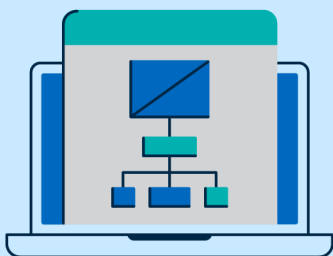


RESEARCH BRIEF

Keeping Up with a Changing Graduate Market

Findings from EAB and NAGAP's Latest Surveys to Empower Graduate Enrollment Teams



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Executive Overview

▶ 9 Key Findings from Our Surveys of Graduate Enrollment Leaders

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 leaders. Conducted between September 2023 and March 2024, the three surveys explored a variety of topics relevant to graduate enrollment leaders, from staffing challenges and the growing use of AI to enrollment metrics and recruitment tactics. **This report compiles findings from each of the surveys to help enrollment leaders understand and keep up with a changing graduate market.**

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Future-Proofing Your Graduate Operations

SECTION

1

Potential of AI to Reduce Inefficiencies

▶ Improving Efficiency as a Response to Understaffing, Workload, and Stress

Last year, EAB and NAGAP’s survey of graduate enrollment leaders revealed that 92% of respondents were moderately to extremely stressed at work and 67% were considering leaving their jobs. While staff dissatisfaction appears to have decreased somewhat, it remains a significant issue. As many institutions find themselves in a tightening budget environment, adding staff is often not a feasible solution. In this context, it is important for enrollment leaders to consider ways to alleviate strain by adding new efficiencies into their workflow. This report explores several strategies for increasing efficiency, including through new artificial intelligence tools.

▶ Introducing New Artificial Intelligence to Graduate Enrollment Marketing

When enrollment teams use new AI tools to brainstorm, create content, or analyze data, they can save time on these tasks. [Research has shown](#) that new AI such as ChatGPT can significantly increase both writing speed and quality of written content.

If enrollment teams are more efficient and effective, they have more capacity to focus on tasks that require their expertise, such as engaging directly with prospective students and crafting smart recruitment campaigns that have the correct frequency of outreach and tone in messaging. Effective use of new AI tools can help make a meaningful dent in workload for graduate enrollment teams, which in turn may reduce stress, improve retention, and support overall enrollment goals.

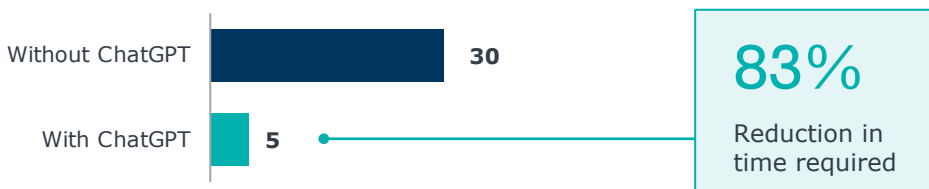
What Is New AI?

[New AI](#) includes technology that incorporates sophistication of output, natural-language processing capabilities, and/or specific and advanced build features. New AI does not include technologies such as chatbots and predictive models, which incorporate elements of AI but are not necessarily or essentially AI.

New AI Can Increase Writing Speed and Save Staff Time

Example: Minutes Required to Create a Summary of Source Texts

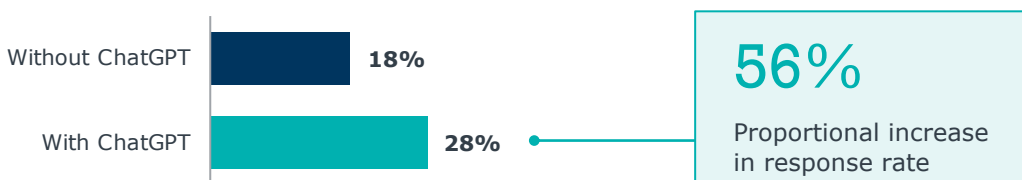
(Bradley)



New AI Can Improve the Quality and Impact of Written Content

Example: Positive Response Rate for Sales-Outreach Emails

(EAB interviews)



Source: Ryan Bradley, [“A Chatbot Is Secretly Doing My Job.”](#) *The Atlantic*.

Understaffing and Workload Contributing to Stress

► Top Workplace Stressors Have Not Changed Since January 2022

For most surveyed graduate enrollment leaders, the top two workplace stressors from January 2022 remained the top stressors in our most recent survey nearly two years later: *unfilled staff positions* and *heavier workload*. *Unrealistic goals* has also remained a significant stressor since January 2022.

How influential any specific stress factor may be, though, is significantly impacted by graduate enrollment leaders' responsibilities, experience, and institution type. For example, lack of flexibility is a top stressor for respondents with fewer than 10 years of higher education experience (23%) but is a top stressor for just 6% of respondents who have worked in higher ed for more than 23 years. These findings are helpful guides to understanding what is stressing graduate enrollment teams nationally, but check in regularly with your enrollment team to understand and address their specific stressors.

What factors are influencing the stressfulness of your current work situation?* (Select all that apply.)

	Sep '23	Sep '22	Jan '22
Unfilled staff positions	45%	57%	60%
Heavier workload	45%	55%	60%
Unrealistic goals	43%	44%	29%
Low office morale	28%	39%	—
Mental health of colleagues, family, self	28%	19%	48%
Caring for children/family	18%	17%	18%
Conflict with/among co-workers	18%	17%	18%
Concerns about job security	16%	15%	15%
Mental health of students	16%	11%	23%
Zoom fatigue	14%	24%	52%
Lack of flexibility	13%	21%	21%
Pressure related to DEI	13%	15%	17%
Challenges due to hybrid work	13%	—	—
Physical working environment	7%	14%	19%
Remote work challenges	2%	6%	9%

55%

of respondents who work at institutions with >3,500 students indicated **heavier workload** was a top stress factor, compared to **39%** of respondents who work at institutions with <1,000 students.

29%

of respondents who work in student services indicated **mental health of students** was a top stress factor, compared to **17%** of respondents who work in recruitment and enrollment.

23%

of respondents who have worked in higher education for fewer than 10 years indicated that **lack of flexibility** was a top stress factor, compared to **6%** of those who have worked in higher education for more than 23 years.

Choices that were not included in previous surveys indicated by —

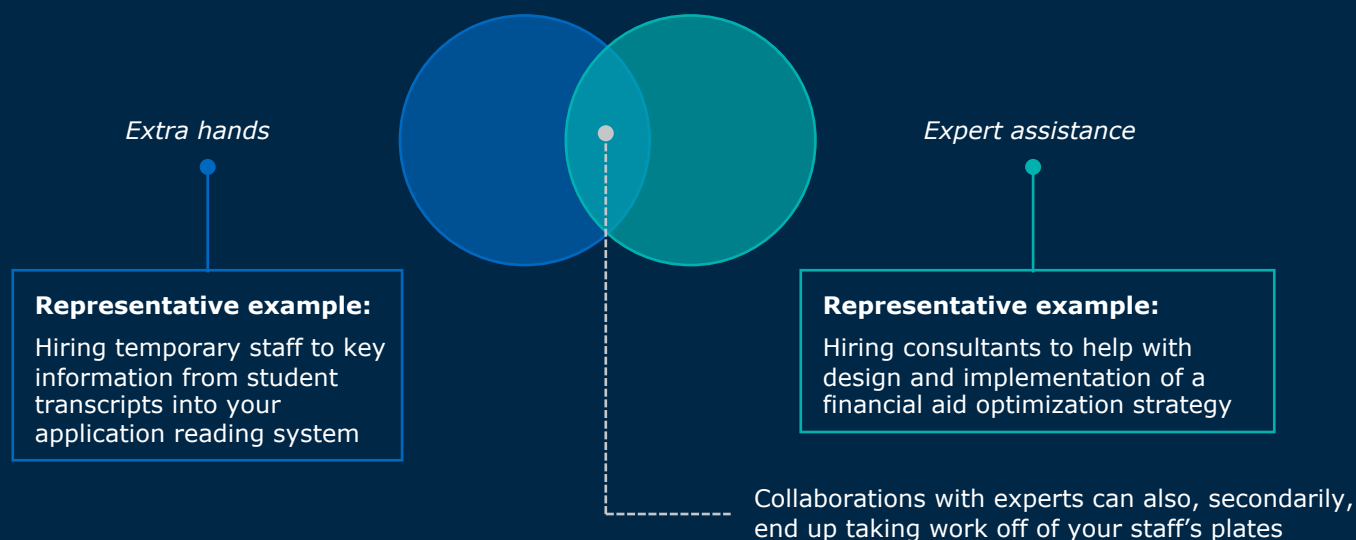
► Better Support and Recognition from Leadership Could Significantly Relieve Staff Stress

The biggest stress reliever, according to survey participants, would be *additional staff*. Respondents also indicated a growing desire for *support and recognition from leadership* to reduce stress (i.e., 9% in 2022 compared to 15% in 2023, the biggest increase from last year's survey). One respondent noted they would appreciate "a wider recognition of the current higher education market dynamics and their broad impact across schools. Otherwise stated, an acceptance that we're not the only ones struggling."

Strategy #1: Consider External Support to Reduce Staff Workload

The majority of survey respondents agree that the most helpful solution to workplace stress would be to hire additional staff. When it is not feasible to hire additional staff, consider options to partner with an external vendor to support your marketing and enrollment efforts. There are two common, and sometimes overlapping, rationales for outsourcing: extra hands and expert assistance.

Common Rationales for Outsourcing



While some tasks are best done in-house, such as maintaining your university brand, not all marketing functions can or should be owned internally. Consider tapping into external resources for functions where you need:

- 1 Scale:** Coordinated and responsive outreach to thousands of leads can be daunting. Partnering with enrollment solutions providers can offer the scale and resources to reach prospects effectively.
- 2 Specialized expertise:** By outsourcing to experts in content strategy, SEO, digital media buying, user experience, data science, and enrollment-specific content strategy, your institution can access cutting-edge talent in short order.
- 3 Staffing support:** External vendors can often provide instant scale in terms of skills and resources when key university staffers leave their roles, making you less vulnerable during periods of high staff turnover or attrition.

Resources to Explore

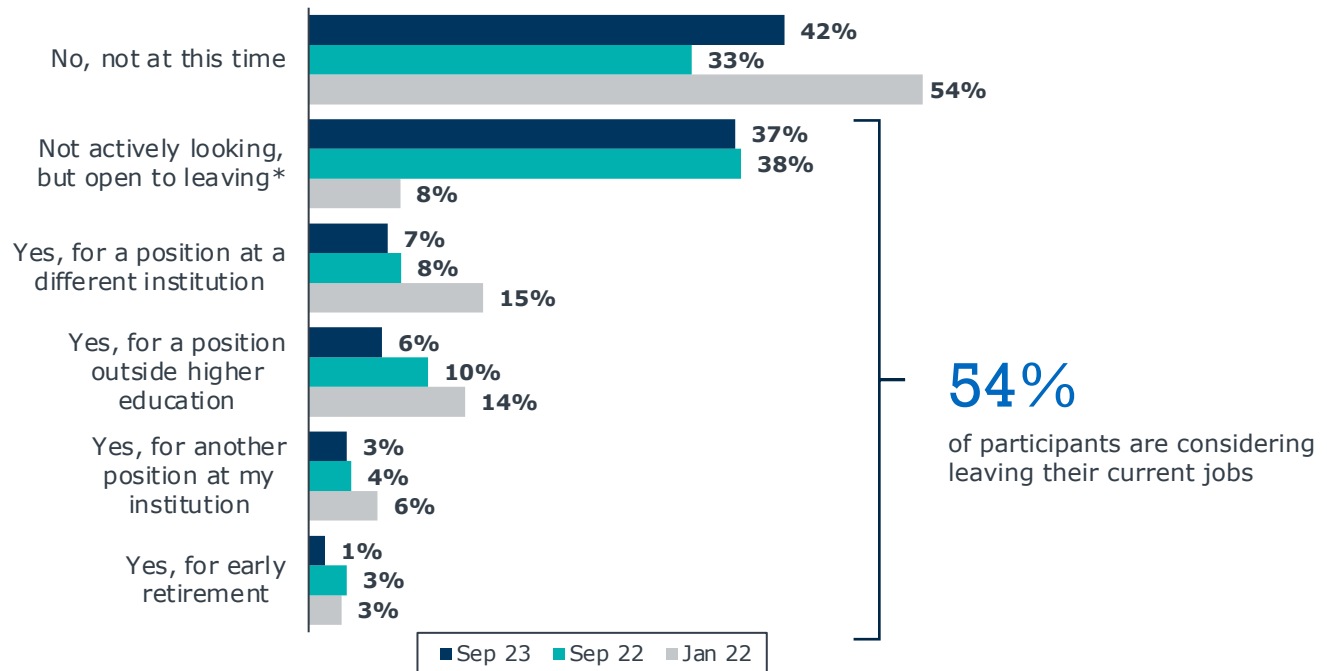
- Take our [enrollment capabilities self-assessment](#)
- Explore our [report](#) on admissions staffing

Staff Retention Remains a Real Concern

► Over Half of Respondents Are Considering Leaving Their Current Position

Fewer respondents are considering leaving their current position now than they were in 2022 (54% and 67%, respectively), likely influenced by the state of the economy being less favorable to job seekers. Yet, more than half of respondents are considering leaving their roles. This poses a real threat to the long-term success of graduate enrollment teams, many of whom already feel understaffed and overworked.

Are you considering leaving your current position?



These compounded findings call for quick solutions. Without near-immediate change, it will be difficult for graduate enrollment teams to find a way out of this cycle of staff feeling overworked, unsupported, and leaving their roles—leading teams to be more understaffed than before.

► Lack of Support from Their Organization Is a Significant Source of Staff Discontent

Just over half of the respondents considering leaving their jobs in higher education seek *better pay/benefits*, consistent with findings from last year’s survey. But the number of those considering leaving higher ed because they want *more support from organization* has grown by 10% in just one year.

The good news is that supporting your staff is not inherently expensive or resource-intensive—and has the potential to be implemented quickly. Exclusionary and discriminatory practices are often some of the most common ways that staff may feel unsupported. On the following page, we explore ways to support staff and address exclusionary practices.

Why are you considering leaving higher education? (Select up to two reasons.)

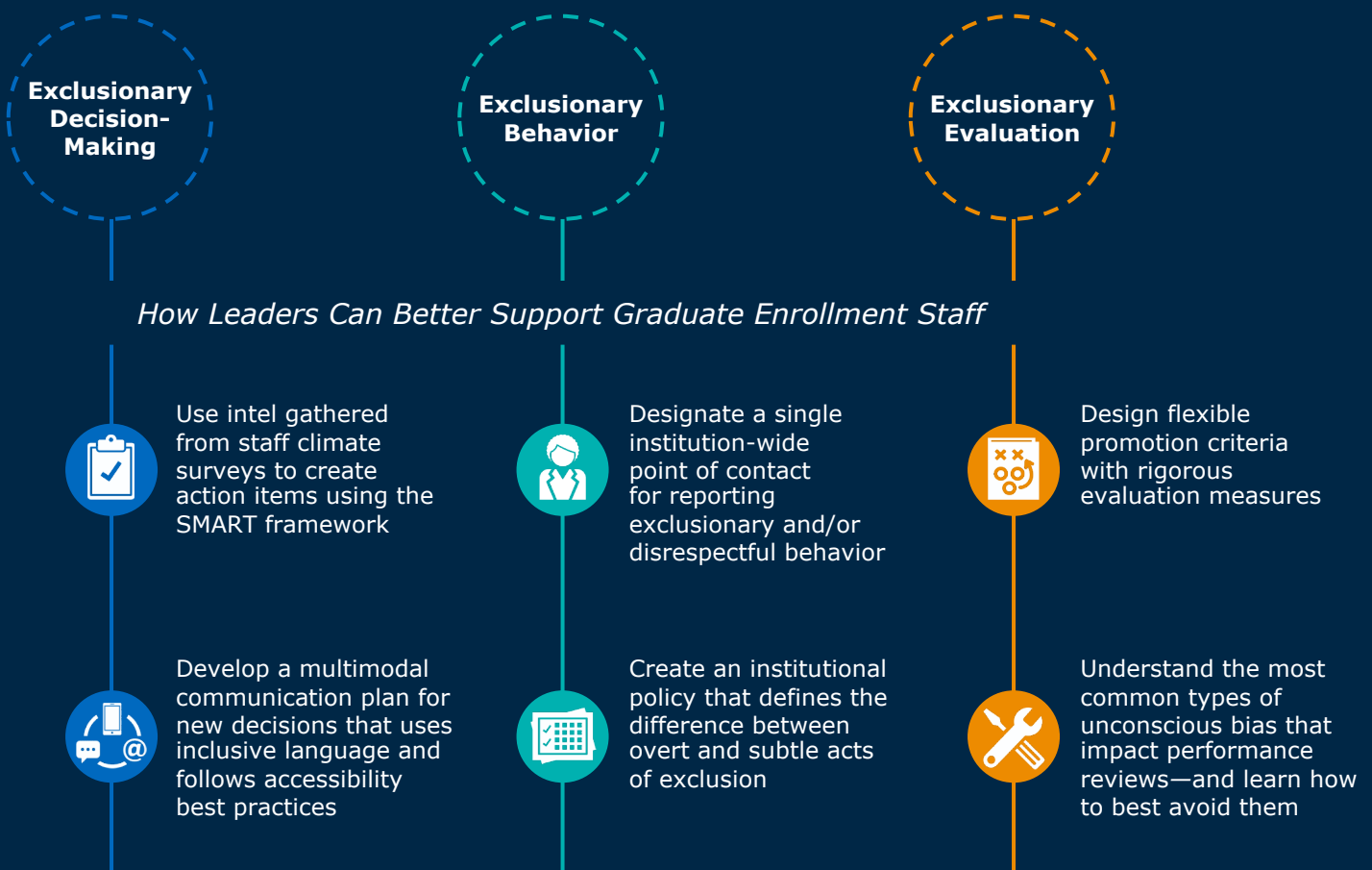
	Percentage
Better pay/benefits	52%
More support from organization	41%
More flexibility	26%
Less stress	26%
Ready for something new	15%
Better work-life balance	15%
Fewer hours	4%

Strategy #2: Prioritize Understanding Staff Concerns and Addressing Them

Graduate enrollment staff continue to share that they need more support. Specifically, survey respondents noted that they want and need better communication, more empathy and rapport, and more recognition for their work. Increasing support for staff could include training and engagement opportunities, diversity and inclusivity, professional development, and more. Below, we explore six strategies that leaders can use to improve relationships and communication with their staff related to exclusionary practices such as excluding staff from decisions, subtle acts of bias contributing to an unwelcoming environment, and unclear evaluation criteria.

Addressing Exclusion to Better Support Staff

Common Forms of Exclusion



Resources to Explore

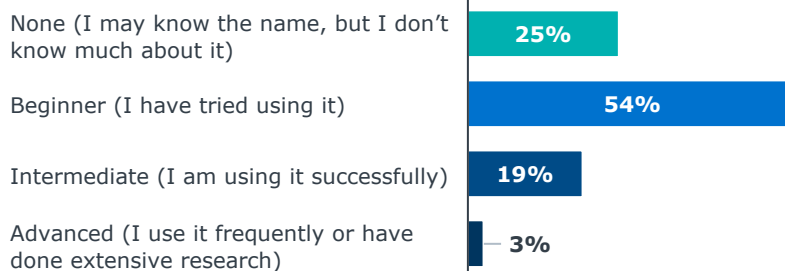
- Review [pages 37–42 of our staffing research](#)
- Explore [this infographic](#) on fostering inclusive interactions

Use Cases for New AI in Enrollment Are Growing

▶ While Most Respondents Have Used AI Personally, Very Few Institutions Are Using AI

Over 75% of survey participants have used new AI in some capacity. Meanwhile, only 8% of respondents say their institution has made the adoption of new AI tools a strategic priority. Even fewer, 4%, of enrollment teams have a formal plan for using new AI, leaving a huge gap of untapped potential for a technology that most respondents have already explored.

How would you categorize your level of familiarity of AI?



▶ Improved Efficiency Identified as a Core Benefit of New AI

Thirty-seven percent of surveyed graduate enrollment leaders find the following uses of new AI compelling: (1) drafting marketing content, (2) using chatbots to field questions, and (3) designing/optimizing marketing communication flows. These use cases can all make this enrollment work more efficient, thereby freeing up staff capacity.

Of course, with new technology also comes the fear of the unknown. Participants' greatest fears related to AI are the costs of tools and training, changes to the nature of admissions work, exposure to legal risk, and an uneven playing field with institutions that have more AI resources.

Which uses of AI in admissions do you find the most compelling? (Select up to three.)

	Percentage
Reducing time required to draft content	37%
Using next-generation chatbots	37%
Designing/optimizing communication flows	37%
Identifying the most promising new markets	29%
Improving our staff's ability to mine enrollment data	26%
Improving of models used to predict outcomes	20%
Automating the processing of transcript information	18%
Scaling holistic applicant review	12%
Reducing staff time required to train personnel	11%
Improving our financial aid optimization models	9%
Integrating previously siloed admissions data sets	8%
Ability to make proactive offers to students who have not applied	4%
Optimizing counselor-visit travel and scheduling	4%
Equipping admissions office staff with coding capabilities	2%

Strategy #3: Educate Your Staff on New AI Best Practices

With only 8% of respondents' institutions making AI a strategic priority, your team has the opportunity to be an early adopter and leader in the space. Despite the potential concerns of using a new technology like AI, [recent research](#) has shown how useful new AI tools can be in increasing productivity when used appropriately.

Below, explore eight ways to optimize the use of new AI. Discuss these tips with your staff to enable your team to get the most out of new AI and ultimately improve efficiencies and reduce stress related to workload.

8 Things for Your Staff to Know About Effective ChatGPT Use

1	The primacy of prompting ChatGPT generates output based on prompts you give it; the usefulness of its answers depends on the quality of the instructions you provide.	5	Prompt structure matters Effective prompting has an "architecture," e.g., parameters can be set at the start of a chat to favor a certain type of output across subsequent prompts.
2	An iterative process You will rarely get what you need from ChatGPT on the first try; you'll need to iterate, tweaking your prompts based on its responses.	6	Always check ChatGPT's work While ChatGPT's output is typically very good, it invariably includes inaccuracies or other problems; check its output before using it.
3	Prompting is a high-level skill The difference between prompts created by beginner versus expert ChatGPT users is big, as is the usefulness of the output obtained.	7	No substitute for subject-matter expertise Because ChatGPT output needs to be checked for accuracy, it is of limited use for tasks or subjects about which a user is not knowledgeable.
4	ChatGPT responds well to coaching Providing ChatGPT with feedback not only improves the results you get in any given chat; it also helps ensure higher-quality output from future chats.	8	Many and varied use cases ChatGPT has a wide range of potential uses beyond drafting copy, including writing code and analyzing data; experiment with it.

Regardless of how ambitious you choose to be with your team's adoption of new AI tools, focus on educating your staff on the risks related to new AI. Consider the legal, strategic, and reputational risks associated with the use of new AI, and as a general rule of thumb, do not share anything with new AI that you would not be comfortable posting on your school's website.

Resources to Explore

- Explore our [AI playbook](#)
- Read [this blog](#) to learn 7 missteps university leaders must avoid in their AI strategy



Meeting Graduate Enrollment and Revenue Goals

SECTION

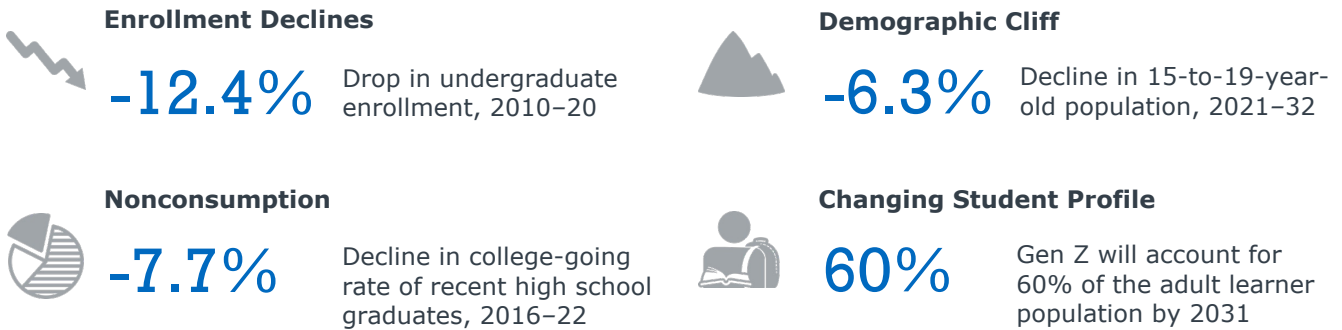
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Reliance on Graduate Program Revenue Is Growing

▶ Troubling Undergraduate Trends Put Pressure on Graduate Programs

In the past decade or so, changing demographics and perceptions of the value of higher education have combined to create an increasingly difficult enrollment landscape for colleges and universities.

Population and Demographic Changes Poised to Hit the Graduate Market



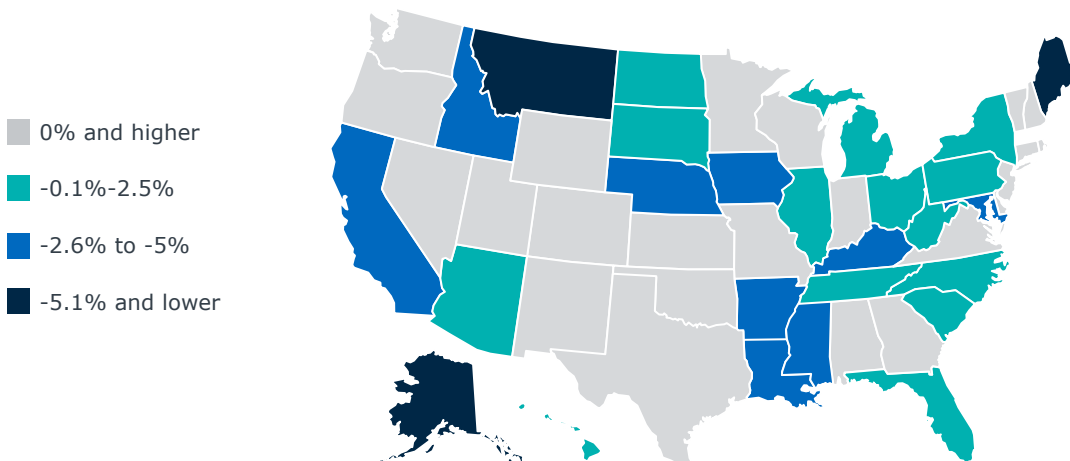
It is not surprising that there is increasing pressure on graduate programs to make up for the gap left by declining undergraduate enrollments and revenue. This was confirmed in 2022, when 47% of surveyed graduate enrollment leaders said there was a growing reliance on graduate and adult learner enrollment at their institution to offset undergraduate enrollment shortfalls.

▶ The Graduate and Adult Market Is Becoming More Competitive

However, growing enrollment in the graduate market will not be easy. There is a nationwide graduate slowdown in enrollments after decades of consistent growth. 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%. We are already seeing graduate enrollment slip in pockets around the country, as illustrated in the map below.

More See Grad Enrollment Fall

Percentage of Change in Enrollment by State of Institution, Fall 2021–22



Source: National Student Clearinghouse; "Global Burdens of Disease Population Projections 2019–2100," Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation; EAB Blueprint for Growth analysis of 2000–2021; EAB research interviews and analysis.

Forty Percent of Grad Programs Did Not Meet Goals

▶ Thirty-Six Percent of Programs Met Headcount Goals

In our most recent survey, 59% of participants indicated that their graduate programs met or exceeded fall 2023 headcount goals, while nearly 40% did not meet their goals. Although more respondents met or exceeded their headcount goals in 2023 than in recent years, a sizable number of graduate programs are still not meeting goals. Incoming market headwinds, such as population decline and nonconsumption, will only make it more challenging to meet headcount goals in the years to come.

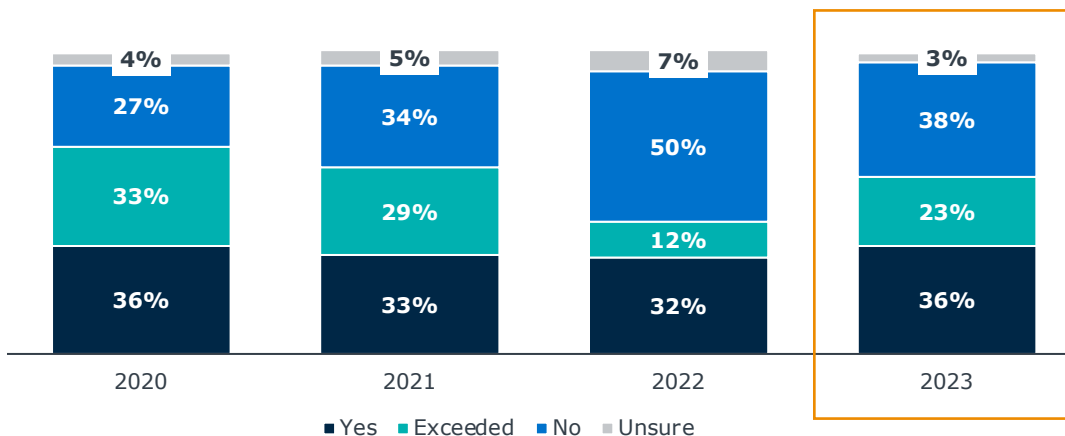
Taking a deeper look into the data, we found that public institutions were more likely to have met or exceeded their fall 2023 headcount goals (65%) compared to private schools (56%). The same was true for schools with more than 3,500 students (71% of which met or exceeded goals), compared to schools with fewer than 1,000 students (55%). Of programs that are fully in-person, 65% met or exceeded their fall 2023 headcount goals, compared to 44% of programs that are fully online.

What happened in 2022?

In 2022, there was a sizable growth in programs that did not meet their goals. Our experts hypothesize that this could be due to (1) international enrollment being limited by visa appointment delays and (2) two years of slower undergraduate enrollment, leading graduate programs to set outsized goals for 2022.

Did you meet your headcount goals?

2020–2023 Comparisons



At the time of this survey, 50% of respondents said their programs were on track to meet their headcount goals for spring 2024. This is an 11% increase from last year’s survey, when only 39% indicated they were on track to meet spring 2023 headcount goals.

▶ Fewer than Half of Programs Met Fall 2023 Net Tuition Revenue Goals

Only 40% of survey participants said their graduate programs met or exceeded their fall 2023 net tuition revenue (NTR) goals, while 30% did not meet their NTR goals. Interestingly, 30% of participants were unsure if they met their graduate NTR goals, compared to only 3% of participants who were unsure about headcount goals. While it is concerning that fewer than half of programs met their NTR goals, it is eye-opening that such a significant portion of respondents are unaware of NTR goals and/or results. This speaks to the need for clear and transparent communication about revenue goals where applicable.

Strategy #4: Improve Transparency Around Enrollment Goals and Results

In section 1 of this report, survey respondents shared that they want and need better communication from university leaders. Transparent communication eliminates barriers to inclusion by keeping faculty and staff informed about institutional decision-making and policy updates. In this survey, participants revealed that new tuition revenue, in relation to enrollment goals, is one area of communication that institutions need to improve upon.

Three Strategies to Communicate Transparently



Set and Share Expectations: Staff need to know how and when to expect communication from leaders so that they know how they are pacing toward goals. Create a timeline to share with your enrollment staff to let them know when you will share goals and progress against those goals.



Contextualize Your Goals: Communicating what goals are being set is a good start to transparency, but EAB research indicates enrollment leaders often fail to communicate *how* decisions are made. Use a “What, Why, How” framework to ensure your communications provide the full context and promote equitable information-sharing to staff members.



Select Appropriate Communication Channels: Communications experts at the [University of Salford developed a tool](#) to help leaders determine which communications channels best suit their audiences’ needs. They recommend using multiple channels to promote staff understanding, reinforce leaders’ messages, and offer flexibility.

By incorporating these tips into your communication plans, your enrollment staff can more easily and confidently answer questions about how you are pacing on goals, understand what is working and what is not, and share thoughts on how to improve.

Resource to Explore

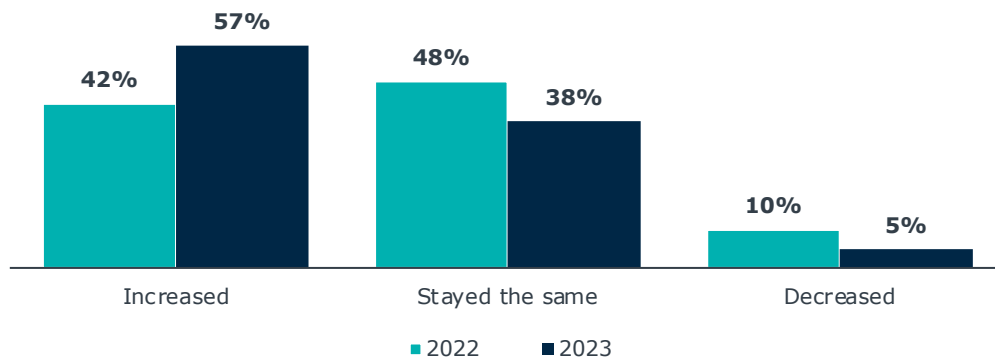
Review [this toolkit](#) on communicating decisions to stakeholders

Enrollment Goals Have Increased for Most Programs

► Nearly Sixty Percent of Programs Have Increased Goals Since Last Year

As mentioned, growing enrollment in graduate programs is a high priority for almost all university leaders. As such, it is not surprising that in our most recent survey, as in 2022 and 2021, enrollment goals have increased for many graduate programs. In this survey compared to 2022, an additional 15% of respondents said their unit increased enrollment goals.

Compared with last year, have enrollment goals for your unit increased, decreased, or remained the same? (2022 vs. 2023)



Our survey also revealed notable differences by program modality. Programs that are fully on campus were least likely to experience an increase in goals, with 65% of those respondents saying their goals did not change. On the other hand, 62% of hybrid and fully online programs saw their goals increase from last year. The survey also indicated a slight correlation between institution size and how goals changed from the previous year. Forty-six percent of schools with over 3,500 students saw their goals increase, compared to 63% of schools with fewer than 1,000 students.

► Higher Enrollments, More Revenue, and Greater Diversity Remain Top Priorities

Of the 14 options presented, the top 3 enrollment priorities for survey respondents remained the same as in 2021 and 2022: higher enrollments in various academic programs, more revenue/net tuition, and greater ethnic/racial diversity. Increasing enrollments was the biggest priority for graduate- and adult-serving units in 2023 by a large margin (i.e., 20 percentage points).

Interestingly, while the top three priorities have stayed consistent in recent years, the order in which they were ranked changed in 2023. In 2021 and 2022, greater ethnic/racial diversity ranked second in the list of priorities, followed by more revenue/net tuition. Higher enrollments and more revenue both grew from the 2022 survey by about 10%, while greater diversity shrank by about 15%, a testament to increasing pressure on graduate programs to grow enrollment and revenue.

What were the top enrollment priorities for your unit?* (Select up to three.)

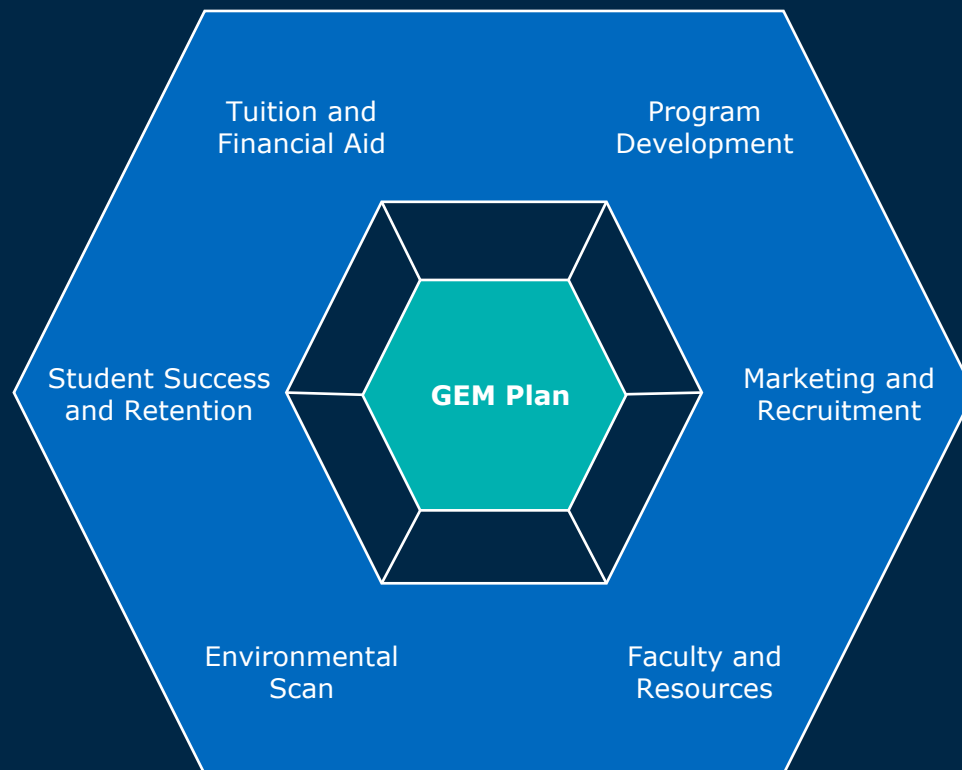
	Percentage
Higher enrollments in various academic programs	76%
More revenue/net tuition	56%
Greater ethnic/racial diversity	36%
Higher percentage of online students	17%
Higher percentage of international students	13%
More full-day students	11%

*Only responses over 10% included for brevity

Strategy #5: Invest in Growth Goals Through Intentional Planning

With most graduate programs increasing goals year over year, it is crucial for teams to invest in a graduate enrollment management (GEM) plan. Today's GEM plan must adapt to the changing landscape of higher education, including demographic shifts, new technologies, changing student perceptions of education, rising costs, and increased student debt. To accomplish this, goals and objectives cannot be created in a vacuum. They must also rely on the inherent or redesigned infrastructure of the institution for input, feedback, and implementation.

Key Pieces of a Successful Graduate Enrollment Management Plan



Ensuring you have a realistic plan and goals (along with an adequate budget, faculty buy-in, and review process for your GEM plan) will allow your team to better avoid common enrollment pitfalls and realize the graduate growth you are seeking.

Resources to Explore

- Watch [this on-demand webinar](#) to learn about Georgia State University's adoption of a GEM plan
- Complete [this diagnostic](#) to see if your program design supports enrollment growth

Grad Leaders' Goal Input and Attainment Were Linked

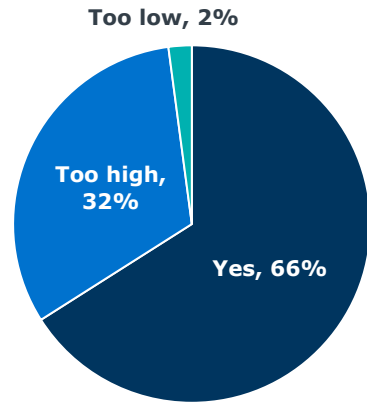
▶ Graduate Leaders Who Have More Input Are More Likely to Think Goals Are Realistic

In last year's survey, we found that there was a positive correlation between graduate enrollment leaders' input in goal-setting and their belief that their goals are realistic—a finding that proved true again in our most recent survey. Thirty-two percent of surveyed graduate enrollment leaders believe their enrollment targets are unrealistically high—a percentage that increases the less input a participant has on their unit's enrollment goals and decreases the more input a participant has.

Only 11% of those who had a great deal of input in goal-setting said their goals were too high, compared to 43% of respondents who had little to no input in their units' goals.

Similarly, among participants indicating they had a great deal of input, 87% believed their enrollment goals were realistic. In contrast, among participants indicating they had little or no input, only 55% believed their enrollment goals were realistic.

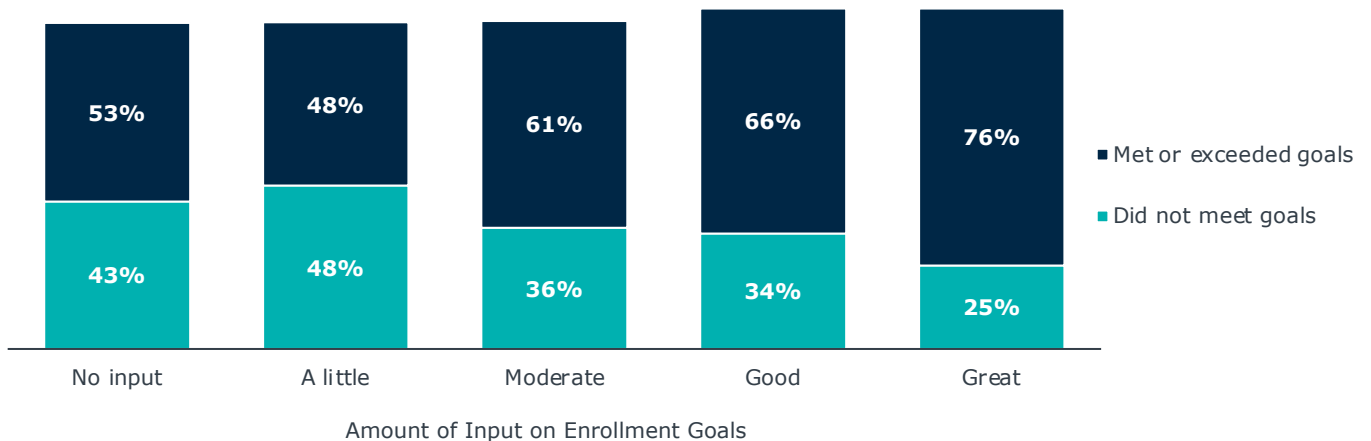
Do you believe enrollment targets for your unit are realistic?



▶ Graduate Leaders Who Have Input in Goal-Setting Are More Likely to Meet Goals

In addition to believing enrollment goals are realistic, graduate leaders who had more input in their units' goals were also more likely to meet their goals. Over three-quarters of institutions whose graduate enrollment leaders had a great deal of input met and/or exceeded fall headcount goals, compared to only about half of programs whose leaders had little to no input.

Did you meet your fall 2023 headcount goals? Vs. How much input do you have in setting goals?



This finding points to the value of involving your staff in the goal-setting process. On the following page, we have outlined four steps to support smart goal-setting. When reviewing these steps, keep in mind the places where your staff may be able to give their input.

Strategy #6: Involve Staff in the Enrollment Goal-Setting Process

Goal attainment often relies on buy-in from key stakeholders. Our survey revealed that graduate enrollment leaders who are involved in goal-setting are more likely to believe their goals are realistic, and institutions that involve their staff in goal-setting are more likely to meet their enrollment and net tuition revenue goals.

Review the following steps for setting smart enrollment goals and consider where staff input and involvement may be most feasible and valuable.

Four Steps to Set Realistic Enrollment and Revenue Goals

1

Assess Your Current and Historical Enrollment Data

Prioritize a close review of your historical enrollment and net tuition revenue. This will require a close look at total annual tuition and fees, based on your enrollment, student credit hours, tuition rates, fees, and retention rates.

2

Determine Resource Requirements

When setting revenue and enrollment goals, consider the expenses associated with operating—and potentially growing—your grad programs. These include faculty and staff salaries and benefits and marketing and recruitment expenses, among others.

3

Analyze Labor Market and Competitor Data

Use labor market data, population data, and conduct a deep dive into conferrals data via IPEDS to understand changes in your competitive landscape over time.

4

Understand Your Current and Ideal Student Types

Consider the make-up of your current and historical graduate students, including enrollment status, residency, university employment status, and more to set realistic enrollment and revenue goals.

By including a variety of people in the decision-making process, goals are less likely to be created in a vacuum and will benefit from a diverse set of perspectives and knowledge. Further, employees who feel a sense of ownership in the [decision-making process](#) often feel more engaged and invested in their work.

Resource to Explore

Review [this step-by-step guide](#) to setting smart enrollment goals



Marketing and Recruitment Trends for Graduate Programs

SECTION

3

Keeping Pace with Changing Student Behavior

▶ Graduate Programs Are Facing Increased Enrollment Goals

In the second section of this report, we explored how the majority of programs saw their goals increase. However, nearly 40% of graduate programs in our survey did not meet their enrollment goals. To meet growth goals and stay competitive, enrollment teams need to ensure that their understanding of marketing and recruitment trends is in line with prospects' changing behaviors and expectations.

Many Graduate Programs Are Not Meeting Headcount Goals

Meeting Your Graduate Enrollment and Revenue Goals, late 2023, n=302



57%

of respondents faced increased enrollment goals compared to the previous year



38%

of respondents did not meet their graduate programs' headcount goals for fall 2023



50%

of respondents indicated they are on track to meet their graduate headcount goals for spring 2024

▶ Your Future Graduate Students' Preferences, Needs, and Behaviors Are Changing

Enrollment teams know best that as technology and students change, so must the marketing and recruitment tactics to reach them. The entrance and expansion of Gen Z in the graduate market is one such change. The proportion of graduate and adult learners from Gen Z is expected to double in the coming years, from 31% of the adult learner population in 2024 to 60% in 2031. Graduate enrollment leaders will need to be nimble to develop marketing strategies and messages that will appeal to this new generation of graduate students.

Four Trends About Your Future Graduate Students

EAB survey of prospective graduate and adult learners, summer 2023; n=3,853



Most Prospects Research Independently

80% of prospects are unknown to the institution prior to applying, compared to 20% in 2012



Students May Spend a Long Time Researching

39% of respondents spent at least 12 months searching for information about going back to school



Enrollment Decisions Are Increasingly Based on Cost

50% of surveyed students are willing to spend no more than \$15,000 annually on their education



Students Seek a Variety of Modality Options

56% of students want all online classes, while 28% want all in-person classes

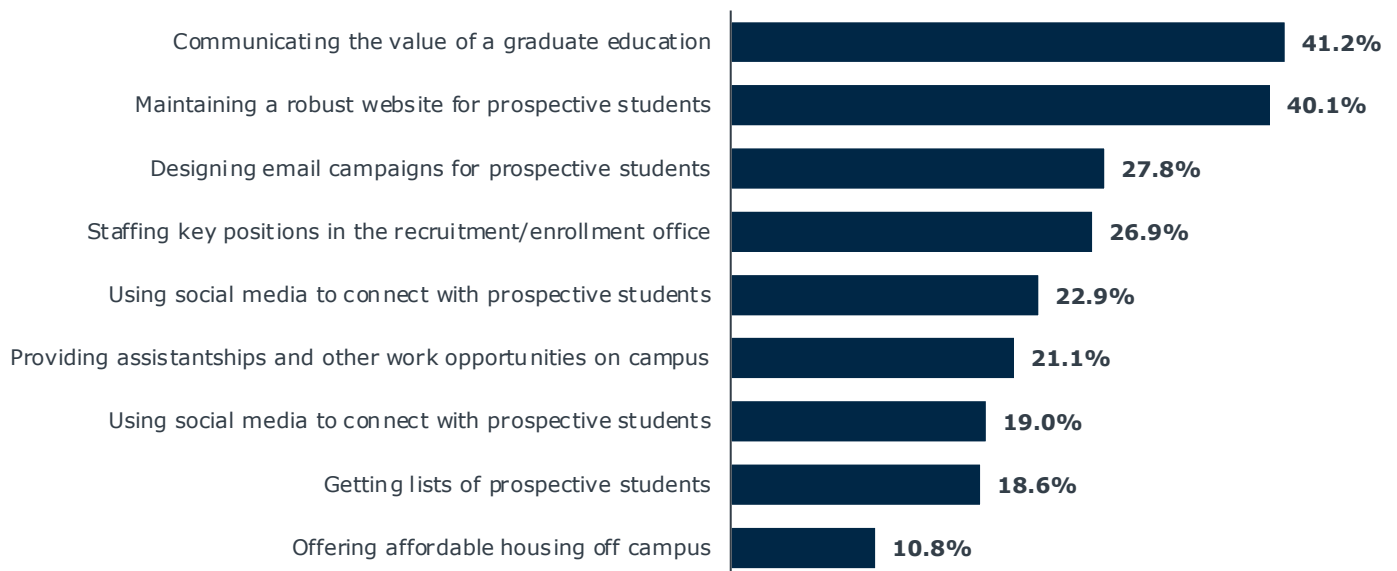
Grad Leaders’ Priorities: Value of Education, Website

► Graduate Leaders Want to Prioritize Communicating the Value of a Graduate Education

“Communicating the value of a graduate degree” is the top priority for surveyed graduate enrollment leaders—and for good reason. As we found in our [survey of adult learners](#), students increasingly make enrollment decisions based on cost, with financial aid ranking as the top factor influencing enrollment decisions. Given this growing cost-consciousness, marketing and enrollment teams need to convey that a graduate education is a smart and worthwhile investment.

Consider the following recruitment challenges for your graduate programs. Indicate your top priorities for the next enrollment cycle.*

(Select up to three.)



*Other responses <10%: providing graduate housing for students on campus, adding programs, scholarships/aid, recruiting domestic students, reducing cost, SEO/SEM, CRM, streamlining processes, visa challenges, flexible programs

The value that you aim to communicate will likely change depending on why each prospective student is considering a graduate education, and each [journey to enrollment](#) is complex and nonlinear. To ensure your messaging speaks to students’ unique motivations and interests, use a responsive and [intent-based marketing](#) approach that is adaptable and specific to each prospect.

According to [survey respondents](#), the top five characteristics that represent the value of education are:

- 1 Successful job placement
- 2 Accredited programs
- 3 Generous financial aid awards
- 4 Moderate tuition prices
- 5 Internships, co-ops, and other active-learning experiences

► A Well-Designed, Informative Website Is Consistently a Priority for Graduate Teams

“Maintaining a robust website for prospective students” was nearly tied for biggest recruitment priority and was a top-three priority in last year’s survey. The importance of an effective .edu only continues to rise. Ninety-three percent of surveyed students said they visit the websites of all the schools or programs they are considering, and 84% said a poorly designed website will negatively affect their opinion of a program.

Strategy #7: Invest in a User-Friendly Website That Displays Need-to-Know Information Clearly

In recent years, an estimated 80% of applicants have become “[stealth shoppers](#),” or prospective students who are unknown to your institution until they actually submit an application. These stealth shoppers are learning about your programs, comparing your institution to others, and making decisions about whether your institution is the right fit for them before they ever engage with you directly.

To recruit these students, ensure prospects have the information they want and need at the click of a button. Review the following list to get a better understanding of what information prospects are looking for on [college and university websites](#).

“What information were you most often trying to find when searching school websites?”

(Responses above 10%)

Programs offered	52.2%
Admissions requirements/processes	47.4%
College costs (e.g., tuition, fees)	38.5%
Financial aid	38.0%
Scholarships	26.3%
General information about the school	18.1%
Outcomes for alum of my desired program	12.5%

In addition to optimizing your website so stealth shoppers can find the information they need quickly and easily, consider engaging with hard-to-reach audiences through paid ads and platforms such as [Apply Advance](#) to meet students where they are.

Source: EAB 2023 Adult Learner Survey.

Resources to Explore

- Review [this document](#) to learn how to ensure your .edu site is optimized for search
- Watch this [on-demand webinar](#) to learn what is required of your .edu to recruit Gen Z

Events, Inquiries, Emails Are Top Recruitment Activities

▶ Events Remain the Top Enrollment Activity but Saw Significant Declines in Impact

As shown in the table below, recruitment events provided the best enrollment outcomes for surveyed graduate and professional schools. As was true in last year’s survey, events were especially effective for in-person programs (30.6%) compared to hybrid (16.8%) and online programs (15.4%). However, the impact of events declined by 25% overall compared to last year, while the impact of web inquiries, SEO/SEM, and social media grew during that time.

What student recruitment activities have provided the best outcomes in terms of graduate/professional school enrollments?* (2023 vs. 2024)

Recruitment Activity	2023	2024
Events	24.5%	18.3%
Web inquiries	15.0%	16.5%
Email	15.4%	14.3%
Referrals from alumni	14.3%	13.3%
SEO/SEM	11.9%	12.5%
Social media	3.1%	5.0%
Text messaging	4.2%	2.9%
Phone campaigns	1.4%	1.4%

31%

of respondents from fully online programs said SEO/SEM was the best recruitment activity

*Other responses <1%: mailed pieces, chatbots

▶ Email Remains a Top Priority and a Top Enrollment-Driving Activity

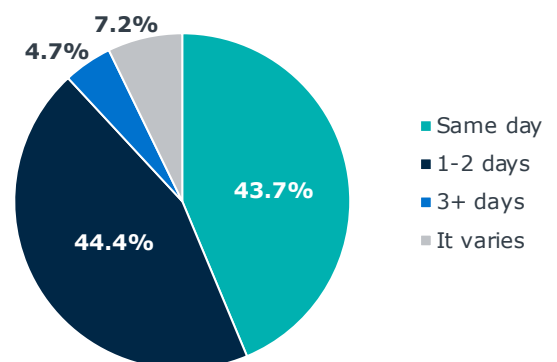
In this year’s survey, graduate enrollment leaders shared that “designing email campaigns” was a top-three priority (see full findings on pg. 6) and that emails were the third most enrollment-driving activity (above). As a tried-and-true recruitment channel, it is important to have a [smart email strategy](#) in place. Despite the growth of other communication channels, such as social media and Paid Search ads, our [adult learner survey](#) found that 20% of prospective students said they consulted emails from institutions during their research, up from 13% in our 2021 survey, underscoring the importance of well-designed email campaigns.

▶ Across All Channels, a Two-Day Response Time Is Paramount

While your most effective recruitment activity may depend on various programmatic and demographic factors, responding in a timely manner across all channels is key to keeping up with the competition.

Our survey revealed that a majority (88%) of institutions respond to requests for information within two business days, with half responding the same day. It is important to note that on average, smaller schools (<1,000 students) were able to respond to students’ inquiries more quickly than larger schools (<3,500 students) and private schools more quickly than public schools.

How long does it take for your office to respond to prospective students on average?



Strategy #8: Develop Marketing Campaigns That Are Specific to Students' Intent and Behavior

Regardless of recruitment channel, a one-size-fits-all approach to reaching and enrolling graduate students will no longer suffice. To craft emails, social media ads, and other content that will resonate most with prospective students, consider adopting intent-based marketing, which relies on personalization and real-time response. Intent-based marketing introduces time and present-day consumer behavior into the equation, in addition to the historical data that marketing traditionally relies upon. When a student sends digital signals that show intent one way or another, marketers need to respond accordingly with communications that reflect a true understanding of the prospect's needs.

Three Steps to Create Intent-Based Marketing Campaigns



Develop creative specific to student intent and behavior

- Tailor creative to students' needs at each stage in the enrollment funnel
- Vary copy and imagery by stage of the funnel and content type
- Update content as priorities or the market shift



Customize your campaign cadence based on audience source and student behavior

- Deliver creative at the right moment in students' journeys to enrollment
- Determine cadence based on what you know about each student
- Modify the cadence based on their engagement with your marketing



Regularly monitor key campaign performance data

- Improve your campaigns by tracking key performance indicators
- Run A/B tests to optimize performance
- Use data science to understand the aspects of your program that best resonate with prospects

As noted earlier, prospects expect quick engagement and responses. While responding within two days won't set you apart from other programs, failing to do so will set you back. As explored in the first section of this report, consider outsourcing some marketing functions if your program is experiencing staffing challenges that make responding to students quickly a challenge.

Resources to Explore

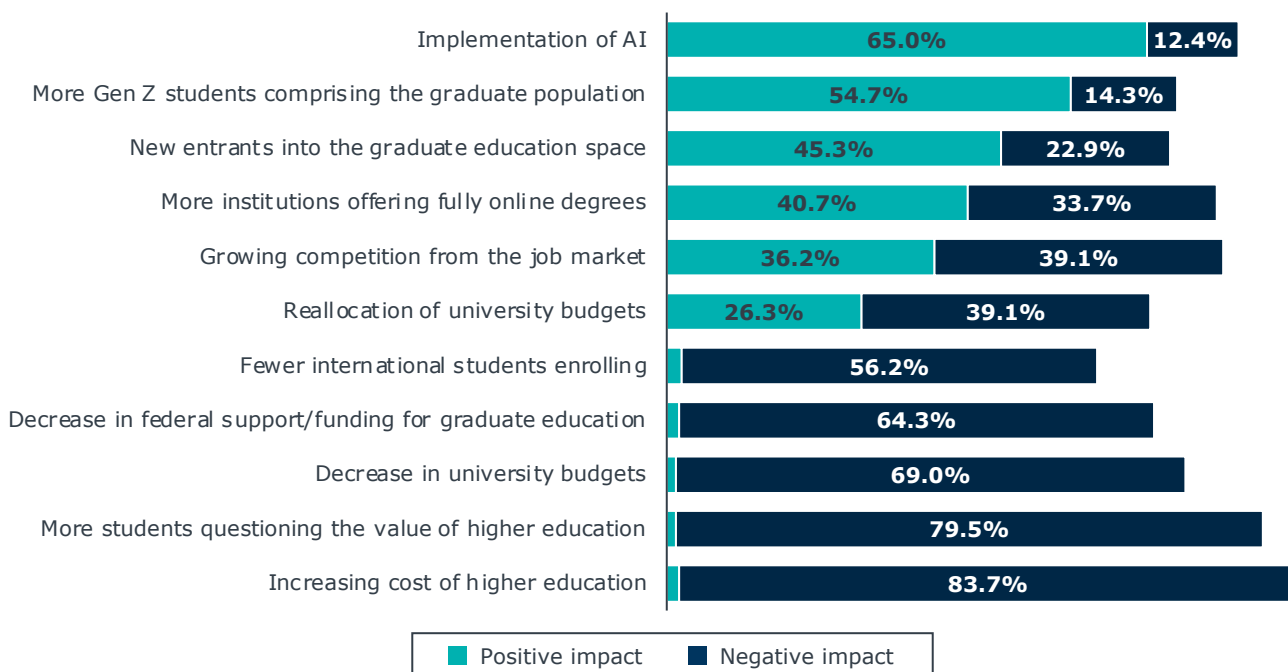
- Read [this blog](#) on customizing your campaign messaging and cadence
- Review [this infographic](#) to learn 11 metrics to monitor campaign performance

Trends Impacting Grad Enrollment: Costs, Budgets, AI

► Graduate Enrollment Teams Most Concerned About Fiscal Trends

To understand how graduate enrollment leaders feel about emerging trends, we asked respondents to label several trends as positive or negative influences on graduate enrollment over the next three to five years. Of the five trends that received overwhelmingly negative responses, several were related to university finances. As revealed in earlier sections of the report, the increasing cost of higher education and students questioning the value of higher education are two big concerns for students and enrollment teams alike. The other two financially related concerns include a decrease in university budgets and a decrease in federal funding for graduate education.

Which of the following trends do you think will have the greatest positive or negative impact on graduate enrollment over the next three to five years?



The trend that had the biggest split between positive and negative reactions was “growing competition from the job market.” Regardless of how you view this trend, reviewing these [state-by-state employer demand profiles](#) may be helpful as you think about supporting your graduates’ journeys to employment.

► Optimistic Outlook on Graduate Enrollment: Implementation of AI

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the trend that scored most positively among survey respondents was the implementation of AI. As discussed in the first section of this report, AI is of interest to many surveyed graduate enrollment leaders, but most have only a basic understanding of it. While 75% of respondents said they have tried using AI before, only 3% consider themselves “advanced” users who use AI successfully and frequently, and only 4% of enrollment teams have a formal plan for using AI. Enrollment teams that use or are planning to use AI may see benefits such as reduced time to draft content, improved chatbots and optimized communication flows, and the ability to identify new markets efficiently.

Despite the potential concerns of using a new technology like AI, such as costs and legal risks, [recent research](#) has shown how useful new AI tools can be in increasing productivity when used appropriately.

Strategy #9: Minimize Financial Barriers to Enrollment for New and Returning Students

We know that graduate students, more than traditional undergraduate prospects, have a lot on their plates and any number of factors they are weighing when deciding if going back to school is the right choice for them. Year over year, one of the biggest factors driving students' enrollment decisions is cost, including financial aid, scholarships, and tuition and fees.

Additionally, in our biannual adult learner survey, 30% of respondents said that high costs were the primary reason they discontinued their studies. To empower those students to reenroll and to attract new students, you'll need to give them confidence that your program can help them achieve their professional goals—without breaking the bank.

Review the following steps to learn how you can reduce financial barriers for prospective graduate students.

Three Components to Minimize Financial Barriers

1

Optimize Financial Aid Strategy

Ensure that every dollar you commit to [financial aid](#) is used to further your enrollment and net tuition revenue goals.

2

Clearly Communicate Costs

On your program website and in emails, transparently [communicate all fees and costs](#) associated with enrolling.

3

Convey Return on Investment

Respond to questions about the [value of a graduate education](#) by providing relevant information, including ROI data, job placement details, and testimonials.



Resources to Explore

- Complete our [diagnostic](#) to learn how to allocate your lead generation budget
- Explore our [report on AI](#) for graduate enrollment leaders

Survey Methodology

▶ About the Survey

In their fourth 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 conducted from September 2023 to March 2024. The 647 unique respondents to the survey represent 438 unique institutions, 50 states, and have 17 years of higher education experience, on average.

▶ Survey 1

The first survey, conducted from September 28 to October 17, 2023, asked graduate enrollment managers and other higher education professionals about their current work environment and use of artificial intelligence. Where applicable, findings are compared to results from previous years' surveys.

Respondents



422 unique respondents

Institutions Represented



311 unique institutions across 50 states

- 52% private
- 47% public

Instruction Type



- 82% on-campus and online
- 16% on-campus only
- 2% online only

▶ Survey 2

The second survey, conducted from November 23 to January 2, 2024, asked graduate enrollment managers and other higher education professionals about their institutions' performance on key graduate enrollment metrics. Where applicable, findings are compared to results from previous years' surveys.

Respondents



302 unique respondents

Institutions Represented



247 unique institutions across 50 states

- 54% private
- 46% public

Instruction Type



- 80% on-campus and online
- 17% on-campus only
- 3% online only

▶ Survey 3

The third survey, conducted from February 14 to March 4, 2024, asked graduate enrollment managers and other higher education professionals about their institutions' marketing and recruitment tactics. Where applicable, findings are compared to results from previous years' surveys.

Respondents



280 unique respondents

Institutions Represented



232 unique institutions across 50 states

- 51% private
- 49% public

Instruction Type



- 81% on-campus and online
- 14% on-campus only
- 5% online only

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%

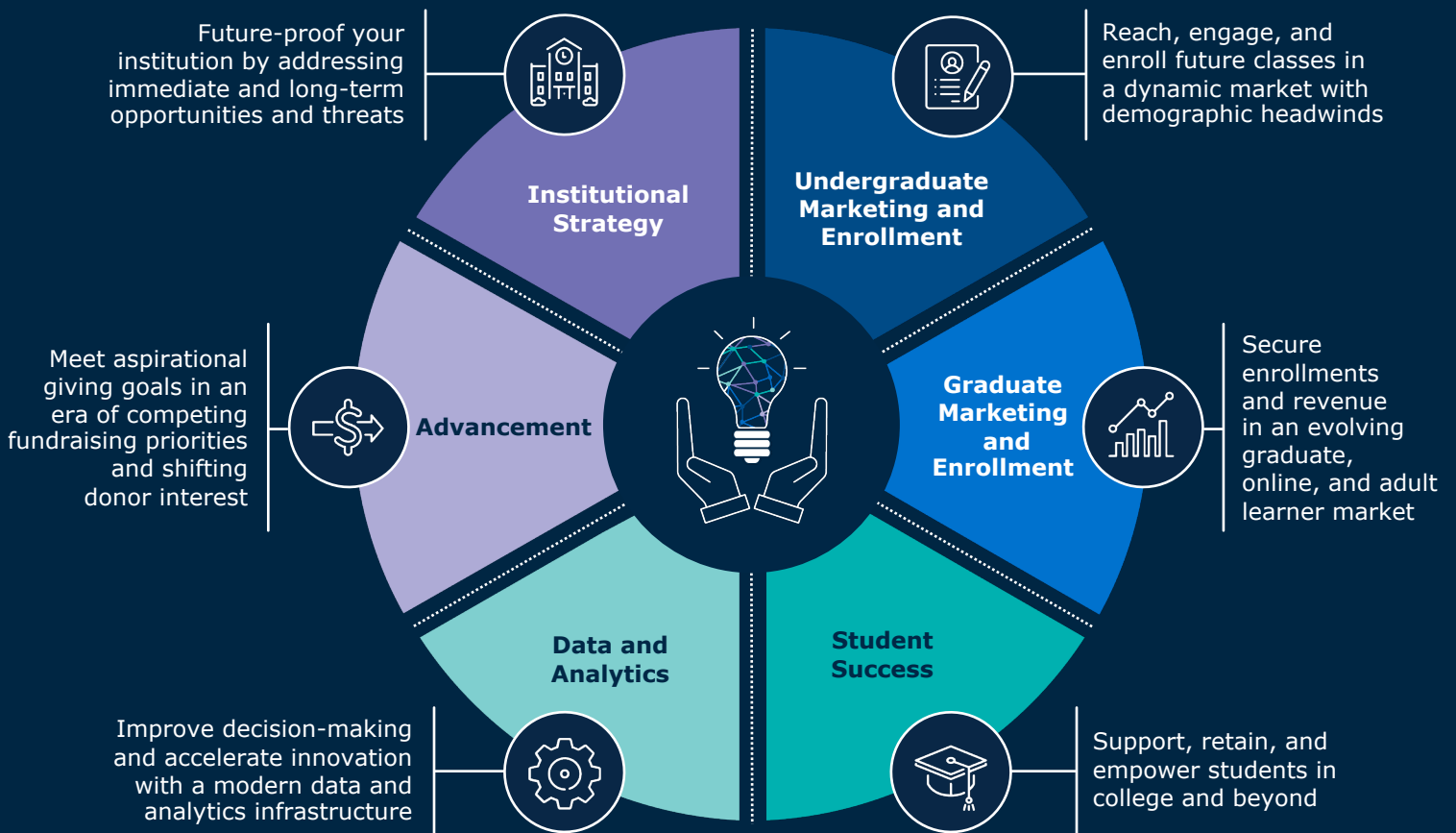
Average graduate enrollment growth

\$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.

**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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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.