

ADULT LEARNER RECRUITMENT

Benchmarking Graduate and Online Enrollment

Key Findings from a Survey of 340+ Enrollment Leaders



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Bridging the Gap Between Growth Goals and Resources



Graduate Programs Expected to Outperform the Market with Limited Resources

Graduate and online enrollment is a growing priority for institutions nationwide. In fact, two-thirds of surveyed university leaders are charged with growing graduate enrollment by more than the 3% enrollment growth expected nationally in the coming years.

The gap between rising expectations and slowing growth is compounded by a lack of dedicated resources and infrastructure. When compared to undergraduate programs, graduate and online enrollment teams often operate with fewer staff, smaller budgets, and less centralized oversight. Without strong infrastructure in place, universities face significant challenges in identifying key enrollment drivers, effectively allocating resources, and ultimately achieving their graduate and online enrollment goals.



Focus of This Report: Benchmarking Graduate and Online Enrollment

EAB conducted a survey of leaders responsible for graduate and online enrollment to help institutions benchmark against peer enrollment shops and identify areas of growth. Given the diverse mix of roles responsible for graduate enrollment, we surveyed leaders who indicated they oversee graduate and/or online enrollment in a variety of roles, including deans, vice presidents of enrollment, and provosts. This report includes findings from the survey across several key areas, including organizational structure and staffing, enrollment objectives, budget and resource distribution, and recruitment efforts.

► *Where possible, statistically significant differences by institutional characteristics or respondent type are noted to help draw conclusions from your most immediate peer set. Comparable trends from a similar EAB survey of undergraduate enrollment offices are included where applicable.*



About the Survey

343

Leaders responsible for graduate and online enrollment responded to our survey¹

27

Questions asked

Survey questions included:

- What are your graduate and online headcount and revenue goals?
- How many FTEs do you have supporting key enrollment, marketing, and admissions functions?
- What is your total enrollment management budget for graduate and online enrollment?
- Which enrollment functions are outsourced or managed in-house?
- Which sources does your institution use to generate leads, and how effective is each?
- What changes do you plan to make to your enrollment strategy next year?

1) For more detail about survey respondents, refer to page 20 of this report.



Organizational Structure and Staffing

SECTION

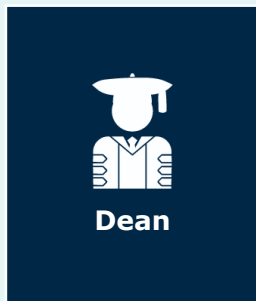
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The Challenges of Organizing Enrollment Teams

Ownership of Graduate and Online Enrollment Varies Significantly by Institution

Organizing graduate and online enrollment teams is a perennial challenge at many institutions given the often-decentralized teams supporting enrollment in these areas and the variety of graduate programs (each with their own enrollment goals) served. The ultimate owner of graduate and online enrollment strategy also varies by institution. As our survey respondents shared, graduate enrollment may be owned by a vice president of enrollment management (VPEM), dean of a graduate school, or dean of a particular school such as business or nursing. The graphic below includes insights about the roles that most commonly oversee graduate and/or online enrollment, including to whom they report, the size of their teams, and their average tenure.

Key Characteristics of Leaders of Graduate and Online Enrollment



82% of surveyed deans oversee recruitment, admissions, and/or enrollment, and 48% oversee marketing and communications

41% of deans report to the provost

Just 8% of deans are part of the president's cabinet

On average, surveyed deans have 24 total FTEs across all their areas of responsibility

38% of surveyed deans have held their role for more than 5 years, and 43% for 2-5 years



26% of VPEMs oversee student services in addition to enrollment, recruitment, and admissions functions, a growing trend across higher ed

More than half (56%) of surveyed VPEMs report to the president; 15% report to the provost

66% of VPEMs serve in the president's cabinet

On average, VPEMs have 60 total FTEs across all their areas of responsibility

28% of VPEMs have been in-seat for more than 5 years



Most surveyed heads of marketing strictly oversee recruitment, marketing, and communications

30% report directly to the president, while 22% report to a dean or VP

Most heads of marketing are not in the president's cabinet (57%)

On average, heads of marketing have 23 total FTEs across all their areas of responsibility

Just 21% of surveyed heads of marketing have been in their roles for more than 5 years



About half (52%) of provosts oversee recruitment, admission, and enrollment, which roughly corresponds to the portion of VPEMs in our survey who report to the provost

42% of surveyed provosts report to the president²

58% of provosts in our survey are included in the president's cabinet

On average, surveyed provosts have 119 total FTEs across all their areas of responsibility

36% of surveyed provosts have been in their role for at least 5 years, and 34% have been in-seat for 2-5 years

2) Provost includes associate provosts, who may report to other provosts on campus.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Most Graduate Enrollment Teams Are Small but Scrappy

Marketing and Admissions Staff Own a Variety of Functions Despite Small Team Sizes

Respondents report 15 FTEs support graduate marketing and communications on average. Staff sizes tend to be similar across institutions of different selectivity and control (i.e., public vs. private institutions). A closer look at marketing teams' responsibilities reveals that staff are often generalists managing several key functions. On average, per institution, less than one FTE is allocated to functions such as digital marketing, creative, and the website. Staff in generalist roles may not have the bandwidth to stay ahead of marketing trends or build knowledge in specialty areas.

Even at institutions with more than 5,000 graduate students, graduate admissions teams are often small. On average, 11 FTEs support graduate admissions. Private institutions, schools in the Northeast, and religiously affiliated institutions have disproportionately more campus-based recruiters than their counterparts. Still, a similar EAB survey found that institutions 9 campus-based recruiters supporting undergraduate enrollment, on average, compared to 2.8 for graduate programs.³

Mean Number of FTEs Associated with Core Graduate Enrollment Functions⁴

Enrollment cross-functional staff	18
Financial aid	17
Marketing and communications	15
Other	12
Admissions	11

Marketing

Operations	1.0
Management/executive	0.9
Creative (content creators, copywriters, designers)	0.8
Digital marketing specialists	0.8
CRM email automation specialists	0.8
Website producers/specialists	0.7
Analytics	0.6
Paid search and paid social specialists	0.4
Search engine optimization specialists	0.4

Admissions

Campus-based recruiters	2.8
Operations	2.4
Marketing and communications	2.3
Management	1.6
CRM analysts/specialists	1.5
Regional recruiters	1.4
Analytics	1.2
International recruiters	1.0
Event planning	0.9

3) Based on a 2024 EAB survey of 182 Vice Presidents of Enrollment.
4) Mean includes institutions that indicated 0 for a role.

Source: EAB research and analysis.



To Build, to Buy, or to Partner

Internal Resource Constraints Amplify Questions of Working with an External Partner

Respondents most often manage their financial aid call center, graduate admissions call center, and admissions CRM fully in-house. Notably, institutions that manage their call centers completely in-house disproportionately met their enrollment goals compared to those that outsourced or shared responsibility of the call center with a vendor, suggesting that internal staff time is well-suited for direct phone calls to prospective students.

Consider the functions that might be best shared with an outside vendor given internal staff capacity and expertise. Respondents most often share recruitment marketing, programmatic market research, and international recruitment with an outside vendor. These functions often require more FTEs than most institutions can [hire in-house](#).

Enrollment Functions by Degree of Outsourcing

	Fully in-house	Split responsibility	Fully outsourced	
 Private institutions more often split responsibility of financial aid services, name buying, and SEO with a vendor than public institutions	Market research	31%	48%	22%
	Recruitment marketing	37%	55%	8%
	SEO	41%	40%	19%
	Name buying	46%	29%	25%
	International recruitment	49%	45%	7%
	Brand marketing	51%	43%	6%
 Institutions in the Northeast work with a vendor on brand marketing and program market research more often than schools in other parts of the country	Data analysis/analytics	67%	32%	2%
	Website	69%	29%	2%
	Financial aid optimization	70%	16%	14%
	Admissions CRM	75%	18%	6%
	Graduate admissions call center	85%	7%	8%
	Financial aid call center	86%	8%	7%



Successful Teams Work with a Vendor to Support Key Functions

The respondents who met their enrollment goals disproportionately outsourced or shared responsibility for programmatic market research, recruitment marketing, and SEO with an outside vendor.

Source: EAB research and analysis.



Enrollment Objectives and Budgets

SECTION

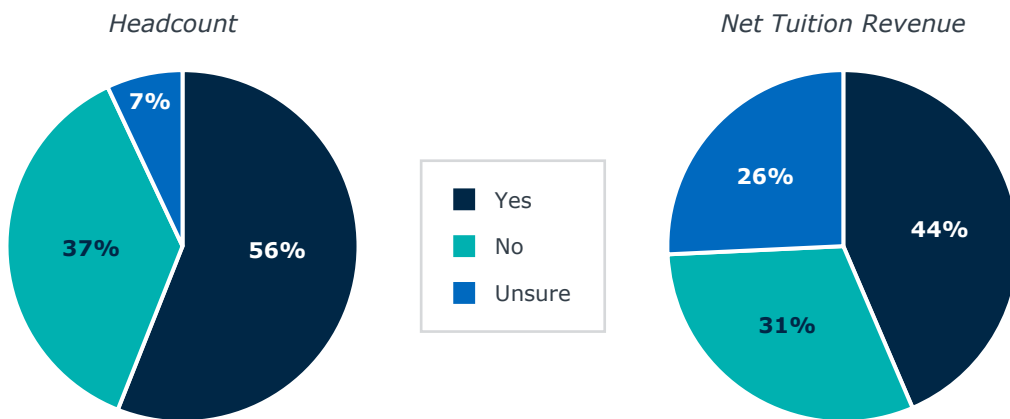
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Public Schools More Often Met Grad and Online Goals

More than Half of Respondents Met Their Graduate Headcount Goals

Fifty-six percent of respondents met their graduate headcount goals. The institutions that met their graduate enrollment goals are disproportionately public schools and institutions unaffiliated with a religion. Further, 44% of respondents met their graduate net tuition revenue (NTR) goals. It is notable, however, that 26% of respondents are unsure if they met their graduate NTR goals. This underscores a common theme from across our survey findings: Many institutions are not tracking graduate enrollment metrics or may be doing so in disparate places across campus, leaving key stakeholders in the dark about progress toward key goals such as NTR.

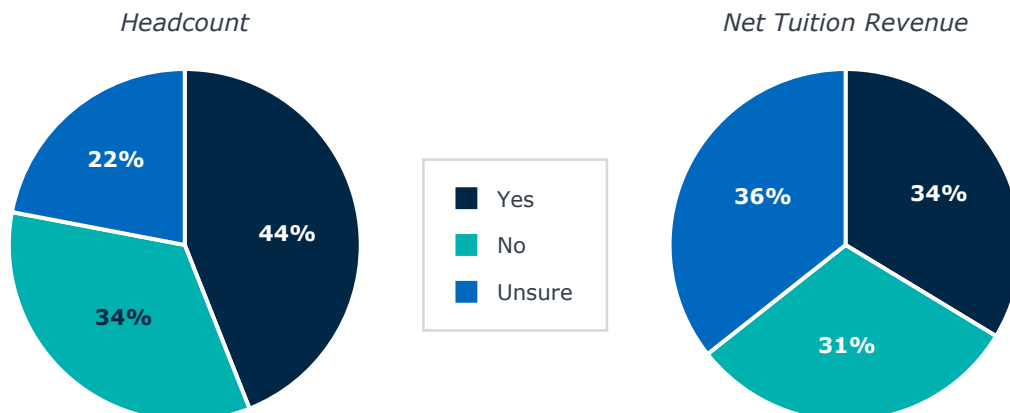
Graduate Goal Attainment



Online Goal Attainment Varied by Institution Type

Much like graduate goal attainment, public institutions more often met headcount goals for online programs than private institutions (52% compared to 34%), as did secular institutions compared to religiously affiliated institutions (48% compared to 34%). However, 22% of respondents said they are unsure if their institution met online headcount goals, while 36% are unsure if they met online NTR goals.

Online Goal Attainment



Graduate Enrollment Goals Continue to Rise

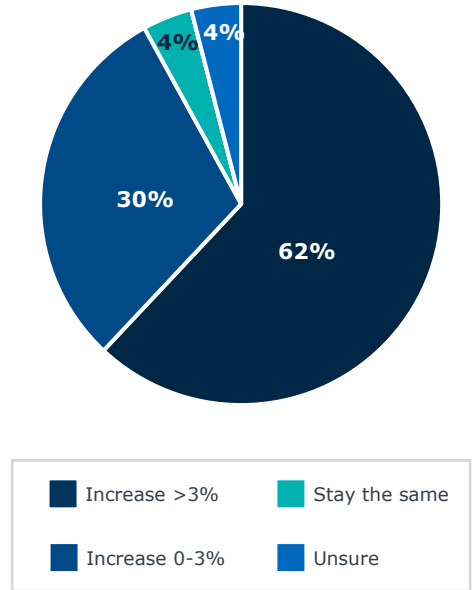
Enrollment Growth and NTR Remain Top Goals

It is perhaps no surprise that 92% of respondents identified enrollment growth across programs as a top priority for the 2024–25 academic year. As noted, nearly two-thirds of respondents are tasked with growing graduate enrollment by more than 3% in the next three years, beating the average annual enrollment growth of 1.1% expected nationally during this time.⁵

An Uncertain International Landscape

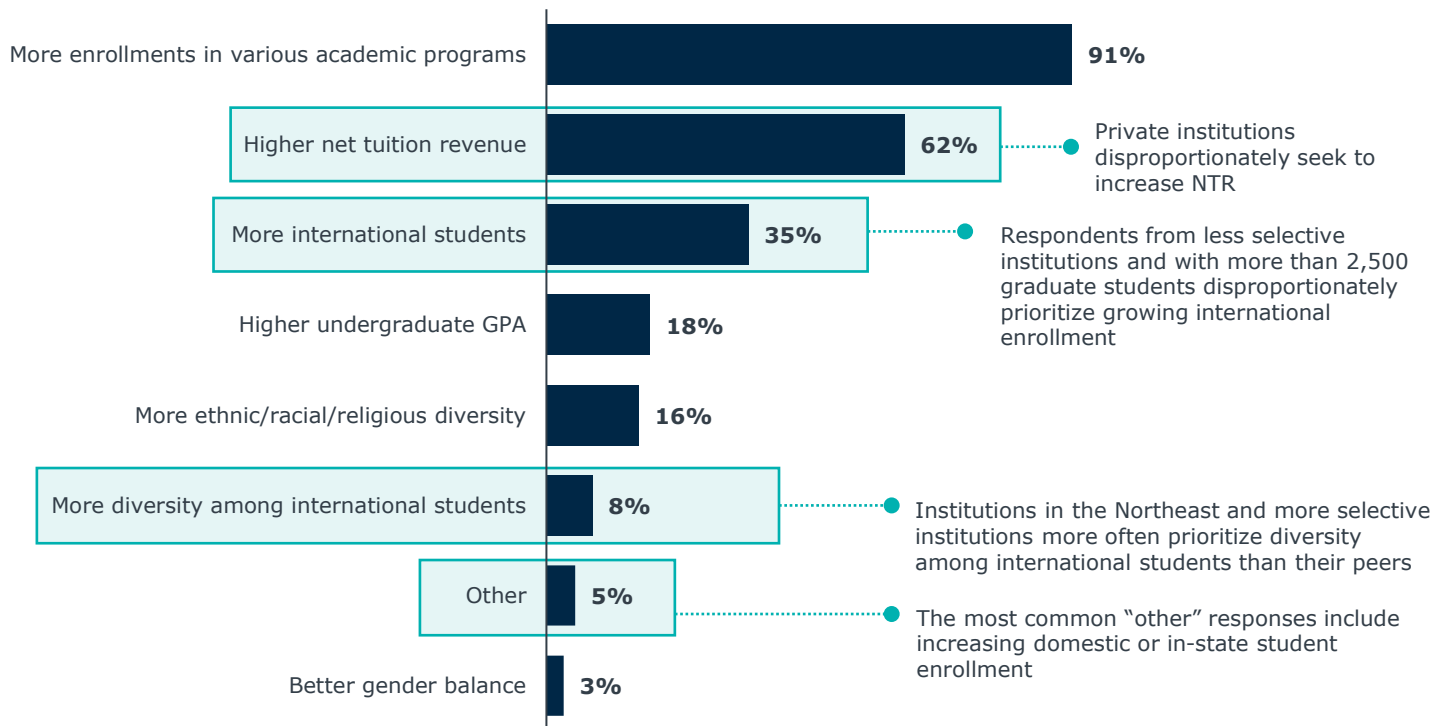
Respondents also list the enrollment of more international students (35%) among their top priorities. However, growth in international student enrollment may be compromised by tightening immigration policies in the United States. Notably, 11% of respondents said they are not recruiting international students at this time. These respondents identify difficulty and cost, lack of central support and resources, and number of viable international prospects relative to the effort needed to recruit them as the primary reasons they are not recruiting international students.

Graduate Enrollment Goals for the Next Three Years⁶



Top Graduate and Online Enrollment Objectives for Fall 2024–25

Respondents could select up to three priorities



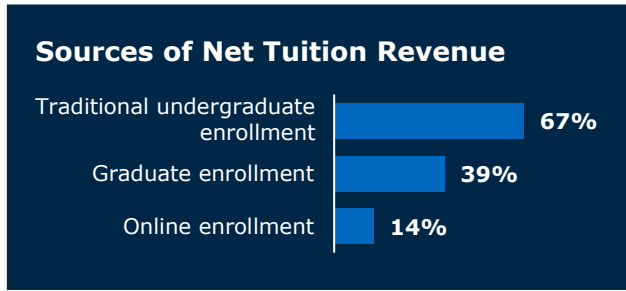
5) The National Student Clearinghouse projects graduate enrollment to increase by an average of 1.1% annually from 2021 to 2031.

6) No respondents said they seek to decrease enrollment in the next three years. There were no statistically significant differences in enrollment goals by institution demographics.

Graduate Enrollment Budgets Fall Behind

Revenue from Graduate Tuition Accounts for 40% of Total NTR

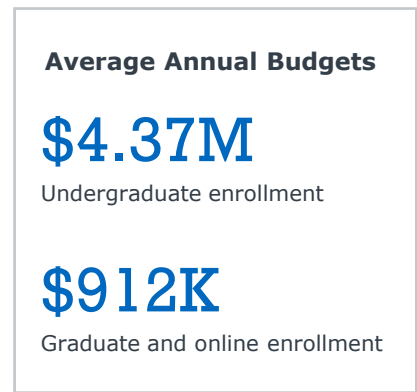
Respondents indicate that, on average, 39% of their institution's total net tuition revenue comes from graduate enrollment, compared to 67% from undergraduate enrollment and 14% from online enrollment (inclusive of both graduate and nontraditional undergraduate enrollment in our sample).



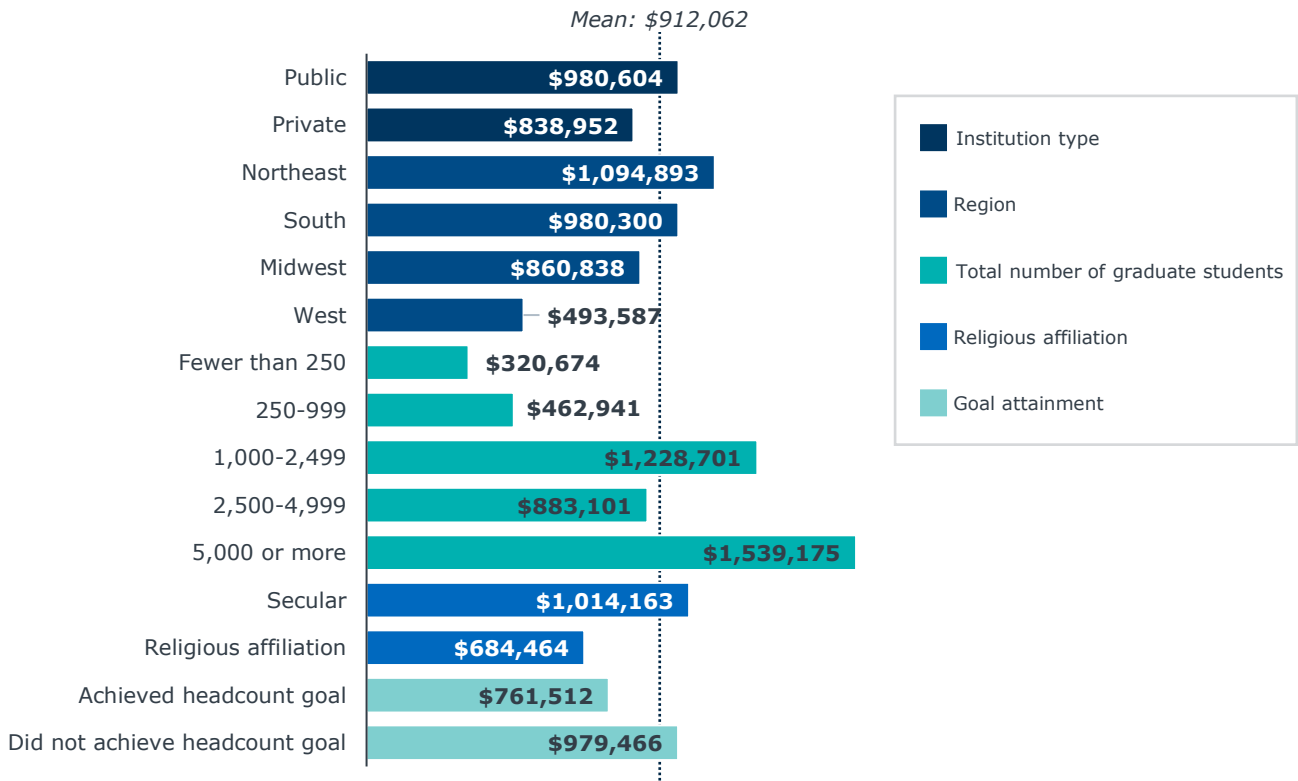
Average Graduate and Online Enrollment Management Budgets Hover Around \$912,000

Respondents report a \$912,000 total budget for graduate and online enrollment management, on average, compared to the average \$4.37M enrollment management budget for surveyed undergraduate programs.⁷ While no statistically significant differences exist by institutional characteristics, it is notable that a larger enrollment management budget does not correlate with achieving enrollment goals in our survey, indicating that strategic resource allocation can help overcome some of the budget limitations institutions face.

Forty-six percent of respondents said they do not know their total budget. This is likely due, in part, to the decentralized nature of graduate and online enrollment at many institutions (i.e., some respondents may not have direct purview over total budget) but reiterates the need for more careful tracking of key graduate and online enrollment inputs.



Total Enrollment Management Budget for Graduate and Online Enrollment, 2024–25



7) EAB's 2024 survey of 182 Vice Presidents of Enrollment Management.

Source: EAB research and analysis.



Recruitment Practices

SECTION

3

Digital Media Is the Most Widely Used Lead Source

Few Institutions Monitor the NTR Invested in Recruitment

Notably, 69% of respondents said they do not know what percentage of NTR is reinvested in recruitment, which may reflect the disbursed budget ownership and decentralized nature of graduate and online enrollment. On average, surveyed institutions that do track this data reinvest 4.6% of net tuition revenue from graduate programs into graduate recruitment marketing. Private institutions disproportionately reinvest in recruitment marketing as compared to public institutions (6.3% vs. 3.1%), as do religiously affiliated institutions when compared to secular schools (8.3% vs. 3.2%).



4.6%

of the 31% who are aware of the percentage of NTR reinvested into marketing, respondents report **reinvesting 4.6% of net tuition revenue** from graduate programs in graduate recruitment marketing

Respondents Identify Digital Media as the Most Effective Source of Leads

Unlike first-time, full-time undergraduate students, there is typically no one central, reliable, or sufficiently large source of graduate leads. For that reason, generating leads from a variety of sources is critical to maintain a healthy graduate enrollment funnel. Respondents most often generate leads for their graduate and online programs via digital media (e.g., paid search and paid social), outdoor and transit media (e.g., billboards, ads on buses and trains), and pay-per-lead services (e.g., [Appily Advance](#), Niche).

However, in our [recent survey](#) of graduate students, only 7% of students said they considered outdoor/transit media in their search. Surveyed students most often turned to web searches (51%), specific college websites (34%), and social media (27%) during their search for graduate programs.

Use and Effectiveness of Lead Sources

Scale of 1-5, with 1=not effective and 5=extremely effective

	Use	Efficacy	
Digital media	77%	3.27	Private institutions more often rely on digital media than public institutions
Outdoor/transit media	44%	2.44	
Pay-per-lead service	43%	2.76	
Test-takers	39%	2.3	
Broadcast media	37%	2.63	Less selective institutions more often use broadcast media than their peers

Additional Resources to Support Graduate Lead Generation



[Building a Diversified Lead Generation Strategy](#)



[Messaging for Graduate Lead Generation Campaigns](#)



[Your Graduate Students' New Search Behaviors](#)

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Digital Media Accounts for Greatest Marketing Spend

Budget for Lead Sources Varies Significantly by Source

Allocating marketing dollars across graduate lead sources can be challenging given the variety of sources available, each with variable cost and efficacy. The combination of lead sources a program relies on, and the budget allocated to each source, should be determined by the program’s specific needs and goals.



Explore our [step-by-step guide](#) for allocating your lead generation budget

Digital Media: It comes as no surprise that respondents most heavily invest in digital media, including paid search and paid social. [Paid search](#) ads are often pay-per-click, which can become costly. However, as noted on the previous page, paid search is among the most effective lead sources. Paid search leads are generated by prospects actively searching for keywords pertinent to your program, meaning they have demonstrated intent to find a program like yours.

Test-taker lists: Test-takers are another source of high-intent leads. About two-thirds of respondents spend less than \$25,000 on test-taker lists. While test-taker lists are typically a low-cost and reliable source of leads, fewer students are taking graduate tests in the wake of the pandemic. As a lower-volume lead source, it is critical to balance test-taker lists with sources that provide more student names.

Pay-per-lead sources: Pay-per-lead sources such as Apply Advance are another cost-effective way to generate high-intent leads. These leads are generated from a variety of digital sources but curated based on student interest and characteristics to focus on students most likely to apply and enroll at your institution.

Total Budget by Lead Source in the Past Year

	Pay-per-lead service	Digital media	Broadcast media	Outdoor/transit media	Test-taker lists
Under \$25,000	30%	17%	30%	28%	62%
\$25,000-\$100,000	23%	22%	19%	17%	5%
\$100,001-\$250,000	4%	9%	7%	4%	6%
\$250,001-\$500,000	3%	6%	0%	1%	0%
\$500,001-\$1,000,000	1%	6%	2%	2%	0%
Over \$1,000,000	2%	8%	0%	1%	0%
Unsure	37%	33%	42%	47%	28%

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Many Respondents Are Unsure of Key Cost Metrics

Only One-Third of Respondents Are Aware of Cost KPIs

Eleven percent of respondents report an average cost-per-lead of under \$50; this is especially common among respondents in the West. An average cost-per-lead under \$50 suggests the enrollment team relies on known audience sources such as university alumni and current seniors and/or less expensive channels such as list buys. However, this may mean that institutions are underinvesting in key channels such as digital media, which can be more expensive.

Notably, only one-third of respondents are aware of their average cost-per-lead, perhaps due to the decentralized nature of many graduate enrollment and marketing teams.



Tracking Key Metrics

Twelve percent of respondents said they are **not tracking average cost-per-lead/inquiry** and 17% are **not tracking average cost-per-enrolled student**. This can make it difficult to identify high-performing channels and reallocate budget accordingly.

Similarly, just 27% of respondents track and are aware of their average cost-per-enrolled student. Nine percent of respondents report an average cost-per-enrolled student at under \$500, suggesting their team relies on known audience sources and/or lower-cost channels such as list buys.

Average Costs

Cost-per-Lead/Cost-per-Inquiry

Under \$50	11%
\$50-\$100	6%
\$101-\$150	6%
\$151-\$200	6%
Over \$200	4%
Not tracking	12%
Unsure	56%

Cost-per-Enrolled Student

Under \$500	9%
\$501-\$1,000	5%
\$1,001-\$3,000	10%
Over \$3,000	2%
Not tracking	17%
Unsure	56%

- ▶ **Colleges and universities in the West** disproportionately report spending under \$50 per inquiry or lead
- ▶ **Private institutions** disproportionately report spending more than \$200 per inquiry/lead compared to public institutions

- ▶ **Institutions in the West** more often spend under \$500 per enrolled student than peers elsewhere in the country
- ▶ **Private institutions** disproportionately report spending more than \$3,000 per enrolled student

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Priorities Include Expanding Budgets, Email Campaigns

More than Half of Respondents Focused on Expanding Email Campaigns and Website Redesign

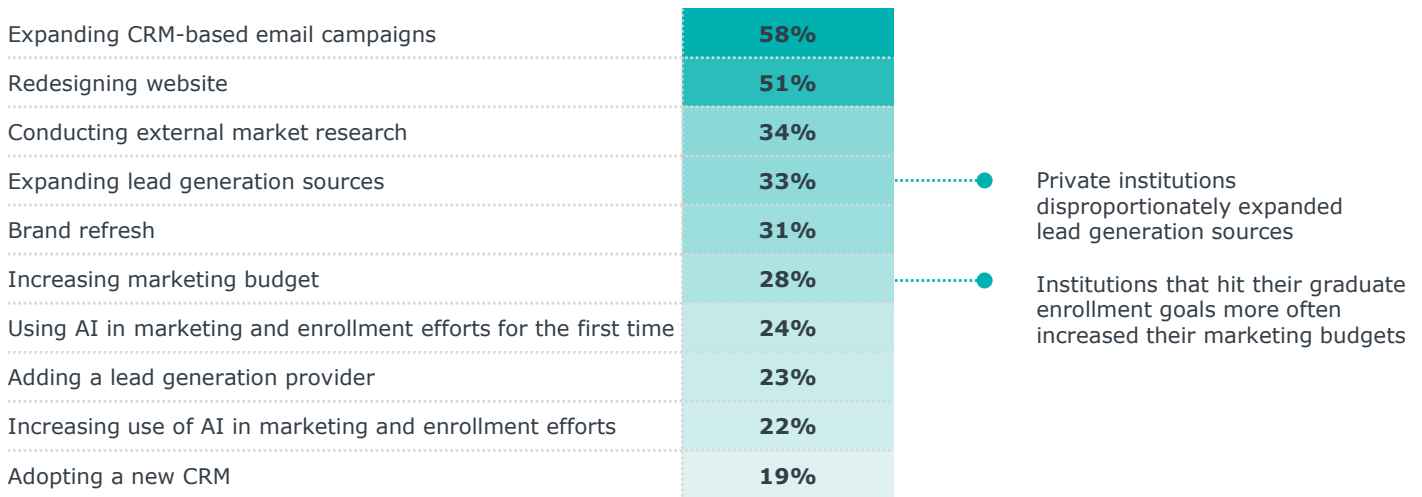
In the 2024–25 academic year, more than half of respondents expanded their CRM-based email campaigns (58%) and/or redesigned their website (51%). The focus on university websites is a worthy one; 90% of surveyed graduate students said a user-friendly website improves their opinion of an institution.

Forty-three percent of respondents intend to increase their marketing budget next year, compared to only 28% who increased their budget this year. Notably, 38% plan to increase their use of AI in marketing and enrollment efforts next year, compared to just 22% who did so this year. AI platforms have the potential to [assist enrollment and marketing teams](#) in drafting and personalizing marketing content and optimizing communication flows, among other use cases.

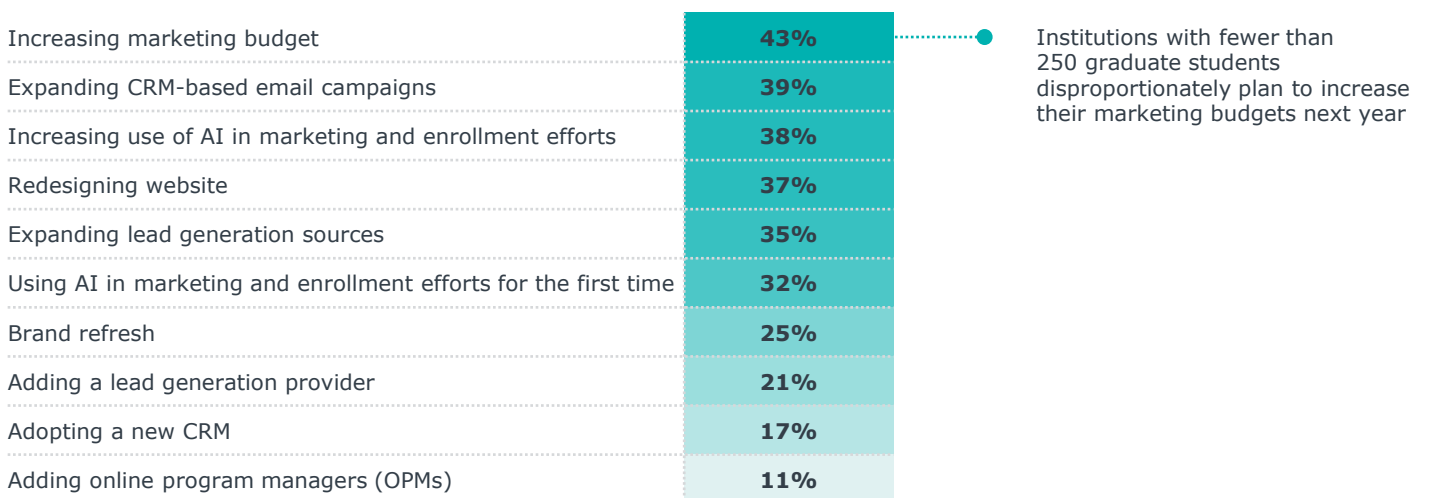
Top 10 Changes Enrollment Leaders Are Pursuing

Respondents could select all that apply

This Year (2024–25 Academic Year)



Next Year (2025–26 Academic Year)



Source: Source: EAB research and analysis.



Additional Resources

SECTION

4

Key Takeaways



Resources and Infrastructure Have Not Kept Pace with Growing Goals

More than half of respondents met graduate enrollment goals this year. However, two-thirds of survey respondents are expected to grow graduate and online enrollment by more than 3% in the coming years. Despite higher goals and the growing portion of total net tuition revenue generated by graduate enrollments, the resources, staff, and infrastructure that support graduate programs lag behind the resources supporting undergraduate enrollment.



Teams Meeting Grad Goals Thoughtfully Balance Insourcing and Outsourcing

Given the limited number of FTEs supporting graduate and online marketing, most institutions outsource at least some functions to an external partner. The institutions that met their graduate enrollment goals disproportionately shared responsibility of recruitment marketing, program market research, and SEO with an external partner. Those institutions also more commonly owned all call center functions internally, a testament to the value of university enrollment staff engaging directly with prospective students in high-touch formats.



Strategic Spending Can Compensate for Limited Graduate Budgets

Respondents identified an average graduate enrollment budget of \$912,000. This pales in comparison to average undergraduate enrollment budgets, which hover around \$4.37M in a similar EAB survey of undergraduate enrollment teams. Notably, there was no correlation between a larger graduate enrollment management budget and goal attainment, suggesting that strategic spending may be more important than total spend.



Inability to Track Key Data Is a Missed Opportunity for Grad Enrollment Teams

The often decentralized and understaffed nature of graduate and online enrollment operations may also contribute to respondents' inability to monitor and access key enrollment metrics easily. For example, respondents often shared they do not know or do not track the percentage of NTR reinvested in recruitment marketing, total graduate enrollment budget, and/or cost per enrolled student. Access to these metrics can help inform strategic decisions about budget and staff allocation, among others.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Research Overview

About the Survey

EAB's University Research and Adult Learner Recruitment teams conducted a survey of graduate and online enrollment leaders in December 2024. The survey asked respondents about the structure and staffing for their graduate and online enrollment teams, enrollment objectives, and recruitment practices. The findings in this report are based on responses from 343 graduate enrollment leaders across the United States.

Participant Profile

Institution Type	
Public	56%
Private	44%

Region	
Northeast	26%
South	37%
Midwest	22%
West	15%

Number of Graduate Students	
Fewer than 25	0%
25-99	2%
100-249	8%
250-499	12%
500-999	14%
1,000-2,499	23%
2,500-4,999	20%
5,000 or more	21%

Title	
Dean	42%
Provost	19%
VPEM	23%
Head of Marketing	7%
AVP	6%
Executive Director	3%

Selectivity of Institution	
Most Selective	4%
More Selective	7%
Selective	21%
Less Selective	40%
Least Selective	28%

Religious Affiliation	
Secular	72%
Religious Affiliation	28%

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.

Outperform the Market at Every Stage of the Funnel



Strategize

Identify and build market-ready programs for competitive advantage



Curate

Expand and diversify your pool of right-fit students



Cultivate

Customized campaigns to drive students to application



Convert

Improve yield and retention to maximize enrollment potential

What Makes EAB Different

40+ Years of **Higher Ed Expertise**

Unrivaled Access to New Audiences

Seamless **Marketing Orchestration**

Visibility into Full-Funnel Performance

Proven Results in a Dynamic Landscape

200+

Partner institutions

6:1

Average ROI across multiyear partnership

18%

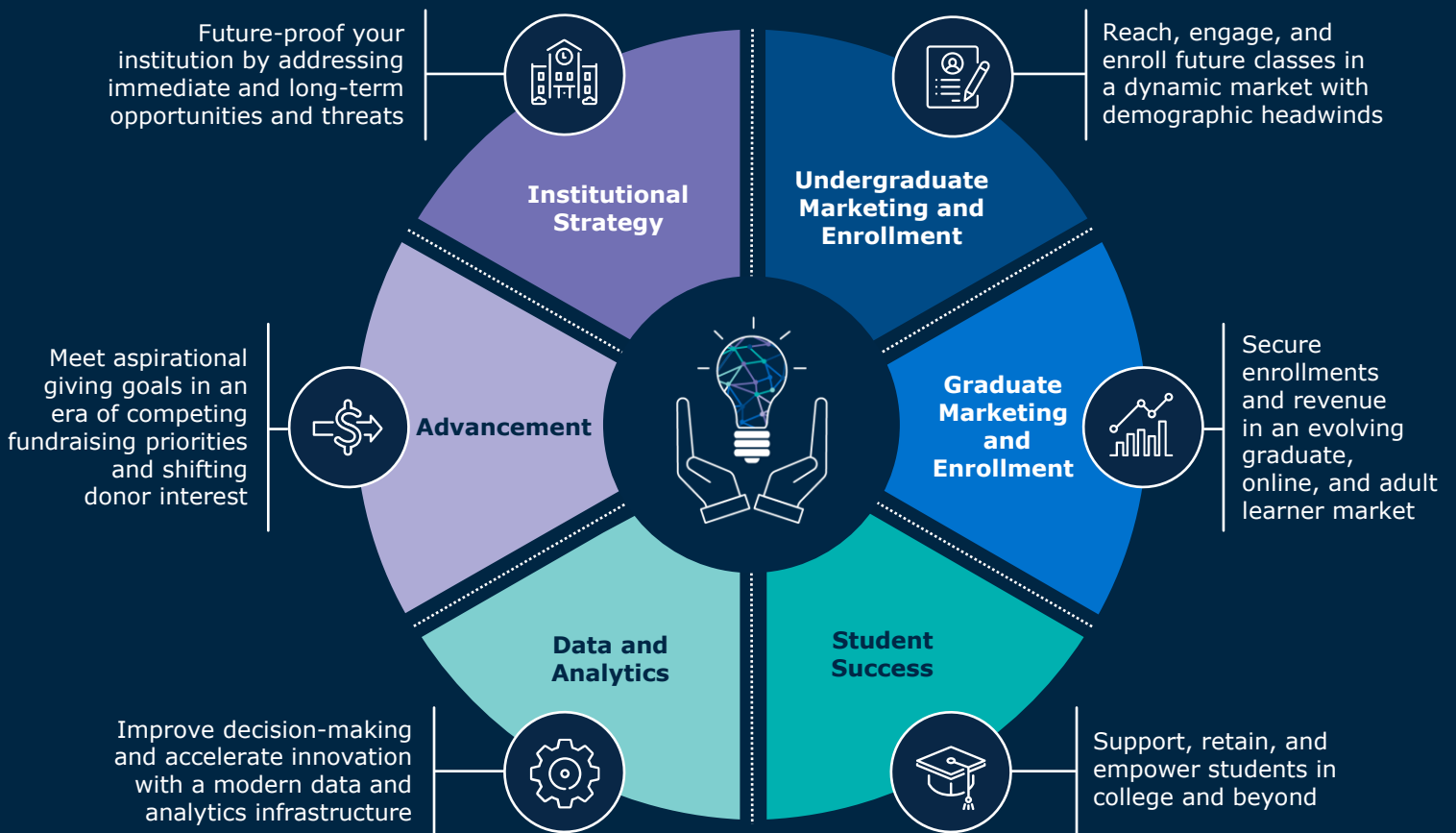
Average graduate enrollment growth

\$2M

Average NTR influenced per partner

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

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We partner with **2,800+** institutions to accelerate progress, deliver results, and enable lasting change.

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



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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.