



BEST COLLEGES 2015 ONLINE LEARNING SURVEY:
**ONLINE STUDENT NEEDS,
PREFERENCES AND
EXPECTATIONS**

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Online Student Needs, Preferences and Expectations

Online learning is still a relatively new phenomenon in higher education, but one with a significant impact on decisions made at colleges and universities around the world. While distance education methods, such as correspondence courses, were developed centuries ago, the first fully online education curriculum was offered in 1994¹. The options available, and the technologies used to access them, have changed over the past 20 years and continue to evolve at a rapid pace.

Institutions of all types and models - private and public, for-profit and not-for-profit, online and campus-based - are exploring a wide range of higher education options. These include the blended delivery of coursework and/or support services, regional learning centers, open education materials and courses, partnerships with education and technology providers and completely online curricula. The future of online education is promising with predictions and projections towards technological trends, which include evolving learning environments, personalized learning strategies, the use of wearable technology and continued growth of collaboration between universities².

It's been widely reported that higher education enrollment is down^{3,4}. Employment and other economic factors alter the rate at which many Americans choose to attend college. The Babson Survey Research Group's latest annual report found that while the number of students enrolled in at least one online course increased 3.7% from the previous year, it was the smallest annual growth rate in the report's history. However, this study also found that "online enrollment growth far exceeded that of overall higher education"⁵. The number of online students increased overall, but decreased in the for-profit sector specifically.

But while future growth of online student enrollment may be more moderate than in previous years, online education options continue to gain ground. Because of this, students interested in a college education have more choices available to them than ever before. Their demographics and preferences have helped shape the options available, particularly those which use digital learning formats on online platforms. Many factors involved in an individual student's preferences for online learning are driven, for example, by work and other commitments. As the competition to attract and enroll students in online programs increases, so does the need to understand who these students are and why they choose digital learning courses over the traditional on-campus format. This insight will help shape the decisions being made about the design and development of future online academic programs.

The Study

Who is learning online? Why do students choose an online format? In May 2015, Best Colleges conducted a web-based survey of students studying online in the U.S. to explore the answers to these questions. Responses were submitted by 1,055 participants, all of whom identified themselves as having taken at least one online class. This sample group was intended to be a representation of the general population of the U.S. and was not limited by state, age, race, or gender. The results provide us - and educators - with a snapshot of today's online student.

DEFINING ONLINE LEARNING

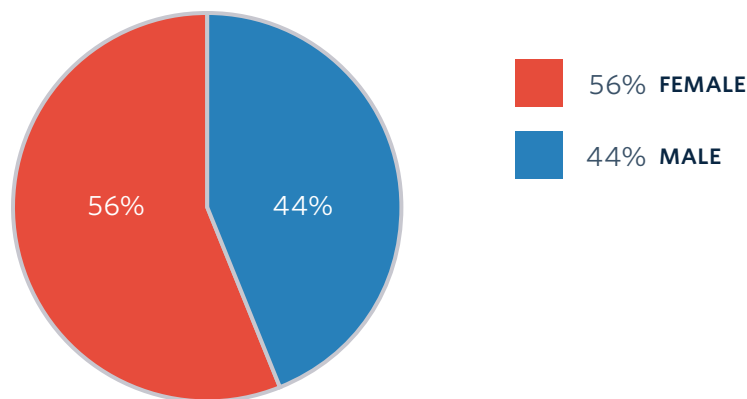
Almost half (45%) of the 1,055 survey participants reported taking more than one online course, but not an entire program, while a fraction (9%) of respondents took all of their courses online. More than one-third (36%) reported choosing online non-credit options for personal learning, which could also include workplace training and other learning contexts.

For the purposes of this report, an 'online course' consists of an activity that has a course structure (organized materials with begin and end dates), but does not necessarily result in academic credit.

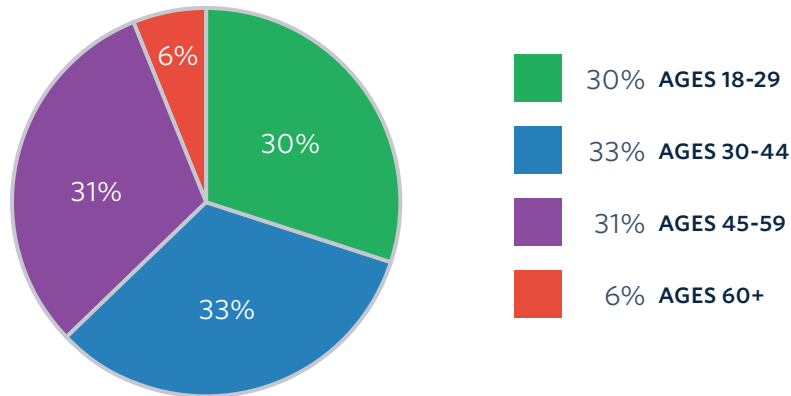
Online Student Demographics

Who is today's online learner? The characteristics of our sample include the following:

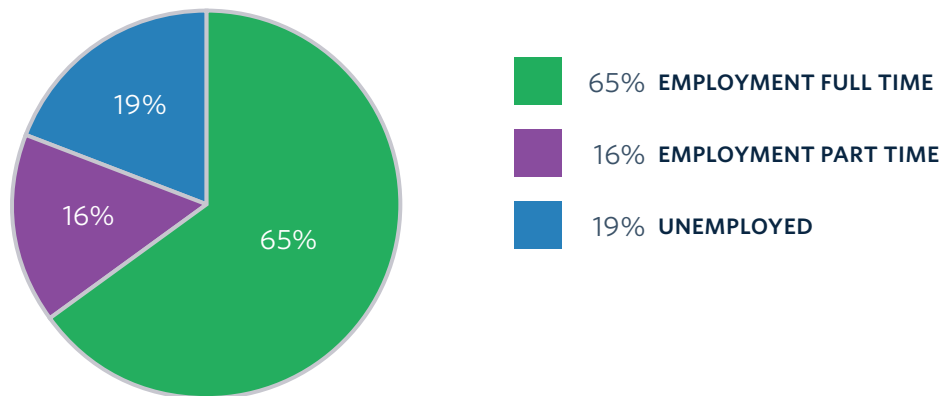
GENDER BREAKDOWN OF ONLINE STUDENTS



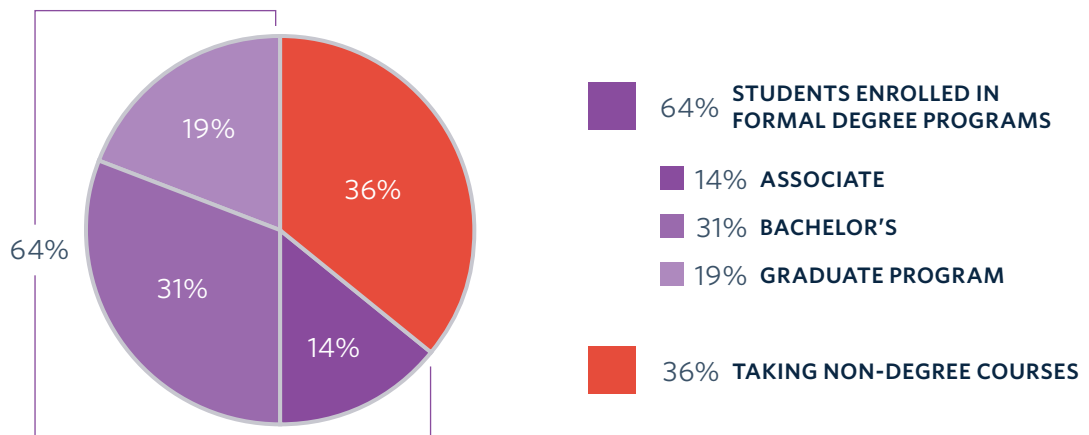
AGE BREAKDOWN OF ONLINE STUDENTS



ONLINE STUDENT EMPLOYMENT STATUS WHILE COMPLETING CLASSES



ENROLLMENT OF ONLINE STUDENTS



The annual Online College Students report from The Learning House and Aslanian Market Research also provides a demographic profile of online students⁶. Our findings are similar to their 2014 sample, in the reporting of gender, marital status and dependent children. However, our sample included a smaller percentage of students in the 18 to 29 and 30 to 44 age groups, and a larger percentage of students over the age of 45.

While the characteristics of online students have remained somewhat stable over the past three years, the 2014 report from The Learning House compares data from 2012, 2013, and 2014. Several potential trends were identified, including a change in employment status in which “the percentage of students employed full time has decreased each year from 2012 to 2014”⁶. Compared to The Learning House’s 2014 student profile, our participants were more likely to be employed, either full- or part-time while enrolled in their online courses.

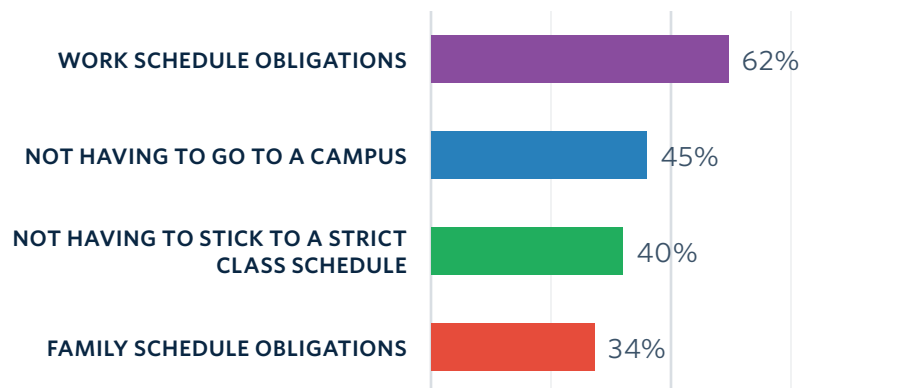
Why Do Students Choose Online Learning?

What are the perceived benefits of enrolling in an online course or program to reach these goals? What external factors play the biggest role in choosing an online learning option? The majority of our survey participants revealed that they were motivated by the convenience of and access to online education, and reported on how their enrollment was related to employment.

IT IS CONVENIENT.

With on-campus programs still plentiful and online programs on the rise, students have a lot of choices. When asked about their decisions to learn online, and the external factors affecting these decisions, many students indicated more than one response related to convenience and flexibility.

TOP EXTERNAL FACTORS FOR CHOOSING ONLINE CLASSES

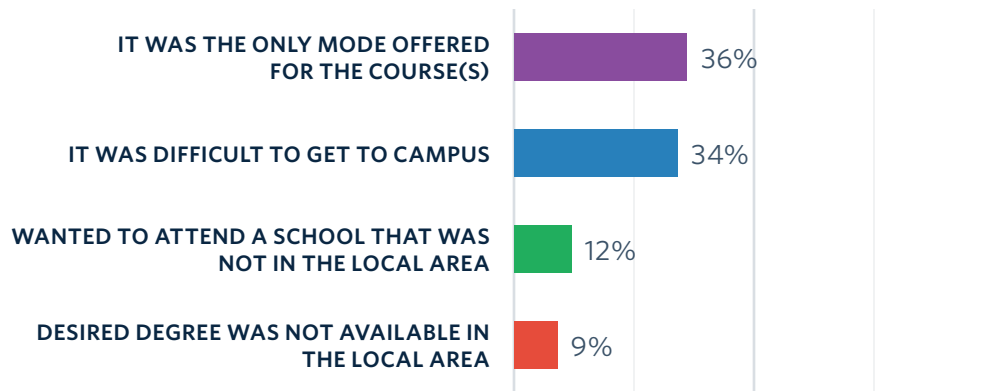


These trends toward decisions based on convenience factors were consistent across age groups and levels of program enrollment (i.e., associate, bachelor's, graduate.)

ACCESS INCREASES OPTIONS.

As the number of online courses and programs grow, covering a diverse range of topics and disciplines, students can study in ways that would not be possible without online access. The students surveyed chose online delivery in part due to the following:

TOP REASONS FOR CHOOSING ONLINE DELIVERY



ACCEPTANCE IS GROWING.

The Babson Survey Research Group finds increasing acceptance of online learning by chief academic leaders working in higher education across the country. In their 2014 study, 70% of those surveyed said that online learning is “critical to their long-term strategy”⁵. Employer acceptance of online education can differ by degree and industry, but there is evidence of growing acceptance in some fields. In education, for example, it’s not unusual for teachers to pursue master’s degrees and specialization certificates in blended or fully online programs^{7,8}.

In addition, a small segment of our survey respondents (13%) reported that they enrolled online because their “employer encouraged it.” While this is currently the case for a fraction of those participating, it is a minority which promises to grow quickly. As online education continues to evolve and graduates gain employment, it is projected that some will turn to digitally-formatted courses to advance their careers. For example, some of the participants indicated that their online learning efforts involved:

- Training requirements of their employer
- Education requirements to earn professional certification and continuing education for certification renewal
- Professional development activities

Reaching Goals and Meeting Expectations

The majority of students who participated in our survey reported an interest in a college education as a way to further their career plans (63%) and to achieve personal learning and growth (61%), while a smaller group see education as a way to change career paths (17%). Younger students (ages 18-29) were more likely to be enrolled in a bachelor's degree program (53%), while older students (ages 45-59) were more likely to be enrolled in non-credit courses for personal learning (54%).

Does online learning help students achieve their personal and professional goals? The majority (72%) of our survey respondents answered "Yes" to this question. Another 16% reported that while they did not get what they wanted out of the experience, they still found value in the courses. An overwhelming majority (85%) said they would recommend taking online courses to others.

Implications for Online Education's Primary Stakeholders

For individuals interested in studying online and institutions developing their first online programs, there are many ways to begin, from open online education options (e.g., MOOCs) to formal academic degree programs and online training courses. This method of delivery can now be found in all types of institutions, at many levels, and is designed to fit the busy schedules of today's students.

PROSPECTIVE ONLINE STUDENTS

The responses we received helped confirm the general perception that one of the major benefits to online education is convenience. This format is popular among students who have families and time-consuming careers. With so many options available to students, it is important to assess your priorities and choose a program that fits your needs. While more than half (55%) of our survey participants said they wouldn't do anything differently in preparation for online learning, other respondents (23%) said they would have compared more programs before enrolling, and a small group of students (19%) would do more to take costs and financial aid into account when making their college decisions.

EMPLOYERS

Best Colleges' 2015 survey of online students found that some employers are encouraging online education and training opportunities for their employees. Online learning is also a viable option for completing the education requirements of professional certification, as well as maintaining certification status through online continuing education credits. In our survey, 72% of online students reported that they were able to reach their goals, the majority of which were related to career advancement and transition. Drexel University Online shared that employers usually focus on accreditation, affiliation with a traditional campus and the school or

program's reputation, and brand when considering applicants and comparing online and traditional programs⁹.

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

This group can include a variety of stakeholders all working to support students studying online as well as on campus. Administrators, faculty members and service providers (e.g., advisors, counselors, librarians) all play important roles in the delivery of online education. Creating programs of academic value, which include consideration of changing student demographics, is essential for success. While convenience was clearly a priority, only 12% of students in our study also chose an online course route because it seemed more affordable than a comparable campus option, and only 7% thought that their online option was more valuable than the on-campus equivalent. The ongoing process of maintaining accreditation and affordability will be important to students, institutions, and employers alike as the industry evolves.

The Future of Online Learning

Our survey participants provided not only a snapshot of today's online education experience, but also a glimpse at the future possibilities of this learning format. Tracking student preferences and goals allows us to identify trends in their needs and potential gaps in what is available.

ACHIEVING CAREER GOALS

The pursuit of a college education is often motivated by a career plan that involves earning a degree or certificate, or completing professional certification. Online students are able to engage in these courses and programs, while they continue to work. The flexibility to accommodate office and family schedules means they don't have to quit a job in order to participate in coursework.

Online education options may continue to grow in numbers and specialization as employers become more aware of the benefits of online learning and continue the trend of encouraging their employees to enroll in courses and programs. American Public University's collaboration with Walmart is just one example of a program design that allows employees to earn college credit for knowledge and skills learned on-the-job, and to prepare for advancement within the company¹⁰.

INCREASING AFFORDABILITY

The cost of higher education continues to be a challenge for low-income students. Almost 20% of the students responding to our survey indicated some level of regret in not taking costs and financial aid into account when making their educational decisions. While there are no clear indicators that college costs will decrease in the future, students can do a lot to prepare themselves for the financial realities of

becoming a student. Recent partnerships between companies and universities, such as Starbucks and Arizona State¹¹, provide online learning for working students, while also offering a break on tuition.

BLENDED STRATEGIES

Roughly one third of our survey group reported that their courses and programs were only available online. The remainder completed hybrid courses or programs which included some offline, on-campus components. A blended approach to education is gaining popularity as a way to provide both in-person and web-based interaction between students, faculty members and a variety of support services. The models for this approach range from hybrid classes that require several face-to-face meetings, to online classes at schools that offer additional support (e.g., libraries, advisors, tutors) in a physical location. As colleges and universities continue to implement and refine new learning environments, the options available to students will increase in number and efficiency.

There's more to be explored about the priorities and preparation of colleges students, and their decisions about on-campus, online and hybrid learning. Follow Best Colleges as we continue to monitor and report on the latest trends in higher education.

References

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- 2 [NMC Horizon Report, 2015 Higher Education Edition, from the New Media Consortium](#)
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- 4 [Why are Fewer People Going to College? from PBS](#)
- 5 [Grade Level: Tracking Online Education in the United States, 2014 from the Babson Survey Research Group and the Online Learning Consortium](#)
- 6 [Online College Students: Comprehensive Data on Demands and Preferences from The Learning House and Aslanian Market Research](#)
- 7 [How Employers View Your Online Bachelor's Degree from U.S. News-Education](#)
- 8 [What Employers Think of Your Online Master's in Education from U.S. News-Education](#)
- 9 [How Do Employers View Online Degrees? from Drexel University Online](#)
- 10 [Walmart Lifelong Learning Program from American Public University](#)
- 11 [Starbucks and ASU Offer Four Years of College with Full Tuition Coverage from Starbucks Newsroom](#)

Our survey was conducted in May 2015 using Survey Monkey, and issued online to 1,055 individuals who completed at least one class online.