EAB

Building an Effective Graduate Enrollment Management Plan

Exploring the Evolution and Elements of Graduate Enrollment Management

EAB Adult Learner Recruitment

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Understanding the Strategic Enrollment Management Imperative

SECTION 1

Introduction

▶ **Effective Enrollment Management Is Key to Stability and Growth**

Enrollment management has a long and storied history in the United States, dating back to 1636 with the founding of Harvard College. Over the past 386 years, enrollments have been influenced by public policy, changing demographics, world wars, recessions, new competitors, and most recently, pandemics. But the need to effectively manage enrollments has become more important than ever. The way that higher education responds to these internal and external forces, specifically at the graduate level, will be the difference between strategic growth or no growth at all.

▶ **Peaks and Valleys in the Recent History of Graduate Enrollment**

While the past 20 years have been a time of rapid expansion for graduate enrollment, it is important to note that growth has not been consistent or easily won. The last two decades have been characterized by several distinct challenges: growth in online education, a rapidly evolving competitive landscape, economic recessions, and a global pandemic. Notably, graduate enrollments in online education[2] grew 52 percent from 2012 to 2019. In fall 2020, when the shift to online courses was driven by the pandemic, the percentage of graduate students enrolled in at least one online class grew to 70 percent, up from 42 percent in 2019. Competition in the graduate market also fluctuated significantly. In 2000, there were 4,104 institutions offering graduate programs. This number peaked in 2007 with 4,588, and in 2020, there were 3,876 institutions with graduate offerings, a loss of 712 institutions. These forces have combined to create a volatile landscape for graduate programs.

Historical Changes in Graduate Enrollment

Year-over-Year Growth of Total Graduate Enrollments—All Four-Year Institutions, NCES 2000-2021
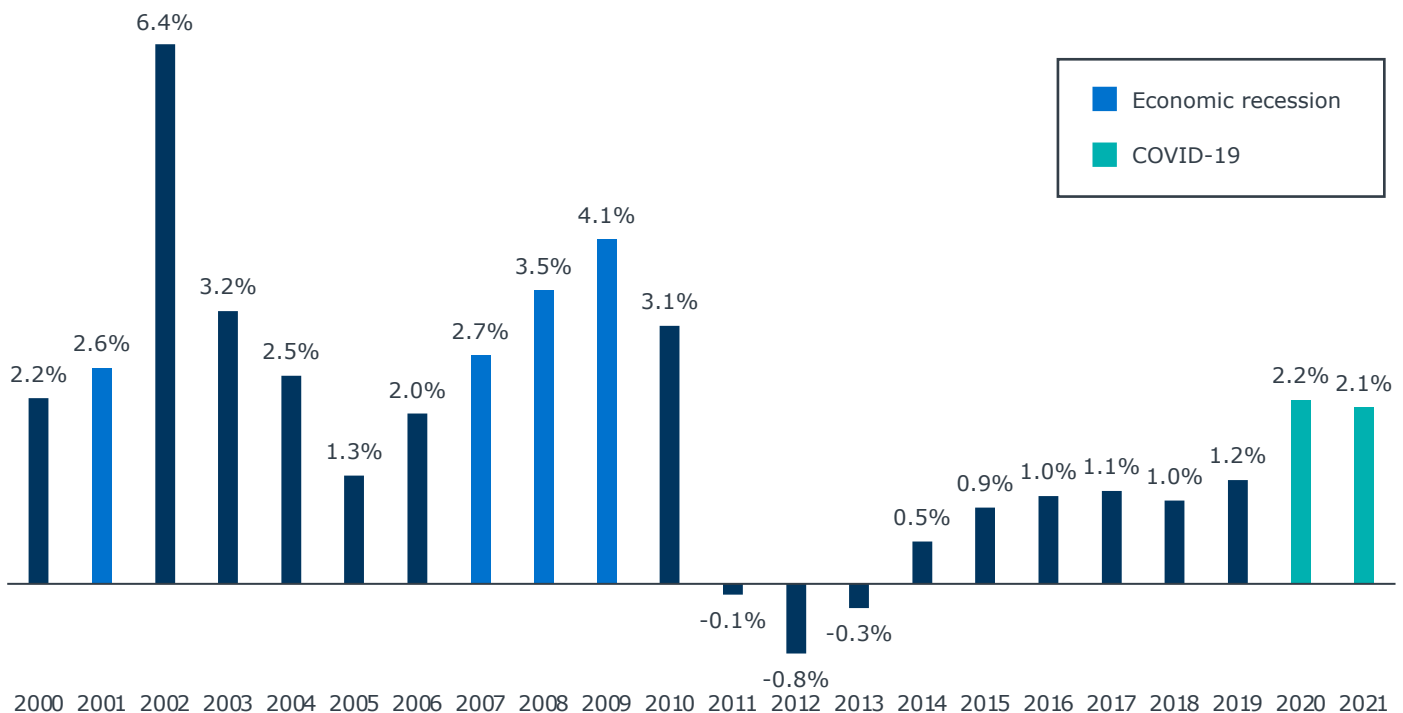
1) Graduate enrollment in the NCES data reflects master's and doctoral enrollments. There is no separation of the two data points in the enrollment data files.
2) Online education is calculated as being enrolled in at least one online learning course.

The Need for a Graduate Enrollment Management Plan

▶ **Slowing Conferrals Raise Concerns About the Future of Graduate Enrollment**

One might look at a combination of the increase in graduate enrollments, the increase in graduate conferrals, and the decline in graduate competition as positive indicators to graduate success now and into the future—and they may be correct. What is missing from this snapshot data is the fact that the **pace of graduate enrollments and conferrals is slowing**. Graduate enrollments have grown only an average of 0.7 percent since 2010. Graduate conferrals have increased on average 2.0 percent since 2010. Private for-profit institutions also had their first positive gain in graduate enrollments since 2010, up 2.1 percent from 2019 to 2020.

Perhaps the biggest factor, not reflected in this data, is the decline in undergraduate enrollments: 12.4 percent from 2010 to 2020. External forces such as these are just one reason why a graduate enrollment management (GEM) plan is critical to the success of graduate programs.

How should graduate enrollment managers respond to these changes?

Slowing Graduate Conferrals and Declining Undergraduate Enrollment Spell Trouble
NCES, 2010-2020

+0.7%
Increase in graduate enrollment

+2%
Average growth in graduate conferrals

-12.4%
Decline in undergraduate enrollment

▶ **Uncertainty for Graduate Programs Necessitates Strategic Enrollment Management**

These challenges are just some of the reasons why a graduate enrollment management (GEM) plan is critical to the success of graduate programs. The process to attract, enroll, and retain more students was referred to as "enrollment management" by Jack Maquire (1976) at Boston College and is commonly referred to today as strategic enrollment management (SEM). The foundational components of SEM, and how many in higher education view it today, came from Hossler and Dean (1990), who defined enrollment management in the following context:

Defining Enrollment Management

An organizational concept and a systematic set of activities designed to enable educational institutions to **exert more influence over their student enrollments**. Organized by strategic planning and **supported by institutional research**, enrollment management activities concern student college choice, transition to college, student attrition and retention, and student outcomes. These processes are studied to guide institutional practices in … areas that affect enrollments, student persistence, and student outcomes from college (p. 5).

An Evolving Approach to Enrollment Management

▶ **Students' Complex, Nonlinear Journeys Require a New Approach to Enrollment**

For decades, enrollment managers have depicted and discussed higher education as the proverbial funnel with the notion that the more prospects an institution has at the top of the funnel, the more graduates and alumni the institution can expect at the bottom. But this model creates a false sense of planning for future growth as it lacks the institutional input, institutional structure, and institutional planning necessary to be effective at each stage of the student's journey. Today, we know that **graduate students' journey to enrollment is not linear** and therefore, a top-down and linear approach to graduate enrollment management will not be effective.
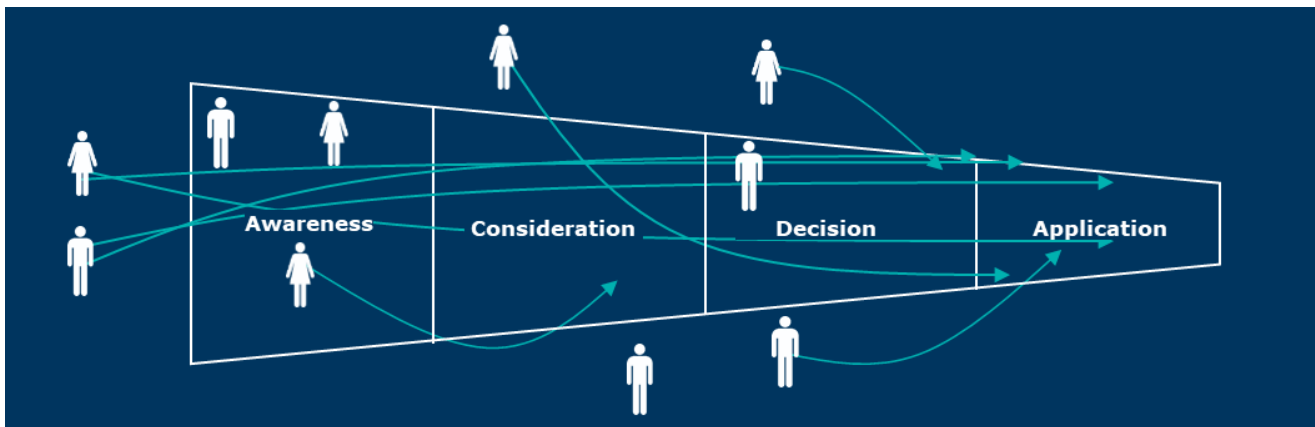
Enrollment Management Has Reached Its Strategic Management Phase

Strategic planning is a process for organizing in the present based on projections of the desired future, resulting in a roadmap to lead an institution from where it is now to where it would like to be. According to Michael Dooris and Gregory Lozier (1990), strategic planning in higher education has evolved through four phases:

1 **Horizontal Reduction Phase**
Higher education institutions moved from a period of rapid growth in the 1950s and 1960s to a period of containment and consolidation. Institutions created plans to deal with budget shortfalls and reductions in staffing.

2 **Vertical Reallocation Phase**
This phase occurred during the late 1970s to mid-1980s when colleges began to evaluate which programs were needed to be effective and selectively reduced programs that were no longer viable. This phase, similar to the changes in horizontal reduction phase, was again attributed to financial concerns.

3 **Strategic Planning Phase**
The strategic planning phase relies upon a defined mission, environmental scanning, and an assessment of strengths and weakness. The plan also establishes the direction and decision-making process.

4 **Strategic Management Phase**
It is the decision-making and implementation process from the previous phase that is incorporated into the strategic management phase and provides the framework for strategic action across all levels of the organization. These phases are interrelated and are not effective without each other.

Creating the Foundations for a GEM Plan

▶ **The Core of a Strong Graduate Enrollment Management Plan Is a Clear Mission**

A GEM plan is not just about solidifying enrollments and revenue; it's about making the right decision on how an organization needs to compete in the marketplace. According to Uhl (1983), effective strategic planning depends on an internal and external analysis; the development of a mission, vision, and goals; creating objectives and action plans; and finally, examining how resources will be utilized within the plan. These inputs, which rely on relevant, accurate, credible, timely, and persuasive data, shape the measurable objectives of the graduate enrollment management plan.

▶ **Exploring the Components of a Graduate Enrollment Management Plan**

Today's GEM plan must **adapt to the changing landscape of higher education**, such as demographic shifts, technology, delivery modalities, student perceptions of education, rising costs, and increased student debt. To accomplish this, goals and objectives cannot be accomplished in a vacuum. They must also rely on the inherent or redesigned infrastructure of the institution for input, feedback, and implementation.

These structures can exist as committees, councils, teams, or departments. Regardless, they should be cross-functional and made up of individuals from across the institution who are both stakeholders and decision-makers in graduate enrollments and graduate student success.

Key Pieces of the GEM Plan

Tuition and Financial Aid

Program Development

Student Success and Retention

GEM Plan

Marketing and Recruitment

Environmental Scan

Faculty and Resources
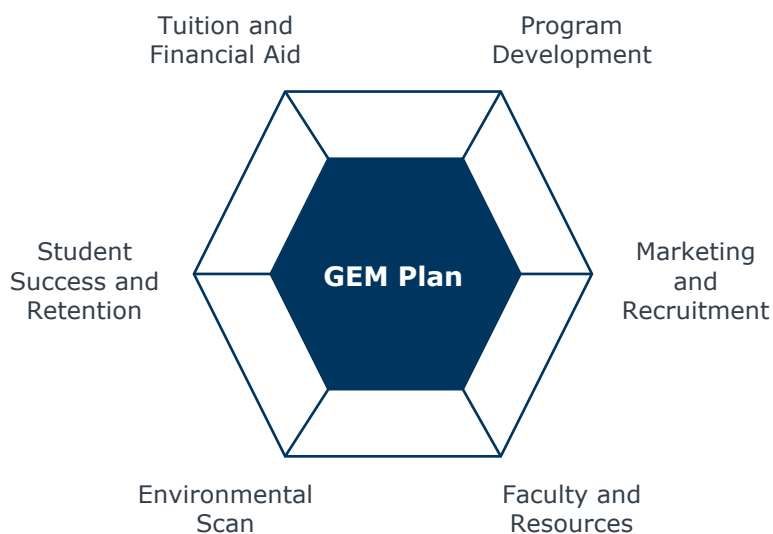
Using This Research to Inform a GEM Plan

Our experts have done extensive primary and secondary research to develop a deep understanding of the many elements of a graduate enrollment management plan. This white paper identifies six main components of an effective GEM plan and offers specific marketing, recruitment, and program design strategies to ensure graduate enrollment teams have the tools and information necessary to make smart growth decisions.

The Six Elements of a Graduate Enrollment Management Plan

Six Factors to Inform Your GEM Plan

2

Internal and External Environmental Scan

▶ **Use Comprehensive Internal and External Environmental Scans as the Basis for Your Plan**

The internal and external environmental scan is a major aspect of effective GEM planning. These scans typically address questions related to recruitment, retention, and revenue. At many institutions, the institutional research department is responsible for collecting the relevant data and providing that data back to the decision-makers who then create strategic enrollment goals based on this data.

▶ **Prioritize Internal Data Gathering When External Data Is Not Available**

As graduate enrollment leaders know all too well, graduate programs do not have IPEDS cohort data with which to make comparisons across other programs as the undergraduate population does. For this reason, it is important to create internal longitudinal reporting that tracks these specific metrics across programs. Institutions should use programmatic accreditation or annual reports from associations such as the Graduate Management Admission Council to compare internal data to that of competitor or peer institutions.

One often overlooked component of the internal assessment is the academic program review. Academic program reviews are a systematic process for evaluating the overall effectiveness and resources of a program to meet the educational outcomes of enrolled students. Program review criteria should be closely tied to the GEM plan and incorporate measurable and actionable criteria, as outlined in the chart below.

Data to Consider in Academic Program Review

Quantitative Data Points	Qualitative Data Points
✓ Enrollment numbers	✓ Questionnaires from key stakeholders, such as community and advisory board members
✓ Student-to-faculty ratios	
✓ Retention rates	✓ Faculty reviews
✓ Graduation rates	✓ Student satisfaction surveys
✓ Job placement trends	

▶ **Take Advantage of External Scans to Save Institutional Resources and Time**

External assessments in strategic planning should assess the favorable and unfavorable effects of events, trends, or scenarios on the institution and its programs. These assessments can be time- and labor-intensive, so many institutions may rely on external agencies for data. Gaining access to external resources available via the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Census Bureau, and the National Student Clearinghouse is useful in triangulating various internal data points with credible external information. Ultimately, aligning market labor demand, internal data, and other external data points with academic programs is important in developing competitive programs that appeal to adult students.

> To learn more about the most in-demand skills in your state or region, please explore our employer demand profiles.

Program Development

▶ **Consider Student-Centric Criteria When Developing Academic Programs**

An essential element of GEM models that is often left out of or glossed over in the literature is the academic program development process. Program development, whether for new or existing programs, is a key academic affairs function, but is often not tied to the overall growth strategies or mission of the institution. To be more student-centric, program development in GEM should identify market viability, modality, and the program's key competitive advantages. By addressing these topics up front, institutions can better understand if a program is geared toward career changers or career enhancers, which can inform marketing, recruitment, faculty, and other resource allocations.

Three Questions to Consider During Program Development

What is the program's market viability?	Market viability should rely on the internal and external environmental scan, academic program reviews of similar programs, and the mission and vision of the institution.
What is the program's modality?	Program modality (i.e., online, hybrid, on-campus) is an important factor to consider during program development and may provide a competitive advantage for the program.
What are the program's competitive advantages?	A comprehensive competitor analysis should be conducted as part of the program development process to identify such advantages as admissions requirements, tuition, total credit hours, number of starts, and modality of the program.

Optimize Your Graduate Programs for Enrollment Growth

For insight information about the market viability of your graduate programs, complete our program planning diagnostic. EAB's Market Insights team is also available to assess the feasibility of potential new programs or determine opportunities to expand existing programs in your portfolio.

Marketing and Recruitment

▶ **Your Marketing and Recruitment Efforts Should Be Informed by Market Research**

Graduate enrollment plans will not be successful without structured marketing efforts that are aligned to the overall goals and objectives of the plan. The structure of marketing, whether internal to the institution or external, should rely on market research to inform not only the competitive nature of academic programs but also the process for targeting and identifying the right student population for enrollment.

Marketing materials and messaging (recruitment) are critical to this process as typically the graduate prospective student audience is evaluating graduate school from a consumer perspective. Our survey of prospective graduate students reiterates that students most value successful job placement, program accreditation, and strong relationships with faculty and mentors when selecting a program.

Key Elements of Graduate Marketing

Ensure Your Marketing Is Responsive to Student Behavior

In today's world, you need an approach to cultivating interest in your school that meets prospects where they are with what they want and need. That requires the right combination of assets, data insights, and comprehensive orchestration—multiplied by every student you are engaging with.

Take Advantage of a Multitude of Campaign Channels

Students are learning about programs through a seemingly endless number of sources, from clicking ads to visiting program webpages to Google searches. They are taking in information and making decisions about going back to school at each of these thousands of micro-moments.

Develop Data-Driven and Personalized Content

Student intent should be at the heart of your marketing campaigns. Each campaign should be personalized for each and every prospect, including micro-surveys, original newsletters, and virtual technology to drive engagement and showcase the experience of learning with your university.

Use Consistent and Frequent Messaging

Busy adult learners may be easily distracted by other work and life obligations. In order to stay top of mind with these prospects, your marketing and recruitment efforts need to continuously engage them, or else you will lose their interest and their enrollment.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

eab.com

Tuition and Financial Aid

▶ **Implement a Discounting Strategy for Graduate Students**

Tuition and financial aid, or discounting, have long been important strategies for yielding undergraduate classes. The same can now be said for yielding graduate classes. First, tuition rates should be evaluated on an annual basis through a thorough review of competitive programs as part of the external environmental scan. Second, both tuition and financial aid are important to the calculation of net tuition revenue (NTR) and achieving the financial goals of the plan. NTR can be calculated as Total Annual Tuition minus Discount/Scholarship.

Total annual tuition can fluctuate based on the number of credit hours that students enroll on a semester basis. Many institutions have adopted multiple start terms (i.e., fall, spring, and summer) as well as multiple enrollment terms to garner more credit hour production from graduate students. This process, referred to as curriculum modeling, shortens the time to degree completion, which many graduate students prioritize when choosing where to apply.

The curriculum model reflected below can be implemented on any program, regardless of modality. The purpose of the model is to ensure continuous enrollment for the student and a seamless path to graduation, while also providing a schedule for faculty resourcing. Institutions may find that a curriculum model based on shorter, term-based courses can bolster part-time enrollment.

Curriculum Modeling for Continuous Enrollment and Faculty Scheduling

Sample Curriculum Model
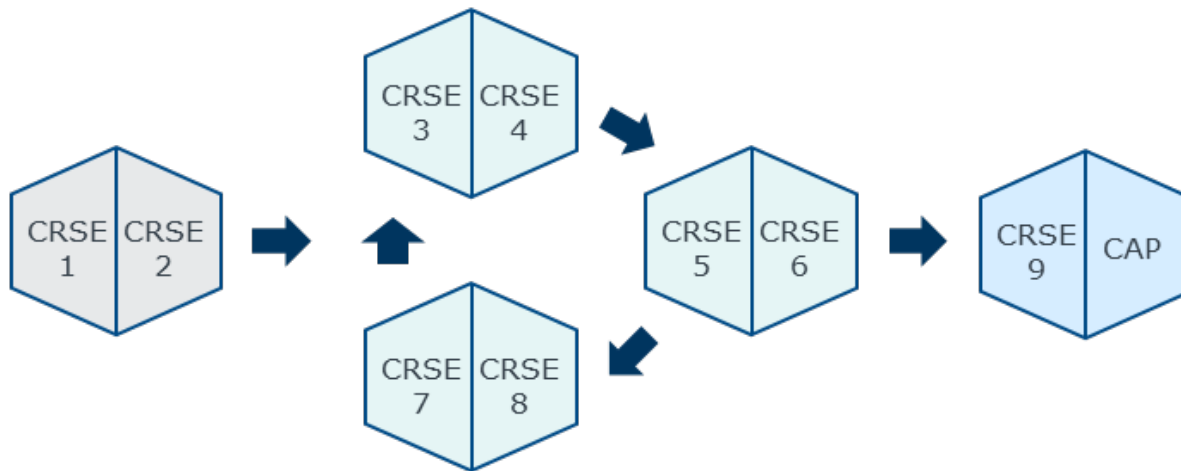
▶ **Remove Unnecessary Financial Burdens to Increase Net Tuition Revenue**

Regardless of the curriculum model for enrollment, the strategy behind tuition and financial aid is key to measuring financial success of the GEM plan. Institutions could offset low enrollments by increasing credit hour production (annual student credit hour enrollment) if it is in the best interest of the student to enroll in more credit hours. Adding unnecessary financial or academic burdens to students will hinder student success and ultimately not lead to increased NTR.

Student Success and Retention

▶ **Prioritize Advising and Other Services to Shore Up Graduate Student Success**

"Student success and retention" is often synonymous with "advising", and several studies have highlighted the connection between academic advising and student retention. However, there is little research into student success at the graduate level. Heck and Cook (2020) reflected that student success professionals in graduate education need to "consider the effectiveness of standard office hours and explore alternative methods of connecting with students." University leaders cannot assume that graduate students successfully navigated their undergraduate journey and therefore have all the strategies figured out to be successful in their graduate program.

Very little data exists on a broad, longitudinal level with regard to how successful, as defined by completions, graduate students are in their programs. It is therefore unclear how many students start and how many students finish their graduate program. As mentioned earlier, these data points are important for internal reporting and developing retention strategies as part of the GEM plan. The Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) report provides a glimpse into student success from a cohort of 9,186 students who enrolled in STEM programs from 2003 to 2007.

Cumulative Completion Rates of STEM Master's Students

Council of Graduate Schools, "Completion and Attrition in STEM Master's Programs"

41%	60%	66%
Graduated within two years	Graduated within three years	Graduated within four years

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▶ **Graduate Students May Require Extra Support Given Their Competing Priorities**

Managing school, life, and work are not new topics to higher education professionals working with undergraduate or graduate students, but it is important to account for them in the GEM plan. Given the professional and personal obligations graduate students often balance with coursework, GEM plans should include student success structures and resources.

First-Year Graduate Students' Concerns

Council of Graduate Schools, "Completion and Attrition in STEM Master's Programs"

18%	16%	13%
Balancing family and school	Balancing work and school and other work issues	Feeling stressed, overloaded, or not having enough time to fulfill all of their commitments

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Faculty and Resources

▶ **Factor in Faculty, Staff, and Resources to Create a Financial Proforma**

This component of the plan is concerned with having the necessary faculty to deliver programs, as well as the necessary resources and staff (e.g., recruiters, advisors, marketers, instructional designers, institutional researchers). Creating a financial proforma, or a set of hypothetical financial assumptions about future enrollment that considers all resources that the GEM plan is utilizing to generate and manage revenue, is an effective modeling process to pressure-test various scenarios of enrollment on the budget constraints of the plan.

The following, simplified example of a financial proforma is one method of calculating overall revenue from projected expenses and revenue from tuition. The key when developing the model is to connect growth with expenses. In other words, your expenses will not remain flat in all categories as you enroll more students, so it is important to project faculty teaching load and advising capacity within your scenario as your enrollments change.

Sample Revenue Calculation with Tuition and Expense Inputs

	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3	Scenario 4
Academic/Fiscal Year	AY 2023	AY 2023	AY 2023	AY 2023
Estimated Inputs				
Enrollment Projections	100	250	250	500
Tuition per Credit Hour	$650	$650	$650	$650
Est. Credit Hour Production	1,800	4,500	5,250	9,000
Tuition and Fees				
Graduate Tuition	$1,170,000	$2,925,000	$3,412,500	$5,850,000
Fees	$292,500	$731,250	$853,125	$1,462,500
Total	**$1,462,500**	**$3,656,250**	**$4,265,625**	**$7,312,500**
Expenses				
Marketing	$350,000	$350,000	$350,000	$500,000
Faculty Salaries	$1,250,000	$1,500,000	$1,750,000	$2,500,000
Staff Salaries	$1,000,000	$1,000,000	$1,000,000	$1,000,000
Market Research	$50,000	$50,000	$50,000	$50,000
Instructional Design	$250,000	$250,000	$250,000	$250,000
Total	**$2,900,000**	**$3,150,000**	**$3,400,000**	**$4,300,000**
Revenue	**($1,437,500)**	**$506,250**	**$865,625**	**$3,012,500**

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Additional Resources

Final Takeaways

▷ **Building Your Graduate Enrollment Management Plan**

Graduate enrollment management should be more than a footnote in the overall enrollment management plan for the institution. Effective graduate enrollment management requires a comprehensive approach to maintaining and growing a diverse student body while optimizing a budget to maintain the financial viability of the institution. This process must utilize the foundational components of strategic planning and strategic management to build a cross-functional team or unit to effectively impact enrollment change.

The foundation of the plan must include the vision, mission, strategic initiatives, data from internal and external environmental scans, and alignment to specific accreditation and programmatic accreditation standards. From there, utilization of the relevant, accurate, credible, timely, and persuasive data is what shapes the measurable goals and objectives of the GEM plan. To effectively implement the plan requires:

▷   Upper administration support

▷   A holistic vision for the institution

▷   A data-informed system

▷   The opportunity to modify the plan to best meet the requirements of all stakeholders
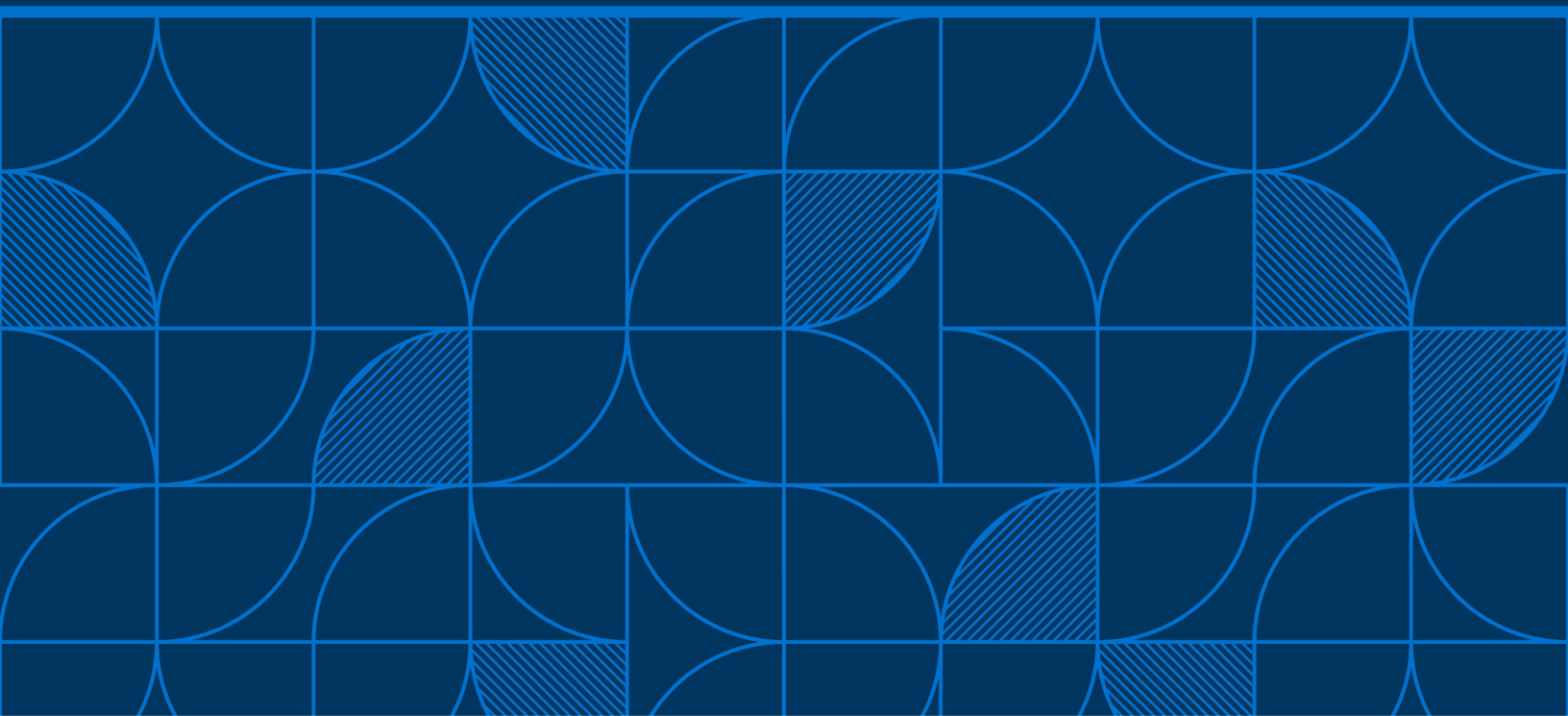
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EAB's Adult Learner Recruitment

Adult Learner Recruitment is a true enrollment partner for graduate, online, professional, and adult degree completion programs. Our next-generation growth strategies help you see around corners in this dynamic market and amplify your results at every stage of the enrollment funnel.

STRATEGIZE > ACQUIRE > ENGAGE > YIELD

170+ Partner Institutions ———————— **No Two Partnerships Alike**

STRATEGIZE

We go beyond OPMs and digital marketing agencies to help you develop a plan to succeed in this dynamic market. Starting with a deep understanding of your institution's needs and goals, our team of experts provides guidance on critical topics such as program and portfolio design, growth opportunities, organizational design, pricing strategy, corporate partnerships, and more.

ACQUIRE

We generate a large audience from a diverse mix of proprietary sources—including our consumer database and Cappex's student search platform—and other sources including first-party digital targeting lists, test-taker lists, your institution's inquiry pool, recent alumni, and current undergraduates. Our lead generation experts partner with your team to develop a strategy that will meet your enrollment and class-shaping goals.

ENGAGE

We drive enrollment results with responsive campaigns choreographed across channels and customized to each student's intent and behavior. We engage prospective students at every stage of their journey from awareness to application using micro-surveys, responsive landing pages, behavioral campaign flows, data-informed creative, and a streamlined application experience.

YIELD

We deploy a proprietary survey-based approach to help you determine accepted students' intentions, predict which students will enroll, and triage your outreach.

WHAT MAKES EAB DIFFERENT

Strategy Transformation + **Unrivaled Access** + **Marketing Orchestration** + **Intelligent Analytics**

To discuss how EAB can help you meet your graduate and adult enrollment goals, email **lexrubyhowe@eab.com**. Learn more at **eab.com/ALR**.

EAB

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95%+ of our partners return to us year after year because of results we achieve, together.

ABOUT EAB

At EAB, our mission is to make education smarter and our communities stronger. We work with thousands of institutions to drive transformative change through data-driven insights and best-in-class capabilities. From kindergarten to college to career, EAB partners with leaders and practitioners to accelerate progress and drive results across five major areas: enrollment, student success, institutional strategy, data analytics, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). We work with each partner differently, tailoring our portfolio of research, technology, and marketing and enrollment solutions to meet the unique needs of every leadership team, as well as the students and employees they serve. Learn more at eab.com.