In Their Own Words:
What Prospective Grad Students Are Saying About Their Search and Decision-Making for Today and Tomorrow

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“It just changes everything!”
The Power of Prospective Grad Student Voices

The survey sample
- Average age: 28
- Registrants/users of our CollegeXpress platform
- High school graduation year of ≤ 2017
- 362 responders

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>Responses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25.99%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>71.19%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transgender Male</td>
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<td>Transgender Female</td>
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<td>Genderqueer or Nonconforming</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preferred Identity Not Listed Above</td>
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<td>American Indian or Alaskan Native</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>13.39%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
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<td>Hispanic or Latinx</td>
<td>22.22%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle Eastern or North African</td>
<td>1.42%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0.57%</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>44.44%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>4.84%</td>
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</table>
What did prospective graduate students tell us?
How concerned are you about COVID-19 and its potential impact on your graduate education?
Concern Remains High

- Over 50% described themselves as having very high levels of concern

- This is up ~10% from a previous April survey, where it was roughly 40%
Would you consider delaying your graduate education if the COVID-19 outbreak was not properly resolved in time for the start of classes?
Delaying Plans

- **10%** increase in respondents saying they will **not delay** their plans over April survey results

- **Over 10%** decrease in respondents saying there is ‘some’ to a ‘high chance’ they would delay over April survey results
During this stay-at-home period since the outbreak of COVID-19, what sources of information have been most helpful about graduate school?
Students are using more sources to actively seek information and have gone to digital offerings with greater regularity.

By the numbers:

- **80%** are using a college’s website for information
- **51%** of students are using Google and it is the 2nd highest information seeking source
- **Social media** ranked 3rd at 26%, followed closely by sites like **CollegeXpress**
- **Virtual options** combined represent a significant area of response
During this stay-at-home period since the outbreak of COVID-19, has the amount of time you spend online changed?
By the numbers
- 84% reported they are online significantly more now than pre-COVID of which ~64% stated they are online 3+ more hours.

Opportunity
- Meet students where they are!

DURING THIS STAY-AT-HOME PERIOD SINCE THE OUTBREAK OF COVID-19, HAS THE AMOUNT OF TIME YOU SPEND ONLINE CHANGED?

- Yes, I’m spending far more time (3+ more hours) online now than before the COVID-19 stay-at-home period.
- Yes, I’m spending a little more time (1-2 more hours) online now than before the COVID-19 stay-at-home period.
- No, I’m spending the same amount of time online now than before the COVID-19 stay-at-home period.
- Yes, I’m spending less time online now.
- I am not sure if the amount of time I am spending online has changed.
Communication Tactics

Opportunity:

Digital marketing & engagement:
- PPC/SEO: reach those actively seeking
- Social media advertising: LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter for all stages of the funnel
- Streaming services: Pandora, Spotify, Radio.com, Hulu, OTT
- YouTube
- Look-alike audiences

College website: This data emphasizes the importance for your .edu content and user experience.
- Easy to use, navigate, and connect (RFI forms)
- Engaging content that gives them the information they need to make informed decisions
How far from home are you willing to travel for your graduate education?
Distance From Home

How far from home are you willing to travel for your graduate education?

- Less than 50 miles or 1 hour travel time in a car: 10%
- About 150 miles or 2.5 hours travel time in a car: 20%
- About 300 miles or 5 hours travel time in a car: 30%
- More than 300 miles or 5 hours travel time in a car: 40%
Has COVID-19 impacted the distance from home you are willing to travel for your graduate education?
Have you already visited at least one campus to help in making your graduate college or university decision?
In the current climate, how likely are you to commit to a college or university you have never seen in-person?
Need for a Visit

By the numbers:

- ~50% said they were not at all or only slightly likely to commit to a school they have not seen in person
- Just 5.25% said they absolutely will
- Comparable numbers to April survey
If in-person events are not offered this fall for you to learn about schools, what channel(s) will you consider using as you search for graduate schools?
Search Options & Preferences

By the numbers:

- Websites (~78%) and Online Search (~58%) at the top again
- Virtual options are represented significantly next
Is Your Website Playing the Role it Needs to?

**SEO & Content**
They are still seeking more information—make sure you are providing it.

- Appear in prospective students’ searches
- Drive users to your website
- Ensure positive user experience when they get there
- Optimize for conversion
Online Program Page Optimization

After optimizing the Online BA in Public Administration page, organic impressions went from 158 to 1,008.
Website Personalization: Department-specific messages on high-level pages.

- GPS emphasizes that their operations are uninterrupted
- Provides a “Connect Online” CTA for both current and prospective students.
If graduate fairs this fall are offered **virtually instead of on campus**, how likely are you to participate?

If graduate fairs on your campus or in your area are offered **in person with appropriate safety measures**, how likely are you to participate?
Virtual Fairs this Fall

- Over 40% said they are highly or absolutely likely to participate
- Roughly 28% said slightly or not all likely
- Roughly 27% said they are highly or absolutely likely to participate
- Roughly 47% said slightly or not all likely
Promoting Your Virtual Tours/Events

- **Display ads:** Target behaviorally, IP Targeting, Retargeting, to get to the right audiences
- **PPC:** RLSA to target past visitors to your site who then are using Google Search and always include site links
- **Social Media:** Organic and paid ads
- **Google My Business:** Use Google posts to advertise upcoming event
- **Website Personalization:** Consider using CDPs (Customer Data Platform) that allows you to target website visitors with specific messaging based on segment/intent
If you intended on having an on-campus experience this fall, how likely are you considering the following?
Fall Plans

Not at all likely.  Slightly likely.  Somewhat likely.  Highly likely.  Absolutely will.

Not at all likely.  Slightly likely.  Somewhat likely.  Highly likely.  Absolutely will.

Going forward with my intended institution even if I have to study partially online.

Withdrawing from my intended institution and pursuing a program closer to home.

Deferring a year, but planning to still attend the institution I selected.

Withdrawing from my intended institution and doing something else this year (working, etc.).

NA

NA

NA
If you were intending on having an on-campus experience, what percentage of your coursework are you willing to take online as a short-term change due to COVID-19?
Online Coursework This Fall

By the numbers:

- **Over 37%** said they are willing to have 100% be online as a short-term solution
- **Just 3%** said they wouldn't be willing to accept any online coursework
Has COVID-19 changed your intentions of pursuing a graduate degree on-campus versus online?
On-Campus vs. Online

By the numbers:

- ~52% said their plans have not changed (this was 60% in April)
  - ~35% still plan for on campus
  - ~17% still plan for online
- Just over 12% said significantly or completely (10% in April)

“The pandemic makes me more interested in grad school because of the online format. I am much more likely to apply and go to grad school if the online offerings are more readily available.”
COVID-19 and the Financial Impact
How much more or less concerned are you about paying for your graduate education as a result of the COVID-19 situation?
Paying for Grad School

- 59% of respondents said they are “more concerned” about paying for their graduate education since the outbreak.
- ~30% see their concern as “about the same”

“My financial status has changed significantly, however, I still need to go to grad school to keep up with the demands of the professional world.”
If a school has to transition your studies partially online, are you expecting tuition to be discounted? If tuition is not discounted, how likely are you to enroll?
“I would expect tuition to be discounted. If it is not, I would not enroll.”

“If I am paying for the on campus experience and don’t get it then I would like it to be discounted.”

“If tuition is not discounted and no other scholarships or payment assistance is offered (besides loans), than I would likely not enroll.”

“Somewhat discounted would be great but not a determining factor. I would still enroll regardless of discount for online/blended courses.”

“I would expect school to be discounted. But I would rather schools not trying to include on campus and online combinations just to keep tuition the same.”

“I will enroll regardless. It's the degree at the end which is most important to me, not how many classes I have to take online.”
What expectations do you have from colleges to be accommodating any financial challenges you have due to COVID-19?
If you have committed to a school (with a deposit or otherwise), are you considering forgoing that deposit and either withdraw or defer if the school’s plans for the fall aren’t in line with what you want?
Forgo Deposit to Withdraw or Defer

By the numbers:

- ~35% said not at all
- ~27% said somewhat
- Just about 16% said significantly or completely
Overall, what would you say the most significant impact is that COVID-19 has had on your graduate school research and selection process?
“The economic problems overall.”

“Makes me question if graduate school is even worth it.”

“It has caused me to pay much much more attention to the cost of tuitions and overall fees.”

“It has actually bumped the timeline up. I was originally going to work a year or a few years before going back to school, but now I have more time and still have not received a job so I am looking into programs now.”

“It’s harder to consider where to apply and where to go. I have to thoroughly search through online tours and sessions to find the right school to choose.”

“I want to form connections and develop relationships, that is particularly hard for a first year student to do online especially in a program that was developed to take place in person. I am hesitant to start grad school online.”
The Qualitative Responses:

● What messages or assistance do you need from colleges or universities regarding the outbreak? (285)

● What can colleges and universities do to make you comfortable with selecting a school without being able to visit? (292)

● If a school has to transition your studies partially online, are you expecting tuition to be discounted? If tuition is not discounted, how likely are you to enroll? (311)

● Overall, what would you say the most significant impact is that COVID-19 has had on your graduate school research and selection process? (302)

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<tr>
<th>A</th>
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<th>E</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>What messages or assistance do you need from colleges or universities regarding the outbreak?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>A call for support for all students and a highly substantial reduction in tuition fees. Online class should not equate to full tuition ever.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>A commitment to have classes, even if they're only online (and if so, a reduction in tuition should be considered).</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>A concrete plan on how they plan on adapting their campuses to ensure the safety of everyone.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>A detailed action plan on how they will respond to sudden issues. I would like to see institutions be more proactive, than reactive.</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>A lot of these grad schools require interviews, so it would be nice to know if these interviews will be online or in person because I'm applying to grad schools all over the US</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>How safe the environment is during in-person classes. Whether all materials and classes will be available online. Reduced costs because of the pandemic.</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>About if there is going to be any change in requirements for GRE testing</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>All kinds of information.</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Answers to questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Any</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Any changes in requirements</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Any changes that influence how they go about the following terms</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Applying</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>Are all classes online?</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>Are they covid 19 set up</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>Are we required to still take the GRE?</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>Availability of programs, online vs offline options, tuition costs in light of economic collapse.</td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Changes in admissions requirements</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Check ins with feedback, progress, and any questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Clarification on how it will affect classes</td>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Clarity</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>Cleaning protocols and what plans are in place for if a student/ professor tests positive</td>
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<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Clear action steps/plans for the future</td>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Clear communications and steps on process.</td>
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<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Clear deadlines and access to their COVID-19 safety plans.</td>
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<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Clear information</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Thankyou

E: mcunningham@carnegiedartlet.com
E: info@carnegiedartlet.com
W: https://www.carnegiedartlet.com/resources/covid-19-resources/