



# The Graduate Learner of Today

Insights into attracting and enrolling today's graduate students

## 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.**<sup>1</sup>

## 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%).<sup>2</sup>
- **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:

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

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.

*The future is female. A majority of graduate students are female—a trend that is expected to increase by 12% through 2026.*



## Most Popular Graduate Fields<sup>3</sup>

- Social Work
- Accounting
- Educational Leadership and Administration
- Curriculum and Instruction
- Registered Nursing/Registered Nurse
- Public Administration
- Electrical and Electronics Engineering
- Counselor Education/School Counseling and Guidance Services
- Special Education and Teaching
- Counseling Psychology
- Computer Science
- Business/Commerce
- Public Health

**Tip:** Degrees with **increasing demand** and relatively **low competition** should be evaluated for potential program development.

### High Demand/Low Competition Graduate Degrees

- Accounting, Computer Science
- Applied Economics
- Computer Programming & Systems
- Information Science/Informatics
- Education/Teaching
- Family & Social Psychology
- Health Policy Analysis
- Marketing Research, Operations & Sales Distribution
- Medical & Clinical Assistant
- Nursing
- Real Estate Development
- Modeling, Virtual Environments, and Simulation
- Web Design

## 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.<sup>5</sup>**

## 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.<sup>5</sup>

## How do they prefer to communicate?

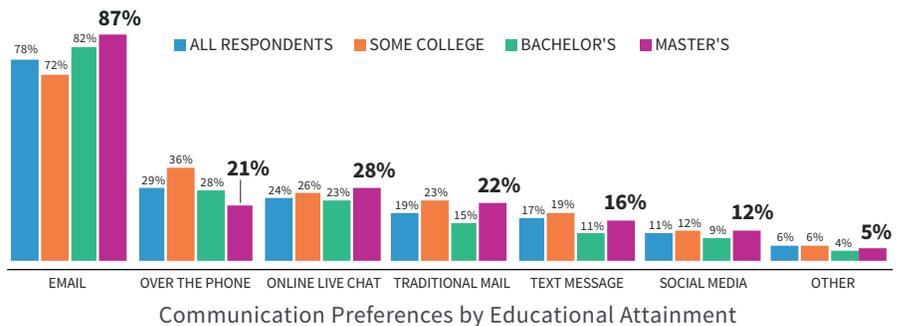
**Email is still key.** 87% of graduate students prefer email as their primary form of communication with a college or university during the application and enrollment phases.

**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.<sup>4</sup>



*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?

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.



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### 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.<sup>4</sup>

#### Sources

1 U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. *The Condition of Education 2017*. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017144.pdf>

2 Advancing Global Higher Education. *Trending Topics Survey: International Applicants for Fall 2017- Institutional & Applicant Perceptions*. <http://www.aacrao.org/docs/default-source/TrendTopic/Immigration/final-report.pdf>.

3 U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. IPEDS: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/>

4 UPCEA and Blackboard (2017). *Navigating Generational Shifts: Understanding Today's Student Demographics, Preference and Expectations*.

5 Snow, Shannon. *Win Hearts, Minds and Enrollments with Digital*. CALEM 2017.

Blackboard can help your institution reach, recruit, and retain more students through:



### Market Research

Understand how best to target prospective student audiences and market to them; identify programs and degrees that offer the greatest opportunity for investment and growth; highlight competitive points of differentiation; and develop financial modeling to plan for sustained growth.



### Enrollment Marketing

Create a strategy, informed by your enrollment goals and the unique needs of your market to attract and recruit qualified students using market research, targeted outreach, and personalized communications.



### Enrollment Coaching

Enroll and retain students more efficiently while empowering and serving the needs of each learner. Coaches work with prospective students to make sure they have the information and motivation needed to navigate the application and enrollment processes.



### Retention Coaching

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