

2022

Trends in Online Student Demographics

Prepared by BestColleges

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





2022 Trends in Online Student Demographics

An Annual Survey of Students and School Administrators

Melissa A. Venable, Ph.D.

This report is the result of a collaborative effort of BestColleges contributors. The team included: Andrew Rice, Claudia Sanchez, Jordan Stewart-Rozema, Liz Zvereva, Neil Foto, Quinn Tomlin, Rebecca Long, and Reece Johnson.

Table of Contents

4	Executive Summary	15	Conclusions
6	Introduction	16	Contributors
6	Choosing an Online Program	17	Data Notes
	<u>Comparing the Options</u>	17	References
	<u>Online vs. On Campus</u>	18	Appendix
9	Enrollment Trends		<u>Online Student Respondent</u>
	<u>Student Age</u>		<u>Demographics</u>
	<u>Overall Demand</u>		
11	Preparing for the Future		
	<u>Skills-Based Learning</u>		
	<u>Other Education and Training Plans</u>		
	<u>Career and Job Preparation</u>		





Executive Summary

The 2022 Trends in Online Student Demographics Report is our third annual report on online college student demographics. It includes findings collected from 1,300 online college students representing three enrollment categories: current online students, prospective online students, and graduates of online programs. The goal of this student demographics report series is to provide a closer look at the experience of participants who self-identify as online learners — those who chose or are choosing to enroll in a program that was designed for online delivery.



Key Findings

Choosing an Online Program

- Online students continue to rely primarily on *college websites* (33%) and *online reviews from students* (25%) when comparing programs.
- Thirty-one percent of respondents enrolled in online programs in order to accommodate existing commitments such as work and family responsibilities.
- The COVID-19 pandemic continued to impact students' decisions to enroll online vs. on campus in 2022.

Enrollment Trends

- School administrators report continued trends related to student age — the age range of students enrolling is increasing to include students who are both older and younger than previously seen.
- School administrators report continued demand for online learning, including from on-campus students who also want to take online courses.

Preparing for the Future

- Eighty-eight percent of online students think skills-based learning is important to their career development, and 41% said that their courses included class assignments they could relate to their current jobs.
- About one in five (21%) online bachelor's students have also completed or plan to complete technical or vocational training.
- Seventy percent of online graduates said that their programs prepared them for their first job after graduation.



Introduction

BestColleges collected data from 1,300 students enrolled in online associate, bachelor's, graduate, or certificate and certification programs in November 2021 through an online survey. Respondents included college students enrolled in online programs at the time of the survey (35%), students seriously considering enrolling in online programs (27%), and graduates of online programs (38%). All data are self-reported. Participants were fielded by Lucid LLC 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, West). Additional quotas were implemented to ensure the sample included sex/gender and racial/ethnic diversity.

- Current online students: 35% (n=450)
- Prospective online students: 27% (n=350)
- Online program graduates: 38% (n=500)

The survey data reported here are part of an annual research initiative that also collects feedback from college and university administrators. Additional information about and findings from these respondents can be found in the [2022 Online Education Trends Report](#) (Venable, 2022).

Choosing an Online Program

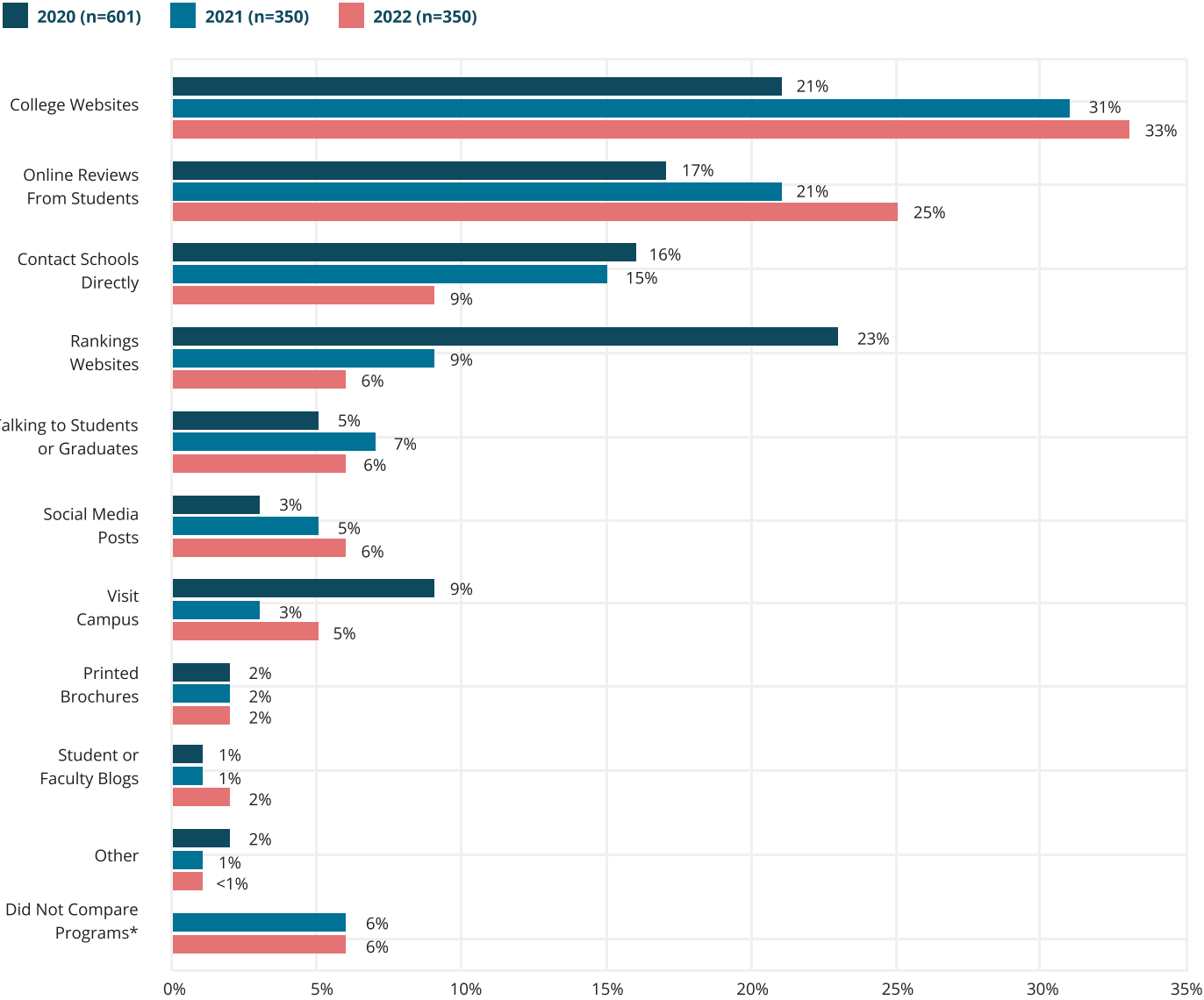


Comparing the Options

Prospective online students have more choices than ever, but finding a program that meets their needs can be challenging (Venable, 2022). When asked which source of information they relied on most to research and compare the options, the top responses were *college websites* (33%) and *online reviews from students* (25%). For two years in a row, 6% of prospective students said they weren't comparing programs at all.



Information Relied on Most When Comparing Online Programs — Prospective Students by Report Year



*New response option added in 2021.

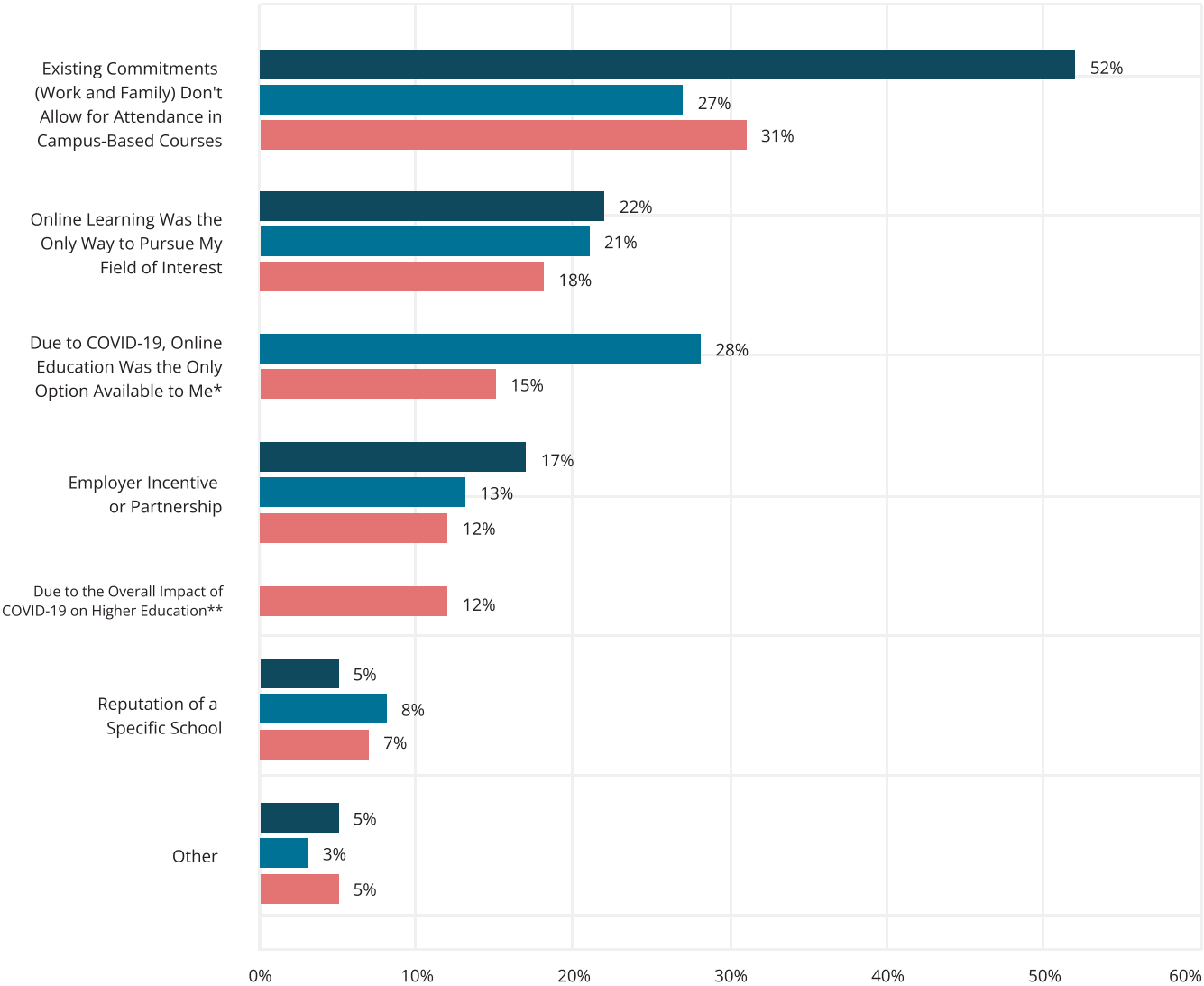


Online vs. On Campus

We asked online students (i.e., enrolled students, prospective students, and graduates) why they chose or planned to choose online learning instead of a campus-based program. In this year’s report, the percentage of students who reported that the coronavirus pandemic impacted their choice was similar to data reported the previous year (28% in 2021, 27% in 2022). However, the primary reason returned to existing commitments (31%), which was the top response pre-pandemic.

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

2020 (n=1,500) 2021 (n=1,300) 2022 (n=1,300)



*Response option added in 2021.

**Response option added in 2022.

Enrollment Trends

The "typical" online student was already hard to define prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Changes to campus-based programs due to the pandemic — resulting in an increase in the number of students learning at a distance — complicated the definition even further. Based on our findings this year, online learners can be described as predominantly: between the ages of 25 and 44 (70%), studying at the undergraduate level (58%), married or living with a partner (56%), having children (60%), employed full time (56%), and enrolled full time in their courses (77%).

Our previous report (Venable, 2022) included a survey of school administrators (n=182) in which we asked, "*What is the most significant trend in online student demographics at your institution?*" The two emerging themes — age and demand — were similar to those found in previous years, although the responses related to demand were more varied this year.



Student Age

When asked about online student demographic trends, a majority of school administrators (70%) mentioned age. This is an increase from the number who mentioned age in 2021 (38%). The findings are similar to previous years, however, with administrators reporting an increase in older students (58%) and younger students (40%). The typical age range for online students continues to expand in both directions.

Selected Responses

- "Students in their early 30's enrolling."
- "We have several nontraditional students who need asynchronous classes to allow them to continue working, taking care of family, and other necessary responsibilities while taking classes."
- "Adult learners from diverse backgrounds who are getting a second chance to complete their dream of earning a college degree!"
- "Working adults with some college but no degree."
- "Increase of 18-24-year-olds entering into our post-traditional programs originally designed for working adults."
- "While our online programs have typically served adult learners, each year we [see] a significant increase in younger and younger students in the 18-24 market."

Overall Demand

Again this year, many responses (30%) included references to the demand for online education, which was up from 18% last year. Responses related to demand included specific student groups such as transfer and degree completion students (24%) and a general increase in demand for online learning options (26%), particularly from on-campus students.

Selected Responses

- "More campus students are taking one or more online classes."
- "There is high demand from students to be online regardless of their demographics."
- "Growth in dually enrolled high school students and visiting, non-degree-seeking students who are dually enrolled at other institutions."
- "Now that [face-to-face learning] is available again, students continue to take both online and [face-to-face courses]."
- "We have primarily focused on adult professionals, but are seeing increasing demand for undergraduate options — also, hybrid options."
- "We are seeing a lot of first-time online students, even those who have taken lots of on-ground courses before. There seem to be a lot of students coming to our online [programs]."

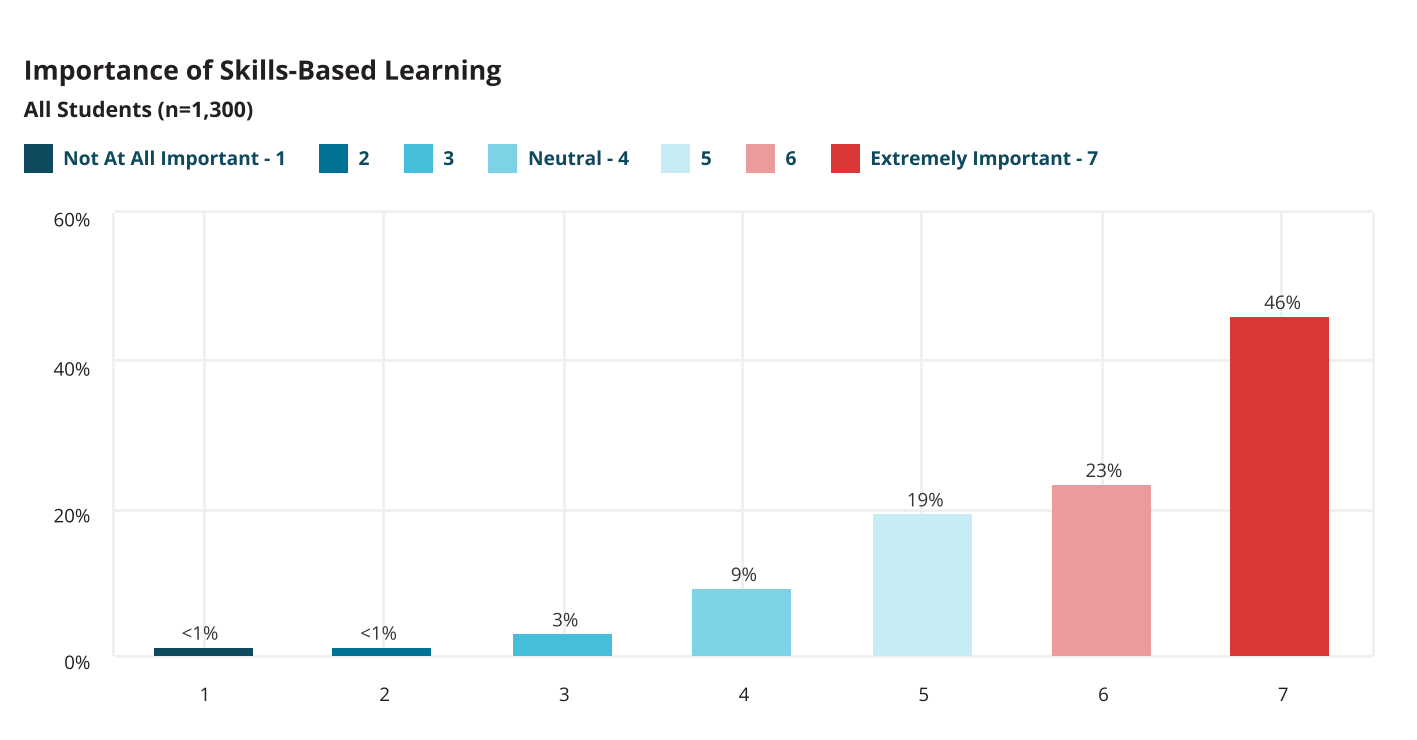


Preparing for the Future



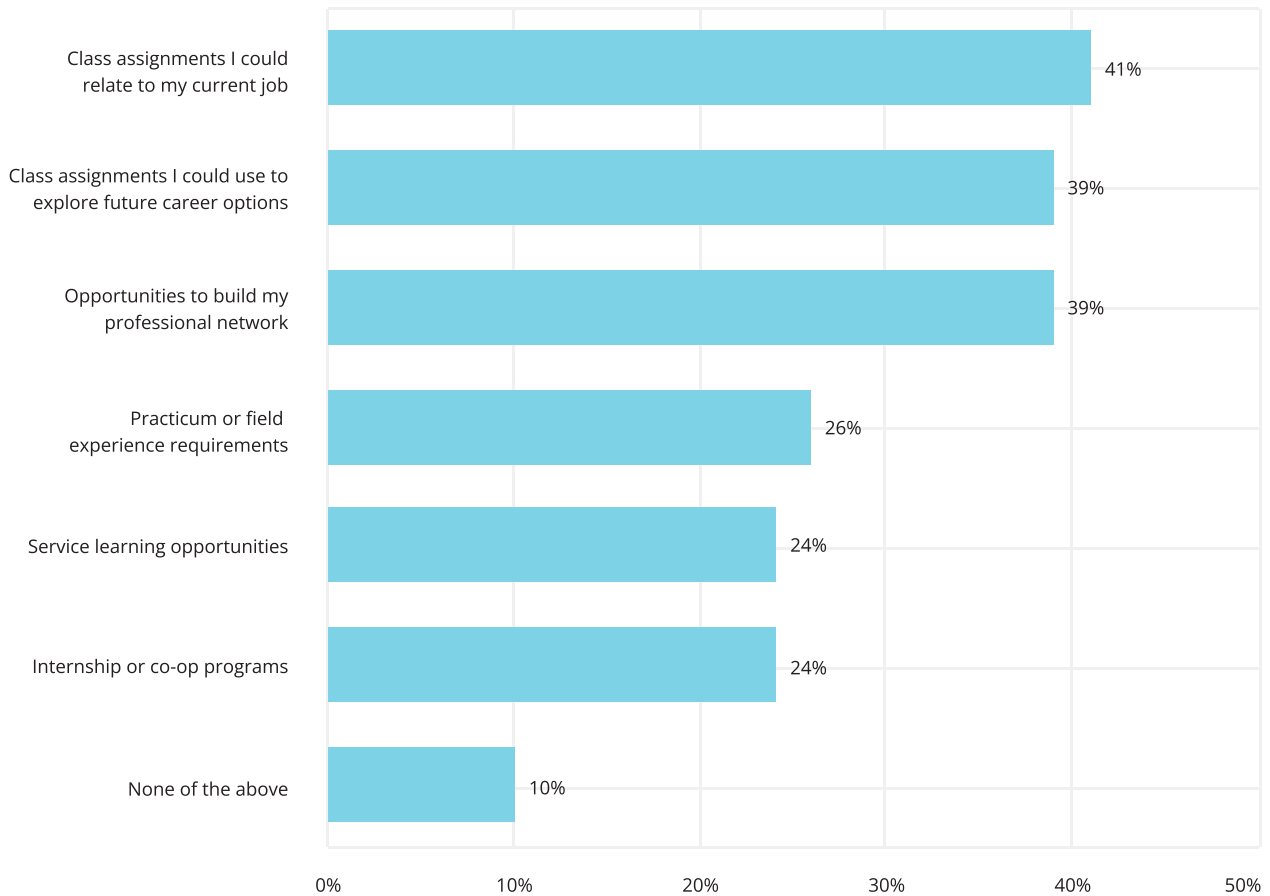
Skills-Based Learning

We asked current online students, prospective students, and graduates responding to this year's survey about the importance of skills-based training and education in their own career development. An overwhelming majority (88%) said that these kinds of learning experiences were important to them, and almost half (46%) indicated that they were *extremely important*.



Additionally, we asked what types of practical experience these students had or wanted in their online classes and programs. Class assignment options related to current work tasks and as ways to explore future career options were the top responses. Students were also interested in building their professional networks through activities embedded in their courses and programs.

Practical Experience Components in Online Education Students Have Experienced or Desired All Students (n=1,300)

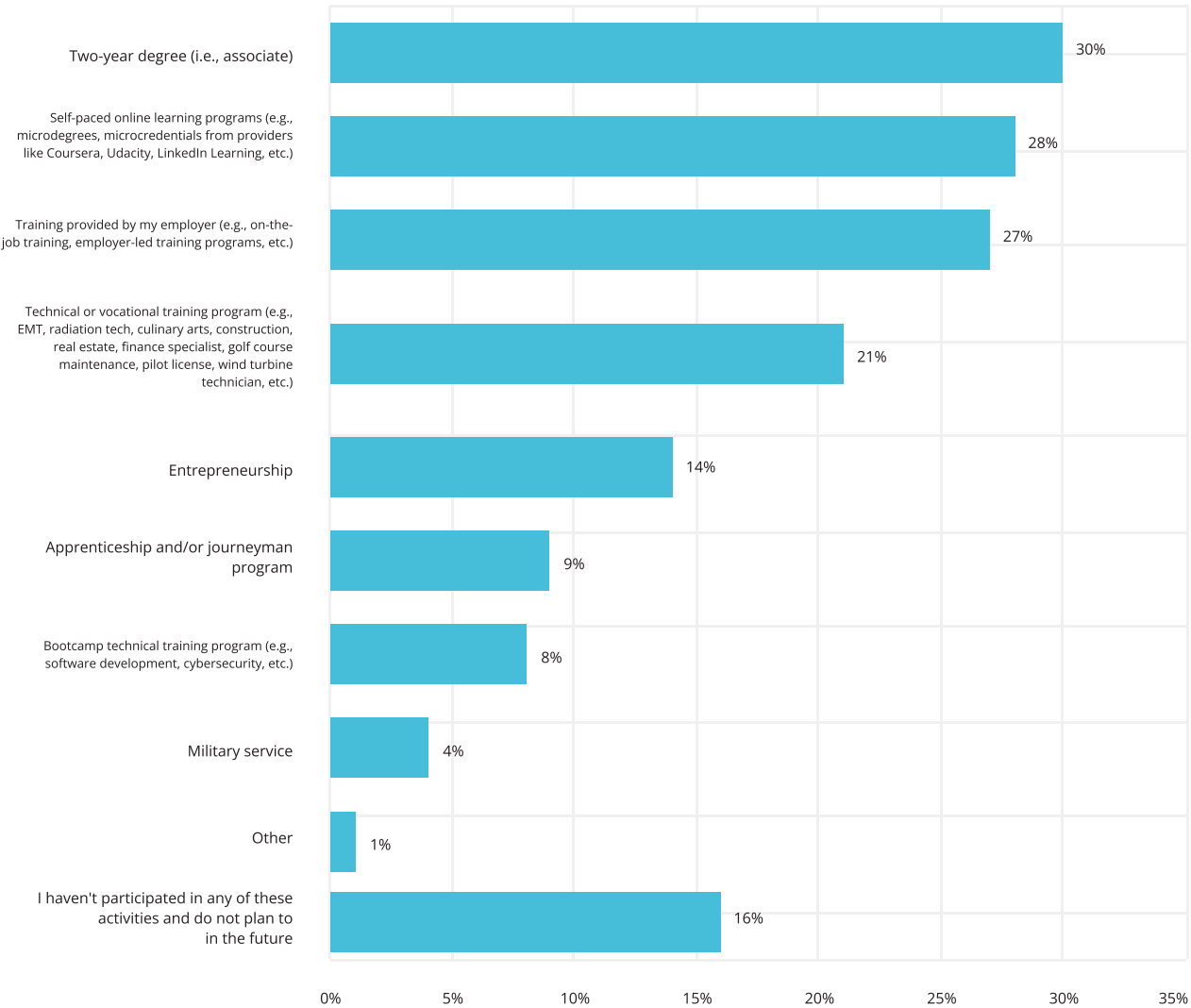


Other Education and Training Plans

We wanted to know what other learning activities these students had previously participated in or planned to be involved in, in addition to their current or former online programs. We asked current, prospective, and former online bachelor's degree students, "Do you plan to pursue or have you already completed any of the following alternative education pathways?"

Almost one-third (30%) indicated a history or interest in *two-year degree programs*, while 28% said they had engaged in or planned to pursue *self-paced online learning programs*, and more than one in five (21%) indicated *technical or vocational training programs*. Only 16% said they were not planning to participate or had not participated in these kinds of learning experiences.

Bachelor's Degree Online Learners and Alternative Education Pathways All Students (n=678)





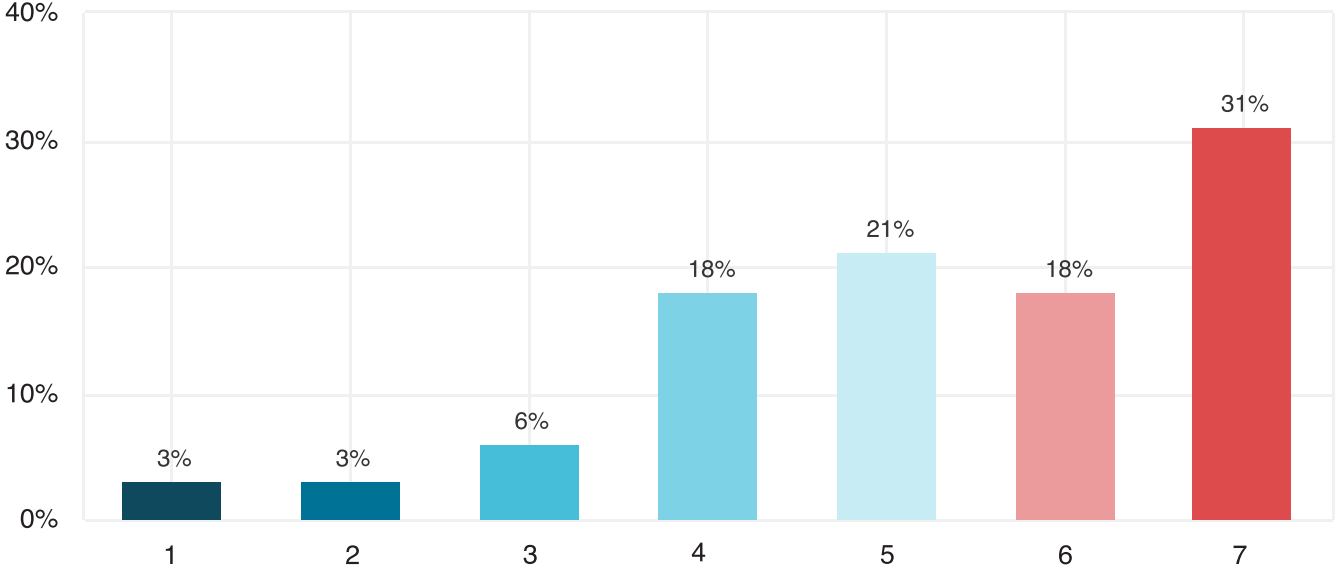
Career and Job Preparation

How well do online programs prepare students for work? From the perspective of the online program graduates responding to our survey, these programs prepare students well for their next jobs. Seventy percent responded positively, with 31% saying they were *extremely well* prepared.

College Preparation for First Job After Graduation — Online Program Graduates

All Students (n=500)

Not At All Well - 1 2 3 Neutral - 4 5 6 Extremely Well - 7



Conclusions

The dynamic nature of modern higher education means being able to pivot quickly in unexpected situations. The personal, professional, and educational experiences of both online and on-campus students during the COVID-19 pandemic have amplified the need for both flexible learning environments and a focus on employment preparation. The findings of this report can inform college decision-makers in their efforts to continuously improve their academic offerings and to better meet the needs and expectations of their students.

Leverage School Websites and Student Testimonials

Students look for online program information on school websites. They also turn to their peers for feedback and advice. Institutions are now implementing changes from lessons they have learned during the COVID-19 pandemic. Share how you are continuing to adapt and improve, and encourage your students to share their stories about your flexible learning environments and career development initiatives.

Focus on Flexible Class, Course, and Program Options

Online courses and programs can meet many students' needs. The flexibility of online and hybrid options may also now be a preference for some secondary students as well as postsecondary students and working professionals. Middle and high school students who experienced remote learning over the past several years may not only expect flexible options in college, but also be more prepared to successfully navigate them. Encourage flexibility at the programmatic and course level as well as in individual class sessions.

Online Students Pursue Education *and* Training

Today's students have more education and training options available to them than ever before. And many are choosing more than one. Online students are building their knowledge and skills through a variety of learning experiences that include self-paced online options like LinkedIn Learning and Coursera as well as vocational and technical training programs. While practicum courses and internships may vary by academic discipline and degree level, other opportunities, such as class assignments, can integrate practical experiences into almost any subject area and further prepare students for work after graduation.

Contributors



About Melissa Venable

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 online course designer at Saint Leo University and a certified career coach with a background in career development services. She earned her doctorate in instructional technology at the University of South Florida where her research interests focused on distance education and support services for online students.

About BestColleges

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

Data Notes

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

References

Venable, M. A. (2022). *2022 Online Education Trends Report*. BestColleges.com.

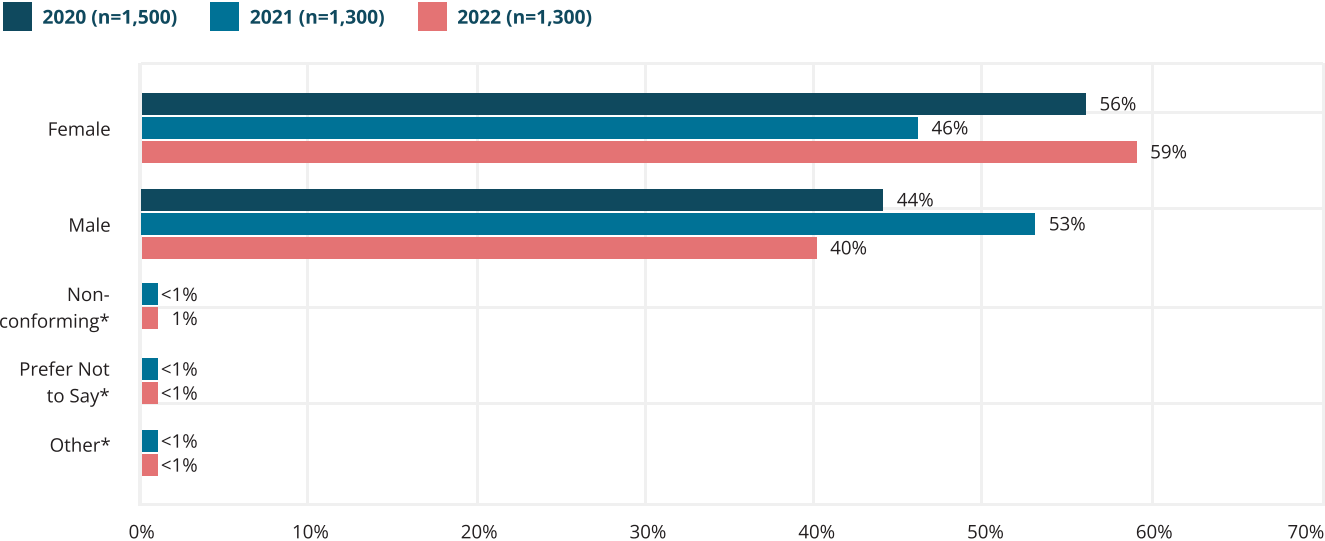
https://res.cloudinary.com/highereducation/image/upload/v1620770967/BestColleges.com/BestColleges_Trends-in-Online-Student-Demographics_2021.pdf

Appendix

Online Student Respondent Demographics

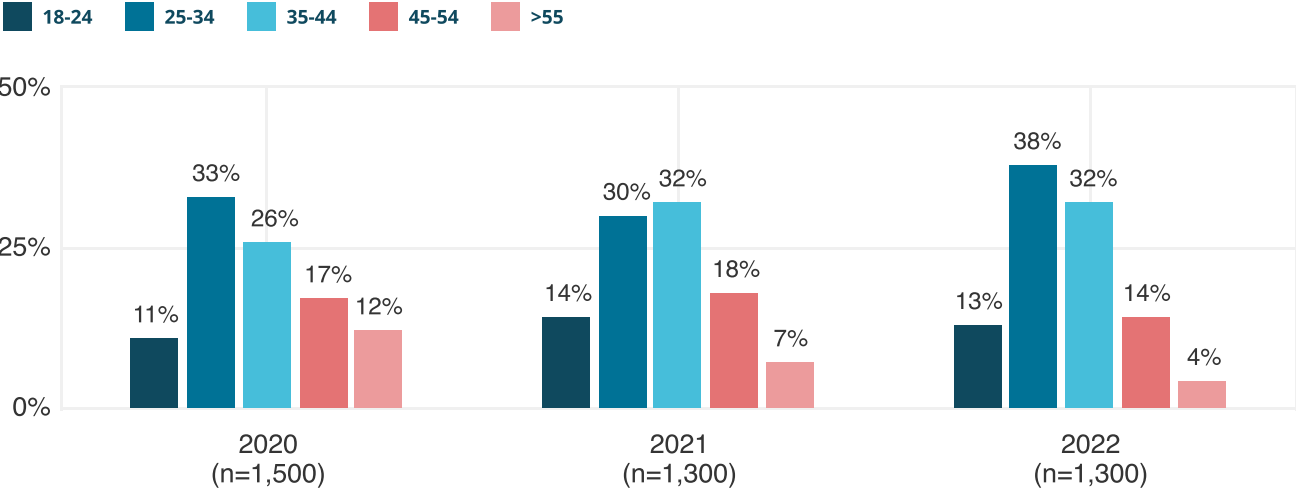
Data Collection — GLG/Lucid LLC, November 2021

Sex/Gender

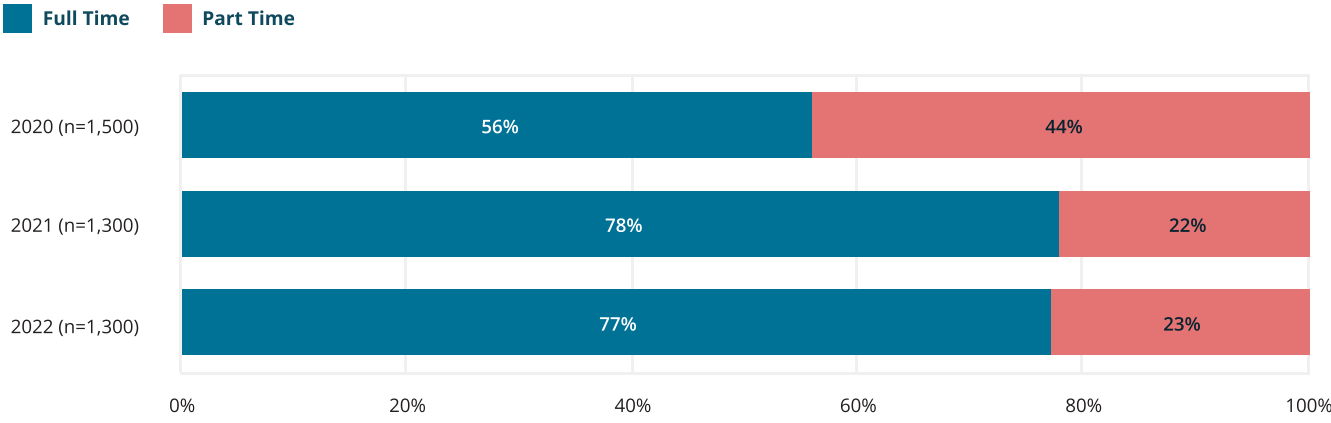


*New response option added in 2021.

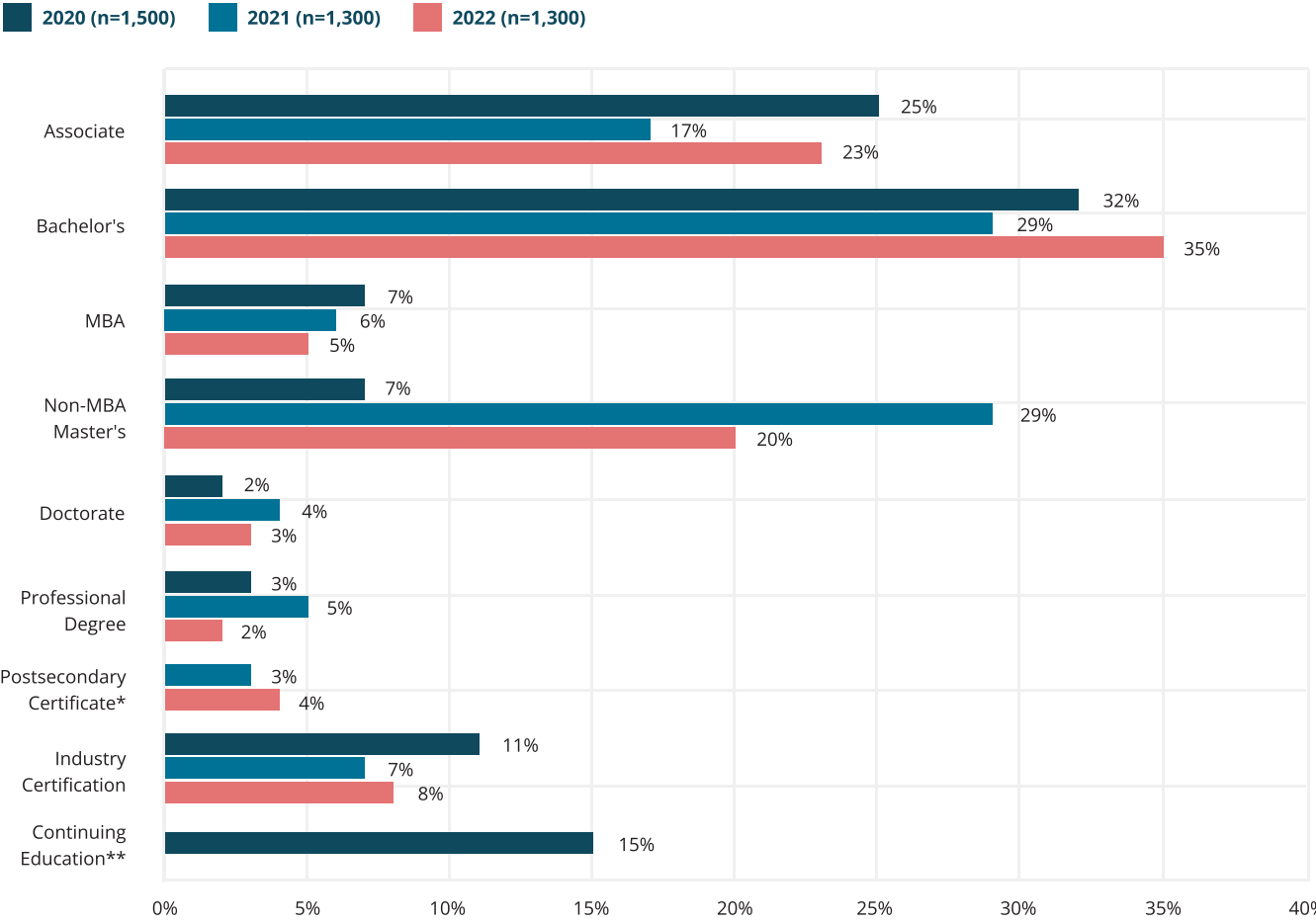
Age



Enrollment Status



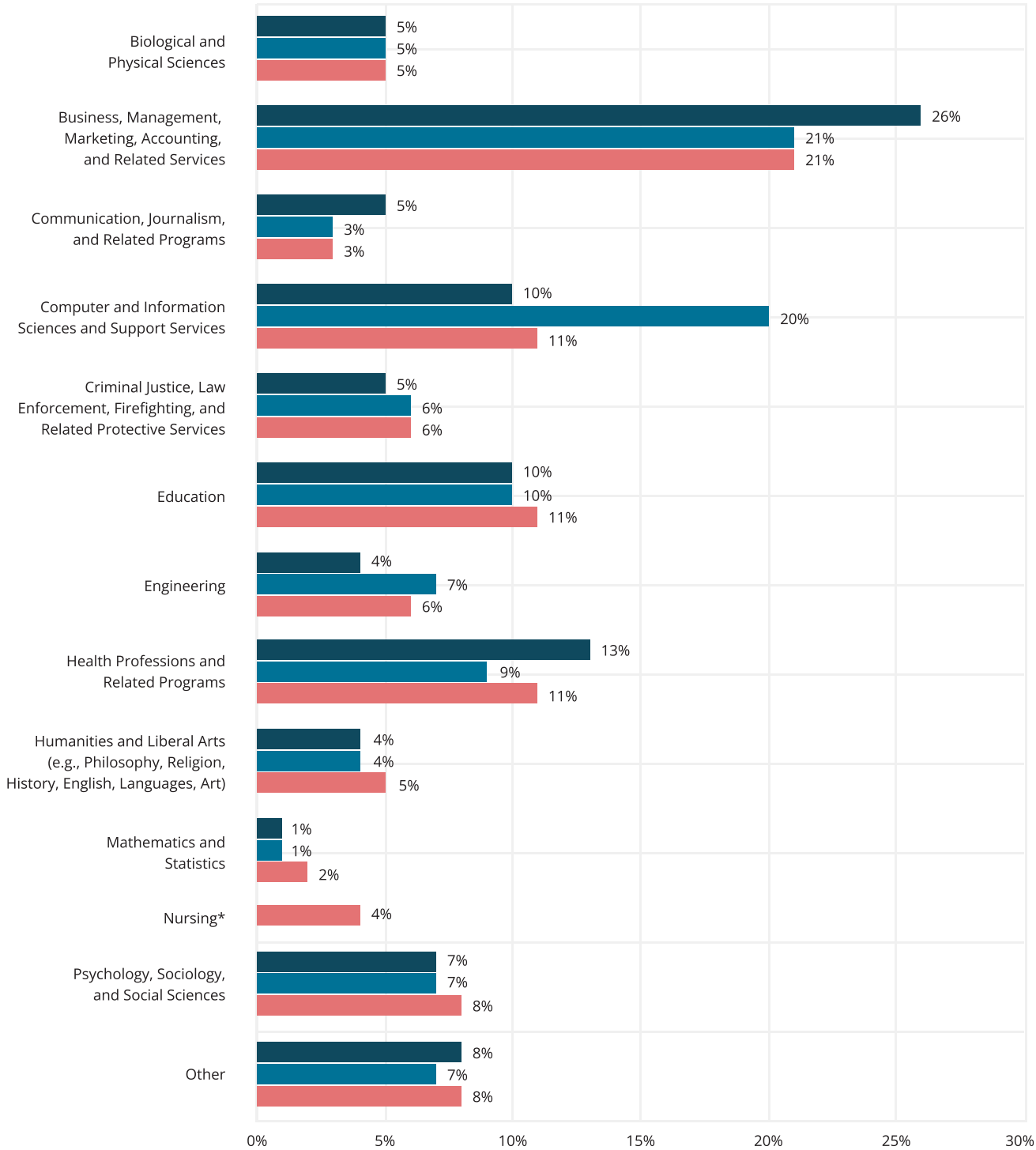
Degree Pursuing



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

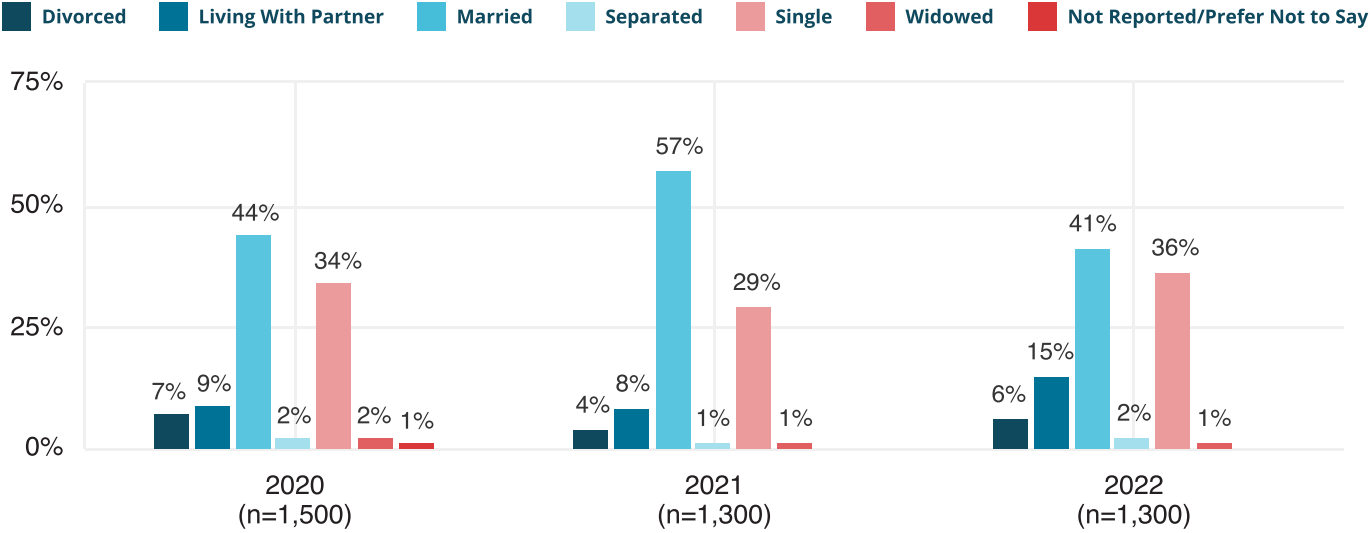
Major/Intended Major

2020 (n=1,500) 2021 (n=1,300) 2022 (n=1,300)

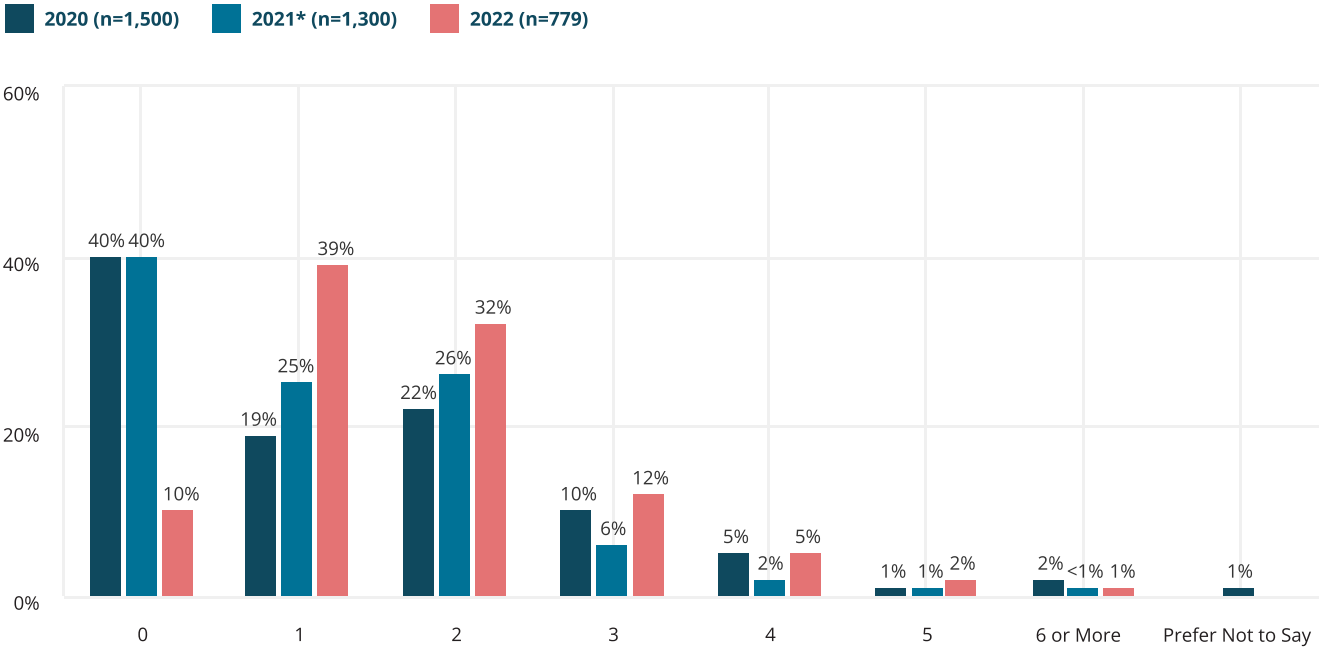


*New response option added in 2022.

Marital Status



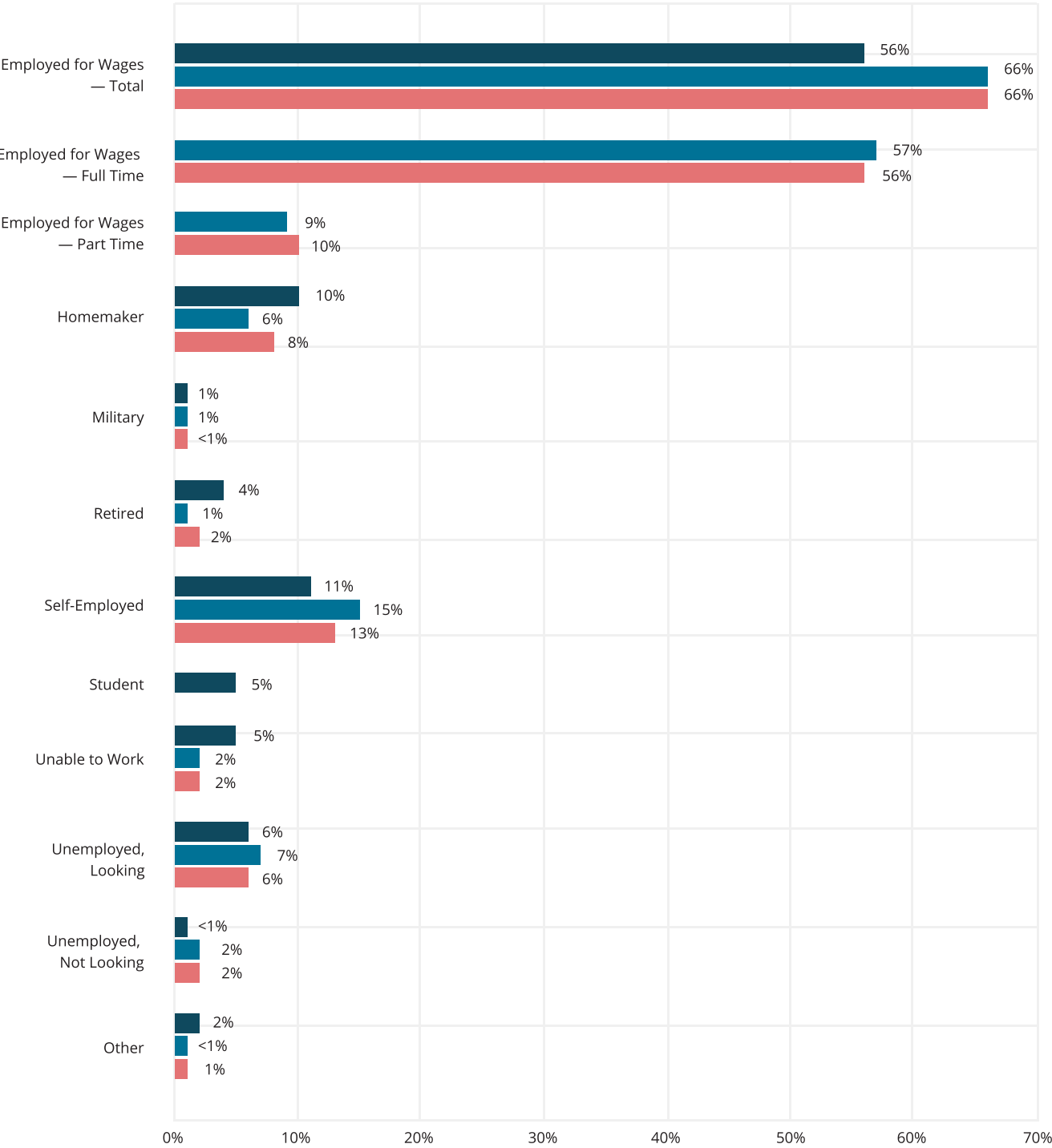
Number of Children



*Item revised from previous year to reflect the number of children under the age of 18 living at home.

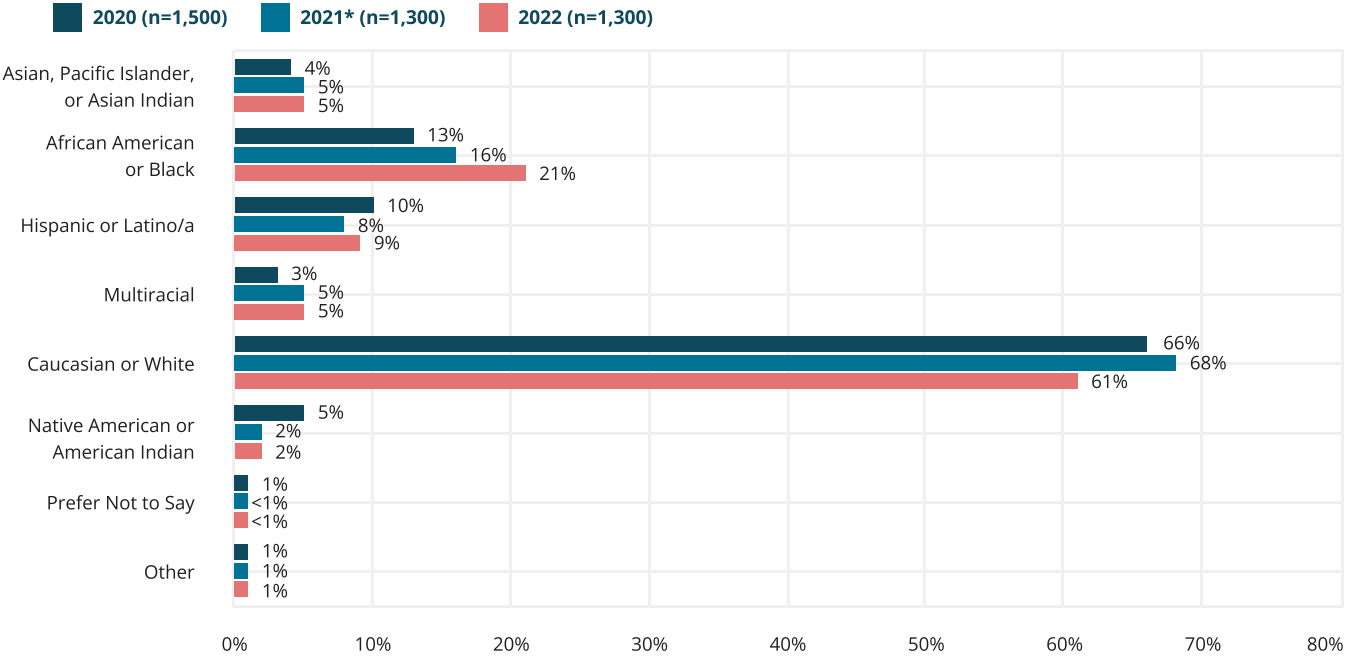
Employment Status

2020 (n=1,500) 2021* (n=1,300) 2022 (n=1,300)



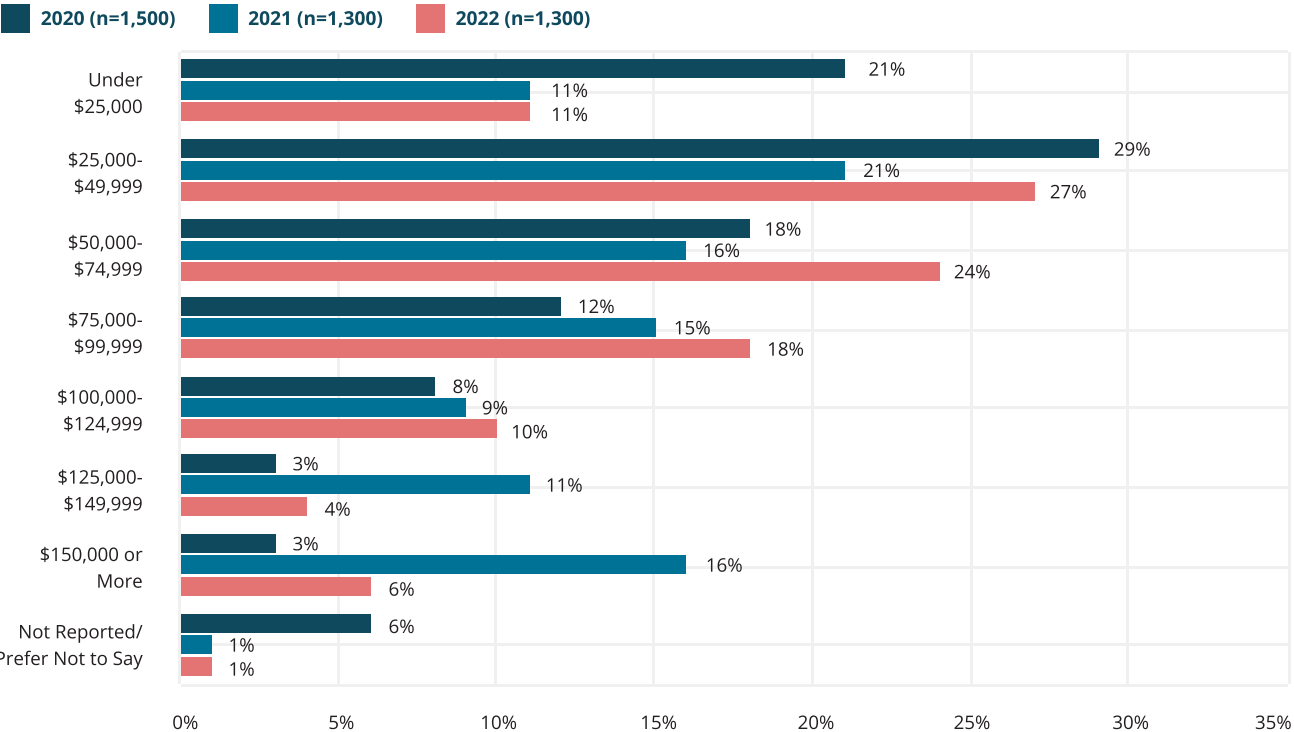
*Response options revised from previous year.

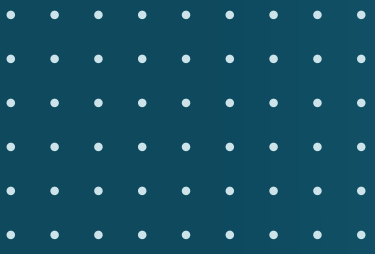
Race/Ethnicity



*Response options revised from previous year.





Income Level





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