2021

Trends in College Career and Employment Planning

Tracking trends in employer perceptions of online education and recruiting practices for online and on-campus students.

Best Colleges

2021 Trends in College Career and Employment Planning

Insights From Business Leaders

Melissa A. Venable, Ph.D.

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

Table of Contents

Executive Summary 4

Introduction 5
Project Goals 5
Methodology 5
Definitions 5

Employer Perceptions of Online Education 6

Employee Education Incentives and Academic Partnerships 9

College Recruiting Insights 11
Recruiting Tools and Activities 11
Recruiting Online and On-Campus Students 13

Continued Impact of COVID-19 15

Conclusion 18

Contributors 19

Data Notes 20

References 20

Appendix: Participant Demographics 21

Executive Summary

This second annual report, part of the BestColleges research series, presents trends in college student hiring and recruiting within the U.S. Out of 1,000 business leaders surveyed this year, 624 shared how their companies and organizations currently recruit and hire college students from both online and campus-based programs. Survey participants also shared their perceptions of online education, details about how they partner with academic institutions to provide education and training incentives to employees, their recruiting strategies, and the continued impact of COVID-19 on their work.

KEY FINDINGS

Employer Perceptions of Online Education

- Over half (56%) of business leaders who recruit students and grads said that online is better than or equal to on-campus learning, up slightly from 49% in 2020.
- Older business leaders who recruit students and graduates were more likely to say online education is worse than learning on campus.

Employee Education Incentives and Academic Partnerships

- This year, 44% of business leaders from organizations that recruit students said that they *do not* offer online education or training opportunities to employees, compared to only 23% in 2020.

College Recruiting Insights

- More than half of the 1,000 business leaders surveyed (59%) said their organizations engage in college student recruiting and hiring, with many specifically targeting online students and programs.
- Only 30% of organizations recruiting college students participated in career center employment portals

Continued Impact of COVID-19

- The number of companies and organizations that slowed or halted college student hiring due to COVID-19 is decreasing, although most don't anticipate a return to pre-pandemic levels in the next few years.

Introduction

This second annual report from BestColleges explores current trends in college student hiring and recruiting. This year, 624 senior business leaders from organizations in the U.S. that actively recruit college students and recent graduates shared their perspectives.

The study's findings are presented in four categories: employer perceptions of online education, employee education incentives and academic partnerships, college recruiting insights, and the continued impact of COVID-19 on current and future college student hiring.

PROJECT GOALS

This work is part of BestColleges' ongoing research initiative to provide long-term tracking and identification of trends related to student demographics, online program marketing and recruitment, and new program design and development.

Last year, we focused this report specifically on online hiring and recruiting activities. This year's survey provides broader coverage of both online and on-campus activities to produce a more accurate picture of practices during a period of remote learning that extended from the end of the spring 2020 semester through the spring 2021 semester.

The findings provide insights for those currently supporting college students and recent graduates with employment information and career guidance.

METHODOLOGY

BestColleges commissioned YouGov PLC to conduct a survey online from April 1-9, 2021. This year, 1,000 U.S.-based business leaders responded. This group included 624 individuals from organizations recruiting undergraduate and graduate students and/or recent graduates at the time of the survey. An overwhelming majority (97%) were from the private sector and not self-employed. All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov PLC.

DEFINITIONS

For the purposes of this study, *online schools and degree programs* were defined as *those in which courses are designed for online delivery 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*. This study did not directly address remote learning, i.e., courses designed for in-person delivery that switched to virtual environments due to COVID-19.

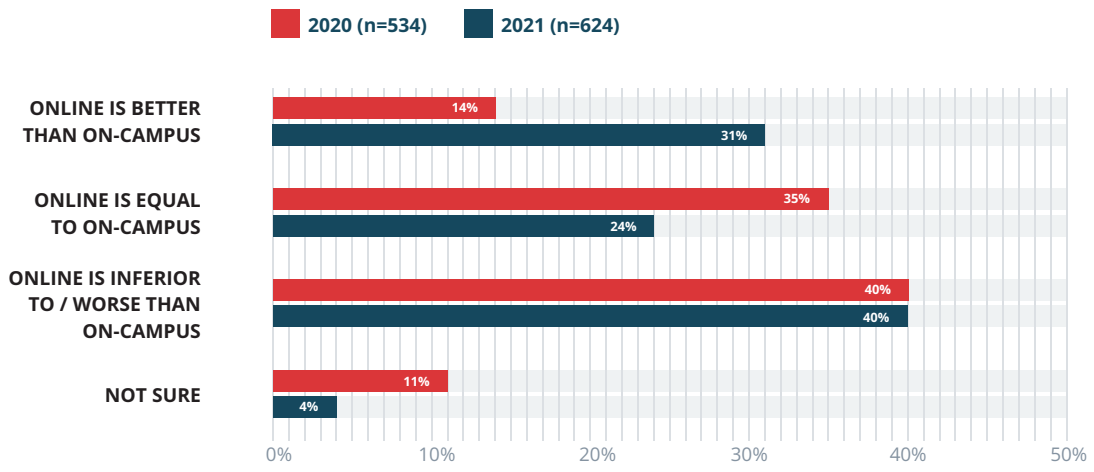
Employer Perceptions of Online Education

Conversations about whether online education is or can be equivalent in quality to traditional, on-campus education have persisted for many years (Nikotina, 2016; Mentz & Schaberg, 2018). However, the widespread exposure to online and remote learning environments experienced during the coronavirus outbreak may be changing the discourse among students and employers (FutureLearn, 2021; Venable, 2021).

This year, 56% of business leaders from organizations actively involved in college recruiting said that online education is better than or equal to on-campus options. This is a slight increase from 49% last year. The percentage of those who said online education is better than on-campus increased substantially, from 14% to 31%.

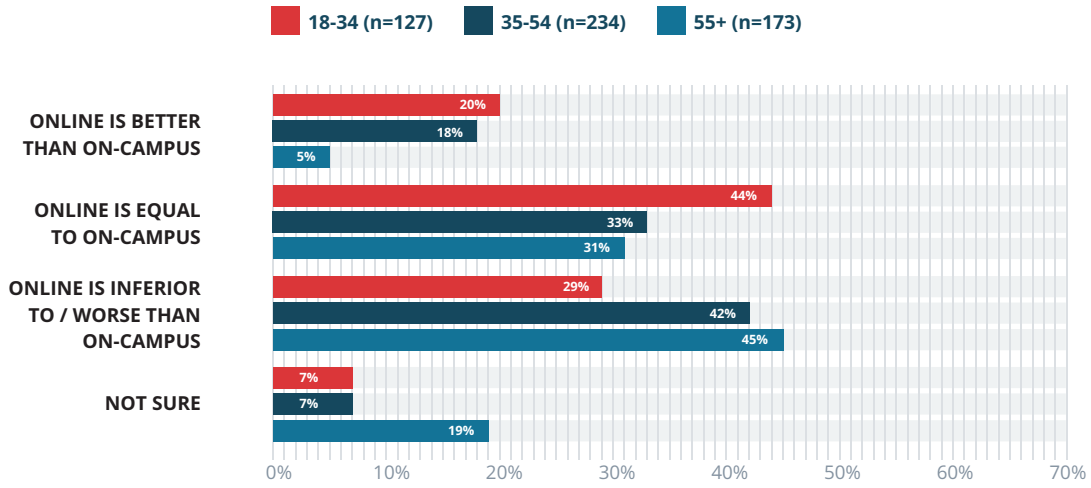
Fewer of these business leaders indicated feeling not sure about the comparison this year. Widespread adoption of remote working and learning in 2020 may have been a factor in familiarizing more business leaders with not only the experience of online education but also its potential benefits.

Business Leader Perceptions of Online Education -
by Report Year

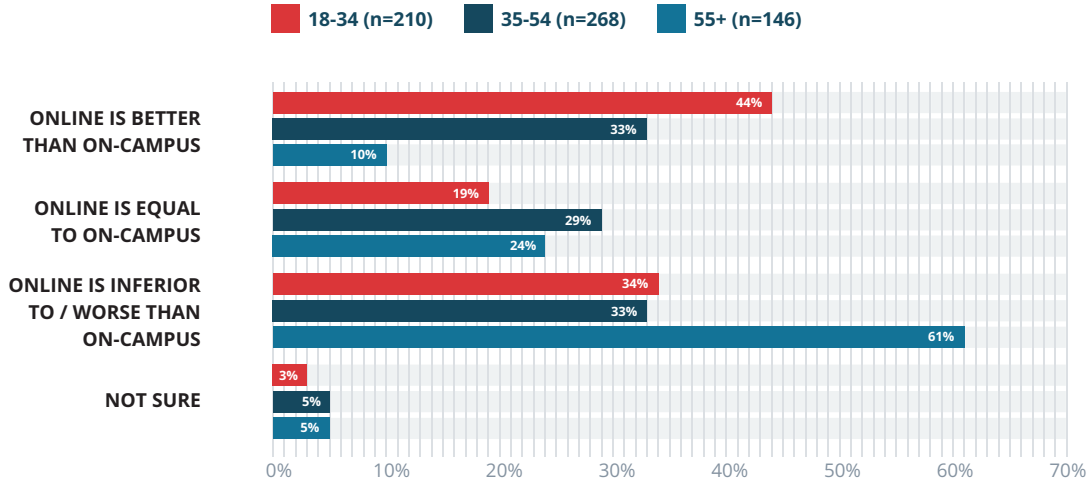


For two years in a row, business leaders from organizations that recruit students who said online education is inferior to or worse than on-campus learning were more likely to fall into the older age group of 55+ years old. In 2021, there seems to be less uncertainty across all age groups as the general perception has shifted from *not sure* and *equal to*, to *better than*. That said, the negative perception of online education among those 55 and older seems to have increased in the past year.

Business Leader Perceptions of Online Education - 2020
by Age of Respondent



Business Leader Perceptions of Online Education - 2021
by Age of Respondent



BESTCOLLEGES INSIGHT

Age May Be a Factor in Accepting Online Education

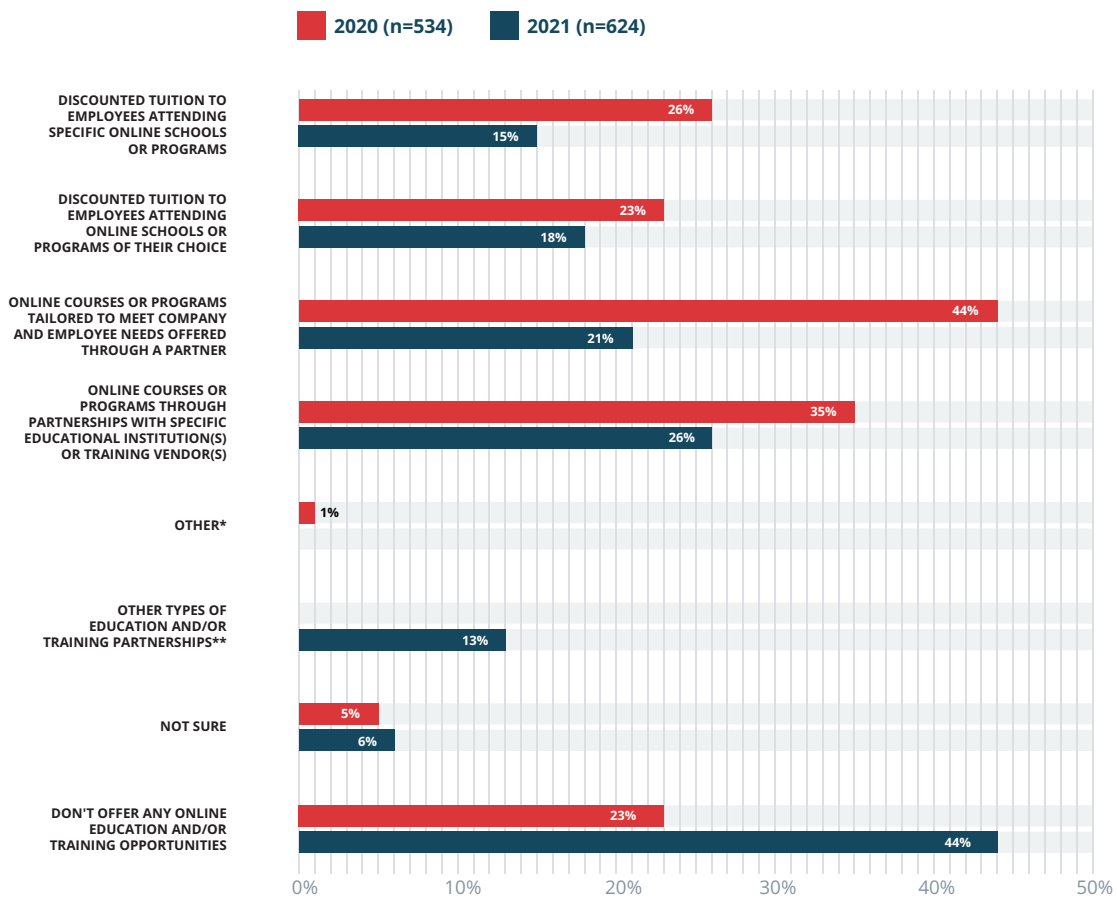
While younger business leaders' opinions about online education may have improved in the past year, older leaders' negative opinions seem to have intensified. Younger business leaders may have more experience with online programs and the technologies used to deliver them. Widespread virtual learning and working environments in 2020 likely introduced online learning to many for the first time. Overall, all age groups felt more certain of their opinions this year.

Employee Education Incentives and Academic Partnerships

While many students have career goals in mind when they choose to pursue a college degree, skills development typically continues well after graduation (Venable, 2021). Most companies and organizations provide some type of employee training, and some do so through online learning opportunities.

This year, over one-third (36%) of business leaders who recruit students said that their organizations work with a partner to offer online courses or programs to current employees. Furthermore, over one-fourth (27%) said they offer discounted tuition as an incentive to participate.

Employer Educational Incentives and Partnerships -
by Report Year



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

While these numbers may seem encouraging, they show declines compared with our findings in 2020 (Venable, 2020). This year, the number of business leaders saying that their organizations *don't offer any online education and/or training opportunities* almost doubled from 23% to 44%.

BESTCOLLEGES INSIGHT

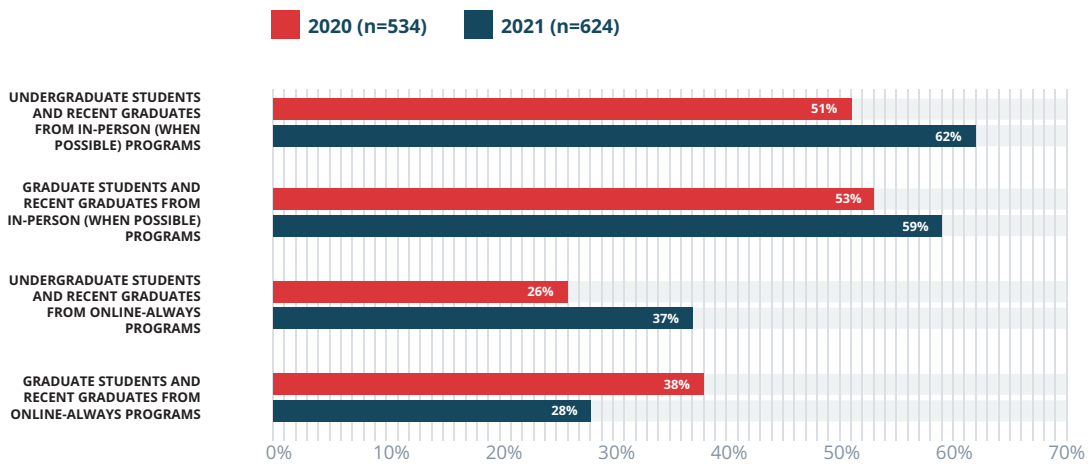
Employer Support for Online Education Is in Flux … for Now

This year more business leaders said that online education was better than on-campus education, but fewer said their organizations offered support or opportunities for employees to engage in online learning. We may be seeing the results of reduced funding for education and training in the past year as many businesses struggled to remain in operation during the pandemic. We can anticipate seeing evolving changes in remote and online work and education in the coming years.

College Recruiting Insights

This year, only 41% of the 1,000 senior decision-makers surveyed said that they were *not* actively recruiting college students or recent graduates. Of those who were conducting college student recruiting, nearly 37% recruited undergraduates and recent graduates from online programs specifically.

Organizations Actively Recruiting College Students and Recent Graduates - by Report Year



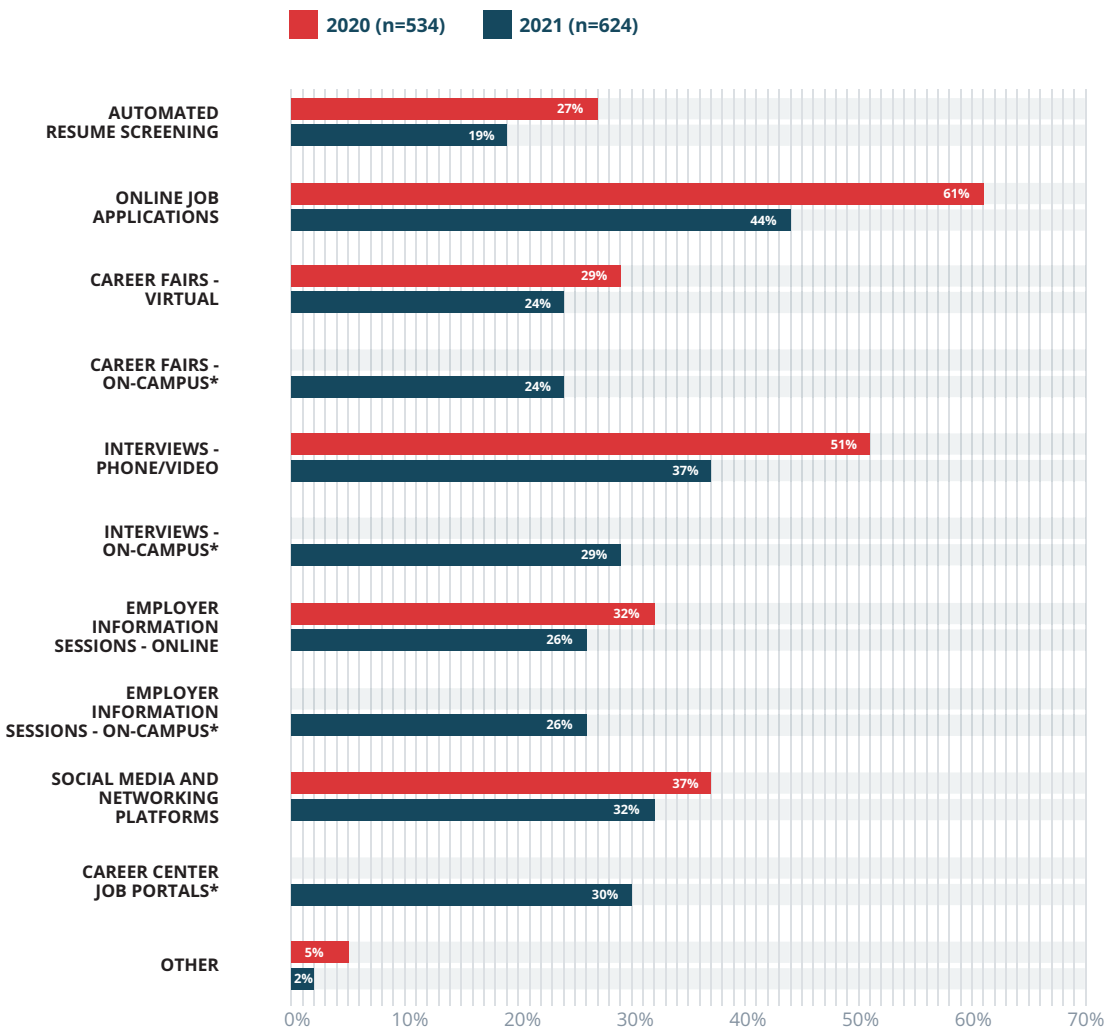
These findings have been fairly steady over the two years of our study. This year witnessed an increase in recruiting from all student categories presented, with one exception: Only 28% of study participants said their organizations were recruiting online graduate students and new online graduate program alumni this year, which is down from 38% in 2020.

RECRUITING TOOLS AND ACTIVITIES

We asked business leaders to share not only how they are recruiting and hiring college students, but also whether their recruiting strategies differ for online and on-campus students. Additionally, we added a broader selection of recruiting activity choices to the 2021 survey.

Overall, the top three recruiting tools reported this year were the same as those reported last year: online job applications (44%), phone/video interviews (37%), and social media and networking platforms (32%). In addition, almost one-third (30%) of the organizations represented by participants worked with student hiring portals coordinated by college career centers.

Tools Used to Identify and Recruit College Students and Recent Graduates - by Report Year



*New response option added in 2021

Our findings indicate a similar reliance on both virtual and on-campus modalities for employer recruiting and hiring in 2021. This was found for career fairs (24% each) and employer information sessions (26% online vs. 26% on-campus). When asked about how interviews were conducted, however, more business leaders indicated that interviews took place via phone or video conferencing (37%) than they did on campus (29%). This change in interview format was to be expected, with many colleges closing their campuses or running with limited campus operations during the past 12 months.

BESTCOLLEGES INSIGHT

Students Should Expect a Hybrid Approach to the Job Search Process

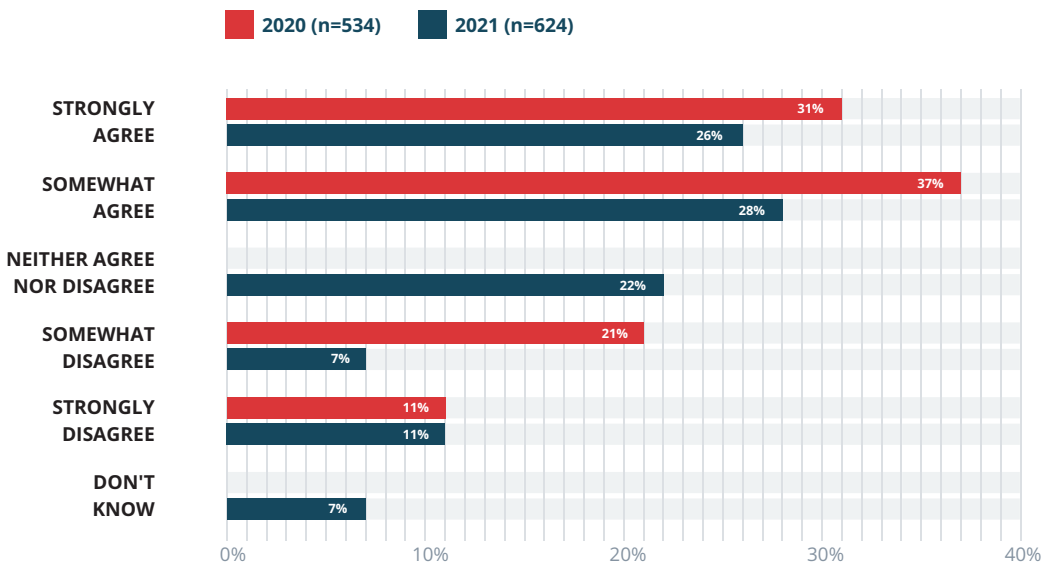
Employers are connecting with students and recent college graduates in a variety of ways. These approaches include both online and on-site events, such as career fairs, information sessions, and interviews. Students' experience with remote and online learning tools and communication may help them develop skills that translate well to virtual recruiting strategies.

RECRUITING ONLINE AND ON-CAMPUS STUDENTS

Business leaders who recruit students were asked to share the recruiting strategies their companies use to connect with students enrolled in online and on-campus programs. We also sought information about whether applicants are screened to determine whether their degrees were earned online or on campus.

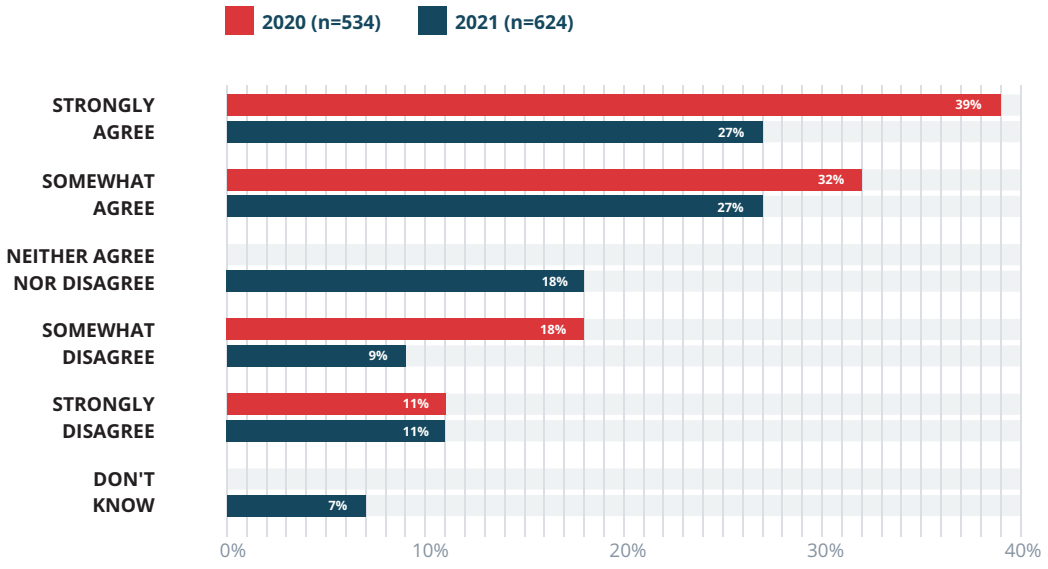
This year's survey added a neutral option for participants, expanding the scale from four to five points, as well as a *don't know* option. When asked about recruiting strategies, the new response options seemed to draw from both sides of the scale. However, the overall response this year was once again agreement that recruiting strategies differ for online and on-campus students.

My company or organization uses **different strategies** to recruit college students from online programs vs. in-person programs



When asked about applicant screening, the modified scale made even more of an impact. Fifty-five percent of these business leaders agreed that job applicants were screened to identify whether their degrees were earned online or on campus in 2021. This is a notable decrease from 71% in 2020.

My company or organization **screens job applicants** to identify whether their degrees are from online or in-person programs

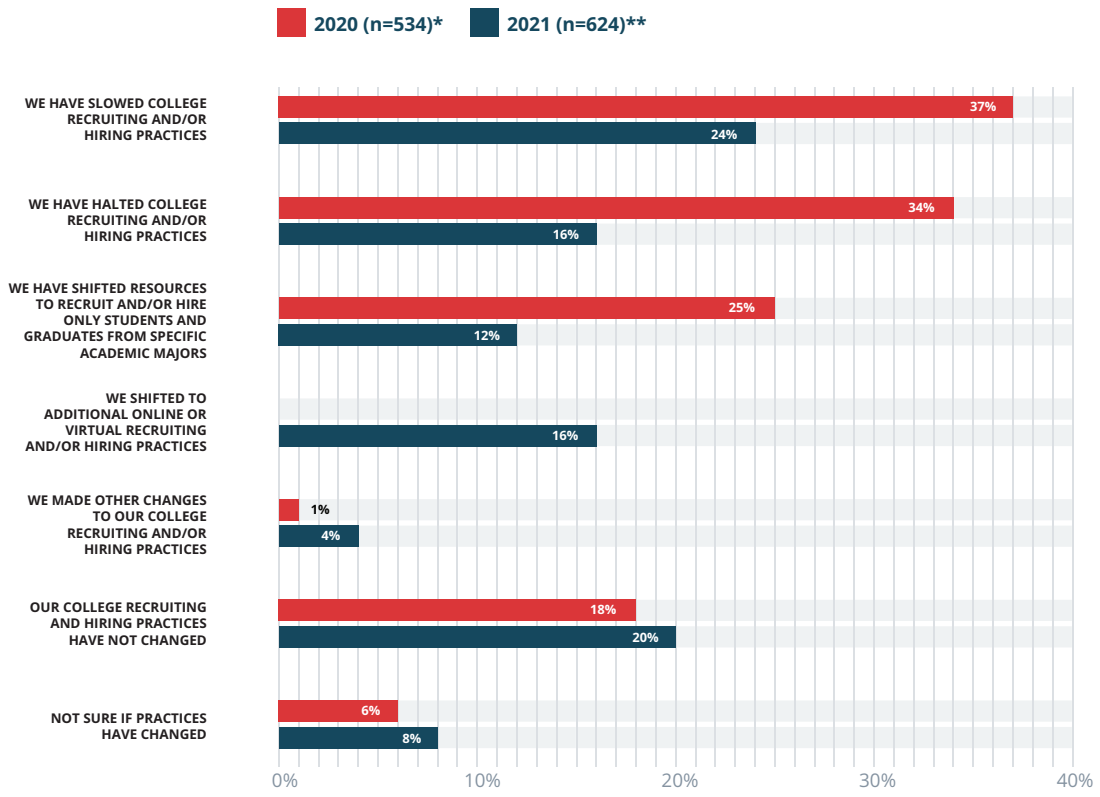


Continued Impact of COVID-19

Our 2020 survey found that COVID-19 had an impact on college student recruiting and hiring. Almost two-thirds (63%) of business leaders said that they slowed and/or halted student recruiting practices during the pandemic, while one quarter (25%) said that they shifted their focus to specific majors (Venable, 2020).

This year, a lower 40% of business leaders shared that they have slowed or halted college recruiting and hiring, with only 12% focusing on specific majors. This survey item format was modified, as noted in the graph below. However, we may be seeing overall improvement in these practices in 2021.

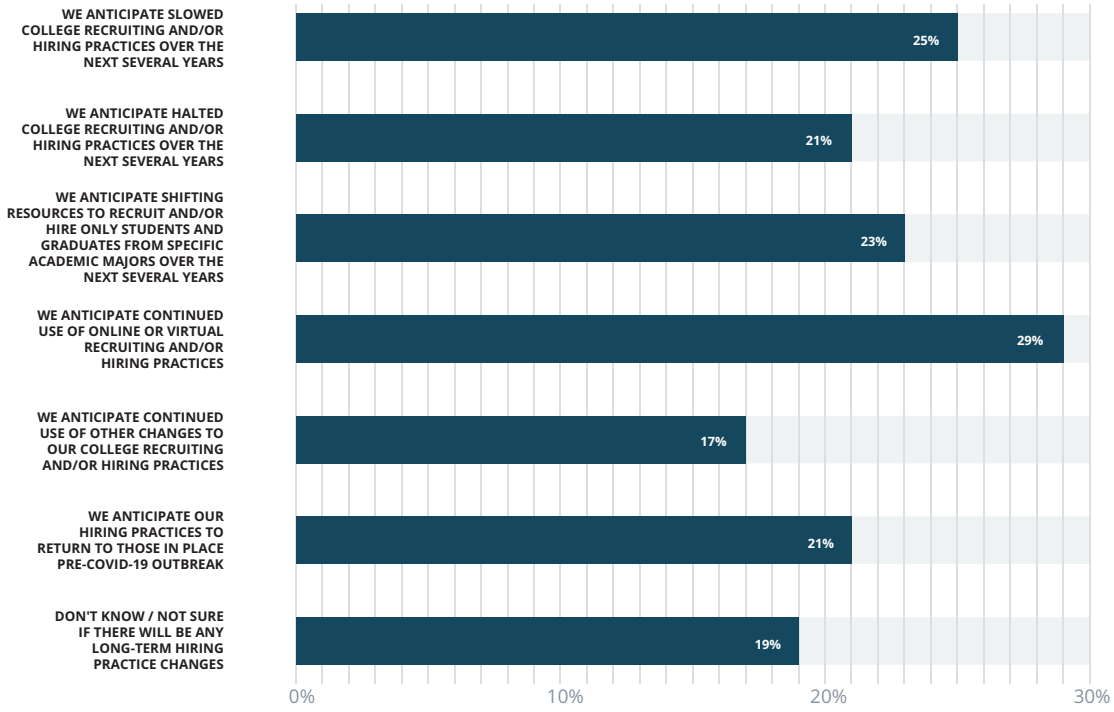
Impact of COVID-19 Outbreak on College Recruiting and Hiring -
by Report Year



*Participants could select multiple responses
**Participants could select only one response

While there is no denying the need for changes in employment processes and priorities during the coronavirus outbreak, only 21% of business leaders anticipate returning to their pre-pandemic recruiting and hiring practices in the future. This year, 1 in 4 business leaders (25%) anticipates *slowed college recruiting and/or hiring practices over the next several years*.

Long-Term Impact on College Recruiting and Hiring After COVID-19 - 2021* (n=624)



*Participants could select multiple responses

Many employers are now using online or virtual strategies to connect with college students and new graduates. Some of the business leaders recruiting students (16%) shared that they shifted their approach to include additional online or virtual recruiting and/or hiring practices, but will this continue post-pandemic? Almost 3 in 10 (29%) of our survey respondents think they will continue to use online recruiting and/or hiring practices moving forward.

BESTCOLLEGES INSIGHT

The Impact of COVID-19 on College Student Hiring May Persist

The effects of the coronavirus outbreak on college campus operations, students' experiences (e.g., loss of internships and job offers), the economy, and specific employment sectors (e.g., hospitality, travel) may present continued challenges for new graduates. One quarter of business leaders anticipate slowed college hiring for several years to come. Preparing students to manage their careers in uncertain times will be critical for their long-term success.

Conclusion

COVID-19 may continue to impact students' educational paths and the economy in which today's college students will enter the workforce. While career goals remain a strong motivator for enrolling in a college program, students should have realistic expectations for what the job search process will look like as they graduate and plan for the future. Up-to-date information about hiring trends and the job search process in their intended fields will prove essential.

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

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The Impact of COVID-19 on College Student Hiring May Persist

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Contributors

About Melissa A. Venable, Ph.D.

Melissa A. Venable, Ph.D., is an online education advisor for BestColleges. In this role, she leads this annual survey research project reporting online education trends found through student and school administrator feedback. Melissa is an adjunct faculty member and course designer at Saint Leo University and a certified career coach with a background in career development services. She earned her doctorate in instructional technology at the University of South Florida where her research interests focused on distance education and support services for online students.

About BestColleges

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

Data Notes

1. Percentages reported in this document have been rounded, resulting in some totals adding up to just under or over 100.
2. In instances in which participants were able to select more than one response, percentages may add up to more than 100.
3. All data is self-reported.

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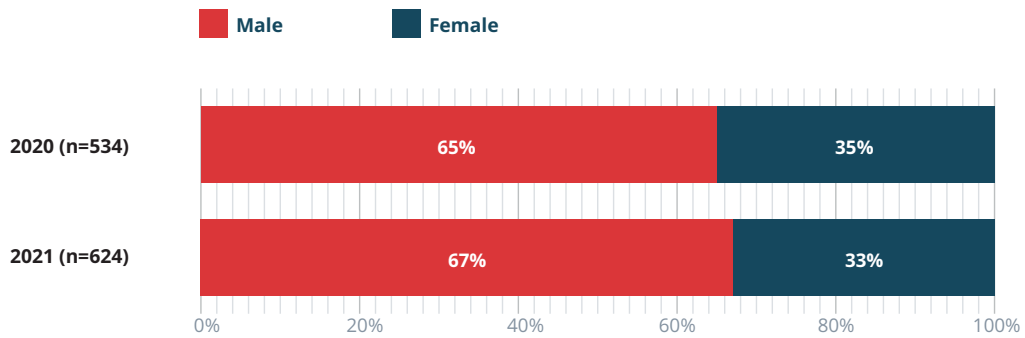
Appendix: Participant Demographics

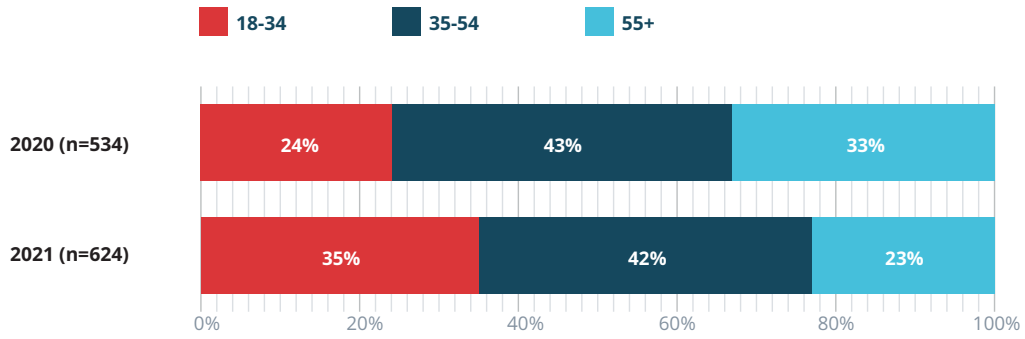
Senior Decision-Makers/Business Leaders Actively Recruiting College Students and Recent Graduates

Data collected by YouGov PLC
(August 2020, n=534)
(April 2021, n=624)

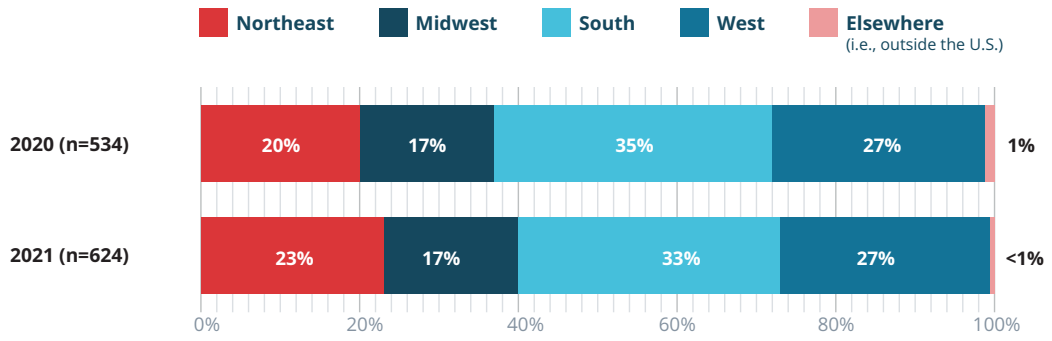
Gender



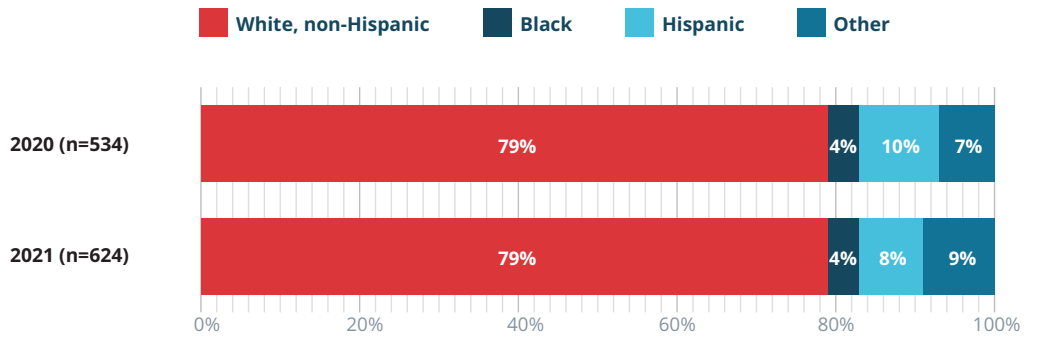
Age



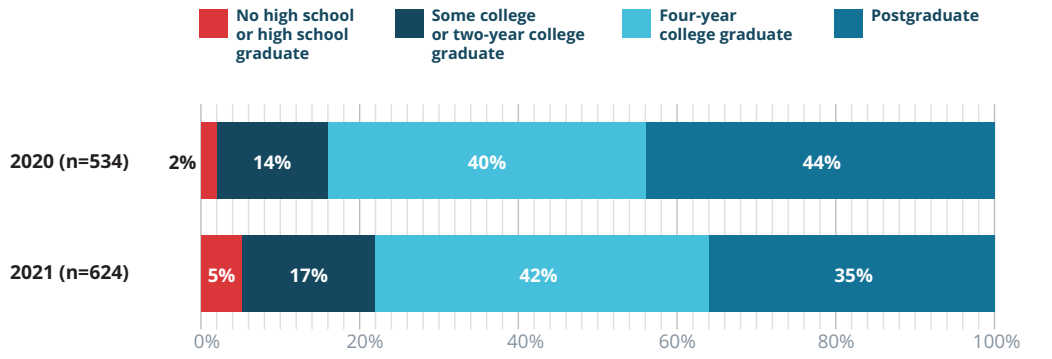
Region of Work



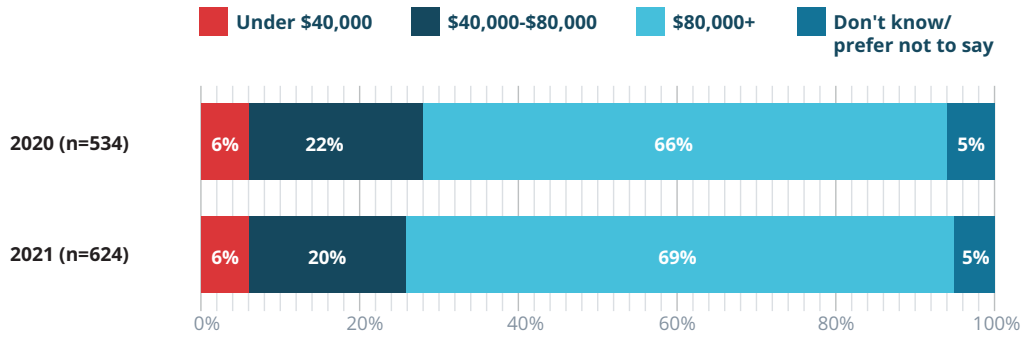
Race/Ethnicity



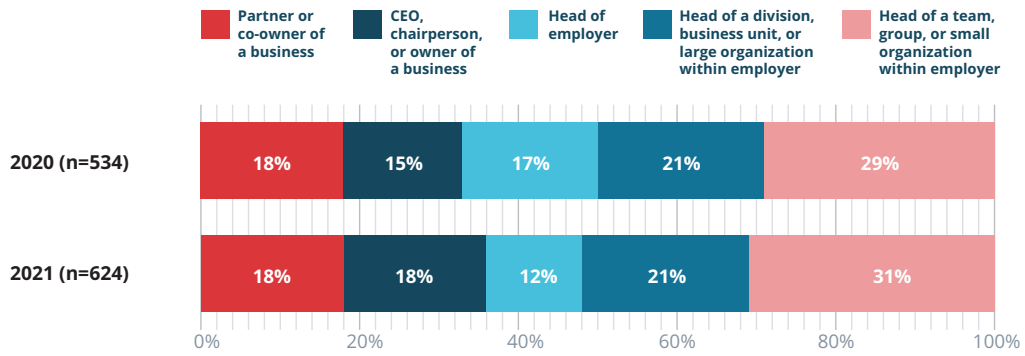
Highest Level of Education



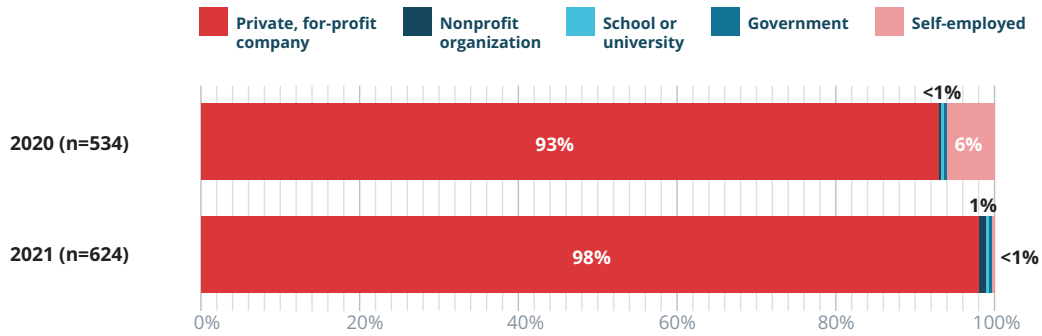
Income



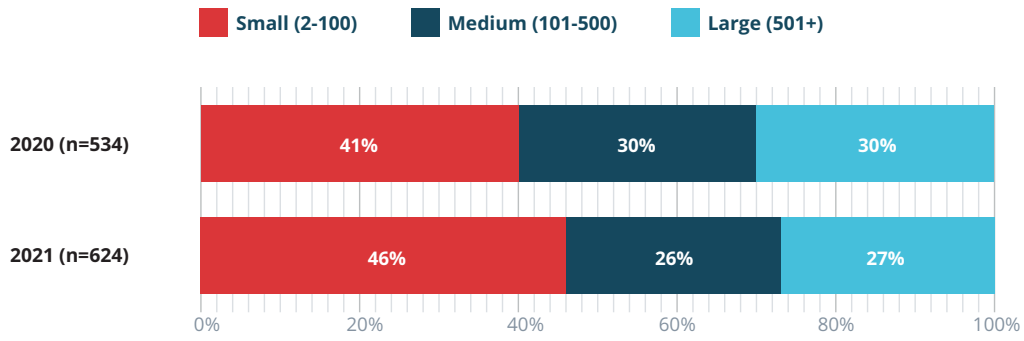
Level of Management



Type of Organization



Company Size



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