



Generations of Learners

How Online Student Expectations Diverge and Converge Across Generations



How can we help?

RNL works with colleges and universities to take their online programs to the next level... wherever you need help:

- Digital lead generation
- Search engine optimization
- Instructional design
- Market research
- Program planning
- Organizational/operations consulting

Contact us to schedule a consultation with an RNL enrollment expert.

RNL.com/OnlineEnrollment

The generations we are serving have shifted

Do you know how their expectations and preferences have changed?

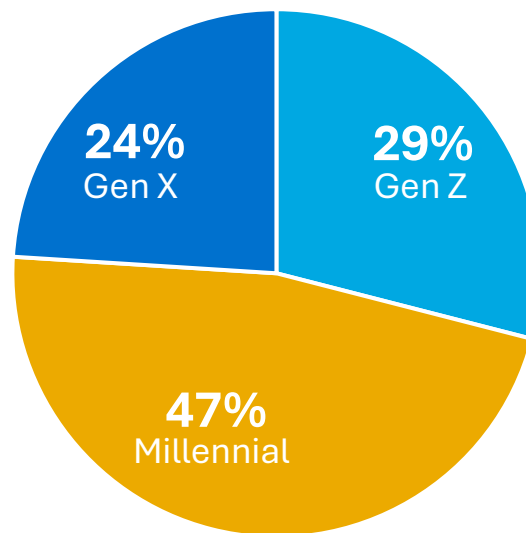
The online education market has seen a shift from being dominated by a “Gen X/Millennial” audience to one that is now predominantly “Millennial/Gen Z.”

Is this a seismic shift?

Do the expectations and preferences of this new target audience—two generations that have grown up in a customized, personalized, tech-enhanced world—diverge considerably from Gen X, the last generation that had a pre-Internet existence?

We set out to compare key findings from our [2024 Online Student Recruitment Report](#) to see how expectations have changed and how institutions can use critical market intelligence to make strategic decisions that will maximize online student enrollment.

Online Students by Generation



Similarities and differences across generations

These factors make the development of target personas for each online program critical. While this is true, there are “universals” revealed by this generational analysis that can be applied broadly to strategies. The two most important are:

Decision-making priorities

Online students of all generations prefer to enroll close to home but will opt for a more distant program if they cannot find a nearby program that meets their needs. Across all three generations, they prioritize affordability, future job prospects, and convenience over institutional reputation or location.

This proves what we have known since at least 2011 with Clayton Christiansen’s groundbreaking book *The Innovative University*: Many students will enroll in an online program that they may know is not of the very highest quality but otherwise matches up with their needs. Christiansen also demonstrated that, upon completion, many rate their experience as completely satisfactory.

Primary motivations

Online students of all three generations are driven to enroll and complete their studies for career-related reasons. In fact, the largest proportions of all three generations are motivated by career advancement, while they differ in terms of what the next most likely motivations are (e.g., Gen X to change careers and Gen Z to prep for their first career).

These findings align with the vast majority of all three generations of online learners being employed when they considered or enrolled in an online program.

Similarities and differences across generations

While specific program-level target student personas should be developed for each online program, planning and strategy can begin by considering these convergences and divergences among the three generations.

Similarities

- All expect a **timely response** within three hours—with not more than 2 percent differentiation among the generations. (p. 15)
- They agree that a slower response conveys they are not important to the program—with no more than a 2 percent difference. (p. 16)
- They prefer receiving communications on weekday mornings—and afternoons. Pandemic-era changes to work may have had a permanent impact. (p. 17)
- They are uniform in expecting that their online coursework will include career-preparatory content and activities. (p. 13)
- They agree that the quality of their online program was at least as good (if not better than) past classroom experiences. (p. 20)

Differences

- Gen X differs considerably in their use of AI and an AI-driven platform in their search—but among those who did use AI, they were consistent with the other generations in their satisfaction. (p. 6-7)
- The generations differ considerably regarding their primary concerns with enrolling in online study. (p. 10)
- Gen Z differs considerably with factors that are most important in their enrollment decision making, while Millennials align with Gen X. (p. 12)
- The three generations differ considerably on the advertising that made the biggest impact on their awareness of online programs, albeit with all three generations leading with search engines. (p. 14)

1. General use of AI

> Finding

Gen Z and Millennials are considerably more likely to use an AI platform regularly (at least once per week.)

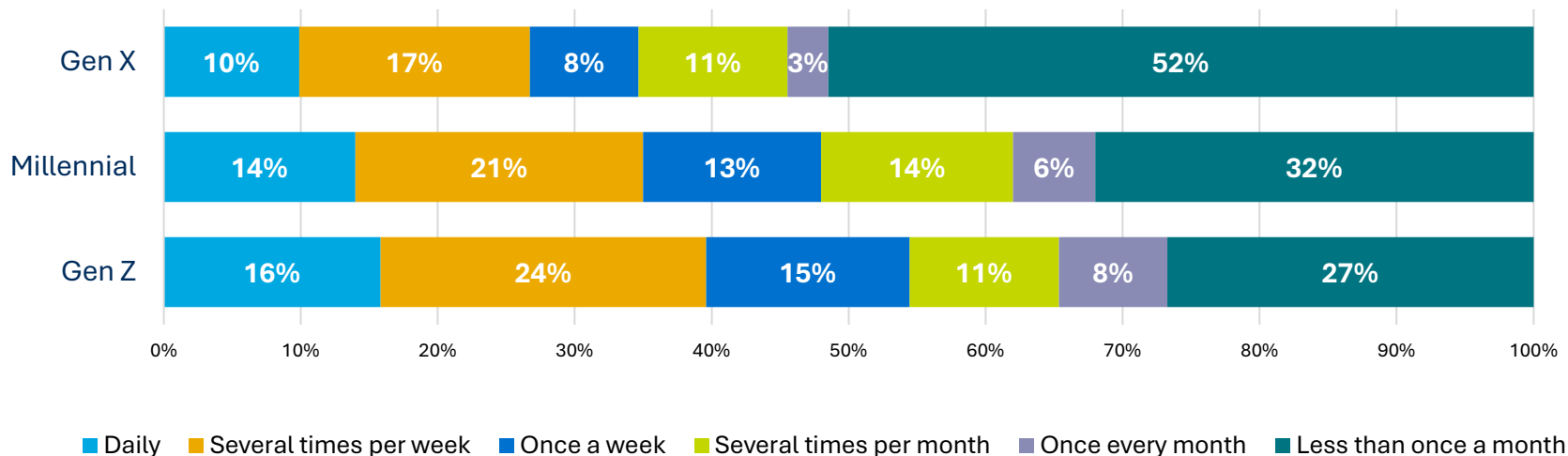
> Implication

The new target audience is likely to be comfortable using AI tools in the recruitment/enrollment process, while older students may need analog options.

> Action

Institutions should deploy AI solutions like AI-driven chatbots or digital assistants while maintaining more traditional methods that are user-friendly and easy to find.

How frequently do you use an AI tool like ChatGPT?



2. AI use in college search

> Finding

Gen Z and Millennial regular use of AI leads to increased usage of AI-driven chatbots in their online program search.

> Implication

While younger students are more likely to use an AI-driven chatbot, most who use one—regardless of their age—find them at least moderately effective, indicating acceptance of the technology among users of all ages.

> Action

When deploying an AI-driven chatbot or digital assistant, institutions should ensure that the underlying large language model incorporates the perspective or both older and younger students.

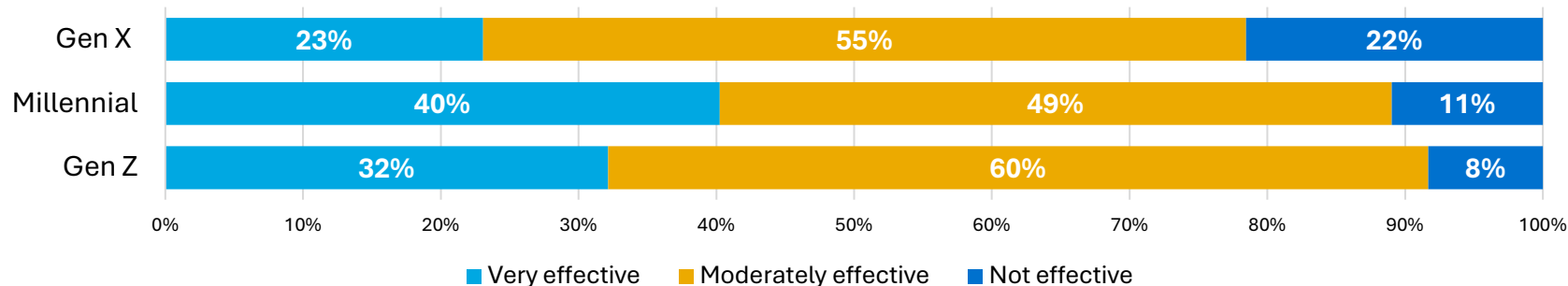
Did you use an AI-driven chatbot during your search for an online program? *Respondents answering yes*

Gen Z: **84%**

Millennial: **82%**

Gen X+: **65%**

How effective did you find chatbots in providing the information you needed for your search?



3. Motivation for enrolling

> Finding

Online students of all ages most frequently enroll to advance their careers, but other motivations are cited by considerable proportions of the various generations.

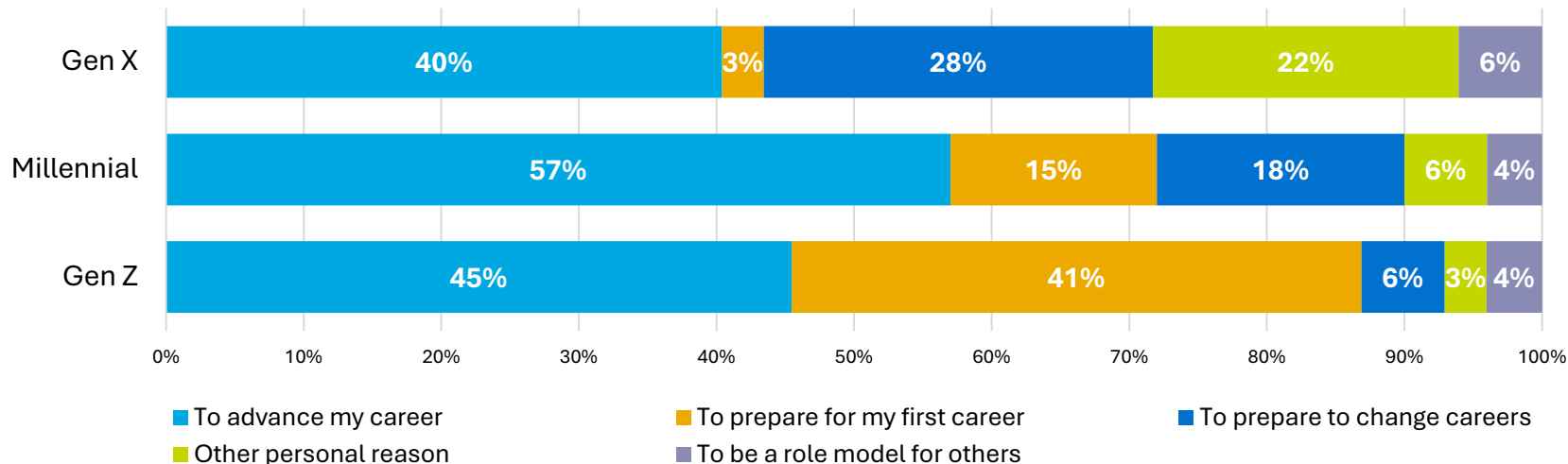
> Implication

Gen Z are considerably more likely to enroll to prepare for a first career, while more Gen X and Millennials do so to change careers underscoring the importance of customizing outreach to meet the goals of each group.

> Action

Promotional and positioning language should lead with career preparation messaging, and curriculum should include skills prep, job simulations, and career planning content.

What was your primary motivation to earn a degree?



4. Employment status at time of enrollment

> Finding

Online students of all ages are employed at the time they enroll in an online program—with all generations most frequently not working remotely.

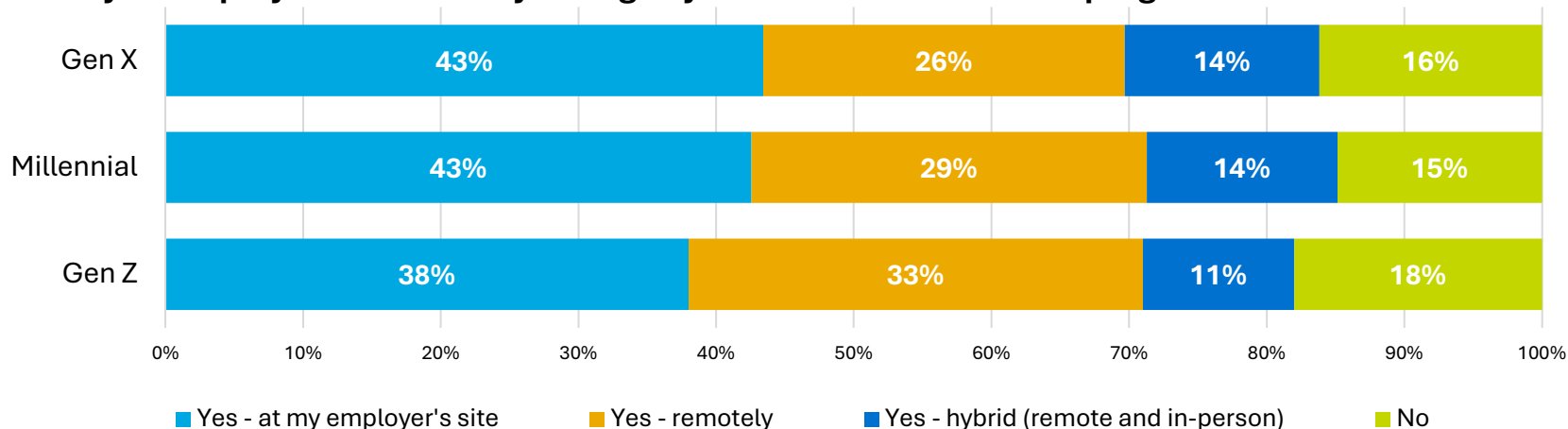
> Implication

Online programs must be designed for students who are juggling work, study, and other responsibilities. Gen Z is more likely to be working remotely, and this may bode well for their success in online learning.

> Action

Programs should reflect the fact that online students are employed, but also that nearly half are also working remotely, and have therefore developed comfortability with tools to foster engagement.

Were you employed at the time you began your search for an online program?



5. Concerns about online learning

> Finding

Online students of all ages are most often concerned about engagement with their instructors. There are considerable differences among the generations regarding all other concerns.

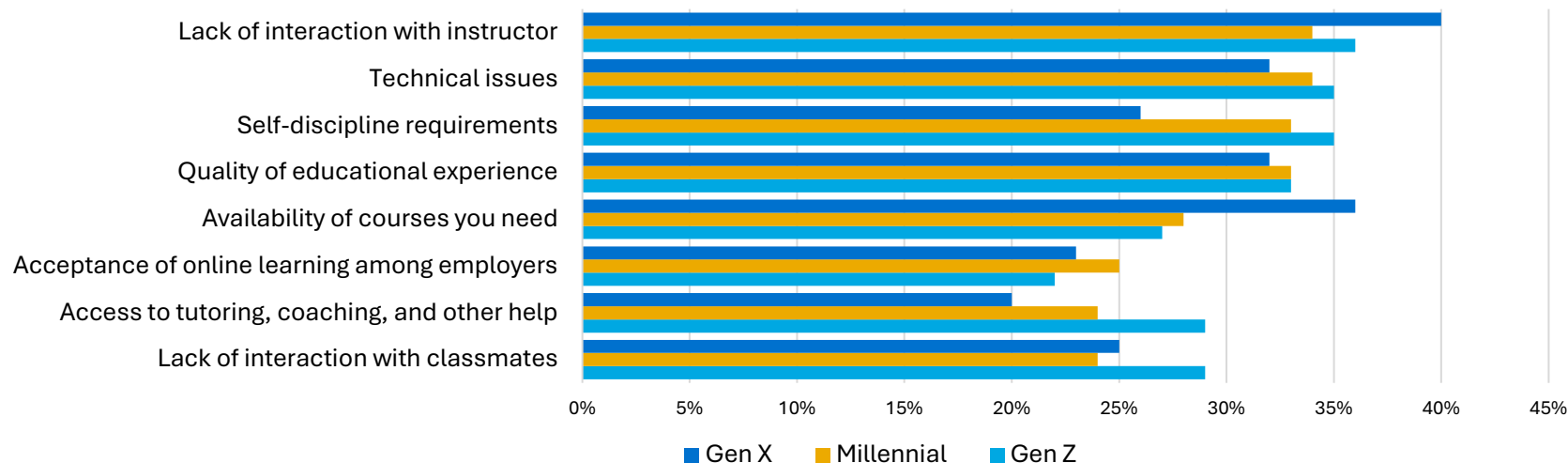
> Implication

Gen Z concerns may relate to past “remote learning” that did not reflect instructional best practices. Millennial concerns largely align with Gen Z, while Gen X concerns reflect more distant educational experiences.

> Action

Online programs must actively address concerns in their promotional content, with specific attention to how students interact with their instructors. Video may be the best way to do this.

What are your greatest concerns about online study?



6. Distance from home

> Finding

Online students of all ages are more likely than ever to want to enroll in programs close to home. Older students are more likely to consider programs far away.

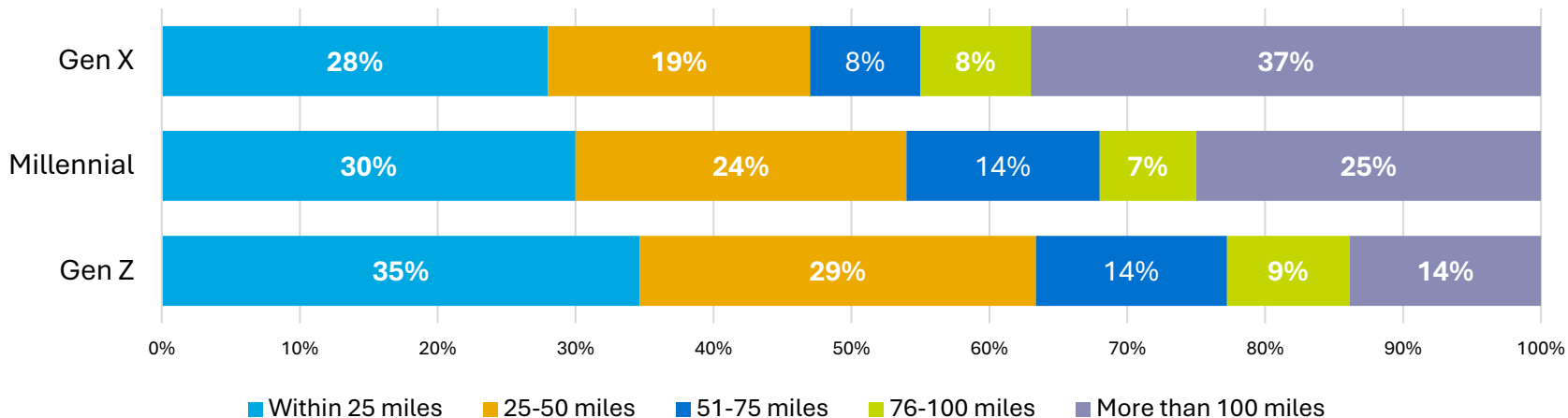
> Implication

Millennial, and even more so Gen Z, students expect their local institutions to offer fully online programs. Gen X students, based on past experiences, are less likely to have this expectation.

> Action

As online programs plan their marketing and positioning, they should focus on serving students in their communities, rather than a national audience—unless they offer a truly unique program with national draw.

How far away from where you reside was the furthest program you considered?



7. Decision-making priorities

> Finding

Online students of all ages most frequently cite cost of attendance as a factor in their enrollment decision, but other factors vary widely by generation.

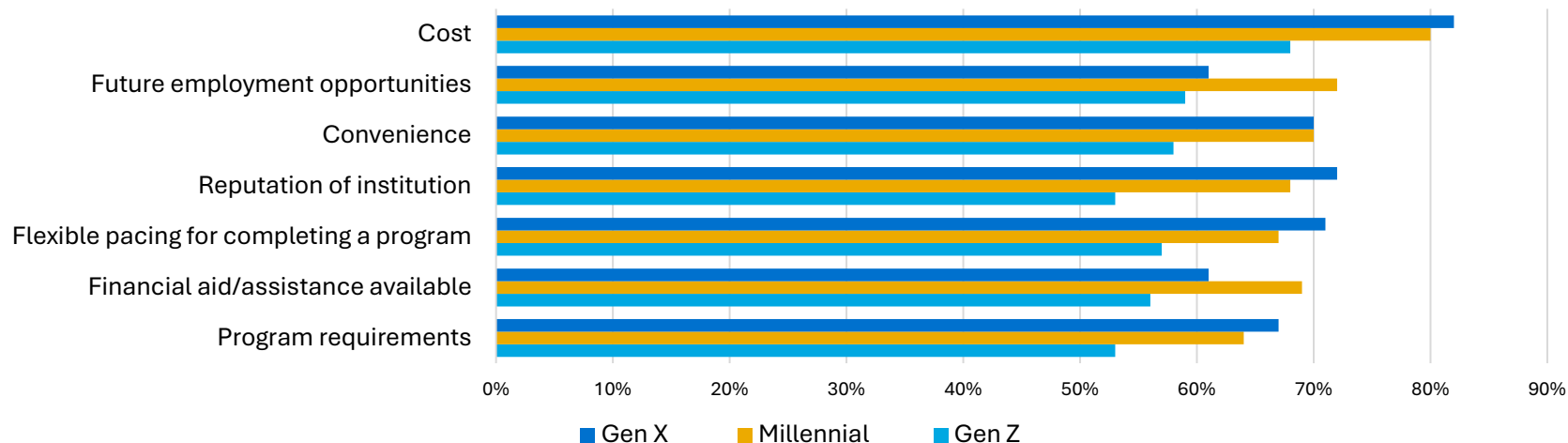
> Implication

Millennial decision-making priorities align more consistently with Gen X than with Gen Z. They are also considerably more concerned with future employment opportunities, which may reflect their documented concern about accumulated student debt.

> Action

As online programs develop their messaging, affordability should lead, followed by documented employment potential, and then convenience indicators.

How important are each of the following in your enrollment decision? *Combined % rating “important” and “very important”*



8. Most important course content

> Finding

Online students across generations expect that their online courses will build career skills, include practical learning opportunities, and provide real-world case studies in their field of study.

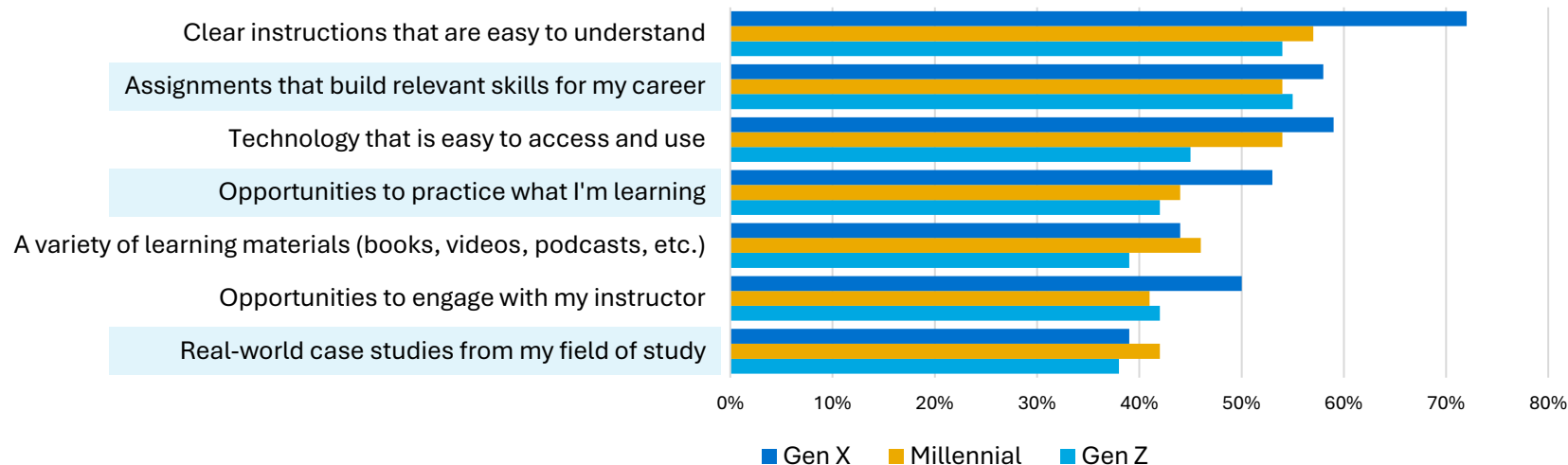
> Implication

With more than 40 percent of online students expecting these aspects of career preparation in their coursework, institutions must not only talk about career prep, but also deliver on it in their courses.

> Action

Marketing, enrollment, and academic stakeholders must convene to ensure that career preparation is delivered in the coursework aimed at all generations enrolling in online study.

What elements are important for you in online courses?



9. Most memorable early information source

> Finding

Online students of all ages indicate ads on search engines were the most memorable early information source. This aligns with 92 percent indicating that they did an online search as either their first or second step.

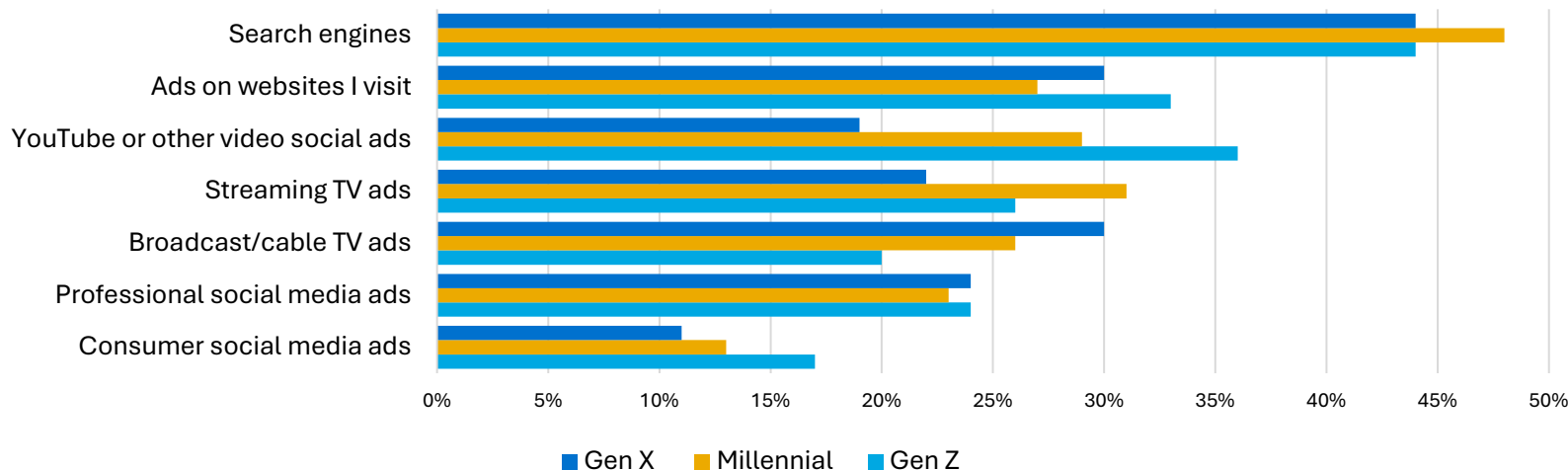
> Implication

With the relative uniformity of search engines, website ads, and professional social media across the generations, these tactics can be used with maximum positive impact.

> Action

Online programs should deploy tactics like YouTube ads, streaming TV, and even consumer social media strategically aligned with the persona(s) for a given program.

Where do you recall first seeing ads about online programs?



10. Timely response

> Finding

There is virtually no difference among the generations in the expectation of a speedy response within minutes or hours.

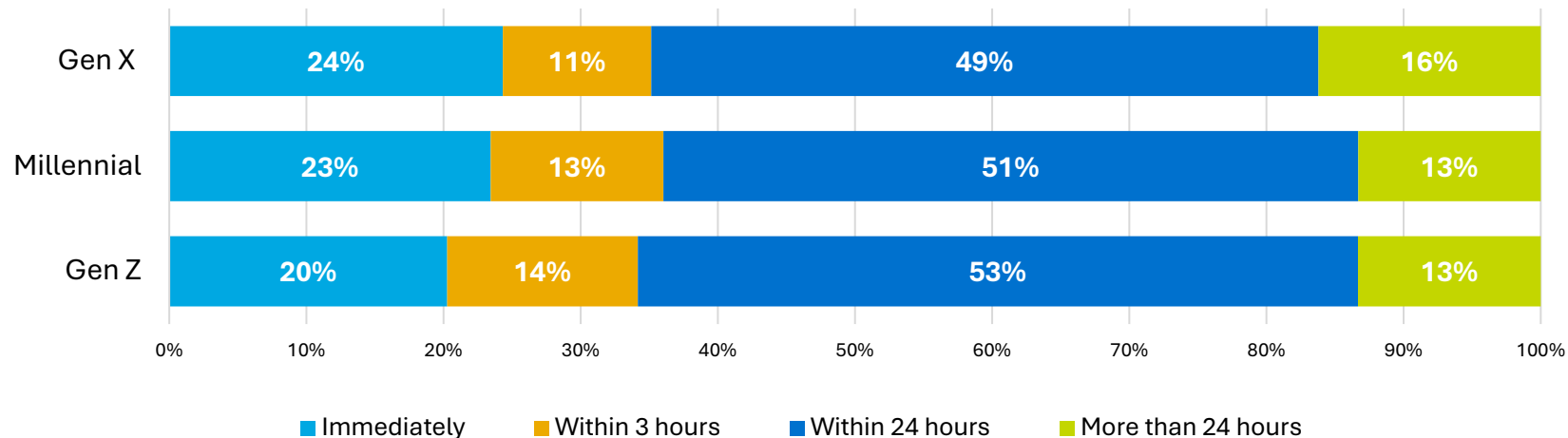
> Implication

These findings dispel the notion that only the youngest online students drive the demand for a speedy response and illustrate the critical importance of timely response to enrollment success.

> Action

Given the uniformity of expectations—and the dominance of Millennials and Gen Z—online programs must invest in the recruitment team to ensure they can respond within minutes or hours.

How quickly do you expect a response from programs to which you inquire?



11. Implications of slow response

> Finding

Not only do all the generations expect a timely response, but they are also uniform in interpreting a slower than expected response as an indicator that they are not important to the program.

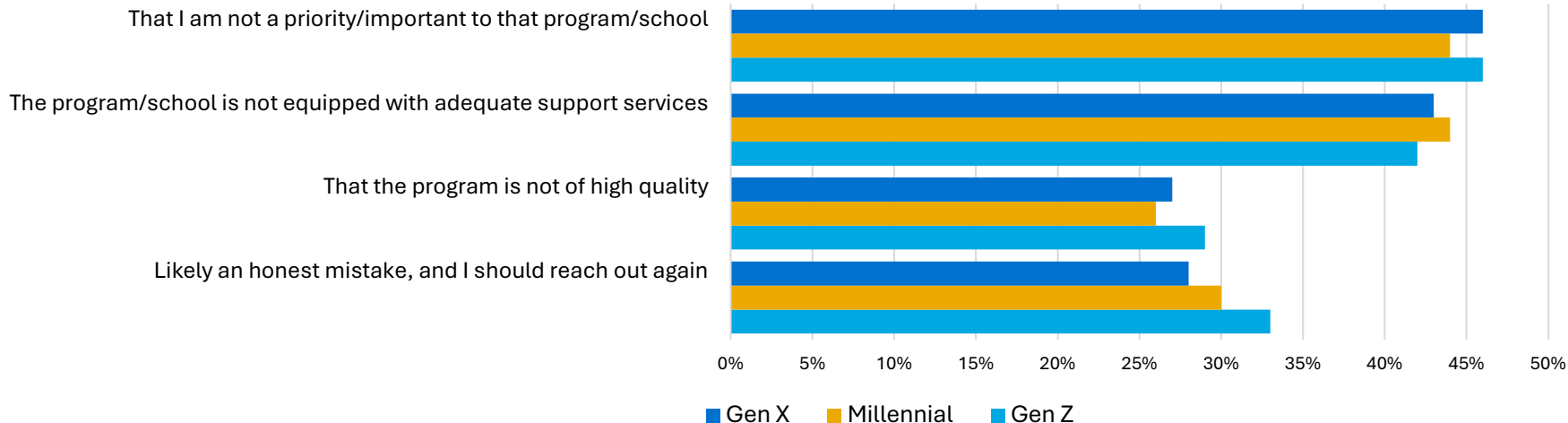
> Implication

The data prove that older and younger students are equally likely to take a slower-than-expected response personally, demonstrating that tech-enhanced personalized experiences have impacted students of all ages.

> Action

Online programs must hold recruiters responsible for timely response. Enrollment success can be made or broke on the ability of a recruitment operation to respond quickly.

What does a slower than expected response indicate to you?



12. Preferred time of day for communication

> Finding

While Millennials and Gen X are somewhat more likely to prefer contact on weekday evenings, students of all generations prefer contact on weekdays before noon.

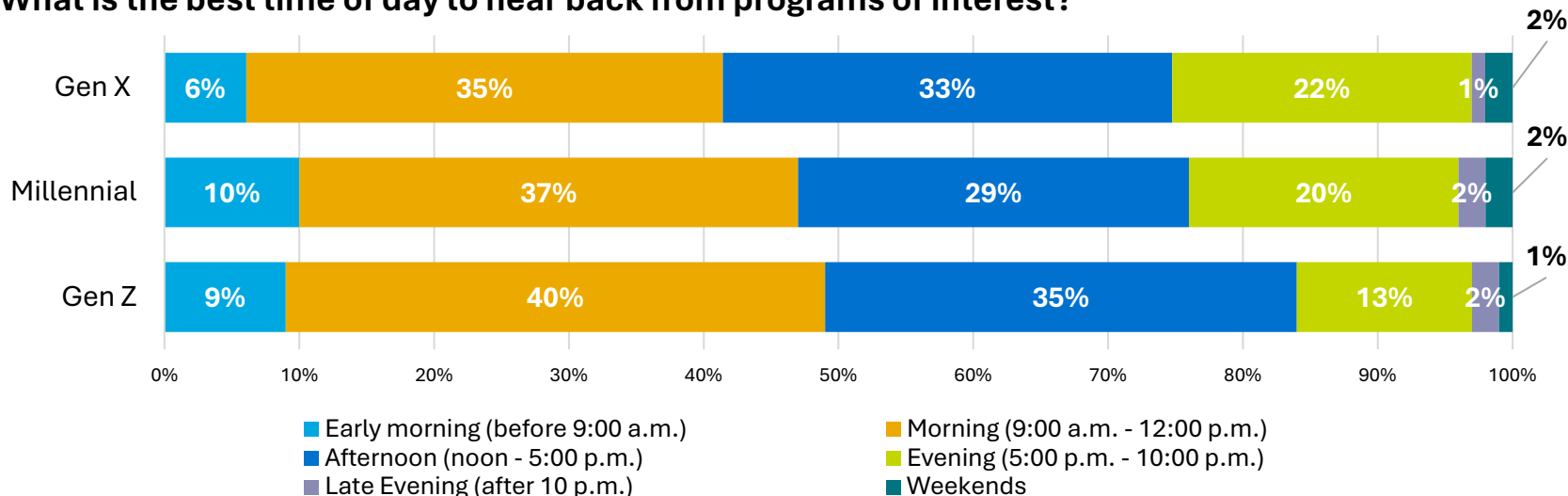
> Implication

Preference for weekday evening contact has dramatically contracted (most profoundly among Gen Z), likely a result of work from home policies begun during the pandemic that allowed for attending to personal business during “business hours.”

> Action

Online program recruitment teams likely do not need a full complement of staff on duty outside of traditional business hours.

What is the best time of day to hear back from programs of interest?



13. Method of first contact

> Finding

There is significant divergence between generations regarding how they first contact online programs, with Gen Z being the most likely to be “stealth applicants.”

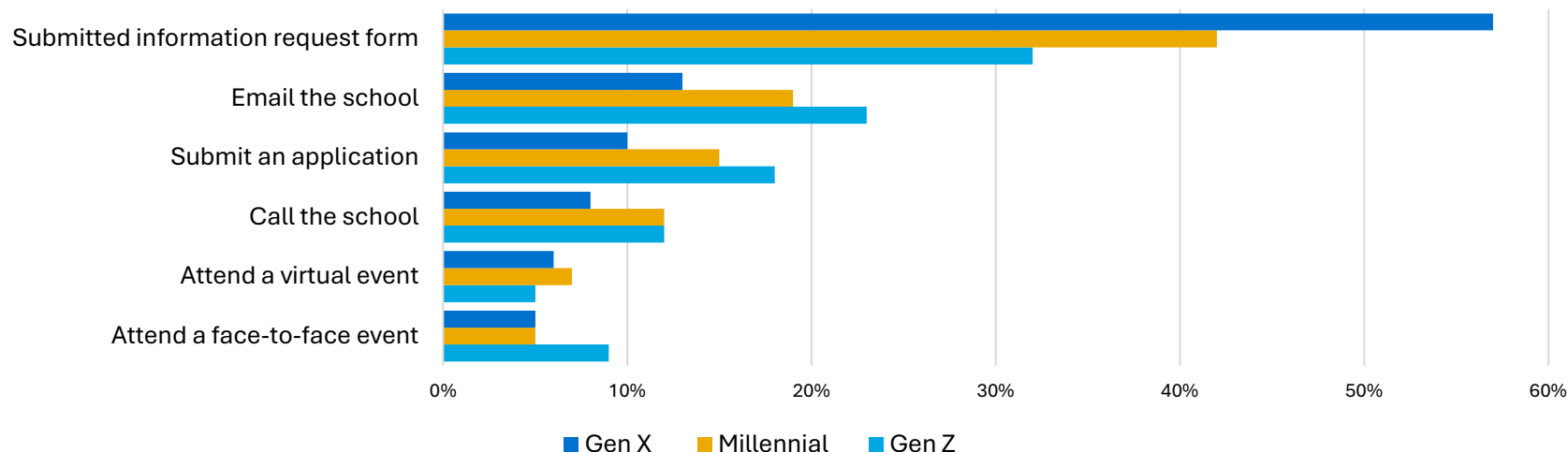
> Implication

Gen X is the most consistent in how they approach online program while Gen Z uses the greatest variety of methods and Millennials concentrate on the top three methods.

> Action

Online programs must have strategies in place to not only respond via multiple channels, but also must develop highly effective methods to track inquiries and subsequent contact from the full array of communications channels.

How did you first contact programs of interest?



14. Inhibitors to enrollment

> Finding

All three generations agree that application fees are the most common hurdle to enrollment, with significant proportions of Gen Z and Millennials indicating that other factors also represent barriers to enrollment.

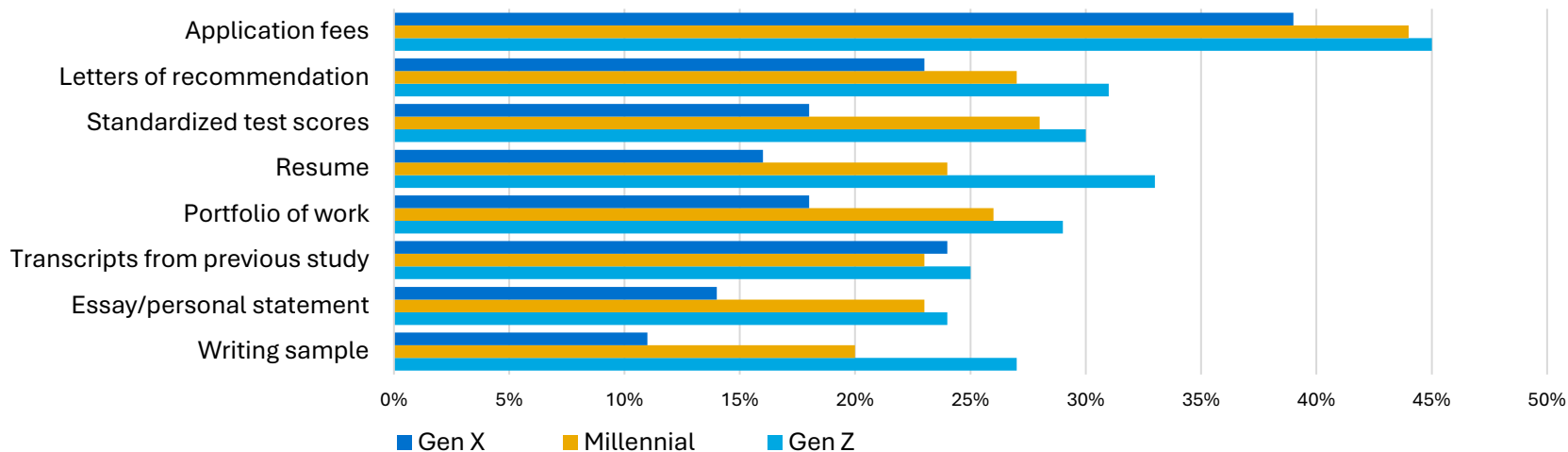
> Implication

Students of all generations do not like paying application fees. Gen X is far more likely to accept all application requirements than the other generations. This represents a paradigm shift to which institutions must respond.

> Action

Programs must consider the extent to which each application requirement is vital to ensuring the right people enroll in the program. If not vital, discontinue.

Which of the following typical requirements is most likely to prevent you from completing your application?



15. What makes students happy

> Finding

Most online students, across all generations, rate their online experience as equal to or better than traditional classroom learning, with fewer than 20% rating it lower.

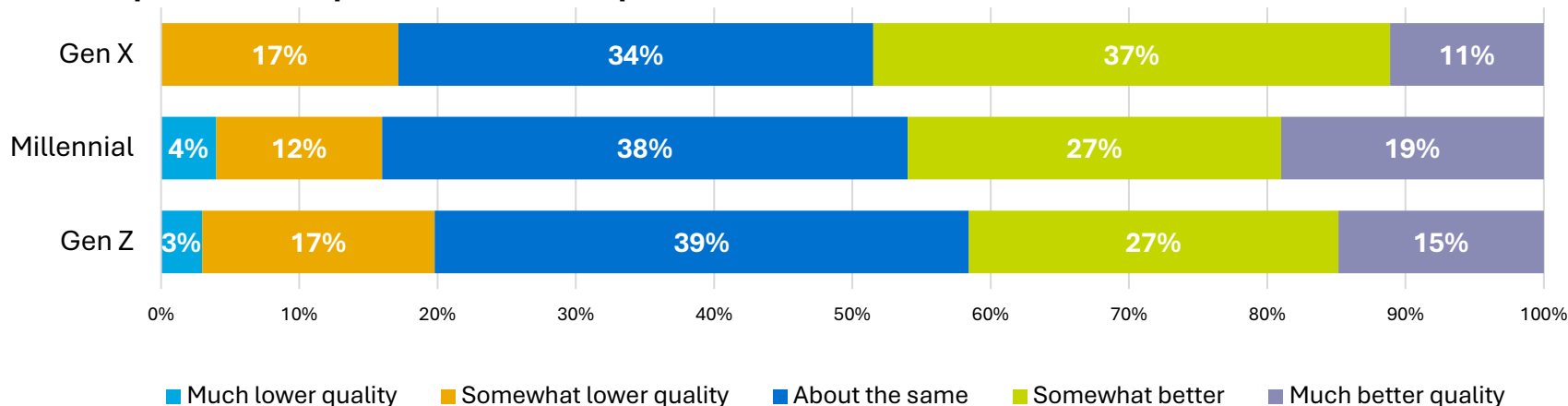
> Implication

When institutions align with student expectations, each generation views the experience as (at least) comparable to in-person education.

> Action

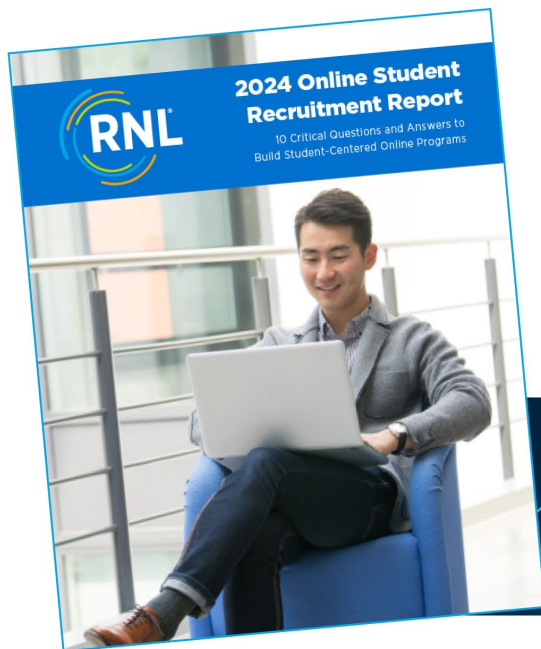
Refine online programs to meet student expectations regarding marketing (connecting with the right students), recruitment (meeting their timing and personalization expectations), format (structuring the program so it works for them), and content (including the workforce prep they need).

How would you rate the quality of your current/recent online program in comparison with past classroom experiences?



Read the full report and receive expert insights

Ask for a complimentary consultation



To read all 50 findings in our *Online Student Recruitment Report*, ask for a complimentary consultation with an RNL enrollment expert. We will review the findings with you and discuss how you can reach your online enrollment goals more efficiently.

Request now at RNL.com/OnlineReport



About the author



Scott Jeffe

Scott Jeffe is the principal researcher for this report. He is vice president of graduate and online research at RNL. Over more than 25 years, Scott has worked with nearly 400 institutions in 40+ states to apply market data to strategic decision making in relation to graduate, adult undergraduate, and online programs. In these experiences, he has developed expertise in how institutions can align with student demand while upholding institutional mission and values. He contributed the chapter on graduate and online enrollment to RNL's *Strategic Enrollment Planning: A Dynamic Collaboration (3rd Edition)* and has been the principal researcher for RNL's *Graduate Student Recruitment Report*, *Graduate Marketing and Recruitment Practices Report*, *Online Program Marketing and Recruitment Practices Report*, and *Serving the Underrepresented: A Review of Graduate Student Data*, as well as dozens of RNL blogs and articles.