

Survey *of* Graduate Students:

Their Motivations,
Behaviors, *and*
Expectations



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For higher education institutions seeking to grow their programs and enrollments in a competitive and crowded market, understanding the needs of potential graduate students is vital. This highly diverse group presents a wide range of motivations, behaviors, and preferences, presenting a challenge.

Wiley Education Services conducted a comprehensive research study in 2018 to better understand the breadth of individuals considering graduate-level studies. These research findings provide insights on who potential graduate students are, what they care about, and what their communication preferences are. This information can help colleges and universities improve and refine their processes and practices in marketing, recruiting, enrollment, and retention to better reach and engage with this population.

To achieve this, the report profiles three distinct graduate student personas and details:

- The motivations that triggered them to explore graduate-level education
- Their different traits and characteristics
- Criteria and considerations they use to select a program
- Factors that might cause them to not enroll in a specific program
- Key themes to connect with them more effectively



The *Advancer*



The *Launcher*



The *Altruist*

In addition, we provide insights into the general population of potential graduate students, including:

- How they research programs
- Barriers to applying
- Modality preferences
- Discipline-specific attributes and preferences

Finally, we outline specific recommendations on how to most effectively personalize communications efforts and support students throughout the entire student journey, as well as suggestions and opportunities for meaningful engagement.

Use this survey data
to help personalize
communications efforts
and support students
throughout *the* entire
student journey.

■ Research Methodology

The participant sample for this study included individuals from Wiley Education Services' own Customer Relationship Management (CRM), as well as an external list of potential students who were in the process of researching online programs, currently enrolled in an online program, or recently completed an online program.

In the first phase of our research we used an artificial intelligence tool (Socrates) to survey 163 individuals representing a range of verticals (such as nursing, healthcare, business, etc.) about their experiences throughout the student journey. The data resulting from these interviews was analyzed by an expert in quantitative linguistics to determine prospective students' motives, emotions, and the process they followed toward enrollment.

Data from the surveys as well as the external list of students was then segmented according to a quantitative needs-based framework that grouped students based on similar needs, wants, or benefits sought. This provided insights into students' behavioral, attitudinal, and demographic characteristics, as well as comprehensive data on aspects of the prospecting process, including activities, motivations, and considerations.

In the final phase of this process, we conducted in-depth interviews with representatives from each of the prospective student segments to further define the student personas in detail. The average age of surveyed individuals was 39.3, and three-quarters of the participants stated they were employed full time.

Survey Findings

■ The Three Types of Online Graduate Students

The majority of students pursue graduate studies for three reasons: to advance their career, to launch a new career, or to achieve a personal goal. The data led us to identify three audience segments.



The *Advancer*

Advancers represent **28 percent** of the total sample and are interested in programs that focus on management topics. Students who fit this persona **are least likely to have an advanced degree already and are more likely to have only thought about returning to school.**

Advancer Traits



They want to *gain the skills and certifications* needed to advance at work and capitalize on career opportunities.



They want to *continue working*, so online and part-time programs are a good fit.



Advancers refer to “having a career” instead of a job and are *driven by salary and promotions*.



Many state they always planned to pursue a graduate degree; however, they do not follow through until a trigger event, such as *identifying a skills gap holding them back*.



They *describe the program research selection process as stressful*, leaving them overwhelmed, nervous, and anxious.



Many Advancers consider opportunities but *need to be prodded into committing*, such as learning about reimbursement opportunities.

Key Program Criteria and Considerations



Valued *by*
employers



Flexible
Format



Proven ROI
(i.e., a higher salary with
the degree)

Major Areas of Interest

Business

Education



Summary

Advancers are building on a solid work foundation to advance in their career and seek programs that fit into their busy schedule.

▶▶ The *Advancer*



Advancer Portrait: *Jacob*

Age: 38

Education and career history: Jacob comes from a family that values higher education. He earned a Bachelor of Science in Nursing to work in healthcare and is now looking for a Master of Science in Nursing program.

Career goal: Wants to keep up with increasing education expectations for nurses and move into advanced roles.

Wants:

- A challenging program that he can manage with family and professional obligations
- A master's for professional advancement

Motivations:

- The satisfaction of having a master's
- More career and advancement opportunities

Challenges:

- Stress from selection process
- Concerns about fitting coursework in with work and family obligations
- Tuition costs

Triggers:

- Seeing peers advance and get promotions
- Availability of tuition reimbursement through his employer

Messaging Themes for Advancers

- Ease and support—many professionals are able to earn a degree while having a family and working full-time
- Opening doors to more opportunities
- Building on experience
- Higher earning potential and more advancement opportunities
- Pride from completing a life or career goal

What Advancers Like Jacob Say:

“An advanced degree will help me be successful.”

“My workplace helps pay for education—why not do it?”



The *Launcher*

Launchers represent **51 percent** of the total sample and like Advancers, **show interest in programs that focus on management topics**. They also tend to be drawn to STEM programs.

Launcher Traits



The youngest of the three personas, they are *eager to gain the skills to establish a new, stable career* — this can be either their first career or a career change.



They *prefer in-person, full-time studies to maximize their opportunities*. This segment is likely to have a family and wants a more stable work schedule.



They are also the *most likely to be currently exploring professional development*, i.e., certifications, boot camps, seminars, or taking a course like a MOOC.



They are *keenly aware of their skills gaps*, most likely from not qualifying for a specific job.



They are *hesitant about pursuing programs that are entirely online*. However, they will if it means attending a more prestigious, well-ranked program.



When selecting a program, they *place great importance on networking potential* and for which types of jobs they will be eligible.

Survey Findings: The Launcher

Key Program Criteria and Considerations



Job positions *and*
professional status
of faculty, students,
and alumni



Career
potential



Networking
opportunities

Major Areas of Interest

Business

Education

Technology



Summary

Launchers are prepared to invest considerable time and effort into their studies and want the best possible return. They seek out programs that offer the greatest chance of maximizing future earnings and connections.

The *Launcher*



Launcher Portrait: *Noemi*

Age: 23

Education and career history: Noemi is the first person in her family to graduate from college, which she did only recently. She quickly landed a job at a bank near her hometown, but she doesn't find the work particularly challenging.

Career goal: Noemi is interested in becoming an analyst at one of the major financial services firms. She knows a graduate degree will set her up for her chosen career and give her an advantage over other job candidates.

Wants:

- A graduate program in finance that employers will recognize and respect
- To acquire new skills she lacks as an entry-level professional
- To build a network

Motivations:

- To establish the foundation for a stable career

Challenges:

- A lack of clarity about her exact career path long-term
- Worries about GMAT, limited experience, and financial risk

Triggers:

- Noticing career possibilities and their background requirements while reviewing open job postings

Messaging Themes for Launchers

- The confidence that comes from earning an advanced degree
- Distinguishing oneself
- Access to a network of talented peers
- Attaining a goal

What Launchers Like Noemi Say:

"I know I need more education to achieve the career I want."

"I want to have more backing me. I don't want to look like just an ordinary person out there."



The *Altruist*

Altruists represent **21 percent** of potential students and are **drawn toward public service**. They enjoy learning and are not directly motivated by career demands.

Altruist Traits



Individuals in this persona are *the oldest among the three segments*.



They enjoy the convenience of online programs, but *demand the interaction typical of in-person learning*.



They want to benefit society and help people. They are more aspirational, and many want a change or have experienced a life event that produced a desire to pursue graduate education.



The experience of evaluating potential programs is invigorating, but *their fears about the time, money, and energy higher education requires can leave them feeling overwhelmed and lead to indecisiveness*.

Key Program Criteria and Considerations



Aligns with their interests



Ability to meet admissions standards



Major Areas of Interest

Social Work

Education

Summary

Altruists are motivated by a love of learning and a desire to help people. They look for programs that combine flexibility and engagement. Often their interest in education is set off by a life stage event, such as retirement.



The *Altruist*



Altruist Portrait: *Anne*

Age: 52

Education and career history: Anne has a BA in Psychology and worked as a daycare teacher part-time while her kids were young, moving to full-time when they got older.

Career goal: Anne is unfulfilled at work. She feels she has more potential to help children, which both motivates and frustrates her. As an empty-nester, she has time to focus on advancing her education, but she tends to research her options in fits and starts. She feels excited about the possibilities but anxious about making a decision.

Wants:

- To make a difference

Motivations:

- Personal enrichment and realizing her potential
- Making a positive impact on people's lives

Challenges:

- A lack of clarity about what type of program best matches her interests
- Worried about returning to school for the first time since her undergraduate degree
- Concerned about costs and time commitment of an advanced degree

Trigger:

- Children leaving home

Messaging Themes for Altruists

- Encouragement
- Investing in oneself to make a difference in the lives of others
- Self-actualization
- Support and partnership from the institution
- The pleasure of exploring an area of interest
- Turning a passion into a vocation

What Altruists Like Anne Say:

"I have all these skills. I don't know what master's or other program would best utilize them."

"I know if I found the right program, I could do something big."

■ General Student Motivations, Research Tactics, and Considerations

In addition to details and nuances about the three student personas, the survey yielded valuable information about graduate students as a group.

Motivations

The two leading motivations for students to pursue graduate education were a desire to advance their career (69 percent) and/or have more options in the future (49 percent). Others in the top five were an increase in pay, a career change, and a desire to help others. Students cited confidence, preparation, and success as the primary benefits a degree would bring to their career and life.

Information Gathering

The amount of time between the initial trigger that sparked students' interest in graduate higher education versus actual research and planning varied widely.

15% of students cited a duration of two to three months

15% cited a duration of more than two years

14% cited a duration of one to two years

13% cited no time at all—they began planning immediately

Most students (89 percent) looked to university and college websites as the primary source of information to aid in their decision-making process, followed by online search engines (79 percent) and speaking to a college representative (73 percent). Students also turned to trusted referral sources (51 percent) and online blogs, forums, and consumer reports (45 percent).

Considerations

The top five considerations students reported when evaluating a program were its alignment with their particular needs, cost, time investment, reputation, and admission requirements. A more granular assessment showed that students selected a particular school because:

- ✓ It offered the exact degree/specialization they wanted **(58%)**
- ✓ They liked the way it described courses and the course experience **(43%)**
- ✓ It had a good reputation **(42%)**

General Student Motivations, Research Tactics, and Considerations

Prior familiarity or knowledge of an institution was not critical, accounting for only 19 percent of responses. Students who stated they only seriously considered three schools or less made up the largest percentage (28 percent).

In regard to funding, nearly half of the students paid for their education entirely via personal savings (28.8 percent) and/or loans (20 percent). Advancers are more likely to pay with savings (24 percent), while Launchers tend to pay with loans (79 percent).



While the majority of the sample stated they would not have changed the way they researched programs, some said they would have:

- Expanded their search
- Compared similar programs more closely
- Sought to better understand what the learning experience was really like, especially for online programs
- Better researched the expected time commitment
- Been more financially conservative and explored lower-cost programs

Barriers

Students also reported obstacles or concerns that might prevent them from applying to or enrolling in a program.

Cost. Tuition was a key consideration in students' assessment of programs and was also a leading concern. Many students stated they are still paying off previous student loans, and they feared the potential to incur additional debt could lead to future financial burdens. Cost was also the primary factor when prospective students chose not to enroll in a program.

Time. In the case of online learners – most of whom work full-time – 84 percent reported time constraints as a barrier. The thought of balancing school with family and professional obligations proved worrisome. In some cases, life event changes (e.g., a new job, health concerns, moving, etc.) stopped them from enrolling in a program.

Fear of going back to school. Many current students reported feeling trepidation about returning to an academic environment. Many stated they were “out of practice” with things like study habits, time management, and newer technology.

■ How Modality Played a Role in Program Consideration

Understanding the factors that led students to choose a particular modality can further provide insights into how schools position their offerings and identify target markets.



Students in Online Programs

Students who chose an online program over an on-campus, in-person program reported several considerations:

- Flexibility
- The ability to keep their job
- Opportunity to attend a prestigious, top-ranked program outside of their local area
- Life stability
- Not having to travel

The majority of students who enrolled in an online program stated they would do so again. These students also stated a desire for more faculty/student interaction, and at times struggled with time management, dedication to studies, and retention of material.

Students in On-Campus Programs

Students who considered online programs but chose an on-campus program had various reasons why:

- Concern about the amount of interaction and dedication they would have in an online program
- A belief that an in-person option would be a better experience and provide better outcomes
- A wish for more student support and in-person interaction

These students also perceived online programs as less prestigious and offering limited post-graduation opportunities, despite mirroring on-ground programs in curriculum and faculty. However, they indicated that validation from employers around online programs would help eliminate this concern.



Discipline-Specific Findings

■ Discipline-Specific Findings

While these findings show the general triggers, attitudes, and needs of individuals considering or enrolled in graduate education, the study also showed major characteristics and preferences typical of students interested in different industries and areas of study. Key themes in each discipline are listed below.

Accounting and Finance

↓ Placed **less weight** on school reputation

Business and Leadership

↑ **More likely** to actively seek out a degree program

↑ **More likely** to base their decision on the value their employer places on the degree

Criminal Justice

Pursued a degree as a result of an **unexpected life change**

Placed a lot of importance on **ease of applying**

Communication

↑ Placed **more weight** on school reputation

Cybersecurity

↑ **More likely** to have only considered a graduate degree as the optimal path to their career goals

Education

↓ **Less likely** to pursue a non-degree education/professional development option (certifications, MOOC, executive education/training seminars)

Engineering

Prompted to pursue a degree by an **ad, change in job scope, work conversation, etc.**

↑ **More likely** to weigh the **benefits of a program**

↑ **More likely** to base their decision on the **value their employer places on the degree**

Viewed the **program evaluation process** as stressful and overwhelming

Healthcare

- ↑ Prompted to pursue a degree by an ad, change in job scope, work conversation, etc.
- ↑ **More likely** to weigh the benefits of a program
- Heavily influenced by **current employer**
- Viewed the **program evaluation process** as stressful and overwhelming

Human Resources

- ↑ **More likely** to pursue a non-degree education/professional development option (certifications, MOOC, executive education/training seminars)
- ↑ **More likely** to weigh the benefits of a program.

Informatics

- Pursued a degree as a result of an **unexpected life change**
- Interest in a degree was **spurred by a self-identified skills gap**
- ↑ **More likely** to pursue a non-degree education/professional development option (certifications, MOOC, executive education/training seminars)
- ↑ **More likely** to weigh the benefits of a program

Informatics (Cont.)

- ↑ **More likely** to consider **time investment**
- Heavily influenced by **current employer**

Nursing

- Pursued a degree as a result of a **conversation with another student**
- Considered **in-person, traditional programs held on campus**

Technology

- ↑ **More likely** to be actively seeking out a **degree program**
- ↓ **Less likely** to attend a **fully online program**
- ↑ **More likely** to pursue a non-degree education/professional development option (certifications, MOOC, executive education/training seminars)
- ↑ **More likely** to consult advisors and **weigh the benefits of a program**
- ↑ **More likely** to base their decision on the **value their employer places on the degree**
- Heavily influenced by **current employer**

■ Recommendations and Opportunities

The findings and insights culled from the study resulted in a list of recommendations that colleges and universities can take to address potential students' concerns and considerations, as well as additional steps schools might want to take to personalize communications and support each persona throughout the student journey.

Adapt messaging for each student persona.

Use insights and themes from each of the three student personas to personalize recruiting and marketing messages for each segment.



Design programming for each student persona.

Online programs can diversify their offerings, with faster certifications for Launchers, focused content for Advancers, and asynchronous programming for Altruists.

Address cost concerns. Be fully transparent about tuition and other costs in concert with content that effectively communicates the value and potential return on educational investment. Students want to see proof of the return on their investment and when they can expect to break even on it.

Faculty engagement matters. Program satisfaction was directly linked to faculty responsiveness, their dedication to students, encouragement, and demonstration of real-world professional expertise. Course designers and curriculum developers can build more direct faculty interaction and touchpoints into programs (especially online) to support a positive student experience. To engage prospective students, colleges and universities should go beyond featuring faculty bios to illustrate the professional experience that faculty members bring to classroom instruction.



Provide time management advice. Offer tips, tools, and techniques for balancing the time requirements of a graduate program with a job and family obligations.

Recommendations and Opportunities

Leverage alumni. Students perceived greater authenticity and put more faith in messaging when it came from actual program graduates.



Connect prospective students with current students. Students cited being able to communicate with current students both during the consideration process and after enrollment as a key factor in their satisfaction. This type of connection helped to address their fear of isolation, particularly for online students.

Emphasize the career payoff. Demonstrate how each program will help students establish and advance their careers with concrete statistics as well as compelling narratives.

Seek endorsements and testimonials from organizations and employers. Validation from top employers and hiring managers not only helps reduce concerns about the online modality but also helps demonstrate the return on educational investment.

Students cited being able *to* communicate with current students both during *the* consideration process and after enrollment as a key factor *in* their satisfaction.

Provide several options for communication. Today's students are living in a digital-based reality and many prefer not to speak on the phone. Instead of hounding these students with phone calls, which can be a major deterrent to some, offer information and content in a variety of channels and "self-service" methods, such as SMS, direct chat, and email.

■ The Benefits of This Research

Understanding the motivations and characteristics of different prospective and current students is vital to reaching and effectively engaging with them. By understanding the three student personas typical of individuals seeking a graduate degree, your institution can take steps to improve and personalize the entire student journey, from the moment an individual starts researching programs all the way to graduation. Designing targeted marketing messages, addressing and removing potential obstacles, and clearly illustrating the benefits to students' careers can all enhance the likelihood that a potential student will consider and ultimately enroll in your program—and be confident about their decision.



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