

ADULT LEARNER RECRUITMENT

Achieving Today's Ever-Growing Graduate Enrollment Goals

Survey Insights and Self-Assessments to Help
You Establish and Realize Graduate Goals



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Using This Report

Insights from Our Survey of Graduate Enrollment Staff

To help university leaders get a better sense of the complex graduate enrollment landscape, EAB has partnered with NAGAP to conduct a series of surveys of graduate enrollment staff. The second of our three surveys for academic year 2024–2025, conducted in November 2024, explored the perceived value of a graduate education and institutions’ performance on key enrollment metrics. **This report shares three key insights to help graduate enrollment leaders better incorporate stakeholder perspectives into graduate goals. It also includes self-assessment tools to help readers identify areas for improvement supported by our findings.**

Topics Covered in Other EAB and NAGAP Survey Reports in 2025

► *Staff stress factors* ► *Artificial intelligence* ► *Marketing and recruitment tactics*

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Pressures and Misalignment Affecting Grad Outcomes

► Continued Pressure to Grow Graduate Enrollment Revenue

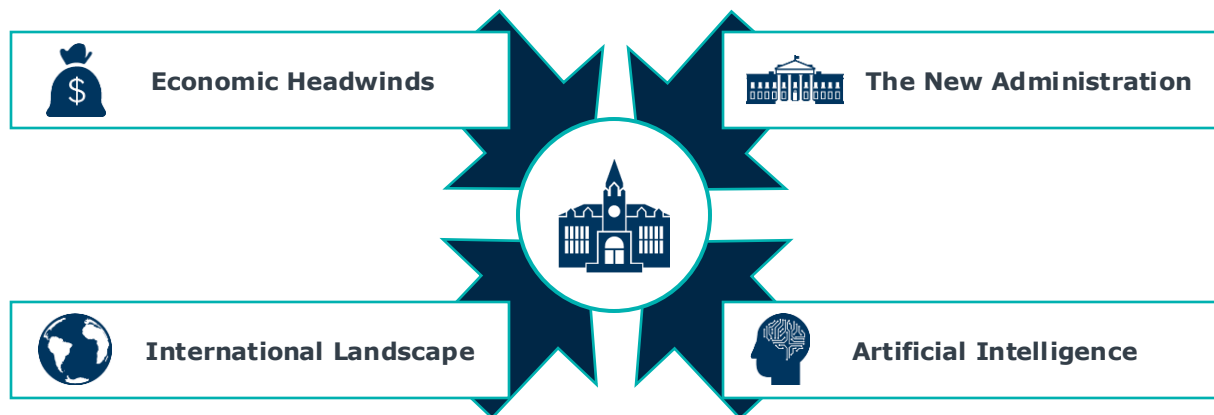
As we noted in our report last year, troubling long-term undergraduate trends, such as an increase in nonconsumption and the demographic cliff, have heightened the enrollment and revenue focus on graduate programs.

Troubling Factors for Undergraduate Enrollment



Growing graduate enrollment is no easy task, however. From 1990 to 2021, graduate enrollment grew an average of 3.2% annually. But according to National Student Clearinghouse, the projected average annual growth from 2021 to 2031 is only 1.1%. Plus, a series of dynamic factors, such as potential policies enacted by the [new administration](#) and [growth of AI](#), also challenge the status quo and create chaos in the graduate education market.

Competing, Dynamic Forces Impacting Graduate Enrollment



► Potential Misalignment Between Program Leaders and Stakeholder Interests

Further complicating graduate enrollment success is the potential misalignment between key stakeholders. When designing and marketing a graduate program, it is important to take various perspectives into account. Even the best program ideas can fail if they do not consider market conditions, student preferences, and faculty and staff insights. Based on the findings from a [recent survey](#) of 6,000 prospective graduate students and the findings from this survey of GEM professionals, this report draws comparisons and identifies potential misalignments between what students value in graduate programs and how they make enrollment decisions versus what GEM leaders think students value.

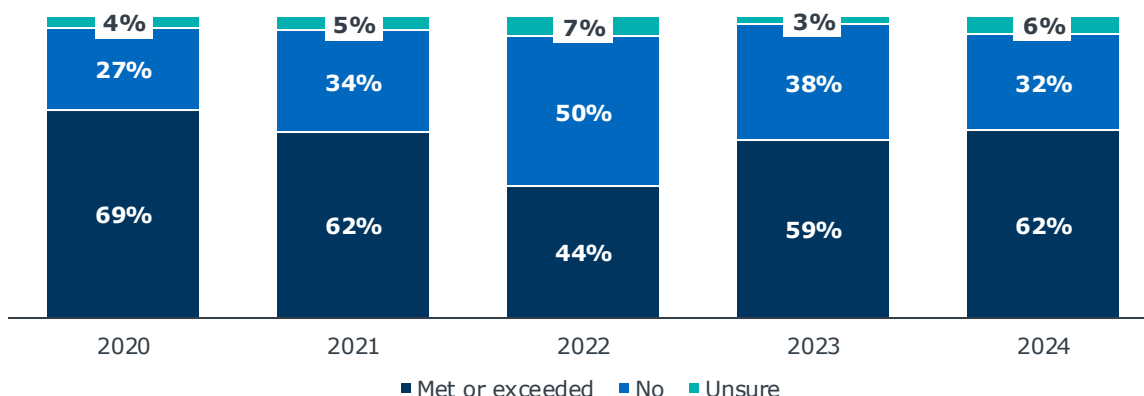
One-Third of Graduate Programs Did Not Meet Goals

► Meeting Headcount Goals Continues to Be a Challenge, Especially for Private Institutions

This year, 62% of participants indicated that they met or exceeded their headcount goals, the most since 2021. Despite this 6% improvement from last year, nearly one-third (32%) of participants indicated that they did not meet their fall 2024 headcount goals. Private institutions disproportionately struggled to meet their goals compared to public institutions, with 39% of participants at private institutions indicating that their unit did not meet its headcount goals, versus 27% of participants at public institutions.

Did you meet your headcount goals?

2020–2024 Comparisons



At the time of this survey, 45% of respondents said their programs were on track to meet their headcount goals for spring 2025, a 5% decrease from last year's survey, when 50% indicated they were on track to meet spring 2024 headcount goals.

► One-Third of Participants Are Unsure if They Met Their Net Tuition Revenue Goals

Forty-three percent of survey participants said their graduate programs met or exceeded their fall 2024 net tuition revenue (NTR) goals, while 23% did not meet NTR goals. Interestingly, 34% of participants were unsure if they met their graduate NTR goals, compared to only 6% of participants who were unsure about headcount goals. This is especially concerning for participants at public institutions, 41% of whom are unsure if they met their NTR goal, compared to 28% of participants at private institutions. However, those who were unsure were more commonly in junior positions. Fifty-two percent of participants with fewer than 10 years of experience in higher ed were unsure if they met NTR goals, compared to 26% of those with over 25 years of experience.

Given that many institutions are turning to graduate programs to make up for declining revenue from undergraduate programs, it is crucial for programs to meet or exceed, and be aware of, their net tuition revenue goals, regardless of tenure. This speaks to the need for increased transparency around revenue goals, tuition strategy, and [financial aid optimization](#).

► Enrollment Goals Increased for the Majority of Online and Hybrid Programs

Although nearly 40% of programs did not meet their enrollment goals last year, 56% of survey participants indicated that their enrollment goals still increased for fall 2024. This is especially true for online and hybrid programs, for which 73% and 59% of GEM professionals saw increased enrollment goals, respectively. Meanwhile, enrollment goals increased for 38% of fully in-person programs, while 56% saw their goals remain the same from last year to this year.

Self-Assessment:

Setting and Communicating Enrollment Goals

Despite the growing attention on graduate enrollment, the often-decentralized nature of graduate programs, lack of clear decision-makers, and limited student and market data can make it difficult to set smart enrollment goals. Many institutions do not set goals at all or they set goals that are unrealistic. Further, when setting goals, it is clear from the survey results that agreed-upon goals are not always clearly communicated to relevant stakeholders.

Use your responses to the following statements to better understand how your team can improve its goal-setting processes and communications for the next enrollment cycle.

Setting Enrollment Goals	This statement describes my institution.		
Assess Current and Historical Enrollment Data We review our institution's current and historical net tuition revenue data to understand what is realistic and possible for our program.	No	Partially	Yes
Determine Resource Requirements We assess the resources needed and the expenses associated with operating and growing our graduate programs to give us a better understanding of costs.			
Analyze Labor Market and Competitor Data We review local and regional labor market data, as well as IPEDS conferral data from competitors, to help us understand the market opportunity in our area.			
Understand Current and Ideal Student Types Revenue from a graduate student can vary based on many factors. We review the breakdown of our enrolled students and determine our ideal student type to set realistic NTR goals.			
Monitor Progress Toward Goals Rather than a "set it and forget it" mindset once we establish our goals, we regularly assess progress toward the goals.			
Transparently Communicate Goals We communicate the goals to all relevant stakeholders in a timely manner and establish a regular cadence to update stakeholders on progress toward goals.			
Total "No," "Partially," and "Yes" Responses			

Resources to Explore

- Consider our [report](#) on setting smart graduate enrollment goals.
- Review our [regional profiles](#) to understand state-by-state employer demand.

Staff Input Is Linked to Greater Revenue Success

▶ Almost One-Third of Staff Believe Their Enrollment Goals Are Too High

Nearly 30% of GEM professionals believe their enrollment targets are unrealistically high. It’s no surprise that those who have more input are more likely to think their goals are realistic compared to those who have little to no input on their goals. Of those who have no input, 46% believe the goals are too high, compared to only 16% of those who have a good or great deal of input on their units’ enrollment goals.

While more participants believe their enrollment targets are realistic compared to previous years (69% in 2024, compared to 66% in 2023 and 65% in 2022), it’s worth noting that more than half of financial aid and registrar professionals feel headcount targets are too high.

Do you believe the enrollment targets for your unit are realistic?

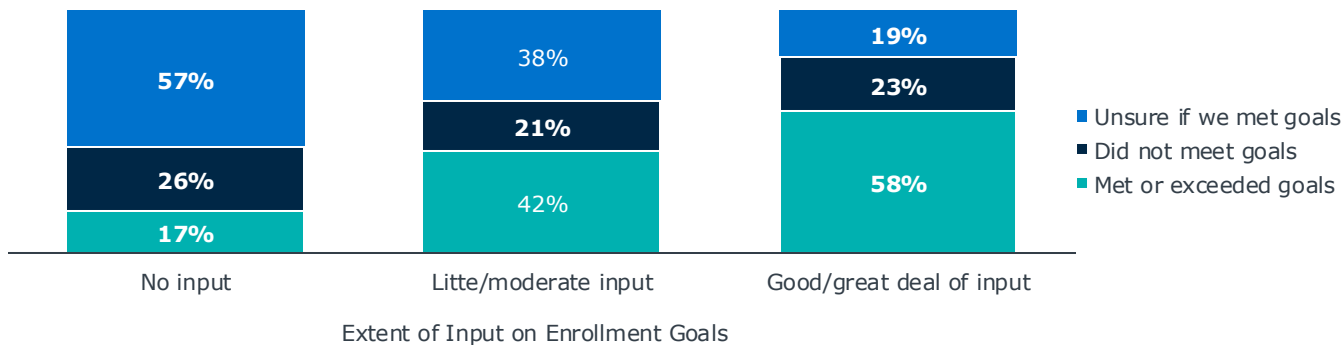


▶ Involvement in Goal Setting Can Lead to Higher Attainment, Especially for Revenue Goals

The level of input staff had on their goal setting also had a significant impact on whether their unit met their fall 2024 headcount and net tuition revenue goals. Among survey participants who had a good or great deal of input on their enrollment goals, 65% met or exceeded their headcount goals, compared to 48% who had no input. For revenue, the impact was even more significant. Fifty-eight percent of participants who had a good or great amount of input met or exceeded their net tuition revenue goals, and only 19% were unsure if they met their goals. Meanwhile, of those who had no input on their goals, a mere 17% met or exceeded their goals, while 57% were unsure if they met their goals.

Comparing the revenue success between units where staff had no input and those where staff had a good/great deal of input, their metrics are almost completely inversed, indicating a clear and positive impact of staff input on goals.

Did you meet your fall 2024 NTR goals? vs. How much input do you have in setting goals?



▶ Staff With Less Experience Are More Likely to Be Left Out of Goal-Setting Conversations

Twenty-two percent of all participants said they had no input in setting enrollment goals for their unit. However, GEM professionals with fewer than 10 years of higher education experience were more often excluded from those conversations, with 39% having no input at all compared to only 18% of those who have 18+ years of experience in higher education. While not surprising, including staff of all seniority levels can only benefit the diversity of opinions and perspectives that are brought to the discussion.

Self-Assessment: Involving Staff in Graduate Goals

Graduate goal attainment is reliant on buy-in from key stakeholders such as graduate staff. Our survey revealed that graduate enrollment leaders who are involved in goal-setting are both more likely to believe their goals are realistic and more likely to meet their enrollment and net tuition revenue goals. Involving a variety of people in the goal-setting process means goals are not created in a vacuum and more people are “bought in” to activities required to meet goals.

Use your responses to the following statements to better understand how your graduate program can best involve staff in determining enrollment and NTR goals.

Increasing Staff Involvement	This statement describes my institution.		
Formally Initiate the Goal-Setting Process We formally communicate our goal-setting kickoff with staff and share a planned timeline to improve transparency and understanding of the process.	No	Partially	Yes
Request Staff Input At various points in the goal-setting process, we request input and feedback on the provisional goals from staff.			
Open Lines of Communication We proactively address common goal-setting questions to clarify common misconceptions and build trust among staff. We continue to ensure an open line of communication about our graduate goals.			
Contextualize Your Goals Once goals have been finalized, we help staff understand how decisions were made and what input was considered (e.g., by using a “What, Why, How” framework).			
Share Progress Toward Goals We create a timeline to update our enrollment staff so they know when we will share progress against our goals and to encourage their involvement and engagement with those goals.			
Total “No,” “Partially,” and “Yes” Responses			

Resources to Explore

- Review the first report in the series, [Understanding and Navigating Today’s Graduate Enrollment Staffing Concerns](#), to understand top workplace stressors.
- Watch this [on-demand webinar](#) to hear proven strategies to reach graduate enrollment goals.

Graduate Staff Are Unclear on Students' Top Motivators

► GEM Professionals Overestimate Extrinsic Motivators, Undervalue Intrinsic Drivers

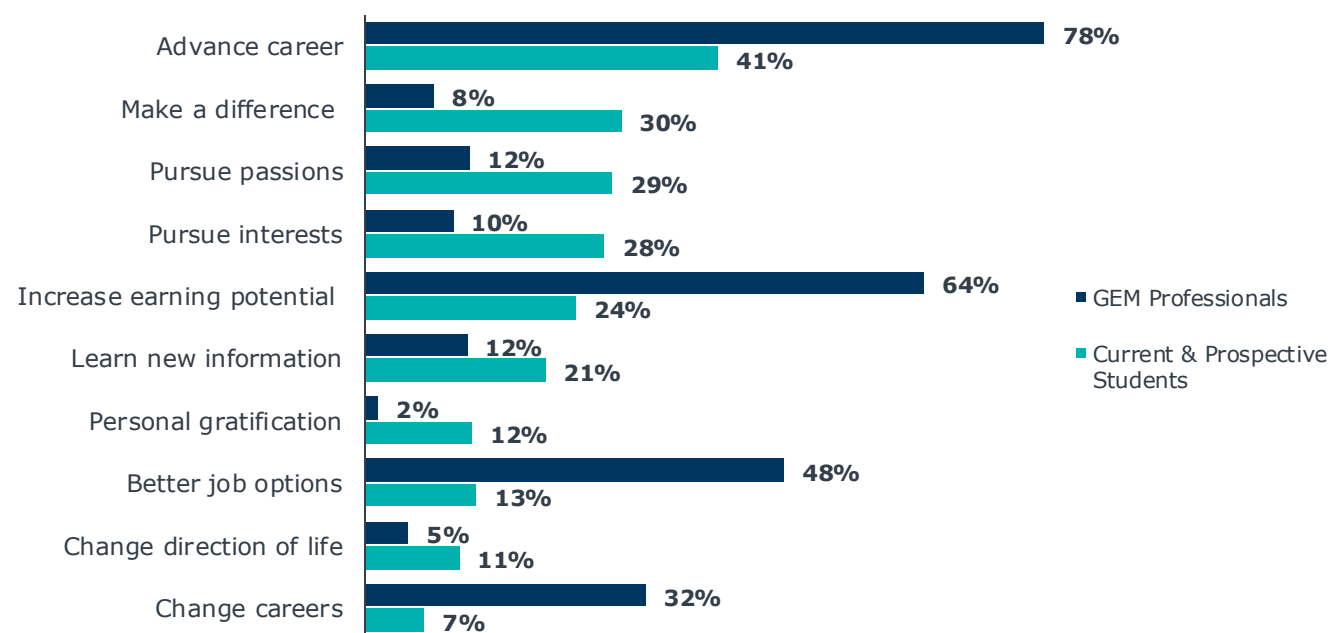
We asked GEM professionals, as well as prospective graduate students themselves, to identify the factors that most motivate students to pursue graduate education. In comparing the survey findings, we found that students place more emphasis on personal fulfillment and societal impact, while surveyed graduate staff seem to assume students are more driven by extrinsic reasons and professional outcomes. When asked about students' motivations, GEM professionals most frequently selected career advancement, followed by increasing earning potential and getting a better job than they could without the degree.

When asked the same question, current and prospective graduate students also rated career advancement as their primary motivator, but after that, students indicated that they were more motivated by intrinsic factors, such as pursuing their passions and interests and making a difference. Students also more often rated learning new information and personal gratification as primary motivations for furthering their education than did GEM professionals when asked about students' motivations.

This disconnect has the potential to lead GEM professionals to miss opportunities to connect with students on their deeper motivations. Marketing messages and recruitment strategies that focus solely on financial and career benefits may fail to resonate fully with prospective students and leave them feeling less confident in, and inspired by, the program.

What do you believe are the primary motivations for prospective students to further their education? (select up to three)

What are your primary reasons for furthering your education? (select up to three)



► Online Program Staff May Benefit Most from Insights into Students' Motivators

Ninety-one percent of respondents whose programs are fully online believe that students' primary reason for furthering their education is to advance their career, compared to 60% of staff whose program is fully in-person, and only 41% of students. Additionally, 0% of staff for online programs thought that prospective students wanted to further their education to pursue their interests, compared to 28% of surveyed students. Given that surveyed leaders of online programs are most likely to face increased enrollment goals, their staff need to be sure that they are marketing to students' interests to stand out among other programs.

Self-Assessment:

Understanding and Using Student Preferences

Every adult learner has [unique motivations](#), expectations, and preferences. The disconnect between what motivates students to pursue a graduate education and what GEM professionals believe motivates students means that recruitment messages could be missing the mark. To craft emails, social media ads, and other content that will resonate with prospective students, graduate staff need to understand their prospects' values, preferences, and motivators and incorporate them in their messaging.

Use your responses to the following statements to better understand how your team can improve its understanding and use of student preferences.

Understanding Student Preferences	This statement describes my institution.		
Survey Current and Prospective Students We survey current and prospective students to understand our specific audience's preferences at a micro-level.	No	Partially	Yes
Review External Resources We conduct an external search for resources that can help our team understand and stay on top of student trends at a more macro-level than our internal assessment can provide.			
Incorporate Student Motivators Once we understand our prospects' motivators and values, we tailor our marketing messages to be personalized and responsive to engagement signals and cues.			
Adjust Cadence and Channels Once we understand our prospects' timeline and preferences, we adjust our marketing channels and timelines to engage with them based on where they are in their enrollment journey.			
Measure Campaign Success We ensure the changes we have made to our campaigns have made an impact by tracking and measuring key performance indicators, such as impressions, open rates, and application rates.			
Total "No," "Partially," and "Yes" Responses			

Resources to Explore

- Review the [insights from our survey](#) of 6,000+ graduate and adult learners.
- Explore this [blog](#) on hyper-personalization in enrollment marketing.
- Read our [blog](#) to understand the power of machine learning and consumer analytics.

Survey Methodology

About the Survey

In their fifth year of research collaboration, EAB [Adult Learner Recruitment](#) and [NAGAP](#), The Association for Graduate Enrollment Management, are investigating the graduate school landscape through a series of three brief surveys. The second survey, the focus of this report, asked enrollment managers and other higher education professionals about their institutions’ performance on key graduate enrollment metrics.

A total of 313 individuals responded to the survey, representing 44 states (and 4 Canadian provinces) and 246 institutions/programs across the country. Participants had an average of 18 years of experience in higher education.

Data Collection

This survey was sent to graduate and professional school enrollment managers and other higher education practitioners, including current NAGAP members, in November 2024. Where applicable, findings are compared to results from similar surveys conducted in November 2023 and 2022.

Profile of Survey Respondents

Institution Type ¹	Percentage
Public	51%
Private	48%

Modality	Percentage
Hybrid	78%
On-Campus Only	18%
Online Only	4%

Respondent Responsibilities ²	Percentage
Enrollment/Recruitment/Admissions	92%
Marketing/Communications	40%
Student Services	29%
Corporate Partnership Strategy	10%
Financial Aid	10%
Registrar’s Office	7%

The third and final report in this series includes findings on:

► Marketing and recruitment tactics

1) One percent of participants work at for-profit institutions.
2) Respondents could indicate more than one area of responsibility.

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

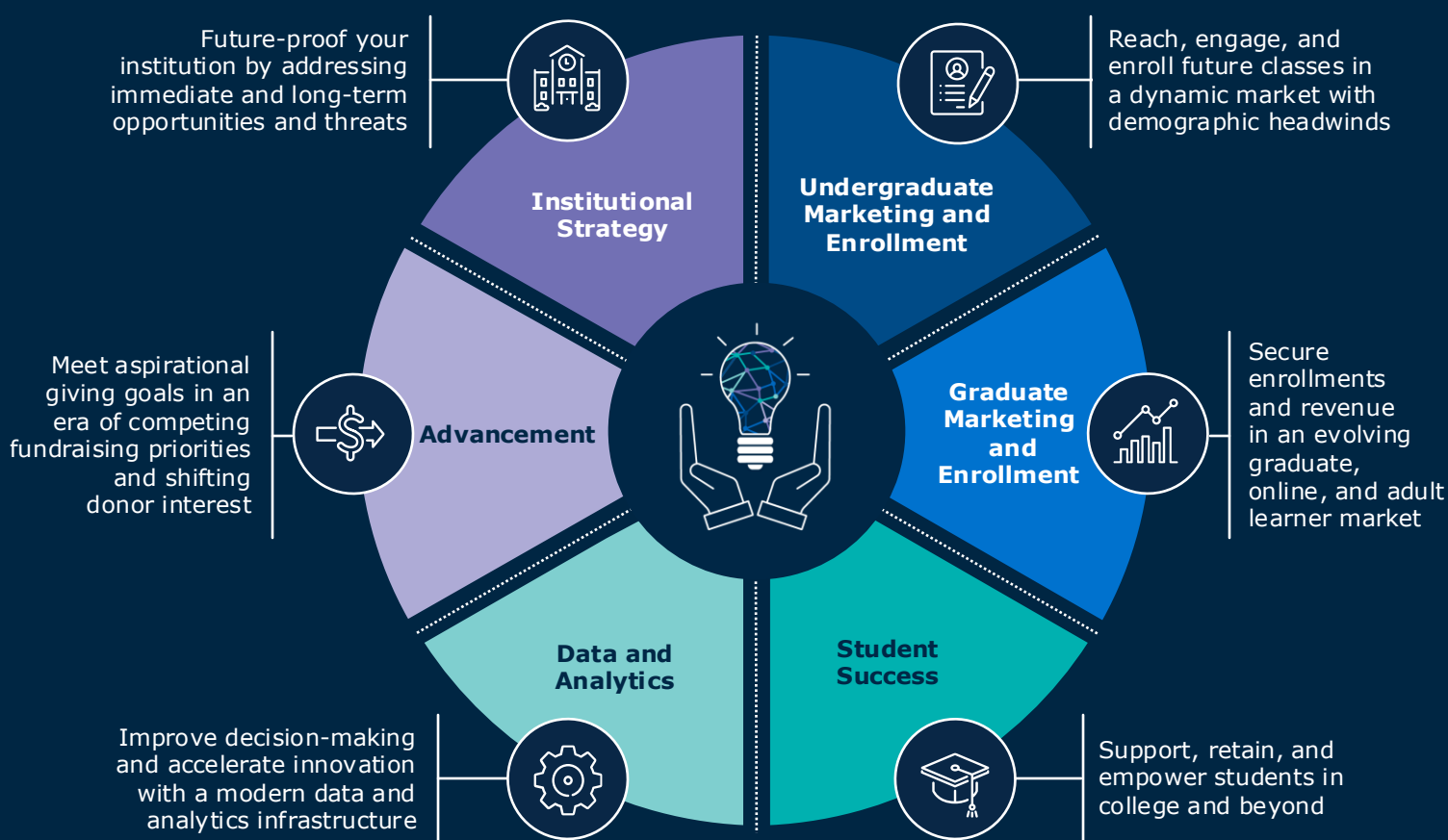
Average NTR influenced per partner

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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Help Schools and Students Thrive

Insight-powered Solutions for Your Top Priorities and Toughest Challenges



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.

About NAGAP



NAGAP, The Association for Graduate Enrollment Management is the only professional organization devoted exclusively to the concerns of individuals working in the graduate enrollment management environment.

Membership in NAGAP provides an opportunity to network with professional colleagues at all sizes and types of institutions: large and small, public and private, secular and non-secular. The annual conference, professional development institutes, membership directory, weekly NAGAP News, Perspectives newsmagazine, mentor program, and chapter affiliations all help facilitate communication among members.

The mission of NAGAP is to engage and advance Graduate Enrollment Management Professionals by promoting excellence and collaboration through education, research, and professional development.



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