

INSIGHT PAPER

# The New Rules of Engagement for Enrolling Today's Adult Learners

Insights from EAB's 2025 Survey of **8,000+ Graduate and Adult Learners**



# Adult Learner Recruitment

## Project Director

Camilla Arias

## Contributors

Tess Arena

Beth Donaldson

Val Fox

Todd Heilman

Lex Ruby-Howe

## Survey Research Consultants

Anne Dodson

Pamela Kiecker Royall, PhD

## Cover Design

Mary Thrift

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# Executive Overview

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## Market Challenges Are Impacting Adult Enrollment Trends



After decades of steady expansion, graduate enrollment is slowing dramatically. From 1990 to 2021, programs enjoyed an average annual growth of 3.2%. Now, the National Student Clearinghouse predicts that growth will plummet to just 1.3% per year through 2032. For enrollment and marketing teams—[many of whom are already stretched thin](#) by budget cuts and hiring freezes—the pressure to deliver results has never been greater.

At the same time, the ground beneath graduate education is shifting quickly. Federal policy changes, volatile international demand, intensifying competition, and the looming demographic cliff are reshaping the market. Meanwhile, the rapid rise of AI is upending Paid Search strategies and redefining both [employer needs](#) and adult learner expectations. The result: a graduate and adult learner landscape transformed—and an urgent need for institutions to rethink how they attract, serve, and retain this critical population.

## Helping Enrollment Leaders Meet Changing Student Expectations



To help institutions better [recruit, enroll, and serve graduate and adult learners](#), we surveyed more than 8,000 prospective and current adult students about their preferences, concerns, and goals. This report includes findings from that survey, along with insights from prior EAB Adult Learner Surveys to understand trends over time. Unless otherwise noted, the findings in this report include insights from both graduate students and adult degree completers, with key differences in response by student segment noted where applicable.

**Read this report for four insights to help you effectively adapt your enrollment strategies to meet shifting student search behavior, application preferences, and market realities.**

### About the 2025 Adult Learner Survey



8,106

Current and prospective graduate and adult degree completion students surveyed

41

Questions asked

#### Topics Include:

- What motivates graduate and adult learners to further their education?
- How do prospective graduate and adult students search for programs, and how has search behavior changed over time?
- What factors are most important in graduate and adult learners' enrollment decisions?

*For more details about the survey and participant profile, refer to page 24 of this report.*



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# Meeting the Moment: International Enrollment Impacted by Costs, Visas, and Politics

## Immigration Restrictions Cause First International Student Decline Since Pandemic

For many institutions, international students make up a significant portion of their graduate and adult enrollment. However, the policies enacted under the second Trump administration have caused uncertainty among international students and enrollment leaders alike. For the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. institutions are seeing a significant [decline in international enrollment](#), leading to a potential revenue loss of \$3 billion in just one year for US institutions—and we likely haven't seen the impact bottom out yet.

### International Enrollment Trends and Impact



**-17%**

Decline in new international enrollment from Fall 2024 to Fall 2025

**-40%**

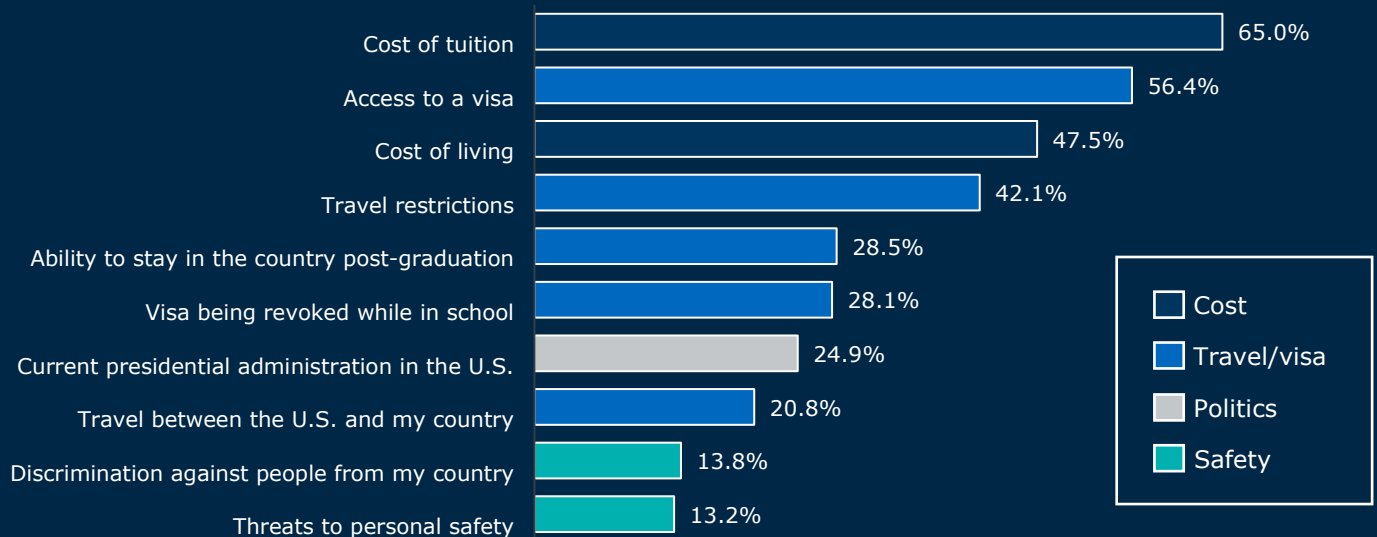
Decline in international student interest in U.S. programs in 2025

**-\$7B**

Potential revenue loss from international students for U.S. institutions in one year

### What concerns you, if anything, about enrolling at a school in the United States?

Asked of participants who are not U.S. citizens. Select all that apply.



### Policy Friction—Especially Visa Restrictions—Poses Real Barriers to Enrollment

International and domestic students alike cite cost as the most important factor in their enrollment decisions. However, beyond price and cost of living, prospective international students must also contend with concerns about visas, travel restrictions, and personal safety. To assuage some of these concerns, address them head-on with a collection of authoritative resources and an explanation of the support services available (both through the university and externally).

# Meeting the Moment: Refocus on Domestic Students amid Uncertainty in the International Market

## Declining International Enrollment Puts Pressure on Domestic Markets

To make up for lost enrollments and revenue on the international front, many enrollment leaders are refocusing their efforts on the domestic market. For institutions with a larger portion of international students, this means a shift in strategy to place greater focus on recruiting domestic students. As those institutions prioritize domestic enrollment, colleges and universities that have always relied heavily on domestic students to meet their enrollment goals now face heightened competition for those same students. This increased pressure on the [domestic student market](#) comes at a time when domestic students are becoming increasingly harder to reach and recruit due to the rise in stealth shopping and changes to federal aid policies.

## Domestic Student Search Behaviors and Program Preferences

Ensure you are [reaching domestic students](#) with relevant, timely, and engaging messaging, offering in-demand programs and speaking to their needs. Explore the survey findings below to better understand domestic students' changing mindset.





# Today's Students Are More Efficient in Their College Search

And More Private than Ever

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# Students' Decision Timelines Have Accelerated

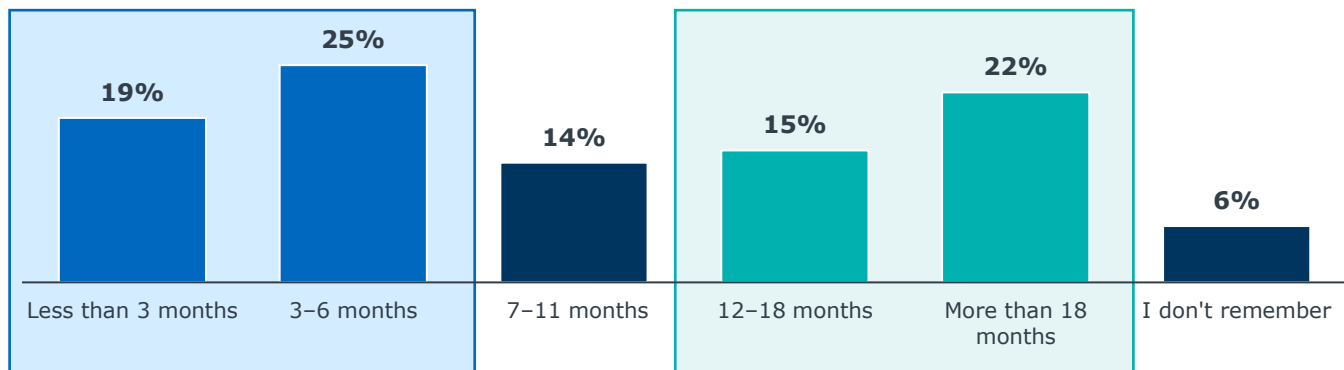
## Search Duration Is Split by Demographic Profile but Becoming Slightly Shorter

Adult learners often take complex, [nonlinear paths to enrollment](#) that span several months or even years. Our survey revealed that students' search timelines have accelerated slightly since last year. Forty-four percent of surveyed adult learners research and make an enrollment decision within six months, up from 41% in 2024. Comparatively, 37% linger in the "search" phase for over a year, down from 40% last year.

This trend is a soft indicator that students are looking to make decisions about furthering their education more quickly, but motivators and competing priorities likely have an impact on timeline. Some candidates may have a narrow goal and external momentum such as an employer need, licensure deadline, or clear promotion path, while others must weigh family and financial considerations, stretching the decision cycle.

Demographics and program preferences impact this timeline. Notably, the majority (59%) of prospective students who prefer an online modality spend less than six months exploring program options, compared to just 34% of those who prefer an in-person experience. Prospective students searching for an in-person program often have more considerations to weigh, from commute time to campus culture, which may extend their decision timeline. The chart below includes additional differences in search duration by student demographic.

### "How long did you search for information related to furthering your education?"



**44%** searched for information for **<6 months**. These students are disproportionately:

- Female
- Prospective degree completers
- Based in the U.S.
- Hispanic

**37%** searched for information for **>1 year**. These students are disproportionately:

- Male
- Prospective graduate students
- Based outside of the U.S.
- Black or African American

## Marketing Campaigns Should Meet Students on All Timelines

Despite slightly faster decision timelines on average, more than half of surveyed students still research programs for over six months. Institutions with short-lived marketing campaigns (i.e., shorter than one year) risk losing prospective students who remain in an extended "search" phase.

In a recent ["secret shopping"](#) of graduate programs' lead nurture campaigns, just 30% of programs continued to market to prospective students beyond 60 days. To engage students who spend significant time exploring program options, continue to market to prospects for 18 to 24 months.

**70%**  
of graduate programs  
stop outreach within  
60 days

Source: EAB study of 50 graduate nurture campaigns, August 2024.

# Adult Learners Have Short Application Lists

## Adults Apply to Just over Four Schools on Average

As leaders of graduate and adult programs know, adult students tend to be pragmatic and decisive. Our survey underscored this truth. Respondents applied to just 4.19 schools on average—far fewer than first-time, full-time undergraduate applicants (8.50). There continue to be notable differences in application volume by degree type, with doctorate hopefuls applying to the most schools on average at 6.78.

### Mean Application Volume by Degree Type

3.51

Master's degree

3.64

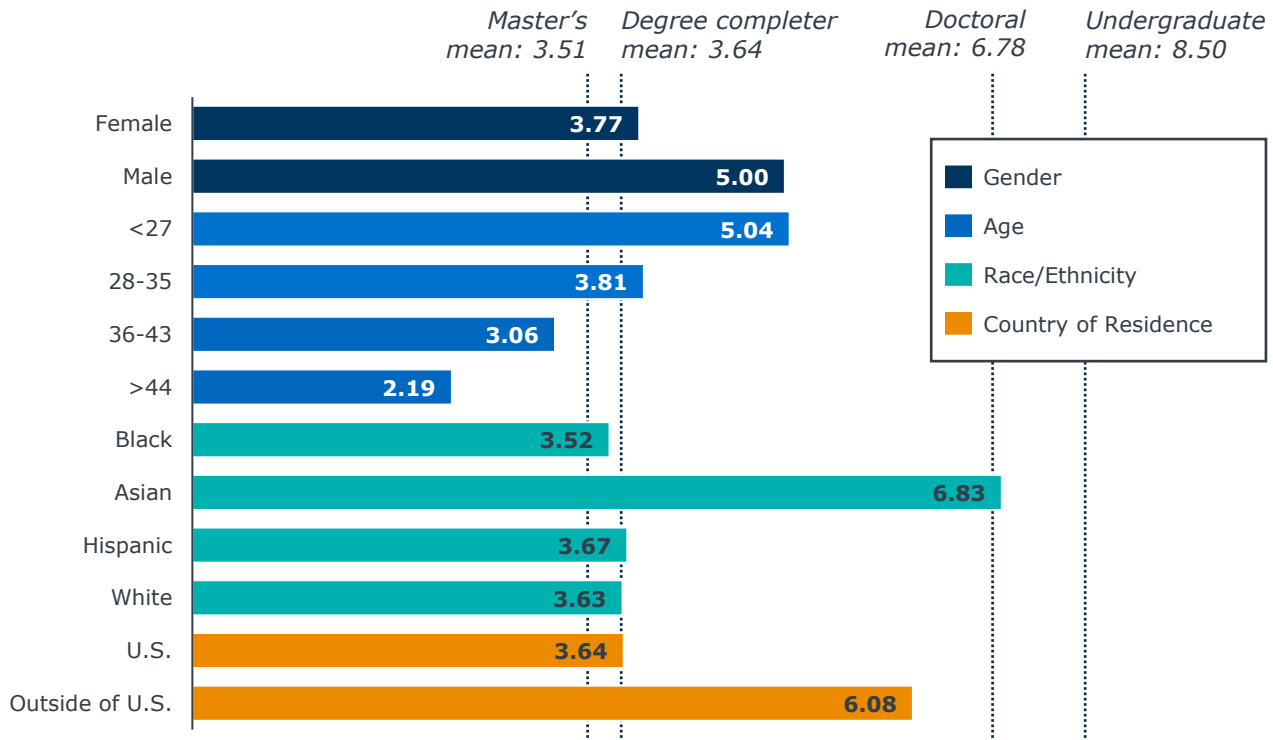
Bachelor's degree completion

6.78

Doctorate degree

International students also submit more applications on average than their domestic peers, likely a practical decision to hedge their bets. However, schools should expect the volume of applications from students outside the U.S. to [decline given new restrictions](#) on international enrollment. At the same time, applications tend to decline with age, from 5.04 applications for those under 27 down to 2.19 applications for those older than 44.

### To how many schools did you apply?



## Increase Engagement Through Segmented and Personalized Messaging

Prioritize segmenting and [personalizing your outreach](#) to prospective students at all stages of their enrollment journey. Since graduate and adult learners apply to so few programs relative to first-time, full-time undergraduate students, it's even more important to meet them with the right message at the right moment in their journey. What moves the needle for one student might lose the interest of another. Ensure your marketing messages respond to student intent and [speak to a student's concerns](#) and interests.

# Privacy Preferences Are Reshaping Early Engagement

## Adult Learners Prefer to Stay Anonymous During the Search Process

Privacy expectations continue to rise among adult learners. An increasing majority, from 50% of respondents in 2024 to 58% in 2025, prefer to [research programs on their own](#) before sharing contact information with a college or university. Another sizable and growing group (25% in 2024 and 28% in 2025) would rather not share any information until they are ready to apply. For busy adults, giving up details often triggers outreach before they are ready to talk, especially at a time when AI usage is growing and prospective students have information at their finger tips. For most, the early journey is stealth, and programs must be creative to adapt to this reality.

80%

of adult learners are “stealth,” or unknown to the institution before they apply

## The Majority of Students Prefer to Research Programs Independently



58.3%

prefer to **research programs on their own** before sharing personal information with a school—an **increase of 8.1 percentage points** compared to 2024



27.7%

**don't want to share any personal information** with a school until they are ready to apply—an **increase of 3.2 percentage points** compared to 2024

## Tailored Information Can Convert Anonymous Browsers into Known Prospects

Despite their aversion to sharing personal information, custom content could be the key to de-stealth adult learners. Forty-three percent say they're willing to share basic information with a school (e.g., name, contact information) if they will receive custom content in exchange. A smaller but still significant portion of respondents (22%) are willing to share information about their goals and concerns to receive custom content. In practice, this means that adult learners will exchange data when the value is immediate and personal but not for generic brochures or “learn more” forms. The content that makes sharing personal data feel worthwhile answers specific and pressing questions, such as “What will this really cost me?”, “How quickly can I complete this degree?”, “Will this fit my schedule?”, and “What jobs do graduates get?”

## Prospective Students Are Open to Sharing Information in Exchange for Custom Content



43.1%

are open to sharing **basic information** (e.g., name, email, program of interest) with a school to receive custom content—a **decrease of 3.5 percentage points** compared to 2024



22.4%

are open to sharing **information about goals and concerns** to receive customized content—a **decrease of 4.3 percentage points** compared to 2024



# Digital-First Resources Are the Backbone of the Search Process

Search Now Redefined by AI

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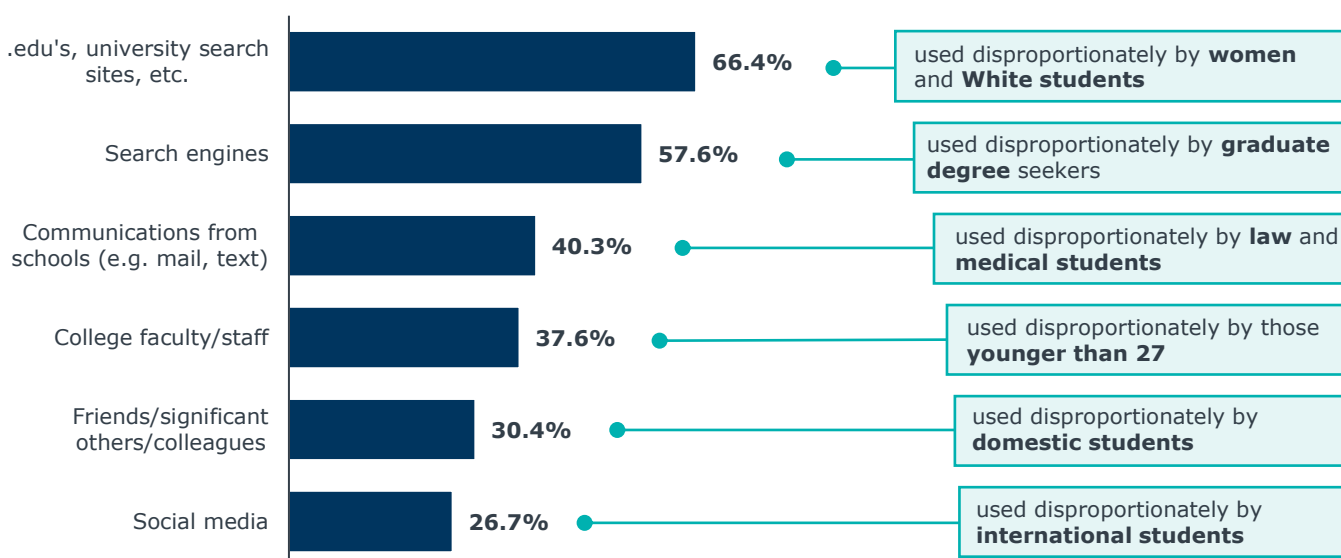
# Organic Channels Dominate Discovery

## Adult Learners Prioritize Authoritative Answers from Trusted Sources

Our survey indicates that two-thirds of prospects use university websites and university search sites such as [Apply Advance](#) in their research process. A majority also rely on search engines (58%) when building their initial short list. For working adults juggling several responsibilities, these channels offer the fastest route to authoritative answers. Graduate and degree completion programs are high-stakes investments, and adult learners prefer to consult sources that are maintained, verifiable, and comprehensive.

### "What sources of information [did you use/have you used] in your search?"

Respondents could select all that apply; top six answers shown

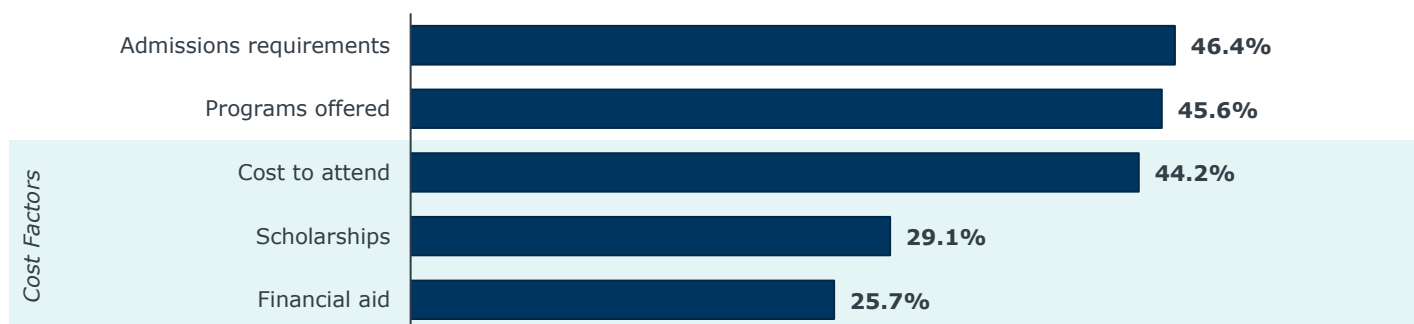


## Prominently Address Student Needs and Decision Factors on Your .edu

If an adult learner is visiting your website, they are likely coming with specific questions, not general curiosity. They want to confirm admission steps and requirements, identify programs offered, and verify an all-in price. [Structure your .edu](#) to answer these common questions before students click away to the next page. To check that you are meeting this need, [audit your program pages](#) to confirm that students can quickly (within 90 seconds) and easily find the information listed below.

### "When you searched schools' websites, what information were you most often trying to find?"

Respondents could select three options; top five responses shown



# Importance of .edu Grows in an AI-First Landscape

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## Your Website Is Often the Basis of Students' First Impression

For most adult learners, your website isn't just a touchpoint; it's their first impression of your institution. Ninety-four percent of respondents make a point of visiting the websites of all schools they are considering, and 86% say a school's website helps them decide whether the school is right for them. If your site isn't optimized, you are at risk of leaving a bad impression on your prospective students.

Make sure to [invest in your website](#) accordingly. It should be easy to find on a traditional or AI-powered search engine, be visually pleasing, and make answers to common questions such as cost, time to completion, and modality options unmissable. With students having shorter attention spans than ever, decision-influencing information should be presented in a scannable, mobile-friendly layout that aligns with how adults actually shop.

## The Overwhelming Majority of Students Use School Websites in Their Search Processes



**93.6%** Make a point of visiting websites of all the schools they are considering

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**90.0%** Say a user-friendly website will improve their opinion of a school

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**86.4%** Say a school's website helps them decide whether the school is right for them

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**84.0%** Say a poorly functioning website will negatively affect their opinion of a school

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**45.6%** Primarily visit school websites on their mobile device

## Marketing Leaders Rank Websites as Their Most Effective Marketing Asset

In a [recent survey of 121 university marketing leaders](#), they ranked .edu as their top digital-marketing strategy contributing to enrollment goals. With both students and university marketing leaders ranking websites as powerful enrollment drivers, not investing in this area means putting yourself at risk of falling behind. At a time when the search landscape is rapidly changing with AI developments, [optimizing your website for search](#) and user experience is a non-negotiable.

## Protect Enrollment with an AI-Ready .edu

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With decades of higher ed web expertise, EAB's Digital Agency helps transform your site into a high-performing enrollment engine, built for how students find information today. Our digital-marketing experts help you improve visibility in traditional and AI search through content that reflects how students search, what they care about, and what moves them to act. No redesign required.



See how EAB can support your website strategy at [eab.com/solutions/digital-agency/](https://eab.com/solutions/digital-agency/)

# AI Usage Surges—and Will Likely Continue to Do So

## AI-Answer Engine Search Grew 5X in One Year

Use of AI tools for program research rose from 3.5% in 2024 to 18.6% in 2025. While it is not the top channel, AI has become a powerful addition to the search process; prospects can ask AI tools to summarize options, compare programs, and estimate costs before they ever click into an .edu page. In an increasingly zero-click environment, a reasonable first answer can shape students' perceptions quickly, especially for busy adult learners. When asked about their online search behavior, 23% of respondents also say they read the AI-generated summary at the top of a search page.

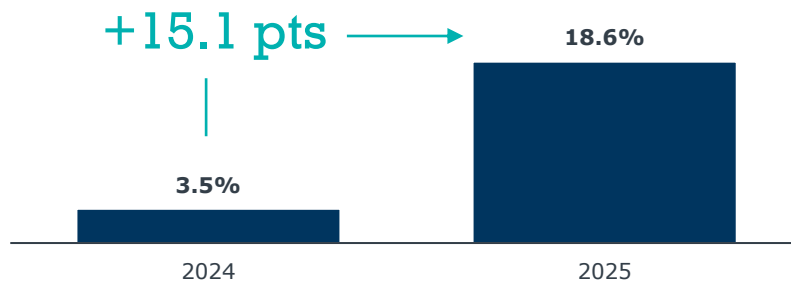
[AI search results](#) won't replace your program pages, but they will play an increasingly crucial role in search. Make sure your program pages are findable and trusted by AI tools. Schools that publish unambiguous, consistent facts across pages and documents are far more likely to have their story represented accurately in AI-generated content.

**Download our guide:** [Navigating Search Visibility in the AI Era](#)

Four tools to ensure your program pages remain competitive and discoverable

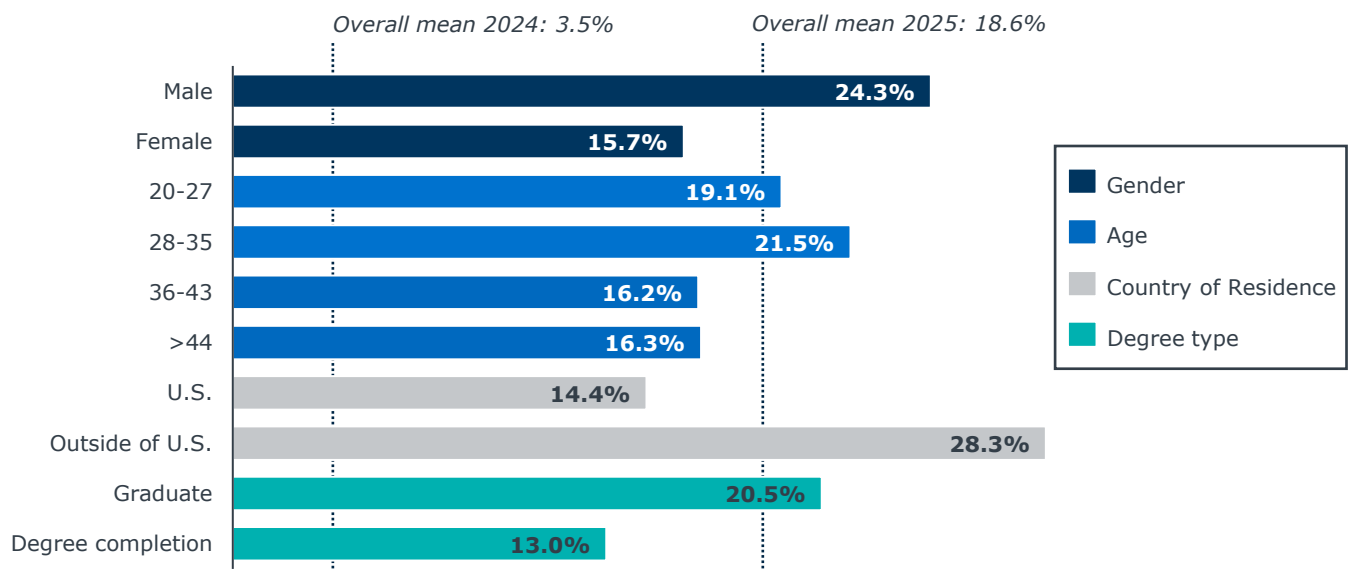
### "What sources of information [did you use/have you used] in your search?"

Respondents who selected "AI-powered search/chatbots (e.g., ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity)"



## Men, Young Adults, and International Students Most Often Use AI in Search Process

While AI adoption has become more widespread, there are variations in its usage across demographic groups. Most notably, men are more likely to use AI in their search than women, as well as 28–35-year-olds, international students, and those seeking a graduate degree.





# Cost Is the Ultimate Gatekeeper to Enrollment

Once That Hurdle Is Cleared, Quality Signals Shape Student Choice

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# Students Are More Budget-Aware

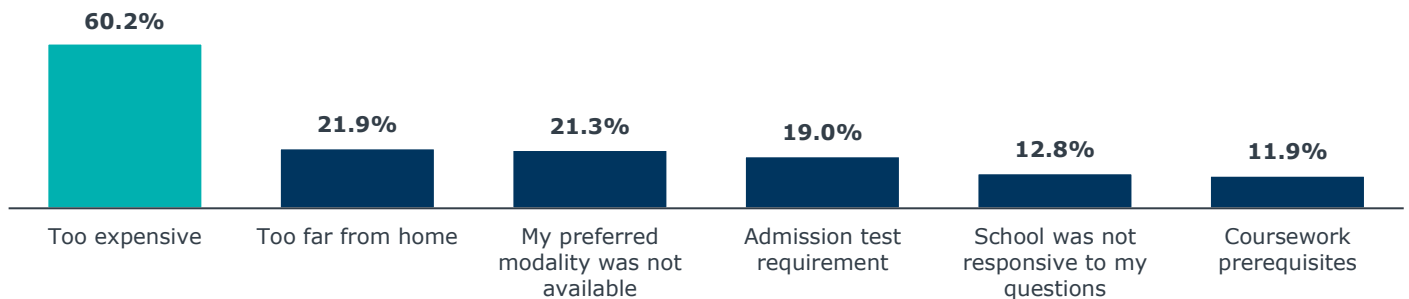
## Cost Eliminates Schools from Students' Short Lists More than Any Other Factor

For both prospective graduate students and degree completers, price is the most common reason students remove a school from their consideration set. Sixty percent of students who plan to enroll but not immediately said cost was the top reason they removed a school from their list. When students refine their lists, they are reacting most immediately to whether the all-in cost is feasible. This includes tuition, expected fees, course materials and equipment, and any required residencies or travel.

Stealth shoppers will not request a call with your team to understand your pricing. Instead, they silently drop schools whose pricing is confusing, missing from your website, or too expensive. Place a single, scannable block on every program page that clearly explains how different financial aid types can stack. Hiding a sticker price, regardless of how high it is, is a surefire way to get your program removed from consideration.

### **"Select any reason that caused you to remove a school from your consideration set."**

Asked of participants currently enrolled, planning to enroll, or planning to enroll but not within the next two years; responses >10%

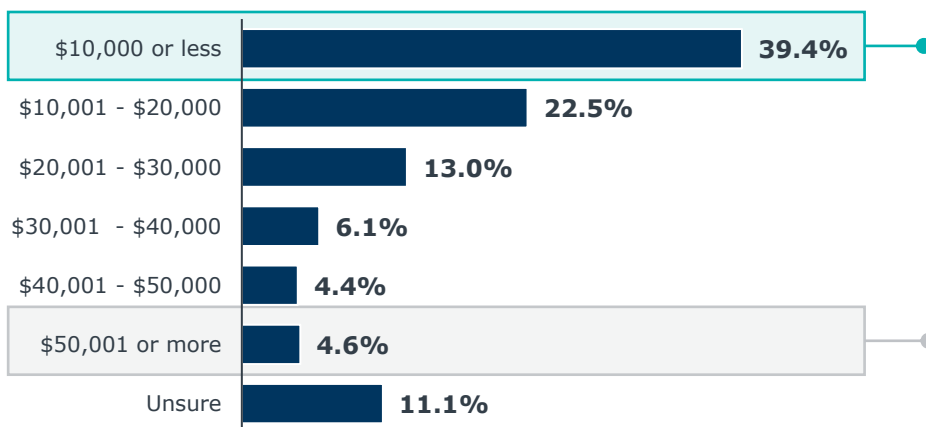


## Two-Thirds of Adult Learners Are Unwilling to Spend Over \$20K Annually

According to nearly 40% of survey respondents, "too expensive" translates to annual costs over \$10,000. For nearly two-thirds, it translates to \$20,000 annually. There are a select few who are less price sensitive. The 5% of respondents willing to spend over \$50,000 annually are disproportionately pursuing a medical or law degree.

### **"What is the most you are willing to spend annually on your education, including both loans and personal financial resources?"**

Asked of students who are currently enrolled or planning to enroll



Students unwilling to spend more than \$10,000 annually are disproportionately:

- Living outside of the U.S.
- Degree completers
- Pursuing degree part-time

Students willing to spend more than \$50,000 annually are disproportionately:

- <27
- Pursuing degree via in-person classes
- Pursuing medical or law degree

# Cost and Program Quality Are Top Enrollment Factors

## Cost Has Grown in Importance Since Last Year and Surpasses All Other Decision Criteria

In this year’s survey, respondents ranked cost as the most important factor in their enrollment decisions, outranking other common criteria and passing last year’s top factor, program accreditation. For adult learners, unclear or expensive pricing is the gatekeeper to enrollment that even a strong brand or compelling faculty often can’t overcome.

If your program makes the cut on price, adult learners shift their focus to program quality. Factors such as program accreditation, reputation, faculty expertise, and career services take center stage. This is an area where your team can have a big impact. It’s an opportunity to [highlight differentiators and stand out](#) from your competitors.

### **“In terms of your enrollment decision, indicate the importance of the following factors.”**

Top 10 responses; Scale: 1=Not at all important, 2=Slightly important, 3=Moderately important, 4=Very important, 5=Extremely important

| Enrollment Factor  | Importance |
|--|------------|
| Cost of attending  | 4.37       |
| Program accreditation  | 4.31       |
| Program quality and reputation (e.g., rankings, brand recognition) | 4.00       |
| Faculty (e.g., reputation, expertise)                              | 3.96       |
| Job placement (e.g., career services, alumni network)              | 3.96       |
| Program modality and format  | 3.95       |
| Convenience (e.g., flexibility, parking)                           | 3.81       |
| Program duration   | 3.75       |
| Student support services   | 3.62       |
| Location (e.g., distance from home, opportunities in the area)     | 3.61       |

## Address Students’ Concerns with Clear Pricing and ROI Information

The best way to address concerns about cost while speaking to program quality is to pair price transparency with [proof of program value](#). When cost and payoff are presented together, students can envision a clearer value proposition and are more likely to enroll.

- ▶ **Communicating about Price:** clearly show costs and highlight any related aid options available, clarify payment plans, and highlight prior-learning/transfer credit as opportunities to save time and money.
- ▶ **Communicating about Payoff:** Publish recent alumni success stories, internship/co-op opportunities, and employer partnerships. When prospective students can clearly see the real-world return on investment, those who have paused their search are more likely to reengage—and admitted students are less likely to melt before enrollment.

# Adult Learners Increasingly Rely on Outside Funding

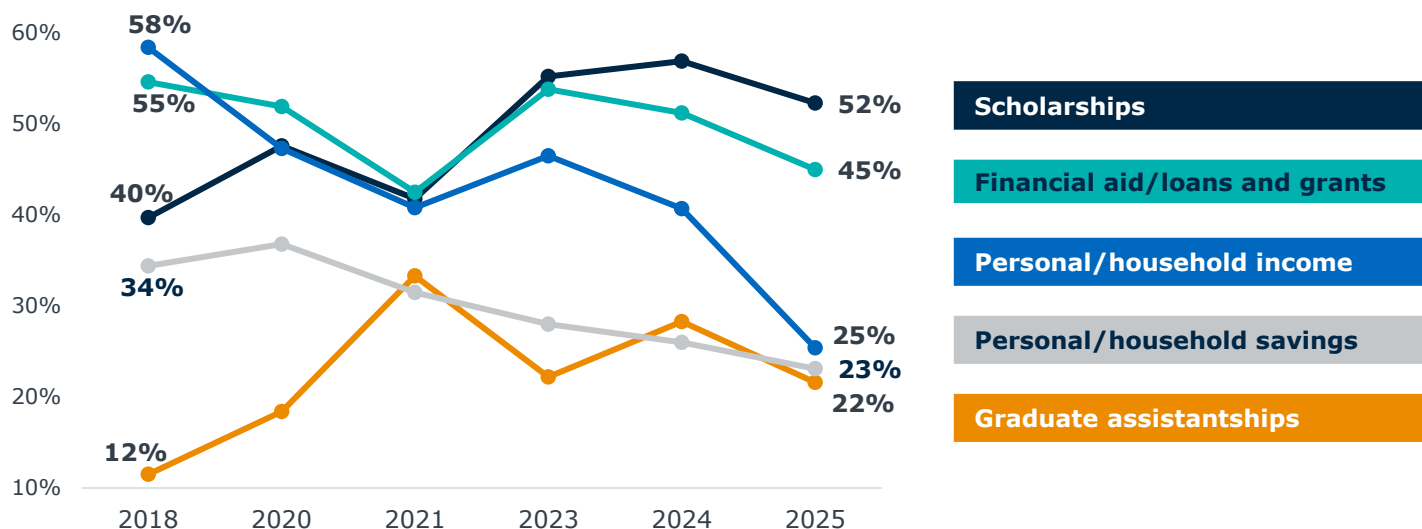
## Funding Mix Shifts Away from Personal Income and Savings

Adults are risk-averse, and they are de-risking the purchase of continuing their education by relying more on external financial support. Scholarships are the single most cited source of financial support (52%), especially for degree completers. Financial aid and loans/grants are close behind.

By comparison, personal/household income and savings play smaller roles in funding education for adult learners, many of whom have limited disposable income, and they continue to decrease year over year. For graduate segments, assistantships (22%) and tuition stipends (17%) are meaningful components of the funding mix. Meanwhile, degree completers disproportionately rely on their parents/guardians for financial support (24%).

### "What sources of financial support will you have for continuing your education?"

Select all that apply; top five responses shown



## Financial Aid Strategy Is More Important than Ever amid Federal Loan Changes

With 45% of survey respondents expecting to use financial aid, loans, and grants to fund their education—coupled with federal policy changes limiting loans and grants—your financial aid strategy is more important than ever. The responses to this survey came just months after the One Big Beautiful Bill Act was signed into law, but before the [changes to Graduate PLUS loans](#) took effect, capping federal borrowing limits and changing loan repayment options. It is difficult to say how much influence these impending policy changes had on survey responses. Regardless, the turbulence in the funding landscape emphasizes how important it is for graduate and adult program leaders to be strategic when it comes to pricing and aid.

### Federal Borrowing Limits Through Graduate PLUS Loans

**\$100,000**

For graduate degrees

**\$200,000**

For professional degrees

Source: <https://finaid.org/loans/gradplus/>.

## Learn More About EAB's Financial Aid Optimization Services

EAB's Financial Aid Optimization program ensures that every dollar you commit to aid is used to meet your institution's diverse enrollment goals. EAB's dedicated in-house team guides you from financial aid policy development through yield management and allows you to monitor real-time performance throughout the enrollment cycle.

See how EAB can support your financial aid strategy at [eab.com/solutions/financial-aid-optimization/](https://eab.com/solutions/financial-aid-optimization/)

# Career-Outcome Messaging Can Bridge the Cost Gap

## Career Advancement Is the Primary Reason Adult Learners Further Their Education

Motivations for pursuing education are as unique as adult learners themselves. Pragmatic enrollment drivers like advancing one’s career (39%) and learning new information/skills (20%) sit alongside intrinsically motivating goals like pursuing one’s passions (30%) and making a difference in the world (28%). These findings are consistent with findings from EAB surveys dating back to 2020.

However, key differences exist by gender identity and age, as well as degree type and field of study. For example, women and those pursuing a doctoral degree disproportionately seek to further their education to pursue their passions. Enrollment marketing teams that factor each student’s individual motivators into their marketing materials are best equipped to cut through the noise. This data can be sourced via micro-surveys or students’ digital behaviors, for example. By incorporating hyper-personalized messages into campaigns, schools can improve engagement and response rates. [EAB Adult Learner Recruitment partners](#) have seen more than 50% increase in response rate when emails are hyper-personalized based on students’ intent signals and engagement behaviors.

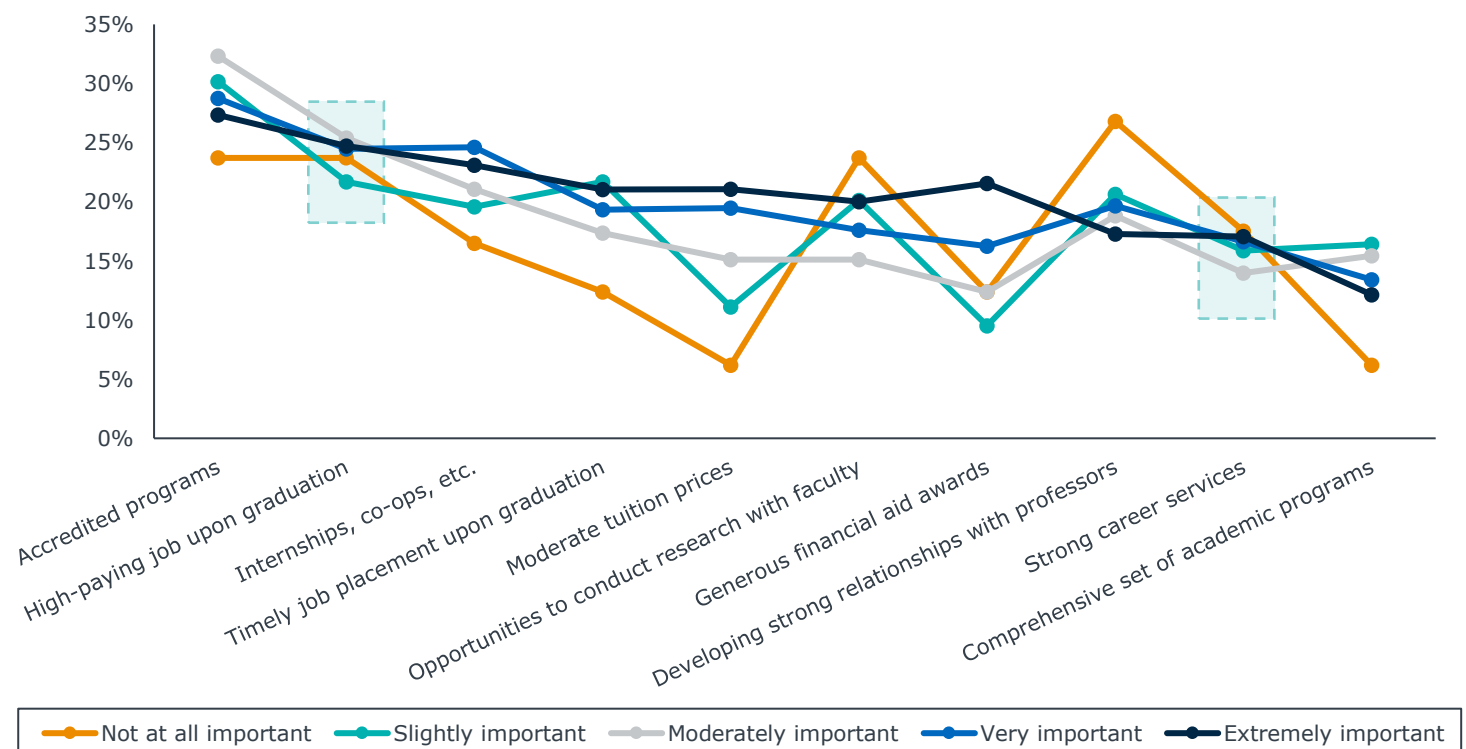
## High-Paying Jobs and Strong Career Services Create Value

We asked survey respondents to share the factors that they think best represent the value of higher education. The top 10 factors are listed below, with accredited programs topping the list. When assessed by how highly they ranked cost as an enrollment factor, the two that stayed the most consistently valuable across the board were landing a high paying job and having strong career services.

For students who said cost was not an important factor (orange line) in their enrollment decision, they placed an emphasis on faculty: opportunities to conduct research with faculty and developing strong relationships with professors. To successfully communicate your value regardless of cost, be sure to clearly highlight your programs’ job placement rates, career services, and faculty expertise in your outreach and on your .edu.

## What characteristics would you say best represent the value of higher education?

Top 10 responses by Importance of Cost as Enrollment Factor







# Limited Program Options Drive Format and Modality Mismatches

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INSIGHT

4

# Adults Prefer Hybrid Programs but Enroll Differently

## Adult Learners Express a Desire for Hybrid Formats

Forty-one percent of adult learners report a preference for hybrid modalities, but this skews substantially toward hybrid formats that lean toward in-person instruction (28%) compared to those that lean toward more online (13%). In fact, 56% of respondents say they prefer courses where most or all classes are in-person, especially graduate students, compared to 37% who prefer to take most or all classes online, who are more likely to be degree completers. Hybrid formats make sense for adult learners who want to retain control over their schedules without giving up access to their faculty and peers.

41%

of surveyed adult learners prefer a hybrid modality

A hybrid modality reduces friction only when the experience and expectations are explicit. Replace generic course outlines with a detailed framework about timing, policies, and expectations. When adults can visualize exactly how coursework and in-person requirements fit into their schedule, the program moves from an abstract idea to a plan they can follow.

### Which of the following course formats do you prefer?

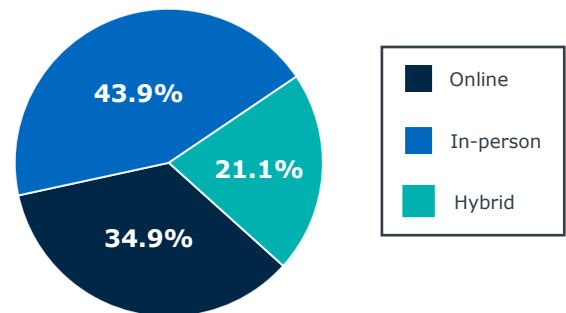


## Limited Modality Offerings Lead Students to Enroll Differently Than Their Preferences

While 41% of respondents express a preference for hybrid programs, only 21% end up enrolling in one. Most (44%) enrolled in fully in-person programs, even though that was the preference for only 28% of respondents. Similarly, more respondents enrolled in online programs (35%) than originally preferred that modality.

An analysis of verbatim comments revealed that 35% of students who enrolled in a course format that was different than their preference made that decision because it was the only modality option they were offered. Hybrid modalities are preferred but time and life commitments are significant. Where possible, add options for in-person activities and community building, regardless of modality.

### What is the format of the course you are currently enrolled in?



There were no options possible in my program that matched my preference.

- Survey respondent



# Flexibility of Asynchronous Programs Is Appealing

## Online Learners Prefer Programs Delivered Asynchronously

The desire for flexibility is exhibited by the overall preference for hybrid formats. This preference is true for online learners as well. Seventy-four percent of students seeking an online program want an asynchronous or mixed format, while just 18% are looking for a synchronous online format. Reiterating this benefit, one respondent said of asynchronous programs:



I opted into an asynchronous program because my husband and I have 3 children under 5. It allots me the flexibility and autonomy needed to accomplish my goals.

- Survey respondent



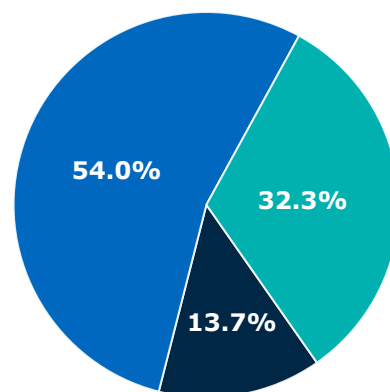
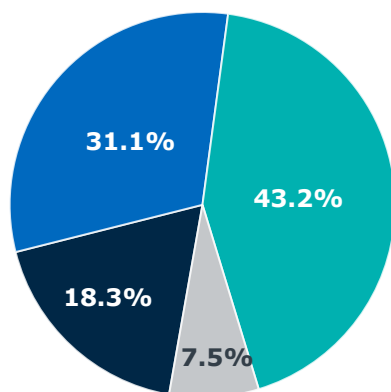
## Lack of Online Options Leads to Students Enrolling Differently than Their Preferences

A lack of offerings affects online students as well. For online learners who indicated a preference for an asynchronous format but enrolled in a synchronous format instead, 87% say the disconnect was due to a lack of offerings. On the flip side, 79% students who prefer a synchronous format but enrolled in an asynchronous format say the same thing—that was all that was offered to them.

There is no silver bullet that will [eliminate this complexity](#). Offering both modalities for one program is often unrealistic from a cost standpoint. Instead of offering the same program in a synchronous and an asynchronous format, consider offering it as a mixed modality. Most online students (43%) prefer a mix of asynchronous and synchronous formats, meaning your program can capture the widest range of preferences by doing so. If this is not feasible for your program, a micro-survey to gauge the preferences of your specific students may be helpful in deciding your online [program's design](#) and structure.

**For online classes, which modality would you select if all were offered?**

**For online classes, which modality are you currently using?**



## Most Adults Are Willing to Attend in Person Multiple Times per Week, Even for Hybrid Format

Of those who prefer to attend all or most classes in person, 71% are willing to attend in-person multiple times per week, but this varies among demographic groups. Young adults, degree completers, and respondents who are not employed are also more willing to travel for classes compared to their counterparts.

**71%**

Willing to attend in person multiple times per week

Most survey respondents don't want to spend more than 30 minutes commuting to and from classes, which is in line with findings from our survey last year. For hybrid formats, ensure that any requests for students to come in person are filled with networking opportunities, [hands-on learning experiences](#), and other active learning that makes the in-person format feel valuable, differentiated, and worth the commute.

# Key Takeaways

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## Today's Students Are More Efficient in Their College Search

Adult learners are pragmatic, decisive, and intentional. While their journey to enrollment is complex to you, it is straightforward for them. They are conducting their research independently, speeding up their search, and applying to just four schools on average. They know what they want and need to hear that your program can deliver. Ensure your marketing campaigns are reaching students across channels and are using hyper-personalization to strike the right tone, speak to their concerns, and adjust based on their behavior and intent.

▶ **Use the resource:** [Creating High-Quality Messaging for Graduate and Adult Lead Generation Campaigns](#)

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## Digital-First Resources Are the Backbone of the Search Process

Ninety-four percent of students will visit your website if they are considering your school. As both the first impression for prospective students and the foundation for your institution's visibility in AI and traditional search results, your website plays a critical role in whether students find and choose your school. Optimize your website for search and clearly display critical decision-making criteria (e.g., cost, modality options) to ensure that your website is an enrollment driver.

▶ **Use the resource:** [10 Essential Tests for Enrollment-Ready .edu Sites](#)

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## Cost Is the Ultimate Gatekeeper to Enrollment

Graduate and adult students consistently identify cost and available financial aid among the most important factors in deciding where to enroll. With the elimination of Graduate PLUS loans and the growing reliance on outside funding sources for education, adult learners will be looking to your teams for financial support and clear guidance on tuition, fees, and other expected costs. While clear pricing and a sound financial aid strategy have always been important enrollment levels, they are now even more critical to your adult learner enrollment strategy.

▶ **Use the resource:** [Preparing for the end of Grad PLUS: 4 strategies to rethink graduate cost and aid](#)

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## Limited Program Options Drive Format and Modality Mismatches

Many adult learners enroll in programs that don't meet their initial preferences, and some are forgoing enrollment altogether, because their program preferences are not being met. While hybrid schedules may be more intensive for faculty and staff, it is the preferred modality for 41% of surveyed students who want the flexibility of online courses and the benefits of in-person experiences. When designing programs, identify your core audience and where possible, use their preferences and goals to inform the program modalities you offer.

▶ **Use the resource:** [Building an Effective Graduate Enrollment Management Plan: Exploring the Evolution and Elements of Graduate Enrollment Management](#)

# Research Overview

## About the 2025 Adult Learner Survey

EAB's University Research Partners conducted a survey of current and prospective graduate and adult learners from August 20 to September 8, 2025. The survey asked students about their motivations, modality and schedule preferences, and search behaviors. The findings in this report are based on responses from 8,106 students.

## Participant Profile

| Age   |     |
|-------|-----|
| <28   | 42% |
| 28-35 | 28% |
| 36-43 | 16% |
| >44   | 14% |

| Gender                  |      |
|-------------------------|------|
| Female                  | 55%  |
| Male                    | 44%  |
| Prefer to self-describe | 0.3% |
| Nonbinary               | 1%   |

| Race/Ethnicity                          |     |
|---|-----|
| African/African American/Black          | 30% |
| Asian<br>(Central/South/East/Southeast) | 19% |
| Hispanic or Latine                      | 12% |
| White/Caucasian                         | 45% |

| Employment Status |     |
|-------------------|-----|
| Full-time         | 51% |
| Part-time         | 21% |
| No                | 28% |

| Degree Pursuing |     |
|-----------------|-----|
| Bachelor's      | 21% |
| Master's        | 47% |
| Doctorate       | 32% |

| Area of Study   |     |
|-----------------|-----|
| Business        | 34% |
| Health Care     | 20% |
| Medical         | 28% |
| Social Sciences | 38% |
| Law             | 11% |

| Residency     |     |
|---------------|-----|
| Domestic      | 72% |
| International | 28% |

| Domestic Region |     |
|-----------------|-----|
| Northeast       | 20% |
| Southeast       | 23% |
| Midwest         | 22% |
| Southwest       | 16% |
| West            | 19% |

# How EAB's Adult Learner Recruitment Can Help

**Adult Learner Recruitment** is a true enrollment partner for graduate, online, professional, and adult degree completion programs. Our next-generation growth strategies help you reach today's students in this dynamic market and amplify your results at every stage of the enrollment funnel.

## Outperform the Market at Every Stage of the Funnel



### Strategize

*Identify and build market-ready programs for competitive advantage*



### Curate

*Expand and diversify your pool of right-fit students*



### Cultivate

*Customized campaigns to drive students to application*



### Convert

*Improve yield and retention to maximize enrollment potential*

## What Makes EAB Different

40+ Years of **Higher Ed Expertise**

**Unrivaled Access** to New Audiences

Seamless **Marketing Orchestration**

**Visibility** into Full-Funnel Performance

## Proven Results in a Dynamic Landscape

**200+**

Partner institutions

**6:1**

Average ROI across multiyear partnership

**18%**

Average graduate enrollment growth

**\$2M**

Average NTR influenced per partner

To discuss how EAB can help you meet your graduate and adult enrollment goals, email [LexRubyHowe@eab.com](mailto:LexRubyHowe@eab.com). Learn more at [eab.com/ALR](http://eab.com/ALR).





202-747-1000 | [eab.com](http://eab.com)

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## ABOUT EAB

At EAB, our mission is to make education smarter and our communities stronger. We work with more than 2,800 institutions to drive transformative change through data-driven insights and best-in-class capabilities. From kindergarten to college to career, EAB partners with leaders and practitioners to accelerate progress and drive results across enrollment, student success, institutional strategy, data analytics, and advancement. We work with each partner differently, tailoring our portfolio of research, technology, and marketing and enrollment solutions to meet the unique needs of every leadership team, as well as the students and employees they serve. Learn more at [eab.com](http://eab.com).