision to enroll in an online program. The top three challenges have remained the same over the past five years, although their order has changed. This year, the top challenges were *finding a program that meets my needs and interests* (22%, n=200), *applying for financial aid and identifying sufficient funding sources* (22%, n=195), and *estimating actual costs* (21%, n=189).

Biggest Challenges Students Face When Choosing an Online Program, Current and Prospective Students — By Report Year



When asked about the sources of information they rely or relied on to research and compare college programs, students' top responses were similar to those from the previous year. *College websites* continue to be the most heavily relied upon source of information (29%), followed by *online reviews from students* (19%).



*Response option added in 2021.

A comparison of currently enrolled online students and currently enrolled hybrid students showed that similar sources of information are used. Hybrid students were more likely than online students to visit campuses during their search (13% vs. 6%) and to talk with students or graduates (13% vs. 6%). In contrast, online students were more likely than hybrid students to rely on social media (10% vs. 4%).

Advice From Online Graduates

Most online program graduates indicated that they would do something differently if given the opportunity to go back and choose their program again. However, almost one-quarter (24%) said they wouldn't change anything, nearly the same percentage as in the previous year (25%).

Many of those who would do something differently said they would *do more research about cost and financial aid* (30%). Graduates also wish they had *spoken with employers or professionals in the field* (24%) and *compared more programs* (22%).

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

*Response option added in 2021.

BestColleges INSIGHT

Connect Prospective Students With the Information They Need in the Places They Are Looking

Prospective online students are finding information about academic programs from college websites and online student reviews. Making sure these sites and pages are easy to find, user-friendly, and up-to-date is essential. Students need accurate details about what their costs will be, as well as how your program compares with similar ones at other institutions. Consider sharing news about how your school's career services and employment programs (e.g., internships) work to connect students with hiring companies and increase the return on investment (ROI) of their degree. It's also important to know what students are saying about their concerns about specific schools and programs on review sites like Cappex, GradReports, Unigo, and StudentsReview.

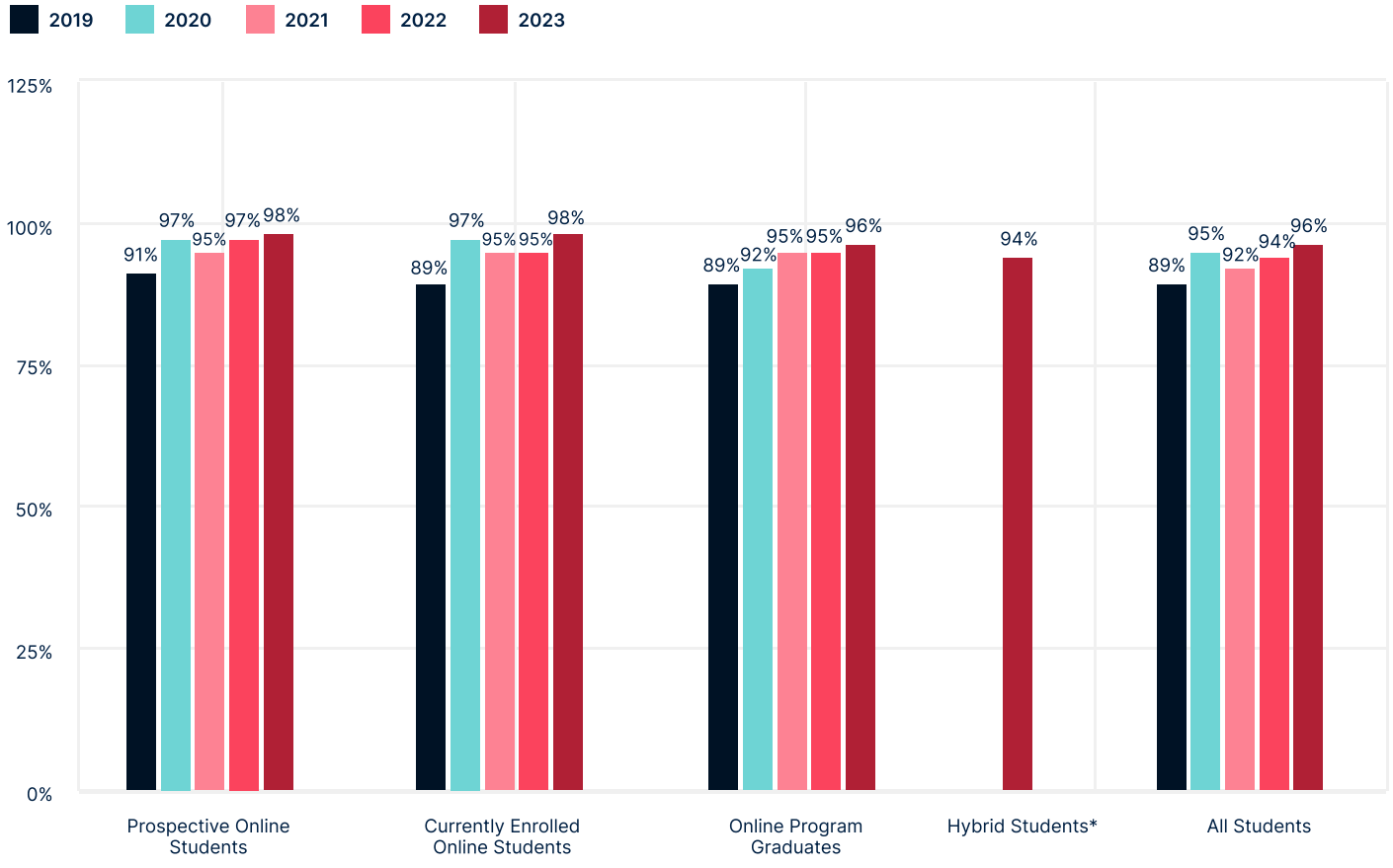
Student Satisfaction

This annual report includes data related to student satisfaction. We ask students to respond to questions about their willingness to recommend online education to others, their perceptions of the ROI of online education, and their perceptions of online education as compared to on-campus education.

Recommending Online Education to Others

The response to the question, "Would you recommend online education to others?" was overwhelmingly positive again this year (98%). Prospective online students, currently enrolled online students, and online program graduates all reported a willingness to recommend online education at the highest levels in the history of this study.

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



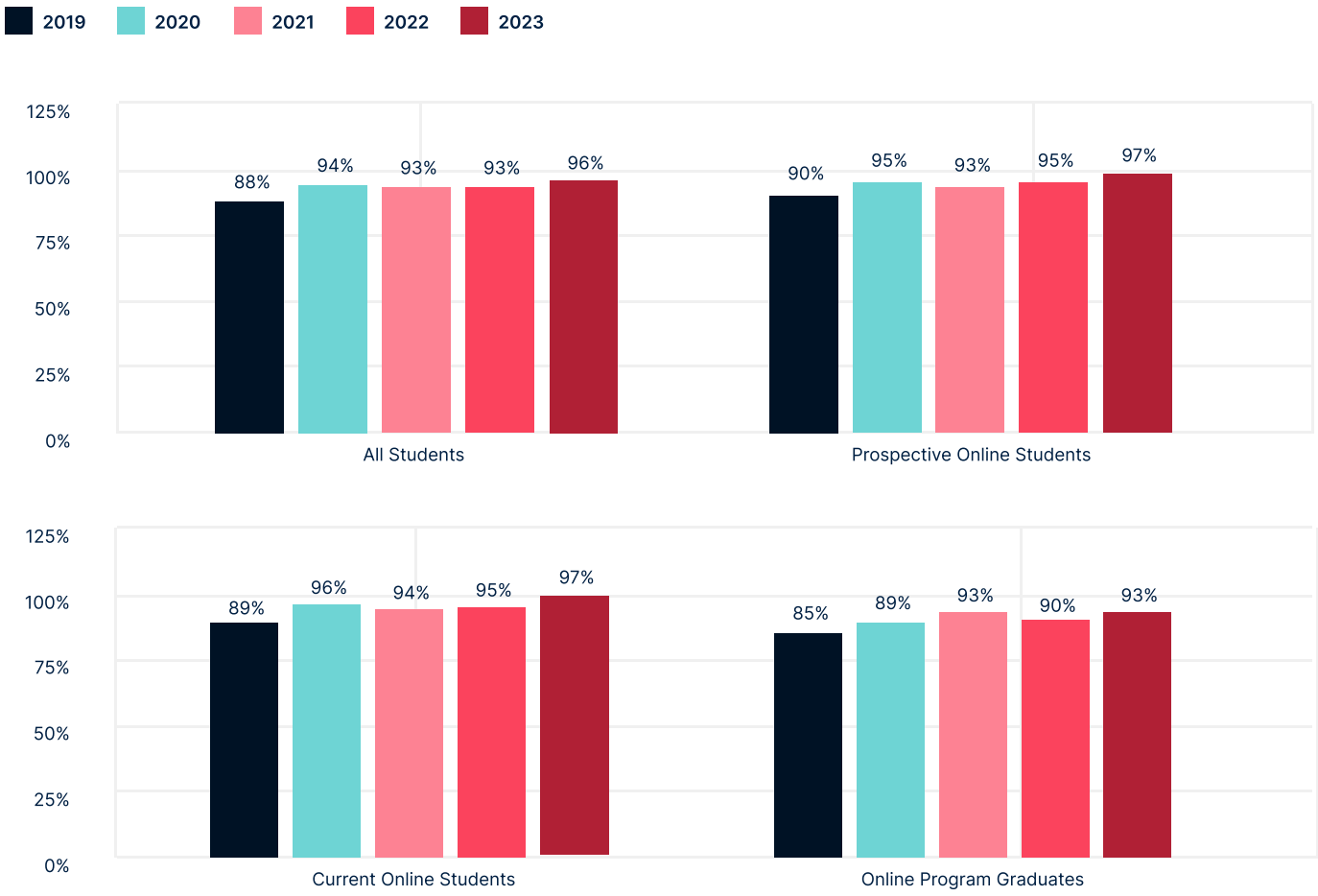
*Student category added in 2023.

Hybrid students were included in the survey for the first time this year. While they were slightly less likely to say they would recommend online education, their willingness to do so was still overwhelmingly strong (94%).

Return on Investment

When asked about ROI, students report a perception that their online degree will have or has had a positive return on investment. This year, the numbers were the highest seen in this study, with 96% of all respondents expecting or experiencing a positive ROI.

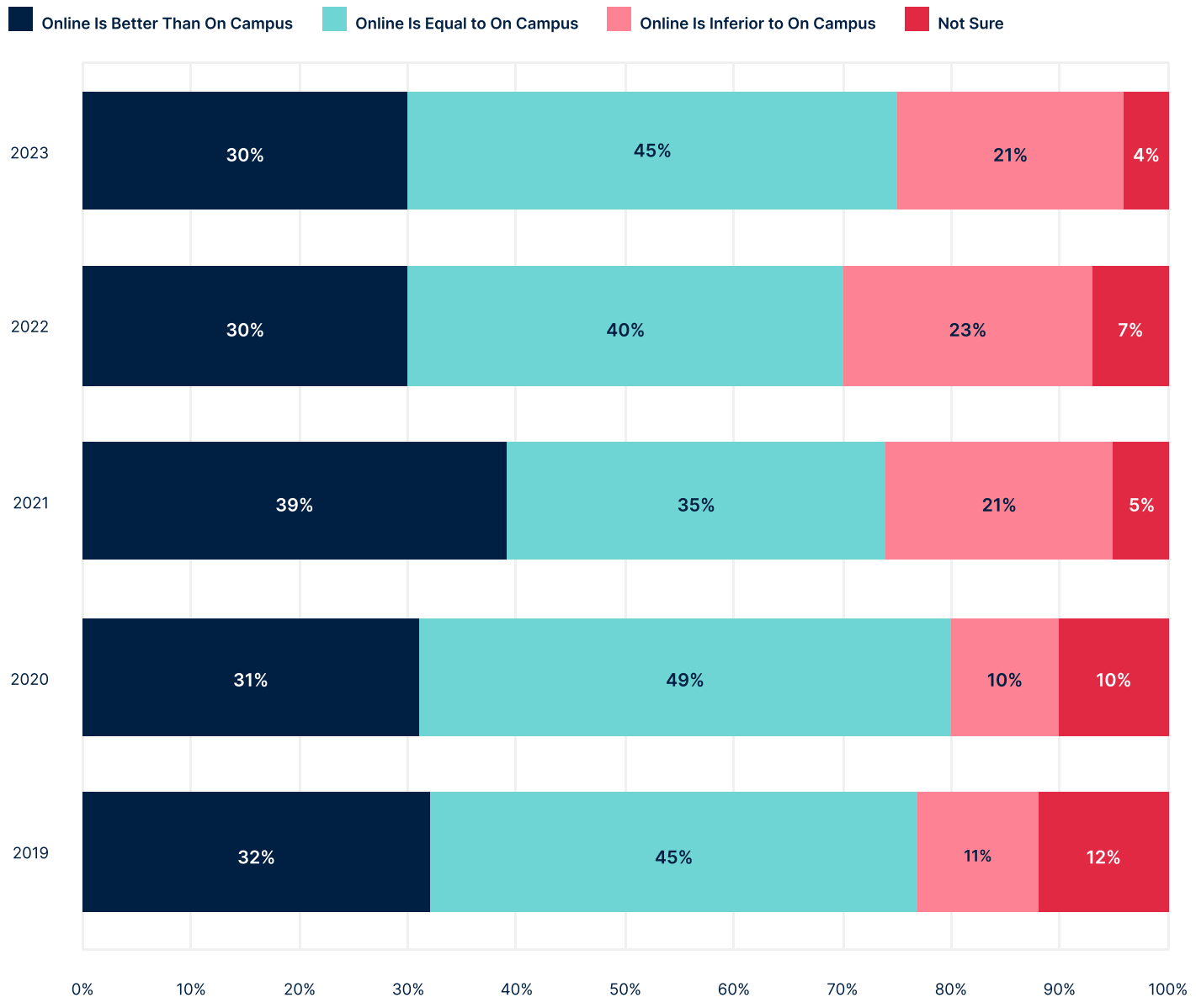
My Online Degree Has or Will Have a Positive ROI — By Report Year



Perception of Online Education

The trends seen over the past several years, with data collection taking place during the pandemic, are steady. Fewer students reported being unsure about how online education compares to on-campus learning, and three-quarters (75%) said that online is better than or equal to on-campus learning.

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



This year, we included hybrid students for the first time, which may account for some of the small changes we're seeing in satisfaction-related responses. Perceptions have been and continue to be positive, but this year, all numbers have increased slightly.

BestColleges INSIGHT

Online Learning Options Continue to Be Popular With Students

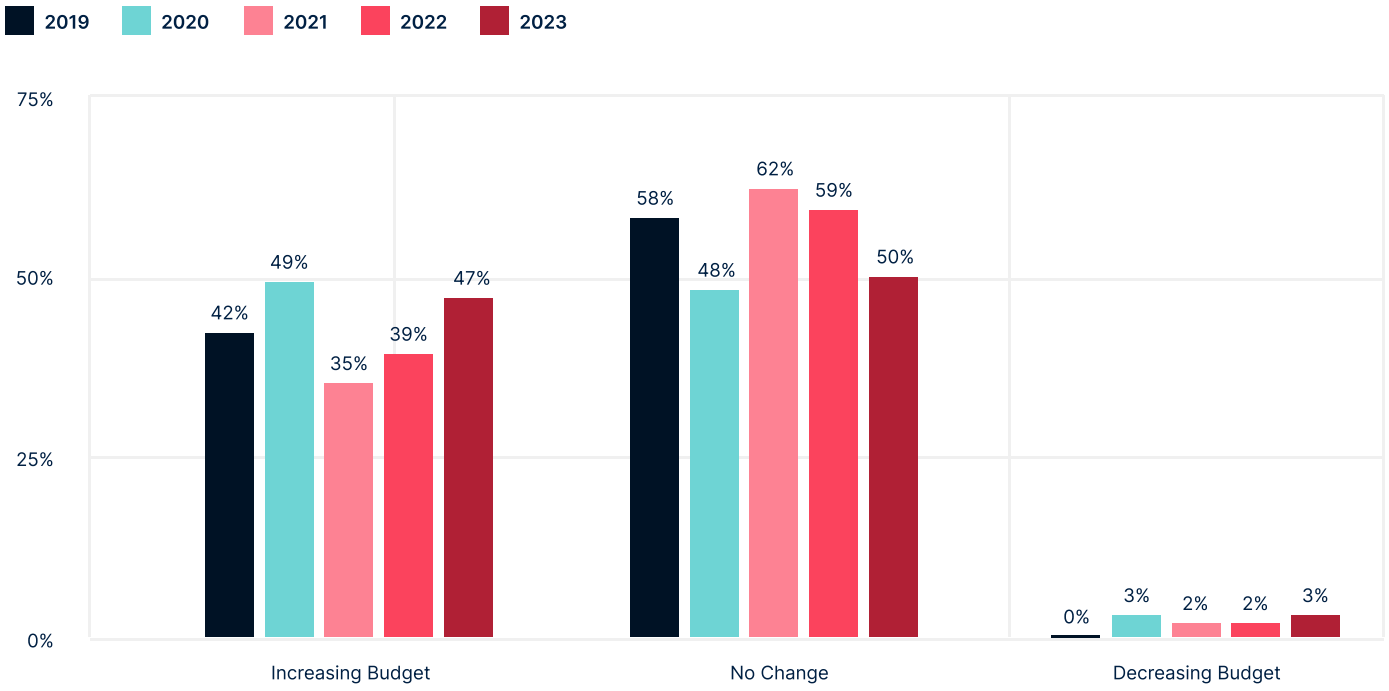
As seen last year, most students have some familiarity with remote and/or online learning due to changes in their college or high school experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. This year, only 4% of students said they were unsure about how online learning compares to on-campus learning, while 75% said the online learning experience is equivalent to or better than the on-campus learning experience. Satisfaction levels with online education are at an all-time high for this study. Schools should take steps to connect with their online students to ensure their needs are being met and that this level of satisfaction is maintained.

Planning for the Future

Budget Planning

Higher education budgets are increasingly difficult to balance as schools encounter lower enrollment and recover from financial changes experienced during the pandemic (Nadworny & Corrillo, 2023). Each year, we ask administrators to weigh in on their school's budget planning for online program development. This year, almost half (47%) of participants said their schools were increasing spending for online programs.

School Budget Planning for Online Program Development — By Report Year



Demand Predictions

Looking ahead, we asked school administrators to share their perceptions of which academic disciplines would experience growth in the next five years in online programs specifically. The predictions across the past several years of this project are similar. The top fields are the same, though they may appear in a different order. This year, the top fields included: *health professions* including nursing (30%), *computer sciences* (20%); and *business* (18%).

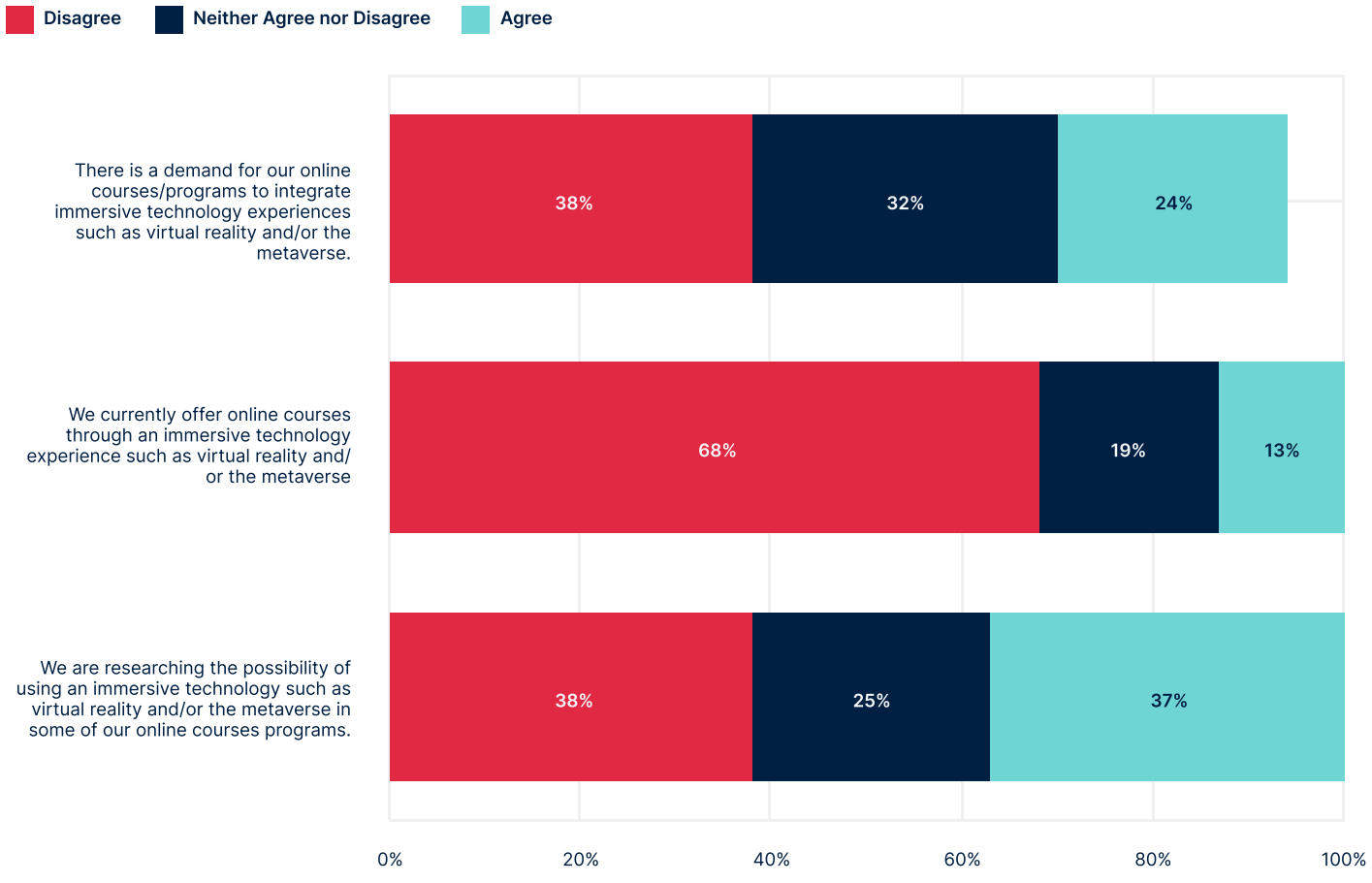
Top Fields of Study for Online Growth in the Next Five Years — By Report Year

	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5
2019	Health Professions (30%)	Business (26%)	Computer Sciences (13%)	Education (6%)	Faith-Based Topics (4%)
2020	Business (20%)	Health Professions (20%)	Computer Sciences (16%)	Faith-Based Topics (8%)	Human Services (Counseling, Psychology, Social Work) (7%)
2021	Computer Sciences (25%)	Health Professions (25%)	Business (20%)	Human Services (Counseling, Psychology, Social Work) (8%)	Humanities and Liberal Arts (6%)
2022	Computer Sciences (26%)	Business (24%)	Health Professions (21%)	Human Services (Counseling, Psychology, Social Work) (8%)	Education (6%)
2023	Health Professions (30%)	Computer Sciences (20%)	Business (18%)	Human Services (Counseling, Psychology, Social Work) (14%)	-

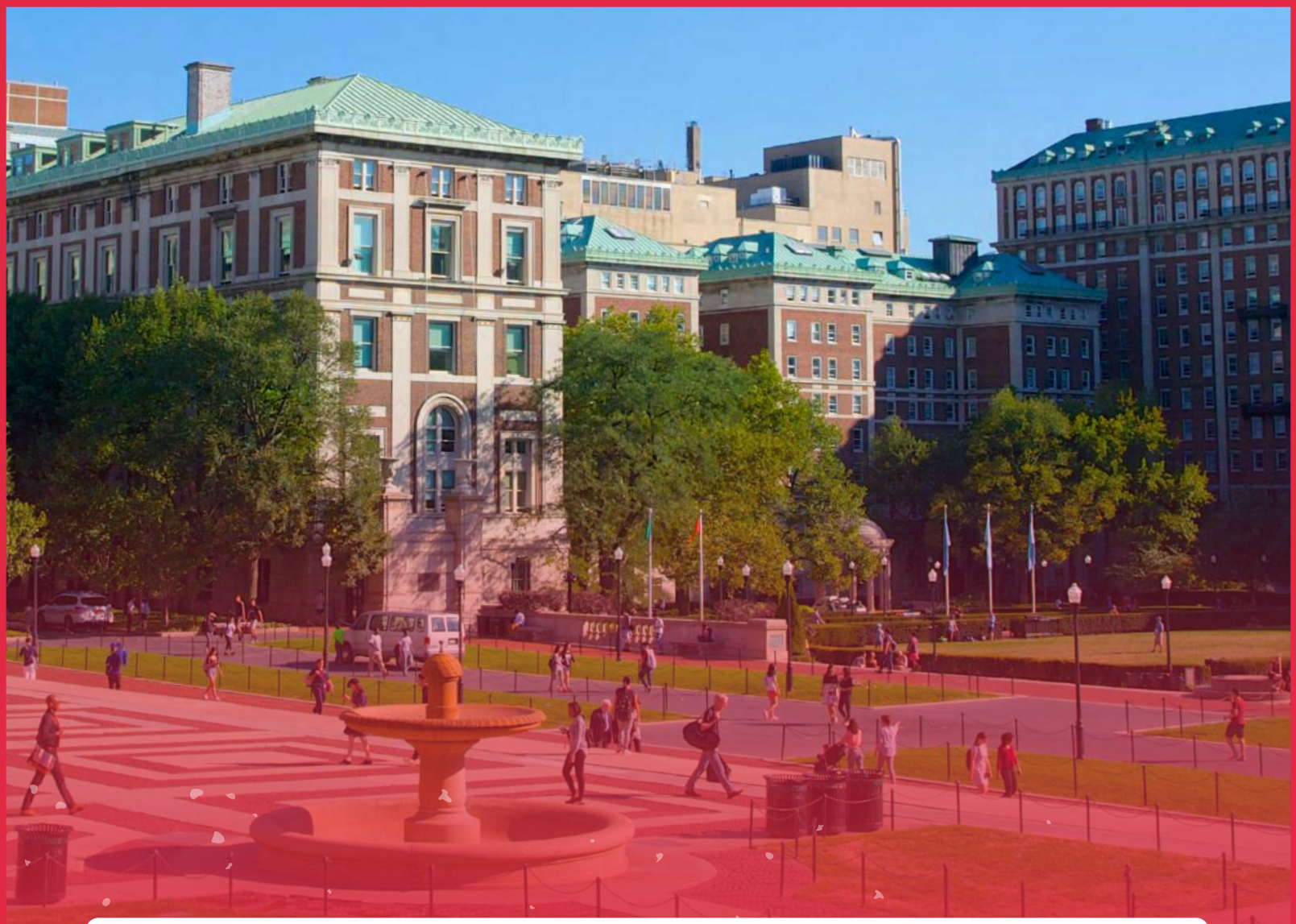
Immersive Learning

The future of higher education likely includes increased use of a variety of technologies from immersive experiences (e.g., metaverse, virtual reality) to artificial intelligence (e.g., ChatGPT). At the time of the survey, our focus was on virtual reality experiences. Administrators shared that there was some demand for immersive experiences in their online programs, but not a lot of current integration in courses. A little more than one-third (37%) are actively researching the possibilities of using virtual reality.

Administrator Perceptions on Immersive Technology Experiences (n=79)



Again, while the areas of anticipated growth are similar to those found in recent years, it's important to remember that the sample size of school administrators was small in this study. The findings in this section need further investigation with a larger sample to establish and verify current trends



BestColleges INSIGHT

Institutional Decision-Makers Are Faced With Tough Decisions and Rapidly Changing Learning Environments

Current institutional planning for the future of higher education indicates an investment of resources through increased budgets for online offerings, a focus on innovation, and research into immersive technologies like virtual reality and the metaverse. In the time since this study was conducted, the increased adoption of language model artificial intelligence (e.g., ChatGPT) has disrupted many industries, including education. Being able to identify the best areas of investment while also vetting the latest innovations for teaching and learning will require challenging and fast decision-making.

Conclusion

As the public debate about the value of a college education continues, schools need to do more to relay the benefits and challenges to students, especially those enrolled in online or hybrid programs. Supporting students who are adding schoolwork to calendars that are already full is more important than ever. And these students need to know what to expect before they enroll in terms of the learning experience, financial commitment, and availability of the student services they need to succeed.

Higher education is facing many headwinds, from changes in enrollment to an influx of new technologies. Insights from this year's report provide a starting point for institutional leaders as they support today's online students while also anticipating and innovating for the future.

Find Ways to Encourage the Balance of Work, School, and Life to Support Student Success

The concept of work-life balance isn't a new one, but online students continue to place it at the top of their list of concerns about studying online. Adding education to their schedule may seem doable for most students who plan to study anytime, anywhere, and fit school in around their other obligations. The reality can be much more challenging than anticipated, however. Prospective students' expectations of the online programs they are considering may be shifting toward a more realistic anticipation of what becoming an online student means and what sacrifices may come with completing an online program.

Connect Prospective Students With the Information They Need in the Places They Are Looking

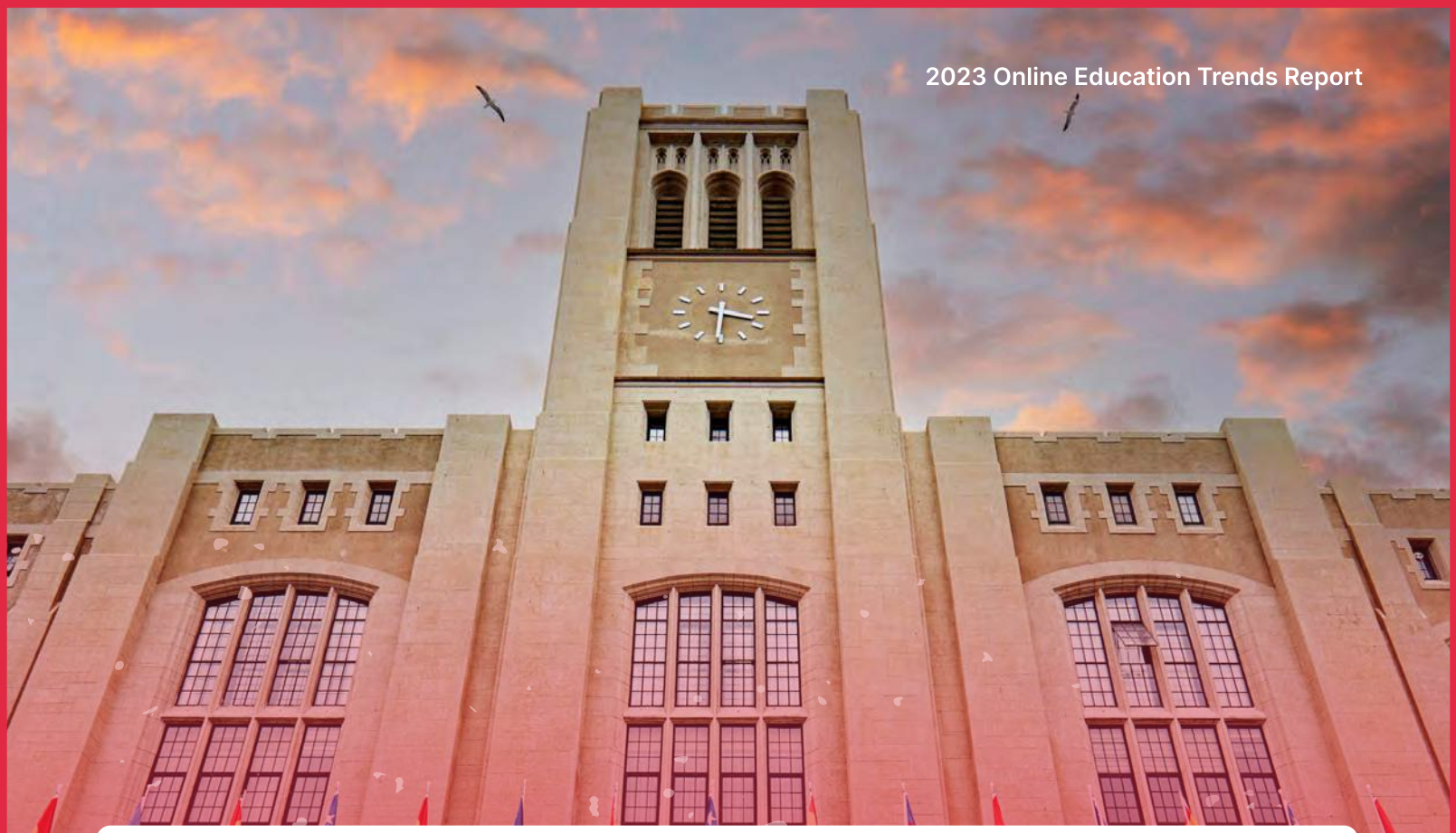
Prospective online students are finding information about academic programs from college websites and online student reviews. Making sure these sites and pages are easy to find, user-friendly, and up-to-date is essential. Students need accurate details about what their costs will be, as well as how your program compares with similar ones at other institutions. Consider sharing news about how your school's career services and employment programs (e.g., internships) work to connect students with hiring companies and increase the return on investment (ROI) of their degree. It's also important to know what students are saying about their concerns about specific schools and programs on review sites like Cappex, GradReports, Unigo, and StudentsReview.

Online Learning Options Continue to Be Popular With Students

As seen last year, most students have some familiarity with remote and/or online learning due to changes in their college or high school experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. This year, only 4% of students said they were unsure about how online learning compares to on-campus learning, while 75% said the online learning experience is equivalent to or better than the on-campus learning experience. Satisfaction levels with online education are at an all-time high for this study. Schools should take steps to connect with their online students to ensure their needs are being met and that this level of satisfaction is maintained.

Institutional Decision-Makers Are Faced With Tough Decisions and Rapidly Changing Learning Environments

Current institutional planning for the future of higher education indicates an investment of resources through increased budgets for online offerings, a focus on innovation, and research into immersive technologies like virtual reality and the metaverse. In the time since this study was conducted, the increased adoption of language model artificial intelligence (e.g., ChatGPT) has disrupted many industries, including education. Being able to identify the best areas of investment while also vetting the latest innovations for teaching and learning will require challenging and fast decision-making.



Contributors

Melissa A. Venable, Ph.D.

Online Education Advisor for BestColleges

Melissa A. Venable, Ph.D., is a principal 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 is an adjunct, online faculty member 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 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, 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. 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

Nadworny, E. & Corrillo, S. (2023, February 2). *The college enrollment drop is finally letting up. That's the good news.* NPR. https://www.npr.org/2022/10/20/1129980557/the-college-enrollment-drop-is-finally-letting-up-thats-the-good-news

Venable, M. A. (2022). *2022 Online education trends report.* BestColleges.com. https://www.bestcolleges.com/app/uploads/2022/03/2022-Online-Education-Trends-Report-Edited.pdf

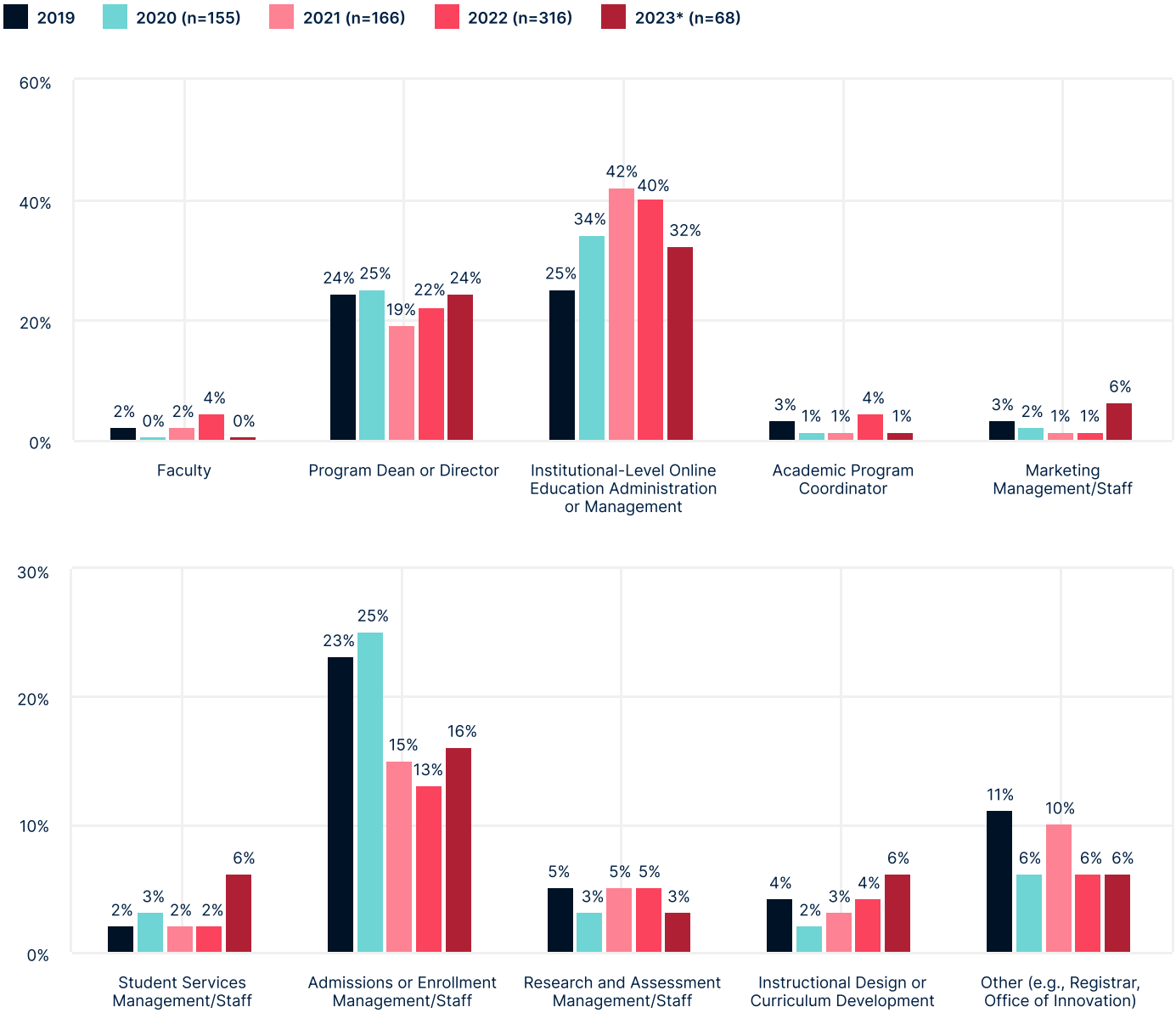
Appendix

Participant Demographics

School Administrator Participants

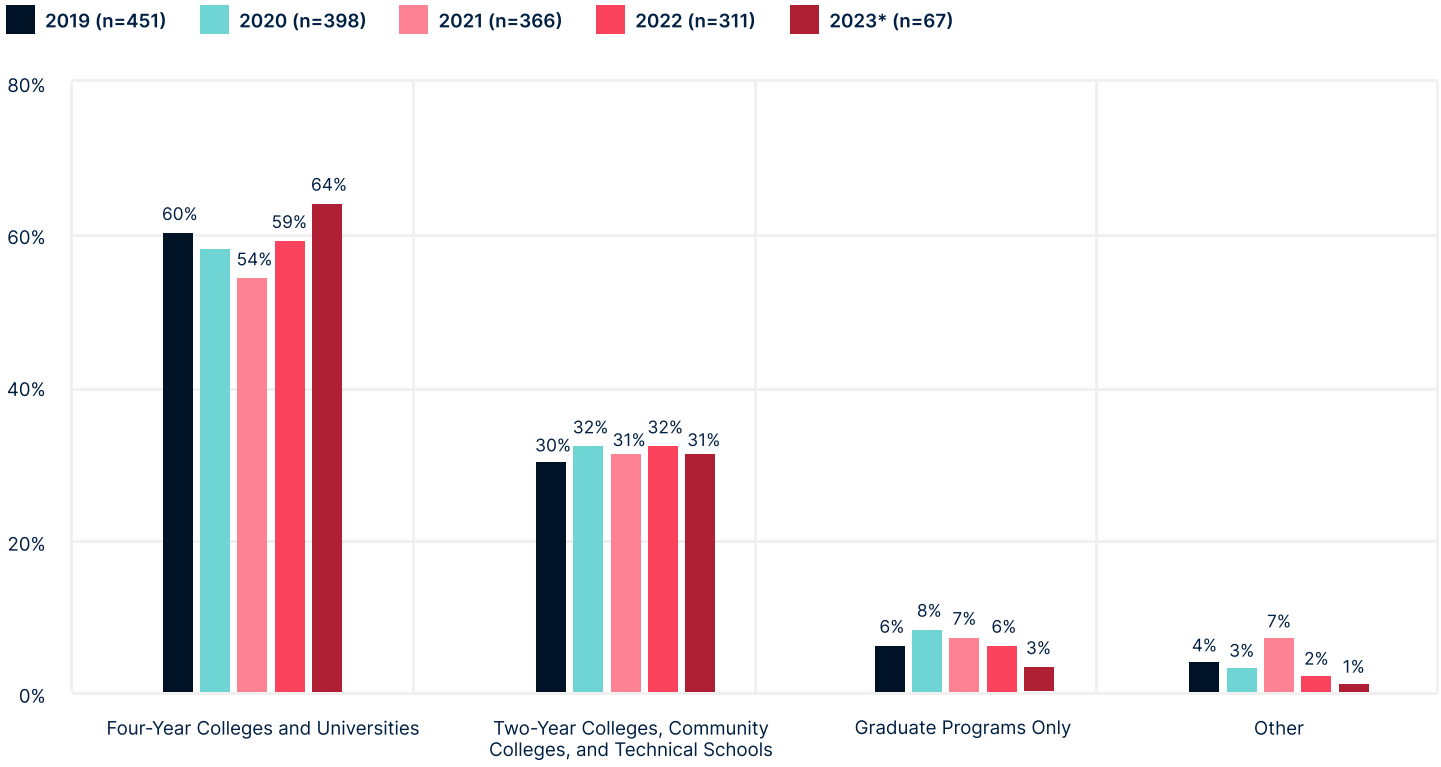
Data Collection - Qualtrics

Respondent's Primary Role



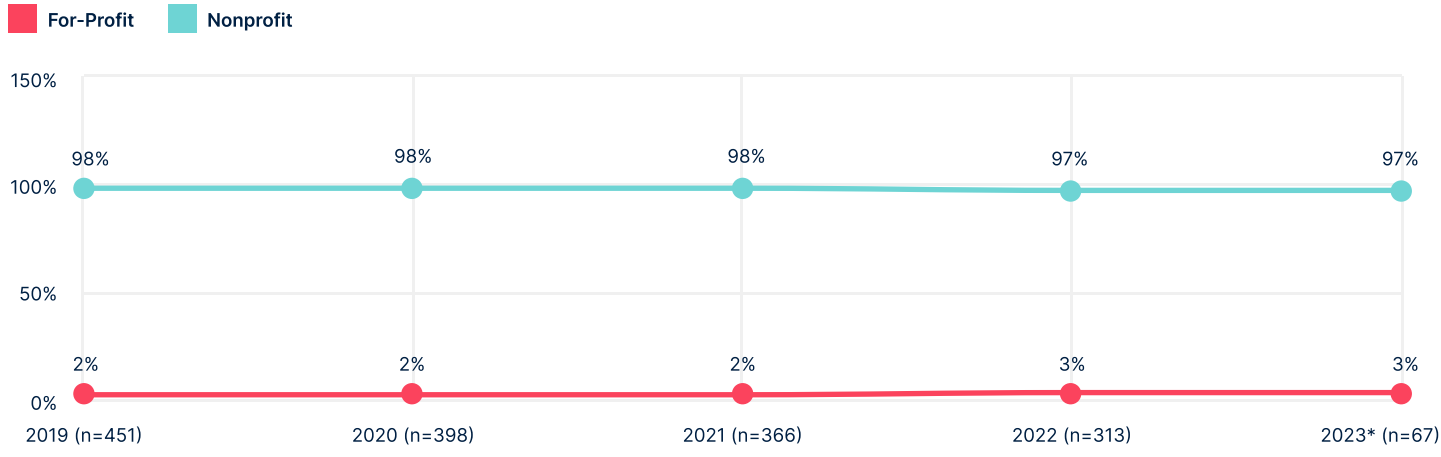
*Low sample size in 2023 limits the ability to generalize findings to the larger population.

Institutional Classification



*Low sample size in 2023 limits the ability to generalize findings to the larger population.

Institution Type

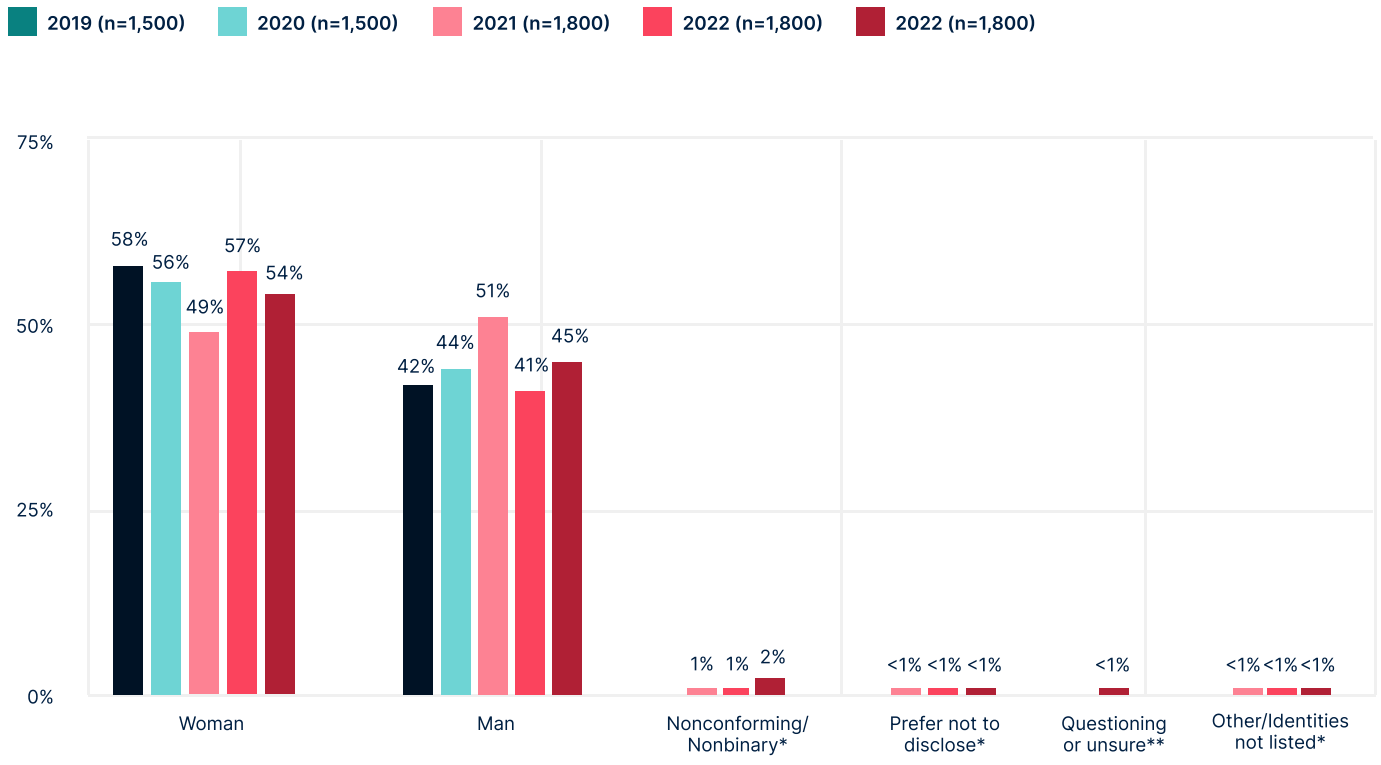


*Low sample size in 2023 limits the ability to generalize findings to the larger population.

Student Participants

Data Collection - Pure Spectrum

Sex/Gender

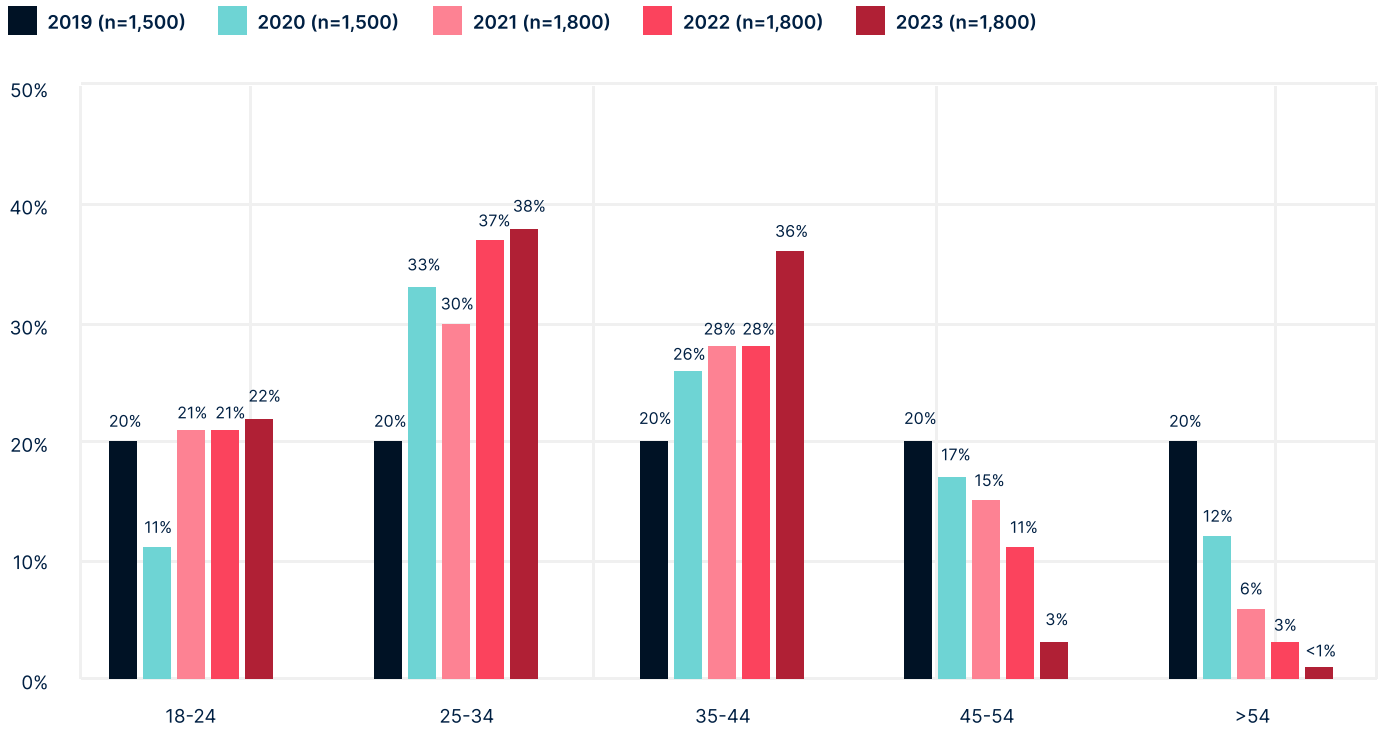


*Response option added in 2021. **Response option added in 2023.

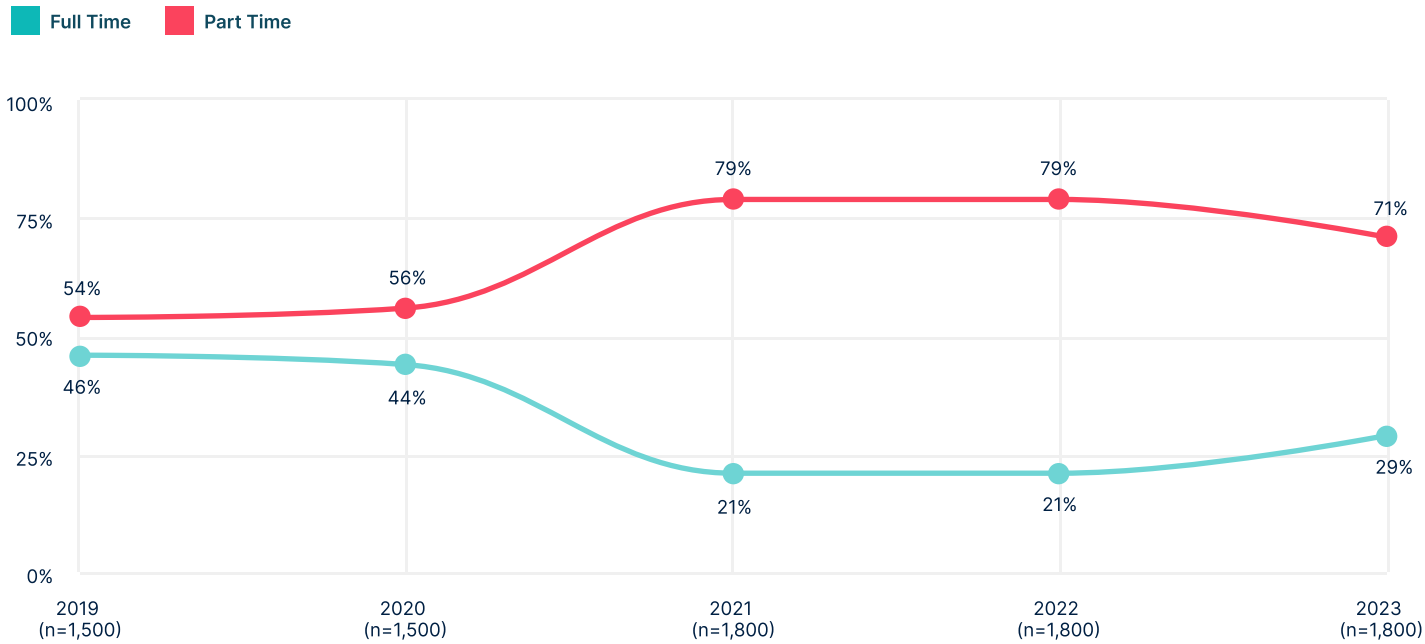
Note: From 2017-2022, "male" and "female" were response options instead of "man" and "woman." In 2023, we revised our survey demographic questions to be more inclusive.

Do you identify as transgender? (n=1,800)

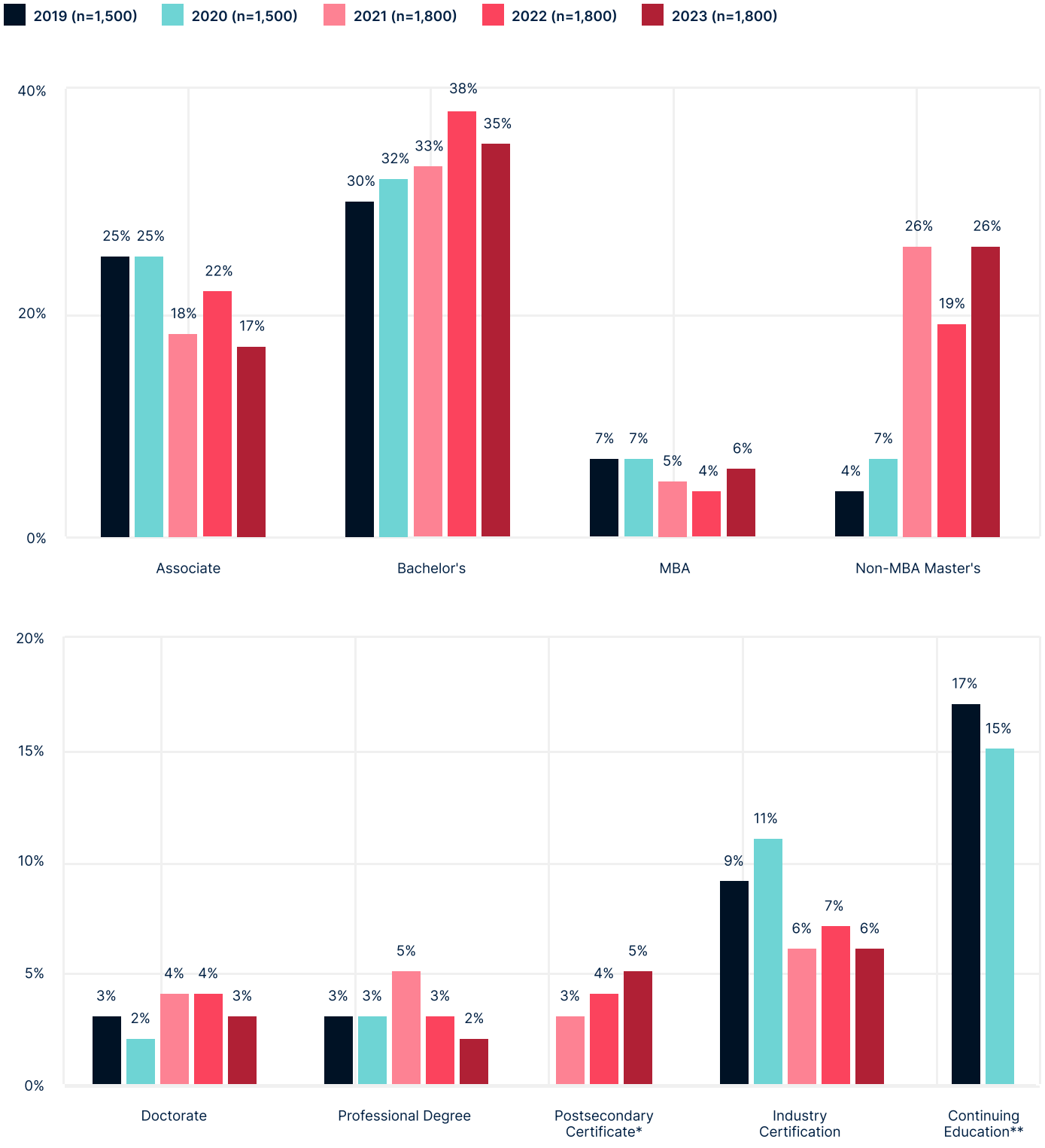
Age



Enrollment Status

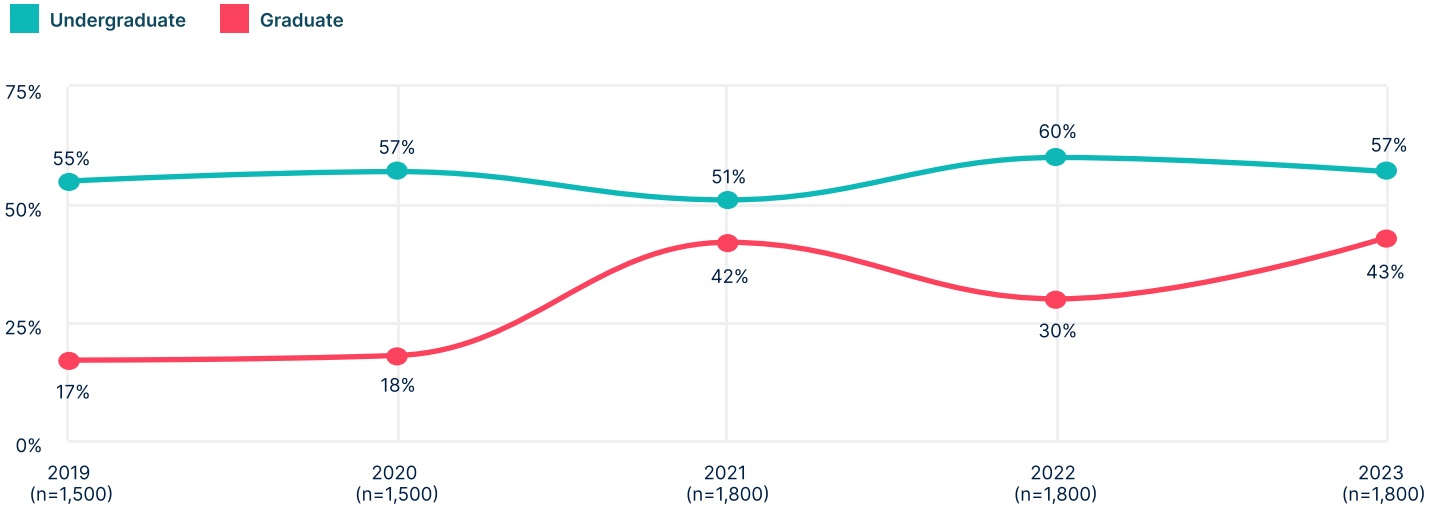


Degree Pursuing

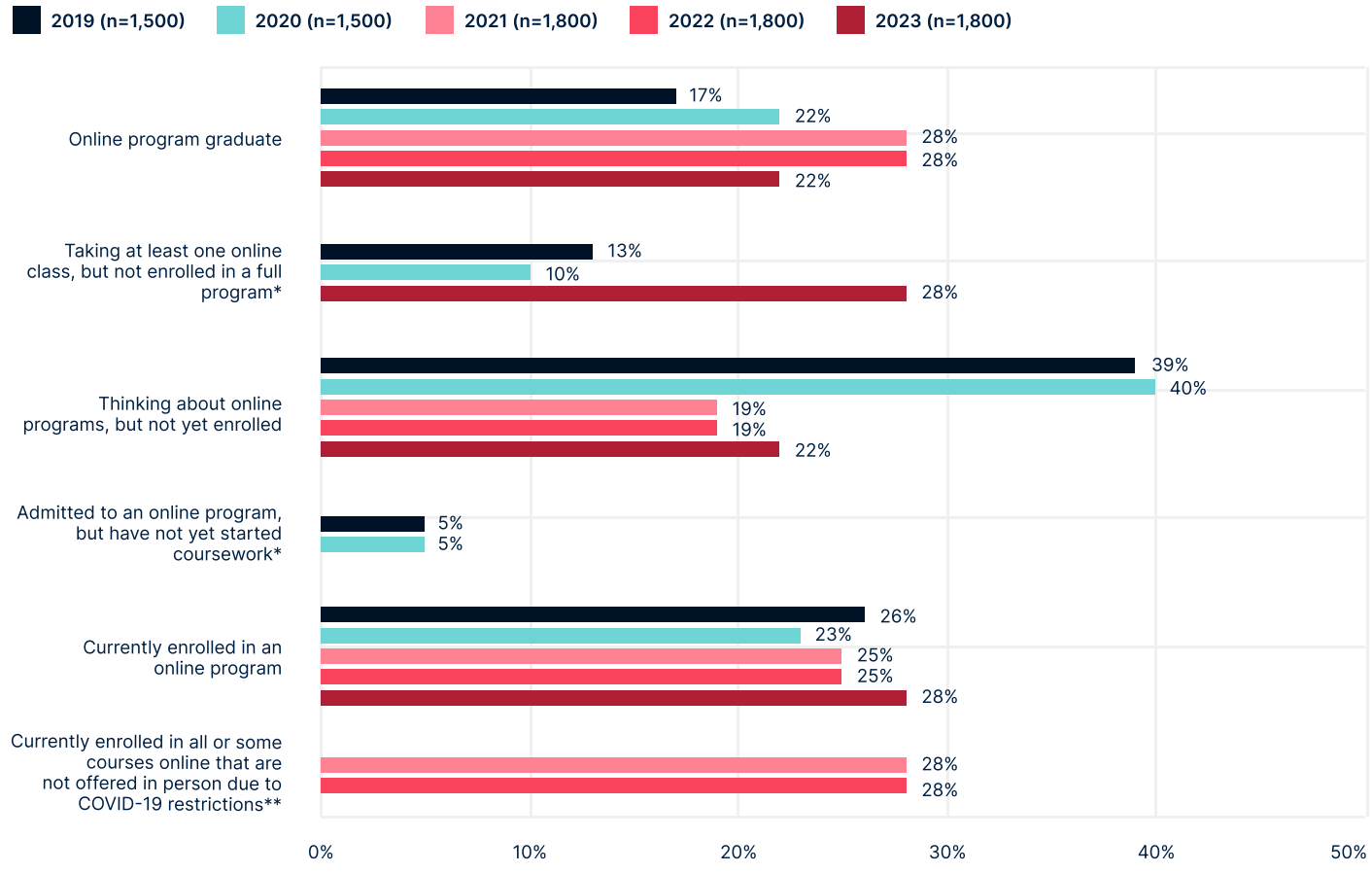


*Response option added in 2021. **Response option removed in 2021.

Enrollment Level



Student Status

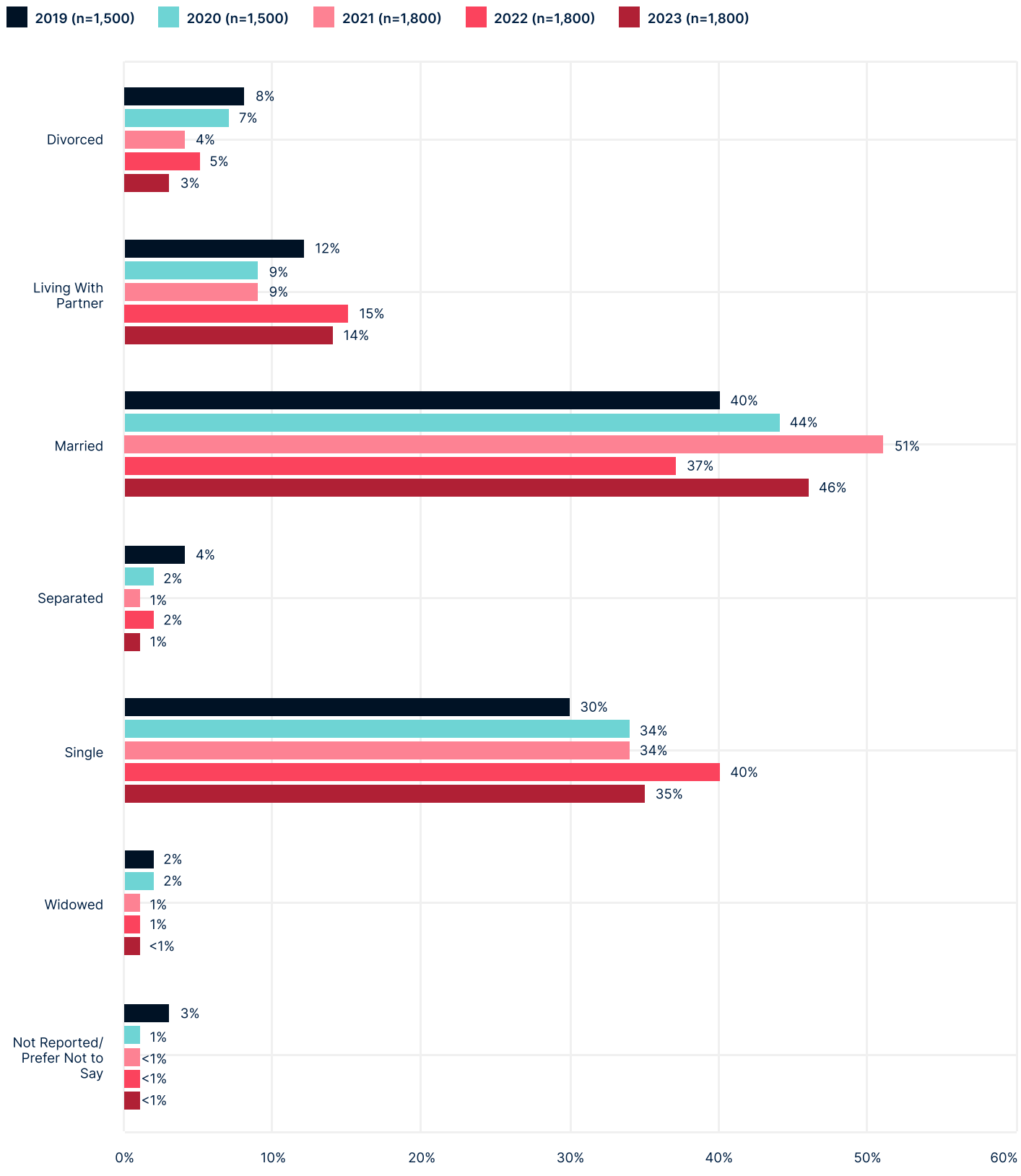


*Response option removed in 2021, returned in 2023. **Response option added in 2021, removed in 2023.

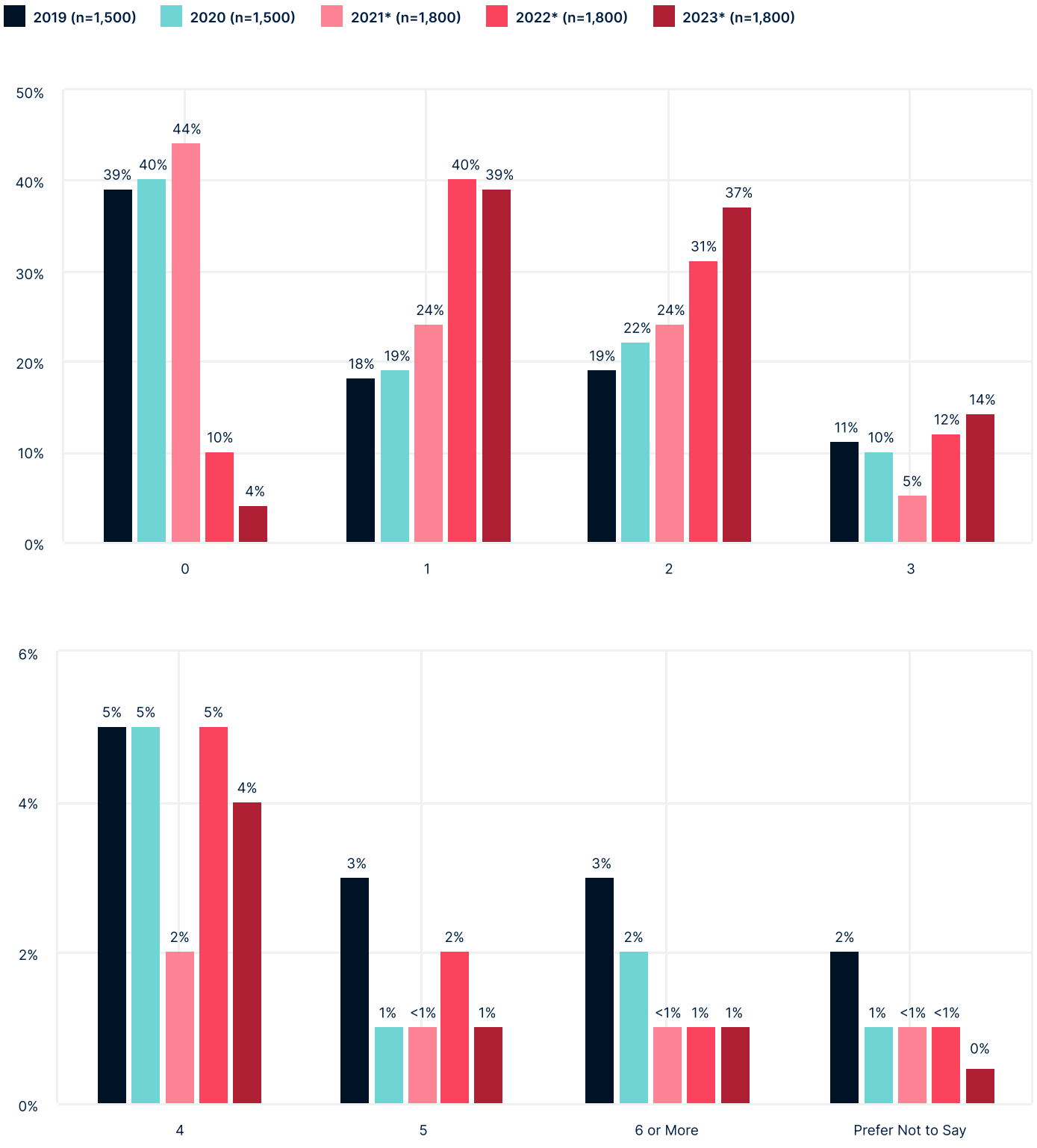
Field of Study/Intended Field of Study

*Response option added in 2022.

Marital Status

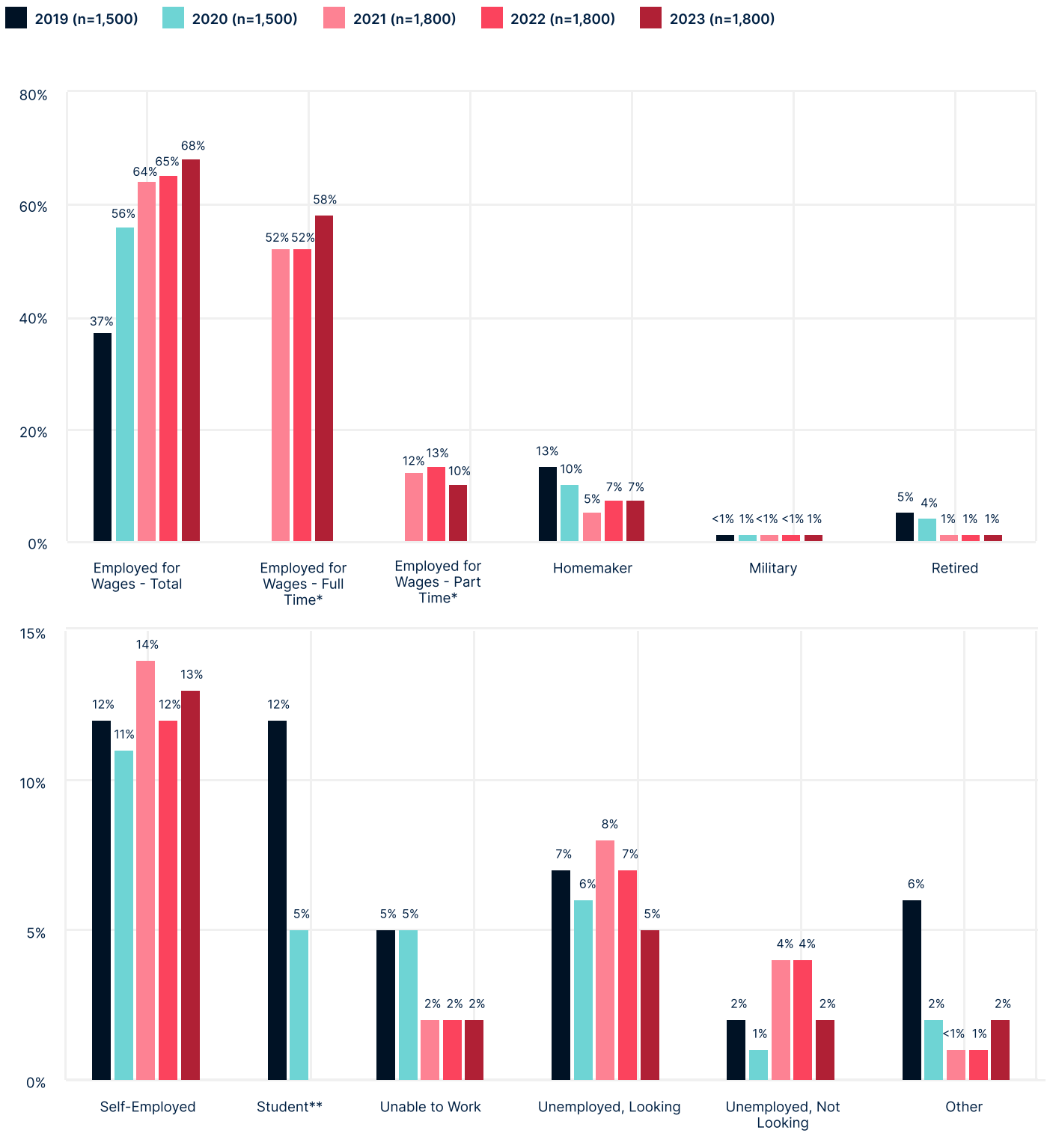


Number of Children



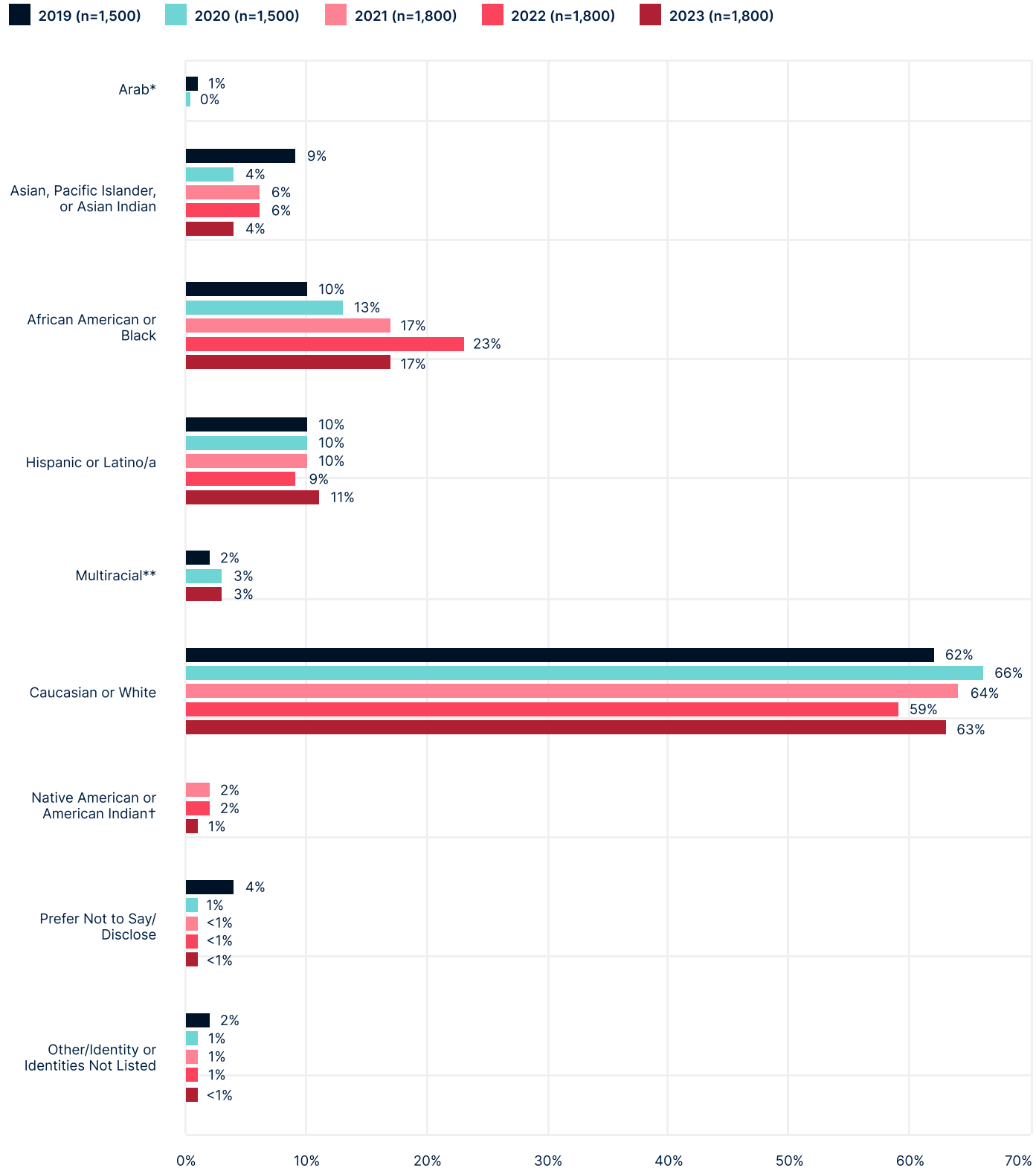
*Item revised in 2021 to reflect the number of children under the age of 18 living at home.

Employment Status



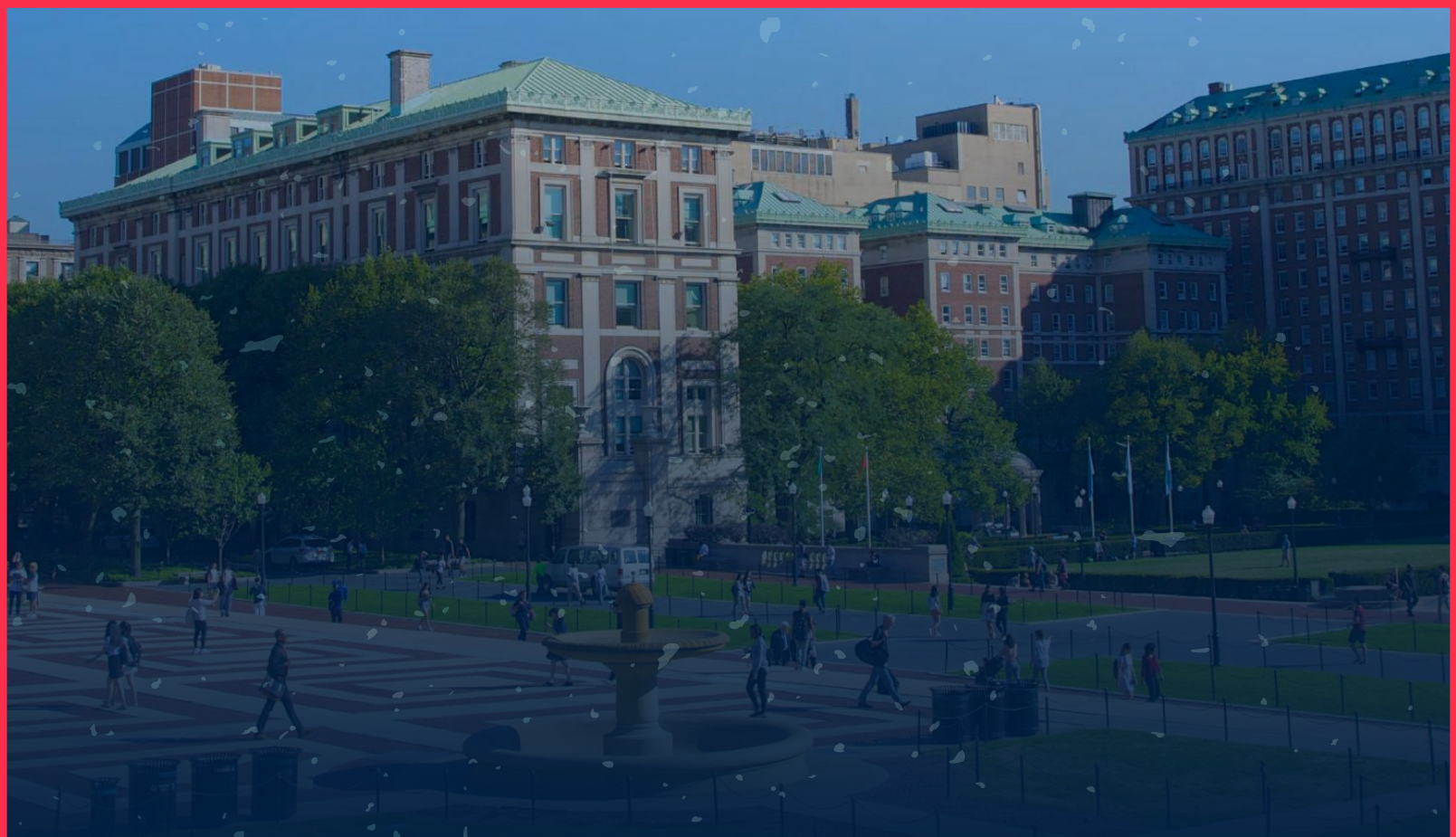
*Response option added in 2021. **Response option removed in 2021.

Race/Ethnicity



*Response option removed in 2021 and returned in 2023. **Response option removed in 2021 and returned in 2023. †Response option added in 2021.

Annual Household Income



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

For additional information, contact: **research@bestcolleges.com**

Best Colleges

@BestCollegesCom

@BestCollegesCom

@BestColleges_Offical

@thebestcolleges

© 2023 BestColleges.com, a Red Ventures Company

Venable, M. A. (2023). *2023 Online education trends report*. BestColleges.com.

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