Tracking Trends in Online Education: Student and Administrator Insights

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About This Project

This annual survey research initiative presents feedback from school administrators and online students. This year marks our third year of original data collection.

Our goal is long-term tracking and identification of trends related to:

- Online learner demographics
- Online program marketing and recruitment
- Design considerations for new online programs
The Surveys

Conducted in January and February 2019. Self-reported data.

451 SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

1500 STUDENTS
(CURRENT, PROSPECTIVE, ALUMNI)
Today’s Session

1. Demographics Overview
2. Key Trends In Online Education
3. Recommendations for Program Development
4. What’s Next?
5. Q&A
Demographics Overview
Respondent Demographics Overview

**School Administrators**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution Type</th>
<th>Primary Job Titles</th>
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<tr>
<td>● 99% Nonprofit Institutions</td>
<td>● Program Dean/Director</td>
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<td>● 60% Four-Year Institutions</td>
<td>● Institutional-level Online Administrator/Manager</td>
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<td>● Admissions or Enrollment Manager</td>
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**Respondent Demographics Overview**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Students</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>GENDER</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>58% Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>42% Male</td>
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What motivates students to enroll in an online program or take online classes?
Key Trend: Career Goals Drive Enrollment

While students choose online learning for a variety of reasons, our findings reveal steady motivations over the past three years related to career and employment goals.

69% of students identified career goals as a motive for enrollment.
- This year, largest number of these students identified as “career accelerators.”

20% Lifelong learners
13% Recent high school graduates

80% of school administrators say prospective students ask for placement and employment rates of graduates.
What is the most significant trend in online student demographics at your institution?
Key Trend: Online Student Harder To Define

1. **AGE**: Are online students getting older or younger? Perhaps both. This year, **37% of administrators reported that students are getting older**, while **28% said they are getting younger**.

  “Contrary to popular belief, the traditional students we believe are tech savvy are not as interested in online learning as our adult working students.”

  “Traditional age students are exploring online degrees so they can continue working.”

  “More dual credit (students still in high school) are taking online courses.”

  “We are seeing more students with less work experience returning back more quickly (to advance themselves more quickly)”

  “Starting to see a younger audience. Still non-traditional, but younger than in the past.”
Key Trend: Online Student Harder To Define

2. LOCATION: Administrators shared trends in students enrolling in online courses from outside the U.S., nationwide, the hyper-local area, and as part of traditional campus-based programs.

“Most of our undergraduate and graduate students live in the U.S., but more international students are applying online.”

“More local who want blended courses.” & “Resident students taking online courses to supplement course schedules and reduce time to graduation.”

“The majority of the online students are from the hyper local area. This shows us that they could attend campus, but opt not to.”

“Online classes have been integrated into the culture, and a majority of our students mix up face-to-face and online classes.”
3. DIVERSITY: An additional trend was identified related to increased online enrollment of those with a range of diverse characteristics and needs.

“More diversity in student enrollment”

“Young African American men and women”

“More and more unprepared students”

“More racial and class diversity.”

“More undergraduates, economically disadvantaged”

“More diversity and more students with disabilities.”

“An increase in underrepresented minorities (e.g., females, African Americans, etc.)”
Key Trends in Online Education
Do your online programs and courses have on-campus or real-time (i.e., synchronous) requirements?
Key Trend: College Campus Part of Online

Why do students choose to learn online rather than on campus? For the third year in a row, the convenience and flexibility offered by online programs topped the list of reasons. But campus resources still play a role.

46% OF ONLINE STUDENTS SAID THEY VISIT CAMPUS EITHER BY CHOICE OR TO FULFILL A REQUIREMENT.

“Resident students are taking online courses to supplement course schedules and reduce time to graduation. Reducing the time to degree completion is a recurring theme.”
Key Trend: College Campus Part of Online

The trends over three years show a rise in multiple areas. The trend toward on-campus participation is increasing, as is a trend toward requirements for synchronous meetings and in both on-campus and online classes.

Students who never visit campus:
47% (2017) - 37% (2019)

Students taking both completely online and completely in-person courses:
9% (2017) - 17% (2019)

Students reporting synchronous requirements in their online courses:
44% asynchronous / 56% synchronous - 2017
40% asynchronous / 60% synchronous - 2019
What is the most significant challenge students face when making a decision about college?
Key Trend: Financial Considerations Impact Decisions

• For three years in a row, estimating actual costs and finding financial aid topped the list of challenges related to making a decision about online education.

• The top two lessons learned for online alumni include: comparing more programs, and doing more research about cost and financial aid.
How do online students research and compare the options?
Key Trend: Comparing Programs

What is the primary source of information?

- **20%** CONTACTED SCHOOLS DIRECTLY
- **19%** READ ONLINE REVIEWS FROM STUDENTS
- **17%** USED RANKINGS WEBSITES
What trends have you seen in the demand for online courses at your institution?
Key Trend: Demand Remains Steady

In each of the past three years, the majority of school administrators said that demand has increased compared to the previous year.

99% of administrators said demand is either “increasing” or has “stayed the same for the past few years.”
What is the primary factor in deciding to offer a new online program at your institution?

What is the primary challenge related to offering new online programs?
Key Trend: New Online Programs Bring Benefits and Challenges

Our school survey provided some insight into how institutions make the decision to offer a new online program and challenges to implementation.

73% of administrators decide to offer a new program as a response to student demand.

71% said they launch new programs as a growth opportunity to increase overall student enrollment.

Top Concerns

- Marketing and meeting recruitment goals (69%)
- Meeting cost and management demands (59%)
What is the most significant challenge students encounter in completing an online program?
Key Trend: Life Happens in Online Education

As with changing demographics, working with students to manage unexpected interruptions has implications for support services, student tracking an intervention, and faculty development.

Almost 40% of administrators said “unexpected circumstances or events in their personal life” were their students’ biggest challenge.

20% of online alumni said these life events were a major roadblock to graduation.
What is the overall perception of the quality or value of online education?
Key Trend: Student Perception of Online Learning Quality and Value are High

This year, we looked at student satisfaction through the lenses of return on investment, willingness to recommend to others, and perceived quality. Overall, the responses this year were favorable.

- 77% of students said distance education is “better than” or “equal to” on-campus option.
- 88% of students said their degrees have or will have a positive ROI.
- 89% would recommend online education to others.
Recommendations for Online Program Development
Online Students Bring Diverse Needs to the Online Classroom

The “typical” online student may be a thing of the past as students of all ages and from all locations enroll in increasing numbers. Explore the range of characteristics and needs among students at your institution and identify the services that will support their success.
Recommendations

Help Prospective Students Find Best-Fit Programs

Leverage multiple avenues of communication to not only meet your marketing and recruitment goals, but also to help prospective students choose the programs that will meet their needs. Share details that help them estimate actual costs and set realistic expectations for learning as an online student.
Students Need Career Development Support Throughout Their Journey

Take a closer look at how you are recruiting career-minded learners -- the majority of online students -- and how you are supporting them after they enroll. Career services, internships, professional networking, employer partnerships, and career-oriented curricula are as important as ever, from recruiting to graduation and beyond.
Challenges Related to Paying for College and Managing Student Debt are Ongoing

Financial support doesn’t end for students after a financial package is offered and accepted. Prepare new students for what they can expect in terms of college costs and financial assistance. Also, teach them the skills they need to monitor (and potentially apply for) financial assistance throughout their programs and anticipate loan repayment after graduation.
Online Students Value Their Learning Experience

Overall satisfaction with online learning seems high. Seek out feedback from your online students and graduates for insights about their satisfaction with the online learning experience and the perceived value of completing their programs.
What’s Next?
Student Demographics Report - Coming Soon!

Student Types:
- Climbers 35%
- Switchers 29%
- Explorers 33%

Student Categories:
- Prospective 39%
- Current 38%
- Alumni 17%

Major Fields of Study:
- Business-related 25%
- Health-related 12%
- Biological, Physical Sciences 10%
- Computer science-related 9%

Online vs. On Campus
Researching the Options
Degrees and Majors
Roadblocks and Regrets
Student Satisfaction
“Employer partnership/incentive” a top-three response for all student types in the Current student category.
  - Almost half of biological/physical science majors

Alumni-Explorers only group to have “reputation of a specific school” as a top-three reason for enrolling online.

Climbers more likely to be interested in industry certification programs.

Highest percentage of students at associate degree level – Switchers.

Almost half of graduate students identified as Climbers
  - 39% interested in MBA programs
2020 Online Education Trends Report

- Student Data Collection – October
- School Data Collection – in progress
- Target Launch: March 2020

https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/EDUTrendsOLC
The Best Colleges Trends Report is available for download:

www.bestcolleges.com/perspectives
Q & A

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Stay Connected!

#LetsTalkCollege

Twitter Chat – every other Wednesday – 3pm ET