



APPLY ADVANCE

Why High Demand Isn't Enough to Grow Nursing Enrollment

Addressing Enrollment and Lead-Generation Challenges in Graduate Nursing Programs



Appily Advance

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Executive Overview

► The Future of Graduate Nursing Enrollment

In the 2023–24 school year, master’s and PhD nursing enrollments declined for the third and tenth year in a row, respectively. Additionally, conferrals have **declined at an annual rate of -1.79%** since the pandemic.

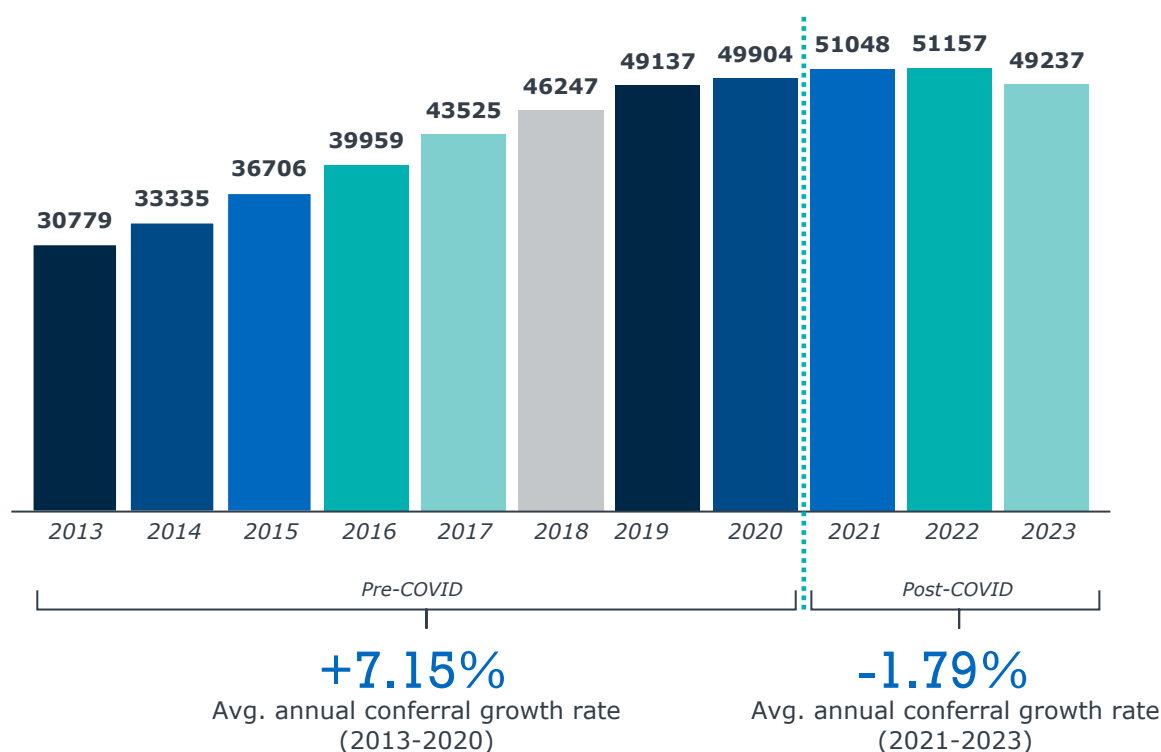
Yet, it’s not that students aren’t interested in graduate nursing programs. In 2023 alone, **10,000 qualified graduate applications were turned away** due to faculty and clinical placement shortages as well as program capacity constraints. Additionally, market demand continues to soar, with projections indicating as much as 40% employment growth from 2023 to 2033.

Addressing this gap requires overcoming logistical barriers, standing out in a crowded marketplace, and converting high-intent prospects into enrolled students. To thrive, nursing programs must refine their marketing strategies, [diversify lead-generation](#) efforts, and differentiate in an increasingly selective market.

This insight brief explores **three key trends shaping graduate nursing enrollment and lead generation**, along with actionable strategies to help programs stay ahead.

Conferral Growth Trending Down Post-Pandemic

Conferrals, All US Graduate Nursing Programs (2013–2023)¹



► More Losses than Gains in Nursing Enrollment Growth

Master’s

-1%

Decrease in enrollments, 3rd consecutive year

PhD

-3.1%

Decrease in enrollments, 10th consecutive year

Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP)

+2%

Increase in enrollments, 20th consecutive year

1) EAB analysis of IPEDS graduate nursing conferral data, 2013–2023.

Sources: [American Association of Colleges of Nursing](#); U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; EAB research and analysis.

Ongoing Enrollment Obstacles Slow Growth Despite Demand

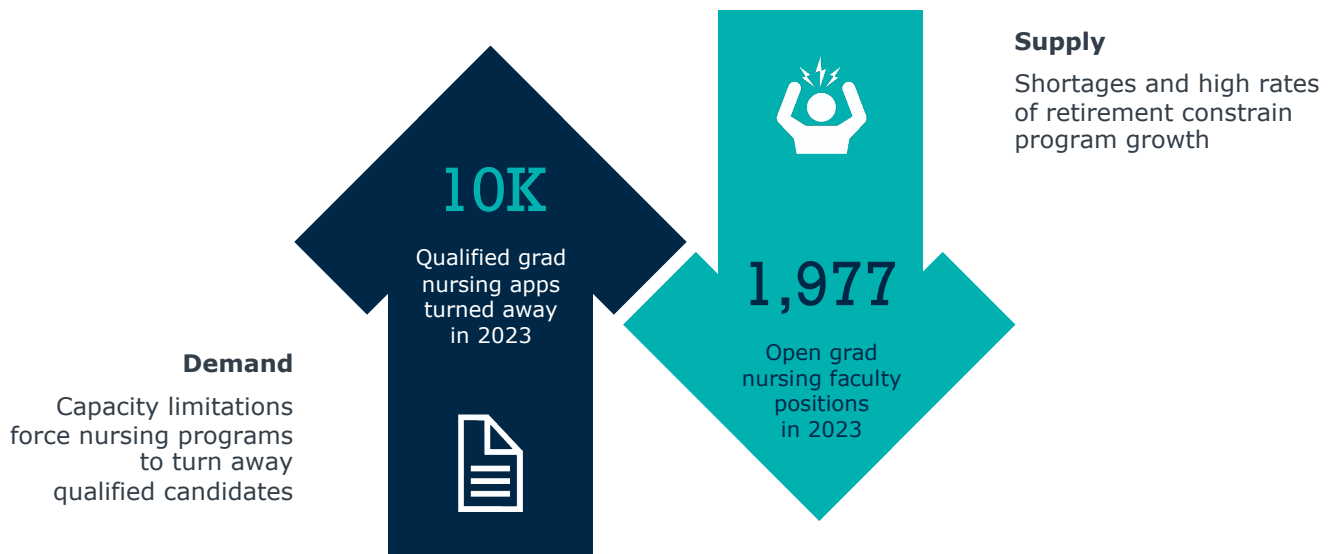
Demand Is High, but Barriers Are Higher

The pandemic intensified systemic challenges in the health care field, with 2021's turnover rates well above the pre-COVID baseline. This disruption exposed systemic challenges and left many prospective students questioning careers in the field, forcing nursing leaders to rethink marketing and engagement strategies.

At the same time, faculty shortages and limited program capacity have become major enrollment barriers. In 2023, **nearly 2,000 full-time faculty vacancies** were reported in a survey of 922 schools—yet respondents reported filling those seats still wouldn't meet student demand. Pay disparities between education and industry, high retirement rates, and a lack of up-and-coming nursing educators to replace the outgoing faculty continue to constrain program growth.

Clinical placement shortages further limit expansion, as site availability is often dictated by location, program offerings, and market needs. Without enough placements, qualified applicants may be turned away. This challenge also impacts lead generation—if schools rely solely on local partnerships, their prospect pool is limited by geography and specialization.

To stay competitive, schools must build strategic industry partnerships—potentially with a widened service area to broaden their reach—and ensure these options are clearly communicated in recruitment materials and on their website.



Industry Demand Outpacing Graduate Nursing Supply

The United States faces critical **nursing shortages, projected to persist until at least 2037**, with over 610,000 nurses expected to leave the profession by 2027 due to retirement, burnout, or both. Yet, the demand for master's-prepared nurses—especially in the areas of advanced practice, teaching, and research—far exceeds the current supply of graduates.

For example, the need for advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs) is expected to **grow by 38% from 2022 to 2032**, requiring 29,200 new APRNs per year to meet demand. However, faculty shortages and clinical placement constraints continue to limit program capacity, preventing many qualified students from entering these high-need roles.

To bridge this gap, nursing programs must find [scalable strategies](#) to expand capacity, strengthen faculty pipelines, and align program offerings with the most urgent workforce needs.

Related Resource:

3 Enrollment Challenges Blog

Scan the QR code or visit
eab.com/3-nursing-challenges



Sources: [JAMA Network](#); [American Association of Colleges of Nursing – Nursing Shortage Factsheet](#); [Mercer Future of U.S. Healthcare Industry: Labor Market Projections by 2028](#); [American Hospital Association](#); [Health Resources & Services Administration](#).

Challenges Persist in Acquiring New Leads, Expanding Lead-Generation Tactics

Competition for Nursing Leads Is Fierce

Graduate nursing programs face intense competition from for-profit and online providers, with 200+ fully online options and **67.5% of candidates and current students preferring online or hybrid modalities**. Regional schools must now compete with national players and public institutions that are expanding online. Online giants such as Walden University and Western Governors University dominate with flexibility, lower tuition, and often large marketing budgets, while traditional universities such as Arizona State and Georgia Tech use brand strength and national reach to reshape the market.

Additionally, **total domestic graduate enrollments fell by 2.6% in 2022–23**, increasing the urgency for effective recruitment strategies. Adding to the pressure, many schools are [cutting ties with Online Program Managers \(OPMs\)](#) due to diminishing returns on investment, leading to a sharp decline in prospective student leads. To stay competitive, schools must diversify their lead-generation strategies by leveraging organic marketing, strategic partnerships, and new recruitment tactics to offset lost volume.

Key Stats Shaping Lead Generation for Nursing Programs

80%

Of students prefer to research, compare, and make decisions before engaging with a school

-45%

Decline in GRE-test-takers between 2019 and 2024

-2.6%

Decline in total domestic grad student enrollment, Fall 2022–Fall 2023

The Biggest Challenges in Lead-Generation Strategy

As the competition intensifies, the demand for [effective, high-quality lead generation](#) will increase. Yet, many traditional tactics are becoming less effective and more expensive, pushing institutions to reassess their strategies. The key challenges in lead generation can be broken down into two categories: limited list sources and a lack of precision.

1. Limited List Sources

Historically, test-taker lists were a reliable source for high-volume leads. However, the shift toward test-optional admissions led to a **45% decline in GRE test-takers between 2019 and 2024**, shrinking both the volume and [quality of available leads](#). Additionally, up to 80% of today's prospective students are stealth shopping, meaning they're researching colleges anonymously and delaying direct engagement until they're ready to apply. This makes organic strategies such as SEO and paid ads crucial, but many schools lack the resources to implement them effectively.

2. Lack of Precision

Traditional lead-generation methods often result in quantity over quality and a fair amount of guesswork, making the cost difficult to justify. This is compounded by the fact that many institutions use the same lists and tactics, increasing competition for the same prospects. Finally, test-taker lists are static, arrive infrequently, and are often outdated by the time they reach institutions, hindering timely outreach. To [overcome these hurdles](#), institutions need to focus on dynamic, high-intent leads—those most likely to convert—ensuring that marketing efforts are more precise and effective in guiding prospects toward enrollment.

25%

Faster response time from Apply Advance leads over test-taker lists

Related Resource:
Generate High-Quality Nursing Leads Webinar

Scan the QR code or visit eab.com/nursing-lead-gen



Sources: [EAB Adult Learner Survey 2024](#); [GRE Snapshot Report 2024](#); [US News & World Report](#); [Council of Graduate Schools Graduate and Enrollment Degrees Report 2013-2023](#).

Program Differentiation Is Ineffective Without Understanding Student Motivators and Preferences

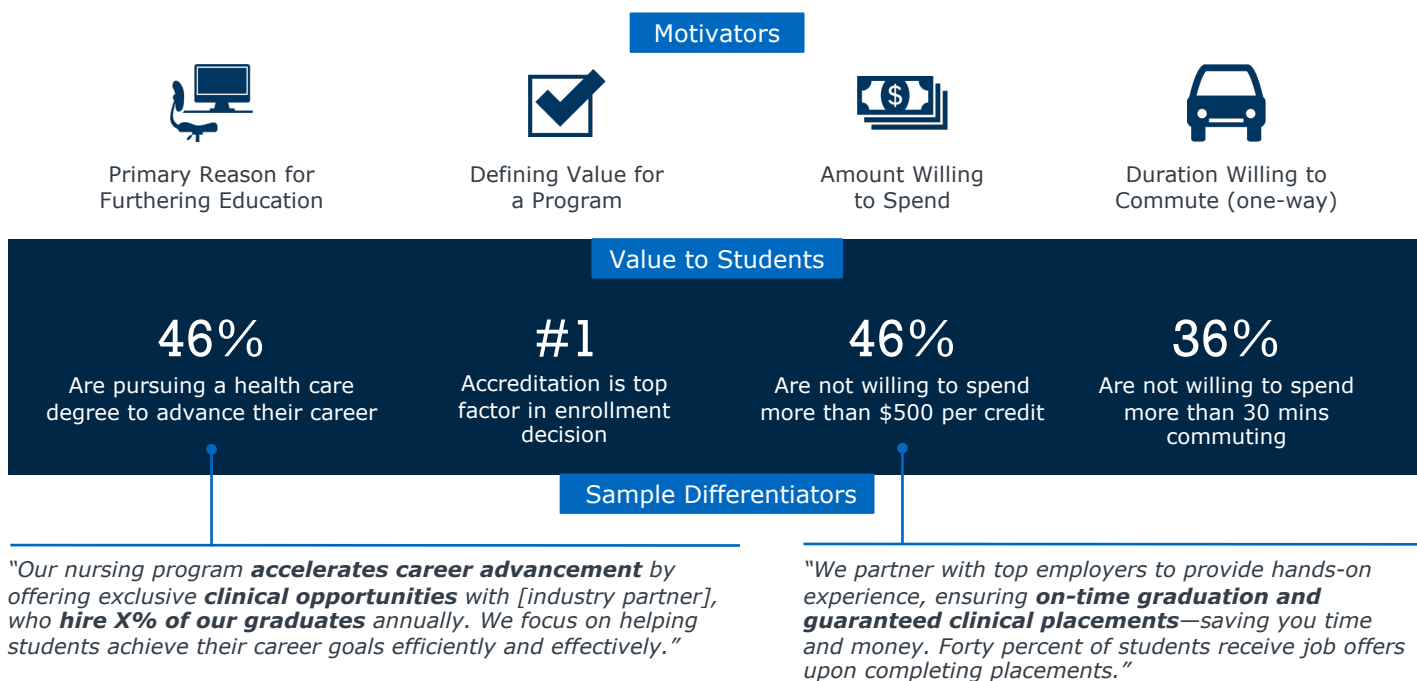
Understanding Student Motivators Is Key to Effective Differentiation

One of the biggest enrollment barriers for nursing programs is a lack of differentiation in a crowded market, making it harder to attract right-fit students. With graduate nursing students applying to an average of 2.7 schools, they research independently before applying—making it difficult for schools to stand out and tap into key enrollment drivers.

Many programs struggle to utilize broad, generic messaging rather than focusing on specific student motivators. To stand out, programs must align their messaging with [four key criteria](#): **relevance, difficulty to replicate, broad appeal, and provable success**.

For example, a program with niche clinical partnerships should highlight exclusive networking opportunities and strong postgraduation employment rates. By moving beyond generic messaging, schools can create personalized marketing that resonates with high-intent students—positioning their programs as the clear choice.

Aligning Student Motivators with Differentiators



Gap Between Workforce and Academic Demands Creates Confusion

A [major differentiation challenge](#) is the unclear value of certain degree pathways. The Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) is considered the highest level of nursing education but is **not required for most advanced practice roles**, with a few exceptions (e.g., nurse anesthetists). Many students can become nurse practitioners with a master's—earning the same credential in half the time and at lower cost. Further complicating decisions, salary differences are often minimal, and some sources report that master's-prepared nurse practitioners may even earn slightly more, making the DNP's return on investment unclear.

This misalignment can cause hesitation or delay enrollment. Schools that fail to clarify degree pathways risk losing high-intent prospects to competitors with clearer messaging. To optimize lead generation, institutions must communicate distinctions early so students can confidently choose the right path.

Related Resource: *Adult Learner Recruitment Survey Paper*

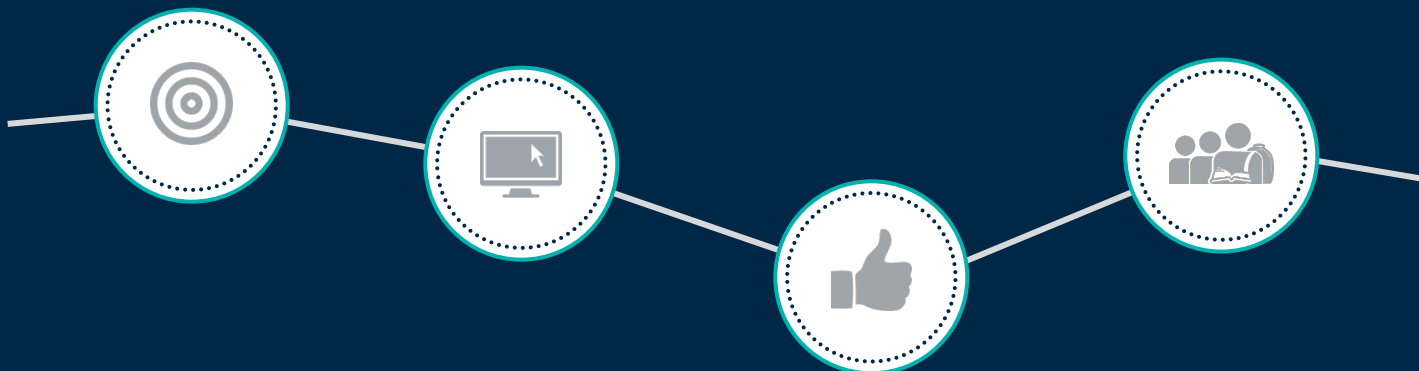
Scan the QR code or visit eab.com/alr-survey



Sources: [EAB Adult Learner Recruitment Survey 2024](#); EAB research and analysis; Indeed.com.

Key Strategies to Engage Graduate Nursing Students

To stay competitive in an evolving landscape, graduate nursing leaders must act decisively now to strengthen their enrollment and lead-generation efforts. Below are four key strategies to enhance your lead acquisition and nurturing plans, helping your programs remain resilient and attract high-quality prospects in the years ahead.



1

Diversify your lead-generation approach

To stay competitive, expand lead sources to reach a robust, targeted candidate pool early. Identify ideal student profiles and align your organic strategy with search behavior. Build filters around those traits to focus on high-intent candidates during their decision journeys. Boost efficiency and control costs by partnering with a lead acquisition provider to refine criteria and deliver high-intent leads at scale.

- ▶ Watch the webinar to explore [Apply Advance](#), EAB's lead-generation solution for grad programs.

3

Strategically address faculty and clinical placement **shortages**

To address shortages, nursing programs should foster strong faculty-practice partnerships and explore fast-track programs to accelerate student progression. Implementing simulation technology, including AI-driven platforms, can offer valuable hands-on experience. Strategic industry partnerships, especially with local health care providers, can ensure placement opportunities, while offering preceptor incentives will help attract and retain experienced professionals to guide students through clinical rotations.

- ▶ Read the blog to [learn actionable strategies to overcome barriers to program growth](#).

2

Differentiate your program to engage right-fit students

With so many choices available, schools must move beyond generic messaging and clearly communicate what sets their programs apart—whether it's strong industry partnerships, location advantages, or career outcomes such as high job placement rates. More importantly, aligning these strengths with prospective students' priorities allows for more personalized lead-generation strategies and stronger connections with the candidates most likely to enroll.

- ▶ Read the executive briefing to [design a differentiated value proposition](#).

4

Personalize your marketing for the greatest impact

Today's prospects expect tailored messaging, making personalization crucial for engagement. Use the data on your ideal candidates to craft timely, relevant messaging that highlights how your program meets their needs. Extend personalization to in-person experiences such as open houses and networking events, where alumni and industry partners can demonstrate the real-world success students can expect from your program.

- ▶ Listen to the podcast to [learn more best practices to boost graduate enrollment](#).

A Diversified Acquisition Strategy to Help You Find Quality Nursing Leads

Challenges of Recruiting Nursing Students



Demographic Cliff

The graduate and adult student market is dwindling, with a predicted 6.3% decline in the 15-to-19-year-old population from 2021 to 2032.



Stealth Shoppers

Prospects typically research degree and program options online, without "raising their hand" as a lead for marketing.



Increased Competition

Pandemic-era hybrid and remote modality courses increased the number of available program options.



Limited Reach

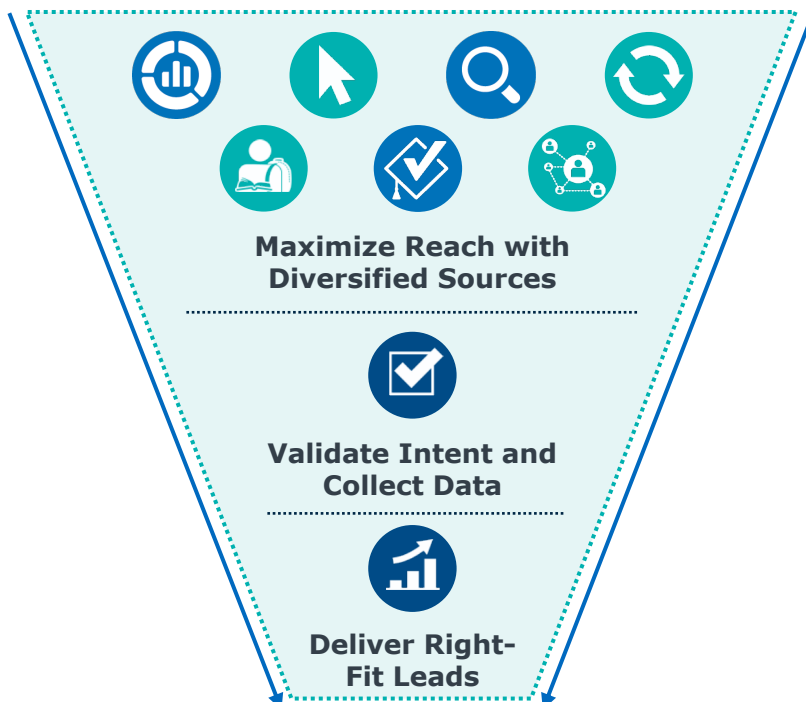
Post-pandemic, many nursing programs are at least partly in-person, limiting program reach.



Market Disruption

Schools are cutting ties with OPMs, in turn losing access to leads. Students are turning away from nursing as COVID highlighted the field's downsides.

Grow Lead Volume with Apply Advance



Generate High-Quality Leads, Cost-Effectively

70%+

Lower cost per lead compared to Meta, LinkedIn, and Paid Search acquisition

25%

Apply Advance leads **respond 25% faster** than leads from schools' test-taker lists

46%

Apply Advance leads have a **46% higher response rate** than other purchased names

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

Customize 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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