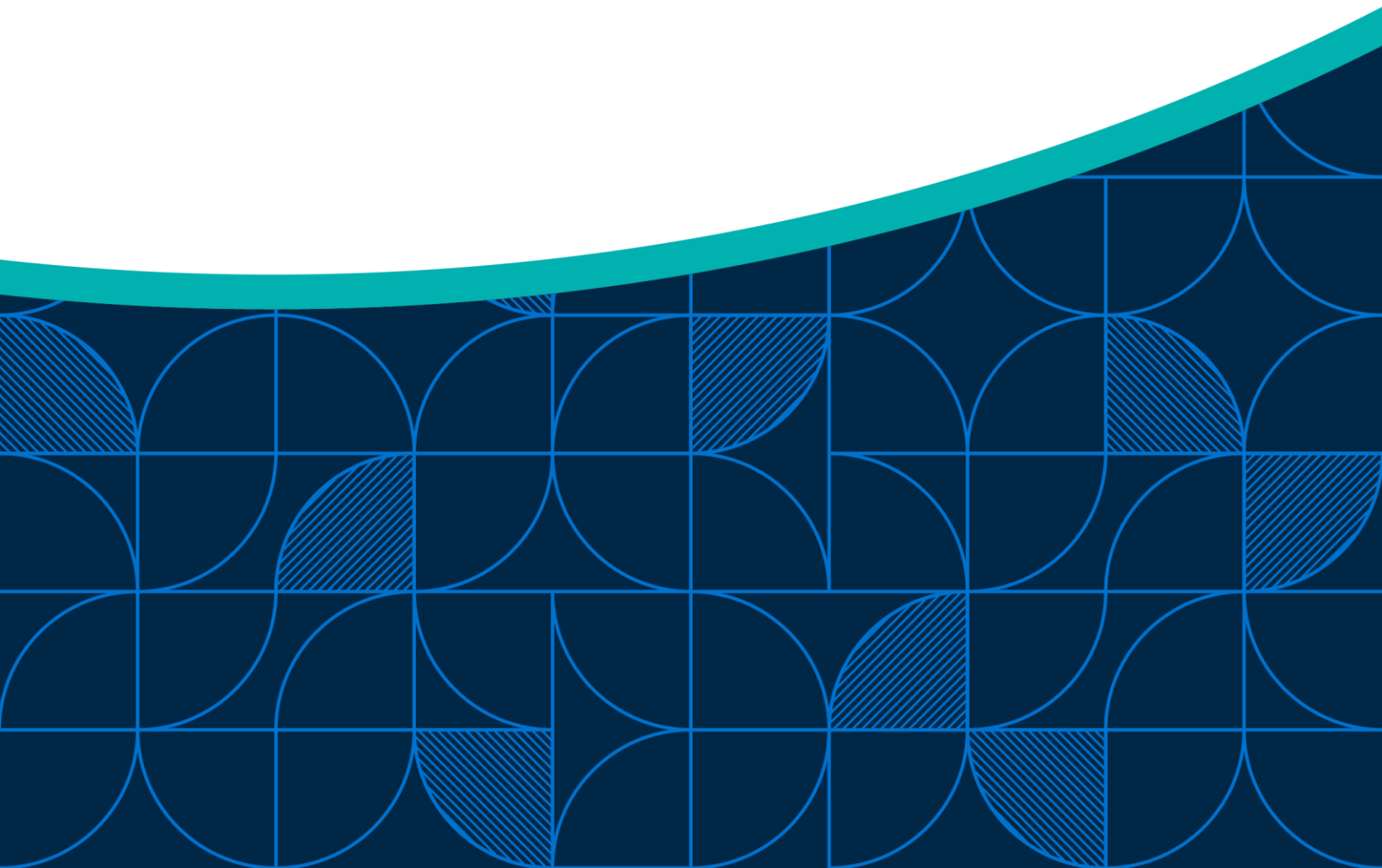




APPLY ADVANCE

# Preventing Enrollment Gaps Before They Form

How Graduate and Adult Programs Can Sustain  
Enrollment in a Volatile Market



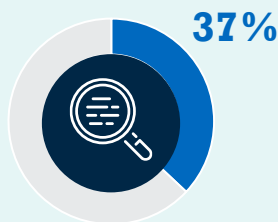
# When Top-of-Funnel Issues Become Enrollment Gaps

The graduate and adult enrollment landscape is becoming more volatile. International disruption, AI-driven shifts in search and paid media, and increasing competition for a limited pool of students are reshaping how demand for programs can be generated. At the same time, budget pressures are forcing leaders to scrutinize every marketing dollar.

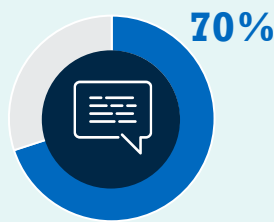
In response, some programs may scale back top-of-funnel activity, assuming they can make up the difference later in the cycle. But enrollment gaps rarely appear immediately. They form stealthily when lead generation efforts slow, when outreach is inconsistent, or when the top of the enrollment funnel narrows to include only familiar audiences. Graduate and adult student journeys often are extended to months or even years, meaning today's lead generation decisions shape future classes.

By the time enrollment shortfalls become visible, the structural causes are already in motion. **Read on to learn more about how those gaps develop and what schools can do to prevent them.**

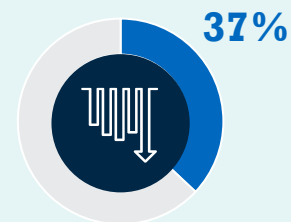
## Programs Miss Enrollment Goals When Lead Generation Is Misaligned with Student Behavior



of graduate and adult students spend 12 months or more searching for a program



of graduate programs cut off outreach to leads after 6 months



of graduate programs failed to meet enrollment goals in 2024

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# How Misaligned Lead Generation Creates Costly Gaps

If your team is scrambling late in the cycle to fill seats, the root cause likely began months earlier. Enrollment gaps are formed when top-of-funnel activity slows, centers on deadlines, or relies on too few sources. When these gaps become visible, programs often increase spend to generate last-minute leads from audiences that may take up to 24 months to convert. These reactive adjustments typically produce one of two structural funnel problems: a leaky funnel or a narrow funnel. Understanding how each problem is formed is the first step toward preventing costly late-cycle recovery efforts.

## The Leaky Funnel

### What's happening

Prospective students disengage at various points during their enrollment journey, leading to a steep drop-off between lead and deposit.

### How it shows up in your data

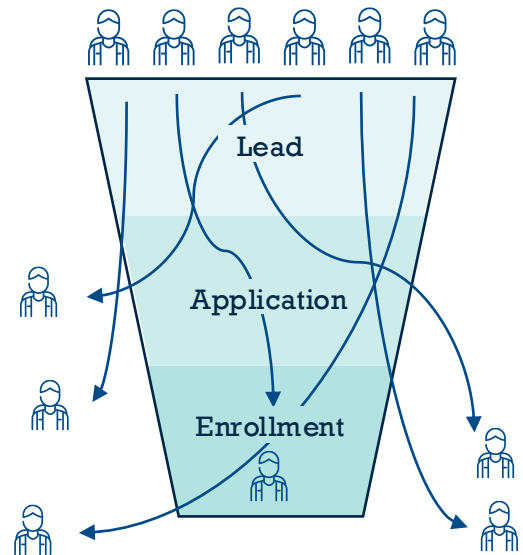
- Low overall lead-to-enrollment conversion rate (e.g., 1%–2%)
- Strong initial lead volume but limited down-funnel movement
- Engagement that declines after early interactions

### Why it develops without year-round lead generation

When lead acquisition and outreach are concentrated around deadlines or near-term needs, students don't receive consistent guidance throughout the decision process. Without sustained engagement earlier in the year, prospects often disengage before they are ready to commit.

### What it costs you

- **Higher late-cycle spend with lower return:** Disengaged leads force reactive, compressed acquisition efforts that increase cost per enrollment.
- **Enrollment volatility across terms:** Inconsistent nurture creates unpredictable yield and last-minute seat-filling pressure.



## The Narrow Funnel

### What's happening

Your program engages primarily with audiences who already know you—such as recent alumni, current students, or branded website visitors—which limits the size of your prospective pool.

### How it shows up in your data

- High lead-to-enrollment conversion rate (e.g., 10%–20%)
- Strong performance from a small number of known sources
- Enrollment growth that remains flat despite healthy deposit numbers

### Why it develops without year-round lead generation

Known audiences often convert efficiently, but when lead generation efforts fail to expand beyond them, future classes see diminishing returns.

### What it costs you

- **Stalled growth despite strong yield:** High conversion rates from known audiences mask a pipeline too small to scale.
- **Expensive short-term expansion efforts:** Attempting to ramp up acquisition late in the cycle drives higher acquisition costs and limited long-term impact.



# Why Some Lead Gen Strategies Are More Vulnerable

## Introducing the Top-of-Funnel Maturity Model

Not all enrollment gaps develop for the same reasons. In many cases, vulnerability to leaky or narrow funnel issues stems from how far ahead lead generation is planned and how consistently it is executed. **The Top-of-Funnel Maturity Model** outlines four planning mindsets that shape lead acquisition, engagement, and performance over time. [Understanding where your program operates on this curve](#) clarifies the structural shifts needed to reduce risk and stabilize future enrollment.

### The Top-of-Funnel Maturity Model

This model outlines four common approaches to planning top-of-funnel lead generation, based on how long recruitment strategies are likely to support enrollment efforts. Level 4 represents the ideal approach, designed to support year-over-year lead generation success.

	Level 1 <i>Present-Focused</i>	Level 2 <i>Short Term-Focused</i>	Level 3 <i>Forward-Looking</i>	Level 4 <i>Multiyear Mindset</i>
<i>Strategy and Momentum</i>	Lead generation is triggered by immediate pressure, often late in the cycle	Lead generation is focused on the current cycle and upcoming start terms, with limited continuity beyond near-term needs	Lead generation efforts are planned to maintain momentum throughout the enrollment cycle	Year-round lead generation strategy is built to anticipate future need and sustain momentum ahead of demand. Recruitment is designed with the understanding that leads may convert over multiple cycles, not just the current one.
<i>Lead Source Diversification</i>	Relies on a narrow set of familiar channels	Occasionally tests or uses other channels, but diversification is inconsistent or reactive	Maintains a diversified source mix; uses a "set it and forget it" method and reevaluates between cycles	Actively manages a portfolio of diversified sources and adjusts mid-cycle as necessary
<i>Key Performance Indicators</i>	Evaluates success primarily by lead volume or surface-level cost metrics (e.g., lead volume, cost-per-lead)	Considers volume and cost as well as some down-funnel indicators, but reviews them inconsistently	Uses engagement metrics to understand and improve performance	Leverages benchmarks, down-funnel outcomes, and year-over-year trends to guide optimization
<i>Communication and Lead Nurture</i>	Early-stage leads receive minimal or inconsistent follow-up	Nurturing occurs, but messaging and cadence are uniform and not responsive to lead activity	Outreach aligns to broad stages of the decision journey, with limited real-time adaptation	Outreach adapts to student behavior and integrates into a coordinated lead nurture strategy
<i>Execution and Support</i>	Depends on individual effort, making lead gen vulnerable to bandwidth changes	Teams put processes in place, but execution still slows or stalls when capacity shifts	Lead generation execution has clear priorities and support structure	Execution is resilient, supported by partners and practices that reduce internal burden



#### Lower maturity levels increase vulnerability to leaky and narrow funnel gaps.

If you are experiencing a **leaky funnel**, you may recognize yourself at Level 1 or 2 in the Communication and Lead Nurture or Execution and Support category.

If you are experiencing a **narrow funnel**, you may recognize yourself at Level 1 or 2 in the Lead Source Diversification category.

# How to Prevent Enrollment Gaps Before They Appear

## Designing Lead Generation to Reduce Volatility and Late-Cycle Scrambles

Programs that prevent last-minute lead generation are intentional with strategy design, aligning lead acquisition, nurture, and performance monitoring with adult learners' extended decision processes. The following shifts outline how to build that structural resilience into your strategy.



### 1 Design a Strategy for the Multiyear Journey

#### Why This Reduces Risk

Enrollment gaps are often formed because recruitment planning centers on the current term rather than the full decision cycle. Designing for the long journey ensures today's acquisition supports not only immediate seats, but future cohorts.

#### Where Risk Increases

- Planning around application deadlines instead of students' decision timelines
- Assuming student non-response equals disinterest
- Focusing lead acquisition only on the next class

#### What This Looks Like

- **Plan out lead acquisition for multiple future start terms:** Build awareness early so upcoming classes aren't dependent on last-minute lead volume.
- **Set the expectation that leads mature at different rates:** Measure success across cycles, not just within one term.
- **Structure lead nurture campaigns to reflect students' long decision cycles:** Provide steady, low-friction engagement over months—not just as deadlines approach.
- **Align messaging to decision stage:** Adjust content based on where prospects are in their journey, not just internal timelines.



### 2 Strengthen and Diversify Your Lead Source Portfolio

#### Why This Reduces Risk

Narrowly focused lead generation strategies create pipelines that convert efficiently but lack the volume needed to sustain growth. Diversifying lead sources prevents overreliance on any one familiar audience.

#### Where Risk Increases

- Heavy dependence on branded or known audiences
- Testing new channels without defining their role
- Treating acquisition and nurture as separate efforts

#### What This Looks Like

- **Assign clear roles to each lead source:** Use some channels to build awareness and others (e.g., high-intent partners) to capture ready-to-act prospects.
- **Invest in new sources consistently:** Build room to test new sources into your yearly lead generation strategy, rather than testing new sources only because you see near-term enrollment gaps.
- **Partner with experts to extend your capacity:** Complement internal efforts with [diversified sources](#), [smarter lead matching](#), and [structured guidance](#) that supports both acquisition and nurture.

# How to Prevent Enrollment Gaps Before They Appear



## 3 Sustain Engagement Across Students' Decision Timelines

### Why This Reduces Risk

Adult learners disengage and reengage frequently. Without consistent communication, viable prospects drop off before they are ready to apply, causing a leaky enrollment funnel.

### Where Risk Increases

- Ending communication quickly after initial non-response
- Sending outreach bursts driven by upcoming deadlines
- Prioritizing message frequency over relevance

### What This Looks Like

- **Extend communication timelines to 18–24 months where appropriate:** Recognize that some students convert long after first inquiry.
- **Taper cadence instead of stopping abruptly:** Move from weekly touches to monthly engagement rather than disappearing.
- **Use email cycling to extend your campaign timeline:** Leverage strong campaigns multiple times to ensure you reach them over a potential two-year decision timeline.
- **Offer low-commitment engagement points:** Include guides, event invitations, or content downloads in outreach to keep students connected without pressure.



## 4 Monitor Early Signals to Prevent Late Surprises

### Why This Reduces Risk

Enrollment shortfalls typically manifest early in the cycle through declining engagement or underperforming sources. Monitoring performance consistently allows teams to adjust without scrambling.

### Where Risk Increases

- Reviewing performance only after the enrollment cycle concludes
- Cutting sources prematurely based on a single term's results
- Focusing solely on applications and deposit volume

### What This Looks Like

- **Track engagement patterns across the funnel:** Monitor opens, clicks, site visits, and lead-to-application progression to identify early issues.
- **Adjust campaigns mid-cycle:** Refine targeting, messaging, or allocation while prospects are still active.
- **Compare cohorts over time:** Evaluate how leads convert across multiple cycles to anticipate enrollment health.
- **Test and iterate incrementally:** Make measured adjustments rather than overhauls driven by a single weak term.

# Close Enrollment Gaps with More than Just Leads

## Build a Strong Multiyear Lead Generation Strategy with Appily Advance

Preventing enrollment gaps requires structure and sustained support. **Appily Advance** not only delivers high-intent leads year-round but also partners with your team to strengthen the systems that convert that demand into enrollment. From diversified lead acquisition and smart lead matching to hands-on strategy workshops and ongoing expert guidance, the Appily Advance team helps graduate and adult-serving programs navigate market volatility, avoid late-cycle scramble, and meet their enrollment goals term-over-term.

### Appily Advance: Strategic Support That Strengthens Results



#### High-Intent Lead Generation at Scale

- ✓ **Diversified reach** to surface high-intent leads you wouldn't otherwise see
- ✓ **Smart lead matching** to connect programs with best-fit prospects
- ✓ **Year-round acquisition** to maintain enrollment numbers term-over-term



#### Hands-On Strategy and Lead Nurture Support

- ✓ Workshops to **strengthen communication and lead nurture strategies**
- ✓ Guidance on **key marketing and messaging questions**
- ✓ Support for designing campaigns that **reflect multi-term student journeys**



#### Access to Best-Practice Research and Expertise

- ✓ **Strategic partnership calls** to evaluate performance and refine approach
- ✓ Access to **EAB experts, events, and on-demand research**
- ✓ **Data-informed insights** to help strengthen your lead generation strategy

### Appily's Impact in Numbers

**3%** Lead-to-application rate

**60** Median days from lead to apply

**27%** Appily leads **respond to marketing 27% faster** than leads from a school's inquiry pool

To explore how Appily Advance can help you strengthen your lead generation strategy, email [appilyadvance@eab.com](mailto:appilyadvance@eab.com) or visit [eab.com/appily-advance](https://eab.com/appily-advance).



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