

THE ERA OF INTENTIONAL ENROLLMENT

A Guide to Understanding
The Graduate Learner

 ADVANCE EDUCATION

How adults are not just
going back to school.

**They are going back
with purpose.**



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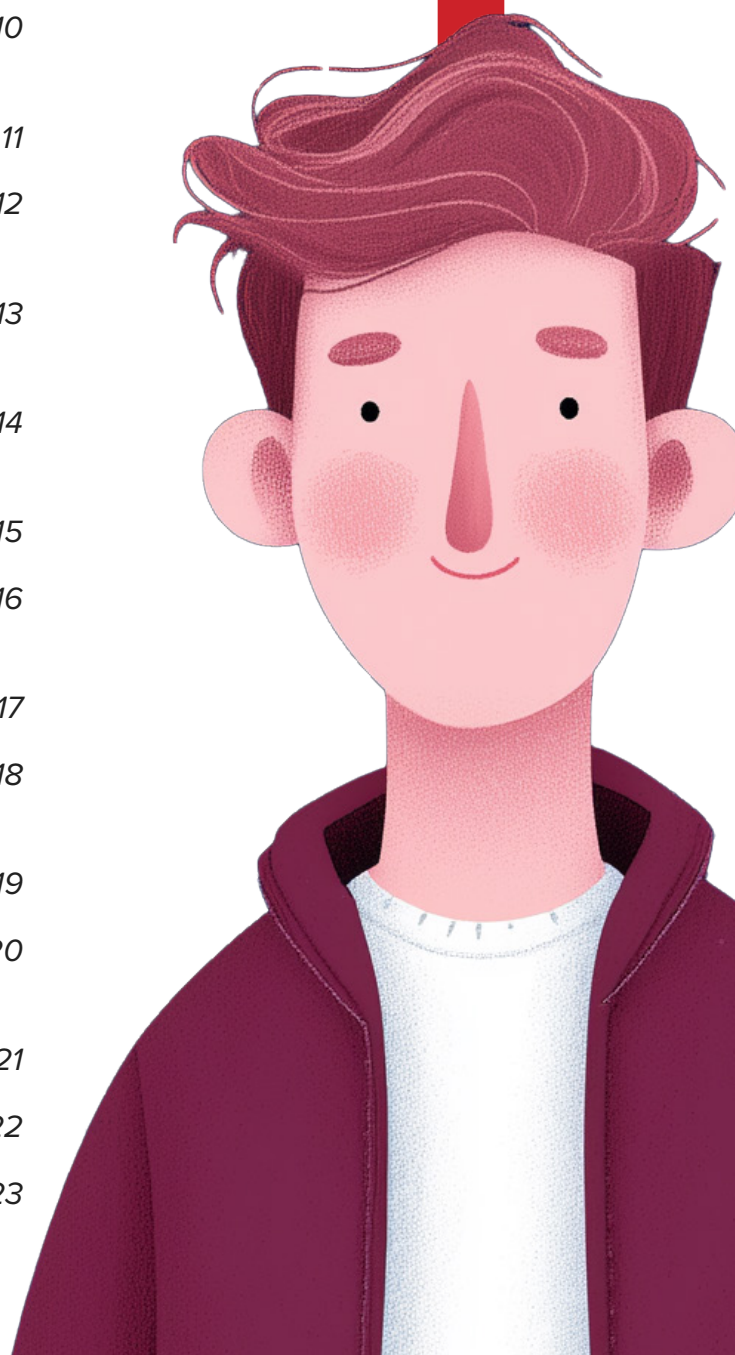
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THE ERA OF INTENTIONAL ENROLLMENT

We've entered "The Era of Intentional Enrollment," a shift defined by adult learners who no longer dream about education—they calculate it. Gone are the days of "maybe this MBA will change everything" or "I should probably get that degree someday." Today's questions are concrete: "Will this fit my Tuesday nights?" "Can I measure the ROI?" "Does this solve my actual problem?" Prestige has lost its pull, and whether someone is choosing an MBA or a welding certificate, the decision-making process is the same: research, compare, decide—fast. Education is no longer treated like a lottery ticket but like a tool, and the institutions that understand this are winning. **They compete on flexibility over tradition, outcomes over promises, and the student's schedule over their own.** This is intentional enrollment—where adults don't just go back to school; they go back with purpose.

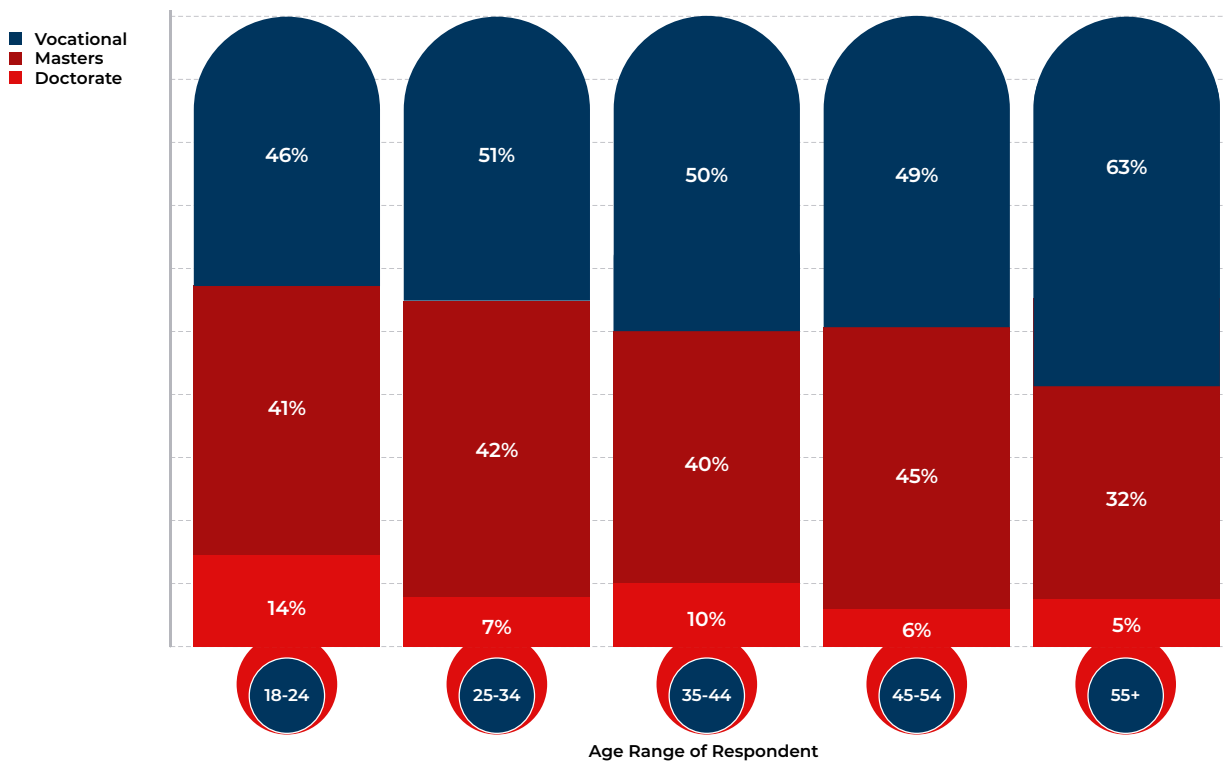
Methodology

To better understand how adults are approaching education today, Advance Education conducted a national survey of nearly 1,000 adult learners exploring their interest in either postgraduate or vocational education. Respondents shared how they search for programs, what stops them from enrolling, who influences their decisions, and how quickly they plan to take the next step.

Because this study captures two distinct learner profiles, this report focuses exclusively on the **Graduate Learner**—adults pursuing master’s, professional, and postgraduate programs designed to advance expertise, leadership, and long-term career growth.

A companion whitepaper, The Skilled Path Learner in the Era of Intentional Enrollment, explores insights from the vocational and technical audience and is available here.

WHAT DEGREE WILL YOU PURSUE?



While vocational learners are driven by urgency and immediate skill application, graduate learners approach education as long-term strategy. Both audiences share the same demand for flexibility and proof of value—but their timelines, motivations, and expectations diverge. As the data shifts from trade-focused programs to postgraduate pathways, a new picture emerges: adults seeking graduate degrees aren’t starting over—they’re leveling up.

GRADUATE LEARNERS IN THE ERA OF INTENTIONAL ENROLLMENT

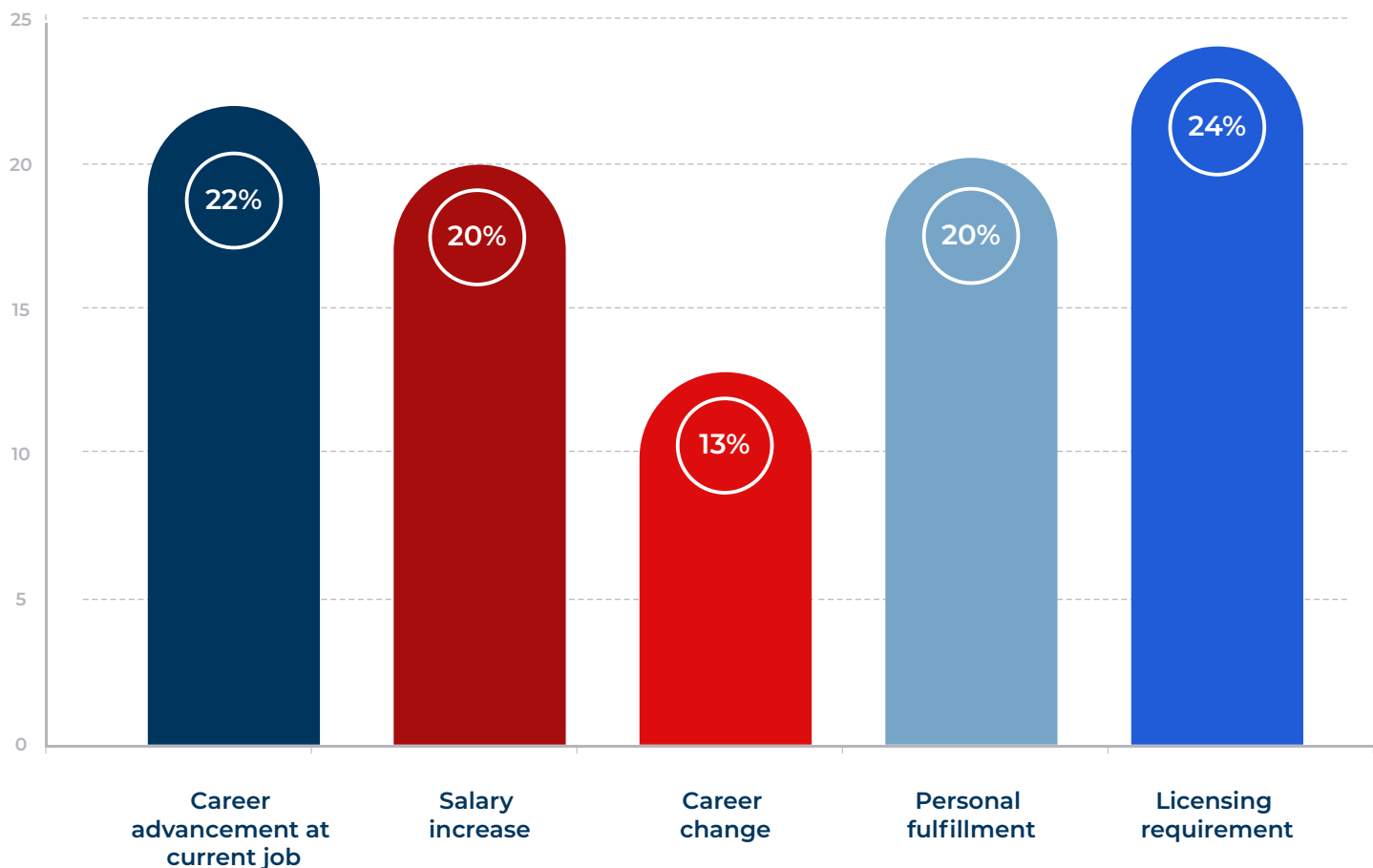
Graduate students represent the most deliberate segment of the adult learner population. In fact, according to Jobs for the Future, this student population makes up one-third of all enrolled college students. However, unlike traditional undergraduates, they view education not as exploration but as acceleration, a lever to amplify expertise, credibility, and career trajectory. Today this pragmatism is sharper than ever. **Our survey data reveals a generation of professionals returning to school with clear intentions: to advance, specialize, and secure their place in an increasingly competitive labor market.**

Motivations & Triggers for Enrollment

The decision to pursue a graduate degree is rarely spontaneous. **Among respondents, the top motivations were employer or professional licensing requirements (24%) and career advancement at their current job (22%).** These findings highlight graduate education's evolution from an academic milestone to a strategic career tool. For many professionals, a master's degree functions as a credentialing mechanism, a way to validate expertise and signal readiness for higher responsibility.



WHY ARE YOU PURSUING A GRADUATE DEGREE?



MARKETING LESSON: **CREATE CONTENT THAT INSPIRES**

Create content that illustrates how your programs build muscle memory for career advancement and give students the tools they need to signal to employers that they are ready for something bigger. **Leverage testimonials and case studies to back up your institution's placement data.**

Motivation for graduate degrees, Age 55+

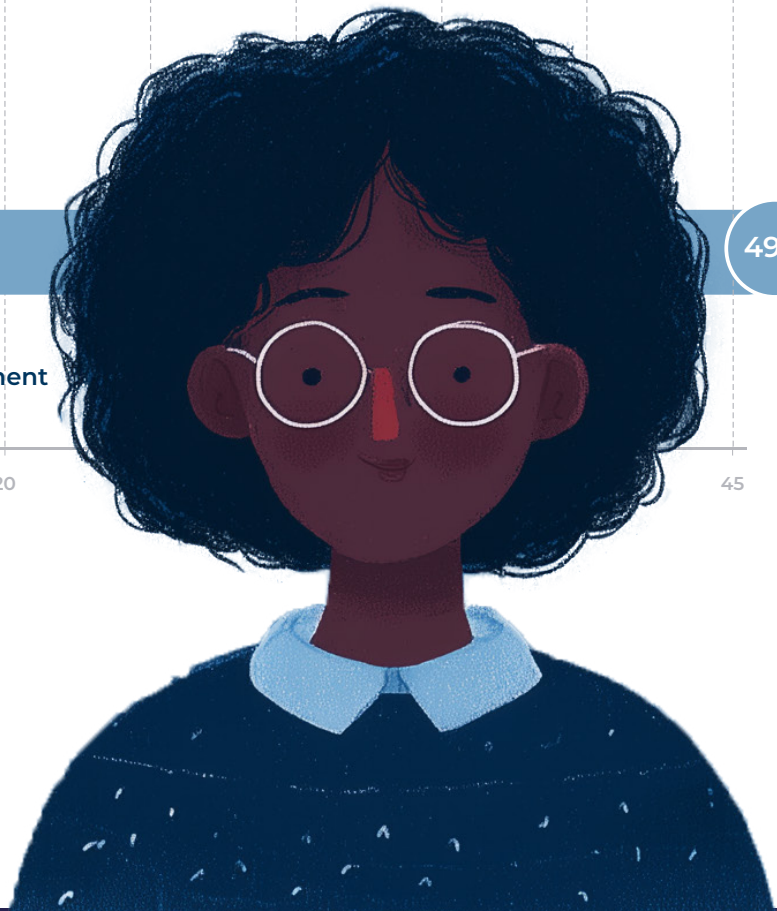
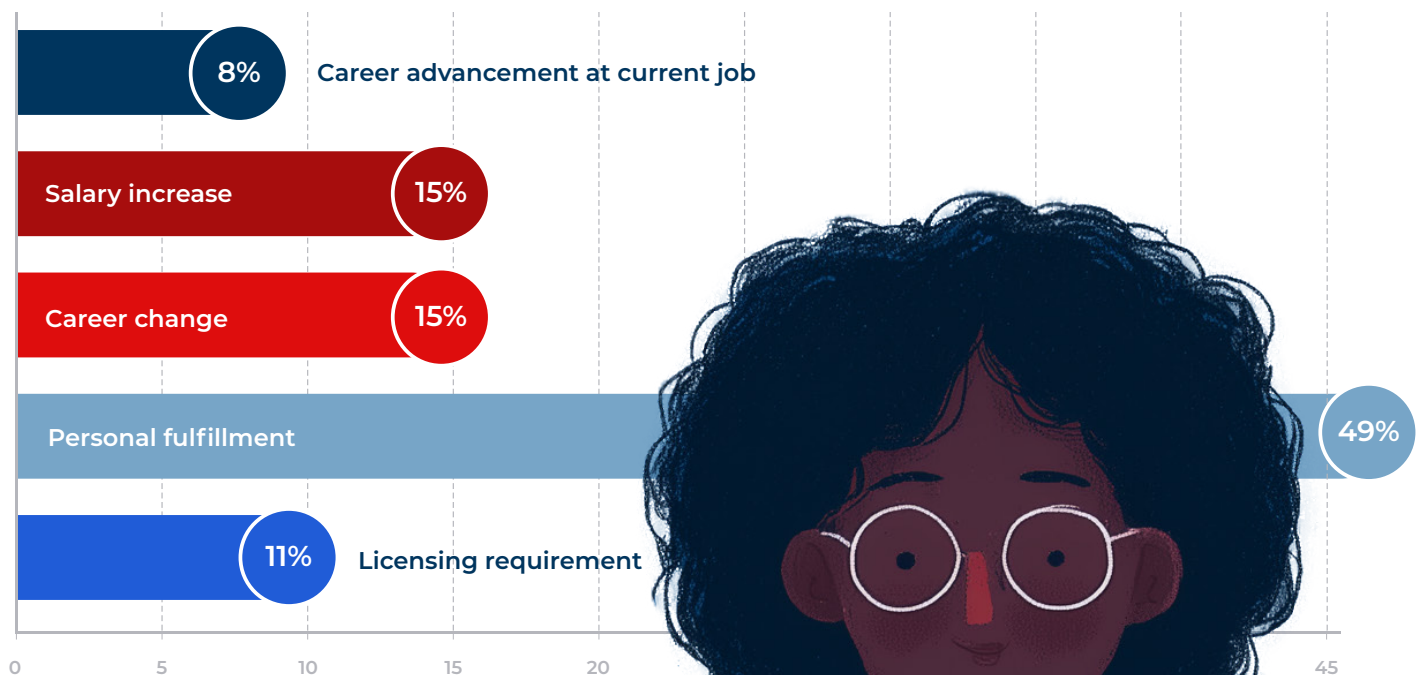
Beneath these data points lies a deeper behavioral shift: graduate students are no longer driven by broad curiosity. **They're optimizing for measurable outcomes, including advancement, leadership mobility, and professional durability.** Education, in this context, is a calculated move toward stability and control. This hints at a through-line for all

our data; potential students want transparency throughout the entire journey as an analog for trust. If at any point your marketing leans into jargon and fog, these students are quick to turn their attention to another program.

WHY ARE YOU PURSUING A GRADUATE DEGREE? (AGE 55+)

49%

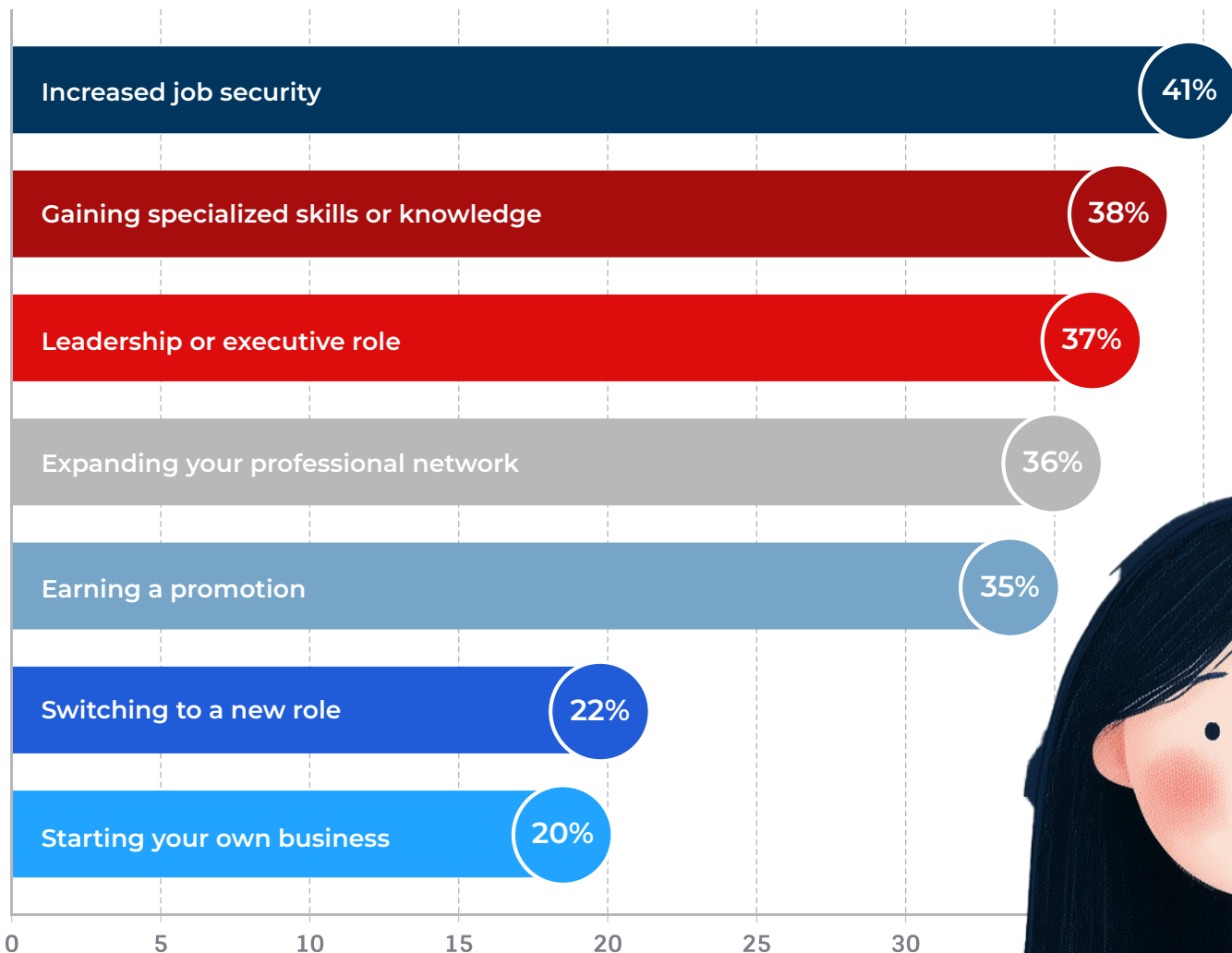
Motivated by
Personal
Fulfillment



What outcome are you hoping for?

When asked what they hoped to achieve with their graduate degree, respondents **prioritized job security (41%), specialized skills (38%), leadership or executive roles (37%), expanding their professional network (36%), and earning a promotion (35%)**. These outcomes map directly to how adult learners define return on investment.

Graduate learners expect a tangible payoff. They view degrees as value propositions, mechanisms to safeguard career longevity and mobility in uncertain economies. Institutions that align their messaging around ROI, career pathways, and leadership readiness stand to resonate most deeply with this audience.



41% of Graduates Prioritize Job Security



MARKETING LESSON: **LEVERAGE THESE TESTIMONIALS AND CASE STUDIES**

This data gives you five distinct story lines to build content around. **Leveraging the previously mentioned testimonials and case studies, you can use this data to tell a more specific story.** Once the content is in the market, you can use your own data to understand which stories are sticky and which stories appeal to more than one of your potential student profiles.

How long have you been actively searching?

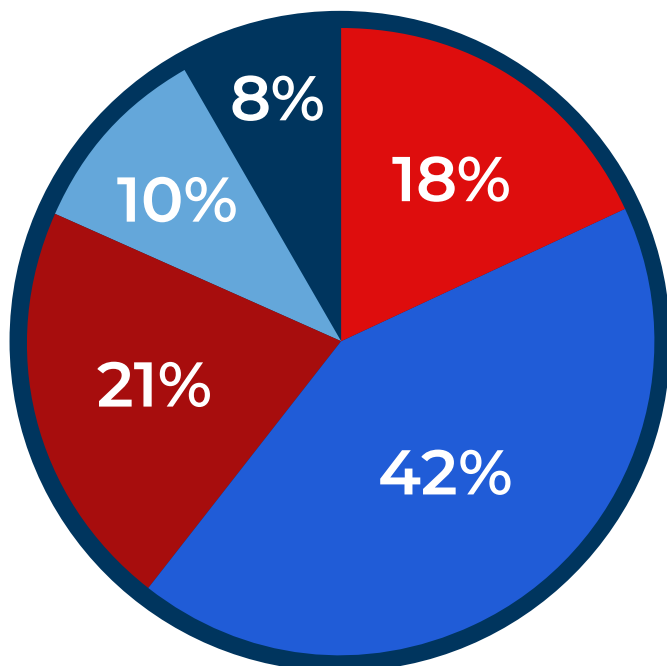
Four out of five respondents have been actively gathering information on programs for less than a year. Think about that for a second, because if we are using our understanding of the hero's journey, that means a potential student experiences an inciting incident (job displacement, passed over for a promotion, employer indicated this would benefit them) and moves to their own postgraduate journey immediately.

This compressed research cycle underscores how digital immediacy shapes modern decision-making. **With 40% first learning about programs through online searches, visibility and search strategy are no longer support functions, they're central to recruitment.**



80%

Looking for
Less Than
A Year



MARKETING LESSON: **LEVERAGE AI TO DELIVER CONTENT**

Does your team have a process in place to distribute content as quickly as the audience is looking for it? Leveraging AI, your team could be searching for disruptions in industries you cater to and dispatching content on platforms like LinkedIn in real time to **catch potential students who are looking right now.**

How did you first hear of the program(s) you are considering?

The survey results reinforce that the graduate journey begins in digital spaces. When asked how they first heard about the programs they are considering, **42% cited online search as their starting point, far more than any other source.** Word of mouth (19%), employer recommendations (17%), and social media (12%) followed distantly behind.

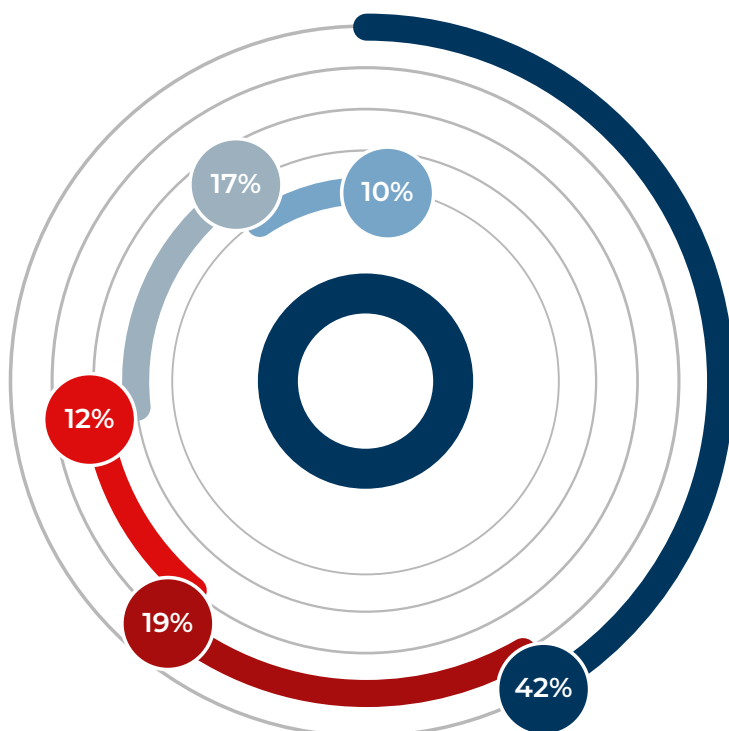
This pattern underscores a fundamental truth in graduate enrollment marketing: your visibility in search results and digital channels determines whether prospects ever reach your inquiry form.

Graduate learners are intentional and efficient. They start with research, compare quickly, and make decisions based on what they find online.

Graduate students are intentional browsers. They rely on reviews, institutional reputation, and transparent details about flexibility and cost to narrow their options. The shorter the discovery window, the more critical it becomes for schools to show up with relevance and clarity in the right digital moments.

42%

Start Their
Search
Online



MARKETING LESSON: **BE FOUND WHERE INTENT MEETS ACTION**

Graduate enrollment success begins at the top of the digital funnel. Optimized content, clear program pages, and strong search presence are not just marketing tactics; they are the foundation of discovery. **When your institution shows up where learners are already searching, you meet intention with opportunity.**

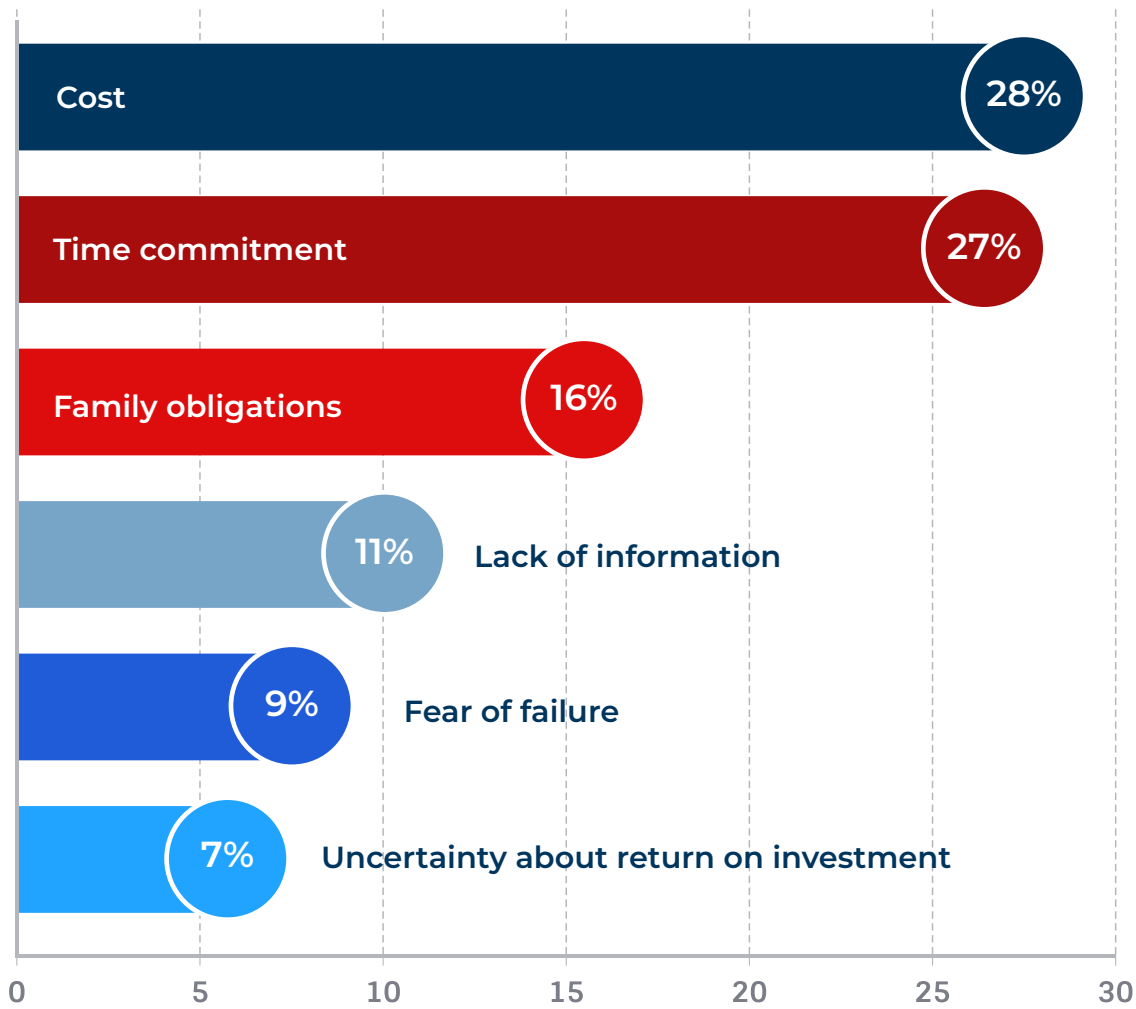
What is the biggest barrier holding you back from enrolling right now?

Cost (28%) and time commitment (27%) emerged as the top barriers to enrollment. Balancing work, life, and study was a consistent concern, cited by 16% of respondents. These aren't abstract worries, they represent lived tradeoffs between ambition and bandwidth.

The modern graduate prospect asks: "Can I realistically manage this program without derailing my professional or personal life?" Institutions that acknowledge this question and answer it directly with flexible formats, transparent pricing, and realistic workload breakdowns reduce perceived risk and increase enrollment likelihood.

Most Important Priorities

COST & TIME COMMITMENT



MARKETING LESSON:

BE TRANSPARENT WITH YOUR MESSAGING

Cost and time are two analogs for what most people describe as work-life balance. **This is where transparency comes back into your content and digital campaigns,** because how many pieces of your content directly answer cost and time questions with any specificity? If the answer is none, you risk missing out on reaching an audience ready to enroll if only they could answer their questions on their own time and not yours.

Who plays a role in your decision to return to school?

Graduate learners do not make decisions in isolation. A third (34%) reported their spouse or partner plays a role in the decision to return to school. Employers (30%) and family members (31%) were also cited as influential voices. These findings suggest that marketing to graduate learners means marketing to their ecosystem, the people who validate, encourage, and sometimes finance the decision.

Employer influence is particularly notable. As tuition reimbursement programs expand and professional advancement becomes performance-linked, the alignment between educational institutions and corporate partners is tightening. **Strategic collaboration here can become a recruitment multiplier.**



MARKETING LESSON: **TARGET YOUR AD CAMPAIGNS WITH INTENTIONALITY**

In addition to creating more partnerships with corporations that leverage tuition reimbursement, are you running content aimed at the people connected to the student you are looking to influence?

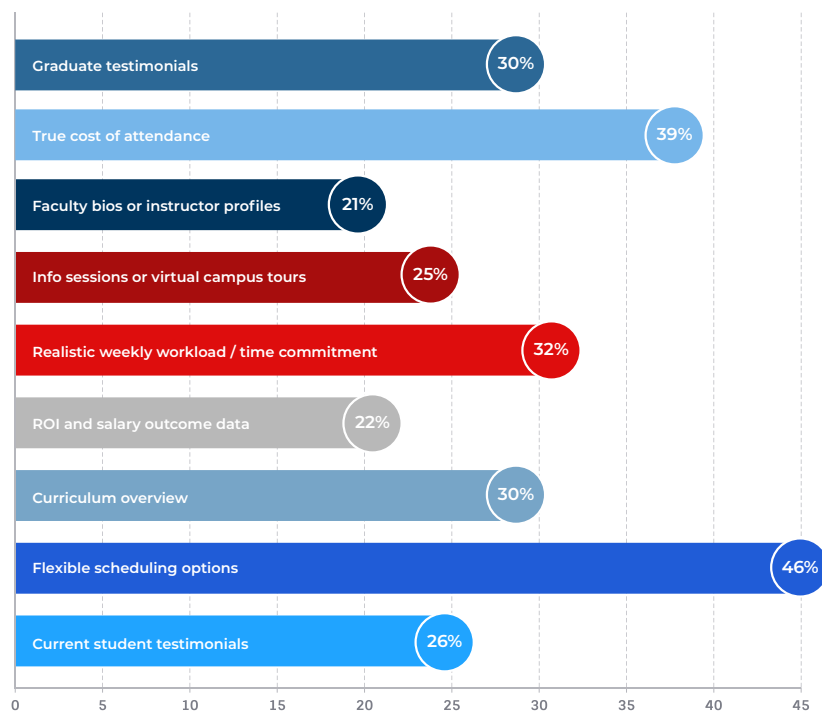
Running ad campaigns with a wider audience than you typically target could influence some of those “friends and family” members who can help push the decision over the goal line. Also, spend time on LinkedIn looking for employees at those companies and start conversations with them 1:1 at scale.

Content Preferences & Messaging Implications

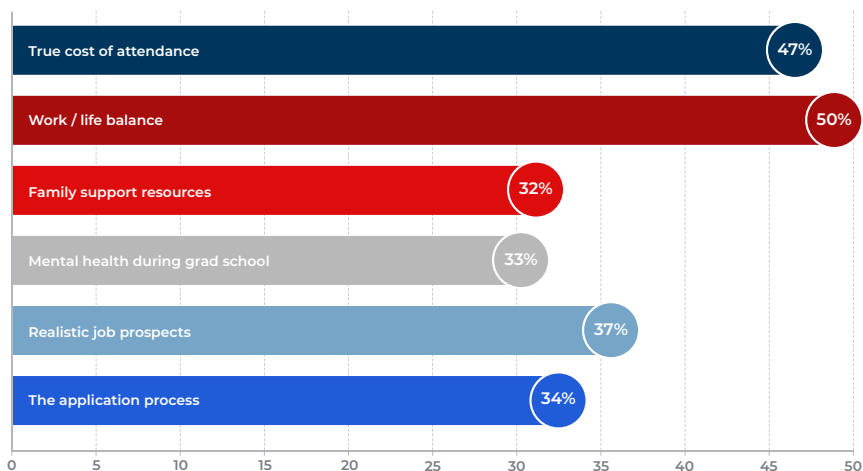
When asked what content would most influence their decision, graduate learners cited flexible scheduling options (46%), true cost of attendance (39%), and realistic weekly workload breakdowns (32%). Work-life balance (50%) and cost transparency (47%) were the two themes they wish schools discussed more openly.

This reflects a larger trust gap in graduate marketing. Learners are skeptical of vague promises and glossy imagery. They want specificity, clear breakdowns of time, cost, and outcomes, paired with authentic success stories that feel real. **Graduate prospects respond best to content that respects their intelligence and mirrors their lived experience.**

What types of content would make you more confident in choosing a school?



What do you wish schools would talk more openly about?



MARKETING LESSON: **SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS**

When was the last time you purchased a car? Have you ever spent time answering questions about paint insurance when your dream car is just outside the window? That is how students feel when they are ready to enroll and cannot get answers to their questions. **The modern adult learner pines for authentic marketing that is very clear on what the expectations are.** These students have enrolled before and want this experience to exceed those prior expectations.

MARKETING IMPLICATIONS FOR GRADUATE PROGRAMS

To reach intentional learners, institutions must shift from persuasion to partnership. Marketing should act as a guide, clarifying choices, contextualizing value, and offering credible proof of outcomes. Three strategies emerge from the data:

1. **Lead with transparency:** Publish cost calculators, time-to-completion tools, and sample schedules.
2. **Humanize success:** Showcase real graduates, leadership transitions, and authentic career trajectories.
3. **Reduce friction:** Streamline application processes, emphasize employer alignment, and integrate work-study options.

Graduate students expect a modern, consumer-grade enrollment experience. Institutions that deliver that clarity will gain not just applications but trust.

THE GRADUATE LEARNER AS INVESTOR

Graduate learners represent one of the most strategically minded audiences in higher education today. In the Era of Intentional Enrollment, they are investors, allocating time, money, and trust into programs that promise measurable return. Their behavior mirrors the discipline of financial decision-making: diversified options, data-backed comparison, and an unwavering demand for transparency.

The institutions that will succeed with this audience are those that:

- Clearly define the value and ROI of their programs
- Provide flexible pathways that align with professional realities
- Build credibility through authentic outcomes and alumni success
- Maintain a consistent, transparent presence across every digital channel

Advance Education helps colleges and universities translate these insights into results. Through research-driven strategy, digital marketing expertise, and proven enrollment solutions, we help institutions connect with professionals who are ready to advance their careers today.

The Graduate Learner has redefined what higher education means. For institutions willing to meet them with clarity, flexibility, and proof of value, the opportunity is not only to attract more students, but to cultivate the next generation of leaders driving innovation across every industry.



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