

PLAYBOOK

Competing for Graduate Leads in a Shrinking Market

Four Strategies to Reach and Convert Prospects



Executive Overview

A Dual Challenge

Graduate enrollment teams face a dual challenge: identifying the right students and persuading them to enroll. Today’s prospects are more cautious and cost-conscious than ever, with **80%** shopping for programs in stealth mode and many questioning whether a graduate degree is worth the investment. At the same time, traditional lead sources like test-taker lists and [international pools are shrinking](#), leaving institutions with fewer high-intent prospects at the top of the funnel and less time to build trust.

To stay competitive, marketing and enrollment leaders need to engage high-potential prospects earlier and prove the value of their programs in ways that resonate with students.

This playbook offers four practical strategies to help you do both: [attract stronger leads](#) and give them the confidence to take the next step.

It’s Harder to Find—and Convince—the Right Graduate Prospects to Enroll

Stealth Shoppers



80%

Graduate prospects remain **invisible** to schools until they apply, up from 20% in 2014

Cost-Conscious



36%

Graduate prospects cite high program costs as the **top barrier** to returning to school

Crisis of Confidence



32%

Americans have **little or no confidence** in higher education, up from 10% in 2015

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Apply Advance, EAB’s Graduate Lead Generation Solution



Apply Advance is a graduate and adult student-focused lead generation platform that helps adult students plan for the next step in their educational journey through career pathing and program research. Apply generates high-intent leads for graduate and adult-serving programs to quickly boost their enrollment.

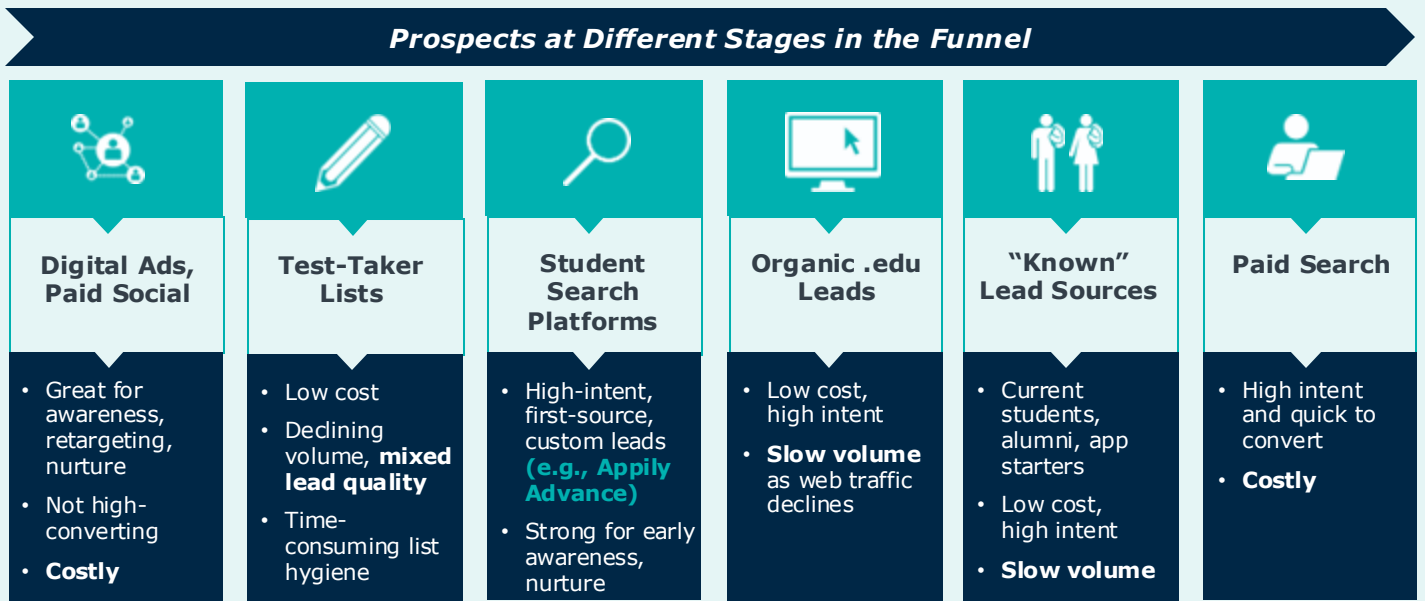
To learn more, visit eab.com/apply-advance.

Strategy 1: Expand Your Top-of-Funnel Reach

Before you can engage the right students, you need to find them. But with fewer traditional sources, declining organic traffic as [AI reshapes search](#), and rising ad costs, many schools are struggling to expand their top of the funnel. To improve reach and lead quality, enrollment teams need a [smarter, more diversified lead generation strategy](#). **Use the framework below to assess your current lead mix and identify gaps.**

What Is a “Diversified Lead Generation Strategy”?

A diversified lead generation strategy draws from multiple sources at every stage of the funnel. To maintain a high volume of the right leads, focus on curating a balanced mix of sources.



Three Quick Checks to Assess Your Current Lead Gen Strategy

1 Maximizing traditional sources

We use all available traditional and “known” sources, such as test-taker lists, current students, and alumni.

We effectively track engagement from known channels (e.g., website traffic, alumni outreach).

Outreach to “known” leads (e.g., alumni or site visitors) should differ from outreach to new prospects. [Use distinct messaging for each group.](#)

2 Leveraging nontraditional sources

We source leads from high-intent, first-source providers who can identify early interest and other key data.

We use paid search, ads, and emerging channels to expand our prospect pool.

Apply Advance leads respond 27% faster than names from schools’ test-taker lists

3 Targeting the right students

We’ve clearly defined our ideal student profile and aligned our outreach and messaging to match.

A clear student profile helps you focus outreach on who’s most likely to engage and enroll.

Strategy 2: Prove Program Value Early

Skepticism and cost-consciousness are higher than ever among today's graduate prospects. **More than a third** choose not to enroll because of cost, yet **41% still say they would return to school to advance their careers**. The challenge for schools is capturing that interest and proving value quickly. While most prospective students visit the website of each school they are considering, they spend only 90 seconds there on average. Institutions must demonstrate value early to capture attention and sustain engagement.

Lead with [outcomes-focused messaging](#) that highlights labor market demand, career options, and salary potential. Showcase employer partnerships, job placement rates, and other concrete data that demonstrate success. Just as important, list information about cost, including tuition and fees, clearly and prominently on program pages. Graduate education is a major investment, and institutions must show that the return is both clear and compelling. **Use the guide below to identify and share ROI proof points that will resonate with prospective students.**

Guide to Leveraging Program ROI

1

Identify valuable proof points about your program.

Example Stats:

Job placement rate Alumni and employer data and surveys
Workforce demand and salary potential Bureau of Labor Statistics (e.g., [Field of Degree](#))
Number and type of official employer or internship partners Program and internship data

Potential Sources:

2

Assign a team member to maintain a single source of truth that includes all ROI stats, the date obtained, and the source. Determine a review cadence (e.g., every six months, annually) to confirm accuracy and look for any new ROI points.



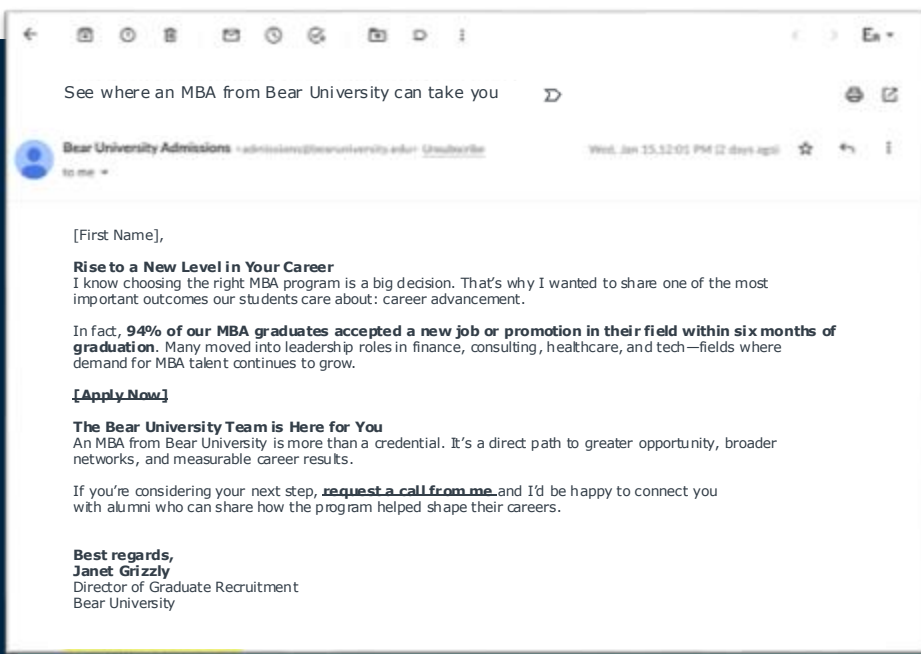
- ✓ Are the statistics or proof points we're sharing still accurate?
- ✓ Are there new proof points to include?
- ✓ Have the right campus stakeholders approved their use in marketing materials?

3

Ensure proof points are woven naturally into prospect messaging and program page content.

70%+

Apply Advance leads are 70%+ lower cost per lead on average than leads from Meta and LinkedIn



Strategy 3: Use Real Stories to Build Trust

Two-thirds of Gen Z turn to online reviews and peer recommendations before making a purchase, and this behavior extends to decisions about pursuing an advanced degree. Authentic voices from peers, alumni, and employers are among the most influential factors in student decision-making.

To build trust and credibility with prospective graduate students, [incorporate social proof](#), including alumni and student testimonials and employer endorsements, into your outreach. **Review the steps below to source and maximize social proof in your graduate marketing.**

Steps to Sourcing Social Proof

1

Select Strong Testimonial Candidates

Work with campus and program partners to identify students, alumni, or industry partners whose stories clearly demonstrate your program's ROI. Current students might highlight internships or networking opportunities, alumni can speak to promotions or career outcomes, and partners can showcase mentoring or hiring relationships.

▶ Sourcing candidates

Look for testimonial candidates via:

- Program, admissions, or tour ambassadors
- Student Affairs
- Alumni Services
- Employer partners
- Student surveys

▶ Candidate selection

Aim to create a diverse pool of testimonial candidates that reflects your student body:

- Backgrounds (e.g., working parent, first-generation)
- Race/ethnicity
- Gender
- Academic or career interests (e.g., accounting, marketing, analytics)



Before approving a testimonial candidate, review their public social media and school profile information to confirm there are no potential reputational concerns.

Could their public posts, affiliations, or comments be perceived negatively by prospective students?

2

Develop Your Testimonial Interview Questions

While you don't want to script testimonial responses, preparing a short list of thoughtful questions will help guide candidates to the most relevant themes. Tailor your questions by topic (e.g., career outcomes, academic success) and audience. AI tools such as ChatGPT can also help you generate ideas and refine wording.

Explore a few example questions below.

▶ Audience: Alumni

Topic: Career outcomes and ROI

1. How has your career advanced since completing the program (e.g., promotion, new responsibilities)?
2. What return have you seen on your investment in the degree (e.g., salary, opportunities, growth)?

▶ Audience: Employer partners

Topic: Job opportunities for students and alumni

1. What qualities or skills make graduates of this program stand out in your workplace?
2. How have interns or new hires from this program contributed to your team or organization?



Typical Recruitment Content

Innovate the field and explore your career potential by earning your master's degree.



Recruitment Content Featuring Social Proof

"Earning my master's landed me my dream job. My internship opportunity ensured I developed hands-on skills that my new employer values, letting me lead projects sooner."

-Jay, MBA '25

Strategy 4: Differentiate Your Value Proposition

With more graduate programs launching each year, prospects are inundated with look-alike messages about flexibility, academics, and career outcomes. At the same time, they apply to only a handful of schools and often rely solely on what they find online to make enrollment decisions. [Domestic graduate students applied to 3.08 schools](#) on average in 2024. To make that shortlist, your message must be distinctive.

Explore the tool below to test and sharpen your value proposition.

What is a Differentiated Value Proposition?

A [strong value proposition](#) sits where your program or institution's strengths align with your audience's priorities—and it must be clearly distinct from what competitors offer. Put simply, it answers: *"How do you meet student needs in a way no one else can?"*

A strong, differentiated value proposition should be stress-tested against the following criteria:



It's Relevant

- Addresses needs, pains, and gains that matter most to audience
- Expressed in audience's language



It's Difficult to Replicate

- Unique approach or asset
- Outperforms competition substantially on at least one dimension



It Reaches the Majority

- Most, if not all audience members participate and receive its benefits
- Integrated into core experience (non-optional)



It's Provable to the Market

- Outcomes data, social proof, external recognition
- Aligned with how audience measures success

Differentiation Starter Kit

Step 1

Consider the list of potential value drivers to the right.

- ▶ What are your top competitors claiming? Cross those items off the list.
- ▶ Check 2-3 remaining items that your program can claim.

Distinctive Academics

- ☐ Program Variety
- ☐ Program Quality
- ☐ Unique Programs
- ☐ Stackable Credentials
- ☐ Flexible Delivery
- ☐ Short Time to Completion
- ☐ Flexible Scheduling
- ☐ Class Size

Student Outcomes

- ☐ Employment
- ☐ Earnings
- ☐ In-Demand Skills
- ☐ Industries
- ☐ Portfolio

Price

- ☐ Low Net Price
- ☐ Low Price Relative to Competitors
- ☐ Payment Options
- ☐ Need-Based Aid
- ☐ Merit Aid
- ☐ High Transfer Credit Acceptance Rate

Step 2

- ▶ Review the differentiators you identified above and combine them to begin to create a value proposition, similar to the example to the right.

Your program's value proposition

Using differentiators from above



Example:



Real-World Projects

Students build an online portfolio in each class



Industry Experience

Industry expert liaison assigned to each course



Alumni Network

Our graduates lead 100+ Fortune 5000 companies

Takeaways

To compete in today's graduate market, schools must adapt to a new reality: harder-to-reach students, rising cost concerns, and the need for a distinctive value proposition that cuts through the noise. This playbook offers practical strategies to expand your reach, prove program ROI with confidence, and differentiate your story so the right students choose you.

1. Expand and diversify your funnel.

- Relying on shrinking lists and “known” sources isn't enough—**reach students earlier with a balanced mix of lead sources** across the funnel to maintain a steady pipeline and adapt to market shifts.
- Prioritize sources that can provide **high-intent leads**.



Related Resource: Building a Robust and Diversified Lead Generation Strategy

Most graduate and adult programs lack a central, reliable source of leads, making it difficult to build a cohesive top-of-funnel strategy. This toolkit builds on that challenge with guidance for creating a diversified lead generation approach that balances volume and quality. **Scan the QR code or [click here](#) to access the content.**

2. Prove value with clear ROI early and often.

- Skepticism and cost concerns persist—**prove the value of a graduate degree with clear outcomes** like job placement, salary growth, and employer partnerships.
- **Centralize and regularly update ROI data** so messaging stays accurate and consistent.



Related Resource: Improve Conversion with Value-Driven Messaging

Complete this toolkit to create a research plan to discover your audience's needs and concerns, develop a messaging strategy, and learn how to test marketing materials with your audience. **Scan the QR code or [click here](#) to access the content.**

3. Use real voices and distinct messaging.

- Graduate prospects increasingly rely on online reviews and peer recommendations when making decisions. **Share authentic stories** from students, alumni, and employers to build credibility and help prospects see their potential success.
- **Stress-test your value proposition** against audience needs and competitor claims to ensure your program stands out.



Related Resource: Differentiating Your Graduate and Online Programs

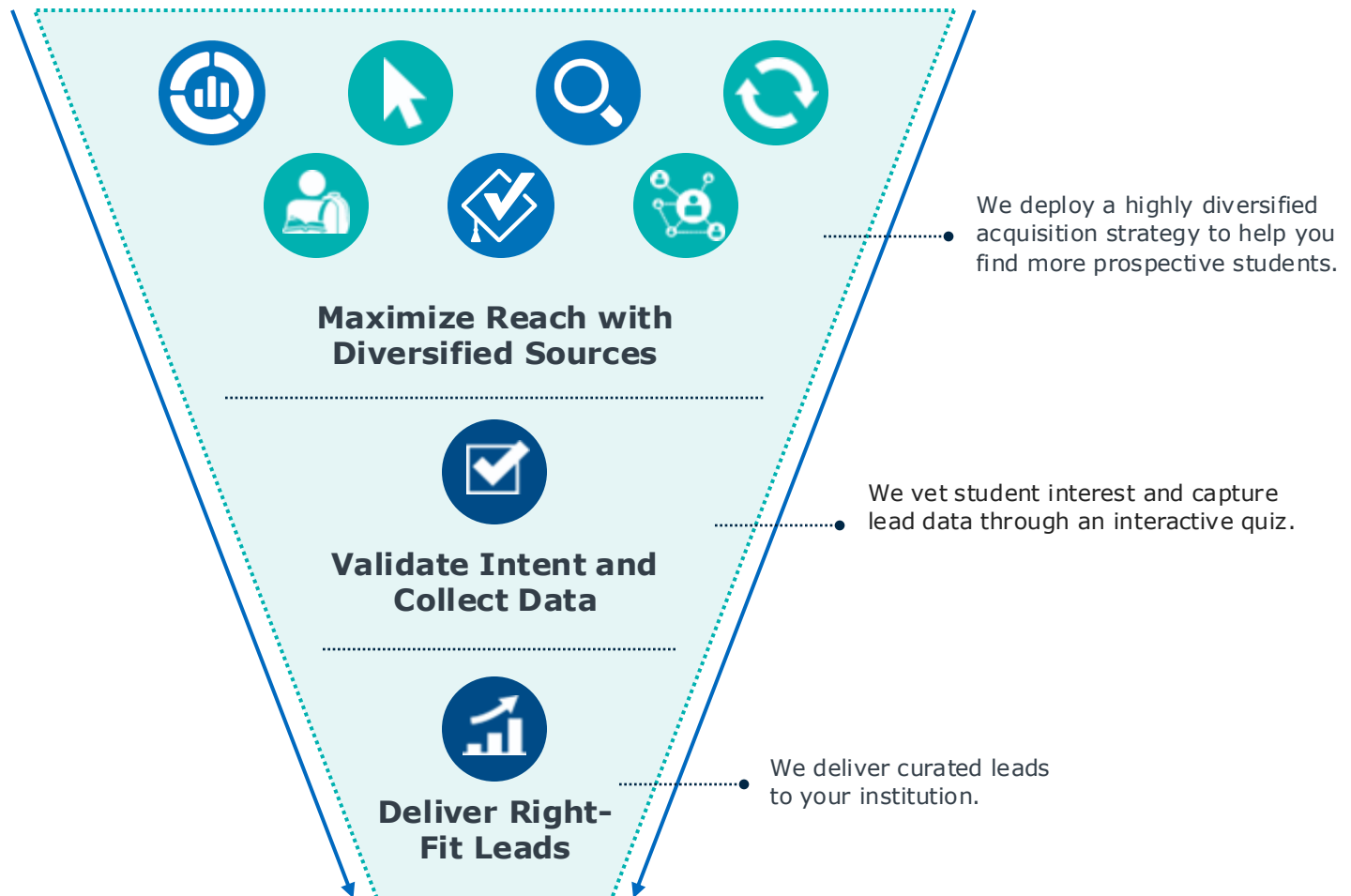
Marketing messages often fail to set graduate or online programs apart. Complete this workbook to build, stress-test, and improve your value proposition. **Scan the QR code or [click here](#) to access the content.**

Expand Your Top of Funnel with Apply Advance

An Innovative Lead Generation Platform

It's challenging to identify high-intent graduate leads in an increasingly competitive, cost-conscious, and skeptical graduate market. Apply Advance provides a reliable, high-volume source of high-intent domestic leads for graduate business, adult degree completion, education, health care, nursing, and STEM programs.

Overview of Apply Advance



Integrating Apply Can Support a Strong Lead Generation Strategy

Apply Advance has wide reach and strong engagement rates that can help you and your team fill in potential gaps in your lead generation strategy, without straining your lead budget.

15% Higher response rate than test-taker names

60 Median days from lead to apply

40 Median days from inquiry to apply

To discuss how Apply can help you find right-fit candidates, email applyadvance@eab.com. Learn more at eab.com/apply-advance.



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