

ADULT LEARNER RECRUITMENT

Graduate Enrollment Guide: What Leaders Can Do to Build Capacity and Drive Growth

Survey Insights and Strategic Next Steps for
Graduate Enrollment Leaders



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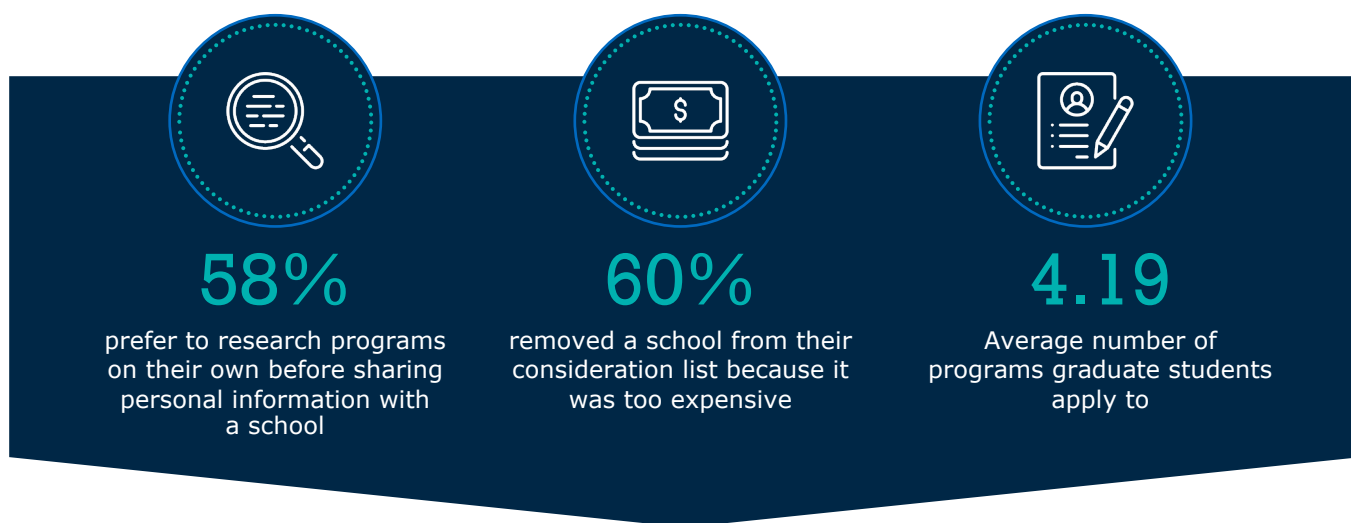
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Executive Overview

Graduate Programs Are Increasingly in the Spotlight

Graduate enrollment has become a higher-stakes part of institutional strategy. As colleges and universities face mounting financial pressure, shifting student demand, and growing scrutiny of higher education's value, graduate programs are increasingly relied upon to drive enrollment growth and provide revenue stability. But the path to growth is becoming more difficult. Prospective students are harder to reach, increasingly cost-conscious, and more discerning about whether a program will fit their goals, schedules, and financial realities.

Findings from Our Survey of 8,000+ Graduate and Adult Learners



► Explore the full student survey findings: [The New Rules of Engagement for Enrolling Today's Adult Learners](#).

Market Pressures Are Expanding

In addition to changing student needs and expectations, graduate enrollment teams are facing different in-kind headwinds due to changing federal policies and AI's impact on how students discover and engage with programs. At a time when budgets are tight and the wrong investment can be costly, institutions can no longer rely on historical recruitment tactics, broad program growth, or quick operational fixes to meet their enrollment goals. Graduate enrollment leaders are operating in a market where growth is still possible, but it feels harder to capture. The institutions best positioned to succeed will protect team capacity, use AI and data more strategically, make disciplined program bets, and communicate value in ways that reflect what prospective students most care about.

Using This Report

To help university leaders get a better sense of the complex graduate enrollment landscape, EAB partnered with NAGAP on a series of surveys of graduate enrollment managers. Conducted between September 2025 and February 2026, the three surveys explored a variety of topics relevant to graduate enrollment leaders, from staffing challenges and the growing use of AI to enrollment outcomes and recruitment tactics. This report compiles findings from these surveys to help graduate enrollment leaders optimize their internal operations and recruitment strategies.

► Where applicable, findings are compared to results from previous years' surveys.

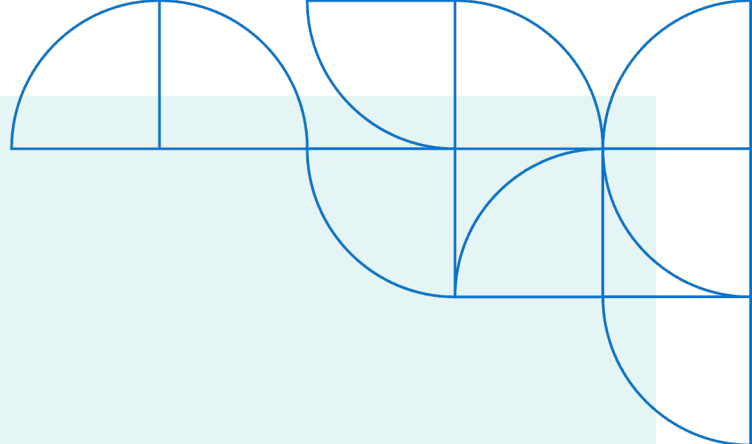


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Protect Capacity and Modernize Graduate Enrollment Operations

SECTION

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Use AI for Strategic Advantage, Not Just Efficiency

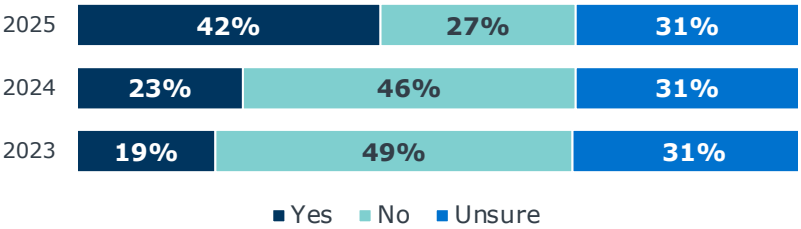
Nearly Half of Enrollment Teams Are Using AI

Enrollment leaders’ familiarity with AI has increased sharply. In 2023, 25% of survey respondents had never used AI. Now, this is the case for only 5% of respondents. For the first time, intermediate AI users represent the majority instead of beginners. Respondents from private institutions were most likely to say they were advanced AI users.

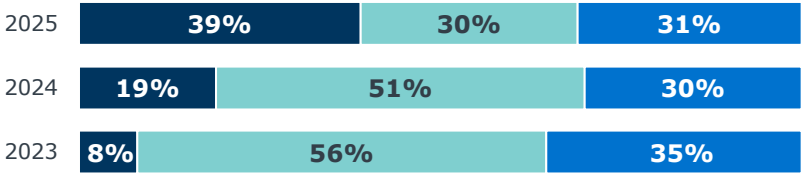
The adoption of AI in marketing and enrollment efforts has also increased compared with previous years, from 19% in 2023 to 42% in 2025. A significant 39% have made the adoption of AI tools a strategic priority.

Of the AI tools available, 95% of respondents report using ChatGPT, followed by Microsoft Copilot at 46%.

Is your institution using AI for its marketing and/or enrollment efforts?



Has your institution made the adoption of AI tools a strategic priority?

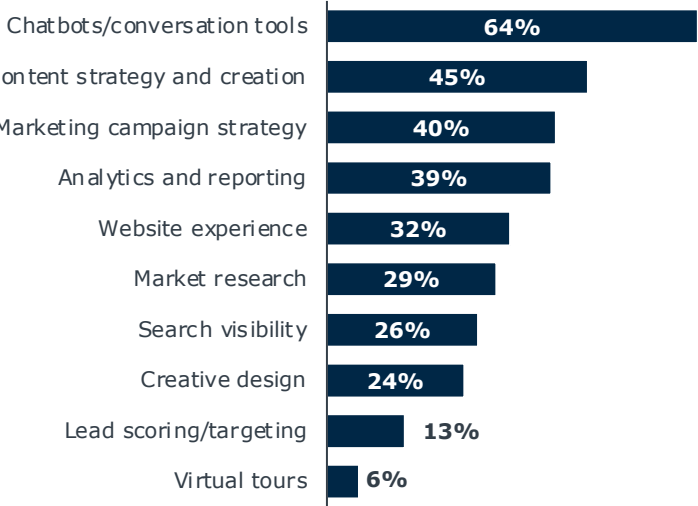


Enrollment Leaders Use AI to Save Time or Extend Staff Capacity

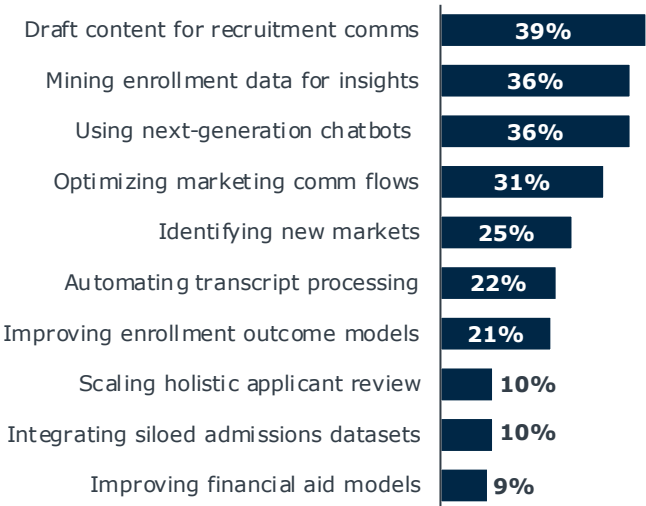
Among survey respondents, the most common applications of AI are ones that help teams act faster. Enrollment leaders say their teams most often use AI to [support chatbots](#) and in content creation. While valuable, these use cases are more focused on building efficiency, not optimizing strategy.

However, when asked which use cases are most compelling, strategic purposes become more prominent year over year. Use cases such as improving staff members’ ability to mine enrollment data for actionable insights grew from 26% in 2023 to 36% in 2025. As enrollment leaders become more confident in their AI expertise, their ability to use AI more strategically grows as well.

In which of the following areas is your institution using AI for marketing and/or enrollment efforts?



Which uses of AI in admissions do you find the most compelling? (top 10 responses)



As AI Usage Grows, Enrollment Leaders’ Concerns Shift from Cost to Risk

Enrollment leaders’ concerns about AI use have shifted as AI adoption has matured. In previous surveys, enrollment leaders most often expressed concern about barriers to getting started, such as the cost of tools and training and the competitive disadvantage of institutions with fewer resources. However, those concerns have softened since 2023. Now, enrollment leaders’ top concerns are more directly tied to the consequences of actual use: mistakes or “hallucinations,” the integrity of student applications, inadvertently sharing proprietary or personal information, and legal exposure.

What are your greatest fears concerning the use of AI in admissions? (top seven responses)

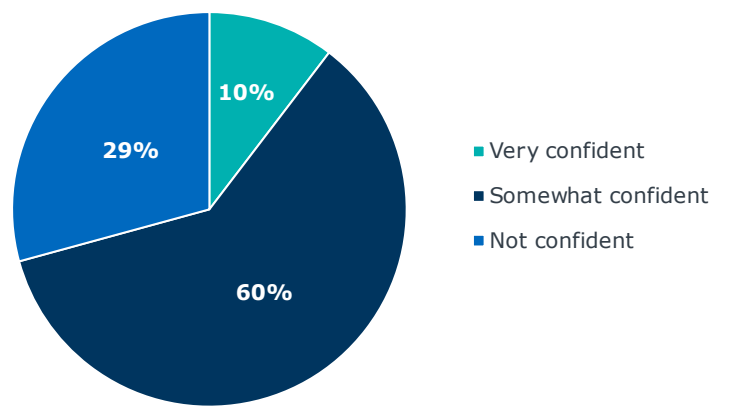
	Sept '25	Sept '24	Sept '23
Mistakes or “hallucinations” from the AI	41%	—	—
Integrity of student applications	39%	41%	—
Inadvertently sharing proprietary/personal information	33%	25%	24%
Cost of acquisition of tools and training	24%	34%	36%
Exposure to legal risk	24%	21%	31%
Introduction of bias in candidate assessment	22%	23%	27%
Uneven playing field against institutions spending more	22%	24%	30%

Choice not included in previous survey indicated by —

Leaders Are Not Confident in How Their Institutions Show Up in AI-Powered Search

That same shift is also visible in how leaders think about [AI-powered search](#). Our recent [survey of graduate and adult students](#) found that students’ use of AI tools in the program search process increased by more than fivefold from 2024 to 2025. As prospective students rely on AI to evaluate programs, enrollment leaders are growing more concerned about whether their institutions are represented accurately in AI-generated answers. Nearly one in three enrollment leaders says they are not confident in how their institution appears in AI-powered search, reinforcing that AI concerns are no longer just about adoption costs but about trust, control, and institutional risk.

How confident are you in the accuracy of how your institution appears in AI-powered search platforms?



Know Where Your Institution Stands in AI Search—And What to Do Next

EAB’s AI Search Optimization (GEO) Solutions help institutions understand and improve how they appear across LLMs and AI-driven search platforms. Purpose-built for higher education, our GEO dashboard tracks visibility across 12+ AI models in one place. We pair insight with expert guidance and optional implementation support so your team can act quickly and improve marketing and enrollment outcomes.

 See how EAB can support your GEO strategy at EAB.com/GEO.

Your Team's Next Steps

To realize AI's full potential, institutions must pair discernment with clear safeguards and strategic intent. That means prioritizing the right use cases, setting governance around risk and brand, and connecting AI investments directly to enrollment outcomes.



Prioritize 2–3 AI use cases tied to measurable enrollment outcomes.

Step 1



Create guidelines for privacy, accuracy, brand voice, and human review.

Step 2



Connect AI use to enrollment strategy, not just efficiency and automation.

Step 3

How EAB Can Help



Improve Search Visibility

Optimize website content, organization, and usability to [improve AI search](#) results



Hyper-Personalize Outreach

Adjust [messaging, cadence, and timing](#) based on student behavior and preferences



Enhance Engagement

Improve real-time prospect engagement using [AI-powered chatbots](#)

Repair Burnout Before It Weakens Staff Capacity

Eighty-Five Percent of Enrollment Leaders Are at Least Moderately Stressed at Work

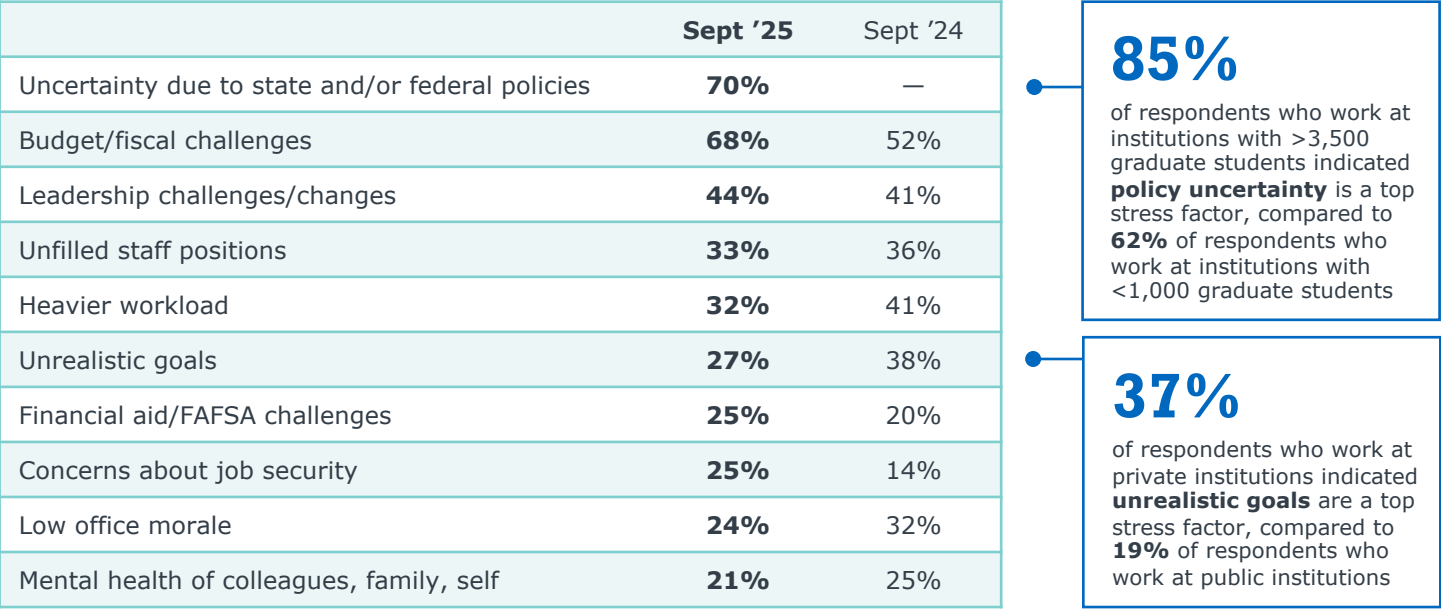
Most enrollment leaders (85%) describe their current work situation as at least moderately stressful, and 53% say it is more stressful now than it was this time last year. Survey results show that Millennial and Gen X respondents were especially likely to report that stress increased year over year, while Gen Z and Boomers were more likely to say they were not experiencing high levels of stress.

Stress Is Increasingly Driven by Forces Outside the Office

According to this year’s survey respondents, the most common workplace stressors are not short-term workflow problems such as lack of flexibility or conflict among co-workers. Instead, respondents cite broader structural challenges as the primary sources of their stress: state and [federal policy uncertainty](#), financial strain, and leadership changes.

► Review our playbook for protecting enrollments amid changing aid policy: [The End of Grad Plus](#).

What factors are influencing the stressfulness of your current work situation? (Select all that apply; top ten)



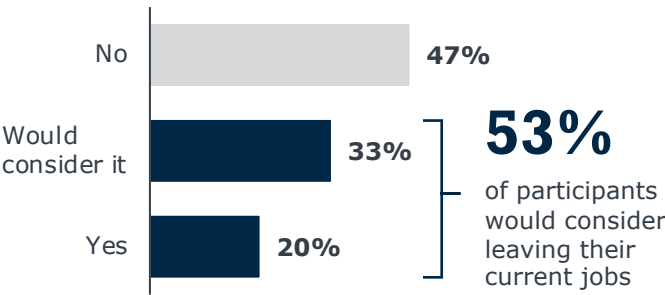
Choice not included in previous survey indicated by —

Burnout and Low Morale Pose Real Retention Risks

Forty-seven percent of graduate enrollment management (GEM) leaders say they are not considering leaving their current position, leaving 53% of staff willing to consider it.

While unfilled positions and heavier workloads are contributing to enrollment leaders’ stress less than they did in 2024, unresolved stressors could still weaken morale and increase feelings of burnout. If underlying drivers of stress go unaddressed, retaining talent will become harder.

Are you considering leaving your current position?



Your Team's Next Steps

High stress, low morale, and rising retention concerns indicate a need for more intentional workflow management across enrollment teams. Leaders need a clearer view of where staff time is going by asking questions like:

- ▶ **Which tasks are actually helping to recruit, admit, or enroll students?**
- ▶ **Which functions are necessary but taking too much time?**
- ▶ **Which tasks could be simplified, redistributed, or handled by an external partner?**

By clarifying swim lanes, reducing redundancies, and setting expectations based on actual workload complexity, leaders can strengthen both staff experience and team capacity.



Reassess where staff time is going. Distinguish high-impact work from time-intensive or highly complex functions.

Assess Time Allocation



Review staff roles, workflows, and processes to create clear swim lanes and reduce redundancies among staff.

Reduce Redundant Tasks



Build staffing models that reflect complexity and average completion timelines to clarify expectations and responsibilities.

Review Staffing Models

How EAB Can Help

EAB's [Adult Learner Recruitment](#) solution helps graduate programs generate leads, improve their nurture campaigns, and convert those leads into enrollments through decades of best-practice research and expert guidance. EAB's team can support graduate programs that are looking to [reduce internal load](#) by supporting functions that:

- ▶ Need scale
- ▶ Require specialized knowledge
- ▶ Are time- and labor-intensive



Identify and Prioritize the Right Enrollment Bets

SECTION

2

Use Revenue Data s the True Measure of Success

Enrollment Leaders’ Top Objectives Were Enrollment and Revenue Growth

Nearly eight in ten respondents selected higher enrollments in academic programs as a top priority, making it the top objective by a wide margin. More revenue/net tuition was the second-highest priority, selected by nearly half of respondents.

What were the top priorities for your unit during the 2025–26 enrollment cycle? (Responses >10%)

	Sept '25
Higher enrollments in various programs	80%
More revenue/net tuition	49%
Higher percentage of online students	19%
Greater ethnic/racial diversity	16%
More full-pay students	13%
Higher percentage of out-of-state students	13%

77%
of respondents who support online programs are prioritizing net tuition revenue (NTR), compared to **35%** of respondents who support on-campus programs only

One in Four GEM Leaders’ Goals Were Influenced by Shortfalls in Undergraduate Enrollment

27%
of respondents said their graduate enrollment goals were influenced by a shortfall in undergraduate enrollment

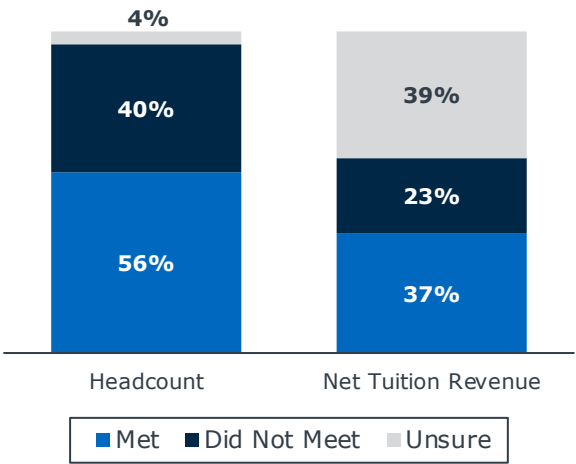
For more than a quarter of respondents, enrollment goals were shaped by undergraduate enrollment shortfalls. This is especially true for respondents from institutions with fewer than 1,000 graduate students, where 43% reported that this was the case. This further underscores the role graduate programs are asked to play in institutional financial sustainability.

Graduate Programs May Be Growing in Ways That Are Not Financially Sustainable

In this year’s survey, 56% of respondents reported that they met their headcount goals, a slightly smaller portion of respondents compared to the 62% who met their headcount goals in 2024. Meanwhile, net tuition revenue (NTR) performance was far weaker, with only 37% meeting their goals. NTR outcomes were also marked by substantial uncertainty; 39% of enrollment leaders said they are not sure if they met NTR goals. Graduate enrollment management professionals from private institutions and institutions with fewer than 1,000 graduate students were more likely to report meeting their NTR goals than GEM professionals from public institutions and institutions with more than 1,000 graduate students.

A sustainable and successful graduate enrollment strategy requires visibility into both the number of students enrolled and the net tuition those students generate. Decisions regarding goals, investments, and strategies should reflect these priorities.

Did you meet your 2025 enrollment goals?



Integrate Staff Input to Improve Enrollment Goal Buy-In

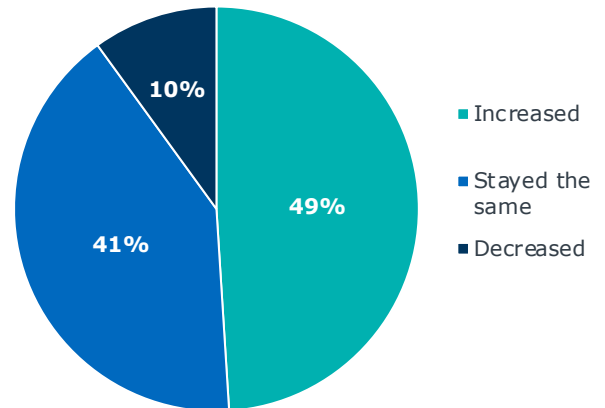
Enrollment Goals Increased for Nearly Half of Respondents

Nearly half of GEM professionals (49%) reported that their enrollment goals increased from the prior year, while 41% said their goals stayed the same. Just 10% reported a decrease in their enrollment goals.

Although 42% of enrollment leaders saw enrollment declines over the past three years (since spring 2023), nearly half of current enrollment leaders are still faced with higher enrollment goals year over year. Respondents who manage enrollment for online and/or hybrid programs more often reported increases in their enrollment goals.

At the time of this survey in September 2025, 57% of graduate enrollment leaders said they were unsure or not on track to meet their unit’s headcount goal for the next semester. This further highlights the concerning high enrollment goals set for these programs or the struggle to meet them, even if they do feel realistic.

Compared with last year, how have your enrollment goals changed?

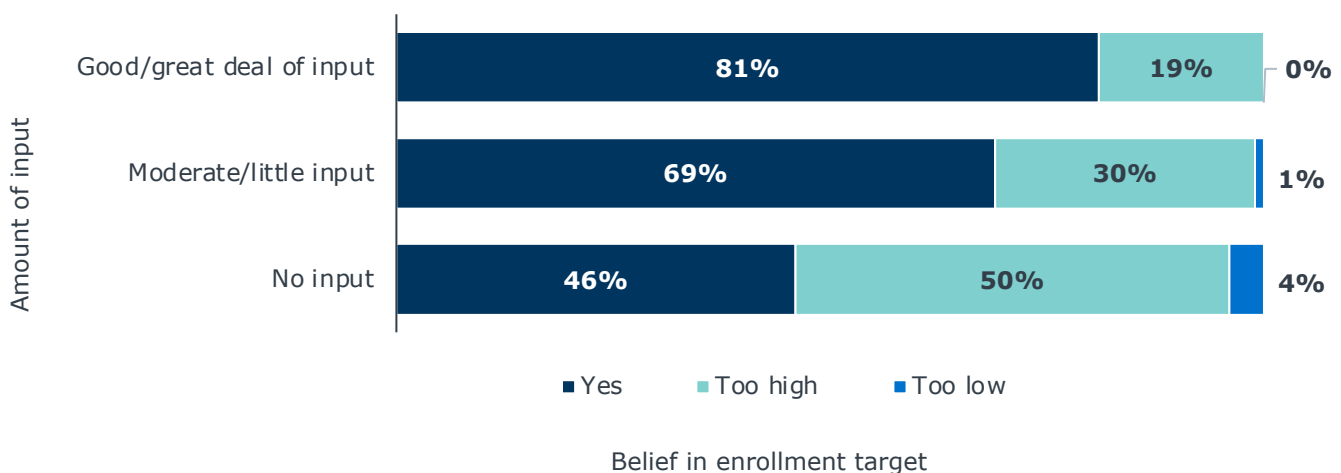


Goal Attainment Improves When Team Members Have a Voice in Setting Goals

The level of input that GEM professionals have in setting a unit’s enrollment goals has remained relatively consistent since we first included this line of questioning in 2022. However, nearly half of respondents had little to no role in shaping the goals they are expected to help achieve. In 2025, 35% said they had a great deal or good amount of input, 37% reported moderate to little input, and 28% reported none.

Unsurprisingly, respondents with more influence in goal-setting were far more likely to view their enrollment targets as realistic. As institutions continue to raise enrollment expectations, involving GEM teams earlier in the [goal-setting process](#) can help create targets that staff understand, believe in, and are better positioned to meet.

Do you believe the enrollment targets for your unit are realistic? vs. How much input do you have in setting goals?



Your Team's Next Steps

As enrollment goals continue to rise, institutions need a more cohesive process for setting and managing those targets. The survey findings indicate that staff buy-in improves when teams understand how enrollment goals were created, see how institutional priorities connect to their daily work, and have a voice in shaping expectations. Where possible, consider involving more stakeholders, clarifying assumptions made in the goal-setting process, translating goals into unit-level action, and sharing progress toward goals transparently.



Bring staff into goal-setting early so targets reflect on-the-ground realities and earn stronger team buy-in.

Step 1: Involve Stakeholders



Convert institution-level enrollment targets into clear unit-level priorities, actions, and ownership.

Step 2: Translate Goals



Explain the data, constraints, and assumptions behind each goal so teams understand the rationale behind it.

Step 3: Clarify Assumptions



Give teams regular visibility into progress so they can adjust tactics, remove barriers, and stay aligned.

Step 4: Share Progress

How EAB Can Help

EAB helps graduate programs set smarter enrollment and revenue goals by pairing market insight, recruitment strategy, and financial modeling to identify where growth is most achievable and sustainable.

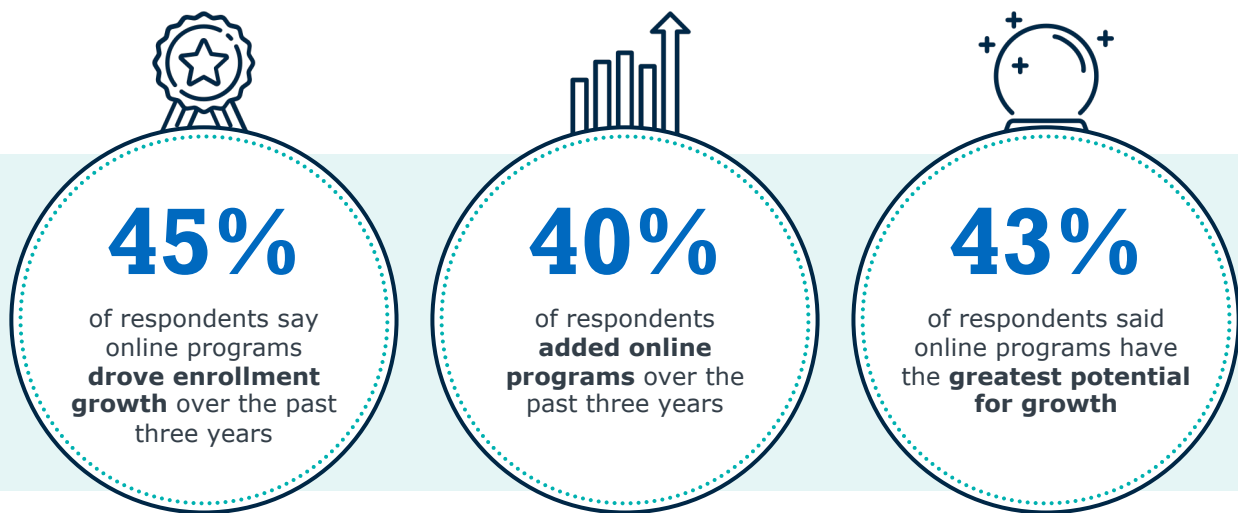
► Watch our on-demand webinar: [Crafting Smart Graduate Enrollment Goals by Harnessing Data.](#)

Determine Program Differentiators Before Investing

Nearly Half of Respondents Are Betting on Online Programs to Support Enrollment Growth

Survey respondents most frequently identified online programs as drivers of enrollment growth. As such, respondents have focused on adding new online programs in recent years. The focus on online programs matches trends in student expectations and interests too. In our [recent survey of graduate and adult learners](#), nearly a quarter shared a preference for online programs.

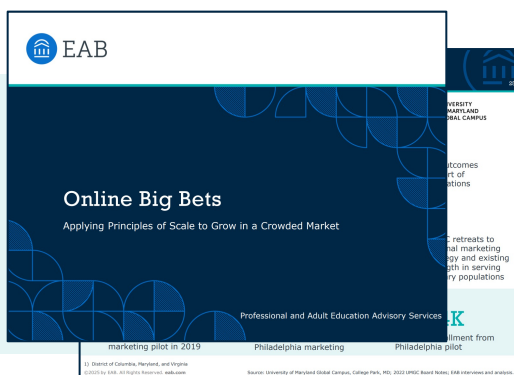
Outcomes and Outlook on Online Programs



Although online programs stand out as an opportunity for many graduate enrollment teams, online growth requires more than converting an existing program to a new format. For starters, it will require strong program design, known student and [employer demand](#), clear market positioning, and the ability to compete in a crowded online market. The best bets will be programs where online delivery expands access without diluting quality or differentiation.

Competition for Online Programs Expands Beyond Local Markets

Online programs expand reach and opportunity in new markets, but they also expand competition. Once programs move online, institutions are no longer competing with just regional peers. Online programs are competing with national brands, including lower-cost, non-university providers such as Coursera and Grow with Google. To succeed in this larger market, online programs need a clear value proposition, strong recruitment infrastructure, and a differentiated reason for students to choose them.



Access More Insights on Growing Online Enrollment

[This presentation](#) addresses the realities of today's online learning landscape and what it takes to achieve sustainable growth. As institutions look to online education as an opportunity to generate revenue, this session will help institutions determine where they have the best chance to succeed in an increasingly competitive space.

Business, STEM, Allied Health, and Nursing Offer Opportunity—but with Different Risk Profiles

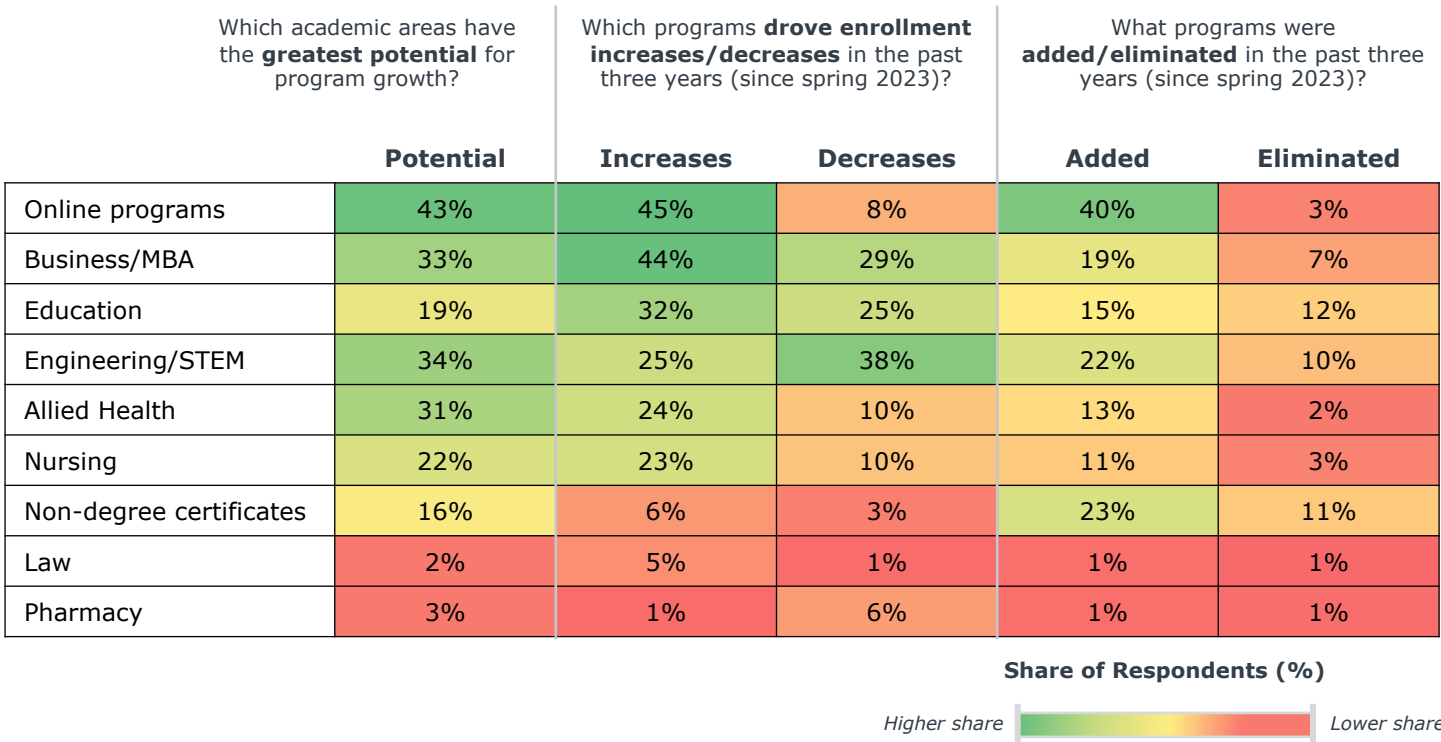
Business, STEM, allied health, and nursing programs all show signs of opportunity. For example, public institutions were more likely to cite graduate business programs as a growth driver, while private institutions were more likely to report declines in business enrollment. Engineering/STEM programs also show meaningful growth potential and contributed to enrollment increases for some institutions, yet STEM contributed to enrollment decreases for the largest proportion of respondents. According to [NSC data](#), graduate programs in health professions, business, and education had the highest enrollments for Fall 2025, corroborating the insights from the survey.

STEM’s International Pipeline Is Closing

For more than a decade, STEM graduate programs could count on a steady international cohort to round out their classes. That foundation is now shifting rapidly as political changes impact international students.

▶ Learn more about [STEM graduate enrollment disruptions](#).

Enrollment leaders should not treat every high-demand field as a safe bet. A program that works well for one institution may struggle at another due to several reasons, such as competition, pricing, faculty capacity or expertise, clinical facilities, employer demand, or brand fit. Teams should assess each program opportunity through both an external market lens and an internal capacity lens. The strategic questions should focus more on whether your institution has the capacity and [differentiation](#) to grow programs successfully, not just if there is general demand.



Certificates Have a High Degree of Experimentation but Haven’t Seen a Strong Payoff Yet

Non-degree certificates are an area of experimentation for enrollment leaders more than a proven enrollment driver. Although many institutions have added [certificate offerings](#), only 6% of respondents cited them as growth drivers, and 16% identified certificates as high-potential areas. Graduate enrollment leaders who have added certificate programs or are considering doing so should evaluate whether those certificates serve a clear purpose, such as brand and workforce alignment, stackable pathways, or revenue diversification.

Your Team's Next Steps

Surveyed enrollment leaders indicated online, business, STEM, allied health, and nursing programs all present opportunity, but growth potential alone shouldn't drive investment decisions. Even high-demand areas can underperform if they lack operational readiness or a clear, differentiated value proposition for the students they want to serve. The strongest program opportunities are those where market demand, institutional strengths, and capacity align.

Four Questions to Ask Before Investing in a Program



Is there durable student and employer demand?

Market Demand



Does this program support our brand and academic strengths?

Institutional Fit



Do we have the capacity and expertise to deliver and scale the program well?

Operational Capacity



Would students choose us over lower-cost or better-known competitors?

Differentiation

How EAB Can Help

EAB can help graduate and adult-serving programs identify the program features, outcomes, and student experiences that make each offering distinct and differentiated from those of their competitors.

- ▶ Use the tools in our workbook: [*Differentiating Your Graduate and Online Programs*](#).
- ▶ Watch our on-demand webinar: [*Differentiating Your Graduate and Adult-Serving Programs in a Competitive Market*](#).



Refine Engagement Tactics Amid Market Headwinds

SECTION

3

Reframe Messaging to Reflect What Prospects Care About

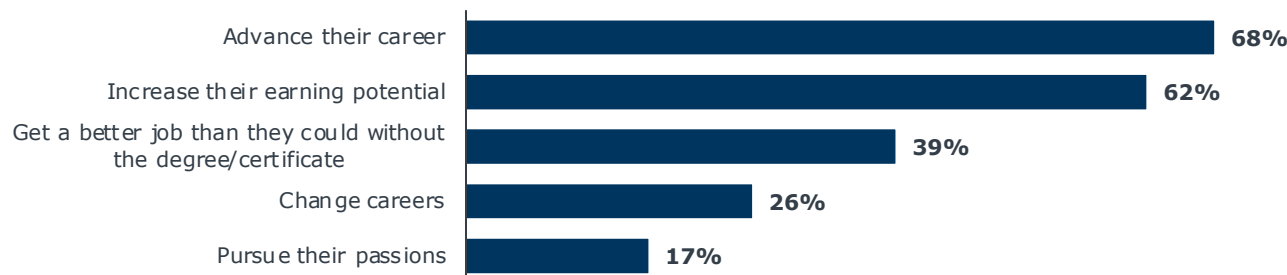
Value Messaging Is a Top Recruitment Priority

Communicating the value of graduate education was respondents’ top priority for the next enrollment cycle, selected by 39% of GEM professionals. As prospective graduate students continue to question the value of furthering their education, that focus is well placed. Institutions are under pressure to make the case for graduate education clearly, early, and repeatedly to gain the trust of prospective students.

Yet many leaders still think that student motivators are rooted squarely in career advancement and earning potential. These factors matter and are key motivators for many students, but they don’t capture the full range of reasons prospective students consider a graduate education.

What do you believe are the primary motivations for prospective students to further their education?

(select up to three; top five responses shown)



Prospects Weigh Outcomes, Purpose, and Personal Gratification

Our [recent survey of prospective and current graduate students](#) reveals the broader mix of motivations that lead students to pursue a graduate education. While prospects are motivated by practical outcomes such as career advancement and earning potential, they also cite more personal and purpose-driven reasons for pursuing a graduate degree. Surveyed students more often identify pursuing their passions, making a difference, and pursuing their interests in greater depth as reasons for seeking an advanced degree than increasing their earning potential. The strongest recruitment messages will connect career progress, personal purpose, and practical support to show prospects not only what the degree can help them earn but also who it can help them become.

From student survey: What are your primary reasons for furthering your education?

(select up to three; top five responses shown)



Your Team's Next Steps

Every prospective graduate student has [unique motivations](#), expectations, and preferences. Prospects are weighing practical program outcomes alongside personal fit, purpose, and flexibility—often in ways that differ from what enrollment leaders assume. To make value messaging more persuasive, institutions need to start with students' actual goals and decision drivers, not an internal view of what enrollment leaders *think* matters most. An effective [lead nurture strategy](#) uses student intent to personalize marketing messaging and cadence. Messages—and the cadence in which they're sent—should adjust to the online and digital behaviors of your prospective students.

► Review our report: [Hyper-Personalized Enrollment Marketing](#)



Understand student goals and preferences more clearly.

Step 1



Customize recruitment copy around what you know about your students.

Step 2



Highlight affordability, outcomes, flexibility, and purpose publicly.

Step 3

How EAB Can Help

EAB can help graduate and adult-serving programs improve their messaging by giving teams the tools and data to understand graduate students' goals and preferences and translate those insights into a [hyper-personalized campaign](#) strategy.

► Explore our report: [The New Rules of Engagement for Enrolling Today's Adult Learners](#).

Coordinate Recruitment Across a Diverse Channel Mix

Events Remain the Most Impactful Recruitment Activity, but the Gap Has Nearly Closed

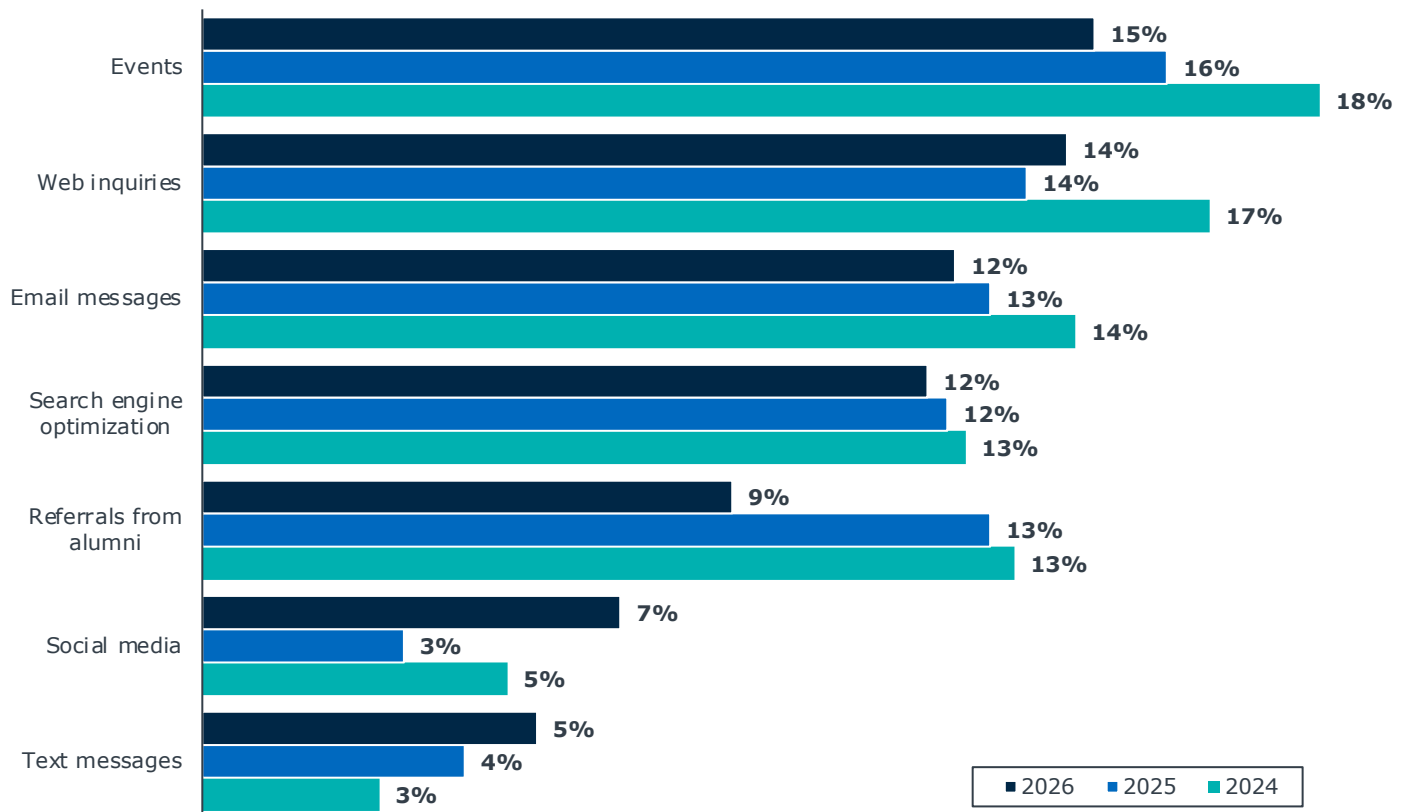
As in prior years, graduate enrollment leaders identified events as the most effective recruitment activity in 2026, but events are no longer a clear standout. Just 15% of respondents selected events as driving the most enrollments, down from 18.3% in 2024. Events are followed closely by web inquiries, email, and search engine optimization (SEO). The top four recruitment activities identified as most effective by GEM leaders are separated by fewer than three percentage points, underscoring the multichannel nature of graduate student recruitment.

AI Search Optimization

At the time of the survey in February 2026, Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) was not included as a survey response option.

▶ Learn more about [EAB's GEO solutions](#).

Which recruitment activities have provided the best outcomes in terms of graduate enrollments?
(responses >5%; not shown: corporate partnerships, phone campaigns, chatbots, mailed pieces)



The Most Effective Channels Work in Tandem to Create a Cohesive Prospect Experience

The year-over-year survey data shows that the recruitment landscape is in a state of flux. Many of these channels represent smaller shares, but their changing impact shows that direct and conversational outreach is becoming more relevant as prospect behavior changes.

This data is directionally helpful, but it shouldn't lead enrollment teams to declare one best recruitment activity or to discount another. Instead, enrollment leaders should acknowledge how the market continues to evolve. More importantly, recruitment activities should all work together and share the same branding to create a seamless prospect experience. A student who finds a program through search, submits a web inquiry, attends an event, and receives an email should experience one cohesive enrollment journey. To improve outcomes, enrollment teams should coordinate these touchpoints into a responsive recruitment engine and continually assess their channel mix as student behavior and channel effectiveness shift.

Your Team's Next Steps

The most effective recruitment channels have changed over time—and AI will only continue to change the ways marketing and enrollment teams use and prioritize these platforms. Institutions need a regular cadence for reviewing channel performance and testing new channel combinations rather than relying on long-standing assumptions about how graduate prospects engage with institutions.

Build a coordinated multichannel recruitment engine



Align recruitment campaigns with prospect behavior across channels.



Treat the website as a conversion asset, not just an information hub.



Optimize content for AI-powered search and discovery.



Use Paid Social to extend reach in priority markets and audiences.



Build alumni touchpoints into the recruitment journey.



Manage phone, text, and email messages around clear next-best actions.

How EAB Can Help

EAB helps graduate and adult-serving programs coordinate digital, email, paid media, event, and other lead sources into a more cohesive recruitment engine.

► Review our [blog](#) to learn five elements of effective lead nurture campaigns.

Be Adaptable as Economic Pressures Reshape the Market

The Graduate Market Is Subject to Questions Around Affordability, Funding, and Value

Enrollment leaders expect that the next three to five years will be defined by economic pressure. Respondents identified reduced federal support, rising costs, and declining university budgets as the most significant—and most negative—forces shaping graduate enrollment. To reach students, enrollment professionals need sharper proof points around affordability, career outcomes, funding options, and the real return students can expect from your degree.

Other trends viewed as more negative included the impending demographic cliff, which will constrict the size of the market; more competitors in the graduate enrollment space; the reallocation of university budgets; more institutions offering fully online degrees; and students opting to enter the job market instead of pursuing a graduate degree.

Which of the following trends do you think will have the greatest positive or negative impact on graduate enrollment over the next 3–5 years?

Top Market Headwinds

Trend	Negative Impact
Decrease in federal support/funding for graduate education	85%
Increasing cost of higher education	80%
Decrease in university budgets	80%
Less financial aid available for graduate students	78%
More students questioning the value of higher education	78%
Fewer international students enrolling	72%

Top Growth Levers

Trend	Positive Impact
Development of corporate partnerships	80%
Artificial intelligence	70%
Programs offering merit aid to graduate students	65%
More Gen Z students comprising the graduate population	48%

Institutions That Act Intentionally on Emerging Trends Will See the Most Growth Opportunities

Even in a financially constrained market, respondents identified several trends that could have positive implications for graduate enrollment growth. Corporate partnerships, AI, and merit aid stood out as the strongest positive forces. Despite the outsized focus on headwinds in the graduate market, institutions still have ways to expand reach, improve fit, and reduce barriers for prospective students.

► Review our resource: [Toolkit to Grow Employer Partnerships](#).

To see the greatest impact of these opportunities, enrollment teams need to move faster and more intentionally than their competitors. For example, enrollment teams that use AI to improve prospect engagement and optimize website strategy in the AI-search era will gain visibility and trust among prospects. Programs that structure merit aid around student decision drivers and who build employer-connected pathways will be better positioned to build and convert demand in an increasingly ROI-conscious market.

Competitive Threats Vary by Program Type

The survey data also shows that market pressures are not felt evenly. For example, respondents from institutions with more graduate students, who rely on broader pipelines to sustain their scale, were more likely to worry about the shrinking international pipeline. GEM professionals from fully online programs, which often recruit working adults who are weighing graduate programs against immediate career opportunities, were more likely to see job market competition as a negative trend.

Your Team's Next Steps

Cost, competition, and skepticism are raising the bar for graduate enrollment strategy. Institutions that adapt quickly to market forces and move intentionally on their strongest growth opportunities will be better positioned to earn student trust and convert demand. Clearer messaging, sharper prioritization, and more disciplined execution will make the difference between institutions that let headwinds sideline their programs and institutions that come out ahead.



Identify the headwinds that matter most by program, modality, and audience.

Step 1



Prioritize growth levers where your team can move faster than competitors.

Step 2



Plan ahead for potential market disruptions.

Step 3

How EAB Can Help

EAB helps graduate and adult-serving programs move faster on the opportunities that matter most by helping teams adapt strategy to market shifts, strengthen value messaging, and execute coordinated recruitment campaigns.

► Review our compendium of partner success stories: [Graduate and Online Program Case Studies](#).

Survey Methodology

About the Survey

In their sixth year of research collaboration, EAB [Adult Learner Recruitment](#) and [NAGAP](#), The Association for Graduate Enrollment Management, investigated the graduate school landscape through a series of three brief surveys. The 556 unique respondents represent 357 unique institutions across the country and have 17 years of higher education experience, on average.

1

Conducted from September 9 to October 6, 2025, the **first survey** asked graduate enrollment managers and other higher education professionals about their **current work environment** and **use of artificial intelligence**.

2

Conducted from November 4 to November 25, 2025, the **second survey** asked graduate enrollment managers and other higher education professionals about their institutions' **performance on key graduate enrollment metrics**.

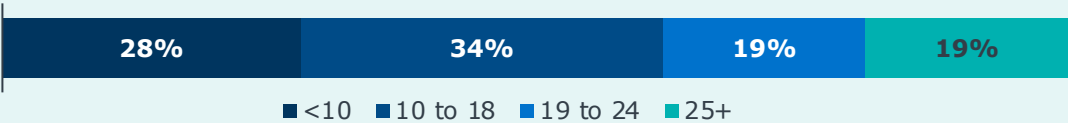
3

Conducted from February 3 to February 24, 2026, the **third survey** asked graduate enrollment managers and other higher education professionals about their institutions' **marketing and recruitment tactics**.

Participant Profile



Years of Experience



85%

Oversee enrollment, recruitment, and admissions functions*

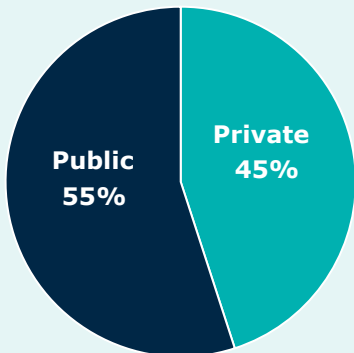


33%

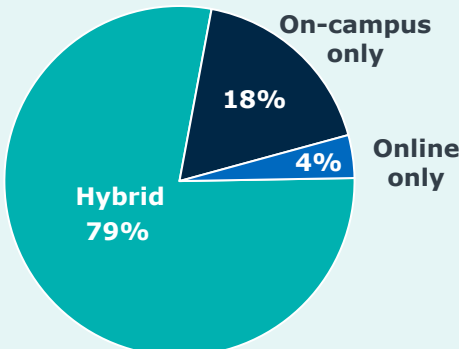
Oversee marketing and communications functions*



Institution Structure



Instruction Type



* Participants could select more than one area of responsibility.



Adult Learner Recruitment

Outperform the Market at Every Stage of the Funnel



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



Strategize

Identify and build market-ready programs for competitive advantage

What Makes Us Different

Unrivaled Mix
of Proprietary and
Known Lead Sources

**Turnkey,
Full-Funnel**
Conversion Engine

24/7, Transparent
Access to Campaign
Data and Full
Attribution

Rigorous Testing
to Stay Ahead in a
Dynamic Market

Proven Impact in a Dynamic Landscape

200+

Partner institutions

40+

Years of higher
education expertise

6:1

Average ROI across
multiyear partnership

18%

Average graduate
enrollment growth

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 more than 2,800 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 enrollment, student success, institutional strategy, data analytics, and advancement. 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.