Graduate students are changing in fundamental ways.

Defining the “typical graduate student” persona is a constantly evolving endeavor. Not only do their changing characteristics complicate marketing endeavors, they pose significant challenges to understanding students’ decision-making processes when selecting a graduate school.

Recent shifts in student demographics shed some light on this, but it’s only when coupled with new data that captures their communications preferences and weighted considerations for selecting a school that a fuller picture of the modern graduate student emerges. This report collects these insights and spotlights key trends that provide a better understanding of today’s graduate students and how best to attract and enroll them.

**Graduate learner insights covered in this report include:**

- Demographic changes
- Media consumption
- Most popular fields of study
- Communication preferences
- Decision-making factors
- Student experience expectations
How is the “typical graduate student” changing?

In fall 2015:

- **58% of all post baccalaureate students were female**—a trend that is expected to increase by 12% through 2026.
- **55% were White, but this group has shown a decrease of 10%** over the past five years.
- **Full-time students comprise 57% of graduate programs**; however, **part-time students are projected to increase at a faster rate**—11% over next nine years.
- **26% were pursuing graduate degrees exclusively online.**

Where are we seeing shifts?

- **Increasing diversity.** The highest growth rate of graduate students is amongst Hispanic/Latino populations followed by Black and Asian/Pacific populations.
- **International shifts.** In 2016, 22% of graduate students were international, but due to legislation and the current political climate, institutions reported a significant decline in international graduate applications for fall 2017 from the Middle East (31%), China (32%), and India (15%).
- **Growing acceptance of nontraditional credentials.** Online certificates, MOOCs, stackable credentials, digital badges, and nanodegrees are on the rise as universities and colleges begin to offer more of these alternative pathways to credentials.

What are they interested in studying?

The Bureau of Labor Statistics designates at least 33 occupations which typically require a master’s degree for entry-level positions. Many of those included in this list also have strong projected job growth through 2024:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field of Study</th>
<th>Projected Growth Rate (2014-2024)</th>
<th>Number of New Jobs (2014-2024)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economists</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education administrators, postsecondary</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>15,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare social workers</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>74,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health counselors and marriage and family counselors</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>31,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial-organizational psychologists</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>32,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematicians</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurse anesthetists, midwives, and practitioners</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>53,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postsecondary teachers</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>177,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physicians assistants</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>28,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehabilitation counselors</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>10,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech language pathologists</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>28,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statisticians</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>10,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban and regional planners</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>2,400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For wages, it still holds true that workers in the fields of business, education, healthcare and social services, and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) will very often earn more with a master’s degree than with a bachelor’s degree alone.
What influences their decision making?

Across generations, more than half of students holding master’s degrees stated the important factors in researching a college or university included details about program and curriculum (65%), clear and complete information about tuition and funding (60%), and personal outreach from an advisor or representative (31%). This last point illustrates the importance of responding quickly and appropriately to inquiries and applications as a means of successfully attracting and recruiting graduate students.

These same individuals, when asked which student services they viewed as most important to their success as graduate students, selected academic advising and support (62%), financial aid and scholarship assistance (58%), and career services (50%).

The majority of students say they rely on digital research (a combination of searches, visits to the school’s website, ranking sites, video and social) to help them decide which school to go to and say these sources are twice as influential compared to admissions counselors.

How do they consume media?

When it comes to media consumption, the typical graduate student ranks quite high in online, for both home and business use. Interaction with radio is moderate to high, outdoor interaction is moderate, and television is low. There is significant value in understanding how media reaches this population and meets the needs of the students. We know that across generations, students are using online tools to conduct research that influences their decision-making process. The majority of students say they rely on digital research (a combination of searches, visits to the school’s website, ranking sites, video and social) to help them decide which school to go to and say these sources are twice as influential compared to admissions counselors.

How do they prefer to communicate?

Email is still key. 87% of graduate students prefer email as their primary form of communication with a college or university during the application and enrollment phases.

Online Chat. Graduate students are more likely than any other demographic group in higher education to use an online chat box for engaging with school representatives.

Digital Content. Graduate students spend considerable time browsing the college’s or university’s website for information, and are highly likely to fill out an online request for information.

Think digital first. Graduate students primarily rely on online tools such as email, online chat, and institution websites to research program options.
It’s clear that a multi-modal communication strategy drives a deeper connection with prospective graduate students. Using personalized communication through a variety of platforms, which connects with students based on their persona and stage in the recruitment funnel, allows schools to “meet students where they are.”

The three questions prospective students ask most frequently are: (1) How much? (2) How long? and (3) What do I get for it?

These findings also underscore the critical importance of a recruitment-focused website, with intuitive and user-friendly navigation allowing prospective students to quickly find answers to their most common questions and request additional information or follow-up from the program. In fact, the three questions prospective students ask most frequently are: (1) How much? (2) How long? and (3) What do I get for it? If information is buried or not easily attainable, there is a real risk of losing potential applicants to competitor schools and programs.

How long does it take them to decide?

Graduate learners can take anywhere from 7-18 months to make their decision. In fact, it may be more useful to think of them as “long-term impulse buyers.” Before they decide which school to attend, graduate learners consider several factors in their life such as family obligations, work, and finances. When the conditions in their life are right, they will be ready to act fast, favoring the school that has remained top of mind and can make it as easy for them to enroll as possible.

What expectations do they bring?

Based on previous experiences in higher education, students enter graduate study programs with widely varying expectations and often preconceived biases. Unfortunately, the very factors which graduate students deem influential in selecting their graduate programs were the experiences which they pinpointed as most negative: financial aid and scholarship assistance (33%), career services (26%), and academic and advising support (23%) ranked as the most negative experiences. These findings show how critical it is for schools to have a strong support and advisory infrastructure, which begins at the inquiry and applicant stage, but continues post-matriculation as well.⁴

Sources